



# FAIR GAME, INC.

By

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## CHAPTER ONE

Tears like crystal raindrops spilled from the pretty blonde's cheeks, splashing down on Amber Shaw's chrome and glass desk. She reached forward, plucking another over-sized deluxe tissue from the silver box on her desk and gallantly handed it to her client. Amber could afford the luxury of scented Kleenex. Business was good.

Afternoon sun caught the silver letters on the door, stenciling them backwards across the gray carpet. "Fair Game, Inc." the sign read. In smaller letters beneath was the phrase, "Don't get mad, get even!"

She was proud of both the business and the slogan. A year ago things had looked desperate at best. Her business, Shaw Investigations, was days away from bankruptcy, until a good friend called and asked her to track down a straying boyfriend.

Once the errant beau had been located, however, the jilted lover was not content with his address. An additional sum could be Amber's she suggested, if she'd play a simple, harmless prank. With the bailiff at the door, Amber had little choice but to agree. The prank went off without a

hitch. Justice was served, the client went on with her life, the straying beau with his, and Amber Shaw found herself back in business for another month.

Or so she thought.

Word spread like wild fire. Everyone, it seemed, had a score to settle, and Amber had found herself a new specialty.

Covertly, she studied her newest client. She was tall, slim, and blonde. Amber couldn't imagine why a man would want to dump a pretty woman like that. She was certain that's what the trouble was. Only one thing made a woman cry like that.

A man.

After that first client, she preferred to work for strangers. Professional detachment was a necessary part of a private investigator's job. Sandy Wylde was a friend of a friend, far enough removed to maintain an air of professionalism.

"Easy now," Amber said in schooled tones. "Cry all you like. Get it all out. Take all the time you need. Then we'll talk about what can be done."

"Men are pigs!" The proclamation was muffled by the wad of scented tissue. Balling up the Kleenex she flung it into the black mesh garbage can. "And I want to teach one particular swine a lesson he'll never forget."

Amber took a silver pen from the holder on her desk and reached for her legal pad. "Let's start with the name of the swine in question."

That simple statement released another flood of tears. Setting down her pen, Amber offered her another handful of tissue.

"Roger...." The rest of the name deteriorated into another wave of shuddering sobs. "Ch-Charles."

Amber filled in the box on the preprinted form she'd designed specifically for this purpose. "And what crime would Mr. Charles be guilty of?"

Guilty, she thought with a grim smile. Most of them were until justice was served, or in the extremely rare case, proven innocent. When she looked up the blood-shot eyes that stared back across the desk at her had hardened to orbs of sapphire fury.

"Desertion," Sandy spat, as if the cause of her anger sat in Amber's chair instead of the woman who was going to settle the score for her. "Cold hearted, heartbreaking desertion."

"I see," Amber checked another box. "Please, bear with me while I take down some necessary background information." She tapped the edge of the pad with her pen. "And what is Mr. Charles' occupation?"

"Advertising executive. That should have been my first clue that he'd be all glitzy talk with nothing beneath the surface to show for it."

"He had a way with words, I take it."

"Oh, he was quite eloquent." Sandy drew in a shaky breath. "He told me I was the gold in the river of his life."

"Hmm, talented, wasn't he?"

"Yes, well, he's presently honing his craft on someone else."

Amber tucked a strand of flame-red hair behind her ear and scribbled some notes in the box marked comments. "I take it Roger, er, Mr. Charles has found a new form of recreation at which to spend his off-hours...?"

Sandy's lip curled. "Her name is Cindy. And he said he didn't even like brunettes."

"I see."

"Oh...." Sandy pulled herself back from the brink of grief and continued resolutely. "I'm so stupid. I was really beginning to believe we were definitely an item. Kind of a permanent item."

Amber reached out to pat her hand. A teardrop glistened in the corner of one sapphire eye. Amber hastily handed her another tissue.

"You wouldn't believe his performance the night he dumped me. He was so sweet. He bought me roses, took me out to a romantic little restaurant. He was leading up to something, I could tell. But by the way he'd been so sweet and loving all night, I just assumed ... you know ... that he was about to pop The Question. But instead he...." Another sob shook her entire body. "He said things just weren't working for him, but that he wanted to remain friends. Can you believe it?"

Amber nodded knowingly. "I've seen this variety of swine before."

"I'm such a fool."

"Don't worry, when we're finished with Mr. Charles he's the one who'll be feeling like a fool."

"Didn't even take him a week to find a replacement for me. You'd think he could at least mourn for a few days, make it look like he at least regretted it a little. Six days after he ditched me I ran into him at what had been our favorite restaurant."

"You spoke with him then?"

Sandy shook her head. "He didn't even see me. He was too busy drinking in the sight of Cindy!" Angrily she swiped at the tear inching its way down her cheek. "Only six days!" She held up six fingers for emphasis.

"Have no fear," Amber said calmly, "I think I can come up with a way to cool Mr. Charles' ardor. Why don't you tell me a little more about the habits of this particular specimen: his routine, where we'd be most likely to track him down?"

Best to keep them thinking, Amber knew from experience. It kept their minds off their grief.

"I'm sure we can find him at The Terrace Restaurant," Sandy growled, looking all the more like a golden lioness than a jilted lover. "With what's her name."

Amber scribbled down a few more points. "The Terrace Restaurant ... he goes there often?"

Sandy swallowed, no longer grieving, bent now on the revenge to come. "He said it was our place. Apparently, he says that to all his girls."

Amber gazed back at her over the top of her legal pad. "That may just be Mr. Charles' downfall."

\* \* \* \*

Roses the color of antique lace decorated the tables of The Terrace Restaurant. Candles flickered, blending with the lights of the city spread below like a giant Christmas tree. Starched white table cloths sat beneath silver ice buckets that held bottles of champagne. Amber snorted softly. For all his other shortcomings Roger Charles had good taste.

Amber smoothed her black skirt and yanked on the lapels of her white blouse. A quick glance at the other waitresses told her she'd guessed correctly. In typical black and white and sensible shoes she was indistinguishable from the other help. Hefting the silver ice bucket, she checked Sandy's instructions one last time.

"Last table on the right by the railing," the note read in Sandy's large, looping scrawl. Amber's eyes scanned across the tables and she wished the place were lit by more than candlelight. "Overlooking the city," was written in brackets beneath. Squinting in the dim lighting, her green eyes zeroed in on their target. Sure enough, there was a man sitting at the last table with only the railing separating him from a three story drop into downtown.

She moved closer, holding the snapshot Sandy supplied into a pool of insufficient light. On the white border beneath the photo Sandy's decorative handwriting proclaimed, "Roger & Me". Her eyes flickered from the fuzzy photograph and back to the dark-haired man sitting alone at the table. His picture didn't do him justice, she thought, but that was him all right. She could tell a skunk from a mile away. Her eyes fastened on the empty place setting with its discarded napkin before him. Already back on the dating circuit. This Mr. Charles was quite the piece of work. Bolstering the bucket full of ice higher on her hip, Amber moved toward him.

"Say, can you get me some more coffee," a patron called out as she passed. It took a moment for the significance of the comment to sink in.

Wouldn't do to call attention to herself, Amber thought forcing a smile. "Be right with you," she said brightly.

"Could I have some ice water," another asked.

"Sure thing," she called back.

Two more tables and she'd be there. Five more minutes and this whole thing would be over. Then she could go home and enjoy her Friday night in peace. Sandy would be avenged, and Fair Game, Inc. would have completed another successful maneuver.

Roger Charles didn't see her coming. Leaning back in his chair, long, well-muscled legs stretched out before him, he stared out into the lights of the city. Amber drew closer, trying to erase the frown already forming on her face. She would have expected a man with a roving eye like Roger to be more interested in the women in the restaurant. She took another covert glance at the photo. Him all right. No doubt about it.

Dark curls spilled onto his forehead, shadowing even darker eyes. Full sensuous lips contrasted sharply with his strong jaw. Muscle rippled beneath his starched white shirt as he reached for his coffee. An expensively cut suit jacket hung on the back of his chair. If ever there was an image of

male perfection, he was it. No wonder Sandy fell for him, Amber thought with a pang of regret, any warm blooded woman would.

For all his handsomeness he had an open honest face. Not self absorbed the way she'd expected. And Amber Shaw had studied a good many faces. After five years as a private investigator, she prided herself on being able to see into a person's soul with a single glance. She faltered, nearly turning away at the last moment, putting her finger at last on the source of that nagging doubt. Roger Charles simply didn't have a guilty soul.

Amber pushed the thought from her mind. Among his other talents, Roger Charles was a good actor. Sandy had said so. So good an actor he could even disguise the contents of his soul.

Wrenching herself from her reverie, she focused her attention on the task at hand. No sense in dragging it out. Best to get the deed done and the night's work over with. Amber launched herself across the remaining space of floor.

Her shadow fell between them, blocking out the candlelight. He looked up then, questioningly. His gaze drifted lazily from her scarlet curls, down over her trim figure to the shapely legs hidden to mid calf by her black skirt. She felt the path of his eyes as if he traced her outline with the candle's flame. Amber suppressed the wave of heat that followed in the wake of his perusal. His eyes fastened on the bucket of ice in her hand. He opened his mouth as if to say something. Amber offered him her most winning smile.

And dumped the contents of the ice bucket square in his lap.

For a split second it seemed as if time ground to a halt. Sounds of the busy restaurant retreated from her attention, leaving the two of them frozen in an absurd tableau. He stared up at her, his expression at once both wounded and bewildered. Amber shook off the persistent feeling of wrongness once again. The picture named him Roger Charles, Casanova.

The moment evaporated. Time sprang into motion. Heads swiveled in their direction. Patrons gawked openly. She watched his expression deteriorate from confusion into pure liquid fury.

"What the hell!"

He leapt backward, knocking over his chair. Ice cubes tumbled from his lap, tinkling like breaking glass onto the terra cotta floor. Dark eyes dragged her gaze upward. She found herself incapable of looking away as the force of his glare all but nailed her to the spot.

"Justice, Mr. Roger Charles," Amber's voice shattered the silence. No sense giving them a chance to deny it. Most of them would. "On behalf of Sandy Wylde."

"Sandy Wylde?" His deep melodic voice was also at odds with his persona. "What are you talk--" Hurt, bewilderment played across his face, then his dark eyebrows drew down into a menacing V. "You better have a good explanation," he growled threateningly low in his throat.

With a flick of her wrist she sent her business card sailing down into the puddle of ice water that had sloshed over the side of the table. He snatched it up out of the puddle, turning it to see better in the light.

"Fair Game," he muttered, "Don't get mad, get even." Understanding flashed across his face. "If this is some kind of prank, I'm not finding it funny."

"Neither did Sandy Wylde," Amber spat back, "when you cold-heartedly dumped her after leading her on for three months, Roger Charles."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. And I'm not Roger Charles."

"What?" Amber felt her mouth dropping stupidly open and shut it quickly. She yanked the photo from her pocket and stared at it dumbly. Spitting image. So what went wrong then? Hesitantly, no longer so sure of herself, she forced her eyes back to his face. But Roger, who apparently wasn't Roger, had his attention focused on something over her left shoulder.

She whirled about, anxious to see what he found so interesting, hoping desperately it wasn't a police officer, and found herself gaping again.

Toward them walked her unintended victim's mirror image.

He stopped a few feet away and gazed with curiosity at the wetness spreading across his dinner partner's pants and the slight red head who faced his twin in what could only be taken as a confrontational pose. A smirk worked its way across his lips, then he took one look at the other man's expression and swiftly smothered it.



Amber looked quickly from one to the other. The likeness was unmistakable. But in their demeanor, the twins were as different as day and night. Certain the newcomer was none other than the missing Roger Charles, she gave him the same once over, noting his self-assured, haughty expression. This man certainly didn't have a flawless soul. Slightly more heavy set than his twin, he wore his clothes with an in-your-face nonchalance. Beneath the jet black jacket he sported a pair of beat up denims and a tie that had all the subtlety of a modern art painting. Hair every bit as dark as his brother's tumbled over his shoulders in unruly waves before it was captured by a ponytail now rapidly coming undone. Eyes the exact shade as his twin's never ceased their wandering. They swept over her body. The leering glance he gave her made her shudder.

Amber's shoulders slumped and she drew in a shaky breath. Now she was going to have to revise her form to include a box to check in case the victim had an identical twin.

Sandy, she wailed inwardly. Why didn't you tell me?

Her victim stared angrily over her head at the approaching man. "Well, little brother," he growled, "you've got some explaining to do." He looked menacingly down at Amber. "And so do you, Miss Shaw."

"Little brother?" she blurted.

He held out his hand, as if making introductions at a formal business dinner. "Miss Shaw, allow me to introduce my brother, Roger Charles. Younger than me by half an hour."

Amber sucked in a shaky breath and squared her shoulders. She might just have made the worst mistake of her career, but she'd be damned if she'd let them know it. Forcing calmness into her voice, she managed to hold out her hand with some composure and look up at the man who towered over her by at least a foot. "You have me at a disadvantage Mr.--"

"Charles," he snapped, taking her hand. Despite the ice in his lap, his hand was warm, his touch practically electric. "Grayson Charles."

"Grayson," she repeated with a sick smile. "Roger's twin."

He nodded curtly. Roger, she noted, had turned away snickering rather obviously to himself, which did nothing to improve his brother's mood.

She looked from one to the other. With both of them in view the differences between them couldn't be more obvious. Roger drew attention like a sponge with his brash clothing and irreverent manner. In contrast Grayson reminded her of a still pond, teeming with life and secrets below the surface. Beyond the obvious anger in his dark eyes hurt hovered barely concealed. The quiet ones were always the most intriguing. Had they met under other circumstances, she'd most definitely have been interested.

Nice one, Amber, the thought roared through her mind. Not only do you dump ice on the wrong guy, you dumped it on the one who obviously doesn't deserve it. Well, the deed was done for better or worse. No sense contemplating the intriguing Mr. Grayson Charles further. Not after the way she introduced herself.

He stared at her awaiting her reply. She wracked her brain trying to remember what she'd been saying. "Roger's twin," she repeated, though the only thing they seemed to share were the same good looks. For lack of a better response, she said stupidly, "I see."

"I don't believe you do," Grayson said. "You see, Miss Shaw, I'm a practicing attorney. And you'll be hearing from me shortly regarding restitution for this prank. For the ruin of not only my pants but my busy evening. Need I outline for you, Miss Shaw--"

"Ms. Shaw," she insisted. Normally, she wouldn't bother, but since he was prattling on without even giving her a moment to explain, she felt an instinctive need to interrupt his tirade. "And I'd be happy to pay your dry cleaning bill, Mr. Charles."

He waved her generous offer aside. "As I was saying, I am needed elsewhere this evening, and you have just thrown a serious snag into my schedule. I'll be seeking compensation not only for my pants, but for my time at my usual billable rate." He snatched up her hand and shook it vigorously. "It was nice meeting you, Ms. Shaw."

Another jolt of heat raced through her, deepening the crimson blush spreading across her face. Grateful for the dim lighting, she tore her hand from his with all the disdain of a displeased monarch. Drawing herself up to her full five foot one and a half inch height, she whirled on her heel and strode off through the restaurant.

"Hey!" one of the patrons called after her. "What about that coffee?"

"Get it yourself," she snapped.  
And disappeared through the restaurant doors.

\* \* \* \*

Heedless of his brother's smothered laughter, Grayson watched her go. Just when he thought the night couldn't get worse, a red-haired spitfire of a woman dumps an entire bucket of ice in his lap. Back at the office a good four hours of work awaited him, and an early morning meeting wouldn't keep out of deference to his bad evening.

"I'm sorry."

Grayson forced himself to meet his brother's gaze. Roger looked anything but.

"I hope you are," he managed before Roger cut him off.

"You can't blame me because Sandy was so miffed she hired a private investigator to track me down and dump a bucket of ice in my lap."

"I can certainly blame you," Grayson forced his temper back down to a manageable level, "because it was my lap that got iced."

"How was I supposed to know she'd be real broken up about it?"

"You dumped her, Roger. How did you think she'd feel? How would you feel?"

"I don't know. It's never happened before. Be the first one out of the gate, that's my motto."

"Among others," Grayson muttered sourly.

"Ah, come on, Gray. It was funny."

"Perhaps from your perspective."

"Anyone else would think so."

"Anyone else?" his voice rose. "Fine, little brother. Next time you have another romantic mishap you call anyone else but me. I'm sick of cleaning up your mess, romantic or otherwise. I took time away from an important case tonight to hear the post-mortem on your latest tryst. I sat here all night while you unburdened your romantic woes. And this is what I get for my trouble. No wonder you haven't found Ms. Right yet. You don't stick around long enough to get to know more than her name."

Roger opened his mouth to defend himself.

"No, keep quiet for once," Grayson snarled. "I don't have time for it. I'm out of here."

He smothered the urge to haul Roger up by that repulsive tie and deck him one like he had when they were boys. But by the still snickering glances from the tables around him, he guessed he'd made quite enough of a spectacle of himself for one night. Instead he snatched his jacket from the back of the chair and left his twin to pay the bill.

Should have smacked him one, he thought bitterly, climbing into his car.

And the impulsive Ms. Shaw, he didn't want to think about what he'd like to do to her. Didn't want to think about her because she'd already driven a wedge into his thoughts.

Women like that were dangerous, he reflected. How could someone so slight cause so much damage? She reminded him of a Jack Russell terrier, all bark and no bite. Except that he was already bitten.

He slammed the door of his Mercedes and let himself into the darkened office building, slamming that door too, and locking it behind him.

So why was he so angry? The question nagged him. He pushed it aside, but it bounced tenaciously back at him. He was angry he decided because Roger saw fit to pick and choose from what he called the smorgasbord of women, while he worked alone in his wet wool pants.

Why had he all but bragged about being a lawyer? Grayson winced. He positively hated it when women found his profession more attractive than he. And why on earth had he threatened her with a lawsuit? If he'd played the situation differently, she might have been sweet and apologetic. He didn't want her to think of him as just a lawyer, he realized suddenly.

Women didn't even ask Roger what he did for a living. Most of them didn't know him that long, he reflected darkly. Even the reckless Amber Shaw had been gunning for Roger. Why Roger? Always Roger. What incomprehensible attraction did his twin have? Did women really fall for those tacky pick up lines, or were they just playing along? Still, a little voice inside reminded him, for all his romantic conquests, his brother went home alone each night, just as he did. He shouldn't be so angry.

But he was. Angry at life, at the unfairness of love, and especially that the most interesting woman he'd ever met had dumped a carafe of ice in his lap. Grayson thumped the top of his desk. File folders bounced, then settled.

He should be working, but instead memories of Amber Shaw dominated his thoughts. He pulled the sopping wet business card out of his pocket and stared at it.

Fair Game, indeed. Well, he could think of one way to get Amber Shaw off his mind once and for all. If she wanted to play games it would be on his turf.

In the courtroom.

## CHAPTER TWO

Amber reached blindly for the bottle of aspirin she kept in her top drawer. The headache that had been building since Thursday night now echoed through her head like someone relentlessly pounding a drum. Four days, and she still hadn't had the nerve to call Sandy Wylde and explain how she'd not only botched Sandy's one chance at revenge, but also made the most embarrassing mistake of her entire career.

How had things gone so completely wrong? Why hadn't she thought to ask the right questions? Why hadn't she been more apologetic to Grayson? Couldn't she have swallowed her pride and offered to pay for Grayson's dinner?

No! The answer roared through her mind. Amber hadn't become the proprietor of a successful business by taking the blame for others' mistakes. She'd carved her own niche in the investigation field. Her only competition amounted to a shady PI with the unlikely name of James Heck. Heck, rumor had it, would play the odd gag to discredit ex-wives hoping to get generous settlements from their soon to be ex-husbands. No, she hadn't come this far to be discredited for a simple mistake. Still, if she examined her heart closely enough, Amber had to admit something about the devastatingly handsome Grayson Charles intrigued as well as irked her. Men ruled the world with their arrogance, she thought bitterly. The way she felt right now, she'd like to give both the Charles brothers an ice shower, from the head down.

Certainly, some of the blame lay with Sandy for withholding pertinent information, nevertheless Amber was the one with egg on her face. If word got around, who knew what kind of damage it might do to her sterling reputation. And get around it would surely, if Grayson Charles made good on his threat to take her to court. She pictured her name under the headline

of News of the Bizarre and winced. Time to yank her head out of the sand and do some damage control.

She owed Sandy a partial refund. After all, the promised revenge had not been carried out. At least not as specified. And Sandy Wylde owed her one heck of an explanation. Amber yanked the phone out of its cradle and dialed Sandy's number.

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, no!" Sandy's eyes widened in dismay. "He was having dinner with Grayson ... Oh no ... and Roger was in the men's ... and you dumped the ice in Grayson's lap ... Oh, Amber, I'm so sorry!" Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Amber sighed. Handing her another tissue, she made a mental note to put in an order for more Kleenex. "Not as sorry as I am, trust me."

"Oh, I should have told you," Sandy wailed. "I just didn't think it was important."

"Kind of a vital piece of information to leave out, don't you think?"

"I never thought he'd be having dinner with Grayson, not in a million years."

"He is his brother, his twin."

"I was sure he'd be there with Cindy."

"Apparently, he took a night off from his torrid love affair," Amber said dryly, feeling the last of her patience evaporate. Sandy's lower lip trembled. Feeling like a total heel, Amber pushed the box of tissue toward her.

Just then a shadow darkened the glass doors of Fair Game, Inc. Amber rose to her feet. "Hang on a second. I'll be right back."

Quite a handsome shadow, she decided staring through the glass. *Hope he's not here to make an appointment*, she'd had her fill of handsome men and the troubles they caused.

He smiled, as she opened the door, a cold frozen smile. "Ms. Amber Shaw?"

"I'm Amber Shaw," she said, blocking any further progress. Extra height gave him the advantage and he stared boldly into the room over her head. "Can I help you?" The tone of her voice suggested she offered to do anything but.

"You certainly can." The insincere smile widened.

"Look, I'm with a client right now, but we could make an appointment--"

He reached into the pocket of his dark suit. "This will only take a moment, Ms. Shaw." Producing a buff-colored envelope, he pressed it into her hand.

With a sinking heart, Amber looked down at the envelope in her hand.

"Do have a good day, Ms. Shaw." The leering stranger was already halfway down the hall.

"Damn," Amber muttered softly under her breath. With the edge of one manicured nail, she tore open the top of the envelope. A glance inside confirmed her suspicions. The one line she could read inside summoned her to appear in night court on September fourth.

With a muffled curse, she stuffed the envelope into the pocket of her blazer. She shut the door firmly and leaned against it for emphasis. Forcing a smile onto her face, she turned back to Sandy.

"He was a looker," Sandy said with an appreciative whistle.

*Thought you were mourning good old Roger.* Amber forced her thoughts to be more charitable. Maybe a good looking messenger of bad news was less likely to get shot.

"Something wrong?" Her client looked up at her with concern.

"No, ah no, everything's fine. Where were we?"

"We were trying to decide what to do about Roger."

"Right." Amber sank back into her leather chair. Nonchalantly, she took the envelope from her pocket, tossed it into her right hand drawer and casually locked it. "As I was about to say, he's on to us now. Our cover is blown, and with it is the element of surprise. I'm sure Roger will be expecting a counter strike. At this point, I don't think we'll get within a mile of him."

"What are you saying? That we should call it off, and let Roger get away with--" Her mouth worked. No sound came out. "Dumping me?" she asked finally in a tiny voice. Tears glistened, threatening to tumble down her cheeks at any moment.



"At this point, I don't think there's anything else we can do." *No sense making a bad situation worse. All I need is another lawsuit.* The words came out more sharply than she intended. Guilt stopped her. Grayson's lawsuit wasn't entirely Sandy's fault. Maybe if she'd been more apologetic. Maybe ... who knew? "Look," she said gently. "I think you've made your point, anyway. Roger knows now that you're hurt and angry. What happens now is up to the two of you. She paused, then added reluctantly. "And I won't charge you for my time."

Sandy nodded, dabbing at a tear in the corner of her eye. "Thank you. And you're probably right. It's best not to do anything more, considering."

"Fine, then." Amber held out her hand. "Nice meeting you, Sandy."

But Sandy was staring down at her long, manicured fingernails. "I can't believe it, Roger wins again."

She rose, the epitome of grace, from the chrome and leather chair. With one last sniffle, she picked up the entire box of tissues and disappeared through the glass doors.

"But--" Amber rested her head in her hands. Better add another bottle of aspirin to that order. With a groan, she unlocked her desk drawer and looked down at the summons on its buff colored paper. Hers was an honest mistake. No way would she let Grayson Charles destroy the reputation she'd worked so hard to build.

\* \* \* \*

Amber stormed through the courthouse doors. Briefcase in hand, she barreled down the marble corridor, heedless of anything or anyone in her path. Heads turned as she rushed past. Black robed judges stepped hastily out of her way.

The door to Courtroom 9 loomed before her more suddenly than she expected. Taking a deep breath, Amber charged through the doors. Mahogany doors swung open, hitting the back wall with a resounding boom. Inside it was hushed, as if someone had sucked all the sound out of the room. Her pumps clicked a staccato beat along the floor, disproportionately loud in the silence. She suppressed the urge to tiptoe as she strode purposely toward the front of the courtroom. No sense in letting him think she was meek in any way. If his opinion ran along those lines, Mr. Grayson Charles, attorney at law, was in for a big surprise.

"Charles versus Shaw," the judge called out. She watched as Grayson rose from his seat, looking entirely formidable in his charcoal colored suit.

*I'll teach him about formidable*, she thought and strode up beside him. He towered over her by more than a head. Amber offered him a look that practically smoked with hostility, daring him to look down at her. Together they approached the bench.

In a monotone, the judge read through the details of the case, pausing now and then upon a keyword. "... revenge ... bucket of ice ..." He raised his eyes over his half-glasses. His gaze swept over Amber, who glared back defiantly and fastened upon Grayson. "You're suing her for what?"

"Your Honor--" Grayson launched into a speech to rival Perry Mason, not even pausing long enough for breath for her to slip in a word in her defense.

She stared up at him, admitting reluctantly that he was intimidating in his expensive suit, his dark eyes blazing with anger, his face intent on his cause. It occurred to Amber that Grayson Charles was the kind of man you wanted as an ally not an opponent. If he'd been defending her she'd have been impressed with his performance. But instead, he was suing her, over an honest mistake that had done no one any harm. Intimidated or not, she vowed he wasn't going to win.

"As I was saying, Your Honor," Grayson shot a withering glance in Amber's direction. "Due to Miss Shaw's negligence, her failure to gather all the pertinent facts, I not only had my clothing ruined, but I lost several working hours from an urgent case."

Anger boiled up inside her, boiled over. Grayson Charles could say anything he wanted about her personally, but she would not allow him to sully her reputation as a private investigator.

She drew in a breath that burned with fury. If Mr. Charles thought he could brush off Amber Shaw so easily, he was sorely mistaken.

"Oh come now, Counselor!" Her voice carried further than she intended in the quiet chamber. "It was only water, ice-cold water at that. It couldn't have shrunk your fine wool pants. Unless of course, it shrunk something else."

A wave of snickers swept through the gallery behind her. Amber felt a deep flush work its way up her neck and over her cheeks, until she was

certain even her scalp blushed in embarrassment. Had she really said that? She raised her eyes just in time to see the judge smother a smile. She didn't dare look at Grayson.

"Your Honor, I object." By the strain in his voice she could tell he'd like to do more than that.

Somehow she'd won the judge over with her impulsive comment.

"Object all you want, Counselor. This isn't the supreme court. We aren't trying a murder case here. I've got armed robbery, hit and run, embezzlement." He brandished a handful of files. "And you want to tie up my courtroom because a woman dumped a pitcher of ice in your lap by accident?"

"With all due respect, Your Honor, Ms. Shaw has made a business of such behavior."

"While it might be questionable business practice, technically it's not illegal, Mr. Charles. You should know that."

Grayson's complexion darkened with anger. Standing only inches away Amber could feel the heat radiating from him. He smelled of soap and aftershave. Nice aftershave, barely noticeable, not the overpowering kind used car salesmen wore. She yanked her thoughts back to the problem at hand. What was it about Grayson Charles that could infuriate her yet entice her at the worst of times?

"What about the damage to my clothing? The time lost from my caseload?"

The judge sighed in exasperation. Removing his glasses, he wiped a hand across his eyes and glared down at them.

"Since you insist, Mr. Charles, I hereby order Ms Shaw to pay the dry cleaning bill for one pair of wool suit pants. And...."

Amber swallowed hard. Before her eyes, the judge's patience wore dangerously thin. And Grayson Charles seemed determined to provoke him.

"Seeing as Ms Shaw's prank caused irreparable damage to your schedule, I hereby order her to one month of after hours assistance at Barlow & Charles."

"Your Honor--" Their voices mingled as one. The judge pounded his gavel for silence.

"I'm a private investigator," Amber said hotly, "not a private secretary."

Grayson looked down at her with disdain. "I can't imagine what help she could possibly be to me?"

"She's a private investigator, Mr. Charles. I'm sure she can help you with your research."

The gavel slammed down once again, dismissing them. Amber snatched up her briefcase and stormed up the steps, followed closely by Grayson. She hauled the door open, letting it go without looking to see if he'd cleared the threshold. Behind her she heard a muffled curse. A strong hand seized her arm. She whirled to face him.

"I hope you're satisfied."

Anger got the better of her. "Me, satisfied? We wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't kept on about your stupid pants."

"Me?"

"Yes, you! You had to go and make him mad. Now look what's happened."

"Oh right, blame me. Well let me tell you, Ms. Shaw, none of this would have happened if you'd done your research in the first place."

Amber's fingers curled into fists at her side. She was certain her face was flushed scarlet by now. One of the drawbacks of being a redhead, she thought angrily. Grayson Charles made a big mistake messing with a redhead's temper.

"If you don't like my research skills, Mr. Charles," she growled low in her throat, "then I guess you won't be needing my help at your firm." She yanked her arm from his grip and strode off down the corridor.

Behind her, there was silence.

"Wait a minute."

He hurried to catch up to her. She kept on walking.

"I didn't say that."

"Oh really?" She turned slowly, shooting him a glare that said 'if looks could kill, you'd already be dead'. "So the research skills you don't consider good enough, you're willing to take for free?"

"You owe me!"

"I offered to pay your dry cleaning bill."

"You owe me for my time!"

"Your time! What about mine? Do you think you're the only one trying to make a living here, Mr. Charles? Did it ever occur to you that I might have cases of my own that require my undivided attention just now?"

He looked back at her dumbfounded. "I suppose you do."

"Fine. Since you got us both into this mess, and I'm not about to defy a court order, just tell me when you'd like me to report to your law firm. And then let me get on with my evening. Unlike some people," her eyes flashed the length of his body, "I don't have the luxury of wasting time. I still have work to do tonight."

\* \* \* \*

*I still have work to do tonight.* Her pompous words echoed like an endless tape loop in Grayson's mind. As if he didn't.

Grayson coasted to the curb, parking just behind the fire engine red sports car. The sight of Roger's car sent a fresh wave of anger surging inside him. In the lobby of the office building, he caught a glimpse of black leather and blue denim.

Roger levered himself away from the wall as Grayson strode through the main doors. "Brought you an espresso."

Grayson accepted the paper cup grudgingly. "I'm going to need it."

"So how'd the court case go?"

He offered his brother a boiling glare in reply. Fumbling for his keys, he unlocked the office and held it open for Roger to enter, even though it was clear he'd much prefer if Roger disappeared from the face of the earth.

"Don't tell me the great Grayson Charles actually lost a case!"

"Don't push it, Roger. I'm not the best of company tonight."

Roger's face clouded. "You didn't actually lose, Gray, did you?"

"Of course not."

"So, how much did you set her back?"

"I didn't set her back, as you so kindly put it."

"You didn't? So what did you get?"

"A month of her assistance and compensation for my dry cleaning bill."

Roger choked on his coffee.

"What so funny?"

"You mean she's coming here? To work?"

"That's what I mean. What could I say? No, I don't need the help. I do need the help. What with Nicole running off to Mexico to get married...." He drawled out the word married, making it sound like a heinous crime. "And whatever's going on with John that he's got to take a holiday in the middle of our busiest month ever, I'm completely swamped." Grayson looked up from the papers he was unloading from his portfolio. "Was there something in particular you wanted, Roger?"

His brother's laughter rippled through the quiet room. "Don't you see, it's perfect."

"What is?"

"You and Amber Shaw."

"Nothing is perfect about me and Amber Shaw in close quarters."

"I beg to differ."

"You deal with her then."

Roger smiled, the epitome of smugness. "Perhaps, I will."

Grayson paused, amazed at the pang of jealousy that tore through him. The unfamiliar emotion unsettled him. He hadn't felt that way since junior high school when both Roger and he had a crush on a certain blonde fourteen year old named Debbie. How had Amber Shaw managed to dig up feelings so long buried? She was an attractive woman with her flame red hair, porcelain skin and gray eyes. He imagined most men would think so. Not the kind of woman you'd be easily bored with, he thought with the ghost of a smile. He wouldn't want to square off against her in a debate. He'd never met a woman who could build a business from the ground up single-handedly, and yet blush so endearingly. Why hadn't he just laughed off her mistake and asked her out? If that's what Roger was thinking of doing, he had news for him. That thought shook him from his reverie. Setting the file folder down on his desk, he looked up at his brother, appraisingly.

"She'd mop the floor with you, little brother."

\* \* \* \*

Amber sat alone in the darkened office. Light from the distant street leaked through the vertical blinds, gilding the chrome furniture. From memory, Amber made her way across the office to the alcove at the back

that contained her coffee maker. She poured herself a cup of coffee hours cold. Adding a splash of powdered creamer, she stuck the mug in the microwave to heat. It beeped, the only sound in the building besides the rush of an occasional car on the street. She jumped, startling herself from her dark muse.

Retrieving the cup, she collapsed back into her leather chair. The coffee was foul enough to jolt her into wakefulness. She flipped on her desk lamp. It cast a puddle of golden light across her desk. With a deep yawn, she reached for the active file in her bottom drawer.

Words in her own handwriting danced across the pages, refusing to make sense. The scent of Grayson's cologne clung like a ghost to her clothing. Her arm was still warm where he had touched her. She could almost feel the heat of him radiating over her as if he stood behind her still.

Spooked by the intensity of her thoughts, Amber spun around in her chair. But the office behind her was as dark and as empty as she remembered.

Fatigue worked its way into her muscles. Exhausted from their encounter in the courthouse, there was nothing she wanted to do more than go home and crawl into bed. But work that didn't get done today only piled up tomorrow. Her time was at a premium now that she'd been ordered to spend evenings helping Grayson.

Stupidly, she thought she'd won the judge's support. They were all the same, she decided, judges, lawyers, men. How could he possibly have sided with Grayson Charles? Couldn't he see it was an honest mistake?

The only one she'd ever made.

### CHAPTER THREE

Amber peered through the binoculars at the nondescript brown building she'd been parked in front of for the past six hours. Resting the binoculars against the dash, she rubbed a hand across weary eyes.

"Come on, come on," she chanted to the impassive building face as if the force of her will could penetrate the brick and the mind of the man who lived in apartment four. She drummed her fingernails against the steering wheel. "You feel the need for take-out Chinese, or you're out of soap and you've got a hot date tonight." But the occupant of apartment four stayed firmly ensconced. With a frown she glanced at her watch. "And I've got a date with Grayson Charles in half an hour."

Leaning back against the headrest she vividly pictured the profits flying out the window. The long time girlfriend of the man in number four suspected she was not the only one in his life. Willing to pay for Amber's deluxe package, complete with videotape of the event, she nonetheless insisted on proof before sealing the deal.

Were it not for Grayson Charles, Amber would be content to sit and watch until either the suspected cheater either left his apartment or the suspected new girlfriend arrived. A loaded 35mm camera with a telephoto lens lay on the seat beside her. But in six hours the most interesting visitors to the tiny building had been a squirrel and a couple of motley looking pigeons.

Amber thumped her fist against the steering wheel. She'd bet the girlfriend would show up the moment she left for Grayson's office. Never failed. If she went out for coffee or to use the ladies on a stake-out it proved to be the five minutes she should have stayed put.

Minutes passed with agonizing slowness. Investigative business of any sort just didn't keep regular hours. Couldn't the judge have understood



that? Unlike Grayson Charles, she didn't go home at six in the evening. Often that was merely the beginning of her day.

If she didn't snap off a few shots of the occupant in number four, she'd be sitting here again tomorrow. While all the work that should have been done back at the office during the day piled up to be done another.

Another half an hour. Grayson Charles could wait. She'd put in the hours as per the court order, and according to her own schedule.

A car pulled up in front of the squat building. Rolling down the window, Amber rested the camera against the glass and put her eye to the viewfinder. But the little sports car discharged only a middle aged woman and a yappy poodle. Amber tossed the camera back on the seat beside her. Another glance at her watch showed thirty-five minutes passed. Now she was not only behind in her own work, but in the work she'd been ordered to do for Grayson as well.

With a deep sigh, she put the car in gear and drove away.

\* \* \* \*

The glass doors to Grayson's office building flew open as Amber charged through. Thinking of the work piling up on her own desk, she cursed Grayson Charles fluently and thoroughly.

It wasn't just the research, the execution of the prescribed revenge. Once a case was completed, there was still the filing, the billing and a myriad other tasks to occupy her time. Someone had to dust the computer. Someone had to wash the coffee cups, order the supplies and vacuum the carpet. As owner, operator and sole proprietor of Fair Game, that someone was Amber. Caution stopped her from hiring an assistant. Her last expansion nearly sent her to bankruptcy court, she reflected darkly. Renting a bigger office and hiring an assistant had tipped the scales on Shaw Investigations. That coupled with a slow year, had plunged the company permanently into the red. Never again, Amber promised herself. For the time being she'd indulge herself with upscale tissues and gourmet coffee. She wasn't about to gamble with her livelihood again.

Grayson Charles certainly didn't wash his own coffee cups, she thought with a glance around the lobby. Marble floors led the way to the elevator. A brass-framed directory told her the offices of Barlow & Charles were on the third floor. Must be nice, she thought bitterly and stopped.

It wasn't jealousy she felt. No, not Amber Shaw. She was proud of the years of hard work that created her success. Better to start with nothing and build up slowly. That way no one could take away what was rightfully yours. The mantra had served her well so far. Fair Game was all hers, down to the last paper clip and bottle of white-out. And if Grayson Charles thought differently, he was in for a surprise.

She stabbed at the elevator button. Chrome doors slid open obligingly. She suppressed the urge to smear her fingerprints on the door as she entered. Anything to tarnish the untouchable interior.

On her way up she pictured the pristine interior of Barlow & Charles. It would be oh-so-tastefully decorated, she suspected. Muted colors, probably beige and that celery green that seemed to have taken over decorators' better judgment that year. Furniture would all be polished to a dull gleam, and it would, of course, all be wood. Real wood. A young, blonde secretary would just be getting up from her desk. She'd put on an extra pot of coffee for Grayson before she left.

And because of that one, albeit regrettable, mistake Amber could sit right down in her vacated spot and spend the evening working for Barlow & Charles instead of Fair Game.

As if Mr. Grayson (never a hair out of place, expensive suit, drives a Mercedes) Charles actually needed her help. He didn't give the impression he'd ever needed anything from anybody.

Striding down the hallway with its plush carpet, she pictured his early life. Born into a well-bred, well-off family, that was a given. From there he'd excelled in school, of course he had. By the time he was in his late teens, his dad, who was probably a judge, was already giving him career advice over brandy at the old boy's club.

Amber gripped the brass door handle as if she wanted to throttle it. She'd bet this month's revenue Grayson Charles never had to work his way through college.

The door swung open. Instead of being ushered in by the departing blonde secretary, chaos greeted her.

At least three phones rang in a discordant chorus. File folders, stuffed to the point of bursting covered every surface. A flurry of green message slips caught the breeze as she entered and drifted to the floor.

"Hello?"

Silence answered her.

From down the hall she could hear the low murmur of a man talking. Presumably on the phone. Amber followed the sound.

The offices of Barlow & Charles had been nice at one time, she thought as she made her way through the inner sanctum. Tasteful paintings decorated the walls. The furniture, what she could see of it beneath the debris was upholstered in muted colors. At the end of the hallway lay a corner office. She poked her head inside.

It took a moment to locate the occupant. The entire office looked as if someone had shaken the contents like one of those snow-globes you brought back from Niagara Falls, and left them to lie as they fell.

A gasp escaped her lips.

"Hang on one sec...." The speaker straightened from bending over the file drawer of his desk. It took a moment for Amber to recognize him in his shirt sleeves and with his tousled dark hair. Grayson pressed the hold button and put the phone back on its cradle. The red light pulsed between them.

"If you just have a seat out front, Ms. Shaw, I'll be right with you." Weariness worked its way into his tone.

"Seat?" Amber asked incredulously. "There isn't one square inch in this entire office that isn't covered with paper."

His eyebrows drew threateningly downward. "Then if you wouldn't mind standing out front for one moment, I promise I'll be right with you."

Amber wrapped her will around her temper and strode back down the hall. Taking a stack of files from one of the chairs in the waiting room, she dumped it on top of another and sat down. Minutes dragged by. *Should have brought my laptop.* If Mr. Charles wanted to waste her court-appointed time that was fine with her. She could put it to good use.

As seven minutes became ten, she found herself pacing the narrow entrance way. Her eyes came to rest on a brass plaque on one of the doors. John Barlow. Amber tried the handle. It opened easily.

Well, J.B. was certainly nothing like his partner, she deduced. In the immaculate interior not even a speck of dust was out of place. She stepped further into the room. The mahogany desk wasn't locked, either. Amber sat in the leather chair and gently pulled open the top drawer.

"Lose something?" The sound of his voice brought her head up sharply. Grayson leaned against the door frame. Gazing at him, Amber had to suppress a gasp. The disheveled stranger bore only a superficial resemblance to the Grayson Charles she'd met last night. Dark curls tumbled across his forehead, bearing evidence of the many times he must have run his hands through his hair during the day. A white shirt that still showed vague signs of once being starched and pressed now hung in a myriad wrinkles. Sleeves had been shoved, not rolled, above his elbows and his tie hung loosely and crookedly about his neck. If she didn't know better, Amber might suspect he had yet another identical twin lying around somewhere. The thought made her shudder. The Charles twins were enough to deal with as it was.

Amber shut the drawer quickly and straightened. "You told me to find a seat." She glanced around the office. "So I found one."

Grayson's expression said he knew exactly what she'd been doing. He glanced at his watch, then pointedly back at her. "You're late."

"I got tied up on surveillance." Amber bit back the urge to apologize. He was the one who should be sorry. Grayson Charles would be the end of Fair Game, yet.

His frown told her just what he thought of her activity. She might just as well have said something obscene.

"You and your partner seem to have differing ideas about neatness," she said finally, to distract him for her lateness and her business activities.

To her surprise, he snorted softly. "Barlow's as uptight as they get."

She choked back the peal of laughter. *A case of calling the kettle black, don't you think?* But she kept her lips resolutely shut.

"They don't call him Jumpy John for nothing," Grayson supplied. Then as if he'd just spilled a dark personal secret, he firmly shut his mouth.

"So why'd you want him for a partner then?"

"He was my father's partner." His expression darkened. "It was obvious Roger was never going to be a lawyer, so that left me to join the firm."

There was pain behind that dark gaze, as he stood before her disheveled and wounded-looking. Amber found herself wanting to circle him with her arms, rest her head against his chest, and tell him it would be

all right. She shook herself from her thoughts. No way was she going to feel sorry for Grayson Charles, who for all the opportunities he'd been granted obviously couldn't organize so much as his date book. But she couldn't stop herself from asking softly, "Your father died young, I take it?" Research, her conscience insisted. Just research.

"Heart attack."

Grayson's words were short, clipped. She knew when a subject didn't want to talk. She'd get no more from him even if she tied him to a chair and interrogated him under a bare light bulb.

But then he surprised her by saying, "Worked himself to death."

"I'm sorry." The words slipped traitorously from her lips. The only thing she was sorry about was having to work for Barlow & Charles, she told herself sternly.

Grayson drew in a deep breath. "Well, Ms. Shaw, as you can see there is plenty of work to be done. I'm afraid I have to make several more calls this evening, so please," he cast a grim glance over his shoulder at the decimated reception area, "jump right in."

Amber rose from behind Barlow's desk. "You don't have a secretary?"

"We did, until quite recently."

"How recently?"

"About a month ago?"

Her eyebrows rose, in spite of her vow to remain detached. "You made this mess in just a month?"

Grayson sighed. "Suffice to say Nicole's departure was ill-timed."

"What happened to her?"

"She ran off to Mexico."

"Ran off?"

"She got married, Ms. Shaw. Her new husband was offered a job in Mexico."

"Isn't that always the way?" Amber said hotly. "A man gets offered a job and he thinks nothing of uprooting his wife and dragging her off to another country. Would he do the same for her? I doubt it."

He opened his mouth to object, but she charged resolutely ahead.

"And once she's given up everything for him, what does he do?"

Grayson threw up his hands in defeat. "I don't know. Please enlighten me, Ms. Shaw."

"He leaves her for his blonde secretary. Just like your brother Roger." The words leapt from her lips. She hadn't meant to say them, hadn't meant to think about Sandy, Roger, nor a certain male named Eric and his blonde secretary, Daphne. But it was too late to call back the traitorous words, so she settled for leveling him a searing stare and daring him to take offense at it.

The corners of his mouth twitched with amusement, but he caught himself. "Is that so?"

She nodded curtly, hands on her hips.

"Allow me to point out that you're operating on a couple of incorrect assumptions here."

"I--"

"In the first place, you're assuming the advantages in relocating were all skewed toward Nicole's husband. That wasn't the case. Nicole was also able to secure herself a substantial promotion. It was a great opportunity for both of them. A great opportunity for everyone except Barlow and me," he looked around at the stacks of files everywhere, "who'd come to depend on her. But what could I say? I didn't want to stand in the way of her chance to start an exciting new life."

"Oh right. Away from her family and friends."

"Perhaps she considered her husband both family and friend. It isn't impossible you know, Ms. Shaw."

"It is from my experience," she shot back at him. Now where had that come from? Amber ground her teeth against her tongue in a stern reminder not to spill any more of her guts to this virtual stranger. The stranger, she reminded herself, who'd sued her over a simple mistake.

Grayson raised his eyebrows at her caustic remark. "And secondly, Cindy isn't Roger's secretary, she's an executive. They met at his health club."

"Oh, that makes it so much better."

To her amazement, he looked embarrassed at the mention of his twin. "Roger is hopeless. I make no excuses for him."

"Did he say why he ditched Sandy after leading her on like that?" she asked more gently.

"He said the relationship wasn't working for him." Grayson looked wearily down at her. "Does that satisfy your boundless curiosity, Ms. Shaw?"

*Curiosity killed the cat.* Her grandmother's words echoed in her mind. The burning desire to ask questions no one wanted to answer was a trait that dated back to her early childhood. Caught in the act again, Amber smiled, a peace offering.

"You might as well call me Amber since we're going to be stuck here together for a month."

"Grayson," he said. The trace of a smile broke across his face.

Like the sun dawning, Amber thought, then mentally shook herself. A woman could get lost in that smile. She wondered how many had.

"Well then, Amber. Are you satisfied?"

"One more question."

The smile faded, like clouds gathering. "One and only one."

"Where's your partner?"

Grayson studied her long and hard. "He's on an extended holiday."

"Why?"

"I said one question, Amber. Next time make sure you use it wisely."

"Doesn't seem like such a great time to take a holiday to me."

He pursed his lips, all but saying he knew exactly what she was up to. "No, it wasn't."

"So why'd you let him go?"

"That's a question," he reminded her softly.

"You're right," she said breaking into a grin in spite of herself. "You can't blame me for trying. Asking questions is my profession after all."

"No, I suppose I can't," he said, sounding even more tired than before. He ushered her from Barlow's office. "Let me show you where everything is."

\* \* \* \*

He leaves her. Grayson couldn't shake her poignant words from his mind. Spoken with just enough hidden pain to make him wonder if in fact she wasn't speaking from her own experience instead of discussing a case

study. Had she made sacrifices for a lover who rewarded her by leaving? Was that what set the hot-tempered Ms. Shaw on the course of a new career? Should he ask her?

Grayson smiled in spite of himself. No, that likely wouldn't be a good idea. Ms. Shaw might be adept at asking questions, but he could be certain she was equally adept at evading those asked of her. If he wanted to repair the damage his ill-conceived lawsuit had done, now was not the time to press for personal information. Not yet. Not with her bristling at his every word.

He'd take his time, ask the right questions. He knew from experience that given the right prompting the most reticent of defendants could be enticed to spill the beans.

Grayson glanced through the crack of his partially-closed door at her slight form bent over Nicole's main filing cabinet. He couldn't help but admire her. Whether her diligence came from training or deep personal pain, she'd built a business around it, created something profitable where nothing had been before. Created something that allowed others to vent that pain and get on with their lives.

Had she taken revenge on him? He wondered. What had she done? And how had she done it? A few gruesome possibilities flitted through his imagination. He could bet it wasn't ice. No, that wasn't her personal style. Something much more lingering, something the poor fool who'd wronged her would never forget.

And then it hit him. She hadn't exacted her revenge. Hadn't been able to at the time, or chose not to. And all of a sudden he understood something about Amber Shaw that he'd bet she'd never share with another living soul. Pain kept her going.

Pain stoked the fires of her success. Pain kept her working on other people's problems instead of facing up to her own. Grayson leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. Ms Amber Shaw was definitely the most interesting case in years to walk through the doors of Barlow & Charles. Perhaps things were working out just fine after all.

But inside a little voice snickered, reminding him instantly of Roger. Roger, who was so blind to his own faults, yet remarkably attuned to other peoples.



*And what fans your fire, Grayson?*

He shut his brother's voice firmly out of his mind. Getting up, he softly closed the door. Amber Shaw was here to help him get his work done, he reminded himself, not to keep him from it. Grayson reached for the phone.

\* \* \* \*

Her pity for the loss of his secretary vanished as soon as she glanced at piles of files awaiting her undivided attention. He was smooth, she grudgingly admitted. Mr. Grayson Charles missed his calling. He should have been an actor. She'd bet even the tousled hair and wrinkled shirt had been part of the disguise. He could certainly dress himself for court. She yanked open the file cabinet. Like dominoes set in motion, files tumbled out, landing in a heap of scattered paper at her feet.

Oh he was good all right, she thought, gathering up the files into yet another pile. He used just the right amount of humor, the faintest touch of a smile, the *see, I'm a good guy, you can trust me* routine. She knew how it went. She used it herself. She just hadn't realized she was vulnerable to it.

Stated his case, he had. The defense rested. Lulled into a false sense of security, she told him more than she ever intended. Not intentionally. Of course not. Just as he planned.

Never again. Amber kicked off her shoes and sat down on the carpeted floor to start organizing the files into some kind of order.

Vulnerability lurked behind every need. So what need kept her vulnerable to Grayson's charms?

Later, she promised herself, out of range of Grayson's influence, she'd think about that one.

It was obvious there had once been an order to the multitude of files littering the reception area. Each color-coded folder had its own laser printed label. But in the weeks since Nicole's departure, titles had been crossed out in ball-point pen and others scrawled in a barely legible hand. Grayson's she deduced. The obsessively neat John Barlow, if his office was any indication, would never have used tools as crude as ball-point. But the color coding that had likely made perfect sense to the departed Nicole made no sense at all to Amber. She found matching folders in the main cabinet neatly arranged in alphabetical order to match the files coded yellow and

blue. But there were no corresponding hanging folders for those with red and black labels. She wandered down the hall to Grayson's office, but inside she could hear the low murmur of a telephone conversation in progress. Deciding not to disturb him, she strolled back down the hall toward Barlow's office.

The door shut quietly behind her. Amber hit the light switch and looked around the immaculate office. His oak filing cabinet was locked. Walking softly over to the matching desk, she tried the top drawer again. A quick search yielded a ring of tiny keys. Amber chuckled to herself. What possessed people to lock things up and then leave the keys within easy reach she'd never know.

Metal connected with metal. The lock popped open. Sure enough, the cabinet contained several rows of files with red and black labels. Amber looked down at the folders in her hand. Red and black. Those colors should mean something to her.

Opening the door quietly, she peered down the hall. Light shone in a thin band beneath Grayson's closed door. Straining to hear, she could make out deep timbre of his voice. She closed the door again and crept back to Barlow's filing cabinet.

*In the red or in the black.* Financial statements? She flipped open one of the files. Inside was a handful of spreadsheet pages. Last years books, if she could trust the date at the top. Amber dug deeper in the filing cabinet, replacing the files from the outer office and flipping through the ones with more recent dates.

The most recent figures were from June. Four months ago. She tilted the file into the light, squinting to make out the tiny figures at the top of the page and stopped. Assuming the figures were correct, Grayson's law firm was already seriously in the red.

Amber's fingers hovered above the next file. She cast a glance over her shoulder, checking for signs of her discovery, but the hallway remained silent. Her heart pounding, she opened the file.

Inside were papers offering the sale of Barlow & Charles to another firm.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It turned out that the elusive occupant of apartment four worked nights, which explained why he'd been so difficult to locate during the day. It also explained how he'd been able to dupe his girlfriend into believing he was working.

Shift work, business trips, overtime. After five years, Amber knew just about every cheating scheme in existence. She shifted against the plastic upholstery of her Honda, peeling the skirt that had become stuck to it in the heat of the Indian summer day. That beautiful day was rapidly becoming evening, while all the work she should have done accumulated with yesterday's. What else could she do? Grayson Charles had manipulated the court into granting him her services in the evenings.

Behind the white Venetian blinds in apartment four, something moved. Amber let go her frustration in a deep sigh. A lamp went on in the bedroom, barely discernible in the late afternoon light. She swung the camera into position.

"Come on, come on," she whispered as if her words could hypnotize the mysterious occupant in number four. "You have a date tonight. I can just feel it."

She was already half an hour late for Grayson's office, but she'd been following Mr. Apartment 4 for three days now. Since her evenings were slated for Barlow & Charles, this might be her last chance. Whatever happened, she couldn't let her business slide in any way during the month she'd been ordered to help Grayson.

The sun dipped lower on the horizon. Afternoon faded into evening. Mr. Apartment 4 stayed stubbornly behind the closed blinds.

"You're late," Amber chanted softly. "No time for a shower. She won't mind a little sweat."

In apartment four, the light went off.

“Come outside and play,” she whispered, then frowned and added, “so I can get this over with and go to work for the rest of the evening.”

Movement. In the lobby. Amber eased the window down and put her eye to the viewfinder. She’d loaded the camera with high speed film, but if she was forced to wait any longer, even that wouldn’t be good enough. Her only alternative would be to use flash and that could prove to be ... difficult.

The front door swung open. A thin blond man jaunted down the steps. “Looks like a surfer,” Amber muttered. Using the telephoto lens, she snapped off a couple of shots just to be safe. According to her client’s profile, he was an information services technician.

“Bet the services you’re currently selling have little to do with computers.” Amber laughed at her own dark humor. “We’ll just see about that, Apartment 4. Information is my specialty, too.”

She ducked as he passed her car, heading for his own. Waiting until there were a couple of cars safely between them, Amber eased the Honda into traffic. A glance at her watch sent her heart sinking. Almost an hour late. Grayson Charles would just have to wait. She’d make it up to him later. If she had to.

“There’d better be a woman at the end of this goose chase,” she told the red mustang two cars ahead. “If you’re going grocery shopping, I’m going to be really mad.”

And so would Grayson Charles.

No wonder he’d been so upset at the loss of his time. If the firm was in fact riding a fine edge between solvency and bankruptcy, Grayson wouldn’t have had the resources to hire extra help. Dark eyes haunted her, last night and all day. He hadn’t looked annoyed to see her. He looked ... relieved.

Amber thrust him from her mind. Since their ill-fated meeting several weeks ago, Grayson Charles had been occupying far too much of her thoughts.

Apartment 4 was pulling into the parking lot of an industrial complex. Amber followed a discreet distance behind. He parked in front of a rambling building. A green sign above was the only thing distinguishing it from the other squat buildings in the industrial complex. Gardner Information Services. Amber eased her car closer, keeping one hand on the camera.

“Going to work early tonight, aren’t we, Apartment 4?” Amber said as he disappeared inside.

Taking the camera, she closed her car door quietly, and crept toward the rear of the building. Most of the workers had left for the day, emptying a multitude of dark offices. Down toward the end of the building, lights were still on in a couple of offices. Bending low out of sight of the windows, Amber ran along the side of the building.

The first illuminated room turned out to be the lunchroom. A couple of industrial tables, a battered fridge and a microwave made up its furnishings. Amber slid around the corner. Peering up over the windowsill, she peeked through the vertical blinds.

“Bingo.”

Sure enough, Mr. Information Highway Surfer was at his terminal. But he wasn’t alone. Pressed intimately between him and his workstation was an attractive brunette in a business suit.

“She’s his coworker.” A perfect scheme. One stayed late, one came in early. Their coworkers probably pitied them clocking all that overtime.

“Well, party’s over, Apartment 4.” Amber inched up to the window. A tiny space between the vertical blinds offered her all the clearance she needed. Pressing the lens against the window, she captured their passionate kiss with the rest of the roll of film.

The kiss ended. Amber dropped out of sight. As if she sensed something, the brunette looked through the half-closed blinds. Plastering herself against the side of the building, Amber rounded the corner and froze.

“I knew it was you!” Out of the shadows a man walked toward her. Right across the view of the open windows, jeopardizing her surveillance with every step.

Tendrils of greasy hair stood out from his head at odd angles, illuminated by the slanting light of the late afternoon sun. Squinting against the glare, he looked like Mr. McGoo behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. His threadbare suit looked like he’d slept in it. And he probably had. Dapper would never be a word used to describe James Heck, Amber reflected.

Dragging in a breath, she forced her heart to resume beating. “What are you doing here, James?” she hissed, her body still pasted against the wall. Dearly she hoped James followed her example to get out of plain sight.

Her hopes went unanswered as Heck leaned against the building, supporting himself nonchalantly with one arm. “I came to see who got the job over me.”

Amber felt her stomach tighten as her body readied itself for the coming confrontation.

“Didn’t know you were bidding on it,” she said noncommittally.

“You should have.” Heck had a frown that made him look like a petulant child. A very large, slimy kind of petulant child. “I am the only competition in town.”

Amber felt the edges of her patience fraying. Long hours spent in a hot car, plus an evening at Barlow & Charles to look forward to put her in a bad mood to start. “My client didn’t mention that she was considering other offers,” she snapped.

“She didn’t mention you to me, either.” Heck kicked at a tuft of grass, and Amber could tell he was taking the loss of work really hard. “Led me to believe I had the job,” he continued, still taking out his frustrations on the hapless turf. “Put in quite a few hours on the preliminaries.”

“Don’t you just hate it when that happens?” Looking for a way out of the conversation, any way, she hadn’t realized how snide that sounded.

“Sure do.”

If Heck was making a point, she wished he’d get to it.

“I’m in for quite a few out of pocket expenses,” Heck said at last.

Amber groaned inwardly. Like she wasn’t.

“Maybe you’d like to reimburse me for all that preliminary work, that way we could kind of work together on it.”

So that was it. Heck wanted a cut. Even if she had the money, slimy James Heck, proprietor of Heck, Sleuth and Company would not be her choice of a collaborator. Truth was she didn’t have a dime to spare. Not that she’d tell the competition that.

“Thanks for the offer, James, but I’ve already done my own preliminary.”

“Figured you would.”

Amber launched herself away from the wall, forcing Heck to follow her if he wanted to keep talking. The longer she fended off proposals from James Heck, the more chance she had of being discovered. “Listen, I was

just on my way somewhere....” Amber looked around for his car, but the parking lot was virtually empty. “Do you need a lift?”

“Ah, no.” The question took Heck by surprise, as if he’d been lost in thought. Or taking her refusal very badly. “But I was wondering something else....”

*Please go away, Amber prayed silently. Don’t ask me anything else.* The irony of James Heck thinking she was so successful he could cash in on her action almost made her laugh. For all his sleazy antics, at the moment Fair Game, Inc. wasn’t doing any better than Heck, Sleuth and Co. If she hadn’t had Heck in the flesh to deal with, she might have laughed out loud. With a heavy sigh, Amber turned to face him. “What is it, James?”

“I was wondering....” He let the sentence trail off, giving Amber a sinking suspicion of the real reason he’d tailed her to her own surveillance.

“Yes, James?”

“Since I’m the one out of pocket here....” He paused again. Her stomach tightened with tension. “Well, I’d forgive you if you’d go out with me on Saturday,” he finished in a rush.

Only James Heck would accuse a woman of theft and then ask her out, Amber thought darkly. He’d made an equally awkward proposition at the association Christmas party. Rumor had it he’d propositioned every woman there. And only James Heck of the firm his colleagues laughingly called Heck, Sleaze and Co., would suggest she owed him a romantic favor for his loss of a contract.

“Sorry James, I’ve already made plans.”

“Some other time then?”

Unfortunately a guy like James Heck would never take some other time as the brush off it was. Some other time would become every other time they met.

“I don’t think so, James.”

He took her refusal in characteristic bad grace. “You seeing someone?”

“That’s none of your concern.” The words sounded harsh, even through the filter of her annoyance. In truth, there hadn’t been anyone for a long time. That fact she certainly wasn’t going to share with James Heck.

“Guess not.” Without so much as a backward glance, Heck turned and walked away in the other direction. Must have parked his car on the street somewhere.

“I’ll let you know if I hear of anything,” she called after him. Heck nodded, but kept walking.

For several agonizing minutes she watched him leave, until he disappeared around a bend in the road. Her heart drummed a staccato beat. Amber glanced back at the building behind her. No one came to investigate. The blinds to all the windows were firmly shut. She heaved a sigh of relief.

That was close. If Heck showed up a couple of minutes before, she’d be explaining her presence there to the police. But for once fate had played into her hands.

And Amber Shaw had landed herself another lucrative contract.

\* \* \* \*

Her exhilaration died as soon as she stepped through the door of Barlow & Charles.

Angry voices drifted down the corridor, Grayson’s and an older man’s. Amber let herself in quietly. Taking a seat at the secretary’s desk, she reached for the last stack of files awaiting organization. She’d almost finished the job last night. That was the problem with untidy people, she reasoned, they just didn’t realize how little time it took to keep things in order.

Snippets of the altercation in progress caught her attention.

“What did you expect me to do?” Grayson sounded even more angry than he’d been in court.

Amber rose silently from her seat. Taking a handful of files on the pretense of returning them to the cabinet, she crept as far down the hallway as she could safely go.

“What I didn’t expect you to do was to hire a private investigator to snoop through our confidential files!”

“She’s not investigating us,” Grayson thundered back, “she’s simply putting away all those files that have been sitting around the office since Nicole left. Besides, she isn’t that type of PI, she has another specialty altogether.”

“So you said.” The other man’s voice was low, menacing.



*Wouldn't want to run up against him in court.* Amber inched further down the hall.

"And I don't like it one bit," he continued.

"She's done a great job," Grayson said, defensively. "Her help is free and we were going to have to hire someone anyway. Is that what's bothering you, John? That you weren't in on it?"

"My only concern is for confidentiality," the other said, now on the defensive instead. Yet there was a hint of malice to his voice that sent a shudder down Amber's spine. She hadn't even met John Barlow yet, but she knew for certain she didn't like him.

"I can't see what interest she'd have in the contents of our files."

"No, of course not." Amber heard him stomp a few feet away, then the impact of his fist hitting the top of Grayson's desk. "Blind trust is one of your shortcomings, just like your father."

Silence filled the office. She heard Grayson walk around his desk, pictured him standing before Barlow, anger darkening his face.

"Let me make one thing clear." He launched the words at his partner, all the more dangerous for the quiet manner in which they were spoken. "I am not my father and neither are you. We are partners in this firm, and I will do what I decide is best for it."

"That's--"

He cut the other man off. "You were the one who insisted in taking time off when it was least convenient. You were the one who left me with not only my own, but your caseload as well not even a week after Nicole left. What did you expect me to do? Work all night and all day? Well, that's what I've been doing. And when help was offered free of charge, I took it. If you don't like it, that's too bad. I'm considering offering Ms Shaw some freelance work once her time here is up."

"We can't afford it." Barlow's words practically exploded between them.

"Why can't we?"

"I've been away. And you've done too much charity work!"

"It was for your charity. If you've changed your mind about that, it's too late."

"I don't want a PI in here."

“Why, John? What are you afraid she’ll find?”

The question hung between them. Finally, Grayson answered it himself. “I don’t really think you care about the PI. I think you’re just angry because I did this on my own. Well get used to it, Barlow, because if I want to hire Amber Shaw, I will. Even if I have to pay her myself.”

“I won’t let you do that.”

“Try and stop me.” For a moment there was silence. “Are you here to work? Or did you just stop by to complain about the way things were going in your absence?”

The door to Grayson’s office flew open. Amber leapt back behind the filing cabinet. A heavy-set dark-haired man with graying temples rushed by her. He leveled a vehement look in her direction, then stormed through the door and slammed it behind him.

When she glanced up, Grayson was standing before her.

“You’re late,” he snapped in greeting.

“Late!” Amber said incredulously. “I stayed late here last night--just because I couldn’t stand to leave any loose ends laying around. Because I pitied you for the pathetic situation you’d allowed your business to get into.” She waved her arm around the now tidy reception area. “The mess it took you a month to make, I almost cleaned up in one night.”

Grayson had the decency to look chastised.

Amber shut the filing cabinet with more force than she intended. “Mark my words, counselor, from now on you won’t get one second more of my time than I’m legally obligated to provide.”

He eyed her sheepishly. “I can’t find a thing.”

Amber grabbed him by the sleeve of his white shirt. The glare she offered leveled the height difference between them. “Come on, then Einstein, let me show you. It’s all very simple, alphabetical order, you know, like we all learned in kindergarten.”

He stood uncharacteristically quiet while she went over the files, now neatly arranged in the main filing cabinet. After that, she outlined the system in his own file drawer, the one he’d presumably invented. But when she went to show him where she’d put the files that belonged in Barlow’s office, the door was locked.

“There’s a key in my top desk drawer,” Grayson said, turning back down the hall to his own office. A moment later he returned, hands stuffed boyishly into his pockets. “I’m sure there was a key in my top drawer at one time.”

“I can just imagine what your apartment looks like,” she growled, taking a seat once again behind Nicole’s desk.

She expected him to storm back down the hall to his own office, but instead he leaned against the filing cabinet.

“Oh yeah? So tell me, Amber, private investigator extraordinaire, what does my apartment look like? Did you go out there and peer in my windows?”

“Of course not. I have a life. I have a business that’s suffering because of your little scheme here.”

He waited.

“Okay,” she said, taking the bait. “You own a condo in a luxury building.”

“Wrong.”

“Townhouse, then. Downtown, close to the office.”

“Close enough,” he said obliquely, but there was a hint of mischief in his expression.

“Two bedrooms, den.”

“Wrong.”

“Three.”

“Wrong again.” He smiled triumphantly.

Four perhaps? Now why would a single man want a house that big, she wondered. Unless in fact he wasn’t single. She’d just assumed. Perhaps he lived with someone. Amber’s eyes narrowed. Still, he just didn’t have that look of married man. He was too untidy.

Now that’s a sexist thought. Her friend Nancy was one of the most untidy people she knew. And she’d been married for six years.

Amber shut her eyes like a fortune teller deep in thought. “Let me see, it’s professionally decorated.”

“Wrong.”

“All right, you decorated it yourself, in one shopping trip to one of those catalog outlet stores.”

“I did not!”

Amber smiled. “So it was two trips.”

Grayson crossed his arms. “You’re not exactly batting a thousand here, Ms. Shaw, Private Investigator.”

“Okay, it’s ... tastefully, but unremarkably decorated.”

“Give me some credit.”

Amber continued undaunted. “Most of the rooms aren’t lived in. A cleaning lady comes in once a week to keep it dusted and to do your laundry. You order your groceries from one of the few stores that delivers every Saturday. Except for the den and the master bedroom, you wouldn’t know anyone actually lived there. The only appliance in the kitchen that gets regular use is the coffee maker.”

“Wrong,” he snapped. “I’m a gourmet cook.”

That stopped her. “Really?” Now she was going to have to rethink her profile of Grayson Charles, yet again. “But you haven’t cooked in a long time. Not since the trouble at the firm.”

“There’s no trouble at my firm.” He pushed himself away from the filing cabinet and stormed down the hall. “We’re just a little short of help right now.”

Amber waited until the door closed behind him. After counting to ten, she followed him.

“What is it?” he demanded when she knocked softly on his door.

“Speaking of help.” Amber poked her head into his office. “Now that the secretarial work is under control, is there anything else I can do to be of assistance?” Seeing as I am a trained professional...” She let the sentence trail off.

For a moment he seemed at a loss, then he shoved a file folder across the desk. “There are a few facts in here that need checking.”

Amber took the file. She glanced at the clock on Grayson’s desk.

“Fine, the reference library is open until eight. That’s where I’ll be.”

He didn’t say anything as she left.

\* \* \* \*

Grayson scowled at the work piled high on his desk. Why did everyone, from Roger, to Barlow and now the self-assured Ms. Shaw, think they had him figured out? He sat back in his chair, Barlow’s words still

digging at his subconscious. Was he truly like his father who'd never been cut out to be a lawyer?

No, Roger favored Dad far more than he. Roger had been his favorite. His father had had a competent but hardly stellar career. Was Barlow right in his criticism? Jumpy John was merely paranoid, he decided. That kind of control freak would find fault in anything he did.

So why did he feel like such a heel? Why did Amber Shaw's assessment of his lifestyle, down to the well-used coffee maker unsettle him? He should have thanked her for her hard work. It was generous of her, considering. He probably would have if Barlow hadn't made him so angry.

The phone startled him from his musing.

"Knew I'd find you there," Roger said, before he'd even had a chance to say hello. "Don't you know that all work and no play makes Grayson a dull boy?"

"Roger--" Even to his own ears, his voice sounded tired and much older than his thirty-one years. "I really am busy. A little sympathy might be nice."

"Sympathy? Gray, I think you ought to get off your butt here. If Jumpy John isn't pulling his own weight, you should get yourself another partner."

"Some help you are, Roger."

"And speaking of nice butts--"

"Roger!"

"How is the lovely Ms. Shaw?"

"She's a great person to have on your side rather than in opposition."

There was a long meaningful pause on the other end of the phone line. Finally Roger said, a little enviously, "And here I underestimated you, brother."

"Don't be ridiculous, she's just helping out at the firm."

"Now that is a waste of a great opportunity."

"What opportunity would that be?"

"Gray, you are truly hopeless. But one man's castoffs are another man's treasures. So they say."

"She wouldn't even look at you."

"What makes you so sure?"

Grayson sighed. "What did you want, Roger?"

"Wanted to know if you could squeeze half an hour from that busy schedule of yours for a drink."

"Sorry, not tonight."

"You're getting awfully boring in your old age."

"Bye, Roger."

"Bye, Gray. Oh, and say hello to Ms. Shaw for me will you?"

"I'm sure she'd much rather strangle you, instead."

Laughing, Roger hung up the phone.

Grayson glowered at his empty office. Even having her company for one night was a vast improvement. She was a lively office-mate. And he did enjoy a good argument. He smiled grimly. It was the most attention he'd had from a woman in months.

\* \* \* \*

Two fact finding tools most people overlooked were the telephone book and the public library. If you asked the right questions, if you knew where to look, if you kept your eyes open, information retrieval was easy. Amber's fact finding mission took less than half an hour. Not much got by her. The ability to read people was a skill she'd had since childhood.

So why was it so hard to place Grayson Charles? Why did he stubbornly refuse to be the villain she so desperately wanted him to be?

She'd heard him tell Barlow what a great help she'd been, yet he spared not even a word of thanks for her hard work. And every time she was ready to slap him for his arrogance, he looked at her with those lost dark eyes, and she found herself working overtime as his secretary while her own work suffered.

Amber let herself back into the offices of Barlow & Charles. Dumping the files on Nicole's desk, she turned to go down the hall toward his private office.

And found Grayson leaning against the filing cabinet, waiting for her. She jumped, in spite of herself and bit back a very unladylike word.

"I was waiting for you," he said softly.

"So I see." She waited patiently to hear what he'd say next.

"I'm sorry I took off after you earlier."

Amber opened her mouth to offer a “that’s okay”, but he held up his hand so she’d let him continue.

“Please forgive my bad behavior. I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately, not that that’s any excuse,” he said quickly. “But I wanted to thank you for your hard work. It was generous of you, in view of the circumstances.”

Amber found herself smiling. A nice euphemism. Especially since the court had ordered her. But it was nice to know her help was appreciated. “I couldn’t resist, you were in such a pathetic mess.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

They looked at each other, suddenly uncomfortable.

“Here’s the material you wanted from the library,” she said, picking up the file folder.

Grayson took it from her hands and put it back down on the desk. “I was wondering if you’d like to have a drink with me. My brother, Roger,” he winced at the sound of Roger’s name and the significance it had to Amber, but she smiled back and he continued. “My brother says that too much work makes me boring.”

“He’s probably right about that,” Amber said. “But I have to admit I’m guilty of the same crime. When you love your work so much, sometimes it’s hard to stop.”

“Have you had dinner?”

As if on cue, Amber’s stomach growled. “No, I came straight from,” she paused, self consciously, “well, the surveillance I was working on.”

“Did you get him?”

Amber grinned wickedly. “I got him.”

“Why don’t we call it a night then? I know this place that makes great burgers, assuming that you eat meat--”

“Right now I could devour a steak!”

“They make great steaks, too.”

He looked so open, so vulnerable, she couldn’t help but agree.

“Sounds great, Counselor. Let’s go.”

The unseasonably warm air packed the sidewalks with people enjoying one of the last pleasant nights of the season. They walked the

couple of blocks to the tiny restaurant Grayson suggested and sat outside on the patio.

“So,” Amber said as they finished the last of their coffee. “Tell me about John Barlow. That was him who stormed past me earlier, wasn’t it?”

“In the flesh,” Grayson admitted.

“He’s a lot older than I expected somehow.”

“Like I said, he was my father’s partner.”

“And you felt obligated to join the firm.”

“We aren’t in court, Amber. I don’t have to answer your questions.”

She laughed and dug into the scoop of ice cream sitting in the silver bowl. “Sorry, force of habit.”

He picked up his own spoon and stole a scoop of her ice cream. “But I’ll answer your question anyway. Barlow & Charles was my mother’s only source of support. I couldn’t let her down. My father died young, before he’d had a chance to save for a comfortable retirement.”

“And Roger wasn’t going to follow in your dad’s footsteps?”

“Roger helps when he can,” Grayson said defensively. “You shouldn’t judge him by what Sandy said. He’s really not so bad.”

“He dumped her, Grayson. After he’d led her to believe they were going to get married.”

“Roger has a problem with commitment.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“There’s no law against it.”

“There ought to be.”

He swiped the last mouthful of ice cream. “Let’s stop talking about Roger.”

“Deal.”

“Now that I’ve answered your questions, you’re obligated to answer mine.”

“Like you said, Counselor, we’re not in court.”

“You’re free to take the fifth.”

She laughed. “What is it that you so badly want to know?”

“What attracts a nice woman like you to a career getting even with straying men?”



Dangerous ground, that, Amber thought. “I take the fifth. And I never said I was nice.”

“Have you never had a male client?”

That softly spoken question stopped her cold. “No,” she said laying down her spoon. “I-I guess I haven’t. Not that I wouldn’t, you know represent one, it’s just that no man’s ever shown up in my office.”

“But they must exist, men who’ve been dumped.”

“The statistics don’t speak well for your gender, Mr. Charles.”

He frowned. “There are always anomalies in the statistics.”

“I’m sure there are. But I’ve never met one, in all the cases I’ve handled.”

“Maybe because men tend to keep their pain to themselves.”

“Perhaps.” Amber took another sip of coffee. “I thought we were trying to forget about work tonight.”

“Guilty.” Grayson rose from his seat. “I’ll walk you back to your car.”

\* \* \* \*

Even in the dark, Amber could tell there was something wrong with the lopsided way the Honda sat on the pavement.

“Oh no.” She rushed forward, confirming her suspicions.

“What is it?”

“Flat tire.” Amber leaned against the car that was at least five years past its prime. “That’s a new tire, too. I must have run over something in the industrial park.”

“Isn’t that always the way?” Grayson offered sympathetically. “My car always breaks down on a full tank of gas.”

“I didn’t think Mercedes broke down.” The barb came out more nasty than she intended and she winced.

Grayson ignored her sarcasm. “Once in a while they do. And they’re expensive to fix. Can I offer you a lift?”

“Thanks, but I’m going to need it first thing in the morning. I better call the motor league.”

“Got a spare?”

“Sure, but it’s a snow tire.”

“It would get you home.”

“I’m perfectly capable of changing a tire.”

“Take less time if there were two of us....”

“I didn’t think lawyers did tires.”

“Consider it a job for legal aid.”

Amber smiled, even though it was past midnight and they were standing in the middle of a deserted street. Opening the trunk, she took out the jack and wrench. “All right, Counselor, it’s all yours.”

Positioning the jack, he went to work with the wrench. “Got a flashlight?”

“Hang on.” Amber opened the passenger side door and reached into the glove compartment.

Glancing up, she caught a glimpse of a strange pattern stenciled across the windows in the dim glow of the streetlight.

Her gasp brought Grayson’s head up sharply. “What is it?”

“Look!”

Leaving the tire, he followed her around the front of the car.

Scrawled in the dust on her windshield were the words: Stay Away.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“The worm!”

The petite brunette stared at the black and white photos spread across Amber’s desk.

“You know her?”

“Her name is Mandy,” her client launched the name across the desk like a flame thrower. “She’s his boss, can you believe that?”

“Actually,” Amber said. “I can. I’ve seen it all.”

Jennifer rummaged in her purse, coming up at last with a well-worn check book. “Well, that’s it then. Will you take a personal check?”

“Check or credit card, which ever is more convenient,” Amber said congenially. The deluxe package was hers, regardless of Grayson’s demands on her time.

“I want the deluxe package. The extra-deluxe package if you have one.”

“We can arrange a custom package if you wish.”

“I want lights, camera, videotape. A framed sixteen by twenty to hang on my living room wall!”

“The photograph will be extra.” Amber reached for her calculator. “I’ll have to hire a photographer and a videographer.”

“No problem. Just give me the grand total.”

Amber named a sum sure to send Jennifer fleeing her office.

Jennifer swallowed, thought about it for a second, then asked quickly, “Can I borrow that calculator?”

Amber watched breathlessly as she balanced her checkbook.

“And how much would you like as a deposit?”

“Thirty percent,” Amber said, certain even that much would be beyond Jennifer’s budget.

To her amazement Jennifer scribbled her name on one of her embossed checks and handed it calmly to Amber.

Amber tucked the check in her top drawer. Folding her hands neatly in front of her, she leaned forward.

“Now all we need to discuss is what type of revenge we should exact upon Mister--”

“James. Aidan James.”

“Mr. James. Please remember in your zeal, Ms. Roberts, the revenge must be physically harmless in nature, that is one of stipulations of my contract.”

“I don’t care if it’s harmless,” Jennifer growled. “As long as he never forgets it. As long as he never forgets me.”

“Oh, I don’t think he’ll be forgetting either of us by the time I’m finished,” Amber said with confidence. None of them ever did. That was the point. Separating men from the sheer arrogance that the world was theirs to shape at will.

“He’ll be difficult to catch by himself,” Jennifer said. “She sticks to him like glue.”

“Don’t worry, “ Amber began. Her words trailed off into silence. She offered Jennifer a feral smile.

“Glue, you say?”

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, the photographer and the videographer were booked. All Amber needed now was to arrange time off in the evening from Barlow & Charles to carry out the terms of her contract.

She should have been elated at the sudden improvement in business, but she couldn’t get the image of the angry words scrawled across her windshield.

Grayson had insisted it was a prank gone wrong. “Stay away from what?” he’d demanded.

“I don’t know?” If it was a prank, its purpose eluded her. “From Barlow & Charles, maybe.”

“You weren’t parked any where near the office,” he’d said, trying to inject some reason into the situation. “Who would have known it was your car?”

“I don’t know--”

“It was probably some wacko who doesn’t like people parking in front of their house.”

“You could be right,” she’d finally agreed. And hoped he was.

Thrusting the episode from her mind, Amber put the Roberts file back into the cabinet and headed for the offices of Barlow & Charles.

\* \* \* \*

“Earth to Amber Shaw.”

Amber jumped, sending the ream of paper in her hand into a miniature hurricane. They settled in an unruly mess on the desktop. Angrily she looked up at the culprit who’d startled her from her contemplation of glue and its many properties.

“Looked like you were a million miles away.” Grayson winced at her expression. “Don’t tell me, a case, right?”

Amber forced her expression into a more congenial one. “Guilty as charged.”

“Not Sandy and Roger--”

“No, Counselor, you can rest easy. I gave Sandy a refund. Your twin is off the hook. For the moment.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Tell Roger not to be smug about it. I might consider remedial action.”

“I’ll relay the message.” Grayson smiled ruefully. “If the expression on your face is any indication, I pity the recipient.”

“Don’t pity him, too much,” she barked, then grimaced at her tone. “He’s in the process of breaking someone’s heart.”

“And broken hearts are notoriously hard to heal. Too bad there isn’t a pill you can take.” As though he’d revealed far more than he intended, Grayson fell suddenly silent.

Had someone broken Grayson’s heart? Amber filed that piece of information in the growing file in her mind and offered him an easy out.

“There is a pill, Grayson. And I’m it.”

It sounded mercenary, even to her own ears. Amber laced her fingers together and looked innocently up at him. “So, what were you trying to tell me while I was ... absent?”

He followed the change in their topic of conversation gratefully. “I asked you if you were hungry.”

“Famished.”

A slow smile crept across Grayson’s face. “Then allow me to take you away from all this.”

“Are you sure? You seem to be amassing quite an expense account for your free help.”

“She’s worth it.”

Amber pushed the papers aside. Contemplation of the properties of glue and the paperwork could wait until later. “I’m glad you think so. Where should we go?”

“How about The Terrace Restaurant? After all, it’s where we met.”

She took him up on the challenge. “All right, Counselor, you’re on.”

\* \* \* \*

Somehow he had to keep Amber in the offices of Barlow & Charles. In a few short days she’d become a necessity to the smooth running of the firm. And though he was reluctant to admit it even to himself, she was rapidly becoming a necessity to the harmonious existence of Grayson Charles.

Roger, if he knew, would die laughing at the irony of it all.

But as he maneuvered the Mercedes through the busy evening traffic, Grayson found business to be the last thing on his mind. His traitorous thoughts kept straying into other possibilities.

What was she like away from the office? He couldn’t help wondering. Did the consummate professional Ms. Shaw own anything that wasn’t a power suit? Did the contents of her closet include a pair of beat up blue jeans? Was there a frayed old teddy bear hiding in a box in her storage locker like an ugly secret?

“What are you smiling about?”

Grayson jerked back to the present. No, stuffed toys certainly weren’t Amber Shaw’s style.

“I was just thinking about the last time we were here,” he said, turning the car into the parking lot.

She glanced over at him, her expression guarded. “And you’re laughing?”

“In retrospect it was funny.”

“I don’t recall you thinking so at the time.”

“I seem to have rediscovered my sense of humor.” He held the door open for her, wondering if she’d glare in return for his chivalrous gesture. She offered him a smile of thanks.

“Maybe Roger was right about you working too hard. It’s not good for you.”

“I’m sure Roger will be delighted to hear you thought well of him,” Grayson said as they followed the hostess to their table.

Right or wrong, he was determined to forget about work tonight. As soon as he got that one detail out of the way, the rest of the night was his. He intended to spend it on pleasure.

A warm breeze stirred the candles in spite of the lateness of the season. Piano music drifted across the terrace. Only the crimson leaves drifting down onto the terra-cotta tile from neighboring maples betrayed the truth. Another few weeks and the trees would be bare, but if she closed her eyes, Amber could believe it was still July and the incident last time she visited The Terrace had never happened.

Candlelight added golden highlights to Grayson’s dark curls. Tips of flames reflected in the dark depths of his eyes. A woman could get lost in the intensity of his gaze. A woman could be lured into a false sense of security by his attentiveness, his quiet humor. Why this man? Had the circumstances been different, she might laugh at the irony of it all.

“When is John Barlow coming back to work?” Amber asked as the busboy cleared away the last of their dinner dishes.

“Within the next few days.” Grayson dumped a lump of sugar into his coffee and stirred it. “Why do you ask?”

“I got the feeling he didn’t like me.” Amber stopped short of revealing she’d eavesdropped on their entire conversation.

“He didn’t even meet you, Amber. What makes you so sure?”

She shrugged and contemplated the menu of fattening deserts. “A hunch. I’m good at reading people.” She decided to pass up a slice of the sinfully chocolate layer cake.

“I suppose it comes with the territory.”

“Lawyers must develop a sixth sense for people as well. You know, who really did it, and who’s innocent.”

“It isn’t my job to judge their souls, Amber.”

“The ones with tarnished souls are obvious to me.”

Grayson tipped back his head and laughed heartily. “And what about me? Is my soul tarnished?”

Amber’s eyes narrowed across the flame between them. “I’m reserving judgment about you.”

“Really? I’m not guilty as charged?”

“Sentence hasn’t yet been passed.”

“Lucky me. I guess I’d better be on my best behavior.”

He reached between them, taking the glass of ice water the waitress had just refilled and moved it to his side of the table. “I think I’ll keep this over here, just in case.”

“Relax, I’ve changed my modus operandi.”

Grayson shook his head. “I do have to hand it to you, Amber. No one I know could have made a business of such a strange specialty.”

Amber felt herself blushing and hoped the darkness covered it.

“Actually, I was a dismal success as a private investigator.” *Now, why did I tell him that?*

In good grace, he let the comment drop.

But the words kept coming, as if the one glass of wine she’d had with dinner had loosened her lips. And her hold on good sense.

“My business was practically in bankruptcy court, until my friend Maureen asked me to track down her boyfriend.”

“And you found him.”

“Of course,” Amber said a little indignantly. “I am a good researcher.”

“I had noticed.”

“Anyway, I did find him. But Maureen wasn’t satisfied. She wanted to get even with him for all the heart ache he’d caused her.”

“So what did you do to the poor guy?”

Amber grinned at him over her coffee cup. “Oh no, Counselor. I never discuss the details of my cases.”

“Come on, tell me.”



She shook her head, crimson hair catching the candle's light. "Uh-uh. It just wouldn't be professional."

"Cruel to pique a guy's curiosity like that. I gather it didn't involve ice."

"No ice. Suffice to say Maureen got her revenge. She told two friends, who in turn told two friends...."

"Don't you ever get tired of it? Looking at the seedy side of love?"

Coffee burned its way down her throat. She swallowed hard. Now where did that come from? If she didn't know better, she'd think Grayson had a similar talent when it came to reading souls. Fixing him with her coolest gray stare, she asked calmly, "Is there another?"

"Ms. Shaw, you are terribly cynical."

"Occupational hazard."

"You've missed your calling, Amber. You should have been a lawyer."

"Oh, I could never have afforded university." The words slipped from her lips before she could call them back. Why on earth had she told him that? *Forget I said that*, she wished him earnestly.

"Still, you have a successful business." He laughed, putting her at ease in spite of what she'd just blurted out. "And I wouldn't have wanted to meet up with you on the courtroom floor. Once was enough."

"You won the case."

He smiled back at her. Eyes like dark jewels glinted in the candlelight. "The settlement was more than I had hoped for."

Grayson reached across the table and covered her hand with his. His skin was warm against the slight coolness the breeze had taken on as the evening progressed. Wrapped in his, her hand looked incredibly small. Amber rarely thought of herself as a short person. Only when she stood next to someone extraordinarily tall, or had to climb on the stove to get something out of the cupboard, did the reality of her height intrude upon her self image. Most of the time she used nerve and persistence to make up for the lack. Next to Grayson, she couldn't help feeling slight and delicate. Normally the sensation would bother her, but instead she felt comforted, protected. And that bothered her a whole lot more.

Amber attempted to pull her hand from his. Grayson captured it with his other hand. Having no other choice, she looked across the table at him. Velvet brown eyes stared back at her. Her gaze dropped to his full lips and she had to physically restrain herself from leaning across the table to kiss him. The warmth of his touch spread up her arm. A rush of heat swept her body. A sudden vivid image of what those hands following in its wake flashed through her mind.

This she hadn't expected. Briefly, she entertained the possibility he might find her as unforgettable as she had him, then banished the thought. Breath caught in her throat. The sensation of protection changed to one of being cornered.

"Amber, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

She had to get away even if it was just to the ladies for a few minutes to gather her thoughts.

"Would you excuse me for a moment--"

Amber moved to stand up. Her napkin slid from her lap. She pulled her hand from Grayson's, reached for it.

And felt his fingers close around it instead.

She looked up, into his face only inches away. His breath was warm against her cheek. He smelled of soap and the dusky undertones of coffee and wine.

Before she could draw away, he closed the distance between them. Feather soft lips covered hers. She felt the sweep of his long eyelashes. Then she was swept under.

Sensation rushed in a dazzling arc from her lips down her spine. Strong arms drew her closer. She went willingly into his embrace. Her own hands laced through his dark curls. For a man she'd thought to be cold he set her completely aflame.

Sounds of the restaurant around them retreated into the distance. Dimly, she registered the click of the waitress' heels against the tile as she moved toward them, then turned abruptly away. *We must make quite a sight.* She hoped none of the staff recognized them from their last visit.

Brazenly, she realized she didn't care. Grayson's lips molded to her own. His tongue flicked against hers, and she responded with a duel of her own. He moaned softly, low in his throat. With more of those weightless

kisses, he followed the line of her lips, then dropped lower to caress the soft skin beneath her ear. Those torturous lips withdrew slightly, drifting up the slope of her nose to deposit kisses like a gift on each of her closed eyes.

But then Grayson drew gently away. Amber groaned, a muffled cry of reluctance. Within the fire of his dark eyes embers glowed like black opals.

“Come back soon,” he whispered. Retrieving her napkin he placed it on the white table cloth.

Amber straightened her skirt and fled to the ladies’ room.

Cool tile against her back helped dull the fire inside her. *What was I doing? What was I thinking?* Sometime during the meal her good sense had taken a dive off the terrace. *I can’t believe I was just kissing Grayson Charles.* He didn’t seem to mind, she thought and swallowed hard. In fact it had been his idea. Or had it been hers?

Did it matter? Either way, it was a very bad idea. She’d been ordered by the court to work for him, as the result of a mistake he’d sued her for. Tonight she’d meant to ask him for a few hours off. And completely forgotten about Fair Game, Inc. and her livelihood.

The Charles brothers were simply too good looking and too charismatic for their own good. But that didn’t change the fact that she wanted Grayson desperately. A strange sensation, she hadn’t wanted anyone since Eric.

In the end it made no difference, she decided. You couldn’t have everything you wanted in life. Some things, even though desirable, just weren’t good for you.

A relationship with Grayson Charles, like too much candy, was not in her best interest. Too much lay at stake--the business she’d built up from nothing, her professional integrity, and last but not most definitely not least, her heart. Amber knew from past experience the consequences of risking your heart in a bad prospect. Emotional damage lingered much longer than bankruptcy.

Amber splashed cold water against her face. It helped to cool the fires raging inside. Rummaging in her purse, she found her compact and brushed powder over her nose. Well, she had the outside back together. The churning emotions inside she’d deal with later. After a long cold shower to restore her common sense.

She made her way back through the restaurant, back straight, projecting a confidence she no longer felt. Patrons thinned as the evening wore on. They ought to be going as well. She took her seat and smiled guardedly at Grayson.

“What did you want to ask me?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask if you--” Grayson cleared his throat. “If when your time with Barlow & Charles is over, if you’d be interested in doing some contract work for us.”

His words struck her like a blow. Is that what the romantic dinner, the passionate kiss had been leading up to?

Silently, Amber called herself twenty types of fool. With one kiss Grayson had her casting aside a vow two years old. Never again, she sworn. From that day on she’d live for herself and build up her new business. Entanglements with men caused only heartache. Beneath the flowers, the dinners, the torrid kisses, there lay ulterior motives. A stab of ancient pain tore through her, followed swiftly by a wave of fury.

Thankfully, she’d seen through him in time. It would be so easy to fall for Grayson Charles with his devastating good looks and his kisses that stoked fires long dormant within her. If all he wanted was some contract work, then why hadn’t he just asked? If he thought Amber Shaw’s soul was one of the fringe benefits included, he was sorely mistaken.

Staring across the table with that same earnest expression, Grayson waited for her reply.

“I do have a full schedule just now.” Anger clipped off the ends of her words with sharp precision.

His eyebrows drew downward at her tone. Hurt gathered in those dark eyes like storm clouds. “I could really use your help,” he said softly.

“Perhaps you could find something else to sue me for.”

Oops! She hadn’t meant to say that. And not with such venom. She watched his full lips harden to a thin line. Delightful tingles of that last kiss settled in her stomach in a cold weight. She choked back the pain she knew was coming. Later. A familiar pain, she’d dealt with it before. She could get over it again. Amber took a swallow of cold coffee.

“I guess we better get back to the office. The work you wanted me to finish tonight is still on the desk where I left it.”

“You haven’t answered my question.” Anguish colored his tone.

I hurt him. Guilt tangled with the ache inside. Why was Grayson Charles hurting, when he’d led her on like that? Humiliated her into thinking he felt the same attraction she struggled with.

“Let me think about it.”

“Please do.” Grayson motioned for the check.

“Let me.” Amber reached for her wallet.

He waved her offer away. “It’s my pleasure,” he said gruffly. And rose to leave.

As she followed him out of the restaurant, Amber realized once again she’d forgotten to ask him for that night off.

\* \* \* \*

*Something I said?*

Grayson focused his attention on the road in front of him instead of the beautiful woman at his side. The image of her sitting across from him, her crimson hair gilded by candlelight tortured him. The way she licked her lips when she was thinking drove him to distraction. Flames of her hungry kiss still licked at his insides.

*What a fool I am. I thought the evening was going well.* Despite his many attempts to understand female psychology, women remained a mystery to him. Roger was the expert. Roger knew all the right things to say. Women flocked to Roger like bees to honey while Grayson lagged behind with his leaden tongue and reticent ways.

What on earth went wrong this time? He hadn’t meant to kiss her. But the sight of her porcelain face, wide gray eyes and waiting lips consumed him. She kissed him back with a hunger to match his own. No woman desired him like that.

Grayson glanced furtively in the rearview mirror to make sure her lipstick wasn’t smeared across his mouth. No, there were no outward signs of their entanglement. He found himself wishing for a souvenir of her.

She hadn’t so much glanced in his direction since they left the restaurant. Did she regret kissing him? Had he completely misread the situation?

With that one item of business out of the way, he’d intended to pick up where they left off, forget about business and enjoy each other’s

company. His sensual plans for the rest of the evening evaporated with his shame. Now he was heading back toward the offices of Barlow & Charles. Definitely not where he wanted to spend the remainder of the warm Indian summer night. Wracking his brain, he still couldn't figure out what went wrong.

He needed advice, but who could he ask? Certainly not Roger. When he finished laughing at his expense, Roger would consider her dismissal of Grayson as an opportunity to move in himself.

But what if Roger didn't know it was Amber he was asking about?

Amber strode through the glass door he opened for her without a word. In silence they rode up to the third floor. He couldn't think of anything light to say as they walked down the hall. The door to the firm swung open with a click, admitting him to his prison.

"I have a few calls to make," Grayson said quietly. Amber nodded.

He was half way down the hall when he heard her scream.

Grayson bolted back down the hallway, skidding to a halt when he found Amber seemingly unscathed staring in horror at the inside of the top desk drawer. Slowly, he came around the side of the desk and glanced carefully inside.

And found the mutilated body of a dead mouse.

Wounded, he reasoned, it had obviously crawled in there and died. The alley behind the building was full of stray cats. Cats the night guard was fond of feeding. Any one of the feline visitors could be responsible. Despite his rationalization, like Amber he was repulsed.

Instinctively, he reached for her, and surprisingly she came willingly into his arms. He leaned his head against the top of her crimson curls, breathing in the scent of perfume and shampoo. "I'm sorry, Amber. I'll get rid of it."

For a moment she burrowed deeper into his embrace, her head pillowed against his chest. Then she struggled, pulling away from him. He let her go.

"I wasn't expecting it, that's all. I wouldn't want you to think I'm one of those women who shrieks at the sight of a spider ... or a mouse."

Grayson tugged the corners of his mouth into a neutral expression. If he laughed, he'd be a dead man. But screamed was exactly what she'd done. "I wouldn't think that," he said softly.

Amber's eyes narrowed, suspicion crossed her face.

*Oh no. Now what have I done?* Grayson watched her face cloud with anger. *Surely she doesn't think I left it there!*

"If this is your idea of a sick joke...."

"Joke! Honestly, Amber, I have better things to do with my time."

"I certainly hope you do."

"Look," he said, desperately trying to remain in control of the situation. "Forget about the work. Let me drive you home."

"I can drive myself, thank you."

Snatching up her purse, Amber vanished through the office door.

## CHAPTER SIX

“What do you mean she was cool to you?” Roger steamed milk for cappuccino as he contemplated Grayson’s plight. The idea of a woman responding with less than unbridled passion was obviously a foreign concept to him. “Did she smack you across the face or something?”

“No, of course not!” Grayson snatched the cup from Roger’s grasp, ignoring the grin his brother didn’t even go to the trouble of trying to hide. “Why, do women make a habit of smacking you?”

Roger shrugged. “It’s happened, sure.”

Grayson shook his head. Why had he ever thought Roger could help? He leaned against the spotless black counter top and smothered the urge to spill something on it just to make the place look lived in. He didn’t need to walk down the hallway and peer into the bedroom to know that Roger’s domain would be just as obsessively neat, with his black lacquered bed, paisley duvet and not even a dirty sock out of place. To Roger appearances meant everything.

As boys they’d fought over space in their bedroom, down to the last inch, finally laying a strip of masking tape across the floor to mark their territory. *And he wanted us to buy a condo together!* Grayson shook his head incredulously. They would have been at each other’s throats!

“You still haven’t told me who this mystery woman is.” Roger added a froth of steam milk to the top of his own coffee and motioned for Grayson to join him in the living room.

“No, and I’m not going to.”

Grayson sunk wearily down onto the overstuffed black couch and waited for the leather to warm up to skin temperature. Roger’s living room furniture, like half of his wardrobe was black leather. Roger thought it made him look artsy. Grayson thought it made him seem like a teenager in the first throes of rebellion against the status quo.



Roger sprawled on the other half of the L-shaped couch. “We wouldn’t be speaking of the lovely Ms. Shaw, would we?”

“No.” He bit off the word, knowing his brother would see through his white lie as if it was written in neon letters above his head. But Roger took his denial in good grace. “She’s someone I met in court.” That, at least, was the truth.

“My, haven’t we been busy lately, big brother.”

“That, too.”

They were silent a moment while Roger grinned like the Cheshire Cat and Grayson struggled with his thoughts.

“Obviously I said something I shouldn’t have, I just can’t figure out what it was.”

“She didn’t tell you to get lost,” Roger offered helpfully. “What makes you think she was put off?”

Grayson groaned. Roger’s view of the world was painted in bold brush strokes. If a woman told him to drop dead, that meant no. Anything less could be considered a come on. How could he explain a woman with such baffling nuances as Amber Shaw? Without giving away that the woman in question was Amber Shaw. “One minute she was all over me. The next she was barely speaking to me.”

“But she didn’t tell you to drop dead or anything.”

“No!”

“Maybe she was just having a bad day.”

Grayson frowned. “That’s not much help.”

“Maybe it was something you said.”

“Thanks a bunch, Roger.”

Roger offered him another of his leering grins in reply.

“Have you finished entertaining yourself at my expense?”

“Not nearly.”

Grayson set down his coffee cup. “I should go. I’ve got to be in court tomorrow morning.”

Roger stood, blocking his path to the door. “Relax, Gray. I was only kidding. And you still haven’t told me what exactly you want to know.”

He didn’t even know what questions to ask. Grayson felt his face coloring with embarrassment. Roger certainly didn’t want to make this easy

for him. “What do you say to a woman, when you want her to know you’re attracted to her, that you want to get to know her better, but...”

“You’re not ready to hop into the sack with her yet,” Roger finished for him.

Grayson drew in a deep breath and prayed for patience. “Something like that.”

“Tell her she’s the most beautiful woman you’ve ever met.”

“Not really my style.”

Roger shrugged, less inclined to be helpful now that his golden advice had been ignored.

“It’s just not the kind of thing you can blurt out over coffee.”

“Coffee!” Roger rolled his eyes. “Take her dancing, Gray.”

Grayson rubbed a hand across tired eyes. “You know damned well I can’t dance.”

“Oh, right.”

“It’s not like I got a lot of practice, is it? As I recall, the girls were always more interested in dancing with you.”

Roger crossed his arms in defiance of his accusation. “You can’t blame all your romantic failures on me. I mean look at you. You work too hard, you take too little time off, and even when you’re not working you’re so deadly serious. It’s a wonder women don’t run screaming.”

“You’re making me feel so much better,” Grayson said sarcastically.

His brother looked him up and down. “That’s exactly what I mean. You’re sitting there right now, glowering at me like the world’s about to end instead of discussing this exciting new woman you’re seeing.”

“Misfortune happens, Roger.”

“That’s right. Relationships break up, hearts get broken, businesses go bankrupt, people sue each other. But you spend so much time looking for trouble, you neglect to see the good around you, Gray. “

“I’m trying to keep Dad’s firm going so Mom can have a good retirement.”

“She’s not going to starve because you take a day off.”

“She might the way Barlow’s been acting.”

“So start your own firm.”

Grayson found himself suddenly at the very end of his patience. “That’s enough, Roger. I came here for some advice, not a lecture. It’s fine for you to make grandiose suggestions, but you’re not the one who has to carry them out.” He carried his empty cup to the kitchen and set it on top of the dishwasher. Why on earth was he wasting his time drinking coffee with Roger anyway? That extra jolt of caffeine would only ensure he stayed up all night, worrying about his court appointment and ruminating over what went wrong with Amber. The whole thing had been a bad idea. Why had he bothered?

“Thanks for the coffee.” He tossed his suit jacket over his shoulder and glanced at his watch. “It’s late, I’d better get going.”

“Meant to ask you,” Roger said as he walked toward the door. “Can I borrow your car Saturday night?”

Grayson regarded his brother from under dark brows. “What’s wrong with yours?”

“It’s in the shop.”

Obviously, he wasn’t going to get away without one last annoyance. “I guess so.”

“How about your new sports jacket?”

“Don’t tell me your leather jacket’s being repaired as well.”

“As a matter of fact, I took it to the cleaners to be mended.”

“Wild date, I take it?”

“You could say that,” Roger said obliquely. He slumped back down on the couch and swung his long legs up on the coffee table.

Shaking his head, Grayson turned the brass door handle. He glanced over his shoulder, throwing a dark look in Roger’s direction. “G’night, Roger.”

“Go to bed, Gray. If you won’t take some time off, at least get some sleep.”

Grayson closed the door on the rest of Roger’s lecture.

“Why did I bother asking him?” he muttered to himself as he waited for the elevator. “We never agree on anything. Especially women.”

\* \* \* \*

Roger watched the door swing quietly shut. For a moment he stared at it, as if he could launch his thoughts through it into Grayson’s departing

back. Finally, certain his brother wouldn't be returning, he got up and locked it. He leaned against the door, surveying the spot Grayson had been sitting. Grayson's thoughts proclaimed themselves as loudly as if they'd been written above his head in letters ten feet high.

A slow smile broke across Roger's face. Of one thing he was sure. Amber Shaw was the woman Grayson was seeing.

"Big brother, thou doth protest too much."

Not that the fledgling romance was going to last with Grayson being such a clod. He shook his head again. What a pity. As much as he'd like a chance at winning her affection, she was obviously perfect for Grayson. It didn't take a genius to see why. A woman like Amber Shaw with a keen wit and a penetrating mind wouldn't be swayed by what she saw on the surface. Grayson's profession, his house wouldn't mean anything to her. She'd be far more interested in the Grayson inside, the man Grayson showed to no one, not even his twin.

What a shame the relationship was doomed to fail.

Then again, perhaps it didn't have to.

Roger's smile broadened. He ran a hand through his long, curly hair. He was long past due for a haircut. He snickered softly to himself.

"The sacrifices I make for you, big brother."

\* \* \* \*

"He called in sick!"

"According to his secretary. I just called from the phone booth across the street." The photographer waited patiently for Amber to pay her and send her home, or to book overtime at twice her usual rate.

Amber stamped one high heeled shoe against the soft earth and choked back the urge to scream. Her heel sunk into the grass up to the sole. Yanking her foot from the sod, she succeeded only in pulling up a hunk of turf, which didn't satisfy her urge for destruction at all. The logistics of this prank had been a nightmare from the moment she'd taken the case.

An hour ago, posing as a photocopy machine meter reader, she'd been admitted to the plant. Finding Apartment 4's office, she replaced the tie he kept hanging pre-tied on a hook in his closet with an identical one smeared with an extremely sticky clear substance. Together with the photographer

and the videographer, she'd crouched below his office window waiting ... at a price tag of over two hundred dollars an hour.

Now she'd received word that Apartment 4 called in sick. Strangely, so had his boss. Which of course meant she was going to need another tie, another way of getting it into the office, and she must pay the tradeswomen for their time and send them home. Jennifer's satisfaction would have to wait until early next week, setting her schedule back several more days.

Her rent wouldn't wait several more days because she ran into a string of bad luck. Neither would her other expenses. If things got much worse, she'd have to take Grayson up on his offer of freelance work.

A wave of embarrassment over last night's events tinged her cheeks pink. Amber wrenched her thoughts from Grayson to the problem at hand. Two women tallied their overtime bonuses and awaited her decision.

"Same time Monday?" she asked finally.

"There'll be an extra charge," the photographer said, "for the extra hours."

"I know, I know." Amber waved her hand impatiently in dismissal. "Payment is on delivery as usual. Just invoice me for the extra time."

"Good enough," said the videographer, packing up her tiny video camera. Confident that she'd just doubled the amount of her contract, she strolled cheerfully off toward her car.

"Have a good weekend," called the photographer, slinging her camera bag over her shoulder and rushing off to catch the next bus.

Amber took one last look at Apartment Four's office and mentally kicked him. Good weekend, indeed! She was already late for her Friday night stint at Barlow & Charles.

\* \* \* \*

Grayson wasn't there when she arrived. Instead she found a hastily scribbled note saying he'd been in court all day and would be tied up in meetings until late in the evening. Underneath was a list of things that needed to be done.

His note gave no indication of his mood or what he'd intended by the 'incident' last night. At least she'd been granted a reprieve from the Grayson dilemma, and a chance to think it over level-headedly during the weekend.

“Now what am I going to do?” she asked the empty office. Every minute she spent in Grayson’s company would be agony after what happened at the restaurant. Obviously, he’d been buttering her up to ask her to do some work for him. She’d misinterpreted his attentions and humiliated herself by practically throwing herself at him.

Amber rubbed her temples, trying to ease the tension in her forehead. She hadn’t slept well last night. Though her body was exhausted, her mind refused to stop running in circles around Grayson Charles.

“How could I possibly have misread him like that?” she muttered aloud. Amber prided herself on being an expert judge of character. But sometime during the ill-fated dinner with Grayson, her common sense had evaporated. “What was I thinking?”

That question brought a flush to her face, even in the privacy of the empty office. “I wasn’t thinking with my brain.”

Absently, she brushed her hand across her lips, remembering the warm pressure of Grayson’s lips against hers, his strong arms pulling her further into his embrace. “Surely he didn’t think he had to kiss me to get me to work for him. He must need help desperately.”

“Not as desperately as I do.” Her entire body ached for more of his purposeful, yet gentle caresses. Feelings, sensations too long buried, now rose to the surface and cried out to be satisfied.

The phone rang, jolting her from scarlet daydreams. Amber looked about guilty and embarrassed, as if the walls themselves could read her thoughts. Gingerly, she reached for the phone.

“Barlow & Charles.”

“It’s me, Grayson.”

His rich, deep voice filled her senses. He sounded cheerful enough. Open and unguarded, completely different than he had the night before.

“Bad day, I take it.”

“What?”

“Your note said you’ve been in court all day.”

“Oh that, right. Bad day in court. I’m going to be tied up most of the night, as well. But I was wondering....”

“Yes?” Amber fought to keep her voice from trembling. This was potentially dangerous ground. What impression had she left him with last night? And what, exactly, had he been wondering?

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out with me tomorrow night.”

“Saturday night?”

“Saturday night is date night.”

“You’re asking me out on a date?” Her voice rose an octave.

He paused, as if he fumbled for the right words to say. “Sure, why not?”

“I don’t know, I--”

“You’ve been doing all this work for me, and I’d like to pay you back.” His voice slid over her like silk, an unfamiliar seductive tone.

“You’ve already taken me out for dinner twice.”

“Yes, well--”

“And after last night I wasn’t sure--”

“Forget last night.” The same silky tone, but she couldn’t mistake the order behind the kind words. “Come out with me tomorrow night and let’s have some fun.”

Fun just didn’t seem like a Grayson kind of word.

\* \* \* \*

Amber frowned at the contents of her closet. A row of power suits in subdued colors took up most of the hanging space. On a couple of hangers squashed into the back lay a pair of well-worn blue jeans, and a couple of out of date party dresses. Her hand froze upon the bulky bag though which she could see the lacy outline of a wedding dress. With a muffled cry of dismay, she stuffed it further to the back of her closet, out of sight and mind, and resolutely turned her thoughts to the problem at hand.

Nothing seemed suitable for a date with a man who’d sued her. Especially considering she didn’t know where they were going, whether formal, causal or strictly business would be appropriate.

Which message did she want to send? She couldn’t decide that, either. What went on in the convoluted mind of Grayson Charles remained a mystery. All her people reading skills were useless when it came to this particular specimen.

Amber rummaged through her closet, coming up with a simple black dress that would be appropriate for any of those roles. Stuffing her feet into a pair of black pumps, she added a single strand of pearls and surveyed her reflection. Black offset her flame red hair wonderfully and added a smoky depth to her gray eyes. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, Mr. Charles,” she told the mirror as she added a brush of taupe eschewed and a hint of lipstick. “But, I intend to win.” Amber pressed her lips together, then smiled.

“Check mate.”

Her buzzer rang.

She opened the door to find him lounging confidently against the door frame. “Hi.”

“Good evening.” His eyes made an appreciative sweep over her black dress. “You look wonderful.”

“I do?” The sudden compliment caught her off guard. “I mean, thank you.”

He looked magnificent himself, she decided. Dark gray pants offset a sweater in a lighter tone. Thrown over one arm was a sports jacket she’d noticed hanging in the closet at Barlow & Charles. Apparently, his casual attire didn’t get much more wear than hers. But it was the open, casual smile that made him look different.

“You’re in a good mood tonight.”

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “You’d be surprised how much a day off can do for a man’s attitude.”

“So you decided to take Roger’s advice.”

For a moment his face clouded in confusion.

“About not working so hard,” she supplied.

“Oh right. Roger is infinitely wise.”

Amber stared up at him, trying to gauge whether he was being sarcastic.

“Among his many faults.” Sarcasm definitely colored the tone of that statement.

“Would you like to come in?”

“Maybe later. Let’s go dancing.”



“Dancing!” The word slipped out as incredulously as if he’d asked her to go sky diving.

“You don’t dance?”

“It’s been a while. I’m ... a little rusty.”

He grinned, showing even white teeth. But his smile didn’t hold the warmth she remembered. “I think we can get rid of the rust, Ms. Shaw.” Gallantly, he offered her his arm. “Shall we go?”

His dark green Mercedes pulled up at the curb of a dance club where even the cover price was beyond her budget. Grayson handed the keys to the valet parking attendant and escorted her past the long line of people waiting to get in. The doorman seemed to know him, that, or the bill he pressed into his hand introduced him effectively enough.

*I suppose wealth has its privileges.* With a dark frown, Amber followed him into the crowded interior. The music was louder than she would have liked, the other women dressed as extravagantly as rare jewels. She turned to protest that they leave and go somewhere quiet enough to hear each other talk, but before she could open her mouth, Grayson smiled devastatingly down at her and led her onto the crowded dance floor.

His body moved with fluid grace, as he led her through the steps of the first fast dance. It was easy to follow his lead, as he held her a chaste distance apart. He was impressive to watch in motion, his limbs moving in effortless harmony. Never would she have guessed Grayson Charles hid such an uninhibited side beneath the outward steel of his personality.

He was a delight to watch as he glided across the dance floor, taking her with him. Poetry in motion, yet his body seethed with unbridled sensuality, as he seduced her with languid movement. She could feel the heat radiating from his body only inches from hers, and yet somehow, the electricity that had crackled between them was missing.

She considered this a moment, losing the time of the step. Grayson Charles was like chameleon, changing color just when she thought she had a fix on him.

“Something wrong?”

“No,” she said quickly.

“Have I told you how beautiful I think you are with your fiery red hair and your raven black dress?”

The compliment slipped easily from his lips as if he discussed the weather instead. Amber's eyes narrowed.

"My mother told me never to trust men who tell me I'm beautiful."

"Really?" He whirled her about and pulled her back against him, not even missing a beat at her accusation. Looking down into her eyes, he said wickedly, "Then I guess I'd better be very nice to your mother. Do you think she'd like me?"

*It's been so long since I brought a man home, she'd probably be impressed with anyone who still had a pulse.* Amber held her tongue firmly in check. "She's a hard lady to please."

"And she passed on her discerning taste to her daughter."

*Actually, she told me never to trust a man, period. After all, she knew my father all her life and see, he left her. She took a lot of joy out of my life with her constant warnings. She took great pride in saying 'I told you so' when Eric left me.* Amber couldn't share any of the ugly thoughts passing through her mind. How could she possibly explain her wildly conflicting desires to be loved and her deep mistrust of intimate relationships? Amber reined in her thoughts. Grayson Charles was enough to handle without trying to battle her own demons as well.

"We're cautious in who we entrust our affections to," she said for lack of a more civil comment and forced a smile. She was out on a date with a handsome, attentive man. Where had her manners fled to?

But Grayson was staring down into her eyes with that warm inviting smile. "Amber, Amber...." He twirled her around and caught her close. "You've got to chill out a little. Have some fun."

Amber looked up into dark eyes that reflected the lights from the dance floor. "You really have taken Roger's advice to heart."

\* \* \* \*

Something was wrong. Grayson could feel it in the air as soon as he stepped out of the cab in front of Roger's condo. He hadn't given Roger's strange request to borrow his car and his favorite sports jacket much thought. His mind crammed with details of the Gridwell case, he hadn't had concentration to spare for anything else. But with the case nailed down, at least for the moment, and a long Saturday night stretching before him, a few

aimless details floated around in his mind, taking shape into a disturbing picture.

A call to Roger's only got him an answering machine message. His twin didn't answer his intercom, either. Grayson left the lobby and strolled down the sloping driveway to the garage entrance. He waited only a few seconds before the door opened and a car came whizzing through. Grayson slipped inside.

So Roger's car was in the shop, was it? He walked along the white lined parking places until he came to Roger's parking space. And stopped cold.

Parked neatly in its customary spot was Roger's obscenely-red Porsche. Grayson's heart froze in his chest.

"Little brother, what have you done?"

\* \* \* \*

Tethered by Grayson's arm, Amber spun in a kaleidoscope of color. She blinked, seeing for a moment double Graysons. One whirled with her through the closely packed bodies on the dance floor. Another strode up behind, his face a mask of fury.

She faltered in her step, skidding to a stop in her high heels.

"What--" Grayson reached to catch her. Simultaneously, he found himself seized by the shoulder and whirled around.

In that moment it all clicked. The easy smile, the meaningless endearments. It was the Mercedes, the short hair and the sports jacket that put her off the trail. Pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

"Roger!" Her voice rose above the music. She heard Grayson echo her exclamation in a lower, menacing tone.

Roger started at the sound of his name. He looked quickly from Amber to his brother, paling at the fury in Grayson's voice. Grayson's eyes raked over his body, taking in the haircut that was a mirror image of his own, the sports jacket and the woman he still held by shoulder and waist. Anger flared in Grayson's eyes. He looked even more furious than the night she dumped the ice in his lap, more menacing than she'd seen him in court.

"I can explain," Roger blurted.

“Don’t bother.” She looked from one to the other, desperately choking back the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes. It was all just a great joke to them. And she’d played right along.

Amber tore her hand from Roger’s grip. Balling her fingers into a tight fist, she resisted the urge to slap him open-handedly across the face. She suspected she wouldn’t be the first woman to do so, but still she abhorred violence. Best to get out of this humiliating situation with a shred of her dignity intact.

Whirling on her heel, she made her way through the press of bodies to the table where she’d left her purse and the twenty dollar bill that would see her safely home in a cab. Never trust a man, her mother’s words echoed in her ears. To think just a moment ago, she’d been ready to let that warning go forever.

“Amber, wait! I’ll drive you home.” Grayson reached for her, catching her by the arm. He looked back at Roger. “Since my car is in the parking lot.” His gaze darkened, Roger went a shade paler. “You!” he said stabbing a finger into his brother’s chest, “Can take a cab home.”

“Don’t bother.” Amber shook him off roughly.

Another couple had taken advantage of the empty seats at the table. A tall pitcher of Sangria sat between them, but their attention was consumed with each other. They looked up, eyes widening at her expression. “Excuse me,” she said tartly.

“Please, Amber, listen to me.”

She felt Grayson behind her before he spoke, but she had no interest in any of his excuses. With a toss of her fiery curls, she turned her back to him, ready to stride off toward the door and hail a cab.

“Please sit down,” he said.

She offered him an icy glare in reply.

“Just for a moment.”

“Not even for a second,” she growled. “You’ve wasted enough of my time, Counselor.” She bent, snatching up her purse.

“Amber!”

As if in slow motion, she saw Grayson reach for her, saw the tip of his elbow hit the pitcher of Sangria, saw it topple precariously, then spill in a waterfall of frigid sticky juice straight into her lap.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the couple spring away from the table in shock, saw Grayson's eyes widen in horror.

"Oh God, Amber, I'm so sorry."

Ice cold liquid trickled down her pantyhose, pooling in her shoes. Behind him, she saw Roger approaching, saw the horror dawn on his face. He looked at the set of Grayson's shoulders, the absolute fury in Amber's eyes, then turned and fled into the crowd.

"Sorry!" Amber's voice cut through the beat of the music. It was desperately hard to behave with dignity with an entire pitcher of Sangria dripping from her dress, but she pulled herself up to sum of her diminutive height. "If that was your idea of a joke, Mr. Charles, fine it's on me. Consider us even."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Amber!” Grayson hollered through the firmly locked door. Down the hall a door opened behind him. A middle-aged woman wearing a housecoat and an array of pink foam curlers glared out the door at him.

*Great, now I’m frightening the neighbors!* He leaned his head against the door in defeat. Inside he heard the dull rush of a shower running. After his clumsiness with that pitcher of Sangria, he ought to slink home and hope in time she’d forgive him. But he simply couldn’t leave her like that, thinking the worst of him. God knew what conclusions she’d drawn about Roger’s impersonation of him.

Roger, he’d deal with later. Right now it was Amber that mattered. Pressing his ear against the door, he heard the shower stop. Footsteps padded past the door.

“Amber!” He glanced cautiously over his shoulder in case the curler lady had heard him again and lowered his voice. “Amber, please! I just want to talk to you for a minute.”

Silence. The footsteps ceased. He pictured her standing still in the hallway, listening, while he embarrassed himself. Grayson knocked again.

“Give it up buddy,” said a male voice behind him. “She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

Grayson turned, coming face to face with a man in sweat pants and a t-shirt who likely outweighed him by about a hundred pounds. Not the kind of guy you told to get lost and mind his own business.

“Look,” Grayson said as politely as he could. “It’s an emergency, okay?”

“Sure, pal.”

“Amber,” he hissed desperately into the door.

To his astonishment, it opened. At least as far as the chain barring it would allow it to open. Amber glowered up at him, looking none the less

ferocious in her purple and black striped bathrobe and with a multitude of damp crimson curls framing her face. He imagined her that way on sleepy Sundays mornings after a night curled up before the fire in his house leisurely making love. Grayson promptly yanked his thoughts back to the present. If she only knew what he'd been thinking ... But wasn't that what had started the whole mess? His failure to share his feelings for her.

"You don't give up, do you," she growled, yanking the robe tighter.

"I just want to talk to you for a moment," he whispered, conscious of their audience. "I promise I won't come further than your front hall."

"So talk."

He glanced behind him. "Couldn't we talk about this inside?"

"You've got to be kidding."

"Everything okay, Amber?" called the guy from across the hall.

She looked crossly up at him through the crack in the door, then her gaze shifted to her neighbor. "Yeah, Chris, everything's okay. Nothing I can't handle."

Amber's neighbor gave him a long warning glare. "Better behave yourself, buddy," he said, then mercifully shut his door.

She was still staring up at him, gray eyes hard as stone.

"I came to apologize," he said softly. "For my clumsiness, and for Roger's interference."

"I certainly hope so." She shut the door, and he could hear the chain sliding free. She opened the door wide enough for him to step through, then closed it behind him. "Okay, let's hear it."

Standing face to face with her in the intimacy of her apartment, the eloquent words he'd planned to say to her escaped him once again. Grayson opened his mouth, no sound came out. He tried again.

"Amber, I know it sounds crazy, but Roger really was trying to help."

"Stop making excuses for him."

"Believe me, right now I'd like to strangle him slowly. It's hard to believe, but he had the best of intentions."

"I can't see how."

Grayson heaved a deep sigh. "He thought I was messing things up between us by not telling you how I felt ... about you."

"And how do you feel?"

“I don’t know.” Truth helped the words flow smoothly. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone else before.”

His confession caught her off guard. Her face softened a little, but her eyes still watched him warily. “You still haven’t told me what that means.”

“It means that when I’m with you, I forget about everything else. It means I want to spend a lot more time with you.” He reached for her, setting his hands lightly on her shoulders. To his surprise, she didn’t pull away. Beneath the thick material of her robe, her skin was warm from her shower. “It means that even though we’ve only known each other for a short period of time, my life feels empty when you’re not there,” he finished softly.

Gray eyes searched his face. He couldn’t imagine a more thorough lie detector. “Isn’t that kind of a change of heart, Counselor, considering you sued me to get that wonderful insightful help?”

He winced at the sarcasm in her voice. “How I wish I hadn’t done that.”

Her brows drew together, but mercifully she didn’t pull away from him. “You do?”

Grayson nodded. “I wish I’d laughed the whole thing off and asked you out instead.”

“That would have been a better end to the evening.”

“Perhaps we could start over.”

Hope lightened her expression. “Perhaps we could,” she said cautiously.

She was still in his arms, all warm and fuzzy in her robe, her hair smelling of coconut shampoo. He slid his hands over her shoulders and down her back, pulling her gently closer. Her hands slid over his upper arms, whether to pull him close or push him away he couldn’t tell.

“Hi, I’m Grayson.” It sounded stupid to say it, but he wanted to make sure they got off on the right foot this time. “I like red wine, good food and playing squash. One day I hope to have enough money to buy a sailboat and enough free time to sail it.” He carefully left out any mention of his career, wanting her to know only him.

“Sailing?” Tiny laugh lines bracketed the corners of her mouth. He hadn’t noticed before. Likely because she spent most of her time scowling at him. “Now that I wouldn’t have guessed. You just don’t look like a sailor.”



“I look devastating in a pair of Dockers.”

Her rich laughter filled the hallway. “Is that so?”

“Come on,” he said tightening his arms around her. “Your turn.”

She stared at the ceiling, as if it had been a long time since she’d had to think about any of this. “Hi, I’m Amber,” she began slowly. “I like expensive champagne, the more expensive, the better, good company and good music. And some day, if I ever have the time or the money, I’m going to learn to play piano.”

“Piano....”

“Don’t you dare laugh at me, Counselor, or I’ll--” White fire burned in those gray eyes.

“I’m not laughing,” Grayson said quickly. “It’s romantic. I’m ... charmed.”

“Charmed,” she repeated with a soft snort that said she didn’t believe him at all.

“Really. I’d never have imagined, but now that you mention it, I can picture you sitting at a black baby grand, a candelabra and a glass of Dom Perignon within arm’s reach.” Her embarrassment told him he’d hit close to one of her fantasies. “And the more I think about it, you do have a musician’s passion.”

*Watch out for the women with tempers, Roger was fond of saying. They’re the most passionate.* Actually, Roger had phrased it more crudely, but Grayson didn’t think it wise to share either version with her.

“What would you play?” he asked, eager to keep her within the circle of his arms, in this rare, reflective mood.

“Oh, everything!” She was beautiful with her face aglow with enthusiasm. “Classical, rock--” Then as if she’d just revealed a terrible secret, she stepped back out of his arms. “This is silly, we’re standing in my front hall and I’m...” She looked down at her robe and the bare legs beneath it in embarrassment, “in my bathrobe.”

Reluctantly, Grayson let her go. He couldn’t allow her to get away from him now. “I don’t think it’s silly. I’ve been enjoying our conversation more than any I’ve had in a long time.”

Again that suspicious, half-hopeful glance.

“You’re safe with me, Amber. No matter what you’re wearing.”

“Safe.” Sarcasm added an edge to her tone. “Is a woman ever safe with a man?”

Amber folded her arms across her chest, defying him to argue with her. She was hurting, he realized suddenly. It wasn’t just the clients or the time spent working with the dark side of love. Someone had hurt her deeply. The thought made him suddenly, irrationally angry. He wanted to track the guy down, settle it man to man. Exact revenge on Amber’s behalf. That invisible lover stood between them now.

“Who was he?” Grayson asked softly.

“What?”

“The man who hurt you so badly, who was he?”

“There wasn’t--”

“Yes, there was. I can tell.”

“There wasn’t only one,” she snapped and walked away from him into her living room.

The inner sanctum wasn’t anything like the offices of Fair Game, Grayson thought with a quick glance around. And yes, he had taken a drive over when he was sure she wouldn’t be there, just before the building locked the doors for the night. No chrome, no leather, no glass adorned Amber’s living room. A Victorian couch, buried under a mountain of cushions, sat before an old-fashioned wood burning fireplace. Grayson wasn’t sure he’d like to live in an old building in which each tenant had their own fireplace, but by the scattering of ashes on the tile in front, he could tell Amber used it often. Dark wood end tables with claw feet held antique lamps decorated with embossed cherubs. The room revealed a private side to Amber he hadn’t known existed. *It’s not as if you looked*, he imagined Roger’s mocking voice. *And right you are about that, Little Brother. This time.*

She stood in profile, staring out the window into the darkness, biting her lower lip, as if to stop herself from saying more. A flurry of leaves blew past the window, caught by the light from the street. He walked towards her, placed his hand lightly on her back, just in case she decided to move away from him.

“Tell me about them, Amber.”

“Stop cross-examining me!” she said, a plaintive plea as well as a command.

“I’m not cross--” She escaped his hold. Grayson caught her again, turned her gently in his arms and looked down into her face. “I care about you, Amber. I care that you’re hurting, I want to make it better.”

“And instead you’ve made it worse.”

He could hear the tears in her voice, and he knew she’d really hate him if he made her cry. “Forgive me. I’ve really made a mess of this entire situation. I’m--” He dropped his hands helplessly to his sides. “I’m not very good at this.”

“What? A successful guy like you?”

“They don’t teach romance at law school.”

“It shows.”

He winced at the knife in her words. “I tried to learn on my own, failed miserably and gave up. Roger,” he grimaced at the accidental mention of his brother’s name, “says I don’t have the aptitude.”

“You’d probably do better if you kept your brother out of your affairs.”

“I never invited Roger into my affairs. But we’re twins. And there isn’t the division between us that there is between other siblings. His intentions are good, really Amber. He thinks you’re wonderful, and that I’m a fool for not noticing.”

“I agree with the fool part.”

“I’m trying to make up for it, retroactively.” His head dipped closer to hers, his lips stopping mere inches from hers. “Let me make it better, Amber, in my foolish, bumbling way.”

\* \* \* \*

And she did so want him to make it better. But dare she trust him? Eric, her father, the men who professed to love her, had something completely different from love in mind. What ulterior motives lay in Grayson’s mind?

His fingers laced through her still damp curls. Those full sensuous lips drifted closer. Whatever his motives, she wanted him desperately, she realized. More than she’d wanted anything before.

“Forgive me, Amber,” he whispered, his lips moving against hers like the brush of a feather. “For the lawsuit....”

Warm lips touched hers.

“For my stupidity....”

Amber tipped her head back, catching his kiss with her own. Her hands flowed up over the roughness of his sweater, across his muscled shoulders and down his back, pulling him against her.

“For my crazy twin brother....” Grayson continued, his breath mingling with hers.

Anything! Pressed hard against him, heat rushed through her. Amber felt her defenses dropping. Her body refused to deny her attraction to him.

“For my clumsiness....” he said softly.

Warm hands kneaded her shoulders, moving down her back to her hips, cupping her bottom, pressing her against him. She felt the evidence of his arousal, his body primed as readily as hers. For the inevitability of their attraction.

“You’re asking an awful lot, Counselor.”

“I’m worth the risk,” he said, sounding for a second just like his self-assured twin.

Amber would have pulled away from him, but for the pressure of his arms around her.

“Trust me, just this once. I promise, you won’t regret it.”

His mouth devoured the rest of her protests.

“This is an unfair way to win your case.” Amber’s lips sampled the stubbled line of his jaw, the strong column of his throat.

“I’m a desperate man.”

“Really, Counselor. I’d never have guessed.”

“When I’m with you....” he paused, brushing his lips over the hollow in her throat, her collar bone, dipping lower to taste the dusky shadow of her cleavage. “I’m reduced to helplessness.”

Amber linked her hands behind his head, drawing him closer. His mouth was fire against her skin. She gasped as he pushed the cloth of her robe aside and kissed the swell of her breast. Her troubles drifted away along with conscious thoughts of her business, Roger, her doubts about

Grayson. The dance of their bodies against each other had a rightness to it that rang true. A surety this was meant to be.

And she meant to have Grayson Charles. Whether she'd regret it tomorrow, or not.

His breath seared a path from her neck down over the mound of one breast. She gasped as he took the hardened peak into his mouth. Sure she'd die as he left and moved to taste the other, Amber arched against him.

Suddenly, the torture of his mouth disappeared. She stumbled forward, and he caught her, taking her with him as he moved toward the cold fireplace. Inside lay one of those pressed-wood logs she'd bought at the supermarket. He added some newspaper from the wicker basket by the side of the fireplace. Flame reflected in his dark eyes as the paper caught the match he held out. He watched, satisfied as the flame leapt higher, catching the wood. And then his arms were back around her, crushing her to him, making her forget everything except the dark gleam of his eyes above her.

"I never learned to dance," he said, so softly she wasn't sure she'd heard him. His palms pushed her robe lower, exposing her shoulders. His hips moved against hers, his mouth brushed her ribcage, moving lower. "But you lend me grace, Amber."

Her hands found the hem of his sweater and tugged, getting it stuck on the barrier of his shoulders. "I want to touch you," she said desperately.

He chuckled, reaching down to cover her trembling fingers, and pulled it free. Her hands spread over the smooth expanse of his chest, curling in the rough patch of dark hair in the center.

Grayson reached behind him, grasping the thick weight of the duvet folded on the end of the couch. He spread the thick, down-stuffed quilt on the rug before the fire, and pulled her gently down to face him.

He brushed a crimson curl from her shoulder, then his fingers trailed down to loosen the sash of her robe. His actions made her feel suddenly vulnerable, and she moved to cover herself, but he caught her hands.

"Let me see your beauty, Amber," he whispered, banishing her fears with another feather-soft sweep of his mouth.

Her hands molded to his ribcage, drifting lower to tug at his belt, finally getting it loose. She slipped a slim hand between his pants and his hot skin, feeling the heat of him.

Grayson pushed her backward into the softness of the quilt. His tongue explored the contours of her body, mapping every hill and valley. He savored every inch of her, down past her waist, past the barrier of her robe, to the soft cluster of curls at her very center.

Her hands fumbled with the zipper of his pants, pushing them down past his slim hips, until he grew frustrated as well and kicked them aside.

He settled his muscular weight atop her, kissing her slowly, from head, to her breast, then slithering down to taste the sweetness at her center. She moaned as his tongue found the heart of her desire. Amber tipped her head back, smothering another moan wrenched from her very soul. She felt the warm puff of his laughter at the effect his caress had upon her. "Oh God," she begged, "don't stop!"

"Relax," he said gently, tantalizing her with more of that languid kiss.

Relaxation was the last thing on her mind as she bucked against him, demanding more of his caress. Sweat beaded upon her forehead and trickled between her breasts. She should be embarrassed, perhaps tomorrow she would be, but right now all she felt was the fire that burned in the hearth beside them and the consuming flame inside.

Fulfillment hit like a shower of fireworks. Her fingers curled in his hair, yanking his head closer. He complied willingly. She felt the curve of his smile against her thighs as her passion subsided into rough sobs for breath. His hardness pressed against her as he reached up to kiss her deeply, thoroughly. Tasting herself on his mouth, she parted her thighs.

"I want to feel you." Dare she ask for what she desperately desired? "Inside me," she finished in a tiny voice.

He stopped, gazing hungrily down at her in agonized desire.

"Amber," he began roughly, "I don't have anything with me. I didn't plan this, and I want to protect you."

"Wait." Her voice came out shockingly husky. Slithering out from under him, she raced to the closet and the little basket of green and red condoms her best friend had given her for Christmas. An invitation back into the world of dating, Maureen had said. Only Maureen knew how deeply Eric hurt her. It sat forgotten in her closet for ten months. Amber had almost thrown it out several times.

Grayson raised an eyebrow when she brought the basket back to him and she felt like a complete fool for not discreetly taking out one of the little packets before.

“It was a gift,” she said a defensively. “From my girlfriend. I guess she was trying to tell me to get a life.”

“I like this friend of yours already,” he murmured appreciatively, putting her at ease. “Would you prefer cherry or mint?”

“Mint.” She reached for the green slip of latex. He closed his eyes in pleasure as her small hand closed around him. Then he was reaching for her again, pushing her back into the softness of the comforter.

“Merry Christmas,” he whispered.

She felt him poised at her moist opening. Laying back, she wrapped her legs around his hips and took him inside.

“Amber...” He moaned her name. Dark lashes fluttering against her cheek as he savored the depths of her.

“Gray--” The rest of his name was smothered against his shoulder, as her hands roved over his shoulders and down the corded length of his back, finally cupping the taut roundness of his buttocks, taking him deeper.

His long slow movements stoked the fire higher, as they moved together in a dance as old as time. Skin touched skin, every muscled inch of him pressed against her, and the beautiful torture of the feel of him inside. Soft hairs of his chest teased the tips of her nipples to hardened nubs, even as his muscular thighs moved erotically between hers. He quickened the pace, driving deeper, faster with gentle, yet purposeful thrusts. Another wave of fulfillment beckoned from the crest of the hill she was scaling. She tipped her hips, rising to meet him, demanding more of this strange sensation of utter rightness.

That thought froze her in stride. What was it Eric had always said? That she was as responsive as a block of ice.

“What’s wrong?” he asked gently. No demand, no disappointment in his voice, only concern for her.

Amber tipped her head back, looking up into the dark depths of his desire. The desire he was willing to put on hold out of compassion. “I’m not sure that I can ... again ... I mean I usually don’t--”

His mouth covered hers, hot and demanding, teasing her with flicks of his tongue which mirrored his other movements. "Trust me," he said, pulling his mouth away to nibble seductively at her lower lip.

Again that word, spoken so softly, so sincerely, she had no choice but to obey. But even as his words coaxed her, his body demanded, and she felt her desire soar despite her reservations. Nothing had ever felt like this, so good, so certain in its promise of ecstasy, so....

The intensity of it stole her breath. Distantly she heard herself moan his name, heard his own hoarse cry. Sparks exploded behind her eyelids, leading her down into darkness and warmth. She sighed deeply against his chest. Grayson shifted away from her long enough to grasp the corner of the duvet draw it up around them.

Warm breath ruffled the top of her curls. Laughter rumbled through his chest. "I take it I'm forgiven?"

She smiled up at him drowsily, only then becoming aware they were lying wrapped in her quilt on the living room floor. "Mostly." Her daring tone covered her growing embarrassment.

"Mostly!" There was real panic in those dark eyes. "What do I have to do for an encore?"

The prospect of more sent another rush of scarlet to her cheeks. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

"I'll give it my undivided attention." His smile dissolved into seriousness. "Let me into your life Amber--" His thumb traced the line of her heart-shaped face. "I think you're wonderful."

"You're already in my life." Amber offered him a wan smile. "You and the rest of your crazy family."

Grayson fell silent for a moment as if he wasn't sure how to handle the mention of the touchy subject of Roger. And then another wave of laughter burst from his throat. "Roger must really have thought you were special. He cut his hair for you. He's been cultivating that famous head of hair since he was a teenager."

"You're kidding!"

"Honestly. Wouldn't cut it for his graduation. Not even for Dad's funeral."

"Should I be honored?"



He frowned. “From Roger that’s a backward kind of compliment.” His mouth covered hers, kissing her deeply, thoroughly. “But I am honored,” he said softly.

This wasn’t the kind of end to the evening that she’d been contemplating. She started with the conviction to murder the Charles twins, especially Roger. Life was strange, Amber reflected, pillowing her head against his shoulder.

“So,” Grayson said. His deep voice rumbled through his chest, tickling her ear. “Should we try cherry?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“She fired him!”

Jennifer nodded. A feral grin broke across her face. Triumph gleamed in that expression. “The ultimatum came down from her boss. I guess word of their entanglement got around. He didn’t say as much, but it doesn’t take a genius to figure it out. What a fool. Apparently she didn’t love him enough to sacrifice her career for him.”

Amber swallowed past the lump in her stomach. “Apparently not.” She already knew what was coming next. No need now to exact revenge. Fate had dealt quite effectively with Apartment Four. “I suppose that’s why he called in sick on Friday,” she said noncommittally.

“Sick with humiliation is more like it. Got himself a large taste of his own medicine.”

“He got what was coming to him, I’d say.”

“And he calls me for sympathy!” Jennifer’s voice rose in amazement. “Can you believe it?”

“I can.” The way things were going, she’d believe almost anything. A UFO could land on her desk and scarcely cause her to blink. “Are you going to take him back?”

“Maybe. When I finish torturing him.” Again that predatory smile. Jennifer looked more like an indignant wolverine than the pixie Amber had first taken her for.

Amber sighed deeply, watching the deluxe package and the company’s financial health fly out the proverbial window. Couldn’t Fate have waited another day to deal Apartment Four the final blow? Surely two lessons would be better than one. For the sake of his soul, of course.

“Does he know you know about his involvement with his boss?”

“No.” Jennifer smiled daggers. “I’m saving that particular morsel of information for future use.”

“But you don’t have the proof you wanted.” The proof that was supposed to be the deluxe package and the month’s rent.

“No, but he knows he’s guilty. If he denies it, he’s history.”

“I suppose it’s a good test of his integrity, if nothing else.” Nothing else was exactly it.

“He’s going to be jumping through a few hoops in the near future,” Jennifer said. She ran a hand through her short tousled curls. Her brown eyes sparkled with new life. A betrayed woman satisfied that justice had been served. Faith in the world had been restored. Amber knew the signs. She helped give that life back to those who were hurting. It kept her going during the tough times. Like the one coming.

“Where does that leave us?” Amber asked carefully. There, the question was out, the inevitability already in action.

“Can we leave things as they stand? You can keep the advance. It’s worth it, just to see his true ilk.”

*Worth it for whom?* Amber thrust the self-pitying thought to the back of her mind. The advance wouldn’t even cover the cost of the photographer and videographer. But she couldn’t bill Jennifer for work that hadn’t been done.

Fate was a man, she decided bitterly. Who else would have such abominable timing?

“Sure,” she said forcing a smile. None of this was Jennifer’s fault. The woman had been through enough already. “Fine.”

“Good.” Jennifer jumped lightly to her feet. Instead of the muted browns she’d been wearing at their last meeting, this time she wore leather boots that reached past her knees, a black mini and a flaming red blouse. She looked wonderful.

Ah, confidence. Amber banished her regret. Seeing Jennifer restored lifted her spirit.

“I’ll be sure to give you a call if I ever need you again,” she said brightly, reaching for the door handle.

“Feel free to pass my card around to any of your friends.” Word of mouth and repeat business kept the bailiff from the door.

Amber sank back into her chair. “The best laid plans....”

Wasted weeks, wasted money. Where had this streak of bad luck come from? Recent events between Amber and Grayson indicated her luck was about to change. For the first time Amber looked forward to her nightly stint at Grayson and Charles.

After their fight in the dance club, and their passionate reconciliation later at her apartment, her love life looked a good deal brighter. They'd lingered over brunch at her apartment courtesy of Grayson. Gourmet didn't come close to describing his cooking. The taste of feather-light chocolate crepes lingered on her tongue. Even if her kitchen looked like a bomb hit it. His scent lingered on her bed sheets. An afternoon walk through the last yellow leaves of late fall had done wonders to lift the feeling of doom lingering over the past few weeks.

And then there was Grayson's offer of contract work. An attractive offer, more attractive considering what had happened since Saturday night. A more sinister thought occurred to her. Where exactly was Grayson getting the money to hire her, when the accounts she'd seen on that first night indicated Barlow & Charles rode a fine line between solvency and bankruptcy court?

Amber shook off the seductive call of paranoia. Grayson surely knew what he was doing. She glanced at the clock on her desk. Half an hour left. And a million niggly administrative tasks to be accomplished. She couldn't stop the smile breaking across her face. Desk work could wait until tomorrow. Tonight she'd tell Grayson she'd take him up on his offer of contract work. That would solve the money crunch. The bottom line would be in the black. And she would have more time with Grayson. No time like the present. She'd show up early and get started on that contract work tonight.

\* \* \* \*

Grayson was standing at Nicole's desk juggling three ringing telephone lines as Amber entered. He winked at her, letting her know he'd be with her as soon as he got things under control.

Finally, exasperated, he put all lines on hold. Grasping her by the waist, he dipped her low and kissed her thoroughly. "You're early."  
"Nice to see you, too."

“I didn’t say I was dissatisfied with the prospect.”

“Good. Because you’re about to get a whole lot more of my company.”

“To what do I owe this wondrous change in fate?”

Amber felt a pang of foolishness and dismissed it, hoping he hadn’t forgotten that he’d asked her work for her. “I’ve decided to take you up on your offer of contract work.”

His cheeks dimpled as he smiled. He hadn’t forgotten, she thought with relief.

“That’s great news. I don’t know what I would have done if you’d said no.”

“You’d have suffered terribly.”

“I’ve been suffering since we parted yesterday. This office is empty without you, Amber.”

“You came in on Sunday night?”

“Had to, more developments in the Tirelli case.”

He shot a guilty glance at the blinking lines on Nicole’s phone. “Let me get rid of these calls and then we’ll talk.” He looked back at her as if he was truly torn, then motioned to the lights that blinked like a demented traffic light. “I need the notes in my office. Do you think you could--?”

“Go on,” she said, reaching for the phone. “Barlow & Charles.” He was still gazing at her wistfully. She waved him off down the hall. “Just a moment, I’ll put you through.”

Half an hour later, the last red light on Grayson’s line winked out. Amber crept down the hall. Sprawled in his chair, his shirt sleeves stuffed over his elbows again, he looked positively beat.

“Bad day?”

“It never ends,” he said tiredly. “But it looks like my day is about to get better.”

“Technically, it’s evening,” she said, coming around the side of the desk.

He pulled her down into the chair on top of him and ran his hand appreciatively up over one stockinged calf, slithering scandalously higher. “All the better.”

“Grayson! We’re in your office!”

Grayson smothered her protests with his hot demanding mouth. “That’s what this office needs, a scandalous romance.” He laughed. “And it’s not going to be Barlow.”

And when she returned his kiss stiffly, he nibbled her lower lip, breathing huskily, “Relax, Amber. We’re alone.”

A sharp cough from the doorway brought their heads up in a single motion.

Barlow stood in the doorway. His eyes raked over them, separating them with a single glance. Amber sprang from Grayson’s lap. Snatching up one of the file folders, on his desk, she tried to slide past Barlow.

“Excuse me.” Earnestly, she wished her voice didn’t sound so breathless.

Barlow shot her a look of utter disdain. Turning his body, he blocked the exit so she couldn’t help but brush up against him as she left. From the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of Grayson vainly trying to straighten the wrinkles she’d left in his pants.

“If you’ve finished with your recreational activities,” she heard Barlow growl as she fled down the hall, “I have business to discuss.”

She didn’t catch Grayson’s reply, but the door to his office was closed for a very long time. Finally, the door to Grayson’s office flew open and heavy footsteps thudded along the carpeted hall. Amber looked up just in time to catch the ugly expression he launched in her direction. His departure ruffled the papers on the desk. The door slammed shut, plunging the office into silence. She crept back down the hall.

Grayson sat hunched over the papers on his desk. A green accountant’s lamp cast an oval of gold light, illuminating his hands and arms, leaving his expression in shadow.

“What’s with Barlow?”

He leaned back in his chair. Shadow darkened his expression. “Who knows,” he said wearily. “But something’s eating him. He’s been acting weird for some time now.”

“Didn’t seem too happy about the improvement in your love life.”

“No.” Even in the shadows, she could see the gleam of his smile. “But I am.” He held out his hand to her, and she came closer. “Is he gone?”

“You mean you didn’t hear the hurricane that blew through the office?” Amber sat on the corner of his desk. Should she share the nagging worry that had haunted her since she came to Barlow & Charles? “Grayson there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you...”

“Not you too!” He held up a hand for mercy. “Everyone has something they want to tell me today. Grayson glanced suspiciously at the phone as if he expected it to ring at any second with more bad news. “Next Roger’s going to call to tell me why he’s breaking up with...” He looked up bashfully, realizing just what he’d been about to say. “What is it, Amber?”

“The first night I was here, when there were files all over the office...” Stalling, she knew it. One eyebrow raised, he waited for her to continue. “Well, I found something,” she blurted.

“And?”

“They were in Barlow’s office. I shouldn’t have been snooping, but I think you ought to know....”

“Know what!” he said, becoming impatient at her halting confession.

“There are papers in Barlow’s filing cabinet that offer the sale of Barlow & Charles to another firm.”

Grayson let go his breath in a rush. Reaching for her hand, he pulled her closer. “Amber, you really have been working too hard.”

“I’m serious, Grayson.”

“He can’t do that. I own half the company.”

“Listen to me.” Damn, the man was dense. She’d just blurted out something that had troubled her for most of a month and he brushed it off like lint on his suit. “I think that’s why Barlow’s been so antagonistic to me. That’s why he was so mad when he returned and found out a PI had been working in his office. There’s something he desperately doesn’t want you to know about around here. And I think that’s it.”

“Amber--”

“Why else would he be so angry to see us together? It’s after hours. And who cares if we like each other?”

“Perhaps he considers our liaison unprofessional considering how we met.”

“Why should he care?”

“I don’t know, Amber. This is crazy.”

“Is it?” she asked quietly. “You just said he’d been acting crazy.”

“Okay.” He rose from behind the desk. Putting his arm around her shoulders, he led her down the hall to Barlow’s office. “Let’s have a look at those papers.”

The fluorescent light contrasted starkly with the soft shadows in Grayson’s office. Inside Barlow’s domain was as obsessively neat as the last time she’d seen it.

“That cabinet right there,” Amber said, pointing to the big filing cabinet behind Barlow’s desk.

With a resigned sigh, Grayson rounded the desk and gave the handle a tug. It slid open a fraction of an inch, then stopped with a thud.

“Locked.” She’d known it would be.

“I’ve got to find that extra key in my office,” Grayson said, as if he’d been expecting as much.

She dogged his footsteps back down the hall and peered over his shoulder as he slid open his top drawer. Reaching for one of the little compartments for pens and staples, his hand came up empty.

“It was there last I looked.” He rummaged around in the drawer.

“Barlow took it. I’d bet on it.”

“Amber--” he said in a tone that betrayed he’d come to the end of his patience. “This means nothing. Nicole could have borrowed it.”

“There aren’t any keys in my desk.” When had she started thinking of it as her desk, she wondered. But Grayson hadn’t noticed her slip of the tongue.

“It still proves nothing. And even if it did, John can’t merge the company without my say so. We’re partners in this firm. He asked me to be his partner.”

She turned, leaning her head against his broad chest. “I know you think I’m crazy, but I think he’s behind the nasty little things that have been happening to me.”

“What things?” She could sense the tension in him, thought his tone was neutral.

“The flat tire. The writing on my car. The mouse in the drawer. I think Barlow’s trying to scare me off, to get rid of me before I find out something he doesn’t want me to know.”



“Now that is ludicrous.”

“It was a new tire,” she insisted.

“You could have run over a nail on the highway.”

“What about the mouse?”

“One of the alley cats probably got to it.”

“And I suppose one of the cats wrote on my car and I hallucinated the papers I thought I saw.”

Grayson’s expression gave her the answer. “Forget about it, Amber. I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself. John and I have worked together for several years now. We’re not terribly compatible in our personalities or our ages, but we’ve managed to run the firm well, so far.”

“But you’ll check it out?”

“I’ll check it out,” he said, dipping his head to brush her lips lightly with his.

He was lying, she thought, even as she returned his kiss.

“Come home with me, Amber,” Grayson whispered. “We’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

\* \* \* \*

“For a townhouse close to downtown, we’ve been driving a long time.”

“I can usually make it in forty minutes, once the rush hour traffic has cleared.”

Amber studied Grayson’s face under the strobing flash of the streetlights. “It’s not a townhouse close to downtown, I take it.”

“You said that, not me. I didn’t want to ruin your carefully thought out profile of me.”

“I’ve had to adjust my profile several times,” she said. Truly, there seemed no end to the surprises that added up to Grayson Charles.

Gravel crunched beneath the Mercedes’ tires. They turned off the highway onto a long winding road. Amber stared into the shadows, her jaw dropping slowly open as the car rolled to a stop. “This is it?”

“Welcome to my humble abode.” He was enjoying her astonishment, she could tell.

Humble didn’t begin to describe the rustic schoolhouse that rose out of the treed property. A line of poplars had been planted to mark the edge of

the lot. Most of their leaves lay on the ground now, the bare branches standing like scrawny sentries.

Taking her hand, he led her up the flagstone walk and through the doorway with practiced sureness. “Stay there,” he said, moving quietly through the darkened stone building.

A wrought iron chandelier hung over the huge wooden table at one end of the open room. She watched as he lit the white candles one by one, and the room blossomed into golden light. A pair of massive over-stuffed couches framed the fireplace. In an alcove off to one side stood an old fashioned roll-top desk. The laptop computer inside seemed out of place in the stone schoolhouse. Beyond the table she made out the shadow of an old-fashioned wood-burning stove. Dishes, pots and pans sat on open shelves. Above, in the shadows among the rafters, she could just make out a loft bedroom and the bulk of a king-sized bed. On the far side of the large room, two shadowed openings still proclaimed boys and girls in stone lettering above the threshold.

“This is wonderful!”

“I was hoping you’d think so.” The warmth of his hand pressed against the small of her back. “I’ll get some brandy to warm you while I make a fire.”

Not a townhouse. Not near the center of town. And practically nothing high tech in it. Amber couldn’t stop the delighted chuckle from escaping. “Counselor, you’re not what I expected at all.”

“I hope you’re not disappointed,” he said pressing the brandy snifter into her hand.

Amber leaned back into the voluminous cushions. “Not at all.”

He spent the rest of the evening ensuring she wasn’t.

\* \* \* \*

A chorus of birds woke her as soon as the wan sun poked through the late October clouds. Amber’s eyes snapped open, staring at the wooden rafters in the unfamiliar peaked ceiling. Someone stirred beside her. Someone warm, large and most definitely male.

“What time is it?”

Before she could answer, Grayson was across the floor, squinting at the alarm clock on the dresser wedged between the loft and the sloping

ceiling. Drowsily, she admired the strong lines of his body, wanting nothing more than to reach out and pull him back beneath the covers. But back in town, Fair Game awaited her. Sleeping late wouldn't make her business problems vanish.

"I'm late," Grayson said curtly. Already she could see the to-do list compiling in his head. "Hope traffic's not bad." He stumbled toward the open staircase that led to the lower floor. Awareness hit him half way down. She waited, patiently, until his head poked above the floor line and he smiled sheepishly. He was across the floor in a second, leaning across the bed, his body hard and warm on top of hers.

"Morning." He offered her a slow, thorough kiss. "I do wish I could stay here this morning with you. But I'm already running late."

"It's okay," Amber said regretfully. "Just give me a ride back into town. I'll take a cab back to my apartment before I go to the office. I don't have any appointments this morning, just a ton of desk work to do."

He looked longingly at the slope of her breasts that disappeared beneath the covers. "Later?"

"Later. We still have the contract work to discuss."

"That," he said, halfway back down the ladder. "And a whole lot more."

"You're on, Counselor."

\* \* \* \*

The day dragged by with agonizing slowness. With Apartment Four out of the way and the whole contract disintegrating, Amber found herself without much to do. Paper work took only half the morning. No credits needed to be entered in the company's ledger. The stack of bills piling up in her in-basket would have to wait until Barlow & Charles paid her. Time to network, hand out business cards at parties, beg, borrow or steal business from the competition.

Problem was, the sleazy James Heck was her only competition. And Heck already nursed a grudge that she'd stolen one of his clients. Amber leaned back in her chair and eyed the silent phone. Not even a message on her voice mail. Time had come to consider a new specialty, perhaps even go back to school. She sighed. She hadn't had the money for university before, she'd never raise it now with another business going under.

Beyond her office windows, the sun broke through the clouds, scattering bars of sunlight across the gray carpet. Where had this ugly mood come from? She had Grayson's kind offer of contract work. She'd make the rent this month. And the next would be better.

Nothing to do in the office and a long walk would clear her head. Amber glanced at the clock on her desk. Four p.m. She'd walk over to Barlow & Charles, where she'd left her car parked. The exercise would do her good. Grabbing her purse and coat, she locked up the offices of Fair Game and strolled lightly off down the hallway.

\* \* \* \*

Amber jumped in surprise, finding someone in the customarily empty waiting room of Barlow & Charles.

"Oh, excuse me."

"Amber?"

She blinked, taking a second, much longer look at the man sitting on the beige couch. He'd found a better barber since she'd seen him last, and a better tailor, but there was no mistaking the profile of James Heck. In the flesh. And minus his horn-rimmed glasses. *Think of the Devil and he appears.* "James, what are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "Doing some work for Barlow. You?"

"Doing some work for Charles," she snapped without meaning to.

His eyes drifted the length of her body. "You look great, Amber."

"Thanks, James. You look ... better. Business must be good."

"Can't complain. You?"

"Can't complain," she repeated, nonchalantly. On the seat beside him was a bouquet of flowers and a card. Could it be that even a worm like James Heck had found love? That might explain the new suit and the much improved haircut.

Behind the closed door of Barlow's office, she heard the murmur of voices. Grayson and Barlow. They didn't sound angry with each other. Perhaps Grayson had been right. Maybe she was paranoid.

James got to his feet. Glancing at his watch, he paced slowly across the confines of the waiting room. "Say, Amber--"

She turned, hoping he wouldn't come any closer. And then he froze, blinking furiously.

“I think I’ve lost my contact lens.”

*Contacts! He really must be in love.*

“Where?” Amber set her purse down. Tucking her skirt under her knees, she bent to scrutinize the carpet.

“I don’t know. It couldn’t have fallen too far away.”

He knelt on the floor beside her, much closer than she ever wanted to get to James Heck. “There!” He pointed to a spot behind the desk, Amber reached to test the spot of carpet he indicated. “Can you feel it? It’s extended wear. Feels like of like plastic wrap, only wet.”

“Must have been the light,” she said tersely. “There’s nothing here except fluff.”

“You sure?” He put his hand on her shoulder, peering at the piece of carpet before her. Amber suppressed the urge to shudder.

“Positive--”

The door to Barlow’s office sprang open. As one, Amber and Heck jumped up from behind the desk. His hand, she noted, still rested on her back. It didn’t feel like Grayson’s hand, she reflected, not warm and wholesome. More like embracing a snake. Amber moved to shrug off his arm.

Instead, to her horror, Heck’s face loomed suddenly before her. Amber shrank back, but the desk blocked her escape. Heck planted a cold, very wet kiss dead-center on her lips.

“Thanks for the other day, Babe,” he said loudly.

Thrusting the bouquet of flowers into her arms, he disappeared with a grin through the door.

“Yuck!” Amber let the carnations fall to the desktop. Wiping her hand reflexively across her mouth, she realized she’d just smeared lipstick across half her face. She looked up, meeting Grayson’s dark gaze. The fury in his eyes was hot enough to burn through her and into the wall behind.

“You want to tell me what that was all about?”

“You tell me.” She spat the taste of James from her mouth. “He said he was working for Barlow.”

Grayson turned his acid gaze on his partner. But the gray-haired Barlow only shrugged. “I know nothing about this. He certainly wasn’t

working for me.” Losing interest in their squabble, he turned back into his office and closed the door.

“Aren’t you going to open the card?”

It was easier to focus her attention on the card, than Grayson’s face. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she slid her nail through the seal on the envelope. The card inside showed a piano keyboard sporting a blood-red rose. With a sick feeling, Amber flipped it open. Written in crimson ink were the words, “Thanks Sweetheart, you were wonderful.”

“Grayson, it’s obvious something’s--”

“It’s obvious we have nothing further to discuss,” Grayson said. He leveled a look full of dark pain at her, then whirled and strode down the hall to his office. The door slammed firmly shut behind him.

## CHAPTER NINE

“She dumped you?”

Grayson held the door open for Roger to walk through. He couldn't believe his brother had driven so far late at night. Roger hated the country.

“Cindy dumped me. We're finished, kaput.” He stopped just past the threshold and turned to look at Grayson who still held the door open in stunned silence. “Don't look so shocked. It was bound to happen once.”

“It was?” Grayson shook himself from his own thoughts. A very different Roger stood in his entrance way. He didn't know what had changed, but burning curiosity demanded he find out. “Sorry, I had a bad day, myself.”

For a moment he thought Roger would ask why, and then they could have brandy and commiserate jointly about the dangers of love and the mystifying creature known as woman. But Roger didn't ask, merely made his way uninvited to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a brandy, raising an empty snifter in question for Grayson.

*Well, at least we'll do the brandy thing, together. So much for male bonding.* After the confusing events with Amber, he craved the straightforward, here's the goods, way that men talked to each other. The circuits of his brain practically smoked trying to unravel the intricacies of their relationship, trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong, what vital clues he'd overlooked. Like the fact that Amber was involved with another. So why did she want him so badly? And she did want him. Lust fell within the male domain. Physical desire he understood. She wanted him, no doubt about that. Or had she just wanted revenge?

Roger pressed the snifter into his hand. Grayson blinked, realizing Roger had been standing there for a few moments, while he stared glassy eyed into the fire.

“Don't you have anything to say?”

“Well, this is a first,” Grayson blurted flabbergasted, then winced. That wasn’t what he’d meant to say at all.

“Thanks a bunch Big Brother. I figured you might have some advice, some condolences for me.”

Not the time to burden Roger with his own problems. “I’m really sorry, Roger.

“I--” *Just broke up with Amber.* No, he couldn’t say that. Involved in the events of his own life, Roger couldn’t have known he’d gone to Amber’s apartment Saturday night and that they’d spent the past few days so caught up in each other, he hadn’t had a thought to spare for his brother. Roger didn’t know that the romance he thought was off, had in fact been just as suddenly on and then off again, while he’d been none the wiser.

But Roger, in true Roger form, just grunted his acceptance of Grayson’s condolences, certain his brother’s support would be forthcoming. “What should I do now?”

“Surely, you’re not asking me for advice in love!” The world just tilted on its axis, Grayson thought. Nothing was quite as it had been. Nor as he’d thought it was.

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it,” Roger snapped.

“I’m not happy,” Grayson said earnestly, hoping his nose wouldn’t grow. His brother’s misfortune saddened him. But misery loved company. Finally, something they could share. Except that in order to share in Roger’s suffering, he’d have to own up to the rest of it. Amber’s betrayal cut so deeply, he couldn’t even share the pain with his twin.

Roger flung himself down onto the couch opposite Grayson, his long legs stretching under the coffee table and well into Grayson’s space. Acting out of old habit, Grayson kicked his feet aside. Roger didn’t seem to notice. He took a large swig of brandy and swallowed hard.

“She said I was shallow, immature. You don’t think she’s right, do you, Gray?”

“Right about what? That you’re immature?” Why was he having such a hard time keeping his mind on the conversation?

“No, shallow,” Roger said, obviously annoyed that Grayson’s thoughts kept wandering away from his emergency. “Pay attention, Big Brother. I’m spilling my guts here, just in case you hadn’t noticed.”



No safe answer to that question, Grayson thought. Did he think Roger was shallow, immature? Of course he did. And the answer was undeniably yes to most of the other crimes Roger had been accused of. But Roger was also his brother. Deep beneath the crusty exterior was a good heart. He might be the only person in the world who recognized that.

“I don’t think you view love with the same importance as most of the women you date do,” he said carefully.

“So, I’m a cad. You might as well come out and say it.”

“I didn’t say that.” An argument with Roger was the last thing he needed tonight.

“It’s the truth.” Roger swallowed the last of his brandy and rose to pour another. He reached for his brother’s glass, but Grayson shook his head. A hangover wouldn’t improve the situation. It looked like Roger would be sleeping on his couch.

“I’ve really done it this time, haven’t I?”

Grayson grunted in the affirmative. The silence that followed was so uncharacteristic of Roger that he stared at his brother in dismay.

Shoulder’s slumped, Roger still wore his black leather trench coat, even though he’d been sitting on the couch for more than fifteen minutes. Hunched over his brandy, he stared into its amber depths, as if he liquid contained the hidden solution to his problems. “What should I do now, Gray?”

Grayson wanted to grab Roger by the shoulders and shake him. How dare Roger march into his house and demand sympathy when Grayson intended on spending the evening wallowing in his own misery? But Roger looked so completely helpless, so strangely sincere for once. Cindy’s rejection shook him to the core. He could tell that much. And if Grayson didn’t offer him any words of wisdom, not that he had any to spare, likely no one would. And Roger would go on being, well ... Roger.

“Figure out what you’re doing wrong,” Grayson said tiredly. “Ask Cindy for another chance. If that doesn’t work, start fresh with someone else who’ll appreciate the new and improved you.”

Roger’s head came up. Sudden comprehension flickered in his dark eyes. He swirled the brandy in his glass and glanced shrewdly at Grayson. “Why do I get the feeling it isn’t Cindy and me we’re discussing.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Grayson said. So much for philanthropy.

“I get the feeling there’s another woman entirely in this equation.”

“There’s nothing left between Amber and me.” It felt strangely good to say it, to stomp on those lingering hopes. If only it didn’t hurt so much.

“No, I took care of that, didn’t I? This time,” Roger said, softly “I’ve managed to mess up my relationship and yours! I ought to get a medal for stupidity.”

“Don’t worry about it, Little Brother. I messed it up myself quite nicely.” Deciding another brandy wouldn’t be such a bad idea after all, Grayson reached for the bottle Roger had brought back to the coffee table with him. Moisture made a circle beneath the bottle, but he didn’t bother himself to rummage for a coaster. Confession burned on the tip of his tongue. He couldn’t leave Roger to think he’d been responsible for the catastrophe between Amber and himself. “The other person in the equation is a man, not a woman.”

“Amber’s seeing someone else!”

*Oh right, Roger, take a blunt instrument to my pain.* Why did his brother have to be so dense? “Another PI. A greasy wimp of a guy. Not what you’d expect.”

“There’s got to be a mistake. She wouldn’t fall for that kind of guy.”

*A mistake all right. The mistake was opening my mouth. My worst mistake was trusting another woman after ...* “How would you know?”

“She’s not the type.”

“Yeah, well that’s what I thought. Apparently, we’re both wrong.”

Roger set his snifter down on the coffee table and leaned forward. “I know you think I’m a total washout when it comes to relationships, but really, Grayson, something’s not right here.”

“What’s not right is the small detail that she’s seeing someone else. Though why she didn’t tell me that before we....” He stopped suddenly. He didn’t need any of Roger’s salt in that wound.

His brother refused to listen to his protests. “I admit, I’m not the best judge of character, but a woman with convictions as strong as Amber Shaw’s ... well, it just doesn’t figure.”

“He brought her flowers. And a card that said, ‘Thanks, Babe, you were wonderful!’” Acid churned in Grayson’s stomach at the thought.

“That could mean anything,” Roger insisted.

“She admitted she knew him.”

“So she knows him. It doesn’t mean she knows him in the Biblical sense.”

“That’s not funny, Roger.”

“And you’ve completely lost your sense of humor, Grayson.”

“She tried to tell me he was working for Barlow, can you believe it?”

“Maybe she’s right.”

“Sure. And I’m a complete fool.”

“Think about it Gray. Didn’t you say yourself not a couple of weeks ago that Barlow had been acting strange? Even for Barlow?” He leaned back into the cushions. Cocking his head to one side, he surveyed his brother and asked, “Why are you so dead against suspecting Barlow instead of Amber?”

Just when he thought a little sympathy might be forthcoming, Roger did an about face. “Since when are you her champion?” Grayson said, annoyed.

“Since you became blind,” Roger shot back.

“Enough!” Grayson set the snifter down on the coffee table with more force than he intended. Golden liquid sloshed against the sides. The crystal rang out a loud ping. Luckily it didn’t shatter. “Look--” He wrapped the last shreds of his composure around his rapidly escaping temper. “I know losing Cindy really shook up your world, but this is simply too paranoid. You’re starting to sound like Amber.”

“Maybe Amber’s right,” Roger repeated and stubbornly set his jaw.

That was too scary to contemplate. Too frightening to admit that the man his father trusted, the man he’d trusted enough to build a career with, might not be the man he thought he was. Too scary to forge ahead into uncharted territory with Amber after really getting burned last time. But Grayson didn’t voice any of his thoughts. Roger already knew. Roger always did.

“Never mind my problems.” He deflected the conversation away from his brother’s prying mind. Roger came asking for advice. It was his failures in love they ought to be discussing. “What are you planning to do about Cindy?”

Roger let his eyelids drift closed, making himself comfortable, as if the offer to stay the night had already been extended. His brother's hospitality was a given. Roger believed in Grayson without question.

*Why can't I believe in myself?*

"I'm going to call Sandy," Roger said sleepily.

\* \* \* \*

James Heck would be a sorry man when she got hold of him. And John Barlow would regret he ever heard the name Amber Shaw when she was finished. Amber drummed her fingers on the desk. The office was empty, quiet as a tomb, her calendar a wasteland, except for those last few evenings at Barlow & Charles. Would Grayson even want her in the office after the stunt Barlow and Heck had pulled on her last night?

She ran the list of possible suspects through her mind. Barlow, instinct told her, the same intuition she'd relied on in so many other cases. She trusted it implicitly, and it never let her down. But intellect demanded a more objective review of the situation. And that left Grayson and Roger.

Could Grayson have hired Heck to get even with her? The idea lay like a bad taste in her mouth. But she had to admit it would be a fitting revenge for the incident with the ice. If it was revenge he wanted. She could have sworn what he wanted was love.

And that made her feel like one Heck of a fool.

So Grayson was a possibility, but not a possibility she liked much. And then there was Roger.

Roger certainly had reason to want to get even for what she'd come to think of as the ice incident. But Roger hadn't seemed angry. He found the whole event funny. In his back-handed complimenting kind of way, he was flattered that Sandy missed him enough to want revenge. Roger for all his irreverent, irresponsible ways, wasn't vindictive at heart.

No, the prank had Barlow's stamp all over it. Her revenge lay in finding the proof. Intuition told her the intertwining clues could be traced back to Barlow. No way would she let this one go. A dead mouse and a flat tire were unpleasant. But the scene in the office of Barlow & Charles had elevated things to a personal level. And James Heck just slid another notch lower in her estimation. Until last night she wouldn't have believed that possible.

A tap against the glass door wrenched her from her ruminations. A dark figure stood in silhouette against the glass. Amber got up cautiously. Last time someone appeared unannounced at her door he was bearing a subpoena to appear in court.

*Pity the messenger this time*, she thought darkly.

The man at the door was well dressed. Not ostentatiously so. A lock of sandy brown hair fell across his eyes. He brushed it out of the way, as she opened the door.

“Ms. Shaw?”

He wasn't carrying a registered letter. No briefcase or portfolio. Didn't look like he was selling anything, either. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of a voluminous wool overcoat. She caught a glimpse of ice blue eyes as his gaze drifted up to meet hers from where he'd been staring at a patch of carpet on the floor.

“I'm Amber Shaw.” Might as well admit to it. If he was carrying another court order, he'd find her soon enough.

“I'm sorry to drop by without an appointment. It's not something I wanted to discuss on the phone, but I was wondering if I could have a few moments of your time.” He pulled a crumpled copy of her business card from his pocket. “Sandy Wylde told me I could find you here.”

Amber glanced at her name on the rumpled parchment, then back at the unexpected and unexpectedly male client. They were still standing in the doorway, she realized with a start. “Certainly, come in, Mr.--?”

“Marchand.” He offered her his hand. “Jean-Claude Marchand.”

Hunched in the chrome and leather chair, he looked out of place in the sleek office. The chairs that made clients like Sandy Wylde appear all the more elegant were too small for a male frame. The thin arm rests weren't wide enough for muscular arms to rest upon comfortably. The width of the chair that allowed for a pair of female legs to be gracefully crossed was all wrong for traditional male posture. She watched Marchand fidget to get comfortable, then give up. He settled for hunching awkwardly in the chair and gazing across the desk at her looking every bit as uncomfortable as he undoubtedly felt.

Taking one of her preprinted forms from her top drawer, Amber steeped her fingers on the glass and gazed across her desk at him. “What can I do for you, Mr. Marchand?”

“Sandy tells me you have some rather unusual business practices that might be of use to me.”

“I deal in revenge,” Amber said. “Revenge isn’t an unusual phenomenon in itself. I merely make sure that justice is accomplished. And that no one gets hurt.”

“Justice is what I came to discuss.”

Amber reached for her pen. “And who exactly would you be seeking justice from?”

“From my ex-fiancée, Ruth.”

Ruth, Amber scribbled in the appropriate box. “What crime has Ruth committed?”

“She left me!” Marchand said, suddenly becoming animated. “I gave her everything--the one-carat engagement ring she wanted so badly. Cost me two months pay. I bought her a house, leased a new car. I gave her everything and she left me for some slimy guy named Dave.”

“I’ve witnessed this phenomenon before,” Amber said in her most soothing professional tone. And she had, first hand. But until now all the perpetrators had been male.

“She stood me up at the altar.”

Memories of pain keen as knife tore through her. Even after two years, she could still remember the pain-tinged shame of Eric’s abandonment. The loss of the dream hurt the most. The brutal reality that the man she’d given her love to her didn’t love her at all. Eric left the month before their wedding date, leaving her with mounting debts for the non-refundable deposits to the banquet hall, the caterer and the photographer she’d retained. Not to mention the silk wedding dress that still hung in her closet.

“I’m so sorry,” she said softly, losing for a moment the professional detachment she’d learned to rely on. What Marchand had gone through was so much worse.

Glancing away from those pain-filled eyes, she jotted down a few more notes. “Tell me a bit about Ruth’s habits so we can determine what kind of

revenge would be fitting. She doesn't happen to have an identical twin, does she?"

"No...."

Amber ignored his confusion. She wouldn't be caught on that technicality again. "A sister that might resemble her closely?"

"She has three brothers," Marchand said.

"Good." Amber leaned back in her chair. Schemes formed in her mind and were just as quickly rejected. Accepting a male client would require a major attitude adjustment. Her entire repertoire of revenge was slanted towards the male of the species.

One shrewd look at Marchand convinced her. She recognized his pain. The shadows beneath his eyes from nights spent wondering what went wrong. Rejection of your intimate self caused the shoulders to slump, the eyes to shine less bright, the whole world to lose some of its color and joy. Amber remembered when she'd looked that way. It wasn't that long ago. Only building up Fair Game had helped. Having one thing that was truly hers, that couldn't be lost on the whim of a man brought her soul back to her. She had to help Marchand bring closure to his pain, so he could have his life back as well.

Fidgeting in the under-sized chair, he waited.

Amber let the momentum of her reclining desk chair swing her upright. "Let's talk about the details of your revenge."

\* \* \* \*

A battered Trans Am sat like a blemish before the offices of Barlow & Charles.

Brown splotches of primer marred the paint job that had once been silver. Amber had to look carefully to tell what color the car had been in its distant youth. Someone had made a half-hearted effort at painting the car with a series of not-quite matching aerosol spray cans. Amber grit her teeth. It did figure that James Heck's car was as shabby as he was.

*Probably inside collecting his check from Barlow at my expense.* The thought rolled around in her mind and came up opportunity.

No mistaking the man who paced the narrow scrap of carpet before the elevator. No one else wore that much gel in his hair. No one else couldn't wait the short moments it took the elevator to come. Stealing

herself for another encounter with James, Amber sauntered up beside him and tapped him on the shoulder.

He jumped, whirling around as suddenly as if she had a gun pressed between his shoulder blades. “Uh, hi, Amber.”

“Hi, James.”

Heck coughed. The doors slid open and he jumped for the sanctuary of the elevator like a man fleeing a sinking ship. His salvation was short lived. Amber slid between the closing doors to take her place beside him.

A white piece of paper fluttered in his hand as he restrained himself from pacing in the narrow confines of the elevator. An invoice, Amber thought darkly. Hope he’s getting well paid to make me miserable. She nodded at the paper in his hand.

“On your way to get paid?” she asked pleasantly.

“Yeah.” Heck folded the paper into quarters so she wouldn’t see what was written on it. Silence stood like a third person between them, broken only by the whir of the elevator’s fan.

“So, uh, Amber--” James fidgeted, coughed again. “No hard feelings about last night?” he finally choked out.

“Of course not.”

Heck’s eyes widened. She hoped he wouldn’t lose another contact. “Why not?”

Amber’s fingers closed around his leather tie and pulled him closer. “Because you’re going to do me a favor, James.”

“What kind of favor?”

“You’re going to give me a copy of that invoice before you hand it in to Barlow.”

“I can’t do that!”

“You can do anything you want to, James.”

“Well I don’t--”

“I’d be willing to pay you for my ... gratitude.” The thought made her ill, but it was the only foreseeable means to an end.

“Sorry, but I can’t--” Heck began, then, “How much?”

“An even hundred.”

“Sorry, Amber, but I promised Barlow the details of this assignment would be confidential.”



*I'll bet you did.* It was a generous offer. *Don't tell me even James Heck has developed standards.* She couldn't afford much more, but she wanted that invoice beyond the bounds of good sense. She wanted Grayson Charles.

"Two hundred," she said coolly.

For a moment, she thought he'd refuse again. The elevator doors slid open.

"Okay, deal." He held out his hand to shake. Amber plucked the invoice from his other fist.

"I'll send you a check," she said and strode off down the hallway to the offices of Barlow & Charles.

Amber froze, her hand on the door handle. Grayson Charles was on the other side of that door, along with everything else that meant. He hadn't called to cancel her last couple of nights at the firm. She took that to mean he intended for her to finish her sentence as ordered. Would he pretend nothing had happened and go back to the cool efficiency he'd shown her a month ago. Beneath that crisp exterior lay a molten core of passion. She knew that now. Would he turn that passion to anger and focus it upon her?

Amber heard Heck's footsteps on the carpet behind her. Now was not the time for second thoughts. If she wanted a Xerox of that invoice, she had to get it now before Barlow intercepted Heck. She turned the handle.

The doors to both partner's offices were mercifully closed. Amber unfolded Heck's invoice, laid it on the Xerox and watched distractedly as bars of light swept across the glass plate. She refolded the invoice, handed it back to Heck. He looked like a little boy presenting his mother with a well-graded homework assignment. She suppressed the urge to laugh out loud.

Snatching the copy from the output tray, she stuffed it in her purse. Heck looked hesitantly around the corner, but the doors to both offices remained closed. Relieved he followed Amber back to reception where he milled about aimlessly as if he didn't know what to do now.

Taking pity on him, Amber crossed the carpet and rapped on Barlow's door. It flew open beneath her hand. Barlow looked infinitely displeased to see her. *If I can put up with you for another day, you can certainly put up with me, J.B.* But instead, she said coldly, "Mr. Heck is here to see you, Mr. Barlow."

As if on cue, the door to Grayson's office opened. Pulling on his charcoal gray suit, he strode down the hallway towards them. He struggled into his overcoat and reached for his briefcase.

"Grayson?"

He froze, one hand on the door. She caught the shadow of emotions playing across his face as he turned toward her.

"I'm afraid I'm running late for a meeting, Ms. Shaw. After that, I'll be working at home this evening." The set of his jaw formed a barrier between them, as impenetrable as a barbed wire fence. "I've left the things that need to be done on your desk."

"This is my second last night here," she said, conscious of Barlow and Heck hanging on their every word.

"I'm aware of that," Grayson said. The door closed behind him leaving her in the company of John Barlow and James Heck.

With one last anxious glance at Amber, Heck escaped into the hall, as soon as he was certain the elevator had deposited Grayson on the ground floor and he wouldn't be offered further companionship. Barlow disappeared behind the barrier of his door. Inside she heard paper ruffling. Heck's invoice no doubt. Instinct grabbed hold of her senses. Barlow was behind this turn of bad luck. No matter what happened with Grayson, she'd settle things between them. Barlow raised the stakes. What started as cool dislike had just become personal.

*Leave!* Amber threw the sum of her will at the shadowy figure behind his closed door. *Leave, so I can get into that filing cabinet!* But the door stayed stubbornly closed, and Amber turned her attention to the work Grayson had left for her.

Lost in thought, she didn't hear him approach until he was standing over her. John Barlow wasn't a handsome man. Neglect marred every aspect of his appearance. From the haircut that was at least a month overdue, to the haphazard tie and rumpled suit. Even his briefcase was battered and worn on the edges. He stared down at her with beady eyes set in a puffy face. The antithesis of Grayson Charles, she couldn't help thinking. No wonder he resented his younger, more handsome and more successful partner.

"Good evening, Ms. Shaw," he said with a leering smile that lingered just a little too long.

“Evening,” she answered curtly.

“I’m going to be having a meeting in my office shortly....” For a moment he looked uncomfortable as if there was a great deal more he wanted to say and none of it nice.

“And?”

He was still standing there, blocking the way to her office. It was a challenge of sorts. What sort, she couldn’t tell.

“And your services will not be needed.”

“I see.”

“Good.” He crossed to the coat rack. Taking her coat down off its hook, he held it out to her.

*He’s kicking me out!* Injustice raged inside her. “What about the work Grayson left for me to do tonight?”

“I’ll see to it.” He pushed her coat further toward her. Having no other choice, she took it.

*You haven’t seen the last of me, Mr. Barlow.* She wanted to say it, but she didn’t dare give herself away. Let Barlow trip over his inflated confidence. They always did.

“Good night, Mr. Barlow,” she said politely. Then the pretense at politeness deserted and she snatched up her purse and stormed through the door.

Thinking of the invoice nestled safely in her purse, she came to a sudden decision.

Could she find the way to his house down those winding country roads in the dark?

It was worth a try.

## CHAPTER TEN

The world disappeared into a dark spiral beyond the glow of her headlights. Amber gripped the steering wheel harder and kept her foot on the gas, and fought back the urge to turn the car back around and head for the city. City-born and bred she could never understand what possessed people to live in what she deemed pre-industrial standards. Quiet, open spaces broken only by the howl of the wind through the trees struck her as eerie rather than comforting. The rules of city living she understood. Don't talk to strangers, mind your own business and watch out for dark alleys where you could be mugged or worse. Good fences, good locks on the front door made good neighbors. It wasn't comforting, but it was familiar. In the country everything was dark, neighbors few and far between.

If she hadn't been so surprised by Grayson's choice of a neighborhood, she might not have paid such close attention to where they were going. Being a passenger once, however, was a lot different than trying to find your own way down unfamiliar roads in the dark.

Ahead, the road branched into two different directions. Had they turned left or right? Amber peered into the darkness. Left, she decided, letting instinct take over. Inside her head, she called herself every variation of fool she could think of. What on earth compelled her to be out there in the middle of nowhere, searching for the home of a man who would likely slam the door in her face and leave her to find her own way home?

She simply couldn't leave things as they stood between Grayson and herself. The thought that he might think her involved with that worm James Heck, kept her driving. *I have my standards, Grayson. What in heavens were you thinking?*

Gravel sprayed beneath the Honda's wheels. A dim glow through the poplar hedge lit up the familiar outline of the schoolhouse. The last time

she'd come here ... Amber thrust the thought from her mind. Letting the car door close softly, she walked toward the house.

He must have heard her coming. Before she could even knock on the ancient wooden door, it flew open.

“You!”

Amber felt the last vestiges of her hope evaporate. Grayson didn't look at all happy to see her.

“Me,” she said softly. A fire beckoned in the living room beyond. But between her and the comfort of warmth on a cold night stood the impassive Grayson Charles. “Can I come in?”

Grayson motioned to the couch before the fireplace. Papers littered its surface and the sum of sitting space on the couch opposite. Apparently, when he worked, Grayson was just as untidy at home as at the office. “As you can see, I'm very busy.”

“I'll only take a moment of your time.”

“I don't have a moment to spare.”

He wasn't going to make it easy for her. Amber dug in her purse, her fingers closing around the copy of Heck's invoice. She brought it out, into the dim light between them. “I just wanted to show you this.”

Grayson took the paper reluctantly, turning it into the light to see better. Amber stepped closer, inching past the threshold. It would be harder for him to turf her out now. An old trick from her PI days. Unfair to use it now, but she was desperate.

Amber watched the storm of emotion cross his face. Annoyance, relief, confusion and back to anger.

“Anyone could have fabricated this,” he said finally. He turned back, finding her suddenly in his way. “As I said, I have work to do.”

Though he towered over her by at least a head, Amber held her ground. “Why is it so hard,” she asked softly, “to believe me instead of John Barlow?”

“Barlow is my partner.”

“And I was your lover,” she snapped. Men misplaced their alliances, she reflected darkly.

His head came up. Suede-brown eyes beseeched her understanding, even as his face remained unyielding.

“Why are you so intent on believing I’m out to hurt you?”

The question took him by surprise. Involuntarily, he stepped back. Amber gained another precious inch of territory. “I might ask you the same question,” Grayson said finally, deflecting the dangerous question back upon her.

*Who is he?* The whisper of his words flitted through her memory. Sudden understanding illuminated the problems between them.

“Who was she?”

Her softly spoken words took him aback. She saw his spine straighten, his face harden for the battle he certainly expected to come. But then he sighed and looked tiredly back at her. Ruthlessly, Amber used that moment to move closer.

“Let me in, Grayson.”

“Amber, this isn’t a good time.”

“There isn’t going to be a better one. Take advantage of my generosity, Counselor. It’s a rare thing.”

That got a smile out of him. “All right, Amber.” He stepped back from the door. Crossing to the couch, he swept the papers into a single pile and motioned for her to sit down. “But just for a moment. I’m going to be up most of the night, anyway. I don’t want to go to court tomorrow without any sleep.”

She took the offered seat and crouched there anxiously. “First, let me say that I am not nor have I ever been involved in any way with James Heck. Aside from the annual private investigator’s trade show, we’ve barely said more than a civil sentence to each other. Barlow should really watch who he hires. Heck was more than happy to sell me a copy of his invoice.”

He was listening, eyes scanning her face intently, as if for reassurance of the truth.

“I hope you appreciate this, Grayson,” Amber said with a sigh that seemed to suck what little energy remained from her body. “That stupid invoice just cost me two hundred dollars.”

Grayson glanced down at the price on the Xeroxed invoice. “He only charged Barlow a hundred and fifty.”

“Yeah, well life’s not fair.”

The ghost of a smile crossed his face. “No, it’s not.”

“Tell me you didn’t really think I was seeing that--that ... worm!”

“When it comes to you, Amber, I really don’t know what to think.”

Grayson flung himself down on the couch opposite, sending the papers into a flurry. They settled, some back on the seat beside him, others on the coffee table and the floor.

“You could give me a bit more credit than that. I do have standards, you know.”

“He didn’t seem like your type.”

Amber glanced at the flames crackling in the fireplace. “So, who was she Grayson?”

“As I recall, I asked you the same question. You weren’t so eager to answer.”

No, she most definitely wasn’t. She stood at the crossroads of an opportunity and a very dangerous risk. To tell him meant she risked Grayson’s rejection. Much easier to continue this way with the walls up between them, keeping them both safe from the perils of love. But also keeping them both apart. Amber dragged in a shuddering breath. Could she really trust him with the ugly fears, the hurt inside?

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as her Grandma would say. And her grandmother was a fountain of metaphors and parables. But Grandma had never told her honesty would hurt this much. Or be this scary.

“His name was Eric.” The words leapt from her lips before she could call them back. If she hesitated now, she’d never tell him. And if he was waiting for her to make the first move, well there it was. “He was my fiancé. He decided he was in love with his secretary about a month before our wedding.”

Whatever he’d been expecting, this wasn’t it. “Amber, I’m sorry.”

She waved his apology away. “It’s okay, it was over a year ago. And a long time before him my father--” Courage deserted her suddenly. This older, deeper wound was infinitely more difficult to discuss. She dragged in a shaky breath. “Suffice to say he also found someone else he’d rather have. Remarried, had a son. Suddenly, I wasn’t so special. I never saw him again.”

Grayson was beside her in an instant. More papers drifted to the floor, but he didn’t seem to notice. She felt the sudden warmth of his arms around

her, the brush of his lips against her temple. “Hush, Amber, it’s all right. I didn’t realize.”

And somehow, inexplicably, it was all right. The heat of him so near melted the ice around her heart. That ice had been melting since the day they’d met. Realization seeped slowly into her consciousness. Somehow she’d known it. And responded by building up that fortress of ice as quickly as he knocked it down. Still, she wouldn’t let him in, not while he built a fence around his heart as impenetrable as her own.

Summoning the last of her false bravado she wiggled from his embrace and gazed up at him. “So, Counselor, while we’re baring our souls. It’s your turn.”

She watched the color drain from his face, felt his hand clench on her arm. “I can’t see what can be gained by dredging up old hurts.”

“Of course you don’t.” Betrayal soured her tone. “But you didn’t mind listening like a voyeur while I dredged up all of mine.”

“That’s not fair--”

“All’s fair,” she said.

“In love and court,” he finished.

“Don’t make me sue you for the answer.”

“You wouldn’t have a case.” His words trailed off into a sigh. Before her eyes, she could see his defenses dropping. Muscles relaxed, he pulled her closer and rested his head against hers.

“You’d lose,” Amber said softly.

His deep chuckle rumbled through him, like a lion purring. “You’d have the answer out of me one way or another.”

“Who is she, Grayson? Who hurt you so badly that you were willing to see betrayal in the guise of James Heck?”

For a moment she thought he was about to divert her attention again with caresses or arguments, he’d used both weapons on her.

But then he surprised her by saying suddenly, “Her name was Melanie. We met when I was in law school.”

“Another lawyer?”

“Oh no, not Melanie. But she was looking to marry one. Her father had already chosen his future son-in-law’s profession. Only the profession mattered to him, not the man that went with it.”



“Sounds like a real sweetheart.”

“He wasn’t all bad. He was just misguided in his attempts to ensure his daughter’s happiness.”

“A frustrated lawyer,” she supplied. “Never had the money for law school. Married young, had kids, lost the dream. Am I right?” Of course she was right. Her uncanny ability to read the truth behind other people’s motivations never failed her. Except where her heart was involved.

“Something like that, I’m sure. But he liked me well enough. And I loved Melanie. The perfect arrangement. I really thought we were going to spend our lives together.”

“Until?” she asked gently.

Grayson sighed. She felt the rise and fall of his chest against her. “Until Dad died and I joined the firm.”

“Dad’s shoes were harder to fill than I anticipated. I was working nights, weekends, trying to keep up. Roger--” He paused at the mention of his brother’s name. “Until then, Roger and I had done everything together. But he couldn’t help me with this one. I was on my own. Even Melanie didn’t understand.”

“That you were doing it all for her.”

“I *was* doing it for her.” That revelation seemed to surprise him, and he turned an appraising look upon her. “For Melanie and for my Mom whose retirement depended on the firm continuing. So Dad’s dream wouldn’t die with him.”

“Melanie couldn’t see the wisdom behind short term pain for long term gain.”

Grayson nodded. His hand moved in calming strokes across her back and she wondered which of them he was really trying to comfort. “I kept telling her to hang on, that soon I’d be making real money. Soon we could get married, buy a house.”

“She saw only what she didn’t have at the moment.”

“Melanie wasn’t willing to wait. She found someone more suited to her, someone who could give her what she wanted.”

“Which was?”

“A good time.”

“He was a lawyer, I take it.”

Grayson laughed, deep rich laughter. “Wrong again, Ms Shaw, Investigator Extraordinaire. An auto mechanic.”

“No! Daddy mustn’t have liked that.”

“I don’t suppose he did, but by then I was long gone.”

“Such a shame.” The wounded hearts, time and innocence lost. It was a story as old as time, and still there was no solution. Unlike fairy tales, there were few happy endings when it came to love. Perhaps that explained the attraction of fairy tales.

“She only had to wait a few more months. Things took a turn for the better shortly after. I bought the house....”

“Melanie never knew?”

Grayson shook his head. “She would have hated it here so far from the city and all the excitement. Melanie’s idea of relaxation was a party a night. Roger would have suited her far better than me.”

“Except that would have made you feel far worse.”

“No fear. Melanie and Roger didn’t get along at all. They were too much alike.”

The look on Amber’s face spoke her opinion of Roger better than an impassioned speech. Grayson’s mouth twitched with the beginnings of a smile.

“You shouldn’t be so hard on him,” he said tracing the line of her lips with one finger. “Did I tell you he and Sandy are getting back together?”

She sat up quickly. “What about Cindy?”

“Cindy called it quits.”

“And Sandy took him back?”

“Apparently.” He settled a weightless kiss on her mouth.

“He’s a better actor than I thought.”

“Oh, I don’t think he was acting. You should have seen him. He was quite upset.”

The justice of it all was beautiful to behold. Even she couldn’t have devised so appropriate a revenge. “Got himself a taste of his own medicine.”

“It seems to have cured him.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

She felt the curve of his smile against her own lips. “Always the skeptic, Ms. Shaw.”

The movement of his lips tickled hers and she couldn't help laughing. "Force of habit."

"I'm happy my prodigal twin has finally found love. It gives me one less thing to worry about. And these days," he said gravely, "one less is definitely an improvement."

"Grayson--"

"Oh no, Amber. Not a word more about Roger. And let's leave John Barlow out of this conversation as well."

Amber opened her mouth to protest. But her objections were muffled by the pressure of his mouth. His kiss grew more demanding. "And now that my twin is once again happily in love, I think I should be as well. We're in competition with each other after all."

"Wouldn't want him to have something that you didn't," she said, a little miffed. Was that all she meant to Grayson? A trophy with which to impress his brother? Old familiar doubts crowded her thoughts.

"Certainly not." The laughter in his words told her he'd been kidding. But there was no mistaking the seriousness in his touch.

"What about your court case?"

Grayson let go a very long sigh. "I gave up on sleep the moment I saw your car."

She was sorely tempted, but careless abandon, even for love, ran against all she believed in. "I think I should go."

His arms tightened around her when she would have broken out of his embrace. "Don't go, Amber. It's only ten o'clock. If you stay, I can do my preparation work and have a bit of relaxation as well. Given a choice I'd rather have it all."

"That sounds an awful lot like Roger."

He drew back, assessing whether she meant it as an insult or a compliment. Deciding it was neither he smiled.

"After some careful deliberation, I've decided that Roger and I could learn a lot from each other." He returned to his careful exploration of her kiss. "Just as you and I do."

A strange thing to say, Amber thought, and wondered briefly what he meant by it. But soon his caress demanded the sum of her attention.

Somewhere between the door and the couch she'd lost her coat. Before she knew it her suede pumps lay abandoned on the rug before the fireplace. Her silk blouse ended up draped across the back of the couch and her tailored wool pants on the bottom rung of the ladder that led to the loft.

No fair, she thought. Having made himself comfortable at home in navy sweats, Grayson had a lot less to take off. She made a game of it anyway, teasing him in the candlelight that cast long shadows on the walls behind them. Grayson, herself, ten feet tall, curving against the slanted roof of the loft. Shortly, it ceased to matter what they had been wearing.

The goose down duvet was soft beneath her as his weight pressed her gently against the mattress. Kissing her, one arm hooked under her neck, he rummaged with the other hand in the top drawer of his bedside table. She sensed his lapse in concentration and yanked him closer.

He pulled away from her briefly, casting one furtive glance in the drawer he'd been blindly searching and coming up with a small foil packet which he left within easy reach. Amber craned her neck, catching a glimpse of pinky-orange.

“Passion Punch?”

“Hope you like tropical fruit.”

Her laugh turned to a gasp as his lips dipped lower, brushing her collar bone, slipping lower still. She moaned as the heat of his mouth enclosed the peak of one breast.

“The ... other one's ... getting jealous,” she got out in rasping breaths. And chuckling, he made peace between them.

With hands and lips, she explored the smooth terrain of his chest, the dark tangle of hair at its center. Her hands traveled lower, past his slim hips to explore the impressive length of him, until he lured her attention away when his lips broached the secret place between her thighs. Gripping the duvet beneath her, Amber abandoned herself to the marvelous sensations he created within her, forgetting everything she'd come to warn him about.

It was only long after, when they lay together, beneath the duvet this time instead of on top of it, that the doubts crept back in one by one. Amber wiggled out from under the weight of his arm. “Grayson, I know this is a heck of a time to mention this....”

“You’re right,” he said sleepily. “This is a heck of a time. And I still have work to do.”

“You should have saved me as a reward for a job well done.”

“Next time,” he said wistfully.

“About Barlow....”

“Oh no, Amber, not now.” There was a desperate plea in his words.

“He wouldn’t leave until I did,” Amber said resolutely. Grayson was going to listen to her this time. A captive audience, she had him at a disadvantage. “He’s hiding something. Something he most definitely doesn’t want me to see.”

“Go to sleep, Amber,” Grayson said pulling her back under the covers with him. “At least one of us should get some rest tonight.”

Warm and cozy in the attic loft, it was desperately hard not to comply. In spite of her convictions, Amber felt her eyelids drifting closed.

Thinking her asleep, Grayson went back downstairs to work on his case by the flickering candlelight that would have driven her crazy.

Her eyes flew open. Once it fastened on a clue, her private investigator’s brain would not let her sleep.

That troublesome problem was John Barlow. Suddenly, she realized that, though Grayson had opened up to her more than ever before, he’d skillfully maneuvered her away from the topic of his unreliable partner.

Did he seduce her just to avoid a topic of conversation even more painful than the one they’d had? Or did he plan to deal with John Barlow by himself? Time was running out. Grayson didn’t even know it.

All was not well at Barlow & Charles. The answer to the mystery lay in John Barlow’s files. Tomorrow was her last day at the firm. Amber’s eyes narrowed.

No matter what else happened, tomorrow she had to get into that filing cabinet.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Something was terribly wrong. Amber placed the phone back in its cradle and stared at it.

She awoke alone in Grayson's house, much later than she preferred to rise in the morning. Next time she visited, she'd pack an alarm clock. This sleeping in was getting to be a bad habit. Arriving late at Fair Game, she called Barlow & Charles and got the firm's answering machine. Grayson had said he'd be in court for most of the morning, so she left a message asking him to call her back. When the afternoon became evening, she began to worry.

Another call to the law firm netted her only a harried voice-mail message from Grayson saying he hoped to be in the office later. Not so much anything he said that gave her the feeling of impending doom, but something in the tone of his voice worried her. Maybe things hadn't gone well in court in spite of Grayson's careful preparation. Guilt nagged at her for keeping him up late last night. They were going to have to set some ground rules regarding these late-night rendezvous. The future of two businesses lay at stake.

Amber glanced down at the file folder on her desk. Behind her the cursor on her monitor blinked off and on, reminding her she should be working on the Marchand case. But her mind slid annoyingly away from productive thought and fastened resolutely on the topic of Grayson Charles. Another of the dangers of being in love. Love? She turned the word over in her mind and hesitantly decided it fit. She did love Grayson, had definitely fallen in lust the moment they met and later, at The Terrace Restaurant, lust had lured her into territory she'd sworn never to stray again. Slowly, between long glances and languid caresses, Grayson Charles had stolen her very soul.

A grown woman, she knew the risks. She could get badly hurt. At the very least she could find more of her attention wandering into thoughts of him.

Tomorrow was her last day at Barlow & Charles. After the scene with James Heck, neither of them had mentioned Amber doing further contract work at the firm. Maybe that was for the best. She had another client. The lull in business seemed to be over for the moment. Better to keep their business dealings on a professional level. And try her best to keep her mind on work. Amber dragged her thoughts back to the Marchand case.

To no avail.

Something was wrong at Barlow & Charles. Or something had gone amiss with Grayson. Private investigator instincts shouted for her attention. She glanced at the clock on her desk. Five-thirty. Time enough to be getting over to the law firm. She'd put her doubts to rest and make a fresh start in the morning.

\* \* \* \*

Grayson rushed by her in the hallway, wool overcoat trailing behind him like dark wings, and nearly running her down as she came around the corner from the elevator.

"Sorry." Not even recognizing her he rushed to catch the elevator still lingering at the floor.

"Grayson!"

He stopped, one hand on the elevator door, one inside already reaching for the button. "Oh, Amber."

"What's wrong?"

His shoulders drooped. He set his briefcase on the floor.

"Bad day in court?" she guessed.

"The worst."

"My fault?" Instantly she wished she hadn't asked. If she'd ruined his case, she didn't think her conscience could help it.

"No, not your fault." He offered her a bawdy grin in memory of the night they'd shared. "But I've got to go. Be back in awhile."

"Should I wait for you here?"

"Don't know how long I'll be," he said, letting the elevator doors slide closed. "I'll call you later."

“Whatever that means,” she grumbled as the doors shut, separating them. That uneasy feeling simply wasn’t going to go away, Amber thought, walking alone down the hall to Barlow & Charles.

Inside the office felt all the more lonely for his absence. No to-do file lay waiting on her desk. Amber checked Grayson’s desk, but in his haste, he’d neglected to leave instructions for her final night at Barlow & Charles. Evidence of his bad day lay all over the office. Papers were scattered over the two leather chairs, in haphazard piles on the floor and littered over the entire surface of his desk. One filing cabinet stood half open. Another flurry of papers bursting from its interior, as if the files inside had conspired to escape as soon as the drawer was opened.

Shaking her head, Amber bent to retrieve the scattered files, attempting to put them into some sort of logical order. Tomorrow Grayson would insist he couldn’t find a thing. How he could find anything in the mess on the floor was beyond her. Her ordered brain wouldn’t tolerate such chaos.

*Might as well make myself useful.* The altruistic action wasn’t nearly as noble as she pretended. It had been weeks since she’d had that first glimpse into Grayson’s files. To find out what lay behind the mystery of John Barlow, she needed another look.

But Grayson’s files yielded no clues. They contained only the details of the firm’s cases. The financial records, the corporate tax returns, all the information on the health of the company lay in Barlow’s files. The ones with the red and black labels. The one in which she’d found a letter detailing how he planned to sell out the firm.

Without proof, Grayson would never believe her. Her last night. Never again would she have an excuse to be rifling the files of Barlow & Charles. Stuffing the last of Grayson’s files back into the cabinet, Amber closed the door to this office quietly behind her and continued down the hall to John Barlow’s office.

She froze, her hand on the brass doorknob. Inside came the low murmur of a phone conversation in progress, spoken in the soft, yet menacing tones of John Barlow. Amber could have sworn his office was empty when she arrived. But she hadn’t checked. Her disappointment at not spending the evening with Grayson made her remiss. She desperately



needed into those files, and she could hardly break into Barlow's filing cabinet with him sitting right there on the phone.

Pressing her ear against the door, she strained to hear details of the conversation, but Barlow talked in a voice that was barely above a whisper. *The jerk probably enjoys everyone straining to hear him.* A subtle power trip, she realized. It made everyone else lower their voice and pay attention. *Gotta try that one some time.*

Frustrated, she returned to her desk. When had she started thinking of it as her own instead of the departed Nicole's?

Was that why Barlow insisted they didn't have the funds to hire a secretary? Because he was planning to sell off the firm to a larger one, where they'd be sucked into the machinery of a large company that already a staff of secretaries and dicta-typists?

Barlow's plan started to make a whole lot of sense. Why hadn't she seen it before? Because she'd spent all her energy on surveillance of Barlow's dangerously handsome partner, instead of Barlow, her conscience answered.

Whatever was going down in that office had to do with the sale of the firm. The sale Grayson was still ignorant of. The sale Grayson refused to believe was taking place. Barlow had kept him busy so he wouldn't find out. Not until it was too late. She knew it. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled with the rightness of her speculation.

And then a thought occurred to her. If she hadn't known Barlow was there, perhaps he didn't know she was there also. At some time in the evening he was bound to leave, either for dinner, or to lay the groundwork for the firm's downfall. Amber picked up her purse. Taking her coat from its hook, she tip-toed back down the hall and closed the door to Grayson's office behind her.

By touch alone she felt her way through the dark office, until she found the cupboard where Grayson kept several dry cleaned shirts and an emergency suit. Slowly, afraid of making even the tiniest noise, she pried the door open. It was barely big enough for her, even more cramped with the purse and her winter coat, but she squeezed inside. If Barlow caught her here, all would be lost. She counted on the fact that he'd been so immersed

in his conversation, he hadn't been paying attention to what was going on in the outer office.

*Please*, she willed the universe. *Get off the phone and leave.* But Barlow seemed content to continue his conversation while she crouched in Grayson's closet and tried not to panic. Minutes dragged by, agonizingly slow.

Finally, far down the hall, she heard the click of a door opening and soft footsteps padded her way. Amber shrank back against the far wall of the closet, flattening Grayson's starched shirts behind her. She'd get them repressed for him later. If Barlow caught her there, it wouldn't matter.

The door to Grayson's office swung open. Light spilled across the floor. Amber held her breath, in case even the tiny sound of her shallow breaths might give her away. Through the narrow band of light where the closet door didn't quite meet the carpet, she saw the shadow of a pair of black men's shoes tread past. Older men's shoes, the kind you could wear to work or to a wedding or even a funeral, polished to a dull gleam. Not the kind of shoes Grayson had in his wardrobe.

Barlow.

Grayson's desk drawer whooshed open. Metal tinkled as paper clips and pens were jostled together, then came a rustle of papers. For a moment Amber wondered if she'd made a mistake, that Grayson had come back and was wondering where she was. For one terrible moment she debated risking opening the closet door to check, but that prickling at the nape of her neck, the sickening weight of dread in her stomach kept her hiding.

She heard more drawers being opened, more papers being examined, the clunk of the filing cabinet sliding shut. Footsteps moved in her direction. Amber uttered a silent prayer.

Then, mercifully, the office door closed, she heard a series of pops and clicks as the lights in the hall were turned off, then the tape shuttling back and forth as the answering machine cued up.

In the closet the darkness was now absolute. Over the rush of blood in her ears, she heard the front door swing to a close. Then....

Nothing.

Her lungs protested their abuse with a sharp burning sensation. Slowly, Amber let go of the breath she'd been holding and dragged in

another. When Barlow didn't come leaping out of the shadows, she sagged weakly against the back of the closet, her chest heaving. For several more minutes she sat alone in the velvet darkness, listening to the rhythm of her own breathing and straining for traces of sound in the outer office. But the silence continued, and finally, she rose from the crouch, muscles screaming at being forced to maintain such an unnatural position for so long.

Slowly, she pushed the closet door open and crept out into the office. Pressing her ear against the door to the hallway, she heard nothing but the regular tick of the clock at the far end of the hall. Flattening herself against the wall, she inched toward the door to Barlow's office, half expecting it all to be a great joke and to find Barlow sitting at Nicole's desk waiting for her to reveal herself. The outer office, however, was empty.

Her hand closed around the doorknob. She hesitated, pressing her ear to the door, straining to hear signs of movement inside. But the interior was a quiet as the proverbial tomb. Amber turned the handle.

Locked.

Shoulders sagging, in a mixture of relief and frustration, she eyed the locked door to Barlow's office and wondered idly if it would respond to a good swift kick. But that would likely only get her a broken toe and make more noise than she was willing to risk. She glared at the door. But it didn't respond to her glare any better. Old investigator skills, long unused tugged at her memory.

"When was the last time you let a locked door stop you, Amber?" she whispered. Down at the bottom of her purse, along with two fuzzy Lifesavers and a disintegrating aspirin were a series of lock-picks. She'd almost thrown them out several times, but they'd come in handy once when she locked herself out of her apartment. And so they stayed.

She reached her hand into her purse, tentatively, trying not to jangle too many keys or too much change. Feeling past the wallet, the furry bristles of a hairbrush that desperately needed to be cleaned, she felt the cold metal at the bottom. Amber felt further, questing after the tiny penlight attached to her key ring. She found it, wrapped her hand around the keys to stop them from jingling.

It was awkward holding the penlight in one hand and the lock pick in the other. Her hand shook as she fed the first thin piece of metal into the

lock. Willing herself to calmness, she slid it further into the brass, probing for the mechanism that would release the tumblers. Sweaty palms made it hard to grasp the pick. Why am I so nervous? Picking someone's lock had never been pleasant, but she couldn't remember being so unnerved. Because this time it's personal, her mind answered. The future of Grayson's firm depended on a hunch. And her future with Grayson depended on not getting caught.

"Please, please, please," she chanted softly, working the lock pick slowly back and forth. She felt the tumblers give before she heard the click, sounding terribly loud in the silent office. The door to Barlow's office swung open. Pocketing the evidence, she stepped inside.

The tiny flashlight cast only the faintest of beams, enough to make it across the office without barking her shins on the desk or one of the chairs that seemed to rear up out of nowhere in the darkness. In Barlow's filing cabinet there had to be a piece of evidence damning enough to convince Grayson.

Crossing to the filing cabinet, she found it predictably locked as well. Perhaps the key was in Barlow's desk. But the desk was also locked. Amber studied this new dilemma.

Break into the desk or break into the filing cabinet. If the desk did hold the key to the filing cabinet, it would make her search easier. But if it didn't, she'd still have to pick the lock on the filing cabinet. That would make a total of three locks. She didn't think her nerves could stand it. Wrapping her hand around the thin piece of metal, she slid it into the filing cabinet lock.

The spring lock was more of a challenge, more pressure required and a smaller space in which to work. Tension mounted. What if Grayson returned and found her crouched there in the darkness raiding Barlow's filing cabinet. Would he believe her intentions were honorable? She doubted it. The lock resisted stubbornly. Amber debated giving up and trying the desk after all. Time crept by. Grayson might be back at any minute. She fed the pick further into the lock, worked it back and forth, putting some pressure behind the movement.

With a loud pong, the filing cabinet sprang open. Amber remembered to breathe.

Holding the penlight above the drawer, she searched for those files with the red and black labels, squinting to distinguish between colors that in the dark all looked like the same shade of gray.

The first drawer contained only ledgers from the past few years. Amber slid it softly closed and opened the next. More detailed accounts, tax returns for seven years running filled the next. No evidence of Barlow's plans leapt out at her. She was sure she'd found that letter in the first drawer, but the files seemed to have been rearranged.

Suddenly it all made sense. The key missing from Grayson's top drawer, where he insisted he'd left it. Barlow's last minute visit to Grayson office. Whatever he was hiding, he didn't want Amber or his partner stumbling across them accidentally.

But Amber hadn't imagined the paper she'd found nestled in the files in Barlow's top drawer. An offer by a rival firm to buy out Barlow & Charles. Why hadn't she taken a Xerox of it then, before Grayson knew what she was up to, before she'd ever met John Barlow?

Because she'd never expected Grayson to become so important to her. Not in a million years had she planned to fall victim to the devastating charm of the man who'd sued her over the only mistake she'd ever made. The mistake she was in the process of compounding. Amber flipped furiously through the files, pulling out the ones that looked likely to be scrutinized under the fading glow of her penlight.

*It has to be here, it just has to.*

Crouching in the darkness, Amber bent to open the last filing drawer. Old correspondence, some of it dating back a decade, crammed in so tightly, she had to wedge the files back in after examining them. She quickened her pace, skimming over pages and pages of text, trying to stem the rising panic at the thought that she might have risked Grayson's trust for nothing.

Only a handful of files to search. Her heart sank. And then, she noticed the dates on these last few files were more recent than the rest. Such agonizingly slow work, she mused, trying to get her fumbling fingers to move faster. Each file had to be placed back precisely where she'd found it, all its pages in order, or Barlow would know what she'd been up to. Just to be safe, she'd wipe her fingerprints off the front of the filing cabinet and the door handle. Just in case. Several times she thought she heard the sound of

the front door opening, but each heart-stopping incident turned out to be nothing more than her overactive imagination at work.

Two files left. And nothing. With trembling fingers, Amber opened the last. Her breath escaped in a rush.

But her search came up empty. The file was full of nothing but call reports to clients. With a leaden feeling of dread inside, Amber stuffed the file back in its place and reached to close the drawer.

Just as she was pulling her hand away, she felt something down at the bottom of the drawer, shoved in behind all the other files. No hanging folder sat on the rack for it. No, that file had been stuffed down behind the others because someone didn't want it to be found.

Carefully, she maneuvered it from beneath the others. Biting her lower lip, she opened the file.

"Bingo!" she whispered triumphantly. "Nice to know I'm not imagining things." In her hands lay a letter from the firm of Belaoussoff, Bekar, Karulis & Lacey confirming the proposed sale of Barlow & Charles.

The sale Grayson still didn't have an inkling about despite her many attempts to warn him. Anger surged inside her. *You won't get away with this, Barlow. I intend to see to it personally.*

No time to waste. She had to get that letter on the Xerox, make a copy of it, file it deep in her purse with the invoice from James Heck and the case she was rapidly building against John Barlow. Grayson would be back shortly. Tonight, after a little romance, when the time seemed right, she'd have a serious talk with Grayson. No ill-conceived, impulsive speeches this time. She'd lay out her case carefully, succinctly. Like a lawyer. He'd have to believe her once he saw the evidence.

Slowly, quietly, Amber shut the filing drawer and rose to leave. The insubstantial glow of the penlight had dwindled down to practically nothing, and she turned it off to conserve its last energy. She'd need it to put the file back.

She should have warmed up the photocopy machine before she went into Barlow's office, she scolded herself. All that had happened between Grayson and herself dulled her reflexes. She should stop thinking like a lover and more like a private investigator. At least until she was out of Barlow & Charles and the entire incident was over.

*Just a couple more minutes, that's all I need,* she prayed as she walked silently across the carpet toward the door. Her hand circled the brass knob.

But just as she was about to turn it, the door sprang open.

Dazzling light from hall beyond assaulted her senses. Amber flung an arm across her face to ease the glare on her eyes made sensitive by the darkness. She blinked, taking in the dark form of an overweight stocky man in an ill-tailored suit. Her eyes teared. But there was no mistaking the quiet menace in John Barlow's voice.

"Can I help you, Miss Shaw?"

Amber scoured her brain for a glib reply. There was no disguising the predicament she'd been caught in. Standing well into Barlow's territory, the damning file in her hand, her quick reflexes escaped her. There was nothing she could think of to say that would deflect the attention from the papers in her hand. No way to rush by him to the photocopy machine, which would take at least five minutes to warm up, make her copy, grab her coat out of Grayson's closet where she'd left it, and dash through the door carrying a copy of Barlow's private property. No way out at all.

"I--"

"You what, Miss Shaw?" Barlow growled.

She could see him now, her eyes finally adjusted to the light. And the expression on his face wasn't friendly at all.

"I--" Damn it, why wouldn't her brain work? Why hadn't she thought of an alibi before she went barreling in there?

"You're going to hand over my property and sit quietly while I call the police," Barlow instructed.

"I don't think so," Amber countered boldly.

"No?" Barlow raised an eyebrow. On Grayson the expression looked charming. On his partner it appeared all the more lecherous. "Then I'm afraid, Miss Shaw, you're even more foolish than I thought."

Amber's mind belatedly sprang into high gear. Schemes formed, then were instantly rejected. Playing meek wasn't going to work on John Barlow. Trapped between him and the door, her only defense appeared to be a formidable offense.

“Thought you could get away with it, didn’t you?” she bluffed. Stall him long enough to think up something better.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” If she didn’t know better, she’d think Barlow sounded bored. Did he really consider her that much of a push-over? She’d show him. “You’re the one, Miss Shaw, who broke into my office and thieved my property. I ought to ask you the same question.”

“And what about the property you’re about to steal?” Amber charged ahead. No turning back now. Not with the evidence in her hands. Barlow could do what he wanted, she had no witnesses to back up her story. “Did you neglect to tell your partner you were about to sell to the firm out from under his feet? The very company he’s been working night and day to build up, while you were out there tearing it down.”

“How very dramatic.”

“It will be when Grayson finds out what you’ve been up to.”

“It isn’t a crime to sell off one’s assets, Miss Shaw.”

“It is when they’re not entirely yours.”

“I beg to differ. I started this firm.”

“He’ll never agree.” Amber’s hand tightened on the file. She couldn’t let that paper fall into Barlow’s clutches. Grayson would never believe her without the hard evidence to back up her claim.

“He won’t have a choice.” Barlow smiled like a wolverine. “And you needn’t worry about your lover, he’ll be well paid for his share, since that seems to be your concern.”

Is that what he thought? That she was worried about Grayson’s assets for the money involved? The swine. Money obviously mattered a great deal to Barlow or he would never have forged the deal she was desperately trying to stop him from completing. “Money isn’t the issue here.”

“Isn’t it, Miss Shaw? I’d say most people have a price. What’s yours?”

The worm, was he really trying to buy her off? Why didn’t he just call the police as he threatened? Afraid the publicity would damage his carefully cultivated deal, she decided.

“My price is beyond your budget, Mr. Barlow. It’s called honesty, integrity.”



To her amazement Barlow burst into laughter. “And this from the woman who makes her living spying on other people! The woman who got sued for her incompetence.”

“We aren’t talking about me.”

“Oh, but we could be.”

She had to get past him, get away with that document in her possession. Taking a gamble, Amber blurted, “Grayson already knows. I told him.” She watched as the facade of Barlow’s self assurance crumbled, then added, “He’s out right now, undoing your hard work.” Chew on that one, she thought viciously.

And darted to the right.

Flattening herself to the wall, she dove for the freedom of the outer office. Shocked, Barlow spun belatedly in pursuit. For an instant, she thought she was free. Never mind the coat, she’d hail a cab. Hopefully Grayson would return before Barlow sent the police after her. The leather strap of her purse snapped tight. Suddenly she found herself flailing backward. Knocked off balance the file flew from her grip, scattering papers in a brief whirlwind of white. As one, they dove for the precious documents.

The office door flew open. Amber looked up to find Grayson towering in the doorway. He glanced from Barlow to the mess on the floor, then back to Amber. His expression darkened, like storm clouds gathering.

“What the hell’s going on in here?”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Amber dove for the pile of scattered papers, Barlow in quick pursuit. Barlow was bigger, but Amber was faster. She would have made it, except that the heel of her pump slid on the slick bond paper. With an undignified tumble, she went down, scattering the papers in the file further out of recognizable order.

The sudden fall served to put her closer to her goal and she shuffled the papers, searching desperately for the one golden piece that would prove her claim.

Barlow found it first.

Amber snatched it from his hands. He yanked it back. With a horrifying sound, the paper tore. She found half the letter in her hands. The other half, the one containing the last paragraph that closed the deal and the signatures of the partners of Belaoussoff, Bekar, Karulis & Lacey, Barlow claimed. Stuffing it deep into the inside pocket of his blazer, he turned to face Grayson.

“*Your* private investigator,” Barlow thrust his fists against his hips in righteous indignation, “has been rifling my personal files.”

Grayson’s eyes widened at the accusation. He watched in obvious embarrassment as she climbed awkwardly to her feet. “Amber?”

“What’s going on here,” Amber said, leaping into the conversation before Barlow could get another word out, “is that your partner has arranged to sell the firm you worked so hard to build to Belaoussoff & Bekar...”

“Karulis and Lacey?” Grayson finished. She watched the flush of his anger drain slowly from his face as he digested this new piece of information. His expression paled from disbelief to dismay. Circles seemed to etch themselves deeper beneath his eyes against the pallor brought on from nights of hard work and too little sleep. He put down his briefcase. Crossing his arms over his chest, he turned to Barlow. His posture

proclaimed the confrontation to come, but to Amber he looked like a young boy who'd been betrayed by his best friend. "John, is this true?"

"Of course not." Barlow dusted off his suit pants and straightened. "Just another point in the smear campaign this private investigator of yours is trying to build against me. Really, Charles. I don't care what you do in your off hours, but this liaison has become more than recreational, it's damaging the integrity of this firm. People are talking."

"What people--"

Amber shoved the half piece of paper at Grayson before Barlow could answer his question. "People are talking all right. And it isn't about you and me. It's about the sale of this firm."

Grayson took the paper from her hands. Dragging his eyes downward, he forced himself to read the three legible paragraphs before the rip.

"The sale he's been arranging behind your back while you've been working yourself to death trying to pay his bills." Amber kept talking. To pause only gave Barlow an opportunity to jump in and persuade Grayson to take his side.

"Believe none of this," Barlow ordered.

"The firm is bankrupt," Amber continued. She glared at Barlow, afraid even to look at Grayson. If he believed Barlow instead of her, she didn't want to know. Not until she'd laid it all on the line. "I found the ledger in Barlow's files my first day on the job."

"Those files are my personal property. She had no business being in there. I ought to charge her with--"

Grayson's head came up. "I want to see those files."

Digging in his pocket, Barlow came up with a series of small keys on a ring. "Fine. Look all you like. There are no such papers in my files."

His performance convinced Grayson. Amber watched him falter, shifting ever so slightly to Barlow's side of the argument. Truth leant Barlow strength. Even if Grayson did examine the files, he wouldn't find the ones she'd seen there.

"Not anymore," Amber interjected quickly. "He destroyed them."

Barlow shot her a caustic look. "That accusation is even more ridiculous than the last. Need I remind you, Miss Shaw, that breaking and entering is against the law."

Logic tipped the balance a little more in Barlow's favor. Certainly what she'd done lay on the shady side of the law. But she'd been trying to protect Grayson's interests. Anger bubbled up inside her, demanding release. Barlow was the one breaking the law, selling off what wasn't his. She stabbed a finger in Barlow's direction.

"He knew I'd been in his office, so he destroyed the evidence. If it wasn't for me, his plan would have gone off without a hitch. That's why he was so angry with you when he came back from holiday. That's why he wanted you to get rid of me."

"Then there's no proof." Defeat colored Grayson's expression. He was right. There was no proof, none but her word. Appearances were not on her side. In Grayson's place even she would have believed Barlow. She was the one with her hand in the cookie jar. Certain Barlow had won him over, she glanced at Grayson trying to determine whether he believed his partner's word over hers. Guarded eyes betrayed nothing of what he felt. But she could feel his faith slipping away from her as he listened to the hard facts of his partner's argument. As a lawyer, he'd be more likely to be swayed by cold detail than the longing of his heart. She couldn't let Barlow win him over.

"I'm the proof! I'm your witness." Amber took the paper from his hands. "I can tell you what the rest of this letter says. I can tell you how much your firm is in the red, because I saw the papers."

"Don't believe her," Barlow said, quietly, reasonably. "Though Miss Shaw is an attractive woman, she is also deranged. She has no evidence to back up her ridiculous claim."

Barlow's words a ring of truth to them, Amber reluctantly agreed. She had no evidence, no proof.

"The ledger has been destroyed," Amber said quickly. "But evidence of the sale of the firm is in Barlow's pocket." She did look at him then, openly, without pleading and risked her very heart. "You'll just have to believe me, Grayson."

"She's lying." The command behind Barlow's words was impressive. He must have been a formidable lawyer, Amber thought. Before he lost his integrity. Barlow looked earnestly at Grayson. "Belaoussoff & Bekar did make an offer to purchase the firm, but nothing's happened with it so far."

Without that last paragraph the letter could be interpreted that way. She couldn't allow Barlow to convince him of that.

"Belaoussoff & Bekar have agreed not only to purchase the firm, but to assume its debts. The deal is practically cinched. Barlow kindly accepted their offer on your behalf. All he needs is your signature." She glared at Barlow "Were you going to forge that as well?"

"Enough of this! I won't stand here and be insulted." Barlow scraped up his papers and rose to leave.

Grayson stepped in his path. "Give me the paper John."

"No."

Standing so close together, the difference in their heights and ages was even more pronounced. What had drawn Grayson to this clearly unreliable man, Amber wondered. Was he trying to replace the father he'd lost? Her sympathy disappeared with Barlow's next words.

"She has no proof of her allegations. Who are you going to believe? Your own partner, or the woman you had to sue for her incompetence?" He waited another second, letting the weight of his argument settle, then added, "Don't disappoint me, Grayson."

Barlow's words dropped into the silence. For a moment Amber had been certain she had Grayson on her side. Then Barlow reached in to tug on his heart strings, dredging up their long history together. A history that went back a lot further than the brief month she and Grayson had been together.

Grayson weakened, buying into the validity of his partner's argument. What Barlow had done was illegal, no doubt about that. But she was the one who'd been caught. Appearances alone accused her.

This was the moment she'd been dreading. Amber felt her heartbeat hesitate, as if in suspended animation. It would take a huge leap of faith for Grayson to believe her over his partner. As a lawyer, Barlow could build a much better argument than she. As his father's partner, Grayson had grown up respecting the older man. Barlow was cool, calm, logical. She had only accusations with no proof of their validity. And a dubious track record at that. Grayson mistrusted her before. Why would he trust her now, when so much was at stake? So much more than an argument. The future of his firm. The future of their relationship.

Anticipation of the disappointment to come seeped into her soul. They'd all proclaimed their love for her, Eric, her father. And they'd all been ... lying. She felt her stomach clench, her shoulders tighten, waiting for the inevitable blow. From the moment she knew she loved Grayson, she'd worried that put to the test, he would disappoint her bitterly. As Eric had. She tried to catch his eye, to show him the sum of her pure and desperate hope, but Grayson had his attention fixed solely on Barlow.

Amber shut her eyes in silent prayer.

"I'm going to believe Amber," Grayson said quietly. "Even if the truth isn't what I want to hear."

"You'll regret this."

Grayson shook his head. "The regrets will be yours, John. Belaoussoff's home number ought to be somewhere in my dad's Rolodex. And if it's not, I'll just keep going, even if I have to call Bekar in Bermuda or Karulis by radio phone up north at the chalet. You might as well give it to me. Because I will get that information, one way or another."

"Don't make a fool of yourself."

"Once they hear what you've done, I doubt they'll want you for a partner. But if they do, you're welcome to sell your share of the firm to Belaoussoff & Bekar, in fact, I heartily urge you to."

"I built this firm--" Barlow began.

"My father built this firm. And I worked my butt off to keep it going. Admit it, Barlow, this partnership isn't working. Even my brother can see that. You're right, John. People are talking."

"Can't you recognize a good deal when it's right under your nose?"

"A good deal! For whom? You? Belaoussoff & Bekar?" Grayson bent to retrieve his briefcase. Opening it, he shoved the paper inside and snapped it closed. "First thing tomorrow morning, I'm going to decline their offer."

"You're not the man your father was." He launched the insult like an arrow at Grayson's back.

Slowly, Grayson rose to face him. "Right you are about that. I'm nothing like my father." Wrenching the door open, he motioned with a flourish for Barlow to step through. "Take your things and go. From now on these are my offices. Especially since I've been doing all the work in this firm."

“I can’t believe you’re asking me to leave.”

“Long over due, I assure you. If my father had severed your partnership he might have lived longer.” He fixed Barlow with a long hard stare. “How much did you shorten his life by?”

He uttered the words so quietly, Amber wasn’t sure she’d heard him. But Barlow did. Snatching up his coat, he stepped through the doorway, then whirled to face Grayson. “You sound as ridiculous as your crazy PI.”

“Actually,” Grayson said. “I think I just went sane.”

He closed the door, cutting off the rest of Barlow’s protests. His footsteps thudded off down the carpeted hallway. They heard him punch the elevator button, then the muted rush of the doors sliding shut.

Amber sagged against the door, as if Barlow might come crashing through it again. With a deep sigh, Grayson sat on the corner of the desk and rested his head in his hands.

“I can’t believe I did that.”

“Grayson--”

His reply was muffled by his hands. “What?”

“I was telling the truth.”

He held out his hand, and when she stepped into range, grasped her and pulled her close. “I know.”

“What made you so sure?”

“I love you, Amber. I just knew.”

“Kind of the way you just know someone’s guilty when they insist they’re innocent.”

“Sort of.”

“So what now?”

“I suppose I have an early morning meeting at Belaoussoff & Bekar.” He ran a hand over his face. “And a ton of work to do if I’m going to set up my own firm.”

“He wasn’t an asset to you.”

“Roger’s been telling me that for a long time.”

“Well, he’s right.”

“Roger? Right? Ms. Shaw, have you completely lost your mind?”

“Perhaps I’m just developing a deeper appreciation of your twin.”

“I’ll believe that one when I see the hard evidence.”

She nuzzled deeper against his chest. “That shouldn’t be too hard. After all, he does have a few qualities in common with you.”

“Does he now? I wouldn’t have expected to hear that from you.”

“Grayson! I am trying.”

“I’m sure Roger will appreciate that. He likes you, you know.”

“So you keep saying.”

“He thinks you’re the woman I should marry.”

“What do you think?”

Grayson rested his head against hers. His arms tightened around her. “I think he’s right.”

Eyes closed, she traced the outline of his chin with her lips until she located the center of his warmth. And for a second she was lost in the feel of him, his weight pressed against her. She laced her hands through his dark curls, reveling in the thick rough texture of his hair.

Knowing finally Grayson was truly hers.

Knowledge settled like a warm reassuring weight within her. Barlow’s betrayal strengthened their relationship instead of breaking it apart as she’d feared. The firm was safe. And she had Grayson.

The pressure of his lips urged hers apart. His hot probing tongue invaded her mouth. A gentle invasion of the most welcoming sort. He made no pretense of his intention. He wanted her. She burrowed deeper into the V made by his legs answering his unspoken question.

His mouth left hers. She felt the brush of his kiss against the pulse behind her ear, then the pale column of her neck. Warm breath puffed against her collar bone as he set to work on the tiny buttons of her blouse with his teeth.

She laughed, her slight movement throwing him momentarily off target. Undaunted, he returned immediately to his task as if he intended to chew through the thin fabric to get to her. Maneuvering one button open, he moved to tackle the next. The roughness of his unshaven chin rasped against her bare chest, and she shivered anticipating more. Deciding he could wait no longer, his mouth fastened on the peak of her breast. Warmth seeped through the silk and the insubstantial barrier of her bra. Within it Amber felt the flick of his tongue and moaned, deep and low in her throat.



With Grayson sitting on the corner of the desk, they were almost the same height, his body ripe for her plundering. Amber's hands slid over the roughness of his wool suit jacket, sliding down over his lapels, until she could reach in between the layers of wool and the smooth cotton of an expensive man's shirt. Muscles bunched beneath her questing fingers. Her small hands dipped lower, finding the waistband of his pants. Then, deciding it was all out of order, went to work on his tie instead.

The tight knot proved to be beyond her patience. She wanted to rip open his shirt beneath it. Large hands covered hers before she could destroy his clothing and came to her aid. Deftly, he worked the knot open, tossing the thin strip of material aside. Amber spread her fingers over the expanse of his chest, weaving them through the thick hair. Her mouth closed on the copper circle of his nipple. His chest rose then fell as he sighed and tugged her closer.

She followed his lead, sliding over to tease the other, then dipping lower with little nibbles, until she met the barrier of his belt.

Definitely beyond her skill. With a sigh of her own, she reached down to undo the silver buckle. But his hands captured hers. She brought her head up sharply, staring suddenly into the dark intensity of his desire.

"Amber..."

"Mmm?"

"Not here," he said quietly. "Not on Nicole's desk."

Suddenly she regained her senses, remembering where they were, what had just happened. And the very real possibility that Barlow could return and find them like this.

But the joy of finding him truly hers, of finding someone in whom she could place her trust would not be contained. Amber kissed him, luring his attention back to her, to their celebration of sorts.

For a moment it seemed he could be persuaded. But then he moved gently, but firmly away. "No, Amber, not after all the ugliness that happened here tonight."

She felt the keen loss of him, of his warmth, his comfort and longed to replace it. "There's that nice leather couch in your office."

"There is...." He hesitated, considering.

Amber pulled away from him, grasping his hand, ready to lure him in the direction of his office.

“And then again...” Grayson said pulling her back. “There’s also a nice couch in front of my fireplace at home.”

“There is that.”

“And I have a nice ... wide bed to cuddle up in afterward--”

“During--”

Warm breath ruffled her hair as he chuckled. “Before--”

“It’s a long drive. I don’t think I can wait that long.”

“Patience is a virtue, Ms. Shaw.”

With one hand Grayson felt blindly along the wall until he found the light switch and plunged the office into darkness.

“Let’s go home, then. I’ll deal with the rest of this in the morning. Tonight is for us.”

His eyes searched for her coat, finding instead the empty hook on the wall. “Didn’t you bring a coat?”

“It’s on the floor of your closet.”

“What?”

He pulled away from her, with teasing little kisses, she urged him back. “Tell you about it later.”

Amber waited while Grayson retrieved her coat from his closet floor and with a puzzled look draped it around her shoulders. Sheltered beneath his arm she walked the short distance to his Mercedes.

With her mind on the night ahead and her relief in winning back Grayson’s love, Amber failed to consider the possibility that implicating Barlow might destroy the peace between them.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

If Amber thought the offices of Barlow & Charles were untidy before, they were a disaster now.

John Barlow's obsessively ordered files lay in haphazard piles around the office as government auditors as well as the lawyers hired by Grayson and the law firm of Belaoussoff, Bekar, Karulis and Lacey struggled to determine whether or not a crime had been committed.

The phone rang incessantly with concerned clients calling for reassurance. Everyone wanted to talk to Grayson. A few called for Barlow, but with all his business transactions for the past few years under scrutiny, he was barred from the office.

Still no charges had been filed. Which meant that John Barlow was free to sit in his home office within reach of his telephone and spread rumors about his partner, Grayson Charles.

Which of course led to more phone calls, deeper investigation. More files strewn around the office of Barlow and Charles, more lines of worry etched in Grayson's face when he staggered home at night.

Grayson had Amber working full-time on his own investigation of Barlow, delving years into the past. What she suspected would be painful for him to deal with. He'd always thought Barlow's partnership was a congenial one. But if her hunch proved true, it had been Barlow who profited from the work of Gordon Charles and not the other way around. No wonder Grayson worried about his mother's retirement. No wonder he'd felt pressured to work hard to strengthen his father's legacy. Amber suspected Barlow had been siphoning off money from Barlow and Charles from the very beginning.

All she needed was proof. Proof that would vindicate Grayson and his late father. Proof to hold John Barlow accountable for his crimes.

\* \* \* \*

Amber stole a glance in her rearview mirror and frowned. There it was again, the same battered brown car that had dogged her since she left the city.

Merely another commuter, she'd assumed at first. Someone else taking the highway to one of the bedroom communities north of the city. But when she'd failed to lose him on the twisting country roads, now made slick by rain rapidly turning to ice, old instincts caused the hair on the back of her neck to prickle with anxiety.

She knew when she was being followed. She'd done it enough times herself to know the signs. Keep a few cars back. Change lanes to make it look random, closer now, then further away. And don't tail someone in a flashy car with vanity plates or they'll be sure to spot you.

Still, she'd noted the brown Ford with the chipped fender easily enough. If he turned off in the next five minutes, she'd chalk it up to nerves. If not, then she was definitely being followed and she wanted to know by whom.

Amber lifted her foot from the gas pedal, slowing enough to coast back a couple of car lengths, hoping to catch a glimpse of who was driving the Ford. But it pulled in behind an eighteen-wheeler disappeared from view.

Someone working for John Barlow maybe. But Barlow already knew Amber and Grayson were a couple. And being a partner in the firm, he would certainly know where Grayson lived.

A disquieting thought occurred to her. What if it wasn't anyone working for Barlow? Her shadow could be someone she'd angered. An enemy she'd made in Fair Game's day to day business of revenge.

In a divorce case the parties were too angry with each other to worry about the private investigator who took the incriminating pictures. But Fair Game brought things down to a personal level.

Had she angered someone enough to plan their own revenge? She'd assumed the vivisected mouse, the slashed tire and the angry note were ploys of John Barlow's to keep her away from Grayson and the secrets in the filing cabinets at Fair Game.

But what if they weren't?

The turnoff to Grayson's house wound away in the distance. Should she keep driving to throw the brown Ford off her trail?

The road narrowed to one meandering lane of traffic each way. Tearing her eyes from the slick pavement, Amber checked her mirror again, and caught a glimpse of brown, outlined against the line of bare trees by the side of the road. Still there, two cars back. She looked again at the turnoff, realizing with a sinking feeling that it led only to more secluded country roads before it reached Grayson's house. Private Investigator instincts went to work. A woman alone in a car could be easily forced off the road. Was that what the person in the car tailing intended? She had about two seconds to make her decision, or she'd be past the turnoff and committed to traveling more country roads alone.

In a splash of gravel and ice, the Ford pulled out from behind, racing against the on-coming traffic to pass her. A wave of dirty water stole her vision as it passed, destroying all chances of catching a glimpse of the driver.

When the wipers had cleared the windshield of muddy water, the battered Ford was no longer in view. Amber sagged against the seat in relief. Not following her after all.

Turning off the highway, she headed for the sanctuary of Grayson's house.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, and still Grayson hadn't arrived.

Amber lay in his loft bed, watching the play of candlelight across the sloping ceiling. Her laptop beeped, signaling the end of its battery power. Giving up on work, she turned off the computer.

According to the radio, freezing rain snarled traffic for miles. She hated to think what it had done to the hairpin turns that branched off from the highway. Crossing to the window, she gazed out into the darkness. No glow of headlights broke the woven blackness of trees and road. No distant rumble of a car motor could be heard above the staccato beat of ice pellets against the roof.

They should have both stayed at her apartment in town. But during the past few weeks she'd practically lived at Grayson's, and the arrangement

seemed to suit him fine. Why didn't she just move in with him? he argued whenever the topic arose.

So why didn't she?

With a sigh, she took the ladder downstairs to make hot chocolate. It was obvious she wouldn't be getting any sleep until Grayson arrived home safely.

But her doubts followed her down to the kitchen. Shadows danced on the walls, cast by the flames from the fireplace.

Doubts danced in their wake. She couldn't dispel the feeling that there was something left uncompleted, some vital clue in the investigation with Barlow that she'd overlooked. The answer to who might be following her, who she might have angered, lingered just beyond conscious reach. If she thought about it long enough, it would come to her. But the notion drifted away from her replaced by that other worry.

Commitment Phobia, Sandy had pronounced it. "It's your fear of repeating that last devastating relationship," she insisted. Amber reflected darkly that Roger's intended deserved to be granted a doctorate in pop psychology in deference to the number of self-help books she'd devoured trying to lure the reluctant Roger to the altar. But maybe Sandy was right. Cold dread settled in her stomach every time she thought of saying 'I do'.

Still that didn't explain the nightmares or the constant feeling of being watched. It didn't explain a lot of things, Amber thought taking the kettle off the stove.

The sound of a key in the lock nearly sent a wave of scalding water splashing across the floor.

"What's wrong?" Grayson asked, taking in the look of panic on her face, the kettle she brandished like a weapon. "You look spooked."

All those doubts, the tale of her harrowing trip home lingered on the tip of her tongue. Amber choked them back. Grayson looked exhausted. No sense worrying him until she knew for certain they were in danger. Spoken out loud it all sounded so ... paranoid.

"You startled me, that's all." She tried to force some levity into her voice and failed.

Grayson didn't seem to notice. From the set of his jaw and the crease between his eyebrows, she could tell his worries about Barlow and Charles had followed him home.

"Hot chocolate?" she asked.

He smiled weakly. "Thanks, but I think I better just hit the sack."

Brushing his lips briefly against her temple, he climbed the ladder to the loft and did just that.

Amber heard not a sound from him as she finished her hot chocolate. But when she climbed the ladder and slid back into his wide bed, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, spoon-like. She could feel the tension in him, his body taut, even though he'd supposedly been asleep for half an hour.

"I've been thinking.-."

Oh oh. Amber felt her stomach clench, ready to deal with another problem, another worry. Grayson never said he'd been thinking, unless he had been thinking. About something important. About their future together, about the firm, either way it meant a heavy late-night discussion instead of reflecting on her paranoia in the sobering light of morning after a good night's sleep.

She twisted around so she could see his face, then burrowed into the crook between his neck and shoulder. "Grayson, you're exhausted, you should go to sleep."

He pulled her closer still. She felt every inch of tight muscle pressed against her. If he did that again, she'd lose the capacity for intellectual thought. "I've been thinking about us," Grayson finished.

Her warm languid thoughts cooled into a tight knot in her stomach. But Grayson didn't seem to notice. Rough stubble brushed her ear as he buried his face in her hair. "I keeping thinking when all of this is over we should make this a permanent kind of arrangement. But then tonight when I was slogging through all the work that needed to be done yesterday, I got to thinking, why wait? You're the one thing that is going right in my life."

Yes! part of her cried out silently. Marry me, love me, protect me. She almost said the words, but then her breath caught in her chest. Her heart skipped a beat then resumed thudding rapid fire. She dragged in a breath past the constriction in her chest, knowing in some rational part of her mind

it was only her body betraying her, acting out its warning she was in danger of being hurt.

Why did Grayson's proposal, something she desired more than anything else in the world feel so much like Eric's rejection? Why when the man she loved had just proposed did she feel exactly as she felt when her fiancé betrayed her days before their wedding?

That old panic triggered new ones, tightening her chest further, stopping her from accepting Grayson's offer of a lifelong commitment to her.

Played out in her mind, she watched her father leave, saw his shape receding as he walked out the door. She heard her mother's bitter warning, "That's what happens when you combine your destiny with a man's. You get hurt." Amber squeezed her eyes shut, but the images just kept coming.

"It's just not working for me," Eric leered from that dark spot in her mind where she kept her deepest hurt. She still had a silk and lace wedding dress in the back of her closet to show for her pain.

But Grayson is different, her heart insisted.

You thought Eric was different her mind replied. She'd trusted him, loved him, and in the end he'd walked away with his new love leaving her with a broken heart, a failing business and a massive catering bill.

"Amber?"

She jolted back to her senses her heart still racing. Grayson looked intently into her face. How long had she kept him waiting for an answer to his proposal?

"A permanent kind of thing?" she asked, stalling to catch her breath. "Like moving in together?"

"A permanent kind of thing like moving in together permanently, forever."

Calm down, she ordered herself. Her body refused to cooperate. She had to find a way out of this conversation to buy herself time to straighten out her tangled feelings. Time to relieve the terror that insisted this time she was setting herself up to be irretrievably hurt.

Because she loved Grayson. More than she'd ever loved anyone else in her life.



The crease between his eyebrows deepened. He drew the wrong conclusions from her silence, but she could barely spare oxygen to breathe instead of reassuring him.

“A permanent kind of thing, like getting married,” Grayson finished, as if she needed clarification.

They couldn’t have this conversation now, not with her heartbeat pounding in her ears and her stomach clenched into a tight ball. She needed time to convince herself Grayson wasn’t Eric. In desperation she settled on the first excuse that leapt to mind. “Should we be thinking about this now?” The words came out more harshly than she meant them to. “I mean we’re both under so much stress. You’ve got the problems at firm to deal with and my business isn’t going well, except for the work you’re giving me, and I don’t know how much longer you can realistically afford to do that--”

“Yes! I do think we should be discussing this now.” Amber could hear the hurt behind his anger and frustration. “I love you. I want you to be part of my life. Forever.”

“I love you, too. And I want to be part of your life, Grayson--” The knot in her stomach wound tighter. Grayson drew entirely the wrong conclusions. The argument snowballed rapidly out of control. Somehow she had to rectify the situation.

“But what, Amber?” She heard the coldness seep into his tone as he put up barriers against the rejection he suspected was coming. “If you don’t want to marry me, you should just say.”

\* \* \* \*

How could he have misread the situation so completely?

Grayson cursed himself silently. He’d mistaken Amber’s contentment with their current situation as a sign she was ready for greater commitment. He’d assumed she shared his dreams for their future together. But instead of his surprise proposal being met with joy, Amber looked about to burst into tears at any moment.

Which could only mean like a fool he’d risked his heart once again. Well, better to know now than later. Better to have this happen while everything else in his life was falling apart anyway. Grayson prepared himself to be hurt.

“I do want to marry you, Grayson.”

Her words cut into his thoughts. With her eyes brimming over with tears, she didn't look like she wanted to get married. He levered himself up on one elbow and turned on the light above the bed. "So what is it then?"

"I--I'd just like to talk about it in the morning that's all. We're both tired and stressed out--"

But tonight had held all the magic. When he'd come home from the nightmare at Barlow & Charles to find her standing in his kitchen wearing that fuzzy robe, he'd felt that somehow everything in his life would be all right. That's why he'd offered such an impulsive proposal of marriage. Now he felt like a total fool. He wanted to cry himself. But he wouldn't, he'd shamed himself enough already. Out of a desperate attempt to soothe his pain and put the situation to rights, he insisted, "In the morning I'll be right back in the middle of the mess in my office. I want to discuss it now."

Tears spilled over onto her cheeks, tumbling like pearls onto the duvet. "You don't understand," she got out, then the words deteriorated into sobs.

Whatever it was, it broke her heart as well he realized, his anger evaporating. He reached for her, pulling her back into his arms. "What is it, Amber?" he forced himself to ask gently. "What don't I understand?"

"How I feel." She shuddered against him, struggling to say more.

His hand cupped the back of her head. He wound his fingers through her fiery curls, as though by pulling her closer he could somehow shield her from her hurts with his body. "You can tell me, Amber. It's all right."

"It sounds so foolish when I say it aloud," she said. "I want to marry you, Grayson. I love you. I'm just so afraid of--"

"Of what?" he prompted gently, when her words would have dissolved into tears again.

"Of getting hurt again."

He opened his mouth to protest her image of him, but she continued.

"I know it doesn't sound much like the Fearless Amber Shaw Private Investigator, Avenger for the Lovelorn, but that's just a stupid image I try to portray. Inside I'm--"

"Still hurting," he finished for her. "We've both been hurt. But we have to find the strength to try again. It's a hard thing to do, but I thought it was working between us. I'm prepared to take the risk."

“This horrible fear I have,” she stammered, “I can’t make it go away.”

“Don’t you know that I love you, Amber?” Grayson asked, risking her rejection all over again.

“Yes, but--”

If she loved him, she wouldn’t have said ‘but’. If she truly loved him, she would have said ‘yes’ emphatically. He prepared himself to hear the same string of excuses Melanie had given him. “It’s not you it’s me. You really are a nice guy, you’ll make some other woman happy.”

Self defense turned his pain to anger. How could she possibly compare him to that lout who’d deserted her? He wanted to ease her pain, but at the moment his own overwhelmed him.

“How can you possibly think I’d leave you after all we’ve been through together?” he heard himself demanding. “How can you take the declaration of my love and just throw it back at me?”

Amber’s mouth moved, but no sound came out. She buried her head in the crook of his shoulder, and he was dismayed to feel the hot wetness of her tears soaking the hair on his chest. Now what had he said? All he’d wanted was confirmation of her love for him. An enthusiastic yes to his clumsy and ill-timed proposal. Somehow he’d upset her deeply and damned if he knew how. It had always been that way. Roger had always instinctively understood the secret ways of women while Grayson had been obviously ignorant.

“Amber.” His voice came out rough, as raw as his feelings. “I love you. I want you to be my wife. But if that’s not what you want, then you should tell me now.”

\* \* \* \*

This wasn’t how Amber wanted the conversation to go at all. Grayson’s distress only intensified her own panic. “But don’t you see, Grayson?” she stammered past the vice around her chest and the lump in her throat. “All the men in my life said they loved me. Eric, my father. But they were lying.” Her words sliced through the conversation. She heard Grayson’s quick intake of breath and winced at her own clumsiness. Bad enough that she’d accused him of being untrustworthy, now she’d accused him of lying as well.

“Oh God, that’s not what I meant,” she moaned. But he thrust her away from him to sit by herself along side him in bed.

“Understand one thing,” he said, and she could hear the protective coldness in his voice as he laid out his argument as if he was in court. “I’m not Eric. I’m not your father. I’m not a dishonest man. I offer you my love freely. If you choose not to accept it, then I think you’re right, we ought to discuss this in the morning.”

“But Grayson--” If the thought of marrying Grayson made her heart pound, the thought of losing him sent a pang of anxiety through her entire body. Somehow, she had to think past her fears, find the right words before she damaged the fragile understanding between them completely.

But he stole the opportunity from her, turning out the light and putting his back to her.

“In fact,” he said. “I don’t think we have much to discuss at all.”

The hurt in his voice put an end to the conversation. She’d asked him for time, and time he’d given her. So why did it hurt so much? Why did it feel like she’d lost something irretrievable? A man’s trust, Amber thought lying silently beside him the dark, listening to the sound of his breathing and the rapid beat of rain. His body lay warm beside her, and she longed to snuggle back into his arms. It didn’t help when a few hours later, Grayson rolled over in his sleep and drew her closer. Did that mean she was forgiven? That even in his sleep he somehow understood?

\* \* \* \*

Morning dashed her hopes of reconciliation.

Their late night discussion caused them both to sleep late. Cursing at the alarm clock they’d slept through, Grayson showered quickly and left the house without breakfast, offering her no more than a curt, “Talk to you later,” on his way out the door.

Amber sat at the kitchen table with a cup of the coffee she’d made for him cooling in her hands. Like their argument, last night’s storm had passed. Weak sunlight streamed through the high windows casting watery yellow streaks across the floor. But unlike the weather, the argument with Grayson only served to muddy things instead of clearing the air. Amber sighed. She should get dressed and go to work, do what she could to salvage

Fair Game, Inc. from insolvency. She should do something other than sitting at Grayson's table. But she couldn't seem to pry herself from the chair.

What would she have without Grayson? she asked herself bitterly. The same as she had when her relationship with Eric had broken up, her mind answered. A failing business and a lifetime of loneliness stretching before her. Only this time it hadn't been Eric who'd destroyed the relationship. She had done that herself.

"Batting a thousand here, aren't we Amber," she whispered. She wondered idly if she should take her clothes and toothbrush with her when she left today.

Tears stung her eyes, but she sniffed them back, determined to do what she could today to fix the situation as best she could. If things couldn't be mended with Grayson, then she had to find a way to salvage Fair Game, Inc. Amber Shaw, Private Investigator did not go down without a fight.

But somehow knowing Grayson had dampened her joy in taking revenge. Getting even on behalf of the lovelorn no longer held the appeal it once had. The thought of spending another moment dwelling on the dark side of love started her heart pounding all over again. Last night's panic attack took the strength from her spine, leaving each limb feeling as if she'd run a marathon. Dawn's gray light tinged the sky by the time she'd fallen asleep.

Grimacing around a mouthful of cold coffee, she dumped what was left in the sink and went upstairs to get dressed. Her problems would not be solved by sitting at Grayson's kitchen table, Amber rebuked herself.

She'd go into work, make an appointment to see her accountant, discuss what could be done about the company's flagging receivables. Perhaps the act of sitting at her desk would nudge her mind toward a solution.

Somehow she'd find a way to save both Fair Game and her relationship with Grayson.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Amber shivered in the frigid air of early dusk. Last night's storm had passed, leaving the air clear and crisp with the promise of frost to come. The premature sunset had stolen the last of the sun's warming rays. Dried husks of leaves rattled across the sidewalk.

Late autumn always brought depression. The brief days, the bare stalks of trees gray against the sky cast her in a somber mood. Flagging business at Fair Game and the mess at Barlow and Charles amounted to a staggering list of problems. Topped off by her argument with Grayson and her unwanted shadow, it was far too much for one person, Amber decided.

And that was before the meeting with her accountant.

Another month, he'd warned her. If things didn't improve by Christmas, she'd be closing the doors of Fair Game forever. Most people didn't have an urgent need for Private Investigators in December, she thought darkly. They were too busy enjoying the holiday.

The prospect of another heart-wrenching talk with Grayson only served to sour her mood further. Somehow she had to mend the rift between them, find the words that would make it all right when all others had failed.

That, or spend another Christmas eating a turkey TV dinner alone.

But Grayson had been out when she arrived. A thick file folder and a list of scrawled instructions greeted her instead. The disorder at the firm only nagged at her already frazzled thoughts. The offices of Barlow & Charles were no place to have a personal conversation, Amber decided. Leaving a note for Grayson to call her later, she gathered up the folder and headed for her own apartment.

Rush hour traffic had appropriated most of the curb side parking when she had arrived, forcing Amber to park several blocks from Grayson's office. She didn't mind the walk in the brisk sun of afternoon, but the empty sidewalks seemed somehow sinister in the thickening darkness.

Dark thoughts occupied so much of her mind, Amber almost missed the soft patter on the pavement behind her. She slowed her pace, listening again for the soft tread of rubber soled shoes behind her.

Events swirled in her mind, the pieces of the puzzle taking shape. The dead mouse, the flat tire, mysterious car following her home, the constant sense of being followed. What was the common piece of the puzzle? What buried clue had she missed?

A stone ricocheted off the pavement behind her. She heard a smothered curse.

*Not again,* she prayed silently. *Not tonight when I'm already tired.*

She listened intently, straining to hear over the rattle of leaves against the sidewalk. Sure enough--nearly buried beneath the rough hiss of the leaves, she heard the regular tread of footsteps moving toward her.

Amber squinted into the shadows between the streetlights. Her car was parked in the next block. Rummaging in her purse, her fingers closed around the cold metal of her keys, as much to use as a weapon as a quick entry to her car. Trying to appear nonchalant, she glanced behind her.

Just in time to see a shadow dart into the darkness between buildings.

Amber crossed the street. The beat of footsteps against the pavement followed, closer now. She picked up speed. The tempo of footsteps quickened. Instinct screamed at her to run.

She cast a quick glance behind her and caught a glimpse of black upon black. Black trench coat, black pants and shoes, black where his face should have been. Streetlights picked up the glint of eyes in the darkness, the flash of his teeth.

Giving up on decorum, Amber raced down the pavement. Another few feet and she'd reach the sanctuary of her car. She brandished her car keys, ready to use them as a weapon if need be.

She raced to the driver's side of her car, fumbled the key into the lock. She wrenched the door open, half fell inside.

A frighteningly strong hand gripped her shoulder and hauled her back. The wool of his ski mask brushed her cheek. Amber spun, bringing the cold arc of her keys down where she guessed his face to be. She felt the impact as the metal tore through wool, cutting into the skin beneath.

Uttering a harsh curse, her assailant wrenched her arm behind her.

“Do that again,” he hissed, his breath hot against her cheek. Her stomach lurched at the smell of garlic mixed with whiskey. “And I’ll snap your little arm like a twig.” He gave it a twist to make sure she understood. Shoving her arm further, counting on pain to hold her to the spot, he fumbled with something in the pocket of his trench coat.

Broken arm or no, she didn’t intend to obey him. Raising her leg, she brought the heel of her boot down on his instep with as much strength as she could summon.

A howl of pain told her she’d hit her mark. His grip loosened. Amber scrambled away from him and dove toward the still open door of her car. If she could just get herself into the car, get the door locked, perhaps she could still escape. Drive to the nearest police station and plead her case.

She heard the scrape of his shoes against the asphalt behind her before she felt the impact. Then she sprawled face down in the road, grazing palms and knees. His weight knocked the breath from her lungs. Amber heaved against him, desperation lending her strength.

But she was no match for the thick cloth that covered her face or the sickening chemical smell that dragged her down into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Darkness, pure and absolute. Concrete pressed against her, stiffening every muscle with its penetrating cold. Awareness brought a surge of panic.

With a desperate surge of will, Amber brought her body under control. Rough cloth scraped against her lashes as her eyelids flickered and she realized her eyes were already open and that a thick layer of burlap blocked her vision.

More of the cloth was stuffed into her mouth. Its foul taste made her retch, but she shook off the reflex. No sense alerting whoever watched her that she had regained consciousness. Amber moved her lips testing the gag and finding her mouth bound with something sticky and immovable. Duct tape, she thought, occupying her mind with inventory to keep the panic at bay.

A stab of pain lanced through her wrist. Moving her fingers, she found her hands bound with metal handcuffs that cut into the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrists. No way she’d be wiggling out of that, she thought, testing them. Her feet had gone to sleep long ago, but even through



the pins and needles, she could tell her legs were just as securely bound with coarse rope.

Wet smells of rot and decay penetrated the cloth. A basement, she deduced. That would explain the dampness and the concrete. She forced herself to take shallow breaths around the gag and not give in to the urge to scream. Not that it would do any good.

Straining her ears, she picked out only the sound of water dripping somewhere. No one moving, no one breathing. Where ever she was, it seemed she was quite alone.

Dust clogged her throat. Amber gasped for breath, trying to lever herself into a sitting position. Instead, she caught only a mouthful of musty cloth. She landed on her side, gaining only a nasty smack on the side of her head for her efforts. She dragged in a breath, drawing the burlap taut against her nostrils. She choked around a mouthful of cloth, dust burning her lungs. Her chest heaving in an attempt to fill itself with air, Amber fought for control of her breathing.

Her mind spiraled off into a number of unsavory scenarios, embellishing sickening thoughts of what a man could do to a woman bound, gagged and blindfolded. She had no idea where she was. Her last recollection was of the fight by her car. Drugged, she had no sense of how much time had passed, how far he could have been taken. She could be miles from home. She might be miles from civilization.

Memories flooded her mind. She remembered running, falling a man's weight pressed against her, his breath hot against her ear.

*I'll break your little arm like a twig.* Familiarity burned in her mind. Something in the inflection of his words, the bald cruelty in his tone nagged at her memory. Amber worked her mind around the problem. Who did she know who prided himself on his ruthlessness?

Amber forced herself to remember every syllable in their brief exchange, every loathsome touch of him. Somewhere in those last few minutes of consciousness lay the answer to the riddle. It had to be someone who knew her, who had reason to bear a grudge against her.

Or she could simply be the random choice of a maniac or a serial killer, her mind suggested with another surge of panic. Amber reined in her escaping thoughts. In spite of her terror and physical discomfort, she had to

solve the riddle. Because she didn't know how much time she'd have until that someone returned.

A sudden thought brought stinging tears to her eyes.

She never had the chance to tell Grayson she was sorry. He might never know what had happened to her.

He may never know she loved him.

\* \* \* \*

“Amber!”

Grayson knocked again on her apartment door. When his pounding died into silence, he put his ear to the door and listened. Nothing. No television or radio playing, no sounds of activity at all.

He glanced again at the note in his hand. *Working at my place tonight*, she'd written. This morning he'd been unable to think past his hurt and embarrassment over her rejection of his proposal of marriage. Another client pulling out of Barlow & Charles hadn't improved his disposition. By the time Amber arrived at the firm, he'd been too tired and stressed out to make more than a brief effort of conversation.

But as the evening wore on, he grew lonely for her company. As his anger dissipated, he found himself wondering if she'd acted out of her own hurt and the still stinging memory of that last rejection. A phone call only reached her answering machine. He couldn't reach her at Fair Game either. He'd returned to Barlow & Charles to find her hastily scrawled note. Working at home....

Arriving at her building, he couldn't shake the feeling something was very wrong. A glance at her apartment showed him only darkness, the drapes open. Not an Amber kind of thing to do. She bordered on obsessive about locking doors and drawing blinds. Perhaps she'd gone back to Fair Game, or out to grab a late dinner.

As he raised his fist for one last knock, the door across the hall swung open. Grayson groaned.

“You again!” snarled a male voice behind him.

Grayson turned slowly, holding his hands up in the universal gesture of surrender. He met the bristling gaze of Amber's neighbor. Chris, Amber had called him. Killer was more apt, Grayson mused. The guy had no neck.

“Have you seen Amber?” he asked in the most conversational tone he could manage.

“You slow or something, buddy?” Killer, or rather Chris, demanded. “She’s through with you.”

“She told you that?” Grayson asked incredulously.

“She don’t answer the door, she don’t want to talk to you,” Chris said, as if that made perfect sense.

“You don’t understand. She told me she’d be here. She told me to come over.” Grayson tried not to choke on the lie. He’d assumed her note was invitation to try to make peace between them. Perhaps he’d jumped to the wrong conclusion.

“You sure about that, pal?” Leaning against the door, Chris crossed beefy arms. “Pretty little woman living alone like that can’t be too careful. What with all them stalkers and perverts wandering the streets.”

“I’m not a pervert,” Grayson insisted. “I’m a lawyer.”

“Same difference the way I see it.”

Grayson crossed his arms, mirroring Killer’s posture. The conversation deteriorated out of his control. But he couldn’t leave without finding out whether Amber had been home yet tonight. “I’m also her fiancé,” he said, playing his last card.

“So, why don’t she want to talk to you?”

“She does want to talk to me,” he ground out through clenched teeth. “But she’s not here. And I’m worried about her.”

“Haven’t seen her,” Chris said and shut the door to his apartment.

“Why didn’t you just say so?” Grayson snarled after him.

The door swung open again.

“Hurt that girl the way her last fiancé did, and we’ll be having a little talk. Understand, Bud?”

Before Grayson could answer, the door slammed shut.

\* \* \* \*

Her fingers had gone numb. Whether from loss of circulation or cold Amber couldn’t tell. Hunger gnawed at her stomach, gnawed at her nerves. Thinking back, she couldn’t be certain when she’d last eaten. After the late night argument with Grayson, she’d been too distracted for breakfast. She remembered grabbing a bagel mid-afternoon. No wonder her stomach

rumbled, adding to the litany of other discomforts. Shoulder muscles screamed in agony at the strain of having her arms bound behind her back. Amber shifted on the damp concrete, trying to find a more comfortable position, and failed.

Straining against the handcuffs, only served to rub another raw streak across her wrists.

The rattle of car wheels against gravel outside made her cease her efforts. She heard the muffled sound of a car door slamming, followed by the jingle of keys. Footsteps crossed the floor above. Heavy boots, she deduced. No leather soled shoes for her captor. Someone who worked in construction, she thought putting her mind behind the problem. Or someone who couldn't afford upscale clothes.

Footsteps paused above her, listening. The screech of rusty hinges tore the silence. Stairs creaked beneath his weight.

Someone heavy set. Amber added that item to her inventory. That would rule out John Barlow, she thought. Unless of course Barlow hired someone to do his dirty work for him.

Boots scuffed against the uneven floor. Amber held her breath, afraid to give away the fact that she was conscious, thinking.

A steel toe connected with her ribs. She grunted in spite of herself.

“Sit up,” a voice barked. “I know you’re awake.”

That voice! His words spiraled through her mind. She knew that voice. Not John Barlow’s, but someone else she knew.

“I can’t sit up,” she tried to say around the gag and the layers of burlap. But it came out as no more than a pitiful moan.

“A little out of our element now, aren’t we, Amber?” He uttered a grating laugh, too high for a man’s voice. Not a pleasant sound at all, she decided. He had the kind of personality that instantly rubbed people the wrong way. She did know someone like that, but her mind refused to make the connection. “Kind of like a fish out of water, aren’t we?” he prompted. She also hated people who referred to themselves in the plural. “Or should I say a piranha out of water?”

Who referred to women as piranhas? Someone who wasn’t comfortable with women, obviously.

Amber cycled through her memories of the past few weeks. Barlow? Not quite his style, she decided. John Barlow, if nothing else, was well educated, exacting in his speech. But Grayson's soon to be ex-partner was also a man under a great deal of strain at the moment. Amber filed Barlow away as a possibility.

Someone she'd taken revenge against? Mentally, she shuffled through the lovers of her recent clients.

Roger?

No Roger had a better sense of humor when it came to his own failings. Besides he and Sandy were back together, and supposedly headed for the altar. According to Sandy anyway.

The guy from apartment four?

If his ex-girlfriend hadn't spilled the beans, number four would never know Amber had been involved. There had to be another explanation. Something obvious she was overlooking.

"What's the matter?" Her captive's voice cut into her thoughts. "Has the little wolverine run out of things to say?"

*Wolverine*, she thought. *An odd word to use*. Revealing that even though she was tied up, he considered himself at a disadvantage. Familiarity teased her mind, his identity lingering just beyond reach.

"Hungry?" her captor asked. Amber's stomach rumbled obligingly.

Paper rustled as he unwrapped what she assumed to be a chocolate bar. Anything, her stomach urged.

But instead of removing the bag over her head or undoing her gag, she heard the wet sounds of chewing. He smacked his lips, more wet sounds as he licked his fingers.

Her stomach contracted painfully, accepting that food would be denied. She heard him crumple the wrapper in his fist. The paper fell to the floor, rolling to rest against her arm.

"Mmm, that was good."

Definitely not John Barlow, Amber decided. Barlow was so obsessively neat he would never have tossed the wrapper on the floor.

\* \* \* \*

"You're acting paranoid." Roger dumped espresso grounds into the trash compactor. "She probably just went out for dinner."

“She said she’d be home.” Grayson took the cappuccino he didn’t want and headed for the living room.

“Maybe she’s trying to make you suffer a little. Women do that kind of thing,” Roger offered.

Coming here had been a mistake, Grayson thought. Roger was worse than useless when it came to advice about the female of the species. Still, he couldn’t dispel the sense of wrongness that had come over him when Amber hadn’t answered her phone. “Amber’s not a game-playing kind of woman,” he said finally.

“All women play games,” Roger pronounced. “It’s part of the mating dance.”

“The--” Grayson bit back the ugly retort lingering on the tip of his tongue. “Save the pop psychology, Roger. Something’s happened to Amber. I just know it.”

“Maybe she had a change of plans and didn’t tell you because she knew you were mad at her and probably wouldn’t be speaking to her anyway.”

“That’s just not like her,” Grayson insisted. “And besides, she’s not at home. She’s not at the office, she didn’t go back to my place. I can’t find her anywhere.” His voice rose in tune with his anxiety. “I’ll never forgive myself if something’s happened to her.”

“Okay,” Roger said, holding up a hand. “Let’s talk about what we know. She’s not at home like she said she’d be. Was her car there?”

“I didn’t think to look for her car,” Grayson admitted.

“Some private eye you’d make.”

Setting down his coffee cup hard enough to slosh liquid over the rim, ignoring Roger’s worried glance, Grayson jumped to his feet. “I’ll go check out the car.”

“Whoa!” Roger said, getting to his feet as well. “If you’re that upset, I’d better come with you. Then we can check out twice as many places.”

\* \* \* \*

Grayson stared at the white sign above the empty parking place.  
*Reserved for Fair Game, Inc.*

“Doesn’t look like she went back to the office.” He had been hoping to find her car in its allotted spot and an apologetic Amber sitting at the

chrome desk in her glass office. The car was missing, the office sat in darkness, and building security was getting more than a little suspicious of the two men asking questions.

Grayson would have pressed for more questions. But Roger grasped him by the shoulder and said, "Let's do a quick drive by of her apartment. Maybe she's home by now."

Roger's cellular phone only netted him another message on Amber's machine. His anxiety grew with every passing second. He shouldn't have fought with her. He should have listened, tried to understand. But he hadn't, and they'd parted in the morning angry with each other. If anything happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

Amber's red Honda wasn't in its allotted parking space. Even from the sidewalk he could tell the drapes in her living room were open and the apartment dark. He didn't want to risk another run in with Chris, the wrestler from across the hall. Not with Roger along. Roger would shoot off his mouth and get them both killed. Grayson had the feeling even Roger and he combined wouldn't be a match for the solid wall of muscle that Amber's neighbor called a chest.

But tonight Roger acted quite uncharacteristically. Roger was the one keeping his head for a change.

"Maybe she went back to your office," Roger said with a worried glance in Grayson's direction. "Gray?"

Grayson came to his senses with a start, realizing he'd been staring up at Amber's apartment for several minutes now, saying nothing.

"Worth a try." Picking up Roger's cell phone, he dialed the offices of Barlow & Charles.

His own voice answered, prompting him to leave a brief message including the time of his call. He slammed the phone shut.

Usually Roger would berate him for abusing one of his new gadgets, but Roger merely shot him another of those sideways glances and remained silent.

Grayson wasn't sure he liked this new Roger. The old one had been far more predictable.

The Honda wasn't parked at any of the meters in front of Barlow & Charles. Nor did they find it in the pricey lot in the next block. Another lead

turning up empty. Amber was the private investigator, Grayson thought glumly. She'd have a plan of action. Amber would know where else to look. Grayson found himself at loss as to what to do next.

"Maybe we should call the police." Roger swung the Porsche into traffic. Grayson scanned the quiet streets for signs of Amber's car, his heart sinking as the blocks passed. "I mean, she's hours late now--"

"Wait!"

Roger slammed on the brakes. The Porsche responded, nearly standing on its end. Grayson's seat belt jerked him backward.

"What?" Roger asked, plainly startled. He glanced in the mirror to make sure he was in no danger of being rear-ended. The street was quiet.

"I thought I saw something, under that tree back there." Grayson pointed to a shadowed spot on a short block behind them. A lane branched off from the road, running behind the office buildings. Roger drew the Carrera around in a sharp turn and pulled up beside.

At first there was nothing unusual about the ancient red Civic parked alone on the street. But as they drew nearer, Grayson made out the deeper shadow of a door left ajar. He felt his heart pounding as if he'd been running as they reached the car.

"Is it hers?" Roger asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

Turning his head to see in dim light, Grayson scanned the license plate. "FG 1," he said, noting Amber's vanity plates. "It's hers all right."

"Damn," he heard Roger's quiet curse.

Steeling himself for what he might find inside, Grayson crept up to the car door and wrenched it open.

"Should you do that?" Roger asked. "I mean, if the police--" He fell abruptly silent.

"I have to know," Grayson said. And forced himself to look into the shadowed interior.

Empty.

He let his breath go in a rush. At least she wasn't tied up inside, murdered or worse--

Grayson reined in his imagination. He felt Roger's hand on his shoulder, watched as Roger dipped his head to scan the interior. Felt Roger heave that same sigh of relief.



But then Roger said, “What about the trunk?” And his wild imagination leapt back into gear. The glare Grayson offered his brother made Roger take a step backward. “Okay, okay. Hang on, let me get my flashlight and we’ll have a look around.”

Still, he couldn’t get the image of Amber suffocating in the Honda’s cramped trunk out of his mind. It looked too small to hold even someone as slight as Amber, but now that Roger had mentioned it, he had to be sure.

Roger’s flashlight cast a shifting pool of gold, as he walked toward him. A spattering of glass sparkled against the tarmac. Grayson glanced absently at it. Beneath the Honda, he caught another flash of silver.

“Wait a minute,” he said, practically snatching the flashlight from Roger’s hands. Shining it under the Honda he saw the silver outline of a ring of keys.

He sprawled out on the road, reaching a long arm under the car, heedless of the oil and glass on the road. Extending his fingers as far as he could reach, his hand closed on cold metal. Gingerly he picked them up, knowing he was tampering with evidence. If Amber’s body was crammed in the Honda’s trunk, he had to know.

Holding the key by its rubber grip with two fingers, he slid it into the lock. The trunk popped open, revealing a set of booster cables, a first aid kit and Amber’s 35mm camera.

“Well, at least she’s not in the trunk,” Roger said.

\* \* \* \*

“Let’s you and me have a little chat.” Amber’s captor kicked the chocolate bar wrapper out of the way and walked toward her. Heedless of her aching shoulders or her abused wrists, he hauled her head up. That only served to put more pressure on her back and shoulder, unable to bear any of her weight with her hands and legs bound. She winced, but refused to cry out, just in case he was one of those sadistic maniacs who enjoyed causing pain.

He wedged her head between his knees, facing outward so she couldn’t see him, and lifted the burlap enough to rip the tape from her mouth. Pale light flashed across her vision. She caught a glimpse of a large concrete room. The wan light of a flashlight did nothing to illuminate the

thickly shadowed corners. She spat the foul tasting cloth from her mouth. Ignoring the pain in her neck, she twisted to see her captor's face.

"Not so fast." Strong hands wrenched her head back around. Burlap covered her face once more. He released her, letting her fall awkwardly back to the floor.

"Who are you?"

Grating laughter answered her question. "Some PI you are, Ms Shaw if you can't figure that one out."

Well, Amber reasoned. She hadn't expected him to tell her. She merely hoped he'd be caught off guard enough to answer. Biting back a nasty retort that could only worsen the situation, she said, "I know you, don't I?"

His laughter died into silence. "Oh, you never had much time for me, Ms Shaw."

Never had much time for me. What did that mean? Until now, she'd assumed her captor was either John Barlow or some creature he'd hired so he wouldn't have to dirty his hands in the business of revenge. It stood to reason it would be Barlow. Investigative lore maintained the most likely suspect was the one who was most desperate. The person with the most to lose. All leads led back to John Barlow. Barlow had his house, his firm and his reputation at stake. Barlow had embezzled money from Grayson's firm for over twenty years. Barlow desperately wanted to keep his dark secret safe.

But now that the secret had been blown wide open, did Barlow want revenge upon the woman responsible?

Amber would bet her paycheck on it. That didn't explain the comment, you never had much time for me.

So it was someone she knew. Someone who held a grudge for a perceived snub. "You're someone who's angry with me," she ventured.

"And you're wondering why, aren't you?"

She nodded. The burlap scratched against the cloth of her jacket.

"You'd like me to tell you, wouldn't you?"

Amber nodded again.

“I’m not going to do that, sweetheart.” He drawled out the endearment, making it sound more like a curse. “It’s such a rare treat for me to see the great Amber Shaw at a loss.”

Sweetheart. Someone had called her that. Recently.

“You want me to suffer,” she stated as matter-of-factly as she could. “Why?”

“Because you made me suffer, Amber. Figure it out. Make the connection, girl. You made me suffer, and you don’t even remember.”

She had made John Barlow suffer. But not in the personal way her captor seemed to suggest. And if he wasn’t Barlow or in Barlow’s hire, then that left her without a point of reference. No where to start, she thought fighting back another wave of panic.

“If I hurt you, I’m sorry,” she ventured.

“Naw, you’re not, Amber Babe. You never gave a damn about me. You thought the whole world was yours to pick and choose from. Did you think you could keep on taking what wasn’t yours and get away with it?”

“What wasn’t mine?” Amber blurted, anger getting the better of her. “I’ve never stolen a thing in my life. In spite of the fact that life has done a good deal of stealing from me!” Now what on earth made her say that, she wondered.

“Oh right,” came that disembodied voice. Closer now, bending over her. The smell of garlic penetrated the burlap. “Daddy ran away when you were little. And even your ex-fiancé decided he couldn’t live with you.”

The barb startled her into silence. “But how--”

“Learn from my example, Amber Babe. I know how to do my research.”

Panic struggled for control. Amber fought it back. Telling herself it wasn’t a matter of the heart they were discussing here, but the cold reality of what might be her murder, she allowed the rational private investigator side of her personality free rein.

Someone had called her sweetheart recently. Someone she had no time for. Someone who also called her babe with the same sickening results. Someone she’d taken something from.

*“Thanks for the other day, babe.”* The words seared through her memory. Panic got the better of her. Her heart pounded furiously. Breath choked in her throat.

Suddenly, Amber had the most awful suspicion who her captor was.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Grayson slammed the trunk shut and leaned against Amber's car.

"What now?" Roger asked.

"Now I find the bastard that did this to her, and--"

"And what?" Roger gripped him by the shoulders. "We've found her car abandoned, and her keys lying on the pavement. But we don't know for sure that someone's done *anything* to her. We should go to the police and get them working on the case. Now, before it's too late."

"It might already be too late, Roger." Grayson shook off his hands and paced away from him. "By the time the cops get working on it, Amber could be dead."

"We don't know for certain she's in danger."

"I do. The facts are staring you right in the face. It doesn't look to me like Amber decided to have dinner with a friend so suddenly that she left her car door open and threw her keys under the car for safe keeping."

"No," Roger conceded. "But who would want to hurt Amber?"

"Good question." Grayson stopped pacing. "One name springs readily to mind."

"Who?" Roger asked cautiously.

"John Barlow."

"Barlow!" Roger held up a hand. "Now Gray, this is sounding just a little too wild for my liking."

"Think about it, Little Brother. Old Jumpy John's got this great scam going here. He's been scamming money from Barlow & Charles since we were kids. And he nearly got away with selling a nearly bankrupt firm and making a tidy profit. He would have gotten away with it if it weren't for Amber Shaw."

"Okay, I'm with you there. But number one," Roger counted the points off on his fingers. "It hasn't been proven yet that Old Barlow was

embezzling. Depending on what your investigators find, he could be suing you for defamation of character, slander--”

“That charge would never stick,” Grayson muttered. “Barlow’s been stealing money. I’d bet on it. I just can’t believe I was so blind I didn’t see it.”

“Assuming he’s guilty and really mad at Amber for seeing through his ploy and bringing the law down on him, that still doesn’t mean he’s crazy enough to ... to what, Gray? Kidnap her? What would that get him?”

“I don’t know,” Grayson snarled. “But I intend to find out.”

Roger snatched at his sleeve as he rushed past him and yanked him back. “Before you go charging up to Barlow’s house and making a scene, why don’t we spend two seconds considering if there might be any other likely suspects.”

“Like who?”

“One of her former client’s ex-beaus maybe.”

“I told her this revenge thing was dangerous!” Grayson said. And told her he had. When his warnings had gone unheeded, he’d given her work at Barlow and Charles, figuring if he could keep Fair Game in the black, Amber would turn away from the business of revenge.

“She sure made you mad enough at her,” Roger’s voice cut into his thoughts. “Mad enough to sue her.”

Like he needed a reminder about that just now. Grayson opened his mouth for a quick retort, but his conscience wouldn’t let him forget that he had been furious with Ms. Amber Shaw, proprietor of Fair Game, Inc. Angry enough to take her to court. Amber wielded the power to yank his emotions in every direction--love, anger, tenderness, sometimes all three combined.

“Do you know who any of her clients were?”

“Beside Sandy, no. She’s keeps that information confidential.”

“So we’re back to Barlow.”

Grayson shot him a sideways glance. “Unless you can pick a lock?”

Roger motioned to the ring of keys he still clutched in his hand, as if by holding them tight, he could somehow protect Amber. “Bet we won’t have to. Bet the key to her office is right on that key ring.”

“No, we’ve lost too much time already. You go to Fair Game and see if you can get a few of those names and addresses. I’m going to go wake up Old Barlow.”

“Maybe I should come with you.”

“We don’t have time,” Grayson strode back toward Roger’s car, intending to drive off with the Porsche himself if Roger didn’t hurry up.

Instead he found Roger right behind him. “Okay, Gray, I’ll see what I can do. But if this doesn’t work, we’ve got to go to the police.”

It would work, Grayson thought. If Barlow knew where Amber was, if this was another of his partner’s devious ploys, he’d have the answer out of him one way or another.

“Don’t do anything at Barlow’s that could get you thrown in jail, okay?” Roger warned. “That’s not going to help Amber. Promise you’ll keep your head about this.”

“Sure, I promise,” Grayson said. Roger took one look at his face and turned away with a shake of his head that said he believed anything but. With a sigh, his twin turned the Porsche in the direction of Barlow’s house.

\* \* \* \*

Barlow lived in a more elegant house than the one Grayson had grown up in. But then John Barlow always had nicer things than Gordon Charles, Grayson thought as Roger turned down the winding lane. It had never occurred to him to wonder why.

“Let me out here,” he said when Roger would have driven right up to the front door.

“You sure about this?” his twin asked, plainly worried.

“I’m just going to talk to him, Roger. Not punch him out. Although,” he admitted, “the thought had occurred to me.”

“I’d better wait.”

“You’d better get those names,” he said in a tone that offered no argument.

“Just remember what it would do to Mom if you ended up in jail,” Roger warned. And drove off.

As he walked up the path, Grayson saw the edge of the curtain drop back into place. It was past midnight. He wondered if Barlow would open

the door to him. He hadn't considered what he'd do if his partner refused to see him.

But the door swung open as he mounted the last of the steps.

"What do you want?" Barlow snapped.

In the dim light he barely recognized his partner. In the past few weeks, the older man had dropped a considerable amount of weight, leaving his cheeks hollowed, his face gaunt. His self-assured, arrogant manner was gone, but the hunger that burned still in his piercing eyes was the same. A desperate man, Grayson thought with an inward shudder. He'd called John Barlow uptight, jumpy, never realizing what that look really meant.

"I want to know where she is."

"Where who is?" Barlow asked, knowing well enough Grayson could only mean Amber.

"You know damned well who." Grayson heard his own voice rising and made an effort to calm himself. Barlow would find a way to use his own desperation against him.

"Regrettably, I don't have a clue what you're talking about," Barlow said, making no move to invite Grayson in. With his body, he blocked the doorway, leaving Grayson to stand awkwardly on the step.

Fine, if that was how he wanted to play it. "I'm talking about Amber Shaw." Grayson enunciated her name carefully, playing Barlow's game, making sure there could be no misunderstanding.

John Barlow looked truly surprised. "In what delusion would you think I'd have any idea where the incorrigible Ms. Shaw is?"

"Don't play games with me, John. I know you hired that PI to try and split us up."

"Even if I did," Barlow held up a hand, "and I'm not saying I did, why would you think I'd have any idea as to her whereabouts?"

Accusation hung in the air between them. *If you can't control your mistress*, Barlow had warned him.

"Because she's missing," Grayson spat out. In spite his promise to Roger, he found the urge to deck John Barlow intensifying. All manner of awful things could have happened to Amber and John Barlow insisted on playing games, toying with Grayson to prolong his discomfort. He longed to



do something physical, just to relieve his own frustration and the terrible fear that Amber was in danger.

“You mean she left you?” Amusement colored Barlow’s tone. Grayson ignored it. If he so much as glanced at his estranged partner’s smug face, he would hit him. Then Roger would be bailing him out of jail, and God knew what would happen to Amber.

“I mean she’s been abducted. We found her car abandoned.”

“I dare say the police would serve you better than I,” Barlow said in that same dry tone.

“I thought--” The words were out of his mouth before he could call them back.

“You thought what?” Barlow raised an eyebrow. “That I kidnapped your disagreeable girlfriend? For what purpose, Grayson?” He uttered his partner’s name like a curse. “To buy back the damage she’s done to my reputation? You better be building a damned good case against me, Mr. Charles, because I intend to see you in court!”

That’s exactly how Barlow intended to hold onto the house he bought with money embezzled from the firm, Grayson thought bitterly, with the proceeds from his slander suit against Grayson Charles.

Grayson’s arm shot out, preventing Barlow from slamming the door in his face. “If it’s really true that you know nothing about Amber’s disappearance, how about letting me in to have a look around?”

“If you want a look inside, get a search warrant!” Barlow threw his weight against the door.

Grayson yanked his fingers out of the way, as the door slammed shut with a resounding boom.

“At least I didn’t get arrested,” he remarked grimly to himself. Though a night in jail would be worth the peace of mind of knowing Amber wasn’t tied up in Barlow’s basement.

\* \* \* \*

He should have thought about how long a walk it was back to the street before he let Roger drive off. And how much time would be wasted finding a phone. Grayson cursed the short sightedness of his plan. He’d been so certain he’d find Amber at Barlow’s that he hadn’t thought beyond

liberating her from Barlow's clutches. Standing in the phone booth that was at least a foot too narrow for his shoulders, he dialed Roger's cell phone.

Roger answered on the first ring.

"That's brilliant, Gray. Ring my phone, let the guard know I'm here."

He ignored Roger's sarcasm. "Where exactly are you?"

"Looking for the keys to her filing cabinet."

"Try her desk drawer."

"I'm trying to figure out which key opens the desk." He could hear the frustration in Roger's voice, even over the background noise of the street. "It's not like I can turn on a light, is it?"

"Best to keep it dark and quiet." Belatedly, Grayson realized how stupid that sounded.

"I was trying to," Roger snapped, "before you called."

Distracting Roger before frayed nerves caused an argument, Grayson asked, "How did you get past the guard?"

"He was asleep," Roger said. "Can you believe it? Some security system they got there. Amber should ask for a rebate on her rent." Realizing what he was saying, he fell silent. "How'd it go with Barlow?"

"He insists he knows nothing and threatened me with a new lawsuit."

"Tell me you didn't hit him."

"I didn't hit him, Roger. But I nearly lost my hand in the door."

\* \* \* \*

He stood very close to her now. Amber could feel the heat of his body in the damp cold of the basement.

"Always thinking about yourself weren't you, Amber?" He said her name with the same insincerity as telephone sales people. *If you'd just like to give us your credit card number, Ms Shaw, we'll sign you up for a lifetime supply of--or if you'd just be so kind to sit there Amber, while I murder you....*

Amber stayed silent, testing her hypothesis. She knew of one particular person whom she'd made very angry. But that was a matter of business and not to be taken personally.

"You couldn't be satisfied with what was yours, could you Amber? You had to go after what was mine." His voice rose, bordering on hysteria.

Amber turned her head in the direction of his voice. Somehow she had to calm him, keep him talking until she could tell for certain. Until she could think of a way to convince him to let her go. “Look, I really do want to make this all up to you.” It was hard to sound sincere with her teeth chattering in the cold and a burlap bag over her head.

“Sure you do, Amber Babe. Are you going to give me my work back? Are you going to give me my self respect back? How are you going to do that, hmm, Amber Babe?”

“Why don’t you tell me exactly what it was I did.” She hoped the answer would confirm her suspicions.

His quick intake of breath made her hope fervently he wasn’t winding up to hit her.

Instead, he brought his head down beside hers. She felt the hot puff of his breath through the burlap, smelled the garlic from his dinner. Scent, sound added pieces to the puzzle. Memory supplied a dark, greasy-haired man leaning over her desk. Garlic wafted down at her on his hot breath as he leered down her top. *So, how’s it going, Amber Babe?* She had to keep him talking. In another couple of seconds she’d be certain of his identity.

The menace in his tone shook her from her reverie. “I’ll tell you what you did to me, Amber Sweetheart. First you took my livelihood...” He gripped her thighs, leaning heavily on her. Shudders worked their way down her spine at the contact. She tried to keep herself from shivering. “But hey,” he said in a falsely lighthearted tone, “I’m an understanding guy, and I always kinda had the hots for you, Amber Babe. Kinda admired your spunk. Even if it was costing me.”

In that second she did know for sure. Hindsight pointed out all the clues she’d missed in clarity that had escaped her the first time. With a sinking feeling Amber remembered the times he’d come on to her, which had been practically every time their paths crossed. She’d assumed he enjoyed making her uncomfortable. Never had she dreamed he actually cared, albeit in a sick and twisted kind of way.

“So, I figured, what the hell. I’d tell you how I feel. I wore my heart on my sleeve for you, Amber Sweetheart. And what’d you do?”

“I didn’t realize--”

“Kinda dense for a PI, aren’t you?”

“I really didn’t--”

“What’d you do, Amber?”

She didn’t know how to answer. What could she say that wouldn’t intensify the anger she could feel radiating from him, in his body’s heat and the vice grip in which he held her?

“Say it Amber.” His grip tightened, bruising her.

She shook her head.

“Say it,” he ordered. “Say you wouldn’t even look at me when you could have that lawyer boyfriend of yours instead.”

“I really didn’t realize you felt that way.” Her voice shook in spite of her vow to remain calm.

“Like hell you didn’t,” he roared, lurching away from her. She heard the scuff of his feet against the rough cement floor.

“That kind of thing,” he said in a voice full of quiet menace that chilled her heart. “Kinda messes with a guy’s head.”

\* \* \* \*

“Filing cabinet’s open.” Roger’s voice was muffled as he held the phone between his neck and shoulder, making it hard for Grayson to hear against the noise from the street.

“See anything?”

“Man, she’s almost as obsessively neat as Jumpy John.”

“Are there any names, Roger?” Grayson reined in his temper. He refused to fight with Roger here in a public phone booth, not while Amber was in danger.

“Here’s Sandy’s file.” Paper rustled. “Wonder what she said about me.”

“Roger!”

“Okay, okay. Some stuff on a guy named Marchand, but according to this he’s a client, not one of her intended victims.”

“Anything else?”

More paper rustling. The clunk of a heavy file drawer closing.

“Whoa! Now, here’s something.”

“What?” Grayson had to restrain himself from yelling into the phone.

“A copy of an invoice addressed to John Barlow from a guy named James Heck of Heck, Sleuth & Company. Who the hell, or I should say, who the heck is James Heck?”

How could he have been so stupid? Grayson swallowed the bile rising in his throat. He’d seen the evidence with his own eyes when Amber brought him the invoice as proof she wasn’t having an affair with James Heck. She’d insisted John Barlow had arranged the whole charade.

“Hey, Gray, you still there? Do you know this guy?”

“Yeah,” Grayson found his voice. “He’s the jerk that showed up at the office with a bouquet of flowers for Amber.”

“The one who caused the huge fight?”

Trust Roger to phrase it in the most indelicate terms possible. Grayson shook his head. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Gray, I think we might have something here.”

“You think this Heck guy might be involved?”

“If he was willing to pull a sleazy stunt like that at the office, who knows what else he would be willing to do.”

“And get paid for it by Barlow,” Grayson finished.

“I think we’d better check this guy out. He sounds like our man.”

He’d called Amber paranoid. And all the time she was in danger. “Is there an address on that invoice?”

“An office address.” He heard Roger moving around in the office, opening more cabinets. “But I bet there’s a listing for his home address in the phone book.”

“Good thinking.” For once they worked together like they had when they were boys cramming late nights on a science project. Before love came between them. “I’m at the gas station behind Barlow’s house. Pick me up and we’ll go have a chat with Mr. Heck.”

Grayson imagined Roger frowning at the phone. “It’s nearly three in the morning. Do you think we should really go knocking on his door?”

“You don’t have to come with me,” Grayson said. “There’s no reason Mom should have to bail both of us out of jail.”

“No, I’m coming with you, Gray. That way I won’t have to explain to Mom how you got yourself killed.”

\* \* \* \*

James Heck owned a ramshackle bungalow on the outskirts of town. Even in the darkness Grayson could make out the paint peeling from the sides of the house. The rickety fence looked like strong wind might blow it over.

“Nice place,” Roger remarked. “Looks like he started with an outhouse and just kept building rooms.”

“The guy doesn’t have a lot of class. I met him, remember.” Grayson took another look at the darkened house. The chain of municipal streetlights ran out about a block earlier. Apparently Mr. Heck didn’t see the need to install his own.

“Well?” Roger asked. “Shall we?”

They were about six feet from the fence when a black missile bolted out of the shadows, barking furiously. Roger gripped his shoulder and hauled Grayson backward. “On second thought, maybe not.”

“If he’s in there, we just triggered his alarm system.”

Grayson looked skeptically at the square-headed black dog throwing itself against the fence in an attempt to break through. One of his arms would fit comfortably within those powerful jaws, he thought.

“That a pit bull?” Roger asked.

“It’s nasty, whatever it is.” They stepped back onto the road, which only marginally quieted the pit bull. No one appeared in the darkened windows. No lights came on inside.

“Doesn’t seem like he’s too concerned,” Roger remarked.

Grayson squinted into the darkness. The house faced away from the street so that the front door was around the side. “Let’s try the door.”

The pathway to the door ran in a narrow strip between a patch of overgrown grass and the two sides of the fence. It took about two seconds for the pit bull to see through their plan. The fence swayed, bulged as the heavy dog battered his body against it.

He could only think of Amber trapped inside a place like that. Judging from the exterior, the inside couldn’t be any more inviting. Fervently he wished for the millionth time that they hadn’t argued, that he hadn’t contrived to be absent when she arrived at Barlow & Charles. Most of all that they’d gone home together and were now lying in his loft bed, snuggled beneath his down comforter.

“Tell me you’re not thinking of breaking in,” Roger said as Grayson’s hand closed on the doorknob. He gave the door a rattle, but the heavy door barely shook on its hinges. Predictably, he found it locked.

Finding neither a doorbell nor a knocker, he raised his fist and pounded on the door.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Roger muttered.

Grayson’s pounding echoed through the rambling house. The pit bull threw itself against the fence. Puffs of its hot breath blew through the wooden slats in tiny clouds.

He had to get into that house to be sure Amber wasn’t in there being subjected to God knew what. Grayson eyed the heavy hinges on the door. It would take more than his strength to break through it. And what if he found Mr. Heck sound asleep in his bed with no idea to Amber’s whereabouts? He could imagine the headlines: **LAWYER GOES ON BREAK AND ENTER SPREE!** He doubted the police would understand about his gut feeling that Amber was in danger. Not when he couldn’t even convince his twin.

Another resounding boom echoed through the house. Grayson felt his hand bruise under the impact.

“He’s not home, Gray.” Roger gripped his shoulder. “That or he’s a very sound sleeper. Or packing a really large gun,” he finished. In answer Grayson threw his weight against the door.

Which didn’t give so much as an inch.

Wood splintered. As one they turned toward the sound.

To find the pit bull’s head sticking through the fence behind them.

“Before we break into his house and get ourselves arrested, let’s try his office,” Roger suggested quickly.

Another tearing sound from the fence. The pit bull had his head and shoulders through.

“He wouldn’t be holding her in somewhere so obvious as his own home,” Roger suggested. The grip on Grayson’s shoulder intensified as Roger slowly pulled him away from the door.

Grayson looked at the narrow strip of wood between them and the pit bull’s teeth. “Okay, let’s try the office.”

The sound of splintering wood followed them down the narrow path. Grayson heard the scrape of nails against concrete. A black shape bolted out of the shadows.

He slammed the car door just as the pit bull's teeth closed on the handle.

\* \* \* \*

Didn't matter what she said, her captor would find a way to turn it against her, Amber realized. Blaming her for his broken heart, he wanted revenge.

In agitation, he walked back and forth, his shoes scuffing against the floor in a rough staccato beat. He cursed, hotly and harshly under his breath. A pop bottle ricocheted off the wall, narrowly missing her head. A shower of glass rained down over the burlap bag on her head, settling in the creases of the cloth. Amber cringed, unable to see whether another projectile was headed her way.

"Kinda messes with a guy's head," he muttered again to himself. "It wouldn't have killed you to say yes, Amber."

Recognition hit her. His words tumbled into her memory. I'd forgive you if you'd go out with me.

In that second she did know him. James Heck, who insisted she'd stolen the aborted Roberts case from him. James Heck who'd been paid by Barlow to discredit her in front of Grayson.

James Heck, who held her prisoner.

"I'm really sorry, James!" Amber blurted out his name before she could call the words back.

Footsteps stopped. His harsh breath died into silence. She heard the rustle of his clothing as he turned in her direction.

"Figured it out, did you, Amber Babe? Took you long enough."

Glass crunched beneath his feet.

"That's too bad, Amber." His hair rasped against his collar as he shook his head. "Really too bad. Because, you see, now that you know who I am, I'll have to kill you."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The offices of Heck, Sleuth & Company were as dismal as Heck's residence, Grayson mused as Roger pulled the Porsche up to the curb. No night guard in this office building, although several signs posted numbers to call in the case of break and enter. Like anyone would, he scoffed mentally. Except for the offices of Heck, Sleuth & Company, the building seemed abandoned. For Rent signs covered broken windows. Re-zoning notices plastered the front door. Whoever owned the building was hedging their bets.

Roger looked up at the remains of what must have been an impressive skyscraper and groaned. "Guy sure knows how to pick a place."

"Must have been a spectacular building at one time." Grayson peered through the notices that covered most of the glass on the front door.

"Sure," Roger agreed. "In the twenties. Looks like the place has been rotting ever since."

What Grayson could see of the lobby lay in darkness, but a light shone from a nearby hallway. Heck's invoice specified Suite 401. He couldn't imagine the owner filling even four floors of such a dismal building. Perhaps Heck was one of the last tenants left on the lease. "I doubt there's a guard," he murmured. Why guard a building you were trying to evict people from?

"Not a human one anyway," Roger said.

Grayson shook his head. "I doubt he's paying for an electronic alarm system, either."

"No, but I wouldn't put it past a guy like Heck to have son of Cujo sleeping in his office."

Grayson tried the door and found it quite securely locked.

Backing up, he debated throwing his bruised shoulder against it, when Roger stepped between him and his intended target. "I'm not going to

let you put your foot through that door, Gray.” Against the lightening sky he could see Roger’s stricken expression. Dawn approached, meaning Amber had been missing since just after dusk. “It’s not like you to resort to brute force like that,” Roger admonished him. “I’m the one who always goes rushing headlong into things, remember?”

But was that really true? Grayson wondered, scanning the building for another route of entry even as he pretended to give Roger his attention. Or did they just act out the roles their parents had reinforced? *Roger’s just not responsible enough to run the firm*, Grayson remembered his father saying when he had balked at the idea of law school. And Roger had lived up to that notion. But tonight it was Roger thinking with his head while Grayson would have run recklessly into disaster.

“There’s got to be another way in. A loading bay, electrical access. Something!”

“Let’s look around back,” Roger suggested.

They made their way through what had once been a landscaped garden. The remnants of shrubs lay like tumbleweeds on the freezing ground. Yellowed grass rose tall as hay before dying off in patches for the coming winter. Like a ghost the figure of a Grecian woman stood in the center of an abandoned fountain. One of her arms was missing and half of her face had been worn away by the weather. Grayson shuddered. “What kind of creep is this guy?”

“A desperate creep obviously.” Roger turned away from the fountain and went to investigate the metal doors on the loading bay. “Did Amber ever say exactly what kind of work he did?”

“Basic PI stuff, I gathered.” Grayson tried the padlock on the door. “Wait a minute. Amber did say something about that Heck guy being angry at her for stealing one of his clients.”

He could tell by the look on Roger’s face that they drew the same conclusion. “This is shaping up to be an entirely different scenario altogether.”

“You think James Heck has a personal vendetta against Amber,” Grayson said, voicing this new fear.

“Think about it. This Heck guy is furious with Amber for stealing his client, so he does a little PI work of his own and finds out that Amber’s got a gig going at Barlow & Charles.”

“He wouldn’t know that she was working off a court settlement.”

“Right. So he goes to Barlow, hoping to get in on some of Amber’s action. Or maybe he’s worked for Barlow before.”

The possibility only intensified Grayson’s desperation. He gave the lock another urgent shake. Rust came away in his hand, but the lock held. “Who knows what Barlow was into behind my back?”

“Barlow pays Heck to pull a prank that will make you angry enough to fire Amber.”

“No one expected us to get personally involved.” Something nagged at the back of Grayson’s mind, demanding his attention. “Wait a minute, Amber did say something about this Heck guy harassing her to go out with him.”

Implication hit him like a blow to the stomach.

“This may not be about Barlow at all,” Roger said, voicing Grayson’s own thoughts.

“If this Heck guy thought Amber stole his client--”

“Then his little revenge plot to steal her client fails,” Roger interjected.

“Then on top of that she turns him down personally--”

“It makes this Heck guy--who sounds like he’s unbalanced anyway--all the more desperate.” Roger stopped talking abruptly.

Grayson rattled the handle again, to no avail. “We have to get in there! This is the place, I’m sure of it. If Heck’s our man, it makes sense he’d hold her in a place like this. I mean, who’d come here? Bet even the landlord hasn’t been here in ten years.” He reined in the urge to throw himself against the metal doors, knowing it would only gain him a dislocated shoulder. “If we could get our hands on some bolt cutters, we’d be through there in a minute.”

Roger eyed the sky which was turning from dark gray to faintest pink. “It’s nearly dawn, Gray. We can’t just hack our way through a lock in broad daylight. There’s got to be another way in. A side door, a broken window ... Gray?”

Roger's voice came as if from a distance as Grayson's attention was captured by a faint ray of light spilling out from one of the lower windows into the darker shadow between the side of the building and a row of half dead poplar trees.

Grayson leapt from the crumbling concrete of the loading dock into the brush beneath. Skeletal trees marked the property line between what had been a building next door. One wall of the foundation was all that remained of the neighboring structure. The rest had been bulldozed and covered with gravel. A weather beaten sign announced daily parking for five dollars. But the ticket dispensing machine bore the scars of numerous collisions and years of rust.

He pushed through waist-high stalks of dead plants, heading toward the pale glow of light he'd seen from the loading bay. Down in the low ground between buildings it was harder to see. The wind shook the dried leaves in an eerie death rattle.

Roger crashed through the brush behind him. They weren't going to win any prizes for stealth he thought, whirling and holding up a finger for silence. Chastened, Roger continued more quietly.

Ahead the yellowed stalks of grass were gilded with light. He crept closer, wincing at the sound of grass crunching beneath each footfall. Hidden by the fence of tall stalks was a basement window. Grayson flattened himself against the wall and looked down.

Among the overgrowth of weeds, he wouldn't even have noticed the window if it wasn't for the pale light leaking from the room beyond. Recessed into the wall, the window was also sheltered by a low wall of corrugated metal.

Crouching by the wall, he craned his neck to see down inside. But the only view was of a narrow concrete hallway that branched off at right angles into another beyond. The faint light came from around that corner. Too dim to be cast by a lamp, Grayson realized, more like a flashlight. If it had been any lighter outside, he wouldn't have noticed it.

"See anything?" Roger asked.

"Just a hallway." Grayson jumped down into the well around the window. Putting his hands against the frame, he heaved with all his

strength. But the rusted metal held. He didn't dare risk making enough noise to break the glass.

"There's got to be another way in." Roger slunk away from the wall and moved quietly along the side of the building.

Grayson pressed his ear against the glass, listening intently. Over the crunch of Roger's footsteps he thought he could hear the low murmur of voices. No, a single voice, he decided. Someone talking on the phone, maybe. Or talking to himself.

"Gray!" Roger's whisper brought his head up. Ahead he saw Roger crouched in the tall grass.

Running close to the wall, he tried to make as little noise as possible. Roger knelt beside a crumbling set of stone stairs that led to a rusting metal door. His hand closed upon the metal handle. Predictably it was locked. But the rusting lock didn't look all that sturdy.

"One good tug," Roger said, placing his hands above Grayson's.

"On the count of three," Grayson said, bracing his weight.

"One, two..."

A piercing scream tore through the basement below them.

\* \* \* \*

Amber screamed at the shock of cold steel against her throat. A big mistake. She heard Heck's laughter above her head, knew he feasted on her fear. The impossibly sharp edge pressed against her skin could only belong to a large knife. She shouldn't have screamed. He was enjoying it far too much.

"Not so brave after all, are we, Amber?" He chuckled again. "Who would have thought with all that false bravado?"

Could it be that he only meant to frighten her, to shake her up? No, the rational part of her brain insisted. She knew who he was. There were laws against forcibly confining someone, laws against uttering death threats. No, James Heck was merely toying with her, prolonging the pleasure of his great revenge.

And she would never see Grayson again. The thoughts poured into her mind before she could stem the flow. Not only would he never know what happened to her, Amber thought dismally, but his last memories of her

would be of their late night argument and their terse words the next morning. If only she could tell him she was sorry....

Thoughts of Grayson forced her mind back to work on a solution. Amber swallowed carefully.

“Look, James....” It was hard to talk with the blade of a knife pressed against her throat. “I’m sorry I hurt you.” Amber imagined herself talking to Grayson. Picturing his face before her lent conviction to her words. She felt the blade slip a fraction of an inch away from her throat. “I didn’t realize how selfish I was being. I was too wrapped up in my own problems.”

“Sure you were, babe.” Heck’s harsh voice jolted her back to reality. “The whole lot of you laughed at me. At the association lunches, the Christmas parties. ‘So how’s it going, James? Still peeking into windows?’” he mimicked a passable imitation of her voice. “Did you think I didn’t know you guys called me Heck Sleaze and Company?”

The knife dimpled her flesh. Amber didn’t dare draw breath to answer.

“I was the bottom of the barrel. Until you stole even that from me.”

“I didn’t know you were bidding on the job, James,” Amber whispered. Not being able to see stretched the tension between them. Better that way, she decided. That way she couldn’t see his face contorted in anger. She wouldn’t know when the moment came. “I was just trying to keep my own firm from going bankrupt.”

“Like you needed clients,” Heck spit through his teeth. “With that lawyer boyfriend of yours feeding you work.”

Irony was Grayson hadn’t been paying her at first. She’d been working off the last of the court settlement. She decided not to share that with James Heck. The last thing she needed was to hear him laughing at her before she died.

“You could have left me to my pathetic life, Amber.” The sadness in his voice made his heart clench. Sadness mixed with righteous anger.

Enough anger to make him feel righteous about killing her. Amber felt the pinch of the knife again. This time there was a purposefulness to the bite of the blade that hadn’t been there before.

“Wait!” she said hoarsely. Unlike the other times he didn’t loosen his grip on the knife so she could speak. “You don’t have to kill me to fix this, James. I could help you. I’d be happy to, really.”

“Sure, like you helped me out of a job. Out of my livelihood. Out of my life!”

The blade vibrated with his anger.

“Too late, Amber Babe. You had your chance.”

\* \* \* \*

Amber’s scream. Grayson knew it instinctively. Terror lent him strength. He threw the sum of his weight into one desperate tug, felt Roger mirror his action.

The ancient rusted lock gave suddenly, unbalancing them both. Together they fell in a heap. Grayson was the first on his feet.

It was darker inside now as the sky lightened with dawn. Grayson bolted down the narrow hallway, Roger close behind him.

They came to another hallway, followed the wan light to the left. The narrow hall opened suddenly into a large open room.

In one sweeping gaze, he took in the bound shape huddled on the floor, the greasy figure of James Heck looming above. In the pale glow of the flashlight, he saw the gleam of a knife.

Caught by surprise, Heck whirled in their direction. Grayson sprang.

The impact knocked Heck to the floor. Grayson sprawled awkwardly on top of him. Anger burned through him, bright and hot. Fury that he would harm the woman he loved. Outrage that a worm like James Heck would sink to terrorizing a blindfolded and bound woman. Especially one as tiny as Amber Shaw.

But anger also drove James Heck, who for being pudgy, was also stronger than he looked. Despite the impact, Heck hadn’t lost his grip on the knife. Grayson looked up just in time to find it sailing down in his direction. He rolled out of the path of the nasty looking blade, giving Heck a chance to half scramble to his feet.

From the corner of his eye he saw Amber trying to struggle to her bound feet, her head cocked, listening intently.

“Well, if it isn’t lover boy,” Heck snarled.

“Grayson?” Amber’s hoarse whisper cut through him and he longed to go to her, but for both their sakes he had to keep an eye on that knife.

Heck lunged at him. The knife flashed in the wan light. Grayson leapt backward. He felt the rush of air as the blade narrowly missed his chest.

Roger! he thought suddenly. Where was Roger?

A blur rushed by him, kicking dirt into his eyes. Grayson blinked. Heck’s eyes widened as he took in the twin rushing toward him. So he hadn’t known. Grayson leapt in Roger’s direction.

Too late Heck turned to meet Roger’s onslaught. Caught off guard, he brought the blade down, unsure which twin to target. Grayson knocked his stroke wide. The knife clattered to the ground. Then Heck was pinned under Roger, who had always been better at fighting. Grayson turned to Amber

\* \* \* \*

Sounds of a scuffle echoed through the basement. Harsh breathing. The male smell of sweat. Amber heard Heck call someone lover boy, then what she thought was Grayson’s grunt of surprise. The dull impact of a punch being thrown in tight quarters. She called Grayson’s name, got no answer. Someone rushed past her. Another set of footsteps, moving quickly. Another impact. She struggled to get her bound feet under her, failed and sprawled awkwardly on the floor.

Then suddenly there were warm hands on her back, warm hands turning her gently. The dull light was unbearably bright after the suffocating darkness. Grayson’s face swam through her tears.

His hands moved over her shoulders, probing gently, feeling along her arms until he located the cold metal handcuffs pressed tightly into her skin. “Are you hurt?” His aching concern for her brought another wave of tears.

“No,” she croaked. “Just cold and stiff.”

He pulled her handcuffs and all into his arms. “We’ll get you out of here, get you warm,” he promised. She felt the warm brush of his lips against her cold cheek.

Amber flailed against him, forgetting for an instant that her hands were bound and she couldn’t touch him. Glancing past Grayson, she found Heck pinned to the floor by Roger. “He wears the keys on a ring on his belt.”



Heck bucked against Roger as Grayson bent over him. It took both of them to hold him to the ground while Grayson relieved him of his weighty key ring.

Metal cuffs fell away. Amber felt the pinprick rush of circulation returning to her hands. Grayson helped her sit up, while he went to work on the coarse rope that bound her feet.

Circulation only brought a wave of shudders. Her teeth chattered noisily. She couldn't stop shaking.

"Hang on." Grayson draped his jacket over her coat. With a worried look in her direction, he brought the handcuffs over to Roger.

"Sit up," Roger ordered. When Heck would have made a run for the hallway, Grayson wrenched his arms behind his back and tightened the handcuffs.

The look James Heck shot in her direction sent another wave of shudders down her spine. "It's not over, Amber Babe--"

"Shut up!" Roger shook him roughly. Knocking Heck back onto the concrete, he used his weight to hold him in place while Grayson secured his feet.

Satisfied Heck wasn't going anywhere, Roger pulled out his cell phone. Amber looked up to find Grayson standing before her.

"Can you stand?" He rubbed gently at her chafed ankles, urging circulation back into her calves and thighs. She leaned against him, not caring if the warm salt of her tears soaked his shirt. He drew her close, burrowing under the layers of their jackets, warming her with his body.

"Oh God, Grayson!" Violent shudders wracked her body. "I'm so sorry about all those horrible things I said the other night. I do love you. I do want to marry you. The whole time I was here I kept thinking I'd never see you again, and the only thing you'd remember of me was our argument."

"Hush, Amber." Placing a finger beneath her chin, he looked intently into her eyes. "It's going to be all right. We have the rest of our lives to make it up to each other."

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, and still Amber couldn't get warm. She sat in Roger's Porsche, running down his battery by blasting the heater. Police swarmed through the basement. The ropes that had bound her legs

disappeared into an evidence bag. The bruises on her wrists and ankles were cataloged as thoroughly. She'd recounted the story of her ordeal at least three times and still she was due downtown tomorrow to make a statement. Grayson wanted to take her to the hospital. Roger offered to drive. The police wanted to fingerprint, prod and question some more. But Amber just wanted to go home.

Which was the crux of the problem.

She hadn't slept in her own apartment in weeks now. In fact, the crowded rooms made her claustrophobic. She longed for the wide open space of Grayson's loft schoolhouse, the expanse of his wide bed.

But the last time they'd been there together, they'd fought bitterly. Now that James Heck was in police custody, the matter of their life together still needed to be resolved.

So, she sat in Roger's car, while the police questioned Grayson and Roger for the millionth time. And James Heck glared at her from the back of a police cruiser.

Finally, the police released Grayson and Roger. The convoy of cruisers pulled out of the parking lot. Amber saw James Heck twist in the seat to shoot a last hate-filled glare in her direction before they disappeared around a corner.

And then it was Grayson sliding into the seat beside her, lifting her into his lap. His arms tightened around her, as if he tried to heal her with the force of his embrace. The heat of his body began to warm her, and she felt herself slipping off into a doze. Dimly, she was aware of Roger sliding into the seat beside them, of the car motor roaring to life. Warm and safe at last, Amber drifted off to sleep.

She awoke to golden flickering light and the sound of water running. Drowsily, she lifted her head to find Grayson's loft aglow with candles. Towers of them burned on his dresser, along the headboard and lit up the bathroom beyond. She struggled from the mummy-like wrappings of his down quilt and jumped when he appeared in the doorway, a towel draped over one arm.

"Madam, your bath is ready."

"Bath?" she asked in a pitiful attempt at humor. "Do I smell that bad?"

His worried expression cracked into a smile. He gathered her into his arms and pressed a kiss on the top of her tousled hair. “You smell just fine to me. But it’s just what you need to work the kinks out of those muscles.”

He was wearing a pair of worn sweats, his chest bare in the heat. Fires burned in both of the fireplaces and he’d moved the electric heater close to the bed. Nuzzling into the center of his chest, she found the downy hairs damp with sweat. But he said nothing, made no move to turn down the heat.

Grayson’s hands moved in slow circles at the base of her neck, urging her abused muscles to relax. Now that it was over, she found every muscle ached with fatigue. Muscles she didn’t even know she had cried out in individual agony. And beneath it all the sick feeling of relief and exhaustion.

Warm fingers brushed her flesh as he fumbled with the tiny buttons of her blouse. His hands drifted over her skin as he spread the cloth wide and moved behind to unfasten the clasp of her bra. Desire flickered in their wake, a smoldering ember. “Grayson, I need--”

“Hush.” His lips covered hers in a gentle, soothing kiss. “I know what you need.” His fingers strayed to the zipper of her pants.

Soon she stood naked before him, pressed against the soft cotton of his sweats. Which did nothing to hide the arousal he could no longer conceal.

But then he was lifting her, carrying her easily toward the claw-foot tub in his candle lit bathroom. Heat steamed the windows and the mirror, but the water was pleasingly warm. As soon as she sank into it, Amber felt her eyes closing.

Grayson’s hands moved tenderly over her, massaging sore muscles, washing away the smell of mold and rot. She smelled the familiar scent of his shampoo, felt his hands sink into her crimson curls as he soaped her hair. She ducked her head under the water to rinse. Eyes dark as night looked back at her as she surfaced.

“Grayson--” she began, having no clue what she would say next. But he sealed her lips with one finger.

“Amber, I love you.” When she would have said more, he covered her mouth in a gentle kiss. “More than anything else in this world.” He knelt beside the tub on one knee.

Then his expression clouded and he looked around as if he'd forgotten something. "Hang on!" he said, panicked. She heard his rapid-fire footsteps on the ladder, then him padding across the wooden floor below. The refrigerator door opened, then shut. He knelt again beside her. "I know I didn't do this the right way last time." He reached into the water for her hand and slid the metal tab from a pop can onto her finger. "But it would make me the happiest man in the world if you would marry me."

"You still want me?" she asked hoarsely, feeling the pressure of tears building once again. "After all the awful things we said?"

He pulled her against him, heedless of the water that sloshed over the side of the tub. "I don't intend to let you out of my sight, so you might as well marry me Amber."

Amber leaned against him, warm and safe. An unfamiliar feeling of peace washed over her, as she felt the depth of her love for him, free at last of the fear and doubt that had plagued her for so long. She looked down at the flattened metal ring on her finger and laughed.

"So?"

She heard the fear in his tone, and answered him with a kiss that left no doubt as to her feelings. "Of course I'll marry you, Counselor."

"Soon?" he prompted, as if she might change her mind. She wouldn't, Amber thought. During the long night in Heck's company she'd been plunged into the darkest regions of her soul. Life had given her a second chance, a life with Grayson.

His hand closed over hers, covering the impromptu ring.

"Soon," she agreed.

## EPILOGUE

“Will you hold still!” Grayson tugged at the ends of the ascot he vainly attempted to fasten around Roger’s neck, forcing his brother to stop fidgeting. Grayson suppressed a smile. Roger’s restlessness stemmed from the fear that after all they’d been through to repair their relationship, Sandy would develop cold feet and leave him at the altar.

Aside from fretting that he’d never get Roger properly dressed, Grayson realized he had no such reservations about Amber. She’d be there, on time and looking gorgeous.

No, the cold feet were definitely Roger’s. It was Grayson’s job to see he got to the church on time. Grayson had solved the problem by dogging Roger’s footsteps for the past three days, even putting up with his company as an overnight guest the night before the wedding. Which left Amber to find somewhere else to spend her last evening as a single woman. She’d willingly agreed, practically fleeing the house.

“Spend the evening watching two confirmed bachelors have a nervous breakdown?” she’d remarked halfway out the door with her overnight bag. “No thanks!” But then she’d come back in and kissed him thoroughly, reminding him what he was missing. “See you tomorrow,” she said, then added pointedly, “You too, Roger.”

The double wedding had been Roger’s idea. If they were both planning weddings, why not share the expenses, he reasoned. Why celebrate just New Year’s Eve when they could be celebrating their marriages as well. Deep down, Grayson knew the real reason. If Roger was going to take the plunge, he wanted company.

Aside from the bow tie, the tuxedo he had to wear, and the flower pinned to his lapel, it didn’t seem so bad so far. Friends and relatives were

coming from all over to drink champagne, to wish them well, to marvel that the Charles brothers were finally getting married.

Outside fat snowflakes rapidly covered the ground in white. Enough snow to snarl traffic and cause delays everywhere. Grayson wasn't worried. Amber would make allowances for the weather. Amber always had a Plan B, usually even a Plan C. And they weren't taking off for Hawaii until tomorrow.

Roger was a bundle of nerves. He paced, fretted, re-pinned his boutonniere for the millionth time, and creased the ascot Grayson just finished tying.

"Stop messing with it!"

Grayson resisted the urge to reach and slap his hand. Spending the past couple of days with Roger had been worse than baby-sitting a hyperactive two year old. He was honored that Roger wanted to share the most important day of his life. But the last nerve wracking hours before the wedding and the imposed closeness of having both of them under one roof frayed his nerves.

Roger, he thought with a deep sigh of relief, was not going to Hawaii. When Roger had offered to make their wedding a double, he feared his brother would suggest they double up on the honeymoon as well. Sandy had her heart set on Bermuda as a honeymoon destination, and Roger had happily complied. Though there was little he wouldn't do for his twin, all his thoughts were for Amber and the two weeks they planned to spend together far away from the distractions of work. And family.

The police held custody of James Heck. John Barlow had finally been charged with embezzling. Though Barlow had managed to raise his bail money, the courts would decide his fate. With his partnership with Barlow dissolving, Belaoussoff, Bekar, Karulis and Lacey had offered Grayson a place in their firm.

Not again, Grayson had decided. The only partnership he'd have from now on was one with Amber. Deciding to take his chances starting his own firm, he'd hired Amber permanently to do his investigative work. Amber he could trust.

Roger's fidgeting brought his thoughts back to the present. His twin threatened to unravel his hard won composure completely.

Why had he ever agreed to hold the wedding at his house? Though the setting was idyllic, the scenery stunning in winter, if they'd married in a church in town, he could have locked Roger in a hotel room for the night and at least have got himself some sleep.

Too late, he thought with a glance into the living room that now hosted chairs neatly arranged to form rows and aisles. Guests arrived by the minute, in spite of the holiday and the bad weather. The hum of conversation mingled with the festive smell of pine and roses. No, best to marry in his house, so they could cherish the memory of their wedding each day.

In a few short hours the festivities would be over. Roger would be Sandy's problem.

Amber would be his forever.

The start of a new year and a new life. He couldn't stop a smile from working its way across his face. Until he looked up to find Roger scowling out the window.

"What is it now?"

"They're late."

"How late? Thirty seconds?"

"It's already five after six."

"And the weather's bad. Relax, Roger. They'll be here."

\* \* \* \*

"He'll be there!" Amber clasped her hand over Sandy's. The warm interior of the limousine was an oasis from the snow rapidly turning the city to chaos. Another few miles to go. They'd make it with just minutes to spare.

"What if we're late?"

"They can wait five minutes."

"What if he's still not sure, what if he's changed his mind?"

"If Roger's changed his mind," Amber snarled, "I have a very special revenge planned for him." She cast Sandy a reassuring smile. "Free of charge. It would be my pleasure." But when Sandy only smiled wanly in return, she added. "Don't worry, Grayson will make sure he's there."

"I don't want him to be if he doesn't want to."

“He wants to marry you, Sandy. I can tell. I’m a good judge of character.”

Sandy turned toward her in a whisper of tulle. “You’re not worried about Grayson?”

“No.”

“Not even a little?”

Amber searched her soul, finding that in the depths of her heart the one thing she was certain of was Grayson.

During the long night she had been held hostage by James Heck, Amber had buried her doubts about Grayson forever. He loved her, she realized. Flaws, fears and all. “Not even,” she said with certainty.

“I wish I could feel that way.”

“It’s just prenuptial jitters. Once we get there and you see everything’s fine, they’ll go away.”

Sandy nodded nervously, pale as a ghost behind her white veil. “You sure everything got delivered?”

“The cake, the chairs and all the dishes arrived last night before I left. Mrs. Charles called me this morning to say the floral designer did a spectacular job. The caterers were due at four.” Amber counted off the many details on her fingers. “Even if the caterers don’t show up, there’s enough cake and champagne to go around. We’ll order pizza or something.”

The thought of pizza only served to make Sandy even more nervous. “I was only kidding,” Amber said.

“Don’t mind me.” Sandy forced a smile. “Like you said, it’s probably just nerves.”

She did look radiant, Amber had to admit. Like an angel in her pure white gown and head of blonde curls. The white dresses Amber had tried on only made her look twice as pale as usual. Though she’d banished thoughts of Eric from her mind, the thought of buying another wedding dress was surprisingly painful. Amber had given up, deciding instead on a tailored white suit. But Sandy, having her heart set on a long white dress and train, had dragged Amber with her to every bridal store in the city. And still Amber refused to be swayed, until in the very last store, she’d found a dress of ivory silk, with silk roses at the shoulder and in the bustle. It cost much more than she intended to pay. But in a moment of weakness, she’d pulled



out her credit card and bought the dress, matching shoes and veil. She hoped Grayson would like it more than she wanted to admit.

The limousine turned off the highway, down the winding road that led to Grayson's house. Amber squinted to see the time on the dashboard clock. Ten minutes after six. Not bad, considering they were arriving in a blizzard.

Someone had gone to considerable trouble plowing the front yard so cars could pull up within easy access of the house. Stretching from the front door to the door of the limousine was a red carpet, already lightly dusted with snow. The limousine rolled to a halt. Amber waited as the driver came around to the side to help them out.

Frigid air gusted into the warm interior. Thankfully, her gown had long sleeves. Holding an umbrella to keep off the snow, the driver helped them down the red carpet to the door of Grayson's house.

Conversation hushed as they entered. Stepping into the warmth, they were greeted by a sea of smiles. A fire burned in the fireplace. Bows of pine and red roses decorated every available surface. At the far end of the aisle of chairs, she saw two black clad figures take their place, saw Roger's face light up with smile sure to melt Sandy's doubts at the first sight of his bride. Grayson drew her gaze past him. She watched as his eyes widened in astonishment, then his face broke into a slow, certain smile as she made her way up the aisle toward him.

\* \* \* \*

Nothing prepared Grayson for the sight of Amber. He expected her to look beautiful. All brides were beautiful and Amber was gorgeous to begin with. His field of vision narrowed to include nothing but the two of them and the beautiful woman walking down the aisle toward him. Beside him he heard Roger gasp as he saw Sandy, but Grayson couldn't tear his eyes from Amber.

Never would he have guessed she'd go for a traditional bridal dress. A white suit, she kept telling him, something practical, something she could wear again.

Well, she wouldn't be wearing *that* dress again. He'd see to it personally. His eyes dropped from the crimson curls to the roses of ivory silk at her shoulder, over the gentle gathers that off-set her petite figure perfectly.

He couldn't look away, even through the ceremony. Even as Roger and Sandy recited their vows, his gaze strayed back to Amber, to the calm certain love he saw there. Smiling up at him, he heard her say 'I do' and echoed it with one of his own.

Amber was his he realized, reaching out to slip the gold band on her finger.

Forever.

The End