

SADDHAIN publishing, LLC

Jerri  
Drennen

INVENTING  
*the* ABBOTTS



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# Inventing the Abbotts

*Jerri Drennen*

## Dedication

I want to thank my husband and children for their patience when I'm in writer-mode, for dealing with the "just one more page, then I'll fix dinner." They have given me the time I've needed to live my dreams.

## Chapter One

Ava stretched a pair of red thong panties between her hands. “What do you think of these?”

Thorn Abbott adjusted the spectacles on the tip of his nose, contemplating the series of silk strings. Heat infused his face as he cleared his throat. “They’re definitely your color.”

“Yes, but are they enough to draw Grayson’s attention? Get me into that circle of trust he holds so dear? I may have to give him a glimpse or two through that red dress, the one you thought was indecent.”

Thorn looked out the hotel window overlooking the city of Lake Charles, his hands fisting in response to her coarse suggestion. “Sleeping with your adversary is not part of the job description, Ava.” *Or showing off your ass...ets.* “You’re an agent for hire, not a paid escort.”

She gave him a lopsided grin, a reaction he was used to. The woman never took anything seriously.

“I don’t plan on sleeping with him, sweetie. But remember, he needs to think I will.”

Thorn scowled. “Men don’t like being teased. Grayson’s a powerful man, used to getting what he wants. Not the type to take kindly to games. A little slap and tickle in this case might get you killed.”

Her smile grew. “Aww, I didn’t know you cared.”

Thorn would be a much happier man if he didn’t care for Ava Stanton. Life would certainly be a hell of a lot easier. Since the day two years ago when he’d met the raven-haired temptress, his world had been turned upside down. She drove him crazy with her reckless ways. Aztec had bailed her out of a number of sticky situations—circumstances that could have been avoided had she followed instructions to the letter.

Thorn buried his hands in his hair. “Look, Ava. I know you think you can handle anything, but you’re underestimating Grayson. He’s not your typical mark. He’d have no qualms about wringing that beautiful neck of yours and tossing you into that alligator-infested bayou running beside his property.”

Sighing, she tossed the underwear into the suitcase next to the bed and flung herself onto the queen-sized mattress. Thorn had an up close and personal view of her delicious ass accentuated by a teal halter dress that clung to her luscious curves.

“I don’t want to talk about this. Let’s go down to the pool and sun ourselves a while.” She lifted her slender arm. “Look. I’m losing my lovely golden glow.”

“I’m serious, Ava. Until our backup arrives, I want you to lie low. You hear me?”

“Yeah, *brother dear*, I hear you.”

Thorn abruptly turned and strode into the adjoining room. He hated her thinking of him in that way—as a brother—because his feelings for her were far from pure in nature.

“Are we going down to the pool or not?” she hollered after him.

Thorn glanced over his shoulder and inhaled a calming breath. “Sure. I’ll meet you there in twenty minutes.”

He closed the door to his suite. Damned if he wasn’t angry at allowing her to rile him yet again. The woman did it for sport.

Ava had no idea how he felt, how much he wanted her. Then again, who didn’t have a thing for Ava “Long Legs” Stanton? The woman was a goddess, and she knew it. She could have any man who crossed her path. She had the grace and ease of a panther, and was just as deadly. Thorn could almost hear her purr in his ear, had dreamed of her doing so night after lonely night. Just the thought of her in the next room lounging on her stomach gave him a hard-on.

What he’d give for the nerve to go back into her suite and show her what he’d like to do to that sweet ass. To give her what he’d wanted to from the moment he laid eyes on her—a mind-blowing fuck she’d never forget. Too bad he didn’t have the guts to do it. She’d probably laugh at him anyway, think it was a joke. Like everything else was to Ava.

At least he wasn’t the only guy enamored and tongue-tied around her. The whole male population reacted with the same jaw-dropping wonder. That’s why she was so damned good at her job. She could lure the most hardened male in for the kill. Evan Grayson would be no exception.

The woman had a gift, a sex appeal exceeding all others. But men were nothing more than a job to Ava, to use until mission accomplished. Her heart was unattainable and made her even more tempting to a male’s ego.

Thorn had never seen her in love. The guys she'd dated were all rich playboys known for their non-committal ways, so like Ava. Men who were easily brushed off once she grew tired of them, an event that happened on a regular basis.

Why on earth would she go for him, a man too afraid to even tell her how he felt? What he wanted? She liked bold men with padded wallets. He didn't make the grade on either count.

Thorn shook his head. Why was he dredging this up again? The woman had turned him into a raging lunatic. Had his mind consumed with her, his goal getting between those creamy thighs instead of the job at hand. Not good when this was his first field assignment, first as direct backup for one of their agents—for Ava, a woman he'd better stop pining over or he could get them both killed.

He knew when to cut and run and this was that time. She was never going to look at him as anything but a brotherly figure anyway.

Rummaging through his suitcase, he located his trunks under a pair of khaki slacks. With suit in hand, he walked into the bathroom, his mind wrapped around how uncomfortable his cock had become.

Now he'd have to take a long, cold shower and hope it'd help get his body under control so he could join Ava poolside. Only to watch men ogle her until his nerves were raw, a perfect way to start another day in the life of a tortured soul.

\* \* \*

Ava sipped her Naked Lady and looked toward the hotel pool's exit. What was taking Thorn so long? Being late was a woman's prerogative, not a man's.

She glanced at her watch sitting on the small drink table next to the lounge chair. Twenty minutes she'd been waiting. Long enough to order a drink and draw the attention of every man around the pool. Of course, her bright yellow bikini helped. The suit barely covered her essentials. Thank God she'd just gotten a bikini wax.

When Thorn did show up, he wouldn't like her choice of sunbathing attire, but she was used to his conservative ways, which she brushed off to his chagrin.

If she wanted his advice, she'd ask for it.

Ava knew what she was doing, how to handle an assignment. A job that entailed dealing with men in any given situation. She didn't need Thorn getting in the way, telling her what she should and shouldn't do.

Hell, this was his first undercover operation. Thorn was nothing more than a glorified system operations tech. He spent most of his time inside Aztec Security working on his computer. He built weaponry and such, though he did man surveillance on agents. He wasn't trained for direct fieldwork. Not that she knew of. Why he'd been assigned to her was still baffling, especially when there were at least ten agents more qualified. Their training was extensive, had to be for the type of dangerous work they did. Aztec worked covertly for the government. They took on people and organizations that needed special handling. Thorn had no experience dealing this closely with their targets.

Ava glanced up and stilled when she saw Thorn heading toward her in a pair of blue low-slung trunks.

*Lord have mercy.* She would have never guessed he looked that good under his clothes.

From beneath the cover of her sunglasses, she allowed her gaze to glide from his taut, well-defined chest to a flat, sculpted stomach lightly peppered with sandy-colored hair. Then her attention drifted lower to the bulge apparent beneath his trunks.

*What the hell are you doing, Ava? Thorn's like a brother. You definitely shouldn't be checking that out.*

When her gaze returned to his face, she was amazed at how handsome he was without his glasses.

Her mouth went dry.

She averted her eyes and took another sip of her drink, her heart thudding out of control.

Why the sudden awareness of Thorn "Mr. Gadget" Abbott? Had to be the six-month dry spell she'd had. That kind of drought would affect any woman. Why else would she look this way at a man she'd thought of as a sibling?

"What are you wearing?" Thorn asked when he reached her side.

She shook her head to clear it. "What?"

His light gray eyes turned stormy as they darted over her scantily clad figure.

Ava had expected this. "It's called a bikini."



He snorted. “It looks like two scraps of material held together by even smaller scraps.”

She took another drink. “Sit down, Thorn. You’re blocking my sun.” Her annoyance was clear and concise. If he knew what was good for him, he’d drop the subject or she’d have to tell him where he could shove his evaluation.

He plopped into the chaise lounge next to hers. “Do you want to draw every man for miles?”

“Of course. Isn’t that every woman’s goal?” She arched a brow. “What took you so long anyway, and why is your hair wet?”

Ava reached over and laced her fingers through Thorn’s damp, sandy hair. It was one of the things she loved about him. When the sun hit it just right, the color and texture reminded her of a field of late summer wheat. The tufts brought to mind a carefree time in her youth—days spent on her farm in Kansas, days that shaped who she was today.

His eyes narrowed as he swatted her hand away. “Cut it out.”

“Excuse me.” Ava stuck out her bottom lip. “I didn’t know you had such an aversion to my touch. I’ll have to make a note of that.” She sat her glass down and pretended to pick up an imaginary pencil and scribble: “Thorn hates for me to touch him. So make sure you do so as much as possible.”

She glanced at him, caught his look of derision and laughed.

“Get serious, Ava. We have a lot of work to do before your first meeting with Grayson.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, saluting him. “But first I must get the perfect tan and a Naked Lady.”

His forehead furrowed. “Naked lady? What would you need a naked lady for?”

“It’s a drink, silly.” She lifted her glass toward him. “Surely you didn’t think I’d gone over to the other camp?”

He stared at her with a disapproving glint in his stony gaze. “With you, Ava, nothing would surprise me.”

## Chapter Two

Ava tilted her head in the direction of a large group entering the bar, a popular nightspot located in the heart of Lake Charles. “There he is.”

Thorn nodded.

She and Thorn had spent time researching Evan Grayson and knew he frequented The Cajun Bayou on a regular basis, usually on Wednesday and Saturday nights. They’d found out the man was a creature of habit and had a sexual appetite he fed on a regular basis.

Two weeks of studying his movements had garnered them a great deal of information on a personal level, not to mention his daily routine. And now that they had backup in place, she and Thorn were ready to go into Operation Fly to the Spider.

Ava studied the tall, magnetic figure as he and his entourage made their way to the back of the club. Grayson had his own cordoned-off section, a private alcove in the back that you had to be invited to enter. That was clout, and Grayson had a lot in the city.

Catching his eye or being admitted into his designated area was the last thing Ava was worried about. She was positive she could, especially in the sexy red dress she’d chosen to entice him into her web.

Grayson would notice.

From a distance the man wasn’t bad looking, though his age had begun to show around the temples. At fifty-two, he was still formidable, even with a protruding stomach emphasized by a midnight-blue silk shirt. His money would make that little imperfection invisible to the right lady. Grayson had a surplus of money and women. He was a millionaire ten times over and wasn’t reluctant to spend it on a woman he wanted to bed.

Ava cringed at the thought of being his next conquest.

How Grayson made the majority of his money wasn’t widely known around town unless you were the criminal element of society, or were out to convict them. Drugs and gunrunning were part of Grayson’s underground dealings, though he fronted it in real

estate. Those things weren't Aztec's concern. Grayson's ties to terrorist cells had the government privately contracting the company—their mission, to get the goods on him. Being private security meant they could do things the government couldn't.

From the outside, Grayson looked like a typical success story—the all-American dream, poor boy striking it rich. In reality, he'd done horrible things to get where he was, even murder. Now they could add one of their own agents to the list of his victims.

Yancy Adams had gone undercover and three weeks later vanished. That was four months ago, and Ava intended to get even for his death. It was payback time for a man who'd been a good friend and a hero in her eyes.

She and Yancy had worked together in and out of the country. Her fellow agent had been the best of the best, as a man and as a colleague. No way was his murder going unpunished.

“What do you think?” Thorn's question drew her attention away from the target.

She smiled. “Piece of cake.”

“Remember, Ava. You don't go to his place. Not tonight. Make him work for it. He likes the chase more than the actual sex.” A fact they'd learned from a woman Grayson had slept with and dumped.

Ava slammed her hands on her hips. “I know. We've been over this like thirty times, Thorn. You'd think I was working my first case.”

His eyes turned steely. “We've lost one agent already, Ava. We need to be very careful with this operation.”

“I will be. Trust me.”

“Two words in your vocabulary that make me wary.”

“Come on, Thorn. Lighten up. I'm not going to leave with him. I'll be fine. Now, I need to go to the ladies room and adjust my ta-tas.”

The look of disapproval Thorn exhibited stretched into an all-out scowl.

She winked at him. “Sorry, but they have to look their best. Remember, the guy is said to be a breast man.”

“You're going to send me to an early grave, woman. You know that, right?”

Ava had become accustomed to Thorn's over-magnifications. “You're as healthy as a horse. Now sit back and watch a pro work it.”

He growled as she turned and sauntered off to the restroom.

Ava had to admit that Thorn's concern was endearing. Yes, it was his first assignment as an agent, but she knew he'd die before letting anything happen to her, and with this came security. That's what she needed right now, especially after losing Yancy.

Inside the bathroom, Ava studied her reflection in the mirror.

This mission left a bad taste in her mouth, not to mention an uneasy feeling in her gut. She had a sixth sense she'd never admit to Thorn about the case. He'd have insisted she stay in Florida, have Mauve go in instead.

Her best friend, mentor, and the reason Ava became an Aztec agent, had more experience infiltrating an empire such as Grayson's.

Unfortunately, Mauve didn't possess the physical traits known to be the man's preference. Mauve was a fiery redhead with a temper to match, a temper that could get her killed if it flared up at the wrong time.

Sighing, Ava opened her clutch and pulled out a brush, running it through her dark hair.

She was the total opposite of her friend. Ava's motto had always been to go with the flow.

Being chosen for the assignment was a privilege, yet with the operation came the unsettling feeling she couldn't shake. She hoped the sensation was nerves and nothing more.

This go-around, they had to get Grayson before he killed again, because that was unacceptable to Ava, Aztec Security and to the world at large.

Thorn leaned against a pillar and watched Ava make her way to the long, angular bar. The harsh lighting above caused him to squint. On impulse, he glanced toward Grayson's table then smiled at what he saw. Grayson had spotted Ava, his gaze as intense as a solar flare.

*Locked on target, now to wait for impact.*

His heart sped its pace. This case had him on edge. Aztec dealt with men like Grayson, but for some reason Thorn was worried about this guy. Yancy's disappearance only served to heighten that anxiety.

Using Ava as bait had been the last thing he'd wanted to do. So she was Grayson's type. Mauve had way more experience and was a lot less impetuous. To Thorn, Ava's carefree attitude was trouble in their line of work.

With some prodding, David Henson, Aztec's director, had agreed to let him be her direct backup along with Simmons and Jameson, who at that moment monitored him and Ava from a van parked in the bar's lot. Where he'd usually be.

So many things could go wrong, such as Grayson insisting Ava leave with him tonight. That would screw up everything. What would happen if he did? Would the team be able to tail them without being noticed? That scenario could jeopardize the operation and get them all killed.

At least Ava had a tracking device in her handbag, one she could activate if things got hairy, making it possible for them to follow at a safer distance. Though he didn't need to worry about that. Ava would stick to the plan and not leave with Grayson.

Thorn took a deep breath.

With each passing moment his misgivings grew. If anything happened to Ava, he'd never be able to live with himself.

"Can I buy you a drink?" a woman behind Thorn asked in a sultry voice.

Thorn turned to find a tall, curvaceous blonde leaning against a mirrored pillar, smiling at him. She wore a shimmery knee-length dress that exposed a large portion of breasts and shoulders.

He swallowed hard, fighting the urge to stare at her generous flesh.

"So, can I?"

"What?" Thorn knew he shouldn't be ogling the woman, not when he needed to be watching Ava's every move, and Grayson's.

Her hazel eyes sparkled with amusement. "I asked if I could buy you a drink."

"No thanks. I'm on the wagon."

The twinkle in her gaze vanished. "If you don't drink, why hang out at Cajun Bayou?"

"The ambience," he lied, then glanced at the bar and found Ava surrounded by a handful of men. No Grayson as of yet.

Thorn quirked his lips. The woman could attract an army. Men were like a swarm of mayflies to a flame with her and she loved every minute of it.

"She your girlfriend?" the blonde asked.

Shit. He'd already forgotten the blonde was standing there. "No. I'm just amazed at how some women can draw so much attention."

“She’s uniquely beautiful, and I’m sure she knows it.”

Thorn snorted before he could stop himself. Heck, a perfect stranger had pegged Ava. That description fit his partner to a T. Gorgeous beyond belief, and she knew it. Ava used her beauty to get men to do whatever she wanted them to. He was no exception.

How many times had he done things because she batted her exotic eyes at him? Too many to count.

“How about a soda?” The blonde’s question brought Thorn’s focus back to her. She was a looker too, though in a completely different way from Ava. The woman’s skin, almost alabaster, made the deep red of her lipstick pop, automatically drawing attention to her lips. Her goal, he was sure, when she put it on.

Women used what they had to get the upper hand. But in this case it wouldn’t work. He was there to bring down Evan Grayson, not to go down on a woman, however tempting, no matter how long it had been since he’d buried himself between a pair of thighs.

“Maybe some other time.”

Her hazel eyes darkened and from the icy glare she gave him, his brush-off hadn’t gone over too well.

Should he apologize? He didn’t know. The art of male/female communication wasn’t his forte, unless it was arguing with Ava. Thorn had become an expert at that. He was an ideas man, not a Casanova, not used to women coming on to him. He obviously didn’t know the proper way to turn one down.

“Maybe we could have lunch at my hotel tomorrow?” he suggested out of sheer guilt for hurting her feelings, while hoping in the back of his mind she was leaving town tonight. She certainly didn’t look like a Lake Charles resident, not with that complexion.

Her eyes lit up. “I’d like that. Where are you staying?”

Damn it. Did his proposition sound like an invitation to join him in his suite? Did she think they were going to get it on? The thought brought the rich, textured stylings of Marvin Gay streaming through his head.

Shit! Why was he so bad at this? Sleeping with a complete stranger just to make her feel better was not an option, especially when his heart belonged to someone else.

He glanced toward Ava.

How could he get out of this without looking like an asshole? He ran an idea or two around in his head, then inwardly cursed.

No way. Any excuse now would make things worse.

Maybe he could have a quick lunch with the woman in the hotel's restaurant while Ava was still in bed. She wouldn't even have to know.

*That might work.*

He turned to the blonde. "I'm staying at the Radisson. I'll meet you in the lobby at eleven."

"Sounds good. I'll see you then." She headed for the exit.

Thorn watched as she made her way to the back door, sure the swing in her stride was meant to entice him. Too bad she didn't have a pert little ass like—

Thorn's attention returned to Ava.

Grayson hadn't joined her yet at the bar, though the man's eagle eyes were glued to her generous breasts—breasts Ava had pushed up and in to draw attention to them. *Like she needed to.* Ava knew how to make herself even more appealing to the opposite sex. Grayson definitely was interested.

On closer inspection, as Thorn glanced around the club, he noticed most of the men in the room were staring at her delicious body, along with a few women. Leave it to Ava Stanton to draw even the fairer sex.

He inhaled deeply, the smoky air tickling the back of his throat.

Ava was too beautiful for her own good, and today her sexy appeal could be the death of her if she didn't follow their instructions to a T.

## Chapter Three

Ava's mouth hurt from smiling and she forced herself to laugh at all the stupid jokes the men around her told. Why did they assume she didn't have a brain? Just because she was pretty, that didn't mean she was born with nothing between her ears.

Then again, if they knew she was smart, they'd probably scatter faster than a room full of roaches when the lights were switched on.

Even Thorn thought he had to repeat things he told her, as if it went in one ear and out the other.

She glanced his way and noticed his attention locked on a curvy blonde leaving the club.

Her stomach dipped and swayed as if on a cruise ship in turbulent waters. Why did Thorn Abbott eyeing another woman affect her belly in such a possessive way? The sensation made no sense when she felt nothing special for him.

Ava dismissed the thought and caught movement from Grayson out of the corner of her eye. He had started toward her, a look of mock boredom plastered on his face. Too bad his lust-filled eyes spoke another story, zoning onto her breasts like a beacon in a storm. Only in this case the lights were a pair of 36 Cs—all her own, nothing encapsulated in plastic.

She had been born lucky, her genetic makeup outstanding on both her mother's and father's sides. She never had to watch what she ate. Her metabolism ran like a well-tuned engine.

"Can I buy you a drink?" Grayson asked from where he stood at the edge of the bar, still some distance from her.

Ava was surprised the men who'd been hovering around her parted like the Red Sea in deference to Grayson's approach. Obviously they knew who he was and what kind of power he wielded.



“I have one, thanks.” She turned away, intending to play it cool. According to her source, Evan Grayson liked the game more than the prize, and she planned to milk that for what it was worth by appearing completely put off by him.

“Are you from out of town? I haven’t seen you in here before.”

She glanced at him. “Do you know everyone in Lake Charles?”

“No, but I’d remember you.”

“Really? And why is that?”

He laughed. “I think you know why.”

“Do tell?” Ava fluttered her eyelashes provocatively.

Grayson arched a salt-and-pepper brow. “It’s not every day a creature such as yourself walks into the Cajun Bayou.”

It was her turn to laugh. How ironic was his statement. If it were the real bayou, there’d be plenty of creatures to be had. “Obviously it’s not the place to be.”

He grinned at her observation.

*Score one for Ava. Zero for Grayson.* Any other man would have had to win a few points before he got even an inch closer. Grayson wasn’t very sharp, not with comebacks anyway. He seemed duller than unpolished silver. If he weren’t her mark, she’d walk away.

Hell, Thorn was better at witty repartee than this guy, and Thorn spent most of his time in front of a computer screen working on diagrams for his latest inventions. He wasn’t up on the social scene. Ava wasn’t sure if Thorn ever went out on the town, and as uptight as he’d been lately, she was pretty sure he hadn’t been laid in a while.

Of course, neither had she. Maybe they could do something about that.

*Whoa! Concentrate, Ava. On the job. Not on Thorn’s sex life and how to spice it up Cajun style.*

“Come join me over in my private section.” Grayson’s request drew her out of the impure thoughts she was having about Thorn.

This was a fast turnaround. Shocking, almost.

His quick invitation made Ava nervous. The man was no pushover.

*Why the rush?*

True, it’d taken Grayson close to an hour to come up and talk to her, but something didn’t feel right. Ava’s instincts said he was not sticking to his usual dance. He’d moved

faster with her than he'd done with any other woman. But she couldn't say no, not when the goal of the night was getting into his private lair to talk. To charm him into thinking she'd go to bed with him.

“Join me?” Was he asking or telling her to?

Ava studied his face. His eyes gave nothing away. She couldn't read him, couldn't get a sense of what he was thinking.

“Sure.” Once she'd agreed, the phrase “lamb to the slaughter” popped into her head. She wanted more than anything to look for Thorn, get a reassuring glance, but thought better of it. Grayson might become suspicious and that was the last thing she needed.

Ava took a deep breath and allowed Grayson to maneuver her through a throng of people, his hand planted firmly on the small of her back. Her skin crawled at the exact point of contact.

This particular operation was going to be difficult. Her acting skills had better be first rate or she could end up like Thorn suggested weeks ago—eaten, and not with the idea of giving her pleasure.

She grimaced. Just the thought of a gator chewing on her delicate flesh gave her the willies.

*God, help me. Let me make it back to the hotel tonight, and in one nicely coiffured piece.*

\* \* \*

Thorn rolled over and glanced at his alarm. Ten o'clock. He still had some time before he was supposed to be in the lobby to meet the persistent blonde, a date he was not looking forward to. He wished he'd never extended the invitation.

What was he going to talk with this woman about? Schematics? How to build a weapon out of paperclips and rubber bands? Not something most women found interesting. Ava rolled her beautiful blue eyes every time he brought up a subject even remotely close.

The thought of Ava brought the prior evening crashing back, a night where his emotions had run the gamut.

He'd watched Ava walk off with Grayson and knew the game was afoot, an event that only added to his anxiety. He'd never sweated so much in his life, and it hadn't been

caused by Louisiana's hot and oppressive climate. He'd been worried about whether Ava would follow the game plan and play hard to get, or yet again do something foolish like leave with Grayson. Thorn knew if she had, things could have gotten dicey. Preparations for that scenario hadn't been discussed. Thank God Ava had listened.

What really irked Thorn was that Grayson's hand had moved from Ava's back to her ass in record time. The guy had some balls, touching her intimately five minutes after introducing himself. No gentlemen for sure. Not that they hadn't known that going in. Anyone who could kill so casually would have no qualms about feeling up a woman without her blessing.

Thorn smiled. He had been proud of the way Ava handled the situation. She'd immediately turned on Grayson, had even attempted to walk away until the guy stopped her.

As he watched, he'd wanted to punch the shit out of the jerk, but knew better. There was too much at stake. They had to get Grayson for Yancy. Their fellow agent deserved that much from his colleagues.

Thorn got out of bed and padded into the bathroom to take a shower.

Ava wouldn't be up for hours so he had plenty of time to meet the blonde, lose her interest and make it back to the room before Ava even cracked an eye open.

He turned the water on in the shower, dropped his boxers and stepped inside, his mind on what his and Ava's plans would be for later that day.

Grayson had gotten Ava's room number before she'd said her goodbyes last night. Most of the day would be spent waiting to see if he'd call. Thorn had no doubt he would. Ava was just too tempting to forget. Hell, he wished he could get her out of his mind. The woman was in his blood, sent heat rushing through him whenever he thought of her.

Lust was only part of what he felt for Ava, though. The rest was what kept him up at night, dreaming of her being his and only his forever. Too bad she wasn't the commitment type, and treated him like a brother, her Alex to his Mallory. But she wasn't a sister figure to him, not even close. Just thinking about her made him hard.

Maybe he should proposition the blonde. Get lucky. His body became impossible to control when he thought of Ava's silky legs, creamy, full breasts and delectable ass. The woman drove him to distraction.

He wanted her so bad he could almost feel her in his arms.

"Are you going to take forever?" Ava banged on the shower stall door.

Thorn jumped as if he'd been caught jacking off by his mother. What the hell was Ava doing up so early? She always slept in. How was he going to meet the blonde now?

"What are you doing in there, Thorn? Can I come in and watch?"

"You wish!" Thorn shouted, angry with himself for his wayward thoughts about Ava. "I'm taking a shower. What do you think I'm doing?"

She pressed against the door and sighed. "I don't know. I've never watched a man shower before."

"I find that hard to believe, Ava. Could you leave? I'm coming out."

Seconds later, a white folded towel came flying over the top of the glass doors. Thorn just had time to catch the thing. "Are you going?" he asked as he began to dry his body.

"Why? I gave you a towel." Her voice was teasing and only served to make him angrier.

He growled out loud.

She giggled and moved away from the door. The sweet, musical sound of her laughter squelched Thorn's anger.

Ava loved playing games, enjoyed seeing how far she could push him. Maybe he should play a little game of his own. Show her what she was missing out on.

He smiled at the idea. The thought had merit. Ava wouldn't expect him to walk out naked. Wouldn't think he'd have the nerve.

What would she do? Stand there and stare, or run for the hills?

Somehow Thorn pictured her hightailing it out of the bathroom as fast as her bare feet could scamper.

Ava Stanton loved the chase as much as Grayson, but to actually follow through was a whole other story.

Thorn's smile broadened. The more he thought about the plan, the more he liked it.

He could already see her blue eyes turn saucer-like, her jaw drop all the way to her chest as he walked past her to go to his room.

He'd bet big money she'd never come into the bathroom while he was showering again.

With that thought driving him, Thorn opened the door.

Ava stood leaning against the sink, looking at her feet. She obviously hadn't heard him come out.

When she looked up, her eyes widened.

Her gaze moved over and down his body then stopped on a particular area of interest.

He walked up and handed her his towel, intentionally brushing against her arm. As he moved away, he heard her suck in a breath, a reaction that pleased him.

*Yes indeed. Let her stew on that for a while.*

"Oh, Ava," he called from his bedroom, hoping to add fuel to the fire. "I have a lunch date with a lady friend, so you'll have to entertain yourself for a few hours. I hope you can do that without getting into trouble."

## Chapter Four

Ava paced the hotel's floor, each step she took adding to her tension. She couldn't put her finger on what was making her antsy, but it might be that she couldn't get the memory of Thorn's naked body out of her head, no matter how hard she tried. The man had a damn nice package, one she'd studied with increasing interest. Nothing appealed more to Ava than a damp male smelling like a fresh rainforest.

The image and scent gave her ideas, all of which ended with Thorn between her legs giving her what she'd been without for months. The big "O", and not one by her own hand. Those didn't count. They were to get her through the long, lonely nights until the right man and his maleness came along.

The thought of a male's equipment brought Thorn right back. Talk about a nice body.

Even before she'd seen him naked, he'd invaded her thoughts and distracted her from the job. No man had taken over her mind so completely.

She still couldn't believe he'd had the nerve to step out of the shower naked, something totally out of character for a reserved, uptight genius.

The man seemed almost uncomfortable around women, nothing like the Thorn she'd witnessed earlier. Not that she hadn't deserved what he'd done, teasing him the way she had. Ava pushed the envelope with him and thought he'd react as he always did, with a disapproving glare she'd grown accustomed to.

No such luck this time.

Yet Thorn's flashing hadn't bothered her as much as his cutting comment. *I have a lunch date with a lady friend.*

Ava stopped pacing long enough to slam her hands on her hips.

Who was this woman he was meeting? The blonde she saw leaving the bar last night? When did Thorn have time to make a luncheon date with her? He was supposed to

be her eyes and ears all night, her shadow, not off lurking in them with a blonde bimbo. All fake from what Ava could tell.

Was that the type of woman Thorn found attractive? A man-made model—something an inventor would appreciate?

She huffed.

Why did all this bother her? Thorn was not her type. Though he'd shocked her with his newfound confidence, walking past her with a *cock-sure* look in his eyes. This was not the Thorn Abbott she'd come to know over the past two years, a man who wore glasses and had an IQ that could challenge Stephen Hawking.

Ava walked by the bed and stubbed her toe on the leg. With tears in her eyes, she lifted her foot to assess the damage. Why did she care what Thorn did? He wasn't what she wanted in a man. Most of the guys she dated were tall athletic types, emphasis on *athletic*. They were born with a lot of money and no brains.

Thorn worked more for the good of society than his need of wealth. Probably spent every dime he made building his weapons and surveillance equipment prototypes.

And wearing the latest designer duds wasn't his forte either. She was almost embarrassed to be seen with him when he donned his worn-out blue jeans and faded, holey T-shirts.

Give the man a clue.

She'd always been a clotheshorse, perfectly dressed even growing up in a small midwestern farm community. Always on the edge of fashion because of her aunt Rebecca, who was a marketing exec for a top designer in New York City.

Ava had been the only child of Rebecca's lone brother Ted, and because her aunt had no children of her own, Ava had reaped the benefits. She'd always had the latest fashions and accessories.

With Ava's unique look, she'd become the most popular girl in school, and that in itself had made her the easygoing woman she was now. She was a free spirit and always would be.

Too bad that upbringing hadn't prepared her for the strange feelings she now experienced. She couldn't put words to the sensation, an uneasiness that made her question herself. There was something about Thorn, a gut feeling that said her life would ultimately change if he fell in love with someone. A foreign feeling to her. What it stemmed from she couldn't distinguish yet, or if the change would be good or bad.

Thorn had a right to be happy, to fall in love and start a family. Wasn't that every man's dream? Tying women to their apron strings? Widening their wives' hips an inch with each child they bore?

Nope. That wasn't for Ava. She wasn't ever going to be the type to let her hips widen for any man, no matter what her heart told her.

In retrospect, she'd steered clear of Thorn because he had always seemed like the type who'd want a serious relationship. That in itself made her look at him as a brother. There was no denying he was a hunk in a nerdy kind of way, and had a body that sent her heart racing. But he'd want a white wedding, and she was so far from that it wasn't even funny.

Ava glanced at her watch. It'd been two hours since Thorn left.

With her mounting anxiety, her pace quickened.

What was taking so long? Sharing lunch wouldn't take two hours unless they were partaking of this so-called feast in the woman's bed.

The thought stopped Ava in her tracks. She stomped her sandaled foot.

*Okay, Ava. Didn't you just say he wasn't your type? That he'd want more than you could give? So knock off the jealous fit.*

She shook her head, confused by her flip-floppy emotions. She'd never been like this. Not once had she questioned her actions when it came to men. But she couldn't say that any longer.

Maybe she was just being protective. Like a sister would be.

Yeah. That might very well be the reason. She was worried about Thorn getting hurt. He wasn't a casual dater, he didn't know how to play the game. Thorn needed her to watch out for him.

With that thought in mind, Ava picked up her purse, shoved her keycard inside and crossed to the door.

Thorn would thank her for spying on him. He'd appreciate her for not allowing him to make a big mistake by going off to sleep with this woman, even if he didn't know that himself.

\* \* \*



“Why are you in town?” Thorn asked Fiona, then shifted in his seat again. The small talk had begun to grate on his nerves.

After meeting in the lobby, they’d gone into the Radisson’s dining area and were seated by a cute redhead whom Thorn found much more appealing than the blonde sitting next to him.

“I’m here on vacation. I wanted a place that wouldn’t be overly crowded with tourists.” She steepled her hands on the table in front of her. “Why are you here?”

“A convention.” Thorn used the cover they’d set in place. He was signed up as a consultant for the Fulton group at the on-the-cutting-edge electronics show. A legitimate cover in case Grayson got suspicious.

If need be, Thorn could easily talk about new technology and what was in the works for the upcoming year. He kept abreast of all the latest innovations, had actually broken some ground of his own in the industry.

From across the lobby, Thorn caught a glimpse of silky raven hair peeking out from behind a large hibiscus plant. Then a pair of intense blue eyes—eyes he’d know anywhere.

What the hell was Ava doing? Her gaze was glued to the blonde sitting with him.

Why all the sudden concern?

Their encounter in the bathroom must have something to do with her newfound interest. Otherwise she wouldn’t give a hoot what he did.

She’d never followed him around before today, never wanted to know what he was doing or whom he was with. So why now?

Maybe she liked what she saw? Could that be why she was sniffing around?

The thought made him smile.

Let her watch. Maybe he’d give her something to remember. Put on a show, one she’d find less than amusing.

“What are you looking at?” Fiona’s question drew Thorn’s attention back to her.

“I was just admiring that hibiscus.”

“You’re into plants?”

“Not really.” Thorn cleared his throat.

“So, it’s the woman standing behind it that you’re into, then?”

Shit! Now what was he going to say? *Yeah, I’ve been into Ava, but never in Ava.*

Her eyes narrowed in on his partner. “Wasn’t she the gal from the bar last night?”

*Damn it.*

“I don’t know.” Thorn couldn’t tell her the truth. The less people who knew he and Ava were together now that the sting had started, the better.

Ava obviously wasn’t thinking. She’d been trained to know better. Besides, the last place she needed to be was here eavesdropping on him. She should be in the room in case Grayson called. Thorn was going to have to have a stern talk with her, remind her of why they were here. How they had to get Grayson, see that he paid the ultimate price for Yancy’s death.

Hanging out in the lobby, checking out what he was or wasn’t having for lunch, wasn’t the job she’d signed on to.

\* \* \*

Ava plopped onto the bed and stuck out her bottom lip. Thorn stood by the door of her room, arms crossed over his chest, glaring at her. Okay, so what she’d done was stupid. There was no taking it back now. The blonde had seen her, had known she was spying on them. Who did it hurt, really? Thorn? The blonde? No one else that she could see.

“What if Grayson called? Have you thought about that?” Thorn’s tone and attitude were surprisingly reserved considering the scowl he wore.

Ava fought not to roll her eyes. “If he did, he’ll call back.”

“You need to take this assignment more seriously, Ava. Yancy deserves that.”

“I know, Thorn. I cared for Yancy, too. Don’t make me feel worse than I do.”

“Jus—”

The phone on the nightstand rang.

Ava’s heart missed a beat.

“If it’s Grayson and he wants to get together, make sure you find out his plans.” Thorn moved to stand next to her.

“I know.” She picked up the phone.

“Hello.”

“Ava?”

Her heart rate ratcheted when she recognized Grayson's voice.

"Yes," she said seductively.

"This is Evan. I'd like to take you to dinner. Are you game?" In the back of Ava's mind, the word *no* resonated like a warning bell. But she couldn't say that, couldn't appear afraid. Not to Thorn. Not to anyone.

"What did you have in mind?"

"There's a quiet, out-of-the-way place that has the best Cajun food in the state. It's owned by an old Creole woman who makes a jambalaya to die for. Care to give it a try?"

He wasn't telling her anything. "Out of the way" could be anywhere and the way he emphasized "to die for" didn't sit well in her stomach.

"Sounds good." Thank God she was an A-one liar. No two words could have been more false.

"I'll pick you up outside your hotel at seven."

"Seven it is. I'll be waiting." She hung up the phone, rose and had started for the bathroom when Thorn's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"What's the plan? What should I tell Simmons and Jameson?"

"All I know is he's taking me to some Cajun restaurant outside the city. I was afraid to ask any questions. I thought he might get suspicious."

Thorn's eyes narrowed. "Damn it, Ava. Now we'll have to tail you. You know that's taking a big chance. We could lose sight of you in traffic or miss a turn along the way. Then you'd be on your own until you could activate the tracking device."

"I'm sorry. The man was evasive. I didn't want to ask too many questions. That might scare him off. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have to start getting ready."

Ava walked into the bathroom. The second she did, a naked Thorn revisited her thoughts, stirring her desire.

Would she ever be able to get that image out of her mind? Ever be able to look at Thorn again without seeing him in all his glory—glory impressive by anyone's standards?

"Think you can handle all this?" Thorn's question gave her a start. What did he mean? Handle what?

His cock came to mind.

Damn right she could handle it. Every last inch. “What?” Ava was embarrassed when her nipples tightened and rubbed against her silk blouse. She could only hope Thorn thought she was cold, because he’d clearly spotted them, his eyes deepening to pewter, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

Embarrassed, or turned on? She couldn’t tell which.

He turned and bolted from the bathroom.

Thorn had always kept his distance. Never seemed fazed by her one bit, but his reaction to her predicament made her question if he was interested or not.

Maybe he thought she wanted him so he’d left, not wanting to hurt her by saying he wasn’t interested.

But all men wanted her. At least the men she’d been attracted to. Until now.

What did this mean? Was she losing her appeal, or was Thorn into a much different type of woman?

Ava sighed. Either scenario meant she and Thorn wouldn’t be sharing a hot and passionate roll in the Louisiana bayou, even if she wanted to.

## Chapter Five

Thorn breathed a sigh of relief when Grayson's limo pulled into the lot in front of an old, rustic building. The place was surrounded by craggy cypress, the bases of the large trees covered in a thick, grayish-green moss.

Dusk had settled in, streaking the distant sky with red, orange and gray.

"Pull over there, in front of that brush." Thorn signaled to Simmons, who was behind the wheel of the white panel van, a utility vehicle that had *Backed Up? Call Plumbers-R-U's* in bold black print stamped on the side.

Once parked, Simmons turned to Thorn and grimaced. "Talk about backwater. It's creepy as hell out here."

Thorn glanced at the banner hanging from the eaves of the building. The sign read Creole Cleo's, with a symbol of a large eye stamped in the right-hand corner.

A chill of apprehension passed over him. Nothing was going according to plan. They'd had to follow Ava at a distance, hoping they weren't spotted. How successful they'd been was yet to be determined.

Thorn picked up a pair of binoculars from the floorboard and looked through them.

Ava exited the black sedan first, Grayson following directly behind her. As they walked inside, his hand rested on her hip.

Thorn's jaw tightened.

Working a case with Ava was harder than he had thought it'd be. Grayson, "Mr. Hands-On", made Thorn's blood boil. Nothing seemed off-limits to the jerk.

That's what a guy like Grayson thought. That he had a right to do whatever he wanted without consequences. Too bad that was going to end once they got what they needed on him. Proved that he'd killed Yancy, along with a number of others he had conveniently made disappear. They'd have had the goods on Grayson sooner if a body had been recovered. Prosecuting someone and making it stick was hard without one,

especially a man who practically ran the city of Lake Charles—a man who had the local cops on his payroll. That was another reason Homeland Security came to Aztec. They could work around that, wouldn't have to let the authorities in on their plans. Sailing under the radar, so to speak.

Once Ava was inside the restaurant, Thorn sat back and took in a ragged breath. This was going to be a long night. Sitting around thinking about Grayson's paws and where they lingered on her body. What suggestive innuendoes he'd spout in hopes of getting into her panties—if you could call them that. The woman didn't own one pair that didn't look like dental floss.

Thorn's jaw tightened further. From what he'd seen over the two years she'd been with Aztec, Ava had seemed most comfortable half-naked. Everything she wore clung provocatively to her lush curves and exposed a large portion of her long, sexy legs. She loved to flaunt her body no matter how many disapproving looks he gave her.

"Ava sure did look hot tonight." Kent Jameson came up from the back of the van. "I'd hate to be her lover. My jealousy button would be on speed dial."

Thorn scowled at Kent then looked out the window again. He was right. Any man foolish enough to get involved with Ava deserved to be miserable. Not a day would go by that you wouldn't worry another man would lure her away. Beautiful women were put on earth to look at and to admire. Not to get emotionally involved with.

Hell, relationships weren't Ava's thing anyway. She loved men then left them, just like that. No looking back.

Thorn had seen at least five rich, successful men enter and leave Ava's life since she'd worked alongside him. Men left shell-shocked by her cavalier goodbyes, men used to doing the leaving.

Simmons rolling down his window, swiping at the sweat beading on his forehead, brought Thorn out of his troubled thoughts. "How long do you think they'll be in there? It's hotter than a jalapeño in here."

Thorn shrugged. "Who knows? Depends on how Ava handles herself. If she doesn't linger over her flirting too long, maybe hours. If she gets Grayson all worked up, half hour at the most." Just the thought of her leaning over the table, flashing her wares, knotted Thorn's stomach.

"Ava was born to flirt. I'll bet they're outta there in twenty minutes," Owen Simmons said, a smirk curling his lips.

Thorn would think it was funny too, if it were anyone else—like Mauve, who should've been given this assignment.

“You okay, Thorn? You look like you just saw a ghost,” Jameson asked.

Thorn hated that he couldn't control his emotions. He wasn't one of those guys who could hide his feelings, though he'd done fairly well with Ava. If he even thought his desire had become obvious, he'd start a fight, pretend to be angry with her unpredictable behavior. An easy feat, considering she was always doing something that could be construed as reckless.

“Thorn,” Jameson prompted. “What's the problem?”

“I'm just thinking about all the things that could go wrong.” Not a complete lie. With Ava, a number of catastrophic events could occur—things that might get that beautiful neck of hers wrung, a consequence Thorn would give his life to avoid.

\* \* \*

Ava smiled demurely and fluttered her lashes at the man sitting across from her. Grayson had to be the most yawn-provoking guy she'd ever had to charm. He had no game at all. His only draw to women, that Ava could see, was his money. Definitely not enough for her to stay interested.

She needed a man she could banter with, a guy who curled her toes. Like Thorn, yet no way could she allow their relationship to go beyond fantasizing. It was against Aztec policy to get involved with fellow agents, and she had to abide by that rule or possibly lose her job. That still didn't stop her toes from curling when she thought about him.

“Is something wrong with your wine?” Evan slid his hand across the table to cover hers. “You've only taken a sip.”

Ava gestured no with a shake of her head, fighting the urge to pull free from his grip. His clammy hand made her want to plead for a towel.

“You seem troubled by something.” His expressed concern had Ava wanting to laugh. She fought that impulse as well. Like he'd care one iota if she were upset by something, unless it was going to prevent him from getting what he wanted—into her nylon panties. *Only in his dreams.*

“Nothing's wrong. I'm just a little tired.”

“Would you like me to take you back to the hotel?”

“No, I’m actually looking forward to having this famous jambalaya you spoke of.”

Grayson smiled and signaled their waitress. “Good. It’s excellent. Cleo’s has a special ingredient you’re going to love.” His amber eyes lit up as if he had a secret he was just dying to tell someone. She wondered what it could be.

“I can’t wait.” Ava took another sip of the red wine and smiled at him over the rim of her glass. All she had to do was get through dinner and then she could go back to the hotel, to the safety of her room, with the reassuring thought that Thorn was sleeping next door.

A few minutes later, the waitress brought their meal. The smell of shrimp, a rich tomato sauce and herbs made Ava’s mouth water. She wasn’t much on spicy food but the bowl placed in front of her looked scrumptious. Almost too good to eat.

“Dig in,” Evan said, a glint of something unsettling in his gaze.

Ava didn’t like the look one bit, but took a bite of her food, amazed at how delicious it was. She took another spoonful and another until the bowl was empty. She had never eaten like this on a date. Seemed unladylike.

With a flush of embarrassment, she glanced at Grayson, who grinned like a cat who’d just eaten something he shouldn’t have.

Something was wrong. But what?

“More wine?” he asked.

A rush of heat washed over Ava, directly followed by a strange tingling sensation. Had it suddenly gotten hot? Did someone turn off the air conditioning?

She shifted in the chair, the odd prickling spreading like wildfire through her body.

Nothing like this had ever happened to her. All she wanted to do was strip out of her clothes and cool down.

“You look flushed, Ava. Would you like me to take you back to the hotel?”

“I—ah,” she mumbled.

An intense throbbing started between her legs and made it hard to think clearly.

She glanced at Grayson, who seemed amused by her discomfort.

The jambalaya. Had he put something in it? Something that made her hot? Suddenly she’d become aware of her body—felt a blazing sexual desire—and it had nothing to do with the company she kept.

“Come. We’ll go for a ride.” He threw a hundred dollar bill onto the table and rose.



Ava had no choice but to follow him, afraid her body would betray her common sense. No way could she let herself do anything she'd regret later. She'd never be able to live with herself.

Maybe Thorn would notice something didn't look right and intervene. Help her out of this mess.

Back inside his limo, Grayson leered at her, his hand snaking out to touch her arm, the heat of his palm igniting a flame deep inside her.

She tried to fight the feelings but found it impossible to stay focused. What type of drug could do this?

Evan's hand moved up her arm and brushed against her breast, the sensation sending a shockwave through her nervous system. He drew her close and pressed his lips to hers, his tongue working at prying her mouth open.

Ava's inner voice screamed at her to stop him when his hand connected with her upper thigh then worked its way under her dress.

The ringing of a cell phone broke through her frazzled state and Grayson's impassioned one.

Breathless, he tore away from her and answered his phone. "What?" he snapped. "You can't take care of it? All right. I'm on my way."

He closed his cell. He looked at her, puffed out a breath, and pressed the intercom button next to his seat. "Dillon, head back into town."

Grayson smiled, one that didn't look genuine, and brought a cold chill coursing through Ava's blood, even with the drug in her system.

"Sorry, baby. I have business I can't get out of, but I promise we'll have another opportunity to get close. Mark my words." The way the assurance was said had Ava certain they indeed would meet again, and he intended to finish what they'd started here.

Ava shuddered. The mere thought iced her blood.

\* \* \*

Thorn knocked on Ava's door a second time, confused as to why the date with Grayson would have been cut short. Less than a half hour had passed since they'd gone inside, hardly enough time to have a drink, let alone eat.

Had she said something to make the man suspicious? Maybe come on too strong? With Ava it could have been a number of things, and he was going to find out what brought an end to her and Grayson's evening and pray they still had a cover.

The door opened. Ava stood draped in a towel, her hair clipped on top of her head. Water beaded off her body. Her face looked flushed.

Thorn pushed his way into the room and slammed the door. "What happened to you?"

"What are you talking about?" She turned abruptly, racing toward the bathroom.

Thorn caught up with her at the door and spun her around. "Why the hurry? What did you do, Ava?"

"I need you to go away, Thorn." In her baby-blue eyes, panic resonated—something out of character for Ava. Up until that moment, she'd never allowed anything to bother her. So what the hell had transpired with Grayson that she was afraid to tell him?

Thorn grasped her arms and drew her close, his eyes searching hers. "Tell me what happened."

"Let go," she screamed, fighting to get free. "You can't touch me."

Her insistent plea sank in immediately and he released her, feeling as if he'd just been sucker punched.

"Sorry." He backed toward the door. "I didn't know my touch disgusted you."

"It doesn't. That's the problem."

"What?" The woman made no sense at all. She didn't want him to touch her because she was afraid? Of what? That he'd want to take things further? He hadn't come on to her before, so why would she think he would now, after two years?

"You need to go, Thorn. Now. I don't know what'll happen if you don't."

"What the hell are you talking about? Are you on something, Ava?"

"Yes," she snapped. "But as to what, you'd have to ask Grayson."

"What do you mean? Grayson gave you something? Do you need to go to the hospital?" Thorn's heart pounded against his ribcage. What the hell had the man given her, and was it deadly?

Her eyes grew big. "No!"

"But you said—"

“It was some type of aphrodisiac, Thorn. I’ll be all right when it wears off. So please, go to your room and lock the door.”

Thorn’s anger spun out of control as the ramifications of what Grayson had planned hit him. The man was scum, a real dirtbag. Anyone who’d stoop to something so low, drugging a woman to have his way with her, was the lowest form of vermin.

“Why did he bring you back to the hotel?”

“He got a call. Something he couldn’t get out of. If he hadn’t, I’d... I don’t want to think about it. Now I need you to leave, Thorn.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying with you until this shit wears off. Just to be safe.”

Her face flushed. “No! I can’t have you around. Not now.”

“Why? What the hell’s wrong?”

“I need...well...release. I can’t with you standing here.”

What the heck was she talking about? Release? From what? Why couldn’t he follow? She was speaking a frickin’ foreign language as far as he was concerned.

Like a light being turned on, her meaning registered.

She was going to give herself an orgasm.

When he’d come to the door, she’d obviously been in the shower—probably getting ready to masturbate. He could picture her fingers moving inside her swollen folds, gliding in and out of her wet heat.

Shit. Just the image gave him a full-blown hard-on—one he knew his own hand couldn’t extinguish, especially when Ava needed him so badly.

## Chapter Six

With each passing moment, Ava's body screamed for attention. Why wouldn't Thorn take the hint and leave? He made the situation more difficult, looking damned desirable in his faded jeans and tight High-Tec T-shirt. Her skin tingled all the more with him so close.

The memory of the encounter in the bathroom that morning returned, bringing to mind his bronzed body in all its naked glory.

Ava took a ragged breath and tightened her hold on the towel wrapped around her. "I'm pleading with you, Thorn. You have to leave."

He moved closer, his breath fanning her face. "Let me stay, Ava."

Intense heat engulfed her belly and her heart thundered.

What was he doing? Trying to see how far he could go before she cracked?

"I...ah—"

Thorn tipped her chin up with one hand, his other drawing her close to his body. He looked into her eyes, his own a deep, stormy gray.

Ava swallowed, the warmth of his touch overwhelming her.

The rough material of the towel caused an agonizing friction against her tightened nipples.

Time moved in slow motion as he leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers, the contact akin to an electrical switch being fried in her head, live circuits charging through her nerve endings like a downed power line.

His mouth was in no way demanding, yet stirred her blood to immeasurable heights, leaving her dizzy and breathless.

When his tongue slid provocatively across her lips, Ava's control snapped. Her hands slipped around to encircle his neck, while she allowed his tongue into her mouth.

He groaned, crushing her to him, deepening their union.

All Ava wanted was to feel his warm skin under her hands, to trace the firm muscles across his chest and stomach.

She pulled away, her breathing labored. Hands trembling, she found the hem of his T-shirt and rolled it up his body, kneading her fingers into the warm flesh. As she watched, his eyes darkened, then fluttered shut.

“Oh God, Ava,” he whispered.

“Take off your clothes.”

He opened his eyes, now pools of liquid silver. He yanked the shirt over his shoulders, the muscles dancing beneath.

As he worked the fly of his pants, his eyes never left hers.

Ava swallowed again, her mouth dry as dirt. She knew what they were about to do was wrong, but her body didn't care. Not any longer.

Thorn grasped her hand and led her toward the bed, his gaze connecting with the towel wrapped snugly at her chest.

She took a deep breath, released the fold and watched the material fall around her feet.

Ava was afraid to look at Thorn, unsure of herself for the first time in her life. This man knew her childish and impulsive ways, yet made her feel more like a woman than any other man had.

“Ava.” The way he whispered her name had her attention returning to his face. His eyes simmered, blazing desire clear in their depths.

His hand brushed her breast.

“Thorn, I do—”

He stifled her apprehension with his mouth, its demand sucking any doubts away.

He backed her up to the bed and eased them down, the mattress molding to her body. The weight of him, and the skin-on-skin contact, was more than she could take.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and allowed her mind to drift, imprinting the taste and texture of his lips into her memory as his mouth devoured hers.

When he applied pressure to her lips again, Ava's mouth opened, allowing his tongue to meld with hers.

Through a fog of intense desire, a thunderous banging started, hard enough to shake the wall next to the bed.

*God, not now.*

Thorn cursed under his breath, then with obvious regret, lifted himself from her. “Run into the bathroom.” He reached down and grabbed his shirt, slipping it back on. “Ava, go.” The force in which his words were said caught her off guard. He threw her the towel from the floor.

“What if it’s Grayson? You can’t answer the door, Thorn. Our cover will be blown.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Yes. You go into your room. I’ll answer the door.”

“Like that?” He pointed to her naked body. The shimmer of passion in his silver gaze moments earlier was gone, replaced now by steely reservation.

Ava quickly tucked the towel in place and eased around him to get to the door. “Go,” she shooed. “If it’s one of the guys, I’ll call you.”

“All right, but if it’s Grayson, don’t let him in.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

Thorn walked into his room and closed the door, his heart still hammering. A few minutes more and he’d have been making love to Ava. Talk about an act that would have changed everything between them.

Maybe the gods were looking out for him. Having sex with her would’ve only made him care more—an emotion unbefitting of a good working relationship.

He laced his hands through his hair and gulped in a breath. What the hell was he thinking?

That was the problem. He wasn’t. All he could see was Ava in a towel, needing him. He wanted to help.

*Help, my ass. You wanted to fuck her brains out. You should be taken out and shot. From this moment on, you are not going to touch her—hell, get within ten feet of her alone.*

“You can come out, Thorn,” Ava called from the next room.

Was he ready to face her yet?

He glanced down at the bulge in his jeans and took another deep breath, then re-zipped his pants. *Think cold. Think arctic chill. Think the end of your career if you don’t get your act together.*

Thorn left the room, surprised to find Mauve standing next to the door inside Ava's suite. "What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too, Thorn." Her words dripped sarcasm, so like the woman.

Mauve was special. Not as striking as Ava, but intoxicating and intriguing in her own right. She'd broken her share of hearts and was a damned good agent. Not to mention a crack shot with a gun, knew Tae Kwon Do and could bring a man to his knees with one of her powerful kicks.

"So, what were you two doing before I so rudely interrupted?" Mauve's emerald gaze studied Thorn. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was baiting him.

"Nothing." He looked to Ava to agree with him.

Ava shifted nervously and turned to Mauve. "We were about to have sex. Thanks for interrupting." She took in a ragged breath.

Mauve grinned and shook her head. "You're such a tease, Ava."

Thorn almost choked on her confession, glad to see Mauve hadn't taken Ava's declaration seriously.

But was it that hard to believe Ava would find him appealing enough to sleep with? Obviously it was for Mauve.

*Women.*

He didn't need their kind of abuse.

"I'm going to let you ladies catch up. I'm hot and tired. I'm going to take a shower and turn in for the night."

Ava glanced toward him, her gaze not connecting with his. She couldn't look him in the eye, probably too embarrassed about what had happened between them. Let her be ashamed. He didn't care. Maybe she'd keep her distance now—something he desperately needed her to do.

\* \* \*

"Hand me the suntan lotion," Ava said to Mauve as they sat parallel each other poolside.

Mauve handed her the bottle and picked up her drink. "I like it here. It's peaceful."

Ava slathered 30 SPF over her legs as the light scent of coconuts filled the air. “How did you ever get Aztec to let you come down here?”

Mauve smiled, sitting up. “I didn’t tell them. They think I’m on vacation in Cancun.”

Ava didn’t know what to think. “Why’d you come then? Don’t you think I can handle the case?”

“No, I don’t, Ava. This man killed Yancy. You know he was our best. If he got made by Grayson then you sure as hell will. The man drugged you. Put you into a very scary situation. Aren’t you worried about him trying something like that again?”

“I won’t let him. I don’t intend to eat or drink anything around him. Besides, he hasn’t even tried to call since. I don’t think I’ll be seeing him again.”

“Then it’s best that I am here. I can try my wiles on the man.”

“But he prefers my coloring, not yours.”

“Pooh. I can get any man to notice me. To hell with genetic traits.”

Ava had to laugh at her friend’s conceit. Mauve had taught Ava the ins and outs of vanity, but Grayson had a specific profile and she didn’t fit it. “I don’t think he’ll go for it, dear friend. He’s got a dark hair fetish.”

Mauve leaned forward on her lounge chair and caught a strand of Ava’s hair between her fingers. “It is beautiful, and maybe you’re right about him not being drawn to me, but I needed to come, to watch your back. Thorn is new to being an agent. Handling equipment is his expertise, and monitoring us, not playing backup for one of us. From the second I heard about Yancy, I had a bad feeling about finishing this assignment. Grayson is ruthless. He’s killed at least a handful of people that we know of. I don’t want to lose my best friend.”

Ava sighed. How many times had she felt that very same way when Mauve went undercover? Too many to count.

She’d give her some slack now that she knew what lay behind her concerns. She didn’t think Ava was a bad agent, just worried that Grayson was too smart to get caught in their snare. If he could get the better of Yancy, he’d undoubtedly outmaneuver her and Thorn—make them his next victims, and frankly she didn’t want to die young.

“I’m glad you’re here. Maybe you *can* help trap this guy.”

“I’ll see what I can do. But first, let’s talk about Thorn.” Mauve’s change in subject had Ava’s head reeling. “I’m not blind. Something’s going on between you two. What happened?”



“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ava shifted her weight to the other side of the chair. Were her feelings that transparent?

Her friend’s gaze bored into hers. “Liar. You forget who you’re talking to. You’re hiding something, and if I had to guess, I’d say you and Thorn have been between the sheets.”

“No, we haven’t,” Ava snapped, her and Thorn’s close encounter rushing back to inundate her senses.

Nothing that powerful had ever happened to her, an interlude she still had a hard time perceiving as real. Just thinking about their tryst made her hot, sent a pulsing heat throbbing between her legs.

“Maybe not all the way, but something happened. Look at you. Even now you’re turning red.” Mauve’s observation had Ava scrambling to think of something to say.

“It’s the sun,” Ava lied. “It’s getting warm out here.”

“Right, and I’m not a natural redhead.”

Ava snorted. Like she could be anything but, with both parents sharing the striking hair color. “Why should it matter what Thorn and I have done? Do you get off hearing about people’s love lives?”

“Like you don’t.” Mauve quirked a brow.

Ava was taken aback. “I do not.”

“Okay then, do you want to know something *I’ve* never told anyone?” Mauve’s tone spoke of a seriousness Ava hadn’t expected. She studied her friend, noting the clouding of her eyes. Whatever she was about to tell Ava was painful to her.

“What? You tell me everything.”

Mauve shook her head. “Not this, because it was against policy. Just like you and Thorn.”

Ava was intrigued, especially after seeing the emotional turmoil on her friend’s face. But was it worth spilling her guts about her close call? Whatever it was, it was something that affected Mauve deeply, enough to keep it to herself. Ava knew nothing about it—had heard no rumor of an affair at Aztec.

Strangely, she couldn’t picture her friend with any of their operatives. Who was the man? She had no clue. If she didn’t find out now, she’d die of curiosity. “Who is he?”

Mauve tucked a lock of curly red hair behind her ear and stared at Ava. “You have to promise never to tell anyone.”

*Jerri Drennen*

Ava sat straight up. She knew what her best friend was about to tell her was going to be nothing less than monumental. “Of course. I promise.”

## Chapter Seven

Thorn watched Ava from the hotel's poolside lounge. She and Mauve sat up, both women wearing serious frowns.

He started to sweat.

What the hell were they talking about? Was Ava spilling her guts about what had happened between them? Was he just a phone call away from losing his job, the one thing he'd worked hard to obtain and wanted to hold on to?

Leave it to her to tell the world they'd almost done it. Wasn't that what women did? Talked about their conquests? Compared notes on size and technique?

Thorn wished he *had* hit a slammer and slid into Ava's home plate. His jockey shorts wouldn't be so tight around the crotch right now.

Hell, since their encounter, he'd had an erection he couldn't seem to shake off. Maybe that's exactly what he needed to do.

Thorn reamed himself for the thought and slammed down the rest of his Wild Turkey.

"I thought you gave up drinking?" a female voice said beside him.

Thorn turned to find Fiona standing a few feet away, dressed in a slinky red number.

"I had a bad day." Thorn signaled the bartender to refill his glass. "I fell off the wagon."

"Do you care if I join you?"

"I'm not going to be good company." Short of saying no, what else could he say? He wasn't in a good mood—it was dark, in fact, and he wasn't feeling a need to talk about it. Hell, if he did need to, he had the bartender for that.

Besides, no one could give him sound advice when it came to Ava.

Thorn knew what had to be done. Complete the job. Leave the fieldwork to the agents who knew how to separate their personal lives from their professional ones.

Clearly he couldn't, not when it came to Ava Stanton. She was too tempting to resist. Though after her obvious embarrassment earlier in her room, he damned sure was going to try, especially if their interlude was a subject of fodder for her. That was the last thing he needed.

"So, who broke your heart? The icy man-magnet?" Fiona's question drew his attention back to Ava and Mauve. Icy wasn't a word he'd have used to describe Ava before today, but that had changed with her indifference after their shared kisses. *Bitch* would work even better.

Yet no way was he telling a complete stranger about his feelings. "Not clear on your meaning," he hedged, hoping she'd drop the subject and move on.

She laughed. "I can spot a crushed ego a mile away. She's not worth it, you know. Why don't you let me show you a night on the town? My treat."

Thorn had never had a woman come on so strong. "Like I said, I wouldn't be good company tonight."

Fiona settled herself in the seat next to his, hitching her dress up to expose more leg. She licked her full lips then cupped her hand over Thorn's. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

He pulled his hand away. Talk about a woman who couldn't take a hint. "Look, Fiona, I appreciate your interest, but I'm not looking for any relationship."

"I'm not looking for that either, Thorn. I just want you to fuck me. Is that clear enough for you?"

Thorn's jaw dropped. Clear as rain—too clear and aggressive for his taste.

She smiled. "Did I shock you?"

That was an understatement. Blew him away was more like it.

Fiona ran a hand up his thigh, her fingers brushing his crotch. "What do you say? We can go to your room and see what comes up."

"Having fun?" Ava whispered next to Thorn's ear.

He snapped his head around, his lips almost colliding with hers. "Wh...a...t," he stammered, feeling his face warm. Shit. Now it was his turn to be embarrassed.

He cleared his throat. Ava's gaze landed on his lap where Fiona's hand rested. Well, rested wasn't quite what was happening. She was groping him.

In a rush, he brushed Fiona's hand away and scowled at her obvious amusement.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me, Thorn?” Ava’s tone was cold and clipped, and so unexpected.

What the hell was her problem? She didn’t want him unless she was under the influence of some kind of aphrodisiac. The old saying “it’s only fun until you get caught” came to mind. At least that’s the way she made it seem. The woman sitting beside him wanted *him*, and no drugs were involved. Why shouldn’t he take her to his room and get his rocks off?

Ava nudged Thorn in the side. “Cat got your tongue, or maybe it’s the hand strategically positioned at your rod that brought about the muteness?”

The bartender came by to fill Thorn’s glass. He gulped his drink down, signaling him to fill it again. Maybe if he got drunk he could take Fiona up on her offer to screw his brains out. That might actually be the answer to erasing Ava from his mind, here and now. Forever.

“Ava, this is Fiona. Fiona, Ava. Happy now?” He glared at his partner.

“And you two are?” Fiona asked.

“Colleagues.” Thorn jumped in before Ava said something she shouldn’t.

“Really? You don’t look at all brainy.” Fiona smirked at Ava.

Thorn knew right away Ava wasn’t going to take kindly to the woman’s unintelligence cut. Ava didn’t know this, but Thorn had seen her college transcripts, knew that under that gorgeous exterior lay a very smart woman.

Ava’s blue eyes turned dark. “Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you.”

Yep. A storm was brewing and if he didn’t take control and dispel it soon, he was going to be in for a category five tornado.

Ava’s temper was about to blow sky high. How dare this woman call her stupid? She knew nothing about her.

Who was she kidding, really? Her anger wasn’t about the shot to her intellect. That she could handle. The hand exploring Thorn’s package had sent her into a frenzy, flashing red before her eyes. *Why*, she was still trying to comprehend. Thorn wasn’t hers—as of yet. Though denying she wanted him in her bed was futile when she knew better now. He made her feel things she’d never experienced with any other man, and the only way to get over this newfound interest was to get it on, to do the nasty and purge

him from her system. That way she'd see he was nothing special. No better at kissing. That the drugs in her system had made her think otherwise.

"Are you sure there isn't something going on between you two?" the blonde asked Thorn, her gaze boring a hole through Ava.

This woman wanted him too, and seemed willing to do whatever it took to get him, intent easily read by someone with the same goal. Too bad Ava desired him more, and what Ava wanted, Ava got.

*First step: remove object of affection from cheap hussy. Second, talk him up to your room. Last, and the most important step, get him aroused and naked.*

"Thorn, could you to come down to the pool with me?" Ava gave him one of her killer smiles, a smile that never failed to entice. "I need to talk to you."

He signaled no with the shake of his head. "I don't feel like slathering sunscreen on you right now, Ava. Have Mauve do it."

"That's not what I wanted." Ava studied his handsome face. Why hadn't she noticed before last night how appealing he was? Blazing hot, actually, especially with two days' worth of growth covering his lower jaw. She'd never seen him unshaven. The look gave him a rakish charm, made her want to tear his clothes off here and now. To hell if a crowd formed and watched in wonder.

"I'm not going to referee between you and Mauve." Thorn's remark drew Ava from the fantasy playing out in her head.

"I don't want that, either. Could you please stop arguing with me?"

"Why? That's what we do best."

Ava's patience slipped a notch. Why was he being so obstinate, so against going off with her? Was he planning to go to his room with this trashy blonde? Give the woman what Ava was just daydreaming about, a sexual encounter ending in a mind-blowing orgasm?

No way, not as long as she had breath in her lungs. She'd tear the woman limb from limb if she even headed in the direction of his room.

"Thorn, I need to talk to—"

His cell phone chime cut into her request.

He stood, walked a few feet away, and opened his phone. He exchanged words, then grimaced.

Closing his phone, he glanced at Ava, his expression guarded.

Something was wrong. Big time, from the looks of it.

“We have a problem.” He turned to the blonde. “Sorry, I need to make some calls. Something’s wrong with one of my prototypes.”

“Okay.” Fiona smiled, though she didn’t seem all that happy about the disruption. “Maybe we can see each other later.”

Ava waited, held her breath to see what Thorn said to the woman’s suggestion.

“This might take days to solve. I don’t think I’ll have time.”

Ava released the air in her lungs. She was tempted to give the woman a victorious grin but thought better of it. No need to start a catfight now, especially when the woman was no longer a threat.

Indeed, Ava would once again have Thorn all to herself.

\* \* \*

“What are we going to do?” Ava looked to Thorn for answers he wasn’t sure he could give. Grayson’s private jet had flown out of Lake Charles, destination unknown. So what now? Did they wait to see if he came back in a few days? Or fly back to Florida with their tails tucked between their legs—no closer to getting even with Grayson than they’d been when they had arrived?

“I’m not sure yet. I guess we wait to see what Aztec suggests.”

Ava stood and paced the confines of Thorn’s room, then turned to face him. “Instead of sitting around waiting, why don’t we see if we can get into Grayson’s estate? Maybe he has some mementos of his victims lying around, or a record of terrorist ties. We can’t just leave, not knowing what happened to Yancy.”

“No, Ava. We can’t. Not without Aztec’s approval.”

She narrowed her gaze on him. “I think you’re afraid. Are you a man or a mouse, Thorn? Don’t you see we may never get another opportunity like this? Knowing Grayson, he probably took most of his men with him. Which means only a handful of staff would be left at the estate. We could get in without being seen.”

“I don’t know. That’s a lot of ifs.”

“She might be right, Thorn,” Mauve interjected. “I think we can do this.”

“You’re not even supposed to be here, Mauve. You don’t have any say in the matter.”

“So, I’ll go in then. No one knows I’m here. This way no one gets in trouble.”

“No way are you going into Grayson’s estate alone. What happens if you get caught? What do we do then?”

“I can handle anything that comes up,” Mauve said, her gaze intent on him. “I’ll just say I was looking to meet him.”

Thorn didn’t like this one bit. “No...no way. It’s too risky. I’m in charge, and I’m not letting you put yourself in such a precarious situation without backup.”

“Okay then. You’ll be my backup. I’m going in, Thorn, with or without your help. It’s up to you.”

“And I’m going with her,” Ava spouted, her hands planted firmly on her hips, her determination evident in the action. She meant what she said. They both did. That meant Thorn would have no choice but to follow blindly, unless he called Aztec, which would have both Ava and Mauve on the warpath. And frankly, he’d rather have the boss on his ass than two angry women.



## Chapter Eight

The sun set, reflecting off the bayou as Thorn, Ava and Mauve sat outside the gates of the Grayson estate. Another few minutes and it would be dark enough for them to slip around the side to scale the wall.

Thorn still couldn't believe he was doing this without Aztec's approval. He'd probably lose his job, a thought that gave him a case of indigestion, acid now working its way up his throat.

He turned to Ava. "We should rethink this, or at least call in Jameson and Simmons."

Ava glared at him. "No, we're going in now. We don't have time to call them."

"So either get with the program, Thorn," Mauve said, smiling at Ava, "or stay in the van while we have a little adventure."

"Okay, I'll go—but remember, this was your and Ava's idea, not mine. You'll be the ones dealing with the boss."

Ava saluted him. "Duly noted."

"Let's go." Mauve opened the van's door.

Thorn scowled. The look of excitement on the woman's face as she disappeared around the front was mind-boggling. Both she and Ava loved this, lived for intrigue and danger.

He, on the other hand, thought about the what-ifs, about the huge chance they were taking. What if they got caught and he was killed? Who'd protect Ava? They had no idea what they'd find once they were inside Grayson's compound. Hell, ten goons could be patrolling the grounds, though they hadn't seen any all day.

Then again, maybe they didn't worry about break-ins during daylight hours. Maybe guards weren't posted until evening.

Thorn exited the van and slipped around to the entrance, opened up his laptop, inserted a connective cord into the gate's security system and bypassed it. That way they could get in without a sensor going off.

After placing the laptop down, he went around the twelve-foot fence surrounding the estate to find Ava and Mauve.

They were already pulling out a rope with a grappling hook, getting ready to toss the thing over the wall.

"Wait." Thorn grabbed Ava's arm. "I'll throw it over. You two stand next to that tree."

"Okay, Tarzan. Jane and I'll do as we're told."

Thorn snarled at Mauve's remark then shook it off and readied the rope. He spun the hook around and lobbed it up, pulling it back until the thing caught at the top. He tugged hard to make sure it'd hold.

"Ava, you go first. Remember—once you get to the top, look around, make sure no security are patrolling the grounds."

"Yes, *dear*. I know." The way she emphasized the endearment had him staring at her, attention that garnered him a wink and a blown kiss. What the heck was she up to? Was she playing games again or did she have something else in mind?

Mauve cleared her throat. "We need to do this, guys. Ava, get up there."

Ava grabbed the rope, using the tied knots as footing and handgrips.

At the top, she sat on the edge of the wall and glanced around, then waved at Thorn and Mauve. "All clear."

Once they'd made it to the other side and patrolled the area, they started toward the house, staying next to the wall in case they needed a quick getaway.

Thorn heard Ava screech, then watched her cover her mouth in horror. He hurried to catch up. "What's wrong?"

"A June bug flew in my hair. I screamed before I could stop myself."

Thorn rolled his eyes. *Women*.

"What was that?" Ava jumped into Thorn's arms.

"What?" Thorn glared at her. "I didn't see anything."

"Something ran over my foot."

He shook his head but had to admit he enjoyed having Ava close. She smelled of honeysuckles on a warm day, a scent that stirred his lower region. “A little jumpy, are we?”

She grimaced. “The thing could have had rabies or something.”

“My God, Ava, you’d have never made it in Davy Crocket, coonskin cap days with your aversion to nature.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you were such a naturalist, Daniel frickin’ Boone.”

Mauve stepped from the shadows. “Sssshh. This is not the time to be having a tiff. A man with a case of narcolepsy could hear you two. Now put Ava down, Thorn, and let’s get into that house.”

Thorn eased Ava to the ground, her body skimming his as they made eye contact. The look she exhibited made him suck in a breath.

Her gaze flickered with desire.

Damned tease. If they were alone, he’d take her right now against the wall, to hell with how painful it’d be for her.

On their way to the house, Ava contemplated how she was going to get Thorn in the sack. She’d give her eyeteeth to be alone with him right now, to throw him to the ground and have her way with him.

When he was near, her mind went all wishy-washy and her lower belly spasmed uncontrollably. Even worse, all she could see was Thorn coming out of the shower, naked as the day he was born, glistening wet and looking quite capable of filling her to capacity.

*Jeez, Ava. Get your head in the game—not on the guy with the bat and balls.*

Ava collided with Mauve’s back when she abruptly stopped in front of her.

Mauve spun around. “Ava? What is wrong with you? Watch where you’re going.”

“Sorry. What did we stop for?”

Thorn reached them. “What’s going on?”

“I saw something move over there.” Mauve pointed past the house.

“Security?”

“I don’t know.”

The strong smell of smoke drifted past Ava's nose, and where Mauve indicated movement, a flicker of red trailed in the night sky and landed a few feet from where they stood. A cigarette butt.

"Someone's watching us." Ava's heart hitched. "We've got to get out of here."

They started back toward the front gate.

The sound of weapons being cocked made Ava's blood run cold.

No sooner had the sound paralyzed her than a series of floodlights snapped on overhead, blinding her.

They were caught.

As soon as Ava's eyes adjusted to the lights, she glanced around, swallowing hard at the five goons aiming assault rifles at them.

"What do we have, boys?" a voice she recognized asked, coming from out of the shadows, a blonde she also knew following.

Grayson and Fiona. How? He was supposed to have left town, and so much for Fiona wanting to sleep with Thorn. The whole sordid event had been a setup from the very beginning. But how did Grayson find out they were in town?

Evan leered at her, a look that made Ava's skin crawl. What was he going to do? Would he kill them like he'd done to Yancy?

"Sweet Ava. I've been expecting you."

Thorn pulled her against him, an action that said he'd die before he let any harm come to her.

"Isn't this touching," came another voice Ava recognized, from beyond the illuminated area.

No way. It couldn't be.

Mauve stepped forward but abruptly stopped when all rifles swung her way. She knew the voice, too, and had shared more than an association with the man in the shadows.

"I didn't know you were in town, Mauve." A tall figure came into the light, a form whose presence evoked a silence so intense Ava could have heard a pin drop. "I bet you never thought you'd see me again."

"No, not really," Mauve said, glaring at the man. "Up until now, I didn't believe in resurrection."

He laughed. “Aren’t you happy to see me, babe? After what we’ve shared?”

Grayson’s goons hooted with laughter.

Ava glanced at Mauve, who looked shell-shocked. Could she blame her? It wasn’t every day a man came back from the dead. A man who obviously hadn’t been who they’d thought he was—a hero, a colleague and a friend—and to Mauve, a lover. Yancy Adams.

\* \* \*

Thorn worked his wrists in the ropes that held his hands together, feeling the cord give a little with each twist he made. He had to get free, no matter how raw his wrists became.

He couldn’t believe he’d let Ava and Mauve talk him into this whole farce. He should have known better. Hell, he did know better. But they’d given him no alternative but to follow or be left behind.

Now they were in deep shit unless he could get loose.

He forced himself not to think about what could be happening to Ava and Mauve, but he assumed Grayson had Ava. *Sick asshole*. If the man even looked at her funny, he’d kill him.

And, to think, Fiona had been a plant to keep him distracted.

Thorn scowled. Could they have made a run for it?

At the time of capture, as he was contemplating the situation, he knew without a doubt there was no way out. Five assault rifles pointed at them didn’t leave much hope for escape unless he was willing to sacrifice one to save the other two, and no way had that been an option. All he could think to do was go along and hope for a chance to elude his captors later.

That time had come, and he had to get free.

Thorn couldn’t believe Adams was alive and a traitor to his company, not to mention his country.

The mere thought ignited a rage inside him and forced him to work harder to get loose.

When he did get free, he’d see that Yancy died for real this time. How a man so revered by his colleagues could be turned astounded him, especially a man like Adams, a

damned good agent. Not to mention a tough SOB. For him to be swayed by a life of crime made no sense.

A burst of adrenaline shot through him and he yanked one hand free.

With both hands loose, he rubbed his wrists then quickly loosened the restraint on his ankles and scoped out his surroundings.

The place looked like a prison cell, nine-by-ten feet with concrete all around him. A single forty-watt bulb lit the room.

Just his luck, no windows.

How was he going to get out to save Ava?

Maybe they hadn't locked the door. Could he get that lucky? He walked to the only object in the room not made of mortar, and turned the knob, frustrated when it wouldn't budge.

With steely determination, he pulled and tugged, hoping by some glimmer of a chance the door was stuck.

Nope. It was locked.

He was trapped until someone came. His only hope was when that happened he could overcome them and escape.

He had to or Ava could die, and Thorn couldn't allow that.

At that moment, he heard a shuffling outside the door.

He plastered himself against the wall, ready for an attack, and prayed his attempt would garner him freedom.

## Chapter Nine

Ava tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry. Her stomach knotted as she watched Grayson from across the room, staring at her.

What was he planning? Somehow she knew it wouldn't be good, especially after their last encounter. The man had no morals or conscience, and that meant he'd have no qualms about killing her.

Evan moved closer. "What do you think I should do with you, Ava?"

"Letting me go would be good." Ava forced bravado. No way would she give him the satisfaction of knowing she was scared.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Right. Yes, that is an option, though not one I'd thought of."

"Maybe you should?"

Grayson stared at her, his eyes glistening with unmistakable lust. No way was she getting out of here in the same condition she came. Unless she thought of something, and quick. She could see from his leering eyes that he planned to have fun with her before she died. Her only hope was to somehow outsmart him and escape.

*Think, Ava. Grayson isn't a brilliant man. You can get out of this with your virtue intact.*

"I do confess," Grayson said, drawing Ava's attention back to him. "You have to be the most beautiful woman I've ever had to dispose of."

Ava's heart skipped a beat. Did he have to be so blunt about his plans?

"Now why would you have to do that?" Ava managed in a level voice.

"Because, dear Ava, I know who you work for. No way can I let you live knowing you were here to destroy my empire."

"Apparently you've kept Adams alive. His objective was the same as ours."

“Yancy has proven invaluable to me. He’s helped single out Aztec agents. I knew what you were up to before we even met. Knew you were one of Aztec’s best. Though Adams was surprised Abbott came along as your backup agent. According to him, the guy’s a computer geek. He doesn’t do direct field work for Aztec.”

Ava couldn’t sit back and have Grayson cut Thorn’s abilities. He deserved better. “At least Thorn isn’t a traitor to his company.”

“True, but will that matter when you’re all dead?” Grayson grasped her arm and wrenched her off the chair.

Ava fought him, crying out when Grayson covered her breast with his free hand and squeezed.

His eyes lit up. “They are real. I wasn’t sure. Very nice, Ava. It’s been a while since I’ve had a woman who was all natural.”

Tears filled Ava’s eyes but she forced them away. This man wasn’t going to see any sign of weakness from her.

“You’ve been on my mind since we shared those kisses. I’ve been thinking about this moment for days. I can’t wait to get between those long legs of yours.”

Ava knew he wasn’t lying—evidence of his desire rubbed against her thigh, causing her whole body to convulse.

She struggled to get free. He wasn’t going to get that thing inside her. She’d die first.

“What did you do with Mauve and Thorn?”

He pulled her closer. “Yancy’s taking care of your female friend. He insisted, actually. The guy’s locked away somewhere. Don’t worry. I don’t plan to kill any of you just yet. Now stop asking questions. I have better things in mind for that mouth of yours.” He crushed his lips to hers, his hands drawing her hard against him.

Bile rose in Ava’s throat, so strong it threatened to gag her. She had to get away.

She clawed at him, fighting for her life. *Please help me.*

Ava closed her eyes, too afraid of what was going to happen. The thought was too awful to even contemplate.

What was she going to do? Let him have his way with her? Let him rape her?

No way. That was not an option. Ava picked up her foot and brought it down hard on his instep.



His eyes widened as he released his hold and stumbled back. Ava took advantage of his surprise and raced to the door. She flung it open and took off at a full sprint.

Halfway down the hall she heard Grayson calling for his men.

*Shit.* How was she going to find Thorn and Mauve and get out without getting caught?

Stepping up her pace, she made it to the end of the corridor and collided with something solid. She was afraid to look, terrified she'd be right back where she'd started with Grayson pawing at her.

"Ava, thank God. Let's get out of here. I know where a back entrance is." *Thorn.*

Ava threw herself into his arms, relief flooding her.

"We don't have time for hugs. We have to run." He grabbed her hand and pulled her down another corridor, then a longer one until they came to a door. Thorn threw the thing open and shoved her onto the back patio.

Gunfire erupted, sending Ava's heart into V-fib.

"Listen to me." Thorn's command got her full attention. "See that tree line? We're headed for that. Don't look back. Just keep running. Understand?"

Ava nodded.

Thorn tugged at her wrist and they took off, sprinting across the lawn toward the back of Grayson's estate.

Ava flinched when she heard a pop of gunfire again, this time close.

*Pop. Pop.* A bullet ripped past Ava's head, splintering the bark of a tree in front of them.

"Keep running." Thorn weaved left then right to dodge rounds.

When they were in the cover of the trees, Ava sucked in a relieved breath. They wouldn't be so easy to spot now.

They kept moving in no particular direction, not that Ava would know southeast from northwest. She was never a Girl Scout or into the whole hiking craze. The survivalist stuff wasn't her thing.

Ava stumbled when her boot caught in the tangle of a root.

Thorn pulled her up and yanked her forward, in another direction this time.

"Where are we going?" She could hardly breathe from the exertion.

"We have to keep moving. I can hear them behind us. We can't stop until they do."

Thorn was right. They'd come too far to get recaptured. But what if they got lost out in this awful place?

For what seemed like hours they trudged through the trees, the ground getting soggy and sucking at her boots.

Were they getting close to the bayou? With the alligators, snakes and God knows what else?

Ava planted her feet firmly into the mire and stopped.

Thorn glanced over his shoulder, his brows drawing together. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe we should change direction again."

"No, we have to follow the bayou. I know it runs east. Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

Ava believed he did, but what was crawling in this swamp, swimming around under her feet? She glanced down and grimaced. Were there leeches here?

"Come on, Ava. We have to keep going. I don't know how far behind Grayson's men are."

Ava took a step and slid, almost losing her balance until Thorn caught her. "Don't let me go face first into this stuff."

"Hang on to my waist. We'll go together—one step at a time." As they moved in unison, Ava had to admit being close to Thorn made her feel safe and secure.

So why hadn't she realized this before?

They'd known each other for years, and worked together most of that time, though not this closely.

She'd been blind. Not only did Thorn make her feel protected, he made her yearn for him physically. Even running for their lives, being near him had her heart racing wildly.

She wanted him. Out in the middle of a swamp, where creatures were lurking everywhere, her body still responded to his. A crazy notion, but one that grew with every step they took, with each murky foot into the bayou they traveled.

Darkness hindered their way, but they kept moving until Ava's legs grew tired and her muscles screamed for them to stop.

"I need a break, Thorn. My legs are cramping."

Thorn stopped and glanced around, obviously unsure if they should keep going regardless of her discomfort.

“Look around for some cover. Just in case those goons are still on our tail.”

Ava peered around, squinting through the darkness. What did he mean by cover? Out in the bayou? Was there such a thing?

Thorn pulled Ava again. “Come on.”

She groaned, thinking they were going to keep running. “Duck,” he said as they hit an incline covered in brushy foliage.

Ava followed his direction and they were soon in a secluded, dry haven, something akin to a fox’s den but much larger.

“Okay, we’ll stay here until daylight. I think we’ll be safe,” he said.

Thorn removed his jacket and spread it out onto the ground. “Sit, Ava. We need to try and get some rest before morning.”

Ava sat on the coat and stared at Thorn. He seemed to be contemplating if he should do the same.

“I’m not going to bite. Unless you want me to.”

He smiled at her remark then dropped next to her, the scent of him instantly working on her senses. Even after their long trek he smelled wonderful, all earthy and male, a realization that sent her heart hammering again. Ava hoped he couldn’t hear it pounding.

No man had ever done this to her. Made her want to get down and dirty in the wild.

“You’re awful quiet.” Thorn studied her then glanced around their hideaway.

“I was just thinking.” Not a lie. Her thoughts were on attacking him.

He turned to look at her. “About?”

Ava was glad it was dark and he couldn’t see her face. She was sure it was red, felt hotter than an iron on steam. “Nothing.”

“Come on, Ava. Tell me what’s going on in that beautiful head of yours.”

She inhaled. “You think I’m beautiful?”

He glanced away. “You know you are,” he muttered, scooting a few inches away from her on the coat.

Ava swallowed up the space between them, inching her hip next to his. At that moment she should be worried about Mauve, yet her full attention was on Thorn. “Do you really think I’m beautiful?”

He turned to face her, his eyes narrowing. “I think you know the answer to that.”

“How about smart?”

“What?”

“Do you think I’m smart, Thorn?”

“I know you are,” he said without hesitation.

Ava’s heart soared. It felt good to know he thought of her as intelligent.

“You are the perfect aphrodisiac.” He turned away.

Was he telling her he wanted her as much as she wanted him? “Tell me, Thorn. Better yet, show me how you feel.”

His eyes widened.

Was that too forward? Would he pull away this time? She held her breath, waiting for an answer.

He leaned in and covered her mouth with his, his lips moving over hers in a gentle yet probing quest. Ava could tell he was unsure of his next move.

She made it for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and deepening the kiss, her tongue darting over his lips, waiting for him to open to her. When he did, her tongue slid inside, tasting, savoring him with wonder.

The groan of pleasure he gave encouraged Ava, excited her and sent her senses spiraling toward the heavens.

Her arms unfurled from his neck, her hands roaming over his shoulders. She wanted to be in his arms, yearned to have his strength cocooning her.

His mouth broke free of hers. “Ava,” he gasped. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes. I want you more than anything, Thorn.”

His mouth met hers again in a fiery kiss, while his hands cupped her breasts.

Ava’s belly coiled tight.

Her fingers fanned his chest, working at the buttons on his shirt. She had to touch his skin, feel the heat of him beneath her palms.

One by one, the buttons gave way, her anticipation building. Her hands slipped beneath the soft material, working the shirt over his strong, muscular shoulders.

Ava could hardly believe she was doing this—actually making love to Thorn in the middle of nowhere.

She gasped when Thorn thumbed her nipple, drawing it up, causing an intense heat to pulsate between her legs. At that moment, she could think of nothing but having him inside her.

With purpose, she worked at his belt, intent on removing all barriers between them. Tension grew with an aching need that she had felt since they'd landed in Lake Charles, a longing so intense she could think of nothing else.

He tugged her top over her head and tossed it aside, then slid his hands around and unhooked her bra, pulling the straps down her shoulders.

Ava sucked in a ragged breath as he kissed her, his hands melding to her breasts. His tongue worked at her lips to explore her mouth. Nothing prepared Ava for the sensations his caresses evoked, the heat his touch stirred in her.

She hoped this moment would last forever—for time to stand still.

As his mouth left hers and he worked his way down the slope of her neck, Ava's blood simmered, turning her to hot vapor.

Her hands went for his belt again, this time working it open along with the button and zipper.

She tore her mouth from his.

"Let's get naked." She heard the rasp in her voice and knew she'd never wanted a man as much as she wanted Thorn. Never cared to share her feelings, her hopes and dreams with anyone until now. And she would tell Thorn how she felt, after they'd made love.

He worked his jeans off his hips and Ava's breath caught in her throat.

With shaky hands, she removed her own, watching his gaze on her, his gray eyes intense.

He crooked a finger at her. "Come here."

Ava knew exactly what he had in mind, and it caused her to go damp with desire.

She moved to straddle him, felt his hard cock against her and sucked in another breath.

"I've waited a hell of a long time for this, Ava."

With a smile, she lowered onto him, a moan of ecstasy escaping her lips as she took him full inside her.

Thorn kissed her again, a coupling that left Ava breathless and panting.

His mouth slid to her breast, sending a bolt of electricity racing down her spine, spreading through her body. She never would have imagined he'd be so good at this, but he knew just what to do to make her hot.

She lifted until she almost left him, then drew him deep inside her again, a move she repeated until her body cried out for more.

Passion clouding her mind, she grasped his shoulders and rocked atop him, tension building, igniting sensations so acute they splintered moments later and left her speechless.

Thorn rolled Ava to her back, driving into her hard and fast, causing yet another orgasm to rocket through her. Then he reached his own release, spilling into her, and collapsed on top of her.

They rolled again, her head landing on his shoulder, the pounding of his heart music to her ears.

At that moment Ava knew she loved Thorn Abbott, realized that their intimacy had only intensified her feelings for him. No way could she settle for anything less. Not when she knew it could be this good with Thorn. They were meant for each other, and she planned to tell him so once they got out of this godforsaken place.

The thought of escape brought with it a number of questions. “Thorn?”

He lifted to look at her. “Yes.”

“Do you think Mauve is okay?”

“I know she is.”

“How could you know that, and how did you get away from Grayson’s men?”

Thorn didn’t reply, he simply smiled.

The gesture was unsettling to Ava, and she was almost afraid to ask why he was so confident in her best friend’s escape.

## Chapter Ten

Thorn held Ava in his arms, the urge to make love to her stronger than the first time. The way her body felt around him was mind-bending. He couldn't get enough of her.

"Tell me what happened, Thorn."

Should he tell her now or wait until they were back to civilization?

He pushed her down and rolled on top of her, his cock growing rigid as it brushed her thigh.

She spread her legs to him as she ran her fingers over his back, her eyes shining with desire.

"How about we talk about Mauve later?" Thorn thrust up, her sigh of contentment enough encouragement to continue.

He could stay inside this woman for an eternity. Her heat drove his own passion to heights he'd never known. He loved Ava with all his heart, and making love to her only strengthened that bond.

At a measured pace, he moved into her, proud of the way he made her moan. The way she looked at him now was so different than before, the way he'd always dreamed she would. Her soft sighs made him want to bring her to orgasm again and again.

A snap from outside their hideaway had Thorn on alert.

He looked down at Ava. From the widening of her eyes, she'd heard it too.

He eased off her and signaled for her to get dressed.

As quietly as they could, they donned their clothes, all the time Thorn listening intently for a sign of trouble.

Was it Grayson's men? Had they heard them making love? Were they now waiting outside?

Shit, why had he allowed his passion to overrule his head, especially when they were in such dire straits?

When another snap came from outside, Ava's eyes widened.

"Thorn, Ava," a female voice whispered. "I could hear the two of you a mile away."

Relief washed over Thorn as he recognized Mauve's husky voice.

"It's Mauve," Ava said, blowing out her breath. "How did she get out of the estate?"

Thorn smiled.

"Come on, guys." Mauve's voice sounded closer this time, directly outside the brushy oasis. "We need to get out of here. Grayson's goons are still following, and the sun is starting to come up."

Thorn glanced at Ava. "Come on, we'd better get going."

As he worked his way toward the entrance, Ava pulled him back and kissed him hard on the mouth.

What he wouldn't give to be back in their hotel room right now so they could finish what they'd started minutes earlier.

Thorn exited the haven and helped Ava out, watching her reaction when she saw the man standing next to Mauve. Shock wasn't even close to what crossed her features. Flabbergasted was the look.

She reached for Thorn's arm and backed away. "What the hell." Ava glared at Mauve.

"No, it's okay, Ava." Thorn squeezed her arm. "Yancy's one of us."

"Right, and he's dead too." Her voice dripped hatred.

"We need to get moving," Yancy snarled. "We don't have time for explanations, or accusations. I'm sure Grayson's goons heard the two of you as we did. They're probably right behind us."

"Why should we listen to a traitor?" Ava snapped.

Gunfire in the distance left them no choice but to move. In succession, they turned and raced in the opposite direction, following Yancy, who seemed to know where he was going.

A mile into the trek, they stopped to catch their breath.

Yancy peered above and pointed west. "We're going to change directions for a while. We don't want to be easy to track."

"How do we know you're not leading us into a trap?" Ava spat, her blue eyes turning dark.



“Look, Ava. I know you don’t trust me, but I know this area better than you. I can lead us to safety.”

She snorted. “Right. Why should we trust you? A man who’s been living a lie.”

“I thought staying alive at the time, and getting some dirt on Grayson, seemed the thing to do. What would you have done? As a woman, would you have spread your legs to stay alive?”

“Is that what you did?” Amusement played over Ava’s face. “We all knew Grayson had a fetish for dark hair, though I thought it was exclusive to women. How was he?”

“Fuck you!”

“Look, we have to get out of here. Yancy has a disk in his possession that will bring down not only Grayson but a number of his contacts. I escaped because of him, Ava.” Thorn touched her cheek. “We’re both standing here now because he’s alive.”

Ava didn’t appear satisfied until she looked at Mauve, who nodded in agreement. “All right, I’ll follow him for now.”

“Okay, let’s head north a few miles and then we’ll turn east. If my calculations are correct, it’ll lead us to a town where we can call for backup.”

Ava still couldn’t believe Yancy was alive and not a traitor. What did they call what he’d done? Deep cover?

Would she have done the same given the circumstances? She didn’t know for sure, but she probably would have.

Her legs felt like rubber as she trudged through the murky bayou, her attention focused on Thorn, who walked beside her. Too many times she tripped over something, watching him instead of the terrain.

Her emotions were in a jumble. Every time her mind meandered back to their private den of inequities, her heart rate pitched.

Making love to him had been even better than she’d imagined, her orgasms so powerful she could think of little else.

Ava would’ve loved to pull Thorn into her arms and jump his bones then and there, but with an audience, she thought better of it.

The man had turned her into a wanton fool. One willing to bow to his every need as long as he gave her what she longed for—his cock buried deep inside her until she screamed in ecstasy.

She sighed. She was in trouble. In love, and wanting what she said she never would—marriage and everything that came with it, even children if Thorn wanted them.

The thought of kids reminded her that she and Thorn hadn't used any protection, and that she'd stopped taking the pill a few months ago because of intense headaches.

Thorn stopped at her side and brought her out of her wandering thoughts. Yancy and Mauve stood in front of them, arguing about something. From the look on Mauve's face, it was serious.

Thorn looked at her and rolled his eyes.

The gesture had once angered Ava but now she found it endearing.

Her lips curled into a smile.

He returned the grin and brushed her arm with his hand. His touch sent a rush of heat coursing through her, her body melting with desire, and she was sure her eyes alluded to it.

His smile faded and he swallowed, his gray gaze turning stormy.

"Oh, go to hell," Mauve bellowed, breaking the spell Thorn and Ava had spun around themselves.

Ava looked at her best friend, then at Yancy, whose face was masked in anger. Whatever they'd discussed, it wasn't pretty.

"This is not the time or the place for this," Yancy said, and stalked off. Mauve followed him, though at a distance, her gait hesitant.

Ava knew she was upset, but this wasn't the time to question her. They needed to get back to the city first. Get to safety, then they'd talk.

"Shit," Yancy cursed some distance in front of them.

Thorn grasped Ava's arm to catch up and see what was wrong.

When they reached Yancy, he held his forefinger to his lips, indicating that they needed to remain quiet. He pointed east and what Ava saw iced her blood.

Six alligators, at least two of them sixteen-feet long, blocked their trail.

Ava's heart pounded hard enough for it to echo in her ears.

Yancy reached into his boot and pulled out a knife Ava had only seen in movies—its blade twelve inches long and four or five inches wide. The knife was something she imagined a mountain man would carry.

Mauve grabbed Yancy's arm. "What are you going to do?"

“What do you care? You just told me to forget about our night together.”

She glared at him. “That doesn’t mean you have to get yourself killed.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I wouldn’t do that for any woman, especially you.”

*Ouch.* Talk about an ego crush. If Thorn had said such a thing to Ava, she’d be devastated.

Instead of being hurt, Mauve laughed. Ava searched her mind for an explanation. Either Mauve couldn’t care less for Yancy or it was all an act, put on to make him think she didn’t care. Ava thought it was the latter.

“Could you two stop fighting? Those alligators have spotted us and are moving closer.” Thorn grabbed Ava and backed up.

Ava clung to him, her skin pricking with goose bumps, her heart racing again.

Thorn leaned in and whispered, “Trees—directly behind us. Climb as if your life depends on it.”

“Will do.” She scooted back until her heels hit the root of the cypress.

Climbing fast, Ava stepped from one branch to the next, Thorn hot on her heels. Once she thought she was high enough, she glanced down and couldn’t find Mauve and Yancy anywhere.

Thorn reached her, his breathing shallow.

“Where did Yancy and Mauve go?”

He shrugged, glancing around. “I don’t know, but those gators are circling.”

Ava grimaced as she watched the scaly creatures. “Can they climb?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Will they get tired of waiting and leave?”

“I don’t know, but we better hope so. If we fall asleep, we could drop and become gator chow.”

“Oh, Thorn. I don’t like the idea of being a meal for those things.”

“Maybe if we’re real quiet they’ll go away.”

“Yeah, and maybe if we sing a song we can lull them to sleep.”

Thorn smirked at her smart remark.

“Sorry, but being eaten by those large-mouthed reptiles isn’t something I’d envisioned. Being shot, maybe, but being chewed to bits, no way.”

“I know, Ava. I’ll get us out of this. Just give me a few minutes to come up with something. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Ava prayed Thorn could think of something. She wanted a future with him, and being killed by gators would seriously put a damper on that.

Thorn glanced around them, weighing their chances of escaping the hungry alligators. Either they stayed put and hoped the creatures got tired and left, or he thought of a way to distract them long enough to flee. Or their third choice, and one not at all desirable, they fell asleep and eventually became a meal to a swamp full of gators.

“I want to tell you something.” The tremor in Ava’s voice caught Thorn’s full attention.

“Do I want to hear this?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m going to say it anyway.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“I thought you should know that I have strong feelings for you, and if we get out of here alive, I’d like us to continue what we started back there.” She pointed in the direction they’d come.

Thorn’s emotions soared. He’d always wanted this. Talk about an incentive to get them out of this precarious situation and back to civilization. Back to a relationship with the woman he’d been in love with for years. Hell, he loved everything about Ava, even her not-so-perfect qualities. Her promised words made him feel optimistic about what was to come.

“Well,” she snapped. “Was I just a roll in the briars to you?”

Thorn smiled, watching her get worked up, her face flushing red. God he loved her, could think of no one else he’d rather spend his life with and watch grow old.

He knew what he had to say, and hoped it was what she wanted to hear. “I love you, Ava.”

Her flustered expression melted away.

“Well,” he said, mimicking her. “Was I just a roll in the briars to *you*?”

She threw herself into his arms, almost unseating them from the tree. “Whoa, woman. Do you want to die before you can tell me you love me?”

She pulled back and looked at him. “I do, you know.”

Thorn knew what she said and what it meant, but he wanted to hear her say the words. “You what, Ava?”

She fidgeted on the limb, her gaze darting around them. “I—ah—”

“What?”

“Okay, I love you.”

He knew he’d pushed her into saying it, but he couldn’t help himself. He felt like teasing her. “Are you sure?”

“I’m starting to question it now,” she said with a hint of sarcasm.

He threw his head back and laughed. Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her until the echo of gunfire erupted from off in the distance.

Ava’s eyes widened, her concern mirroring his own.

Grayson’s men were coming.

Thorn flattened himself against the tree trunk and indicated that Ava back up against him.

Maybe if they were lucky they wouldn’t be spotted, though the gators circling the tree would be a dead giveaway that something was up on a limb to avoid being eaten.

All they could do was wait and hope some twist of fate would save them from being discovered.

## Chapter Eleven

Ava's elation faded and was quickly replaced with anger.

She and Thorn had confessed their love and now they could die before they got a chance to explore the emotion.

*Think, Ava. If you want to spend a week in bed with Thorn, you'd better hurry and come up with something.*

What would Mauve do? Where had she and Yancy disappeared to anyway? You'd think they would at least try to rescue them from the gators.

She and Thorn could outmaneuver Grayson's goons, but these slimy creatures were another story. Ava didn't know a thing about them, how their brains worked, if they had one. Men and their motivations were clear, but neck-snapping, razor-teethed critters drew nothing but a hideous image of being torn to shreds.

Another round of gunfire sounded, this time a couple hundred feet from where they sat.

They were running out of time. Grayson's men were almost beneath them.

"Shit!" a voice Ava didn't recognize cursed from off to their right.

"What the hell you cussing about?" another man asked, his tone sharp. "You're not the one covered in this slime."

Thorn pressed them closer to the trunk, his warm breath tickling her ear. Ava glanced down and saw that the alligators had started toward the voices. She pointed for Thorn to look.

He nodded and released her.

Ava climbed down with caution, trying not to make a sound.

Once they were both on the ground, they bolted away from the alligators and gunmen, sprinting across the marshy woodlands. Neither stopped until they came to a road, a sign touting a town a mile ahead.

Ava gulped for air. “What do you think? Should we chance it?”

“I think so,” Thorn said, he too catching his breath. “If we can get to a phone, we can call Jameson.”

“Do you think the gators ate those goons for breakfast?” She cringed at the thought.

Thorn shrugged. “If they caught them off guard maybe. They did have firearms, though I didn’t hear any go off.”

“What about Mauve and Yancy? Do you think they’re still out in the swamp somewhere?”

“I don’t know.” His tone wavered. “I hope not.”

“I want to go home, Thorn. I want to take a shower, get some sleep and fly back to Florida.”

“I do too, and we will as soon as we find Mauve and Yancy. Yancy has the goods on Grayson. There’ll be no need for us to hang around St. Charles any longer.”

The roar of a truck’s engine caused Ava’s heart to careen out of control. What awful luck. They’d finally made it out of the swamp, only to be caught again.

“Shit,” Thorn cursed as the truck came barreling up a bank, heading directly for them. “Run.” He grasped her wrist and pulled her down the road.

“Ava, Thorn,” Mauve screamed.

Ava stopped abruptly, jerking back. Thorn kept dragging her until he too recognized Mauve’s voice.

“Get in the back. Grayson’s men could be right behind us.”

In no mood to argue, she and Thorn jumped into the truck’s bed as it inched by them.

As the vehicle jumped the ditch, Ava grasped the lip of the bed, her knuckles whitening from the force.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived in Sulfur. In the heart of town, they found a payphone to call Kent.

While Ava waited for an answer, Thorn asked, “Where’d you get the truck, Yancy?”

“When Mauve and I found the road, an old man came by and I gave him three hundred bucks to borrow it. I told him I’d leave it in town for him to pick up.”

After relaying information to Kent, Ava hung up the phone and glanced at Mauve. Her best friend looked as if she wanted to pound Yancy into the ground.

It had to be hard to trust him after what he'd done. Ava wondered if Mauve ever would. If it'd been Thorn, could she have believed in him?

Thank God she didn't have to answer that, because she didn't know if she could. Trust was something earned, and when lost, hard to rebuild. Mauve would have to decide if it was worth the effort to do that with Yancy. Ava didn't know what her friend's feelings for him had been, she only knew they'd been intimate. Though Mauve's eyes had teared up when talking about their affair.

Hell, she'd only found that tidbit out a few days ago. Supposedly Yancy and Mauve hadn't seen each other since. Both received assignments back-to-back with no time in between for them to explore their feelings about the event.

Ava wasn't going to let that happen with Thorn. Not a chance. She was in love for the first time in her life and she wasn't going to allow it to slip through her fingers.

\* \* \*

Thorn jumped into the van and slid the door closed, relieved they were headed back into Lake Charles.

A loud pop sounded from outside the van. Thorn assumed it was the vehicle backfiring. When a bullet shattered the back glass, Thorn dived for Ava, blanketing her body with his.

"Shit," Yancy cursed, reaching for the gun strapped to Jameson's side.

He pushed his way past Thorn and aimed the gun through the window, firing back. "Get this heap moving," Yancy hollered to the front. "They're going to ram us."

Simmons picked up speed while Yancy took another shot, hitting the passenger side of the windshield.

"Thorn, grab Simmons' weapon. Let's aim for the tires. It's our only hope of losing them."

Thorn reached for the .45 tucked into Owen's holster, pointed at the road and fired, missing the target by a good five feet.

He cursed to himself and aimed again.

"You can do it, Thorn. I know you can," Ava said at his side.



Thorn held the gun, focusing hard on the tire slapping the road, then squeezed the trigger and watched as the bullet hit dead center. The Jeep veered off the road and flipped.

Ava melted into his arms and held him. “Good job, Agent Abbott.” She smiled seductively. “I might have to take some lessons from you.”

“It was a lucky shot,” Yancy said under his breath.

Ava scowled at Yancy, who grinned and turned away. There was definitely no love lost between the two, though Thorn knew Ava had always respected the man. That respect had been lost with what Yancy had done, not letting anyone know he was alive and working deep cover.

“I don’t think we should go back to the hotel. I imagine Grayson’s men will be waiting for us. I suggest we head to Baton Rouge and catch a flight to Florida,” Yancy said to Simmons.

“I agree.” Thorn knew full well that Grayson wanted them dead and would do whatever it took to see that happen. The man wasn’t stupid. He surely knew Yancy had evidence in his possession, proof of his illegal dealings, terrorist activities and murders.

Hours later, they arrived at the Baton Rouge airport.

“I can’t catch a flight looking like this,” Ava said to Thorn, rubbing a dirty stain on her jeans. “Would they even allow us to board looking like we just stepped out of the swamp?”

“Okay, so you ladies stop at one of the shops, get a change of clothing and clean up in the restroom while we get the tickets. Grayson could have spies anywhere.”

Once inside the airport, Ava and Mauve went off to shop while Yancy, Kent, Owen and Thorn headed for the ticket counter in hopes of getting a flight within the hour.

Grayson could have an army of men out looking for them, and Thorn wouldn’t feel at ease until they were in the air, on their way home.

\* \* \*

“So.” Ava peeked out the airport’s restroom stall as she changed. “What did you and Yancy argue about in the bayou? It seemed pretty intense.”

Ava watched Mauve at the sink, time ticking by. Maybe she was prying. Mauve might not want to talk about it. She should have waited for her to broach the subject.

“I can’t trust him, Ava. He’s not telling everything.” The tremor in Mauve’s voice spoke volumes. Yancy had hurt her, and knowing Mauve as well as Ava did, her friend wouldn’t let that happen again. Nope. That relationship was over. Ava couldn’t see the two together anyway. They were both too stubborn. They’d be butting heads all the time.

Ava zipped her jeans, picked up her dirty clothes and stepped out of the stall. With no regret, she tossed the slimy garments into the trash can and went to wash her hands. “I understand how you feel, Mauve.”

“Would you feel the same way if it were Thorn?”

Ava squirmed under Mauve’s scrutiny. Would she feel differently if indeed it were? Could she throw away what they had because of a trust issue? She wasn’t sure.

She shrugged. “I don’t know, Mauve. I really don’t.”

“That’s my dilemma.”

Ava threw an arm over her friend’s shoulder. “Can I make a suggestion?”

Mauve gave her a sideways glance. “Okay, what?”

“Wait until we get back to South Beach and have Grayson behind bars. Maybe then things will look clearer. By then you can be more objective about what happened.”

“All right. But I’m not sitting next to him on the plane. Promise me you’ll make sure we don’t get seated together.”

“Okay, I’ll see that you sit with Kent or Owen, deal?”

Mauve smiled. “Deal.”

“So, let’s go see if we’re flying out of this godforsaken place or not.”

When Ava and Mauve reached the boarding area, Thorn, Owen and Kent were slumped into a row of airport seats, all looking about ten years older. It had been a rough few days, though Ava felt much better since she’d gotten cleaned up. She was excited about going home. Could already picture Thorn lying on her bed, naked, waiting for her to join him.

Hell, she wanted to do that right now. Even filthy, Thorn was a sight for her sore, tired eyes.

All she wanted was to be in his arms and make mad crazy love to him. Too bad they’d be on a plane for the next four hours.

Ava glanced around the terminal. “Where’s Yancy?”

“He went to the restroom.”

“Are you sure?” Mauve’s gaze darted around them. “For all we know, he could be off calling Grayson.”

“Yeah, I could be, but I’m not,” Yancy said in a hard tone that could have frozen water.

Mauve and Yancy glared at each other, neither giving an inch.

“Flight 207, destination Miami, is now boarding at gate three,” came over the intercom.

“That’s us.” Thorn rose and laced his fingers through Ava’s. “Let’s go home.”

Ava squeezed his hand and smiled. “Your place or mine?”

Thorn leaned in and whispered in her ear, “I don’t care as long as we’re together.”

## Chapter Twelve

“What do you mean, the disk’s empty? That can’t be. Yancy said it contained names and locations, enough to bring Grayson and his cronies down for good.” Thorn couldn’t believe what David Henson, his boss, was telling him. This was the last thing they needed.

“Somehow the disk was erased. Yancy couldn’t believe it either.”

Their escape had been too easy. The whole thing was a setup of some kind, but did this mean Yancy was a pawn, or a spy? Maybe he’d just pretended to be shocked that nothing was on the disk, a plan that could have been concocted by Grayson himself.

“That could explain why Grayson let us leave Louisiana. I thought it strange he’d given up trying to stop us, made it so simple to catch a flight out of the state.” Thorn glanced at Ava, who looked as nervous as he felt. What was Grayson planning? Was he, with help from Yancy, preparing to bring down Aztec Security?

“I don’t like this.” Ava’s words echoed his thoughts. “I have a bad feeling Grayson has just turned from prey to hunter, and Aztec is his target.”

“I’d keep a close watch on Yancy, just until we know he’s not a deep cover for the man.”

Yancy wasn’t Thorn’s biggest concern, keeping Ava safe was. He refused to let her out of eyeshot until Grayson was brought to justice. Who knew what the man had in mind? He glanced at her again, his body instantly responding to hers. Staying close to her wouldn’t be an unpleasant assignment—watching her every move, not at all.

He planned to enjoy it thoroughly.

“Any ideas as to how we do this without letting on to Yancy that he’s being watched?” David rose from his chair. “If he’s secretly working for Grayson, we need him to believe Aztec trusts him.”

“I guess that’s where I come in,” Mauve said from the doorway.

Ava turned to look at her friend. “No, Mauve. I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why, what’s going on?” David frowned, obviously confused.

Mauve strode across the room and stopped in front of his desk. “Trust me, David. I know Yancy. Better than I should.”

“You mean—”

She nodded.

“I thought you knew better.” David’s brows knitted together. “Working and sleeping with a co-worker is a bad idea, and against policy.”

“Since we’re confessing office romance...” Ava glanced at Thorn. “You might as well know that Thorn and I are dating.”

David frowned. “Dating? Is this true, Thorn?”

“Actually, I’d like her to move in with me. So I’d say we’re more than dating.”

“Oh, Thorn, really?” Ava threw herself into his arms.

“Only if you want to.”

She nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“But can we afford the rent?” Thorn returned his attention to David. “Do we still have jobs?”

“I might have to rescind that policy, though I thought it was a smart one to include. Right now losing our best agents is out of the question with Grayson still on the loose. This thing with Yancy, I’m going to need time to think about. Go home and get some rest. I’ll mull over the situation and call you when I make some decisions.”

\* \* \*

Ava took the keys to her apartment, her hands shaking as Thorn waited for her to open the door.

Being there with him seemed strange, but she was excited to be alone with him again, the first time since out in the Louisiana bayou. As soon as they’d arrived in Florida, a car had been waiting to take them to Aztec.

Ava opened the door, a rush of contentment taking hold when she saw all her favorite things. She loved her place, felt so happy here. It was nice to be home.

She turned to Thorn. “Come in and make yourself at home.”

Thorn closed the door behind them and glanced around. “Nice place.”

“I like it. Question—did you mean what you said to David?”

“What did I say again?”

Ava quirked her lips. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“You mean about living together?”

“Of course. Were you serious?”

He smiled. “I never say anything I don’t mean, Ava. Yes, I want us to live together.”

“Here, at my place?” She waved her arms around the living room.

“If that’s what you want, dear Ava. I’d live in a briar patch with you if that’s what you wanted.” He reached out and caressed her cheek.

Ava ran into his arms and hugged him. “I love you, Thorn.”

“Care to show me how much?” The lustful grin he wore gave his intent away.

“I’d love to, after I take a shower and wash the swamp out of my hair.”

“Good idea. I think I could use a good washing as well.”

Ava’s heart hitched at the idea of taking a shower together. “In the interest of time, maybe we could share the hot water.”

His eyes light up. “Saving time and energy is a good thing. I say, why not?”

Ava grasped his hand and led him down the hall.

Once in the bathroom, she headed straight for the shower and turned on the water.

Both undressed, neither looking at the other. Thorn was the first inside the stall, Ava only seconds behind him.

“Were you telling me the truth when you said you’d never watched a man shower?”

The memory of the hotel’s bathroom rushed back. She’d been naughty that day, threatening to come in and watch. “No, I didn’t lie. I’ve never showered with a man until now.”

“Well then, it’s a first for both of us.”

Ava smiled. “Really?”

He nodded.

“Then we need to make it special.” Ava reached for the soap and handed it to him. “You can wash me, and I’ll wash you. How does that sound?”

His soap-filled hand slid down her belly, working up a sudsy lather. One of his sandy brows shot up. "I think it sounds intriguing."

Ava closed her eyes and sighed, reveling in the feel of his touch. She planned to savor this experience, the first of many to come with Thorn.

"Turn around," he whispered next to her ear.

Ava's eyes popped open. She wasn't sure what he had planned. "What did you have in mind?"

Thorn laughed. "I want to wash your back. What did you think?"

Ava turned around, too embarrassed to admit what she had running through her head. Men were into all kinds of kinky shit. How could she know what Thorn was thinking?

He spun her around and grinned. "What do you say to using each of our bodies to wash the other's?"

"I like that idea." Ava sidled closer, rubbing against him. "Give me the soap and we'll make this really interesting."

His brow arched again. "How interesting?"

"Let's just say you won't get bored."

He handed her the bar and grinned. "I haven't had this much fun getting clean since I was in a tub of Mr. Bubble."

"Oh, this will be so much better than that. Trust me." Ava backed him against the shower wall, her hands working up the bar of soap.

With one hand, she lathered his chest, the white bubbles running down his flat stomach to his massive erection. *Lucky bubbles.*

Ava placed the soap in the shower tray and smiled. "I hope you enjoy this." She worked her hands around his cock, the soap making it easy to glide up and down the shaft.

When he groaned with pleasure, a gravelly sound that came from the back of his throat, her spirits soared. His passion ignited her own.

She quickened the motion, moving her palm and fingers over his engorged penis until he gripped her hand.

She looked up. "You don't like it?"

"Too much. Now come here. It's my turn to torture you."

She chewed at her bottom lip. “Oh, I like the sound of that. Do what you will, big boy.”

He laughed and pulled her into his arms, kissing her, a mating that set her on fire. His hand roamed down her belly, connecting with the nest of curls between her legs. His finger dipped into her heat then withdrew. He played with her until Ava was wet, her breathing ragged and hitched.

He broke their kiss and whispered, “I love you, Ava. You know that, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes, Thorn. I love you. Show me how much.” Her lips met his again, their tongues finding each other.

Ava’s desire overflowed. She wanted him now, was more than ready to feel him moving at a fevered pace inside her.

She guided him to her, moaning with pleasure when he drove deeply into her.

Gripping his ass, she held on tight, riding the waves of passion each thrust evoked until her body coiled and shuddered with release, his own coming just moments later.

As her breathing settled, Ava leaned on Thorn, listening to his heartbeat.

At that moment, Ava could see herself married to Thorn, with a couple of kids to complete the picture. A little boy who looked like him, a little girl who resembled her. Thorn Abbott was the man for her, and she wasn’t going to let him get away.

She’d dated a lot of men in the past eight years, but had never felt such an overwhelming calmness before, had never been willing to put her own needs behind someone else’s—ever. But now that she’d found Thorn and they’d confessed their love, she wanted it to last forever. For them to live together and be happy for the rest of their lives.

Whatever Thorn wanted, she wanted, and she’d work hard to show him that.

“What are you thinking about?” His question drew her back to him. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction, and that made her even more content. “I was thinking about our future. What I want for us.”

He grinned. “Care to let me in on that?”

“Now, Thorn, you know women have to have their little secrets. If men knew everything there was to know, they’d get bored.”

“Ava, darling, with you, I’ll never get bored. Trust me.”

“I hope you feel that way thirty years from now when I start to show my age.”



Her words brought a twinkle to his steel-gray eyes. “I’ll feel this way until the day I die, Ava Stanton.” He kissed her with such passion that Ava knew their future was set—neither had to ask, but knew, they’d be husband and wife one day soon.

## About the Author

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*The destruction of a historical landmark sparks a treacherous chain of events...and Reed Harris's life isn't all that's in jeopardy.*

## Dirty Little Lies

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Tall, dark and sinfully seductive, Bain Kavanagh won't stop until he gets his ex-fiancée, Reed Harris, back in his life and his bed. Danger and unbridled desire keep her there, for now. But with gun-toting treasure hunters thwarting their search for answers, Bain's resolve, his strength and his love will be tested.

A sweet little old lady drags freelance writer Reed Harris into a world of dark intrigue. Not only does Reed have merciless killers chasing her heels, but one ruthless male pursuing her heart. Spurred on by a lifelong dream of becoming an investigative reporter, Reed casts aside caution to help Bain solve a deadly mystery. Unfortunately, she has no idea what she's in for. It'll take more than her sharp wits and a nail file to get her out of it.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Dirty Little Lies:*

Bain had always been a very dominant lover. That had been one of the reasons why she'd never been able to move on. It was as if he knew her mind as well as her body. His allure wasn't so much about what he did physically to her body as what he said, how he looked at her, how he made her feel inside.

She could see already that he hadn't lost that gift. His hooded eyes spoke to her very soul, both promising her most secret desires, and demanding her full surrender. Submission.

“Undress for me, baby.”

A quiver of delight shook her entire body. His gaze was like a literal touch. Hot. Scorching. A brand. She peeled off her shirt first, enjoying the dangerous glimmer in Bain's eyes. The warmth of her mounting desire churned in her belly and gathered between her legs.

Next came her bra. She kept her eyes focused on his as she unclipped the clasp and let the straps slide down her arms. The garment fell away, and she cupped her hands over her tight nipples, thrilling in the sweet friction.

“Oh, yes. Play with them.” Perched on the edge of the mattress, Bain shifted, running his flattened hand over the visible bulge in his pants. “Look what you do to me.”

There could be no doubt what she was doing to him. Just like there could be no doubt what his I’m-going-to-eat-you-alive expression was doing to her. It was sheer agony, this game they played. They toyed with each other, delaying release until they were both clutching each other in trembling arms, their bodies slick with sweat.

It was only the beginning. Her body anticipated the delights sure to come.

After driving herself nearly crazy by pinching her nipples and rolling them between her fingers, she was finally granted permission to remove the rest of her clothing. Within moments, she stood before Bain’s hungry eyes, nude, vulnerable.

Bain motioned for her to come closer. Still seated, he gripped her hips between his hands and dragged his tongue down her torso, from the center of her breastbone to her belly button.

Reed’s knees were quaking. She was going to fall to the floor any minute now. She just knew it. She grabbed his shoulders and widened her stance.

Of course, the change in position opened up new opportunities to Bain, ones he didn’t hesitate to take advantage of. He slid a hand between her legs and teased her slick labia with a fingertip.

Quickly losing herself in the urgent need pounding through her body, Reed let her head fall back and moaned. Bain’s mouth devoured her nipples. His hand possessed her pussy, stroking, taking, claiming. She was his. She had always been his.

With hands, mouth and body, he turned her around until she was lying on the bed, legs dangling over the edge of the mattress. Through blurry eyes, she watched him undress.

That glorious body. Muscle and sinew. Fully masculine. Powerful. Her pussy clenched around aching emptiness.

“Please, I can’t wait much longer.”

“I won’t make you suffer too long. This time. I promise.” Bain lowered to his knees and lifted her legs, setting one on each shoulder. Then, being cruel beyond words, he

used his tongue, lips and fingers to torture her, driving her to the brink of ecstasy once, twice, three times, but stopping no more than a second before she'd found release.

"How I love the way you taste. How your body responds to my touch." He climbed up onto the bed, easing her into position farther up the mattress with gentle hands. "We're perfect for each other, don't you agree?"

Did she ever.

He wedged his hips between her parted thighs and teased her nether lips with the head of his cock, spreading slick juices down over her perineum and up over her clit. "We fit together in every way. Body. Mind. Soul."

His body was hard and hot over top of her. Rigid, with a latent strength she craved to experience more fully. She ran her hands up his chest, over his shoulders, down his back. His muscles rippled beneath satiny skin as he levered himself lower to kiss her.

She could taste herself on his lips, tongue. The smooth, sweet flavor added yet another sensation to an already overwhelming mix. She wanted release. No, she needed release. Whimpering, she begged into their joined mouths, "Bain, please."

He broke the kiss. "Soon, baby. You're not ready yet."

She was about to combust. Not ready? Could a girl get any readier?

He set about proving that indeed, a girl could.

*He could be everything she's hoped for. Or everything she fears.*

## A Desperate Longing

© 2007 Brenda Williamson

Two years after Kacy Carwell eluded kidnapping by a serial rapist, she still lives with nightmares and panic attacks on her painstakingly slow path to recovery. When a mysterious new neighbor moves in next door, her tenuous hold on her mental stability spirals out of control. She thinks she sees her attacker everywhere she goes, and no one believes her.

Only the new neighbor, the patient, kind and handsome Gulliver Knight, prevents her from sliding into mental deterioration. He alone feeds her desperate longing to feel normal again. His gentle, attentive care calms her frazzled nerves, while his passionate lovemaking quickly sends her tumbling from attraction to deep love. His affections work like a balm to her wounded spirit.

Then Kacy discovers that Gulliver is not all he appears to be. Her world crashes around her just as danger—this time real—threatens not only her sanity, but her life. Before she can untangle the web of deceit from her own broken emotions, someone will get hurt.

And someone will die.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for A Desperate Longing:*

“Are you ready to see the stars?” she asked.

“I already see them.” He smiled, placing his forehead against hers. “And they’re beautiful.”

Everything a girl dreamed of in a man stood holding her. Only she felt herself withdrawing. She didn’t want to take a perfectly decent guy and ruin his life by making him tend to her dementia. She felt safe with him, and yet all it took were words to push her into that other world, the one in which she doubted she’d ever fully trust anyone.

“Gulliver, don’t involve yourself with me.” She blinked and tears dropped. “I’m going crazy very slowly and I don’t want to take anyone with me.”

“What if I don’t let you go?” He brushed the tears from her cheeks. “What if it’s too late, what if I like crazy? Though I still contend you’re not, never were, and never will be.”

Kacy wanted to push him away. She could save him and she knew how. She would, too, if she hadn’t hurled headlong into the trap of love. Who’d believe it really did happen at first sight?

Gulliver wanted to protect her from everything, including herself, and she clung to the idea.

“Then I’d say you’re crazy.” She hiccupped a laugh and brushed her lips over his. “Come look at the skylight and the real stars.”

“Kacy?” His fingers threaded between hers as she tugged him toward the bed.

“Yes?”

“I have something I have to tell you.” He kissed her knuckles.

“Oh?”

He scooped her up in his arms and she squeaked in surprise.

“Sorry, I forgot to warn you I was going to touch you.”

“I don’t want you to warn me ever again.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him firmly. “Now what was it you wanted to tell me?”

“The best view has to be lying down.”

She giggled as he tossed her on the bed. He glanced at the skylight and then her. She held her hand up, wiggling her fingers for him to take them.

“View is better from down here.” Her voice lowered and she marveled at how seductive her tone could become with little effort. It worked, and he dropped down next to her.

“Hey, I like this.” He pulled her close.

“Me too.” She shifted on her side and snuggled tighter, never turning her gaze away from his features.

Gulliver kissed the corner of her mouth. “I was talking about the view up there.” He pointed.

She heaved a heavy sigh of resignation and flopped over on her back to look.

Brightly lit by both the moon and the stars, the sky floated like a picture on the ceiling. If she ignored the framed opening, she could imagine the room didn’t exist.



“I use to go camping with my parents.” Kacy searched for his hand on the bed next to her. “I loved being outside at night and I miss it.”

“Night comes every twenty-four hours, what’s too miss?”

“Not being there when things go ‘bump’. I don’t go outside after dark.”

Gulliver sat up and swung his legs off the bed. “Come on.” He took her hand and tugged her off the bed.

“Where are we going?” She watched him take a pillow and the comforter from the bed. “Gulliver, what are you doing?”

“Trust me.” He towed her along behind him.

“I do,” she whispered, and followed as he took her to the kitchen door. “We’re not—?”

“We are.” He led her to the middle of the backyard and spread the thick comforter on the grass. “Here we go. Better than the skylight, isn’t it?”

He sat and took his shoes off.

Kacy stood, apprehensive about being outside at night. Gulliver and intimacy took a backseat to her worries when she stared into the darkness surrounding them. Could someone see them?

“Kacy?”

She forced herself to look at Gulliver.

“I recall a short while back a woman wanting spontaneity. Is this a stupid idea?”

She shook her head. Wanting it didn’t mean she could handle it.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.” He drew his pant leg up, showing her the gun.

She smiled timidly and sat alongside him.

“It’s supposed to rain.” She plucked her shoes off and tossed them near his.

“Will you melt or shrink?” He fixed the pillow to the one side and lay down.

“No.”

“Then come down here with me.” He patted his chest and she laid her head on him.

“This can’t be very comfortable for you.”

“No? You’d be surprised at how much I like this.” He pulled the other half of the comforter over them. “Now watch the sky and if we’re lucky, we’ll see a shooting star to wish on.”

“I wouldn’t suggest holding your breath.” She sighed. “I never have good luck.”

As for wishes, she’d had one granted already—lying in Gulliver’s arms. It made her not want to be greedy and ask for more.

Gulliver kissed the top of her head. “Have faith,” he whispered.

Kacy didn’t say much as her brain picked through the conversations they’d had, replaying all the nice things he’d said. Five, ten, fifteen minutes went by without a word from Gulliver and she wondered how long they’d stay outside.

“Oh look,” she gasped as a shooting star made a liar out of her.

When Gulliver didn’t say anything, she turned her head and smiled. Adorably peaceful, he slept. She traced his lips and schemed of ways to wake him. She leaned close and brushed his firm mouth delicately with hers. His sleepy sigh excited her.

Taken by surprise, she didn’t fight the restraint of his hand behind her head. His kiss held her spellbound for a long time. The deep passion curled her toes as his tongue stroked hers. She pulled his hand from her waist up to her breast.

“Patience,” he whispered.

“I haven’t any.”

Gulliver read all the signals and his touch began a steady trek downward. Across her belly, over the front of her denims and right to the sensitive hub of her crotch, he rubbed. He applied pressure with his steady pushes to and fro, and Kacy moaned with delight as tears came to her eyes.

Greedily, she kept kissing him, hoping he’d not stop. His arm tightened around her. In his fervor, his lips traveled her cheeks and her eyelids and she reveled in his physical attention.

He tugged on her denims and the snap popped open. An exhilarating warmth spread over her entire body. Then he slid her zipper down. She tilted her head and watched his hand ease the waistband over her hip. Shifting to make it possible, she closed her eyes and concentrated on not giggling with excitement. A draft of air rushed inside the heated front of her panties and the laugh bubbled up and out of her.

“I like blue.” He slid his fingers between her legs.

“Okay,” she replied, not understanding why he brought up the subject of colors.

“Your panties and bra.” His stroke touched the silk against her clit, and his mouth claimed hers.

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