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Leather and Lace

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LEATHER AND LACE

Taylor Tryst

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of Abigail Williamson, my grandmother, whose love of reading made an impression upon me at such a young age I didn't realize it until years later when I finally opened my heart to the passion of putting the written word onto the page. I miss you every day, Grandma.

Also, my aunt, JoAnn Campbell, and cousin Brenda Blueze, both of whom greatly influenced me at some point in my life. They will both be missed.

Finally, to my family. My son Anthony, who never wavered in his belief that his mother could do anything. I love you, Anth. And my own mother, Betty, who passed along the ability to translate emotions into words, and who has shared with me the true heart and soul of a poet.

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Chapter One

Lukas Nathanial Lace might be the CEO of a multibillion-dollar corporation but he was still a man and as far as Cleo Tanek was concerned that made him easy game.

She tugged on the hem of her black leather skirt and nudged it up just enough to reveal a slice of bare thigh.

He was definitely a leg man.

Very deliberately crossing her mile-long legs, she worked her only pair of Manolo Blahnik stilettos for all they were worth, which was a cold eight hundred dead presidents.

They worked like a charm.

They were her "fuck-me" shoes after all.

His gaze was like a tangible thing. The lightest brush of fingertips dancing over her bare flesh. It was impossible to ignore. She closed her eyes, imagining the fine sheen of sweat that would dampen his hot, taut skin as he moved over her.

She could almost feel the ripples of muscle, the pounding drum of his heartbeat raging in rhythm with her own as he pulled her against his body, his cock throbbing against her bare thigh.

Warm, wet kisses that trailed down her calves, to her shoes, which he would slip off one at a time, taking her toes into his mouth and suckling, giving her a taste of what was to come – both literally and figuratively.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Cleo took a cleansing breath and tried to devise a plan. She lifted the menu to conceal most of her features from view and like a magician employing the trick of misdirection, slid the Nikon digital camera she'd used to take surveillance shots of him into her bag.

She had made an error in judgment. She'd thought Mr. Lukas Nathanial Lace wouldn't notice her. That he was too busy with board meetings to pay her any mind. She'd been wrong, though. Dead wrong and it just might cost her the case she'd been working on for nearly a week.

Lace had spied her in the lobby of his office building just that morning and now again in the restaurant he'd chosen for a late afternoon power lunch with his top executives.

He hadn't taken his eyes off her since.

Her nipples drew to a peak beneath the weight of his gaze and heat coursed through her body and settled in a pool of moistness that dampened the black bikini-cut panties she'd chosen to complete her ensemble.

She could almost feel his probing fingers methodically working their way inside her pussy, making her wet, her muscles tensing as he worked her clit and brought her to orgasm.

God, she had to get a grip. This man was off-limits. He was a predator in an Armani suit, for God's sake. Like an alpha wolf, he was summing her up, gauging her reaction and preparing to move in for the kill.

The worst of it was that she wanted to fuck him silly. She peeked over her menu and found him staring back, openly. They locked gazes for one long moment and she nearly forgot her own name.

Watching her with an intensity that nearly frightened him, Luke closed his mouth, the pair of legs that had his undivided attention nearly knocking him out of the chair and onto his ass.

He spent most of his life being on guard against women who threw themselves at his feet and honestly, he hardly noticed them anymore.

He couldn't help but spot this woman. Hell, a man would have to be ten years in the grave not to. Lush brown hair highlighted with streaks of gold and teasing her slender shoulders. She was dressed to perfection in a sleeveless black tank that hugged a pair of perky breasts and accentuated her defined arms.

And those thighs, dear Lord in heaven, those thighs.

Though Luke couldn't quite put his finger on it, she had an air of danger about her. Instead of dissuading him, as it normally would, it seemed to draw him in.

Danger wasn't a quality that he was attracted to—not usually, that was his brother, Tommy. Maybe it was the black leather mini and those stilettos. She definitely wasn't his type but she was killing him.

Dark and mysterious, she had that Angelina Jolie badass attitude that drifted off her in the same way that some women smelled of expensive perfume. He just couldn't take his eyes off those legs, those shoes and that tight little body.

Luke hoped to catch her attention, and all he wanted was to earn a smile or even a bit of casual interest but her pert little nose was glued to that menu. She wasn't budging.

Cleo shifted in her seat. Knowing he was watching her made her wetter than she'd ever been. Nevertheless, she was on a case, she reminded herself. This guy was off-limits. It was that simple.

She'd managed to divert his attention from her face and to her other attributes but now she had to escape without being cornered, which was easier said than done.

Moistening her lips with a drink of water, she couldn't help but wonder how Lukas Nathanial Lace would taste.

Rich, she imagined, very rich. It would be quite a rush to be up close and personal with the king of Lace Incorporated.

Her breasts crushed against that rock-hard chest, her hands exploring the rippling muscles that he'd tried to disguise beneath the impeccable tailoring that only the wealthy could afford. She'd run her fingers through that gorgeous blond hair, which he kept short and so carefully styled.

He was a six-three, one-hundred-and-ninety-pound, incredibly gorgeous überstud.

She was so screwed.

Scanning the menu but not paying attention to the fare, Cleo couldn't help but wonder about the mystery client who'd hired her for this little undercover soirée.

A courier had delivered an envelope that contained a wad of cash and explicit instructions to follow and document Lace's every move.

Once she had obtained the appropriate information, the client would be in contact with further instructions.

Cleo had personally visited the courier service that had made the delivery to her loft but it was a dead end. She had no idea who wanted this information and why.

The envelope contained instructions for delivery and enough cash to cover the delivery fee and a case of designer brew for the courier.

Short of having the envelope fingerprinted, Cleo had been out of options. Who knew how many sets of hands had touched the damned thing before it had arrived at her doorstep. Whoever the client was, however, it was extremely clear that he wanted to remain anonymous at this point.

As much as Cleo hated to admit it, keeping Lace under surveillance and gathering personal information about him had proven to be much more difficult than she'd first imagined.

He had money. That much was painfully obvious. He topped *Forbes* magazine as one of the top ten wealthiest men in America. He was single and nearly reclusive, which also put him at the top of another list, America's most eligible bachelors.

Lace had kept an extremely low profile and that had made him an elusive target, not only for Cleo but also for the droves of females wishing to turn his head.

Peeking over her menu, she couldn't help but smirk. Luke was a power player, all right. He sat at the head of the table, a king of many minions, his employees hanging on his every word.

He was the center of attention, so much in fact that the waitstaff of the restaurant catered to him as if they were in his employ personally.

Hell, Cleo was lucky to have gotten a glass of water from a busboy and she hadn't even seen the server. She looked around, only to find a couple seated behind her, lingering over coffee and dessert.

At least they'd gotten their food, she thought bitterly.

"What are you having?"

Cleo didn't even have to look up. She knew by her gut reaction to the sound of his voice that Luke had moved in for the kill.

A predator indeed.

Maybe it was his confident attitude that gave him away or the deep tone of his voice, which seemed to envelop her like supple velvet enveloping bare skin.

She knew it was Lace before she met his gaze.

Lowering the menu, Cleo held her breath. She attempted to feign disinterest but the moment their eyes locked, all hell broke loose.

Her heart skipped a beat or two, she couldn't be sure, and then pummeled her rib cage like fists into a punching bag.

Breathe, just breathe, she told herself. It was something she did on a daily basis, so it should be easy enough. In and out...in and out...nice and slowly.

Oh God, he'd asked her a question, Cleo realized. She replayed it in her mind and had to interpret his words as if they'd been some exotic foreign language.

Having? What am I having? For dinner?

"I'm afraid I haven't decided," she said, finally managing to move her tongue and spit out a few words. She flashed a smile, exuding just the right amount of charm, mixed with a stab of indifference that she had to dig deeply to employ.

This was Oscar-winning shit right here.

"The veal is fabulous," Luke said, casually slipping a hand into the pocket of his pants, as if perfectly relaxed. Nothing Lace did, however, was casual. Cleo had known that about him immediately.

He was a businessman at heart, a wolf among sheep, every move well crafted and perfectly executed. Why did she suddenly find that so hot?

"May I?" Luke asked, motioning at the chair across from her.

Sit, oh God, he wanted to sit. She'd screwed up big time. So much for her little undercover op. One of the golden rules of tailing a subject was not to have the subject notice your tail.

She tried to remain calm but her eyes must've betrayed her because he caught the look of surprise she'd tried to conceal.

"Forgive me," Luke said with a respectful nod. "You must be meeting someone."

"No—" Cleo corrected, a bit too soon.

Uugh. She sighed in frustration. She sounded like an idiot. She hadn't meant, no, of course not. Had it come out that way? Desperate, as if she had no friends, no dates?

As if she was a recluse who ate every meal unaccompanied and never went to the movies because she hated sitting alone in the theatre.

"This was an impromptu lunch," she added, scrambling to sound at least somewhat intelligent and compatible with the male species.

"Then you don't mind," Luke asked. He pulled out the chair and sat down with all of the confidence of a man who was accustomed to getting everything he wanted.

"Can I get you another drink, Mr. Lace?"

Priceless. Joined by a rich hottie and she suddenly gets service. Cleo bit her tongue and exchanged a sunny smile for the nasty sneer she had going.

"Well, that depends on the lady." Luke motioned toward Cleo and flashed that billion-dollar smile.

"Ma'am?" The little blonde waitress turned her attention to Cleo as if just realizing she was breathing.

"I'll take A Piece of Ass," Cleo said without glancing at the menu she had clutched in her hands as if it were the last pair of size-seven Jimmy Choos.

Beautiful.

She was as tense as hell and had habitually ordered her favorite club drink. She so had to get a grip. Men just didn't do this to her. She never got riled. Not at a man's expense, anyway.

"I'll definitely have what she's having," Luke said, that icy exterior melting with a devastating smile that softened all of his features. This one had reached his eyes and Cleo realized that he had a dimple.

A goddamned, honest-to-God dimple. She was so screwed. Literally. Screwed.

Luke held her gaze and everything around her seemed to fade away. The dull description that the DMV had used to describe his eyes sure as the hell didn't do them justice, Cleo thought as she looked into them and everything around her disappeared as if she'd just been lulled into a trance.

His eyes weren't just blue. Oh no, they were gleaming azure crystals sparking in the sunlight that shone through the bay window behind her.

Snap out of it, Cleo scolded herself. This was sick. Sick.

He was hot. So what? She'd met other hot guys, even dated one or two in her day. She could deal.

"My name is Luke," he said, holding out his bare hand.

Cleo stared at it, knowing that he was a man who didn't play games, who took what he wanted without a second thought or a moment's hesitation.

This game was getting dangerous.

"Do you always crash other people's lunches, Luke?"

"Not always," he admitted, still having the nerve to smile. He realized that she wasn't going to extend the courtesy of a handshake and lowered his arms. "You were staring at that menu so long I figured you might need some advice."

"Did you?" Cleo tried to break eye contact but couldn't seem to look away.

"Didn't I see you this morning?" Luke asked, changing tactics and the subject with ease.

Cleo watched those eyes, hungry and dangerous, as they focused in upon hers, absorbing every detail, every nuance and she couldn't help but shift in her seat.

No wonder he was CEO of his father's corporation.

"In the lobby of my office building?" Luke added, recalling seeing her there that morning. He smiled at the server as she appeared with their drinks. He sat silently, while Gina, their waitress, carefully placed each on a napkin she'd plopped down before them.

"Ready to order, ma'am?"

Thank God for bad timing, Cleo thought. "In a moment," she answered.

She wanted to use the menu as a prop, as something to focus her nervous energy upon, something else to look at besides those eyes of his.

Luke took a drink and Cleo couldn't help but smile at the surprised look on his face. Eyebrows raised, he tossed it back and looked over at her.

"This is amazing," he said, lifting the glass and saluting Cleo. "What the hell am I drinking?"

He'd caught her off guard and she couldn't help but laugh. She had to give the man credit for quick wit and a daringness to try new things.

"Amaretto, Southern Comfort and Sweet 'N Sour," she answered, raising her glass and tapping his in a toast.

Would he be like that in bed? Would he be daring and explorative, powerful and in control and yet be willing to step outside his comfort zone and allow himself to be somewhat vulnerable?

That was hot on so many levels it should be illegal.

"My office is in Lace Towers," Luke said, refusing to be sidetracked. He sat his drink on the table and shook his head as if certain. "I could've sworn I'd seen you there, in the crowd, near the elevator."

"You'd be a hard man to forget," Cleo said simply. That was the honest-to-God truth. She hated lying, even if it meant doing so to retain her cover, so she avoided it at all costs.

She would have to be more careful with this man. He was damned observant for the rich, self-absorbed, reclusive billionaire the media had made him out to be. Those damn rags, always blowing things out of proportion.

"Well," Luke reached over and toyed with the trademark one-inch silver-studded black leather bracelet Cleo wore on her left wrist, "I can assure you that no man could ever forget you."

The moment his fingertips made contact with her bare flesh, a flash of heat blasted through her body. Settling low in her abdomen, it evolved into an ache she had no business experiencing. Not here, not now and not with this man.

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Had it really been so long that the simple touch of a man would be her undoing? Okay, she refused to answer that on grounds of self-incrimination.

Chapter Two

"Can I get you anything?" their server asked Cleo. She returned to the table, her hip cocked and her brown eyes fluttering back to Luke as if it was difficult not to look at him.

Hell, Cleo agreed empathetically, it was. How could she blame the poor girl?

Luke's hand rested beside Cleo's, his index finger whispering over her knuckles, giving away his secrets, telling her that he had to touch her. That his touch would be soft and sensuous and that things were about to get hot.

Cleo swallowed, though her throat was dry, feeling as though she had consumed a bag of salt instead of her drink, which wasn't strong enough by a long shot.

Out. She had to get out. Now!

"I'm sorry," Cleo gave a polite nod, "but I'm running out of time. I really should be going." She stood and Luke had his eyes glued to her killer Manolos. She felt the first drop of perspiration running down her temple. She brushed her hair back and inconspicuously swiped at it with her hand.

This guy was making her work.

Cleo could feel his eyes climbing their way up her legs and saw the smile on his face when he reached the hem of the miniskirt, which rested mid-thigh.

"Another drink, Mr. Lace?"

"I should be on my way as well, Gina." Luke stood and looked back over his shoulder at his staff. They seemed to be waiting patiently, not ready to make a move without the big guy's approval.

He'd let her hand go and Cleo was thankful that the physical contact between them was broken, no matter how inconsequential it seemed to onlookers. It had only been the lightest of touches and yet she'd felt as though she'd been aching for his caress her entire life.

She felt that this was the moment, but for what, she had no idea. She slammed the finger of booze in her glass, which she needed desperately and scooted it away.

Tension radiated between them like an electrical current through wire. Cleo tensed, jolted by the physical power of Luke's gaze. She managed to remain standing, ignoring the urge to move toward him, feeling as though there were a magnetic pull luring her in his direction.

Ah, good ol'-fashioned chemistry. It was primal and almost uncontrollable.

Cleo wanted to loosen that tie, peel off his expensive suit and unravel the impeccably mannered king of Lace Incorporated, layer by layer.

It didn't matter that her hands were trembling, or that her black lace thong was soaked even before he touched her wrist.

This man was off-limits. Especially now that she knew there was something indescribable smoldering between them.

Luke picked up the check, signed the bill and glanced at Cleo, flashing that devastating smile, dimples in full bloom. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to speak to someone. I'd like to walk you out."

It was those damned dimples, Cleo thought, closing her eyes and cursing her luck. He knew those dimples made women weak in the knees and he was using it to his advantage.

The bastard was ruthless, Cleo thought. Ruthless.

She watched Luke lean over to speak to his assistant, who shot her an accusing glance. *Run*, her instincts screamed. *Get out while you still can*.

Hell, even in the field of battle, the most courageous generals knew the precise moment to cut their losses and retreat. As far as Cleo was concerned, this was one of those moments.

She dropped a ten on the table and headed for the exit, knowing suddenly what it felt like to be the weakest animal in a herd, the one marked for death by a predator. She pushed the door open at a near run and the moment her Manolos hit the sidewalk she sucked in a breath of air that filled her lungs.

Yes, she thought. Breathe, just breathe.

"Get your shit together, Cleo," she chastised herself aloud.

Thank God that this restaurant was only blocks from her loft. She'd left her car on the street in between the two, when Luke had stopped at the restaurant with his staff. She'd walked over, needing the air desperately.

Now she couldn't get enough of the brisk fall day. Her car was safe enough there. She'd walk home and grab a quick, ice-cold shower. She had to rethink her surveillance tactics. Regroup and go from there.

She'd never come this undone over a man, nor had she ever come this close to blowing her cover. Hell, just looking at Lace across the table had turned her into a sexual deviant.

A nympho.

She had to reassess this case, she realized. Pass it on to an associate. She'd not only been made, but had been compromised. She couldn't allow the case to suffer because of that.

"Ma'am—" Gina the waitress came running through the door into the fading sunlight. She was waving an arm in the air, Cleo's handbag gripped tightly in her hand. "Your bag, ma'am. You forgot your bag."

"Oh shit." Cleo wanted to slap herself for the sheer stupidity. It was an amateur mistake. Just the thought of losing her camera and the surveillance shots she'd taken

over the course of the week made her sick. She turned and walked toward the server just as Luke stepped through the door.

"Allow me," Luke said, smiling at Gina. He took Cleo's bag from the waitress as if it had been planned and headed right for her. Smooth, very smooth.

"The least I can do is drive you home," Luke offered. He leaned in, his voice a whisper in her ear, his hot breath tickling the bare area of skin just beneath her earlobe, sending legions of hot chills racing down her spine.

"That's not necessary," Cleo protested. Her body, however, seemed to consent, her traitorous nipples hardening as he drew near.

He pulled the limousine door open and ushered Cleo inside, settling in beside her. He took a deep breath. "I love your perfume," he whispered.

Well, Cleo thought, she was about to ruin his day and disappear. He wouldn't be able to linger in her aroma. Hell, she could barely handle him being so close.

"And your hair," he continued. "I can hardly keep my hands out of it." He ran his hand over her slender shoulders. "The way the sunlight reflects the golden highlights."

Oh God. She was in trouble, she thought, wishing she hadn't poured her body into a lethal leather skirt and fitted tank. She was the ultimate eye candy and glancing down at his lap she could see that Lukas Lace had a raging hard-on.

"You never mentioned your name." Luke leaned back against the seat, and took a deep breath, slowing things down just a bit.

"No, I didn't." Cleo could see it in his eyes, his relaxed posture. He didn't want to appear too eager. He had mad skill at feigning disinterest, which was a skill that every successful executive had to acquire to thrive and survive in the business world.

Did he want her? It was obvious to them both that he did.

She could see however that he didn't intend to let her get away without gaining her contact information at the very least. He was trying to be smooth about it.

"I think you should tell me your name," Luke said, his voice teasing and light. "A business card, or phone number, hell, I'll settle for an email address."

"I bet you would," Cleo said, knowing that he'd find out everything else on his own. She dampened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I don't usually give my personal information to strange men," she said, trying to think fast. She'd gotten herself out of worse situations.

There was that case with the cheating husband in Edina who had hands like an octopus and a mouth like—whoa, speaking of hands.

"Uh, Mr. Lace—" Cleo wanted to purr like a kitten as his hand slid up her back and into her hair, giving it a firm but gentle tug, her long brunette locks fisted in his palm.

"Uugh," she groaned, losing the ability to form words over one syllable. Her eyes drifted closed, the promise of ecstasy building like the base of a wave and sweeping over her, through her, making her pussy ache and a flood of dampness moisten her already slick cunt.

Damned if she wasn't falling apart here.

She couldn't give in to the temptation, no matter how much her body thought otherwise, because this man was untouchable. Not in her league. He was a case. A client had hired her to conduct surveillance on the man, for Pete's sake. It would be both morally and ethically wrong to jump this guy's bones.

"Your hair is so soft," Luke whispered, almost as if talking to himself. "I can't help but touch it, touch you."

Cleo couldn't speak.

"It's like silk," he whispered, leaning in closer. He slid his hand down to massage the base of her neck.

One touch on her bare skin and Cleo was about to come.

Jesus, what she'd give to sit atop of him. To straddle his waist and ride his throbbing cock while he slid his hands through her hair.

She knew he was having the same reaction, and couldn't help but give off mixed signals.

Her body melted beneath his touch, her lashes sweeping closed over half-closed lids as if in ecstasy.

Yet, she'd bolted from the restaurant and hadn't mentioned her name, though he'd asked directly. She hadn't so much as offered her phone number. She hadn't shown the usual signs that women tossed at him without a qualm.

Cleo bit her bottom lip to keep from quivering, his touch sizzling through her body like her own blood heated by a thousand flames. She shifted in her seat, wondering how she could possibly be so wet, so hot and so ready to jump this guy's bones.

He was a job, a mark, she reminded herself. A goddamned case. Pictures, she was supposed to take pictures, to gather information. That was it.

She was a professional, a businesswoman. She'd been a cop for ten years. Worked with many men who'd wanted to get down and dirty. She'd dealt with it and hadn't once given in to the pressure.

Until now. She couldn't control her yearning for this man. She wanted to do such naughty things with him, though he was virtually a stranger. Well, maybe not a stranger. She knew just about everything about him.

She knew that he ran most mornings after a vigorous workout in the company health club, situated on the thirtieth floor of Lace Towers.

She knew that he had a fondness for wine, specifically a red merlot created by a distant cousin who was related by marriage and owned a winery in Italy.

She knew he wore boxer briefs and that he had a deep fondness for his mother, purchasing roses for her three times a year without fail—Mother's Day, her birthday and his, respectively. After all, she'd the one who spent a torturous fourteen hours in labor, which she'd never allowed him to forget.

It must be that intimate knowledge that was drawing her toward him, Cleo reasoned. At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

"Thanks for the ride," she said as prudishly as she could muster. "But I'll walk from here."

She licked her lips, perspiration beading above her brow as she reached for the handle of the door. "My place is close, so if you'll excuse me."

Why did she just say that?

Luke hit a silver button on the panel beside him and the privacy glass went into motion. It fell just enough to make eye contact with the driver. "Randall, I'm walking the lady home. I'll ring you when I'm ready."

Luke pushed the door open and with four long strides, caught up with the woman of his dreams.

Cleo slid the strap of her bag over her shoulder. She needed a physical barrier between them. Hell, she couldn't think clearly when he was so close, when he touched her.

"Have dinner with me." Luke fell in beside her, giving her a glance, his hands in the pockets of his pants so he wouldn't touch her.

"You just ate." Cleo couldn't help but laugh. This guy was something. He edged closer as they walked, his shoulder brushing hers.

Two more blocks and she'd have to make an excuse to get rid of him.

"But I'm famished," Luke teased. "A late dinner or perhaps a drink, then?"

Jesus, he sounded like a teenager with raging hormones. She loved it.

Her pace slowed as they approached an office building that was zoned as both residential and commercial.

It had been for sale at one time, the real-estate sign still in the grass, the word sold written boldly across the top.

Cleo knew that Luke owned a few buildings in the area himself, though she imagined that he had a hard time keeping track of every property that Lace Inc. had its hands on.

She glanced down, the sidewalk splintered, slivers of grass reaching for a bit of sunlight like a flower growing between two rocks. She knew the place could use a little attention, and was nothing compared to his corporate office.

"Thanks for walking me back," Cleo said, trying to avoid his question. She reached for the door, ready to make a break for it but Luke covered her hand with his.

She was pinned between Luke and the door and stared at his hand, time standing still, the rest of the world fading away. Closing her eyes, she made an effort to find the strength to send him away. She had no choice here. She was up against a wall, literally.

She was hyper-aware of everything from the subtle scent of pricey soap and clean, expensive aftershave floating through the air, to the smooth texture of his skin, which begged to be touched.

No five o'clock shadow for Mr. Lace.

She ran her hand over his cheek, shivers coursing through her body as she imagined him tracing the curve of her breast with his fervent mouth.

What was he doing to her brain? Mush, it was turning to mush.

"Thanks for walking me back," Cleo managed. She dampened her lips with the tip of her tongue, wondering why she couldn't think. Blood blasted through her veins, forced by a thousand rapid-fire heartbeats.

She stared determinedly at his Adam's apple, refusing to lift her gaze and meet those deadly azure eyes that were locked onto her like missiles.

"I should really—"

Like an assault, his mouth was on hers, though she hadn't sensed either of them moving. Swift and deadly, Luke swallowed her gasp. He pulled her against him, her breasts crushed against his rock-hard chest. She ground her hips against him shamelessly, not caring what anyone thought, not caring about much at all.

Pushing against the bulge in his pants, her body reacted with throbbing need, the void deep inside her aching, one that only this man could fill.

"Jesus," Cleo gasped and pulled away. She was shocked by her body's reaction to his kiss. She fought her emotions and desires, tried to get control. This had to end now but before she could push him away, before she told him that she couldn't do this, she found herself opening her mouth and kissing him back.

Now that was willpower.

Chapter Three

"Jesus—" Luke gulped for air, his cock aching in the confines of his ribbed boxer briefs. He hadn't meant this to happen. He'd only wanted to know her name, to get her damned phone number.

He'd say she was heaven-sent but the black leather told him she'd been sent from somewhere else.

The miniskirt hugged every curve, and he followed the line of an athletic thigh with an observant eye. She was toned and trim. His fingers itched to touch her. She made him want to be a very, very bad boy.

Cleo pulled him into the foyer and backed him into the wall, trying to get control. Their eyes locked and a blast of heat exploded between them like a jagged bolt of lightning streaking across a darkened sky.

The power created by her reaction almost visceral, Cleo fisted his button-down shirt and pulled him in for another mouthful. She took, feasting upon him, slapping at the up button for the elevator. He was going straight to hell for this, he thought.

She tugged at his shirt, trying to pull him against her but not able to get close enough.

"Christ," Luke groaned as if in pain, his fingers splayed over her waist. Like the rising sun and the effect of the moon on the crashing tide, he had no control over what was to transpire.

"Tell me your name," Luke demanded as he tore his mouth from hers. He pulled her against him, and kissed her, his lips brushing hers. He tried to retain a modicum of self-control. He couldn't stop, wouldn't stop if he had to.

The need, the drive to have her was almost physically painful. It was torture like no man had ever endured.

The tension in his body, his cock throbbing against her slightly rounded abdomen and the feel of her breasts crushed against his chest made him want to shove her into the wall and impale her with his cock.

He wanted to know her name, to know if she liked it fast or slow, to know if she had a secret spot that drove her crazy, to know if she liked to make love from behind. He had the deepest desire to know her in every way. A desire so powerful that it took over all reason.

Cleo opened her mouth and swallowed his tongue. She teased with tiny flicks and tasted, sucking it. She took, her mouth moving in motion with her hips as she ground against him.

"Oh God." Luke was helpless. He cupped her beautiful ass, knowing nothing else but that he had to taste her. Had to feel her, had to be inside her.

This woman was merciless. It was a full-on brutal assault.

Viciously and without remorse, Cleo worked her tongue against his. She probed his mouth. Jaw opening and closing as she drank him in. She nearly swallowed him whole.

He might have caught her by surprise when he'd kissed her at the door but she'd come at him with the vengeance of a woman desperate to even the odds.

The elevator doors opened with the chime of a bell and Cleo shoved him inside.

She wasn't gentle with him, but there was nothing gentle about the way either of them was feeling now. There was an unfathomable storm brewing inside him. Primitive emotions battled with common sense and generated a surge of fiery heat that overrode all of his logic and common sense.

His body sizzled, a thousand erotic fingers moving over his flesh. He kissed her, his tongue probing deeply. He wanted to open her up and make her pussy throb. Lips and mouths, hot and wet, their tongues driving against each other in a battle for control.

Cleo pulled back and, as if in physical pain from their separation, Luke groaned. She'd stirred a hunger within him that was so primal he'd never known it had existed.

It was instinctive, desperate, as if he had no choice but to be inside her and she had no choice but to take him there.

He touched his hand to her face, rubbing his thumb over her lips, swollen from being so thoroughly kissed. He realized for the first time that there was someone else in the elevator with them.

Cleo turned and smiled at the building's newest uptight pansy-assed owner, who must've just arrived home and picked up his mail at the basement level. He'd recently purchased the building and had moved into the penthouse on the top floor.

Penthouse. Pretty much summed it up.

"Hey," Cleo said as nonchalantly as possible, giving him a nod. This was her one chance to cool off, she thought, adjusting her clothing. The thought was fleeting, because she backed up against Luke's hips and the moment his shaft met her ass, she got a taste of what was to come.

Literally.

Lukas Lace was packing.

It felt like he had a .50 caliber Desert Eagle in his pants and that's a mighty big weapon.

"Good day," Cleo's neighbor mumbled with a stuffy nod. He worked the collar of his starched shirt nervously, loosening his tie and fidgeting.

"Roger?" Luke did a double take. "How the hell've you been?"

"Lukas?" Roger Lace Pennington glanced at his cousin, his brows raised in surprise. He folded his newspaper in half, stacked his mail on top and slid the neat bundle beneath his arm as he accepted Luke's outstretched hand.

Giving it a stiff shake, Roger avoided glancing in Cleo's direction. She was grateful. They had never actually spoken, though they'd seen each other around. To say they were in completely different leagues was a major understatement.

"Been quite some time," Roger said to Luke. He tilted his head as if in contemplation. "At least five or six years. The family reunion at the country club, right?"

"That's right," Luke said with a friendly smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "How's your father?"

Luke backed against the wall as if trying to escape. Cleo imagined he was trying to talk his cock down, but it would be impossible the way it was wedged between her ass cheeks.

"My father is..." Roger hesitated, as if searching for the correct word.

His mild manner didn't work. Cleo saw right through him. Roger was filled with resentment. Interesting, she thought, very interesting.

"Well," he said finally. "He's doing quite well, thank you."

Cleo noticed the stiffness in Roger's body, the square shoulders and the tightness of his jaw. He didn't look happy to see Luke at all.

The elevator rolled to a stop and Luke gave his cousin a nod.

Cleo stepped through the doors the moment they opened. She ran her hand through her hair, smoothing it down from his incessant touch. She tucked her hair behind her ears and sighed in frustration. She was a hot mess, and ready to fuck.

Luke couldn't seem to keep his hands off her, or out of her hair. It turned them both on, she thought. The feel of her hands stroking his back, his fingers tangled in her tresses, tugging her head back and opening her neck to his lips.

"We should get together," she heard Luke say to Roger. "I'll give you a call. You could come up to the cabin. We could have another reunion. Have a few beers, laugh about what geeks we were back in the old days."

Cleo found her keys and fumbled with them as Luke stepped into the corridor. He didn't wait for his cousin's reply, and she felt him focus on her like a missile on target.

This was out of control, she thought.

This was her chance to fix it, her one reprieve. To get back a little of the respect she'd probably lost by groping him in the elevator. And the corridor. And the lobby.

Tommy was the playboy, she thought. Not Luke. No, his brother dated models, the who's who of fashion and lingerie. A different woman every other night. Hell, even Tommy couldn't keep track of their comings and goings, pun intended.

But Cleo knew that Luke was much more...selective. Women just weren't that high up on his list of priorities. At least, not since he'd called it off with his ex-girlfriend, Kathryn.

Kate was beautiful and privileged and had appeared to run him ragged during their relationship. In short Cleo thought she was a high-maintenance bitch.

Unwittingly, their breakup had thrust Luke into the limelight.

Along with Brad, Angelina and Jennifer, Britney and Kevin and Jessica and Nick, their faces gracing the front page of the tabloids, Luke took center stage as America's most eligible bachelor.

Cleo slid the key into the lock, opened it and turned around. She refused to look Luke directly in the eye and put her back to the steel door. All she had to do was make it inside and she would be safe from ruining this case.

She had to be quick about this. Painless was impossible at this point but goodbye would be like the bullet that ended a suffering animal's pain and would end their misery.

Her body was on fire and the need to have him inside her was taking over all rational thought. Her nipples were stone peaks at the very thought of his mouth devouring them, making them protrude through her bra and silk tank, begging to be fondled and kissed. To be suckled.

Cleo wanted to kiss him again and again, kiss him forever. Her panties were drenched and her pussy throbbing from the inside out. It made her wonder how wet she'd be if she actually fucked him.

Which she couldn't do, she promptly reminded herself. Just couldn't do.

"Thank you," Cleo muttered, trying desperately to get rid of him without offending him. She finally met his gaze and instantly recognized the look on his face.

Pure determination.

He was a billionaire, a real-estate mogul who closed multimillion-dollar deals before lunch and his sights were set on her. She couldn't help but love the thought.

"Do I have to steal your mail, or will you tell me your name?" Luke asked.

He crowded her, moving in a step at a time until Cleo had nowhere else to go. His mouth was inches from hers. Her breasts crushed against his chest. She knew that he could feel her nipples, which were tiny buds, ripened and ready to suck, and the worst of it was that she wanted him to suck them.

"I can still taste you," Luke whispered. "I'm nowhere near done with you yet. Tell me your name," he coaxed.

Cleo's instincts, that of an ex-cop turned detective, told her to conceal her personal information. She was undercover, after all. She didn't fool herself. She was in the business of lies. Using lies to seek out the truth, discovering lies that were carefully hidden within well-told truth and disproving lies spoken by those with much truth to conceal.

It was what she did and she was the best in the business. Yet, there was one thing she despised more than anything in the world and that was a liar.

Her ex-boyfriend had lied as if it were second nature. Hell, lying could have been his profession and she refused to become what she most despised. A compromise was in order.

"Have a business card?" she asked. She cocked her head to the side and gave Luke a quick grin. "Maybe I'll call you sometime."

Knowing that a man of his means would find out the truth all on his own, Cleo decided that it was better not to give him too much of a challenge.

Luke edged toward her but she turned the knob and pushed the door open. She edged back, trying to keep the distance between them but he trailed her step for step into her loft.

Her job, her life and everything else around her ceased to exist because the heat smoldering between them burst into flame and fully consumed her. It was an inferno. A glorious fire raging with passion that was so electric it was undeniable.

Cleo backed up, focused on his piercing blue eyes. There was no defense. Her back hit the door, which had stopped with a bang when it slammed into the wall inside her loft. She shuddered, realizing there was no escape though the door was wide open and at her back. Not that she really wanted to flee.

"Tell me your name," Luke said more firmly.

His voice was deep and low enough to draw her in closer.

Luke waited, his body not quite touching hers. She'd swear that there was an electrical current flowing between them, drawing them together like magnets.

Jesus, that sounded insane but she didn't know how else to describe it. It felt as if he couldn't walk away even if he had to. Every pore, every nerve in her body was responding to his on some innate level.

"You're very stubborn, aren't you, Mr. Lace?" Cleo was panicking now. She had to find a way to end this before it started, before it was too late. Okay, it was already too late but she had to do whatever she could to salvage this case.

"One of my best qualities," Luke said with a nod and that damned charming smile that most women could never resist.

"Ironic. So am I." Cleo rested her head on the door and made the mistake of looking up and into his eyes. She was trembling but women like her didn't quiver from the touch of a man.

She just couldn't seem to take her eyes off that mouth. Those lips, warm and thorough, begging to be kissed, nipped and sucked. He had her pinned but the combination of the cool steel against her back and his sheer physical stature as he stood over her, was as erotic as hell.

For a woman who controlled ever facet of her life meticulously, being dominated was against her nature. He was so bulky, expansive shoulders, rock-solid arms and

stood several inches taller than she, his shirt pulled tight over the wide expanse of his chest.

She'd never felt this—feminine. This dominated.

She'd rolled around with the boys as a child. She'd mastered tag, as well as flag football, could tackle the biggest and the best and had even outrun the star quarterback in high school. She was a tomboy through and through.

She worked in a man's world, played tough and had to labor even harder to be taken seriously when it came to wearing a gun and toting around a badge. She'd finally given up her career and had decided to work for herself but that still didn't mean she could slack off.

A woman might have to be a bitch to gain a man's respect but she had to prove herself worthy of that respect repeatedly.

Therefore, control was like air for her and this man made her feel like she couldn't breathe. Yet, she had a desperate desire to relent, to allow him to control her, to fuck her until neither of them could move.

"Stubborn, well, I like to look at it as being persistent," Luke corrected her with a twinkle in his bluer than blue eyes. "Persistence *has* allowed me to get what I want. I always get what I want, you know, Ms.—"

Cleo knew that he wasn't spoiled. He wasn't a tyrant, but when he wanted something, he went after it with everything he had. It was in his nature, part of his DNA, probably a Lace attribute.

She could see that it was killing him but he held back. Waited.

As if waiting for her to make some decision. As if he knew she was weighing the pros and cons and that she had to be the one to make the next move.

The bastard. He was a master at reading people, Cleo thought. He'd spent his life maneuvering circumstances to his advantage, ensuring the success of Lace Incorporated.

In the business world, Cleo had read that Lukas Lace could be merciless if required. She also knew that he didn't enjoy it, but that he'd do whatever was necessary to ensure the success of the Lace legacy.

His father had taught him well, she decided.

Right now, merciless or not, all she couldn't think of anything but kissing him again. She was a head below his six-three and all he had to do was lean down just a bit and she could slide her lips over his. Hell, if that wasn't tempting.

She knew that he wouldn't take a kiss this time.

No, Cleo thought. This time he wanted her to make the move, to give him the signal to proceed. He wanted to release the animal within her, to make her step outside her boundaries and give in to whatever this was between them.

"What makes you think I'm offering what you want?" Cleo asked, more as a statement than a question. She was so close to him that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her face.

"I'm all about negotiating the best terms," Luke said with a crooked smile. "That's my specialty," he said with a wink.

How could she not love this guy?

He had all the right answers, which usually annoyed the hell out of her. He was also invading her space and personal boundaries, a major no-no in her line of work.

But the very fact that she didn't want to kick his ass said more than she wanted to consider.

"What exactly are your terms?" Cleo asked as he moved in closer and pressed her back to the door. Body to body, the steel hard against her back, she felt helpless and heard herself whimper.

Actually, whimper.

She should be pissed off at him, at herself and frightened at her reaction.

Instead, it felt so hot.

She wanted him to touch her. To explore her body. She wanted to feel him against her, flesh to flesh, to have him inside her, his cock thrusting into her pussy, her legs spread wide.

"One kiss," Luke proposed. He cupped her waist with his hands, kneading her flesh with limber fingertips.

Cleo knew that if he wanted to, he could take her here. Ram her against the door. She saw the desire in his eyes, felt the bulge in his pants and saw the trickles of sweat that ran down his temple. He wasn't so prim and proper after all.

She loved it. She couldn't help but smile, knowing that she'd taken away his self-control. His money, his manners, none of it mattered right now, right here.

Eyes wide, daringly, Cleo slid her lips over his in the most tender of kisses. Soft as a whisper, she teased, coaxing him along.

"Jesus—"Luke swallowed. She could see his control slipping. Even a man with his restraint had his limits. "You taste...amazing," he groaned. "Amazing."

Cleo seized his mouth, harsh and hungry. Her tongue invaded, darting in and out of his mouth and devouring everything in her wake. She couldn't be sure who was seducing whom and at this point, she didn't care.

He pushed his body against hers and crushed her breasts against his chest. Cleo ground her hips into his groin and his cock pulsated. She wrapped her arms around his neck and just as she imagined, shoved her fingers through his silky blond hair.

The kiss deepened and she tugged his head from side to side, working her tongue inside his mouth with greedy strokes. He was making her insane.

"Hurry," Cleo demanded between wet, sloppy kisses. She was ready to tear him apart. God, his mouth, his tongue, he was amazing. "Up—" she panted, "upstairs." She backed him toward the private area of her loft, tearing at his clothing.

She *was* being paid to learn everything she could about Lukas Nathanial Lace, after all, and she supposed this qualified.

It was a dirty job but somebody had to do it.

Chapter Four

Cleo was so wet, and as they stumbled up the staircase, their fingers interlaced, she was unable to tear her mouth from his. He was like fire, and the worst of it was that she wanted to be burned.

His flesh was hot to the touch, and his mouth, dear God in heaven, thank you for that amazing mouth.

Exploring, sampling, taunting. She wondered if he tasted this delicious all over and desperately hoped she'd find out.

He stepped into the living room, heading for a black leather sofa and reaching up to loosen his tie.

"No," Cleo scolded. "Don't." She knocked his hand away. She wanted to be the one who undressed him, wanted to be the one in control.

She was always in control and didn't plan to give it up anytime soon. It was how she'd stayed alive in her line of work. How she kept her heart from being broken for so many years.

Though part of her wanted to give this man everything, to allow him to control her, her mind screamed out, demanding that she employ the only survival method that had worked all of these years.

If she was going to do this, she decided, she planned to enjoy the hell out of it and do it her way.

"Sit," Cleo demanded, motioning Luke toward her black leather sofa.

Luke was so prim and proper in his expensive suit and those designer shoes. She wanted to tear away the layers of control that he prided himself in, and draw out the real Lukas Lace.

Oh, he checked that shit, all right. He was certain to keep it hidden, to keep his emotions hidden behind lock and key and hide what he really wanted from everyone.

He spent his entire life doing what his father had wanted him to do and being polite and proper, as his mother had required. Business and etiquette classes by age ten. He was a fine young man.

He was the perfect son, the perfect boss and the perfect executive but Cleo needed to be the one woman who drove him over the edge. The one woman who helped him break all of those stuffy rules.

In her book, rules didn't apply.

Cleo'd had a desperate desire to peel off those clothes the minute she'd seen him. To ruin that good-boy image he so dutifully portrayed. She put her foot on the arm of the couch and bent forward to unbuckle her stiletto.

"No," Luke said, shaking his head. "Don't."

Oh, Mr. Lace wanted to play. Cleo smiled wickedly. She was very good at playing games.

"I said sit," she countered. He reached for her wrist but she palmed his chest and gave him a shove. She pushed him back into the sofa and bit her bottom lip.

She wasn't one of his minions.

She wasn't one of the women who threw themselves at his feet. She would do as she pleased and he would like it.

She'd see to that.

"I'll come," he warned her as she straddled his lap and he hissed as if in physical pain. He ran his palms over her thighs.

"You're so hard," Cleo whispered, grinding against his cock.

"I want you," he growled. "I can't remember the last time I wanted anyone like this." He tugged on her hair, pulling her head back and leaning in to kiss her neck.

Cleo moaned as his lips found her bare skin.

"Maybe never," he told her.

Cleo pulled back and nipped his lower lip, staring boldly into his eyes, eyes that were flickering with blue flame.

She grasped his face between her palms and shoved her tongue into his mouth.

The kiss was deep and fast, hard and thorough. Panting, gasping for air, they consumed, feeding off one another as if giving life.

Cleo ground her hips against the bulge in his pants. Hearts racing, she lost all conscious thought.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph—" Luke tore his mouth from hers. He squeezed her hips, trying to get control.

If this kept up, he definitely wouldn't last more than five seconds. He was a grown man, for God's sake, not some pubescent teen on his first date.

Premature ejaculation wasn't something he'd had to consider since Rebecca Ross in junior high. Not even then, when the mere sight of female flesh sent him over the edge, had he been so out of control, reacted so primitively.

Luke closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He attempted to ignore the rock-hard boner that was trying to pull an Incredible Hulk and rip its way out of his pants.

It had been too long since he'd had sex and this woman was unlike any he'd ever encountered. Couldn't even be compared.

It was as if there had been no one before and there'd be no one after, for either of them.

The air filled with her flowery scent and he ran his hands down the long arch of her back and to the slope of her ass.

The moment he'd laid eyes on her in the lobby of his office building that morning—and yes, he was certain it had been her—he'd felt the earth shift around him like there'd been a quake.

She'd disappeared in the crowd and now that he had found her, she wasn't getting away.

Fate had brought them together. Luke never challenged fate.

Her skin was creamy, as pale as midnight moonlight and her features cut with razor-sharp angles that took her beauty to a whole new level.

She wasn't a perfect ten with the thin, gaunt look a model was required to maintain. She didn't have perfect bone structure and there was no delicacy there.

Only dramatic strength. From the slash of her cheekbones, to arched brows that framed her emerald eyes burning with flecks of gold and brown, she was all power and intensity.

Cleo reached down between them and ran her hand over the bulge in his pants, tracing the outline of his cock beneath the fine fabric of his suit.

"No—" Luke shuddered. He grabbed her by the wrist and shook his head, pleasure so powerful it was almost painful filling his body and soul. "I'll come..."

He had to take control or this was finished and he'd disappoint her. Disappoint them both.

He released her and drove his hands through her glorious hair. He pulled her into him, bucking his hips and capturing her mouth with his for a punishing kiss.

God, he loved her hair, her amazing body, the taste of her mouth.

He drove his tongue against hers, battling to take control. Tasting, seeking and feeding off her succulent flavor.

Cleo nipped his bottom lip, fighting him for control. She was making a power play but she was failing to control the zone, Luke thought with a half-smile.

Luke slid his hands up her athletic thighs and gripped her hips, pulling her against his throbbing cock, dry-humping her.

"Bed?" he commanded. He stood so suddenly that she gasped. Her legs instinctively wrapped around his waist as he cupped her ass and held her against his cock.

No more teasing. He wanted to fuck her now. Had to have her. "Where...is...it?"

"Didn't take you for the traditional type," Cleo teased, grabbing his bottom lip between her teeth and biting.

She crushed her hips against his erection and frantically tugged off his tie. She worked the buttons of his shirt and pushed the fabric aside, slid her hands over his smooth, bare chest and moaned in ecstasy.

"Fuck tradition," Luke growled. "I want you under me." He kissed her hard and fast, hungry. His tongue invading, plundering, taking everything she offered and more.

"Hall," she managed, pointing a finger in that direction. She nibbled his neck and ran her tongue over his exposed flesh, tweaking his nipples with her fingertips.

Luke palmed her sweet ass, grinding into her with his hips as he moved down the corridor.

"Second...door—" Cleo didn't get another word out before he drove his tongue into her mouth.

God, he couldn't think. Couldn't do anything but feel.

This was revenge for the way she'd kissed him in the lobby. Sweet, sweet revenge.

Exploring her mouth, Luke lashed at her with his tongue as if punishing her with pleasure. He broke the kiss as he came down on top of her on the bed, her body compressed into the mattress by his weight.

Growling low in his throat, he tried to control himself but somewhere along the line, he'd lost the capability to think.

Cleo started to pull away, to tug off her tank but he wasn't willing to give up her mouth. He stopped as briefly as possible and ripped the tank up over her head.

He palmed her breasts, running his tongue over the milk-white cleavage at the top of her black as sin lace bra in short, hurried strokes.

"Beautiful," he panted. "So damned beautiful." He slid the black straps between his fingertips, lifted them and trailed them with his tongue as they fell from her delicate shoulders.

"Shit." Cleo gasped for air.

Luke's hands were hot. His fingertips demanding as they studied her body an inch at a time. He ran his tongue over the slope of cleavage as he unhooked her bra and pulled it off.

He cupped her pale white mounds in his palms, squeezing them together and biting at her nipples. Lapping. Sucking.

"Oh fuck," Cleo cried. She dug her nails into his skin and rolled him over onto his back. "Hurry," she gasped. She impatiently unbuckled his belt, and worked his pants and boxers from his body. He was bucking and grinding his hips. He gasped when she slid her hands down the front of his pants.

"Oh God," Luke panted as she took his cock into her silky hands and pumped it. Up and down, from tip to base, she had flesh-covered steel in her palm.

"Mmmm—" Luke couldn't take it. He was quivering and about to embarrass himself. He ran his tongue over her nipple, flicking the nub with his tongue, trying to focus on her body and not the fact that he was about to come.

His cock throbbed in her silky hand. She reached over and grabbed a condom from the top drawer of her nightstand.

"Easy—" Luke pled when she smiled and ripped the condom package open with her teeth. She spat it out and reached down and took his cock in her hand.

"Shhh," she whispered. "It better fit."

Luke groaned as she lined it up with his shaft and unrolled it, working her way over the head of his cock and down his shaft until she reached the base.

She wasn't gentle, and Luke was grateful for that. He didn't want to come yet. She leaned over and licked his lips.

He was sheathed for the ride.

Cleo straddled his hips and spread her legs. Luke prepared to drive his cock into her wet pussy, never prepared for what was to come.

Literally.

Chapter Five

Cleo straddled Luke's hips, and he moaned as if he couldn't take it.

"I'll come," he warned her.

Cleo spread her legs wide. It was her turn to be on top. Her turn to be in control.

She took her hand and guided his cock to her pillowy lips, sliding it through her wet juices and making the condom slick with natural lubrication.

"Don't," Luke hissed. He shook his head, begging her to understand. He was about to explode.

"It's all right," Cleo purred. She kissed his lips, slow, soft baby kisses. He was writhing beneath her, his hands locked onto her hips, desperate to take her.

She was in control and that feeling of power made her more daring. "What do you want?" she whispered. She took the head of his cock and worked it into her tight little opening, stopping the moment it filled the entrance of her pussy.

"Is that what you want?" she asked, closing her eyes at the feel of him. He was so huge and just the tip of his cock fought the confines of the opening of her tunnel. Pressing outward, forcing its way inside. She bit her lip so hard that she tasted blood.

"Yes—" Luke hissed, barely able to speak.

He was right there. Right there. He was nearly inside her. He couldn't take it. He was about to lose his mind and explode before he even made it completely inside her.

It was the tip, just the tip of his cock, Cleo thought incredulously, as her pussy stretched to accommodate him. "So big," she whispered, throwing her head back and moaning long and low, her thighs shaking from supporting the weight of her body as she squatted over him.

Her chestnut hair dangled around her hips and the small of her back and the visual of her stretched out like that was something Luke would never forget.

He gritted his teeth as she very slowly began to work his cock inside her, sliding her way down it like she was sliding down a pole.

"Ohhh," she cried out and gasped in pure pleasure. She froze, waiting for the white fog in her brain to clear. Dizzy, this man made her dizzy. She leaned forward to kiss him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He tethered her to him as the world spun out of control.

"Please," Luke grunted into her mouth. He was begging. He had to shove his cock into her as deeply as he could. Had to move. Had to pump. Had to take her.

"So...big," Cleo whispered, closing her eyes, relishing in the feel of his cock as it split her apart. "So fucking big." She kissed him, their damp lips opening to consume and their tongues sparring in a war that was impossible to win.

Luke grabbed her hips. She could see that he wanted to bury his cock to the hilt in her sweet little box.

The head of his cock was positioned no more than half an inch inside that taut, velvety sheath and she knew he was going out of his mind.

"I'll come—" he growled a warning. He shook his head, letting her know that he couldn't take much more. It was too much, she was just too fucking tight. "I'm going to come, baby."

"No," Cleo ordered. She bit into his bottom lip just hard enough to give him something else to focus on. He groaned and she laughed, getting his attention. Their eyes locked and she kissed him, running her tongue over the spot where she'd nipped him. "Wait for me, baby. Wait for me."

She watched his face, a glorious study of concentration. Gasping, he focused. Sweat ran down his brow. His heart raged. He couldn't catch his breath.

Her fleshy mounds crushed against his chest, Cleo rewarded him by sliding down the length of him and impaling herself upon his cock. "Oh God," she screamed, her little pussy stretching open as his cock filled her as no other ever had.

"Oh baby." Luke focused. He wanted desperately to make it last but everything was against him.

She was so fucking tight.

His cock was being squeezed into a hot, velvet fist, a half an inch at a time. She was torturing him, absolutely torturing him.

It had been so long since he'd been with a woman and even then, it had never been like this.

Sex with Kate had been...well, neat and tedious. Conservative. It had been like having high tea with the Queen of England. There'd been so many rules, so many dos and don'ts, that one couldn't thoroughly enjoy the experience.

Well, that did it. He was all the way inside her now and had distracted himself by thinking about the perfectly mannered Kate. His biggest mistake to date.

"You like that?" Cleo whispered, face-to-face. She looked deeply into his eyes and he tightened his grip on her waist, his cock buried to the hilt in her tight little box.

"Fuck, yeah." Luke nodded, her breath cooling his achingly hot skin and sending a chill dancing over his flesh.

She surrounded him with her luscious pussy and he filled her. She was crushed against his chest, their bodies glazed in a fine sheen of perspiration and he began to move.

"That's it," she whispered. "Yeah. That's it."

Luke locked his hands onto her hips, his face buried in her silky hair. He slid his hands down her body, luxuriating in every slope, every amazing curve. He slid his palms beneath her and cupped her tight little ass, spreading her cheeks wider apart.

"Oh God." Cleo clasped onto him, gasping deeply as his cock swelled inside her. "Feels like you're going to rip me apart—" she gasped.

Luke lifted her ass up with his palms and dropped her down again on his cock, fucking her hard and fast.

Cleo arched her back and he latched on to her breast, sucking it and making her nipple hard, stretching it out as she leaned back. He gasped, releasing it as he dug his fingertips into her perfect little ass.

"Don't move," he begged. He froze. Oh God, one move on her part and he was done. Done. It had just been too long since he'd had sex and this woman wasn't like any other he'd ever known. Sex with her was a whole new game.

He wanted this to last, had to make it last.

He kissed her hair, her cheek. "Don't move. Minute," he pleaded, "just...a...minute."

He wanted to satisfy her as she had him. Wanted to brand her with his cock, make her his, to spoil her for any other man. However, at this rate, it wasn't happening.

Another man. That did it, just the thought of her ever being with another man made him want to give her the best fuck she'd ever had or ever would have.

He just didn't know if he could survive long enough.

She was too tight, she was too hot, she was too wet. She was everything.

He slid his hands up to her hips and gathered control.

Looking into her eyes, he could see that she was as gone as he. There was an emerald fire there, in her eyes. Passion ignited by lust so desperate that like flame, it consumed everything it encountered.

Luke thrust his cock into her with long, slow strokes.

In and out. In and out. Nice and slow.

"Fuuuuck," Cleo panted.

Tiny white stars danced behind his eyelids and Cleo cried out in desperation, clawing at him, trying to get him to move faster, wanting him to pound into her and come quickly and selfishly. But he refused.

Their bodies intertwined, his cock expanding, he drove deeper and farther into her, forcing them into a wild frenzy of heat and emotion.

Thrust for thrust, Cleo pounded her hips against his.

Harder and faster. Faster and harder. In and out, he pumped, allowing her body to adjust to his size, his girth. She was opening like a flower, opening like the bud of a rose, opening for him.

"That's it, baby." Luke held on to her hips, driving into her with incredible force, bouncing her up and down on his cock. Her face contorted into an expression of both pleasure and pain, her chest rose and fell as she struggled to catch her breath. Her breasts bounced as he drove up and into her and all he could do was watch every move, listen to every sigh.

"Oh yeah," Cleo gasped. She raised her hands and slid them into her hair, pulling sticky, damp strands from her face and neck. "You want me to fuck you?" she asked.

Luke growled something that wasn't even human, let alone English.

Flinging her upper body, she pounded her hips against his. She rode him hard and fast.

Luke closed his eyes, concentrating on keeping his body neutral. He'd never had a woman talk dirty to him before. Little rich girls were too well bred for something as common as enjoying sex.

He loved it. God, if he didn't love it.

He watched her face, studied it. Tiny lines framing her eyes but barely noticeable. Her mouth was full and rounded as she gasped for air. Her breasts were perky and she had nice edible nipples that came to a peak in his mouth.

Natural, not store-bought. Everything about this woman was true and raw, unrefined and probably what made her so damned hot.

He knew she was frantic now.

Luke was trying desperately to see what she liked. He fucked her, faster and harder, skin slapping skin, their bodies nearly sliding across the bed as she rode him and he lifted his hips, bucking into her, meeting her thrust for thrust.

He wanted to give her exactly what she wanted. He was fucking the shit out of her. And he could tell she loved it.

"That's right, baby." Luke was at the end of his rope. Longer, deeper strokes grew into a shorter, faster rhythm. "Ride me, baby. Ride me."

Cleo tossed her head and arched her back in one motion. She stroked his chest and pounded her pussy onto his cock.

"Yesss—" she screamed. "Yes. Oh God, yes."

He knew she couldn't hold it any longer. Her body seized and he pulled her down and into his arms as a contraction ripped through her, feeling as though it would rip her apart from the inside out, her pussy gripping his cock like a fist.

She came, shaking in his arms. Her body twitching and jerking as he held her close until the last ripple tore through her. He turned the tables and flipped her onto her back.

Not allowing her a moment to catch her breath, he drove his tongue into her mouth, working it in rhythm with his cock as he drove her into the mattress with pistoning hips.

In and out, fast and brutal.

"So tight," he grimaced. He leaned back, every muscle in his body rigid, and sat on his knees. He grabbed her thighs and pulled her into his cock, slowly at first.

He backed nearly all of the way out of her pussy, just in an attempt to gain control.

Slow down, he told himself, he had to slow this down.

He hesitated, the head of his cock just inside that tight silk paradise and tamped down the urge of satisfaction when she moaned and tossed her head from side to side.

"Don't stop," she panted. "Don't stop. Please."

"Never," Luke promised, "never."

He meant it.

He slid his hands down her thighs, grabbed on to her and pulled her into his cock, dragging her against him roughly. Hips meeting hips, flesh-pounding flesh, he fucked her until they were both raw.

"Fuck," Cleo screamed. She clutched the pillows with her fists. He pounded her without mercy, his hips pistoning into hers, driving her wild. She couldn't catch her breath, couldn't do anything but lie there and get fucked. "Oh God. Oh, fuck."

"You like that?" Luke demanded. He dragged her body into his, ramming into her with his hips, his hands locked onto her thighs. "Do you like that?"

"Yes," Cleo screamed, powerless to do anything about it. She tossed her head, fisted the comforter, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh God, yes."

Luke filled her with his cock, pounding into her and she loved it. He'd never been so in control, and yet so powerless to a woman. He was being driven by need, by desperation and by a deep desire to pleasure her in every way. To brand her with his cock. To make her his own.

He reached out and captured her bouncing breasts He tweaked her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, kneading her breasts with his palms. "Tell me."

"Oh God. I love it," Cleo cried.

Luke could tell that the pleasure was building and something within her was about to break free. He slid his hand down until he found the nub of her clit with the pad of his thumb. He worked it in slow, methodical circles as he thrust into her.

"Yes," Cleo yelled. "Don't stop. Fuck, yeah."

He hooked her legs over his shoulders and thrust his cock into her, banging her into the mattress.

"That's it. Take it, baby. Take my cock." He held her legs over his shoulders and fucked her. Her pussy was so hot, so wet. He thrust his hips, and hammered her into the bed.

Luke leaned down and slammed his cock into her pussy while pillaging her mouth with his tongue.

"Tell me your name," he gasped, breaking free by pulling her hair and tilting her head back. It wasn't too rough. Just rough enough to make her groan in pleasure, opening up her neck to his mouth.

He bit her there, on the slope of her beautifully arched neck and felt her racing pulse throb against his tongue. He drove harder and harder into her pussy with his cock, faster and faster into that wet paradise.

She was clawing at his back, screaming out things he'd never heard a woman say and pounding her hips against his with each thrust.

He held her in place, bit down harder when she screamed out, her nails ripping into his back. He was savoring all of it, feeding off her.

He let her go, jammed his tongue into her mouth and swallowed her pleas, teasing her the same way she'd teased him.

"Oh God, yes." Cleo couldn't take much more. He had her legs pushed back and draped over his shoulders, her "fuck-me" stilettos in the air, her pussy opened up to him completely. "Fuck me, fuck me."

"Tell me your name," Luke insisted. He shoved his cock into her again, forcing it all the way to the hilt, his balls slapping into her silky, shaved lips.

"I-I'm going to come. Please," she begged. "Fuck me. Fuck me."

Luke pulled back, this time nearly sliding completely out of her, and froze.

He held perfectly still, denying her the release her body craved. "What's your name?"

"Please," Cleo begged. She threw her head to the side, clawing at his back, trying to pull him back inside her, to keep that deliciously irresistible cock buried where it belonged. "Fuck me."

She swallowed him with her pussy, fucking him faster and faster. She worked at making him come, at trying to make him as insane as she felt.

"Tell me!" Luke demanded, putting more power behind each thrust of his hips. "Tell me your name."

"Cleo," she screamed out, as shock waves reverberated through her body from the tips of her hair to the ends of her toes.

Clutching him to her chest, an explosion rocked through her, every nerve, every cell, every aching muscle seizing and bright lights filling her head.

Her pussy constricted around his cock.

He hammered into her as she came and, with one final shove, exploded. Panting, white lights dancing around his head, Luke lost himself.

Cleo whimpered into his mouth as he kissed her, clutching at him as if she never wanted to let him go.

"Cleo," she repeated her name in a breathless gasp, her eyes watery with tears.

"My name is Cleo."

Leather and Lace

Luke collapsed against her, in exhaustion. He kissed her tenderly. Tiny gentle kisses filled with something he was certain he had no business experiencing.

Once he could move, he propped himself up on an elbow and smiled into those incredible eyes, eyes he would dream of the rest of his life. "Hello, Cleo."

Chapter Six

Cleo rolled over in bed, and it took her a moment to get her bearings. She stretched out like a cat, arms over her head, her back arched. She smiled, the long forgotten soreness in her muscles and thighs, reminding her of him.

Luke, oh God.

She turned over and looked at the other side of her bed, expecting to find him there, drooling on her pillow.

Not that a Lace would drool but it helped her to believe that he had one of those dreadful habits that most guys have, like leaving the toilet seat up or scratching his nether region, something that brought him down to her level.

The bed was empty with the exception of a pillow that smelled of his wonderful cologne, crisp citrus and a woodsy musk scent that made her smile.

Grunting, Cleo was almost disappointed not to find a puddle on the pillowcase. She slipped out of the Egyptian cotton sheets, grateful that she'd purchased them the previous Christmas as a gift to herself, and grabbed her white robe from the back of the bedroom door.

The sheets had been the one luxury she'd allowed herself personally, beside the Jimmy Choos and Manolos, which were work-related, of course.

She peeked into the bathroom, noting that if he'd used the facilities, he'd been kind enough to put the seat down but then again, he was Mr. Prim and Proper.

"Figures," Cleo grumbled, growing more agitated by the minute. Of course, politeness was probably inborn and ran in his genes, although he sure hadn't seemed very prudish and refined when he was screwing her brains out.

Just the memory of him inside her made her ache all over again. Deep inside, in the spot only he could fill.

She wanted him again. God help her.

She sure as the hell hadn't felt this way about any other man. Sure, she had the occasional desire for sex but she'd never experienced bone-dissolving, stomachdancing, heart-bursting-out-of-her-chest, soul-rocking passion.

Until now. Until Luke.

"Hello?" she called out from the top of the stairs. The only sound was her voice echoing through the loft. She padded down the staircase barefoot and walked around her desk.

It was a cluttered mess, just as she left it. Nothing had been moved or was out of place. She picked her bag up from the floor and removed her digital camera. Hitting the

power button, she reviewed the shots she'd taken while conducting surveillance of Luke.

The moment she saw his profile, she felt herself smile and her breath caught in her throat.

"Stop it," she scolded herself, trying not to smile. This guy was poison. POISON.

He was leaning over talking to his assistant and just looking at his square jawline and the dimple in his cheek made her stomach dance, made her wet and hot.

She sighed and powered on her laptop, realizing that he was indeed gone. She wasn't certain if she felt relief or if it pissed her off. He hadn't even said goodbye.

Coffee, she needed coffee.

Then she could get mad. She would decide if Mr. Lace was a player or just plain rude.

Slipping into the kitchen, she snagged her favorite coffee cup, a black mug with the emblem of a gold badge and Minneapolis Police Department written across the top. She'd received it after graduating from the academy and had used it every morning since, despite the chip on the handle. She took the bag of coffee out of the cabinet and turned to the coffeemaker, hesitating when she saw it.

"Lace, you sly bastard."

Luke had set the coffeemaker up and all she had to do was hit the button. She turned her attention to a note on the countertop and the single red rose lying beside it.

Cleo couldn't help but smile. She picked up the rose, basking in the glorious sent, taking a few moments to savor it as the coffee brewed.

The simples pleasures of life.

It was a perfect way to wake up after an incredible bout of sex and she couldn't recall the last man who'd given her a flower for no particular reason.

Most men waited until they were in the doghouse, or for an anniversary, or a birthday, to buy their girl flowers. Of course, Mr. Lace had to exceed the standards she'd set years ago and had known that no man could ever meet, let alone surpass.

She smiled, looked back at the note and for reasons she didn't want to comprehend, read it again.

Cleo,

You are amazing.

Have dinner with me tonight.

I'll pick you up at 7 p.m.

Luke

Cleo filled a single bud vase with water and contemplated having an actual dinner date with Mr. Lace, running the petal of the rose over her cheek, the soft texture reminding her of his lips sliding over her skin.

She couldn't have dinner with him.

Could she?

She recalled the overwhelming desire she'd felt when his lips were on hers. The sizzling heat of his touch and his hunger to satisfy her needs before he saw to his own.

His absolute resolve to give her more than she'd expected, more than she'd had from any man.

Lukas Lace was pure sin in a six-foot-three package.

Cleo slid the rose into the vase and sat it on the counter, unable to take her gaze away.

Snap out of it, she told herself.

She had things to take care of. She had things to make right. She turned and headed upstairs for a shower. Standing beneath the spray, she couldn't help but sigh. Her muscles ached wonderfully and the warmth of the water was soothing against her sore body.

She'd used muscles last night that she'd forgotten existed. Hell, maybe she'd never known they had existed.

She leaned against the wall, touching the spot on her neck where he'd bitten her, holding on to her like an animal attempting to mate. No man had ever dominated her in such a way.

She'd felt so feminine, so helpless in receiving pleasure, as if there'd been nothing for her to do but lie there and take it.

Cleo poured mild freesia body wash into her palms and worked up a rich lather, massaging her sensitive breasts, her nimble fingers drawing her nipples to a peak. She thought of Luke's mouth, of the heat that it had sent through her body.

She ran her hands down her stomach and to the center of her body, playing with her clit and finding that it was still sensitive from their rendezvous.

Her pussy was wet and she didn't have to slide anything inside her, she just parted her legs, her nipples hard beneath the spray of the water and circled her clit with her thumb, remembering how he'd touched her just hours before.

"God," she cried out, banging a fist into the wall as her body convulsed. As orgasms go, it wasn't one for the record books.

She'd never needed a man to satisfy her. If she'd had the urge, she'd either take care of it herself, or pull out her battery-operated lover.

"Damn you, Lace," she whispered as she rinsed her body off with warm water and climbed out of the shower.

Maybe he'd ruined her for good.

It was an intriguing thought but it mostly pissed her off.

After her shower and disappointing orgasm, she dried off, luxuriating in the feel of her body, the soreness of her thighs, every ache reminding her of what they'd done and exactly how long they'd done it for.

She replaced the birth control patch on her lower abdomen, grateful that she'd kept using it despite considering discontinuing its use and changing products.

Better safe than sorry, she'd always thought. She made it a practice not to have sex without a condom but that was never fail-safe.

Of course, she knew that Luke hadn't been with anyone since he and his last girlfriend, Kate, had broken it off and that was over a year ago. Before that, he rarely dated. No wonder the poor guy was such an animal, she thought with a wicked smile.

As she dressed, she thought of what she'd learned of his relationship with Kate. They'd actually been engaged at one time but the more Cleo had learned about Luke, the more she realized that Kate just wasn't his type.

Oh, she was wealthy and beautiful, she fitted right into the high-society life that came along with the money, the glamour and the glitz but where Luke was capable of being a normal, average person, Kate failed miserably.

Cleo glanced out the window and found the sky dark and overcast, branches blowing in the wind, the fall leaves taking flight.

She loved fall. It meant she could wear her favorite pieces.

Leather skirts and boots, ultra-soft sweaters that showed just the right amount of cleavage. Made her job a lot easier when men spent so much time captivated by her body that they never noticed they were the ones being watched.

Heading for the stairs, empty coffee cup in hand, Cleo hesitated on the landing.

Her door was open.

Crap.

Out of sheer habit, she reached for her weapon, her hand settling on her right hip. After years of wearing a gun, it was reflex.

She scanned the room from left to right, seeing that her handbag still sat on the floor beside the desk where she'd dropped it.

Her gun was inside.

She moved fast. Walked down the stairs, the soles of her boots slapping against the hardwood floor.

So much for stealth.

She wondered if the door had been unlocked when she'd awoken and realized that she'd been so preoccupied with the fact that Luke had left that she hadn't even checked.

She couldn't imagine him leaving her sleeping naked upstairs and not locking the door behind him, a detail she knew he wouldn't have missed.

"Nice place, Ms. Tanek."

"Who the hell are you?" Cleo stopped and whipped around, facing the man with the low accented voice. Italian?

He was a hulk in a blue suit, white shirt and ponytail. A Steven Segal wannabe if she ever seen one.

"You've completed your surveillance of Mr. Lace, then, Ms. Tanek?"

It was a statement, not a question and it pissed Cleo off because he was ignoring hers.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked again. She moved toward her desk, arms folded in defiance. She wouldn't back down, not in her own home and certainly not to this mongrel.

Her bag was within reach and she fought the urge to pull out her Glock and draw down on this SOB.

"Were you able to gather the intel or not?" he asked smoothly, his mouth, chin square, lips full, quirked into a mocking smile.

He thought she was funny. She'd show the bastard funny, all right.

"I wasn't expecting anyone so soon," Cleo snapped. "And I didn't hear you knock."

"It was open," he said without missing a beat. Hands in his pockets, he walked toward her. Slow and confident.

He was big, she noticed. Bigger than Luke and that was saying something.

"I'm sure." Cleo said, turning and glancing at her door. She summed him up with the ruthless efficiency of a cop.

His brown eyes were anything but warm. They were cold and empty. He was hot, in that bad-boy, aloof way that so many criminals spend a lifetime perfecting. Dark hair, slicked back and in a ponytail. Italian suit and shoes, so he worked for money.

The fact that she was alone with this man in her loft sent a chill skittering down her spine but she resisted the urge to cringe and straightened her shoulders instead.

Never show weakness.

It was something that had been instilled in Cleo during her weeks at the police academy and her years on the force.

"The report will be completed in a few hours and I was planning on delivering it this afternoon," she said smoothly, "once I was advised of my client's name, of course."

"Of course," he said, turning and shifting his weight to the other foot. He slowly crossed the room, taking everything in. Desktop computer, laptop, electronic surveillance equipment, HDTV. Her loft was a paradise for a crackhead looking to score quick cash.

"So whose trash do you take out?" Cleo asked as he pulled the door open to leave. She knew hired muscle when she saw it.

He frowned, looking truly insulted. The look of displeasure on his face told her that she'd not only pegged him but that her bite had drawn blood.

He reached into his coat pocket and removed a business card, holding it out, his eyes daring her to take it.

Cleo maintained eye contact as she strutted across the room. She managed not to wince when his finger brushed over hers, though she was revolted. He smiled but it

broke through his grim expression like a crack in the bottom of a dry riverbed, his face crumbling around it.

It was ugly. This man could be ugly, Cleo realized. Very ugly.

"Lake Minnetonka," she said, reading the address, which was the only thing written on the card. How mysterious.

Whoever this mystery client was, he certainly had some green.

Lake Minnetonka was a prestigious address. A playground for the rich of the north.

"Two o'clock. I wouldn't disappoint, if I were you, Ms. Tanek."

"I never disappoint."

"I'm sure," he mocked. "I'm sure." He scanned every inch of her body, his eyes stopping twice on her cleavage.

Talk about feeling mentally undressed.

He turned and headed for the door. He stopped as he put his hand on the knob and looked over his shoulder, that evil smile still cut into his face. "By the way, you should be more careful about locking your door."

He leaned against the doorjamb and folded his arms over his chest. You could practically hear his shirt ripping off his pecs.

"A hot piece of ass like yours, all alone in a big place like this with no one to hear you scream," he said, raising his arms in the air and motioning at the expansive space of her loft. "That'd be a shame."

"It's the asshole who breaks into my place who has to worry about his screams being heard," Cleo said, walking toward him and meeting him eye to eye. "You can count on that." She waited until he cleared the threshold and slammed the door in his face.

"Bastard." Not wasting a moment, Cleo slid the metal bolt home, turned the latch, and backed off the door, her heart racing. After a few moments, she heard the elevator and walked to the window with her camera.

The goon crossed the street and headed for a dark sedan that pulled up to the curb directly across from her loft.

She took shots of him crossing to the Audi four-door sedan and was certain to zoom in on the license plate.

She would have the locks changed today, she decided. She'd been meaning to replace the simple lock with a deadbolt. She cursed herself for not having it done sooner. It was on her list of things to do but she was forever a procrastinator. Too busy with life in general to find the time to change a lock.

Boy, her father would give her hell for that one.

Cleo stepped away from the window and immediately logged on to the internet, downloading the photographs from her camera and printing them out.

Her friend Anna worked at the Minnesota Department of Motor Vehicles and could have the registered owner of the Audi within the hour.

It was time to save her ass.

Retrieving a manila envelope from her desk drawer, she tucked the printed photographs of Luke inside and opened the Word program in her computer. She typed out the remainder of the report she'd begun on the life of Lukas Nathanial Lace and an invoice for her time. She sealed them inside with the photographs and grabbed her purse.

Picking up a coat in case of rain, she couldn't help but feel grateful to clear the case, one way or another. She slid into the lightweight fabric, memories of the previous evening shooting into her mind.

Luke's tongue, warm and wet, the way he stood up and cupped her ass with his hands, spreading her cheeks apart and pushing his cock against her.

The way her legs had slid around his waist as if by memory and how he'd entered her pussy, spreading her wide open.

Her stomach danced when she thought of the size of his cock, her nipples peaking into rock-hard pebbles and heat pulsating in the empty space deep inside her, reminding her that he'd been there, filling her as no man ever had.

He'd nearly ripped her apart. His mouth, his tongue, his fingers, they'd probed, invaded and filled.

His hot and silky tongue gliding over her naked flesh, fucking her with long, hard strokes of his rod.

She wanted to drive over to his office, throw the door open and jump his bones at the mere thought.

Down, girl.

Cleo headed for the elevator, making certain her door was closed and locked behind her. She had the business card in hand, trying to place the address on Lake Minnetonka, focusing instead on traffic.

She was nauseated and rubbed her stomach, taking a deep breath.

Guilt? She actually felt guilty about handing over Luke's case information.

Damn, damn, damn. There was a first for everything.

Chapter Seven

Stuck in traffic on Interstate 394, Cleo couldn't help but wonder why this client wanted the information on Luke.

She'd never asked herself that before. The why of it all. Case after case, she'd taken photographs, videotaped abuse and cheating spouses. However, she'd never considered what happened after the case left her hands.

It had never concerned her.

The ground rules of a private investigator, she supposed.

The ground rules had changed, however, the moment she'd fucked Luke.

She'd fucked someone she'd had under surveillance, another first.

She'd complicated all of the issues but the way she figured it, she only had one option. She had to provide this mystery client with the details she'd discovered about Luke and close the case.

No case, no problem.

Right?

She'd be free to have dinner with Luke. Free to do whatever else the two of them could come up with and she was sure that between the both of them, they could be quite imaginative.

It was a scary thought actually.

No guilt. No moral dilemma, she tried to convince herself.

It wasn't working. Hell, she still felt guilty about Sister Ruth Ann catching her with a pack of matches in the fourth grade. It didn't matter that she'd been holding them for Bobby McFarland, or that she hadn't tried to burn anything down.

She'd still received the brunt of the punishment and had felt guilty for it, despite the fact that she hadn't even done a thing wrong.

The traffic began to bottleneck near Ridgedale Mall, making Cleo wondering if she should make an impromptu stop and pick up some new lingerie.

It'd been a while since she'd bothered to update her non-period panties and lord knows that a visit to Victoria's Secret could do her some good.

Just the thought of surprising Luke with something sinful put a smile on her face.

She was certain it would put one on his as well.

She took the appropriate exit, Lake Minnetonka just a few miles away.

Ah, the beautiful people.

It wasn't only money that earned you a lakeside lot on Minnetonka. It was prestige, power, absolute wealth and one couldn't forget the importance of having the proper lineage.

The entire area reeked of old money. Beautiful people, the water surrounded by mansions equipped with floating docks, Jet Skis and balloonlike water trampolines for the lucky children who called the lake home.

Practically every house sported an enormous yacht powered with inboard motors and the most modern technology and creature comforts money could buy.

Drops of rain splattered her windshield and Cleo clicked on the wipers. She removed her sunglasses and glanced into the dark sky, black angry clouds washing in like the tide, adding to her already dim mood.

The guilt was there and she had no choice but to deal with it.

"Just doing my job," she argued with her reflection in the mirror.

Why then did she feel so damned shitty about it?

As she closed in on the lake, she thought about turning around. She could tell this mystery client that she'd come up empty-handed. That the job was too difficult, that Mr. Lace was just too reclusive.

The money wasn't a big concern.

Sure, she needed every dime to invest in equipment, to pay the rent on her loft and to cover the overheads but it was her relationship with Luke that weighed upon her mind.

Listen to her, "relationship". What the hell was she thinking? They'd had one night of mind-blowing sex and that was that.

Sure, he'd rocked her world but he was notorious for avoiding relationships. Who could blame him, with the droves of gold-digging babes who hunted him down and fought over him like a discounted Prada handbag?

The one long-term commitment he did have ended badly. Kate had done nothing but bash him since their breakup, blaming Luke for everything.

Cleo wasn't exactly looking for a long-term commitment. Hell, she had a business to run and didn't have time to pamper a spoiled rich stud, or to fluff his ego.

She braked at a set of large iron gates, whistling as she eyed the estate.

The grounds were lush, covered with well-groomed trees, shrubbery and plants but she could still make out the mansion and it was really something.

Greek pillars, tons of brick stairs, long winding driveways and perfectly manicured gardens.

She rolled down the window, reached out to push the intercom button and nearly jumped when the iron gates swung open to allow her entry.

She glanced at the video camera and nodded but didn't like it. The mere fact that whoever was operating the gates knew her by sight was a bit disconcerting.

Cleo followed the antique cobblestone road that wound its way through the trees. If someone told her that the stones had been extracted from a street in England, she wouldn't have been surprised.

Parking her Mustang beneath a huge covered drive, grateful that she was out of the rain, Cleo slid out of her seat belt just as the double entry doors opened.

She watched as a blond-headed hottie stepped outside, catching her watching him and immediately turning and covering his eyes with designer shades. He hurried to a red Mercedes–Benz that she couldn't help but covet.

Sorry, God, she thought, glancing up at the overcast sky, her Catholic training taking over. She was a recovering Catholic and added another item to the list of sins she'd have to ask forgiveness for in confession, if she ever dared to go back.

It had been, what, fifteen years since her last confession. She'd probably give the poor priest a coronary.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I have used handcuffs in many improper ways." Cleo couldn't help but laugh at the thought. Nevertheless, this guy was one lucky bastard.

Hesitating, she watched the hottie as he approached his Benz, moving with a confidence that verged upon arrogance. His haircut was a bit too shaggy but tossed about in that sexy male-model "I just crawled out of bed" look that women find so irresistible.

He was rangy and lean, built like a runner. Tall, with a well-balanced body, scruffy jeans, button-down shirt and a gold Rolex Cleo could spot a block away, he looked like one of the models in a Tommy Hilfiger ad.

Cleo crossed to the door and rang the bell, turning to look over her shoulder and catching the Benz driving by with the hottie behind the wheel giving her the once-over. An arrogant smile softened the strong line of his jaw and he gave her a nod as if in approval.

Cleo snorted, having been eye-fucked by the pompous son of a bitch and not appreciating it. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and turned toward the opening door, brushing him off.

"Come in, Ms. Tanek."

"Jeeves?" Cleo asked, giving the butler a teasing jab. Black suit, tie and shiny leather shoes. Talk about clichéd.

"My name is Prescott, Ms. Tanek." He didn't smile. Didn't get the joke.

"Works for me," Cleo said with a shrug. "But you can call me Cleo."

Prescott clicked his heels together as if reporting to the Nazis and motioned toward the other room with his hand. "This way, please."

Cleo took his arm, loving the silver streaks through his coal-black hair and the way he smelled, a combination of Old Spice and Murphy's wood soap. She realized suddenly that he reminded her of her old man.

He smelled the same as her pops.

Strolling arm in arm, as if he were escorting her to a gala in the ballroom, she could swear that poor old Prescott was blushing.

Hell, it never hurt to flirt shamelessly with the staff. One never knew what it might stir up. Not to mention, the blush looked good on Prescott. He needed the color.

"Nice place."

"Indeed." Prescott reached out and opened a set of double doors, leading Cleo into a room that was obviously a library that doubled as some sort of office.

"Have a seat, Ms. Tanek." Prescott escorted her to a leather sofa and gave her a bow.

Cleo watched him walk away, wanting to ask him about the meeting, about the man who'd hired her but he bolted from the room so quickly he left her breathless.

The room was decorated with thick red velvet drapes, mahogany floors and plush Aubusson rugs placed strategically beneath ornate English furniture. It appeared to belong in a turn-of-the-century English estate instead of a Minnesota lake house but it worked.

Shelves covered the walls and more leather-bound books than she could have counted, let alone read in her lifetime, lined up in tidy rows.

She eyed the enormous wooden desk in the corner of the room, a computer sitting on top, the flat-screen monitor as large as her television at home.

A test?

Put bait in front of her and see if she bites?

There were more than likely surveillance cameras everywhere, so Cleo remained seated, though the urge to snoop around was intense.

She'd worn a thigh holster. Her skirt had a quick-release zipper sewn in should she need quick access to her weapon but she didn't want to have to use it.

Walking to the stone hearth, she sat her briefcase at her feet and warmed her hands by the fire, wondering how she was going to live with herself after she handed over Luke's information.

She had to tell him the truth.

The thought saddened her, because no matter how she explained it, she was certain that Luke wouldn't understand.

Truth or lie, either way, she was going to lose him.

"Ms. Tanek, so good of you to make the trip."

Cleo reached out and took her client's outstretched hand. "Hello," she said, barely able to speak.

Oh God. She recognized this man.

"Richard Hammerstrom," he introduced himself as he lifted her hand. He pressed a gentle kiss just above her knuckles. "I've been looking forward to meeting you in person."

"Thank you," Cleo managed. She tried not to visibly cringe.

"I've been extremely busy, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Of course." Cleo swallowed, trying to keep the acid in her stomach from spewing onto that fancy rug when she barfed.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Just when she didn't think it could get any more complicated, it did.

Chapter Eight

"Did you hear me?" Tommy repeated. His brother had his hands stuffed into his pockets and was pacing nervously over the generous Persian rug on Luke's floor. "Damn it, Luke. You're not listening to a word."

Tommy had the same all-American good looks that Luke had been graced with, only Tommy Lace wasn't quite as well built as his older brother. Something he'd never forgive Luke for, as he'd always envied his brother and the luck he'd had with the ladies.

Hell, Luke could have any woman he wanted and yet he'd spent years dating only occasionally. He'd even broken it off with Kate, his most serious relationship to date.

She was the one, Tommy had thought. She was the one.

Kate's family had nearly as much money as their own and if Luke and Kate had married, it would have created the perfect political base to launch his brother's career.

Instead, Luke had pissed it all away.

Now here they were, time to make a pivotal decision and all Luke wanted to do was screw around.

How ironic was that?

Luke glanced into the mirror and met his brother's gaze, which was a shade darker than his own eyes were. More like his father's, their mother had always said.

"I'm losing my patience," Luke said simply. He slid out of the tie. Too stuffy. He unbuttoned the first two buttons nearest his collar, hoping he wasn't trying too hard.

"The meeting is first thing Monday morning," Tommy nagged. He walked to the window unable to stand still, too nervous to sit down. He had too much at stake.

"We need to work on your image. We have to plan a fundraiser so you don't have to tap into your trust. You don't have time to go on a frickin' date, damn it."

"That's rich." Luke laughed loudly, though the smile clearly didn't meet his eyes. He turned toward his brother and folded his arms over his chest, standing his ground.

"Let me get this straight. You give Hugh Hefner a run for his money and you have the nerve to tell me I shouldn't be dating."

"Jesus, Luke." Tommy walked to the bar and poured a finger of scotch. He tossed it back, slamming the Baccarat crystal glass down on the marble countertop with a thud. "This is serious."

Tommy knew his brother too well.

He thought of all the fights they'd had growing up. If Tommy had said that it was day, Luke would argue that it was night.

If Tommy wanted to go to St. Tropez for their summer vacation, Luke wanted to go to Paris and visit the Louvre. The Caribbean over Christmas break, Luke would talk his mother into skiing in Aspen.

No, anger wouldn't get him anywhere with his older brother.

Lukas had *always* been one stubborn son of a bitch.

Tommy poured another shot and swallowed it. He let the alcohol work its magic. He forcibly relaxed his shoulders and worked his neck from side to side.

God, he was tense.

He needed a good bout of sex himself. There was that actress he'd met in Malibu during a director's party but they were in different time zones and the last thing he wanted to do was fly anywhere just for a fuck.

"Look," Tommy said with a sigh, still resenting Luke's absolute determination to do something once he made up his mind, or in this case, not to do it.

Luke had been this way since they were children, as if he'd been born with the determination to accomplish a goal no matter what stood in his way.

A trait Tommy lacked and one his father never let him forget.

Lukas was the son with a 4.0 grade average, the son who chose the ideal girlfriend, the son who was mature, understanding and responsible, the son who had always had what it took to run Lace Incorporated.

Now he was the son who was pissing it all away.

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

Luke glanced up, as the door swung open, and nodded at Tammy.

"Excuse me," she said, hesitating for direction.

Tommy smiled, seeing that his brother's secretary outright ignored him. He made her nervous.

She'd barely been able to speak to either of them when she'd begun working for Luke, and Tommy went out of his way to make her nervous. It was cute.

"Sorry to interrupt," Tammy added quickly.

"Come in," Luke said as he moved to his desk. He dropped into his leather chair and reached for the Montblanc pen that had been a gift from his mother when he took control of Lace Inc. He glanced over the documents before signing, making certain that legal had corrected them to his satisfaction. "I've been waiting for these."

"I rushed them right in," Tammy said, glancing at Tommy and ignoring his raised eyebrows.

"Perfect." Luke had used his own funds to purchase a thousand acres between Baudette and Warroad, Minnesota. The land was heavily wooded and exceptional in every aspect. It consisted of a vast amount of lake frontage on Lake of the Woods, including several islands and gave him many options if he decided upon development. He wasn't certain what he was going to do with the land as yet, but he'd stumbled upon it quite by accident.

He'd been staying at the cabin his parents had purchased on Lake of the Woods and had taken a long hike, wandering through the heavy mass of thick trees.

He loved the scent of pine that tinged the air, the sound of aspen leaves dancing in the wind, as if singing a misunderstood tune. Oak, tamarack and pine. He'd seen eagles and foxes, a falcon and had found wolf tracks.

He stumbled upon a trail that led to the property and had ended up standing on the shore of Lake of the Woods and falling in love.

He was drawn to that land in a way that he'd never been drawn to anything in his life.

Well, until he'd seen Cleo.

"I don't know why you'd waste your money on that godforsaken piece of rock in the middle of nowhere, when you've got the opportunity to make your dreams come true."

The pen stilled as if on its own accord and Luke took a deep breath, keeping his hand from trembling.

His brother was an insensitive ass.

"You mean, your dreams," Luke corrected. He handed the documents back to Tammy and smiled. "Can you get these to Jack Valentine immediately?"

"Yes, sir." Tammy headed for the door, her skirt rustling as she moved across the room. "Your reservations are for seven-thirty, Mr. Lace."

"Excellent." Luke glanced at his watch. He had just enough time to make the meeting with his departmental heads and then get on the road.

If he could concentrate on business long enough, that was.

"See you Monday, Tommy." Luke stood and headed for the door, his thoughts already focused on the night ahead.

"Luke," Tommy said, raising his voice. "Wait a damned minute."

"Monday" was all Luke said. He headed for the boardroom, though company dividends, stock reports and real-estate holdings wouldn't hold his interest. Not when he could swear that he could still taste Cleo.

Not when he could close his eyes and still hear her cries of pleasure as he plunged into her tight little pussy with his throbbing cock.

Great, he had another raging hard-on. He'd physically ached for her all day, the claw marks on his back tingling randomly, as if she'd just run her nails over his flesh.

It was another physical reminder of the mind-blowing sex they'd had the night before.

Luke licked his lips, thinking about plunging his tongue into her slick cunt and then running it from top to bottom of her pillowy lips, in long, languid strokes. He wanted to drink her in, to consume her.

He somehow managed to make it through the meeting, trying desperately to focus on Powerpoint presentations of future investment sites and budgets but failing miserably.

All he could think about was the way Cleo's kiss had tasted. The way it felt to be inside her, to lay her down on the bed and fuck her brains out, how it felt to take control, nearly violently.

She'd stirred something within him.

She roused a part of him that he didn't recognize, a part of him that he could barely acknowledge existed.

A carnal beast seeking only to possess, to control, to ravage.

He was consumed with a raw need.

It was both terrifying and yet mystifying because it made him feel almost...human, almost normal, whatever that was.

Something he'd never been allowed to be. Not as a Lace.

Like nobility, he'd been reared by a nanny, in a home with staunch conservative parents who drew the line at emotional outbursts of any kind.

Feelings were kept in check, no anger or lust, no arguments, or loving shows of affection. Hell, he hadn't even been certain how he and his brother had been conceived, considering the fact that his parents had separate rooms for as long as he could recall.

Love, oh, he'd had plenty of love from his mother but only displayed in a proper manner at the proper time and place. His father had made certain of that.

"There's a time and a place for emotions," Daniel Lace would say continually. "You'll be CEO of Lace Incorporated someday, son. You can't afford to wear your heart on your sleeve."

"Leave the boy alone, darling," his mother, Beverly, would come to his rescue. It had always been the two of them against the world.

At least it had felt that way for a boy of eight. Mother to the rescue with chocolate chip cookies.

Maybe that had kept his parents' marriage exciting, Luke thought. It had never occurred to him before, that perhaps they had needed the continual bickering to keep each other hot.

Like foreplay, of a sorts.

Sick, Lukas. Sick. That was one visual he didn't need.

Power and greed were foreplay for his father and Tommy. Damned if Tommy wasn't so much like his father that it terrified Luke.

The drive for money and prestige, the desire for fame and the hunger for the companionship of countless women.

Luke tried his best to bridge the gap that had been there for as long as he could remember. As an adult, he finally realized that they would never be fully joined as a family.

Beverly would gather both boys together, doling out different tasks for each of them. "Let's bake," she'd say, ruffling their hair. "You get to pick this time," she would tell Luke.

Beverly would commandeer the kitchen and kick the chef out for a few hours.

"Chocolate chip," Luke would prattle off the cookie of the day. They'd bake, Beverly allowing Luke to mix the ingredients. She'd sit beside him on a stool and they'd each lick a batter-covered beater clean.

Tommy would sulk because he didn't get his way and would eventually disappear to find their father, breaking his mother's heart.

As an adult, Luke now realized that it was his mother's way of taking a portion of her life back. Her way of showing her love and devotion to her children and strangely enough, it was as close to normal as they could ever get.

Extreme wealth seemed to do that to people. It crept up on you, stealing your life away, your desires and dreams and molding you into the image everyone expects you to be.

The perfect son, the perfect student, the perfect CEO, the perfect brother, the perfect politician.

Luke was sick to death of perfection.

He was no longer himself but the person his parents had molded him to be.

He was a frickin' cardboard cutout, a label. Lukas Nathanial Lace, son, brother, political ally, corporate CEO, billionaire bachelor.

It was all too much.

Feeling the need to get outside, to feel fresh air blowing over his skin, Luke headed for his office. He grabbed his keys and briefcase and made it to the elevator, nearly home free.

"Lukas."

Almost, damn.

"Wait a minute, brother." Tommy rushed to cut Luke off, blocking his exit by standing between him and the elevator. "We need to talk."

"Look—" Luke reached around his brother and pressed the button on the wall. Tommy didn't stand a chance at keeping him from getting to Cleo on time.

No one did.

Luke faced his little brother, checking his emotions. "I'm late. We'll talk about this Monday." He glanced at his watch and cursed under his breath.

He'd told Cleo he'd be there at seven and he intended to hold true to his word. Something told him she wasn't the most patient woman in the world.

Other than that, he hated to admit, he didn't know much else about her but he certainly intended to find out.

Well, that wasn't necessarily true.

He knew she had an incredible body and the most soulful eyes he'd ever seen. He knew that if he ran his tongue over the sweet spot just beneath her ear, she'd melt in his arms.

Damned if he hadn't been able to think of anything else all day, meetings, demands from his brother and the land deal that had nearly consumed him for the last six months.

None of it had mattered.

Hell, he pretty much spent the day dreaming about being inside Cleo for the next fifty years or so.

"We need to choose a campaign manager," Tommy argued, his face tinged with red, his tempter heating up. He was tired of being ignored.

The elevator doors opened and Luke pushed his way inside, removing his keys and smiling. "We'll discuss this Monday, Tommy. I told you I haven't decided to do anything yet."

"That's a copout, damn you—"

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you, bro?" Luke cursed himself after the doors closed, the shocked look on Tommy's face still eating away at his conscience.

Why did he feel guilty? His little brother deserved worse.

"Shit," he said, feeling edgy and frustrated. He couldn't wait to get his hands on Cleo. He needed her and he knew she'd help him forget everything, everything but the silkiness of her hair and the softness of her lips.

He wanted to be inside her, to kiss her until both of them forgot to breathe.

Chapter Nine

What had she done?

Cleo released his hand and her knees nearly buckled beneath her. "It's lovely to meet you, Senator Hammerstrom."

She had to sit. She was about to make a fool of herself and collapse to the floor.

Oh God. Minnesota State Senator Richard Hammerstrom was her client.

What the hell did a senator want with Luke?

And why would someone with his means hire Cleo to do the job?

Senator Hammerstrom released Cleo's hand and sat down across from her, his eyes glued to the file that Cleo had clutched in her palm.

"Anything to drink?" he asked, motioning at a maid in a black skirt and white top who was hovering in the corner.

"No, thank you," Cleo said, managing to pull herself together.

"That'll be all, Rene."

Cleo smiled at the maid and watched her leave, glancing back at the senator and thinking that he appeared to be more handsome in person than on television. He had steely gray hair, thinning considerably on top. He was confident enough not to overcompensate with a comb-over and kept it cut short. He was dressed impeccably in a perfectly tailored gray suit, the color matching his eyes.

His skin was tanned—from many hours on his yacht, Cleo imagined.

His eyes told her everything else she needed to know. Gray tinged with light blue near the irises, they darted around the room as if looking for an escape route.

He was hiding something and it was so soon in their relationship. Tsk, tsk, Cleo thought.

Men.

"You have an incredible home." Cleo glanced around, pretending to be distracted by the posh décor instead of searching for the cameras she knew had to be hidden somewhere within the room.

Apart from the bookshelves filled with hundreds of leather-bound tomes, there were several vases appearing to be from the Ming Dynasty, one of them a white enamel with a red dragon pattern catching her eye. It was pristine and of museum-like quality.

There was also colored glass that looked like it had been hand blown in Ireland. The senator certainly was well traveled.

Cleo wondered about bugging devices and decided against them. She was certain that the senator wouldn't want anything shady recorded. Wouldn't chance it getting out and ruining his stellar reputation.

"Thank you, my dear." The senator stood, shaking his head. "I think I need a drink." He walked over and grabbed a tumbler. "You sure you wouldn't like anything?"

"I'm afraid I have another client to meet with this afternoon, Senator." Cleo said, the delivery of the lie smooth, despite the fact that she hadn't known she was going to employ it until it had come out of her mouth.

This man was dangerous. She didn't know why but she felt it innately.

She wanted out. She needed to think about what was going on and to figure out what she had done by providing this man with Luke's information.

"Being a woman of such extraordinary beauty and so exceptional at what you do, I'm certain you're extremely busy."

That comment could be taken either as an insult or a compliment.

Cleo opened her mouth but was speechless for a moment when it struck her that he'd nearly quoted her mother word for word.

"You have such extraordinary beauty, Cleo Tanek," her mother, Mary Ann Tanek, would tell her only daughter. "Like Lauren Bacall and Lana Davis. You have strong features. You're a strong woman. Don't you ever forget that, do you hear?"

As if in rebellion on her twenty-first birthday, Cleo slipped into a bulletproof vest and strapped on a Glock nine-millimeter pistol. She didn't play up her beauty but made it a point to use only lip gloss and mascara, hiding her so-called attractiveness behind a badge. Or so her mother had accused her of doing on more than one occasion.

It had been her calling, Cleo thought. Helping people whether they wanted help or not. Now here she was, gathering information about a billionaire, fighting the good fight by snapping pictures of him chairing power lunches and board meetings.

As unimportant as it seemed, she couldn't help but feel the weight of what she held in her hands, as if Luke's very life depended upon the information contained within.

Times, dates, his daily routines, meetings, agendas, persons of interest in his life. It was all there. His vehicles, driving record, information about his family, including a brother who lived life in a completely different frame of mind. Hell, a completely different world.

Senator Hammerstrom lowered his gaze toward her file as if he couldn't wait to review what she'd discovered.

A fist formed in the pit of Cleo's stomach as she prepared to hand it over. Wrapped up in her daily life, in working her cases and trying to make a living, she didn't pay world events or local politics much attention.

Sad? Absolutely. If it affected her life in some way, however, then it'd be at the top of her radar.

Self-absorbed, some would say. Cleo would be the first to agree. She was lucky if she knew what the frickin' president looked like during any given term.

"On second thought—" Cleo sat up, trying to change the subject. She needed a few minutes to put this together. "I'd better have that drink."

"That's a girl," the senator cooed. "You know, my sources assure me that you're one of the best private investigators in Minnesota." He poured a finger of brandy into a snifter and handed it over to her, smiling as she raised it to her lips, watching her intensely.

"Sources?" Cleo said, after swallowing the smooth liquid. She raised an eyebrow in suspicion but tried not to appear too obvious about it.

"As an ex-law enforcement officer, I'm sure you know all about sources, Ms. Tanek." Hammerstrom smiled and leaned back on the leather sofa across from her. He saluted her with his drink, giving her one of his most polished smiles.

Cleo swallowed another mouthful in an attempt to calm her nerves. It wasn't working. She made a show of crossing her legs and getting his full attention. She leaned forward to reveal just a touch of cleavage, working it for all she had. "I appreciate the comment. May I ask you something, Senator?"

"Of course." He stared openly at the slit revealing her cleavage, both breasts as well as her thighs.

"I wasn't able to uncover anything remotely negative in regards to Mr. Lace," she explained, giving him a better view. "Honestly, Senator Hammerstrom, I have to wonder why you chose me to gather this information. You have the means to hire a much larger and more prestigious investigative firm."

"I'm afraid I can't share my reasons with you," he said after seeming to get his fill of eye candy.

Hammerstrom leaned forward, elbows on his knees, the crystal tumbler empty in his hands and lowered his voice. "I *can* say that I needed this case handled as discreetly as possible. Quite frankly, my sources assured me you could do so."

"I see," Cleo said, not believing a word the senator said. There had to be a reason why he'd hired her. She wasn't certain what it was, at least not yet, but she would find out.

"Thank you for your time." He stood suddenly, like a man jumping right up after sex. He got what he wanted and had other things to do.

It left Cleo a bit restless.

He scanned the pages inside the file she handed him, as if he couldn't wait to read its contents. Like a child peeking beneath the wrapping of a gift, he glanced inside and smiled that thousand-watt smile. "This is excellent, Ms. Tanek. Most excellent. You'll be highly rewarded for your efforts."

"Mr. Lace is actually a very reclusive man," Cleo explained, coming to her feet and folding her arms over her chest. She wanted to know what was going on and wanted to

know now. "Works Monday through Friday, goes home, has no company. No recent dates. No skeletons buried in his closet or rose garden for that matter, Senator."

"I'll be certain to refer you to my associates, Ms. Tanek." Hammerstrom closed the folder and gazed back at her breasts. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed, glancing down her cleavage. "I assure you, I won't forget this."

The telephone rang and the senator headed for the door as if on cue. Cleo followed him into the corridor. She was being dismissed, quite rudely she felt.

The hulk who had been in her apartment earlier that morning was coming straight at them. Shoulders square, he crossed the Persian rug, barely missing the delicate glass sconces along the wall. He looked like the proverbial bull about to do some major damage.

"You've met Demetrius," the senator said as his bodyguard approached.

Cleo nodded, not looking him in the eye. He wore that same smug expression he'd brandished before, which faded only when he leaned in to whisper something into the senator's ear.

"I'm afraid I have to cut this short, my dear." The senator took her arm, his strides quickening as they moved into the foyer.

"Thank you," Cleo said, sneaking a peek at her watch.

"Thank you," the senator said, squeezing her arm. Cleo hesitated for a moment. "May I use the powder room?" she asked, leaning in and cutting the hulk out of their conversation.

"Of course, my dear." He leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. "My, you are quite beautiful, Ms. Tanek."

Before she could respond, he was gone.

Cleo headed for the bathroom, hearing musclehead behind her, following along like a trained guard dog.

"You look pretty hot in that skirt," Demetrius said, his head tilted to the side to get a better view of her mile-long legs.

His breath smelled faintly of onions and Cleo couldn't help but feel as though he was too close. This guy was invading her boundaries. Boundaries that he had no right to invade. She spun around and smiled at him, her face nearly contorted.

"Ever had a stiletto in the balls, D?"

"Knew you'd be into kinky shit like that, baby." He put his hands up on the doorframe, pinning her in.

"You have no idea," Cleo said. She backed into the bathroom and slammed the door in his face. She wanted to shoot his ass and smiled at the thought.

"Bitch."

Cleo heard him mutter and chuckled, loving the fact that she was getting to him. She heard him walk away and took a chance by easing the door open.

The hall was empty and she bolted. Moving as quickly and quietly as her Manolos would allow, she headed for the library.

Down the corridor, she moved quietly and efficiently. She sat her briefcase on the floor beside the leather sofa and walked to the cherry wood desk, tapping the keyboard with the back of a knuckle.

Of course, she expected it to be password-protected, so she moved on quickly, not having enough time to sit and try to decipher the password.

She tugged on the top drawer, disappointed to find only pads of yellow Post-It notes lying beside an assortment of pens and business cards.

She flipped open a schedule book and glanced at today's date, telling her that the senator had a meeting at one p.m. with someone by the initials of TAL.

The man she'd seen leaving, perhaps.

Cleo heard the sound of footfalls and stepped away from the desk.

"Lost?"

"Left my attaché," Cleo said smartly, leaning over to pick her briefcase off the floor. "I always know where I'm going."

"Good way to get hurt," Demetrius retorted. "Knowing more than you should."

"Is it true that guys who use 'roids have tiny cocks?"

He started to answer her, his face going red, a vein pulsing near his temple. Cleo laughed and walked away, leaving him in silence.

Though it was something she hadn't experienced firsthand, she'd always heard rumors that steroids did a number on a guy's package.

Obviously, the rumors were true and Demetrius was a member of the official "pinky" club.

"Stop," Demetrius called out, trying to catch up.

He was big but not nearly fast enough to catch her. Cleo bolted through the foyer and with quick, long strides, headed for her Mustang.

Her heart racing, she climbed behind the wheel and punched the gas. She coasted through the swinging gates and let out the breath she'd been holding.

She'd done something terribly wrong.

She was certain of that. Very certain.

She had to figure out exactly what the senator wanted with Luke. Why he'd bother with him at all, for that matter.

Luke was the CEO of his family's corporation and had no political connections that she'd discovered. She'd researched his family and hadn't found any scandals.

Descended from a long line of money, Luke's grandfather had founded Lace Inc. at the tender age of eighteen.

He'd originally dealt in real-estate investment, purchased land and invested in shopping malls and housing developments before the trend.

He'd originally purchased the land that Luke's father had used to back the family's investment into the Mall of America. Whatever Hammerstrom intended to do with the information, Cleo hoped she could figure it out before Luke suffered.

It boiled down to one fact. She had put Luke at risk. She just had to figure out what to do about it.

Chapter Ten

Luke crossed the parking lot and stopped at his car, noticing something beneath the wiper. He removed a business card and, without reading it, tucked it into his pocket as he unlocked the door.

He didn't notice the Lincoln Town Car parked a few rows away, or the man sitting behind the wheel.

He backed out of his space and glanced at the digital clock on his dash. He could be at Cleo's place in twenty minutes. The very thought made his cock throb as if he'd swallowed a Viagra cocktail for lunch.

He turned out of the garage and took every shortcut imaginable through town. He cut around slower-moving vehicles, getting the finger twice and nearly sideswiping a parked car.

Finally pulling up to her loft, Luke had to refrain from running up the staircase when the elevator didn't move fast enough. Heart racing, palms damp, he was a mess and loving it.

It had been hell on Luke that morning when he'd woken with her spooned up against him, flesh to flesh, his cock throbbing against her round ass. Their legs intertwined, her body still smelled of him, of sex.

He'd come close to canceling his appointments for the day and staying with her in bed. Waking with her in his arms, sharing kisses and once again hearing her scream out his name.

He had meetings he couldn't miss, however and had to sign the documents for the Lake of the Woods real estate. Otherwise, he wouldn't have left her.

He thought about how peaceful she'd looked when he left and oddly enough, how innocent she appeared while she slept.

That gorgeous chestnut hair, fanned out over her pillow, her skin smooth and lightly tanned and her beautiful face, strong lines, powerful features.

Angelic, he thought. Not perfect but powerful.

God, he was losing it.

No, Cleo certainly hadn't been sent from heaven. She was a very bad girl.

Luke had moved away from her carefully, not wanting to awaken her. He'd pushed a strand of hair away from her face. He'd kissed her cheek gently and savored the moment his lips touched her silky skin.

It'd taken everything he had to get out of her bed and the moment he'd left her side, he'd wanted to be right back there. He'd had no idea how he would make it through the day.

He'd paged his driver, had him pick up a single long-stemmed rose, which he'd left on the counter beside her coffeepot.

She'd been on his mind every second since.

"Hi," Luke said to the beautiful blonde who'd opened the door after he'd knocked. He glanced at the number on the placard, thinking he'd gotten off the elevator on the wrong floor.

That's what happens when you sport a hard-on all day, depleted oxygen to the brain, or something.

"You must be Luke," the blonde said. She smiled warmly and stepped back, blinking at a pair of gorgeous blue eyes. "Come on in." She tossed a strand of long hair over her shoulder and pointed upstairs. "Cleo's just finishing up. She'll be down in a moment."

"Thanks." Luke followed her inside and watched as she grabbed a coat and her bag. She turned off a Tiffany lamp on the desk where she'd apparently been working.

"I'm Anna," she said as she extended her hand graciously, a nicely done diamond on her finger.

She was engaged, Luke observed, and looked incredibly happy about it.

"Cleo's *best* friend," she said, with an emphasis on the best. I help Cleo with...research sometimes. Nice to meet you."

"You don't have to rush off on my account," Luke teased her, sliding his hands into his pockets and relaxing. "I'm early."

"Smart man," Anna said, giving him the once-over. "Tardiness is one of Cleo's pet peeves." She looked upstairs and shook her head. "She hates it when guys are late."

"Any other pointers?"

"Bad shoes, dirty cars and tobacco products."

"Thanks for the tip," Luke said, glancing down at his shoes.

"You're all good!" Anna laughed, catching him scrutinizing his Gucci loafers.

"Am I good?" Cleo said from the top of the staircase.

Luke looked up and couldn't even speak. His heart nearly exploded and he hoped Anna didn't notice the woody he was sporting. He felt as if he hadn't seen Cleo in a million years, as if he'd waited a lifetime to lay his eyes upon her.

Maybe he had.

"All good," Luke finally managed, forgetting that there was anyone else in the room with them, let alone on the planet.

"That's my cue, kiddies." Anna leaned toward Luke and lowered her voice. "Be good to her," she said, wagging her finger in his direction. "She deserves a nice guy for once."

"Count on it," Luke assured her. "Scout's honor," he said, holding up his fingers in pledge.

"A Boy Scout?" Anna said, looking over at Luke as if in pity and shaking her head. "Easy on this guy, Cleo Marie."

"Don't spoil all of my fun," Luke told Anna. "I love her just the way she is."

Anna fumbled with her keys and looked down at the floor as if embarrassed. She and Cleo exchanged glances and Anna cleared her throat. "Well, you two behave."

"Something I said?" Luke shrugged. He couldn't take his eyes off Cleo as she descended the staircase. She stopped two steps from the floor, making her nearly eye level with Luke.

"She wouldn't want a good boy like you corrupted by little ol' me." Cleo tucked her hair behind her ear and tried to play it off.

He couldn't know, Cleo thought to herself. Couldn't know that his words cut straight through her heart.

She had no idea how many nights she and Anna had sat up late, consuming massive amounts of wine and discussing how Cleo had to find a man who would love her just the way she was.

That was something she'd never heard a man say before. Not in her lifetime, anyway. Sure, Luke had only said it in jest and couldn't have known that it meant something more to her but hearing the words cross his lips was a bit earth-shattering.

She'd never run across a man who truly accepted her, Manolos, Glock and all.

"Well?" Cleo asked, changing the subject by glancing down at her clothing. "Do you like?"

"All depends—" Luke gave her the once-over and shifted his feet.

"Depends on what?" Cleo asked, frowning as she glanced over her choice of attire. She'd spent too much time working on the presentation to be totally off the mark.

She'd chosen a black leather mini that showed a bit too much thigh and a pair of black fuck-me stilettos with a needle-thin heel. Leather straps crisscrossed her ankles and they clasped with a silver buckle.

She'd recently purchased and had yet to wear the angora sweater she'd chosen for the evening. It was very feminine and had dozens of tiny buttons. It barely held her cleavage in check. Yes, she'd even managed cleavage. Thank God for Victoria's Secret.

Her ensemble wasn't slutty but she'd definitely pulled off provocative.

She'd added a Gothic silver cross that dangled from a black leather choker and her signature bracelet, a leather silver-studded band that fit around her wrist.

"Depends upon how fast you really want to get out of here," Luke said with a wink. He started up the stairs, a gleam in his eye telling her what he had in mind. He reached out for her hand but she took a step back, her mouth just out of reach of his.

"Hold it, Lace." Cleo held up her hand to stop his ascent, the bulge in his slacks telling her that he approved of her choice of apparel. "I'm famished."

She leaned in, stopping with her mouth a fraction away from his, their lips nearly touching. She was grateful to have him so close. To feel the magnetic electricity his body exuded when he was so near hers.

"You smell delicious and look stunning," he growled. He let her lean against him, their bodies aligned. "Part of me wants to pin you down and screw your brains out. The other just wants to look at you forever."

"Mmm," Cleo purred. "Mutual, and you don't look so bad yourself." Cleo leaned in, inhaling the light, clean scent that made her want to run her tongue over his flesh and lick him up. "You smell even better."

"I aim to please," Luke teased, finally catching her lips with his. The kiss was harsh and fast, his mouth invading, his tongue fierce in its pursuit of hers.

Cleo pulled back and smiled, running a finger along the edge of her lips and wiping away her smudged lipstick. She reached and ran her finger over his lips, wiping the siren red color from his lips, the sight of it doing something funny to her gut.

How could he do this to her? Cleo wondered. He made her feel like a sixteen-yearold Goth queen with a crush on the high school quarterback. They were so mismatched and yet, she couldn't help her attraction to him.

A good boy – a bad girl. It was one hell of an erotic combination.

Luke captured her gaze with those incredible eyes, his dazzling blue shirt matching the color as if he'd paid to have it perfectly coordinated.

He was so sexy that it hurt.

Cleo couldn't help but recall how amazing it had been to have his cock buried so deeply inside her, stretching her pussy like a fist squeezing into a tight leather glove. Big and hard, velvet-encased steel jabbing into her moist box.

Mouth opened slightly, she leaned against him, their lips brushing in the most teasing of kisses.

Luke growled and pressed his cock into her abdomen. She felt it throb against her, barely able to remain standing. She wanted to rip off his clothes and show him how to be a very bad boy.

"Ah, Jesus." Luke grabbed her by the elbows, steadying them both.

"I don't think he'd approve," Cleo teased. She opened her mouth and swallowed his tongue, sucking and tugging, nipping and tasting.

The kiss was torturously slow. A study in concentration.

She forced his mouth into a slower pace, though he was frantic and gasping for breath. She fed off his mouth, savoring in the kiss. He tasted of mint and his body was strong and hard against hers. He made her feel so feminine, so hot and so frickin' wet.

The kiss evolved into a hungry feast, their tongues probing and the tiny nerve endings deep inside her body jolting awake, aching to be caressed by his cock, his fingers and his tongue.

She was so wet, dampness soaking through her black panties. She pulled back, just far enough to look into his eyes and the world faded away.

"Hi," Luke said once he was finally able to speak.

"Hi," Cleo whispered back.

Luke leaned his forehead against hers, and Cleo could feel his body pulsate as if he physically ached for her. She knew that one taste was nowhere near enough, for either of them. They needed one another like their next breath of air, the next beat of their hearts.

"I'm starved," Cleo said as a means of distraction. She held him at arm's length. "You have a good chance to get me out of here if we leave now."

"Since you're hungry for actual food, I'm obliged to feed you first," Luke said. He slid his hands down her arms and took her hand into his. He brought it to his lips and kissed it tenderly. "But you'll just have to put up with me touching you. I can't get enough."

His hand in hers, they moved to the door. Cleo knew what he'd wanted to do the moment he'd laid his eyes upon her. She'd seen it on his face. He wanted to fuck her until they both fell unconscious. She could relate to that.

"I can't have you passing out on me before I'm done with you, now can I?" he teased, his hand stroking her back.

"We'll see who passes out, Lace." Cleo stopped and checked the lock on the living room window. She glanced around the room as if forgetting to do something but couldn't quite recall what it was.

"Everything okay?"

"Sure," she said with a shrug, trying to appear casual. She'd had the locks changed, the door now secured by a deadbolt. A mental check told her the windows had been secure all day. She was free to enjoy her evening. "Let's get out of here." She took his hand and made certain that her door locked behind them. He smiled at her and she melted, grateful that there was no tension between them.

She'd been worried about "day after" regrets and about feeling awkward. She'd never fallen into bed with a man after they'd just met.

That had to be some kind of record. She was a modern, sexually liberated woman but it was a bit wicked even for her.

The problem, she supposed, was that she felt as though she'd known Luke all her life. It had been her job to find out everything she could about Lukas Nathanial Lace, the man, and she had.

Maybe that was what had bridged the gap from sanity to insanity and allowed her to take him to bed.

Cleo licked her lips, loving the way he tasted. She wanted to climb into his lap and impale herself on his cock. Ride him until they both exploded with a mind-numbing orgasm so powerful that neither of them could speak nor move for days.

"Where are we headed?" she asked as they waited for the elevator.

"Surf and turf?" Luke said, posing it as a question because he hoped she'd like the restaurant he'd chosen.

"My kind of man," Cleo said with a wink. She pulled him into the elevator and shoved him up against the wall, pinning him there with her body, her breasts crushed against his chest.

They were alone this time.

Luke cupped her waist, and Cleo moaned helplessly as he ran his palms up her rib cage, skimming the sides of her breasts with his fingertips. She gasped when he took the mounds into his palms, feeling their ripeness and weight.

Cleo surprised herself by whimpering. She actually whimpered. Jesus, this man was making her insane, making her feel things she didn't know she could.

Luke slid his hand up into her hair and pressed his mouth to hers. She opened and he plunged his tongue past her lips.

He punished her with the kiss, drinking her in, consuming her as he ground his cock into her abdomen. She couldn't think, her mind pleasantly blank of anything but the taste of him, the feel of him in her arms, against her body.

Hands in her hair, Luke pulled her head aside and ran his tongue down her neck. He followed the neckline of her sweater, tracing it with his tongue, sliding wet heat over the tops of her breasts and Cleo melted against him.

"You have amazing cleavage," he whispered.

She wanted him to taste her nipples. As if reading her mind, he brushed his thumbs over them, and they hardened beneath the soft fabric.

"God, you're killing me."

"Me-killing-you?" Cleo gasped in response to his touch, his comment. The elevator doors opened, though it took a few moments for either of them to realize it. She pushed him out into the hallway. "Come on, Lace. Feed me and then we'll take our time with dessert."

"That's a deal I can't resist," Luke said with a laugh. He took her beneath his arms, his hand in the small of her back and guided her toward his vehicle.

Cleo stopped dead in her tracks and stared. Minutes, maybe. She couldn't be sure.

Luke punched in an electronic code and opened the door, looking over at Cleo and giving her that magnificent smile.

She didn't know what looked better.

The midnight black Mercedes SL600 Convertible Roadster or the Adonis standing beside it.

She should have known he'd drive something extraordinarily hot. A frickin' Benz convertible – God help her.

Hot, fast cars had always revved her engine.

"Something wrong?" Luke asked, looking down at the car as if he'd change anything about it for her, she just had to give the word.

"No," Cleo said, talking with her hands. "No—I-I—love it." Hands trembling, she walked to the door and licked her lips. "It's...amazing."

There was really no word to describe how incredible the car was. She slid inside, moving exceptionally slowly, almost hesitantly, as a woman might when touching herself for the very first time.

It was erotically sinful just to touch the exquisite leather as she came to rest on the seat. She would've creamed her panties, if they weren't already soaking wet.

This was foreplay.

Cleo had two fetishes. Leather and hot cars.

Okay, three. She couldn't forget the handcuffs.

Age fifteen. Her first love, Mike Costilla, had a restored Mustang Mach II. It was a muscle car and he even had the black leather jacket to complete the bad-boy image that went hand in hand with a car like that.

Cleo had lost her virginity on a cold winter night, while lying beneath Mike in the backseat of that Mustang, the leather of his coat creaking as he thrust into her. She dug her hands into the seat and held on, that moment engrained in her mind.

God help her, she had a thing for leather and speed ever since.

Lace had just hit her erogenous zone twice and hadn't even laid a finger on her.

Leave it to him to leave her shell-shocked.

The fact that Luke embodied her every fantasy was a bit terrifying, she thought as she glanced over at him as he climbed behind the wheel. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and shifted in her seat.

Her leather miniskirt creaked against the buttery leather beneath her and she was drowned by the erotic combination of Luke's cologne and the new-car scent still lingering in the air.

The smell of the leather, the feel of it beneath her.

Some guys couldn't pull off a car like this. It would be pretentious and so over the top but put someone like Mr. Prim and Proper behind the wheel, wearing his Gucci shoes and gold Rolex and he reeked of sex appeal.

Cleo made a living at reading between the lines and this car was his little way of defying his parents, of rebelling.

She knew that Luke had spent his lifetime being everything everyone else had wanted him to be, secretly wishing he could just once, live for himself.

This car did that for him.

She did that for him.

She'd allowed him to lose control. She'd allowed him to meet the beast he kept hidden away behind lock and key. She'd destroyed his carefully manufactured restraint and allowed him to lose his inhibitions.

That could be a religious experience.

Beneath all the money and polish, all of the crap that comes with wearing a famous face, she'd introduced Luke to his inner bad boy.

It looked like that bad boy had been waiting to get out, however.

She squirmed in her seat at the thought of rupturing his willpower yet again. He worked so hard to maintain self-control over his life and his emotions.

She planned to shatter it all. She wanted to release him from that carefully crafted control. Force him over the line that his father had drawn in the sand and Luke had yet to cross.

Oh, he'd dared, he'd tested the limits of his capabilities but he had no idea what it was really like to go beyond that, to forget the world and live for the moment, for the rush, for himself.

She'd be sure to give him that before she had to walk away, because freedom was something that even with his power and fame, with his money, he could never buy.

Walking away was inevitable. A woman like Cleo didn't belong with a man like Luke. She knew that.

They were complete opposites, their lives differing so vastly. Had it not been for this case, they never would have met. She couldn't imagine holding his interest beyond the physical but she planned to enjoy him until then.

Annoyingly, Luke was everything she'd never known she'd wanted, until now. The man her subconscious longed for and her body craved.

Yet, their relationship was based on a lie.

Listen to her, relationship.

"I'm not sure I can make it through dinner without ravishing you," Luke said as he slid the key into the ignition.

He reached out and took her hand. He was surprised at how delicate she was and couldn't help but think of the night before. She'd shoved him around like a schoolyard bully and had been so hot and in control that Luke couldn't help but relent.

Yet she'd allowed him to take control when the urge overcame him, which in itself was an itch he'd never before experienced, let alone scratched.

Luke lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed each of her delicate knuckles in turn. He wanted to taste her, to feed off her skin, touch every single inch of her flesh with his mouth and tongue.

His lips tingled where they pressed against her bare flesh. He could have sworn he felt her pulse racing, the swift beat of her heart quickening his own.

Luke released her hand with a groan and pulled into traffic, stealing a glance at her legs. They were even sexier tonight in black stockings, with another pair of stilettos making his mouth water and his cock ache.

He'd never imaged that a pair of shoes could kill a man. Now he knew better.

Deep down, Luke couldn't help but feel that somehow Cleo Tanek would literally be the death of him. He ran his hand down her mile-long leg, the silk beneath his palm making his fingers inch to touch her pussy, not caring if he lived or died, as long as he did it with her at his side.

Chapter Eleven

"You're staring," Cleo, said. The light from the street lamps they passed spotlighted her as they headed through downtown Minneapolis.

She could feel his gaze upon her just as she had at the restaurant where he'd first approached her. He'd been staring then too, so much in fact that she could hardly sit still.

It was having the same effect now as then. She squirmed in her seat, leather creaking against leather and her breath catching in her throat.

"I love looking at you," Luke muttered, his voice guttural and low. His hand was still on her thigh, working that damn leather miniskirt up higher and higher. "I can't stop myself."

When he fingered the top of her thigh-high stockings, he groaned as if in physical pain.

Cleo exhaled raggedly, fighting to retain control. She could feel the power of the engine beneath her, hear its roar as he slid into fifth gear on the interstate and flew across the open road.

"Luke," she gasped out his name. She couldn't help it. His touch was so powerful and yet so delicate. It was as if she were a piece of precious art, one he had to discover with all of his senses.

She parted her legs ever so slightly, giving him more room as he pushed his hand between her thighs.

He slid his hand down the inside of her thigh, finding the warmth of her panties and discovering the dampness that had soaked through.

"Oh God," Luke growled. "I can smell you."

Cleo whimpered, unable to form tangible words as his fingers stroked their way over the crotch of her panties.

Her eyes clenched, she tossed her head from side to side as Luke's fingers tickled and stroked over her pussy lips, one tiny garment separating his touch from her flesh.

Up and down. Up and down, he ran his fingertips, stroking the length of her pussy.

Cleo glanced into the rearview mirror and checked for traffic. There was a single car a few lengths back but no one so close that he couldn't explore her body the way she longed for him to do.

The engine roaring, he pulled her panties to the side and gently dipped his fingers into the slit between her beautiful thighs.

"Jesus," he moaned. "You're so fucking wet."

Cleo couldn't speak, couldn't move. She opened her mouth but no sound came out. Her legs fell farther apart and all she could do was concentrate on the glorious feel of his fingers as they dipped into her body.

"Luuuuuke." Cleo cried out his name as he found her clit. He circled the tiny nub with the pads of his fingers, making it hard and swollen and feeling her nearly leap off the seat.

"Don't stop," Cleo panted. She was begging and happy to keep it that way. They said there was a first time for everything and apparently it was true. She'd never begged a man for anything. Usually it was the other way around.

"Oh God." Cleo jumped and bucked her hips, her clit swollen and hard beneath his meticulous touch. She grabbed his hand, pushing it against her clit, trying to make him stop teasing her.

Swollen and ultrasensitive to touch, her clit was like a tiny crux of energy. She was almost unable to sit still. She wanted him to stop, wanted him to keep touching her, wanted to scream in ecstasy.

"You like that?" Luke growled. He moved slowly as if refusing to be hurried. "Tell me, baby."

"Fuck—yes," Cleo panted. She was moving her hips now, rotating them in the opposite direction to his fingertips. She ground her hips into his hand and spread her legs even wider.

Luke growled low in his throat, his eyes following the length of her legs, which she had propped on the dash. Her black stilettos were a foot apart, the needle-thin heels hanging off the ledge of the dash. "Pull up your skirt," he demanded.

Moving at his command, Cleo tugged on her skirt, moaning as his fingers worked her pussy.

"Open wider for me, baby. Come on." His voice was commanding and as her legs fell farther apart, Luke applied pressure to her swollen clit with his thumb.

"Mmmm," Cleo hummed. He was on a quest to make her come. She spread her legs, one thigh against the door. She slid her hand beneath the other leg and pulled her thigh back, opening to him.

Her panties cut high on her hips, they rode up her ass, spreading her cheeks wide apart as he worked her with his hand.

"Tell me," Luke demanded.

Cleo tossed her head from side to side, unable to speak, her fingers digging into the headrest and her thigh. She'd dressed to please him, to drive him crazy but she'd planned to be in control.

He'd swiftly changed all of that.

"Is this what you want?" Luke demanded, finally sliding a finger into her tight, wet pussy.

"Oh fuck, yes," Cleo screamed. Her body seized the moment his finger invaded her tight little channel. "Yes, oh yes." Her pussy clenched around his finger like a spasming fist. She hung onto the headrest, her entire body contracting as she orgasmed.

Jerking her head from side to side, she bucked her hips against his hand, feeling the orgasm from the inside out as it ripped through her body like a tornado, leaving havoc in its wake. "Oh God. Oh fuck. Oh Luuuke."

She was on the verge of tears and turned her head to look out the window, wondering how he could so completely rule her body and emotions so dramatically.

Luke withdrew his hand and slid his finger into his mouth. "God, you taste so incredible. I've been dying to taste you."

"Luke," Cleo gasped, the thought of his mouth buried in her pussy making her crazy.

"You taste like the nectar from the sweetest, juiciest peach."

Cleo straightened her skirt, wanting to climb into his lap. She sighed, wondering where he'd been all of her life and why she'd had to meet him now, under these circumstances.

Wondering why God would be as so cruel as to allow him to enter her life, only to discover the truth and break her heart.

She knew it was coming. She wasn't a fool. She had to tell him that their entire relationship was based upon a lie. That they hadn't met by chance.

"I hate to tell you this," Luke said, adjusting his cock. "But we're only about a mile away from the restaurant." His voice was low and breathless and Cleo could hear the longing interwoven between the wavering of his speech and the shakiness of his breath.

It was going to be a very long evening.

Cleo wasn't hungry anymore. At least not for food. She wanted to ride his cock until she had him begging her to come. She would take him to the edge and then pull him back, making him suffer in ecstasy, just as he had her.

It was the least she could do.

Luke cut across a lane of traffic, narrowly missing a Volkswagen Jetta as he pulled to the side of the road. He grabbed Cleo by the shoulder and pulled her toward him, driving his tongue into her mouth.

It was an assault.

Brutal, hot and wet, he plundered her mouth, taking what he wanted as if trying to relieve some of his own frustration.

It wasn't enough for either of them.

Cleo went limp in his arms and all but climbed into his lap. She shoved her hand into his hair, changed the angle and deepened the kiss, consuming him as he had her.

Luke righted her so suddenly she hadn't even been aware that he'd moved and slammed the car into gear and pulled into traffic.

"We could always eat later," Cleo teased. She pulled the vanity mirror down and wiped away her smeared lipstick. She was such a mess.

She looked like a porn queen after a gangbang and out on the town for a binger.

Cleo caught the reflection of the headlights in the mirror. There was a car that had pulled into traffic in unison with them. Had she not been so distracted, she would've noticed that they had a tail a long time ago.

Luke glanced over at Cleo as she righted herself in the mirror and slammed his fist into the steering wheel. He shoveled a hand through his short-cropped hair and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I-I shouldn't have—"

"You'd better be sorry," Cleo interrupted, snapping the mirror closed. She glanced out the side-view mirror and saw that the car behind them was still there. "I'm not sure I can make it through dinner now without climbing into your lap and fucking your brains out."

"I didn't mean to lose control like that—" Luke was disgusted with himself. He had spent his life maintaining a substantial amount of self-control. It was a bit frightening to have actually lost it completely. "I shouldn't have—"

"Luke." Cleo took his hand and raised it to her lips. His fingers smelled of her. She raised his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers. "That wouldn't have happened if I didn't want it to."

He nodded, grateful that she wasn't pissed off about being molested in his car. Jesus, this was high school shit. He was a grown man, a CEO of a multibillion-dollar corporation and he was acting like an out-of-control teenager.

Sex was simply sex. He'd done with it and done without.

However, he'd never met a woman he absolutely had to have. All the time. Every moment. He couldn't think of anything else but the way she tasted, the way she responded to his touch. How tight she was and how incredible it felt to be inside her, with her legs wrapped around his waist.

She was a drug and he was hooked like an addict.

Luke took her hand, interlaced his fingers with his and held it tightly. He had to touch her in some way, wanted her closer, tucked beneath his arm.

He wanted to pamper her, to comfort her, to give her romance instead of making her feel like he was only in this for the sex.

Cleo was watching the side mirror. The car was three lengths back and still in their lane.

"By the way," Luke said with a full dimpled smile, "you're really limber."

Cleo laughed. "Oh, that was nothing," she purred, batting her lashes and smiling. "Wait 'til you see what else I can do."

"Cheerleader in high school?"

Cleo punched him in the arm.

"Ouch," Luke laughed and held up a hand in defense. "Sorry, what the hell was I thinking?"

"The cheerleaders hated me," Cleo remembered, "the football players—that was a different story."

"The entire team?" Luke asked. He was trying not to sound too panicked. It'd be tough to order a hit on an entire football team without a few questions arising. "I need names and current addresses."

"Jealous?" Now it was her turn to laugh. "I didn't sleep with one damn football player but I had them all eating out of my hand."

She was actually talking about herself, Luke realized.

"It's those damned skirts, right?" Luke said, shaking his head and eyeing her attire. "A guy can't look at any type of miniskirt without thinking about sex. Proven statistical fact."

"Did you hear that from Dr. Ruth?" Cleo asked. She turned to glance in his direction. She looked over at him, using the moment to sneak a peek out the rear window.

"Trust me," Luke said with a nod, "it's true."

"You know this how?" Cleo asked, giving him a demure smile.

"You, let's just say, distract me."

"Get out," Cleo said.

"Absolutely true," Luke confessed. "I couldn't concentrate worth a damn today. Couldn't think about anything but you."

"Poor baby," she cooed.

She loved it. Absolutely loved it. He'd thought about her as much as she had him. Though she'd never admit it. It would be giving him too much power and she refused to do that.

She could play at allowing him control but giving it up completely, she would never do to a man.

As it stood, he already had too much control over her. He dominated and she allowed him to be in control. Hell, she even liked it. She'd given him that power. She was allowing him to take her where no man ever had.

Lust, she reminded herself, never survived long.

It was flash and bang, like a percussion grenade.

A deadly explosion that quickly burned down to nothing more than suffocating smoke, with no real fire to back it up.

A little lust never hurt anyone but she'd never gotten past that to consider more.

Cleo flipped the vanity mirror down once again and busied herself with applying lipstick, using the mirror to get a quick view of the vehicle that was now just one car length behind.

She only managed a partial plate number before the Town Car began weaving and riding the bumper of the car between them.

The driver had caught her sneaking a peek.

It looked like a rental, so the plate wouldn't tell her anything. Either that or the vehicle had been stolen.

Cleo closed the mirror just as Luke pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

Their tail followed but made a beeline for the farthest corner of the lot, with a clear view of the door and valet parking.

As Luke fussed with handing off the keys and receiving a ticket from the valet, Cleo climbed out and openly stared at the driver of their tail.

Although she couldn't see through the glass, she watched the car, letting him know she had made him.

It was, essentially, a grown-up game of chicken.

"I see you," she whispered at the driver of the Lincoln.

"Ready?" Luke placed his open palm against the small of her back. She could swear she felt sparks when he touched her.

Cleo hesitated when he stepped forward to open the door. "Thank you," she said. The gesture was unexpected. Did he have to be such a damned gentleman? How many guys still held doors open for ladies?

When she'd been a cop, working her way up the law enforcement ladder, she'd struggled to hold her own with the men she worked with.

She had to prove she was strong enough, capable enough to do the job just as well as they did, usually even better.

It was still a man's world, law enforcement. Balls and glory.

She'd proven that she had balls, despite her gender, but once she'd blown the stereotypical female role out of the water, her male counterparts were so afraid to treat her like a woman that they went completely in the opposite direction.

Just one of the guys—with great boobs and a tight ass that looked fabulously hot in a miniskirt or jeans.

However, what woman wouldn't appreciate a little kindness, a little respect and a little old-fashioned courtesy? It didn't mean she was less competent in her job, or less capable on the streets.

The whole issue intimidated the hell out of most men, so they avoided it completely. So, as far as Cleo was concerned, chivalry was dead and buried. She just hoped that no one ever told that to Luke.

Being pampered and treated like a lady, feeling feminine, it was reminding her that in essence she was still a woman and had neglected that aspect of herself for far too long.

Maybe they were both crossing boundaries, Cleo thought.

She stepped inside, glancing at whomever it was who was stalking them. She turned and followed Luke through a set of double doors, glancing back again to find the vehicle simply sitting there. There were no interior lights on and no movement from the driver. Not a sign of life. It was a bit spooky, actually.

She didn't like it.

She thought back to the days when she'd conducted surveillance on Luke and tried to remember if she'd seen the Town Car then.

She'd have to look through her copy of the digital photographs she'd taken, she decided, to be sure. If it had been following Luke then, she may have caught it on film.

They followed the maître d' to their table and Cleo frowned when Luke withdrew her chair, waiting for her to be seated.

Gentleman was an understatement. "Thanks."

Luke pushed her chair in and sat across from her, grateful to see the bottle of champagne he'd ordered already on the table.

"What's this?" Cleo watched as the waiter uncorked the bottle. "Are we celebrating something?"

"Our first official date," Luke said. His voice was low and sexy, reminding her of the words he'd whispered into her ear while they fucked.

The moment they were alone, Luke reached for her hand and brought it to his lips, skimming her knuckles delicately.

"Not to mention, we made it here without pulling over and seducing each other completely. A miracle, I assure you."

"Well then." Cleo followed his cue, tapping her glass to his. "To our first date and self-restraint, for the time being."

"My sentiments exactly," Luke said with a nod.

"Mmmm." Cleo rolled the bubbly around on her tongue before swallowing. "I've never had champagne before."

It was too rich for her blood, so she'd never bothered. On the other hand, maybe it was because she'd never really had anything to celebrate.

It was most assuredly the company, she decided, but the champagne tasted heavenly. The bubbly tickled her tongue, fizzed and made her feel sinfully content from head to toe.

Nothing like a soul-rocking orgasm and bubbly to top it off. No wonder rich people were so damned happy all of the time, Cleo thought.

The waiter came by the table and Luke waited for Cleo to order and then quickly placed his. He explained to the waiter that they had another engagement this evening and would need to be served immediately.

"Engagement?" Cleo said, smiling so much that her cheeks hurt. She unfolded her napkin and shook her head. "Is that the proper thing to call it?"

"Definitely." Luke laid his napkin over his knee and touched the leather bracelet on her wrist. "You've never had champagne? What, no ex-boyfriend worshiping you with bottles of Dom and roses."

"Huh," Cleo snorted. She covered her mouth, embarrassed but seeing that no one noticed. "I'd swear you're actually disappointed by that, aren't you?"

Those sparkling azure eyes of his were riveted upon hers, speaking volumes without him having to say a word.

She never would have dreamt that one look could carry the heat of a thousand burning fires.

"Yes and no," Luke said simply. "And I know a trick question when I hear one."

"Was not," Cleo retorted. She sat her glass on the table. She couldn't believe how quickly this stuff had gone to her head.

The waiter brought their plates. Cleo nearly choked. That was record-breaking service. The wealthy had no idea how different their lives were from the mediocre.

Luke cut into his prime rib and took a bite, watching Cleo cut into hers and roll her eyes, savoring the flavor of the meat.

"Well," Cleo swallowed, shaking her head, "this is excellent."

"Well—" Luke said between bites. He lifted his glass, trying to buy time to put his feelings into words. He certainly didn't want to scare her off on their first date. "Spending the evening with you is what's excellent."

"You're smooth, Lace. Very smooth."

"Is that what you really think this is about?" Luke took another bite, chewing and trying to stay calm. It made him angry to believe that she didn't trust him, or that she believed he was in this for only one thing. "Being smooth for the sex?"

"You don't have to be smooth with me for the sex," Cleo said coolly, wondering why he was getting pissed. "We both know that."

"We both know more than that," Luke said, lowering his voice and relaxing. He wouldn't allow her to underplay what was happening between them. It was more than just sex, more than a casual fuck and she knew it.

"Do we?" Cleo laid her fork on the table. She reached down and released the leather buckle of her shoe. Barefoot, she lifted her foot up to Luke's lap. She touched his crotch with her toes, trying to make him hard.

"Absolutely," Luke said. He took her toe into his hand and laid her foot against his cock.

One touch and he had quite the chub, she noticed.

"You know that I plan on spoiling you and ruining you for any other man."

"I should've known that you'd have some sort of strategy," Cleo said, trying to lighten the mood. "That's the businessman in you, isn't it?"

"Always negotiating, yes. Believe me when I say it's my pleasure, however."

"Then we have to go back to my place," Cleo said, biting her bottom lip and adding a little pain to the pleasure of wanting him so much.

She stroked his cock with her toes, as he massaged her foot with his hand.

"I don't know how long I can sit here and watch you slowly devour that meat," Luke said, gasping a bit when she stroked her foot up and down the length of his cock.

Cleo took a bite and her eyes drifted closed, savoring everything about this moment, this man and this place.

Because she knew, she'd probably never experience it again. Not once Luke found out the truth.

Finished with his own meal, Luke sat back to watch Cleo take her last bite. There was something about watching her derive pleasure from something as simple as a fine meal.

"Let's get out of here so we can talk about that dessert," Cleo said, lowering her foot and sliding it back into her stiletto. She leaned down and buckled it, tossing her napkin on the table.

Luke seemed to ponder her for just a second, watching every move she made.

"Tell me something about you that I don't know," he asked.

I'm a private investigator. No, really, I am.

Crap. Crap. Crap. This wasn't the place or the time to tell him the truth.

She knew that when she did finally tell Luke the truth about how they met and what she did for a living, she wanted to have all the answers about Senator Hammerstrom. She had to find out why he wanted Luke's information, why he'd hired her to discover it.

"I don't think we have that much time," Cleo joked. He ran his fingertip around the leather band on her wrist and butterflies danced in her stomach. Every time he touched her, something in her body went haywire.

"We have the rest of our lives," Luke whispered, stroking his way down the delicate skin of her arm and interlacing his fingers with hers.

If only that were true, Cleo thought. If only. Why it bothered her, she had no idea, because when had she ever wanted more?

Cleo closed her eyes without commenting. She reached deep inside and drove away the emotions. She focused on the lust, the animalistic need she felt every time she looked at him. Raw and sexual. No emotions. Hell, they were both professionals, after all. Neither of them could afford to become emotionally involved.

Especially if his life was in danger. At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

Chapter Twelve

Stroking his hand with her fingertips, Cleo could see Luke's body physically respond to her touch as if it were the most erotic foreplay he'd ever experienced. And those eyes of his. He stared into her—no, through her—with those amazing azure eyes.

Luke stroked her hand with gentle pressure, running his thumb over her skin, slowly circling, as he had her clit.

Evil, the man was evil.

"We should leave," Cleo said. "You think?"

"Absolutely," Luke said, clearing his throat and raising his hand for the check.

Cleo could see that he was fighting the urge to pull her into his lap and take her right here, right now.

"Tell me about your parents," Luke asked, looking up at the waiter who was heading their way with the check.

"My mother died a few years ago," Cleo said. It didn't pass her lips before she regretted the words.

God, the man turned her brain to mush.

She never really spoke of her mother's death. It had taken years to talk about it with Anna and they were best friends. Instead, Lace had her spouting off like a damn fool.

"I'm sorry." Luke raised her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. "That had to be difficult."

There was so much compassion in his voice, empathy in his gaze and tenderness in his words that it broke through her defenses and she felt her heart melting.

She didn't know how to respond to his kindness.

"Thank you," she managed, "it was terrible but my father and I managed."

Luke had this way about him, she realized. A way to make another person feel at ease no matter what walls they'd erected.

"Pop's in Colorado now," Cleo said, wanting to pull away but finding that she couldn't to stop talking.

She looked down at the table and Luke stroked her hand, refusing to let her go, to allow her to shrink back or pull away. Not now, not when he was just getting her to open up about her life.

Cleo couldn't figure out why she felt as though she could tell him anything but the truth about how they'd actually met. About who she was and what she did for a living. That he'd been a case, an assignment.

"Mr. Lace," the waiter returned with Luke's credit card in hand. "Thank you. Enjoy your evening."

"We certainly will." Luke took Cleo's hand as they stood and headed for the door, his other palm in the small of her back, guiding her along.

She decided that she'd tell him the truth tonight. She had no choice. She felt as guilty as hell about following him around with a camera and selling his information in the name of commerce.

She wouldn't allow him to believe a lie, when she knew inside it wasn't the right thing to do.

Luke wasn't a liar. He was a man who was honest to a fault. He paid his taxes and he didn't have as much as an unpaid parking ticket on his record.

How could she allow this to go on without telling him who she was? What she was? Fate hadn't brought them together at that restaurant that day. She'd followed him there. She'd been working. Spying. How was she supposed to explain that?

She was no better than the paparazzi.

Luke tucked her beneath his arm protectively as the valet retrieved his car, and inhaled her scent.

Cleo leaned against him, feeling his raging hard-on against her thigh.

She couldn't get close enough.

Cleo glanced into the parking lot and saw exhaust billowing from the tailpipe of the Lincoln, which awaited them. It still sat in the same spot, idling with the parking lights on.

She had news for him though. It wasn't going to be as easy to follow them this time.

"Can I ask you something?" Cleo leaned in to him and burrowed her face into his neck. She lightly kissed his bare skin, just above the collar of his shirt, nuzzling her face into the warmth of him, his amazing scent.

Luke slid his arms around her waist, his cock throbbing against her abdomen.

"Ask," Luke whispered in her ear. He groaned and ran his hands up her back, as if trying to keep her warm but wanting to touch her everywhere.

"Mind if I drive?" Cleo asked. She rested her lips on his neck and opened her mouth, circling her tongue over his skin.

"Like I could deny you anything—" Luke gasped, kissing her cheek softly, working his way to her lips, his hands everywhere and yet, not touching her enough.

He turned and tipped the valet, handing the keys off to Cleo.

"Hope you like it fast," Cleo said as she climbed behind the wheel.

"Jesus, you slay me." Luke fidgeted in his seat, trying to adjust his throbbing cock. "Who the hell needs Viagra when they have you?"

"Mr. Lace, you are not a candidate for Viagra." Cleo fastened her seat belt and adjusted the mirrors before she slid the transmission into gear. She pressed her foot down on the gas, feeling the engine humming through her veins.

She stopped at the curb before pulling into the street, the Lincoln edging along behind them, as if waiting for her to make a move.

The streetlight on the corner was in the process of changing from yellow to red. Cleo slammed her foot down on the gas. She pulled into the right lane and burst through the intersection, taking a left-hand turn, the tires spinning.

The Lincoln tried to catch her but the light was red and a police car pulled out of the gas station and stopped at the light beside the Town Car, having completely missed her stunt.

Amateur.

Luke repositioned himself, as if uncomfortable but if he was bothered by the show of speed, he certainly didn't show it.

"Could you be any hotter?" Luke asked, wiping his hand across his face and shoveling it through his hair.

"You think that's hot, wait 'til I get you naked."

"Dear God." Luke made the sign of the cross and glanced up at the sky through the moon roof. "Thank you," he mouthed.

Cleo glanced in the mirror and repeated the license plate of the Lincoln in her head until she'd memorized it.

"How do we get to your place?" Cleo asked suddenly, deciding upon a change of plans. Of course, she knew but he couldn't know that yet.

Luke smiled and Cleo knew that he'd wanted to take her home all along. That he'd been dreaming of bringing her there. Her scent lingering in his bedroom, seeing her among his things, in his house, his kitchen, his bed, just as she herself had imagined it. Cleo revved the engine. She took several turns at rocket-like speeds, the power beneath her like an aphrodisiac.

The Mercedes was powerful and wicked – just like her – and she loved it.

Luke gave her directions. He watched her behind the wheel. Long legs and "fuck-me" shoes speeding through town. If she turned him on any more, he just might have a coronary.

"Just pull up to the keypad," Luke explained as they arrived at the entrance. It consisted of an eight-foot iron gates and a keypad. They'd passed a security checkpoint at the main entrance but the officer inside merely waved them on.

He gave her the code and Cleo glanced at him in surprise. "Hope you don't give all your dates your access code."

"Only the ones who're really hot," Luke teased. "You can park in the circular drive near the house."

Cleo had only seen the place from the road, from beyond the gates. This wasn't a house. It was an estate.

She suddenly felt terribly inadequate. Thank God, the man had already been to her loft because if he hadn't, she certainly wouldn't take him there after seeing this place up close and personal.

This mansion was a little on the intimidating side and she didn't intimidate easily or often. The garage alone was bigger than her office and apartment combined. "You live here alone?"

"Don't be too impressed. It's one of my parents' places. They have several, including a family retreat on an estate in northern Minnesota. We each have our own cabin, but I have yet to make it up there this year. He sighed and looked around at his parents' home in the city. "I moved in here to look after the place, that's all."

Luke pulled the door open and took her hand. He watched those killer shoes emerge, followed by her long-as-sin legs and those incredibly perky breasts that he wanted to suckle while being buried deeply inside her.

Cleo caught Luke taking pleasure in the view of her body, a thrill working its way through her.

"Enjoy yourself?" he asked, nodding at the car.

"More than you'll ever know," Cleo said. She reluctantly handed him the keys, taking a longing glance.

Luke pulled her against him in a quick move. He cupped her face between his palms possessively.

"Show me," he demanded.

So she did.

* * * * *

Cleo slid her hands up his chest and over the rigid muscles beneath her fingertips and Luke groaned as she leaned in for a kiss. He took her mouth before she could take his.

Lips, mouth, tongue, he consumed, swallowing her gasp and pulling her against his body. He slid his hands up into her hair, tugging and pulling, worshiping her.

"Hurry," Luke said, taking a step toward the door.

Cleo stayed against him as they moved, like a blind dance, allowing him to lead the way as she danced across the room, her tongue moving against his.

Luke gasped when he hit the door with his back. Not wanting to let her go, he spun her around, pinning her there, her back to the wooden door. He needed to punch the code into the keypad but just didn't want to let her go.

She tasted incredible and her mouth was giving and supple.

"Hang...on." He pulled away, glancing down at the keypad and punching in the access code.

Cleo tugged at his shirt while he fumbled with the lock. She loosened his tie and slid her hands up over the rigid muscles of his stomach, the feel of her fingertips sending chills through his entire body.

Luke kicked the door open and swept her into his arms, lifting her off the ground and carrying her inside like his bride.

"I've managed to walk everywhere on my own for several years now," Cleo said, pulling her mouth away from his.

"This requires a much quicker pace," Luke retorted. "Besides, I love the way you feel in my arms." He set her down in the hallway and hit the lights.

Luke lifted his hands and fumbled with the tiny buttons on her sweater, unbuttoning them to reveal a black bra.

"Ah, kill me now."

"That's not my plan," Cleo whispered, leaning up and running her tongue over his neck. "I was thinking you could fuck me first."

"Excellent idea," Luke agreed.

There was a high-pitched beep and Luke turned, looking at the alarm box on the wall. "Shit," he cursed, pulling away and punching a code into the damned thing.

Cleo walked into the living room, taking in the perfectly decorated interior. It was rich, the fabrics, the furniture and the designs.

"This place is incredible," she said, running her hand over an antique rolltop desk. There was a mixture of opulent antiques and beautiful exotic woods. There were gorgeous silk fabrics and both traditional and modern pieces that made the room relaxing and distinctive.

Cleo gravitated toward the oil painting of his parents that was mounted above the fireplace.

"My folks aren't that bad at all," Luke said with a nod and a smile as he walked to the bar and removing two snifters. "Drink?"

"You know what I like," Cleo said.

"I certainly do."

"They are a beautiful couple," Cleo said, a warmhearted smile playing over her lips.

"Yeah." Luke smiled back at the idea of his parents being so in tune with one another. He mixed their drinks, averting his eyes. "They're complete opposites but they bring out the best in one another. That was commissioned for their fortieth anniversary."

"Forty years," Cleo said in awe. "That's an amazing feat."

His father was stern-looking, his face long and his expression serious. His eyes were a bit cool, a much more faded version of Luke's own blue.

His mother flashed both a carefree grin and bare shoulders, a faux fur wrapped around her body. She was hanging on to Luke's father as if he were her entire world. Luke knew he was.

"Opposites attract," Cleo said, accepting the drink and raising it in toast. "I'm finding that to be true."

They were about as opposite as two people could be, Luke thought. He was an extremely wealthy man, and yet didn't care if she had a dime. He was a corporate CEO and she...well, he had no idea what she did.

"This was taken at the lodge," Luke said, nodding at an older photograph above the bar.

There was a much younger Mr. and Mrs. Lace with two young boys.

"That's you," Cleo said, pointing Luke out and smiling. "Adorable even then."

Luke looked at the picture and grinned. His huge blue eyes overwhelmed his features, and back then his hair was wild and spiked in different directions from the north wind. He was tanned from all of the time his family spent out on the lake and his smile was infectious, seeming to catch on to his mother, who had her arm around Luke and was holding him close.

"And this one?" Cleo asked, keying in on another photograph of Luke.

Luke shook his head. He didn't like that particular snapshot. He was older and much more serious. The precocious child who'd been so carefree had turned into a stoic young man. He stood in front of a cabin made up of a rocky mass of stones and logs. He wore jeans and a button-down shirt that matched the color of his eyes, topped off by a sports coat.

"No dimple," she pointed out.

"That was just after my high school graduation," Luke remembered, shaking his head. "Dad wanted me to go off to Harvard but I wanted to go to the University of Minnesota."

"Did you get to do what you wanted?" Cleo asked, when he didn't elaborate.

"My mother saved me by talking him into it." Luke really didn't want to talk about his family. Truth was that he hated being here, in this house, surrounded by his past and all of the memories.

"Quarterback?" Cleo said, wiggling an eyebrow of the next photograph, which she'd picked up and was holding in her hands. "I like you in those tight white pants."

"I'll remember that," he said. "My father insisted I play."

He tried not to sound bitter, but could tell by the tilt of her head that she'd caught it.

"What'd you want to do?" Cleo asked, holding his gaze intently, watching his eyes grow wide in surprise. The question caught him off guard. He'd never been asked that before.

"I wanted to play hockey in the NHL," Luke said, surprising even himself by admitting the truth, though he'd never told another living soul except his mother. "Wanted to travel, try out for a few teams and see if I could make the cut."

He surprised her. It showed on her face, the raising of an arched brow.

"No hockey photographs."

"My father hated the sport," Luke explained. He watched her face carefully as she weighed his words and studied the walls with a roaming eye. "Not one photograph."

"How long did you play?" Cleo asked.

Luke mourned for the loss of his childhood fantasy. One that should've been well cared for and nurtured by his parents.

"Until high school. At sixteen, I could've tried out for AAA hockey but my father refused to allow me to continue playing. So, instead of playing for the Gophers, which every kid growing up in Minnesota dreams about, I had to throw around the football like my old man."

"For the Gophers?" Cleo said.

"I played quarterback and I hate football to this day."

"Why'd you do it?" Cleo asked him. "You gave up your dreams."

"For my mother," Luke said simply and without hesitation. "To keep the peace and to take care of my family. My little brother Tommy wasn't so accommodating."

"That you and Tommy?" Cleo said again, more as a statement than a question.

"At the lake house," Luke said. He smiled, recalling his love for the outdoors. He and Tommy were sitting in front of a campfire and smiling, each holding a long, straight stick with a puffy white marshmallow on the end.

"Tommy was eleven and I was thirteen. We were camping on one of the family islands on Lake of the Woods."

One of the family islands, jeez. How pretentious did that sound? Luke winced at the major gaffe.

Luke tried not to be pretentious or pompous. He was just telling a story, stating a fact.

"He looks so familiar," Cleo said carefully.

Luke nodded, "My brother's face is all over Hollywood."

"This is Tommy now?" Cleo asked, scanning the walls and finding a more recent family photograph.

"He's a little rougher around the edges these days. Drinks too much and stays up too late. Too many women." Luke held up his glass in toast. "To my second Piece of Ass."

"How can I not toast to that?" Cleo said with a laugh. She drank and settled on the edge of the leather chaise, running her hand over the material and sighing. "This is exquisite."

Luke figured she'd go for the leather. He'd never look at a cow in the same way again.

"Fire?"

"Please." Cleo sipped her drink, watching as Luke crossed the room. "Mmm," she groaned, licking her lips in appreciation. "You'd make a fine bartender."

"I have many talents, Ms. Tanek." Luke flipped the switch for the gas fireplace. He hesitated and watched as it erupted into flame.

"You're also very easy to be around," Cleo said with a nervous laugh. "I was worried that we might be uncomfortable."

"I believe you could make God himself uncomfortable," Luke teased as he sat down beside her. He planted a kiss on her cheek and pulled her into his arms.

Cleo rested her head against his shoulder, and they fell into a contented silence as the flames dance around the sculptured logs in the marble fireplace.

They were on a roller coaster, Luke thought, lust and desire arising unexpectedly, followed by absolute contentment with each other's simple companionship. So far, it was one hell of a ride.

He drained his glass and sat both of their drinks on the end table. He ran his hands up her arms, stroking her skin slowly, just wanting to touch her. He couldn't help himself. There was no way a man could sit this close to her and not have his hands on her, not want her.

He'd have to be six months dead and even then, he had his doubts.

Her skin was petal-soft and her hair scented with a flowery aroma. Roses and jasmine, maybe? He slid his hand up into it, massaged her scalp and tugged gently, pulling her head back and opening up her neck to his mouth.

Insane, the woman was making him insane.

He lost himself in touching her. She was a burning demand, stronger than any desire he'd ever experienced.

Luke tugged her head back and she turned into him, her eyes drifting closed. He cupped her face, as if she was the most precious thing he'd ever touched and slowly slid his lips across hers.

It wasn't like any kiss they'd shared. It was amazingly gently, amazingly erotic. A tease, a whisper, a coaxing of her lips by his. He was pampering her mouth with his own.

Cleo sighed, moaning into him. He groaned as she slid her fingers into his hair.

Luke moved his hand down her neck and squeezed her shoulder. Sliding his hands over her breasts, he gently unbuttoned each tiny button of her sweater and traced his fingertips over her cleavage as he worked his way down to her bellybutton.

"Hurry," Cleo gasped.

He knew she wanted it fast. Hot and fast, that way she didn't have to think, didn't have to experience.

He wouldn't do it. No, he wanted her to suffer through every sigh, every stroke of his hand until she couldn't wait any longer for his cock.

She turned her head, deepening the kiss. Panting, she tried to coax his tongue into a faster motion but he refused, kissing her in a thorough exploration of her mouth. Slowly. He moved his tongue so slowly.

Even with such an absolute tenderness, with his hands gently exploring her body, he'd taken control again. He knew innately that control was something she demanded and was humbled that she allowed him the honor.

Lips parted and her head thrown back, her sweater open. The swell of her breasts and her stomach bare, it was all Luke could do not to rip off her clothes and fuck her.

He wanted it to be different this time. Needed it to be different. He took her mouth with his. The kiss was deeper and painfully slow. He wanted her so desperately, wanted to touch her, feel her, to satisfy her beyond reason, beyond control but he held back.

God, her tongue, so soft and silky, dancing with his. She licked his lips, sucked his tongue. Hot, wet kisses.

They were moving faster now, the pace quickening and nearly out of Luke's control. He took her by the shoulders and flipped her over, putting her beneath him. He came down upon her, her back against the chaise.

Luke leaned up on an elbow and kissed her, angling his head for deeper penetration. She tasted like the sweetest nectar and he wanted to lick every inch of her body, wanted to consume all of her, bit by bit.

"Luke," Cleo panted his name.

His cock throbbing against her abdomen, he felt both her demand for control and her body dissolve beneath the pressure of his weight.

He was surrounded by sensations. He pushed her into the supple leather beneath them, his hard cock pressed against the pillowy softness of her body, his hands in her hair and his tongue inside her mouth, stroking, tasting, exploring and demanding.

"Hurry," she gasped, shoving his shirt off and reaching for his belt. "God, please. Hurry."

"Look at me," Luke demanded. He waited until their eyes locked and then slid her sweater off, working each arm in turn. He eased her back down, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand, staring deeply into her emerald eyes. "Tell me what you want."

"Fuck me," she gasped, kissing him wildly.

Luke nearly lost control. Her mouth was hungry, her tongue hot and wet.

He tore his mouth away from hers, leaving her crying out. He leaned back and eased down to kiss her breasts. He traced the top of her cleavage with his tongue, taking full licks up one side and down the other.

Cleo gasped, arching her back and feeding him her breasts. He lost all sense of time, lost all thought. He lost himself as he sank deeper and deeper into her. She dug her nails into his back and slid her hands to the front of his pants to unbuckle his belt.

Before Luke knew what was happening, she had her hands down his pants. She took his throbbing cock into her hand and worked it back and forth.

Luke hissed in exquisite pain. Her fingers were silky soft and he nearly came by her touch alone. "Easy, baby."

Cleo slid up to his mouth, her hips crushed against his throbbing cock as he unhooked her bra, tossing it aside and taking her breasts in his palms.

He tweaked her nipples, working them with his thumbs and fingers. Her globes filled his hands and he loved the weight of them, the feel of them.

Cleo kissed him, fast and ferociously. Luke slid his hands down to her hips and inched her miniskirt up, squeezing her ass with greedy hands.

"Jesus Christ," Luke growled.

"Shhh," Cleo purred, slithering out from under him, until her feet hit the floor. She dropped to her knees.

"Oh Jesus," he growled.

Eyes locked onto his, both of them panting, Cleo tugged his pants and boxer briefs off, stroking his cock with diligent fingers.

Luke watched her face, her eyes focused, concentrating upon him. If he thought about what she was doing for one millisecond, he was done. He would come.

He watched helplessly as she took control, leaning over and kissing the bare flesh just above the waistline of his boxers. She stroked his muscular abdomen with her tongue, worshiping his body with her mouth.

"Cleo—" he was gasping now, pulling her up toward his mouth, trying to kiss her. "Baby, come here."

"Don't move," Cleo commanded. She pushed his hands away and smiled wickedly.

"My turn to punish you," she said, taking his cock into her mouth.

Punishment indeed.

Chapter Thirteen

Empowered by his reaction to her mere touch, Cleo stroked his cock with a quick, firm grasp. He was so big, so hard.

She ran her hand up and down his long shaft, watching his face. It was contorted with excruciating pleasure. Eyes closed, his jaw was clenched as he concentrated so desperately on controlling his body.

She remembered when she'd seen him for the first time. He was such a good boy, so powerful, well mannered and impeccably dressed.

Knowing she could be his undoing drove her to the edge. It filled her with the desire to exploit his every weakness.

Luke hissed out a curse and slid his hands into her glorious hair. "I'm going to come—" he gasped.

Her mouth was hot, wet and so hungry. Sucking, she stroked his cock with her tongue, licking, working it like a piece of fucking candy.

"Oh fuck—" Luke growled. He was about to lose it. "I'm gonna come, baby."

Cleo broke away and released his cock with a smacking sound. She pulled away and he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her toward him. He drove his tongue into her mouth.

Oh, she thought. *He wanted his control back.*

Cleo tore away, catching his nipple between her teeth. She bit down, let go and blew a burst of air over it, watching it become hard.

Flicking his nipple with the tip of her tongue and hearing him curse, she moved on.

Jesus, he was the CEO of a major corporation and he was helpless and she could tell damned well it was one of the hottest things he'd ever experienced. "Baby, I can't. I'm going to come—"

Cleo kissed him then, taking his mouth hard, her tongue punishing his violently. She bit his lip, her eyes wide open. "We have all night and I want to taste you."

"Ah God." Luke groaned as if in pain. He squeezed his eyes closed as she slid her way down his body.

Cleo swallowed his cock completely, taking it into her mouth to the hilt. "Fuck, baby. Oh fuck."

She worked it. In and out. Up and down with quick, frantic strokes. She opened her mouth and ran her tongue over the side of his cock, using the tip in a circular motion around the head of his shaft. Tracing the ridge. Up and down, she stroked faster, sucking him, his hips grinding.

Cleo took him deeply into her throat. She worked her mouth up and down. His cock throbbed and pulsated.

Luke ran his thumbs over her nipples, making them painfully hard as she sucked him off.

"Jesus," Luke gasped. "Oh Jesus."

Cleo tasted the pre-cum that dripped out of the head of his cock and ran her tongue around the ridge, slurping it up.

"Take it," Luke gasped. He grabbed her head and shoved his cock into her mouth, pumping it into that gloriously juicy mouth.

Cleo stroked the head of his shaft with her tongue and, as she moved, felt his body seizing.

"Yeah, baby. Oh God."

Cleo swallowed him, holding him tightly as his body thrashed beneath her. She squeezed the base of his cock and pumped with one hand, the other stroking his balls as he exploded in her mouth. She slid her tongue over the vein at the head of his cock and swallowed when he spurted hot, salty cum down her throat.

"Oh Christ," Luke gasped. He nearly skyrocketed off the chaise. He grabbed her hair, holding her head in place as she sucked up every drop of cum from his balls. "Oh fuck, baby. Fuck."

Cleo took one last lick of his sticky and salty cum and then released him, kissing his abdomen.

Luke nearly jumped off the chaise, his stomach muscles flinching. Fuck, he was touchy. She'd made him nuts.

Luke stroked her hair and pulled her up into his arms. He ran his hand down the long line of her back, trying to catch his breath.

"I know your weakness now, Lace."

He couldn't talk, so he kissed her tenderly, lips lingering, caressing her cheek, cherishing her.

The outrageous sex was one thing, Cleo thought, though she'd never had it this intense before, but when he was so tender with her, she didn't know how to handle it.

She'd never let someone get to her this way.

She smiled, running her hands over his chest, a fine sheen of perspiration dampening his flesh. He was panting and trying to catch his breath.

"Now that one's out of the way," Cleo said with a smile.

"So, there's a method to the insanity?" Luke sat up, barely able to move.

"God, you look amazing," he said.

"Please." Cleo shrugged it off, secretly savoring his comment. Her hair was tousled and her full mouth swollen and red from his kisses.

"Time for revenge." Luke grabbed her and rolled her beneath him. He grabbed her hips, tickling her and making her laugh.

"Stop it, Lace," she cried, unable to hold still. Luke finally gave in and kissed her like a man hell-bent on retribution.

"Turn over," Luke demanded.

Cleo gasped when he flipped her, putting her facedown into the chaise.

He grabbed her hair and slid it over one slender shoulder, revealing the long line of her neck, which he latched on to with his teeth.

Her breasts pressed into the leather chaise, his rock-solid body above hers and his mouth on her neck, Cleo closed her eyes. For the first time in her life, she gave herself over completely, allowing a man to take her any way he wanted.

Luke unzipped her miniskirt and slid it off her hips. He loved the way the leather stuck to her skin and he had to peel her out of it.

"Ah baby. Jesus," he groaned when she lay there beneath him in thigh-high stockings and a black leather thong.

He worked his thumbs between the leather straps of her thong and her hips and tugged, making a task out of sliding it to her knees.

"Mmmm," Luke groaned. Her beautiful ass was bare.

The sound rumbled deep in his throat. Luke ran his hands over her ass, stroking each round cheek. He smiled when she cried out, writhing her hips against his cock.

He was as hard as a rock, from touching her sweet ass and being teased by those thigh-high stockings and needle-thin, fuck-me, high-heeled shoes.

Oh yeah, she was going to be fucked all right.

But now, it was payback time.

Luke slid down onto the floor and on his knees, ran his palm down the slope of her back.

Jesus, she was beautiful. Not in the traditional sense, as in having a delicate beauty but toned and athletic, strong and dramatic.

It made her surrender to him nearly more than he could bear.

Luke grabbed her hips and pulled her back, until her knees came off the chaise and were on the floor as his were.

Cleo whimpered, following his silent commands. He slid his hand down her spine to the center of her shoulder blades and pushed her down, pinning her to the chaise, her ass in the air.

Luke wanted her doggie style but first, he planned to feast upon her, to take her, to make her his.

He slid one hand up to massage her breasts, her nipple hardening between his thumb and forefinger, while the other hand was still kneading her ass cheek.

"Please," Cleo gasped. She tried to sit up, to turn and kiss him but he pushed her down, his palm once again in the small of her back, controlling her.

"Oh yeah. That's it." He palmed her ass cheeks with both hands and spread them apart. "Jesus, there you are, baby."

Her entire fucking pussy and asshole were open for him to see.

Pink and soft and luscious. She'd had a Brazilian wax and her pussy and asshole were bare, pink and smooth.

Luke leaned down and ran his tongue from her clit, up through her wet, juicy slit and bathed her asshole with the tip of his tongue.

"Oh fuck." Cleo flinched, trying to move. He held her there, forcing her to stay in that position. Ass in the air and pussy completely exposed.

"Please," she cried, fisting the throw pillows above her head. "Oh God. Fuck me. Please fuck me."

Luke dove in this time, using his tongue to fuck her, sliding it into her sweet, tight sheath.

Cleo screamed out, slamming her fists into the chaise.

"You like that, don't you, baby?" he demanded, stopping and pulling her ass cheeks farther apart, spreading her wide open. "Don't you?"

He dove in with the tip of his tongue, finding that sweet little pink entry and dipping his tongue inside. It was pillowy soft and warm as he slurped her nectar, devouring her pussy, fucking her with his tongue. "You taste so fucking good, baby."

"Fuck me," Cleo gasped, begging him to stop. "Please. Hurry. Luke, please—"

"Tell me you like it," Luke insisted. He ran his tongue up and down her pussy, distracted by her swollen clit.

He swept his tongue over her clitoris. Her clit ached to be devoured, swollen and sensitive to the touch. Flicking it with the tip of his tongue, he covered her pussy with his mouth.

She was crying out, cursing but he focused on her clit with his mouth, sucking it gently and nibbling at it with his teeth.

Incoherent, Cleo writhed against his face. She was panting now, throwing her head around, out of breath, trying to get her ass out of his hands, out of his mouth.

"You love it, tell me, baby!"

"Yes." Cleo gasped for air. She threw her head to the side in a near convulsion, her back arching. "God, yes. I love it. I love it."

"That's a good girl," Luke murmured, sliding his tongue into her little love entry. Making his tongue stiff as a board, he tongue-fucked her, jabbing it into her pussy.

"Yeeesss," Cleo cried out, digging her nails into the chaise. "Oh yes."

Fucking her with his mouth, Luke drove his tongue inside her, harder and faster as she writhed against him. "That's it, baby girl. That's it."

She was so tiny, so small, it was hard to believe he'd shoved his cock into her pussy and she'd taken him completely.

He was ready to come again and she hadn't even touched him but his cock was throbbing so badly that it nearly hurt.

He loved it. Fucking loved it.

He drove his tongue into her pussy, savoring in the taste of her, slurping and drinking her in. He slid his thumb over her clit and had to hold her down on the chaise to keep her from bucking beneath him.

"Oh God," Cleo screamed, her hips writhing against his face.

Luke continued to fuck her with his mouth, jabbing his tongue into her little pink scrumptiously wet sheath, savoring her musky flavor, all while rubbing her clit with the circling motion of his thumb.

"Please," Cleo cried out. She was cursing now, gyrating, trying to get away and begging him to fuck her.

Luke moved his tongue slowly up and down her wet slit, sliding all the way to her little puckered asshole.

When she nearly leapt off the chaise, he dove in, making a slurping sound with his mouth, pleasuring her as no man ever had.

Jesus, every part of her body was so tight. He tasted her and sucked her, he fucked every hole she had with his mouth and still couldn't get enough.

"Luke," Cleo gasped, her voice weak, sounding like a whisper. "Oh God."

He worked his thumb into her pussy, feeling it open for him like a petal to the sunshine.

Pumping it in slow and erotic motion, he primed her, feeling her pussy clench up like a tight velvet glove. He nearly came again, exploded right there on the floor.

Using his middle finger on her clit, circling it, rolling it around, his thumb inside her, he drove his tongue into her asshole and that's when reality ceased to exist.

"Luuuuke," Cleo screamed out his name, her entire body flinching in an orgasm that brought her off the chaise.

Her muscles constricting, her pussy clenching his thumb, spasming, he locked onto the nub of her little hard clit as she orgasmed into his mouth.

"Fuck," she screamed. "Oh fuck, yeah."

Luke pulled back and held her down with his hand in the middle of her shoulder blades, that little ass up in the air.

He'd been waiting for this his entire life.

Chapter Fourteen

Cleo couldn't move, her entire body had been invaded and controlled, manipulated and rocked and he hadn't even fucked her yet.

Luke pushed her down, one hand between her shoulder blades. She cried out as he put the head of his cock against her slick lips and poised himself, ready to plunge into her.

He slid his cock up and down her pussy, lubing it up with her honeyed nectar. "So wet," he murmured.

She could tell that he was trying desperately to be gentle, but the moment his cock touched her hot, wet pussy and she'd cried out in pleasure, he sank into her with one glorious thrust.

Cleo screamed out as his cock spread her pussy wide open. She clutched at the chaise, bouncing up and down as he pounded into her, skin slapping skin.

Forcefully, Luke rammed her pussy, slamming her into the chaise with each violent thrust.

"Yeeeess!" she cried out. "Oh God. Yes." She met each thrust by driving her hips back to meet his cock, fucking him hard and fast. Her ass moving, gyrating and her hips working hard against him.

"So tight," Luke gasped. "So fucking hot, so wet." He hammered into her, faster and harder with each toss of her head, each echoing scream.

"You like that, don't you, baby?" he demanded, shoving his cock into her pussy. He leaned down and drove into her. He pressed her into the chaise and lay there a moment.

His mouth in her ear, his cock throbbing, he kissed her cheek and her neck, dominating her completely. "You love it, don't you, baby?"

"Yes," Cleo gasped, nearly breathless, her voice quivering. "Yes. I love it. Oh God. I love it."

Luke stopped and pulled his rod completely out of her in a slow withdrawal. He flipped her over and Cleo gasped as if in pain, not wanting him to break contact for even a moment.

She cried out as he pushed her back against the chaise, facing him this time. Staying on his knees, he found her pussy again and slid his cock into her slowly, painfully slowly.

"That's it," Luke groaned. "There's my pussy." He watched her mons as he sank his cock into her, her pink lips opening up and swallowing him whole.

She was soaked with perspiration and whimpering beneath him, clutching her arms around his neck and hanging on. Luke grabbed her ankles and pushed her legs straight out, her stilettos in the air as he pumped into her with long, slow strokes.

She might not have been a cheerleader but she was as limber as hell.

"Closer," Luke gasped. He stood suddenly, lifting her with him. "I can't get close enough."

Cleo gasped, clutching him tightly, her arms and legs wrapped around him automatically, his hands cupping her ass, impaling her with his cock.

They were sticky and clinging to each other. Cleo didn't know where he was taking her but she wasn't letting go. She didn't care where they went, just as long as he didn't stop fucking her.

Luke grabbed her hair, pulled her head back and plunged his mouth into hers, his cock throbbing in her heated depths.

They were both frantic, his mouth working hers. He pumped his hips even as they moved. He started up the stairs but when Cleo moaned into his mouth, he stopped suddenly and went down onto his knees. He placed her on the staircase, unable to move another step until he fucked her some more.

He pushed her legs back, opened up her pussy and fucked her right there on the staircase. He pounded into her, her back arched, her legs wrapped around his waist and her fleshy mounds bouncing with each thrust.

"Oh God," Cleo screamed. "Oh Luke. Oh God." Her pussy was open and completely exposed, with him buried deeply inside her, holding her legs back. He pounded into her hard and fast.

He leaned over and latched on to her breast. He sucked her nipple, biting, laving it with his tongue. "I love your breasts," he said between mouthfuls. He bit her nipple gently, making it hard between his teeth.

Then, he suckled at it, as if drinking from her.

Cleo cradled his head, her pussy pulsating around his cock. She nearly came there, on the stairs. He pushed her boobs together, running his tongue over both of her nipples, biting, all while fucking her. He moved his hips, his cock sliding in and out in long, painfully slow strokes.

Luke stood abruptly, lifting Cleo and keeping her close, his cock still buried inside her. He finished climbing the stairs, shoved her against the wall and pushed his bedroom door open.

Before she knew where she was, Luke dropped her down onto the king-sized bed, never once breaking their connection.

"Oh, baby. Fuck yeah." He pushed her into the mattress, her legs wrapped around his waist and her body crushed against his. He found her mouth, probing with his tongue, making her moan and squirm beneath him.

He fucked her slowly, taking the pace down several notches but hotter in intensity.

He was deep inside her and he remained there, holding perfectly still as he kissed her. He didn't know how long they remained that way, mouth to mouth, their tongues on an endless quest. They kissed and kissed. Long and hard, deep and wet.

He consumed her with his mouth. Tasting her, eating her and feeding off her.

Cleo was lost. Lost in feeling, lost in emotion. Even in high school, even in the back of that Mustang Mach II with Mike, she'd never been kissed like this.

It was a mindless, frenzied kind of emotion that came hand in hand with the feel of his tongue in her mouth and the hardness of his huge cock buried deeply inside her pussy.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and held on. It was all she could do.

"Can't get enough," Luke groaned. "Oh baby, ah God. Never get enough."

Her body was on the edge, her muscles on the verge of seizing, and Cleo buried her head against his neck, running her tongue over his flesh, feeling his pulse bang against her lips.

Every time he'd withdraw, he'd rub her clit at the perfect angle and she couldn't hold still. She was about to come again.

"Faster, Luke," she pleaded. She pulled him against her, meeting him thrust for thrust.

"You like that?" Luke asked. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, his hands wrapped in her hair. He pounded into her pussy, skin slapping skin and echoing in the room. "You like it, don't you, little girl?"

"Yeeeess," she screamed. His breath in her ear, his cock driving into her pussy, his weight thrusting her into the ultra-soft bed beneath them, it was all too much. Just too much. He was in control and she wanted it that way. She wanted to belong to him, wanted him to own her pussy, her body.

"Oh, Luuuuke," Cleo screamed out his name as her body tensed in orgasm. It ripped through her. Every muscle contracted and she nearly squirmed out of his arms. She clawed at his back, digging her nails in his skin, tearing at him, still calling out his name, over and over.

Luke tensed and leaned down to kiss her deeply, gasping into her mouth, letting go physically and emotionally. "I'm...coming," he grunted, pumping his hips once, twice more.

Luke drove them over the edge, pleasure consuming their bodies and souls.

His muscles tensed and he spewed hot cum deep inside her pussy.

It was so much that he never thought it would end. He was in that wet, hot paradise and could only think of coming there again and again.

Out of breath, each gasping for air desperately, they clung together with sweaty bodies.

Cleo pumped her hips a few times, milking him of every ounce of cum he had left.

They stayed that way for a long time, sweaty and hot, gasping for air and holding each other close, their arms and legs entangled.

"Water," Cleo gasped when she finally had enough strength to speak.

Luke kissed her temple and tore himself away, sighing when he slid out of her.

"Be right back, gorgeous." He pulled on a pair of boxers and went into the bathroom, returning with a glass of the best water she'd ever tasted.

Cleo handed him the glass, which he finished off, before returning to the bathroom.

She pushed a damp strand of hair out of her eyes, hearing the water in the sink come on. She smiled, her entire body humming with contentment. "I have a run in my stocking," she groaned.

"I'll by you two dozen more," Luke yelled from the bathroom.

The sound of shattering glass brought Cleo out of the bed. She was on her feet and moving before she even thought about it.

A shrill alarm sounded, sending a high-pitched shriek through the entire house.

"What the hell is that?" Cleo whispered harshly as Luke came out of the bathroom.

"Another false alarm," Luke said. "Damn security system needs to be replaced." Luke tugged on a pair of flannel pajama pants that hung low on his hips and headed for the door.

He didn't look worried enough, as far as Cleo was concerned. He looked more peeved than anything else. Jesus, did nothing ruffle this guy's feathers?

She hustled to the closet and grabbed one of Luke's white button-down shirts, managing to fasten two buttons as she followed him down the hallway toward the stairs.

"Stay here," Luke whispered. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Then I'm sure it's okay that I come with you," Cleo bit back. Her gun was in her bag. Downstairs in the living room.

Brilliant. She was brilliant.

But then again, she hadn't exactly been thinking clearly at the time. His mouth, his tongue, his hands, they reduced her to nothing more than adrenaline-charged hormones.

Luke practically jogged down the staircase. Jesus, he was going to get himself killed.

"Careful," Cleo said, reaching up and touching his shoulder. She pushed him against the wall. "Shhh," she whispered, holding her finger to her mouth.

Cleo followed him through the house, until they found a garden brick lying in the front entryway, the window on the door smashed.

Luke stared down at it and frowned, shaking his head. He didn't say a word.

The phone rang and Cleo flinched, which Luke mistook as fear.

"Don't worry," he whispered, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "That's the security company. Probably just kids."

Walking to the den, Luke picked up the phone and gave the security code to the dispatcher, explaining what occurred.

"Have them send someone out to check the grounds," Cleo said, touching his arm. She glanced around, looking for any other signs of forced entry. The window was broken just above the lock, though the door itself remained secured.

Anyone could've reached in and turned the deadbolt back into place after entering, closing and securing the door behind them.

"Could you send someone out?" Luke asked, nodding at Cleo and giving her an intimate smile. He eyed her legs, slowly working his way up to mid-thigh, where the bottom of his shirt caressed her gorgeous legs.

Listening to Luke's voice, Cleo eased into the living room, careful to stay away from the windows. She slid into her panties and removed her gun from her purse. She walked to the wall and leaned toward the window, peeking out and noting that the security lights leading up the front walk were now dark.

Somebody was testing the waters.

The intercom buzzed and Luke hung up the phone and began a conversation with the security officer at the main gate, just as Cleo caught a glimpse of a silhouette running past the window.

In cop mode, she reacted instinctively.

She unlocked the front door and bolted outside, gun in hand, wearing black stilettos, thigh-high stockings and Luke's white button-down shirt.

Okay, it wasn't one of the smartest moves she'd ever made but then again, somebody was fucking with her man and revenge was the only thing on her mind.

Until the first shot buzzed by her head, that is.

Chapter Fifteen

As the gunfire exploded above her head, Cleo slid in the damp grass and went to the ground.

"Shit," she cried out, landing hard on her elbow. She rolled onto her stomach. She aimed her compact 9mm in the direction of the muzzle flash and pulled the trigger.

As if surprised by the return fire, the silhouette popped up from the ground like a moving target in a carnival game and then bolted straight for the wall.

The SOB was going over.

"I don't think so." Cleo scrambled to her feet and ran toward him. Gaining ground, she lunged, tackling him to the grass just as the security vehicle cleared the electric gates.

They rolled across the grass and he ended up on top. Cleo spun and bucked her hips, turning until she was on top but the slippery bastard managed to break free. She scrambled to her feet to follow him. He swung just as one of her heels sank into the soft grass.

Cleo tried to dodge the strike but couldn't pull her foot free. That fraction of a second cost her big time.

He landed the punch.

His fist connected with her jaw and sent her back onto her ass, completely breaking the heel off her shoe. "Jimmy Choos, asshole!"

He was so going to pay.

Cleo caught movement out of the corner of her eye. She glanced up just in time to see Luke in a dead run heading right for her.

She turned and saw the suspect scaling the brick wall surrounding the property. He hesitated once he made it to the top and took aim.

"Get down," Cleo screamed just as a round whizzed by their heads.

Sleeping with Luke had been a huge mistake, she realized, the weight of what she'd done hitting her as bullets flew by his head.

This just got personal.

The shooter disappeared over the wall. He'd gotten the hell outta there. Cleo looked at the driveway and the security officer had taken cover behind his sedan. He was on the radio, frantically trying to get help.

She shoved her gun into her panties, smoothing Luke's shirt as she came to her feet. "Are you all right?" she asked as she limped toward him.

She patted down his chest, his head and his shoulders, looking for blood, frantic, thinking that he'd been hit.

"Me, Jesus —" Luke pulled Cleo into his arms. He crushed her to his chest. "Are you okay? What happened? Are you hurt?" he rambled. "What the hell's going on?"

"I'm fine," she assured him, taking a moment to inhale and sigh in relief. By some miracle, Luke hadn't been hit. "I'm just fine."

"Thank God." Luke held her for a moment, his hands in her hair. "You're limping?" he observed, holding her at arm's length. "You're hurt."

"One of my Jimmy Choos is mortally wounded," Cleo said morosely, as if she'd just lost a dear friend. "It took me two months to save up for these frickin' shoes."

Luke swept her into his arms.

"Just wait a minute," she argued, pushing on his chest. "Damn it, Luke."

He headed for the driveway, where the security officer was running toward them.

"Hey, five-hundred-dollar pair of Jimmy Choos murdered here," Cleo whined. She wasn't receiving any sympathy for her loss. "Put me down, Lace."

"I'll ask Jimmy to get you another pair," Luke said, kissing her on the cheek. "But I'm not going to have you limping across the estate."

"I can walk. It's just a broken heel."

"Not a chance—" Luke held her tightly, ignoring her protest. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Jimmy?" Cleo asked, tilting her head and looking up at him, the meaning of what he'd said finally registering. She was a bit dizzy but attributed it to the rap on her chin. "You know Jimmy Choo personally?"

Luke kissed her temple. "That was incredibly insane, you know?"

"Your security system sucks," Cleo told him, sounding a bit too defensive.

"So you, what, chase a burglar down barehanded?"

"I don't suppose you have any ice?" Cleo asked, ignoring his question but unable to disregard the ache in her jaw. She rubbed it and groaned, pissed off that he'd actually landed the punch.

"He hit you?" Luke asked, stunned. He stopped dead in his tracks. "Jesus, Cleo." His voice was louder than normal and his face a darkening shade of red. His azure blue eyes had taken on a deeper color, reminding her of an angry ocean. A frown line furrowed his brow and made him appear a bit intimidating. "I'm going to kill that bastard."

"Ice," Cleo repeated, her heart pitter-pattering. He wanted to protect her and for some reason that did things to her. Things that she didn't even want to consider. How could a man touch a woman like her on so many levels?

Luke bypassed the driveway and headed right for the house. He kicked the partially opened door with his foot and hurried into the kitchen. His steps were brisk and his silence saying more than angry words.

He sat her on the kitchen counter and turned to retrieve an ice cube bucket from the chrome side-by-side fridge. He found a sandwich baggie and dumped ice inside, sealing it up and wrapping it in a dishtowel that he yanked out of the drawer.

So, this was the famously smooth Lukas Nathanial Lace ruffled.

Cleo flinched reflexively but Luke didn't hesitate. He stepped between her legs and very gently laid the bag of ice on her chin. His damned hands were shaking.

It had hit Luke hard when he couldn't find Cleo inside the house. He'd just happened to glance out the window to discover her rolling around in the grass with a burglar.

His heart had literally stopped. He couldn't breathe.

It was like a nightmare. He couldn't move, couldn't react to what he was seeing for a few moments. Just couldn't believe it.

He'd just found Cleo. He'd spent thirty-five years searching for the right woman. Years of relationships that just didn't fit. He'd played at it with Kate. Thought briefly that she'd been the one, had listened to her family as well as his assure him that she was indeed the woman he should spent the remainder of his life with.

In the end, however, Luke had known in his gut that Kate had been wrong for him. He'd finally found the right woman and there was no way he was giving her up without one hell of a fight.

"We have the community locked up tight," the security officer said to Luke as he approached, clearing his throat and stepping into the kitchen. He got his first good look at Cleo and blushed, shuffling his feet.

He looked like he might bolt from the room any second, Luke thought, empathizing. He didn't intimidate easily or often, and she'd done both.

"Thanks," Cleo said, holding the ice to her chin.

"Thank you, Jack," Luke said, not moving away from Cleo but turning to look at the security man.

Jack Potts was taking his first year of criminal justice classes and had only been on the job for six months. The most excitement he'd seen was when there was a fire in the McDermotts' kitchen and he'd seen Mrs. McDermott in her robe.

Poor kid was in way over his head. Luke was certain that Jack had definitely never had a conversation with a hot babe wearing thigh-highs, stilettos and a man's shirt before.

She looked like a pinup from the Forties with those amazing legs and wild hair. "The— The police are on the way, Mr. Lace."

"Good job, Jack. Can you keep an eye out for them?"

He couldn't be much more than twenty or twenty-one, Luke thought. He looked both terrified and jazzed at the same time.

"My partner closed the main gates," Jimmy said, avoiding looking in Cleo's direction after catching Luke frowning at him. "We'll try to lock this guy down on the property."

"He's long gone," Cleo interrupted. "Wouldn't have stuck around."

Both of them looked at her in surprise, and she immediately looked offended.

Cleo shoved Luke away and climbed off the countertop. The barrel of the gun, which she'd tucked into her panties, was intruding on a rather sensitive area. If she didn't relieve herself quickly, she was about to become extremely intimate with her own firearm.

One time, in band camp...

She headed for the stairs, angry with herself for putting Luke in danger. Angry that she'd reacted so stupidly.

That's exactly what she'd done, put him in danger.

She'd been selfish and careless. Irresponsible and overconfident.

God, this could have been so much worse. Luke could've been shot tonight. Killed and it would've been her damned fault.

"Will you stay at the door until maintenance arrives?" Luke asked Jack.

"I've already contacted the director of environmental services. He's on his way but don't worry, Mr. Lace, I'm not going anywhere."

"Excellent job, Jack."

Cleo pushed Luke out of the way as he followed her but she didn't make it past the hallway before she heard an all-too familiar voice and cringed.

Triple shit, Cleo thought, realizing that there was no way to avoid what was about to happen.

"Detectives, this is Mr. Lace," Jack made the introduction. "Mr. Lace, Minneapolis Police detectives."

"Mr. Lace," the older of the two officers said. He leaned in and shook Luke's hand.

"This is my girlfriend, Cleo," Luke said, making the obligatory introduction.

Girlfriend? Cleo thought, glancing at Luke and closing her eyes.

She was so about to be busted. She'd managed to reach the status of girlfriend but that was about to end. Worst of it was that there wasn't a damned thing she could do about it.

Could her life suck any more?

"Did you get a look at him?" the younger of the two detectives asked, looking at Cleo and not Luke.

"Detective, Cleo has already been through enough and doesn't need to be interrogated like a suspect."

They were nearly the same age, Cleo thought, looking from the detective to Luke, and wondering how many mistakes she was going to make in her lifetime.

"Black mask, dark clothing and gloves. Six feet, one-eighty." Cleo glanced at Detective Danny Patrick, employing her best poker face. She didn't as much as blink.

Luke looked at Cleo, staring at her with those deadly eyes. Just as in the restaurant the first time they met, she could feel him looking right through her.

She could just about hear the wheels turning in his head.

"Car?"

"Couldn't see it," Cleo snapped. "He scaled the wall with a rope, so there was premeditation there."

Luke turned his attention to Detective Patrick. He shifted his weight and folded his arms over his chest, going into defensive mode.

"Gun?"

".45," Cleo said confidently.

"You're a bit underdressed for the weather, aren't you?" Detective Patrick said, nodding at her attire. He couldn't help but sound bitter, though he didn't mean it.

"You certainly arrived fast," Cleo retorted. "Simple burglary?"

Detective Patrick ground his teeth, biting his tongue. "A house in this area of town has shots fired and everyone's called in. You know that?"

"I need a shower—" Cleo turned on her heels, limping away with all the dignity she could muster, dead Jimmy Choo be dammed.

She grabbed her bag and clothes from the living room and headed for Luke's bedroom.

"I need a written statement," Patrick yelled at her from the foyer. He turned and cursed, heading for the exterior wall.

"I have the distinct feeling you two know each other," Luke said, following behind Cleo.

"A lifetime ago," Cleo explained.

She stormed up the staircase and kicked off her shoes, sighing when she saw the missing heel. She dug through her bag and grabbed her cell phone. Tossing her bag on the bed and with Luke hot on her ass, she closed the door in his face.

"Can you explain what that means?" Luke asked. His voice was oddly cold. It took a lot to get him angry and being made a fool of certainly had done the trick.

She could tell that Luke was putting it all together. He was pissed and perhaps felt foolish. God, she thought, she should have told him everything.

Cleo grabbed her clothes, and unbuttoned Luke's shirt, her hands shaking. "Nothing to explain," she said to the door.

Luke knocked, refusing to accept her copout. "Let me in, we need to talk."

Cleo zipped into her skirt and dialed information from her cell phone, pacing back and forth. "North Town Taxi," she said to the operator who answered her call and then connected her.

She had to get out of here before this thing exploded all around her.

"Cleo," Luke called out her name from the other side of the door. The knob rattled and she glanced at the window, actually considering using that to avoid the confrontation that was about to occur.

"Yes, I need a ride," she whispered loudly to the cab company's dispatcher, over the banging on the door. She gave Luke's address and snapped her cell phone closed, wondering if Luke would rip the damn door off the hinges.

No, she told herself. He could never get that angry.

"Cleo, open the damned door."

Cleo looked at her reflection in the mirror and suddenly wished for a change of clothes, a change of lives, for God's sake.

The banging stopped so suddenly that she actually flinched at the silence.

He had gone downstairs, she reasoned, her heart pounding against her rib cage.

She ran a hand through her hair, picking out blades of soggy grass and leaves. Her mascara was smudged and her lips red and swollen from being so thoroughly kissed.

The memory of his mouth upon hers was like a physical jab, a knife in her heart. She sucked in a deep breath of air and opened the door. She turned toward the bed and stopped dead in her tracks.

Luke was sitting on the bed, the contents of her purse spilled out around him. He was having a grand time going through her wallet.

"Hey," she yelled. "What the hell are you doing?"

Luke held up her Minnesota private investigator's identification badge, his eyes slowly moving from the ID to hers. "You're a private investigator?"

"You have no right going through my things," Cleo raged. "No right."

"You're kidding me, right?" Luke said, so calmly that Cleo backed up a step or two. Not that she was physically afraid of him but that his eyes had taken on an icy blue hue that she'd never seen before.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was planning to," Cleo said, slumping against the threshold of the door. There was nowhere else to go. No escape from the truth. She really had been planning to tell him, planning to tell him tonight.

She'd just kept being distracted by his mouth, his lips, his cock.

Luke stared at the ID, turning it over and over in his hands. He kept looking at it, as if he thought it was a fake. "That's how you know the hotshot detective out there?"

"You're jealous?" Cleo said in disbelief.

"Answer me, Cleo. It's the least you could do."

Oh, he was angry, all right. She could see it in the way he had gone cold. His fury bottled up inside, hidden behind those impeccable Lace manners. His parents would be so proud.

"I was a cop for ten years," Cleo finally said. She tried to meet his gaze but he wouldn't look at her, wouldn't take his eyes off that damned ID card.

Luke finally set her wallet down and tossed the identification beside it. He stood and crossed the room, walking in the opposite direction. He leaned against the window ledge, and stared out as if not seeing anything at all. "What else don't I know about you?"

"I was hired to obtain information about you—"

"Hired?" Luke barked. He looked over at her then, really looking at her as if seeing her for the first time.

Cleo watched as his gaze fell to the short skirt, fuck-me shoes lying disheveled on the floor and the body-hugging sweater showing plenty of cleavage.

"Tits and ass," Luke said. "You put on a show and I fell for it hook, line and sinker."

This wasn't happening, Cleo thought, this couldn't happen.

"You set me up."

"No," Cleo argued at the accusation. "I would never—"

"You were following me," Luke said, pointing at her. He rolled his eyes, nearly slapped his own forehead. "I'm a fucking fool. I knew I'd seen you. So you, what, dug into my private affairs. Invaded my life?"

"I was hired by a client," Cleo tried to explain. "And you were supposed to be a job."

"A job?" Luke interrupted, looking at her in disbelief.

She regretted the words as soon as they'd slipped from her mouth. That wasn't what she meant. Damn it, this was going all to hell.

"You've got quite the pair of balls to complain about me going through your bag," Luke said, motioning at her open wallet. "But you violate what little privacy I've managed to retain. What a hypocrite."

"It's what I do," Cleo snapped back. She tossed her hairbrush and wallet into her purse. "You're going to judge me now. This is how I earn a living, pay bills, keep food in my stomach and a roof over my head. But you wouldn't know about that, would you?"

"I was a fool," Luke said, shaking his head and crossing the room.

Cleo watched him back away as if he couldn't get far enough away. Jesus, it hurt.

"A goddamned fool to believe a woman like you would be interested in me."

"No," Cleo maintained, trying to get him to see the truth. She felt ashamed enough about what she'd done but she truly had feelings for him. "This was – personal."

"Personal," Luke said with a chuckle. "Oh Jesus. You expect me to buy that?"

"That's what you do, isn't it?" Cleo snapped. She shoved her bag under her arm and swept up her shoes, hugging them to her chest. "Buy things."

She turned and stormed out of the room. She held on to the railing for support and didn't stop until she was at the bottom of the staircase.

God, something inside her chest hurt. Was it her heart? Her eyes burned with tears that she refused to let fall. She deserved this, she thought, deserved the pain, because Luke was right.

Hesitating at the bottom of the stairs, Cleo reached out and touched the silver frame of what looked like the most recent Lace family photograph.

Luke stood proudly beside his mother, his brother Tommy standing between their parents. Looming in the background was a cabin large enough to be a lodge.

If there'd been any doubt in her mind before, she knew for certain now. She recognized Tommy Lace, and this situation had just gotten a whole lot uglier.

Tommy was the young man she'd seen coming out of Senator Hammerstrom's home when she'd met with him at his lakeside estate.

Tommy was connected to the man who wanted Luke dead.

Cleo heard the door open at the top of the stairs and bolted outside where she found Jack standing guard dutifully at the door. She didn't want to look at Luke again, couldn't stand to see those warm azure eyes go so cold when they met hers.

The maintenance man had arrived and was measuring the dimensions of the broken glass with a yellow tape measure.

"Good night, ma'am," Jack said, tipping his hat as if he were the sheriff of a wild town somewhere in the west.

"Jack, keep your eyes open," Cleo said, looking over her shoulder and back at the house. She hesitated only for a moment, wanting to explain further but not knowing where to start. "I believe that Mr. Lace is in danger."

"Yes, ma'am." Jack looked around, standing a bit taller, squaring his shoulders. "I'll keep watch over him, ma'am."

Cleo reached into her purse and retrieved a business card, handing it off to Jack who eyed it in disbelief. "Please call me if anything out of the ordinary occurs."

"Wow," Jack said in awe. "A real PI."

She would've laughed under different circumstances. She didn't feel so real tonight. No, she'd violated every code of ethics she might've had and had completely screwed up the case.

She could've been a stripper. A porn star. She liked sex enough, didn't even mind using her body to influence men, enabling her to find evidence and solve cases.

Was it seduction? In a roundabout way, yes. Even as bold as she was, however, she wasn't into voyeuristic sex.

She turned to find Detective Patrick waiting for her near his car. Cleo went straight for him. "Can you give me a lift to the main gate so I can catch a cab?"

"Where's your boyfriend?"

Cleo didn't answer. Instead, she looked over at the yellow crime scene tape and the techs that were finishing up for the evening.

Danny sighed, looking back at the mansion and then at Cleo. "We found 9mm and .45 slugs," he said, changing the subject.

"He fired four or five rounds but I think he was aiming at Lu – Mr. Lace."

"You missed?" Danny said, a bit shocked by that. Cleo never missed. "We dug three 9mm casings out of that wall. Wouldn't happen to know why this happened, would you?"

"Not yet," Cleo said.

"What's going on?" Danny took her arm and walked her to the passenger's side of the sedan. He opened the door, ushered her inside and climbed behind the wheel.

The temperature had dropped considerably and Lord knows she wasn't wearing much of anything. "This is a case, right?"

"So to speak," Cleo said, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. She had a headache coming on. She bit her bottom lip, still thinking about Tommy Lace.

The implications of Tommy coming out of Senator Hammerstrom's mansion earlier that day were devastating.

Danny put the transmission into drive, ignoring the knocking sound in the engine. He turned the heater on low for Cleo, hoping to warm her up.

"Thanks," she said after a few moments. She turned to him. Couldn't help but notice that he looked well. His dark brown hair was customarily longer than it should have been but his goatee was trimmed close to his face.

It was a policy that officers who worked for the Minneapolis PD had a clean-shaven face and short hair but Danny had a thing about rules.

Shave everyday. Danny wore a goatee.

Haircut every four weeks, Danny had one a year.

Suit and tie. Danny wore a jacket and jeans over a button-down shirt. No tie.

Don't sleep with your partner.

"I've never been one to follow the rules," Cleo whispered to herself. Though, sleeping with her partner had been a rule she never should have broken.

"What?" Danny said, turning his full attention to her.

"How've you been?" she asked instead. She hoped to ease some of the tension that radiated between them.

"Heartbroken," Danny bit back. He sighed and shook his head. "His girlfriend?" he asked, in disbelief. "You're Lace's girlfriend?"

"He's a job." Her words were so icy that Cleo herself almost believed them.

She knew that she'd broken Danny's heart and that he'd always harbor angry feelings toward her. She hadn't meant to hurt him, hadn't even meant to fuck him but she had. In more ways than one.

They spent nearly forty-eight hours together, working a murder case hard. It just seemed natural to have Danny around and one thing led to another. Next thing they knew, Cleo had shoved Danny up against the car and fucked his brains out.

She'd known exactly what happened but Danny had been unrealistic. He wanted more. It just couldn't be.

"Didn't look like you were just doing your job when I arrived," Danny said.

He was right, of course, though Cleo would never admit it. Not to Danny and certainly not to herself.

It didn't matter now, anyway.

It all took second place to the fact that someone had followed her and Luke tonight. Someone had stalked around Luke's estate, trying to test his alarm system.

"Why'd the big shot hire you?" Danny asked, looking over at her and smiling. "Big bad rich guy afraid for his life."

"He didn't hire me, Danny." Cleo shoved the door open the moment they arrived at the guard shack, even before the sedan rolled to a stop.

"I'm confused here, Cleo."

"Me too," she said, giving him one last look. "See you around, Patrick."

Danny would never believe that Minnesota Senator Richard Hammerstrom had actually been her client. Hell, she barely believed it herself.

Did the senator want Luke dead?

She had to do some digging on her own before she could make an accusation that outrageous. One thing was certain, however. She had to find out why Tommy Lace was at Senator Hammerstrom's mansion the morning that she'd handed over the dossier she'd compiled on Luke.

It didn't make sense and yet it gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. If the senator had Tommy in his pocket, why'd he need to hire her to find out about Luke?

Either way she cut it, Luke was in danger. Cleo just couldn't shake the feeling that not only had she done nothing to protect him but that she'd put him there in the first place.

That his life was at stake. If he died, she might as well have pulled the trigger. His death would rest upon her shoulders and his blood would forever stain her hands.

And if that bullshit was her destiny, then she was sure as the hell going to try to do something to change it, even if it meant dying herself, to save his life. It was the least she could do. After all, he was the only man she'd ever loved.

Chapter Sixteen

Wait for it.

Wait for it.

Cleo repeated the silent command in her mind, forcing her body to relax and remain in place. Her back against the solid wood door, she stood silently.

Listening, waiting and anticipating.

It was bright outside for being past the witching hour. The harvest moon was on her side, showing her the way through the darkness like a torch lighting a path through a dark, deserted wood.

The condo was located in the high-rent district of Loral Park near downtown Minneapolis.

Having chosen black low-rise leather pants and a leather and lace bustier that she'd topped off with a black leather jacket, she blended in with the eclectic mix of art students and inked, hardcore rockers who frequent the tattoo shops littering the area.

Cleo pulled her hair back into a low ponytail and wore a silver-studded leather collar around her neck and a matching leather bracelet on her left wrist.

She was feeling mean tonight and it showed.

The lock was too easy and once inside, Cleo blinked and waited for her eyes to adjust. The darkness certainly matched her mood.

She slid along the wall as quietly as possible, listening to the sound of a ticking clock somewhere in the room and a baby crying somewhere in the distance.

She had studied the layout of the condominium during a showing in the model with the property manager earlier that day.

She knew exactly where she was going.

Padding through the kitchen, over ceramic tile, she eased down the hallway in what seemed to take an eternity. Inch by inch, she moved, being as stealthy as possible.

The bedroom door was open slightly and she stood there for minutes, which clicked away on the clock in the other room.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

She listened but heard only the sound of his breathing. In and out. Slow and deep. He was gone. She was sure of it.

After deciding that it was safe to enter, Cleo eased the door open and stepped inside the bedroom. She stopped for a moment to make certain it was safe and slid her weapon out of her shoulder holster.

She walked to the edge of the bed but he didn't stir. Inhaling deeply, she focused on the sound of his breathing, on the way he was situated in bed, the moonlight reaching in through the open blinds allowing her to see the outline of his body.

One.

Two.

Three.

She pounced. Placing the barrel of her 9mm against his head, she cocked the hammer just to emphasize her point.

"Don't - fucking - move."

"What the hell?" he stirred, jerking awake. He tried to reach for the nightstand where he kept his weapon but Cleo backhanded him with the butt of the gun.

Blood sprayed the pillowcase and he gasped, shrinking back. She grabbed his outstretched hand and cuffed him quickly, having done it thousands of times while working the streets.

He was out of it for the moment.

Cleo shoved her sidearm in her holster and quickly cuffed his arms to the metal headboard, which was absolutely convenient.

"Wake up, pretty boy," Cleo cooed.

Demetrius groaned, confused, still half-asleep and dizzy from the force of the blow to his face. He'd done some boxing as a teenager but had always had a glass jaw.

Cleo straddled his waist and used every ounce of her buck twenty-five to hold him in place.

"You look pretty hot in that sheet," she whispered slowly, her voice incredibly low. She couldn't help but recall his comment about her leather miniskirt. He'd said that she looked really hot.

She was hot all right, hot to pay him back, and payback was her specialty.

"How'd you get in here?" Demetrius groaned, still spitting blood. He tried to sit up and shook his hands, frustrated when he realized he wasn't going far.

He didn't like losing his power and control. No, he absolutely thrived on that.

"Your door was unlocked," she said coyly. "You should be more careful, D."

Cleo felt him trying to catch his breath beneath her. His breathing was rapid, nearly out of control.

She slid her hands up and over his bare chest. He was solid, all right. Built like a tank. She smiled when she found that his nipples were erect, worshiping them with pliant fingers.

"What the hell're you doing, you crazy bitch?"

"Nice," Cleo said, adoring his body with her hands, relishing in the feel of him beneath her. He was restrained and all of his power lost but it drove into her like a cock filling her empty core.

She was finally in control.

"Screw you."

"Maybe," Cleo said, her voice lilting into laughter. She leaned forward until they were nose to nose and realized that not only was his chest hard but so was his cock.

Pressed against the inside of her thigh, his erection throbbed.

Well, Hammerstrom's hired muscle was into bondage. Go figure.

"Knew you'd be happy to see me, D," Cleo said, sitting up and grinding into his cock, "but you could at least play a little hard to get."

"Let me go, we'll see how much trash you talk."

"Tell me about Tommy Lace first."

Demetrius chuckled and gave his hands a good shake, trying to free himself. "Let me go, you bitch."

"Why'd Hammerstrom hire me if he's working with Thomas Lace?"

"You have a hot ass," Demetrius retorted. He squirmed beneath her but it was only making it worse on him. His cock was growing harder and bigger by the second.

Cleo smiled, holding on for the ride. She ground her ass into his hips and his cock jumped. "Oh," she said as if shocked. "What's wrong, D? Do you like this?"

Demetrius held still, as if refusing to move. He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply, trying desperately to gain control of his body.

"Tell me why Hammerstrom hired me to gather information about Lace, when he already had Tommy?"

It was easy to rub her body against his cock. It was easy to make him squirm beneath her. She was beyond pissed off. Furious with him, with Senator Hammerstrom and Luke.

Moreover, damn it, she was livid with herself.

Cleo rocked her hips back and forth, dry-humping his cock. Slow and hard, she moved until he was quivering beneath her.

Demetrius moaned low and long. He tugged on his wrist in an effort to reach for her. He'd forgotten he was restrained for just a moment, the motion of her hips driving everything else but fucking her from his mind.

He was so hard she thought he'd come. Gasping for air, Demetrius seemed as if he'd never catch his breath. She reached up and trapped his face between her palms, her mouth nearly touching his lips.

His skin was rough, not cleanly shaven like Luke's but thick with a five o'clock shadow. His cologne was stronger, not as subtle and much sweeter.

"Tell me why?" she asked again. "Last chance."

Demetrius gasped for breath when she ran her tongue over his lips. He tugged on the cuffs in an effort to break loose but it was a halfhearted attempt at freedom and they both knew it. They were solid, cold and unbreakable, metal against metal. Cleo envied their power.

"A—hit," Demetrius panted.

Mouth open, Cleo stroked her lips over his face. Not kissing him but feeding him with her open mouth.

Demetrius was doing everything he could to maintain control. It wasn't nearly enough.

She latched on to his bottom lip with her teeth. Hips gyrating, she moved in small, controlled circles. She gave him the best lap dance he'd had in his life.

She bit down, nearly drawing blood, her nipples tingling when he cried out in exquisite pain.

She liked that, his pain.

"Bitch," Demetrius hissed, humping her with his cock, pressing it against her thigh. He couldn't control himself. His body had taken over. "You little bitch."

Cleo released him with a shove and sat back. She ran her fingertips over the light tuft of hair that dusted his muscles, a trail leading down his abdomen and disappearing beneath the sheet.

He was beautiful really and so different from Luke.

Luke, Jesus.

Cleo chastised herself.

She had to stop thinking about Luke. She couldn't start comparing every man she encountered to him.

It had only been twenty-four hours but she hadn't slept, hadn't eaten and hadn't stopped thinking about him.

"Why does Hammerstrom want Lace dead?"

"Let-me-go."

"Tell me first," Cleo said teasingly. She pulled back the sheet and revealed his gloriously naked body. Moving backward, she slid down his legs, sliding her hands through the coarse hair covering them.

She stroked her hands up his thighs, to his hips and cupped his ass cheeks, palming them, digging her nails into his flesh. His cock was standing straight up, at attention.

"Uugh," Demetrius groaned, trying not to lose his mind. "Fuck."

"Tell me, or I'll leave you cuffed to the bed," Cleo said. "I'm sure Hammerstrom wouldn't be very happy to find you in such a...compromising position."

Demetrius growled like an animal and tried to reach for her, giving his wrists a tug, the metal frame shaking.

If he thought about it, Cleo realized he could probably rip the damned bed apart. She'd just have to keep him distracted, she supposed.

She'd been right about one thing, she realized, sizing up his cock.

Though he was buff, he'd been overcompensating for, how should she put it, much smaller attributes.

But he wasn't exactly a member of the little-cock club either.

No, he was bigger than her pinky finger and his cock was wide in girth, which could make all the difference.

He would rate worthy on her and Anna's fuckable cock list.

Come on, we all know size really matters.

"Let me go," Demetrius gasped. "Or fuck me."

Oh, she could fuck him, all right.

The first thing she thought about, however, was Luke.

Damn him.

She remembered the way he'd reacted to her the night before. He hadn't given her a second to explain herself. Hell, he hadn't even looked her in the eye.

Fuck, if that hadn't hurt.

She'd spent years making certain she wasn't the one who ended up with a broken heart and wham, he doesn't break it, he tears it out of her chest.

Cleo shoved Demetrius' legs apart. She watched his face, shadowed by a thin veil of moonlight from the window and contorted in exquisite pain.

She fed off his helplessness, the darkness and power she had over him shedding light upon the emptiness in her heart and soul.

She didn't have to think, didn't have to try, she controlled this man and he wanted her.

That was true power.

"Tell me first why Hammerstrom wants Lace dead?" she demanded. Her voice was eerily calm and sent chills down his spine. She leaned down and rubbed her cheek over his thigh, the hair tickling her face.

Demetrius shivered and her lips curved into a wicked smile.

"Tell me," she demanded, raising her voice. She leaned forward and blew ever-so softly on his balls. His cock jerked and she had the urge to tease it with her tongue.

Demetrius bucked his hips, the handcuffs clanking against the metal frame, the sound breaking into her subconscious like the sound of a shrill alarm rupturing the silence of the night.

Just like the alarm that had sounded in Luke's home after they'd made love.

Made love?

Cleo closed her eyes, trying to drive Luke from her mind. She licked her lips, looked at Demetrius' shaft and fought the urge to climb onto it and ride him until she couldn't move.

Couldn't think.

Couldn't hurt.

He wanted her and she was in complete control. That was a rush, both physical and emotional but she had to ask herself what this really was.

She was trying to drive Luke out of her mind, to forget but no amount of fucking in the world would ever do that.

She pulled back for a moment, eyes clenched tight. What the hell was she doing?

"I—don't—know," Demetrius panted. He licked his lips, his mouth bone dry and his body stiff, his muscles contracting as he tried to free himself. He was staring at her now, his dark eyes hungry.

"Bullshit. How could you not know?" Cleo shook her head in disbelief. She stood up and wiped her hand over her face. This was out of control. She had to stop now, before anyone was hurt, before she did something extremely stupid.

"I do what I'm told," he snapped at her. Metal clanking against metal, the sound was deafening in the silence of the night. "Now if you're done screwing me around, let me the hell go or climb on, bitch."

He was telling the truth. She could hear it in his tone, see it in his eyes.

She'd broken him down. He was naked, vulnerable and reduced to a quivering mass of rigid muscle. He couldn't lie to her now if he'd tried.

Cleo slid a cuff key into his hand and backed away from the bed, from him.

"Wait," Demetrius yelled. He tried to work the key into the lock but couldn't quite maneuver it. "Finish this."

"Maybe next time—" Cleo said as she turned to leave. "I got what I came for." She ran through the bedroom and worked her way through the dark. She hit the door, ripped it open and ran.

She could hear the cuffs release and Demetrius in a dead run toward her, the hardwood floor beneath him thumping like a herd of horses running over dry, cracked earth.

He was quick for being such a big guy. She'd give him that. But then again, he was especially motivated.

Cleo hustled down the stairs, taking two at a time. She hit the sidewalk and slowed to a walk. She crossed the street and slowed to a quick walk as she headed for her car around the block.

She unlocked the door and started the engine with the remote starter. She slid into the driver's seat and quickly pulled into traffic.

"A hit?" she said in disbelief. Who the hell had put a hit on Luke and why didn't Demetrius know more about it? He was Hammerstrom's right-hand man. Wasn't he?

Cleo had gone to Demetrius' place in search of answers but was leaving with more questions.

She knew one thing, however. Luke was in danger and she still had no idea why or how to protect him. She still couldn't be sure where the threat was coming from.

She did manage to discover one thing about herself, however.

She could have fucked Demetrius but she hadn't.

Hell, six months ago she would have fucked him raw but not after meeting Luke. Not after falling for him hard.

Cleo pulled over and slammed on the brakes, jerking her car to a stop. She draped her arms over the top of the wheel, resting her head on the hard rubber, tears filling her eyes as the realization took hold.

She was in love with Luke and couldn't do a frickin' thing about it.

The irony of it was that she'd broken up with her last boyfriend because of his lies and now she'd lost Luke because she'd neglected to tell him the truth.

There was no going back.

She swiped at her cheeks and forced the hot, salty tears away. She hated to cry. She never cried, because no matter what happened from here on out, her life would never be the same again and even tears couldn't change that.

Chapter Seventeen

The red Mercedes raced north on the interstate, whizzing in and out of traffic and breaking about a dozen or so laws. It was all Cleo could do to follow him without turning him in with a quick cell phone call to the state police.

She tried to keep a fair distance between them, though Tommy was oblivious to everything around him. Where Luke was observant and aware, Tommy was ignorant of the world around him, focused solely upon his own interests and needs.

Cleo stopped at the curb and watched him pull into valet parking, toss a cigarette to the curb and head through a set of blacked-out glass double doors.

Great.

She glanced up at the sign above the door and cursed her rotten luck.

Siren's Gentlemen's Club

Come In and Get Burned.

It was Saturday morning, Cleo reasoned, so it couldn't be that busy. Right?

She tied her shirt at the waist and released two buttons, revealing the white v-neck tank she'd worn beneath, as well as the lacy push-up bra.

A leather mini and pencil-thin heels, though they weren't her Jimmy Choos, and she was ready to go. She applied a coat of lip gloss and turned to head for the strip club.

The place was a standing contrast to the rest of the world. The brightness of the day was drowned out by the darkness of the dungeon-like interior. The underlying bass pounded through the wall of speakers to destroy the serenity of a quiet weekend morning.

Temporary blinded by the darkness, Cleo hesitated while her eyes adjusted.

There was an unattended cash register behind a high counter and surveillance cameras with red lights blinking above her.

Despite the thumping music that hummed through her body, she almost expected to find the club deserted. She walked through the second set of double doors and blinked, the darkness lit by flashing strobe lights.

She scanned the room and glanced at the mirrors that lined the walls, immediately eyeing Tommy.

He was sitting directly in front of the stage and speaking with a man she didn't recognize.

"Are you hiring?" Cleo asked the no-neck bartender standing behind the polished silver and black lacquered bar.

This guy's name had to be had to be Benny the Ball Breaker or perhaps Tony the Crusher. Some clichéd mob name, Cleo thought, because this guy had bruiser written all over. He was even bigger and more intimidating than good ol' Demetrius.

She smiled to herself, wondering how he planned to get even with her for the little midnight visit she'd paid him.

"Talk to Mark," he yelled, his deep voice nearly drowned out by the pounding music. He pointed at Tommy and the man he was speaking to, both of them sitting down beside the stage.

Cleo turned her back to them both and eyed a voluptuous blonde walking toward the bar.

"How long have you worked here?" Cleo yelled over the music, leaning over to talk into her ear.

She looked at Cleo, poker-faced but her eyebrows rose in mild suspicion and a bit of amusement.

"I'm thinking about applying here," Cleo lied, feeling her uncertainty vibrating through her body like the pulse of the beat ringing in her head.

The blonde relaxed a bit, looking Cleo over from head to toe. She flashed a smile, bleached teeth and a huge rack, making Cleo wish she had the cash to spend on cosmetic upgrades.

She'd never had any complaints about the size of her breasts but definitely envied more endowed women.

Her makeup was dark but carefully applied, and her body was held together by a bikini that looked like it was made for Barbie, the doll, not the dancer.

"I'm wondering if you're hiring." Cleo glanced around the club, making a show of chewing on a stick of gum.

"Honey, for a girl like you, they're always hiring." She grinned and glanced over at Mark. "He's the owner but even if you couldn't dance, you'd draw a crowd."

Cleo glanced in their direction but Tommy and the owner were having a heated discussion about something, neither of them paying attention to anything else.

"Who's the dude?"

"He's Mr. Money," she said with a wink. "He fancies a few girls, puts hundred-dollar bills in their g-strings."

Tommy stood up and glanced in Cleo's direction but she turned her head to avoid eye contact. Hopefully, he hadn't gotten too good of a look at her.

She waited a moment and, after Tommy walked out the door, turned to face the blonde.

"Thanks," Cleo said. "I'll be back after I think about this." She left before the blonde could comment and turned to hurry through the first set of double doors.

Tommy was pulling away as she ran out of the building.

The remainder of his day wasn't as exciting but Tommy stopped at the Byerly's near his place. It was an upscale grocery store for the wealthy who still bothered to shop for their own parties and meals. He returned to his vehicle with a tiny brown bag.

He made one more stop, stopping at Radford Dry Cleaners and carrying in the small brown paper bag he'd come out of the store with.

"What are you doing?" Cleo mumbled to herself, tapping the dash with her fingertips as she waited.

Tommy returned to his car and Cleo frowned. First of all, she couldn't imagine a man as supercilious as Tommy shopping for his own groceries or picking up his own dry cleaning, for that matter.

Secondly, he exited the dry cleaners empty-handed. No shopping bag, no dry cleaning.

This was something else all together and Cleo didn't like it.

She picked up her camera and took a few shots of the building, the name of the company and the cars parked in the lot.

"What the hell are you up to, Tommy boy?" She sat the camera on the seat beside her and touched her jaw with her hand. It was still sore from her tussle with Luke's burglar.

She still couldn't believe he'd gotten the better of her but she had the bruise to prove it.

While waiting for Tommy to run his errands, Cleo had spent some time doing research on her laptop.

Senator Hammerstrom was from old money and it was true that he and Luke's father, Daniel Lace, had been associated when they'd each entered the business world. Partners of a sort.

The only information that she still lacked was discovering exactly what Tommy's connection to Senator Hammerstrom was.

When she'd originally accepted the case and had done the basic background check on each of Luke's relatives, she obviously hadn't gone deep enough.

Tommy, of course, came back with a record for a DWI and a multitude of moving violations. Go figure.

The charges for the drinking and driving were dropped thanks to the high-profile attorney that his father had acquired but it was clear that Tommy Lace was the black sheep of the family.

Cleo followed Tommy and was extremely grateful when he pulled into a parking lot and stepped out of his damn car. She parked on the other side of the lot and sank into her seat. Her heart skipped a few beats when she saw Tommy get out and walk over to meet another man.

Luke wore a pair of Oakley sunglasses, jeans and a casual blue shirt that would bring out the blue in his eyes. If she could see his eyes, that was.

God, seeing him was like a physical jolt.

Cleo had to do everything she could just to keep herself from going to him. From trying to explain, to make him understand.

Luke looked tense, he looked tired. It was in the slump of his shoulders, his pace.

Tommy was doing all the talking but Luke seemed not to be paying any attention. They stepped into a coffeehouse and Cleo waited, wanting to get close enough to overhear but not wanting Luke to see her.

He was way too observant for that.

They emerged from the shop, each with a cup of coffee in a Styrofoam container and headed toward the office building across the street.

Luke shook his head and sighed, now arguing with Tommy. He wasn't a happy man. She could see it from where she sat.

Making a spur-of-the-moment decision, she climbed out of her car. She crossed the street and glanced through the glass doors before entering the building. The hallway was empty. Heart raging, she hurried inside and glanced up just in time to see them step onto the elevator.

She waited as the elevator traveled up and hit the stairwell door with her body, before turning the knob and bursting inside.

She popped her head out on the floor above but the elevator was still on the move.

It stopped on the third floor.

Cleo ran, hit the wall and hesitated before peeking into the corridor. She dared a glance and caught sight of Luke's profile as they entered the waiting area of the Senatorial Nomination Committee.

She back into the staircase and put her back to the wall, trying to catch her breath, trying to reason this all through.

Was Luke going to run for senator?

Cleo thought of what Demetrius had said.

There was a hit on Luke.

Jesus, Hammerstrom probably couldn't handle competing against a Lace in a senatorial race. He'd lose the race for sure.

She had no choice. She was going to have to pay a visit to Hammerstrom. She needed to know exactly who he'd hired to intimidate Luke and why. Would Hammerstrom stoop so low that he'd ask that Luke's life be taken for a price?

Cleo couldn't be sure about anything, at this point.

She had to get the answers one way or another. Even if she had to kick a little ass to do it.

She was certain that Luke's very life depended upon it.

* * * * *

"What can I do for you, my dear?" Senator Hammerstrom asked, watching Cleo walk into his office, led by his housekeeper, a rather matronly woman who was hot on her tail.

"Hello, Senator Hammerstrom." Cleo took his hand and smiled, licking her lips slowly, trying to calm her racing heart.

"Have a seat, dear," he said, motioning at the leather sofa. He was courteous enough to scoot over and give her a bit of space but patted the seat beside him. "Please, call me Rich."

"Thank you," Cleo purred, grateful he didn't want her to call him Dick. There was nothing worse than a man named after his most promising attribute.

Cleo tugged on her skirt and slowly crossed her legs. She'd learned over the years that there was no downplaying them, so she might as well use them as she would any other weapon in her arsenal.

She'd worn her most conservative pair of heels but they were still as sexy as hell. "I wondered, sir, if I could ask you for a favor?"

Hammerstrom didn't hide his appreciation, moving his eyes slowly from her legs to her face. He smiled and nodded. "Of course."

"Honestly, senator, my agency is just getting off the ground." Cleo leaned forward a bit, working her cleavage for all it was worth. "I'm trying to build a base of solid clientele and I was wondering if there was anything else I could do for you?"

Cleo accepted a drink from the housekeeper, who disappeared without having to be dismissed. "Frankly, I could really use the business."

"My but you are delightful," Hammerstrom said, leaning forward and reaching for Cleo's hand. "I would love to see you on a regular basis, my dear."

"Thank you, Senator."

"What have I told you about that?" he chided.

"Thank you, Rich." Cleo lifted her glass to her lips and slowly took a sip. She played with the snifter, swirling the sweet amber liquid around the bottom.

"See, my darling. That wasn't difficult and you've made me an extremely grateful man." He ran one of his fingers up her arm and she fought a shiver of disgust.

"I'm willing to do whatever you need, Senator, er, Rich."

"Very well, my dear." The senator nodded and leaned against the sofa, seeming to relax at the very thought. "You're quite beautiful, if I might say so."

Cleo pretended to blush. She glanced down at the carpet and smiled demurely. Well, as demurely as she could pull off. It must've worked because he moaned very softly, his eyes riveted on the little pout she had going with her bottom lip.

"I believe that your beauty and grace would allow you to accomplish many, many things that most men in your profession could not. Don't you agree?"

"I'm counting on that," Cleo said, tilting her head and pulling her lips up into a sultry smile.

Senator Hammerstrom seemed to consider something carefully and then stood. "This man, Lukas Lace," Hammerstrom said, looking back to meet her gaze, quickly scanning the room as if he expected to find someone eavesdropping. "I need him watched very vigilantly."

"Was my report not thorough enough?" Cleo asked, a bit insulted by his request. She hadn't expected him to mention Luke's case.

"Of course not," the senator scolded her, reaching out and taking her hand. "It was perfectly detailed, my dear."

He released her hand and stood suddenly. He walked to the bar and poured another finger of brandy into his glass. He held up the carafe. "My dear?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine," Cleo said, swirling the remainder of her drink around and waving it in the air.

"I would like to have more information on his activities. It's very important. Anything you could do to assist in the matter would be greatly appreciated."

"Could you tell me what I'm watching for, Senator? What I'm dealing with here."

"I can't at this time," Senator Hammerstrom said, dropping his eyes to the floor. He moved to a panel on the wall and pulled it back, revealing a wall safe. He spun the lock, quickly and precisely opening the safe. "But you have all the information you need at this time. Just don't let Mr. Lace out of your sight."

Hammerstrom removed a strongbox, unlocked it with a key he kept in his pocket and withdrew a stack of bills. He slid them in an envelope and handed them off to Cleo.

If she didn't take it, she'd blow her cover. If she did, how would she live with herself? She accepted the envelope, the feel of it in her hand making her feel a bit queasy.

"I'll do my best, Senator."

"I have no doubt," Hammerstrom said, kissing her cheek. "Thank you, my dear."

The sound of panicked yelling and loud voices rocked the silence. Cleo was just about to draw her weapon from her handbag when the door burst open.

"There's a problem at the gate, Senator Hammerstrom."

It was Demetrius and he faltered the moment he laid his eyes on Cleo.

"What is it?" Hammerstrom snapped, crossing the room, a look of annoyance overriding his features.

"There's a car at the gate with smoke billowing out of it. We need to evacuate you from the property, Senator."

"If it's on fire—put it out," Hammerstrom snapped, not seeing the logic in letting it burn. "I don't need to leave for that."

"Senator, he's right." Cleo stood, glancing over at Demetrius and exchanging a knowing look. She wouldn't acknowledge him, wouldn't allow him to intimidate her.

There were uniformed security officers everywhere. "This way, Senator."

Cleo wasn't quite certain what to do. Demetrius took her arm and walked with her directly behind the senator. Her entire body was stiff, her heart racing. He didn't say a word.

They ushered them through the house and into a waiting Suburban, the windows blackened out.

"What is going on?" Cleo asked anyone in general.

"A dog barks and I'm ushered off," Senator Hammerstrom grumbled. "It's ridiculous."

"My car?" Cleo asked, looking around, trying to scoot away from Demetrius, who had sat beside her, of course. The farther she scooted away, however, the closer he drew.

"We can return you to your vehicle once we get the all clear," Demetrius said, leaning over and whispering in her ear. His thigh was touching hers and he pushed his leg against hers, smiling when Cleo squirmed.

"Thank you," Cleo said, looking at the senator and trying not to let Demetrius intimidate her. He was so big, it was hard to avoid touching him.

The Suburban drove through the servants' gate and in the opposite direction to the front entrance.

"Status?" the driver asked into the radio.

"They've got the fire out. It's all clear. Code four."

"I think we should go to the condo in town," Demetrius suggested, looking over at the senator, who nodded in agreement.

The vehicle stopped and Demetrius got out, nodding at Cleo and holding out his hand. "I'll take you back to your vehicle."

She looked around but there were no other volunteers. "Senator, good day."

"See you soon, Ms. Tanek."

Cleo slid out of the Suburban, avoiding Demetrius' outstretched hand.

He grunted and led her to a golf cart. He slid behind the wheel, watching her as she climbed in, sitting as close to the edge as possible.

"We still playing a game?" he asked, looking over at her, though she couldn't see his eyes because he'd slipped on a pair of dark glasses.

"I live for games," Cleo said, looking straight forward and sitting tall. There was nothing he could do to her in the middle of the afternoon on a state senator's estate, right?

She opened her purse and slid her hand inside, her finger on a can of pepper spray that could knock down a bear. She wanted to shoot him but that might be a bit drastic.

Demetrius slammed on the brakes and punched a code into the computer, waiting for the gate to swing open. He drove straight to her car and stopped, grabbing her by the arm and holding her in place. "I'll be seeing you really soon."

"Promise?" Cleo said, turning to look directly at him, seeing her reflection in the lenses of his sunglasses. "Just remember that I like it rough," she said, pulling her arm away and breaking his grasp. "But I guess you already know that."

"You haven't bled yet," Demetrius said. "It'll change your mind."

Cleo laughed, she couldn't help it. She knew what she did to him and yes, his ego had been bruised but come on. This was about sex, about having what she'd deprived him of, having what she'd never give him because she'd discovered something about herself that night.

She didn't want to, but she wanted a man who she could no longer have, a man who just might die because of the information she'd provided and whether she could have him or not, her heart belonged to him.

Chapter Eighteen

"It's the opportunity of a lifetime," Tommy said to his brother as he poured a cup of coffee into his favorite black mug. He turned to glance over his shoulder and managed to eye Luke straight on. "Why the hell are you holding back?"

Luke signed the documents he'd needed to take care of and glanced at his watch. He'd been thinking of nothing but Cleo since he'd watched her walk away and it was killing him.

He'd been lost in thoughts of her kiss, her touch and the way she tasted.

He'd never forget the way she tasted.

Yet, it had all been a lie.

Hadn't it?

He couldn't help but wonder. He kept asking himself how what they'd shared could have been faked. How the attraction couldn't have been genuine. Hell, it was more than attraction. It had been as if he'd spent his life with half of a soul and the moment he'd laid his eyes upon Cleo, he finally found the piece of himself that he'd been missing his entire life.

"You aren't even listening to me, damn it." Tommy glanced into the mirror and adjusted his silk tie. He noticed that his tan was fading and decided that after he straightened out his brother and the campaign was rolling, he'd head south. Get some sun. Relax, if that was possible. "What the hell's up with you anyway? You look like shit."

"Thanks, bro." Luke dropped his pen and scrubbed his hands over his face. He could feel a stress headache coming on. He'd never been so tense in his life.

He just couldn't stop thinking about what an ass he'd been to Cleo. He'd been too angry, had felt too violated and betrayed. He'd been so selfish that he'd never even given her time to explain.

"Tell me what's holding you back?" Tommy asked, trying to take a different tack. "You have the support of the Democratic Party and your family. What more could you ask for?" Tommy walked to the window and folded his arms over his chest. "Jesus, Lukas. This is ridiculous."

"That's it," Luke snapped. He couldn't take it anymore. He pushed his chair back, rolling away from the desk that had once been his father's. He looked around his office, really looked and was surprised to see that there wasn't much of Luke himself inside the room.

Photographs of his father and grandfather lined the walls. A portrait of his great-grandfather adorned the fireplace mantle.

It was all about the Lace Legacy.

"Did you hear a word I said?" Tommy asked, glancing at Luke.

Luke could see the worry in his eyes. He knew that he'd always been predictable and here he was acting just the opposite.

"Is this a midlife crisis?"

Luke chortled, making a spur-of-the-moment decision. He stood, pushed his chair in and grabbed his coat. He shrugged it on and picked up the file he'd avoided looking at all day, heading for the door.

"Where the hell are you going?" Tommy followed Luke into the lobby, hot on his heels and ready for a fight. "We have to talk."

"Don't push me, Thomas." Luke punched the elevator button a few times. He wanted out of this building. He needed fresh air, needed to get away from everything, everyone. Away from his brother.

"You're going out again?"

"My personal life isn't up for discussion," Luke said, tapping the elevator button again, ready to take the stairs. "You're my brother, not my chaperone."

The elevator doors opened and Luke stepped inside. He sighed when Tommy followed but leaned against the wall and stared at the numbers, which seemed to be lighting up at an incredibly slow pace.

"Who is she?" Tommy insisted. He propped one hand up against the wall and glared at Luke. "I know you can kick my ass, but at this point I don't care. I just want some answers."

"You've got some nerve, little brother." Luke couldn't help but laugh. This was priceless. His little brother, the fuck-up, the man who'd never dated the same woman twice, was grilling him.

Luke burst through the doors when they retracted and removed his keys from his pocket as he entered the parking garage. He tugged on his collar. God, he wanted out of this fucking suit.

"Damn it, Luke. Your cock is gonna blow this."

Luke spun around. His face was bright red and sweat beaded his brow. He backed Tommy up, fisting the collar of his three-hundred-dollar shirt. He shoved him against a pillar, nearly forgetting himself completely.

Onlookers scattered out of the way, knowing better than to stop and stare at the boss and his brother. Luke didn't see them. He didn't see anyone because the ferocity of his emotions overrode all rational thought.

"I'm sick of you pushing me," Luke yelled. "It stops now, today. Right this fucking minute."

Things had changed, Luke had changed. He'd been oblivious to his life, to his needs and Cleo had walked in and destroyed the world he'd merely existed in for far too long.

She'd awoken him to the truth, allowed him to discover in one chance encounter everything that his life lacked.

"Luke, you're going to blow your chance of a lifetime."

"You mean your chance of a lifetime, don't you, Tommy?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"If I do this," Luke said finally. "Then I do it for me." He poked Tommy in the chest, emphasizing his point. "Not you, not Mom and Dad but for me!"

After a moment, eyes locked, Luke backed off, leaving his brother speechless for the first time in his life.

It felt extraordinary.

Luke headed for his car. He slammed the door, trying to contain his anger. Jesus, he was sick of this shit. Sick of the constant pressure from his family.

For once, just once in his life, he wanted to be selfish.

He'd always been the go-to guy. He'd taken care of everyone and everything around him. He'd taken care of his parents' house and his brother's mistakes. He'd even stepped up and taken control of Lace Incorporated when his father had retired.

Luke braked at the curb and glanced in both directions, at a crossroads.

Literally.

He pulled over and glanced at the manila envelope on the seat beside him. His fingers itched to pick it up but he just stared at it, torn.

He'd asked a friend, who happened to own a private investigative firm, to conduct a background check on Cleo. Contained inside was everything there was to know about Cleo Tanek.

He couldn't help but feel as though he'd violated her privacy, just as she had his. It was different, however, because Cleo was in fact, only doing her job.

"Screw it," Luke said, taking a left turn, instead of the right he'd normally take to go to his parents' home. No, he didn't want to return there. As a matter of fact, just the thought of going back to that place made him cringe.

He didn't want to be alone in the hallowed halls of the Lace Estate.

He didn't want to wallow in the memory of Cleo and the short time they'd shared there, in the den, on the chaise, on the stairs and in his own bed.

She'd been naked and hungry for his cock and he was hard just thinking about it. Like a crime scene, that home had been tainted. Only instead of blood or trace evidence left behind, there was only emptiness.

It was tangible.

He could hardly breathe.

Someone behind Luke honked a horn and he realized suddenly that he'd driven into the downtown area. On a whim, he pulled into valet parking, handed over his keys

and walked to Neiman Marcus. He went directly to the men's department, knowing exactly what he needed the moment he cleared the fragrance counter.

After shopping for himself, he caught sight of ladies' lingerie and drifted in that direction. An hour later and making one stop in between, he'd stopped to have a few of his packages wrapped.

"Any special occasion?" Augusta, the sales clerk, a middle-aged redhead who'd been well preserved by plastic surgery, asked Luke with the waggle of an eyebrow. She'd even managed to throw in a beautiful smile.

"Because I'm an idiot," Luke said honesty, realizing it for the first time. He laughed when he did and he honestly wished that it wasn't true.

"Could you call my husband?" she teased, sliding his packages up on the counter and placing them in a large shopping bag with handles. "You do realize that most men wouldn't admit that, Mr. Lace."

"It just takes the right woman and a man would admit to any fault," Luke said honestly. "Thank you, Augusta."

Luke reached for his bag and someone behind him bumped his arm. He was pushed forward and if he hadn't reacted fast enough, he would've been shoved headfirst into the counter.

"Mr. Lace, are you all right?" Augusta asked, rushing out to see if he was injured. She looked at the man as he headed for the men's department, picking up the phone and calling security."

"Fine," Luke said, grateful that he had his wallet in his hand. That couldn't have been an accident, he thought. He remembered about the burglar and the shots that were fired.

He'd been confused and concerned with Cleo's safety but looking back, he'd swear those bullets had his name on them.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Lace." Augusta huffed and folded her hands together, not sure what to say. "I'm afraid that was terribly rude."

"Don't worry about it," Luke assured her. He glanced around, the tiny hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

The store was bustling with early Christmas shoppers and ladies searching through displays. There were kids crying in the background and mothers scolding their children. It was the typical day at the mall.

Luke thought about the fact that Cleo bad been hired by someone to follow him. She'd been hired to discover information about him but he'd been so shocked and hurt that he hadn't asked the two most important questions.

Who hired her and why?

Jesus, he was losing his mind. He'd been so distraught by losing her that he hadn't even considered his own safety. What if someone was trying to harm him? Trying to threaten him or his family.

"She's a lucky lady, Mr. Lace." Augusta handed Luke his shopping bag and gave him a cheeky smile, silver moon earrings jingling from delicate lobes.

"No," Luke said with a nod. "I'm the lucky one. I just hope I didn't blow it."

"Sometimes we make hasty decisions," Augusta said, glancing down at the wedding ring on her finger. "But if it's meant to be, Mr. Lace, it will be. Be certain of that."

Luke smiled, thinking that Augusta reminded him of his own mother. He certainly appreciated the pep talk. It was exactly what he needed to hear. Walking through the store and into the fancy indoor mall, he glanced over his shoulder, keeping an eye out, though for what he had no idea.

"If it was meant to be," he said to himself as he stepped into the men's room. He immediately loosened his tie and slipped it off, shoving it into one of the shopping bags. "Then it will be." He looked into the mirror and smiled, unbuttoning his shirt.

Ten minutes later, he was back on track, watching the faces in the crowd as he headed for valet parking. Once he was safely behind the wheel, he grabbed his cell and called his friend back, asking him to meet him at his place.

He'd never been a paranoid man, had never worried that his money and famous name made him a target. Life was too short to live like that. He was a man who dealt in facts, a man who took care of whatever came his way.

Until now.

"Hey, Jack," he said as he pulled up to the security checkpoint at the main gate of his parents' property. "Can you keep an eye out for anything or anyone suspicious?"

"Sure, Mr. Lace." Jack glanced around, looking out of each window and shifting uncomfortably. "Something wrong?"

"No," Luke said. "I'll be gone for a while and want to be sure everything's okay around my parents' place."

"You got it, Mr. Lace."

Luke handed Jack a business card with his personal cell phone number on the back. "I have a friend coming any minute. Nathan Draper. Let him right in, would you?"

"Sure," Jack said, glancing at the business card and smiling. "Your pretty lady friend gave me her card the other night."

"Did she?" Luke said, braking and drawing all of his attention to the security officer who'd he'd known since his first day on the job.

"She thought that you might be in danger, Mr. Lace. Asked me to call her if I saw anyone suspicious." Jack looked at another car that pulled up behind Luke's. "Sure is hot, if you don't mind me saying so, Mr. Lace."

Luke smiled. "I don't mind it at all and yes, she is." Luke reached into his wallet and slipped Jack a bill. "Stay on your toes, Jackie boy."

"Yes, sir," Jack said. His eyes were wide with disbelief. "Thank you, Mr. Lace."

Luke accelerated through the gates, giving Jack a wave. He punched in the security code and drove to the garage, where he parked his Mercedes.

He knew Cleo had fallen in love with the SL convertible but he had something else in mind. He headed for the house, glancing over his shoulder as he punched in the new security code.

"Easy, Lace." Luke made an attempt to calm himself down a bit. He was more nervous than ever. Especially after hearing from Jack that Cleo had been worried about his safety. It only confirmed the eerie feeling that had settled over him.

He headed for the bar and poured a finger of scotch. The phone rang and Luke swept it up. Nathan Draper had arrived at the main gates. He was on his way up to the estate.

"Nate," Luke said, greeting his college buddy at the door.

"You started without me," Nate joked, stepping in and watching Luke as he reset the alarm. "You all right?"

Luke went to the bar, poured his friend a drink. He handed it off, took his coat and tossed it over the back of a chair. He turned and paced the living room.

"This about the skirt?" Nate asked, wiggling his eyebrows and giving Luke his best detective lingo.

"Isn't it always?"

"Not with you," Nate said, taking a seat on the leather couch, Luke finally settling down on the chaise across from him. The same chaise he'd thoroughly fucked Cleo on.

He could swear that he could still smell her.

"I dug up everything I could," Nate said. He nodded at the file that sat unopened on the bar.

"I think I'm being followed by someone," Luke blurted. "He's big, dark and probably Italian. I've seen him several times but he shoved me pretty good today at the mall."

"Jesus," Nate said, coming to his feet. "What the hell are you into, Luke?"

"Nothing," Luke said, running his hand over the chaise and remembering how he'd had Cleo's ass up in the air and his mouth buried in her pussy.

How he'd tongue-fucked her, sucking up all of her juices.

"As far as I know, Ms. Tanek works alone." Nate shifted his weight and walked across the room, glancing out the window and toward the driveway. "Has since she went out on her own about a year ago." He took a shot of his drink and loosened his tie. "I still can't figure out who hired her."

"I was worried about that," Luke said, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Looking back at that night, I can see it clearly now. The 'burglar'," he said, making quotes with his fingers, "I'd thought he was firing randomly but now, I don't think so."

"Firing at you?"

"Yeah, I just can't shake it the thought."

"I'd like to have one of my men shadow you for a few days," Nate said, raising his voice when Luke interrupted him. "Just temporarily. You wouldn't even know he's there."

"That's not necessary," Luke argued. He sat his glass on the bar and made a decision. "I'm leaving town for a few days, maybe a few weeks."

"Alone?"

"Leave a message on my cell if you find out anything else."

"Damn it, Luke." Nate spun around and eyed one of his best friends. He'd never seen Lukas Lace worked up over anything. Especially a woman. "She really got to you, didn't she?"

"Yeah," Luke said finally. "She did and I blew it to hell."

Nate laughed, "If she's half as clever as I think, I wouldn't worry about that."

Luke slid his hands into his pockets and glanced over at the envelope on the bar. "I'll be leaving within the hour."

"You haven't read it yet, have you?" Nate asked, following Luke's gaze, which was focused on the envelope of information that Nate himself had collected.

Nate didn't know Cleo Tanek personally, but he'd heard things about her.

There were dozens of PIs in the twin cities and she'd already begun to make a name for herself. She'd also been the hottest cop on the force and that was hard to keep quiet.

"No," Luke said, pouring another shot and then setting it down. He had a six-hour drive and as badly as he wanted that drink, he knew he shouldn't have it. "I couldn't bring myself to pry into her life. That's irony."

"You have it bad," Nate said, slapping Luke on the shoulder. He grabbed his coat and pulled it on. "One thing I've never doubted about you, Lukas, is the fact that you have the biggest pair of balls I've ever seen. And I'm not talking literally, though you do give me some competition in that department."

Luke followed Nate to the door.

"I'll let you know what I find out," Nate said. "Be careful, damn it."

Luke punched the code into the security pad and opened it. "Thanks, man."

"You owe me a beer, brother."

"You got it," Luke said, closing the door behind him. He flipped the bolt, set the alarm and headed upstairs.

The walls were closing in fast.

He had to get out.

Luke showered, changed and packed in record time. He glanced around his bedroom, realizing that there wasn't anything there that he couldn't just leave behind.

That was a sobering realization.

He swept the envelope Nate had delivered into his duffel, set the alarm and took the garbage to the can on his way to the garage. Once inside, he flipped the light switch and unlocked the key box with a smile.

He grabbed the appropriate key set, grateful to escape the world and knowing exactly which car he'd do it in.

"Hi, baby," Luke whispered. He removed the protective cover he kept over the car when he wasn't driving it and placed his bag in the trunk. He hit the garage door remote, and watched as the door lifted. He eased his baby into the sunlight.

He wasn't through the gates for more than a minute before he knew that he'd made the right decision. He glanced at that damned envelope from Nate, which he'd sat on the seat beside him, realizing something else.

He'd driven the first woman he'd ever loved away, and all of the money in the world couldn't buy her back.

Chapter Nineteen

As with most police work, it was the good old-fashioned legwork that had allowed Cleo to pick up a trail.

She propped the phone against her shoulder and glanced at the documents printing from her fax machine, listening to Anna speak into her ear.

"Walter Hammerstrom, the senator's father, has multiple real-estate holdings," Anna said, papers shuffling in the background. "Thomas Lace was listed as the representative of Lace Enterprises who handled the sales of the properties."

"Another connection to Tommy," Cleo said aloud, tossing a bit of salty popcorn into her mouth and chasing it with the ice-cold Molson she'd been nursing. She swiped her finger through the condensation on the bottle and dried it on her jeans.

"This is where it gets weird," Anna continued. She scanned the documents that an ex-boyfriend had provided. It paid to have a real-estate broker in her pocket, so to speak. "He sold them at a considerable loss. He practically gave them away, according to my fiancé Gary."

"So what's in it for Tommy?" Cleo pondered. She was sitting on the sofa Indianstyle, her laptop on the coffee table, the popcorn beside her. She popped a few more kernels, trying not to chew in Anna's ear.

"I suppose he can write off the loss," Anna offered. "I don't know. You're the detective. You figure it out."

"Thanks," Cleo said, deciding exactly what she needed to do. "I owe you."

"This cost me big." Anna tossed a long blonde strand of hair over her shoulder and shrugged. "I've got a date with Gary tonight."

"At least you'll get an orgasm out of it." Cleo heard Anna gasp and laughed, hanging up the phone. She ran her finger down the page that had just printed, scanning the location of each property.

She came across an address she vaguely recognized but couldn't quite place. Tapping her finger a few times, she sat the document on the coffee table and retrieved the notebook from her bag. She scanned the log she'd kept of Tommy's activities.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered, realizing why she'd recognized the address. She picked up her Molson and immediately put it back down. She'd only had two or three sips but she had to be clear-headed to drive.

The address was familiar because she'd tailed Tommy there the day she'd followed him. The company with that address was Radford Dry Cleaners, which sat upon two lots owned by Walter Hammerstrom, Senator Richard Hammerstrom's father.

So, she'd personally witnessed Tommy coming out of the senator's home and she'd followed him to the dry cleaners where he'd dropped off a mysterious brown paper bag.

On a whim, Cleo removed the phone book from the drawer and opened the yellow pages. She scanned the section titled nightclubs until she located Siren's Gentlemen's Club.

She cross-referenced it with her own log and the document from the assessor's office.

Bingo.

The address matched another address also owned by Walter Hammerstrom, Senator Richard Hammerstrom's father.

That was three strikes against Tommy. He was outta here.

Whether Cleo liked it or not, there was a link.

She just had to figure out what it was. No matter how she looked at it, it didn't leave Tommy sitting very pretty.

There's a hit on Lace... Cleo recalled what Demetrius had said that night.

She closed her laptop and stuffed it into the leather backpack made especially to carry a laptop computer. She'd spent way too much money on the bag but couldn't resist at the time.

It was perfect for those long hours spent in her car doing stakeouts. She didn't have a partner, so she spent most of her time in the car, with the exception of the pee breaks she occasionally allowed herself. She so envied the penis and the ability to pee in a cup.

Cleo tossed her lip gloss and an extra pair of clothes, panties and a sports bra, into the suitcase just in case. She threw in a bag of travel-sized hygiene items she kept stocked for spur-of-the-moment trips and grabbed her keys.

Following the directions on her GPS, Cleo located Tommy Lace's condo, just as he arrived. He pulled his shiny red Benz into the driveway, nearly jumped out and took the stairs two at a time.

"Big date, Tommy boy?" Cleo glanced at her watch but it had stopped again. She gave it a couple of taps, realizing that it was about time to retire the damned thing and buy a digital.

It was a tradition to wear her watch during stakeouts. Like sliding into her leather shoulder holster, it took her back into that "cop mode".

She adjusted the time, synchronizing it with her Sirius Satellite Radio. It was only four p.m. and Tommy had been inside for just under ten minutes when he emerged.

He had an overnight bag and Cleo was glad she'd tossed a few personal items into her bag. He placed the bag in his trunk and glanced in Cleo's direction, hesitating for a moment as if he'd seen her.

Hell, he was staring right at her.

Damn, she must be losing her touch. First Luke had spotted her and now it was his brother, who was quite literally in his own world. Maybe she was losing her touch.

Cleo busied herself with the GPS, flipping buttons and inputting Tommy's condo on the map. She kept her head down but her eyes, which were hidden by a pair of shades, stayed on him.

As if he hadn't seen her, Tommy slid behind the wheel and backed out onto the street. Cleo waited a few moments and fell into traffic behind him. It was early enough that the traffic on 35W was just beginning to build as they headed north.

She had no idea where he was going but she was as curious as hell about his destination. She needed to confront Tommy but wanted to find out as much as she could before doing so.

Four hours later, he stopped for gas and to take a pee.

Thank God.

"About time," Cleo complained, pulling into the pump a few rows away. She swiped her credit card and locked the nozzle into place, running in to take the quickest pee she'd ever managed in her life.

It didn't matter, though, because Tommy was taking his time, picking out snacks, filling up a cup of java and grabbing a soda for the road.

"Caffeine binge?" she whispered, a bit worried that he was stockpiling. She grabbed a stick of Colby and Swiss cheese, a bottle of Evian and a diet soda, topping them off with an overcooked hotdog.

She didn't have time for the luxury of sitting down to a meal, not with Tommy on a mad dash through northern Minnesota.

As she walked to the car, she dumped enough relish and mustard on the bun to kill the taste and ate it in four bites. She tossed the garbage away, replaced the nozzle and climbed into her car, seeing that Tommy was still waiting in line for a sandwich.

"Prick," she said, coveting his Quiznos sub. He even had a bag of Sun Chips.

She wished that she hadn't eaten that rubbery weenie. Not that rubbery weenies weren't bad under the right circumstances.

The knock on her window nearly sent her through the windshield.

She was busted.

Cleo hit the button and rolled her window down, trying to think her way out of whatever it was that Tommy had to say. He'd obviously seen her following him.

"Hey..."

"Luke?" Cleo gasped in astonishment.

She brushed the back of her hand over her mouth, hoping she didn't have mustard and relish on her face and shook her head, literally dumbfounded.

Luke was standing there in a perfectly fitted pair of jeans, that hot ass of his filling them out in a way that should be illegal.

He wore a white t-shirt beneath a black bad-boy leather jacket that smelled brandnew, the leather creaking as he leaned in and rested his elbows on her car door.

He looked amazing. Delicious and tired but incredible. Just incredible.

"I thought I was imagining you," Luke said, putting both hands on the door and leaning closer. Eyes locked, his somber expression melted into an enormous smile, dimples in full bloom. "Jesus, come here."

Before Cleo could utter a word, Luke leaned through the window. He took her mouth in a kiss, his lips hungrily pursuing hers. Fast and hard, his mouth open, his tongue drove through her parted lips and sought hers out in a furious motion.

Cleo reached up and shoveled her hand through his silky hair.

Her heart stopped.

She didn't breathe, didn't think. She just kissed him back with every cell in her body screaming out for him.

She worked his head in motion with her tongue, driving deeper, stroking harder and wishing desperately that she could climb into his lap. Her channel pulsated and her panties were instantly soaked, nectar dripping from her pussy.

One kiss, it had only been one kiss.

She wanted more, so much more but she couldn't believe this. She had to be delirious from all of the driving, from holding her urine for so long that it drove her over the edge.

"What are you doing here?" Luke asked, pulling back only far enough to look her in the face. Merely inches away, he stared right into her eyes. "I went to your place and you weren't there. I didn't know what to think. I tried your cell," he rambled on, "but got no answer."

He'd looked for her. He'd called for her. The thought sent the butterflies swimming around in her stomach.

"I—" she hesitated, refusing to lie to him in any way. Not this time. Not eye to eye, not knowing that he'd come to her loft. Especially not after everything that had happened between them.

He'd felt so betrayed once he discovered her profession and the fact that she'd allowed him to believe that they'd met by chance.

She would never lead him astray again. No matter what was at stake.

"I was actually working a case," Cleo said carefully, knowing that she had to tell him everything she'd discovered about Tommy, about the fact that she believed Luke to be in danger. "But I need to talk to you."

"The cabin is no more than five miles up the road," Luke said, nodding his head in that direction. "Move it to a parking space and leave it." He opened her door and popped her trunk, taking out her suitcase. "We'll come back for it."

Before she could protest, Luke took her hand and grabbed her keys and backpack from the seat beside her. He closed the door, locked it up and took her hand.

He was a man on a mission.

Just breathe, Cleo told herself. In and out.

She could do this.

Cleo suddenly remembered that she'd been following Tommy and that he was nowhere in sight. Shit. She'd lost him.

It was frickin' odd, she thought, that she'd followed Tommy up here only to run into Luke. It couldn't be a coincidence. They were nearly five hundred miles away from the cities and practically on the Canadian border.

Yet, both brothers were shopping at the same convenience store.

As if seeing Luke here and the mad kiss hadn't been enough, she stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the car.

"You have to be kidding me," she said in utter disbelief.

"You like her?" Luke asked, pulling Cleo in against him, tucking her beneath his arm.

"Like her?" Cleo said. "Puh-lease."

Too much was happening too fast. Cleo watched Luke put her bags in the trunk and walked to the passenger's door, which opened upward, like a Lamborghini. "What the hell is she?"

Luke took her hand and put her inside, closing the door and climbing behind the wheel. He pressed the button to start the engine and smiled at Cleo, who was still dumbfounded.

"NASCAR and Mercedes dreamed her up. She's basically a hybrid between a Benz and a Formula One race car."

"Jesus." Cleo closed her eyes as they ripped out of the parking lot and hit sixty miles per hour in seconds. Like a roller coaster, her stomach sank as Luke took the turn onto the dirt road that would lead to the Lace estate.

The car skid around a turn, and Cleo dug her fingers into the rich leather seat. Luke hadn't spoken any more than he had to, and was panting, their breaths falling into rhythm. They'd both been surprised to see one another.

Did he wonder why she was there, at that gas station? Why they'd run into one another in the middle of nowhere, Minnesota?

Cleo grew more nervous with each breath, with each passing second. She had so much to tell him and he wouldn't even look in her direction.

Was he angry? There was a tension in his shoulders, in his body. The way he gripped the wheel, the way he drove, a bit out of control, a bit reckless.

Lukas Lace was never careless.

If he harbored angry feelings, Cleo thought, how was he going to feel after she told him that there was a price on his head? After she explained that she believed Tommy was involved. Plus, a senator wanted him dead.

Cleo finally turned her gaze toward the road. The north woods of Minnesota thickened into pockets of dense pine and stands of aspen. The five miles he'd estimated felt more like fifteen.

The road to the cabin was a private drive, paved and gated. Another security keypad, though there wasn't an officer or a checkpoint.

It was private. Secluded.

The Benz/Formula One dream machine skidded to a stop and Cleo waited for Luke to open her door. Her palms sweaty and her heart hammering against her rib cage like golf-ball-sized hail, she came to her feet.

"I want you to know that I'm so sorry —" Cleo began to explain.

Luke pushed her back and pinned her against the car with his body.

He yanked her up onto her toes and covered her mouth with his. His tongue drove deep. His cock was hard and pressed into her abdomen but he didn't care if she knew what she did to him.

He wanted her and he wanted her to know it.

It was an all-out assault. Hands groping, tongues lashing, mouths working in furious motion.

Cleo broke away, her hands pressed against Luke's chest to hold him back for just a second. "Luke," she gasped, trying to catch her breath. "We have to talk."

A minute, she just needed a minute.

Cleo made the mistake of looking up into his eyes. Before she knew it there were azure crystals swimming around in her head and she lost focus, the world around her disappearing.

It was only Luke.

"I'm the one who's sorry," Luke said, cupping her face between his palms. His lips were on hers before she could speak.

She tasted just as Luke remembered. He couldn't get enough and knew now that he never would.

He found her breasts with his palms and Cleo cried out when he covered them and squeezed.

Luke leaned down and took one hard nipple into his mouth, biting through the fabric of her shirt. He teased her nipple, making it hard and leaving a wet spot on her clothing as he moved to the other perky mound.

One groan was all it took.

Cleo cried out and Luke lifted her into his arms. Her legs circled his waist automatically. Hand cupping her delicious ass, he turned and headed for the door.

He tried the knob but it was locked.

No shit.

His keys were in his frickin' pocket.

"Keys...sorry, baby," he gasped. He pressed her against the door, driving his cock between her legs and dry-humping her through their jeans as he dug for the ring. His mouth still on hers. Seeking out her tongue.

"Shit." He had to let her go, break the kiss for only a moment.

Cleo slid down his body, her feet flat on her hardwood deck. She held on to him, the world around her spinning violently.

Luke didn't want to give her time to think. He moved as quickly as he could. Slid the key into the lock and turned the knob. The last thing he wanted to do was give her the opportunity to ask herself what she was doing.

Her breath catching, Luke pulled her against him. He was rock-hard, his cock aching for her damp, soft as silk pussy.

"Something's different about you," Cleo muttered, looking him over as he pushed the door open.

Luke knew he looked harder, leaner, hungrier. He'd been a man starving, working out, running ten miles, pushing himself in search of the same high he'd felt with her in his arms. He hadn't found it.

He stepped into the living room and went for the button of her jeans. He wanted her naked. He'd waited too long as it was, hell he'd waited a lifetime.

They tore into each other.

Luke realized that she wanted him as badly as he wanted her and it made him hotter. She tugged his shirt off and kissed him back, long and deep. He unbuttoned her shirt impatiently and shoved her jeans down over her slender hips.

Cleo kicked them off, her hands in his hair, her lips on his, their tongues sparring, driving the need into a furious passion.

Luke slid his thumbs beneath the straps of her panties and gave them a tug. He dropped to his knees as they fell down her thighs.

"Jesus," he gasped, his eyes trailing their way down her body, moving over her stomach and stopping on her bare pussy lips. He drove his tongue into the slit between her legs, slurping up her sweet-as-a-peach nectar.

"Fuck," Cleo cried out, clawing at his back, pulling his hair. "Oh Luke. Fuck."

His mouth was hot and wet. His tongue probed her pussy, gliding up and down her slit. She was so wet. He used the tip of his tongue to work her swollen clit in quick, hungry circles.

He ate her pussy, consumed her as if he'd been starved for her alone for a lifetime. He slid his palms up and tweaked her nipples, driving his tongue into her pussy as she arched her back and exploded into orgasm.

Luke cupped her ass cheeks with his hands and spread her wide. He hung on as she bucked her hips into his mouth. She screamed something unintelligible, words he couldn't make out because he was so focused on the taste of her sweet pussy and swallowing her nectar as she exploded in his mouth.

Chapter Twenty

Luke could feel the orgasm as it ripped through Cleo's body, the muscles in her vagina contracting around his tongue, the spasm bursting through both of them like an explosion. She yelled out, clawing at Luke's hair, every muscle contracting and her back arched impossibly.

"Fuck," Luke gasped.

"Luuuuke," she screamed out his name. "Fuck—me—please," she gasped, begging him. "Fuck—me."

Luke spun her around and shoved her over the back of the leather sofa, bending her at the waist. He unbuttoned his jeans and held her there, a hand in the small of her back. His jeans fell to the floor. "You want to be fucked?" he growled.

"Yeeeesss," Cleo panted.

The feeling of overpowering her was hotter than anything he'd *ever* experienced. She was so petite, but he knew better. He'd seen her in action. She could handle herself, and somehow knowing that she was allowing him to dominate her, made it even hotter.

She was giving him complete control. She made a halfhearted attempt to turn around and face him, but he held her there. He pinned her chest to the sofa, her ass in the air.

"I love it," Cleo gasped. "Love it."

Luke wrapped his fist in her hair and held her down, feeding his cock into her tight little pussy with his free hand.

"Oh God," Cleo gasped. "So big, so – fucking – big."

Luke watched her face, which was contorted beautifully in exquisite pleasure. Eyes closed, she fisted a pillow in each hand as her pussy expanded to fit his cock.

Luke worked his rod into her a sweet inch at a time until his balls were pressed against her bare lips, spreading her apart, invading her.

"Oh fuck," Luke growled. He pumped into her. He drove his cock deeper, his rhythm quickening. "So tight, so hot."

Luke held her there, growing harder as she struggled against him.

Cleo tried to turn toward him, wanting to face him. "You're going to stay here and get fucked," Luke growled, raising his voice and tugging her hair gently. "Got it."

"Yes," Cleo whimpered, spreading her legs as wide as she could.

His cock stretched her pussy open as he plunged deeper and deeper, fucked her faster and faster.

"Oh God. Yes, oh yes," she screamed.

Luke grabbed Cleo by the hips and pounded into her. Flesh slapping flesh, the sound filled the room, filled his mind.

He pumped into her, stroking her pussy with his cock. He looked down and watched as his staff sank into her little pussy. He plunged, pumping even harder. Faster. Harder. Faster.

"Yes," she was screaming, gasping for air. She couldn't catch her breath. His cock was thick and wide and barely fit inside her.

God, she loved it.

Luke pinned her leg to the side of the sofa with his knee, pushing her even farther apart, opening her up to be fucked, to be branded with his cock.

"Oh, yes. Yeeeess," Cleo panted, pounding her hips against his with each thrust.

"My pussy," Luke growled, pushing her ass cheeks apart as he pounded into her.

"This is mine. My pussy, do you understand?" He saw her pink and shiny lips, soft and wet as he drove his cock into her. "Mine."

"Yes," Cleo said. "It's your pussy, Luke." She was practically crying now, tears filling her eyes as he consumed her body, soul and mind.

Luke was frantic now, gasping, panting, sweat beading down his brow and into his eyes, dampening his back. "My pussy, baby. It's mine."

"Oh God." Cleo banged against him, her pussy lips spread wide, his cock penetrating her, nearly driving through her. "Harder," she cried. "Harder."

"I'm going to come," Luke grunted with another pump of his hips. He tossed her hair over her shoulder and leaned down, biting into her neck, her pulse racing against his tongue as he spurted cum deep inside her.

Cleo pushed against him, her hips gyrating, sucking him of every ounce of fluid she could milk from his cock. She was gasping for air, trying desperately to catch her breath. "God," she gasped, "oh God."

Luke slid out of her and gently pulled her into a standing position. He took her into his arms and swept her feet off the ground.

Cleo went limp against him. Her body was exhausted. She relished the feel of his muscular arms wrapped so tightly around her. She could feel his heart raging against his rib cage and realized that he too was panting for air.

Luke carried her through the cabin.

"I need you in bed," he whispered, kissing her temple, her cheek and her lips.

Tiny, baby kisses. Butterfly whispers against her skin and lips.

From a ferocious animal, to the gentlest man that she'd ever met, in a heartbeat. No wonder he melted her into a puddle.

Luke carried Cleo up the flight of stairs. He entered the bedroom, turned on the bathroom light so he could see her and laid her on the bed after pulling the comforter back.

"Beautiful," Luke muttered, as if talking to himself. He ran his fingertips down her legs, stroking her flesh, not able to get enough of her. "God, you're beautiful."

"Not so bad yourself, Lace."

Cleo tried to focus but the way he was working his way up her body with his fingertips made her forget how to speak. This man was certainly a brilliant negotiator. He slid into bed and pulled her alongside him.

They were face-to-face and Cleo couldn't help but smile. She'd missed him so much. She didn't know how it was possible to miss someone you'd only just met, someone you'd only had sex with twice, but she did.

"I can't believe you're really here." Luke touched her face, stroking the back of his hand over her smooth skin.

Each touch seemed to make it more real for both of them. He kissed her again, gently this time, almost delicately.

"Your lips are so soft," he whispered, stroking his mouth over hers as if trying to make up for being so rough, so needy.

"I was worried I wouldn't see you again," Cleo admitted. It was odd to feel as though she could tell him anything, to want to tell him everything.

"I went to your place but you were gone," Luke said.

"Why?" Cleo asked, looking into his eyes, sinking into him as he stroked her shoulder and ran his fingers down her arm.

"To tell you what an asshole I was."

"Was?" Cleo teased, kissing him and laughing when he caught her lip between his teeth and bit down playfully.

She laughed, her eyes smiling, lighting up.

"I should've listened to you and I'm sorry for that."

"Luke, I have to tell you something."

"I don't like the look on your face," he said, kissing her gently where he'd just bitten. He pulled her against him, their bodies pressed together tightly.

Cleo sighed in contentment. She ran her hand down his arm, memorizing each muscular bulge she encountered.

Touching him was like handling a fine masterpiece. A wide chest and washboard abs. Lean hips and muscular thighs. He was amazingly hot.

She could touch him for the rest of her life, and that was a terrifying thought. Only because he had yet to know the whole truth and she was afraid that when he did, she would lose everything.

Her pussy throbbed at his touch, and Cleo closed her eyes, wanting him all over again. She'd never felt so needy and greedy for a man, for his body and his cock. For the things, he did to her and for her.

The lights went off with a flicker, and Cleo flinched. "What's going on?" she asked, remembering that her bag was in the car.

Crap. Every time she needed her weapon, it was somewhere else.

"Probably the breaker." Luke sighed and fumbled around in the dark for something to wear.

Cleo tugged the sheet around her body, suddenly chilled. She remained absolutely still when the sulfur of a match tip ignited and she could see Luke's gorgeous face, lit by dancing shadows.

He lit the kindling in the fireplace, and she glanced around the room the moment she could see clearly.

Luke wore a pair of jeans, slung low on his hips. Her eyes followed the trail of hair that disappeared into his jeans. She wanted to trace it with her mouth, to study every inch of his body, map it out with her tongue.

The fire caught, flames burning the kindling and finally catching the wood. Luke found a t-shirt in the top drawer, handed Cleo a hooded sweatshirt and watched with a smile as it fell over her perky breasts. "The breaker is in the back, on the sun porch."

"Wait," Cleo said, scrambling into her jeans and feeling naked without her gun. "Do you have any weapons?"

Luke glanced at her, hesitating. "I really don't think it's that serious," he said with a chuckle. "There's a storm coming. It's been all over the radio."

"Luke-"

"What's going on?" Luke asked, holding her gaze.

Cleo could tell that he knew something was up. He could read her too well, at this point. The stiffness of her shoulders, her worried expression, the smile he'd put there only moments before, gone.

"I planned to tell you—" God, how could she have screwed this up so badly. "I think you're in serious danger."

Luke stared at her for a moment and all of his concerns were solidified. He'd felt it but had gone against his better judgment. He'd tried to ignore it, to let Nate deal with it but here they were. And damn it, he was finally ready to live his life for himself. He couldn't die now, not after he finally found the woman of his dreams. "There's a gun safe in the den."

"Show me," Cleo said.

Luke took her hand and pulled her against him, kissing her temple. "Come on, baby."

"Luke, I'm sorry."

"Don't say that to me anymore," he said, turning her into him and kissing her lips. No tongue, he brushed his mouth over hers.

It was a show of emotion, deep and true. "You could never be sorrier than I am."

"I thought—"

"We'd never see each other again," he finished her sentence. "So did I," he admitted, knowing they both felt the same and grateful for it.

Cleo nodded, staying close to him, holding his hand and following him through the dark. He found the den with ease. They crossed the room, heading right for the gun cabinet.

The battery backup allowed the keypad to glow in the dark and Cleo knew right away that it was top of the line.

"4120," Luke told her the code as he punched it in. "Remember that for me, just in case you need it."

"Okay." Cleo watched as Luke felt for something and then turned on a flashlight. He pointed it into the safe and she couldn't help but smile at the collection of beautiful firearms lying inside. "Oh Luke."

"Guess you like guns," he said with a chuckle.

"What's not to like?" Cleo said, reaching for a silver-plated Sig Sauer .45 with pearlized grips. "Can I?" she asked, hesitating for a moment before touching it, as if afraid to handle such a beautiful weapon.

"I'd be honored," he teased her. "Picked that up in Switzerland from a private collector."

Luke reached in and grabbed a shotgun, feeding three shells into the spoon underneath and pumping it, chambering a shell.

He grabbed the box of buckshot, handed it to Cleo and closed the safe.

"Wow," Cleo said, picking up her own flashlight and whistling long and low. "Benelli 12 gauge, custom stock, hand-carved, silver-plated with a gold trigger."

"Birthday present from my father," Luke said fondly, watching Cleo stroke the 12 gauge and getting a hard-on.

What was it about hot women and guns that make a guy so crazy?

"Sexy," Cleo said, sliding a loaded clip into her Sig and pulling back the slide, jacking a round into the chamber.

"I'll take point. Tell me where we're going," she said to Luke as she moved out of the room and into the hallway. The cabin was quiet, eerily so.

He only thought about it for a second. She was the professional, after all. He trusted her, so he didn't have much choice.

"Take a right, through the kitchen," Luke said, holding the shotgun with the barrel aimed at the ceiling. As they moved through the cabin, Cleo stopped at every window, making sure every access point was secure.

They ended up on the sun porch and Cleo eased toward the door, finding that it was unlocked. She turned and frowned at Luke. "Do you keep this locked?"

Luke pulled the electrical box open and flipped the breaker, the Benelli in one hand.

"Usually the whole place is locked up," he said, relaxing when the lights came on. "Want to tell me what's going on or do I have to guess." He closed the electrical box and turned to face her, backing her against the screen door she'd just locked from inside.

"How about a drink first?"

"This first," Luke said, leaning against her. He found her lips with his mouth and sank into her, driving his tongue against hers. "I missed you, Cleo Tanek."

"Did you?" she asked, kissing him back, gently biting his bottom lip. Her stomach flip-flopped and she couldn't help but smile at the thought of him pining away for her.

Luke took her hand and led her inside the cabin, locking the door behind them, following her into the living room. He lit the gas stove and walked to the bar. "What would you like?"

"To drink?" Cleo posed, looking at him with her head tilted and wiggling her eyebrows.

"To drink, or dare I ask?"

"How about a beer?" Cleo sat the Sig on the coffee table and warmed her hands by the fire.

Luke removed two bottles of Sam Adams and popped the cap on each, handing one to Cleo. He sat on the leather sofa beside her and took a pull of his beer. Taking her hand, he pulled her down into his lap.

Waiting patiently, Luke took her beer when she lowered it from her lips, placing it beside his. He cupped her face between his palms and stared into her emerald eyes, not saying a word, losing himself in them.

He leaned forward, brushing his lips against hers softly. Tenderly, as he'd never kissed her before, as she'd never before been kissed.

His lips were warm and giving instead of conquering or demanding. His tongue didn't probe, didn't plunder but instead eased into her mouth, coaxing hers along in an exotic dance.

Cleo melted into his arms, into his mouth. She ran her hands over his chest, tracing the muscles beneath his clothes. "I want to touch you everywhere," she whispered.

"I love your mouth," Luke answered between kisses, easing away, his tongue sliding over her lips, licking her mouth as he'd licked her pussy. He ran his hands down her back and grabbed her hips, grinding his cock into her.

"Wait," Cleo said and tried to pull back. "We have to talk."

"We can talk," Luke said, his mouth on her neck.

"It's about Tommy," she added.

Luke released her gently. He nodded, knowing that the conversation couldn't be avoided.

It was a bit frightening, because the last thing in the world that he wanted was to argue. He wouldn't allow anything to come between them again. "What about Tommy?"

"I think he might be in trouble." Cleo slid off his lap.

Luke let her go, supposing it was difficult to have a serious conversation with her in his lap. "Tommy's always in trouble," Luke said casually. "Nothing you say could surprise me."

"This all started because I had an envelope of money couriered to me," Cleo told him. "With instructions to follow you, to detail your every move."

"That's why I saw you at my office building," Luke said. "You were following me then."

It was a statement, not a question and Cleo nodded. "I also tailed you to the restaurant where you approached me."

"I couldn't help it. There was just a—"

"Connection," Cleo finished his sentence, having felt it too. "I know because I felt it from the moment I first saw you."

"You came out of nowhere," Luke said, leaning forward and kissing her once again. He slid his tongue over hers, his cock rock-hard. He was ready to come again but he knew this was going to be a painful conversation if it included his brother.

"So did you," Cleo agreed, touching his face with her palm. "I've never become involved with anyone I've had to investigate before."

Taking a sip of beer, Cleo held the bottle in her hands.

She needed a distraction, Luke thought.

"This may sound melodramatic," she continued, "but someone wants you dead."

He tried not to laugh. He imagined that there were many people who would be very happy if he kicked the bucket.

Before he could continue, Cleo told him everything she'd learned to date.

"A hit," Luke said, taking a pull on his beer. He shook his head in disbelief. "That's insane, why would anyone bother killing me?"

"If anything happens to you," Cleo said with a swallow. "The thought alone pisses me off, but if something...happens to you, where does the money go?"

"Tommy gets everything," Luke said reluctantly. He stood up, thinking about his brother. "He's been pushing me, trying to get me to run for the state senate."

"He's connected to Senator Hammerstrom," Cleo said. She looked up at Luke, seeing a pained expression cross his face. She told him about the land deal and Tommy selling properties to Hammerstrom at a significant loss. "The properties themselves are registered to Hammerstrom's father, so he's obviously in on the deal."

"That's not possible," Luke said. "The senator's father died in an accident ten years ago."

"Some of the Lace properties were sold within the last six months," Cleo explained. "By Tommy personally, to Hammerstrom's father."

"There's no way Tommy could do that without my authorization," Luke argued. He stood, sliding his hands into his pockets. "No way." He was pacing, looking completely exhausted. It was all catching up to him.

"It's true," Tommy said, his voice echoing in the room.

Luke and Cleo jumped, startled.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Before you and long enough." Tommy shrugged his shoulders and leaned against the wall.

"Evesdropping?" Cleo asked, already knowing the answer to the question.

He had a bottle of booze and walked into the kitchen to pour two fingers worth into a tumbler for them both.

"What the hell do you have to say for yourself?" Luke asked. Jaw clenched, hands fisted, he forced himself to remain still.

"Parties, women, drugs. Whatever I wanted, all I had to do was sell Hammerstrom the land he needed and move small amounts of cash to be laundered into his legitimate companies."

"The paper bag," Cleo said in realization. "You moved the cash in a paper bag?"

"Less conspicuous," Tommy groaned.

"Why does he need the land?" Cleo asked. They both glanced at her as if just realizing that she was still standing between them.

Chapter Twenty-One

The punch came out of nowhere. Luke met Tommy in the doorway, rushing him. He swung and landed the punch directly on Tommy's chin.

"Hey," Cleo yelled. She sprang from the couch and tried to get between them, but Tommy was fast. "Take it easy," she yelled. She pulled on Tommy, putting her arms up and trying to keep them apart. "This won't solve anything, damn it."

"Do you know how hard I've worked?" Luke yelled at his brother. He waved a finger in his direction, feeling like an angry parent. "I've never had a life. It's always been for you, for Mom and Dad, for Lace Inc."

Luke shook out his fist, clenching and unclenching it as if in pain. "You don't give a damn about anything or anyone else."

The only consolation was that Tommy was holding his jaw, working it back and forth. He'd managed to draw blood, split the corner of his lip but nothing could be worse than what Tommy had done. "What the hell're you doing?"

"Trying to save your ass." Tommy scrubbed a hand over his face, coming away with blood on his fingertips. He deserved a lot worse than a fat lip. "I screwed up. All right. Is that what you want to hear? I fucked up."

"I want to hear that you're taking life seriously. That you care about the business and about our family. That you've grown up and I don't have to take care of you anymore."

"Parties, women, drugs. Whatever I wanted, all I had to do was sell Hammerstrom the land he needed."

"Needed for what?" Cleo asked, interrupting. They both glanced at her as if just realizing that she was still standing between them.

"Who the hell are you?" Tommy turned his full attention to Cleo for the first time. He moved toward her, his walk as predatory as his brother's.

Must run in the family, Cleo thought. Exuding power like most men sweat.

His lip bleeding, Tommy was furious and looking for someone to dump on. He walked around her, looking her over and smiling a crooked smile that was much more devious than his brother's ever could be.

Luke was there and Cleo hadn't even seen him move. He stood between them, blocking Tommy from harming her in any way. Not that he'd stoop so low but at this point, Luke couldn't be sure about anything.

"This is my fiancée," Luke said protectively. He slid his arm around Cleo's waist and pulled her into him. "Cleo Tanek."

"Fiancée?" both she and Tommy said in unison.

Cleo looked up at Luke, her heart in her throat. She wondered when he'd planned to let her in on their engagement.

"This is my little brother, Tommy." Luke didn't budge, refused to leave her side though she'd practically cringed at the idea.

"Why does Hammerstrom want the properties?" Cleo asked Tommy, her heart still in overdrive from Luke's little admission.

"He never told me why," Tommy said. He turned and walked to the bar. He poured himself more than a finger of scotch and slammed it back. He slapped the glass down on the granite countertop and glanced over at Cleo. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"She gets that a lot," Luke said. He crossed the room, his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. He waited for Tommy to swallow his drink and pour himself another. "Getting drunk isn't going to make any of this go away."

"Look," Tommy said as calmly as he could manage. "I told him I couldn't sell the land he wanted. It pissed him off."

"Why couldn't you?" Cleo asked, stepping around Luke. She needed answers, had to put everything together.

"I finally realized that the actual property that he really wants belongs to Luke."

"He wants my land?" Luke said, staring at his brother skeptically. "That real estate was on the market long before I came along. If he wanted it, he could've had it."

"Not at such a killer price, however," Tommy said. He lifted his glass and toasted Luke. "See, he figured you'd buy it and I'd sell it to him at the Tommy Lace discount rate."

"What does he have on you?" Cleo asked, seeing the tension in Luke's shoulders and worried that there'd be another scrapping session between the two of them. Talk about testosterone. The room was filled with it.

"She's smart," Tommy said to Luke. "Not like the last one you had."

"What property is he talking about?" Cleo asked Luke. She'd done a thorough background check on Luke but hadn't found any real-estate holdings that he owned personally.

"I just signed the papers a couple of days ago," Luke explained. "It's a remote location right on the lake, includes several islands in the deal."

"Why would the senator want to purchase such a remote property?"

"I don't know exactly but when I told him I couldn't sell, I received this." Tommy removed a single white envelope from his pocket. He handed it to Luke. He sat down in a leather recliner and took another drink as Luke handed the letter over to Cleo.

Cleo walked to the bar and dumped the letter out onto the counter. She used the tips of her fingers to open it and bit her bottom lip when she read the newsprint, which

was different sizes and cut and pasted onto a piece of standard twenty-pound bond copy paper.

Sell or your brother dies.

"Did you show this to the police?" Cleo asked Tommy. She stared at it, hoping that something might jump out. It was a note typical of the television blackmailer or serial killer. There was nothing familiar about it, nothing telling.

"How could I tell the cops without setting myself up to do time or worse yet, embarrass my father yet again?"

"So you, what," Luke said, throwing his arms up in the air, "tried to get me to run for office to oust Hammerstrom and save your own ass?"

"Didn't seem like a bad idea at the time." Tommy glanced at Luke and shrugged. "Besides, you're getting married, you have political candidate written all over you now. If you weren't attractive before, the public will eat the two of you up. Just look at you. Nearly as beautiful a couple as Brad and Angelina."

"We're not getting married," Cleo snapped, dizzy at the mere thought. Just the idea that he'd even consider marrying her had caused a warm fuzzy feeling to course through her body.

She'd never pictured herself married with kids. It was just something that she'd never fantasized about, never imagine would actually happen. Not to her.

Okay, maybe she had.

She'd been what, eight? Every little girl dreams of falling in love with a prince and having a fancy wedding with the white dress and the whole shebang. She'd been no different.

Then she'd grown up. She'd become a cop, lived in an ugly world, seeing what man was capable of firsthand.

Then, she'd stopped dreaming.

"Really?" Tommy asked. His voice was filled with skepticism and an eyebrow rose as he looked at her with a tilted head.

It was funny really, Cleo thought, how much alike the two men really were and yet were still so different.

"Well," Luke said, "I haven't gotten down on my knee and asked her properly yet but we've been a little distracted."

"Look," Cleo said, her hands trembling. "The point is—" Ah, hell, she'd forgotten the whole point.

He'd planned to ask her to marry him.

Oh God.

She hadn't seen this coming.

They hadn't even known each other a week yet. Hell, she'd thought he'd been done with her, thought that he'd never want to see her again after he discovered the truth.

"The point is—" Luke picked up on her train of thought and continued, seeing how shaken she was at the mere mention of his plans. He certainly didn't want to scare her off but as far as he was concerned, there was no going back. "I'm not running for office just to save your ass, little brother."

"It's more than me, Lucas. It's Mom and Dad."

"The son of a bitch threatened Mom and Dad?"

"He's got something on Dad," Tommy said, summing it up easily enough. "Something that Dad would do anything to keep buried."

"I need to see your father," Cleo said, turning to Luke. "I have to talk to him, it's the only way."

"Talking to him wouldn't work," Luke said, shaking his head. "He doesn't talk. Doesn't discuss anything. He is how he is and you just have to accept that. He's a very private man."

"I've already tried talking to him anyway," Tommy explained. "He just tells me to mind my own business. No one can get my father to talk if he doesn't want to, it's useless."

"He hasn't met me yet," Cleo purred, folding her arms over her chest.

"She's right. Besides, he'll have no choice. He'll tell either Cleo or me." Luke swallowed the remainder of his beer and grabbed another from behind the bar, holding it up in the air and offering one to Cleo.

"Sure," she said, sitting down.

"Well, you'll get the chance to talk to our father," Tommy said to Cleo, pouring another shot and sitting down on the sofa across from her. "They're both coming up tomorrow morning."

"Shit." Luke glared at his brother. He turned to Cleo and shrugged his shoulders, giving her a grin, dimples full bloom. "I suppose meeting them is inevitable," he said, "I'm truly sorry you'll have to suffer through it."

"I hear it's customary for the bride to meet her in-laws before the wedding," Cleo said with a sarcastic shrug.

"She's hot," Tommy said with a laugh.

"She's standing right here," Cleo snapped.

"Feisty, I like that." Tommy gave her a wink.

"Neither you nor your money intimidate me, Tommy."

"Hell, I'm in love." Tommy saw Luke flinch and smiled. "You're everything that I never imagined Luke falling for, which makes you perfect."

"So glad I have your approval," Cleo said sweetly. She tipped her beer in his direction, toasting him and ignoring his comment. "So nice to finally meet you."

"Is there another one at home who looks like you?" Tommy asked, holding up his hands and waving Luke off when he glared at him for flirting.

"Damn it, Tommy." Luke knew his brother couldn't behave himself around a beautiful woman, especially when he usually had a model on each arm.

Luke was so easy, Tommy thought with a laugh. "Did you feed this delicate flower yet?" he asked, standing and rolling up his sleeves. "She looks like she could use a few good meals."

"Eyes off," Luke growled. He took her hand before Tommy could get to it. "Sorry, my brother can't stand not to have a beautiful woman falling all over him."

"Oh, he's charming." Cleo kissed Luke, leaning up on her toes.

"They all think that at first," Luke said. He pulled her against him, stroking her back with his palm. He kissed her, his mouth lingering upon hers, tasting the beer on her lips and savoring the warmth of her tongue as it gently nudged his lips apart.

"Get a room," Tommy yelled as he headed for the kitchen.

"Don't you have a cabin to go to?" Luke asked, more frustrated by the moment. All he wanted was to have Cleo alone. He glanced at his keys, thinking about returning to the city. In just a few hours, they could be alone.

"How do you feel about steaks?" Tommy asked, taking her other hand and leading her through a long corridor and into the kitchen.

"Love 'em." Cleo liked Tommy. Really liked him and it surprised the hell out of her. She'd seen him as nothing but a spoiled playboy who was immature and needed constant stroking of his ego by beautiful women.

Now that she was in the same room with him, however, she realized that Tommy Lace wasn't anything like she'd imagined.

Cleo hadn't noticed earlier, being so distracted, but the kitchen was an amazing room with floor-to-ceiling windows and a wood-burning fireplace. There were pine cabinets and gorgeous hardwood floors throughout, with a skylight, though they couldn't see anything but the darkness of night beyond the panes of glass. A large farmer's table sat in the corner of the room and a butcher-block island in the center.

Cleo walked to the island and grabbed a barstool, sliding a long-bladed knife from the stand after Luke laid out the makings of a salad. She picked up a tomato, washed it in the small sink and laid it out on a chopping block. She cut it while Luke headed for the door. "Where are you going?" she asked, the blade stilling.

"Starting the grill," Luke said, stopping only for a moment. "Do I need a bodyguard for that?"

"She can guard my body," Tommy said, glancing over his shoulder and giving Cleo a wink.

"Behave yourself." Luke pointed. "Or next time, I'll go for your nose."

"That's dirty," Tommy said, touching his face. "But I hear that women love a guy with a rough exterior."

"I'll only be a few feet away." Luke smiled at Cleo and gave her a wink. "If he doesn't behave, shoot him."

Cleo had to fight the urge to follow him outside. She could see him from where she sat.

"Lot of good that'll do if you're shot at again," she said under her breath.

"Again?" Tommy put down the pepper grinder and turned around, leaning his butt against the countertop. "What the hell does she mean, again?"

"I'll be back," Luke said, rolling his eyes. He shoved the door open, avoiding his brother's question.

"Stubborn to a fault," Tommy said. "And the last thing he'd do is hide from anybody." Tommy turned to grind more pepper onto the steaks. He sprinkled salt and rubbed garlic over the T-bones. "Or be intimidated. That's not Luke, bullet or no bullet."

"That's why keeping him alive is so difficult."

"He's more stubborn than anyone I've ever known," Tommy admitted. "Except my dad, of course."

"I saw you," Cleo told Tommy. She tipped her beer and took a swallow. "At the dry cleaners."

Tommy was assessing her. His eyes, Cleo noticed, were a shade darker than his brother's and he was thinner in face and frame but just as handsome, only in that careless, male-model way. His hair was streaked blond and spiked in that "just out of bed" look.

"Are you a cop?"

"Ex-cop," Cleo said. "What're you moving for Hammerstrom?"

"You're a Fed, aren't you?"

"Private investigator," Cleo said, hoping to put him at ease. It was her turn to roll her eyes because he was stalling. "Tell me what's going on, Tommy."

"Did my brother hire you?"

"No," Cleo said, trying not to let her surprise show. "Why would he?"

Tommy shrugged. "I deserve it."

"He doesn't trust you very much, though." Cleo lifted the cutting board and scraped the diced tomato into a glass bowl with the blade of the knife.

"Luke doesn't trust anyone." Tommy leaned against the counter, a gold bracelet dangling from his wrist. "Never has but you'll learn."

Cleo noticed that he also wore a ring on his right hand and that Luke had no jewelry. They were as different as night and day.

"Would you be surprised if I told you that it was Hammerstrom who hired me?" Cleo asked, watching Tommy's expression carefully. He was really trying to push her buttons as far as Luke was concerned but she wouldn't allow that.

"No. Hammerstrom wants Luke dead. He's probably using you to get to him."

"Using me?" Cleo repeated, sitting the knife down with a clank.

"Sure. You gave Hammerstrom everything he needs to kill my brother." Tommy grabbed himself a cold bottle of beer and removed another, handing it to Cleo after popping the top. "His schedule, his habits, his interests. Thanks to you, the senator always knows where Luke is and when."

Cleo hadn't thought of it like that. Leave it to Tommy to point out one's obvious mistakes. He was right, though and it made her sick to her stomach.

If Luke died, she would've been the one who inadvertently put the bullet in his heart. "I'm going to throw up," she said, looking at Tommy and running for the bathroom.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"What'd you say to her?" Luke asked, glancing around the kitchen and finding Cleo MIA.

"Pee break," Tommy told him. "You know how women are, can't go ten minutes without visiting the bathroom."

"This one doesn't intimidate, Tommy. She won't cheat, she won't lie. It's not in her nature."

"So we shouldn't have a thing in common," Tommy said, winking at Cleo as she returned from the bathroom, looking a little green. "How about some water?"

"Thanks," she said, accepting the bottle of Evian as if it were a peace offering.

"Can I get you anything?" Luke asked her, looking at her with concern in his eyes. He walked up behind her and stroked her hair. He pushed it off her shoulder, much in the same way he had when he'd latched on to her with his teeth during their last bought of lovemaking, er, sex.

It was sex, Cleo told herself. Just sex, nothing more.

"Food," Cleo said, nodding at the platter of steaks on the countertop. "Food will help. I need to eat."

"Of course," Luke said. "I'm guess I should make sure that I feed you every once in a while." He picked up the platter and kissed her on the cheek. "One steak coming up. Rare, right?"

"How'd you know?"

"Wild guess," Luke teased, as he disappeared through the door.

"Tell me about your dad and the senator," Cleo asked Tommy the moment Luke was out of earshot.

"There's always been contention between my father and Hammerstrom," Tommy said without skipping a beat. "He's had Dad's balls in his fist for as long as I can remember."

"And yours?"

"Let's just say that I haven't been very discreet with my bad habits," Tommy said, lowering his voice and dropping his gaze. He handed Cleo a head of lettuce. He watched as she tore it apart, washing the leaves in the sink. "It finally caught up to me. Partying too hard, doing everything a bit too hard."

"And Luke?"

"He squeaks when he walks," Tommy said with a snort. "Hammerstrom wants the property that Luke acquired on Lake of the Woods. He's trying to find some leverage. He's willing to do anything to get it."

"He'd have Luke killed for waterfront property?"

"I'm not selling," Luke interrupted, coming back into the kitchen. He leaned against the bar and looked at Tommy. "That land is mine. Bought and paid for it with my own money. The money I worked my ass off for."

"If Luke should happen to kick off before me," Tommy said, reaching up into the cabinet above the sink and removing a bottle of scotch, "I get it all, you see."

"That's so not going to happen," Cleo said. She set down the knife she'd picked up to finish the salad, shredding lettuce by hand into the glass bowl. "At least, not while I'm around."

"Jesus, no wonder he wants to marry you. You've got balls, baby."

"Don't call me baby," Cleo said, giving Tommy one of her looks. She'd never allowed anyone to call her that but it didn't sound so bad coming out of Luke's mouth when he was inside her. "And my mother called it a firm desire to see things through, no matter the cost."

"You're of Irish descent, then?" Tommy pegged her. "You've got the spunk."

"My father," Cleo said fondly. "He even drinks like an Irishman. His great-grandfather would be so proud."

"Brothers or sisters?" Luke asked, coming up behind her and stroking her back with his hand.

"You're awful stealthy for being such a big guy," Cleo said, nearly jumping out of her skin, which wasn't like her. She was tense, skittish.

He leaned in, focused entirely upon her in a way that was foreign to her. As if, she was his whole world. No one had ever looked at her that way before.

"Only child." Cleo glanced up at Tommy. "I envy you two. You don't know how lucky you are."

"People take what they have for granted," Luke said, washing the blood off the platter for the steaks. He kissed Cleo on the cheek and disappeared through the door.

She watched him go, saddened by his pessimism. To have so much and to feel so empty, so used and so alone.

Alone.

She could relate to that emotion. Though, she'd never felt alone until she'd spent the night with Luke.

"He's in love with you, lass."

"What?" Cleo glanced up at Tommy, the sound of his voice breaking through the haze surrounding her thoughts. The beer must be getting to her, she thought. She had to have heard him wrongly.

"Is not," Cleo said with a snort. "We just met."

She glanced at her beer, ready to pour it down the sink.

"I've never seen him this way. He actually looks — Jesus, I don't know, happy."

"He was happy with his ex, wasn't he?" Cleo asked as she came to her feet. "What was her name? Oh, Kate."

Right. She knew everything about Kate. Rich, spoiled, high-maintenance. She wanted a huge wedding, had been planning it since she was six. Luke just so happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Cleo snapped a plastic lid over the salad bowl and sat it on the second shelf in the refrigerator. She bit her bottom lip, waiting for Tommy to answer. My, did he enjoy suspense.

Cleo finally looked over at him, realizing that what he was about to say actually mattered to her. She wasn't sure when it had happened, or exactly how but Luke's feelings really mattered.

"Kate was a cold bitch and Lukas knew it."

"So am I," Cleo said, giving Tommy a true smile. "I pride myself on that."

"I love it." Tommy folded his arms over his chest, leaned against the counter and crossed his long legs at the ankles. "You're perfect for Luke, you know."

"He doesn't think you care," Cleo said, grabbing plates out of the cabinet and silverware out of the drawer. "That any of you care."

"He said that?" Tommy washed his hands, lathering them a bit too long, as if trying to keep busy.

It bothered him, she supposed, despite the funny-boy façade. Knowing that Luke doubted him really bothered him. Cleo could see it in the slump of his shoulders.

"You know he'd never say it." Cleo had only known Luke a few days but she knew one thing for certain. He'd never tell his family how he felt. He was proud and strong and had spent his life being the rock. No, he'd never admit to neediness. He would see it as a weakness.

She leaned against the island, elbows bent and her chin resting in her hands. "But he needs to hear it. From all of you."

"Lucas has been so focused on the business, on pleasing my parents, that he's never seen anything else. Not even me. Unless I was pissing him off."

"Which happens a lot," Cleo said.

"You are quick." Tommy dried his hands off on a towel and sat it on the counter. "Are we that transparent?" He shook his head, "No, don't answer that."

"Hey you two. Let's eat outside," Luke said, popping his head through the open glass door and waving them out onto the patio. "Don't worry, the coast is clear."

"And you know this how?" Cleo asked.

"No suspicious characters in the brush," Luke teased.

"It's not like he's going to be out in the open wearing a t-shirt that says, 'hit man, ask me how'."

Cleo picked up the place settings, stacking the silverware on top. "I've got this. You get the beer, Tommy"

"Deal," Tommy said, reaching for three cold ones from the Sub-Zero fridge.

"You okay?" Luke asked Cleo the moment they were alone. "He's not being too obnoxious, is he?"

Cleo laughed. She couldn't help it. Tommy was slick, all right but he was also an easy read. He covered for everyone, his father, Senator Hammerstrom and God knows who else.

He was the life of the party, the center of attention and he was hurting. Cleo could see it in his eyes, in the way he protected his feelings.

Locking her arms around Luke's neck, she kissed him on the lips. No tongue, she hesitated there, holding her mouth to his, a firestorm of heat smoldering just beneath the surface.

Luke groaned as if in pain. He pressed against her, thinking about how she tasted, about how she'd screamed when she'd come in his mouth. He wanted to make her scream all night.

"You two need to get over it," Tommy said, handing his brother a beer. "Good to see that you're rejoining the human race, though, bro."

Cleo set the table, talking to Tommy and relaxing more and more as the evening progressed, the tension between them easing.

Once she was done setting the table, she looked over at Tommy and smiled. "Would you stay with Luke while I take a quick walk?"

"No way," Luke said, shaking his head. "You aren't setting foot out of this cabin alone."

"I need to check the perimeter for myself and I don't want you alone."

"I don't want you wandering around alone, either."

"Look you two, knock it off. Lukas, she seems like she can take care of herself. Maybe she's right."

Hmmm. Tommy Lace taking her side. Wasn't that something?

"It'll just take me a few minutes," Cleo said. "I need to check this area and any points of ingress."

"Fine," Luke said. "Do you have the Sig?"

"You gave her the Sig?" Tommy complained, looking at his brother as if he were still ten. "You won't even let me touch that damn thing."

"She wants the Sig, she gets the Sig," Luke said clearly. He opened the grill to flip the steaks and Cleo walked away smiling.

She'd never experienced such an easy camaraderie with anyone before and even though Luke and Tommy were fighting and arguing, that whole brotherly thing was still there, just below the surface.

It must be amazing, she thought as she checked the side gate. To have a sibling, another part of you, to argue with, to fight with and to love.

Six feet of wooden fence with a locked swinging gate. It seemed secure. No tampering with the lock and no foot prints around the area whatsoever.

Everything was quiet and locked up tight, so Cleo returned to the table to find Luke setting the platter down as she approached.

"Perfect timing," he said with a wink. He took Cleo's hand and sat her down, loading a steak onto her plate.

Tommy appeared with the salad and a loaf of freshly baked bread from a local bakery in town.

"This is wonderful," Cleo said between bites. She glanced at Luke thoughtfully and then at Tommy. "Did you guys get along as kids?"

She was curious about their relationship, about things she couldn't have possible learned by reading their biographies. Personal things, things only they could share with her, if they so chose.

"Luke and our cousin Roger shaved my head when I was six," Tommy offered, taking a bite of steak and following it with a forkful of salad. "True story. They told Mom that I did it. Took six months to grow back."

Cleo laughed. She couldn't help it. She couldn't imagine Luke pulling something like that. She looked over at Tommy and laughed harder, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Laugh it off," Tommy said, rubbing a hand through his hair. "It was traumatizing." He smiled, taking a pull on his beer and trying his best to look wounded. "Molly Jensen stopped talking to me until I grew back every strand."

"That why it's long now?" Cleo observed. "You're making up for it."

"Now she's a psychiatrist?" Tommy said, tossing a hand towel in her direction.

Cleo dodged it, laughing and catching it midair.

"That had been all Roger's idea," Luke clarified, using his fork to emphasize his point. "Tommy had chewed all his bubble gum and he was determined to make him pay." He looked at Cleo and smiled, his head cocked mischievously. "I was merely an innocent bystander."

"You gave him the buzzer," Tommy argued.

"To get even, Tommy and Roger wrote a love note to Four-eye Melanie Rice, telling her that I wanted to teach her how to French kiss."

"Ouch," Cleo said, trying not to choke on her steak. She swallowed her beer and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

"How else were you ever going to get any?" Tommy said with a shrug. "Talk about forty-year-old virgin. Roger and I had to do all your legwork, or you never would've gotten any. Probably never would've been laid if it hadn't been for us."

"I still have an irrational fear of women who wear glasses," Luke said, offering Cleo a slice of bread.

"I had the impression that you and Roger weren't very close," Cleo observed, recalling how they'd run into Roger in the elevator of her building when Luke had followed her home.

"The three of us fought like lions over fresh kill," Tommy said, tearing his bread in half and smearing butter on top. "But we were inseparable."

"What happened?" Cleo turned to Luke, who'd gone silent, shifting in his chair.

"Our parents had a falling-out," Luke explained. He stood and scraped what little remained on his plate into the garbage. "We weren't allowed to speak after that."

"That's harsh—" Cleo began, interrupted by the buzzing of the intercom. They all fell silent, turning and glancing at the white box on the wall as if it had just spoken in some exotic tongue.

"You expecting anyone?" Luke asked, glancing at his brother and leaning against the sink.

"Probably the twins," Tommy said with a waggle of his brow. He could see Luke didn't find it funny. "Joke," he said, shaking his head. "Tough room."

Tommy had seen fear before but it wasn't fear for Cleo herself but for Luke.

Tommy would do anything to keep Luke from being hurt, even take a bullet. It was the least he could since his brother had devoted his life to taking care of everyone he loved and never hesitated to make a sacrifice on another's behalf.

Tommy just hoped he didn't have to die to prove himself. It'd be hell on his sex life.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Can I help you?" Luke said into the intercom.

Dead silence.

He hesitated, looking back at Cleo and Tommy and shifting his feet uncomfortably. He took his finger off the button and leaned against the wall.

Cleo's paranoia was contagious.

"No one knows I'm here."

"Me either," Tommy said. "I was planning on surprising Mom and Dad."

"You both stay here," Cleo said, pointing a finger at Luke. "I'll check it out."

"Oh, no you won't," Luke argued, shaking his head adamantly. "There's no way you're going out there alone."

"I never say this but I concur with my brother on this one," Tommy piped in, unable to believe it himself. He usually opposed everything that Luke said just to screw with his brother's mind.

"Nobody asked you," Cleo and Luke said in unison. They looked at each other and groaned in frustration.

"I need to get my things, anyway," Cleo explained, edging closer to the door. She glanced at Luke with those jewel-colored eyes and batted her lashes. "I did leave my bag in the dream machine."

"Last time you disappeared outside, you were shot at," Luke said as he came off the counter and walked toward her. He looked over at Tommy and gave him the same glare he'd given him his whole life, which usually prefaced a warning.

Don't eat all the candy.

Don't tell Mom I'm with my girlfriend.

Don't take my porn magazines.

The classic older brother's, "If you screw this up, I'll kill you" look that's especially reserved for younger siblings. "Keep an eye on her."

"Don't even think about it," Cleo huffed. She turned toward Tommy, her arms folded over her chest, daring him to try.

"Even I'm not that stupid," Tommy said, backing off and raising his hands in the air in surrender. "Come on, let's go."

Tommy took Cleo's hand and they followed Luke through the house and into the living room, stopping in the foyer just behind him.

"You were shot at?" Tommy asked. "What the hell've I been missing?"

"Don't worry," Cleo assured him, "I shoot back."

"Of course you do." Tommy looked over at Luke and touched his palm to his chest. "I'm in love."

"Like I haven't heard that before," Luke said, rolling his eyes. God, his brother was so predictable. He unlocked the hand-carved pine door and reached for the knob.

"Wait." Cleo grabbed Luke's arm, her voice raised a pitch or two. "Do you have a death wish?" she asked, holding him off. She flipped the bolt back into place. "You have to take this seriously, damn it."

"You're one to talk," Luke retorted, turning on her mid-sentence. He crowded her but Cleo stood her ground." You're the one who ran after a hit man."

"He was an amateur," Cleo snapped. She slid the Sig .45 from her pocket and looked over at Tommy. "Was whoever pressed that buzzer at the main gate?" she asked.

"Yes," Tommy said, looking at her over his shoulder and turning back to the security system. He pushed a few buttons and a thirty-two-inch high-def video screen blinked to life. He scanned through each camera until the driveway came into view. "But whoever it was didn't stick around."

"Stay inside," Cleo commanded, pointing her finger. Eyes narrowed, she looked both Tommy and Luke square in the face. "Stay put, got it. If you hear anything out of the ordinary, call the police."

"Why is she going out there if there's a hit man out there?" Tommy asked, frowning at Cleo as she unlocked the bolt. He looked at his brother in disbelief. "Am I the only one who has a problem with this?"

"I don't care who has a problem with it," Cleo said. "This is what I do."

"She's in cop mode," Luke told his brother. "It's like second nature to her, she doesn't even realize it."

Luke took a deep breath, trying to stay put but finding it impossible. He just couldn't let her go out there by herself. Not the woman he loved.

Loved?

Iesus, he loved her.

Luke grabbed the Benelli from the closet and headed for the door. He scanned quickly, left to right and stepped outside.

"Where the hell are we going?" Tommy asked as he followed his brother, dropping his voice to a near whisper. He grabbed Luke by the shoulder but backed off when he shoved him away. "You're not a cop, Lukas."

"I can't let her do this by herself." Luke slid the safety off and rushed forward.

"She's going to kick both of our asses," Tommy surmised, smiling at the thought. "How come I don't get one of those?" he asked, looking at the shotgun his father had purchased for Luke as a gift.

"Later," Luke said as they moved through the grass and down the drive. "We don't have time."

"Why do you two get the guns when I can shoot as well as both of you?"

"You don't even know how to shoot," Luke said, rolling his eyes. "Jesus, you never stop."

"Just because I don't participate in father-son firearms day, doesn't mean that I don't know about guns, bro."

"That's about all Dad and I have in common, you know." Luke stopped at the end of the house, his back to the wall, with Tommy beside him. "We can't talk about anything else. Never have been able to."

Luke took a quick look around the corner but it was all clear. "Let's work our way to the main gate."

"Would she really go to the gate alone?" Tommy asked in disbelief.

Luke looked at his brother and frowned. "Do you really have to ask that?"

"Go," Tommy said with a nod.

Luke led his brother into the trees, trying to stay off the main drive. He took cover behind a tree and pointed for Tommy to use a zigzag pattern and work his way behind him since he didn't have a weapon himself.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and ducked back, holding his hand up and motioning for Tommy to remain in place. Heart racing, he ducked down as low as possible and very slowly looked around the side of the tree.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Cleo whispered harshly. She was ten or so feet ahead of them and obviously not happy to see him. She looked from Luke to Tommy, who only shrugged as if his brother had dragged him out here.

Innocent little Tommy. Right?

"Go back," she mouthed, kneeling down behind a large tamarack tree. "I can't worry about you guys. Go back."

"No way," Luke said, ignoring her and advancing to cover behind another tree. He waved Tommy forward, not paying attention to the glare she gave him.

Cleo was going to kill them both. Was it cute? Sure but Luke's life was in danger and he was trying to be the hero. She knew he'd done it his entire life but it was his turn to be protected whether he liked it or not.

She put her back up against a tree, the bark digging through her clothing and into her back. She popped her head around. She could see the wrought iron and block gate. She looked back at Luke and nodded, holding out her hand and signaling for him to hold his position.

He nodded and she bolted from her position and moved to the interior of the gate. Ducked low, she stayed there a few moments. Listening but hearing only silence and a soft beeping sound that she recognized at the buzzer to the intercom.

Someone had pressed it again.

One.

Two.

Three.

Cleo swung around the corner post, the firearm aimed between the wrought iron slats. She scanned from right to left but it was clear.

The sound of her heart thrumming in her ears was all she could hear as she backed up against the post. She turned to tell Luke that it was clear, when what felt like the wrath of God knocked her on her ass.

* * * * *

Fifty thousand volts of electricity slammed into Cleo's chest. It knocked the breath from her lungs and her feet out from beneath her.

She felt her head smack the ground, the thud reverberating through her mind like the wake from a speedboat thrashing the shore. Her body convulsed as electricity charged through her core, jolting her limbs and cracking through her spine like a whip.

Her nervous system was in chaos and she couldn't run, couldn't scream. She couldn't control her body as she flailed around on the ground. Eyes clamped closed, Cleo lost conscious thought as someone picked her up and flung her over his shoulder.

He headed for the trees. She could hear the branches and leaves crackling beneath his heavy footfalls. Probably boots, she reasoned. His body wasn't built for speed. Power and control, yes. Speed, not so much.

She was so small, so light that she wasn't much of a burden on him. He zigzagged his way through the pines and headed for the location he'd pre-chosen.

Once inside he grabbed a length of rope and duct tape and went to work just as Cleo tried to force her eyes open and clear her head.

Wake up. Get up. Move, she tried to scream out the orders in her mind but her body refused to obey.

It was the clanging of the handcuffs against the metal pipes that finally allowed Cleo to open her eyes. Probably because she recognized the signature sound and it terrified her.

She'd trained in the academy never to give up her weapon, any of them. That included her cuffs. It wasn't a good time to have your own arsenal turned against you.

Cleo tried to focus, tried to move. Her wrists were clasped a few feet above her head. Her shoulders ached as if they'd been pulled out of their sockets by an angry demon extracting vengeance for the evil men she'd put behind bars.

An eye for an eye. This demon wanted his pound of flesh.

Easy, Cleo, she told herself. Take it easy.

She was allowing her mind to run wild. Being restrained was making her go a bit mad.

Having a stranger with complete power over her was terrifying and pissed her off. Power and control had always been an issue. She'd needed both desperately, even thrived upon them to keep her sane and safe.

Now here she was, at the mercy of a stranger who wanted to do her harm.

Sure, she'd toyed with the power-control issue a bit, allowing Luke to play at being dominant.

But this was different.

She trusted Luke enough to allow him that control. Trusted him enough place her in a vulnerable position, knowing he wouldn't harm her, knowing that all she had to do was say the word and he would release her.

This was different.

"Don't move," the voice whispered, the barrel of a gun pressed against her aching temple.

Cleo tried to speak but could only manage a groan. He'd made sure of that by stuffing a rag into her mouth and sealing it with duct tape.

Duct tape should have a warning label on it, Cleo thought to herself as she struggled to gain freedom.

Hell, she thought, there was a do-not-remove tag on a mattresses and it was illegal to pirate DVDs, so why shouldn't customers be discouraged from using these products to bind and gag innocent victims?

Cleo forced her eyes open, blinking, trying desperately to see. It was dark but when she looked up and *his* face came into focus, panic set in.

She knew she was going to die.

The room was musty, fingers of light reaching at them through the darkness and stroking her bruised face, leaving his in shadow. It was dank and dark. Basement, she thought, they were in a basement.

"It's your turn for a little rough stuff, baby," he whispered, his voice deeper than she remembered and his words harsh, filled with fury and spite.

The son of a bitch.

He reached out and stroked her face, tracing his thick stubby finger through the blood that ran from her bottom lip. He stroked his way down the bare canvas of her flesh, finger-painting the globes of her breasts with bright red blood.

She'd been cut when she'd hit the ground. She could feel the blood oozing from her face and head.

Plenty for him to play in, goody.

"Red becomes you," he whispered. He smeared blood down her neck and reached deep into her cleavage to cover what he couldn't see.

Opening his mouth, he ran his tongue from one breast to the other and down the valley in the middle, slurping the blood from her skin as if it were honey.

"You look hot. So fucking hot in cuffs."

Cleo groaned, trying to pull free, not wanting him to touch her. She focused on his face, taking in all of the details while staring at him in defiance.

He hadn't shaved and his eyes were bloodshot. He clearly hadn't slept. He leaned in close, his mouth inches from hers. He smelled like cheap vodka and a sickening-sweet fruit.

He'd definitely been drinking.

"We have unfinished business," Demetrius said, grabbing the duct tape and ripping it off her mouth, nearly taking off a layer of skin with it.

Cleo flinched, trying not to cry out. She spat the rag out of her mouth, not wanting to feed him the sustenance he needed to continue to torment her. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction of winning. "What do you want, Demetrius?"

"Revenge," he said simply, pulling off her sweatshirt, then grabbing the bottom of her shirt and ripping it open. He tore all the buttons off, sending them scattering over the brick floor.

"That supposed to scare me?" Cleo asked, licking her lips, tasting the metallic flavor of blood and growing angrier by the second. Her breasts rising and falling as she gasped for air, she tried to free her hands. "Why don't you try something a little less clichéd?"

Demetrius backhanded her. He slapped her across the face with a full swing of his arm.

Everything was fading and Cleo closed her eyes. The entire room was out of focus. Her cheek stung and she could barely feel her arms because they were nearly numb from holding up her body.

How could she have let this asshole get the drop on her?

It was stupid really but she'd been so worried about Tommy and Luke.

She'd been too distracted. Hell, from the moment she'd laid eyes upon Lukas Nathanial Lace she'd been in a whirlwind. She had feelings for him that she didn't want to admit to and after meeting Tommy, couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by it all.

"I haven't been able to think of anything but you since the night you came to visit me," Demetrius whispered in her ear. He reached up and cupped her breasts palming them with his hands. He squeezed, watching her face for the slightest hint of pain.

He grew angrier when she failed to react.

"You're scared," he whispered. "I know it. You're stubborn but it doesn't matter. I'll love breaking you."

"Maybe if you learn some manners—" Cleo spat at him, hitting him in the face and bracing herself. "You'd get laid."

Demetrius hit her, slapped her across the face openhanded. He fisted her hair and gave her head a shake, smiling when she groaned involuntarily. He shoved her back, the pipes creaking as her body swung like a pendulum.

"Is that all you got?" Cleo whispered, her voice cracking. She shook her head, trying to remain conscious.

"Hardly," Demetrius said with a hearty laugh. He reached down and unbuttoned her jeans. "You get that—and a whole lot more."

He worked her jeans down over her hips, cupping them with his palms. "Nice," he groaned. "Very fuckable. Most women have hips as thin as spaghetti, but you have nice curves. Hips that men would kill to bend over and fuck, childbearing hips."

The thought made Cleo a little sick.

"Oh," he gasped, catching sight of her black panties. "For me, they're sexy as hell." He snapped the waistband and smiled. "You've been my wet dream every night," he whispered. "I love your body." He tweaked her nipples through her bra, and growled low and long.

"Thanks," Cleo managed, closing her eyes and licking the blood from her lips. She imagined what she was going to do to him when she was free, instead of focusing on his dirty hands. "I work out a lot."

She'd been expecting another slap and he hadn't disappointed her.

He couldn't run fast enough, couldn't hide far enough, Cleo thought as her body seemed to revolve in circles, swinging from the momentum of his openhanded slap.

She would find him and make him pay for the humiliation, for forcing her to be under his control.

This was a thousand times worse than what she'd done to him. Being raped just didn't compare.

She'd teased him, she'd taunted him and then she'd let him go. She'd hit him in the face with her gun but hadn't really physically harmed him.

Demetrius leaned down and bit her breast, pinching her flesh between his teeth, trying to make her cry out in pain.

"I told you I like it rough—" Cleo said between gritted teeth. "You still haven't given it to me."

He came at her then and she rocked her body, swinging into him and raising her knee. She landed the kick in his gut and tugged on her arms, trying to pull herself free, using her own weight. Her wrists ached, the bones feeling as though they were going to pull apart.

"Rough enough?" he asked, clasping her by the throat. He squeezed her windpipe with his fist, cutting of her access to air. He watched her face turn red, her eyes grow huge as she struggled to breathe.

Gasp... Gasp... Gasp. She was like a dying animal, desperate for its last breath of air and Demetrius laughed, slowly releasing his grip around her slender little neck, giving her just enough air to hang on.

Cleo battled the darkness, the heaviness swimming around her body like a riptide, threatening to suck her into the black depths of the netherworld.

But no matter how hard she fought, it was too late. An unholy darkness swallowed her whole, taking with it her mind and giving Demetrius everything he wanted.

Her body, completely and totally.

"Wake up," he said, slapping her face lightly. "You're not passing out on me yet. I'm not done playing." He shook Cleo by the shoulders, bringing her back by degrees.

"I want your pussy. I want you awake for it, bitch."

He unbuckled his pants, and released his cock. "I'm taking what you refused me. Nothing worse than that change your mind at the last minute feminist bullshit."

Cleo groaned, tried to fight him off, but her body simply refused to move.

"In my country, when a man wants pussy, he takes pussy."

Demetrius lifted the band of her panties, slid his thumbs beneath and started to lower them. The sound of a shell jacking into the chamber of a shotgun stopped him with a jerk.

It was a sound that could make anyone crumple to their knees in fear.

"Get away from her or I'll blow your fucking prick off," Luke said. His voice was steady and sure but the repressed anger deep within him was visible in his rage. He moved closer, his brow creased, the color of his face a furious red.

His jaw was clenched tightly and he worked it back and forth, his finger sliding to the trigger of the weapon when he got his first clear sight of Cleo.

All he could see was her half-naked body, blood smeared everywhere, much like gory fingerprints that proved without a doubt that Demetrius'd touched her.

"Back the fuck off or die," Luke said, barely able to think beyond what he was seeing.

"Luke?" Cleo heard his voice, calling out to him in disbelief. She had to be imagining him, she thought to herself. Had to be. She was making him up. He was only in her mind. She'd wanted him there so desperately, that she'd created the fantasy of him rescuing her. Just as she had when she'd been a lonely ten-year-old child who'd been lost at the mall, imagining her white knight coming to save her.

She'd learned the hard way that there was no such thing as a white knight but she opened her eyes and Luke was truly there, standing before her, shotgun in hand.

Was she already dead? Was Luke in heaven with her?

Luke, a hot shower and all of the size-seven Jimmy Choos she could ask for. Ah, that would really be heaven.

If it was heaven, then surely her mother would be with them. "Mom," she whispered, a single tear running down her cheek.

"Cleo," Luke said soothingly, "I'm here." He slid an arm around her waist and lifted her body up, trying to relieve some of the pressure from her arms.

Demetrius backed into the corner of the basement, not liking the look on Luke's face. Little rich boy was extremely pissed.

The barrel of the Benelli was trained on his chest and promising its own brand of justice. "Tommy, the key?" Luke said, waving his brother over. "Find the fucking key."

"There isn't one," Demetrius said with a foolish grin. He edged closer to Luke, staring at the shotgun and gauging the rich man's reaction. "I didn't need it. I planned on keeping her."

"She's mine," Luke said possessively. "But who she stays with is her choice and it doesn't look like it's you, asshole." Luke handed off the shotgun and Tommy buttended Demetrius in the face with the Benelli. He sent him reeling backward and into the wall.

Demetrius slid to the floor.

"Your turn to bleed, asshole." Luke shook his head, taking Cleo into his arms and sweeping her feet off the ground. This animal deserved to do more than bleed but for the moment that was enough.

"This isn't what it looks like—" Demetrius spat. "I—"

"Find the key, Tommy." Luke looked up, trying to see if he could somehow release Cleo without the key. "Hurry before I shoot this bastard."

"My pleasure." Tommy crossed to Demetrius, getting an eyeful of Cleo in her black panties and disheveled bra. He saw the blood, painted on her skin like a crude Picasso and turned to eye Demetrius with disgust. "You sick fuck."

"Wait," Demetrius yelled just as Tommy put a boot in his gut.

"Cleo," Luke whispered her name, trying to awaken her. She cried out in pain, her entire body trembling. "My arms," she whispered, licking her lips. "Arms."

"I know. It's all right, baby. I'm here now. Just a minute and we'll have you free."

"You know," Tommy said, not wasting a moment as he began searching Demetrius' pockets. He patted him down with terrible efficiency. "As many times as I've been searched, I should become her partner."

"Six," Cleo muttered, opening her eyes and glancing at Luke and then his brother.

"Six what?" Luke asked, helping her sit up and touching her bruised cheek with his hand, anger building within his chest like a balloon filling with helium.

"Arrests," Tommy said with a laugh. "She's right, but the last one shouldn't have counted."

"Jesus, tell me you're okay," Luke said to Cleo. He looked her over, making certain she wasn't bleeding anywhere but her lip.

"One of the models I was dating decided to hang out of the sunroof in downtown Minneapolis," Tommy continued on with his story. He flipped the thug over and checked his back pockets.

"She stripped naked, littering the streets with her designer bra and thong, and earned me a ticket for littering of all things." Tommy found the key lying beneath him and reached for it. "Got it," he said triumphantly.

Luke slid the key into the cuffs, releasing Cleo's arms and she grimaced as they fell bonelessly to her sides and she collapsed against Luke's chest.

"Cuff him," Luke said to Tommy. He handed off the handcuffs and turned his attention to Cleo.

"Talk to me," Luke begged. He held her tightly against his body. "If he—"

"How'd you find me?" Cleo asked, leaning back and squeezing her fists, trying to get the feeling back in her hands and arms.

"Found the stun gun, and followed the tracks in the mud," Luke said proudly. "He headed right for the basement of a guest cabin."

"You're really here," Cleo whispered, resting her head on his chest and inhaling that clean, woodsy scent that was Luke.

"Of course," Luke chided, brushing his lips over her bruised temple in the softest of kisses. "I'll rescue you, whenever you're not rescuing me."

"Who rescues me?" Tommy asked, glancing up at Luke and frowning. "Because, technically..."

"Shut up, Tommy," Luke and Cleo said at the same time.

"This is my fault," Luke told her. "I'm so sorry, baby." He glanced over at Demetrius, ready to kill him. "I thought you'd been kidnapped or killed. That I'd lost you again."

Cleo listened to the rhythm of Luke's heartbeat, pounding steadily in her ear. Her eyes drifted closed as she focused on the beat, her own heart keeping pace with his. She'd never been so comfortable in a man's arms, and had certainly never before been a damsel in distress.

It wasn't so bad.

"I'm fine," she said finally, leaning back and looking Luke in the eye. She was lying of course and they both knew it. Her voice was shaky and she was hurt a bit...but she was enormously pissed.

"Did he assault you?" The question left a rancid taste in Luke's mouth, but he had to know.

He looked her over, his words trailing off as his eyes roamed her body. The buttons were missing from her shirt and she had a fat lip. Her bra was crooked and her breasts were showing. Her jeans had been pulled down around her ankles.

Her panties, he thanked God, were still where they belonged but he could see bloody marks around the waistline and knew that Demetrius had touched her there. It was like seeing a bloody map of fingerprints all over her body.

"No," Cleo reassured him, patting his arms and glancing at the ground, as if looking for a place to stand. "He hadn't got that far, yet."

"That's the only thing that's going to save his goddamned life." Luke helped her put her feet on the ground and knelt down, assisting her in righting her jeans.

He pulled his sweatshirt over his head and helped her slide her arms out of her ruined shirt. He opened the neck of his sweatshirt and slid it over her head, watching her pull it down and cover her bloody bra and exposed breasts.

Tommy grabbed Demetrius by the collar and dragged him to his feet. He gave him a shove and pushed him toward the door. "Go. Up the stairs."

"Wait," Cleo interrupted, turning around and facing Demetrius for the first time. She moved forward, grabbed him by the shirt collar, reared back and shoved her knee straight up into his balls.

"There you go," she said, leaning down and looking Demetrius in the face as he struggled for air. He grunted in pain, rested on his knees, and turned various shades of white as he struggled to catch his breath. "I played with your balls," she whispered, "just like you wanted me to."

Chapter Twenty-Four

"You bitch." Demetrius panted, bent over on the ground. "I'll still fuck you. You'll see. Someday, somewhere, when you aren't expecting me, I'll be there and I'll get what I want."

"Shut the hell up," Tommy warned. He grabbed him by the shirt and jerked him to a standing position. "Move."

"No," Demetrius argued. "No fucking way. I'm not going anywhere with you fucks."

"Why are you really here?" Cleo asked, tired of his mouth. "Why'd Hammerstrom send you? Are you here to kill Luke?"

"Hammerstrom doesn't want him dead, you dumb bitch." Demetrius turned and smiled at Cleo. Like a little kid with a deep, dark secret. He edged closer, looking her up and down as if she were still on the menu.

"You think you're so smart," he said with a groan. "But you're just a snotty dominatrix who gets off on control."

"Show her some respect," Tommy said. "Or you won't have any balls left."

"Respect," Demetrius grunted. "You talk about respect. Like you're the perfect brother? The perfect gentleman."

"Shut up." Tommy exhaled, trying to control his temper, to stay calm. "You've always been an asshole, give it a rest."

"No," Luke interrupted, stepping forward and moving between the two of them. "Let him talk."

"You can't believe a word this guy says." Tommy shook his head. He looked at Luke pleadingly. "He's nothing but a hired hand, a thug."

"You sleeping with her too?" Demetrius asked Tommy, motioning at Cleo. "Only this pussy's better than Kate's. This is a pussy worth destroying a family over. A pussy worth fucking your brother over for."

Luke glanced at Tommy, eyes narrowed in disbelief. "What the hell is he talking about?" he asked, wondering how this animal would know anything about Kate.

"He's screwing with you," Tommy argued, rolling his eyes as if he was full of shit. He stepped back and turned toward Luke, patting him on the shoulder. "Don't listen to this crap, man."

Tommy had never used a brotherly gesture in his life.

As a matter of a fact, Luke didn't even think they'd hugged once in their lives. He knew then that it was true.

"You fucked Kate," Luke said in disbelief. "I never wanted to believe it."

Luke recalled all of the parties he'd abandoned over the years. All the times he'd had to leave Kate in Tommy's care, having asked his little brother to entertain his fiancée while he attended to urgent business.

Obviously, their definitions of "entertain" were completely contrary to his.

So, while Luke attended to the Lace Empire, Tommy attended to —

"I didn't mean it to happen," Tommy clarified, holding his hands out as if trying to keep Luke from punching him yet again. He glanced at his brother and shifted uncomfortably. "She needed you. You weren't there."

"But you were?"

"Someone had to be," Tommy reasoned. He wasn't sure what else to say. "I ended it. It didn't matter."

"You're right," Luke said, still holding on to Cleo. He looked deeply into her eyes, seeing beyond the walls that she'd spent her life erecting and into her soul. "It didn't matter. I know that now."

Luke reached out and touched Cleo's face. Nothing mattered now except her.

Cleo lost herself in his eyes, nearly forgetting that they were in a dank basement where she'd nearly been raped.

She looked at Luke, into his startling eyes, realizing that she'd never really shared herself before, never relied on a man for comfort or security. That she'd never trusted anyone.

Not until now. Not until Luke.

"If you trust this bitch, you're an idiot." Demetrius ranted. He watched the two of them lost in one another and was disgusted by what he saw. He lunged at Luke but Tommy stopped him by stepping in between them.

"Benelli makes one hell of a quality weapon," Tommy said, pointing the barrel in Demetrius' direction. "Don't you think?"

"Stop," Cleo commanded. She stepped away from Luke and touched Tommy on the shoulder. "He and I need to talk."

"Upstairs," Tommy said, giving him a shove in that direction. "Now."

Demetrius walked up the staircase to the upper level of the cabin. He glanced down the hallway, looking both directions before stepping out of the basement and into the kitchen.

The sound of a helicopter broke through the silence, the wind from the blades scraping the trees against the screen on the window, scattering leaves over the yard.

Demetrius looked up at the vaulted ceilings and exposed log beams, shrinking at the chopper's approach, as if being physically cut down by the rotating blades.

"Fantastic," Luke said with a sigh. He cursed and glanced at his watch. "My parents," he whispered to Cleo. "They're early. They're never this early. Never."

"Dad's assistant said they'd be up tomorrow morning," Tommy agreed, looking at Luke and nodding. "It doesn't make sense."

"Dad does like to make a grand entrance," Tommy complained. He pushed Demetrius down into a leather wingback chair and backed away, keeping the Benelli trained on him and wishing he had a drink. "Don't move."

Cleo swiped at the blood on her lip with the back of her hand. Demetrius hadn't played fair at all.

There wasn't any pain involved when she'd had her playtime.

Demetrius had to go and break the rules. She walked over and stood just out of reach, needing answers. "Why is someone trying to kill Lukas Lace?"

She was calmer now. Felt stronger.

"You weren't so in control when I had your tits in my hands," Demetrius said, challenging her with his eyes, which were dark brown and filled with hate.

Luke moved toward him but Cleo stopped him with a hand against his chest. She needed answers now. She looked back at him and smiled. "Since you're in such a sharing mood," she said, ignoring the sting of his remark. "Tell me why Hammerstrom wants Luke dead."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you back," Cleo snapped. She walked up and punched him, making a full swing and catching him in the nose. There was a huge popping sound that echoed through the room but she didn't know if it was her hand or his nose.

Either way, it was his turn to bleed.

"He doesn't want him dead, you dumb bitch." Demetrius glanced at Luke and smiled, blood dripping down into his teeth. "He's been trying to keep him alive."

"Liar," Cleo yelled. "Why?"

"What the hell is going on here, son?"

Luke turned to see his father standing beside the sheriff of Lake of the Woods County. He, Sheriff Benjamin Black and his father had fished together on multiple occasions, enjoying the remote waters of Lake of the Woods.

But it had been years ago, before Luke had stopped spending time with his dad at the cabin. Before they'd drifted apart, becoming virtual strangers.

Tommy had never been interested in fishing, camping, or in losing himself in the peacefulness of the north woods. For him it had always been about women, about parties, about sex.

That would never change, Luke thought, wondering if Kate felt remorse about their affair.

"Ben," Luke said, surprised to see the sheriff standing there. So much for the old adage of where's a cop when you need one.

He needed one.

"This son of a bitch assaulted my fiancée." Luke walked toward Cleo and stood beside her, taking her hand and easing her beneath his arm. "Arrest him before I kill him, would you?"

"Fiancée?" Luke's mother stepped into the room, eyeing Cleo as she repeated the word. She looked up at her son and found a chair, nearly collapsing in it.

Everyone in the room turned to face Beverly Lace, their eyes slowly moving toward Cleo, who decided upon distraction as a way to survive the awkward moment.

"Cleo Tanek," she said, sitting in the chair beside Mrs. Lace. She reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle shake. "Lovely to meet you, Mrs. Lace."

"Are you hurt, my dear?" Mrs. Lace asked, holding Cleo's hand a bit firmly, as if she feared the girl might faint if she let her go too quickly. "Do you need a doctor?"

"Yes," Luke said, crossing to where they sat and standing beside Cleo.

"No," Cleo said at the same time Luke had agreed with his mother. "I just need to freshen up, that's all."

"You're bleeding, my dear."

"What's going on here, Lukas?" his father asked, coming forward and eyeing the shotgun.

"Have you been assaulted, ma'am?" the sheriff asked Cleo, not seeming to wait for an answer before lifting up the microphone of his radio and ordering the medics to arrive via watercraft.

"This man kidnapped her and had her handcuffed in the basement," Tommy said, nodding at Demetrius, who sat in the chair with his hands interlaced. "He'd bloodied her up pretty good, before we could get to her, Ben."

"That's impossible," Mr. Lace snapped. Luke's father slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks and walked over to Demetrius. He glanced down at the man, clucking his tongue as if turning something over in his mind. He turned toward the sheriff, frowning. "I don't know what's going on here but this man works for me."

"You must be mistaken, Dad," Luke said. His entire demeanor changed as he crossed the room, shoulders squared and his back stiff as a board. "He's not employed at Lace Incorporated," he told his father, positive he'd never hired this man and had never seen him before he'd attacked Cleo.

Though Lace Incorporated employed thousands of employees, Luke knew the faces of the people who worked for him. He walked through the office, delivered his own paperwork, spoke to the department heads, held regular meetings. No, he didn't know this man. He was sure of it.

"I didn't say he did," Daniel Lace said. He turned to his eldest son, dismissing Cleo without as much as a glance. "He works for me *personally*."

"In what capacity?" Luke demanded, unable to believe what he was hearing. His father was no longer involved in the business. He'd retired. He'd turned all responsibilities over to Luke.

He didn't make personnel decisions.

"That's my business," Dan told his son. He walked to a stocked bar and removed a Baccarat crystal tumbler. He poured a finger of scotch and glanced at Luke. "Somebody let him out of those ridiculous handcuffs."

"Now just a minute, here, Daniel." The sheriff walked over and stood by the chair, looking at Demetrius and rubbing his chin. "I think Luke asked you a legitimate question under the circumstances."

Dan Lace swallowed his drink, pouring himself another. He wasn't used to answering to anyone.

"Dan?" his wife scolded. Her voice was nothing more than a firm whisper. "What's going on?" Beverly Lace met her husband's gaze, wringing her hands in her lap.

"You've always had your secrets, and I've put up with them, but now you have to give us all an answer."

Dan Lace looked at his older son, searching his eyes for understanding that wasn't there.

"You've never depended upon anyone else but me," Luke said to his father. "I've tried to understand that. To live up to that. Now I'm asking for the same."

"I hired him as a bodyguard," Dan finally admitted, taking a seat, another drink in his hand. "Everything is falling apart," he reasoned, looking from his wife to his sons. "But all I wanted to do was keep Luke safe. To keep my family safe."

"Well, Mr. Lace, you hired the wrong man for the job," Cleo said. She walked toward Daniel Lace, facing the man she'd only seen in photographs, had only read about during her background investigation into Luke's family.

If this guy had been hired to protect Luke, then Cleo was seriously worried about who'd been hired to kill him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lightning streaked across the darkening sky and Sheriff Benjamin glanced out the front door and then back into the living room. "This storm's moving in quicker than I thought. We have to move."

He walked over and took Demetrius by the arm, pulling him to his feet. "Under the circumstances, I'd just as soon leave those on 'til we can establish your identity."

"I vouch for him myself," Daniel said, sticking his chest out and looking perturbed that his word would be questioned. "There was a day when that was enough, Sheriff."

"Daniel, you know I answer to the taxpayers as well as you and we have a young lady who claims to have been attacked by this employee of yours."

"And who vouches for her?" Daniel asked, pointing at Cleo and shrugging his shoulders. "We don't even know who she is or what she wants with this family."

"I vouch for her and that's enough," Luke said to his father. "And I say she was attacked by this goon, nearly raped, Father. Did you pay this guy to smear blood all over my fiancée?"

Daniel went white as a sheet and glanced at Demetrius in disgust.

"I can explain, Mr. Lace."

"Before you do that," Sheriff Benjamin said, "Let me tell you that you have the right to remain silent."

"I have extra clothes at the main house, my dear." Beverly said, taking Cleo's hand and heading for the door, listening as Ben read Demetrius his rights. "After you shower, of course."

"I'll need photographs first," Ben said, lowering his voice and looking back at Cleo, as if he had not only eyes in the back of his head but a second set of ears as well.

Cleo nodded, knowing the procedures all too well from years of being on the streets. She was extremely grateful that she didn't have to suffer through a rape collection kit.

The indignities that women suffer through were nearly unbearable and then to be humiliated and probed by a medical professional as well. It was an awful thing to suffer, Cleo knew.

Looking out the door, Cleo saw that the rain was beginning to fall. Big, fat drops reminding her of a child's tears. So much for evidence collection, eh?

"She's pressing charges," Luke piped up, interrupting the sheriff. "I don't care who he works for, he attacked the woman I love."

"Oh dear." Beverly twisted the gold bracelet she wore on her right wrist, toying with it as an outlet for her nervousness. She looked up at Luke, her eyes wide, as if she couldn't believe what she'd just heard him say.

Love?

He loved her.

Cleo couldn't believe it either.

She turned toward Luke and he pulled her against the hard shell of his body. Despite the fact that her lip was seeping blood and hair wild and in her eyes, her head throbbing as if it might pop right off her shoulders, she couldn't help but smile.

He loved her.

He hadn't told her but he'd said it aloud and even if it had been a Freudian slip, she knew that he'd meant it. Despite the fact that they'd only just met, despite the fact that they were complete opposites, despite the fact that they were in completely different social classes, he loved her.

It was just too bad that his confession of love wouldn't make a difference.

There was just too much standing between them. Not too mention, his father hated her, hadn't even looked in her direction and his mother, well, she was just being kind.

It was in her nature.

Her eyes were a brighter shade of blue than Luke's were. They shone like stars in the night sky. Beverly Lace held Tommy's arm as they headed for the main cabin and Cleo could tell that Mrs. Lace was a woman who loved her family and would do anything to protect her boys.

"I'll get the car," Tommy said as he led his mother to the covered entryway and hesitated, looking out at the rain.

"I'll sue all of you bastards," Demetrius promised, turning and glancing at Mr. Lace. He raised his hands over his head, showing him the handcuffs. "So this is what happens to your hired help?"

"He works for Senator Hammerstrom, as well," Cleo said to the sheriff and Mr. Lace. "Hired muscle."

"The senator would never put me in cuffs," Demetrius raised his voice, lifting his hands and showing them to Cleo.

A shot exploded, the echo like thunder reverberating through the air. It left them all momentarily stunned.

"Get down," Cleo yelled when she saw the red blood seep through his shirt, bleeding into the white of the fabric and spreading in the rain.

It was too late.

Demetrius looked down at the shirt, dropping his arms and stumbling forward. The round had pierced his lower abdomen and he clutched his stomach in shock. "Jesus," he yelled. "I'm hit. I'm hit."

He'd managed to fall back forward right onto the sheriff and pinned him to the ground.

"Inside," Ben yelled, groaning as he tried to reach his weapon. His arm was twisted and trapped beneath them both.

Cleo pushed Luke's parents into the house and crawled back out the door. She unsnapped the sheriff's holster and withdrew his weapon. Sig .45. She aimed into the trees and returned fire, reaching out with one hand and grabbing Demetrius by the belt.

She tugged but he was too heavy and she couldn't budge him.

"Forget him," Tommy yelled. He grabbed her arm and tried to pull her back inside, rounds exploding and sending them ducking for cover. He tried to haul Cleo back but she only struggled harder, not releasing her grip on Demetrius.

"He's alive," Cleo shouted. There was more gunfire and she ducked down, shielding Demetrius' body with her own. She couldn't hear anything but the sound of rounds exploding and couldn't see anything but his blood.

Luke and Tommy were there suddenly. They grabbed on to Demetrius and pulled, yanking him into the entryway.

A round exploded over his head but Luke reached out and grabbed Ben's good arm and dragged him inside.

"Thank you," Demetrius gasped once they were inside. Blood seeped through his fingers as he hung on to his gut, trying to keep everything where it belonged. "Oh God."

Cleo propped himself up against the wall, covering his wound with his hands to stop the bleeding. It wasn't working.

Cleo handed him a towel she'd grabbed from the kitchen and folded it over his wound. "Hold this."

"I thought you'd been sent by the devil...but you're an angel in disguise."

"Shh," Cleo said, holding his hand against the cloth and trying to stop the bleeding.

"I deserve to die."

"No one deserves that," Cleo told him. She grabbed a blanket from the back of the sofa and covered him, trying to keep him from going into shock.

"I know I'm going to hell for what I've done to you," Demetrius gasped.

Cleo shook her head, "Be quiet."

"I was hired to protect you all, but you pissed me off." He shook his head when she tried to silence him, wanting to get this out before he slipped away. "You pissed me off and I wanted to teach you a lesson."

"You succeeded," Cleo said, leaning down and kissing his cheek lightly. "Now I need you to lie still and shut up."

Cleo turned toward the room, and scanned the crowd. "Everyone upstairs," she shouted at Luke and his family. "Hurry." She turned and waved them toward the staircase. "Go, now."

Pieces of log exploded above her head, rounds splintering the wood and shattering everything around them. Lamps exploded. Glass shattered.

Holding his arm against his body, deciding that it was probably broken, Ben worked his way to his feet, took Beverly's hand and pulled her toward the stairs. He pushed Daniel up behind his wife and looked back, wishing he'd brought a few more men. "There's a deputy in the chopper," he yelled at Luke. "Imagine he's on his way."

"Go with your parents," Cleo said, looking back at Luke and Tommy. "Get them upstairs." She ducked behind the sofa and flipped a pine coffee table over to use as a shield.

"No way." Luke turned and waved at Tommy, motioning for him to follow the sheriff up the stairs. "Take care of them," he said to his brother with a nod.

"I'll take care of them," Tommy said. "I'll give my life for any one of you."

"Then take them upstairs, little brother." Luke patted Tommy on the shoulder and squeezed. "Hurry."

Luke gave him that *don't screw this up* look and Tommy nodded.

"Don't worry, I won't screw it up," Tommy told him. "You just take care of her."

"I'd give my life for her," Luke told his brother as he turned to Cleo. "I'm not leaving you," he told her.

He grabbed the Benelli and loaded the shells he gathered from the hardwood floor.

"Stay low," Cleo said, tugging him down beside her. She couldn't make him go, couldn't keep him from being shot but she was willing to sacrifice everything to make certain that he lived.

He had the business, his parents, his brother and the Lace legacy to care for. It would all be lost if he died. "Don't fire at random," Cleo explained. "Make every shot count."

Luke would sacrifice everything for her. There was no arguing with him, no reasoning. She knew in her gut that he wouldn't leave her side. So she didn't even try asking him.

There was a momentary lull, silence and Luke kissed Cleo on the cheek. He turned into her and brushed his lips over hers in a chaste kiss. "Marry me?" he said, pulling back to looking her in the eyes.

"You're insane—" Cleo shook her head, not knowing what else to say. "It's the adrenaline talking."

She closed her eyes, the mere touch of his lips making her melt from the inside out. Her stomach danced, her skin pricked and her heart fluttered, alive with something she'd never experienced.

Love. Marriage. What was wrong with this man today?

"We have to get him to a hospital," Cleo told Luke, pointing at Demetrius, who was groaning and looking as if he might fall unconscious at any moment.

"Be my wife," Luke said, fixing their gazes after she'd purposely broken the connection by looking across the room. He wouldn't take no for an answer. It was what he did, after all.

He purchased, he acquired, he sought multimillion-dollar real estate. It was how he made his living. Yet, nothing mattered more to him than winning Cleo's hand. Nothing meant more than gaining her trust, her companionship and her loyalty.

He loved her. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her and it was about time she knew it. If he lost her, it was going to be after spending their lives together. He'd known it the very moment he'd laid eyes upon her in his office building.

He'd lost her in the crowd, only to gaze across a crowded restaurant later that day and see her sitting there, alone, the woman of his dreams.

It didn't matter that she hadn't come to him by chance, or that she'd been doing her job. What mattered was that fate had brought them together and destiny would keep them that way. That it would bind them to one another for the rest of their lives.

"It's never enough with you, is it, Luke?"

Cleo spun around at the sound of the unfamiliar male voice. She raised her arm and pointed the Sig in that direction.

There was a gun to Luke's head.

It took a moment for the other details to come into focus.

"You have everything one man could want and still, it isn't enough." Luke's cousin Roger shoved his gun against Luke's head, his voice lilting with laughter. He slid his finger onto the trigger. His eyes, so dark that they looked like pools of black oil, were focused solely upon his quarry.

"What the hell are you doing, Roger?" Luke turned to look at his cousin. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. They'd always had sort of a rivalry going but Luke had never realized that it had sunk to this level.

They'd been reared together, fighting, sharing and teaching one another about life, about healthy competition. At one point, Luke had felt closer to Roger than he had to his own brother.

But as they'd grown older, they'd drifted apart. Luke still wasn't sure what had transpired between their parents, or what it was that had made Roger hate him so. "Why the hell are you doing this?"

"Do you honestly have to ask?" Roger said, grabbing Cleo by the hand and pulling her to her feet. "I'm taking everything and everyone you have, everyone you care about. You'll have what I've had my whole life, cousin. Nothing."

"You have Lace Incorporated and your father's undying admiration. You have the woman of your dreams, fucking you every time you look at her with those baby blues

and you still aren't satisfied. What other reasons do I possibly need to want to blow your brains all over this beautiful hand-hewn cedar cabin built with money that should belong to me?"

"Let her go," Luke commanded, his voice unwavering. He tried not to look at Cleo, tried not to reveal his absolute devotion, his willingness to die to save her life.

No, Luke wanted to spend every moment he had left in the world, with Cleo by his side. He didn't plan to ruin that.

He couldn't die, not yet, not when he'd just discovered what living was really about.

"You make me ill," Roger muttered. He smiled at Cleo, pulling her toward the kitchen. He held her against him, his arm around her neck in a weak attempt at a chokehold. "I've always envied you, cousin. Now I'm taking it all away. Taking what should be mine, what I deserve to have."

"So buying my building was no accident, was it, Roger?"

"You're so blind, so full of yourself. So easy to decipher and manipulate. Until she came along. She posed quite a challenge, I must say."

"Luke, I discovered that your father pushed his brother, Martin, out of the company," Cleo explained what she'd found out to Luke. "He was once vice president of Lace Incorporated."

"No way," Luke argued, shaking his head adamantly. If his Uncle Martin had been a part of the family business, he would have known. "That can't be true."

"I discovered a copy of your father's will in public records," Cleo explained. "It named you, Roger and Tommy as heirs to the company." She looked up at Luke's parents and straightened her shoulders.

"Two years after Lace doubled their profits, your father forced your uncle out of the company. He took away everything he had, including the woman, the only woman, he ever loved."

"She's right, Lukas." Luke's mother stood at the top of the staircase, wringing her hands together. Her eyes were filled with tears and her bottom lip quivering. "It's true."

"No." Luke shook his head. "This is insane."

"I've always loved your father—" Bev looked at her son, her eyes saddened by what had happened so many years ago. "It still haunts me, haunts us all and probably always will."

Not if Roger could help it.

"I never wanted your Uncle Martin to be hurt. To lose everything. But he just went a little...crazy. What started as an infatuation turned into an obsession."

"My father loved you," Roger yelled up the stairs, saliva spewing from his mouth as he spat out the words. He tightened his grip on Cleo, making it hard for her to breathe. "He worshiped you."

"He wanted the woman I loved. He wanted everything I had," Daniel said, interrupting and taking a step down the staircase. He moved toward his nephew, trying to make sense out of all of this. "He hated me for it."

Roger glared up at the one woman he despised more than anyone in the world. "My father loved you more than his own wife, more than my own mother, more than me—" Roger raged.

"She died of a broken heart, remarried to an abusive alcoholic just for the little stability and support he provided. He adopted me, but I lost everything."

"He was a liar," Daniel said, stopping at the bottom of the staircase. He walked toward them, backing Roger toward the kitchen. The gun still trained on Lukas.

"Your father tried to steal my wife. Tried to take Lace out from underneath me."

"The senator?" Cleo said, looking at Daniel and seeing it in his eyes. "Martin turned to Senator Hammerstrom for help. They tried to buy Lace Incorporated out from beneath you."

"That's right," Daniel agreed. "He pilfered money out of the retirement fund for the senator's campaign. He stole the money from our children's trust funds."

"Martin is partners with Senator Hammerstrom," Cleo said, working it all out in her head. "He invested the stolen funds in illegal activities and is using front companies like the dry cleaning company to launder the cash."

"It should've been ours, all of it." Roger squeezed the Glock, tightening his grip on the weapon. "Why should Luke get it all? Why should Luke be so happy?"

"That's why the senator loaned you Demetrius," Cleo said, looking over at him, nearly unconscious against the wall. She looked at Daniel Lace, pleading with him to fix his mistake. "Because the senator sided with your brother so long ago and now he's trying to make amends."

"He owed me that," Daniel said. "Making sure my son was safe against the threats on his life." He walked right up to Roger and lowered his gaze, looking at the hardwood floor. "I never pressed charges against your father, Roger. I kept it all quiet, made it all go away."

"You knew about this all along," Cleo said to Tommy. "The senator and your cousin are forcing you to help run the cash. That's why you've been pushing Luke to run for office."

"If anyone could oust Hammerstrom," Tommy said. "Sorry," he shrugged, holding up his hands as if in surrender when Roger glared at him.

"You're on his side?"

"He's my brother, Roger."

"He's already taken away everything," Roger ranted. His voice was wavering and his hands shaking. He slid his finger onto the trigger, wanting desperately to blow Luke's brains out. "If Hammerstrom goes broke, so does my father—so do I."

"It doesn't have to be like this," Cleo said, trying to reason with Roger. "Roger, please. Luke didn't know. Let him fix it."

"He knew," Roger yelled. He looked from Daniel to Luke, seeing only what he wanted to see. Luke was his worst enemy, though they'd once been best friends. "You were like my brother," he said, lifting the gun. "Like my brother."

He pulled the trigger.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Cleo felt Roger fall away from her but saw Luke go down and landed on the floor herself. "No," she crawled toward Luke, screaming. "No."

She looked up to see Demetrius on his knees, holding the gun in his hand and dropping his arm. She turned to see that he'd fired just in time and had hit Roger in the shoulder.

Demetrius had fired the bullet that had saved Luke's life.

"Mission accomplished," he gasped, falling back and leaning against the wall.

"Here," Sheriff Benjamin said, handing Cleo a pair of handcuffs. "Hook him up, quickly."

Cleo slapped the handcuffs on to Roger's wrists, listening to him snivel about the pain.

He'd lost everything.

He was begging someone to kill him.

The son of a bitch was lucky that she'd somehow lost her gun or she just might put him out of his misery.

"Jesus," Luke said, rushing to her side and sweeping her up against him. He held her tightly against his chest. "I thought — I thought I was going to lose you."

"I know," Cleo managed, her eyes drifting closed. She clutched him tightly, holding on for dear life.

When she'd heard that round explode...

"I thought he'd shot you," Cleo said, her voice catching in her throat. Suddenly there were tears there and she couldn't control them. She held Luke tighter, clenching her eyes closed.

She'd heard that gunshot and had known deep down inside that she'd lost him. That her life would never be the same because she watched the man she loved, die.

Deputies stormed into the room, guns raised. The room erupted in chaos, everyone talking at once and still they held on to each other, Cleo knowing that the moment she let go, she'd lose him forever.

Within twenty-four hours, she had. Luke had stayed with his parents at the cabin and she'd returned to her loft, feeling lost and for the first time, utterly alone.

She climbed into the shower, the water spraying her bruised skin. She looked at her wrists, covered in black bracelets of bruises from the handcuffs and tears filled her eyes.

"Stop," she told herself, trying to wipe her mind clean. She poured shampoo in her hand and began washing her hair, the pain in her arms bringing with it images of her body hanging from pipes and her arms stretched out above her.

She turned the water warmer, making it as nearly hot as she could stand. She leaned into it, feeling the burn, the ache deep within the tissues easing.

There was another ache that she couldn't drive away, however. Not with hot water and certainly not with positive fucking thoughts. It was an ache that was so deeply embedded within her body, that it had remained dormant until now.

Its location was so foreign that it was as if Luke had discovered it and had awoken her at her very core.

"No," Cleo yelled out, pounding her fist into the wall. "No. No." She leaned her forehead against the cool tile, the hot steam burning her skin. She didn't want to know how it felt to be so empty and the tears were suddenly inescapable.

So empty. He'd filled her and now he was gone and she was so unfulfilled.

Cleo slid down the tiled shower wall, her tears turning into sobs, racking her body as she lost control.

She cried because of the physical pain. She cried because of the emotional roller coaster she'd endured and she cried because for the briefest of moments, she'd loved.

She'd loved so deeply, that it tore her apart.

But as Cleo climbed out of the shower, she was good and pissed. She was done with the tears. Done feeling sorry for herself.

"Get over it," she told her reflection in the mirror, sighing in disgust. Her eyes were red and swollen and she looked liked she'd been through hell.

She needed to snap out of it. She decided to go shopping and go out to lunch. She would surround herself with Jimmy Choos, Manolos and swanky accessories. She would buy something new in black leather and pamper herself.

She deserved it, after all.

Hours later, Cleo found herself sitting at the same table she'd sat at the day she'd first met Luke.

It was her way of facing her emotions head-on.

She put the menu down and looked up to find Luke sitting down across from her.

She noticed that he'd scraped his chin during the scuffle at the cabin and there was a slight nick there, just where she loved to run her tongue over his skin.

He was wearing an Italian business suit just like the one she'd first seen him in and leading a power lunch with his top executives.

Talk about déjà vu.

Luke glanced up at her the moment she'd come into the room and couldn't think of anything or anyone else from the moment he'd seen her. He'd forgotten the meeting, forgotten about the land he'd acquired and the lodge he wanted to place there.

No high-priced condominiums chewing up the north woods, this would be a good ol'-fashioned lodge with fishing guides and excellent food. This place would be a part of the Lace legacy that his children would someday be proud of.

Despite the attempt on his life, Luke had refused to press charges against his cousin Roger, demanding instead psychological counseling and an inpatient stay at the best mental health facility in the state.

Luke had also arranged for any children that Roger would sire in the future to receive a portion of Lace stock and had arranged for them to receive a trust.

Even if his father couldn't change the past, Luke could change the future.

He came to his feet, pushed in his chair, acting as civilly as possible. He crossed the room, and stopped at her table.

"What're you having?" Luke asked Cleo. He couldn't help but smile, recalling the first time he'd approached her, which just so happened to be at this exact table and in this exact restaurant, using the exact same line.

Now that was fate.

"I'm afraid I haven't decided," Cleo said, an eyebrow arched, playing the double entendre for all it was worth.

"The veal is fabulous," Luke said, casually slipping a hand into his pocket as if perfectly relaxed.

"Do you always crash other people's meals, Mr. Lace?" Cleo asked, her lips lilting into a full smile.

"Not always," Luke said. "But you were staring at that menu so long I figured you might need some advice."

She was more beautiful than he remembered, Luke thought in surprise, wondering how that could be possible. She was wearing a bad-girl leather skirt and a silk top that hugged every curve of her sweet bod. He reached across the table and ran a finger over her hand, tracing her arm and the leather silver-studded band she wore there.

"How about we take this to my place?" Luke asked.

"My place is closer," Cleo said.

"We should hurry then," Luke said, placing his hand in the small of her back and guiding her through the busy restaurant and toward his awaiting limousine.

He tipped his hand at his driver, noting that Cleo's lip had started healing but that the bruises on her skin were darkening. He should be gentle with her, he though but it was all he could do not to throw her on the sidewalk and fuck her right here. He didn't know if he could be gentle at this point. He'd missed her so much that it was eating away at him.

"We should talk first, Luke."

"Oh, we'll talk." Luke stopped at the curb and pulled her against him as he reached for the door of his limo.

He pressed his cock against her thigh. He was so hard. He had missed her as much as she'd missed him. That was obvious.

They'd been swept into a whirlwind of police and interrogations and had been surrounded by Luke's family. They hadn't had any time alone during their last twenty-four hours together.

"Come here." Luke took her by the arm and pulled her into the backseat. The privacy glass was up and he tugged her into his lap, grateful when she didn't stop to argue.

Cleo tugged her skirt up, gasping when Luke cupped her ass with his palms. His mouth assaulted hers. He drove his tongue in for a hot, wet kiss, unable to control the speed or momentum.

The thirst to taste her, to drink her in, was too powerful to control.

"Oh Jesus," he gasped, pressing his cock into her thigh, bucking his hips, his hands in her glorious hair.

Cleo unbuttoned his pants and freed his cock, taking it in her hands, feeling it throb and pulse, groaning, wanting it inside her. "Hurry," she whispered, holding the throbbing mass at the base as Luke tugged her panties aside and lifted her up by the ass.

He sat her on the tip of his cock, holding her there, sliding along her pussy and finding her wet, juicy entry with the head of his cock, the ridge fitting there perfectly.

"Say it," Luke demanded, looking her in the eye, holding her there, suspended in midair.

"Please," Cleo gasped, trying to push into him, wanting to shove his cock into her until he felt as though he'd go right through her. "Fuck me. Fuck me, Luke."

"No," Luke said stubbornly. He kissed her, running his tongue over hers, fighting for control of every touch, every kiss. He wanted her more than he wanted his next breath but he had to have her *completely*.

Cleo cupped his face between her palms. Eyes open, she ran her tongue over his lips, wet and slow. "Missed you," she gasped, nearly ready to come when he gently nudged the head of his cock into her pussy.

"That's it, Luke," she whispered, throwing her head back and clawing at his shoulders.

Luke pulled her silk top open, baring a black lacy bra. He unhooked it and cupped her breasts toying with her nipples, taking them into his mouth.

Cleo fisted his shirt, twisting and pulling as his rock-hard cock eased into her, a sweet inch at a time, spreading her pussy wide open.

Luke pulled her ass cheeks apart and pressed his cock into her until neither of them could move because she was completely impaled against him. Their bodies crushed

together, he found her mouth, his hands tied up in her hair. She tried to move but he held her there.

She was his prisoner. His to possess.

Luke reached up with one hand and cupped her breast, finding her nipple and tweaking it. He supported the weight in his palm, squeezing, molding his hand to form around the fleshy globes.

"Please," she gasped, breaking the kiss to plead with him to move his hips. "Fuck me."

"Tell me," he demanded again.

Cleo pushed into him with her hips. He was buried so deeply within her that his cock twitched and pre-cum dripped out of the head, seeping into her deepest recesses.

Cleo came like a rocket.

She screamed, holding on to him, her breast in his hand, her pussy expanding as his cock filled her, one of his fingers probing her asshole and his tongue raiding her mouth.

The orgasm was so powerful that tears filled her eyes as every muscle in her body spasmed and contracted. Her pussy clenched around his cock like a fist and she gasped for air, holding on to Luke for dear life.

"My pussy," he growled. "Mine." He sat up, lifting her off his cock and shoving her into the seat face first.

He pulled up her skirt all the way and kicked her legs open with his knees, lifting her hips and opening her up to him. "My pussy," he whispered, leaning down and running his tongue up and down her wet, succulent lips.

She tasted like the sweetest peach he'd ever had, ripe and full, dripping into his mouth.

Cleo screamed, begging him to fuck her, relishing in the feel of his wet, probing tongue. She grabbed the seat, the tip of his tongue finding the nub of her clit. She tried to pull away, barely able to sit still because her clit was swollen and hard. He'd made her so wet and sensitive. "Oh Luke. Yes."

"I have to fuck you," Luke growled. He leaned back and placed the head of his cock into her pussy. He pressed, pushing into her until he was flat against her back and her face was pressed into the seat. She was gasping for air but all he could do was fuck her.

The need was beyond anything he'd ever experienced in his lifetime.

He pumped his hips, slamming his cock into her pussy with a driving motion. He pounded her into the seat. He fucked her hard, both of them panting, gasping for air, her tight little ass bouncing as he slammed into her hips.

He stroked her perfectly round ass with his palms, leaning back and running his hands up to her shoulders and back down again.

"Oh, fuck." Cleo couldn't think, couldn't do anything but spread her legs and get fucked. "Oh, Lukas. Oh God."

Luke stopped, sliding his cock completely out of her but leaning down and biting her neck. He could feel her pulse pounding against his tongue. He tasted perspiration on her skin, felt her trembling beneath him.

Primal, animalistic, he wanted domination and control. "Be my wife," he groaned in her ear, using his hands to spread her ass cheeks wider. He'd been toying with her asshole, stroking it with his fingers, tickling it.

He wanted it. He wanted to fuck her ass. Wanted to own her.

He slid his cock up her cunt until the head lodged into the opening of her asshole. He held her there when she gasped and struggled against him.

"Luke, I've never—"

"Me either, baby." He kissed her neck, biting into her, sucking her skin. She groaned and he held her there, not moving. He wanted her but he wanted Cleo to make the decision.

He wanted her to want him in every way.

"Give it to me," he whispered. "Only me."

Only him.

Cleo had already given him so much more than she'd given any other man. He controlled her, dominated her and she loved it.

She didn't know why but it hadn't been hard to relinquish control to Luke.

But she'd never had anal sex in her life. Never given herself to a man so completely that she shared everything with him.

She turned into him, taking his mouth into hers. This kiss was slow and controlled.

Painfully slowly, their tongues dancing, tasting, sucking, licking. She put everything she felt into him, into the kiss, into this moment.

Relaxing beneath him, Cleo no longer resisted. She opened her legs wider and stuck her ass into the air.

"Oh God," she cried out. There was a moment where it hurt so badly. He was ripping her open but he stopped, groaning as if he were in sheer physical pain.

"Oh fuck. Oh fuck," he growled. He held her hips, afraid to hurt her.

She was so tiny. He barely fit into her pussy and now, virgin ass... It took everything he had not to come. She was so tight, so little. "Do you want me to stop?" he whispered, worried about hurting her.

"No." Cleo forced herself to relax in his arms, her body pressed into the seat by his weight. The pain had been replaced by pressure, by an overwhelming sensation of his cock working its way into her asshole, a place no man had ever been.

It was like losing her virginity all over again.

"I love you," she cried out, moaning as he worked his way farther into her ass. "I love you."

Luke lost it.

He'd been waiting for her to say those words. Praying and hoping she felt the same way he did.

She'd left the cabin without giving him an answer to his proposal.

He didn't want to push her, didn't want to drive her away, so he'd decided to wait. Now he was glad he had.

"I'm going to come," Luke groaned, thrusting his hips, banging his cock into her asshole. He soared over the precipice they'd been teetering upon, spilling his cum into her tight little ass and knowing that no matter what happened that she truly belonged to him.

Cleo panted into his mouth, his hand in her hair, pulling her head back as he exploded.

Luke's cock pulsated and cum spurt into her, filling her ass with warm fluid. He closed his eyes, luxuriating in the feel of her.

Both of them gasping, Luke kissed her cheek and then her shoulder. He held her there, not moving, still inside her.

"Yes," Cleo said once she was finally able to talk. "I want to be your wife."

"We could be in Vegas in three hours," he whispered. He pushed her hair off her shoulder, lifting it and kissed a spot he'd missed.

"Let's do it right, Lace."

"Like I could deny you anything," Luke said, finally pulling out of her. "Did I hurt you?"

"The ego," Cleo teased, tugging on her bra and panties.

"Is this a good start?" Luke said, sitting down beside her and taking her hand. He slid the ring onto her finger, watching her face, hoping she liked it.

Platinum, the diamond was round and not at all modest.

Tears, those damned tears were back. Cleo hated it when she did something as girly as cry. Today, she couldn't seem to stop.

"It's – more beautiful than I could ever say."

Luke kissed her as the car rolled to a stop. "How about a hot shower and some champagne?" Happy tears. As mad as they made her, seeing tears fill her eyes made Luke's heart melt. God, he loved her.

"I have to tell give you something else," Luke said, bringing her hand to his lips and pressing them against her skin. "It's about my mother," Luke said with a smile. "She asked me to give this to you."

Cleo took a manila envelope from his hand and looked at Luke suspiciously. It hadn't even been a minute since he'd put a ring on her finger and he was already bringing up a pre-nup, Cleo thought to herself.

She opened the envelope and removed a letter from Beverly Lace, laughing aloud as she read it, deciding that her future mother-in-law was full of surprises and she loved her for it.

Cleo,

This is a formal letter terminating our contract for services rendered.

It was I and not Senator Hammerstrom who was your mysterious anonymous client. He owed me one, so to speak.

I hope you can forgive me for not coming forward sooner but as you can see, I had my son's best interest at heart.

The moment I saw your photograph and read your background information and bio, I knew you'd be the only woman who could not only save my son's life but also help him find true love.

Welcome to the family,

Love, Bev

About the Author

Taylor Tryst lives in Northern Minnesota near the Canadian border, and spends her cold winter nights penning hot and spicy love stories. The mother of an 18-year-old son, Anthony, who has never doubted that his mother would be published, Taylor has finally seen her goal realized and is walking in the clouds.

Having just acquired two mares in foal (pregnant) and another horse with the appropriate name of Nuisance, she is busy building fences, working on a barn, and keeping her four dogs from playing in the road (five acres just doesn't do it for them).

Returning to the dating scene after a 14-year marriage that ended in divorce, Taylor is committed to writing Romantica® for Ellora's Cave. "I couldn't have made it through the pain of my divorce without believing that love prevails in the end, and that sex not only empowers a woman but that she can discover the beauty of it at any age or stage in her life."

Please feel free to write to Taylor, and may you discover your inner strength and beauty and remember to have that Tryst with the man of your dreams.

Taylor welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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