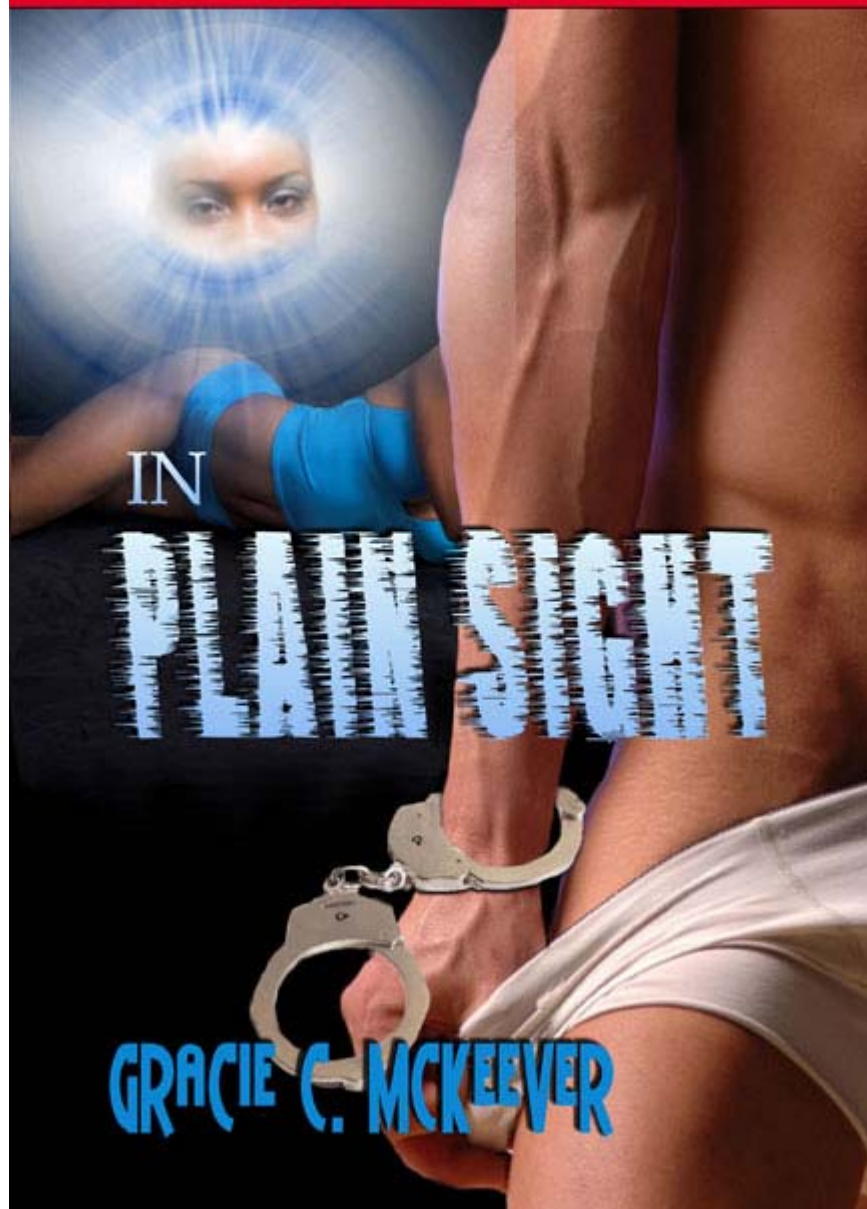


SIREN PUBLISHING



SEX RATING: SCORCHING

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SCORCHING: Erotica; contains many sexual encounters; may contain unconventional sex; will offend delicate readers

SEXTREME: Excessiveness; many instances of unconventional sex; may be hardcore; not for the faint-hearted

Gracie C. McKeever

In Plain Sight

When Samantha Taylor dropped out of her senior year of college to marry gorgeous and almost ten years her senior Dawson Foster, she never knew what she was getting into. But Sam is a quick study, and a year into her marriage, she prepares to remove her unborn baby and herself from a bad situation before it's too late. A headlong tumble down some stairs, however, violently nips her plans in the bud. But someone upstairs has other plans for Sam in the form of rough-and-ready, newly-expired bounty hunter, Dara Kelly.

Twice-divorced, Dara Kelly doesn't want to get married again, not even to luscious, Cuban-Irish Caution Foster. An African-American woman, she thrives in a profession where men set the rules, garnering respect and a tough reputation to match. But along with respect comes envy and enemies who will stop at nothing to gain a bounty...not even murdering a fellow skip tracer.

Genre: Contemporary Paranormal: Angels/Ghost/Interracial/Reincarnation/Suspense
Length: Super Plus Novel (100,000+ words)

IN PLAIN SIGHT

GRACIE C. MCKEEVER



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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In Plain Sight

By Gracie C. McKeever

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PROLOGUE

Afterlife

Samantha Foster drifted, memory fading in the wind as she tumbled head over heels down the stairs, surrounded by pitch-black silence before a burst of blinding white light greeted her several yards away, gently vibrating.

She slowed. She didn't know how far she'd traveled, or to where, and didn't know if she was in control or had totally lost it. She just wanted the crazy ride to end. She'd had enough, and was tired of hoping for a different ending to her life than the pitiful reality.

She'd always been athletic growing up, and was a varsity soccer player in high school. She continued to keep herself in shape with daily Pilates and yoga sessions, even had some martial arts training under her belt, which was both a good and bad thing since the arts focused more on the philosophy of self-discipline rather than self-defense. Unless one's life was threatened, of course, but Dawson's attacks had been so abrupt and unprovoked, Sam hadn't had an opportunity to properly respond. She had never dreamed she'd have to use what she'd learned against her husband.

It was an embarrassing insult to go out in such a manner. It was so mundane and unoriginal—no drama, barely a struggle or whimper—taking a headlong tumble down a flight of stairs. The one time she had to defend herself against someone turned out to be with the man who'd sworn to love and protect her.

Sam wasn't completely sure now whether to blame him or herself, not completely sure who had struck the fatal blow. She remembered swinging out with her free hand

before Dawson lost his grip on the one holding the only piece of luggage she had packed, and she hit the bottom of the case landing at an awkward angle. Her head struck against the shiny parquet floor with a sickening crack, luggage wedged beneath her back and the floor.

She smelled the scent of polished wood and new house as she left her body and floated over the scene to watch the action unfold like a fender-bender's spectator. She remembered thinking that if she wasn't dead, she was at least a quadriplegic. That's how broken her body had looked. She lay bent and twisted like a crime scene chalk outline model. She remembered going after Dawson in her astral form, angrily swinging at his head as he tearfully knelt beside her body at the bottom of the stairwell. She'd barely stirred his hair, but at least garnered a slight shiver as her fist went through his jaw. The very last thing she remembered before she'd been yanked away from the scene was seeing her father go after Dawson, her parents having entered the house at some point during their daughter and son-in-law's altercation.

She should have stood up to him sooner, planned her escape better, left him when her parents had wanted her to—so many shoulda, coulda, woulda—and now it was too late.

Or was it?

The light ahead glimmered with a life all its own, white-hot and beckoning.

Sam floated several feet before it, finally came to a stop, calm and at ease.

"Tater-Tot." The sobriquet came out on a strangled whisper, and Sam wondered why the memory of an infant boy was so vivid when her baby hadn't yet been born. It was a mere three-month fetus nestled within its mother's womb unknowing and unprotected at impact.

Sam lowered her palms to her stomach, cupped her abdomen in a protective gesture to shelter a life that had already been lost. She'd failed before she ever had a chance to try, failed despite her best intentions to remove her baby from a bad situation while she still had a chance.

You did not fail, Samantha.

Had that voice come from the light? Only her parents called her Samantha, and usually when they were at their wits' end trying to either talk some sense *into* her strong head, or talk her *out* of one of her rebellious antics.

Sam smiled. She had to admit that she drove her parents to the brink of several nervous breakdowns with some of her stunts. The last two infamous ones were dropping out of college during her senior year and marrying a man almost ten years her senior.

"Sam, honey, we're only looking out for your welfare. You need to explore the world, explore yourself. Why settle down so soon?"

She'd known the level of her mother's desperation at hearing that last one. Neither of her parents had ever approved of any of the boyfriends she'd entertained. *"Common riff-raff,"* they usually said. *"Beneath you,"* they harped on. Not to mention their favorite against her marriage to Dawson: *"If he really loves you, he'll wait."*

But Sam had been the impatient one, and unwilling to wait when she knew what she wanted, knew she had found the man with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life.

Dawson was mature, so much more so than the boys Sam had dated. Dawson wanted her the way a man wanted a woman—with tender passion and primal lust. And she'd wanted him.

She should have listened to her parents for once.

Do not regret, child. It gets you nowhere.

"Why?" One word, encompassing, and the omnipotent voice understood.

We have plans for you.

"Plans? Why did you let me die then? Why not after I had my baby? At least you could have let me have my baby!" Sam sobbed. She wondered if she would have done a better job as a mother than she had as a wife. She wondered how good she would have been at protecting her baby once it was born. Then she remembered her dream, the one where she made a clean getaway from her ranting husband, their newborn son, Tate, alive and well behind her in his infant seat. Well, almost a clean getaway. If memory served her, she'd crashed on the highway as Dawson gave chase in his car, screaming about her not taking his son anywhere.

Not a dream.

Sam sniffled, heart skipping with hope. "You mean it was real?"

One reality. An alternate reality.

"Then you can send me back? I can have my baby, my life—"

Not in the way you expect.

What was that supposed to mean? *It means, we have plans for you.*

Sam wasn't so sure she liked the sound of that, but something told her she didn't have much say in the matter.

They had plans for her.

CHAPTER 1

New York City - One Week Later

Dara Kelly paced, impatient and uneasy in the nippy rain-slicked alley. She hated waiting, unused to waiting, especially for Diego.

Her partner was nothing if not reliable, and hadn't let her down since she'd hired him five years ago as an apprentice in her bail enforcement venture.

She hadn't regretted taking on the twenty-two-year-old even though most of her colleagues and friends had warned her, again and again, against hiring the greenhorn. Never mind that Dara suspected more than half of the objections came from homophobic chauvinists. *All* of the "nays" added up to one big fat "yeah" to Dara Kelly, who rarely listened to anyone when it came to how to run her business—or her life. Her instincts, and a sharp, unselfish mentor, had gotten her this far. She doubted they'd let her down now.

Dara glanced at her watch for the umpteenth time since she'd arrived, the illuminated green dials taunting her. An hour had passed since she'd arrived fifteen minutes earlier than the appointed time of ten o'clock. Diego was forty-five-minutes late, unheard of since he'd started backing her up.

She'd tried his cell several times and had gotten the voice mail, the non-response her first clue that something was amiss.

Where could he be? Had something happened to him? Had he been waylaid? A flat tire? Caught in traffic? What?

None of the options boded well for Dara, but especially the something-happening-to-Diego part. There were some unsavory characters out there, and more than a few of them were in her business. She wouldn't put it past any of them to have...

Dara violently shook her head as if to ward off bad tidings. Diego could take care of himself. He'd proven this to her more than once since he'd been with her; he had never been one to bug out if an apprehension got ugly.

Dara couldn't afford to let this skip get away. Million-dollar bonds don't come along everyday, and she ought to know since her first \$100,000 payday had been her last almost eight years earlier. Still new to skip tracing with barely two years under her belt, she'd had to use all the skills she'd learned to bring the guy in. Not to mention her main competition for the skip had been a big, ornery, seasoned son-of-a-gun who, to this day, hadn't forgiven her for besting him.

She made a living on what she did, a pretty good one most times, especially with her side income of providing locator services, skip tracing dead-beat dads, finding credit skips, determining the whereabouts of a lost friend, long-ago lovers or family members. All done from her desk—by telephone, computer, fax—and with tools and methods already in place, making it one of the lowest overhead, highest profit part of her business. There was more than one way to milk a cow, and more than one way to make a buck. But then there were the dry spells—one of which she'd been experiencing the last couple of months—that made a large payday like this skip promised to be very attractive.

No, she'd done too much leg work, invested too many man-hours to get to him before another agent snatched this guy out from under her.

Diego, where are you?

Dammit, she hated when her plans went awry. Hated when she, for whatever reason, lost control of a situation.

Time to start making some decisions here.

Diego had let her down. And the local boys in blue? Aside from Cal Madison, a homicide detective with whom she'd worked and gotten tight in the last few years, she'd never depended on the police before. Though it helped when a squad responded to a notice and actually showed up to support her, which was rare. Dara didn't know if they ignored her because she was a woman or because she was a woman and a bounty hunter. She'd been pretty thorough with her research and surveillance, and didn't think this guy would cause her too much trouble. Operative words: "didn't think." All skips presented a risk. All could be "trouble", even if they were white-collar embezzlers who looked like Charles Grodin on a bad day.

Dara glanced at her watch, more out of desperation than to glean information, since she barely noticed the location of the dials. The time didn't matter. She'd already made up her mind and was going to do something she rarely did in her business: go in after a skip without backup.

She flipped up the collar of her black leather jacket as if this could deflect the rain that had started falling in earnest the last couple of minutes.

This spring had sucked, bestowing enough cool-damp-dreary-stormy weather onto the city to guarantee a drought-free summer. At least Dara thought so, though she was sure the local weathermen would be crying of critical water shortages as soon as the first hazy-hot-humid heat wave swept through the area and heralded the dog days of summer.

She pushed off the wall where she had found a modicum of shelter and glanced up at the second floor window where the dim glow of a night lamp shone through the

blackout shades.

Late night reading? Crunching numbers? Purchasing plane tickets to Mexico on Priceline? No matter, his days of reading past lights out, surfing the Web, and freedom would soon be over.

Dara watched as someone extinguished the light, as if in preparation for her arrival. She then waited several beats before she leaped to reach the fire escape above her, caught the bottom rung and slid it down as quietly as possible. Carefully, she placed a booted foot on the second rung, then placed the other foot on the next rung and ascended the slippery metal, unconsciously holding her breath against the soggy smell of garbage wafting up from the alley and the weight of her Kevlar vest.

She hated wearing the monstrosity, but hell, she'd invested enough in it to get her money's worth. She would have been a special kind of fool not to take the precaution. Bad enough she was going up alone.

Dara reached the second floor without incident and pressed herself against the hotel's brick wall before peeking into the window on her right. She unlocked and opened the window easily, climbed inside the empty room, sauntered across the funky, plum commercial carpeting to the door, stepped out into the corridor and glanced both ways before closing the door behind her.

He wouldn't be expecting her to come at him from already inside the building, and she didn't want the lobby attendant to rat her out. She knew the skip had paid more than enough for the attendant to keep an eye out for anyone exercising undue curiosity about his whereabouts. She could have tried to up the ante, but that would have tipped off her target before she was ready to make a move on him. She needed the element of surprise, dangerous or not.

She walked down the corridor until she'd reached the room at the far end of the hall near the fire stairwell, pressed an ear to the door and detected no sounds from within.

Dara crouched in front of the door, checking both ends of the hallway again before she pulled out her lock-picking tools and went to work. Old building, old door, old-fashioned lock, she was done in seconds, putting away her case and drawing her Glock 45 with her left hand.

She smiled as she turned the knob with her right and remembered husband number two, the smooth talking brothah with skilled, strong hands to match, a locksmith by trade. He'd slipped into her life the way she'd slipped her tools into the lock—quick and easy.

She thought how beneficial to her job each marriage had proven—breaking and entering and choosing and handling firearms were definitely skills that came in handy in this business.

Dara eased open the door and raised her gun overhead as she took several steps into the room before her eyes adjusted to the dark.

There he was, snoring away under the light comforter, the outline beneath the plum and gray geometric pattern moving up and down with each exhalation and inhalation as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins, in search of an outlet. This had been easy so far, almost too easy. She needed resistance, some reaction or movement to let her know she wasn't alone in the world. She needed a struggle to make this worthwhile.

Dara stepped to the bed, eased the barrel of her gun under the comforter, sliding the material down her target's face, slowly, until she exposed his eyes moving back and forth in REM. "Up and at 'em, homeboy. Sleep time's over."

His eyes drifted open, widened at the sight of Dara hovering over the bed, and almost fell out of their sockets when they honed in on the gun.

"Didn't think you could hide forever now, did you?"

"Whatever they're paying you, I'll double it."

"Now how are you going to make good on a check like that from the pen?" Dara wiggled her gun under his nose, and jerked her head. "C'mon. Let's get something on so you can go bye-bye."

"Okay, you're driving a hard bargain. I understand perfectly." He raised his hands and slid his legs from under the bedcovers as Dara took a step back to give him room to stand up. "Surely we can work something out?"

Dara silently smirked. These white-collar types thought they could buy and sell anything and anybody for the right price. Gambling away people's life savings on the Street, and stripping away livelihoods without blinking an eye on their way to a vacation getaway in the Caribbean.

Dara thought of the behemoth chemical corporation that had been at the root of her father's death. She'd been seven-and-a-half when her father had shown the first signs of asbestos poisoning. She'd barely been eight when he died and left behind a widow and six kids.

"I'm not for sale, homeboy." At least not to some unscrupulous corporate raider with more gold bullion and ice running through his veins than hemoglobin and iron. "Let's get the lead out." She motioned with her gun, almost disappointed when he complied without further argument and headed to the room's closet.

Dara followed close behind, gun cocked as she watched him pull a sharp blue suit from a hanger. Designer, much more than the Givenchy, Paul Stewart and Versace knock-offs proliferating her closet at home.

He glanced at her over a shoulder, arched an eyebrow.

Dara planted her feet and motioned with her Glock. "Might as well get used to dressing in front of people, hun. Not much privacy where you'll be going." But then again, guy like him, who knew? Probably get sent to one of those fancy country club prisons. Wasn't her job to judge or figure it out either. Hers was just to tag him, bag him, drop him off and claim her cash.

The skip reluctantly slid out of his pajama bottoms and Dara had to stop herself from giggling. Maybe she should have let him dress in private. Those scrawny excuses for legs would outrage Frank Perdue. Not like the lean-muscled runner's legs Caution sported in a pair of shorts.

Mighty Isis, she really needed to get a grip and stop thinking about the man, especially here and now. Only one man should be occupying her mind and he was standing in front of her sliding on his Parisian designed attire.

"Going to jail in style, I see."

He shrugged his slim shoulders, the first sign of amusement twinkling in his eyes since Dara had ambushed him. "One must keep up appearances."

Dara made a fist and raised it in a Black Power gesture that made her tag frown. She couldn't tell if he were displeased or confused. She didn't care. After all, she had to keep up appearances too.

Once he was dressed, she got out her metallic cuffs and tossed them to him. He put them on without a fuss, and Dara stepped to him and did the "tip of the index finger test" before double-locking the restraints.

Dara grasped him around the biceps of one arm, beginning to think she was home free and that this entire apprehension was too easy for the price, before she heard the door open behind her and grinned. "Well, it's about time. But I have to tell you, I did all the hard work already without you." She turned, gaping as she saw the large shadow framed in the doorway, jutting an inch from the top. It was definitely not Diego.

"Glad to see you too, bitch. And thanks for gift wrapping my present."

Dara reached for her gun too late.

The shadow stepped across the threshold, gun drawn. He took aim at her chest, fired, hitting her dead center.

Dara flew back, realization dawning as the bullet pierced her vest.

Cop killers. Oh hell, oh damn...

Her old rival noiselessly, unhurriedly strode across the carpeted floor past the skip cowering behind the bureau. He smiled down at Dara as she crawled backwards, towards the window, on her elbows and heels.

She reached behind her, pulled herself up on the windowsill, blood seeping through skin, bone, and Kevlar, numbing her limbs. She leaned a shoulder against the jamb as her assailant leisurely switched guns, leering at her once more when he raised the new weapon.

"I told you I'd pay you back no matter how long it took. No one takes a skip away from me and gets away with it. Especially not some lezzy cunt."

Dara wheezed, gurgling her next words. "Tarrent, think about what you're doing."

"Oh, I have. Long and hard." He smiled, moving so close to stare her in the eyes she thought for a moment he might have changed his mind. Then he reached out to snatch the small gold hoop from her left earlobe.

Dara gasped, then regretted it immediately.

"I'll keep this as a souvenir of our time together." He graced her with sharp white canines as he pocketed the earring. "Be glad it's not your ear. Not that you'll have much

use for either in a few seconds." He stepped back, taking aim at her chest.

Barbarian, cannibal, man-eater... Dara closed her eyes, knew she was a dead woman, but tried to get through to him one more time. "Tarrent, ple—"

"Bye-bye, bitch."

His next shot sent her crashing through the glass and tumbling out the window.

CHAPTER 2

Dara landed on the hard pavement, surprised that she wasn't dead and wishing she was.

Excruciating pain lit up every nerve ending in her body. She was sure she had broken her back, among other major and minor bones, in the fall, but her insides, they were the real problem, on fire like someone had shoved a grenade packed with razor blades inside her abdomen and detonated it. She'd heard about talon slugs before, breaking onto the street in the nineties, but had never come across anyone who'd used them, or lived to tell about being shot with one. Leave it to that mean-spirited bastard to use outlawed ammo.

The pain was unreal, unbearable, inhuman, and just when Dara thought she couldn't take another minute of suffering, she felt herself drifting—up, up, up, and away. Her body, however, remained on the rain-slicked pavement, still and bleeding.

Someone brushed by her on Dara's way out. Someone on her way in. Into Dara's body!

Dara sampled the other's soul as they crossed paths—her first impressions raising her hackles—rich, spoiled, suburban American princess. Bourgeoisie. Everything Caution's grandfather loved, everything Dara loathed. Her next impressions weren't much better—wheat-gold hair, sky-blue eyes, young, petite, beautiful...and very dead.

Oh God! I'm gone, dead, kaput...

Was He punishing her? Teaching her a lesson?

No, punishing would have meant leaving her soul in her body writhing in agony as her internal organs bled out. He had done her a *favor* by pulling her out of her body when He had.

But, Mighty Isis, what had homegirl done to deserve the fate Dara had just escaped?

Dara didn't have time to think much more on it. She hadn't stopped drifting; her journey was just beginning. She was mildly amused and mightily shocked that her trip seemed to be going in an upward direction.

* * * *

Sam slammed into her new destination with such force, the trauma left her breathless for several long moments. Awareness – painful, corporeal awareness – forced her to finally take a breath. She immediately regretted it, cursing Their plans and wishing for sweet oblivion again. The broken neck was nothing compared to what she was feeling now. Fire inside and out. Heck, even her left earlobe throbbed! This new body must have been thrown down *several* flights of stairs, if not the roof of a tall building. How it still possessed the ability to breathe and feel anything was beyond her. But not beyond Them, evidently. Why?

All in time, Samantha.

Yeah, sure, You say. That's what They all say.

Might as well have been talking to the backward-talking creature in Star Wars since the answers she'd gotten about her predicament so far made about as much sense as Yoda's brain-twisting phraseology, and were about as satisfying.

"Dare! *Dios mio, que paso?*"

Sam opened her eyes as someone rushed over to her in the rain. The dimly lit side street where she lay afforded little opportunity to see her rescuer clearly. Or maybe he was her attacker, for all she knew, coming back to make sure he'd done the job right.

God, what had They gotten her into?

Take care, child. All will be well.

You're leaving me?

"No, *chica!* I wouldn't leave you for the world. And I'm so sorry I was late."

Sam hadn't realized she'd spoken out loud until she saw the horrified look on her rescuer's face and something else she could just barely make out: guilt.

She tried to sit up and gasped as the stranger pushed her back. He placed his rolled up leather jacket beneath her head and opened her jacket to probe her rib cage with gentle fingers. When one of his hands brushed the outer edge of a breast, she slapped it away before she realized he was searching for wounds, wounds inflicted despite a bulletproof vest.

She felt the weight of the contraption against her chest and abdomen, and the blood, wet and sticky against her skin, and almost became sick with the implications.

Just how badly had this body been injured? And whose body was it? Who was this Dare?

Gradually, pain faded as if fleeing in response to her questions, or perhaps the stranger's touch. Sam didn't care which, just that alleviation was at hand.

"Dios, I am so sorry, Dare. I...I was detained. I don't know what else to say."

Sam didn't know what to say either, deciding not to say anything at all for the time being, and just tried to take everything in.

She was in a cold, wet, dark alley and some strange man, obviously concerned, obviously her friend, needlessly ministered to her already healing body.

"I'm ready to get up now."

He frowned. "I really think you should wait for an ambulance."

"No!" Sam sprang to a sitting position, surprised that it didn't hurt, almost not at all. She seemed to be completely healed. She knew she had Them to thank for her miraculous recovery. The least They could do. And for some reason, she didn't think a trip to the hospital was in Their plans for her.

"All right, *chica*. Don't have a cow." He grinned grimly as he helped her to her feet.

Sam glanced at him from the corner of an eye, wishing she knew who he was, what his name was, and what her connection to him was.

"Did the skip do this to you? I didn't peg him for this rough a customer."

"Skip?"

"*Dios*, you must have gotten knocked on the head pretty good, huh?"

"Guess so," Sam mumbled. "You're, uh...?"

"Diego." He grimaced at her incomprehension, shook his head. "Your partner?"

As in? Sam wondered but didn't say it out loud. Partner in crime? Partner in business? Life partner? Exactly how close a relationship did they share?

"C'mon, I'm taking you home."

That was an answer she hadn't expected, and raised more questions than it answered.

Where was home? Their home? His home? Her home?

She let Diego grasp her under an elbow and lead her out of the alley, having no idea where they were going, but strangely trusting him. She didn't see how she had a choice.

* * * *

Randall Tarrent watched from his pick-up idling at the end of the alley as the cunt's partner ran to her body. He shook his head at the waste, thought how perfect a couple the fag-hag and 'mo use to make. Now there was just the 'mo to pick up the pieces.

He sneered, glanced at the skip beside him from the corner of an eye, felt the little man's fear permeating the car, and fed off of it, smiling. There was no love lost, no more than he had for the woman he'd just killed. A skip was a paycheck to him, no more, no less, and he didn't care if the guy had whacked his entire family before fleeing or had embezzled fifty million dollars.

No skin off his nose concerning what the crime had been, as long as he got his

money at the end of the day.

Randall pulled away from the curb, glanced at his passenger one more time, and knew he had nothing to worry about. This man wouldn't say a word about what had happened in the hotel room. He knew this as surely as he'd known that the cunt's partner would go for the male escort hired to come onto him earlier in the evening.

He was a good judge of character, always had been, and knew from the moment Dara-the-Cunt had taken on the Rico Suave pretty boy as a partner that the kid would be her weakness. It had taken him some time to maneuver tonight's setup. Rico had been hard to nail down. He was a pretty boy but Kelly's partner didn't flaunt his queerness like some other fairies he had seen, and didn't hang out in any of the known 'mo haunts, which made it difficult to pinpoint his exact proclivities. But he had his instincts and they hadn't yet been wrong.

He had gone the hired help route, well worth the two hundred bucks for expert assistance, a mere drop in the bucket if he came away with the skip once all was said and done.

He'd asked around, tapping his snitches and streetwalkers for information on where to find exactly who and what he needed. Then help had fallen into his lap from an unexpected source, and hooked him up with this young male escort. (Seemed he wasn't the only one who had it in for the cunt.) After meeting the kid, he had the sneaking suspicion the fairy would have done the deed for free had he been asked. He'd seen the look of lust in the American gigolo's eyes after he'd gotten a peek at his mark, the kind of look other, real men reserved for big-boobed babes like Pamela Anderson and Carmen Electra, chicks made for men like *him*.

Initially, it looked like A.G. wouldn't be able to get the job done, unable to keep Rico's attention off his watch long enough to make a play. The Rico kid played hard to get, duty and responsibility calling. At least he had a redeeming quality to offset his other ungodly traits. Not that it would do the queer any good in the long run, as far as Randall was concerned. Not that it had done his partner any good.

A.G. worked his fairy magic, a persistent little fag, earning his money. He was finally able to buy Rico a drink, which Randall noticed had been non-alcoholic. The pair left the bar together, the escort holding Rico up, and he realized the kid must have mickied the cunt's partner—smart fairy, pulling out all the stops after more than an hour of fencing.

Randall had followed the escort in his pick-up to make sure the kid got Rico where he wanted him, on his back and unconscious, at least for the time it took Randall to make his way back to the hotel to waylay his favorite rival hunter and her skip.

His skip now.

* * * *

"I don't know how you function in this place." Diego almost tripped over a stray motorcycle boot in his path before picking it up and tossing it to the side as he entered the large sunken living room in front of Sam.

Sam stood at the top of the step behind him and appraised her surroundings, not

knowing how this Dare person functioned here either. Maybe Dare was a code name for slob.

It wasn't that the apartment was dirty or unattractive as much as it was in a state of disarray. Beneath the boots, jeans, book piles, and various motorcycle parts strewn across newspaper on the floor, Sam glimpsed the stylish furnishings—green leather recliner and sofa, green and burgundy Persian area rug over polished parquet floor, and smoke-glass cocktail and end tables—an eclectic mix of contemporary and retro.

Diego plucked a pair of blue jeans from the seat of the recliner, folded and placed it over its back before heading for the wet bar across the room.

Sam stood in the middle of the room, confused as to what her next move or word should be. She tried not to roam around as if she were a stranger in her own apartment, but couldn't help admiring the tasteful African artwork on the walls and two three-foot high sculptures—one a nude female, one a nude male—strategically placed on opposite ends of the room, facing each other profile to profile, yet strangely seeming as if they stood closer.

The artwork took away the initial feeling that Sam had of the place being just a well-furnished pit stop. That and the various potted plants and large meticulous aquarium, all of which showed signs of tender loving care.

There was also an extensive DVD collection lining an entire wall behind the thirty-six inch TV, the most prominent among them a wide assortment of Pam Grier movies, especially her earliest endeavors.

Sam moved a little closer to glean titles, surprised by the magnitude of Blaxploitation videos and DVDs among this Dare's collection which led her to wonder who this woman was, what she looked like. She was afraid to find out.

"Drink?" Diego held up a glass from behind the wet bar.

Sam shook her head, wanting to keep a clear one at least for the next few hours.

"You look like you need one." He poured himself ginger ale on ice.

"What about you?" She eyed his non-alcoholic beverage. He seemed to flinch as she eyed his glass, as if she had accused him of something.

"When have you ever needed company or an excuse to drink?"

Was he trying to say she was an alcoholic?

"Besides, I don't drink on the job."

He sounded defensive, but not knowing him, it was hard for Sam to tell exactly what kind of mood he was in. Everything he said and did was strange to her. *He* was strange, and almost too solicitous for her taste. All the way over in the car he had asked how she was, if she were in any kind of pain, if there was anything he could do for her, if she was sure she didn't want him to take her to the hospital. As if he was trying to make something up to her.

"I didn't know you were still on the job."

"I'm always on the job with you," he mumbled before taking a swig of soda.

"Am I some sort of slave driver?"

"No. Just a workaholic." He stared at her. "You couldn't have waited a few more minutes before going up there?"

Sam gaped, unsure how to defend herself, unsure how to defend Dare. She was sure there was a perfectly good answer for Diego, she just didn't know what it was. "I waited long enough," she finally blurted, half-angry with him and half-angry with the Ones who'd been responsible for her being a strange woman in a strange surrounding.

"Fine, point taken. But you at least could have called it off for another day. No skip is worth your life."

"I guess that was my decision to make."

Diego whispered, "You could have gotten yourself killed."

I did, through no fault of yours. "I'm okay, you know. You don't have to babysit me."

"Trying to get rid of me?" He smirked.

She was, but didn't want to hurt his feelings anymore than she already had. She had a feeling he had enough to deal with, a guilty conscience being paramount. She wasn't sure if it was warranted or whether some uncontrollable circumstances were at play for which he was blaming himself.

Diego drained his glass, placed it in the sink behind the bar before heading for the door.

Sam followed him as far as the top step, waited as he opened the door.

"I'll call tomorrow, see how you're doing?" he said over a shoulder.

She nodded, swallowed hard as he closed the door behind him with a light click of the slam lock, not for the first time wondered what the nature of their relationship was.

They seemed pretty close for business associates. He had a key to her apartment and walked around the dwelling like someone with intimate knowledge, as if he belonged.

Definitely friends. Had they once been lovers also?

The latter didn't seem right for some reason that Sam couldn't quite put her finger on.

Diego Davis was attractive—a young Latino with matinee idol looks reminiscent of Oscar De La Hoya, with the same tight, lean-muscled build to match—could even be considered her type in another place and time. But there was something off-kilter about his sexuality.

Sam was by no means an expert and hated to judge especially after only one meeting, but she wondered if Diego was gay, or even bi. He treated Dare like a sister, which was all well and good if she wasn't his type. But a healthy red-blooded male and female not even making passes at each other? Perhaps she'd come in late in the game, long after the pair had made all the plays, and done all the teasing they were going to do,

and now were settled down in a platonic friendly partnership. Or maybe Sam was just looking for controversy where there was none, since there was certainly nothing obvious enough to give the guy away.

She leaned against the door, swept the room, trying to get a feel for the woman whose place she appeared to have taken.

She went to the entertainment center housing the television set and examined the slew of family photographs inhabiting several shelves, a large brood of people, mother, father and six children in varying shades of brown—cinnamon, copper, pecan—but unmistakably blood relations. Sam examined the only girl surrounded by a sea of older boys in one shot at a family picnic. In another shot, the girl cradled a football in the crook of an arm, racing toward an unseen goal with three boys on her tail as two others blocked for her.

Sam smiled at the shots, slowly sauntered from the living room down the hall to her left, and paused at the open door of a small office. Computer, fax, scanner, phone, and printer occupied the desk and immediate space along with reams of open files atop a worktable against one wall that made the living room seem positively orderly. Sam tried to bypass this room, unready to tackle this Dare's business concerns, but curiosity got the best of her.

She went in and glanced through several pieces of mail, mostly bills and clothing catalogues, scattered around the desk, all addressed to Dara Kelly.

Ah, so now she had a name to put to this new life she had slammed into.

Sam left the office and sauntered down the hall before finding herself in the master bedroom.

A large walk-in closet was opened to her right and Sam drifted inside, struck by the meticulous organization, worlds away from the living room and office.

Activity and style separated the wardrobe. One wall lined with casual and sporty gear, highlighted by khakis and jeans. Another wall lined with femme fatale gear, very good designer knock-off dresses and pantsuits. One wall lined with what Sam thought of as professional dominatrix gear, leather pants and skirts in every imaginable color—but especially black—and matching leather jackets abounding.

One small corner made Sam gawk, heart pounding as she carefully neared the mounted weapons. What the arsenal didn't have in sheer volume, it made up for in menace—several semi-automatic handguns in varying types and sizes, a rifle, a shotgun and even a sub-machine gun that looked like the standard-issue weapons SWAT team members carried in every cops-and-robbers genre movie Sam had ever seen.

She plucked one of the weapons from its mounting, the Winchester rifle, feeling at home for the first time since she had entered the house.

Sam caressed the barrel and ran her fingers over the butt, admiring the weight and initials carved into the wood in elegant calligraphic script: *DK*.

Unless the fashion designer had wildly deviated from her vocation, it was probably not Donna Karan.

She chuckled, raised the weapon to her shoulder, and aimed at a point across the room, thanking her father for the shooting lessons he'd had her take as a teen, against all her mother's objections. Seemed her experience with guns would come in handy if her encounter in the alley and this arsenal were any indication.

Sam replaced the weapon, took a deep breath, closed her eyes and exited the closet. She waited a long moment before sliding the closet door closed and opening her eyes to glance in the mirror hanging against the wood panel.

She gaped when she caught her reflection. The pictures in the living room hadn't done a thing to prepare her for the woman staring back at her.

Sam could not say whether she was pleased or displeased, only shocked, standing in one place for five minutes just looking at herself. Her new self. Dara Kelly.

She closed her onyx eyes, shutting out the copper-tone face as she remembered the soul she had past during her journey. A woman in her thirties, black hair falling to her broad shoulders in silken waves, framing a striking rather than pretty face, strong angular cheekbones and jaws, and almond-shaped eyes accentuating the features. A woman who took no mess, a woman who took what was hers. A tough cookie, and cynical.

Sam opened her eyes once more, traveling the length of a curvy but lean-muscled body at least eight inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than her former frame, and looking with a different vision, that of a curious child, wondering what was Ms. Kelly's history.

The phone rang, startling Sam out of her reverie.

She headed down the hall to retrieve the phone from the office, still uncomfortable in the bedroom, the vitality of two sensual and in-love beings effervescing all around her like a just opened champagne bottle, making her feel like a voyeur.

"Hello."

"Dare, baby, I've been trying to reach you all night, but I guess your hands were full."

"Uh—"

"I see where your friend bagged that skip you were tracing. It's all over the news, him bringing the guy in. Tough break, huh."

"Yes, it is."

"Whassa matter with you, babe? I'da thought you'd be a little pissed to say the least. Normally I would have had a stream of four-letter ones burning my ear-drum by now."

"It's been a long day, uh..."

"Ralphie! What happened? You get konked on the head?"

"Something like that."

"Well anyway, I've got a chance here for you to redeem yourself."

"I don't kn—"

"I'll admit it's a far sight less than a million dollar bond, but it's something almost as near and dear to your heart as a dead-beat dad: a domestic abuser."

Sam's heart skipped a beat, ears perked for more. "Why is he on the run?"

"Jumped a \$200,000 bail awaiting trial for his wife's murder. Worth a nice piece of change for the one who brings him in. I thought of you immediately."

Either this Ralphie had the hots for Dara Kelly, or Dara Kelly was that good that he thought of her first to bring in this guy.

"This skip have a name?" She might as well learn to talk the talk sooner rather than later.

"Dawson Foster..."

Sam's head swam with incredulity, the room blurring before her vision. She clutched the cordless tight to keep from dropping it, almost strangling the handset as Ralphie rattled on with the "skip's" particulars. She didn't hear any of what he'd said after the name, and she didn't need to.

Sam drifted to the living room, made a beeline for the wet bar, and decided she needed a shot of something to calm her suddenly shaking hands and fast. She found the brandy, poured herself a glass over rocks and took a long swallow, handset cradled between an ear and shoulder.

"Did you get all that, Dare?"

"I did," Sam lied. She knew all she needed to know.

Ralphie wanted her to bring in a murderer: her husband.

* * * *

Sam paced the living room floor, wringing her hands; surprised she was still standing after knocking back three tumblers of brandy in the last hour.

Maybe the adrenaline shooting through her veins canceled out the effects of the alcohol.

She finally slumped into the recliner, buried her face in her hands, and wondered what she was going to do.

They had told her all would be well. Either They had lied, or They obviously knew something she did not, because Sam didn't see where any of this situation was going to turn out well, at least not for her.

Even if she found Dawson, how would she go about bringing him in? Sure, she was a lot meatier in this new body than she'd been in her former life. Her former self at five-one and a buck-five soak and wet hadn't had much of a chance against Dawson, even with her knowledge of self-defense. But then she hadn't had the element of surprise; he had.

All of this back and forth was getting her nowhere. She needed a solid plan. She needed to know what she was doing.

Sam was the first to admit that she was way out of her element. Several sessions

on the target range did not a hard-ass bounty hunter make. She couldn't think of any other skills she'd mastered in her former life that would benefit her now. Ballet? Horseback riding? Ice-skating? Swimming? Tennis? Likely none of these country club activities would come in handy or stand her in good stead on the street.

She needed help, expert help. A mentor. She needed—

Sam felt the woman in the apartment with her before she saw her. She pulled her face out of her hands, quickly scanned the room, and caught movement at the top of the stairs leading to the front door. Sitting there was a woman. *The* woman.

CHAPTER 3

Sam blinked several times, closed her eyes tight then slowly opened them. The woman was still there and she was smiling.

Great. Insanity was a foregone conclusion. She was no longer *going* crazy. She was already *there*.

Sam stood and slowly approached the specter, vibrant energy emanating so strongly she thought she could surely see the woman's aura when she didn't know the first thing about reading or recognizing one.

"You're not seeing things."

Sam paused, squinted at the familiar face, warily continued forward until she was standing a couple of feet in front of the... Woman? Ghost? Spirit? Angel?

"Trust me. I'm no angel. But then you probably know that already."

"What are you then?"

"Let's settle for who, shall we?"

Sam dumbly nodded.

"You've probably already guessed. I'm Dara Kelly."

"Can anyone else see you?" Sam blurted.

"Get right to the point, don't you?"

Sam stared, waiting.

"Look, I don't know all the rules yet. I'm still feeling my way. Just like you."

"Great." Sam smirked.

"Don't catch a 'tude with me, homegirl. It's not my doing."

"I can only imagine." And actually Sam could. It didn't make her feel any better

though.

"Looks like I'm not the only one who's not too happy about this situation," Dara said.

"Looks like neither of us have a choice about it, either."

"Hmm, guess not."

Sam watched as the woman rubbed her chin with a pointer and thumb, eyebrows furrowed in deep concentration. She took a chance and sat down beside her on the top step, felt the warmth radiating from her in gentle waves, reached out to touch Dara's shoulder and met no resistance, hand going straight through as it had when she'd swung at Dawson. Only this time she was on the other side of the conundrum. She wasn't so sure it was a good thing.

"Look girlfriend—"

"Sam. Samantha Taylor to be exact." Her maiden name blurted out unbidden.

"Well excuuuse me."

Sam almost laughed at how much the woman sounded like John Belushi and smiled at the annoyed expression spreading across Dara's already expressive features.

"Okay, *Sam*, here's the deal. You need help and I'm here to help you."

"I don't see how y—"

"With information. With experience. I'm not so sure how good I'll be with you in the trenches, seeing as I'm not exactly corporeal. But I can damn sure help you with preparation."

"What are you suggesting? That I become you?" Sam realized how moronic she sounded as soon as the last word left her mouth and she saw Dara's eyebrows practically fly off of her face to touch the ceiling before the woman frowned.

"I hate to break it to you, honey, but you are me, whether you like it or not."

"I didn't mean—"

"We don't have time to interpret what you meant. We have to get to work."

Sam nodded as if it was the most natural thing in the world for her to be sitting, talking with, and taking orders from a dead woman.

"So, mind my asking how it happened?"

"It?"

"How'd you die?"

Sam gasped, still not used to hearing the word "dead" and "die" in conjunction with herself, still not used to not being her, still jolted by the entire situation and not sure if she'd ever recover or when. "It's a long story," she finally mumbled.

"Well, I would say we've got plenty of time, but we don't."

"We don't?"

"You've got things to do, places to go, people to see, and a pretty ass to protect, namely mine, or now, yours."

"I don't understand."

"C'mon honey, wake up." Dara snapped her fingers as she stood and plunked one fist on a hip. "Think about it. You're me. Wonder how that happened?"

Sam nodded.

"I was murdered. And the guy who did it isn't going to be too happy when he finds out he didn't succeed."

Oh God, she was a target now? She'd gone from the frying pan to the fire wearing a gasoline soaked thong and bra.

"Not to mention, I'm not too happy he *did* succeed."

"You want revenge."

"I wouldn't exactly call it revenge. More like justice."

"And how do you propose—"

"Never fear. That's what I'm here to help you with. The ins and outs. The how-tos, the dos and don'ts. I need you and you need me."

Sam's head spun at the swiftness with which Dara talked. It was like the woman was on speed or maybe just high on...afterlife.

"So, who was that on the phone earlier?"

On speed and switching gears in the middle of the track like a race car driver.

"An associate of yours. Said his name was Ralphie."

"Hey, if Ralphie called that means only one thing. He had a job for me. So, who's the skip? Someone you know? Your face looked a bit green when you were talking to him."

Sam didn't know whether to be angry that her privacy had been violated, or that this perfect stranger could read her so well.

"My husband."

Dara arched a brow, waiting for more.

"He...we..."

"He's the one who killed you? Oh, this is rich!"

"It's not what you think. It was an accident."

"Hun, don't defend him."

"But it was. Dawson's a lot of things but he's not a murderer."

"You're dead."

"Like I said. It's a long story." She was running out of excuses, and wondered why she defended her husband so staunchly. Dara was right. He was a murderer. Dawson had

all but pushed her down the stairs when she'd told him she was leaving. He'd looked at her bag and the determined look on her face, and lost it.

He struggled with her at the top of the landing, snatched the bag out of her hand and flung it down the stairs. When she started to go down the stairs after it, Dawson grabbed her wrist with one hand and backhanded her with the other. She flailed, desperately reaching out for the banister and Daw's outstretched hand, but only came up with air as she took her header down the stairs and heard her mother scream from the front door.

"Did you say Dawson?" Dara asked now.

Sam nodded.

"Dawson Foster?"

"You know him?"

"This is getting better and better every minute." Dara smiled, sat back down beside Sam and wrapped a phantom arm around the younger woman's shoulder.

Sam shivered despite the warm energy.

"C'mon. We've got a lot to teach you before you can make another move."

* * * *

Caution took one last glance at his daughter's sleeping face and pulled the door, leaving it open just a crack, enough so that she wouldn't feel totally abandoned should she wake up again before daybreak. This precaution and a night-light were the next best thing to her sleeping in bed with him, which he frowned upon as much as possible. There'd been a few occasions when she'd been so hysterical and inconsolable that, short of seeming heartless and inhuman, he'd let her sleep in the bed with him. These were the exceptions.

Caution yawned and stretched his arms over his head as he sauntered down the hall to his own bedroom, another all-nighter soothing the nightmare-ridden ego of his five-year-old firmly under his belt.

The kid loved scary movies, ate up all of Dara's dangerous chase and apprehension tales, had read every Goosebumps book ever written and was now firmly entrenched in the Harry Potter series. Caution had even caught the kid leafing through the pages of several of the Stephen King novels proliferating his bookshelf. Daring and precocious barely encompassed his kid.

However, short of depriving her curious and advanced nature, he tried to keep her exposure to the scary stuff down to a minimum. This is until he realized Tayte had abandonment issues and not bogeyman issues.

In the last year, the child had been having what seemed an inordinate amount of bad dreams, at least three or four times a week, most involving some scenario where Caution leaves her on a foreign doorstep in the middle of the night, or gives her away to strangers.

He didn't know what to do to console her, but suspected her fear was directly

related to the absence of her mother, for which the child firmly blamed herself, and probably figured sooner or later her father would be leaving her too.

Caution smiled at her rationale, shaking his head as he got back in his own bed. He folded his hands behind his head and glanced up at the ceiling, contemplating the nightmares and his ex-wife's departure.

Short of Sandy coming back into his life to reclaim her maternal rights, Caution didn't see an end to their daughter's bad dreams. And Sandy's return was the furthest thing from possible for the mere fact that he didn't ever want to see the woman darken his doorstep again.

He didn't hate her, didn't even dislike her. They hadn't parted on bad or uncivil terms.

No, what Sandy Melendez had done had been a lot more unforgivable than any cheating or hater games she could have played on him: she had abandoned their daughter.

Kid hadn't been a year old before Sandy was out the door, lamenting her lack of freedom and her feeling suffocated by the "whole domestic thingy". Typical Sandy.

Caution grimaced, owning most of the blame.

Deep down he'd known the woman hadn't been ready for marriage, knew her history with a competitive mother and absentee father. But he'd let his terminal savior complex interfere with his good judgment, ignoring her neediness and confident that his love could overcome any parental baggage from her past. Confident that once they were entrenched in the day-to-day business of matrimony, she'd come around to seeing that he was nothing like her father and wouldn't desert her.

But he'd miscalculated Sandy's deep-seated abandonment issues. She walked out on Caution—on Tayte—and he knew her crazy logic told her to do it to him before he did it to her. And now his daughter was paying for her parents' folly, bereft of her mother because her father had been too pig-headed to see the truth: that Sandra Melendez was more self-centered and immature in her late twenties than her own daughter was at five.

Next came Pamela, older and more together than Sandy, at least on the outside. On the inside, she had the same sort of baggage and neediness that had made Sandy such a bad choice as a wife.

After Pamela, Caution took a break for some alone time with his daughter. He promised himself not to repeat the same mistakes with the next woman and get attached too fast, but he found this promise difficult to adhere to once he'd encountered Dara Kelly, a woman he'd fallen instantly in lust with, and who was totally suspicious where his sincerity was concerned. Worse than her skepticism, Dara was a woman who didn't believe in love and marriage, wanted nothing to do with anything remotely smelling of "settling down," and treated Caution like her own personal pleasure toy. She made it hard to fall into the same traps as he had with Tayte's mom and Pamela for the simple fact that she wouldn't stay still long enough for him to try to woo her, never mind slipping a proposal in the mix.

She'd been out of contact going on two weeks now—the longest she'd stayed away and silent since they had been seeing each other off and on for the last two years—

and he missed her.

Caution drifted off on thoughts of Dara and what he would say to her when she finally decided to darken his door again. He knew from past experience that a heated argument and an even more heated sexual encounter to melt the paint off his walls would follow her arrival. It was their M.O.

His cock hardened at the image, consciousness moving towards what would inevitably become an intense wet dream to leave him aching and breathless early in the morning. A noise downstairs jerked him from his erotic fantasies.

He bolted from the bed, mind still cloudy with arousal, before he realized the noise had originated from the kitchen. He waited, listening for further sounds, and heard a clatter as if someone had bumped into the pots and pans hanging from the ceiling over the island. Roscoe barked seconds later, but it wasn't a vicious, I'm-going-to-take-a-chunk-out-of-your-butt bark, rather a friendly I-know-you-let's-play bark.

Still, he didn't think it was Tayte who had Roscoe up and about; the kid could make it around the house, especially the kitchen, blindfolded and noiselessly. She'd had much practice going down for milk in the middle of the night. She reserved the warm milk and hot chocolate midnight forages for special disturb-daddy's-sleep-time occasions.

Caution crept to the door, antennae raising with hope about who might be in the kitchen, but still wary as he retrieved the Louisville Slugger he kept propped against the wall. He opened the door and stole down the hallway, stopping at Tayte's room and taking a quick peek. Good news, she was there and sleeping soundly. Bad news, because it meant an uninvited someone was roaming around downstairs in his house.

He headed toward the stairs carefully, with a purpose, and stepped on something spiked at the top step. He slapped a hand over his mouth to smother a gasp as he hopped on one foot; he realized immediately what the "something" was.

Tayte had warned him before he'd put her to bed that she'd lost a jack earlier.

He pocketed the offending object, remembering the kid also mentioning something about a hairpin she'd left somewhere when she'd been doing Barbie's hair.

"I'm not absolutely positively certain, Daddy, but it could be with my jack."

If he didn't know better, he'd have thought she was setting down booby-traps to keep him from leaving her.

Caution grinned at the thought, limped the rest of the way downstairs before he spotted the hairpin right there on the next-to-last step. He pocketed the pin too and tip-toed down the balance of steps and toward the kitchen as quietly as he could. He perked his ears as he heard Roscoe panting and someone trying diligently to shush him.

His heart drummed so loudly in his ears it was a wonder he could hear anything at all.

Times like this, Caution wished he kept a gun in the house, except for his long-time aversion reinforced by Tayte's existence and Dara's affinity and preoccupation with firearms.

Dara didn't have a choice, needed a weapon for her job. But he did have a choice, and wouldn't put his daughter in jeopardy unnecessarily. There were other ways to keep her safe.

Caution made it down to the main floor unharassed, nostrils picking up a familiar scent.

Her scent—dangerous, sexy and sweet. His heart sped with certainty.

Why was she bumping and sneaking around downstairs instead of just coming up? Too embarrassed to show her face after so long an absence?

Caution couldn't put embarrassed and Dara in the same sentence without seeming deranged. Dara didn't do embarrassed, didn't embarrass easily if at all. She didn't care enough what anyone thought about her to succumb to so human an emotion.

He loved this about her, that what-you-see-is-what-you-get-take-me-or-leave-me-if-you-don't-like-it-too-bad-and-kiss-my-ass attitude about her, though the trait had an annoying way of biting him in the butt when he was trying to make a point about her life style and profession. She always took his suggestions as a personal attack. Maybe that was his fault, knocking her career choices when he knew that bounty hunting wasn't *just* a job to her, but a way of life, a form of redemption.

"You can't have it both ways, Caution. Either you love my style or you don't. I am what I am, and that includes a ruthless bounty hunter."

Damn her unshakable, Popeye's logic.

Caution reached the kitchen, caught Dara backing away from Tayte's twenty-pound Beagle as if the dog was a two-hundred-pound Rottweiler in attack mode instead of the playful Snoopy-dog she knew and loved.

He cut on the light and she yelped, turning to him with a start. "What are you doing skulking around down here like a cat burglar? You scared me half to death."

Roscoe turned and ran to him now, sorrel-and-white tale wagging behind him as he pounced, front paws on Caution's knees.

Silently, Dara pointed the gun at him, and Caution frowned, more at the unfamiliar expression in her eyes than the implied threat of a raised weapon.

"Dara, is that gun loaded?"

"Of course it is. I wouldn't pick up a skip with an empty gun." She chambered a round.

His eyes widened. "Have you lost your mind?"

"You're coming with me."

"I'm not coming anywhere with you. And put away that gun."

"Drop the bat." She aimed the gun at his chest, hand unsteady, which made her more dangerous than had her hand been as rigid as a marble pillar.

Caution gawked, Roscoe now barking wildly at his feet. He bent and slid the fingers of his free hand through the dog's collar to try and calm the animal down, then

eased the bat to the floor. "Okay, fine. I've put it down."

Dara reached behind her, removed a pair of cuffs, and tossed them to him across the floor. "Put them on."

He smirked, toying with the cool metal before twirling the cuffs around on one finger. "Are we about to act out some kinky role-playing?" Hell, when he imagined their reunion and a heated encounter, he hadn't imagined this, but he was game if she was.

"Do I look like I'm playing, Dawson?"

He glared at her, working his jaws, thought she most definitely looked serious. As serious as she had the night she'd run him down at *Foster's*.

Caution had been short-handed at the Manhattan site that evening, and had just taken a tray of drinks from the bar when one of Dara's infamous skips barreled in and flew past him. He spun three-sixty, tray overhead, didn't waste a drop, the only article missing from his maneuver a red matador's cape. He wasn't able to avoid the collision with Dara, however, when she burst through the front door a second later and crashed into him shoulder first.

The tray went flying, drinks splattering anyone within a one-block radius; mugs and glasses shattering against the floor and walls as Caution toppled backwards, landing on his butt.

Recovering, he grabbed Dara's ankle as she tried to run by him—not even an "excuse me" or "get out of my way" in her wake—and stopped her forward motion short.

Dara pitched face first and rebounded spewing four-letter words. "You idiot! Why didn't you stop *him*? What are you, on his side?"

"I'm not on anyone's side at the moment except my own." Caution had slowly gotten to his feet to face her, not the least bit threatened by the gun she'd wielded. In fact, it turned him on.

The woman menacing him with a gun in his kitchen now seemed miles and miles away – confused, nervous, unsure—the total antithesis of the bounty hunter in his bar years ago.

Either Dara Kelly had lost her mind and her nerves, and had gone soft, or she genuinely thought he was his twin.

Whether the former or latter, Caution didn't like having a gun pointed at him, especially when he recognized that unfamiliar look he'd earlier seen in her eyes, a look and emotion he'd never before seen Dara Kelly exhibit: fear.

CHAPTER 4

Sam watched as Dawson complied and placed the cuffs around one wrist, nervous at being in the same room with him after what had happened between them, nervous since she'd broken into the house like a thief in the night. A new townhouse in Brooklyn. His house, not their house.

She remembered her surprise at the appearance of the place from the outside, a look of domesticity and affluence, a feeling of warmth and wholeness, as if he'd started over and already replaced her. She'd been shocked that skips could live so high on the hog and so out in the open.

Her next big surprise came in the form of Dawson's clean-shaven appearance—chiseled jaws devoid of hair (the better to see his cleft chin and dimples), no mustache or goatee hindering a view of his full sensual lips. He'd cut his shoulder-length black hair to within a couple of inches of its life, black waves neatly trimmed around his ears, cut close to his nape.

But Sam wasn't fooled.

"Behind your back," she said now, hoping the tremor she felt inside wasn't discernable in her voice. She steeled herself and warily approached as her husband indignantly mumbled before turning his back to her. She preferred not getting so close. She'd been thrown enough when he'd walked into the kitchen shirtless, undeniable virility wafting to her on a spicy male zephyr that instantly made her wet and threatened to overwhelm her. Sam had almost turned tail and run when he'd come in brandishing that slugger like an MVP batting champ in a pair of drawstring pajama bottoms.

She engaged the second cuff around his wrist as he compliantly held out his hands, checked and double-locked the restraint the way Dara had shown her.

He turned to face her, crinkling lush brows. "Are you satisfied now?"

"Not yet." She wouldn't be satisfied until she saw him behind bars where he belonged and for a very long time. It was the least he deserved. And even then, would she

be satisfied? He'd taken her life. He'd taken her baby. He'd taken everything that meant anything to her, especially her trust. Prison was too good for him.

She grabbed him by the biceps of one arm, not surprised by the hardness and strength she encountered as he involuntarily flexed, pulling away. She pulled back, rougher than she would have if she hadn't already worked herself into a tizzy.

"What do you think you're doing, Dare?" he asked, his deep voice a caress, as if he were trying to calm down an agitated mental patient. Or seduce a woman.

The latter was already working despite her tension, his words reaching deep to her core and moistening her panties. "I'm taking you in, Dawson. There's a bounty on your head and you know why."

"Okay, I've had about enough of these games. You know damn well I'm not Daw—"

"Daddy! I had another bad nightmare. Can I have some hot chocolate?"

Daddy? He has a kid to go with the dog? A kid this old? No way, this can't be happening... Sam gaped as the child padded into the kitchen and paused on the threshold, knuckling her eyes with small fists.

"Honey, go back up to bed and I'll bring it to you."

The child stopped rubbing her eyes long enough to peer up at Sam.

She was the spitting image of her father, right down to the wavy black hair—hers framing a pixie's face in tousled curls to her shoulders—and emerald-green eyes now trained on Sam.

There was no doubting Dawson's paternity, and Sam thought the child's mother surely must have hated his guts while she was carrying the kid, if there was anything to the old wives tales she'd always heard coming up.

Child's mother? Who might that be? The infamous Lolita, perhaps? Or another one of Dawson's indiscretions? Were any of them still in the picture?

Sam's heart twisted at the implications.

We have plans for you...

She had plans of her own now that They'd given her her life back; they just happened to be clouded by jealousy and righteous indignation at the moment. Not to mention a healthy dose of unbridled, clit-throbbing lust. "Why are you handcuffed, Daddy?" Before her father could answer, the kid turned her sharp gaze back to Sam. "Are you taking him to the hoosegow?"

"Tater-Tot, it's a, uh...we're playing a little game. You know, like Twister."

"Oh." The girl nodded so sagely that Sam blushed, wondering how much she understood, if she got the double entendre that Sam had.

Wait a minute! Had he just called the child Tater-Tot? How in the world...?

"Tayte, I'll bring the hot chocolate up to your room as soon as we're done here, okay?"

"Promise you won't forget?"

"I cross my heart."

Tayte giggled as her father crossed his chest with his chin. "Okay. I'll wait for you."

"Take Roscoe upstairs with you, Tater."

"Okey-dokey." She caught the dog by the collar, and smiled up at Sam in an almost *atta-girl* gesture before turning to go.

Shaken, Sam turned back to Dawson just in time to see he'd unlocked the cuffs.

He stood in front of her, grinning, restraints dangling from the pointer of his right hand as he whistled a nameless tune, looking entirely too self-satisfied.

How the heck had he gotten out of the cuffs? Sam couldn't remember being married to Harry Houdini!

Her heart hammered not just from the fact that she was in the room with a dangerous escaped felon, the man responsible for her death, but from the wicked butter-melting grin spreading across her husband's face and reaching his eyes. She couldn't tell whether he was enraged or just a little peeved, and didn't want to find out, but he reached out and caught her wrist with both hands, wrestling the Glock from her grip before she could squeak.

Dumbfounded, Sam watched as he ejected the chambered round, emptied the clip and pocketed it before placing the empty gun atop the marble center island.

He stalked her around the kitchen as she tried to gain the door. She dodged to her left, didn't fool him as he caught her by an arm. Sam threw one leg behind his, but just as she was about to flip him over a hip to the floor, Caution reversed position in time to take her with him, cushioning her fall with his body as they both went crashing to the linoleum.

She struggled as he flipped her beneath him, straddled her hips, pulled her arms up over her head and grasped her wrists.

"You shouldn't do that." He leered.

Sam frowned. "Do what?"

"Thrust and plunge that way. I might get the wrong idea."

She struggled harder at his words and it only made him laugh. "Let me go."

"You came into my house, Ms. Big Bad Bounty Hunter, pointing a *gun* at me as if I was some dangerous felon, and now you want me to let you go?"

"I was perfectly within my rights."

"And so am I, Ms. Kelly." He leaned in, lips a hair's breadth from hers, and paused as he stared into her eyes. "Is this what you wanted? Does this turn you on?"

Sam bucked. "Don't flatter yourself!"

"Actually, I'm flattering you." He leaned further, stirring her hair with his breath

as he brushed her cheek with his lips, then murmured, "If I'd known you were into the kinky bondage scene, we could have tried this a long time ago."

Sam squirmed, gasped when she met Dawson's hard erection with her slit, and instantly felt moist heat between her legs as her pussy gushed. "I'm not," she said.

He arched a brow. "Not flattered?"

"Not into the kinky bondage scene." *Tell that to your dripping wet cunt.*

"Pity," he whispered. "Now, about this Dawson jazz..." He slid his mouth up, ran his tongue over her full lower lip. "You've never been fooled by my brother before. Besides my mother and Grampa Brody you're just about the only one in the world who *can* tell us apart."

Foiled? Brother? Grampa Brody? What did he mean by *brother*?

Sam frowned, light slowly dawning before she saw red. She should have known something was off-kilter when the man had addressed Dara so familiarly.

That evil, deceptive witch!

Sam remembered the last thing Dara had said to her before directing her to the townhouse: *"I'm going to give you a lead to the skip."* Not *lead* Sam to the skip, but *give* her a lead. Very subtle wording but it made all the difference.

If the woman weren't already dead, Sam would make sure the deed was done right the next time and kill Dara Kelly herself.

And Dawson! Talk about deceptive. He never once mentioned a sibling, much more an identical twin. But then again, Sam had never shown any overt interest, thus she only knew that he was estranged from his family, and she stupidly had not pried for the low down. She'd loved him, she'd married him, and the rest hadn't concerned her blind sensibilities, not to mention her overactive, twenty-two-year-old libido.

Fool.

She'd married a stranger. A stranger with a twin. An identical twin. Deliciously, erotically, lusciously identical.

Calm down, kiddo, that's what got you into this mess in the first place. A fool and horny.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"Pardon?" She really wanted to tell him that *he'd* have her tongue in a few seconds if he didn't back off. His mouth was so close, breath warm and enticing, if she reached out to lick her lips, she'd touch his.

"This is a first. I've never seen you at a loss for words before."

Sam could well imagine. Dara Kelly didn't seem the type to hold her tongue for anyone or anything, quite the opposite.

"I'm not at a loss. I've said what I need to say. And I want you to let me go and get off."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a bossy cuss?" Dawson—or whatever his name was—grinned, and Sam realized a total stranger held her captive. She didn't even know his name, despite knowing every angle of his gorgeous face.

How could she not tell the difference! He was so much more intense than Dawson was, serious and somber, a very solid and trustworthy vibe about him.

She wondered if the brothers were as alike as they were different. They both seemed to have the same spicy sense of humor; both had the same smooth, bronze skin, the lean-like-a-runner's build; both instantly kicked her female hormones into overdrive, but beyond these, Sam was almost in the dark as to demeanor and mood.

Where was help when she needed it and why did ghosts only pop up at the most inopportune times? Not that she had had much experience with the latter, but couldn't Dara see that she was in trouble? Or did she see and just not care?

Sam was tempted to call for Dara, but held back because of the strange man astride her.

His name is Caution.

The words came out as if said through clenched teeth, and Sam had to stop herself from searching the room for their source. Instead, she caught movement on the island behind Caution's hand, and peered as a cup and saucer violently rattled then levitated from the marble surface.

She gawked, and blurted, "Look out!" right before the ceramic-ware flew off the island towards the back of her captor's head as if flung.

Caution didn't hesitate and ducked without blinking or releasing her, and the cup and saucer hurtled past his left ear, missing his head by centimeters before crashing into the refrigerator and breaking into so many pieces.

Sam didn't know whether she was happy or disappointed the man had such quick reflexes, thwarting an opportunity for her escape.

Caution glanced behind him, eyebrows knitting as he turned back to her with a twinkle in his eyes. "Neat trick."

Sam bit her tongue in denial, but decided to turn the tables instead. "You too."

He frowned.

"The handcuffs. How'd you get out of them?"

"Trade secret."

"You're an escape artist?"

"Not quite."

His enigmatic smile only emphasized the fact that he had her where he wanted her, and that she was at a distinct disadvantage.

She should have been more nervous, more afraid, but once she realized it wasn't Dawson imprisoning her, her fear had evaporated. For the moment. Who knew what other sort of threat this Caution represented, besides the assault he was currently waging

on her senses of course?

"So, what are we going to do about this impasse?" he asked

"You could try letting me go and getting off of me," Sam repeated, but noticed he didn't seem in any particular hurry to do either.

"I like it where I am."

"But I don't."

"You've made that abundantly clear the last couple of months."

Sam did *not* want to get into a debate about Caution and Dara's relationship. "I'd rather not talk about that right now."

"Running away from our problems isn't going to solve anything."

What problems?

"You never gave me an answer to my proposal."

Proposal? Now this was getting just a little too sticky for her. Sam decided she wanted not only to kill Dara the next time she saw her, but also to make the woman sorry she'd ever been born! "My hands are turning numb," she mumbled.

He smiled as he sat up straight, taking her with him and holding her hands close to his chest. He slipped one cuff around her left wrist and locked it so fast she didn't have a chance to protest.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You wanted me?" Caution slipped the other cuff around his right wrist and locked it. "You got me."

"You're coming with me?"

"Hardly." He stood, pulling her with him. "You're coming with me."

Sam got to her feet too, but stopped when he headed for the entryway. "Where?"

"Upstairs to bed."

She arched a brow, heart drumming, and tried not to betray how much his words affected her, tried not to betray how much *he* affected her and that the thought of being alone with him in a bedroom totally unnerved her; totally turned her on.

Who knew she had this kinky, naughty streak, that the thought of him handcuffing her to his bed and having his way with her would zap her pussy with fire and speed her heart to near bursting? "You're kidding," was all she could manage in protest.

"I kid you not, and I don't have the energy to argue with you about it." He tugged her arm and she followed with no choice or she would have risked him dragging her like a caveman and popping her shoulder out of its socket, not to mention further damaging her ego.

She pulled back at the top of the plush, cream-carpeted staircase. "What's your hurry?"

"I'm bone tired and I want to get back to bed. I've got an early day tomorrow."

Like a two-year-old, she wanted to ask him a thousand questions—Where was Dawson? Did Caution know his brother's whereabouts, and/or was he harboring him? Why was Caution so bone tired? Early day doing what?—among her top choices. Instead, she quietly followed him into the large master suite and swallowed hard as he closed the door behind them.

* * * *

Dara sat at the top of the steps leading to the upstairs' bedrooms, chin in her cupped palms, eyebrows knitted, trying to decide whether or not to go through that door and bust up their party. That is if she even had the ability to bust up anything more than ceramic-ware.

Roscoe nosed his way out of Tayte's bedroom and trotted towards her.

When she turned, he backed up a couple of paces, tilted his head to one side, and frowned as if he were confused.

Dara peered at him, wondered if he really could see her.

She waved, beckoning him, and he barked, steadily backing up. "Here boy, come here." She patted a thigh, and Roscoe ran up to her, sniffing her outstretched hand, or rather the outline of her hand. His muzzle went straight through, but still sent an electric tingle all over her.

"You're about the only friend I have now, boy."

Roscoe barked, pushing his snout at her neck before thoroughly licking at the outline of her face. He whined when his tongue met no resistance, as if totally dissatisfied with Dara's non-corporeal reality and lack of scent.

"I know boy, I'm not too happy about it myself."

He barked two times in quick succession as if in agreement.

At least *he* could hear her and see her.

Dara wondered if Caution would be able to see her the way Sam and Roscoe could. She was still getting the hang of this whole spirit world jazz, but doubted it since she'd *wanted* Caution to see her when he'd been tussling with Sam on the floor in the kitchen. She had tried to materialize, concentrating the way she had with Sam, but nothing had come of it. Not even Sam had been able to see her, at least Dara didn't think she had.

She sighed now, upset with herself for letting frustration and jealousy get the best of her. She could have hurt someone with that cup and saucer.

Indeed you could have.

Oh, Them. Just what she needed. Astral parents. Disappointed astral parents.

They were probably the ones behind her invisibility.

What purpose would it serve for Caution to see you?

Dara shrugged, uncharacteristically diffident.

That was not very nice, Dara.

And to what were They referring? Her cup and saucer tantrum? Or—?

You misled Samantha.

Dara ground her teeth at the idea of Sam behind that bedroom door with *her* man, biting out her next words, "You wanted me to get them together. They're together."

You used deceit and trickery.

Hey, she'd used a lot worse to get a job done in the past. What were They complaining about? They'd put her in an impossible situation, a very unappealing situation, and expected her to work with it.

She'd had to watch her man practically fucking another woman on the kitchen floor; another woman he was under the impression was *her*! More, she had to encourage the union.

You did not want him.

Did they have to remind her? Still, she couldn't let Their statement go without challenging it. "Who says I didn't?"

Actions speak volumes, Dara Kelly.

She swallowed hard, remembering all the times she'd pushed him away—physically, emotionally—all the times she'd told him she didn't want or need him in her life. All the times she'd let his I love you's go unanswered, instead burying herself in his embrace and pushing him towards a more economical form of communication, one involving their bodies and a lot of moaning and sweat, rather than romantic words of commitment.

How many times had Diego jokingly threatened to steal Caution away from her if she didn't stop treating him like a disposable man? How many times had her friend told her she should count her blessings that she had a "catch"—a single, straight, gorgeous man with money to spend and eager to lavish it on her?

"Dare, if you don't want him, I know more than a few 'mos who'll take him off of your hands in a second. Me being one of them."

The last time they'd been together, she'd practically thrown his proposal in his face.

If she'd had a mirror—had a flesh-and-blood face to look at—Dara knew she'd see her cheeks flushed. She felt the phantom heat in her non-existent body. It was such an alien emotion, this shame, and she knew it was Their doing. They had her—not just her body and soul, but her mind and emotions. And she didn't like it one bit. She'd never been one to let what others thought affect her decisions, emotions or actions.

"So is this my penance? Giving him to someone who'll appreciate him?"

Not a peep. Silence.

They had an answer for everything else, why not this, the most important

question? Or was Their silence supposed to be enough of an answer for her?

No way. This wasn't a session on a shrink's couch where she was expected to come up with the answers herself after paying through the nose to have someone else help her with her problems. This was her life, what there was left of it anyway.

Dara glared at the ceiling. "You heard me! I want to know why you're doing this to me!"

All in time, We will reveal.

Well wasn't that just so special? Could they get any more ambiguous? Like her very existence wasn't at stake?

Dara bit back a curse, thinking it wouldn't go over well with Them even though she wanted to just let a string fly.

Hell with it.

The thought of getting sloppy drunk immediately came to mind, just as quickly squashed by the idea that she probably couldn't. Where could a ghost go to get a buzz? Dara didn't think she knew any bars that catered to the dearly not-quite-departed. She could always go to her apartment, or what used to be her apartment. She guessed if she got angry enough she could handle a glass and bottle long enough to make a drink. But would the alcohol have an effect on her non-corporeal being?

Next to a stiff drink, she had a strong desire for revenge. But against whom? So many candidates—Randall the slimy bastard, Sam, Caution, not to mention Them—so little time.

Abruptly, she stood and gave Roscoe a brisk pat and rub on the head before stalking down the stairs and through the front door. She didn't know where she was going, or what to do. She just knew she needed a change of scenery.

She couldn't face her empty apartment, but then she remembered she didn't have to. She was a ghost, she could go through walls and float. She didn't need conventional transportation; she didn't need anyone to help her with this visit.

If there was anyone to whom she owed a visit, it was Randall Tarrent. And if there was anyone who needed a cup and saucer and more flung at him, it was that man.

Dara would love to see the look on his face when he saw her.

CHAPTER 5

Caution woke to a dreary morning, rain clouds allowing in only minimal sunlight through the cream bedroom blinds as he lay face to face with Dara on his king-sized bed.

He started to raise his right hand to rub the sleep from his eyes and immediately stopped when he remembered the wrist attached to his.

He opened his eyes to watch her sleep, his face only an inch from hers as she rested on a side, left arm flung overhead with his right.

She looked so vulnerable and young—almost like a little girl—that it was difficult for him to reconcile the tough-as-nails bounty hunter who pursued dangerous felons for a living with the fiery, soft and sensual woman sleeping beside him.

And last night hadn't gone very far in diffusing the perception of her vulnerability and youth. Despite her pulling the gun on him and expectedly making demands, he didn't think he had ever seen Dara so unsure, so timid, so afraid.

Of him?

The idea sent his protective instincts into overdrive, along with a wave of ambivalent rage. That she would be afraid of him when he'd been the one under siege in his own home had him wavering back and forth between indignation and defensiveness.

The thought that something had perhaps happened to her during her last job flashed through his mind. Something that had deeply affected her, *changed* her.

Caution didn't know if this were a good or bad omen for him. For them.

Omens or not, she'd definitely been acting weird last night, as if she didn't know who he was, as if she really believed he was Dawson.

Caution vowed he'd wring his brother's neck when he found him, and not just for the money the knucklehead was costing him. That was a minor concern. Money he could acquire, did it every day, more than he'd ever need to give his child and himself a comfortable life. No, he had it in for Dawson for an entirely different reason than a

monetary one, the least of which was the threat the man's flight represented to Caution's family unit.

What if another bounty hunter besides his paramour had broken into his home under the misguided impression that he was his brother? Another impatient, less amiable, more deadly bounty hunter immune to reason?

Dara yawned and stretched, and Caution smiled, letting her take his right wrist with her.

He knew the exact moment when she remembered what had happened last night and realized that she was attached to him and in his bed she froze, right arm midair, eyes flying open to stare at him. "Morning, Dare."

"Unlock these cuffs."

"Morning Caution. How are you today?"

"I'm not kidding."

"Are you threatening me?"

"This has gone on long enough. You need to let me go."

"I do?"

Dara bolted upright, almost wrenching his right arm out of the socket when she slammed a fist on each hip. "Now look..."

She didn't need to tell him to do that, his eyes already glued to her hard nipples protruding and pressing against the thin cotton material of her black T-shirt, making his mouth water with the idea of wrapping his tongue around each nub and sucking them into his mouth, making his cock rock hard to tent the front of his pajamas.

He knew the exact moment when Dara noticed it too, color quickly suffusing her already glowing copper face as she averted her eyes, trying to look everywhere but at his crotch.

Dara Kelly? Shy? The world must have been about to fall off its axis!

"Like it?"

"Like what?" She arched her eyebrows, her apparent confusion doing absolutely nothing to divert his libido.

Caution pitched his hips towards her, bumping his cock against her and grinning when Dara jerked back as far as she could without falling off the bed. He wiggled into her space again, closing the distance between them. "Don't act like that. He missed you."

"*You* can tell *him* to settle down and get a clue, because I didn't miss him."

"Your girls tell another story." Caution reached out with his left hand to gently pinch a nipple, rolled it between his thumb and forefinger as Dara gasped before closing her eyes and whimpering.

"Don't."

"You sure?" He bent his head, enclosed her cotton-covered breast with his mouth

and sucked her nipple through the material of her top and bra before gently nibbling.

She squirmed beneath his touch but didn't try to escape his mouth.

Instead Dara burrowed her fingers in his hair, fisted a clump at his nape and pushed her breast further into his mouth. She rolled her hips against him, gasps turning into groans as she lowered a free hand and curled it into a fist against his naked chest, desperately clutching at the light dusting of hair there.

Caution slowly moved his mouth from her breast to her lips, licking a hot sexy path from her throat, to her chin until he latched onto her mouth with resolute intent as his free hand squeezed past the waistband of her jeans and inside to cup her hot mound. He plunged a finger into her cunt, testing and not disappointed when the digit instantly came out wet, her woman's scent wafting up to encircle his senses with her arousal. He moaned against her mouth, thrusting his tongue inside and grinding his erection hard against her slit when she met his tongue stroke for stroke.

Dara instantly pulled back when the door burst open and Tayte came in trailing Roscoe, the dog's tail eagerly wagging behind him.

"Daddy, you forgot my hot chocolate!" The little girl froze several steps away, eyes widening as she took in her father and Dara in bed. "Are you two *still* playing Twister?"

"Something like that." Caution folded his arms across his chest, pulling Dara closer, her head falling against him in a glossy black spume of curls that tickled his bare chest.

Clad in pink flannel Barbie pjs, Tayte skipped to the bed, hopped up beside her father and wrapped both her arms around one of his as Roscoe waited on the floor. "Can I play too?"

"Not this round, honey."

Tayte pouted. "Why not?"

"Because I have to make your breakfast and get you ready for the babysitter."

"Is Grampa Brody coming today?"

"You betcha."

"Goody!" Tayte clapped and leaped off the bed, catching Roscoe by the collar and leading the dog to the door. She stopped at the threshold and turned, a small fist on her hip as she scowled at her father, and Caution thought she looked like a miniature Dara. "You are going to remember my hot chocolate this morning?"

"If you still want it."

Tayte rolled her eyes. "Who doesn't want hot chocolate?" With that, the little girl flounced out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Caution turned to see Dara staring after his daughter and smiled at her look of wonder.

Dara stopped gawking when she noticed him staring. "She's so grown."

"Five going on thirty-five," Caution said with more than a little pride. "So, what's it going to be, Ms. Kelly?"

"What do you mean?"

"Breakfast with me and my daughter before I go to work, or I leave you handcuffed here in the dungeon?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"Don't try me."

She peered at him as if measuring his resolve, and Caution hardened with desire at the idea of having her handcuffed in his bedroom, to his bed, easily accessible and open.

Shit, it had been too long since he had had her!

"I'd like to shower and change."

"Can I trust you not to leave until we at least have a chance to sort some of this out?"

"Of course."

"You said that a little too quickly for my taste."

"What? You don't trust me?"

"Would you?"

"Yes."

She was so damn irresistible—dark bedroom eyes so bright they looked like polished onyx cast in almond, black hair falling around her shoulders in tousled waves through which his fingers ached to burrow.

"So where's the key?" he asked and watched myriad realizations light her eyes. "Don't beat yourself up too badly about not trying something last night. I'm a pretty light sleeper, and would have stopped you before you had a chance to say boo."

"You think so?" she teased.

"I know so." He reached for her hair, tucked stray tendrils behind an ear. He felt her tense, body stiff as she peered at him. "What's wrong, Dare?"

"Besides you holding me here against my will?"

He raised his eyebrows and said nothing.

"Well, it's true."

"C'mon." Caution sighed, flung his legs over the side of the bed to get up. He paused as Dara scrambled to his side of the bed and stood up beside him.

She reached into her jeans pocket, pulled out the handcuff key and unlocked her wrist from his.

Caution stared at her long and hard, waiting for her to make a move. When she didn't he walked to the top bureau and retrieved a pair of fuchsia cotton boxers and a matching T-shirt that belonged to her. "You know where everything else is." He handed the items to Dara, headed for the door and paused without turning. "I'll see you downstairs."

* * * *

Contrary to what Caution might have thought, escaping now was the furthest thing from Sam's mind. Not when she had so many unanswered questions crowding her brain, competing for attention. Not when she was this close to the possibility of finding her errant husband. Not when she wanted to know so much more about his enigmatic twin, the least of which was the origin of his child.

Sam sat on the edge of the bed, freshly showered and clad in the tee and boxers Caution had given to her before leaving, and feeling strangely comfortable in the alien surroundings. Her head was still reeling with all that had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours, the least of which was that hot and heavy petting session that surely would have turned into full-fledged...screwing had Tayte not burst into the room to save her from herself.

Save her? Like heck. She'd been on the verge of stripping off both their bottoms and impaling herself on his hard, hot cock without a second thought had the child not burst in.

The child. He'd called her Tayte, a beautiful cherub of a child whom Sam thought she would have been lucky to have borne. But she hadn't. The question was, where did she fit in? Who and where was the mother? Or was Sam the mother in an alternate reality she had yet to experience? Were They trying to right Their mistake in taking her away before her time?

Sam got up and pulled on her jeans, enjoying the way the blue denim hugged her rich curves. As she turned back and forth in the mirror and took in her new figure, she liked the way the vibrant tee contrasted against her new-penny brown complexion.

She hadn't been too shabby a specimen in the smaller body of her previous life, but she could see what Caution saw in Dara, at least the physical package. Not to put the inner package down, since she didn't know enough about the woman to do that. She didn't want to judge. Although she felt judged and convicted several times over since she'd come back.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that Dara didn't like her. Sam wasn't too crazy about the older ghost representative she'd met either. But they needed each other, likes and dislikes aside. And she needed to learn as much about Dara Kelly as she could if this charade was going to work.

Sam hooked her leather jacket through a finger, flung it over a shoulder and headed out the bedroom door and down the stairs where the smells of home cooking assailed her senses long before she reached the first floor. Eggs, breakfast sausage, French toast smothered in butter and syrup—she could identify each culinary treat separately and together, her mouth watering as she turned the corner to the kitchen and saw Caution diligently scrambling eggs at the stove.

He turned, pan in hand as she took a seat at the center island opposite his daughter.

"Morning."

The little girl gave her a gap-toothed grin. "Are you going with Daddy to work today?"

"Um—"

"We're going to spend some time together, yes. Now eat your breakfast." Caution put a small portion of eggs on Tayte's plate, and the little girl immediately poured ketchup over them before bringing a forkful to her mouth. She chewed quickly and swallowed before asking her next question.

"Will you be here when I come home, Dara?"

"Stop asking so many questions and eat, Tater."

Sam put her hand over her own plate as Caution came to her with the pan. She didn't think she could eat the French toast and sausages that were already piled on it.

"None for me."

"Don't be ridiculous. You need to start off your day on the right foot with a hearty meal."

"Learned that from your mommy, did you?"

"My grandfather, actually." Caution politely pushed her hand aside and doled out a warm helping of scrambled eggs, then put some on the plate adjacent to Sam's and finally took his seat after rinsing out the pan in the sink.

Sam leaned in, whispering, "My stuff. Did you—?"

"I put your duffel and...other equipment away in the bedroom."

She didn't have to ask what he meant, and cringed, blood rushing to and warming her face when she remembered how she'd treated him last night, the things she'd said to him, how haphazard she'd been with that gun and those cuffs.

It would be nice if she could blame her behavior on something else other than the situation, on *someone* else besides herself. But she couldn't. She'd willingly come into his house, prepared to arrest him, almost prepared to shoot him if necessary to bring him in. She'd been Dara last night, no ifs, ands or buts about it.

But not enough to fool Caution Foster. She knew he knew something was wrong with her, different about her.

We're going to spend some time together...

He had it all figured out, did he? Just assumed because she'd stayed and hadn't yet hightailed out of here that she was going to do what he said, when he said it? He had another think coming then.

"You're not eating, Dare." Caution peered at her as if trying to penetrate her skull to read her thoughts. "Something wrong with the food?"

"Nothing. I'm just not very hungry."

Tayte pushed her plate away and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not hungry either." She glanced over at Sam and stopped just short of winking.

"Oh no you don't, miss. You're eating breakfast whether you want to or not." Caution glared at Sam as if to say, "See what you did," and she reluctantly picked up her fork and dug into the French toast. "See, Dare's eating. Now clean your plate."

"Oh, all right."

Caution smiled, obviously holding in a full-fledged laugh when he looked from Tayte to Sam beside him.

She turned to face him full, relishing the taste of the French toast as she held his rich green gaze, falling into the intensity of his look and the wonderful food affecting her taste buds in ways she had never thought possible.

The doorbell rang, breaking the spell, and several seconds later, an older man entered the kitchen, his towering robust presence filling the room. Tayte jumped from her seat and raced across the floor, hugging the new arrival's legs, Roscoe on her heels.

The man picked her up over his head, and parked the little girl on his shoulders, his strength and posture belying the shock of white hair on his head and wrinkles on his face.

"And how's my Tater-Tot?"

"Fine, Grampa Brody. We were just waiting for you."

The man arched his brows at the "we" from his six-and-a-half-foot height, sending a piercing look Sam's way.

Between the look and the thick Irish brogue, she was more than a little thrown.

"So, what are your plans for today, Grampa?"

"Boy, if I tell ya, then it wouldn't be a surprise to me Tater."

Sam followed the interaction and thought Caution rude for not introducing her to his grandfather, until she realized Dara probably knew the old man, maybe better than she cared to.

She couldn't have explained it if someone put the question to her, but she knew that the man didn't care for Dara, and it was more than just the woman's profession and brassy manner. She sensed his dislike came from somewhere deeper, more primitive.

"Didn't know ya was havin' company today."

Sam felt the cold as Caution's grandfather raked her with his gaze, and she knew: the man not only didn't care for Dara Kelly, he hated her. She tried not to shiver visibly, swallowed her pride and stared up at the older man. "Caution and I are going to be spending some time together today."

"Hmm, that's interesting." Brody swept a desultory look over her before turning his gaze back to his grandson. "Have ya been hearin' from that Pamela lately?"

"Gramps, you know Pamela's one of my partners. Of course I've heard from her lately."

"I'm not talkin' business, laddie."

Could the old coot get any more obvious? Sam gritted her teeth.

Her parents had taught her to be respectful to her elders, and to not say anything at all if she didn't have anything nice to say, but Sam was just a few seconds from giving Caution's grandfather a piece of her unpleasant mind.

For the first time since she'd met Dara, Sam actually felt sympathy for the woman.

And who the heck was Pamela? Tayte's mom, or someone else that Caution was dating?

Brody lowered Tayte to her seat and took the empty high chair opposite Sam, folding his hands on the island top and staring at her, as if to take her full measure.

For a brief moment, she wondered if he could *see*, if he knew who she was, then just as quickly discounted the thought, and decided she could handle whatever he had to dish out. She'd come back from the dead after all, and there wasn't much else he could do to her.

Bring it on, Grampa.

"Tayte, you about finished?" Caution asked.

"Now, now laddie, what's yer rush? Let the tyke take her time."

"You may not have places to be on time, Gramp Bro, but I do."

"Boyo, I told you don't shorten me name like that." The older man took a playful swipe at his grandson's head and Caution ducked and chuckled.

Sam watched them and realized something she hadn't allowed herself to think about before. These strangers were related to her, family, by default, that she didn't know she'd had.

Tayte was her niece-in-law, Grampa Brody, hateful racist and all, was her grandfather-in-law and Caution...ah Caution, her secret brother-in-law who was under the impression he was her man. Fiancé, had Dara accepted his proposal.

Sam could see the woman turning down Dawson, but Caution didn't seem anything like his brother; he was more staid and reliable. Unless he had some dark side of which Sam was unaware.

Like Dawson. Perhaps Dara had seen this dark side. Or was it that the woman just thought marriage beneath her?

The thought crossed Sam's mind that she had married the wrong brother. Dara with her Glock 45, handcuffs and take-no-prisoners attitude seemed a far better match for the likes of the hands-on Dawson, and she probably could have handled him a lot better than Sam. Sam had been a tiny sitting duck waiting for roasting. Was Caution so different, or even better, than his brother was? Maybe Sam was deluding herself yet

again, pinning bows with thoughts of the noble, the gentle, the trustworthy man she wanted, instead of the reality she had gotten.

"All righty, Tater, let's be on our way. I can tell when we're not wanted."

"You know better, Tater." Caution cut his grandfather a look and caught his daughter's hand as she got out of her chair. "Don't I get a kiss?"

"Of course, Daddy!" Tayte gave him a nice wet one on the cheek, then bounced over to Sam and did the same. "See ya later, Dara."

"See ya," Sam murmured, brushing the newly kissed spot on her cheek, heart beating bird-fast at the child's easy affection.

Heart filling with the thought of her own loss, she watched as Tayte followed her grandfather out, thinking that the old man couldn't be all bad if he could elicit the tender loving feelings of Caution's precocious daughter. That didn't mean Sam had to like him though.

"Old man was in rare form this morning."

"Likes baiting me, does he?"

"Grampa Brody likes baiting everyone. But you especially." Caution grinned, reached for her hand, raised it to his mouth, and lightly touched his lips to the back of her wrist. "I'm a lot like him in that way."

Sam shuddered, struck by his similarity to Dawson, and the differences, the sincerity wafting to her from his aura. Perhaps baiting and teasing ran in the family, but this was where she was sure the similarity ended between Caution and his grandfather.

Dawson and his grandfather? Hmm, she had never sensed hate from Dawson, even when she'd gotten on his wrong side. Dawson's anger hadn't been fueled by hate; in fact, it hadn't had much focus. It was more general and uncontrolled than Grampa Brody's.

"So, you're coming with me?" Caution asked.

"I thought it was already decided."

"By me, but I figured I'd check with you, see how that flies."

"How nice of you to consult with me now."

"I had to put up a united front for Tayte. Don't want her to get the wrong idea."

"Which would be what? That we're a couple."

"Dare, we are a couple. You just don't want to admit it."

Sam lurched to her feet, wiped her mouth with her napkin and threw it down on the table as she put a fist on a hip. "Are we ready to leave yet, or are you expecting another family member to drop by with whom I have to do battle?"

Caution stood beside her and slid an arm around her waist that she was loath to remove.

"He wasn't that bad, was he?"

"Bad enough."

"I'll talk to him about it."

"Don't bother on my account."

"Are you going to be contrary like this for the rest of the day?"

"For the rest of my life at least."

Caution grinned, pulled her close and pecked her cheek.

Sam wanted nothing more than to fall into his arms for a full-fledged Hollywood kiss, but kept her hands fisted at her sides, reminding herself that he wasn't her man to take.

Where the heck was Dara anyway?

CHAPTER 6

She had paid Tarrent and paid him well, not once but twice. Yet his mutual hatred and reputation for getting the job done had not netted success. The no-necked good ol' boy had failed and failed miserably, even with the help of an excellent male escort that had not come cheap.

Good help was so hard to come by.

She ground her teeth thinking about the time that had been wasted, the contacts and resources exhausted, and finally coming back to the beginning: the Amazon was still breathing, walking and sniffing around Caution.

He did not belong with her, the Black Amazon who was not in the same league and never would be, but Caution couldn't see it. He needed someone to see it for him, to help him over her when the time came. He would appreciate the advocacy in the long run.

Trying again was not a question, but the timing had to be just right, not too soon and not too late. The Amazon couldn't be allowed to get any more cozy with Caution than already was the case, any closer or entrenched in Tater-Tot's life.

She'd have to concoct another plan, be more painstaking, less emotional. In the end, however, it would be worth it to see the Amazon taken down, her time on earth past due.

* * * *

Randall eased back in his La-Z-Boy recliner and hit rewind on the VCR remote. He needed to unwind after Ralphie's call and get into pre-job preparation mode, which meant motivating himself with a preview of what he could look forward to after he thwarted the cunt again.

Randall had watched this episode from his video library several times since he'd gotten home in the wee hours, as a treat to himself for a job well done, and couldn't resist seeing Pam's boobs just one more time before he officially dug in and started his work

day.

No one could fill out a red bathing suit better than that chick. Tommy Lee was a fool to have let her go. Of course, if he were a real man like Randall, he'd have known how to satisfy his woman and keep her in her place to boot. Didn't take much. A lot of loving, and a little discipline when needed. A woman needed her man, *wanted* him, to show her who was boss.

Randall had learned this from the best, first at his father's knee up until the age of five when his parents had dumped him up north with his aunt and uncle, then from his father's brother Wade until Randall had been banished from home at fifteen. He'd learned all he needed to know by then, that most women were cheating, lying whores and came a dime a dozen. Had he stayed on any longer, someone would have died. Randall hadn't planned on that being him.

He licked his lips now as he watched Pam dash across the sand towards the surf – jugs jiggling, ass firm yet bouncy—all the while reminding him of his Aunt Debra.

On automatic pilot now, he unzipped his pants, closing his eyes as he reached inside and unveiled himself. He grasped his hard cock and visualized Debra's come-hither blue eyes beckoning as she waved him into her bedroom one day after he'd come home from work.

"I have a birthday present for you, Randy. Want to see?"

He gawked, nodding as his feet did the hurrying, eager as a rapacious crocodile. He was just eighteen and had been waiting for this moment all his life. He didn't think how wrong it was, or that she was old enough to be his mother (because she *wasn't* his mother, not even close). He only thought about putting his hands on those womanly curves—the big tits he had been admiring from afar for three years now, the round ass he had been dreaming about every night since he'd moved in with his aunt and uncle—and burying himself in something more giving and pure than his five fingers.

Randall opened his eyes now, stared at the screen and watched Pamela leaning over a drowning victim and giving mouth-to-mouth. What he wouldn't do to be that victim. What he wouldn't do to have back those several times he had been with his aunt.

They'd gone at their "affair" for months and could have gone on longer, since Uncle Wade barely paid his wife the attention that she deserved. It had been Debra who'd broken it off, explaining that she wanted to try and make things work with her husband and that Randall had turned into too much of a distraction.

For a long time afterwards, he had hated her, though he'd never pansy out like these delicate and politically correct kids today and admit she'd abused him as surely as her husband Wade, who laid an extension cord to Randall any chance he got, and for the smallest infraction. No, Randall had enjoyed every minute of his encounters with Debra, as angry at himself for letting her manipulate him as he was at her once they'd ended things and he'd moved out.

He'd vowed never to let anyone, especially a woman—older, younger, pretty or in between—get the best of him again. Never.

Ralphie was another trip, a man who liked playing both sides of the fence, and

covering all his bases. Randall respected this, but didn't appreciate that the bondsman had called his rival first, delegating him to second best.

It was a gig, and he was used to the bondsman's M.O., but it didn't mean he liked it.

Randall reached for the towel on the arm of his chair now, coming up short when his hand met leather and not terry. He jerked his eyes to the arm, surprised that the towel wasn't there or even on the floor nearby. He was even more surprised when he spotted it neatly folded and resting atop his breakfast nook counter, several feet away.

He could have sworn he had put it on the arm of the chair in preparation of his video-fest, force of habit.

Randall shrugged, got up to retrieve the towel, and returned to his chair and his Pamela-Debra wet dream. He manipulated his penis for several moments, the show's theme music suitable accompaniment as he expanded on his fantasy, adding the bounty hunter bitch. He sprinkled in the look of shock and pain on the cunt's face when he'd burst into the room and shot her. That had been priceless, and...and... Randall released a guttural groan, stroking himself to completion, and moaning as he climaxed on a vision of complete domination, watching that bitch squirm at his feet.

He stared at the screen, breath slowing and chest tightening with thoughts of his unlikely failure and how he would end the cunt's life right the next time. For good.

* * * *

Dara cringed as she sat on the Formica counter and watched Tarrent masturbate.

Pamela Anderson? No accounting for taste. But then Randall was nothing else if not a predictable chauvinist pig. Couldn't handle a real woman if he tried, so the blond bimbo would have to do. What a freaking walking cliché.

Gave decent men and the profession a bad name with last night's stunt. Not that anyone would ever believe Sam. Not that Sam could prove anything, especially since she was walking around alive and in Dara's body.

Not for long.

Dara shivered at the thought, wanting to do something, wanting to make something happen, but They had placed some pretty harsh restrictions on her abilities, especially since she'd arrived at Tarrent's. She couldn't manifest her image—wanted to scare the hell out of the bastard, truth be told—but no matter how much she concentrated, Randall didn't see her, didn't even sense her in the room.

You are wasting time, Dara Kelly.

Yeah, yeah, fine. But what did They want her to do?

Find Samantha.

And then what? Wait, never mind, I know, I know.

Wasn't anything here for her anyway, unless she wanted to see a grown man cum in his hand over and over again to the apt refrain of "I'm always ready," and scantily clad bimbos and mimbos prancing across the big screen television.

Dara hopped to the floor from the countertop, swept her hand across the counter and knocked over a cartoon character cookie jar, watching with extreme satisfaction as it crashed to the floor and broke into pieces.

Tarrent jumped from his seat, wildly looking around.

She smiled as he rushed over to the broken pieces, a look of confusion plastered across his hard, broad features. He squinted his ice blue eyes before swerving his gaze around the room as if in search of something.

Dara put a hand to her mouth, holding in a laugh, then thought, why not.

She walked over and crouched beside Tarrent's imposing frame—six-five, two-fifty, barrel-chested with arms like baseball bats and legs to match—emboldened for the first time in her life around him. Out of all the people she'd run across in the course of her business, he alone held the power to intimidate her where no one else ever had. But now she had nothing to lose, had lost it all. And he had been the one to take it from her.

Dara swung at him with as much force as she could muster, hand going right through his head, rustling his long dirty-blond hair enough to draw his attention however. Tarrent jerked up his head, glanced around the room again, brow crinkling. Finally, he shrugged, stood and headed for the kitchen to retrieve a broom and dustpan.

Dara knew she was procrastinating and putting off the inevitable by not leaving. She didn't know what else to do, only what she wanted to do, what her heart wanted her to do. Unfortunately, her desire and Theirs didn't always coincide.

There will be time for that.

She didn't know what she hated most. That they could read her every thought and feelings before she could, or that she was dead and powerless to get the retribution she wanted.

Unfortunately, your wants are not paramount at the moment.

The hell they weren't.

Dara cringed, waiting for a lighting bolt or something to jerk her out of the apartment, but nothing happened except light laughter riding the wind to her ears—distinctly a Male and a Female. Like she thought. Her astral parents.

She should have known They had a sense of humor. Look at what They'd done to her.

She wanted to stop by Diego's and see how he was doing. Of all the people she missed in her life, next to Caution and Tayte, Diego was the most important to her. But she feared she'd overstepped her bounds today and wouldn't be allowed.

Dara glanced up at the ceiling as Tarrent made it back from the kitchen, walking through her to get to the cookie jar pieces.

She wouldn't ask. She wouldn't beg, or genuflect. Not anymore, so They could just take Their orders and stuff 'em. Let Them do what They wanted to her. Dara left the apartment, stalking through the door and out into the hallway, planning her revenge for when the right time came for her and Tarrent.

* * * *

"She is willful," Michael said.

"But We knew that when We chose her," Gabriel responded.

"This is true." He nodded. "She also has something of a temper. She reminds me of you." He peered at her from the corner of an eye, grinned as he waited for a tirade that did not come.

"Are you trying to put my wings in a bunch, Michael?"

"I would never think of doing such a thing."

"Hmph." Gabriel smiled. "Nevertheless, she is a fighter. She will do well with the other."

"If they do not cancel out each other."

"They will work together. They have no choice."

"There is always a choice, Gabby." Where his allusion to her well-known temper did not ruffle her feathers, his shortening of her name did.

"You are walking on thin ice, Mikey."

"My apologies, Gabriel. I misspoke." Michael stifled a chuckle, lest she go into a lecture about her uniqueness as the only Female in the higher echelons and how she sat on the left hand side of God, residing in the seventh—holiest of—heaven.

Rather, he directed his thoughts to the vagaries that made up human and celestial existence, and how each entity co-existed, most of the time without ever crossing paths or even being aware of the other.

His Master and Father was above reproach and mistakes, it was true, but sometimes Michael wondered about the rationale behind His decisions.

He had explained his plans to Gabriel and Michael—as much as He decided They should be privy to—and instructed Them to find two suitable candidates. They had chosen the twins' women, enjoying the ironies built into the situation, and glad to have the freedom to exercise Their judgment, since He had as excellent a sense of humor as Theirs.

Usually, They did not involve Themselves with so mundane an assignment. They were mainly responsible for bigger, more apocalyptic life-and-death struggles. But every once in a great while, a seemingly inconsequential assignment came along that aroused their interest and harked back to the days of antiquity when They had led the charge—Michael the "prince of light"—in The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness.

These days, Michael preferred a lighter hand, with as little interference and manipulation as possible in an assignment. In the human Sam and the human/ghost Dara, He and Gabriel believed that since They had chosen wisely, little interference was needed. Maybe a nudge here and there in the right direction, but nothing more.

But of course, only time would tell.

* * * *

Caution parked his silver Lexus in the parking lot around the corner from the mid-Manhattan location of his bar and restaurant chain, *Foster's*, and he had yet to lose Dara—her interest or her company.

Emboldened, he turned to her in the passenger seat as he killed the engine, peered at her in the dim light of the garage. "You've been pretty quiet since the day started."

"Just taking in the scenery."

"Pretty agreeable too."

"Your work is interesting."

"Not as interesting as bounty hunting."

"Depends on how you look at it."

Caution arched a brow. "Dare I hope?"

"Is that a weak attempt at pun?"

"Not entirely." He smiled, slid an arm across the back of her seat, played with the long waves at her nape and delighted in the tremor his fingers sent through her body. "You're not second-guessing your career choice now, are you?"

"I never said that. I just said your work is interesting. Can't I appreciate both for what they are?"

"No arguments here." He leaned in and kissed the side of her neck, and Dara almost jumped out of her seat, before sliding as far away from him as she could without getting out of the car.

"You've never been shy, Dare. What's the matter?"

"I just don't think this is the most appropriate place for us to..." She shrugged, face flushing as she seemed to search for the right nice-nellyism for the act.

Caution decided to help her along, since she was having such a problem. "To get our swerve on?"

"If that's the term you want to use. I was thinking more along the lines of quenching our thirsts."

Caution gawked, couldn't remember a time when Dare shied away from calling the act what it was, throwing the "f" word around like the bounty hunter she was without a second thought.

He knew for damn sure he wanted to do a lot more than quench his *thirst*. "Euphemisms aside, since when does the location matter to you, Ms. Kelly?"

"Since now. Besides, someone has to be the voice of reason."

"That would usually be me."

"Things change."

"Evidently." Caution sat back in his seat, folded his arms across his chest, and

envisioned one of their first times getting hot and heavy at the bar and restaurant where they'd met. She'd popped by during one of his breaks, showing no shame as she'd cornered him behind the bar, and felt him up in plain view of several patrons sitting at the bar.

He just didn't get the woman. She was not only softer and more timid than the Dara he knew, she was acting like what she always accused him of being: a prude. Any other time and place, he might have appreciated her ethics, but not now, after almost twenty-four hours in her company without sharing more than a couple of chaste kisses.

Thirsty? Ha! He was starving for her, had been for days now, and last night—first in the kitchen, and then in his bedroom—had done nothing to slake his appetite, had only wetted it.

The image of her handcuffed to him, face to face in the bed, haunted Caution, affected his anatomy in naughty ways, the least of which was a raging hard-on that threatened to burst full blown through the zipper of his jeans *Aliens* style in the next minute if he didn't get away from her, or unless she decided to have mercy on him and give him some. Hell, he was ready to beg, not that he'd ever do it because heaven forbid Dara should think she had more than her usual power over him. He'd never hear the end of it.

"So, will I be seeing Pamela today?"

Ah, so that's what was bothering her, the "other woman" in his life?

Caution decided he'd give his grandfather a piece of his mind when he saw him, whether Dara wanted it or not. "Probably. Is there going to be a problem?"

"That depends..." Dara paused, biting her bottom lip. "Do we usually have a problem?"

"You'd know about that better than me. Do you have a problem?" He turned at the same time she did to face her fully, barely hiding a grin.

"You like teasing me."

"You make it so easy."

"Hmph."

"You're not going to let the prospect of seeing Pamela ruin our day, are you?" He was banking on her jealousy to disallow her turning heel and running, not that Dara ever backed down from a challenge—either of the male or female variety.

Caution opened the driver's side door, put one foot on the pavement before turning back to Dara. "So are you coming with me or not?"

"I'm with you."

CHAPTER 7

Sam had been with Caution since morning. They'd toured several of his bars and restaurants spread across the five boroughs, and she'd watched him smoothly don several businessman hats—checking inventory, conferring with his managers, going over franchise contracts, perusing the books, selecting an advertising budget and campaign—before finally circulating among his customers.

But nowhere did his enthusiasm and talent shine through more than it did here in *Fosters'* Manhattan digs.

The man was an endless fount of energy and patience, jumping behind the bar and immediately digging into the place's melodrama.

He took orders and served drinks like an old pro, as if it were his calling. Much of the time, he listened to tales of woe—love lives gone irretrievably in the toilet, cheating spouses, partner swapping—and boasts of triumphant encounters to make the horniest teenage boy blush. During the remaining time, he took delight in commiserating and doling out the expected advice that would probably never be followed, but was in demand nonetheless.

Sam noticed too, in all the hours she'd spent with Caution, that he didn't once lift a drink other than orange juice or bottled water to his lips. She vaguely wondered if there were some unresolved substance abuse issues there, if he were facing some demons head-on by running an establishment that served alcoholic beverages, à la Sam Malone, then just as quickly chastised herself for playing shrink and jumping to conclusions again.

She sat back now and absorbed Caution's command performance, appreciating his ability to make everyone feel at home and comfortable enough to share confidences. He was the embodiment of the bartender stereotype—ears open, lips sealed, the image of a trusted confidant.

Heck, if she weren't still feeling her way and so darned unsettled, she'd probably be pouring her soul out to him right along with everyone else, knowing that her confidences would go no further than Caution.

And therein resided the problem.

The one thing she wanted, *needed* to confide to him was the one thing she couldn't dare tell him without seeming a mad woman ready for the funny farm.

Sam had been going over the situation again and again, not wanting to keep the man in the dark, convincing herself that he deserved to know the truth as well as what he was getting himself into by further nurturing a relationship with a marked woman. Each time she convinced herself that he was better off not knowing, that he'd never believe her, or worse, that he would.

The last had occurred to her as a mere hope and wish, something as likely to happen as a heat wave in February; nevertheless, the prospect kept her with Caution most of the day on the off chance that she would get up enough courage to confess.

The object of her speculation sauntered to the end of the bar where Sam sat nursing a Slow Gin Fizz she had made the mistake of ordering earlier.

Caution's eyebrows had instantly shot up at her request, as if she'd asked for cyanide straight up and in a dirty glass. Evidently, Dara didn't go for sissy mixed drinks. Caution further confirmed this when he'd asked before mixing her order, "No vodka straight up?"

"You doing all right over here?" he asked now.

"Right as rain," Sam said

"Righter." He leaned across the bar, surprised her with a soft kiss on the lips. "Hmm, you taste sweet and tart. Fizz suits you."

She felt the blood rush to her cheeks at his blatant flirting, back now to wanting to confide in him. How many more times would she go back and forth before she just blurted out her secret to him? It was just a matter of time. She should get it over with and spill.

"Caution, there's something I need to tell y—"

"*There* you are! I've been looking all over for you. I should have known you'd be hip deep, mingling with the natives."

Natives? Who did she think she was talking about? Sam or the customers? And who was *she* anyway?

Sam watched as the beautiful auburn-haired bombshell traversed the polished wood floor, smoothly winding between tables, customer and waiter/waitress traffic like a serpent. A straight white smile plastered across her flawless face, bright green eyes calculating and predatory as she made it to the bar and took the stool beside Sam.

Slim but curvy in all the right places, her expensive musk wafted out to Sam on a cloying breeze of Bloomingdale's/Macy's/Lord & Taylor pomp and circumstance. She reminded Sam of the society matrons with whom her mother socialized at the tennis and golf clubs, only much younger and much more attractive. She had the body and looks of Ginger but the impeccable rich air and bearing of Mrs. Howell...and had Sam mentioned beautiful already?

She gawked as the woman practically elbowed her out of the way to lean across the bar and give Caution a kiss full on the lips.

This must be Pamela. Who else would take such liberties, besides Tayte's mother?

"Hi Pam."

"Why you insist on doing..." Pamela glanced over each shoulder then leaned in, lowering her voice to stage whisper, "grunt work, is beyond me. That is what the help is for and certainly not why your grandfather turned over the reins of his business to you."

Sam didn't like this woman. She couldn't help herself. She'd grown up with pompous people just like Pamela and had fought hard never to become one herself, because she'd loathed the pretentiousness that much. She guessed that's where her "rebellious" streak came in to cause her parents so much grief.

There was another emotion there, effervescing right below the surface that Sam didn't want to put a name on but had no choice: jealousy.

She realized she had no right to feel any such emotion where Caution was concerned, but darned if it wasn't right there, glaring her in the face.

"Oh, Dara dear, I didn't see you sitting there." Pamela turned to her with a smile, offered her cheek for an air kiss, which Sam ignored. The heck she hadn't noticed her. She'd practically knocked Sam off of her stool. "My, seems someone woke up on the wrong side of the jail cot this morning."

"Pamela." Caution glared. "Be nice."

"Am I ever anything but?"

Sam could name that tune in five notes: b-i-t-c-h.

"Anyway, I wanted to see if we could have dinner tonight, go over the plans for the new site in the Village. Grampa Brody said he'd keep Tayte a little later, so you have no excuse and I won't take no for an answer."

"I might have known you two had gotten your heads together already to ambush me."

"We talked. And no one wants to *ambush* you, Caution dear. Don't be so melodramatic."

Caution grimaced. "Did my grandfather happen to mention I had company while you two were filling my social calendar?"

"He mentioned that Dara was at the brownstone for...breakfast. Now, stop being such a curmudgeon. You're starting to sound like him." Pamela giggled.

"Perish the thought," Sam muttered.

Pamela turned to her. "Did you say something dear?"

If you call me dear, one more time... "I just said that Caution and I have plans for dinner tonight. Don't we, baby?" She arched a brow, dared him to dispute her version.

Caution stopped gawking long enough to nod his agreement.

"The prodigal girlfriend returns and all business gets thrown by the wayside, is that it?"

Sam felt the woman seething, and took pleasure in it, stroking Caution's hand on the bar, and smiling. "Caution and I have some catching up to do."

"As well do Caution and I," Pamela addressed her with just barely veiled venom before turning her attention back to Caution. "When were you going to tell me about these plans? You know perfectly well my time is money. We need to sit down and discuss the designs in detail before anything else can go forward. We need to meet with the architect, the contractors, the—" "If you let me get a word in edgewise, I'll answer one question at a time." Pamela sat back on her stool, arms folded across her buxom chest as she huffed. "Very well. Answer away."

"First of all, Grampa Brody had no right to speak for me or Tayte. Second, you're my consultant, not my wife, and who I go out with to dinner is my personal business, and no longer your concern. And finally, I'll check my calendar and see when I'm available to discuss the new site with you."

"Did anyone ever tell you you can be positively beastly when you're making a point?"

"I'm being positively straight-forward."

"Point taken. Sheesh." Pamela hopped off her stool, and wiggled behind the bar.

She stood face to face with Caution, her six-inch heels a great equalizer to his six-two as she reached up and splayed her fingers across his firm chest. "So, can I make an appointment?"

Caution smiled, caught her wrists and removed her hands from his chest as Pamela pouted. He stepped back, pulled a Blackberry out of his front pocket and pulled up his calendar. "How's, um...Friday at seven?"

"That's so far away. Surely you can squeeze me in sooner? I am your partner, after all."

"One of my partners."

"The most important partner."

"You're just the most vocal, and not a silent partner." Caution chuckled.

"Very well, put me in. But if an earlier date opens up, I expect to be on the top of your list to get a call."

"Of course."

Pamela came from behind the bar, picked up her Chanel clutch from the polished mahogany top, aimed a smooth rosy cheek Sam's way for an air kiss, oblivious to Sam's repeat snub. She then leaned her busty upper body over the bar to her cleavage's best advantage gracing Caution with another full-mouthed kiss.

Sam watched as the woman shamelessly sneaked in some tongue and Caution jerked up his head and pulled away as if appalled.

Was he appalled, or just putting on a show? How did Dara put up with the woman, anyway?

"I'll call you."

"See you Friday," Caution said.

Sam watched the woman flounce out of the bar and restaurant the same way she'd entered, a whirlwind of expensive pink silk tank, and cream linen pantsuit.

"Well, that was interesting," she said.

"I thought you were used to her by now. You never usually let her bother you."

"Some times are tougher than others." Knowing Dara the way she did, Sam was sure the woman chewed nails along with her tongue whenever Pamela was in the vicinity.

The woman was impossibly arrogant. Sam might as well not have been there.

Caution leaned on the bar, playing with black waves framing her face. "So, what were you about to tell me?"

"Pardon?"

"Before Pamela breezed in. You were about to tell me something?"

"I'd rather talk about you."

"Me?"

"More specifically, you and Pamela."

"Dare, we've gone over this before. She doesn't mean anything to me now."

Now? So there was a before? "I know we have, but humor me."

"She's only as much of a threat to you as you believe or allow her to be."

Right about now, that was a lot. "You've got an answer for everything, don't you?"

"Not everything. Like I don't know why you haven't given me a yes to my proposal yet."

Sam almost choked on the sip of drink she had just taken, coughed a few times to cover her chagrin as Caution reached across the bar to pat and rub her back.

"You okay?"

She nodded, coughed a few more times, and then put her hand up to let him know not to leap over the bar and try the Heimlich maneuver.

"Enjoying yourself?"

If Sam hadn't just recovered from nearly choking, Dara's appearance on the barstool beside her would have sent her into a paroxysm of coughing to rival the worst TB patient's.

"Will you excuse me?" She rose from her seat, clutching her handbag to her side.

"You're not deserting me too, are you?"

"Wouldn't think of it. I'll be right back. Fix me another drink, please, while I'm gone."

"Sure thing."

Sam barely heard him as she rushed through the mahogany door to Caution's office, closed and automatically locked it behind her. She didn't even check first to see if someone else was there, but luck was with her, and she was alone to deal with Ms. Kelly. "You!"

"Didn't think I was coming back, did you?"

"I'd like to know where the heck you were."

"And I'd like to know what you thought you were doing with my—"

"Your what, Dara? He doesn't belong to you anymore."

Dara stalked closer, and if she could have wrapped her hands around Sam's neck that moment to strangle the life out of her, Sam was sure she'd have done it. Instead, she gritted her teeth, took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Don't remind me."

"Remind you?"

"That I'm dead and you're not."

Sam heard the despair, but knew had she went to the woman to console her, it would be misconstrued as pity. So she stayed where she was, waiting for Dara to say something first.

"So, have you been enjoying yourself?"

Sam heard the jealousy again, mixed with the grief, and reacted in kind. "You have a lot of nerve attacking me."

"I have nerve?"

"Gallivanting God knows where, leaving me at the mercy of a complete stranger."

"I didn't see you doing much complaining."

Sam glared. "How long were you spying on us?"

"Long enough. And as for leaving you at a stranger's mercy—"

"You know what I mean. I don't know him. I don't know anything about him."

"You don't need to. Just trust your instincts. Trust him."

Hmm, she'd been about to do that before being so rudely interrupted...again. "I...I do trust him."

Dara stared. "You haven't told him about—"

"I was about to."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"You just said to trust him."

"Trust him, yes. But use *some* good judgment."

Sam gaped then instantly snapped her mouth shut, trying to hide her humiliation. That last blow stung, catapulted her back to her childhood when all her mother seemed to do was lecture her about her judgment, or lack thereof. Because they didn't always share the same values. Because Sam wanted to experience life beyond the sheltered existence of her parents' Long Island home. Because Sam wanted more.

She took a deep breath now and scowled at Dara. "I should take advice from Ms. Disappearing Act? Where were you?"

"Trying to keep my business afloat, which is more than I can say for you."

A solid uppercut. If they had been in a heavyweight fight, Sam thought she'd be leaning against the ropes, immersed in blood, sweat and tears. She decided to turn the tables as much as she could. "So, this Pamela...who is she to Caution, exactly?"

Dara frowned. "They're business partners."

"I got that much. What else?"

"Are we just a little jealous?"

"Of course not!"

"Nothing wrong if you are. Caution's a catch, and Pamela's never gotten over the fact that I have him and she doesn't."

Sam rolled her eyes. "Just tell me what's the deal," she bit out.

"She's his ex."

"Girlfriend?"

"Second wife."

"Is she—"

"Tayte's mom? Hell no! That pretentious plastic-boobed bitch couldn't have a cat, much less a sweet baby like Tater."

Sam hadn't thought so, but that meant there was another woman out there, another rival for Caution's affection and attention.

What rival? This ain't no contest and you're not a competitor. You're a... She hated to think of herself this way, but she *was* a victim of circumstance. Problem was making the best of the situation; had it *been* a competition, the only thing she wanted to win was her old life back, which at this point seemed impossible.

"Don't sweat it, Sam. Tayte's mom hasn't been in the picture since Caution and I have been together. That's about two years, off and on."

Sam guessed that meant more off than on, if up to Dara. So how accurate *were* the on-again, off-again girlfriend's perceptions? "What happened to her? Tayte's mom?"

"Sandy? She ditched. Walked out on Caution when Tater wasn't even a year. He's pretty bitter about it too, so I wouldn't mention it if I were you."

"Thanks for the advice." But, oh, did she want to dig for more. Like *why* was he bitter? Because Sandy had left him? Or because she'd left him to raise their child alone?

"How many times has Caution been married?"

"Two and what of it?"

"Sheesh, why are you so defensive? I'm just trying to learn as much about him, and you for that matter, as I can."

"Look, arguing is getting us nowhere. You know all you need to know for now."

That was debatable. What she knew about Dara Kelly could fill a thimble. What she presumed could fill a shot glass. What she *wanted* to know, could fill a deep well. But then Dara wasn't exactly the sharing type, so the well would remain dry for now.

"C'mon, let's go."

Sam gawked at Dara's receding back as the woman headed for the rear exit leading to the alley. "Now? Where?"

"To my apartment. You do have a business to run and we need to sketch out some battle plans for tracking your hubby, Dawson."

"And just leave Caution?"

"I know he's irresistible, but you're just going to have to tear yourself away." Dara smirked. "Besides, he's a big boy and you'll catch up with him later."

"I just think it's a little rude."

"I had to get stuck with Miss Manners," Dara grumbled. "Will you stop stalling and c'mon," she finally flung over a shoulder.

Sam took one last glance at the office door where on the other side Caution served drinks and made merry with his customers.

Reluctantly, she headed out the rear exit through which Dara had just disappeared.

She was alone, ghost nowhere in sight.

Now what?

Okay, she wasn't a baby, she could get around on her own, and she knew where Dara lived and how to get there.

Sam headed down the alley away from the main street and heard a car rev behind her. She glanced over her shoulder in time to see a midnight-blue car coming towards her. And the driver wasn't slowing down!

She hastened her pace to a sprint as the car gained on her, not looking back once to ensure the car was still chomping at her heels as she madly dashed because she could hear it. Speeding and focused.

Sam reached the end of the alley where a ten-foot-high fence blocked her path. There was nowhere to go but up. Either that, or surely be crushed. Heart hammering, she leaped, clutching the chain link as her booted feet barely found purchase in the links below.

The car's bumper rammed into the fence seconds later, inches below Sam's boots, the impact rattling her teeth and taking away what little breath she had left. Sam tightened

her grip, lungs burning, heart threatening to leave her chest as she climbed several of the links, and glanced down at the car.

Then as suddenly as the attack began, the car backed up several yards, and paused as if the driver was undecided as to what to do next

Sam stared over her shoulder, gasping. She decided not to stick around until the driver committed to another attack, and climbed the rest of the way up the fence until she got to the peak. She threw over first one leg, then the other, and ripped her jeans on the jagged top before scrambling down the other side.

Ignoring the burning pain on the inside of her left thigh and the blood trickling down her leg, she limped several paces before stopping to look back.

The car hadn't moved.

What was going on behind that wheel? What was he thinking? She'd give anything to see a face, to make visual, human contact, but the windows were so darkly tinted she could barely make out a shape.

God, what if the maniac waylaid her on the other side? Would the driver be bold enough to try anything out in the open, with witnesses?

Sam watched as the driver revved the car's engine then continued out of the alley in reverse, making a sharp right at the mouth, and screeching down the avenue and out of sight.

CHAPTER 8

She rode uptown on a wind of paranoia, seeing assassins in every passenger on the train and hit men in every pedestrian she passed from the station to Dara's brownstone in Harlem.

Sam made it to the apartment in a little under an hour after the attempt on her life, fuming and ready to take out her frustration on the nearest object, and if that happened to be a bounty hunting ghost, then heaven help Dara!

She pounded on the door, breathless from her sprint from the subway, and realized two seconds into her rampage that she had the keys. She pulled them out of her bag, unlocked the door, opened it, and slammed it behind her as she stormed down the stairs into the sunken living room and froze.

No sign of a ghost. Where the heck was she?

She threw her shoulder bag and leather jacket on the sofa, stalked down the hallway towards the office, and was prepared to rip the place apart if it would make Dara show herself.

Sam came up short on the threshold and saw Dara calmly sitting at the computer.

"Nice of you to join the party. What took you so long?"

"What took me so long is that I was almost killed."

Dara sprang to her feet and came over. "What're you talking about, almost killed?" Sam walked through Dara and shivered at the strange non-contact as she pivoted to glare at the ghost. "You heard me the first time. Someone tried to run me down on the way out of *Foster's*."

"Are you sure it wasn't an accident?"

"About as much as your death was an accident." Exhausted, Sam wandered over to the executive leather swivel chair that Dara had just vacated, flopped down into the seat, and glanced up at the other woman. "You deserted me again. Where were you?"

"I was on my way here. I thought you were right behind me."

Sam sat up and threw her arms in the air out of frustration. "In case you haven't noticed, I don't have the ability to float around and through things at the speed of light."

Dara grinned. "I noticed."

"And also, in case you haven't noticed, I'm not the only one falling down on the job."

Dara frowned and slammed her hands on her hips. "And what the hell do you mean by that?"

Sam squinted and pointed an accusatory finger at her. "I mean, what kind of guardian angel just deserts her charge in the middle of nowhe—"

"Manhattan isn't nowhere."

"It might as well have been for all the assistance and company I had."

"I told you before. I'm not an angel. I'm a ghost. Better learn the difference."

"Yes, I guess I'd better," Sam mumbled. She had thought she knew everything she needed to know about the afterlife after having gone through it, but now guessed that wasn't the case.

"Want to settle down and tell me what really happened?"

"I told you what *really* happened. Someone tried to kill me. Or kill you, take your pick."

"Calm down and tell me."

Sam glared at the woman's quiet soothing tone, not in the mood to be soothed, or mollified, especially not by some cynical, holier-than-thou ghost of a merciless bounty hunter.

"Did you come straight home after...after the attempt?"

Sam grimaced. "Of course. Where else would I go?" She stared at Dara hard, realizing almost instantly where the devious woman's mind was going. "You just think you're so superior to the rich little White girl with no experience or common sense, don't you?"

"You said it, I didn't." Dara shrugged. "Besides, *I'm* not the one who almost spilled the beans to Caution."

"Spilling the beans, as you call it, is what I would call confiding and trusting in another human being. And if you were *human* and had a heart you might know what that entails."

"Don't judge me." Dara seethed.

"I'll stop when you do."

Dara closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, and Sam thought she seemed to do a lot of that around her. She wondered if it was just her, or whether the woman lost it like this with everyone.

"So I might have overstepped my bounds. A little." Dara opened her eyes to stare at Sam, then swallowed hard before muttering, "I'm sorry."

Sam didn't know what to say; she had the feeling she had just witnessed a momentous occasion. Where were the streamers and champagne?

"Want to tell me what happened now?"

"Someone tried to run me down," Sam said, becoming as good as Dara at switching gears midstream.

"Tell me how it happened."

"I followed you out the back exit, and when I got outside, you were gone. I headed away from the main street, on the off chance that I might bump into Caution or anyone else from the bar."

Dara nodded and smiled. "Good girl."

Sam's heart filled with pride that she'd finally done something right. But she decided not to revel in it for too long. "Anyway, this car was waiting for me—"

"What make? Color?"

"I think it was an Infiniti, late model, dark blue. I didn't get a license plate number. I was too busy running for my life."

"Okay, we established that." Dara grinned.

"I don't think this is the least bit funny. Someone wants you dead."

"I told you that."

"Yes, well, it's dawning on me now that it's not you they're going to be killing."

"I also told you we need each other. Need to work together. You believe me now?"

Sam sighed. It wasn't that she hadn't believed the woman before now. More like she hadn't *wanted* to believe, and that if she ignored the signs, maybe they'd go away.

"Sam, are you okay?"

She stared at Dara and thought she saw concern, but didn't want to consider that possibility either. She didn't need concern; she needed protection! "So, who do you think did it?"

"I have no idea."

"You're lying."

"Look, I don't know anyone who drives an Infiniti."

"I said I think it was an Infiniti. It might not have been. And it could have been a rental."

"That's true. Or stolen."

"So, who might have rented or stolen a car to kill you?"

"That's a stretch, don't you think? Renting or stealing a car on the off chance of seeing me at Caution's and running me down. Who could have known I'd go out the back way?"

"I don't know, okay. Maybe the person had already rented it for something else, and happened to be in the area. Work with me."

"Tarrent doesn't have that sort of style."

"Tarrent? Who's that?"

Dara frowned, and Sam knew she was about to lie again.

"I thought I mentioned him. Randall Tarrent. He's a rival bounty hunter I've butted heads with on a couple of jobs. He's the one who, uh..."

"Shot you?"

"Yeah. That's him."

"No, you didn't tell me. I would have remembered something like that. Just like I would have remembered you mentioning that the skip I was trying to tag last night happened to be your lover and my brother-in-law and not my husband."

"Whoops."

"You're just having a lot of fun at my expense, aren't you? It would serve you right if I just went straight to the police and told them everything."

"Look Sam, you know as well as I do that that wouldn't get you anywhere but in more hot water. What would you tell them exactly?"

"I don't know! Heck, anything has to be better than being a sitting duck. Darn!"

Dara grinned, and Sam could see her holding in a chuckle.

"So what, I said 'darn'. You'd rather I was like you and cursed a blue streak? Fine! I'm mad as hell that you lied to me! And if you weren't already dead, I'd damn well try to kill you myself. How's that?"

"Still upset that I didn't show up on time the other night?"

Sam started, realizing that Dara had done her usual disappearing act, and that Diego was standing on the threshold of her office, smirking.

She hated that the woman could just pop in and out on her as she pleased! She hated more that the woman was usually right.

She would have taken her anger out on Diego if the guy didn't look so contrite and sincere as he crossed the room to sit on the worktable beside her desk.

"I bought a peace offering." He pushed several piles of paper to the side and made room on the table for the containers of Chinese food he produced from the shopping bag he carried.

"Shrimp Egg Fu Yung, broccoli and chicken."

"I, uh...I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything for now. Just eat." He peered at her for a long moment. "You look like shit. Did you get any rest since I left you last night?"

"Some," Sam muttered. "Let me go get some plates..." She stood to go to the kitchen and Diego grabbed a hand before she could leave.

"Since when do you use plates for Chinese food?"

"You're not eating any?"

"I ate earlier." He pushed her towards the chair, pulled a fork from the bag and handed it to her. "Now eat."

Sam took the fork and dutifully dug into the broccoli and chicken. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until she bit into the first spicy and steamy mouthful. "This is good," she blurted out.

"Of course it is. I bought it from your favorite spot." Diego frowned. "You've been acting weird since last night. Sure you don't want to hit the emergency room for an x-ray or two?"

"I'm sure."

"I called you off and on all day. And Ralphie's been trying to contact you too. Want to tell me where you were and why you didn't have your cell on?"

"I, uh, was out. With Caution." She didn't know why she knew that her being with Caution would meet with Diego's approval, but when she saw his leer, she knew she'd made the right decision in saying so, and that it explained everything for Diego, even her not carrying her cell phone.

"Catching up on old times, huh?"

"Something like that."

"You'll be happy to know that while you were out rekindling your love life, I was busy collaring that dead-beat dad you were so hot to get your hands on. And Mrs. Fletcher made her final payment today. I picked up the check on my way over here." Diego produced the check from his front jeans pocket and handed it over with a flourish. "So, if you're worried about paying for the emergency room visit..."

"Sheesh, you've got a one-track mind." Sam smiled, took the check, gave it cursory attention before she noticed the four zeros behind the one and looked to whom the check was made out – *Kelly and Associates* – and for what purpose, *Fugitive Warrant Services*.

How official. Brought to glaring reality that she was a small business operator now, a businesswoman *and* bounty hunter with responsibilities—to herself and other people. People counted on Sam now, not just her clients, but her business partner, Diego. How did Dara manage it, she wondered, seeing the woman in a new light and admiring her savvy and independence.

For the first time since she dropped out of college to pursue her heart, Sam regretted not listening to her parents more, regretted not taking more challenging curriculum than liberal arts. She gulped, food suddenly heavy in her mouth and tasting

like wood chips as she placed the check aside and stood to reach for a napkin.

Diego grasped her wrist as she tried to sit back down and noticed the cut on her thigh.

"What the hell happened to your leg?"

"Oh, that. It's just a scratch."

He squinted, and she flinched when he reached to pull back the torn flap of denim to get a better look. "This is more than just a scratch."

"Will you lighten up? You sound like my mother."

"You need to put something on that." Diego stood up and headed out of the room. "You don't want to get lock jaw."

She listened to him as he grumbled in his deep Spanish accented voice about "stubborn workaholic sistahs who couldn't admit when they needed help."

Sam tried to block him out, tried to block out everything that had happened to her since last night. She closed her eyes tight, not wanting to think about faceless crazed killers who wanted her dead, or desperate wives and other clients clamoring for her services. It was too much for a twenty-three-year-old to handle. A twenty-three-year-old brought up in the genteel lap of luxury in Long Island and practically going straight from her parents' home into the home of her well-off, indulgent older husband to live until a few months ago.

Maybe Dara was right to judge her and she was just a rich spoiled brat.

"So how'd we do it this time?"

Sam opened her eyes as Diego hovered over her with a bottle of peroxide in one hand and cotton swabs in the other.

"How'd I do what?"

Diego huffed. "Take off your pants."

"What?"

"I can't clean it properly through the denim. Take 'em off, hun. Despite my proclivities, you don't have anything I haven't already seen."

Sam almost laughed at the absurdity of her situation, before she realized Diego was serious and intent on helping her strip out of her clothes when he crouched beside her to unzip her motorcycle boots.

She leaned over to work on the other one, stood, slid out of her jeans once the boots were off and as carelessly as possible under the circumstances flung them across the back of the swivel chair before sitting back down in just her T-shirt and boxers.

"Fuchsia. It suits you."

"Are you going to ogle my undies, or fix my boo-boo?"

"Fix your boo-boo, Boo-Boo."

Sam chuckled, thinking that had it not been for his "proclivities" she could have easily fallen in love with him, except that would have ruined the friendship.

Sheesh, she was such a slut, even if only in her mind. First Caution, now Diego. No wonder Dara was so angry with her most of the time. She had come in and taken over her life—flirting and sleeping with her man, eating and joking with her friend and partner, but most of all, Sam was alive and living Dara's life.

She flinched. "Ouch!"

"Ah, that stings now, does it, Dirty Harriet?"

"Of course it stings."

"Good thing you had a tetanus shot recently."

Sam wondered for what and how recently. God knew with Dara it could have been for a bullet wound, a stab wound, scratching herself on *chevaux-de-frise* trying to enter some skip's home in the dead of night, or a bite from a vicious guard dog. Okay, maybe not the vicious dog. That would involve rabies and not tetanus. What a life.

"You still haven't told me how it happened."

How could she tell him without alarming him? How could she tell him without telling him, because she was sure that Dara Kelly wouldn't tell him the truth under the circumstances?

"I, uh...was chasing a skip, lost him in an alley when I got caught up on a chainlink fence." Well, it wasn't a total lie.

"*You* lost a skip in a foot race? What's the world coming to?"

Sam laughed; she liked Diego and his sense of humor, and wondered what was weighing on his mind so heavily. She didn't know him as well as Dara, true, but she knew that the same thing bothering her about the night before was bothering him. "Why were you late last night, Diego?"

She had to give him credit for keeping his cool. He didn't miss a beat as he gently finished cleaning her wound, and put a couple of butterfly bandages on it to keep it closed.

"That should do for a while. You'll need to make sure to keep that clean though."

"I will, but you didn't answer my question."

Diego stood, deliberately replacing the top on the peroxide before putting the bottle aside. Once done, he jammed his hands into his jeans pockets and averted his eyes.

"Diego?"

He sighed, took a seat on a corner of the worktable, and caught both her hands in his.

That's when Sam noticed the scars, the skin lighter and slightly puckered where someone had long ago sliced a sharp object across the inside of each wrist.

Someone or him?

Sam swallowed hard, knew the answer but didn't want to admit it. She returned his soulful stare, and didn't have the heart to ask him and confirm her suspicions. Not now, if ever.

"I never meant to let you down, Dare."

"I'm sure it couldn't be helped."

"That's just it, it could have been helped." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes before opening them to pin her with his dark gaze. "I, uh, I was waylaid by this guy. We got to talking and one thing led to another and, uh..."

Sam gently squeezed his hands. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

"No, I need to. It's been bothering me since it happened. You see if I had been on the ball, he wouldn't have been able to..."

"To what, Diego?"

"I've gone over this in my head again and again since last night, and the only thing I can think of is that he drugged me. I let him buy me a drink, an orange juice, at the bar where I was waiting, and the next thing I remember is waking up in this strange hotel room. I couldn't believe how many hours had gone by. By the time I came around, my rendezvous with you had long past. That's when I got up and rushed over to look for you."

Vaguely, Sam wondered if he'd been waiting for Dara at one of Caution's establishments. "Someone drugged you?" she asked.

Diego nodded. "It's the only thing that makes sense. Someone wanted me out of the way." The question was who, besides Randall Tarrent? Could he have paid "the guy" who had waylaid Diego at the bar? Did he have anything at all to do with the set up, or was it someone else who had it in for Dara? The woman had been in the business for a long time, and she must have made more enemies than just Tarrent.

Heck, the suspect could be a jealous employee at one of Caution's bar and restaurants for all anyone knew. The man was a natural flirt, not as blatant as Dawson was, but just as entrancing and effective. And Sam had seen the way the waitresses and female customers had reacted to his smiles and attention. A couple quite nearly swooned. For that matter, a couple of the male customers and waiters had queer eyes for the straight guy!

She shook her head as if to clear it of the suspects and conspiracy theories spinning there. Envious and lustful employees, business partners being drugged, near hit-and-run misses in back alleys...someone really wanted Dara dead.

The thought chilled Sam to the bone.

But Diego's earnest look warmed her blood.

"Forgive me?"

He could have been killed, not just drugged, and he would have died for Dara. "There's nothing to forgive," she murmured.

"You say." Diego stood and forked his hands through rich brown waves as he

glanced down at her. "You have no idea how hard it's been not to tell you, how much I wanted to just spill it last night, but didn't know how to. Especially after the way I found you."

Sam knew exactly how he felt, because she was in almost exactly the same situation with Caution, and she didn't know how or when she was going to tell *him* what she needed to. All she knew was that eventually she would, Dara be damned.

The phone rang beside her hand and she started before picking it up. "Hello."

"I should have known you'd slip out on me. Things were going too well."

"Caution?" The man must have heard her thinking about him.

"Who else would it be?"

Of course, who else. And he sounded fire breathing mad. She couldn't really blame him.

"What happened to you, Dare? You locked the office door, left out the back way and didn't say a word to anyone. You had me worried to death."

"Something came up?"

"Aren't you sure?"

"I'm going to put the rest of this stuff away," Diego said as he gathered up the Chinese food cartons. Sam didn't think to cover the mouthpiece as she responded, "Okay, but don't leave yet."

"Is someone there with you now?"

"Diego. We were, uh..." What could she say? That they were going over missteps from her last job, the one where Dara had died a horrible death? That she was sitting there in her boxers while her partner and friend tended to the wound she'd gotten while running for her life? "Catching up on some cases."

"I'm pulling you away from work, then?"

"No, not at all. We're just finishing up."

"Good. I'm on my way over then."

It wasn't a question and Sam fumbled for her next words. "Uh...sure." Could she really tell him no? Would Dara?

"I'll see you in a little while."

"Caution—" She cut herself off when she realized she was talking to a dial tone and that he'd hung up on her.

CHAPTER 9

"That was close," Michael said. "I did not think those women would settle down long enough to discuss matters logically."

"Where has your faith gone, Michael?"

He did not want to say that where the female of the human species was concerned he had none. They were, most of the time, too incomprehensible for mortal men to understand, much more an angel, and as sudden and unpredictable as a meteor shooting across the sky, at least where affairs of the heart were concerned. And Michael had to admit that the situation so far did not suffer from a lack of emotion; in fact, it was drowning in it.

Heaven only knew what would happen once the other male arrived.

"You have to admit they handled their differences in a rather civilized manner."

"After the shouting and accusations, yes, they were rather civilized."

"You are having a hard time admitting I was right," Gabriel said. "Don't be such a spoilsport, Michael. It is most unbecoming."

Michael stayed silent, not wanting to further speculate on the doings of humans, at least not until the female and male were together again.

He had to admit, there was certain chemistry between Samantha and Caution, more than that which had existed between Dara and Caution, and Sam and Dawson.

He did not want to pat His own back just yet, for the situation was far from being settled. There was much that yet needed to be revealed—hurt feelings to smooth over, old wounds to expose and heal, love to lose and find...killers and conspirators to bring to justice.

Michael was looking forward to the next act with far more enthusiasm than he had anticipated, or would ever have admitted.

* * * *

Caution's heart palpitated, rushing blood to his head and flushing his body with a warm glow of horny-teen-boy-on-his-first-date jitters as he ascended the steps to Dara's walk-up once she'd buzzed him in.

Dara didn't believe in exchanging keys, and had refused his offer of a set to his townhouse early on in their relationship when she started to stay with him on several overnights and he'd bowed to logic with his proposal of the swap. She'd delivered her rejection with an off-handed, "No thanks. I prefer stealing my cookies."

He hadn't known exactly what she'd meant until the first time he'd walked in on her taking a shower in his bathroom one morning, having broken into the house the night before.

She'd smiled at him over a shoulder, totally uninhibited as she soaped her smooth tanned curves, and invited him in to join her.

At his own risk, Caution had returned the favor not long after, much to Dara's chagrin at his resourcefulness in taking up her challenge: *"If you want cookies at my house, you're going to have to find a way to get to them."*

All those endless magic lessons he'd taken as a boy had finally paid off. He thought twice about sneaking in on her now but didn't want to walk up on an unpalatable or compromising situation. Sure, he knew the deal with Diego and Dara, but figured if any woman could make a man switch teams, Dara was the one to do it.

Caution shook the ridiculous thoughts out of his head and knocked, determined not to let the woman drive him away again, no matter what she did, determined not to let her run away.

"It's open!"

He arched a brow, turned the knob and walked in.

Caution stepped through the expected obstacle course of motorcycle parts, mechanic magazines, and how-to book piles on his way to the stairs, then stopped at the bottom in the middle of the living room and realized why Dara had left the door unlocked.

The living room was in its usual state of disarray, and dead center, surrounded by a collection of firearms sat Dara, legs folded Indian style as she cleaned her Winchester rifle.

"What are you doing?"

"Duh, what does it look like I'm doing?"

She was such a smart-ass, and he didn't want to tell her that what it looked like she was doing didn't matter, since watching her gently stroke that weapon with a cleaning cloth turned him on as surely as if he were naked and beneath her ministering fingers instead of the rifle.

Since when had watching someone clean a gun become a turn-on for him? *Since now! And it's not just someone; it's Dara.* God, he had been too long without her, and

after two years, he still had it bad.

He took a couple of tentative steps forward, and decided to ask a silly question, unable to help himself. "Are those loaded?"

She rolled her eyes at him, and didn't pause in what she was doing as she said, "I figured I'd make myself useful while I waited for you."

"You couldn't make a soufflé, or bake some cookies?"

She paused long enough to give him the finger, and Caution chuckled as he lowered himself to the floor and sat down beside her, folding his legs in the same fashion. Other women cleaned toaster ovens and pots and pans to make themselves useful; his cleaned firearms. "Were you dressed like this while Diego was here?" he blurted.

"You know me and my pajama parties with the employees. It's the only way to go over skip tracing strategies."

He knew he was on thin ice, knew how touchy Dara was on the subject of her business and Diego. The guy was pretty much untouchable in her eyes, and anyone who badmouthed him, his lifestyle, or his and Dara's *Will & Grace-like* relationship be damned.

Not that Caution ever would. He had too much respect for what Diego—and Dara for that matter—did for a living, and he appreciated the guy watching his woman's back when he wasn't around to do so.

Caution leaned towards her, pungent cleaning oil wafting to his nostrils and mixing with Dara's sweet-spicy musk as he gently slid a palm along her thigh and noticed the bandage.

Dara's hand froze over the weapon as he fingered the bandage briefly before continuing upward, fingers stealing towards her crotch.

He felt her holding her breath; he was holding his too.

"Caution, what are you doing?" she whispered.

"What do you think?" He slid his hand beneath a leg of her boxers, fingers burrowing in her moist curls before he found her clit and flicked it with his thumb.

Dara gasped and turned her head to stare at him.

Her aghast look made his cock twitch in his pants, spurred him on.

He dipped a finger into her cunt and she pitched her hips forward, clutching the rifle in both hands as if to keep her from going too far, as if to keep her from enjoying what he was doing to her.

Caution added a finger, pumped them inside her—several deep, long strokes. He watched her face intently as he slowly pulled his fingers from her pussy then cupped her pubis.

Dara had yet to release the rifle, only gawked at him when he slid his hand down along her thigh and stopped at the bandage again.

"What happened here?" he asked, evidently catching her off-guard as he felt her

thigh muscles tense beneath his fingers and heard her gulp.

"I...I got into a little squabble when I left your place."

"And it turned into hand-to-hand combat?"

Dara shrugged. "Usual. Another bounty hunter and I didn't see eye-to-eye on tracking and collection methods."

"Where is Judge Judy when you need her?" His first thought was Pamela, but he couldn't see his ex lowering herself to participate in an activity that might ruin an expensive manicure. Besides, Dara would have probably wiped up the floor with her.

He carefully reached over now to remove the Winchester rifle from her grasp, and placed it with the rest of the arsenal surrounding her.

"Mind if we get rid of the company?"

"Diego's already go—"

"I mean all your little friends."

Dara frowned then smiled as she glanced at her stockpile. "They really aren't loaded."

Unlike him, who was fully loaded and ready to fire!

It wasn't right for one woman to affect a man so deeply, barely saying an off-color word or wiggling a seductive hip to make his cock hard enough to pound railroad spikes into the ground.

Of course the fact that she was sitting there in just the fuchsia boxers he'd handed her earlier in the day and a matching tank didn't help.

Dara stood and picked up several guns and carried them back to the master bedroom.

Caution picked up the remainder, and followed her. He bumped into her on the threshold as she was leaving the bedroom.

"Here, let me take those off of your hands."

He leaned against the doorjamb, watched her replace all her little toys to their proper places before sliding the closet door closed and rejoining him at the door.

She grabbed his hand and led him back out to the living room. "Hungry? I've got Chinese and pizza."

"And I left a home cooked salmon and spaghetti dish with a spinach salad for that?"

"No, you left a home cooked salmon and spaghetti dish with a spinach salad for me."

"How conceited."

She turned to him with a wide smile, and said, "But true."

Caution followed her to the kitchen to the left of the living room and leaned on

the Formica counter as she pulled a pizza box out of the fridge and threw two slices with pepperoni on a plate and into her micro. "I missed you, Dare," he blurted.

"Sheesh, we've only been apart a few hours."

"You were gone for a while before that." He wanted to say so much more, that he'd thought he'd lost her for good, but he knew she'd think him a wimp. And maybe he was a wimp, at least where she was concerned. Hell, he knew as much, since he didn't have a problem being assertive or making his demands known with anyone else, and had no qualms delegating and supervising the managers and staff in his business concerns.

Pamela didn't buy into Caution's *Cheers* mentality. She didn't believe an employer could be "friends" with his employees, and thought Caution was too loose and free with his discipline and time, that he didn't follow a hard enough line with his "underlings".

Caution considered himself a taskmaster but fair, and tried to keep the atmosphere friendly and communal at his bar and restaurants. He'd never considered the people in his employ as his underlings and neither had his grandfather.

As intolerant as the old man could sometimes be, and as much as he liked Pamela for his grandson, customer service and fair treatment were something in which he put a lot of stock, the personal touch his creed. Ironically, it was also a creed in which Dara placed a lot of stock.

He wouldn't dare tell her that she and his grandfather had anything so important in common since she thought that Brody Foster was the embodiment of all that was wrong in the world. Nothing good that Caution said about the old man could change that opinion. Not that he blamed her. His grandfather had been giving Dara nothing but a hard way to go since Caution and she began seeing each other.

The microwave beeped and Dara pulled the pizza out and handed Caution a plate and napkin as she headed for the living room with her own. "I know it's not salmon and spinach salad, but it's the best I could do on such short notice," she said over a shoulder.

"I understand. Cleaning your weapons should always take precedence over sustenance."

"Preventive maintenance," Dara corrected, sitting down on a corner of the sofa and peering up at him. "You really do have a thing about guns, don't you?"

"No, *you* have a thing about guns." Caution sat down beside her, took a bite out of his pizza then put it back on his plate.

"It's my job. They're just the necessary tools I use to get it done."

"You sound like my Grampa Brody."

"Heaven forbid," she mumbled. "Your grandfather used to be a bounty hunter?"

"No, but he used to be NYPD. Now he just hunts."

"Figures."

"Why do you say that?"

"He just seems like a card carrying member of the NRA, is all."

"Funny you should say that."

Dara grinned, stood and went back to the kitchen. "Want something to drink?"

"Whatever you're having."

He listened to the sounds of her rummaging through the refrigerator, heard glass clinking together as she closed the fridge door with her foot and made it back to the living room with two chilled bottles of Yoo-Hoo.

She paused in front of him, raising a brow. "Unless you'd like something stronger?"

"Nah, this is fine."

She handed one of the bottles to him with a flourish, flopped back in her corner of the sofa, and waggled her eyebrows at him. "I know it's not hot, but who doesn't want chocolate?"

Caution chuckled at her allusion to his fresh five-year-old, opened his bottle, took a hardy swig and remembered finding Dara and his daughter ensconced in the middle of Tayte's canopied bed one Saturday morning eating large bowls of Count Chocula cereal and raucously watching Saturday morning cartoons.

Once again, she'd just popped by in the middle of the night, but instead of going to his room, she'd made a beeline for his daughter's and spent the night with Tayte before waking the little girl up to a cavity-producing breakfast and belly laughing entertainment.

Caution didn't think he had seen the woman so at home and at peace than when surrounded by all the comforts of his little girl's bedroom.

"So, tell me about this aversion you have to guns," Dara said.

"Who said anything about an aversion?"

"I saw the way you looked at my guns. You were decidedly uncomfortable around them."

"Especially when one's pointed at me."

"Touché. But you still haven't answered my question."

Caution shrugged. "I just don't think guns are a good thing to have around the house."

He hadn't thought his "aversion" so obvious, but the truth was he hated guns, hated the necessity and reasons for their existence. He didn't know if the antipathy was born of the suspicious circumstances under which his father had died, or because his Grampa Brody had forced him and Dawson to accompany him on hunting trips to the Adirondacks every year without fail since their seventh birthday.

Even before his mother had shot his father, or he'd watched his twin brother bring down his first buck at eleven—to their grandfather's great pleasure—Caution couldn't remember a time when he had liked guns or enjoyed any activity that involved their use, not even childhood games like cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians.

Every year until he'd turned fourteen he'd gone on his grandfather's hunting trips.

He'd listened to the macho NRA rhetoric, the constitutionality and tradition arguments for gun ownership. He'd learned the lingo, even how to handle several types of firearms, as adept as any young teen could be with rifles in the woods. And every year since he'd been old enough to handle a gun with adult supervision, he'd refused to raise his weapon and fire it at an animal for sport.

After his father had been killed when he and Dawson were eight, their Grampa Brody put double the pressure on for Caution to "act like a man and kill something." And on his fourteenth birthday, Caution refused to go at all.

He had nothing to prove, not to himself, his brother or Brody. He could handle a gun well enough to take care of himself and do damage if he had to. That was as far as he was willing to take his experience with them.

He'd taken a lot of flak for his stance, more from Dawson than their grandfather. From Grampa Brody, he'd sensed grudging admiration rather than anger, and liked to think his grandfather respected his position against him more than not.

Caution felt Dara staring at him, knew his answer hadn't been enough to satisfy her unexpected curiosity, but didn't know how to say the words that would open up a floodgate of emotions he'd kept buried for more than two decades.

She reached for his left hand, squeezing it in her right. "Tell me."

It was both an order and a request, and it tightened his heart in his chest with its simple eloquence. She sounded like she wanted to know, looked like she would understand what he felt and why he felt it even though he'd never made one allusion to his experiences with his grandfather and brother, even though he'd never intimated what had happened to his father. And Dara had never asked, never seemed the least bit interested in the relationships he'd fostered and shared with his blood as a child.

Until now.

"My father was shot and killed when I was a kid. By my mother," he said.

Dara gasped, then squeezed his hand tighter. "Caution, I'm so sorry."

He shrugged again, confused at her concern when he should have been heartened. Before now, she hadn't exhibited much of a concerned or sympathetic bone in her body past how it would affect his performance in bed. Sometimes he wondered why he put up with the woman at all, wondered what drove him to care so much for someone who didn't seem to care for him beyond the multiple orgasms he could provide her. And then he'd catch her childish pleasure at eating chocolate chip cookies in bed and coloring in a Spider-Man coloring book with his daughter—each with tongues lolling from a corner of their mouths just so—and he wouldn't wonder again. Not until the next time she started an argument for no good reason, or refused his proposal, or claimed love was for weaklings and stalked off in a hissy fit, curly black locks flinging behind her.

His entire relationship with Ms. Kelly, Caution realized, was based on Hobson's choice. Take what she offered—a hint, a piece of the complete woman that he knew her to be—or get none of her. Take her shoddy behavior and abuse, or leave it. He'd abdicated free choice a long time ago where the woman was concerned.

"Caution?"

He glanced from their entwined hands to her face, dazed.

"I know it's difficult, but if you want to talk—"

"It happened a long time ago. I've pretty much gotten over it."

"That's not something you just get over, Caution."

Her reprimanding tone reminded him of his mother, and he grinned at the irony.

Here was Dara pulling teeth, lending an ear, when usually it was the other way around, him trying to get information out of her—about her childhood, about her life. Now that he had an opportunity and arena to vent, he couldn't find it in himself to take advantage of it. He'd been holding it in so long he almost understood the logic in Dara's policy limiting intimacy and disclosure; it cut back on the drama.

"Dare, let's change the subject." He hated shutting her out, especially when she was so open and willing. But he had to risk her wrath, her retreating into her shell, because he didn't feel right bringing his mother and father into this relationship now.

"So, where's Tayte hanging while you're here with me?"

Caution grinned, thinking that he had always loved the woman's instant resiliency and ability to improvise. "I left her with my grandfather."

"Did he know you were coming over here?"

He chuckled, shook his head. He knew where her mind was going. "I wasn't real clear about that. I kind of gave him the impression I was meeting Pam."

"How did you sort of give that impression?"

He shrugged, took another swig of Yoo-Hoo.

"He might check. She might call him looking for you."

"Then I guess that's when he'll find out where I am. Besides..." He put his bottle down on a coaster on the smoke glass table, slid closer to her, but didn't touch. "Tayte will probably be more upset that I came over to see you without her, than he will be that I came over at all."

"I like Tater."

He glanced at her, thought she looked stunned by her admission. "She's a likable kid."

"So's her father."

"Why Dara Kelly, I do believe you just gave me a compliment!"

She shrugged, smiled as she gulped some Yoo-Hoo and put her bottle on a coaster too.

"How well did you know Dawson's wife?"

"I didn't," he said, antennae immediately going up.

"You never met her?"

"Are you shocked?"

Dara shrugged again, peered at him.

"You know there're a lot of myths and fables attached to being a twin, especially identical. But we're not inseparable. We're individuals."

"I know that."

"My brother and I haven't spoken in a long time. I didn't even know he was married until long after the fact, and even then, he kept his distance and I kept mine."

"Are you preparing your defense?"

"Am I on trial?"

"No, but Dawson will be caught eventually, and *he* will be."

"You sound like a prosecutor grilling a hostile witness. Do you think I condone what my brother did?"

"You put up his bail money."

Caution scowled. "Contrary to popular opinion, the justice system is still based on the assumption of innocence. Innocent until proven guilty. You have heard of the concept?"

"I don't need a civics lesson or a lecture on the law from you." Dara lurched to her feet and glared down at him. "He killed m...her. He needs to be brought to justice for what he did."

"And you're his judge and jury now?"

"I'm the person who's going to bring him in."

"You think I'll stand in your way?"

"Will you?"

Caution stood to face her. "I should be insulted that you'd suggest that."

"He is your brother. Your blood."

"And if he's wrong, I'll be the first one to admit it."

"There is no if." Dara flung herself back into the corner of her sofa.

Caution listened to her fidget on the leather, watched as she folded her arms across her breasts, felt her shields sliding up from where he stood and waited for her to string together the decrees—"go," "leave," "get out"—that would banish him from her apartment, if not her life.

He thought for a second about beating her to the punch and just leaving, but decided not to make her job easy. If she wanted him out, she'd have to say the words; not that she'd ever had a problem doing that. "We shouldn't be arguing about this."

"Please don't try to mollify me."

"You think that's what I'm doing?" He realized as he asked it that he was trying to smooth things over—tone conciliatory, trying to keep the peace, true to his nature—when he had been the one wronged as if he had killed Dawson's wife. By all rights, he should have been offended, instead of letting her put him on the defensive.

Dara murmured, "I think you should leave now."

"What if I don't want to?"

"You'd stay where you're not wanted?"

"That's a normal occurrence when I'm with you." He closed the space between them, sat down beside her, not surprised when she didn't retreat. "You don't really want me to go, do you? Not when it's been so long between us..." He slid a hand between her legs and cupped her hot mound through the thin material of her boxers.

"Caution..."

"Yes," he murmured as he leaned in to nibble an earlobe before sucking it into his mouth.

When Dara moaned and arched her neck, Caution slid a finger under one leg of her shorts, brushing her labia before sinking it into her wet pussy, quickly joined it with another to thrust inside with measured, deep caresses.

"You are so *wet*," he whispered. "It makes me hot." He'd been painfully hard inside his jeans since before he arrived, and now his cock throbbed with the need to be released. The need to get inside her!

Dara jerked against him, grabbed his arm in a half-hearted attempt to push him away.

But Caution rotated his hand and scissored his fingers inside her, closing his eyes to listen to the musical lilt of her keen. He leaned in to circle his tongue against her throat, licking and sucking in rhythm to his deep strokes against her soft creamy folds. "I know you want me inside you. I know you want more than this. "

"No." She shook her head, even as she bucked her hips against his hand. "It's just a physiological reaction. It doesn't mean anything."

"That's where you're wrong." Just physiological? Was she crazy? Her reaction meant everything—to him, to her, to them. It meant that he wasn't in this all alone. Now if she would only say it, just admit it to him... "Caution, please..."

"Please?" He opened his eyes to look at her face, wanted to watch her when she came, feel her when she melted against him. He knew that it was just a matter of time from her expression of confused concentration, eyebrows knitted together, sexy lips parted as if preparing to make a plea for mercy.

Caution didn't intend to give her any—no mercy, no release. Not yet. "Do you really want me to go, Dare?" He pulled his fingers back until just the tip of them were teasing her vulva. He waited for her to look at him.

When she opened her dark eyes to glare at him they were bright and glossy with lust and denial. "Blackmail's unlike you, Caution."

"There's a lot about me you don't know." He plunged his fingers into her and she gasped and caught his arm again. "You don't give yourself a chance to know me. You don't give us a chance." He redoubled his thrusts, added his thumb to the mix, flicking her swollen clit with just the right amount of teasing pressure, once, twice, three times...

Dara writhed beneath his manipulations, holding his hand in place and pushing closer, firmly impaling herself. "I shouldn't be...doing this..." She panted.

"Shouldn't be doing what? Enjoying yourself?"

She didn't stop moving, instead pumped her hips in a fierce rhythm and tightened her vaginal muscles around his fingers until he felt the vibrations of her approaching orgasm all the way to his toes. "I'm mad at you," she murmured.

"That's not going to stop me from making you come." "It better not," she gasped, bending like a bow in his arms as he stroked inside her, harder, deeper, faster. "Oh, God! Caution!"

He wrapped his free arm around her as she collapsed against him and buried her face in his throat. He listened to her labored breathing as she tried to center herself no doubt, felt her take several deep breaths, closed his eyes and held her tight, relishing the feel of her in his arms —so warm and soft and compliant.

After a long silent moment, she slowly raised her head to stare at him.

Caution gaped at the tears in her eyes. "Dare?"

"You really need to go, Caution."

He wanted to act like a spoiled brat and cry foul that she had gotten hers but he hadn't gotten his, but the look on her face boded much more serious matters than parity in their physical pleasure and release. Strangely, he didn't feel used. Just confused.

She hadn't been herself all evening. Shit, she hadn't been herself since she'd shown up in his kitchen last evening; and now the tears, so unheard of. If he stayed a minute longer, who knew what other bizarre behavior she'd demonstrate? Who knew if he would be able to leave just because she asked him to?

No, better to leave now, while he still had the strength.

Reluctantly, he removed his hand from her cunt, brought his fingers to his mouth, licked them one at a time and got much satisfaction watching her bite her bottom lip and shudder as she watched him.

See what you're missing, Dara Kelly?

God, she brought out the crudeness in him!

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"I'm not." Caution leaned in and kissed her full on the lips, sliding his tongue into her mouth to lovingly stroke hers and let her see how she tasted to him. She let him kiss her for a full minute before pulling back. "I'm going." He cupped her face, pushing stray black strands from her eyes before silently standing to leave.

Caution paused at the door with his back to her and thought twice about playing

the macho alpha male, but he knew she would never go for that. She'd had enough of that with her first two husbands and he didn't want to remind her of those assholes or that time in her life, not when he was trying to convince her that he was different.

He didn't even waste his energy to argue with her; he knew where it would get him, where it would get them both. Besides, he needed to leave now for his own sanity.

* * * *

She had missed her chance, squandering her opportunity at redemption, and the Amazon had managed to get away again by a thread of her jeans.

Perhaps trying something so close to home, so soon after the previous attempt—so close to Caution's place of business—had been hasty and reckless, two things that she needed to avoid at all costs. Nothing would come of pushing forward too fast, nothing but failure. This evening just proved that.

She needed to regroup, meet with the good ol' boy and the gigolo and hash out ideas and options. Three heads were better than one, and the Neanderthal had proven more than useful so far. She just needed to put his talents to better use, let him do what he was good at, and keep suspicion from falling in her direction at all costs; the last part was going to be a challenge, but one she thought she was more than up to.

She smiled, picturing the scene Tarrent had drawn for her when the Amazon had fallen beneath his hail of bullets. Pity his initial assault hadn't been more effective, a fact over which they were both still puzzling.

He'd been so sure the Amazon was dead, had assured her of the same.

What had gone wrong?

CHAPTER 10

Sam shuffled to the kitchen and dumped the remainder of her and Caution's pizza slices into the garbage, her appetite having gone the way of her would-be, could-be lover.

The entire time Caution had sat in her living room—dark, virile, illicitly handsome, and miles from intimidating in the same form-fitting blue jeans and red polo shirt he'd been in earlier—she'd pictured Dawson the last time she'd seen him. She couldn't forget her husband's anger right before he'd whacked her down the stairs.

She had tried her best not to anger Caution for this very reason, her fear of his reaction and her concern that deep down he was the same as his brother, and would react as had his mirror image when thwarted or disagreed with.

It wasn't until Caution had left that Sam realized her fear was unwarranted, the possibility of violence from Caution the furthest thing from the truth.

Not only had she seen his aura—a pure blue glow surrounding him like a nimbus—as she had noticed Dara's on their first meeting, but she realized he'd done everything he could to diffuse the situation, smooth her anger, and make things right. But Sam had been too absorbed with memories of her husband's violence and the stormy weather of her past to see the calm haven of her present in front of her.

She hadn't wanted to alienate him, especially after his revelation, and she hadn't wanted him to go, but she didn't know what she would have done had he stayed.

Scratch that. She was lying to herself. She knew exactly what she would have done, knew exactly what she wanted him to do to her. She also knew that she would have enjoyed it, would have enjoyed Dara Kelly's man—every hard-muscled angle and curve of him—as her own, in every way a woman could enjoy a man.

He was too much of a distraction, one in which she could too easily confide, and to whom she could too easily spill all of her and Dara's secrets. Secrets that, for now, needed to be kept.

She was mildly sure that telling him would make her feel better, but not that sure that Caution could handle the truth. Would he ever be ready? And could she let his likely

disbelief keep her from what she needed to do?

Sam felt alone and lonely. She needed to bounce her thoughts off someone, talk things out, but one of the only people she wanted to talk to, one of the only people with whom she could entrust her secret, was one of the people she could least afford to trust by virtue of his involvement. She realized she'd sent away her most likely candidate. And the other, well, Dara didn't like her enough to act the confidante or help Sam. The pair of them spent more of their time together at each other's throats than not, with Dara bossing her around like her mother.

She couldn't blame the woman. To her, Sam was an inexperienced and undeserving kid, a usurper butting into a life that didn't belong to her and never would.

But it was all she had, so she had to make the best of it.

Sam paused at the phone hanging on the kitchen wall, fingers itching to dial his number and see if he had made it home okay. She wanted to hear his voice now more than anything. She needed the assurance that something hadn't happened to him.

She'd never been so gloom and doom before, no history of prognostication in her background. Heck, if that were the case, she would have seen that fall down the stairs before it happened and done something to prevent it.

But that was then, and this was now, and Sam was worried.

Perhaps she had brought back the "gift" from her trip to the other side? At least popular fiction would have her believe this possible. It would be nice to think she hadn't come here totally unprepared and empty-handed.

She told herself that he was a grown man and could take care of himself, but the self-assurances didn't stop Sam's nerves from jangling, or cold dread from riding down her spine. She picked up the phone to dial Caution's, certain that he was in some kind of trouble and she was already too late to help him.

* * * *

Dara thought Them just as manipulative and deceptive as she could be, yet They castigated her for the way she had gotten Sam and Caution together. At least Dara was honest about how she felt while They, on the other hand, liked to lead an individual around by the nose without a hint of why They were using said individual and for what purpose.

Dara knew she was just as bad, toying with Sam's feelings, feeding her information crumb by crumb, manipulating the poor kid, and leaving out the vital main course as if homegirl couldn't handle it. She was jealous, she had to admit, but even she saw the nonsense in misinforming or only releasing parts of the story as she was being forced to do.

She felt guilty about keeping homegirl in the dark, not telling her what was going on or why, especially when Dara knew that if Sam knew more, it would only help the girl with Caution.

They thought Sam should learn as she went, by trial and error. Not counting that first night when *she* had let her feelings get the best of her and had lied to Sam, Dara

thought Their way put homegirl at an unnecessary disadvantage, making the situation more difficult than it needed to be. Not that They cared. Not that Dara was so eager to get Sam and Caution together.

Why had homegirl started that argument? Why had she antagonized Caution when things had been going so well? And Dara well knew the ploy when she saw it, having used it many times before to either get her way, or get away from Caution when he was about to make a momentous point or trump her.

Sam had put a crimp in Their and Dara's plans, for sure. What was wrong with the girl, pushing away a good man who cared about her? You'd think she was Dara.

She chuckled as she remembered when Sam extolled the merits of having and using a gun in her profession. It almost felt as though she was listening to herself talk. Sam not only talked the talk, but also seemed to know her way around more than a few firearms, something for which Dara thanked her lucky stars. At least the princess wasn't totally useless.

Of course, she was more than a little peeved at Sam for making Caution leave, but she knew her feelings ran much deeper, to the marrow where envy and frustration dwelled and simmered.

Dara had never known about Caution's parents, never having taken the time to find out. And she didn't know what galled her more about that tender moment between her man and homegirl back at her apartment—that Sam, a perfect stranger, a new Jill had thought to ask him, or that Caution had trusted her enough to unburden himself.

She needed to talk to homegirl, but it was the last thing in the world she *wanted* to do. She ached to be with Caution, ached *for* him, and knew that he needed her whether he would realize she was with him or not.

Something bad was about to happen to him, and it unnerved her that she didn't know exactly what, when or where. It annoyed her that she didn't know Their plans for her, Sam and Caution.

Dara left the apartment and followed Caution, wanting to make sure he was okay and not taking Sam's rebuff too hard, because she knew he was perfectly capable of doing so. Sometimes Caution was too introspective and serious for his own good, most of the time too sensitive for Dara.

But you love him.

Dara realized that she had for a long time, but the hell with it, it was too late to do anything about it now that she was finally able to admit her emotions. Wasn't that always the way of it, not missing something until you didn't have it anymore?

She sat in the front passenger seat of Caution's Lexus, watching him maneuver through the light evening traffic as he exited the expressway, and feeling him stewing.

For the first time in her life—or her afterlife—she wanted to reach out and comfort someone, not just someone, but an adult. She couldn't remember feeling this maternal and empathetic when she was alive, except with little Tayte and perhaps her mother directly after her father's death. Adults, she'd always told Caution, could take care

of themselves. Kids couldn't, they needed coddling and care. At least this had always been her reason for not cuddling after sex or for nipping foreplay and intimacy in the bud to get to the main event. She knew now her reasons had only been excuses. Excuses to keep Caution at arm's length—a hard chore to accomplish against an ingratiating man with ideals firmly entrenched in woebegone days when princes were still charming and even a rogue would give a lady his jacket to keep her warm, put his coat over a puddle to keep her dry, or duel to protect her honor.

Rather than applaud his old-fashioned ethics and values, Dara used to tease Caution about his Byronic and maternal tendencies, and about his exceptional way not just with people and his own child, but with children in general.

She'd caught him in action at Tayte's third birthday party not long after they had met.

He'd been in his glory, all the young guests at the party naturally gravitating towards him, the one adult who didn't talk down to them. He showed a genuine interest in their likes and dislikes, and took the time to see to their needs and entertainment as if his own happiness depended on making them happy.

Dara thought Caution braver facing down the demands and howls and whines of a bunch of hungry and bored three- and five-year-olds than she'd ever been facing down the barrel of some desperate and violent skip's gun. And though far from the maternal type herself—too afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing to a little person with whom she couldn't really empathize or relate—she often thought that if she ever had the serious inclination to bring a child into the world, she'd want Caution to be its father.

Dara heard Caution curse under his breath as he pulled into the driveway connected to his home. She watched him as he silently sat behind the wheel for several long moments, and could almost hear the wheels spinning in his head about the missteps he'd taken with Sam when he actually hadn't made any at all. She wanted to reach out to him, assure him that he wasn't at fault, that everything was going to be okay, if he just gave Sam a chance. Dara realized that she wanted this to work. She wanted them to be together like she hadn't wanted anything before.

More than she wanted to be with him herself?

She didn't know if she could be that magnanimous, but she did know that she wanted Their plans for Caution to work out, even if things didn't quite work out for her. And right about now, Their plans seemed as much in jeopardy as they could possibly get. Dara followed Caution from his car into the house where she helplessly watched as Dawson appeared out of nowhere and ambushed his brother.

* * * *

Caution woke to darkness, head pounding, unable to move. He tried to stand and realized his legs were tied to a chair. He tried to lift his arms and found them bound just as securely to the chair, behind his back. He twisted and turned his wrists enough to know they were wrapped in duct tape. Hell, he wouldn't be able to get out of this in years, no amount of escapism or magic in his bag of tricks to help him work out of this sort of binding. He'd always been better with mechanical rather than organic bindings—handcuffs, leg irons, once in a while a straight jacket which always took him three times

longer than any record he'd set with just wrist and leg manacles. Without a sharp instrument, he didn't think he had a chance at getting out of his current straits any time soon.

He blinked, feeling the blindfold over his eyes and gritting his teeth against the bitter taste of helplessness threatening to choke him long before the tape across his mouth.

He listened for movement, inhaled deep and tried to sniff a familiar scent but found nothing. Irrationally, he'd expected a sign of Dara—her musk, her touch, her soft breathing—especially after her last stunt. But he realized that would be asking for too much.

This wasn't a game, at least not one he wanted to play.

He struggled for several long minutes against the bindings on his wrist, worked up a solid sweat, and felt the perspiration sliding into his eyes, yet to no avail. He was bound just as tightly as he had been when he started.

Seems he had nothing but time now on his hands to think about his predicament.

He consoled himself in the thought that Tayte was safe with her grandfather and wouldn't be home until tomorrow. By then, he hoped that whatever was happening to him would be over. As long as Tayte was safe, it didn't matter what happened to him.

Caution tried to feel good about that until he thought about Dara and that he might never see her grouchy or stern expression again, or hear her rich laughter as she watched Bugs Bunny and Roadrunner cartoons with his daughter on the weekends.

He didn't like the way they had left off, with business unfinished, him parting just barely angry. He also didn't like that he'd gone right over there and let her do to him exactly what he had sworn he wouldn't let her do: drive him away.

Why had he gotten so defensive with her? She'd been curious, had asked him questions that any girlfriend would ask of a man whose brother had been charged as a killer. And he'd practically attacked her. She had every right to her curiosity, not to mention the fact that it was her job: finding out about and tracking down killers.

Caution knew better than anyone how Dara felt about men who smacked around women, more, who killed them. He knew how she felt about the strong abusing the weak. She was a maverick with a cause and didn't stand for any abuse of power, not on her watch.

Already on Dara's hit list, Dawson had treaded onto her watch by killing his wife, and Caution was standing in her way simply by virtue of the blood flowing through his veins.

Not for the first time in his life, he resented his brother and the incontrovertible bond between them.

"Don't struggle, bro. It only binds you tighter."

Caution recognized his brother's voice and froze at the words, as if the man could read his mind and not just see his actions. He listened as footsteps came closer, and

suddenly his eyes were flooded with bright light as Dawson whipped off the scarf covering his face. Caution blinked several times, eyes widening at the sight of Dawson standing over him, gun in hand.

He was getting mighty damn tired of people pointing guns at him in his own house. First his woman, now his brother. What the hell was this?

"I'm going to take that tape off under one condition." Dawson paused and raised his eyebrows, and Caution raised his in turn. "That you promise not to make any ruckus. After all, this is a peaceful residential neighborhood."

Caution wanted nothing better than to knock some sense into his brother's head, if he didn't slap the man silly first, but only nodded his acquiescence. Dawson came closer and ripped off the tape none too gently. Caution sucked in his breath and gritted his teeth to keep from crying out, glaring as Dawson took the seat across from him. "You're probably wondering why?"

"Why would I wonder that? You only skipped out on your bail and probably have half the city looking for you."

"The least of which is your girlfriend."

"She doesn't have anything to do with this."

"She has everything to do with this, big brother. She's out to get me."

"It's her job."

"And mine is to stay free."

"You picked a strange way to do that, coming here."

"You wouldn't turn me in now, would you, Caution? Your own blood?"

Caution gawked, wondering how far his brother planned on going, then realizing that he'd gone as far as any human being could by killing his wife. Things couldn't go any farther or get any worse than taking a human life.

But if he did it once he could do it again.

He remembered his conversation at Dara's, how she'd spoken of Dawson, the accusations resting on the tip of her tongue unspoken, but not unheard. And how he'd defended his brother. Knee-jerk reaction? Or did he believe in his brother's innocence? Did he care if he stayed free?

"Caution, this isn't like when we were kids and you could get out of my ties in record time. You're not going to get loose, so you might as well stop struggling."

He hadn't realized that he was struggling until Dawson's words.

Dawson stood and pushed his seat closer, then sat down resting his forearms on the back of the chair, gun nonchalantly dangling from a hand.

"You mind not pointing that at me?"

"This?" Dawson held up the gun. "This is just in case of company. Just a precaution. Like binding you. I needed a captive audience."

"For what? Your latest sob story?"

Dawson sat up straight, a wounded look on his face as he put a hand over his chest. "You offend me, big brother."

"Knock it off with the 'big brother' jazz. I'm only ten minutes older than you."

"It makes a difference to me. Always has."

Caution couldn't see where since his brother had never taken his "older" and "wiser" advice that he could remember, choosing instead to always follow his own beat, the wrong one. Which had been fine with Caution, until his brother invariably dragged him into one of his get-me-out-of-trouble-quick schemes. "Where's Roscoe?" he blurted.

"That noisy little Snoopy pooch?"

"If you hurt Tater's dog—"

"Relax. He's fine. Taking a little nappy pooh in the basement."

Caution stopped short of sighing in relief. His troubles weren't nearly over, but knowing that his daughter's dog hadn't come to any harm eased his mind.

"I just needed someone to talk to, Caution. Someone who...someone who understands me.. Someone close...before I..."

Caution grimaced. "You're turning yourself in?"

"I wouldn't say that."

What was the alternative except—"Daw, don't."

Dawson stared at him, eyes widening as he realized what his brother was thinking. "You don't have to worry about that, bro. I haven't gotten that desperate."

"Then why are you here?"

Dawson shrugged. "Wanted to see a friendly face."

"And you thought of mine?"

"Every time I look in the mirror."

Caution chuckled, couldn't help it, his brother's sick sense of humor eternally contagious. "You need a shave and a haircut."

"You need a mustache and goatee."

"Daw—"

"Remember that first time, not long after..." He took a deep breath before continuing. "After Dad died that we went hunting with Grampa Brody?"

Caution swallowed hard. Remember that first time? Everything up to and after their Mom had shot their Dad was an indelible mark on his brain, something he wished he could wash away but knew he couldn't.

The night before Grampa's usual hunting trip was even more indelible, imbedded in his memory; even now he could see his brother, a skinny eight-and-a-half-year-old in

his cartoon character pajamas as he climbed up into the top bunk with Caution to cuddle.

Caution felt his brother's tears on his hand before he heard Dawson sobbing quietly in the dark. He put his arms around him and pulled him close, spooning like they'd done often as toddlers, something they hadn't outgrown until they'd come to live with their grandparents while Mom "dried out" in some rehab center upstate and recovered from the trauma of the "accident."

"Do you think she did it on purpose?" Dawson asked into the pillow.

Caution didn't know what to think anymore. He had gone over that night again and again in his mind and hadn't come up with a good solid reason why his and Dawson's father was dead, and they were without the comfort and presence of their mother.

Their parents had argued a lot before that night, about everything and nothing, but more times than not they fought about money, or Dad's inability to earn tons of it. Their father didn't make enough for a decent lifestyle according to Mom, and Mom liked to shop as if she was Zsa Zsa Gabor and lady of the manor according to Dad. They'd had the same ugly argument for months. By the time that fatal night had rolled around, Mom had been so hopped up on booze and pills—trying to escape an existence with which Caution couldn't find that much fault—that she'd mistaken her husband coming home late from an extra tour of overtime for a prowler.

Caution didn't want to believe that their mother had murdered their father, but couldn't deny his suspicions. To his brother he said, "I don't think so."

Unlike their Grampa, who blamed their mom for the death of his only son, having yet to forgive his money-hungry, gold-digging daughter-in-law. The "thought-he-was-a-prowler" defense didn't wash with Grampa Brody, just a poor excuse for Reina to finally see her way to a fat payday in which to wallow after Keane Foster's life insurance checks cleared.

"I don't want to go hunting with Grampa Brody anymore." Dawson turned and burrowed close to his brother's chest, tears coming in earnest now as he held tight.

"But you always like the trips."

"I just act like I do for Grampa's sake."

Something in common between them that Caution, up until to that point, hadn't known. "You make Grampa proud."

Dawson shook his head. "No, you do."

Caution didn't know how true that was since he had yet to prove his worth and had no intentions or inclination to ever do so. "You can't let him down. He depends on you."

"Why do we have to...to kill things?"

"I wish I had an answer for you, Daw, but I don't know."

They were silent for a long time, retreating in each other's grasps, taking comfort in their twin bond where words weren't necessary.

"I can't see Daddy's face anymore when I close my eyes," Dawson murmured.

Caution didn't know what to say to this, so he just held his brother tight, trying to be strong, trying to live up to the "big brother" title his father and mother had assigned him from day one, and trying not to cry in the dark.

* * * *

They had fallen asleep in each other's arms that night, before their Grampa Brody had rudely awakened them at the crack of dawn hours later, yelling about "Reina's raising two little Puerto Rican fairies" and having "ruined my grandboys and made them soft".

Caution grinned at the memory.

His grandfather had never gotten Reina's racial designation correct, and of course had no reason to except for his grandsons, his blood. "You seen one spic-Latino-Hispanic-Puerto-Rican-Mexican, you seen 'em all," was Brody's motto, and it didn't matter to him that Reina was Cuban, since "they" were all the same to him.

"We had some good times with Grampa Brody, even after," Dawson said now.

Before the resentment, Caution thought, when Dawson had started to think of his father as a do-gooder wasted in a thankless blue collar job that didn't pay nearly enough to make ends meet. Before his brother started to buy into their Mom's negative party line about their "worthless schmuck" Dad. Before their mother went off the deep end and tried to bury her grief in shopping sprees and more drink and pills than before the shooting.

The phone rang.

Both Caution and Dawson started, then stared at the offending instrument on the wall as if it were an alien that had landed in the kitchen. Caution felt his heart pounding in his throat, threatening to strangle him when his answering machine picked up and Dara's voice floated through the room, rich but uncertain.

"Hi Caution, it's me, S—Dara. I just wanted to make sure you got in okay. I don't like the way we left off and I...just give me a call when you get a chance, okay?"

Dawson glared at him as Dara finished her message and the phone beeped. "Sleeping with the enemy, brother." He tsked.

"She might come over," Caution warned, not knowing which thought worried him more, that she would pop over to check on him and find his brother here, or that she wouldn't and he'd be left at Dawson's mercy for the remainder of the night.

"She might. We'll just have to finish up before she gets here then, won't we? Unless you want to invite her to the party."

Caution's heart dropped at the idea of his bounty hunter girlfriend and bail-jumping brother in the same mile radius, much less the same house. Dawson was acting too unpredictable for his taste, having already broken into the house and ambushed his own brother. There was no telling how far he would go, who else he'd hurt in his desperation.

"I want you to leave Dara out of this, Dawson."

"I will if she will."

CHAPTER 11

This was turning into a real party that Randall was itching and all too willing to crash.

He didn't like being unprepared, didn't particularly like puzzles, and Ralphie inviting him to this little soirée after the fact had put him at a decided disadvantage.

First, he had tracked his mark—or whom he thought of as his mark—Dawson Foster to the fancy townhouse and watched him break in.

Randall had only had to wait less than fifteen minutes before the guy's double—with shorter hair and sans the mustache and goatee—arrived at the place in a fancy silver Lexus and entered the house through the back door.

He wanted to kick himself for not having followed his first instinct and waylaying this Dawson before he broke into the house, but something had held him back.

Now as he trained his binoculars on the house and watched the pair, he was glad he hadn't jumped the gun. He could have made a grave error and brought in the wrong guy. After all, there was no guarantee that this Dawson was the first one who had entered the townhouse, although he matched the picture Randall had acquired from Ralphie and his breaking in pointed to a bail jumper or someone else not above breaking the law to get what he wanted.

Randall sat in his pick-up across the street and watched them talk. He didn't need to be a lip reader to know what was being said, but wondered about the relationship between the twins. What would lead one to knock the other out and bind him to a chair? Shouldn't they have been each other's biggest supporters and allies? Had this Caution betrayed his brother in some way? Or was Dawson tying up loose ends before he skipped to parts unknown?

Not usually one for inaction and guessing games, Randall was having an interesting time trying to figure out what was going on. He had no choice. He didn't want to enter a situation without having all the facts, and cursed Ralphie for his obvious

favoritism, putting him in the predicament in the first place by choosing that bitch over him.

Hadn't Randall proven himself more than worthy of first dibs on a skip? More than likely, Ralphie had gone soft in his old age with his preferences for a pretty face and nice curves. Not that Randall noticed Kelly as anything more than a thorn in his side, an indestructible thorn that refused to die, but he was sure the same didn't apply to others in the male population. That detective in the One-Five Kelly was screwing, for one. He knew this as surely as he knew Ralphie wanted to get a piece of Kelly for his old self.

A couple of assholes who hadn't been burned by a nice pair of tits and ass before. Randall had, and he hadn't forgotten it, nor would he forgive.

He still couldn't believe the bitch had survived not only his armor piercing and talon slugs, but also the fall from the window. He still couldn't believe she was alive and kicking, but hadn't gone to the police with her tale.

Was she afraid they wouldn't believe her? Or did she have her own brand of revenge in mind for him?

Bring it on, bitch.

Randall leered at the thought. He would welcome nothing more than a confrontation, especially a chance to do things right this time and rectify his mistake, not to mention shut up one very vocal and dissatisfied benefactor.

* * * *

Sam hung up the phone, disconcerted and wondering why there had been no answer. He was a grown man, free to come and go as he pleased, of course, and he had every right not to answer his phone.

She went over the laundry list of logical explanations in her head, from the simple Caution being angry and not wanting to speak to her, to the more bothersome, something had happened to him.

Sam unconsciously leaned toward the latter, dogged by visions of Caution's father dying at his mother's hands, making her leap to the most cataclysmic scenarios when she normally wouldn't have. But that was before They brought her back to rub her face in the brutal underbelly of a world where husbands killed their pregnant wives and wives killed their husbands.

Okay, this was silly! The man might not have arrived home yet, or if he had, perhaps he'd cut off his ringer. He might be in the shower. He might be out for a walk with his dog. Maybe he went over to his grandfather's to pick up Tayte, though Sam couldn't see him disturbing the child or his grandfather this late in the evening.

She was grasping at straws and she knew it, unwilling to accept the fact that her instincts were right and something was wrong.

Sam picked up the handset in the kitchen and dialed Caution once more, refusing to believe he was that rude and listening to her, though her alternative was ten times scarier.

The phone rang three times before she lost her nerve and hung up on his machine.

"Sam, you have to go over there right now! Caution's in trouble."

For a hot second, Sam thought she had spoken out loud, to herself, before she turned to see Dara standing at the kitchen counter, panting as if she'd just run from Brooklyn to Harlem, and not floated or flown in her usual seemingly effortless ghostly manner.

Apparently, Sam didn't react quickly enough and Dara came behind the counter, reached out to grasp her shoulders and try to shake her, but failed. The cold air from Dara's grasp passed through Sam, however, and shocked her more than contact might have. She thought that if the woman had been corporeal and not a ghost, her arms would surely be bruised from the impact.

"Did you hear what I said? You have to go over there now. Dawson has him."

"Dawson?" Sam gawked, Dara's revelation getting a reaction out of her where an attempt at physical contact hadn't. "What's he doing there?"

"Hell if I know. I just know he knocked Caution out and tied him up. They were sitting and talking when I left."

"You couldn't...*do* something to stop him?"

"No, and I tried, dammit! I yelled, tried hitting him, tried grabbing him, but nothing worked. I might as well have not been there."

"But what can I do?"

"Go over there and get your man!"

Sam's blood froze in her veins at the dual implications.

She wasn't a bounty hunter, wasn't much of anything except a failed wife and a wet-behind-the-ears kid. What was she supposed to do?

"Sam, you're wasting time. You have to get a move on now. I don't know what that crazy brother of his is capable of doing."

"Dawson wouldn't—"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear what your mouth says. But you and I both know different."

Sam marched to the phone, picked up the receiver.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm calling the police."

"No. This is your call. *You* have to go over there."

"What difference does it make who goes over there as long as he gets help?"

"What are you, crazy?" Dara threw up her hands in exasperation as she paced the room, as impatient as a groom's dick at a drawn-out wedding reception.

"I'm not a bounty hunter, dammit!"

"Like it or not, you are. You're me. How's it going to look, you calling the police to go over there and pick up your skip? We'll be laughed out of the business."

"It's not my business."

"You are so full of shit. You just got off the phone trying to reach him, don't tell me you didn't." Dara stepped closer, backing off an inch when Sam flinched. "I know you care about him. And I know you want to get Dawson."

"That may be..."

"You're not a wimp, Sam. I know you can do this. You have to."

Sam walked past Dara to the sofa and slumped down against the butter soft cushions, face in her hands.

There was a time when she would have bought into Dara's rah-rah, you-go-girl pep talk, a time when she would have fought back, no matter who the opponent, but now she knew mortality and she wasn't too crazy about the idea of tempting fate again.

"Don't let Dawson win," Dara whispered. "Don't let him beat you again."

Sam jerked her face out of her hands and glared up at Dara. "What would you know about it? I bet you've never been afraid of anyone or anything a day in your life!"

"You'd lose." Dara came over and sat down beside Sam, turned to face her. "What's the worse that could happen? You'd go over there, get Dawson, save Caution—"

"Get killed."

Dara smiled. "Been there, done that." She draped a ghostly arm over Sam's shoulder.

Dara was right. She wasn't afraid of death, had stared it in the face. She was afraid of losing what she'd found in her second chance, this life as Dara Kelly.

"You just want me out of the way so you can have him back."

Dara laughed at her lame attempt at humor. "Who knows? We might both lose him. I already have, and you, well you might lose him tonight. Maybe it's what's meant to be."

Like dying and losing my baby?

Sam still couldn't see the sense in that, not when the alternative was a thousand times more painful in its repetition. She couldn't let anything happen to Caution. She cared about him, was half-way in love with his daughter.

Tayte. My baby...

If she didn't do anything else, she at least needed to find out why. Why had They taken her baby away from her, only to give her this second chance with a ready-made family in its place? Why was she here in this body, and Dara not?

"I hear the gears churning."

Sam turned to Dara, giving the older woman a weak grin as she wiped her eyes with the back of a hand. "Tell me what I need to do."

* * * *

Randall's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw the newest arrival.

Knowing she was alive was one thing, but seeing the woman in the warm-blooded and interfering flesh was something else entirely.

Despite the call from his customer, despite previous knowledge and preparation, he wouldn't have believed her real if he hadn't seen her for himself. She came to a stop at the curb, cut off the motor and hopped off of her Ducati bike. If he hadn't been sure before, he knew the minute the bitch pulled off her helmet and swung that black hair loose that the rider was Ms. Dara Frigging Kelly.

Randall stared at her through his binoculars, his version of a double take, followed her progress all the way up the driveway to the back door.

Whatever happened now, he didn't think the two men inside would cave as had the previous skip Randall had taken from Kelly. They looked like they had a little more backbone.

Two witnesses.

Things were starting to get interesting.

* * * *

Her misspent youth hanging out with bad boys was beginning to pay off for Sam in ways she never would have expected.

First breaking and entering to apprehend Dawson a couple of days ago, getting the drop on and imprisoning a total stranger, now coming to the rescue of that same stranger—who wasn't such a stranger any longer—in the dead of night a couple of nights later.

That is, if she wasn't already too late.

Sam couldn't see Dawson hurting his own brother. But then, she hadn't been able to picture him harming her, and had been proven wrong on that score in a big way.

How many other guys had she chosen and just as quickly dismissed because he hadn't measured up to her idea of what a strong, take-charge guy should be? How many Cautions had she thrown by the wayside because they might not have had that rough-edged illicit air of a Dawson, or even a younger version of him in Josh Brennan?

She smiled as she worked on the lock at the back door, wondering what her last beau was up to now. Knowing Josh as she did, probably something not too dissimilar from what she was doing at present.

A typical date with Josh had consisted of Sam riding on the back of his bike as they sped down a long stretch of smooth pavement to some secluded spot where he would have Sam take target practice at beer cans, bottles and scarecrows on a makeshift firing range. To say Josh had not been into wining and dining was an understatement. But they'd had adventures and taken risks, something which Sam had thrived upon back then. She had a feeling the potshots she'd taken with Josh years ago would be coming in handy too, sooner than she wanted to admit.

Sam heard the satisfying sound of the lock clicking open beneath her manipulations with the fingernail file and bobby pin. She slowly pushed open the door, blinded by the bright light of the kitchen.

She spotted them right away, Caution bound to the chair, glaring at Dawson sitting no more than a foot away from him, brandishing a gun.

He was farther gone than she had thought.

Sam knew her husband had no qualms about handling guns. Heck, he'd owned several during their marriage, a point that had unnerved Sam more than she wanted to admit, especially once Dawson had shown his violent side and struck her.

How long would it have been before he'd taken the ultimate action and raised a gun against her instead of a fist? The end result would have been the same either way; she would have been no less dead.

God, how could she have been so wrong about one person?

"It's all right to come out now, Dare. We know you're here."

Sam stopped short of gasping at the sound of the deep voice. It took her a moment to identify it as her husband, and she was surprised that she could distinguish between the two men. But in the last couple of days she had come to know just how different they were, the timbre of their voice the least of the differences.

Sam stood up from behind the marble island and caught Dawson glancing at her over a shoulder with a grin on his face. A grin! Like this was all just a big game to him.

She carefully drew her Glock as she made her way over to the pair.

"That's far enough, Dara." Dawson slid his chair closer to Caution, positioning himself adjacent his brother rather than face-to-face and giving Sam a clear view of Caution's face.

She didn't know what she had been expecting before seeing him, but wasn't surprised by the cold expression in his green eyes. No fear, no panic—just simmering anger.

Was that look for her or his brother? Did he hate her for starting that argument earlier? Did he blame her for the situation he now found himself in?

"You're losing your touch, hun. There was a time I wouldn't have known you were here one way or the other." Dawson smiled, training the gun firmly on his brother. Caution didn't flinch, but Sam did, heart pounding so hard in her chest she thought it would burst free any minute. She took a deep breath, deliberately trying to calm herself before she spoke. "You're not going to shoot him," she whispered. She couldn't be wrong about this. Not when more than just her own life was at stake. Not when the adorable Tayte's father was at risk. Not when the brother-in-law Sam had only come to know and like in the last forty-eight-hours was in danger.

"You know, you might be right." Dawson aimed his weapon at her instead and smiled. "But you, I'd have no qualms about shooting."

"You're not going to shoot me either, Dawson."

He arched a brow, waiting.

"You've already taken one woman from Caution and regretted it. You won't risk hurting him that way again, now would you?"

This got a rise out of both men, Caution gawking at her right before Dawson turned to peer at him. "You told her about Caitlyn?"

Caution opened his mouth to speak but Sam broke in before he could say anything. "Of course he told me, Dawson. I'm his lover."

"And I'm his brother."

"You overestimate your worth." God, where was this coming from? Dara had given her Caitlyn, granted. But the rest? How did Sam know how Dawson might react? This entire girlfriend-versus-blood strategy could backfire.

"You're doing okay, Sam. Just keep up the pressure."

Sam didn't turn, already knowing that Dara was floating somewhere behind her.

"How about it, Caution? You think she's right? Have I overestimated my worth?"

Caution stared hard at his brother, jaw working as he silently gritted his teeth.

"So, she's right?"

Caution suddenly jerked against his bonds and growled as if he had finally lost his patience with the entire situation. "Damn it, give yourself up, Dawson. Save us all the trouble while you're still in one piece."

Dawson smiled, stood and sidled behind his brother's chair. He crouched beside Caution, trailing his gun a hair's breadth from the hair around his brother's right ear. "Tell your girlfriend to leave so we can finish our conversation in private."

"Daw, you're not going to get away."

"You sound like you're against me too."

Caution turned to him, eyes wide. "When have I ever been against you, Dawson? I just want to help you."

"I don't need your kind of help!"

Okay, she'd had about enough of this ridiculous ménage. She needed to make a move.

"What kind were you looking for? Caution should risk his freedom, his life helping you escape? Is that it?"

"Mind your business, Kelly. This isn't your concern."

"You made it my concern when you skipped."

"So tell me something, Dara. What's more important to you? That \$200,000 bond? Or my brother's life?" Dawson moved the barrel of his gun, pressed it against Caution's temple.

Sam froze, Glock at her side. "Don't."

"I wouldn't hurt my brother." He showed her the safety of his gun was on, then just as quickly slid it off and chambered a round. "You should know that by now."

"Give it up, Dawson."

"Sam, behind you!"

Sam instantly reacted, heeding Dara's warning as Dawson raised his gun and aimed it at her. She rolled behind the island as he got off a shot, striking the wall high behind her and the new arrival.

She watched the large man crash against the doorjamb several feet away from her, raising his gun as he went down, firing past her at Dawson.

Sam peeked from behind the island, saw Caution toppled over on his side, struggling to get out of his bonds a couple of feet away from Dawson.

"Caution! Are you okay?"

"Is that another partner?"

The man in question stood and stepped over Sam on his way to the two brothers.

Randall hovered over Dawson, kicked the gun away from his hand before crouching beside the injured man to frisk and then handcuff him. He turned to Caution, gun still drawn, teeth bared as he stood. "In answer to your question, pretty boy, I work alone."

Sam crawled from behind the island on her forearms and belly, took aim at Randall. "Drop it, Tarrent!"

"You've gotta be kiddin' me. I just bagged this loser for you and saved your life."

It was the least he could do after taking Dara's. "I had things well under control."

"Did you now?" Randall slowly turned, arms spread, gun dangling from the finger of his gun hand. "You wouldn't be out to prove something since your last job, would you? Million dollar bond is a pretty big incentive for redemption."

Sam gritted her teeth, imagined Dara's shock and pain after this low-life shot her, and felt her own anger simmering.

Would she be so wrong killing a man like this? Would she really regret shooting first and asking questions later?

She aimed her Glock at his chest, hand steady. Dawson had missed, but Sam knew she wouldn't, not from this distance.

"You wouldn't shoot me now, would you, Kelly? In front of witnesses? In front of your boyfriend?" Randall smirked. He was so darned arrogant! Sam just wanted to blow that cocky grin right off his face.

But she couldn't bring herself to pull the trigger. Not even knowing he was a cold-blooded murderer. Not even knowing he'd murdered Dara.

"Drop your weapon," Sam bit out. "Or you're going down, witnesses or not."

"Revenge can be a real mother."

"This has nothing to do with revenge. He's my skip."

"You don't really think I'm going to let you walk out of here with this guy after all my hard work, do you?"

"My hard work. And you don't have a choice."

"You don't know me very well." Randall licked out his tongue, wagging it like a painted, hopped up rock star before he raised his gun.

Sam didn't think twice before firing.

CHAPTER 12

Caution sat on the orange waiting room sofa, face in his palms when Dara made it over with two cans of soda from the floor's vending machine.

"Here you go. No water. The best I could get was Sprite."

He pulled his face out of his hands, grasped the soda between both palms as if to garner strength from the cold aluminum.

Dara sat down beside him, silent as she took a long gulp from her own soda then placed the can on the coffee table before the sofa. "You hate me, don't you?"

Caution grimaced and turned to her. "Why would you say that?"

"It's because of me that your brother's here, that he got shot, that—"

"You're not responsible for Dawson's reckless behavior."

"Those things I said...about Caitlyn, about—"

"Why are you apologizing, Dare? You did what you had to do."

"I broke your confidence."

Caution shrugged, feeling strangely unbetrayed by Dara's actions, only glad that they both had made it out of that madhouse alive. "I never thought you paid much attention to pillow talk, the things I mentioned about past lovers. You always gave me the impression you could care less about who came before you."

"Except Pamela."

Caution grinned. "I can hardly blame you for that. She's not exactly past."

"She isn't?"

"You know what I mean. She's still in the picture. Physically not—"

"Not emotionally, I know." Dara put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing and then rubbing his arm. "Want to talk?"

"About?"

"How you're feeling."

"Since when did you start to care?"

"Since now."

Caution shrugged again. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Caitlyn."

"Everything I needed to say about her has already been said." He turned from her, stood, and walked several paces away, trying to sound as harsh as he could and keep as much distance as possible between them. He needed to stop her curiosity and further questions. Now that she was providing the opportunity for him to purge, the less he wanted to do so.

He couldn't handle thinking about Caitlyn and his brother in the same breath, didn't want to dredge up that episode from his past. But the more he wanted to disconnect, the more his brain drifted to thoughts of his first serious relationship.

The thought of Caitlyn Morrow and what Dawson had done with her and to her had Caution's blood boiling anew. The episode had been the beginning of his and his brother's falling out, when Caution first started to lose all respect for Dawson.

They'd played the typical twin switcharoo games throughout most of their youth, trying to fool their parents (always failing with their mom where they were a little more successful with their father), their teachers and schoolmates.

Caution drew the line when it came to girlfriends, whereas Dawson had no such qualms about seducing a girl on whom his brother had his eye, or with whom his brother might have been involved. Dawson thought everyone and anyone fair game.

Always, Caution would find out about his brother's antics after the fact, once Dawson had gone out with the girl and acted a fool. Caution would invariably get a call the next day, if not a few days or week later, and get royally cursed out and/or hung up on for some ungentlemanly behavior he hadn't committed.

Each time Caution went to Dawson furious, and just as often their mother would chastise him for letting a girl come between him and his brother.

"He's your blood, Caution, the only brother you have. Girls come and go, but Dawson will be your brother for life. You're not going to let a woman come between you two, are you?"

His mother always put such an emphasis on "woman," as if it were a dirty word (much the way Grampa Brody referred to her), that Caution always wound up feeling foolish and unreasonable right before apologizing to and forgiving his brother.

Until Caitlyn Morrow.

Caitlyn had been a sophomore majoring in business at St. John's University when they had met. Unlike most of the girls initially attracted to Caution's gentle and protective nature but who ultimately fell for and later regretted their attraction to his "bad boy" brother, Caitlyn had eyes only for Caution, even after meeting his brother.

Inseparable throughout their final two years of college, Caution and Caitlyn got engaged and had plans to marry once they graduated.

Dawson's reaction upon seeing the ring had been typical cynicism, scoffing at his brother's too-soft heart and willingly relinquishing his balls instead of just hitting it and quitting.

"That's your style, Daw, not mine."

But Dawson refused to leave the discussion at that, and set out to prove that Caitlyn wasn't the girl she made herself out to be, the innocent, one-man woman his brother thought she was.

Remembering it now twisted his heart in his chest so hard that Caution thought he was experiencing the betrayal fresh.

He knew now the disloyalty had not been Caitlyn's but his brother's. Several busted knuckles and a sound reprimand from his mother later, Caution realized he'd been too blind with jealousy, taking his brother's words over Caitlyn's, susceptible to his mother's twisted logic, thus losing his fiancée in the bargain.

Caitlyn left New York for parts unknown soon after their break-up and only much later did Caution find out he'd lost more than just the woman he loved when word of Caitlyn's miscarriage reached him through a mutual acquaintance.

His reaction ran the gamut from shock, to grief, and finally relief that he wouldn't have to live with having fathered a baby with a woman who wanted nothing at all to do with him or his family, indeed a woman who wished them all dead.

The child could have been Dawson's or his, Caution had no way of knowing. He often wondered if Caitlyn had really miscarried or aborted rather than face either him or Dawson with her news. Rather than face her child's father and uncle, both of whom she had slept with.

* * * *

"Are you okay, Caution?"

He turned to her, dazed, surprised to hear her voice.

"Okay" didn't begin to encompass what he was feeling. He didn't think he'd ever be okay again. But then he'd thought that after his mother killed his father.

Things changed, people healed, recovered—even from the loss of a father, a fiancée, a baby, a wife. Others had lost so much more than he had, and he'd be a weakling to sweat the little things he'd forfeited. He had no choice but to go on. There was Tayte to think about, Tayte to take care of and raise. Sometimes, she seemed the *only* reason for him to go on from day to day.

And Dara.

"No one's come out about Dawson's condition yet?"

She shook her head and Caution swallowed hard and closed his eyes, regulating his breathing, his heart rate, attuning to his brother.

He wasn't dead, Caution knew that much, but he'd lost a lot of blood from the wound. A shoulder wound, a gaping hole. Fire-hot at the site as they extracted the bullet, infection a major concern, but Caution didn't think the injury fatal.

He went back to the sofa, sat down, bowed his head, folded his hands, and wondered why he cared so much when it was obvious his brother couldn't care less about anyone but himself. Even Caution ran dead last to the big things for Dawson: adventure, excitement, money, women—and not necessarily in that order.

He turned to Dara, his tongue prepared to defend his blood. His heart wasn't in it, pounding now with the enormity of what Dawson had done, and the recognition that his blood was now lost to him forever. There was no way to go back, no way to recapture those brief moments when two boys in their super hero pjs could hug each other in the dark and hope for the best by daylight. They were both too far-gone, too old to rely on the simple, the black-and-white, their lives askew by deep-seated desires, resentment, and wishes.

"Are *you* okay?" Caution blurted, turning to Dara on the sofa, seeing her as if for the first time since they'd arrived.

He hadn't thought twice about the possibility of losing her, that she could have just as easily been killed as he could have. More than concern for his own safety, he thought about what life would have been like had he lost her.

Impossible. Unbearable. Unimaginable.

"I'm fine."

She hadn't left him. She'd stayed with him from his house, to the hospital, and finally, to the waiting room, patient and sympathetic, her bounty hunter duties put on the back burner, so unlike Dara Kelly, and yet... Caution opened his mouth to apologize, to thank her, wanting to say so much, but said nothing for a long moment until he realized Dawson owed her his life. And so did he.

"You saved his life," he murmured, watching her blush.

"I wouldn't go that far."

"I would." He'd seen the look in that big bruiser's eyes, the murderous glint, as if he'd been ready to take out all three of them and Roscoe in the basement too if need be.

Caution jerked his head toward the door behind where the other bounty hunter was being treated for a gunshot wound to an arm and leg. "Friend of yours?" He'd had no idea how dead-on Dara's aim was, how efficient she was with a firearm until he'd seen her in action a few hours ago. Put Grampa Brody and his brother to shame.

Dara shook her head now. "No friend of mine."

"Enemy?"

"Something like that."

She was playing it close to the vest. Fine. Probably didn't want to worry him, but she didn't know he worried anyway. Especially when he realized that Tarrent guy could have shot her in the back without blinking and the only thing that had saved her was her

own quick reactions and, ironically, Dawson's wild shooting.

"You don't have to stick around, Dare. I know you've got business to take care of."

"Whatever business I have to take care of is here. With you."

He remembered that she'd wanted to tell him something before, but was interrupted twice earlier in the day. He knew that had he asked her now, she'd feign amnesia or evade the subject altogether. Whatever her secret was, he knew it was important. Dara didn't make a big deal out of small things. She barely made a big deal out of what would be a big deal to most people.

Caution thought she must have been rubbing off.

When he'd called Brody upon arriving at the hospital to let him know what was going on, he'd spent the better part of the conversation trying to calm down his grandfather, the man ready to rush over with Tayte in tow and see what that Black Amazon—his term of endearment for Dara—had done to his grandboys. After several minutes, Caution had finally convinced the old man that he was okay, and said he would call back as soon as he had word on Dawson's condition.

Calling his mother had been a different experience altogether, much less successful, and Caution now anxiously awaited her arrival, preparing for the worst.

"I thought you convinced Brody not to come."

Caution silently looked at her, prompting.

"You keep watching the elevators like you're expecting someone."

"My moth—"

"There you are!"

Caution frowned as his mother got out of the middle elevator and stalked across the plush plum carpeting from the elevator bank to where he and Dara were sitting.

Reina stopped just in front of Dara, slammed her fists on her hips and looked her up and down before exploding. "I should have known you'd be at the bottom of this!"

Dara arched a brow. "I beg your pardon?"

Reina didn't even bother to answer, and turned to Caution as if for an explanation.

"Where is he?"

"He's still in surgery."

"How badly was he hurt?"

"I don't think it's that serious. He was hit in the shoulder."

"Don't try to downplay what your girlfriend did!"

"Mom, why don't you sit down and relax?" Caution motioned her to the space between him and Dara, thought the gap more than adequate for his petite mother, nonetheless shocked when she folded her arms across her bosom and tapped a foot

against the linoleum floor.

"I refuse to sit next to the woman who shot *m'ijo*."

"Your *hijo* was a fugitive from the law." Dara gritted her teeth. "Besides, I didn't shoot him."

"Really? Well, I'd like to know who did."

"Mom—"

"That would be me." Tarrent sidled over from the room across the hall, grinning broadly as he glanced down at Caution's mother.

Caution smiled himself when he watched the inimitable Reina Gonzalez-Foster stand her ground, glaring up at Mr. Tarrent without flinching. All those years of standing up to Grampa Brody were finally paying off.

"And you would be?"

"Randall Tarrent. Fugitive Recovery Agent."

Reina sniffed, ignoring the hand Tarrent proffered. "A bounty hunter."

"Six in one hand, Ma'am."

"Don't 'Ma'am' me." She glared from Tarrent to Dara who'd stood as soon as her rival had joined their little group sporting a sling on his right arm. "I don't believe you two had to gang up like a lynch mob to bring in *m'ijo*. He's not a desperate, hardened criminal."

Caution caught his mother by the shoulders and directed her to the sofa where she now sat and glared up at him.

"How can you associate with a...with a woman like *this*?"

He wished he could tell her how easy it was to be with Dara Kelly. Easy and hard. He realized now what his father must have gone through all those years with his mother.

"How's that brother of yours making out?" Tarrent asked.

"Still in surgery."

Tarrent stared at him long and hard as if trying to decide whether or not he had bagged the correct twin, finally grinning as he turned to Dara. "If you think we're splitting that bounty, you've got another think coming."

Dara silently gave him the finger and turned her back. She paused at Caution's side, squeezed his shoulder before passing him to go down the hall.

Caution turned and gave her what he hoped was his most appealing look, hoping she'd get the message and wouldn't leave him alone with his mother and Tarrent.

"I'll be right back," she whispered, as if this could do the trick.

Caution let a few moments pass before he followed and caught up with Dara several minutes later in the hospital lobby, anxious to leave and take her with him.

"But what about your moth—?"

"She got here on her own, she can get home the same way."

Dara didn't question him further, though he could see the questions brewing and decided not to entertain her curiosity.

Caution hadn't wanted to go home, vivid reminders of what had happened to his brother there—etched into the walls, and staining the carpets—awaiting him. He admitted to Dara that he didn't want to be alone, especially not in his house. He hadn't cared how it sounded, and finagled a ride to her apartment.

They arrived at Dara's close to dawn, and once there, Caution felt more like a stranger in alien surroundings than a man in his lover's apartment. He stood in the middle of the living room, hands jammed in his jeans pockets, the image of his brother—pale, sullen, handcuffed to the bed, but alive and well—an unpleasant reminder of his part in the evening's events.

"You hungry?" He smiled at her as she headed to the kitchen and rubbed his stomach. "The pizza's still sitting here from earlier."

"You hardly ate anything."

He walked over and sat on the barstool, folded his hands on the Formica counter in front of him. "Don't let me stop you from eating."

She popped her head out of the fridge, smiling sheepishly. "I eat when I'm nervous."

"And what would you have to be nervous about now? Shootout at Foster's Corral has long since past."

Dara chuckled and sat down opposite him, taking a gulp from a bottle of Yoo-Hoo as she handed him a bottle of his own, which he ignored.

"Want something stronger?"

"That's the second time you've asked me that today. Are you trying to tell me something?"

Dara shrugged. "No, just figured all adults aren't as into the chocolate thing as I am."

"I don't drink."

"First time for everything."

"Not this." Caution scooped up the bottle and took a deep swig before replacing it on the counter and bowing at the waist. "Satisfied?"

"I'd be more satisfied if you told me what's bothering you."

"Besides my brother lying in the hospital under house arrest and blood stains and bullet holes riddling my house? Everything's peachy keen."

"He brought it on himself."

"It doesn't make me feel any better about his...apprehension."

"What would?" Dara came out of the kitchen, sidled behind him and gently

massaged his shoulders before leaning close to whisper, "Does this?"

He groaned, muscles tensing more beneath her ministrations, rather than relaxing. And he knew exactly why he was so wound up. Nothing had changed since earlier. If anything, he wanted her more. Maybe she was right, and he had a thing about guns. Or more importantly, a thing about women who could handle guns so expertly. She had never been more sexy to him than when she'd wielded that Glock and fired off a couple of rounds at that rival bounty hunter, had never turned him on so much as when she'd drawn her weapon on and handcuffed *him* in his own house. Maybe he was into BDSM and didn't even know it. He was certainly drawn to Dara in a mean way, and had been from the very beginning.

Was it her take-control persona or the requisite paraphernalia of her profession that had him so hard when he was around her?

Caution wanted to tell her not to stop what she was doing, but couldn't accomplish it and turned to pull her in his arms instead. He kissed the top of her head, her cheeks, her neck—lingered here for a long breathless moment, hovering over her cleavage—but stayed away from her mouth or he'd have been lost. And he didn't want to lose himself in anything at this moment except her company, the comforting sound of her heart beating close to him. That was all.

He pulled back, took her hand and led her to the sofa where they sat down.

Dara must have sensed his mood, for she said nothing, just followed his lead, silently sitting beside him as he stretched out on her sofa and rested his head in her lap. She forked her hand through his rich jet-black waves, cradled the base of his skull with one hand, and continued her light massage as he closed his eyes.

Caution muttered, "I don't want to dream alone tonight."

* * * *

Sam didn't know what she was doing, or why, only that she enjoyed it more than was probably wise. She immersed herself in the silken texture of his hair, his tangy male musk wafting up to her, the hard weight of his upper body on her thighs as he cuddled close, his light breathing tickling just below her belly button as he turned into her body.

She could have stayed this way forever and never complained except for having to get up to handle bodily functions. And even with the pressure on her bladder screaming for release, she was reluctant to get up, reluctant to break the spell and risk his not being in her apartment when she got out of the bathroom. Like a dream, he'd have disappeared.

Sam risked losing the warmth and lifted his head as gently as possible, trying not to disturb his exhausted sleep. She stood, lingering by the couch for a moment to watch him sleep, and caught the impossibly long lashes curled against high chiseled cheeks, the picture of his female complement—tiny, copper-brown, beautiful and spirited—in Reina Foster, immediately coming to mind. She didn't know what Caution and Dawson's father looked like, but as she was able to see Caution in Tayte, she could see the sons in their mother Reina, and vice-versa.

The idea that until last night, she had never met her husband's mother, had barely

known a family existed beyond a peripheral haze of "estrangement," hammered home the ignorant egotistical box to which she had relegated her previous life.

How selfish could she have been to not have shown an interest in Dawson's family?

Sam returned from the bathroom, but rather than sit on the sofa, she took a seat in the recliner catty-corner, pulling up her legs and tucking her bare feet beneath her as she watched Caution from a safe distance and wondered about the rancor between his mother and Dara.

Was there *anyone* in Caution's life who didn't dislike Dara Kelly? God, except for Diego and maybe Ralphie, the woman seemed universally disliked by men and women alike. Caution didn't count; he wanted her, liked her body. But did he like *her*? Did anyone?

Feeling sorry for herself wasn't the answer, and she knew she wasn't being fair to Dara. The woman wasn't all bad; no one was. And Caution must have found something likable in her to stick with her all this time. Sam didn't think he'd keep the woman in his life, around his young daughter, if he hadn't found one redeeming quality within Dara.

"He's a good man."

Sam didn't even start, just turned to see Dara standing beside the recliner, almost accustomed to the woman sneaking up on her when she least expected it. She stood and headed for the master bedroom, Dara on her heels. "You're talking about Caution, I presume?"

"Who else?" Dara sat down on the bed, crossed her leg over the opposite thigh, and glanced up at Sam as if cueing the younger woman to join her.

Sam finally took a seat.

Caution was more than a good man and he was getting under her skin in dangerous ways—innocently, naturally, warmly—luring her into the fantasy of what life would be like with him.

She couldn't remember the last time she had just sat with a man she was so attracted to and done nothing but watched him sleep. Couldn't believe she'd done it for the last few hours with no signs of tiring or boredom.

"How long have you been waiting to get me alone so you could extol his virtues?"

Dara gaped, and Sam laughed, glad to finally catch the older woman off-guard. With victories so few and far between, she had to enjoy them while she could.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to take his old lady for too long," Dara segued.

Sam blurted, "Why doesn't she like you?"

"Why is the sky blue? She just doesn't. I'll live."

Sam gave her an ironic look that made Dara smile.

"Okay, maybe not, but she's not the one who killed me."

"I don't understand how that...pig, for want of a better word, could look you in

the face. How he could—?"

"He's a murderer. He doesn't have too many ethical dilemmas to wrestle with from the beginning. Looking you or me in the face is the least of his worries."

"So what now?"

"You mean all that stuff with Dawson's bounty?"

Sam nodded.

"Are you going to split it?"

"Not according to Mr. Tarrent."

Dara smiled. "You'll work it all out. But the rest of it..."

"His trying to kill you?"

"He's going to try again, you can believe that. We're just lucky he didn't have an opportunity tonight. If he thought he could have gotten away with it, he would have tried."

"What am I supposed to do? Wait for his next attempt?"

"You lay low, watch your back, and do your job."

"All at the same time?"

Dara chuckled. "You'll be fine."

"I'm glad you have such faith in my abilities."

"You did good tonight."

"A compliment? I'm moving up in the world."

"Don't get a swelled head."

Sam laughed, then noticed the other woman's serious look and paused. "What?"

"Thanks, Sam," Dara murmured.

"For what?"

"For saving my...for saving Caution."

Sam realized she'd had as much to lose tonight as anyone had, maybe more.

She could have lost Caution.

CHAPTER 13

Michael paced back and forth several times before finally coming to a stop in front of Gabriel sitting serenely on a makeshift sofa of clouds, legs swinging out as She watched the action below. "Aren't You the least bit worried about her?"

Gabriel glanced up at Him, a complacent smile on Her face. "There is no need to worry."

"I beg to differ."

"She did exactly what she was supposed to do. She succeeded, and they all made it out of the situation alive and well."

"Just barely."

"They made it," Gabriel insisted.

"For now."

"For now is what is important, what We are dealing with. We cannot control the future or what they do, only give them little nudges and the tools they need to reach their destiny."

"I do not like it."

"What is it about the situation You find so unpalatable?"

"Everything!" Michael threw up His arms in frustration. It was not an emotion He was accustomed to feeling. "He could have been killed. Then where would His precious plan be?"

"But he did not die. And neither did she."

"They came close. Too close for comfort."

"Everything worked out for the best."

Michael folded His hands behind His back, coming to a stop in front of Gabriel

once more before finally sitting down beside Her. "How can You be so calm?"

"Because, dear Michael, I have faith."

"Hmph." There was a time when He had had faith too. Now He wondered when and where He had lost it. Could it have been helplessly witnessing the Twin Towers topple? No, His faith had been dwindling far longer than that, and for centuries—so much unnecessary death and strife, so much human loss. And at the hands of other humans, that is what made the loss so tragic. Oh, certainly fate and His plans played a large part in who lived and who died and when. But as He himself had pointed out to Gabriel, there was always a choice. Humans were creatures of choice. And many times they did not make the right ones, veering off the path that He had chosen for them and wreaking havoc on the planet and each other.

But then there were those brief moments, those rare fragments of time—watching a first-time father like Caution hold his newborn close, wide-eyed awe etched on his face as if he held the missing piece that would make his life whole and meaningful—when Michael thought the human race would actually make it.

He and Gabriel certainly had the same notions of hope.

She patted His leg as if reading His mind and trying to steer it back on course. "Everything is going to be all right, Michael. They will be fine."

* * * *

She had not known that coming home would be so trying for her. Perhaps if she had been herself, in her own body, she would have been comfortable walking up to the front door of her parents' house where she had spent the better part of her short life trying their patience in teenage rebellion.

As it was, Sam found herself lost in a sea of familiarity.

The tree on the front lawn where she had carved her and her first beau's names—*Keith and Sam, forever*—a glaring reminder of blissful nine-year-old ignorance and life's transience. The large oak out back where she'd broken her left arm falling out of the top where her father, according to her mother, had been "foolish enough to build a tree house." The red front door, which had always been a source of pride to her mom and dad, which Sam had only wanted to see from the rearview mirror of a speeding car or motorcycle as she left home for more exciting, parentless ventures.

Now all she wanted to do was knock, be welcomed in with the open arms of her mother and told that everything was going to be okay, but she knew that wasn't possible.

Riding through town on Dara's electric-purple and lime-green Ducati, she might as well have been as much a ghost as Dara for all the recognition she'd received. Sure, the sleek bike and its mysterious rider drew attention—as out of place in the tree-lined enclave as a Russian tank rolling down Forty-Second Street and Broadway—but not a soul recognized her once she parked it and pulled off her helmet.

Not Mr. Schwartz the town butcher by whom her mother swore for the best in fresh deli meat and cheeses. Not her high school chemistry teacher, Ms. Fromme, at Hollenbeck where Sam had caused more than a few mishaps, mixing two or more

chemicals that didn't belong in the same zip code, much less a beaker in an all girls' private school. Not any of the town or mall regulars where and with whom she used to while away the days shopping, shooting the breeze and occasionally snatching an illicit toke of a joint.

To these people and everyone else Sam might have known in her youth and previous incarnation, Dara Kelly was a non-entity, an eccentric Black woman, a harmless curiosity and anomaly passing through, but nothing more.

Would her parents be just as blind, unable to see through the façade?

Distinguishing one's twins from each other was one thing. Singling out one's infant in a sea of interchangeable infants in a nursery was another. But recognizing your child's soul in another body was something entirely different. Would her mother, who knew her better than anyone else on the planet, be up to the task? Did she even have the guts to march up the walkway to the house to tempt fate and test her parents?

Sam didn't know what troubled her more: the thought that her mother would recognize her and welcome her, no questions asked, or that she'd recognize her and turn her away in horror. The third option was a little less painful to bear, but no less realistic: that her mom wouldn't recognize her at all and would call the cops on her for trespassing.

"Do you need some help, ma'am?"

A familiar baritone pulled her out of her reverie when the squad car pulling up behind her hadn't rated a blimp on her radar screen. Not until she heard the voice did she think about the sight she made: a Black woman in biker gear, standing out front and staring intently at an affluent house of White owners. She imagined what had been going through the neighbors' minds—*Oh no, there goes the neighborhood*—right before one of them had picked up the phone to dial those universal three digits and report a potential burglar casing her next job.

Sam turned around slowly, carefully forming her next words in her mind before all reason left her when she recognized the Nassau County police officer getting out of the car and making his way towards her on the sidewalk. "Joshua?" she blurted.

He paused, frowning as he reflexively put his right hand on the butt of the gun in his hip holster. "Do I know you, ma'am?"

Did Dara look that old to him? Was he being sarcastic, or just being courteous?

Sheesh, she was standing not five feet away from a past flame, a man with whom she'd shared some of her sexiest escapades, and who now didn't know her from a prostitute plying her trade on the street. And all she could think about was whether or not she looked old to him.

"Ma'am?"

Sam focused on his face—the blue eyes in which she used to so easily lose herself, the black hair through which she used to happily plow her fingers, the full lips in which she used to hedonistically indulge—and said, "Joshua, we need to talk."

This drew out an even deeper frown across his finely chiseled features before he took a step forward and rested a hand on her arm. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave

the premises unless you have some business here with the—"

"Taylors. They're...old friends."

"I doubt that."

Sam leaned to one side and slammed her free fist on her hip, with only a vague idea of how threatening and inappropriate she was acting. "Oh really? Why is that?"

"I don't want to take you in, ma'am, unless you make it necessary." He guided her away from the house, over to his squad car. "I'm not going to have to take you in now, am I?"

"That might be a good idea, if it's the only way I can talk to you."

"I don't understand what you think you and I need to talk about, ma'am."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop calling me 'ma'am', Josh."

He glared at her as he opened the back door. "I'm going to have to ask you to come with me, ma'am."

"Sure thing." Sam motioned to get into the car when he gently caught her by an arm.

"I'll have to frisk you."

She ground her teeth, wondering if he'd have to frisk her if she weren't now Black. She quickly complied, placing her hands on the roof of his car and spreading her legs, telling herself he was only doing his job.

He was pretty thorough, pausing at the bulge under her left arm, then calmly reaching around her to remove the Glock from her shoulder holster.

"I have a license to carry that."

"I'm sure you do."

"Really. I'm a fugitive recovery agent. You can check my wallet."

He didn't need much prompting and reached into her inside leather jacket pocket to pull out her wallet.

Sam knew the exact moment when he saw her badge, license and identification that confirmed what she said. She watched his blue eyes widen just enough for someone close to him to know that he was mildly shocked.

Josh handed her back her gun and wallet, stepped back, arms folded across his chest as he eyed her with what Sam could only identify as curiosity and a new-found respect.

She hoped she wouldn't bust his bubble.

"Want to tell me why you're casing the Taylors' home, Ms. Kelly?"

"I told you, I'm a friend of the family."

"Look, they've been through enough in the last few months. They don't need crackpots rolling up on them to pick at raw—"

"I'm hardly a crackpot."

"Who are you?"

"I knew Samantha. We used to be...friends."

He looked at her skeptically.

"Look Josh, can we go somewhere to talk?"

"I suppose Sam told you about me and that's why you know my name?"

She almost lied and said she'd read it from his nameplate, but realized he only had a first initial and last name there. "Something like that," Sam said, and watched as he struggled with his personal and professional interest. A little of both finally won.

"Are you here about Sam's husband?"

"Dawson Foster."

"I heard he was already apprehended."

"I know. I was the one who apprehended him."

She saw his eyes light with unmasked reverence and appreciation, having never felt as old and unworthy as she did right then beneath his innocent and untested twenty-three-year-old gaze.

What would he say when she told him the truth?

Sam realized with the thought that she had already decided to tell him her secret. She needed to tell someone, the mystery was weighing too heavily to carry alone.

"When does your shift end, Joshua?"

He arched a brow, said nothing.

"If you have a mind to meet, I'm staying at the Holiday Inn just outside of town. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have." She handed him a business card, and stared at him a long, silent moment before she asked, "Am I free to go?"

"As a bird, Ms. Kelly."

* * * *

Sam paced the carpeted floor until she was sure she'd wear a hole clean through to the wood, fully expecting, if not Joshua, then Dara to show up any minute. It was the woman's M.O. after all, showing up when Sam least expected or needed her.

Hmm, she should amend that last part. Maybe she did need Dara, more than she wanted to admit. The bounty hunter was older, wiser, tough and used to dealing with reversal and life on the fly. And although she had been gruff in delivering it, her advice was usually pretty sound.

Sam didn't want to admit that she *wanted* Dara to show up—keep her company, talk her out of her latest planned folly—but not admitting the want would have made her a liar.

Had the older woman given up on her? Had They taken her back, leaving Sam to

sink or swim the rest of the way on her own? Either prospect sent a chill of abandonment through Sam's bones, leaving her as cold and isolated as she'd felt that first time Dawson struck her.

Like many modern young couples they had fought about money, but Sam's objections came not with a limited supply, but Dawson's source of seemingly unlimited funds. He was so polished and well-spoken it had never occurred to her that he was dealing in something illegal. Then she thought of her favorite TV shows and movies—*To Catch a Thief*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*—that highlighted the antics of some of the most urbane and well-spoken thieves around, and saw the similarities between the media-hyped playboy thieves and her husband.

To top things off, she'd soon found evidence of his infidelities right on the heels of discovering that not all of her husband's business dealings were on the up and up.

Their marriage had barely been seven months old, and Sam decided she wouldn't stick around for an anniversary if Dawson didn't clean up his act.

When she approached him with her knowledge of at least one of his liaisons—some young dancer predictably named "Lolita" at one of the clubs where he did business—he'd first tried to mollify her with the expected assurances that she was the only woman in his life. Professions of love and assurances quickly turned into impatience at her skepticism, until even impatience eventually gave way to anger and finally violence.

To say she was shocked by his backhand would have been an understatement, but it did nothing to deter her from her course, and only intensified her resolve to make a change. She would just have to take a less confrontational route.

Sam wished that the latter route had been in her. Had she been less defiant—even smart enough not to challenge a man who had already proven by his actions that he cared little for her emotional or physical well-being—she might still be alive and safe somewhere, nursing a baby at her breast, but far away from its father.

To whom would They have given Dara's body? Sam wondered. Or was she arrogant enough to believe that had she changed her actions, moved quicker to leave Dawson, that she would have been *allowed* escape? That he wouldn't have eventually come after her to claim what was his and fulfill her destiny in another manner?

One reality. An alternate reality.

Was her reality destined to end a violent death at some vengeful man's hand? Her husband, Tarrent...Caution?

Sam shook her head at the last. She couldn't imagine anything that would bring Caution to the same violence as his brother.

But she'd been wrong before.

Sam paused in her pacing long enough to glance at her watch, thinking that her powers of persuasion weren't as powerful as she'd thought. Or perhaps she hadn't piqued Joshua's curiosity enough for him to come and find out more about the enigmatic Black woman who'd cruised into his town to stir up trouble.

She went to the window and pulled aside the heavy drapes, looking for a sign that her cryptic parting had gotten the best of her ex and he was on his way into the building. She wanted to think she had gotten to him as much as his unlikely appearance and profession had gotten to her.

Never in her wildest dreams would Sam have thought Josh Brennan capable of a career in law enforcement, as she was so used to seeing him bend the law. The last she had heard anything about him, somewhere in her sophomore year of college, he had given up on academia, dropped out of high school and left town. Somewhere along the line, he must have gone back to school and gotten his act together.

Sam wondered what had scared him straight.

The phone on the night stand rung, and she froze in the middle of the room before rushing over to answer it. "Hello."

"Ms. Kelly?"

God, did that sound odd to her ears—the title of formality, but especially the name. "Yes, this is she."

"This is Joshua Brennan. I'm downstairs in the lobby."

She was tempted to tease him, to ask him what he was afraid she'd do to him if he came up to her room, but she realized this wasn't the same Josh she'd dealt with years ago. This Josh was more mature, more serious...distant.

Again, she wondered what had changed him.

"Would you like me to come down to meet you?"

"I'd appreciate that."

She thought he'd sighed on the other end before speaking, as if he'd been holding his breath, anticipating opposition. "I'll see you in a few then," Sam said and grabbed her jacket from the foot of the bed before hurrying out the door.

* * * *

Before seeing him, hearing his voice, Sam hadn't fully realized why she'd come home. She'd thought she'd wanted to get away from Caution and Dara's situation in New York. But now she knew that hadn't been all, that she'd also been starved for home, needed to see and talk to someone who knew her before there'd been a Dawson Foster, or Dara and Caution. She needed someone who wasn't out to get her and see her dead.

Joshua Brennan fit the bill perfectly.

From the moment she arrived in the lobby to see him leaning both elbows back on the hotel front desk—comfortably clad in civilian gear blue jeans, rugby shirt and cross-trainers—Sam sensed his vigilance. He was wary of the bounty hunter who'd addressed him so familiarly and claimed a friendship with a woman from his past.

He sat across from her now in an anonymous diner a few blocks away from the hotel, face buried in his menu, for the moment intently ignoring her.

"How did the rest of your day go?" Sam asked. Joshua arched a brow. "Your

shift? After you released me?"

"Pretty uneventful."

"And you like that?"

He lowered his menu to stare at her. "You sound surprised."

Sam shrugged. How could she mention that she knew a wilder, rougher side to him without giving herself away, even though this was her purpose in coming? Even though she wanted a sympathetic ear? "You don't strike me as the Mayberry type." She grinned and he smiled in response, for the first time since she had seen him today. It reminded Sam of how beautiful a man he was, how sexy.

What was she thinking? She hadn't come here to hunt up an old flame and flirt with him.

Had she?

"It's not that bad," Josh murmured.

"Bad enough."

He didn't say anything, just gave the waitress his order when the young girl came over, letting Sam order for herself as he leaned his elbows on the table and peered at her.

A tremor scudded down her spine at his intent look. It wasn't a suspicious cop's gaze, but a man-interested-in-a-woman gaze and Sam didn't know which was worse. Didn't know which was more dangerous to her bewildered and wanting psyche.

Was it possible something in him recognized and was drawn to her? Or was he just attracted to Dara?

Strangely jealous at the latter thought, Sam cleared her throat. "May I ask why you're staring?" He shrugged, sat back in his chair. "You remind me of this girl I used to know."

Her heart hurried at the possibility of who he meant. "Is that so?"

Joshua nodded, cracking another smile. "She was a restless soul too."

"Was? She's not anymore?"

"Not anymore."

She watched him lower his eyes and fiddle with the napkins in the napkin holder on the table. She wanted to push him but decided not yet, at least not too hard. "So, you think I'm restless?"

"You have wanderlust."

Sam raised her eyebrows at his insight, and thought that maybe she wouldn't have to say a word to him about who she really was and that he'd guess. But her life hadn't been that easy so far. "Do I look anything like her? This girl you used to know?"

"Oh no, not at all!"

Sam raised her eyebrows. "Should I be insulted or flattered?"

"Neither actually. You're two totally different women, attractive in different ways."

"Really?" Now Sam leaned forward, her elbows on the table. "Tell me more." He shrugged, stirring his coffee before taking a sip and putting his cup back on the table. Sam knew he was stalling and tried to push him along. "Is she the reason you became a cop?" She didn't know why she said it, but had a feeling it was the right thing to mention, especially when she saw the pained look spring into Josh's eyes.

Not for the first time, she noticed how young he looked, how much older she felt than him. She wondered if she had ever looked as wide-eyed as Josh, as trusting, and she thought she understood now why Dara treated her like such an inexperienced fledgling who had been pushed out of the nest too soon.

"You never told me how it is you know the Taylors. Or why you wanted to talk to me," Josh segued.

Sam smiled. She didn't want to scare him off, so she tried to go along, biding her time. "Or how I know your name."

"That too."

"I'm sure you checked me out already, to see if I was on the up and up?"

"You know I did."

The waitress arrived with their food, setting their respective orders in front of them and quickly departing, leaving Sam to tell her tale.

"You're probably still going to have a hard time believing what I have to tell you." Sam leaned back in her seat, averted her eyes and picked up her fork to pick at the food that suddenly didn't look so appetizing on her plate. Now that the moment was upon her and there didn't seem to be any face-saving interruptions on the horizon, she didn't know how to tell him.

"I have a pretty open mind," Joshua assured her.

"Not this open."

"Try me."

"I don't just know the Taylors, Joshua. I know you."

Josh sat back in his seat, shaking his head, a grin slowly spreading across his face. "I doubt that. I'd certainly remember someone like you."

"You remember taking Sam to the makeshift firing range on your first date?"

He nodded.

"She thought it was the best date she ever had."

"How close were you two?"

"I lied about that too. I didn't know Sam."

"I didn't think you did."

"At least not before she died."

Joshua frowned.

"I didn't know Sam, because...I am Sam."

"And when does Allen Funt come from out of the kitchen?"

"I'm serious, Josh." She reached across the table to grab his hands, stared in his eyes, and tried to will him to see the truth, to believe her.

She didn't know if in the end her look unnerved or convinced him, only that he snatched his hands out of hers after several long moments and stumbled out of his chair to his feet.

"Joshua?"

He reached into his wallet, extracted several bills and threw them down on the table before backing away. "I was right the first time. You are a crackpot."

"Please don't go."

He turned and left the restaurant.

Sam stood and followed, finally catching up to him in the parking lot just as he was getting into the driver's seat of his SUV. She grabbed the door handle, and opened the door. "Joshua, please don't leave until you hear what I have to say."

"You don't have anything to say to me that I want to hear." He looked at her pointedly until she released the door and allowed him to slam it shut.

But Sam wasn't finished, and she reached through the open window and cupped his chin. "We got matching tattoos on our second date, a Celtic pattern on the back of our shoulders. Yours on the left, mine on the right."

He gawked at her, gripping the steering wheel as if it could save him from the ravings of the mad woman at his window.

"Please Josh. Don't leave until you hear what I have to say." He *had* to believe her. She'd paid dearly for getting that tattoo once her parents had finally caught sight of it, grounded from her junior prom, under house arrest for most of the summer that followed.

Josh unlocked the doors and murmured, "Get in before I change my mind."

CHAPTER 14

Joshua worked his jaw muscles, staring straight ahead as he fingered the burgundy velvet jewelry box he and Sam had buried off road five years ago; the box that Sam had just led him to and unearthed.

She sat in the passenger seat beside him, anxiously waiting for the truth of her words to sink in, for the proof he held in his hands to register. She could only imagine what stormy thoughts had been going through his mind between the lengthy silence and her admission.

They'd been going together close to eight months when he'd first brought her out here—optimistic, playful, secretive and wanting her to help him "bury something." He'd told her as he pulled the box out of his pocket and showed her its content, that the necklaces—a pair of Celtic Love Knots duplicating their matching tattoos—were a symbol of their commitment. As solid and everlasting as the time it took either of them to come back here to dig them up.

"Under the best circumstances I'd like for both of us to come out and unbury them together. Once we're sure that we want to be together, once we know..."

Sam was sure that these current circumstances were not what Joshua had envisioned.

At seventeen he'd been more serious, sure and hopeful about them, their longevity, than she'd ever been. She had only gone along for the wild ride and experience this side of a Hell's Angel that her biker boy could provide her with.

She hadn't deserved him, and had used going away to college as an excuse to leave him and end them, when Joshua had thought he still had a shot at their winding up together.

"How did you know where to find these?" he finally whispered.

"I told you how."

He turned on her, blue eyes flinty. "I know what you told me and there's no way you could have known unless Sam told you."

"Or unless I'm telling the truth."

"Yeah, right." He scoffed.

"Just say you don't believe me, Josh. But don't call me a liar."

He caught her by the shoulders. "What you're saying can't be true, so you have to be a liar. Because if you're not, then that means you're...you're—"

"Sam."

"No," he rasped.

"I know it's difficult to believe. But it's true. I wouldn't have come all this way otherwise."

"Why did you come? To rub my emotions raw?"

"I needed to see someone who knew me. Talk to someone—"

"That's why you were standing in front of the Taylors'."

Sam nodded. "I didn't have the nerve to go up to the house and talk to them."

"Because they wouldn't have believed you any more than I do."

"Look at me, Josh. Look at that box. Can you honestly say you don't believe me?"

He quietly opened the box and sat staring at the jewelry cushioned against the velvet back. Finally, he reached inside and removed one before turning to her again. "I can't honestly say anything about any of this." He looked at her. "Why me?"

"I trust you."

"Should I be honored?"

"Be honored. Don't believe me. I don't know what else to tell you."

"Why you really came."

"I told you. I needed to see someone who knew me. You just happened along at the right moment."

"You mean you had no idea I was a cop in town?"

"None whatsoever. It really was a chance meeting. It's not exactly the sort of profession I would have expected to find you in."

He grinned. "People change."

"So I see."

"Speaking of change..." He let the rest of his sentence hang as he gave her the once-over.

"I don't know how to explain what's happened to me, but it has."

"And someone's out to kill you? Kill this Dara Kelly?"

Sam nodded. "Only she's already dead and a ghost, and I'm in her body."

"Uh-huh."

"You still don't believe me."

"I don't see where I have much of a choice." Josh caressed the Celtic design as if trying to glean strength from its reputed mysticism. "I never told anyone else about this place, about the box. And if Sam didn't tell anyone, didn't tell you, then I have to believe that you're Sam."

"See, that wasn't so hard."

"I just won't mention this incident on my next psych evaluation."

Sam chuckled as she clapped him on the shoulder. "As long as you know the truth."

He nodded, reached a hand out to caress her face, blue eyes taking in her onyx ones, gaze wide with awe. "So beautiful."

"I'll tell Dara you said so."

"Are you jealous?"

"I don't have any right to be."

"You have every right." He stared at her, took one of her hands in his. "I never stopped loving you, Sam."

"Josh, I—"

"I'm not fishing for reciprocity." He smiled. "We never would have made it back then. I had things to work out and you...you already knew what you wanted, where you were going."

"I thought I did."

"Dawson?"

"He was obviously a mistake, and not what I needed."

"I wish I could have been there for you."

Sam smiled. "You think you might have made a difference had you been around?"

He shrugged. "I was with the Suffolk County Sheriff's when I got the news. Didn't get reassigned here until months later. But I might have tried."

Sam doubted he'd have succeeded. Back then she'd been so in love with Dawson, so blind. She doubted anyone could have talked any sense into her, especially not an ex who was a cop. She doubted Dawson would have quietly gone along with any interference. Heck, Joshua's involvement might have rushed along her demise, as well as initiating his own.

"So, this Caution guy? You in love with him?"

Sam gawked, surprised by the question, surprised at hearing "Caution" and "love" in the same sentence and related to her.

When she didn't answer right away, Joshua said, "The only reason I ask is that I'm wondering if maybe you had other reasons for coming out here besides seeing the Taylors."

"You're so astute."

Josh nodded. "Astute enough to know running away isn't going to solve your problems."

"I'm not running. I just needed a break."

"And now that you've gotten one?"

"What if I did stay? Would that be such a bad thing?"

"I'd like to help you out there, but I think you already know the answer to that. You can't stay here. There's nothing here for you."

Did he know there was nothing back in New York for her either? She'd probably all but alienated Caution with her latest stunt, just up and leaving without a word. And Dara, who knew what was going on with her, or whether or not she was still in the picture?

"I don't want to go back," she blurted.

"You have to go back, Sam. You have to finish what you started."

What *she'd* started? She hadn't started anything. She'd been thrown into the middle of the ocean without a boat, a paddle or a map and expected to safely navigate to shore.

"Is he anything like his brother?" Josh murmured.

"Nothing at all."

He nodded, seeming satisfied with her answer as he keyed the ignition to his SUV.

Too satisfied? Sam wondered. Had she told him what he wanted to hear and killed any chance the two of them might have had together? Did she really want a second chance with Josh, or was she just grasping at an easy escape from her heavier concerns with Caution and Dara?

Josh turned to her, caressed her face once more before leaning in for a tender kiss that too easily turned deep. She closed her eyes a second after he did, pushing her tongue into his mouth, searching for the old passion, the youthful intensity. Only remnants remained. A mild wave of pleasure flowed through her, tightening her stomach muscles, but nothing like the crippling heat that used to drive between them years ago.

Josh lifted his head, took her hand and held it for a long time before pressing one of the medallions into her palm and pressing her fingers closed around it.

He gave her one last peck on the cheek before pulling his SUV back onto the main road. "You need any help with this Tarrent guy, you know where to find me. But it seems like Ms. Kelly has things covered guiding you through this."

Sam thought it ironic that a dead woman could handle her business better than she

could.

* * * *

Get something on the bitch. I want her to lose everything she cares about. I want to make her suffer as much as I have.

So did Tarrent, but surveillance had never been his cup of tea—he was a man of action—and tracking someone out into the middle of nowhere wasn't exactly his idea of a good time until he'd spied that kiss.

Lingering, deep, tender. All descriptive qualifiers that told him two things about the pair in the SUV: either they had once been lovers and were rekindling their passion, or they were now lovers whom, for whatever reasons, were breaking things off.

From his vantage, and despite his camera's power, Tarrent couldn't tell what had been the final verdict between the pair and vaguely wondered at the reasons for the meeting.

Maybe the cop was married and had finally decided he needed to call it quits? Kelly had an attack of conscience and decided to stop playing two dudes at once? Or the pair had decided to go forward with an illicit affair, to be continued at another time and place?

Initially, Tarrent had had more sinister guesses. He had initially thought the couple had driven out here to bury a body, not putting anything past the Kelly broad and her off-duty cop. And when she'd started digging with a shovel she'd gotten from the guy, he'd been certain of it, until Kelly had unearthed some small box and refilled the hole she had made without putting anything—like a body—in it.

He'd been hoping for something big and juicy to hold over the bitch, and was slightly disappointed when his instincts had been proven wrong and there was no body. At least not this time.

In any case, Tarrent had hit pay dirt with the pictures he'd taken of the couple getting cozy in the front seat of the SUV.

He smiled, watching them through his binoculars as they drove off in a cloud of dust.

Seems the customer *was* always right.

* * * *

Caution put a plate of grilled chicken, steamed broccoli and brown rice in front of his daughter, then fixed a plate for himself and silently took the seat opposite her.

The kitchen was silent except for the clock ticking on the lemon-yellow wall behind him and Roscoe panting at Tayte's feet.

The little girl swung her legs back and forth, eagerly picked up a piece of broccoli by its stem and bit off the flower. "Daddy, can I have a plate for my friend?"

Caution glanced at his daughter, frowning as she motioned to the empty seat beside her.

He'd thought he'd "seen" the last of Tiffany months ago, never again having to fix a plate or set an extra place for his little girl's imaginary friend. Seems the little lady was back. He wondered if Dara's disappearance had anything to do with Tiffany's "reappearance."

Wordlessly and without question, Caution made his way back to the stove to fix another plate, knowing all along he'd wind up eating Tiffany's serving himself. He must have gained five pounds during her last stay. Tiffany hadn't been satisfied with "imaginary" food, and insisted on the real thing.

"Daddy, are you still going up to the cabin?"

He'd planned to take Dara with him for the long July Fourth weekend, a quiet little get away for the both of them after everything that had gone down because of his brother. They both needed the vacation, her probably more than him. He'd been all set to talk her into taking the trip up to the Adirondacks when he'd gotten up the morning after Dawson's apprehension and discovered that she was gone.

Not believing she'd pulled one of her famous disappearing acts so soon after her last one, he'd searched her apartment—for her or at least a note saying where she'd gone—but had come up empty. Calling her cell and Diego had netted him an expected big fat zero.

When she hadn't turned up by afternoon, Caution had put her silence down to Dara needing space. He'd half-way decided to let her have some by the time the next day rolled around with no sign of her. On the second day, however, he started to worry.

Diego didn't seem bothered by his employer's disappearance, but then he probably knew where she was and was under orders not to tell Caution.

Pamela, of course, thought Dara's disappearance was proof positive that she was unreliable and selfish and not the woman for Caution, certainly not the sort of woman he should keep around his daughter. Grampa Brody was of the same mind.

He should have been used to it by now, having had gone through the desertion so many times since they'd been together, her absences old hat.

How many times could he let her walk away from him, drifting in and out of his life as she pleased, and accept her back, no questions asked? How many times could he accept on-again-off-again and not demand more? How many times could he accept less?

"Daddy, are you?"

Caution glanced at his daughter, and tried to lighten the mood with a smile. "Who wants to know, Tater?"

"Dara is wondering."

"Tayte, I know how you feel about her leaving, and I miss her too. But pretending that Dara's your new imag—your new friend isn't going to bring her back any faster."

"But I'm not pretending. She's right here."

"Yes, like Tiffany."

"Not like Tiffany." Tayte vigorously shook her head, then raised her eyebrows.

"Can't you see her, Daddy?"

"Tayte..." He wished he could find escape and solace in a fantasy as well as his daughter could. Life would be so much less painful.

"She's only asking so she'll be packed and ready."

"Be packed and ready?"

"To leave with you when you go."

"Tayte, go to your room."

"But Da—"

"Go to your room now!"

Tayte gaped, big tears pooling in her eyes before sliding down her round cheeks. "You're mean!" She stood and slid her hand through Roscoe's collar. "I don't ever want to speak to you again and neither does Roscoe."

"Never's a long time, Tater," Caution murmured, watching his daughter stalk upstairs to her room—head high, mouth pouting, indignantly huffing—and thought it was a performance of which Dara would have been truly proud.

* * * *

Dara sat at the table opposite Caution, and decided she would ring the little hussy's neck the next time she saw her.

She stopped herself from lifting the plate to throw it across the room, not wanting to startle Caution, but couldn't think of another way to get rid of the frustration that had been dogging her since this incarnation.

It wasn't fair to have this sort of power—floating through solid objects, floating through *air*, appearing and disappearing as she pleased—yet be so powerless.

She hadn't been able to locate Sam – through conventional or non-conventional methods—since the woman left several days ago. And without Sam, she couldn't reach Caution, couldn't communicate with him or make him see her. She wanted to assure him that she'd be back, and that he just needed to be patient and listen to what she had to say once she turned up.

Maybe it was better that he couldn't see or hear her. He'd be laughing up a storm at the irony of her telling him to be patient.

Dara hadn't meant to get her little Tater-Tot into hot water, but couldn't help talking to the child once she realized Tayte could see her. Out of desperation she'd tried to reach Caution through his daughter. Big mistake. She'd forgotten about Tiffany. Of course Caution would think her only another, different manifestation of his daughter's imaginary friend phase.

Just her luck.

The doorbell rang and Dara didn't know who jumped higher at the noise—her or Caution. She didn't wait for Caution, flying from her seat and out the front door to see who was there waiting on the other side. She felt simultaneously relieved and angry when

she saw Sam standing in the rain looking like a lost little girl. "You!"

"Is he okay?"

"Do you really care?"

"Look, Dara, I've had a rough time of it, okay. So just cut me some slack."

Dara folded her arms across her non-existent chest, and glared.

"Is he okay or not?"

"Guess you'll find out now, won't you."

CHAPTER 15

Sam hadn't expected a homecoming queen parade, but she certainly hadn't thought she deserved to have a door slammed in her face.

She got a glimpse of Caution's face before he closed the door—green eyes hard and pained, hair mussed as if he had just run his fingers through it—and gaped.

Sam rang the bell and pounded on the door until Caution flung it open.

"Go away before I call the police."

"You'd really call the cops on me?"

"Not that they'd do anything. You've probably got a few in your back pocket."

"You give me too much credit."

"What do you want, Dara?"

"Can I come in?"

"And I'm supposed to say sure, come in, have some dinner. Maybe we'll talk, watch some television and probably have some great sex. Then what?"

His casual mentioning of the latter threw her, and for several seconds Sam couldn't find her voice or the words to respond, too busy imagining what his version of "great sex" would entail and whether or not their definitions meshed. "This isn't a drive-by."

"Funny you should put it that way. Very perceptive and accurate too."

"Caution—"

"How long before you disappear again? How long before you break Tayte's heart?"

"Only Tayte's?"

"You'd like me to tell you how much I missed you? Well, you can forget it, Dare."

I've had enough of your now-you-see-me-now-you-don't games." Caution motioned to close the door again and Sam blocked it with her foot. "Dara, move your foot."

"You're really kicking me out?"

"You're not *in*."

"Caution, please. Can we talk?"

"We don't have anything to talk about."

Seemed like the last twenty-four hours involved a lot of wheedling on her part. Sam took a deep breath now, prepared to do more. "You never got an answer to your proposal."

He grinned but didn't open the door any further. "I'm not so sure I want one from you anymore, and I'm not into empty promises."

"Empty promises?" Sam arched a brow. Sheesh, Dara had done a job on him. "Don't be that way." She held his gaze for a long moment, trying to emit her sincerity, hoping he'd crack before she gave up. She was so close, and she had come too far to let him turn her away.

Tayte and Roscoe barreled down the stairs, starting an impossibly gigantic ruckus as they made it to the door behind Caution. Tayte began calling for Dara behind the wood.

Sam watched and laughed as the little girl and Beagle jumped up and down behind Caution, Tayte waving at her between openings.

"Please, Daddy, please let Dara come in!"

Caution turned from her to smile down at his daughter. "I thought you didn't ever want to speak to me again."

"I changed my mind." Tayte grinned. "Please, Daddy?"

Caution chuckled, shaking his head as he turned back to Sam. "You've got a reprieve."

Sam mouthed a hardy "thank you" to Tayte as Caution opened the door to let her in. Before she could get past him, Roscoe was on her, front paws scraping the top of her jeans-clad thighs as he jumped up to give her his patented panting-and-slobbering, tail-wagging greeting. Tayte slid a hand into Sam's as they walked to the kitchen, Caution bringing up the rear. Sam paused at the table. "I interrupted dinner?"

"Tayte was under the impression you were already here, and she had me make a plate for you."

Sam glanced at Caution and frowned.

"I'll explain it to you later."

* * * *

Diego sat at the bar nursing a ginger ale and waiting for lighting to strike twice.

As astute and perceptive as he was in his professional life, he was that much less

perceptive in his personal life. Usually, he didn't let the twain meet—his personal and professional lives—but something about that night, that guy, had turned his head enough for him to forget about Dara waiting for him in that alley, to forget about skips and tracking, to forget about everything except him. And those big long-lashed baby-blue eyes. And that rich gold-blond hair. And that lean muscular body.

Diego silently chastised himself. Thinking with his dick was what had gotten him into trouble in the first place. Here and now was not the place and time for that sort of thinking. Now was the time for reflection and calculation, planning what he would do if he actually came across Mr. Wylie Sennet again. If that was even the guy's name. Diego doubted it, beginning to doubt everything about the man and what he had presented that night.

Someone covered his eyes from behind and Diego started, then immediately relaxed when he recognized the tangy citrus scent of Wylie's expensive cologne. His first reaction was anger, then wariness as he covered the opening of his tumbler with a palm.

"Guess who."

"Judas?"

"Close." Wylie chuckled, releasing Diego's eyes. He stepped back as Diego turned on his barstool to glare.

"You've got a lot of nerve sneaking up on me like that after what you did to me."

"I know you're angry with me, and you've got every right to be. But you're the one who left me, remember?"

Diego frowned. Actually, he didn't remember much about that night between going to the hotel with Wylie and waking up alone and in a strange dark room hours later before rushing off to Dara. And he was sure he had Mr. Sennet to thank for his amnesia. *"I left you?"*

Wylie nodded, slid onto the barstool beside Diego and ordered a scotch on the rocks.

Damn but he looked good. Diego had almost forgotten how attractive the guy was. Every luscious wave in place, accentuating his finely carved Nordic features.

He slid his eyes down, over the pricey navy jacket, and pinstriped Oxford shirt beneath, remembering how comfortable he'd felt enwrapped in Wylie's firm arms. He thought about the feel of Wylie's hard chest as he'd helped Diego out of his jacket, the clean male scent of him as he'd leaned into Diego before pressing him against the king-sized bed. Then nothing. Just blackness.

The man could have done anything to him. Robbed him, beat him, killed him. But he'd done none of those things. Which meant he'd had another agenda.

Has.

"So, how have you been? I was worried how you fared once you left."

"I bet you were."

"Really, I was." Wylie put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "I'd like a chance

to make amends. Perhaps explain?"

"I don't see what you could say to me that would—"

"I'm sorry."

Why did that sound familiar? As if Diego had heard Wylie say it to him before, in exactly the same remorseful tone, the same deep voice? He thought he might have been drifting off when the words had floated down on him. "Are you sorry for drugging me, or for getting caught at it?"

Wylie leaned close, slid his hands inside Diego's leather jacket, fingers lightly stroking his back before sliding around to palm his rib cage, finally shifting to his front where he splayed his hands across Diego's chest.

Dios, that felt good! Diego couldn't remember the last time someone had touched him like that—with easy, slow care—besides Dara, and as good a friend as she was, she didn't count, not nearly in the way Wylie did.

He'd been celibate since his last partner, Jefferson, split the scene two years ago, and hadn't yet found anyone who turned him on—intellectually and physically—in the same way Jeff had. He hadn't seemed to be able to find anyone who interested him beyond a one night stand. And one night stands he did not do, not intentionally, despite what his father thought of his "lifestyle".

Just his luck to have gotten involved with a homophobic closet homosexual. He should have known something was up at Jeff's coolness towards him in public. In private, Jeff was more open, even tender, though he balked at kissing on the mouth unless Diego insisted. And so it had gone, the hot and cold, does-he-love-me-or-doesn't-he act for the better part of a year. Diego and Jeff had lived in the worst kind of denial and wish fulfillment until Jeff had finally called it quits, packed up his stuff and headed out the door with barely an explanation or a good-bye.

His father would have said that Diego deserved just what he got, desertion and all, for flouting a decent Catholic upbringing to practice his "deviant behavior".

Now two years later, clean but still recovering, Diego was gun-shy, afraid of starting something new with anyone and afraid to even get his feet wet. Too many risks, the dating climate too hazardous—to body and soul.

Diego shook his head as if to rid his mind of the bitter memories as he tried not to lose sight of where he was and why. "I'm not wearing a wire," he murmured.

"You really are distrustful, but I suppose I'm partly to blame for that."

"Mostly to blame."

"Let's see what we can do to remedy that."

"What, you're going to buy me another drink?"

Wylie held up his palms, eyebrows arched. "No tricks. I promise. I really want to talk to you and...explain things."

Diego didn't trust him as far as he could throw him. But he found himself agreeing to go with the man to his apartment. His curiosity and libido wouldn't let him

say no.

* * * *

Following Kelly had turned into an interesting little exercise during the last couple of days.

Randall had thought he knew all he needed to know about the broad. He had thought he had her all figured out and that learning anything beyond how severely her presence affected his job performance would bore him silly. He hadn't known just how intriguing a life she led, but then again, he hadn't cared about her life for longer than it took it to cross and interfere with his.

In the last few days he'd discovered a past (or present, he still wasn't so sure) cop lover, and a current boyfriend he hadn't known existed before he and Kelly had tagged said boyfriend's brother for jumping bail. Not to mention there was a kid in the mix.

Randall glanced down at the little girl now, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth as he reached down to brush a stray tendril of soft black hair away from her face.

Cute little rugrat, looked just like her daddy. And he'd bet one of his precious talon slugs that she was the apple of her daddy's eye too. Just like he'd bet Mr. Caution Foster had no idea that she let the mutt sleep up in the bed with her.

Randall's own parents would have torn the roof off of their trailer home had they caught him entertaining an inkling of letting his beagle Bart (short for Bartholomew as his momma and daddy had had visions of grandeur, if not for their son, then for their dog) sleep in the bed with him. In fact, his own daddy's favorite warning to him about "lying down with dogs and waking up with fleas" was the all-purpose precursor to the harangues he laid on the old lady every Friday night when she got all duded up for a night on the town with the girls.

He smiled down at Foster's kid now, a perfect picture with one little arm flung across the Beagle's neck, the pooch snoring loudly next to the little girl's soft breathing. He was grateful, although surprised the dog hadn't woken up when he'd entered the bedroom.

Adrenaline surged with the thrill of the chase, of getting the best of an opponent of equal measure. The kid, yeah, she tipped the scales, a weakness he hadn't counted on. The customer had though, knew her business, knew how to get to her enemy. But most important, she knew how to get to her friends and relations.

"I want you to send her a message, make her squirm..."

Okay, so he had to hand it to her, she had good instincts, especially where subterfuge was concerned. Randall just didn't have much faith in her agenda—too Lifetime Movie-ish and roundabout for his tastes—and he didn't like turning over control to someone else, especially not some know-it-all, uppity broad who thought her shit smelled like lavender potpourri.

Initially, Randall had accepted the offer of assistance out of curiosity and a perverted sense of irony, considering the source. But now his original mission had turned into a complex game of who-done-it and backstabbing estrogen wars when all he'd

wanted was the bitch dead. Served him right for letting some broad take control of *his* operation.

If he never had to deal with another bossy broad or smug fairy again in his life after this little undertaking, it would be too soon. But for the money and the personal satisfaction promised at the end, Randall wouldn't have been dealing with either.

He pulled out the bowie knife attached to his left boot, crept to the head of the little girl's bed, and stood staring down at her for one long moment.

Send Kelly a message and make her squirm? He knew just the trick.

Randall couldn't wait to see the expression on the cunt's face when she found his present.

* * * *

"Thanks for helping me put Tayte to bed."

"My pleasure." Sam put the last dish into the washer, closed it and turned it on before passing Caution to go to the living room. She would have passed him, that is, if he hadn't caught her around the waist with an arm and pulled her back against his chest.

"I don't know why I still care." He breathed in her ear before circling the outside shell with his tongue and making her pussy wet, quivering with desire.

She turned in his arms to glance up at his unshaven face and reached out a hand to palm his angular jaw, reveling in the rough-silken feel of his whiskers against her fingers. "Because all good things come to those who wait."

"If you're trying to endear yourself, try another aphorism."

Sam chuckled, hugged him close, buried her face in his chest, and deeply inhaled his pure male aroma, then sighed against the soft cotton of his shirt.

Why did things have to be so difficult? She wondered if maybe she'd have been better off had They left her alone, let her finish her journey to the other side and just called it a day. Unless They were into some twisted version of celestial sado-masochism and got Their rocks off watching Their earthly charges go through the motions of surviving when all the cards were stacked against them.

"Caution?"

He pulled back to glance at her, arching a brow as she chewed her bottom lip. "What are you trying so hard not to tell me?"

What indeed?

She couldn't go through the frustration again, not so soon after her last efforts with Joshua. Telling the truth and putting all her cards on the table was one thing, but making someone believe that truth was a whole other issue, and took a lot out of a body.

"Why do you love D—me?"

Caution grinned. "Let me count the ways?"

She playfully punched his ribs, and he doubled over, palm to his middle, puffing

out air with the expected amount of histrionics before catching Sam to hug her close.

He whispered in her hair, "I don't know why, Dare. I just do."

She was sure he'd said as much—the I-love-you's in between the will-you-marry-me's—to Dara and just as sure that she'd scoffed at his romanticism.

As easily as it was for Dara to shun Caution's affection and professions of love, it was difficult for Sam to accept his feelings for her face value. And maybe that was a fatal flaw on her part, one she needed to rein in if she was going to cope with the coming days and weeks with Dara trying to tag her murderer.

"Something's bothering you, has been since you got back," Caution said. "What happened to you on that last job?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"My, aren't we flip."

Sam realized too late that she had responded too nonchalantly, too easily for Caution. But she also knew that it was the exact same way Dara Kelly would have responded.

She was slowly turning into the woman, for better or worse, and Sam didn't know exactly how she felt about that. Except that she was here with Caution, in his arms, and loving every minute of it.

What if she had to give him back?

The thought hadn't occurred to her before now, and it was something that was totally possible, considering that she didn't know *what* They had in mind for her, Dara or Caution.

Would they allow her to cut her losses now and walk out on Caution to spare her heart? Could she walk out even if she wanted to?

"Not flip. Just my survival instincts kicking in," Sam said now.

"You don't need to do the hard-ass bounty hunter routine to survive with me. You don't need to front."

"You'd rather I crumple at your feet and beg you to rescue me?"

"You know that's not what I mean." He scowled. "All I'm saying is you can show me your kinder and gentler side and I won't think any less of you."

"Who says I have a kinder and gentler side?"

"I do..." He leaned in, pausing for an instant before tilting his head to softly press his lips against hers, gradually increasing pressure until she opened her mouth beneath his to welcome in his tongue. "And this does." He slid a hand beneath her top, fingers stealthy and deft as he opened the front of her bra with one hand and gently cupped a full breast.

She pressed closer, and his fingers brushed her hardened nipples with enough urgency to make her moan. She flattened herself against his chest, tried to ease the pain in her nipples, eager to feel him, his hard erection nudging her abdomen and telling her he

was just as aroused and ready for her as she was for him.

Sam squirmed against him, wanting to get as close to his skin as she could without slipping inside it. She drew her arms around his trim waist, hands creeping up his back of their own volition, caressing firm muscles, urging him lower, closer, so that she could taste him more deeply.

Caution abandoned her breasts to embrace her full, and roughly slanted his mouth across hers as if to find just the right spot to cause her the most pleasure, or pain. Sam was no longer sure which except that his holding her didn't make her forget about her deserted and ignited breasts as much as his mouth ignited other parts of her.

Sam imagined his mouth wreaking havoc far lower, felt the telltale wetness seeping between her legs in anticipation and at the same instant, a scream pierced the air from above.

Caution instantly broke from her. "That's Tayte!" He grabbed Sam's hand and dragged her with him to the staircase as if the house were on fire, long legs taking the flight three steps at a time until he had reached his child's room.

He flung open the door and turned on the overhead light before rushing to Tayte's bed, where Roscoe paced around the child in a protective circle, barking and howling like a wild animal. "Good boy, get down now." Caution slid his hand in the dog's collar and guided him to the peach-carpeted floor, where he continued to bark.

"Tayte?" Caution eased down beside her and brushed the moist curls away from her face as she threw her small body at his and flung her arms around his middle. He held her close, wondering if she were awake as she hadn't opened her eyes once from the time he and Dara barged in until now, only murmured about the bogeyman that had come to get her.

"He was real, Daddy. He really, really was."

Caution rocked her against him, smoothed a hand over her head before sliding it down to her back, gently patting and rubbing in a circular motion. "I know, baby. Shh, it's going to be okay. I'm here."

"Please don't let the bogey man get me, Daddy. Please don't..."

"I won't, Tater."

Sam eased across the threshold and sidled over to stand beside the bed. She gave the room a cursory look over her shoulder but didn't see anything untoward. She didn't know exactly what she was looking for except that something didn't seem right.

She had no doubt that Tayte had seen a bogeyman, just not one of the mythical-evil- spirits-that-haunt-childhood-dreams variety. No, this monster was real, as real as her and Caution. He walked among the living and wakeful in the daylight, as well as vulnerable young sleepers in the dead of night. Sam had a feeling she knew who it was.

A few seconds later she spotted the missing swatch—small with edges so neat and precise, Sam knew it had been removed with a very sharp knife, or a scalpel—at the top of Tayte's canopied bed.

She caught sight of the mint-green fabric exactly matching the bed and room's décor, crumpled and sitting atop the bedside lowboy, and inched closer. Instinctively, surreptitiously, she slid the swatch and its unknown contents off the lowboy and into a jeans pocket where it proceeded to burn a hole into her skin for the next half-hour as she joined Tayte on the bed opposite Caution and helped to calm down the hysterical little girl.

CHAPTER 16

"It's not his style, Sam."

"I don't care what his style is, Dara!" Sam threw up her hands as she paced the length of Dara's bedroom. She stubbed her toe on a pile of books and kicked them across the room out into the hallway. "You know as well as I do who that earring belongs to. Don't deny it's yours, I watched the look on your face when I showed it to you. And you know that it was Tarrent in that little girl's room. God knows what he would have done had he had more time."

"But he didn't, so calm down, take a load off and just relax for a minute."

Sam glared at her for a long moment before flopping down on the bed beside her luggage, arms crossed over her breasts.

She glanced at the opened, half-packed bags from the corner of an eye and got a sudden chill remembering the last time she had packed for a trip, an unknown future. Not that this trip upstate with Caution was any more a known quantity than her flight from Dawson would have been, but at least she was going to be with someone she trusted.

Someone you love. Just come right out and admit it to yourself if no one else.

Dara sat down beside her, made a motion to hug her, then grimaced and gave up in frustration as if realizing how futile an effort she would have been making. "Are we a little calmer?" she finally asked.

"No."

Dara grinned and moved closer. "Sam, I'm just being realistic. What you're describing was... metaphorical, too subtle. I know Tarrent and he's straightforward, cut to the chase and through the bullshit. And that little trick with the canopy and earring? That was far from straightforward, not his M.O. The man has no patience for subterfuge. He's all action."

"M.O. or not, the message was straightforward enough for me." Sam didn't want

to admit that seeing that swatch had scared her to death and it was all she could do now to keep her cool and act like going on this getaway was the most normal thing in the world for her to do, when a madman was out there quietly threatening everything about which she cared. Everyone.

"If he had wanted to hurt Tater he would have," Dara whispered.

"You're not making me feel any better when I know this is all my fault."

"Don't fall into that guilt trip. Besides, what do you have to feel guilty for?"

"Do you really need to ask? I'm as responsible for what happened at Caution's the other night as you are." Maybe this was it in a nutshell, Sam thought. Dara was feeling guilty that an innocent child and the child's father were now vulnerable and at risk because of her business activities. Oh, she had suggested other suspects—Dawson's business associates who wanted to get back at Dawson through his blood—in a lame attempt to shift Sam's focus. But Sam knew better, knew the truth. And so did Dara.

"You're doing exactly what he wants. You give him that power over you, and he'll win, he'll own you."

"He already does."

"No." Dara shook her head. "Only if you let him."

"Why are we wasting time arguing about this?" Sam threw up her hands again. "You and I both know who broke into Tayte's room." She was tempted to show and tell Caution what she had found, explain away her dodge and get the police involved, but knew she couldn't tell anyone anything without revealing what had happened to Dara on her last job. She might have to admit who was now inhabiting Dara's body, and this she could not do. She even thought of asking Caution to keep a gun in the house, for just-in-case protection, but knew she couldn't without alerting him to the danger. She was stuck with keeping her silence in order to stay free and maintain her façade of sanity to Caution and the world at large.

Heck, she couldn't even tell Diego!

Sam liked to believe she was being altruistic in her actions, protecting Caution rather than unnecessarily alarming him about an enemy against whom he couldn't really defend.

That's because you won't trust him with the truth and give him a chance.

Every solution she came up with presented its own set of problems. Tell Caution, and risk him either kicking her to the curb and as far away from him and his daughter as possible, or turning her into the nearest institution for appropriate disposition. Go to the police with her evidence and have *them* commit her. Deal with it herself, and risk Caution and Tayte's life if Dara was wrong about motives and suspects, or if Sam failed.

She envisioned all the scenarios where she told Caution the truth, mentally wincing at his expected reaction. He'd wash his hands of her and call it quits then and there. He'd have every reason to then, even if he hadn't during any of Dara's previous stunts.

"Let's say you're right," Dara said, relenting as if to keep the excitable mental patient happy. "Tarrent *might* have been the one in the room, I'll grant you. But I'm almost a hundred percent certain that someone else is behind his actions, pulling the strings. This is about more than just his hate for me. This goes deeper, more insidious. Someone is trying to drive a wedge between m—you and Caution." Dara rubbed her chin with a pointer and thumb, staring not at Sam, but across the room, miles away and deep in thought as if she were all alone and had forgotten about Sam and what they were talking about. "But they didn't succeed."

Not yet anyway, Sam thought. But how long before "they" stepped from behind the protective shadows of an obvious hateful enemy to do their own handiwork? How long before "they" grew tired of the game and decided to eliminate third-party menaces with minor grudges to grind, to personally do in Dara? Would it stop there? Would "they" be happy once Dara was out of the picture, or was there a bigger agenda involving Caution – and not Dara's business or past – of which Sam and Dara were unaware?

Sam realized she was as ready to grasp at straws as Dara was.

She didn't want it to be Randall Tarrent. The man was a murderer with no conscience, with whom any reasonable person couldn't bargain, and it didn't matter for whom he was working because Sam had a feeling he was enjoying his job just a little too much to stop.

She shivered at the idea, her heart tight in her chest as she wondered if she'd make it through this episode of her life intact, and if not, if she would at least be able to weather the coming damage.

* * * *

The good ol' boy had effectively frightened the child out of her socks, thereby frightening Caution. But the entire episode had been for naught, as no one knew what had actually scared the girl, or more importantly, that her life had been in danger.

She had instructed Tarrent to be subtle but direct—direct enough for Caution to understand that keeping around the Amazon would be detrimental to him and/or his daughter. Yet this information was either being ignored, or somehow, someway, the Amazon had managed again to outwit them.

What other explanation could there be for the romantic getaway upstate? Would Caution up and leave Tayte in another's care, even a trustworthy someone, after a threat had been made on his daughter? Not likely, so this meant only one thing: he was unaware of the danger. Not only unaware, but didn't think that the Amazon had been at the root of the break- in.

The situation was intolerable, a defeat and failure her mother never would have accepted without making a scene and calling her daughter to the carpet for not living up to the ideals of excellence that her mother had drilled into her from a tender age.

She hated failure, but hated the need for comparisons more. She hated that she had failed to measure up when she knew her mother would have succeeded.

Since before her father's departure when she was seven, and most of her life after, she had competed with her mother—the perfect matriarch, the perfect homemaker, the

epitome of feminine sensuality and womanhood—for men's attentions.

Her father had been fooled by her mother's womanly wiles only as long as it had taken him to understand that he didn't stand a chance of ever pleasing her, that he didn't stand a chance of competing with the rest of the world's male population.

By the time she'd reached her fourteenth year, she had become adept at attracting exactly the type of males she craved, exactly the type of males to which her mother always seemed drawn: men with money, generous men, men who clung to her every word.

Caution fell into every category from the above, except clinging to her every word. If he'd listened to half of her advice, the Amazon would have been out of his life a long time ago.

But he was his own man, not ripe for whipping, except when it came to the Amazon. When it came to her, he was infatuated beyond reason, wouldn't allow a negative word against his precious Ms. Kelly.

But this was soon going to change.

* * * *

Caution stood on the finished wooden deck of the chalet, sipping hot tea with honey and deeply inhaling the fragrance of summer foliage wafting to him from the backyard.

Dawn wasn't quite an hour old, sunlight peeking through the lush woods, gently touching the tree tops, and warming the floor of the deck where he stood.

Summer in the Adirondacks was nice—nicer with good company like Dara—but his favorite season to come up was fall. A trip through the area offered remarkable beauty, and a perfect view of foliage color changes, with yellow, mustard, orange, rust, mauve and cranberry-colored leaves highlighted by occasional reds from the maple trees.

The place was ideal for a drive or hike, the mountains greener than most ranges, overflowing with maples, oaks and evergreens. Part backwoods, part civilized life, the Adirondack region was both impressive in its beauty and attainable as a vast outdoor playground.

Not that this lure of majestic nature had ever been enough to drag Dara from the confines of a warm bed. She was strictly a city girl, concrete jungle pumping through her veins, and Caution had to drag her the previous couple of times he'd brought her up. He could usually talk her into at least one hike along a scenic path, if not skinny-dipping in one of the thousands of ponds.

The chalet Caution had rented for two weeks was set amid the grandeur of the Adirondack Mountains—a wonderland of lakes, trails, almost fifty mountain peaks, and nearly a hundred campgrounds—and it would have been a waste not to enjoy some of the territory.

Planning the coming days, Caution smiled, closed his eyes and aimed his face towards the sky, trying to soak up the quickly dwindling sun. True to form and the last couple of wet months, the sun was already disappearing behind gray rain clouds.

His mind drifted not to Dara sleeping soundly in one of the bedrooms inside and how he'd get her up and convince her to go explore some wilderness, but to Tayte in New York and how she was taking their departure.

The little girl had been nearly inconsolable after her nightmare, only calming down a couple of hours after he and Dara had initially rushed into her room.

He'd put off the idea of a getaway with Dara, hadn't even mentioned it to her after the incident. It was Tayte who'd brought it up the next day. She insisted he and Dara should go away together.

Touched by her five-year-old selflessness, Caution still delayed the trip a couple of weeks, spending the Fourth with his daughter and Dara watching the Macy's fireworks spectacular in the city.

Now he had nothing but freedom and time on his hands, if he didn't count Pamela calling him twice since they'd arrived, wanting to discuss details of the new site and franchise contracts *after* he'd made it clear to all involved that he wasn't to be contacted unless it was an emergency. Even his mother didn't call him as often, although he knew he was due to receive a shout-out from her soon if her current bank balance was any indication.

"How long have you been up?"

Caution turned, cup in hand as he leaned his backside against the wooden railing. He watched Dara come out onto the deck, sliding the glass doors closed behind her. Her black hair attractively tousled around her face, slanted onyx eyes sleepily taking him in as she approached with feminine feline grace that belied the well-worn football jersey in which she was clad.

"Not much longer than you."

"Long enough to make a nice hot cup of..." Dara sniffed the steam riding the wind to her from his cup. "*Tea?*"

"What's wrong with tea?"

Dara stepped closer. "Is that herbal tea at that?"

Caution grinned and nodded.

"I need a shot of caffeine that can only be found in a nice hot cup of *coffee*." Despite this affirmation, she reached for his cup, which he gladly relinquished, and took a hardy sip. "Not bad."

"Thanks," Caution deadpanned.

"So, what's to eat around here?"

"What do you want?"

Dara shrugged. "Don't know what I'm hungry for yet."

He knew what he was hungry for, something for which he'd been hungry for the last couple of months, his craving increasing with the ferocity of a category five hurricane since they'd arrived the evening before and he'd gone without sleeping in the

same bed with Dara.

She had opted to sleep down the hall from him in a separate bedroom, much to Caution's chagrin and confusion. He could see her reasons for modesty if Tayte had come along; even then, they'd never spent the entire night in separate beds, always finding a way to sneak into one another's rooms once the child was asleep.

"I've never known you to be indecisive, not where your wants are concerned."

"It's early, and I'm still half asleep."

Caution stared at her.

She looked tired, strained as if there were a great weight pressing on her shoulders that involved more than just the stress involved in her job and their relationship.

Dawson was safely behind bars waiting for trial, but there was something or someone else on her mind that she wouldn't talk to him about, something standing between them like a flimsy lake of ice she was unwilling or too afraid to cross.

Dara had assured him she'd cleared her schedule to make this trip, that Diego would hold down the fort, and that she needed and *wanted* the vacation.

He wanted to believe her enthusiasm was real. Wanted to believe she was with him not because she couldn't resist the wheedling of an adorable five-year-old moppet but because she couldn't resist the idea of spending a couple of weeks alone with him in an isolated chalet.

He grinned, realizing that it wouldn't be the first time he had played second fiddle to his daughter. Sometimes he thought Dara only used him as an excuse to come over and spend time with Tayte and Roscoe.

"I'm surprised you're in such a good mood this morning." She came closer until she was standing less than a foot in front of him, and Caution could smell her sweet-tangy musk wafting out to him, mingling with the aroma of his tea and honey.

"Is there a reason I shouldn't be in a good mood?"

Dara shrugged, and it was one of the rare, but quickly becoming more frequent, times he could remember her being uncertain. The old Dara, the one he knew before that last job, was usually so aggressive and take-charge. This new Dara threw him.

Caution didn't like her this way, retiring and indecisive, and he realized he missed her bossiness. Grampa Brody often said she was too bossy, and that Caution needed to tame her, show her a woman's place. But taming Dara had never been Caution's goal. He only wanted her to trust him enough to be herself with him; after almost three years, he thought he might be getting his wish.

He closed the small space between them and slid his arms loosely around her waist. "Can I have some more of that?" He nodded at the cup and Dara lifted it to his mouth. He took a long sip before removing it from her hand and placing the empty cup atop the deck railing behind him. "Ever made love outdoors?"

"Is that a not so veiled attempt at seduction?"

"It's whatever you want it to be." He pulled her closer, pressed against her,

enjoying the fact that she didn't shrink away from him. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and welcomed his hard erection already pushing against her soft lower belly.

"I don't like splinters in my butt."

Caution laughed, nodded to the sleeping bag in a corner of the deck.

"Very presumptuous of you."

"Not presumptuous. I slept out here."

She arched a brow, prompting.

"I like sleeping under the stars. And there were a lot out last night to admire."

"You like communing with nature."

"Among other things."

"Walks in the rain."

"Swimming in the buff."

"I thought after my not wanting to sleep in the same room with you last night you'd decided to get as far away from me as possible."

"I don't scare that easily. Besides, I know your bark is worse than your bite."

"You think so, huh?" She stood on her toes, leaned in, slanted her mouth across his throat and gently nipped his skin, then sucked until she elicited a moan.

Caution slid his hands down to her ass, fondling and cupping each cheek before he lifted her off the deck. He stepped away from the wooden railing as she wrapped her legs around his hips and leaned in for another kiss.

He tasted herbal tea and honey mixed with mint mouthwash as he slid his tongue into her mouth, instantly touched that she'd gone through the trouble.

She met his tongue with her own, dueling for several long moments as Caution carried her over to the quilted sleeping bag and stretched her across the plush synthetic covering without releasing her mouth.

Dara pulled away, panting as she stared up at him. "You were serious?"

"Too many steps to get you back into the house, and I can't wait any longer to get inside your hot, wet pussy."

Rather than quarrel as he'd expected, Dara chuckled, crept her fingers from his ripped abdomen to his chest where she splayed her fingers against his firm warm flesh. "And you just know it's hot and wet, huh?"

"For me? Yeah."

"Arrogant jerk," she murmured, nonetheless bending her knees, welcoming him.

Caution knelt between her thighs, caressing the satiny insides with his palms, evoking tremors as he trailed his fingers toward the hot juncture at the apex of her thighs. He slid up her jersey, pressed a palm against the moist crotch of her boxers, reveling in

the throbbing warmth before slipping his hands beneath the lavender material and sliding in a finger. She pitched upward, and he was glad that she was so ready for him. He slid in another finger, scissoring both against her inner folds, simultaneously teasing her firm nub of flesh with his thumb, clit already burgeoning with desire.

Dara writhed against his hand, caught his wrist and pushed his fingers deep, quickly becoming wetter, turning him on with every groan and thrust of her pelvis against his hand.

Caution worked his fingers and thumb in a rhythmic dance with one hand, sending Dara into a violent paroxysm of want as he grabbed her by the wrists and imprisoned her arms above her head with the other.

She opened her eyes, firmly bit into her full bottom lip as she looked at him with a dazed expression. He watched her pupils dilate with passion as he felt each sensual gyration radiating from his hand up his arm then back down to his groin where the sensation of her orgasm made his balls tighten with eagerness and need.

Caution slowly slid out his fingers, pulled her boxers down over her hips, then ran his forefinger across his mouth, licking his lips to savor her flavor. He reached behind Dara's head and retrieved a foil pack from the folds of the sleeping bag, staring at her the entire while.

"Now *this* is presumptuous." He smiled.

"Presume away. Just get out of those jeans and inside me right now."

"I've never been one to disobey a direct order." Caution quickly stripped off his jeans and boxers until he was kneeling before her naked, his desire clearly evident by his large erection jutting towards her as thunder fittingly clapped above them.

Dara leaned up on her elbows, oblivious to the blare, admiring the view. She reached for his shaft with one hand as Caution opened the foil pack with his teeth and hands.

"Smooth and hard," she murmured. "I like that."

"So do I." He got on the condom and positioned himself between her legs before Dara could blink.

She reached for him, demanding and hot, pulling him close, inhaling his skin until she seemed to saturate her senses with his clean male musk, an intoxicating spicy combination of lemon and sandalwood.

Caution braced his weight on his palms, each hand planted on opposite sides of Dara's head. He lowered his face, took one nipple between his teeth and suckled until she moaned.

She skimmed her hands down his back, squeezed his round firm ass cheeks and urged him forward, becoming frustrated when he paused, the head of his arousal barely kissing her lips.

"Don't tease me," she bit out.

He stared at her, an ironic grin crawling up the side of his face as he moved to the

opposite nipple, gave it the same attention as he had the previous, pushed inside her, pulled almost completely out before thrusting deep as lightning lit up the sky above them.

He liked making love in the rain as much as he liked walking in it, liked that Dara gasped between his retreat and final plunge before he was rotating his hips against her and she matched his beat measure for measure.

Caution reached a hand down between them, found her clit hard and swollen with need, gently flicked, tormenting it further, felt her pussy muscles tighten around his cock in a strangle-hold, and groaned as Dara arched her body towards him. He flicked the nub, a steady continuous tempo that sent her panting over the edge five seconds before he reached his own climax to a rumbling accompaniment above.

He cradled her body beneath him, motioned to pull away but Dara stopped him, wrapping her arms around his back and holding him close.

"Don't go yet." Her third order of the day. Now that was more like it. "What are you grinning at, smart aleck?"

He twined a long curly lock of black hair around a finger as he peered at her for one long silent moment before he blurted, "Marry me, Dare."

CHAPTER 17

Sam all but spluttered as she struggled to sit up beneath him, but Caution caught her wrists, held her in place.

"Not so fast."

Dara, he's your man. Get me out of this!

"He belongs to you now. You're on your own."

She gritted her teeth against the familiar smug voice and glanced past Caution, at her surroundings, searching for her partner in crime, but didn't see one sign of the hussy. Sam wondered if They would have had just as definitive and cruel an answer as Dara's, and was surprised the woman hadn't hurled the empty tea cup from the railing at Caution's head while he and Sam were getting busy.

What was she supposed to say?

"Dare?"

"Yes?" she croaked.

"I don't get you. It's not that hard a question."

"It is for me."

"I thought we'd gotten past all the games."

"If by games, you mean my career, my independence—"

"Oh bull. You know exactly what I mean and it has nothing to do with those. I love you because of your career and independence, not in spite of them."

"It's not the right time, Caution."

He jerked up to a sitting position, his sudden motion accented by a thunderclap above as he stared down at her. "I didn't mean right this instant. Say yes, and we'll set a

date. Whatever's

comfortable for you, within reason, of course."

"Whatever's comfortable" wasn't a part of her vocabulary anymore, hadn't been for a long time. Yet, he was being so darned agreeable, Sam was finding it hard to say no. She averted her glance in time to catch Dara standing several feet away with her back toward the railing, staring down at them.

Sam felt incredibly exposed and vulnerable, tried to cover herself with a flap of the sleeping bag but Caution stopped her, splayed his fingers against her flat belly, circling her navel with a thumb.

"Can't we talk about this later?"

"Do you have some place you need to be, besides in my arms?"

"Yes...no! I mean...Caution, please—"

"Please what?" He leaned in, circling the inner shell of an ear with his tongue, eliciting shivers that she tried to control but couldn't.

She wanted nothing more than to say yes and lose herself in his embrace, to snuggle against the safe haven of his hard smooth chest. But she didn't want to pollute the waters with any more emotional minefields than were already there. "Please, we need to get inside before we get soaked."

"So we'll get a little wet." He smiled right before the sky opened up.

Sam chuckled, raising herself up on her knees to put on her jersey and rush for the glass doors. Caution followed close on her heels, struggling into his jeans as she got the door open. They stumbled into the house together, both hysterically laughing as they shook rainwater from their hair like wet dogs.

"I told you so," Sam said.

"So you did." He advanced and Sam backed up, shaking a finger at him.

"Ah, ah, a—"

Someone knocked at the front door and Caution arched a brow at her as if to ask "Who the hell could that be?"

"You'd better get that."

"I don't believe this." He mumbled as he headed for the door. "It would serve whoever it is out there right if I left them to—" The words froze on his lips when he opened the door and saw his mother standing on the front porch, just closing her umbrella, holding it over the railing and shaking off the excess water.

"It's about time. I've been out here for ages."

"Mom...what are you doing here?"

"That's a fine greeting, *m'ijo*."

Caution didn't blink. "How did you find out where I was?" He stepped aside to let her in the house and the woman took off a stylish micro-fiber trench and imperiously held

it and her wet umbrella out to him. Sam watched as Caution bit back what she knew was a curse, took the coat and hung it on the mahogany rack adjacent to the front door. He leaned the umbrella beside it.

"And in answer to your insolent question, I spoke to your...grandfather."

Caution looked doubtful that Brody would ever be persuaded to give Reina any sort of information that would lead her to his grandson, and Reina elaborated.

"After much prodding on my part, I was finally able to get the information out of him."

Sam wouldn't have believed it, except that Brody knew Caution and Dara were together and probably wanted to ruin their little romantic tryst by siccing Caution's mother on them. That was the only explanation, and she was sure Brody had gotten a lot of enjoyment picturing the scene when he told Reina where her son and Dara Kelly had gone.

"I suppose I don't have to ask what you two were up to." Reina shot an accusatory look Sam's way, and for the second time that morning she felt cheap and dirty. She folded her arms across her breasts as if for protection.

"Actually, that's none of your business," Caution said.

Sam applauded and did a standing ovation in her head.

"Be that as it may..." Reina drifted by her son into the living room, took a seat on the country floral sofa, spine straight and rigid as she settled her pocketbook in her lap, then glanced up at Caution from her seat. "Well, aren't you going to offer me something to drink? Coffee, tea? I am a guest, after all."

Not for long, Sam hoped.

"We got up not too long ago, and nothing's made yet."

"Certainly you have some coffee."

"I'll go put some on," Sam offered, eager for an excuse to leave as she rushed into the kitchen, regretfully leaving Caution at his mother's mercy.

She got the instant coffee down from one of the cupboards, scooped a healthy serving into the coffee maker then gravitated towards the threshold to shamelessly eavesdrop.

* * * *

Caution watched Sam's round, shapely ass beneath the green Philly's jersey as she switched out of the room to the kitchen, and wanted nothing more than to get down on his hands and knees and follow her like the hungry, wanting subject he was.

"Do you know how this looks, you coming up here to *enjoy* yourself on a vacation while your brother is rotting away in jail?"

"Don't you think you're being a little melodramatic?"

"Melodramatic? You've all but deserted him in his time of need."

"Mami, what do you want me to do? I put up the bail, he j—"

"Oh, posh. One thing has nothing to do with the other."

"When you're through with your ranting, you'll realize that short of defending him myself at his trial, there's nothing else I can do."

"You could be a little more supportive, Caution. He is your brother."

His brother whom his mother had never failed to staunchly defend, right or wrong. His brother who had gotten all the attention from their mother since the beginning.

He was an adult, a successful businessman running his grandfather's enterprise, and tripling its revenue in less than a year of taking over. Yet, with his mother, he was still the bitter young man who'd watched his pregnant fiancée walk out of his life years ago. With her, he would always be the seven-year-old boy who'd taken the blame when his brother had broken one of his mother's favorite shopping-spree vases, rewarded with a spanking that had left him unable to sit down for a week.

Caution bit back a retort. He was a grown man now and needed to get over his jealousy. He'd long accepted that Dawson had been, still was, and would always be their mother's favorite, and he had been their father's. But their father was long gone, and Grampa Brody had yet to forgive Reina for taking away his only son.

Speaking of which, Caution was dangerously near some uncharitable thoughts and feelings himself, and wanted his mother as far away from him as she could get before he vented. He sighed and ran a palm down his face. "What do you want from me?"

"You could start being a little more sympathetic. The boy is rotting in prison, after all."

"So you mentioned. But I'd hardly call it rotting."

"Don't be smart. And you know exactly what I mean."

"I'll see what I can do about getting him private representation."

"The best."

"Yeah, sure."

"Good." Reina stood, looping her pocket book strap over her shoulder.

"Does that mean you're happy now?"

"Not quite." She stepped close, reached up to put a palm against a cheek, smiling.

Caution knew what was coming before she opened her mouth.

"I'm a little short on cash."

"I thought you might be."

"Caution, don't be fresh," she said. "Besides, I'm you're mother. I took care of you when you weren't able to take care of yourself. It's the least you can do."

The least he could do was kick her out and tell her never to darken his doorstep

again. Or was that the most and best he could do? "How much are we talking?"

"Just something to tide me over. Five thousand should do for now."

Sometimes he thought his grandfather was right, that his mother was a gold digger and had only married his and Dawson's father for what he could give her. Between her constant bickering over their father's bargain basement mentality and their father's claims of her over-spending, Caution's mother was the epitome of breeding and entitlement. She felt that every material thing she'd received during her marriage was her due.

If Brody knew what he was about to do, the old man would have his head. He not only hadn't forgiven Reina for killing his son, but swore she had done it for the oldest reason in the book: avarice. To Brody's mind, any money made from his son's death—whether direct funds or Caution's earnings—was blood money, ill-gotten gains that Reina did not deserve.

Caution wasn't so sure his grandfather was wrong. Reina had gone through more than a quarter of a million dollars of life insurance in a little less than two years. The stipends she'd gotten from Caution since then were compliments of excellent investments he'd made with some of the money before she'd exhausted the funds her husband had left to his boys.

"You'll have it in your account by the time you get home."

"Good."

* * * *

Sam was not too crazy about Caution's mother. She'd realized it at the hospital during that first meeting, but now she knew for sure that she didn't like Reina Gonzalez-Foster. And if this weren't enough on its own, the woman clearly reminded her of Pamela Harris.

She wondered if that had been the attraction between Caution and Pamela, her resemblance to his mother, except that Sam was sure *this* would have put Caution off rather than infatuated him since he seemed more exasperated with his mother than enchanted.

She tried to picture Caution's beautiful and petite mother wielding a gun and shooting her husband dead, or even behind the wheel of a late-model Infiniti trying to run her down, and scared herself with how easily the images came to her, how accurate they seemed. Just as likely and accurate as Pamela behind the wheel of a car speeding at Dara.

She had no point of reference, no way of discounting either woman, because she didn't know them well enough to gauge whether they were capable of murder. What she did know, she didn't like. The cold, hard facts pointed to people out in the world who didn't like Dara Kelly, enemies—both men and women—who had one reason or another for wanting to see her dead.

Poor Dara, surrounded by cutthroats and snakes.

Poor Caution, surrounded by unappreciative takers and users.

His own brother and mother saw him as their exclusive piggy bank, and Dara

treated him like her personal sex toy to turn off and on at will. The only person in his life who seemed remotely on the man's side was his grandfather, and we all knew what Sam thought of him.

She would have questioned the sagacity of leaving Tater in the care of a racist, but for the sweet and caring attitude he seemed to reserve for her five-year-old sensibilities alone. She hadn't been around them often, but so far, Sam hadn't heard a curse or narrow-minded remark leave his mouth when Tayte was near.

But Sam knew; all the signs were there: the hateful attitude, the snide remarks. The man just didn't like her. And that was all right, because just as she didn't like Reina, she wasn't too crazy about Brody Foster either.

Sam paused on the threshold of the living room a moment longer, in no particular hurry for Reina to notice her. In fact, she was more than happy to wait where she was for the woman to leave. But the woman spotted her.

"Ah, Dara, my coffee. Pity it took you so long. I was just leaving."

Sam sidled over and stood just behind Caution, using his tall, broad body like a shield. "No problem at all. It won't go to waste." She'd drink the entire pot herself if she had to. Indeed, she figured she needed the pick-me-up after this visit.

Reina stood on her toes, soft cheek upturned, and Caution leaned in to peck it. "Enjoy the rest of your vacation, *m'ijo*."

"I'll try." Caution walked her to the door and helped her on with her coat.

"Give me a call when you're back in the city."

"Will do. And drive safe."

Reina opened the door and stepped outside onto the porch, sweeping a supercilious gaze over Sam one more time before turning to go.

Caution didn't waste any time closing and locking the door behind her. "Sheesh!"

"C'mon, be nice. She's your mother."

"I am being nice. Actually, more than nice. She just exasperates me sometimes." Well, she did a little more than that to Sam and she was sure the same held for Dara. "Now..." Caution rubbed his hands together, a devilish gleam in his eyes as he advanced. "Where were we?"

Sam leaned against the kitchen doorjamb, legs crossed at the ankles, one arm folded under her breasts as she lifted the coffee cup to her lips and tested the heat of the black liquid.

"That's scalding hot, isn't it?"

"That's why I waited in the kitchen so long. Of course I didn't want to give it to your mother like *this*."

"Of course not." Caution stopped in front of her. "So, you never answered me."

"Gosh, you're like a dog with a bone."

"When I know what I want."

"Let me ask you something..." Sam paused, watched Caution arch one lush brow and gathered her courage. "Have you mentioned your little proposal to Reina?"

"Why would I?"

"She's your mother."

"I'll break the news to her when you say yes."

"No need to unnecessarily ruffle her feathers, is that it?"

"You got it."

"Is that how your brother did things?"

"Why are you bringing Dawson into this? Besides trying to change the subject?"

Sam shrugged, saw his eyes narrow to slits as he looked at her, and thought she was this close to getting on his bad side, a side she hadn't yet seen. She wondered if Dara had. "I'm just curious as to how you guys operate."

"I can't speak for my brother. But I don't *operate*."

"You're insulted."

"Wouldn't you be?"

Sam put down her cup, closed the space between them, wrapped her arms around his waist, and peered up at him with what she hoped was an earnest look. "I'm sorry. Forgive me."

Caution gawked, and she playfully punched his ribs.

"Smart-ass."

"I have to keep up with you."

Sam eased a hand down to the crotch of his jeans and caressed the firm bulge there, smiling with satisfaction at his sharp intake of breath. "You do just fine in that department."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

He leaned down, kissed her hard on the mouth before scooping her up into his arms and walking to the bedroom. "A little practice never hurt though."

CHAPTER 18

She'd lost him.

Dara had been rejecting the reality for a while, in denial of the situation, yet her deprivation a plain fact glaring her in the face every day since her murder.

She needed to face the fact that she was never going to get Caution back.

Too much had happened since her death—to Caution, to her, to Sam. There would be no going back—not physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

It would be the epitome of cruel for Them to make her get Caution and another woman together, make her *watch* him with another woman, then not let Sam and Caution wind up together after the relationship had been nurtured with such care and pain. But who was to say They weren't cruel? Cruel seemed to be Their middle names, proven time and again in Dara's life when They had taken away people she loved, people for whom she cared. What was it to Them to take just one more thing, to keep it within arm's reach and torment her with its unattainability?

Do you not think you are being a bit cynical, judging Others too harshly?

Was that a rhetorical question or did They really want an answer with the unrelenting state of mind she was in?

Dara opened her mouth to speak, then just as quickly snapped it shut. If she spoke now and didn't hold her peace, They'd probably zap her from here to eternity without a second thought. Let's face it, she didn't have anything good to say about Them or to Them, and was barely able to hold in her anger at everything she had lost starting with her father, her life, and her lover.

She swallowed hard at the sudden rush of emotion when she remembered her dad. The reverberation of his laughter when she and her big brothers ganged up and relentlessly tickled him, the boom of his voice when he shouted at them to stop pillow fighting way past their bedtime, the sincerity in his eyes when he told her what a pretty little girl she was despite her rough and tough tomboy act.

Dara smiled now at one of the fondest and last memories she had of her father. The man had worked six days a week for most of Dara's young life in Pennsylvania, sometimes seven at one full-time job and a part-time job that often seemed as full as his first.

Dara had seen how hard the man worked to keep food on the table for her mother, her five brothers and herself, as well as clothes on their backs. But if you looked in the dictionary under "quality time" you'd see a picture of her father—tired, but invariably smiling—next to the phrase. When the man was home, he was home, and did whatever it took to share himself with each and every member of his family.

On her seventh birthday her daddy had made the supreme sacrifice, treating her to a special father-daughter outing, putting aside an entire Labor Day weekend—time that, even at her young age, Dara knew he could ill-afford to take.

He took her to a festival of balloons in upstate New York. A day full of arts and crafts, kiddy rides and games, indoor and outdoor grilling, and funnel cakes and ice cream, all amidst thousands of visitors waiting for the main events: the launchings of balloons.

Six launches were scheduled during the course of the weekend, and Dara's father took pictures as several crews inflated their balloons. He shared in the preparation and excitement even though he and Dara couldn't make the actual trip up, because nothing compared to an actual take-off. The beauty of early morning flights was awesome as dozens of balloons gracefully glided over the valley, the thrill of a mass evening launch a real crowd pleaser.

Her father had opened her up that weekend, exposed her to the wonder, the thrill of hot air ballooning—and Dara had never forgotten it.

Less than a year later, her father was dead, but ever since she'd gone to her first and only festival of balloons, Dara had always wanted to take a balloon ride, and thanked her father for everything she'd experienced, everything he'd shown her that day.

Dara frowned as she glanced skyward, thinking that They had given her as much as they had taken away. She just hated to admit her greed, her dissatisfaction. She wanted more—more time to do, to see, to feel, to love. She wanted more Caution.

It had taken every ounce of restraint in her to keep from asserting herself, making her presence known before Sam and Caution had consummated their relationship. Standing there like a dirty peeping Tom, silently watching them make love, had been nauseating enough, not to mention feeling the final nail go into her elusive coffin, confirmation that she could never return things to the way they had been.

Dara paced the bedroom, wringing her hands, biting her bottom lip, eyes searching the bedroom for something to throw. She was desperate and sick with wanting, not having realized that someone who wasn't could feel so deeply, ache so sharply.

Dara had been clinging to the thin threads of her existence with everything she had these last few weeks. She sensed the futility, sensed her strength steadily, daily dwindling, the earth-energy she'd been harnessing since her death slowly tapering. Soon it would be down to nothing. Then what? Would They take her, this time for good?

Dammit, she didn't want to go, didn't want to let *him* go!

Is he not much better off with her than he was with you?

Another loaded question. They were full of 'em, as well as other things.

She had to fight again to keep her cool and not answer right away or she'd have said something she'd later regret. She was grateful They hadn't asked if she were better off dead. She didn't know what she would have said to that one.

"That's a matter of opinion," Dara bit out.

Melodic laughter was her only response, and she wondered if she'd ever get over this feeling of being the butt of some big cosmic joke, when her death had been far from a laughing matter to her. She didn't see *why* They found her existence so humorous.

We are not laughing at you, child.

Yeah, yeah, They were only laughing with her. Well, Dara wasn't laughing, and if Sam and Caution didn't get back here soon from their little romantic excursion, she would scream.

You have done well, Dara Kelly.

Where had that come from?

Dara's heart flipped with the implications. Were They through with her, or so thoroughly fed up with her recalcitrance that They were ready to cast her off?

You will soon be rewarded, child.

There'd been a time in her life when she might have welcomed such news. But since her murder, everything that came out of Their mouths only seemed like another death sentence.

What did "rewarded" mean, and when did They plan to spring this "honor" on her?

* * * *

Sam stumbled into the master bedroom, giggling as she tried to close the door against Caution's stalking form, but his reflexes were too quick and he managed to slip half his body through the gap. Not that she really wanted to lock him out; she just needed a few minutes alone to regroup from her latest shock. "Caution, c'mon!"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to do."

She chuckled, opened the door and let him cross the threshold.

"You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No, not at all," she blurted. Truth was, she was having second, third and fourth thoughts, but not about him or her promise to him. No, her thoughts ran more along the lines of whether she'd be around long enough to be with Caution the way they both envisioned. Or would Tarrent and his co-conspirators manage to take her out before she told Caution how much she loved him, how much she needed and wanted him in her life?

Caution slid his arms around her waist, lifted her so that her soft center was

aligned against his insistent arousal. "Sure?"

"Positive." She leaned in and gave him a deep, slow kiss, mating her tongue with his, and ground her hips against him as she tasted the champagne and juice that they'd earlier shared still lingering on his lips. She pulled back to stare at him, incredulous but happy that he really belonged to her, or at least that he soon would. "I just want to spend some time relaxing and freshening up for our night on the town."

"I would say we have our whole life together to relax and freshen up, but you've got a point." He leaned in to give her one more kiss, holding her tight for a long moment before releasing her to stand on her own. "It's only four o'clock. You're going to spend the next three hours freshening up?"

"I did mention relaxing."

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "I can think of much better ways to relax."

"That's not relaxing!" She playfully punched his shoulder, laughing as she tried to close the door.

Caution stopped her once more, parking his foot in the door, and skating his fingers down an arm until he clasped her free hand. "Can't wait to see the results."

"Neither can I. Now go so I can get started." Sam grinned and shoved his chest, and he moved his foot, finally letting her close the door. She leaned against it for a long moment, listening to his deep velvety laughter drift down the hallway, garnering energy from her momentary solitude and the solid oak door separating them. An hour or two to herself, that's all she needed to be ready for another go-round with him.

Sam closed her eyes and remembered their last "go-round" before leaving at four this morning. She touched herself, imagining his lips as they had worked down there, insatiable and stirring embers in the pit of her stomach that she hadn't known endured.

"You look like you had a good time."

Sam started, and felt a flush of color warming her cheeks as she opened her eyes to see Dara staring at her from across the bedroom. "It was nice."

An understatement if she'd ever made one.

Caution had taken her hot air ballooning and the voyage was like no other experience she'd ever had. Breathtaking, tranquil, exciting, infinitely memorable, and nothing close to the "small trip" at which Caution had earlier hinted.

She'd thought the region beautiful from the ground, but nothing compared to watching the sunrise while floating above the countryside. From the sky—two- or three-thousand feet up—the lakes, trees and mountain peaks were all awe-inspiring, and well worth the pre-sunrise drive to the prearranged spot.

Now back on solid ground, she felt like she had to defend herself against the indictment flaring out of Dara's eyes. Or was that just her guilty conscience?

After all, she had taken the woman's man. And today, she'd taken the relationship to the next level when he'd proposed to her again, high over Lake George, and she'd finally said yes.

"He's relentless, Dare!" Sam blurted. "Honestly, I don't know how you held out so long and refused his proposals."

"It wasn't easy."

"Why didn't you want to?"

"Marry him?"

Sam nodded, coming closer, easing herself down on the edge of the bed as Dara did.

Dara shrugged. "Because he wanted me."

Sam gaped. "And you can't imagine anyone wanting you?"

"Don't sound so shocked. I'm not the easiest person in the world to get along with."

"No!"

"Don't be sarcastic either, smart-aleck."

Sam watched as Dara cracked a smile, still feeling her way around the older woman and her mysterious ways.

She wanted to know so much about her, what had shaped her, made her the relentless, rough-and-tumble bounty hunter that she was. She wanted to touch her, frustrated that she couldn't reach out and feel Dara's hand in hers, touch her shoulder or brush a cheek.

She was sure that if Dara had known she was having such soft and maternal feelings for her, she'd probably spit and curse.

Sam smiled at the image.

"Having a flashback to the other day?"

Sam stared at Dara, saw the leer and instantly knew to what Dara was referring, just not which "other day" she was talking about. She and Caution had been going at it pretty hot and heavy—in the shower, on the kitchen counter, in the car on their way to a lake for a picnic and some swimming—since that first day on the deck before being so rudely interrupted by the thunderstorm and Reina's arrival.

She felt her flush intensify at the idea that Dara had been with them, *watching* them every step of the way—every kiss, every caress, every moan and groan of ecstasy. The thought was unsettling.

"Actually, I was thinking about...the ballooning. What a wonderful time we had," Sam finally said. "Have you ever been?"

"No."

Sam launched into a narrative about the day's events—from Caution's early morning wake-up call when she'd grumpily gotten out of bed to prepare for the day, to the drive down to the launch site, to the inflation process that had wholly fascinated her, to the exhilarating take-off and landing.

She realized a bit too late that she was rambling and that Dara was almost totally silent except for several brief grunts and clipped "uh-huh's" scattered throughout Sam's monologue. Sam peered at the older woman, finally recognizing her mood for what it was: jealousy.

God, she was an idiot!

"Sounds like you had a great time."

"We, uh...we did."

Dara closed her eyes and took a deep breath, opened her eyes after a long silent moment to stare at Sam, then smiled, shocking the younger woman. "I'm glad," she murmured.

"You are?"

"Don't push your luck. I said I'm glad."

Sam acknowledged the teasing tone, rather than the harsh edge she was expecting. She saw the smile on Dara's face *and* in her eyes.

A sad smile, she thought, sorrow apparent, soul deep and pervasive. Poor woman. Sam wondered how she handled the loss.

Easy. Like you, she has no choice.

But at least Sam hadn't gotten so short the end of the stick. At the beginning of this little adventure, her new life, she'd thought she had. God, or whomever They were, had royally shafted her by letting her die at her husband's hands, as well as letting her innocent baby die. Now she knew there were worse things than betrayal and death.

"Have you been drinking?"

"Huh?"

Dara squinted at her like a mother whose child has broken a curfew to go out drinking, drugging, and partying. She came closer and sniffed the air around Sam. "You're drunk!"

"Only a little tipsy."

"A little tipsy, huh." Dara smirked.

"We had a little champagne." Actually, she had drank more than a little. The pilot had popped open a magnum at the end of the flight and poured them each a glass. He said it was a tradition.

Caution had briefly balked, requesting juice to make a toast, but Sam wouldn't have it, and she relentlessly needled him until he finally gave in and had a glass with her to properly toast their engagement. Sam had finished Caution's drink and the balance of the bottle by herself.

She collapsed back on the bed now, giggling. She felt soooo giddy and happy!

"You're going to pay for that in the morning."

"I know. And the night's not even over yet." She sat up to look at Dara. "I swear,

if the romantic ride hadn't made me say yes, then the champagne would have."

"And it has nothing to do with how great a guy Caution Foster is." Dara grinned.

"There's that."

"So, you guys are really going to go through with it, huh?"

Sam nodded and winced as if prepared for a blow. "Are you angry?"

"Why should I be?"

Sam just stared at her.

"Look, Sam, he's more yours than mine. Especially now. So...you guys have a nice life."

"Are you going somewhere?"

Dara shrugged, uncertainty veiling her expression.

"You can't leave me until we find out who tried to kill me and we put away Tarrent for killing you."

"I don't intend to."

Sam looked at her, waiting as if for a punch line. When Dara didn't elaborate, Sam stood and headed for the bathroom. She paused and turned at the threshold. "Dare, were you with us when...every time we—?"

"Just that first time."

Sam nodded as if in agreement, smiled, then continued into the bathroom.

She missed Dara already, unable to understand the sudden dread that had seeped into her bones at the idea of never talking to the woman's ghost again.

CHAPTER 19

Diego reached for Wylie's firm, warm body in his sleep, and was surprised when he found it and Wylie reached for him too. He opened his eyes, glanced directly into the slightly younger man's baby-blues and smirked.

"You expected me to be gone, didn't you?" Wylie chuckled. "You are so cynical, not to mention transparent."

Diego silently turned and moved into his arms, spooning his body against Wylie's. He didn't respond, didn't know how to tell Wylie that he was right and Diego didn't trust him.

Despite the several weeks they had been seeing each other. Despite dinner dates and movie dates and play dates where Wylie had no qualms about showing his affection—holding Diego's hand, or kissing him on the lips—when they were out. Despite all of this, Diego still didn't trust Wylie. But he feared he was falling for the guy in a mean way.

He loved the man's sleek, lean body, his suave manners, his rich tenor voice, his sincerity. They worked together like a thumb and a middle finger, and if it weren't for everything that Diego had found out about Wylie's past, or the shaky way they had started out, he'd have believed he'd found his soul mate.

Except that he didn't trust Wylie. And he knew that Wylie knew he didn't trust him. Which made his feelings that much more treacherous—to himself as well as to Wylie.

"So, what do you want to do today?" Wylie whispered in his ear. He wrapped his arms tight around Diego, and snuggled as close as he could without climbing inside Diego's skin.

"We don't have to do anything special."

"But I like doing special things with you."

Diego turned in Wylie's arms to face him, lightly resting a palm against the other man's left hip as Wylie entwined his legs with Diego's. He wanted to tell Wylie that being in his company was special enough for him but the words wouldn't leave his lips, stuck somewhere between his heart and his vocal cords. He wanted to tell the man that he'd been checking up on him, and he knew his history. He knew that Wylie wasn't a "business man" but a very well paid male escort, although his career didn't matter to Diego.

But he didn't say anything, didn't want to give himself, or the depth of his mistrust, away.

Wylie had been nothing but attentive since they'd been together, making time for Diego during the week, even cooking dinner for Diego at least three times a week. Either that, or taking him out to dinner if Diego was able to pull himself away from his tracking activities—the least of which included checking up on one Wylie Sennet, aka Guillermo Sentorini.

Diego closed his eyes against the name but couldn't escape it any more than Wylie had been able to. The electronic age made running difficult, and sooner or later the past always caught up with you, even a smooth operator like Wylie.

He'd started seeing Wylie to get the truth and find out why he'd come onto him that night when he'd drugged him. Other than getting the prerequisite "You were just so irresistible I couldn't help myself," among other lines, Diego hadn't been able to get any more information. He'd had to do some digging on his own and wasn't entirely surprised with what he had found.

Initially, he hadn't come up with much on Wylie, and it took him a couple of days before checking into variations of the name and doing some leg work in Wylie's childhood stomping grounds had yielded pay dirt, and Diego found what he was looking for.

Wylie had had several scrapes with the law back in Chicago as a juvenile. Then he seemed to disappear off the radar before re-emerging several years later in New York, ostensibly as a "freelance consultant."

Sounded good on paper, but Diego knew better. He knew that ambiguity, evasion and sticking as close to the truth as possible without really telling it was the mark of a good liar.

He dug a little deeper, tapping some contacts on the police force, and getting information about the missing years—from age sixteen to current day—between Chicago and New York.

A life on the street followed after his parents kicked him out of the house. They had had to bail him out of trouble one too many times for getting caught with his hands in the drug jar. Years of hustling followed this, penny ante stuff until a friend told him about another, less risky way to make good money: exotic dancing. He'd stayed at the exotic dancing gig for a few years, garnering contacts and matriculating at NYU in the evenings.

By the time Wylie got his degree in business administration, the exotic dancing had segued into working as a male escort. Wylie was already well-established and

making paper providing his services through an underground but well-known network to those whom knew the "right people".

Diego had gotten a hold of some photographs from Wylie's exotic dancing days and a mug shot to confirm he had the right man.

He remembered when he'd first received the fax from Chicago, incredulously glancing from the picture on the fax to a copy of Wylie's driver's license. Guillermo Sentorini and Wylie Sennet. One and the same. And the guy hadn't aged much in the ensuing nine years since leaving home, didn't look too many years older at his current twenty-five than he had at sixteen.

Except for the drug dealing, exotic dancing, and two-year age gap, he and Wylie could have run together as teens. They had gone to the same university and had majored in the same subject. And they'd never met until that night he'd found Dara in the alley near unconsciousness. Diego didn't want to put himself into the same league as Wylie's clientele—desperate single matrons with money to spare for the privilege of having a sexy boy toy displayed on their arm for a night out at one of their many altruistic and aristocratic functions. He didn't have any money, any connections, or anything that Wylie could possibly want.

Except you. Isn't it possible that he likes you for yourself, the way you like him?

Diego didn't believe this as much as he tried, years of rejection from his own blood as well as tired lines from those who claimed to love him, inuring him to all the good that he saw in Wylie, highlighting only the way they had met.

"Tell you what," Wylie said now, gently forking his hands through Diego's hair. "I'll catch a shower while you make up your mind."

Diego turned just in time to see Wylie's tight rear end as he got out of bed and strutted towards the bathroom down the hall.

Every day that they were together, he found something else for which to love Wylie Sennet, the man's spontaneity and passion being paramount.

Wylie didn't think any more about swaggering bare-assed naked around his own opulent surroundings on the upper east side than he did about doing the same in Diego's modest brownstone apartment in Chelsea. Same as when they were out. Unlike Jeff, he didn't shy away from public displays of affection. In fact, he initiated them, where Diego was still too gun-shy.

The man was so freehearted and open about everything, except his past. He wished that Wylie were as uninhibited with the truth as he was with his body.

Diego understood his silence, but he still wanted Wylie to level with him about more than just the college he had attended and the town where he had grown up.

Wylie's cell phone purred on the bedside table and Diego thought twice about calling him from the bathroom, then decided against it. On the second purr, he set to answer it, leaping to the other side of the queen size bed before Wylie's answering service could pick it up. Breathless, he glanced at the digital readout, noted the number, pressed "talk" on the handset, and gaped when the other voice immediately lit into him about not

showing up for some prearranged lunch appointment that Wylie had evidently forgotten to keep.

The voice was decidedly male, and decidedly someone with whom Diego was well acquainted. Confused, he pressed "off" on the handset.

By the time Wylie came out of the shower, white terry towel hanging low on his trim hips, Diego had already replaced the phone to the bedside table where he'd gotten it. He was undecided about whether or not to let Wylie know he'd gotten the call.

"You had a call while you were in the shower," Diego blurted at the same instance the cell rang. "I wasn't able to catch it, figured they'd try you back."

Wylie smiled as he reached for his cellular, mouthed "thanks" before pressing "talk".

Diego watched him closely, tried to decipher his mood, a slight tightening of the man's jaw the only indication of his annoyance.

Wylie winked at Diego before turning his back to leave. He closed the door behind him as he went into the living room and Diego got out of the bed and went to the door to politely listen in. After several seconds of quiet "uh-huhs" and muffled "I understands" from Wylie's end, Diego gave up, frustrated that the man hadn't given anything away; not that he'd actually expected him to. Even when they were out together and Wylie showed tenderness and appreciation, he was nothing if not discreet about it.

Diego heard Wylie make his way back to the room and had a couple of seconds to dash back and leap into the bed before Wylie opened the door, sporting a disarming grin. He came to the bed and sat beside Diego, gently rubbing a thigh. Diego had a feeling he knew what was coming. Wylie had broken dates before, not too often but enough for Diego to read his frame of mind from his expression.

"Promise you won't be angry with me?"

"When have I ever been angry with you?"

Wylie leaned in for a kiss, slid a hand to the back of Diego's head and pulled him close. They melded tongues and lips for so long, Diego thought the man was saying good-bye forever. He was breathless by the time Wylie pulled away to stare at him with those soulful blue eyes.

"Got a last-minute business lunch I can't get out of. Can you take a raincheck?"

"No prob." Diego watched as Wylie walked around the room, retrieving his clothes—white Oxford shirt flung across the Chippendale chair, navy cuffed slacks on the oak headboard, socks on the floor, tie across the Tiffany lamp shade—before he stepped into a pair of clean boxers from Diego's bureau.

The benefits of having a lover who wore the same size he did, Diego thought. Wylie dressed in silence, and Diego took pleasure in observing every lithe bend and stretch before Wylie finally stood from putting on a pair of expensive Italian leather shoes, and came back over to him, tie draped over one palm. "I like the way you do the knot."

Diego smiled as he left the bed, took the proffered red silk material and slid it around the collar of Wylie's shirt. He took special care in doing the knot, working slowly, savoring the tangy citrus scent of Wylie's cologne.

"You keep that up, and I won't be able to leave you."

"Keep what up?"

"Looking so tempting."

If only he could tempt the truth out of him. "You'll leave," Diego murmured, saw Wylie arch an eyebrow, and added, "Duty calls." He leaned in to peck Wylie on the lips, but Wylie put a hand behind his head and pulled him close for a deep soul kiss.

"I'll call you when I'm free. Keep tonight open."

"Hmmm, I don't know. If a better offer comes along..."

Wylie laughed and pulled him into his arms. "No offer's going to be better than my homemade lasagna and chocolate mousse."

Diego wanted to laugh, but knew that Wylie was right.

"*Ciao*, handsome."

Diego walked him to the door, already dressed and flying down the stairs behind him in his head. As soon as he had the door locked he ran to the window in the living room, waited until he saw Wylie exit, get into his red Porsche parked at the curb, and smoothly pull away.

Diego ran to the cordless in his bedroom, quickly dialed the number he'd remembered from Wylie's cell, listened as someone picked up the phone, and identified the establishment as a restaurant Diego vaguely recognized as being in the area. He asked for the exact location, thanked the man once he'd given him the address and hung up.

He'd been checking up on Wylie behind his back, sure, but this was the first time he contemplated outright following him.

He guessed it had to come sooner or later. Especially after that call.

What did Wylie Sennet have to do with Randall Tarrent?

* * * *

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Sennet?"

"Arriving for our lunch date?"

If they weren't in public, Randall might have slugged him right there. He might do it still, and wipe that smug look off A.G.'s face.

Randall stood from the frou-frou burgundy Queen Anne chair in the waiting area of *Giannini's*, stalked over to Wylie at the entrance, caught him by an arm and dragged him towards the men's room several yards to the left of the restaurant's currently unattended intake desk.

"Do you mind?" Wylie jerked his arm free and straightened his jacket as soon as they were inside and the door closed behind them.

Randall checked the stalls, then stalked back to Wylie. "I damn well d—"

"Would you mind lowering your voice? We're in a respectable establishment."

"Fuck respectable. I'm two seconds from your ass, A.G."

"I appreciate your play on words, Mr. Tarrent, and we've had a good laugh at your allusions to my career and American pop culture. But I asked you once before not to call me that. I'd appreciate it if you'd respect my wishes."

"Ooh-hoo, I'm scared. And what's the little A.G. going to do if I don't?" Randall chuckled, then instantly turned serious before Wylie could respond. "I know what you're up to and I don't like it."

"Would that be staying close to the mark?"

"Staying close is one thing. But you two seem just a little too cozy."

"That's the point, isn't it?"

"Sure you're not getting soft? Or should I say softer."

Wylie smirked and Randall grabbed him by the lapels and pushed him against the wall. A.G. was small, at five-eight, maybe five-nine tops and one-fifty, much smaller than Randall, but he didn't flinch. Randall didn't necessarily like that about the fairy, but he respected the kid's pluck.

Damn waste of male flesh if you asked him.

Wylie looked at him pointedly. "Once again, I ask: Do. You. Mind?"

Randall took his time releasing A.G., tried to stare the younger man down, but didn't succeed despite turning on his death glare. Mentally, he gave the fairy brownie points for sticking to his guns.

"Mr. Tarrent, I assure you I'm doing my job. You're concerned for no reason."

"Just seems like you're enjoying your job a little too much."

"No more than you enjoy yours."

Randall noticed him avert his eyes for the first time since his arrival, and prepared to pounce on the weakness, to hit him where he lived.

"I don't think our customer will be so nonchalant about your attitude. In fact, I think she'll be downright pissed that you're in bed with the enemy."

"Getting in bed with the enemy is in my job description." Wylie grinned. "I'm pretty good at it too."

"I'll bet you are." Pretty boy was getting too close, probably was already in it up to his eyeballs and just putting on a front for Randall's benefit. "Have you found out anything useful during your bed-hopping?"

"I'll give you a full report as soon as the customer arrives. That way, I won't have to say it more than once."

"Hmph." Randall turned, opened the door and left the men's room, fully expecting

Wylie to follow. When he didn't hear the kid behind him, he turned back, barely noticing some guy, baseball cap low on his face, standing at the phone cubicle outside the men's room. Recognition simmered as Wylie came out of the men's room, and when he briefly glanced at the guy before passing him, Randall was sure.

He pushed by Wylie, stuck his hand under the bill and flipped off the guy's cap. "I knew it was you," he bit out.

Wylie turned, widening his eyes at Diego.

"Don't act surprised, A.G." Randall turned back to him, then grabbed Diego's arm. "C'mon." He pushed him back into the men's room, not bothering to check for Wylie because he knew the little fairy wouldn't let his boyfriend too far out of sight.

Randall checked stalls again just to be sure, then ordered Wylie to close and lock the door behind him.

"We don't have to do this. He doesn't know anything."

"He knew enough to come here." Randall peered at Diego who glared back and jutted his chin. He'd had about enough of these smug and tough little cake boys. "You follow him?"

"No. I always eat here."

Randall reared back ready to hit him and froze right before Wylie put a hand out to grab him. "Don't worry. I won't mess up your pretty boy's face. I've got a better idea." Randall pulled out his cell with one hand and his gun with the other, pointed it at Diego. "Take his weapon, while I get ready to settle this once and for all."

* * * *

Diego had known all along he couldn't trust Wylie but had never expected this. He'd wanted to believe he was jumping to conclusions, that there was a logical explanation for Wylie and Randall Tarrent to be meeting for lunch other than Wylie stabbing Diego in the back.

A set-up. Their first meeting had been nothing but a set-up to get Diego out of the way while Tarrent copped Dara's skip. And the brute bastard had almost killed her doing it! He'd stepped in it and big this time, and silently castigated himself for his recklessness.

Diego looked at Wylie and Wylie stared back at him, expression unreadable. He didn't know if that was a good or bad thing for him. His heart pounded with the knowledge that he might not know the man standing in front of him as well as he thought, that his lover for the past several weeks would betray him.

Like you betrayed him?

That was different. He'd been protecting himself, making sure he wasn't getting involved with a total madman. And he'd wasted all his hard work staking out and researching Wylie, only to walk headlong into him here.

Sloppy. Damn sloppy and careless. Guy had him acting like a beginner, but it wasn't all Wylie's fault. No one had told Diego to lose his heart to the first dude to come along and show him a modicum of affection and respect, all circumspection and common

sense going right out the window as a result.

Diego smiled, had to stop himself from outright laughing. To think he'd suspected something entirely different, entirely outrageous when he'd heard Randall's voice on the cell. Tarrent was homophobic beyond the word, not one ounce of closet in him. Diego knew there was no way the man would tolerate someone like Wylie longer than it took to pay him off for a deed well done, much more entertain a sexual relationship with a man, any man.

Dios mio, he hadn't even backed up any of his material. He hadn't even mentioned anything to Dara about the case on which he was working, indeed, hadn't officially considered tracking Wylie Sennet a "case." His mistake, and probably a fatal one. Diego swallowed hard at the implications. Something might happen to him—probably would if the look on Tarrent's face was anything by which to judge—and no one would know what had gone down or why.

Diego listened to Tarrent's end of the conversation—words clipped, tone cold as he sneered at Diego—and it didn't sound good. He glanced at the door behind Wylie then the window out the corner of his eye, Randall's gun unflinchingly trained on his chest.

Would Randall really shoot him if he tried to make a run for it? Would Wylie let him?

Diego glanced at Wylie once more right before Tarrent finished with his call, and detected a tiny note of uncertainty. If he could get to him and work on that—

"This is your unlucky day, Rico Suave." Randall stepped closer, baring his teeth like a predator about to rip into his prey's throat.

"That was the customer?" Wylie asked.

Tarrent nodded, not taking his eyes or his gun off of Diego. "And she said to do whatever's necessary to keep him quiet."

"Wait, Tarrent, we don't have to—"

"You heard me, A.G. Whatever's necessary."

CHAPTER 20

Crunch time fast approaching. Things were starting to come together nicely, but in the same breath ready to fall apart. She had to keep a cool head or the latter would come to fruition. If it weren't for her organization and planning, things would have fallen apart a long time ago.

The good ol' boy was reliable for manual labor, and took particular pleasure in doing the dirty work, which was what she paid him for. But sooner or later she was going to have to do something about him. He was becoming more of a liability than an advantage. Oh, he did his job, did it with relish when it came to hands on, bring-the-pain, but frequently he was less willing to defer to her word, to her authority. She knew it was because she was a woman, well aware of the good ol' boy's misogynistic tendencies. No matter as long as he got the job done. For now.

The single most important reason she'd sought him out and partnered with him in the first place had been his vendetta, his feral hatred for Dara Kelly. In that, she and he were in perfect synch, revenge making theirs a perfect partnership. But was their mutual aversion enough to keep the good ol' boy quiet and reasonable? Would he stick to their bargain and do his job without trying to up the ante or make a power play?

She'd noticed the changes in his tone and in his attitude towards her, especially after he made that trip out to Nassau and caught the Amazon consorting with a policeman there. Minor compromising situation, certainly something some enterprising individual could use against Kelly at a later date. The same way the good ol' boy could turn against her, use their affiliation, or reveal her identity to the right person.

Did the good ol' boy have the smarts or the desire to turn the tables?

She wouldn't put anything past him—not the Neanderthal bounty hunter who thought he was God's gift to woman—didn't underestimate anyone. This creed was what had gotten her where she was today.

Now Sennet was another problem altogether. She'd seen the way he looked the last time the three of them had met for an update, love for Kelly's partner clearly written

all over his face. She felt the vibes emanating from his every pore, experienced the emotion through his body language. She knew the signs well, and when she had met he and Tarrent at the appointed spot to do the deed and dispose of their most recent complication, the signs were all still clearly evident in Wylie Sennet's contrite expression and pleas for leniency.

He'd all but begged for his lover's life, stopping only short of offering his own life in return for Davis'.

Fool! Weakling! She'd thought more of him, thought that he knew better than to mix business with pleasure. She'd solicited his services because he was a professional, after all. But the little gigolo had gone right out there and fallen for his mark like a rank amateur.

Damn it! Sometimes she felt like incompetents surrounded her.

She took a deep breath, loosening her grip on the steering wheel of her Infiniti, and hoped that she hadn't too late stemmed the flood before it wreaked havoc on all her well-laid plans. She'd come too far, done too much, worked too hard to have everything fall apart now. She'd seen it happen to her mother time and again. Just when the woman had gotten things under control—her professional life, what there was of it, her personal life, when she could seduce a viable prospect into it—they'd fall apart under the weight of her mother's lack of preparation and foresight.

She was not her mother. She would not let another woman have what belonged to her.

* * * *

Silence dogged most of the drive home to the city.

Balance between them had always been delicate, but now the scales had tipped. Their relationship was moving in a direction Caution had always wanted it to go, but had never in his wildest dreams expected. He had been totally unprepared for her capitulation. He was too aware of the change, too aware that any minute now Dara would say she'd made a mistake, that there was no way she could marry him, no way that she would.

He hadn't realized he was so pessimistic until just now, but then he had been well-trained by the woman next to him, not with endless broken promises or pledges, but with promises hotly desired and never made, not verbally.

Her body was another story. With her body, Dara promised him everything but the stars and the moon, simultaneously snatching away the universe with an until-we-meet-again departure and nonchalant flick of a wrist.

Caution thought of asking her what she was thinking, but didn't want to come off clichéd. He could try and make a joke about her acceptance, but wasn't in a particularly humorous mood.

He should have been jumping up and down for joy, relieved that the woman had finally said yes, but his uncertainty overshadowed the moment and he knew exactly why.

She wasn't the same woman he'd fallen in love with.

His mind kept drifting back to that first night when she'd come into the house prepared to take him in—the fear, the anger, she with no recognition of him. She'd talked the talk and walked the walk, but there was something elementally different about her—attainable, naïve, sympathetic...soft—characteristics Dara Kelly had rarely owned.

In and of itself, the changes weren't bad. In fact, they were barely noticeable, just unexpected, and this alone should have reassured him. If Dara Kelly had been nothing else with him, she'd always been predictably unpredictable.

Caution glanced at her from the corner of an eye as she gradually stirred from a nap. He hit the exit leading into Brooklyn, visions of body snatching and other alien activities marching through his head when the simplest explanation should have been that she'd finally seen the light and that's why she had said yes. But he couldn't accept that, especially after the last several weeks with and without her.

"I'm missing the chalet already." Dara yawned and stretched, turning her body towards his, and smiling.

"Me too."

Dara arched a brow and he drove in silence for several long moments before she broke the quiet again. "I'll ask you like you asked me: are you having second thoughts?"

Caution looked at her. "Not a chance." His heart already felt married to her, had for a long time. November seemed so far away, yet it was right around the corner: the date they had agreed on for the ceremony. Something small, intimate, with only her family and his. He had briefly considered eloping, but hadn't thought she'd go for it, hadn't wanted to push his luck by rushing her.

"You've barely said a word since we left Lake George."

He shrugged, said nothing, and felt her fidget in the passenger seat beside him.

"We've been living such a fantasy the last couple of weeks. It's hard leaving it behind and coming back to reality. Don't you think?"

Caution silently nodded, felt her restlessness.

The old Dara didn't go in for small talk and discomfort. Breaking the ice had never been difficult for her because she took a pickaxe to it head-on. She wouldn't have owned up to liking their get-away, though she might have thought it, loath to admit she'd enjoyed his company or their going away. She was the type to let him sweat and guess—about her feelings, about her wants and likes and dislikes. And woe to the beau who read her mind incorrectly.

"Caution, is something wrong?"

"Not at all."

She moved close and looped an arm around his waist. "I love you," she whispered.

He put an arm around her, kissed the top of her head, and swallowed hard.

In the last several days, she'd said the infamous three words more times than she'd said it during their entire two-year relationship. Caution didn't know what to do with this.

But then she didn't ask for reciprocation, merely snuggled as close as she could without interfering with his driving, and sat quietly.

"Looks like your grandfather and Tater have company," Dara said as Caution noticed the midnight-blue car parked in his driveway.

He pulled around to the opposite side of the house and parked in the driveway there, heart clenching at the idea of who it might be. If he had been reluctant to come home before—ruining the vibe he and Dara had created in the idyllic confines of upstate—he was ten times as uneasy about seeing the strange Infiniti in the driveway. He knew its presence couldn't bode well.

Caution thought his mood was rubbing off, because he could feel Dara's tension mounting as they both got out of his Lexus. He caught her hand and held it as she made her way around to the driver's side, leaned in and kissed her firmly. She submitted beneath the pressure of his lips, allowed a moment of exploration as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, reassuringly caressing her tongue with his.

He palmed a cheek when she pulled away to stare up at him, at a loss for words. He didn't want to lie, and how many visitors were in his house was unknown. Bad enough she had to go in there and face down Brody's barely veiled disdain. "Time for a reality check." Caution squeezed her hand and led her to the front door. He heard the raised voices before he unlocked and opened the door, glanced at Dara and frowned before entering.

"Gramps? You here?" Caution called as he headed towards the kitchen, Dara trailing behind him.

Roscoe rushed out of the kitchen, tail wagging, instantly followed by Tayte.

"Daddy! Dara!" The little girl rushed into the vestibule, arms outstretched as she leaped towards her father.

Caution had a second to drop his bags and catch her breathless form. "Hey Tater-Tot!" He hugged her tight, relishing the sweet innocent smell of soap, baby shampoo and powder wafting to him from her skin and hair. "All this excitement for little ol' me."

"Uh-huh." The little girl vigorously nodded. "And Dara too." She reached towards Dara who immediately relieved Caution of his bundle.

"Hey kiddo. Missed you too."

"There's a surprise for you in the kitchen, Daddy."

Caution arched a brow just as Brody came into the living room fuming, with mystery guest in tow.

"Sandra?" He realized how accusatory he sounded, had promised himself long ago that he'd never fall into the trap of bad-talking Tayte's mother, especially in front of the child. It was a promise he'd kept. Until now.

"Caution, really, it hasn't been *that* long."

"Mommy wants to take me to Disneyland."

"I've been trying to reason with the...woman. Make her wait until you get here."

"Whoa, whoa." Caution made a time out sign with his hands, glaring at Sandra across the short distance between them. He stalked past Brody and was on her in two long-legged strides.

God, just being in the same room with the woman set his teeth on edge, and standing inches in front of her sent hair-raising anger rushing to his head. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" He caught her arm, careful not to grasp too hard when what he really wanted to do was choke the living daylights out of her. She didn't have her foot in the door good and was making outrageous requests, getting up the kid's hopes. She couldn't start off small, not Sandra. She came in talking about dragging his child not just to another state, but several states and three thousand miles away. The woman had lost her mind.

He remembered Dara as he reached the threshold, and threw an "I'll be right back" over his shoulder before proceeding into the kitchen.

Sandra tried to shake off his hand as soon as they were alone, but Caution didn't release her until he was ready. When he finally did, she eased to the opposite side of the island, leaned her elbows on the marble top, chin in palms as she looked at him. "You're looking good, *papi*."

"Don't *papi* me. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Oh, did I miss something? Or is that my daughter out there in that...woman's arms."

"You gave up the right to be judgmental where I or Tayte are concerned, Sandra."

"Not exactly." She smiled and licked her lips as she came from behind the counter.

"Oh, you can't be serious. You want custody?"

"*Dios*, no. What would give you that idea?"

"Then what are you doing here?"

Sandra rolled her eyes and sighed as if it should have been as clear as the nose on his face. "*Ella es mi niña*."

"Big news flash."

"Don't be sarcastic, Caution. It doesn't suit you."

"How the hell would you know what suits me? You didn't stay around long enough to find out one way or the other."

"I stayed around long enough to know it wasn't for me."

"Motherhood or marriage?"

"Both. And why are you being so difficult about this?"

"Sandra, you haven't seen difficult."

"I have a feeling I'm about to, though."

Caution ignored the simultaneously bored and hurt look on her face. She had an

expression for every occasion and he knew that this homecoming, or whatever the hell she wanted to call it, was no different. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

"It's not sudden. I've been thinking about you, about the two of you, for months."

"Hmph."

"I was hoping you'd be reasonable about my seeing her. There's no need for legalities."

"Are you making a power play, Ms. Absentee Mother?"

"Don't be mean." She pouted. "Besides, women don't make power plays. That's something we leave up to you testosterone-laden men."

"You make them. They're just called temper tantrums."

Sandra tsked as she came closer and hooked an arm through his. "You know you can trust me. It's not like I want to steal her or anything. What would I do with her?"

"I'm glad you realize you're totally out of your league."

"What we could do, which is what I mentioned to that condescending grandfather of yours before you arrived, is go out together. Make a family outing out of it, just the three of us. You could watch me with her the entire time."

"That's the only way you're going to see her without a court order."

"Oh posh."

When she pouted like that, she reminded him of his mother. Was he doomed to repeat these Oedipal tendencies over again and again? He'd already done it twice, he realized, marrying Sandra and then Pamela not long after Sandra's departure. He was no longer sure who he had been trying to fill the void for: him or his daughter.. With Dara, he was hoping to break the cycle, and resolved to do anything he could to keep Sandra out of his daughter's life.

"I don't want to be cruel or be the one to remind you, but you have some abandonment issues in your history. In case you get any ideas about pursuing custody."

Sandra smiled, eyes lighting as if with pride for her child prodigy. "*Papi*, you're so cold. You've changed."

"I haven't. You just haven't been around long enough to know the difference."

"Was it very hard when I left?"

He gawked, then bit his bottom lip so hard he thought he'd break the skin. "Hard enough."

Sandra jerked her head toward the living room, subtly but firmly fondling his biceps. "I noticed the engagement ring on her finger. Does she make it easier?"

God, the woman didn't miss a trick. And she was making him decidedly uncomfortable with her closeness. "That's none of your business."

She chuckled, wrapped her other arm around his so that she was embracing his with both of hers. "Tell me, Caution, what do you see in her? Really?"

"Really? She's not you."

Sandra exaggeratedly shivered. "Aye, your tongue is in rare form today." She smiled, as she stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the lips, easily sliding her tongue into his mouth.

Caution gasped and pulled away. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Seeing what I've been missing all these years."

"I thought you were here to rekindle your relationship with Tayte."

"I am."

"Then you're barking up the wrong tree molesting me."

"Molesting?" Sandra chuckled, squeezing his arm once more before trailing her fingers down to caress his rib cage as she leaned in to whisper, "*Querido*, you have such a way with words."

Caution pushed away from her. "Are you really serious about seeing Tayte? Because if you are, we need to set down some ground rules here and now."

"I love it when you put your foot down."

What had he ever seen in her? She was beautiful, sure, surprisingly intelligent and could be charming in mixed company. But take these attributes away and you had a selfish, spoiled, wannabe socialite who'd had the misfortune to hook up with someone whose ideologies drastically diverged from her visions of married life, the reality lacking in comparison to her Cinderella fantasies.

Initially, he'd been protective, wanting to take care of her, her smallness a deceptive lure. But he soon realized that Sandra Melendez didn't need any help taking care of herself, that she was adept at self-preservation if nothing else, and to the exclusion of others. He didn't think she had changed much in the intervening three plus years and wondered what her real game was. To be in Tayte's life, or to interfere in his?

"So, can you get rid of the Amazon so that you and I and the kid can get together?"

"Don't call her that."

"Your grandfather does."

"I'm not my grandfather. You should know that by now."

Sandra moved closer, tilting her head to one side as if absorbing a fresh discovery. "True enough," she conceded, then leaned in again, snuggling her head against his chest. "But it never hurts to explore."

She was doing a little too much exploration for his taste, Caution thought, and fought the shiver that rode his spine as she splayed her hand over his heart.

The anger was still there, but with each passing minute, it slowly evaporated into a fog of livable neutrality that he hadn't known since she'd left. He was nowhere near forgiving her, but the closer she got to him, the less he wanted to throttle her. He felt himself softening in some spots and hardening in others that he had long thought dead to

her wiles.

To say his reaction to her proximity surprised him was an understatement.

He tried to focus on the hatred, the bitterness that had ravaged his psyche on her departure. He tried to get a hold on why he should have felt that not moving away from her was inherently wrong.

He didn't have time to examine all the contradictions of the situation, but did think the pose he was in with Sandra was too cosy, and would be just the excuse Dara needed to run for the hills. Almost simultaneous to his thoughts bearing fruit, he heard the woman in question clear her throat from the threshold.

Caution eased away from Sandra rather than jerked, and glanced at Dara wielding her cell phone as if it were a magic wand.

"I have to go."

"Wait." He was at her side in a heartbeat. "I need to talk to you."

"You don't have to explain."

"That's not what I meant." No way would she make him feel guilty about how she'd found them. Nothing happened, and nothing would have happened. He knew that with everything that was in him even if Dara didn't.

"Caution, it doesn't matter. Something's come up. An emergency at the police station. I don't know what it is, they wouldn't say, but I need to go check it out."

"The police station?"

She nodded, seemed weary.

This was turning out to be one hell of a welcome home for her, for them both. "I'll go with you." Caution took her hand, brooking no argument as he led her back to the living room. He stopped in front of Brody. "Got an errand to run, Grampa. Keep an eye on Tayte for us."

"And where are you off to *now*?"

"We have some business to take care of."

"What about that one?" Brody jerked his head in Sandra's direction as she joined them.

"Just do what you've been doing until we get back."

"We'll be right here," Sandra said.

"Wonderful."

CHAPTER 21

Sam didn't know about Dara, but her heart felt ten times lighter when Caution insisted on coming with her. Call her a dependent and needy female, but she liked having his warm energy and strength beside her, quietly reassuring as he drove her to the Fifteenth Precinct in the Village.

She didn't know what had gone on between he and Sandra in the kitchen and didn't care. She was glad he had decided to go with her, and thought they'd deal with Tayte's mother later. She couldn't afford anything else on her plate after the mysterious call from Detective Madison.

He'd had all the right banalities prepared and flung them at her with uninhibited bureaucratic glee: *Not at liberty to elaborate over the phone...need you to come down to the station at your earliest convenience...something of an urgent nature to discuss...*

She didn't know whether it was related to Dara's business or not, and the detective wouldn't say, though she could tell by the familiar way he addressed her that he was someone with whom Dara had dealt in the past. Sam would have appreciated having had more time to digest all that he hadn't said, time to go over the detective's cryptic words with Dara. But, as usual, her friendly neighborhood ghost was nowhere to be found. Perhaps it was just as well. She didn't have the freedom to exchange theories, and didn't know if she was ready for the dressing down she was sure to get for her dainty, unassertive reactions at seeing Caution and Sandra together. She already knew that Dara wouldn't approve of the way she had handled things.

"Kelly, over here."

Sam glanced at the unfamiliar man waving at her from an office across the floor where the detective's squad resided just as Dara popped up beside her.

"That's Cal Madison. He's a good guy, great inside contact. Helped me out tracking a few skips. He say what this was about?"

Sam shrugged, hiding her surprise. Her guess was as good as Dara's. She had a

bad feeling about this meeting, especially when she neared the detective and saw his grim expression. She didn't know him, but she knew what a bad vibe was and she was definitely getting one from Madison's aura.

Caution caught one of her hands and held it firmly as if reading her mind. She glanced up at him, trying to draw from his strength and that of Dara on her opposite side.

She had a sudden image of Sandra's car in Caution's driveway and the one that had tried to run her down at his bar, the pictures melding until they were standing side-by-side as if in a snapshot.

It hadn't clicked before, not consciously, where she might have seen Sandra's car before. Hadn't clicked that it could have easily been the car that had tried to run her down. Could have. It was a big leap, one she didn't want to take without being sure, if at all.

There were probably hundreds, if not thousands, of dark-blue late model cars in the city, in the state. Like she'd told Dara, she hadn't gotten that good a look, couldn't tell an Infiniti from a Lexus in the dark, just knew the car had been dark and sleek. But Sandra's sudden appearance struck her as oddly convenient, that she was driving a dark-blue car frightening.

Sam tried to convince herself that Dara's paranoia had rubbed off on her, until Caution squeezed her hand, and she glanced up at his face and thought that he was a man over which someone might try to kill another.

"I'm sorry to get you down here like this."

"What's this about?" Sam blurted.

Madison motioned to the office behind him. "In here."

Sam started to precede him inside, then paused and turned back when Madison stopped Caution from following her. "He's with me."

"He's a civilian. And this is...not really a civilian matter."

Sam felt him hedging, felt Dara's tension mounting and surpassing her own.

"Something's wrong. I don't like this."

Neither did Sam, but she was here and had to deal with it, and Dara...Dara wasn't "here."

"Anything you have to say to me, you can say to him." Sam saw Madison's hesitation, improvised a Dara move and punched Madison in the shoulder. "C'mon, Madison. Let him in."

"Okay, fine."

Caution followed her in, evidently prepared to observe rather than participate as he silently took the seat beside her and in front of Madison's desk.

Madison closed the door and took the seat behind the desk, taking a deep breath before folding his hands on top of the timeworn wooden surface.

"Look Dara, this isn't going to be easy for me to say, but I'd rather you hear it

from me than from someone else."

"Out with it."

Madison took another deep breath, and Sam squeezed Caution's hand so tight she noticed from the corner of her eye that he winced.

"We found your partner, that kid Diego—"

"What do you mean 'found'?"

"Dead."

"No!" Sam lurched to her feet, and heard Dara shouting her disbelief and denial too as she paced behind Sam and Caution.

"How? Ask him how? When? Where?"

"I'll make a long story short. While you were out of town, your boy's boyfriend came in, reported him missing."

Boyfriend? Where had Sam been that she hadn't known? She couldn't remember Diego mentioning anyone. Not that she was entitled. She just thought he and Dara were close enough that he'd mention something like that.

"Anyway, Diego turned up a couple of days later, dead in his car. Coroner's ruled it a suicide. We contacted you as the next of kin."

Sam moved her lips but no sound came out. She collapsed back in her chair, silently staring at Madison as Dara ranted behind them.

"It's a lie. Ask him how exactly. Ask him where this boyfriend is! Ask him..."

Sam listened as a sob choked off the rest of Dara's words.

God, could this really be happening? Diego dead? Her, the next of kin and not his parents or some other relatives, relatives closer than a business associate and friend? Or was Dara as close a friend as Diego had?

She remembered the scars on the young man's wrists and swallowed hard against the dread swelling in her stomach, threatening an upward trend until she was sure she would soon drown in her own juices.

"You needed a positive identification?" Sam managed.

"It's a formality. I recognized him as soon as they brought him in."

"How'd he die and why does the coroner think it's a suicide?"

"Asphyxiation. Carbon monoxide poisoning. Left the car running in the garage next to his house, and *adios muchacho*."

"A little too cut and dried, don't you think?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, Dara. What matters is the evidence."

Sam stood again, paced in front of Madison's desk. "Did anyone look into this boyfriend? What's his story? And how close were they?"

"Look, I know you and Davis were friends."

"That has nothing to do with this."

Madison sighed. "Wylie Sennet. And he was pretty distraught when he came in."

"So you guys just discounted him as a suspect because he was *distraught*?"

"This Sennet guy came in of his own accord, reported Diego missing. He admitted they'd quarreled about Davis not wanting to introduce Sennet to his parents. Said the last time they spoke, they'd parted angry, exchanged some hurtful words. When Sennet hadn't heard from Davis in a while, he got worried, thought Diego might have done something drastic."

"Sennet's a liar, Madison! Don't you see that? He was setting up an alibi from the beginning."

"So it was never a homicide investigation? On the word of the boyfriend?"

"Not just his word, the coroner's."

"It's not possible he missed something?"

"There's always a possibility of that, however small. Regardless, the boyfriend was dismissed; had an airtight alibi."

"I'll bet he did."

"Where is he now? I'd like to talk to him."

"He's not a suspect, Dare. And it's not considered a homicide. Case closed."

"Is that an order?"

"But—"

"Dara, look, I know you might not want to hear this, but Davis had a history. And all the evidence points to suicide. There's nothing else for you to do except make a positive ID."

Sam stopped in front of Madison's desk and glared. "I know all about Diego's 'history' and I know what this is about. He was gay, so you don't want to put in the extra effort it would take to make a case. Just another fag bites the dust. Good riddance to bad rubbish." God, where had all that come from? She'd barely known Diego. But what she had known of him, she'd liked.

Sam guessed Caution had had enough of being an innocent bystander when he stood beside her and clasped her shoulders. "C'mon Dare. This isn't helping anyone," he whispered.

Madison stared at her, dark-brown gaze penetrating, jaw working vigorously as he ground his teeth and put his fists on his hips. He didn't say anything for a long moment and when he finally spoke, it was obvious that he was tamping down not a little justified anger. "You know me better than that, Dara."

"I'd like a copy of the coroner's report."

"Sure. As a professional courtesy, I'll get that for y—"

"Thanks."

"On one condition."

Sam arched a brow.

"That you promise to leave this alone and let sleeping dogs lie."

Sam vaguely wondered if she mentioning the attempt on her own life would make a difference, making the detectives give Diego's case a closer look.

So much time had gone by. He'd wonder, and rightly so, why she hadn't mentioned it before. He might think she was making it up to push the case for Diego. God, why *hadn't* she mentioned it before? Why hadn't she gone to the police for help instead of going along with some macho image Dara had of handling this entire predicament alone like some lone wolf, or, as Diego had called her, a Dirty Harriet.

Sam felt tears welling that seemed to spring from nowhere, then she remembered that scene in her office, Diego crouched beside her, skillfully and gently ministering to her wounded thigh. She remembered his sensual smile, his ready sense of humor, and felt the tears slide out of her eyes. He'd been nothing but sweet to her, right from the beginning, and had wanted nothing more than to help her since he'd found her in that alley cold, wet and bleeding.

God, she wasn't cut out for this life—conspiracy theories, subterfuge, running for her life, and looking over her shoulder for unseen and unknown enemies.

Sam almost laughed at the irony her life had become. She used to believe that her current straight was all she ever wanted out of life—excitement, intrigue, and a continuous adrenaline rush. But the reality was far more complicated and dangerous than the daydreams she used to nurture surrounded by the safe confines of her parents' home in the suburbs.

"How about it, Kelly. Do we have a deal?"

"Sure," Sam said, knowing full well that Dara would do everything in her power to stop her from keeping the promise.

* * * *

Caution eyed her warily, conscious of her mood as if it were a third person in the room.

She'd been entirely too quiet on the way home, more quiet than he'd been on the way to his house from upstate. It was a charged silence, portentous and grave and lying in wait for an opportunity to vent. He wasn't sure he wanted to be in the vicinity when she blew, but he knew he wouldn't leave her unless she asked him to.

He couldn't imagine what she was going through, had no point of reference except his own father's death and if her emotions were anything like what he'd felt then, Caution knew that she would need someone to help her pick up the pieces even if she wasn't willing to admit it.

Dara stopped just inside the door at the top of the living room and didn't turn as Caution followed her in. "I'm okay, you know."

"You shouldn't be alone," he murmured, preparing for her hard act and version of the big kiss-off. He searched his memory banks for just the right comeback, something Dara would respect, something elegant, witty, succinct and nonjudgmental, but feared it was a juggling act he was nowhere near up to performing.

"I won't be alone."

Caution arched a brow and went further into the house, descending the short staircase and turning to stand in front of Dara. The two steps gave her a couple of inches advantage on his six-two which he didn't mind relinquishing. "You're not going out to visit that guy."

"Is that an order?"

"Dare, you heard what Detective Madison said."

"When have I ever let anyone tell me what to do?"

"I don't think that's what he was doing. He was giving you advice. Advice I think you'd be wise to take."

"That's easy for you to say. He wasn't your friend."

"That doesn't mean I mourn his death any less than you do."

"How could you not?"

"I care about you and you cared about him. That's how."

"It's not the same thing." Dara threw up her hands as she stepped down the two steps to pass him and walk into the living room. She turned back, glared at him and dared him to tell her she was wrong. When he didn't respond, she went on. "Caution, I appreciate that you went with me to the station, but like I told you: I'm okay."

"So we'll be okay together."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"I don't see any babies here to sit." He approached her slowly, carefully, and felt like a predator nearing quarry at a watering hole. "I know how you felt about him."

"I can handle it."

"No one's saying you can't."

"Besides, you've got your own problems to deal with, remember?"

"What does one have to do with the other?"

"Nothing. And everything. I'm just saying. You should be getting home."

"I'm a grown man. I can decide when I need to go home or not."

"Tayte's probably waiting for you."

Caution came closer until he was standing an inch in front of her. He didn't want to think about Tayte's mother who was probably waiting for him. He didn't want to think about anything but Dara and how she was going to make it through the night with Diego so tragically taken from her. "Don't play the responsibilities card with me, Dare. I know

mine. And I know how to prioritize."

She stared up at him, teeth clenched, hands at her sides balled into fists.

He gave her credit for checking her anger at the door when he knew that all she wanted to do was blow up at him and throw him out. He took a chance and moved closer, wrapping his arms around her. When she didn't resist, he tightened the embrace and pulled her close, burying his face in her hair to inhale the fresh vanilla scent of it and her skin.

She was stiff in his arms, unresponsive. He might as well have been holding a mannequin. He had never seen a more stubborn woman, so unwilling to take a helping hand when it was offered. He was this close to shaking her, but knew he'd be rattling the lion's cage and pressing his luck.

"I don't want to leave you like this."

"You don't have a choice, because I'm telling you to."

He felt her distancing herself, closing herself off. He had felt it since they'd left the precinct and gotten into his car to come home. Inch by inch, foot by foot, until he was sure she'd lock him out totally and irrevocably if he walked out the door.

But he realized staying wouldn't stop her from pushing him away. Physical proximity didn't equal emotional closeness. Right now, she was about as emotionally detached as he had ever seen her and that was saying something. Forcing himself, his company on her, would only alienate her more. The last thing he wanted, but the first thing he needed to do.

How many times had he wished for the comfort of a shoulder to cry on the first days and weeks after his father's death? How many times had he needed an ear to comprehend the plaintive sound of his unspoken grief?

Dawson had been the most logical choice, but also the least sympathetic. He'd lost his father too, but had been so deeply entrenched in their mother's camp, he couldn't get past her righteous indignation to his own loss.

Reina had been a lost cause, so wrapped up in guilt, drowning her sorrow in more booze and pills than before she'd killed her husband. She walked around in a perpetual substance haze that neither her wanting sons or vengeful father-in-law could get past.

Caution didn't even want to think of Brody, so angry at his son for marrying a woman he thought of as beneath a Foster, blaming the young man for his own death while hating the woman who had caused it. He didn't have the time or inclination to soothe the damaged egos of two fatherless boys. Caution had been surrounded by loved ones, alone in a sea of the grief-stricken, his own soothsayer, and best friend. He didn't want that for Dara, and knew that he could do better for her. If he left now, he'd be giving up on her, something he'd never been willing to do and knew he didn't want to start now.

Caution slid his face from her neck to her jaw, gently kissed and nipped the firm smooth skin beneath her chin before moving up to her mouth, cool, moist and impassive, until he slid his tongue across her full bottom lip and she gasped.

He pushed his slight advantage, nuzzled her neck, blowing against the most

sensitive parts of her—moving from nape, to collarbone to ear and back to the pulse point in her throat—until she almost violently trembled in his embrace.

His cock throbbed in response.

“Caution...” She clutched his shirtfront with both hands, and buried her face against his shoulder. “Why are you making this so hard for me?”

The desperation in her voice gave him pause, but only for a moment before he decided to push further. “Don’t send me away now, Dare. Not now,” he whispered against her lips before teasing the seam of her mouth and finally plunging in his tongue. He felt her struggle—against him, against her own feelings—her hands still clutching his shirt before she slid them down to his waist as if trying to get a better grip to hold him at bay.

He refused to be held, pressed himself closer, hating himself for taking advantage—she’d just lost her best friend, her partner. Caution refused to lose his, and playing rough and dirty seemed to be the only language she understood. Fine, he’d play her way.

He thrust his tongue, stroking the inside of her mouth with his own silent desperation. He grasped her by the ass and picked her up in his arms, flattening her supple breasts against his chest where he could feel her heart pounding next to his, so in synch he swore he could feel their souls melding.

Dara pulled back slightly, panting as she smoothly sunk her teeth into his lower lip before licking it. Slowly. Lovingly. “Caution, I love you. You know I do. But I...I can’t do this now.” Her words vibrated against his mouth like the soft touch of a bow to violin strings, but their meaning hammered against his brain like a two-by-four, a blow he refused to succumb to without a fight.

“You don’t have to do anything except let me hold you, Dare. Let me love *you*...” He closed his eyes as his heartbeat sped up, the rhythm all but obliterating all sounds outside of it. All sounds except her soft whimpers as he lazily circled one of her taut nipples with a thumb.

“Caution, please put me down. I...I *can’t*...”

His breath hitched in his chest at the sound of Dara choking back a sob.

Damn it, he couldn’t do this either! He wanted her—wanted to comfort her, wanted to make love to her—but not while she was so close to breaking.

He released her, letting her slowly slide down his body, torturing himself with the curvy soft feel of her as she landed back on her own two feet in front of him. He caught her arms and held her away from him to stare at her. “I’m not going to let you use what’s happened as an excuse to get rid of me or walk out of my life again.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“You should leave. Staying now isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

“Dare—”

“I need you to leave. Now.”

Caution reached up to palm a cheek and felt the muscles working along her jaw, heart twisting at her façade of toughness. "Have it your way." He grinned to cover his frustration, determined to be there when she needed him. He turned on his heels, and headed up the stairs to the front door. He paused for a long moment without turning back, knowing that if he looked at her he wouldn't leave, regardless of what she wanted, and would probably wind up giving her a good reason to hate him. He reached for the knob, and opened the door. "You know where to reach me when you're ready."

CHAPTER 22

Dara had never met Diego's parents. But once she'd crossed their paths at the city morgue where she'd gone with Sam to identify and claim her friend's body after Sam had called to inform them of what had happened to their son, she could almost believe that Diego had taken his own life. She certainly might have with parents like his—the mother a devout, browbeaten Catholic without an opinion of her own that didn't originate with the church or the father an overbearing, sanctimonious, homophobic jerk who didn't have the sense or human capacity to appreciate the blessing he had been bestowed in Diego Davis.

Dara had seen her share enough to know Mr. Davis' type, and remembered Diego's calm and discreet reply when she'd asked him about the scars on his wrist at their first meeting.

He had come in answer to the ad she'd placed announcing an opening in her firm and she'd noticed the marks as soon as he'd reached out his hand to shake hers at his interview in her office. Dara hadn't wanted to dismiss him out of hand without getting all the facts, but also hadn't wanted a flake on her payroll, responsible for covering her ass in life and death situations. Diego hadn't hesitated to respond to her interrogation, protecting the names of the innocent and not so innocent, and pointing fingers at no one but himself. Dara appreciated his candor, and immediately got the gist.

He'd left home at an early age, earlier than her, not quite sixteen. The injury, as he'd referred to his scars, happened early during his life on the streets, a moment of weakness to which he'd succumbed over someone who didn't respect him. This person hadn't deserved his regret, pain and tears, and was no longer a factor in Diego's life.

Dara had too easily filled in the blanks, though she had never personally experienced parental hatred and disapproval to the same degree as had Diego. She'd left home of her own accord, an open door policy and ready welcome back in her wake. She'd always had a choice to return if that had ever been her decision. She never had, not as a

wanting child with her tail between her legs, but plenty times as a giving and valued adult of which her mother and brothers could be proud.

Dara couldn't imagine what it must have been like for a teen on the street, denounced and scorned by his parents for something over which he had no control, and finally sinking so deep into depression that he saw taking his life as his only way out.

She'd hired Diego after interviewing several other very qualified and experienced candidates, going with her instincts and knowing the entire while she was taking a chance on a wild card. But there had been something about Diego that had enlisted her trust—his toughness, his honesty, his gentleness, his self-confidence—and caused her to bring him into her firm.

From the beginning, Diego had never hidden his proclivities, never lied to her about his sexuality. And as their relationship had grown he'd confided in Dara more and more, explaining to her in detail what had happened, and why he'd hurt himself. He'd fought too hard and long against his father and haters like him, he'd told her. He wanted to come out and be who and what he was, and he wasn't going to allow anyone to beat him down or push him back in the closet where they thought he belonged.

Dara pictured him now as he'd shaken her hand across her desk, his grip firm, his expression cool and direct, a lopsided dimpled grin that could light up Broadway as he assured her she wouldn't regret her decision. And she never had.

If she had it to do over again, she knew she'd make the same decisions. Except now Diego was dead and it was because of her.

Mighty Isis, Diego, I didn't regret it, but you did! Damn it, I'm so sorry. I never meant for anything like this to happen to you. This is all my fault—

"Are you okay?"

Dara hadn't thought she'd spoken out loud, but realized she had, or Sam had heard her thoughts if the guarded look on the younger woman's face was any indication.

She sniffled, wiped her nose with the back of a hand and nodded. "God, I thought he'd never leave. You did good to get rid of him."

"Did I?"

"He would have done nothing but smother you with kindness and pity."

"Maybe I want to be smothered."

"Trust me, you don't."

Sam glared at her, slamming her fists on her hips as she confronted Dara. "How would you know any damn thing about what I want? When have you ever cared?"

"I care more than you think." *More than I want to.*

She liked the kid. How could she explain that without seeming soft, without giving her the wrong impression, without losing focus on what was important here? And that was the most important thing now, keeping focus. Finding out who had been behind Diego's death and bringing her own murderer to justice. She knew that the former and latter were one in the same.

"Look Sam, I know you love him. I do too. But we don't need him here right now while we decide what to do."

"How can you be so cold? Your friend is dead."

"You think I don't know that?"

"Well? Don't you care?"

"Of course I care, damn it!"

Sam's eyes widened as a barstool from the dining room counter flew across the room. She had a second to duck and it just missed hitting her in the head. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Am I out of my mind? You're damn right I am! I'm out of my mind with grief and anger and guilt and...and..." Dara panted and stopped pacing long enough to collapse down on the top step of the sunken living room.

Sam sauntered over and sat down a foot away from Dara, warily glancing at her from the corner of an eye.

"I know he didn't do it, Sam. I know..."

It was a mistake I'll never make again, Dare.

They'd gotten drunk one night after bagging a particularly difficult skip, staggering into Dara's apartment in the wee hours like sailors on leave, singing sad love songs, and sharing emotional and sexual horror stories as they'd cried on each other's shoulders.

Dara had told him about her controlling, anal-retentive first husband who'd have liked nothing better than Betty Crocker in the kitchen and Mary Magdalene in the bedroom. Her second husband, she explained, had been just as bad, but in a different way, using her to support his gambling and drug habits, when he wasn't knocking her around.

"And we all know you're not the enabler type."

"Damn straight I ain't!"

They had a good ol' laugh about that before Diego suddenly got quiet.

"My father told me to leave the house when I came out. Said he couldn't stand to see my sissy face anywhere in the vicinity, that if I didn't straighten up, as he put it, I wasn't any son of his. Said I made him sorry my mother ever bore me."

Dara gasped. "God, that's awful!"

"Yeah, I thought it was pretty awful. So, I left."

"Good for you."

"But I never stopped thinking about him. I couldn't. He was...he is my father."

"It's his loss. He doesn't know what he's missing." His father was alive, but he might as well have been dead. And he'd almost killed his son, though he'd never know it. But Dara knew, knew that the pressure of being disowned, despised by his own flesh and

blood, were what had driven Diego to slice a blade across his wrists.

Homophobic asshole!

What she wouldn't do to have her father back. What she wouldn't do to hear his laugh one more time, see his smile, feel his work-callused touch against her cheek.

She almost said it all out loud, almost told Diego how much she missed her own father, but didn't want to make him feel guilty that his own father was still alive, as useless, undeserving, and hateful as the man was.

"He didn't kill himself, Sam. Diego wouldn't do something like that."

"He tried it before."

"That's ancient history that I'm not holding against him. I never did."

"But the facts—"

"Could have easily been manufactured." Dara pierced Sam with her ghostly gaze. "I know Diego, and he wouldn't." It was all she could do not to start shouting again, not to vent her anger. And yet, she wasn't sure why she was so angry or at whom.

The idea that her friend had been murdered while she had been with Sam, her *assignment*, pissed her off to no end. She wanted to kick something, hurt someone the way she was hurting, the way Diego had hurt when he died. Oh God, she hoped he hadn't hurt, hoped he'd just gone to sleep and that it had been as painless as possible and... She glanced heavenward.

God damn You! God damn You all to hell, You supercilious manipulative sons-of-bitches!

Why had They let him die? Hadn't he been through enough rejection and pain in his life? Hadn't he paid his dues enough? He didn't deserve to die, not like that, not alone, so young.

"Dara?"

She looked at Sam staring at her, and that's when she felt the tears.

She hadn't cried in so long. Not since her father had died—so unnecessarily, so suddenly—and not since watching her mother mourn for several years afterward as she struggled to take care of her six children without her husband.

"I didn't know ghosts could cry," Sam murmured.

Neither had Dara, and she was shocked that she actually felt the tears sliding down her face, warm and salty. She'd thought that pain ended with death. But in her case, it appeared pain and sorrow and grief only began with death.

When *would* the pain stop?

Dara stared at Sam, regretting her outbursts. She knew the kid didn't deserve everything she was and had been blaming on her. She hadn't been fair reprimanding Sam for what happened. She remembered Sam's reaction at the precinct. Homegirl had acted like a mother lion protecting the reputation and memory of her cub. She'd acted like someone who loved Diego.

"He was so easy to love," she blurted and Sam slid closer, nodding.

"He was."

"He was like a younger brother I didn't mind looking out for." It was an alien feeling, one she'd never experienced coming up with five older and domineering brothers. But she thanked them every day for being as rough and unrelenting as they had been with her. She'd never have made it in her business without that push, that foundation of having to fight for and earn everything she got. She never would have made it through those two horrendous marriages.

"What are you going to do, Dare?"

"I don't know." She'd known at the precinct, knew for sure she wanted to dig and dig deep into this Wylie Sennet's business. Now she wasn't so sure this was the way to go. She might get her curiosity sated, but it certainly wouldn't bring back Diego. "Damn it, why didn't he mention this guy?"

"Sennet?"

"We used to tell each other everything. But he never said a word about him."

"I'm sure he had his reasons." Sam said. "Maybe he didn't want to jinx it."

"Maybe." But that didn't sound like the Diego she knew. Cautious, maybe, but not superstitious. Perhaps he had mistrusted this guy on some level. Perhaps he wasn't the boyfriend he claimed to be and was actually someone that Diego was tracking.

...I was waylaid by this guy. We got to talking...the only thing I can think of is that he drugged me.

Dara recalled the conversation between Sam and Diego after Sam's close call outside of *Foster's*. If she'd been alive, she'd have felt the acid boiling in her stomach with alarm, and she wondered why she couldn't since she felt almost everything else negative.

Could this Sennet be the guy that Diego had met at the bar? Was the guy lying about his status in Diego's life? If not, what would have made Diego come around to trust Wylie enough to start a relationship with him?

She knew Diego. He didn't give his heart or his trust freely. Either this guy was that fantastic a con, or he had really cared about Diego. Dara hoped it was the latter, not wanting to think that even in his last days, Diego had died without having found love.

"We need to go over to Diego's and check out his place."

Sam didn't even question her, just grabbed her leather jacket from the recliner's back and headed for the door.

* * * *

Under Dara's direction, Sam searched Diego's brownstone.

She'd been as careful as possible not to disturb anything unnecessarily, reverently handling his clothes and papers as if they were holy items that belonged to Christ, periodically stopping for a moment of silence or tears when nostalgia struck Dara.

He had a neat little apartment, a place for everything and everything in its place. Sam would have thought it was the typical apartment of a homosexual, except that there had been nothing typical about Diego Davis.

An hour or so into her search, a light bulb came on, and Sam decided to go through the belongings she'd brought home with her from the morgue. She didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before.

Diego had been old fashioned, sometimes to the point of paranoia, Dara had conceded, and hadn't trusted electronics beyond their necessity to stay in contact with Dara and do his job. Instead of a fashionable PDA, he kept an old-fashioned little black book, though the entries were paltry compared to some little black books to which Sam had been exposed. Her own address book—before she had abandoned it for greener pastures to a cutting edge Palm—had phone numbers and addresses from high school acquaintances, all the way to the friends she had made in her first year of college. It filled up a nice-sized book from A to Z.

"I found something." Sam held the book open for Dara to see, her finger holding the page in question.

Dara glanced at the entry, whooped, jumped up and down and clapped her hands. "I could kiss you!" She reached for Sam's face with both hands and leaned in for a quick peck on the lips.

Sam wasn't prepared for the brief, cool touch of Dara's mouth. She had assumed like all the other times before that she wouldn't be able to feel the contact. But she did, as fleeting and subtle as it was, she knew the feel of Dara's mouth and fingers.

It was like finally meeting and shaking the hand of someone she had until that moment, only communicated with over the phone or through e-mail. The touch made Dara seem real, more real than she'd ever been since this whole episode had begun for Sam.

And now that they'd touched, she knew it would be that much harder to say good-bye when the time came.

She knew a departure was inevitable, and wasn't looking forward to it.

* * * *

Dara hadn't wanted to forewarn Wylie of their arrival, or let him know that someone other than Diego was onto him, so she insisted on popping by the Upper East Side address and seeing what developed.

Sam had pointed out that Wylie already had the upper hand, probably knew what Dara looked like, and would see her coming before she'd see him.

"You're probably right, but we'll just have to take that chance and be extra careful."

Turned out they needn't have bothered being careful.

Dara whistled through her teeth after Sam had shown her badge to and slipped the doorman at the front desk a twenty for his silence before they rode up in the elevator to

the penthouse apartment. "Fancy digs."

"Wonder what this guy does for a living."

"*The* sixty-four-thousand-dollar question."

They alighted from the elevator and headed down the long, sumptuously carpeted hallway, stopping at the apartment at the end of the corridor and staring at each other.

"What now?" Sam asked.

Dara chewed a phantom fingernail on her right hand, eyebrows crinkled. "I'm thinking."

"We could just knock."

"Too mundane." Her face brightened with a devilish smile. "Know what I'm thinking?"

"I wouldn't feel right."

"What right? We have every right if this guy turns out to have had anything to do with Diego's death."

"But what if he didn't?"

"You and I both know better than that." Dara glared at Sam. "Now reach down into my kit and get to working on that door. I'll be your lookout."

"Gee, thanks." Sam got out Dara's lock-picking kit, pulled out the tools she needed and started on the door. Even with Dara's instruction, the job took her longer than she would have liked, much longer than it would have taken Dara to do herself with the same door and tools.

When the lock finally clicked open, Dara shouted, "Yes!" and slapped Sam on the back.

Sam briefly wondered what Dara's sudden materializations meant, both excited and frightened by the implications. Dara preceded Sam into the apartment. Scratch that, Sam thought as she crossed the threshold behind the older woman. More like a palace. Even for her well-to-do, country club sensibilities, Wylie Sennet's tastes and style were a little rich for her blood.

The living room was furnished in cream, butter-soft Italian leather sectional and matching, combination recliner rocker. The deep wine throw pillows on the sectional were covered in rich silk and flawless brocades.

The apartment was equipped with all the prerequisite gadgets from the sixty-inch Plasma TV in the living room, which was currently tuned to some Animal Planet show, to the five-disk CD player with name brand speakers that would make any audiophile cream her panties to touch, to the elaborate state-of-the-art computer setup in an office off the main hallway.

The apartment had the latest of everything. Expensive paintings lining the walls, an aquarium filled with priceless exotics, bountiful potted plants and life-like sculptures. It had everything, except a soul.

Dara came from one of the back rooms and met Sam as she was coming out of Wylie's office. The ghost's expression was grim. "You didn't touch anything, did you?"

Sam frowned. "No. Why?"

"Because this apartment is a crime scene."

CHAPTER 23

"You just couldn't stay out of it, could you, Kelly?" Madison scowled at Sam as plainclothes detectives and uniformed officers bustled around them—someone clicking shots of the victim, someone else collecting evidence into plastic bags, another dusting for prints—all fastidiously working the crime scene while waiting for the medical examiner's arrival.

"You say that like I caused his death. I'm the innocent bystander who found him."

"First of all, bystander would indicate an individual who *stood by* and minded her own business the way I instructed her to. Second, you are far from innocent."

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you're insinuating."

"Oh, I don't think you did, but we'll leave the final determination for the coroner. That is, if it's all right with you."

"He is such a smart ass."

"Madison, I had to check for myself."

"What exactly were you hoping to accomplish?"

"I was hoping to get some answers."

Madison sighed and ran a palm down his face, then swept the room with a glance before staring at Sam. "It looks like you've got more questions than answers."

"Are you going to look into Randall Tarrent?"

"Sam, what are you doing?"

"I would, if you could give me one valid reason, besides your little turf war, why I should suspect him of being responsible for this death."

"It's not a turf war, and there is nothing little about it."

Madison just looked at her, waiting.

"Don't do it, homegirl. They'll have you in a straight jacket and shipped off to Bellevue for observation quicker than you can say delusional and deranged."

"Call it a feeling I have."

"I can't just go pulling in individuals off the street based on a 'feeling'."

"We're not talking about just any individual. We're talking about a business rival. He's a legitimate suspect."

"Good girl. Stick to the facts."

"You guys have been rivals for years. Why all of a sudden would he start offing your associate and his lover? I need a motive. I need opportunity."

Sam threw up her hands, overwhelmed by Dara's ghostly admonitions buzzing in her ear and Madison's stubborn rationale. "Why don't I just do your job for you?"

"I wouldn't entertain such an offer, as attractive as it sounds."

"Damn it, you're infuriating!"

"That's what my ex-wife says."

Sam frowned, trying not to crack a smile. "Am I free to go?"

"We've got your statement."

Sam nodded, headed for the front door, paused and turned back, her most appealing look in place. "Madison, please at least consider looking at Tarrent."

"I'll consider it," he said. "In the meantime, why don't you consider waiting here while I call your boyfriend to come get you."

"What? You think I'm going to go over to Tarrent's place on my own?"

"The thought crossed my mind."

"I don't need my boyfriend to pick me up. I came here on my own."

"And I'd rather you didn't leave the same way. Maybe he can stop you from getting into any more trouble. At least for the rest of the evening."

"I doubt it," Sam mumbled.

Madison pulled out his cell. "You want me to call him or will you?"

"I'll call him."

* * * *

"I do not understand His reasoning."

"It is not up to Us to question Him, Michael." Gabriel peered at him. "If it is any consolation, I understand how You feel."

"Thank You, but it is not any consolation."

"I know that look in Your eyes, and what You are considering is not a good idea."

"What look?"

"You are thinking of challenging Him, are You not? You remember the last time You tried something so imprudent."

"I am not concerned with the past. I am concerned about the here and now, and the fate of Our charges."

"They are His charges, Michael. As are We."

"I do not see the sense in letting the young man die at the hands of those fiends."

"He has His reasons."

"Well perhaps I do not agree with them!"

"Michael, You must calm down. You are beginning to sound like a human."

"Where would We be without the ability to empathize, Gabriel?"

"You cannot let Your grief affect Your judgment. It is not wise."

Michael sighed, pausing from His pacing to flop onto the cotton soft cushion of a nearby cloud. "You are right, of course. I am just overtired."

Gabriel sauntered over, sat down beside Him and wrapped an arm around Him to grip His shoulder. "I do not want to lose You to a battle You cannot win."

Michael frowned. He had no intentions of losing, had learned well from His last fiasco. To His friend He only said, "Why Gabriel, I did not know that You cared."

"I care very much."

Michael looked at Her, silently waiting for the punch line, and when it didn't come right away, He prompted. "And?"

Gabriel shrugged, causing Her luxuriant plumage to gently vibrate. "I do not want to spend a millennium breaking in another partner. Good partners are hard to find."

"Do not worry, Gabriel. I am not going anywhere." At least not until He had seen His three humans safely through to the next level.

** * * **

"You're not going to say I told you so?"

"I'm not into pouring salt into wounds."

"You're perfectly welcome to. I deserve it."

Caution shook his head as he turned into his driveway, and shut off the ignition. He glanced up at his daughter's bedroom window. The lights were off upstairs, and he knew that Brody had already put Tayte down to bed. The lights on the ground floor however, were blazing bright, but rather than beckoning, they repelled him.

He was not in the mood to deal with Sandra again, shocked that it had only been a few hours when she'd first resurfaced with her outrageous request for visitation. To add to his confusion, Dara had asked to come back to his house and hadn't asked him to drive her to her own apartment. It was a pleasant surprise he hadn't anticipated.

"Are you sure you're up to this?"

"After everything I've been through today, I don't think your grandfather or Ms. Melendez could say anything to bother me tonight."

Caution smiled as he got out of the car and met Dara at the front of his Lexus. "You won't have to deal with either of them for long. Trust me."

"Don't get rid of them on my account."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close to his side. "I'm getting rid of them for peace of mind. Your account is a desirable side effect." He released her to unlock the front door and saw Brody right away, napping in one of the living room easy chairs, lightly snoring. He quickly swept the first floor area, but when he didn't find any sign of Sandra his heart twisted with dread of the possibilities.

"Gramps?" Caution shook a shoulder just as Tayte made her way downstairs, sleepily rubbing an eye with one hand and clutching a Raggedy Ann doll in the other.

"She left."

"San—your mother?"

Tayte nodded.

"Boyo, what's all the ruckus fer?" Brody asked, peering up at Caution standing over him.

"What did Sandy say before she left?" He hadn't noticed that her car was no longer parked in the driveway, and wondered how he could have missed it.

"I told her t'wasn't no use her waitin' 'round. You might be gone fur the rest of the night." Brody stopped at this to flash an accusatory look Dara's way, sliding his gaze from her face to her left hand before Dara fidgeted and put her hands behind her back. "She finally decided to leave. Said she'd catch up with you soon."

Caution didn't know whether to be relieved or upset, but felt glad that she was out of his hair for now. His daughter, on the other hand, looked far from relieved or happy.

"Hey Tater, c'mere." He opened his arms for her and she readily came into the circle of his arms and let him pick her up. "We'll hook up with her soon."

Tayte shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"Don't tell me. I can look at your face and see that it does."

"If you don't want her around, it's okay."

"Who told you I don't want her around?"

"I can see it in your face." She stared at him, hooked an arm around his neck and nestled her head against his. "I was only kinda hoping we could go somewhere and I could get to know her. Not that she could ever take your place."

Caution grinned, suppressing a laugh. "You sure know how to make a guy feel good."

Tayte wrapped her other arm around his neck and gave him a big wet kiss on the

cheek. "I love you, Daddy," she whispered.

He swallowed hard past the boulder that his Adam's apple had become and squeezed her tight before putting her down on the carpeted floor. "I love you too, honey. Now go back up to bed, okay?"

"Kay."

Brody stood and joined Caution and Dara as Tayte ran up to her room. "I assume yer in fer the night?"

"We are."

"Hmph." Brody turned and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair, mumbling as he headed for the door. "Gimme a call tomorrow and let me know how things are doin' and whether or not you'll be needing a baby sitter."

"Will do." Caution clapped him on a shoulder and squeezed. "Thanks Grampa."

The older man grunted, donning his jacket and stepping outside. "I'll see you tomorrow then. You're hitting the Manhattan site?"

"Right." Caution nodded, closed and locked the door behind Brody before turning back to Dara. "Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Not too bad."

"I think I'd take the two of them over that Detective Madison and a crime scene any day."

"Given the choice."

Caution slid his arms around her waist, pulled her close. "Why'd you go over there?"

"It's like I told Madison. I needed answers."

"Suppose the killer had still been there. Do you know what kind of danger you put yourself in?"

She arched a brow. "It's my job, and I can take care of myself."

"I haven't forgotten that. You won't let me. I'm just saying, there's nothing wrong with better safe than sorry, is there?"

"Caution, if you're going to give me lip, you can just drive me back to get my bike and I'll go home from there."

"You're not going anywhere." She tried to pull away but he held tight, drawing her against him. "Don't get all prickly. I worry about you. I'm allowed to, aren't I?"

"Sure." She returned his hug, slipping her arms loosely around his waist. "Besides, all the initial evidence points to suicide."

"Another one?"

"Sounds fishy to you too, doesn't it?"

Caution shrugged, not wanting to take sides when he didn't have all the facts.

"You found him hanging from the shower rod in his bathroom right?"

"Yep. Cut and dried. There was even a suicide note. They're going to analyze that for its authenticity, but I don't think they're going to find anything."

"Why's that?"

Dara shrugged. "They didn't find anything at the scene of Diego's death. And I'm sure the same individuals responsible for his death killed Sennet."

"Dara..." Caution pulled back to stare at her, an image of her thigh injury flashing past his mind's eye. "Does this have anything to do with your business?"

"The police don't seem to think so."

"Have you given them any reason to consider it business-related and not a personal thing between Diego and Sennet?"

"What are you getting at?"

"You could be the next target, Dare. That's what I'm getting at." He felt his heart rate increasing in direct proportion to his implication, the perceived threat, thinking that she already *had* been a target but had escaped.

What had really happened to her leg that night, and who had inflicted the injury? How narrow had her escape been?

She looked at him, opening and closing her mouth as if she wanted to say something but had instantly decided against it. Her second of hesitation gave him his answer, made him consider more closely the card that detective, Madison, had pushed into his hand when he'd come to pick up Dara. Despite his suspicions about her and the detective's relationship, he thought perhaps Madison was onto something and that Dara needed to be watched for her own safety's sake. "Dare? You don't think that's a possibility?"

"Anything's possible."

"Don't evade. Do you or don't you think it was business-related?"

"No, I don't."

Caution glared at her for a long moment as if he could intimidate an admission out of her.

What would it get him if she acquiesced? He'd only have confirmation that her life was in more than the usual danger. And that would only get him a giant case of high blood pressure, worrying about her every move or breath when she wasn't with him and he had no control over her actions. Like he ever did.

He wanted to kidnap and handcuff her to his bed for the duration. Problem was, he didn't know what the duration was, how long it would last, or from whom he'd be protecting her.

Dara squeezed his middle and glanced up at him. "You worry too much."

Sometimes he didn't think he worried enough, at least not where her job was concerned. But what could he do? Ask her to quit her life's work? He'd have a better

chance of getting her to walk down the aisle.

Wait a minute! She'd already accepted his proposal, hadn't she? Had that been only several days ago when his life had taken a sudden turn for the better? And as soon as they had arrived home, it had taken a turn for the worse that was just as sudden.

"What plots are concocting behind those gorgeous green eyes of yours?"

"You really think they're gorgeous?" He sexily batted long lashes at her, garnering a playful punch to the rib cage, proud of himself for knowing when to quit and keep things light.

"You know you're a hunk. Don't make me say it again."

He lifted her off her feet, pulled her close enough to feel his hard cock. If possible it hardened more as the warm juncture between her thighs aligned with his erection. She leaned in for a kiss, mimicking the sinuous movement of her body against him, with her tongue in his mouth. Caution groaned, put an arm under her knees to lift her in his arms, never once losing contact with her sweet lips. He headed for the stairs, pulling away long enough to look at her and smile. "Sure you don't want to go in for a little more buttering me up?"

"I'll go for buttering you up. Just not the way you're thinking."

His balls tightened, dick twitching in his pants at all the possibilities as he rushed up the rest of the steps, took her to his bedroom and pushed the door closed behind him with a foot.

"Want to make sure Tayte's asleep?"

"I'll take that chance."

Dara giggled at his husky tone as he tossed her onto the center of the bed. She got up on her knees and waited as he stalked her across the mattress.

He took off his shirt and tossed it right before Dara tackled him to the mattress and he instantly flipped her beneath him to straddle her. "You always like being on top, huh?"

"If you let me be on top..." She reached for and quickly unzipped the front of his jeans. "I promise you a nice treat."

"Such as?" Caution bent his head to suck and bite her throat.

Dara reached inside his fly and pulled out his hard cock, thumbing the pearl of pre-come gathered at the tip as Caution arched his neck and moaned.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Giving you your treat." Dara eased herself down until her mouth was aligned with his jutting penis. She reached out her tongue to lick the liquid from his slit, closed her mouth over his smooth head and sucked hard.

Caution growled deep in his throat and gently pumped his hips to push his shaft further into her mouth, slowly, slowly, inch by torturous inch, until she pulled him all the way into the hot cavern of her mouth and his penis bumped the back of her throat. "Oh,

Christ..." He unhurriedly rolled his hips, waiting for her to adjust to his throbbing dimensions, the rush to climax a burning need painfully tightening his balls.

She reached between his legs to gently scrape a fingernail over his scrotum before cupping him and Caution raked his hands through her silken hair and pulled her closer.

"Shit...I'm going to come, Dara."

She sucked harder, moving her head up and down his shaft, tongue massaging the underside from base to tip.

Hell, he wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer, but couldn't stop thrusting his hips in rhythm to her pulls and slurps. "Did you hear me, Dare?"

She groaned around his flesh, cupped and squeezed his scrotum in answer and that's when Caution let go, releasing an endless hot jet of sperm into her mouth. Dara tightened her mouth around him, drinking him down and pulling until there was no more come left to release. She grasped his narrow hips tight as shudders wracked his body. Caution fell forward, catching his weight on his palms as he eased off of Dara and lay down on his side next to her. She leaned up on an elbow, looking at him, smiling and licking her lips like a cat licking away cream. "Nice treat?"

He reached out to palm her face, determined not to lose her—not to that crazy dangerous job of hers or some other vengeful bounty hunter with a score to settle. He would do everything in his power to keep her with him, safe, and to get her to their wedding and the beginning of their life together.

Until then, he decided, he was going to show her how much he loved and needed her, and not just for her dynamite body and blow jobs, but for her—Dara Kelly, brash, cynical bounty hunter, and romantic vulnerable woman—the entire package.

Caution nodded in answer to her question and leaned in to kiss her on the mouth, nibbling her full lower lip before pulling back to say, "Now it's my turn to give you a treat."

For the rest of my life, and for the rest of yours.

* * * *

Randall hadn't known what he wanted to do with the pictures he'd taken of the cunt and her cop boyfriend until he saw the big nugget shining from the finger on Kelly's left hand. Then it hit him with blinding clarity.

Her Highness didn't appreciate his sense of drama or timing. She had mentioned another use for his photographic coup, intimated using them as some sort of lure.

Lure, smure. Someone needed to have a fire lit under his or her ass besides him, and the pictures were just the trick. Easy for the customer to dictate when it was *his* ass on the line and not hers. His timing, as she put it, was on the money as far as he was concerned, since the Kelly bitch had that detective in her pocket and sniffing up Randall's ass. Too close for comfort, regardless of the fact that he'd been extra careful not to leave clues. He didn't enjoy Madison suspecting him for the murders, and if it hadn't been for the customer and Kelly, the detective wouldn't have known Randall existed.

They were his pictures, products of his blood, sweat and tears and he'd done with them what pleased him. She was lucky he'd even mentioned it to her, like she was his mother and had to be aware of every frigging move he made!

Oh, he'd had to hear it from the customer, had gotten a ranting, squawking earful, all for naught. The deed was done, the pictures already on their way. He didn't understand her logic. If nothing else worked, the pictures would drive a wedge between and probably break Kelly and her boyfriend up quicker than anything else he or the customer could do.

Breaking them up may have been all right before, but the customer wanted it all, her rival completely out of the picture, unable to interfere with the customer and Caution Foster again. Fair enough. He could understand her reasoning, especially since it was much like his as far as the Kelly broad was concerned.

Why should Dara Kelly live happily ever after when he was stuck dealing with the she-devil from hell?

Besides, it was the least pleasure he deserved for taking out the customer's two little problems. One had turned into two when little Ms. Hoity Toity had gotten the idea that keeping Sennet alive was too much of a risk. She feared he'd talk. Had that skip who'd watched him take out Kelly talked? No, and he wasn't going to. But the customer didn't want to take the risk that Tarrent's intimidation was enough to keep Sennet silent. Never mind killing lover boy so close on the heels of his lover "committing suicide" looking suspicious.

"Unless you don't have the stomach for it."

The customer thought she was so smart, trying to bait him. She thought he was stupid. But he had another thing coming for her. He'd done her little job, had no difficulty disconnecting and taking out Sennet. The suicide angle had been a nice touch, one the customer had come up with, to her credit. He wouldn't have tried it again after the last one, but that was just him. And he didn't know how she'd finessed the suicide note out of the smug and stubborn Sennet, but she had. Guess womanly wiles counted for something. And he ought to know, having been taken in by them more times than he wanted to remember.

But never again.

CHAPTER 24

Sam felt the coolness behind her and flipped onto her left side, instinctively reaching for Caution's body. Her eyes flew open when she realized she was in bed alone. She turned toward the window, catching a so far rare glimpse of bright sunlight slashing through the slightly open slats of the blinds. She swerved her head to confirm her suspicions and saw from the LCD on the bedside clock radio that it was near noon.

Caution came into the bedroom bearing a breakfast tray brimming with sliced melons, strawberries, and waffles, as she was revving up her energy to fuss.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"I'm waking you now, with a—"

"Hearty breakfast." She smiled as he settled the tray over her lap, and leaned in to give her a kiss full on the mouth.

Sam slipped in her tongue, gliding her hand down to the front of his pajama bottoms and firmly cupping his early afternoon arousal. She rubbed as if it were a lamp and she was trying to get a genie to come out, felt him grow harder against her palm, then blinked open her eyes to look at him. "I shouldn't start something we can't finish," she whispered against his mouth.

Caution pulled away long enough to ask, "Who says we can't finish?"

"Where's Tater?"

"I called Brody this morning. He came by and picked her up hours ago."

"You've been a busy beaver while I've been sleeping my life away." She leaned back on her elbows to stare at him, smiling. "So, we've got the house all to ourselves."

"For a little while. Until we get ready to go in."

"Oh yeah. That little thing called work."

"You knew we had to go back sooner or later. I've already gotten a couple of calls

from Pamela *and* Sandra this morning."

"You poor man." Sam cupped his erection more insistently, leaned in and slid her mouth along the strong column of his throat, nipping and licking as she worked her way up to his mouth. She kissed him deeply, pushed her tongue into his mouth and hungrily took her fill.

"What about breakfast?" Caution asked.

"I'm hungry for something else entirely different."

"All my hard work gone to waste." He pulled back to remove the tray, smiling as he made room for it on the bedside table and placed it atop.

"We'll work up a nice appetite and I'll help you make the next batch."

"Aren't you sweet."

"That's me, sweet Sa—Dara." She caught the Federal Express envelope from the corner of an eye, reached for it. "What's this?"

"My guess is a draft franchise contract from Pamela. She's only been bugging me about it for the last couple of months. I guess she got tired of waiting and decided to get the ball rolling without me. Wants to turn *Foster's* into another Houlihan's."

"Or McDonald's."

"One that serves alcohol."

"Ms. Auburn Ambition has you on a short leash." Sam frowned at the weight of the envelope in her hands, the heat and energy radiating from within. Something told her this had nothing to do with Pamela or Caution's business but everything to do with her, despite it being addressed to Caution. "Maybe you should open it."

"It can wait." He leaned in, balancing himself on his palms as he gently sucked and bit her neck, pulling back to arch a brow at her silence and serious look. "What's the matter?"

"Never let it be said I stood in the way of progress." She pushed the envelope at him.

Caution sighed, mumbling as he pulled the tab and ripped open the top of the envelope. "If it'll get this to go along any faster."

Sam chuckled as he emptied the contents—a thick packet of snapshots—before all humor disappeared and a pall fell over the room as quickly as the pictures scattered onto the bed. She swallowed as Caution reached for the shots, and had to fist her hands at her sides to keep from reaching out to wrest the packet from him. Darn, she'd brought this on herself, whatever *this* was, and she knew it could only be bad.

She watched his expression change from confusion, to shock, to anguish, and finally to anger all in the span of seconds. She thought she could take anything—Dawson's abuse and infidelities, losing their baby, her own death as Sam—before he raised his eyes to stare at her and she saw all the emotions reflecting in his striking green eyes, eloquently accusing her.

"Is he the reason for the frequent out-of-town jaunts?" He tossed the pictures in her lap, stood and paced the room at the foot of the bed as Sam leafed through the shots, stomach muscles knotting with each new view.

She swallowed hard as she recognized Josh, his SUV, the secluded spot where they'd parked, and realized how suspect the shots looked without the fact that she'd been caught in an intimate clinch with another man.

"Who is he?" Caution rasped.

"It isn't what you think, Caution."

He laughed, the sound bitter and grating against her ears as he paused, staring at her from the foot of the bed. "I don't think you really care what I think, Dare. I don't think you ever have."

He peered at her, gaze slowly sliding from her face to the medallion hanging from a thin leather strap around her neck. He closed the space between them in three easy strides and reached for the Celtic knot. "He gave you this?"

She nodded, breathless, mute, not knowing what to say to stop the out-of-control-elevator-going-down she'd suddenly boarded.

"What is it? Some sort of promissory note until you two are together again?"

She almost gasped at how accurate his allegation was, then clutched the medallion in her hand. She thought she could still feel the warmth from Joshua's fingers when he'd pressed it into her hand in the SUV.

Caution lurched to his feet and restarted his pacing at the foot of the bed until Sam was sure he'd walk a hole straight through to the dining room below.

"If I told you he was an informant, would you believe me?"

"Do you kiss and accept jewelry from all your informants?"

"You have to believe me, Caution. It isn't the way it appears."

He came back to the bed and sat beside her, and she flinched when he reached for her face to gently palm a cheek. He scowled. "I'm not Dawson, Dara."

"I know that."

"Are you sure?"

"If you were Dawson, our positions would be reversed. Only I haven't done anything to earn your mistrust, despite how it looks."

He leaned close, pressed his right cheek to hers, forked his hands through her hair to nape, cupped the base of her skull and pulled her close. "Damn, I want to believe you more than anything."

"Trust me, Caution. Please." She slid her arms around him, reveling in the feel of his muscles bunching beneath her fingers, the smooth warmth of his skin, the fresh male scent of his soap and shampoo—a woodsy mixture of citrus and musk—wafting to her on

a teasing billow of memory and anticipation.

Sam pulled away to stare at him.

He was so important to her now, and she realized she didn't want to lose him, didn't want to lose his love. Whoever sent those pictures must have realized these facts better than she did, and meant to sabotage their relationship and embryonic trust.

Elementary, but could it be as simple as Randall Tarrent?

* * * *

If she didn't know better, she'd believe that they were beginning to rub off on each other.

She shuddered at the thought, could barely countenance a world where she and Randall Tarrent breathed the same air, much less one in which they had the same thoughts. But his sending the pictures to the Amazon had been a stroke of genius, something that she would have chalked up to a woman's envy and intuition if she hadn't been dealing with the most colossal male chauvinist she'd ever known in her life. She wouldn't have sent the pictures so soon in the game, however, but would have waited to use them later on.

Randall had scoffed at this plan, couldn't see what possible difference it could make ruining the cunt's life sooner than later. He still didn't quite get her agenda. She didn't want to simply ruin "the cunt's" life. Like him, she wanted to end it, nothing less. And the more time went by, the firmer her wishes, especially now that the Amazon was wearing Caution's ring.

She'd tried to be nice, scare the Amazon away, get her to leave Caution of her own accord once she saw the light. But that hadn't worked. And except for that one time with the car in the alley, she had been pretty discreet, and hadn't resorted to drastic, one-on-one measures.

This had to change.

When she'd first discovered Randall and his plans for the Amazon, she'd rejoiced in the knowledge that here was someone other than herself with a reason to see Dara Kelly brought down, and the motivation and desire to do something about it. Randall Tarrent didn't just talk retribution; he lived it, plotting and planning for years before he'd been ready to try something. She had respected that kind of tenacity, thought that they'd work well together and approached him with a proposition.

As their relationship had grown first from benefactor to partners, then partners to co-conspirators, she realized that there was no turning back, and perhaps she had been going about her revenge all wrong, not giving it her all.

Her association with Tarrent nurtured the killer instinct within, took her vindictiveness one step further until she'd reached an irreversible death wish. It was a transformation she didn't so far regret. It only made her look forward to having taken an active role in bringing down her enemy.

According to Tarrent's calculations, the pictures should be in Caution's hands this moment, burning a hole through the very fabric of his and the Amazon's relationship,

although she didn't believe the dissolution would be anything as simple as Fed Exing a packet of pictures.

Caution was too level headed, not one who was easily angered or jumped to the obvious first conclusion. These were some of the main reasons she loved him so much. He was unique, so different from her—from his twin, and father, definitely miles above his grandfather—and balanced out all their negative traits with his positive ones.

For anyone else, she wouldn't have gone through so much trouble. But he was worth it—even after all that they'd been through, all that she'd put him through. And he wasn't just anyone else but a man she wanted to keep in her life as long as she could, if not forever.

Caution was everything her mother couldn't have, and had strove all her life to achieve. He was everything her father had aspired to be, but had never been—trustworthy, stalwart, dependable, but most of all, present and accounted for.

No, she wouldn't let the Amazon have him without a fight. She had worked too hard, gone too far to keep the man close and in her camp. She wouldn't lose him now.

She picked up the phone on the desk and dialed Tarrent's, drumming her manicured nails on the polished wood surface as the phone rang. She spun in the swivel chair, almost heady with their progress since Sennet's death. Killing him had been unfortunate, but a necessity nonetheless. At this late stage, she couldn't afford any slip-ups, especially not avoidable risks represented by a pair of grief-stricken loose lips. Loose lips period, and that included her friend, the good ol' boy.

Tarrent picked up on the fourth ring, and she could easily picture him in that shabby one bedroom apartment, jerking off to his heart's desire in his La-Z-Boy chair.

She closed her eyes and shivered at her own overactive imagination as Tarrent's gruff and hoarse voice sounded over the phone, thought her visions weren't too far off the mark. "Aren't you up yet?"

"Good morning to you too."

"It's afternoon, and we've got work to do."

"What do you need me to do now?"

"Have the pictures arrived?"

"I watched the Fed Ex guy drop them off late morning."

"Perfect." She grinned. "You think they've dug into them yet?"

"Depends."

She listened to his robust yawn and clearly pictured him reaching inside his shorts to scratch his balls as he nonchalantly shrugged. She shivered again.

"Unless you've got some pressing matter you need me to attend to, your Highness—"

"As a matter of fact, I may."

"May?"

"I'd like you to make a phone call to the Amazon to set up a meeting."

"And what's going to make her fall for a call like that?"

"Curiosity."

"I don't think there's that much curiosity in the world."

"Trust me. She wants to know who was behind her friend's death. She needs to know."

"You think that'll be enough?"

"For someone like the Amazon? It feeds right into her self-righteous search for truth, justice and the American way." This actually got a chuckle out of the Neanderthal, and she smiled against the mouthpiece as a floorboard creaked at the door behind her.

** * * **

"Oh! I didn't know anyone was in here."

She fixed a smile to her face, told Tarrent to hold on and swiveled around in her chair. "Brody! How are you?"

"Fine. I was lookin' fer Caution. He said he'd be at the Manhattan site some time today."

"He hasn't shown up here. I'm waiting for him myself."

Brody turned to leave and stopped when she called to him.

"You have a message you want me to give him?"

"Nothin' important. Just tell him I stopped by with Tayte. She wanted to see him before we headed off to the park."

"Tater's such a sweetie," she said. "I'll let him know as soon as I see him."

Brody curtly nodded before turning again to leave.

She cursed as soon as the door closed behind him, seething at her own stupidity.

"What's up?" Tarrent asked.

"Fly in the ointment. We're going to have to change our immediate plans."

"I hate it when you get that bossy tone in your voice."

"Will you be serious? We've got a problem." She took a deep breath. She hated to do this especially so soon after the last two, especially with the child present, but she didn't see any way around it. It was either assume Brody had heard just enough to incriminate her, and in turn would talk to Caution, or wishfully assume that Brody hadn't heard enough of her conversation to make a difference, and leave him alive.

She had never been an unnecessary risk taker. And the thought of Caution's reaction, that he might mention Brody's quotes to the Amazon... She could just see the insufferable woman putting two and two together, even on the off chance that Caution might not. She couldn't take the chance. "I'm going to need you for some urgent hands-on work. The kind of job on which you thrive, trust me."

"Urgent?"

"Time is of the essence. I mean like yesterday."

* * * *

Caution wanted to believe her, wanted to trust her. She'd never given him any reason not to, not when he got right down to it. Aloofness and staunch independence didn't count, otherwise, he'd have ended their affiliation long ago for her faithlessness.

He listened to her in the master bath, singing badly in the shower. Her off-key alto alone tied his stomach in knots and made him hard. The image of her naked body beneath the steamy spray, droplets from her wavy hair clinging to sleek copper curves did him in righteously.

Fantasizing was getting him nowhere except in a wound up state of arousal with no hopes of assuagement in the near future. It was a far sight better, however, than torturing himself over whether or not she had made it with the kid in the SUV out in what looked like the middle of Death Valley.

He had had these feelings before—possessiveness, jealousy —especially in the beginning when he'd seen how Dara got down with the male colleagues in her life, from uniformed officers and the plainclothes like Madison, to the snitches and informants on the street, all fair game. It had taken him a while to learn the woman was an incurable flirt, flaunting her wares when and where it pleased her, a trail of stomped-on hearts and psyches in her wake.

He didn't think she knew the effect she had on the male species half the time, so wrapped up in getting the job done that she didn't have the time or inclination to worry about male ego and sensitivity. And he ought to know, since he'd been on the other end of her merciless boot the other half of the time. The kid in the SUV might very well be an informant, perhaps one she'd gotten too close to, perhaps one with whom she had a past, which would explain the medallion.

Caution had often wondered about her work associates—the ones who might fall into the current or past lover category—which was difficult to nail down as she treated most men and more than a few women with an aggressive competitiveness that belied a loving bone in her body, and spoke volumes of a woman who avoided intimacy at all costs.

But there was something about the kid who'd given her the medallion, a deep-seated intimacy that spoke of long walks on the beach and spontaneous road trips, blood bonds and pinky bets, senior trips and high school proms.

On top of all this, there was something familiar about the medallion itself. He knew he had seen the design before and wondered why this particular guy, this particular piece of jewelry bothered him so much.

Perhaps because Dara wasn't much of a jewelry wearer, and hadn't been since he'd known her. Aside from a small pair of gold hoop earrings (that he hadn't seen on her in a while, come to think of it), a functional stainless steel watch, and now his engagement ring (guess he should thank God for small favors), she didn't wear any sort of adornments. Which meant that the medallion was important to her.

Caution picked up the packet, skimming through the photos again, like a masochist who hadn't had a sufficient dose of flagellation. He stared at that one shot towards the end, the one that showed the kiss between Dara and the mystery man.

He felt the heat and energy, as if the photo were a living thing rather than just chemicals, color ink and paper. He felt chemistry emanating, as intoxicating as the chemicals used to develop the shot itself. Despite the other man's youth, there was definitely something there, something with which Caution doubted he could compete. He decided that if he had to, though, he would. He'd come too far, fought too long and hard to give up on Dara now.

"You're not looking through those again, are you?" Freshly showered and changed, Dara came behind him, slid her arms around his waist as she rested her chin on his collarbone.

"Don't you wonder who sent them?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

He widened his eyes and turned to her. "Care to let me in on it?"

"What good would it do?"

"I'd like to confront your accusers."

"I can handle them."

"You don't think this is connected to Diego and Sennet?"

"Boy, you're full of conspiracy theories today."

"I learned from the best." His smile was grim when he stared at her. "Besides, it's better than the alternative."

Dara looked at him, silent and serious, as if she knew what the alternative was—Caution's believing that there was something more between her and the mystery man than just air and a kiss. She put a hand on his closest arm and squeezed his biceps. "He doesn't mean anything to me, Caution," she whispered.

He nodded, took her hand and brought it to his lips. He kissed her palm. "I know." He tried to convey all that he was feeling, all that he understood and was willing to live with, in those two words, but knew he'd failed miserably. How could he convince her that he believed her, when he didn't totally believe her himself?

CHAPTER 25

Sam made her way upstairs to the homicide division of the Fifteenth Precinct and briefly stopped at the civilian aide's desk before she spotted Calvin Madison across the room at the door to his office.

He caught sight of her too, stage-whispered "Oh no" and turned to go back into his office as Sam thanked the aide and headed for Madison's office. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

"I'm surprised you stopped at the desk and didn't just barge in."

"What barge? Your door was open."

"Don't get any ideas that that's my policy."

"Why are you such a hard-ass?" Sam flopped into the chair across from his desk and crossed her right thigh over her left, eyeing him across the solid expanse of wood and tension.

"You need to ask?"

"You shouldn't let this place take away your humanity. Then they'll have won."

"By 'they' I'm assuming you mean the criminal element?"

"Exactly."

"You of all people should talk, Ms. Hard-Ass."

"Yeah, well...do as I say."

Madison grinned, dark brown eyes unreadable as he peered at her over his pyramided fingertips. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Have you picked up Tarrent?"

"And why would I be doing that?"

"Madison, you said you would."

"I said I'd consider it."

"Why are you playing with words? Are you going to look at him, or not?"

"Don't you have anything better to do than bust my chops?"

Sam lurched to her feet, fist on a hip. "As a matter of fact, I do. I could march right over to Tarrent's and question him myself."

"I wouldn't advise that."

"Oh, you wouldn't?"

Madison sighed. "Why don't you take a load off and listen for a minute, Dare."

Sam gaped at the term of familiarity, not as surprised as she thought she should be. She'd sensed something during their first meeting, yet had hoped she was wrong. Reluctantly, she took a seat, more out of exhaustion than shock.

Madison came from behind his desk, sat on the edge of it, and took both of her hands in his. "You've been dealt a pretty heavy blow, losing your partner."

"What are you saying? That I'm not thinking clearly? Besides, I didn't *lose* him, someone took him away from me."

"That still remains to be seen."

"So you are checking into it?"

"I'm not saying whether we are or we aren't."

"Damn you, Madiso—" She gasped when he leaned in and kissed her on the mouth, too shocked to pull away before she felt the gentle pressure of his lips slanting across hers. When Sam finally withdrew, she was breathless, and she gaped at Madison as he sat working his jaw. "What the heck was that about!"

"I couldn't resist."

"Are you out of your mind? I'm engaged."

"That means you're not married yet."

"So I'm fair game?"

"Not exactly." He ran a palm down his face and sighed again as he made his way back behind his desk. He sat shuffling and straightening papers for several long, silent moments and Sam stared at him, waiting.

"We got an anonymous phone call the other day. Something about a murder that had taken place several weeks ago in a hotel room. Problem is, there's no body."

Sam frowned, heart hammering. Had Dara's skip turned on Randall? Why had it taken him so long?

She knew the answer before the last question had fully formed. He'd probably been scared to death, intimidated not only by Randall's size but by his depravity and disregard for human life. Hell, he probably reasoned if Tarrent could take out a fellow bounty hunter, anyone was fair game, especially a tame and well-to-do bond-jumper.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"I think it's you who needs to tell me something."

Sam just looked at him, waiting to hear a strident warning for only her ears, but nothing came. She was on her own again. "I don't know what you mean."

"Tarrent. You. A terrified skip."

"I thought you said the call was anonymous."

"We have our sources. Besides, I'm pretty good at putting two and two together."

"Obviously, your addition is flawed. I'm alive and well."

"According to the caller, miraculously so."

"If you have all this information, then what are you asking me?"

"I'm not asking you anything. I'm stating. You've got a serious bone to pick with Tarrent, and with good reason. I understand, but I can't abide a grudge match in my precinct."

Sam arched a brow. "Does that mean you're not going to look at him?"

"It means, I don't want to see you get hurt."

"So is that what the kiss was about?"

Madison came from behind his desk and sat on the edge of it again.

Sam tensed. As pleasant and right as his lips had felt, she didn't think her nerves could take another kiss. She didn't know how she'd react and was ashamed of herself for the doubt. She vaguely wondered how much of her reactions belonged to her own almost-married conscience, and how much to her commitment-phobic host.

"You know how I feel about you, Dara Kelly. That hasn't changed. But I can't let my feelings for you interfere with an ongoing investigation."

"Interfere? I could help you."

"No. You can't." He stood, caught her by an arm, and guided her out of her chair and to his office door. He leaned in and gave her a chaste peck on the cheek, as if he didn't want to push his luck or didn't trust himself with more. "Your fiancé is a lucky man. I'd like to make sure he stays that way, and so should you."

* * * *

Sam had never been brushed off so sweetly before.

How had Dara managed to attract such honorable, trustworthy men when Sam had gotten stuck with the cowardly and violent bottom of the barrel?

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. She'd flipped a coin and made her choice, and it had turned into a youthful indiscretion of fatal proportions. But she didn't know what Dara's story was, or how many frogs the older woman had had to kiss before she'd gotten to Madison and Caution.

A girl could go crazy trying to choose between them. But then Madison had taken

the decision out of her hands with his parting. Hadn't he?

She could read so much into his words, his actions. He could have been saying good-bye- have-a-nice-life, or I'll-be-waiting-here-if-your-gig-doesn't-work-out. She couldn't tell and the uncertainty wound her insides into knots.

Her decision to leave Josh and come back to the city and Caution was beginning to look more and more like another error in judgment.

When They had said They had plans for her, she couldn't have guessed to what extent in her wildest dreams, and now she wondered how far her current odyssey would go before someone ran out of gas and ideas. Before someone decided that she'd had enough.

Sam entered the apartment with her key and paused on the top step of the sunken living room, waiting for Dara to do her reappearing act. She was not surprised when the woman became visible, sitting in a corner of the sofa. She went down the stairs and stalked across the floor, stopping in front of Dara with her fists on her hips. "Why didn't you warn me?"

Dara gawked, looking as innocent as the Virgin Mary.

"You and Madison."

"Oh, that."

"Yeah, *that*."

"I thought it better if you didn't know."

"That you'd had an affair with Detective Madison?"

"Not exactly an affair."

"Whatever the hell you want to call it. You slept with him, right?"

"Yes."

"Is that the reason he has an ex-wife?"

Dara glared at her as if she would have liked nothing better than to take off Sam's head with her bare hands. Sam took a step back and wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the sudden temperature drop.

"If you don't know me better than that you should."

"I thought—"

"Madison was already divorced when I met him and I hadn't yet met Caution. Still, against my better judgment, Madison and I...we, uh, had a little fling. I'm not ashamed of it, it's just not the wisest decision I've made."

"Was he that bad?"

Dara chuckled, the sound momentarily lightening the tension in the room. "No, not at all. He was pretty good, actually. Nowhere near as good as Caution but—"

Sam held up a hand in a stop sign. "I'd rather not hear the gory details."

"Anyway, things went a little further than I'd planned. Madison's a nice guy, and like nice guys usually do, he wanted more than I was willing to give."

"That happens with men on the rebound."

Dara's eyes lit with admiration. "It can. Or they could go completely the other way and become merciless playboys and womanizers."

Sam wondered if that's what had happened to Dawson. She also wondered if Dara were so gun-shy after her two marriages, or being taken advantage of by those types, although she couldn't see anyone taking advantage of the Dara Kelly she knew, not even the slickest playboys or womanizers. "I don't think Madison has it in him to be either."

"You're probably right. Which is where my unwise decision came in. He's not the type of guy a woman can put on a back burner to her career. But then, neither is Caution."

Sam watched as a distant look came into Dara's eyes, as if she were weighing the sagacity of all her love-life decisions, regretting all the compromises she had never made. "Dara?" She didn't know what she'd do if the woman zoned out on her now. She couldn't do this alone. "Are you okay?"

"Just thinking," Dara murmured.

"Are you in love with Madison?"

"I wish it were that simple." She peered at Sam. "Besides, what difference does it make now? You're in love with Caution and me...I'm a ghost."

What could Sam say to that?

* * * *

After the scene with the pictures and Dara, Caution was not in the mood for either of his ex-wives when he arrived at *Foster's*. Truth be told, he wasn't in the mood to deal with anyone who had a vagina and breasts at the moment.

But damned if Sandra wasn't waiting for him in his office when he arrived, feet up on the polished antique desk, exposing a long expanse of sleek tanned legs encased in nude pantyhose. "How did you get in here, and what are you doing here?"

"Fine greeting for the mother of your child."

"You want a medal for playing hostess? Try cleaning up after the guests have arrived and trashed your place." Caution sauntered behind the desk and silently hovered over Sandra until she got the message.

"Sheesh, you don't have to tell me twice, *papi*." She slid out of the chair and took the high-back leather chair adjacent to the desk.

Caution sat in the executive leather chair Sandra had just vacated, stared at her and thought how out of place her tangerine designer outfit and matching pumps looked in the purely masculine wood and leather paneled room. He could actually only think of one woman who did fit in his office and that was Dara in her customary denim and black leather. The image of her straddling him in the very chair he was sitting in tightened his stomach muscles and rushed blood to his cock in record time.

He remembered the last occasion they'd gotten hot and heavy in his office when Brody had barged in on them to break up the party with "business." Ever since then, Caution had gotten into the habit of locking the door when he was in his office with Dara.

But not now with Sandra. He was rather hoping for an intrusion to save him, but knew he wouldn't be so lucky. He had to deal with her.

"So, how'd you get in?"

"The door was open."

"I doubt that."

"Sure it was. I came in when this woman, some snooty *putana* who said she's your partner, came out. She almost locked the door in my face before I told her who I was."

He wanted to berate her for her language, but didn't want to be hypocritical when Dara had been known to use far more colorful adjectives. "You must mean Pamela. And for your information, she's my ex-wife."

"No, *papi*, I'm your ex-wife."

"I should have said my second ex-wife."

Sandra gawked. "You took a step down, huh?"

"That's a matter of opinion." Caution glanced at the papers on his desk, noticed the franchise contract with sticky notes—Pamela's imperious, meticulous handwriting—attached. He groaned and pushed them aside, knowing he wouldn't be getting to them any time soon, not until he got rid of Sandra.

"You said you'd call."

"It's only been one day, Sandra."

"How long am I expected to wait?"

He glared at her, working his jaw muscles. "You can't be serious."

"I'd like to start making up for lost time."

"Sandra, I can't go through this with you. Not right now."

"You might as well admit it, Caution. It's never going to be a good time for you."

He was surprised at her astuteness, but more telling was her determination. "Why did you come back, Sandy? It's obvious you don't want for anything." He gave her expensive linen outfit the once over, and took enormous satisfaction at the twin blush staining her high cheeks.

"I told you. I want to try and reconnect with my daughter."

She almost made him feel like an ogre—the hurt voice, the sincere expression—until he remembered how she'd walked out on him and Tayte.

I was only kinda hoping we could go somewhere and I could get to know her...

It wasn't fair of him to punish Tayte because of what her mother had or hadn't

done and he knew it. He just had a hard time forgiving someone once the love was gone. Dawson could attest to this.

"Why don't you drop by the house this evening? We'll take it from there."

"You mean it?"

Damn, she seemed so genuinely happy, he hated to burst her balloon. More than that, he hated the thought of bursting Tayte's. "Yeah, I mean it." What he was going to do about Dara was anyone's guess.

The phone rang, and he instantly reached for it, thinking telepathy really did work and that it was Dara. He received a rude awakening at the officious tone of a stranger's voice on the other end instead. Several sentences into the conversation, his body went numb. Only the mention of Tayte alone at the hospital spurred him to his feet, handset clutched in his fist.

"Caution, what's wrong?"

"That was the police."

Sandra raised perfectly waxed brows as he hurried from behind the desk and grabbed her arm. "My grandfather's been...he's at the hospital and Tayte's there with him."

"At the hospital? Why? What happened? Is Tayte okay?"

"I don't know anything yet..." Caution dragged her with him to the exit. "Except that I have to get to them."

CHAPTER 26

Caution held Tayte close to his chest, neck still wet from where she'd been crying since he'd arrived at the hospital to retrieve her.

He handed Sandra his keys and entered the house behind her after she unlocked and opened the front door, then flipped on the overhead light in the foyer. Roscoe greeted them as soon as they stepped inside and Caution sidestepped him as he passed Sandra to take Tayte upstairs, his daughter's beagle on his heels.

Sandra put a hand on an arm to stop him. "I'd like to help you tuck her in."

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Caution, you're going to have to let me in sooner or later. Please. The child just lost her great-grandfather."

"And I don't want her to get used to another person who's only going to walk out on her and break her heart again!"

Sandra gaped, stepped back and dropped her hand. "Please, don't spare my feelings."

Caution closed his eyes against the distress in hers. He didn't have it in him to comfort her now. He was too numb with his own grief, with Tayte's.

He'd just seen the old coot this morning, less than twenty-four hours ago, and now he was gone. The man had always seemed so sturdy and indestructible in his tough moodiness. This had been especially true when Caution had been a boy hungry for the attention and approval of the male role model in his life, but had only gotten the granite logic of a man still grieving the loss of his own son, an old man set in his ways to a fault. It was hard for Caution to believe Brody was dead.

No more jibes about his settling down with the right kind of woman. No more cracks about Dara's inappropriateness for him and Tayte. No more misnomers and racial slurs. No more need to defend his choices, his existence to the old man.

He was gone.

"Sandy, I'm sorry." Caution turned from her and headed up the stairs, listening as her soft footfalls followed his lead.

He got Tayte undressed and washed in short order as Sandra silently stood by and watched as if looking for pointers.

The kid barely cracked open an eye when he got her out of her clothes and into her favorite pair of pink Barbie pjs. As soon as he put her in bed and drew the covers up to her chest, however, she reached out a small hand to grab one of his big ones.

"The policeman said it wasn't a monster, Daddy. He said it was a bad man that took my grandpa away."

"Don't talk about it, Tater. You don't want to have a nightmare." He almost laughed in hysteria. She'd already lived the ultimate nightmare, her entire afternoon at the park turned into one endless bad dream that she'd remember for the rest of her life. She'd watched some masked faceless fiend take her great-grandfather from this world. Two deep knife thrusts to the chest, wallet rifled by cold grasping hands, an old man's outing with his great-granddaughter forever marred by one man's avarice, and a traumatized child left outside the gates of a playground for Good Samaritans and police to find.

Monster. Bad man. One in the same.

"I wish Dara was here," Tayte whispered.

Caution wrapped his arms around her and sheepishly glanced at Sandra over the child's head as he pulled Tayte close. "So do I, honey."

"I betcha she would catch that bad man and lock him up and throw away the key."

"She probably would." He swallowed hard over the lump in his throat, would have liked nothing better than to put Dara on the case because she wouldn't rest until she'd hunted down the bastard and brought him to justice. But he knew her hands were full now with something about which she had no desire or reason to tell him. The realization sent his confidence spiraling to new lows. How much more was she not telling him about, besides the guy in the SUV? Not that the lines had ever been open and well delineated, but how much further would communication between them decay?

Caution felt the other side of the bed sink under Sandra's delicate weight as she sat on the edge of the mattress, and he pulled away from Tayte to watch her smoothing the child's wavy black hair with sure gentle strokes, as if she'd been doing it all her life.

"It's going to be all right, Tater. You'll see."

Caution opened his mouth to protest. He felt like saying that things would never be all right again. He wanted to tell Sandy not to lie to their daughter, but he didn't want to dispute her in front of the child, and he couldn't find it in his heart to burst whatever bubble of comfort Tayte might find in the hollow words.

He guided his daughter to her pillow, pulled the cover to her chin and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "Don't dream," he whispered and bent to pat Roscoe's head, the dog reclining in his doggy bed beside Tayte's. "Take good care of her, boy."

He caught Sandra by an arm, led her to the threshold, cut off the bedroom light and watched Tayte's night-light cast an eerie glow across Sandy's features as she stood wistfully staring back at her daughter.

"C'mon." Caution led her out of the room and downstairs to the living room. He couldn't explain it, but he felt uncomfortable with Sandra in such close proximity to Tayte. He didn't trust her to do the right thing. He also didn't want to face the larger issue: that he might be a little jealous and more than a little threatened.

"I know I shouldn't have said that, but I didn't know what else to say. She just seemed so...so heartbroken."

"Brody was the only grandfather she knew. The only one she had."

"How are you doing?"

"Me?"

"He was *your* grandfather, after all."

"I'll be okay."

"That's what you say."

"It's really not a question of whether I am or I'm not. The answer is, I have to be. Tayte needs me to be. I need to be."

"Are you always like this with her?"

Caution arched a brow.

"So fierce and protective of her?"

"She's my daughter."

"And possessive."

He ran a palm down his face and lowered himself to sit on a cream-carpeted step near the bottom of the staircase with a sigh. "I don't have the energy to argue semantics with you, Sandra. I'll concede your maternity, but procreation does not make you a mother."

"You don't have to rub it in, Caution. I know my shortcomings very well, trust me."

"Just how far do you want to take this, Sandy?" He recognized that belligerent edge to his voice, but didn't regret it.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean visitation. We're not even going to get into custody, so you can forget it."

"Just like that?"

"You and I both know that's not what you're here for. You couldn't take care of Roscoe, let alone my child."

"There you go again, with the 'my'."

"Sandra, cut the bullshit, and tell me what you want."

"Maybe now isn't the best time to talk about this."

"Yeah, well, like you said, there's never going to be a good time to discuss this."

Sandra hazarded a few steps closer, sat on the step beside him, and reached out to put her hand on his closest arm. He didn't react, so she squeezed his biceps and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, *papi*. I just thought that I'd like to try...that I wanted to..."

Caution pulled back to gawk at her. "Not get back together."

She shrugged. "I can't say the thought hasn't crossed my mind."

"After all this time?"

"You're stuck on this time issue, Caution. It's never too late to mend fences, have a reunion, rekindle old romances."

He stared at her as she leaned close, the scent of her expensive perfume cloying, threatening to strangle him, not like Dara's subtle vanilla musk. He should have moved away as soon as he knew what she was about to do, his biggest mistake freezing like a button-nosed forest creature caught in oncoming headlights. Her lips touched his, tentative at first, gradually turning bold, hungrily running her tongue across his mouth, demanding entry. She splayed a hand against his chest, glided it down to his crotch where she palmed his hardening sex, massaging in easy intimate circles.

Caution slid his hand to the nape of her neck, fisted a handful of long black hair and pulled her head back to stare at her. "We're not rekindling any romance, Sandra, now or ever."

The front door opened and Dara entered and froze three steps into the foyer when she saw them sitting on the steps.

Caution looked at her. "Dara—"

"I decided to spring for dinner, since you treated me to such a great breakfast this morning. Perhaps I should have called first." She glared at Sandra and Caution in turn before turning to leave, aromatic plastic bags in hand.

Caution leaped to his feet, beat her to the door in three quick strides, and slammed it shut with a palm before she could open it. "Sandra was just leaving."

"I was?" she purred.

"Don't go anywhere," Caution ordered Dara before stalking back to his ex-wife. He caught her by an arm. "Yes, you were." He proffered his free hand. "My keys."

Sandra stood, sliding the keys out of her linen jacket's pocket and smiling as she dropped them into his palm with feline glee. "See you soon, *mi querido*." She smoothed a dangerously long nail down his jaw as she passed him to leave.

For one infinitesimal second he'd been tempted to give in, more for Tayte's sake than his own, but he wasn't that desperate or grief-stricken. He knew all too well that Sandra's compassion, commitment and seriousness had the shelf life of a housefly.

Sandra paused at the door, looked Dara up and down, and said, "Have fun you two," before flouncing out the door on a nasty air of triumph.

Caution locked the door and leaned back against it.

"Did I interrupt something?"

"Not at all."

"It certainly looked like it."

He should have been relieved to see her, relieved she was here, but suddenly he was drained, didn't have the energy or time for anyone, not even the woman he was going to marry. "Brody died today," he blurted.

"What? My God, what happened?"

"He was mugged this afternoon. Bastard stabbed him to death, and my daughter got to watch the whole thing go down."

"Oh no, not Tater!" Dara dropped the bags she was holding, went into his arms and held him close. "Caution, I'm so sorry."

He pulled away to look at her. "I know he wasn't your favorite person in the world."

"That doesn't mean I wanted to see him dead."

"That's not what I was suggesting." Caution scowled. "Guess I was just trying to lighten the mood. Wrong way to do it, huh?"

"Hey, you have to do what you can to get through."

"That's what I keep telling myself."

"Do the police have any leads? Any witnesses besides Tayte?"

He liked that her lawman instincts kicked into gear. If nothing else, it pulled him out of the mire of hopelessness and helplessness into which he had fallen since receiving that phone call from the police earlier.

Caution shook his head. "All they could get out of Tayte was that he was a giant dressed in black and wearing a ski mask."

"In the summer? In broad daylight?"

"I thought it was odd too."

"More like premeditated."

"What are you suggesting? That there was more to this than a mugging?"

"Don't mind me. I'm in paranoid mode since Diego."

"Are you going to, uh, try and replace him?" Her eyes turned watery when she looked at him and he immediately regretted the question.

"I was thinking about it. In fact, that's what I was doing part of the day. Going over some old resumes in D—my files."

"What about the rest of the day? Ignoring that detective's advice and trying to track down Diego and Sennet's killers?"

"Something like that." She grinned, the grim expression in her eyes belying it as she pulled away. "Did you try to call me?"

He gave her a slightly embarrassed look. "I didn't even think about it once I got the call from the police to get Tayte from the hospital."

"You had other things on your mind."

But they were the furthest things from his mind now.

He wanted her, urgently. He had never wanted a woman more in his life than he did right this moment looking at Dara in her motorcycle gear, copper cheeks flushed, almond eyes glistening.

"You're going to be busy making arrangements for Brody the next few days." Caution nodded, didn't want to think about laying his grandfather to rest just yet. "You're going to need some help with Tayte and all. I could stick around for a while, give you a hand." She slid her arms down to his waist, drew herself close to him.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm at your disposal. All you have to do is ask."

He not only wanted her, he needed her. Needed to feel her warm skin against him, glide his hands down her generous curves, and touch her reality. He needed to know that he was alive and still able to feel joy as well as pain.

He pulled her against him, erection painful, pressing hot and heavy against her abdomen, straining for release, seeking solace. "I'm asking."

* * * *

She hadn't felt shy with him since their first time together, but as she led him upstairs to his bedroom, her stomach muscles tightened with stage fright, as if she was about to perform for an audience.

Sam glanced over a shoulder as Caution closed the door and saw why she felt on display. Dara stood at the door, arms folded over her breasts as if she were a disapproving parent. Sam tried to make out the expression in her eyes and the best she could come up with wasn't reprimanding but melancholic.

"C'mere," Caution whispered as he pulled her down with him to the bed and Sam tried to get her mind off of the ghost at the door watching them. He must have felt her discomfort because he frowned up at her as she sat astride him.

Sam leaned in and put a finger to his lips right before he opened his mouth to speak, bent her head and slanted her mouth across his.

He opened his mouth for her, lips firm, searching and purposeful. She thrust her tongue, mated with his, absorbed his anguish, and emitted her longing and trust as she slid her hands down to the front of his jeans and rubbed his arousal, slowly, familiarly before decisively cupping him.

Caution groaned deep in his throat, pitched his hips, and reached for her breasts as if they were the Promised Land, gently kneading the plump flesh, thumbing the already tightened and erect nipples. "God, I want you, Dara. I need to feel you around me."

"You can have me around you. As long as you want." Even as she said the words she felt the heat on the back of her neck from the ghost at the door, the jealousy and possessiveness permeating the room.

What do you want from me? It's not my fault I'm alive and you're not!

No answer, just complete silence, eerie heavy silence that spoke better than words.

Sam tried again, emitting her thoughts stronger, mental projection coming as easy to her as popping in and out of rooms seemed to come for Dara.

Dara, what is it you want?

She knew the answer before she heard it in her mind.

To feel him one last time.

Caution caught her around the waist with both hands, flipped her beneath him and straddled her hips. He slid up her shirt, splayed one hand across her flexed abdomen, bent his head and dipped his tongue in her navel as if he were sampling a luscious and decadent dessert. He unbuttoned her jeans, slowly slid them down, inch by inch, mouth and tongue following the trail all the way down to her ankles until he had stripped her of the jeans.

Sam covered her eyes with an arm and arched her back as he slid off her purple boxers, trying to block out the somber eyes of her host, block out the pain suffusing the bedroom: Caution's grief and Dara's loss. She felt surrounded by it, infected with it.

She gasped at the first caress—Caution's tongue to her clitoris—gritted her teeth, hissing air into her lungs as he first sucked, then gently nibbled her pulsing kernel of flesh into his hot eager mouth.

Her hips moved of their own volition, thrusting upward as Caution inserted first one finger then two, delving and indulging until his hand was moist. She gyrated against his palm, lowered her arm from her eyes and gripped the bed linen with both hands to anchor herself.

One last time.

Sam didn't know if it was possible, if she or They had control over it. She only knew that Dara would take her place, at least as long as this lasted. She felt the ghost's energy swelling like a wave before it crashes against the coast. Dara wanted back on land, and Sam was the shore. Question was, would Dara want to leave her body once she was back in it? Where would it leave Sam if she didn't? She knew it was a chance They were willing to take.

Sam closed her eyes, panting as Caution worked her into an unbearable frenzy with his mouth and fingers, his manipulations short-circuiting concentration. She ground her teeth as Dara hovered on the edge of her consciousness, crackling like an approaching

thunderstorm Sam could almost smell in the air.

She relaxed, let her mind go as Caution brought her to the edge, drifting away from the scene seconds after a shattering orgasm crashed down on Dara's body.

* * * *

Caution slid his fingers from her slowly, reluctantly, palming her wet sex as if it were a treasured gift he was unwilling to give away. He slid up the length of her body, his piquant male musk penetrating her senses for the first time in months, more than a memory, more than a wish.

He was real, touching her, making love to her body with his hands and his mouth. And she could feel him, every caress and light-as-a-feather breath as he moved from the warm juncture between her thighs to her stomach, slowly kissing his way from the slightly rounded curve of her waist up to her aching full breasts.

Dara opened her eyes, assaulted by the dim illumination of the bedside lamp, still awash with remnants of Sam's climax, making it hers, sensations riding her body like a surfer hitting the sweet spot of an ultimate wave.

Caution circled the outer shell of an ear as he unlatched the front of her bra and her breasts sprang free. She felt his mouth on her, slow and skilled as he laved each nipple in turn. She was too stunned to move, too stunned to respond, frozen in place as if she had lost all motor function or forgotten the choreography to a favorite dance.

Make love to him.

She heard the voice as if it were her own, but knew it wasn't. Sam was with her, a whim and an entity buried deep inside, not a ghost on the outside. They were together, they were one. Dara knew if she was going to make anything happen, she had to do it now. Sam and They had given her a chance. She would not blow it. Not this time.

Caution discarded her bra, and when he bent his head to graze a nipple, the impression of his tongue jolted her into action. She reached for his jeans, rejoicing in the feel of the rough denim against her fingertips, fondling cool metal buttons with a thumb before slowly undoing each one. She slid the jeans and boxers down his hips, freeing his erection.

She circled it with both hands, gently stroking the hard flesh, the smooth wet head and rough veiny shaft, perceptions igniting flames in her belly, bursting bright colors behind her eyes as if a fireworks display had gone off in front of her face, blinding her with its intensity.

Everything was new to her, every gleaming light, every tangy aroma, every warm caress.

Caution groaned and shuddered above her as she stroked his cock without reserve. He reached down and caught her hands in a fist. "If you don't stop, this is going to end much sooner than either of us wants it to."

She grinned, alive with newfound power and delight as she released him to reach for the buttons on his shirt, undoing two before Caution rasped against her lips, "Rip it off."

Dara didn't need any further prompting. She jerked the front of his shirt and watched the rest of the buttons pop off and fly. She slowly pulled the shirt over his shoulders and down his arms.

Caution moved away from her long enough to yank his arms out of the sleeves, discard the shirt and shuck his jeans and shorts on the floor in almost one motion. He slid back between her legs in seconds, nudging them wider with one knee, the weight of his arousal heavy and hot against the inside of a thigh as he positioned himself above her.

Dara reached behind him, skimmed her hands from his lean waist to his upper back, closed her eyes and immersed herself in the feel of his taut muscles beneath her fingers as he slowly entered her. She relished the feel of his cock as he rotated his hips to a steady sinuous rhythm that urged her to match his rise.

He bent his head to kiss her, and she tasted herself on his lips, ravenously taking his full lower lip in her mouth, nipping and sucking as she cupped his firm ass cheeks and pulled him closer. He buried himself to the hilt in her heat, then lay still for so long and silent a moment as if orienting himself to now alien territory he hadn't visited in ages. Dara wondered if he noticed the difference between her and Sam's essences.

Caution finally stirred, languidly moving inside her as she wrapped her legs tight around his middle, loath to let him go.

Dara knew Sam's reservations about relinquishing jurisdiction, her body, and understood the younger woman's fears. She wanted to allay them but didn't know how without bringing Them into the mix, without letting Caution know something was amiss.

Dara cupped his face between her palms and stared at him instead. She lost herself in every cherished feature—the angular lines of his jaw, the cleft in his chin, the deep dimples in his cheeks, the rich emerald of his eyes—as if snapping a roll of film to the end that she would later take with her and develop to remember him by.

She slid her hands up to his head, raked her fingers through his hair, fisted a handful of silken jet-black waves at his nape and drew him within a hair's breadth of her face. She felt the tears sliding down her cheeks right before Caution frowned, leaned in, and caught one with his tongue. He enfolded her in a desperate embrace as if he could drive away her demons, chase away his own pain washing her tears.

He plunged his tongue into her willing mouth, mimicking the movement of his hips as he ground his lips against hers. She sampled the salty, sweet taste of her own juices, arched her body, reaching for him, clenching her muscles around his hard vibrating flesh as if to imprison him. She wanted to freeze the moment in time and space so that she'd never have to go back to the other side again. Alone and cold. Neither here nor there.

She felt herself slipping away, losing energy and her grip on reality as Sam gradually re-emerged and Caution's slow sensuous movements turned into firm deep thrusts. He pistoned his hips, piercing her core as he picked up momentum and Dara lost hers. He said her name again and again claiming her as his, and she cried out, no longer aware if she or Sam were experiencing his flesh, his smell, his strength, no longer caring as Caution brought her body to a fracturing climax.

Dara held onto him—his voice, his passion, everything he was and could be—while drifting back to that other plane of consciousness, back to that other little death.

* * * *

Sam's eyes fluttered open to the sight of Caution's face hovering above her, his expression anxious and wary as he braced his weight on his forearms and gently pushed moist black tendrils away from her face with both hands. She reached up a hand to his lower lip, running her thumb over the smooth damp surface of his mouth and when he drew in the digit, licked and sucked it, her stomach muscles tightened at the memory of his mouth on her sex, bringing her to completion. Had that been hours ago, or minutes? It was hard to remember, her sense of place and time thrown by the switch with Dara. Sam didn't know what invigorated her more, Caution's lovemaking, or the idea that she had participated in a threesome by proxy. She glanced towards the doorway and saw Dara leaning against it, grinning. All was right in the world again, things back to the way they were supposed to be. For the time being.

Caution motioned to pull out of her and that's when she realized that they hadn't used anything, his seed filling her and overflowing.

She held him in place with arms around his waist, and murmured, "I want to hold onto you for a little while longer."

Just a little longer, as long as They'll let me.

CHAPTER 27

Sam tossed and turned most of the night, finally slipping from Caution's grasp in the waxing morning light, surprised her restless sleep hadn't kept him up with her.

She pulled on her boxers and a T-shirt and stood by the bed for several long silent moments, grinning as she watched him sleep, body tingling and sore. A special kind of tingling, a good kind of sore, each making her feel alive, had her nerve-endings singing with energy and hope.

He, on the other hand, looked exhausted, and she couldn't blame him when she remembered their last several go-rounds.

Sam grabbed her cell from the nightstand and slid it into the waistband of her shorts, loath to disturb Caution in his sleep any more than she had already. She headed for the stairs, determined to beat him to the punch this time while she had the chance and get down to the kitchen to throw together something edible.

The cell phone rang as soon as she reached the kitchen, signaling an incoming text message. Sam answered the call, and what she read made her wish she had never engaged the phone. An anonymous communication—but she had her suspicions—promising answers to all Dara's questions about Diego's death, and more, a message promising closure. But only if she came to the appointed spot alone and in the next two hours.

Sam read the rest of the message—a location, a set of instructions, and a threat—before disconnecting, and Dara popped up in front of her.

"Who was that, Sam?"

Sam didn't respond or halt, passed through Dara's image and made it back to the bedroom, where she rushed around the room retrieving and donning her clothes as quickly and quietly as possible.

"What's the rush?"

She could spill the beans, but something about the message told her that wouldn't be a good idea. Besides, Dara couldn't help her, not in her ghostly state. She could only hover around and watch, while Sam either sank or swam. "It was a wrong number."

Dara glared at her, and Sam knew that the woman knew she was lying, but didn't pause in her preparations.

She went to Caution's work desk in a corner of the room and Dara followed while Sam quickly scribbled out a note, folded it and gently placed it on the pillow beside Caution's head before leaning in to kiss his upturned cheek.

He stirred and opened one eye to peer at her. "What's up?"

She didn't know what to say to satisfy him and make him go back to sleep. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to go to sleep, or stop her. Finally she blurted, "Got an appointment."

Caution glanced at the bedside clock, then back at her. "It's barely five o'clock. What kind of appointment?"

"Something came up. An emergency."

He frowned at her, half-asleep. "Know when you'll be back?"

"I won't be long." She leaned in and kissed him again, this time a lingering soul kiss on the mouth as she gently fingered the stubble on his jaw.

"Don't listen to her, Caution. She's lying!"

Sam gritted her teeth against Dara's warning, barely acknowledging that she'd heard her. "I'll call you as soon as I'm done."

"Don't be long."

She watched him close his eyes and drift back to sleep.

"Damn it, Caution! Don't go to sleep on her!"

Sam rushed out of the room as if being pursued, as if Caution could hear Dara's tattling, and sure enough Dara turned to follow her down the stairs and out the house to her bike.

She didn't care, didn't have time to waste if she wanted this nightmare to end and wanted to keep Caution and Tayte safe.

* * * *

Time to put the good ol' boy out to pasture. His usefulness had been exhausted.

He'd done an excellent job taking care of all the nasty little details of their project, and had really come in handy when she needed someone to get down and dirty in the trenches for wet work.

She was ready to try her own wings now. She knew that she could do the rest from here, especially since her plan was nearing its final phase.

She couldn't risk a second party outsider, couldn't risk him turning on her. And he would eventually, of this she had no doubt, his treason just a matter of time. She'd been

careful, but he knew more than enough about her to make things unpleasant, had too much knowledge and evidence to use against her. All he needed was a reason—ruffled feathers here, a wounded macho ego there, and she'd be looking at the bad end of a blackmail scheme rather than masterminding it.

They'd had some close calls, too many as far as she was concerned. They'd also had some good times plotting and planning. But all good things must come to an end, and better to do it to him before he did it to her.

She had one more job for him as soon as he was done with his phone call and it was going to be the easiest, simplest thing he'd ever had to do. She watched him as he signed off from the Amazon, almost regretting her decision, respecting his balls and dedication. Her plan had been chancy and reckless, but he'd turned it around in their favor and made it work, his execution and delivery inspired. She had no doubt that his spiel had had the desired effect. She certainly would have followed the instructions to the letter had she been on the other end of the phone.

Perhaps as the Neanderthal had been saying all along, the direct method really was the best method. Especially now when time was of the essence and Caution's tying the knot with the Amazon seemed inevitable.

She couldn't let them get married. It would destroy everything she'd been working toward the last few years, moving Caution one more step away from her.

"So, she's on her way then?"

Tarrent nodded and smiled, arrogance oozing from every pore. "I have no doubt. All we have to do is be there when she arrives."

"Sounds like a plan." She pulled a gun from her handbag, and the cool metal eased her nerves as soon as she wrapped her hand around the butt.

The Amazon would either show up or she wouldn't. Either way, Tarrent was the only one who'd incriminated himself so far, whether the Amazon had put two-and-two together about the text message or not.

She cocked her gun and didn't give Tarrent a chance to debate or challenge her stamina, simply fired into his chest, and watched him crash back against his kitchen counter.

"You bitch..." He gaped, slid to the floor, a crimson stain quickly expanding on the front of his T-shirt. He gritted his teeth against the pain. "You think you're going to pull off the rest of this without me?" He gasped.

She came closer, glared down at him as he glared up at her. Arrogant until the end. She was going to miss his explicitness. "I certainly intend to." She raised the gun and fired again, this one a head shot.

* * * *

Sam ran around the apartment gathering what she thought she would need for her meeting, as Dara trailed her the entire while, begging her not to go. She'd already wasted enough time getting back to the apartment and didn't intend to waste anymore arguing. But Dara insisted, standing in her path at every turn, her presence not enough to stop

Sam's momentum, but enough to unsettle her. Finally she froze in the middle of the living room after she'd donned Dara's Kevlar vest, fists on her hips and feeling totally out of her element.

"Finally, you've decided to do the smart thing and stop ignoring me."

"I'm not changing my mind, so make it quick."

"Who do you think you are anyway, going off half-cocked on your own? Rambo?"

"Not at all. I think I'm you."

"Even I wouldn't be foolish enough to go it...alone." Dara gawked at Sam's arched brow. "Okay, fine. But that's exactly why you shouldn't do this now."

"I don't have a choice. The message said they'd hurt Tayte." Sam pulled a Henley shirt on over her tee and vest, and checked Dara's Glock before holstering it at her hip. "God, this thing is uncomfortable. I don't know how you move around in it."

"You get used to it, and don't try to change the subject."

Sam scowled, grabbed her jacket and headed for the door.

"Sam, wait, please!"

She paused, hand on the knob, but didn't turn around.

"You don't even know what or who you're up against. You're walking into a trap blind."

"Not totally blind."

"How do you figure?"

Sam took a deep breath and let it out. She didn't know how to explain that she needed to go, that whatever happened from here on out was meant to be.

"Sam? You need help."

"No."

"At least call Madison."

"There's no time. If I don't go now, they'll bolt. Besides, the message said alone."

"This is ludicrous, utter madness." Dara threw up her hands and paced. "Of course it said alone. They always do."

"Don't you want answers?" She knew she certainly did, along with an end to this entire nightmare into which They had flung her.

"Not at the expense of your life."

Sam half-turned, glancing at Dara over a shoulder. "That's sweet. But I'll be careful."

"Damn it, Sam, I've already lost one friend to that bastard!"

"Why Dare, I'm flattered."

"Don't be, hussy. I'm serious."

Sam scowled. "So am I."

* * * *

Caution woke two seconds after Dara had left, something about her early departure bothering him enough to get him up and out of bed. Who would call her for a meeting so early in the morning? A legitimate meeting?

He thought of that detective, Madison. Maybe the man was starting to give Dara's concerns the attention they deserved and had some news about Diego and Wylie's deaths, perhaps Brody's too. He suspected the deaths were all connected, like he knew in his gut that Dara's sudden departure had something to do with finding out who was behind them.

The note she'd left held no clues. It simply said what she'd told him herself before leaving, no hint about where she was going, or what the emergency was. Caution didn't want to start panicking, especially when he had nothing to go on, except Dara's weird behavior of late.

He nicked himself shaving in the foggy mirror, trying to speed through the process after a hasty shower. He had no idea why he had injected an air of urgency to his ablutions, only that the need to move and get going had his heart pumping blood through his body at an alarming rate.

Caution was near finished when he saw the letters forming before his eyes in the condensation of the mirror until two complete words materialized: *She lied*.

He gawked, dropped his razor in the sink. If he hadn't cut himself before, he certainly would have after seeing those words. The first sentence faded, replaced by an entreaty in the fading fog: *Help her!*

Caution stumbled back, watching the words evaporate, unsure if he had actually seen them before he heard the crash in his bedroom.

He turned and stopped on the threshold when he saw the bedside lamp on the carpeted floor in the middle of the master bedroom. Roscoe was nowhere in sight and neither was Tayte. The wind certainly hadn't done it.

What the hell was going on?

He was on his way out of the room to go check on his daughter when the shape materialized several steps in front of him and he froze.

Oh God, he was hallucinating! There was no other explanation for what he was seeing.

"You're not hallucinating and I don't have much time before I start fading again, so listen up and listen good, Caution."

He closed his eyes and shook his head against the specter.

Dara. It's Dara. But it can't be...

"You have to listen to me now, Caution. Don't shut me out!"

He snapped open his eyes and stared at her. She was still there. He tried to wrap

his mind around the reality and still couldn't despite the image before him. If he believed his eyes, then who had just left his house? Who had he made love to last night? Who had he been loving for the past several weeks?

"I know it's hard to believe, but you're going to have to start. I need you to."

"Dare?" He reached out a hand, then yanked it back when his fingers encountered a force field, heat emanating as if from a live wire.

"Caution, I need you to trust me and not be afraid."

He listened to the tacit order in her words despite her soft coaxing tone, the rich voice so familiar yet alien. "Tell me," he rasped. "You were killed on that last job, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I can't go into all that right now."

He doubted he'd believe her if she did except that she was here now, like some surrealistic hologram, real but unreal.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, steeling himself before uttering his next words and hoping he wouldn't regret them. "What do you need me to do?" he asked.

Dara told him.

* * * *

He got dressed and out of the house with Tater in tow in five minutes flat. Tayte, however was in her pjs, favorite stuffed doll in the crook of one arm, thumb of her other hand plopped in her mouth as she sat in her car seat in the back and stared at Caution with this excited, we're-going-on-a-trip-I-like-adventures look on her face.

Caution wished he could share her innocent enthusiasm.

He made it to the address that Sandra had given him—not far from his neighborhood, thank God—in ten minutes. He questioned the sagacity of his plan all the way over, telling himself again and again that he was doing the best thing he could under the circumstances.

Okay, so she wasn't Mother of the Year material, this was for certain. But he thought he could trust her for a few hours, half-convinced, fervently hoping that whatever Dara was leading him into wouldn't take any longer, nor be as dangerous as she'd indicated.

"Is it a surprise, Daddy, or can you tell me where we're going?"

Caution glanced at his daughter in the rearview, wanting to drown in her untainted wide-eyed look, wanting to own the emotions behind her expression. "We're going to your Mommy's. You want to see your Mommy, don't you?"

"Oh, yes!"

Good, that's what he was counting on.

"Where's Dara?"

He wasn't counting on that. "I'm going to meet up with her after I drop you off."

Then we'll hook up with you and your Mommy later."

"You shouldn't lie to the kid, Caution."

It took everything in him not to jump and swerve off the road.

"Good, you didn't freak out. Sam was good that way too."

Caution glanced at the passenger seat but didn't see anything. He glanced at Tayte in the rearview again and wondered if she—

"I thought you said you were going to meet Dara, Daddy, but she's already here in the car! Yeah!" Tayte clapped her hands, then stopped herself as if she realized what she was doing in front of an untrained outsider. "You can see her, can't you Daddy?"

"It's okay to answer her."

"You just told me I shouldn't lie to her," he muttered and heard a deep-throated chuckle rise up from the passenger seat. He reached out his right hand and passed it in front of the seat, feeling the heat and energy he had in his bedroom, but not as intense.

"Daddy?"

"I see her, Tater."

"Can't you go any faster? I know this thing does speed."

"I'm trying not to get pulled over. I'll have enough explaining to do to my shrink."

"You don't have a shrink."

"I will now."

She chuckled again as Caution pulled to the curb and parked in front of the brownstone where Sandra was staying. He disengaged Tayte's car seat, took her in his arms and practically ran to the front door. He heard footsteps coming towards the door seconds after he had rung the bell and held his breath. Sandra flung open the door, fully dressed and wide-awake, which immediately struck Caution as odd.

"Well, well, well."

"Please save your I-told-you-so's for another time. Right now, I need your help."

Sandra frowned. *"Que pasa?"*

"I need you to watch Tayte for a few hours."

She didn't hesitate. "Okay. Sure."

Caution handed their daughter over to Sandra. "Be good for Mommy, Tater."

"I will, Daddy."

He leaned in to kiss her cheek and thought how right Tayte seemed in her mother's arms. The kid was almost a miniature Sandra except she had his green eyes and disposition.

"Anything I should know?"

"Huh?"

"I know she's not an infant, but I still need to know how she eats, stuff like that."

"No allergies, food or otherwise." Caution pinched his daughter on the cheek.
"Tayte eats just about anything, don't you honey?"

"Yeppers."

"She hasn't had breakfast yet though."

"That's okay. A trip to IHOP will solve that problem."

"Ooh, goody! Can I have a Rooty, Tooty, Fresh and Fruity?"

"You betcha."

Caution smiled, turned to go, and stopped when Sandra put a hand on his arm.

"Be careful," she said.

He nodded, then frowned as he headed down the cobblestone walkway.

How did she know he needed to be?

CHAPTER 28

Sam parked her bike a few blocks away from the rendezvous point—a secluded scrap yard across the bridge in Brooklyn—and hung close to the sides of buildings, crouching low as if she were on *Rat Patrol*. She didn't know why she bothered.

If Tarrent wanted to take her out, he could pick her off from any of the surrounding tall buildings before she knew what hit her. Only this sort of pastime didn't strike her as Tarrent's style. He liked wet work, up close and personal. Look at how he had taken out Dara.

No, if he were going to do anything, it would be in her face.

She guessed she had that to look forward to, no pun intended. Sam jammed a fist against her mouth to silence an approaching bubble of hysterical giggles. God, she was losing it, did need help, just like Dara had said.

She'd called Madison's home on her cell right after she'd parked her bike. Last minute decision that hadn't panned out. She got the voicemail and left an urgent message on the off chance that he'd check his messages any time soon. Desperate, she'd tried the cell number Dara had given her and reached the workaholic on his way into the precinct.

From what she could catch, he was chasing a lead on Brody's case. He'd mentioned something about a body having turned up, and Sam almost forgot why she'd called him. Not that it mattered since her phone kept fading in and out. She seriously doubted that he had gotten the gist of her tale, certainly not that she was following a lead of her own and she needed his help.

She was on her own, in a dead zone in more ways than one, and way out of her league.

Sam entered the scrap yard, passing piles upon piles of ruined cars. The stacks seemed to go on for miles, and she couldn't help thinking that this was the perfect place for someone to die—an isolated metal death trap.

She turned left at the end of one row, hand inside her jacket on the butt of her

Glock. She glanced at the watch on her free hand and wondered if she were too early or if Tarrent had just been jerking her chain and decided not to show up. She was almost ready to give up when she spotted a figure several yards away, too small to be Tarrent, who didn't even look like a man. Sam gaped as she neared and the figure turned.

"Reina? What are you doing here?"

"Why darling, I'm here to meet with you."

Sam swallowed and suddenly had a bad taste in her mouth. She'd expected Tarrent and/or his accomplice, some other big bruiser of the bloodthirsty variety, not this petite ultra-feminine woman in designer threads. Caution's mother.

This isn't happening.

"You're punctual. I like that in a person," Reina said, and when Sam didn't respond, she arched a brow and smiled. "Surprised?"

Surprised wasn't the word. She was flabbergasted and wondering how to get off of this crazy ride.

"I thought the last threat was a nice cherry, knowing how you feel about little Tater."

"But she's your granddaughter."

"I had no intentions on hurting her, of course. That was just to get you here."

"Why?"

"Why the threats? Why the meeting?"

"Why everything?" Sam threw up her hands, glaring. She couldn't believe this woman had been behind Dara's murder, couldn't see her associating with the likes of Tarrent. "God, at the hospital. You acted like you didn't even know Tarrent!"

"Well, it would have blown us out of the water had I indicated we were good old friends, don't you think?" Reina pulled a gun out of her handbag and pointed it at Sam before the younger woman could react. "You might want to think about dropping that and kicking it away."

Sam slid the Glock out with her thumb and finger, pausing for the instant it took her to consider taking her chances with a bullet in the vest and being able to recover to take Reina down. Reina's chambering a round and pointing the gun at her chest put a crimp in that plan and quick. Sam slowly did as the woman instructed. "Why are you doing this?" she croaked.

"To keep my family together."

"By killing D—me? By killing Brody?"

"The man never liked me. And the feeling was quite mutual."

"So you had Tayte's great-grandfather murdered?"

"She'll get over it. I know I will."

"What about Diego?"

"He found out about Wylie and Tarrent, stumbled across some information he shouldn't have and had to be eliminated, like Brody."

"Eliminated?" Sam gawked, unable to believe what she was hearing. The woman was so prim and proper in her expensive duds and accessories, her better-than-thou attitude looking down her nose at Dara, berating Caution for his choice in women, and still able to keep a straight face defending her murderous activities.

Now Sam could see why Dawson had kept his mother under wraps, and she was glad she'd never had to meet the woman before now. Heck, Reina might have killed Sam before Dawson did.

"Don't look at me like that, dear. If you would only examine the facts you'd see I did what I had to." Reina waved the gun as she nonchalantly gestured.

Sam eyed the weapon, waiting for an opening—any lapse, any weakness.

"Brody was trying to take Caution from me. Eventually, he would have succeeded in driving us apart—*mi y m'ijos*."

"He was their grandfather."

"And they're my boys, not his! He failed to realize this. And he took special pleasure in taking them away from me after...after Keane's death. Having him killed was the perfect revenge, though I hadn't planned it that way." Reina raised her gun again, aim deadly precise. "Now, once you're out of the picture, I'll have Caution to myself the way it should be."

Sam searched her brain for something, anything to say. She was frantic to keep the woman talking, keep open her window of opportunity, though it repulsed her to have to listen to the details of Reina's demented logic and plans. "What about Tayte's mother? You know Sandra's back in the picture."

"I'll handle her if it becomes necessary, and I don't think that it will. Caution knows trash when he sees it. That's why he divorced Sandra and Pamela in the first place. Don't know what the problem was with you."

And she had thought Pamela was a bitch on wheels? Sam wondered if Dara's romantic rival knew what Mrs. Foster really thought of her. "You don't need to do this, Reina. I can just walk away, not say a word about this to anyone."

"I tried to get you to do that, but you wouldn't get the message and leave. Now you're engaged." Reina shook her head as she scowled at Sam's ring finger. "No, I can't take the chance that he'll make the same mistake for the third time."

Sam gaped, chest clenching tight with fear, so tight it felt as if a fist were inside squeezing her throbbing heart. She had thought she had this all figured out, had thought she could handle whatever turned up at this scrap yard. She wasn't nearly as ready or flinty-hearted as she'd imagined, nor as smart. She'd walked into more than a trap. She'd walked into a quagmire of madness.

"You're insane," she said, silently castigating herself for the error. It was never a good idea to call a crazy person crazy to her face. Especially not one with a gun pointed at her. She was all out of niceties and witticisms, her only excuse.

Reina shrugged, unfazed, neither confirming or denying.

"So, am I going to commit suicide too?" Sam asked.

"Haven't figured that out yet, but I'm sure I'll think of something." She paused, looking Sam up and down as if sizing her for a coffin. "You know, you could have made this so much easier had you just stayed gone with that cop boyfriend of yours."

"Josh?"

"Is that his name?"

Sam nodded dumbly. The thought of this woman watching her with Josh, knowing her every move when she was and wasn't with Caution, set her teeth on edge with the violation. "Where is Tarrent?" she blurted. "I can't imagine him missing his opportunity to gloat."

"He couldn't make it. He's...indisposed."

Sam swallowed hard over the lump in her throat and knew that Dara's bounty hunting rival was dead. She wished she could take satisfaction in the knowledge, but facing down the barrel of Reina's derangement seriously limited her ability to take satisfaction in anything.

"Now dear, time to put all this nastiness to an end..."

Sam caught a flash of movement a couple of yards to her right and gave herself away when she glanced in that direction. Maybe Madison *had* gotten all of her messages and had made it. Or maybe...

Reina caught the motion too, kept the gun trained on Sam's chest, and smiled. "Hmm, your little fairy friend's dead. Who could you have brought for back up, I wonder? That lover-boy detective of yours? Your cop in Nassau?"

"Mom, don't!" Caution sprang from behind a stack of cars, hands raised in front of him as Reina began to put pressure on the trigger.

She turned to him, eyes wide. "Caution! What are you doing here?"

He sidled towards Sam, glanced at her from the corner of an eye. "All of this isn't necessary, Mom. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know that, *m'ijo*. You always were the reliable one."

"Mom, you need to put down that gun."

"Can't do that."

"It's over. Everything's out in the open. What are you going to accomplish?"

Reina sighed and lowered the gun a couple of inches, but kept it trained in Sam's general direction as Caution circled closer. "I have to finish what I started."

"We'll get you help, Mom."

"I got all the help I needed compliments of your grandfather, thank you very much!"

Caution backed up a step, and so did Sam.

She admired his calm tone knowing how he felt about guns, knowing how much they unnerved him. And it couldn't have made him feel any better that his mother was on the other end of the trigger, the woman who had killed his father.

"You know I didn't kill your father on purpose, don't you, Caution?"

"I know, Mom. I've always known."

"But they put me away for it, your grandfather and grandmother. They punished me, took you and Dawson away from me."

"That's all over now, Mom. No one's going to take us away from you again."

Reina tilted her head and looked at her son with a far-away, nostalgic expression in her eyes. "You know, I always liked you best. You were different from Dawson, with your sweet disposition, so solid, like Keane, but with an edge, a sense of drive and success."

"Everything will be all right if you just give me the gun, Mom." Caution took a step closer and Sam thought they wouldn't have a better chance than they did right then. But she miscalculated, and when she eased to her right, closer to her gun, Reina caught sight of her and instantly fired off two rounds.

Sam flew off her feet, the force of the bullets knocking her on her back, stunned as Reina motioned to fire another shot.

"No!" Caution rushed forward and made it to within several feet before Reina turned the gun on him and he froze in his tracks.

"I want to take you with me, but Dawson would probably miss you..."

Caution didn't waste another minute, raced forward as Reina turned the gun on herself. He lunged as she fired, fingers brushing the smoking gun seconds too late. Reina gaped, pink silk shirtfront slowly darkening with blood. Caution eased off of her and came to one knee beside her as she reached for him. He took one of her hands and squeezed.

"I'm sorry, *m'ijo*, so sorry..."

Caution watched her eyes close, held on as her life slipped away, reliving his father's death all over again in vivid Technicolor. He tried to console himself in the knowledge that Dara's nightmare had ended. But his own had only begun.

He gently lowered his mother to the ground, pressing her eyes shut with a thumb and forefinger as he dropped a kiss on her forehead.

Dara!

Caution got to his feet, ran to where she lay and crouched beside her. He lifted her shirt, initially relieved when he saw the Kevlar vest. But there was only one indentation. He thought maybe the second shot had missed her altogether until he saw blood, masses of it seeping from the area around her neck, so much he couldn't really tell *where* she was hit. Bright red, probably arterial. Not good news.

Caution sat beside her, pulled her head and shoulders onto his lap and pressed a hand against where he thought the wound was. He pulled out his cell with the other, praying that he wasn't in a dead area. No luck. He was.

Madison pulled up in an unmarked car, lights and sirens issuing just as Caution gave up on the phone and threw it to the ground. He made a quick assessment of the scene and called in an ambulance on his squad radio.

Caution listened to him on the peripheral of his awareness, heard the "officer down" claim, chest tightening as he pulled off Dara's shirt and the vest beneath. He rolled the shirt up and pressed it against her throat.

Madison crouched beside him. "How's she doing?"

"She's losing a lot of blood."

"Keep pressure on it. An ambulance'll be here soon."

Caution silently nodded, not holding out much hope that it would be soon enough. He realized his worst fears when Madison left his side to check on Reina and he saw the image spiral upward from Dara's body to float several feet above. He thought it was her spirit drifting out until he saw the unfamiliar visage of the hovering specter. Young, pretty, right up Dawson's alley.

There was one thing out of synch, and that was the necklace around the apparition's neck, the necklace that had until a minute ago adorned Dara's neck.

Caution squeezed his eyes tight, shook his head and gave into his bewilderment for a moment before opening his eyes to stare up at the ghost. "Sam?" The specter nodded, grinning sadly.

Caution swallowed hard as if he could wash the approaching tears down his throat, as if he could wash away the last few minutes of his life. Everything Dara's ghost had told him was true. He didn't know whether to be relieved or worry for his own sanity, especially now after watching his mother's breakdown.

If Sam's spirit was outside, drifting away, then where was Dara's?

God, he didn't know which woman was in his arms, whether he should rejoice or mourn. Sam waved at him as she floated up and away.

Dara coughed in his arms, opened her eyes and stared at him. "Caution?"

He closed his eyes, not wanting to hope. When he opened them next, he removed the shirt from her throat, wiping the area around her neck, and peered down into her onyx eyes. His voice was shaky when he spoke. "Dare?"

"It's me." She grinned. "Really me."

He looked at her throat and collarbone, watched the wound close, watched the bleeding stop and pulled her close, chest full to hurting. He quickly released her, afraid of exacerbating her injury despite its evident instant healing.

"I'm okay," she said, reading his mind. "I'll be okay."

He embraced her as if to keep her earthbound, ensure himself of her reality and

that she was telling the truth.

"Will we?" she asked.

Caution frowned.

"Be okay?" she asked and he smiled.

"We will now."

EPILOGUE

Afterlife

She drifted for what seemed like hours, but then time didn't exist as she knew it, not where she was going.

Limbo. Again.

Ten seconds could have gone by, or ten years for all Sam knew, and her suspicions were confirmed when she finally came to a stop, floating on a cloud and looking at the scene below where Dara lay propped up in a hospital bed.

At first, Sam thought her friend was recuperating from the shooting, but then she saw Caution at her bedside, beaming right before a nurse came into the room with an infant cradled in an arm. The nurse handed the baby over to Dara and Caution leaned in to get a good look at his newborn baby.

Sam smiled as a procession of relatives joined Dara and her new husband in the room—Dara's mom, and all five of her strapping older brothers, an assortment of uncles, aunts and cousins. Sandra showed up with Tayte in tow, the little girl doting on her new baby brother. Even Pamela put in an appearance.

She didn't know whether she was watching real time or They were showing her a sample of what could and would be months from now, but Sam liked to hope.

They are well, Samantha. They will be fine, thanks to you.

She didn't want to be so bold as to believe that she had had anything to do with Dara and Caution's happy ending, only glad that everything had turned out okay for them. It was herself she was worried about.

There is no need to, child.

Sam swerved her head, searching her surroundings for the owner of the decidedly amused and Male voice, surprised when They appeared before her, no longer detached, faceless voices, but entities she could see and identify, if not reach out and touch.

They weren't like what she'd expected at all, seemed oddly human and familiar. They looked like her parents.

We project the image you need to feel most comfortable.

Sam stared at the Male as he spoke and nodded her understanding as a warm sense of home suffused her entire body. If this was her final destination, death wasn't so bad after all.

Then the Female chimed in.

We know you have your doubts. But even Caution will heal. He has to.

For Tayte, Sam thought. And his new wife and baby.

Now, as for you...

Sam closed her eyes, squeezed Josh's medallion in one hand and vaguely wondered how it had come to be with her and had not been left behind with Dara.

It is where it has always belonged, Samantha.

"Do you have more plans for me? Am I going back?"

All will be answered soon, child. This time, for good.

Sam held onto to the words and her medallion and tried to prepare herself for whatever They had in mind for her. Although she knew she'd never be ready for one of Their whisk-bam-thank-you-ma'am trips through space, she hoped the landing was a little more gentle than the last time.

* * * *

"Ma'am? Ma'am, you're going to be all right. We're going to get you and your baby out of there as soon as we can."

Sam tried to move but was pinned in her seat by the seatbelt. "My baby?" she rasped.

"Yes, your baby. Just hold on and we'll get you both out."

Sam tried, holding on tight to the familiar baritone, swimming up from oblivion to the sound—a safe haven, strong comfort in a sea of pain and confusion. The sound of metal rending beneath heavy equipment jerked her attention to the activity going on outside her car.

The Jaws of Life?

She opened her eyes and saw two firemen working on the crushed driver side door, then glanced behind her and saw the infant strapped in the car. A little boy, maybe eight or nine months old from what she could tell, and he beamed back at her, gurgling and bicycling his thick legs, a happy ball of energy.

God, was he hers?

Sam glanced back out the driver's side window and saw the uniformed Nassau County police officer hovering behind the firemen as they worked their magic on her door.

The officer smiled when he saw her looking at him, then pushed forward as soon as the door popped open under the firemen's efforts.

Where was she? "Josh?"

He stared at her and frowned. "Do I know you, ma'am?"

Sam grinned and closed her eyes as two EMS workers rolled a stretcher up to the car. She glanced heavenward, not knowing what mess They had dropped her into this time, or what They had planned for her, but glad They had sent her Josh to get her through this go-round.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

Josh leaned forward to peer at her, his gaze drifting down to her breasts and freezing there for several seconds.

Sam caught his surprise as he lifted his eyes to hers from the medallion she wore.

"Sam?" he blurted.

She nodded and grinned. "We'll talk later, Josh. It's a long story."

IN PLAIN SIGHT

THE END

AUTHOR'S BIO



Gracie McKeever is an author from the Bronx, and aside from several side trips along the way, has lived and worked her entire life in the New York City area. She has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience for various short story readings and performances.

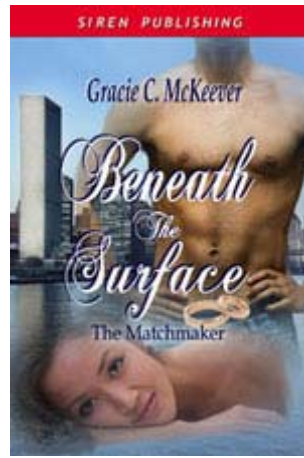
An eclectic and voracious reader whose audience has grown outside of the supportive family members, she's had the great fortune of being able to incorporate two of her favorite passions and talents—reading and writing—as a book reviewer for several online e-zines, both as a regular staff member and freelancer.

Her short stories, novellas and poetry have seen exposure in various lit and art magazines and other venues—online and in print. Of particular note, heard over the airwaves on KFJC's morning show, *Dancing In The Fast Lane With Ann Arbor* (Unbedtime Stories) out of Los Altos Hills, CA (*New Life Incognita* was the story of the month for March 2000). She's also proud to be a member of the ("Worlds' Oldest Active Homeless Paper") Street News family and has seen numerous articles, poems and novel excerpts published within its pages as well as having had a poetry reading on Pseudo On-line Network (Street News Review).

In 2001, Gracie caught the erotica bug, sinking her teeth into her first erotic e-book for a review, and hasn't looked back since, an instant affinity for the genre spawning her first erotica title, *Beneath The Surface*, published in 2006 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

Visit Gracie's website at
www.graciecmckeever.com

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at
www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com



The Matchmaker, Book 1

Beneath the Surface : Terms of Surrender : Manifest Destiny

Angela Calminetti, mother of five, New Age practitioner and gifted psychic and telepath, is proud of her family ties and does everything she can to make sure that all of her younger siblings are as happy in love and marriage as she is...whether they want her to or not.

Note: Each book is written to stand alone.

Beneath the Surface

Former Madison Avenue ad exec EJ Vega just landed a seven-figure advance from Renegade Publishing. Older sister Evelyn convinces him he needs a fashion makeover before he goes on his first national book tour and has just the person in mind to turn his wardrobe inside out. EJ, too late, recognizes the handiwork of his oldest, matchmaking sister Angela, and by the time he realizes what he's gotten himself into, a very hot and uptight personal shopper has invaded more than just his wardrobe; she's invaded his soul.

From a broken home and driven by past demons, Tabitha Lyons is the proprietor of flourishing *Lyons Style, Inc.* and knows success when she sees it. In EJ she sees not just success, but sexy and sin with a capital "S." She doesn't want to turn his wardrobe inside out as much as she knows EJ will turn her world upside down...

Sensuality Rating: Scorching

Genre: Contemporary Paranormal/Psychic/Interracial

STORY EXCERPT

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The Matchmaker, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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“I have your two o’clock here, Tabitha. Mr. Vega?”

“Send him in.” Tabitha sat behind her desk and hit Escape on her keyboard.

Eric strolled in just as his dossier reappeared on her screen, and Tabitha swallowed at the sight of him, suddenly wishing she had stuck with her usual formality when they’d been on the phone and kept their relationship on a strictly last name basis. She didn’t want him to get the wrong idea, especially since her own treacherous hormones already had the wrong idea and had her pussy muscles clenching in response to his tall height and broad shoulders filling the doorway as he paused on the threshold.

Instant attraction. Not only was it not good, it was unprecedented.

Tabitha stood up behind her desk and proffered a hand across the glass top as he approached, thinking Evelyn had somehow bamboozled her and that her brother’s profile did not do him a bit of justice. There was nothing about the man that needed to be “made over.”

He was inhumanly gorgeous, the black hair he had mentioned in his profile was sleek and wavy, worn in a longish but masculine and neat style combed back off his forehead and glistening beneath the fluorescent lights of her office.

Tabitha slowly moved her gaze down, taking in the aquiline nose, angular jaw, and cleft chin—the cleft he had neglected to mention in his profile as he had mentioned his dimples—immediately drawn back up to his indigo eyes, ridiculously long-lashed, so dark and intense they almost looked black.

She almost smiled when he grinned and she noticed the big dimples to which he had previously alluded, mentally taking his measurements and surprised he had been so accurate with his description. Most men—most people—boasted, overcompensated for some shortcoming or were too humble with their self-assessment. Rarely had she met anyone who’d been so accurate. Accurate and modest. *God, the man can’t be this perfect!*

Tabitha slid her gaze down further to take in his outfit and amended her last thought. Today was not Friday, but he was definitely dressed down.

Okay, he *wasn’t* perfect. Thank God for small favors.

His sense of fashion seemed to come straight from a discount store. Actually, a discount store would have been a step up. She could easily see the man perusing the aisles of a neighborhood thrift shop. Not that there was anything wrong with that. She frequented some of the better thrift shops herself when she was on the hunt for that perfect item for a client and not that his clothes were ill fitting, quite the contrary.

He had the kind of body on which clothes hung well, any clothes, pulled off the casual ragged, torn-up look with sensual style rather than coming off as a slob.

Tabitha glanced at her clock as he caught her smaller hand in his big one and gently squeezed. The resultant energy tingled all the way up her arm until she thought he had one of those practical joke buzzers in his palm, but there was nothing touching her palm except his smooth, warm skin.

He noticed the direction of her glance and grinned, showcasing those dimples to their fullest effect. "Come on now, you have to admit I'm on time."

Tabitha arched a brow. "Just," she said coolly.

"Let me guess, you're the type who turns up to all her appointments at least a half-an-hour early, am I right?"

"Why don't you have a seat and we can get started," she said, ignoring his quip. That he was so on target about her was totally beside the point.

He released her hand slowly, his body heat and intensity overwhelming and invading her comfort zone so much, it made her think twice about walking across the room to close the door before she finally did just that.

When she got back behind her desk and sat down, Eric was still standing and running a hand over the glass top admiringly, glanced up at her with a knowing look.

"I knew you'd be a glass and chrome type."

Tabitha glanced at him with a start, entranced by his long fingertips stroking her desk, imagined him caressing her skin instead of the smooth cold glass, her body wantonly arched beneath his manipulations. "Excuse me?"

"I got a definite vibe from your voice on the phone the other day." He glanced around her uncluttered office and nodded. "Cool, Spartan, functional."

His matter of fact appraisal made her feel as if her character had just been attacked, that maybe she should defend herself, but he spoke up again before she had a chance.

"Don't get me wrong. I like the look. It suits you."

"Not quite an apology."

He arched a lush brow. "Do I owe you one?"

"No, I suppose you don't. You were just making an observation after all." She leaned her elbows on the desk, folded her hands and leaned her chin on her clenched fingers as she looked at him. Two could play the intuitive game. "What type are you?"

"Eclectic, whatever feels good at the moment."

“Mmm-hmm.” Just like she thought. A free spirit. He probably would have been right at home at Woodstock.

“Is this part of the interview process?”

“Everything you say to me here is basically part of the interview process. I get to know what you like, your general style, it helps me when I finally have to go and pick things out for you. That is, if you’re not with me at the time I make the purchases.”

“You mean I have that option?”

“If you have the time, of course you do. Most of my clients don’t use the option. Time constraints are one of the main reasons people hire me in the first place. Your time is valuable, so why not let me do what I do best while you’re using your time to do what you do best?”

“I like that philosophy.”

Most men did. Most of her clients of the male, no-time-or-desire-for-frivolous-nonsense persuasion where shopping was concerned, did. Must have been something in the Y chromosome, some anti-shopping gene.

Tabitha looked at her monitor and hit the Enter key twice to make room for additional information. “Now, you mentioned eclectic...” Tabitha paused to glimpse his outfit. Not quite as out there as some of the Woodstock fashions she had seen, but definitely unconventional for the business world in which she moved. The white T-shirt tucked into a pair of blue wash-and-wear Levi’s hinted at firm well-muscled abs that tapered down to a slim waist, would have been more suitable attire for a *Grease* revival. Same went for the black distressed leather blazer that clung to his broad shoulders and had Tabitha’s fingers itching to divest him and see if his physique was as hard as it looked.

He had the anarchistic artist look down to a science, and she wasn’t sure yet whether or not it was a façade, or a well-honed image he’d perfected just for their meeting today, because Eric seemed like the type to go out of his way to shock.

Eric finally took the seat across from Tabitha’s desk, resting his right ankle on his left knee and giving her a good view of a comfortable, well-worn black desert boot.

“So, let’s get back to your sty—”

“I don’t like suits and ties. I did the whole corporate dress for success deal years ago, and I’m not interested in reimmersing myself. What you see here is as dressy as I usually get.”

True, the customer was always right, but Tabitha took offense at his tone, as if he was too good for a suit and she wasn’t; as if he were attacking her tastes without even knowing what she might have planned for him.

“There are a lot of things we can do with slacks and a suit jacket that don’t involve a tie.”

“There are a lot of things I could do with a tie that don’t involve clothes at all.”

If she'd had liquid in her mouth, she might have spewed it across the desk in his face. As it was she had to tamp down a strong urge to laugh, and instead frowned to show her displeasure.

Her look didn't go a long way to putting him in his place, however.

He simply grinned at her, a smug boy who had just put his second grade teacher on the spot with his risqué comment in front of the class.

"Other than the suit and tie aversion—"

"I'm fairly easy."

She just bet. "That helps a bit." Although she didn't consider the subject closed by any stretch of the imagination.

He'd insulted her and Tabitha did not take well to insults. Rather than dwell on it though, she typed in "easy and casual" on his profile, then peered at him. "Would it be safe to say blue or black are your favorite colors?"

"Today they are. Tomorrow it might be something that's at my fingertips when I reach into my closet."

Tabitha shifted in her chair, crossed her legs to stem the sudden flow of wetness in her panties. She'd never found wise-asses a turn-on, but there was something intrinsically sexy and inviting about his grin, something raw and challenging in the depths of those indigo eyes.

She highlighted and underlined "easy and casual," already envisioning him in a charcoal single breasted suit and vest to highlight those beautiful dark eyes, and a black T-shirt underneath. There, no tie! "Any colors or materials you don't like?"

He shrugged, but rather than give off uncertainty, the motion emitted his indifference.

Tabitha stopped herself from flinging her mouse over the pad, and stared at him across the desk as he merely arched a thick brow. "This is not the best way to build rapport, Eric. I need cooperation from you to make this work. This relationship has to be a two-way street, give and ta—"

"Okay, okay." He chuckled, put up his hands as if in surrender. "You're absolutely right. I have to apologize for dragging you into this."

That was more than she expected, but less than she deserved, and Tabitha waited for the other shoe to drop. She was sure he had something up his sleeve, especially when she realized what he had said. "Dragging me into what?"

"Vega vendettas and power struggles."

"I'm not following."

"I have to be honest, my sister damn near twisted my arm to sell me on the idea of a makeover and personal shopper."

"You don't have to feel obliga—"

“*But*, now that I’m here I’m getting used to the idea of having a fashion consultant.”

“Let’s get something straight, I can’t work miracles.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“And I won’t do anything to your wardrobe you don’t want me to do.”

“I leave myself and my wardrobe at your total discretion, Tabitha.”

She stopped herself from sputtering at his silky warm murmur, the sound of her name on his lips, still waiting for that big size twelve desert boot to drop.

At the thought, he did lower his right foot to the polished parquet floor, rolled his chair closer before leaning his elbows on her desk.

Tabitha purposely held her ground, though she was tempted to roll her chair back an inch or two, his clean musky scent riding the wind to her nostrils and making her light-headed.

It should have been illegal for a man to smell as good as he looked.

“Well, ah, that’s good to hear.”

“And I promise to cooperate and be a good boy for the rest of our meeting.”

She didn’t think he could or would keep that particular promise, not even if he tried, not a “good” bone in that big well-built body.

“Scout’s honor.” He raised his hand and grinned at her silence.

“Were you?”

“Was I what?”

“A Boy Scout.”

“Even better. I was an Eagle.”

She wasn’t that up on what the qualifications for an Eagle Scout were, but she was sure they were pretty extensive and doubted that Eric’s footloose and fancy-free mien had held him in good stead with the fraternity.

“I could show you my merit badges,” he said at her doubtful look.

“I bet you could.” *What did they give merit badges out for?* She was certain he’d excelled in totally different areas of achievement and socialization than had the rest of his troop. And despite his aversion to suits and ties, she could imagine him in the little green shorts uniform, politely helping an old lady across the street and shamelessly flirting with her all the way.

Tabitha bet he had nice legs too, to go with the rest of that hard body she’d been secretly ogling since he’d arrived.

“What about you?”

“Me?” She raised a brow.

“I can see you in a little Brownie’s uniform selling cookies door to door.”

The double entendre didn’t escape her—she knew he’d meant it not to—his smile slow and seductive as he sat back in his seat waiting for her response.

“I was entirely too busy with more important activities to indulge in that particular whimsy.” Too busy surviving, she thought.

Tabitha had never had to sell cookies door to door, but she’d had to barter, borrow and steal for a meal more times than she liked to count.

She especially remembered a period when her mother had neglected to come home for several days after Tabitha’s father had left them. Everyday for a week she had come home to an empty house, and an even emptier refrigerator before going out to the neighbors to play “Whimpy from Popeye” with promises that her mother would gladly pay them Tuesday for a meal today.

No, hawking hundreds of boxes of overpriced cookies for top-selling honors and a cheesy overrated prize had not been high on her list of eight-year-old priorities.

“So, back to least favorite colors and materials?”

“I’m not too fond of orange and pink, unless they’re on a woman. As for materials, I like anything that’s washable.”

She wanted to ask him if that jacket he was wearing was washable since it looked like it had been through the ringer. Distressed leather had been a trend back in the 90’s, which looked to be about when he had bought the jacket. Of course, leather and blazers were pretty timeless...

“Before you ask, yes, it is.”

“I’m sorry? Yes, what is?”

“The jacket’s washable.”

Her jaw dropped but she quickly coughed into a fist to cover her shock. “What are you, a mind reader?” she asked and watched as he fidgeted in his seat, for the first time since he’d come into her office looking uneasy, as if she had hit a nerve.

ADULT EXCERPT
BENEATH THE SURFACE

The Matchmaker, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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He closed the space between them, reached for her, cupping a breast.

She gasped, not realizing he'd undone the top several buttons of her blouse and unlatched her bra until she glanced down and saw his hand against her naked copper tone flesh. "You're fast," she blurted.

"You have no idea." He pressed her against the wall, lightly pinching and rolling an already hardened nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Tabitha moaned and Eric covered her mouth in a scorching kiss that sent her stomach spiraling in a pool of molten liquid draining straight out of her vagina.

"Is everything all right in there, sir?"

Eric dragged his mouth away from hers long enough to say, "Everything's fine!" He stared down at her, licking his lips like a hungry predator. "More than fine," he murmured, making slow sensual circles with a forefinger around her right nipple.

Tabitha moved away and slapped at his hand. "You're absolutely incorrigible."

"Guilty as charged."

She stopped herself from smiling. She didn't want to encourage him, not that he needed much encouragement to be the total scoundrel that he was.

God, when he looked at her like that—indigo eyes smoky and heavy-lidded, plainly proclaiming exactly what he wanted to do to her—Tabitha wanted to give in, give him anything he wanted, do anything to please him.

She had to get away from him before she fell any deeper under his spell.

Tabitha moved to the opposite side of the cramped room—not nearly far enough—warily watching him, didn't realize she was panting until she saw her breasts heaving from the corner of her eyes. She reached up to latch her bra and button her blouse with shaky hands under Eric's glittering watchful gaze, couldn't drag her eyes away from his. "You messed up my clothes."

"I was actually trying to get them off."

"You don't stop, and you'll mess up those clothes." She pointed her chin at his outfit.

“If I’m going to buy them anyway, will it make a difference?”

“Yes, it will. They’ll know what we were doing in here.”

He took a couple of steps towards her and before she knew it, he had her pinned against the wall again. “They already do,” Eric whispered.

“Eric...” Her next words died on a groan as he lifted her skirt and palmed her sex.

He caressed her through the crotch of her pantyhose for several long torturous moments before he slid his hands up to the waistband and pulled down her panties and hose in one rough swift motion.

“Eric, please do—”

He got to his knees, buried his head beneath her skirt and in an instant, Tabitha felt his mouth on her.

Unconsciously, she gyrated her hips, grinding her pelvis against his mouth, felt him open and explore her with his fingers before his tongue penetrated her.

Tabitha gasped and would have tipped over had he not held her steady, gripping and spreading her ass cheeks as he pushed his tongue into her pussy as deep as it would go, burrowing and circling like some piece of earth moving equipment—how freaking appropriate!

She felt his fingers again, thumb and forefinger rhythmically stimulating her clit, zinging hot flashes of sensation straight to kitty town.

God...she was...going to...explode!

Tabitha bit her bottom lip hard to keep from crying out, tasted blood in her mouth as an orgasm crashed down on her sudden as an epileptic seizure. She stiffened, then convulsed as Eric got to his feet and held her close.

She lay her head against his chest—just resting, just catching her breath, she told herself—listened to his speeding heartbeat echoing the pattern of hers, slowly opened her eyes and stepped out of his arms to see him smiling down at her.

“C’mere, I’ll kiss the hurt and make it better,” he said and leaned close, smelling of her juices, tasting of her essence, caressing her lips with his, sliding his tongue into her mouth.

REVIEWS for Beneath the Surface

"Ms McKeever has created a tight family group around psychic telepath Angela, whose words of wisdom and guidance help all around her. There's a strong sense of realism and locale in this book that really drew me in, and the attraction between EJ and Tabitha just grabs you. Even their banter is sexy, so you know that when they finally go to bed it's not just sex, it's something else, something amazing. The supporting cast is just as great, from bitchy Jade to lovable Frankie, the fast-talking sisters and the rest of Eric's family. With plenty of romantic twists and entanglements, this will keep you reading to the very last page. You're sure to love it—and there's more to come in this fantastic series. Keep a look out for the next book! **5 Magic Wands.**" —Autiotalo, *Enchanted Ramblings*

"*Beneath the Surface* is Book 1 in The Matchmaker series. The story is a phenomenal start to the matchmaking talents of Angela Calminetti, EJ's sister. Angela wants all her siblings and family happy and in love. She uses her telepathic abilities to make sure that this happens.

EJ and Tabitha, they have to struggle to make it to happiness, the two are stubborn and try to best each other. But they are miserable without one another. EJ knows Tabitha is the one because she reminds him of his first love Sinclair. Sinclair committed suicide when EJ was much younger and he has never really trusted his heart to another woman. Tabitha is different, for the first time in years EJ wants to tell her the truth about his telepathic abilities. Tabitha has had a rough life and is not very trusting of anyone but Eric James seems like he is worthy of her trust. Gracie C. McKeever shows that the bond between EJ and Tabitha will be long-lived and everlasting. And that the two are each others pretty match. *Beneath the Surface* is an outstanding book that is captivating. I definitely recommend this for readers. **4.5 Stars**" —Chantay, *Euro Reviews*

"*Beneath the Surface* is the first book in The Matchmaker series and a wonderful beginning. Tabitha is a great heroine with plenty of backbone to stand up to whom and whatever. This makes reading about her a pure joy. EJ is not your typical author and it doesn't take much to transform him into incredibly sexy and totally hot. This couple has a fiery relationship both in and out of the bedroom and readers won't be able to get through the pages fast enough. The love scenes are full of desire and fraught with sensuality. Gracie McKeever has penned a book that will have readers desperately seeking the next volumes in the series. **4.5 Blue Ribbons**" —Angel, *Romance Junkies*

"Gracie C. McKeever has compiled one wonderfully enjoyable read full of rich, full characters. This story will make you laugh, shed a few tears and make you wish the next tale was available. The witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath The Surface* an engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has a new fan in this reviewer and I eagerly await her next tale. **4.5 Roses**" —Noemi, *A Romance Review*

"*Beneath the Surface* is the first stand-alone entry in Ms. McKeever's Matchmaker Series featuring psychic matchmaker Angela Calminetti. Angela and EJ are understandably close as they share a psychic as well as a familial bond, so naturally Angie turns her talents toward her brother first. Prickly Tabitha is a wonderful character whose appeal grows as each layer is pulled back and another facet of her character is revealed. This is really a feel-good love story with slight paranormal

elements and with graphic language and spicy sex scenes. This reviewer became immediately engrossed with this tale and slurped it right up in one marathon session. Once again, Ms. McKeever has shown a deft touch with her prose and characterizations and produced a wonderful tale. This reviewer looks forward to the future installments in this series and will enjoy visiting the zany Vega family again and again! **4.5 Hearts**" —Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com*

"Ms. McKeever captures intense love scenes loaded with earthshaking passion and desire. Eric and Tabitha burn up the pages of this book every time they give into the uncontrollable longing inside of them. At times, I felt like a voyeur watching the steamy embraces. Their passion is only the backdrop for an intense connection that bonds these two souls into one. The feelings and link they share [are] very special and unique. It is what we are all searching for out of life.

I will read *Beneath the Surface: The Matchmaker* many more times through the years to remember the beautiful love story of Eric and Tabitha. I look forward to the next installment of the series. **4 Hot Tattoos**" —Ophelia, *Erotic-Escapades*

"Ms. McKeever has succeeded in taking an often-used story line and breathed new life into it. Both Tabitha and Eric are full of such life and anguish that you laugh and suffer right along with them. This author has the talent to draw you into her story and you can really feel the sexual chemistry between the hero and the heroine. The author also sets things up so there will be more books in the series, something I will look forward to. I highly recommend this book. **4 Flowers/Excellent**" —Char, *May Reviews*

"EJ and Tabitha are a wonderful couple, and throughout the book, I enjoyed the interaction between them, especially how their past makes them closer. Stubborn isn't strong enough to describe these two, but their resistance to taking a chance at love never gets to the irritating stage. Their chemistry is excellent and the desire they feel never fades as the super hot sex gets better with each encounter. Definitely have a significant other available when this book is done. The interaction with the sisters was good and brought a break from the intensity of EJ and Tabitha's developing relationship...The paranormal link is very well-done, and was not only a selling part of the book but completely plausible. *Beneath the Surface* is a entertaining book and I look forward to reading the rest of the Vega siblings' stories when they come out. **4 Stars/Orgasmic**" —Anyia Khan, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"I really enjoyed this story. Gracie has a very nice voice and a terrific sense of pacing and story momentum. I loved the prickliness and baggage of both the main characters and the way they struggled against each other and against their own baggage. Eric's sense of responsibility and purpose made him instantly likeable. Tabitha's complex character and the way she strives for logic and reason in emotions and things inherently irrational made her a heroine to eagerly follow and root for.

One of the most interesting things about this book was that, unlike many paranormals, it was more contemporary than paranormal. The characters live in the real world and their issues and growth is easy to comprehend and sympathize with. The paranormal aspect of this story was masterful. It didn't beat me over the head and it didn't hide in the background until the very last moment.

This is the first book I've read by Gracie McKeever but it won't be the last. **4 Hearts**" —Maura, *The Romance Studio*

"*Beneath the Surface - The Matchmaker* has a wonderful flow and was a joy to read from start to finish. The loves that the Vega family had for each other could easily be felt throughout the story. I absolutely enjoyed following E.J. and Tabitha as they navigated the rocky road of their relationship. They are both strong and independent and it was fun watching them struggle as they tried to build a relationship without giving up control. This book is full of suspense, surprises, laughs and really heated sex scenes. I got such a feeling of comfort and joy when the story ended. **4 Angels**"
—Lisa, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

"What do you get when you take a man and a woman with very different personalities, add an impossible to resist sexual attraction, and some meddling family members? You get Gracie C. McKeever's *Beneath the Surface*, one heck of an enjoyable read. Not only does it turn up the heat, it will make you laugh and cry and look forward to the next tale in Ms. McKeever's The Matchmaker series.

EJ is the type of man that it would be easy to underestimate. Only as you get to know him, do you see beneath his laid back exterior. When EJ decides to woo a lady, he does it relentlessly and with style. Tabitha's cold, business-like exterior protects a heart and soul that have been sorely battered. When she confronts her past, it will bring tears to your eyes. With interesting secondary characters to move the plot along and add some spice of their own, *Beneath the Surface* flies by at a quick pace.

Witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath the Surface* a delightful, engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has certainly caught my interest and I will be eagerly awaiting her next tale. Don't miss out on this wonderful new series." —Vicki Turner, *Romance Reviews Today*



The Matchmaker, Book 2

Beneath the Surface : Terms of Surrender : Manifest Destiny

Angela Calminetti, mother of five, New Age practitioner and gifted psychic and telepath, is proud of her family ties and does everything she can to make sure that all of her younger siblings are as happy in love and marriage as she is...whether they want her to or not.

Note: Each book is written to stand alone.

Terms of Surrender

Slany Breeze has been in control, of herself and her family, since she was an early teen when her mother was killed in a tragic accident and her father retreated into himself, a broken and lost spirit.

But Slany's tired of being the strong and responsible daughter and the dependable and inspirational big sister. Just once, she'd like to give over the reins of control and let someone else take care of her every need and want. Wanting, however, and admitting her secret longings to the one man willing and capable of satisfying them, are two different things.

Nick Vega has come a long way from his bad boy, rebellious childhood when a learning disability was the bane of his disappointed father's existence.

Once he discovers Slany's submissive nature and the stalker from his past that threatens her, he will do whatever it takes to protect his new claim and woman.

Sensuality Rating: Scorching

Genre: Contemporary Paranormal/ BDSM/ Interracial/ Suspense

Length: Plus Novel (~94,000 words)

STORY EXCERPT

TERMS OF SURRENDER

The Matchmaker, Book 2

By Gracie C. McKeever

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He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Slany's spicy-sweet woman's musk sent his salivary glands into overdrive, and his cock stood at attention under his desk.

"Are you listening to me, Nick?"

"Of course I am."

"Then what did I just say?"

"Something about your ad beating the jocks off of mine in the split run."

"Lucky guess." She smirked.

Nick chuckled. "If it's any consolation, they're both great copy, each playing on basic semiotics." He waited for her retort, remembered how she'd reacted to his "Everwell...our name says it all," compared to her "Quality and longevity is in our name." They'd argued the merits of each catch phrase through most of that first day working together. Slany thought his slogan oversimplified, that it sacrificed clarity in the name of cleverness. Nick insisted it was clear and clever enough, despite its simplicity. They'd finally settled on a split run, competitive to the bitter end, and may the best director win.

"It isn't," Slany murmured.

Nick arched a brow. "Isn't what?"

"Isn't any consolation."

"Don't like bones, huh?"

"Bones are for dogs."

"Care to make it interesting?"

She stared at him long and hard, then finally asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"A little wager. Loser takes the winner out to dinner." He figured even if he lost, he still won. The luxury of Slany's company was enough assuagement for any man's wounded ego. He could see Slany figured the same as he did, that she resented his manipulation.

She stood up straight, hands on her hips in what was becoming an achingly familiar pose of defiance that made his cock throb in his pants with longing.

Loose-fit designer chinos had never been as uncomfortable on him.

He glanced up at her from his seat and goaded, "Don't have any faith in your text?"

She marched from behind his desk at this and planted herself in front of it, putting a nice slab of hard wood between them as she seethed.

Smart girl, because he'd been about to do something that probably would have warranted a slap, or arrest for lewd and lascivious behavior by the laws of at least several states.

Nick was sure there actually were some archaic regulations on the books that outlawed several of his favorite activities to do in bed, two of which he could see doing with Slany in his office this minute if he could get away with it.

Slany stared at him for a long moment, finally sighed, and dropped her arms to her sides, as if in resignation. "I don't even know why I let you stress me out."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Stressed out."

"I'm slowly getting there."

Nick laughed as he stood and came from behind his desk, aware of the bulge in his pants and not caring if she noticed, especially since she was the one who'd put it there.

Slany eyed him warily, but didn't retreat as he approached, stopping a foot in front of her.

"You know what they say is the best stress reliever?"

Her eyes widened ever so slightly, but she remained silent as she stared up at him, plainly anticipating his next move.

He had news for her, because the ball was in her court.

Your move, Breeze.

She didn't disappoint him, slowly ran the tip of her tongue over her luscious lips, igniting his imagination and making him wonder what that organ of taste would feel like wrapped around and stroking his hard cock.

"No. Why don't you tell me?"

If he picked up the gauntlet she'd just thrown down, he knew there would be no turning back for either of them, and no longer cared about the consequences. Hell, he barely remembered they were at their job, in his office, the door unlocked.

Nick took a step closer, paused as he stared at her, giving her a chance to fall back.

She didn't, simply looked up at him with a curious heated expression.

Good girl. Stay with me.

He tilted his head to one side as he leaned in to take her mouth, closed his eyes and saw skyrocketing off when their lips converged.

He pulled back for the second it took him to murmur, "Open for me, Slany," surprised when she did. He thrust his tongue against hers before sweeping past it altogether and into the hot depths of her eager mouth to thoroughly devour.

In that instant, he knew. Slany was a submissive!

ADULT EXCERPT

TERMS OF SURRENDER

The Matchmaker, Book 2

By Gracie C. McKeever

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He reached between her legs and gently opened her folds with his thumbs, bent his head to lick her wanting clit, slowly sucked and nibbled the engorged flesh to vibrant life. The flesh bloomed like a berry on the vine, ready to burst in his mouth.

She moaned, arching her hips to bring his mouth closer, and when he plunged his tongue inside her, deeply, hungrily, she screamed, struggling against her shackles.

She needed to touch him, hold him!

Slany bucked her hips to meet his thrusts, mindless of whether she was hurting him, would bruise or smother him.

He caught her hips and held her in place against the firm mattress as he worked in earnest, lapping at her as if she were his first and last meal.

Her uterus contracted and expanded, heat flaring in her center, rising up and through her body, simultaneously bathing her limbs and nerves in cold heat, every sensation intensified by her restraints, by his masculinity and superior strength.

She felt perspiration beading her forehead and upper lip, climax overtaking her like a masked bank robber, sudden and violent, body spasming inside and out.

Slany opened her eyes several seconds after her body finally stilled and watched Nick sitting beside her, gaze drifting over her body with stimulating intent as he caressed her with one hand from head to foot.

She licked her lips, tongue sluggish like her eyes she could barely keep open, like her body paradoxically heavy with satisfaction and need. "Please, I want to see you."

"You want to see me, what?"

"Master." It shocked her that the word left her mouth so effortlessly, almost automatic, as if she had been saying it, addressing him thus, for years.

Nick silently reached for the buttons of his designer shirt, slowly unbuttoning each one before drawing his arms out of the sleeves.

Slany squirmed on the bed, his movements taunting her with the view of his well-muscled torso, abdomen hard and sectioned like a swimmer's, and almost as smooth but for a small sprinkling of dark hair between his pectorals, light trail arrowing down

beneath the waistband of his slacks. The sight made her more anxious to feel him, made her want to follow that trail of hair with her tongue.

God this was so unfair! She'd never felt so helpless, so needy and vulnerable before, and she wasn't sure how much she liked it.

Her fingers automatically flexed with the need to run up and down his body, feel his velvety skin and hard muscles beneath her palms. Slany watched him stand, slowly unzip his slacks and drop them to the floor. She was finally gifted with a banquet of long, lean legs, his calves and thighs athletic, tightly corded like a runner's, but not overly bulky like a weight lifter's.

She had a brief second to glimpse his round, masculine ass covered in a pair of navy boxer briefs and swallowed hard at the idea of cupping each firm cheek in her hands.

Nick stepped out of his pants, leisurely strutted back to the bed. His movements were unruffled and nonchalant, as if he were unaware of her focus or didn't care about it one way or the other.

He sat beside her, gaze heated and attention rapt as he ran the back of a hand down one arm, from shoulder to wrist.

It killed her to just lie there unmoving, unable to reciprocate and only watch him. Her legs itched to wrap around his waist, eager to feel him between her thighs as he rode her hard.

She peeked at his lap, where the cotton material of his boxer briefs hugged his hard penis, barely able to contain his large size.

"I can tell you're not used to this, not being in control."

She licked her lips, vagina wet and weeping with wanting him.

No, she wasn't used to it, but she could get used to it very quickly.

"Every muscle is tight. Relax, Slany. I'm only going to make you feel good. Nothing you have to brace yourself for, no reason to be tense."

The hell there wasn't. There was every reason to feel tight and tense and on edge. She was at a disadvantage. She was at his mercy. "I want to see you," she whispered.

He spread his arms. "This isn't enough?"

"To tease me, maybe."

"Tease and please and torment." He leaned in to suckle her throat, making her shiver beneath him as he dragged his mouth along the column of her neck up to her chin. He licked the cleft in the middle, taking his time moving up to her lips. He nibbled the bottom one before lazily dipping his tongue into her mouth, reacquainting himself with her taste, as if he hadn't just taken the most intimate sample of all with his previous kiss below.

Slany writhed beneath him, turned on by her piquant taste on his mouth. She held in a moan, didn't want to lose control too early, didn't want to lose it at all in front of this

man who prided himself in keeping control. But she knew control was no longer hers, something she could not claim in Nick's presence.

"Now, Slany," he murmured against her ear, "tell me how you want me to fuck you. Slow and easy," he said, running a palm up her leg, tickling the edges of her vagina with his fingers, light butterfly caresses setting fire to her clit and labia, "or hard and rough?"

She didn't *care*. Any way he wanted, she would take it. Take him, his cock. She would take him beneath her, on top of her, inside her—oh, God.

She swallowed, gasping for breath, unable to form the words, unable to form a comprehensive thought as she stared into his honey eyes.

She'd waited most of her life for this moment, this man, and couldn't find a more intelligent way to express it than shamelessly bucking her hips at thin air, out of her mind with desperate need and want. Hunger. No man had ever done this to her before, ever made her feel so wild and wanton and reckless, so strong at the height of her subjection.

"Let go, baby, just let go." He circled the shell of her left ear with his tongue before plunging it in, simultaneously stroking her sides with both hands before moving to her breasts, where he slowly rotated her nipples with his thumbs.

Slany bit her bottom lip, vibrating beneath him as she closed her eyes tight.

Nick lowered his head to her breasts, the nipples already puckered and hard from his previous manipulations, standing at attention now, begging for more, begging for his mouth, his tongue, his teeth.

He straddled her, then suddenly sat back on his haunches to stare down at her.

Slany's eyes flew open, and she looked at him taking her in, like a diner at a mouth-watering buffet. All-you-can-eat, and from the looks of it, Nick intended not to leave a crumb.

"Take me, Nick. Please..."

"Are you sure?"

She frowned, stared at him. "Of course I am."

"Any way I please?"

She pitched her hips up, and her pubic bone collided with his balls. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she thought she should think twice before answering him, but no longer cared about appearances and boundaries and roles, despite the tiny warning bells going off at the mysterious tone of his voice. She just wanted him inside her, whatever terms. "Yes. Any way you please. Just take me now...please..."

REVIEWS for Terms of Surrender, The Matchmaker 2

"Gracie McKeever as always delivers heartwarming, empathetic characters, coupled here with an intriguing mystery and a plot line throbbing with both sensuality and danger. Her character delineations are excellent, and few readers won't simultaneously be enraptured with both Nick and Slany and their personality conflicts disguising their true attraction. Angela is a winning personality of her own and any reader would be thankful to have a big sister with love for the extended family, such as her. *Terms of Surrender* is a story well worth reading, and works as a stand-alone novel, but reader, don't do yourself the disservice of missing the entire The Matchmaker Series. **4.5 Kisses**" —**Frost, TwoLipsReviews**

"*Terms of Surrender* has a heavy focus on the danger surrounding the main female character Slany Breeze. Her life is in jeopardy from a madman with his own agenda and a personal vendetta against Nick Vega, the new man in Slany's life. With a stalker on the loose, these two are in an unknown race for time.

The beauty of this novel is its depth. There are so many aspects of this story that it easily entices any number of readers from across genres. The suspense is an alluring draw to keep people reading from beginning to end in one sitting. The romance is amazingly open and honest. We get a chance to explore a dominate/submissive relationship as it develops between Slany and Nick from the very beginning.

Without a doubt Ms. McKeever has written a must read for everyone. *Terms of Surrender* is the best of multiple genres and should appeal to those who enjoy books with conflict and strong story lines. **4 Stars**" —**Kimberley Spinney, Ecataromance**

"*Terms of Surrender* is not for the faint of heart and readers will find themselves melting in their seats from the heat of the love scenes. Dominant does not even begin to describe Nick and his powerful passion will leave you breathless. Slany has a time giving in to Nick, but when she does, it really pays off. Nick's past comes back to haunt them when his stalker returns and wants to hurt Slany. Gracie McKeever is sensational author and her stories are always full of explosive plots and mesmerizing characters. I can't wait to see what the next book will bring. **4 Blue Ribbons**" —**Angel, Romance Junkies**

"*Terms of Surrender* is a mystery that has more threats to the main characters than that of a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Ms. McKeever has written a very well thought mystery that has lots of guessing as to who is the bad guy ... The author does a good job of building the relationship between Slany and Nick. She also has put a lot of thought into Nick's family and Slany's friends. Finally, she has written some of the hottest sex scenes that I have read in a long time. You are definitely going to need the ice water and the toys for this one. **4 Stars/Orgasmic**" —**Oleta M. Blaylock, Just Erotic Romance Reviews**

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at
www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com

Sisters of Emsharra Collection

by Gracie C. McKeever

Even though both are Inanna, Genesis Enki and LaMia Enlil have varying views on how best to serve Emsharra.

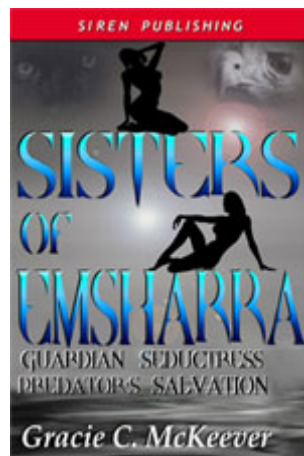
When Kalika Enlil entrusts Genesis with the safekeeping of her outlawed child Alex Ryan before her death, Genesis' way is set to take up the New Regime's torch. Only one woman, the leader of the insurgents and Kalika's nemesis and cousin, stands in Genesis's way to protecting Alex from assassination: LaMia.

LaMia does not believe in the New Regime or its doctrines and is willing to do what she must to see it and the alliance between Emsharra and Gaiam fail. She will even go as far as kidnapping and enslaving Mateo Diaz who has already suffered at her hands in the past more times than a human should endure. It's Mateo's misfortune, however, that Genesis and Alex wish to recruit him in Emsharra's Harvesting Program....and Genesis and Alex are LaMia's mortal enemies.

In Electronic Format



In Trade Paperback



STORY EXCERPT

GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Alex stirred beneath the covers, yawned and stretched his arms over his head. He froze when he opened his eyes and saw her standing over his bed.

"You are awake."

"You have a funny habit of stating the obvious." He pushed himself up to sit against the pillows and headboard of his bed, stared at her. "Where is she?"

"Kate is gone."

Alex's eyes widened. "You killed her?"

"Of course not. I released her."

"Where?"

Genesis gritted her teeth, the green-eyed monster holding her tongue. Why was he so concerned about where and how Kate Summer was? The woman had tried to kill him! True, she had been bedazzled and under the influence of Inanna or Sebitu enchantment at the time, but that was beside the point.

Finally, Genesis sighed then said, "She is home, asleep in her bed. When she awakes, she will have no memory of what happened."

"Lucky her. I wish I didn't remember what happened. Starting with my father's death."

Alex closed his eyes, the sooty lashes so long and thick they brushed his high cheekbones in a sensual stroke that made her heart somersault in her chest at how vulnerable he looked. Vulnerable, totally sexy, and very fuckable.

Genesis' pussy muscles clenched as if applauding in agreement. She saw his rich bronze complexion redden as if he had heard her thoughts and was blushing in response.

Had she slipped? Was she broadcasting? Lilith! Genesis felt heat rising to her face, signaling her own unusual blush. Where was this modesty coming from? She had had thousands of men in her lifetime, had killed at least that many. Shame and embarrassment did not customarily figure into her mentality.

True, she was worldly-wise and experienced, but never had she been around a man who could read her thoughts as well as she could read his. Never had she been so

exposed, so naked when not in the act of feeding and sex.

Vulnerable.

Was this why being around Alex made her bashful as a turkey at Thanksgiving? His ability to so effortlessly strip her when she least wanted to be stripped? His ability to make her feel...powerless?

As if to anchor herself, regain some control, she reached out a hand to grab one of his and squeezed. "You will be fine."

"That remains to be seen." Alex opened his eyes to glance at her. "How long was I unconscious?"

"Several hours."

"Several hours!"

"You lost a lot of blood. More than you realized."

"She hit a vein then?"

Genesis fidgeted, did not like where the conversation was going; was not ready to answer his questions. He might get curious about how he had healed so quickly, about... "I believe so."

Alex held up his arm, inspecting the bandage, stark white against his darker skin.

Since she had rescued him from Kate Summer, she was able to read him much more clearly than before, as if saving him had bonded them in some way. Consequently, she felt his surprise at the lack of blood and pain, though his face remained neutral.

Genesis realized that this situation went both ways. If she could read him, then that meant he *could* probably read her too, hence that earlier blush.

"Want to tell me who and what you are?"

Genesis started as if coming out of a trance. "What I am?"

"I already know you're not quite human. But I'm wondering if there's an alien abduction or anal probe in my future."

She smiled at his ironic tone, except that probing his anus sounded like a delicious idea about now, more attractive than the inquest she knew he intended to conduct. She definitely would not mind more closely inspecting his butt, ready to admire it more up close and personal, feel the steely power of his ass cheeks in the palm of her hands when he pumped into her.

Genesis glanced at him, and noticed him blushing again.

"I don't know whether to be flattered or frightened."

"Perhaps a little bit of both," she blurted, sure now that he was reading her, and decided she had to be more careful with her shields around him.

"So, uh...what do I call you?"

"My name is Genesis. I am Inanna."

Alex frowned. "What is an Inanna exactly?"

How could she tell him hers was a race of predators and his species was the prey? Genesis quickly blanked her mind to stop him receiving any of that. She could have taken the easy way out, she supposed, and let him see for himself, see the pictures of her past inveiglements and victims. But she would not be a coward, at least no more than she had been already in deserting Kalika when she had. She had come this far, had promised to tell him that his mother loved him.

And Genesis always kept her promises.

"You will not believe me."

"Lady, you disappeared before my eyes and turned into a hawk at my father's funeral. Then hours later you subdued my psycho ex in a blue ball of light. I think I'm more than open to any explanation you have to throw at me."

Genesis went to the foot of his bed and paced before it, pausing to stare at him and say, "It is difficult to explain."

Lilith, she would rather be doing anything in the world right now than this. Like stripping him of his briefs and slowly ravaging his body. She would start at his head, sliding her tongue into his unresisting mouth, tangling it with his, tasting his spicy flavor. Then she would move down his chin, plant her lips against the pulsing vein in his neck...

"You're doing it again, Genesis."

She jerked her eyes to his, saw the small grin, his slow murmur touching her core and teasing her clit with its sensuality. "I am sorry." She hurried to the overstuffed chair adjacent the bed, sat down and crossed her legs as if to strangle her misbehaving pussy into submission, stop it from throbbing with heat, so wet she thought she would float away on the tide of her cream. Genesis did not think she had ever wanted a man so much.

"I knew your mother," she blurted as if bringing up Kalika could stop her rampant desire. Not likely, but it had been worth a try for her to steer the conversation in another direction.

"In what capacity?" Alex asked now. "You can't be more than twenty-five."

"I am...a bit more than that."

He tried to scan her, she felt him probing around the edges of her mind, pushing for entry, and backing off in frustration when he could not glean her thoughts.

Impatient, was he not?

"How much is a bit?"

"I am the equivalent of two-hundred human years."

Alex arched a brow. "Two-hundred?"

Genesis nodded, scratching the surface of his mind where his thoughts were clambering to make sense of her statement, how he instantly discounted her claim as preposterous. She heard all this, felt his frustration at his perception of being lied to. He was a man who dealt with logic after all, facts. Abstraction was not something he could deal with, not something he wanted to deal with despite his own illogical "gifts."

"Inanna have been around for centuries. We...subsist on the uh...energy of others."

"Energy that you obtain how?"

Lilith, he was going to make her say it out loud? "We extract it from humans during sex."

"Okay." Alex nodded, got out of bed, and took her by an arm to lead her to the bedroom door. "I think it's time for you to go back to the mental ward where you came from, lady."

ADULT EXCERPT

GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Genesis lost patience with manually removing her clothes, instead used enchantment to make her pants and boots disappear. She went to him on the sofa in just a pair of burgundy lace thongs.

Alex sat on the edge of the sofa as she approached. She paused, standing astride one of his legs before she bent and planted a knee against his erection. He moaned, pulled her closer and ran a palm from her crotch up to her plump breasts, pinching each hardened nipple in turn before he lowered his face to her center and took a deep breath. "You smell like sex," he whispered before burying his face in her satin-covered folds.

She pushed him back, the thong mysteriously disappearing as had her clothes before it. "Eat me, Alex. I want to feel your tongue in my cunt." She thrust her hips at his face.

He groaned and drew his arms around her, cupped her ass cheeks and pulled her flush against his mouth to do her bidding.

The first touch of his tongue sent heat spiraling down from her chest to gather in her pussy in a pool of liquid fire. Feminine juices trickled down her thighs as he sucked her engorged clit into his mouth. Genesis arched her neck and buried her fingers in his close-cropped waves, reveling in the silken caress of curls against her palms as she fisted his hair.

He spread her with his thumbs, nibbled and sucked her labia, then closed his mouth over her, and buried his tongue deep before pulling out to stroke her soaked folds like a painter. Tremors violently rocked her body and when he replaced his tongue with two thrusting fingers and went back to sucking her clit in the rhythm of his plunges, Genesis flung back her head and softly keened. Alex reached up a hand too late to cover her mouth.

The taste of herself on his hand drove her wild, and before either of them knew it, she had him on his back straddling his hips, the blue light of her spirit ignited and encircling them both in a wavering glow. Genesis caught his hard shaft in one hand and guided it to her pussy, rubbing the mushroom head of his cock up and down her slit until it was thoroughly coated in her cream.

"I need you inside me, Alex. Now."

He circled her waist with both hands, and pitched his hips up as Genesis impaled herself on his shaft.

They moaned, began moving together. Genesis rode his dick, and Alex thrust inside her and rolled his hips for several long silent moments.

"Shit," he hissed. "I don't want to come yet."

It was the only provocation Genesis needed to squeeze her vaginal muscles tight, and milk his cock.

"I want you to," she whispered and leaned down to cradle her mouth against his throat. "Come for me, Alex. Come now."

She sank her fangs into his neck, felt his blood spurt into her mouth at the same instant that he shuddered and spurted his semen deep inside her cunt. Her spirit light shimmered around them before Alex's, bright and deep red, rose from his body to fuse with hers and form one purple light that surrounded them.

"Oh, God...Oh...God!"

"Yes. That is it, Alex. Give me all. Give yourself to me. Yesssss..." Genesis mindlessly arched her back, fingernails digging deep into Alex's shoulder blades as she planted the heels of her hands into his collarbone for balance when his *kundalini* blasted into her body. She rode the wave of her climax for several long minutes, Alex panting and thrashing beneath her before she realized what she was doing.

Lilith, no!

Genesis immediately stopped moving, felt Alex convulsing between her legs, his fingernails driving deep into her hipbones where he held her fast.

It is not too late, cannot be too late. He is alive. He is not a dry empty husk...

She glanced down at him as his shudders subsided, shocked when she saw his face changing from feline to human to feline and finally back to human again. She looked further to see fine, shiny black fur receding back into his upper body, the hair on his head withdrawing back to its original close cropped length.

Genesis put her hands on his shoulders and shook him when her shock subsided. "Alex!"

He opened his eyes, a beatific expression shining out of their amber depths as he stared at her and rasped, "More, Gen. I want more of you. I need more."

REVIEWS for Guardian Seductress

"*Guardian Seductress* is the first book in a series about the sexy Sisters of Emsharra and it is a winner! Gracie C. McKeever has done an exceptional job of world building as the reader is immediately drawn into Genesis and Alex's plight. Their romance is both sweet and spicy and readers will cheer Genesis for being willing to break the social taboos of her culture that amount to nothing more than a form of racism against humans. The sex scenes are tasteful but steamy and sure to heat up anyone's warm night!

Gracie C. McKeever does a wonderful job of explaining the intricate details of the world of the Inanna and Sebitu. Explanations for concepts such as kundalini, the life force necessary for survival, are all provided in the context of the story as well as in a very useful glossary at the end. The idea of the conservation of humans was an interesting twist and one this reviewer had never seen before. Kalika had high hopes for Alex as she envisioned him as solving both the problem of a shrinking food supply as well as ending the war on the borders between the Inanna and the Sebitu.

Readers of urban fantasy and erotica would do well to take a peek at *Guardian Seductress: Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*. The story is both highly enjoyable as well as thought provoking. Gracie C. McKeever is obviously a gifted writer and it is well worth adventuring into her fantasy realm to explore the world of the Sisters of Emsharra. **4.5 Klovers** —Anne, *CK2SKwipsandKritiques.com*

"I was surprised at how much I enjoyed *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress*. It was loaded with action, titillating sexual encounters, and most of all, a good romantic plot line. No matter what was happening around Alex and Genesis, they never stopped eyeing each other as if they were a double scoop of Moose Tracks ice cream...I really liked the characters and the story. Both Alex and Genesis seemed so lonely that I could not help but hope they would find something in the other that could cure their solitary existence. In one way or another, they were always on the outside looking in. That was what made them perfect for each other. I was hooked on these characters and the world they lived in. This was my first time reading Gracie C. McKeever and I'm betting it will not be the last time. I found *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress* thoroughly enjoyable. **4.5 Stars**" —Suni Farrar, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"*Guardian Seductress* is a chill-tingling fantastic read. Genesis has strong characteristics throughout as she keeps Alex in her care at all costs, and Alex is interesting as he tries to come to terms with the crisis landed in his lap. Ms. McKeever pens a fabulous tale. When Alex was confronted with the woman with hazel eyes, I think I was just as frightened as he was. I kept looking for claw like fingers to jump from the pages. Ms. McKeever fashions a gripping story that this reader enjoyed very much and look for the others in the series. **4 Cups**" —Cherokee, *Coffee Time Romance*

"*Guardian Seductress* is a shape-shifting, paranormal, fantasy thrill ride that will keep readers on the edge of their seats. Genesis is different in so many ways and all the things she can do will shock and amaze you. She is attracted to Alex and tries to fight it, but as usual that never lasts long. Alex can't believe what Genesis tells him and thinks she's nuts, until he experiences first hand just what she can do. He has no clue about his past or what happened with his mother and Genesis is there to make sure he finds out. I have read several books by Gracie McKeever and each one

has its own appeal. Her writing is creative and readers will love her flair for intrigue.
4 Blue Ribbons" —Angel, *Romance Junkies*

"Welcome to the world of Emsharra, a world set in a parallel universe where the warring Inanna and Sebitu races, both of whom live off of human energy, have formed an uneasy truce due to the depletion of their human food supply. Ms. McKeever has created a vividly imaginative world, complete with its own language and culture, and *Guardian Seductress* is an impressive introduction into that new world. This story truly provokes the thought of what if there was life out there besides us and we were the prey rather than the hunter. While this reviewer would have liked to see certain portions of the book developed a little further, especially the back story surrounding Alex's conception and the somewhat contrived instantaneous acceptance of Alex by his royal grandmother, this brief but powerful tale took this reviewer on a wild ride through a fantastical tale that will resonate long after the last page is turned. Genesis is strength personified and Alex proves to be her match in all ways. This story is hot, hot, hot and any reader that likes fantasy and doesn't mind explicit language and sex will absolutely love this tale as much as this reviewer did! **4 Hearts" —Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com***

STORY EXCERPT

PREDATOR'S SALVATION

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Mateo couldn't help feeling as if he was being led down a dark and lonely path he really didn't want to pursue or explore.

He paused at the passenger side door of Alex's car and waited for Alex to disengage the power locks. His heartbeat sped when he caught the sudden, spicy-sweet scent of cinnamon on the air, as if someone were baking a cake nearby with the ingredient generously sprinkled in. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and an icy-hot liquid sensation of lust settled in his groin in response to the enticing aroma.

Mateo sniffed the air more thoroughly, looked at Alex to confirm that he had smelled the scent too and saw Alex frown as if confused.

Mateo had an instant to glance up right before something swooped down towards them from the indigo, star-dappled sky, something large enough to be a person, but with wings spanning five feet across from either side of its back.

Definitely not human, but definitely a female.

Mateo thought it right before the woman dive-bombed towards him, arms outstretched in front of her as if she were some sort of super-heroine.

He had a moment to step away from the car and hear Alex's warning cry of "Look out, Matt! Duck!" before the woman hooked her arms beneath his armpits, scooped him up, and took off for the sky again.

"Oh, shit...Mateo! Matt!"

Okay, this could *not* be happening! He wasn't soaring a hundred yards off the ground with Alex yelling through cupped hands and chasing after him from the parking lot of McDougall's. A woman with humongous wings had not just swooped out of the sky and grabbed him. No, siree!

Mateo glanced up at his abductor, but she didn't look at him, just kept her eyes straight ahead as she flapped those big bat-like wings and acted as if he wasn't suspended below her.

"Hey! Hey...you!" What exactly was he going to say? 'Put me down' didn't seem like such a good idea when she was soaring over rooftops as if she had a hang glider attached to her back.

“Silence, human. We will be at our destination shortly.”

What the hell was that? A line out of a Shakespearean play he hadn't read? She certainly spoke in the same stilted accent.

Christ, he hated heights!

Here's a hint, Matt. Don't look down.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth to try to make the sick feeling in his stomach go away.

Mateo opened his eyes, couldn't help himself, as they glided over a deserted area of the city in Lower Manhattan. From what he could make out by the light of the moon, it looked like some place in TriBeCa with converted lofts and narrow streets dominating the immediate area.

She aimed for the roof of one of the warehouses and smoothly landed.

As soon as his feet touched the rooftop pavement, Mateo tried to make a run for it but was stopped in his tracks by a green force field that completely encircled him after he'd taken only two steps forward.

He scowled at his kidnapper through the bubble prison as she circled him, hands clasped behind her back. He thought there was something oddly familiar about her, about the way she looked at him.

He pummeled the capsule with his fists, and she smiled at him like an indulgent parent watching her baby throw a fit of temper in his crib.

“Let me out of here!”

She raised a fist in front of her as if in a Black Panther salute and twisted it back and forth a couple of times, her movements unhurried and strangely erotic. “You will sleep now,” she murmured.

They were the last words Mateo heard before he passed out.

ADULT EXCERPT
PREDATOR'S SALVATION

Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Mateo stared at her back as she walked away from him to the stainless steel kitchen in the distance. He tried to see if he could spot the wings she had used to fly away with him, but there was nothing except the mahogany smoothness of her well-muscled back.

His fingers itched with the memory of how that smooth skin felt beneath them, as if he had been with her before, inside her, too many times to count, and craved to do it all again.

He let his gaze lazily drift down her six-foot tall, hour-glass figure from the gentle slope of her bare back to the slim curve of her waist and finally to her endless legs encased in painted-on burgundy leather pants and matching knee-high boots.

Despite his precarious state, Mateo felt his cock hardening in his boxer briefs, fantasized about putting his dick in her slick, hot cunt. What was *wrong* with him?

She turned back to him then, hazel eyes glinting with insight, leering as she stalked across the burnished parquet floor.

She sat at his bedside. "I am LaMia Enlil, and there is nothing at all wrong with you except that you are a healthy, red-blooded male."

What was this? Formal introductions before she killed him? And damn, he wished she would stop dipping inside his head like that!

He used to think it was cute as well as advantageous to know other people's feelings, especially girls he was involved with as a late teen. He had, however, gotten over his psychic voyeurism years ago when, at twenty, he'd experienced his then girlfriend's severe menstrual cramps. He'd snooped because they'd argued earlier in the day and he had thought she was just using her period as an excuse to get out of having sex with him. He had been sorry for his mistrust ever since.

LaMia was more outright and rude with her snooping than he had ever been though, and he didn't like it one bit. He didn't like someone like her tooling around in his brain and knowing every little thing he was thinking.

"Contrary to your assumptions, I am not rude. I am merely availing myself of any and all opportunities to get to know my submissive better. And you will call me Mistress or Mistress LaMia, by the way," she said then firmly placed her hand on his forehead.

Mateo grimaced.

Who the hell is this woman?

He closed his eyes and braced himself as her subtle, yet heady, cinnamon-and-female scent washed over him. He felt the tug on his brain as if she had reached inside his head to gently peel back the layers of his past.

Mateo's heart pounded a vicious beat in his chest, obliterating all miniscule sounds in the loft as he wondered if his heart would explode.

She held her palm against his forehead for several long moments, ransacking his mind, melding with his memories until she became a part of them.

He knew this woman! Knew her too intimately to deny her or forget what he had been doing with her for the last several months—but more importantly, he knew her too intimately to deny what she had done to his family so many years ago.

One woman he implicitly trusted with his body and soul. The other had taken too much from him for Mateo to trust her at all.

How could they be one in the same?

Her touch was insidious, seductive, seeping into him like the mist in his dreams, and then he realized she *was* the mist in his dreams.

He could see how his brother and father had succumb to her allure, how his father had allowed her to come between him and Mom and how his brother had allowed her to drain the life right out of him. The promise of the ultimate climax and release was too powerful to resist.

But resist he would...this time.

Suddenly, LaMia jerked back her hand and gasped.

Good! He wasn't the only one so overwhelmed by what she'd just done.

"It *is* you! At first I was not certain, did not believe it was possible that fate would actually send you to me..." She reached for a corner of the tape and viciously stripped it off his mouth.

"Shit!"

"Do not make me regret doing that."

Like he wasn't regretting it already, Mateo thought as he flexed his jaws in concert with his fists clenching and unclenching in the cuffs above his head.

"Speak!"

"I'm not a dog!" Mateo shot back and silently gauged her reaction. He noticed the slight upward tilt of her lips, an expression of admiration and amusement that just barely reached her hazel eyes.

So, she was enjoying this, enjoying him. Hell, he'd give her something to really admire and smile about once he was free. "What do you want me to say, Mia?" he asked, thinking two could play the game as he let the moniker slide off his tongue and saw her

blink at his audacity. “You accuse me as if I tried to defraud you. *You* abducted *me*. I thought you knew who I w—”

“Silence!” She slashed the air with her hand as she leaped from the bed.

Mateo had a flash of her in Julian’s bedroom the last time he had seen his brother alive.

He saw the woman’s glowing yellow gaze when she glared at him over a shoulder, bared her teeth and hissed.

Mateo had a second to react as she finished draining Julian of his life-force—or whatever the phosphorescent red light that was arcing from his brother’s body into the woman’s was called—before she turned on him.

He charged across the threshold and hurled his body through the air, intending to knock her off Julian. He got within a couple of feet of the bed before she raised her arms in front of her and rasped, “*Kundalini*” right before zapping him with a green bolt of lightning from her fingers.

His body heated now with the memory. Lust raged through him, making his cock jut upward like a repugnant invitation.

Get a grip, Matt. Forget how much you want to drive your dick into her and make her scream like she made your brother scream. Just concentrate on now. Here and now.

“You killed him.”

“Julian’s death was an unfortunate consequence of our coupling.”

He reacted without thinking, violently kicking out with his shackled legs.

She drew back and stared at him as if he were a dangerous animal that had to be watched carefully.

Her reaction was instant and infinitesimal, just enough to let him know that he wasn’t the only one affected by their encounter.

Mateo closed his eyes, tuned into her body’s responses, felt the shimmering fire inside her, felt her vaginal muscles spasming and...was that regret hovering just on the outside of her consciousness? Regret for what had happened to his brother?

Good, he would take these and run with them.

He opened his eyes and smiled. “Why did you take me?”

“I took you for the same reasons I took your brother. I took you because...” She slashed the air with her hand again and sat back down on the bed, a tightly wound ball of energy.

Mateo’s body immediately reacted to her closeness, that energy. If he had been free, there were all sorts of ways he could have helped her unleash that energy but she wasn’t giving him a choice. Not yet. “Why?” he demanded.

“It matters not why I did it, and beginning now you will learn it is unwise to question my actions or my motives. As of this moment, you are a human with no rights and no say over what I do to you here.”

The hell he was. Human, yeah, but with no rights and no say? Where the hell did she come off? This was still America, wasn't it?

"The quicker you learn to deal with that, Mateo, the better."

He didn't know what angered him more, the familiarity with which she addressed him or the fact that hearing his Christian name flow from her lips made him hotter than had she put her hand on his cock and caressed him. In fact, the more she spoke, the angrier and hotter he got.

He had time and energy to indulge his desires. He was, as she had just put it, a healthy red-blooded male, after all. He didn't, however, like to waste his time or energy on anger and a past he could not change. Life was too short. For Ms. Arrogant Nubian Queen though, he thought he might make an exception. "I'm not afraid of you," he said and as he peered at her, she returned his glare tenfold. He didn't flinch, would die before letting this woman intimidate him.

"Oh, you are a spirited one, so worth the effort of taking you. I am going to enjoy breaking you in, Mateo."

He just bet she would enjoy breaking him in if he allowed her to, but he had no intentions on allowing her to break him in.

All this time he had thought she was a figment of his traumatized, juvenile imagination, something he had conjured up to help him deal with the bizarre nature of his brother's death. He thought she was something he had created to help him deal with the horrendous circumstances surrounding his parents' murder/suicide.

She was real, however, and before him now, the woman at the root of all three losses, a being he had grown to despise.

Mateo pulled against his manacles. "Undo these cuffs," he commanded, sudden rage fueling his bravado. He knew very well what she was capable of, how powerful and lethal she could be. He didn't care.

"You are giving me, LaMia Enlil, an order?"

"I'm giving you an order, yes," he bit out.

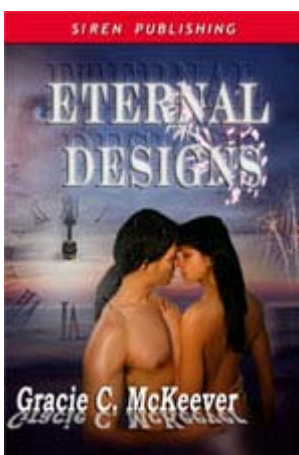
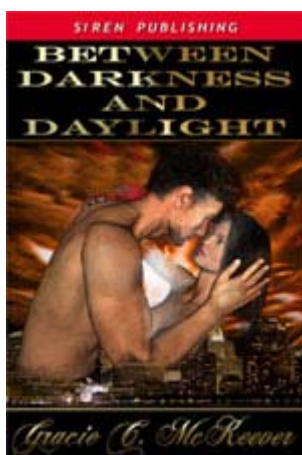
She laughed, reached out a hand to smooth a stray lock of light-brown hair from his face, and his dick twitched in his boxer briefs at the unexpected gentleness of the contact. "You are absolutely precious," she murmured.

She said it like he was a cute poodle or kitten who had just done a neat trick.

Mateo snarled and jerked his wrists against the cuffs again. "Bitch. Let me out of here, now!"

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at
www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com

Single Titles





Spells Cast in Shadows

Driven by recurrent dreams to take an ill-advised predawn ride around her ranch, Montana Freeborn stumbles across something in the road from those wildest dreams: a real live centaur. At least she thinks so. By the time she reaches the supine figure trampled beneath the hooves of her prize Appaloosa, she begins to wonder if her eyes deceived her, since before them now is a man, a magnificent, unconscious and very naked man.

Cast out from his tribe as a punishment for causing the death of a fellow Sapphiran, Seth Phoenix is an arrogant young centaur of royal heritage infatuated with the human race, and now, after a twist of fate, forced to count on one of its ranks for his survival.

His one chance at redemption—brokered with the Black Elf by his desperate mother, Thyra Phoenix—could be the key to his mother's freedom, or his own downfall...

Sensuality Rating: Sizzling

Genre: African-American/Paranormal/Psychic/Shape-shifter/Urban Fantasy

STORY EXCERPT

SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Nearing the edge of the grove where the forest began and the ranch ended, Montana raised her face to the dimly lit sky, reveling in spring's airy fingers gently lifting her hair and lightly brushing her face. She hadn't closed her eyes or taken them from the road for more than a second before the shadow appeared out of the darkness without warning.

Sunny instantly reared up, blowing rollers as he tried to avoid colliding with—*Pony-man*.

"Whoa, Sunny, whoa, boy!" Montana gripped the horse's reins, squeezing her thighs tight against his flanks as she tried to calm the animal. Good thing she wasn't having one of her clumsier moments, or she'd have taken a header off the horse right to the hard ground!

She looked on in horror, heart pounding in her ears as Sunspot's front hooves came down, knocking the creature over and pounding his torso into the ground.

She watched him roll from his side to his back. As he moved, his lower half transformed, changing into two human legs before her eyes.

She couldn't believe it. Had she really seen a half-horse, half-man?

Sunspot grew quiet beneath her, prancing and walking a wide berth around the figure on the ground. Montana leaned forward and rubbed his glistening neck, gently murmuring to the horse. "It's all right boy. Everything's going to be just fine." When she was sure he was okay and hadn't hurt himself, she carefully dismounted and crept to the stranger's side.

What struck her first wasn't that he was indeed a man and not the centaur she had initially seen—and she *knew* that she had—but that he was naked, just completely and totally *na-ked*.

Montana pulled in a deep breath as she crouched beside him to check for injuries. Her fingers glided over the hard, smooth curves of his chest and abdomen, all the while trying to avoid that sizable area of his anatomy several inches lower and resting peacefully against one thigh.

God, he was magnificent!

Not that she'd been exposed to that many naked men before, except maybe when she indulged in her guilty pleasure, watching hunk-inhabited soaps every once in awhile. Or when she'd splurge on one of those novelty beefcake calendars embellished with

pictures for every month of shirtless cowboys clad in snug jeans that hugged all the right curves.

As far as beefcake and shirtless went, her unconscious stranger was beautifully formed from head to toe. Long, lean-muscled flanks curved up into a slim waist accented by a sectioned abdomen and well-defined pectorals. He had a swimmer's body, elegant, poised, and powerful, even in repose.

Her clit swelled beneath her jeans, and Montana simultaneously squeezed her eyes and her legs shut as if this could stop her tsunami-force lust.

She bit her bottom lip, contemplating. Heart speeding, palms moist, she itched to touch him, feeling like she was about to do something intrinsically illicit as her hand drifted of its own accord, closer and closer until her fingertips caressed one male nipple.

She brushed her hand across his chest, acquainting herself with his smooth pecs, then drifted further down to his abdomen....lower, lower until she made contact with the hair around his cock. She froze.

Montana's eyes shot open when she realized what she was doing.

Shit, she was horny! How else could she explain this instant hot attraction? Why did she have a sudden uncontrollable urge to molest an unconscious man as he lay injured?

Montana stopped gaping long enough to scold herself for her unconscionable act as she berated her foolishness in not heeding Jason's warnings about riding around the ranch in the dim light. She could just hear the I-told-you-so's now, which gave her some pause.

She needed to get her injured stranger some help, but how to do that without going back to the ranch and submitting to an interrogation or righteous censure?

She certainly couldn't lift him herself. True, she was made of sturdy stock at five-nine, one-fifty, and was in pretty good physical condition having worked hard all her life on the ranch and at various positions with the Forestry Service, but this man had to be six-four and two-hundred pounds of solid muscle. Dead-weight muscle at that. Not to mention he was naked.

Montana realized she had more qualms about the latter than the idea of actually trying to lift and carry an unconscious and injured man to the house by her lonesome.

She pivoted and marched back to Sunspot to retrieve the heavy blanket from beneath her saddle, returned, and crouched beside the stranger before gently covering him with the coarse material.

The stranger.

Her stranger, she thought, feeling connected to him and oddly possessive, as if he belonged to her and she to him.

Montana pulled the cell phone from her belt, flipped it open without much hope of getting a signal. She had to walk several yards away toward the ranch until she was out

of a dead zone and able to get an open line. She dialed 911, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Sunspot and her stranger were okay. He'd disappeared.

ADULT EXCERPT

SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS

By Gracie C. McKeever

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He pulled back to peer at her for a long moment before he bent his head to tease her slightly parted lips. Montana opened her mouth to him on a long moan and flung her arms around him, almost throwing him off-balance.

Seth planted one palm against the wall adjacent them and lowered her to the carpeted steps with his free arm. He pushed her legs apart with his knee as she wantonly sprawled across the several bottom steps, then he cupped her moist pussy with a palm. "Shall I please you before you take your leave?"

"Yes, Seth. Please..." She grasped his soft 'locks with both hands and held on as he lifted her T-shirt up past her breasts. She writhed beneath him anticipating the feel of his lips on her a second before he wrapped his hot mouth around one nipple. "More, Seth. I want more of you..."

His hair was like cotton balls in her hands, and she reveled in the soft feel against her palms, reveled in the musky clean scent that wafted up to her from his skin and hair as she inhaled deep and held him tight.

Seth slid a hand into her panties, slowly eased two fingers into her wet pussy, and Montana immediately clamped down on the two digits with her inner muscles, desperate for more.

He laved, nipped, and sucked both nipples until they stood at attention, then found her engorged clit with his thumb and flicked it. He scissored his fingers inside her, working them in concert with his thumb and making Montana shudder.

She gripped his hair so tight her knuckles hurt, and still he tortured her. "If you want me to beg, Seth..." She gasped as he hit a particularly sensitive area deep inside her. "I will. Please..."

"I only want you to feel." Seth slowly licked his way down from her breasts, to her stomach until his mouth was poised over her hot center.

Montana felt his heated breath against her even through the satin of her panties. She pumped her hips in rhythm to his manipulations right before he ripped her panties off and buried his face between her legs.

"Oh, God..." She didn't know whether it was the sound of her panties shredding beneath his hands or the insistent way he caressed her pussy with his tongue, but she almost came on the spot at his gentle brutality.

He covered her pussy with his mouth, teasing her sensitive nub with his tongue before pushing it deep inside her and stroking her wet folds.

REVIEWS for Spells Cast in Shadows

"*Spells Cast in Shadows* is quite a befitting title. It really sets the mold for the theme of the story. Because of the magic that has occurred in the darkness of shadows, Montana and Seth are thrown obstacle after obstacle but their attraction to each other is strong. And they both are determined not to be without each other. Within this book, readers will see that the forces of evil will do anything to try and prevail over that which is good. But some times it takes a higher force to maintain the goodness. This is the second book that I've read by Gracie McKeever. She does wonderfully when describing scenes in her stories and those scenes make for incredible visuals. Gracie McKeever is a talented author and you will want to read her work! This book is a definite must read. So, what are you waiting for? Go and buy the book! **5 Stars**" —Chantay, *Euro Reviews*

"Gracie McKeever's imagination may well be unbounded, and once again she renders a richly tapestried contemporary fantasy, with vividly illustrated characters, a romance to-die-for, and sizzling sensual peaks. One story of Ms. McKeever's will readily convince any reader to keep reading her books, and *Spells Cast in Shadows* is certainly no exception. **4.5 Kisses**" —Frost, *Two Lips Reviews*

"*Spells Cast in Shadow* is a well-written book with captivating characters. This book includes the use of dark magic to manipulate lives, murder, intrigue and an amazing love story within a love story. The hero and heroine face many obstacles in discovering their love for one another. There are several plot lines developed within the story, some of which could have been expanded to add even more depth to this book. I hope Ms. McKeever will pick up the threads to tell the stories of Montana's friend, Jason's and that of Seth's brother Endre to make this a series. The possibilities make my imagination soar! Seth and Montana struggle mightily to resist the lure of each other. Their resistance raises the heat level at every encounter until they surrender to the needs of their bodies, even if not acknowledging the desires of their hearts. Seeking to please themselves and each other physically, they please this reader with the passion they ignite. This book is one I'll read again and again. **4 Stars/Hot**" —Ginger, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"Gracie McKeever has written a marvelous modern-day fairy tale, complete with a classic good vs. evil struggle of epic proportions. Because of her clever use of foreshadowing, the relationship between a human and a centaur is immediately believable. Montana is as sympathetic a heroine as this reviewer has read about in recent memory, one who has overcome all of the obstacles life has placed in her path with strength and grace, and without becoming bitter and withdrawn. Seth possesses a great combination of arrogance, wisdom and vulnerability, and is a true alpha male hero figure. The sexual tension between Seth and Montana is so palpable that steam fairly rises from the computer screen. Ms. McKeever's language is somewhat graphic but not offensively so and is definitely part of the plot rather than gratuitous cursing and use of common slang for sexual terminology. Her excellent prose brings both her characters and her settings to life in the reader's imagination. While billed as erotic in nature, the erotic elements occur naturally in the flow of the story and are not extreme or overly explicit. This reviewer enjoyed this tale and looks forward to more from Ms. McKeever. Highly recommended! **4 Hearts**" —Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com*

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