

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



WANNA PLAY
GAIL FAULKNER

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Wanna Play

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WANNA PLAY

Gail Faulkner

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Chapter One

The huge bike between her knees roared as Jas shifted to make the turn, screaming down to somewhere around fifty, she threw it into the curve. She was low and leaning with the turn when she saw the mess on the road, there was no time. Oil was everywhere. If the heavy bike went down on her leg, the best she could hope for was mangled. It'd more likely be ripped off.

Survival reflexes kicked in and both feet were on the seat under her as she balanced for a split second before pushing off into the jump just as the tires slid out from under the bike. Using the push to ensure the direction the bike would go, she'd propelled herself in the other, tucking into a roll for landing.

By the time she quit rolling, people were rushing to the scene. Jas lay on the ground unmoving, trying to decide if she'd lived. She must have since every inch of her hurt so damn much.

Wincing, she gingerly sat up and looked for the bike. It was lodged in a tree trunk on the opposite side of the asphalt. Just past the huge pool of oil on the road. *NIGGER* was scrawled in white spray paint across both lanes.

Apparently she'd managed to clear the road entirely and landed on the shoulder, rolling into the heavy grass and dirt. The relatively "soft" landing that included rocks, small trees and assorted underbrush, along with her knowledge of how to fall seemed to have saved her from being the mess someone wished she was.

Barry skidded to his knees in front of her, his face contorted in fear. "Jas?" His breathless question hung in the air as his hands reached for her but stopped just short of touching.

Wearily, Jas unsnapped the helmet and pulled it off her head. "Still here, Bare."

"Don't move! You could be injured!" he commanded harshly.

She'd been saved a multitude of scrapes and lacerations due to the tight leather that encased her body. If she'd not been wearing the helmet, she'd be dead, no question.

"Don't worry, I won't and I am. Nothing's broken." Jas sank down and stared at the early morning sunlight winking through forest canopy. Throbbing aches across her body were nothing compared to the "mad" building in her gut.

"How could this happen?" Jas wanted to know in deceptively mild tones.

"The spray paint is still tacky. They were just here," Barry explained absently as he watched her face. "That's it. I'm getting serious help. We can't afford these things. Damn it, woman, they meant to kill you this time."

Jas closed her eyes. "I don't feel like dying right now."

Barry snorted. "I didn't notice them asking."

A ghost of a smile fluttered across her face. "Someone's definitely asking to play. Time to accept the offer."

Barry kept waiting for an outburst of emotion. People who'd just faced death usually couldn't avoid it. Jas seemed calm and even cold. *Shit!* Suddenly he got the emotion building in her. It wasn't fear, shock or any other reaction people normally responded with. It was anger.

"No! Jas, don't you dare think about handling this yourself. We *really* can't afford that! I'm getting someone to take care of it. Don't move," Barry barked as she lifted her head. "Let the doctor look at you before you move."

* * * * *

Eight a.m. Next Day

She was magnificent! Blaster remained concealed in the shadows, his gaze locked on the scene playing out across the clearing. Watching her work through her attackers, he felt her energy zip down his own body, triggering a base male response he had to control.

She was symmetry and grace. She cut through the fight like nothing he'd ever seen. Her body whirled and twisted in a mind-numbing display of an incredibly limber female form. Avoiding one of the hits, she dropped in a split that he hardly had time to register as she rolled out of it and up with a man's foot in her hands. She twisted his ankle as she moved, driving her attacker into what appeared to be an agonizing flip.

Damn! He wanted her. Blaster smiled, mostly, baring his teeth as sexual hunger sizzled through him. Totally visual in origin and shallow as a frat boy at a keg party, he enjoyed the shameless pleasure that watching her fight gave him. It enveloped his body, pooling between his legs in throbbing approval.

Elusive and deadly, the fight unfolded. She appeared to be dancing with demons but perhaps it was the other way around. Her dark form was menace in Venus' body. The demon dancing was her. Four men scrambled to get a hold on her but she was always gone just as hard fingers glazed glowing skin. Her stunning long body bowed and twisted as she delivered brutal hits while evading the thugs circling her. Energy crackled around the woman as if the absence of fear created a fierce goddess of speed and grace.

Twisting as one leg went high in a vicious kick while her torso swooped low, sending counter weight through her elbow to a thigh behind her, she took out two burly men. She was already facing the next charging fellow as the fourth came at her from the side with a knife. A quick step toward the screaming charger changed everyone's trajectory just enough for her to go low and flip the charger into the knife guy. Blaster sucked in a breath and winced as he watched the two the men slam into each other.

Intensity churned the early morning mist as it swirled over rocky terrain. Those two men went down and foaming vapor nearly obscured their moaning figures. She swung around in a ready stance but none of the men on the ground moved. Standing a moment, chest heaving, her body glowing with the power flowing through it, she appeared mystical.

"Cut!" echoed across the mountain meadow.

Blaster stood stock-still as her body relaxed. He found his mouth was gaping open and snapped it shut. She reached a hand down and yanked one of the men up to his feet. The guy let out a yelp and then scowled at her as he ambled off rubbing his shoulder. The other three men managed to get up on their own, also scowling and rubbing various body parts.

She had to be six feet tall. Her long, incredible body was clothed in a supple leather vest that laced down the front, displaying an amazing cleavage with no break. The top ended just below her breasts and there wasn't another scrap of clothing obscuring her muscled torso until the low leather pants riding her hips. Those also laced up and were just barely decent. Soft leather hugged her thighs and disappeared into knee-length leather boots. The flat-heeled boots laced tightly around her calves but obviously didn't restrict her movements.

Soft buckskin clothing was almost the same warm coffee shade as her skin. Creamy browns complemented so flawlessly that he couldn't help thinking she'd be difficult to see moving in shadowed forest conditions. It was a perfect costume for a barbarian huntress part, except it was ridiculous. She wasn't playing a barbarian huntress. *Wonderfully ridiculous*, Blaster mused as he watched her leisurely walk to the guy who'd shouted "cut".

Even her walk made him swallow hard. She moved in a smooth, loose-limbed stroll. The simple activity caused muscles on her torso to flex and ripple in a fascinating display of a female body about as fit as it could get without being pumped. Her arms glided at her sides in relaxed readiness that spoke of weapons, though none were visible. It was the walk of a huntress. A little arrogant, a lot dangerous.

Blaster felt lightheaded as he watched her move. Lack of blood to the brain did that to a guy. It'd never happened to him before, but he'd heard of it.

He was remarkably sorry when she stopped in front of the director's chair to engage in discussion. Her face still wasn't clear at this distance but considering her profession, he was confident it'd match the rest of her. *Mercy!*

He felt the need to wait a few seconds before leaving the tree line. Swallowing again, Blaster concentrated on slowing his breathing, allowing the calm of his surroundings to seep into his body. He actually glanced down to make sure steam wasn't billowing from his crotch before he ambled out to move in her general direction. Time to regain center and at least pretend he wasn't ruled by the *idiot head*.

He'd met women who were dangerously beautiful, women who were beautiful when they were dangerous, but never one who was both. His weakness for that edge in

sexual partners had left him seriously disappointed most of the time. It was actually difficult to drag his eyes away from her. Wanting her was that little bit forbidden, totally perilous and entirely pagan. What he wanted to do, over and over again, could possibly get his ass kicked into next week if she ever read his mind.

Blaster forced his gaze to take in the entire set. It wasn't a happy set. Everyone was tense, speaking in low, sharp tones and continually glancing around at the woods. His sudden appearance had been noted by each of them and he'd seen fear on several faces when he broke the tree line. At least they were alert to their environment, he approved silently.

He made sure his approach was casual so the crew could get a good look at him. Blaster smiled in anticipation. The conversation at the director's chair became clearer as he neared.

"No, damn it. That sucked! They didn't attack me! There was no heart in it," she insisted around a long drink of bottled water. Blaster noted she used the tilt of her head to check the site perimeter while appearing engrossed in her discussion. Interesting.

"They're supposed to be afraid of you. It was fine. We've only got the right light for another hour. Let it go." The director was barely paying attention to her as he also managed placement of equipment for the next scene.

Unused adrenaline still beat through her veins as Jas surreptitiously watched the beast of a man trying to look harmless as he strolled up to the set. He was a shitty actor. He couldn't look harmless if he had bluebirds twittering around his head and Snow White on his arm.

Where had that silly visual come from? Possibly the blue of his eyes reminded her of those irritatingly cheerful birds. Even as a child, Jas had thought Snow White an idiot and the birds annoying. If that silly chick really were on this man's arm, she'd have a whole new look. Recently ravaged.

His disturbing air of watchfulness and the testosterone-enhanced confidence rolling off him spoke of a dark and deadly animal. He was muscle and guile though his face was that of a naughty angel. Outwardly he embodied everything blond, blue-eyed and charming. However he wasn't quite able to hide the wicked intentions dripping off his attempt at a casual smile. That smile wasn't reaching his eyes.

His jeans hugged nicely muscled legs and had a lovely faded look that only came from actual years of wear. The boots below frayed hems were worn at the heel and genuinely scruffy. His nondescript denim shirt had seen better days.

Everything about him felt powerfully real and a little bit rough under the layer of casual charm he thought he was projecting. He was *more* in a way that ran a shiver up her spine.

This man was the sort who'd be gone in the morning, but there'd be a smile on the woman's face when she realized she was too sore to get out of bed yet. Personally, Jas appreciated that quality in a partner but it was damn difficult to find.

Blaster was about ten yards away from the director's chair when a shot pierced the morning. Battle sight accompanied the sound for him and he clearly saw her do a half spin going low, retrieve a handgun from her high boot and return fire at the exact spot where the shot came from. They were already gone and Blaster's own weapon was trained twenty feet up the mountain when he squeezed off two rounds. Dimly he realized she'd started to move before he had. She was possibly a quicker draw.

Around the set, everyone dropped and then there was scrambling and screaming. The only people standing were Blaster and the statuesque actress, both with weapons trained on likely retreat paths for the shooters. She took off at a run toward the shooter's location and Blaster had to follow the "Amazon woman", yelling at Barry, the director, as he passed him. "Call the cops!"

"You're fucking late!" Barry shouted at Blaster's retreating back.

Blaster didn't bother answering as the woman had about reached the far tree line. Luckily, the beautiful fool slowed just inside the shadows. She was moving low and fast but he could catch her at this game. Coming up behind her, he had no doubt she knew he was there. The training she displayed was good but he still wanted to spank her round ass for putting herself in danger by chasing the threat in the woods.

"They're long gone. What do you think you're doing?" Blaster demanded in tightly suppressed anger. She kept moving toward the site where the shooters had been.

"Shut up or go back," she hissed at him as if she had a right to.

"You get back to the set and wait for the cops. Who do you think you are? Sheena, Queen of the Jungle? This is a job for professionals."

"I'm using the small words, so focus. I said shut up or get out, stupid."

She slid through the undergrowth without bending a leaf and if his eyes weren't trained on her, he might have lost her. She was obviously a professional on some levels Blaster was becoming uncomfortable with.

"They're gone. I creased one twenty yards up the mountain as they were moving over the ridge." Blaster came up beside her as she surveyed the spot where the two men had been standing.

Hands on hips, Jas studied the ground as the blond gorilla steamed beside her. His accent made him a native son of the South but his training said he'd left home long ago. "You're a bit of a Huck Finn, aren't you? What brings you to our little reenactment of the Civil War?"

He was standing too close. She could feel the heat of his gaze sizzle down the bare skin of her back. His maleness was too damn invasive at the moment and she didn't want its distraction.

Blaster didn't bother looking at the ground. He already knew what was there. Cigarette butts and prints. Looking at Sheena was much more interesting. She was an elegant, dark angel and he couldn't even remain mad at her. The close-up view siphoned his blood supply south at a dangerous rate again. Was it possible to incur brain damage from a persistent hard-on? Probably not or he'd have noticed the effects

when he was thirteen, but it sure could put rational thought out of reach. At this age, that was a problem.

"Name is Blaster. Barry asked me to come by," he introduced himself, ignoring the belligerent questions.

She glanced at him. She was exactly the same height though quite a few pounds lighter. She didn't waste an ounce of what she had. She carried extra on her chest and filled out the back of her leathers in a way that could make a strong man weep. And he'd been correct about her face. Large eyes, high forehead, molded cheekbones, distinctive nose and full, glistening lips. Her chin was firm and a bit pointed, giving her face strength where it might have been softly rounded without it. She could drop a red-blooded male at twenty paces with a look.

He hadn't found a view of her that didn't stand every one of his hormones up in the ready position. There were women who tripped the animal switch, women who drew out the gentleman and women who brought the boy out to play. She blew his *animal-fuck meter* outta the water.

Jas' eyebrows went up as her gaze slid over him. It was for show. She'd looked him over while arguing with Barry. "You always armed when you go visiting, Huck?"

Even the timbre of her voice strummed down his body. A husky female pitch that spoke of whisky-drenched murmurs on sweltering summer nights. She was speaking softly and if he didn't listen to the words, he'd have been seduced by the tone alone. Shit, yet another thing about her that stroked his beast.

Behind them, the confusion on the movie set was not dying down. Obviously some people wanted to leave and others were trying to convince them to stay. General yelling and slamming things around seemed to be gaining momentum. Blaster couldn't resist the slow grin at her sexy, sassy self.

"I'm a prepared sort," he acknowledged just as softly. His voice rumbled low and intimate, thick with Southern charm. "You always armed when you're on the set?" Blaster returned her question as his eyes traveled down her in obvious enjoyment of her costume or lack of it.

"Tie it in a knot, Huck." She glanced down at his bulging crotch. Ignoring his question, she turned away from him to stride toward the set. "Sista' envy looks bad on you, Huckleberry."

"You're mistaking lust for envy. I guess I was too subtle." He followed her, captivated by the sway of that full bottom as she moved through the forest. Round and firm, she didn't bounce, she flowed in a loose gait that mesmerized him. Delicious muscles flexed with each light step. The power in her thighs and ass brought to mind hours of rhythmic movement that left a man dry in the deepest sense of the word. He nearly groaned just watching her.

Jas knew she hadn't mistaken one damn little thing. Huckleberry was pumping out invitations to sin with every breath he took. The lust was real but she wasn't fooled. He was using the adrenaline high to enhance it as a shield and distract her from his real

talents. Actually, sticking to that particular truth was a good choice. She felt the sexual current between them too and flirting siphoned off some of the stress.

Considering the Southern background his deep voice betrayed, she hadn't expected respect from him. The lust was no surprise though.

Pausing for a moment, she didn't turn as her hand came back to smack her own bottom. "If you're going to keep staring at my ass, try shutting your mouth when you break the trees. You'll look less stupid."

He had been staring, but her move showed him she was as fully alert. All her senses were whirling if she could feel his eyes glued to her swaying ass. Could she sense what was going through his mind? Probably not, she'd have slapped him by now.

"Yes, ma'am," he breathed, enjoying her more every minute. "But when I'm officially in charge of security, there'll be a few rules. Number one being, your lickable ass moves away from the crazy people with guns."

She stopped to turn. "Barry summoned Huckleberry Finn to handle security? Amazing. I guess it takes one to deal with them. Tell me, are these cousins or just school chums? Damn! Sorry. I forgot. White boys don't get schooling south of the Mason Dixon, jus' possum and coon hunting tips from Daddy."

"No need to be sorry, angel face. I know your delicate nerves are upset over the shooting." Blaster smiled condescendingly at her just to see what she'd do next. "And you're mistaking a smooth Mississippi drawl for the local Carolina accent."

Her body didn't even ripple at his return barbs. "Aren't you just the hopeful Huckleberry?" She smiled and turned away from him to proceed across the meadow. "Hang on to that sad little hope that I'll do something stupid and give you an excuse to get your eager hands on me." She laughed softly. "Course you'd lose a limb, Huck. Try not to think about it. You'll live longer."

"Depending on which limb, the sacrifice could be worth it," Blaster murmured as he followed her again. This time the reason was to keep his body between her and the forest as much as possible. It'd be a pure crime if someone put a mark on her that couldn't be licked away. Course there were several ways to mark her that could be licked up and they had to flash across his brain now.

She glanced back and snorted. "The first thing to go would be that stub you think with, Huck."

Blaster rubbed his hand through the buzz cut on top of his head and grinned at her second snort of derision. Her reaction to his obvious misunderstanding of what she'd remove tickled him a bit. She had a spark that was about to burn him bad. She knew what she was doing when she pulled the handgun and again tracking in dense undergrowth. Whoever she really was, it wasn't a Hollywood princess.

They reached the center of chaos, Barry was yelling directions and people were packing equipment into rental trucks. He turned to Blaster. "You owe me," the director started belligerently.

"Relax, Bare. I'm here for you. No need fer' the favor callin'." Blaster grinned in his slow way, enjoying this. "Now just for the record, clear up who I am to Sheena."

"Sheena? Who the hell is Sheena? Oh you mean Jasmina. Sure. Jasmina Carson, this is Samuel Callaway, better know as Blaster. Blaster this is Jas." Barry turned away to yell instructions into the activity.

"No, Bare. Why I am here. Now." But Barry was striding off, shouting at someone about handling something gently. Distant sirens were whining up the mountain and Jas turned away, laughing softly.

Blaster kept pace beside her and she glanced at him. "Where you goin', Huck?"

"To help you find a shirt."

They reached the actors' trailer, which was bustling with activity, being packed up and people getting into street clothes. It was simply a long trailer with a row of doors to narrow cubicles where people could change. Nothing fancy about it.

"No. Really?" She stopped at the door to her small space. The sirens were much closer.

"Hurry up. They'll be here in a minute." He opened the door by reaching around her back, his body brushing hers.

Jasmina glanced toward the dirt path where the police cars would soon appear. "You have a problem with my clothes? I seem to remember you enjoying the view. Run along and play with the boys." Cop cars nosed through the narrow path and into the clearing, sirens still blaring.

Blaster frowned at her a second. "Don't disappear. They'll want to question you too. You know you're stone sexy, woman. I assumed you'd want men to at least glance at your face when they talk to you."

"I'll hold my breath." A husky chuckle accompanied the shrug as she stepped into her small dressing room, pulling the door shut behind her.

An hour later the meadow was cleared except for Barry, Blaster and the sheriff's car. Blaster had had enough. The sheriff wasn't dumb. Blaring sirens all the way up the mountain and his attitude about "flighty Hollywood folks and their imaginations..." told Blaster exactly where the guy stood. He was retiring in three months and didn't have a reason in the world to let this little fracas mess that up.

"Boys was proolly huntin'. Didn't mean a thing by it. Ya'll jus' finish up your little movie," the rotund sheriff repeated for the hundredth time as Barry went over the events again, trying to impress the sheriff with the need to investigate.

Blaster was standing to the side, his arms crossed, watching them. It was actually the first time he'd heard the whole list of miss-events and near injuries. The film company was having a serious run of bad luck and it'd started when they'd moved up to the high country.

At first Blaster had been worried he'd be tripping over the local law, messing up evidence and such or just making a pain of themselves. Right now he knew for a fact

that they'd not see the sheriff or his staff until the next incident, at which time he'd only appear after a long drive with sirens blaring to make sure the perpetrators had vacated the area before he arrived.

The only person Blaster was sure of was Barry. It was obvious Barry needed help of a special sort. "Special Help" was Blaster's favorite kind and beautiful, dangerous women were his next favorite.

Barry was Blaster's family or as near to it as foster kids get. The two boys had spent seven formative years in the same house. Since then they'd gone vastly different directions but that didn't change the fact Barry Levine and Samuel – Blaster – Callaway were and would always be brothers.

Barry allowed no trace of Mississippi mud to remain in his manner or speech. The slender movie director appeared taller than six feet two. It was his clothes and manner. He looked as if he'd sprung up fully formed from the stardust floating around Hollywood. His sharp features reminded a person of a hawk if they were being kind. A crow, if they were being honest. Black hair, beak nose and thin lips, his features were not perfect, but on his face they came together in a rather appealing way.

He just looked smart. Barry appeared always in motion. The air around him was charged with energy as if his active brain needed more space to work.

Blaster was the other side of that coin. A flat six feet, ash blond hair cut in a buzz was striking in contrast to the ruddy tan of his skin. He appeared a man constantly outdoors. His baby-blue eyes were surrounded by laugh lines. He had a Robert Redford type of all-American look. The easy smile and unhurried air was in complete contrast to Barry. Blaster's indolent stance was a well-practiced lie.

Blaster had left Mississippi on his eighteenth birthday with a judge's gavel ringing in his ears. Youthful indiscretions, a kind phrase for what he'd been doing, would turn into jail time shortly. The choice was do the time in jail or in the Armed Forces. Blaster now knew he owed a debt to the judge for giving him that choice. Besides Barry, the judge was probably the only other person who'd seen something more than just the smart-mouthed ass in him back then.

Now the people who mattered in his life knew him as a highly decorated and respected demolition expert and Special Forces retiree. He had medals for doing things in places that didn't exist during action that never happened. Most of his career was still highly classified so there was no point talking about it. He enjoyed appearing the relaxed Southern boy who smiled more than he should. It gave him the jump on people who assumed he didn't see the details.

The details were adding up to a whole different "animal" than Barry had told him on the phone. The incidents had been carefully scripted to appear racial. Making an action movie starring an African-American woman in North Carolina was certainly a natural setting to get hillbillies ruffled at seeing a beautiful black chick kicking white ass. But even deep in the mountains, Blaster didn't believe the local boys would have put up this kind of fuss.

What he'd seen this afternoon under the trees had been another "set". Things left to make it look as if the men standing there were dumbasses.

First, the men who'd been there didn't smoke. The butts were props. Blaster had one fine nose and as a demolition expert, he could smell smoke and tell what caused it an hour later. He'd reached the place the men stood minutes after they left and the only scent on the air was gunpowder residue. No, they didn't smoke. Nor were they hillbillies. They had left common tennis shoe impressions under the tree. But on the exit route there had been no sign at all. If the people exiting the area had been wearing the same shoes as the prints under the tree indicated, they couldn't have helped leaving an impression.

He'd found no sign of them on the exit route, which he'd inspected again after everyone left. There was only one tiny splatter of blood where he knew he'd creased one of them. Not one footprint. No blood trail, no other sign at all. Damn professional.

Then there was the puzzle of Sheena, starring in Barry's film. She was a professional something other than actress. The fight scene had been acting for the stunt men but she'd been fully engaged and enjoying it. Her frustration at its conclusion had been real. The stunt men were not fighting her. They'd been following scripted steps and rolls to get through the scene.

What was she doing here? This many *professionals* did not accidentally congregate in backwoods North Carolina. He could understand men gathered to watch her. He even understood that most of them would find her alarming in several basic ways. She was that rare combination of extreme beauty and lethal skill that stood a man's dick up and made him want to protect his balls at the same time. And there it was, his main problem. There had to be something wrong with her. No one was the perfect combination. He needed to find her fatal flaw fast while he could still manage to coax blood above his belt buckle.

Chapter Two

After the ride down the mountain in the crew van, Jas cautiously opened the door to her motel room. Flicking on the light, she surveyed the relatively small space carefully. Nothing seemed out of order. The bedspread didn't move. No horrid spray-painted messages. Two days ago, she'd opened the door a lot less cautiously to find a revolting scene.

The first thing that caught her eye had been racial slurs crudely scrawled everywhere. Then she'd noticed the bedspread moving. The words *NIGGER WHORE* spray-painted on the spread in huge black letters seemed to writhe luridly as long slithering forms moved. She'd shut the door quickly and found Barry and the hotel manager.

The poor manager had been beside himself. They'd eventually removed three large black rat snakes from the room. Not poisonous but still disgusting. The room had to be gutted and repainted.

Snakes and rude names she could deal with. The last two days had been much more serious. The motorcycle incident could have killed her. Whoever shot at them today had the opportunity to kill her. She was pretty sure the miss had been deliberate. But still, too damn close. Someone wanted her to know he could kill her any time. He was playing a game. Fear was his weapon, intimidation his goal.

Jas glanced at the time and quickly calculated the difference to Southern California. Liana would be getting ready for tonight's event. Jas had to smile as she dialed the phone. Liana loved dressing up. She enjoyed it more than the reason for it usually. Jas hated to ruin the fun with a call, but she had to be sure everything was okay.

It took four rings before the phone was answered. "Hey, Jas."

"Is everything all right," Jas worriedly needed to know.

Liana laughed. "Of course it is. Except I'm having my nails done to match my dress and the phone rang."

"Sorry. I had to check on you. I know you're in middle of the endless dressing ritual but there's been another incident and I wanted to make sure you're paying attention to security."

"What happened?" Liana demanded. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Someone took a shot across the set today. They didn't hit anyone. So what color are you getting painted?"

"My God, Jas. Do you think he'd really hurt us now?" Liana's voice faltered.

"No. He can't afford to kill us, but I'm glad he's focused on me instead of you right now. So what color is the new diva wearing for her awards gala?" Jas tried again to lighten the mood with the delights of dressing up.

"The award is as much your's as mine, Jas. You should be the one accepting it, however since you're on the other side of the county being a movie star, I get to." Liana laughed softly.

"Yeah, yeah. You know how much I enjoy those things. You're the one who does "Cinderella" well. I work myself up to it and I still hate it. Now tell what you're wearing."

"A coral dress that's not too revealing but not too stuffy. It's difficult to find something decent in this town that doesn't involve T&A display." They both laughed. "So now I'm getting my nails done to match and then having my hair done. Not going coral with the hair though. I had to draw the line somewhere."

"The three major networks have confirmed a TV crew. Watch the news tonight and you'll see. I'm betting cable shows up too. Your sending your movie-star friends made a huge difference. Suddenly it's *the* party to attend. Even politicians and government people are showing up. The seating arrangements have been a nightmare."

"Let Sebastian handle everything. He's the event planner. I just want you to have fun. You've earned it."

They chatted for a few more minutes and Jas enjoyed Liana's excitement. This was an amazing recognition for something both Jas and Liana had simply needed to do for their own sanity. Opening the Hope Center for Women was possible because of Jas' connections to the money floating around Southern California, as well as a heavy investment of her own. But running it was Liana's baby. It was the road back to being whole for Liana.

Beautiful Liana was no longer a broken shell of a woman. Her spirit had been poured into helping other women in need. The acts of healing performed for others were the medicine that healed both of them. Jas couldn't take back that one night when she'd promised to look after her friend and failed miserably. What she could do was make up for it. Well, sort of. It was probably a little unbalanced to need to keep fixing what had been broken so long ago.

Liana had never really needed "fixing". Her strength was not as apparent as Jas', but it was probably much deeper.

They'd found a way to use the experience, make it a stepping stone to changing others' lives.

* * * * *

It was after eight in the evening when Barry pulled the door shut in the big editing trailer. It was permanently parked next to the hotel since some of the equipment in it

was too sensitive for the rough ride out to location. The only people in it were Blaster, Barry and Jas.

"We need to talk and I thought this might be the most private place to do it. Jas, I asked Blaster to come out here to find out what's going on. He's the most dangerous man I know and we need serious help."

Jas raised an eyebrow. She could believe that, though no power on earth would make her admit it.

"You're ex-military. You know what a Special Forces unit is, right?" Barry directed the question to Jas. "Blaster was a member of one of the most elite."

"Hey now," Blaster interjected.

Jas snorted, "Right." She sat down on one of the swivel stools as she continued. "Did Huckleberry actually tell you that? He's obviously compensating for something. Using the term "elite" is handy that way. No way to prove he was in such a unit and no way to prove he wasn't."

"She's right." Blaster consciously relaxed. Going along with her misconception was neat and simple. He tried to appear sheepish and vaguely guilty. No telling if he managed to wipe the glazed, sexual predator look off his face.

Barry glanced between them. "I see. Then what was the designation of your unit? I'm trying to impress her with your expertise to handle this situation. Help me out."

Blaster ran a hand around the back of his neck and grimaced a bit. "I'm ex-Special Forces. The unit is now retired. Enough to say we never trained a replacement." Again he went for a sincere open look. She already knew way too much about his urges. This wasn't the time to let her focus on them.

Sitting on a stool, Jas leaned her elbows on the console behind her so that long body stretched out in apparent ease with ankles crossed. She gave the impression of being supremely comfortable. Wearing a formfitting tank top that ended above her navel, low hip-huggers and a black silk bomber jacket left open to show off her body, she was jarringly beautiful. The jacket was useful to cover a multitude of weapons she didn't seem to be working that hard at concealing.

Both eyebrows rose as she looked at Blaster. "Never had a replacement? Your unit didn't lose one man? What were you, Special Ops Kiddy Care? No functioning unit retires the original members."

Blaster grinned as he lounged against the equipment table behind him. "Yep. We're damn good at babysitting." It wasn't his habit to defend the Unit. Facts were simple and sticking to the ones that were unclassified was his only concern. That, and doing his damndest not to physically drool while looking at her. Her casual sprawl was deceptive and dangerous. It allowed her instant access to the weapons he knew were on her body. She was such a sexy sort of deadly and he couldn't look at her long enough.

Exotically tilted eyes regarded him for an unblinking moment. Jas' forehead wrinkled for less than a second at his refusal to brag. It wasn't natural for a guy as arrogant as she assumed he was. That fact whispered a little strength into the possibility

he told the truth about the Special Forces service claim. Checking his facts wouldn't be difficult, just a bit time-consuming. He should know better than to lie. Her gaze slid to Barry. "So you've hired security. Good job. What do you need to tell me for?"

"Because I get to baby-sit you." The heat in Blaster's deep voice dripped with Mississippi sweet.

"Oh?"

"What he means is, I think you need protection," Barry rushed on before she could interrupt. "Come on, Jas. I'm not an idiot. You come to the set armed. Every one of the incidents has happened around you. What's going on? Do you know who's doing this and why?"

"Are you accusing me of something?" Jas' tone remained softly conversational.

"No. Absolutely not, but I think you're in danger, Jas. You and I have sweat blood over this movie. It's your big break and even more so, mine. You'll be a star and I'll be the director of a smash hit. We *are* that good. But none of that will happen if our crew is scared shitless and continue to quit like the three who did today. We're around a week away from getting this one in the can. Fuck! We've got to finish location filming and we've got to do it within budget.

"I brought Blaster to ensure we make it. I know you don't trust men much, but you trust me. Can you extend some of your trust in me to him? Tell us what's going on and let him take care of it. I promise, it'll go away."

"Barry, you can't sublet trust. I know you. I don't know him from the next hillbilly and besides, he's military. Where do you think this kind of trouble comes from? Don't get your shorts in a wad. No one is trying to kill me. They're trying to intimidate me."

Blaster felt a little stab of satisfaction. "So you do know exactly what's going on?"

Jas ignored Blaster's comment. "An old idiot must have gotten nervous. Someone who assumes he can control everyone with fear. And this," Jas jerked a thumb at Blaster, "is probably one of his lowbrow fuckups. You may think you called him but I bet he didn't have a thing to do when he got your call. Isn't that a little bit odd for such a talented guy? Didn't you wonder why your buddy boy had nothing better to do?"

"No, Jas. You don't understand. Blaster is my family. He has nothing to do with whatever you've got following you. And what the hell is it? My shorts are in a damn tight wad and if anyone else quits on the production, both our asses will be feeling the heat. We can't afford this, Jas."

"He's family? I thought you didn't have any family? Which statement is the lie, Barry? I have to tell you, I wanted to trust you." Ice-cold calm entered Jas' voice with that statement.

"Stop it, Jas. Stop it right now. I'm not one of your monsters." At this point Barry lost all surface sophistication. "He and I spent time in hell together, better known as the Beckley household. Foster parents who not only did it for the money but were sick enough to enjoy stripping away a child's humanity. They loved the process. I know you had a grim childhood but don't damn well assume you're the only one. This is the

person who at twelve, knew what mental toughness was and could teach it to a ten-year-old. He is family!" Barry stopped and drew a deep breath. "Look, I'm not trying to deceive you. There's too much at stake."

There was silence for a moment and Jas looked at Blaster. "Nothing to add?"

"Nope. If he can't convince you, nothing I can say will. This is your life. Your future, honey. Sometimes you just have to trust someone."

Her gaze had the hard look of a veteran. Blaster wasn't exactly sure what she was a veteran of, but she'd seen too much of whatever to trust anyone easily. Ugly suspicion began a slow burn low in his gut. Suddenly the reasons she was beauty with a beast within began to matter in a personal way. He didn't like the conclusion he was coming to about why trust was the unattainable prize with her.

Her lovely face had no chance of reflecting the wealth of bitterness in her voice, "Poor lil' white boys have a sob story. Go tell it in the Hamptons coz it don't even rate in the District. It is my life. I don't need a babysitter. This ain't no thing, so rest your shiny white hiney and relax."

"We get it! You're a tough chick from D.C. who can kick some ugly ass," Barry snapped. "If it were just you, I'd stand back and enjoy the show. Kicking ass is sexy as hell when you do it, but this is about ninety million already invested in a movie. It's not just you. It's about someone trying to shut down this production."

Jas regarded Barry with a cool look. Abruptly she stood.

"No, no," Barry held up his hands to stop her when Jas jolted off the stool. "No one blames you for having a life, a past. I don't care what the problem is. The solution is all I'm interested in. Don't let them steal your future, Jas, because if it doesn't stop, the three of us are gonna be the only ones left. People don't hang around and get shot at just to make a movie."

Blaster forcefully schooled his body to stay relaxed, a difficult task when watching female perfection, armed to the teeth and coiled to spring. She was so intoxicatingly sexy, totally dangerous. At the moment she carried at least two guns. He'd only seen the print of them, the faint outline, and was certain that was intentional. It was a warning most men would pay attention to and back off. She had no way of knowing it drew him like an aphrodisiac.

She'd relaxed on the stool again. Her long body once more stretched out with legs extended and elbows resting on the sound console behind her. Predatory awareness rippled around her. Sleek and firm, she flowed with the fascinating hills and valleys of a woman whose body was more weapon than not. Undulating muscles were defined with utterly feminine grace. There was not one hard angle of the fashionably slender sort on her. Every bone was coated and rounded with a generous layer of muscle.

Jas sighed and glanced around the trailer meaningfully. "You're right, but consider the fact that we're in a sound and editing trailer. You can't sweep it for bugs. The whole thing is a giant bug. I get it that the problem has to go away. This isn't the smartest place to discuss the details."

"Anyway, how do you plan to install a new head of security? Mark is also your second unit stunt coordinator. He's not gonna be a happy white boy about losing half his job."

Barry shifted uncomfortably as she regarded him. "I thought we'd sorta not tell Mark. Blaster is good at undercover work so we'll call him your boyfriend. That way he's with you 24/7 and by extension on the set all the time. We figured it was a disgruntled lover, someone who isn't quite ready to give you up. Blaster makes it clear you've moved on and perhaps does that personally if you tell us who he needs to visit."

"Oh hell *no*! You have got to be joking!" Jas stared at Barry and allowed her jaw to drop a bit.

"What?" Blaster frowned. "Don't tell me you've never dated a white guy? Are you prejudiced?" Her instant rejection nipped at his ego a little too viciously for his liking.

"Look at you. I mean it, Huckleberry. Look at you and look at me. What crack-induced fantasy would put the two of us together? Wait, let me guess. You have one suit and it's done you just fine for the last fifteen years? Your idea of a fun date involves all the ribs you can eat and if she's really special, imported beer?"

Jas stood and slowly walked toward Blaster, fingers of one hand stroking her exposed midriff absently as she moved. "And you like your little woman simpering and spineless too, don't you, Huckleberry? A brainless chick who doesn't mind a fast ride to nowhere?"

Jas walked directly into his body, leaning against him from knees to chest, letting her hands trail slowly up his arms to lightly loop around his neck. Ever since they'd met, he'd been turning up the wattage on the sexual current zipping between them. Edgy erotic rolled off him in suffocating waves. She needed to take control of this, show him who was in charge of "invitations" so his vanilla ass would back off already. All this throbbing sexual junk was messing with her concentration.

She expected to have him under her control in about two seconds. If the weapons didn't do the trick, sexual aggression usually reduced a male as obviously eager as this one to slobbering compliance in record time.

Blaster stood perfectly still, absorbing the burn of her gently swaying hips rubbing his bulging crotch. A lazy smile tilted his lips as he let her purr that last taunt into his ear.

Her undulating stroll and then the full-body drape had sent fire crawling across him at an agonizing rate. Turning his head slightly so the breath from his words bathed her neck, he said, "Delicate idiot doesn't do it for me, baby. I'm damn easy, but I refuse to go it alone. Test the length of the ride anytime you want, sugar, but if you're looking for bullet train speed, you're gonna hafta go to China or wherever the hell it is."

Blaster inhaled her scent deeply as she stilled. It was a heady mix of tropical spice, woman and gun oil. He was probably one of the few males on the planet who'd pick up how well she cared for her weapons this way and then be turned on by it.

Her sensuous body caressing his was a perfect fit. They matched hipbone to hipbone, chest to chest. Her intention might have been to intimidate him with her brand of formidable sexuality but that certainly wasn't the result. Oh yeah, she'd affected him. Course she could do that from across the room, but she wasn't going to get his *idiot head* in command of his body just yet.

Blaster's voice rumbled up from the knot of lust below his belt buckle. "And unless you mean for us to show Barry how very carnal a sex scene can be, ease up on the teasing. You have my full attention in every way." That wasn't the most brilliant bit of reasoning. Was the best he could come up with from a brain currently starved for blood. He'd have to send out a rescue party to coax some of it back north again. Up close and personal, she was kryptonite to his Superman.

Jas slowly peeled herself off Blaster, watching him closely. She was surprised. He met her gaze without blinking. The heat in his expression left no doubt that he'd enjoyed her play, though he'd not moved a muscle to touch her. She suspected she hadn't won that little skirmish. His warning to ease up followed by a confession of lust was aggression followed by surrender. Sly shit. He flung the command to stop out there then canceled the aggressive move too quickly for her to respond to it. That tactic left him in control.

Barry chuckled. "I can see the sparks from here. No one is gonna believe you two aren't sleeping together. See how easily that works? I even give you permission to dress him up if you want to, Jas, but let's get back to the problem."

"Dress me up? What the fuck is that supposed to mean and who are you to be giving permission?" Blaster couldn't look away from her as he flung the indignant question at Barry. He was trying to drag his eyes off her. Lord knew he needed to for sanity's sake.

Jas grinned as she turned her back on him and strode away. It was a view she knew he enjoyed. He might have won that one. No reason not to make him pay a price for winning.

Both Barry and Jas ignored Blaster as she moved to the door. "I'll see what I can do with him. He could be a handy item to have around." She smiled at Barry then sobered. "I know you're worried, but as I said, I don't feel comfortable discussing the details in here. Nothing can be done about it tonight. Let me sleep on it and I promise, tomorrow I'll take care of the problem. See you in the morning." She was almost out the door when an arm slipped around her waist.

His hand came to rest low on her hip, not impairing her reach to most of the weapons on her body. Jas glanced at him and Blaster grinned. "Can't have my girlfriend all vulnerable out in the night alone," he murmured in her ear.

"If you think you can put an arm around me, then I get to dress you, Huckleberry." Jas smiled sweetly as Blaster fell into step beside her. The stroll was leisurely as they crossed the motel parking lot.

The only motel in town, or out of it for that matter, it was just a strip of rooms with parking spaces in front of them. Probably built in the fifties, the place had seen better days—thirty years ago. Now it just looked sad. However, for possibly the first time it was completely filled. Film personnel seemed to overflow around it with several temporary equipment storage units as well as living quarters trailers parked on the far side of the parking lot. The establishment had one security light at each corner of its long structure, but three of those security lights were not functioning. Jas and Blaster were easily swallowed in the dark, vehicle-jammed parking lot as they headed for the last room at the end of the building.

As soon as they'd stepped out into the night, Blaster had felt a telltale prickle run down his spine. He'd almost dragged her to cover with that arm around her waist but then the distinct shuffle of movement in the shadows convinced him whoever was behind them were pitiful amateurs.

"I guess I could hear a suggestion or two, but what the hell, I like these clothes." He waved a hand at himself and used the motion to flash Marine hand signals that two people were following them.

Jas snorted. "Like I didn't know that, hillbilly boy. You look like a pickup-drivin', tobacco-chewing, honky-tonk-type jerk. Just the sort this sista is itching to get her hands on tonight." While she spoke, her hand flashed the location behind them of the figures following.

Apparently sheepish, Blaster grinned. "Well, you're in luck. I don't care where you put your hands."

Jas' smile was predatory and her tilted, honey-brown eyes sparkled with a child's enjoyment of a wicked plan. Anticipation zipped around her and she couldn't resist a chuckle that sounded suspiciously like delight. "I neva' did enjoy myself today, bubba. Dressin' you down should be fun."

She'd told him she knew the stalkers were there, described them to him and stated her intention to deal with them. All in a few sentences that sounded as if it were part of their conversation.

She was good. Her observation skills were on a par with his. Dropping into slang was a handy device for communication in code and it also shot a barb of satisfaction through him. She expected him to know she didn't speak that way normally. It was a small bit of confidence in his abilities that made him ridiculously happy. She'd been paying attention.

Blaster paused, his hand contracted briefly on her hip as he leaned to brush his lips over her ear. "Do. Not. Kill. Anyone," he whispered in warning.

The two men jumped just as Jas and Blaster arrived at her room door. Appearing totally unaware as they faced the door, the slightly clumsy stalkers had felt secure in their attack. Two surprised grunts and both bodies landed with muffled thuds in the parking lot. No screams disturbed the night. Both men were unconscious before they hit the ground.

Blaster hefted one attacker over his shoulder. Jas grabbed the other unconscious man's collar and began dragging him to her room.

Blaster got there first and was waiting patiently for her with his burden. "I'd have gotten him for you, angel," he told her cheerfully.

Jas let the man slump against the wall and fished her room key out of her pocket. "I take care of my own messes," she told him calmly as she opened her door. "He smells. I don't want that stink all over my jacket." She dragged her still unconscious man in and deposited him against the wall next to the one Blaster had placed there. Blaster patted both men down quickly but didn't come across anything more threatening than a key chain.

They stood back to survey the would-be attackers. The two were average, scruffy young men. There were no jackets over the threadbare T-shirts. Both pairs of jeans had the grimy look of being worn for days without being taken off. The only fresh thing about these two was on their feet.

"The boys have new shoes," Blaster grunted.

Jas raised an eyebrow. "Ya think?" Her tone was condescending. It was an obvious detail she'd noticed already. "Looks like we have the donators for the fake prints under the tree. Too bad these dumb fucks weren't the shooters. We would have caught Stumble and Fumble." Jas shook her head as she regarded the men.

Jas abruptly turned to the bathroom, grabbed the cheap ice bucket off her dresser and took it to the sink. Coming back, she grinned at Blaster. "Ready?"

In two quick flicks of her wrist half the bucket of water hit one man in the face, followed by the rest of it in his buddy's.

Sputtering and groggy, both men started to come around. Looking up, they were faced with Blaster and Jas standing a short distance away. Both began to scramble up.

"Bad idea, boys. Y'all get to your feet and she'll put ya' down again," Blaster drawled casually.

"Fuck that," the larger man snarled as he made it to a crouch.

Jas stepped forward and slammed the heel of her open palm into his temple. The man crumpled into unconsciousness. The move was fast and smooth, appearing effortless on her part. The other man's eyes rounded at the vicious hit that effectively incapacitated his companion. He slowly relaxed back to the floor.

"Wise choice," Blaster smiled. "I see you boys gotcha some new shoes. What happened to the old ones?"

"My shoes? You wanna know 'bout shoes?" Confused, the skinny man glanced at his feet. Not an overly small man, he managed to appear smaller than he was because of his leanness. Ferret-like in appearance and mannerisms of quick glances and nervous jerks.

Blaster's smile was his standard *I'm a nice guy* friendly grin. "I figure it's the beginning. Thought I'd let you start there so as not to confuse yourself. The lady is impatient and if you start stumbling all over a lie, well, as I said, she's impatient."

"I know my rights. I don't hafta' say nothin'. You got no evidence and you hafta' let us go. Hit us again and we'll sue!" The man on the floor warmed up to his threats and the last was yelled at them in a futile attempt to draw attention from anyone who could hear the noise.

Blaster laughed softly before he squatted to be on eye level with the boy. "Do I look like the law? You have no rights, idiot. You attacked us. You're inside the door of our temporary home. Someone could *accidentally* shoot you both and we'd probably get off. Now I figure you and the napping bubba were set up. I'm giving you a chance to explain. It's a sure bet the boys who put you up to this never mentioned angel face is trained to kill. Alone and defending herself against two men would likely involve a kill. Why don't you start with the shoes and explain what happened today?"

"Nobody said nothin' about killin' anyone." The man's wide eyes flicked to Jas who leaned one shoulder against the door. Her arms were folded and she appeared relaxed as Blaster questioned the man.

"What were you supposed to do?" Blaster asked insistently.

"Ah, it weren't nothin'." Glancing at the woman who'd so effectively knocked his buddy out—twice—the skinny man made a choice to talk. "They told us to have a little fun..." He paused as he stumbled over amending his instructions. "Make sure her face was bruised and let her know there'd be more if she didn't shut up..." He stopped talking as Jas slowly straightened from the door.

"Your job was to beat and rape me?" Her voice was silky with menace.

"Ah, no, no!" the man denied, shaking his head. "Jus', ah, they said you needed a les... Earl and I was to..." The man looked desperately at Blaster. "It was a job, man. Just a job. There ain't many jobs," he insisted earnestly.

"Is that right?" Blaster scratched his jaw as if he were considering that. "Seems to me y'all got lots of jobs with the movie people in town. Has this motel ever been full before? How about the diner, ever had a line before? And the U-Haul rental at the gas station, has it ever been used up before? What do you think happens if you mess up the lady's face? The movie people leave and there are no more jobs. What do you suppose the folk around here are gonna do with you and Earl when they figure what you did? Mighty shortsighted plan you got. Now start at the beginning and tell us what happened today."

The man on the floor gaped at Blaster a few seconds as he absorbed that bit of logic. It seemed to penetrate and he glanced down at his shoes.

"These two guys jus' bought our old shoes this morning. Paid us a hundred dollars for 'em. Then they was in the bar this evening and told us they had a job for us. Paid us a hundred dollars each this time. We was supposed to rough her up. Said it'd be easy..." Wide eyes darting between them, he gulped in air.

"What's your name anyway?" Blaster asked calmly.

"Morley, my name is Morley. This is Earl," he nervously indicated the slumped man beside him.

"Have you ever raped a woman, Morley?" Blaster asked gravely.

"Ah, no, sir. We wasn't..."

"Don't start lying now, it'll make her mad. The thing you need to understand is rape is not about the sex, Morley. It's about control and dominance. It's a violent act meant to destroy more than her looks. Right now the lady is having fun and the two of you are looking a little banged up on the floor.

"Did you know she's a fully trained Marine? When a Marine lays hand to weapon, it's a serious thing, Morley. What do you suppose would happen if she felt threatened? The fellas who sent you know all about her training and how effectively she uses it. I 'spect she has at least two guns and possibly four knives on her. It's hard to tell. Do you get what I'm saying?" Blaster was still on his haunches looking Morley square in the eye.

Morley glanced apprehensively at Jas, who smiled at him, and then she chuckled as he shrank back, flattening himself against the wall. Standing with one shoulder leaning on the door, she was cleaning the undersides of her nails with a wicked-looking knife. Its matte finish made it appear even more threatening. In weak light from the overhead fixture, the dark blade managed to glow menacingly as it moved in her hand.

"I see you got the picture. Those guys were hoping she'd kill one or both of you. Do you understand me?" Blaster paused for the information to sink in. Morley nodded mutely after a moment. "So your new best buddies sent you here to die. They made sure of it by warming her up to full defensive alert by shooting at her this morning and then sent you two idiots to attack her. Your part of the plan was to die so they could have her arrested and shut down the movie."

Morley gulped as he glanced between Blaster and Jas. He appeared to be making every effort to meld with the wall as his eyes ricocheted between them.

Beside Morley, Earl groggily grunted and grabbed his head. "That bitch broke my skull. She fucking..." Earl's eyes slowly opened and he looked around, his face twisting in an ugly snarl.

"Shut up, Earl!" Morley hissed without taking eyes off Jas, who'd straightened from the door. The knife had disappeared on her body somewhere and she stood with her arms slightly bent. Obviously in ready stance, though the look on her face was barely interested.

Earl, still holding his head, gaped at Morley. "What the fuck? Since when do you fuckin' order me around? I'm gonna beat you to a goddamn pulp right after I'm finished with the bitch."

"Shut the fuck up!" Morley repeated slowly as he watched Jas stroll the short distance to stand beside Blaster, who was still on his haunches.

Blaster stood as Earl pushed himself up, using the wall. It was apparent he was dizzy for a moment then he got a hold of himself. Even though Earl was obviously quite young, he had a heavy look about him. He carried the oily weight of too much to drink, too much to eat and too little time in a shower. The skin under his eyes sagged as if it were already tired of being on his face. His thick lips had a tendency to hang open. It was a shame because the open mouth showed how little he knew about dental hygiene.

"You hit me, bitch. You fuckin' hit me and you're gonna pay." Earl's thick, but soft body weight shifted, telegraphing his intention to rush Jas. Morley moved amazingly fast, straightening off the floor and grabbing his buddy by the shoulders to pin him against the wall.

"For once in your life you're gonna shut up and listen to me, Earl. These people are killers. Think about it. They put us down without breaking a sweat. They can do it again." Morley glanced over his shoulder at Blaster and Jas. "Just let us go and you'll never see us again, mister. Honest."

Blaster shrugged. "It's up to the lady."

"Ma'am, please. He's an idiot. He's got two kids to support. Killin' him would close down your movie for sure. Please, ma'am. You'll never see us again."

"What the fuck?" Earl mumbled in consternation at Morley's strange behavior.

"There's the door, idiot. You're not tied up." Jas flicked a graceful arm at the door. "And I wouldn't kill him. Just have a little fun. Why don't you let ol' Earl go, hon? Baby boy wants to dance and he's sweet-talked me into the mood." Her smile was soft as her head tilted to the side in charming question. Her arms hung loosely at her sides, the only sign of danger were her hands. They slowly opened and closed at her sides.

Morley turned to Earl. Nose to nose he gritted out between clenched teeth, "You damn, dumb fuck. You do something stupid and leave my sister to raise those kids alone, I'll kill you myself. You're gonna walk outta here and do it with your mouth shut. Come on."

Morley dragged a confused, muttering Earl out the door.

"Well, that was disappointing." Jas shut the door behind them and turned to grin at Blaster. "But interesting. Why did you make me out to be the devil with tits? Damn, I was beginning to believe I could grow horns with the best of them. We both know who the real killer in the room is."

"Seemed the boys needed a little fear to spread around to their friends and you're fully capable of everything I said. Certainly armed with more weapons than I mentioned."

Blaster ran a hand around the back of his neck as he eyed her leaning against the door again. Through the tank top he could see her breasts puckered in excitement. The intoxicating aroma that was so singularly hers barely tinged the air he breathed. She was aroused and wet. Sweet Jesus, how was anyone supposed to resist her? He answered himself—by remembering she could probably remove a man's balls before the message got to his brain that they were missing.

Blaster recognized the move she'd used to put Earl down was from an Eastern discipline. The core of that art was speed and stealth. It taught its students to work with their own strengths regardless of the size of their opponent. He'd never studied it himself, but he'd seen the results when an outwardly small master got through with an opponent. Jas appeared quite proficient. Damn, his dick was a rain stick pointing at the astounding woman.

Jas raised a brow and chuckled. "And how many weapons do you have stashed? More than four I'm betting."

"I told you I'm a prepared sorta of guy." Blaster let his eyes travel up and down her. "And I know for a fact that you're carrying more than four." She was vibrating with energy. Adrenaline still sang in her veins as it did in his own.

"Oh yeah? How do you know that?" The purr in her voice was perilous and he knew it as she pushed away from the door to stroll into his space again.

Blaster let a lazy smile tug at the corner of his lips. She stopped intimately close. His hands slowly cupped the two guns holstered under her arms hidden by her jacket. "'Coz I saw these." His hands trailed down to her waist then to her hips. Palms on her hip bones slowly moved around to her back, in a whisper he counted, "Three and four," as his hands passed over two knives. He stopped. "Want me to go on?"

Taut under his touch, she was motionless in the fashion of a cat that's done stalking and waiting to pounce. He expected her to move away with a smart comment or knee him in the nuts. Both of them were dangerously high on the sexual struggle that'd sprung up. He knew it was stupid to give in to the temptation to touch her but, damn, she'd walked her luscious self into his space one too many times. He wasn't made of good intentions. At the moment he didn't have one good intention on him.

"I believe it's my turn to search." Jas smiled, looking directly into his eyes. Lids lowered over large, liquid-soft eyes in sexy half blinks. He noticed she never actually blinked but it looked as if she did. Another skill. Her opponent was supposed to think she was relaxed, even flirting with him, but in reality she never took her eyes off him, even to blink.

Jas reached around behind him and placed both hands on the globes of his ass, squeezing lightly. Blaster's eyes narrowed in surprise but he didn't move. Her hands slid to the dents in his hips where male muscles flexed when he walked. Pausing there, her hands moved up and down in a slow, exploratory caress while she watched his soul pace behind his pupils.

This man was made for sex. Sweaty, nasty, satisfying sex. There was no puppy adoration in his eyes when he looked at her. No dazzled worship that could easily morph into obsession. This rippling specimen carried the intoxicating spice of danger and complete awareness. And it was amazing to watch the beast jerk on its chain.

It was the respect of his awareness that really did it for her. He didn't assume a thing, he expected her to be a challenge. Damn, it felt good to play on equal footing.

This man knew all about control. He would show her the animal within but never let her have it. Surrendering the beast would be too high a price for a free spirit this used to moving on. That was okay. Teasing a beast was often more fun than actual playtime. And this particular one was so damn sexy.

"Mmmm, nothing here." Jas' hands were low on his hips and sliding slowly to the front of his pants. Blaster's pupils dilated, blue disappearing into black. An interesting indicator as her hands slid to the hard thigh muscle bunched in front. Her left thumb rested lightly along the bulge going down his pant leg. Both of them were still.

"I think I found something." Her lips barely moved as she breathed the words.

Her words softly washed over his lips, fanning the flames licking up from her hands. The scent of her filled his lungs as he inhaled and swallowed the saliva flooding his mouth in response. Woman and wild. Oh how she tempted him.

Blaster knew he was a little nuts with wanting her. The allure of her female power had been a magnet from the first. However, he wasn't a total idiot—yet. "You know, it's considered 'best practice' *not* to handle ordinance you don't intend to use," he warned softly.

The air around them was thick with anticipation. This could go either way. The physical effort of remaining perfectly still under her hands was painful as he waited for her to make up her mind. He knew he was holding his hand out to a feral cat. If he moved wrong, he'd bear the marks of her claws. If she accepted him, he'd still feel the claws but, damn, getting under those sharp talons was about the only thing he wanted in life right now.

"You're the one who thinks he's my boyfriend," Jas accused and invited. Just the type of statement meant to drive a man insane. Deciphering that complicated little comment added another edge to the situation.

"I'm good on a mission, good to see that no one drives home from the bar and an excellent choice to burn off that sexy mad, babe. But if you decide you wanna do it that way, you'd better be ready. I don't share and I don't make promises I can't keep."

They were speaking softly with mouths close enough to taste the words passing between them. Both bodies held painfully still, waiting for the other to break, to give in to the onslaught of lust crashing around them in a hurricane gale.

He was well aware this power struggle was old as time. Men have been losing it forever. It wasn't logical or even fair. She'd placed herself in his space. Sliding her hands around his hips toward his cock was a debilitating tactic. Stopping at that point and giving him a nonanswer to his direct question was the power play and he wasn't about to give her the upper hand that way. Women won every time a man went Neanderthal and jumped her. This was one time the male of the species would win, even if it killed him.

"No one asked for a promise, Huck. Maybe I just wanted to see what you're armed with."

Her sassy smile just about did it as she came close to denying she was pushing him. It was a weapon women used effectively. The hint of innocence inflamed a male, adding anger to lust as he suspected she was not going to admit she'd invited his attention.

A muscle ticked in his cheek. "I'm armed, Jas. What I'm not is gentle. I've made no secret of the fact you turn me on, but I'm not asking, sweetheart. It'd be your request. Don't start something you can't finish. And don't think that weapon has a hair trigger." He inhaled deeply. "I can smell the want on you. There's nothing I'd rather do than get at that cream between your legs and you know it. But you can't force me to take without it being offered."

Jas abruptly swung away from him and paced across the spare little motel room. There was nowhere to go. Turning to face him again, she leaned against the door. Hands on hips, legs braced, she wasn't relaxed. *What the hell was she doing?* screamed through her brain.

Okay, so he was wicked temptation on the hoof and she'd been in need for some time. Not a reason to be stupid. She knew he was a dangerous man. Violence was obviously his business and had been for a long time. Hadn't she had enough violent men in her life?

Not one like this, her body moaned. *We want him! We want him! We want him!* The damp heat burning up her panties was chanting in rhythm with the tiny trembling contractions in the place that wanted him most. That alone shocked her. She'd never actually hungered for a man before tonight. Never.

Lust was common and quick to dissipate. This was something else. It compelled her to trust because he didn't demand it. Now that was a wild-haired thought. Frowning, she decided to test the waters with a little trust.

"I have a video of a high-ranking military officer forcing a woman. I got out of the service a year early with full benefits but didn't surrender the evidence. The deal was he leaves me alone and I leave him alone. That's the only thing I can think of that the intimidation campaign might be about. But I can't prove that it's him behind this crap."

Blaster was breathing deeply. Her abrupt choice wasn't a surprise. He'd have been shocked if she'd chosen intimacy. It was his disappointment that was surprisingly difficult to deal with. On top of that, her unvarnished revelation burned through him.

She hadn't said it, but there was little question that the "woman" was herself. She'd been forced somehow. The only way a woman like her could be forced made for an ugly image in his head. She'd have to be restrained, possibly drugged and totally helpless. She wasn't the helpless sort.

A red haze of insane anger washed over him. He hadn't felt this type of rage in a long time. It was helplessly debilitating as it consumed his mind and some part of him recognized it. Waiting patiently for the madness to dissipate, he remained perfectly still, his eyes burning into her.

"Did you hear me," Jas demanded impatiently as he simply stood staring at her. It wasn't a dumb-look stare. The intensity in his look made her want to step back. She could swear she saw flames behind the dark wells of his dilated pupils.

"Yes. Makes sense," he responded shortly. Blaster still needed a few minutes to clear the fumes of the killing rage from his mind. He walked over to the little uncomfortable chair beside the bed. Sitting, he concentrated on making himself as nonthreatening as possible.

She'd rejected one intimacy only to extend another. This one was infinitely more dangerous and its effect on him a handicap. He needed to get past the emotions and deal with the facts. Her kind of beautiful made a man stop and stare. Beyond that, if a guy was an adrenaline junkie, much like himself, she presented the type of pull that could make men do stupid things.

Blaster closed his eyes and stretched his legs out in front of him, his butt on the edge of the chair as his torso relaxed. Stacking his hands behind his head and tipping the chair back on the wall, he asked cautiously, "Where is this..." Blaster paused, and considered the likely issue of the room being bugged. "Officer stationed now?"

He could hear her start pacing. The small room only offered the area in front of the bed to the sink vanity and back for her use. "He's at LOGCOM in Georgia."

Great, a member of Logistics Command. Blaster absorbed the information coldly. It didn't matter how high this maggot climbed. He was still the lowest life form. Living off the pain of others, eating from their wounds as surely as the larva Blaster had named him.

"Reasonably close. Why didn't you nail him with it to begin with?"

"At the time I didn't have the resources to believe I'd survive his court-martial. The deal was, I got out of the military with a clean slate and full benefits. If I die, become permanently incapacitated, anything like that, a copy goes to the Pentagon, *Washington Post* and *TIME Magazine*. If I ever call the party holding the evidence and ask for the copies back, it gets sent to the media. That's insurance against capture and torture."

"Good plan. So you think he's getting nervous now? Maybe your success makes you a bigger threat?"

"Wouldn't you? The unknown black girl from the hood is easy to get rid of. A successful actress with hard evidence is another story."

"I see your point." Blaster sighed and his eyes opened to watch her pace back and forth. "His only resource is to intimidate you and hopefully remove your success. Making you once again unimportant."

"Looks like that's the plan, but I still can't prove it's him behind the events here."

"Doesn't damn well matter, Jas." Blaster sat forward, his elbows on knees. "This bastard should be making sure you lead a charmed life. Who cares if you can prove he's behind this? Make him responsible for ensuring it goes away. Why the hell should you sit back and let it happen? Use his ass. We both know it's him."

Jas stopped and looked at Blaster expectantly. "You have a thought on how to use his ass?"

"Yep. Let's get some sleep. We'll discuss it in the morning somewhere else."

Jas nodded. Blaster stood and went to the door as she watched silently. The door closed behind him and she frowned slightly. No "goodbye", no "see ya later" or "meet you for breakfast". He'd just left. Doubts about trusting him with the information she'd given swirled around her head as she turned to the bathroom for a much-needed shower. Passing the door she flipped the dead bolt but was too eager to wash the day off to pause and slide the chain on.

Ten minutes later Jas emerged from a pleasantly steamy bathroom, flipped her towel over the sad little luggage rack and hit the wall switch. Last thing was to put the chain on the door.

She usually wore a T-shirt and leggings to bed. Her life history made her a cautious sleeper, but tonight none were clean. Living on the road sucked and the town's little Laundromat was only open during business hours. Shooting schedule and the problems they'd been having had kept her away from it this week and yesterday she'd just been too sore after the fall.

It wasn't 'til she slipped into bed and settled that she heard the soft even breathing coming from the floor on the other side of the bed. Leaning over the side, Jas looked down at the man sleeping on her floor.

Chapter Three

"What the hell?" Jas hissed at him. No response. Reaching down, she was about to poke him in the chest. His hand caught her wrist in a crushing grip as his eyes opened and abruptly let go of her wrist.

"What are you doing?" Jas tried again.

"Sleeping."

"Not in my –"

"Yes, right here. You've told me his secret. If the place is bugged, he knows. I'm staying. Now get some sleep, woman. You have to look all dewy and sexy for filming in the morning. I'll know if someone is trying to get in. I'm here so you can relax and forget about the bad guys."

"What makes you think I'll relax? The dangerous person is already in the room, Huckleberry."

"I want you, Jas, but I'd like to survive the fun. So until you fall in love with me, we'll just play nice." Blaster shut his eyes.

"That's it? You think the little woman is going to be grateful for the big man's protection and nod off? Listen here, Huck, I've been handling –"

"Jesus, Jas, shut up and go to sleep. If I were going to hurt you, I'd have done it while you were in the shower and had no idea I was in the room." Blaster blew out a deep breath. "I'm not here to upset you, woman. There's no way to prove that to your suspicious mind, you realize that, right? Time is the only way you'll truly get it. So sleep with the pistol in hand, whatever it takes. I'm not leaving."

Keeping his eyes shut, he waited for her reaction. Would she buy it? He sure as hell was not leaving. Well, not without a lot of protest. If she did insist, it'd be a very uncomfortable night. Course if he stayed right here, it'd still be the floor. The flat, lonely, frustrating, hard-on-all-night floor.

Jas rolled over and pulled the sheet up to her chin. Getting out and finding clothes wasn't an option. Telling him to shut his eyes would be an invitation. She closed her eyes in exasperation. She was just going to rest a few minutes.

She woke to the sound of the shower. Squinting at the bedside clock showed her it was four-fifteen in the morning. The only thing she really wanted to do was moan and roll over. The shower went off. Jas was out of bed, pulling on the first clean things she could find. No way was she going to be naked and cowering under the sheets when he came out of the bathroom.

Sitting on the already-made bed, fluffing gel through the short loose curls of her hair, Jas glanced at him as he emerged from the bathroom. There was no cloud of steam behind him and the little motel towel slung low on lean hips barely disguised the reason for the cold shower.

Six feet isn't overly tall for a man. Blaster's body was tightly packed with muscle and scars. Her casual glance was easily snagged on the map of a violent life played across rippling flesh as he strolled around her to squat at the bag he'd dropped on the floor by his bedding. Golden hair covered his legs and trailed up from beneath the towel at his groin to spread across his chest in a generous pelt. It gave him a strange angelic glow in the odd motel lighting. Angelic and marked by death. Most of the scars were obviously burns.

"You like dancing through hell, Huckleberry?" Jas asked quietly.

"Good way to put it." Blaster plucked his jeans, standard denim shirt and socks out of the bag and stood. Turning to her, he flicked the knot on the towel, dropped it and stepped into the jeans while talking. Hoisting the jeans up over his butt and tucking cock and balls in, he left the fly open as he chuckled and acknowledged her comment while pulling on his shirt. "I'm a demo specialist. Fire in all its forms. I like to know how and why it does what it does and then bend it to my will."

Jas didn't even blink as she watched him dress. His total lack of modesty didn't bother her. He was so matter-of-fact, so comfortable in his skin that she couldn't be threatened by his nudity. His body fascinated her with its stories as she watched him swiftly button the shirt and tuck it into open jeans.

Apparently Barry was partially right in his idea that she could trust Blaster through him. She believed the two of them and their story of a grim childhood. She recognized the signs of truth in it and couldn't resist a feeling of kinship with the two little boys they had been. It was difficult to suspect this man of being the enemy who stalked her. His was an old soul. His loyalty to Barry and Barry's loyalty and faith in him were genuine and that bought a huge chunk of her trust in a way she couldn't resist.

"Not all those scars are from playing with fire, Huck. I see two gunshot wounds, a couple knife wounds and some cigarette burns."

"Yeah, misspent youth. I never could back away from a good fight. Even the bad ones are fun'ner than doing nothing."

"Action. You're an action junkie," Jas marveled. "How the hell did you make it to the good guy's side? This personality is gangsta'."

Blaster sat beside her on the end of the bed to pull on socks and stomp his feet into the worn boots. "At eighteen the judge gave me a choice. Do the time in jail or join up. I wasn't completely brain-dead and figured I'd get some leave from the military. No leave from jail. Found that the service was a great place for a guy like me. Volunteered my way into Special Forces. You know, volunteer for every damn dangerous thing that comes along and took every class I could to master the good stuff. If one survives long

enough, they let ya play with the really bad boys. Damn, the action there is fierce. I was hooked."

At the end of the bed, sitting side by side, Jas took one of his hands in hers. Her touch was gentle and he let her have it. Turning the hand over, she examined the marks on both sides. "These are your work. Badges of honor. The gunshot wounds too. Knife wounds are the bar fights. What are the cigarette burns?"

"Exactly what you think they are, the past." Blaster looked into her eyes and let her see his soul. There was no pain, simply knowledge. The worst type of knowledge. The type she knew intimately.

"Your time with..." The thought trailed off. "Does Barry have the marks?"

"No."

Jas jerked as if he'd hit her with the word. It was a small movement one makes when absorbing pain. "Only you?"

"Yes."

"I see."

"Those marks were the proof that got Barry out of that house and kept me out of jail. They saved us both. There's no pain in them, Jas. Not for me. Don't let them hold pain for you.

"You know the drill, when someone intentionally leaves a mark, it's a form of control. We both know that control through fear is more painful than receiving the mark. I always knew that, even as a kid. It didn't work with me. Unfortunately it worked on Barry in the cruelest way. They knew if they marked me, they had him." Blaster smiled, his hand closing up over hers. "He still feels those marks, I can't make him quit. I'd rather you didn't."

Jas regarded him seriously a few seconds. "As a human, I have to put value on them, but that's all. I'm not some bleeding heart, Huck."

Blaster grinned. "How could I forget? You're the hard-ass bitch-goddess who kicks ass and checks dog tags later."

Jas tugged at her hand. The mood had lightened and she was ready to get out of close proximity with him. She still agreed with her first impression of him. He was *more* in an indefinable way. Sexier, more intriguing, more mysterious, more male...more. She needed space to process him and he kept being right next to her.

Blaster retained his hold gently. "Wait a sec. We need to talk about something. Soon as we walk out that door, I'm your boyfriend. I'm gonna play that part, Jas. The crew needs to believe it, if only for this week. Tell me you'll avoid takin' a limb off when I touch you."

"Touch me? You think my boyfriend gets to touch me?"

"This one does. Cut the crap. I'm convinced you're a hard-ass. Can we at least pretend we've gotten through all this posturing? If I'm with someone, I want them. I'm not going to be told I can't touch. I know you think we'd spend months scraping for top

dog in a real relationship, I don't. If I were lucky enough to be your man, I'd be so damn proud, Jas. I wouldn't have time to think about proving what a hard-ass I am. Can we act like we've discovered we respect each other too much to want to diminish our partner in any way?"

"You're serious? You don't think there'd be a power struggle between us?" Jas was momentarily amazed at this unusual bit of male reasoning and realized there hadn't been much of a power struggle so far. There'd been a whole hell of a lot of sexual tension, but no question that it was up to her to say yes or no.

He'd handed over control, even in front of the two idiots last night. Doing it without subterfuge about his own abilities. No flowery compliments or slick innuendoes about what a lucky girl she was to have this respect from him. Unlike every other powerful male she'd ever met, this one seemed to have no need to prove anything.

"Nope. I damn well adore every dangerous talent you have. Your military background makes it so I don't have to explain who I am. I think we'd go at it like wild animals, but in the sack. Can't imagine there would enough beds in the world for at least six months." He grinned in his lazy way that wasn't lazy at all.

"Why is it so important the crew thinks we're bumping uglies and likin' it? Can't we just be white about it? You know, smiley but proper."

Blaster barked out a laugh at that. "Do I look proper to you? Would you believe I'd care about proper if I want a woman? Hell, that's not gonna work. Are you concerned that I'll take advantage of you and start groping? I'm well aware of the rules, relax, but we need to appear as natural as possible with each other.

"I don't think this room is bugged, I've gone over it. Bad guy has eyes on you but not ears. I'd like him to believe getting to you involves goin' through me. It might stop him in the short term so Barry can finish this film. Then you and I have all the time in the world to work a permanent fix."

"He'll know who you are? Knows and thinks your ass is scary enough for him to lay off?"

Blaster shrugged with a little grin. "If he's got any connections, he'll be shitting big ones shortly. Anything happens to me, he has a team to deal with. He's gonna understand what that means."

Jas snorted and laughed. "Careful, you could damage yourself on that ego, Huck."

Blaster lifted her hand, turning it over so his lips feathered the inside of her wrist as his eyes remained locked with hers. "Don't worry, what's likely to damage me is sitting beside me," he whispered across the beat of her vein under the thin covering of sensitive skin.

"I thought you didn't want to lose a limb, Huck. We don't have an audience." In the second it took to change the mood, her eyes were narrowed and her body tensed. Threat rippled around them.

He let go of her hand and stood. "Wanted you ready, Sheena. That's the dangerous bitc...ahh...woman who gets me going." Grinning big, he stepped back as she stood. "So what's the schedule for today?" Shrugging into his shoulder holster, he watched her slip a little pistol into the top of the knee-high boots, put on a harness with double gun holsters and knife sheath down from the neck in back.

"First a rundown on the choreography for the next fight scene then breakfast, makeup and costume trailer. Shoot a few scenes and hopefully get most of them done." Jas pulled on the silk bomber jacket that was just loose enough to hide her arsenal. The stretchy waist snapped together. She left the rest of the jacket open in an enticing view.

Standing before him in clingy black pants, which were tucked into the tall soft boots, a sandstone tank top and the black silk bomber jacket, she was class wrapped around deadly intent.

Beautiful eyes were coldly direct as she looked at him. "I'll go along with your little plan, Huckleberry. I agree with most of your reasoning if you are who you say you are. Here is a safety tip for you though. I am a dangerous bitch, no preparation required. I was raised in a combat zone. I don't know how to stand down from full alert. If you think I'm relaxed, it's an act. Do not mistake the thin skin of civil behavior for weakness. I'm a damn good actress. When I'm with a guy, I want him too. I'm used to taking what I want. I'll be your girlfriend, Huckleberry. Don't expect it to be easy." Jas turned and strode to the little bathroom.

Rolling out of bed and dressing double time wasn't a problem. The years in the Marines made it second nature. However leaving without visiting the bathroom wasn't wise. She took the time to rinse her face and brush teeth. Then picked up her purse and went to the door.

"I'll struggle through." Blaster pulled on a windbreaker and followed her out into the early morning gloom. The shiver that raced down his spine had nothing to do with morning air. Her warning went straight to his libido. Goddamn! She turned him on. It wasn't that he discounted a thing she said. The thing that got him was his gut belief in every word.

The sun was about to make the horizon but it wasn't visible yet. The large parking lot was locked in a twilight gloom that created odd shadows and murky dark abysses between the trailers. "Where do you rehearse?"

"The main floor of an empty building just around the corner from the diner. We go in the van," Jas added when Blaster headed to a large, dented and generally scruffy looking F-150 parked at the end of the lot.

At the other end of the motel strip, several guys were making their way to the film company van. "Do you recognize them?" Blaster asked softly as the two of them approached the vehicle.

"Every one," Jas confirmed.

"Trust them?"

"All but one." Jas slipped her hand in his and smiled as if they were the lovers they pretended to be. "You tell me which one is working on more than stunts at breakfast." They'd reached the men at the van and Jas introduced Blaster.

The four stunt men accepted Blaster with the standard early morning man noise, a grunt and seeming unconcern. It was the fifth man who pasted an ingratiating grin over eyes that were too sharp.

"Blaster, this is Mark, stunt coordinator and security," Jas introduced as the two shook hands.

"So? Here to see the little woman do her thing?" Mark asked with a handshake that was a bit too tight. Blaster let him win the handshake squeeze with a casual smile.

Mark turned to Jas, dismissing Blaster before he could answer. "Babe, sorry about what happened yesterday. If I'd been up there, it wouldn't have. Can't be everywhere at once. I can see why you felt a need for the security of a man."

Blaster felt the hairs on back of his neck ripple as the moron tried to step between him and Jas. The man went so far as to reach out and grasp Jas' shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

"I've suggested we intensify your security. It might have been better to let me handle this instead of putting your friend in danger," Mark added.

Jas shifted around Mark in a natural-looking move, ending up sliding under Blaster's arm as if she'd done it a million times. Both her arms going around his waist from the front and back, her body turned into his side. "Don't worry, Mark. The only danger this man is in is from me." Her voice was a sexy, purring chuckle.

She melted into him and it became necessary for Blaster to remind himself that she was a damn fine actress. The feel of her rubbing up him to get his arm around her was too natural. Again he was reminded of a feral cat, her tight body sensuously twining around him while she bristled with weapons. His reaction was totally natural, no acting required as heat flash-fired his groin and the "stupid head" tried to rise.

Amazed at the moron's insulting attitude toward the woman rubbing up his side, Blaster made a point of not even glancing at the idiot, giving all his attention to Jas and making it clear that she was his focus.

"Damn straight." He grinned at her as he agreed with her statement of independence. Their lips were barely an inch apart and sexual tension swirled around them.

Blaster made sure she knew she was choosing the face they showed. Responding to her with acceptance anyone could see, but not pressing the Neanderthal button. It was her show. Mark was trying to establish himself as the protector when she brought her "friend" into the scene. His display told Blaster more than he wanted to know about the moron. Jas' reaction added the details.

Mark's fully inflated ego made it impossible for him to notice that she wasn't impressed with him. Her aggression-defense skill level was so far above the man, it was laughable. Jas hadn't shot him down because she needed him for some reason. She was

willing to put the pretend relationship up as a shield and was watching to see if Blaster could read the situation or if he'd sink to Mark's attitude.

Rehearsal was uneventful except for Jas' frustration. She kept insisting on more intensity. Blaster spent the time leaning against the wall after he'd had a look around the empty building. The fight choreography was interesting. Nicely vicious and deceptively simple while it showed off Jas' abilities. The men doing the scene with her were standard stunt men, appropriately scruffy for bad guys.

Mark was obviously talented. There were no wasted or outrageous moves in the sequence. He directed the action with an eye to authentic abilities. There was the reason Jas needed him. He excelled at this portion of his job.

Thinking about her putting up with this blustering ass brought a scowl to Blaster's face. He knew it was part of the business, part of being a gorgeous woman. He'd just never thought about the shit women had to deal with before. Even women who were completely capable of snapping the ass's neck had to deal with it.

The group was back at the motel by eight-thirty for showers before rushing up to location. Breakfast was eaten on the way to the shoot site. The rest of the crew was already there. Jas only had an hour for makeup and wardrobe and then they were shooting. There was no time to chat privately with either Jas or Barry.

Blaster made sure he was highly visible, introducing himself as Jas' friend whenever possible. Amused when she noticed his tactic, Jas leaned against him in a calm that wasn't exactly an act anymore. His behavior told her she could trust him to behave as promised in public. He was a touchy guy, but not rude or invasive. He didn't get in the way.

Relieved, Jas found there was a lot of fun to be had in this situation. He wanted her. No question about that. It was a circumstance where teasing his beast was a good thing. And who wouldn't want to have their own tightly chained beast pacing behind those beautiful blue eyes? She even went so far as to brush his lips with hers, right before they stepped out to do the first take.

Blaster hadn't actually seen anyone taking photos of them as they moved around the set but he had almost no doubt they were. Hopefully they'd gotten the kiss and uploaded that to the source of the trouble.

A military man always assessed a new threat as thoroughly as possible. Right now Blaster was sure there was a computer somewhere spitting out the little information that was public of his military record. He sincerely hoped the bastard had enough clearance to see more than the public material. Since he couldn't confirm the information was getting through, it was time to set the hounds to hunting.

Stepping back from the set but remaining in a clear line of sight, Blaster fished his cell phone out of his pocket and placed a call. A deep, calm voice answered on the first ring.

"Blaster, what's the problem?"

"What? Can't a guy call 'cause he misses ya?" Blaster drawled back to his former Unit commander Gray Winston.

"It'd be a first," Gray mused. "Where do I send the bail money?"

"Not this time, but hold the thought. What I need is information."

"What're we looking at?" Gray's voice changed subtly from friendly banter to business.

"Do some nosing around and don't worry about being quiet. Looking for a Marine officer who would have had contact with Marine Jasmina Carson around the time of her discharge. This officer is currently stationed at LOGCOM in Georgia. Anyone questions, you make noise about not being at liberty to discuss it unless someone does something stupid. When you get the officer's name, I suspect you'll find what I'm looking for without having to go deep. Concentrate on his entertainment habits and how they might involve unwilling enlisted people under his command, mainly minority women."

Silence on the other end for a few seconds. "You're asking a damn dangerous thing. Is the line secure?" Gray's voice had gone silky with the eerie calm of a predator.

"Hope not." Blaster's grin was more bared teeth than humor. "Don't give a rat's ass if they have a tap on it or directional pointed at me."

"Fuck. Your position could be exposed and you want some Marine officer to know you're sifting his shit?"

"I'd like him to know exactly whose fist is about to be up his ass."

"Who's backup? I assume Carson is your concern and shortly you'll be having some trouble."

Blaster heard computer keys clicking through the phone. "Jackson still loafing up at your place? I 'spect he's about done with the little field trip."

Gray Winston owned an elite security firm that catered to global corporations and their need for multifaceted protection. He handled everything from terrorist and kidnapping threats to corporate espionage defense.

The Unit, though retired from the military, had not ceased being a cohesive group. The bonds forged between them went deeper than blood. As a military commander, Gray had chosen men for his team with instincts older than any military abilities profiles. Descendant of a long line of Seminole warriors, Gray was that indefinable leader who gathered a family around him. Their fit as a Unit was so seamless they became the perfect beast. A fierce fighting entity who'd earned the legacy tag of Ghost Unit. Nothing official about that name. It was only used verbally between the few people who had a view of their actual activity. Ghost Unit referred to their style of accomplishing the seemingly impossible mission without leaving a trace of their passing.

Currently they led separate lives across the country, but were never really separated. Often one or more of them would step in on a job for Gray – or each other. If one called, the entire beast was alert.

"I'm putting you on speaker. Jackson's right here."

"Hey, Jack." Blaster gave Jackson his location before outlining the situation for him. "There have been several accidents on the set but the last two days it became serious. Yesterday they didn't know I was on site. They used a near-miss shot to spook Jas then sent two locals to attack her that evening. She could have handled the locals but I suspect they wanted her to do something stupid like kill one. With her training, it would have been difficult not to."

Jackson whistled low. "Jesus. She's that good? I've never read anything about her defensive skills. Poor country boy like you must be dazzled by all that long-legged danger in a woman. Did you see her at the Golden Globes? That dress was a weapon sure to cut any boy off at the knees."

"Get your head off her damn dress or whatever," Blaster growled. "I ain't seen no golden globes around here. I've been busy watching a couple professionals circle her."

"Golden Globes are an acting award, idiot. She was nominated for Best Supporting Actress. Don't you know who she is? Damn, Blaster, Jasmina Carson is expected to be big. The movie she's working on now is projected to be a blockbuster."

"I know who she is and it has nothing to do with all that Hollywood you're talking. Don't get your hopes up, Jack. She's not one of your innocent little princesses." Blaster's tone dropped to an unusual seriousness. "Right now the lady doesn't trust anyone. I need info from Gray and someone deep cover in case things go south for some reason. That means you keep a distance, Jack. The men who did the near-miss shot were professionals. They set a stage and got out clean. It was flawless 'cept I creased one."

Gray cut into the conversation. "Anything else you can tell me about who I'm looking for? So far, everyone is coming up squeaky clean."

"She didn't tell me a name. As I said, she trusts no one, especially not guys with a military background. What I do know is she has recorded evidence of the officer raping someone. The evidence was her ticket out of the military clean. She still has it."

"I see," Gray murmured. "What makes you believe this is the person coming after her?"

"It's her assumption as well," Blaster added. "All the accidents have occurred around her. No other apparent constant. She said she didn't use the evidence against him at the time because she had no expectation of surviving his court-martial. She seems to think he might be getting nervous because of her success. So if Jack has heard of her, there might be something to that."

"A lone woman with no support making that accusation is not the same as a respected actress coming forward with evidence in hand. The bastard has to be getting nervous. She could really fuck up his little habit."

Blaster kept an eye on the filming as he talked. He'd thought her affect on him would start to fade by now. Beautiful became commonplace when it was looked at long enough. He hadn't been watching her long enough apparently. His other head kept

insistently reminding him of that fact. Even talking on the phone he was aware of her every move.

When had his cock become “Jas radar”? And how did he make it stop? Shit, finding ways to make it stop would involve all sorts of experiments. Every one of those tests included her and the creative things both of them were capable of.

“We’ll see what comes up.” Gray was obviously already distracted with what he was looking at.

“I’ll be heading down from Ohio soon as we get off the phone. I expect an introduction after this,” Jackson added.

“Let me know when you get here, Jack.” Blaster didn’t bother responding to the introduction part. He wasn’t sure he wanted Jackson fawning on her. Flipping the phone shut, he didn’t feel much better about the situation. Something didn’t set right with the entire state of affairs. A “dog” was sniffing around Jas, but the effort to wear a different skin each time it got close said there was more involved. Nothing straightforward about it.

Blaster figured if he were trying to intimidate a person, he would make it very clear who was doing it. All this effort to make it look racial said the force behind the action was used to concealing its identity. Blaster watched them start filming a new sequence as he thought about it. He couldn’t put his finger on exactly what this felt like.

Several times during the morning, her eyes sought him. The first time Jas quirked an eyebrow and glanced around. Her body-language question about gave him a buzz. She expected him to read her. He shook his head and grinned, telling her the area was free of lurkers today. Both her brows went up, asking him if he was sure. He nodded slightly and subtly adjusted his dick in an arrogant motion that told her how sure he was. Her response startled a bark of laughter out of him when she turned around and bent over to adjust the laces on her boots. That move was just as arrogant and direct as the one he’d sent. It was also playing with him. She couldn’t have been clearer with the message to kiss her ass if she’d said the words.

He had no problem kissing whatever she presented. She’d figure that out at some point. Until then, he chuckled and winked when she stood, certain she’d caught his reply. He’d kiss that ass anytime, anywhere. They were ready to shoot the next scene and Jas went back to work. The conversation had been carried out across the clearing from each other. Blaster blew out a breath and shook his head.

The Unit had perfected silent communication. Their private method was a mix of sign language, military hand signals and Native American signs. All six men were fluent. He supposed his ease with sign communication sort of leaked through. Why else would she so easily fall into this form of contact with him? It wasn’t normal for people who were not long-time companions.

Lunch was served on site while two more scenes were being set up. Jas strolled over to where Blaster was seated at a side table. There weren’t enough folding chairs for everyone since no one expected the entire company to be eating at the same time. She

slid between his legs and sat down on one of his thighs as if she'd been doing it for ages. Blaster had been chatting with one of the stunt men.

"Hey, babe." Blaster's hand naturally landed below the small of her back as her lovely butt settled on his thigh. "Want me to fix you a plate?"

"No, this one is fine." Jas scooted up him so her hip nudged his abdomen, took the fork from his hand and started working on his plate of food.

His hand caressed her back as she ate and conversation resumed. Jas was soon laughing, her dry humor drew most everyone else who wasn't working and the table off to the side soon became crowded.

She ate, chatted and glowed. She had *it*, whatever the *it* is that draws people. Some call it star quality or natural charisma. Blaster found holding her, touching her was intoxicating as the crowd around them thickened. She was the center of attention though she didn't intentionally hog the spotlight. That was the *it* thing, he decided. She was generous with attention to each person there. Laughing, joining with them, not trying to lead. The amazingly equal feeling was extended to the barely twenty-something grips as well as the seasoned professionals.

Watching, he realized she might naturally draw people but she also subtly manipulated conversation to include everyone. She made a point of it. This group of people would be her fans forever, right down to the truck drivers. She knew all their names and how to give attention or credit. While making a joke, she'd suddenly ask the painfully nervous young man the name of a comic book character she needed to finish the joke. He knew it and felt a short snap of pride when she thanked him with the compliment that he knew the best bad guys. Conversation went on and the boy was more of a man.

She finished his food, drank his drink and Blaster was damn happy. He felt proud of her. Admiration, amusement and satisfaction to be the one she leaned in to when she was done. His body adjusted to be her chair as her legs now settled over both of his thighs so she could relax on his lap. She was completely comfortable with the public display and so was he, Blaster realized.

All he had to do was look at her to want her but getting to know her was creating a different kind of desire. Something deeper. It began to bother him that he didn't technically have the right to be proud of her. He hadn't earned it. Most of all, he hadn't earned her trust. Hadn't put in the time to rightfully enjoy holding her. Their relationship was an act as much as her film character. That needed to change. He wanted this woman, but he was beginning to want more, much more than sex.

The morning of watching her work the movie had given him a respect for the talent she brought to it. She worked hard, took it seriously and expected everyone else to do the same. Now as he held her, his respect for her naturally generous personality grew into admiration. And then there was the dangerous side of her. She was a stunning huntress who tempted with the promise of wicked risk in every movement. If a guy

was lucky enough to get next to her in an intimate way, it was because she wanted him to.

He was damn sure she could make any man fall for her in less than a day. Look where his sorry ass was headed. Uncomfortable with the possibility that there could be someone else out there who had a right to hold her but didn't have the skills for this situation, he decided to make the most of his opportunity. It occurred to him that it might not be exactly ethical to use this pretend relationship to build a real one. That thought just made him smile. Too damn bad.

Her body shifted on his lap as she chatted and he began to suspect it wasn't all accidental. That sweet ass was rubbing his cock and the little witch knew what she was doing.

His hand slid down her bottom as he leaned into her ear. "Something you're interested in keeping up, Sheena?"

Jas looked down and bit her lip so the others wouldn't see her smile. Conversation flowed around them in a heated exchange over which comic book superhero had been best portrayed in a movie.

"That has been up all morning, Huckleberry," she informed him in a private tone only he could hear.

"And here I thought you wanted me for my mind." Blaster sighed mournfully. "Now I find all you're checking is the equipment."

"Oh I do want you for your mind. The part you think with is your most attractive feature." Jas' eyes danced as her ass shifted again. "I was just wondering how deep your thought process could go."

Blaster gritted his teeth through the caress to already engorged nerve endings. "Do that again and we'll be going to the truck to discuss it, woman. You just said you wanted me and my thoughts. In hillbilly speak, you proposed to me."

"Gawd, I love it when you translate." Her lashes fluttered in mock innocence. "Just takes my breath away."

"I've even got a clean towel in there. So behave. That equals a hillbilly Hilton, ya know."

Laughing softly, she stood. He immediately moved his chair into the table to be sure he was covered from the waist down.

Jas trailed a hand across the width of his shoulders. He was sexy, smart and funny. Damn, she hoped he was what he appeared. Bending to brush his lips, there was no resisting the temptation to taste him. Her tongue sneaked a lick. "Gotta go to work, lover," she purred for the audience's benefit. Blaster's eyes narrowed on her as she straightened.

"I'll be waiting," was his only comment as Jas strode to the set, smiling.

They filmed until the summer sun went down. It was nine p.m. before the set was packed and everyone left the site. Then Jas was in the sound trailer with Barry going

over the day's takes. It'd been a good day of work and both of them were excited that they'd gotten a little ahead of schedule. Around eleven they finally left the sound trailer and headed to their rooms.

Jas was dead tired. Throughout the afternoon Blaster had made sure she had enough Gatorade or something to eat if she wanted it. He'd been amazed at how physically hard it was to make an action movie. His respect for everyone involved increased as he watched them pour out every bit of energy they possessed for the camera.

When the two of them reached her motel room door, Jas glanced at him with an eyebrow raised in question.

"Let me have a look around, woman," Blaster growled. "Just because we haven't heard from them today doesn't mean they gave up."

He entered the room while she leaned on the wall outside. Apparently she didn't have the energy to argue.

The room was clean. He came out the door and nodded as she peeled herself off the wall and went in.

"Don't lock the door," he called after her and received a grunt in return.

He figured half an hour and she'd be dead to the world, if not before. The shower went on and he relaxed. Gliding into the shadows, Blaster did a quick recon of the parking lot and surrounding area. Nothing was out of place. The correct vehicles were parked where they should be. The only thing that gave him pause was Mark standing outside his trailer across the parking lot from Jas' door. The man was smoking a cigarette and appeared to be watching Jas' motel room door.

Blaster knew Mark had been there when they went into the room. He'd obviously seen Blaster come out and not return to the room with her. Time to make sure Mark saw Blaster enter that door and not come out. There was going to be no question about who slept in there.

Blaster's upper lip curled back in a silent snarl. He knew she was fucking beautiful and men around the globe would want her. But this ass just rubbed his primal beast the wrong way. And he had the nerve to do it blatantly. Blaster sincerely hoped the time would come when he could set Mark straight on who was allowed to touch her and who wasn't.

Being sure he was completely visible and making it look as if he'd just gotten something from his truck, Blaster paused in front of Jas' door before entering. He drew the Heckler & Koch USP SD 9mm from its holster under his arm, checking the ambidextrous safety. He enjoyed the soft hiss as it switched on and off both sides of the weapon. Pulling the magazine, he checked it before sliding it in. Slipping the gun back into its holster, he looked up directly at Mark and smiled a predatory grin. More a baring of teeth to make sure the message had gotten across. Entering the room, he closed the door quietly.

She was passed out on the bed, sheet pulled over her back and breathing deeply.

Quietly shucking boots, the guns and shirt, Blaster lay down and closed his eyes. On the floor again. Dammit.

"Everything okay?" Jas asked quietly.

A little surprised, Blaster responded, "Yeah, looks like."

"What's with the lock and load outside the door then?"

"You're supposed to be sleeping. That was a bit of man talk with your stalker."

"Mark watching the door again?" Jas chuckled softly in a pillow-muffled way. "Think he's bright enough to understand your meaning?"

It wasn't quite "pillow talk" but the intimacy of the murmured discussion in the dark was surprisingly comfortable. If at all possible, Blaster avoided discussion when in a bed with a woman. It was invariably a clingy time and women became unreasonably needy. He found it unreasonable because they always wanted holding and none of the good stuff. Jas wasn't sharing his pillow so maybe that's why this felt right.

"I'm not sure his ego allows him much room to hear anything. Important thing is I enjoyed myself."

Jas' smile was in her tone. "That's the important part?"

"Of course. Making a statement to ego boy is pointless unless I enjoy it. Go to sleep. You have to be on set at six a.m."

"I'll sleep when you stop distracting me."

"Hell, woman, I left my jeans on. It's your problem if you want me that bad."

"Now whose ego doesn't leave him much room to hear?" Jas sighed and rolled over. "Night."

Jas woke up to the shower again. It was quarter to five in the morning and it felt as if her limbs were made of lead. Oh for the luxury of rolling over and just drifting off again. The shower went off and she didn't move except her eyes opened halfway. He'd be coming out and, well, the show had been damn interesting yesterday.

It occurred to her that there was no trepidation this morning. How could she be comfortable, even relaxed with this stranger? Not really relaxed. There was too much "zippy" sexual tension between them, but there was also calm. Oh hell, calm wasn't the word but she didn't want to use the one that fit there. Trust was a huge step for her. A word she wasn't willing to toss around at this point.

He came out of the little bath and toilet room. Directly beside it was the sink and mirror where shaving things were laid out. Again the tiny motel towel was knotted at one hip. On that side he was bare to the knot and above it, the towel straining to make it. Those muscled legs and firm ass were just too fine not to study as he went about the morning rituals. Not to mention the flex of his back as he reached for the razor. He started shaving.

Jas watched lazily, realizing she'd never seen a man do the whole morning habit. She'd seen parts of it as a guy got it together to leave. Or as she gathered her belongings

to get out of his place. In fact, she'd never actually slept the entire night with a man in the room before. There was a stunning realization that should have occurred before.

The shock of that thought made her shut her eyes to concentrate on it. Why the hell was she able to sleep with him in the room? He'd been here what? Two days?

"If you're pretending to be asleep, frowning gives you away," Blaster drawled as he rinsed the razor and continued with the job at hand.

Jas' eyes opened to meet his in the mirror. "I make it a rule not to pretend anything with a man," she snapped at him before she'd really thought about the response. It was the first thing that popped into her head and she regretted it. Him mostly naked and her lying in bed was not the time to start flirty, sexual banter. "Shit! I shouldn't have said that. That was not an invitation or suggestion or any other damn thing. It's too early to watch what I say."

Blaster continued shaving calmly for a few seconds. "Jas, relax. I already told you we'd wait 'til you fall in love with me. I'm not going to jump you."

"From a guy I've known all of two days, that's reassuring."

"You know you can trust me, woman. You already do, so get over it and get outta bed."

Jas rolled over and sat with her back to him. This time she had on a sports bra and baggy gym shorts. Getting up with him in the room didn't concern her. Scruffy bed-head, ratty shorts and the utilitarian sports bra did not equal seductive.

She stared at the beige motel room wall for a few minutes. He was right. She had extended trust. But it'd been so natural. It was a weed growing around the sharp comments and laughing. It was woven into the ability to communicate without words that had sprung up between them. It fed the sexual tension in their pretend relationship that wasn't so pretend when he was touching her. He'd extended respect and even admiration for her abilities, both acting and defensive, and she'd sucked it down like a starving idiot.

She wanted him to respect her. That was the thing that did it. The fact that he was sexy and charming as original sin wouldn't have made an impression if he hadn't added the one gift she couldn't resist. Respect. He'd read her. From their first encounter he'd been learning her and using the information so effectively.

Was it possible he *didn't* know respect was a tool? A reward that could be held just out of reach? Nope, not a chance. Huckleberry was way too bright not to realize that. Was it possible he was sincere? Unknown. She wanted it to be real but it was wise to doubt it.

Jas let the lovely bubble burst. Their relationship was superficial at best. They were strangers. They might enjoy each other but that was it. His agenda was still an unknown. He and Barry appeared close and natural with each other. It looked as if they were exactly what they said they were and it'd be nice if Barry was the only reason Blaster was here. However hanging on to fairy tales and rosy endings was not Jas' weakness. She expected the worst. Anything else was a pleasant surprise. This time it

made her a little sad. The fairy tale might have been nice. Her fairy tale wouldn't be all sappy and filled with twittering birds either.

As he finished shaving and rinsed, Jas stepped into the little toilet room beside him. There was no real privacy but she didn't care. He'd parked himself in her room. He could deal with it. Jas came out and grabbed panties and a bra while he brushed his teeth. Back in the cubicle, she showered quickly. Out to brush her teeth in her underwear, he already had his clothes on. She ignored him.

Blaster was stomping into his boots when she sat on the end of the bed to apply lotion to legs, arms, midriff, neck and chest. He was in the little chair off to the side. She noticed he didn't seem to be moving.

"Something wrong?" Jas didn't glance at him as she completed the morning grooming.

"Besides my tongue hanging out? No." His deep voice was a rumble. "I was considering the danger of offering to help you with that."

"Deal with it. Was your idea to invade my room." She got up to do her hair in front of the mirror.

"Can I get you some coffee? Or are you just a cranky bitch in the mornings normally?"

He was amused, she realized. No sharp retort, no snarly comment about her prancing around in underwear and what did she expect? He wasn't making excuses or defending his right to have the hard-on he was sporting as he leaned back in the chair. Stacking his hands behind his head, the man grinned and watched her.

Jas lifted an eyebrow. "Are you offering to go up to the office and get me a coffee?"

"Yep. Want it?"

"Yes. Make it sweet and white."

He got up but bypassed the door, coming up behind her as she watched him in the mirror. His head dropped to flick his tongue over her shoulder for a brief lick then whispered in her ear, "I like mine hot and black. I'll be right back." Then he was out the door.

Jas frowned into the mirror as she finished fluffing gel through her short curls. Her hair was cropped in a skull-hugging cut. It was saved from being masculine because her hair curled riotously but not tightly.

From anyone else that comment would have been offensive. Between them it wasn't. Between them it was a compliment and she damn well liked it. He did "tempting" like nothing she'd ever seen before. Sexy bastard! He pushed the edges of their relationship and did it in a way that felt right, natural. Even when she was on guard with him, it didn't make a difference. How did he manage that?

He came back with two cups of coffee just as she was strapping on holsters. They drank and finished dressing. For both of them that involved weapons.

There was no rehearsal today and they went straight up to the site and grabbed a bagel from the crew tent for breakfast. Jas was tense. The intimate casualness of him nearby felt way too comfortable. She was beginning to feel defensive because it felt so comfortable. Okay, she knew that was a female contradiction, but there it was. Touching him was natural and sexy and dangerous and she liked it too much. Who wouldn't get irritated with that?

It was midway through the morning when the script called for an intense kiss. Hero and heroine were in the middle of a battle and uncertain if they'd survive. The kiss was supposed to convey an emotional commitment regardless of what was to follow. They were on the seventeenth take when right after Barry called "cut", Blaster politely asked the actor to move aside and stood in front of her.

"Quit sticking your tongue in his mouth and kiss him, damn it!" Blaster's face was a tightly drawn mask.

"I am kissing him. What are you doing here?" She was more than irritated and the criticism of her kissing wasn't helping. She knew it sucked. There were seventeen takes to prove it.

"I'm doing what it takes to get you through this scene." There was nothing civilized in his face, the mask was gone. In its place was a primal snarl. "I want you, Jas. I want you so bad my balls ache every time I move. Do not mistake patience for disinterest. Every male on this set wants you. That one gets to lay lips on you one more time, woman. Kiss him as if his life depends on this last taste of paradise because it does."

Then he swooped down and took her mouth. Rough and demanding, he forced her lips open and speared his tongue into her. Eating her with a rumbling growl vibrating up his chest, he jerked her against him. It was hot and fast, a carnal face-fuck that flashed her right into intense heat as her body exploded in response to the base demands his body was making. Abruptly he let her go and stepped back a pace. "Do it right."

Blaster turned and walked away.

Barry immediately yelled, "Places!" The scene rolled.

Her eyes barely focused and they were in the middle of action. By the time the kiss came, she was mad as hell at Blaster's arrogant ass. The kiss she gave her costar embodied every bit of her anger and frustration as she took it out on the man in her arms. The intensity of her mood was what the camera saw. The take was good.

Looking up, she found Blaster at the far edge of the set, way behind the equipment. He was standing with his back to the set, hands on hips, gazing off. He wasn't relaxed, smug or anything else she expected from the guy who'd drawn that much emotion out of her. He was mad. There was no outward sign except he didn't move.

Eventually he turned around to watch them finish the morning's scenes but he didn't return to the set. At lunch he was roaming the surrounding undergrowth. Jas realized she knew exactly where he was, what he was doing. Something connecting them had shifted. Awareness was snapping between them that rippled with tension.

At lunch it came to her. First, she missed him not being there as he had been yesterday and second, he sucked as an actor. What he gave her was the real thing. He was staying away because it wasn't finished between them. He'd meant every word and all the things that'd swirled between them in that kiss. Looking around, she spotted him on the far side of the clearing, leaning against a tree, one knee cocked as his foot rested on the trunk. His arms were crossed.

At least a football field away, their eyes met. Neither smiled. Distance didn't matter, she could feel the coiled tension radiating off him. He wasn't over it. She wasn't exactly sure what "it" was, but the man needed something he wasn't getting. It was more than sexual friction that zipped back and forth. He was vibrating with something much more basic. Jas sat back and consciously relaxed her body as her head tilted slightly. Her look softened into a feminine question. What did he need?

Blaster's cheek jerked as his eyes locked with hers. He nodded curtly at her and disappeared into the forest.

For once, Jas was at a loss as to what had passed between them. The nod seemed totally unconnected to the exchange. His disappearing left her feeling a little abandoned. As if he'd agreed to take care of the problem without her.

Then it dawned on her... *Without her? What! Oh no he didn't! That damn bastard was doing just that! Here she was hot and frustrated while he took care of his balls' problem.* Jas abruptly found she was done with lunch.

Ohhh the boy was gonna learn that had been a mistake. If she had to suffer lust-induced wanting, he had no right to go get all "relaxed"! He was gonna supply some satisfaction on her terms before she was done with him today. But she could wait. No need to warn him she was pissed.

She knew being pissed was totally illogical. She had no rights to what he did when he needed to relax. Knowing she was being unreasonable didn't matter apparently. He brought out the primitive woman in her and that bitch did not appreciate his going off at all.

Filming was going extraordinarily well and the day passed without an incident that could be blamed on an outside influence. At four they'd completed all the outside shots and Barry called the day done.

Jas was in a hurry to get off the mountain. Ignoring the costume change since all the scenes in this sequence were completed, she threw on her weapons and silk jacket and headed straight for Blaster. His eyes ate her as she approached.

"Damn good thing no bad guys were around today, Huck," Jas murmured as she grabbed his hand, turning him with the momentum of her stride and dragging him to the truck. "If it wasn't printed on my ass, you didn't see it. Come on, we're in a hurry."

"What's your rush?" They slid into the pickup's cab and Blaster glanced at the unbelievable creature lounging beside him as they pulled away from the set. "I did recon and no one was up there with us. My reward for being such a scary guy and driving them off was ogling you all day. Where are we going?"

Jas snorted at that. "Not your only reward, I'm thinking. We need to get to Whyrl and Wash. It closes at five-thirty. I have to do some laundry and this is the first time we've finished early when I could get to it this week. If we don't hurry, the rest of the crew will be there and it'll be too late. Does this thing go any faster? You're driving like an old lady."

"We're only hitting the tops of the ruts in the road, woman. Any faster and we would need bat wings. And it's a compliment that I can't stop looking at you."

He frowned at the winding two-lane road. "You're the star. Don't you have someone to do this sort of thing for you? An assistant or something?"

Jas glanced back but only the cloud of dust was visible behind them. "When I'm a star, I'll get one of those. Right now I'm just an actress. My boyfriend is the only one who fetches for me." Jas smiled smugly at Blaster's raised brow.

"Yeah? Your boyfriend?" A slow grin spread across his face.

They pulled into the motel and Jas sprinted to her door. She was coming out with the bag of laundry and box of soap before Blaster could make it in.

"Hey. I'm the damn boyfriend. Let me do my job," he grumbled, and took both items out of her hands to deposit them in the truck bed. "And from now on I go in the room first. Just because it was a quiet day doesn't mean your new friends are gone."

"You're Mississippi-mud slow, Huckleberry. I'll get old waiting for you." Jas swung into the cab.

"I'm careful. You have no idea what's out of place in the parking lot, do you?" Blaster backed out of the parking space and headed out again.

Jas didn't even glance around. "Three cars are missing and there's a new Blazer at the office."

"Okay, so you do know. Well," he paused to look both ways before pulling onto the town's main street, "I also like watching you bounce around."

"I don't bounce. I stride." Her superior sniff made him laugh.

Pulling into the Whyrl and Wash parking lot, Blaster started cursing under his breath. The only other vehicle in the lot as a huge black Harley Dyna motorcycle. Blaster glared at it as he parked.

Jas eyed the cursing man beside her. "A problem?" Her head cocked toward the bike.

"Yeah," Blaster muttered.

"Something you wanna share before we go in there, Huck?"

Blaster shut off the engine and didn't move for a moment as he frowned at the bike. "I should have run over it."

Jas looked at him for a few more seconds then snorted, "I don't have time for this. Make up your mind and get outta the truck." Jas hopped down and was reaching for her laundry and soap.

Blaster's hand was there first from the other side of the truck bed. Jas blinked in surprise.

"I'm the boyfriend. I get to do this." Blaster sounded defensive.

"Hey, I was kidding, Huck. I don't seriously expect you to wait on me."

"Too late." He hoisted the items and rounded his truck with a frown as he headed for the door. Jas kept up and was bemused when he shouldered the door open for her, waiting for her to pass.

The laundry was a long, narrow space. Down the center of the painted cement floor there was a row of eight washing machines in varied shades of olive, yellow and dingy white. Along the wall facing the door were eight dryers. None of the equipment was standard industrial. They were simply large home washers and dryers altered with coin slots. In the back corner a twenty-inch television sat on a wall mount. It was so far up the picture was difficult to see.

There was a row of nearly vintage molded plastic chairs on a pipe set up with backs to the long window front. The glass front had been tinted with stick-on film to cut the heat from the sun in the already hot interior, preventing them from seeing the lone customer until they'd entered.

He lounged against the wall under the television. His chin seemed to be resting on his chest as if he might be sleeping on his feet. The tilt of his head made it difficult to make out features, only the top of his dark head and wide shoulders stretching a dark blue T-shirt. His arms were folded across his chest emphasizing the bulges in both chest and biceps. Dark gray jeans rode low on lean hips and seemingly endless legs were casually crossed at the large, booted feet. He was the biker. Everything about him said he'd stepped off the big horses out front.

Blaster didn't even glance at the man as he tossed the laundry bag up on the fourth washer with its butt pointed at the biker. Flipping up the first three washing machine lids, he started sorting laundry into colors, delicates and whites. Jas watched him swiftly and expertly load her wardrobe into the washers, measure soap and feed coins into the slots. Only after all the lids were closed did he turn to the biker and glare. The relaxed, calm Southerner was gone.

"This is what they call deep cover in Montana? Staking out the local laundry and copping a peek at a lady's personals?" Blaster's voice sounded calm but even with this short exposure to him, Jas heard rumbling threat in it that'd never been there before. "And how the hell did you know we'd be here? Had a little look around, did you? I don't recollect inviting you into her room. Last I knew, deep cover meant far, far away from the primary client. Invisible is also a common phrase used to describe it. Those points escape your notice?"

The tall biker's head came up and he grinned, flashing straight white teeth. Jas almost gasped. The man was beautiful. Amused hazel eyes were surrounded by sooty lashes. Lean cheeks creased with his grin. A straight, regal nose. Biker also sported a Kirk Douglas chin, deep cleft and all. Chestnut hair flipped over his forehead, the long

cut was deceptively ragged. It was naturally wavy and as perfectly male beautiful as the rest of him.

"It would have been deep cover if your rooster feathers weren't all in a twist." The biker-god-person replied calmly.

Outside two other cars pulled into the parking lot and movie people were piling out with laundry bags.

Blaster glanced out at their fast-disappearing privacy. "You've had eyes on. Now go do your damn job."

"Town is clean. Your boys are long gone," Biker relayed calmly. "They had a camp two miles out and it's cold."

Jas' eyes were suddenly drawn to the television above Biker. It'd been a casual glance at first but now her attention was trapped in horrified disbelief. "Wilt-Wanna-Be, turn up the TV," she ordered sharply into the men's conversation.

Blaster glanced at her and immediately followed her gaze to the television. One look at her face and the tall biker reached up to punch up the sound.

They all watched the network news person sadly inform them that, "Homeland Security has taken over the investigation of a chartered airplane that crashed in the Everglades last night. No survivors have been found so far. The plane carried the president's special prosecutor and his senior staff in the..." Jas didn't hear any more.

Jas' gaze flashed out the wall of windows and she stepped around the washers, sinking to the floor with her back to a washer as she dialed her cell phone with shaking fingers. The movie people were coming in the door talking loudly. Blaster's hands moved in a signal to the biker but it wasn't necessary as he sank to his haunches in front of Jas. Biker hadn't moved away from the wall but he was on full alert, scanning both the noisy crowd entering the laundry and the street outside.

"No, no, no..." Jas moaned softly as the phone in her hands rang endlessly. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

"What? Baby, what happened?" Blaster's hands were on her drawn-up knees as she sat on the floor clutching the phone to her ear.

Ignoring him, Jas dialed another number. This time there was an answer on the first ring.

"Hello? Liana is that you?" a woman worriedly asked.

"Hello, Mrs. Allacosta. This is Jasmina. I'm looking for Liana."

"Jasmina! I thought maybe she'd gone to visit you. I haven't seen her since she left for that award yesterday. I think she might have gone home, but I can't be sure. She's not with you?" Mrs. Allacosta couldn't help asking hopefully.

Jas put a finger in her other ear as the noise in the confined laundry increased with all eight washers running and people talking over the noise, but she didn't stand up. Several of her coworkers were glancing at her on the floor questioningly.

"No, ma'am. Could you tell me exactly when you last saw her please?"

"I last saw her on TV accepting the award. The big party."

Blaster frowned. He couldn't hear the other side of the conversation but Jas' whole body shuddered as she asked that telltale question. The "when did you last see her" question was only asked about a missing person. There was another player in the game. Someone Jas was worried about. The plane crash in Florida had tipped her off to trouble somehow. What the hell was going on?

Suddenly there was a large hand on Blaster's shoulder. Blaster's head whipped around to look up at Jackson. Jackson never took eyes off the outside view as he said quietly. "Mexican calling card just dropped in the truck bed. Any idea who?"

"Fuck!" Blaster couldn't see around the washers, again he glanced up at Jackson. "What did you see?"

"Bike, leathers, helmet. No plates. Gone. Calling card is in view. We have to move."

Jas' eyes opened, her voice went calm and flat. "Yes, Mrs. Allacosta. I'll keep an eye out for her. Please call me if you hear anything. Bye."

Blaster grabbed her forearm and pulled her up without saying a word. Jas looked out at the truck and back at the two men in front of her. The place was full of curious people but she'd heard the biker's quiet report.

Turning, she walked out of the laundry and got in the truck with no comment, not even glancing in the bed where a smallish burlap bag lay. It was discolored with a dark stain at the bottom.

Blaster slid behind the wheel, started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot with the big bike on his bumper. Neither of them said a word as they headed out of town at a sedate speed. Ten miles out, he turned off the main road at random, choosing a small dirt track. Out of sight of the main road, he swung over to the side at a place where they could see anyone coming both ways. It wasn't the best choice but it was as good as they'd get on short notice. Jas said nothing as the Harley pulled up behind them.

Silently they stood around the back of the truck bed looking at the bag. Blaster finally reached for the burlap and Jas caught his arm.

"No. I'll do it." Her face hardened into determination as she carefully handled the burlap.

Rough fabric was tied with a pair of silk panties, she careful untied them without lifting it and the cloth fell open in a crude square. Late afternoon sun cast shadows across half the bed as a soft breeze flipped the burlap corners in a gruesome waving motion. At the center lay two delicate fingers tipped with sculpted nails painted pale coral.

Chapter Four

Jas turned away and took two running steps before she doubled over and wretched. Dimly she was aware of Blaster wrapping an arm around her waist and supporting her weight. The dry heaves passed. He handed her a handkerchief and a bottle of water, stepping back as she straightened but his hand remained on her back, lightly gliding up and down in a comforting motion. Jas stood there and gazed out at the pastoral scene that was the rural field they'd pulled into and gathered strength from its tranquility. Once again everything had changed but it was the same old story.

One of the definitions of insanity is to repeat the same action and expect different results. In her life she'd run, hidden and found a way to survive over and over again. But each time she thought she'd carved out a new safe place, the unthinkable happened. Jas suspected there was such a thing as being a magnet for evil.

Her early childhood in the Washington, D.C. projects had been grim to say the least. Predators of little girls lurked in every shadow. School had been promised as a way out. At fourteen, she'd become painfully aware that even teachers could be predators.

The struggle to finish high school had seemed monumental, but she'd thought she'd found a way out if she could just do it. The military promised that hope. She'd anticipated training would be tough when she'd joined the most difficult branch she could qualify for. But she'd expected working hard and excelling at being a Marine to earn her safety at last. The type of safety where she belonged to the group who could be trusted to watch her back. She'd been wrong again.

She'd done her part, excelling at being a Marine. Invested every fiber of her being into the training. Loving it. Seeking higher combat and marksmanship qualifications at every opportunity available. The war games had been a particular favorite. But in the end, it was still just her.

The one thing the military had given her was the skills to fight back. Getting out had been a battle that she'd won with those skills. Then she'd felt confident enough to use the one thing that'd been her greatest weakness. She was beautiful. The place that would finally work for her was the stage and she'd excelled. But evil was still following her.

Running, escaping and building a new life was no longer an option. Repeating that action and expecting it to work this time would be insane. No. It was time to stand and fight for the life she had or die in the attempt. Blood had been drawn and there was no question people had to die to put an end to this battle. This time she was armed, trained and not leaving the field until the battle was over. It didn't really matter if she left in a box or was the one walking. It'd be over one way or the other.

Recovered, she turned to face the two men. "Well, do what you're gonna do. I'm not leading you to the evidence. Killing the attorney holding it doesn't get your boy off the hook. Torturing Liana for his name was your one play. Now it's my turn." She'd stepped back as she turned. Her arms hung loosely, deceptively casual-looking.

"Damn it, woman! We're not here to hurt you. Our job is to fucking protect you," Blaster spat out. "This geek with the bike is Jackson St. James, a member of my Unit. He was supposed to go deep and be backup. As you can see, he couldn't manage that, but it's only because he's half infatuated with you. Despite that, we're professionals, Jas. Just tell us what's happening so we can fix it. Whose are those?" Blaster waved a hand toward the truck bed.

"If you're not part of this, take me back to the motel. I've got things to do." Jas hadn't moved as she regarded them.

"Jas, be reasonable. Apparently the body count includes a plane full of people and a woman. Stakes just went through the roof. Someone is coming hard and you're the target. Trust us. Trust me enough to let us help you. If I wanted to hurt you, I'd have done it. You know that." Blaster ran a hand around the back of his neck as he looked into her stunning face and saw nothing. She simply watched him. There was silence as she waited.

"Look, Miss Carson, he's telling the truth. I'm a huge fan of yours, by the way. You can't charge into this alone. These people are capable of anything," Jackson tried sincerity.

Jas' eyes remained locked on Blaster, seemingly ignoring Jackson. Blaster glared back at her and then turned away, hissing curses as his fist swung back and connected with the side of his truck. The scream of dented metal was accompanied by a bellow of frustration. In the ensuing silence Blaster's head was bent and he panted harshly as if he'd been running. Jas didn't flinch at the sound. Simply watched him.

Finally looking at her again, his eyes were resigned, Blaster stated calmly, "You can't go back to the motel. They'll be there."

"If you're not kidnapping me, get me a vehicle, Samuel." The soft use of his real name made him grit his teeth a moment. She extended intimacy in the same phrase she demanded he let her go off alone.

"Jesus, Jas. Do not do this. We have the resources to fix this if you'll just tell us what's going on. Damn it, woman! Why does letting you go get killed have to be the only way to prove that we're on your side? That *I'm* on your side. There has to be another way."

Jas abruptly started talking. Her tone was soft and difficult to hear as she looked Blaster in the eye. "One of the passengers on the airplane, Cable Bourne, was the attorney who held the evidence on the rape I mentioned. There were two of us in the room. We'd been drugged, or at least I had. I suspect Liana was too drunk to need a drug. In any case, I didn't protect my best friend on the one night she asked me to. The one night she needed it most. She'd asked me to go out with her so she could get

smashed and I woke to find her broken in ways unimaginable." Jas took a deep breath to continue. "Just now I called Liana and couldn't reach her. Her mother hasn't seen her.

"Two nights ago Liana received a national award for her work running a center for battered women. She wore a coral dress. She likes to match shoes, purse and nails.

"Those are the cards on the table, Samuel. Your choice. Whichever way you decide to go, I'm going to end this. You need to get about the business of killing me or let me get about the business of taking care of the problem."

"Jas, I know it looks bad, but shouldn't we at least confirm that your friend is...that that's whose..." Blaster gritted his teeth and sucked in a breath as he tried to find a way around this. "Where would you go? Don't you think wherever it is they are expecting you? As far as these guys are concerned, the party is on. You're just the next item of entertainment on the playbill. Don't force me away from you, Jas. I understand you need to finish this, but you don't have to do it alone. Let me watch your back."

"What?!" Jackson looked at Blaster in amazement. "You can't be thinking of letting her go. Fucking kidnap her if we have to. Alive and mad is better than dead and mutilated!"

"No. It's not," Blaster responded quietly. "We *are* them if we don't let her go. She has to know she can trust us."

"Fuck that!" Jackson turned and took a step toward Jas. Blaster hit him blind side and had him pinned to the ground before Jackson knew he'd been hit. Leaning into Jackson's face Blaster growled, "Touch her against her will and I'll slice up whatever's left of you, but she'll kill you first, idiot."

"Jesus Christ! Are you insane?" Jackson didn't yell, his disgusted tone said he suspected the insane part was true.

"Look at her, Jack. If I hadn't hit you, there would be a hole in you." Jas was watching them with a gun held down by her thigh. "I told you, she's not what you think. This is not a Hollywood princess." Blaster let Jackson go and stood.

Jackson decided it was better to remain in an unthreatening position for a few minutes and sat on the ground looking at Jas.

She wore deadly calm as if it were a cape. Still in her movie-set leathers with the light silk jacket hanging open, he could see the butt of another gun under her right arm. Down by her left thigh her empty hand flexed open and a blade shot down into her palm. She caught the handle. It was pointed behind her in a stab grip. Gun in one hand, vicious-looking knife in the other, her long body rippled with energy. Her head tilted to the side fractionally. "Wanna play?"

Jackson shook his head and stood slowly to wearily dust off his jeans. "Fine. Get yourself shipped off somewhere in little pieces."

Blaster frowned as he glanced at the truck bed significantly. "It's not military, Jas." Pointing at the burlap, Blaster continued. "That is the work of mercenaries. It's a message that's supposed to make it look organized crime this time. This might not be

coming from the guy you think it is. Let's be logical. The few bits of evidence I have tell me this is bigger than you thought. Something pushed the stakes up and they're through playing games. They want you to do something and the present was a push. Why else send you such a graphic message? Why warn you of what they are capable of?"

"I know. I need a vehicle." Her voice was quietly insistent.

"Christ!" Jackson spat out in frustration. "He's trying to tell you that there isn't anything these people will not do. No honor, no ethics. Our Unit can handle this sort of thing. We work together and we have a chance of getting to the bottom of it. You go out there bareback and you've got no chance. These people will kill you, Miss Carson. They've even told you they are going to do it ugly. Backup is the logical... No, not logical, the sane choice." Jackson paced to his bike, flipped up a saddlebag and retrieved a bottle of water, gulping it down.

"There is nothing they haven't already done except kill me, Mr. St. James. Right now that looks like their big mistake. Going after Liana, the weakest one, might have been easy but the price on the other end is going to be as high as I can make it..." She glanced at the truck and then met Jackson's eyes. "Liana has fought every demon they left her with and won. She'd made her life real again. She didn't deserve this." Jas turned to Blaster. "I have things to do and I mean to put an end to it. Make a choice."

"What about you? What about your demons?" Blaster wanted to know softly. "You can't win if you're reacting. You need to calm down. Killing Bourne doesn't get rid of the evidence. But they'd try to get their hands on it. Do you know where he kept it? We can get it. Come on, Jas, it's not just you anymore. Give us the time to come at this with the best possible plan."

"My demons? Hell, I'm about to trot them out for a little field trip. Don't worry, mine are much older than this psychopath. They've had time to mature. He's got nothing new to show us. The problem is, I know where this guy's other skeletons are. By tomorrow they'll be gone. The evidence I held on the man is stashed in Bourne's safe, in his office. Chances are that's already gone. I'm leaving tonight with or without your help. Stop stalling, Huckleberry, time as we know it just ended. Now there is only the end-game."

A long silence followed her calmly delivered statement. "Give her keys to the bike," Blaster said tiredly. "Can't use the truck. They obviously know it." He fished out his wallet and pulled out all the bills. "Here, this will get you a ways. Call me if you need more." He handed her the money.

Jas tucked the bills in a pocket. The gun and knife had already disappeared. "I'll pay you back when this is over."

"Wait a damn minute. The bike? Why does it have to be my Harley? I'm the one who thinks this is a shitty idea. Right up there with pissing into the wind." Neither Jas nor Blaster even glanced at Jackson. "Hello! Is anyone listening to me?"

Blaster handed her a card from his wallet after he'd written two numbers on it. "Call me when you get where you're going. The top one is my cell. If you can't reach it, the other one is my Unit commander's. He'll know who you are."

"Oh for the love of Pete, wait." Jackson grabbed the card and the pen and quickly added a third number before handing it to her. "If you're taking my bike, you'd damn well better call me. I'll want it back." Glancing between Blaster and Jas, who hadn't broken eye contact, Jackson sighed loudly. "Come on, I need to show you a few special additions to it. You have ridden before? This one is heavy, if you lay it down, you won't be able to pick it up again."

Jas smiled at Jackson for the first time since he'd laid eyes on her and it didn't reassure him one bit. He hadn't known it was possible for deadly intent to look so lovely. She moved over beside him and listened carefully as he pointed out the big motorcycle's special features, one of them being a hidden gun.

"Now you're sure you can handle this?" Jackson asked again as she pulled on his leather jacket over the soft silk one and rolled up the sleeves. She hadn't even protested when he insisted she wear it for protection if she crashed.

"If I can't, you're in deep shit." She smiled dryly and turned to Blaster.

Her whole body changed as she looked at the rangy, blond man who ate her with his eyes. The she-predator morphed into an utterly sexual hunter. He was two steps away but her stroll into his body was fluid female approaching a male. She leaned in to him from knees to chest as her hands slid up his arms and around his neck in slow motion. There was no smile on either face as she flowed into him, her body a wave sliding around a rock. Her fingers sank into his hair and her lips stopped a breath away from his.

The air around them crackled with tension as they both remained perfectly still and wildly entwined.

"Don't do this if you don't mean it," Blaster said quietly. "I'm way past a play date, Sheena."

"Do you want my mouth, Huck?" she asked into his lips.

"No," he growled.

"What then?" The hard evidence that he did want something burned into her lower belly.

"I want this." His mouth slammed down on hers and the dam broke. They were kissing, that fierce duel of lovers. They ate each other, hands clenching into flesh and bone. Bodies writhed as they battled and lost to lust, fear, passion, too little time and too much need. This was the first real kiss and it could be the last. His arms whipped around her, trying to absorb her into the heat that was him. Her moan answered him and her legs came up fast to clamp around his waist and shamelessly press her now-damp crotch to the rigid cock beneath it.

Jackson gaped at them. They were the elements—sex, life, death and need. Something about them was so decadently carnal that he couldn't look away and yet felt

shame that he watched. He could see their tongues moving as mouths pressed open in moaning need to taste more. Blaster's hands each held one of those perfect bottom cheeks and he kneaded them roughly as her body rode him in undulating demand.

The clawing kiss escalated in intensity and Jackson felt the need to back up as if the heat rolling off them were scorching him.

Abruptly Jas' body went rigid as her back arched to slam her hips into Blaster. Her head came up and a low snarl hissed out of her throat. Blaster's mouth went immediately to her breast. His teeth clamped around a jutting nipple through her vest, biting down and sending shuddering jerks through her body. He was growling, a rumbling bestial sound that mingled with hers.

Jackson stumbled back another step and was grateful the truck bed wall hit him in the ass. Watching her forced him to control the need to come as her body undulated. He was shocked. She hadn't come but he needed to. Jackson's hands reached back to grip the truck bed on either side of his body, propping himself up as he gaped at them.

Jas slowly relaxed, collapsing into Blaster, her legs still wrapped around him as her body surrendered to his hold. Head on his shoulder, they both were breathing harshly, though Blaster kissed her neck tenderly. Deep rumbling growls interrupted the kisses. Her body melted while his remained rigid, though his hands gentled and petted. Jackson felt his own harsh breathing match their cadence as swirling sexual energy flowed around the couple.

Her legs slowly slid down Blaster until her feet were on the ground again but their hold on each other didn't loosen.

"I want more than that, woman," Blaster breathed into her hair.

"Then let me trust you." Jas pulled back to look him in the eye. "Be there when I call you." Jas turned away from him and strode to the bike. She slung a leg over and was mounted, grabbed the helmet and strapped it on.

"Lordy, give me strength. I'm as crazy as Blaster," Jackson murmured as she fired it up.

The snarl of the big bike coming to life echoed into the twilight, a warning. It was the roar of a lioness across savanna plains. The huntress was hungry.

Jas idled down the engine and lifted her visor to look Blaster in the eye. "I want to trust you." The big engine revved, she flipped the visor down and the woman took off.

Both men watched as she disappeared into gathering night. Blaster stared after her in grim silence.

Finally moving, Jackson went to the back of the truck and carefully closed the burlap over its gruesome contents, using the panties to secure it again since there was nothing else handy. He gently set the package in the toolbox behind the cab. "Going to stand there mooning after her all night?" he asked quietly.

"No." Blaster strode to the cab. "You did get a mic in the jacket, right?" Blaster shot Jackson a narrow glance as both men strapped in and Blaster started up the vehicle.

"Of course. Only place I had to put it since I didn't get a kiss goodbye." Jackson grinned at Blaster's dark scowl.

"You could have put up more of a fight over the bike. She's gotta know it has a locator since you gave it up so easy."

"Hey, I'd already sounded like a Sally-boy for you. She'd figure it out anyway if she's half as smart as you claim. You let her go too damn easy. I still think it's a shitty idea. Where's she going?"

"Hell if I know."

"Christ, Blaster. That's a damn huge gamble. I thought you two were involved. That kiss sure looked involved. Jesus, she brings the heat."

"The kiss is none of your damn business. Don't even think about it. Got it? Not a thought, asshole. And I know it's a risk. It was the only way to earn her trust. It's not like I'm in love with this plan."

Blaster pulled into the Laundromat. "What the fuck are we doing here? The plane is thirty minutes out the other side of town."

"Picking up her laundry and getting her things from the motel. I need to tell Barry, the director, his star is gone for a few days. Then we go to the plane."

"What? Did she slip a 'to-do' list in your mouth with her tongue? When did you become her errand boy?" Jackson slid out of the truck with Blaster but didn't go in. Scowling, he stood with his back to the store making it obvious he was watching the surroundings. Five minutes later Blaster came out with the bag of clothes.

"How'd you get her laundry dry?" Jackson asked.

"She's popular. One of the women on the movie did it after we left." Blaster slung the bag into the truck bed and hopped in the cab. They headed for the motel.

Amazed, Jackson regarded Blaster critically. "Seriously, why are you wasting time with this shit? She could be anywhere by now."

"I take care of her and this is what needs taking care of." Blaster shot Jackson a glare. "You did come down in the jet, right?"

"Yeah"

"Jet beats bike. We'll catch up."

"She could have turned off the locator by now. We need to get to the plane."

"If she's gonna do that, she'll change direction as soon as she does it. Don't matter when we realize we can't follow her. These are things I can do. Now shut up with the whining."

"I'm not whining, I'm pointing out logical information. You're the one acting like her damn butler when we should be double-timing to the jet."

"Get off my six, Jack. She's my woman and I'll take care of her how I see fit. We will not crowd her. What part of your brain doesn't get it? She will not trust me or any of us if we don't keep our word," Blaster snarled at Jackson. Tension was consuming him in

ways he'd never felt before. Hard and deep, a knot lodged in his gut that was eating him from the inside out.

"The part of my brain that doesn't get it is the one that keeps seeing fingers with pretty nail polish and no soft hands attached. That shithead is not playing. You just let her ride off into the sunset like some fucking hero in a movie. Life is *never* like the movies. You know that! Even a battle plan, when we have months to prepare and scope things out, is only good for the first five minutes of action. Then it's work with what's left. We don't even have a plan!" Jackson swung out again as they parked in front of her motel door to do the obvious guard thing.

"Yeah, seems to be a glitch." Blaster went into the motel room to gather her things and call Barry.

Little over forty minutes later Jackson was powering up the jet while Blaster flicked on the receiver for the locator. It was a special custom-made model built specifically for the Unit vehicles. Nothing was impossible to circumvent, but these were as close as they could make it and transmitted piggyback on a commercial band. It looked like normal static unless a person had the proper receiver.

"Damn, she's headed straight for Georgia." Jackson came back from the cockpit into the cabin to lean over Blaster's shoulder. Blaster was studying several southern maps and the laptop locator screen as the green dot moved with Jas' progress. They weren't taking off until they knew where to go.

"Jesus, there has to be some mark she knows about, a place this guy is likely to be. She's not headed on a trajectory that'd take her to the base. Well, not directly to it." Blaster rubbed a hand around the back of his neck as he watched the little light move on the screen. She was doing ninety or better on dark country roads in mountainous terrain. Traveling at that rate on the smaller roads told them she didn't have far to go. Wherever she was going, she expected to get there tonight.

They could hear the low roar of the motorcycle through the mic Jackson has secured in the jacket. Suddenly the bike slowed as she turned off the roads marked on the map. The light on the screen jerked and swerved as if she were riding through rough terrain. Then it stopped. Both men watched with rapt attention. The engine noise stopped and all they heard was night sounds. Leather creaked as she dismounted.

A second later Jas' voice came through in a soft monotone. "Since your pal didn't bother to leave an earbud with the mic, you'll just have to follow directions, Huck," she said quietly, there was no further creaking of leather. "The jacket is too loud. I left it with the bike. I'm going to a cabin on Kash Mountain, south face about three miles off Steger Road on Coldwater Drive."

Neither man moved in the plane, waiting to hear what was next. She'd obviously chosen to trust them, yet she also knew they were hobbled. If she'd gone a greater distance, they could have reached her quicker. As it was, they would have to take the same route she did to reach her. They couldn't do it as fast since they didn't know the terrain and were already more than an hour behind her.

"Hiking in to the cabin since the damn bike is so loud. It'll take me about twenty minutes," her hushed voice informed them. "I don't know if the asshole is here, but I'm betting he is. His target is in the library and he's gotta want to destroy anything that connects him to this location. If this is outta his hands, the shelves of disks I saw last time I was here are his weakness.

"If he's here, there will be several sentries I'll need to take care of first," she continued quietly. "If he's not, the security system is a bitch. Either way it'll take about an hour before I'm in. I expect you here, Huckleberry. Bring your toys. This place needs to go after I get the rest of the evidence. Time we started sending messages back.

"I'll leave the mic on for you in case I go down. Don't disappoint me. Finish this."

Then there was nothing but the chirp of crickets and occasional distant call of night birds.

"Fucking shit!" Blaster punched directions into the keyboard to get the log of her trip printed on a map.

Jackson called Gray and quickly laid out events as they knew them. "Hey, boss. Here is what we know. We have to bug out fast. Be on the comline if you have questions. Facts are, the plane that just went down in Florida was not an accident and connected to this case. An attorney on board, Cable Bourne, was the person holding evidence for Carson. The evidence of the first crime is in Bourne's office safe. His name was gained by torturing and probably killing one Liana Allacosta. Proof of the tortured was delivered with a bag drop. Fingers in the bag are assumed to be from the hand of Liana Allacosta."

"Roger that," Gray confirmed he'd made note of the relevant facts.

"Our contact is live and moving. We're forty minutes behind."

Beside Jackson, Blaster was cursing in a steady stream as he gathered equipment and weapons to take with them. After Jackson was done outlining what had happened, Gray started barking a steady stream of questions that Jackson had no answers for, followed by clipped cursing.

Gray finally concluded, "You two let the woman go having no idea who she's really up against?"

"Yep."

Gray paused, conveying his deep disapproval with that silence. "But she's talking to you on the comline?"

"Yep."

"What frequency?"

Jackson gave the relevant info. "Let us know when you know more about the names I just gave you. I think we can consider this a high-level shitstorm. No idea where it's gonna point."

"This has politics written all over it," Gray agreed. "Someone is in bed with bad guys and Ms. Carson is the key. I'll see if the evidence has been acquired."

"If you get it, don't break the seal, boss. She has to trust us. Time to go," Blaster growled as he carried the last thing they'd need out of the jet. It was the transmitter-receiver radio. Nothing but night sounds was coming through on it. Jackson flipped his phone shut and quickly powered down the jet before he secured the plane door, hopped to the tarmac and sprinted to the pickup.

"Worry about your woman, Blaster. I'll take care of acquiring the evidence," Gray assured them, already on the radio frequency they were using.

Just as Blaster inserted the key in the ignition, there was a soft grunt from the transmitter. Then a gurgling wheeze. Both men froze. It was the unmistakable sound of a person dying from a knife cut to the jugular. No way of knowing if it was Jas or someone else since no further sounds followed it. Blaster fired up the truck and took off.

Though he wasn't familiar with the physical roads, Blaster had memorized the route.

She was out there fighting. He had to believe that had been Jas taking out a sentry. No other option was acceptable. Besides, if it were the other way around, the guards would have spoken by now, telling someone about the intruder. It was the worst possible outcome. He'd hoped the damn cabin would be empty, better yet, already destroyed. At least she'd be safe.

The site was live and hot. She was alone, she'd already put in a day's work and then the shock of the fingers. Her ride on the bike had been fast and rough. Any man would be damn tired after all that and this woman was charging into battle. Probably not charging, more like slithering, but shit! Still going full steam and expecting him to "catch up" when it was over.

They had the receiver hooked up to earbuds. The noise of the road would make it difficult to hear without them. They both had mouthpieces since Gray was hooked into it with them.

Jackson glanced over at Blaster. It was twenty minutes into their drive and a third mark was down. "Two more kills. Your girl is working smart, she might live."

"She'll live," Blaster answered grimly. "Gray, what were her Marine proficiencies?"

Silence for a few minutes after Blaster asked that.

"She's A-1 across the board but no combat kills."

"Three tonight," Blaster corrected quietly.

Never in his life had he felt so damn proud, frustrated and helpless. He wanted to spank her but good, well, not really, but something like that. However, she was fucking amazing as a woman. Every time she touched him, he lit up as if his cock were a roman candle. Wanting her was probably common, he concluded. It was difficult to look at her and not imagine sinking into that fine flesh. Who didn't want to know what a wildcat ride would be like?

But he liked her as well. Her humor, the sharp edge of her mind. The way she expected nothing of anyone. She wasn't vain but she was proud and confident. The

little he knew of her life told him she'd made a choice to be that way. Taught herself that she deserved better and then went after the life she wanted. Fearless, that was the word he'd use for her. Others would see it as reckless but he recognized it for the thing it was. A choice.

She refused to let fear rule her life. Still guessing, but he'd bet she'd made that choice as early as he had. Making that choice early meant there'd been a string of people who'd let her down. There was nothing Blaster wouldn't do to stay *off* her list of disappointments.

He'd suspected he was falling as fast as any kid in first lust, but there was nothing sophomoric about where he was now. Warrior woman would be his in this life. Following her into hell to explain that to her busy ass was a pain, but she'd damn well better be expecting him.

Blaster's foot was buried on the floorboard. The night sped past them as the deceptively dilapidated F-150 rocketed across the hills between southeastern North Carolina and the northern Georgia border.

Chapter Five

Jas wiped the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand as the third sentry gurgled his last breath. She was unconcerned with the dirt and blood she probably left on her forehead. Leaning over, she heaved quietly. There was nothing left in her stomach. This time her physical reaction was separate from her mental one. It was as if she watched her revulsion from a calculating distance. The warrior regarded the woman's response coldly, as if to say, *Are you done yet? Lets go.*

She hoped he was the last man outside. Eyeing the cabin, she breathed deeply to settle herself. There was no past, no future. Right now she was the center of the universe as her senses stretched out around her. Battle awareness. She'd heard of it, had been looking for it and not even realized it was already in attendance as it settled over her. Every receptor was razor-sharp, cataloging even the minutest changes in her environment.

The night was dark and she was grateful for a late-rising moon. Crickets chirped, telling her she was still mostly undetected. She noticed the small animals knew better. A hunter was stalking and they scurried away from the smell of death.

Resting on her heels, she reviewed her options for the benefit of her listeners. Talking in a barely audible flat tone, she outlined what she saw and her conclusions to the men she knew were listening. Going in the front door was the last thing the man inside would expect. She'd considered the back door but suspected it was a trap. It'd be a trap if that were her cabin. Also, was there really only one person in the cabin? The expanse of lawn would make her a target if she'd missed a sentry or a sniper who was hiding in some tree or waiting in a darkened window. No more time to worry about it.

In the truck rocketing through the night still forty miles away, Blaster swore in a vicious stream. He'd heard her gagging on her reaction to her first kills. She didn't have to do any more, dammit. He'd take care of it, if she'd only wait. But he knew she wouldn't. If she waited for him to get there, the target inside would realize his men outside were dead and have time to take up a defensive position. She was going in. It was what he'd do.

His lips pulled back in a snarl that he didn't waste time controlling. A brutal animal peered out the slits of his eyes.

Jas used all the available cover and made the porch without alerting her prey. Cover was good there, provided by a wicker seating arrangement placed on either side of the door under wide windows. Gracious Southern living, it was Georgia.

Silently, she crouched behind the wicker couch and watched through the window as the man inside systematically ran disks across a large magnet. He was doing exactly

what she'd expected. Destroying evidence. Burning the disks in the large fireplace across the room was not half as effective as the magnet.

Robert Larkin was absorbed in his task, never looking up or in any way indicating there was someone else in the house with him. Jas watched for several minutes, concentrating on the shadows around the room that she could see. A person could easily hide behind something in there, several persons actually. None of the shadows moved or were wrong in relation to the thing that was casting them. Was it possible Larkin was alone? Up here with just the three barely trained thugs she'd found outside?

Larkin suddenly looked up and nodded to the left. A man strolled into view adjusting his pants. The fourth guard had been in the bathroom. The guy was in no hurry and ambled over to say something to Larkin.

Jas glanced around calmly. She needed something to keep the door from clicking locked when the guard exited. If she had a roll of tape that would have been perfect. She could stand behind the door as it opened and stealthily slide a sliver of tape over the catches from behind with two fingers. Then take the guy out after he made it to the lawn so no noise leaked into the cabin. She didn't have any tape.

There was a fat decorative candle on the wicker table, matches beside it. That would have to do. Grabbing the candle and matches she used her body for cover as she set it on the floor against the wall, lit the wick as she glanced up in the window. The man was moving away from Larkin to the door. No time!

Larkin barked out something and the guard paused to look back and answer. They exchanged a few more words. It was enough time.

Jas blew out the candle and scooped her finger around the wick, gathering a ball of hot, tacky wax. Then she was flattened behind the door as it opened. Her finger was ready and she jammed wax into the locking prongs as the guard stepped out. It wouldn't last long. She didn't have the luxury of allowing the man to move away from the house. It had to be a silent kill before the little bit of wax cracked under the door's pressure.

The door swung shut and Jas was behind him. Delivering a brutal blow to his temple with her left fist, she stunned him for the kill stab. In smooth motion her left hand covered his mouth while grasping his face, yanking it to the side. Turning his head exposed the target area for easier access. Her hips twisted to add powerful body weight for the lethal upthrust, plunging the knife through his brainstem and into his skull. The blade sliced home then a wrenching half turn to finish the job.

The intimate act of killing a man with a knife requires full body contact. She had to engage counter point and weight momentum to ensure the first thrust was a kill incision. There were no second chances, no comfortable distance a gun allowed. Blood gushed down her arm. Already stained with three kills, the warm flood was nevertheless jarring. It marked her and made her the blade, the instrument of death as surely as if it were her fingers twisting in his brain.

Each kill cost a piece of her soul. She knew the reckoning would come, but not now. Now she had to be the shadowed hand of death. Dealing it out coldly or her life would be forfeit. These men were here for the specific purpose of capturing her. She had no illusion about what would have happened if they had managed that. Repeated rape would have been the least of her worries.

As the thug crumpled, Jas held him to ensure there was no thud as he dropped to the porch. Her body slid down with him to drape over his back. In this, the last move of their ghoulish dance, she controlled his thrashing with her weight. She couldn't afford the noise he'd make on the boards. Those few seconds as he violently rushed into death were the hardest. The body relaxed and she rolled up to her haunches, keeping low and scanning the night as she wiped her hands and blade on his back then turned to the house.

Sliding in the door, she disappeared behind the first available cover—a large stuffed black bear. This was too easy. There was no alarm or warning given to the men outside. That lack of information told her she'd made the right choice in trusting Blaster. Lord knew she wanted to do a hell of a lot more than trust him. But after tonight, he might not be interested in a woman who could do this. *No time to think about that. She had to remain alert.*

Larkin was still focused on his job.

Only a single lamp burned in the opulent cabin's interior. Last time she'd been here the interior had been a blur, this time she looked around with an eye for the details. The details told her how wrong she'd been assuming Larkin was the main man. From the outside, the cabin attempted to look innocuous as any other on the hillside. But inside it was furnished in leather and brass with onyx accents, a wealthy man's play place.

The front of the cabin was one large room with several distinguishable areas. Seating around the fireplace was a combination of high wingbacks and low couches. There was a dining area with a huge oak table and ten chairs. The big kitchen was open-front and she could see it was equally well appointed. Scattered around the large space were the heads of animals or the entire thing. Lion, tiger and elephant heads, an entire grisly and polar bear, various deer and antelope she didn't recognize. Probably the global list of endangered species could be found here.

The desk in the study alcove where Larkin worked was worth more than Larkin made in a year. It was mahogany with ivory inlays of hunting scenes. There remained no question that Larkin worked for someone. He was still in his Marine uniform as his hands swiftly passed disk after disk over the magnet. Light winked off the brass on his collar and Jas grimaced. It was time to find the real boogie man.

"Don't move," she warned softly.

Larkin's head jerked up to face the silencer on the end of her nine millimeter. He straightened slowly in the big old-fashioned chair to smile at her. "I've been expecting you, Jazzy girl. But I did think the boys out front would welcome you first. They're big fans and have been looking forward to this."

"Yes, they were *dying* to meet me."

One eyebrow went up and Larkin glanced at the window.

"It's just you and me," Jas grinned, "again."

"Jumping a few trolls outside doesn't impress me. They weren't even military. No challenge. Now be reasonable and hand over the stupid gun. I can help you."

"I noticed your closest friends are suddenly from south of the border. Looks to me like someone doesn't trust you, Bobby. Who would that be?" Jas smiled at him. Pulling two pairs of cuffs she'd lifted from the sentries outside from her jacket pocket, she tossed them to him. Larkin caught them out of habit. The reflexes of a physical man who'd maintained his fighting form for over twenty-five years of service.

"Cuff your right wrist to the arm of the chair, your left ankle to the leg," she instructed in the same conversational tone.

"Really, my dear. There's no need for this. If you've gotten rid of my watchdogs, we can both get out of this. Obviously you've finally figured out that I'm not your main concern. Hasn't it occurred to you that the boys out front were here to keep me in as much as keep you out?" Larkin tried again.

Jas had been moving around the desk steadily as they spoke. She was out of reach but now stood to his side, the desk no longer between her and Robert Larkin. She knew he thought he could now lunge at her and she'd probably only get a wild shot off. She felt it was time to impress him with the error of his thinking. His lame attempts to convince her that he was on her side had been insulting anyway.

The silencer suddenly dipped down and a soft pop went off. Larkin screamed and doubled over to clutch his right foot.

"That was only your little toe, asshole. I'm tired of talking. Now cuff yourself while you're down there. I want your ankle to the chair leg and your arm coming down under the armrest and cuffed to the back chair leg. *Do it now.*"

"Damn!" Jackson breathed as they listened to Jas handle Larkin. "She's good. Knew not to warn him. Just went for it."

Blaster grunted. His grim face appeared pinched.

She was doing everything right. How long could it last? She wasn't Unit trained. She had a solid Marine background but would that be enough? This was her first real action after all. Raw recruits were usually nut jobs during their first taste of blood and guts. She seemed cold as an old professional and he'd think she was one if he didn't know about her barf sessions tonight. Damn, damn, damn.

Blaster wasn't sure who he was praying to, but he pleaded with the gods of war. Just a little longer. She needed to hold on, he'd be there soon.

He had to get there. He was her backup and his ass was still too damn far away. It didn't matter that she'd forced him to let her get ahead of him. What mattered was she was in the shitstorm and he wasn't there to make sure she came out of it. There was no

time to marvel over her natural huntress instincts. They were serving her well so far. He grasped at the grim faith that she could hang on to them.

"Fucking bitch!" Larkin spat at her, clutching his booted foot. Blood seeped out of the shot-off toe. He made a move to lift his torso.

"Sit up and I'll shoot you where it counts," Jas warned. "Cuff yourself."

Larkin realized she wasn't playing and picked up the cuffs he'd dropped by his foot and cuffed his leg and then his wrist as directed. He was bent double, his head between his knees, one arm wrenched back so his hand grasped the back leg of the big old-fashioned chair. Cuffed in that awkward position, he had to struggle if he wanted to look at her. It also cut down on his ability to plan an escape on the fly before she got his other wrist and ankle cuffed.

Jas had his other hand as soon as he was done and quickly cuffed it so his hand gripped the top of the armrest on the other side of the chair. Jerking his left foot over, she cuffed that to the opposite leg. He was bent and twisted in an awkward position, in tremendous pain, but that was the point.

"Let's hear it. Who's your boss?" she asked tightly.

Larkin managed a wheezing laugh. "What makes you think I'd give him up, little girl?"

Larkin screamed again. There was loud moaning and harsh breathing for a few minutes.

"There are four more fingers on this hand. Who is your boss?" Jas repeated as she placed his pinky finger on the floor under his face.

Larkin managed to lift his head and look her in the eye. His face was pale, sweat and tears dripped down to his square chin. He had been a reasonably good-looking man. His features were unremarkable but solid. His nose had been broken sometime in the past and never set completely straight. He looked the career Marine in every way. Now though, he looked different. There was a twisted quality to his face that matched the painful contortions his body was bound in.

"He's already fucked you, bitch. Don't think your new boyfriend can Ghost your ass out of here." Larkin laughed, it gargled and turned into a choked cough, but he continued. "You were never free, just too stupid to realize who owned you. He's done playing with you, idiot. Bastard is done with all of us."

Jas stared into manic eyes and brought the knife down again. She'd been holding it poised over the next finger on his left hand. The ghost babble was interesting. It hinted at something fascinating. He'd also told her why it'd been too easy getting in here. Whoever was in charge had lured them both here. Getting out was going to be the trick.

In the truck, Blaster sucked in a deep breath. Jackson started cursing soft and low.

"Shut up, Jackson," Gray hissed into the earpiece.

"Stop the truck! The cabin's a trap!" Gray barked in quick succession.

"She doesn't know," Blaster responded as he brought the truck to a skidding halt. "Jackson, you have two seconds to get out. This is where she turned off with the bike. We can't leave it. Straight north about a mile."

"Shut up, she's talking," Gray hushed them.

Jackson hopped out of the truck and took off at a run. He'd reach the bike in about five minutes depending on how thick the underbrush was.

Blaster roared down the road. The driveway to the cabin was another few miles.

"Don't you pass out on me, you fucking white bastard, in yo creepy rich man's cabin!" Jas yelled "Why do all y'all white folk need to plaster the walls with moldy old dead animals? You tell me that, bastard. Feel like they watchin' me an' shit. Beady dead eyes lookin' outta carcasses."

"She doesn't talk like this," Blaster said quietly. "She's telling us there are eyes in the cabin."

"You're sure?" Gray asked skeptically.

"Yeah. She did it when we were being followed once. Sounds like conversation, but it's a message. She's as good as I am at seeing the details in her surroundings. I couldn't catch her when she didn't know what was different than it should be."

Blaster pulled the truck off the road before he reached the cabin drive and turned it off. The cabin was a trap. The person in charge was running a delicate operation that depended on human behavior playing out normally. They'd correctly pushed Jas' buttons to bring her to this place.

The complexity of the plan was erupting and none of them could afford to be sloppy. One thing had gone wrong with the plan, Larkin had known about it or guessed it. Amusing that human behavior was the only thing that tripped up a plan that had worked so flawlessly depending on the predictability of behavior.

In any case, roaring up the driveway is what he would have done normally. It was only logical to assume that the driveway would be both monitored and booby-trapped. He worked his way to the cabin through the thick scrub of the forest surrounding it.

Blaster was confident Jas had picked up that she was in a dangerous situation and possibly not alone in the house.

Jas had kept talking, apparently muttering to herself if one didn't know what to listen for. It was a steady stream of information.

"Gives me the damn willies. Damn dead fuckin' animals. There's just no need for it. Surrounding yaself with stupid crap like dis. A body walks in here and it's a freakin' tomb."

"She knows it's a trap," Blaster said softly to the two men listening. "She's telling us not to enter the cabin. I'm betting it's wired with explosives that can be detonated remotely."

"Only white asses think it's fun to stuff they kills and keep the carcasses hangin' 'bout. Must be sixty dead animals in here. Who needs that many reminders they can

point a gun? He prolly didn't even get 'em in a fair fight. Use that blind shit, so he ambushing the poor things. Larkin, are you wakin' up yet? You stay out and I will beat you to consciousness. You hear me, hillbilly white boy?"

"The trophies are stuffed with explosives," Blaster interpreted her rambling. "She's telling me it's an ambush again and insisting we stay outside."

"Insisting?" Gray chuckled darkly. "I think she just threatened to beat you if you came in."

"That's my baby," Blaster acknowledged.

"I have the bike," Jackson interjected. "Do you need help?"

"Naw, she'll get out. Meet us at the jet," Blaster responded. "Be ready to go, our tail might be hot."

"Good luck." Jackson took off.

Blaster remained at the edge of the yard. His concern about the possibility the drive was wired now extended to the rough yard surrounding the building. There was no way to tell, he didn't have the right equipment.

"Ohhhh now you went and did that!" Jas yelled again. "Pass out and you have to piss your pants. Jesus, you stank! I need some fuckin' air and then I'm gonna hose your foul ass down. You will tell me who pullin' your fuckin' strings, bastard."

Jas came out the front door still yelling at Larkin. She was acting like a maniac, screaming threats over her shoulder into the cabin as she stepped onto the porch and grabbed one of the two smaller wicker chairs from the seating area and the matches from beside the candle.

The loud, steady stream of expletives didn't even hitch as she strode to the other end of the porch where a kerosene lantern rested on the other table of that side's seating arrangement. Swiftly screwing off the top to the lantern tank, she splashed the round wicker chair back with flammable liquid. Actions done in quick, smooth movements, she put down the lamp and lit a match. The wicker chair back ignited as she pitched it over the railing.

Jas dropped to the porch floor as the chair hit the ground. The rounded back allowed it to roll across the lawn and on the chair's second revolution it exploded. She was up immediately to light and toss the second chair beyond the first one. Her throw was powered by adrenaline and this chair landed exactly where she'd aimed it and rolled just as the first had, exploding after a brief roll.

Jas figured time was up. She'd cleared a path more than halfway across the lawn but there wasn't time for more. The two quick explosions would be slightly muffled in the house but the maniac had just about enough time to realize she'd suspected his trap. He probably wasn't expecting her to know the different types of charges he'd have used in the yard. They had to be heat or weight activated and out in the wilderness, wired on some sort of switch. He couldn't have the yard secretly mined if animals could trip it. She needed to get the hell outta Dodge.

Watching her from the woods, Blaster felt pride expand as his fucking smart woman worked out her problems. Damn! Her natural situational awareness was poetry in motion for a warrior. The instinctive predator living in her skin was the rare personality that made up any Unit. He'd never witnessed it outside his highly trained comrades. She was working her enemy, crawling into his head.

Blaster whistled an owl call and she knew he was in the trees at the edge of the lawn. No real owl would hang around after the two explosions. Jas was over the porch rail in a side jump using her hand for leverage and landing in the path her first chair had taken. It was barely enough time as she carefully followed the alleyway of the chairs.

If she didn't make it away from the building fast enough, it wouldn't matter if she stepped on a land mine. Speed was more important than caution. Luck would find her, or not. Jas dove the last ten feet, coming straight at Blaster. He managed to catch her and roll them both. The cabin went up in a massive blast.

"You hurt?" he asked urgently as he was yanking her up.

"No."

They were both running through the underbrush. Explosions kept going off behind them as the cabin debris fell on the lawn.

"Yard was a minefield," Blaster stated as they ran.

"Ya think?" Jas mocked him, dodging around trees.

"How'd you know?" Blaster questioned as they neared the truck and he started it with the remote.

"Bastard didn't mean for anyone to live, not even his own," Jas stated, and flung herself in the passenger side of Blaster's truck. Diving in the driver's side, he squealed away, flying down the road to the sound of continued booms from the cabin area. "It was a trap for all of us."

"How'd you know he was gonna detonate?" Blaster wanted to know as Jas slumped on the seat that was bouncing wildly as they sped away.

"He had to. Larkin knew it too." Jas grinned at him as they reached dangerous speeds on the narrow road. "You're not driving like an old woman anymore."

"Nope." Blaster tried to concentrate on driving but he knew the woman beside him was still in trouble. Her system was fried with "go juice" and she had no way down.

Jas fished the mic out of her pocket. "We still live?" she asked, holding it up. Her hand trembled violently and Jas immediately lowered it.

"Yes. And recording," Blaster confirmed, glancing at her, trying to read her. The animal in him was reading equally wild woman in her. She brought the storm with her. It swirled around her body in undulating waves of adrenaline.

"Who's listening?" Jas wanted to know as she continued to pant in harsh breaths.

"Gray Winston, Unit commander. Jackson picked up the bike. He's on the same frequency. He'll have the jet ready to go by the time we get there."

Jas tried to sound casual. It was difficult to control her body's palsied shaking much less the intensely sexual urges rioting through her as she looked at the man who'd been there. Exactly where he'd promised. The impulse to jump her hillbilly clawed at her. "Jet? Hillbilly has a jet?"

Blaster being outside that cabin had been as intense for her as the actual battle. He'd come. He'd kept his word. He'd respected her. He'd allowed the two of them to be equal without her having to fight for it. The feelings welling up in her didn't have a name. Mostly because she'd never experienced them before. Mixing that with the battle rush created a volatile turmoil that apparently translated to sexual urges just about too intense to withstand.

"It's not mine, woman. Belongs to Winston."

"How does retired military afford a jet?" Jas asked frowning, and not caring about the answer. She just wanted his voice, needed the comfort of his rough rumble. She needed a damn sight more but was having difficulty reading him. Her own chaotic wants were getting in the way as well as the insecure fear that he couldn't still want her. Men went for the helpless princess sort, not the fully capable wicked witch type.

Blaster picked up the spare headset that'd been on the console between them and handed it to her. "He can explain. I'm driving here." He glanced at her again and sucked in air, frowning darkly.

She took the earbud from him and immediately his hand snaked down to thrust between her thighs. His grip was hard and brief on her upper thigh but intimate as hell. That was the sign she'd been waiting for. Her body twisted around so she leaned over the console facing him. His arm lifted quickly and re-gripped the wheel around her. Her hands dug into his shoulders as her head tilted and she took his mouth.

His eyes glued to the road over her head, he let the heat exploded between them. There were things they needed to discuss, but right now base physical contact was required. Blaster groaned. His head dipped to press her mouth open with his. He needed more of this witch and he needed it right now. Her mouth opened eagerly, sucking his tongue into her damp depths, encouraging him to fuck her with it. A feminine purr accompanied the damp sounds of the kiss.

There were not enough words in the world to tell her where they were. He was damn proud of her but he was *never* letting her go off to battle alone again. She'd proved herself warrior woman. He'd proved she could trust him. Those questions had been answered and would not be repeated. If she ever faced death again, it'd be with him at her back fighting it off. Her surrender in the kiss, giving him control, appeased his ravenous need to assert his right to protect her in some small degree.

"Stop that you two!" Jackson roared into the headset. "I swear to God, you get in an accident because she's climbing you, Blaster, I will *not* scrape up the pieces. We don't have time for this shit!"

Blaster couldn't help a chuckle. Jas pulled a breath away from his mouth to press the earbud in her ear and adjust the boom. It was the same size as a cell phone hands-free device. She'd been able to hear Jackson bellowing through Blaster's.

"Jackson, stop whining. I saw how you liked watching last time," she accused softly with a laugh in her tone, and then reattached her mouth to Blaster's. Again Blaster started growling as she sucked his tongue into her mouth and made love to it.

"Jasmina Carson! Get your mouth off him! I am not a voyeur," Jackson yelled. "You behave like a lady this instant or I'll... I'm not sure what I'll do but you won't like it."

Jas moaned softly then sat back off Blaster, laughing. The three of them were bickering and that was a good thing. They needed to stay sharp to make it out. She trusted these two men and if that was a mistake, it was too damn late. Her acceptance of Jackson as part of Blaster was an example of the immediate trust Barry had wanted her to extend to Blaster in the editing trailer. This time it had worked. However, circumstances made it a black-and-white issue. Either Blaster was fighting her or fighting for her.

The relationship developing between her and Jackson was unique in her experience. Sharp-edged wit flew between them with uncommon ease and no concern for causing real damage. She expected him to understand her. Perhaps she was more comfortable with Jackson because of the way Blaster read her.

"You go ahead and believe that, honey," she countered softly. Jackson was fun but she couldn't focus on him. Her attention was drawn to the man beside her.

The needs crashing through her were wickedly powerful. There was no escaping as heat burned up her body. It was becoming painful. Sexual and savage, her reactions to the action tonight were focused on the fierce man in the truck with her.

Blaster shot her a scowl. "My woman. Don't be teasing his infatuated ass. He can't take it. He's the baby and has no idea how to handle you."

Jackson snorted. "I hadn't noticed you doing such a damn fine job of handling her, hotshot. So far she's gotten every wild-ass thing she wants. Taking my bike and going off into an ambush for starters."

"Shut up, Jackson. She knew what she was doing." Blaster glanced at Jas. Being proud of her washed over him again. She was leaning back, her long body stretched out, seemingly relaxed with her head resting on the seat back. Her eyes were closed. Trust. She was giving him complete trust by not even watching the road as they sped through the night on the narrow country routes.

"Jackson, who knew what I was really saying in the cabin? I'm betting it was hillbilly here," she purred without opening her eyes, but her hands were busy.

Jackson agreed reluctantly. "Yeah. He's the one who knew you'd figured out it was a trap."

Blaster glanced over again. What he saw nearly threw him out of his concentration on the driving. Jas released the laces up the short fly of her pants and lifted her bottom

to shove them down. Her hands were still shaking as she caressed her own bare thighs and her eyes opened to look at Blaster.

She responded to Jackson, "There you go. He knows he doesn't need to handle me. He reads me just fine. That's the difference." Her hands slid to the insides of her tensed legs, lightly dragging clawed fingers up sensitive skin. Blaster's glance flickered back and forth between the road and her as she framed the dark triangle he could barely see in the dashboard lights.

Jackson continued arguing. "Difference? A difference from what? From me being the only sane person? As I recall, every one of my suggestions involved not going near the rabid killers! You two wing nuts didn't even hear me. Jesus, one of you can't wait to blow everything up and the other one throws down weapons as if she were born with 'em in hand."

They'd traveled far enough to be reasonably sure they were not being followed. Blaster eased off the gas. He understood the demon clawing at her. She'd made a clear choice, turning to him to focus all the rioting emotion on sexual need. It had become overwhelming just as the combat experience had been. She needed a way down and this was the path to get her off the adrenaline cliff she was teetering on.

His own need hadn't peaked yet. He'd been damn scared for her but now that he had her with him, he wasn't done getting her out of danger. However, she was being honest with how she needed off her battle high. That was a statement about her trust in him, whether she knew it or not.

He knew for males, the sexual hunger laced with a victor's euphoria had always been a dangerous cocktail. It's the reason rape was added to pillage. They went together. He knew the roar of that beast well. Could her needs be the mirror image of that? Was this a drive for confirmation of her feminine nature? Could she possibly need affirmation of her appeal?

Just because he wasn't done battling for her safety didn't mean he didn't want exactly what she wanted. His own beast was well aware his woman needed him. He'd give her all the affirmation she could handle.

Her head was turned to stare at him as her fingers speared into damp folds. The earthy scent of the fire burning her from the inside out intensified. Blaster glanced over, traveling at a more sedate speed, he put a finger to his lips indicating she be quiet. Jas nodded and he reached over to flatten his palm over her trembling belly. Her body jerked up, pressing into him.

Jas closed her eyes and bit her lip to restrain the gasping pleasure he gave her with that firm touch. Her own hands left her body, one clutched the door handle and the other moved under his arm to dig into his hard thigh. With her feet braced as widely as her pants would allow, her bottom barely touched the seat as her hips moved in desperate need. She surrendered.

Firm fingers slid down over her mound and into wet folds with forceful demand. Pressing in hard, he separated outer lips from tender inner secrets. Her hips rocked up

as he rimmed her wet opening while the heel of his palm pressed into her clit, grinding down on it. She met him with abandon, thrusting up as he opened her.

Jas grabbed his wrist with the hand that had been clutching the door, trying to force him to enter her. Blaster didn't take his eyes off the road as he dealt with her. She needed his help to climb off the combat high, but she also needed to trust him and part of that was the intimate battle for control they were about to have. She'd never be satisfied with less, even though she might fight him for it. Right now the power struggle between them was one she desperately needed to lose. Even if she didn't know that, he did.

His hand lifted off her pussy against the force of her hold. She couldn't move him. She might be strong but she was no match for the contest of raw muscle power. Her eyes opened to glare at him and he looked at her. His teeth were drawn back in a silent snarl that commanded compliance. Her grip loosened and he didn't move. As her hand lifted from his wrist, his palm came down between her legs in a sharp spank.

Jas jammed the back of her hand into her mouth to hold in the scream as burning sensation rocketed through her. He lifted again to repeat the explosively erotic punishment and her hips followed his hand, needing him like this. Oh God!! It felt so good. Brutal and intense, it matched her frantic hungers in mind-shattering perfection. All of it. His demand for control fed her needy soul in ways she'd never imagined anyone could. She could trust him to know what she craved but she couldn't master him. Her body gushed in lewd approval and she gulped back sobs.

The open mic forced her to silence as he took her to the most erotic place she'd ever been. Never had she needed so badly. His complete control of her animal responses thrilled her in a way that shocked. She felt safe. No matter what occurred she was safe.

When had this happened? Who the fuck cared? The erotic slaps drove her exactly where she needed to go as her body burned and twisted under them. On the third smack, two thick fingers speared into her gushing cunt. The demanding invasion stretched her roughly and drove her to a new level of sensation. He forced the fingers in as far as possible and ripped them out again. He was fucking her hard and fast—she couldn't hold back.

Doubling over so his forearm scraped her cheek as he invaded her with those digits, she came hard in a bone-melting crescendo. He continued finger-fucking her through it, never taking eyes off the road and she silently jerked on his thrusting hand. As her contractions declined, his motions slowed to gentle rubbing and then stilled.

Her mouth was open and panting as she rested her cheek against his arm. Buried in her as deeply as he could, he felt her calm down slowly. Finally she sat back and he reluctantly pulled out of her. Tender flesh clenched around him as he left her and Blaster met her eyes briefly. Out of her body, his fingers felt cold and he brought them to his face. Looking at the road again, he inhaled deeply then leisurely licked her taste from his hand.

"Going silent a minute. We're not being followed," Blaster said gruffly, and tapped a glowing blue button on his earbud, the blue light went out.

Jas immediately did the same. "You could have done that five minutes ago!" she accused harshly as she grabbed her pants and pulled them up.

"You needed the control. You were on the edge of totally losing it and you needed to control something. It was the best I could give you in the circumstances." Blaster shot her a searching glance. "We gonna be all right?"

Jas finished lacing the leather pants, still breathing heavily. "I think so." Her tone was shaky. The anger had been short-lived. "You knew where I was, didn't you? What I needed."

"You were with me, baby, right where you should be. I take care of what you need and how you need it," he replied in understanding that answered several questions they didn't have time to discuss. "We're not separate, Jas. Not anymore. I can't do this again. Where you go, I go, and I will not watch while you're in danger. Do we have a problem with that?"

"Our problem at the moment is getting out of the state. Right now I have no intention of going anywhere without you."

Blaster nodded. "That'll do for now. We're not done with the subject though. I'm not asking you to stop being a damn dangerous woman. I'm warning you that you'll have company."

Blaster tapped the headset again and the blue light blinked on. "Back," he said, ending the private conversation. Jas tapped hers on as well.

"Miss Carson?" a deep voice she hadn't heard yet greeted her.

"Mr. Winston, I presume?"

"Yes. Well done this evening," Gray continued. "I'd like to invite you to join these two 'gentlemen' at Remington Morgan's ranch in Florida. He's part of the Unit and a reasonably close location that can be secured. The situation just went public with that explosion though I doubt your involvement would be detected."

"Of course, Mr. Winston. I need to let Barry know what's going on though," Jas injected seriously.

"I'll take care of that, Miss Carson. We've met and he knows who I am. I'd like to talk to Barry anyway. It would be best if the film company acted as if they don't know where you are. At this point, you're believed dead by the people attempting to kill you. At least we hope you are. If there is no one pursuing you right now, we'll be able to assume they didn't plan for your escape and protecting that information might prove valuable. I'd like it to stay that way while we assess the situation.

"You try and get some rest if you can. It's my understanding that you've been awake around twenty-four hours now. And please, call me Gray. It's a rare honor to make your acquaintance."

"Then you'd better call me Jas. People who call me Miss Carson are strangers. I take it you've been listening the last few hours."

"Thank you, Jas. Blaster, turn left. It's a faster route to the plane," Gray instructed fast.

"Ten-four. What's Jackson's ETA to the jet?"

"I'm in, warming up," Jackson responded. "Couldn't locate any observers and loaded the bike with no problem. We might be out of this clean."

"Good, I haven't seen anything following but that doesn't mean they're not. Cover us when we get there," Blaster instructed. He couldn't quite believe it'd be that easy. Whoever had conceived that cabin scenario couldn't be so arrogant as to think that one ambush would solve all his problems? Could he? Granted, Jas was exceptionally skilled in action. Her instincts were those of a natural predator.

That type of awareness couldn't be taught or learned. A person possessed it naturally or they didn't. It was a quality each one of the Unit men brought to the group. Gray had looked for it in the men he selected when forming his command. But few were truly aware of its power as the big Seminole knew it. He drew on hundreds of years of fighting knowledge passed down through his family. The modern military had no way of amassing that type of understanding and remaining politically correct.

Tense silence followed while Blaster navigated the narrow back road to the airfield. He pulled up as close to the plane as he could get and still have room for Jackson to lower the stairs. Everyone knew this would be the danger point if there were a sniper waiting in the night. They were open targets getting from truck to jet.

The stairs slowly descended and the door opened. A rifle muzzle gleamed darkly out of the cracked door as Jackson advertised his readiness to cover them.

"Blaster, bring the Mexican calling card," Jackson reminded him softly. "We can't leave it in the truck."

"Roger," Blaster agreed, and glanced at the toolbox in the truck bed, calculating the time it'd take him to grab the burlap sack and get around the body of the vehicle.

"Wait 'til I get to your side," Blaster commanded softly.

"Fuck that, hillbilly boy. Two targets are more difficult than one," Jas hissed at him, her hand already on the door. "You'd better catch up." She was out and sprinting for the stairs.

Blaster swore and followed her damn ass, retrieving the little sack from the tool case as fast as possible. He really would have to spank that woman sometime. She sucked at following orders.

They both were in with no incident. Jackson had punched the button to withdraw the stairs as soon as Blaster's foot hit the bottom one. The door was closing behind them as they burst through it. Jackson rose from his cover crouch and grinned at them. They made a frightful sight. Jas was liberally streaked with blood and dirt. Blaster wore it as well, though it was mostly where she'd touched him.

"Strap in. We're out of here." Jackson secured the door and strode into the cockpit to slide into the pilot's seat.

Jas looked around at the posh jet as Jackson flipped on low interior lights. It was all leather and rich woods gleaming with the soft understated whisper of old money, class and impeccable taste. A space decorated to impress its occupants.

Glancing down at her crusty self, she laughed softly. "Someone is gonna be pissed." She sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs and buckled the seat belt.

Blaster quickly placed the bag he carried in the wet bar's freezer then sat across from her. "Several folks are pissed tonight, Sheena. Which one are you worried about?"

"Whoever has to clean this thing." Her hand indicated her clothes then reached up to remove the headset, handing it casually to Blaster.

Blaster couldn't smile. She sat across from him covered in a battle she'd almost not come out of. Her face was streaked with blood as were her clothes. She'd operated efficiently and ruthlessly, staying a precarious step ahead of losing her life. Far as he could tell from her service record, it was her first combat mission, though it obviously wasn't the first time she'd struggled for her life. It damn well was gonna be the last time she did it alone.

"I'll buy Gray a new chair," Blaster replied grimly as he tossed both earpieces on a low table beside him.

Jas raised a brow at his surly response as the plane taxied out and took the runway. "We won. What's the matter with you?"

"We got away. And in case you hadn't noticed, the only good guy in real danger was my woman. Makes me fuckin' cranky."

The plane took off, climbing sharply to cruising altitude. "Twenty minutes and we're there," Jackson informed them from the cockpit.

"Your woman? You sure about that, Huckleberry?" Jas questioned softly. "I'm not all shiny and new, ya know. This woman is not a princess and never was. I've done things most men do not want to know their woman is capable of. I don't expect anything, you never made any promises."

His eyes narrowed. "I'm damn sure about that, Sheena. Let me explain it to you."

Blaster snapped his buckle off and leaned forward to flick her seat belt open. His hands slid under her ass in the chair and jerked her up to him as he shifted his weight back into his own chair. She landed on his lap with her legs draped over the armrests. Chest to chest, cock to pussy, he pulled her flush against him. "See how eloquent I am?" His mouth landed on her gasp and he dove into the hot little opening.

Jas moaned, her mouth sucking his tongue in. That lethal body of hers relaxed, pushing her center down on the pipe under his jeans. Blaster growled low in his throat.

He couldn't pull her close enough, run his hands over enough of her. Her limber body didn't seem to be protesting at the position as she initiated dragging herself up and down his cock. He let her have his desperation, his admiration, the frustration of

being an observer as she met danger face-to-face. He gave it all to her. His entire body tried to consume her as he drove himself into her mouth.

He lifted his lips for a better position and she followed his mouth, growling at him in feral demand.

Son of a bitch! She captured his mouth again with a nasty little nip to his lip. Blood wet his mouth as she dove into him again. The tiny sting of pain and primal copper taste of blood spun him into overdrive. Heat raged through him and his cock swelled, furiously scraping against the confines of his jeans. His hand landed sharply on her ass in retaliation, driving her into him harder. A muffled snarl emerged from her throat though she didn't break the kiss. His fingers dug into her hair to pull her mouth off him. Panting with open mouths, they glared at each other. Her body stilled as the two of them regarded each other in barely contained intensity.

He wasn't the only one feeling the affects of nearly losing something they'd not had time to experience yet. She met his animal emotions and matched them. Blaster wasn't prepared for the primitive recognition of mate as it washed over him in a shocking wave of red-hazed possessiveness. His lips drew back in an unconscious grimace as it sliced him from heart to soul.

She was the one he'd not been looking for. The realization of exactly who she was to him shredded through his being in total disregard. It didn't matter that he'd spent a lifetime unaware it was possible for someone to own his soul. Suddenly there she was in all her horrifying glory. Beautiful and deadly, possessor of the power to destroy him and he had no defenses. No control. No clue how to assimilate her into his world. What the hell was he supposed to do next!?

"Jesus Christ! Don't kill each other!" Jackson snapped from the cockpit.

Blaster's fingers relaxed and released her head. Jas slowly leaned forward to lick over his bleeding lip. The damp scrape of her tongue was more than he could handle and he had to have it again. Swooping down, he captured her mouth for a gentle, moaning mating.

"Stop already! What am I? Invisible?" Jackson glared at them. Their chairs were easily visible from the pilot's seat with the cockpit door secured open as it was. "Jas, you need liquid besides his saliva. Your body is in overdrive and you don't feel things like hunger or pain. I'm not talking because of the jerk you're sitting on, I mean from combat.

"Blaster, have you bothered to check her for wounds?" Jackson asked as he picked up a bottle of water from his bag and threw it at them.

Blaster caught the water missile just before it hit her in the back. Jas pulled back from Blaster's mouth to take the bottle of water.

Jackson tossed the other one. Blaster caught it. "You too, stud," Jackson snapped, irritated with the earthy erotic energy wafting around them again.

Jas opened her bottle and tipped her head back, draining it. "Who died and made him Captain Health?" She tilted her head briefly at Jackson as Blaster drained his own bottle.

"He's the medical officer," Blaster informed her. "He always wants to know if you ate your peas or need stitches. Damn irritating sometimes."

Blaster found Jackson's interruption a relief. The sharp conversation between the three of them aborted the out-of-control panic he'd experienced. It'd probably saved him from some stupid display that he wouldn't have been able to explain. Focusing on right now, right here, seemed a damn good idea as he attempted to shove the realization of who she was to him into a dark corner. Even though he scrambled to move away from the knowledge, it wasn't working. One phrase slithered through his brain in a repeating loop. *I am so damn screwed.*

Jas chuckled. "I can see that. Is he always around when you've got a woman's legs draped around your hips? Just want to know if this is some sort of package deal."

"Hell no!" Both men snapped at once.

Jas twisted to look at Jackson's long form as he checked the panels around the pilot's chair continually. "Because I think I'd mind...eventually."

Blaster grabbed her chin and swung it around to face him. "Focus, Sheena," he commanded darkly. "I'll be your Huckleberry, baby. Your options just got narrowed down to one. Don't expect that to change in the near future."

Jas smiled at his frown. She leaned forward and gently licked over Blaster's lip where a bead of blood had gathered.

"Watch it." Blaster sucked in a breath.

Jackson's eyebrows went up as he glanced back again. "Blaster? You're actually bleeding? Any other injuries?"

"Not yet," Blaster growled, "but we have time."

An insistent dinging noise came from the cockpit and Jackson straightened. "Jas? Injuries?" he asked impatiently as he flipped switches in efficient motions.

"Not yet," she purred as Blaster dabbed his lip.

Jackson snorted in disgust then directed, "Get off him already. We'll be landing soon and I'm not explaining killing you both in the plane." Then under his breath, "God, give me a kitten. I don't want to sleep with a gun under my pillow."

Blaster lifted her and deposited her in the chair facing him. "I wanted to talk before we landed. Explain who'll be there."

Jas buckled in and leaned back closing her eyes. "Okay, Huckleberry. Who's going to be there?"

"Jas, stay awake, baby. This is important. I don't want you to get uncomfortable when you see the number of men who'll be around."

"I'm awake." Her eyes opened lazily. "You and Jackson will be there. Why would I be uncomfortable?"

Blaster smiled to himself. That statement told him where her trust lay. He wasn't crazy about Jackson being part of it, but that seemed to be the way when a Unit member found his woman. There was a second man who developed a strong protective relationship as well. Gray had his close friend Dave who'd actually had known Gray's wife Prin longer than Gray had. Rem and Kathryn had Charlie who'd pretty much joined the family and guarded Rem's twins as if he were a fucking Rottweiler.

However in this case, it might take two of them to protect the world from Jas instead of his needing the extra layer of protection for her. They'd not made much headway in that direction. So far the world had a hole in it and several bodies scattered around.

"Yeah, we'll be there but also some of the Unit. When we land, it'll be at the Morgan Ranch. Robert Morgan and his wife. Remington Morgan is their son. He'll be there with his wife Kathryn. I'm betting Charlie is already on site. He guards the Morgan twins with a vengeance."

"Hope this place is big," Jas murmured.

The plane began to descend. "It's big. The Morgan Ranch might be the biggest operation in Florida."

Jas glanced around the extravagantly appointed cabin. "You boys seem to have done well."

Blaster grinned. "It pays to be badder than the bad guys. I'm surprised you didn't go into protection with an outfit like Blackwater. I know for a fact their operatives earn a pretty penny. Then again, you don't exactly make peanuts, Miss Starlet."

Jas snorted. "Not even close to this, hillbilly boy."

The wheels touched down with barely a bump. "Wait for the movie to come out, angel face. Then tell me how poor you are," Blaster scoffed.

Chapter Six

Robert and Remington Morgan casually leaned on the hood of the Escalade watching the Winston jet pull off the runway and park beside the hanger. They were both tall men though Rem was more heavily muscled than his father. Sleek, feline features were a look they shared. The elder Morgan's face was a bit more lined with age, but his body showed few other signs of it. Shortly the plane door opened and three individuals emerged.

The late Central Florida night hosted a full moon flirting with dark, low-hanging clouds. Around them the air was thick with humidity. Elusive, murky reflections in the puddles on the pavement created patches of night that moved with the individuals crossing the runway in shadowy relief.

"Damn," the elder Morgan murmured under his breath as the small group approached.

Three people strung out in a line glided toward them in long-limbed strides, a male flanking the woman on either side. Relatively comfortable on friendly ground, they didn't bother closing jackets, indifferently revealing strapped-on weapons as they moved. Backlit by runway ground lights, an indefinable air of combat simmered off the group as if it were a dark cape swirling in their wake. The impression of danger grew to palpable proportions as they neared.

"Yeah," Rem agreed with his father's mostly unspoken comment as the trio approached.

The eye was naturally drawn to the woman. Her tall form was clad in leather from head to foot, though she wasn't covered. She did have on a light silk jacket, but it was left open and billowing softly behind her as she moved. Her long muscled torso was left bare by the cropped lace-up vest and low-riding hip-huggers. Flat-heeled, knee-high boots added to her aura of deadly sexuality in a way that drew one in and demanded distance at the same time. The need for distance was further reinforced by the dark stains smeared across her body and clothing that could be blood or dirt in this light. Either way it was evident she'd seen action.

Even if the Morgans didn't know anything about the events earlier this evening, she was the one in the trio who they'd be most wary of. The two men were alert, scanning their surroundings with battle awareness. She seemed boldly relaxed with danger. Either she trusted the men implicitly to alert to a threat or she didn't feel there was a threat out there that she couldn't beat. The confidence combined with her outfit created an edgy sexuality she carried with ease.

The men greeted each other with long-standing familiarity and introductions were made for Jas. The two Morgans seated in front, the Escalade was equipped with two

more captain's chairs and a comfortable bench seat behind those. The Cadillac ride was nearly silent luxury to the kitchen entrance of the sprawling ranch house. Jas appeared relaxed but Blaster was aware of her taking in every detail. The charming actress role was a damn good place for the huntress to hide, he realized.

They entered a big country kitchen, which seemed filled with people when they all filed in. It was long past midnight but this room retained the cheerful feel of an active family. Mrs. Morgan offered drinks. Food in several forms was set out on the large kitchen table. There was a fruit bowl, a basket of assorted breads and a cutting board with several bricks of cheese. Kathryn Morgan was warmly welcoming in her natural, cheerful way.

Jas smiled and said hello. Her dirt-streaked face showed no flicker of unease as she turned down food but accepted a large glass of chilled orange juice. Kathryn tried to get her to sit down.

"Oh no, please. I'm a mess," Jas declined with a smile. "I could use a shower."

"Of course." Kathryn smiled at her with a woman's understanding. "Let me show you to a guest room. We can get acquainted after you've had some rest."

The back door opened and a large man entered, drawing all eyes.

"Jose!" Jas exclaimed, and turned to stride toward the newcomer.

The thickly muscled Latin male grinned. "Hello, Miss Carson. I'm very pleased to see you."

Jas enveloped him in a hug and Blaster scowled, his lip curling back. "Mind climbing off him, Jas? Or do I have to kill him?"

"Since when did I become 'Miss Carson'?" Jas let go of Jose and stepped back laughing, ignoring Blaster's surly attitude. "What are you doing here?"

"You're 'Miss Carson' since I paid hard-earned money to see you on the big screen," Jose answered with a big grin, also unconcerned about the scowling man behind her. "I'm the ramrod here. Thought I'd step in and check on you when I heard you'd be in tonight." Jose smiled but his eyes were full of questions as he looked at the blood, mud and fatigue written across her face and body. "Everything all right?"

"Things have been interesting tonight but clear now. This is my boyfriend Blaster. Blaster, Jose Cruze. Jose dated my friend Liana a while back." Jas slipped her hand into Blaster's as she said that and held on tight.

Blaster's face cleared and he held out a hand to the man. "Cruze. It'd be nice to see you again if I didn't have to peel my woman off you." They shook hands briefly and smiled at Blaster's humor. They had met several times before when Blaster had been at the ranch.

Blaster knew Jas didn't want to deal with telling Cruze about Liana tonight. Her little tremble as her hand slid into his had told him it would be difficult. Looking at the large Jose Cruze, he could see it. A man didn't become ramrod on a ranch this size by

being a pansy. His position was more than a foreman. It was a title straight out of the old west and not required on most ranches these days.

The title ramrod made him operations manager and troubleshooter for all the different aspects required on a property this large. Function and upkeep of the place required several types of employees. All the crews answered to the ramrod. His knowing Jasmina Carson would be on the plane coming in after midnight was not a surprise to Blaster. Jose Cruze had proved himself to the Morgans and was a core member of the ranch. He was also a veteran and in his position had immediately recognized the Unit members for what they were. He knew when to question activity and when not to. His unique talents were invaluable to the Morgans.

"I won't keep you but if there is anything I can do, let me know," Jose offered seriously.

"I'd like to chat tomorrow, Jose. Whenever. Right now a shower is calling me."

"I can see that. Good night." Jose nodded to everyone in the room and slipped out again.

Jas and Blaster turned to follow Kathryn who was waiting patiently.

"I need some clothes, I guess," Jas murmured to Blaster.

Jackson responded from where he sat at the table across the kitchen. "Don't worry, Blaster brought everything from the hotel. Even picked up your dried laundry before he'd leave town. I'll get it and be up with your things shortly."

Jas twisted in the doorway to look at Jackson and her face winced in pain quickly followed by surprise. Blaster grabbed her shoulders to freeze her upper body. "What is it?" he demanded harshly.

Jackson was across the huge kitchen in three strides. "Where's the injury? Tell me, woman, or I'll strip you and find it myself." His face tightened with anger as he reached for her.

"It's only a scratch! And what makes you think you'll survive that little mission?" Jas snapped at him.

"Because I'll hold you while he does, dammit. The injury, Jas?" Blaster growled.

"Like hell..." Jas' head swung around to Blaster as her body jerked to get out of his hold in a twisting step back. He didn't allow the move to work, his body crowding her as he exercised the physical dominance he was capable of.

Jas' face changed. All expression leaving it as her eyes glared into his. "Take your fucking hands off me," she stated clearly. Her whole attitude had altered to a dangerous intensity that everyone in the room recognized. She had slid into battle mode.

"Stop it!" Kathryn barked into the escalating hostility. "You two, back off. If it were more than a scratch, you'd have known long before this." Kathryn had been leading them to the door and was a few paces ahead of them. She stepped up behind Jas, her angry eyes glaring at Blaster and Jackson.

"Take your hands off her *now*, Blaster," Kathryn directed stiffly.

Blaster let go of Jas' shoulders. "Better," Kathryn approved efficiently, and smiled up at Jas. "It's your side, right? Under the jacket?"

Jas nodded but didn't take cold eyes off Blaster as Kathryn lifted the silk jacket to look at the wound.

"It is just a scratch but it's a bit long," Kathryn informed them. "I'll give you some iodine to put on it after the shower."

"Thank you, Kathryn," Jas replied quietly, still watching Blaster, her face blank and set.

"Let me have a look at that," Blaster insisted in a dangerously low voice.

"I assume he just lost his spot in the blue guest room?" Kathryn stated conversationally to Jas, ignoring the two scowling men.

"Oh hell yes," Jas agreed through tight lips.

"Oh hell *no*!" Blaster reached for Jas again but the large body of Rem, Kathryn's husband, slid in front of him forcefully, cutting off the woman from his grasp.

"Not in this house, stud. The lady said no," rumbled out of the deep chest blocking his path. "Now would be a good time to go get that luggage. Use the trip to switch heads you're thinking with," Rem stared coldly at the two men as the women behind him turned and walked into the den.

"Looks like I missed all the fun," another voice drawled as Charlie entered from the back door. He was one of those people who had the amazing combination of height and exceptionally developed muscle mass. Big, dark as a moonless night, he briefly met Rem's eyes and raised an eyebrow in question. The aggression levels were palpable and the room was full of good guys.

"She needed medical attention," Jackson snorted in disgust and swung away.

"You threatened her, stupid," Rem told him without taking eyes off Blaster, who was scowling after the women disappearing out the other side of the den. "And you agreed with him, idiot. I don't even know her and I've worked out that threatening to force Miss Carson to do anything is dirt stupid."

Blaster's burning blue eyes traveled briefly to clash with Rem's now amused gaze before he silently swung around and followed Jackson outside to retrieve her bags from the plane. The kitchen door closed silently behind the two dark individuals stalking out of it.

"How are they getting back out to the plane? You don't expect them to walk a mile there and back do you?" Robert Morgan asked his son mildly.

"I left the keys in the Escalade. They'll figure it out," Rem said as he ran his hand through his hair and shook his head. "And I thought I behaved like an ass when I got hold of Kathryn."

His mother raised her eyebrows speculatively. "What did you do, dear?"

Rem grimaced. "Lost my mind mostly."

Charlie leaned on the counter, his combat-booted feet crossed at the ankle in front of him. "Anyone going to tell me what just happened?"

"Wait 'til you meet Miss Carson. Then imagine someone threatening to strip her looking for injuries. You'll get the picture." Rem grinned as he related the details. "She's six feet, armed to the teeth and covered in battle. Those two wanted to muscle her into something."

Charlie whistled silently then pressed, "What battle?"

Rem glanced in the direction Kathryn and Jas had disappeared and frowned. "Hell if I know. But from the look of her, several folks made peace with God tonight. All three of them were pumping out the kind of awareness that comes with action."

"Any idea what it has to do with all of us? Why the alert from Gray and suggestion to secure the ranch? Which is done, by the way. There are six men stationed around the property and I'll be going back out. Would be handy to know what we're watching for," Charlie questioned casually.

Rem shrugged. "I don't have any more information than you do."

"Apollo is in with the kids on guard command," Charlie added, and Rem relaxed.

Charlie lived about ten miles away but spent a lot of time at the ranch. His connection as a Unit member had always been strong, but since Kathryn's kidnapping and then the children being born, he'd become one of the family. Kathryn trusted him with her own life and the welfare of her children for good reason.

Rem didn't kid himself. He was more comfortable with Charlie around. Something he'd not realized before finding his heart resided in three pieces—one in his wife, the other two securely locked in the bodies of his children. The extra layer of vicious protection felt right. And besides, Charlie came with Apollo.

Apollo was Charlie's K-9 partner, a huge shepherd who adored the Morgan children as much as Charlie did. He was a highly trained search and rescue professional and pretty much better than the humans at guarding. He'd hear or smell anyone getting close to the kids long before a man would. Left with the guard command, he'd alert to a stranger immediately.

He also had firm doggie ideas about parenting the twins. No one but their mother was allowed to correct them when he was around. When they were infants and just learning how to crawl, Apollo had appointed himself child herder. His worried gaze followed their every move, which was difficult since there were two of them. If one of them neared a dangerous object, he'd gently pick the child up by the padded bottom and carry it back to the middle of the room, carefully placing it down and usually having to go check on the other one.

As toddlers they were too big to pick up so he'd stretch his long body out between them and the danger. Invariably the child tried to climb over him using his collar to pull themselves up. Once they were straddling his back, he'd carefully stand and carry them to wherever it was he thought they should be. The children caught on immediately and did it for the rides now.

The kids' room was probably the most secure area in the house right now.

By four in the morning the house was quiet. Deep sleep had settled over the building. A guest room door opened abruptly and the man sleeping in front of it was instantly alert.

Blaster regarded the ten painted toes in front of his face and debated the wisdom of speaking to her yet. He knew he'd fucked up badly. After cooling down, it'd become very clear to him that he might have gravely damaged their fragile relationship. In essence, destroying the trust she'd been willing to invest in him with one stupid sentence.

There were no excuses. Respecting her boundaries was his job. Being crazed with fear that she'd been injured didn't make it okay. The relationship between them depended on an equal exchange of trust. He'd never experienced a woman like her before. That wasn't an excuse for trying to force her to submit to his will. He knew better. If he wanted to stay with her, he'd have to share the power exchange. She needed control as much as he did. Until that moment they'd been working that unique relationship out. Forcing control was the quickest way to get rid of her.

He knew all that but he still couldn't be sorry for being concerned. He was sorry for how he'd acted, sure. Yet a part of him was wounded too. She should have understood. If they were going to be equals, she could have given him a little slack.

When he'd stomped in the house with Jas' bags, Kathryn had been in the kitchen again. The little woman had given his still furious face one look and marched herself right in front of him.

"Get over it, Blaster," Kathryn directed firmly. "You were wrong on a baseline level. If you think you ever want to get next to her again, you'd better realize that she needs as much space as you do. As much respect, dammit!"

Jackson came through the door behind Blaster. Kathryn glanced at him, frowning darkly and included him in her dressing down. She wasn't done yet. "I could beat both of you with a belt. Selfish bastards. If you can't manage respect, you don't deserve any woman, much less someone like Jasmina Carson!" she stated directly.

"Are you even aware of the incredible charity work she does for battered women? She's opened an amazing center in Southern California. I saw a special on it the other night. And let me tell you, she's one of the most generous, kind persons I've ever seen. Her foundation is focused on the lost, forgotten women with no resources and no way to fight back." Kathryn took a breath, but still wasn't quite finished. "And then, God knows, *what* she's been through tonight! But you two Neanderthals act like bullies and have the nerve to stomp out of here!"

Kathryn knew exactly what it meant to be a forgotten woman with no resources. Blaster was more aware than Kathryn was that she and Jas shared a lot in common. Apparently there was no need to tell her. She'd already fully identified with Jas.

Kathryn had been right. He was a little bit terrified Jas would agree with her. It seemed everyone knew more about Jasmina Carson than he did. Jackson had caught him with her awards, now Kathryn was talking about her charity work as if Jas walked on water. The woman he knew was a tough fighter, wicked wit and dangerous lover. Not that he knew near enough about the lover part.

"Get up, Huck. Something has come up," Jas whispered softly.

"We have several issues, Sheena. Me having to sleep on the floor. People trying to kill us. General mayhem. Which one has you outta bed?" He rolled over on his back to look up at her.

"You sleeping on the floor didn't get me out of bed. You screwed up and deserve it. But it's cute as hell."

She was wearing black leggings that molded her muscled legs in a faithful second skin that ended on her firm belly below her navel. A black sports bra was the only other scrap of clothing. Her generous breasts filled it out completely. Her firm, muscled body was clearly outlined and Blaster sighed. Smelling of the shower she'd taken earlier and faintly of iodine was as appealing as ever to him.

His body reminded him how appealing she was with an instant hard-on. He wished his genitals luck with that freaking pipe dream. His brain was damn sure they were not getting lucky tonight. Those were the three amigos that'd gotten them sleeping on the floor in the first place. His brain reminded the rest of him that they were too old to enjoy this shit. However, no fucking way was he acting as if he belonged in any other bed in the six guestroom-equipped house.

Stacking his hands behind his head, he regarded her solemnly. "Yep, I screwed up. But so did you. Glad you appreciate the sleeping on the floor effort. What drove you out here then? It's drafty you know," he added to see if sympathy would get him some points.

Jas crossed her arms. Her eyebrows climbed her forehead as she looked down at him. "You're losing the cute thing, Huck. Whining just sucks it out of the room. And how did I screw up?"

"You doubted your team. We overreacted but you abandoned us."

"Abandoned you? Did you need cover getting to the plane and back? Was it dark and scary?"

"You had no faith in us."

"Damn right. You were acting like jerks. Besides, when did we become a team?"

"I'm sorry for being a little outta control with worry." He ignored the team question. Answering that would involve explaining too much. Most of it she already knew and might not be willing to admit yet. He was unwilling to put her on the spot where she'd have to agree or not. Nothing in this world was gonna make him give her a choice. Choices meant it was possible to give a negative response.

"That's it?"

Blaster grinned his sleepy, Southern-boy smile. "You still can't resist me."

Directly across the hall from them the door opened and Jackson stood there in shorts rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. "Don't you two ever sleep? If you're gonna fight, go outside or something."

"Good, you're here. I don't want to explain this again." Jas beckoned him over.

Jackson scowled at her and the grogginess fell away from him as his eyes narrowed. Abruptly he strode across the hall, taking her arm he turned her a bit to examine her side. Soon as Jackson touched her, Blaster was on his feet. Realizing what Jackson was doing, he leaned in to have a look too. Jackson grunted and let her go.

"I told you it was just a scratch," Jas hissed.

"If you'd bothered to tell me about it in the plane, we could have avoided the nasty scene last night," Jackson retorted, obviously not as repentant as Blaster.

"Okay. You've had your look." Jas frowned and waved a hand dismissively. She was about to continue but the thunderous expression on Blaster's face was comical as he interrupted.

"That's it?!" Blaster demanded indignantly. "He's the one who said it and he gets an 'okay' while I have to sleep on the floor?"

"You could have slept in there with him, Huck," Jas shot back, indicating Jackson's door across the hall. "No one said you had to sleep on the floor."

"Hell *no*!" both men responded.

Jas laughed softly, her eyes dancing at the two disgruntled male faces. Happiness radiated off her. "Come in here, both of you."

Scooping up his bag from beside her door, Blaster let her grab his other arm and drag him in her door with Jackson on his heels.

As the door shut, she beamed at them. Jas explained. "Jose just called me on the ranch line. He'd gotten a call from Liana. She's alive but thought I was dead."

"What? She's alive? Those weren't her fingers?" Blaster demanded.

"No. She was a little out of control at first and wouldn't believe I'm alive. Jose said she couldn't be convinced he'd just seen me. I think she knows who the bad guy is and went into hiding. She's somewhere in Kansas. She was calling him because she didn't know where to turn and needed some help. Jose rang me just before he stepped out the door to go get her.

"She said something about some sort of threatening message left with her mother. Liana's gone deep cover. Jose doesn't know the whole story so he couldn't understand what she meant by most of it."

"He can join the fucking crowd," Jackson sighed. "What is happening?"

"Okay, okay, I'll explain it as clearly as I can. After an evening at a club in Atlanta with Liana, I woke in a room I didn't recognize, tied to a bed. In the room was a Marine officer—Robert Larkin—and my friend Liana Allacosta. Liana was bound in a sex swing. Larkin had his back to me. Liana was unconscious and bleeding and he

appeared to be trying to get her out of the swing. It was obvious that I was coming out of some drug-induced state that he'd expected to last much longer. My bindings were knotted leather straps and easily escaped. Waking up restrained and naked gave me the adrenaline push to get out of there.

"I disabled Larkin, cut Liana out of the swing and pulled on some clothes. She was still unconscious and bleeding. There was a digital video camera on a tripod and I took the disk out of it, wrapped Liana in a blanket and took Larkin's keys. Getting her to the hospital was my first priority. We were in a cabin in the north Georgia foothills.

"Using the evidence I'd confiscated coupled with the medical records which included semen samples as leverage, we both secured an honorable discharge. I was aware neither of us would live long if we tried for a court-martial so we gave copies of the disk and a full account of events as we knew them to a trusted attorney along with the medical records. Copies were made to be sent to the press should anything happen to one or both of us.

"As you know, I've become an actress. I'm also heavily involved in abused women's charities.

"I incorrectly assumed Larkin was getting nervous because both Liana and I are becoming public figures. Liana runs a woman's center that just received several awards and is getting national attention. My film career is rising. If we choose to level charges now with evidence in hand, he couldn't quietly kill us.

"The truth is, the visual evidence I took that night isn't conclusive. DNA on the semen samples would be but I'd have to have a matching sample. I'm now aware that match would not be Larkin. The man on the disk wears a ski mask and though his body type is similar to Larkin's, the only defining features are a couple discolorations on his back and legs. If it's enhanced, there might be a scar of some sort on his body. It wasn't something either Liana or I were interested in pursuing.

"My first indication of real trouble was the news report yesterday that a plane went down in the Everglades killing everyone aboard. Our lawyer who held the evidence was on that plane. Like us, his situation has changed and risen rapidly and he's now part of that presidential commission or whatever. When we were in the Laundromat, I tried to reach Liana but could only contact her mother who said she'd been missing for two days.

"One of the few things I remembered about the interior of the cabin from my first visit was seeing a shelf of disks like the one I pulled out of the camera. Yesterday it seemed someone was playing an 'end game' with me. Even you guys knew Larkin probably was not the mark. He was the cleanup boy.

"You both know I wasn't supposed to leave the cabin. The yard around it was a minefield. Even if I'd gotten out of the house before it blew, I shouldn't have made it across the minefield.

"Now you know everything I do. The good news is Liana's alive and Jose is on his way to her. Bad Guy thinks I'm one of the bodies in the Georgia foothills."

"They were close enough for her to trust him completely like this? She'd still have his cell phone number?" Blaster asked.

"Yeah. That's why we were out drinking that night. Jose had just broken up with her because she refused to commit. Actually she was drinking. I was baby-sitting. I only had one drink. Then these two cute guys came up. She was dancing with one of them and the other offered to get me another drink. It was iced tea, for God's sake. I figure he put something in it."

"You think she knows who the real threat is?" Jackson asked this time.

"She has to. That's what changed, made it time to finish the game. The drug worked differently on her than me. She's been getting flashbacks. I knew it'd only be a matter of time before she remembered everything. But the guy had that ski mask on. I didn't think she'd be able to identify him. Course I thought I already knew who it was anyway. We weren't worried about that part."

"Shit!" Blaster spat out the curse. If the Liana woman did know who the threat was, her life was in the wind. It seemed she was smart enough to know it and had gone to ground immediately. The play with the fingers had been a blind and accomplished exactly what it'd been intended to. Bad Guy must know Liana hadn't been in contact with Jas and he'd planned to have his game over before anyone realized Liana was alive. That meant he had surveillance capabilities. He had to be monitoring Jas' cell phone.

"You need to get out of sight. The people who know you're alive can be trusted but I don't want anyone else to see you," Blaster concluded.

"What are my options? Staying out of sight here shouldn't be too difficult. Problem is, we don't know what the chances are of Bad Guy making the connection between Liana and Jose. And we sure don't want to bring this battle to these folks," Jas pointed out.

"Yeah, we can't stay here until we know more about who we're dealing with," Blaster agreed.

"Time to be pirates," Jackson said to Blaster with a crooked grin. "He sure as hell doesn't know about that place."

"Right," Blaster agreed.

"Pirates? What are you two talking about?"

"The Glades have always belonged to the Seminoles," Blaster explained, "but it's also a handy place to disappear. Pirates have long known the value of disappearing. Ever been on an airboat ride?"

"No." Jas shifted to look at Blaster. Her brows went up at his gleeful face. "I'm guessing it's fast, dangerous and therefore fun?"

"It can be. Let's go."

"Where do we get a boat?" Jas wanted to know.

"At the dock." Blaster laughed then he sobered. "You need some downtime, Jas. I need to look after you. Let's both get what we need, just for a little bit. Let's steal time away from it. Tomorrow your friend will join us and we can figure what to do." A rakish grin spread across Blaster's face. "Come on, matey. We've a pirate's booty and a pirate's watery path to take. Get dressed so we can get out of here while it's still dark."

"We're pirates now?" Jas laughed.

"Jackson, go raid the kitchen for some supplies, we'll be down in a few minutes. Let Gray know what's up and tell the others what you need to to keep them quiet. Rem will know how to get ahold of Jose. When Liana gets here, we can meet up and go over what we have and who this person is."

Jackson turned to the door. "Get a move on you two. No time for kissy face." He was gone, sprinting down the hall.

The time for modesty was gone. They needed clothes on fast to beat the sunrise. Jas stripped out of the leggings and sports bra while walking to her own bag. Behind her there was a low-timbre growl.

"See something you like, Huckleberry?" Jas asked as she plucked panties and a bra out of the clean laundry. Turning to face him with the two items in hand, she stepped into the panties first then straightened to slide on the bra.

If a man's eyes could burn, his were. He hadn't stopped moving for a second, nor did he take his eyes off her body. "Oh yeah, Sheena. I see something I need to lick from head to toe again and again. You enjoying this? You didn't have to strip." His voice vibrated with the sincerity of his need.

Looking at this woman naked and not being able to touch her was about as close to hell as Blaster wanted to come. Perfection in a live body was almost more than a man could bear. Damn well more than he could deal with. If she wasn't already as involved with him as he could get her, he would have had to shoot someone. Or blow something up. Time to touch her was becoming as urgent a need as keeping her alive.

Enjoying her soul made it painful. If she'd just been a beautiful body, he could have relaxed. But she was more. She was Jas. A complex creature who fascinated him. She challenged his world, his point of view, his very soul. The wildcat in her seduced the insane beast within him so completely that he was breathless with awe sometimes. She met and matched him. *Mate*, whispered through his mind again. Close on its heels the logical side of his brain inserted, *We are so screwed*.

The bra in place, Jas cupped her full breasts to adjust the fit. Not that she really needed to, she did it to see him jerk as he tried to get his boots on and not look down. "Yeah, it's part of your punishment." She chuckled softly. "You need to be sorry and this is the best I can do in the circumstances. You'd better start convincing me you're really sorry about last night and that it'll never happen again." Jas stepped into a pair of jeans that rode low on her hips. A tank top quickly followed.

Blaster was done with clothes and boots, he was about done stashing the guns and knives as Jas started the process. "Baby, we don't have enough time for me to list the

ways I am sorry at this moment. Sorry we never have time. Sorry I lost my mind. Sorry you got sucked into this..."

Jas glanced at him sharply as she holstered the guns. "The attack was not your fault. Do you think you put me in danger? I was there long before I knew a thing about you."

"It escalated the moment I stepped into the picture and started poking around. I wanted him to see me, know the Unit was involved. I had Gray do a computer search and do it loud. The point was to give the bastard a reason to get nervous. Yeah, it could be my fault."

"Get over it, Huck. This would have gone down without you. Just so happens, I get to remain alive in the version that includes you so don't expect me to feed your need for guilt. What is that anyway?"

Blaster held the door for her. They both carried a duffel bag as they strode down the hall. "Beats the hell outta me. Guilt is new to me but I seem to be getting acquainted with it since I met you. First in the truck when you were alone in battle because I wasn't there and now this. Stop it."

"Stop it?" They entered the kitchen. "Stop what? I just told you to quit it," Jas snapped at the frowning man beside her.

Jackson glanced up as he zipped an insulated bag of food. "Why is it every time you two appear you're either killing each other or climbing each other?"

Jas handed Blaster her duffel bag and grabbed the food bag. "Because Samuel is a sensitive, high-maintenance boy toy."

Jackson barked out a laugh.

Blaster scowled as they all headed out the kitchen door. "Boy toy? Don't you have to toy with me some for me to be one of those? I'm your boyfriend and I'm not high maintenance. I'm willing to sleep on the floor, remember that? That shit is damn low maintenance."

Jas shook her head as they piled into the Escalade that was still parked at the kitchen door. "See how he is?" she commented to Jackson as both she and Blaster took the seat behind the driver's.

"Then why are you back there with him when you could be spending time with a real man like me?" Jackson wanted to know as he started the vehicle and pulled away from the house without turning on lights.

"Because we need you to live long enough to drive us to the dock," Blaster growled, his arm sliding around Jas. "You keep getting confused, Jack. First it was the deep cover concept and now your ability to survive touching Jas."

Jackson chuckled as the nearly silent vehicle glided through the half-light before dawn. "Is it safe to let you two go off alone? Will there be two live bodies when it's time to come back? It's hard to tell which way you guys are headed."

"Don't stress over it. Keeping her alive should be easier if there isn't anyone blowing things up," Blaster responded.

Jackson raised a brow. "You giving up explosives? I thought that was your first lover."

"Do you see the woman back here with me? I'm not giving up a thing."

The drive out to the edge of the Sea of Grass was twenty minutes, headlights were flicked on after they left the ranch buildings far behind and out of sight.

The dock was located on ranch property and therefore a private location. There were three airboats in the water and a boathouse with two more in dry dock. Muted early morning rays glinted off massive blades as they pulled the tarp off one. The sun had just risen above the horizon when they loaded into the wide, flat-bottom boat and hotwired it. No one took the time to search for keys. Pulling away, Blaster headed southwest as Jackson pointed the Escalade back to the ranch.

Airboats are fast and loud. They're powered by man-sized propellers. The blades are housed in a large cage and the bigger the blades, the faster the boat. These were very fast boats. Huge and ugly, they could go more or less anywhere and were created for the Glades.

An hour later the landscape had changed from the Sea of Grass to dense undergrowth and trees. They were following brackish waterways that were only passable to a shallow-bottomed boat like theirs. Jas tried not to map their route as they twisted a mysterious path through the wilderness. She wanted to relax, needed it desperately.

Last night's dark deeds came with a cost. Exhaustion was the only reason she'd been able to sleep a few hours. Her mind crawled over the events in an endless loop. There had been no choice, had there? She could have taken off in the opposite direction from that cabin. And what? Run away? No. There had been no choice. Even if she'd known those fingers did not belong to Liana, she still would have gone the cabin. The gruesome invitation meant someone had paid a high price to summon her. It was time to stand and fight the monsters, negotiating with them would be unacceptable. Ignoring them would have been criminal.

She looked over at the man beside her. His face was calm as sunglasses obscured his eyes, adding an air of rakish glamour to his already handsome face.

Trusting him had not been a choice either. It simply was. She'd tried not to but he was a force of nature, irresistible. He offered respect as if it were her right. Never withdrawing it or behaving as if she had to earn it over and over again. He gave it to her by never doubting her abilities, by being unsurprised at her intelligence. It was part of his appeal and inseparable from the mysterious relationship they'd developed.

He had the skills to take over. She knew he could have restrained her any time. Armed to the teeth was one thing. Guile and experience were another. He had them. Yet he'd never seemed to consider that path. The thing that apparently ticked him off was that she hadn't let him help her. Not once had he demanded the "lead" position. He wanted to stand beside her.

Jas leaned back, her face turned up to the sky, letting damp heat seep into her bones. The loud drone of the flying blades behind her became white noise as calm came to her on the fragrant breeze. Fragile as dragonfly wings, peace fluttered through the horror and death. It wasn't freedom, but it was enough for this moment.

Chapter Seven

Blaster glanced at her as he let the boat glide up the stream. Speed was not important. They were close to the destination but he didn't want to disturb her. It seemed the storm had stopped in her at last. She was relaxed and calm in a way he hadn't seen yet. The brackish water they glided over began to clear.

The boat slowed even more and Jas straightened. Around them the water was sparkling and clear, right down to a surprising sandy bottom. The body of water they drifted over was surrounded by towering cypress trees and lush undergrowth. It was a separate world. Rounding a slight bend, she saw a wide pool open before them, not quite big enough to be called a lake. The clear water showed the bottom dropping away 'til the other end went deep blue-black.

They pulled up to a short dock. Beyond the dock, a rocky path rose abruptly for a few yards and there it was. The building was magnificent and peculiar, appearing as if it'd been dropped on the banks of the jewel-bright water by otherworldly hands. Ghostly gray walls were covered in flowering bougainvillea, splashing it with bright purple clumps of flowers. The small Moorish castle looked both fortress and dreamscape. It rose out of the near jungle with elegant lines and gracious angles.

Blaster cut the engines and abruptly the sounds of the birds, insects and gently swaying trees seemed loud.

"What the hell is that?" Jas asked softly.

"The pirate's cabin." Blaster was tying up the airboat and turned to grin at her. "There's a story to explain it."

"Where is here? There's nothing else around. Why would anyone build that gorgeous thing in the middle of nowhere?" They stepped off the boat and the old dock swayed gently. Jas immediately hurried off the wooden structure and frowned back at Blaster following her closely.

"That thing as old as the house? It feels like it'll go any time."

"It'll hold 'til tomorrow." He stepped around her to lead the way up toward the exotic little castle.

"So what's the story? Are you sure it's safe to go in there?"

"The place is semi-maintained by the Seminole tribe. It's on tribe property. They keep it repaired enough not to deteriorate further. They don't tell outsiders about it because they'd rather not have people trying to dig up the treasure all over the place. It's safe."

"Treasure? Pirates and now treasure?" Jas laughed as they crossed the wildly bohemian front garden. It had once been a formal garden. The structured remains

barely visible. A few Greek-like sculptures peeked out of the greenery. The trees appeared to drip with orchids and vines in a lush landscape.

"Of course there's treasure. How could it be a pirate's hideout without lost treasure?" Blaster opened a high metal gate that protested as it gave them access to a walled patio. It was more grotto than courtyard as the abandoned plants had gone uncultivated. However a tinkling trickle of water drew her eyes to a functioning fountain pouring water down from the far wall into a pool at its base.

Blaster paused as she took it in. The relaxed smile on her lips as she gazed around was what he'd been seeking. She was so caught up in the surprising structure that she'd forgotten the last few days. He could give her that, at least for a short while.

"How in the world does that still work?" Jas asked in amazement.

"The man who built this place should have been an engineer instead of a pirate. He used forced water from deep in the spring, no mechanics. Come in. Let me show you the first air-conditioned house in the Glades. It's actually water conditioned."

The big double doors in front of them easily swung open to what had once been a grand entryway. There had been no lock. The first thing she noticed was the distinct drop in temperature as she entered. Then the house took over. The floor was inlaid stone in a pattern that appeared a random use of color but was very pleasing to the eye.

There wasn't a scrap of furniture in sight and the wide windows were shuttered, only allowing thin strips of light. There had once been drapes, but only rods remained. The subdued lighting added an air of forgotten opulence as they looked around. There were great rooms opening off either side of the entryway, their murky depths beckoning the explorer in her. Shadows whispered invitations in every direction.

"Oh my God, Blaster, it's fabulous!" Jas gazed around in awe.

"It is. Would you like to explore?"

"Yes! Who could resist?"

"Okay, go that way first." Blaster indicated the left. "Give me ten minutes this way, then come out to the end of the building."

Jas glanced at him. "You're up to something."

"Course I am. Indulge me."

Laughing she turned to the left and slowly entered what must have been a grand parlor room. "It'll be more than ten minutes."

"I meant at least ten minutes." Blaster turned the other way and strode through the house carrying both duffle bags and the food bag, disappearing out the back.

It was an hour later when Jas finally found him. Stepping through double French doors, still glassed in old leaded panes, she entered a wide patio whose low stone wall overlooked the spring below. Modern-looking screen panels had been rolled down from the tile roof shading this private haven and cutting off bugs from the amazing space.

On the stone floor sat several chaise lounges complete with cushions, obviously not original furniture. The cool floor made the space comfortable even though it was outside. One side of the patio was taken up with another ingenious fountain. Out of the castle wall spewed water into a wide rounded pool that was large enough for several people to sit comfortably on the stone ledge a few feet below the waterline. The water escaped through holes near the top of the pool and was funneled off to the side of the patio. It created an indoor spa of sorts.

The water was clear and the stone showed no signs of moss as she would have expected. Throughout the castle she'd come across these amazing uses for the water coursing through the walls somehow. The kitchen had running water, as did the surprising bathrooms. Obviously built before modern plumbing, she supposed the architect took his inspiration for the Roman's use of running water. They too had engineered functioning indoor restrooms.

The chaise lounges invited with overstuffed cushions and Blaster had pushed two of them together facing the equatorial perfection of the scene below. Beside the lounges was a low wrought iron table with bread, cheese and the fruit they'd brought.

The man himself was floating in the pool though. Completely nude and appearing asleep. Could someone sleep while floating without a raft?

"It took you long enough," he murmured without opening his eyes.

"Have you seen this place? It's astounding, a monument to engineering and ingenuity. How the hell has it remained a secret? Why isn't it a national treasure? How come there's no moss on the stone surfaces in the house?"

"Slow down, woman. I'll tell you everything I know. Are you hungry? There's some food if you want it." Blaster still hadn't opened his eyes as he floated so he was startled when the water was disturbed as Jas stepped into it.

"Holy shit! How come this water isn't cold like it is in the rest of the house?" Jas exclaimed in shock as her body sank into the comfortable warm depths.

"He was a brilliant engineer. That's why." Blaster's eyes were open, watching her.

Jas frowned as she floated beside him. "You don't know how he did it?"

"Sure I know how he did it, but I can't remember at the moment."

Floating on her back beside him, as nude as he was, she presented a visual that drove the old pirate from Blaster's head with a vengeance.

Jas glanced at him. "Huckleberry, don't you dare glaze over and become an idiot. This place is amazing, I have a million questions."

Blaster swallowed and closed his eyes again. Safest way to handle this, he supposed, and started with the questions he could remember. "The water is warm because it flows through the roof of the patio before it enters the pool. I think this guy invented solar heating."

"How does he get it flowing through the walls?"

"Apparently he used varied sizes of pipe. Water flowing down from a large pipe to a small one creates velocity that can be used to send it up if he wanted to. No one is sure because they'd have to take the walls apart to prove it, but it's the theory that makes the most sense."

"How does he get the cold water from the spring and it's still cold when it gets here?" Floating beside him, her eyes closed, the water soothing stress out of her system, Jas wallowed in the puzzle of the house.

"Underground stone vaults. He starts with using the natural velocity from the flow of the spring deep down near its head, and then he uses pressure from pooled water escaping through small pipes to move it up while keeping it underground. Again, a theory, have to dig it up to know for sure. That'd be frowned on."

"Why doesn't anyone know about this place? How is it kept a secret?" Jas wanted to know next.

"Well, to begin with, it was a secret. The only way to reach it is the water. In every direction off this patch of raised ground are dangerous bogs with sinkholes, quicksand and all inhabited by the natural barriers of alligators, water moccasins and the like. You can't physically walk here from another safe piece of land. No one knows how the captain found this spot. Later when it was abandoned, the Seminoles considered it cursed ground and saw little value in it. They never spoke of it simply because there was no reason to do so.

"When the reservation was given to the Nations this sat in the middle of it, unknown and unseen. The tribe became aware of the value they possessed and they still remained silent, sure the government would find a way to take it from them. There was an elder in the twenties who convinced the tribe maintaining the roof and storm shutters was important. So here it is."

It was a perfectly peaceful refuge, Jas thought. The light waterfall sounds coupled with tropical birdcalls, even the insects outside the screen were soothing. Large, spreading trees filtered the sunlight streaming down around them, making it dance through the lush foliage fed by the spring. There was nothing but peace.

"Tell me the story of this place," Jas murmured. She liked the sound of his deep voice mixed with the other noises. Something about his timbre and pitch blended with the wild, barely civilized surroundings perfectly.

Though they were both completely relaxed, luxuriating in the warm, natural hot tub, he was the energy that made this perfect. Alone she'd have enjoyed it but not as much as the decadent pleasure of being naked with a full-grown man-beast. It was somehow sweeter to indulge in complete relaxation of the muscles when at any moment his hands could be skimming over them. He wouldn't force her, but there was no doubt she could trust him to tempt her. Perfect.

"That's a long, twisted tale of an idiot and his poor choices. Sure you want to hear it?"

"I thought you said he was brilliant?"

"I said he was a brilliant engineer and eventually he turned into a very successful pirate by pirate standards, but he was a freaking idiot were women were concerned. Of course this huge project was constructed for a woman. Two women actually."

"Two women?" Jas snorted, "I can see where that'd get his ass in trouble."

"I'll tell you as we eat." Blaster stood and reached down to scoop up her floating form.

"Hey, I was floating there," Jas protested mildly, way too relaxed to do more than hold on to his neck as he transported her to the lounges. He laid her down nearest the table and slid up next to her on the other side. Propped on his elbow, he reached over her, grabbed a square of cheese and held it to her mouth.

Jas opened to speak and he jammed it in. Chewing on the tangy treat, she managed around it, "Tell me."

Blaster leaned over all that lush woman for another piece of food. Way back in the bleachers of his brain, logic was laughing its ass off while occasionally gasping out the phrase, *You are so screwed, idiot*. Point was, he was lying beside the woman of his darkest fantasies, naked as a drunk in a whorehouse, and she wanted him to tell her stories. He was too damn nuts about the woman to do anything but what she asked.

So this is why married people complained about not getting any? Naw, that couldn't be it. He wanted to "do" her more than he wanted to live. Only reason he wasn't convincing her that she didn't really wanna hear the tale was that he knew she was tired...and fuck it all, he cared more about her being tired than the rigga' that would soon be affecting his upper body. Cells deprived of blood long enough would die, upper torso was gonna go first on him.

"The story starts in Scotland. It seems Old Captain Collin was the third son of some British titled guy. No real prospects so he was shipped off to the Royal Navy. When he returned, his dad no longer lived in England but had been given a huge estate in the Highlands. We now know where Collin's real talents lay and it wasn't at sea. So he goes up there happy as a clam to tame the wilds of Scotland. His dad, still hoping to get rid of the boy, buys him a boat and tries to make him become a merchant marine. So everyone is unhappy.

"Apparently Collin falls for some local girl who's engaged to a native Scottish laird. He steals the woman from her wedding ceremony and takes off in the ship Daddy had bought him. That plan made him an outlaw and he can't return home.

"He brings her to Tampa and sets up house. On the way over, he'd stopped in Barbados and picked up a young girl to be her servant. Soon as they hit Florida, the black servant becomes a slave by the law of the land. Born a free woman, she's not happy with this.

"The Scottish chick hates his guts so he consoles himself with the slave. Some say he started this place as a prison for his stolen bride. In any case, stolen bride soon takes off with their only child and is last seen riding north.

"He finishes this place and installs his mistress, the slave. He gives her every conceivable extravagance except freedom. Of course he couldn't live with her like that in society at the time, so this is the best he can do. He's out here with her and two old slaves to care for them and the property. As you know, this place is a secret so no one ever comes around. His mistress hates it.

"Eventually he goes off to practice his new profession. Thinking the three slaves would be secure here, he takes off in the only boat.

"One time he returns and finds only the two old slaves. They tell him the girl made a raft and left. He knows she's not likely to have made it out of here alive and searches for her. Not finding her, he goes a little mad. That's when he took to pirating for sport, becoming one of the bloodiest, most feared men on the high seas.

"In the end he became fabulously wealthy and retired to New Orleans where he lived with a whore for another twenty years. They had a bunch of kids but he never married her."

Blaster had been feeding Jas bits of bread, cheese and fruit as he told the tale, his head often dipping to lick a crumb off her shoulders or the tops of her breasts. He'd leave a gentle kiss but never explore farther south.

Jas found lying there naked in the Florida afternoon was so damn comfortable in an entirely spoiled princess way. The eroticism of it was lazy and intense. They were primal male and female, who had all the time in the world to explore, enjoy, drown in the pleasure of the moment.

"Where's the treasure part of that story?" Jas opened one eye and looked up at his golden face. Handsome as sin, the pirate leaning over her was as wicked as any long-dead sailor.

"Remember the fabulously wealthy part? Turns out he didn't keep the stash in New Orleans. When he died, the lady who'd lived with him couldn't find the gold. None of his descendants have been able to locate it. Obviously they knew about the house in Tampa and have searched there. They didn't know about this place. No one but the Seminoles knew about it since the day Captain Collin stopped coming here. So, there's a good chance it's hidden here."

"How come they haven't torn this place apart looking for it?"

"Actually they didn't know that part until recently. Public Television did a special on the guy when it was discovered his decedents from New Orleans were the only living heirs to the old title and estate his dad held in Scotland. That's where the tribe learned most of the facts to put together with the story they knew from the house in the Glades."

Blaster waved a hand at the food. "Want any more?"

"No, I'm full enough." He'd just finished serving her chunks of mango. The sweet, sticky juice now coated his fingers. Jas grabbed his hand before he could put a finger in his mouth and redirected his index finger to her mouth.

Her tongue flicked out to slide down its side, gently pressing his fingers wide to flutter over the sensitive joint between index and forefinger. His hands were heavily scarred and calloused, but she'd found the one spot that sang with undamaged nerve endings. Holding up his hand for her tongue, he stared at her. His face appeared frozen, his eyes unblinking as he watched her devilish mouth move.

She was working on his pinky when he finally spoke. "You've got to stop." He tried to sound forceful but it had come out a low-timbre moan. Watching her agile tongue move over his flesh as her beautiful eyes closed in pleasure was ripping away his control with every lap.

"Why?" her soft question was a purr as she shifted to her side and pushed him to his back at the same time.

He sank down on the cushions willingly, his eyes never leaving her face. "Because I'm...I haven't apologized." His civilized man scoffed at that lame reasoning. Falling back on the lounge under the pressure of one of her fingers was no way to take control. He needed to take control. If he didn't, things would be over before she even entered the game. On the other hand, he was certain she needed to initiate this part of their relationship to feel safe. They weren't in the heat of battle or scrambling to escape. Letting her push them into a sexual situation was a gift he could afford for a little while longer.

Jas leaned over him, her lips gliding across his but not stopping, moving down over his chin to the underside and nibbling on the scratchy texture for a moment. "Do you know what was wrong with what you did last night, Huckleberry?"

Blaster had to clear his throat past the moan lodged there as one of her hands came down, claws first on his shoulder and scraped down a thick pectoral muscle to his nipple. The nail of her index finger circled inside the copper disk. "I behaved like an ass?" he croaked.

Her mouth nibbled his throat and she chuckled. "Gonna do it again?"

"Jas. I'd never intentionally disrespect you." He couldn't hold back a desperate yelp as her wicked lips found the pebble of sensitive flesh atop the other pec. Teeth gently bit down then her head pulled back stretching him, forcing his back to arch in response.

Fire licked down his body straight to his balls. "Oh good God! Wait!" His hands clutched her shoulders in an attempt to hold her still.

Her teeth let go and she looked into his eyes. "Why?"

"We should talk first," he insisted as her hand skimmed his abdomen 'til a finger rested on the thick head of his cock. It circled through damp desire, spreading the evidence of what his body thought over him.

"We're talking now. What's on your mind?" Her hand explored the pulsing vein on the underside of his cock then slipped around the root of him in a firm grip.

"My mind is having trouble functioning when you do that," he informed her through gritted teeth as his hips jerked up for her. "But I thought we should discuss what happened that night. When I can manage some blood flow north of where you're

torturing me, it occurred that maybe that incident changed what you need from a man in ways I should know."

"Mmm, very astute of you." Her hand firmly pumped up the length of him, gathered the pre-cum seeping out of him and slid back down. "I have no memory of that event from before I woke up. Liana had flashbacks that affected her deeply. I've never experienced any," she whispered into his chest as her mouth closed over the other nipple.

Blaster couldn't control a growling hiss. His body rose to her hands and mouth and he thought his brain might explode trying to process the sensations firing across his flesh. She wasn't gentle or hesitant. Her touch firm and demanding in a way that took him to the edge instantly.

"For God's sake, *wait!*" he roared, flipping them over fast and grabbing her hands to pin them beside her head. She claimed the experience hadn't marked her, but he was sure there were others that had. He was willing to share control because she needed it, not surrender it completely.

"What now?" she demanded as the two of them glared at each other, nose to nose, both breathing hard.

Chapter Eight

"I want you too badly to handle that," he informed her fiercely. Need clawed into his gut with razor-sharp talons. It wasn't civilized and he almost didn't care. Almost.

"Good. I'm tired of waiting for you to make up your mind," she spat at him.

"My mind is damn well made up, woman." His legs pressed down between her thighs, spreading them.

At his forceful nudge, her legs shot up around his waist, locking his body into the groove she wanted him in. Hot, damp cock rested up the length of equally dripping female folds. Her heels dug into his backside to encourage him to move.

"Well? Is there some other problem?" she demanded impatiently when he didn't move.

"Yeah. I'm not convinced you want me as much as I want you." His lower body remained rigidly still as his mouth dipped down to her lips, gliding in nibbling kisses. Tasting her at long last suddenly became a new addiction. She invaded every one of his senses and he wanted more.

"Here's a news flash, Huckleberry," Jas gritted out as he refused to move and refused to kiss her properly while holding her immobile. "Your cock is resting on a wet, willing cunt. My legs are around your waist and I put them there all by myself. In girl speak, that translates to, *I want you*. Honest, ask anyone." The sentence ended in a breathy moan that took some of the smart-ass out of it.

Blaster was nipping and sucking down her neck, slowly working his way across her collarbone. "*Want* isn't good enough," he told her between licking kisses. "I need you. Gotta have need from you."

His mouth climbed the mound of her breast, licking as if it were his favorite ice cream flavor. Reaching the cinnamon nipple, he slowly stroked the puckered areola around it, his head moving in unhurried motion. Jas' body vibrated with sensations that were not enough. His painfully leisurely journey to the peak of her breast was maddening as her body burned in expectation of a touch that was forever in coming.

Her hips could barely flex up under his solid weight. Jas arched into his mouth and bit her lip to hold back the frustration. Everywhere his mouth touched tingled with a damp heat that was spreading fast. Those insidious flames were robbing her of reason and she knew it. If she could just get him to get on with it, she had some hope of clinging to reality and not becoming a slobbering fool.

Blaster's head left her breast to look at her. "Hold back on me and this will take *so much* longer, baby. I want to hear you, Jas. I need to hear you. Trust me to take us both where we need to go. Trust me one more time."

He released her hands as he shifted and used one arm to brace his weight above her chest the other went to her neglected breast. Rolling the distended nipple carefully between hard fingers as his mouth returned to the one he'd been tormenting. He kissed the swollen tip tenderly before suckling it into his mouth in a moaning pull.

Jas hissed as sensation shot straight down from nipples to uterus. Her womb contracted involuntarily in empty protest. Both her hands landed on his back and clawed up it, raking deep groves into hard muscle. "I'm not good at need!" she panted when he switched to the other nipple.

"I know. I'll help," Blaster told her softly. "Let me take you there, angel face. I promise you'll like it. You're not giving up control. We're sharing. This doesn't have to be scary." He took her breast into his mouth again. His hips began rocking gently, barely moving on her damp folds. The pressure was firm but the motion slow and easy. Hot and smooth, his cock rocked on and off her clit, sawing down and up so she bathed his entire length in liquid pleasure.

"Oh God, Samuel! How do we know when we get to need?" Jas demanded as his lips kissed and licked down her trembling abdominals. She struggled with the sensations he was carefully igniting. It was luscious and insane. The heat was a building pressure as every nerve strained to answer his touch. He'd asked her to trust him but she needed to know how they were measuring this escalating situation.

She was using his given name, Blaster smiled as he ate at her fascinating bellybutton. She might be closer than he'd thought. Wanting her was more than the clawing physical demand in every inch of his body. He wanted her to need what he could give her. Crave his touch at least half as much as he craved hers. Teaching her to trust him was going to be the trick. Warrior woman dove into the physical play and balked at letting it consume her. He wasn't about to let her escape the experience because she was too afraid to enjoy it.

Finally Blaster's face hovered above her mound. He looked up as his hands flattened on the insides of her thighs and watched her face as he applied a little pressure. Carefully making sure it was not enough to move them but just enough to be a clear request. Immediately her thighs shifted wide.

"We'll know when you can't live without it," Blaster murmured as he looked down at the gates to paradise spread open under his nose. His face dipped down and he couldn't resist rubbing his cheek in the soft curls, wallowing in the fragrance of her. He was gulping in air, filling his body with her as he turned his face to rub the other cheek. Growling again, soft and low, he covered himself with her scent.

Jas' hips rolled in frustration. "Do you need written instruction on what to do to down there?" she demanded impatiently. Rumbling like a contented lion, he was nuzzling her straight into madness.

"Real men never read the instructions," he murmured hoarsely. "Patience, Sheena."

Blaster turned his head to her inner thigh. It glistened wetly with the excess of her want. His tongue flicked out to gather her taste into himself. He bathed her down to the

fold of leg to hip and then turned to the other thigh, blowing across her open cunt as he turned his head. Her hips jerked up and he nipped her inner thigh to settle her down so he could lick her clean there.

Jas gasped, her fist clenching in frustration as her body wound tighter and tighter with each lap of his tongue in the *wrong* place.

"Huckleberry! Figure it out fast or it's my turn."

Blaster pulled back a little to gaze at his prize, ignoring her threats as he watched cream gush from her and slide down that fascinating bit of skin to her other opening, leaving a wet invitation all the way down. She wasn't anywhere near ready for that pleasure. Someday when fear was no longer a part of her sexual experience she would understand how intense surrender could be. He smiled to himself and moved on.

One of his hands started at the top of her mound, combing through short black curls, down to circle her clit, pinching it lightly then pressing fingers inside her outer lips to spread them as he watched. She pressed up into the caress, growling with a frustrated snap of her teeth when he released her clit to move on.

His fingers swirled around her opening, coating them with her cream before he nudged the tips of two fingers into her gently, testing. Jas moaned in a long drawn-out growl. Her knees came up to her chest and her hands grasped them, holding them high and wide for him. The invitation couldn't be clearer. Two fingers plunged into her deep and fast as his mouth dove down to suck her clit in.

Jas gasped in a breath sharply as her body arched into the invasion. His mouth drove fire up her as the wicked tongue flicked over sensitive nerves. Hard fingers stretched her clenching core, teasing with the promise of much more to come. He entered hard and withdrew slowly, drawing out the pleasure only to push in hard. The fire licking up her insides sent wild tremors through her body. But it still wasn't enough.

"More! Now!" Jas demanded harshly.

In response, his head lifted off her clit and his fingers withdrew from her cunt. She was about to scream in frustration when he pushed into her.

Looking down her body, the erotic scene was nearly too much. She held her own knees, pulling them apart. His face was barely an inch above her cunt.

Blaster glanced up at her as if he'd felt her watching. Their eyes holding, his tongue snaked out to lap at her vagina around his fingers. She was slick and ready. He watched her, giving her neither satisfaction nor taking away the touch that promised more.

"Yesssssssss, More!" Jas hissed as she let out her breath and her shoulders relaxed back on the lounge. He didn't make her wait but rewarded her surrender to pleasure. Showing how safe she was when she chose to ride the edge with him. Pulling his fingers out of her again, his tongue plunged into her cunt and he sucked, licked, fucked, her with it.

The fire of that first press was pleasure on the edge of madness. His wicked tongue flayed her gapping pussy. He pushed in harder this time as her legs around his face

started visibly trembling. Licking up to her clit, his teeth captured it, nipping ever-so gently. Then he was laving it with his tongue.

Jas screamed as her body jerked in shrieking sensation. He was demanding she feel everything as intensely as possible. No half measures, no holding back. The swarming lightning storm overtook her and her body went rigid in jerking orgasm.

Then there were three fingers slamming into her and the sensation shot up another level, ripping her from this place. His mouth sucked her clit in hard, stretching it up then diving down on it to furiously flick abused nerves. The three fingers in her cunt pumped with determined demand.

Her head was thrashing on the lounge, she had no idea she was screaming at him, "More, more!"

"Oh yeah. Now you're ready for *more*, baby." Blaster pulled back and flipped her. Jas landed on hands and knees, a little startled but she got over it fast.

Her head whipped around to stare at him, her expression a tight grimace as she watched him pull a condom down his cock. It was thick and long, the purple head wide and pulsing as he came back to her.

Positioning it at her pussy, he used it to saw up to her clit, spreading her lips over it and coating it with her cream. Satisfied he'd not hurt her, he grasped her hips and gritted his teeth as he watched the head disappear in her.

Oh God, his cock tunneling into that sweet pussy was a sight he could hardly stand. She closed around him, a living silk fist clenched and milked him as he drove into her slowly. Withdrawing 'til just the head stretched her, he looked up into her eyes.

Her teeth were bared in a hiss. "What part of *more* don't you understand?" she demanded impatiently.

His hands tightened on her hips. "Patience, woman. It's our first time once. I'm enjoying it."

"You've been enjoying it too damn long," she insisted, and pushed back on him.

His hands held her in place. "Mine. This is mine. Behave!"

"Patience left the building when you got in my pussy," Jas snapped, "Now give me what you promised or let someone else drive." Her head whipped around and arched back as her body contracted on him, squeezing the head of his cock as if to expel it.

"Damn it, Sheena! This one is mine. You got your free ride before you took off and scared the hell outta me." He thrust into her, forcing himself through her contracting muscles one excruciatingly slow inch at a time. Jas moaned and shuddered.

He fell forward, covering her like a beast to power that last inch of himself into her. Their arms braced side by side, both tense with bunched muscle, his chin hooked over her shoulder, he was finally completely seated in his woman. His wild, shockingly oversexed, dangerous bitch who was mad because he wasn't pounding her like a fucking machine.

Turning his head, he sucked her earlobe into his mouth and closed his eyes. This was so good it hurt. He knew there'd never been a moment in his life when anything had ever been this right.

Jas' body rippled under him. "Figure what to do next, Huckleberry. Don't make me turn around and have you calling me 'ma'am' and liking it."

Blaster chuckled then whispered in her ear, "If you could, you'd hate it."

Jas' head jerked up, but he'd already pulled back. Upright behind her, he grasped her hips and pulled out fast to slam in with all the need and want of that desperate moment when she'd ridden away into the night. There was no reason to hold back. She wanted fucking and he was of a mind to give it to her. She took him and liked the hell out of it. She liked everything and he was certain he'd shortly be losing his mind. No one was this freaking perfect, beautiful and carnal.

His body pounded hard and fast, each thrust ending with a jerk up as he twisted on his knees. Holding her hips, he let her push back on him but controlled the movement ruthlessly. Again he watched himself disappear in her dripping body and reemerge. Intoxicated with the view, he increased the speed and power, taking her with pure animal intent. His lips drew back, baring his teeth in a snarl, when she exploded on his cock.

She screamed. A hissing, piercing scream that rang though the wilderness, hushing all that heard it for a second. Animals and insects alike froze at the primal sound. She was gasping in air when his hand snaked up her back. Grasping the back of her neck, he leaned over her again, forcing her head down and to the side.

His head by her ear, his voice was a guttural rumble as he told her one more time, "*Mine*," drawing his dick out of her contracting cunt to pull back for the plunge to the hilt. He didn't pause. Taking her hard and deep in short pounding thrusts that opened her to his invasion and kept her that way for his pleasure. The sensations crashed into her screaming orgasm and Jas spun completely out of control for the first time in her life.

Eyes closing on the stars exploding before them, she couldn't escape them. The beast on her back pinned her and took her with appalling force. The brazen power of his demands sent her soaring into the universe. Her entire body jerked uncontrollably and then he came. Hard and deep and long, pumping furiously he thrust his head back as a deep roar exploded from his chest. Bestial and low, it echoed after hers and nature trembled.

Dimly she was aware that they both were flying an unaccustomed path. Who knew it could be like this? The spinning explosions kept coming and she lost track of time as they consumed her in mindless pleasure. For once powerless to control anything, she welcomed it and let it take her where it would.

When Jas opened her eyes again, she was floating in the pool. Her head rested on his shoulder as he gently supported her back to his chest. Blinking, she stared at the rafters above them and tried to assimilate what just happened.

"Samuel?"

"Mmm?"

"Did you just fuck me until I passed out?"

"No. We made love. You were tired and fell asleep after."

"Yeah?"

"Yep," Blaster confirmed confidently.

"I might be pissed if I passed out," Jas informed him seriously.

"I know."

It was late afternoon and outside the patio rain poured down, creating a wall of noise that seemed to cut them off from reality. It wasn't a thunderstorm, just the usual summer shower pelting the heated earth with cooling moisture. Sheltered in the protected pool they were indeed in another world.

Floating in the warm water and cradled on his chest, the complete relaxation of weightlessness pulled her eyelids down again.

"I think I might sleep some more," she mumbled in warning.

"It's okay. I've got you," he whispered around a soft kiss to her temple.

* * * * *

Jas woke slowly. Usually she was either asleep or wide awake, but this time consciousness floated around the edges of her awareness. Strangely relaxed, she didn't rush it as relevant facts drifted across her mind. First she became aware that she was supremely comfortable but it sounded as if she were outside. Night sounds surrounded her, unmuffled by walls. Second, she was wearing a snoring blanket.

She was lying on her stomach, a natural sleep position for her, and he was half on top of her. He lay partially on his side so most of his chest covered her back, an arm extended around her, a little bent so his palm was actually under her breast. His head nestled in the crook of her neck. Her face was turned away from him so his nose was buried in her hair. Both of them had one leg extended straight and the other hooked up. Only his hooked leg crossed over her straight one, his thigh pressed against her pussy from behind.

Just knowing that sent a flush of lazy, tingling heat between her legs. The glow of that low-burning fire spread up her body as yesterday's events ordered themselves in her mind. They were pieces of an erotic puzzle, the details drifted to the surface. Each memory was a burning ember of decadent passion that grew more intense as Jas fit them together. Oh Lord, the man knew his way around a woman.

The low burn between her legs wasn't lazy anymore. Needing a bit of relief, Jas arched her back just enough to press her inflamed pussy a little harder into his thigh, hoping that touch would be enough. Behind her Blaster grunted and shifted, his thigh now firmly pressed into her wet cunt, the movement created friction. Jas sucked in a

gasp but managed to hold the sound in. His leg was pressed even higher into her, almost under her bent leg. Swollen with yesterday's memories, her clit was now being minutely and wickedly rubbed with every breath he took. The coarse blond hair on that hard thigh felt like tiny fingers at this point.

Then there was her breast resting in his open palm. Every breath she took massaged that engorged tip in the hard, rough surface below it. The beast was *sleeping* and had her womb contracting in empty need! How was that fair?!

Blaster sighed then grunted again, rolling off her onto his back. Jas stifled the moan of disappointment, rolling half over to look at him as he lay there with his arm stretched out to the other side now. Her eyes traveled down his body and stopped abruptly at the engorged cock he was sporting. Laying thick and heavy on his belly, it glistened in the faint moonlight, he was fully erect.

"Come here, woman." Blaster's eyes didn't even open as he mumbled the sleepy command.

Oh! Commanding her? If the man thought he was going to get a hazy ride to release, he needed educating on the subject. She would get the ache taken care of and he would damn well wake up to do it.

Chapter Nine

Jas rolled over and snuggled into his side, her head resting on his chest with her lips a millimeter away from a male nipple. Her hand trailed down his chest and belly to find his cock, gripping it gently at the thick base.

Blaster sighed and smiled, his eyes remained closed as his arm came around her hip, giving it an approving squeeze before he relaxed again. The big bastard probably thought he was dreaming, Jas mused maliciously.

Her tongue licked out to softly drag over the pebble of male flesh in front of her. At the same time her hand slowly pulled up the length of his cock. He moaned a soft sigh, his neck arching back but settled again when she didn't move. Great. He really was sleeping. Time to take care of that.

Lifting her head, she sucked the flat male breast into her mouth a moment then clamped her teeth around his nipple, rolling it sharply. Her hand slid back at the base of his cock where she could barely grip around it, she held it straight up. At his bark of surprise, she released his chest and her head shot down to the long, thick weapon between his legs. Open and ready, her mouth sank over him 'til the fat head nudged the back of her throat. His hips jerked in reaction, thrusting him past the constriction and down her throat until her mouth couldn't open any farther around him. They both froze.

Never having actually done this before, Jas first felt like gagging. Damn!

Above her head, he groaned in what sounded like pain as he jerked to full awareness. "Jesus Christ, Sheena!" His head snapped up to gaze down at her in stunned surprise that morphed into a teeth-clenched grimace as she began to move on him.

Exactly the reaction she was looking for. Easing back slowly, she pulled off him, her lips closed around his flesh, sucking all the way so there was a wet pop as he emerged from her. Immediately her tongue snaked out to circle the purple bulb of his cock, rimming the sensitive lip then dragging flat up over his weeping opening.

Holding him steady with her fist at his base, Jas opened over him again and sank her head down. When he reached the back of her throat, she closed her eyes and relaxed, pressing firmly and letting muscle memory take over. It was easier. The taste and feel of him began taking over her senses as she moved him in and out in long strokes.

Jas was aware that Blaster's body was matching her movements in shallow thrusts, the muscles in his legs trembling each time he sank into her and down her throat. Big and hard, he stretched her lips and jaw, filling her throat as completely as he'd filled her pussy. He was perfectly made for her body, her pleasure. That was a thought she'd have to pursue when she had time. Right now the slow suck and thrust was the only

thing that mattered as she learned his feel again. His taste of salt, man and lust. The way his scent intensified as he moaned, filling her lungs with him.

One of his hands reached down to close over Jas' fist at the base of him. He gently showed her how to move it, stroking in concert with her mouth, closing more firmly around him.

"Oh damn, yeahhhh," Blaster hissed gutturally as he lay back. Reaching over his head, he grasped the frame of the lounge and hung on for dear life. It'd been a shatteringly erotic way to wake up. He'd been dreaming of her touch and suspected not all of his dream had been unreal. And yet it was still unreal, amazingly dreamlike in its perfection.

He hoped to God her not knowing exactly what to do meant she hadn't done this before because he didn't want to spend the rest of his life in jail for killing a string of men who know what this felt like. He sure as shit wasn't gonna mess it up by giving in to the natural instinct to hold her head and guide her. Jas might see that as forcing her and then it'd all end with her biting his dick off. The wicked angel between his legs was still dangerous and he damn well wasn't going to forget it.

The wet velvet of her mouth was heaven and hell, sucking his soul out his cock. She gave him heaven with the shattering sensations screaming through his body. Damned him to hell as he hung on to control while she slowly pumped him deep into her throat and sucked him all the way back out. In desperation Blaster started running the Mississippi State football team roster through his head. Last year's stats for every game. It wasn't working.

The slow, tortuous head-fuck was driving him insane. Her other hand finally reached down to cuddle his balls, fingering them gently and it was too much.

"Enough!" Blaster bellowed, trying to sit up.

Jas' fist tightened around his balls, pulling them away from his body and Blaster froze in shock. Her mouth came off his cock and the woman hissed at him, baring her teeth. He lay down dazed. He was again plunged into the velvet of her mouth and swallowed down, his balls gently cuddled in the warmth of her palm.

Oh *hell* no! She wasn't going to have it all her way.

She was kneeling beside him, eating him like her favorite treat and that was dandy but not quite good enough. Time to show the lady that play went both ways with him.

Giving her no warning, Blaster reached over and grabbed her hips. A risky move considering where his dick was lodged and who was holding his balls. His feral little cat was unpredictable as hell. But then, so was he. He had Jas astride his face in one swift move. His hands jerked her knees apart and beautiful wet pussy was in his mouth before she could react. His tongue plunged into her as far as he could reach and then he sealed his lips around her and sucked, shaking his head like a dog with a bone.

A white-hot fireball burst up Jas' body as the growling beast latched on to her and demanded a response from the intimate flesh he was consuming. Her head stopped moving on him with his cock shoved deep in her mouth. The hand on his base clenched

a bit harder but that was it. She couldn't move. He drove all thought, knowledge and anything else from her brain. All she could do was absorb the thundering explosion of his demanding mouth. Drown in the gushing flood of her body's frantic answer to him.

That's exactly what he'd hoped for. She needed to stop, just for a minute and let him gather some control. Her insidious mouth held him but at least she wasn't forcing the release that was so close. His tongue moved furiously, determined to drive her insane, bring her to the point of pleasure she'd taken him to. Only then would he give in to her demands on his body. Oh God, she was so wet, so ready for him and yet she held him within herself already.

Lashed with a knowing tongue, Jas was unprepared for the sensations he gave her. Perhaps it was the position, the carnal decadence of it. Whatever, her body was already clenching in nearly painful reaction to the snarling possession of her cunt. Dazedly she resumed moving on the hot cock in her mouth. Sucking and thrusting shallowly over him now, she couldn't concentrate while he did that.

Firm hands gripped her again, lifting her off him and to the side. Jas rolled onto her back and Blaster was already crawling up her body from her feet. In the dark, his form was predator. She reached down to pet wide shoulders as he stopped at her breasts. Kneeling over her, his head bent to lave a firm nipple with his tongue, Blaster was aggressive male consuming his woman.

Even though she'd started this, his taking control didn't alarm her. Jas was too overwhelmed with the physical storm he could ignite in her. It raged at her and Blaster licked it higher while insidiously dragging his cock over her pussy. Only the fat head nudged her as he moved to the other breast to suck that engorged nipple into his mouth to inflict torment on it.

Jas' hands on his shoulders turned to claws as his cock nudged her inflamed cunt. Her legs reached up to grasp his hips and pull him down on her. Teeth nipped at her nipple, capturing it and pulling away from her body in a painful jerk. Jas froze then her legs subsided to the cushions. Immediately his head sank down to lick around the abused nipple in slurping excess.

Jas moaned in protest.

Blaster growled his way up her chest as his knees spread between her legs, shifting her legs apart. Dropping light kisses along her jawline before abruptly sitting back on haunches as he picked up another condom from the pile he'd dumped on the little table last night, and ripped it open. Kneeling between her legs, he rolled the thin sheath on. He couldn't have looked more powerful, more intensely sexual if he'd tried.

Jas smiled and arched her body in a long stretch, clasping hands above her head as she mewed softly. He froze above her, watching her. A dark figure whose eyes were in shadow, yet she could feel them on her, burning her. Neither of them had spoken. He didn't now. She saw the gleam of white teeth as he snarled and then his body fell forward on her.

Bodies perfectly aligned, he entered her with the power of his lunge up her. The shocking invasion drew a grunt from her as he stretched sensitive flesh around his thick cock. Face-to-face, he lay on her and began pounding in hard pushes. His hands shot up her arms to clasp both of them above her head. Holding hands in a feral grip as they fucked in classic embrace, nose to nose.

Her legs rose to lock around him high on his back with limber ease. Opening herself in female demand for more with a pose that might have been surrender on another woman. On Jas it was meeting him halfway and pushing them both. He was laid out on her, but he wasn't pinning her and they both knew it. By grasping her hands above her head instead of bracing himself on either side of her, he'd made himself vulnerable to being bucked off or rolled over. He gave her that choice as they stared into each other's face.

The power of his possession that wasn't confining did it for her. She wanted to be beneath him because she could remain there and be safe. And it felt so good. His searing cock pounding into her was making her crazy as the man above her gave her his body and was waiting for something at the same time. His face was a fierce, passionate mask from which he watched her.

"Yes," Jas breathed in hissing response to his unspoken question.

Blaster's body moved in dizzying speed. His cock shoved in her deep and hard, his hands released hers to reach under her shoulders and hook over them from the back in a hold that could control her torso. His knees came up and he lifted Jas with those powerful arms so she was straddling his kneeling thighs. Her body suspended in air with only his arms holding her on his cock. She had no control in this position, but nor was she helpless.

He wasn't restricting her arms or legs. She could choose to escape him. However, if she chose to remain as he held her, she had to give up all control. Jas' hands grasped flexing shoulders and her head tilted back as her eyes closed in complete surrendering trust.

The beast holding her roared in satisfaction and began pounding into her as he jerked her down on him. His penetration was overwhelming as he pulled her off him and then thrust into her as he jerked her down. Suspended in the air, lying back on his arms, her only job was to enjoy the deep, hard fucking he was giving her. Jas had no problem with that.

Shattering contractions burst through her immediately as she relaxed on his cock. They didn't end. Blaster wanted more. He took it. She had no idea how many times he drove her up the blistering slope of release. Finally he roared completion, holding her down on him as his hips jerked through the powerful orgasm.

Very gently he lowered them both to the lounge again. Blaster's arms wrapped around Jas, cradling her to his chest as he buried his face in her hair. His cock didn't leave her as he rolled on his back, draping her over him.

"So beautiful. So fucking beautiful," he murmured over and over again. Gentle hands stroked down her back, petting over her ass in firm approval.

Jas was gasping in shuddering reaction. He'd taken her somewhere new again. Asked for her surrender and yet taken her hard. He confused her. The way she was with him scared her. It felt as if she had no defenses. Yet he'd never taken anything she wasn't willing to give him. Cradling her on top of him was again being free in his arms. He held her in a treasuring grasp she could break at any time. She didn't want to.

Jas relaxed on him, letting his hands and voice soothe. Slowly his cock slid out of her and she even enjoyed those sensations. What was she doing?

He didn't let her panic as he praised her. "So amazing, baby. You drive me crazy and pull me back," he confessed into the top of her head.

Soft and low he told her how she took him. His words gave her complete control, soothing the frightened knot low in her soul. Sleep stole over her. Safe in the hold of his arms, she drifted off.

Jas opened her eyes and realized the sun had come up at some point. The next thing she noticed was Blaster splashing out of the water, using his shirt to dry himself off hurriedly. Then she heard it, the distinctive drone of an airboat engine. It was close and coming in fast. She managed to prop herself up on her elbows when the engine cut off below them. Two seconds later a voice bellowed up at them.

"Blaster! Jas! Put your damn clothes on and get out here."

Jas frowned. Standing, she clamped a hand over each breast and hurried to the low wall to answer. The wall was barely high enough to cover her mound but since Jackson would be looking up it didn't concern her. Blaster was pulling on his pants when she reached the wall alone.

"What happened?" Jas demanded sharply.

Jackson stood in his airboat, not bothering to even step onto the dock, and gazed up at her in silence.

"Well?" she prompted impatiently.

"I said, put your clothes on," Jackson repeated, frowning darkly. "How am I supposed to remember a damn thing with you standing there looking like some pinup?"

"Get a grip! This is more than most bikinis. What happened?"

"But you're holding your..." Jackson shook his head. "You have no idea, do you?"

Blaster strode up behind Jas and draped his damp shirt around the front of her like a straitjacket with the buttons in back. "Now tell us why you're here," he directed calmly.

"Jose and Liana are here, so is Gray. Things have changed again and we need to respond. Liana won't talk until she sees, Jas. Now get dressed and come on!"

Blaster squeezed her shoulders. "Come on, baby. Let's go."

Jas whirled away from the wall. Blaster had a hold of the sleeve of his shirt, saving it from falling forgotten to the floor.

Jas grabbed clothes and was yanking them on. She swiftly strapped on holsters for both guns and knives.

They rushed off the patio and back through the house.

"What about the mess we left?" Jas wanted to know as they hurried out the front door.

"Gray will have one of the tribe come out and take care of it. We'll apologize later." They were jogging down the path to the dock.

Jackson had the motor running. Soon as Blaster and Jas showed up on the path to the water, he turned and took off. Quickly, they cast off and were traveling Jackson's wake. The trip back was made at top speed and done in well under an hour.

Skimming across the water at exhilarating speeds, Jas realized she felt whole. Deep in her soul there remained the peace that she'd thought was so fleeting yesterday. Glancing at the man driving, she acknowledged that he'd found a way to pack the gaping wounds her life force had sustained at the cabin. Not replace the loss each kill had cost her, but fill the void with something good.

Somehow he'd become the antidote. Not exactly a cure. There was no cure for death. One had to live with those marks. She already knew that. But being folded into this man's life brought acceptance and understanding. He knew her. In the short time they'd been in each other's lives, he'd managed to know her better than any man ever had. Honestly, that wasn't true. He knew her better than any person ever had.

Jas smiled as she enjoyed the fast ride. The whole concept of a relationship that made the people involved "better" was astounding. It was the mystery of the intricate cut of his life's experiences that were exactly the right fit to fold over her jagged edges. This fit should have been impossible to find. A quirk of fate had brought them together, Jas realized she would be a fool to treat the opportunity casually. Hillbilly was a rare find but there was no guarantee he felt the same way she did. Needing what he did for her soul made her vulnerable. Jas was uncomfortable with that but unsure what to do next.

Was it too late to pull back? For her it was. Whenever he chose to leave her, it'd be a gut-wrenchingly painful experience. The only thing she could do was minimize the damage from here on out.

At the ranch dock, a scruffy-looking Ford 150 sat waiting for them.

"What happened to that nice Escalade?" Jas wanted to know.

Jackson grinned as he slid into the driver's side. "We don't get to be choosy. People aren't supposed to know I'm driving around Hollywood's next big starlet."

"Starving starlet," Jas corrected him.

Jas slid in to the middle and Blaster followed her. "What's changed besides Liana and Jose getting in?" Blaster wrapped an arm around Jas and tugged her into his side. It

was a blatantly possessive display but he couldn't help it. He wasn't about to let her rub up on another man, even if the guy was Jackson.

"I told you Gray was down, right?"

"Yeah, why? What brought the wolf in from the fringes?" Blaster pressed, looking around Jas and using the opportunity to rub his lips over her shoulder.

Jas glanced at him and raised a brow, asking the silent question of why the contact?

Blaster dropped a silent kiss on her lickable skin and gave her a sheepish smile that answered her inquiry. *I can't help it.*

Jackson's eyes became glued to the road as he answered. "Action, what else? Liana's mom was arrested by Homeland Security around four this morning. We pretty much don't need Liana's conformation to pinpoint who Bad Guy is. He just did it for us. Goes to show he has no idea what the Unit is. I wonder if Larkin was holding that information back, you know, as a bargaining chip. Larkin had to know the guy was dangerously close to being finished with him. If I were Larkin, I'd have wanted some leverage. Stop licking her, Blaster."

"Jesus! Homeland Security?" Jas gasped. "Where is Carmen? What have they done with her? Can you guys track that?"

"Don't worry, I'm sure Gray and Rem already have that under control. Nothing is going to happen to Mrs. Allacosta," Blaster assured Jas. "Bad Guy is just using her to force Liana to meet him. It's his pattern. He thinks he's manipulating the events to fit his plan. We need to hear the message he sent Liana to get a handle on what he wants. If he just wants to kill Liana, we'll change his mind. But I have a feeling it's way more than that. I wasn't licking her, and it's none of your business if I do," Blaster added.

Jackson scowled out the windshield. "It's my business because I'm trying to drive casual here. You two are not stable, ya know."

"Stable? What does stable have to do with anything?" Jas wanted to know.

"Sometimes he's licking you, sometimes the two of you are ready to throw down arms and sometimes you're crawling him. I never know which way the wind is blowing 'til it's too late. Damn unstable if you ask me," Jackson drawled.

"Yeah, that's what happens in an intense relationship," Jas agreed in a sarcastic tone of voice that marveled at Jackson's ignorance. "What do you expect to happen?"

"I expect an escalating level of affection. Not a rehash of hormonal chaos from when I was sixteen. I might as well be hanging out with horny teenagers in the backseat of a car. I feel as if I should be grounding someone or taking away the car keys."

"Oh my," Jas murmured as if she were talking to Blaster. "Who would have guessed he has a 'daddy' fetish. What kinky friends you have, Huckleberry."

"Jasmina! You keep that up and I'll get a daddy fetish long enough to paddle your behind," Jackson retorted.

Jas chuckled softly. "Mmm, is he more a Puritan with a spanking fetish? You are a naughty boy, Jackson."

"You have no idea," he responded calmly with a slight smile.

"Since when did you become Dr. Jackson, Relationship Coach?" Blaster wanted to know. "Just drive the truck and tell us what happened."

Jas smiled a little too wide as she wiggled farther under Blaster's arm. "I think we make him nervous."

Jackson glanced at Blaster. "Now that Gray knows who it is, he's done a background. I didn't hear the rest."

"What? So who is he?" Blaster frowned.

"Yeah, no idea. I had to go off and find you guys. Took me outta the room, ya know."

Jackson was driving at a sedate pace, which seemed like crawling after the speed of the airboats. He turned the truck off the dirt track and drove across an open pasture instead of heading toward the ranch. "We're going to Charlie's house. In case there is any possibility of Jose and Liana being tailed, we didn't want the activity around the ranch to alert this guy."

For Jas, Jackson explained, "Charlie is a Unit member. His place is on a lake that hasn't been developed yet and it's isolated enough to make it difficult for surveillance without our knowing."

On the far side of the pasture, they came to a gate out to a rural paved road. From there they wound around to Charlie's property, entering it from the side and using another barely visible dirt road ending up at the back of the fifties bungalow Charlie had purchased and remodeled. They drove straight under the massive deck at the back of the house. The area was enclosed. Parked inside was a gleaming black Hummer and another battered pickup. The garage door slid soundlessly shut behind them proving their arrival had been seen by the men upstairs.

"Very Bond," Jas commented as she slid out of the truck and looked around briefly for cameras. None were visible.

"Better than Bond, baby." Blaster grinned as they strode to the stairs leading up to the house.

"Well, you boys better have food too. I'm starving," she shot back at him as they mounted the stairs.

They entered the house via a door in the laundry room. Jackson was in front and strode through the kitchen to what seemed like a large number of men were gathered in the front room-dining room area. Jas was close on his heels with Blaster behind her.

Jas paid no attention to the men as she scanned the living room and found Liana perched on the edge of a huge sofa. Jose stood beside her, his arms folded across his chest and a grim look on his face as he watched the other occupants.

As soon as Liana saw Jas she stood and gasped, the two women were in each other's arms laughing. They hugged for a long minute as the Unit members greeted Jackson and Blaster.

Over Liana's shoulder, Jas looked into Blaster's eyes. He was across the room shaking hands with a tall Native American. Glancing around, Jas realized the multitude of men only numbered six. It's just that they were all so large, they used more space. Two of them she hadn't met, but she had no question who they were. The Native American had to be Gray Winston and the incredibly muscled black male was Charlie.

The girls pulled apart and Jas smiled at Jose, who nodded his greeting to her. Jas still held Liana by the shoulders as she examined the exhausted face of her friend.

"You haven't slept much, I take it?"

"No, I've had a bit of trouble with that." Liana smiled slightly as she looked at Jas. "You look fresh as a spring chicken for a dead person."

"Dead is amazingly restful." Jas glanced at Blaster again. "But I've had some help relaxing. Meet Blaster. He doesn't like to admit it, but he's a high-maintenance boy toy who's been very handy." Jas grinned as deep chuckles rippled around the room. "The tall guy behind him is Jackson, who seems to have a Madonna complex about women, which doesn't make sense because he hangs out with my boy toy."

Liana laughed and held out her hand to Blaster who now stood beside Jas. "I'm not high maintenance and I keep telling this woman she has to refer to me as a man toy," he defended himself easily while smiling into Liana's face. "I'm very happy to meet you, Miss Allacosta. More than I can tell you."

"I assume you've met the other guys here?" Jas continued as Liana nodded. "They are what they say they are, Liana. We can trust them."

Gray Winston held out his hand to Jas. His amazingly pale eyes crinkled at the corners in a smile that didn't touch his lips. "Ms. Carson," he greeted her with a firm shake, "glad you made it." He nodded at Liana. "Miss Allacosta, we're the Unit, however one is missing. Miguel is on a job and couldn't join us."

"We agreed I'd be Jas and you'd be Gray. Don't make me hurt you so you can remember that," Jas responded to the humor she saw in his face. Gray was a man she wanted to trust it seemed. Blaster had purchased her respect for all these men and now that she'd met them, she wasn't disappointed.

"I live in fear, Jas." Gray actually grinned this time.

Jas turned to the large black man who was leaning casually against the doorjamb that led out to the deck and a spectacular view of his lake. Sitting beside him was a large German Shepherd. Alert with ears pricked, the dog watched Jas, ignoring the two men who'd entered with her. "Mr. Campbell, thank you for having us."

"Entirely my pleasure, Ms. Carson," he smiled and murmured back.

Jas took two steps toward him and dropped to haunches, holding out a hand below the dog's muzzle for sniffing. "And who is this?" she asked with a smile.

"Friend," Charlie murmured to the dog, releasing him to get acquainted with the woman asking for an introduction.

At his master's release, the magnificent dog didn't move but his tail wagged twice in acknowledgement. He leaned his long nose forward to investigate Jas' hand. She remained perfectly still, letting the dog come to her if he wished.

"This is Apollo," Charlie said as he watched Jas greet the dog correctly, not trying to pet him until Apollo was ready. Everything about her radiated pleasure as Apollo finally got up and walked into her reach with tail wagging, ears back in doggy approval and joy at having a new friend.

Charlie made no move to touch her. In fact none of the men had except Gray, who'd shaken her hand.

Standing after her introduction to Apollo, Jas glanced at Blaster and resisted a private smile. His friends were good men. The respect they extended to her was the same brand Blaster handed out. But more impressive was the respect they displayed for her hillbilly. Not touching his woman unless invited to in old-fashioned deference. A level of feudal regard she wouldn't have understood a few days ago.

"Everyone has been introduced, right?" Jas asked as she looked around. Standing in the room were Samuel—Blaster—Calloway, Jackson St. James, Remington Morgan, Gray Winston and Charlie Campbell. Beside the couch where Liana had been sitting was Jose, who hadn't moved. A more intimidating group it'd be hard to find.

"Yes." Liana nodded.

"Good, 'coz I'm starved. Can we move the discussion to the kitchen? I'll eat cereal if you have any?" Jas looked at Charlie.

Charlie chuckled and turned to the kitchen. "No chance, Carson. Dry cereal will wither your bones. Come on in here and we'll see what we have. Anyone else hungry?" He received assenting noises from all the men and they followed him into the kitchen.

In the remodel of the bungalow, Charlie had preserved the beautiful, fifties-style kitchen while expanding it to modern proportions. It was large with two back doors, one to the Florida room on the deck and one to the laundry room, which also had an outside door. In middle of the floor was a large chrome and Formica table with six matching chairs. There was plenty of counter space and the sink was under a bay window that looked over the lake.

Charlie went straight to the oversized refrigerator and pulled out two double cartons of eggs, a couple packages of bacon, and from the freezer, an oversized bag of hash browns and two more packages of breakfast sausages. The food created a pile on the counter that looked a bit mountainous to Jas.

Jackson efficiently retrieved mixing bowls and skillets from cupboards while Rem took charge of the eggs. Charlie, Rem and Jackson moved around the kitchen smoothly while the rest of them pulled out chairs at the table.

Jas sat with Liana on one side and Blaster on her other. Jose didn't seem comfortable enough to sit. He leaned in the doorjamb, watching the activity. Gray sat across from the girls. Apollo stretched out in middle of the space below the wide table.

"Miss Allacosta, I realize this is difficult but while we're waiting for the chefs, could you tell us the events of the last couple days from your perspective. The Unit has been involved with Jas and we've heard about the events several years ago that started this. We'd like to assist in ending it for you two ladies."

"It's time to tell us, Liana." Jas smiled into the tired face of her friend. None of the men spoke, obviously listening to the conversation at the table.

Liana nodded and took a deep breath. "He's some sort of important person in Homeland Security. Now you see why I say we're not safe anywhere?" Liana leaned forward to emphasize her point. "He can find us anywhere and arrest us for anything."

"How did you recognize him? I don't understand. How would he know you did?" Jas asked as Liana started trembling.

Jose handed her a bottle of water. She took a long drink and smiled softly at him before turning to Jas. "I was at the awards ceremony. Recognition happened through a combination of things. His voice, his touch and his scent. When he leaned in to shake my hand and congratulate me, I knew exactly who he was. I froze and stared at him for a horrified second. He must have recognized the look. He knew I knew. He didn't miss a beat though, just kept on talking smoothly with a smile on his face. But his hand, he squeezed my hand very hard. It sort of snapped me out of it. His eyes were so cold, Jas. I felt like puking on the spot. But I was too afraid to.

"Oh God. I panicked and left the event. I drove home and called Cable Bourne's cell phone. I was terrified and wanted him to know. I don't even remember the man's name, but I told Cable he was in Homeland Security. Cable said it was really important that I didn't tell anyone else. If this man really was who I thought he was, things could be dangerous. He said the man's DNA would be in government records. If the sample we have could actually be matched to him, it'd come up on any military-type search.

"Cable told me to lock the doors and windows and not open for anyone. He'd be back in Washington in the morning and we'd figure out what to do. But the next morning Cable was dead." Liana covered face with her hands. "I killed Cable by calling him."

"No! No you didn't. None of this is your fault." Jas pulled Liana's hands away from her face, leaning in to look her in the eye. "You know what victim mentality is, stop it. Don't give the abuser even this much of you. Not again."

Jose couldn't take it. "*Hijo de puta!* Son of a bitch! That one is not worth another tear from your eye, *querida mía.*" His body folded onto his haunches beside Liana while he wrapped an arm around her as if he'd like to envelop her into his being. "You should have told me instead of running from me, princess. I know we'd just split, but hell, I didn't expect you to vanish. We could have worked things out. Even this."

Jose looked around Liana at Jas. "And why didn't you tell me? I had a right to know. You knew the breakup was temporary. I thought you were my friend, Jas."

"I was busy trying to keep us alive, Jose. It was dicey at the beginning," Jas snapped in irritation. "Besides, wasn't my call. If Liana refused to tell you, I had to leave it alone."

"Hey," Blaster interjected coolly. "The problem is right now. Let's focus on fixing it. If I understand correctly, Liana remembers more than Jas does of the actual events and now she can identify the perpetrator and make it stick with DNA evidence. The bastard knows she made him and he happens to be in Homeland Security. That would normally make him one formidable motherfucker. What we need to do is work with our advantages and use them against him."

Calmly Blaster outlined the strengths of their position as he saw them. "We have several things he doesn't. One is knowledge. We know Jas is alive, he doesn't. We know who he is. He incorrectly thinks Liana is alone and running scared."

"Liana is not alone and she now has a damn nasty Unit of men on her side. We're not helpless. We're the fucking scary ones. We can move faster and harder than he can. He's handicapped with having to justify himself to a government."

"The thing we need to come up with is a plan to take care of him. We should move fast before they figure out Jas isn't several million body parts on that mountain."

Blaster continued, looking into Liana's eyes. "This Unit is retired from the military. That doesn't mean we're dysfunctional. At this moment you have one of the most elite forces on the planet at your disposal. I'm not bragging. I'm trying to impress you with the fact that you two are not going to be running from this guy. He's going to be fucking running from you. Besides," Blaster raised a brow and indicated Jose with his chin, "this guy is damn formidable himself. Even if Jas didn't bring the Unit into this, he would have taken care of it."

Jose sighed and nodded slightly at Blaster. "He's right, *cariña mía*. The fool only thinks he's working his problems. He's going to learn the cost of playing shortly."

Liana smiled and wilted back into her chair. "You're all trying to wrap me in cotton so I don't break. All I need is some sleep but even without it, I'm not that breakable. I'll be fine. I wish I could remember his name. I don't think he told me because I froze. He knew I recognized him and he just kept talking but he wasn't saying anything. Then I left. I didn't think to ask anyone his name. Next morning, the first thing I saw was the news of the airplane crash. I borrowed a car from one of the women at the center and took off."

Jackson was flipping the hash browns, he asked casually, "Your cell phone? Did you bring it, Miss Allacosta?"

"Yes, but I took the battery out. I'm not stupid. He could have tracked me with it."

"Excellent," Jackson approved.

Gray searched Liana's face for a moment before he asked, "Miss Allacosta, have you seen the news recently?"

Liana frowned. "No, why?"

Gray glanced at Jose then back at Liana. "I didn't realize you two hadn't heard yet. Carman Allacosta was arrested early this morning by Homeland Security. It was done with full network coverage."

"Oh my God!" Liana turned pale as she stared at Gray.

Gray reached across the table, his large hand covering Liana's as he continued into her stricken face. "It's bad, I know. But it's also the best thing he could have done. No, let me finish so you understand." Gray gently tightened his hold on Liana's hand. "This is an obvious move to force you to come to him. But it's also a huge lie. It gives us documented evidence of his abuse of office when the time comes. Rest assured he can't afford to hurt your mother. She is his bargaining chip with you.

"As soon as he made that move he told us who he is. His name is Harry Kauffman. He holds a slightly higher than middle management position in Homeland. The action proved that he doesn't know who we are or that we're involved. Right now Miguel, the missing member of the Unit is shadowing your mother's position. Miguel is Latin American. He can communicate clearly with her if he needs to get her out on an emergency basis. According to Miguel, she's fine so far. They've not spoken to her and she's afraid but all they did was put her in a cell.

"We'd rather not break any laws to get her out. It's better if all the lawbreaking is done by Harry Kauffman. Your mother is in no jeopardy. We can have her out or at least out of this man's control at any time if we need to. His leverage over you is an illusion."

Liana stared at Gray, her face pale and set, eyes narrowed. "You're sure she's safe? This man—Miguel—has seen her?"

"Yes," Gray answered flatly. The lack of elaboration made the statement ring with honesty.

"Your team is really that good? You already have a person on her, you know who the rapist is and you're all willing to help us? Willing to get my mother out even if you have to break laws to save her? For strangers?" Liana pressed.

Gray sat back releasing Liana's hand and glanced at Blaster with a raised brow. "You want to explain? I believe this is your family, Samuel."

Blaster's arm rested along the back of Jas' chair as he shifted sideways so his legs straddled her seat, his other hand on the table lightly stroking her arm which rested there as he looked past her to Liana. "Not strangers, Liana. Tell me something, before the incident in Atlanta you and Jas were simply close friends, right?"

Liana nodded.

"After going through hell together you were sisters by a right deeper than blood. You didn't abandon each other. You found trust lives on a whole new level. That's how a combat unit becomes welded together. We know for a fact that these few men will be at our back even as we march through hell because they've proved it. It's also how abuse survivors become brothers regardless of parentage. Barry, the director of the movie Jas is working on, is my brother by right. Just as Jas is your family by right.

"Barry called me because the movie was having serious security problems involving his star. Barry's problems are my problems and I come with this family, these other men who are my brothers as well.

"But it's more than that now. Your sister Jas makes it more. She and I are involved and it's not causal. So you see? You and your mother become my family because you are Jas' family. These brothers of mine will risk life for my family because I am one of them.

"That's only *one* reason you see the warriors gathered here. The other reason is as powerful. What happened to you ladies is wrong. This man—Harry Kauffman—is a sick predator who must be stopped. He offends us at the core of our value system as humans and as military men. Given the opportunity and information, we *would* do this for strangers, Liana. We'd damn well enjoy it too. That's how deeply we're offended by this bastard."

Liana nodded and smiled shyly. "You should be a lawyer. You make a hell of an argument."

Jas took Liana's hand in hers as she chuckled. "He does, doesn't he?" The two girls sobered looking at each other. "You willing to trust them?" Jas asked softly. "We're going to finish this and get Carmen back. They make the job a hell of a lot easier but you and I could throw on fatigues and get the job done, ya know. We're Marines. We can take care of this pissant."

Liana's face was serious as she leaned into Jas and said in a stage whisper, "You don't think for one minute that they wouldn't be there, do you?"

Jas' smile was slow and wide. "No," she whispered just as loudly. The two of them laughed as they sat back and looked at the men who'd all stopped what they were doing to watch the exchange.

Movement around the kitchen resumed as a massive amount of eggs, bacon, sausages and potatoes were in frying pans and the oven. The room was filled with comforting smells and the low rumble of male voices as food was prepared.

"Good, that's settled." Gray nodded, his pale eyes strangely warm. "Miss Allacosta, can you tell us what Kauffman said to your mother in the message he left with her right after you left L.A.? He obviously thought it was enough to get you in and viewed your remaining on the run as defiance."

"Ah, I can tell you what my mom told me but I don't think it's a word-for-word replay. She was upset when I called her from the road and wouldn't tell her where I was or where I was going. In the phone call to her, a man identified himself as a close friend of mine and told her I'd know who it was from his message. He said I would want to keep our friendship private as we were both public figures so he wasn't leaving his name. Then he offered condolences for *both* my losses. Now that I was free from the two who controlled me, I was to feel confident in his protection since we had a mutual interest that he needed to discuss with me. Please call him immediately and that I already had his number."

Liana spread her hands in a shrug. "It was confusing. His using the phrase 'both losses' and calling me 'free now from the two who had controlled me'. That told me the other death had to be the only other person who knew what Cable knew. That was Jas. I was sure she was dead because there was no question Cable was dead. I had no idea what he meant by his protection and that I had his number."

"Gezzzus," Rem growled from the stove where he was making scrambled eggs that smelled suspiciously gourmet. "Filter that through a sick mind and you come up with a bast...jerk who needs a new pimp."

"What?" Jas and Liana said at the same time.

"Amazing." Gray's face was grim.

"It's logical." Jackson spoke as he turned hash browns on a large sheet that he shoved back in the oven. "She has access to hundreds of his favorite flavor in women."

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, "and he just blew up his old pimp. He needs a new supplier and cleanup crew."

"Freakin brass ones," Blaster whistled a low exclamation. "Can he be that delusional? Obviously Larkin never mentioned our involvement to this idiot."

"Fits his profile," Gray confirmed. "He lost any sense of right and wrong long ago and has been 'acting' for a very long time. Mimicking normal people to fit in." Gray scowled as he went on. "Larkin had to know Kauffman was getting close to an edge. That's why Larkin was cleaning house. He was getting rid of evidence that would connect him to Kauffman. I don't believe he went to the cabin expecting to die."

"When I was looking into Robert Larkin I found he comes from Hoffman's hometown. They joined up together but went to separate branches. It doesn't look like they hooked up again for quite a few years. Then they were both stationed in Germany. As you know, the profile on Larkin says he's a victim who became his abuser's accomplice. He displayed the classic drives, always striving for approval and always expendable. I think whatever brought these two together happened long before they joined up. There hasn't been time to fully investigate."

Gray continued to explain. "Think of Kauffman as a junkie. He's been sinking deeper and deeper into his habit for years. The reality he perceives is no longer what the rest of us see. Now he needs to know where his next fix is coming from. Until he has that securely nailed down, he will continue getting more and more out of control. He also believes he's invincible. Look how long he's gotten away with his lifestyle. Those delusions make him an idiot and he doesn't know it."

"His next fix?" Liana asked. "You think he is setting me up to..." She trailed off. "Ohh!"

"Yes," Gray confirmed her exclamation. "You run a woman's shelter. You have access to hundreds of women with no one to run to. You are a perfect supplier. He obviously perceives you as weak and alone. He feels he has you right where he wants you."

"Surprise, surprise," Jas murmured. "This is going to be fun."

"Given all that, there are a few things that are a nuisance," Gray continued. "Even though he's unbalanced morally, he's extremely intelligent. Even brilliant. So the hard, messy push to eliminate Carson, Larkin and Bourne, your attorney, seems hasty and way too public. Blowing up a plane full of important people is a high-risk operation. Blowing up a cabin, not as much, but still state and local officials get involved on the scene.

"He always intended to use the cabin as a trap, though I doubt he knew exactly who it would be for. He had it wired and armed, ready for use, but the lack of follow through on that event indicates a hasty operation. If it were planned, there would have been someone following you away from the site, Jas. At the very least, he should have had a sniper at the airfield where our plane was parked."

"Blowing up a cabin?" Liana asked. "Larkin is dead?"

"Yeah," Jas explained. "Kauffman led me to believe Larkin had tortured and killed you to get me up to the cabin outside of Atlanta. I was supposed to die in the trap he'd set. He managed to get Larkin. It's a long story. I'll tell you all about it later."

Gray continued. "Taking down the plane in Florida was done fast and dirty but still a smart kill. Eliminating everyone on board was cover ensuring no one will know there was only one mark. My question is, why do that one so fast? What is he worried about? He didn't want the evidence released, but logically he had a scapegoat in Larkin's death. If the evidence you took from the original scene is as indistinct as you say it is, this level of malice would not be needed."

Platters of food were placed in middle of the table as Gray talked. Plates and utensils were handed out mess-hall style, fast as possible. A couple of chairs were dragged in from the dining room and everyone sat. They all filled plates in silence.

"So you're wondering if there is something else on the disk?" Jas asked after she'd taken a few bites.

"Yeah. Maybe something that has nothing to do with the event you were involved in. Since you took the disk, Kauffman might not be sure if whatever he's worried about is on it or not. That would explain his being unwilling to stir this pot if he doesn't have to for this many years. He may not have been the one behind the attacks on the set. Those were generic compared to the action after Miss Allacosta recognized him." Gray agreed with her.

"I see where you're going with this," Blaster added thoughtfully. "Larkin could have been the one getting worried about Jas' position for his own reasons. She knew who he was. She could hurt his career. Kauffman didn't have a reason to be concerned until Liana made him. The hard push and attempt to recover the evidence came within twenty-four hours of Liana shaking Kauffman's hand."

"Did you see or hear anything out of place when you reviewed the disk?" Rem asked.

Jas glanced at Liana, who was barely picking at a few bits of food on her plate. "I'm the only one who looked at the disk. I didn't view it all they way through." Jas took a

long drink of coffee that had been passed around the table. "It opened after we'd been restrained. I watched a minute of it. I don't have memories of the events and I didn't want them. All I did was confirm it was what I thought it was, dupe it down and stash the original."

"You have the disk you took from the scene? You didn't give it to Bourne?" Gray asked sharply.

"Not on me, but yeah. I kept it," Jas confirmed.

"Good. Prints." Gray didn't need to explain his bark of approval to this crowd. "Where's the disk?"

"Safe-deposit box in D.C."

"So the ones Bourne had were the copies?" Gray pressed.

"Yeah. I'd guess they're now in Kauffman's hands," Jas continued. "I bet he had someone get them from Cable's office. Just killing Cable wouldn't erase the evidence. He'd have to know where it was and believe he could get his hands on it for the killing part to do him any good. Whoever handles Cable's estate would have followed the written instructions on the envelopes. So if he has them, he might think they are the originals but I doubt it."

"Actually, no. Kauffman doesn't have the copies from Cable Bourne's office." Gray's eyes warmed in an interesting way. "I know a uniquely talented guy in D.C. who happened to owe me a favor. Since I had the location of the evidence because of the plane crash and you identifying the lawyer it was aimed at, I took steps to ensure chain of custody didn't leave your control."

Jas sat back from her plate in mild surprise. "Does all that translate to breaking and entering?"

"Hardly. I know for a fact my associate didn't break a thing," Gray grinned. "However, he did observe someone else enter the building as he exited. Someone he felt was capable of doing the job he'd just completed. As I said, he's uniquely talented. He left an eye behind. The gentleman who followed him did enter Cable Bourne's office and knew exactly where the wall safe was. Eventually that individual had to leave quite frustrated."

"Did this other uniquely talented guy see your friend?" Jas asked.

"Of course not. My associate wouldn't be so unique if that were the case. I have five sealed envelopes that belong to you ladies," Gray smiled.

"Impressive." Liana put down her fork, giving up the pretense of eating.

"You want to go over the disk?" Jas asked quietly.

"I think someone should," Gray confirmed. "It'd be your choice who, but I'm certain there's something else on that disk. Kauffman is working too hard to obtain it. He's cutting corners and incurring risk. He seems out of control, but more than that, panicked."

Jas nodded as she looked at Liana. "You okay with that?"

"Just one person," Liana said quietly.

Gray nodded curtly. "I'll take care of it. Nothing on that disk will ever be seen if it doesn't have to be, Miss Allacosta. You have my word on it."

Liana search Gray's unusual eyes for a few moments then nodded. "Thank you. Thank you for understanding, Mr. Winston," she conceded.

Gray's smile was a little sad. "You've come a long way Miss Allacosta. If anything, I'm a fan of yours. Of the way both you and Jas chose to survive. Of the work you've done for women who can't help themselves. I'd do this for strangers, but I'm exceptionally proud to assist you and Miss Carson. Know that whatever is on that disk is evidence of a battle fought and won. I respect it as I do the life totems of my forefathers or the scars of my brothers in this room. Please try to get some rest while I do this. By the time you're up we'll have a plan."

Liana nodded and smiled. "Please call me Liana. All of you." She looked around the table at the men gathered there. "Thank you all for being willing to help us."

Chapter Ten

Jas insisted on helping with the clean up after breakfast. The same thing Blaster had seen on the movie set occurred. Her talent for integrating into a group made everyone around her comfortable. In this setting she was moderately subdued but still at ease with the other men. She wasn't exactly a buddy, but she wasn't a movie star either.

Gray had left the kitchen to open one of the manila envelopes and go through the evidence. He was sitting in the living room with his laptop watching the disk, using headphones.

After the kitchen cleanup was complete, everyone migrated to the deck overlooking the lake. Part of it was to stay away from Gray and also to move the noise of their chatting out of the house so Liana and Jose could sleep. Charlie had shown them to a guest room, leaving them to rest.

Blaster and Jas were standing at the railing a little apart from the others. Jas fidgeted as she looked at his Unit and then out at the glass-smooth surface of the lake. The better she knew this man, the more questions bothered her. Things she'd never thought about this clearly before. He'd mentioned the power dynamic between lovers more than once, prodding her to look for the reasons behind her actions.

"If you're still uncomfortable with Gray reviewing the disk," Blaster murmured, "we could go down to the garage so you don't have to be around him as he does it."

"What?" Jas was a little confused at Blaster's suggestion. "No. I'm fine."

"Then why are you actin' like a fly at a church picnic? Twitchy."

"I've been thinking." Jas turned to face the lake and grasp the balcony railing. Forcing herself to stand still. "Why do you let me call you boy toy?" she asked quietly.

Blaster turned so his hip leaned on the rail. He was facing her as she continued to look out at the water. "Why shouldn't I?" he countered in the intimate tone that kept the conversation private.

Jas glanced at him. "Because you're a macho beast and this is your crew. What's up with that?"

"So?" Blaster grinned and shrugged wide shoulders as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Jas frowned. "You know what I'm asking. Sometimes I push you. You let me."

"I don't care and mostly I like it," he answered her scowl. "Baby, what you say is usually damn funny. You've got great timing."

"How can you not care? I know you have an ego like everyone else. Why do you let me get away with that?"

"Jas, it doesn't matter. What you think of me, how we are when we're alone, well, it's private." Blaster shifted so he leaned on the railing with his back to the lake. "These people, the ones you've used the boy-toy term in front of, know me. You being that comfortable, trusting me enough to play hard, that tells them more about our relationship than any declaration from me." He smiled as he continued. "You might as well be saying you love me."

Jas raised a brow as her eyes left the lake to regard his smug expression. "Oh really?"

"Yep, sorry. You're pretty much engaged to me now."

"All from calling you my boy toy?"

Blaster nodded gravely. "I think Rem is gonna want to know our china pattern soon. He's very good with details and all that proper procedure stuff. I'm pretty sure Jackson expects to be best man. Seriously, I'd like to dress the groomsmen in purple if you don't mind. I need to put Jackson in a purple tux with something like a school-bus yellow shirt. It'll look funny but the opportunity to drag out wedding pictures and piss him off for the rest of our lives is just too good. I'm willing to beg on that one."

Jas was laughing. He'd done it again. Put her at ease by handing her control when she was feeling shaky. The sneaky bastard was also introducing the subject of a wedding as if it were a natural topic of discussion for them. He did it by employing slightly self-deprecating humor and a visual she couldn't resist. It was impossible not to touch him and she stepped in front of him. His hands glided around her waist as she moved between his legs to lean up his body. Her fingers combed through his short hair in a light caress as they settled into the full body contact while smiling in shared humor.

"You are a very bad man, Samuel Callaway," Jas whispered as her eyes sparkled into his. "I'm on to you though."

"And you're a truly wicked woman, Jasmina Carson," he murmured. "I'm willing to work at making sure you're *on* me as often as possible."

Jas' hands on his skull pulled his head down so she could meet his mouth. The kiss was immediately deep as open mouths met. Blaster's hands tightened on her, one spanning the small of her back to press her into him, the other cradling the back of her head.

Sucking on his tongue, Jas mewed softly as her hips rocked in minute caresses.

Blaster lifted his lips from hers to smile down at her with lazy-lidded eyes. "If you're thinking of seducing me, Miss Carson, you should know that I'm too shy to do it in public."

Jas smiled indolently. "You are not shy, Mr. Callaway. What you are is a shitty actor and a piss-poor liar. How many times do I have to tell you that?" Her voice purred intimately as her body continued to move, rubbing from crotch to neck.

"Okay, I lied. I'm too possessive to lay you down on the deck," he conceded softly. "If you keep rubbing up me like a hungry cat, I'm gonna have to take you down to the garage anyway. I saw a mattress against the wall. Throw that thing in back of the

pickup and we're in business. Course, you'll have to be quiet this time, baby. I don't share, not even your screams."

Jas stopped moving, simply leaning against him as she looked into his eyes.

"What?" Blaster asked after a minute, his hands moving up and down her back but not dipping below her waist.

"I'm enjoying," Jas responded as she smiled at him.

"What exactly are you enjoying?"

"I just gave you an opportunity to prove to your buddies that you're in control of your woman. You know, get all caveman and drag me off for a fuck. You refused it in favor of treating me with respect. I'm enjoying trusting you," she told him softly.

Blaster's head tipped back to chuckle. "A test? All that rubbing and purring was a test? Damn woman, can we arrange for you to test me every night and most mornings? I told you, I didn't care what they thought but you needed more than the words?"

"Yeah, I did. Words are cheap. Face it. I have deep trust issues."

Blaster leaned down, putting his lips to her ear. "I do want to drag you off for that pickup-truck fuck, but I'm not civilized enough to do it for any other reason than you turn me on. Proving anything to these guys is way damn far down on the list of what I need." He ended by licking down her neck as Jas hummed in pleasure.

Her body pressed up at him in response to the licks. Blaster's large hands gripped into her back. His powerful legs tightened on the outside of hers in a full body hug.

"Stop it you two," Jackson snapped behind them from the seating arrangement. Charlie and Rem chuckled as he continued. "You need a keeper, for God's sake. Come over here and behave like adults."

Jas was openly laughing as she turned in Blaster's arms to face the men lounging on the large furniture that served as patio chairs. "We are acting like adults. Didn't anyone ever show you the S.E.X. tape in high school?"

"See, even you admit you're acting like teenagers again," Jackson responded with a superior smile.

"And you're being daddy again. What's with that complex of yours?" Jas shook her head.

Blaster was chuckling as he picked Jas up, draping her legs across his arms and strode to a chair. Settling with Jas in his lap, he seriously shook his head. "I told you he's the baby of the Unit, innocent and everything. It's been hell trying to shield him from wicked women over the years."

"Is that what we've been doing?" Charlie marveled. "I just thought there was never enough wicked woman to go around. Now I feel much better about not waiting for his slow ass to think of something to say to a woman."

Rem snorted. "Like you ever felt guilty about anything?"

"Never said I felt guilty, 'zactly. I just feel better now."

"No need for guilt, buddy. I was busy feeling sorry for you and your poor choices in companionship." Jackson shot back at Charlie. "I had no idea you were under the misconception that those were the only women out there. Damn, that must be rough."

Charlie leaned back on the big couch glider he was sharing with Rem. His long-muscled body relaxed as he grinned. "I'll struggle with my misconceptions and the bad girls they lead me to. Thanks anyway."

"Protect him? Damn, he needs an intervention. Not protection," Jas scoffed from Blaster's lap. "I know this chick in D.C. who has an awesomely complete toy bag. We need to tie him up and dump him on her doorstep."

"Toy bag?" Rem raised a brow. "Tie him up?"

"Only to get him there," Jas clarified. "I'm sure she'd untie him. Course we'd have to gag him too or he'll bother the neighbors."

"Jas, you're a menace. You know that?" Jackson drawled.

Gray's voice interrupted, "Gentlemen, we have something we can work with. Time to set the trap."

The group was instantly alert, joking banter forgotten as Gray stepped onto the deck and sat down.

"It's a phone conversation. The audio is clear enough without enhancement to make it damning. Idiot was standing beside the camera. Apparently the attack happened soon after his promotion to Homeland. Kauffman was altering his deal with a person of interest and the activities they discussed make Kauffman a traitor at best. More likely he'd be charged as a spy. His interest was monetary, but if he were to rise higher in his profession, the threat to national security becomes critical. It's difficult to gauge the damage he's already done. That's the director of Homeland's job.

"In any case, we have all the evidence we need to hand him over and ensure his activities end." Gray continued. "The job is capture and delivery. It'll be a standard acquire mission."

"What?" Jas interrupted. "That's it? I know you're professionals and all, but personally, I'm not satisfied with just grabbing him and handing him over."

Gray sat back and regarded Jas for a moment. "What would satisfy you?"

The planning became creative and left most of the Unit shaking their heads in wincing amazement. Blaster and Jackson were unfazed at Jas' additions. In the end there wasn't a good reason not to give her most of the satisfaction she wanted.

They split into three groups to travel. A precaution that was natural but in this case required. Kauffman had taken down a plane and his ignorance of this Unit's existence was only an assumption.

No shortage of pilots, they rented light planes from three separate charter services, declining the provided pilot. Rental was higher but they didn't want anyone close enough to question the contents of duffel bags as they loaded in. The Unit used dummy

companies that had been established long ago for this type of operation, making it difficult to trace the rentals back to the real user.

Jackson, Blaster and Jas left immediately. They had supplies to secure in D.C. Charlie and Gray didn't have to be at the designated area until later in the evening. Rem was bringing Jose and Liana but there was no need to wake them. They didn't have to be in D.C. until tomorrow morning.

Jackson took the pilot's duties again, doing the walk around, checking every possible item that could be checked for preflight. Jas and Blaster stowed gear and strapped in to passenger seats.

"I could get used to having staff," Jas commented as Jackson completed preflight. "Handy to have a pilot at our beck and call."

"Unfortunately you've secured one," Jackson responded absently, concentrating on his duties. "But it ain't me."

Jas raised a brow at Blaster. "You fly?"

"We all do," Blaster confirmed. "Required training. Jets, helos, private planes and a few other things. Jackson has been piloting because I have better things to do."

In the plane they were wearing headsets. Unlike the Winston jet, here engine noise was hardly muted by the cabin walls.

"I want to," Jas stated firmly.

"Want to what?" Blaster questioned, confused as they began the taxi to the correct runway.

"Learn. I want to fly," Jas clarified.

"Why? You've got me or Jackson if you need a pilot."

"What if you're not around? I hate being dependent. You know that."

The plane revved for takeoff and Jackson yelled back at them, "Will you two please shut up and let me concentrate! I get us safely in the air and I've got a few thoughts to insert on that fool idea before he gives in and agrees to any damn thing you want, Carson!"

"No one was asking you, St. James," Jas yelled back at him. Even with headphones, communication had to be loud.

"I don't care. Now stop distracting me, woman. Takeoff is critical. The ground is too close for mistakes."

The plane screamed down the runway and lifted, climbing hard to altitude.

"You didn't have to make it a combat lift," Blaster snarled.

They leveled out and Jackson settled the little plane in for the ride. "Course I did. I've seen you cave to her. My time to talk reason is always limited."

"What's eating you?" Jas asked Jackson. "Don't you think I can learn to fly?"

"Jesus, Jas. You're about to become a movie star. No studio is going to let you get into dangerous situations. You'll be contractually forbidden to even do your own

stunts. You can't be serious," Jackson argued loudly. "Learning to fly is frowned on by the studios. Did you know that?"

"Yeah, but they can't control what I do on my own time when I'm not making a movie," Jas pointed out.

"Sure they can. If even a whisper of your involvement with an outfit like Ghost Unit gets out, they'll avoid you. You can't have that this early in your career. You need to be well established before you start taking risks they don't like. Right now they can make you a one-hit wonder. You'll disappear if no one wants to make a movie with you because you're too high a risk for insurance."

"Ghost Unit?" Jas asked and looked at Blaster. "*The* Ghost Unit? The one no one admits to and everyone else thinks is a myth?"

Jackson scowled back at them for a second. "You never told her?" he asked Blaster harshly.

"Well damn, buddy. I was getting to it." Blaster sighed as she regarded him. "Yeah. That one. You just met the Ghost Unit."

"Fuck me," Jas breathed in surprise.

"As often as I can, baby. The Ghost Unit thing is no big deal and at the same time a huge secret. You get that, right?"

Jas nodded while staring at him.

"Really, we're regular guys," Blaster insisted as she looked at him.

"Ah, yeah." Jas cleared her throat and glanced away.

"Come on. This doesn't change anything, baby." Blaster's calm voice rumbled around her as she stared out the window.

Jas smiled as she turned back to him. "Sure it does. It's like telling me your part of a mythological beast. Ghost Unit is the superstar of the military. Most people don't even believe it exists. The stories are too fantastic. And do you know who the original Ghost Unit was? Are they real too?"

"No, I don't know who they are, but yeah, they were a real unit. I suspect Gray knows names," Blaster answered honestly. "You realize those stories you've heard have probably been exaggerated. It's not like we're that much different from any other unit. We've gotten lucky a few more times is all."

"Lucky?" Jas echoed softly. "I suppose I should have suspected something like this when you said your unit hadn't replaced a man. I never made the connection."

"Okay, are you over it yet?" Jackson asked Jas impatiently from the cockpit. "I still want to talk you out of doing dangerous shit."

"Don't worry about it. I'll not be butting in on Ghost Unit business," Jas responded seriously.

"You won't?" Jackson glanced back in surprise. "That was easy."

"I'm not an idiot," Jas shot at him.

"No one said you were. But it's not like you to...concede to reason." Jackson frowned. "Got a fever? Are you coming down with something, Jas?"

Jas finally laughed. "Don't you know what respect is when you hear it? I'd never be so stupid as to think I could insert myself into the Ghost Unit. Jezz, Jackson. Do you even know what people say about you guys?"

"Guess not." Jackson was scowling out the cockpit windshield now. "But if it clips your wings, I'm not sure I like it. This discussion has nothing to do with skill, Jas. Though integrating into a unit is not simple or quick. I'm not talking about that. You know what training is. How long it takes a group to become a unit. What I'm talking about is you risking your ass when you don't have to."

"Will you relax with the daddy complex already?" Jas demanded, some of her attitude returning to her tone. "I simply want a pilot's license. Thousands of people get them all the time. You can't stop me, St. James, so live with it."

"Well there are lots of shoddy places that only want the money and hand them out like box top certificates. You have to promise not to go to one of those places," Jackson insisted.

Jas glanced at Blaster. He was quietly watching her as she argued with Jackson. "Fine. You pick the instructor. I don't intend to argue about this. I will learn to fly," Jas informed Jackson belligerently.

"You'll be in California for a while?" Jackson asked firmly.

"Yeah."

"Good. I know a guy who used to instruct at Miramar. He'll do it," Jackson grunted in satisfaction.

"What!?" Jas squawked. "Miramar? Now who's fucking going too far? A guy like that doesn't teach beginners. Are you insane?"

"This one will if Jackson tells him to," Blaster joined the conversation. "He's Jack's cousin."

Jas' eyes narrowed as she glanced between them. "You two are making sure I stay in the family, aren't you? What was all that junk about studios and shit if you had a guy picked out already? Why do I feel cotton wool walls creeping around me?" she accused suspiciously. Pointing at Blaster she continued. "You let him lead me down that path because you knew where he was going with it, didn't you?"

Blaster shrugged and grinned. "Burner is a good instructor. You'll learn from the best and be safe at the same time. So yeah, I did. Now everyone's happy. You learn how to fly and we feel good about it."

"I don't know what you think is cotton walls," Jackson added. "You're going to learn how to fly from a guy who'll teach to you to do rolls, dogfight, how to come out of a flat spin and survive. When he figures out what an action junkie you are, he'll train you like a fighter pilot. Who the hell would call that protecting you?"

"The studio junk was manipulation, you're right. I needed a place to start so you'd get what a big concession I'm making." Jackson looked back and grinned. Not a trace of repentance on his face.

Jas' head tilted as she looked at Jackson. "You knew I'd eventually try all that anyway. Both of you were two steps ahead of me getting into trouble and making sure I learned how to do it safely."

"We weren't two steps ahead of you," Blaster denied. "But of course you'd do all wild-ass stuff and training to do it safely is the goal. Nobody's hemming you in, baby. The concern is making sure you have the skills to be safe."

Jas dragged in a deep breath as she looked at her Hillbilly and then glanced at her other keeper, who wasn't a keeper at all. Jackson had manipulated her as skillfully as she'd ever seen it done. Blaster had been aware of it. The two of them had acted as a team to get her compliance. In getting her to do what they wanted, she'd ended up with something so much better than she'd ever have expected.

For all Jackson's blustering about being reckless and safety, he was not trying to clip her wings. He was trying to hand her golden wings to fly as far as she wanted. He expected her to train as hard as any military pilot and in the end have skills that matched his. Jas felt the sting of tears wash over her. Fighting the reaction, she felt a little overwhelmed.

Relationships that made the people in them better were damn new to her. But she recognized the fucking fairy tale when she saw it. She knew Liana loved her. Her grandmother had loved her too. That was the extent of Jas' experience with people who supported and loved.

Jas had spent a lifetime looking for the place she fit as a valuable member of the community. Excelling at school had been her first attempt. Then excelling in the Marines had followed. She'd been trying to find the group who would accept her and expect her best, in return give her their best. The possibility that she'd actually found that place, those people, was almost incomprehensible. She'd given up. In the battle to free herself, she'd been willing to die.

Jas hadn't been fully aware of her fatalistic surrender until this moment. When she drove off on Jackson's motorcycle what seemed like so long ago, she'd not expected to survive. Believing Liana dead, her only motivation had been to make the bastard pay.

Jas wasn't sure how to respond to the situation. Did she acknowledge it? Would that embarrass these two generous men? Jackson's relationship with her was sharp and challenging. His trapping her into accepting something better than she'd have had the balls to dream of was freaking endearing.

Jackson was also implying a long-term commitment. He expected her to handle both challenging training and be part of his life. Jas let the warmth of those expectations flow over her with surprising ease. But she couldn't integrate them onto her being. The future was too murky. Right now she couldn't see past tonight's mission.

"You okay?" Blaster asked softly, his face concerned as he watched her sit in silence for so long.

"Mmm." Jas wasn't ready to comment on her feelings yet.

"We're here," Jackson announced from the cockpit as he began descent procedures. "No more arguing 'til we're on the ground."

On the ground they split up. Jackson had a van to rent and set up for surveillance. Jas and Blaster were after entirely different supplies.

Two hours later Blaster and Jas were in a seedy motel room again. A private place for Blaster to assemble the items needed for tonight.

Jas sat beside Blaster eating her sandwich as he built the items. As soon as she pulled up the chair, Blaster had started explaining exactly what he was doing. Subtly teaching her his art in between bites of his lunch. In the end he'd pulled the little desk over beside the bed so he could sit behind her, his thighs bracketing hers, his arms reaching around her to guide in the construction if necessary. But it was Jas who completed the job then packed the parts to be transported safely.

She'd had basic explosives training, so learning the fine points from a master of the art was a rush. Blaster was handing her wings instead of clipping them. When the job was complete, it had been Jas who'd finished it.

Leaning back into his chest, she closed her eyes and let him believe the reason her belly trembled under his hands was because he was gently kissing down her neck as he caressed her. That was part of the reason after all.

Large hands pulled her shirt from her jeans to roam up her abdomen as he growled behind her. The low rumble of his pleasure as he licked her neck made Jas smile. He could be such a beast. A wild Southern street dog who'd never been fully civilized. He paced the fringes of society as surely as any feral stray, watching the world with eyes that burned. Blaster swiftly unbuttoned the shirt.

Tension zinged through Jas. The rough hands petting her strummed nerve endings that were already snapping with restrained energy.

Hooking his chin over her shoulder, Blaster watched his hands glide up her firm flesh to cup perfect breasts. She undulated beneath his touch and damn well took his breath away as she moved.

Jas hissed in frustrated approval. Her head was turned to the side, nuzzling his ear. Blaster smiled. She was trying. Trying to live in the moment she though he wanted.

"Pin me, Sheena," he growled softly.

"What?"

"Go ahead. You want to fight. All that energy is almost jumping out of your skin. Try to pin me," he encouraged. "I don't want surrender. I want you as you are, woman."

Jas sucked air in through clenched teeth. "You want to wrestle?"

"I want to fuck your brains out, baby. But you need to siphon off some of that energy."

"So you want to fight for it?" Jas shoved away from him and stood up, backing from the bed, pushing the little desk against the wall with her butt.

Blaster relaxed, propped up on elbows. "No. We never fight for *it*, Jas. Sex isn't a competition, a bargaining chip or any other damn thing." He sat up and pulled his shirt out of jeans, unbuttoning and shrugging out of it. "We can't go for a run, there's no gym. I'm offering my skills as a wrestling partner because you damn well need to relax." Blaster reached down, unlacing his boots, pulling them off.

"You're stripping though." Hands on hips she watched him suspiciously.

"Yep. I don't want to hurt you."

Standing, he shoved down jeans, stepping out of them. Gathering clothes, he took them to the little clothes rod and hung up his shirt, folded the jeans and placed them on the rack on top.

Turning back to her he raised a brow. "What are you waiting for, Carson? You that sure you can't pin me?"

Clothed only in hard, rippling muscle and a lazy smile, Samuel Callaway was a beautiful beast. He strolled toward her and there was no mistaking how much he liked looking at her.

Jas waved a hand at the thick erection swaying in front of him. "I might hurt you."

Blaster chuckled. "Well, that's a reason to chicken out. But I promise, if you hurt me, I'll deserve it. I've got a weight advantage as well as experience. Now strip down and show me how wicked an opponent you can be."

"Take the clothes off me," Jas challenged with narrowed eyes.

Blaster froze and held up his hands in a flash reaction. "No. Baby, if you don't want to wrestle, just say so."

Jas breathed out a scoff. "I never said that."

Blaster cocked his head. "Okay, leave bra and panties on. I stripped because I don't want to hurt you with rough jeans. I'm not going to force a shred of clothing off you. Ever."

"All right, stud." Jas shrugged out of her shirt and sat on the bed to remove boots.

Blaster calmly lay down on the bed, stacking his hands behind his head as he watched her push off jeans. Jas straightened in bra and panties, hands on hips she again regarded his relaxed body.

"You giving up already?"

"Come here, I'm handicapping myself by starting on my back," he murmured as his eyes roamed over her body.

"Doesn't look like you have the proper head in the game," Jas chided.

"That's the other half of the handicap. My libido is on your side."

Jas chuckled and leapt on him. He'd already moved before she landed, but she'd expected his move. Hard and fierce they grappled. He'd almost had her in a pin and she twisted out. Her skills in the eastern discipline coupled with extreme flexibility enabled her to elude him. They rolled off the bed and somehow Blaster was the one who hit the floor first, cushioning her fall.

The room was filled with low grunts and hissing breathing as they rolled across the floor. Jas scrambled up but he had her cornered against the sink vanity. Her body appeared to contract as she was suddenly crouched on the countertop and then launched into the air in a jump that allowed her to tackle him almost from behind. Her body weight descending as she would have wrapped an arm around his neck should have taken down an opponent who was shocked at her aerial attack.

Blaster was countering it as she flew at him. Again they landed on the floor, wildly thrashing across it.

"Nice," Blaster complimented as he eluded her.

"Glad you liked it."

Jas was an eel. Her firm body always twisting out of reach while coming at him.

"You're not fighting me," Jas snarled.

They were on top of the bed again, writhing in conflict.

"Bullshit."

Jas was on his back as his body twisted in a swift jerk to throw her. "This is pansy crap," she accused as she countered.

"I'm not using strength. Makes us more even," he panted as they rolled off the other side of the bed.

Jas intensified her attack and they were silent except for the heavy breathing and grunts of battle.

"Dammit." Blaster laughed as five minutes later she eluded him again but did it with a sharp slap to his ass.

Jas grinned and used his surprise to gain advantage. Blaster had to concentrate and they were locked in a hold that gave neither the advantage.

"Winning isn't playing fair," Jas gritted out. "You've been playing fair."

Blaster immediately released his hold, surrendering to her pin as he laughed in short gusts. "We're not training," he reminded the woman looming over him.

Jas immediately straddled his hips, grinning at the laughing man. "We need a gym," she informed him. "This place is too small." She sprang off him and backed up. "So is that a win for me?"

"What do you think?" Blaster stood slowly and prowled toward her.

Jas backed into the door, chuckling as he walked into her body.

"I told you I'm easy," he continued softly, pinning her with his weight against the hard surface behind her. His body was aggressive, but no longer challenging as the thick, hot weight of his erection pressed into her abdomen.

Whatever the hell he'd done to deserve this woman, he wanted to assure the gods that he'd really meant it. Didn't matter if he couldn't remember the good deed, it was done and he'd be keeping this woman. Thank you very much.

Halfway drunk on the feel of her every minute she was within touching distance was an illness he didn't want to recover from. He slowly unhooked the front clasp of her bra and slid the cups off her in an open-handed caress.

Jas' chest was still heaving in deep gulps of air. "And you said you weren't gentle."

Blaster's mouth crushed down on hers, taking a brief kiss. "I don't take what isn't offered. Remember that part?"

Jas grasped both sides of his head to pull him back for another sucking kiss. Thrusting into his mouth with her tongue before responding, "I'm offering. I don't want gentle."

Both his hands shot down, jerking her legs up around his waist. "Using me to work off the rage at Kauffman?" Blaster thrust into the panty-covered crotch spread around his cock, rubbing with brutal intensity.

"Maybe," Jas conceded as she pulled his head down to her again.

Both of them undulated, rubbing bodies in fierce demand as the kiss burned between them.

Jerking away from her mouth, Blaster glared at her through narrowed eyes. "I'm not that bastard. What we're doing has nothing to do with him."

Jas bared her teeth in frustration. "You wanted to know how that night affected me? Here it is. I need something and I don't know what it is. I fucking know you're not doing what he did."

Blaster was still, panting as he glared into tilted eyes that spat back at him. They were crushed together, straining when there was no need and she wanted more. "I will not play rape games."

Her elbows and forearms were abruptly against his chest as her legs dropped to the floor. Shoving off him was easy. He let her go. Jas paced away, hands on hips, head down. She drew in air as if she'd been running. The bed blocked her pacing and she stopped with her back to him.

"Is that what I'm asking?"

"Yeah."

Her hands came up to rub down her face in fatalistic frustration. "Wow, I didn't know I was still fucked up over this."

It was difficult to stay away from her. Blaster leaned against the door and crossed his arms over chest to keep from reaching for her. "What made you think you were past

it? Have you had a sustained relationship since that night? Ever been with a man more than one night?"

"No, I thought I was busy."

He nodded seriously and was silent, hoping she'd find a way to get her feelings out. Talking about them, acknowledging the issue was the only way to deal with it. It'd been with her too long. Twisting her emotions to fit a box that guaranteed she was never comfortable. Never relaxed.

"I don't like to feel trapped. Yet I'm always setting someone up to trap me so I can escape. Aren't I?"

"Wouldn't have said it quite that way, but yeah."

"You're refusing to play my favorite game."

"Damn straight."

Jas swung around. Her face was twisted in a bitter mask. "What the fuck do I do now?"

"Trust me."

Deep and calm, his voice washed through the choking panic that suddenly gripped her. With the realization of her game had come knowledge that she'd be in Kauffman's grasp every day of her life since she left the cabin. He'd dictated her relationships as surely as if he were standing beside her.

The only relationship he hadn't infected was the one he'd created. She and Liana had been such good friends. Now they were sisters because of Kauffman. He had become a suffocating fungus that coated everything. Just because she hadn't been aware of his putrid influence didn't make the realization less revolting.

"How do I get him off me? I need to get him off!" Jas wanted to bathe in bleach, anything to get the feel of his ugly influence off.

"Come here. Trust me," Blaster encouraged her steadily.

Jas launched herself at him, half leaping half running. Blaster stepped into her, catching her flying form as she clamped around him. Legs around his hips, arms clutching his neck. She fastened on to his mouth in frantic need as if his touch could erase the feel of cold fingers she didn't know she'd remembered.

Blaster kissed her, holding her in steady arms but not letting her drive him with the panic she was feeling. Through the deep kiss he stroked her back, barely having to hold her on him as she strained to get closer. They stood for a long time kissing, Blaster supporting her weight effortlessly as she calmed to his touch.

Jas broke the kiss to bury her face in his neck, fighting sobs she didn't want to give the monster in her mind.

"I've got you," Blaster crooned, and began walking to the bed. "It's just you and me, baby. No one else is involved with what we have. How we are."

Lowering himself to the bed on his back, he held her on top of him, stroking down the curve of her spine in gliding encouragement. Jas held on tightly. She'd straightened

her legs when they lay down, but they still bracketed his hips. Her body pressed into his as closely as she could. Shuddering, she fought the emotional meltdown churning inside.

How could she have been this weak, this stupid? Had she been intentionally blind? Questions were bitter-bright barbs, hooking into every aspect of her life.

"Let him go, baby," Blaster commanded softly. "Feel me. Feel us."

Jas lifted her head to look into his eyes. "How?"

"Like this." Blaster reached up to her lips. Sucking her into his reality with soft kisses and rumbling approval as she pressed into him for more. Soon his head relaxed on the pillow and she followed him down.

The kisses intensified and Jas gripped his shoulders to roll them over. Blaster only let her roll them halfway, stopping on their sides. Refusing to roll on top of her.

His mouth moved down her neck, nipping and licking the salty spice of their wrestling match off her. Jas relaxed onto her back and he let her. Leaning over her to eat her taste. But he had to stop to watch his hand frame luscious globes, gently caressing sensitive undersides. He was fascinated as the firm points of her nipples swelled in engorged demand.

He hadn't even touched her there and her body was shooting fire through his balls. The burn in his body didn't matter.

"Damn I love these," Blaster growled. "Look how perfect they are. Just looking at them and I want to touch. Always."

"Always?" Jas murmured. "Why? Every woman has breasts, ya know?"

"Not like these, heavy and firm at the same time. Not tipped with perfectly formed nipples that beckon a man's mouth like that. If I could stand behind you and hold your breasts all the time, I'd be a happy guy."

"Why are men so fascinated with breasts? Is it some childhood fetish?" Jas wanted to know. Mostly she needed to hear him. Let him surround her in every way.

Blaster chuckled as he fondled her with soft touches, not going near her nipples, just softly running his fingers around sensitive undersides and cupping them occasionally. "Does this feel like a child's touch?"

"No."

"Good. It has nothing to do with being a child, I assure you."

Her eyes closed as that long body relaxed, moving to his touch as if he were stroking a cat. A hard shudder ran through him as he took pleasure in her sensual trust. His feral cat was letting him pet her as he pleased. Trusting him to please her, to know what she needed.

Her eyes opened lazily to watch him as he studied her breasts with absorbed wonder. Slowly his head lowered to place his tongue lightly at the bottom of a perfect globe. In lazy licks he explored. Moving around to her breastbone and nibbling softly to

the outside of her trembling breast. The cocoa-butter taste of her wasn't enough. His mouth opened to suck in more of her.

He got lost in the texture of her, the feel of his lips moving over her. He slowly shifted so he could reach more. His knees between her legs, he was kneeling over Jas' body but not on her. His wide stance suspended him above her by an inch. Powerful thighs held him with just his cock resting on her belly. Both hands cradled a breast, holding them up. His elbows dug into the mattress as at last he licked around puffy soft centers. Reverently his tongue glided over a stiff nipple and Jas groaned.

The intimate sound of her pleasure was a branding iron burning into his brain. He needed that sound. With slow deliberation he licked both nipples. Dividing his attention with studied resolve. Her lungs heaved, her body rippled in feminine waves of pleasure and Jas moaned for him.

A man could only take so much. Growling, he opened over an engorged peak and sucked in hard, filling himself with her as she arched into him and hissed. The sound and feel of her drove him. Blaster's body collapsed down on her in instinctive possession, holding her beneath him as he consumed what he needed.

Her claws dragged up his back and his hips bucked into her. Blaster let her nipple pop out of his mouth as he looked at her face. She was biting her lip. A frown creased her brow above closed eyes. The woman was still battling. He needed her full attention on him. With him.

Coming to his knees between her legs, his hands caressed heavy handfuls of natural breast. Open palms caressed her ribs, across straining abdominals and finely to the low ridge of her panties.

"God, you're so beautiful," he whispered as he watched her. Every time he saw his rough, scarred hands on her smooth skin, it was slightly shocking. Erotically sensual as his ugly paws moved over the stunning beauty that she was.

Jas mewed and shifted as she watched him with heavy-lidded eyes. His hands molded her in possessive strokes, petting down her burning skin with some sort of otherworldly knowledge of how to do it so she lost her mind. He loomed over her with a wild intensity that should have frightened her. Instead he took her with him into that place where only touch mattered. Where fire jumped between them with every caress.

Hooking his thumbs in the lace elastic he murmured, "Up." Telling her to lift her legs straight up instead of his moving away from her to pull panties off.

Jas' legs rose above his head and he slid the panties to her ankles, shackling them together with the delicate material.

"Hold these," he commanded, pushing her legs forward, bending her in half.

Her hands grasped her ankles and Blaster immediately seized her hips in both hands, his eyes locked on the glistening pussy below him. In slow motion he sank to lick over the prize he was seeking.

His clever tongue dipped into her with hard jabs then dragged up, forcing its way between puffy folds in insistent demand. And the sucking! He apparently wanted to suck every inch of her into his mouth. He couldn't stop.

He slurped to the top of her cunt and circled his tongue above her clit in teasing touches. She needed to get those damn panties off! If she couldn't spread her legs in the next two minutes, she'd have to kill someone.

His tongue pushed down into her folds to barely touch the top of her clit in an almost-there brush. Jas hissed in frustration. He did it again and she jerked at the panties. They'd become twisted into narrow strands of silk that were too strong for her to rip. He pushed his tongue down again and her hips jerked up to get more of the contact. With her legs shackled together, she couldn't get enough!

He held his mouth over her and let her hips rock up. Rubbing herself on him as she snarled and hissed in frustration. The taste of her raced through him. It was his new addiction. He knelt at the altar of her gushing pussy and worshiped.

"Help me!" Jas yelled. "Get it off!"

Blaster glanced up, not lifting his mouth. Reached to the nightstand for his knife and flicked it open. Jas' lips peeled back in fierce delight as he deftly slit the panties with a quick jerk. His wrist twisted again and the knife was safely embedded in the wall, out of harm's way.

Her legs opened and his mouth sucked in her clit. Jas gasped in both relief and breathless shock as sensations intensified. Her feet landed on his shoulders, knees open wide. Her head thrashed on the pillow as he ate at her.

Snarling into damp folds, his head butted up never letting go of her clit. Thick fingers entered her, pushing through soft, damp flesh. He buried them deep and began stroking her internally with moving fingertips. Not fucking them in and out, just moving in her until he found the spot that pulled a surprised scream from her. Then he kept his fingertip right there, gliding over the spot in repeated caresses.

Jas was sure she'd lose her mind. His wicked tongue was lashing her clit in an insidious rhythm and now he'd found a spot inside her that was just as sensitive. She had no control of the jerking bucks he could command with those knowing fingers. His head lifted off her cunt and he watched her move on his fingers buried in her.

He wasn't letting her come. Stroking this way, he could fire up the burn in her body, driving to screaming intensity, and somehow control it.

"That's it, baby," Blaster purred as the liquid from her body dripped off his wrist.

Jas was moaning, hissing in breaths in great gulps. She'd never felt anything so intensely in her life. He wasn't holding her down, controlling any aspect of her body. He'd let her accept or reject how he placed her. He'd very carefully searched for and found a spot within her that gave more pleasure than she'd ever known. But he'd known it was there.

"Trust me," he whispered, and changed the touch inside her as his mouth sucked her clit back in.

Jas screamed and flew into a convulsing orgasm. Its white-hot intensity was like jumping into a blaze. Her entire body was exploding and he kept on stroking her.

Gentling the touch, he let her off the shrieking high. Jas panted down. Her eyes opened in unfocused wonder. Her body still burned, but once again he was holding it right below the shocking fire he'd just introduced her to.

"Let's do that again with me in you," Blaster suggested softly.

"Sure. You can fit both cock and fingers in?" Jas wanted to know dazedly.

"Trust me, baby," he responded as one-handed he ripped open a condom package with his teeth and sheathed cock in practiced ease while still working his fingers deep inside her body.

He grabbed a pillow. The insidious fingers inside her did something new and her hips lifted off the bed. He thrust the pillow under her. He grasped a leg and pushed it over to the side on top of her other leg, turning her hips on the pillow so pussy was once again displayed and squashed together. Her legs were pressed up at the knee with his large hand holding the backs of both knees. At last his fingers pulled out and Blaster lunged up, his cock finding her opening, its thick head pushing in as he leaned over her hip. Releasing her legs, he anchored both hands on either side of her chest and used his body weight to brutally slam into her.

Both their backs arched in the searing pleasure as he powered into the tight channel. The position gave him full access and stimulated the same nerves he'd been strumming. But this was so much better. Every time the head of his cock powered into her, he drove over those nerves and found new ones at the back of her womb.

Jas looked up at the face of passion and knew what it meant. He was giving her the beast and damn if she didn't adore the monster it made him. The wild, urgent scent of sex surrounded them as the bed slammed into the wall with each thrust. The pounding announcement to anyone in hearing didn't bother her. It was earthy, a little nasty and honest.

Jas felt the release building. Her body tightened and he had to feel the clench.

"No, not yet, baby. More. We need more," Blaster grunted, and slowed his strokes.

"Yes! More. Do not stop!" Jas disagreed.

"Hurting you? Sore?" he gasped.

"No."

"Then come. Come now!" he commanded in a strangle voice.

Jas let go. Hard and long, her body contracted around him in a screaming orgasm that blew away every thought but the feel of him ramming into her sensitized channel. He kept on fucking. Pistoning thick male flesh into her. Driving her through the first burning orgasm into the next.

Then he lifted her top leg, holding it in the air. Straddling her other leg he came down on all fours pushing her raised leg high against her shoulder. The position opened her to him and gave him leverage to ram into her with even greater force.

Now he fucked with a twisting thrust that removed all reality from her mind. There was only the feel of him and pounding pleasure. Driving into constricting muscles, he picked up the pace as if he'd simply been playing before. They both climbed the sharp cliff of sensation. Throwing themselves on each harsh burst of pleasure with complete abandon.

This time he joined her, bellowing his completion as she moaned through the shattering release. No longer able to scream, Jas shuddered as wave after wave of shooting explosion accompanied the short thrusts of his cock as he emptied in her.

Slowly sinking down over her, Blaster squeezed his eyes shut to stop the room from spinning. Gently he lifted her leg around his head and laid it on the other. Buried deep in her body, his arms tunneled under her shoulders to anchor himself in reality. Oh God in heaven. He was so screwed.

Being with Jas was more intense every time. Eventually he pulled out and rolled off her, groaning with the effort. Removing the condom, Blaster stumbled to the short vanity area and dropped it in the trash. Stopping at the sink, he took the time to wash his face in cold water before warming it and wetting one of the little hand towels in it. Wringing the towel out to mostly damp, he returned to the bed.

Jas moaned as his weight dipped the side of the bed, but her eyes didn't open. Carefully Blaster draped the little towel across her neck and started wiping down her chest. Gently circling a breast then the other with the warm cloth.

"What are you doing?" Jas asked.

"I'm taking care of my own."

His hands moved down her abdomen, across her belly from hip to hip. Smoothing down the inside of a thigh his eyes met hers. "Why don't you sleep for a couple hours? We'll be up all night."

"You're bathing me," Jas accused, ignoring the sleep suggestion.

"Uh-huh." His hand smoothed up the other thigh and he finally pressed it firmly over her mound, cleaning away the excess of their lovemaking. "Feel better? Would you like it again with a clean towel?"

"Um, no," Jas murmured. "That was nice."

Blaster smiled. "Good." He pitched the towel toward the sink and climbed in to stretch out beside her.

"Do you always do that?" Jas wanted to know as he settled in, sliding up beside her with an arm around her waist.

"No."

"No? You seem good at it."

"Thanks. You going to sleep or not? If we're gonna talk, warn me now," Blaster murmured.

"You can sleep before action?" Jas questioned in mild surprise.

"This is a field trip. Action is when there's a remote possibility of danger."

Jas chuckled softly. "My Ghost Unit beast. Don't worry. We're not going to talk. Get some sleep."

This time Blaster chuckled. "That didn't wear me out." His hips moved and he rubbed her with his semierect cock. "I just want you to rest so you'd be alert later. And I'm not worried about the field trip. It's after that I'm interested in."

"Oh? Battle sex?"

"Naw. Perhaps satisfaction sex. Hush, you have a few hours to rest up."

Jas rolled so her leg rested over his thigh and her head was cradled in his shoulder. "Fine. I'll sleep, but it's only because I want that satisfaction sex. Not because you just fucked my brains out and I'm too tired to move."

Chapter Eleven

Blaster stood back and surveyed the man. "Honey, you are one sadistic bitch when you get a mad on," he commented mildly.

Jas smiled calmly as she looked at the man as well. It was three-thirty in the morning. They were in Kauffman's northern Virginia condo and had just finished securing him to one of his kitchen chairs. The man was naked. They'd used common duct tape on ankles, wrists and knees. His legs were spread and secured to the chair legs, his arms were taped to the armrests. His flaccid cock had been taped up on his abdomen leaving his balls unprotected.

Jas had been none too gentle grabbing the globes to pull them away from his body as she snapped a ball flask around them. Made of hollowed 316L surgical steel, the ball flask attached to his balls and imprisoned them inside a steel canister.

In the canister was just enough plastic explosives to obliterate the man's balls. The steel would contain the small blast. Around the top opening of the canister there was a ring of flash to burn the wound closed. Jas wanted to be sure Kauffman survived his castration. Working with quiet efficiency, Blaster wired the explosives to a pad with a single button.

To finish it off, the push-button pad was secured under Kauffman's right hand on the chair arm.

"Time to explain a few things," Jas said as she pulled the knit mask off her head. To this point Kauffman might not have been sure who'd woken him with a gun muzzle to his temple. Jas had no intention of leaving him in doubt.

Yesterday Liana had called Kauffman and sounded like the terrified victim he wanted to believe she was. He'd arranged to meet her today at a site near his condo. Letting Kauffman think he was fully in control had been the Unit's aim. Their plan was quiet and simple until Jas started adding things. Now it looked like a horror-torture movie sequence. At least that's what Gray called it. Jas raised a brow and regarded Gray with a deadpan expression as he said that. He'd shrugged.

"A *good* horror-torture sequence. Sorry. In any case, keeping a plan simple is always the goal. Our boy Kauffman is an excellent example of overthinking the problem. If he'd kept it simple, we'd never have known what he was really after. His plan would have worked if he hadn't gotten worried."

Jas smiled as Kauffman's eyes widened. The tape over his mouth had been first so his only method of expressing himself was his eyes. "Here are your options, shit-for-brains. That button under your finger detonates the explosives in the flask. Push it and you lose your balls. Two seconds later the charges on the tape will go and you'll be able to get out of the chair."

"Only problem is, below the chair is a directional mine. Weight leaves any one of the four legs and it'll detonate straight up. Really beautiful work. The blast is engineered to hit the body above it without damaging surroundings. No danger of destroying the building or starting a fire on the tile floor.

"The charge makes getting off the chair a challenge though. You have a slim chance. Think you can dive off the chair fast enough? You'll be a bit lighter, being ball-less and all." Jas smiled and glanced at his genitals. Looking into his eyes again, she continued. "It's three-thirty. The file on your busy criminal career will hit the director's desk at nine this the morning. See, that gives you almost six whole hours. If you survive getting off the chair, it's possible you could bandage up and waddle to an airport. Not likely you'd make it that far, but you could try."

Blaster had left his mask on while Jas enjoyed her chat. He'd wanted her to remain masked as well but her need to face this bastard was too deep. The malice of her plan had been brilliantly simple as well. The agony of spending six hours letting freedom slip away was nearly as painful as sacrificing his balls to gain freedom.

Not that the Unit was really extending a chance for the traitor to escape the country before the bomb squad from Homeland showed up. Several small cameras were now placed in Kaufman's apartment. If he did blow his balls off and try to run, Jackson in the van parked the next street over would know it. Jackson would have little trouble controlling the traitor until a Homeland squad showed up.

Jas shook her head in mock sympathy as she continued. "It's a tough choice but I really do hope you choose to run. You've made a pain of yourself, Harry. If you'd just left things alone, you've have gone on forever. But you're a paranoid sort, aren't you? You had to work a plan on someone to feel safe. To feel like you were in control and now you've driven me to find out what was really on that disk I took.

"Tsk, ts, Harry. Stupid move. Being obsessive and you've faithfully kept up your part of the agreement you made with the drug dealer-terrorist dude. It glares up from the pages of your service record. If all we had was the audio of you making that deal, it wouldn't have been enough. You provided the evidence by keeping it. Then there are the more recent crimes. How long do you think it'll take your assistant to roll on you for the plane crash? The lies required in arresting Carmen Allacosta? God knows what else. Point is, he's not going to take the fall for any damn thing that might turn up under investigation when evidence for some of it is on the table.

"Your Homeland buddies are soooo not going to want any of this public." Jas shook her head and grimaced. "You prove they are everything people say. Sexual deviant, secret murder plots, drummed-up arrests, executions blamed on terrorist bombing planes, every horrid little cliché the press has already accused them of. Homeland is going to get rid of you, quiet as a mouse. You'll disappear. Where do you think you'll go?" Jas cocked her head in mock interest.

"No matter, what we're concerned with are your options right now. You can choose to wait for Homeland guys to show up. And let me assure you, they don't have the choice of ignoring your indiscretions ether. Too much damning evidence in my hands.

But we both know they don't have to report your arrest, officially charge you or even list you on any record. The second option is you can choose to die. But before you are given the fucking easy way out of dying, you have to castrate yourself."

"Enough," Blaster interjected calmly. "He knows his options. We've better things to do than explain to the idiot how much of an idiot he is. Let's go."

Jas chuckled. "You're right. Bye, Harry. Oh by the way, tipping the chair over without pushing the button will activate the explosives in the canister." Jas raised a brow. "You didn't think we'd give you that out, did you? The only way your ass leaves that chair is as an eunuch."

In the van, Jackson grinned as Jas and Blaster closed the doors behind them. "That went well."

"I still think you should have let me take his balls off," Jas sighed.

"Maybe next time, baby," Blaster consoled her.

"You say that now," Jas murmured morosely as they stood behind Jackson's chair and watched the monitor. "Six hours doesn't seem like enough torture time. It was too easy."

Blaster grunted. "This is real life. If the mission can't go down smooth and quiet, the people running it aren't professionals. Drama is bad unless it's in a movie."

"I know. I wanted more though. After all the years Liana and I spent recovering, it feels as if there should have been more of a challenge. Something bigger. For God's sake, you guys went through his security system in less than three seconds. There was no stalking, no risk, no damn satisfying revenge of outwitting him and then making him pay."

"The man is crying, Jas. He's seriously considering blowing off his balls," Jackson pointed out in a patient voice. "Jesus, woman. You are a bloodthirsty piece of work. How the hell do you know about things like that damn ball flask anyway?"

Jas grinned. "What? You've never gone shopping in a big-boy toy store? If you ever get hooked up, I'm going to have a long chat with your chick."

"You're banned from speaking to my woman," Jackson snapped as they watched Kauffman snifle, tears dripping down his face. They had left his mouth taped so he couldn't make enough noise to bother his neighbors. It was a condo after all.

"So there is a woman somewhere?" Jas asked silkily.

Blaster was standing behind Jas with his arms around her waist. His body shook with restrained laughter.

"No! There is no one for you to sniff out, Jas. Damn, you're a menace. Blaster, is there any hope of you controlling the woman?" Jackson hissed in disgust.

"None," Blaster assured Jackson. "Keeping her relatively safe is all I can be responsible for. The rest of the world is on its own."

Jas' head turned to kiss his cheeks softly. "You say the sweetest things," she purred, and pressed her bottom into Blaster's crotch.

Blaster growled and captured her mouth, his hands pulling her firmly into him.

Jackson glanced at them. "Do not start in this van. I refuse to witness you climbing him, Jas."

Slowly pulling away from the kiss, Jas let her head tip back to rest on Blaster's shoulder. His mouth moved down her neck in open kisses as his big hands cupped her breasts. He wasn't being gentle. Jackson had turned back to the monitor, but there was no way he could miss the hitch in her breathing as pleasure shot through her.

"You are so sensitive, Jackson. I really should introduce you to a girlfriend of mine who can help you grow up," Jas suggested seriously. "Besides, I'll climb him any time I want." Her sassy declaration ended in a little mew as one of Blaster's hands left her breast to slide down her body and span her lower abdomen. Not quite cupping her crotch, his big hand pressed into her in a pulsing rhythm that couldn't be seen, just felt.

Jackson laughed. "Woman, I know too much. I'd have to guard my balls with any friend of yours. That kind of worry is a real mood breaker."

"If you say so," Jas murmured. Losing interest in chatting couldn't be helped. Her ass pushed at Blaster as he handled her. Thick cock nudged her as he petted her body. Jas realized she couldn't turn around. He was holding her in front of him and running his hands over her body. They were not in a private situation. He really didn't care what anyone thought or just Jackson specifically.

A low growl rumbled in her ear.

"Will you two get out of here? We've got this. Gray will be in the Homeland office this morning. He and Miguel will have Mrs. Allacosta out by nine-fifteen. Liana and her mom will be on the jet back to California by ten. Charlie and Rem have Kauffman's assistant's house staked out. He's not getting away. It's taken care of. Go do movie star things."

"Really, Jackson. To think you used to want my autograph," Jas chuckled as Blaster's hands relaxed on her. He licked her neck in a last stroke and stepped back.

"I never said that. I said I wanted to meet you," Jackson defended himself. "I expect an invitation to the next Tinsel Town awards party by the way."

"Only if you let me set you up with a date." Jas shivered in reaction to the loss of contact and turned to seek it.

"Damn. Watching it on TV again," Jackson murmured.

"Come on, Sheena. We've got a charter waiting." Blaster captured her hands that were reaching for him. "Time we get going."

Jas tilted her head in silent question as she willingly followed him. Her body was humming with arousal and he was moving away from her. Not likely she'd let him out of her range. At the van doors he checked the perimeter in habitual caution before they stepped out.

In the early morning gloom, Blaster and Jas walked briskly toward a nondescript sedan. At the passenger side, Blaster jerked her into his body for a fierce kiss. Moaning at the heated demand of his mouth, Jas melted into him.

He was handling her and she loved it. He backed her up against the car in a hard push. One of her legs came up the outside of his hip, wrapping around him. His body rocked into her crotch in maddening rhythm as he thrust into her mouth. His hard length burned her with a fire just out of reach because of the clothes separating them.

"What are you doing?" Jas gasped as his mouth left hers to drag down her neck again. His hands moved down her body in a long caress that ended with them spanning her ass and jerking her other leg around his hips. She was pressed between him and the car.

"I'm enjoying the hell out of my wildcat," he murmured. His hips rocked in shallow thrusts. Each push pulling a gasp from her as he pressed into now sensitized folds, forcing her jeans to rub what she wanted him to handle.

"Are you going to fuck me in the street?" she demanded as the force zinging through her built with each thrust.

His hands left her ass. Holding her in place with the pressure of his body and the car behind her, he lifted his head and upper torso so his hands could grasp her breasts. Closing over perfect globes, this time thumb and forefinger clamped around swollen nipples, rolling them harshly as he smiled. "We don't have time," he told her softly while watching her jerk at the sensations his rough handling gave her.

Jas couldn't help it. Her back arched into his hands, straining up for the exquisite pleasure he was inflicting. Flames flashed down her body with each twist of engorged nipple. The combination of harsh touches and the dry humping of his hips were driving her to the edge of not caring where he fucked her.

"Damn it!" Jas snarled. "Then what are you doing?"

Blaster smiled and stopped moving. "Proving we can have it all while getting you back to your movie." Releasing her, he pulled them off the car and opened the door. Jas was physically trembling as she sat down in the passenger seat. The short drive was silent as she sat there and burned. It wasn't just her body in high gear. Thinking about his words caused her stomach to tighten. What did he think having it all meant?

"Barry knows we're on our way back?" Jas asked as they pulled into the airfield.

"Yeah. He thinks you'll be doing some takes today. I told him you'd hardly slept this twenty-four." Blaster parked the car and glanced at the amazing woman beside him.

"I'm not tired," Jas murmured as they looked at each other for a second before unbuckling.

"I know," Blaster said softly, his hand reaching to glide fingertips down her cheek. "I know exactly what you are, Miss Carson. I know what you need."

"You really don't have a problem with me. Do you?" Jas narrowed her eyes as she studied him.

Blaster chuckled. "Fire is my passion. You're a living flame, woman. How could I have a problem with that?"

Entering the plane, Jas paused as she looked at the cabin. There were four captain's chairs, but the rest of the opulent space was dedicated to a huge bed and wet bar. "A flying bachelor pad?" she murmured as she headed for a chair to buckle in. I suppose Jackson will be flying the other plane back to Florida?"

"Yep," Blaster opened the cockpit door. "Hey, Brian. We're ready. I'll let you know when to land."

"Fine. Tanks are full. Flight check's done. We'll be taking off in a few minutes," the pilot confirmed.

Blaster pulled the door shut and turned to sit facing Jas and buckle in.

"You'll let him know when to land? What does that mean?" Jas asked as they taxied onto the runway.

"We're always in a hurry. I took away the need to rush."

"What about getting back to the movie? Weren't you the guy who didn't have time to finish what he started just now?" Jas asked with a raised brow. The damp heat between her legs was an uncomfortable reminder of exactly what he hadn't finished.

Blaster let his lip tick up in a slight smile. "Weren't you the woman who was suggesting we do it in the street? Figured we needed to settle a few thing before it comes to that."

"Like what?"

"What we want."

"That is?"

"Partnership."

"What?"

"Do you trust me?" Blaster's voice was a low rumble that vibrated around them as the plane began its takeoff, gathering speed down the runway.

Jas' hands clenched the armrests. The lift as the plane left the ground was nothing compared to the lurch his question gave her. Trust. He'd been trustworthy through every bit of this, but what was he asking now? They'd just about exchanged bodily fluids on a public street and he wanted to know if she trusted him?

"Hell, Samuel! You said you knew who I am. What the fuck kind of question is that?" Jas scowled at him.

"For you, it's a trick question. You trust me in combat. You're perfectly willing to gamble your life on the fact that I'll keep my word and be where I said I'd be. But as soon as we step away from the action, I'm a stranger. How close am I to the truth?"

Jas shrugged and crossed her arms defensively.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Blaster regarded her levelly. "The heat on the street back there was a last-chance thing. You wanted a taste, one more time before we have to go back to being normal people."

"No one was raping you. As I recall, the periscope in your pants was fully engaged."

"Damn right. But I wasn't ending anything. You were."

"I never said that."

"I don't need words to read you, Jas. You figured we'd have a few more days 'til the shoot is over. You'd go back to California. I'd suddenly be called somewhere on a job. We'd promise to call but even if we do once, it'd be over. No harm, no foul. If I ever need a hand invading a country, or you could use help crushing an evil empire, we'd get in touch. We're combat fuck-buddies. Is that about how you see it working?"

They had reached cruising altitude and Jas unbuckled to wander around the cabin before she responded. "You have us all figured out, Huckleberry."

Blaster stood and strolled up behind her as she looked at the bar and its contents. He was close enough to feel the heat of her body as he asked in a silky, calm voice, "Is that the problem? Is it the Huckleberry issue? A Mississippi mud-rat is not what you want hanging around the Stardust Mansion? Would it be embarrassing if people knew you were doin' the trashy white guy?"

Jas swung around. Her hand made it to within a millimeter of his cheek before her wrist was caught in an iron grip. Anger boiled between them as they glared at each other. Breathing hard, Blaster slowly released her wrist.

"Care to explain that explosion?" he invited softly.

"I don't appreciate your choice of words. My man is not trashy," Jas bit back at him.

"Sure he is. He wears worn-out jeans and old boots. He drives a used pickup and he talks with a low-country accent."

"He's a decorated, ex-Special Forces, mean-fucking bastard. He is not trashy," Jas insisted fiercely.

Blaster leaned into her, his body lightly brushing hers. "That's not what Hollywood will see, Sheena. You'll hear everything else but that. I will never defend myself with the truth. This is what we need to settle. I don't damn well care if anyone calls me your white boy toy. Do you?"

"They will think I'm stealing from you or using you. Other black people will call you ugly names for supposedly keeping me around. They will condemn you right down to your bones. And you can never tell them the truth." Blaster's hands now rested on the bar, trapping Jas between them.

"If all that's too much, I can understand it. I don't fucking like it, but I'll understand and step back. That would be a life issue. One I can't fix. Any other reason for us going our separate ways is crap."

It took two seconds for Jas' body to relax and tilted eyes began to twinkle instead of shoot fire. She wasn't smiling and the humor was almost indistinguishable. "So you're proposing to me?"

Blaster jerked in surprise. Jas' body followed him, remaining intimately close. "In hood-speak, *remaining with you* is getting married. You just listed all the ways you're willing to fight for me. Regular gangsta' throw down. Tellin' me how no one will approve of you and you don't give a damn. Yep, I should be wearing your bling now."

One finger poked him in the chest as he stumbled back from her. "And I expect whatever goes on my finger to be worth more than your ugly truck." Slowly backing him as she spoke, her head swayed slightly for emphasis as she went on. "I don't give a damn what people say, Huckleberry. You should know that shit by now. What I do mind is being all turned on and then my man is so busy slamming the doors outta this relationship that he forgets to finish the job. You start with the sex, you'd better bring it, babe! You can talk all you want after. I promise."

The back of Blaster's knees hit the bed. Grabbing her hips, he fell on it, pulling her down on top of him. "You done talking?"

Jas' hands grasped his head, holding it beneath her face. "Damn straight," she breathed, and dipped down to take the kiss he was demanding.

Blaster's head came up to meet her mouth on a sharp breath as his hands gripped the back of her shirt, yanking it out of her jeans. Need swirled around them in a violent storm. He couldn't rip her black silk shirt off over her head fast enough.

Jas arched for him to pull it off then fell on him in growling hunger that matched Blaster's urgency. They rolled as her hands clawed his shirt, ripping the buttons open. Her hands met his chest in curled talons as he arched up to dispense with the garment. Breaking the kiss, Blaster flung his shirt off and came back to her mouth, pushing into her deeply with his tongue while he shifted off her lower body so he could get at her jeans.

"Let me," Jas gasped as his hands fumbled.

"Fast," Blaster grunted, and rolled to get out of his own jeans and boots as Jas did the same.

Panting, they were suddenly naked, facing each other on the bed. Blaster grimaced as he hauled her to him roughly. "I didn't propose," he stated as his body covered her again. "But we'll get the bling tomorrow." His mouth fastened over hers in fierce demand as he held her head under his this time.

Jas' body bunched and they rolled. Her head lifted from his as her body undulated down the length of him. "I don't take bling if you didn't propose," she informed him through harsh breaths. "I'm not some hoochy."

"You are not...whatever you said. You'll wear my ring," Blaster snarled, his hands skimmed down her back to open over her ass, palming the globes roughly. "Just making the point that when I propose, you'll know it." His hips thrust up, rubbing the thick length of his cock up her mound and abdomen.

Jas' head tilted slightly in question as she grasped both sides of his head. Her knees came up on either side of his hips, forcing the hot cock between her legs to the mouth of her cunt. "So you want to buy me the ring now, but reserve the right to propose later?"

"Yes. My woman." His hands slid to her hips, holding her off him as she worked the thick head of his cock to her opening. "Condom," he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Fuck some then condom," Jas countered. Their sentences were fast becoming short, abrupt demands as they sank into the erotic urgency.

"No," Blaster snarled. "No condom, no pussy. We're not together because you got pregnant."

"Bastard. Where the hell are they?" Jas glanced down them to where he held her suspended. Big hands wrapped around her hips in effortless control.

"Pants pocket." He gently set her off him and sat up to find his pants.

Jas wasn't going to be that easily handled. She actually heard herself growl as she sat and somehow became attached to his back, her body draped around him. Both her hands grasped his cock as her legs wrapped around him.

Blaster bent to retrieve his jeans from the floor and found he couldn't reach them. He froze for a second as her hands began stroking the length of him in knowing pulls. The damp heat of her pussy burned the small of his back. Standing carefully so she wouldn't be dislodged, he took two steps to reach the pants with Jas riding.

The insistent hands stroking cock didn't pause as he squatted to pull three packets out of the pocket.

Jas' chin was hooked over his shoulder. She reached for a packet. His hand moved, keeping it from her.

"Let me!" Jas nipped his shoulder for emphasis.

"Ouch!" Powerful legs pushed him up and he stalked to the bed with her riding his back. "You're in too much of a hurry." Beside the bed, he did a fast jerking twist and suddenly she was no longer on his back but being lowered to the bed. Her legs were draped over his thick forearms as he did it, spread in front of his face as he sank to the floor.

"Hey! What..." Jas' indignant demand was cut off. His hands had glided down the back of her thighs in a sneaky caress. At the back of her knees he'd gripped them and swiftly lifted, spreading her high and wide as his mouth descended on her cunt.

Jas wailed as swollen folds were brutally assaulted. His knowing tongue lashed down the curvy hills, thrusting into sensitive valleys. He was forcefully holding her open for his exploration and nothing could have felt better. Jas clawed the bedspread and howled in abandoned response. His possession of her cunt was bestial as he growled and slurped, sucking her in and shaking his head harshly. It was overwhelming to already responsive intimate flesh.

The physical result of his animalistic attack for Jas was complete focus on completion of the drive to feel his cock in her body. She didn't have the time or desire to

worry about how that was accomplished. Her body was on fire and he was turning up the heat with every move. Emotionally she was astounded and wildly gratified.

He could handle her with a simple shake of his body like a bear shrugs off water. She'd thought his physical strength would scare her, inject fear into the moment. She'd been so wrong. The ancient woman within was stronger than any external defensive training. That woman needed his strength. The fact that he could so casually take control, demonstrated in such an overwhelming sexual context drove her to an unknown elemental high. She'd *never* been with a man who could do that.

It told her how unselfishly he shared the power exchange with her. Giving her the reins when she needed them. Control was not an issue for him simply because he could have it any time. His concern was her comfort. Knowing that made every time he'd relinquished it to her so much more significant.

She could surrender to him and be safe. Oh God! That revelation shot through her and Jas screamed. Her body arched into his mouth and then he was leaning over her. Still holding her legs up and away from her body, his mouth fastened on a breast, sucking harshly as the head of his condom-coated cock dragged down her pussy to lodge at her entrance. Jas' head arched in straining pleasure.

Lifting his head from her breast, he demanded her attention. "Look at me."

She willingly looked into his eyes. Glaring at her fiercely, his hips thrust his long, thick shaft into her slick body. Seating himself in one hard lunge. Both of them gasped through the explosion of sensation. Grabbing her wrists, he stretched her arms over her head in a fast move as if he were afraid she'd resist. Securing them in one large hand, his other came to rest around her neck, carefully holding her face turned to him.

"My woman," he gritted out as they stared at each other.

The total control of his hold should have been frightening. It wasn't. This was Samuel Callaway. Her man. He was doing his best to lay his soul naked for her. Asking her to accept him, trust him. Doing it as directly as it could be done. He was a shitty actor and sucked at lying to her. So now he waited.

The moment flashed in silent question. He was asking her if she could handle him as he was. Was she strong enough to hand him the power of their relationship when he needed it? Could she meet him on the same ground he met her soul on? Jas blinked back the surge of emotional ecstasy his total honesty wrenched from her deepest fears. He knew what they were, knew he was the embodiment of them and also the eraser of those scars so deeply embedded in her past. With him, long-held fears where nothing but shadows. They had no power over her. If she trusted him, he could destroy them for her.

That's what he did. What he wanted to do. Fight her battles. Jas smiled as her eyes moved over his harsh features. He couldn't soften them for her in this moment and that was okay. "Your woman," she whispered.

His whole body shuddered then burst into action. His hips jerked back and slammed into her. Jas let tears stream down her face as the pleasure of his demanding

fuck took her. His hands let her go to tunnel under her shoulders from beneath, grasping her that way to hold her on his cock as he pounded into her cunt. After a few seconds he stopped and stood up, still holding her on him. Very carefully he lowered them both to the bed, never leaving her body as he searched her eyes.

"Tears?" He hovered over her, supporting his weight on bulging arms.

"Love," she answered softly.

"Damn it!" He squeezed his eyes shut, baring his teeth in a grimace as if she'd stabbed him with a knife. "You're killing me, woman."

Jas' hands framed his face as he opened his eyes. "Say it. I can't wait for you to get over it," she demanded. Giving him the harsh push he needed to deal with his own demons.

"More, Jas. So much more." His lips still pulled back from his teeth in a harsh snarl. "I'll never get over it, past it. Don't think it'll go away." He panted in warning as he glared into her eyes. "I need you."

"Good. I need cock—now," she informed him as her hips pushed up. "Remind me never to tell you I love you while we're fucking. I can't deal with the delay."

Blaster's body jerked into action, his hips thrusting hard and fast. "Legs around my back," he directed.

Jas was already shifting to take him deeper.

"Yeah, just like that," he approved in harsh gasps. "You will tell me you love me when we fuck."

"Why?" Jas reached under his arms to drag her nails down his back as the hard penetration blasted up her body with each invasion. "It screws with your timing."

"Because I need it," he confessed through gritted teeth. Sweat filmed both their bodies.

"Yours. Believe it," Jas gasped. "Shut up already."

His mouth snaked down to hers, opening to suck her tongue in forceful pulls as both of them arched into the pounding rhythm. He pulled away as her nails dug into his back. "Come for me."

Jas let go of reality. He set her free with his command. In his arms she was unleashed from the restrictions of past experiences. He made her the moaning, screaming woman who abandoned herself in passion. In the safety of his control nothing but pleasure existed.

The explosion of her release shattered through her, wiping all other knowledge from its path. Her channel contracted on his cock in sharp, milking demand as Jas let the world spin away. He continued pounding with guttural grunts that drove her even further into oblivion. They were primitive male and female. He was the beast who could cover her and she needed him just that way.

Abruptly he pulled out of her and lifted her in the same move, flipping her facedown and jerking her hips up. Jas was aware of what he needed from her. Her

knees spread in invitation as her hands reached up to brace herself on the headboard. There was no question, no resistance. Arching her back, she presented and demanded.

He was there. Grasping her hips in primordial control, he slammed into her without hesitation, penetrating the gushing cunt before him so deeply Jas screamed.

"Yes!" he bellowed. "Mine!" Harsh and deep he thrust into her, jerking her up off her knees with each intrusion. Spreading her open around a cock that stretched her in ruthless dictate as it swelled with each violent penetration. His release took them both over the edge.

Jas rocketed into another orgasm as if it were the bullet train thundering through her. Her wail of pleasure and surrender was lost in the harsh roar of his completion. Driving his seed into her with uncontrollable thrusts, he let her take him in every way.

Eventually Blaster opened his eyes. He was draped over Jas' back as they lay on the bed. His cock was still lodged in her cunt. Reality was a sweet thing as he let it filter into his brain. He lay still a moment to listen to her breathe. She didn't seem to mind the weight of him and abruptly he realized she didn't mind because she was already sleeping.

He nearly chuckled as he peeled himself off her. Jas grunted in protest. "Shhh, I'm right here," he soothed, and she sank into deep sleep.

Picking up the intercom phone beside the bed, he contacted Brian, the pilot. "Put us down in an hour."

After washing up in the bathroom, Blaster dressed slowly. His body ached in ways that made him smile. Moving to one of the captain's chairs where he could watch her sleep, he pulled out his cell phone.

The call went through immediately. "Jackson?"

"Everyone checks in fine," Jackson informed him.

"I need a favor."

"Sure, but I'm a little tied up doin' the last favor you asked for."

"After you're done I need you to get me a ring."

"Damn. You have got to be..."

"Shut up and listen. Get one you'd find offensively large. In fact, it should be something you'd feel makes up for the fact that I'm going to put you in a lavender tux and frilly yellow shirt for the wedding. Not exactly obscene but close."

"You fucking bastard. If I didn't know Jas, I'd be pissed. She'll never let you do lavender. Frilly shirts died a decade ago. Why the hell am I picking your engagement ring? Shouldn't the two of you do that together?"

"It's not an engagement ring. It's a statement." Blaster glanced at the woman sleeping soundly across the cabin. "I'm getting her a doubled-edged, serrated Silver Trident as an engagement gift. That'll come later when she's accepted there's no getting rid of me."

Jackson laughed. "You're still a bastard but she'll love the knife."

"Yeah, she will. Have the ring at the motel tonight."

"I'm not coming down there."

"I don't care how you do it."

"You'll owe me."

"I'm good for the damn ring. You know that."

"Not about the money. It's the pain of forcing me to pay copious sums of money for offensive shit. You'll owe me."

Blaster grinned. "That's an added bonus."

"Get off my phone. Do not call me again," Jackson snapped. "Next thing I know you'll need someone to do Lamaze class for you. I refuse in advance."

"She's not pregnant. I figure she wants to wear something nice for the Oscars next year. We'll work on babies after that."

"She knows you have this planned out?"

"She will."

"Good luck, buddy," Jackson signed off sincerely.

"Thanks. For everything." Blaster hung up. A slow smile tugged at his soul.

He had time. He didn't know how long it would take for his warrior woman to realize she was home. He was her home. It didn't matter. Working through the time by making love to her at every opportunity to help her understand was a mission. One he might never be done with.

About the Author

Hello everyone. If you're reading this, I hope it means you've enjoyed reading one of my books. If you have some other opinion of them, feel free to lie to me anyway. I hereby absolve you from all possible guilt and consequences for flagrant, adjective, saturated lying to the author.

I'm a chronic fantasizer. Every good romance novel ended too soon. After a while, I started making up stories when I had a few minutes to while away. So now, instead of sitting around with a blank look on my face, I've taken to writing them down.

Because of my father's job, we moved every three years in my early life. My first memories are of Bermuda, and then we were in several African countries. It was a wonderful childhood. I gained a rich cultural background in the world community, but never learned to spell. As an adult, I avoided writing at all costs, embarrassed over my limitations.

But the writer will not stay silent forever. She broke out, and insisted on learning the mystical world of grammar and spelling. Haven't mastered all of it yet, but they let me write for you anyway. Bless every editor on the planet. They give dreamers a place to send fantasies and save us the embarrassment of owning our shortcomings.

Gail welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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