



Loose Id

Melissa Schroeder
for LOVE or HONOR

Praise for the writing of Melissa Schroeder

“Seducing the Saint” in *Charming the Snake* with MaryJanice Davidson and Camille Anthony

Ms. Schroeder’s imagination and sense of humor shine in this novella. “Seducing the Saint” is the sort of story that will appeal to those of you who like sexy romances with a good deal of action thrown in. I definitely recommend it..

-- Mireya Orsini, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Ms. Schroeder is known for writing sensually enticing stories and this is another one. Bringing together the sensual nature of her characters and a story line that has a hint of danger to it, “Seducing the Saint” is a HOT read and another winner for sure..

-- Sheryl, *Coffee Time Romance*

Charming The Snake is an anthology of three wonderful stories, all of which I enjoyed tremendously... “Seducing the Saint” has unexpected twists and scorching love[.] ...I loved all three and I look forward to more from these very talented authors..

-- Lyonene, *Enchanted in Romance*

If you’re looking for a futuristic adventure full of erotic romance, sit back, relax, and let “Seducing the Saint” seduce you..

-- Phillipa Ann, *Romance Reviews Today*

Charming the Snake is now available from Loose Id.

BOUNTY HUNTERS, INC.: FOR LOVE OR HONOR

Melissa Schroeder

Loose Id

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: For Love or Honor

Melissa Schroeder

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Dedication

To Kally Jo Surbeck for her many hours of chatting, her insane belief in my writing, and our mutual love

of Eddie Izzard. You are definitely one of kind, kid.

Chapter One

Del Littleton didn't like when jobs went sour. She'd had three go south in just the last month and Peter had threatened to fire her if screwed up this one. Finding her latest collar lying in a pool of his own blood, two days gone, would not help matters. Frank Totter wouldn't be able to testify in court back on Earth.

She particularly didn't like when Dylan O'Farrell was the reason it went bad. There he stood, a smug smile tilting his lips and all she could think of was smacking the bastard. That, and jumping his bones. Both would probably have the desired effect -- he'd be pissed.

"What the fuck are you doing here, O'Farrell? This is my collar." She pulled her Barracuda 911 out of her side holster for good measure.

His smile widened, his green eyes twinkled, and a zing of heat flashed through her. Dammit.

"I had a tip that I might find you here."

"Really?" She didn't try to hide the sarcasm. It would mask the fear that was curdling in her stomach. Just who the hell had told O'Farrell about this?

"Really. You seem to be having a run of bad luck, Littleton." He walked into the dingy hotel room. His long, easy strides reminded her of a lion. "First there was that shoot out in the Edideton Sector."

"I was cleared. You know that because you did the investigation."

He nodded as he prowled the room, not touching anything but looking for clues.

"Then there was that woman you brought in who turned out to be the wrong collar."

"Twin. A twin. How was I to know?"

"Then there was that incident with the agent."

"Vicentes is a pain in the ass. And that was *my* collar, not his."

He slanted her a look out of the corner of his eye, then continued to look at the contents of Totter's suitcase. She hadn't touched anything when she entered. She hadn't had the time. Just long enough to find Totter and wonder who the hell had a hard-on for setting her up. Nerves turned into outright panic. Someone had to be setting her up, but she couldn't figure out why.

"Vicentes is a pal of mine." The Irish lilt in O'Farrell's voice brought her out of her thoughts. "And he said that you fucked that one up yourself."

She had, but she refused to admit it. Confessing she'd been wrong would make her look weak. And that was one thing she didn't want to do to in front of O'Farrell. She studied her nemesis as he continued his search. Tall, probably about six foot, O'Farrell was known for his way with women. His reputation for bagging just about every available gorgeous agent was legendary. With those mischievous green eyes and

that dark red hair, he was hard to resist. Add in his athletic build and toe tingling smile, and he was irresistible. It was said he could charm a nun into bed. She apparently was the only woman he hadn't tried to charm. Each time they'd met over the last few years, they'd been at each other's throats.

"So, you just happen to be in the area, and decided to pop in and see how I was doing on my job?"

He didn't turn around. "No. I told you. Someone tipped me off."

She shook her head as she sorted through what she knew about Totter and who was after him. "Someone called and said you would find Totter dead?"

"No." He sighed, a sound filled with resignation and irritation, and turned to face her. "They called and said that you would be found with the body and the weapon. They said you killed him for a price."

* * * * *

Dylan almost rushed forward when all the color drained out of Del Littleton's face. She'd probably smack him upside the head or hit him in the bollocks for trying to help. The woman was prickly, that was for sure, but he should have never blurted it out that way.

"What do you mean?" Her voice was hoarse.

Damn. He didn't like this. As much as he would like to get Littleton out of the retrieval, Dylan didn't want her going to jail. She was a hothead, a pain the ass, packed into a tight, athletic little body. She didn't belong in the business any more that he belonged at a tea party.

"I had a call. Told me I would find you here. Dead collar, you killed him."

She eyed him, then looked down at Totter. "He's been gone for two days at least."

Dylan was thinking the same thing. She might have a temper that got her into trouble from time to time, but Del wasn't stupid. And hanging out with a dead body for two days wasn't just gross, it was stupid.

So, someone was setting her up. Someone who wanted her gone for a long time and knew of their prickly relationship had called him to set her up. Damn.

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

She eyed him skeptically but kept quiet.

"Someone's setting you up."

She snorted. "Tell me something I don't know, O'Farrell."

Sarcasm dripped from her voice but she started to pace the room, carefully avoiding touching any evidence. Her nervous energy, something he was used to, had an edge of panic to it.

"I've got to wonder just what the hell you did to get yourself in this mess, girlie."

Her eyes narrowed, and she sneered. “Girlie? Listen, O’Farrell, I know you’re used to women who cream themselves over that Irish accent of yours, but I’m not like them.”

“You can say that again.” His gaze took in the short mess of hair, the smudge of dirt on her face, and the wrinkled camouflage outfit. Heat zinged through him, forcing his pulse to accelerate and sweat to gather beneath his leather gloves. Dylan ignored it. “I like my women to dress like ... a woman.”

Her face flushed, with embarrassment or anger, he’d guess the latter. “Well, thank God for that.” She looked down at the body again. “What the fuck am I going to do?”

“First thing, I’m calling this in now. I don’t like being used.” And, dammit, the person who called knew that he would rush here and confront her. He hadn’t believed it, not for a minute, but he’d hauled ass out of a departmental meeting to get here. “They know we have a history.”

Her head whipped around. “A history?” The edge in her voice had turned lethal, and damn if it didn’t sink under his skin.

“You know what I mean, Del. We’ve gone head to head a few times, quite a few times in the last several months. Think. Someone thought for sure I would jump to the conclusion that you killed him.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. She’d left a few buttons loose at the top of her shirt and the motion caused a bit more flesh to appear. Dylan should ignore it, but it was hard to. For being a hard-assed bounty hunter, Del Littleton had skin that begged to be caressed. He’d often wondered what it would be like to slip his hand inside her shirt, glide his fingers over her soft breasts, finger her nipples ...

He shifted his weight from foot to foot, trying to ease the pressure in his groin.

“I don’t like it.”

“Join the bloody crowd.” He pulled out his telecommuter and flipped it on. “I’ll just get a hold of Vicentes.”

“Vicentes.” She spat out the name as if she were naming the devil. “What the hell do you want with him?”

“He’s going to cover our asses, that’s what. I told you he’s a friend of mine.”

“Like that’s going to make him look good to me.”

He rolled his eyes while he keyed in Vicentes’ number. He picked up on the first ring.

“Vicentes, and this better be good, Dylan.”

Dylan chuckled, remembering that Vicentes had said he was busy tonight. “Sorry to interrupt your evening, but I’ve got a situation.”

“Please, oh, please don’t tell me it has to do with Littleton. Last time I talked to you, you were following that tip. I want nothing to do with that she-cat.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble. She’s here, with a dead body.”

“*Gracias*. Now, arrest the bitch and leave me alone.”

“She was set up.”

There was a pause, and then the sound of sheets rustling and a throaty, feminine voice in the background. “Work,*amor* .” More sheets shuffling, the woman’s voice, and then Vicentes came back on the line. “Tell me.”

He brought Vicentes up to date, and then waited for his reaction. “You sure this isn’t because you’re hot for the woman?”

“What?” His voice came out in a surprised shout. Del glanced at him, one eyebrow raised in question. He shook his head and turned his back. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Hey, I call it like I see it,*compadre* , and that woman’s been under your skin for months.”

“Her collar has been dead for two days. If she was stupid, and she isn’t, she might stick around, but I just don’t see someone who’s paid to kill hanging out and waiting for the authorities to arrest them.”

“Okay, I agree with you there. What do you want from me?”

“I want to get Del back on Earth, away from this mess. The sooner I can do that, the sooner she can help us start sorting out why someone would set her up. Send up Francis to take care of the investigation, but don’t tell him about my involvement or Del’s.”

After a few more minutes of discussion he keyed off his telecommuter and turned to face Del. “So, let’s get going.”

As he walked to the door, he noticed that he didn’t hear her following. He looked over his shoulder. From the stubborn look on her face, he knew he was in for a fight he didn’t have time for. They could be discovered at any moment.

“Just where the hell are we going?”

“I have to get you out of here before anyone discovers us.”

“And, this wouldn’t be your way of getting me to get on your ship, into your custody, without a fight?”

Irritation crawled along his skin. He wasn’t used to people questioning his motives or his authority. Especially some irritating pain in the ass like her. “Listen, Del. If I really thought you did it, you’d have your face on that floor, your wrists in cuffs, and that damn smirk off your face. As it is, I may do it, just to make myself happy. Now, either you listen to me, take my advice, or I deliver you hogtied to the Interplanetary Authority. Take your pick. I’m not in the mood to fuck with you tonight.”

She drew in a deep breath and opened her mouth to argue with him. They didn’t have time so he did the one thing he could think of to shut her the hell up.

He drew his stun gun and shot her.

Chapter Two

Del slowly opened her eyes and winced. The overhead light was so bright she was sure it seared her corneas. She snapped them shut, unable to take the pain. Hazy impressions of what had happened, where she was, took form. She remembered finding Totter dead, then O'Farrell showed up. There was an argument, then he ...

Her eyes shot open. The son of a bitch shot her. She was going to kill him. Glancing around she studied her surroundings and realized she was in some sort of a bedroom, probably on his ship. She had to get out of there and when she did, Dylan O'Farrell was going to regret ever fucking with her.

"I'd think twice about it if I were you."

She turned and a fresh shaft of pain shot through her head. She slid her eyes closed again and swallowed. Her stomach turned over, almost making her throw up.

"You never listen to me."

"Why should I, jackass? You shot me."

"You were arguing. I didn't have time for that."

He could have been reciting the weather conditions from the tone of his voice. When she was better, she was going to wrap her fingers around his neck and squeeze. She would take great pleasure in his pain.

"You can open your eyes; I turned down the lights."

She opened them, and almost pulled back when she realized he'd sat down in a chair next to the bed. He was closer than she thought. She drew in a breath and with it his scent. Her head spun.

"Ahh, there are those beautiful eyes." He leaned closer; concern darkened his eyes. "I'm sorry I had to do it, lass."

"For some reason I doubt that."

He drew back a little and the unsettling anxiety eased. She couldn't handle the man up close and personal.

"Don't take it personally, Del. I had to get you out of there before we were discovered." He sat back in his chair, his legs spread and his arms crossed over his massive chest. "As it is, we almost didn't make it out without getting detected. Some agents showed up as we were heading out the back. I didn't see them but I heard them."

Del tried to make sense of his comments, but her head was still whirling like an out-of-control merry-go-round. "If you didn't see them, how do you know who they were?"

"I listened. Their conversation told me who they were." He leaned forward again, his expression pensive, worried. Reaching out, he laid the back of his hand on her forehead. "Are you all right?"

She shifted away from him, which caused his frown to deepen.

“Fine thing for you to worry about now.”

He sighed. The aggravation she heard in it told her he wasn’t used to explaining himself. “I told you I was sorry.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I think I did.”

It was her turn to sigh. “Never mind. I don’t want to argue, I just want to get back to my place and figure out what the hell is going on.”

“Can you sit up?”

She nodded, setting off another round of pain shooting through her brain. He steadied her by taking her arm. She rose to a sitting position and took stock of the room. It was sparse -- a table to the side of the bed, which was up against a wall. Other than a computer center, there didn’t seem to be much in the room at all. She noticed two doors, one at the end of her bed, the other across the room.

“You have nowhere to run, Del. You might as well take it easy.”

“I wasn’t thinking of it. I can’t think of anything.” She rubbed her temples. “Couldn’t you have just said, ‘Shut the fuck up, Del’?”

He chuckled, and she ignored the way her pulse jumped. The masculine sound always caused her to melt. “Now, I have a feeling that if I’d tried reasoning with you, we’d still be there.”

She grimaced. “Okay, I’ll give you that. But your stun gun?”

He ignored her question, which irritated her even more. Dylan liked to walk around and act like the big dick with the big gun. “Why don’t you freshen up? Then we can start going over things, deciding just where we are in this mess.”

She nodded and tried to stand. Her legs wobbled and her stomach roiled. Closing her eyes against the pain, she plopped back down on the bed. The next thing she knew, O’Farrell’s arm slid around her waist.

“Come on, Littleton. Never took you for a pantywaist.”

She scowled at him, but stood with his help. The heat of his body warmed her as his clean scent surrounded her. Her body responded instantly. Her blood heated; her heart flipped over.

“I can handle it myself, thank you very much.” She pulled away from him and, on unsteady legs, walked to the bathroom. The sooner they got to work, the sooner she got away from him and her strange reaction to him.

* * * * *

As soon as the door shut, Dylan ran a hand through his hair and sighed. From the time he’d joined the

Earth Intelligence Agency he'd plotted his career. Each step had been part of the bigger plan. When new worlds were discovered halfway through the 21st century, the realignment of the agencies took at least a decade. Many people attempted to cash in, trying to take over the ungoverned areas. Dylan knew from early on he wanted to be part of the EIA and had designed his entire career by the time he graduated from the academy. He'd taken shit jobs in the Gerdah and Frumurlloh Sectors and gave up any ideas of a personal life. Twenty years into his career, the one thing he had always wanted, and now he wanted out.

During the past year, departmental politics had about pushed him over the edge. Things he could take five years ago drove him insane now. The littlest thing would send his blood pressure sky high. The new Bounty Hunter Retrieval Act was just the last nail in the coffin. It'd been enacted to help with the financial burden EIA had incurred the last few years, but it had allowed too many new companies to sprout up. Barely any training, no regulations, and the idiots were out on the street. They were losing them left and right because they weren't ready to do the job.

Those thoughts brought him back to Del, who he realized he hadn't heard anything from since she'd gone into the bathroom. She hadn't acted like the shot had cost her any more than it had anyone else, but the silence bothered him. He walked to the door and listened for a minute or two.

"Are you all right in there?"

"Yeah, dickhead, I can take care of myself. Unless you want to hold my hand while I take a piss?"

Couldn't the woman just say yes or no? "I was just checking."

"Don't worry, secret agent man. There isn't any way off this ship."

"Jesus, I was just making ..." Dammit, she couldn't even let him be concerned about her. "Just hurry up."

He spun away from the door and fought the irritation creeping along his spine. Since he'd met her, Del had driven him insane. One problem after another, and he was always there to break it up. She was as prickly as a grizzly bear, especially when she was injured or in need of help. Del never admitted to needing help.

That brought him up short. Now he was worried her behavior might mean she was actually hurt. He glanced at the door waiting for it to open. When it didn't, he walked closer and bent his head to see if he could hear anything. The instant he did that, the door opened and he found himself eye level with Del's breasts. Even through the heavy fabric, he could make out the shape. On the smallish side, but pert.

He licked his lips. Slowly his gaze traveled up to her neck then her face, which flushed. This time he could tell it was more from embarrassment than from anger. *Well, wasn't that interesting?*

"Get an eyeful, O'Farrell?"

He could tell she was trying to sound like a hard-assed bitch, but her voice quivered just a bit. Nerves? Arousal?

He knew the smile slowly curving his lips had to show his interest. "Not as much as I'd like to see, but it'll do for the time being."

Something flashed in her eyes, something that looked like hurt, but it was gone before he could decipher

it. She pursed her lips, and he fought the urge to kiss her.

“Yeah, I’ve heard about your likes and dislikes, and I’m happy to know I’m not in the ‘likes’ category, O’Farrell.”

“And just what do you know about me and my likes?” His voice dipped, and a surge of lust warmed his blood. The fact that she had taken the time to find out about him pleased him, for some stupid reason.

She inched around him and then let out an audible breath. “I don’t know much, but from what I hear you like them stacked and stupid.”

“Really?” He followed her, almost stalking her every step. “Seems you’ve been paying a lot of attention to my social life.”

She stopped and he ran into her back. Looking back over her shoulder, she shot him a sarcastic smile. “Kind of hard to miss you. I mean, you do have a reputation.”

“But, you know my particular type, which means you’ve been paying attention.”

She turned and faced him. “O’Farrell, do you not know how many agents talk about you? It’s a small world in our business and since we’re under your direction, everyone knows you. Hell, most of the men in my line of business recount almost every one of your conquests. I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard one of them go into detail about some agent or model you were screwing.”

Heat crept up his neck and into his face. He wasn’t that bad. Okay, so he did see a lot of women. He didn’t screw all of them. Most of them, yes, but not all.

“I didn’t know you would pay attention. I’m touched that you care.”

She snorted, a rather loud sound and it made him laugh.

“O’Farrell. Your ego amazes me. Besides, I thought you might be doing it to compensate.”

Before he could say anything, the message alarm sounded on his telecommuter. The moment he noticed the number he answered.

“Whatcha got, Vicentes?”

“Hello, Vicentes. How are you doing, Vicentes?”

“Why don’t you kiss my ass, Vicentes?” Another snort sounded from the cockpit where Del had wandered. “Quit dicking around and tell me what you have.”

“There were two hits put out on Totter. One from his old boss, Ritter.”

“The one he was testifying against. Who was the other?”

“No idea. Just know that someone was putting out feelers, and they weren’t too discreet. Which makes me wonder who else wanted him dead and why.”

Dylan turned the implications around in his mind, trying to sort out just who the hell would want Totter

dead. The only one who would be after him was the boss he laundered money for. He had a clean slate other than that. Until someone had hired Del to find him. "Del."

"That was what I was thinking, too. Whoever hired the hit is in *her* past, not Totter's. I'd bet my left nut on it."

"Right. Start digging."

He switched it off and noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. Del leaned against the entryway to the room, her arms crossed over her chest and a scowl darkening her face.

"What was that about?"

"Totter was killed to get at you. Vicentes is sure of it. So, we are going to have a nice long chat about your past."

Chapter Three

Del shifted in her seat and frowned at O'Farrell. The way he was studying her was giving her the heebie-jeebies. It was as if he could figure out what made her tick. Inwardly, she snorted. If he could figure it out, she hoped he'd tell her.

"So, you get the call for Totter?"

She nodded and shifted again. The cold steel of the chair seeped through her clothes and chilled her bones. He'd brought her to the tiny dining area, offered her a seat and then sat down across the table. The only thing they were missing was a bright light to shine in her eyes.

"Yes. Peter said it was a good pay. The whole case hinged on Totter. Without him Ritter goes free."

"And, with your screw-ups lately, you didn't think it odd that he gave you this assignment?"

She swallowed. She had, but she wouldn't admit to it. "No."

He studied her, his green gaze somewhat disturbing. She'd heard Dylan was well known for his interrogation techniques. She now knew why, but she refused to be a victim for him. Even though her head still throbbed and her muscles ached from the stun gun hit, she wouldn't allow him the upper hand.

Straightening her spine, she smiled. "Peter has had a lot of problems lately. He's lost three hunters to other agencies. They're popping up all over the place. Besides, for every one of those *screw-ups*, I had three or four more that were as smooth as glass."

He grunted, but she didn't know if it was a yes or a no grunt. "Totter was big game."

Del tried not to be irritated by the disbelief in his voice. "Two months ago, he was. But talk amongst the hunters was he'd been terminated."

Dylan's eyebrows rose to his hairline. "I hadn't heard that."

"You know how hunters are. Always wanting to prove they're the big dick. With a reward like that, do you think they wanted to accept they couldn't find him? Any bounty hunter worth his salt would at least try to find Totter, but wouldn't admit that he couldn't. Especially for that amount of money. He was going for three times as much as the average collar."

"So, everyone thought he was dead. Why did you go looking for him?"

She sighed and shrugged. "Peter said that he had a great tip and since I'd saved his ass with that Desrali capture, he owed me a big score."

He placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. Del fought the urge to move back from the table, away from him. She would not show weakness in front of him. The problem was, when he was this close, she could see the golden flecks in his green eyes, could smell his cologne on his skin. It did funny things to her insides. Her heart flip-flopped when he smiled and his dimple appeared. Oh, she would love to kiss him right there. She'd love to run her fingers through that short, trimmed auburn hair and muss it up. Curling her fingers into the palms of her hands, she tamped down on those wayward thoughts. Even so, there was no denying her nipples tightened painfully as images of Dylan wearing nothing but that smile and what she would like to do with him flashed through her mind.

She shifted again. The fabric of her pants rubbed against her clit, heightening her arousal. Dammit, she could feel the dampness on her panties. She had to stop the insanity of this attraction. Not only was Dylan out of her league, he was also someone who could put her in detention on a whim. She didn't need to go through the hell of being involved with another asshole like that.

"I believe you. But what we have to do is decide why you, and who set you up. You have to tell me about your past."

She wanted to shout she didn't need to do anything. But, she knew the truth. "You know about my past. It's in my files."

"There isn't a lot there, Del."

"My life's an open book." Her face heated when she heard the catch in her throat. She battled her childhood memories. She would not let them get her down now.

"Sure, all the facts." He leaned back in his chair and threaded his fingers behind his head. "Your mother was unmarried. After ten years of her neglectful care, you were taken away by the government and placed in foster care. You were there until you turned sixteen and emancipated yourself. Then, nothing. You disappeared from the system until about a year ago."

She shrugged, trying to forget the many ways she'd had to scrape by to survive. "Ten years is no big deal, O'Farrell. I'm sure you did plenty during those years in your life you don't want in a file."

"Hmmm. Either way, it could be someone from your past. If you did some illegal --"

"I did nothing illegal." Even to her own ears she sounded defensive; she couldn't help it. She'd defended her decisions in the past, and it was a sore subject with her.

He studied her for a moment. "But it might've put you in contact with people who would like to set you

up.”

She looked away from his penetrating gaze. It was almost as unsettling as her attraction to him. Del thought he might be able to see right down into her soul. That disturbed her more than finding a dead body.

“I doubt anyone I knew then would have the money to hire a professional hit. And besides, most of them are probably dead or in places they don’t want to be found.”

Silence stretched out, and when Dylan didn’t say anything, she gathered her courage and looked at him. He’d crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at her. “Now why would you say it was professional?”

“Jesus, O’Farrell. One shot, back of the head. I might not be some fancy ass agent, but even my simple mind can wrap around the fact it was professional. I’d bet his old boss put it out.”

“No. He had a hit on him with a different cleaner.” He stood and for the first time she could remember, she watched as Dylan paced nervously. “This hit was for a reason. Not to get rid of Totter but to set you up.”

“But I know nothing. Everyone I’ve picked up went to trial and is detained. Unless something happened in the last forty-eight hours, and that would be odd seeing that this took awhile to set up.”

He chewed on his lower lip. A tad bit fuller than the top one, she watched as he grazed it with his teeth, back and forth. The action mesmerized her.

“We should get back to Earth in a little bit. We’ll go to headquarters --”

She shook her head. “No fucking way, Dylan. I’m not going to headquarters. I don’t trust them.”

He frowned. “Listen, I can’t be sure I can keep you safe on the street, Del. Someone wants you set up and locked away.” He leaned forward, the anger in his eyes at odds with his calm voice. She shivered as a chill raced down her spine. “And until I catch the bastard, I’m your new best buddy.”

* * * * *

Rafael Vincentes rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. He didn’t feel like being at headquarters at midnight on a Saturday night but damn if that wasn’t where he was. Sitting there waiting for O’Farrell to bring in his *chica* .

His aggravation dissolved when he thought about his best friend. That woman had him tied in knots and it was only a matter of time before the two of them ended up in bed. He just hoped the woman didn’t turn out to be a killer.

The door to the office area where several agents shared space slid open and O’Farrell marched in, his fingers wrapped around Littleton’s upper arm. From the mulish expression on her face, Rafael knew she’d knock O’Farrell in the *cojones* given the chance. They wound their way through the desks to reach his and it was hard to keep a straight face. Littleton was going out of her way to slug behind and slow O’Farrell down. They arrived at his desk and O’Farrell not so gently shoved her in the chair. Fire snapped in her eyes, but O’Farrell didn’t say a word. Tension fairly crackled between them. He’d bet O’Farrell would either throttle her or bed her before the week was over.

“Vicentes. Did you find anything?”

O’Farrell’s tone was cool but Vicentes could tell it was taking every ounce of control for him to keep from shouting.

“Got a lead on a cleaner. He’d been hired by someone recently, been bragging about the extra money he was making. Derrick Whiteside.”

“Did you track him down?”

Vicentes leaned back in his chair and let his gaze drift to Littleton. “Yeah. Found him, dead, shot in the head.”

Any color Del had drained from her face but she didn’t say a word. As she brushed the hair back from her face, her hand shook. From her reaction he was betting she didn’t know about the hit on Whiteside and he breathed a little easier. Dylan’s attraction could make things sticky but if Littleton was dirty, it would make it disastrous. Vicentes assumed she was an inept, hot tempered smart ass, but he just couldn’t see her doing anything illegal.

Dylan paced, as he always did when he was trying to think something through. “I don’t like the feel of this one, pal. Did anyone know you were looking into this?”

“No. I made sure just to use my most trustworthy contacts on the street.”

Littleton snorted. “Please don’t tell me you trusted snitches?”

He narrowed his eyes. “That is how real detectives find out info.”

She crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair. Even though much of the color had returned to her face, Vicentes noted the dark circles beneath her eyes and the fatigue that darkened them.

“So you just put the word out that you were looking for someone?” He nodded and she sighed. “Did you check them out before you did?”

“Of course I checked them out. I said --”

“Recently. Recently, Vicentes. When was the last time you checked out their finances, who they owe, what mess they’re in? And I’m talking about last week.”

Irritation threaded his voice. “I’ve used these people before.”

She rolled her eyes. “How do you all ever find anything? Do you ever keep witnesses alive? Now I know why Totter ran.”

He bolted out of his chair and loomed over the desk. “Just what the hell --”

“Stand down, Vicentes.” The deadly calm in Dylan’s voice caught his attention. He’d only heard it a few times and those who didn’t pay attention to it paid for their foolishness. “We all know mistakes were made with Totter. Del, here, has a problem with pouring salt into wounds. She’s really good at it.”

“When there’s a bit of truth to it, there’s a bit of sting. Right, Vicentes?” She was standing now, her expression defensive and somehow vulnerable. “Let me tell you about those people you trust. Those people who in the past have proven worthy. They’re street people. Yesterday’s best friend could knife you in the back without a thought today. They would sell their own children for their next fix when they’re under the influence. And some of them, the ones who are evil in the deepest parts of their souls, never see you as a friend but as a means to an end. They will use you and discard you faster than you can say Special Agent Vicentes. So, think about that next time you bandy my name about when looking for information.”

“Del, watch yourself.” Dylan’s voice had turned softer but was no less commanding than when he had reamed Vicentes.

She glanced over at Dylan but her expression didn’t soften. “No, you watch yourself. I listen to this shit constantly, how you all are the higher command, but we wouldn’t be here if you all could keep your recruitment numbers up, now, would we? You need bounty hunters because you couldn’t keep up with the trash. I go in without any backup, without any help. But with all your resources and gadgets, all you have is a dead witness and a dead cleaner.” She turned and started toward the door. Without turning she said, “And, just so both of you know, this is the first collar I lost. What number is it for you this year?”

Vicentes sighed. “You got your hands full with that one, *compadre* .”

Dylan nodded. “I know. See what you can find out about the cleaner and get back to me.”

As he watched his friend follow Del out the door, Vicentes wondered if Dylan really knew what he was getting into.

* * * * *

She was halfway down the hall before Dylan caught up with her. Punching numbers furiously, she apparently thought she would leave him behind and strike out on her own tonight. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back.

“Hold on there, Del. You’re a target. You go out there unprotected, you could be dead.”

Her eyes narrowed, her face flushed with anger. He could feel the heat of her through her uniform and a little thrill raced through him thinking about it. The scent of her -- musky, clean woman -- drifted over the scent of disinfectant. Dylan figured they must have just cleaned the hall.

“So, you think that you can protect me?”

“I can if you don’t do something stupid.”

She huffed and looked away. “At this point I think I’ll be better off on my own.”

“Like Totter?”

She glanced at him and pulled her arm out of his grasp. “No. Totter was an accountant. Do you think he knew anything about protecting himself? He was lucky he stayed alive long enough for you all to get his statement.”

Dylan tried to push aside the pride and anger but he knew it still showed in his voice. “You spend twenty

years doing your job, then you can give me an assessment on how I do mine, girlie.” He grabbed her arm and jerked her along behind him as he headed to the door. Knowing anger was a dangerous thing in this situation didn’t make a difference. Del always knew what buttons to push.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“What I’m doing is taking you out of here to a safe house. Then, we’ll get down to the nitty gritty and find out who the hell is after you so I can solve this case and get you the hell out of my hair.”

She didn’t strike back and instantly he felt guilty for the harsh comments. They weren’t that mean, but the tone had been nasty. She jerked her arm away again and walked through the opened door. Dammit, he hated to apologize, especially to women. They knew just how to use the fact you admitted you were wrong.

He hurried through the door and stopped at the scene in front of him. Two thugs stood, dressed in leather. The shorter of the two held Del against him, his fingers digging into her neck, a gun to her head.

“Welcome to the party, Agent O’Farrell.”

Chapter Four

Del took fast, shallow breaths trying to grab as much air as she could. It was hard with the idiot’s fingers digging into her throat. Damn O’Farrell for getting her so pissed, and damn these assholes for actually thinking they had a chance to beat her and O’Farrell.

“Easy, there, boy-o. You don’t want to hurt the little lady.”

She rolled her eyes as the two cleaners laughed.

“Little lady?” The one holding her motioned to his partner. “I’ve never heard Del Littleton referred to as a little lady. Even in her former career.”

The sneer in his voice was unmistakable. For a second, her heart stopped beating. Icy fear swam through her blood as she realized these men knew more about her than most. Even Peter. She’d kept that part of her past hidden.

Dylan cocked his head as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. “Well, you got me there. I was taught by my sainted mother to treat every female as I treated her. So I’m thinking you’re not that nice to your mother.”

Her captor’s partner growled and jumped forward. He’d moved before he had time to think so he had no weapon drawn. But he was bigger, outweighing Dylan by at least fifty pounds. He threw a punch with his right, which hit Dylan squarely on the jaw. After shaking his head a couple times, Dylan blocked the next punch with his forearm and leveled one of his own. He hit the thug in the nose. Blood spurted out. The thug grabbed his nose and when he did, Dylan pressed his advantage and punched him in the gut. The assailant doubled over.

Del realized at this point the thug's fingers were no longer digging into her neck as he stood watching the action. With a move she learned during her dancing days, she pulled her leg up and slammed down her heel hard on his instep. He released her with a curse. She elbowed him in the midsection then turned to face him. But, she'd forgotten about his gun. Even though he was bent at the waist, he held the gun on her.

"You fucking bitch." His finger massaged the trigger, but Dylan's voice stopped him.

"I'd think twice about that, boy-o."

All the blood drained from her assailant's face at the sound of Dylan's lethal threat. She glanced back and noticed Dylan had been joined by several agents, all armed, including Vicentes.

"I think you'll agree with me, pal. Drop the weapon and lace your hands behind your head."

He hesitated, but then did as Dylan instructed. The moment the gun hit the pavement, several agents rushed forward to take him into custody.

"So, girlie." Dylan draped his arm over her shoulders and turned her toward the building. "I guess I do know what I'm talking about. And from now on you'll listen to me, no arguments."

Anxiety, fear, and anger still skidded along her nerve endings. Her body almost shook with tension. She would not cry, not in front of these men, and not in front of Dylan. It was the reason she nodded and said not a word as he led her back into the building.

* * * * *

It took nearly two hours before they finished all the paperwork and he could whisk Del away to a safe house. He'd picked it because very few within the agency knew where it was. It wasn't much, just on the outskirts of DC in a suburb in Virginia. Once, it had been one of the better neighborhoods but the bad economy of the 21st century and the push to move even further away from the crime of the city had sent property values plummeting. And then the vultures moved in.

He pulled his vehicle into the driveway and clicked it into park. Glancing at Del, he found it hard to think that less than twenty-four hours had passed since they'd left Totter lying in a pool of his own blood. Her fatigue was evident in her slumped shoulders and the shadows beneath her eyes. Eyes, he knew now, that held many secrets. Just what did that asshole mean about her former career? He'd known at the time the man hit the mark because he'd seen the expression on Del's face. And he would find out. It seemed that everything about the woman fascinated him, from her shady past to the fact that she turned his blood hot even dressed like a mercenary. But, he would not press now. She'd never forgive him if he forced her secrets out of her when she was this vulnerable.

"Fancy digs, O'Farrell." Even in her state she somehow found a way to sneer at him. The fact that it turned him on, made him want to lean across the seat, grab and kiss her, should worry him.

"Hey, better than most we have, and this was one place I knew was secure."

She snorted, looked around to check out the area and then got out of the hover car. He followed suit.

"This isn't where you guys took Totter, is it?"

“No.” He wasn’t going to rise to the bait. Running on sexual tension, irritation and no sleep, it was going to be hard not to do.

They reached the front door and she leaned against the wall. “Cause it was my understanding that was the safest place in the country.” The sarcasm in her voice didn’t set well in his stomach. It pushed him over the edge.

He crowded her and placed a hand on the wall at her back, effectively caging her in.

“Listen, Del. I’m not in the mood to toy with you. I have no patience left. What I am doing could get me in a load of trouble. On top of that, I’m trying to convince myself not to hand you over to Vicentes for safekeeping.” Her eyes widened and she shook her head. “So this is how it’s going to be. You are going to shut the hell up. You’re going to haul that cute little ass inside and not say a word, not one sneering remark. ’Cause if you do I’m going to paddle your ass but good, do you understand me?”

He could have handled it if she’d made a smart remark, some comeback that would set him on edge. Instead, her eyes darkened and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. As she moved her teeth over her fuller lip, he stood mesmerized by the action. Heat poured through him. His blood drained from his brain and headed directly south. Need for her, to release the tension that had been building for months between them rushed through him. He bent his head, determined to capture her mouth when a horn sounded down the street, and he realized he was standing on the front porch with a woman someone wanted to kill, about to make out. Like a freaking rookie.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph.”

He pulled away, keyed in the code to open the door and then pulled her inside. Slamming the door shut he pressed her back against it and gave in to the urge that had been driving him insane since the moment he’d met her. He touched his mouth to hers. She gasped. The quick intake of breath was one of the most erotic sounds he’d ever heard. Just one quick kiss; that was all he needed, just to feel her lips, taste her. But the moment he did, all rational thought fled.

Too many times he had wondered what this would be like. To have her body against his, to taste her need. Del placed her hands on his shoulders. His hands went to her hips, pulling her against him. She moaned and gyrated her hips. He could feel the very heat of her core through their clothing. Lust and something unfamiliar blazed through him. He wanted to rip off her clothes and sink into that tight hot pussy, feel her muscles clasp around his cock, and lose himself in her.

She pulled away from him and placed a hand on his chest. Bending his head, he kissed a path from her jaw down her neck to her shoulder.

“Dylan.” The sound of her voice, husky with desire ... need ... shot straight through to his cock. He curled his toes inside his shoes to keep from losing control and coming in his pants.

“Dylan.”

He noticed then that she was pushing against his chest. She wanted to stop? Dylan pulled himself back and looked down at her. “Ahh, Del, don’t say no.” It was pathetic. His own voice showed his need for her, and it probably told her he was just a hair’s breadth away from going down on his knees and begging.

“We have to check the house.”

Shit. Again he was acting like an idiot rookie. There were men wanting to kill her, or at least abduct her, and he was dry humping her like a freaking out of control eighteen-year-old. Almost forty years old, he should know better.

Regretfully, he pulled away and tried not to get annoyed at her sigh of relief. He glanced at her. Her skin was flushed, her lips reddened, and she was still trying to catch her breath. “We’re not done, you and I. So don’t be thinking I’ll forget you were moaning my name a second ago.”

Her eyes widened at his tone, which was harsh because he was sporting a boner that could probably hammer a nail into steel. Without another word, he spun away and began to search the house. Most of the furnishings were outdated and used, but from the looks of it, things had been left undisturbed since he’d been here a month ago.

He looked through the kitchen, trying his best to concentrate, but with little blood left in his brain, it was hard. The pantry was full, as he requested Vicentes to stock it, and there were enough things in the refrigeration unit to keep them going for at least a week. But he wasn’t hungry.

Dammit, he could still taste her in his mouth. She’d been so sweet, so utterly delectable he didn’t know if he would ever get enough. He jumped back from that thought. One time. That was all he needed to get the spitfire out of his blood. Well, maybe two. And then he could move on.

He sensed movement at the door and he knew it was Del.

“The bathroom and the bedrooms are clean. All windows are secure.”

Nodding, he really didn’t pay much attention to her comments as he walked to her. She backed away from him, to give him room to go through the doorway but instead of going past her, he slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her against him. He closed his eyes and sighed. Jesus God, nothing ever felt this good.

Glancing down, he noticed her eyebrows knitted in confusion, or was it concentration? As if she were trying to come up with something to say, something to explain that this just wasn’t going to happen. He slipped his finger beneath her chin and raised it until he could look into her eyes. Doubt was there but he only saw desire. It was like a swift kick to the ribs. He wanted her. There was no way around it so he laid it on the line.

“Why don’t we go try out that king-sized bed, Del?”

Chapter Five

Del’s body throbbed with a want so strong she almost passed out from it. Her mind spun with denials she could throw at him. This would complicate things. They were wrong for each other. They would drive each other to murder within a day or two. But all those thoughts dissolved when he smiled, a dimple winking at her. She couldn’t think beyond wanting to touch him. And have him touch her.

“O’Farrell --”

“You called me Dylan just a few minutes ago.” His smile widened. “In fact, you moaned my name.”

She blushed. She wasn't the most experienced of women, but neither was she ashamed of her sexuality. One thing she wasn't ready for was Dylan's flirting. A man that lethal should come with a warning on the package. She could feel his heart beat, the heat of him, against her and the only thing that came to mind was yes. But she pushed it back, trying to be logical.

“Dylan. Are you sure --”

He bent his head and kissed her. Quick, hot, it melted her knees. It was more request than demand and she felt it to her toes. When he pulled back, both of them drew in an unsteady breath.

“Oh, I'm sure, Del.”

She knew, somewhere back in the logical part of her brain that seemed to have gone to sleep, that she should say no. That she should deny this because it would just end up a mess. But as she looked up at him, she couldn't form the word. She wanted him. Even if it was for this one night, she wanted to touch another person, feel close to him, feel wanted. He must have seen the answer on her face, in her eyes, because without a word he grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hall.

As soon as they were through the door, he pulled her into his arms. His lips were on hers, his hands slid to her rear end, urging her closer against the thick length of his cock. She moved against him, eliciting a groan from Dylan.

“You'll be the death of me, Del,” he said against her lips. His voice held a hint of amusement but it was overpowered by the sexual need she heard. Never in her life had she heard anything so sweet.

She cupped his face as he lifted her off the floor. Wrapped her legs around his waist as he stumbled to the bed. They fell with an oomph, neither one of them paying much attention. It was as if both of them knew that they didn't have anything but this short time together and they were going to take all they could.

He broke from her lips and kissed a path down her neck to her chest. His fingers deftly flicked open each button of her shirt as his mouth moved over her skin. His tongue darted out, wetting her skin, sending heat coursing through her veins. When he reached the last button, he drew back from her and pushed the fabric aside. His gaze fastened on her breasts. Cool air washed over her already sensitive, hardened nipples. Heat flared in his eyes as he skimmed his fingers over her breasts.

“Lord have mercy, Del. If I'd known what you were hiding under all those horrible clothes, I'd have stripped you months ago.”

She should have been mad. But a curl of pleasure warmed her belly at the admiration she heard in his voice. The backs of his fingers slipped teasingly over one nipple then the next. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself the pleasure of having his hands on her. The light touch drove her almost over the edge of sanity. She allowed it. Del had never felt anything so blissfully erotic in her life. Virginity wasn't something she could remember. It had been too many years, and too many forgettable encounters. Dylan made her feel as if this were something different, something for the first time.

He pinched her nipple lightly and her breath caught in her throat. She felt it all the way to her pussy. She squirmed as a gush of liquid wet her lips. Her clit was already sensitive, wanting attention and they were

mostly clothed.

“Like that, do you?”

The chuckle in his voice slid down her spine and curled into her heart. He slid his hand to her nipple and bent his head to take the other into his mouth. The moment he pinched one nipple, he swept his tongue over the other.

Jesus. He continued the same movements as she tangled her fingers through his thick hair. He moved back over her, not breaking his ministrations. Before she was satisfied, he moved away, kissing a path down her belly. She came up on her elbows and looked down at him. Dylan was already unbuttoning her pants, kissing the skin he revealed. When he had them undone, he looked up at her, and the grin on his face wasn't one of a seductive, trained lover. It was pure pirate. As if he were the conquering hero and she the treasure he sought.

“You have the most amazing skin, Del. All soft.” He bent his head and nipped at the skin just above her thatch of hair. Oh, God. “I'd never thought you would feel like silk under that tough exterior.”

“Dylan.”

It was more a demand, or maybe a request. Either way, he apparently knew what she needed. He stood up, grabbed her pants, and tore them off her. Dropping to his knees at the foot of the bed, he latched onto each of her legs and pulled her to the edge of the bed. Slipping his hands between her thighs, he pulled them further apart.

He pressed a kiss against her inner thigh. His tongue darted out, his breath was hot against her, and every nerve ending in her body shivered.

“Hmmm. You are definitely a delight, Del. All this muscle -- great legs, by the way -- but the skin of a goddess.”

His lips moved up her thigh, and when they reached their destination, he paused. Frustrated, she looked down at him. He caught her gaze and then leaned forward and licked her slit.

One swipe of his tongue drew her closer to the edge. Heat gathered in her stomach, and as it slid to her groin, she felt another gush of hot liquid fill her sex. The moment his tongue slipped into her, every thought and feeling centered on racing toward the finish line.

She let loose a frustrated growl when he pulled back just as she felt herself slipping. He chuckled but rose to his feet and discarded his clothes.

“You thinking I'll let you go without me along for the ride, love?” His Irish brogue had thickened with his arousal.

When he was completely naked, her heart turned over. Good Lord, the man was a work of art. All hard muscle and strength. She licked her lips. Her gaze traveled down his body, studying the developed chest and ab muscles. His erection jutted out from a nest of auburn hair. Her eyes widened and her mouth went dry at the length and thickness. Good God almighty, she'd never seen anything she wanted more.

“Del.” She looked up at the sound of her name on his lips. “You've done the shots.”

It took her a moment to remember that he was talking about the contraceptive/disease shots required by each bounty hunter and agent. She nodded and thought he said something like thank God. But she missed it because the next moment he was on the bed with her, pulling her to the top of the bed and settling on top of her. She sighed. It pleased her to feel his skin against hers, his chest hair against her breasts, his cock throbbing against her pussy. He drew himself up, and resting his weight on one hand, he took his cock in hand and entered her in one fast thrust.

“Oh, bloody hell, that feels good.”

He moved slightly, pulling back a fraction then shoving himself back into her. Catching onto the rhythm, she joined in. He kissed her, and she could taste herself on his lips. As both of them edged closer, he pulled himself up to his knees, grabbing holding of her hips. It drove him unbelievably deeper.

“Oh, yeah, that’s it, Del. Baby, come for me.” He massaged her clit with one of his fingers. Her body tightened, her muscles preparing. Picking up speed, he slammed into her over and over again. Her eyes slid closed as her body moved beyond. “Come on, let loose, let me see you come, do it.”

He pressed down hard as he muttered his demands. The next instant, her body exploded into convulsions as a myriad of bright colors flashed behind her closed lids. As she came floating down, she opened her eyes. In that moment he slammed into her once more and came, groaning her name. He collapsed on her a few seconds later. Del wrapped her arms around him. She felt his breath on her neck, his heart beating hard against her breast, and knew she was in way over her head.

After several minutes, Dylan raised his head and smiled down at her. The curve of his lips told her that he was pretty proud of himself, and he should be, but it was the look in his eyes that bothered her. There was something there, something akin to tenderness that sent a spurt of panic to her chest. She didn’t do well when people got all icky with feelings. It was intimate, scary, and she failed each and every time feelings got involved.

“Now, don’t get your dander up, love. There are a few things to discuss, but I think if we don’t get dressed, I’ll just have to make love to you again. And although nothing would please me more, we have to figure out who wants you dead.”

* * * * *

Minutes later they were in the kitchen fixing a simple meal. Dylan was still trying to push aside his feelings about their lovemaking. It had never been a problem before, but concentration was hard to come by. Damn, but the woman had thrown him for a loop. Sliding into her had felt like heaven and hell wrapped up into one confusing bundle.

He pushed away from those thoughts and tried to focus on Del, who was wearing nothing but his shirt, which showed off her spectacular legs.

He cleared his throat. “So, you gonna tell me what the hell those two goons were talking about?”

She hesitated in cutting her sandwich, then resumed her actions.

“You know, you can try to ignore me but I will get the information out of you.”

She sighed, a sound so sad and filled with resignation that he had to fight the urge to pull her into his arms. She would probably get pissed and knock him upside the head. Also, if he did that, he’d never get

to the truth.

When she finally faced him, her mouth was turned down in a frown. Something akin to regret flashed in her eyes and disappeared before she masked it. She raised her chin and crossed her arms beneath her breasts.

“You have to promise that no matter what I say, what you hear from me, you’ll not tell anyone, unless it is pertinent to the investigation. I’ll castrate you myself, I swear I will.”

He nodded and held his breath. Her gaze wavered but she steadied herself.

“I used to be a dancer.”

Letting loose of the breath, he smiled. “A dancer. What’s so wrong with that?”

She groaned and rolled her eyes. “An exotic dancer. I used to strip, O’Farrell.”

He chuckled. “I know what you meant. What’s the big deal?”

“What’s the big deal?” She turned and paced in front of him. “If men in my business knew about that, I would have no credibility. Peter knows, but that’s it.”

“Anyone from your past might have a grudge against you? Customer, boss, another dancer?”

Just the thought of her dancing drove him insane. She’d be fantastic too. Those legs, those wonderful breasts. He sighed. The fact that men had seen her didn’t turn him off so much as make him possessive. He’d like to pretend he was the only one who’d enjoyed her body, even though he sounded like an asshole for just thinking it.

She stopped pacing and shook her head. “No. I worked at Joy’s Palace, and you know the clientele.”

“Joy’s?” Only the most exclusive club in DC. “And how long did you work there?”

She leaned against the counter and smiled. “Three and a half years. Made some damn fine money. Then I went into bounty hunting.”

He cocked his head to the side and studied her. “Strange jump in jobs there. Stripper to bounty hunter.”

“I liked dancing but it was getting old. The hours sucked, but worse, they’d started the freak show of a commission trying to outlaw all the clubs. I decided to get out while the getting was good. Joy was selling the club and I didn’t know what the new owner would be like.” She shrugged. “Peter was a friend of Joy’s and they hooked me up.”

“Are you sure there was no one? No crazy fan?”

“No. I’m sure there were freaks just like everywhere else, but no one who stood out. And why wait so long? Doesn’t make sense. Besides, I doubt many of them would recognize me now. My hair was longer, I plastered my face with makeup and I danced under a different name.”

“I would have liked to see that.”

She snorted. “Yeah, I figured you’d like to see me dance.”

He shook his head. “No. Although, I’d be happy to see you strip.” She blushed and he chuckled. Del Littleton blushing. Who’d have thought it? “What I meant was I’d liked to have seen you with long hair. What was your stage name?”

She cleared her throat and mumbled.

“Ah, I didn’t quite get that.”

“Delilah.”

“As in Samson?”

“As in Del.”

“You’re real name is Delilah? That’s not in your records.”

“My mother hated the name, so everything except my birth certificate has Del on it.”

“Interesting. I kind of like that name. Delilah.”

“I don’t and if you don’t want a knee to the groin, you better not use it again.”

She was so cute, standing there in his shirt, an indignant look on her face. A curl of heat slid into his heart before he could stop it. Something primal, basic, possessive. He wanted to shout about it at the top of his lungs, but from her frown he figured she’d object.

“So, we go back through your cases. Vicentes is working on that right now. He should be here tomorrow.”

“You have to promise not to tell anyone about my dancing.” She started to pace again.

“Uh-huh.”

The movements of her legs caused the tail of the shirt to flap. With each step, he was rewarded with a glimpse of her upper thigh.

“Can you imagine? They’d all start coming onto me.”

“Yeah, can’t have that.”

Damn, she was cute when she was riled. How had he not noticed that before? Probably because every time they fought, it’d been foreplay. Foreplay to the best sex of his freaking life. Just thinking about it brought back the sounds ... the tastes ... He’d never tasted anything as sweet as Del Littleton.

As she continued to rant, he started to plan. Maybe, he could convince her they’d eat later. He wanted the shirt off her and himself in. He could just picture those pretty little tits with her nipples hard from arousal, her pussy hot, wet with need for him. His cock twitched then throbbed.

“O’Farrell, are you paying attention to me?”

He shook his head trying to bring back rational thought and to remember what she said last.

“Have you noticed, Del, that you use my last name when you are irritated with me?”

She sighed. “O’Farrell, we don’t have time for stupid questions like that.”

He stepped forward and stopped her pacing. Grabbing her by the waist he lifted her to the counter, bringing their mouths to an even level. She squeaked, a totally feminine sound that made his heart skip a beat. He’d never thought to hear such a sound from Del before today, but now he wanted more of those sounds. And her laughter. Oh, and her moans.

“I know when you do say my first name.” He nipped at her lips. “You moan it, if I do remember correctly. I would very much like to try that again.”

Chapter Six

Dylan smiled at the shocked expression on Del’s face and decided to press his advantage. Without closing his eyes, he pressed his lips against hers. As he kissed her, he enjoyed watching her eyes turn cloudy with passion and her eyelids slowly drift downward.

He pulled her to the edge of the counter as her hands slid over his shoulders and into his hair. Damn, it had been less than an hour and the woman had him harder than a pike and ready to ride her until dawn.

He left her lips to nip at her neck, flicking his tongue over the delicate skin. Del was a mass of contradictions. Tough, but vulnerable. Hard to deal with, but damn, she was sweet when she surrendered.

As he pulled her earlobe between his teeth, she shivered. Her breasts shifted against him. The fabric of his shirt was the only thing separating them and he felt the turgid tips of her nipples. Moving to nuzzle and kiss the skin behind her ear, he deftly unbuttoned the shirt. That accomplished, he pulled back from her and slipped the shirt off.

“Beautiful.” She shook her head and he ignored her because she was beautiful. Not in the traditional sense, but that had never appealed to Dylan. Individual in spirit, in mind, she was more woman than those he’d touched before. A drop of pre-cum wet the head of his cock, but he tamped down on his needs. Lean muscle, soft skin, pert, sensitive breasts. Damn, he didn’t think he’d ever find another woman who responded like she did. She was one of the most beautiful things he’d ever seen. He could admit to himself that he wanted her more than she probably wanted him, and usually that would piss him off. Or scare the hell out of him, but for some reason, this time he didn’t give a damn.

He dipped his head and licked one nipple while rolling the other between his fingers. She moaned his name and her hands were in his hair again. She squirmed on the counter and he could just bet she was already dripping. He closed his eyes, battling his inner demons, wanting to wait, to draw out the anticipation. His dick was pressed so hard against his fly he was still amazed he hadn’t come in his pants.

“Dylan.” His name came out on a breathless moan that sank into the deepest part of his soul. He

wanted -- no -- needed to hear that surrender, that corresponding need in her voice.

He looked up at her. "Delilah." Her fingers clenched in his hair and pulled him up level to her face.

"Do not --"

He stopped her with a quick hard kiss, which made her lose her hold on him. Sinking to his knees, he placed a hand on each thigh and spread them wide. Her pink lips were already wet, as he'd suspected. He leaned forward and inhaled. The musky scent of her arousal was almost his undoing. But he wanted another taste. He wanted his mouth on that pretty little pussy when she came.

Without hesitation, he pushed his tongue between her lips and tasted her. Hot, spicy and so fucking sweet. In and out he moved his tongue, licking, nipping, sucking. He'd moved his hands from her thighs to cup her ass, to pull her closer. Her legs moved restlessly against his face, her moans increased. He moved to lick her clit and then inserted a finger.

Her inner muscles clamped down hard on him, pulling him deeper. Damn, she was tighter than a fist. He couldn't wait to shove his cock in her again, to fill her with his cum. She was moving in rhythm with him now, her hips keeping time with his fingers. He added another and took her clit between his teeth. Her muscles tightened around him and then she exploded. Her body convulsed as she screamed his name, her hands on his head, keeping his face against her. As if he would move. Her sweet cream poured over his hand, and he moved down to lick it as it seeped from her.

She moaned his name again and it was more than he could take. He rose to his feet, clawed at his trousers. The second they were open he had his cock in hand and pushed his way into that sweet, hot pussy. She leaned back, placing her hands on the counter behind her while he placed his hand at the small of her back to steady her. He began to pound into her, her inner muscles clamping tight, pulling him deeper into her core.

"Oh, yeah, Del, that's it, baby." He could feel another gush of liquid and knew she was with him, building to another explosion. She groaned louder as he flexed his hips, angling for a slightly different position. "You like that, do ya, baby?"

She arched her back and he took a nipple into his mouth, nipping and licking. His body shook with a need for release, to pour out his seed and mark her as his. Lifting his head, he slid one hand down her stomach, to her clit. With the flick of his finger she came again, her own orgasm causing her cunt to bite down hard on his dick and pull him even deeper. His balls drew tight and with two more pumps, he came. He shouted her name as he poured himself into her, losing himself in the feeling ... in the woman, knowing that nothing would ever feel as good as this.

* * * * *

Del woke the next morning to an empty bed. She knew Dylan was nearby because she heard the rumble of his voice in the other room. Stretching her arms over her head, she winced. Even in all the years she danced, she'd never had such a work out. The man was playful, seductive, and the most accomplished lover she'd ever had. She smiled when she thought of the number of times they'd made love, then fallen asleep in each others' arms.

Her smile faded when she thought of the end of the assignment. Dammit, she was growing attached to him and they had only been together for a couple of days. Del didn't expect people to hang around, especially men, so she'd just have to accept that he would leave. There was nothing to this relationship

but good sex. Okay, great sex. And no matter how many times her heart turned over at the sight of his smile, or how many times she got a strange, fuzzy warm feeling in the pit of her stomach when she thought about touching him, she would just accept it. Swallowing a strange sense of panic, she sat up. It would not do to lie around all day in bed. The sooner they figured out who was after her, the sooner they could get on with their lives. She sighed. It should make her determined to find the culprit who set her up but she could only think of how much she would miss touching Dylan.

“That’s not the look I like to see on my lover’s face the morning after a night of good loving.”

She glanced at him and tried to smile. His Irish brogue was thick with sleepiness, making it deeper. And, dammit, he was cute. Tousled hair, sleepy green eyes, only wearing a pair of pants, she could eat him up. She licked her lips and he chuckled.

“I’d love to accommodate that sinful thought, but we have company arriving any minute.”

She frowned as he approached the bed. “Who?”

“Vicentes. He has all the files on your collars so we might be able to find something there. Thought you might want to jump in the shower.”

“We took one last night.”

“We actually didn’t do much cleaning if I remember correctly.”

Heat crept into her face. “Yeah, well ...”

He sat on the bed next to her and cupped her face. Pressing his mouth to hers, he kissed her, his tongue stealing past her lips, tangling with hers. It was over in a matter of seconds but her heart was pounding and she knew her legs would be weak if she tried to stand.

He kept his hands on her face. “How are you this morning, Delilah?”

“Oh, God.” She closed her eyes, trying to remember everything she’d told him the night before. She opened them to find him staring at her, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.” His voice had deepened, and the sound of it sent a tingle down her spine. He nipped at her lips and then kissed her nose and let her go. “Take a shower and I’ll cook breakfast.”

He was gone a moment later, and she swallowed the lump in her throat. No one had ever treated her so tenderly, as if she were something precious. And she knew she would never have that from another person as long as she lived. She closed her eyes trying to block out the feelings -- love, anxiety, pain -- but it was no use. She felt the tears wetting her face before she knew she was crying.

Drawing in a deep breath she headed to the bathroom for the shower where she could cry without Dylan knowing. She didn’t want him to know she’d been blubbering like a little girl. They both knew the score. They’d solve the case, enjoy each other, and then part ways.

And somehow, just somehow, she’d continue without having him to touch.

* * * * *

Dylan leaned his head against the wall. Del wouldn't appreciate it if she knew he'd heard her crying. She hadn't been loud but he'd heard her nonetheless. What was worse, he had no idea what to do about it. Just what the hell do you do with a crying woman?

Years in the Agency had kept Dylan from making permanent commitments. His job had been too important to him. Sure, there were married agents, but they tended to take the desk jobs a few years after the wedding. Either for safety or to appease the spouse. Dylan had wanted no part of that. He didn't shun family -- hard to do with seven brothers and sisters. But he'd stayed away from women who wanted commitments.

Del wasn't one for commitments, either. For some reason the thought left a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. Several times between their bouts of lovemaking, he'd simply sat there and watched her sleep. For such a pain in the ass, Delilah Littleton had resembled an angel while asleep. He really didn't know what he would do about her. His life was a mess. The job had gotten old, and he needed out. But what would he do with himself? He'd been an agent for nearly twenty years. The job, the red tape bullshit. He didn't know how to be anything else.

The water turned off, and he started down the hall. He didn't want her to know he'd been standing there like a lovesick fool waiting for her to finish. As he powered up the coffee machine, he decided that tension was causing all these morbid thoughts of commitment and future jobs. He had to finish this job and then he could decide where to go, what to do next. Freedom was what he wanted, and that is what he had always had.

Rubbing his chest, he wondered why the hell it sounded so boring now.

"So, where is this big breakfast you promised me?"

He whipped around. Del stood, her face scrubbed clean, her hair slicked back, and his heart flipped and then fell to his stomach. She'd dressed in her camouflage again, but he knew what lay beneath the stiff fabric and it sent his pulse pounding. He swallowed.

"I'm working on it."

She smiled and stood on her toes to give him a kiss. It was quick, light, and he felt it all the way to the soles of his feet. She wandered past him to the coffee pot. Clean, sweet, her scent drifted around him, and just for a second he debated grabbing her and dragging her back to bed. All thoughts of the investigation disappeared. The fact that Vicentes should show up any moment didn't matter either. But, as he stepped toward her, glass shattered, the crash echoing through the house. Gunfire followed. They both hit the floor. Nerves and aggravation swept through him, along with a good dose of adrenaline.

"You have a weapon with you?" Her question told him she probably didn't have one on her.

"No." Dammit, he'd been acting like a fucking rookie again. He was supposed to keep her safe and he was walking around half dressed, no weapon. He'd barely checked outside. "I think it came from the living room."

He looked over at her ready to reassure her but it was a waste. She had bit down on her lip, and she was already thinking of a way out of there.

"I think we can get to the bedroom. There's a blind spot in that hallway. And, I haven't heard any glass

crunching so we should still be alone.” Steady but threaded with nerves, her voice was just a whisper and he leaned his head closer to be able to hear. “I’m assuming that’s where you have your weapon.”

“Follow me. I want to make sure that they can’t see us as we head back.”

Her lips thinned and she nodded. Del didn’t like taking orders but he wasn’t in the mood to argue. As he crawled, he heard talking outside and another barrage of gunfire. But all of it seemed to be random, with no clear goal. Distraction. That had to be what they were trying to do, but to what purpose? He shimmied down the hall and rolled aside to allow Del through the door. He shut it and crawled to get his weapon and his shirt. Pulling on the shirt, he fastened the buttons. She’d already grabbed a weapon and was making sure it was loaded.

“I think they are trying to distract us.”

She looked at him and smiled. “I was thinking the same thing. Figure they’re waiting to make sure it’s just the two of us.

“Makes sense. I’m just trying to figure out how they found out. Hardly anyone knows about this place.”

“You called Vicentes, and he’s headed here.”

He didn’t like the insinuation in her voice. His tone was cold. “Vicentes has honor, and he’s my best friend. I know he would never turn us over.”

She paled and her lips turned down. “I wasn’t saying he would, but unless you made damn sure the house was secure, you might have given away our location. I didn’t see you going around testing for electronic sensors last night.”

Another round of gunfire erupted and they waited for it to end, both of them eyeing the other. As soon as it stopped, the bedroom window slid open, and the figure of a man stood silhouetted against the rising sun.

Chapter Seven

Del’s heart pounded. Her throat and mouth dry, she tried to swallow the panic. Both of them pointed their weapons at the window and waited. She knew Dylan was ready to fire, but until now, she’d never killed another person. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the determination on Dylan’s face and knew he wouldn’t hesitate.

“You better have a damn good reason for breaking and entering.”

The threat was clear in his voice. She suppressed a shiver.

“See if I come and save your sorry ass, *gringo* .”

She knew that voice. “Vicentes?”

He chuckled. "Of course it's me. Come on. The asses out front seem to be milling around waiting for someone, but no one was scoping out the back." The disgust in his voice almost made her laugh. *Nerves* .

"Jesus, Vicentes, you scared the hell out of us."

"Come on, they're sitting back not doing anything. They have no idea you're about to be rescued. They seem to be waiting for someone, or something."

She wanted to ask him if he'd told anyone, but a warning look from Dylan told her that he wouldn't let her interrogate Vicentes.

Grabbing her jacket, she slipped it on trying to hide the fact her hands were shaking. She climbed onto the bed and out the window, dropping on the ground with a grunt. Dylan followed landing on his feet with no problem.

"Looking kind of cute, Littleton." Vicentes smiled down at her and she got a hinky feeling. Vicentes always tried his best to worm information out of people using his charm.

"Well, you're not, jackass."

"Do you two mind? I really don't want to get my blasted brains blown out because you have to fight."

"Whatever you say, boss, but I was wondering where Littleton got that hickey on her neck."

She gasped and touched her neck as if she could tell it was there by feeling for it. "I do not."

"You do." He glanced at Dylan, his eyes were dancing with amusement. "I take it you're responsible?"

"Damn right, I'm responsible. I like to mark my territory." The amusement in his voice was apparent and she turned to face him. She wanted to smack that damn arrogant smile off his face.

Irritation shot through her, chilling her fear and adding heat to her anger. "Mark your territory. Why you son of --"

They heard some shouting out front and all three of them sobered.

"Got my hover car in the alley."

She stepped in line behind him, Dylan followed. All of them kept their attention on their surroundings as they headed to the vehicle. She climbed into the backseat, the men in front. Vicentes keyed in his code and drove down the alley, the silence within the vehicle stretching out as the tension rose. Her palms were sweating as he turned in the opposite direction of the house and headed away from whoever had staked them out. They all let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Tell me how you knew to park out back?" Dylan's voice was all business.

"Got a call. Said there was a hit put out on Del."

Del felt her blood drain from her face, leaving her body cold. "Someone put a hit out on me?"

"Yeah. I have no idea how, but they bid three million."

“Jesus,” Dylan said, his voice soft but deadly. He looked at her. “Do you have any idea? Anything at all? Men don’t put out that kind of money because a bounty hunter threw them in jail.”

“Really, I don’t know. I have no idea.”

“I have a theory on that one myself.”

Both of them looked at Vicentes.

“I think this might have to do with the Totter case. Maybe he’d had friends in high places, know what I mean?”

“He was a second-rate accountant.” And so bad, he was caught in no time flat by the FBI. “He couldn’t even launder money to save himself.”

“There’s a case file on him at the FBI that has nothing to do with this case. It has to do with his former career.”

“Former career? I thought he was just a lowly accountant.” Dylan’s voice sharpened with each word.

“Up until five years ago, our Mr. Totter used to be a hit man. FBI thought he’d gone straight, but he started having financial problems, started laundering money and then, he lost quite a bit of money on a land deal in the Silicanina Sector. Seems speculation was he was cleaning again.”

Just her luck, her one big collar was probably dirtier than the man he was supposed to testify against. “Well, shit.”

* * * * *

Vicentes drove them to a hideaway nobody but he and Dylan knew about. They’d used it once for a safe house and had since used it as a sort of getaway. Their stressful jobs made it necessary to jump out of the city every now and then, and the rustic cabin in the woods was the perfect escape. Built in the latter part of the twentieth century, it was an old-fashioned log cabin, complete with a porch and a wood-burning fireplace. Surrounded by trees, there was only one road in. It always looked like something out of movie to Dylan but he couldn’t help but appreciate the hominess compared to the sleek quarters he had in DC.

Dylan glanced at Del as she slumbered in the backseat. He should’ve taken her here in the first place. It was secluded but he hadn’t liked the idea of being out there alone. If something happened to him who knows what would’ve happened to her. She’d be alone, no one to help. Del was tough, but the men after her now weren’t her typical perp.

“You gonna have some major problems with that one, *compadre* .”

He glanced at Vicentes. “Major problems? A bounty on her head -- I would say so.”

“I’m talking about after.”

“After what?”

“After you clear this up. She’s going to fight you all the way, that one.”

He grunted but didn’t comment. Once they arrived, Del awoke and the three of them surveyed the area. Once they felt everything was fine, they unloaded the supplies and settled into the cabin.

Two hours later, they’d poured over every case she’d worked on. “I told you, there is nothing. I know nothing at all.”

“There has got to be something, Del. Is there anything you’re hiding from your days before bounty hunting?”

She sighed and shot Dylan a nasty look. She really wanted to rip into him, but she noticed the fatigue stamped on his face and the worry in his eyes. He truly wanted to help and she had been a bitch and a half for the last hour.

“No. Nothing. Maybe it has something to do with Totter. But what, I have no idea.”

“Tell you what,” Vicentes said, his voice as tired as theirs. “Why don’t we take a break and grab a bite to eat? We need some wood.”

He rose to get it but she stood and waved him back down.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Del, it’s not safe for you to go out alone.”

She wanted to tell him it wasn’t any of his damn business, but she couldn’t. Because somewhere between making love and running for their lives, she’d realized how much she loved the jackass. And truth be known, she thought he had some kind of rights.

“Dylan. We checked out the place. There is no one here. It’s right by the porch. I’ll be back in a moment, maybe two.”

He studied her, his gaze roving over her face.

“I need some fresh air, that’s all.”

He nodded and she hurried out the door. She let it close behind her, and leaned against it for a moment. The tension had grown throughout the ride and while they discussed her cases. For the most part, she was proud of her work and she’d felt some kind of pride when she saw Dylan realize she was one of the busiest bounty hunters in DC.

The cold night air seeped through her clothes, and she decided to get a move on before she got too cold. She stepped off the porch, heard the crunch of snow and turned. The next moment, pain exploded in her head, stars formed before her eyes, and then everything faded to black.

Chapter Eight

As soon as the door shut, Vicentes looked at him out of the corner of his eye and smiled.

“That woman knows how to handle herself. One thing I like about her is she doesn’t complain about the quarters, her hair, or if she broke a nail.”

Dylan smiled. “Yeah. True. I just don’t like the way she’s acting. Do you think she could know something she’s keeping from us?”

Vicentes shook his head. “No. She doesn’t know. But I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

He stood and walked away from the table then turned to face Dylan. “I mean that anyone who knows you, and you know I do, can tell you’re in love with the woman. Jesus, you almost got your dick shot off because you weren’t paying attention to the job. You’ve never done that before. Ever.” He crossed his arms over his chest, leaned against the counter and narrowed his eyes. “You are in love with her. You aren’t concentrating on the job as much as you’re concentrating on her.”

“She *is* the job.” But panic was settling in his chest, his heart skipped a couple beats. Everything Vicentes said made sense, but damn if he wanted to admit it.

“Really. So tomorrow we solve this, and you can walk away. You’d have no problem leaving her, letting her go on to her next man, her next whatever.”

Anger rushed through him at the thought of any man touching her. Anger he had no right to feel but he didn’t give a damn. She was his.

Fuck.

“Yeah. I see you might just understand now.”

“The job --”

“Isn’t any harder to do than hers. Isn’t any more dangerous, and besides, you want to get out. You’re sick of the crap, you told me yourself. You should think about going into her business.”

“Bounty hunting?”

“Yeah, think about it. Your job has been to oversee it. Good name in the business. You could start your own company.”

It was too much to think about. His head was still spinning when he thought about Del, about his feelings for her. Every time she snarled at him, he wanted her. Damn, he had to be in love to want to bed a she-cat like her. His heart was finally getting back to normal when they heard a thud and then feet shuffling outside.

Both men were on their feet and running toward the back door, weapons drawn and readied. They each took a side to the doorway, Vicentes glancing out the small square window in the door.

“One man, has a hover jet.” Dylan had to strain to hear his voice.

“No one else?”

He shook his head and motioned with his hands telling Dylan they were to the right of the door and that he would knock the door down. Vicentes kicked down the door and the two men rushed through it. The moment he jumped off the porch and saw Del slumped over the jet, his heart stopped and then fell to his stomach.

The man sitting behind her turned, startled at the noise, his eyes wide with surprise. He tried to start the jet but it refused to turn over. Jumping off, he grabbed Del and held her in front of him. The man was only slightly taller than Del and not that big. It was a struggle for him to carry her dead weight. The halogen security light clicked on with his movements, and Dylan took an assessment of the man's features. Blond, balding, small, predatory eyes. He had no fucking idea who the guy was. Not being able to help himself, he looked at Del. Blood trickled down her pale, unconscious face. Rage and fear tangled in his gut.

"Put her down."

"I can't, she knows."

Vicentes and Dylan shared a glance.

"She knows about Bea and Totter. She knows I paid."

He kept backing away, and that was when Dylan noticed the knife he held to her throat. Jesus God. If he stumbled, he could kill her. He wanted to rush him, but he knew it would risk more than it was worth.

"Bea? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Bea, my wife."

"Your wife?" He noticed Del's fingers twitch and his gaze shot up to her face. She was still slumped over, but damn, her eyes were opened slightly. He looked at her side and noticed she wore her weapon. If he could keep the ass talking, she might ...

"She knew about your wife and Totter? Were they having an affair?"

"No, goddamit. No." The man's face was mottled in fury, his eyes bulging. "I paid Totter to kill her for insurance money to start my business."

"You have a business?" Vicentes asked the question. Dylan figured he'd seen Del's movements also and the more confused the man was, the easier it would be for Del to save herself.

"Of course I do. I --" his words were cut off with a strangled cry as he crumpled to the ground, his hand on his groin.

Del weaved where she stood, her gun dangling in her hand, but kicked him in the side for good measure. Dylan and Vicentes rushed forward, Vicentes grabbing the man and getting rid of the knife. The man was crying now. Dylan grabbed hold of her and pulled her in his arms.

Her abductor continued to rant about her. "Damn meddling woman. What the fuck is wrong with you? Couldn't you leave me alone?"

"Peter Federent." Her voice was muffled because Dylan held her so tight against his chest.

“Your boss.”

“Dylan, I can’t breathe and I’m getting blood all over your shirt.”

He released his hold, just a bit, and looked down at her. Blood matted her hair, and had left a trail down her cheek. It was going to need some fusing. “Your boss is trying to kill you.”

She nodded and then glanced over her shoulder at him. Vicentes had handcuffed him and was practically sitting on him.

“Bea died about six months ago. I had no idea.”

“You were asking questions.” The man’s indignant tone apparently irritated Del and she pulled away from Dylan.

“I asked how she died.”

“You were there that day Totter was at the office.”

She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His pale gaze studied Del, and Dylan could see the first signs of self-doubt cloud them. “You were there. You passed him in the hall. The day you brought in that twin.”

She laughed, but it wasn’t a pleasant sound. It was one part sarcastic and one part hysterical. “You jackass. I was so messed up that day, he could have walked by me naked and I wouldn’t have noticed. Dylan threatened to pull my license and all I could think about was having to go back to dancing.”

“So you set her up by killing your accomplice, then calling Dylan to make sure he caught her. When that didn’t work, you put a bounty out on her?” Vicentes voice sounded almost amused.

“Yes. Dammit.”

“Why?” Dylan asked. “Kill your wife, kill Totter, set up and then try to kill Del, for what purpose?”

Peter was stupid enough to smile. “I needed the money.”

Dylan, always calm, always in control, always playing by the rules, stepped forward, grabbed him by the collar, and punched the son of a bitch. His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the ground.

“Well, I promise not to testify about abusing the prisoner.” Del’s sarcastic voice hit him the wrong way and sparked his anger.

He cut Del a sharp glance and then strode to her and pulled her into his arms again. His body shook with the remnants of his fear. Fear that he wouldn’t save her, fear that he’d never be able to tell her that he loved her.

“Shut the hell up, Littleton. Just shut the hell up.”

* * * * *

It was almost morning by the time they'd made it to bed. The FBI had been called in, and more information about Peter popped up, including that he was wanted in several states for fraud. Del couldn't believe the man she'd thought of as a friend had done this to her.

When they had fallen into bed, Dylan had made love with her in such a frenzy she was amazed she'd survived. He'd pushed her further than the night before, toying with her body, messing with her mind and nearly breaking her heart. Because today, he'd leave. And she would be alone.

She snuggled deeper into his embrace. He lay behind her, his arms wrapped around her, his body spooned with hers.

His lips dragged over her neck, his tongue wetting the skin. "Stop worrying, Del."

"Worrying?" She was trying her best to sound nonchalant but she was sure she failed.

"I have a plan."

She snorted. "When do you not have a plan, O'Farrell?"

He chuckled and it vibrated down her spine. "You sure are bitchy in the morning, woman. No, I have a plan about us."

Her heart took a little leap of joy, but it died instantly when she figured he probably spoke of their testimony ... the investigation.

"I figured we'd have to testify." She tried to wiggle out of his hold but his arms tightened. "And I have to find a job."

"About that."

"Yes?" Her voice was all breathy like some little high schooler caught in her first crush. But this wasn't a crush, it was love and it was going to hurt so bad.

"I've been thinking about retiring for the last few months."

"Hmm." His fingers brushed over her nipples in a light, teasing touch. They tightened painfully, as heat tingled along her nerve endings. The man really did have the most amazing hands.

"Would you be interested in working together?"

For a second her mind didn't comprehend. But then she realized he'd offered her a job. Her spine stiffened and she tried to bat away the hand traveling down her stomach.

"No, thanks."

His hand stilled right above her pussy. "No? But you have no idea what I'm asking you."

She wiggled, angry with him, with herself for wanting more. She had to get out of that bed before she started bawling. "I don't want to work for you, O'Farrell." There is no way she'd work with him, knowing she couldn't touch him, watching him with a string of women. She had her pride, dammit.

She continued to try to get away. Before she knew what he was about, he flipped her on her back and covered her with his body. His cock lay heavy against her slit; his heart beat against her chest. The perfectly groomed hair he always had in place was a mess of tangles from sleep. His face showed the remnants of the last few days. Stubble covered his chin and dark circles marred the skin beneath his eyes. His very irritated eyes.

“Now, listen here, Littleton. I have a plan and you’re going to just shut the hell up until I finish.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but stopped when she really listened to his voice. There was irritation there -- always was when he talked to her -- but there was something close to panic, too. *From O’Farrell?*

“Vicentes said I should start a business, and you know the way of it, so what do you think?”

She shook her head to clear it. “What do I think about what? I have no earthly idea what you’re talking about.”

He sighed. “I want to open a business, a bounty hunting business and I need your help.”

A little part of her, mainly her heart, shattered. He wanted a fucking business arrangement. Just her luck. She finally falls in love and he wants to go into business together.

“No.”

“No?”

“You heard me, O’Farrell.” She had to get away before she broke. She was close to tears and she refused to do that in front of him. Give him the satisfaction.

“Why not?” His indignant tone sent her temper soaring.

Her head throbbed, her heart was breaking and the ass was arguing with her? She’d been through too much so she couldn’t stop the flow of angry words that exploded. “O’Farrell, you jackass. I’m not going to spend the rest of my days working with a man I love, watching him with other women, day in and day out. I don’t want anything to do with that.”

His face went blank for a second, and then his lips curved, slowly, sensuously. “What did you say?”

“I said, no.”

“No, there was something else in there.”

Fuck. *What did she say?* It came to her in a blinding instant of embarrassment. Dammit. She shut her eyes and felt the tears she’d been holding off seep from behind closed lids. “Never mind.”

He leaned closer, his breath against her ear. “Littleton, you idiot, I love you too.”

For just a fraction of a second, she thought she’d heard him wrong. Then she opened her eyes and looked up at him. He smiled down at her with a goofy expression that could only mean one thing.

“I’m not asking for just a business relationship.” He nipped at the tip of her nose, then her lips. “I love you, Delilah. No woman could make me as crazy or as happy as you do. I just thought we could, you know ...”

She raised an eyebrow. “You thought to entice me with a business proposition?”

His face flushed and she laughed. “Just shut up. I mean, if you want the whole thing ... marriage --”

The way he turned green when he said the word marriage had her shaking her head. “Why don’t we just play it by ear and see where it leads us?”

His relieved smile should’ve irritated her, but she was a little relieved herself. She’d never been one for commitments. “So, what are we going to call this new business?”

“The O’Farrell and Littleton Agency.”

“I don’t think so. Why am I second?”

He laughed. “Okay, something else then.”

“How about we incorporate ourselves?”

“O’Farrell and Littleton, Inc?”

She sighed. For one so smart, he really said some stupid things. “No. Jackass. How about, Bounty Hunters, Inc?”

He nodded. “Now, as my first job as president --”

“Who said you’re president?”

He ignored her as if she hadn’t said anything. “I think we need to go over search and seizure.” Kissing a trail down her chest, stopping to lick each nipple, he traveled down her body, his fingers stroking, his tongue darting out over her skin. “Any objections?”

As he buried his face between her thighs, she said. “No, none at all.”

Epilogue

“We’ve got a lot riding on this one, my friend,” Dylan said, as he leaned back in his chair and studied Vicentes. “We’ve done some smaller jobs but this is a big one, and it’s because Del has such a good reputation in the business.”

Vicentes didn’t comment, kept reading the electronic file. Dylan looked at Del, who sat in the chair in the corner. She shrugged.

“Any questions?”

His friend was frowning when he looked up but Dylan knew that he was just thinking over everything he'd read. "Now, let me get this right. This secretary slash psychic was the girlfriend of Ritchy Summers, the underling that Foreman killed. She saw the murder."

Del nodded. "That's right. Police had her under protection but she slipped away."

"Is she involved in the killing?"

It was Dylan's turn to shrug. "I have no idea. The police in Atlantic City have been really mum about it. They seem to have botched up the job real fast. FBI was coming in to take over. The ACPD lost her within five hours of finding her."

Del snorted. "Yeah, I can see why they might not want to give up any info on her. Makes them all look stupid."

Vicentes smiled at her then stood. "I still can't believe you convinced me to do this. A psychic secretary?" He headed to the door, which slid open noiselessly. Looking back over his shoulder he said, "You'd think she would know about the murder before they went."

He saluted them as the door shut. Dylan chuckled. When Del didn't join in, he looked over to find tears in her eyes. Panic set in. He still wasn't used to this side of her. Sometimes she cried for no reason whatsoever.

"What's the matter, love?"

She sniffed. "Our first employee."

Knowing exactly what she was talking about, he stood and walked over to the chair. He lifted her, and then sat down in her place, setting her on his lap.

"Three months and we could already hire someone. I think he'll work out."

She pouted and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "Of course he will. I trained him, jackass."

He ignored her pet name for him. "You know, we christened every piece of furniture in the office but this one."

She slid her hands up over his shoulders and clasped them behind his neck. "Really? Now, how did we miss that?"

He bent his head and nipped at her lips, the familiar hum of desire racing through his blood. "I have it on good authority that we should be left alone for at least an hour or two."

"Well, O'Farrell, I suggest you quit wasting time and get to work."

He laughed, his heart filled with love for the ornery woman on his lap. Kissing his way down her throat, he grazed his teeth against the pulse on her neck and was pleased to feel it accelerate.

"Maybe, I can convince you to make it more of a partnership." He'd somehow changed his mind in the last three months. Something predatory wanted a more permanent link to Del, but she'd resisted all the

way.

“Tell you what.” Her voice was breathless with arousal and anticipation. “We’ll compromise. I’ll let you seduce me in this chair, and I’ll consider marriage.”

“It’s a deal. But remember, I can be very persuasive.”

Her laughter filled the office and Dylan figured that at that moment that was all that mattered as he set to work holding up his end of the bargain.

THE END

Melissa Schroeder

Born to an Air Force family at an Army hospital, Melissa has always been a little screwy. She was further warped by her years of watching Monty Python movies and her strange family.

From the time she read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the seventh grade, she dreamed of being a writer. After years of struggling, trying to write short stories filled with angst, she finally listened to her college writing instructor, and allowed her natural comedic voice to shine through. She counts Jayne Ann Krentz, Jenny Crusie, Stephanie Laurens, Julia Quinn, and Lori Foster as influences in her writing.

She is a military wife and mother to two military brats and an adopted dog daughter, and lives wherever the military sticks them. Which, she is sure, will involve heat and bugs only seen on the Animal Discovery Channel. In her spare time, she reads, cooks, reads, travels, reads some more, and dreams of living somewhere the bugs die in the winter.

She LOVES hearing from her readers. Visit Melissa on the Internet at <http://www.authormelissaschroeder.com>.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Still Waters: A Kyra Moray Mystery

by Deanna Lee

Available Now from Loose Id

Still Waters: A Kyra Moray Mystery

Kyra shouldered her bag and propped her groceries on her hip as she unlocked the door. With more bravery than agility, she stepped over the package that was now across her threshold and took her groceries into the kitchen. The long box, obviously from a floral shop, was something of a surprise. She hadn't dated in a while, so there was no man trying to get back in her good graces. She picked it up and shut her door with one foot.

A simple red bow was tied around the box. She pulled it and dismissed it as it fell to the floor. Inside the box, she found a blood-red rose and an envelope. Curiosity piqued, she laid the rose and box on the counter in the kitchen and opened the card.

Length: 9.5 inches

Circumference: 5.16 inches

References Available upon request

Laughing, she put the card aside and found a small vase under the sink for the rose. Amused by his gift and his card, she took the rose and vase to her bedroom. The rose had almost erased her displeasure. She'd spent twenty minutes on the comm-u with the costume shop before she'd successfully changed the size. She hadn't been a size eight in nearly ten years. Her grandmother never ceased to amaze her. Since her grandmother was a ditz, Kyra didn't consider the costume or the sizing some sort of emotional warfare. It was just who her grandmother was.

No wig, no corset, and a dress that was a size ten, thank everyone very much, was in Kyra's future, and she was grateful. She wasn't exactly pleased to be going in pink, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Anyway, maybe she'd get wounded in the line of duty before the damn ball happened. Horrified at her mental wanderings, she crossed herself and sent God a small prayer hoping He'd forget her stupidity.

Nine and half inches? She dropped back on her bed and looked at the rose. She was going to see him Friday night, but it wouldn't hurt to swing by Still Waters tonight, would it? Kyra sat up, ran her fingers through her hair, and hopped off the bed. With a sigh, she went into the bathroom and pulled out the nanobot activation kit. Pulling out an injection unit, she pressed it against her skin and jumped just a little when the compressed air shot the activation-bot into her bloodstream.

Kyra glanced briefly at her reflection in the mirror as she put the injection unit down. The bruising was much worse than she'd thought, mostly, she supposed, because of the second hit she'd taken. Otherwise,

she looked good, which she could blame on her grandmother and the four years spent on the pageant circuit. The permanent enhancements to her face and eyes made beauty chemicals unnecessary. Though her skin was slightly pale from lack of sleep, her lips were a nice lush pink; cheeks were highlighted expertly with a soft, barely detectable blush. Her dark green eyes were gently outlined with a soft brown tattooed eyeliner that accentuated their shape and size. Her lashes were naturally thick and dark.

She touched the bruise once and sighed. Intellectually, she knew that she couldn't feel the nanobots as they activated and started to move around her body to repair minor damage to her cells. However, on some deeper level the knowledge that the invisible little bots were running around inside her body, beyond her control, made her itch. She made a quick run through the kitchen to put away the perishables, and left.

Out of her apartment building, she made herself stroll leisurely down the street to the bar. It wouldn't do to be out of breath when she got there. The man at the door gave her an abrupt nod as she walked across the street. With a little flourish, he opened the door and shoed her in out of the night.

Jazz and beer were flowing nicely for a Wednesday night. She found an empty stool and slid up onto it.

"I bet you're the cop."

Kyra turned and offered the man who'd spoken a smile. He had neat and orderly braids falling over dark, angelic features, and he looked like pure sin. "I am a cop. Who are you?"

"Marcus Waters." He offered her his hand and smiled when she took it. "You got a look, that's for sure." He focused on the bruise over her jawbone. "Who won the fight?"

"I always win the fights," Kyra murmured, pulling her hand from his as Alex moved down the bar and set a glass of water in front of her. For a couple of seconds, she just stared; there was something so alluring about him that it made her apprehensive. Men like him didn't fit into neat little pockets, and that's all she had room for in her life. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. Catch any bad guys today?"

"Not today." She plucked a straw out of his pocket and stripped it as she frowned. "Say, you know Professor Willie?"

"Yeah, he's an institution around these parts. He usually comes around on nights like this, but one is his limit here." Alex leaned on the bar. "Something happen to him?"

"He got jailed last night for D & D. Not unusual for him, especially since it was supposed to rain." She shrugged.

"Except, today when I was talking with him, he made it clear he didn't want to go back on the streets. You hear anything?"

Alex shook his head. "Nope. Not many people mess with a big boy like him."

"Yeah." She swished her straw through her water and looked around the bar before settling her gaze on his brother. "I have your last CD."

Marcus smiled. "See, I told ya I'd find the lady who bought it."

She rolled her eyes. The album in question had gone platinum; she knew she wasn't the only one to buy it. "My grandmother told me I shouldn't keep sex music out in the living room with the rest of my music. She hid it the drawer of my nightstand."

Alex shook his head and laughed as a customer got his attention. "He always was the one."

Kyra watched him move down the bar, her gaze traveling over the startlingly nice view she had of his ass, and then looked at Marcus. "So, why are you retiring?"

"At the moment, I'm tired of the travel." He looked at his brother and then back at her. "I've never known him to be interested in a cop." Marcus looked her over and grinned. "But then, I've never seen a cop like you."

"Sure you have. Don't you watch the vid-panel?"

"Not enough, apparently." He pushed aside his drink. "Want to make him mad?"

Kyra shook her head. "No, not yet. He hasn't done anything to warrant it."

Marcus slipped off the stool. "I guess I'll go find some lonely young lady to dance with, then."

She shook her head as he disappeared into the crowd and Alex appeared back in front of her. "Your brother is an interesting man."

"Yeah." He met her gaze. "You look tired, Inspector."

"Long day." Kyra looked down at the bar and frowned. "Crap. I should have made him stay seated."

Alex laughed as one of his regulars strolled down the length of the bar and slipped up onto the stool next her. "Need a refill, Ken?"

"Nope, thought I'd buy the lady a drink."

"The lady doesn't drink." Kyra cast a glance in his direction and then pushed aside her water. With a small smile for Alex, she shrugged out of her jacket and let it fall on the backrest of the stool. The light gleamed on the steel of the weapon she had strapped on.

Ken raised an eyebrow. "Got restraints?"

"Get lost, before you make her mad." Alex motioned him away and looked around the bar. "Where did my brother go?"

"Off to seduce some unsuspecting woman." She slid off the stool. "You got an office?"

"Yeah." He signaled to one of the bartenders at the other end of the bar and then motioned her around. "Meet me on the end."

Kyra followed Alex Waters into his office, wondering what she thought she was doing in the middle of a

crowded bar on a Wednesday night. She leaned against the door as she shut it, and sucked in a breath as he reached past her to flick the lock. It had been easier to ignore how attracted she was to him when other people had surrounded them.

Sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, Kyra took the time to consider what she was doing and what it would accomplish. Did she really have time to get involved with a man? The answer was no, of course; she barely had time to pay the rent on her apartment, much less get involved with a man like Alexander Waters. He was a complication, and he was already there, in her mind, teasing her with images of the incredible sex they were certainly going to have.

"Inspector, are you still on duty?"

"Umm ... no." She met his gaze as he rested one hand above her head. "I got your note."

"I'm glad." He ran his finger along the line of her jaw, then rubbed her mouth gently with his thumb. "Did you want those references?"

"Only if you want assorted lovers from your past brought in on trumped-up criminal charges." Kyra sucked in a deep breath as he moved closer.

"Jealous already, Kyra?"

"Territorial. It's my nature." She made no apologies for it; she had a feeling he was the same way. Kyra tossed the light jacket in a small chair to her left and let her hands run along his sides. "How did you find out where I lived?"

"I'm a business owner in this neighborhood. It's advantageous to know where the cops live. Had I known you looked like this, I would have sought your assistance a long time ago. You are much nicer on the eyes than Sergeant Calhoun."

He took in a deep, audible breath as her fingers ran along his belt.

Kyra slipped her fingers into the front of his jeans and pulled a little. "My friend Glory thinks you're sexy."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." Kyra wet her bottom lip.

"What do you think?"

"I think," she whispered with a smile, "that you look good enough to eat."

She grinned, and showed him her teeth in the process.

Alex met her gaze. "I tend to be demanding, Kyra. A woman in my bed doesn't keep secrets, doesn't play games, and isn't afraid to tell me exactly what she needs."

"The only secrets I have are professional."

His hands smoothed over the straps of her shoulder holster. "Those kinds of secrets are acceptable."

"I'm fairly demanding myself."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. If I'm in a man's bed, no other woman is. This wouldn't be negotiable, and failure to adhere to this rule would terminate all relations, with no discussions." Her gaze drifted over his mouth before she met his eyes. "It's my dick until I'm done with it."

"That's a pretty hefty stipulation for this situation. You barely know me."

"Those are my rules, if I decide to have a sexual relationship with you."

"Really, Inspector, I think you've already made that choice."

She shrugged. "It may have to be re-evaluated. You look amazing, but there are lots of pretty things around that prove to be useless."

He laughed. "Any other conditions or rules?"

"My job is dangerous, and I'm not giving it up for any man. I don't need a man to keep me, protect me, or manage me."

"What do you need a man for?"

She pulled him closer, curling her fingers deeper into the front his jeans at the same time. "To fuck me, respect me, and occasionally I might need a shoulder to cry on."

"I think we understand each other's terms."

Kyra nodded and sighed when his body was flush against hers. She slipped one leg around his and ran both hands up his chest. Their mouths met in a furious crush. She shuddered and groaned against the swift invasion of his tongue. He lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist with no hesitation. He pressed his cock against the heat of her and groaned when she held him tighter.

Alex pulled his mouth from hers, moving his lips along her jaw and placing a very soft kiss on her neck. "You are such a temptation."

"I'm trying." Frustration made her voice a little more breathless than she would have preferred. She couldn't remember ever being this hot and willing for a man.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Still Waters: A Kyra Moray Mystery

Deanna Lee's *Still Waters* is suspenseful, engrossing read that won't let you go...you'll want to keep reading well after it's time to go to bed! I loved the depth in which she takes her characters and plot. This

book a keeper, and one for the shelf.

-- Alyssa Brooks, author of *Spell of Love: Lust Upon Roses* (Loose Id)

This story draws you in. I couldn't put it down. And yes, it is steamy, but it is soooo much more. Not only does Deanna Lee make the characters come to life, but the setting as well. *Still Waters* has a strong plot, wonderfully life-like characters and one heck of a mystery...not too mention a GREAT romance. Kyra Moray is a strong likable character, with a great supporting cast. A truly wonderful read.

-- Jeigh Lynn, author of *Adventures of the Soul* (coming soon from Loose Id)

Still Waters is an entertaining roller-coaster ride of a read that grabbed me from the first sentence and didn't let go. Inspector Kyra Moray is an ultra-feminist bad-ass that doesn't quit in her quest for the first serial killer in forty years in this near-future mystery/romance. She doesn't quit, but she does make time for some hot love scenes with tall, black, gorgeous Alex Waters, a man who satisfies in every sense of the word. Hats off to Deanna Lee for this sleek, sexy thriller. I'm ready to take another ride with Kyra and the gang any time and I can't wait to see more.

-- Evangeline Anderson, author of *Marked* (Loose Id)