



Diamond
By
Mia Romano

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Dedication

For my daughter, Leslie. You've finally found a gem. Hold onto him and treasure him for the diamond that he is. And to Chris Muse—may she always bring sparkle to your life.

Prologue

Adara Alston stared in disbelief at the newspaper article about her sister. How had Kari gotten involved in such a dangerous situation? Now she was dead. She'd been found thrown into a ditch wearing very little clothing, leaving a five-year-old behind to be raised by strangers.

Anger, grief, and shame played through Adara's mind. Only seventy-two hours before she'd been on the telephone with her sister, listening to her little niece, Cici, babble in the background about Grover on Sesame Street.

In three more hours, Adara would be flying back to the hometown she'd left behind over four years before to attend her sister's funeral and make arrangements for her niece to be placed in a stable and loving home.

Adara didn't have a choice but to find foster care for the girl, and it tugged at her heart. Her own lifestyle didn't allow for raising a child. When you worked for the FBI, you never knew where you would be from one day to the next. Adara and Kari's parents were dead, so there were no grandparents to take over. And the girl's father...well, who knew who he might be? Kari had been the wilder of the two sisters and now she'd paid for it with her life, leaving a frightened five-year old behind as a legacy.

Chapter One

"I'm tired of women who resemble nothing but plastic Barbie dolls." Blake Roxbury shut his eyes and tossed the photo on top of the dented file cabinet. "These looks get women in trouble. I don't know why the FBI insists on hiring agents like this. Why in hell can't I pick a special agent like I've always done in the past? When did the rules change? Who else do you have for me?"

"Well, there's this one." Jim Parco handed over the last photo. "You've met her before, but never worked with her. The job's going to require someone who's a real knock out. Not that Adara isn't pretty, but she looks too innocent. I'd say the reason you have to interview her, if she's the one you want, is because of her relationship to the victim and the fact she's personally involved in the case. The dead woman was her sister."

"I don't care." Blake uncrossed his long legs he'd propped on his desk, then stood with the photo between his thumb and forefinger. His heart skipped a beat. She was a natural beauty, nothing fake about this one. "She's perfect."

"You've gotta be *kidding*." Jim dropped his body into the worn brown leather chair opposite the desk. "Those people will eat her for breakfast. You know how rough that business is."

"Maybe. But she's...refreshing." Blake ran his finger along the outline of her face in the photograph. "What's her name?"

"She goes by, Adara, Adara Alston."

"Call her. See if she can meet me tomorrow at noon."

Jim shrugged and pulled out his cell phone. "Whatever you say, boss. Anything else you want me to tell her?"

"Yes," Blake turned from the window where he was studying traffic. "Tell her to wear something that leaves no doubt in my mind she can handle the job. She's already seen the qualifications."

"Err...um...you want me to tell her to come in wearing a see-through thong and a Wonder Bra?" Jim let out a snort. "Can I sit in on the interview?"

"Hell no, but you can start ironing those damn pants you wear in here every other day. You look like you sleep in 'em. While you're at it, try combing that mop on your head and getting a fucking haircut. Your undercover job on the Smith case was over two weeks ago. Don't take advantage of our friendship."

"Hell, Blake." Jim stood and tucked in his shirt. "Don't know why I put up with you sometimes." He teased. "Not that I mean any disrespect or anything, sir."

"Two reasons. One, I saved your ass from being shot last month. And two—" Blake reached in his pocket handing Jim his direct deposit slip. "You like getting paid."

"Good point. I'll just make that call to Ms. Alston." He folded the slip, stuck it in the worn back pocket of his pants and flipped open his cell phone.

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Adara put the final touches on her French manicure and combed out the strands of auburn brown hair falling across her shoulders. She wanted this assignment—knew she could do a good job at bringing down the underground porn ring in the small town of Bakersville. These people were slick; she'd studied the modeling agency they used as a front for days. Nothing would be more pleasing to her than to put an end to the

hideous games Luscious Lingerie was using to lure innocent young woman into their pornography ring.

She'd buried her sister, Kari, two weeks ago because of it.

Adara recalled the picture taken by the local press of Kari lying in that muddy ditch by the highway with her throat slashed, wearing nothing but a stiletto heel on her left foot and a small diamond chip embedded in her forehead.

People in Bakersville were in denial about the activity taking place in their quiet community. Things like this only happened in places like Miami or Los Angeles. The woman they'd found in the ditch surely had been driven in and dumped there. They'd tried to bury the event like a dog would bury a bone. Now the FBI had been brought in to investigate, and the Bakersville townspeople were in an uproar.

They didn't want trouble stirring up their sleepy little town. A town where people slept with their front doors unlocked and children were free to play in their neighbors' yards long past dark. Mostly, they were angry that the modeling agency had chosen Bakersville as its new home.

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"Send her in," Blake jammed the button on the intercom with his index finger. This was the moment of truth. He combed a hand through his dark hair, wondering if Special Agent Alston would live up to her kick ass reputation. The thought of having to conduct something resembling a formal interview before sending her undercover, had his blood boiling. But when she walked through the door to his office, he wasn't prepared to have the breath knocked out of him. Her picture hadn't done her justice.

The woman standing before him had her hair pinned up neatly yet seductively, with perfect tendrils curling around her face. Her crisp, dark linen suit spoke of class and sophistication. Yet it couldn't mask the luscious curves lurking just below the surface of the navy blue fabric.

"Mr. Roxbury?" Adara stretched out her hand. "We *do* have an

appointment for today don't we?" She pulled her Blackberry from her satchel with her free hand and checked her schedule.

"Yes...yes, we do. I'm sorry." Blake stood and took her hand. She was a goddess. He inhaled a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she gave him a firm handshake.

"Please, have a seat," he motioned to the chair opposite his desk and sat back down. Blake indicated the dingy room with a movement of his hand. "Sorry about the temporary setup. I'm afraid this is the best we could get. Bakersville doesn't want us here stirring things up. At least the local police department has been cooperating. We're lucky they gave us this space for an office."

He flipped the desk fan on high and pointed it in his direction. The temperature of the room seemed several degrees hotter than before Adara walked in. He reached up to loosen his collar and propped his feet on the desk.

"I take it you've looked over my credentials." Adara crossed her long, shapely legs and tugged down the hem of her skirt while noting the chipped, faded green paint on the walls. "You'll find that I'm well qualified. I also have a personal vendetta against this pornography ring. I hope that won't be a hindrance in your decision."

Blake took his legs down from the desk, sat up, and shuffled a few papers in front of him, tapping them into a neat stack. The only difficulty he had with his decision was standing at full salute below the zipper of his dress pants. *Damn, what the hell was he thinking?*

"No...it won't hinder my decision, Ms. Alston. I'm well aware of your tragic loss. I'm sorry to hear about your sister."

"Thank you. It has been difficult, but I'm coping with it. I'm sorry to say that this is the first time I've been back in my hometown since leaving for college. I wish it had been under better circumstances."

Blake studied her while willing his libido to calm itself. Would he be able to work with her knowing she'd be shedding most of her clothes in exchange for modeling lingerie on the runway for Luscious Lingerie? He hadn't expected this type of reaction upon meeting her face-to-face.

Normally he was under control at all times—including his desires.

He found himself undressing her with his eyes while she sat, slowly swinging her high-heeled foot, unconscious of what he assumed to be a habit. He mentally scolded himself. The last time he'd *assumed* something, the woman had picked his pockets clean to the tune of eight grand, *excluding* the damn cost of the trip to Paris. You would think he would have learned his lesson about being attracted to such a beautiful woman. Yet, here he was, fantasizing about things he had no business thinking about. Like how good she'd be in bed.

"I can handle the job," she said, although he barely heard her thanks to the fog clouding his mind.

Blake sat up straighter in his chair, shaking his head slightly as if to clear his brain. "Have you ever done any modeling while undercover, Ms. Alston? I didn't notice anything in your file. Looks like you've mainly done work in drug trafficking."

"No. But please, I can do this." Adara closed her eyes as if to express her plea. "Just give me a chance. I've been studying the requirements of Luscious Lingerie's employees. I know what they're looking for."

"And what might that be?" Blake cleared his throat and grabbed a pencil from the desk, nearly snapping it in half. Why was he trying to find a reason not to give this woman the assignment? She'd passed every requirement of what he needed on a professional level as well as in his bed. Here he was thinking about things he shouldn't be again. What the hell had gotten into him?

Adara sat up straighter in the worn leather chair. "They're looking for women who dress in a classic, professional manner with corporate attire on the outside and sexually-enticing lingerie underneath. It's their signature style. Their models start out on the runway in drab corporate blue, slowly revealing what's underneath. By the time they reach the first turn of the runway, they've shed their jackets and blouses. The skirts come off next, revealing what the buyer really wants—elegant women. Luscious Lingerie deals only with high class buyers. They don't want cheap looking

women. Their after-hour clients demand class, from what information I've been able to gather."

"Tell me what else you know." Blake urged her on with a motion of his hand.

She nodded. "After my sister disappeared, I found some notes that were quite shocking in a box of her things. To the local police, I'm sure they looked like innocent love letters, but I know better. Before Kari took this job, she only dated occasionally and never got that close to any man. When I questioned police about the letters, they told me they'd dusted them for fingerprints, and couldn't get a single good print from any of them. The letters were all written on a computer in a generic font."

Now, have I done my homework?" A hint of defiance laced her voice as she took in the dingy green wallpaper behind Blake's desk. Adara was tired of having to prove herself to her superiors every time she was assigned to a complex case.

The man was starting to infuriate her. She'd heard what a hard-ass he could be from some of the other agents who had worked with him. And he had the look to match his name. Her heart fluttered when she took a quick glance into his dark copper eyes, making her want to melt into those pools of sin. But regardless of what he was doing to her insides, she was going to stand her ground and show him she was qualified to go undercover on this case.

"I'm impressed with your research, Ms. Alston, and I'd like to take a look at those letters, if you don't mind. That being said, you haven't answered my question. Have you ever done any modeling? We can't afford to blow our cover."

Adara was stunned for a brief second. Damn the man! She stood and leaned over his desk in a stance that told him she was in charge of the situation. Her skirt caught on a splintered corner of the desk and hiked up, revealing her weapon strapped to her thigh. She'd show him fucking modeling, damn it.

"Let me add one more thing to my resume, Mr. Roxbury." Adara was taking a risk that might get her fired for being unprofessional. It

might be a good thing that she'd applied for a job at the Pentagon a few weeks back in an effort to settle down in one place for more than a week at a time. She'd have a desk job in a permanent office if the Pentagon hired her. It would mean being able to spend more time with Cici.

She watched Blake's eyes practically bulge from his head. She loved the feeling of domination and control and Blake appeared to be enjoying it if the smirk on his face was any indication.

Adara calmly walked to the office door and snapped the lock in place. When she turned, she took on a personality that would make a saint willing to fall into the flames of hell.

She twisted her body in all the right directions, slowly removing her outer jacket and unbuttoning her blouse. Then she tossed them on the floor and posed in front of him, her breasts filling her black silk bra.

Blake inhaled a sharp breath, held it, and rubbed his hands down his face. His cock begged to be released from the prison of his pants, and a small wet spot formed on his outer fly.

"Holy shit," he murmured into his palms. "What have I unleashed?"

"Shall I continue?" Adara leaned in, bringing her cleavage to within inches of his face. "Look at me and tell me if you still think I lack the necessary qualifications for this job. Do you think this is what it takes for a female to get an assignment? To flaunt her body in front of you? I'm more qualified than any man you have on assignment right now when it comes to doing a job. It has nothing to do with having a great *rack*, as you men like to call it."

Blake spread his fingers, peeked through them, and took in the beauty of her body. "Put your clothes back on, Ms. Alston. You had me when you walked in the door."

Chapter Two

Adara studied Luscious Lingerie's employment application and pulled out the false identification card the FBI had given her once Blake gave her the go-ahead to go undercover. It was going to take some getting used to answer to the name Nikki Diamond. Who the hell had come up with that one?

She fumbled with the necklace she'd been given, along with strict orders never to remove it. There was a small video device hidden below the gemstones that was quite sophisticated. It had the capability of panning at a one-hundred and eighty degree angle with a 400x zoom in and out. She'd worn a similar piece of jewelry in the past, but this one seemed extremely elegant and expensive. The video chip alone must have cost a small fortune. Perhaps that's what bothered her more than anything—knowing that Blake Roxbury would watch her every move, even when she wore her most seductive outfits. Funny how she hadn't been bothered standing half-naked in his office. Now, if she could only convince Luscious Lingerie she was right for the job, they could start the investigation. What if the modeling agency didn't want to hire her? She recalled Jim's words when he'd phoned her to make the appointment with Blake: *"Wear something appropriate for the job. If you can convince Blake Roxbury to hire you, then you can convince anyone, sweetheart."* The comment had been unprofessional. It made her furious that some men thought female agents had to stoop to such measures.

Well, she *had* convinced him. Now she was fretting over whether she'd worn the right type of clothing into Luscious Lingerie. The woman at the desk was eyeing her up and down with a scowl. Maybe she should have worn something that showed off her figure a little more. Instead, she'd chosen a light pink two-piece suit with a white camisole underneath, which revealed a small amount of cleavage. But hadn't Blake said they wanted class?

No need worrying about it now. She'd just have to make the best of it. When Adara completed the last question on the application, she stood, smoothed her skirt, and walked with a smile to the front desk.

"I look forward to hearing from you." She handed the receptionist her application. "You know, it's always been a dream of mine to be a model." That probably sounded corny, but the receptionist seemed to like what she'd heard and became friendly and chatty. She seemed to change moods faster than a streak of lightning.

"We'll be in touch soon, Ms. Diamond. Thanks for coming in this morning. Luscious Lingerie has lots of perks for its employees. If you are chosen for the job, I'm sure you'll see your dream soon become a reality. Our plan is to become the next Victoria's Secret. Once we do that, we'll move our headquarters to New York. We started our agency here, because it was the owner's hometown until a few years ago. I guess he wanted to prove to the townspeople he could make something of himself. They used to consider him somewhat of a slacker, from what I gather. You know how men are about their egos."

She let out a shrill laugh that sent a shiver up Adara's spine. "If you have any questions in the meantime, call and ask for me. My name's Paula."

She extended her hand, and Adara shook it. *Ms. Diamond*. That would take some getting used to. She'd almost flubbed and written down her real name on the application. And when she'd entered her address, she'd felt like a prostitute writing down the address of the hotel where she now resided. Adara couldn't take the chance of staying in her sister's old apartment. Eventually, she'd have to take care of getting the place cleaned

out so the landlord could put it up for rent.

Her worst job so far was finding a foster home for her niece. The little girl would have to go through therapy for months, and Adara knew from her own troubled past just how traumatic that particular type of therapy could be. She'd gone through something similar when her parents were killed in a car wreck. Maybe that's what had led to some of Kari's problems. She'd been in the backseat of the car that tragic afternoon, and by some miracle had survived without a scratch.

Adele and Kari were fortunate to have loving grandparents to take them in. Too bad Cici wasn't going to have the same privilege. In times like these, Adara often thought about choosing another line of work. Maybe she'd seriously consider it after this case, and take Cici home with her so she could bring up the child in a home filled with love. It was the least she could do.

The ring of her cell phone stopped her chain of thought. She pulled the device from her handbag, not recognizing the number on its display. With a push of a button, she was connected with the sound of heavy breathing, then a click. Apparently the idiot calling didn't know how easily his number could be traced.

Adara unlocked her car and dialed Blake. "Hey, I'm on my way," she said, then disconnected. No way was she going to explain anything on a cell.

Ten minutes later she pulled in the back parking lot of their make-shift office, and climbed the rickety, rusted stairwell, careful not to catch one of her high heels in the steps' metal mesh openings.

Blake opened the door before she could knock and pulled her inside, slamming the door behind her. "What gives? How did it go down at Luscious Lingerie?"

She noticed how he eyed her from head-to-toe, giving her a look that could have been either one of appreciation or of disapproval. Not that she cared. She had an excellent record of solving cases because of her professional skills, not her looks.

"Hello to you, too." Adara moved to a corner chair and threw down

her purse. "I think it went well. I should know if I get an interview by tomorrow evening. Right now, we have a slight problem." She pulled her cell phone from the side pocket of her handbag and brought up the number of the breather.

"Can you trace this number?" Adara handed the phone to Blake, and couldn't help but notice the touch of his fingers against hers. "I seemed to have picked up a heavy breather already." Blake still only half held the phone, and the current flowing through his thumb to her index finger sent little pulses of excitement through her. *Why in the hell didn't he just take the thing? Damn him.*

"Let me see what I can do." He finally pulled the cell into the palm of his hand and went to the computer. After ten minutes of typing and searching, he raked his hand through his crop of dark hair. "Unbelievable. I'm not getting anything at all on this number. I've searched through every database we have. Operational Technology Division should be able to come up with something. It's their specialty."

"How could that be possible?" Adara moved to stand behind his chair. "I'm *telling* you, someone called from that number and there has to be a way to find out who did it."

Blake turned in the swivel chair, causing it to send out a squeak that sent a chill up her spine. "I'll keep trying." He handed the cell phone back to her. "Keep me posted on anything else that might seem out of the ordinary."

He reached for a pen and tablet on the desk and jotted down the number of the caller. "OT will contact the phone company. This guy probably used a pre-paid cell to make the call. They should be able to triangulate the signal and at least get the location." Glancing up as if to dismiss her, he pulled open the center drawer of the desk and shuffled through some papers.

"Keep me posted on what OT finds out." Adara worked her way to the door. "I'm going to grab a bite to eat. Can I bring you anything?"

Blake looked up and arched his brow, as if he'd never had anyone offer to bring him food before. An uneasy silence filled the room while his

gaze roamed over her, causing her to shift uncomfortably. He opened his mouth to speak, and then clamped his jaw shut.

Adara took that as her cue to leave. "See you." She slammed the door shut with her words. What was it about this man that had her so unsettled? She had enough to worry about without trying to feed the man's ego. Right now she wanted to be as far away from Blake Roxbury as she could get.

* * * * *

"We'd like you to come in this afternoon and do some modeling for us." Adara heard Luscious Lingerie's receptionist tap a pencil on her desk as she made her request. "Mr. Groves wants to make sure that whomever he hires will be able to stand up to his expectations. Is two o'clock convenient for you, Ms. Diamond?"

"Y-yes, that will work just fine," Adara stammered. "Is there anything I need to bring to model in, or will Luscious Lingerie provide my clothes?"

"Mr. Groves will choose our outfits. Just make sure your hair and make-up are done before you arrive. We'll see you at two." The receptionist disconnected.

Adara's nerves jangled. Here was her one and only chance to get her foot in the company's door. If she blew it, then...well, she couldn't. She had to make sure Mr. Groves liked what he saw.

Adara carefully applied her make-up and spun her hair up in a French twist. She glanced in the mirror, and saw that she'd transformed herself from what she considered plain, into an image that resembled Kari. Her hands shook as she applied her lipstick. She'd never noticed such a resemblance to her sister before in her reflection. Would the modeling agency see it, too? Should she play down her make-up? Did they want a clean, wholesome look, or one of a seductress? How was she ever going to pull this off?

Cici's image flashed before Adara. She shut her eyes, inhaled a long

breath, and then let it out slowly. She had to do it for her little niece.

* * * * *

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Diamond, I'm Kevin Groves, owner of Luscious Lingerie." The pudgy man extended his hand, and the overpowering scent of his aftershave drifted in the air, nearly causing Adara to choke.

She gripped his fingers and withdrew her hand as soon as she could. "I'm pleased to meet you as well. Thank you for allowing me to model for you."

"Did you bring along your portfolio? I'd like to see some of the other modeling you've done before we get started. Your application said that you'd done some modeling for a clothing store in New York."

"I'm afraid I wasn't allowed to keep any of the photographs from that job. They became property of the store through an arrangement of the photographer."

He nodded. "That happens on occasion. It's a shame you don't have them." His brows knit together while he studied her.

"I was hoping my personal portfolio would do." She gave him another warm smile, hoping she sounded convincing. Blake had arranged to have one done up, and she was pleased with it, but apparently the owner wasn't interested.

"Well then, let's get started and see what you can do. I hope you won't mind if we snap a few photos during your trial run. It will give us a chance to see if you look natural and comfortable."

If only Mr. Groves knew just how *well* she understood. She'd seen a few of the shots of her sister on the credenza behind the receptionist when she'd checked in a few minutes ago. It had been all she could do to retain her composure.

Adara cleared her throat. "No, I don't mind at all. I'm ready anytime you are."

"Great, the dressing room is down the hallway to your left. You'll

find the few outfits I've chosen for you to get started with. Just dial extension three-three when you're ready for the first run. I'll get the camera crew to set up the lighting."

Adara pressed on her necklace to start the tiny video camera inside it as she entered the dressing room. With just one touch, it would record everything within a one-hundred-eighty-degree radius. She thought about the moves she'd practiced after studying the modeling video that had made Kari so proud when she'd sent it to Adele the month before.

Kari had been pleased with her accomplishments, and Adara hated to admit that modeling had come naturally to her sister. Would she be able to mimic the moves and sultry looks Kari had used so casually?

The next thirty minutes would tell the story.

Five outfits hung on a small hook on the back of the dressing room door. Adara fingered fine lace, black leather, and the beautiful sequins of a cute baby doll outfit. She'd never dare purchase such an outfit for herself. Now, she was about to wear it for several pairs of eyes to see—male eyes.

And as for the shoes, she'd seen those black leather boots on models before. Her mind drifted to what it would be like to wear those leather boots to bed. To dig those spiked heels into the creamy white mounds of Blake Roxbury's taut, sexy ass.

She closed her eyes and imagined him pulling the leather strings from the corset, tugging on them with his sensual mouth, and freeing her breasts. Then gazing at her with passion in those unusual dark copper colored eyes. She blinked. *Damn, where had that thought come from?*

Adara opened her eyes and found her hand kneading the supple leather thong panty that matched the corset.

She released it and fingered the red sequined baby-doll set, deciding that it was the least revealing of the three outfits, and slipped it off the hanger. Standing in the dressing room fully-clothed, she somehow felt exposed, as if cameras were recording her every move. She inspected the small area, and found nothing that backed up the thought. Adara reached up to her necklace to shut off the video she wore while she dressed. There wasn't any reason for Blake to watch this. She had an

image of him already burned into her mind that made her cheeks flame with color. No need in adding to her embarrassment.

"Showtime," Adara said. She reached for the telephone and punched in the extension she'd been given. "Mr. Grover, I'm ready." She gazed over her appearance and brushed a nervous hand down her stomach. The mirror reflected a seductress, not the Adara she woke up to every morning with her hair tumbled in disarray and a shoddy T-shirt hanging limply from her body. Where had this girl come from? Something about that vision of herself gave her a strange feeling of excitement, a wildly delicious feeling of wickedness. This type of lingerie could quickly become addicting if she wasn't careful. It boosted her confidence, and when she walked down the hall to start her walk down the runway, she became the sensual woman every man dreamed would warm his bed. Luscious Lingerie had awakened a side of her she never knew existed.

The flash of the camera, the bright lights, having all eyes on her every move—it could easily become an obsession. She had to remind herself she was here for a job; an assignment that could end up being a dangerous mission and could end her life in a heartbeat.

With each change of lingerie, she became more confident in her modeling ability. Finally, she was brave enough to sport the black leather outfit and thigh-high boots she'd caressed in her brief fantasy less than an hour ago.

Sweat beaded her brow when she made the final turn at the end of the runway. Kevin Groves drew his brows together and looked puzzled, even unhappy. She cringed. What had she done wrong?

Seconds later during the final turn, she heard him clap his hands together and yell out to her to stop. He jumped up on the runway and continued clapping.

"Bravo, Ms. Diamond. You have the job. Meet me back in my office and we'll finish up the paperwork."

"Oh," she paused, as relief spread through her. "The look on your face scared me. I thought you weren't pleased with my work. Thank you. I won't disappoint you."

"You did an excellent job. I'm very pleased with what I see." His gaze moved over her body. "It's just that you seem...well, familiar. You remind me of a young lady who recently modeled for us. Kari was her name. Unfortunately, we lost her when she moved on to something much better."

"I see." Adara swallowed around a lump in her throat. *And a little girl is without a mother.* "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes, such a tragedy." Kevin headed for his office, but suddenly halted and turned to face her from down the isle. "Oh, Ms. Diamond, by the way—you can choose any of the outfits you've modeled today as your first bonus. Just call it one of the perks of the job. The harder you work and the better you are, the more perks you get. And I see a lot of perks coming your way."

Chapter Three

"I'm in the door. They loved how I handled the runway and my moves and expressions. My first job is tomorrow night." Adara said a little breathlessly, sitting across from Blake. "Now do you doubt my abilities?" She arched her brow with a satisfied smirk on her face.

"So, that's a good thing. And no, I've never doubted your abilities as an agent." Blake rubbed the five-o'clock shadow darkening his chin. "Are you going to remove the necklace so I can unload the data?" He reached in her direction, motioning for her to hand it over. "You did take some footage, didn't you?"

"Mr. Roxbury, there is no need to insinuate that I failed to do my job. I've been an agent for over five years. I think I know how to handle things." Adara undid the clasp and tossed the necklace on his desk. "What is it with you when it comes to my skills? Do you treat every woman you work with in this manner?"

"Only the ones who might need a little coaching." Blake turned and took a specially designed video chip from the back of the necklace. I've seen the video already. You've never done this kind of assignment before. I'm just trying to help."

"If you think I'm not capable of handling this job, why did you consider me for your team?"

Blake ignored her and pulled up the footage of the hallways and the dressing room. "Looks like they keep the place pretty classy," he

mumbled, resting his chin in his hands. "I can't say the same for this place. The shower's ice cold."

"At least my hotel has hot water." Adara smiled at his back. "Although it doesn't have much else."

She heard Blake's sharp intake of breath as he watched the video. He let out a long whistle. His voice hitched when he turned to face her. "Quite impressive. You get better every time I see it."

Adara watched the image of herself in the black leather outfit walk across the screen. Was Blake watching the video again in an attempt to belittle her? Maybe embarrass her?

Blake stared at her. "This could be a problem

"Problem? You think I should have turned off the video for some reason? I know when to turn the damn video off and on. I'm not an idiot."

He didn't give her an answer, but leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes as if he had a headache.

She glared at him. "Look, I've got better things to do this evening than argue with you. If you'll give me the necklace, I'll put it back on and be on my way."

"What's the rush? It's not like there's a whole lot of night life in this dump of a town. You need to keep a low profile." Blake turned his back and she heard the computer humming with activity.

"Since the police have finally released Kari's apartment, I have to get it cleaned out and figure out what to do with her belongings." Her voice snapped. "I also have a frightened little girl living three towns away who needs me. Or have you forgotten?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound harsh." Blake rubbed his forehead "I've been cooped up in this hole too long. Why don't I go along and give you a hand? It might not be safe for you to go by yourself. You never know who might be watching."

He reached to shut down the computer. "Here." He handed the necklace back to her and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair. "Remember to never take that off unless you're instructed to do so."

"I'd rather do this by myself, but I appreciate your offer." Adara

stood with her feet apart in a determined stance. "This part of it is my problem."

"I'm not asking your permission. I'm going with you." Blake motioned for her to walk in front of him to the door. "Let's get moving."

* * * * *

Adara stood outside her sister's apartment door and took a deep breath. As much as she hated to admit to it, she was glad Blake had insisted on coming along. If for nothing else, his moral support was a small comfort.

"I don't know what we'll find here," she said, turning to watch his expression. He was standing so close, it made turning difficult. Did he think she was so weak that she might faint and he would need to catch her?

Her hand shook when she inserted the key into the deadbolt, making it awkward to get the key into the lock. Kari had mailed her the key months ago, begging her to visit. Now she was finally here—far too late.

A steady hand reached from behind her, covered her trembling fingers, and helped guide the key into the lock. The sexual static from Blake's touch had Adara's stomach twisting in knots.

"There." He pushed the door open, and the combined scents of stale air and musky dampness slid over them. The place was a mess, partly due to the way Kari had kept house, and from the local police dusting for fingerprints and searching for answers.

Adara bent down and lifted a small musical toy from the living room carpet. A nursery rhyme jingled through the air while a tear slid down her face. Cici hadn't even gotten to take her toys with her. Adara swore under her breath. "Damn, it shouldn't have to be this way."

She tried to hold in her emotions, but in spite of herself she began to sob.

Blake knelt down and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Are you

okay?"

"Do I have a choice?" She choked on the words. "I have to be strong—for Cici."

"Want me to help you gather her toys? I'm sure she'd feel better having some familiar things around to play with."

"Yes, thank you." Adara wound up the musical toy again and brushed her hand over the plastic globe. "I should have been here for Kari more than what I was when she was alive."

"You're doing all you can."

"Yes, *now*. But what about two months ago? What about when she called and Cici begged me to come play with her and spend the night? Where was I then?"

"On an assignment. Doing your job." Blake gently pulled Adara to her feet and turned her face to his. "Being an agent comes with a price. Either you choose to have a family and get a job doing something else, or you choose to make the FBI your life and stay unattached. You can't have both. I tried and it didn't work. But then again, that's only my opinion."

She gazed into his eyes. "Do you ever regret it?"

"Regret what? My choice?"

"Yes." She studied him.

Blake reached up and brushed an auburn curl from her face. "I think I'm starting to," he whispered.

Chapter Four

Blake crushed his lips against hers, and she found herself responding to the gentle probe of his tongue. His embrace tightened before he reached up with one hand and undid the pins holding her hair in place, allowing it to tumble over her shoulders.

His fingers recklessly wove through the auburn tendrils and he pulled her head backward, breaking the kiss. His mouth worked its way down the soft ivory hollow of her neck and across to her shoulder, where he inhaled a deep breath against her skin.

Then he suddenly broke free and turned away, rubbing the back of his neck in what seemed to be frustration.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me," he blurted out. "Shit!"

Then he turned back around, seeming to have regained his composure. "What do you say we gather a few things and get out of here? You're far too emotional to tackle the job of packing right now."

She was too emotional? What about the little display of emotion *he'd* just demonstrated? Or had he just decided to take advantage of her fragile state of mind? Adara rubbed a finger over her lips, which still tingled with the memory of his kiss.

"We should go." Her face shaded with a blush to her cheeks. "After you promise me that won't happen again."

"It won't." Blake's voice held a hard edge. "My mistake." He bent to pick up the musical toy.

"If you want, just leave your rental car at the office. I can drop you at the hotel. You shouldn't be driving in the state you're in." He said in a dry tone. "I'll make arrangements for Jim to pick you up in the morning."

If Blake Roxbury knew the condition she was in was caused by his passionate kiss, he'd think twice about offering to give her a ride to the hotel. *Damn him.* Just after making the statement about it not happening again, she found herself fantasizing about tumbling with him onto her bed.

"I could use a drink." She put the last of the toys in a plastic bag she'd found under the kitchen sink. "Care to join me?"

"Thanks, maybe another time." Blake straightened from his position on the floor. "I'll be glad to stop at the liquor store and pick up whatever you'd like on the way, though."

"Sure." Adara nibbled on her lower lip. "I understand."

"Ready?" Blake pulled the overloaded plastic bag from her hand. "Tomorrow, I'll arrange for someone to come in and finish this for you, if you want. I know it's been hard on you. I want you to put all your concentration into finding out all you can down at Luscious Lingerie. You can't do that if you're worrying about cleaning this place up. Just let me know where you want the stuff sent."

He headed to the door. "There are some local charities you might consider."

Was that what it came down to in the end? A person's entire possessions, collected throughout a lifetime, just shoveled up and deposited inside a Salvation Army store? Adara shuddered at the thought. It seemed so cold and impersonal. Maybe that's how Blake handled everything in his life. Keep it cold, and shove it aside like yesterday's garbage when it no longer had a use.

"It's not that simple." She brushed by him to stand in the hallway with the key. "Let me sleep on it and I'll let you know in the morning."

When Adara went to lock the door, her foot slipped on something in the entryway. Looking down, she spotted a square piece of paper. She picked it up and flipped it over, and a small gasp slipped from her lips. It

was a picture of her in the black lingerie. Below it, three words had been typed:

You're next, Beautiful.

Blake gritted his teeth and snatched it from her. "Let me see that." His teeth remained clenched with his words. "How in hell...?"

"You tell me," Adara whispered. She leaned against the wall, put her head back, and shut her eyes.

"Wait a minute. This couldn't have come from that video."

Her head snapped to attention and she leaned over to study the picture. "How can you tell?"

"The video on my computer shows your left hand fumbling with the necklace. This photo shows your hands clasped behind your back."

"Are you sure?" She reached to inspect the photo more closely.

"Damn right, I'm sure." Blake tilted her chin up with his index finger and forced her to look at him. "If there's one thing I never miss, it's an important detail like this. The image of that video is etched into my brain. Every damn minute of it."

He shoved the picture in the front pocket of his shirt with his free hand. "Maybe I'll take you up on that drink after all."

"Make mine a double." Adara reached for the bag of toys after locking the door.

* * * * *

Blake flipped his turn signal of his BMW and whipped into the hotel parking lot. "So when do you plan to visit your niece?"

"I plan on driving down to Carrington this weekend. I want to surprise her. So far, I'm not scheduled for anything at Luscious Lingerie after Friday night's event. Care to tag along?" She gave him a smile when he glanced at her briefly, noticing he didn't answer.

The couple glasses of wine they'd drunk at Jasmine's Lounge had done its job of relaxing her. Blake seemed a little less on edge, and had become more talkative. She stole a glance at him when he pulled into the

parking space. His rugged good looks weren't helping her keep her distance. How long had it been since she'd had mind-blowing sex with a handsome man?

"Too damn long," she said, uttering the words out loud without realizing it.

"What did you just say?" Blake shut off the engine.

"Nothing." She felt the heat of her blush in her cheeks.

"It didn't sound like 'nothing' to *my* ears."

"Well, it was." She reached over her seat and pulled the bag of toys from the back. "Thanks for the ride and the company."

"Oh, I'm not going *anywhere*. Do you honestly think I'd let you stay by yourself in a strange motel room after this?" He pulled the photo from his shirt pocket as a reminder. "You're not safe until I get to the bottom of this. First, you have a heavy breather call we can't trace. And now, we have a threat to your life."

"I'm a big girl. You don't think I became an agent by being a wimp did you? Perhaps you underestimate my abilities, Mr. Roxbury." She forced the words from her lips in anger. Something about this man flared her temper *and* her desires. "Besides, I only have one bed."

"Did I say anything about sleeping in a bed? I've slept in a chair on more than one occasion.

"Sorry," she gave him a grin. "No chair. Just the basics, I'm afraid. A bed, a bathroom and a television set that flickers on every other channel."

"Nice try, babe. I know the place at least has some fucking carpet and an extra pillow." He opened the car door. "I'll probably be asleep as soon as my head hits the floor. You won't even know I'm around."

"Um..."

"What?" Blake paused before getting out of the car, acting more than a little agitated.

"I use the extra pillow as a backrest. So, sorry. No extra pillow." She gave him a grin.

He blew a breath through clenched teeth and walked around to open her door. "I certainly wouldn't want to deprive you of being all

cushy and snug," he said when she got out of the car.

They didn't speak during the walk up the flight of steps to Adara's room. The echo of their footsteps seemed magnified in the awkward silence. She pulled out her key card and pushed it into the slot, waiting for the green light to blink.

"At least they have modern locks." Blake said when she shoved open the door. "The room doesn't look too shoddy, either." He walked in behind her and flipped on the bedside lamp. Then he reached for the TV remote.

"Men are really attached to those things, aren't they?" Adara laughed when the cheers from a baseball game blasted through the room.

"Not necessarily," Blake's breath hitched when he spotted the black leather outfit Adara had worn on the runway strewn across the end of the bed. He put down the remote and fingered one of the garment's soft leather straps. "Sometimes there are better things than remotes to occupy a man."

"Give me that!" She jerked the wicked outfit away from him. "I'm going to grab a shower. Pick your spot on the carpet there, big boy."

She heard him chuckle as she snapped the lock on the bathroom door and dropped the leather outfit on the counter.

"I heard that!" Adara yelled.

Within seconds, The sound of the baseball game grew louder.

* * * * *

"I'm all finished. The bathroom's yours." Adara stepped over to the bed and dried her hair with a towel. She'd secured her bathrobe around herself snugly, but when she went to wrap the towel around her head, she heard the rip of the sash, causing a rush of cool air to brush her legs. It didn't do much to lower the temperature quickly rising inside of her. What was it about Blake that could annoy her, yet make her want him with heated passion at the same time?

"Shit, sorry about that," she said sharply, pulling the fabric together

in frenzy in front of Blake's eyes, which glazed with appreciation and passion.

"Blake?" She held her robe closed with one hand while moving the other back and forth in front of his face. "Hello? Anybody home in there?"

He didn't answer.

"Yeah, yeah, thanks. I'm going," he said coming out of his trance while still watching her.

There was no denying the look of want in his eyes and the expression of desire on his face. Blake Roxbury might have said he wouldn't touch her again, but the words coming out of his mouth didn't match the truth of his erection pushing against his pants.

"Maybe you'll get lucky," she teased. After all, it had been a rough day. Why should she deny herself the chance to unwind with a little fun and innocent sexual relaxation?

Her words stopped him in his tracks. He turned back. "Lucky? Maybe I've changed my mind about not kissing you again. If I'm going to get lucky, how about making me feel like a real winner?"

"What do you mean by that?" Her voice held a playful note.

He entered the bathroom and stepped back out holding the leather outfit. Tossing it toward her, he said, "You'll figure it out."

Blake set a world record time for taking a shower. Adara barely had time to secure the outfit's leather laces and zip the thigh-high boots before he emerged from the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his midriff.

She hurriedly plopped down on the bed, propping herself in a seductive pose and enjoying the look of his firm abs. Suddenly, getting involved with this hunk of a man didn't seem like such a bad idea. She had sexual needs just like any other warm-blooded female.

She gave him a sexy grin and with a wiggle of her index finger, motioned for him to come over to the bed. "Feeling lucky?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling I'm getting ready to find out," Blake said, sitting on the edge of the mattress. "You're beautiful, Adara. How can I keep my hands off of you? I'm only kidding myself into

believing I don't desire you."

"Hush up, will you?" She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around the glorious hunk of a man in front of her. He smelled as good as he looked, and Adara had a strong desire to get to know every inch of him.

Within seconds, she had removed the towel from his waist and was straddling him, licking every inch of his neck, suckling and moving her body seductively over him, enjoying the heat he was causing to course through her body.

Blake ran his hands over her back, stopping when he reached her bottom and kneading each perfectly-shaped ivory cheek. He inhaled her scent and nipped at her neck between swift sensual flicks of his tongue against her heated flesh.

"Adara," he whispered, saying her name over and over as he tried to restrain his hands from pushing her little leather thong aside. One little push would allow him to shove his cock deep inside the core of her heat until she screamed out with pleasurable orgasms.

"Do you want me, Adara?" he continued in a low, seductive voice. He slid down her body and tantalized her with his mouth close to the soft folds of her opening.

"Yes, oh yes!" she cried. "Right now, more than anything else. Let me show you how much."

She wiggled from under him slowly with a sexual twist of her hips and moved her mouth down his torso, licking a fine line from his belly button to the triangle of hair above his cock. She took her hand, surrounded his cock with it, and moved it up and down along his shaft, causing him to draw in a sharp breath. She placed her mouth over him and cupped his balls, sucking to create a tight friction of pleasure with her mouth up and down in a bobbing motion. "You taste *so* good," she whispered against him.

"Adara," his voice strained between breaths. "I'm going to come if you don't stop." Another burst of pleasure rocked through him. He closed his eyes and gasped with a shiver of pure ecstasy.

"Not yet," she continued the pleasurable action, driving him to a brink of passion.

Suddenly, she removed her mouth from his cock and traced the line between his balls and his anus with her tongue, flicking it with a teasing, sensual motion she enjoyed almost as much as Blake did.

He couldn't stand it. Reaching for a handful of her hair, he forced her up and kissed her passionately. Moments later, he was pulling her up toward his face, burying his tongue in the soft folds of her opening, teasing her clit, and telling her to climax for him.

Adara rocked back and forth, riding his face and grinding her pussy over his lips, until she came with an orgasm that buckled her into a knot of frenzied pleasure.

"Blake," she screamed out in a husky voice. "Please...fuck me! Fuck me like you've never wanted to fuck anyone in your life." Her voice took on an edge of desperation as her climax built. She took in a sharp breath.

"Not yet, sweetheart." He entered her with his fingers, pulling them in and out of her wet pussy. "Do you know how good you taste?"

He paused, removed his fingers from her body, urged her to open her mouth, and swirled them against her tongue.

"Have you ever tasted anything so close to heaven?" He urged her to suck his fingers, teasing her with the wet sweetness he'd lapped up moments ago like a young kitten nursing a bowl of milk.

Then he flipped her beneath his heated body.

She moaned and thrashed her head back and forth. "Take me...please. Now."

"In a minute. I want to look at you first." Using his teeth, he undid the leather strings criss-crossing her breasts, tugging them free and exposing the rosy tips he so desperately wanted to taste.

She dug her spiked heels into the taut flesh of his ass when he took the soft firm mounds into his mouth and nipped at the sensitive beads of her nipples. He pinched one between his forefinger and thumb, rolling the taut tip back and forth in an erotic, pleasurable torture that had her grabbing his hair and fisting her hands in it, pulling him to her as if they

were one.

It sent a tantalizing shock down through her stomach to the core of her sex.

Blake licked her slowly, moving his tongue below her breasts and across her stomach, where he stopped to swirl his hot greedy tongue into her belly button. She grabbed his hair again with her hands, fisting them and forcing him lower, as he willingly pushed the small triangle leather thong out of his way again. Orgasm after orgasm overtook her as he licked her there, causing her to nearly take leave of her senses. Never had she felt anything like this before.

Then he took his finger, lubricated it in his mouth, and ran it over the sensitive opening of her anus while applying slight pressure. She buckled and rolled, grabbing him, clawing at his back with burning desire before another strong orgasm had her screaming out his name. Adara wanted more of this man. She couldn't possibly get enough to satisfy her desires, even though her pussy still pulsed with the after effect of her orgasms, its inner walls contracting and begging for more.

Adara lay breathless and spent, still needing to feel the firm hardness and length of his cock inside her core. "T-there's a condom in the nightstand," she said, reaching to open the drawer. "I put it in there." She grinned seductively.

Blake took control and reached inside the drawer for the small packet.

Her hands shook as she tried to help him open it. He wasn't moving fast enough for her. She had to have him inside her, pumping with every ounce of male energy he possessed.

When he finally placed the condom on the tip of his cock, unrolled it, and mounted her in a feverish pitch, she clung to him with all her might. Almost immediately he entered her, plunging deep inside her again and again, increasing the speed of his thrusts with every push into the center of her heat, which he craved. He couldn't hold back any longer. One final plunge sent him spiraling out of control, screaming out her name and collapsing on top of her.

The room which had seemed to spin only moments before held the scent of steaming fresh sex and passion. Blake Roxbury's world would never be the same.

He rolled off of Adara and pulled her against him. Blake nuzzled her neck with his mouth, giving her pleasurable little love bites in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

Finally, he was able to get his bearings and speak.

"Adara, I don't expect you to understand this, but...as of now, you're off this assignment."

Chapter Five

A look of shock on her face, Adara sat up and shoved him off the mattress. He hit the carpeted floor with a thud.

"You...you son of a bitch! You used me, didn't you? You got exactly what you wanted, and now you're ready to toss me out like yesterday's garbage. Get out! Get the *fuck* out of my room." Her voice trembled.

Blake pushed himself off the floor and grabbed the discarded towel in an attempt to cover himself. "I have a good reason for taking you off the case, Adara." He gritted his teeth.

"You never wanted to use me in the first place. I guess you thought I had a little of my sister in me and I would be some cheap entertainment." She walked toward the bathroom still partially clothed in her leather outfit.

A second later, she came out with his clothes and threw them at his bare chest.

"Get the fuck out of my sight. I'm *still* on the case. You can work with me and get this thing solved, or you can work against me. The choice is yours." She noticed his erection as he pulled on his jeans. "I hope that damn cock of yours breaks off when you zip up your pants, you jerk!"

Blake left his shirt unbuttoned and grabbed his shoes. He didn't bother to put them on. Instead, he opened the door and stormed out, slamming it shut behind him with such force it caused the glass pane in the window across the room to rattle.

Adara heard the engine of his BMW race, and then the squeal of tires as he flew out of the parking lot.

She fumbled with the necklace hanging from the chain around her neck. They'd been in such a heated rush she hadn't thought to remove it. Chances of the power button being pressed to activate the camera during their little tumble were pretty high. Maybe she'd captured her explicit interlude with Blake and the command center was having a huge laugh. If so, the video they saw would contain some pretty steamy footage. That's what he got for telling her never to take it off unless instructed. She smiled grimly. Just let the scum try and dismiss her, damn him.

* * * * *

Adara clutched the bag full of toys and knocked on the door of Cici's foster family's home. She both dreaded and looked forward to holding the little girl in her arms as she tried to offer her some small form of comfort.

Now that the occasion had finally arrived, she found herself hesitating. How could she answer the innocent questions her niece was bound to ask? What would she say if the child asked her to if she could come live with her in her small apartment in Washington? A five-year-old couldn't possibly understand Adara's reasons for not being able to fulfill her request. A moment of regret tugged at what was left of her heart. Thanks to Blake, who had severed her heart into tiny pieces already, Adara had little left to give.

She drew in a deep breath, tapped lightly on the screen door's metal frame, and pasted on her best smile. Marie Pinkerton answered seconds later and gave Adara a concerned look before saying anything.

"We've been expecting you, Ms. Alston." Marie knotted her apron in her hands. "But I need to prepare you. Cici has been experiencing quite a bit of anger and anxiety the last few days. I'm not sure what type of reaction she might have when she sees you."

"I'm prepared for that, Mrs. Pinkerton. I wouldn't expect her to be

the carefree little girl she was a few months back. May I come in?"

"Oh, certainly." Marie blushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

She moved to the side of the door and motioned Adara inside. "I've just been a little out of sorts lately. I've tried so hard to make Cici feel welcome and to urge the rest of my children to accept her. It's been somewhat of a challenge helping three boys under the age of ten adjust to a stranger in the house, let alone trying to warn them to be careful what they say to Cici about her mother's death. I'm so sorry for your loss, by the way."

Marie wrung her hands in the faded floral print fabric of her apron. "This is the first foster child we've had in our home and I must say that I'm having doubts about whether it's going to work out on a long-term basis. The state was quite thorough with their application process, so I can assure you that I'm quite qualified, but I didn't know it would be this difficult."

Adara got the feeling that Marie Pinkerton had only taken on the foster care project to pick up some extra money. The idea didn't sit well with her at all, and made her want to take Cici out of the situation.

"Is my niece getting the counseling she needs? I set up the sessions on a limited basis, but if you think she needs more, I can arrange it."

"I think she's getting plenty." Marie stated dryly.

Adara took a seat on the worn sofa in the living room and set the bag of toys beside the end table, looking around for any signs that children occupied the house. It seemed far too quiet to have four children under the age of ten living under its roof. It was a Saturday, and the house should have been full of laughter and innocent mischief. Instead, the sound of a ticking clock on the wall echoed in the cluttered room.

"I'll go get Cici for you." Marie turned away.

After a couple of steps, she turned back. "Some of the children are taking a nap, but Cici is probably not minding my orders, and trying to help my oldest with his homework," she let out a nervous laugh. "She's a stubborn one, with will of her own. We have strict rules about naps and homework around here. I'd never get anything done otherwise—*nor* be

able to keep my sanity."

The woman left the room and moments later, Adara heard her niece's excited squeal and the sound of her bare feet slapping the hardwood floor in the hallway. She rose from the seat she'd taken, scooping up the child in her arms while tears streamed down both their faces.

"I love you, sweet pea." Adara called Cici by the nickname she'd always used. "I brought some of your favorite toys. Come on, they're right over here." She set the child down reluctantly and pulled her along with her small hand clasped in her own.

Cici's lower lip trembled and big blue eyes filled with tears. "Did you bring Mommy back with you?"

"Oh baby, I wish I could have." Adara brushed a silken blonde curl from the child's face. "You'll see her again one day, I promise."

She placed a kiss on the child's pallid cheek. Cici's eyes were sunken and hollow and the healthy glow that usually brightened her face had vanished.

"Are you eating well?" Adara asked, eyeing the tiny girl's tiny frame with concern.

"I don't like the food here." The honest answer escaped Cici's lips. "I have to eat peanut butter sandwiches for dinner every night. I hate peanut butter." She stamped her foot and shoved her lower lip into a pout.

Marie spread her hand out in frustration. "I do the best I can, but Cici doesn't seem to like anything I fix for dinner. Money is tight. It's the best I can do. *My* children don't seem to mind. In all fairness, I *do* fix vegetables two times a week, and I try to give them the most balanced meals that I can. The state came here and questioned me about the type of meals I prepare. When I told them, they didn't have a problem with it. Peanut butter is nutritious."

"I'm not saying it isn't." Adara forced herself to be polite. "But I'll be happy to arrange for some groceries to be brought in for you and the children. Right now it's important that we work together."

"I don't need any handouts, Ms. Alston. We'll be fine."

Adara focused on her niece, who was happily digging through her toys. She had to make a decision. She couldn't let Cici move from foster home to foster home. The little girl deserved a solid upbringing. If Adara had to make a lifestyle change in order for that to happen, then so be it. She didn't know anything about being a mother, but damn it—she could learn.

After an hour, Adara tried to remain strong as she hugged her niece and told her she'd be back for another visit soon.. She tried to comfort the child the best she could, and after Cici reluctantly went off to play with the other children, Adara told Marie that she'd work on making other arrangements for the girl.

Marie protested, but finally said she understood and bid her a hasty goodbye at the door. "I'll try to do all I can with her in the meantime," she said with a wave of her hand.

Then she closed the door in Adara's face.

Chapter Six

"Tonight's the big showdown, huh chief?" Jim eyed the computer screen over Blake's shoulder. "I've got the van ready to roll and have found a secluded spot to park near Luscious Lingerie."

"Have the techs tested all the equipment?" Blake rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin. "I don't want a chance of a screw up. I'm already giving Adara another chance against my better judgment. Taking her off the case this late in the game would have caused too much suspicion. If the killer approaches Adara, you'd better be ready to move in like lightning. Is that understood?" He turned and gave Jim a stern look.

Jim moved to a chair on the other side of the desk. "Yeah. Everything's ready to go. This should go down smooth as silk."

"Good. I'll be inside watching her every move."

"I assume you'll be wearing a wire too?"

"Yes, and an ear bud. You know the protocol."

"What makes you think this psycho will move in on Adara tonight?" Jim ran his fingers through his unruly short hair.

Blake turned and brought up a screen cap of Adara on the computer screen. "This is why."

"Oh, yeah, I see *exactly* what you're talking about." Jim let out a long whistle.

Blake punched his partner in the stomach. "Get your fucking tongue back in your mouth. And," he glared at Jim's head. "I thought I

told you to clean up." Blake growled, noting Jim's rumpled pants and five-o'clock shadow.

"I'm trying." Jim propped his lanky frame on the desk. "My pants are clean. That's a start isn't it?"

"Get you a fucking tie and a dress shirt on before tonight, or you won't be viewing this dark haired beauty you see on my screen from the van this evening. You *got* that?"

"That's enough of an incentive," Jim laughed. "It's a good thing we're friends, otherwise I might be a little offended. I think I'll go get a shave."

Blake turned away and started typing on the keyboard.

An hour later he massaged his temples, hoping to ease the tension. *Damn Adara*. She'd refused to back down on the case even after he'd told her she was too emotionally involved. He'd tried to reason with her, but she hadn't listened. Instead, she'd slammed down the phone, ending the conversation. The hell of it was, she was already deep into the case. He couldn't justify pulling her off of it without causing suspicion.

Now she'd be sashaying down the runway in four more hours, wearing almost nothing but a smile. His nerves were shot. His heart couldn't take it. What had made him want to be so damned possessive—so protective—all of a sudden? They were both here to do a job. That was all. So why couldn't he let it go?

Because he'd crossed the forbidden line and had become her lover. He'd made the mistake of actually caring about someone besides himself—even sneaking a box of toys and canned goods to the foster home for Adara's niece. When he'd been introduced to Cici, during his secret visit, he'd fallen for the little girl. Fallen hard with emotions like wanting to protect her and Adara, become a family. Something about Adara had softened the hard spot in his heart. Could it be he'd fallen in love?

The mind blowing sex they'd shared had nothing to do with it. Or so he told himself. And what about Adara's plans of finding her niece a loving, stable home? What if something happened to her during this case

and she never got the chance to get Cici settled and secure? Damn, why did he even care? It wasn't like he had any say in any of it. Adara had brushed him off when he'd offered to help her during the phone conversation in which he'd tried to explain his actions and make amends. She wouldn't listen to his explanation.

* * * * *

Adara stood behind the curtain waiting for her cue to start her walk down the runway. She'd fidgeted with the necklace a thousand times, making sure it was turned on and recording. They'd sent her a sound check from the van while she was in her dressing room. Thank goodness she'd been able to convince Paula, the snarky receptionist, that it was the one piece of jewelry she had to wear. She'd told the woman it was a gift from her late husband, and she'd made a promise on his death bed to always wear it close to her heart. Adara hadn't been prepared for that close call. Lying wasn't one of her strong points, but she'd been convincing enough.

She also wasn't happy that the rules had changed and she found out she'd be modeling strictly the lingerie line. The beaded gemstone baby-doll outfit with matching high-heeled slippers fit her perfectly. She loved the color. Peridot had always been one of her favorite stones, and it complimented her auburn hair. The owner had given her an appreciative glance of approval and commented that she looked like a goddess when he'd passed her in the hallway.

"They're going to love you. Knock em' dead, babe." he'd said, eyeing her up and down.

She moved out onto the stage, remembering all the right moves and sultry looks she'd practiced. The audience consisted of as many women as men. Some closest to the stage were marking an order form in preparation for purchasing an outfit like the one she was modeling.

A few men held out folded slips of paper for her to take back to the dressing room. Adara smiled at each one, thanked them, and wondered if

any of the slips in her hand might contain an offer for her to do a porn movie like Kari had. Soon, she'd find out if the killer was in the audience, offering her a diamond as payment for her services. It was his calling card.

On the last turn, she spotted Blake at the end of the runway. The look on his face was a mixture of agitation and amusement. The words they'd exchanged since the incident in the hotel room had been few and far between. Adara hoped that after tonight, she'd never have to worry about working with him ever again. A feeling of relief came over her, followed by regret that things couldn't have turned out differently between them.

Fueled by a moment of wickedness, she bent down, took his face in her hands and planted a hard kiss on his mouth. The crowd went wild with applause and laughter. Blake looked like he was ready to kill her. With a wave and a satisfied smirk, she headed to the dressing room.

She paused before turning the door knob. Would someone be waiting for her on the other side, ready to kidnap her and use her before slashing her throat as they had her sister's? Adara inhaled an unsteady breath and opened the door.

"Well, you seem to have done a bang-up job out there." The low female voice came from a dark corner of the room.

Adara flipped on the lights with an unsteady hand. The minute the room was illuminated with light, she spotted Paula, the receptionist, sitting in the corner.

Adara placed her hand over her thudding heart with relief. "You startled me."

"That was my intent," the woman stood and approached Adara. "Take off the outfit." Her voice held a commanding tone. "I want to see exactly what I'm getting."

"W-what?" Adara was confused.

"You heard me. I know your kind. My daughter was just like you. She turned into nothing but a cheap whore who loved making underground porn movies for men to sit around and jack off to half the night. She died five years ago. But the money she made from it set me up

quite nicely."

"I don't understand." Adara tried to stall for time. She'd known something wasn't quite right about Paula the day she'd filled out her employment application, but this proved the woman was insane.

"You have five seconds to start undressing."

"Okay. Just relax; I'm taking the outfit off right now." Adara put her hand out as if to stop the woman from coming any closer.

She slowly undid the clasp to the fitted top and allowed it to drop to the floor.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your daughter." Maybe sympathy would work with this woman. "I know the amount of money she left you won't ever replace her." *Where in hell was her back-up? Blake and Jim should be bursting through the door down at any moment. He had to be hearing this through his earpiece.*

"Keep undressing," Paula demanded in an icy tone. "I don't give a damn about my daughter. I like making money, and lots of it. If you pass my approval, you'll be making plenty yourself. In addition to that, I always give my girls a little diamond as a present. But if you screw up and turn on me, then the only movie you'll star in is the six-o'clock news. That would be a shame, wouldn't it?"

Adara removed her high-heeled pumps and continued to stall for time under the woman's scrutinizing gaze. "I hope you find I'm what you're looking for." She tried to smile.

The receptionist approached her, and started walking around her. Paula ran her hand down Adara's back and snapped the elastic on her sequined bikini panties. "So far, I like what I see."

The woman let out a laugh that bordered on pure evil. "Take these off, too."

She snapped the elastic a second time and ran a hand down the front of Adara's stomach, pulling her panties partially down.

Adara gasped and jerked away. "Please, no. I'm straight."

* * * * *

"Jim. Where the hell *are* you? You fucking asshole—answer me!" Blake spoke into the tiny microphone that should have been heard on the headset in the van and pushed his way through the crowd of people milling around the hall leading to the dressing rooms. Something was terribly wrong. The last thing he'd heard through his ear bud was Adara speaking to a woman in her dressing room. Then a crackling sound had nearly burst his eardrum, ending the communication.

He finally made his way through the crowd. . Blake knew he was running out of time. He cursed Adara for going through with the assignment while at the same time praying that she hadn't been harmed. Damn it. How had things gotten so out of control? And when had he developed strong feelings that bordered on love for her? He wasn't supposed to ever love a woman again. It only meant trouble and heartache.

In a last attempt to make communication with Jim, he heard a scream from a room three doors farther down the hallway.

Fuck! Blake ran like a streak of lightning, yelling for people to move out of his way while he flashed his FBI badge.

He didn't attempt to turn the doorknob, but slammed his weight against it. It burst open with splinters of wood flying. Blake spotted Adara and another woman on the floor rolling around in a struggle. The flash of a knife glittered in the air above Adara's head.

With one hard, swift kick, Blake sent the knife sailing towards the vanity.

Adara shoved the woman off of her and pinned her to the ground. Within seconds, Blake had the receptionist in handcuffs. "It's over, bitch." Blake inhaled fresh air into his lungs.

Adara grabbed her robe, quickly securing it around her naked body, and nursed her lip, bloodied in the struggle.

Jim came storming through the broken door seconds later, out of breath.

"Shit." He leaned over and braced his hands against his knees while

gasping for air. "I thought I was going to be too late. Somehow, we lost signal and got nothing but static and a blue screen. I ran over a block to get here," he said between breaths, while Blake took the receptionist away to hand her over to the authorities.

Jim stood up straight and looked at Adara. "I'm glad you're all right. Blake would have killed me if something had happened to you."

She gaped at him.

Jim arched his brows. "I don't know what you've done to him, but he's cranky as hell when it comes to any conversation involving your name."

"If that's the case, I'm done here. You can inform Mr. Roxbury that he won't have to worry about being such a crank any longer." Adara turned and walked out the door without giving him a backwards glance.

"Adara, wait!" Jim worked his way down the hallway in her direction. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Then, what *did* you mean?" She stopped walking and turned to give him a hard glare that froze him in place.

"I just meant that...um, well—I've worked with Blake Roxbury for years, and I've never seen a woman get under his skin the way you have. I didn't mean any disrespect."

"Well, perhaps that explains why he wanted me off his team." Adara placed her hands on her hips. "I guess he isn't used to someone who can do a job better than he can. You can tell him he won't have to worry about it ever again. I've decided to take a job at the Pentagon I applied for. Cici needs some love and security. It will give me an opportunity to take care of her."

Jim scrubbed his hand over the stubble on his chin. "You're quitting your job with the FBI? Why would you do that? After tonight, you'll be one of the most sought after agents we have."

Adara sucked in a deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly, trying to calm her emotions. Finally said in a whisper, "Sometimes the price is just too damn high to pay."

She jammed her FBI identification into Jim Parco's hand. "Give this

to Blake and tell him to shove it where the sun doesn't shine."

* * * * *

"I don't know. Adara just said to give you this and you could shove it up...well, you know. She took off down the hallway after that and vanished into the night."

Blake paced back and forth in his office and slammed his fist against the worn desk, causing a piece of wood to splinter from it. "Damn, I can't believe you just let her walk away. She could have stuck around to help tie up the loose ends on this case."

"Yep," Jim shook his head. "I was going to tell her that you'd dropped by that foster home where her niece stays and took a huge box of canned goods and some toys to those kids, but she didn't give me a chance to say much. I think if she knew that someplace down in that hard heart of yours you might just have a soft spot."

"Just shut up, will you Jim? I just happened to feel sorry for the kid when I saw the wreck of a home she'd lived in with her mother. That's all."

Jim's shoulders shook with a chuckle. "Whatever you say," he continued laughing. "You look like hell, by the way. The big question is, what are you going to do about it? You gonna make her come back and tie up the loose ends?"

"No. That's your job now, Jim. I've got something far more important to tackle. I should have told her I loved her. My damn pride got in the way."

* * * * *

"Cici, would you like to come live with me?" Adara hugged her niece. "I'm taking a job at a place called the Pentagon. I could be home with you every night because I wouldn't have to travel any longer."

The little girl shook her head enthusiastically. "I was wondering if

you were going to come for me, Aunt Adara."

The tear that slid down her niece's face broke Adara's heart. She was thankful she'd escaped her brush with death to witness this moment.

Adara had made the decision to leave the FBI and Blake Roxbury behind. The job at the Pentagon would mean less traveling and more time with the little girl. Even though it meant leaving a huge piece of her heart along with it, nothing in the world would keep her from giving Cici a home and the love that she deserved and so desperately craved.

"Oh, baby," Adara wiped the trickle of tears from Cici's face. "You don't know how happy that makes me to hear you say that."

"I love you, but I miss Mommy." Cici's big brown eyes filled with more tears. "Do you think she went to heaven?"

"I'm sure of it, honey. I miss her, too. But one day we'll all be together again." Adara lifted the child into her arms. "How would you like to take a long plane ride to your new home? Have you ever been on an airplane?"

"Nope." Cici shook her head and smiled.

"I tell you what. Let's go pack your things, and we'll head to the airport. I'll even let you sit next to the window."

Marie Pinkerton looked relieved that Adara was finally taking Cici to a home she deserved.

"I'll go gather her things for you," she said with a smile.

"You're really taking me with you, Aunt Adara?" The little girl repeated. Cici's dimples popped into her cheeks with her smile.

"Really."

Five hours later, Cici babbled to everyone on the plane about having a new mommy. She quickly managed to charm everyone sitting nearby with her enthusiasm. An hour after that, she leaned her head against Adara and fell sound asleep.

The past week had been an emotional nightmare for Adara. A time of happiness mixed with pain. Adara recalled the look of shock on Blake's face when she'd stopped by the field office to bid him a hasty goodbye and explain her plans.

The words he'd spoken had almost made her change her mind. They echoed in her head.

"You think running away is going to solve everything? Do you know how this makes me feel, Adara?"

She nodded her head before she'd spoken. *"Yes, it should make you feel a great sense of relief. I know your stand on relationships. You made that clear in the beginning."*

He'd accepted the fact that she was going to do what she felt was right and had kissed her on the forehead, wishing her the best of luck like a friend instead of someone with whom she'd been intimate. The passionate look when he'd gazed into her eyes said differently, but she'd walked away.

She leaned her head back the headrest of the plane. So many things had changed in such a short period of time. She was emotionally and physically exhausted. The case had been close to her heart, and she'd put everything she had into finding her sister's killer. Blake had chiseled a piece of her heart out of her with his lovemaking. She knew she would never feel so strongly about a man ever again.

Cici wasn't the only one who needed time to heal. Adara tried to push the memory of Blake from her mind, and a tear slipped down her face.

Moments later, she heard the familiar music of Cici's favorite toy drifting through the plane. She smiled without opening her eyes. Apparently the child had found her bag of toys stashed under the seat in front of them.

Panic set in a minute later, when she realized the music wasn't coming from close proximity, but from somewhere farther back inside the plane.

Startled, she opened her eyes, immediately checking on Cici.

She was fast asleep.

The music grew closer, and she watched Cici open her eyes and direct a smile to someone in the aisle. Adara turned, practically jumping out of her seat and taking the seatbelt with her. To her surprise, Blake

Roxbury stood beside her holding a musical toy identical to the one Cici had in her bag.

"Hi," Blake crouched down and put himself at eye level with her.

"Hi." Confused, Adara could barely speak. "W-Where did you come from?"

"Um...I couldn't stand not seeing you." His face colored with a tint of embarrassment.

Cici leaned over Adara and tugged at his sport coat. "Hey, are you my Daddy?" She was all curls and dimples and wide-eyed innocence.

Blake cleared his throat and gave her a smile, and then looked Adara in the eye.

"That depends on your Aunt Adara." He hesitated, and acted like he was holding his breath. "On whether or not she says yes."

"So, what do you say, sweetheart? Am I her new daddy?" He set the music box on the floor of the plane and removed a jewelry box from the front pocket of his shirt.

Adara couldn't believe this was happening. She watched him open the jewelry box, revealing the most beautiful Peridot ring she'd ever seen.

She undid her seatbelt and fell into his arms, sobbing tears of happiness.

"Yes...yes, Cici, he can be your daddy."

She nuzzled Blake's neck, and he pulled her face to his to kiss her passionately. "I love you, Adara. I can't live without you. I realized the minute you walked out of my office that I had to come after you. When you left, you took my heart with you. I'm here to get it back." He smiled.

He placed the ring on her left hand. "I knew you probably wouldn't want a diamond engagement ring after everything that's happened." Love glowed in Blake's eyes.

"That would be a correct assumption." She smiled through her happy tears and leaned over to whisper in his ear, "But I do have a killer outfit the same color as my engagement ring. I think you'll really like it."

"Oh yes, I think that will work." Blake laughed out loud, and hugged her.

Cici reached over and tugged at the sleeve of his shirt. "Daddy, are we home yet?"

He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

"Almost, princess... we're almost there."

Author Bio

Mia Romano wrote her first story at the tender age of six. She was promptly taken out in the school hallway, where her first grade teacher paddled her for that particular story. Today she's still writing stories, but avoids the hallway.

She lives in Alabama with her husband, Chris, and their mysterious cat, Sherlock, who is the inspiration for the animals in many of her books.

Please visit Mia's website at: www.miaromano.com or drop her e-mail at mia@miaroman.com.

