

Loose Id

Melissa Schroeder



Sinner's
Delight

BOUNTY HUNTERS, INC.: SINNER'S DELIGHT

Melissa Schroeder

LooseId®
www.loose-id.com

Warning

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

* * * * *

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

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: Sinner's Delight

Melissa Schroeder

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

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © March 2007 by Melissa Schroeder

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

ISBN 978-1-59632-224-0

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

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Lorri-Lynne Brown
Cover Artist: Scott Carpenter

Dedication

To My Chatters,

*For your support and good wishes, and always, always for the laughs we have shared.
You keep me going, my heart light, and my soul honest.*

Your support is more than any author could wish for.

Thanks so much for the good times, ladies,

Mel

Prologue

February 25, 2135, Midnight

Washington DC, Earth, Sinner's Delight Adult Club

Eddie Warwick slid his fingers through Destiny's blue hair as she drew his cock between her lips. She slipped one hand to the base of his shaft as she caressed his balls with the other. He hissed in approval as he felt her fingernails graze over the sensitive skin. As she began to work on him in earnest, he leaned against the bedroom wall and gritted his teeth. The stress of the last few weeks had been almost unbearable or he wouldn't have stopped by Sinner's Delight.

Damn, he'd needed this. Stress had been building for weeks from all the politics going on behind the scenes at work. It lurked beneath the surface sending ripples of uneasiness through just about everyone. He could feel it. The only problem was he had no idea what the fuck it was. Whatever it was, it would probably cause more problems than he wanted to deal with. Eddie had enough problems dealing with his bitch of a wife.

For the moment, though, all that mattered was the feeling of having his dick serviced by his favorite whore. He clenched his fingers in her hair as she increased her rhythm. Heat

lanced through him, pushing him closer to the pinnacle. Destiny took him balls deep again, then moaned. The vibrations pulled his orgasm from him. He shot his load into her mouth, and like the well-paid whore that she was, she licked up his cum as if it were nectar from the gods, making approving noises. All his worries faded, his body shook, then his muscles relaxed as she drained him.

Several moments later he watched her get dressed as he reclined on the bed. Destiny's body spoke of her love of exercise. Long, lean, muscled in just the right spots, curved in the areas that mattered. Each time she moved, her body moved like a well built machine. It was probably the reason she could suck off a cock the way she did.

"You were very tense tonight, Eddie," she said as she pulled up her thong. "You have problems at home?"

He thought of his diplomat wife, with her perfect hair and perfectly hidden temper. Not to mention the fact she would never be caught dead in a thong.

"No. For once, she's not a problem."

Once she finished dressing, she walked over to the bed, and sat beside him. She took one of his hands between hers and rubbed it.

"You haven't been in for awhile. I thought you might have forgotten about me."

"There's no way I could forget about you, Destiny. I'm just glad I could get you tonight."

Her worried expression cleared as she smiled. "Well, Sasha made sure of it when you requested me."

He nodded. "Ah. I assumed that was the case, but I didn't see her." The owner of Sinner's Delight knew how to keep her customers happy, especially high ranking officials like himself.

"You have the room for the rest of the night?"

"No. I've brought some files to work on. I'm going home after a bit." He cupped her face with his free hand. "Thanks, Destiny."

The humor that had lit her eyes now dissolved. "Don't be a stranger, Eddie. I worry about you."

He sat up and brushed his lips over hers. "Don't worry, love. I'm not the head of Universal Security Council for nothing."

She smiled again, although it didn't reach her eyes. He could tell she wanted to say more, but wouldn't. Although he shared some of his life with her, there was a distinct line between their worlds, no matter how much either of them would wish differently.

When he was finally alone, he allowed his mind to drift, trying to get back to the pleasant after-sex feeling he'd just had. The reminder of his work problems, not to mention his less than happy home life, ruined the mood and he could feel tension inching up his spine.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by a knock at the door. Shaking off his morbid feelings, he rose from the bed and grabbed a black silk robe provided by Sinner's Delight. Padding barefoot to the door, he opened it, and was surprised to find Betty, another of his favorites, standing on the threshold. She was holding a bottle of Archinian Champagne.

"Betty. How are you this evening?"

The smile she shot him was full of sensual promise. He felt his dick stir. Over a month without a woman was apparently too long for him.

"Sasha thought you needed a little extra attention tonight."

Heat pulsed through him as he stepped back to let her in. "I wouldn't want to disappoint Sasha."

As she passed him, she brushed her hip against the tip of his cock. Drawing in a deep breath, he closed the door and followed her to the table by the window. She set the champagne down, then turned to face him. She wore only a kimono, black, with the letters S

and D embroidered in red on one side. It was the feminine version of his robe but only hit her mid-thigh whereas his was full-length.

Her golden blonde hair spilled over her shoulders and her blue eyes sparkled. She looked like a damn prom queen. If Eddie didn't already know she fucked like a bitch in heat, he'd think she was a virgin sacrifice. Lucky for him, she wasn't.

"Sasha wanted to be sure you understood Sinner's Delight missed your patronage."

She slipped her fingers into the knot at her waist and loosened it, letting the robe fall to the floor. His cock went from mildly interested to an all-the-way there, throbbing erection. It would be insane not to get hard over a woman like her. Smooth honey-toned skin, ample breasts with hardened nipples the color of coral, a tiny waist, flared hips, and legs that seemed to go on forever. His gaze roved back up her body, his attention snagged by her bare pussy. He licked his lips, then looked up at her face.

Betty smiled at him, and then turned to pour the drinks, giving him a splendid view of her heart-shaped ass. Once she filled the glass she walked toward him, and with each step, he felt his blood pound. Damn, he wanted to fuck her. Wanted to sink his cock into her wet pussy and bang her until she came.

She handed him the glass. "Take a sip, Eddie."

He did just that. Hell, she could probably tell him to bark like a dog and he would.

"You're not having any?"

She shook her head. "No. I really don't like it. Drink it all up, sweetie, and then we'll do anything you want." His hand shook as he drained the glass, then threw it on the floor behind him. "You remember last time, don't you, Eddie?"

The memory of his last visit flashed through him. He'd had a particularly nasty fight with his wife and come to Sinner's to work out his frustrations. Betty had him coming before his pants were off and sucked his cock off, then took him to bed. There wasn't anything she

didn't allow, and he'd spent the night in a haze of sensual delight. She may not be his favorite, but she was definitely his most depraved.

She climbed onto the bed, spreading her legs and showing him her cunt. Again, he licked his lips, thinking of the taste of her. Undoing his sash, he struggled out of the robe and was on the bed in a matter of seconds.

He kneeled between her legs, grabbed his cock and gave it a few hard pumps. A drop of pre-cum already wet the head. As he continued doing that, he slipped two fingers in her pussy, sighing when he found her wet. He didn't know how long he would be able to wait. Just stroking her a few times had her moaning, begging for relief. He slipped one hand beneath her rounded ass, and positioned his dick at her entrance with the other.

With one fast, hard thrust, he entered her. His balls tightened as he pulled out and pushed back into her cunt. Three thrusts later, he was on the edge of an orgasm, when pressure built in his chest and pains shot down his right arm. Unable to breathe, he collapsed on top of Betty, his vision fading, and his world going black.

Chapter One

The shrill ring of her earphone brought Sasha Petosky out of the most pleasant dream involving three men and whipped cream. She could almost taste the soft, airy sweetness as the constant ringing pulled her from her favorite fantasy.

“That’s yours, Sasha, not mine.”

She opened her eyes and looked toward the sound of Vic’s voice. He was propped against the doorjamb of her bedroom. His sandy blond hair was tousled from sleep, his eyes half-closed and glaring. Even as mean as he looked, she couldn’t help the little feminine thrill that raced through her at the sight of him. Vic was a big man, all muscle and testosterone. Dressed only in a pair of knit boxers, he was the picture of perfection. Even in the dim light she could see the washboard abs. Every time she saw him half dressed she couldn’t help a small feminine sigh in appreciation. It had been one of the reasons she’d been attracted to him to begin with. But then, once she got to know him, she realized that the charming smile she loved only came when he was in a good mood -- which wasn’t often.

“You need to answer it. I’ll put some tea on.”

He tossed another glare in her direction and left without another word. The nasty look had been enough. She’d forgotten what a grump he was on just a few hours of sleep. Sighing,

she thought -- not for the first time -- that being friends with your ex-husband wasn't always a good idea.

The ringing continued and she picked up the earphone and slipped it on, pressing the small button on the underside of it.

"Sasha!" Stan, her assistant manager yelled.

"Stan. Please, no yelling." She rubbed her temples at the familiar headache that had plagued her for the last couple of months. "What are you doing calling me at four in the morning?"

"The cops are everywhere. I didn't know what else to do. Apparently, Betty freaked when Warwick dropped dead on her and called them. Now, I can't find her, and they keep asking all kinds of questions about your relationship with him."

With each word, his voice rose. Stan could be a bit ... melodramatic, but even this was beyond his usual performance. "Give me twenty minutes and tell the cops I'll be there."

"Oh, thank God! I wanted to call you right off, but they pulled us in and started questioning us."

"Sit tight. I'll be there."

She clicked off her phone before he could say anything else. With Stan she could be on the phone for hours over a broken nail. How his wife handled him, Sasha had no idea. A few hours a day and she was ready to throttle him. However, the man knew how to manage a club, and he never expected favors from the girls.

Stretching her arms over her head, she tried to gather her thoughts. Anything that brought in the Capitol Police wasn't a good thing. They could shut down Sinner's Delight just for kicks because of the investigation. She knew there was a movement within certain circles to legalize adult clubs again, although she doubted it would happen ... Just her luck to have a government official drop dead. Sasha didn't even want to know what his wife would do and unfortunately, this one had the power to do it.

She slipped out of bed and grabbed up her robe. Before she had the sash tied, Vic returned.

"Problems?" he asked as he handed her a mug.

"*You* are a god." She took a long breath in, enjoying the aroma.

As she took a sip, he quirked one eyebrow and then crossed his arms. "That isn't what you said to the judge when we got divorced -- or when I showed up here last night."

"What did you do this time to be thrown out?"

He let loose an aggravated sigh. "I didn't do anything wrong."

She regarded him over her cup. "You know, you can say that to other people and they buy it. However, I was married to you. I know just what a pain in the ass you are to live with." She took another sip. Vic wasn't a bad guy. He was loyal to the bone, but he had a tendency to be single-minded and cranky. "So, knowing you don't cheat, what did you do? Forget a birthday?"

"I'm not living with a woman."

She absorbed the information as she took another sip. "Vic, really? I had no idea you went that way."

He gave her an evil look. "I don't mean that way. My new partner, as in working partner, moved in with me. He had some family in. I forgot. Besides, I gave up living with women about six months ago."

"That explains why I haven't had to put you up for the night for awhile. But why couldn't you stay there? I mean, you have a pretty big place."

"I felt it was best I left after scaring the bejesus out of his seventeen-year-old sister. Who, I might add, sleeps like the dead, because I was naked and crawling into bed before she screamed."

She cleared her throat trying to suppress the unholy giggle that threatened to erupt. The image his words evoked was so comical, she didn't know how she would hold off. Vic

was constantly uptight about dating younger women, let alone someone who would be young enough to be a daughter.

“And not one comment out of you. Freaking bad enough that she called me a pervert.”

She snorted but his narrowed gaze had her swallowing the rest of the laugh. Knowing she needed to get to Sinner's Delight, she went to her closet, pushed the button and waited for the door to slide open.

“Unfortunately, that tale will have to wait. I have to get down to Sinner's.”

He followed her into the walk in closet. “What do they need you for? Must be something important to get you out of bed.”

“You know Eddie Warwick?”

He nodded. “Head of the Universal Security Council?”

“Yeah, that one. He's one of my customers.”

“What does that have to do with you? Not like you work the ropes.”

Vic had avoided the whole idea of her owning a legalized brothel since she bought into it a few years ago. He didn't have problems with the clubs. Nevertheless, she knew he really didn't like her around the business. And being the Neanderthal that he was, he hated the idea that his ex-wife might work there. “Well, said Mr. Warwick dropped dead while being ... serviced by one of my girls.”

He whistled. “Holy shit, Sash, you're going to have a media circus when this gets out.”

She pressed the button for the sweater compartment of the closet. The door glided open and the drawer slid out. She pulled two sweaters out, one purple and the other red, and debated which to wear. Lord knew the media would probably be there causing a fuss. “Tell me about it. It probably already is. Betty freaked out when he dropped dead on her and called the police. And I have no idea what she was doing there because Destiny was supposed to be there.” She sighed, deciding to go with purple, returned the red one to the drawer, and pulled the sweater over her head. “Some days I just want to run away.”

Grabbing a pair of black slacks, she stepped into them and then pulled on a pair of boots.

"That's not like you." When he didn't continue, she glanced at him and found him frowning at her. "You said you loved that place."

She pushed him out of her way, and then walked into the bathroom. "I did, but lately, it's getting to be a pain. All the regulations, and now this. Maybe it's time I sold. I could get a lot for it and with Janice gone it isn't fun."

He stepped behind her and slid his hands around her waist. When he caught her gaze in the mirror, nothing but sympathy shone in them. They were long past anything sexual. "I was sorry to hear about that."

Pain squeezed her heart at the thought of Janice's murder. It had been months and even though she didn't cry anymore, she still felt as if she lost a part of herself. "Thanks, Vic." She sighed, fighting past the emotion clogging her throat. She didn't need to have her feelings in turmoil when she went to Sinner's. "Her sister didn't take it well. I'm worried about what she'll do. She has some kind of idea that Warren is responsible for her sister's death."

He cocked his head. "Sorta is his fault, don't you think. But then she stayed with the bastard and lied to keep him safe. And he pays her back by leaving her unprotected. So, in a way it was. Besides, what could her sister do?"

"You've never met Syd. She's a force of nature. And where Janice wasn't the brightest bulb, Syd is a walking encyclopedia."

She tugged free of his arms and brushed her hair and teeth. After pulling her hair up into a twist and clipping it, she rushed out.

"You want me to go with you?"

He made the offer and she knew how much it cost him. Even as a computer nerd type of cop, having an ex who ran a brothel wasn't great for your career. Showing up with her in

the middle of the night when a high level official had died in her brothel would be disastrous.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, Vic. But I can handle it. I hope I won't be long."

He sighed. "I'll be gone. I have some work to do."

She smiled and patted his cheek. "You're welcome to stay another night, as long as you bring home supper."

He returned her smile, and again, she sighed. The man was lethal when he did that. "Don't worry; I remember my payment from my days of incarceration."

"You know, I should kick you out for referring to our marriage as a jail sentence."

"Just using the words you did when you said you wanted a divorce."

* * * * *

By the time she arrived at Sinner's it was a mess. Press was all over the parking lot. She paid her cabbie and stepped out of the glider cab. Before she had taken two steps, the hounds came rushing at her. For just a split-second, panic swirled in her chest. The horde of men and women coming toward her held her frozen for a few seconds. Sasha didn't do well in crowds and having them approach her like a pack of hungry wolves sent alarm crashing through her. Her childhood claustrophobia was back in full force.

"What was Warwick doing at your club?" one man shouted at her.

She blinked as someone flashed a bright light in her eyes. That seemed to bring her out of her trance and helped her push her way through the crowd. She ignored her rising fear even as one overzealous reporter grabbed at her sweater.

Jerking her arm, she pulled it free of his grasp. "I have no comment until I speak to the Capitol Police and find out what the hell is going on."

She brushed past the reporters, ignoring their pleas for more information. She tried her best to give them a calm façade, however, irritation and worry marched down her spine and

her stomach threatened to revolt. She refused to let the freaking jackals know they had rattled her.

As she reached the door, it opened, and Donny, the head of her security, stepped out. The sound of footsteps seemed to dissolve the moment the crowd got a look at him. Six-foot-five, two hundred and fifty odd pounds of pure muscle seemed to convince them that maybe bothering her wasn't a good idea.

"Sorry, Sasha. I didn't know you were here or I would've tried to meet your cab." The worry in his eyes forced her to smile to reassure him. He was a giant, but a gentle one unless you got on the bad side of him. His long blond hair and blue eyes spoke of his Nordic heritage and fed into the image of being a warrior. The hardened, muscular body helped too.

"No problem, Donny. I take it the police are still here?" she asked as she stepped past him into the club. At once, she felt the sharp shaft of pain she'd felt since Janice had been murdered three months earlier. Always one with a good joke, Janice would've been thinking of all kinds of inappropriate jokes about Warwick dying in the act. It wasn't the first time since they opened the club, but this was the most highly ranking government employee they'd had drop dead.

"Yeah. They got here about two hours ago, asking all kinds of questions. Like it's our fault Warwick had heart problems."

The first thing she noticed when she walked through the door was the number of officers milling around the entryway. As she studied them, she realized that most of them were gathered around the areas where her girls were standing. She rolled her eyes. No wonder there were so many of them around. Once the area was secure, most of them should have left. Some things never change.

"Donny, make sure you keep an eye on those officers. I don't need any problems with them, and there are *no* freebies."

Without a word, Donny headed off in the direction of where most of the officers were standing.

"I don't think you need to worry about that, Ms. Petosky."

She turned to face Inspector Walton, the lead vice investigator for the CP. He wasn't a tall man, but he made up for it with charm and looks. Short brown hair kissed by the sun had turned the tips golden. He made most of the girls at Sinner's just melt when he smiled at them, dimples included, and those green eyes turned mischievous. Sasha could see how he succeeded in Vice where most detectives were as cynical as the day was long. If he bore the same scars as his co-workers, he did an excellent job hiding it.

Sasha would've tried her damndest to seduce him if he hadn't been a cop. Being married to one and now having him haunt her apartment every time he drove a woman to kick him out was enough to fill her plate. Still, Walton hadn't indicated any thoughts in that direction. The fact that he and Vic knew and hated each other probably didn't help the situation. Walton also stuck to the rules and sleeping with her would be a tad too gray in his black and white world.

She smiled. "Inspector. I'm glad to see they have placed a good cop on this one. But, I'm confused on why they sent Vice."

He returned her smile, albeit a little strained. She sensed there was something else going on that he didn't want her to know. Or he didn't want to tell her. Swallowing a wave of panic that clawed at her gut, she tried her best to slow her heartbeat. It had to be very bad for Walton to be covering up something.

"I'm considered the lead on this one. I moved from Vice a couple weeks ago."

"Hmm. Well, can you tell me just what happened?"

Before he could answer, Stan came rushing around the corner. He wore his usual black suit, but his tie was off center. His jacket and pants were wrinkled as if he'd slept in them, and his face was flush with exertion.

“Sasha! Oh, thank God you are here.” He tossed a nasty look in Walton’s direction, then took hold of Sasha by her upper arms. “Don’t say a word until you talk to a lawyer. You have to protect your interests, your rights!”

Again, with each sentence his voice rose. “Stan, take it easy. I’m sure Walton here just wants to straighten everything out.” She shrugged. “No biggie.”

“No. No! Sasha --”

“I think we can handle this, Skinner.” The threat in Walton’s voice caught her off guard. When she glanced at him, the regret she saw in his eyes sent a cold ball of ice to her stomach.

“What division are you with now?”

He sighed, his lips turning down in anger or irritation, maybe a combination of both.

“Homicide.”

She flinched at the word as she tried to comprehend why he was there.

Stan released her arms, placed his hand on her shoulder, and leaned in closer. “Sasha, they think Warwick was killed, and they think one of us had something to do with it.”

* * * * *

Sasha rubbed her temples and closed her eyes against the glaring overhead light. She had no idea what time it was, but she knew it had been hours since she’d been brought in. Walton had wanted to be her interrogator, but his supervisor had nixed the idea, citing a past relationship between her and Walton. It wasn’t as if they’d slept together, and they had never seen each other on a social level. And he definitely didn’t use her club. Now she wished she had slept with him. Sasha knew just from their brief acquaintance, he would make an excellent lover, and it would make up for the hell she’d endured. All without an adequate amount of caffeine and no food. Sasha had endured too many hungry years as a child and she rarely skipped a meal now. In other words, she was one cranky bitch

"So, if you could go over it again, Ms. Petosky."

She gave Fender a dirty look. He was the captain of the division, Walton's supervisor. At least forty pounds overweight, he still combed his hair over his shiny head in apparent hopes that no one would notice he was balding. A politician at heart, he wanted something more from her than the truth. She'd have stood a better chance with Walton who would have gone by the book. This slime ball would sell his mother out if it meant more political capital. Catching the "killer" of the head of the USC definitely would be a feather in his cap.

This situation had all the makings of bad news for her. Dead customers, especially a well-known one who was married like Warwick, would bring money. As morbid as it was, people would want to be in the place, to see where he died. Especially since he died fucking a high-priced whore. However, if it was murder, she was in for another mountain of paper work and lawyer fees.

"I have nothing more to add until I speak to my lawyer. I know my rights."

His lips thinned as he curled them inward. She noticed his hands twitching as if fighting the urge to throttle her. The silence stretched until several of the assisting officers shifted their feet trying to ease the tense atmosphere. Fender approached the table and shifted his hip on to it.

"You lost your rights ..."

The door slid open and revealed a very irritated Vic. Sasha felt the anxiety that had filled her stomach ease a bit, but with Vic present, there was a new worry. She didn't want him to punch Fender. With three reprimands already for his inability to get along with others, Vic would lose his badge over this one.

"Fender, I think you can let Ms. Petosky go." Vic's voice left no one at a loss about his feelings. Venom dripped from each word and he was big enough to back up the threat. Fender, with his extra weight and his years behind the desk, wouldn't stand a chance against Vic. He might be a computer nerd, but the man could probably snap Fender like a twig.

Fender eased his hip off the table, then said, "And just what authority do you have here?"

Vic smiled. It was one of those evil smiles he gave people he was about to crush. She usually felt a little sorry for the person caught in the crosshairs, but she had little sympathy for a rat like Fender. Vic pulled out his e-reader and powered it up. After hitting a few buttons, the hologram image of an order signed by the Police Commissioner Jasper appeared.

"By order of Jasper she's to be released. You find something on her, or anyone in her club, you know where to find her."

The grim satisfaction in his voice almost made Sasha smile. Before she could relish Fender's put down, Vic wrapped one hand around her upper arm and pulled her out of the chair.

"Detective Ashley, you have no authority here!"

Vic tossed one of his nasty looks over his shoulder. "Tell ya what, Fender. Why don't you go and tell the PC to suck an egg. I'm sure the department will cover the hospital stay, after he's done tearing you a new asshole."

Fender swallowed and tugged at his shirt collar. His gaze moved from Vic to rest on her face. "Fine. But understand that you are not to leave the area. Other than your home, if you must leave DC proper, you will check in here first and get permission."

Vic's fingers flexed on her arm. Worried he would end up without a job after cold cocking Fender, she brushed her fingers over his to let him know it was okay. Without another word, both of them left. Vic steered her through the throngs of people gathered in the halls. He nodded to a few acquaintances, but said nothing else. The moment they stepped out the front doors, a cold burst of air had her shivering, and the sunlight, even as weak as it was, had her squinting.

She glanced at Vic, who already had donned his sunglasses. Most people wouldn't be able to tell what he was feeling, but she could by the flexing of his jaw.

"I'm sorry --"

"Don't." He practically dragged her down the steps and to his car. He unlocked his car, shoved her into the front seat, and then walked around the hood and joined her inside. "We'll talk about it at your apartment."

It took only a few moments to get to her building, but the tension was ready to kill her. She was not only worried about the club closing. Now she had murder charges and a very grumpy ex who might have just screwed up his career to help her.

He parked in her space, since she didn't have a car. Once they were in the elevator, she couldn't take the silence anymore.

"Vic, I really appreciate everything you did."

Looking at the numbers as they lit up, he nodded. Sasha sighed, all the memories of her reasons for divorce cropping up. Vic tended to brood, as did Sasha. Not a good combo. And, just like during their short marriage, irritation took control of her mouth in these situations.

They reached her floor and were stepping out of the elevator when she tried again, none too gently this time.

"Vic, I want you --"

The look he shot her stopped her in mid sentence. "I said in your apartment." Every word was perfectly spoken from behind clenched teeth. "These walls might have ears."

She keyed in her security code, then used her thumb print for verification. The door slid open. She moved to step in and Vic stopped her with a hand on her arm. He pulled out his weapon and stepped in front of her, quietly taking stock of the apartment. Countless seconds later, her nerves already raw, he returned.

"It's safe." He placed a black box on the table and flipped a switch. "Kills any listening device."

She nodded and stepped into the room, allowing the door to slide shut behind her. After taking off her coat, and resting it on the back of a dining room chair, she collapsed on the chair next to it.

“I’m so tired.”

He studied her for a minute. “This isn’t going to be so easy to get out of, Sash.”

She sighed, knowing he was right. The police were suspicious for a reason. If they had a reason, or evidence, then something else was going on. Whatever it was, she seemed to be a target.

“I don’t know what to do.”

He rested his hand on her shoulder, then squeezed. “We’ll figure something out.”

The moment he said it, the front door slid open, revealing a rather dashing man, dressed in black, accompanied by two men, about the size of Vic.

“How reassuring, Detective Ashley.” The man’s voice seeped of sarcasm and anger. “But I think that you might need to reevaluate the situation.”

The man nodded and the brute on his left stepped around him, aiming his stun gun at Vic, and shot. Before Vic could react, he was hit. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he slid to the floor. Fear curled into her stomach as she sat, frozen by the actions of the men, feeling as if she let Vic down in some way. Before she could react, brute number two grabbed her arm and yanked her up.

Their leader said, “Ms. Petosky, I think we need to have a bit of a chat.”

Chapter Two

Raphael Vicentes groaned when he walked through the doorway to Bounty Hunters, Inc. Smiling up at him, from her place behind the desk, was Joy Harrison. It was a sight he dreaded every day. He'd thought he had a free week since she was supposed to be off visiting her sister. Apparently, she had changed her mind.

"Rafe!" She smiled him.

Attractively rounded, skin the color of light brown sugar, and twinkling light green eyes, he couldn't help the momentary surge of heat. She had that affect on most men. Her years as a chorus girl on Venus taught her just how to mess with a man's mind. No matter that he knew he'd never have anything to do with her sexually, Joy's sexuality was innate to her. From the way she talked to the way she moved, sensuality oozed from her naturally.

A year ago, the alert about a con artist who also had a thing for embezzlement had gone out. Each and every bounty hunter and detective sent after her had failed to bring her in. He'd been the one who'd been able to accomplish that and keep his hands off her.

"I thought you were off today, Joy."

Her smile dimmed. The look in her eyes went from flirty to serious. "I was supposed to be off, but I had ... a vision."

He should have known. “No.”

She frowned. “I knew you were coming in today, so I decided to come in. I needed to tell you --”

“No! I don’t want to hear it.”

She stood, brushed her hair back over her shoulder, then placed a hand on each hip. “But it’s important.”

“No, it isn’t. If I believed in your psychic nonsense, then it would be, but I don’t. So, keep it to yourself.” He sighed when he noticed the hurt look pass over her face. True, she’d gotten a few vague predictions about upcoming events correct, but it didn’t mean he believed in the idiotic notion of ESP. “Joy, I deal with facts, and you can’t give me any.”

Her lips flattened as if she was trying to keep from saying something, but she nodded. “Dylan has a case for you, and Del is eager to see you.”

“Do you know what case and what Del wants to see me for?”

Her frown deepened and she shrugged. “Not sure about the case, and as to the other, Del is trying to avoid another one of *the talks*.”

After thanking Joy, Vicentes chuckled as he walked down the hall to their office. A year ago, Del and Dylan were adversaries, but after working on a case together, and subsequently falling in love, they’d opened Bounty Hunters, Inc. Dylan had been keen on getting married for some time now. Del had not. Those talks usually ended with Del breaking something in the office and both of them disappearing for three hour lunches together. And the sad thing was, Dylan would keep it up. Vicentes shook his head. How the mighty have fallen. Dylan’s prowess with women had been legendary. Now, he was tied to the one woman who drove him absolutely over the edge.

As he neared the opened door, he could hear them bickering. Or rather, Dylan yelling and Del calmly responding.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what do you have against marriage?" The aggravation wasn't hard to miss in Dylan's voice.

"I have nothing against marriage."

Rafe could just imagine the way she looked when she said it. The shrug was easy to hear in her voice.

"Then why the bloody hell are you refusing to get married?"

"Not ready." Again, her voice was calm, as if discussing the weather. She knew just which buttons to punch when dealing with Dylan. Staying icy calm drove the Irishman insane.

The growl that emanated from Dylan was, from Rafe's personal experience with the man, a warning sign of horrible things to come. Before Del could get herself into more trouble, Rafe decided to step in and divert their attention. The moment he did, the dark emotion swirling in the room just about slapped him in the face. Del was sitting behind the desk, her trusty combat boots propped on the desk. She'd let her hair grow a bit over the last year, giving her a softer look. Something he was sure she used to her advantage at work and at home.

He glanced at Dylan who stood a few feet from Del. He towered over her, his hands on his hips, looking a bit ragged even if he was dressed in his customary suit and tie. At the moment, Rafe couldn't tell whether Dylan wanted to throttle Del or strip her down. Dylan probably didn't either.

"I hope I'm not interrupting."

The sound of his voice made both of them jump. He smothered a chuckle at the differing expressions on their faces. Del smiled brilliantly while Dylan frowned at him.

"Truthfully, you are, boy-o. Del and I are having an important discussion."

She tossed her lover a nasty look, but then smiled in Raphael's direction. "Ignore him, he's just grumpy."

Dylan muttered something under his breath.

“Joy said you both wanted to talk to me.”

The moment he mentioned Joy, both of them seemed to calm down. One thing about Del and Dylan, their business came first.

“Yeah.” Dylan settled one hip against the desk. “You heard about Warwick’s death last week?”

“Yeah, died in that Sinner’s Delight. That’s been getting a lot of press, especially with his wife’s connections.”

“Well, seems he didn’t just die, although they’re keeping that under wraps. They think he was murdered.”

He whistled silently. “Holy Shit. Why?”

“A bunch of files are missing, he was in perfect health at his last physical two months ago, and there was some kind of residue on his lips. The coroner thinks it might be Defrent.”

“Damn.” Defrent was a nasty synthetic developed in the Renwalder Solar System. It didn’t have but one use, murder. Once it hit the blood stream, it was almost impossible to detect, making it a perfect weapon. “What does it have to do with us?”

Dylan glanced at Del and she apparently took this as her cue.

“Sasha Petosky is your assignment. She’s been missing since the day after. She’s the owner of the club, and was questioned and released. Then she disappeared.”

“You want me to hunt up a whore?”

An angry flush crept up Del’s neck and into her face. All easiness drained from her body, her muscles going rigid and she stood, planting her hands on the desk between them. “She’s not a whore, for your information. Even if she were, it wouldn’t matter. She owned the place, never worked it. And, she was a friend of mine before I started bounty hunting. I would appreciate it if you could remember that.”

Silence lengthened, and Dylan leaned forward and brushed his fingers over her hand. "Raphael didn't mean anything by it."

She looked at Dylan, her muscles relaxing as she sat back down, but the cold expression in her eyes remained.

He nodded. "Agreed, but I don't know why we would want to look for her, or who would want us to. Shouldn't the cops be handling this?"

"She hasn't been charged, yet. But she was released and left with Vic Ashley," Dylan said.

Rafe crossed his arms as he thought that over. "Didn't know Ashley was working homicide."

"He's not." Del answered him this time. "They have a prior relationship." She then shot Dylan a look. "Vic is her *ex*-husband."

Ignoring her comment, Dylan turned back to Rafe. "He's the one who contacted us. He claims that when they got home, someone attacked them. Granted he had a nasty knot on the back of his head. He was shot with a stun gun, then smacked his head against the floor."

"Any leads?"

Del nodded. "Whoever attacked her and Vic left with her. She was seen on a transport on her way to New York, alone. Pretty banged up, from reports. After that, nothing. That was five days ago."

Dylan handed him an electronic file reader. Raphael pushed the power on. The hologram report materialized before him. He read the information they had on her, her history, and finally a picture.

The first thing that stood out were her eyes. Blue, with flecks of gold filtered throughout, they dominated her face. A wealth of thick, dark lashes surrounded them, and highlighted the way they tipped up at the corners. Even though her eyes were the one thing you noticed first, the rest of the face definitely added to the attraction. High cheek bones,

full pink lips, and skin the color of pale ivory. He was sure the black tresses were threaded with gold. A face that perfect had to have been paid for.

Even so, he could see how the woman had gained notoriety as a dancer and now drew in customers at her club. Of course, she was beautiful. He'd known she would be. There was a sense of power beneath the practiced smile she'd flashed for the picture. And, being who he was, his body responded. He shifted his feet, trying to relieve the sudden pressure as heat rushed to his cock. He loved beautiful women, but he really enjoyed women who knew their worth. And Sasha Petosky definitely did.

He'd heard of her club. Since it opened three years earlier, Sinner's Delight had catered to the wealthy, the powerful, and had a reputation of being clean as a whistle when it came to drugs. In fact, he knew that out of all the area legalized brothels, this Sinner's was the only one that had not been written up for violations. Some people thought it had been because of payoffs. Considering her ex-husband was Vic Ashley, Rafe figured he might know.

Rafe didn't have major objections to adult clubs, but they were havens for other crimes. He would never understand how any man or woman could sell themselves that way. He understood being hungry, but the whores at a place like Sinner's made top dollar. Someone who would compromise themselves in that fashion for that kind of money wouldn't think much of moving to murder and stealing state secrets.

"So, you think you can track her down?"

Dylan's voice broke into his thoughts. He glanced up to find both of his bosses staring at him.

"No problem. I'll talk to Ashley, see if he can help."

"He's the one who hired us, so he'll do anything to help," Dylan said. "Make sure to check back in."

"Right. I'm calling the private line though. I can't handle anymore of Joy's predictions."

Del laughed. "But the predictions about you are the only ones that she gets right."

He frowned trying to push aside that idea but he knew it was true. Three times she'd been right about jobs and how they would end. She had been his first assignment, and now felt grateful that he had set her back on the right track. She apparently thought it her job to watch over him.

Ignoring Del's last comment, he turned off the file. "I'll let you know what I find out."

As he walked down the hall, he slowed his steps, dreading Joy. She'd pounce the instant she saw him.

True to form, she popped up from the chair the second he came into her line of vision. "Rafe, wait! I know you want to ignore me, but just hear me out and then you can leave."

Sighing, he resigned himself to her predictions and nodded.

"Okay, last night it came to me. I was lying there reading, and then it hit me. You are in grave danger."

She'd lowered her voice on the word danger, and visions of carnival sideshows and fortunetellers with warts came to mind. He wanted to laugh, but he couldn't do it and hurt her feelings. No matter how kooky she was, she had a good heart. Joy thought it her duty to protect him.

"Is there any other kind?"

She frowned and settled her hands on her hips. "This is serious. You have two tests coming to you, Rafe. One shall test your will; the other will test your heart."

"And?"

She shrugged. "Not sure what it means, I just know that in the end, if you are not careful, you'll lose everything."

Well, that helped. "Thanks, Joy. Gotta get going."

He turned to leave and she stopped him with a comment. "Rafe, be careful. You are about to encounter something that could set you on a path that will change your life forever."

Looking back over his shoulder, he smiled. “That isn’t always a bad thing, Joy.”

* * * * *

Sasha looked at herself in the mirror and winced. Six days since her run in with goons and her upper lip was still a bit puffy. Not to mention the beautiful bruises that colored one side of her face.

“It’s not all that bad, Sasha.”

She caught Sydney’s gaze in the mirror and smiled, which, fucking *hurt*. “Shit, I keep forgetting not to do that.”

The split in her lip was taking forever to heal thanks to being so close to the corner of her mouth and constantly irritated.

“Come on, Sash, we’ll put some more coolant on it.”

Sasha followed her out of the small bathroom into the kitchen. It was less than a dozen steps. After Syd gave her the package, Sasha carefully pressed it against her lip. She looked around the small space, the dingy colors, and the crappy last century appliances and frowned, thinking, not for the first time, things were not adding up with Syd.

“You shouldn’t be living here, Syd. You make more than enough off Sinner’s to have an apartment four times this size, even here.”

Syd sighed and walked to the refrigeration unit. After hitting a few buttons the door slid open, producing a tray offering up a container of orange juice. Sasha studied the young woman, as she ordered her breakfast from the microcooker. When she’d met her just a few weeks before Janice’s death, Sasha had been struck by the differences between the two sisters. Not in looks. Both women shared the same brilliant red hair, bluish green eyes, and small stature. At the time, Sasha remembered thinking both of them reminded her of pixies. Where they had differed was their personalities.

Janice had run from an abusive stepfather, into dancing and later whoring. Thankfully, she worked her way out of that mess, but the scars of her earlier abuse had primed her for another abusive relationship. The last one eventually led to her murder.

Because of her genius I.Q., Syd had been sheltered. Her mother made sure she'd profited by selling her to the highest bidder, a think tank on Jupiter. It wasn't until she turned eighteen that she could leave and search for her sister. It took her three years, and by the time she had found Janice, she'd had less than a year to get reacquainted before Janice's death.

Syd took her food to the tiny dinette in the corner, and settled in one of the two chairs. When she caught Sasha studying her, she sighed, the sound filled with such aggravation, Sasha would have smiled if she didn't know it would have hurt.

"Listen, I understand your concern, but the less you know the better. Let's just say, I have my reasons."

Nerves bunched in Sasha's tummy at Syd's comments. She was bent on revenge, and she could end up dead like her sister. "You're not planning anything foolish, are you?"

She smiled, reminding Sasha just how sunny the young woman's disposition usually was. "When have I ever done anything foolish?"

"And if you were, you could probably think of a million different ways to hide it from me."

Syd laughed. "That's true, but don't think I don't know you could probably figure it out in a heartbeat. You're smarter than you give yourself credit for."

The usual denials fought to surface, but Sasha beat them back. She was done with pretending to be a fluff piece. Most men took in her looks, her background, and the fact she owned an adult club and assumed she was stupid. Truthfully, it took as much smarts as good looks to succeed in her business. One of the things that had drawn her to Vic was the fact he didn't expect her to act like a dumb bimbo. Inwardly she winced, thinking he was probably

still pissed at her for disappearing. She'd scanned the e-news looking for any info about him and had been relieved when she'd found nothing. Contacting him would put him in danger, and she couldn't do that after he'd been zapped. If he was okay, he was going to be irritated. Bringing on another round with the jackasses who beat the hell out of her would definitely make him furious.

Syd's voice drew her out of her morose thoughts about Vic. "Did you ever figure out what those men were after?"

"No."

"Tell me again what they said."

Sasha closed her eyes and tried to think back to that day. She didn't like doing it. It had taken her years, but she had built a life for herself. She no longer went hungry or lived in fear. In one day, less than a day really, she had lost all of it. Every bit of safety she'd built into her world was now stripped away. Feelings she hadn't had to deal with for years rose up. Fear was there, but also vulnerability. She hated not being in control of her life and she had lost that in one swoop. For what reason? She still had no idea.

Opening her eyes, she caught Syd's gaze and knew the younger woman wasn't being pushy. If anyone could figure it out, Syd could. However, Sasha was already worried that she'd put her in danger.

"They asked after some files that were missing. I'm assuming they are worried that maybe Warwick had them, and whoever killed him stole them. I wasn't there, I have no idea."

Syd pursed her lips, then opened her mouth, but was interrupted by the doorbell chime. She popped out of her chair, a perplexed look on her face. "Odd for someone to be calling this time of the morning."

"I still think it's a sin to be up this early."

Syd snorted. "I told you I'd work somewhere else if you needed rest."

She followed Syd to the door. After punching in her access code, the video monitor flickered once, then died. "Fuck a duck." She slapped the side of it, and once again, it blinked, then an image appeared.

"Ohh, honey. That is one pretty man."

Sasha couldn't have said it better herself. The picture wasn't great on the monitor, but even with that, Sasha could tell the man was attractive. Hispanic, short hair, a sculpted lean face, with a mouth on him she'd have paid to have on her body. The color was off, but she could tell his eyes were light. She'd bet the rest of him was just as delicious.

Shaking her head, she tried to rein in her hormones. Jeez, what was wrong with her? Now was not the time to have a burst of lustful longings, especially for a stranger.

"It is a shame he's not mine."

Sasha's senses went on alert. "You don't know him?"

"Nope but there's a model who lives a floor above me, they sometimes get the wrong address." She moved to open the door, but Sasha stopped her.

"Double check."

Syd looked at her. Her eyes widened and then she nodded. "Of course. I was momentarily stunned by the hottie."

Pushing the button she turned on the receiver. Sasha had moved out of way of the camera. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to talk to you about a mutual friend."

Syd tilted her head to one side and Sasha almost laughed. Syd loved fucking with people, and they always assumed the woman wasn't much of match because of her looks and her size.

"Really? I would have to say whoever this *mutual* friend is isn't much of a friend."

"And why is that?"

“Well, because whoever they are, they never told me about you. And if they did,” she sighed longingly, “I would have remembered.”

He chuckled. The sound of it, even over the shitty speakers, sent shivers racing down Sasha’s spine. Deep, rich and full of sensuality, he definitely could make a saint want to sin. Considering her past life, Sasha definitely didn’t fit into the saint category.

“I’m not so sure of that. I’d rather not discuss this in the hallway.” His voice was smooth, cultured, with just a hint of Hispanic undertones.

“Sorry. You may be pretty, but pretty is as pretty does.”

The next time he spoke, his voice wasn’t as seductive. “Vic Ashley sent me here.”

All the teasing left Syd’s features as her face paled. Fear curled into Sasha’s stomach, chilling her from the inside out. The fact she’d brought danger to Syd’s doorstep just added to the feeling.

“I don’t know a Vic Ashley.”

“No, but you know Sasha.”

Syd paused before answering. “Yes, I do. She was my sister’s business partner. What does she have to do with you?”

“Nothing. I’ve been hired to find her.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to be found.”

The sigh from the speakers was so aggravated that Sasha almost smiled. “Listen, if you know where she is, I need to know. Vic hired my agency to find her, and then gave me instructions.”

“And what would those be.”

“When I get her cornered, he gave me permission to strangle the living hell out of her for running.”

“What’s your name?”

"Vicentes. Rafe Vicente."

The name nudged at a memory. She tried to grasp it, remember where she'd heard that name before. Then it hit her. He was a cop or agent or something. She knew he was someone Vic knew.

"Let him in."

Syd looked at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"Vic knows him."

Syd frowned. "He said to strangle the living hell out of you."

"That's something Vic would say."

"No wonder you divorced him." Resigned, Syd pushed the buttons to open the door.

When it slid open, the man she'd seen on the screen came to life in 3D. Mother Maria, he was a gorgeous hunk of man. Tall, over six feet, he wore a suit of synsilk, one of the most expensive synthetic fabrics. Dark gray, the suit looked fitted. It hugged the contours of his body. When she met his gaze, she was startled by the light green color. The shade was in such contrast to his other features, it was almost otherworldly. The delightful shiver that ran through her had nothing to do with cold and everything to do with wanting to lick him up one side and down the other.

He stepped into the room, and the door shut behind him. First, his gaze shifted to Syd. "Syd Walker?"

She nodded, then he shifted his attention to Sasha.

"And you must be Sasha." When she didn't say anything he handed her a card. "Vicentes. I'm here to take you back to DC."

She cocked an eyebrow. "And what if I say no?"

"I have express permission from Vic to hog tie and gag you. In fact, he asked for pictures. He said it would make every dollar he spent to find you worth the cost." He smiled

and she felt the power of it all the way to her toes, and various other parts. Damn, he was dangerous. “And at the moment, I’m thinking it could really make this job worth the effort.”

She snorted, trying to fight off the heat racing through her. The man was gorgeous, too gorgeous for her peace of mind. The hint of accent threading his voice, not to mention the deepening of it, had her curling her toes in her slippers. She had to protect herself from him. Damn Vic. He probably picked Vicentes because he knew her preference for Hispanic and Latino men.

“Really, Mr. Vicentes, I doubt you could handle the job yourself.”

Instead of vanishing, his smile turned devilish. “Oh, Ms. Petosky. I can assure you, I am more than man enough for the job.”

Chapter Three

Rafe tried his damndest to hide his reaction to seeing Sasha Petosky in the flesh. Especially when she left so much of it showing. However, hiding his reaction would be tantamount to hiding Mount Everest. Besides, a woman like Sasha was used to men's reactions and would be even more suspicious if he didn't react. She already looked ready to bolt, and other than being dead or gay, a man would be a fool not to at least respond to her sensual beauty. The little kimono robe she was wearing was probably on loan from Sydney because it barely covered her interesting parts and afforded him a view of her long legs.

Jesus, he could tell she'd been a dancer. Long, lean, with just enough muscle to give them shape. The image of them wrapped around his waist as he slid his cock into her appeared in his mind, and he had to shake his head to clear the image. Even if he could accomplish that, just the flash of what it would feel like to lose himself in her hot pussy had his body reacting. He shifted his weight trying to quell the tightness of his groin.

"You're very amusing, Mr. Vicentes. But I'm not going anywhere. I'll pay Vic back."

The slight Eastern Quadrant accent made her even more exotic, and unfortunately, ten times more appealing. Not that the package wasn't already appealing. She'd pulled the heavy mass of her thick black hair up on top of her head, although a few wisps had escaped and

lingered. It made a man want to twist his finger around one of the strands just to see how silky it was. Despite the bruising, it appeared no bones had been broken. The beauty of her striking bone structure was easy to see, if you ignored the explosion of color from the attack. Sculpted arched eyebrows and thick lashes framed a set of cool blue eyes that even at that moment were assessing him, weighing her options. His gaze traveled to her mouth, full and alluring, even with the slight swelling and split.

A muffled chuckle sounded from the other woman bringing him out of his assessment and back to the moment. He glanced at Sydney and from the knowing look in her eyes, she'd seen his appraisal, noted his interest. Shifting his attention back to Sasha, he tried to grasp what they'd been talking about. Oh, payment.

"With what?" When she stared at him blankly, he realized she didn't know all that had transpired since her departure. "They've frozen your accounts. Your club is shut down, and one of your *girls* told the police you hired her to kill Warwick."

Her face drained of color, and he worried she'd faint from the blood loss. "Betty?"

"Yeah, they're keeping it hush hush at headquarters, but I called in a few favors." She nodded and closed her eyes, visibly swallowing. "Unfortunately, when I asked to speak to her, they said it was impossible."

When she opened her eyes, the misery he saw struck a chord. The woman had been through hell in the last few days -- and it was about to get worse.

"They wouldn't let you talk to her?"

"No. Couldn't. As in, they found her body a couple days ago. She'd been shot twice, Gutar bullets, which means a professional hit."

She nodded in agreement. Of course she would know, not just from running the club, but also from being married to a cop. Gutar bullets were small, but damaging. They contained just enough gunpowder to be shot. Once they were in the body, poison traveled through the victim's body, causing paralysis almost immediately and leaving no way for the

victim to call for help. Then, it slowly spread through the body, attacking every major organ, inch by inch killing the person. While they couldn't talk or walk, and some of the feeling would be lost, the victim never lost the ability to think. Hit men used it when they wanted to make a point.

"So, all the leads come to me. Did she offer any evidence?" She swayed when she asked the question. Anger and lack of sleep had him moving across the room and grabbing her arm.

"Sit down before you fall down."

She didn't argue, but she did shoot him a look of disdain probably at his rough command. But dammit, he didn't like seeing any woman, especially one as strong as she was, falling apart. And he knew she was strong from what everyone said about her. According to Ashley, Sasha would never have run without good reason.

Once Sasha settled in the kitchen chair, he released her and looked at Sydney. "Do you have any juice, anything with sugar in it?"

Sydney nodded. "But she won't drink it. Sash doesn't believe in breakfast until afternoon."

The weak chuckle from Sasha had the muscles in his back relaxing. "Better do as he says, Syd. He's a bully."

He ignored her comment and studied her face. He'd been worried about whether he would find her alive or not. From the looks of it, he was lucky he did. An explosion of saffron and purple bruises marred the left side of her face. Her lip also looked a little puffy. Even days later, he knew she was probably suffering from bruises the goons, she'd been caught by, gave her. He just hoped it had only gone that far.

Sydney handed her the drink. He glanced at the younger woman. "You have somewhere you can lay low for a few days?"

"No problem."

Sasha was already shaking her head. "Now wait a second. There's no reason why she should have to be troubled."

He crossed the floor, what little of it there was, and then leaned down, bringing his face within inches of hers. "The jackasses who came after you aren't going to let it go. Now that they are sure something is missing, they will come and find you again. If I could find you in a day, Lord knows they will find you in no time flat. In addition, I can assure you they aren't the only ones who are looking for you. Whatever those files were, they were worth a pretty penny. Enough to kill for."

All the remaining color drained from her face, leaving her skin pale, her bruises more prominent. She swallowed visibly, either to gather courage or to fight back nausea, he wasn't sure which.

Her gaze moved to her friend. When Rafe glanced at her, he was struck by Sydney's composed manner. The news killers might be at her door just didn't seem to faze her.

"Before you say anything, Sash, it's no problem. I have that vacation time I told you about. I have a place up in the hills, pretty secluded. No one knows where it is."

He nodded. "You need to leave first. I'll watch to see if you're followed. I don't want to leave you here, just in case they decide to try and find out where we went."

"But I won't know where you go, will I?"

"Better that you don't. But let me give you the contact information for the Bounty Hunters, Inc. headquarters in DC." He handed Sydney another of his cards. "You have a problem, call there -- ignore the woman named Joy who answers -- and ask for Del Littleton or Dylan O'Farrell. Either of them should be able to help you."

He could feel Sasha's gaze as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. All the reactions he was having spoke of his need to find a social life. Just the thought of her staring at him had his blood heating, his cock twitching. He returned his attention to her. The narrowed eye look she was giving him wasn't what he expected.

"You mean to tell me you aren't a cop?" She pronounced every word as if she were trying to piece together the puzzle.

"I used to be an agent, but now I work for BH Inc. I gave you a card." He said it as if she were an idiot, which was probably why she frowned harder at him.

She took a deep breath as she looked at the apparently forgotten card in her hand. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, she said, "Vic hired a fucking bounty hunter to find me?"

When she looked up at him, anger had brought a hint of color to her skin and a spark to her eyes. Rafe was glad to see it. From what her ex had said, she wasn't a wilting type, but anyone who had been through what she had, would probably have a tendency to act out of character. He really didn't want to deal with a whiner.

"He couldn't go through the regular channels and he knows he can trust Dylan and me. We've worked with him before."

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and huffed. "More like he didn't think the police could handle me."

He had to smile because Vic had said something pretty close to that. "There's a warrant out for your arrest but for some reason, Vic is more worried about other people who might be after you. Want to tell me who that might be?"

She frowned. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't."

She shrugged, causing the silky kimono to slip a bit more, exposing more of her breast. He'd never seen skin so pure. It resembled cooled ivory from Venus, and he bet it was just as smooth. The thought of running his fingers over her flesh, watching goose bumps rise over it, feeling her shiver against him ...

After taking a deep breath, he pulled his attention away from the view back to her face as she continued. "Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. Believe me; these people don't want to be found." As she said it, she touched her mouth. "They wanted to make sure I understood that very well."

He was ready to argue, tell her that he could handle them, but Sydney interrupted.

"Listen, Sasha, I think you should listen to him."

Sasha frowned at the younger woman, but didn't argue.

"These guys definitely wanted something from you. Who knows what the hell they were after, but think about it. What if they set you up after beating the shit out of you? If they did, if they are tied to something to do with espionage -- or worse, treason -- they won't stop at roughing you up, closing down Sinner's, and setting you up." She leaned back on the counter and crossed her arms. "If it is even the sicko who showed up at your apartment pulling the strings on the warrant."

He studied Sydney for a second, then asked, "Who the hell could it be other than the asses who showed up at Sasha's?"

She cocked her head to one side and Rafe could almost see the wheels turning in her mind. Short, delicate, with short pixie hair, wide blue-green eyes, and a cupid's bow mouth, Sydney probably fooled many people into ignoring her intelligence.

"Well, someone stole whatever they are after. I would assume there is more than one faction after it, and the people who killed Warwick and Betty are probably the ones with more to gain than the ones looking for it."

"Great. Just what I fucking need." Sasha sighed, then stood. "I'll be dressed and ready in a few minutes."

"Dress in something easy to move in. No high heels. I don't know who is watching and we might have to make a run for it when we hit DC."

She nodded, but didn't say anything more. She stood and then wearily walked to what he figured was the bathroom. It had to be the bathroom since there wasn't another room. As she walked, the silky fabric of the robe swished back and forth with the rhythm of her hips. He watched, his palms itching to slide up under that fabric and explore that grade A ass. Heart-shaped, full and just the type he liked on a woman. It was just his luck the woman was built exactly like his favorite type of lover. Curvy, but lean, fair skinned and dark hair. The personality was just the cherry on top. Unfortunately, he was having all kinds of ideas on what to do with whipped cream and cherries and that body of hers. He had to shift his weight again to ease into a more comfortable position.

"Tsk, tsk, Agent Vicentes."

He glanced at Sydney and then tried to ignore the heated flush that warmed his face. It had been a long time since someone had gotten onto him for admiring a woman and somehow the pixie made him feel as if his grandmother had caught him.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. She's your caller."

He shrugged and slipped his hands into his pockets. "You don't have to worry about me, Sydney. I have a rep for always bringing a caller in -- no matter how beautiful -- and keeping my hands off of her."

"Hmm. Well, Sasha isn't your typical caller."

He chuckled. "No, but I know strong-willed women. I was raised in a house of them, and one of the company's owners is another one. I have no problem working with them." Glancing back at the door, he said, "I'm still amazed that she didn't argue."

"Sasha can be a mule but she's smart. Too smart sometimes. But there is one thing I want to assure you." She walked closer, until she stood toe-to-toe with him. All humor had fled, her eyes deadly, coldly serious. "Anything happens to her, I will hunt you down and make you pay. I owe her for what she has done for me, for my sister, and I won't think twice about altering appendages I'm sure you are highly attached to."

He would have laughed but there was something in her tone that told him she would do it -- and enjoy it. That type of woman was serious. Even knowing there is no way she would get her chance, he couldn't help wincing at the image. Anytime a man was threatened with that, it was impossible not to react.

He swallowed, then cleared his throat. "Gotcha."

"I'm glad we understand each other." She stepped back from him and smiled as if she'd just suggested they go on a picnic and not whack off his dick. "Would you care for something to drink? I have some Saturani Coffee."

"That would be good." As she moved slowly around the kitchen, he heard a cuss from the bathroom. "Does she need help?"

"Oh, Sasha is probably putting on makeup." She rolled her eyes as she pressed the buttons on the coffee maker. "She's one of those chicks who won't go out without it, like she needs it. But I'm sure she thinks covering some of the damage up will make her less conspicuous."

She filled his cup, then handed it to him. After taking a sip, he asked, "Are people always that easy for you to figure out?"

Chuckling, she settled herself into one of the kitchen chairs and motioned for him to join her. "Common sense, and I unfortunately have a lot of it. It tends to get me in trouble every now and then."

He grunted.

"I bet I can peg you." She studied him and he resisted the urge to shift in his chair under her scrutiny. "You like order. You have a set of rules of how life is supposed to go. You aren't rigid, but you definitely are not a go with the flow. I bet you have said more than once that plans don't fail, you just fail to plan. And, you have a strict code of what is right and wrong, no gray area."

He frowned, trying his best not to let her know how close she'd gotten. "I've never said that asinine saying."

"Give the man a break, Syd. He had to put up with Vic and now he has to put up with me."

He turned at the sound of her voice and hoped his reaction didn't show on his face. When he told her to dress in something easy to move in, he didn't mean for her to dress in a catsuit. The stretchy material clung to her skin, highlighting every curve, and there were plenty of those. Heat spiraled through him as she walked the short distance to him. Each step closer, his heartbeat increased a notch.

When he got past the outfit, his gaze rose to her face. He could still make out the bruising, but she had done a good job covering up most of it. With a pair of sunglasses, no one would be able to tell.

"I'm not so sure that outfit is going to work."

She frowned, a little wrinkle forming between her sculpted eyebrows. "I have nothing else, Vicentes. This is all I have that will work."

"And really, there is nothing Sasha puts on that makes her any less of a target." Sydney shrugged. "Hate to tell you, but there is just no way you're going to get men not to notice her."

"Oh, shut up," Sasha said, without any heat. "I'm going to grab my ID. You need to get ready."

"Packed and ready to blow."

This comment made Sasha frown harder. "Syd, I don't want you --"

"Don't worry, Sasha. I'm a big girl; I can take care of myself."

Sasha nodded, although Vicentes could tell she wasn't happy about it. Turning, she leaned over the bed to grab a bag. He almost groaned as her suit pulled tightly over her ass. With that view there was no way they wouldn't attract attention. And he was going to have

a heck of a time keeping his hands off her. Good thing it would be a short trip back to a safe house and then he would be rid of her.

* * * * *

Sasha settled into the plush reclileather seat as Vicentes locked the door behind him. She glanced around the private cabin and tried not to be impressed but it was hard not to be. The Plutonian marbled walls and carpeted floor was better than she had in her own club, where she didn't skimp on décor, didn't stint the quality. A ceiling-to-floor window allowed for perfect scenery viewing. Gold-tipped hardware rounded out the cabin's features. The company Vicentes worked for must be top class if they could afford this type of ride on an airtrain. She knew exactly to the nickel what it cost to grab one.

Vicentes leaned forward, stretching his arm over her head. For the briefest of seconds, his scent surrounded her. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath in appreciation. Masculine, musky, a hint of exertion, mixed with pure sensual male. Sasha loved the smell. There was nothing as erotic as a good smelling man, or as delicious. Her pulse jumped, her body warmed. After he pressed the button that brought down the window shade, he pulled back and she opened her eyes to watch him take his seat opposite her in the cab.

Unlike most men in law enforcement, Vicentes fit these surroundings. Through all her years on the stage, and now with her business, Sasha could spot a cop a mile away. From the way they dressed, to the way they studied a room made them stick out like a nun at a strip joint. Not this man. His suit spoke of taste but more importantly money. He relaxed enough to tell her that he would have no problem assuming the role of a man used to this kind of wealth.

It was her job to know men, their likes and dislikes. Knowing what they wanted or needed could make or break her business. As she studied her companion, she could tell from their short time together, Vicentes wouldn't be the kind of man who would frequent her club. He wouldn't need to.

The man moved like a lethal cat. A big one at that. All that masculine beauty wouldn't do him a bit of good if he sucked in bed, but she could tell he wouldn't. The way his eyes had studied her, watched her move -- when he thought she wasn't looking -- told her he knew a lot about women. It was such a shame he was in law enforcement. After her divorce, she'd sworn off cops, or anything related to the law. They tended to view the world in black and white. Sasha saw it as a huge gray sea of opportunity. Not that she did anything illegal, and she didn't believe in breaking the law. But, she'd learned from an early age that people like Vicentes had a high tendency to starve. Two months after arriving on Earth, she'd been flat broke, homeless, and she had no problem at the age of sixteen to trade her morals and take her top off. It was better than some of the alternatives.

"It shouldn't take but fifteen, at the most twenty minutes. This is the non-stop."

He didn't say anything else, just studied her. Used to speculation and men's stares, she stared back. Stan, Sasha's assistant, had said that he'd never seen a woman with such a perfect poker face. Nothing fazed her -- especially a man. If they had, she would have never made it through her first night of dancing. However, there was something too perceptive in his gaze. It was if he could see her secrets. She didn't like it one bit. An itch crawled up her spine and she flattened her back against the seat trying to ignore it. For the first time in a really long time, she had to fight the urge to fidget.

"Do you know who did that to you?" He gestured his hand to her face.

Pulling off her glasses, she smiled and then cursed again at the pain. "No. They didn't leave a calling card and I really wasn't interested in getting better acquainted."

He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. "They didn't tell you who they were but beat the crap out of you?" She nodded. "I'm assuming that they were after some sort of file or whatever Warwick had on him. Do you know what it is, why it's so important for them to find it?"

She hesitated, not sure anymore who to trust. Someone at the club had set her up and there was a pretty good chance Betty didn't do it by herself. Betty wasn't bright enough to figure out how to get from the front, to the office without explicit instructions. So there was a good chance someone on the inside had helped her. Someone she trusted and counted as a friend. Now, the only two people she trusted were Syd and Vic. Even if Vicentes was Vic's friend, she didn't have confidence in him. She knew the men who were after that file were after it because of money. Freelancing spies were a nasty bunch from her personal experience, she thought as she touched the corner of her mouth with her fingers. She definitely didn't trust anyone -- especially someone who asked questions like a cop.

"I'd rather not say."

Oh, he didn't like that from the dangerous glint in his eyes. "And why is that?"

His tone spoke of irritation, but also pride along with a dash of disbelief. So, Hunter Vicentes didn't like having his integrity questioned, did he?

Welcome to the club, gorgeous.

"I would rather talk to someone who can do something about it. If you're just a bounty hunter, you can't really do anything, can you? You can't put me into protective custody. USC is the only one who can protect me."

He worked his jaw for a moment as his narrowed gaze raked over her. "Why didn't you go there to begin with?"

She snorted to cover her fear. In the past few years she forgot what it was like to avoid men with fists. After meeting Vic she'd learned there were decent men. It'd been a good five years since she'd had to fear a man. Owning Sinner's had made her soft. "Yeah, that would have worked. I just had two jackasses work me over, I wasn't sure if Vic was okay, and they made damn sure they knew my every move. I didn't want to have another run in with them. The first one wasn't a tea party."

His gaze softened ever so slightly. It did funny things to her insides, like make them go all gooey. For a second, maybe two, she almost lost it. It had been a long week and it wasn't getting any better, even with the arrival of Vicentes. The backs of her eyes burned with tears but she would not give in, no matter what she'd been through. The safe cocoon she'd built had been demolished and everything she had worked for was now in jeopardy. There were so many times she wanted to sit down and cry, though she had yet to give into the urge. Crying wouldn't get her anywhere, and she looked bad enough as it was without adding puffy eyes from sobbing like a baby.

"If I knew, or if Vic knew, we could check it out."

The man was as tenacious as a drunk with his whiskey. "I don't know. I told you that I didn't know before."

Again, he held his tongue as he studied her. He was a thinker, which was the most dangerous kind of the male species. She'd been married to one, so she'd studied the creature up close and personal. They usually had a habit of plotting each move and keeping ahead of them was a pain in the ass. She'd avoided them at all costs since her divorce. Fluffy headed pretty boys, as Vic called them, were her style now.

The airtrain pressed forward, the momentary jolt making Vic break eye contact to look at their door. When he brought his attention back to her face, he shook his head. "No. You said you didn't know who they were, but you didn't remark on what they wanted."

Sasha sighed, knowing that she wasn't thinking straight if he could catch her so easily. From her years on stage, she knew how to distract a man. It wasn't that hard, since inevitably they allowed their dick to think for them. However, from the moment she saw Rafe Vicentes face on Syd's shitty security screen she'd been a little off kilter.

Sasha was sure it wasn't him, but the situation. The only man she kept a personal relationship with was Vic. And, truthfully, if he'd quit showing up in the middle of the night

needing a place to stay, she'd probably lose contact with him. Men were never to be trusted further than a good time in bed.

"A woman in your position would do well to learn to trust at least one person, especially the one saving her cute little ass."

His smirk irritated her, more than she liked to admit. "A woman in my position?"

"You're on the run, which I am sure you are more than used to."

That misconception stung, as it always did when someone made it, but this hurt more than usual. Why, she didn't really know. Maybe it was the stress of the last week that caused her to have the idiotic need to be accepted. Just once, she would love for someone to accept who she was without questioning her.

"I don't want to talk about it right now. And if I tell you, what's to keep you from selling the info, or me." His eyebrows lowered, his frown hardened. "And don't give me that look. Would you trust just anyone who showed up? I bet not."

Vicentes opened his mouth to, undoubtedly, spout out another argument, when the airtrain shuddered to a stop. She watched as his argumentative pose took on the look of a predator, every muscle tensing for action. He stood and went to the door, leaning against the wall, out of view of the portal window. His hand moved to the arm holster and pulled out his gun.

"That was fast," she said as fear curled into her stomach, then spread through her veins. She couldn't deny that her heart had just fallen to somewhere in the vicinity of her feet.

Vicentes grunted, never taking his attention from the corridor outside their cabin. Nerves already overwrought from the last week stretched thinner as she waited for him to tell her it was okay. There were probably millions of reasons they would stop right out of the shoot. Maybe it was just a mechanical function, or some disturbance in their path. She knew the trains had to run a direct path to their destination, due to federal laws, so anything in its way would stop it.

The moment that thought had popped into her mind, shouts and gunfire erupted. Vicentes practically growled. Holstering his gun, he pulled out what looked like a pen, but when he pressed a button, a tiny bright spark made her jump. He held it close to the keypad. A few bright flashes from the contact and he was pocketing his little gadget and pulling out his gun again. He spun on his heel and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her up out of the seat. She expected him to head to the door, even though she knew they couldn't get out that way. Instead, he went the opposite direction. Which meant she was with a mental case because the door was the only way out and he'd jammed them in. It would just figure Vic would send her someone who was insane.

"Where --"

"We don't have time to debate it." As he spoke, he raised his gun and then shot at their window. The sound of the crashing Teflavar, plastic-glass, would probably bring whoever just boarded to their cabin. A gust of icy wind filled the cabin.

He tugged her, his fingers digging into her skin through the fabric of her sleeve. She dug in her heels which didn't do any good because he was bigger and stronger. He ignored her and just pulled her along.

"Just what the hell are you doing?"

"My job."

A burst of gunfire just outside their door sent another wave of panic dancing down her spine, her mind spinning. He released her arm, then retrieved another gadget. After leaning outside the window, he aimed the steel cylinder and pressed a button. A cord flew out of it, but she couldn't see where it landed. He tugged on the contraption. Then without a word, grabbed her and pulled her against him.

He pulled more cord, wrapping it around their waists and securing it.

"Put your arms around me and lock your hands."

She followed his orders, not even thinking twice about it. The tone in his voice told her he'd probably leave her to her fate if she didn't listen to him. It wasn't a chance she wanted to take, even if being this up close and personal with the man was driving her insane. Again, the scent of him filled her senses. Even with the danger and being scared enough to pee her pants, her body reacted. Her nipples tightened and a flush of heat chased away her chills. After sliding on a pair of gloves in quick, efficient moves, he looked at her and smiled. Before she read his intent, he leaned down, pressed his mouth to hers for a quick kiss. His tongue slid into her mouth, and before she was ready -- but just long enough to make her knees turn into rubber and her body hum -- he pulled back.

"Just what the hell was that about?" She tried to sound angry, but it was hard when even she could hear the arousal in her voice.

He reached up, grabbed hold of the cord, then looked down at her. The smile surprised and aroused her at the same time. Even with all the noise outside the door, the danger that apparently was ready to hunt them down, the world shrank away as she just stared up at him.

"I figured if something happened and I died, I deserved a little taste of heaven before I did."

Then he jumped out the window, taking both of them into a free fall.

Chapter Four

Helen Yardley Warwick stared out into the DC night wondering what the hell she had done to be saddled with such a bastard of a husband. She'd known when they married that he was doing it for her connections. Even before she moved up through the ranks of the diplomatic corps, the Yardleys had a long history with the government and the connections that resulted were of more interest to Eddie than she had been. However, she'd been dazzled by him, by what she saw as a marriage, not so much of the hearts, but of like minds. Helen had been so sure that given time, that mutual admiration would finally turn to love, at least on his part -- she had already been there. She'd been so naïve, but ten years of a cold marriage had taken care of that. The bud had not only bloomed on that rose, but it had shriveled up and died.

She'd known of his women, those he paid, those he didn't. And, stupid woman that she was, for years she blamed herself. Somewhere along the way, she finally realized it was his fault not hers and left. They'd still been married. No doubt about that as he threatened to make sure her family paid for her rejection. However, she walked away from the marriage years ago. She'd thrown herself into work and inadvertently helped his career. She told herself it didn't matter. However, one early morning call from the police had dissolved that

illusion. Of course, the embarrassment of his death probably would have pleased him. One more parting shot to the frigid bitch he'd married.

"Ambassador Warwick?"

She turned and released a sigh of relief when she saw Inspector Walton standing in the doorway. Helen was positive if one more person came to see her under the guise of wishing her well, just so they could feed off the flesh of her husband's scandal, she thought she might hit them. She suppressed the snort that threatened to escape.

"Inspector." She walked forward offering her hand. He took it, and not for the first time, she felt a jolt of heat at the contact. When she met his gaze, he showed no signs of having the same reaction. After offering him a seat, she took the opposite chair.

"Would you like anything to drink?" He shook his head and she crushed the desire to scream. Everyone was being so careful with her. She hated it. "Do you have any more to tell me?"

"A little bit. It seems Sasha Petosky was seen leaving New York."

He said the words carefully, as if afraid he would hurt her with the name, the details. Truthfully, other than embarrassment, she'd stop feeling anything years ago.

"And?"

"Raphael Vicentes, a bounty hunter, was seen accompanying her. I found out that her ex-husband hired him to find her. They were on an airtrain on their way back to DC."

His slow, patient tone was really aggravating her, but she tried her best not to let him know. It definitely wouldn't do for the Ambassador to the World Court to tell the man investigating her husband's murder that she didn't give a goddamn about the investigation.

"When was that?"

"Earlier today. Unfortunately, the train was attacked. Vicentes seems to have gotten them out of there before security could even show up."

She stared at him nonplused. "The train was in route?" The inspector nodded. "How the hell did he do that?"

He smiled slightly, just a small curving of the lips and her pulse tripped. "Vicentes used to be an agent, pretty well known for his gadgets. I'm ninety-nine percent sure that if we haven't heard anything by now, Vicentes got them off there."

Restless, Helen stood and wandered over to the floor to ceiling windows that gave her a spectacular view of the capitol.

"Have you found anyone who knows what was going on at the USC?" His voice was quiet again as if he worried she'd fall apart and sob. Fat chance of that happening. Yardleys didn't show emotion in public -- and most of the time in private.

"It was contract work. That is all I have gotten out of them so far." She didn't try to hide the irritation in her voice. Helen Warwick wasn't used to people telling her no. "I have a feeling that Eddie was looking into crooked deals."

The reclileather squeaked as he shifted his weight. It was a sure sign he had to ask questions he didn't feel comfortable with.

"Ambassador --"

"Please, Inspector, just call me Helen. I really think since you came to my house, in the dead of night, last week to tell me my husband had been found dead in a whore house, we're past formalities."

When he said nothing, Helen glanced back over her shoulder to find him watching her. "Okay, Helen. Do you think there is anything illegal your husband could be involved in?"

She turned fully to face him, then sat on the window seat. "No. As I told you that morning, Eddie wouldn't do anything illegal."

"But, he was ..."

His voice drifted off and his cheeks flushed. She smiled for the first time in a week at his reaction. "But he fucked whores so who knows what he would do?"

He nodded.

"I know what my husband was. He couldn't stay faithful if his life depended on it. In fact, I used to say that to him. He would laugh, but I guess he learned his lesson a little too late. When we married, he assumed I understood. I didn't but it didn't take long. Eddie was a horrible husband. One of the worst kind. He never raised a hand to me. He never once yelled at me. What he did was worse. If it had a set of breasts, and was cheap and easy, he couldn't resist. Including one of my bridesmaids at the reception." She swallowed to work past the bitterness, the remembered pain. "But there was one thing Eddie believed in. His job. He worked very hard to get it, and he hated people who were dishonest with money. He wasn't sincere when he uttered his marriage vows, but when he took his oath of office he was serious as a heart attack. If someone on the council was dirty, he wouldn't let it rest. There had been something bothering him in the last few weeks, but I have no idea what it was."

"He didn't tell you?"

Her shoulders slumped. Helen was so sick of pretending. It made her tired. "Please, don't treat me as if I am an idiot or some kind of a helpless widow. It's not a secret we lived separate lives."

"But wives sometimes notice things that others don't."

"I'll tell you what I know. Eddie had gotten really secretive in the last few weeks. Not that it was any different than usual, but I do know he'd been working a lot. I also know that it had been weeks since he'd been to Sinner's. It had to be pretty important to keep him away from his favorite whore."

He winced but she didn't regret her bluntness. She was sick of playing games and the sooner this mess was cleared up, the sooner she could get on with her life.

Shrugging he said, "I already found a lot of that out, but I was hoping you might have something else to help."

She shook her head. "You're welcome to go through his home office again."

"I don't think there's an inch of it that we haven't looked at." He stood, but made no move to leave. "Are you sure there isn't anything else?"

"I would suggest you look at everyone on the council, and anyone who worked in his office. I'm sure you would get more information than I could about what had been their chief concern the last few weeks."

"You mean with your credentials you couldn't get information?"

The teasing tone in his voice, accompanied by the smile, made her hands grow damp. She licked her lips and tried to get her reactions back in control. "Actually, my job makes it a hindrance. That place shut down tight before I got word of Eddie's death. I would be in a position to make someone very sorry for their sloppy security."

His smile grew. "And I am sure you would know exactly how to make that happen, Helen."

Before she could respond, the clearing of a throat interrupted their conversation. She looked beyond the detective to find her admin assistant, Felicia Wainwright, standing in the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt, Ambassador, but there is a call from the president of Quadrant Seven in the Demetria Galaxy."

From a moment, Felicia's gaze narrowed on the detective, and knowing the woman's reputation for men in law enforcement, Helen couldn't help but feel a bit irritated by Felicia's attention. It was stupid, but for some reason, Helen felt territorial about him.

"Thank you, Felicia. Tell him I'll be with him in a moment."

Felicia hesitated just a moment, as if to say something, but then nodded and left them. When Helen returned her attention back to the detective, she found him still smiling at her, albeit with regret.

"I'll let you get back to work. If I hear anything at all, I'll let you know."

She moved to walk with him, but he stayed her with a wave of his hand, "Don't worry about it. I can see myself out. I am sure the president has much to discuss."

"Thank you, Inspector."

He nodded and then turned to leave. As she watched him walk through the doorway, her gaze traveled down his body. Inwardly she sighed. What she wouldn't give to have a man like that for a night. Or two.

* * * * *

Dylan tried to study the electronic file on the new job they had just acquired, but his mind kept slinking back to his lover and her damn obstinate personality. Would it kill her to give him an inch? It wasn't as if marriage was such a bad deal. And they had been together for long enough to know it was for keeps. Being so temperamental about a damn license was asinine and aggravating to him.

The object of his frustrated thoughts walked through the door. As usual, she had dressed in black, and today she wore one of his favorite outfits. The jumpsuit's stretchy material hugged her legs, hips and breasts. The familiar heat of arousal swept through him and all he could think was "mine." His to touch -- with his hands, his mouth, his body. All he wanted was the legality to prove it. He opened his mouth to argue his point until he saw the worry in her expression.

"What's wrong, love?"

"The airtrain Vicentes was on was attacked. The perpetrators escaped."

She sank down in the chair in front of his desk.

"Any word on Vicentes and Sasha?"

Tears gathered in her eyes as she shook her head. The worry he'd had now turned into full-blown panic. Del wasn't a pushover and it took a lot to make her cry.

"Their cabin was one of the ones attacked. The door was blown off." She swallowed and his fear increased. "The cabin is pretty much destroyed but there was no sign of them."

Some of the tension eased as he stood and walked around the desk. Grabbing her by the hand, he pulled Del out of the chair and into his arms. She rested her head against his shoulder. Taking in a deep breath, he allowed the familiar scent of Del comfort him.

"Now, don't go worrying about Vicentes, darlin. He can handle himself."

She shivered and cuddled closer. "How can you be so sure?"

"If there is one thing I know about him, it is that Rafe always goes into a situation prepared for the worse."

"We should have invested in those detectors."

It was a common argument. He'd wanted them, she said they always knew where Rafe was, and they worked together. The money would have put them a bit in the red and she'd vetoed the expense. He remembered the argument, and how he tried to convince her by kissing her anger away. Heat shot to his groin, his cock hardening as the memories of a hot, fast, quick, fuck on his desk ending the argument swept through him.

"Dontcha worry about him, love." He was mentally calculating just how long it would take him to ease his worries and then convince her to have another interlude in their office, when his ear intercom bleeped on.

"Dylan!"

Silently, he cursed their secretary, but released Del and picked it up. "This better be damn important, Joy."

"It is."

She didn't say anything else, but the phone clicked over.

"Compadre."

He recognized Rafe's voice immediately and he smiled. That man had nine lives, he did. "Yeah, what's up?"

"Nothing much, but I might be late for the meeting today. Why don't we reschedule it, around five in the afternoon tomorrow?"

Which meant they wouldn't be back in DC any time soon. It also meant they possibly had a bug of some sort in their office. "No problem. See ya then."

He clicked it off and glanced at Del. Holding his finger to his mouth, he reached over his desk, hitting his blocking device. It took a few seconds, but the green light blinked on indicating it was sending out electronic waves to scramble any bugs.

"He's fine. They're hiding, and he'll get back as soon as he can."

"You got all that from that short conversation?"

He smiled. "We've worked together long enough to understand one another, plus it's a code we use when we know that someone might be listening."

She let out a breath, her muscles relaxing. "I'm still worried. Maybe we should --"

"No, we'll cause him more harm if we go looking for him. They might be keeping tabs on us. I know they probably bugged the office."

Her shoulders slumped and she walked to the window, looking out at midday sky traffic. Crossing her arms beneath her breasts, she watched the different vehicles whizzing by. He knew she wasn't really seeing them, but thinking. As she did, he studied her and smiled. That was his Del, always solving the next problem. Unfortunately, it usually ended up with her saying, "Fuck it," and shooting someone. There was something fascinating about her when she was thinking. And arousing. The body, the mind, the way she would shudder in his arms as she came.

"I don't like it."

Her voice broke into his thoughts. Del was like a dog with a bone when she thought action was needed and she would complain until he did something or convinced her otherwise. Which was one of the hardest things in the world to accomplish.

"Del, you know Rafe. He gets his job done, but he won't risk Sasha's life. If he needs us, he'll tell us." As he spoke, he walked to her, sliding his arms around her waist and pulling her back against him. There was no doubt in his mind she would detect his arousal.

"Dylan, we don't have time for that." Even as she said it, she tilted her head back for a kiss.

Moments later, he finally remembered to press the lock button for the office door, as he followed Del to the floor behind his desk.

* * * * *

Rafe switched off the ear phone and thought about what lay ahead of them. It wouldn't be an easy trip back to DC. If they were picked up so quickly after leaving New York, he knew any normal transportation would be closed to them. As his mind jumped from one idea to another for their trip back, he turned to face the still fuming Sasha. Truthfully, he'd been a bit surprised she'd been so accepting of their jump. She reminded him a bit of a cat, always landing on her feet and apparently assessing the situation fast enough to adapt. Once they had landed on the weigh station platform that he'd used to escape, and she was reassured they would live, her body vibrated with anger and she'd thrown a fit. Damn if that didn't make her more attractive.

"Before you say anything, we need to get out of here."

She frowned. "But you said -- after you dragged me through that jungle you called just a little scenery -- that we were safe."

"It was just a little wooded area. Besides, you know detectors can find us pretty fast. I'm pretty sure someone has the headquarters under surveillance."

“Well, now I feel even safer. I mean, if you can’t keep your headquarters clean, I’m sure I’ll make it back to DC without another bruise.”

Normally, he’d laugh at her sarcasm, but he knew if he let the *Diva* in her take hold, it would take them another ten minutes before they would be on their way. He shot her a mean look that caused her to snort. Thankfully, she didn’t say anything else. He viewed that as a blessing, and turned to lead her to the destination he had in mind.

His family owned a cabin in this area, not far from where they were, and not many people knew about it. Dylan was about the only person who knew about it, and probably Del since Dylan couldn’t keep a damn thing from her now. Even so, it was secluded and loaded with security. He needed a place to regroup. Someone was after her, but he had a feeling not just one person. Yes, the authorities were, but there had to be other factions at work. With Warwick involved, it could have something to do with terrorism. While he thought Warwick a slime of a man in his personal life, Rafe had always thought that the man was honest in his work. But then, if he frequented hookers while married, he might be involved in other less savory pursuits in some way. After he had a good think, he would definitely need a cold shower.

He should never have kissed her. With the taste of her in his mouth, the feel of her in his arms, it was hard to concentrate. She was sweet and spicy all in one curvy bundle. Her smart ass attitude didn’t help matters. Surrounded by strong women all his life, he always seemed drawn to them on the romantic and professional level. With that luscious figure, legs that went on for miles, and her accent, she was driving him crazy. She’d be a perfect bedmate, except she was a job. Rafe didn’t fuck the jobs. Sleeping with a woman while on the job could screw with your mind and definitely put your life -- and hers -- in danger.

Not that he thought Sasha was a danger in that way. She might run what amounted to a modern day brothel, but he knew her rep and she was a straight shooter. He truly believed that she’d been tangled up in something not of her making, but it didn’t mean in the back of her mind she wasn’t calculating how to make it work to her advantage. She always seemed to

land on her feet. Still, his body was having a hard time ignoring her. It was a novelty for him to say the least. He'd brought in more than one woman because he was well known for not letting his dick get in the way. Pretty faces did turn his head, but he had a job to do, a set of rules, and he never had one fucking problem with it until Sasha Petosky became his caller.

"Do we have much further to go?" She wasn't a bit out of breath after their trek up the hill, but she did sound annoyed.

"Not much."

"Please tell me there is food there. I'm starving."

"You ate before we left." And quite a bit in his opinion. He'd never seen a woman put away that amount of food. Most of them ate like birds around him.

"That was at least three hours ago."

Her antagonistic tone grated down his spine. Which was fine, because if he were annoyed with her, he wouldn't have to worry about being attracted to her. Even if he was still semi-aroused and he knew from the way his body was reacting, that one little opening from her and he'd have her down on the ground, naked and moaning in a second. They walked silently for a few more minutes until they reached the clearing where the cabin was.

He stopped and looked around, thanking God that no one in his family seemed to be around the compound. Explaining why he had the notorious owner of Sinner's Delight with him might get a little sticky if his mama were around. Rafe didn't want to think how his nineteen-year-old brother Freddy would react. Sasha stepped up beside him. When he glanced down at her, he was amazed to find a frown.

"This isn't a cabin. It's a freaking fortress."

"No. It's the family cabin."

He ignored her snort and walked ahead. A few seconds later, he heard her stomping up behind him. For a woman who looked to weigh next to nothing, she ate like a teenage boy

and sounded like a herd of elephants when she walked. He wondered just how good of a dancer she was.

Taking the steps two at a time, he hurried to the front door. Now that he was here, he was ready to get settled and do a little research. He was missing something in the equation. Yes, he needed to get Sasha back to DC, but he knew he'd be able to protect her better if he had some kind of an idea who might be behind the hit. Thankfully, his family was in the security business so he could trust their computing systems. After keying in the code, the door slid open. He stepped through the door, pulling out his weapon just in case. Seriously, he doubted anyone would know he was associated with Perez Security Systems Inc. To keep people from assuming he succeeded because of his family connections, he used his mother's maiden name, which was actually part of his name.

"Are you done playing Space Ranger? I need to pee and then you need to feed me."

He shot her a black look over his shoulder and ignored the momentary jolt of lust the sight of her caused. A fair amount of testosterone still pumped through him, waiting to be released. "I want to make sure everything is secure. Stay close."

She rolled her eyes but complied, grumbling something about cops that didn't sound complimentary. After a quick search of the downstairs, he headed upstairs, Sasha on his heels. It took a bit longer to search the upstairs, since there were more rooms. Once he was satisfied that it was secure, he holstered his weapon as he walked down the hall.

"This is a pretty cool place. You said your family owns it?"

He nodded as he headed to the guest room. Less said on that subject the better "You can refresh yourself in here."

"And you'll feed me."

He noticed she didn't ask, but commanded. *Royalty to peasant*. Since she couldn't see his face, he felt safe smiling. Ever the queen, even after having the shit knocked out of her,

being confronted by him, and jumping from an airtrain. He admired her for that. Many women would have fallen apart, and he really didn't have time to deal with that.

"You ate before we got on the train."

"You said that, remember? And then I said, 'That was three hours ago.'" Her tone had turned condescending, as if she were talking to a simpleton. "See, running from bad guys, jumping off an airtrain and then traipsing through the damn forest, kind of makes a girl hungry. And, I have a high metabolism."

He could hear the weariness in her voice, and he realized he might be pushing her too hard. Considering the fact that she complained little about recent events, he figured she deserved a break.

"Yes. I'll feed you."

She didn't say anything before he heard the door shut. He smiled when he heard the lock click. He shook his head, then headed down stairs. The woman was a piece of work. A man who could put up with her had to have nerves of steel and the patience of a saint. Rafe might be close to the first one, but he definitely didn't have the second.

Chapter Five

Sasha looked at herself in the mirror, taking note of the bruises showing through her makeup and wondered when the nightmare was going to end. It had only been a week since her life had fallen apart, and it looked like it was getting worse. Every little ray of hope had been dashed. Okay, she had maybe a shaft of light in Vicentes. Even not knowing the man well, she knew Vicentes was her best chance and even if he wasn't, he was all she had. Vic would have been a sure bet and she inwardly winced as she thought about how mad he probably was at the moment.

Vicentes seemed to know what he was about. Granted it was sheer luck to have his family *cabin* in the vicinity of their flight from the airtrain, but she assumed if it had not been, he would have found a way out of that situation. She was sure Vicentes could get them out of this mess. There was something about a man who had as many gadgets as he did and knew how to use them. She shivered remembering that kiss and the free fall into the forest. She'd never thought she would be an adrenaline junkie, but she couldn't knock the thrill of that jump, or the kiss that had preceeded it.

She raised her arms to pull out the remaining pins in her hair when she noticed her hands still shook. The moment she saw them, it was if her mind just registered just how close

she'd come to losing it again. All the fear and tension she'd kept under control surfaced in a tidal wave.

Quickly, trying to hold on to her emotions, she drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Leaning against the sink basin, she practiced the deep breathing methods she used for stress. Remembering the exercises her therapist taught her, Sasha tried to envision her quiet place. It had never failed her before, but the stress from the last week had pushed her beyond her limit. The emotions she'd kept in check bubbled up and exploded. Unable to stop the sob gathering in her throat, she abandoned trying to control her feelings and slid down the basin, dropping to the tiled floor on her rear.

Drawing up her knees, she wrapped her arms around them and rested her forehead on her knees. A chill swept through her causing her to shiver. Pulling her legs tighter against her, she tried her best to warm herself. Sasha wasn't sure if that was ever going to happen again. All her careful planning, all her work to get on top shattered in one night. Another sob escaped and she barely registered the echo of it in the bathroom. Nothing mattered now that the comfortable world she'd built around her as protection no longer existed. The same fear that had ruled her world when she was sixteen and alone rushed back. The desolation, the hunger, and the downright desperation where she almost succumbed to selling herself for a piece of bread. It was as if those years of work, of struggle had never existed, that she had never dug out of the hole of poverty. She never wanted to feel that way again. However, here she was, hiding at a cabin, on the run with a man she could trust to keep her alive, but couldn't trust completely, and none of it was her fault. It was spinning out control and she didn't know how to stop it.

In the middle of the torrent of tears, a knock sounded on the door.

Her head came up when she heard Vicente's voice. "Sasha? Are you okay?"

Lord, she must have been causing a racket for him to hear her all the way down stairs. She scrubbed her hands over her face as it heated with embarrassment. It'd been years since she'd had an outburst like that.

Drawing in a deep breath, she said, "I'm fine, Vicentes."

"Sasha. I'm not leaving until you open the door."

The immovable tone of his voice told her he was prepared to stand there until she did. If she were in complete high Diva, she would leave him out there. However, this was different. She didn't want to teach him a lesson; she wanted to keep her self respect, which was hanging by a thread. Sasha was sure that seeing him would make her breakdown completely, and she didn't want to show him her weak side. The side that didn't want to keep going. The same side that wanted to curl into a ball on the big super king-size bed in the bedroom and cry. Reality hadn't always been wonderful for her, but it definitely hadn't been this bad.

"Sasha."

Abandoning any hope of being left alone, Sasha drew in a shuddering breath, then grabbed hold of the edge of the counter and pulled herself up to her feet. She glanced in the mirror and winced at the sight. The bruising was now accompanied by puffy eyes and blotchy skin. Vic had always told her she wasn't a pretty crier.

At that one thought, just the memory of Vic caused her to tear up again. Their marriage had gone sour in less than a year because of their personalities, but they'd always been the best of friends. He was the only one she'd been able to really trust, other than Syd. Her eyes filled as she tried to take deep breaths. Running the cold water, she splashed her face. After she dried it, she straightened her shoulders and unlocked the door.

The moment it slid open, she saw him. He'd propped one shoulder against the wall and had been staring at the door. When they made eye contact, the understanding she saw in his almost made her break.

Needing to keep herself in check, she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and tried her best to pretend there had been some other woman crying in the bathroom. "What did you want?"

One eyebrow rose at her tone, which, she would admit, was shrill. The bravado that she was trying to project wasn't quite making it. He never said a word; he just pushed away from the wall and opened his arms. There was no admonition in his expression. She hesitated for a split second, knowing in her mind what would happen the moment he touched her. Being the wimpy girl she was, she didn't care. The thought of comfort, even just for a little while, was enough to throw caution to the wind. She practically jumped into his arms.

As she predicted, the moment her body came into contact with his, what little resistance she had dissolved. The emotions she thought she had under control just seconds ago, boiled over again -- and loudly. Before she knew it, she was clinging to Vicentes, her fingers clinging to the front of his shirt, her tears dampening the expensive fabric. All the while, he said nothing. His hand moved along her spine, a caress meant to soothe. It had been so innocuous that at first, she hadn't noticed it. It was just sort of there, like that cool air against her skin, but soon her tears slowed, and her mind started to focus on the feel of his fingers lazily sliding up and down her back. His lips brushed against her temple and she shivered. Apparently misunderstanding her reaction, he wrapped his arms tighter around her.

The heat that had started when she was coming down from her crying jag, pulsed through her blood. She drew in a deep breath trying her best to remind herself that Vicentes was as bad -- or worse -- than a cop. No matter how pretty he was, or how much she wanted him, she would not give in. But, along with the air, she drew in his scent. Musky, with a hint of male exertion, along with the smell of clean fresh air, it had her head spinning. There was nothing like the smell of a man to arouse her. She didn't need the fancy designer skin fresheners, or even cologne. What she loved was the feel of skin against skin, the smell that came off a hot, aroused male.

She shivered again.

"Ah, *querida*. Everything will be all right."

Sasha should have let him keep on believing she was still having her breakdown. If he thought that, he'd never know how much she wanted -- needed -- him. Instead, she found herself pulling her head away from his comforting warmth. When she made eye contact with Rafe, his hands stilled and his expression blanked. For several seconds, the only sound in the room was their breathing. When he said nothing, did nothing, she pushed herself up on her tiptoes. Closing her eyes, she brushed her mouth over his. When he didn't respond, either way, she opened her eyes, but didn't move back. As close as she was she could see the steely determination in his gaze. She licked her lips, tasting the essence of him, just a tease which she was sure would be decadent once she got a full taste.

"Rafe, give me a kiss."

His eyes narrowed, his hands slipped to her waist. "That wouldn't be a good idea."

"No, it's not a good idea." She shifted her weight and felt his hardened cock against her belly. Shamelessly, she rubbed against him. "It's an excellent idea. Just a little one. It won't hurt. I promise."

Heat flared in the depths of his eyes and a flush crawled up into his face.

"Sasha, this would be wrong. I can't give more --"

"No." She slid her hands over his chest and then up and over his shoulders. She wanted him naked so she could feel flesh against her palm. "I don't care if it's wrong. I just want to feel."

Rafe closed his eyes for a moment, and Sasha was sure she had lost. She didn't know what she would do if he turned away from her in disgust. Not for her, because she knew he was aroused. However, if his attraction to her disgusted him, Sasha was certain she would fall apart. She wasn't a woman who asked often, but this one time she needed to touch, to feel. Just when she'd about given up hope, he let loose a groan of surrender, took her face between his hands and took her mouth. His tongue stole past her lips immediately, giving

her a full-throttle taste of him. Exotic, tangy, with just a hint of seduction sent a rush of heat dancing along her nerve endings.

A strange mix of excitement and panic lanced through her as she moved closer. There was a part of her she knew needed this connection, needed to feel human and alive again. There was also a part of her that understood this man was dangerous. He'd never intentionally hurt her, but she would do well to remember that this was just about that connection, about the sex. With her emotions running a thin line between anger and dread, she didn't need to muddy everything with anything other than pure, simple lust.

As he slanted his mouth over hers, taking the kiss deeper, she ignored the fear and lost herself in the kiss. As she expected, Rafe liked to be in charge. He slipped his hands from her face, down her body, briefly skimming the sides of her breasts.

Soon, he took her by her waist and pulled her up. Without a thought, she wrapped her legs around his waist. Rafe's arms snaked around her back as he walked her backward, she assumed to the bed. When he tumbled them both onto the mattress, the simmering jolt of lust was now pinging through her system at full boil. He looked down at her, his gaze dark and dangerous. She'd always liked a man with a little danger to him, that edge that could push her over the edge. His fingers threaded through her hair, pulling it free of restraint.

"Magnifico." Barely above a whisper, his voice vibrated with heated desire. It sent a rush of goose bumps over her skin as he grabbed a handful of her hair and then kissed her roughly.

Rafe moved from her mouth to kiss a path down her neck, his fingers already working her zipper down the front of her suit. He lifted himself up to part the clinging fabric, then tugged the top off her shoulders. She speared her hands through his hair as he bent and pulled her hardened nipple into his mouth. His tongue moved over the tip before he took her fully in his mouth.

Sasha shuddered the moment his teeth scraped over the tip once ... twice. Tension gathered in her tummy. Rafe skimmed his fingers over her other nipple as he moved down further, dropping kisses on her belly. His tongue slipped over her skin, then another scrape of teeth. Before her body could recover from that, his tongue was dipping into her navel as he continued his journey down. His fingers left her breast, trailing down her stomach, then he slipped them beneath the fabric. Still raining kisses over her skin, he slowly pulled her suit down, his fingers skimming the inside of her thighs. By the time he had freed her of her clothes, her body quivered with arousal so strong it was hard not to beg for relief.

She felt the wet lick of his tongue on the inside of her thigh and she shivered. His breath warmed her skin as he moved to her pussy. Placing a hand on each leg, he spread them wider. Sasha raised herself to her elbows and watched the top of Rafe's head as he paused to take a breath.

"Hmm, *querida*."

Rough, aroused, the tone in his voice sent another blast of heat traveling through her as he bent his head. At the touch of his tongue to her skin, she dropped her head back and closed her eyes. The press of his mouth, the feel of his tongue as it slipped into her had her body quivering, her heart beating out of control. Warmth gathered in her tummy, then slid to her sex. He hummed his approval as he slipped a finger into her.

Unable to hold herself up, she dropped back onto the bed, pumping her hips in rhythm with his hands, his mouth. Tension tightened she arched her back. Rafe added another finger, then slipped his tongue over her clit once ... twice ...

She exploded, her body convulsing, his name on her lips as she came. Before she'd recovered and came back down to Earth, Rafe was moving up her body, taking her hips in his hands, and plunging into her. He took her mouth in a rough, wet kiss and she tasted herself on his lips, on his tongue. Even as she still pulsed with her last orgasm, he pushed her with each thrust to another height. Her muscles tightened, her blood surged, and she came again. Rafe followed her only seconds later, her name on his lips.

Moments later, they both pulled themselves up to the pillows on the bed and collapsed into exhausted sleep.

Chapter Six

Rafe woke later, not sure what time of day it was. This was the room his brother used and Freddy hated any clock in his vicinity. Since Freddy always seemed to have perfect timing, no one in the family minded, but it was a bitch waking up and not knowing what time it was. The only thing good about it, he thought, was having Sasha snuggle closer and then settle against his side.

There was something so wrong with what they did. No, what he did. Sasha had no obligation to keep him safe. His lack of professionalism was painful to deal with, but what was worse was that it was hard to feel bad about it. Rafe realized now that he'd spent too many months wound tight. It wasn't as if he hadn't been with women, but there had been something so unsatisfying to those interludes. But with Sasha ...

"Your brain is hurting mine," she said, her voice husky with sleep.

He looked down at her and found her watching him with amusement. A jolt shot through him when he realized just how right it felt to have her there. This was not good. He frowned and she chuckled and settled her head on his chest.

"What do you mean?"

"Rafe, quit thinking. We both needed it. And you were ... fantastic, even though I think I might have a few bruises to add to the ones the goons left me."

Instantly, guilt filled him. He had been a bit rough.

"I said quit thinking."

"Sasha --"

"Stop it. Stop worrying."

"But, I shouldn't have."

She laughed. "If you hadn't, I'd still be crying, falling apart like a little girl."

"Still --"

She stopped his argument by slipping beneath the sheet. The instant he felt her mouth on his skin, all brain functions fizzled. As she slid down his body, her mouth was hot and wet against his skin and, *Jesus*, he felt the scrape of teeth just above his navel. Her tongue slipped in, then over, moving down toward her destination.

He was confused when she bypassed what, he assumed, had been her target, but then hissed through his teeth when her mouth moved over his balls. With each touch of her mouth, each lick of her tongue, each caress of her fingers, Rafe felt another shred of his resistance fade away. Truthfully, there hadn't been much to begin with. As Sasha licked her way up to his cock, her hair slipped over his skin, heightening the tension that was already spiraling out of control. She trailed the tip of her tongue along his length and knowing he had to see, had to watch, he pulled the sheet away.

Smiling she said, "I see you don't have a problem with it anymore."

He opened his mouth to respond but ended up moaning as she wound her hand around the base of his shaft and slipped her clever mouth over the tip. Not all the way, just enough to feel the swipe of the tongue, the heat of her mouth. Again she smiled up at him.

"You have a good taste, Rafe." That comment, along with her tongue licking over her lips, almost had him coming. A drop of precum seeped out. She bent her head and licked up

the drops, then hummed her pleasure as she took him further into her mouth. He'd never seen anything as erotic as watching his cock disappear between her pink lips.

Jesus God. The vibrations from her mouth sent a jolt all the way to his feet. Closing his eyes, he let his head fall against the pillows. As she worked his cock in and out of her mouth, her hands caressed his balls. The moment she lightly scraped her nails over them, every muscle in his body tightened, all remaining blood rushing to his groin.

Knowing he was just about over the edge of no return, he reached down and pulled her up and over him. She positioned herself and he slid in, feeling as if he'd been waiting his whole life to feel the tight glove of her sex pulse around him. As she increased her rhythm, he felt his balls twist. In the next instant, she shattered, her pussy clenched tight on his cock, pulling him deeper into her heated core, and pushing him over the edge.

Sasha collapsed on top of him and he tucked her head beneath his chin. Every muscle in his body relaxed, his mind blank except for acknowledging that he hadn't felt this good in ... well, forever. She shifted her weight and he smiled when she licked his nipple.

"You're insatiable, Ms. Petosky."

He was still inside her and he could feel the vibrations when she chuckled.

"You never fed me, Mr. Vicentes."

"Oh, yeah. Well, if you would get off me, I'd go get something for you."

She sighed. "I'll move in a minute."

Seconds later he felt her even breathing, her breath warming his skin, and he knew that she'd fallen asleep. He knew he should go down and get some food started, but he was just too warm and comfortable at the moment. He'd just let himself doze a bit and then he would go get her some food. It was his last thought before he joined her in blissful sleep.

* * * * *

Hours later, they finally made it to the kitchen for food, but ended up eating most of it in bed. Rafe had thrown on a pair of pants -- and nothing else -- while she had stolen one of his flannel shirts he had in the closet. There was something delightfully decadent about eating in bed. Settling against the pillows, Sasha attacked the simple meal. She'd been starving before their bedroom antics and now she was damn near famished.

"So, how did you end up here from the Eastern Quadrant?"

Rafe's question broke into the enjoyment of her dinner. She frowned down at her sandwich. "My parents were killed in the rebellion in the early twenties. I didn't have any other relatives." She shrugged, trying to will away the memories that she still hadn't come to terms with. "There weren't a lot of prospects there. The rebellion had depleted a lot of resources."

Hoping that was the end of the questioning, she took a bite of her sandwich. She hadn't even gotten through the chewing that piece before he continued.

"But there are a lot of other places you could have gone that were ... safer."

She looked up and found him studying her with an intensity that had more with getting to know her than anything else. Cops, no matter if they were carrying a badge or not, were always cops, and even simple questions could turn into inquisitions.

"I was sixteen. I thought I wanted adventure." She laughed but there was no humor in it. "Adventure isn't quite the word I would use for what I got."

"Sixteen, that's pretty young."

"I was self-sufficient. My father was a merc, so he taught me everything I needed to protect myself. I just didn't think ..."

The memories -- that sometimes she just couldn't shake -- came rushing forward but she beat them back. Twelve years and just thinking them clogged her throat, choking her as she woke up from a nightmare, or almost overwhelming her when she took another girl off the streets.

“Things look different to a sixteen-year-old.” His voice was threaded with gentle concern. “You think you’re invincible. Nothing can touch you.”

“And you think that people want to hire a sixteen year old nobody to dance in their production. It didn’t take long for my money to run out.” She blinked back the tears burning the back of her eyes. “It did take a little longer for my pride to run out. Even then I didn’t take the easy way.”

“How did you get hired to dance being sixteen?”

She smiled looking away from him, back into some of the more pleasant memories. “I lied, and they let me. I’m not sure the owner of the first club knew for sure, I just knew he didn’t give a damn.”

“So, you became a stripper.”

“It was better than the alternative. It didn’t pay as much as selling my body on the streets, but I knew the survival rate of strippers was higher than hookers on the street.”

“But you run Sinner’s.”

She looked at him, ready to find some kind of condemnation in him. The people like Rafe who saw the world in black and white didn’t like the people who muddied the waters. Instead, she just found normal curiosity.

“Janice was running a bad game. We were roommates and she danced, but she also hooked to supplement her income. She liked big and she liked flashy and you can’t really have that on a stripper’s pay, unless you work at some of the better places. I was worried about her, and when the opportunity came up, I talked her into it, hoping to keep her out of trouble.”

“But I don’t see the difference. You wouldn’t do it on the street but you do it in a club.”

Anger and resentment fired her temper and added an edge to her voice. “First off, I have never *worked* in Sinner’s. I run it. Secondly, it’s legal, as the street enterprises aren’t. Thirdly, I make sure my girls are not abused; if they are on drugs, they have to get clean. I

may not be the epitome of decorum because of my business, but I do more to help than others.”

“While turning a nice profit.”

“Yes, I make a profit, but my girls can say no and be confident that I’ll back them, none of them are forced to stay. Most leave me for a better life, not all. I’m not a saint, I’m a businesswoman.”

“Yeah, you’re really cold hearted.”

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and stared at him. The warm look in his eyes worried her more than any condemnation.

“If it wasn’t good for business, I wouldn’t do those things. It is smart and as I said, I am a businesswoman.”

There was a beat of silence, then the corner of his mouth kicked up. “One who makes sure her employees aren’t abused.” He leaned forward, placing his hands on either side of her hips. She could smell him, feel his heat, and predictably, she started to melt.

Old instincts went on alert. This man was getting too close to her ooey gooey center and she didn’t like it. However, she wasn’t sure she could fight it.

“I said it’s good for my profit line.”

“You take them off the street. Protect them.” His mouth was within inches of hers. “And I bet if you didn’t give a damn about them, you could make more money off them than you do.”

“I --”

“No. Don’t even try to play the cold bitch with me, Sasha. I know better.”

That is what was scaring the hell out of her. She didn’t like that he knew some of her secrets, but she really hated that he was starting to figure out that she was more than what she portrayed.

“Don’t.” He brushed his mouth over hers, gently. “Don’t pull back, don’t run away. Just for once, just let it be us, not that other persona.”

Fear was morphing into outright panic. She placed her hands on his shoulders to push him away, but as he continued looking into her eyes and gently kissing her, she found herself curling her fingers into his t-shirt.

“Let go. I’ll catch you, *querida*.”

His tender tone was her undoing. With a moan of surrender, she slipped her hands over his shoulders and opened her mouth for his possession. Instead of the frenzied love making of earlier, this was different, warmer, more ... caring. As if she was precious.

He covered her body with his, as he kissed, touched, and caressed her. She softened as his fingers skimmed up her arms, to her jaw. He cupped her face, his thumbs moving over her cheeks. This was not about taking her body; it was about taking a piece of her soul. Sasha would have protested, but her mind was numb to anything but the pleasure of his touch, his adoration. Somewhere in the back her mind, there was a warning flashing, but as he unbuttoned her shirt, his fingers slipping over her breasts, she ignored it and fell into pleasure.

Chapter Seven

Helen was looking over the contract negotiator's latest report when her assistant buzzed her with the news that Scott Thomas was on the way to see her. Eddie's second in command, Thomas, had been like a brother to her husband. Understanding as always, he'd been especially gentle in questioning Helen about the missing records. The door slid open and Helen stood, walking around her desk to greet him.

In his mid-thirties, Thomas was considered a hot item on the dating circuit. Short wavy blond hair, blue eyes, and a lean athletic build attracted most women. She was probably the only heterosexual woman in all of DC who felt ... uncomfortable in his presence. She knew it was irrational. Eddie had told her more than once she was imagining it, but she couldn't ignore that every time she saw Thomas alarms started ringing.

"Helen." He walked toward her, his smile held just the right amount of understanding. "I wanted to stop by and see how you are doing."

They hugged, one of those DC, diplomatic, fake hugs that didn't mean anything.

"I'm doing just fine, Scott. Why don't you have a seat?"

He did, but only after she regained her seat behind her desk. Some would think it gallant but Helen was sure the jackass wanted to tower over her. She'd seen enough subtle gestures in her years in diplomacy to know just what got some of these asses off.

"What can I do for you?"

He looked suitably offended. "I just wanted to check on you, Helen."

She checked the clock. "But we work about ten minutes from each other. I figure if you really wanted to check in on me, you would do it during work hours."

There was a flare of something dangerous ... maybe just pure hatred ... in his eyes that she ignored even as a chill ran down her spine. As usual, he masked it with a diplomatic smile.

"I didn't want to bother you while you were working."

She didn't point out that that was exactly what she was doing at eight o'clock at night.

"Well, I'm doing fine. The investigation is moving right along, and I feel Detective Walton will get to the bottom of the matter soon enough. Other than that, I have these negotiations with the contractor for security for the World Council that have been keeping me busy."

He shook his head and tsked. "They don't give you much time to grieve."

"Really, it is all that kept me sane."

"But, you and Eddie had been married for so long ..." He let his voice trail off so she could finish the thought.

"Scott, my husband died while screwing a whore. It's not like he was my soul mate. " He didn't say anything so she forged ahead. "I know you have things you need to do, and you don't have to pretend anything with me. I know you knew everything Eddie did. And, I know you might need to look around his home office. The police have cleared it, so you are more than welcome to have at it."

He cleared his throat as his face flushed. It was exactly what he wanted, but in Thomas's mind it was bad form to just ask. He had to do the little dance that made him look sympathetic. Helen had no patience left for games of that sort.

"Felicia will take you there. We keep it locked so you will need her to open it for you."

He rose, but she didn't. "Thanks for the help, Helen."

She nodded and said nothing more as he turned and walked out the door. As soon as it slid shut, Helen clipped on her earphone and called Walton. There was something about Thomas that wasn't adding up and the good detective needed to at least be aware Thomas was looking through the records.

* * * * *

The sound of the front door closing brought Rafe abruptly awake. It only took a couple of seconds for his mind to click into gear and register that the alarm had not sounded. So, either he was dealing with a clever criminal, or worse, family. He slipped from the bed, grabbed his pants and his gun and then moved to the door, opening it just a crack.

"Is something wrong?" Sasha's warm, dreamy voice reached him as he was about to slip out of the door.

He glanced over his shoulder and felt his heart trip over. She'd risen up on her elbow, the sheets barely covering her breasts, her hair a delicious mass of rumpled curls. Warmth stole through him at the picture she presented. This was more than lust.

"I heard the front door."

Her eyes widened and she made to move out of bed but he waved the action away.

"Stay here." He tossed her his ear piece. "If there is any problem, make sure you get your ass out of here and call Dylan at Bounty Hunters."

She opened her mouth and he shook his head. "Please, Sasha, just agree."

She nodded and said nothing as he slipped out the door. Carefully, silently, he walked down the hall, listening for any tell-tale signs of who had just entered. Nothing, other than his own quiet moves. The sun had yet to rise, and without any lights on, he couldn't make anything out. As he neared the landing, the kitchen light came on and he knew now he was dealing with a family member or a really stupid criminal.

Damn. Just what he needed, someone who would expect an explanation for Sasha. He wasn't sure of anything, and he didn't want to explain anything to anyone when he didn't know what to tell himself. Knowing his family, they'd figure out just what was going on, so the whole idea of saying she was just a caller wasn't going to fly. Besides, denying it -- what they had shared -- sat wrong with him.

Still making sure to muffle his footsteps, he made his way downstairs. He crouched, taking in the scene of his youngest brother -- the one with the biggest mouth -- muttering as he cleaned up the kitchen.

Deciding to teach the little shit a lesson, he moved forward, keeping in the shadows as he approached.

"Mom would kick his ass if she saw this kitchen."

He smirked at his brother's ramblings about what punishment their mother would give him, each new one worst than the last, as he moved within a few feet of him.

"Mom would kick your ass for being so damn unobservant before she'd kick mine over a dirty kitchen."

His brother yelped, dropping the packages and spinning around. When it registered in his mind he was staring at his brother, he scowled.

"What the hell are you doing here, Rafe? And don't be too sure of Mom. You know how she likes a clean kitchen."

Rafe studied Freddy and noted that his younger brother had done a bit of growing since he'd seen him a few months ago. Just starting college, Freddy was the baby of the

family, something he truly hated being called. The shaggy hair was so long, his bangs hung in his eyes, and he kept brushing them back. Rafe would bet a thousand that the kid was wearing clothes that had been sitting on his floor for a week.

"I had a job go a little sour we made a detour."

Freddy's eyes lit with enthusiasm. "You brought a hardened criminal to the compound? Oh, Mom is going to love *this*."

Rafe set his gun on the counter and then crossed his arms over his chest. "No. I brought a witness. We ran into big guys with guns and decided to stop here for research. Kind of hard to keep her alive if I don't know who is coming after her."

"Her?"

Rafe didn't like the interest he detected in that one question.

"That's all you need to know. Now, what I need you to do is leave."

Freddy's eyes widened at the blunt comment. "Why is that?"

"I can't keep both you and Sasha out of trouble. She's my job."

His younger brother frowned, his spine straightening. "I can take care of myself, Rafe. You still think I'm still thirteen."

"No. But this is a job, and usually I try to keep it separate from my personal life."

"Come on, Rafe, I can help."

Rafe sighed because what Freddy said was true. He was a whiz with a computer, not to mention a crack shot.

"Am I interrupting something?"

He turned to find Sasha dressed in the black catsuit she'd worn earlier, her hair ruthlessly pulled back into a tight ponytail. The bruising on her face seemed even more prominent under the bright lights. Her gaze shifted to his little brother.

"Are you going to introduce me?" Sasha asked.

Figuring he didn't have a choice, he reached out his hand as she descended. She hesitated before taking it, irritating him. But, the moment their hands met, that same connection flowed.

As they turned toward his brother, Rafe said, "Freddy, I would like you to meet --"

Freddy bounded forward, his attention on Sasha filled with worship. "Sasha Petosky. I would know you anywhere. Oh, man. No one will believe I met you. Can I take a picture with you?" The closer Freddy got, he apparently became aware of the bruising on her face. "Damn, what the hell happened to you?"

Rafe looked over at Sasha to see how she was taking the comment. Her smile was filled with gentle amusement. "I ran into a couple men who wanted to make an impression. Believe me, they did."

Freddy shot his brother an accusing look, then took Sasha by the arm and led her around the counter to the breakfast bar. "Where the hell was Rafe? He should've made sure you were protected."

Sasha laughed, and glanced at him. The look in her eyes told him that she was going to play this to the hilt.

"I've been asking myself the same question, Mr. Vicentes."

After settling her in the chair, Freddy took the only one other one available. If Rafe wasn't so amused by his brother's obvious puppy worship, he'd be pissed.

"You don't have to call me by my last name, which isn't Vicentes. Just call me Freddy."

She patted his hand and smiled at him. "Okay, Freddy. If your name isn't Vicentes, what is it?"

"Perez. Rafe uses Mom's maiden name so people don't connect him to Perez Security."

She cocked one eyebrow in his direction. He took it as a warning they would discuss that bit of information later.

"Where was Rafe when you were being worked over? It's not like him to mess up."

She chuckled. "Really, I hadn't met Rafe before this happened. He was hired to find me."

Freddy moved his arm to the back of her chair.

"Okay, that's enough of that." Rafe walked around the bar and picked his brother's arm from the chair, then urged him up. He then took Freddy's place. "You want to help?"

As expected, Freddy's interest moved from Sasha to the idea of investigation.

"Oh, yeah. What do you need?"

"I need you to find everything you can about Eddie Warwick."

"Head of the USC?"

"Former head of the USC. He was murdered in Sasha's club."

Freddy looked at Sasha, then back at Rafe. "What kind of dirt you looking for?"

"You won't find anything." This came from Sasha.

Both of them looked at her, waiting for her to explain.

"Eddie was a straight shooter. If he was dirty, no one will find it."

Even knowing she'd never worked in her own club, that Warwick meant nothing to her, Rafe couldn't stop the surge of anger he felt toward the other man. It was useless, a complete waste of time, but it didn't stop the idea of beating the crap out of the man and how much enjoyment he would get out of it.

"He went to your club, Sasha."

A shadow moved across her face, and she inched away from him. He knew Freddy probably didn't notice, but Rafe did. Irritated, he moved closer to her and ignored her questioning look.

"Still," she said, her voice turning a bit cooler, "he wasn't an idiot. He cheated on his wife, but I would bet my last dollar that he didn't screw around on the job. Eddie really liked the idea that he was the head of the USC."

Rafe beat back the caveman emotions that rose. He didn't like her talking about Warwick in such a familiar manner, anymore than he liked the idea that she had sex before she met him.

"Was he one of your customers, Sasha?" Freddy asked.

"Of course, he was. He died ..."

Her face turned pink when she realized what Freddy meant. The idea that his brother could make her blush dissolved some of irritation he felt with her at the moment. There was something utterly adorable about her blush. She cleared her throat. "No. I don't do that."

"I'll get started on it right away."

Freddy was already on his way to the computer room when Rafe finally called out, "Make sure to cover your tracks, little brother."

For a few moments, neither of them said anything, the silence an uncomfortable hum between them. Sasha was the one who broke first.

"So, you don't go by your own name?"

She wasn't looking at him, but at the tiled counter in front of her.

"I use my mother's maiden name. When I started in the agency, I wasn't much older than Freddy, and I didn't want to live up to the Perez name."

Sasha looked at him then, her gaze unreadable. "I would think it would open doors."

"And close a lot of them. I didn't want anyone giving me breaks, or setting up roadblocks because of the family."

She nodded in understanding. "I'm going to take a shower if that is okay with you."

"Sure." Without touching him, she walked around him and in the direction of the stairs. She reached the bottom before he said, "Sasha, I just want you to know --"

"Don't worry, Rafe. I understand."

"What do you mean?"

She turned around and faced him. Hiding again, he thought. It angered him that she would do that, and some of that anger was directed inside because he knew he was at fault for some reason. He just wasn't sure what he did wrong. Still, after everything, that she would do that, pull back from him, angered him.

"Do you think I don't know your family? The Perez's have held the Secret Service contract for the last twenty years. Hell, I've probably had some of your agents at my club protecting my clients."

"And?" His tone was abrupt, irritated, but he didn't give a damn.

"Different worlds, Rafe."

He knew what she meant, but he wasn't in the mood to discuss it. There was one thing he wanted to make sure she understood. With deliberate steps, he approached her. Her expression moved from uninterested, to irritated, to something bordering on panic. By the time he reached her, Sasha was taking a step back, as if to retreat. He gained a small amount of satisfaction from that uncertainty.

Without pausing, he snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. Immediately, his body reacted to the feel of her against him. He bent his head and kissed her quickly, a bit roughly. His body sang, his blood heated, his cock throbbed. Before either of them were satisfied, he pulled back and released her, ignoring the chorus of complaints from his hormones.

He looked directly into her eyes and said, "At this moment, all that matters is that and keeping you safe." She shook her head, but he caught her chin between his fingers making sure she couldn't avoid him, deny him. "I won't let you use my family to come between us."

Sasha shook free of his grasp. "It's the moment, Rafe. You said so yourself. Don't let the situation confuse you." He opened his mouth to argue, but she stayed him by raising her hand. "I'm really tired and don't feel like talking about it. Just ... let's say you have an out, we both do."

He wanted to argue with her, but she did look ready to pass out. Relenting, he nodded, then watched as she ascended the stairs. There was no way the woman was shaking him free. The fact that she thought she could, had him wanting to shake her, but he knew that would send her in the other direction.

As she disappeared into the guest room, he turned and headed in the direction of the computer room. The sooner they had this cleared up, the sooner the both of them could settle this thing they had between them.

Chapter Eight

Simon Walton leaned against the apartment building and watched as Vic Ashley turned off his airbike and then pulled off his helmet. The parking area was filled to capacity with vehicles, but they were the only two people on that level. From the moment he met Ashley years ago, the man had set Simon's teeth on edge. He had a lot of respect for him, but both of them had different ways of working, and the disdain the older man felt for Simon was palpable each time they ran into each other. Ashley had a temper he didn't even try to keep contained. He also let everyone know he had no need for following rules. He had his own set, and if you didn't like it, you could fuck off. Years of undercover drug operations gave him the attitude and a set of meritorious citations -- not to mention the admiration of most of the ranking officers.

Ashley's attention zeroed in on Simon immediately. Even with those added years, Ashley was sharp as any man ten years younger. His icy blue eyes narrowed as he approached Simon. He'd known when he set out to find Ashley that it wouldn't be easy. He was still sore, justifiably, about Sasha. It was something that was still bothering Simon and he needed her ex's help.

As Ashley approached, his frown hardened. He stopped within inches of Simon. They were about the same height, but Ashley probably had about thirty to forty pounds of pure bulk muscle on Simon.

“What the fuck you want, Walton?”

Inwardly Simon sighed. “I need your help.”

There was a few seconds of silence, then he nodded. “About damn time you showed up. I took you for being smarter than that.”

Without another word, Ashley walked past him and to an elevator. When he didn’t follow, Ashley scowled over his shoulder. “What the fuck you waitin’ for, Walton? I don’t have engraved invitations.”

This time, Simon didn’t even try to hide the sigh, but he followed Ashley to the elevator and eventually into his apartment. After hitting a series of buttons on a highly intricate lock, Ashley finally got the door open. He’d heard he was a bit paranoid, but Simon thought it was a little over the top for him to have six locks, and, he thought as he watched Ashley hit another series of buttons to turn on a scrambler, bordering on insane.

“Okay, whatcha got, Walton?”

“Not much.”

“What the hell have you been doing for the last two weeks? Jesus, you new recruits are a waste of space. Fancy techniques, no street smarts.”

It was an argument he’d heard Ashley make before, but he refused to let him get away with tagging him with it. “Listen, asshole. You might pull that crap with other people, but you can’t with me. I did my time in Vice, so kiss my ass.”

Ashley studied him for a moment, then smiled. “About time you grew a set, Walton.”

He turned and headed to what Simon figured was the kitchen area. “Did you check out that Thomas, the deputy?”

It rankled that Ashley had nothing to do with the investigation but had gotten to where he himself had gotten. Simon followed him and watched him pull a mountain of food out of the fridge unit.

"Helen had a visit from him last night. He wanted in Warwick's office."

"Helen?"

"Warwick."

Ashley shot him a look over his shoulder, another scowl. "Don't let it get personal, Walton."

"Your ex-wife is implicated in the murder we're discussing."

With a move that belied his forty years, Ashley had Simon up against the wall, his arm over his throat. One move from Ashley and Simon knew he would be dead, his neck snapped in half. As it was, he couldn't draw a sufficient breath.

"And she would be safe if you hadn't sicced Fender on her. I've never seen an investigation go sour so fast. You remember this, *Inspector*; anything happens to Sasha, you won't be able to find a hole deep or dark enough to hide you. You got that?"

Simon nodded, then lifted his knee and hit the other man in the nuts. Ashley immediately let loose of Simon and doubled over cussing.

After a few deep breaths, Simon regained some of his composure. He offered Ashley a hand up. He shot him the normal scowl but accepted Simon's offer.

"Now, if we are through with threats, I have a few questions for you. I take it you hired Vicentes to find her?"

Finally in an upright position, he said, "Yeah. I talked to Del and Dylan, then Rafe came over."

"You know they disappeared off an airtrain?" Simon asked.

He nodded, a trace of worry flashing in his eyes. From everything Simon had found, Sasha and Ashley stayed friends over the years, and he definitely understood Ashley's worry.

He'd come to know Sasha when he worked vice and had a lot of respect for a woman who took care of her girls. Not everyone did.

"I figure they're fine because Vicentes has a habit of landing on his feet. What I need to know is how they found them so fast. I assume Bounty Hunters Inc. has the latest equipment, but someone knew he'd been hired. I know the leak didn't come from you."

One eyebrow rose and a cynical smirk curved Ashley's lips. "Stop, you're going to make me think you like me, Walton. Just so you know, I don't swing that way."

Simon grunted, thoroughly irritated. He didn't like wasting time. "But there is one agency that could probably have the newest, best, intervention equipment. Other than the police."

"USC. Fuckers."

"Not in total but someone. You team that up with the fact that Thomas has been snooping quietly about the missing papers."

Ashley rubbed his jaw and then leaned against the counter. Simon could almost hear the wheels grinding in the man's head. If you could get past the personality, Ashley was a grade A cop.

"But, if Warwick was killed, you would think Thomas was behind it, if he is the mole."

"Unless there is someone else who wants that information, or more importantly to protect it."

"What was the info?"

Simon hesitated. He really didn't have clearance to tell Ashley, but he wanted this case solved. "It had to do with the new security system the USC put in place. Some of the most important info missing deals with the vulnerabilities that they were working on."

Ashley whistled silently. "And you found this out how? I mean, I would think the USC would keep this under wraps."

"Having a diplomat in your back pocket helps. Helen Warwick did some digging."

"So, we have a double agent, or agents, stolen info, a dead USC director, and a deputy who is sniffing around. Sounds like a setup of some sort."

Simon nodded. "But what kind?"

"That, Walton, is what we need to find out." He ignored the pile of food he'd pulled out and headed out of the kitchen. "Let's do a little illegal computer access to find out some answers."

* * * * *

By the next morning, Rafe was ready to scream. They'd been searching for hours and hadn't found a thing. There were a few inconsistencies here and there with security, but not enough for Freddy to slip through.

"You know, if I didn't know better, I would say that the USC is a bit paranoid," Freddy said.

He smacked his brother in his head with a file folder. "Gee, genius, I figured they had a reason."

Freddy leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Yeah, maybe. But there seems to be a lot of layers of security around Warwick. The codes are a lot different, too."

Rafe frowned. "Whatya mean?"

"The security codes have different authors, and that means it isn't the same person who wrote the security codes for the rest of USC. Those were relatively intricate too, but these, you can tell the person who wrote them did it to confuse. More so than usual."

Rafe turned that information over in his mind. It could be that Warwick was into something illegal and had to cover his tracks.

"So, how long have you and Sasha been an item?"

His brother's question brought him out of his musings. "We're not an item."

“Give me a break, Rafe. You practically light up the room with lust when you are in the vicinity of each other.”

Usually, Rafe didn’t have a problem with Freddy’s unusual perceptiveness. However, he didn’t want to talk about Sasha when he wasn’t sure where it was going. They’d barely spoken since their kiss last night. She’d been sleeping -- something she desperately needed, and he’d been working with Freddy.

“Give it a rest, Freddy.”

“Come on, Rafe. Give a guy a break. You’re doing the owner of one of the most elite brothels on the Eastern seaboard.”

“Vaya al infierno.”

“Oh, touched a nerve, did I?”

The smirk on Freddy’s face was making Rafe’s palms itch. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He turned to look over some other notes they’d made. Freddy whistled.

“Damn, *hermano*, you do know how to go big, dontcha?”

Turning around, he shot Freddy a nasty look. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You’re in love with her.”

“I just met her yesterday. No, wait, Yeah, yesterday morning. You’re making more of it than there is.”

“Doesn’t always take long. What does Papa say? Within an hour he knew he was going to marry Mama.”

Panic settled in Rafe’s stomach. He cared for Sasha, admired her for what she had accomplished, but he was *not* in love. “It’s only been a day.”

He turned around and started working, ignoring Freddy’s chuckle.

"That's okay, Rafe. Papa says when the mighty fall, it is usually harder to bring them down."

"Lay off it."

"Just remember, when the time comes, I get to tell you I told you so."

Before Rafe could dispute Freddy, his computer beeped. Both brothers stopped their arguing as Freddy settled into the chair in front of the screen.

"What's that you got into?"

"I did some ... clever techniques and got into a database at Warwick's bank."

Rafe set his hand on the desk and leaned over Freddy's shoulder to look at the screen.

"Anything interesting? I would think this would've turned up in the investigation."

Freddy hit a few buttons. "Would have if they'd known about this. It's an account from the Edian sector, his name is the only name on it."

"Edian, the favorite place for crooks to hide their money. And, without his wife's name on it, it would be hard to find unless they really searched for it."

"I'm assuming they didn't, or if they did, they stopped."

"Why would you say that?"

Freddy hit a few more keys, then looked over his shoulder at Rafe. "Maybe someone at USC doesn't want the police to know that their former director was taking payments for something and hiding it."

"How much are we talking about?"

"At least a billion. I think there is probably more somewhere. If it's this easy to find a billion, there is a good chance they have pockets of money elsewhere."

"That's a lot of money, but for what?"

"One of the things that has been playing under the radar is the new security system they installed. It isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Rafe snorted. "Of course it isn't. Renardi Corporation sucks. I have no idea how they won that bid."

"They underbid as usual and then cut corners."

"So there are gaps, and what? It's possible that Warwick was selling them out to someone. And Perez was the only competition for that contract, so it isn't us. I'd say someone has an agenda, someone has a plan. Warwick fit into that plan."

"I told you that Eddie would never sell out his job." Sasha's comment caused both brothers to jump since they hadn't heard her approach.

Rafe's heart did a little dance, then tumbled into his stomach as he watched her walk closer. Just the sight of her had his pulse scrambling, his palms sweating. He'd been through more than one round of lust with women but nothing had affected him this way. This feeling sank into his soul, grabbed him by the balls, and left him feeling vulnerable.

"Why are you so sure of Warwick?" Rafe asked. It rankled she trusted a man who frequented her club, a married man at that.

"First, I know men. It's my business." She shrugged. "Sorry to say, gentlemen, but your sex is easy to read. With Eddie, the most important thing in his life was his career. Nothing - marriage, friends, his mistresses -- got in the way of that."

"So, you are saying that he would forsake everything for the job?" Freddy asked.

She nodded. "Eddie would sell his mother on the street if he thought it would help his career."

"So, if someone threatened his job what would he do?" Rafe asked, not liking the questioning anymore than she apparently did. Being reminded that Sasha had more faith in a scum like Warwick than she had in him angered him. And, he would admit, it made him jealous, something he didn't want to explore too closely.

"I'd say he would take the person out. Do you have evidence that there was something going on?"

Freddy nodded. "That's what I was telling Rafe, but there's more."

Rafe shot his brother a nasty look but said nothing.

"It seems that there is the money situation, all in his name, from his computer at work. It was encrypted, but there's more. I found a cyber account registered under Warwick's name. There are a lot of emails between him and the People's Radical Revolution."

"Good Lord," Sasha said, her voice just above a whisper. "They're dangerous. Why the hell would Eddie mess with them?"

Rafe grunted as Freddy handed him the info on electronic file. Sasha was right. It was odd that Eddie would have anything to do with the PRR. They were a fringe group who were proud to boast that they had three wanted murderers among their group. Their drug trade, not to mention their mercenary jobs, placed them at the top of the USC's list of most dangerous terrorist groups.

"Is there a chance he was working undercover?" Sasha asked.

Freddy answered, as Rafe was still looking over the file. "If he was, it was well hidden. Not to mention, there would be other people who had access. They didn't. He was the only one."

"I have to agree with Freddy on that one, Sasha. It is all a bit odd, but it looks like Eddie might have sold himself out."

She sighed. "I'm rarely wrong about men."

"I think it's time to go back to DC."

He waited for her to explode, but she just studied him with one of those long patient stares and crossed her arms beneath her breasts.

"Do you really think that is a good idea?" The princess tone was back in full force. He ignored it.

"Yes. With the proper help. I'm going to contact Thomas, who is now running USC. He has reason to keep this quiet and anything involving civilians will bring attention to it."

“Mama always says blackmail works the best,” Freddy said with a smile. “I’m going to clean up and get ready to go.”

Neither Sasha nor Rafe said a word as Freddy left. Once they were alone, the silence stretched out as they continued to stare at each other.

Sasha broke the silence first. “I don’t know if it is a good idea to do this, Rafe.”

He hid the anger coursing through him. Rafe hated to be second-guessed, but damn it, there was more to it than that. He was getting a bad feeling that she didn’t trust him. For that reason, his voice was harsher than he intended when he spoke. “It is the best idea, and besides, going to the authorities is more in line. Makes you look less guilty. What should we do? You can’t stay here forever. Nothing will get solved.”

She threw her hands up in the air and stalked to the windows. “I know that. I just don’t want to chance it again. Every time I think I’m in the clear, something else happens.”

He approached her, and, without a word, slipped his arms around her and drew her against his chest. She leaned back into him, her muscles relaxing as she sighed. Inhaling her sweet scent, he kissed her temple.

“I understand, Sasha.”

“How can you? I just don’t want to go back. I don’t want to face it. And do you know how that makes me feel? I feel like a fucking coward. I’ve never had a problem with facing what lay in front of me. And now I just want to hide. I want to crawl into bed, pull the covers over my head, and just forget about the world.”

“Hell, I don’t blame you. It has been a shitty week for you, and it probably won’t get better. Even after we do get this all cleared up, you will have the press hounding you. Besides, I know just how you feel. I think spending the week in bed would be an excellent idea.”

She chuckled weakly and then patted his hands. “If we are going to do this, I might as well get ready.” Breaking free of his hold, she turned to face him. She took his face into her

hands, and then brushed her mouth over his. "Just remember you owe me a week in bed when this is over."

"You got it." The moment he said it, he knew how true it was. However, he didn't want a week. He wanted a month, a year, a decade. It was impossible, but it wasn't. Somehow, this woman had gotten to him, and he couldn't even think of life without her. Less than forty-eight hours and she had him by the balls. He felt the blood drain out of his head as he realized his little brother had been right.

Fuck. He'd fallen for one of his callers.

"Rafe, are you all right?"

"Yeah."

But he wasn't. Raphael Vicentes, the bounty hunter who never slept with a caller, never had a problem leaving any woman behind, was now in love with a woman who didn't want to any ties. She was the owner of a brothel. Damn, his mother was going to have a fit.

"Listen, no commitments. When I said no strings, I meant it."

He looked down at her and found her staring at him warily. "When all this is over, we are going to have a talk."

She opened her mouth, but Freddy interrupted them.

"Rafe, that Thomas you put a call into earlier is on the ear phone. I scrambled the signal before I picked it up, but he wants to talk to you."

He looked down at Sasha, trying to read her expression. She was blank with no real emotion showing on her face. "We're not done."

"Just go set it all up," Sasha said.

She slipped away, and he had the feeling there was something he missed.

"Rafe. This guy is going to get impatient."

Freddy handed him the earphone and Rafe pushed aside his feelings and got down to negotiating.

Chapter Nine

Sasha settled deeper into the jacket Rafe had found for her at the cabin and prayed for patience. They'd arrived at the depot on the outskirts of DC nearly twenty minutes ago. Rafe had yet to agree to let her go in. She understood why they were waiting, why they had showed up early, but she was freezing her butt off.

"How much longer?"

Freddy chuckled and Rafe ignored her.

"I don't think he's going to show up."

Both brothers ignored her and she frowned. They were all business, and although she understood, she needed something to keep her occupied. Since Rafe had made love to her at the cabin that last time, she'd had an itch under her skin. No one, not even Vic, had ever treated her that way. Gentle, as if she were precious, breakable. Everyone expected her to be strong and for once in her life, a man had let her be the one who could be vulnerable. While she felt cherished, there was a part of her damn near ready to bolt.

She'd known for a really long time that she wasn't a woman who could depend on a man. They expected her to be the strong one. While Vic hadn't expected to be taken care of, he was more of an equal. Rafe was that, but she trusted him enough to show a vulnerable

side. That alone scared her spitless. She'd known him less than three days and he was getting to her, crawling right up into her heart. When he left, it was going to hurt.

"There's Thomas, Warwick's second in command." Rafe's voice was cool, unemotional.

She leaned forward between the brothers and studied the man as he opened the door. He was pretty, that was for sure. Tall, lean, a charming smile -- but there was something off.

"I've never seen him before. Not one of mine," Sasha said

Rafe shifted in his seat and his hands flexed on the wheel. Freddy chuckled. Before she could ask what was wrong, another person grabbed her attention. Stan, her manager, strode along the sidewalk. However, he didn't quite look the same. Dressed in black, including a slick leather jacket, his hair had been slicked back. His posture spoke of leadership, and he had small number of men following him, all dressed similarly.

"What the hell is Stan doing here?"

Rafe glanced back at her and then back to the men going into the depot. "Stan?"

"My assistant manager, Stan Bellows. But ... well, usually he's kind of, different."

"How long has he been working for you?" Freddy asked.

"About six months."

"Shit," Rafe said.

"What?" Sasha asked looking between the two brothers.

Freddy turned in the seat while Rafe kept an eye on the front door. Stan and his entourage had disappeared into the depot. "The transactions started about six months ago. Too much of a coincidence."

"Stan?"

Freddy nodded. "I don't think it would be too much of a stretch that Stan, or whatever his real name is, would use Sinner's to keep an eye on Warwick."

"And dumbass Thomas was followed here. I swear, with the idiots they have running the USC, I don't feel that safe."

At that moment, a shadow moved across the interior of the car and too late, Rafe and Freddy realized they'd been caught.

The door was torn open and Stan leaned in. "I couldn't agree with you more, Vicentes. But then, you aren't a good example of planning either."

"Stan?" Sasha's disbelief morphed into dread when he looked at her. Instead of the lovable man she'd come to trust, Stan was a monster. His eyes, usually warm and welcoming, held a note of cold hatred.

"So glad you could join us tonight, Sasha. You've caused enough problems as it is."

Before she could get over the chill tone of his voice, the other door was yanked open and the two goons who'd been in her apartment pulled Freddy and Rafe out of the vehicle. She moved away from Stan's grasping hand. When his fingers caught her jacket, then curled around her arm in a vice like grip, Sasha smacked at them with her free hand.

"Sasha, I would play nice if I were you. I wouldn't want to have to hurt your boyfriend or his little brother to get your cooperation."

Sick dread stopped her, her mind momentarily numb. Stan used her pause to pull her out of the vehicle and out into the cold. Rafe and Freddy stood restrained by the goons who'd pulled them out. Both brothers looked a bit grim, but mostly pissed. The thunderous expression on Rafe's face told her little except that he was angry.

"Deputy Thomas is in the depot right now. You won't get away with this. He's expecting us."

Stan laughed, but it held no amusement. It was a cold snicker, one that sent a chill down her spine.

"Hey, Scotty boy. The whore still doesn't realize what the hell is going on."

The well-dressed and perfectly groomed man she'd seen earlier stepped from behind another car.

"Bellows, do you always have to fuck up everything?"

Stan swung to face him, pulling Sasha with him. She heard Rafe growl and hoped he didn't try anything foolish.

"Me? Me fuck things up?" That sick laugh surfaced again and Sasha shivered. He stopped laughing as abruptly as he started. The silence was eerily startling. "First, you try and double cross me ..."

"I didn't double cross you." This time the younger man's voice didn't sound so sure. "I found out Warwick was poking around."

"So you sent in Betty the boob to try and steal the information. Jesus, could you have picked a dumber bitch? And left me to take care of her. I'm sick of cleaning up your messes."

Thomas surged forward, anger now etched on his face, a nasty sneer diminishing the smooth elegance of his features. "These are not *my* messes. I gave you enough information, everything you asked for."

Rafe's calm voice cut into the argument between the two men. "While all this is really interesting in a soap opera kind of way, why the hell wouldn't you just leave Sasha alone?"

Stan swung around again, pulling her with him. His fingers were wrapped so tightly, she was losing feeling in her arm.

"Because of the two idiots you have there. She could identify them, not to mention me. I'd sent orders to kill her and Ashley."

"Not to mention Radney." This came from Thomas.

Stan didn't even spare the other man a look when he said, "Radney was in charge of that operation and is now no longer a problem."

Thomas' steps were hurried as he approached. "Bellows, I can't abide any more killing. You can't go running around executing people."

He stepped in front of Stan and Sasha. Stan's fingers flexed on her arm causing her to wince.

"I'll do whatever the hell I want, Thomas."

"Really?"

Before Thomas could answer, bright lights flashed on, blinding them all.

"What the fuck?" Stan yelled.

His momentary loss of sight gave Sasha just the opportunity she needed. Lifting her leg, she used the heel of her boot to hit Stan on the side of his knee. He immediately loosened his grip.

"You fucking bitch."

Shots began to ring out, coming at them from all direction. Thomas screamed and went down in front of her and Stan.

"Sasha, get down," Rafe yelled.

She didn't have to be told twice. Dropping to the ground she didn't look behind her as she crawled to hide behind the fender of a vehicle and prayed for the first time in years.

Rafe kned the jackass who had hold of him, smiling when he heard the grunt of pain and the man's collapse. He looked over at his brother, who had somehow gotten the massive goon, who'd had hold of Freddy, to the ground and held him down by placing his booted foot on the back of his neck. Freddy smiled over at Rafe, a look of satisfaction lighting up his youthful face. His next thought was of Sasha and the need to find her and make sure she was okay. But before he could, a shot was fired and Freddy jerked, grabbing his arm.

"Freddy!"

Rafe turned and saw that Stan had found them through the haze of lights and was aiming to take out Freddy with another shot. Rafe dove to the ground and grabbed the gun

his captor had dropped, rolling over and taking aim at Stan's legs. He popped him once in the thigh, then the kneecap. Stan screamed, dropped his gun and crumpled to the ground.

Immediately, Rafe scrambled over to his brother, who was sitting on the ground. An officer from the Capitol Police Department had cuffed the jackass who'd been holding Freddy.

Sick dread coated Rafe's stomach when he saw the flow of blood running over Freddy's hand.

"Don't pass out, Rafe. I'll be fine. Just a flesh wound." His voice was tinged with humor, but weak, which sent another wave of panic through Rafe.

He lifted his brother's hand from the wound and found that Freddy was right. It wasn't serious and would only require fusing strips from the looks of it. His heart was still in the bottom of his stomach. "Mom's going to kill me."

"Not that it isn't heartwarming to see two brothers bonding over blood, but I do feel the need to interrupt." Thomas' voice cut through the air like a sharp knife.

When Rafe turned, he found Thomas holding Sasha by a fist full of hair. The barrel of his gun was pressed against her temple. Terror slid down Rafe's spine, chilling his bones, freezing his blood.

"You don't want to do that, Thomas. Right now, they only have you on selling secrets. Killing is a different matter."

"Do you think I give a fuck what they do to me now? This wasn't about money." His voice dripped with disdain as he inched further back away from all the officers, dragging Sasha with him. Rafe couldn't look at her, wouldn't. If he saw the fear that was more than likely on her face, he would lose control. He'd already fucked this up enough, he had to save her.

"That's funny seeing how you have a billion in an account somewhere."

"That isn't for me. I don't need money. I come from money and still have more of it than I need. What I wanted was Warwick's job."

Disgust for the worthless excuse for a man filled Rafe, but he tried his best not to let it show. So many people dead, so many lives ruined so this asshole could get a promotion.

"And what about the money? You took bribes for information. You didn't think that would come to light?"

An almost hysterical laugh exploded from Thomas and a crazy look entered his eyes. "What a jackass. You ruined all my plans but you don't even know what those plans were. Listen up, dickhead. The so called holes in security don't exist. I made them up. But I set it up to look like they were there. Jesus. I'm not an idiot. I took their money, sent it to an account and in the end, I would expose Warwick and win. But Bellows ruined it all when he stole the information after killing Betty."

"You set them all up."

He stopped his movements and smiled. It sent a chill of trepidation through Rafe. "I did. And I am going to escape with at least one prize. Sasha will make a wonderful companion for me, at least until I tire of her."

At the mention of her name, Rafe looked at her and was surprised to see the calculating look in her gaze. She was frightened, that much he could tell, but there was something else. Something that told him she was ready to act.

He smiled and said, "Go ahead."

"What the fuck --"

Thomas broke off in a scream as Sasha elbowed him in the groin. He released her, and Rafe lifted his gun just as Thomas aimed his at Sasha. Without hesitating, he aimed for Thomas' head and shot.

Thomas dropped to the ground a split second after his gun. Sasha ran to Rafe, practically jumping in his arms. She burrowed her head in the crook of his neck. He wrapped

his arms around her, his whole body vibrating with fear and anger. Fear that he'd lost her. Anger at himself. When he tried to pull back, she refused to let go. Rafe gave up trying, freed one hand, and pulled her along to find Freddy and check on him. Rafe's heart dropped to the pit of his stomach when he saw all the medics surrounding his brother. One stepped out of the way giving him a clear view of Freddy, who was leaning back against a female medic. Some of his panic dissolved at the sight of a weary smile curving Freddy's lips.

One of the men standing closest to Freddy captured Rafe's attention when he shifted his weight from one foot to another. He recognized Walton from the news reports, but the man standing next to him drew his attention away from the inspector.

"I hire you to find Sasha. Then, you get your brother shot and her life threatened," Vic Ashley growled as he approached Rafe and Sasha.

Sasha shifted to face her ex-husband and frowned at him. Rafe studied her expression to see if there was any residual emotion from their marriage. When all he saw was irritation, he relaxed, pulling her closer to him.

"Shut up, Vic. It's not Rafe's fault that the police screwed this up from the beginning."

"We didn't." This came from Walton who'd come to stand beside Vic. "The USC hid some of their investigations from us, which made it damned difficult to get to the bottom of the matter."

"I can imagine why they did," Rafe said. "Probably ordered from up high."

They all watched as the medics worked over Thomas. One of them shook his head at the other telling them there would be no trial for him. It irritated Rafe that he'd probably saved the USC a load of embarrassment.

"I'm not saying a fucking word until I see my barrister," yelled Bellows.

All four of them turned to watch as they hauled Bellows off in restraints. Rafe looked down at Sasha and found her gazing up at him. His heart did that funny little tumble, and his

body warmed. He'd almost lost her. Due to his idiocy, his unprofessional behavior, she'd almost been killed.

"Are you going to need a statement from Sasha, Walton?" Ashley asked. He was watching them with a curious intensity that Rafe didn't like one bit.

"No. I'll contact you in a day or two, Sasha." Walton then excused himself to deal with one of the officer's questions.

"Let's go, Sasha," Ashley said, reaching for her.

She shook her head. "I want to go with Freddy and Rafe to the hospital."

Ashley studied them, his gaze moving from one to the other. "I think that Vicentes might just need to have his mind on taking care of his brother and contacting family -- before this makes it to the news."

From the sound of vehicles arriving, it wouldn't be long. He knew Ashley was right but Rafe wanted to be the one who took Sasha home. He wanted her beside him, wanted her comfort, craved it like a junkie.

"I won't get in his way, Vic. You go play cop."

Ashley's gaze moved between them, his frown hardening. "I really think --"

"Give it up, Ashley." Rafe's voice had Ashley narrowing his eyes. He was sure Sasha's ex had plenty to say to him, but he wasn't particularly in the mood. The news crews would scream the moment they found out that Freddy was from a powerful family like the Perez's, and he wanted to call his folks ASAP.

"Really, Vic, let it go," Sasha said. She stepped forward, an action Rafe didn't like. He had to fight the urge to pull her back to his side. He allowed her to hug her ex-husband, who never took his gaze from Rafe's face. "I'll be fine. Thanks for sending Rafe after me. If it weren't for him, I'd probably be at the bottom of the Hudson."

"The jury is still out on that one." Ashley's tone left no doubt he would vote against Rafe, but he didn't care. All that mattered was that Sasha was staying with him.

Chapter Ten

It was at least two hours before they cleared everything, got his brother into his room, and called his parents. They were on their way, after saying a few choice words to him about allowing Freddy to tag along. Del and Dylan had been in already. Both had chastised him for not getting a hold of them immediately, but when they left several minutes earlier, Del had given him a hug. Sasha, who had been quite efficient through it all, had run down to the cafeteria to grab them both coffee. Freddy was snoozing from the drugs they'd pumped into him before they fused the wound. It gave Rafe a moment alone with his thoughts. No matter how much he wanted to ignore Ashley's statement, there was something to it. Rafe had let down not only his brother and Sasha, but also Bounty Hunters Inc.

For the first time in his career, he'd let his emotions rule, and it'd almost gotten Sasha and Freddy killed. It had brought shame to the name of the firm.

"Mama will expect something really gorgeous for her birthday next month to make up for this." His brother's voice brought Rafe out of his musings.

He glanced over at Freddy whose eyes were still closed, although a small smile curved his lips. Another wave of anger, directed inward, flashed through Rafe. This would have never happened if he had kept everything on a business level.

"Stop worrying, *hermano*. Doc said I will be out of here in an hour or so, loss of blood was minimal. You heard him." Freddy opened his eyes, just half way, and studied Rafe. "It wasn't your fault."

"I was in charge, Freddy. It was my duty to make sure Sasha made it to USC safely."

"You did, jackass. You just didn't know Thomas was dirty. He set it up that way."

"But --"

"What? Perfect Raphael Vicentes made a mistake." Now his brother's eyes were first opened, then narrowed. The smile had turned into a sneer. "Welcome to the world where us mere mortals reside. Must be tough falling down to Earth with us."

"I don't mess up jobs like this." Rafe paced away from his brother's bed, to the window, staring unseeingly into the night. "Everyone knows I don't mess with my callers. Hell, not one bounty hunter or agent could pull in Joy. I did. I had no problem ignoring her advances."

"You weren't in love with Joy." The words were spoken quietly with such a tone of self assurance it startled him.

He glanced over his shoulder and found his brother staring at him. "I wouldn't have fallen for Sasha if I hadn't slept with her."

At this, Freddy snorted. "Right. Because it was all about sex."

He shook his head and turned away again. "You don't understand. I have a reputation. It took years to build and because of one woman, it is beyond fucked. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do now. I should never have taken this job."

"If that is all that matters to you, you will end up cold and lonely, Rafe."

Before he could respond, the door slid open to reveal Sasha holding two cups of coffee. Predictably, his pulse spiked, the moisture in his mouth disappeared, and his heart flipped over, until he saw her face. She smiled at him, a little too brightly, too practiced. All of that warmth, all of the electric shocks evaporated. Instead, cold seeped into his blood and into his bones. There was something off. He was pretty sure she couldn't have heard their

conversation. The room was sound proof and the door had been shut. Before he discovered what lurked behind her emotionless gaze, she looked at Freddy and her expression warmed.

“You’re awake. The nurse said you might be. Do you want me to tell them you want to eat?”

Freddy shook his head and offered her a small smile. “I think I just want to rest right now, if you don’t mind. Once Mama descends I will get little to no sleep until they get me home.”

Sasha handed Rafe his coffee as she passed him on the way to Freddy’s bed. The scent of her wafted toward him making his head spin, but it was temporary as she barely paid much attention to him. Taking his brother’s hand, she leaned down to give Freddy a sisterly peck on the cheek.

“Then I’ll get going and let you be. Make sure you rest. You’re going to definitely need it once the reporters get an eyeful of you.”

A flirty smile turned the corners of Freddy’s mouth, albeit a weary one. “Think I can get a few dates out of it?”

She laughed, but it didn’t sound all that genuine to Rafe. “Sure thing.” She squeezed Freddy’s hand before letting it go. When she turned around, she offered him that practiced smile again. Worry now almost turned into panic. Something was really wrong. “I’ve got to get things cleaned up, talk to the police, so I’ll be going.”

She offered him the same kind of kiss that she bestowed upon Freddy. Her easy dismissal of him, of everything stunned him. His mind was still not in working order. It hadn’t been since he’d seen that bastard press the barrel of the gun to Sasha’s temple. That had to be the reason she made it out the door before he registered that she left.

“Don’t be a jackass, Raphael. Go get her.”

He glanced at Freddy whose eyes were now closed. Rafe would’ve loved to argue with the little shit, but again, Rafe’s mind wouldn’t cooperate.

"If you don't go after her, *hermano*, you'll regret it. Your life just walked out the door."

In that one blinding instant, everything became clear. He hadn't just taken a little tumble; he'd dived in head first and didn't want to come up for air. Of course he loved her. There was no other way to explain his mistakes. He'd allowed his emotions to overrule everything, and he never did that. However, this one time, for a smart-mouthed, long-legged woman who had turned him inside-out in less than three days, he had. How did he go from being perfectly happy, to not wanting to wake up without her in bed beside him? He'd spent much more time with women getting to know them, but in these few short days, he'd come to love Sasha. Her wit, her sarcastic mouth, that world-class ass, not to mention the warm woman she was beneath all that polish. At that moment, he knew, no matter what, he wanted her in his life, his arms, his bed.

"Be right back."

Rafe hit the door so fast he barely noticed when his brother said, "About damn time."

* * * * *

Sasha walked out the front doors of the hospital, stopped and blinked. The first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon. She heard the whizzing of the traffic on the highway above her, the beginnings of just another day in DC. Like everyone else, she had work to do. She had a club to get cleaned up, and ready for business again. Because *that* was important. *That* was all that mattered.

So, she was the assignment he shouldn't have taken. The one that messed with his perfect reputation. Bastard. It didn't really matter, she thought as she blinked again, this time trying to keep the tears at bay. So it pinched her heart a bit. She'd get over it. Men were expendable. She didn't need one in her life constantly to feel complete. Rafe had been there to get her through a tough spot, save her, and then let her go. Pretty much like Vic did years ago. A temporary savior, no longer needed. They'd used each other and both gained their just rewards. Perfect.

So why was she feeling so lost? It was as if the world she'd created had been ripped to shreds. Sure, the last couple of weeks had her world tattered, but she'd cleaned up the ragged edges and moved on before. She could do it again.

She set off on foot with a brisk step. It only took her thirty seconds to realize she had no idea where to go, what to do. Stopping dead, she stood frozen. How was she ever going to forget him? He'd blown into her life, and she hadn't wanted him there, damn it. She liked her life orderly, just as she had it. Work kept her happy, and the occasional man satisfied her libido. But she didn't need them around, making demands. They screwed with your thinking, your life, and your heart.

A swift, sharp stab to that organ had her rubbing her chest. Oh, shit. This was not good. She hadn't gotten this crazy over Vic, and they had been married. Rafe, hell, she hadn't even known him a whole week.

Needing to put some space between her and the man in question, she started walking again. She didn't need him or love him. Just because every time he got snarky it turned her on. Or the fact that she'd opened her soul to him. It was the situation, being in danger, running from men with guns. It had nothing to do with the fact that she didn't think she wanted another man as long as she lived.

This brought her to another halt, her mind whirling with the revelation. No way. There is no way she could think that way. She never had before. Not even with Vic. Faithful, yes, but just the thought of another man touching her other than Rafe had lost its appeal.

Oh, no fucking way.

"Sasha!"

She glanced over her shoulder to see Rafe running toward her. At first, sick dread coated her stomach as she thought of Freddy. She turned and faced him as he slowed his steps and stopped within a few feet of her.

"Is Freddy okay?" she asked, afraid of the answer.

"Oh, yeah. He's more than fine." He was out of breath, his face flushed with the exertion. Dear God, he was beautiful. It was killing her just standing there looking at him. He was a pain in the ass, complete by-the-rules guy, but there was a goodness underneath. The way he took care of her, loved her, touched her. There was warmth beneath that cool by the book jerk. And that was what she would miss the most.

Needing to keep herself in check, she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and said, chillingly, "What do you need then?"

For a second or two, he didn't say anything, just looked at her. Then, he moved before she could react, cupping his hand behind her neck and pulling her to him for a hard, long kiss.

Before she could tell herself not to, she responded. She opened her mouth, allowing him entry. The taste of him, the feel of him, the scent of him overwhelmed her and made her knees liquefy.

Someone honked close by, pulling her out of the sensual haze Rafe was creating with that clever mouth of his. Sasha pulled back, reminding herself she really didn't want him. She'd just ignore the way her body hummed like a well-oiled machine.

Rafe moved closer and she stepped back. He frowned and released her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The nerve! "Nothing. Just wondering what this is all about."

Now he was scowling at her. "I don't want you to leave."

She stifled a sigh. What did she expect? Undying love and a proposal? She was just a toy, one that was leaving. Men didn't like that.

"Well, the job is over, right?" She tried keeping her voice cool -- as cold as she felt.

"Yes. But --"

"But, that's it. Right?"

He didn't answer, just kept studying her. So, to cement the deal, she smiled. He blinked, then his gaze turned knowing.

"So, you're through with me. It was all about getting through it, and now you are happy to just go back to life like it was."

Damn it, did he have to take it so well? Couldn't he see that every word was tearing her to shreds?

"Yes."

He cocked his head to one side and said, "Bullshit."

"I --"

Before she could finish, he grabbed her, pulling her into his arms, trapping her. She ignored the first blast of heat to her blood and started to struggle. Panic now set in as she kicked and cursed. But, no matter what she did, he wouldn't budge. He just laughed. The sound was like a sharp knife to her soul. She couldn't stop the tears this time. They welled up and spilled over, and she didn't give a damn.

He pulled her closer, nuzzled her neck and sighed, the sound of it filled with relieved pleasure. She felt the brush of his mouth just below her earlobe and shivered. She also started to cry harder.

"*Querida*, please, don't cry." She wanted to believe the warmth in his voice had more to do with love than it did, but she didn't want to fall into that trap. Pretending it was something more would end up killing her in the end. "Talk to me, Sasha. I don't know what to do."

"Oh, go away." She ordered this even as she snuggled closer, lost in the comforting heat of his body.

"*Cielito*, tell me. Tell me why the woman I love bursts into tears because I don't want her to leave me?"

She pulled away so fast, she smacked him in the chin with her head. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

He drew back to get a better look at her. "I love you."

"No."

His lips twitched. "No?"

She nodded, not moving her gaze from his.

"And why is that?"

"You don't know me. I'm bad for your career. I have all kinds of faults."

"Really."

He sounded so reasonable; she didn't really know what to do so she just nodded.

"What, like your smart mouth, your need to tell me what to do, oh, and the fact that I will probably go poor feeding you?"

She frowned. "You don't sound like a man in love."

"Well, how do you account for the fact that I went against every one of my instincts?"

"Lust."

"Hmm, that would be good except, hate to break it to you, Sasha, I've had lust before and controlled myself. Nope, it is more than that. It's the fact that I don't think I want to live without you."

"Sex."

He shook his head. "Again, been there, can get that without a problem. No, I never go out of the rules."

"You did this time. But you wished you had never taken the job."

His eyes widened, then narrowed. "Eavesdropping were we? How did you hear that?"

"The nurses monitor."

“Well, what I didn’t say was that I would do it all over again. Which means I suck because my brother was shot, you almost were ...”

His arms flexed against her, and she knew he was blaming himself for everything all over again. It would eat at him until he hated her and she didn’t think she could survive that.

“I’m fine. You’re just feeling obligated because of your honor.”

“No.”

“Yes, Rafe --”

“No. Listen. I don’t know how it happened, but you got under my skin, woman.” He didn’t take his gaze from hers, his eyes dark with emotion. “You aggravate me to no end, you run a fancy brothel, and you are completely wrong for me. Hell, you delight in playing outside the lines. I like drawing the lines. But there isn’t another woman I want beside me. Don’t run, don’t leave. If you did, I’d just come find you and drag you back.” He dipped his head and brushed his mouth over hers. “*Te amo*.”

The tears returned. “Rafe, I don’t know what to say.”

He loosened his hold and she lifted her hands to his face.

“Say you love me. That you’ll stay with me. I don’t care where, just with me. I don’t even give a damn about the club.”

She shook her head. “I was thinking of selling it. I ... since Janice died, it has been bad.”

“I don’t care. I just want you.” He kissed her this time sending her heart into palpitations. Beneath the heat was another emotion, one that had her whole body warming, her mind going blank.

By the time he pulled back, she was lucky she remembered her own name.

“Tell me.”

“I love you, Rafe.”

He smiled and his body relaxed. “Say you’ll marry me and do it quick.”

“Why?”

When he leaned in to nuzzle her neck he said, “Because my mother is watching and if you say no now, she’ll not be very happy.”

She glanced over her shoulder to see a noble-looking woman, with her black hair pulled back from her face. She was frowning at Sasha. A multitude of others surrounded her, including a stately man to her right wearing a grin she knew too well. Sasha’s attention returned to the woman. She was shooting daggers from her eyes that were the same shade of pale green as Rafe’s.

Sasha turned back to Rafe and wanted to smack that knowing grin off his face. But, she was seriously worried his mama would her.

“I come with baggage,” she warned.

“Yeah, well you’ve seen mine. They’re standing behind you.”

She laughed, joy lighting her heart. Throwing her arms around him, Sasha pulled him closer. “Yes, Raphael, I’ll marry you.”

As she lifted her lips to his she heard his mother say, “Well, we know that we’ll get some grandbabies at least.”

Epilogue

“Rafe suggested this Vic Ashley and what’s the other bloke’s name ... Walton. We need some more hunters,” Dylan said, leaning back in the chair in front of the desk. “Odd that Rafe has no problem with his wife’s ex working here, but both of them wanted out of the police. The little episode with Sasha was enough.”

Del nodded and kept working. For the last three weeks, Dylan had been suspiciously quiet about the marriage issue. She had thought for sure he would be hounding her night and day after Rafe and Sasha got married so fast. But ... there had been nothing. Del was kind of surprised she found it a little disappointing. Especially considering her condition. Something she hadn’t told him about.

“If there was anything between them, it might be a problem, but there isn’t. And we need them. We had four more cases come in this week and Joy has been after me again about training her.”

“No, bloody way. That woman would drive me crazy in a heartbeat while I tried to train her.”

“So, train one of the guys, then let him train her.” She smiled. “Easy as pie.”

He returned her smile and she felt the customary bump in her heart rate. Hell, all he had to do was exist and he made her hot.

"That's why I keep you around, Delilah."

But, instead of just going on, his smile dissolved into a scowl and he jumped out of his chair.

"Okay, I tried to back off but I can't take it. Rafe meets a woman, someone he thinks, and I would have agreed before meeting her, who is completely wrong for him, falls in love, and gets married, all in less than two months. You? Nothing. I don't like it. I don't know why you won't marry me."

Del watched as Dylan paced the length of their office. All loose limbs and male arrogance, he was a pleasure to watch. She could feel the heat invade her stomach as she started thinking of ways to get him naked. She wanted to see those limbs free of clothes and preferably beneath her. Or above her, she wasn't picky. As long as both of them were naked and getting sweaty together.

She smiled, as he shoved a hand through his hair leaving a few strands of it sticking up.

"Listen, I know you don't trust marriage. I know you think it is stupid of me to want this, but I just do." He stopped abruptly, then walked over to her. Getting on his knees in front of her, he gathered up her hands. When she met his gaze, she knew what her answer would be. There in his eyes, his heart shone through, his love, his dedication to her. She was foolish to throw that back, not when it was true that they belonged together.

"Okay, Dylan. I'll marry you."

At first disbelief, then joy tinged with arrogant acceptance flashed over his face. With a whoop, he picked her up, took her place on the chair and plopped her in his lap.

"I love you, Delilah."

Her heart skipped. She would never get used to hearing that. "I love you, too, jackass."

He smiled and bent his head to kiss her when the door opened. Dylan frowned at Joy as she briskly walked in, a set of electronic files in her hands. She smiled at Dylan, undisturbed by his disapproval and winked at Del.

"Files on the Petoski, Reynolds, and Batten cases. I'm done for the day, and I am out of here."

"Dylan and I are going to get married, Joy."

She smiled and said, "Congrats." Turning to leave, she paused to say, "It's a good thing since that baby is going to need a last name."

With that she sauntered out the door and down the hall.

Dylan chuckled. "That woman is always a pain in the ass. Baby, really."

Del felt her face flame. "Well, see, Dylan ..."

She trailed off when he zeroed in on her, his eyes narrowing. "Do you mean you are?"

She nodded.

"And you told Joy first? How could you do that?"

"I didn't tell her."

Both of them digested that announcement for a moment.

"I won't say a word if you don't," she offered.

He smiled and pulled her closer. "I don't give a damn. I get a wife and a baby all in one day."

Bending his head again, he brushed his lips over hers. "Nothing could be better. Well, except if you were naked."

Moments later, they'd both achieved their goal, and lost themselves as they came together in the fading winter sun.

THE END

Melissa Schroeder

Born to an Air Force family at an Army hospital Melissa has always been a little bit screwy. She was further warped by her years of watching Monty Python and her strange family. Her love of romance novels developed after accidentally picking up a Linda Howard book. After becoming hooked, she read close to 300 novels in one year, deciding that romance was her true calling instead of the literary short stories and suspenses she had been writing. After many attempts, she realized that romantic comedy, or at least romance with a comedic edge, was where she was destined to be. Influences in her writing come from Nora Roberts, Jenny Cruise, Susan Andersen, Amanda Quick, Jayne Anne Krentz, Julia Quinn, Christina Dodd, and Lori Foster. Since her first release in 2004, Melissa has had close to 20 short stories, novellas and novels released with six different publishers in a variety of genres and time periods. Those releases included, *The Hired Hand*, a 2005 Eppie Finalist for Contemporary Romance and *Tempting Prudence*, a 2005 CAPA finalist for short erotic romance. Her contemporary, *A Little Harmless Sex* became an international best seller in June of 2005.

Since she was a military brat, she vowed never to marry military. Alas, fate always has her way with mortals. Her husband is an Air Force major, and together they have their own military brats, two girls, and an adopted dog daughter and they live wherever the military sticks them. Which she is sure, will always involve heat and bugs only seen on the Animal Discovery Channel. In her spare time, she reads, complains about bugs, travels, cooks, reads some more, watches her DVD collections of *Arrested Development* and *Seinfeld*, and tries to convince her family that she truly is a *delicate genius*. She has yet to achieve her last goal.

She has always believed that romance and humor go hand in hand. Love can conquer all and as Mark Twain said, "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand." Combining the two, she hopes she gives her readers a thrilling love story, filled with chuckles along the way, and a happily ever after finish.

Visit Melissa on the Web at <http://www.melissaschroeder.net>.