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September  
Heat

Diana Castilleja

SEPTEMBER HEAT

A Forbidden Publications production, September 2006

Forbidden Publications

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September Heat

By

Diana Castilleja

I would like to thank my publisher and editor, Rene, for taking a chance on me, not just once, but twice. Also, I have to thank one of my best friends, Dayna H. for listening to my attempts and telling me honestly when it was good, and even more when it was bad.

## I

Rose ducked under the baggage compartment and collapsed into her window seat. Her hand lifted to make sure the silk scarf she was wearing still hid her wayward hair, then drifted to her over-large sunglasses, which made up the rest of her impromptu disguise. Her fingers still trembled, brushing down the length of her thigh, tugging at her sheath dress. There hadn't been time to change; just throw clothes into a bag and be hustled to the airport. Her fingers began to twist her dress hem and she forced them to stop. It had been so long since she'd drawn an unstressed breath, her lungs hurt.

There wasn't anyway she was going to be able to take an easy breath until the plane took off and left New York in the dust. The memory of the detective's words came back to her with amazing clarity. She could even smell the butterscotch candy the man had been sucking on.

"Miss St. Johns, we need to get you out of the city. That's the only way," he'd said, that irritating candy clicking against his teeth. She *hated* hard candy.

"But I have a shoot in Baltimore. I can't just walk out! I'm obligated to those contracts," she argued, her fingers clutching the arms of her chair in shock.

She whipped back around to plead with her agent. "Come on, Beverly! Tell them they can't make me do this!"

Detective Rodriguez shook his head, deflecting her arguments before Beverly could answer. Rose had never met a more scarred and chillingly deliberate man. She shrank back into her seat when he began to detail the severity of her situation. "You don't have a choice, Miss St. Johns. He's hunting you, and we aren't finding anything useful in the information from the letters. We are not going to put your life on the line

to try to catch this guy. In cases like yours, the safest thing to do is take the victim out of the picture. Quietly."

They had been in her agent's plush office a mere two hours ago when the decision had been made for her. Beverly, her agent, had stared on in abject horror at the predicament of her life struggle. The fact that she was literally being kicked out of the city didn't seem to impact Beverly in the same way it did Rose.

"But you can't yank me like this! What about my apartment?" Her arguments continued to fall on deaf ears, his and Beverly's.

Detective Rodriguez's graveled voice grated on her nerves as she helplessly watched her life being taken over. He loomed over her, his gaze as ice cold as his voice. "You don't have a choice in the matter. I have connections in Las Vegas who will keep you safe."

His expression was relentless when all she could do was gape in astonishment at him. His last words chilled her, effectively ceasing any and all further arguments. "Miss St. Johns, you are going there to stay alive, that is why you have no choice."

She was forced to concede defeat. New York was too stretched to spare the manpower to keep one person under a protective watch within the millions who lived there. Especially since everybody who knew her would know she wouldn't stop working. It just wasn't possible. She lived for the catwalk.

Now she was on a plane going to, of all places, Las Vegas. Send her to Los Angeles! Miami! Why the hell did she have to go Vegas? A nasty frown pulled her sculpted brows downward. Her thoughts were raging. Only a guy would think to send a woman to the gambling mecca of the planet, expecting her to enjoy the half-naked mentality of the city. She was so furious at how her day had gone, she wanted to throw something!

So, the detective had taken the model out of the clothes, so to speak. And saying she was happy about it, was the understatement of the century. She glared out the tiny viewing window, making an indelicate sound in her throat. She could bite a nail, and not one of her own! One of the ten-inch variety came to mind, she was so mad.

She shouldn't be furious at Detective Rodriguez; he was only doing his job. Which meant getting her out of the picture until, hopefully, they found the guy who was currently tormenting Rose. It made her stomach sour knowing he believed he was her prince charming. Her stalker wouldn't know she was gone for some time, so whoever it was would likely continue to make a nuisance of himself until he made the mistake of getting caught, or so they believed. In her mind, the possibility was slim at best.

She stuck out her tongue. Blek! She didn't need this!

"Sorry, are you feeling all right?"

The unexpected male voice snapped her around, her head feeling like it belonged atop a bobble head doll. "Excuse me?" she gasped, then took a breath to hide it. She saw crisp slacks and a sharp jacket over a cotton shirt in a glance. Not high dollar, but quality filtered into her mind without conscious effort.

"I asked," he murmured, "If you were all right? You look flushed and you were making a good argument for the gag bag necessity."

Her hands pressed to her cheeks in a rush of embarrassment. "Oh my, I'm so sorry." He watched her with a soft, concerned smile. *When had he sat down?* She needed to be more careful. That had been another warning. She needed to be aware of her surroundings. She fought the pounding of her heart, trying to regain a calm she was nowhere near feeling.

"Would you like a water before we take off?" he offered.

She inhaled a shaky breath. She needed to pull herself together. "Sure. It might help."

He waved to the stewardess and made the request. "Fly much?" he asked.

"All the time," she answered, but she didn't continue, not wanting to encourage him.

He handed her the little plastic bottle with a glass and napkin from the stewardess then he relaxed again. She took it with a grateful nod. "Well, I hope this flight is smooth. There was a huge storm over Kansas. Personally, I hate turbulence."

She didn't reply, but sipped on her water as her gaze fell to the window again. He leaned back, stretching out long legs, eating up the comfortable space of first class. She drank in slow swallows, trying to not let this make a wreck out of her.

Oops. Too late.

What was she going to do? Her entire livelihood was going to suffer! Didn't the detective understand that? She was twenty-eight, not eighteen! She couldn't possibly do this all over again. She was getting older in a business where new and fresh was the rule. If she was off the catwalk for even a month, it would hurt her. That thought made her stomach twist even worse.

She understood she needed to get away; she believed every word about the guy who was sending her love letters and had hacked into her email accounts. He'd become very vocal in his contact attempts, and she was positive her apartment was being watched now, too. The whole damn problem was giving her goose bumps. Her self-delusional Lothario was after her and wasn't going to stop. Her skin crawled at the very idea.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I need to take that for departure," came the stewardess's kind voice a moment later, flickering her gaze toward the bottle and cup that Rose held.

She handed them over without a complaint. It had helped a little. "I never said thank you," she said as she turned to her flight companion.

"No problem," he answered without opening his eyes. His hands rested over a flat stomach, his long legs pulling his length out. "I'm notorious for helping out," he told her with a humoring grin.

"Not a bad thing to be known for," she said, but he only shrugged.

Well, at least he wasn't overly talkative. It helped her to relax, knowing he wasn't inquisitive. No chance of discovery, or so she thought.

"Why the disguise, 007?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth as the floor boards began to thrum, the engines picking up velocity, traveling at a good clip down the runway.

"Disguise? I don't know what you're talking about," she said with a nervous



flutter of her hand. She glanced around quickly, but only spotted two others in first class. There were two businessmen in a heated discussion over a spreadsheet and, thankfully, oblivious to herself and her seat companion.

She swallowed when the plane launched, her seat sinking beneath her as fast as her stomach, her hands gripping the arms of her seat until her knuckles protested. When they were airborne, she looked down to the receding airport and the shrinking skyline. She took a long, deep breath. The second one came even easier.

“Okay, now I know who you are,” he said with quiet laughter in his voice.

She spun in her chair as an icy finger dragged down her spine, the seatbelt biting like a garrote into her waist. There wasn’t any way! It wasn’t him. It couldn’t be. She’d only been AWOL for two hours. No one worked that fast! Her skin went cold as he faced her across his shoulder, returning her stare with a loose smile and closed eyes, however dim through her glasses.

“You’re the heavy breather who’s been calling me for the last week, aren’t you?” His tone was low, teasing, but the tone wasn’t what she heard.

Her veins chilled, almost feeling the ice water as it surged through her. Yet, his voice was warm and chuckling until he opened his eyes. They widened alarmingly into two brown pools.

“No, wait!” he told her, pulling back, holding up a hand in apology. “I didn’t mean anything by it, I swear. You were nervous. I just tried to take your mind off of it. I swear.”

She forced a dry lungful of air into her body. Her hand lifted to her throat and her pulse pounded like a hammer against numb fingers, while she pressed deeper into the corner of her seat.

“I’m so sorry. I never meant to scare you.” Everything about him, from his expression to his voice, showed real sincerity.

She nodded once, carefully.

“I’m very sorry,” he repeated. When her hand finally dropped from her neck to her lap, he held his hand out. “I’m Gavin, by the way. It’s a long flight and I really don’t

want you to think I'm going to pounce. Not my style," he said with a deprecating smile.

She'd overreacted. Not the first time. *But this whole stalker problem...* She stopped the thought there. She licked her lips. "I understand. I'm Rose," she said as evenly as she could, placing her hand in his. "I've had a problem lately. I guess my nerves are shot."

He was staring at her hand in his. "You have nice hands." He flipped it over instead of releasing her. "Have you ever had them read?"

She shook her head, tilting down to look at their joined hands. She was thankful when he didn't ask more about her problems but instead, managed to distract her the way his heavy breather joke hadn't. "No, I know I haven't." She pushed the too large for her face sunglasses up as they started to slide down her nose.

He traced her life line down her palm and she felt the tenderness in his touch. "You have a strong life line. You enjoy your life, you work hard to enjoy it," he told her with a straight face.

"Don't most people?" she asked, not quite willing to buy his snake oil show.

"No, not everyone. Some work to pay the bills, to pay a debt. I work to take care of my father." He leaned in a little to scrutinize her palm some more. His thumb traveled with a delicate caress down her palm. She followed it, wondering at the trail of warmth he had created. "Let's see here. You've had a serious heartbreak in your life. See this juncture here? That means it's past rather than pending." He made a thoughtful sound in his throat. "This one, this is a love line. You are still waiting to meet the one man of your dreams." His dark brown brows rose, a short lift that hinted at amazement. "And according to what I see here, he's right around the corner." She gasped once, unable not to. He glanced up, snagging her attention with dark, sparking eyes. "Don't let me alarm you with this. I'm a professional bullshitter." He laughed with a grin. "But you've forgotten about your problem, right?"

She stared at him completely speechless, then laughed. "Yes, I did." Her mouth curved and he smiled back at her.

"Relaxed now?" he asked, releasing her hand.

"Much," she told him, meaning it. "Was any of that real?" she asked him after a few minutes.

"Actually, yes. I could tell about your job and your heartbreak."

The plane banked and would soon be making a due west shot to Vegas. "Yippee!" she muttered to her window.

She gave him her attention again when he continued. "I've been doing the palm reading at my father's special needs home for over four years now. The ladies love it and the guys make bets. It's fun watching them. They never catch on that the stories stay the same."

She wasn't feeling brave enough to ask about the rest. A man in her life was the last thing she needed. She was trying to avoid one like the plague as it was!

"Wasn't I right?" he asked with a curious light in his gaze.

"Incredibly. That is why I had to ask. Even guesses can be good ones, though."

"True," he admitted.

It was quiet for several minutes between them as the stewardess passed them, offering refreshments again. "Can I ask you something?" he asked.

"I imagine so." She uncurled her toes in her heels dreaming of a hot Jacuzzi and a mud pack.

"Do you still need the disguise? I won't tell I know you," he whispered with a grin from behind his hand.

She smiled easily back at him. "No, I guess with just us and the ladies we're safe." She tossed a look back over her shoulder. The two men were still going over their sheets and the curtain had been drawn. Taking a breath for courage, she removed her sunglasses with fingers that still shook with touches of fear, and met his stare.

At first, he just looked at her, his gaze taking in her features from the top of her brows to the soft point of her chin. "I had a feeling you were beautiful," he told her, but even as he said it, his gaze locked with hers. It felt like time stopped as his gaze widened. "Oh my God!" he breathed. "Sappy?"

She snapped her glasses back up and she faced forward again. "I am not," she

retorted. Even as her cheeks reddened, her mind flooded with memories of the nickname.

His hand lifted to her chin, directing her to face him. "September? Is that you?"

She felt her stomach fall out beneath her seat. How bad could her day get? First she's chased out of town, out of her job, and now...now someone's recognized her!

"No, my name is Rose," she replied emphatically. She crossed her arms over her chest, stopping any further argument.

"She left my heart amid passion's woes, my beauty, my fair September Rose," he breathed into her ear.

She stiffened at his closeness, lashes fluttering as the last line of the poem burned through her deepest memories. She turned with aching disbelief. "*Gavin?*" She knew her mouth was hanging loose.

"The one and only," he said with a wide smile, his brown eyes flashing in wonder. "Wow. How long has it been?"

Her lips lifted in a disgusted moue. "Evidently not long enough. God, how long have you had that sitting up there collecting dust?"

"Hey, I won first place with that at competition. You should be more gracious that you were once the reason for such poetic hogwash." He sat back again facing forward, his arms crossed now when hers hung like limp noodles in shock.

"How long has it been?" she wondered out loud.

"Well," he mused. "There was Mr. Henley our freshman year."

"Then Mrs. Tralls our sophomore," she remembered. "We didn't have any our junior year, did we?"

"No, or senior, but by then you had forgotten about me. Johnny Devlin had stolen your heart from me," he cried woefully, his head tossed back in mournful exclamation.

"Shh. Stop that!" She grabbed at his sleeve even as she tried to look over him to see if anyone was paying attention. "And he didn't steal my heart. The beast had a car for prom."

“Ah, altruistic reasoning. Subject yourself to some meat handling cur for the use of the wheels. Hey, it makes perfect sense to me,” he said in a mocking tone.

“What are you getting all upset about? It was eleven years ago for Christ’s sake,” she said.

He shrugged. “Who said I was upset? I had a date,” he informed her.

“We were friends, Gavin,” she murmured, still trapped in disbelief. How could she forget? He had gone to prom with Jonie Fiske, the class Amazon, blond and beautiful. How he pulled that off, she’d never known. Gavin was geekdom redefined. Prom was also the last time she had seen him, the last time she talked to him, in over ten years.

“I never said we weren’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, blinking at him. He only rolled a shoulder, digging his way into the chair until the upright light blinked out, then he leaned back and fell asleep. She turned to stare out the window again seeing the long streaks of sunlight coming from the west coast.

How weird was her week going to get, anyway? She lifted her hand and ordered a scotch. Time to put weird on notice.

\* \* \*

Gavin waited until she was absorbed in staring out the window before he tried to peek at her. Oh, man. How long had it been? Too long, that was for sure. He’d had the biggest crush on her when he was sixteen. She had been all legs and incredible green eyes, and from what he was looking at, neither had changed. He wondered what she was doing now, and why she was as jumpy as a Christmas goose on the 24th. He hadn’t meant to scare her, but somehow he had--enough for her to practically jump out the viewing window.

He watched through lowered lids as she sipped on the scotch she held in slim hands. Sappy was all grown up. His heart did a thudding dance watching her mouth

curve over the cup. Damn, but she had always been able to do that to him. Not Monica, or Sandra or any of the other girlfriends over the years could make his entire body wake up like she could. Not even Melissa.

It had been a very embarrassing condition in high school, too. Long hair, glasses and enough acne to make any oil control product run the other way. He'd been a mess, and for a while, she had been a great friend. The best. Until the guys began to notice her, began to see her the way he did. The legs, the hair and those eyes. Emerald green with startling flecks of silver-gray. Simply unique.

He was just fun Gavin, study partner Gavin. A ride in the morning Gavin. It still stung how easily she had forgotten him. So what if they didn't have any classes their last two years together? It was the same damn study material!

He bit his cheek to keep from flinching. He didn't want to get busted. He was only human and her sunglasses were still in her lap. She was as beautiful as she had been at sixteen, seventeen and a blossoming eighteen, more so now that she was a woman. So what if he was a cad now? She'd never know. Even nerds get opportunities to go downhill. What was the chance she would run into him on a flight, or that he would see her in Vegas, anyway?

There were thirty something hotels on the strip alone. Surely those odds, no pun intended, could keep them out of each other's line of sight. He let his eyes completely slip closed; secure in the feeling this was a one chance meeting. No reason in dredging up old feelings, or old dreams, when she would be even more disgusted now. Even if she hadn't been then, this was a whole new era. Sadly, this Gavin Throckton was absolutely nothing to brag about. It left an ache near his heart to know he never had been.

## II

"Excuse me, sir. The Captain has asked for all seats up. We have turbulence ahead." The stewardess touched his shoulder, her voice apologetic and he blinked with sleep-dry eyes at her.

"Sure. Must be Kansas." She nodded then continued down into the main cabin. He adjusted his seat and swept his hands over his face. Focusing on the seat in front of him, he was aware he was alone. Where was Sappy--Rose?

Gavin stretched out, flexing his legs to get the feeling back into them. He was going to have to stop thinking of her like that. Sappy had been a little girl's nickname. He spotted her leaving the lavatory, and oh yeah, she was not a little anything anymore. He followed the line of her legs under the dark blue hem of her dress to her waist, the sight making his hands itch to just touch.

The scarf she had used for a disguise was gone, and in its place thick brown hair with those crazy curls swung like a cloud around her. Just like he'd remembered, and then some. She'd always been a lightweight, but when you put those legs and that hair on her... She was gorgeous. No doubt about it.

"Take a picture. It lasts longer," she remarked under her breath.

"I'd love to," he said right back. "Your place or mine?" He was rising to let her pass when there was a ding overhead. A split second later the airplane made a huge dip. Before she could latch onto the chair next to her, she fell right into his lap, both of them tumbling backward into his seat. She blushed to the roots of her hair.

"Oh, Gavin! I'm sorry. Here, I'll get..."

"No, you're fine." It came out a touch hoarse, and he prayed she didn't notice.

Well, some things hadn't changed over the years after all. He curved his hands around the waist he had just admired and gently held her close. It only lasted a heartbeat, but it was long enough to enjoy her scent and the weight of her against him. Before she could squirm and find the reality of his arousal, he aided her up, holding her steady as the plane bucked again until she was in her own seat.

When her fingers trembled, he pushed them out of the way to snap her buckle in place. "There, snug as can be," he said without looking at her. It was safer not to at the moment. He was making himself remember the winter spent in Alaska, and prayed it would make things happen--or rather, un-happen. Cold. Very cold.

It took a few minutes, but his heart rate dropped to a nearly respectable pace. He leaned back again, relaxing. When the plane bumped once more and a flash of lightning could be seen beneath the curve of the plane, Rose closed her eyes and whimpered.

"You hate flying more than I do," he said as he lifted an arm and tucked her into his chest, pushing back the seat arm as he did so. She was stiff as a board for several seconds, but when all he did was hold her, she relaxed trustingly into him. Suddenly that cold winter didn't do a damn thing for him. "Just keep your eyes closed and this will pass in a few minutes," he told her.

*Please keep your eyes closed,* he prayed silently. Surprisingly, five minutes later when they passed over the edge of the storm and he said her name, she didn't move. He groaned for several reasons. Finding her asleep was just at the top of the list.

He peeked at his watch. Two hours to go. He looked down at her cheek pressed into his chest, her hair spilling all over and the cad that he was, knew what he wanted. He lifted an arm, hitting the call button and asked for a blanket. For the next two hours, he lived one of the best fantasies he'd ever imagined. Just holding her while she slept.

\* \* \*

Rose sat up, staring out at sunlight through the small side window. She'd awakened to find a blanket over her and a pillow under her. For some reason, the



simple gesture made her want to cry, but she wouldn't. She had too many worries, and too many problems to get out from under.

To start with, who was the man chasing her? Did he know her? Did she know him? How long would it take to catch him? And after all that time, would she still have a job? A life? Whoever was out there doing this to her would be flayed for the problems he was causing her, she'd see to that.

When the landing light came on, she pulled the pillow from beneath her head and folded the blanket, handing them to the stewardess as she walked by. She took out her scarf and started to wrap her hair as Gavin took his seat again.

"Do you have to wear that here?"

"I have to. It's necessary," she told him without explanation. If someone spotted her anywhere, the news would tear it up, and then her own private cheering section might try to find her. She shivered as the revolting thought hit her between the eyes. It didn't matter where she went. She wasn't safe anymore.

"Rose, you're not looking very good. Are you all right?"

She nodded as her hands finished the wrap, tying the ends under her chin. She wasn't surprised to find her hands were shaking again. "Stress and nerves."

"So, is this like a vacation for you?" He buckled himself in and turned to her.

She made a short sound as she searched for her sunglasses. "Yeah, a forced one," she said unable to hide the tight, bitter sound.

"Rose, we were friends once."

She faced him, slipping her glasses on, then took them off to see him clearly. "Gavin, I appreciate what you're about to say, but there isn't anything you can do." Why hadn't she ever noticed how kind his eyes were?

She lifted a hand to his sleeve, her polished nails a soft red against his dark jacket. "Look, let's just say this was a great chance to say hi one more time, and let that be it. I don't have the time or the energy for anything more in my life. In fact, right now is the worst time for me to get involved with anyone." *If you only knew.* The hot knot reformed in the pit of her stomach. It hadn't really left her since the meeting with

Detective Rodriguez.

“So, dinner and drinks are out?” He leaned on a shoulder regarding her, his arms crossed over his chest.

She actually hated telling him no. He was half expecting it, by his expression. “Gavin, I have to stay out of sight. I’m being forced into seclusion,” she told him, her voice dropping along with her chin. She hated being thrown into a closet two thousand miles away!

“Why?” he asked. “Is your husband threatening you? Did you win the Lottery and need to escape the press?” he asked with a bite of sarcasm.

She bit her lip. “Gavin, I really can’t tell you. I don’t want to hurt you, and this time I might.”

His full brows pulled together. His face had character now, real emotion and determination. He was now a man, when she had only known the boy.

His gaze cooled as he continued to stare at her. “Fine. I’m sure we can avoid each other easily enough.” He flipped back into his seat. “I doubt we are even at the same hotel.”

She tugged her lip between her teeth once more. God, she was being awful. This was Gavin, for goodness sakes! She looked out the window, the crest of the renowned black pyramid visible over the top of the airport as they taxied up.

She pivoted to look at him. His eyes were closed, his body stretched out like a lean feline in his slacks and jacket--just like when they had left.

“Gavin, I have a limo. Let me at least get you to your hotel.” When he was silent, she softly added, “Please.”

“I’m sure you have important things to do. Don’t worry about me.”

“Gavin.” She ground her jaw, her patience stretching. “Please.”

He sat up, his gaze hot and intense when it raked over her. “Never beg, Rose. You of all people should never have to beg, and never from me,” he said with conviction, but she waited for several expectant seconds anyway. “All right. I’m staying at the Bellagio,” he finally relented. “But you don’t have to do anything else for me. I

won't purposely bother you." He flipped back into the recess of his seat, all but dismissing her.

She felt her lips curve as the breath she had been holding loosened. "I'm staying there too! See? Was that so hard?" she said as her smile lifted more. "And Gavin?" She rested her hand on his arm as she perched her sunglasses on her nose. "I am sorry. You could never be a bother. I'm stretched really thin right now."

He took her by surprise and leaned over, brushing a quick kiss against her lips. "But you're still beautiful," he said as the air compression balanced out. They had docked to the bay arm and she hadn't even noticed.

He stood, waiting for her to lead the way from the plane. "You only have one bag? No trunk of womanly necessities?" he teased lightly.

"I didn't have time for much." She flinched as she said it, realizing she needed to be more careful. One slip, one misplaced word, could send her on the run yet again.

He glanced at her quizzically, but again he didn't ask any questions. She looked up at him as they began walking, wondering what had happened to the boy who had been the pest of her life. What happened to the Gavin who needed to know every little detail about her? Her schedule, who she was seeing that weekend, if she'd finished her assignments, if she needed help with any of it?

The man striding next to her was quiet, reclusive; not asking and not offering. His sable hair was trimmed to a crisp length that said he was a professional, creating a complete neat picture with his suit. She realized it would have taken her far longer to recognize him without the glasses she could still picture. Stretching her memory, she couldn't even remember the last classmate she had run into.

Gavin had grown taller, was her next thought, his long strides easy with her in heels, but slow to her pace. His thoughtfulness brought a quick damp weight to her eyes and she had to blink to keep it back. She fought with herself, wrapping the turmoil of her emotions up in a knot, the state most of her was already in. If she was ready to cry over this and the stupid blanket, maybe she did need a damn vacation after all! She lifted a hand to his elbow, and he automatically crooked his arm to let her walk next to

him. Her gaze swept up, surprised at the gesture. Gavin was quite the gentleman. It was taking time to separate the teenage boy from the man she had at her side.

This was Gavin. Her friend. Surprisingly, she admitted, she could use a friend right then, and then they were on their way to get her limo. Keeping focused was going to keep her sane, if not necessarily safe. It was all she had at the moment. Taking a long breath, she decided she would take it.

She spotted the driver and walked up saying hello. He looked at her with confusion because he knew she was supposed to be alone, but she had promised Gavin. After a battle of tense stares, the driver just shrugged. "Any bags?" he asked, his tone bored.

"At the carousel." She didn't have any, but she knew Gavin must. Sane people without death threats hanging over their heads usually do when they go to Las Vegas.

"Why did he meet you here? Don't they usually wait out front?" Gavin asked lowly as the driver fell into step several feet behind her.

"I always have them meet me," she said with forced unconcern. How could she explain the driver was part of making sure she made it to the hotel in one piece? That he was actually her escort from Detective Tanner, Detective Rodriguez's contact?

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Not into talking anymore, are you?" she finally asked.

He looked down at her, and she could tell he was wishing she wasn't wearing the disguise. His gaze never stopped moving over her, following the outline of her scarf, until he landed again on her eyes, hidden behind the dark sunglasses. "I just don't like discussing things in front of an audience. I have a feeling this is going to be a good one by the time you're done," he informed her with a brisk nod. "The bags are coming."

It only took a few minutes to collect his, and before she could blink three times, they were on their way to the hotel. He sat in one corner, and she took over another. She watched as the hotels whisked by, but it took only minutes to reach the front drive of the Bellagio.

Nervousness slammed into her as the limo pulled to a stop. What if someone saw

her? What if even with her hair covered, someone recognized her? For a brief second, she hated her hair with a blazing flare of fear, but quickly squashed it. She took a deep breath, trying to force herself under control, but the fears were still there, taunting her. Reality was setting in now that she had arrived and she didn't like it, not one bit. She stared through the smoke tinted window of the limousine. What if he was already here? She turned and looked at Gavin. Of course! No one would pay attention to a couple if whoever was looking for her was expecting her to be alone.

"Gavin, could you be kind and just walk inside with me?"

He shrugged. "Sure, we're both going in."

She tried to tie down the butterflies in her stomach as he slid out through the open door, offering her a hand. She pasted on a simple smile and let him hold her as she followed. There was barely a whisper as she started for the marbled entrance to check-in. Well, that was a good sign. No one was paying one bit of attention to her next to Gavin.

She walked up to a young man behind the marble and stone counter, saying, "You have a room for a Rhonda Tanner, please."

Again, Gavin just looked down at her, saying nothing, but she could see the questions in his darkening eyes.

"Yes, Ma'am. Here is your card key."

She reached for it as he rattled off the number, her fingers shaking so much she could barely grab it.

"Here, let me," Gavin said as he slid it off the counter from underneath her numb touch.

She nodded, a little surprised. Gavin dropped his arm to curve around her waist, whether to hold her up or just for support, Rose really didn't care. She faced the young man again, pulling down her sunglasses to the end of her nose. She spotted his name tag. "Javier, I know you don't give out room numbers, but it is imperative that no one be given my information. I must know if anyone is asking for me. Is that understood?" she said in a silky voice to hide the tremble.

He typed a message onto the screen. "Not a problem, Miss Tanner." He finished typing, looking up with a smile. "Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you," she said. She started to walk away, then looked at Gavin. "Don't you need to check in?"

"Once you are safe," was all he said. His voice was a low murmur that only she could hear, because he had leaned down to all but breathe into her ear.

Great! Now Gavin was going to be all over her demanding to know what was going on. He'd caught onto her case of nerves. She probably glowed like a neon sign with nervousness. Yet, as they made their way to her room, he remained stoic and quiet. Maybe she was just being paranoid. Not without just cause, she reminded herself, but this was Gavin, or so she kept telling herself. If history was to be remembered, he would bombard her with questions the second he had a chance, wanting to know.

As he slid the card home, the light turned green and just like that, she felt drained to the bone. It had been six hours since the start of her day, when she'd been trussed up and pushed out of New York. Six very long, distressing hours.

The bellhop brought in their bags. She reached for her purse, but Gavin was already at the door. He pushed a few bills into the young man's hand and waited until the door was closed, then he locked it.

She fell over backward on the bed with a huge sigh, not even caring about the room for the moment. "God, what a day." Two seconds later, the phone rang.

## III

Gavin watched her collapse onto the bed, full of questions. What on earth was going on? Who the hell was Rhonda Tanner? Was Sappy married? And why had she been so nervous to walk in? She'd trembled like a leaf against him from the second he'd wrapped his arm around her outside the hotel.

His thoughts were killed by the ringing of the phone. He watched her sit up, tearing off the scarf to reach for the phone. Her sunglasses landed with a flicking toss on top of the yellow material splayed over the night stand, and she started in on the phone call.

"What?" she bit out. "Don't I even get to pee? Yes, I'm fine. No, he's an old school friend who had the nasty luck of being my seatmate. So? Come and meet him. He's fine." She rubbed a pale, shaking hand across her eyes. "Look, Detective, all I care about is getting my life back, and damn it, it'd better be soon! Every hour I'm out of New York is killing my career."

Detective? She was being watched? He studied her through half closed lids as he leaned against the door, shamelessly eavesdropping.

"No, I won't go out," she said morosely. "Good grief, who thought I'd enjoy Vegas? Well, tell *Defective* Rodriguez I don't want to be here!" She inhaled a deep breath, trying to find some control. He sensed she was failing when her tone remained brittle. "Look, I need some rest. This whole situation has me twisted like a screw. Call before you come up. Yes, it's the same room. You called me, didn't you?" She slammed the phone down.

Gavin was still as stone, his arms crossed over his chest, just watching. She looked tired and worn and...scared to death. What was going on in Rose's life? Who

was she that someone had her hiding in Vegas?

“Look, before you leave, could I go to the bathroom?” she asked. Before he could answer, she swept into the restroom, the door closing with a locking click.

“Leave?” he muttered crossly. “Not likely.” He pulled the bags into the room, placing hers on the table to be unpacked, and set his to the side. He could pick them up whenever he got himself checked-in. He sat down in one of the large upholstered chairs and waited.

The room was nice, a large king bed with a plush comforter done in muted natural tones. It was a luxurious step up from where he usually stayed, but that had been part of the decision to stay there. This was supposed to have been a vacation for him, and he had wanted to splurge. Now unexpectedly, he’s thrown into a time warp with his high school crush who was at the moment hiding in the bathroom, scared and tired. He was cooling his heels, grinding his teeth wanting to know why.

When they were younger there had been few secrets between them. At least he hadn’t thought there had been. Then again, when she’d moved on and left him behind because of his nerd status, there was almost nothing left to be said.

So why was he even bothering with her now? Obviously she was in some sort of trouble or she wouldn’t be shouting at cops and needing disguises to show herself in public.

Sappy was in trouble!

He straightened up as the realization finally began to beat into him. She was in Las Vegas when it apparently was the last place she wanted to be. What career was she talking about? What did she do?

He stared out the window in concerned quiet, his legs crossed at the ankles as he waited. He could hear her voice, muttering loudly for a few minutes, railing at some man who was ruining her life. His eyes slid closed as he tried to listen. So, she’d been involved and someone was causing her problems. That explained a few things, but why come all the way to Vegas to avoid him? Why were the cops in on it? Was he her husband? Was she trying to get out of a bad relationship?



He flinched when something hit the wall with a thump. Well, her temper hadn't changed much, he mused as he waited, knowing it would only take another minute or two before she returned, composed once more.

Once she got that one good throw out of her system, she'd feel so guilty for being violent, that she would deflate like a hot balloon. While meek would never be a name you could tag on his September Rose, she was not a violent girl, or woman he corrected himself.

He could still remember when he had started using Sappy as her nickname instead of September. They had been doing homework at her kitchen table their freshman year. She only lived three houses down from him when he had moved in during his eighth grade year.

He steepled his fingers as he let the memory return. It had been Biology and Algebra that year, then Algebra II and Chemistry. She had hated it all with a passion. He had called her a ninny and a wimp and she had made girly noises. Which had in turn made her sound sappy, and it had stuck. His expression softened just thinking about those long ago memories.

He was the only one who had used it. He never called her by it to her face outside of their private homework sessions. Even then, he had respected her enough to not let that follow her around. Even though September was her name--her father had called her that in celebration of the month she had been adopted in--nearly everyone called her Rose. Even as the years melted away, he could see her blooming like the rose she was.

Her legs had been long and coltish, and she'd been a fast runner. She was hell on wheels at the track meets. Her hair had always been a mass of untamable curls, a luscious brown that he used to twirl his fingers through then yank before she realized what he was doing. He always assumed she'd had a perm until the summer he went swimming with her and watched as those curls came to life in the sunlight as they dried. Even sopping wet, her hair hung in a scalloped wave down her back. It still held that wild fascination for him.

His mind replayed her coming back to her seat while they were on the plane. Her snug blue sheath dress accentuated her body, and he compared the differences of ten years. She still had the most incredible legs, legs that could do justice to heels and short hems. *Her hem was very short*, he thought, with more than a touch of male appreciation. It only went to mid-thigh.

He groaned to himself as he remembered the feel of her in his lap, the scent of her perfume, soft and floral, her body frozen by the rough ride of the airplane and by his hands. He had long fingers, and he was certain if there was a chance again, they would wrap completely around her trim waist. It was a very stimulating picture, to say the least. His mind replayed the whole episode second by second. His thoughts were stopped mid-grope as the bathroom door popped back open.

Her eyes widened momentarily. "Oh, you stayed." She pushed the edge of her hair back, damp droplets from washing her face flying free with the sweeping motion.

"You asked me to," he reminded her.

She moved to the bed and sat on the edge, her gaze down. "I know. I guess I wasn't expecting you to." She lifted her hands to her lap, her fingers tying themselves together.

His gaze narrowed on the strangled motions of her fingers, knotting together repeatedly. That he recognized. He didn't move from his chair, but his voice lowered. "Sappy? What's going on?"

Her head snapped up, catching his gaze. Emotions--fear, uncertainty, indecision, warred over her. Her tongue darted out, running along her bottom lip. He saw her eyes fill with tears. "Oh, Gavin," she whispered. Her hands lifted to her face and she began to sob.

He rose from the chair and sat next to her, his arm molding over her shoulder. "Shh. It's all right. You don't have to tell me." He gave in and wrapped both arms around her, tucking her into his chest and he swallowed. God, he was a jerk. He should be thrown out of the room for the thoughts he was having, but he wasn't, and he didn't leave because of them either.

He tugged and fell backward, pulling her back with him until she was curled up against his shoulder. Reaching into his rear pocket, he handed her his handkerchief, then wrapped her up again in his arms, and just let her cry. Which just happened to be something else he had prior experience with. She'd cried when she lost the science fair, the project she had busted her cute little rump over for a month. She cried when she had learned her birth mother had died, after her adoptive parents had allowed her to search, knowing some things were inevitable. She cried when she'd skinned her knee at a track meet, although he was the only one to know she had cried.

Only Gavin had ever seen this side of her, Rose at her vulnerable best. At least until she'd started to drift away, to ignore him. He wondered if anyone had seen this side of her since.

He drew a hand through a length of her hair, feeling it again for what felt like the first time, the unruly curls floating under his palm.

"You've always been a good friend," she told him between deep breaths. "I don't know how I could have forgotten that."

"Like I said, I have a habit of being where I'm needed." Her chuckle was soft as she curved up against him a little tighter. He couldn't help or deny what that did to his heart rate.

"My favorite teddy bear had nothing on you, Gavin," she said in her youthful voice, the one he distinctly remembered.

He lifted his watch. It was getting late. "I need to get checked in or I'll lose my room," he informed her. Not to mention his control.

She looked up at him, those emerald green eyes glistening with the remnants of her tears. He had to physically keep himself from rolling over and kissing the last possible breath out of her. He stared for a heartbeat, watching closely as her tongue darted out again. His chest hurt for a split second as he battled against himself.

He couldn't do it. She was involved, probably married, and she was in trouble. Even a dog knew when to leave well enough alone.

He gently slid her off his shoulder, rising to the edge. "I'll be back in a few

minutes to get my bags.” He stood and walked to the door, not trusting himself to look at her sprawled across the width of the bed. The vision he held, her hair spread out on the blanket, the line of her hem rising on her trim thighs. He had to swallow to find his voice. “I’ll knock loudly,” he told her as he let himself out. He paused, pulled the card key from his jacket pocket, and left it on the table next to the door. He made sure the door locked securely behind him.

\* \* \*

Rose lay on the bed, resting her cheek on her hands as the door closed with an audible click. She lifted the handkerchief once more, dabbing at still dripping eyes. She must be exhausted. She never cried like this.

She noticed he had pulled up her bag. She should change while she had a few minutes. She lugged it to the bed, searching for her jeans and a t-shirt. She slipped off her heels and sighed. She was going to make an appointment at the spa. She had to. She was so twisted up, tense and knotted, she felt like a pretzel--an over baked one.

She wondered how long she was going to be stuck there as she changed. She glanced out her window and could see the lagoon where the water ballet played out. It was quiet for the moment. Las Vegas wasn’t a bad town. It was actually quite beautiful, especially at night. She knew that. She had been there before doing shoots. It just wasn’t where she wanted to be right at that moment.

She wanted to be in New York. She needed to protect her career. She needed to be on a runway.

Her breathing hitched painfully when her vision landed on the folded sheet of paper lying in her suitcase. It was a copy of the last written letter she’d received from her ‘secret admirer.’ Detective Rodriguez had the original trying to do a writing match on it. She had received five in the last week, all with a growing sense of desperation.

She’d made a copy before turning it over so she would have a reminder of why she needed to stay away, of why she had been spirited away from New York and in

such a rush.

The man was sick. It hadn't started out that way. He had been kind and gracious for several months as the letters had arrived via the agency. Then he had found her email accounts. She'd blown it off. They aren't that secret if you know how, and he did know how, and a whole lot more.

Then he started sending her letters to her home address. It never occurred to her to be concerned. She got fan mail all the time. Every now and then someone would get her home address, and send her letters or postcards there. It wasn't until they started coming everyday, when there was never a return address on what she received. When he began to call her his love and saying how much he loved to watch her shows. When he described her to a 'T.' When he knew her schedule better than she did. When he began to claim he was in love with her. When he started to get mad with her because her picture was in the style section with an escort, then finally she began to get a clue, but by then it was too late.

He knew her. Her life, her home, her schedule, her everything. He even knew her damn dress size! Not that it was a secret, but only someone who had a reason to know, knew it. Like her fitting crew.

Now her life was being turned upside down because of this guy. The last letter, the one she was using as a stark reminder, was the scariest yet. He had written that if he ever caught her out, cheating on him again, he was going to kill whoever she was with and make her pay. She was his, the letter had screamed. He had spent too much time wooing and courting her to let her blatant disrespect continue.

*If this was his idea of courting a woman it was no wonder he had to do it by letter, she thought glaring at the letter in her fingers. He was going to ruin her!*

She jumped when the phone rang. She stuffed the page under folded clothes, diving across the bed to pick up the white monster.

"What?"

"Don't you ever just say hello?" came the deep voice. A tired voice.

"Tanner." She sat up. "Look, I'm here. It's in my best interest. No one said I have

to like it." He was Detective Rodriguez's choice to keep her safe. Somehow, he just didn't seem to fit the bill. He always sounded so weary and dreary.

"I'm coming up. I have a stakeout tonight. Is your friend still there?"

"No. He went to get his own room, but he'll be back soon."

She heard his hard breathing. "Are you sure you can trust this friend? You're kind of a hot commodity now."

She laughed without humor. "He is probably the only one I do trust."

"Fine. See you in three." She blinked when the phone went dead with an eerie suddenness.

She hung up her end. She was definitely going to have to ask how long she was stuck out here. Three minutes later there was a loud knock. She looked through the peep hole. Had to be Detective Tanner, but she wasn't taking any chances.

"Name?" she demanded through the door. She opened the door when he identified himself. "That was quick."

"I was already on my way when I called," he said, striding through the door. His gaze shot through the room, landing back on her.

Detective Tanner was an older man, probably forty-ish, with a very short military buzz cut. His gut was not bad, but had potential. He walked around the room seeing the spare bags. "Those your friend's?" he asked blandly.

"Yes. He'll be back to get them." She sat down in a chair as he continued to search the room.

"I still want to talk to him. Does he know?"

"He suspects I'm in trouble. We were close in high school, and I guess he can still read me like a book. It can't be that bad. Madonna had a stalker and she's fine."

His expression was not enlightening. "We got the profile on this guy this morning after you took off," he said through his blond mustache. "You are safer where he can't find you."

"So that means you know who it is!" she cried, feeling the first light of hope on the horizon.

"Rodriguez thinks so, but they still have to find him."

She couldn't hide the relief in her voice. "So I won't be here but a day or two, right?"

"Miss St. Johns..." His flat tone brought her back down to earth with a crash. It was as far as he got, though, interrupted by the brisk knock on her door.

"Should be Gavin," she said, walking to the door. After one quick peek, she opened the door, letting him in. She shot him a grateful look. His expression was guarded when he noticed the other man.

He held out his hand. "Detective, I presume," Gavin drawled.

The detective shot a sideways look at Rose. Tanner slid a notebook from his pocket, shooting off questions. It was like watching a tennis match for Rose. First one, then the other. Neither man looked at her as this went on for several tense minutes. When Tanner seemed mostly satisfied, he asked Gavin for his room number.

"I got the one across the hall. In case she gets cabin fever," he said with a shrug.

Tanner's sharp gaze narrowed at him. "I don't trust you, Throckton."

Gavin actually smiled back, a cold lift Rose couldn't have envisioned. "I would be shocked if you did. Feel free to do a background check on me. I'm mostly clean."

"Mostly?" Tanner asked, his thin brow arching.

"No one's perfect, detective." A chill slid down Rose's spine at his quick reply.

"This is too damn convenient," he muttered absently.

Gavin only shrugged. Tanner turned back to Rose. "I'm leaving now. You have my direct line. If you have any problems, call me. Rodriguez or myself will call in the morning to let you know how things look."

"So, I won't be here for long, right?" she asked again, anxious energy making her tap the toe of her foot where she stood.

Detective Tanner could only look at her. "I really don't know, Miss St. Johns. Just stay inside for tonight." He turned to head for the door, then stopped and pivoted. "No one knows you two met up, right?"

They both shook their heads.

"No one knew you were leaving other than the agency and Rodriguez?" he directed to Rose.

"I told no one."

He actually offered a smile. "Then you should relax. Unless someone recognized you coming in, which I doubt, you should be able to relax." His expression flattened as he nodded once at Gavin, and then he let himself out.

"Whew," Gavin breathed when the door closed on them. "I haven't been talked to like that since a girl I dated had her father interrogate me." He sank down on the chair he was closest to.

"I'm sorry to get you into this, Gavin. I would understand if you just took your room and ignored me." She sat on the edge of the bed, silently waiting. Her hands began to twist in her lap again.

"Why would I do that? I haven't had this much excitement in forever," he said with a wicked grin. "So, are you going to tell me?"

She hung her head, shame tainting her tongue. How could she tell him? She had been a clueless fool for more than six months, unaware of how this was building to bite her in the butt.

Gentle fingers lifted her chin. "You know, Sappy, there was a time when you could tell me anything," he reminded her, his voice as gentle as his touch. "And I am here after more years than I care to count. It must be for a reason."

"It's a mess, Gavin. I'm a mess because of it," she told him weakly.

"Remember, I specialize in messes," he answered with a grin.

She searched his soft brown eyes and could remember every hug, every good luck he had ever given her. She felt her eyes fill as she threw herself onto his lap, her arms grabbing on tight. "God, I've missed you," she whispered. He smiled and his arms found her waist.

"I missed you too, September." He reached a long arm to the bed and picked up the linen cloth, holding it to her eyes one more time.

"You are the only one, other than my family, who ever used that name," she told



him through a snuffle.

He rolled a shoulder beneath her weight. "It was a special name for a special girl. It just got to be a mouthful when Sappy was so much easier," he teased.

She punched him on the shoulder. "Rat."

"First in line," he said. She could hear the light laughter in his voice. His hand sat loosely against her, but she had never felt safer.

She dried her eyes again. "All right. Let's order room service. Then I'll talk."

He nodded, sliding her from his lap. When he was standing in front of her, a full head taller in her bare feet, she told him, "You know, suddenly I'm not so upset to have run into you."

He brushed his thumb against her cheek in silence, then he grabbed his bags.

"Wait for me," he said as he walked out the door.

## IV

Gavin dropped his bags in a room identical to Rose's. He shed his jacket, hanging it in the closet, loosening an extra button on his shirt. No matter how innocent her little move had been to be in his lap, he was as overheated as the sidewalk outside. It still surprised him how easy those old urges to hold her, touch her, and so much more, could come back and knock him senseless.

He had assumed after the crush phase he was safe. Evidently, his body never got over it, but he knew he was still good old Gavin. Best friend of the moment. When she went back to New York, and he went back after his vacation, he would be forgotten again.

For tonight at least, he was in Las Vegas with a friend right across the hall. A friend who he still liked and who didn't know what he was underneath the surface. He would enjoy it while it lasted.

He pulled his door closed and knocked on hers. He noticed she had moved her bag, but refused to unpack when he walked in. If he guessed right, it was her statement about her belief in how long she would be forced to stay.

She took over the middle of the bed looking at the menu. "I think I know what I'm having," she said as he took a chair himself.

"Just order me a burger with the works and double fries."

"And cheese?" she asked, a glint of memory in her eyes.

He gave her a shocked gasp. "Is there any other way to have a burger? Why, it would be a travesty," he replied in a strong Cockney accent. He knew it would be useful sooner or later.

He liked it when she laughed. She looked more relaxed than she had an hour ago

as she made the order, then all he could do was sit back and wait.

She leaned against the bed, her legs stretching out at him. She lifted a brow as he stared. Thankfully she didn't realize he was staring at parts of her. "What, no questions? I guessed you would be the first to start."

"If it will make it easier," he offered. She nodded as her mouth tightened. "Are you married?" She shook her head. "Boyfriend?" He kept the small feeling of relief out of his expression when she replied negatively. "So, why the disguise?" He stretched out as well, watching as the color rose then fell on her cheeks.

"Well, technically, I am hiding from a person. I seem to have acquired a stalker," she explained, her voice tinged with guilt, unable to meet his gaze.

He forced his body to remain still even though he wanted to fly across the room to protect her. He had always had that problem with her. Good old Gavin to the rescue.

"And he is...? An ex? A friend?"

She stared at him as tears started to form again. Her fear was tangible when she said, "I don't know! It started out as fan mail, then he hacked into my email accounts. He found my address and started sending me mail there. I have even been followed home twice." She swallowed, fighting the tears as her hands twisted a finger war in her lap. She flipped a hand to her suitcase. "The most recent letter is in there. A reminder to keep me from getting too mad at people who are only trying to protect me by sending me out here."

When he gestured to the bag, she nodded and he lifted the top. "It's at the bottom," she offered as he searched through the silk and satin. He swallowed once, aware of what he was touching and exactly who it belonged to, then his fingers hit a sheet of paper. He held it in his hand and retook his chair, striving to forget the other items that had been in that bag.

"I don't know what you think of me anymore, Gavin, but I didn't do this! I've been so caught up in work, I just wasn't paying attention." Her hands were still in her lap, while her head hung dejectedly.

He opened the page, and as he read, began to see why she was so distraught.

*To the woman I love:*

*How could you do that to me? You know how I feel about you, and yet you hurt me. I know you went to the opening with that super hunk that all of you bitches hang on. That should have been me! You belong to me! I have warned you about going out without me. I have told you over and over I love you. Why do you do this to me?*

*You break my heart, Rose. I will not warn you again. You are mine. You need to accept it. If you go out again and I am not with you, I will not be held accountable. Your date will suffer. You will suffer. You can do your work. You are beautiful on the catwalk, but I can't allow such flagrant disloyalty any longer. You are mine and mine alone. R*

He swallowed heavily. "Wow. He's intense."

"And warped out of his mind!" she cried.

"What is this about a catwalk? What do you do?"

She stared at him in open surprise. "You don't know what I do?" She laughed then. "I should have guessed. You would be the only human on the planet who wouldn't know because I wasn't built on a computer screen."

"That wasn't nice," Gavin retorted. "I just don't follow the world like some."

"I'm a model. I'm booked through an agency in Manhattan."

He nodded once. He should have known. Her figure was a dead giveaway. "Sorry for not noticing."

Her brows drew together immediately at his blasé tone. "Hey, don't make it sound like I'm a glory hound. I'm not. You should know that. I went in for a commercial extra and came out with a contract. I was lucky."

He leaned back, rereading the page, lingering on the writing. "And this has been going on for how long?"

"He's been writing for well over half a year. He's only gotten bent out of shape the last two months."

"What happened two months ago?" he asked. He folded the page, the words memorized.

"I was escorted to a screening party by an actor friend and evidently this 'R' guy

went overboard," she said with disgust.

"How much does he know? Why did they make you leave New York?" His hand tightened into a fist that someone was causing her grief. He tapped his chin with his knuckle as she explained.

She blushed deeply at his question. Her gaze fell and she started pulling at imaginary threads on the comforter. "He knows everything. From my schedule to where I live. That is why they said it was best if I left," she told him, guilt laced through every word.

He couldn't sit still any longer and lunged to his feet. He shook the page in his hand. "How long was it before you even told anyone about this, September? I mean, you had to have noticed something in the writing?"

She shrugged at him. "I get fan mail all the time. I read what I can. Some of it is done by agency aides. His never has a return address so it's usually the last to be read, if at all," she explained to the top of the bed. "That one is a few days old as it is. I'm sure there are more by now." Her gaze lifted with a hopeful light. "But it sounds like they know who it is and can find him soon. I won't be out of work or stuck inside for too long."

"September, I don't want you to show one hair out of this room," he said flatly. He was seething even if she wasn't. She seemed perfectly at ease. He almost smacked himself. Of course! Good old Gavin to the damn rescue! Again. Just like in school, just like all the times before when he hadn't been able to help protect the girl, now a woman, in trouble.

"Detective Tanner said he'd call in the morning," she parroted with a smile.

"And I am here now. I can't believe you let this get so out of control," he bit out with heat.

She started to glare at him. "Hey, Madonna had a stalker!"

"So, now you can make a club," he retorted. "I don't care. This is outrageous! Didn't any of it give you a clue before now?" he snarled.

Real embarrassment clouded her gaze and his anger began to dry up. "I was

naïve, Gavin. I know that, but I can't even think if I'm not working. I live for my shows. And in a couple of months, I'll be getting ready for the next Spring Show. I have to make that show, Gavin. I'm getting older. My career has an expiration date. I have an expiration date!" she cried, her voice laden with desperation, a sadness he could only imagine.

"But September, you're beautiful," he told her, standing in front of her. "You've always been beautiful to me."

She ran a finger across her nose. "Thank you, Gavin. You always were my strongest supporter, regardless of what I did."

"Yeah," he breathed. *And look what it got me*, he cursed to himself. "Look, just stay put..." He turned at a knock on the door. "I'll get it." He dropped the letter back in her luggage, then opened the door and tipped room service, dragging the cart in himself.

"So, who's paying for the digs?" he said a few minutes later as he settled a chair close to the round table that cornered the room. At least his anger was back under control.

"The agency is for a few nights. I guess after that it's up to me." He heard the forlorn note in her voice, hoping she wouldn't be there that long.

He reached for her knee when she took the chair across from him. "Don't worry. Tonight, you're on vacation, and for some stupid reason, I decided to tag along." By her gaze, he knew he hadn't been able to completely hide the disgruntled sound. Fortunately for him, there was no way she could discern the real reason behind it.

She bit into her salad while he started on his fries. "So, what are you doing out here?" she finally asked.

"I really did come out for vacation," he said as he popped in a fry. *Take that, cholesterol!* "Work's been a real grind lately."

"Is programming that hard?" she asked, pushing her salad around.

"No, it's fixing everyone else's screw ups that makes my life miserable."

"But why Vegas? Why not the beach or the mountains?"

"I wanted to see if all the odds talk is true. I have a bonus that's just been sitting

in my account for the last four years." Whoops! Loose lips sink cad filled ships.

"And I guess you came prepared?" she asked with a corner of her mouth lifting. Damn, but that turned her entire mouth sexy.

He leaned back, redirecting his thoughts to her question. "As much as I could. I've never gambled, but I'll try anything once. Life is too short and too damn dull otherwise."

"I could agree there, but I'm a little full and tired of excitement," she replied. She put her fork down. She looked across the table and his pulse hopped, her green eyes soft and luminous in the light. "Gavin, would you stay? Watch a movie with me or something? I don't want to be alone."

"Sure. What are friends for?" he answered, a ghost of a smile flitting over his mouth. Her return smile made the whole day worth it.

An hour later, they were settled against the pillows he had stolen from his room, plus hers, watching a movie on the TV. She tucked herself up onto his shoulder and he slipped off his shoes, rolling up his sleeves as they watched Keanu Reeves kick butt.

"You know what's missing?" she whispered.

"Parents," he said with a soft chuckle.

She laughed with him. "No. Popcorn." She sighed. "I love popcorn."

"Check the microwave." She scooted off the bed and he could hear her rummaging around with an excited "Aha!" and then a digital timer starting.

"It's not low fat or anything," she sighed. "But I'm not going to complain. Not tonight."

"Good, get up here. He's about to kick someone's ass again." He smiled when she laughed once more. Even as she relaxed back into her spot, he knew she needed that more than the popcorn. She needed a chance to relax and forget the whys.

"Here. Open up." She lifted a bite to his mouth, his abdomen crunching as her fingers slid over his lips. *Why oh why, do we torture ourselves?* When she did it again, he knew.

He flicked his tongue out to brush against her fingertips, their salty, buttery mix

sending his pulse through the roof. His lids sank to half mast when her fingers brushed against his lips.

“You...you have some here,” she whispered, her thumb brushing the corner of his mouth.

That was when the cad made his appearance. When her hand stilled, his tongue snaked out, wrapping over her thumb, gently sucking it into his mouth. He swirled all over her skin, feeling his entire body burst into a pile of need.

He let her go when she whimpered. He swallowed, barely able to breathe himself as shock rifled through him, dispelling his rising desires for her. “I shouldn’t have done that, Rose. I’m sorry.” He tried to put some distance between them, except he couldn’t move because she was lying against his shoulder. He fought to get his body back under control. This was Rose, his September Rose! He refused to do this to her.

There was no way he was going to let her know what a real jerk he could be. She didn’t say anything, her body wrapped over his. She nodded once as he whispered into her hair again.

She wouldn’t even look at him! Great. Now he had gone and done it. He’d disgusted her. “Look, let’s just finish the movie and get some sleep. It’s got to be bedtime somewhere, right?” She nodded quickly as his body ached beneath her weight. Her breathing was short and her breasts were still pressing into his chest. It was taking a lot of willpower to keep the wanting inside.

Gavin breathed a little easier when she shifted to watch the movie again. He was disappointed and relieved when she didn’t hand feed him any more popcorn, either.

When she finally fell asleep, he was careful to slide her down. Dropping the popcorn in the trash, he turned on a low light. He folded the comforter in half over her and slipped out with his shoes in his hand, turning off the overhead lights. He closed the door, careful to not make any sound and slipped across the hall.

She hadn’t spoken much after the thumb incident, not that he could blame her. He was still disgusted with himself, but the longer he was with her, the more those urges he’d had when he was just a teenager seemed to come back to haunt him. Only



now it was with a man's body with a grown up need, and he hated himself even more because she trusted him implicitly. How she would laugh if she knew that good old Gavin was still drooling after her like he had at sixteen?

She would laugh herself to tears to know he'd had a crush on her at all. She had been clueless about it then, and the best he could do now was attempt to keep it hidden. There was no way he was going to do anything to hurt her, not with the trouble she was facing, the threat she was under.

He stripped out of his shirt, laying it with his slacks on the chair next to his own bed. His skin still felt hot where she had been curled up against him most of the evening. He could still smell the essence of her shampoo, something with a citrus flair to it. He had been right; his hands could span her waist, mostly. He was only a few inches short if he touched his thumbs. He had done that while she'd slept. He couldn't help himself. She was so slim, even for her height.

He was all limbs, and well, she was definitely all legs. He grinned and couldn't stop. He was tall at six-two, and she had to be at least five-nine, maybe even a bit taller. There were so many things that he had liked about her back then, and she had grown into a lot of them, he thought, crawling into his bed.

He stretched out and sighed once in mild annoyance. He had left his pillows in her room. He considered getting up to see if there were spares in the closet, but was too tired. His day had been extremely unusual, thanks to Rose. He flipped over and crossing his arms, fell asleep on his hand.

The next morning, he was dragged from his sleep by a harsh pounding. "Gavin!"

He was out of bed like a shot and jumped into his slacks from the night before. He threw the door open before he had a chance to completely remember where he was. She ran into his chest, sobbing and nearly hysterical. He shut the door, soothing her with a hand. "What's wrong, Rose?"

He noticed she was still dressed in last night's clothes. She hadn't bothered to change and it made him feel a little guilty. That was when he noticed it was still dark out. He shook his head, holding her close. "What time is it?"

She hiccupped. "I don't know." He rocked her on his heels as the sobs gradually slowed to a trickle.

"Come on, Rose. It's all right," he said. He walked her to the chair setting her down carefully as he grabbed the box of tissues from the counter. "What happened?"

She turned a beet red. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." Hiccup. "Bothered you."

He brushed her unruly hair back. "It's all right." He glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Twenty after two. They had been asleep for a whole two hours. "Okay, what happened?" he asked again as she pressed the tissues to her face.

"God, I'm getting to be such a mess over this," she moaned into her hands. He maneuvered himself to sit beneath her and rocked her as he waited, keeping her close. "I had a nightmare," she finally admitted. "And when I woke up in a strange place all alone, I freaked out."

"You stay in hotels all the time," he reminded her, his hand drifting down the wavy length of her hair.

She nodded. "I know. I just don't usually have nightmares about mean people breathing down my neck!"

He pulled her into his body, wrapping his arms around her. "Shh. It's going to be okay. You've really been holding it all inside, haven't you?" She nodded, a stilted guilty motion. "And that's why you never told anyone. My brave little Rose. Doing it all on her own," he said with a chuckle. "You were a terror in school and nothing has changed."

"I know. I wouldn't have said anything at all, except Beverly found me reading one of the letters in the dressing hall. I almost fainted on the spot," she breathed. "Oh my God! Gavin, you're naked!" she cried, leaning back to gape at him. "I woke you up!"

"Of course you woke me, Sappy. It's two in the morning. And I am wearing pants. So no, I'm not naked." He fought down the ache her words had stirred up. He continued to hold her until she calmed down completely. "I guess we better get you back to bed."

She finally looked up, a stricken look on her face. "Oh no!"

He rolled his eyes. "You locked yourself out, didn't you?"

She was very slow to admit it, but she did nod, sort of. It is hard to nod when staring at the floor.

"And my pillows are in your room." He lifted her to the bed. "Let's see if there are any spares." He found two, thankfully, in the closet.

"Come on, lady. In you go," he said, holding the sheets back for her.

"But where will you sleep?" Her green gaze was as dark as spring leaves.

"In bed. I will stay on top of the sheet. Don't even think of arguing, Sappy," he told her when her mouth popped open. "I'm tired. We'll get you into your room in the morning."

She gave in after a long staring contest which he won. When she was in, he rounded the bed and pulled the sheet tight, sliding under the blanket. Damn his slacks were uncomfortable and now he'd have to get them pressed, but his heart relaxed when he heard her sigh.

She was nothing but trouble; always had been, but he would never let her down. Not if he could help it.

"Gavin?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you," she whispered in the darkness.

"You're welcome." And just for a second, he let himself smile.

## V

Rose rolled over, but was stopped short by a heavy weight holding her down. Her hand drifted down and found an arm thrown across her stomach, a well muscled arm.

He made a deep sound in his chest when her palm flattened against warm skin. Gavin. She remembered now. She had woken him up. She didn't know what had come over her. For some reason, when she woke up with the dream running in front of her with her eyes wide open, knowing Gavin was right across the hall was all she'd needed to find wings on her feet.

Her hand trailed down his chest, a surprisingly smooth expanse of skin that was trembling under her touch. She pulled back her hand, feeling a growing warmth in her fingers. She wasn't fast enough.

His hand captured hers with a quick snatch. When he cupped her hand in his, folding her against him, her arm pinned into his chest, her heart skidded to a stop before she dared to breathe.

"Don't," he growled with a husky voice when she tried to pull free. His eyes were hooded. She simply stared.

"How did you do that? You've been legally blind forever," she asked bewildered.

"Laser surgery, three years ago."

No wonder. She had assumed contacts. His face had narrowed with maturity, strong cheekbones and long brows. His hair was still the same earthy brown. She stretched out her fingers again, finding the warmth of his chest where the blanket had fallen to his waist.

He had a magnificent chest; she had seen enough of them on the runway to know. Well toned, but not over done. He let her hand slip free as her fingers traced the length of his collarbone. He made the sound again, deeper, as her hand formed over his shoulder. When her hand slid back down to his neck, the pulse under her touch beat erratically.

“Gavin?” she whispered. She lifted her gaze, searching. His were closed. He slid from the bed with barely a flicker of emotion, surprising her with the sudden movement.

“I’ll get cleaned up while you call housekeeping,” he told her, grabbing clothes, heading for the bathroom. In less time than it took to blink, she could hear the shower running.

What was she doing? She had shared a bed with Gavin purely by accident. He was her friend. He’d opened his door when she’d been frightened out of her mind by a nightmare, and because of her, he had lost half his bed, not to mention his pillows. She lifted a hand into her hair, pushing it back.

She stared at the bathroom door as she reached for the phone, sitting up slowly. So what if he had a gorgeous chest? It wasn’t the first time she’d seen him without a shirt. They’d been swimming when they were kids, but even she knew better than to think then had any comparison to now.

Gavin had grown up. She shook her head, dismissing the notion. Gavin was her friend. He’d helped her more times than should be required between friends. She dialed for housekeeping, making the request explaining she had let herself out without her key.

She almost slipped and gave her name instead of the alias when they asked, but saved herself at the last second. The person on the other end said it would be about ten minutes.

She hung up the phone as her memory fell back to her school days with Gavin. They had both attended Crestview in southern New York. He moved in during the eighth grade year and he had been so quiet, but she hadn’t let that stop her. In a week,

she had him smiling and talking. In two weeks, she had a reliable homework buddy, which had worked out well because she hated so many of the assignments. Gavin thrived where she expressed distaste. He was labeled a nerd, but she refused to let that come between them. Until their junior year they had been close.

What had happened? Why had they drifted into different circles? Johnny Devlin hadn't tried to get her attention until late in the senior year when his cheerleader girlfriend started dating a freshman college boy.

Oh, yeah, now she remembered. Someone had told her Gavin had a crush on her. She still felt like laughing in disbelief. He'd helped her through more scrapes and bumps, but for some reason the idea of her friend liking her "that way" had felt wrong.

Even as she tried to play it light, he had drifted away too, until prom, the last time she had seen him. He had worn glasses then, his acne had been a problem, and he was tall, which was probably why Jonie had gone with him. She was the center for the basketball team. He was only one of a few she didn't stand over.

Her head snapped up from her childhood memories when she heard a sharp knock across the hall. She ran for the door, and found the maid as she started to turn away. "Sorry. He let me borrow his phone," she explained in a rush.

She threw herself into her own room, glad to finally be back. Being close to Gavin was having odd affects on her. She pushed herself off the door, spotting the blinking light on her phone.

Shower, then check. She really needed a shower.

An hour later, Gavin found her bundled up in a robe and her hair twisted in a towel when he finally got her to answer the door.

Rose was the walking numb. She didn't even check the peephole and she wasn't thinking well enough to care. She let him in and reseated herself in the center of the large bed, the phone purposely off the hook, surrounded by tissues. She knew she looked a wreck, the shower's hot water relaxation completely ruined.

He didn't say anything, just sat down next to her and cradled her again. "Gavin. I am so sorry! I'm ruining your vacation," she said on a sob filled cry.

"What happened?"

"What hasn't happened!" she choked out between tears. "I just got off the phone with Beverly. I lost my shoot schedule for the next three weeks. My apartment was broken into. And wouldn't you know it; *Defective* Rodriguez questioned the wrong guy."

He went still as a statue. "Your apartment was broken into?"

"Yes. They dusted and didn't find a single freaking print. All those tax dollars and not one damn print!" she raged. "And now, it's very likely he knows I'm not in town any longer. According to the cops, the place was wrecked."

"Good lord, Rose! You could have been there." She caught his stricken expression, but she was too angry for it to register.

"But I wasn't! No. I'm here, holed up like a damn criminal myself. I can't go outside. I can't shop. They've even told me to stay out of the casino. If someone recognizes me, and reports it to the news..." She growled in exasperation, her fists pounding into the mattress.

He tried to wrap her up like he always had, but she tore herself loose. "No! I can't let you keep doing this! I'm a wreck, and all I've done since you sat down yesterday, is ruin your trip." She jumped from the bed and started pacing. "I have got to do something. I hate hiding."

She threw her hands in emphasis as her pacing turned agitated. "I woke you up in the middle of the night. You haven't done a single thing since we got here," she tossed out, just looking for things to yell about. Fortunately, she had plenty.

"And have I made one complaint?" he told her, startling her out of her ranting. She spun on a bare heel.

She glared at him in exasperation. "Gavin," she groaned. "You never have and you never will." She stopped in front of him. "You are the kind of friend everyone should have, but I can't do this to you." She started to pace again and he reached for her with insistent hands.

"Do what?" His gaze was intense as he held her, clasped against his body. "You

need to give them a chance to find this guy, Rose. You aren't safe in New York."

"According to Tanner, I'm not safe anywhere. I can't handle this!" She pushed against his chest and his arms tightened again. "Gavin! Let me up. Go have some fun. One of us should," she said bitterly.

"Rose?" he said softly.

"What?" She was still too angry. Too furious. His hand cradled her chin in his palm, turning her to face him.

"Just this," he whispered as he formed his mouth against hers.

She gasped in shock as the feel of him raced throughout her body. Her toes curled when he pressed into her. Her ears began to ring when she felt his tongue against her lips.

His touch never changed. Calm, cool, controlled, subtle desire as he slowly fogged her brain. She whimpered when his hand slid under her towel, easing it away, letting damp tresses fall down her back. His fingers slid through the waves, massaging. It felt incredible.

He held her still when he released her mouth. "Now then, ready to hear me?" His hand caressed her head where he continued to hold her steady.

She nodded just staring at him. Good Lord, Gavin could kiss! When did he get sexy lips? His voice brought her back to a listening state of mind. Almost.

"I have a suggestion. We'll check it out with your bulldog, but if we find you a suitable disguise, wig, clothes etc. would that help? I don't want to push too hard, but I can see keeping you locked up is going to drive you right up a wall."

"You think Tanner might let me out of here?" she asked, almost too scared to hope.

"I will see what I can do," he said firmly. "Now get dressed. Something very casual. Give me Tanner's number."

He called from his cell phone while she dug through her bag, tossing clothes like rags onto the bed. Didn't she have even one t-shirt? she thought in misery, tossing one piece after another in futility onto the bed. She overheard portions of the conversations



as she continued her search.

"I understand," came Gavin's voice. It dropped an octave when he was serious. Why hadn't she ever noticed? "I have an idea. There are wig shops and we can dress her like a tourist. We will stay close, but trust me on this Tanner; she will run wild if you try to keep her indoors." He nodded as he kept his back to her, giving her privacy. "Has there been any other news?" There was silence as she finally found clothes to wear.

"I will keep her with me. At least I can block most curious stares." He made a short sound in his throat after a pause. "Look, could you keep that quiet for now? It isn't necessary. It's just my job. Thank you." He hung up and asked, "Are you decent?"

"As much as I can be." She should have paid a little more attention to her clothes. She looked at the castoffs with growing disgust. Most of her clothes lay in an unusable heap.

She planted her fists on her hips when he openly stared, trying not to laugh at her. The skirt was a mini of a mini and the shirt didn't even cover her navel. She was a walking sex ad, but it was the best she had.

"You can't be seen like that. Even I won't be able to keep people from staring," he said as he crossed his arms, his throat working.

"Well, what do you suggest? Unfortunately I am rather limited," she replied dryly.

He swept her key off the table. "Wait here," he said, and he stalked out the door, leaving her with her mouth hanging open in shock.

He returned with a gray t-shirt. "Put this on. Do you have any shorts? A longer skirt even?" His voice had grown hoarse, and he wouldn't look at her.

He was mad at her. Great! "Gavin, I'm sorry. I was a little rushed." He turned around again when she automatically reached for the hem of her shirt. Did he just groan?

She shook her head. Not Gavin. They were friends, and she was ruining his vacation. She slid the t-shirt on and it fell to below her hips. "All right," she said, utterly

sorry she had dragged Gavin into her mess. "Gavin, I'm ruining everything for you. Please don't be mad. You should just go."

His long legs ate up the space between them in two strides. "Why would I be angry?" He planted himself in front of her, pulling her hair loose from the back of the shirt. "This is the most fun I've had in years," he said with a lift to the corner his lips.

"You're kidding? I'm fun?" She gaped up at him.

"Well, not your problem. That is definite, but I can't tell you the last time I got to share my bed, my clothes and a kiss all on the same day."

He stroked her cheek and she felt them flush with color.

"Now come on. The bulldog said so long as we are careful and you check in every once in a while, he will let me keep an eye on you." He reached for the scarf and sunglasses. "Are you sure you don't have anything longer?" he said, looking at her legs.

"I have my jeans. I could wear those."

"You better. We need to make you look like a tourist, and I hate to say it, but those are not a tourist's legs." She watched as he lifted a brow, his gaze sweeping down to her toes.

She bent over and snapped the jeans off the floor. "Oh really! And just what kind of legs are they?" she asked, a little miffed at his tone.

Gavin stooped over and whispered one word as her eyes snapped open then drifted closed. Her heart thudded erratically against her ribs until he was standing looking out the window. Her hands were shaking as she stripped the skirt and replaced it with the jeans.

\* \* \*

Gavin waited until he heard her say it was all right to turn around. "A baseball cap should do it," he said giving her a critical once over. "Along with those sunglasses, no one would pick you for a million dollar model."

She put her fists on her hips again, daring him to say something worse, but he

couldn't have if he tried. He'd said her legs were edible. And she had just stared at him. He was having a hard time keeping his darker personality in check around her, but he was going to have to fight it. She needed to get out of the room. So did he, for that matter, before he kissed her again.

"Ready then?" he asked. She grabbed her purse, and before he could tell her to leave it, she pulled out her cash and dropped it on the bed. The purse had to be pricey with the designer logo on the handle.

"Let's go," she said. "First stop, clothes. I can't live in jeans alone." She wrapped up her hair in the elevator, and they hit the gift shop first.

He came up behind her as she walked her fingers over a stack of Bellagio t-shirts. "Don't go anywhere. I'm going to get some cash. Neither one of us should use any plastic outside." She nodded once as she pulled out shirts and tossed them over her arm.

Great! Now she was hardly talking to him. Was it because of the kiss? He had no idea as he went to the concierge desk and took a withdrawal against his room charges. It was reserved against a no limit platinum card. *Let them deny me*, he thought.

He had worked a long time to get comfortable, and for once, he was going to enjoy what that had earned him, even if it meant he only got to splurge to help keep Rose safe. He didn't care.

He folded the cash, keeping the majority in his front pocket as he slipped some into his wallet, then placed it back in his jeans pocket.

He found her in a pink t-shirt with a kitten on the front saying 'Las Vegas is a Purrrrfect town.' She looked all of eighteen again. When did she change? Sneaky woman.

"What do you think of this one?" she said holding up a black Bellagio hat. "Maybe a scrunchie or two while I'm at it," she said to herself.

"Whatever you want," he told her. She slid her glasses down a little, peeking over the top with those flashing green eyes of hers and his mouth went dry. "My treat," he managed, his tongue thick and heavy.

She bit on her lip for a second. "I can afford it Gavin," she started.

"Yes, but the fewer who know anything about you the better," he said into her ear. "So let me." He took what she had chosen and placed it on the counter, charging it to the room. "Could you have this delivered up there please?" he asked the counter attendant.

She nodded quickly. "No problem. Right away." He reached for the baseball cap before she could bag it and pulled the scarf from Rose's head.

"Here, try this. The mirror's over there."

He watched as she bunched up her hair and pulled it through the hole in the back. "Perfect," she said as she slid her glasses back on.

*Yes, he thought. You most certainly are.*

## VI

With the help of a quick taxi ride, they found a wig and costume shop just off of the strip. From there on, it was lunacy on wheels. She tried to be a blond, a redhead and a raven haired brunette.

They were near the back of the shop, a semi-private corner with his view toward the front in case someone became interested in them and her antics.

“What do you mean you don’t like them?” she pouted as she fixed the blond one again standing jauntily in front of the mirror.

Actually, he loved them, but he also loved her hair, her natural, wild hair and felt torn. He could so easily picture her in nothing but the wig and that was not helping his promise to behave any.

He waved a hand. “Turn around again.” He pressed back in the chair as she did. “We need something to help obscure your features so we don’t have to spend the entire time locked away in a room.” Even though as he said it, it did have its appeal.

She stopped turning, facing him directly. “We? Gavin I told you, this is not your problem,” she reminded him, plucking at the wig.

“But you are my friend. Therefore, luck or not for being in Las Vegas, I will help you.” Good old Gavin! The thought rose with a bitter taste, but he couldn’t help himself. He sighed inwardly. He hadn’t been able to help himself when he was sixteen, why should now be any different?

“So, if we go out to dinner tonight, are you blond or redhead?” he asked with a raised eyebrow and an overdone leer on his lips.

She faced him, her gaze blazing, but he knew she wouldn’t argue about it there. So, for now, he had won.

“How about both?” she said with a saucy gleam in her eyes.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” he said, rubbing his hands together in playful glee, and finally, she laughed.

With the wigs tucked away, they headed to the mall to find more clothes for her. She admitted, too late, that she had packed like she was going on a shoot, and even he knew that wasn’t going to work. Those clothes alone were enough to draw every male eye within a mile radius.

He held up t-shirts and jeans, frowned over skirts and shorts, and really wanted to see her in the black cocktail dress she found. By the time she was ready to go, he was more than ready to kiss her again.

“What do you have against my legs?” she whispered heatedly making their way back outdoors in search of a cab. “Not one pair of shorts. What about that red skirt I saw?” He shook his head emphatically. He’d had to find a rack to hide behind when he’d pictured her in it. “I get paid good money for these legs, thank you very much,” she hissed, glaring through her sunglasses at him.

He held open the door as the driver popped the trunk for their shopping bags. When they were settled and he directed the driver, he twisted to her, whispering right into her ear.

“I have nothing against your legs, Rose, but even I have my limits. And I find your legs incredibly sexy. So there,” he finished as he sat forward again.

She faced him slowly. “You meant that, this morning?” she choked out.

“Yes.” It was a dry reply. When she stayed silent for a heartbeat, he asked, “Are you hungry? We never did eat this morning.”

“You drop a bomb like that, and then ask me if I’m hungry?”

“Not now.” She shot him another quelling stare, but remained quiet. He took a deep breath. It was going to be a short reprieve for whatever was on her mind, and he was almost certain he wasn’t going to like it.

She stewed the rest of the drive back to the hotel, staying close as he paid the fare and grabbed their bags with the two wig boxes. When she was on the elevator, she

crossed her arms and refused to look at him. She remained silent as he unlocked her door and let her go through first.

He dropped their purchases on the table and waited. She had marched to look out the window, silent and unwelcoming. Well, she asked. So what did she have to be mad about? He'd just spent several hundred dollars on her to help her cabin fever and now she was mad?

"Want to order in or go out?" he asked.

She tore off the cap and flung her glasses on the bed. Well, that answered that. He reached for the menu, but her soft words stilled him.

"Gavin, what are you doing here?"

"I told you. I planned a vacation." He straightened while she stared out at the movement of the lagoon and the strip beyond.

"No, I mean why are you here helping me? This is far from necessary," she pointed out. "I am ruining your vacation and you are still having fun. I don't get it." When she shook her head, the soft highlights in her curls glowed in the sunlight coming in through the window. They were still beautiful enough to make his breath catch.

"What's to understand? I wound up next to you on the plane, and unless you really don't want me to be here, I want to be."

"Why?"

He groaned. He was going to regret this. He could feel it coming, but he was powerless, especially when it came to this particular woman.

He walked around the bed placing his hands on her shoulders until she faced him. There was a mixture of worry, uncertainty and confusion in her gaze as he searched her face. He brushed a thumb against her skin, still warm from the sunshine outside. Reawakened desire made his blood hot from the single caress.

"Because many years ago we were friends. I hoped we still were, but if not, then I am sorry I have bothered you." When she said nothing, just stared back up at him, his heart clenched. His lids closed over his eyes as pain knifed through him. Nothing had changed. She was still out of his league, and she would never see him as a man. "I'm

sorry, September. I didn't mean to make this worse for you."

He let his hands drift away, and he turned for the door.

"Gavin?" He stopped a few feet from the door at her quiet entreaty. "Don't go. I'm sorry. You're not wrong. We are friends. I am just not used to being ordered around by friends. Or I guess, being told my legs are edible either," she said with a wry smirk.

He flinched. He should apologize. Clear it up. But he couldn't. It was the truth. He'd always thought so, and he couldn't change that fact now.

She walked up to him, facing him once more. "Gavin, you are my friend. Right now, you're my only friend on the whole planet. I don't know what's going to happen, how long I will have to wait this out, or if I'll even have a life to go home to," she said with some despondency. "This whole stalker situation has ruined me and my judgment." She leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his waist, her cheek pillowing against his chest.

His arms encircled her willingly, his chin lying on the top of her head. How many times had he held her just like this? How many times had he dreamed he would never have to let her go? He reached for her even before he knew he was going to do it.

Her gaze was smooth and liquid, a tumultuous green that hit him right in the solar plexus. They darkened to an emerald heat, the silver slashes like emblazoned stars in their depths, a unique combination he had known and loved about her since their shared childhood. They drifted shut. Her lips were soft and warm as he coaxed her into the kiss.

Rose pressed herself against him as he covered and teased, sipped and savored her lips. Her fingers danced across his back, dragging his need back up from the well where he had buried it that morning when he had awakened next to her in bed.

She had been exquisite lying next to him, her hair thrown around her shoulders, her eyes soft with sleep. He had fought with the raging desire of his other self and barely won. The more time he spent with her, the more he realized his need for her was well beyond any childish dream, and the cad knew it. Now, he had let himself kiss her again.



When he licked her lip, she trembled in his hold. When he pushed, seeking entry into her sweet mouth, she whimpered. No matter how loud he yelled at himself to stop, he couldn't. For the first time in his life he was holding, adoring the woman he had cherished secretly for years, and she was even sweeter to him than he could have ever dreamed.

Gavin groaned deep in his chest when she nipped at him with light teeth. Her hands caressed him, stroking his back through the cotton of his suddenly too small t-shirt. He felt way overdressed. He ached with her in his hold. Even as he realized how much he did want to let it go on, he knew he couldn't.

This was not the right time. She was stressed and scared. He loosened his hold even as he strengthened the argument. He would not add to her problems. Not like this. For once, the cad in him lost, but it was becoming far harder than he'd ever imagined.

Her lips were damp and softly pinked by the time he released her. He didn't want to say anything to ruin the kiss. He didn't want to think it would be his only one either. His alter-ego would have already laid her down in bed, would have begun to whisper promises, but not Gavin to September. She was what every other woman had not been.

"Would 'wow' be appropriate?" she whispered, her hands still stroking him with languid sweeps as he tried to regain his control.

That brought a smile to his lips. Lips that still tasted her. "Wow is allowable, I think."

"Gavin?"

"Hmm?"

"Please stay."

"I'm not going anywhere, September."

He felt her smile curve against him. "I can always tell what you're thinking."

"How's that?" He glanced down, but her eyes were resting closed and her smile was soft.

"When you say my name, whether it's Rose or September." Her arms tightened a

little more. "I never did appreciate you enough."

He frowned. Appreciate? Well, he knew it was only a fantasy. There was his proof. He knew he had been the one with a crush, and he was just a friend. He sighed. He should be thankful he had that, except he wondered how long it would be before it wasn't enough.

He stepped back before he let that thought go any further, his hands settling at her waist. "Hungry yet?"

"Sure. Let me check with the bulldog." She pulled away, moving for the phone.

"Meet me at my place in thirty," he said with a grin, his desires hidden, pushed back into the murkiness of his childhood dreams.

"I can do that." She picked up the phone, and he was out the door.

\* \* \*

Rose called Tanner and was disappointed to learn that Rodriguez was losing the trail. Which meant he'd either left town or 'R' had lost interest. She seriously doubted it was the latter. She explained what they had been doing and how she planned on using her disguises. She rolled her eyes when he warned her to remain close to the hotel.

"I'm not stupid, Tanner," she said. Her fingers started playing with the phone cord.

"I never said you were, Miss St. Johns, but if this guy falls back into the woodwork, then we have got a problem."

She swallowed, that knot daring to resurface in her stomach. "You don't think he could trace me here, do you?"

"I don't know. I doubt it."

He didn't sound very convincing. "Has something happened, Tanner?"

She heard the sigh on the other end. "We have three more of his letters. Rodriguez sent them to me to keep up on the guy. They are getting very descriptive."

"How so?"

"Let's just say it's a good thing he doesn't know where you are. If you had been home last night..." He didn't finish it.

Her hand lifted from its meanderings with the phone to settle on her throat. "What are you saying?"

"Miss St. Johns, his manner has changed. He doesn't just want you anymore, he wants you dead." The flat statement sat between them like a powerful curse, rendering her numb. "You need to be aware this isn't a game in any way."

She licked her lips. "I understand." Her lungs began to hurt before she remembered to make herself breathe. "Is anyone else having problems with this guy? I would feel awful if--"

"No, he seems to have centered on you. He is sending more email and letters everyday."

"Can't the email be traced?"

"Yes and no. He sends them from public domains. It could be any coffeehouse or any internet house in the city."

She nodded again. "I see."

"Look, just stay quiet and out of sight," he told her, but she cut him off.

"Detective, I can't. I have a life in New York. It's already slipping past me. If I'm not working, then he will figure out I'm gone. He could transfer this to someone else."

"Give us some time. Give Rodriguez a chance. It hasn't been quite forty-eight hours," he said in a placating tone.

"All right, I'll call in tonight," she relented, and he ended the call.

*Why was this guy after her? Why did he now want her dead? She had never in her life done something so awful to someone for them to want her dead, had she?* She brushed a hand over her brow, trying to remember. She wasn't like the brassier models, flaunting the fact that she got paid for her body. She was actually quiet about it.

Her parents were proud of her. They had assumed she would go on to college, but when she landed the contract that guaranteed her three million the first two years, they stopped worrying. Her father was retired, her mother worked at a beauty salon,

which is where she probably picked up the beauty for money mentality to do the modeling.

So, if she hadn't done anything, what was happening? On impulse she picked up the phone and called her parents. *They didn't even know I left town*, she thought with a twinge of remorse.

"Hi, Mom."

"Baby! Where are you? We've been trying since yesterday to find you! It's been crazy here with police and questions. They won't tell us anything!"

"Oh Mom! I'm sorry! I had no idea they'd come to you," she cried, hearing the worried anguish from the other end. "I had to leave town in a rush. I seem to have a problem," she said, filled with guilt that her parents had suffered over her situation. She told her mother what was happening without a lot of details. "I wish I could tell you more, but I just got off the phone with the detective where I am, and it isn't getting any better."

"But your apartment!" she said through an anxious sob. "Good grief, what is this world coming to?"

"I wish I knew," Rose said sadly. "Tell Dad I love him, and I will call in a day or two. Just whatever happens, don't listen to the news. I'm fine. I am not hiding out at the Betty Ford Clinic and I am not at Sinai."

"Of course, baby girl. You listen to whatever that detective tells you to do. You always were headstrong and insistent about doing things your own way, but not this time. You hear me?"

"Yes, Mother," she said rolling her eyes.

"Don't you roll those eyes at me, young lady," her mother retorted.

Rose bit her lip to keep from laughing. "I wasn't." But her mother gave a disbelieving harrumph and she knew better than to argue. "All right, kisses Mom. I'll see you guys when this is all over, and Mom, no gossiping. I mean it."

"Of course! I wouldn't dream of it."

"Keep that in mind when you're doing Mrs. Sills perm next week, all right?"

“That woman is as regular as clockwork,” her mother stated absently. “But you are right. I won’t say a thing.”

“Good, I gotta go. ‘Bye.”

After her mother’s goodbye, she hung up. She sat for a few minutes trying to figure out what the attraction was for her stalker. Had she unintentionally snubbed someone? She had never worked anywhere but the agency, so there couldn’t have been a rebuffed co-worker.

She sat on the edge of the bed, turning over the last few months. There had been a few parties, two shows and magazine layouts. Had she said something? Insulted someone? She couldn’t think of one thing.

She glanced up and caught the clock. Gavin! Her stomach grumbled. It was already after lunch. They had been all over this morning and neither of them had even thought of food.

Then she remembered the kiss. Never in her life had she been kissed like that! She fell back on the bed, her eyes drifting closed. She could still feel him wrapped around her, his arms holding her snug.

He had always been a good friend. Even the years between didn’t seem to diminish that feeling. So, if he was a friend, why had he kissed her? Did he think of her as a woman? She thought back ten years or more, when Jeremy had a spiteful moment and blabbed that Gavin had a crush on her.

Did he still? A crush? Was it possible that he still thought of her that way? She doubted it. Surely he would have outgrown a childhood crush, but then why the kiss? The first one that morning had shocked her, curling her toes as tight as her hair. The one before he left had her panting and hot, and definitely thinking about things she shouldn’t be thinking about, not with Gavin.

Then why did she want another one of those kisses? Why did she want him to hold her again? Why did she know he would keep her safe?

Her breath caught a little as she replayed the kisses. She could even remember the one he had snuck in on her on the plane. She’d been too shocked, too overwhelmed

to even think about that one, a chaste brush of skin. But the two since then...

She laughed lightly, sitting up again. It was probably her imagination. Gavin still bearing a crush! She shook her head. Gavin was her friend. She doubted he would hold on to something like that. She wasn't worth it for one. She was just Rose. Yet, the silent thought stuck with her. Maybe, just maybe she would have the chance for one more kiss.

## VII

"I was thinking," he said as he let her in at her knock. "Why don't we go downstairs, hit the buffet, and take over a roulette table?" His hand settled low on her back as the door slid closed and she felt a rush of heat. "I still want to try to take on the casino," he told her with a lopsided grin.

"And I'm keeping you from it," she groaned. When she turned to sit in a chair, he slid his arm higher and pinned her against his chest. Her hands lifted on their own, and without trying, she could picture the hard wall of his chest beneath his shirt. She swallowed. The kiss was still there, and she knew she wanted more. No sense in kidding herself.

"No, you are not. It's a suggestion on how to share some time. Personally, I could just stay in, so long as I had you for company."

"Gavin?" she whispered, feeling hot.

His voice became husky and she felt a shiver slide down her back. "Yes?" She looked up trying to see into him, but his gaze was hooded, his dark lashes protecting his thoughts.

She licked her lips and his arm tightened. "Why did you kiss me?" She winced when the question slipped out. She felt seventeen again! What was going on?

His free hand rose and caressed her cheek. "Are you angry with me?"

She shook her head quickly. "I just don't remember you ever kissing me." She felt herself growing hotter, his body pressing against hers.

"I never have." He leaned down and brushed his lips against her cheek. "Do you like them?" he asked. His warm breath on her skin made her tremble.

"Yes," she managed on a whispered breath, and before she could blink, she was

trapped between his solid body and the door, his mouth devouring her. Her arms roped around his neck as his hands held her steady, firmly on her waist.

She was flying, his kiss overwhelming her. His fingers burned her through her pink t-shirt. His mouth was hot, searing her with passion. His tongue invaded and she melted into a puddle against him. He formed his body against hers, his thigh slicing her legs open and she trembled uncontrollably. There hadn't been a lot of time for frivolous affairs or lovers, and of the two relationships she'd dared, neither had done this, made her feel so out of control, made her feel so hot, bursting with need.

He pulled away with a vicious groan. He was breathing in harsh gasps when he yanked away from her. She felt a cool blast of air where his body had molded against hers.

"I'm sorry," he said through a clenched jaw just before he spun and disappeared into the bathroom.

She slid down the door, completely unprepared for his passion or for his retreat. Holy cow! Was that Gavin? Since when? What had she done? Why on earth did he stop? Would he have made love to her? Gavin? Her friend, her old study partner? Her eyes widened as the thoughts rushed to form one big one.

She palm walked back up the door, her shocked gaze glued to the closed door. When did she start to want him? She swallowed as the heat in her belly started to fade. Did he want her? His kisses were flammable. She was still feeling them.

She took a calmer breath a few minutes later when the door opened in front of her. His face was taut, his expression blank. She stared into soft brown eyes and could still see a heat smoldering in them. She did that to him?

He brushed a thumb across her cheek. "Come on, friend. Let's eat."

It all cratered like he had poured ice water on her. Of course, friends. What was she thinking? "Sure," was the most she could manage as he guided her from his room.

She had tucked her hair back into the baseball cap, her sunglasses in place as she found things to nibble on. Gavin, on the other hand, had no problem with an appetite. He had already cleared three plates and was working on a fourth when he finally



leaned back and just stared at her.

The silence had been heavy. She wasn't a big eater, never had been, so she just wallowed in her problems. First the stalker, and now unbelievably, she was finding herself attracted to Gavin.

She peeked at him occasionally across the table. He was not incredibly handsome in a Hollywood kind of way. It was more than that, something in his face struck a chord within her. His skin was slightly rough from his school days. He was lean and tall and trim. So what was happening? She felt her mouth dry up as she unobtrusively watched his hand on the table. Strong hands, long fingers. Gentle fingers. He had held her, caressed her with those hands. Her palm itched as the memory of his reading came back to her. He had to be the gentlest man she'd ever met. Even with his build he wasn't wiry and he had incredible strength. She knew that about him easily.

Her gaze followed his arm coming to rest on his features again. His eyes were so bottomless. They were a light brown that most would call boring, but she had seen them with heat, with a passion that was all Gavin, and right now he was watching her as intently as she was watching him.

He wiped his mouth on a napkin, drinking his water as he just stared at her.

"What?" she snapped. "Am I wearing my food or something?"

He lifted a brow. "No." He leaned in so she could hear him without raising his voice. "I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have done that. You have enough problems without dealing with me." He snickered softly. He pushed his plate out of the way, crossing his arms on the table. He purposely avoided her searching gazes, his own eyes flickering away, roving. "I was hoping you would never see that side of me."

Her mouth stopped moving, swallowing slowly. "See what?" She sipped at her own drink before the growing lump got stuck.

He avoided her. "I have a reputation. I don't want to hurt you."

His bitter tone took her by surprise. "A reputation? Like what?"

He actually flushed. "Look, Rose, I am not going to drag you down." He pushed back from the table. "Ready to go lose a lot of money?" he asked, a playful grin on his

mouth, the previous expression gone. He held out his hand. "Come on. Let's go break the bank."

She eyed him carefully. That grin didn't fool her for one minute, but for now, she took his hand and let him lead her to the gaming floor.

So what if he had a reputation? What was he, an ax murderer? A scoundrel of hearts? What could be so bad? She looked up at him again, but his expression was completely shuttered. Except for the easy going smile he gave her, there was nothing, not a hint or a clue.

What could be so bad about Gavin? He was a computer programmer, not a playboy. She avoided those like the worst germ farm anyway. What was he talking about? As she watched him study the roulette table and place his marker, she came up blank.

"Keep your head down," he told her several minutes later as he moved behind her, blocking her from view.

She could feel the tension in his body and waited for it to pass, but it didn't. A couple had moved in on the table. She peeked out of her eye and noticed the woman was shooting her speculative glances. Great!

"Excuse me, but are you Rose St. Johns?" she asked with an excited nervousness.

Gavin's hand rested on her shoulder to still her shaking, giving her silent strength.

"I don't know who that is," she said, seeking a calm heart rate.

"This is September Throckton, my wife. I'm sorry, it happens all the time," Gavin said in a smooth, easy voice.

"Oh, sorry to bother you. You're really a dead ringer for her," the woman said, then just as easily dismissed them.

He squeezed her shoulder and gradually she felt the air in her chest loosen.

"Ready to go back to the room, honey?" he asked.

She wanted to scream, *try and stop me*, but she just nodded and let him wrap an arm around her. She shook uncontrollably the whole way back until they were once

again locked in his room.

She buried herself against him. "God, what am I going to do?"

"Is it possible your stalker would follow you if someone did recognize you?" he asked rubbing his hands down her arms, his concern genuine.

"I don't know."

"And you hate that," he said with a soft sigh. "Ah, Rose." He gathered her close.

"Thank you," she said a few minutes later. At his blank look, she told him, "I was ready to run. You've always been good on your feet. Quick."

His laugh was short. "Good old Gavin. Are you all right now?" he asked, stepping back.

She nodded her head. "Much. Look, I'm going across the hall, call Tanner and take a nap. I am dying to go to the spa but I better make sure he thinks it's all right first. Meet me in a couple of hours?" she asked, feeling hopeful.

"Of course. Why don't you pick a wig? With one of those and posing as my wife, I doubt anyone will question it. The couple downstairs bought it."

"They won't question you. You can look pretty fierce when you want to," she said with a wink.

"I can?" He seemed rather pleased with that announcement.

She nodded as she backed up. "See you tonight?"

She opened the door when he agreed, and before she could do something stupid, she let herself into her room.

And screamed.

\* \* \*

Gavin had barely turned to decide if he was going to go back downstairs when her scream split the air of the hallway. He wrenched his door open and pounded on hers.

"Rose! Rose! Open this door, damn it!" He stopped to listen. "Where is she?"

Rose!" He pounded harder and still nothing. It was only a minute or two before security showed up and she hadn't opened the door. His heart dropped like a rock into his shoes. "Rose!" he shouted louder, still pounding away.

After a telling look at his panicked face, one of the guards opened the door where he found her sprawled out on the floor. "God, Rose!" he choked out, brushing her hair away from her pale face when he fell to his knees next to her. "Oh, thank God. She's only fainted." He pulled her up into his arms, turning her over, searching frantically to see if she was alone.

"Um, sir, I think I can see why," said one of the guards who had trailed him into the room.

He looked up and felt sick to his stomach. In dark red paint on the window were the words, 'found you'.

"Dear lord." No matter how much he wanted to play down her drama, this was a very real testament to her situation.

Gavin turned and glared at the guard. "I want to know immediately who has access to this room! Who could have been in here in the last three hours? All day! I don't care who, I want everyone!" He was shouting now.

"Sir, I'm sure we can get you..."

The guard, a young kid in his early twenties, stopped talking and stepped out of the way when Gavin stood to his full height, carrying Rose like she didn't weigh more than her name.

He set her down, carefully, on her bed and faced the young man. "Get me the damn Manager now!" He spun facing the other guard. "And you, don't touch a damn thing!"

The guard snapped up, startled from his perusal of the room.

"Gavin?"

He dropped like a stone next to the bed. "Rose? Are you all right?"

She took a breath. "I would be if you would quit shouting," she said, gasping for air. He brushed a hand over her forehead. She was pale, completely washed out.

“Rose,” he whispered as he leaned his head next to her on the bed. “I need to call Tanner.” He was finally getting his head back on straight. “And you are not staying alone anymore,” he said in a firm tone.

She was still too stunned and weak to argue, which was fine. He wasn’t going to let her face this alone.

Tanner arrived in less than ten minutes after Gavin explained the room break-in. By that time, Rose was sitting up with her back to the obnoxious graffiti sipping on water. The guards were still present, but had assumed quiet places close to the door while Tanner questioned everyone, including the manager.

Gavin felt chilled. Someone had gotten in; someone knew who and where she was. Someone was after his Rose.

“How did he find her?” Gavin asked through a jaw that hurt. He’d had to bite his tongue several times at the reaction rate; it was slower than the subway into Manhattan. He wanted something done and he wanted it now! He forced his hands to relax as Detective Tanner turned to speak to him.

“I’m not sure, to be honest.”

“Rodriguez took in the wrong guy. He could have found me as early as last night when my apartment was sacked,” she said, her voice quivering with suppressed shock.

“Did you have anything at the apartment with your itinerary on it?” Gavin asked.

She shook her head. “I didn’t even know I was coming here until they picked me up for the airport.”

Gavin’s eyes narrowed. “Who picked you up?”

She shrugged. “Some guy in a suit. Plain car. He didn’t talk much.”

Gavin faced Tanner. “I want to know who that was.”

Tanner’s expression reddened, but Gavin stopped him. “I want to know everyone who’s had contact with her since you guys decided this would keep her safe.” He stared down at the detective. “Because so far it’s not working.”

“Throckton,” Tanner threatened, his voice chillingly low.

“Stuff it, Tanner. You don’t scare me, and I don’t care that you know what I do.” He towered over the older man. “What I do care about is that Rose is hiding, scared out of her mind, and the best you can do is let her be bait.”

Tanner stepped back, his gaze firing at Gavin. “Fine, I will see what I can do. Evidently the stalker isn’t the only one I underestimated.”

“Don’t let it happen again,” Gavin snarled softly. “You won’t like what I can do to you, Tanner.” He stared until Detective Tanner turned to leave, then he added, “And she’ll be with me. I will leave up to you if you want to send eyes.”

“Somehow, I don’t think it will be necessary,” was his only response. One by one the others filed out, following the manager’s promise to have a list of anyone who could have had access to her room over the last twenty four hours sent to him and the detective as soon as it was printed.

Gavin leaned against the door, his heart racing like he’d never experienced. Why was this happening? Who was doing this?

He had thought he could leave it all behind, but Rose’s life was in danger and now he knew why fate had landed him in that seat next to her. It might be a case of good old Gavin to the rescue one more time, but he would do it, a thousand times over for Rose.

“Gavin? What is going on?”

“Nothing.” He rolled his head to look at her. She was regaining her color and someone had drawn the drapes. Good, at least they wouldn’t have to look at it. “Let’s get you moved across the hall.”

She was still in shock. She didn’t even whimper a protest when he gathered her suitcase, stuffing her clothes into them. He cleaned out the bathroom and with a hand on her elbow led her the four steps across to his room.

When she was sitting at the table in his room, he poured them both water, letting her drink hers slowly while she stared at nothing. Gavin on the other hand, was unable to sit still any longer. Twenty four hours of incompetent detective work was driving him as he pulled out his laptop and set up camp on his bed.

He started the way he always did, researching from the beginning. He started writing notes on his legal pad. He located her email address through the agency website and hacked the code to review the previous emails. He searched her through every browser and search engine, finding several obscure notations that had no correlation to the agency, but it was more than he had expected, and it worried him. He did a cross reference on the emails and her account tagging the repetitive addresses. When he had those, he backtracked her schedule through the last year, recreating her life, and he kept going.

He worked on her profile for two hours, barely aware when Rose had moved to lie across the foot of the bed. He glanced up once and found she had fallen asleep, too overwhelmed to ask him what he was doing. He stopped long enough to flip the comforter over her prone body, and went back to work. The less she knew of the details of what he did, the better. For the both of them. The less she knew about what and who he was, the less he could disgust her.

His mouth drew down as he worked, fighting the tension that was building between his shoulders from growing anger. He had drawn the stalker's profile and it was making him furious that the cops hadn't gone this route at all. Why was the computer such an evil thing and the people who knew how to make it work were reviled? He was good, better than their traditional manner in many ways. He also knew exactly what he was doing, each step, a definitive direction.

He never wanted Rose to find out who he was, what he had become, but the longer he worked, it was becoming apparently inevitable. He had worked on more than his share of cases where computer fraud was possible, but he got those cases because he was able to do the exact same thing the suspected criminal could do. He had never used it against anyone, never tried to rob or extort for the knowledge. He had earned one reputation following another, and now, thanks to that very talent, he was finding out exactly how her stalker had found her.

It was in garish print across two inner office emails. Her entire dilemma talked about like water cooler gossip. Someone had hacked into the agency. Someone had

tracked her to Las Vegas.

He started reading the letters the stalker had posted and became sickened all over again. How could someone at the agency have overlooked these? The references were too direct, detailing schedules and clothing. He had attended some of her shows! Who could have access? Were fashion shows public? Gavin was beginning to wonder if all the emails were even read by living beings. How could these have been missed? He raged in silence.

He made himself focus again; writing his thoughts down, noting time gaps, when one was immediately followed by another he made a notation. When a gap appeared, he wrote that down. Were the gaps from unavailability to a system? He looked at the calendar, seeing that several were weekends. So he wasn't sending on weekends. But soon enough that patterned changed. Did he work weekends? Nights? Did his schedule change? It reverted twice. Shift work came to mind, cyclical shift work. Who did that? Was he part of the industry?

He had a thousand questions by the time he stopped, his eyes tired and his back sore from sitting cross-legged on the bed. He leaned back, moaning as his back popped.

"Gavin?"

His gaze swept to her, her back facing him. "You're awake. I was trying not to bother you."

"You weren't. I've been awake for a while," she replied. "I'm going back to New York. I can't let this guy, whoever it is, keep scaring me."

"Rose, you can't leave. Think about this a minute. It took him less than twenty four hours to find you, and I found out how he did it. If you put yourself back out in the public eye, you are only adding to the possibility of him harming you." He shuddered as the letters the stalker had written replayed through his mind. It was best she hadn't received anymore of those.

"Wait. You know how he found me?" She rolled over, her eyes filled with bewildered shock.

"Yes. He hacked into the agency. They have no respect for your problem. It's all



over their inner office email.”

“You’re kidding? No one was supposed to know I had even left.” She sat up, brushing her hair away from her face with hands that were shaking again. She had lost her color again at his remarks.

He pulled up the page, and pointed to the two emails. “It’s right here, dated early yesterday. It looks like you became hot news about the same time the flight took off.”

She flipped to his side, staring at the screen. “That’s Crissie! She’s been after my shoots for months.” She smacked the mattress. “She would be the first one to gossip about me. She doesn’t like me,” she explained in a flat voice.

“Do you know who this is?” he asked pointing to the recipient.

“No, I don’t know everyone at the agency.”

He hit a few keys and got a profile. “Do you know who it is now?” he asked her, looking at the name. She still shook her head. “That’s all right. I doubt everyone knows every single person who walks through the doors.” He turned it off before she could ask to see something else, like the letters.

He placed his computer on the table, his notes hidden beneath it, then he faced her. “Rose, you have to understand. Whoever this is, he’s good. He knows how to get information.” He smacked his head. “God, I’m an idiot.” He lifted the phone and contacted the manager who had been in earlier. When he was on the line, he asked him straight out how hard it would be for someone to hack into their reservations system.

“It wouldn’t be easy,” he came back. “We have alarms and firewalls a foot thick.”

“Could you check to see if someone has tried in the last twenty-four hours? I need to know how he got the room number.” He didn’t mention that it was under an alias. At that point, her alias wasn’t exactly a secret with the hotel any longer.

The manager agreed, saying he would have that information added to the access list which was compiled and ready to be delivered. Gavin hung up, working it over in his mind.

“Gavin, what are you doing? You’re acting like a cop.” She was staring at him

like he had grown horns, or maybe just a purple third eye.

He smiled loosely. "Just doing my share," he said. "Want to keep you safe." He lifted a hand and slid it into her hair, giving her a gentle tug. "You know, Gavin to the rescue and all that," he said lightly.

"But Gavin, how did you-" He shut her up the most effective way he knew how.

He kissed her.

## VIII

Gavin needed to stop. He needed to quit kissing her, but he couldn't. He had a legitimate reason for doing it, but just the feel of her lips became reason enough to continue. He slid his other hand through her hair, holding her steady and he slowly stopped thinking.

Rose's lips trembled against his and once again the cad in him wanted to keep going, wanted to make love to her. Gavin wanted it too.

"Gavin," she whispered as he sipped at her mouth. The husky sound of her voice brought the fire higher.

He leaned his forehead to hers, fighting himself. "You don't need this, Rose. I'm one big problem you don't need," he whispered hoarsely.

He felt her hand on his cheek and his skin burst into flame at her touch. He moaned deep in his throat when she swept her tongue against his mouth. "Gavin, do you want me?" she asked. His gaze snapped to hers, a forest green that impaled him.

He groaned again as she lifted her lips to his and he could no longer deny himself. "Rose, I have wanted you forever, but I am no good for you." He tried to make her understand, tried to make himself pull away, but there was no turning back when her sweet voice hit him between the eyes.

"Gavin, don't stop." Her gaze was intense and he swallowed.

"This is too fast, Rose. You're in shock," he said, needing her to stop him. His hands were already cradling her, pulling her down to lie next to him. He kissed her cheeks. "You don't know what you're asking."

"Yes, I do."

He groaned deep once more as her hands lifted and spread against his chest. He

loved the feeling of her palms against his body.

“Rose,” he sighed. “I could ruin you,” he finally threw out to her, needing to give her one last chance, but his warning faded into the room around them when she pushed him back, her hands planted on his chest and she lowered herself to kiss him.

He had never tasted a kiss like hers. He had never had a woman who could take control from him, to one he would gladly give it. She tortured him with her slow seduction, made him burn like a rocket when she swirled her tongue between his teeth.

He curved his arms over her as she whispered against his skin, his neck, his face with lips of pure heat. He just closed his eyes and waited for the fantasy to disappear, to end and leave him aching.

She didn’t stop there. She tugged his t-shirt from his jeans, pulling it away and throwing it somewhere. He didn’t care. Her body was pressed to his and her fingers were touching him. He groaned when her tongue traveled across his chest, moving downward. He hissed through his teeth when she dipped into his navel. When did she unsnap his jeans?

He didn’t think about it for long as her hands slid off his jeans and boxers. Then she did the most incredible thing he had ever experienced. She swept that hot, wonderful tongue from his big toe all the way back up to end at his ear. He groaned so deep, trying hard to not let it end.

“Open your eyes,” she commanded, her voice husky and sexy.

They snapped open, finding her kneeling on the bed beside him. “You’ve got an incredible body, Gavin,” she whispered as her fingers traveled over his abdomen.

He couldn’t have spoken if he had wanted to. He was speechless watching her lift the hem of her t-shirt and tossing it. His body reacted in pure pleasure. She wasn’t wearing a bra. She had the most perfect breasts he had ever seen, could have possibly dreamed of.

She stretched out next to him and that was all he needed to take over. He rolled her over onto her back and kissed her until she was moaning and breathless in his arms. She was warm, soft, and so perfect against him.

He reached between them and undid her jeans. Unable to resist the temptation of her heat, he slid his hand down and she bucked against his touch.

"Oh, God, Rose," he ground out as she writhed and cried from his touches. He pushed one, twice and was swept away with shock when he felt her shudder and cry out. "I have got to do something," he said into her ear.

He stripped her jeans off with a thorough yank. Oh, yeah, he had wanted this for as long as he could remember. He slid from the bed and pulled her down. Before she could blink, he introduced her to the cad.

She screamed for a different reason when tongue met hot flesh. He wanted to please her over and over, until she was weak and trembling on the bed. Until she was limp. Until she was satisfied.

Only then did he allow himself his own pleasure. Only then did he cover himself and let himself sink into her. With her body wrapped around his, her long legs tugging at his waist, her hands grasping and clawing, he finally gave himself over to the pleasure that was Rose. When her cry matched his, when his body could no longer withstand the beauty he found in her arms, he allowed himself his strongest fantasy.

He allowed himself to fall in love.

\* \* \*

"Did you really have a crush on me?" she whispered some time later. She felt him tense under her touch at the question. She was lying in his arms against his chest, her fingers sifting through the dark hair over his ear.

"Would you be upset if I did?" His voice rumbled from somewhere deep in that incredible chest of his. His eyes were closed, his hand drifting up and down her back.

"Not now. Back then it bothered me. You were too special to me to think of you that way."

He snorted. "That makes me feel better."

"I'm looking at you with mature eyes now," she said even as he seemed to shrink

beneath her touch.

"I know, Gavin to the rescue." It was a hollow statement.

"That was the old Gavin. My friend who was always there by my side. Now," she said, pausing, trying to place her thoughts. "Now, you're Gavin Throckton, special agent, computer guru, breaker of women's hearts..."

He jumped from the bed.

"Hey, what did I say?"

"I warned you, I could ruin you, Rose," he said, a dark, haunted glow in his eyes. "And no matter how much I care, if we are put together, it's inevitable." His hand sliced through the air between them.

"I was trying to compliment you." She lifted up to an elbow. "Why do you keep saying that? You couldn't ruin me unless you fed me pounds of chocolate. Gavin, I'm sorry," she told him when he just stared at her, not moving. She patted the bed. "Please."

He raked a hand through his hair, indecision bright in his expression. He looked back at her and there were so many things in his gaze, thoughts that made up this man that she could only guess at. When he didn't move, she took the situation into her own hands.

She knelt on the bed, wrapping her arms around his neck. He was stiff, unyielding for several seconds. When his hands lifted to her waist, she smiled up at him.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" she whispered as she started attacking his chest again.

"Rose, you don't understand," he sighed. His head tilted back as she moved up to his neck.

"Maybe after, you could explain it to me," she said as she lured him back to the bed.

"After what?" he breathed.

"This," she said, lowering her head in retaliation of the cad.

His groans and her sighs were all that were heard for a very long time.

\* \* \*

Gavin slid from the bed, Rose's sleeping breaths soft in the darkness. She was beautiful, passionate beyond his wildest dreams, a tigress when she had a plan. And he'd done the unthinkable. He had made love to her.

He had fallen in love with her.

He turned on the bedside lamp, swiping a hand over his face. Making love to her, letting his feelings begin to have a life, was wrong. She needed a man without a history. A man who could be there for her. Yet, as he stood over her and just watched her, her arm thrown over her head, one bared breast teasing him in the dimness of the room, it was difficult to keep the arguments going, much less have them build speed. He sank down on a chair and just watched her as his thoughts rolled around.

How could he tell her? She had no idea how direct her compliments had been. Except for the special agent, but he could be construed as a double agent. Was that the same? Could a computer geek hired by the D.A.'s office be considered a stool pigeon?

Too easily.

He hadn't been joking when he'd said he had planned a vacation. Planned and booked in about thirty seconds flat, right ahead of the raid, when he knew he needed to get out of town. Even before meeting Rose again, he was thinking about quitting, about letting his contract disappear. It was getting to be too stressful. Too dangerous also came to mind.

Secret agents didn't have anything on him.

He had been in some of the most corrupt businesses in New York, just your average IT guy, either finding the evidence or hacking his way in from outside. He had a talent. He could get in and get out without leaving a single fingerprint. He knew the codes like preachers knew their bibles.

His head lifted slowly at a slithery sound from the door.

There in front of the door sat another unmarked envelope. He knew it could only be from one person, as he cautiously rose to his feet and picked it up. He opened it with a terrible feeling. His hands were clammy as he slid out the picture. It was her, baseball cap and glasses, standing at the table with him standing behind her. Someone had taken their picture in the casino. Whoever it was knew she wasn't alone. They also knew she was no longer in her own room. He clenched his fist. He popped open the door, but the hallway was silent, empty. He let the door slide closed again with a sigh of frustration. He couldn't give chase in his boxers anyway.

Who was this? Who was able to keep track of her with so much ease? Who would think to hack into emails and private accounts to find her?

Someone with trained ability was after Rose. Who else could have avoided police detection? Granted until that afternoon, he hadn't put a whole lot of stock into her situation, and hadn't been diligent, but that was changing. He let his head sink down. There were too many questions to try to cut through tonight. He needed a clear head and some sleep.

He slid back into bed and she turned to him. He could so easily let himself believe this was real. That she was there not by chance, but by choice.

The other side of the coin wasn't a better picture, though. He was a cad underneath it all and he knew it. He had broken a few hearts, but not for any good reasons, like misplaced affection. Plain and simple, it was over sex. The cad's reputation was widespread. And that's not even counting the really pissed one he left at the altar just three months ago.

Gavin had thought Melissa was the one. He thought he adored her, cared enough to make the walk. He'd been wrong. Dead wrong. He had embarrassed her and himself when he'd 'no showed,' leaving her to deal with the mess of an absent groom.

He found her the next day, and talked with her after suffering the first and worst hard liquor hangover of his life. Even he wasn't that cold hearted, but it wasn't what he had wanted, or the right woman.

It hadn't helped the other reputation, proving he couldn't commit. Now Rose



was in his arms, trusting him to see her through this. Trusting him to not hurt her.

He only hoped he could see her through this to the end without damaging her reputation. He knew he was still just Gavin. Her friend, now her lover, but he would see her through this. He was between assignments, between headaches. He would see her back to her life in New York.

Then he would decide about his own life. Until then, there was no way anything, or anyone was going to get to the woman in his arms. He fell asleep with her soft weight against him, letting himself, just for the moment, forget what was outside their door.

\* \* \*

The next morning, he found the envelope the manager had slid under his door along with a note that the same information had been sent to Detective Tanner by his request. At least he had established whose side he was on. He tried not to think of the delivery he had gotten in the middle of the night, now hidden at the bottom of his own bag.

Rose was still crashed, literally exhausted from her adventures and their time together. He couldn't help the soft smile or his warming heart as he watched her in bed. But even as he dressed, his mind was already pressing matters into place, needing to solve the problem of Rose's stalker.

He spread out the information, grabbed his laptop, and set up on the table trying to be quiet for her sake.

Three people had valid access to the rooms. One, rather obviously, was the maid. Then the busboy when he had delivered their meal. The third was maintenance, but only by request. So how had 'R' gotten in? How had he found the room number?

He checked the hour. The manager he had spoken with should be on duty, so he called downstairs, dragging the phone across the room with him.

When the man answered, Gavin quietly started asking questions, and the longer

he talked, he started to picture a scenario.

“So you’re positive that’s the time frame the maid was on our floor?” He fought to keep his voice low, swallowing the bile tainted anger in his throat.

“Completely,” came the response “They have to log each room and any incidentals out of the norm.”

When he hung up again, he felt a chill slither across his skin. He couldn’t prove it, but if he was a betting man, it looked as though the stalker had been in the room yesterday when they had first returned from shopping. It wouldn’t be an impossible stretch to have him slip in behind the maid and hide. Then once he had recognized Rose, the rest was simple.

‘R’ could have even escaped while he had her lip locked against the door, the damage to the room already done.

He wanted to beat his head against a wall. He had believed her, but not enough. He had put himself across the hall, but it had been for selfish reasons--to be close to her.

He attacked his computer again, wanting, needing to find the why. Why would someone be after Rose? Why would he threaten her life?

Gavin had filled three more pages with notes and questions when she began to stir. He watched with unashamed interest as she stretched and sighed. Her hair was a halo of milk chocolate curls on the pillows as her arms lifted then fell with a plop. He grinned at her, feeling less stressed just watching her antics. She was a girl in a woman’s body in so many ways, not at all self-conscious about her body as she rejoined the world.

He wondered about her career. He knew modeling could be tedious, stressful, and demanding, but it didn’t show on her. Her body was still youthful, supple, and slender. She still had a runner’s body.

He grew hard as he remembered the soft weight of her breasts in his palms. He swallowed when without warning the sheet shifted, lowering to bare one of those luscious globes to his view. But her hands were still, her eyes closed against her smooth skin. Then the sheet moved again, falling lower across her abdomen. Her toes twitched

and he grinned more.

“Have you always been such a tease?” he asked. Even as he stood, his arousal was straining obviously against the pleats of his slacks.

“You seem to bring out the best in me,” she said with a throaty laugh. “But now that I have your attention, what are you doing? You were on the computer for hours last night, and when I wake up, there you are again.” She rolled over, cupping her head on a propped hand, her body still bared to his view.

He glanced at the computer and sighed. “I’ve been trying to uncover who your stalker may be.”

An odd glow appeared in her green eyes, but she blinked quickly, finding something very interesting on the bed. When she looked up again, her face was blank, not a thought to be found. “You can do that, from here?” she finally asked.

“I have been trying to. I don’t like how they just sent you out here. They didn’t even send a bodyguard.” He joined her to sit on the edge of the bed, wanting to run his hand over the curve of her hip where she lay concealed under the rest of the sheet.

She was silent for several minutes, her thoughts her own. She shrugged. “I don’t know why they would. I’m just a model. Not even an overly rich one. I really don’t even know why they sent me out of New York to be honest. The letters I have received haven’t been life threatening.”

His jaw tightened. “Rose, you don’t have any of the current ones. You just got out of town before he got mad.”

She paled a little. “Oh,” she breathed. Her green gaze locked with his. “So you think I am in danger?” Her eyes widened as she stared at him.

“Now I do, yes. That is why I have been working on profiles since last night. I was about to start on your father and mother when your delicious body distracted me.”

A tinted glow warmed her cheeks, her eyes drifting closed at the compliment. “Wait. Profiles?” Her eyes snapped open.

He lifted a finger to her sweet lips. “Don’t ask, Rose. The less you know, the better it will be for you when you go back. Believe me, I am not the kind of guy you

want to be associated with." The truth of that statement burned him.

"How can you be so bad, Gavin? I've known you since I was sixteen!" She lifted her head, her gaze searching his.

"You knew me in high school, and for two years we were inseparable." He hated breaking it down to the bare bones, especially if it was hurting her as much as saying it was killing him. He stood, angry with himself and not entirely sure why. "Just let me help you get your life back, so you have one to go back to."

"And what about us, what about now?" she demanded as she swung from the bed. Her naked body rendered him speechless.

She was glorious in the morning light. She made him feel all of sixteen again himself. He blinked. "What?"

She slipped up to him, walking fingers over his chest. "I said, what about us?" Her throaty voice drilled into his head with a burst of heat. "What about now?"

"Were you always this direct?" he asked, feeling breathless and achy as he fought to keep his hands at his sides.

"No. Usually I didn't have to repeat myself to you," she returned with a saucy smile. "Now quit changing the subject," she warned.

Unable to resist any longer with her standing so close, he folded his arms around her waist and tugged her length against his. "Rose, we will do this a day at a time. When it is time to go home, you will go back to your life. You will be stalker free and live a happy life. Just do me a favor and don't pick up any more strays," he teased her, a light smile hovering over his mouth, hiding his real turmoil.

"And you? What will you do Gavin?"

## IX

Rose waited for his answer, her breath barely escaping through lungs that didn't want to work. Did he care for her? Was it possible after all these years that he would? He'd all but admitted to his crush, so what was different now?

He exhaled slowly, his arms tightening even as his head rested against hers. "I am no good for you Rose. I never was and I never will be." He lifted his head and the amount of sadness in his gaze made her want to cry. "Let's just enjoy this one chance. I will help you with what I can do, I'll help keep you safe, but when you go home, you need to forget you knew me."

Her hand lifted to his cheek, his torment slowly darkening his gaze. He covered her hand with his, the warmth shooting down her arm. "Don't ask Rose. I can see the questions in your gaze. It's better that you don't know."

"You're married!" she bit out, feeling herself be swept into a sea of anger.

His expression softened, stifling her from becoming enraged. "No, I've never married."

"I don't understand." She shook her head in confusion. "What are you? Who are you?" she asked.

He shrugged, a nonchalant motion that was anything but. She was beginning to know this Gavin, and he wasn't going to get out of answering her that easily.

When she stroked his cheek and made it apparent he was going to have to say something, he did. "I am a computer programmer with a gift. I've used it. I have made some friends and a lot of enemies because of it." He held her tighter. "The last thing I would ever want is to have you get involved and get hurt because of me. You are safer not knowing me at all, but I have been given this chance to help you."

He stopped talking, his jaw clenching as if he had already said too much when he'd said almost nothing. "You sound like you're the mob, for Christ's sakes."

He shook his head and simply replied, "Worse."

"Gavin!"

His gaze flattened. "No, Rose. I won't do this to you. You will have to trust me that in this instance I know what is best. And right now you need to get dressed. I'm starving, and you are too tempting to have walking around naked. I can't think when you are naked," he whispered against her neck, his voice gruff, tantalizing her senses. "And that is what I do best."

"No, I could argue that," she offered in a soft sigh. "But for now, you win." *Just not forever*, she thought. Somehow she was going to break down his defenses. Somehow she would make him see reason.

By the time she showered and changed, he had already ordered breakfast and it was waiting for her. Her gaze lifted to him, intent on his computer as she lifted the dish lids. She couldn't stop the budding smile at what she uncovered.

He had remembered.

Some time during her freshman year, she developed an allergy to eggs. She finally discovered it was the protein in the yolk that was making her nauseous. He'd ordered her an egg white omelet with tomatoes and cheese along with a wheat English muffin and strawberry jelly, her favorite. How could he have remembered all of that after so many years?

She peeked under his tray cover and found a mountain. It resembled food. Gavin had the bottomless leg when it came to food. She wondered if he'd yet hit the need to work out to stay trim. Brat. She grinned at him, his inattention making it unnecessary to hide her inner musings. She had to work out constantly to stay in weight. As it was, she had missed two days, and she was still dying to get her foot in the spa.

"Gavin?" She sat down, setting his juice next to him. He barely acknowledged her as he concentrated. "I was wondering. Would it be safe for me to go to the spa? It's a confined area with limited access," she added hopefully.

He shot her a quick grin. "I've already made you an appointment." He lifted a finger to her chin when she gasped, stroking her once, and then closing her loose jaw. "I have also instructed them to keep you under constant attention. If anyone so much as drops an eyelash next to you, I want to know," he told her matter of factly. But his gaze was alight with understanding. He knew she hated being cooped up. "In fact," he said lifting his wrist, "You better eat. You are due there in forty-five minutes."

"You didn't? You really did that?"

He gave her a tender look and her stomach flipped. "I know this has been hard on you. I will walk you down. When you are done, call me. I will be here."

"You think I'll be safe enough?"

"I think so. I went and looked this morning while you were sleeping. They are very secure about letting people in and out."

She threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you Gavin. I will be careful, I promise."

"I know you will be," he assured her. "Now eat."

He was quiet while she ate, then nearly cold, his attention focused while walking her to the spa. He brushed a quick kiss against her cheek, the scarf once again over her hair. "Call when you are ready," he reminded her. He waited until she was locked behind the spa doors, then he left her.

Who was Gavin Throckton? It was a repetitive curiosity. He had grown into an enigma, a question mark. Years before she could have spouted his every waking thought.

She looked down the menu list once inside. "Swedish, please," she replied when she was directed to a table. Her mind wandered as the masseuse's hands did their magic on stressed and upset muscles, returning back to Gavin without interruption.

He was silent and brooding when presented with a problem. How could he find her stalker when the police couldn't? Was 'R' in the same hotel? He'd arrived so quickly, he had to be following her. She had no way of knowing.

She groaned as she recalled the email Gavin had shown her. They were

discussing her problem like it was tabloid news. Who was this guy? Why did he want to hurt her? Was she in danger?

A sickening thought came to her. Was it someone she actually worked with? How did Crissie find out so quickly about her departure? Was she a part of this?

The two women had never gotten along. Crissie had a more flamboyant nature with striking blond hair and the model attitude to have the world on a string for her amusement. Rose was low key, malleable. Crissie was high maintenance and demanding.

"Relax," came the woman's accented voice. "You are tightening up what I just got to relax," she said with a smile in her voice.

Rose took a deep breath. "Worries."

"I know. We were informed, Miss Tanner."

Bless him. He had used her alias.

"But let me help you relax. It is my job," she reminded Rose.

"Can I get the pecan scrub and a soak?" she asked as she let the rest of her worries drift away under thorough hands.

"You have the whole spa if you desire it."

"I think I love that man," she sighed.

"Which one?" came the other woman's innocent reply. "The one who booked, or the one who confirmed for you? They're both handsome."

"Oh my God, I think I'm going to be sick," she said as she slid from the table.

Rose was shaking from head to foot, wrapped against Gavin's hard body in nothing but a spa robe. She didn't even care. It had taken only minutes for him to answer her quavering summons back from their room.

"I think it's time we changed hotels," he said. She clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. "I am going to get us a protected penthouse." His voice drifted over her ears.

Gavin's voice was mellow as he questioned the personnel at the spa, not even bothering to wait for Tanner. They had a description now.



Shorter than Gavin, probably right at six feet, blond hair and blue eyes, non-descript. No viewable tattoos or scars and about twenty-five years old, but no older than thirty.

Anyone was what came to mind. Her stomach flipped again and she swallowed to make it behave.

His hand drifted over her back, as he tried to soothe her, but she had gone from shocked to numb in about three seconds flat.

“Can she stay here? I’m going to close the room and have our stuff sent ahead.”

“Certainly,” the spa manager replied. She was wringing her hands, her face pale under the situation. “I am so sorry about all of this, Mr. Throckton.”

He nodded once. “It isn’t your fault. I am just glad the warnings I gave were followed. Everything must be done to keep her safe.”

The spa manager nodded. “Whatever you need, I will see you get it.”

He had started to turn, but he glanced at Rose. She saw the worry that was there before he faced the manager again. “Can you get us out of here without being seen? I need a driver and car, someone who can’t be bought.” Rose shivered at the coldness in his voice. She was beginning to understand how her stalker had tracked her so easily. Money talks in Vegas, baby.

“Right away,” she answered and was on the phone before Gavin left.

“Stay here,” he warned her. She nodded quickly. He dropped a quick kiss on Rose’s cheek before he disappeared. Rose wasn’t about to move two feet unless he was with her.

He reappeared several minutes later with a change of clothes for her and one of the wigs. “I’ve sent our stuff ahead. We’re going someplace very private for a while.” He pointed her into a room. Her fingers shook as she changed.

“Gavin?” she whispered through the door.

“Yes?”

“Please don’t leave me.”

“I’m right here, sweetheart,” he said, and she almost cried.

He brought her jeans, a rhinestone covered t-shirt, and her blond wig. She didn't get an ounce of enjoyment out of wearing it.

He looked up as her door cracked from where he had slid down the wall, his arms crossed over his knees. The strain of the morning was lurking in the shadows of his brown eyes. He had become her bodyguard overnight. He stood slowly, watching as he towered before her.

His thumb brushed against her cheek. "Beautiful," he whispered. His expression slammed shut. "Rose, do you trust me?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes."

"All right then. Let's go." He led her down a hall, and immediately the spa manager met them. They followed an employee hall to reach an exit door.

"Your car is waiting outside. He has orders to take you anywhere, and he is very reliable. He's my son," she explained.

Gavin shook her hand. "Thank you."

He pushed Rose's head down and blocked her with his body as she slid into the open rear door of the limo.

"Do you think he knows?" she whispered through lips that almost hurt from holding them together.

"He will soon enough. I left a trail for him. It will take him to the Rio then the Nugget. But we aren't going anywhere near another casino."

He directed the driver to an address in Henderson. When she turned to him to ask where they were going, he gave her one of his looks, and she clicked her teeth back together.

"I knew I shouldn't have done it," he muttered.

Hearing him, she touched his arm. He was looking out the window, cursing. "Done what?"

"I never should have let you out of the room. For anything."

"Gavin, please don't blame yourself. I'm the one that got us into this mess."

"No, I knew he was close, and I still let you out." She saw guilt tearing into him.

Her voice softened. "Gavin, please don't. I dragged you into this, remember?" He almost smiled, but his expressive eyes didn't change.

"At least Tanner has the guy's description. He doesn't sound familiar at all to you?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "I work with a dozen people a day, different assistant's, aides, and help in every city." Her fingers started to twist in her lap, an old habit she'd long since accepted. It was the finger war or ulcers.

He rested his hand over hers, calming her frantic movements. "We'll catch him before he finds you again. Tanner is working on the hotel as we speak." When she gave him a blank look, he told her in a low tone, "I called when I went to the room. They are finally deciding to treat this like a real case," he said with a touch of annoyance.

"They weren't before?" she asked, appalled.

He made a disgusted sound. "No, Rodriguez had all but blown you off. After getting nothing from the break in at your apartment and with you hidden out here, he'd put you out of his mind. When I explained what's been happening to Tanner, along with the visual, Rodriguez seemed far more cooperative."

"What happened?" she asked, a tight flutter in her stomach.

He gave her a look, a flash of indecision before he spoke again. "I didn't want to worry you. I talked myself into the spa thing to keep you from getting too scared. I screwed up." He smashed his fist against his thigh his voice lowering in self-inflicted anger. "I screwed up and he saw everything."

She placed a hand on his arm. "Gavin, what happened?"

He fought with himself for several seconds, the decision obviously paining him to tell her, his lips thinning in anger. "He knew where we were all day yesterday. He was kind enough to take our picture at the roulette table." His strained voice was damning in the secluded limo.

She couldn't stop the gasp, feeling light heated as her face drained. Her head began to hurt.

"Rose!" he whispered quickly. "Come on, baby. It's going to be all right. I'm

taking you to a safe place until we can catch him. You'll be safe. I promise."

His hands cradled her face as she sucked in air. She nodded weakly, her ears pounding. She sat in silence for the rest of the ride, fighting the swimming spots before her eyes.

He held her hand gripped in his as the limo slowed in front of a high rise building. When he led her through the large glass doors, she was hit with the arctic blast of strong air conditioning that sent a shiver down her back. He squeezed her hand, never letting her go, as he entered the elevator and produced a card, swiping it across a pass-code reader.

The elevator ascended without a sound until the doors opened with another blast of bracing, cold air, facing a beautifully decorated sunken living room. She finally found her voice to ask, "Where are we?"

"Believe it or not, a safe house," he said. "I got this approved through my office. No one will know to look for you here."

She stared at the understated elegance of the room, soft beiges and desert reds with a touch of sage green. "How?"

"You don't want to know," he said out of the corner of his mouth. He led her to the couch to rest and picked up a phone, walking a few paces away to stare out a window.

"Tanner, we're here. Did anyone follow us? Good. Any breaks on the description? Damn!" He rubbed a hand across his eyes. "Look, it's going to be hours before our stuff catches up with us. I don't have my computer. I can't run his description until it shows up."

She watched and listened in stunned silence. Who was Gavin? He had all but taken her over. Like he was running the show, and Tanner was letting him.

"No, I don't know if he's armed, but I wouldn't dismiss it," she heard him continue. "The last letters he sent to the agency were very explicit. I don't know about anything he's sent to her directly." His silence was lengthy as his color deepened.

"I can't let it go, Tanner. This became more than harassment with the B and E

yesterday, and you know it, so just do your damn job!" He slammed down the phone, his shoulders clenched as he glared out the window.

She could hear the anger in his breathing, the frustration rippling across his shoulders. "Gavin? Who are you?" she asked one more time.

"Rose, I can't answer that," he said with cold finality. "It's best that you just forget me. After this, I'm the last person you are going to want to know." Self mockery dripped from his words.

"But why?" she cried, leaping to her feet. "What is going on? Who is after me?" She stared at him hard. "You know, don't you? You know who's behind this." She felt her blood run cold at his chilling expression.

"I think I do, but I can't be certain until I have a chance to search the databases." He lifted his hands on her shoulders, and for a split second his expression changed. It was soft and tender as he searched her face. "Rose, go lay down. You should be home in a day or two at the latest." Her heart pinched at his words. A day or two? Her eyes swung up to his when his voice softened. "Please, Rose. There's nothing to be done now anyway."

She nodded once and felt him drift a thumb against her cheek, but she couldn't keep her eyes on him. His cold withdrawal was beginning to slice through her numbness and it hurt.

Once in the bedroom with the door closed between them, she tossed the wig on the nightstand, running her hands through her hair to loosen it. She wasn't going to be able to sleep, but she stayed in the bedroom knowing that Gavin was just on the other side of the door, worried over her and fighting her battle. Again.

She stared out the window watching the sun pass, creating shadows until her eyes drifted closed on their own. Until she could ignore the aches of her heart. Until she could forget that Gavin didn't want her. Praying she could forget him.

## X

Gavin threw himself onto the now deserted couch, and stretched out as he argued with himself. He knew better than to let her go to the spa, but he didn't want for her to feel unsafe any longer. It was his fault things had gotten to this point. If he had kept her inside. If he hadn't doubted the man behind her problems. If he had put the damn clues together sooner.

He realized sitting in the limo, he was going to have to let her go. He forced himself apart, to separate himself from her so he could protect her, and it was killing him. He loved his September Rose, but once she was safe, she would know the truth. He couldn't keep her in the dark forever, couldn't keep his life a secret for much longer.

What infuriated him more was he couldn't even get online to check the New York databases to see if his suspected hunch was correct. She may not remember him, but he had a real good idea who her stalker was.

His hands clenched behind his head as his lids drooped, his mind filled with memories from their childhood. They had gone on a field trip their sophomore year. Nothing fancy, just a museum, but it had given Gavin a chance to be a buddy with his friend. As they had walked along, he had made comments under his breath and she had giggled, like two conspirators. They'd hung back and hung out as they'd traversed the halls of dinosaur bones and arrowheads.

He had even dared to hold her hand, once, just a quick tug to get her attention. He had been far too shy back then to even think about telling Rose about his feelings, but someone had noticed.

Jeremy Haspers. Gavin would be more than willing to bet he was the one who had squealed about his crush so many years ago. Jeremy had liked Rose too, but she

rarely gave him a passing glance. He was big and brawny, a wife beater in training. He had been rude, belittling, and mean. In the exact same manner the letter and emails had been written. He had always used the term “bitches” like a group name. Rose took it as an insult, but Gavin knew how it had been meant, and it wasn’t any more complimentary.

Gavin tried to keep him away, subtly fighting in his own way for her, but at the time Jeremy had outweighed him by a good fifty pounds, and ‘the strong shall survive’ was the rule in high school. Gavin had been subjected to a lot of harassment by Jeremy for those efforts, most of the time to protect Rose. Gavin knew she never suspected Jeremy or his interest in her, not the way Gavin had, nor the level of it. Man to man, there was no misunderstanding.

Except now, if he was right, it was time to turn the tables on the Haspers kid. If Rose hadn’t recognized Gavin, there was an even better chance Jeremy hadn’t either, plus his exclusion from the neck up in the picture implied he wasn’t important or viewed as a threat to Rose’s stalker. That would be Jeremy’s mistake. No one underestimated Gavin anymore.

His thoughts slowed as he fought to keep the anger over his own stupidity from plaguing him. She was safe now.

He had no idea how long he stayed there, imagining her in his life. Imagining she could some day love him and be with him, without a shadow of his past between them. Either the contracted mole or the cad. He would live like a monk for a lifetime if he could put it all behind him and have Rose as his wife. He wasn’t sure when dreams turned to reality, but in a heartbeat, he knew the difference.

He felt her hand on his thigh, but didn’t move.

Her voice was soft and seducing. “Gavin, I know you’re awake.” Her hand drifted up his thigh, resting on his abdomen before venturing further. He fought to stay still, to keep his breathing even, but under her touch it was an impossible feat.

He felt himself pushing against his slacks, and when he heard her throaty ‘you’re so busted’ chuckle, he knew he had been caught. He let his gaze open slowly and felt

his mouth go dry with desire.

She was beautiful, a soft smile, her eyes watching him with a green fiery heat of desire. Just once more he needed her to be his. Completely. His reach was lightning quick, but she made no protest.

It was as if she could feel the urgency as it drove him onward. Her hands were strong, her kisses hot, as she met him and flowed with him. He adored her body; he cherished her under his touch.

When he let his primal urges take over, when he felt the need to claim what was his, he growled low in his throat and she met him. He burst wide open, could feel her as she exploded for him, her nails scoring his back, her teeth cutting into him as their passions met.

He loved her in the living room, in the shower, falling apart then together once again in the bed. He held her close, knowing if he was right, she would be gone from him in a matter of hours.

For the first time in his life, he desperately prayed he was wrong.

A mere two hours after his computer arrived and he searched the name base and New York criminal records, Jeremy Richard Haspers was arrested, trying to bribe a clerk at the Golden Nugget. From there on things moved quickly, too quickly as far as Gavin was concerned.

Rose and Gavin met Tanner at the police station, and waited while Jeremy “Rick” Haspers was processed. He’d put on a little weight, but he was still bulky, Gavin noticed, comparing him to memory.

Gavin waited outside, his insides torn to shreds as Rose sat in an interrogation room, talking quietly with a police officer, granting the time to hear Rick’s side of things. Gavin had done what he had been there for. He had helped keep her safe, and in the morning she was returning to her life. And he hated his with a fierceness that overwhelmed him.

All he could do was sit on the other side of the glass and listen as Rick pleaded with her, explaining why he had stalked her. His story was believable, but the more



Gavin heard, the more he wanted to run Jeremy over with a large vehicle, several times.

Jeremy had found her in a magazine and remembered why he'd had his own crush on her. Her spirit, her beauty, her tenacious ability to pull through. They shared a certain tie, Gavin heard as he explained things to her in a rush of words. Jeremy had also been adopted, but his family hadn't been quite the loving home that Rose had been blessed with. It wasn't until the night of the screening when she'd had an escort that he felt something more and began to sink into a well of anger and jealousy. He honestly believed himself in love with her. Even then he was pleading for her understanding.

Her voice was strong inside the little room. "Jeremy, I send those pictures to every one. It's a carbon copy," she told him, answering his petulant need to know why she would send him a picture to begin with.

Gavin watched as Jeremy deflated a little more. "So, you really don't care for me?" Gavin's stomach lurched at the puppy love in Jeremy's blue eyes. The man needed serious help.

"Jeremy, I hardly knew you in school. What you have done has cost me a month's share of work. You have frightened me, made me leave my apartment and scared the hell out of parents on the side." She stood, signaling to the third in the room, she was ready to leave. "I can't forgive you for that. I will never love you, I will never care for you," she stated flatly.

Gavin finally allowed himself a deep breath when she walked back through the door, straight into his arms.

"Throckton," Tanner said from next to him. "Thank you for your quick thinking on this. I'm sorry I ever doubted you." Tanner offered his hand and Gavin shook, if slowly.

"I understand. Will you send the reports to New York for me? I'm on vacation, or that was how this all started anyway."

Tanner shrugged unconcerned. "To the precinct?"

Gavin nodded. "They'll forward to my house. And it wasn't really quick thinking. I have a photographic mind for names and faces."

"Whatever, you get the collar on this."

Gavin didn't reply. He could feel Rose staring at him. Had he said too much? He looked down at her and all he could see was a trusting expression in her gaze. "You ready?"

She nodded.

"Where?"

"I don't care. Away."

With their things still waiting in Henderson, he ordered the taxi there, not wanting to let his last few minutes end.

He let her drift through the penthouse, knowing she needed time to assimilate everything. The chase was over. She was free to return home.

He stood by the door with his hands in his pockets as he watched her through half closed eyes. He wondered what she was thinking. What was going on behind those beautiful green eyes? Was she anxious to be gone? Was she trying to find the polite way to end what this was?

He still had almost ten days of free time. And he had absolutely no idea of how to spend it now that he didn't have her.

He cleared his throat. "You know," he started as he ran a hand behind his neck. "I don't know what you think of the idea, but how would you like to stay?" She spun out of her thoughts. "Just for a few days," he rushed on. "Come down from all of this until you absolutely have to go back. You've really only been gone for three days." He tried to smile, feeling selfish all over again, but unable to draw any real remorse for it. "That is, if you would like to stay with me," he finished gamely.

He shoved himself off the wall, striding to stand before her. "Let's have a real vacation. Let's be friends again," he told her, wanting to persuade her. His hand lifted to her face as a flash of pain crossed those emerald eyes of hers. Was being his friend such a bad thing? After all these years?

He pushed on; afraid she might think about saying no. "No more disguises or room service. I can take you out, we can see a show." He set his hands on her shoulders

as her smile lifted, a coy twist that had him grinning.

"I don't know. I like it when we have a reason for room service." His heart rate rocketed. Did she just say that? Her eyes grew dreamy as she stared up at him. As unrealistic as it was, he really wanted to be a part of that dream.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked her as he slowly wrapped her up, unwilling to break the spell of her in his arms.

"I don't think the Bellagio really wants us back," she said. "How about the Luxor or the MGM?"

She wrapped her arms around his waist and he felt light. "Anywhere. I'll get us the biggest suite they have," he said.

"There are so many choices. Why don't we pick together?" She searched the room, smiling when she spotted his laptop. He loved her smile. She grabbed his hand and he followed willingly. "Fire this baby up, Gavin. I think my luck is about to change," she said as she pushed him into a chair. He was caught off guard when she scooted in and sat down right on his lap, but he was in no mood to complain.

Ten days to make a lifetime of memories. He was willing to try. He refused to acknowledge the ache that afterward he was still going to have to let her go.

The last thing he was expecting was for the phone to ring. He slid Rose from his lap while she reviewed some of the hotels.

"Gavin? They told me I'd find you there," came the male voice.

"Jamison. What do you need?" he answered in a non-committal way.

"Hey, I need you to come back. We've got a hot one."

Gavin ran his hand through his hair. "Jamison. I'm on vacation. Do you even remember what that is?" he asked, annoyed. "I am off the clock."

"But we've got the spot primed, man. Just walk in and probe."

"Jamison," he ground out, "I'm not a lap dog. This is the first vacation I have had in five years. No."

"But your contract renews this year," Jamison reminded him. "You know, the magical carrot on the pole," he joked.

Gavin stared at the ceiling a moment, thinking about who the ass truly was. "I can't discuss that right now. I'm not alone."

Jamison's rude, disgusting laughter made his blood boil. "Oh, man. You always were good with the ladies. I never could figure that out. A computer nerd like you and the women adore you. What's your secret?" he asked, a snide question that made Gavin want to punch the man. It wasn't the first time he'd felt the urge, either.

"I'm not discussing that either. Goodbye, Jamison."

"Wait! Gavin, I'm serious man, this isn't the time to say no."

Gavin looked over his shoulder. Rose was still tinkering on the computer. "Jamison, I'm on vacation. I will talk to you when I get back." Gavin hung up on the other man. "Sorry. I don't know how they even knew to look for me here," he offered in explanation.

"Work?" she asked, scrolling down a screen with her chin resting on a cupped fist.

"Yes."

"The work you won't discuss?" she asked quietly, feigning disinterest. She wasn't fooling him.

He turned his back on her. "Rose, this isn't something I can talk about," he told her evenly. "I'm not the guy you knew in school."

"No, you are the man I know now," she said, turning in the chair. "So, are you a super agent, a detective like Tanner?" she prodded gently. "I can take it, Gavin."

"You'll be disgusted Rose. I can't," he said. "Can we have this time? I want to spend it with you."

The phone rang again, startling the both of them. "Now what?" he grouched under his breath.

He answered and stilled as Tanner spoke.

"Throckton, we have a problem."

Gavin narrowed his gaze, looking out into the desert. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"This isn't the right guy."

"What!" he exploded. "He confessed to her face! You were there!" His hand clenched on the phone, wanting to snap it in two. He saw that Rose had stilled and was facing him, listening intently.

Tanner warned him, "He didn't do the break in, or the hotel. We checked his flights. Haspers arrived this morning. All he wanted to do was plead his case. He wasn't here to do the B and E yesterday.

Gavin cursed running a hand over his face. "What about the letters? What about the spa this morning?"

Tanner's voice deepened. "That was him at the spa. He recognized her but not you." There was a telling silence that seemed to stretch out forever between the men. "But Throckton, he didn't do the paint job on the window." There was a click, like a pen on the other end and Gavin wished he could do this face to face, without Rose listening in. "Someone else is involved. It isn't hard to write letters if some of them are printed."

Gavin released the heated breath he was holding. "And the apartment?"

"That wasn't Haspers either. He had an alibi. It checked out."

Gavin wanted to throw the phone out the window. Rage boiled to new heights. "So what the hell have we been doing for two days?"

"To put it bluntly, hiding from the wrong guy."

"Shit!" he spat. Gavin paced. "So now what?"

"We take it back over. Witness protection program, if necessary, to keep her safe," Tanner suggested.

Gavin shot a look at Rose. No, that wasn't going to work. She would go bonkers in a matter of hours. She was listening, too well. "I don't think so, Tanner. Give me a few minutes to think about this. I'll call you in ten." And without an ounce of remorse, he hung up on the detective.

She sat with her hands in her lap, just the slightest hint of fear in her gaze as she stared back at him. She licked her bottom lip.

"So, I guess I'm not done, yet, am I?" she said, a little sadly and little scared at

the same time.

"I'm sorry, Rose," he said through a tight jaw. "I wanted it to be. I want for you to be safe."

Her words were quiet, reaching him easily even though she hadn't moved. "I know, Gavin. So what has happened?"

"Someone is following you other than Jeremy, and has been using him as a smoke screen to keep you in his sights." Gavin felt sick. "I would have to say, with this news, Jeremy didn't take the photos." Which also meant they knew she wasn't alone. Gavin didn't care. Her life was in jeopardy, not his.

"Gavin, I don't know if you know or not, but Tanner told me yesterday that the tone of the letters had changed."

Gavin stopped on a dime. "How?" he asked cautiously.

She didn't flinch, exhaling slowly when she spoke. "Whoever this is, wants me dead."

Gavin didn't know if he would faint or curse, but the cursing came first. Rose paled as his anger grew. "Thanks for saying something," he finally managed to get through his teeth. "I will talk to Tanner about that when I call him again." He stopped and stared right at her. "Is there anything else, Rose? Anything that you can think of about this? If he didn't break into your apartment or your hotel room, and had the means to follow immediately after you left, then this is someone who knows you and your situation." He met her gaze. "Who knows?"

"Just Beverly, my agent, Detective Rodriguez, and the guy who picked me up. Except for the email you found, they were it."

He wanted to smack his head. "The email!"

He jerked the laptop over to him and opened the program with quick fingers. He grabbed the phone again and got Tanner on the second ring.

"I am sending over emails that describe Rose's life in detail. Take it to the president of the agency if you have to, but I want names." He started packaging all of it into a zip file as Tanner gave him the information to forward it. He sent it.

"You should have that in a minute. Once you do, let me know what you've found. And I still want the name of her delivery guy."

"Yeah, I'm waiting on Rodriguez on that as we speak," Tanner said. "Look, Throckton, we can do our job."

"I'm hoping you can, Tanner," he said in a low voice, not bothering to hide the rage he felt. "Because as I see it, you're not. I want to see the letters she's received in the last seventy-two hours. Send them to the account this is coming from." His voice was hard, it wasn't a request.

Tanner growled low on the other end, tired of being bullied. "Just because you have some high muckety-muck friends..."

"Tanner," he bit out as his eyes narrowed to match his seething mood, "You should be more concerned with who my friends are paid by rather than who they are. They wouldn't appreciate it if this turns out bad," he threatened in a low voice. "I know I wouldn't."

Tanner was silent for a long minute. His exhalation was a long curse that would have blistered paint. Gavin completely ignored it. "Fine. Does this mean you're officially on this?"

"I was as of the minute I boarded the plane. I just didn't know it," he replied without a trace of humor. "Let me know what you find out. She'll be protected."

"Are you going to stay at the penthouse?"

"As long as they let us."

"Fine," Tanner said, and he hung up.

Gavin set the phone down, and with a racing heart, forced himself to face Rose.

## XI

“So, Jeremy wasn’t behind everything?” she asked cautiously. Gavin turned away and looked out the window. Rose wanted to see his face, his expression. Something.

“No.”

“And I’m still in hiding?”

He sighed, once, regretfully. “Yes.”

She rose slowly from her chair and walked to him. She hugged her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek into his hard back. She could feel the coiled tension, his heart rate, his anger. “How long do you think it will take?”

“I don’t know, Rose. I need to break it down and see who could have known you were leaving and who from them may have a reason to hurt you.”

She shivered a little at the cold, calculating tone he used. “I can help.”

His movements were slow when he lifted a hand and rested it over hers where she held him tightly across his waist. “I know you can, but you need to be kept safe.”

“You’re taking this well,” she said, “Considering you’re on vacation.” She spread her fingers across his abdomen and felt his reaction. His inhalation, the crush of muscle under her fingers, and silently thrilled.

“Well, my plans changed,” was all he said. She stood for a few minutes just holding him, enjoying his solid shape and knowing he would do as he said. Gavin always had.

She took a breath, and then took a chance. “Gavin, tell me something about yourself. Tell me who you are, what you do.” His shoulders tightened but she didn’t let go. “Tell me how you can threaten a detective and get away with it. Tell me who your



friends are and why he's scared of them. Tell me what you do that makes you invaluable twenty five hundred miles away." She breathed against him, making her requests, feeling how her words affected him.

"Rose," he groaned, agony in the long syllable. "I want to see you home to a life you will enjoy."

"And somehow knowing you could ruin that?" she prodded, a determined hitch in her voice.

He laughed a harsh sound. "Knowing me could ruin you."

"I don't believe you, Gavin." She relaxed her hold, but only to walk around to stand in front of him. The bleakness she caught in his brown eyes tore at her. He blinked and it was gone. It was just a fleeting emotion that was a part of this Gavin she needed to know. "Stubborn," she accused.

He looked almost shocked, his brows rising sharply. "Me?"

"Yes, you," she stated, wrapping him up once more. "Since when have you kept anything from me? I know we went our different roads, but Gavin, I'm still me and you're still you."

Her heart raced when he lifted his hands and cradled her face. His answer was succinct. "No. No, I'm not."

She released him when he dropped his hands. "Fine. Then I have a plan," she stated firmly. "I am not going to hide out while some man steals my life away from me."

"Rose," he began, rubbing a hand down his face again.

"Don't 'Rose' me!" She turned and stalked back to the computer, retrieving her internet connection to search the hotels. "And you can stay here if you want, but I am going to a hotel with a nice spa. If I have to work these kinks out, then by damn, I am going to enjoy a day or two to get over this."

He slapped the screen down. She pulled her fingers out just in time. "Rose, this isn't over! Someone out there is still after you!"

"So what?" She was starting to get real annoyed with his controlling attitude.

"You walked all over the cops who are supposed to be on my side. You threaten everyone you meet." Her gaze narrowed at him. "Who are you, Gavin?"

When he remained silent she sighed in dismissal. "Fine, you don't want to talk, I don't want to stay here any longer." She flipped the laptop open again. She started scrolling through pages, although she already knew where she wanted to go. It took all of five seconds for him to crack. This time, when he closed the laptop, his hand was slow and calm and she didn't have to count her fingernails. He took over the chair next to her.

"I will tell you what I can, but you have to stay here. It's either me or the Witness Protection Program." He told her this avoiding her gaze.

Her jaw dropped. "Are you serious? Tanner wants to hide me?"

Gavin nodded. "He wants to hide you deep. They've made several mistakes on this. If something happens and it gets reported, both departments, his and Rodriguez's, will take a hit. They'll be fried alive by the publicity."

"Mistakes?" she wondered. "What mistakes?"

"Rodriguez didn't want to take this seriously. He saw you as another flighty model with an over-attentive fan. Therefore, no bodyguard, even though you were eligible. Even Tanner is at fault, because when the letters changed so graphically from the day you left to now, that should have tipped him off. But he didn't pay attention. He didn't want to look any deeper than the obvious."

She leaned back in her chair as the implications of what he was saying rattled around in her head. "So I was nothing but a burden. A problem that some guy had decided to make a target and they found the whole situation a nuisance."

"Basically."

She glanced up at him. "How did you know it was more?"

His gaze gentled. "Because I know you," he said simply. "You're quiet, non-threatening and not self-absorbed or self-centered. When you cry wolf, you mean it."

"But you didn't know there was anyone other than Jeremy involved either," she reminded him.

He shook his head ruefully. "No, I didn't. Then again, I'm not working this case from their vantage point. I didn't have the information they had."

She lifted a brow. "This case?" She caught his wandering gaze again with a firm touch to his chin. "Does that have something to do with you now?"

His gaze was deep, his thoughts troubled. "Yes, Rose. It has a lot to do with who I am now."

"Tell me."

He reached for her hands, covering them. He started slowly, as if the telling somehow made it worse. "I work undercover for the state of New York. I have a contract with the D.A.'s office. I also have," he swallowed, "A few contacts that have nothing to do with that contract. And a reputation." The last three words were spoken in a remorseful voice. "I'm not a gentleman, in any sense of the word."

"How?" She searched his features. His dark bleak look was back.

"I was approached by a recruiter. I was just finishing my course studies, but what I didn't know was that my scores were abnormally high. That my methods were identical to certain others, people who excelled at breaking the law." He took a deep breath. "There are ways to break into a system, without leaving what is called a fingerprint, a history of the intrusion. I have that talent."

"I helped in two small case busts my first year. I was instantly in demand, made good money, made more busts, larger names, corporations." He let out a breath. "Hell, Rose, I'm a hired mole."

"And because of that I'm supposed to think the worst about you?" she asked, mystified.

He shook his head, a disgusted sound quickly following. "No, Rose. That is only the tip of the iceberg." He stood before she could catch his hand to stop him. "I'm trained. I took the academy training a year and half into this. So, I can keep you safe. I just don't have any jurisdiction here."

"So you are a cop."

He shrugged. "Sort of. No credentials, and if you asked, no one would claim me."

It's part of who and what I am, what I do." He had walked to stare out the window again, his hands hidden in his pockets. She could almost feel how much this bothered him to tell her about himself.

"And the reputation? What is that about?" she asked quietly. "Why do you keep saying you could ruin me?"

This time his laugh was long and rude. It was almost like a different man stood before her as he turned from the window and faced her. He gave her a leering bow. "Let me introduce you to The Cad," he mocked. "I am the one they call when a woman is involved." He sneered it, like a curse, but his gaze was infinitely sad. "I wine and dine, and other things to get information. No one suspects me, ever, as less than the affable IT guy who knows how to treat a lady."

"You mean... 'other things' like I think you do, don't you?" She wasn't sure what shocked her more, the fact that he did, or just that there had been others. Many others.

His shoulders sagged. "Yes, Rose, that's exactly what it means." His soft brown eyes filled with pain. "I didn't want you to know. Hell, I still don't!" he said violently. "But there haven't been as many as I see you counting in your mind. Just the right ones to make my reputation appropriate." He faced the window again, turning away from her.

"But you're a good person!" she cried, feeling anxious again. "You've always been that way."

His laugh was a little less cruel. "You are the only one who ever thought that, Rose, even when I knew you in school, but I was never good enough for you. And yes, I had the biggest crush on you, but it can't go any further. You have a career to consider, a life." His features were drawn, what she could see of him.

"What do you have, Gavin? What do you have to go back to?" She shadowed his every step, refusing to let him escape.

"My father is in a convalescent home. He had a stroke four years ago. I work to keep him in good care and keep him happy, but I even failed him. He just doesn't have the capacity to know it anymore."

She grabbed his arm and yanked him around. "Quit that! This instant! There isn't one thing wrong with you."

His lips pulled up into a snarled smile. "You think so? Tell that to Melissa. I left her at the alter three months ago. She was the first time I thought about leaving everything. Walking away. Except, I couldn't do it. The Cad won. Even then. My alter ego, my dark shadow." Gavin lifted a hand to her face. "You see, he loves all this crap." He gestured around the room. "He loves the beautiful women, feeling useful, making a difference. He loves the thrill of the hunt, finding the dirt to put major criminals behind bars." He looked into her eyes and if she didn't know any better, she could see as far down as his wounded soul in that second. "I have nothing to go back to that really matters."

She stepped back, the shock of it hitting her. "That's why you've been so determined with me."

His answer was gentler. "Yes, as crazy as it sounds. I know you. I have always liked and respected you, which is why I tried to keep us from happening." His lips thinned as he fell silent, staring out the window once more.

"What? Finish it," she demanded. Her gaze raked over him, the indecision evident in the firm hold of his mouth and the heightened flush of his cheeks.

He turned his back again. "There isn't anything else that you need to know," he replied bitterly. "You know the truth. That is more than enough." He gave her one last look and left her to go to the bedroom. She was stunned to see the door close between them.

She went back to the table where the laptop was and shut it off. All she could do was sit and think.

Gavin, this man she'd just spent half of two days with in bed, was an undercover spy, a mole. She hated to be the one to tell him, but there wasn't anyway he was going to ruin her. His reputation was just that, a fabrication of a story to help him get what he needed to make the cases complete. She could understand that.

He had been protective of her since the first minute he had stepped on the plane.

That had nothing to do with the stalker and everything to do with Gavin. Didn't he see that? Didn't he know the difference? Her gaze slid half closed and she licked her lip. And damn the Cad! She liked him!

He was passionate, caring, and attentive. Didn't Gavin understand that was his own nature? One and the same? The blanket on the airplane, the walk into the hotel, her nightmare. He was there for her, and that's not daring to count all the times in their youth he had been there for her, to help her, to hold her up and keep her together.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she stood and marched to the door, slapping it open without knocking. His suitcase was open, perched on a chair and he stood, naked as a baby, his hair damp. She felt a flutter in her belly at the sight of him. She met his cool stare head on. "You think you are not worth my attention because of what you have done. You think you have done something wrong because you enjoy what you get out of your work." She began to walk toward him, tearing her t-shirt off. She wasn't wearing a bra and she knew exactly what that did to him. His chest staggered then fell and she forced herself to go slow. "You are a passionate man, Gavin." She stepped out of her jeans, kicking them to the side. "Let me introduce you to my passionate side."

He dropped his clothes in a heap when she leaped at him. He turned and they fell backward onto the bed. "Rose? What are you doing?"

She started laying kisses on his chest. "Showing you that you are more than your alter ego. Showing you that you are worth affection," she said between damp, seductive touches.

He groaned beneath her, but he didn't try to stop her. She smiled in victory, but it was short lived. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her up. She slid out of her underwear as he tried to complain. "Rose, don't do this. You deserve a better man."

She ran her fingers down the sensitive skin of his stomach. His eyes snapped closed in reaction. "What I deserve is a man who knows what he's doing. Are you that man?" She raked her nails on the inside of his thigh and he groaned again, a deep rumble that shot through her veins. She leaned against him. "I deserve a man who puts

me first when I need his protection. Is that you? I think so," she whispered in a breath against his skin.

"Rose." His voice had dropped, heavy with desire. She hungered at the sound.

She rested her lips against his as she straddled his thighs, pinning him to the bed. "I know you've had lovers. I've had one or two, but no one makes me feel like you do," she admitted. "Does that make you less of a man?"

"There were ulterior motives," he said gasping as she brushed against his length.

"So you're not morally perfect." She breathed in a rough moan as she felt him rub against her. She closed her eyes, fighting the urge to take him. "I have a motive. Right now," she bit out, even as she dug her nails into him, to keep herself grounded.

"What?" A dark deep rumble of need sounded from his chest.

"Giving the cad a run for his money." She sucked on his bottom lip. "Now, give me a condom so I can make him pay."

He reached around her, groping. "Pay?" His gaze was hot and made her entire body ache with want.

"You'll see," was her only warning.

And pay he did.

\* \* \*

"I have a plan about the stalker," she told him some time later. Rose was curled up on his shoulder, drawing languid patterns over his chest and abdomen. He was nearly purring with the gentle caresses.

"Rose, let them catch him," came Gavin's immediate response. "It's what they get paid for, you know."

She knew he wasn't going to like it but she had never been the kind to hide. "Let's go to the Mandalay Bay, act like tourists, make pains of ourselves and draw him out."

She felt the vibration of disapproval under her fingertips before she heard it. "No

way.”

“And you are expecting what? For him to trip over a curb and fall into jail?” she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

“I would rather that, than let you be a target. Or bait,” he replied. “Besides, I’m still waiting on Rodriguez. I need the follow up on those emails, and the name for your delivery driver.” She heard the touch of annoyance that those particular items were taking as long as they were.

“When did you last talk to Tanner?” she asked him, looking out the window. It was dark outside.

“Around five, I think. It was probably later. Today has been a bitch,” he sighed.

“I beg your pardon!” she sniffed playfully.

He tickled her until she giggled. “Lady you are not,” he teased her back.

“Never said I was,” she reminded him. “Anyway, that’s partially why I feel I need to do this. I’m laying low, hoping for him to make a mistake. I can’t hide forever. I can draw him out.”

“Rose,” he said with distinct disapproval.

“Gavin, think about this. While I’m enjoying every second I spend with you, I still have my career, bills, and my apartment.”

“Things to go back to,” he said, withdrawing again. “I know.”

She lifted up to look at him. “That’s not what I meant.”

“But it is,” he disagreed. “And you are right.” He pulled her back down. “Give it until tomorrow. Let them and me find this guy.”

“And then we will try my way?” she asked.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. Really looked at her. She felt his gaze all the way to her toes. “You’re enjoying the thought of it, aren’t you? Outsmarting him? Tripping him up?”

“And if I am?” Her palms itched with it, actually.

His gaze turned cloudy and unreadable. “Rose, you have no training for it. You could get hurt. What if you get trapped, taken? You don’t even have any self-defense



training.”

“I do. A little,” she admitted, but her eyes opened wide in innocence as she settled her chin, resting on his chest. “But I have you. Gavin, my own super agent.”

At that, he chuckled lightly. “Do I have to wear tights and stuff?”

“Nah, just look dashing and cute at the same time. But you’ve got that down. So, what do you think? Willing to try?”

“No. I’m not going to use you for bait,” he told her firmly. “I’m not going to risk you.”

“Gavin,” she pleaded once more. The ol’ college try.

“No. I mean it, and if I have to keep you naked in bed to keep you safe, then I will sacrifice my body,” he said in a droll way. She fought the laughter, barely.

She purred instead. “What a sacrifice. Can I have grapes with that?” He rolled her over, his gaze instantly dark and heated.

“Chocolate covered strawberries? Is that what I heard?” he murmured as he nibbled.

“You’re making me hungry,” she warned him. Her hands were roaming all over him.

“That was the idea.”

But it would be a long time before they ate.

## XII

All right, she knew Gavin was going to be ticked. It wasn't like she hadn't warned him, though, and she did leave him the note. If he wasn't too mad to join her. If he wasn't ready to kill her for just disappearing. If he wasn't pissed enough to just leave her to fend for herself. She wouldn't blame him. How could she? This was her idea.

She was tired of hiding. Three days, two hotels and a private penthouse. She wasn't moving again until she absolutely had to, preferably on the way home, and this time she made sure everyone knew it. She flounced in, the bell hop ogling her like a cheese steak sub with the trimmings. No disguise, no cover up. The stretch limo entrance hadn't hurt any either. She thought she could even hear the music to *Pretty Woman* in her head as she emerged, legs first. If Julia Roberts could have it, why not?

The turquoise skirt she was wearing barely reached her thighs, and lord help him, Gavin had been right. Every male eye landed on her legs with the matching heels. Trust a man to know what other men would want. The top to the outfit--what there was of it--was a halter style mid-drift which showed off her trim waist and long length. Her makeup was impeccable and her hair glistened in the early morning sun so that even a blind man would know who she was. That was the plan.

She was through with hiding, through with waiting. She was going to bring her stalker out right on Las Vegas Boulevard. She got her room, flirting easily with the counter guy, leaving instructions for Gavin to have a key. If he showed up. She hoped he would.

She only hoped if he did, she was able to deflect her deception. Something she had never seen was Gavin really angry. Not with her, but she really didn't see where she had much of a choice. Not in her mind. She had never been an idle on the sidelines

kind of girl. Take life and run with it.

By the time she turned to go up the elevator, four reporters were waiting for a picture. "Why the sudden trip, Miss St. Johns?" asked one.

"Are you on a shoot?" asked another. His look said he had heard nothing about it if she were.

"Miss St. Johns!" cried another with a camera. "Over here please." He snapped several and for a split second she was back in her element, could almost forget why she was even there. Almost.

"Sorry, boys. Gotta go change," she said with a saucy smile and a wave. She sauntered off with a smooth stride after her baggage.

"I wonder why she's here?" she heard from behind her.

"Could be for anything," whispered another. "This is Vegas," was the last thing she heard as she entered an elevator, her luggage at her side with a helpful bellhop.

He cleared his throat. She glanced at him, early twenties, young and handsome. "Would you like an autograph?" she asked.

"We're not allowed." But his expression said he would like one just the same.

She filched a pen out of her purse, and a napkin. "Here. You didn't ask. It fell," she said, handing it to him. "And you found it."

"Finders-keepers," he said with an appreciative smile.

"Sure. I won't tell," she told him with a wink as the door slid open.

She opened the room door with an energetic shove and smiled at the opulence that was Las Vegas. Her hop put her bag down and she handed him a fifty. His grin turned up in wattage.

"Oh, by the way," she said as he turned to leave. "I'm expecting a friend. Extremely tall and he is probably going to be furious with me. Stand back if you see him."

"No problem," he said as he pulled her door closed. Then she sighed and for the first time, decided to unpack. She was sure it would take some time to find and trap her stalker, but regardless she was out of the bag. She wasn't moving again.

With her suitcase in the closet, she sat down and called Tanner. She cringed as he yelled, but refused to be cowed.

"Is Throckton with you, at least?" he snarled at her.

"No, he didn't agree with my plan." She leaned back in a chair, crossing her legs. He snorted. "Smart man," he muttered. "So I guess we need to send you cover."

"No, you don't. I am sure Gavin will be here. Soon," she added. "I just can't wait for things to happen, Tanner."

"Miss St. Johns, I could have a car there in five minutes and have you hauled away for interference."

"Try it!" she snapped back. "I can have you investigated for inattention to detail. Don't think just because I'm a woman I can't do it. I have claws, Tanner, and right now I'm going to use them to skewer my stalker. Either help or stay out of the way."

"Hell," he spat. "Why are you damn models always so much trouble, anyway?"

"I was trouble before I became a model, Tanner. Accept it."

He grumbled incoherently a minute longer. "Fine. What is this great plan you have?"

She spent a few minutes outlining it for him. "Now keep in mind, that doesn't account for unforeseen incidents, but I know I can get him on camera that way."

Tanner was silent while she listened for any noise from the door. Nothing out there yet. She wasn't looking forward to it, either. "Well, I have to give it to you, if it works, it will be a first," he finally agreed.

"No, it won't. It will just be a first time for me," she clarified. "Look, I'm going to change. I made sure my entrance was news worthy."

His voice was sour. "See you on the news, Miss St. Johns, and hopefully, not as a missing person."

"Not going to happen. Have faith in me. I'm not a stupid woman." She stood and hung up the phone.

Well, stage one was done. Tanner knew, the news knew, and by the end of the afternoon, her stalker would know. If not sooner. She was counting on it.

She walked through the length of her suite, with a separate room for a dining table and even a sitting room. *Now this was more like it*, she thought with a sigh. Pure luxury. The Bellagio had large suites too, but the agency wasn't going to pay for it, and she didn't want to darken their doorstep again. Common courtesy was a good way to look at it.

The bathroom, well that was a whole adventure in itself with marbled, polished granite and a large stretch out and swim sized tub. She could hardly wait for that! And there was the spa downstairs. She wasn't stupid, she would be careful, but she wasn't going to hide forever, either. When this was done, she was going to go back to New York and get back into the swing of things, provided Crissie hadn't taken all of her shoot time. Provided she still had shoots to go to.

She heard the slot lock on the door and turned to face him. Her palms became damp and she quickly wiped them off on her hips, forcing a calm appearance.

She didn't blink an eye as he coolly tipped the bellhop and shut the door on the rest of the world. Lord, he looked good. Good and pissed. His mouth was a sharp line. His gaze was as cold and hard as diamonds. And he had yet to say one word. His jaw worked back and forth as she waited. She instinctively knew better than to try to talk first. She had challenged him, his ability, his knowledge. She had hurt him.

She bit her lip, sorry for not seeing it sooner. His gaze narrowed on her and she stopped chewing on her lip. His eyes glittered as he pushed away from the door, eating up the space between them.

He stood before her, towering over her even in heels. She saw his throat move, a slow swallow that gave a great indication of the amount of restraint he was using, because of her.

"Childish, immature, unthinking. You put yourself in danger! After everything, you still did this!" A red hue stained his cheeks, his voice low, leashed anger vibrated just underneath the bite of his tone.

She let him have his say, watching the heat of his skin as he raged in front of her. What else could she do? Now she knew what she had done was unforgivable.

"I should have just left you! You think you can take down a stalker on your own, try it! You think you know what you are doing, but you don't have a clue!" When he moved, it was to rake a hand over his hair. He blinked and his eyes were still lashing an earthy fire. "I can't believe after yesterday, all of it, you would try this! Didn't any of it sink in to that head of yours? Didn't one thing make you realize that maybe you are in danger?" He took a breath and started again. "Jeremy was a screen, damn it! Don't you understand what that means? Someone else was in your room; someone else broke into your apartment!"

She kept her breathing even, kept herself from flinching at his anger. Now she knew what he looked like. She also knew she'd never do anything like this to him again.

He was breathing hard and fast when she finally found the courage to meet his gaze. The top button of his shirt had been extremely fascinating for several minutes as he let her have it.

"Not even going to apologize. Not one word," he said heavily.

"I didn't know it was my turn," she offered, hoping she sounded meek enough. She sure felt it.

He glared at her again but he nodded. "Make it good."

"I knew you didn't approve."

"And you did this anyway," he interrupted her, swinging an arm to encompass the room.

"Because I really do have a plan." He barely acknowledged her statement. "When we were younger, you once said I was the bravest girl you knew. That hasn't changed. I don't expect other people to fight my battles."

He relented a little. "No, you never have," he admitted. "But, Rose. This?" he asked again. "You've shown the world everything. Without a reason."

"What about just a plain vacation? Wasn't that your intention? I refuse to keep screwing up your life," she told him with a bite of her own.

"Hell, Rose, you're not," he said. He raked a hand down his face. "But when I

woke, Jesus! You scared ten years off of me.”

“But I left the note,” she argued.

“And it took me fifteen minutes to find it! The AC had blown it off the table,” he retorted. “I wasn’t any happier when I did find it!”

He turned and stalked across the room, spending energy that she could see emanating from him. This was a side of Gavin she had never witnessed, never envisioned. He was contained anger, a lethal picture of maleness.

He was silent for several minutes before he faced her again. “Yeah, well now you’ve got a big problem.”

“Bigger than the reason I’m in Las Vegas?” She couldn’t see it.

“Those damn reporters downstairs heard me and got the room number and played connect the dots. They know I am here with you.”

She shrugged. “That doesn’t bother me.”

Brown fire flashed again. “God, Rose! When did you get so dense? Or self-centered? I’ve never seen you so unconcerned about your own life.”

She was beginning to feel angry herself, and confused. “Look, Gavin, you can yell at me all you want, I know what I’m doing.”

He laughed, that cold rude sound that she had heard yesterday. She still didn’t like it. “No, Rose, you don’t. You see, not only do they know you are here, but I am with you. Remember what I told you? Did any of it sink in?”

“Of course it did!” she shot back. “And I can tell you until I’m dead that I don’t care. I know the man you really are. If you have a secret identity, a job that most wouldn’t understand, I know the man under it all.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re so open-minded about it,” he sneered, a firm tilt to his chin.

She planted her fists on her hips. “What is this about, Gavin?”

His answer was so quiet she had to stretch to hear him. “I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to be the man that ruins whatever you have left to go back to.”

She rolled her eyes. “Are we back to that? Look, Gavin, it isn’t going to happen.

We, you and I, are going to nab this stalker guy and see him roast, then we can get back to whatever boring lives we had. All right?"

She watched him as he fought with some decision. Something was really bothering him, a deep down pain that he was trying to keep hidden. She walked up to him and put a hand on his arm. He was wearing a pull over and jeans and he looked good, especially to her and her heart rate.

"Gavin, what is it?" she asked gently. "Why do you feel you are going to ruin me just by being here? And don't give me the story about what you do and your reputation. I'm not buying that book."

He rubbed the palms of his hands into his eyes as he cursed under his breath. "It's the reputation you should be scared of," he said. "I didn't earn it by being a boy scout."

"Gavin, I'm sorry I walked out this morning. I knew you would stop me. In order for this to work, I need him to know I am not scared, that I can walk outside with my head held high. He will freak and hate it. He'll get careless. I have every intention of getting this guy on security tape."

"You're going to do something in the casino?" He looked shocked.

"Didn't think I had a clue," she scoffed with a small smile. "That's only the first stage, but I had hoped you would be by my side."

He snorted. "Good old Gavin, to the rescue."

She shook her head, reaching for his hands and holding them. "No, not to the rescue, as my friend. My partner."

He stared at her for a long minute. "You know, people are going to see us together, and the tabloids are going to love it. You have a clean name. I don't want to--"

"If you say ruin me, I'll smack you," she threatened, not in the least bit humored any longer.

He let out a sigh. "All right. I'll find another word. How's tarnish?"

"Gavin," she groaned. She shook her head anyway. "No. You are the last person I would ever be disgraced by."



"I really wish you hadn't done this. All we needed was a little time."

"And I have run and hid enough already. If I have to live like this, hide to stay protected, then I might as well go back to New York where I'm comfortable and hide there."

"Don't you dare!" he said, his eyes widening at the suggestion. "It's bad enough I can't keep you under control out here." He gave her an assessing look. "You should be spanked for this. It was completely childish, Rose." He shook his head, lids drifting to cover his earthy eyes.

"So, am I forgiven?" she asked, folding up against his body. She smiled when his arms roped around her and held her tight.

He was silent for several minutes as she listened to his heartbeat. His anger was gone, but he was still upset with her. She could feel the flashes of tension that roamed over him. Eventually he dropped his head to hers and rested his cheek against her hair.

"You didn't answer me, am I forgiven?" she repeated.

"I think so, but I am going to have to keep you close. I can see that now, and you can't run away again," he told her sternly.

"I already decided this was it. I'm not packing again until I'm ready to go home."

"Good, then that will make this easier."

She looked at him at the odd tone of voice he used. His gaze was dark and bottomless. "I have a plan also, and it requires absolute compliance."

"To catch the stalker?"

He shook his head. "To take care of you." The depth of his voice reached a level in her she'd never felt. Her blood began to hum, need blossomed.

"What do you mean? Take care of me?"

"It's simple Rose. You need me to help you, and I will." He paused, his gaze flowing over her face like a caress. "Because in order for both of us to leave Las Vegas unharmed, there is only one thing we can do."

"What?" She licked her lips, suddenly feeling very dry. His tension was back and the heat of his gaze flared as he captured her eyes.

He lowered his lips and brushed his mouth against hers. "Absolute compliance," he repeated. "Do you agree?"

"Yes," she whispered. She swayed from the heat of his body, almost like a thermostat as he started to blaze under her touch.

"Good. I will protect you."

"How?" she barely managed.

He told her without a single sound of remorse, "We will marry." Then his mouth did what he had been teasing her about, and possessed her.

## XII

"You can't be serious?" she exclaimed, her eyes bursting open with shock. He still held her tight.

"Very," he came back, giving her a perfectly even stare. "You see, while you may not care how much being with me will affect you or hurt you, I do. And if I'm the only one that does know, then I have got to make sure you are unhurt in all of this."

"But marriage?" she squeaked. "I don't understand-"

"Think about it, Rose. I have the less than polished reputation. I have a track record and you don't. In certain circles," he paused, blinking slowly, "Let's just say, who I am has nothing to do with that contract I told you about."

She searched his gaze, seeing the deep seated pain again. "Oh my God!" she whispered. "You really are into something, aren't you? What? Drugs, embezzling? What is it Gavin?"

"It isn't anything illegal, Rose, but if I was ever found out, I would go to jail because my backers wouldn't claim me."

"This has nothing to do with the state, or with your mole identity, does it?" she asked, feeling a chill develop on her skin.

"No," he said, sighing heavily. "It has nothing to do with them. They don't even know about it."

"So what is it, and don't lie to me Gavin!" She looked deep into him, wanting to see his heart, his soul. "You never would have lied to me before," she told him, her heart in her throat.

He brought her close again, resting his chin against her. "I have never lied. I just didn't tell you everything. The less you knew the better it was." He reached for her

hands, his gaze traveling over her. "I am going to quit, if they let me. I was considering it before I came out here. The last job I had was a little too close."

"No! Were you hurt?" She looked up and down his body, trying to think if there had been a sign of any injury anywhere on him.

He smiled down at her. "No, I wasn't hurt." His thumb stroked her cheek at the same time his face lost all expression. "The sad thing is the people who pay the D.A.'s office my salary, also pay for my knowledge, under the table, separately, of course. Except to the D.A.'s office, I'm just a lapdog who gets paid to do retrievals out in the field. They know nothing of who got me into the D.A.'s graces and never will. The D.A. is my smokescreen for my real work." His mouth turned grim, his gaze hollow. "I'm an expert with technological espionage."

He stepped back as her mind wrapped around that. *Espionage?* "So, people above your employer, above the state. That only leaves--"

He put a finger over her mouth. "Don't. The less you know, the better and safer you will be. I'm afraid now that it's already too late. I have to keep you safe."

She backed away and he let her, walking to the window, looking out to the length of Las Vegas Boulevard beneath her. "How can marrying you be safer for me then?" she wondered out loud.

She saw in the window's reflection as he swiped a hand through his hair. "Because if you leave here, and the fact that I was seen with you is noticed..." A pained expression hit his features unlike any she'd seen. "God, Rose. I never wanted to get you messed up in this!"

Espionage. A hired mole. A Government mole. Gavin. She shook her head in numbing disbelief. "I could be in real danger is what you have been trying to say," she said in a low, calm voice.

"Yes," he said with a definite bitterness. "This whole situation could blow up and the stalker will look like a penny candy robbery in comparison."

"And to save me, both of us, there needs to be a legitimate reason behind our meeting up." Her arms folded around her middle, feeling chilled. "Why haven't you

tried to quit before now?" She watched his expressions in the window.

His hesitation was short. "I made good money, and was able to provide for my dad. I had discussed it with them when I was engaged to Melissa, and we worked out a compromise."

She met his gaze in the reflection. "Did she know?"

His shoulders lifted and fell, with a heavy sigh. "No. She didn't know anything."

"What compromise?" She licked her lips. She needed to know.

"I would not go into any situations that looked imminently dangerous. I didn't carry a weapon and I still don't." He walked up to stand behind her, but he didn't touch her. "Look, all we need is a sufficient story to keep anyone from thinking you are anyone other than who you are. We don't even have to stay married." She noticed his gaze turned deep again. Pained, bleak, lonely.

"And the stalker?"

He laughed, that chilled sound. "Two days. Max."

Her eyes widened. "You think so?"

"You've already laid the ground work. He knows where you are, or will in a matter of hours, and we are going to make sure everyone and their uncle gets a look at you." He turned away picking up his laptop, taking over the table and couch. "I got the information from Rodriguez and Tanner this morning. While I was yelling at you in the shower, I ran the databases," he told her.

She gaped at him. He was cool, collected, and assured. This was a man who knew what he was doing. She moved to stand next to him, and he yanked her down with a firm hand. She squeaked but didn't protest.

"I need you to look through these and tell me who you do know." He turned the screen to her and she started looking through the names.

"Most of these are people in the agency." She frowned when Crissie's name kept appearing. "What a witch," she whispered, getting angrier. "Who does she think she is, the town crier? Look at this," she said pointing out an email. "She put it in good detail, didn't she?"

"I thought the same thing."

She snapped around at his tone. "What?"

He pulled the screen back before he answered. "Look at this one." He turned it again.

And she swallowed. "Who is this lamb241? That's not inner-office." She faced Gavin. "She's setting me up!"

"I think so." He leaned back. "The way I see it, she heard of your misfortunes with Jeremy and whoever it was that broke into your house and your room is connected to her."

"Then I need to get back! She can't do this!" She leaped to her feet and he yanked her down again.

"Not so fast. Think about it. She, maybe, has someone keeping you under their thumb. If we get her watchdog, we get her. Right now, all she is right now is a loud mouth with a spiteful streak."

She made a moue with her lips. "Oh, I see what you mean." She rubbed a hand across her forehead. "How long has this circus been in town in anyway?"

She felt his chuckle. "Three days."

"Is that it? I'm taking a real vacation when this crap is over."

"How about the islands?" he murmured, closing the computer.

"Which ones?" she asked, leaning back.

"I've always wanted to go scuba diving in the St.'s," he said with a grin.

"Really?" she asked, with a small smile of her own. "I would love to go shopping there. I have heard the diving is phenomenal."

She relaxed a little, her lids drifting shut imagining a couple of weeks in a tropical paradise.

"So, are you ready?" he asked a few minutes later, interrupting her mused vacation.

"Sure. Do you want to change?" she asked him, even though he looked absolutely wonderful in jeans.

"Do you? How do you feel about wearing white?" He brushed a finger across her brow when she frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I just always thought my parents would see this. It's one of those things my dad has looked forward to since I was a baby." She looked up at him. "What happened to your mom, Gavin? You haven't mentioned her."

"My parents divorced, Rose."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She rested a hand against him. "I shouldn't be so nosy."

"That's all right. I stay in contact with her, but she lives in Florida now," he said. "So, what do you think?"

She looked at him, and then at herself. She thought he was just right and if she wanted to be noticed, what she was wearing would do the trick. "Let's go get married, Gavin," she said with an easy grin. "Let's see if we can turn your bad boy image around." At that minute, she made it her mission to do just that.

She stood and waited for him, but he pulled her down on his lap instead. "You know what? The courthouse is open twenty-four/seven. How about, in say, two hours?"

She shivered when his mouth found skin. "I can see merit in that," she breathed, and her head fell back to his touch.

\* \* \*

Five hours later, she was Mrs. Gavin Throckton, and that did make the news. He pointed out the late edition. "See? Told you this would happen."

She shrugged. He was acting uptight about the news release, but she was not going to let it bother her. The evening was cooling and it was a beautiful night on the strip. "But that's what we needed to draw this guy out."

"It doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

She was wearing a long off white sheath dress with heels, her hair pulled back and she looked the part of newly married woman. Even down to the three carat ring

Gavin had bought on their way to the courthouse. His hand was adorned by a single band.

"Don't worry. We make a good team," she assured him. "We always have."

He only grunted in answer. They were sitting in a restaurant at the hotel waiting for their food when a young gentleman approached the table. She saw Gavin tense as he began to speak.

"Miss St. Johns? Wow! I'm sorry to interrupt," he began, gushing with enthusiasm.

"That's all right," she said with a flashing smile. He was in his twenties, probably not much younger than herself. He felt harmless enough. She wasn't anticipating someone being this obvious. "Can I help you?"

He blushed. "I was hoping I could get an autograph," he said, a little embarrassed now.

"Sure." She reached for a pen and gave him one. He whispered an awed thank you and left them quickly. He didn't even look at Gavin.

"Does that happen often?" Gavin asked from across the table. His gaze was hooded in the low lights and flickering candles that rested in the middle of the table.

"Fairly often. I hope you can take it for however long this lasts."

"I'll try to refrain from throwing you over my shoulder to escape the drooling hordes of men," he told her with a tight smile.

She laughed at him. "Oh, Gavin. It isn't that bad. I'm really low key about it." Her gaze widened a little. "You're jealous!" She couldn't believe it.

"I am not," he retorted quickly. He sat up and back. "I've just never been exposed to this," he admitted. "It will take some getting used to."

She rested a hand over his. "Relax. It won't be all bad. I'm actually a good date."

"I'm sure you are," he replied easily. "Look, stay put. I have to use the restroom." He dropped a quick kiss on her cheek and walked away.

"Well, what's the matter with him?" she muttered. She watched until he was out of sight. He had been quiet since leaving the room to get their limo to take them to their



destinations--the courthouse, then a simple chapel out of the hundreds in town. He was solemn during the whole trip. *Was he regretting it now?* It had been his idea, but maybe something else was making him worry.

How much else could there be? As far as she knew she was still being followed. Crissie was snapping up her photo shoots like they were the last ones on the planet and now, she was married to her own secret agent.

Was there something she had missed? Was he going to have repercussions for marrying her? Was he worried she would? Was he regretting ever becoming involved in her mess? Not that she could blame him.

She took a sip of her drink, watching as people talked and ate in the secretive shadows of the restaurant.

How was she supposed to know she really had not one, but two stalkers? Jeremy wasn't really threatening, just confused. She wiped her hands on her napkin. If Jeremy didn't do the graffiti in her room or the apartment break in, then someone had been following her. The thought made her shiver.

She glanced up as a trio of men walked by. She didn't recognize any of them, not that she was actually expecting to know anyone. Her gaze was caught by a flutter of paper as they left. She leaned over and picked it up, turning to catch them but they were gone, rounding the décor to the restaurant.

"What's that?" Gavin asked, retaking his seat.

"Those men dropped it," she said, pointing over her shoulder. It was a folded newspaper clipping. "I hope it isn't important."

Gavin reached for it and opened it. She felt a chill take her over as his expression hardened. He rose again. "Stay here." The clipping was clenched in his fist as he stalked out after the trio.

Her heart began beating wildly. What was going on? What was the clipping? She tried to keep him in sight as he hurried out of the restaurant, but she lost him behind the lush plants and shadows. He was gone for only a few minutes when he came back, his expression no less grim.

"Gavin, what's the matter?" she asked, leaning in.

He handed her the clipping without a word. She unfolded it with trembling fingers. In bold print, it read, 'congratulations' over the photo of them leaving the chapel. "But that just means someone saw us," she said.

"No. That means your stalker knows what you're doing to the last detail."

"But how? It's just you and me." Her tongue darted out. "Isn't it?"

"I wish I knew," he said heavily. His finger tapped on the table as he became withdrawn, thinking. "Whoever this is, can't be more than a step behind us. He's here," Gavin stated simply. "I wonder how he could have been that quick, though?" he mused.

"The reporters," Rose said. She relaxed a little. "But think of it this way, the hunter is becoming the hunted and he just doesn't know it yet."

His mouth pulled up a little, an attempt at a smile. "You are one devious woman," he breathed, reaching for her hands on the tabletop.

She felt the color on her cheeks at his assessing stare. "Do you want to know what else I have up my sleeve for tonight?"

This time he actually chuckled, a light sound that relaxed the tension in the air, and in his body where he sat across from her. "Lay it on me."

She leaned over a little feeling the imp inside she was daring to challenge. "We're going to the casino," she said in a low whisper. "You and I are going to make a stir at the tables. A crowd will have some benefits and only one con that I can think of. Too many faces, but I'm willing to bet with my man standing at my back, both of us can get an idea of who this is." She cleared her throat once. "I asked Tanner to contact the hotel directly and advise them I have a problem and we may need to see those tapes. He's working on the court order to release the tapes if we need them."

His smile was genuine. "You did think some of this out, didn't you?"

"Not just some of it, all of it, Gavin. I also sent word through him to Beverly to have Crissie watched. No connections to me to alert anyone else she may be behind this, only that she might be next. From what I understand, Beverly flipped out. One model

she could handle, two is a catastrophe for the agency. That means money and she doesn't mess around if it means money."

He leaned back. His smile was growing. "Is there more?"

Now came the hard truth. She steeled herself for what she was going to have to admit to. "I am almost positive I don't know this person. So that means everyone is suspect. That is the largest problem that I came up with." He nodded in agreement. "The other side of this is I don't believe I'm being physically threatened, just freaked out enough to give Crissie free reign to take over my slots. The apartment was wrecked, but it didn't sound like anything was stolen."

"A scare tactic," he murmured.

She shrugged a shoulder, saying, "That would be my guess, like the window. With Jeremy out of the picture, we will have to see how subtle he can be." He was silent for a few minutes, his thumb caressing the hand in his hold. Shivers slid down her spine from the tender strokes.

"All right," he finally relented. "We'll try it your way. But I am warning you, you have got to listen to me. No more stunts."

She shook her head, brown curls bouncing with her movements. "No more stunts," she promised. "I think I've stirred the pot enough to get whoever this is out of the woodwork." She glanced at the clipping. "That's proof. I just wish I had gotten a better look at them as they went by."

"How did they pass the table?"

"Two together, one behind. All of them were dark haired and fairly tall."

He pulled back his shoulders. "Fitting in."

They had to sit back and stop talking when their food arrived. Every few minutes he reached across the table and would touch her hand in reassurance and it made her heart flutter. He was still quiet, carefully casting glances around them. He was stunningly handsome in a dark suit and tie. She did happen to notice that a few ladies seemed to keep looking his way. And he thought only men were obvious!

When they were done, he slid around the table to be closer and ordered dessert.

She melted with each dark eyed look, with every single brush of skin. His thumb brushed against her bottom lip and her stomach tightened. Her breath hitched when he ran a caressing finger down one arm.

He hand fed her the delicate custard treat resting between them. On impulse, she ran a finger through the whipped cream and offered it to him. She moaned softly when he swept his tongue around her skin and licked her clean. The heat in her stomach bloomed into a full blown need.

“I don’t think we’re going to make the tables,” he breathed against her ear when he had finally released her finger. His voice was low and husky, sending a torrent of sparks down her back.

“Well, this is our wedding night,” she pointed out, her own voice soft and slightly tremulous on a sigh as his warm breath flowed over sensitive skin.

It took less than a minute to sign off on the receipt and, holding her close with his arm protectively around her waist, he led her from the restaurant to go back to the room.

## XIII

Gavin continued to keep his eyes open, searching deeply into recessed corners and shadows while he guided Rose to the elevators to go to their room. The clipping was tucked into his pocket and every sense he could use was on alert.

His blood was humming, racing with the erratic speed of his heart with Rose in his hold, pressed into his side. It was hard to keep his thoughts separated.

The elevator doors slid soundlessly closed and he yanked her into his body, unable to resist the temptation of her lips another second. She whimpered in immediate capitulation, opening for him like the gates of heaven. She was sweetness and raging desire held together by the sexy white dress she had worn. His deepest desire was to tear it from her luscious body. If he could hold her, keep her safe, then he could almost convince himself marrying her had not been a totally selfish thing to do.

He had lived one fantasy after another with her in his arms. Now she was his wife. He was living strictly in the moment.

His hands formed over her rear, pulling her harder against him. She moaned in answer, and he thought he would die right there in blissful pleasure. Her fingers dug into his hair, holding him tight, as his tongue probed, dipped, and tasted. Every second he held her his need grew.

The sound of the doors opening caught his attention, only he didn't let her go. He slid his body around, sliding an arm under her, lifting her easily into his chest. She didn't even open her eyes, trusting him. His heart was beating hard enough for both of them; her trust in his actions humbled him into slowing the kiss to gentle caresses of heat as he carried her to their door.

They encountered no one in the hall as he slid the card into the door and

impatiently pushed it in. He made sure it was locked and bolted, then carried her through the suite to the bedroom and let her slide to her feet.

She was beautiful. There was no other way to describe the woman who stood before him, her curly hair starting to fall in disarray, her lips, pink and pouting at him from his kisses. He drifted tender touches down her cheek, her head falling back in moaning invitation. His pulse rocketed again.

“God, Rose,” he breathed into her ear. His brain had almost completely shut down. Her soft perfume was clouding everything else. Her whispered moans were drawing him deeper into this, his most perfect fantasy. Making love to Rose, his wife.

She trembled when his fingers found the zipper at her neck, dropping it with a slow rasped sound to the dip of her back, the dress gaping open to his inquisitive fingers. She was satin smooth and liquid heat. His lips traveled over delicious hollows and curves of her sinfully creamy skin as the dress slid from her shoulders to fall in a white puddle at her feet.

He looked at her, cherishing every inch of her body with his gaze, caressing her with heated looks. Her nipples were hard, pushing toward him in blatant aroused invitation.

Never being one to turn down a lady, he complied. Her arms wrapped around his head, holding him to her as she mewled out little hisses of pleasure, his teeth and tongue traveling over one pert breast. His hands caressed her warming flesh, feeling her quiver under his loving touch. His breath caught when she arched into him, tight as a bow, becoming lost in his ministrations.

“I love when you do that,” he told her, still dropping kisses on her heated skin.

“Do what?” she gasped, dazed.

“Lose yourself, beautifully.” He scooped an arm under her legs and tenderly laid her down on the bed. He tore off his jacket, and his tie and shirt followed in quick order.

He couldn't believe the sight that met him when he found her again. Hot flushed skin, hungry needy eyes filled with passion. He would never get enough of pleasing

this woman.

“Come here,” he commanded. He ran his hands from her ankles to her thighs, and she quivered under his touch. She had worn a white lace thong under her dress and right now the only thing he wanted to do was bite it, shred it, remove it. He wanted the treasure hidden within.

He looped her legs over his shoulders and laved his tongue across her damp juncture, the lacy material sending an erotic jolt through him. She shrieked and jumped off the bed. His laugh was pure dominant male. “Easy, sweetheart. Someone pointed out this was my wedding night.” He looked up and caught her glowing green gaze, feeling the slam of her passion clear down to his toes. “And baby, I’m going to take all night.”

“Oh, God,” she whimpered.

“He can’t help you now,” was his only warning when he dipped down again. He inhaled, finding her exquisite scent. His body throbbed with his own desires. She shook like a hot wind in his hold as he nuzzled and probed, tasted and adored. Eventually the thong disappeared and he enjoyed the beauty of the gift of her sensuality. Cad or no, he lived for that moment, with her at his mercy, with her will bending to his all in the name of pleasure.

Her cries of ecstasy were fading when he stood and dropped the rest of his clothing. He was full and aching, but he wasn’t done yet. If he had only this escape, this one chance of loving the woman in his bed, in his arms, in his heart, then the night just was not going to be long enough.

\* \* \*

Gavin stared at the ceiling; Rose was sound asleep on his shoulder. She sighed, a rich deep release that caressed his still heated skin. He had loved her for hours. He would never forget tonight. The wild erotic passion, the tender sharing of desires. Rose was his every dream.

His eyes drifted painfully closed. She was also the one dream he would have to wake from. Once she was safe, once her stalker had been caught, he would release her from their marriage. It was the only thing to do. He had no right to condemn her to the life that he led, the man that he was.

Maybe that was why he hadn't been able to marry Melissa.

Guilt.

No, he wished he could admit to being that honest, least of all to himself. Melissa was a wonderful woman, but not even for her had he been willing to leave everything behind. There was too much of a draw for him, for the Cad.

Yet, if there was a way, he would leave it all completely, without regret, for Rose. He still wanted out, but he wasn't sure how he could accomplish it and remain unscathed in the process. He knew too much. Knew too many people and what they had used him for. But for the first time, the idea of really dropping the contract, just disappearing from the work he had done for almost six years, became a burning need.

Being completely free was the only way he could even think to offer a life to Rose. Despondent over that thought, a sad sigh slipped through his lips. Could he be truly free? Could he just walk away when this contract ended? The ones who held his contract had been willing to make concessions for him when he was going to marry Melissa, to work around her and her ignorance. What would they do now? Rose knew everything.

Was she in danger from him now?

He shook his head sharply. No, he would die to keep her from being dragged into the mess that was his life. He had married her to keep her safe.

He snorted softly. *Get real, Gavin. You married her for yourself.* He had wanted and he had found a way to take. Selfish bastard.

For her safety, it had been a necessity. It was very possible once they were connected, she would be scrutinized for association. Melissa had been, in detail, and she had never known anything about what Gavin did. He could always give them the old high school sweetheart story--chance meeting, renewed affections. It was the truth, and



she wouldn't be in jeopardy for it, either. Or so he hoped.

Would Rose even want to stay with him if he were a free man? His hand drifted down those tempting locks of hers, unruly curls that just scrambled his mind. He had all but forced her into the marriage. She had a right to find someone she could love, not be tied to him--a man with an unknown future, a horrid, telling past, and a contract with the state. Although it wasn't overly dangerous, it could place him in some very serious trouble, physically and legally.

No, he knew he couldn't do that to her. Even as the pain built and spread through his chest, his lungs tightening under the onslaught of his decision, he knew he couldn't condemn her to that. He loved her too much to ruin her life.

If their time together in Las Vegas was the whole epic of their relationship, he would have to accept that. He would cherish this time, and the woman who shared it with him. Forever.

\* \* \*

"And black eighteen wins again!" cried the roulette dealer.

"I won!" Rose shrieked. "Holy cow! I won again."

"You have a knack for it, sweetheart," Gavin told her, blowing into her ear. She blushed from her neck up.

"Stop that," she said, tossing Gavin a look over her shoulder. "I can't think when you do that." She laughed at his grin. "You are horrible."

"Never said I wasn't," he shot back, a sexy brown brow lifting to tease her. "Try odds and see what happens."

Rose played her chips and waited. Soon the marble was doing its thing, and bounced, and jumped, and clinked. And landed.

"The lady is lucky, folks," the dealer called, laughing as the wheel slowed, her number flashing on the board yet again. She jumped and clapped with exuberance.

"Damn, this is fun," she said, taking her winnings from the dealer, her own grin

growing.

Gavin nuzzled her neck. "Don't be obvious, but look over two tables to your right. There are two dark haired men, facing us. Do they look familiar?"

She palmed her chips and swept the room, barely stopping as she perused the men in question. She swept back as if contemplating their next destination. "I can't say for sure. The one on the right looks familiar. He could have been one of the trio."

"He was probably camouflage." Gavin's hands stayed firm, but relaxed as he kept his arms looped around her waist. "Neither seems interested in this table, or in you. At least we can work by elimination." He nudged her. "Make another bet. You still feel lucky to me."

She laughed at his sexy tone, and placed her chips. She felt as he stretched, casually looking around them, behind them, until he settled against her again. "No one is behind us. We'll play a few more then move on."

She could feel his body shifting casually as he continuously gazed around the floor. It was early in the day and people were thin and scattered, but he had stayed with her, literally a second skin. He wasn't taking any chances with whoever was out there looking for her. She loved his tenacity.

"Nuts," she moaned. "I lost."

"It happens," Gavin said in an unconcerned tone. "But you made a good chunk on those last three."

A shiver traveled down her spine unexpectedly. She casually made another bet, keeping her gaze lowered. She tapped a finger against the hands at her waist, bringing his head down to her level. "Gavin, someone is watching us. I can feel it." He kissed her cheek.

"Smile, sweetheart. You're tense. Let me look," he said in that assured tone. He stood straight again, dropping his arms, turning. She glanced through her lashes, trying to pinpoint the direction the feeling was coming from.

She automatically molded against his body when he wrapped his arms around her again. "There's a woman at the slots staring at you like she's seen Elvis." There was

a note of humor in his words.

“Is she the only one?”

He nipped at her earlobe, his breath hot against her skin. “Look to her left. There’s another guy. He’s playing, but I think I’ve seen him looking this way. You seem to have that affect on people,” he joked.

She did as he asked, focusing on the woman first. The woman’s jaw fell open with shock when Rose’s gaze met hers. Then she guiltily ducked her head for staring, returning to the slot machine in front of her. Rose’s gaze slid past her, finding the dark haired man two machines away from the woman.

The man seemed relaxed, playing casually, not quite bored. He shifted on his feet, almost absently turning in their direction. The man blinked once, and quickly jutted out his shoulder, breaking her eye view.

“Gavin, did you see that?”

“I sure did.” He palmed her chips. “Let’s go try the slots.”

He kept his arm at her waist, walking slowly, first down one line of machines then another, all the while unobtrusively keeping an eye on their target.

They walked down the far side of the slots where the man was standing, but the way he was positioned, with his hand propped on the top of the machine, was hiding his face from them.

“Miss St. Johns?”

Gavin and Rose spun as one at the older feminine voice. She had walked from the machine where Rose had found her staring and stood behind them. “I’m sorry to bother you. I just couldn’t believe it when I spotted you,” she said with a wondering, if guilty smile.

Rose slapped on a quick smile herself. “Not a problem,” Rose assured the older woman. Gavin’s hand still rested on her hip.

“I saw your photos in the January issue of *Glamorous Fashion*. You were stunning.” She was grinning broadly now, gushing that she had met a celebrity model.

“Thank you,” Rose replied evenly. She leaned into Gavin, hoping the woman got

the hint. When she finally looked up, and blushed, Rose knew she had.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I won't keep you. Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you, again," Rose answered. She waited until the woman was gone and looked further down the machines. She slumped in disappointment. "He's gone," she cried forlornly. "I never got a good look at him."

"I did. I don't know him." He sighed. "But I doubt that I would."

"Now what?" She was craning her neck, trying to look around them. She couldn't even see over the machines completely.

"He's gone, Rose. He slipped out the front doors."

She sighed in defeat. "I need to see if Tanner has had any luck with that court order yet. Do you think that might have been him?"

"It's possible. He didn't hang around, and he was careful to keep his face hidden." Gavin shrugged. "Then again, he might be hiding from his wife and doesn't want to be seen."

She poked an elbow into his ribs, making him oomph and laugh out loud. "I should go call Tanner, anyway. I need to let him know I'm still going to be a pain in his neck until this is taken care of."

"My phone is upstairs. They don't like you to use them on the floor." Gavin sauntered over to the machine the man had been standing at and shot her a dry look. "You know what? I think we should see if you can get those tapes after all and soon." When she returned his with a questioning look of her own, he pointed to the machine. "No one just walks away from a loaded machine."

Rose gasped when she saw the credits. "There's over fifty bucks sitting in there!"

"I noticed." He hit the cash out button. "I don't think he's coming back for this," he said with an evil grin. "Small compensation for scaring you in your room. Don't you think?"

She slid in front of him, scooping out the heavier dollar tokens. "Let me see if I'm still lucky." She wiggled her bottom against his front. "Gotta rub the lucky rabbit," she purred, then dropped in her tokens to play and pulled the lever.

She was just playing, having a brief moment of relaxed fun since her problem escaped detection, and felt his laughter through her body, but her air slammed to a stop when the first reel stopped, then the second. And the third.

“Oh my God!” she screamed. Lights and alarms starting going off on her machine.

“I don’t believe you,” he murmured through a laugh. “I’m trying to keep you from getting hurt, from being too noticeable, and you win a jackpot. I think you’re the lucky one in this relationship.”

She spun in his arms. “I don’t care! Gavin, I just won five thousand dollars!” She was screaming and jumping up and down. If she wanted to be noticed she was doing it, curious passerby smiling at her antics.

The floor manager came up and she managed to calm down enough to breathe, accepting the cash. “Holy cow,” she said again when he had gone and she was sitting on a stool, Gavin towering over her, laughing. “Now that’s fair compensation for scaring me in my room,” she said with a huge laughing smile.

Gavin leaned against a neighboring machine, grinning at her. Now that was the kind of look he should have, carefree, relaxed. Not burdened with her problems, her safety.

She felt guilty again for causing him so much trouble. “Gavin?” she began softly, staring down at the colorful carpet beneath her feet. She glanced up and was captured by the earthy depths of his gaze. “Thank you. For everything. For putting your life on hold for me. For being there for me. For everything.”

He pulled a stool close, straddling it and pressed his forehead against hers. He slid his fingers through hers. “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world, Rose.” He brushed a sweet kiss across her lips and she felt herself melt.

He lifted a hand into her hair, tilting her easily until he was consuming her, kissing her deeply. The world faded away until it was just them. His touch, his lips, his hands. And her.

“Let’s go back to the room.” His voice was husky, deep, causing her to shiver in

his hold. She nodded, unable to speak.

There wasn't anywhere else she wanted to be.

## XIV

"Tanner, I'm not positive. I didn't get a good look at him, but he was acting suspicious, and he had dark hair. Whoever dropped the clipping last night had dark hair." She gripped the phone in her hand, resisting the urge to throw it.

"Not exactly a positive ID, then." Tanner's voice was gruff, and dreary. Just like always.

Rose looked at Gavin, still sinfully sexy, walking around in jeans and nothing else. Lord, the man had a chest. Gavin was too damn distracting. She forced herself back to her conversation. "I'm aware of that, but would it hurt to question him?"

"No. The casino has agreed to the court order. It will make it easier since you know what area you think you saw him in."

She ground her teeth softly. "Not think, Tanner! I know I saw him. And no one just walks away from a machine with fifty-two bucks sitting in it." God! Were all men dense or what?

"Has anything else happened? Any other disturbances, threats?"

She looked back to Gavin. "No, nothing. But we've only been here since yesterday morning. If he thinks we have figured him out, do you think he'll keep trying?"

"If he's a professional, yes. Somebody's dumb toy, no."

"Well, that's blunt," she muttered. "If he stops, can I go home?" she asked softly, hopefully.

Gavin had stopped in front of her. His gaze was chocolaty warm and bottomless, unreadable. She smiled at him, dispelling the sense of unease settling in her stomach. "Miss St. Johns," Tanner said, breaking in on her thoughts again. "If he stops, it just

means he'll be back, possibly to harass, or hurt someone else. He needs to be caught."

"So we'll catch him and you throw away the key. That sounds fair."

"Let me know if you find out anything else," he told her in an expressionless voice. "Tell Throckton to call if anything changes. I'll be in contact once I have the tape released." With that, he hung up.

Rose replaced the phone. "Well that's done. Tanner's going to get the tape."

Gavin nodded. She caught his gaze, watching her. Then he blinked and took a breath. "I'm going to check the agency emails again. See if there's been anymore contact through Crissie."

"All right," she said as he walked back to the front room where his laptop was. She stared around the bedroom of the apartment suite. Was it possible? Had that man been her stalker? Was Crissie behind her problems? And if she was, how were she and the strange man connected?

A better question was what were she and Gavin going to do once she was no longer threatened? She was ready to go home. Sort of. She was enjoying her time with Gavin. Really enjoying him. They had fun together. She relaxed around him, with him. She didn't want this to end.

She picked up the phone automatically when it rang. "Hello?"

There was a cold heartbeat of silence. "We're not done yet," the voice hissed. "I know where you are. I know you aren't alone, but you will be. I will be there."

Her hand crept to her throat nervelessly. "You don't scare me anymore," she managed.

"I don't need you scared," the man told her, a dark, malevolent depth to his words. "I need you dead." She shrieked as the phone fell from her shaking fingers, the grating sound of his voice still ringing in her ears. She didn't feel as in control as she had an hour ago.

Gavin's arms were around her instantly, pulling her up to his embrace. "What happened?"

"It was...was him." Her eyes were wide, unseeing.



“Shh,” Gavin whispered into her ear. “You are safe here.” He tugged her down again, but to sit on his lap. “Take a breath, that’s it,” he soothed. “Can you tell me what he said?”

She nodded, breathing deeply, unabashedly curled into his shoulder. “He knows about you. And he wants me dead.” Gavin nodded carefully against her. “I told him he doesn’t scare me anymore,” she whispered.

“Rose,” he said, pressing his lips into her hair.

“I know, I shouldn’t have,” she told him. “But he doesn’t, didn’t. Now, I don’t know. Am I still in danger?” She looked up into those brown eyes of his and felt herself being held by more than just his arms.

“If he knows where you are, that you aren’t alone, and is still willing to make death threats, then yes, I would say we should still take this seriously.” He tightened his hold. “You were almost able to forget after this morning, weren’t you?”

She nodded, slowly. “I was having fun. I let myself forget. I don’t want to be frightened by this guy, Gavin. I’m not a weak woman. I don’t want to be scared.”

“I know you don’t. I don’t want you to be scared either. I’m not doing a good job if he is scaring you.”

“I answered the phone,” she reminded him. “And you’re doing a great job.” She leaned back and pressed a kiss against his neck. “Very thorough.” He rumbled a groan under her mouth.

“Wicked woman,” he accused, but he was watching her with a heated gaze just the same. He leaned over and replaced the phone on its cradle. It began to ring immediately.

“Allow me,” he said. She didn’t want to touch it. He gave some short answers then hung up again. “Tanner has the tape.” He settled a finger against her jaw. “Do you want to go look?”

“Try and stop me. I want this jerk caught.” She slid from his lap, but his hands caught her waist.

He pulled her between his spread thighs and fell over backward. “He can wait

five minutes," he breathed just before his lips found hers.

\* \* \*

"That's the man we saw, he disappeared when we got close. I told you he left money in his machine," Rose said, staring at the freeze frame of the man.

They were in an enclosed private office, staring at a large screen with the tape frozen in place. Tanner was writing down notes. "Can we get a hard copy?" he asked the security advisor in the office with them.

"It'll take a few minutes," he replied, nodding.

"And he called again, not long after you," Gavin advised Tanner. "It was a death threat. If this is him, then he doesn't care that we know."

Tanner's brow lifted momentarily. "Either you scared him by getting this close or he's on an agenda."

"Scared him?" Rose choked. "I'm the one he wants dead. I just want him in jail."

"Provided this is the man," Tanner pointed out in his droll way. He looked at the security advisor. "Can you find out if he's a guest?"

"I can let you know." The security advisor turned off the tape. "If you need anything else, Miss St. Johns, just let us know." He handed her a card. "This is my direct number. Tanner has explained everything to us."

"I'm sorry to be so much trouble," she replied, looking at the toes of her sneakers.

"You're doing it again," Gavin whispered into her ear. She shot him a questioning look. "This isn't your fault."

She sighed. "I know, but what did I ever do to anyone? That's all I want to know."

She followed Gavin and Tanner out of the offices, barely paying attention to the stark corridor of doors that they passed. Compared to the public front of the casino, the office corridor was flat gray and uninviting. Gavin's hand wrapped over her hip, her

only comfort.

They were in the elevator going up again before he spoke. "Hey, look at it this way. Your plan actually worked."

"If that is the right guy, like Tanner said." She sighed. "What if I'm wrong?" Gavin's arms hugged her close and she went willingly.

"Personally, I don't think so. Tanner has to be cautious. These casinos are big industry here. He doesn't want to do something too fast, making him and his department look worse."

She barked a sound into his chest. "They can look worse?"

His chuckling humor helped her to relax again. "I have an idea," he said, unlocking their door. "Let's go out, see a show or something."

"Is that a good idea?" she asked. "I mean, I'm pretty sure that was him on the tape, but what if I'm wrong? What if he tries something again?" She swallowed down the knot of uneasiness that was traveling upward.

He let the door slide closed behind them, locking it securely. "Weren't you the one who said you wouldn't hide?" he taunted her gently, a sharp brow rose at her. "We'll be fine, in a crowd. And so far, regardless of what Tanner thinks, I think this guy is a clown. I've had shoes that were harder to find than this guy. You got him on tape. He followed you just like you thought he would. I don't think he's professional. He's too casual about how he's doing things."

She flopped down into a chair and just stared at Gavin. "Do you think he's a friend of Crissie's or something?"

"He could be. I didn't get to search the emails before your phone call, but it won't take long to see if there's anything new there." He sat down on the couch and opened his computer, doing as he said. "This won't take a minute."

She jumped when his cell phone rang.

"I got it." He answered it and Rose was unprepared for the flare of anger that swirled from him.

"Jamison, damn it! I said I was not coming back. No, I don't care how sweet it

looks." Gavin let out a low sound. "Yes, something has happened. How did you find out? You're kidding, already?" He raked a hand through his hair in agitation. "Yes, I know she's a model. Yes, I know she's famous." He ground out a deep growl. "Jamison, let it be. She is my wife and I will not have you talking like that... And you're a son of a bitch for saying it," he snarled back. Sparks shot from narrowed eyes.

Rose listened intently, aware now that whoever this Jamison was, he was tied to what Gavin did. His job, his work, his mole identity. The Cad. She pushed that thought away. Her bad boy was going to go straight, somehow. Evidently their marriage had already gone coast to coast and it wasn't being taken well from the sounds of his end of the conversation.

Her eyes snapped up again to try to focus on his half turned expression. "I don't care if you pull the contract!" he nearly shouted. "Damn it, Jamison. I don't want to talk about this now. I was going to discuss it when I got back." There was a few minutes of silence, then he said lowly. "I want out, Jamison. I'm tired of it. Yes, you heard me. We'll talk about it when I get back. No, not before. Goodbye." His hand was clenched in restraint to keep from throwing the phone across the room.

"Gavin?" she asked, quietly.

"Not now, Rose," he snapped. His air left him in a hiss. "Sorry, it's not you. Just not right now. Okay?" His back was still to her, his shoulders tight, flexing in anger and frustration.

"Sure, Gavin. I'll go sit in the tub for a while," she offered, to let him have space. He turned and cleared the space between them in just a few tight strides.

Gavin's hands curved around her arms, pulling her fiercely into his body. "Rose, whatever happens, know that..." There was so much torment in his expression, her chest ached for him. "I just want to..."

"Just kiss me, Gavin," she breathed. His eyes glowed and she sank into his embrace just before his mouth possessed hers.

\* \* \*

How could he tell her? Jamison was an ass, threatening Gavin because he wouldn't jump on the first plane back. He would sacrifice everything to keep Rose safe. If that meant staying in Las Vegas instead of doing what he had been hired to do, then that was just too damn bad.

Their wedding had already made the big news at the precinct and at his head office. He was going to hear about it for weeks.

Rose's hands inched up his arms and he was soothed by her caressing touch. He gentled his kiss, his frustration seeping away with her understanding. How could he ever hope to win her love? How could he expect to have a life to offer her? She deserved so much more than what he could give her.

He wanted out of the contract. He had finally made that decision. He had even felt a brief moment of satisfaction hearing Jamison trip over the announcement. He had never liked Jamison. He had a sleazy mentality that went with his looks. He looked more like a hit man than an undercover cop. That was why he did undercover, he fit in. It had always irked Gavin that he was the go-between between the D.A.'s office and himself. Not even a direct link. He wasn't even sure if Jamison was just one degree from his orders. He could be fourth or eighth. Gavin had no way of knowing.

Rose shifted in his hold, burning him with her tenderness. His hands lifted to crush strands of her hair between his fingers. He loved her hair, had always loved her hair. And those damn, sexy legs.

He lifted slowly from her soft lips. "You better take that bath," he told her, his voice husky and coarse with desire. He brushed her lips once more, feeling their tantalizing heat clear down to his toes. "I need to think."

Rose leaned back a little. Her hand lifted to caress his cheek with a gentle touch. "Gavin, this will all work out. Everything."

He pressed his cheek into her hand. "I hope you're right, Rose." He closed his eyes for a brief moment and just let himself dream. A picture of her forever in his arms. Frustration slammed through him again at the improbability. "Go on, sweetheart." He kissed her cheek once and let her go, avoiding her concerned looks.

He turned back to his computer before she could see the confusion in his expression. He sat down, hearing her go through the suite to the bedroom. His head dropped heavily to his hands, forgetting all about the computer.

Jamison had made a good point. She was famous, known everywhere, all over the world. How much trouble was his decision to marry going to cause them? Her? Was there any way to keep her safe? Could he get out from underneath everything before damage was done? It was too late. Disgust burned at him. Damage control had come and gone and he'd missed the bus.

He didn't care if they did something to him. He had known what he was getting into when he agreed to the first contract. But to have involved Rose... He groaned at his selfishness.

He straightened, staring down the suite. The best he could do was get Rose home safely, with her stalker behind bars. The rest would just have to be forgotten.

He opened his emails again, scanning over the last twenty four hours. He found Crissie's easy enough, and read through them. His fingers held his chin as he read each one.

"Well, well," he breathed, his eyes widening, feeling a bit of luck, finally to form the connection. He saved the email to a file and sent it Tanner. "Crissie, my dear, you are in some hot water."

Now with the motive found, when they get their stalker, Rose was free to go home.

He cursed softly, knowing that there would be no other reason to keep Rose there with him. He turned off the computer, clicking the screen into place with slow fingers.

One more night, was that too much to ask? He'd been married for a total of one day. And now, with Crissie's email on its way to the police, his little fantasy was almost over.

Once more the Cad lifted his insatiable head. And Gavin knew what he was going to do. Because he knew when everything was over, when Rose was safe and it

was time to go home, he was going to have to let her go.

## XV

He walked quietly to the bathroom doorway, leaning a casual shoulder against the side. Rose was submerged to her chin, bubbles piled high, surrounding her, hiding her.

She stole his air; she was so beautiful and relaxed. Her fingers slowly trailed through the water, without a care. She almost made him believe in the picture.

How he ached for this woman! For her courage, her strength, and her belief in him. The realization came slowly that no one had ever granted him that before. She believed in him, even after knowing the sordid truth of his life. Of what he was. Of who he was.

Somehow, none of it mattered to her. It was going to kill him to let her go. Just not tonight.

Last night had been beautiful beyond measure. Tonight would be better. Tonight he was going to make sure she had memories, good memories to hold on to. There was no doubt in his mind that she would go back to her life in New York. Her hope to return had been in her voice earlier that day, talking to Detective Tanner. She was anxious to return to the life she had been forced out of. Gavin would see she had that life to go to, and somehow walk away. It was the best he could offer her. He loved her too much to drag her into his world.

He pulled his shirt free from his jeans and tossed it away. He knelt at the tub behind her, brushing her skin with a tender caress.

"I wondered how long you were going to stand there," she teased, the corners of her mouth turning up in that sexy way she had.

"Only as long as it takes to engrave this picture into my mind." He carefully



pulled the clips from her hair to let the mass fall free into his hands. He leaned forward and found the citrus smell of her shampoo, holding it deep for several heartbeats. "Move forward."

She scooted forward in the tub and he started working water through the length of her curls. She sighed under the tender treatment. "That feels good."

His smile was bittersweet. He needed to tell her about the email, the connection to Crissie. Let her know it was almost over. He couldn't make himself do it. Not yet. And he refused to feel remorse because of it. "Wait until I start the shampoo," he told her instead. She purred when he did. He massaged her scalp, using his fingers to caress and soothe, lather growing and dripping from her strands. "Back you go," he said, tugging her gently to bend backward. He tenderly rinsed her hair, slathering the scented conditioner between his palms.

She was making little sounds in her throat as his fingers slid through her hair. She was making his blood hum and heat with each little sigh of pleasure.

When she bent backward again, he rose on his heels and dropped a kiss on the depths of her throat. She gasped at the contact. Sitting back again, he lifted her in his hands, finding the curve of her ear, her shoulder. She moaned deliciously under his lips, her hands no longer loose in the water, but gripping the edges of the Jacuzzi in reaction.

"You are so beautiful, Rose," he breathed against her neck. "I have always loved your hair." He nipped at an ear and she shivered in the water.

He stood and stripped, sliding into the heated water with her. Her green eyes were bold, sparking with the wonder of those silver flecks in the darkness of the color. Her gaze followed him as he reached for the scented soap.

"What are you doing?" Her lips lifted in a knowing way. He did what came naturally. He leaned over and kissed her.

"Enjoying tonight with my wife," he allowed, his mouth barely touching hers. His hands formed over her shoulders, trailing down her arm, caressing and tantalizing down to her fingers. He brushed slowly across the soft swell of her breasts, thrilling at

the soft hitch of her breathing at the innocent contact.

She moaned when his hands disappeared beneath the water, sliding down smooth skin. Her lips parted with quiet pants of excitement. He bathed a soft breast, rubbing a hard nipple gently in the palm of his soaped hand until she pushed against him. He moved slowly, imprinting the memory of her gaze, her expression, her breathing into his mind. To hold and to live with for the rest of his life. Rose's lids drifted closed when he moved into the valley of her breasts, delicately washing, nearing his goal--her other breast.

She moaned deeply when he repeated the caress. His hands curved around her ribs, carefully sliding down to her hips, his thumbs brushing against her stomach. He smiled when he felt her abdomen flutter under his touch.

Her breathing deepened considerably when his thumbs came together, pressing gently between her thighs. He urged her to open for him. He shifted her legs to either side of his body where he knelt before her. The tub was deep and broad, the water rising to his chest.

He found the soap and continued on his quest, his hands once more disappearing beneath the water. Rose's head fell back with the first touch of his fingers. He groaned feeling her heat on his hand, pouring over him.

He pressed his palm into her and she arched into him. He loved the way she lost herself so completely, so immersed in his touch. She held back nothing, her moans and gasping breaths telling him how close she was to the edge.

He dipped a finger, feeling her heat envelope him and he had to close his eyes, feeling the pleasure of her release everywhere. "Beautiful," he breathed.

Her eyes slid open with an emerald fire, capturing him by the heart and holding tight. "My turn." She reached for the soap and pressed him backward until he was sitting against the wall of the oversized tub, her body straddling his legs.

She replayed the sensual torture, bathing him with exquisite tenderness. She worked her way over his shoulders, his arms, then his chest. She took her time. "I love your chest," she said, leaning forward and licking a wayward drop of water from its

meandering path. He trembled at the moist heat of her tongue traveling over sensitive skin.

She purposely met his gaze, soap in hand as she built a lather. "Now then," she whispered. "Fair is fair."

"Oh, God, Rose," he groaned as her hands fell beneath the water. His head dropped back with the first unbelievable touch of her hands on his hard flesh. His eyes closed in heated bliss, her hands curved around his length, stroking, teasing.

His hands sank underwater on their own, seeking her. Touching her was necessary. Straddled across his lap, she was open for his inquisitive touch. Her body spasmed for him and he groaned long and deep, feeling her reaction over every inch of skin.

She leaned up. Finding his lips, she tugged the bottom one into her hot mouth to suck on. His hands found her waist unerringly as she moved against him, her breasts brushing wantonly against his chest.

Before he could stop her, before he could even think condom, she was sliding over him, enveloping him, engulfing him in heated sensual passion. She moved once, twice, and for the first time in his life, he let himself dismiss the need for protection.

She was hot and slick, unbelievably tight as he slid between her legs, her body undulating against him. He lifted his head, needing to find a breast, needing the taste of her in his mouth, on his skin, embedded in his heart and soul.

She cried softly when he found what he wanted, her hands wrapped around his head in abandoned feeling. It was too much. She was too much.

The first spasms radiated out, covering him, heating him. He thrust deeper, harder, feeling her response to him, escalating like a fire, burning with need and pleasure.

She exploded in his arms, crying out, gripping him in her hands, with her body. He shouted her name once and felt the world fall away while his body floated to heaven holding hers.

“Simply beautiful,” he breathed against her neck, his hands resting casually on her waist.

She met his gaze in the mirror, her hands stilling at her earring. “You look pretty studly yourself,” she said, a teasing light in her gaze as she looked from his head to his shoes and back up again. “Edible,” she told him, using the word he had used just days before describing her.

“Really? You think so?” he said, a shy, pleased grin popping up unexpectedly on his lips. He wasn’t handsome. Yet, hearing her say it, with such an honest, hungry gleam in her eyes, he could almost believe it.

“In that suit, you look absolutely dashing, honey.” She reached for the length of her hair. “Could you check my zipper, please?”

“Up or down?” he asked with a straight face. It worked. She laughed.

“Up, you sex fiend.”

“Damn.” But he was smiling. “You’re fine. Almost ready?”

“Yes, just need to find my shoes,” she said looking around the bedroom. “Aha, sneaky devils,” she said, spotting them peeking out from underneath the bed. She sat on the edge of the bed with the sling back black heels she had to go with her black mid thigh dress. He smiled, remembering the morning they had spent shopping, when she had found that dress.

He stepped back, letting her finish. “Rose, there’s something I need to tell you.”

She glanced at him, half of her attention on her shoe. “What?”

“There was an email sent from Crissie this morning to whoever it is that’s helping her. I sent it to Tanner.” He folded his arms over his chest, leaning as casually as possible against the wall. He noticed her movements had slowed considerably. “It described a show account that she was ready to sign paperwork on for their clothing line. Evidently it was being offered to her because you were unavailable. There was a subtle mention of keeping things as they were for another day.”

“So she is behind this, then?” Rose said. She snapped her shoe into place with a firm hand, her lips thinning.

"I'm afraid so." He didn't move as she stood from her perch.

"So, if we get the stalker and prove the connection, she has motive." She walked to the dresser and picked up a little black purse with a rhinestone design on the lip.

"Yes."

She was slow in turning to face him, her expression thoughtful. "That means only two things. One, that once she has the contract, the stalker just disappears and I'm free to go home." She took a deep breath. "Or two, we still somehow get the stalker, prove the connection and her motive, and they both go to jail. And then I get to go home."

"You always were a smart woman," he told her. "But yes, that is about where things are right now." He heard the note of hope in her voice to go home. His heart bled at her tone.

"So at most, another day, like you guessed." She dropped her gaze to play with a part of her purse.

"Tanner is looking for the man on the tapes. I haven't heard from him if he's here at the hotel or not, but I'm guessing that he's at least half trying to be a cop."

"Well, that's good then, right?" she said in a cheery voice. "This can be put behind us."

"And you can go back to your career without a problem."

Her gaze grew dark for a split second. "Right. Go back. To our lives."

"Yes." He couldn't offer more. Not yet. Not until he was out of the contract for good.

Her words were faint. "And until then?" Her eyes were slow to meet his again.

He pushed off the wall, reaching for her, his hands curving over her bare shoulders. "Tonight, I want to take my wife out and show her the town. Show the world how beautiful she is," he told her in a gentle caress, meaning it.

"Gavin," she asked, "Will I still be your wife after tomorrow?"

Her words hit him like a stinging slap, but he managed to keep it hidden behind the easy smile that resided on his lips. Was being married to him so awful that she was

counting the moments to be free from him?

“Until I know you won’t have any repercussions from my association in this adventure, it’s probably for the best that we stay married.”

“Oh,” she said. “I understand.” Her head bowed once more, adjusting her purse to sit where she wanted it to. When she lifted her head, there was nothing in her expression. His heart beat heavily at the lack of light in her lovely eyes. “I’m ready when you are.”

He stepped back. “Sure. Let’s go, sweetheart.” He offered his arm and she curved her hand around his jacket sleeve. She fit as if she were made for him. His heart bled a little more and he didn’t know how to stop it.

\* \* \*

Rose watched the stage with unseeing eyes. Her heart was breaking, blinding her to what was happening in front of her. When had she fallen in love with Gavin? That was the only explanation to feeling this unbelievable agony over his ambivalent attitude toward staying married with her. It felt like a part of her was dying inside. It could have only been her heart.

Didn’t he want to be married? It had been his idea after all. She hadn’t forced anything on him, at all. He had taken everything upon himself, her safety and her reputation. Did he not care for her at all? Could he grow to care for her? If he didn’t care, why marry her at all?

She loved him, completely, without hope of being saved. She didn’t want to be saved. She wanted him to love her back.

Was it the contract? Had he changed his mind about quitting? She sat up a little straighter. Now that they could see an end in sight to her problem, it was a perfect explanation. He wasn’t stressed out about her safety, knowing they were half way to having her home, safe once more. Maybe he realized being married to her was going to be a burden. It would ruin his wooing reputation if he were married.

He had even said he wanted to be married only until he knew she didn't suffer any repercussions from this, from having him with her, however unintentionally it had started out.

Yes, that was definitely her heart breaking. She heard the audible crack from behind her ribs.

"I'll be back. I need the restroom," she said, slipping soundlessly from her seat before he could respond. She needed to get away for a minute or she was going to cry.

She marched up the aisle, looking neither right nor left until she was in the auditorium front room, going straight for the restroom. Once inside, all she could do was lean against the marbled counter and breathe and fight the tears.

What was she going to do? She had fallen in love with Gavin. She had even married the man, but it didn't sound like he wanted to be with her. Not in the same way. "Why?" She shook her head, biting her lip to keep the tears at bay. "Damn him," she cursed softly.

First things first, she needed to get her stalker out of the way regardless of the death threats, deceit and lies. She didn't care anymore. Then she needed to find a way to get through to Gavin. She had married him! And damn it, unless he was just sick of her, she was going to keep him. Bad boy image or not, she loved him. She was not going to let him just walk away.

She dabbed a tissue to her eyes, firming her resolve while trying to salvage her makeup. She would use every trick she knew of to convince him. He thought she was beautiful, she would use it. He thought she had sexy legs, she would flaunt them. He loved her hair, he would notice it. And by God, if he cared for her at all, then maybe he could love her.

*How much are you willing to risk for him?* her little voice asked. Her hands froze, her face far too pale in the mirror. How much was she willing to risk, to put on the line? If it meant keeping him, could she turn her back on what she knew, what she had worked for?

Her career had meant the most to her through the years, but did it still? She

slumped a little as the staggering thought hit home.

She could give up everything for him. It would mean adjusting, but she'd been doing that since she was a child. She was adopted for heaven's sakes! Adjusting was like yesterday's news. So could she do it, turn her back on her career if it meant keeping the man she loved?

Her reflection showed a woman in a black evening dress, with flashing dark green eyes and thick curly hair staring at her. Defiantly. Decisively. Her shoulders pushed back, her spine snapping straight once more.

Her answer --In a New York minute.

She reached inside her little bag and touched on her lipstick, then applied a little powder to help hide the tracks of her tears. Repaired and polished once more, her resolve firmly in place, along with her determination, she turned to leave the women's restroom.

She had barely cleared the corner when a hand grasped her elbow. "Don't look at me, just smile and keep walking to the door." He jabbed something into her side. "Feel that? That's a gun and it's loaded. I told you I would get you alone."

"Who are you?" she managed through a dry mouth. Her tongue didn't want to work.

"Don't talk!" he snapped. "Just walk."

Rose did as ordered, pushing open the auditorium doors to the breezy, street heated outdoors of Las Vegas. He propelled her toward the passenger side of a four door sedan. "Get in. You're driving." She slid all the way across the seats at his prodding.

"I don't know where we're going," she said even as she took her place behind the wheel.

"I do. You don't need to know anything else. Start the car." She did as she was told. She tried to look in his direction, but he held the gun at her ribs.

"Don't. You just watch the roads. Don't look at me or talk to me. Just do what I tell you."



A shiver rocked her body. "Are you really going to kill me?" she managed on a choked whisper.

"Drive, damn it. Nothing else."

She nodded, suddenly too scared to think of anything beyond the immediate future, and maybe saving her skin. The gun he held glinted just beyond her sight as they pulled away from the curb, passing under bright street lights.

\* \* \*

Gavin looked at his watch once more. Rose had been gone for a long time. She was upset about something; she had hardly spoken through dinner.

He glanced over his shoulder, but couldn't see anyone behind him heading his way. Where was she? What had upset her?

Knowing he was going to have to let her go when he knew for certain she was safe still hurt like hell. Making sure she didn't have any problems from being with him was paramount. He had no idea how his superiors were going to look at his being married now--without consulting them. He couldn't put Rose at risk. Not for his own selfishness.

He glanced again at his watch, his fingers tapping on his knee. He rose from his seat with a little burst of agitated energy, whispering his apologies as he took small steps to reach the end of the seats. His strides ate up the carpet as he strode to the double doors of the auditorium. Where the devil was Rose?

The heavy doors closed silently behind him as he viewed the open area of the front hall. His eyes narrowed as his feet unconsciously began walking.

In the shadows, a woman in a black dress... Rose! He watched her walk through the outside doors, a dark haired man at her side. She was pale and visibly tight, her mouth pinched as he held her elbow. He hurried after the pair, spotting them just as they slipped into a car, the glint of a gun shining as the man dragged his hand inside.

He yanked his cell phone from his pocket. "Tanner, he's got Rose," Gavin

snarled as soon as the line was answered, and in an instant, nothing else mattered.

## XVI

Her hands twisted over the steering wheel while mile after mile disappeared underneath the car. She was purposely driving beneath the speed limit, hoping. "Why are you doing this?" Rose asked. Silence. She flexed her shoulders and blinked, keeping her fear at bay. "Are you connected to Crissie?"

Silence, but he flinched. She barely caught it out of the corner of her eye. "Who is she? Who are you?"

"I told you, don't talk. Just drive." His voice was sharp, curt. He touched the gun to her ribs in emphasis.

"Damn it!" she snapped. "If you're going to kill me, I at least have a right to know why."

"It's nothing personal."

"Did she pay you for this?" she asked, guessing.

"Turn on that road," he told her.

"It's a track!" she cried, peering through the darkness.

"Christ, just do it!" he snarled, jabbing hard with the gun, making her grunt in pain.

She turned without making another complaint. She slowed intentionally.

"What's the matter?" he shot at her.

"I can't see the damn road!" She yelped again when the gun bit into her side. "Damn it! Stop that!"

"Don't yell at me, Rose. I'm the one with the gun." He pressed it under her breast to prove his point.

"Big man with a gun," she muttered under her breath. Tears sprang to her eyes

when he yanked painfully on her hair.

“Just do what I say.”

She nodded, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. She closed her eyes for a brief second, taking a deep breath. She bit her lips together to restrain herself from saying anything else.

“Stop the car and get out.” Her hand shook as she pushed the gears into place. She started to look over her shoulder, but he stopped her. “Don’t look at me! Now get out!”

Her head whipped around and she slid from the car. He shoved with a hand to her back, and she stumbled forward to her knees. He yanked her back up by her arm, keeping her off balance.

He pointed her in a direction. “Walk, Rose.”

“Just going to shoot me in the back? Big man,” she said sarcastically. She bit her lip again, instantly sorry she hadn’t kept her mouth shut.

A flash of bright white pain flared outward from her jaw. She fell to the ground, outstretched palms barely able to catch her fall. Her vision blurred with renewed tears.

“I told you this isn’t personal. Crissie is the one who wanted you out of the picture.” He knelt down, pressing into her back, keeping her faced away from him, into the dirt. “Once she gets that contract, I’m home free.” A length of rope appeared and he quickly tied her hands behind her back. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for my chance? How long I’ve been at her beck and call while she lived her life?” He tugged the ropes in emphasis with his words. “Be thankful you’re an only child, Rose. Having family sucks.”

She dragged in a shaky breath. “You’re her brother?” she choked, almost too stunned to believe it.

“I’ve lived every moment as her damn gopher. Once she has that contract and gives me my share for this, I’m out of here. I’ve had it with her imperial demands.” He shifted and tied up her feet. “She thinks she can rule the world,” he sniped, tugging once more to ensure the knots would hold. “And that includes me, because she’s held

all the money. Until now. I don't care what she gives me for this. I can disappear on what I have already. But damn it!" he swore brokenly. "She owes me!"

"How can she do this?" she asked. "Use her own brother?"

He grunted, sounding tired. "I'm not her blood brother, Rose. I'm her step-brother. She's hated me from the first day."

Rose fought to assimilate that. She blinked. Were those headlights in the distance? She squinted, peering underneath the car. No, she must have imagined it. They were alone, somewhere, miles from the highway.

His head drooped. "I want you to know I am sorry for this, Rose, but I have to get away from her. I can't live like this. She can have the world. I don't want it."

"Why do this then?"

"Because when it started it was just to scare you a little. Crissie found out about your other infatuated man and I just tailed him. Except now you've got my face on tape, I know you do." Her head sagged once more to the ground, her breathing shallow. "So now I've got to clear out, and I can't have any witnesses."

"But Crissie will be linked to this," she pleaded with him. "You'll still be implicated."

"But I won't be around." He stood casually, dusting himself off. "It's like I said, Rose, this isn't personal. I just need to get away from her. I want my own life."

"This won't do it." Tears dripped from her tightly pinched eyes.

"I'm sorry, Rose. You seem like an all right lady," he told her quietly. She knew with a sick feeling, what was going to happen next.

Rose squeezed her eyes shut, and waited. Sobs stole from between her lips. The quiet lengthened. And nothing happened. Her sobs deepened, an excruciating silence enveloping her.

She cried out in alarm when he collapsed at her side. "I...I can't do it." She saw him curl up through her tears, his legs drawn tight, the gun held loosely in his hand. "I can't kill someone," he whispered. "Not even to get away from Crissie."

She let an explosive cry escape her chest, unashamed of her moment of relief. She

lay in the darkness on the sandy earth, waiting for the next stage.

“Matthew, step back from the woman.” Both jumped at the voiced command. Rose saw Matthew’s head fall completely limp, his body racked with a harsh shudder.

“I deserve this,” he said loud enough for Rose. “I am sorry.” He stood slowly, his arms outstretched, the gun hanging limply from a single finger.

“Put the weapon down, slowly, and take three steps away.” Matthew did as ordered. “Down to your knees. Hands on your head.” Matthew complied.

Then someone was lifting her, cradling her body against a solid chest, carrying her to a police vehicle. She closed her eyes and just let it be over.

\* \* \*

Rose turned over and winced.

“Easy, sweetheart. You’ve got a bruise the size of an island on your cheek.”

“Gavin?” She tried to blink, but her eyes were dry and tired.

“Right here, baby.” His fingers spread through her hair with a gentle tug and she sighed.

“Where am I?”

“In bed with me, unless you prefer someone else,” he teased her, his voice a single caress of warmth. She sighed, feeling safe at last.

“Never.” She forced her eyes open, finding his concerned stare. “How did you find me?”

“I walked out to find you, just as Matthew was taking you from the building. I called Tanner with the vehicle information and managed to get a cruiser to tail you until Tanner picked me up.” His fingers caressed her in gentle strokes.

She rested gingerly against his shoulder. “My hero,” she breathed.

His chest rumbled with soft laughter, his arms squeezing tight for a split second. “Your hero was almost too late,” he replied. “I almost died when they carried you to the car, bound. I thought he had done more to you than just this.” His finger carefully

stroked the outline of her bruise.

She worked her jaw. "Yeah, that didn't tickle." She relaxed against his solid warmth. "But he couldn't shoot me, not like that. Probably not ever. Some people just aren't made to kill. I don't think he's one."

"I don't think so either, but he won't be finding out anytime soon either. He's already been booked on almost a half dozen charges, and Crissie's waiting to join him."

Rose shook her head. "All because of a contract."

He let out a long sigh. "Amazing what a contract can do to a person."

She heard it in his voice. Something had changed, again, but she was tired, her eyes gritty. She'd think about it later. She just wanted to sleep for a month.

"By the way, how much was that contract supposed to be worth for her to risk murder for it?"

Rose shrugged. "It was an exclusive contract. When they first approached me, the table was set at twelve million for four years. If I took the exclusion clause, they'd double it."

"Exclusion? Meaning they would have your name and face solely as spokesperson?" She nodded drowsily. "Shh. Rest for now. We'll talk tomorrow." He pressed a tender kiss into her hair. She drifted into sleep with his hand in her hair and his arm wrapped around her body.

\* \* \*

Gavin marched into his superior's offices with purpose, his face expressionless, his heart set. He'd only been there one other time, when he'd first accepted the contract. Now he was ready to walk away from everything.

Rose and he had returned just a few days before from Las Vegas. She needed time to get her apartment back in order and he needed time to get his life back.

When Sergeant Simms had walked up with Rose cradled in his arms, Gavin had almost collapsed to the ground himself. A red haze of rage clouded his vision for

several seconds when he had first laid eyes on her unconscious form. She had been covered in dirt, an awful bruise forming over her lower jaw with her arms and legs bound. He feared the worst. It wasn't until the Sergeant's words reached his fogged brain that she'd been unhurt, that Gavin had been able to think clearly. Then Matthew had been brought up, in handcuffs, without protest as they pushed him physically into the cruiser.

Gavin had held Rose in his lap, his head buried in the mass of her hair as tears fell unhindered. Terror unlike anything he had felt eclipsed every thought in his mind when the silent and unmoving car was spotted in the darkness.

He paused at the private elevator doors to enter his pass code. The doors slid open and he entered, pushing the button for the top floor. It was only a few seconds before the doors opened again.

He walked to the desk. The woman looked up as she slid a hand under the desk. Gavin didn't have to ask if she had a gun under there. Defense was no small business.

He introduced himself. "I need to see the Director. I don't have an appointment, but I'm sure he's aware of why I'm here."

She nodded, and he stepped back while she announced him. She looked up. "Mr. Throckton, please go in." She gestured to a heavy steel door to her right, which opened at the sound of a release buzzer.

He dipped his head in thanks. The hallway hadn't changed since the last time he was there six years ago. The same beige, bureaucratic boring. He knocked on the correct door and waited for the acknowledgement.

He pulled on the door when he walked through and approached the desk. The man sitting there was in his late fifties. Gavin had never learned his name. He was The Director, period, and Gavin knew he had his fingers in a lot of business pies. Political and civil. Gavin stood, waiting.

"Have a seat, son." The man's voice rumbled, a deep baritone that fit his stature and his penetrating gaze. "I understand you married recently."

Gavin wasn't surprised he knew, but he didn't relax in his chair, his attention



focused on his boss. The real one. "I did."

"She's a beautiful woman," the Director said in an off handed voice. "Someone you knew?"

Gavin nodded carefully. "An old high school acquaintance."

The silence grew as the older man regarded him. "And what does she know? If I remember correctly, you wanted to marry before and told nothing."

Gavin felt no remorse. This had been his decision and his alone. "She knows everything."

"And? She wants what?" The Director steepled his fingers before him. Gavin refused to look away from his know all stares.

"Nothing. She sees me beyond what I am."

"Interesting. She's a model, correct?"

"Yes, sir." Gavin felt the first stirrings of sweat on his brow but ignored it.

"And you? What do you want?"

Gavin took a slow, steadying breath. It was now or never. "I want out of the contract. All of it."

The Director's mouth made a contemplative move. "It won't be easy. You are still obligated."

"It expires again this year," Gavin pointed out. "I don't want to renew."

The Director nodded thoughtfully. "So you have considered this?"

"In detail."

With that announcement, the Director's smile was rueful. "That I believe of you, Gavin." The man behind the desk relaxed into his thick leather chair. There were no windows in this office, only pale walls. Gavin didn't have to search to know video equipment was concealed behind hidden panels.

"It will take some time to eliminate you from the system, but I can assure you a mundane life."

For the first time, Gavin felt a small relaxed lift on his lips. "Not too mundane, sir. I don't want her dying of boredom before old age."

The Director bit off a laugh while his gaze lightened. "That is why I always liked you. You and your work." He fell silent once more, his penetrating gaze missing nothing. "Did you know I personally picked you?"

Gavin sat up straight in surprise. "No, sir, I didn't."

"I knew you were the right man, on all counts. Thorough, precise to the smallest detail, and you have proven me right again. You are not the type to make this kind of decision over something as idle as sex." The Director offered a purely male smile.

He stood, offering a hand to Gavin. "Go and have a happy life, Gavin. You've earned it many times over. You've done your government a great service. I'll make sure the rest just fades away."

He clasped hands. "And the remaining term of the contract?"

The Director shrugged. "What contract? I'll pass it down."

Gavin relaxed for the first time since entering the office. "Just like that?" he asked, almost scared to hope.

The Director walked from behind his desk with a limp, his leg stiff. "Son, by this time tomorrow, your name will not even exist in our records. If this is what you want," he added with emphasis. Gavin didn't avoid his stare.

"It is, sir." Gavin swallowed, thankfully aware at how easily they were letting him go.

"Don't worry, if you need a place to work, we can do something about that. Tell Sam out front and she'll give you a number to call, say in a month or so."

Gavin felt like shouting with gratitude. "Thank you, sir."

"No, Gavin. Thank you," the man replied in all seriousness. "You've done a great job for me, and for your country. You've earned your time."

Gavin walked back down the hall dazed, not ten minutes later, stopping to converse briefly with the lady the Director had called Sam. He placed the business card she handed him in his wallet and let himself back out, a subtle shock filling him even as joy made his step lighter.

"Rose! Darling, smile love," Chauncey said, waving an imperious finger to get her to spin a shoulder.

"Sorry, Chauncey," she said, focusing once more. She lifted a hand to her forehead, feeling a little flush.

"Makeup!" Chauncey cried. "Rose, darling. Breathe. What's the matter?" He walked up, passing his camera off to his assistant as he fluffed her hair. "You never sweat like this."

"I don't know. I feel a little out of sorts."

The photographer clucked. "I told you it was too soon. All your high-jinx and escapades," he ranted. "And that stupid witch, Crissie. God, she was a nightmare."

Rose smiled at his rambling. Chauncey was a great photographer. He could photograph pond scum and make it look interesting. Models were a piece of cake, unless one rubbed him the wrong way. Then all bets were off.

"Here, drink some water," he said, thrusting a chilled bottle under her nose. She sipped obediently. He continued with his primping as he spoke. "I just don't know what got into her head. She was making great money, traveled as much as anyone."

Rose shrugged, no longer caring anymore about Crissie, or Matthew. Gavin on the other hand...she hadn't seen him in two weeks.

Maybe he had decided to go back to work after all. She knew he loved it. Well, at least a part of him did. The Cad. She still somehow managed a weak smile over that. The man was not a cad. He was a sweet, protective man who had been her support for the days she had been ensconced in Las Vegas.

But what if he couldn't leave it behind because of his alter ego, like he had tried to convince her?

She automatically closed her eyes when Mattie started touching up her face. "Thank you," she managed around a cotton dry mouth. She sipped again at the water. Her stomach didn't like it. At all.

She thrust the bottle at Chauncey. "I'm going to be sick," she whimpered and raced for the restroom. She barely made it, her legs buckling as she slid to the floor.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Chauncey cried, his hands on her shoulders. "You're not doing that upchuck thing, are you?"

"Of course not," she retorted. "I'm not feeling good."

"Too much excitement, love. I told you it was too soon to come back to work." He rubbed her shoulders with easy fingers.

She nodded weakly. "Probably," she admitted. She leaned against the porcelain, uncaring for the moment that she had put the whole shoot on hold.

"Have you been eating?" Chauncey asked. "You've had so much going on, and Beverly throwing you back into the den so soon," he said with a note of censure.

She would have smiled, except her stomach rebelled against even the thought of food. She collapsed again a moment later, unable to do more than breathe in panting gasps.

She closed her eyes. "Give me a minute, Chauncey. I'll be fine in a minute."

"I'm telling you, too much excitement," he said in his mother hen voice. Her smile fought through, even as weak as she felt.

Vaguely the sound of a ruckus entered her tired mind. A shout. A crash. Someone was causing problems again. Chauncey left her in a huddled pile of misery.

"Where is she?" a voice roared.

"Sir! This is a private studio. We're shooting today." Exasperation and annoyance echoed through the studio.

"I know! Damn it, where is my wife?"

"Security!"

"Let go of me! Where is Rose?" the voice shouted again. "Damn it, I'm her husband. I demand to see her."

Her lids shot open. Gavin? She hadn't been imagining his voice? She stood on shaky legs, palming the counter as she inhaled large gulps of air. God, she looked like hell.

She was too pale with huge green eyes that stuck out like gemstones. What was happening? Was she sick? Her reflection offered no answers.

"Sir! Please. This is a private..."

"Rose!" he thundered. "September Rose, you better be here!"

She leaned on the wall, facing out. "I'm here," she panted. Silence was instantaneous.

Gavin shook off the security guard who held his arm, a low snarl leaving him. He strode up to her, took one look at her and swept her into his arms, cradling her possessively. "What are you people doing to her?"

"She just became sick," she heard Chauncey say. Voices rose to collaborate.

Rose lifted a hand and everyone stopped shouting. "Gavin, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," he said. "But they didn't want to let me in." He shot the roomful of people a dark look.

"Sir..." The speaker was startled quiet by one of the most telling glares she could ever remember seeing on his face.

"Why are you sick? You were fine two days ago," he demanded.

"What do you mean two days ago? Why are you here?" she repeated.

His big brown eyes widened more. "A husband can't see his wife?" he asked intently. The remainder was left unanswered.

"Chauncey, take fifteen," Rose said. When no one seemed inclined to leave her with Gavin, he added his two cent's worth.

"Clear out," he snarled at everyone. People scattered. When it was quiet once more, he took her to a side couch and laid her out on it, his hands caressing in his inspection.

"Sweetheart, what have you been doing to yourself?" he asked, his voice torn. "You've lost weight." His hand lifted to her chin. "And you're so pale."

"I've been sick the last couple of days. Nothing horrible. Some stomach flu. I can't eat."

"You should have called."

She turned away, hiding her pain with lowered lids. "I didn't think you wanted

me to," she said quietly. "You just disappeared."

He reached behind him and dragged over a photographer's chair. He held her hand cradled protectively between his, and she felt her heart leap. "Rose, honey, I'm sorry. I thought you wanted time. I didn't think you wanted to see me," he told her, his voice rough. "You were so anxious to get home, to get back to work. I didn't think you wanted to be with me."

Her head rolled back to find him staring at her, the truth in his earth brown gaze. "Gavin, when you didn't call, didn't come by, I assumed you had returned to what you did. I knew being married to me would be a detriment to your cover. I didn't want to impose on you anymore."

He lifted her hand to his lips. "Ah, sweetheart, I walked away from the contract, all of it. I thought you knew. I had made up my mind weeks ago to do that."

She shook her head once, then stopped when the room swam before her eyes. "No, I thought you changed your mind. The night Matthew cornered me, you were so quiet." She squeezed his hand. "You quit? And they let you?"

His smile was lopsided. "It wasn't as painful as I had imagined. The Director understood. I'm a free man." He swallowed. "If you want to be with me."

She sat up slowly. "Gavin." She managed his name on a hard sigh. He put an arm around her to steady her. His fingers trembled as he slipped them around her waist.

"When did you last eat, baby?" he asked her anxiously. "I know you're a light weight, but this is beyond you."

She ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know, three or four days."

"And you didn't go to a doctor?" His gasped voice echoed the shock in his expression.

"I've been waiting for it to pass," she admitted. "Chauncey is probably right. Too much excitement."

He groaned out her name. "Stubborn woman." He knelt down in front of her. "First this, then the doctor." His gaze was intense when he captured hers. His shoulders

lifted when he inhaled. "September Rose, I want to be married to you. I need you in my life. Whatever happens from here on, I want to do it with you. Will you marry me of your own free will?"

Shock hurtled through her. "Gavin, I did marry you by my choice. I want to be your wife." Her free hand lifted to caress his face. "I've wanted to since you first asked me. I don't know when it happened, but Gavin, I love you. I've been hoping you'd love me enough to keep me," she told him.

"Keep you?" he choked out. "Honey, I don't want to let you go! I love you so much." He crushed her into his embrace. She sighed blissfully when he pressed his face into her hair. "When Matthew dragged you off, I wanted to kill him. I knew I loved you, but when the officer brought you to me," he swallowed thickly. "I was terrified for the first time in my life. Terrified I had lost the most important thing in my life. Nothing mattered more to me. Not the contract, not the money, the reputation. None of it."

As he cradled her, tears fell silently, slipping down her cheeks. "Gavin, you're the best thing that ever happened to me. How could I not want that?" She sniffed and he hugged her tighter.

"Does that mean you want to marry me?" he breathed into her ear.

She shifted back a little to meet his gaze. "Gavin, we are married." Her hands found his face and pulled him forward. "I meant it then, but if you want to do it again, then yes, I will marry you."

He brushed her lips softly. "Do you want the white dress, pictures to show our kids, to let your dad give you away?" he asked her. "I'll do it. Whatever you want."

She bowed her head. "Well, I had always hoped Dad could. It would mean so much to him," she said, her eyes filling again.

"Then we will. The whole circus. Whatever you want. I wasn't fair to you when I convinced you to marry me. I was thinking of myself more," he admitted, his gaze dropping to her lap.

She tugged him back up with a loving hand. "Gavin, even if you thought it had been a life or death situation, if I had not wanted to, I wouldn't have. I wanted to.

Always, always remember that.”

“I don’t deserve you.” His eyes glimmered with happiness.

“No, you don’t,” she teased back. “But you’re working on it.”

He leaned in, stopping just shy of her mouth. “I love you, Rose. Completely.”

“I love you, too,” she whispered just before his mouth kissed away any last words.



## EPILOGUE

Rose held Gavin's hand as they walked among the throng of guests at their wedding reception. He had given her the wedding of her dreams. The flowing gown, the memories. Almost everyone from the agency was in attendance and her father was the beaming proud papa of the bride, just like she had always dreamed. She smiled when Gavin leaned over and pressed a tender kiss to her temple.

"How are you feeling?"

"Just fine. I'm getting the hang of this pregnancy stuff now." She gave him a wink.

"You definitely took it better than I did," he said, smiling ruefully.

"I remember. I thought you were going to faint." She laughed lightly, remembering his dropped jaw when he had nearly collapsed into a chair, then looked at the floor as a viable possibility to the doctor's announcement.

After he had found her at the shoot, he'd whisked her to a doctor without a single argument. The cause of her 'illness' had taken them both by surprise. "I will never forget that day, or your look," she murmured with a tender tone.

"Me either," he confided. "I'm just glad my patience ran out. If you had really believed I had gone back to work, you would have never come looking for me. That was not an option. I had to let you know everything." He swept her into his arms, his tux molding deliciously across his chest. Her fingers caressed him willingly. His gaze grew heated with the innocent contact.

"Behave," he growled at her, the sound of his voice raking down her spine. Want pooled low in her body. "We've still got almost ten hours of good behavior before we get to St. Barts."

She tugged him down to whisper in his ear. "Anticipation makes life sweeter." He groaned into her hair when she purposely brushed into him. "And just think, now we've got a baby to look forward to."

He rubbed his cheek against her hair as he coaxed her out to the dance floor, the only place they could talk without being disturbed. "I never even imagined it, to be honest. You managed to turn my life completely upside down, September."

"Ah, there you go again, using my name." She grinned up at him. "At least I wasn't adopted in October," she joked. "That just wouldn't have fit."

He chuckled softly, guiding her in his arms to the slow tempo of the music. "I could call you anything you want, but you will always be my September Rose."

"I like the way that sounds," she purred as the music swelled around them, his arms holding her close, his heart holding her even closer. And reveled in the pure happiness she had found in Gavin's arms.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DIANA CASTILLEJA

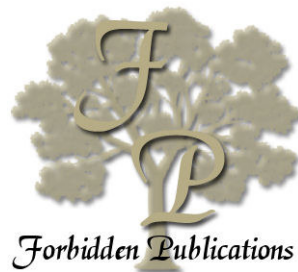
Diana Castilleja is originally from the Rio Grande Valley, South Texas, and is now residing in Kyle. She is a horse nut, but unfortunately can't keep one in the closet. She lives with her husband and son, and juggles everyday life raising them both.

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