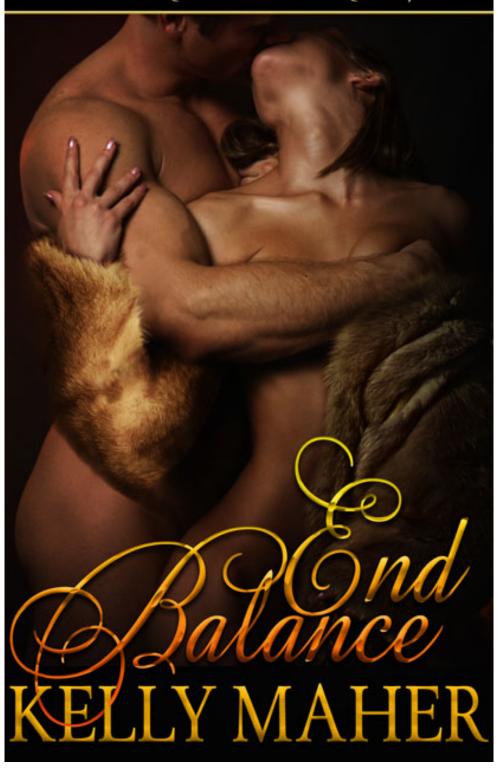
Ellora's Cave Presents



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End Balance

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END BALANCE

Kelly Maher

Dedication

To everyone who has supported me over the years with my quest to see this published.

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Harp: Diageo Ireland

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Prologue

New York City, 2075

Robert MacLendon strolled through Central Park, letting his mind turn to when his little girl would be home next from Scotland. She now had her doctorate in archaeology, but she'd always be his little girl, pigtails flying as she chased after the park's waterfowl. The call of ducks, geese and children mingled with the hum of the air purifiers located throughout the park to create a contemplative white noise. He fingered the ring box in his pocket. Raquel would probably understand; she'd always liked Louise.

Pausing at a vendcart, he selected a soy dog and fries and inserted his credikey into the slot. The service platform creaked through its program and Robert felt blessed that his food actually gave off faint spirals of steam when it finally rose from the bowels of the machine. He ordered a soda from the vendfridge to complete his lunch and made his way over to one of the empty benches.

He was getting older and he'd always imagined his life ending with his wife by his side. Mirielle had died five years ago and he'd been lost. His relationship with Louise had slowly, but surely, changed from that of boss and assistant to lovers. He didn't love Louise as he had loved Mirielle, but how could you love two completely different women in the same way?

Dusting the remnants of the dog and fries from his suit, he got up and threw his trash into the nearest waste compactor. He'd taken the afternoon off work, knowing he'd not be able to keep the question to himself until his date with Louise tonight.

Feeling as if his world was centering once again, he dodged the kids and adults on airskates and navigated his way through the congealed mass of humanity clogging the sidewalks of New York. Most people had taken to the air in some way and he knew the next generation of personal transports he envisioned would be a smash hit. Despite his belief in the mode of transportation, though, he was one of the few traditionalists who still preferred walking on his own two feet. The dance between man and machine kept him nimble.

Just as he was swerving out of the path of one young rascal on a flatboard, a punch to the middle of his back threw him off balance and into the flow of traffic. For one moment, as his body whirled through the air, he saw the face of his attacker. Shock suffused his system a moment before his world went black. Forever.

Chapter One

Raquel ran her hands through her hair, pulling it back into a knot and pinning a clip to it. She scanned her ID card and the baggage chute belched out her two bags. The flight from Scotland had been mercifully short. Her father had told stories of when he visited his grandparents and the trips over the Atlantic to Edinburgh would take seven hours. She shuddered at the thought of being trapped in one of those old-style airplanes for longer than the two hours it currently took to fly between JFK and Connery International.

She linked the bags together and pulled them behind her to the taxi stand. The line to the signal bot extended past the entryway. If it weren't for her bags, she'd just give in and take the subway. Louise had offered to come pick her up, but Raquel didn't want to face anyone she knew until tomorrow. Tomorrow, when the ritual grieving would begin. Blinking back the tears that seemed always just below the surface, she focused on what she needed to discuss with Niall on her next check-in with him.

With her father dead and no other successor named, it was unlikely she'd be returning to the dig anytime soon, if at all. MacLendon Industries' board would follow her father's wishes of having her installed as the next CEO, despite her own feelings on the matter. She already knew Edward didn't want the job, as her father had offered him the position of crown prince a few years ago. Since Edward had turned it down, her father made no move to install anyone else, probably expecting to live forever.

Tears leaked out of her eyes. Forever was too fucking short. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Pure JFK with the humid saltiness of Jamaica Bay on the wind. *Center.* The line crept forward.

When she got to the signal bot, she programmed her loft's address. She'd dump the bags, find something to do and head out to Murphy's for lunch. If it was still open. David had been talking of selling it and retiring to County Mayo the last time she'd been in town.

The taxi zipped through traffic. Early Sunday morning in New York City was always quiet and still. Even with the population boom in the last fifty years, she'd always been able to depend on the sleepy silence of the city at this time of the week. The streets would be filling soon with people heading off to Sunday services and then the mad rush to work.

She thought back to the last time she and her dad had spent a lazy Sunday together. He'd been laughing over the funnies they used to read together when she was a kid and she'd been cooking a breakfast of eggs and soy bacon. He'd taken the day off to spend it with her. Her breath shuddered in and out. Memories of happy times fought their way through the grief.

Her doorman opened the door for her as soon as the taxi glided to a stop. "Hi, Henry."

"Ms. MacLendon. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Thanks, Henry. I'm just going to drop my bags off and go for a walk."

He nodded and held the door open for her. "I'll make sure the building staff is aware you are back in residence."

She nodded and walked over to the glides. Keying in her code, she waited for a pod to become available. A door opened and she slipped inside. "Good morning, Ms. MacLendon. Please hold on to the rail for safety purposes."

Raquel rolled her eyes. Why the damn program had to say that every single time a person got on one of these, she'd never understand. It's not like after riding on these things for almost thirty years, she didn't know it was a smart idea to hold on to the rail. The pod quickly ascended and the door opened to her loft. She'd left Edinburgh midmorning and now light was just gilding her furnishings as the sun rose.

Stowing the bags in her bedroom, she changed her shoes and headed back down to the lobby. Henry held the door open for her and she strode out into the sunlight.

At first she turned to the right, toward Central Park. She stopped in her tracks when she realized where her feet were taking her. Her father had died steps from its entrance. No way could she deal with that today. She whirled around and headed south, toward Bryant Park. Fashion Week had ended a couple of weeks ago, so the park should be clear. If she wanted to, she could just take refuge in the Old Library Museum. She could lose herself in the displays of old books and manuscripts. Plus the walk would help her burn off some of her excess energy.

The wake would be tomorrow. She'd be trapped in the grief room with her father's colleagues and acquaintances. Some of her family might crawl out of the woodwork, but she wouldn't bet on it. They only bothered with her father when they needed money. He'd made it clear to them not to expect anything when he died, so there was no reason for them to show.

Stirrings in the shops and apartment buildings she passed showed the signs of life in the city. She quickened her step so she could reach the park before the general air quality disintegrated. Combustion engines hadn't been extinct long enough for the air to completely clear of pollutants and it was always worse when the populace was up and active en masse.

The park was gorgeous, as usual, and she splurged on a real egg and bacon breakfast sandwich from the little restaurant. She ate by the Lowell fountain, enjoying the tinkling and bubbling of the water as it flowed down. A cool breeze flowed through her hair. It was probably manufactured by the standard filters, but it was welcome. Already, she could feel her psyche calming and centering.

She spent the rest of the day wandering first the park and then the museum. It was just as peaceful as she remembered it from her childhood. Her mother had saved a number of books from her own childhood and read them to Raquel religiously, but it

wasn't until she was older and her father's business was firmly established that they'd been well-off enough to actually afford to go to a bookstore with printed books to buy new ones. The sensual pleasure of paper cost a dear price, and the everyday person had to content themselves with the gel broadsheets for their pleasure reading. They folded into any standard print format size, so it at least felt like you were holding something the size of an old paperback or a newspaper and with a flick of a finger across the top corner the "page" turned. The miniscule battery pack powering them had guaranteed the creator the Nobel Prize in Physics for that year and thanks to the international embargo on new paper consumption, they'd taken off and made MI, as the manufacturer, a mint. Plus, you only needed space in a drawer to house your own personal library.

On her way home, she browsed through a number of shops, looking for something to wear at the wake and memorial service. If she really needed to, she could wear what she had to her mother's funeral. That had been five years and five pounds ago, though. Besides, she needed a pair of comfortable shoes if she was expected to stand for any length of time. Her best friend had once told her she had the best body for heels, thin and lean. With having spent the last two years on a dig and in work boots, though, Raquel knew her feet would be screaming at her if she jumped right back into wearing any kind of heel.

Luckily, she found what she needed in short order. She exited the shoe store and walked into the wall of jet lag. She needed sleep. Now. Scanning the street, she saw a few empty cabs. One hustled over to her as soon as she held up her all-one to signal. For the second time that day, she programmed her address and fell back against the seat. Through the fog of exhaustion, she let Henry help her out and into the glide pod. She paused inside her entry only long enough to hang the dress up in the closet. Her couch was five feet away and she collapsed onto it.

A crick in her neck woke her. She untangled herself from the pretzel position her body had contorted itself into while sleeping. Rubbing the kink out, she stood and looked for her wall clock. Nine o'clock. She'd slept for a solid eight hours. Unfortunately, that meant she'd probably spend the rest of the night awake.

Blowing out her breath, she already knew what her food prep would tell her, empty. Some good pub food would hit the spot. She'd missed lunch at Murphy's, but dinner would do just as well.

She slipped out the door as the doorman, a new one, was helping one of her neighbors into a cab. Murphy's was only two blocks to the east, but she quickstepped through the crowds. Her stomach growled, and she realized the breakfast sandwich was the only food she'd had in twenty-four hours. The airplane food had been a funky mass of gray protein mash, completely unappetizing for someone whose stomach was filled with a softball-size mass of grief. Shaking her head at her stupidity, she pushed through the door.

Murphy's was packed with the Sunday evening crowd. She pushed her way through to the bar and ordered up a bacon cheeseburger and fries.

The barman programmed the order into his screen. "Want anything to drink with that?"

She shook her head. "Just a water for now. Wait, put a Harp and a shot of Jameson on the order to come with the food."

He nodded. "Want a tab?"

"Yeah, MacLendon, Raquel. I should be in there."

Tapping a couple of times on the screen, he gave her the thumbs-up. She worked her way over to where she saw David talking with one of his servers in the corner.

She tapped his shoulder. "Hey, old man."

He turned and caught her up in a bear hug. "Hey, little girl. How are you doing? I was sorry to hear about your da."

She squeezed him back. "Thanks, David."

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be getting ready for the wake or something?"

"I needed some good food and better music. I passed out this afternoon from exhaustion and if I hope to stay awake tomorrow, I've got to do something to get me tired again."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Want to sing a set? Green Beer's up in fifteen minutes."

"Hell, no. Even if I've managed to stay in tune, I don't need to be in front of a crowd tonight. And GB is just a bunch of overaged frat boys."

David tugged on his lower lip as he gazed at her with his too-knowing eyes. "Don't I know it. Well, go have a seat in your usual booth. Nobody's claimed it yet for the night. Have you ordered your food yet?"

"Yep."

He jerked his head once. "I'll make sure it gets over to you, then. Signal if you need anything."

She patted his cheek. "You're too good to me. Tell Mary I'd like to talk to her soon."

"And she'll be pleased to hear from you. Now get."

Wending her way through the mostly middle-aged crowd, she found her way to her booth before some slightly drunk groupie fell into it. As promised by David, her food found its way to her in no time. After eating half the burger, she felt sufficiently full to start drinking the beer. The cool yeastiness coated her tongue, reminding her of the first time her dad had brought her here. Damn. There was no way she was going to completely avoid thoughts of him now that she was back here.

"Mind if I sit down?"

Raquel looked up into deep pools of cool blue. The rest of his body was just as fine. Scanning the room, she saw the rest of the booths and tables were indeed taken. "Uh, yeah, sure."

"You mind? Or I can sit?"

"Sorry, I'm a bit slow. I flew over from Edinburgh this morning. Please sit."

He held out his hand. "My name's Hayden."

"Raquel." She shook his hand. He had strength in his grip, but not overtly dominating. Calluses rasped along her own. A man who worked with his hands. Intriguing. She smiled. "Nice to meet you, Hayden."

"Are you here for the band?"

"Nope. The food. Well, the band's good, I'm just not one of their groupies."

"Yeah, I know. See those ladies over by the amp?"

"Uh-huh." She spotted two obvious groupies with band shirts torn at the neckline and gaping enough to show quite a bit of cleavage. She took a bite of burger and chewed.

"That's my mom and her best friend."

Raquel clenched her jaw so as not to spew mashed burger and bacon into his face. Taking a sip of beer to wash down the food, she swallowed. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. If I'd known they would be here, believe me, I wouldn't have stopped in. Hope you don't mind, but I'm using you as camouflage."

She grinned. "No worries. First time I've ever been camouflage for someone against his mother. Are you gay?"

Shock suffused his expression. "Ah, no, why do you ask?"

Raquel shrugged her shoulders. "Well, since you're using a woman as camouflage, I assumed that you normally don't hang out with women."

She felt his legs come to rest along either side of hers, bracketing them in.

"No, I can assure you I'm not gay."

The server came over at that point and took his order. Raquel ordered another Harp, hoping the cold liquid would cool her down. And if this guy gave her any trouble, David would make sure she was okay.

"So, Hayden, are you a regular here?"

"Not usually. Some buddies were having a bachelor party for one of our friends at the hotel down the street, but the bride crashed the party. I decided to hightail it out of there for a bit."

"Oh, you're from out of town?"

"Nope. I'm a townie, but since I'd already checked in to my room, I figured I'd just be wasting my money by going home."

She dipped a fry in ketchup. "Good point."

The waitress deposited their drinks and collected Raquel's empty. Raquel took a deep draught of the cold beer. Nope, no noticeable cooling of her body temperature. She snuck a peek at Hayden and felt her temperature shoot up another couple of degrees. Well, there was one sure-fire cure for her insomnia. Plus, it would take her mind off tomorrow, providing he was any good.

How to proposition a man for a one-night stand, though? He was most definitely interested, the way his gaze kept straying down to her chest and his leg kept rubbing against hers. All of her other lovers had been the products of fairly long-standing relationships. Even that worm, Terrance.

She had just finished the last bite of the burger when the band belted out their first song. Her comment about them being overaged frat boys wasn't far off. They still played loud enough to break eardrums.

"Hey!"

Hayden's fingers grazed the back of her hand and she leaned in to catch what he was saying.

"Do you want to get out of here?"

"Sure." She nodded vigorously in case he couldn't hear her. Holding up one finger, she took the Jameson, said a quick prayer for her dad and downed it.

"Now I'm ready."

He scooted out of the booth and cleared a space for her to exit. After he swiped his credikey through the table scanner to clear their bill, he took her elbow and guided her through the crowd. She waved to David as they exited to the relative quiet of the street.

"The bar at my hotel is pretty decent. Would you like to come over for a nightcap?"

She paused for a moment. If she went back with him, she'd end up in bed with him. Taking a shallow breath, she held out her hand to him. "Sure."

He pulled her up against him, his lips firm and warm on hers. She let her other hand skim up over his muscled chest and neck to where his hair lay close cut against his skull. He broke the kiss after a moment, not even trying to French her.

Her system was nicely humming along. She licked her lips, hoping for a faint taste of him.

A wicked smile bloomed on his face. "Raquel, I think this was my lucky night."

She laughed, the first spurt of mirth breaking through the grief of the last two days. "Funny, Hayden, I was thinking the same thing. Let's go."

Walking in the cool night air, Raquel reveled in the heat arcing between her and Hayden. His arm draped across her shoulders and she breathed in his clean scent, which reminded her of spices and...lemon? Soft strokes from the tips of his fingers traced the edge of her collar along her skin.

"Just so we're clear, you are joining me for something more than a nightcap?" Raquel flashed a smile up at him. "I plan to wring you dry by morning."

He bobbed his head. "Interesting, and painful, imagery. How about we agree to enjoy each other to the best of our abilities?"

"As long as I get a few orgasms out of the deal, I'm happy with however you want to phrase it."

"Blunt. I never thought I'd find that trait attractive in a woman. What is it you said you do?"

Raquel turned her gaze to look down the relatively empty street. Most of the city's denizens were busy partying it up in the clubs and restaurants. "I'm an archaeologist, but it looks like I may be facing an unexpected career change."

"So you're like Indiana Jones?"

The cleansing release of laughter rocked her frame. "Not quite. I wasn't sure anyone not in the field knew those old movies."

Hayden spun her around into a tiny alcove hidden from public view only by a screen of greenery. His hands raked through her hair, anchoring her head for his ravaging of her mouth.

He broke from her after reducing her knees to custard. "You're gorgeous when you laugh, so free and light."

She fought to regain her breath. "Thanks for the compliment." Giving in to the moment, she ran her hands up underneath his shirt, reveling in the taut skin and hardened muscles. The roughness of his chest hair contrasted with smooth skin and pebble-hard nipples. Ripples traveled under the skin wherever her fingers caressed. Her own system mirrored his as he stroked his hands up and down her back.

"You do realize we're on a street in the middle of New York? If you continue what you're doing for much longer, I'm not going to care."

An old, old fantasy of making love in front of a crowd flashed into her mind. "Mmmm...the idea is amazingly appealing."

Dropping his head against her shoulder, he groaned and she rubbed her chin against the silky strands of his hair. His hands grasped her hips, pulled her against his and she undulated against the hardened ridge of his cock. "So not the encouragement I needed."

Grabbing her hand, he drew her out of the alcove and quickstepped the rest of the way to the hotel. Moments after getting into the glide, he had her blouse undone and her breast in his mouth. Holding tight to his head, her head dropped back against the wall as the suction of his mouth seemed to tug deep into her moistening center. The door opened and he lifted her into his arms, his mouth never leaving her breast. His room was only two doors down from the glide and he put her down just long enough to dig his uni-card out of his pocket and open the door.

"Raquel, are you sure?"

Appreciating the sentiment, but needing the oblivion of a night of sensual indulgence, she pulled his head down to hers. "Yes."

They stripped each other in the race to the bed. He threw her down hard enough for her body to bounce twice. She wriggled against the rich bed coverings. It wasn't silk, satin or velvet, but good clean cotton. He went to his open bag and yanked out a handful of condoms that he dropped on the table next to the bed.

"Expecting to live it up at the bachelor party?"

"Not really, but my parents came from the scouting school of parenting." He smoothed a hand down her body, cupping each breast in turn.

Her breath caught. "Be prepared?"

"You betcha." His head sank down and replaced his hand, trailing kisses up and down her body.

Raquel gave herself over to the caresses of a man experienced in the ways of a woman's arousal. He lingered over her hot spots, obvious ones and those less so. Fingers fluttered against the skin of her inner thighs, his tongue traced trails of fire along the tendons in her neck and his chest hair scraped against her beaded nipples. He even found one she hadn't been aware of at the edge of her hipbone as it curved downward when he kissed his way from mouth to lower mouth. Her legs fell open to his ministrations and he took full advantage of her, feasting as if she were a buffet laid before a starving man. She groaned and tugged at his hair, wanting him inside her when she came.

When he finally entered her, she had enough of playing the passive lover. She clutched him to her with her legs and flipped him to his back. Dragging his hands to her breasts, she covered them as she rose and sank down onto him. He pulled one hand out from her grip and slipped down to the ripe flesh of her clitoris as she stroked up and down, faster and faster. It was like a match thrown on a powder keg and she exploded.

* * * * *

Raquel shook the hand of the next business dignitary in line.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. Your father was a great man."

She murmured her thanks. She'd have to ask Carly the man's name later. Everyone and their sympathy, whether genuine or not, had blurred together. She just wanted to kick her shoes off and collapse on a seat with a bottle of Jack Daniel's and toast her dad.

Right after the wake, he'd be taken to the body preparation center and readied for burial and the trip to Scotland. When her mother died, he'd had her buried on his grandparents' homestead. They would be together once more.

"Raquel."

She took a deep breath and turned to Carly. The chair of the board of MacLendon Industries was a sharp-featured woman who could freeze water with one glance. Carly had been one of her mother's best friends and, like Louise, had always been there for her. "Yes, Carly?"

"There's a gentleman I'd like you to meet. Your father had been in talks with him about a possible merger, but he'd never written up a proposal for the board before he died, so I have no idea where the talks stand. Find out for me."

"Now, Carly?"

Carly ran a comforting hand along her arm. "No. Not right now, but soon. If the merger is a good fit, I don't want it lingering because of your father's death. We can't let the business world think we're in any way wavering."

Raquel smiled. "I understand. Who is it?"

Carly pointed to the far corner of the room and Raquel's breath flew out of her lungs. *Hayden*.

He must have sensed her because his eyes met hers, and his smile was a little crooked. She pressed her lips together and gathered herself. She'd crept out of the hotel room while he was still sleeping, not wanting to face what essentially was a stranger's face in the morning. Fate mocked her.

He strode over to where she and Carly still stood. "Ms. MacLendon?"

"Ye-yes." Damn, she was stuttering like a schoolgirl.

"I'm Hayden Campbell. I'm sorry for your loss."

She closed her eyes. He was speaking to her as if she hadn't spent the night exploring his hot, naked body. She could be professional about this. Her father had reared her to handle herself. No matter the shock.

Chapter Two

Six months later

Raquel blinked the sweat out of her eyes and focused on her gloved opponent as he circled her in the ring. She punched the dark-haired man in the nose, and grinned at the sound of cartilage breaking. The thud of flesh on flesh followed by a faint metallic ring echoed in Jimmy's combat chamber. The damn bastard would not stand down. He kept coming back for more. Two more shots to the face and a kick to the balls knocked him back five feet. If she could just get her hands around him, he'd think twice about messing with her and hers.

"Raquel! Enough! You're about to bust up a thousand dollars' worth of good equipment. Rock, power down."

The man coming for her stopped and returned to stasis mode. She wiped the sweat out of her eyes and turned to where Jimmy stood at the ropes. "Come on, Jimmy, just five more minutes."

The wiry little man poked at the air. "Five more minutes, girl, and I'm going to have to get another sparring dummy. If I have to do that, I'm charging it to your account."

Raquel laughed. "I can afford it."

He huffed. "Yeah, but I think you've got that poor thing pounded into submission already."

She looked back to where the dummy stood crouched, waiting for her. Glints of his TitaniSteel frame shone through the rips in his simulated skin. She sighed.

"Come on into my office, girl. You can tell Uncle Jimmy all about it."

Raquel shook her head. "I don't think so."

He climbed through the ropes and walked over to her. Throwing an arm around her shoulders, he hugged her to his side. "I know it's been tough, but you're doing good. Your dad would be proud of you."

She looked down at him, a shock of white hair falling across his navy eyes. "Would he, Jimmy?"

He nodded so hard, she thought he could be a model for those weirdly popular bobble-head dolls. They just kept coming back every fifteen years or so. "He would, girl. He was always proud of you. Couldn't stop talking about what new trick you had gotten up to since he'd last been in."

Raquel let her head fall back and drew in a deep breath. She could taste sweat and the chemicals purifying the air on her tongue. She missed the cleaner air of her dig site in Scotland. Fighting this merger was taking a lot out of her, and she just wasn't cut out

for this type of stuff. Give her the ancient past and fighting off tomb raiders any day of the week.

Stripping off the sparring gloves, she handed them to Jimmy. "Thanks for the offer, but I've got to get back to the office. Campbell is due in at four." She grimaced at the thought of another sure-to-be contentious meeting with him.

Jimmy gripped her arm as she passed him. "If you need something taken care of — anything — just let me know and I'll get someone on it."

Raquel's lips quirked up at the edges. Her dad had always told her Jimmy was one of the best go-to men in the city for when a problem needed "taking care of". He never failed to get a job done. "Thanks, I appreciate the thought."

She headed up to the changing room and showered. Keying in her personal sequence, the spray system automatically adjusted direction and water temperature. Jimmy's place catered to the few-frills crowd, but he knew people weren't interested in the antique plumbing system experience in the showers. She was the only woman in at this time of day and she took the opportunity to strip down and shower in the open area. She squirted some body wash into her cupped hand. Building lather, she stroked her body. The freedom of this time of day exhilarated her. She massaged her breasts, nipples peaking, and slipped her hands down to her stomach, soothing the muscles there. Shivers raced up her back.

Dipping her fingers into her center, she found the wetness waiting for her. She coated her fingers and circled her clitoris with it. Leaning against the wall for support, the warm rain from the shower added to the stimulating motion.

Her eyes closed, she pictured swimmer's shoulders, a chest with pecs to die for and a cock broad enough to split her. When they'd been together, she'd thought him the perfect size, but it was her fantasy, wasn't it? She imagined his wide hands tracing down from her breasts to where her fingers played with her clit. His rough calluses would touch off sparks.

Groaning, she wanted that cock inside her now. She plunged three fingers into her aching pussy. They weren't enough. They were never enough.

She pressed inward, rubbing against her G-spot. She tweaked her right nipple with her other hand and shouted, her eyes flying open.

Sliding down the wall, she turned her head up to let the water pour over her face. Her head dropped to her raised knees, lungs bellowing to pull in air. She needed to get this out of her system. Get *him* out of her system.

Her lips curved up as she thought of her lover just prior to Hayden, one of her coworkers on the dig. He'd taught her some tricks and she thought a quick weekend trip could be worked into her schedule. She must still have his number somewhere. Anything to clear her body of the desire for the man who plagued her.

She stood and finished her shower. It was time to get back to the office, and her driver would be waiting.

Hayden reclined in the visitor's chair. He couldn't believe MacLendon Industries had bought these torture devices on purpose. Raquel probably had the staff change them for when he was expected. He laughed at the image of the prissy Ms. MacLendon opening the storage closet and hauling these ancient monstrosities out. A brief fantasy of his office chair which adjusted to his every movement, along with a spectacularly naked Raquel, flashed through his mind.

The image of her at the point of ultimate relaxation and satiation flashed into his mind. He sighed. Seeing that look again had been a foolish dream ever since he introduced himself to her at her father's funeral. Checking his wrist unit, he saw it was fifteen minutes past their appointment time. He got up and strode over to MacLendon's secretary.

The woman put him in mind of the nun he had for first grade. He mentally shuddered. "Is Ms. MacLendon in yet? I have other places I need to be."

The woman looked over the top of her half-glasses. "I told you she would buzz me when she was ready to receive you, Mr. Campbell. Please sit down. Would you like some coffee?"

"No. Thank you."

He paced back to his chair, but didn't bother sitting down. If he suggested she get new chairs, she'd just laugh it off. Shaking his head, he let his thoughts turn to his erstwhile adversary. He had no idea why she was fighting this merger. It was in the best interest of both companies. Hell, her father had been the one who had started the ball rolling in the first place. And he'd heard enough about Raquel's business acumen since she'd taken over to know that it probably wasn't spite over their one-night stand.

Hayden thought back to the first time he'd met Robert MacLendon. The man had been a bruiser, but a hell of a businessman. His parents had emigrated from Scotland in the late 1980s and he'd made good use of the opportunities afforded him. President and CEO of a World Top 100 company he'd built from the ground up, he was looking to expand into personal transport manufacturing.

Hayden was honored MacLendon had come to him. The basis for his own holdings was a small, exclusive bike shop his great-uncle had started building choppers in as a kid.

A buzz sounded from behind him, breaking him out of his reverie. "Ms. MacLendon will see you now."

He gathered his coat and turned to where the secretary waited at the office entrance. She placed an intricately fashioned object into a slot, opening the door. He girded his mental loins and strode into the dragon's lair.

The dragon was sitting behind the desk, scanning the images flashing across her comp screen. She flicked a glance to him. "Have a seat, Campbell."

She'd refused to call him by his first name since she found out who he was. "MacLendon. I thought our meeting was scheduled for four."

"I got caught up in traffic." She pressed a finger at the top of the screen and it flashed off. Sitting back in her chair, she crossed her arms. "I'm here now."

He raised an eyebrow. She was a cool one. Taking a seat across the desk from her, he let himself remember what she'd been like after a good fucking. He'd pull her hair out of that prim bun first, and let it spill over her shoulders. Then he'd remove her clothes, one piece at a time. Her breasts would neatly fill his hand. She cleared her throat. As he met her gaze, she lifted an eyebrow. "Do I have your attention?"

Forcibly drawing his mind back from the pleasurable interlude, he crossed his legs. "Did you get the revised figures?"

"Yes. And I reviewed them with our CFO. You've yet to convince me this merger is in the best interests of my company."

He sighed. "What else do you need? Those figures showed a twenty-percent increase in profits for both of our companies after two years of production. With the new government regulations for an environmentally friendly infrastructure, personal transports are going to be in high demand. Your father saw it, why can't you?"

She pokered up. "My father was a brilliant man, Mr. Campbell. However, the papers I found after his death indicated that while he was of the opinion PTs are going to be in demand, he was not of the opinion that your company would be able to meet the demand."

He shook his head. "I can't quite tell if you're lying or if you can't read numbers."

Her eyes blazed to life at the insult. He'd begun to wonder if the fiery woman from their one night together had been his imagination.

"I assure you I am not a liar, and though my degree is in archaeology, I am able to make sense of the figures presented to me. My father made sure I would be able to step in if I was ever needed."

Hayden stood and slipped on his overcoat. "Well then, you might want to check the advice you're getting, because it's not jibing with what your father told me or what I know to be the status of my company."

Her eyes froze back into ice. "Thank you for the uninvited advice. Please, don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out."

Placing his palms down on the desk, he steadily met her frosty gaze. "Lady, if you'd ever have that steel rod you've got up your ass removed, you probably would get a lot further ahead."

She shook her head. "Again with the uninvited advice. Good day, Mr. Campbell."

"Goodbye, Ms. MacLendon."

He stalked out of the office and punched the pad for the glide. The door swooshed open and he stepped into the pod.

"What level, please?"

He smirked at the soft, Southern-belle-accented voice. "Parking level three."

"Descending to parking level three. Please take hold of the rail for safety purposes."

The ride was quick and efficient, the door sliding open again short minutes after he entered. "Thank you for visiting MacLendon Industries. Come again soon."

He snorted. Like he'd ever be invited back into the dragon's lair. He pulled out his Triton A3 and tapped in the sequence for his office.

Jeannine's cheery face flashed on-screen. "Campbell Holdings."

"Hey, Jeannine, it's Hayden."

"How did the meeting go?"

"Not as I anticipated. I'm on my way home to get ready for that thing tonight. Where is it again?"

"The Field Museum in Chicago."

He groaned. "Okay. Have the jet waiting for me and I'll get to the airpad as soon as I can."

"It will be ready when you get there. Who are you taking?"

"Myra. I think."

Jeannine's broad face split into a grin. "Well, I hope she knows that."

"Even if she doesn't, she'll jump at the chance of a photo op. Talk with you later." He signed off and slipped the Triton back into his pocket. Sliding into the Jag, he punched up the volume on the sound system and programmed the autopilot for home. He closed his eyes and settled back into the seat for a quick catnap. Knowing Myra, she'd be especially grateful later tonight for the trip out to Chicago. Better get his rest while he could.

Chapter Three

Raquel laid her head on the cool surface of her desk. How the hell did he turn her on like that? Every time she saw him, it felt like she was being pulled in two. One part of her wanted to beat the crap out of him in whatever way possible, and the other wanted to jump his bones and ride him until they were both boneless with exhaustion.

A tap sounded a second before Louise DiVollo entered. Her father's longtime secretary, and lover after her mother had died, Louise had been an anchor for her in the days following her father's accident.

"Am I screwing up, Louise?"

A hand stroked her hair. "No, I don't think you are. You're doing what you think is best for the company. Just because Mr. Campbell seems to have misinterpreted your father's intentions doesn't mean you have to go along with them."

Raquel scrubbed her face with her hands. "You're right. You're always right." She smiled up at Louise. "Thanks. I've got to get going if I'm going to make it to the function tonight."

"It's in Chicago, isn't it?"

"Yes, the Field Museum. Charles asked me to help serve as hostess." She sighed. She'd always hated having to dress up for these things, and if she hadn't agreed to bail Charles out, she wouldn't have had to.

Louise leaned down and bussed the top of her head. "Have a wonderful time, then. Will Terrance be there?"

Raquel wrinkled her nose. "Probably, but I'll deal with it."

"Well, hurry up, then. I'm sure your salon appointment is waiting."

Raquel watched Louise head out for the night and went over to the hidden closet where she had stashed her party clothes earlier. When they had been shopping, her best friend assured her the emerald green dress was the perfect complement for her dark hair and eyes. Too bad there was so little material to it. She eyed the spike-heel shoes that matched the dress. Thousands of years of evolution and they'd yet to design a comfortable, yet stylish, shoe for women.

She carried the ensemble with her to the salon on the third floor and turned herself over to their ministrations.

"Raquel, bella mia! What look are we going for tonight?"

"Hi, Dante. Sleek and stylish, as I'm playing hostess tonight and I don't want to deal with an absurd amount of gunk."

Her stylist laughed as he always did when she referred to his tools of the trade as gunk. "Did I not return your skin to its dewy youthfulness within a week of your return with a minimum of gunk? How much time do we have and where is your dress?"

"A half an hour and it's hanging up by the reception desk."

"Bene. One moment for the relaxation treatment and I will be back to work my magic."

First reclining the spa chair, he then fitted the face mask on and she was immediately taken in by the subtle scents of lavender and chamomile. Little beads massaged her facial muscles and a cool, fibrous pad pressed against her eyelids. The chair cupped her and massaging waves caressed her tired body. As promised, within moments she felt the tensions of the day slipping away.

When Dante removed the mask, Raquel immediately regretted the need to rush the session. Catching the look on his face, she recoiled a bit. She'd seen that look only a few times before, usually when he was dealing with other clients. The women had always come out of the session looking absolutely gorgeous, but the session itself had looked like a war zone to an outsider.

This one turned out to be no different. Dante called for wands like a master surgeon. Her hair was tugged from all directions, and Dante muttered under his breath about hue saturation. Thumbing the dial on his wand, she felt a slight heat edge her brow line. He flipped the dial again, and this time a cool mist covered the lid. He repeated the process on her other brow and lid. Another wand and her lips met the same fate.

She could feel her hair, what there was of it, getting twisted and pulled and lacquered into place. When Dante adjusted the chair and she could see herself in the mirror, she gasped. She looked like a fairy out of one of those fantasy paintings. "Wow."

Dante clasped his hand against his heart. "The complimento ultimo! Grazie."

"No, mille grazie da me, Dante. You are a true artist." A buzz sounded and the time flashed on the mirrorscreen for a moment. "I'm sorry I need to rush, but please send the bill to the office."

"I will, now va, va."

Raquel paused only long enough to claim her bags. She met her driver at the back entrance and they made it to the airpad in record time. The sleek silver jet lifted up as soon as she buckled in. Once they were stabilized, she took her bags to the only private room on the transport. Slipping the lock on the bathroom door, she spread out her ensemble and changed. She tugged at the dress, but almost all of her chest was still exposed. Gold piping crisscrossed her stomach, attaching the top to the skirt. She turned, looking at the back. It at least covered her ass, but she'd have to be careful when sitting. Plumber's disease was never pretty.

Unlocking her jewelry case, she pulled out the piece she'd specially packed for the night. Hammered gold and decorated with triskelions, it had been a gift from her father

for receiving her master's. She slipped the gold cuff onto her left biceps. A matching bracelet went on her right wrist. She fastened the earrings her mother had given her as a high school graduation gift to her lobes, finishing the effect.

"Dr. MacLendon, we've been cleared for landing. You may want to take a seat."

She touched the intercom. "Thank you, Warren."

Pulling on the shoes, she went back to her seat and gripped the armrest as they circled down into Chicago.

Raquel smiled and greeted yet another guest. "Thank you so much for coming. Please enjoy yourselves."

A soft voice whispered in her ear. "You're doing wonderfully. Thanks so much for agreeing to do this."

Raquel gritted her teeth, keeping the smile on her face. "Only for you, Charles. But if one more man mentally measures the size of my chest, I won't be responsible for my actions."

She held out her hand and murmured a polite greeting to the next set of newcomers before turning to Charles. His distinguished silver hair was set off to perfection by the silver-shot tuxedo. "Is it time to go in yet? I need to sit down for a bit. My shoes are killing me."

He looked at his wrist unit. "Well, I was hoping for one more of our bigger supporters, but it looks like he's running late." His black gaze met hers. "We still have to open the dancing."

She sighed. "I know. Let's just make it fast."

Charles laughed. "If Edgar wasn't waiting inside for me, I'd try to snap you up."

Raquel tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "That's what you've been telling me for the last ten years. You're still married and I don't do married guys."

He escorted her into the grand hall. Tables had been set up on the north end, leaving room for the dance platforms by Sue, the museum's prized Tyrannosaurus Rex. Stopping in the center platform, he tapped the pin on his lapel. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?" His voice boomed over the PA system and all eyes were on them. "Thank you for your support over the past year. We hope you enjoy yourselves tonight by eating, mingling and, of course, dancing. The museum's staff has graciously opened a number of exhibits, thanks to my lovely hostess, Dr. Raquel MacLendon. Explore them to your heart's content. Docents are available for any questions you may have." He turned to the bandstand. "Maestro, if you will?"

The band struck up the classic standby from the late 1970s, Donna Summer's "I Feel Love". They were soon soaring twenty feet above the crowd on a private dance pad, swaying to the orgasmic croon. Over one hundred years old, the song still resonated for those looking to intimately dance in public.

Raquel let the music wash over her. The sensuous beat and pounding rhythm demanded total participation. If she could have ditched the shoes and the dress, she would have.

She sighed as they floated back down to earth as the last few bars of the song echoed through the hall. They touched down and the band began playing Texas' "I Don't Want a Lover".

Raquel laughed. "Someone has a sick sense of humor."

Charles clasped a hand to his heart. "You wound me! I was only thinking of your enjoyment. Remember, I know you've got every single album Texas ever released."

Raquel patted his arm. "Yeah, and you're not getting your hands on them."

He pouted for a minute, but then grinned as he looked over her head. "Oh, here's our late guest. Smile pretty, dear."

Raquel turned and locked her jaw. No, no, no. What in the hell was he doing here?

The late guest took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Ah, Ms. MacLendon. How nice to see you twice in one day."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Campbell. What are you doing here?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you know? I helped to fund Charles' latest pet project." He held out a hand and shook Charles'. "It looks like you got a great turnout. You did a really nice job putting this shindig together, and I'm sorry I couldn't have been here earlier. My date had some...trouble, with her dress."

"I bet." Raquel flicked a smile at the latest sensation to hit the fashion runways. "Myra, isn't it?"

The woman's expression could only be called supercilious. "Yes. Hayden, honey, I'm thirsty."

Campbell petted her hand and nodded goodbye to them. Raquel bared her teeth at his back.

"Ah, ah. People might think you were being antisocial, and we do want them to crack open those credicounts of theirs."

"I promise to be the epitome of social grace as long as I don't have to deal with him." She jerked her chin toward where Campbell and the freak of beauty science were downing martinis.

Charles nodded and took her hand in his. "Your blood sugar level must be low, so let's fix that. I know Edgar promised to save us some seats and the choice selection of dishes."

Raquel blew at the sweep of hair in front of her eye. "You're right. I can't let him get under my skin." She reached up and pecked at his cheek. "Thanks for putting up with my bitchiness."

"You're welcome. I expect a nice donation from MacLendon Industries for the pleasure tomorrow, though."

Raquel laughed and followed his lead to where Edgar had indeed saved the best selections for them from which to choose.

Raquel scanned the room. Most of the people were on the dance floor or at the bar. She leaned over to where Charles was whispering in Edgar's ear. "Listen, you two, I'm going to head up to the Celtic Cultures exhibit. I never got a chance to view it since I had to leave the dig."

Edgar nodded. "Shout if you need anything, darling."

"I will. Charles, if you need me back here for anything buzz me on my link." She held up her purse.

"Will do." He held up his drink. "Get yourself one of these, they're wonderful."

Raquel wended her way through the tables, avoiding the bar. She did not want to run into Campbell or his date again tonight. Once was enough, thank you very much.

A finger slid down her back along the crease of her spine. She shuddered and turned. As if she didn't have enough to deal with as it was. "Terrance."

He leaned in to kiss her and she bent back, barely able to remain standing on the spike heels. "Darling Raquel, I've missed you so. What's a kiss between old friends?"

She glared at him, wondering how she hadn't been able to see beyond his model-perfect good looks. Not that there was much there to actually see. "Old friends is one thing. Letting a lying, cheating, son-of-a-bitch ex kiss me suggests some kind of mental failure. As far as I know, all of my neurons are in working order."

He held up his hands to where a heart would be. "You wound me, Raquel. She was only a one-night stand. She meant nothing. You ran off to that dirty island before I could explain. When you came back, the gorgon you call an assistant wouldn't let me speak with you, and of all things, wouldn't give me your home number. You really must fire her, darling."

She poked him in the chest with a finger. "Listen, you..."

He took hold of her arm and pulled her off into a darkened alcove. "Raquel, I'm sure you wouldn't want to air our dirty laundry in front of anyone. Now that you're back, I'll send the movers over to the hovel you must be living in and we'll have your things brought home."

Raquel did the only thing she could think of. He was down on his knees, clutching his groin, in under a second. She leaned down to his ear. "If you ever, and I mean ever, attempt to contact me again, whether by all-one or in person, your nuts won't be bruised, they'll be no longer attached to your body. Do you understand me?"

Air whistled from between his clenched teeth, but he nodded.

"Good." She didn't bother to look behind as she strode from the alcove. She'd have to ask Charles to kick him out, but she needed to bring herself down before she ripped into any innocent bystanders or reverted to her childhood habit of breaking anything she could get her hands around. She resumed her trek to the Celtic Cultures exhibit.

Losing herself in the finds she'd helped to unearth would go a long way toward soothing her ragged emotions.

The stairs down to where the exhibit was housed were shrouded in low lighting. She hoped because it was fairly far away from the party that none of the guests would be inclined to explore it, despite it being specially opened for them.

She wished that she had been able to participate in the final stages of the dig and the setup of the corresponding exhibit. Her father's lack of succession planning beyond her as "Plan B" had changed everything and now she hoped she could carve out the time to attend a dig, any dig, in the next five years. The merger with Campbell would have probably provided her with that time sooner, but those figures Edward had run over with her had been so tenuous she couldn't justify the risk to herself, let alone the board. As CFO, he'd have gone over those figures with a micro-toothed comb.

The exhibit was dark when she reached it. Funny, she had been assured it would be open and a docent would be on duty. She shrugged and tried the door. Barely a moment after she placed her palm on it, the heavy glass door swung open. "Whatever." She pulled out her link, operated the light feature and hunted out the hidden panel for the lighting controls she knew were located just beyond the first bend of the entrance. Within seconds, a warm glow from strategically placed spotlights suffused the rooms.

She returned to the beginning of the exhibit to experience it in full. A holoscreen cycled through photographs from the dig. Tears formed in her eyes as the memories flooded her mind. This dig had been one of her happiest. She had been hoping to be awarded a permanent position with the foundation at the end of it. When her father died, she'd not only lost him, but the work she'd devoted years of her life to.

Dashing her palm across her eyes to wipe away the tears, she moved to the first display. Wallowing in pity was not acceptable.

The sunlike disc stole her breath, as it had the first time she'd seen it. She reached out, her fingertips meeting the cool wall of the display case rather than the warm...humanity...of worked gold. The connection to her ancestors of thousands of years ago called to her.

She wandered through the exhibit, pausing to read narratives and examining the holographic displays of the more fragile artifacts. It was in the middle of a short video presentation that she heard a muffled moan ring out just ahead of her.

"Hello?" What on earth was going on? She knew she should call security, but the moan wasn't one of distress, more like...pleasure?

Activating the stun mode of her link, she snuck through the exhibit halls. Thank god her father had insisted on getting her the personal protection model of this link. Too bad she hadn't thought to use it on Terrance. Reaching the penultimate room, the one she knew the altar area had been reconstructed in, she discovered one hell of a tableau. Myra lay on top of the altar and held her legs so that she was bent double and one of the waiters was pounding away at her. A gag was between her teeth.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Their gazes swung toward her, but the waiter kept thrusting into Myra. Raquel froze, her gaze swinging between the two faces and the motion that wouldn't stop. She wasn't sure if she wanted it to stop. She could see the waiter's hard-on was wide, so wide, just like the fantasy Hayden from her shower in the gym. Myra's shaved pussy didn't hide anything. The feelings of lust she'd kept locked down outside her private times since her night with Hayden came flooding back, and she licked her lips. The waiter pushed down with his thumb on Myra's beaded clit. Her face contorted as she kept her eyes on Raquel.

The waiter slammed into her three more times before he, too, stilled. A low moan issued from behind Myra's gag and they both slumped.

Raquel broke out of her stasis and drew her shoulders back. "I want the two of you to get dressed, now, and get the hell out of here."

The waiter nodded, pulled out, so long, he was so long too, picked up his pants and hurried around her and out.

Myra took her time getting up. She stretched her arms over her head, her breasts rising. Drawing the gag off, she ran a hand down her body to her soaking pussy. Her fingers circled her clit and then thrust in, pumping. "Raquel, isn't it? Do you want the name of the waiter? He'd probably split you in two, but I have never found a man as hung as he was. I could feel every ridge along his cock, he stretched me so tight."

She rose off the altar and came over to Raquel. She reached out a hand and cupped Raquel's breast. "Or maybe you'd like to play with me?"

Raquel caught her breath as her nipples were tweaked, fire racing down to her loins. Myra leaned in and licked her ear. "Do you, Raquel? I can dig out a toy from my bag and we can play together. Have you ever been with a woman?" Myra took Raquel's hand and drew it to her slit. Fluid covered her hand.

Yanking her hand from Myra's grip, Raquel backed away. "No, and I don't think I'm going to start now with you." She turned and ran down the still-dark hallway. The scent of Myra's juices rose from where they coated her hand. She'd been tempted, however briefly, but Myra plain scared the living daylights out of her.

She hurried out of the exhibit and back to the main hall. Spotting a restroom, she detoured. She needed to wash her hands. It wouldn't do to show up smelling of sex. Especially since she hadn't been the one engaging in the play.

This time the lights automatically turned on. She hurried over to the basins and waved her hand in front of the sensor. "Sixty-nine degrees." Cool water rushed out.

Plunging her wrists under the flow, she looked in the mirror. A raving lunatic, and one more than a little aroused, stared back.

She closed her eyes and splashed some water up onto her face. Thank god she had opted for the temp tattoo makeup. The restroom door whooshed open and she opened her eyes to see who came in. Water filled her eyes and she blinked to clear her vision. Strong hands gripped her hips and a firm tongue licked up the side of her throat. Hands and a tongue she intimately recognized.

"So, the ice queen can melt?"

She gasped. "Campbell." She tried to wiggle out of his grip, but it was too strong. He pressed her against the counter. Her rear cleft cradled his erection. She froze, trying to ignore the heat coursing through her body at the contact. "What, what are you doing here?"

"Myra offered a show, but I hadn't realized I'd almost get two." He nipped her shoulder.

"You saw." She bit her lip, forcing herself not to soften and push back against him.

His hands ran up her front to her breasts, and pinched her erect nipples. "Oh yeah, I saw. I have to say, though, I'm glad I get to be the one to taste you instead of Myra."

Raquel moaned. The image of him eating her out burned through her. She gripped the edge of the basin.

Keeping one hand on her breast, he reached up and undid the clasp at the nape of her neck. "I want to see your breasts. I need to know how you taste tonight. Hmm, ripe little berries. Will they taste as sweet?"

If she had been wearing panties, they'd be beyond salvage from being soaked. Her eyes met his in the mirror. She took a deep breath, giving in to the long-suppressed demands of her body for this man. And for only this man. "Why don't you find out?"

His nostrils flared and he turned her around. Stripping the dress from her, he hitched her up onto the counter.

He spread her thighs and settled into the V. His mouth descended and sucked almost her entire breast into his mouth. She gripped his hair, trying to force more of her aching flesh in to the heated haven of his mouth.

Her head fell back to rest against the mirror. Supporting her back with his strong arms, he ground against her waiting pussy.

"Please, Hayden, please. I need you."

He lifted his head, blue eyes blazing. "Say it again."

"I need you." God help her.

He shook his head. "No, my name. I need to hear you say my name."

"Hayden. Hayden, fill me, I need you to fill me."

He reached down and unzipped his trousers. Holding her open, he positioned himself and pistoned in. Primed from her solo play earlier in the day and the erotic show she'd witnessed between Myra and the waiter, she came with the first thrust, little whimpers filling the air around them.

He groaned. "More, take more."

"Yes. More." She grasped his shoulders and hooked her ankles around his waist.

He picked her up and held her against the wall, pounding into her the entire time. He gripped her breast, twisting her nipple. The unexpected twinning of pleasure and pain tossed her off another cliff. Five more thrusts and he followed her over.

Her legs unhooked from his waist. For a moment, because he was so much taller, she was pinned by his still-erect penis to the wall. Her only support in a world gone mad around and within her.

She let her head fall to his shoulder, her lungs panting for air. Aftershocks rippled through her, massaging his pike-like cock.

"If you don't stop, I'm going to take you again."

She lifted her head and met his gaze. "I don't think I'd fight you on that."

His pupils took over the iris. "I'll hold you to that." He leaned down and invaded her mouth. No quarter was given. The faint overlay of peppermint on martini, with the underlying taste of man, sent heat washing through her again.

He separated from her and she slid down the wall. "No."

"I'm not going anywhere." He stripped, uncovering the body of a god. "Get on your knees."

"What?" She reached to caress his chest.

He captured her hands, turned her around and guided her down to the floor. On her hands and knees, she turned her head to look at him. He pressed down between her shoulders. "Have you ever been taken like this?"

Her breath shuddered. "Yes."

He traced her rear cleft, circling her anus. "What about here?"

Shivers racked her as he applied pressure to her virgin entrance. "No. No one's had me there."

"I will one of these days."

Moisture flooded her at the thought. "What makes you think there will be more?"

He spanked her ass. Again, chills from the pain raced to her cunt, inflaming her. "I know there will be more." His finger entered her from behind. "Look how wet you are from the thought."

The broad head of his cock was placed against her entrance. "Are you ready?"

She pushed back against him, feeling the head slip between her lips.

"I guess you are." He surged home.

Oh god, the pressure. Her nipples swayed across the cold tile as she countered his surging rhythm. *Caught between stone and a deliciously hard place*.

He reached around and gripped her left nipple, pulling tightly on it with every thrust in. She could feel him hitting her cervix, he was so deep.

"More. I want more."

He grunted and let go of her breast. He angled her hips up high enough that she could no longer get traction on the floor. She was at his mercy, supported only by her hands, his hands and his cock. The cock that now dragged against her G-spot with every thrust.

"Are you going to be a good girl and give it me whenever I want now?"

"No, this is only for tonight."

His broad palm stung her ass as it connected. "That's not what I want to hear." He continued the light slapping, hitting hard enough to bring heat and a pain that edged into pleasure. "You will be ready for me whenever I want."

She whimpered. The walls of her vagina gripped his cock. She was so close. "No, not your slave."

He pulled out of her, the head sitting just inside her pussy. He lowered her enough for her knees to lightly touch the floor. The hand that had spanked her now came forward, two fingers rubbing the edges of her clit.

She tried pushing back onto his cock. She needed him in her...now...almost there.

He leaned down, licking up her spine. His breath caressed her ear as she felt the fur on his chest caress her back. "I'll give you what you want as long as you give me what I want."

Her heartbeat stuttered at the sensual temptation lacing his rough voice. The craving she had for him already threatened to overwhelm her. Reaching back, she tried to grab hold of what she needed most at this moment. He easily evaded her. He bit her ear and streaks of fire ran down to her cunt.

"Tomorrow, you are going to be waiting for me outside your building wearing nothing but a coat I'll send you in the morning." His fingers skimmed down her thigh to her ankle. "And shoes. I'll have shoes sent with the coat. You are going to be my slave for twenty-four hours."

She shivered at the image of appearing in public as he described. What was wrong with her? How could he tap into her deepest fantasies and turn her into a writhing mass of sexual need so fast?

He edged into her, one inch at a time. "You are going to cater to my every whim, naked, and be ready to service me anytime I choose for those twenty-four hours. Do you understand?"

He thrust the final three inches and tapped her clit with a fingertip.

"Yes!" Shudders racked her body, and she was blinded as the tension rushed out of her. She heard him groan and felt the flood of his semen hit her cervix.

He collapsed against her back. Tremors shook her every few seconds, slowly tapering off. She tried to catch her breath, but with his weight, she couldn't pull in enough air.

Oxygen flooded her lungs when he pushed up and away. He ringed kisses along her back from shoulder to shoulder. He thrust once more before sliding out.

Raquel shuddered. "I don't think I can get up."

He leaned down, rolled her over and picked her up. She laid her head against his shoulder.

"I mean it. Tomorrow, you'll get a package, and I want you to be waiting outside for me. If you call out of work, I'll know and I'll just have it delivered to your house with the same expectation."

Shivers tingled over her skin.

"Do you understand?"

She felt like she was floating over her body and had no control over it, but she nodded. He kissed her forehead.

His chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath. "Raquel..."

She laid her finger over his lips. "No, not now. I...I just can't handle it right now, okay?"

He nodded. The look in his eyes was soft, and she turned her head away, hoping he wouldn't see the tears forming in hers.

Chapter Four

She air-kissed Charles and Edgar before exiting the limo. "Now you guys promised to visit next month."

"Don't worry, we'll be there." Charles' grin defined loopy. "Maybe then you'll tell us who you were with while you were away." He pouted. "You're supposed to tell us these things. We're old married men and have to live vicariously through you."

Raquel felt like bursting into tears, but dogged determination kept them at bay. "You two will be the first to know, I promise. I've got to go. There's a meeting in the morning I can't miss." She slipped out of the car, closed the door and waved until the car turned out of sight.

"Dr. MacLendon, the jet's ready if you are."

She bit her lip and took a deep breath. "All right."

Accepting the pilot's hand as he helped her up the stairs, she let the tension of the night drain away. When the door closed, she informed the crew she could be found in the bunk area if she was needed.

She opened the door. "Lights, ten percent."

The soft glow lit her path to the gel mattress used for short naps. Stripping out of the dress and shoes, she glowered at them. They were going into the recycler as soon as she got back to her apartment. There must be something in the dye to have fucked with her mind.

She covered her face with her hands. What in the hell was I thinking? The one-night stand was supposed to be just that, one night.

At least she didn't have someone waiting for her at home. One small saving grace at least.

She gripped her hair. Maybe she should just have the jet refuel in New York and head to London for a week. It had been months since she visited the MI office there.

No, he'd find her wherever in the world she escaped to. She laughed, but could hear the tone of resignation in the hollow sound. She was never going to shake him.

Her nipples pebbled at the thought. Oh god. She was thirty years old, for Christ's sake. Hormones had never taken control of her body like they had tonight. If she were truly honest with herself, she'd barely kept them in check for the last six months.

If she didn't know damn well all of her drinks tonight had been in her possession from the moment they'd left the bartenders' hands, she would have sworn she had been drugged.

"Jesus. Fucking hell. Fuck. Fuck." She pounded her fist into the wall next to her, but the pain didn't distract her from the confusion that racked her.

She snorted as she remembered the old saying that the fiercest antipathy was usually a mask for the fiercest of desires. She didn't want to desire Hayden, but she couldn't really bring herself to say no to him.

She craved what she had discovered with him. It ate at her belly until she was about to go out of her mind. If it wouldn't have been a total capitulation of self, she would have invited him to fly back to New York with her so she didn't have to wait until tomorrow to see him.

Closing her eyes, she focused on the meditative breathing she had learned once on a dig. Relaxing her muscles from her toes to her legs to her stomach to her chest and through to her arms and head, she felt her racing heart slow.

That's what she needed to do. Beat him at his own game. Turn the tables on him. She had acted like a sex-starved idiot tonight and he thought he had the upper hand. Tomorrow, she'd prove to him she was no one's slave, sexually or otherwise.

She smiled as she thought of some of the *artifacts* she'd picked up in her travels. Some way, she'd find a way to sneak them with her wherever they ended up tomorrow.

"Raquel, there's a large package here for you. The young man won't leave until you've signed for it."

Raquel nodded to Louise's image on the intercom. "I'll be right out."

It would be the coat and shoes from Hayden. The delivery boy was a teenager who had not been able to escape that bane of his age group, acne.

She handed him some credits with the signature box.

"Um, thanks, ma'am."

Raquel managed not to wince. She was barely a decade older than this kid, but she may as well have been seventy for all the notice he took.

Louise raised an eyebrow at her when the teen had left in the glide. "What is it? You would have told me to expect something if you'd ordered."

Raquel's smile felt weak. "It's a present. From a...friend. I only found out last night I would be getting it."

"Oh, let's see."

Raquel blushed. "If you don't mind, I'd like to open this in private."

Louise's eyes gleamed. "One of those presents? It's so big, though..."

"Yeah, one of those presents. Thanks." She turned back into her office, closing the door behind her. She went to the private sitting room behind the hidden door for further privacy before tearing the wrapping from the box and lifting the lid.

A piece of white imitation vellum sat on top of what looked to be an actual fur coat. It had to be an antique. These had been outlawed before she had been born.

She looked at the card. "Meet me downstairs in an hour. Remember, nothing but the coat and shoes."

She stood and held up the coat. It would hit her mid-thigh. Did the man have no concept of decency? She looked in the shoe box and snorted. It figured, fuck-me pumps with rhinestones.

Apparently, Mr. Hayden Campbell wanted a hooker. If that's what he wanted, that's what he was going to get.

She pulled out the box she'd set aside earlier and went to work on the coat's lining. A twinge of remorse for damaging an antique hit her with the first slice. However, it was for the greater good. Hayden Campbell would never know what hit him.

Hayden sat back in the leather seat and looked across at the bench seat that ran across the rear of the car. He'd take her there first.

He never imagined taking Myra up on her offer of a show, since he had declined her other entertainments, would have such unexpected results.

Cupping the crystal goblet in his hand, he rolled the brandy around in it, warming the liquid. Taking a sip, he let the burn flow through him.

Raquel MacLendon's appearance in the exhibit surprised him, but her reaction to Myra's play shocked the hell out of him. The Ice Queen certainly had melted. Spectacularly. The chink in her frozen façade he'd been waiting for turned into a volcano.

He took a deep breath and adjusted himself. It felt like he'd been smacked upside the head when he saw her rushing from the exhibit.

Snorting, he took another sip of brandy. That was the understatement of the millennium. He'd counted it as a stroke of luck when he saw her go into the bathroom.

Seeing her in the light, still looking incredibly aroused, well, he couldn't help himself. He'd had her stripped and his cock buried in her before he knew what hit him.

He blew out his breath and stretched his leg. Thinking about it was only making him more uncomfortable.

The limo glided to a stop. He peered out the window. Raquel was standing on the sidewalk looking as regal as a queen. She took a step toward the car and he saw she indeed had followed his directions to the letter as the bottom of the coat's closure peeked open for half of a heartbeat.

He stepped out and held the door open for her. She raised a brow and nodded at him. She bent over enough as she entered so that he could see her glistening folds. Fire shot through his belly.

He looked around to make sure no one else had noticed and saw a guy staring at them from the entrance of the building. Hayden glared at him and the guy got the message, scurrying off like a rabbit. He slid into the car. Raquel was sitting on the backseat, her legs crossed. Taking his seat, he poured a brandy for her as the car eased back into traffic. "Are you ready for our day together?"

She took the proffered glass and sipped. "Yes. I think I'm more than ready." Her tongue caressed the lip of the glass.

"Really? Mind if I see?"

She uncrossed her legs and spread her thighs. Setting the goblet down, she undid the coat. Sable fur framed a scene of decadence. She was dressed in slightly more than the shoes and coat he'd insisted on. Jeweled nipple clamps decorated her breasts and sparkled in the light as she cupped her ivory flesh and lifted them as if for inspection. "Do you like the view?"

He swallowed. "Very much."

Her grin was wicked as her left hand stroked down to her wet pussy. She held the lips aside. A matching clamp decorated her clit. She flicked the engorged flesh. "I told you I was ready." Dipping a finger into the gleaming wetness, she held it up to him before she brought it back to her mouth and licked. "Mmm. Don't you want to taste?"

He groaned. If he didn't take control of the situation right now, he'd be fucked out of his mind. Not a bad prospect, but if he was going to win at this game, he couldn't let her get the upper hand. And he intended to win not only the game, but her. He'd studied her during their six months of sparring. She was a woman who was used to being in charge and didn't like being caught by surprise if she hadn't prepared for the possibility. With those clamps, though, he knew she'd appreciate all the surprises he had in store for her. He popped open a hidden compartment. A slim, pliable rod fell into his hand.

A slim eyebrow lifted. "What's that?"

"One of the latest products from a small arm of my research and development division. I thought you might be interested in doing some beta testing for me." He kneeled between her thighs.

"What does it do?"

"You'll see." He bent down and swiped his tongue against her open cleft. Rich liquid coated his tongue. Her head fell back as he played with the clamp, twisting it that little bit. She shouted and he shafted the rod into her. Sitting back on his heels, he reached up and tied her wrists to the straps on either side of her head. Finally, he had her at his mercy.

He moved back in his seat. When her eyes opened, he held up his all-one to his mouth. "Fifty percent."

Her eyes widened. "Oh my god."

He could see the ripples of her inner muscles adjusting to the increasing size of the rod under the taut skin of her lower belly. Undoing his zipper, he caught his erect cock as it popped out, eager to play with her. He stroked it from base to tip, imagining the

tight grip of her muscles massaging it as she orgasmed. "I know you can take all of me. We've designed this to instinctively respond to a woman's capacity. Fifty percent should have you pretty full. Do you want to see how much you can take?"

Her head rolled back on the seat. "Yes, god yes." Her hips fucked the air.

"Vibrate."

Her body shuddered in response. "Hayden!"

"Take it, Raquel. You know you can. Seventy-five percent."

She groaned, body twitching. He leaned over and pressed against her clit. Her eyes rolled shut and her chest bellowed for air.

Kneeling down in front of her, he blew against her soaked pussy, the lips throbbing in concert with the vibrator.

"God, god, I'm about to come."

"One hundred percent."

She shouted and incoherent words spewed from her lips. Taking her clit into his mouth, he sucked. Her body tried to collapse into itself.

He reached down and caressed the folds surrounding the rod. Pulling the vibrator out, he slammed into her rippling vagina with his cock. His mind craved the physical connection between them when she gave herself over to pleasure. She pushed her hips against him, taking all of him easily.

"Yes, that's it. Take it, Raquel. Come for me again." He claimed her mouth with his tongue, his lips devouring her.

She shuddered once more and fell against the seat. He thrust once more, and came. Electric pulses ran from where the tip of his cock rested in her pussy, through his cock and straight to his brain.

After the fog of lust in his brain had cleared enough for him to think, he propped himself up with his arms. Her eyes opened, a glazed look to them. Still hard, he started a shallow thrust.

She licked her lips. "I think you have a winner on your hands."

"I've got one in my hands. Well, on my cock at least."

She smiled. "So, what do you have planned to follow up on that little surprise?"

"Hmmm. I was thinking about having dinner." He licked her neck from collarbone to ear. Her breath hitched.

"And where were you planning on taking me to dinner? I'm not exactly dressed appropriately." She canted her head to the side.

He bit her earlobe and nibbled. "It's a bit out of the way, but well worth the wait."

"What's it called?" Her inner muscles tightened, gripping him.

He ground against her. "My cabin."

"Your cabin?" She lifted her hips into the thrusts.

"Yep, it's in the northern part of the state. Where I go to get away from it all."

She panted. "And what makes you think I want to get away from it all?"

"How about we've been fighting like cats and dogs for the last six months and now we're fucking each other brainless?"

She crossed her legs behind his ass. "Good point. Give it to me, Hayden, I can't wait."

He pounded into her, the slow pace no longer enough for either of them. Barely managing to wait until she had climaxed, he exploded deep into her.

He slipped out of her, coated in her wetness and his. She tugged her arms once, and he untied her wrists before shifting her over so he could sit next to her. When he settled in, he moved her over him and draped her loose limbs across his. He kissed her closed eyelids. "Go to sleep, you'll need every last bit of energy you have when we get to the cabin."

She purred.

Raquel woke up in the middle of a bed, her arms and legs tied to each of the four posters. Hayden sat in a chair across the room. He was stroking his delicious erection. She tested her bonds and they were like the emotions swirling in her heart, silky and seductive but ultimately risky. Could she trust him enough with both? But wasn't that what the rest of today and tonight were about? Trust?

Licking her lips, she decided to let the soul-searching fall away until this time together, outside the real world, had ended. Thinking back to the limo ride, she felt as if she would never get enough of that cock. She let her gaze roam around the room, trying to bring her resolve back into order before she broke the bonds and jumped him. The walls were paneled in a dark wood. Artwork hung in a sporadic pattern. What caught her eye though was the one painting that took up almost the entire side wall. It was of a woman lounging on a bed similar to the one she was on now. The woman's legs had fallen open, and her hand was buried deep into her pussy. Her other hand gripped her breast. The look on the woman's face was one of exultation. A woman completely whole in mind and body and confident in what each could do for the other.

Raquel looked back at Hayden, who was now also studying the painting, his hand still massaging his cock. "Powerful, isn't it?"

"Yes." Raquel barely recognized the rasped answer as her voice.

"I have no idea who the woman was, probably a girlfriend of my great-uncle. When he wasn't building choppers, he painted. A number of his works are hanging in my home. I'd like to show them to you one day, as I think you might enjoy some of them."

His dark eyes turned back to her. His smile was sardonic. "At least, I think you'd enjoy me doing to you what's depicted in them."

He stood and walked over to her. "I think these can come off now." He reached for the nipple clamps, easing them off and laving each engorged bud with his tongue. After moving to the foot of the bed, he repeated the process with the clit clamp. Raquel tried to move her legs to hold him there, but the give from the silken scarves didn't allow for that.

He walked out of the room.

Raquel squirmed on the bed, trying to find some relief from the tension that gripped her. She could hear him moving around in the rest of the cabin. Water ran. Feet shuffled along the wooden floor. A door, maybe a cabinet, slammed.

He strode back in and she saw he held the rod in one hand. Like Pavlov's dog, her body reacted with wetness to prepare the way for it. She knew though it was more than the device, but the man who wielded it, that elicited the reaction. Was she forever doomed to creaming herself the moment he walked into a room?

He followed her gaze to his hand, held the rod up and shook it. "I have plans for this. But first we have to get you ready."

"Ready?"

He only smiled. Setting the wand down next to her hip, he positioned himself between her spread thighs. He held a container which she hadn't noticed before over her stomach, The cone-headed bottle was clear and filled with a golden liquid.

He flipped it over, and the liquid hit her in the navel, pooling there. He drew a stream up to each of her nipples, and back down to her cunt.

"What is that stuff?"

"One of my favorite treats. Honey."

"I'll be sticky."

He slipped two fingers into her core. "I'd say you already are."

She drew her breath in sharply. "Hayden."

"Relax, Raquel. I'll clean you all up." Putting actions to words, he leaned over her, following the trail of honey with his tongue. He paused to nibble around each of her nipples, never quite taking them into his mouth.

She tried to thrust her hips against his stomach, needing to ease the ache gathering in her loins. He bit one nipple. Fire streaked down to her clit and she cried out.

Resuming the trail, he took his time eating up all of the honey that now coated her stomach. He moved down to where she needed his magic tongue most.

Again, he licked all around her clit, managing to never directly touch it. She pulled at her restraints, but couldn't break free of them. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Lick me. Suck me."

"I am licking and sucking." He pulled one of her nether lips into his mouth and sucked.

Groaning, she undulated against his wicked mouth. "No, I need you to suck my clit. Please."

She looked down her body, glistening from the honey and his saliva. He didn't respond, keeping his head buried between her thighs. Frowning, she tried to cant her hips up to rub her clit against his face, but he pressed them back down into place. She growled, but he only laughed. The vibration from the sound strummed against already taut nerves, setting off shocks.

He leaned over the side of the bed and pulled up a pillow. Lifting her hips, he slipped the pillow underneath them. He had access to all of her now with the added bonus of freezing her in place. Setting his mouth back to her pussy, one finger dipped into her quivering vagina.

"You're so creamy, I think I need to spread it around." He dragged the finger down to her anus.

Raquel's eyes flared. No one had ever had her there. She'd thought about it, fantasized about it, but it had never felt right. He'd said last night he wanted to take her there, but she hadn't thought she would be with him long enough for that to happen.

He pulled more of her cream down, his finger entering her virgin hole. The slight bite of pain sparked through her. He leaned down and sucked on her clit. Her muscles flexed, straining for more.

"Yes. Please, I need your cock in me."

He lifted his head, eyes gleaming. "In a moment." He sat back on his heels and reached for the wand.

Oh my god. He wasn't going to use that again, was he?

He placed the tip of it at her nether hole and pressed it in with a steady pressure. Once more, the bite of pain caused her inner muscles to clench in pleasure.

"That's it, take all of it." The roughness in his voice rasped against her nerves, causing her to clench down even more. The steady pressure of the rod pushed her into a realm she had never imagined. She tried to draw in an even breath, but it was beyond her.

When it finally stopped, he moved forward, positioning the head of his cock at her entrance. She panted and tried to relax her muscles. He eased in, coming to rest at her sweet spot. Electric shocks sparked up and down her body. Taking a deep breath, he shouted out, "Fifty percent!"

Raquel screamed. The ballooning of the rod made it feel like two full-sized cocks invaded her. Hayden lifted up to caress her clit with his rough finger. He slid back out, his return thrust smoother this time. "How does it feel? Can you stand more?"

She felt ready to pass out from the pleasure already cresting through her. *More? He wanted her to take more?* She felt stretched beyond capacity, his steady thrusts taking her breath away.

He pushed down on her clit. Bright lights exploded in front of her eyes. Hayden groaned. His thrusts became short jabs. She clamped down on him and he came.

What felt like hours, days, but was probably only minutes later, she felt her heartbeat finally start to slow. Shivers racked her body. She couldn't take any more. Could someone die from too many orgasms?

He eased out of her and then removed the wand. She clenched down, unable to fully release the instrument of torture...and pleasure.

Hayden's strained laugh echoed around her. "Come on, honey, you need to rest. I promise we'll play more, later." He pulled the wand out the rest of the way and retreated to the bathroom. Water ran, and he came back carrying a cloth.

He placed it on her sore cunt, the wet silkiness of it washing away their mingled juices. When he finished, he dropped a kiss at the apex above her clit. He released her bonds and removed the pillow. She curled up into the fetal position, tremors intermittently racking her. Closing her eyes, she felt the trickle of a tear down her cheek.

Throwing the cloth onto the bedside table, he climbed up behind her. She settled back into the warmth of his chest.

"Hayden?"

He traced a finger from her elbow to her hand. "Mm-hmm?"

"What's happened to us?"

His fingers paused in the middle of their trek. Silence wrapped around them before he sighed. "I don't know. I've wanted you back in my bed since the night before your father's wake, but that was more of a caveman-must-conquer-woman reaction." He bit her shoulder. "I still feel the need to conquer, woman, but I can't get enough of you. Now I need to know how far I can take you and how far you can take me." He lapsed into silence again.

Raquel turned around and looked up into his eyes. "I feel so out of control. I've never reacted to anyone like this before." She paused to nip at his collarbone. "I still want to beat your ass in business, though."

He barked out a laugh and kissed her forehead. "That's good, that's very good. Let's sleep on it, okay? We'll figure it out in the morning."

She nodded and burrowed into his shoulder, sleep overtaking her.

Chapter Five

Hayden moaned. Wet heat engulfed his balls. Nails scraped the inside of his thighs. He moved his arms to reach down and direct her head a little farther north. His hands moved only a few inches before meeting resistance. Tugging harder only resulted in chafed wrists. The little witch had somehow managed to get him tied up while he slept.

He bit back a groan as she removed her luscious mouth.

"Awake now, are you?"

"Yes."

Her eyes gleamed and a flush encompassed her body. She raised her arms in a stretch, her pert breasts pointing to him. His cock jumped.

"I'll be back in a moment." She climbed off the bed and turned to where the fur coat lay on a chair. Her heart-shaped ass swayed with each step she took as she crossed the room. As soon as he could get his hands on her, he was going to take her there. Feel the tight walls encircle him, milk him. He thought he'd use the wand again up her pussy. It had been unbelievable, the feeling of another working in her. He'd never share her with another man, so it was the next best thing. Burned into his mind was the combination of shock, pleasure and lust in her gaze when he'd increased the size of the wand.

She slipped a hand into the lining of the fur, and pulled something out.

"What the hell?"

"Sorry about that. I couldn't figure out how else to get this here without you knowing. I'll pay for the repairs." She held up her hand, chains falling through her fingers.

He shook his head, more curious about what was in her hand. "Don't worry about it."

Smiling, she climbed back between his thighs. She put the object at the base of her knees and crouched over him, her mouth going to his nipples. He felt like coming just from her ministrations; her teeth nipping, her tongue laving, her lips kissing.

She lifted her head after attending to both of them. "I think that's just about right." She bit each nipple once more and reached for the chains. He craned his neck to see exactly what it was they were attached to and groaned when he felt the pressure on his pecs.

Nipple clamps. She'd snuck nipple clamps for him in the lining of the coat. He moaned, enjoying the bite of pain. It had been a long time since he'd last played with this area of sex.

"Like it, do you?"

He looked directly into her eyes. "Yes."

Her lips flirted with a smile before flattening back into a stern line. "You have to be punished."

"What for, mistress?"

"Teacher." She slapped his ribs.

Lust fogged his mind as she played with him. "What?"

"I'm your teacher, you're my student. You've been very naughty with me and you need to be punished."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes, teacher."

"Good. Now for your first lesson, you're going to learn patience." She waved a finger in his face. "I don't trust you to be able to learn it without some help." She held up the other end of the chains. A leather cock ring was attached.

His nostrils flared. "I must have been very bad, then."

"Yes, you were. You looked like such an angel, but were a little devil for talking me into showing you what a wet pussy looked like."

He fell into the role she'd assigned him. "But I really wanted to see one and I'd noticed the looks you've been giving me. All the other guys said I should go for it."

She smacked the inside of his thigh. "The other boys know about us?" She tightened the cock ring.

He immediately felt the effects of the restricted blood flow. "Noooo."

She leaned down and licked the tiny slit at the head. "I'd hope not. If they knew, then I'd have to leave and you'd never see my pussy again. You want to see my wet pussy again, don't you?"

"Yes." He panted.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, teacher."

She got up and straddled his face. "Lick me, like you did when I taught you yesterday."

Raising his head, he darted his tongue out to flick at her clit. She groaned, working her soaked pussy against his mouth. "More, more."

He plunged his tongue into her pussy, wishing he had a hand free to play with her breasts or her clit, or, hell, any part of her hot body.

Moving back to her clit, he sucked hard on it. She shuddered and moved away from him. "Not yet." Her chest was heaving as she drew in short breaths.

She slipped off the bed. "I'll be back. Remember, you have to learn patience."

His head fell back onto the pillow. He wondered if she had felt this overwhelming anticipation when he'd left her tied up. Aware of everything, but unable to do anything but receive the pleasure she doled out. Hearing her moving around through his retreat, wondering what she was doing.

She came back, a covered tray in her hands. "What we have here, my student, are things that are going to help you learn patience. You are only going to come when I tell you to. If you don't wait for me, then you're going to be in bigger trouble. I may have to break out the riding whip and cane you."

The image of her riding him, whip in hand, sent his temperature soaring. She pulled the cover off the tray with a flourish. With a glint in her eye, she held up the bottle of chocolate sauce he'd stashed away months ago.

"I'm hungry for chocolate and I think I want a nice long, hard chocolate stick. Do you know where I can find one?"

"No, ma'am."

She pouted. "I guess I'll just have to make one." She tipped the bottle over, the cool sauce running in streams down his cock. Her hand spread the chocolate around so it covered his entire cock and balls, her clever fingers sending him into orbit as they worked every sensitive spot on his cock.

"Mmmm. That looks wonderful." She leaned down and licked up the underside of his cock. His eyes rolled back into his head and he wanted to come right then and there. She pinched his inner thigh.

"Remember, no coming until I say so." Her smile wicked, she poured more sauce over him. "I want to eat lots and lots of chocolate."

He was not going to survive this. No way in hell was he going to be able to wait until she told him he could come. He pulled at the bonds, but they were just as the store owner described, able to withstand a thousand pounds of pressure.

"You're being a naughty boy again. I guess I have to punish you some more." She tightened the nipple clamps another notch. She probably would have tightened the cock ring too, but there was no slack to it for her to be able to do so.

"Since you like honey so much, I thought you'd like some more." He watched as she took the honey container from earlier, lay back on the bed and canted her hips enough so she could squirt a little up into her pussy.

Turning her back to him, she crouched back over him, her pussy to his mouth. She bent forward and started licking his cock as is if it indeed were an ice-cream cone.

He groaned against her, letting the vibrations caress her most sensitive areas, and she hummed in response. She took three inches of him into her mouth, her teeth lightly rasping against his taut skin.

Firming his tongue, he speared it into her slit, letting her move against it as she sucked his cock in and out of her mouth. She pumped what part of his cock she couldn't cover with her hand, and he thrust up against her.

He inhaled her musky scent mixed with the sweetness of honey and lapped at the liquid now flowing from her. Sighing once against him, she squeezed his cock one last time and turned around.

She straddled his erection and eased down. The heat of her welcoming body consumed him. He tried to thrust into her, but she flowed upward out of reach.

Flicking her fingertip against one of his engorged nipples, she eased back down on to him. "Naughty boy. I'm in charge here."

A rumble sounded from low in his chest, but she ignored him. Positioning his straining cock once more at her heated entrance, she eased one inch of him in at a time. His eyes crossed as he watched her rub her clit in time with the circular motion of her hips.

Her eyes were hooded. "Should I tell you how this feels?" Hayden nodded, unable to do more than grunt and groan. "Your cock's so huge, it's stretching me almost to the point where it's painful. I love the little ridge under the crest. It feels like a little lip, caressing me from the inside."

Hayden nearly passed out at her description he was so close to coming. She reached around and pressed a spot at the base of his cock. Fire streaked across his nerve endings.

He thrust up into her, needing the full release. She sank down onto him, riding him like the bucking bronco that he was. The wet heat of her pussy enveloped him. It was probably as close to heaven as he was going to get and he wanted to soar.

"Now, Hayden." She leaned down and bit one of his nipples. His semen burst forth, flooding into the mouth of her womb.

She cried out and her orgasm wrung another burst from him.

He let his eyes close as she collapsed against his chest, his cock still hard within her grip. After a bit, he felt her reach and loosen the restraints at his wrists. The nipple clamps and cock ring followed. He stretched his arms and then wrapped them around her back, carrying her into sleep with him.

A blue glow illuminated the face of the traitor. Years, it had been so many years since the first steps had been taken and the finish line was so close. He could not be allowed to ruin the many years of work. MacLendon Industries was going to die in a fiery crash. It had to die in a fiery crash, just like little Davy had.

The settlement the lawsuit had garnered had never been enough, would never be enough. Davy would be avenged.

Raquel relaxed in the backseat of the limo, Hayden's arm around her shoulders. He had taken his all-one out and turned it off, saying he preferred a quiet ride back to the city with her.

The last twenty-four hours had been amazing, but she bit her lip. Did she want to see more of him? Did he want to see more of her?

She tilted her head up and opened her mouth, but he laid a finger across her lips. "We'll talk about it later, okay? Let's just enjoy this."

She nodded and burrowed her head back into his shoulder. He pressed a kiss against the top of her head. She watched the countryside fly by. There was so little of it now. New York City had crept into rural America and wasn't letting go of its grip. Her father had loved the urban sprawl for the added business opportunities it afforded him, but she never quite felt comfortable surrounded by so many people.

That was probably why she had elected to go into archaeology. She could have her pick of remote locations to do her fieldwork. Her work with the ancient northern European cultures, specializing in the Celtic cultures, had been extremely lucrative too. The Irish, Scottish and Welsh governments were willing to invest heavily into their cultural heritage because they recognized it helped fuel their number one industry, tourism. The Irish were especially wonderful to have worked for because they had become to Europe what Silicon Valley had been to the U.S. in the 1990s. She'd had her pick of the latest technologies to work with.

Maybe she should take a closer look at what Campbell Holdings could do. She still had some contacts over in Ireland and they were more than happy to gloat over the latest things they could lay their hands on. If anyone would understand the potential of Campbell Holdings, it would be them.

She let the possibilities filter through her mind as the edges of downtown started flowing past the windows. Raising her head, she looked around.

He ran a finger up and down her neck. "Do you want to go to your apartment?"

She sighed. "Yes, I had only planned on going into the office for a couple of hours yesterday anyway."

"Can I have lunch with you? I'm a poor starving man, about to collapse because he was ridden hard all night long."

Raquel laughed. If anyone were about to collapse, it would be her. She had lost count of the number of times she had come. It had begun to blur into one long crest of intense pleasure by the end.

"Sure, why not. My cupboard's kind of bare, though. If you can stand a couple of oat bars and zip packs, I promise to feed you."

"Woman, if you want me to keep my stamina up, you need to do better than that." He flicked the switch for the intercom and instructed the driver to stop at the nearest Chinese takeout.

When they stopped, he ran in and was back in twenty minutes, arms laden with bags. She looked at him with horror. "Who do you think we're feeding? The local army squadron?"

"No. This should tide me over until dinner."

She shook her head at the copious amounts of food he carried. She was no stranger to the hollowness of a man's stomach, but wasn't this taking that a little too far? "Well, I hope you got some General Tso's Chicken in there."

"Two boxes." He grinned. "It's my favorite."

"Mine too." She grinned back, ridiculously pleased they shared something in common.

They ate the feast in the comfort of her living room, discussing politics and the fate of the Red Sox versus Yankees rivalry. Sad to say, he was an unwavering Yankees fan.

"You guys had your chance in '04, but you blew the momentum."

"Look, this year we're going to do it. We beat your butts for over seventy years and Jeter's going to lead them to the World Series."

She rolled her eyes. "If his grandfather couldn't do it in '04, what makes you think he can do it this year? That family is cursed and you know it."

He sniffed and dug back into his box of chicken. They were about to break into the fortune cookies when his all-one rang. Flipping it out of his back pocket, he glanced at the readout. "I'm sorry, my assistant triggered the override. I've got to take this."

"No problem." She gathered up the empties and disposed of them while he took the call.

He walked into the kitchen, his jacket on and his expression forbidding. "I've got to run. Someone hacked into our servers and I've got to do damage control."

"I understand. Remember, I run a business too."

He scowled. "Don't remind me. We've got some discussions still unfinished."

She slipped her arms around his waist and reached up to give him a peck on the lips. "Well, let's just say I may be willing to reopen talks."

His brows rose. "Hm, I'll definitely have to get back to you, then. I don't know how long this is going to take. How about I give you a call when I'm free?"

"Sure." She walked him to the door, snagging his cookie from the table. "Don't forget this. You'll have to tell me what your fortune is when you call."

He leaned down and gathered her into his arms. "I don't think I can call that little nothing a goodbye kiss."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Who says it was intended as one?"

His tongue traced her lips leisurely. With short laps, he coaxed her mouth open and dueled with her tongue. Clenching his hands on her ass, he drew a moan from her. She could feel his erection growing against her stomach before he broke away. "I've got to go." He kissed her quickly once more, tweaked her nipples and walked out the door. Sticking his head back in, he winked. "Think of me tonight."

She nodded, incapable of words. His smile had to have been the one the devil had used to tempt Eve, it was so suggestive. He was gone a moment later.

She shuddered and sat down in front of the table. Absently picking up the remaining fortune cookie, she broke it open. It took her a moment to focus on the words. He is the one.

Hayden walked through the door of his office. Jeannine was waiting for him. "What happened?"

Her hair stood up in odd clumps. "I don't know. One minute we're all working fine, the next minute everyone is getting the same fatal error message. I called Tommy and he came over as soon as his class let out. He took one look at the server logs and said we'd been bombed."

Hayden threw his jacket on his chair and called up his unit. "Invalid execution? What the hell is an invalid execution?"

Jeannine shrugged. "Tommy's still working on the servers and hasn't said anything."

"Have we gotten any calls from clients?"

"No. It seems it's isolated to this office, but Tommy wasn't exactly positive about the threat of it spreading."

Hayden speared his hands through his hair. "Does he know where the bomb originated from?"

"If he does, he hasn't told me. Why don't you just go down and talk with him."

Hayden grimaced. Talking to his younger brother was like talking to someone from a different planet at times, and always when he was hip-deep in computers.

He headed two floors down to where the servers were housed. As usual, the only light was the glow of a screen, his brother's hair haloed from it.

Tommy whirled around, eyes blinking owlishly when Hayden flipped on the overhead light. His frame was scrawnier than Hayden remembered. "Remind me to take you out to dinner."

"Yeah, sure. This is incredible, Hayd. The bomb seems to be a worm at root that transposes to a Trojan as soon as it enters the system. I've seen hybrids before, but this is frozen. The guy who did this is beyond."

Hayden crossed his arms. "Beyond what?"

"Beyond brilliant, beyond genius, just beyond." Tommy's hands were lightning quick as he maneuvered between windows. "It's going to take me a couple of hours to break it down to find out where it came from. Do you want me to call your all-one when I've got it?"

Hayden closed his eyes. If it was going to take Tommy a couple of hours to do anything on a computer, it was bad. "Yeah. I'll order in something and call Mom and tell her you won't be home for a while."

Tommy was already engrossed in the mathematical symbols flashing across the screen. Hayden left the lights on. There were a finite number of times you could go in for corrective eye surgery in a two-year span. Tommy had already hit his limit with ten months to go and Hayden knew he'd resist glasses as long as he could.

He went back to his office and called Raquel. He was grateful no one else was in the office because she answered stark naked. He smiled. "Did I catch you in the middle of something?"

"No, did you want to?" The look on her face reminded him of the cat his mom had owned when he was a kid. Very mysterious, and it had your number. He shifted uncomfortably.

"I wouldn't be averse to catching you at anything." He sighed. "But I'm not going to get out of the office tonight until late, if at all. It looks like it was a bad attack. My IT guy says it's going to take him a few hours to find where it came from."

"I'm sorry. Call me back when you can surface."

He started unbuttoning his shirt. "Something's surfacing right now."

She drew a hand along her collarbone. "Oh really?"

"Yeah." He pressed a button on his console, ensuring no one would walk in on him. "If I were there with you right now, what would you want me to do?"

Her eyelids closed until all he could see was a sliver of her eyes. "I think first, I'd have you clean the dishes."

He stopped in the middle of unzipping his pants. "So prosaic."

She raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't done yet. I'd want you naked, in all of your glory for me to feast my eyes on. Then, when you were done, I'd have you draw me a bath."

"Bubbles?" He threw his shirt and pants onto the guest chair. He sat back in his, the warm leather caressing his skin as it adjusted to his weight.

"But of course. I'd have candles set up in there already, so all you'd have to do is light them. Then I'd have you bathe me."

"Would I be in the tub with you?" He stroked his erection, letting her lazy, sensual tone dictate the pace.

"Eventually. First, I want you to wash me all over, cleaning every little nook and cranny, and I want you to pay special attention to my breasts." She cupped one and massaged it, tweaking the nipple to a point.

His mouth watered. He loved sucking her there, hearing the little moans she let loose. His hand slowly squeezed his cock as he imagined stroking through her pubic hair to find her as wet as the water that surrounded her. "What do you want me to do to your breasts? Suck them, bite them?"

She bit her lip. "Both. I could come from you sucking on them."

A tight ball formed in his stomach. He leaned back to ease the pressure. "What next, Raquel?"

"I want your hand in my pussy and I want to ride it until I come from you sucking my breasts."

Taking a deep breath, he could see it clearly. Her hair wet from the steam of the bath and body glistening from the water. One of her hands had disappeared off-screen, probably to act in place of his.

He rubbed the tip of his cock, spreading the pre-come that had gathered there. "Can I get in with you now?"

"Yes. I want you to get in behind me and settle me with my back to you onto your hard, hard cock. It feels huge when you enter me from behind and I need the pressure. Your beautiful hands are stroking me all over, I can't control them." Her breathing grew deeper, her breasts rising and falling more rapidly. "You start playing with my clit and it hits me. So fast, so hard." Her face flushed and little squeaks filled his ears.

Hayden hunched over, letting the waves of pleasure wash through him. He bit back a shout, not wanting to alert anyone to what they were doing.

They sat in silence for a minute. When her gaze focused on him again, she looked tired, but had a glow to her as she smiled. "I had never done that before either."

"Link sex?" He pulled out a spare handkerchief and wiped his hand.

"Um-hmm. You seem to be pushing all of my boundaries." She ran a hand through her hair. He could detect a slight shiver and the rosy glow that had colored her skin was fading and wished he was there with her to carry her to bed and tuck her in for the night.

"Go to bed, get warm and I'll call you when I can."

"Later." She kissed her fingertip and pressed it to the screen. He did the same, placing his finger on the image of hers before the connection blinked off.

He awoke to someone shaking him. He rubbed his eyes. Tommy stood over him. "I hope you've got something to be waking me at..." He looked at his wrist unit. "Three in the fucking morning."

Tommy's hair was standing on end and excitement glowed from his eyes. "I think I got it. It was a nasty sonofabitch, but I got it."

Hayden sat up on the couch and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Okay, give me a moment to get my brain together."

Tommy scurried over to his desk screen and pulled up a file. It was gibberish to Hayden. Tommy pointed to a section of the screen. "Look here, this is the root. I had to parse it out and track down some hex code, but this is it."

"Tommy, in English, please. For the sake of my sanity, at least."

"This. Section. Of. Code. Is. What..." He flinched away before Hayden could smack him.

"I can cut your salary to an eighth of what it is."

The kid grinned back at him. "You do that and I go to work for the feds. They're willing to pay me what I'm worth."

Hayden glared at his brother. "Since when do you talk to the feds about work?"

Tommy lifted a shoulder and turned back to the screen. "Since they approached me after my AI class wrapped up. That I aced, mind you."

Hayden narrowed his eyes at him. "I hope you turned them down."

"Of course, but now you've got to reevaluate my salary since I've got another job offer on the table."

Hayden clasped a hand on a shoulder that somehow had turned broad when he hadn't been watching. "I'll reevaluate at your annual recap. Now what's this code trying to do to us? And where did it come from?"

"Well, this little bit," he pointed to the same section he had earlier, "is programmed to basically crash all of our computers. Not before it transfers all of our data to a remote location, though."

Hayden still couldn't make heads or tails of it. "What kind of data?"

"All of it. Our payroll, our financial projections, engineering specs from R&D. Every little bit of information that makes it possible to run Campbell Holdings."

"So where's it going to?"

"Ah, this is where I deserve every cent you're going to raise my salary by. This little section of code here is the transmission instructions, telling our servers to transfer their load to servers at this IP address."

"Can we trace that address?"

"I already know it."

Hayden shook Tommy's shoulder. "I'm not watching a mystery here, so cut it with the attempt at suspense."

"It's the servers at MacLendon Industries."

"MacLendon?" Hayden stood up straight. What the hell?

"Like I said, though, this is what you pay me the big bucks for." He scrolled down the screen. "That's just a mask, though. They're not the final destination."

Hayden ran his hands through his hair. "Tommy, I said stop screwing around. Where's the end point?"

"It's right here. See how there's all of this dreck code? I was just scanning because my eyes had crossed by that point and I saw this little bit right here. It's a classic Wronski cover."

Hayden let his breath out slowly. "What is a classic Wronski cover?"

"It's named after this guy from the twenties. Basically, this guy layered two algorithms over each other to confuse whoever was examining the code. Whoever wrote the code, however, only applied it to this section."

Hayden shook his head, unable to see the difference. He rubbed his eyes and patted Tommy on the shoulder. "I'll take your word for it. So, getting back to my original question, where is this guy?"

"He's got access to MI's servers, and it's not any old hacker. I know most of the guys who'd play like this."

Hayden stared at the back of Tommy's head. His shoulders had hunched over further. "You know criminals?"

"Well, they're not exactly criminals, but this is the type of stuff they do. They're like, well, they're like me. You know how you catch a cracker? Send a cracker after him."

Hayden sighed. "You were never a cracker."

Tommy shrugged. "If it hadn't been for you, I could easily have been."

Hayden ruffled Tommy's hair. "Male bonding time over. Where is he?"

"I think this is a home location. I can't get the exact address, but I can tell you he's most likely employed by MI."

Hayden sat on the edge of the desk. He thought for a moment, trying to frame the words. "Would he have been hired to do this job?"

Tommy slouched back in the seat. "Well, you don't pay me enough to guess at motive, but since I've never seen anyone like this, I'm intrigued. I'd guess this is personal, not professional. This guy has either got a grudge against you or against MI."

"Why do you say MI?"

Tommy tapped his fingers on the armrest. "Well, he's trying to make it look like the attack came from MI. Honestly, if I hadn't seen the Wronski before, I probably would have missed it. So would most of the computer guys out there. A lot of them are hackers in their spare time, but the Wronski is high-level stuff. And, almost outdated. Its problem is that it creates a recognizable pattern providing you've seen it before."

Hayden nodded. "Okay, going with that, do you think the more likely scenario is this guy is going after MI?"

Tommy looked him in the eye. "Yeah, that's my gut instinct."

Hayden rubbed his chin. "What do you suggest? Do we bring MI on board, or do we try going it alone to get our stuff back?"

"Having MI on board wouldn't hurt. They might let me at their servers, and I can probably get more data there."

"Do you want this quiet or noisy?"

"Quiet. This guy is serious, and could disappear like the wind."

"Okay. I'll talk with Raquel tomorrow—wait, no—this morning. Do you know anyone over at MI?"

"Yeah, Sarah works there." Tommy's gaze went dopey at the mention of his latest girlfriend.

"Do you even need me to contact Raquel then?"

Tommy crinkled his nose. "Well, yeah. I don't want Sarah to lose her job."

"Done."

Chapter Six

Raquel lounged about in her tub, remembering the call from Hayden the night before. She trailed her hand along her breasts, dipping down past her waist and into the heated cleft below.

Her fingers circled her clit, applying the lightest pressure. She let them work in and out of her pussy. In and out, in and out, press harder, in and out, in and out, change direction, in and out, in and out, press harder. Her breath shuddered out of her as the orgasm washed over her, as relentless and gentle as the tide.

She sank deeper into the water, the bubbles grazing her chin. There was nothing like starting the morning off with an orgasm. It cleared her mind for the rest of the day.

Glancing over to the clock on the wall, she groaned in protest. It was past time for her to be getting to the office to pick up some papers, but she just wanted to laze away her Sunday. It had ceased being a recognized day of rest decades ago, but she appreciated the idea of one day a week where the majority of people weren't thinking about getting business done. However, what was the use of having the power of a CEO at your fingertips if not to take a deserved day off here and there?

She plucked her all-one off the shelf in the corner. "Louise." Closing her eyes, she waited for the connection.

"I'm sorry. I'm currently unavailable. If you leave a message, I will get back to you as soon as I'm able to."

Raquel waited for the recording blue screen to pop up. "Louise, I've decided I'm not going into the office today. If you need me to look at those papers ASAP, send a copy to my all-one and I'll get to them at some point today. I just need some downtime right now, so I'm going to have my all-one on auto-answer. Have a great day."

She set the all-one to auto and placed it back onto the shelf. Carefully standing up, she climbed out of the tub. A walk in the park sounded mighty tempting. It had been too long since she'd taken the time to just go out and enjoy nature. Maybe she'd download a book and bring it with her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd picked up a novel, either. Stepping into the dryer, heated air washed over her, finishing in seconds. She'd always thought that dryer was the invention of a woman who understood the sensuality of the flow of air, as the hottest air always seemed to be at the crotch and chest levels.

Plucking her all-one from the shelf, she popped it into the shopping dock. Programming it to buy the latest NYT bestseller and an erotic novel, she hurried over to her closet. Dragging on jeans, sneakers and a thermal skin jacket, she planned out where to go. Central Park would be a nice walk and she could stop at the market on her way back. If Hayden would be spending any kind of time at her apartment in the near

future, she direly needed to stock up on her foodstuffs. With that in mind, she pulled out her rucksack from her dig days.

She grabbed the all-one and stuck it into her pocket. Looking at the display, she saw she'd missed a call from Hayden.

Hoping everything was okay, she called him back. His face flashed on-screen. His hair was rumpled and dark circles accentuated tired eyes. "Hey, Raquel. I'm sorry to ask this, but can you meet me at my office?"

"What's up?" Her forehead wrinkled.

"I'd rather we discussed it in person."

The hair on the back of Raquel's neck stood up. "Okay. I was about to head out for a walk in the park, but I'll catch a cab and be there in about twenty minutes, traffic gods willing."

His smile was slight, but there. "I'll notify the guard you're to be let up immediately. See you soon."

The screen winked off. Raquel's instincts were screaming. A discussion that couldn't be conducted over links was rarely a good thing in her experience. She doubted it had anything to do with what had happened between them the last few days, otherwise he would have asked her to meet him somewhere besides his office. If she wasn't mistaken, she'd also seen a kid with wild, wiry hair behind him at a desk unit, so it wasn't something that was completely private, either.

She lucked out and Henry was able to hail a cab immediately. The ride to Campbell Holdings was fraught with the usual number of near-death experiences any true New Yorker learned to ignore.

The security guard waved her through and she took the express glide to Hayden's offices. Unlike MI, Campbell Holdings didn't own the building they had their offices in, but they did lease the lower five of the top ten floors.

The door opened and she was intrigued by the decorating scheme. It felt like she was entering someone's home. The décor managed to look sleek and sophisticated, but comfortable and welcoming at the same time. She figured it was the intriguing blend of light woods and taut leather with the cleanest of lines. The lighting was recessed, but highlighted works of art that ranged from soothing and airy to intense and sensual.

She stopped in front of an ethereal oil painting of a waterfall framed by a green forest.

"Do you like that?"

She whirled around. Hayden had managed to sneak up behind her and she was forced to take a step back so her nose wasn't buried in his chest. She inhaled, catching the faint scent of his aftershave. "Yes, I do. It's like you're about to step into a fairy world."

"That's exactly what my great-aunt said." He nodded to the picture. "My great-uncle did the painting, but he based it off of a photograph my great-aunt had taken when she traveled in Scotland while studying abroad in college."

"Scotland?" Raquel turned back to the painting, and was lost in the play of light upon the water. It really did look like the gateway into the world of the Fae.

"You worked there, didn't you?"

"Mmm-hmm. For about a year. But I focused most of my work in Ireland and Wales."

"Do you want to go back there someday?"

She shrugged. "I'm committed to MI for the foreseeable future. Maybe as a vacation, but I don't think I'll ever be able to go back full-time."

His hands came up and massaged her shoulders, his thumbs digging deep. She relaxed into it, letting the tension drain away. "I do miss it on days like today. That's why I was going for a walk when you called."

He pressed his lips against the back of her head. "Thanks for coming in. You should probably come into my office. I doubt you want anyone overhearing what I've got to tell you."

She turned to look at him. "That serious?"

"I'm afraid so." He slung an arm around her shoulders and guided her into the back rooms. When they entered what appeared to be his office, she spotted the kid she had seen behind him on the all-one typing away furiously at an old-fashioned keyboard.

"Hey, Tommy. We've got a visitor. Show some of those manners Mom drilled into you." The boy looked up and blinked. "Raquel, this is my younger brother and IT guru, Tommy. Tommy, this is Raquel MacLendon."

"Oh hi, Ms. MacLendon." He smiled absently.

"Hi, Tommy. Please call me Raquel." She looked up to Hayden. "So, what's going on?"

"That crisis we had last night was someone cracking our servers and crashing them. Unfortunately, the cracker managed to copy all of the files on our servers before killing them."

"I'm sorry, but what does it have to do with me?"

He led her over to a couch that sat in the back corner of his office. Holding her hands, he crouched in front of her. "Tommy was able to trace the guy. He used MI as a mask and, according to Tommy, the guy made it look like it was someone at MI doing the cracking."

Raquel's spine whipped up, poker straight. "Are you telling me MI resources were used to damage your business?"

"Yes." His hands clenched on hers. "I'm not accusing you, Raquel. Tommy was very clear that while it looks like the guy probably does work for MI, what he did was probably a personal job."

Raquel disengaged a hand and ran it through his hair, trying to straighten it. "I get that, Hayden, but still, someone is using my company to hurt you."

She sat back into the cushions. "Was any of the data recoverable?"

His grin was mischievous. "I'm thanking my lucky stars my kid brother is, at times, a paranoiac packrat. He'd been maintaining a remote backup without telling me. He did it through a backdoor program, so the cracker didn't know about it. We lost about a day's worth of data and orders, but nothing that can't be redone. It's a headache, but it could be a hell of a lot worse."

Raquel bit her thumbnail. "Was Tommy able to trace the cracker beyond MI?"

"He could tell the IP address was probably residential, but beyond that, he needs to have access to MI's servers. That's why I wanted you to come here to tell you about this. We don't want to tip our hand to this guy until we know what's going on. Tommy and I aren't sure if Campbell Holdings is this guy's target or if MI is. Tommy'd like permission to work on MI's servers in person. The girl he's currently dating works in your IT department, so if he was over there, it could easily be explained that young love is deepening."

"Convenient."

Hayden winked. "Ain't it just?" His expression sobered. "So, do we have your permission? Can Tommy spend some time over at MI?"

"Who's his girlfriend?"

"Sarah Lawrence."

Raquel reviewed her mental file for Sarahs who worked in her IT department. "Tall, thin, dusty brown hair?"

Hayden turned to Tommy. "I haven't met Sarah yet, is that her?"

Tommy mumbled something. Hayden swiveled on his toes back to her. "Take that as a yes."

"I've met her. I didn't know her last name was Lawrence. Good lord, what on earth were her parents thinking, naming her after one of the state's most famous schools?" Raquel shook her head. "She seemed like a very intelligent person when I met her." She sighed. "Go ahead. When do you want access?"

Tommy piped up. "As soon as possible. I'm chatting with Sarah right now. Can I tell her I'm coming over?"

Hayden stared at Raquel and she nodded her head. He stood, turning back to Tommy. "Sure. Tell her you're going to be in the neighborhood and your big brother was pestering you about meeting the new girl in your life."

"Like that's something new."

Hayden cuffed the back of Tommy's head, but didn't say anything. Tommy grumbled, but closed out of the screen and hurried out of the office, saying he needed to grab his bag.

Hayden moved back to Raquel and sat down next to her. He lifted her up and sat her down in his lap before wrapping his arms around her waist and sighing. "You were an only child, right?"

She nodded. "But I bet you really like having your brother around."

"Most of the time, I do. He's such a smartass, though."

She sat up, faced him and raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

"Well, maybe a little." He kissed her, his tongue slipping through her lips.

"Why don't you guys get a room?" Raquel pulled away from Hayden reluctantly and saw Tommy shifting from foot to foot in the doorway.

Hayden's grip tightened. "Do you want to pound on him or do you want me to do it later?"

She sighed. "Later. I want this guy taken care of."

Hayden pushed her up and followed. "Mind if we take my car?"

"Nope. I took a cab over here, remember?"

Hayden clasped her hand in his and led the way to the glides.

"Hey, Hayd, can I drive?"

Hayden scowled. "No. Remember the last time you had my car? You came back with five scratches on it."

Tommy rolled his eyes as they climbed into the glide. "You are so anal. So what if I brushed a couple of trees. If I'm going to be a better driver, I need to practice."

Hayden pulled Raquel's back to his front. "You won't be practicing in my Jag."

Raquel tugged on his hand and craned her head back to look at him. "You have a Jag? Can I drive?"

Hayden's eyes gleamed with laughter. "Don't take this the wrong way, but no. No one drives my Jag until I evaluate their driving skills in a lesser vehicle."

Raquel looked over at Tommy and caught his conspiratorial wink.

"See, the big bro is a control freak."

Raquel brushed her ass against Hayden's growing erection. "I've noticed."

He pinched her ass. "You're going to pay later."

"I can't wait." She pressed back against him once more before the doors opened into the garage.

The Jag was there waiting for them. It really was a work of art, low-slung and an iridescent blue, the color of the sea on a sunny day.

Hayden held the passenger door open for her and she began to climb into the backseat but he held her shoulder. "Nope, you're in the front seat. I want to be able to fondle you."

"I'm sure that must be against the law somewhere. I'm the smallest person here. It's easier for me to sit back there. Besides, how bad can it be sitting in the back of a Jag?"

Hayden shook his head. "Sorry, my mother reared me right. Well, except for the wanting to fondle you while driving bit. Tommy's in back, you're in front, end of discussion." He nodded to where Tommy was already climbing in from the driver's side.

"Fine. You fondle me, though, and I get to drive the Jag on the way back here." He looked pained, but swooped in to kiss her.

"Agreed."

Raquel climbed in and the seat automatically adjusted to her proportions and body temperature. She sighed at the hedonistic luxury.

Hayden pulled out of the space and raced out of the garage. His hands were relaxed on the wheel and he was in total control. He slipped into traffic and they were on their way to MI. Raquel turned to Tommy. "So, how long have you been working at Campbell, Tommy?"

"Since Hayd caught me trying to hack into the First American Party's servers. That was what, five years ago, Hayd?"

"Yeah, you were fourteen." Hayden's gaze didn't stray from the road, but his one hand slid down and onto her knee.

Raquel raised her eyebrows. "You're only nineteen?"

Tommy grinned. "Yeah, and instead of my mom having to pay my tuition at school, I'm doing it all on my own."

"What are you going to school for?"

"Archaeology with a minor in computer science."

Raquel's jaw dropped. "What on earth are you going into archaeology for? Outside of certain specialties, the pay is horrible, and I'm speaking from experience here. Before I moved to the British Isles, eighty percent of my meals were leftovers."

Tommy sat a little straighter. "Hey, that's right. You were in on the dig that discovered the Viking burial ship in Maryland."

"My grad school days, and believe me, I was just cheap labor. Why are you going into archaeology?"

"My mom is a fan of that classic, Indiana Jones, you know?"

Raquel nodded, remembering her own fascination with those movies as a kid. "But you can have a great and high-paying career in IT."

Tommy leaned forward. "Yeah, but it's like play. I want to do something meaningful. I'm building this program that will assess possible migration routes of cultures, and therefore dig sites, based on local linguistic heritage."

Raquel's jaw nearly dropped and she turned to Hayden. "Do you realize your brother's a genius if he can pull that off?"

Hayden smirked. "Try keeping him from hacking political organizations he doesn't agree with."

Tommy sat back and crossed his arms. "Hey, they're a bigoted group of racists."

"Free speech, Tommy. We worked really hard to win that right back. You don't have to like them, but you have to let them have their say."

Raquel turned back into her seat. Hayden took her hand and squeezed. He shot a look into the rearview mirror. "He's going to spend the rest of the ride sulking, so what kind of music do you want to listen to?"

She squeezed his hand back. "Classic rock."

"Good, a preprogrammed channel. If you'd said alien transmission, I'd have to dump you."

Raquel rolled her eyes. The latest fad in "music" just sounded like an old-time modem trying to connect. At least, that's how her dad had always described it.

They pulled up in front of MI. The doorman opened her door and helped her out. "Jacques, this is Mr. Campbell."

The doorman tipped his hat. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Campbell."

"Jacques, please make sure Mr. Campbell's car is taken directly to the VIP parking for MI. If he's needed, he'll be with me."

"I'll take care of it personally, Dr. MacLendon."

She nodded and led the way to her offices. When they exited, she noticed Louise had taken her at her word and was out for the day.

"One less dragon to worry about."

She turned to Hayden. "What do you mean? Louise is a sweetheart."

"She looks like a former nun. That, or a drill sergeant." He shuddered.

Raquel bit her lip. "I think you may be right about the drill sergeant. She can be very dictatorial when need be."

They entered her office and she sat down behind her desk. She flipped the screen on and located Sarah. She sent her a text message, asking to meet them in her office.

Once she had a reply, she turned back to the Campbell men. "She'll be up in a minute. Can I get you guys something to drink?"

Hayden frowned. "How come you never offered me anything before when I've been here?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "Because I didn't want to deal with you any longer than necessary on your previous visits."

He scowled, but only replied with, "Orange juice if you've got it."

She nodded. "Tommy?"

His gaze was fixed on her desk unit. He looked as if he were about to drool. She stood up and gestured to the chair. "Feel free."

He rubbed his hands and moved with alacrity. She turned to Hayden. "Should I give him anything?"

"Water. If you give him any sugar at this point, he'd probably burst out of his skin." He looked around the office. "Do you have any place to sit besides those torture devices?"

Raquel fought a grin. "Funny you should ask." She went over to the light pad and hit the sequence to open a recessed door to the left of her desk. A large daybed was revealed.

Hayden whistled. "For naps without the employees knowing?"

She shook her head. "No, for the rare occasion that my father slept over. I've kept the sheets cleaned and changed, but I haven't had call to use it yet." She programmed the vendfridge for a juice and a bottled water. She opened the door and pulled them out, handing the juice to Hayden, who immediately cracked it open, and setting the water on the desk next to Tommy's elbow. A knock sounded on her office door.

"Come in."

Sarah entered and sent a confused look to where Tommy was sitting at Raquel's desk unit. "Hi, Dr. MacLendon. What's going on?"

Raquel waved her farther in. "Have a seat, Sarah, and close the door behind you. This is Tommy's older brother, Hayden. They notified me earlier today their servers had been attacked by a cracker using MI as a mask. Tommy thinks the person is an employee of MI, though, and would like a look at our servers."

Sarah's gaze fluttered wide. "Why on earth would someone do that?"

Raquel shrugged. "Who knows? Industrial espionage is an old game. We don't want many people knowing what's going on, and we figured if Tommy made it look like he was here visiting you, not many questions would be raised. I want you to act as if you're trying to recruit him over to MI so that would give him even more cover while he looks at our servers. Are you willing to do this?"

Sarah's head nodded vigorously. "Of course, Dr. MacLendon. Anything to help."

Raquel turned to Tommy. "Do you want to go down now and get started?"

"Yeah." He looked over to Sarah. "Ready for some playtime?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "You're such a goober. That's probably why I kick your ass at Hellvision."

They headed out, arguing over who was the better player.

Raquel looked at Hayden. "Let me guess, Hellvision is the latest super-hot computer game?"

"Right in one." Hayden came over and gripped her ass, pulling her into the cradle of his hips. His erection pressed into her soft belly and she felt her juices gathering, preparing her. She was beginning to think she'd need to check into a rehab center for addictive behaviors if she ever wanted to get over this man. The thought of him no longer in her life, though, caused an ache in her chest and she caught her breath.

"What do you say we christen the bed for your tenure?"

Raquel looped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down. "I think it's past due." Her lips pressed against his. She was first to act, outlining his lips before sliding the seam of them open and exploring his mouth. His tongue slid against hers, coaxing her farther in. He tasted like orange juice and man. She kneaded his shoulders before slipping down to undo the buttons of his shirt.

He broke the kiss and slipped her jacket over her head. His eyes darkened at the sight of her bare breasts. He traced around one turgid nipple and it drew even tighter. "You're so sweet here, like ripe berries. I could suck on them all day long."

Drawing in an erratic breath at the thought, she pushed his shirt down and off. The lights in the office emphasized the cut of his muscles. "Why don't you?"

He framed one nipple with his thumb and index finger, bent down and sucked. The added pressure from his fingers spiked her arousal. She pressed into his mouth, needing more. "Hayden."

His moan vibrated against her, striking the erotic strings that reached deep within her. She clutched and released his hair, letting the silky strands run through her fingers. Lifting a leg, she hooked it around his waist and ground her aching center against him. If she could have absorbed him into her body at that moment, she would have.

Strong hands gripped her ass and lifted her up, his mouth still attached to her breast. She settled her pussy on the outline of his stiff cock and rode the length of it.

He walked her over to the bed and laid her down on it. Lifting his head, he divested her of her remaining clothes. He licked his way down to where she ached most for him. His tongue danced circles around the lips, dipping into the slick juices that gathered for him there, and up to her straining clit.

She writhed on the bed, needing more. He pressed her thighs against the bed, restraining her movements. He lapped at her. The teasing drove her out of her mind.

"Hayden, please, fuck me."

"I'm not done with dessert."

Oh, he was done. Raquel sat up, grabbed his hair and yanked, pulling him over her taking possession of his mouth. Making fast work of his pants, she freed his engorged cock. She pushed him over and mounted him. The slide down was deliciously slow. She took his hands and placed them on her nipples.

Hayden's laugh swiftly turned to a groan as she swiveled her hips on the downstroke. He raised his knees and she leaned back against them, bracing her hands on her ankles. The change in angle put pressure on her G-spot and her breath hitched. He stroked down her stomach, fingers coming to rest where they were joined.

Raquel looked down. Her dark hair mingled with his lighter hair. Her lips were spread wide by his cock. She lifted up, almost emptying herself of him. Pushing down, his ruddy cock disappeared back into her. She watched, entranced. Up. Down. Inch by inch. Freed. Consumed.

He pressed his thumb against her clit and circled it. She was cast out onto a sea of sensation. Buffeted by the waves, she collapsed against his chest as he jabbed into her. Once, twice, warm jets of fluid exploded into her. Claiming her as she had claimed him.

Rough hands shook her awake. She must have dozed. "Raquel. Wake up. I can hear someone outside."

Her eyes blinked open. He was struggling into his pants, grabbing their clothes from the floor. She could hear the footsteps just outside the office. They paused.

She waved her hand at him. "Get in here."

He'd cleared the wall and she hit the close mechanism just as the door to her office opened.

She knew the wall door closed as soundlessly and quickly as the main door to her office, so she didn't worry about being discovered. Puzzled, she wondered why whoever opened the door didn't call out for her. If it had been Tommy, he would have called out.

She whispered. "Lights, fifty percent."

Hayden hadn't bothered with his shirt. She took the clothes he handed her and she slipped into them.

Flipping open the control panel, she activated the spyhole system. The screen remained gray. She pressed another code, but no video appeared. "Weird."

"What?"

"The spyhole system isn't working. All I'm getting is a gray screen. My bypass code can't get around it either."

He leaned down and his warm breath floated across her ear. "Is this room soundproofed?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I think my dad had installed a speaker system so he could hear what was going on in the office to go with the video, but I'm not positive they wouldn't be able to hear us in here."

"It's not Tommy. He would have called out."

"I know. If Louise had shown up, she would have called out too. The doorman would have told her I was here. I have no clue whom it could be." She did have an idea, though. It was probably whoever had cracked Campbell Holdings. Taking a deep breath, she reached to hit the wall door release.

Hayden gripped her wrist. "No. Not yet."

She turned her head so her lips were almost against his throat. "What do you mean 'not yet'? Whoever is out there is probably the guy who cracked your servers."

"I think you're right, but I don't want to confront whoever it is unprepared. They could be violent, and I'm not trained to for that kind of thing."

She sighed. "You're right. I just hate sitting here, trapped."

He rubbed her arms and hugged her to his chest. "I know. Just a few more minutes, though, and he'll probably head out." He kissed her forehead. "I don't like it any better."

Finally, footsteps echoed into the room, but the sound paused outside where they sat. They held their breaths, but the footsteps continued on.

Raquel let out a breath. She looked up at Hayden. His face was cast into shadows in the low lighting and he reminded her of what an ancient Celtic warrior must have looked like just before battle.

He looked down at her and smiled, his expression immediately lightening. "Ready?"

"Yeah. This is nice, but I do not want to spend the entire rest of the day and night in here."

He triggered the release and they slipped out. She sighed as he tugged on his shirt, regretting that the gorgeous view was now hidden from sight.

Striding over to her desk unit, he tapped at the keyboard and popped out his link.

"What's up, bro?" Tommy's voice sounded a little strained.

"We've had a break-in. I need you to come up and take a look at Raquel's unit."

Tommy sucked in a breath. "Yeah, sure. Um, I'll be up in about ten minutes."

"Get here sooner if you can."

"Yeah." Tommy cut the connection. Hayden turned to her with a twinkle in his eye. "I think I saw Sarah's hair every couple of seconds at the bottom of the screen."

Raquel opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it. She glared at him. "You Campbell men are way oversexed."

His smile reminded her of a wolf as he stalked her. "You women love it, though."

She circled her desk, managing to stay just out of his arm's reach. "Ha! Keep telling yourself that, buster. We only put up with your posturing because other women are too nuts for us to deal with."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really, and who was it who I saw about to make out with Myra?"

Raquel blushed, but fired back. "Have I been with anyone else since you and I hooked back up? Wait. Let me rephrase that, have I had a moment to hook up with anyone else since you?"

"Have you wanted to?"

Raquel paused. She was so caught by the question. Had that been a note of vulnerability in his voice? He pounced.

Picking her up in his arms, he carried her to her chair. He settled her in his lap and sprinkled kisses along the rim of her ear. She pulled away, cupped his cheeks in her hands and looked him dead in the eye. "I'm not sure what's happening between us, but I have not even thought of being with anyone but you over the last three days. I don't know if it's plain old lust or what. I'm willing to see where this road leads. How about you?"

He gripped one of her hands in his and carried it to his mouth. He pressed a kiss against her open palm. "That first night, I thought you were one of the most beautiful women that I had ever come across and, for the six months after it, one of the biggest pains in the ass in the history of womanhood. You'll keep me on my toes." He grinned.

She smiled back and leaned in to kiss him. The door opened and Tommy and Sarah hurried in, both looking a little worse for the wear. She climbed out of Hayden's lap, surreptitiously making sure her clothes were in order.

Hayden laughed and pinched her ass. She jumped and shot him a glare. "Get up. Let Tommy at the unit."

He stood up and tugged her hand. "No hovering now. Let the computer geniuses do their work."

Raquel frowned at him, but followed where he led her. Tommy sat down in the vacated chair and pulled up the command module. He typed away furiously, nodding when Sarah would point out something. Raquel went over to the vendfridge and pulled out waters for them all. She placed Tommy's and Sarah's in front of them, but they were entranced with whatever was happening on-screen.

She went back to where Hayden had seated himself in one of the visitor chairs. He patted his thighs and she climbed into his lap. She held up a bottle of water for him and he took it.

It was half an hour before Tommy sat back. He rolled his shoulders and rubbed his hands together.

Raquel spoke up. "What's going on?"

Tommy and Sarah turned to her, their looks identical ones of someone who has just been reminded they were standing in front of an audience.

Grabbing his water, Tommy uncapped it and chugged it down. "This is definitely the guy. Basically, what he did was lay a trail to your unit from Campbell Holdings. I could go back to my computers right now and find that the original source I tracked will read as another mask layer and that the originating unit is yours."

Raquel shook her head. "I don't understand. My office is biometrically protected. Only those who are granted access can get past the door when it's locked."

Tommy looked between Hayden and Raquel. "Could you guys have left it open after we went to Sarah's workstation?"

Raquel turned to Hayden. "We locked the door, didn't we?"

Hayden nodded. "Remember, I said I didn't want us to be interrupted?"

"That's right. But then, how did this guy get in?" Raquel paced the length of the office. She didn't like the way her thoughts were turning.

"Who has access to your office?" Sarah's thin voice piped in.

Raquel turned back to them and held up her hand, ticking off a finger with each name. "Myself, Louise, Edward Lightfoot, our CFO, and Carly Feany, the board chair."

"What about your head of IT?" Hayden stood and came up behind her. He rubbed her shoulders. The warmth from his hands penetrated the layer of ice that had begun to encase her.

She looked to Sarah. "Probably, now that I think about it."

Sarah's head was bobbing up and down. "Vinnie said if he ever needed access to your office, he didn't want to have to wait around for it. He got permission from Carly and Edward."

"Raquel, where do you keep your hot tea?"

She turned around in Hayden's light embrace. "Why? Do you want some?"

"Yeah, but I want you to have a cup too. You're shaking like a leaf."

She nodded, knowing it was only sheer willpower that kept her teeth from chattering. From the hot liquids station, she programmed two cups of chamomile tea, the kind her mom had given her when she was sick as a kid. If Hayden were one of those macho guys who wouldn't touch the herbal stuff, she'd pour it down his pants.

He took the cup from her and drank. Setting the cup down, he leveled his gaze on hers. "Now you."

She inhaled the scent of the tea first. The fresh, flowery aroma immediately began to calm her down. Just like when she had been a kid. She took a sip and the heat almost scalded her, even though she'd set the water temperature to a comfortable one hundred and five degrees.

Taking a longer draught, the liquid warmth spread through her body to the tips of her fingers and toes. Hayden nodded at her. "What do you think of Vinnie?"

She glanced at him sharply. "He's a good guy. He knows his stuff and gets things done when he says they're going to get done. He treats these systems as if they were his babies."

"He always says computers give him less heartburn than his daughters do. I don't want to be around when he finds out you didn't call him in on this immediately, Dr. MacLendon."

Raquel nodded at Sarah's assessment.

Hayden placed his cup down and crossed his arms over his chest. "What about the other people who have access, Raquel. Could any of them do it?"

Raquel shook her head, as much in answer as denial that the possibility existed. "Carly's a straight-arrow businesswoman and spends all of her free time raising champion show dogs. Edward started working for MI when he was a teenager. He's been here for almost twenty years. Louise was my dad's lover, for Christ's sake. None of them would do something like this. It would be like betraying my father, and none of them would do that."

She bit her lip and gazed at Hayden, tears beginning to form. "Why is this happening, Hayden? Who hates me enough to do this?"

He reached over and gathered her into his arms. "I don't know, baby. We'll find out, though, won't we, Tommy?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, Raquel. You've got the Campbell boys on your side. Our mom always said hell had better watch out when we got there, because we'd turn it upside down within fifteen minutes."

Chapter Seven

Hayden reached down and took Raquel's hand in his. Her eyelashes dusted her cheeks as her head lay against the headrest. They had dropped Sarah off at her apartment and Tommy off at his mom's. Raquel had fallen asleep by that point, so he had put his mom off on meeting her. She needed the rest.

The last forty-eight hours had drained her. Circles had started to form under her eyes. He ran his thumb across the silken skin between her thumb and index finger. There was a small callus just past the first knuckle of her finger. It was probably residual from her time in the field.

He pulled into his garage and turned off the Jag. Sitting back in his seat, he regretted having to wake her. He shook her shoulder. She mewled and batted at his hand. "Come on, Sleeping Beauty. We're at the prince's bachelor pad."

Her eyes blinked open, still clouded with sleep. "What?"

"We're at my place. Come on, let's get you in a real bed." He climbed out of the car and ran around to her side. She was still buckled in when he opened the door. He undid the catch and pulled her nearly dead weight out.

"Only if you promise to carry me up and let me sleep. No sex. I'm too tired."

He bent and slung her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"Hey!"

He slapped her ass. "So am I, woman. You've drained me dry for the next five years."

Her voice was muffled as he went through the door into his house. "I'm not the one who's got a stiffie every fifteen minutes. It's your own damn fault."

Her hands started roaming his butt, fingers pinching him every other step. He slapped her ass again. "Hey. You were the one who said no sex. If you keep that up, I cannot be held responsible for my actions."

"Promises, promises. How much farther?"

"Two more flights."

She pushed against his lower back and he adjusted for her weight shift. "How many floors are in this place? Wait a minute. Is that an Arnot?"

"There are three floors, plus the below-ground garage, and yep. Phillipe and I went to school together. He gave it to me for helping him pass algebra sophomore year of high school."

She spanked him. "You have an original Arnot? And you went to school with him? Do you know how long I've been trying to lay my hands on one of his pieces? They're practically spoken for until I die."

Hayden shrugged her off his shoulder, rotated it to work some feeling back in and pushed her through the doorway of his bedroom. "Yeah, well, it helps to have slipped the guy the answers to the final."

Raquel grumbled. He leaned down. "What was that? I must have missed it."

"I said, you sanctimonious bastard, if you're missing it in the morning, don't come looking for me."

A shout of laughter burst out of his chest. He picked her up and whirled her around. "I'm very glad we hooked up."

"Hold still, I'm getting dizzy." She leaned back in his arms and stared back at him. "Surprisingly, I am too. That Arnot still is not going to be here when you get up."

"Wouldn't it be called stealing?"

Raquel waved a hand in the air. "You can get your cheating buddy to make you a new one. I want to own one before I die."

Hayden leaned down and nuzzled her throat, biting the base of it. Her breath caught. She leaned back in his arms, giving him even more room to work.

He lifted her up, rubbing his aching cock against her mons. She moaned as he set her on the bed. He stripped off her jacket and then her pants. The little thong she was wearing provided almost no coverage. He could see her cream glistening against the fabric. He bent down and swiped his tongue against her.

She gasped and pushed her hips up. He nipped at her through the black lace and inhaled her scent, ripe, musky woman.

He pulled the thong out of his way and lapped at her pussy. She pumped her hips against his face in response. As soon as he felt her starting to tighten, he pulled away.

"Hayden. Come back."

He shook his head and turned away to get a hold of himself. For what he had in mind, he needed total control. He bit the inside of his cheek and quickly stripped out of his clothes. Walking over to his dresser, he pulled out the stash he needed for this.

Bringing the supplies over, he set them on the floor next to the bed. Raquel had stretched out, one leg cocked at the knee. "What are you planning?"

Lying down next to her, he ran a palm from her collarbone to her breast, rubbing against the pebbled nipple. "I thought I'd play here for a little bit. Maybe I'll be able to get you off just by sucking on your breasts." Her chest expanded as she pulled in air. He stroked down her stomach and circled a finger around her navel. "Then I thought I'd pay some attention to here to see how sensitive you are." Goose bumps had pricked up along her skin.

His hand slid down underneath her panties. He played with her clit so that it was standing at attention and then slipped two fingers into her. "Then I thought I'd spend

some time here." He slipped his drenched hand out from between her legs and traced them down to her nether hole. Pressing his fingers against it, he murmured, "Then I'd fuck you up your ass."

Her eyes darkened and she licked her lips.

"Are you ready, Raquel?" He pressed in. The tight ring of muscle resisted, but eventually gave way. A shudder ran through him at the thought of it closing in on his cock.

He pumped his finger in and out. After a minute she began pressing back against the thrust. He bent down and nipped the soft skin where her leg joined her hip and pulled his finger out. "I asked you a question."

"Yes." Her voice was breathy and barely audible.

He moved up and kissed her. Delving his tongue deep, he feasted on her. Her tongue tangled with his, fighting for supremacy. Cupping his hand around her breast, he kneaded it, plucking at the nipple.

Breaking from her mouth, he kissed his way down her neck to her other breast. He drew the tightly beaded nipple in. With his tongue, he pushed the tip against the roof of his mouth and pulled on it with a steady suction.

She gripped his hair, clutching him closer to her. Her damp folds pressed against his thigh as she rode him.

He released her breast and traced a pattern with his tongue to the peak of the other one. She twisted toward him, cutting short his journey. He repeated his previous torture, this time using his teeth at the edge of her areola. She grunted his name and pressed hard against his thigh, shuddering.

Lifting his head, he saw she had collapsed back against the pillows. He grinned at the sight and set to work rousing her into wakefulness.

Her abdomen was tightly muscled. Ripples fluttered under her skin, residual spasms from the orgasm that had gripped her.

Moving down her hip to her inner thighs, he scraped his teeth along each side, noting the clenching of her muscles. He kissed his way down each leg and, when she cried out, discovered that the backs of her knees were another hotspot.

He reached down and picked up the lube he had left on the floor. Setting it next to her hip, he slid his hands up her legs to her pretty cunt. The folds were a soft pink, deepening in color as they led inward. Cream dripped from them and her clit was standing tall, begging for attention. He looked at her face and met her gaze.

Her eyes glittered and she ran her hands down to frame her pussy. "I think I'm ready for you."

He drew a finger down her cleft and brought it to his mouth, savoring her innate spiciness. "I'd agree."

Bending down, he licked his tongue up each side of her slit, ending with a swirl across her clit. She groaned each time. As he slowly fucked her with his tongue, her slick walls clasped him, but couldn't hold on.

When she moved to grip his head with her thighs, he raised up to sit on his haunches. He took the tube and uncapped it, and her breath speeded up.

He squeezed out a line of the lube and coated her rear entrance with it. One finger entered her, then two. She bit her lip and her hips pistoned against his invading digits. A third finger soon joined the first two.

After a minute of the sensual torture, he pulled them out and slicked another dose of lubricant up and down his engorged cock. He spread her thighs over his and lifted her hips. Positioning the tip of his cock at her little rosette, he began pressing in.

She relaxed for him, letting in a half-inch in at a time. He closed his eyes as her ring of muscle gripped just below the head of his cock. If he weren't careful, he'd ejaculate before he got all the way in.

He played with her clit with his other hand, getting her to relax enough for him to surge a little farther in. She was panting now. She pressed down, taking a little more of him. He started a shallow thrusting, fighting the urge to take her as he wanted to. The scent of her arousal wrapped around him and the siren's call was overwhelming.

He picked up the pace, entering her fully with each thrust. Her hands twisted in the bed sheets next to her head. He drove three fingers into her pussy and bent down, taking her breast into his mouth. She clutched his head and he felt the fluttering of muscle signaling her impending orgasm. He shortened his thrusts, needing to be fully in her when she crossed over. Biting down on her nipple, he pressed his thumb against her clit.

She shouted. Her muscles milked him and he let loose his restraint. Pounding into her, he emptied himself.

Raquel sat bolt upright. She covered her ears, protecting them from the shrieking alarm. Hayden's head remained still on the pillow, his eyes closed. She shook his shoulder, but got no response.

"Hayden, wake up. Hayden!" she shouted into his ear. His eyelids fluttered, but remained closed.

Throwing the bed sheets off them, she went for the one thing guaranteed to wake a man up. She took his cock in hand, bent down and sucked.

His eyes popped open.

She lifted her head and smacked his stomach. "Turn that thing off, now."

He blinked. "What?"

"Turn off the fucking alarm. I'm going deaf." He blinked twice more before reaching over and touching the control pad on his nightstand.

She stuck a finger in her ear and wiggled it. Glaring at him, she gathered the sheets around her and climbed off the bed. "If I go deaf, you are paying for the repairs."

He grinned as he caught the corner of the sheet. He tugged. She tugged back. He yanked and she let the sheets go. With her head high, she walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

The water cascaded down from above her head and she ran her hands through her hair, completely wetting it. Calloused hands wrapped around her breasts from behind. She leaned back into his chest, the light covering of hair cushioning her back.

He licked the tendon that ran from her shoulder and up her neck. She shivered.

"You're all sweaty. I think I need to wash you."

She picked up the washcloth and held it over her shoulder. "Be my guest."

He took body wash from the dispenser and lathered up the cloth. He focused his efforts first on her breasts. The nubby material tickled against sensitive skin.

She rolled her head and ran her nails up the outside of his flanks. Reaching back, she gripped the firm muscles of his luscious ass. She could feel the first stirrings of his cock and pressed back against it, enjoying the feeling of it riding between her cheeks.

Remembering what had happened last night sent goose bumps racing along her skin. The fullness of taking him there had her mind blanking from the pleasure. She had enjoyed the magic wand, but having his live, hot flesh in her ass had created an inferno inside her.

His hands spread the soap down to her stomach. He massaged and kneaded the muscles there, his finger flicking in and out of her navel.

She caught her breath. "So, what are we going to do today?"

His teeth nibbled on her earlobe. "Hmm?" His hands slid around to her butt, pushing her away from his chest.

She bent over, bracing her arms against the wall of the shower. "I said, what are we going to do today?"

Two of his fingers ran up her spine. The light touch had her nipples beading even tighter as they ran back down to the crevice of her ass. He circled her rosette and continued down to her dripping pussy.

He plunged his fingers inside her and she cried out. She pushed back against him. He pulled his fingers out, but then rammed his cock into her.

The shock of the penetration caused her to gasp. Her inner muscles clenched, pulling him deeper, ever deeper.

His hand moved to her front, and he placed two fingers along either side of her erect clit. The power of his thrusts had her riding his hand. She soon dissolved into a writhing mass of pleasure from the constant friction.

He shouted and exploded deep inside her. She collapsed to her knees and he followed her down, still joined to her.

When the dots stopped dancing in front of her eyes, she took in a shuddering breath. "That was a better wake-up than the alarm."

His nose nuzzled at her neck. "Better than coffee. As for what we're going to do today, I figured we'd start off by going to our respective places of work and deciding from there."

She managed to sit up and brushed her hair out of her eyes. The water still fell down onto them. "Come on then, big boy, we've got to get going."

He sighed. "If we must." He stood, braced his back against the wall and pulled her up until she lay against his chest. She licked a still-erect nipple.

"Maybe we could stay in here for a little bit longer. I still need to get cleaned up, and you do too." She licked her lips.

He slapped her ass cheek. "No more. I'm done for the day. You've wrung me dry."

She laughed. In the face of his teasing attitude, all she wanted to do was smile and play. "So you keep saying. Just wait until lunch. I'll bring something by your office."

He smiled down at her. "Just bring yourself and we'll be set."

They finished the shower and Hayden got dressed for the day. There was something about the way a well-cut suit draped on a man that made her hot and bothered. He drove her to her apartment where she changed clothes, after which he dropped her off at work.

She leaned down and kissed him through the window. "I'll give you a call later once I check my schedule."

"Take care. Remember, if anything funky happens, give me a call."

"Will do." With one last kiss, she pulled away and hurried into the building. Louise was waiting for her when she finally got off the glide.

"You look refreshed. What did you do this weekend?"

Raquel walked into her office and set her things down on the desk, booting up the screen. "Not much."

Louise narrowed her eyes as she sat down across from her. "You've got that look about you. I know it, you were with a man."

Raquel blushed. Talking to Louise about her love life was like talking to her mom, embarrassing as all get-out.

"Who was it? It was the guy who had sent you the coat, wasn't it?"

Raquel nodded. She got up and walked over to the vendfridge and ordered a bottle of water. "Do you want anything, Louise?"

"Just the name of this guy. You've never looked more relaxed and I'm glad you've found someone to be with. I know you've been hiding yourself in your apartment since you took over MI."

Raquel shrugged and took a sip of water. "It was out of the blue. I'd kind of like to keep it quiet right now. I'm still not sure if this is going to be more than a fling. If it ends up being short-term, I'd like to be able to leave him behind."

Louise walked over and hugged her. "It's okay, honey. You'll tell me when you know if he's the one, won't you?"

Raquel hugged her back, feeling the love the other woman had for her. "Thanks, Louise. You've always been there for me since Mom died. I really appreciate it."

Louise wiped at her eyes. "Not every young woman would be willing to let her father's new lover into her life, but you've been like a daughter to me."

Raquel knew her smile was watery. She waved her hand in front of her face. "If we're not careful, we're both going to have to redo our makeup." She drew in a deep breath and blew it out. "There. Let's go over the day's schedule."

She had meetings all morning and afternoon. Lunch was booked too. "Damn. I forgot about the meeting with Edward."

"We can reschedule if you want."

Raquel shook her head. "No. I want to go over those figures with him. I'll just make other arrangements for what I had planned on."

"A little lunch nookie?" Louise's eyes twinkled.

Raquel laughed. "Maybe." She shrugged. "He'll understand. For now I want to go over the proposal for the Paris investment."

Louise nodded and stood, but turned back at the door. "Oh, before I forget, Vinnie told me he heard that Sarah Lawrence's new boyfriend was in over the weekend."

Raquel let her brow furrow. "So? We've never had a strict policy about staff receiving visitors."

"Well, her new boyfriend happens to be the younger brother of that Hayden Campbell."

Raquel raised her brows. "Oh?"

"He's also the IT manager for Campbell Holdings. I think Sarah needs to be reminded there could be a conflict of interest there."

Raquel smiled. "Thanks for the heads-up. I'll talk to Vinnie. By the way, how did he know Sarah's boyfriend is Ha—Campbell's younger brother?"

Louise frowned. "He wasn't quite clear about that." Her expression lightened. "Well, I'll leave it in your capable hands. Let me know if you need anything else regarding Paris."

"I will." Raquel frowned after Louise had left. She swiveled in her chair to look out the windows at her back. The cityscape of New York may as well have been the plains of Kansas for as much attention as she paid to it. Tommy had said he'd visited Sarah a few times before, but no one had bothered to mention it to her before. Coincidence that it had been brought up now after her computer had been cracked to make it look like she had been the source of the Campbell Holdings break-in? She shook her head and turned on her link. After a minute on hold, she was connected to Hayden's office.

He smiled. "How's my girl?"

"Confused. How about you?"

He leaned back in his chair. "About the same. Can you make it to lunch today?"

She sighed. "I'd love to, but I forgot about a meeting with Edward."

Hayden's features hardened. "Ah, yes, your CFO who claims we're on shaky ground. We're going to have to talk about that, you know."

"I do. We're supposed to talk about another investment opportunity, but I'll try to find some way to bring your deal back into the conversation."

"Do that. I want to know where he got his figures from."

"I will. Has Tommy made any progress on the cracker?" Raquel played with her earring, imagining the feel of Hayden's mouth on her earlobe. She shook her head. She was turning into a nymphomaniac, unable to go fifteen minutes without thinking about sex.

"He was right on the money about your unit being a mask. If he hadn't seen the original data, he would have bet your unit was the originator."

"I know my way around computers, but I've never been interested in knowing more than the programs I needed to in order to get my work done."

"Me neither. He's got classes this afternoon, so he promised to work tonight on digging through the data he accumulated over the weekend." Hayden looked over his shoulder. "I've got to go. Do you want me to pick you up after work?"

"Yeah, I've got to get to my gym, though, as Jimmy gets worried if I don't show up every couple of days. Do you want to come be my sparring partner?"

"I'll be there. Give me a call when you have an idea of when you'll wrap up for the day."

"Will do. Talk with you later."

He blinked off, and she switched to her desk unit, pulling up the figures for the Paris proposal. She was soon lost in estimates of building costs and historical preservation.

Raquel swirled the noodles onto her fork and lifted them to her mouth. The subtle burn of the peanut sauce danced across her tongue. "Edward, I know we've gone over this dozens of times already, but I can't seem to get the offer from Campbell Holdings out of my head."

Edward Lightfoot's ice-blue gaze cut into her. "I know it was one of the last deals your dad was working on, but you can't let sentiment get in the way of good business sense."

Raquel might have been tempted by the man's model-good looks, as light eyes and dark hair always were a secret fantasy of hers, but his cool all-business treatment of her nipped anything that might have developed of the attraction in the bud.

He used his chopsticks in the same manner as he did everything else, with deliberate care and economy of motion. He would have gone over those figures thoroughly, making sure he wasn't missing anything. If anything were funny about them, he would have said so. Edward took pride in his well-deserved reputation as one of the keenest minds in the business world.

Raquel took another bite of the noodles. "What would you say if I asked you to go over those figures again?"

His gaze pinned her. "What's going on? You're normally more direct."

If she didn't trust her instincts, she had nothing. "I think something funny's going on. I can't explain everything quite yet, but I've been in contact with Hayden Campbell and he convinced me someone's purposefully thrown a wrench into the works for our deal with Campbell Holdings. How did you get the figures that you reviewed?"

Edward's brow creased. "The usual method. Campbell sent them over by courier to your office and Louise sent them down to mine. Unless someone got to the encoded courier, I don't see how what Campbell sent over could have been tampered with."

Raquel sighed. This is what she had been afraid of. "Well, we'll have to take a look at the courier then. I'll have Campbell get in touch with you so he can give you the proposal again directly. If you still think it would be a bad investment for us, then I'll drop the subject for good."

Edward nodded and made a note on his link. "Very good. Now, getting back to Paris."

Hayden scanned through Tommy's report. "Explain this again."

"I had a breakthrough when I was in my cultural foundations class. Basically, you can think of programs in kinship terms. We were talking about kinship schemes, especially the Eskimo scheme, and well, it just made sense all of a sudden. The program that siphoned off our records is probably a second-generation cousin to the base data architecture system MI uses."

Hayden rubbed his forehead. It was bad enough when Tommy would go off in techno-speak, but when he started talking in anthro-geek-speak, forget following what he was saying. "Simple terms, Tommy. Remember, I'm a poor misguided business major."

"Basically, these two programs are second-generation derivatives of another program. Whoever created these two programs had to know the creator of the original program, however, there are enough differences in syntax that I'd say it was two different people who developed the derivatives."

Hayden ran his hands through his hair. "How long do you think it's been since the original program was developed?"

Tommy looked over his shoulder and waved to someone. There was a sudden influx of people in the background of the screen. "Sorry, Hayd, what was that?"

"Can you guesstimate how long it's been since the original program was developed?"

"Oh well, it's probably been at least five years. Parts of it seem like it was for systems that were in common use up to fifteen years ago. I can say for sure the most recent sections of code that I'd guess were written by the original developer are for systems that are three generations removed from current technology."

Hayden figured he'd be better off talking to Tommy when he wasn't between classes. "Okay, I'll talk to Raquel and see if we can meet up tonight. When is your last class over?"

"Five. I could get there probably by five thirty. I took one of the protos today."

Hayden sat bolt upright. "You did what?"

"Uh, the bell's going off. Gotta go."

"Tommy—" The damn idiot cut the connection before Hayden could get a word in. He punched in the redial code, but only got Tommy's "in class" message.

He was going to wring the kid's neck when he got in. Stupid fool, taking one of the protos. If he got pulled over, the cops were going to be on him like white on rice. The protos hadn't been cleared for everyday road testing yet, and if Campbell Holdings got fined for the unlicensed use of a prototype, he'd take it out of Tommy's hide.

Punching up Raquel's code, he got an away message for her too. "Hey, Raquel, it's Hayden. Give me a call when you're available." He hung up and turned to putting the finishing touches on the revised estimates for the quarterly earnings.

He was about to tear his hair out from piecing together the reports from his R&D divisions when Raquel called back.

Glancing at his wrist unit, he saw it was already four o'clock. Where in the hell had the time gone? "Hey, babe."

"Hey. I just wanted to let you know that I got Edward to review your figures once again. I told him you'd drop them off personally. Can you bring them with when you pick me up?"

"Sure. By the way, Tommy called to say he's made progress and he said he'd be able to be here before six, but I know you wanted to work out. Do you want me to call him and tell him to come later?"

She shook her head. "No, I'll just call Jimmy and tell him I'll be by later tonight. He doesn't close until eleven, anyway."

"Okay. I'll be by in about thirty minutes then."

She blew an air kiss at him. "See you then. Just come on up to my floor. I'll have Louise take you straight to Edward and I'll meet you at his office."

He smiled. "See you."

They both clicked off at the same moment. He gathered his stuff and put in another call to Tommy.

Tommy was still blocking calls, so Hayden left a message saying he might be a little late, but should be back at the office by six thirty. "And I won't forget about the proto, either, so don't think you can squirm your way out of it. Mom's going to have a pissy fit when she finds out."

The traffic was usual weekday in New York, congested and heart attack inducing. He programmed in some Metallica. The bands of today just couldn't match those of a century ago for pure, unadulterated fuck-the-world songs.

When he walked into MI, the doorman escorted him to the executive glide. Louise met him at the door. "Mr. Campbell."

He nodded. "Ms. DiVollo." The woman looked as if she had been force-fed a lemon. He held up a slim disk. "I'm supposed to see Lightfoot."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I know exactly why you're here, Mr. Campbell. I have no idea why you persist in pursuing an association with MI. Robert was correct in not furthering his acquaintance with you. Unfortunately, I have yet to convince Dr. MacLendon of that fact."

A corner of his mouth kicked up. "Scottish charm and all of that, Ms. DiVollo. It's been useful for me. If you wouldn't mind, I believe Lightfoot's expecting me and I'm sure he'd like to get home."

She sniffed and turned her back to him, proceeding down the hall. He bit back a laugh. *Exactly like Sister Antoninus*. His first-grade teacher put the fear of hell into every single one of her students. DiVollo pressed her thumb on a door lock about fifty yards down from Raquel's. It slid open without a whisper of sound. "Edward, Mr. Campbell is here to see you." She turned around and walked back to her desk.

"Thanks for the directions," Hayden called out to her retreating back, but it only stiffened further. He shrugged and walked over to Lightfoot.

The man was built like a mountain. Hayden held out his hand and was met with a firm, almost painful, grip. "Lightfoot. Thanks for meeting with me. I appreciate it."

The man nodded. If Hayden hadn't already been clued in by the man's name, his features would have betrayed his Native American heritage. "Campbell. I have to say I'm unable to see what our meeting is to prove. I went over the reports you provided earlier thoroughly. It will be hard to change my mind on this matter."

"I appreciate your willingness to at least review them this last time. I'm prepared to let the matter drop if you still feel Campbell Holdings is not in a position to pursue the project as presented."

Lightfoot gestured to a meeting area to the side of his office. "Let's go over here. It will be easier for me to point out anything I have a question on."

Hayden followed him over and handed the disk to him when Lightfoot held out his hand. He quickly loaded it up to the pertinent information. Hayden noticed the rapidity Lightfoot exhibited in manipulating the various programs on the unit. "Do much programming?"

"Hm?" Lightfoot broke from his concentration on the figures flying past on the screen.

Hayden sat back in his chair. "The only person I've seen move through a unit as fast as you just did is my kid brother. When he's not in school, he's my IT manager."

Lightfoot shrugged. "You have to get this fast when you do as much work as I do on the blasted things. That's funny." He did some more fancy finger work and pointed to a side-by-side shot on the screen. "On the right are the figures I received from your office last week and on the left are the ones you just brought me. This was the key point in my argument against merging with Campbell Holdings on this project."

Hayden leaned forward. "I see what you mean." The section Lightfoot had pulled up were the current and projected manufacturing outputs of his various divisions. The figures on the right were lower than the ones on the left by almost a third, if not more, in places.

He met Lightfoot's cool gaze. "I honestly have no idea how to explain this. What I brought you today is an exact copy of what my office sent last week. I can get the timestamp of when it left our building and compare it to when it arrived here, but I have a feeling whoever screwed with my reports isn't going to leave a trail as easy to follow as that."

Lightfoot sat back in his chair. "I agree. I also agree the difference in these numbers warrants further consideration. If you don't mind, I'd like to commission an independent audit. I'm inclined to believe you, but you understand I'm not willing to risk MI's future on your word alone."

"Go right ahead. In fact, here's my CFO's number and you can contact her for anything you or your auditor needs." Hayden scribbled the number on a slip of paper from his pocket. He handed it to Lightfoot, but the man's attention was fixed on a spot behind Hayden's shoulder.

He glanced over it and saw Raquel standing in the doorway. Hayden returned his gaze to Lightfoot. A faint redness tinged the man's cheekbones, but otherwise his expression was perfectly flat. Hayden stood and walked over to Raquel. He slid his hand down her back and let it rest just above her ass as he guided her into the room. "Thanks for coming, Raquel. Lightfoot and I were just talking about the figures he had received last week." Hayden shot the man a look from behind Raquel's back as he helped her into the seat he had vacated.

The man's eyes hardened, but he infinitesimally inclined his head. Hayden had to be satisfied with that. Raquel would flay him into tiny little pieces if he were to jump across the table and beat the man to a pulp.

Raquel crossed her legs at her very fine ankles. "I'm sorry I'm late. Louise popped into my office with something she said needed my immediate attention." She smiled at Hayden and then turned to Lightfoot. "What do you think, Edward?"

The man was silent for a moment, his gaze moving between the two of them. Hayden remained standing at Raquel's shoulder. "I think what Mr. Campbell brought today warrants another review of his proposal. I want an independent auditor to review his files."

Raquel opened her mouth, but Lightfoot held up a hand and she stilled. "He has already agreed to my terms, Raquel."

"Very well." She subsided back into her seat and brought her hand to her mouth. Hayden's eyebrow rose as he realized she nibbled on her nails. Interesting.

Lightfoot rested his clasped hands on the desk in front of him. "Raquel, I'm more worried about this breach of security."

Raquel looked up at Hayden and he nodded. Lightfoot struck him as an honest, if stiff-assed, kind of guy. He was direct in acknowledging having a thing for his boss, anyway.

Raquel laid a hand on top of Lightfoot's folded ones. Hayden frowned. "Edward, over the weekend Hayden's systems were broken into and all of his data erased. However, before that was done, the cracker downloaded a copy of all of the files. It looks like the person who did it is somehow affiliated with MI."

Lightfoot scowled and looked at Hayden. "How did you get a copy of these files, then?"

Hayden's smirk was humorless. "I forgot to mention my brother can be a paranoid bastard. He has an off-site computer set up for backing up and he masks the backup as financial transactions by one of our European customers. He's assured me that, for the moment, it's cracker-proof and so far he's been right."

Lightfoot got up and paced. "I don't like this, Raquel. Have you talked to Vinnie vet?"

Her back straightened even further. "No, I haven't. You're the only one at MI I've told, Edward, and that includes Louise."

He turned around and stared at her. "Well, why not?"

"I was in my office last night and someone broke into it."

"Did you see who it was?"

Hayden saw Raquel's cheeks were now stained a bright red. "I was in a hidden room, Edward. Whoever it was didn't see me and I didn't see them. Dad's spyhole viewer in the room wasn't working. Even my bypass code wouldn't work. When I came out, we found out my unit had been used. According to Tommy, Hayden's brother, my unit was showing as the originating unit of record for the crack.

"Edward, my office door was locked. Only five people that I know of have a keypass to my office."

Lightfoot crossed his arms against his chest. "And I'm one of them."

Raquel nodded. "And you're one of them. Edward, I don't believe you had anything to do with it, but then, I don't believe any of the others could either. I have no idea why this is happening, but I'm determined to end it."

Lightfoot closed his eyes. When he opened them, he pinned his gaze on Hayden. "You'll take care of her?"

"With my life. If it goes beyond corporate espionage, then I'm taking her out."

Raquel stood and whirled to him. "Wait a minute. You don't have a say on whether or not I get taken out."

He looked at her calmly. "Yes, I do."

She drew in a deep breath and opened her mouth. After a second, though, she closed it. *Probably thinking better of arguing with me here.*

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Later."

He nodded. "If we have to." His wrist unit beeped. "We've got to get going. Tommy's waiting for us. Lightfoot."

"Campbell. I'll contact you when I have an auditor in place. Most likely tomorrow morning."

Hayden held out his hand to the man. "I'll look forward to your call." The grip was firmer than before. Hayden squeezed back, and then broke the hold. He wrapped his arm around Raquel's shoulders. It was a sign of her distraction that she didn't shrug off the contact. "Do you have all of your things?"

"Yes." She turned and waved to Edward. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Hayden removed his arm after they exited Lightfoot's office. They got into the glide under the eagle eye of DiVollo. The ride down occurred in silence and he waited until they were in his car before asking the question that had been burning at the back of his mind.

"Have you ever fucked Lightfoot?"

Chapter Eight

"What?" Raquel's jaw dropped.

Hayden pulled into traffic and she braced herself against the dash, fearing they would crash into the car in front of them.

"Are you crazy?"

The muscles in his jaw were clenched and he kept his gaze on the traffic. "Have you ever fucked Lightfoot? Just answer the question."

"Of course not. Jesus, Hayden. What's gotten into you?"

He sent the car into hover, and her stomach dropped at the suddenness of the move. "He's wanted to."

Raquel snapped her fingers near his ear. "Are you hearing what's coming out of your mouth? Edward has never been anything but professional with me."

Hayden took a sharp right. Raquel closed her eyes. It probably would be better if she didn't open them until they got back to his office. "Do you mind slowing down, just a teensy bit?"

"Being professional does not preclude his wanting to fuck you. I can tell when a man wants to fuck my woman."

Raquel swallowed the faint taste of bile burbling up at the back of her mouth. She was in serious danger of becoming carsick for the first time in her life. "I'll address that statement later, after my stomach's caught up with me."

Hayden growled. He downshifted and they merged back into traffic on the ground. Raquel held a hand to her stomach and took five deep breaths. When they pulled into his parking space, he got out and slammed his door. She was still gathering the contents of her bag that had spilled out during his midair maneuvers when he opened her door. She looked at him. Sections of his hair stood out in spikes and his expression still carried a scowl. "I'm sorry. I'm overreacting."

"Damn right."

He closed his eyes and let out a breath. "I'm overreacting and I'm trying to get a hold of myself. I'd appreciate you being kind to my fragile male ego." He held out his hand to her.

She pursed her lips, but picked up her bag and took his hand. "I'll think about it. Don't think I'm going to let the 'my woman' comment fade into nothingness."

He nodded. Again, the glide ride was accomplished in silence.

They found Tommy working at Hayden's desk. She'd have to give some serious thought to stealing him away from Hayden when this was over.

Tommy glanced up at them and waved. "I've got some more stuff for you guys."

She hung up her coat and pulled a chair over to the desk where Hayden was hovering over Tommy's shoulder. "Why don't you update Raquel on what you figured out earlier? I didn't get a chance to do so."

Tommy's eyes were bright when they met hers. "You know of the Eskimo kinship scheme?"

She nodded. "Of course, it's the one most prevalent in Western society."

"Well, we were discussing it and the other kinship schemes in my cultural foundations class today, and it dawned on me it can be applied to how this program was developed."

Raquel's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, like I was explaining to Hayd, I'm pretty sure the program the cracker used to break in and download our stuff is related to the base data architecture program that MI uses. Sarah was showing it to me yesterday and I thought it looked familiar."

Raquel massaged her eyes. "I'm not sure I understand, Tommy."

His face looked crestfallen for a moment and then brightened. "Oh, I forgot the Ego, didn't I?"

Raquel looked over at Hayden. "Can I have a piece of paper and a pen? I always understood these schemes better when I drew them out."

Hayden opened a drawer and handed her the needed items. She uncapped the pen and looked back at Tommy. "Okay, go ahead."

"Okay, pretend the cracker program is Ego." Raquel drew the Ego symbol on the paper and gestured for him to continue. "I'm pretty sure your data architecture system is a cousin to it. I've been comparing them for the permutations. If the screws were put to me, I'd say your system is four generations removed from the original program, while the cracker program is only two."

Raquel finished sketching the scheme on the paper. "Okay, so what you're saying is the cracker program is closer to the original program?"

"Exactly. I was telling Hayd I'm pretty sure the cracker hasn't worked on the data architecture program and that he's not the guy who created the original program."

Raquel looked at Tommy. "But the cracker probably knew the original programmer, since he has a purer form of the code?"

"Exactly!" Tommy's face lit up like a kid finding out that all of the Christmas presents were for him alone.

Hayden walked over to his vendfridge and pulled out a couple of bottles, tossing one to Tommy who caught it one-handed. He passed Raquel's hers, letting his fingers linger on her skin before drawing away. He sat on the edge of his desk, popped the top and drank deeply. "Raquel, do you know who created the data architecture program?"

She shook her head. "No. I have no idea when it was created or implemented. My dad never talked to me about the day-to-day stuff when I was in school."

Hayden turned back to Tommy. "I know you've told me you find ways to notate your name in all of your programs. Is there anything on the data architecture program?"

Tommy was shaking his head even before Hayden finished. "I've found holes, though, so I'd say the cracker probably wiped any mention of the original programmer from the data architecture program without messing with the functionality."

Hayden blew out a breath. He turned to Raquel. "Do you think you guys would have a record of how you got the data architecture program and who the creator was?"

"I'd have to talk to Vinnie and he's going to wonder why I'm asking." She sat back in her chair and opened the bottle. Taking a sip, she promptly choked. "What the hell is this stuff?"

Hayden patted her back. "An energy drink. Finish it."

Raquel scowled and took another sip. The taste of foliage promptly coated her mouth. "What do I tell Vinnie when he asks me why I'm asking him?"

"Be vague and just say you came across something in your father's records. He doesn't have to know the exact reason. Threaten to fire him if you have to."

Raquel crossed her legs. "If I have to fire Vinnie, I'm taking Tommy away from you. That's your fair warning."

"Duly noted." Hayden stood and tossed his bottle in the trash receptacle. He paced the office, hands clasped behind his neck. "This guy's smart. If Tommy can't track him down, I'm not sure what else we can do until he makes another move."

Raquel chewed on her thumbnail. "What if there was some way we could draw him out?"

Hayden looked over at her. "What do you mean? We haven't figured out what the motive is for this guy."

Raquel stood, her nerves too fidgety to remain still. "Why did he choose Campbell Holdings instead of one of the other companies that's approached me over the last few months?"

Tommy piped in. "We actually have a viable product?"

Raquel bit her lip. "Pat answer, but I don't think so. There's got to be a connection to Campbell, something we're missing. What is it?"

"We've never done business together before, and I never really considered it until your father came to me, Raquel."

She looked at Hayden. "Do you think it could have something to do with my father? I haven't come across anything like this prior to his death."

Hayden shrugged. "I'm sure he probably made his fair share of enemies over the years, but I don't understand why they'd care beyond his death."

Raquel let out her breath. "True." She pulled at her hair. "I know life isn't fair, but this just doesn't make any sense." She looked at Tommy. "Is Sarah at work?"

Tommy looked at his wrist unit. "Probably not, but she's online. Let me check." His fingers flew over the keyboard. "Huh. She's still there. What do you want?"

"Have her make a copy of MI's financial transactions over the last year and send it to my private unit. I want to take a look at them at home." She glanced to where Hayden was sitting on the edge of the desk. "Don't they always say follow the money? What if this person was doing something funky with our financials?"

"Don't you think Lightfoot would have clued into it if there was something going on?"

"Considering how well this guy has covered his tracks so far, I wonder. Edward's sharp as a surgineedle, but if it wasn't a big enough impact, maybe this guy was able to fly under Edward's radar."

Hayden shrugged. "It's worth looking into."

Raquel checked her wrist unit. "Shit. Hayden, I really want to make it over to Jimmy's and we need to go now before it's too late. Is there anything else, Tommy?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Don't think so. Hayd?"

"Call me on my all-one if you come across anything."

Tommy nodded. "I'm going to head over to MI in a bit to pick up Sarah."

Hayden laid a hand on Tommy's shoulder and squeezed. "If you even think about taking the proto over there, I will personally make sure I'm the only Campbell that's able to pass on his genetic code. *Capisce*?"

Tommy winced and nodded. "Capisco."

"Good." He turned to Raquel. "I've got my gym bag in the car."

Raquel grabbed her coat and bags. "Fabulous. My stuff is in the locker I've got there, so let's get on the road."

Raquel blinked the sweat out of her eyes. Focusing in on her target, she let loose a kick to the abdomen. It was blocked and she ducked to avoid the counter-maneuver. She slammed the back of her forearm into tough obliques.

Hayden grunted. She slipped out from under his arms and danced to the edge of the combat mat. "Come on, Hayden. You said you knew how to fight."

Rubbing the muscles she'd attacked, he glowered at her. "It's been a while since I've sparred." He circled the edge of the combat area. She kept her distance, dancing out of his way.

"Hey, Raquel." Her attention was diverted by Jimmy waving at her. Her breath slammed out of her lungs as Hayden tackled her.

Dazed, she stared up at the ceiling. "Shit."

Both Hayden's and Jimmy's faces wavered into view, concern shining from both. Jimmy snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. "Raquel. Are you okay? I'm sorry, I know better."

Hayden's fingers were racing over her body, probably checking for any broken bones. What breath she could catch wheezed in and out. She coughed once. Twice. Hayden picked her head up and cradled it in his lap.

"Raquel, are you okay? Come on. I know you can talk."

She waved a hand in front of her face. "Give me a minute."

Jimmy moved back out of view. "Well, she's coherent. That's something. Do I need to get the med unit?"

"No. I think I just knocked the stuffing out of her."

Raquel nodded at that assessment. She felt like a freight truck had hit her. Closing her eyes, she forced herself up with her palms supporting her weight. Hayden propped up her shoulders and she took in shallow breaths. When the slight dizziness had passed, she took his hand and let him pull her up.

"Come on, let me soap your back and we'll head home for the night."

She nodded and hobbled with him into the locker area. She waved to Jimmy to let him see she was all right. There were only two other patrons in the gym and they were still working out, Jimmy watching over them.

Hayden sat her down and undid her shoes, massaging her insoles and up her calves. She let her head hang, enjoying the feeling of her muscles relaxing one by one as his hands passed over them. Lifting her arms, she let him pull her shirt off over her head, taking her bra with it.

He massaged each arm and shoulder in turn. His fingers wandered down and worked their magic on her breasts.

"Mmm. I don't think those got a workout tonight."

He looked up and his eyes gleamed with mischief. "I'm hoping they'll get their own private workout in a few minutes." He stood and stripped, his burgeoning erection popping out from his shorts as he pulled them down.

Raquel sighed and wrapped her hand around his cock. A little bead of semen formed at the tip of the slit. He groaned as she licked it and pulled her hand away. "I've got plans, and if you keep doing that, they're going to get tossed out the window."

She sighed, letting her breath flutter over his cock. It jumped in her hand. "Well, if you insist."

"You realize you're a tease." He gripped her upper arms and forced her to stand as he stooped and pulled off her shorts and thong.

He massaged her ass cheeks and kissed her pussy. His tongue penetrated her slit and played with her clit. She reached down and gripped his hair, pulling him away. "Unless your plans are for me to attack you here and now, you'd better step back."

Grinning, he kissed her mound once more before standing and picking her up into his arms. She wanted to snuggle into him, feeling more protected than she had ever before in her life. Even if he had been the one to nearly knock her out cold on the mat.

She looked down and slipped her arms around his neck and locked her ankles together at the small of his back. "I always thought this would be sexy, moving and everything, but I promise I will kick your ass into next week if you drop me."

He grinned and tightened his hold. "And I know you can do it. My ribs still are hurting after that shot."

She kissed his neck and nibbled at the cord of muscle there. He set her down and reached behind her. Warm water pounded her back. She hooked a leg around his hip. His erection was cradled in the junction of her thighs, and she tried to hitch herself that little bit higher for it to actually do some good.

His hands slicked down her back to her ass, spreading the soap he had found. Setting his mouth against hers, he devoured it. She shivered as one hand found its way down her rear crack. A finger entered her anus. She groaned into his mouth.

He plunged the finger in and out. She pushed back against it, the tightness of the entry taking her to the razor edge of pleasure and pain.

She broke the kiss and moved her mouth down to his chest. Laving a nipple, she worked a hand between their bodies. She wrapped her palm around the head of his cock and used it like her stress balls, massaging it.

Hayden growled, and removed his hand from inside her ass. Cupping her cheeks, he lifted her. She positioned his cock at her entrance and he pulled her down onto him.

She arched her back, shouting her pleasure. She felt stretched beyond fullness and he worked his cock in and out of her like a piston. The water continued cascading down her back, adding to the sensation of his fingers raking down her back.

Hayden moved back and propped himself against the wall. He slipped his hand between them and rubbed her clitoris. Her breath caught. He pressed in, and she leaned back. With the added angle, he hit her G-spot.

She convulsed as tremors racked her body in orgasm. "Oh god, Hayden!"

Gripping his shoulders, she tried to hold on as waves of pleasure buffeted her.

They slid down to the floor, Hayden still buried deep inside her. Her inner muscles clenched him periodically, keeping him hard. She sighed. "The last time I was in here, I jacked off to the fantasy of you doing almost exactly this to me."

His hands stroked along her back. "Really?"

"Um-hmm." She nuzzled her cheek against his chest and wrapped her arms around his back, loving having the real thing in her arms this time around. "It was the day of the fundraiser, right before you came to my office."

He squeezed her butt. "I was very tempted that day to see what you would do if I were to lay you out on your desk and have my way with you."

She leaned back, driving him in deeper. Air caught in her lungs. "Have your way with me?"

His hand slipped from her back, around to where they were joined. "Yep. You looked so ice cold that I wanted to see if you'd melt." He strummed her clit. "And here you are, melting all over me."

Not only melting, but probably falling in love with a man who seemed to always know exactly what she needed and when she needed it. She pulsed around him, and could feel the beat of his blood in his cock. He kept circling her clit, pressing in at random intervals.

"Just like ice cream, my favorite dessert." He leaned down and sucked in the beaded tip of her breast. It sent her over the edge into another, softer orgasm.

She collapsed against the wall when it was over. After a few minutes, he lifted her up. "Come on, before someone comes in."

Lethargy dragged her so deeply down that he had to help her into her clothes. Her muscles eventually firmed up and she was able to walk out of the changing area under her own power to where Jimmy was waiting for them.

He looked at Hayden. "Is she okay?"

Hayden clutched her shoulder and squeezed. "I think so, just needed to get her breath back."

Raquel hugged Jimmy. "I'm fine. I'm going home now, straight to bed."

He shook his finger at them. "No fucking, not after a fall like that."

Raquel bit her lip and felt a blush stain her cheeks. If Jimmy only knew. She moved her finger over her chest. "I cross my heart and hope to die."

He nodded. "Okay." He looked around the gym and motioned for them to follow him into his office. "Now tell me what's going on that you haven't been here in almost a week. And don't you dare think about trying to steamroll me, Raquel."

She clutched the straps of her bag. "Jimmy, do you know if my dad was having any problems with work before he died?"

Jimmy's brow creased. "No. At least, he never mentioned anything to me. Why?"

Hayden spoke up. "Someone cracked my computer system and tried to make it look like it came through from Raquel's unit at work."

Jimmy's head turned sharply toward Hayden at that. "You want to run that by me again?"

"I think someone is trying to damage—if not destroy—MI, Jimmy, and I have no idea why." She blushed. "Hayden and I had hooked up by that point. If we hadn't, he may have easily believed it was me."

Jimmy shook his head. "That's fucked up." He glared at Hayden. "What are you going to do about it?"

Hayden pulled Raquel in front of him and hugged her to him. "Take care of it. My brother is working on figuring out where the program came from and we'll go from there. Until then, we're trying to figure out who may have a grudge against MI."

Jimmy took a deep breath. "I honestly have no idea. The last few years of the business seemed to be going well for your dad, Raquel. And other than when your mom died, I can't think of anything that was big enough for him to talk to me about."

Raquel sighed. "Thanks, Jimmy. He never mentioned anything to me, either."

"You might want to talk to that Louise of his. I never met her, but he did say she knew all of his secrets."

Raquel kissed his cheek. "Thanks. I'll be in later this week, okay."

"See you then, little girl." He glared at Hayden. "You let anything happen to her and I'll make some calls. A few people still owe me some favors."

"I understand and thanks for the help." Hayden held out his hand to Jimmy.

Jimmy shook Hayden's offered hand and then walked them out the door, locking it behind them.

Raquel leaned into Hayden's embrace as they walked. He hugged her. "It's going to be okay. Did your dad keep a journal or anything?"

Raquel thought for a second. "I'm not sure. When I packed up his house, I didn't come across anything like that. Louise packed up the office and she didn't mention anything to me. Shouldn't we be looking at who I might have for enemies? I mean, this all started after Dad died."

"I don't think so. This is business related and, honey, you haven't been in the business world long enough to make an enemy this dangerous." Hayden opened the car door for her and she slid into the seat. She exhaled and relaxed back into it.

Hayden climbed in next to her. "Where to?"

Raquel closed her eyes. "Why don't you just drop me off at my apartment and then you can head back to your place."

He took her hand and squeezed. "If I go back to my place at all, it will only be to pick up a change of clothes before I head back to yours. I promised Jimmy I wouldn't let anything happen to you, and to me, that means staying with you through the night. I can't be with you at work, but I'll call Lightfoot about it."

Raquel opened her mouth to argue, but closed it. He was right. This person hadn't done anything to physically harm her, but who knew how serious he could be about hurting MI. For all she knew, she could mean MI to him.

The ride was uneventful and traffic was light, so they got to her place less than fifteen minutes later.

The glide ride was too short in her opinion. Hayden's hands had only just breached her panties when the pod stopped. She broke away from him and sighed. "While I've always wanted to see what having sex in a glide was like, I guess it will have to wait."

Hayden spanked her butt as she turned. "I promise, I'll find a glide somewhere for you to explore that fantasy." The pod door opened and she tripped over her feet trying to hide from the sight that greeted her. Her breath, for the second time that night, was

knocked from her. Hayden reached around her and pounded on the command screen to close the door, pulling out his link.

Building security was the first to respond, quickly followed by the police. They were sequestered in one of the lobby meeting rooms while the investigation began. An officer came over and asked them a number of questions before returning to the loft.

Raquel shivered. The sight of the lifeless eyes, the color of her own, staring at her was frozen into her psyche. She tried to bury herself into Hayden. How could he be warm? Ice sank frozen claws into her. He wrapped his arms and his coat around her. "We'll figure this out, Raquel. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"Dr. MacLendon, Mr. Campbell?"

They turned to where a squat man in the stereotypical trench coat stood behind them. Hayden answered. "Yes?"

"I'm Detective Ross. You found the droid?"

"Droid?" Raquel's voice sounded faint even to her.

"Yes, ma'am. It was a droid."

Raquel shook her head. "No, it looked so real."

The man's hangdog face quivered as he nodded his head. "I assure you, no one was injured. It was only a droid." He pulled out a notebook and stylus. "Now, can you tell me who would play this kind of prank on you?"

Raquel looked up at Hayden. "I don't think this was a prank."

Ross blinked his eyes. "Ma'am?"

Hayden rubbed her shoulder. "We believe someone is trying to take down Dr. MacLendon's business, MacLendon Industries. My business's computer systems were cracked over the weekend and it was made to look like the attack had come from Dr. MacLendon's personal unit."

Ross scribbled notes as fast as he could. "Have you reported that to the authorities?"

Raquel shook her head. "No. Mr. Campbell's brother is still in the process of tracking the transmission and origin of the program used."

The detective looked up from his notes. "We're not exactly pikers ourselves. If a crime has been committed, it needs to be reported to the authorities."

Raquel opened her mouth, but Hayden hugged her harder to his chest. "We realize that, Detective, but it didn't seem to be more serious than someone who got his rocks off by doing damage remotely at the time. We understand now it's gone to a level that we didn't anticipate."

Ross nodded. "As long as you do. Dr. MacLendon, we need to close your loft off until we finish processing the scene. Is there anything I can have one of my officers retrieve for you?"

Raquel shook her head. She didn't want anything the intruder possibly touched. If she needed to, she'd purchase a completely new wardrobe. "No, thank you. Is there anything else you need from us?"

"Not at this time, no. I do need for you to come down to my office tomorrow and give a statement." Ross dug around in his coat and pulled out a card.

Hayden took the proffered card and slipped it into his pocket. "Will later tomorrow afternoon be good? I can see if my brother is able to make it too."

Ross' head bobbed. "Yeah, that would be fine. Have a good night." He returned to the scene, stopping to direct an officer over to them.

The officer nodded and quickly strode over to where they were standing. "Sir, ma'am. Detective Ross asked me to escort you to wherever you wanted to go."

"Thank you, Officer." Hayden inclined his head. They took the glide down to the parking level, Raquel rubbing her arms, burrowing farther into Hayden, trying to warm up. Hayden gave the officer his address and they agreed to meet at the entrance of the building's garage.

When they got into the car, he immediately turned on the heater and kicked it up. She held out her hands to the vents. "It's fifty fucking degrees out, why am I so cold?"

"Shock." He took one of her hands and wrapped it in his, rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand. He lifted it and pressed a kiss into her palm. Flicking on the viewer, they were greeted with the evening news.

Raquel shook her head, not wanting to listen to tales of death and destruction that populated the evening newscast, and Hayden flipped to a music station. Mellow notes of jazz flowed from the speakers and Raquel wallowed in the sense of security she felt from being in Hayden's presence.

Hayden pulled out of the garage. The squad car was waiting for them and he blinked his lights to let the officer know they were ready.

"I really need to stop thinking of the worst-case scenario. When I do, it happens." She let her head fall back onto the headrest.

"When we get back to my apartment, I'll call Tommy and see if he's managed to find out anything new. Then I'll tuck you into bed and you're going to sleep."

"If you don't mind, I think I'll close my eyes now."

He kissed her hand again. "By all means."

The last view she had of him was a hand on the steering wheel, his eyes straight ahead. He reminded her of the ancient warriors she'd studied. Strong, powerful, not someone to be fucked with.

She fell asleep with a smile on her lips.

Hayden lifted her out of the car and carried her into his house. He turned on enough lights to get by, but otherwise didn't bother. He looked down at her and shivered. She hadn't understood what she had seen. The droid had been made to be her twin.

He opened the door to his room. Laying her on the bed, he stripped off her clothes. Pulling the sheets down on his side of the bed, he curled up alongside her and slipped the covers back over her. Stroking a hand through her hair, he took note of the way her charcoal lashes dusted her cheeks, emphasizing the faint pallor of her skin and hoped it was more from exhaustion than shock.

She sighed and rubbed her cheek against his hand. He smiled at the unconscious gesture of affection. She muttered something, but didn't wake and turned over, her back to him.

He left the room and went to the all-one in the one across the hall.

"Yo." Tommy's eyes were red and only open half-mast.

"Did you find out anything more after we left?"

"No, man. It's three in the morning. What's going on?" He rubbed at his eyes.

"Raquel's loft was broken into. A droid was left in her entryway with a couple of butcher's knives sticking out of its chest."

"Shit. That is seriously fucked up."

Hayden rubbed the back of his neck. "It's got to be the same person."

"Did the police say anything? You did call the police, right?"

"Yeah, and they weren't saying anything. I have to take Raquel down to the precinct house tomorrow and give a statement."

"I'm too beat right now to do you any good and I've got an exam tomorrow morning. After that I'll get to work on finding out what I can."

"Just come to my office. I told the detective what's been happening and he wants to talk to you too."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sure." His mouth opened wide enough that he probably could have swallowed a watermelon.

"Go to bed, kid."

"Thanks. Think I will." Tommy cut the connection.

Hayden went back to his room and stripped out of his clothes. He climbed into the part of the bed Raquel had managed not to spread herself over and pulled her into his arms. He fell asleep with her head on his chest, close to his heart.

Chapter Nine

Raquel picked at her food. MI had world-class chefs on staff, so it was some of the best to be had, but she had no appetite for it and she couldn't explain to Louise why she'd not eaten every last bit.

She glanced at her wrist unit. One more hour to go before Hayden was due to pick her up to take her to the precinct house. Smoothing the silky material of her new skirt, purchased that morning as part of her new wardrobe after Hayden dropped her off at work, she hoped the outfit was restrained enough for a visit with the police. She shook her head to clear it. This soupy-headedness was something she did not have time to deal with.

Picking up her plate, and the bottle of water Louise had left for her with the admonition to drink all of it, Raquel left her office. Louise looked up from her unit and Raquel smiled, but she knew it was weak.

"I'm taking this to Edward's office. There are some things I need to go over with him and I'm not getting anything else done."

Louise nodded. "Okay." She pursed her lips. "Are you feeling all right? You're looking a little peaked."

"That's a word I haven't heard in a long time. I'm okay, just a bit tired. I worked out at Jimmy's last night and sparred. Got wind knocked from me thanks to a jab gone wrong."

Louise's brow furrowed. "All right, then. But if you need to go home, I can call the car for you and reschedule your meeting with Mr. Campbell."

"Thanks, Louise." Raquel's gut twisted at the white lie she'd had to tell Louise. She had agreed with Hayden to keep the escalation as much under wraps as possible at the office. The business fallout could be bad from gossip alone and it would be giving the attacker what he apparently wanted.

Raquel shook her shoulders and knocked on Edward's door with her foot.

"Come in."

She shifted her dishes and pressed her thumb against the lock. The door slid open. Edward sat at his desk, printouts spread all over it. "I came in to see if you wouldn't mind a little company for lunch."

He leaned back in his chair, hands clasped against his stomach. "Sure. Is there something you wanted to talk about?"

She glanced over her shoulder and saw the door had closed again. Setting her lunch things down, she took a seat.

"Someone broke into my apartment last night." The word he uttered turned the air blue. "My sentiments exactly. We think it's probably the guy who cracked Hayden's system over the weekend." She shrugged her shoulders. "It doesn't seem like it could be anyone else."

"Did you call the police?" He grabbed one of his memo pads, his stylus poised above it.

"Yes. Hayden called them right away."

"Who's the detective in charge?"

"Ross. I don't think he ever gave us his first name."

Edward scribbled the name on the screen. "Have they told you anything?"

"No. Hayden was with me when I discovered the break-in and we're supposed to go down to the precinct house this afternoon and make a statement. His brother is going to come with us and report on what he's found out."

"Do you mind if I come with you?"

Raquel raised her eyebrows. "Well, I guess not, but that will just tie up your afternoon. I can recap it for you tomorrow if you want."

Edward steepled his fingers as he leaned back in his chair again. "I want to meet this Detective Ross. Plus, everything can be told at once. If I think of any questions, I can ask them right away."

Raquel took a bite of her lunch, but it may as well have been sawdust for all that she tasted of it. "If you're sure." She twisted her wrist to check her wrist unit. "Hayden will be here in less than an hour. You can ride with us, but I think he'll also have his brother with him and it would be a tight fit for all four of us."

"Not a problem, I'll just take my car. I have a couple of things I need to take care of afterward, anyway. Give me a call when you're ready to go."

"Okay." Raquel gathered her things up and left Edward's office. She slapped her forehead as she realized she had forgotten to call Vinnie about who had written the original program. *Definitely losing it.* At least she had time to call before she had to leave. Frowning, she paused outside her office door.

Louise's desk was empty. Raquel figured she must have finally gone to lunch.

The droid had been inspired. Davy would be proud. He'd always liked the intricacy of stage makeup and turning himself into another person. Mama had brought home lots of makeup from when she was doing shows.

Mama had always smiled when Davy would come out, made up and spouting lines from Shakespeare. She'd always said he would eclipse not only her, but the greatest actors of the day when he got old enough.

The blood that had coated Davy had been real. Terrifyingly real. The flow couldn't be staunched and he'd died on the way to the hospital.

Raquel had better have gotten a good look at the droid because that's exactly the way she would be carted to the hospital. Metal sprouting from her body, her blood staining the ground.

Ross flipped through the report Tommy had brought with. He grunted at parts and made notes in the margins.

Raquel crossed her ankles, trying to force her body to relax. It didn't help that a lot of the tension coursing through the air was due to the dueling testosterone producers surrounding her.

Tommy, at least, was a calm port in the storm engulfing them. He was too focused on messaging with Sarah.

Raquel looked back and forth between Hayden and Edward. She still couldn't believe Hayden's assertion that Edward had a...thing...for her. Edward had never once, through word or look, indicated he wanted anything more than a professional relationship from her.

She blew up a puff of air, forcing her bangs out of her eyes. Ross looked up at Tommy. "You were able to note which IP address the attack originated from before they switched it to Dr. MacLendon's unit?"

Tommy looked up and nodded. "Yes, sir. It was enough of an anomaly that I made a copy of the report and stashed it with our backup."

The detective turned to Raquel. "And your IT manager didn't know who the creator of the program is?"

Raquel shook her head. "No, he couldn't find the records for it. He's quietly digging around for them now."

Ross picked up the all-one and dialed. He did a quick rundown of the report for the person on the other end before grunting once more and hanging up.

"That was Detective Maria Gira. She'll be meeting us here in a minute and is one of our top systems crime investigators."

Hayden leaned forward in his chair. "What can she do that we haven't done already?"

"Since she was hired after hacking our system, along with those of a number of other criminal investigative institutions, just to get a job, I'd say she's qualified to offer some insights. Damn woman still goes to hacking parties to see who she can break into."

Raquel's jaw dropped. "And she's still employed?"

Ross shrugged. "From what I hear, the guys upstairs would prefer to keep her on our side of the fence. As long as she doesn't cross the line into cracking and gives reports on security weaknesses, they don't have a problem with it."

Tommy straightened up. "Wait a minute. Do you know what her game name is?" Ross shrugged. "Dark something-or-other."

"Dark Angel? Dark Angel is going to help us? Man, that is frozen!" Tommy quivered in his chair.

Edward frowned. "I take it you know of her, Campbell."

Tommy turned in his seat to look at Edward. "Dude, Dark Angel is legend. She's been able to hack pretty much every system that's ever been created. She can run ten levels deeper than ghosts. I only *wish* I could do what she's capable of doing."

"I'm glad to know my fan club survives." They all turned to the husky voice that came from the doorway.

Her latte-colored skin set off light green eyes. She was the most gorgeous woman Raquel had ever seen.

The woman crossed over to Tommy and held out her hand. "Game name?"

Tommy took her hand, his Adam's apple bobbing. "RaiderOne."

"For the Scottish raiders or Raiders of the Lost Ark?"

"Um, both."

She nodded. "You're good, but you need to spend more time studying your systems if you want to get better."

"Thank you, ma'am." Tommy's face was bright red.

Her gaze swept the room, pausing a fraction of a second longer on Edward than the rest of them. No one else probably noticed, but Raquel did. "I'm Maria Gira. Ross' report was interesting."

Hayden spoke up. "We had a cracker over the weekend. He crashed our systems, but not before downloading all of our files to his location."

Gira sat on the corner of Ross' desk. "What makes you so sure it's a man?"

Hayden sat back and crossed his ankle onto his knee as he smoothly reached over and took Raquel's hand. "Habit, I guess. If you don't know someone's gender, you start calling him or her 'he'."

The detective nodded and brushed a hank of straight ebony hair behind her ear. "True. Unfortunately, with systems crimes, you're never fully sure of whether you've got a woman or a man." She turned and picked up the report from where it was sitting on Ross' desk.

Hayden's thumb grazed her inner wrist and Raquel shivered. She looked up and caught Gira's gaze focused on where their hands linked. Gira glanced up after a moment and smiled. "You two together?"

Raquel blushed. "Only for the last week now."

"How long have you two known each other?"

"A little over six months. Hayden came to my office because of a deal my father approached him about prior to his death."

"It was my understanding the deal was dead, however." Edward broke his silence from the corner of the room.

Gira turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "How come?"

"I received a memo from MacLendon's private account the day before he died, saying he'd decided the deal with Campbell Holdings was too risky. Their business infrastructure wasn't as solid as he'd been led to believe."

Gira turned back to Raquel. "How did your father die?"

"His health seemed to be fading over the last year or so. He was out for a walk, and from what the reports said, he tripped and fell into traffic. The autopsy said it looked like he suffered a minor stroke, which caused him to fall like that."

Gira turned back to Ross. "Can you pull up the report for me?"

Ross shrugged and flipped on his unit. Gira turned back to Hayden. "Can I come and have a look at your system tonight?"

Hayden looked over at Tommy. "Do you have any papers due?"

Tommy checked his all-one and then shook his head. "Nothing I can't take care of. I was supposed to go out on a date with Sarah, but she'll understand."

Hayden turned back to Gira. "Fine. I'll notify our security to expect you."

She nodded. "Dr. MacLendon, I'd also like to take a look at your systems. I'd prefer to do it from inside, but I can do it remotely if needs be."

Raquel turned back to Edward. "There's a staff meeting tomorrow, right?"

He inclined his head. "Nine in the morning and everyone's expected to be there."

Raquel met Gira's gaze. "You can come then and no one should be around."

"I'll need an escort, just in case, and to answer any questions I might have."

Edward spoke up. "I'll do it. You're expected to be there, Raquel, and it will be easier for me to claim another commitment."

A smirk danced across Gira's lips. "I'll meet you at the door, then. If anyone comes in, you can claim you were showing me your etchings."

Edward glowered at the detective. "I'm not trite."

"I never said you were. Dr. MacLendon, Mr. Campbell, Raider, I'll see you later tonight. Have Ross here page me when you're ready to leave."

Raquel turned to Ross. "Is there anything else you need from us?"

He shook his head, jowls flapping. "No. Thank you again for coming in. If any clarification is needed in your statements, I'll be sure to give you a call. Until we catch this guy, there probably won't be anything. I'll keep you all appraised of the progress of the investigation as needed."

She turned back to Gira. "Well then, I think we're ready to go."

Gira smiled. "I'll meet you downstairs. Mr. Lightfoot, I'll see you tomorrow."

Edward nodded once and then shook Ross' hand on his way out.

Gira grinned at Raquel. "Taciturn, isn't he?"

"A little, but he knows his figures."

Gira licked her lips. "I'm counting on it." She winked at Raquel. "I'll go grab my things and meet you folks downstairs."

Hayden, Tommy and Raquel shook Ross' hand after Gira left and headed to the garage. Tommy bounced as he walked, like a ten-year-old who'd just met his favorite arenaball player.

"Man, Dark Angel. I can't believe I've met Dark Angel and she's going to be coming to my place!"

Hayden hooked his arm around Raquel's shoulders. "Chill, Tommy. I thought you were interested in Sarah."

"Sarah. Man, I've got to call and tell her. She's going to flip."

Raquel shook her head and smiled at Hayden. "I think I'm finally witnessing a man more interested in a woman's brain over her body."

"And a fine one at that too."

Raquel quirked an eyebrow. "Her brain or her body?"

Hayden's grin spread over her face. "Both, honey, both."

Raquel slapped his stomach. "Remember how I can kick you into next week?"

Hayden leaned down and pecked a kiss on her lips. "She's gorgeous, but I get to have you anytime I want. And, honey, I want. Too bad Tommy's with us."

Raquel sighed. "You're such a sweet-talker."

Gira was waiting for them at the garage entrance, a helmet in hand. "I'll follow you. Where are you parked?"

She followed them to the Jag, and they waited for her to pull her bike around. Tommy turned around in his seat.

"This rocks! She's got the Blade, Hayd."

Raquel turned around. The detective was indeed straddling an SC Blade cycle. "I thought those were the high end of Scottish Choppers."

Hayden nodded. "They are. But from what Ross said about what she does, she probably makes some good money on consulting fees. If she can get this figured out for us, though, she'll never have to buy another SC in her life."

He pulled out and they were soon sailing through the late-evening traffic. It seemed as if being in the police station put you in a time vortex. What felt like an intense one or two hour session turned into six or seven as everyone had to repeat their stories multiple times.

The traffic was light enough so Gira easily kept pace with them on the powerful bike, gliding in and out of traffic. Tommy kept a running monologue of her maneuvers.

Raquel rolled her eyes, but smiled when he asked her what she thought of Gira's riding prowess.

"I've never ridden an SC bike, Tommy, so I couldn't begin to comment."

Hayden's gaze slewed to her. "I'll have to remedy that."

Raquel checked to see that Tommy's head was turned again to Gira. She leaned over and whispered into Hayden's ear. "Make sure you wear pants with a lace-up fly, so I can ride you at the same time."

The car jerked to the right before he corrected it. Tommy shouted at the lurch, but settled back after razzing Hayden about driving skills deteriorating with age.

When they got to Campbell Holdings, Hayden had Gira waved through. She parked next to them and pulled her helmet off. She was glaring at Hayden. "What was with that little sideslip back there?"

Hayden glowered at Raquel. "Sorry. I got distracted."

Gira looked at where Raquel was blushing and laughed. "Remember, no distracting the driver."

Raquel grimaced. "Yes, Officer."

"Why don't you guys show me where your system's at?"

Hayden led the way with Tommy mooning after Gira. Raquel pulled out her all-one on the glide ride up to find two messages from Louise.

"Raquel, dear, don't forget the breakfast meeting tomorrow with Quill from the European office. Also, you have a staff meeting tomorrow at nine. I've attached the agenda to this message for you to go over. Everyone's looking forward to the recap of the second quarter earnings." Raquel rolled her eyes. Everyone was probably looking forward more to finding out what the pension match was going to be for the quarter. She forwarded to the next message.

"Hi, Raquel. I'm sorry to bother you again after the last message, but a package was delivered here for you a couple of minutes ago. I'll have it sent to your apartment. It looked like it came from Scotland and I figured it was probably from one of your dig buddies. I'll see you in the morning. Remember, Quill's wife is expecting twins next week and this is the only chance he has to go over the plan for the next year with you before that, so do not be late."

Raquel looked up and met Gira's eyes. The other woman smiled. "I couldn't help but overhear. Would you like for me to have one of our officers go over to your apartment and bring the package over here?"

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that."

The door opened and they filed out. Tommy led the way to the systems office and he and Gira were soon engrossed in the data transactions and reports.

Hayden took her back to his office. She was about to sit down in one of the guest chairs, but he took hold of her arm and stopped her. He led her over to his chair, sat and pulled her down onto his lap.

He stuck his nose in the hair behind her ear and kissed the lobe. "I've missed you. Don't get me wrong, I'm horny, but I've missed holding you."

She sighed and relaxed into him. "I have too. My muscles are cramping with tension, like something's happening, but it isn't."

His arms tightened around her. "I know exactly what you mean. I keep waiting for a big explosion, but I can't tell when or where."

Raquel traced the stubble that had formed along his chin throughout the day. "I want to leave when this is all over."

He leaned back and looked her in the eye. "Me?"

Her lips curved up. The idea of leaving him completely was getting harder and harder to imagine. "No, silly, the city. I want to go to a remote island where there's no one but us and we can have wild monkey sex anytime and anywhere we want."

His grin was decidedly wolfish. "I could get behind that." His hand moved up from where it had been cupping her thigh to cover her breast. The touch was light at first, firming as he circled tighter and tighter. He stroked her burgeoning nipple with his thumb. Pausing in his ministrations, he unbuttoned her jacket and slipped his hand underneath her blouse.

His fingers traced patterns over her stomach and her muscles there clenched. He pushed the cup of her bra out of his way and the warmth of his hand encased her breast. Slowly circling the outer edges of her areola, he flicked her beaded nipple with every other rotation.

"When we're on that island, what do you want to do?"

She pushed her breast into his palm, needing an increase in pressure. "Besides making love?"

"Making love's fine, but tell me, in detail, how you want me to make love to you?"

She licked her lips as he took the nipple between his fingers and tugged on it, words beyond her. "Every way you can think of."

"Mmm. What a choice. I enjoyed having you with the wand. You were so tight, it took all of my concentration not to come as soon as I entered you."

She gasped. The reminder of the magic wand with the sharp twist of her nipple nearly sent her over that first peak.

"How did you like it?"

She met his fiery gaze. "I loved it. I loved being so full of cock."

Redness stained his cheeks and his pupils dilated so that there was only a faint ring of blue around the black. His hand moved back down her stomach and underneath the waistband of her skirt.

"I want to spend the night inside of you. Your cunt pulsing all around me until we can't tell one orgasm from the rest."

The rough tip of his finger worked its way down to her clit and she flew off the razor edge into a sea of pleasure as he grazed it.

When the shudders finally stopped racking her, she climbed off his lap and removed the rest of her clothes. She kneeled in front of him and ran her hands up his thighs. He opened them and she moved forward into the vee.

His eyes blazed as she undid his fly. Reaching in, she pulled out his cock. It really was a work of art, filling her like no other had.

The head was purple and a tear of semen beaded at the slit. Her tongue darted out to catch it, salty, and he groaned.

She stroked a finger up and down the length of him, pressing in on the protruding veins. His hands came down and cupped her head, pulling her in.

Running her tongue along the underside of the rim, she sucked on him like a lollipop. With her hand, she continued to pump him from root to tip. She wanted—no, needed—to give him as much, if not more, pleasure as he gave her every single time they made love.

"More, I need more." His guttural command sent flames racing to her already overheated center.

She relaxed her tongue and throat and let him pump himself in and out. Clamping her lips tight, she twisted her head as he retreated.

"God, baby, so good."

She increased her grip on him as he increased the pace of the pumping. His counterstrokes had him reaching the back of her throat. She sucked on him as he pulled out and she felt the deeper pulsing quiver through his tense muscles. His groan was low and deep. His semen splashed the back of her throat, coating it.

After four such pulses, she pulled back and licked her lips. "Mmm. My favorite candy."

He laughed. "You're going to be the death of me." He looked down at his still-hard cock. "Why don't you climb aboard?"

She rolled her eyes. "That is probably the cheesiest line I've ever heard."

He took her hand and pulled her up. "Probably the cheesiest line I've said since I got out of college."

Lifting his hips, he pushed his pants down. She straddled him so that one leg went up over the armrest of the chair and sank down onto him, taking him in one inch at a time. Pushed herself up a bit and slid down again, relishing the slow penetration. When she finally seated herself onto him, he lifted her other leg and propped it up on the other side.

She tried to lever herself up and realized the position made it impossible for her to move. Her breath shuddered out of her.

His laugh was low as he cupped the back of her head and brought her in, his lips covering hers. Kissing her, his tongue penetrated her mouth and thrust in, mirroring the movement she desired below. He stroked her back, running his one hand down the crack of her ass. Her muscles clenched down on him in anticipation, and he moaned into her mouth.

She sucked his tongue into her mouth, pulling on it as she squeezed her inner muscles on his cock.

His finger circled the rim of her anus and eased in. Pumping it in and out. It felt like a tiny little cock grazing her delicate tissues. She could feel his real one pulsing, pushing back against the pressure from his finger.

She broke the kiss and let her head fall back. He moved the chair and she felt the edge of his desk hit her mid-back. She threw her hands over her head and rested against the flat top. Now able to get the tiniest bit of leverage, she pushed back against him. The angle had her clit constantly rubbing against the patch of rough hair that surrounded the base of his cock.

His head came down on her breast and he sucked in her nipple, worrying his teeth against it. The finger in her ass thrust in and out, faster and faster.

When he bit and tugged on her breast, the nipping pain sent her into convulsions, stars exploding in front of her eyes.

She could feel him coming against the mouth of her womb as her inner muscles milked him. Staring up at the ceiling, panting, she was unsure if she'd ever be able to move again.

He stood, driving his cock deeper still into her, and she moaned.

"I'm going to have you all to myself. You're going to do anything I desire of you, even if it means coming every second until I tell you to stop."

She shook her head, but he pulled out. He kneeled, his head between her thighs. His tongue lashed her clitoris, sending shock waves through her. "No more."

"Yes, more. Take me. All of me." His tongue buried deep inside her, laving her abraded tissues. He settled her legs over his shoulders and she crossed them, pulling him in deeper.

He leaned back against the pressure and sucked on her clit, pushing three fingers into her. He crooked them, dragging them against her G-spot.

Her eyes flared wide, unable to stop the tremors overtaking her, sure she was about to pass out.

He bit down on the skin surrounding her clit and she blacked out.

She awoke to Hayden cradling her in his arms. She licked her lips. "Did I pass out?" "I'm pretty sure you did."

Was that a trace of smugness she heard in his voice?

She blew out her breath, unable to believe orgasms could be that intense. *If that even qualified as an orgasm.* The French had it wrong when they referred to it as *la petit morte*. She mentally snorted. *More like* la grande morte.

She burrowed her head against his chest and sighed. "We probably should get dressed."

His fingers stroked up and down her arm, sending tiny shivers through her. "Why?"

Squinting, she couldn't make out a clock in his darkened office, but figured it had been a while since they had left Gira and Tommy in the systems office. "In case your brother or the cop comes in. I'm pretty sure she could arrest us for indecency."

"Nah, we're in a private office. I could have her kicked out for trespassing."

"I'd like to see you try that one. She looks like she could really kick your ass."

His breath fluttered through her hair. "You're probably right. Okay, up and at 'em."

He boosted her up and she braced herself against his desk. Her knees were gelatin. Worse than gelatin. He handed her skirt and blouse to her and she slipped them on. Her panties had been shredded.

He slipped on his pants and fastened them just in time.

Tommy came rushing in and froze at the sight of them.

"Oh, uh, um, I'll just come back."

"Wait. Lights on one hundred percent." Hayden strode over to the door and caught Tommy by the back of his shirt. "If you'd come in five minutes before, I would have told you to scram. What's going on?"

"Detective Gira asked me to come get you guys. She thinks she may have found something."

Hayden let him go. "Okay, we'll meet you down there in a minute." Tommy rushed out of the room and Hayden came back to where Raquel leaned against the desk. He swooped in for a kiss. "Embarrassed?"

"Nope. Like you said, five minutes earlier and I probably would have been."

They walked down the hall and found Gira hunched over the screen. Her hair was pulled back and she was muttering. Tommy sat next to her, taking notes.

Hayden knocked on the door and Gira waved them to seats without ever looking up from the screen. "Give me a second."

Her fingers flew over the keyboard and Raquel could see data careening on and off the screen. Raquel sat and crossed her ankles, impatient for the results, but knowing from Gira's posture that her head would be snapped off in a heartbeat for interrupting. Her foot tapped a rhythm on the floor.

Hayden's arm covered her shoulders and his fingers found the same rhythm, tapping against her biceps.

"Gotcha, you bastard." Gira pushed herself away from the screen and stretched her arms over her head. Raquel couldn't help noticing the lithe body encased in serviceable clothing.

Gira rotated her neck and Raquel could hear faint poppings. She cringed at the sound. "What did you find?"

"I was able to trace the IP address to the ISP and I hacked into their accounts."

"Is that legal?" Raquel bit her lip. She didn't want this case to be thrown out of court due to improper collection of evidence.

"We can't use it in court, but based on this information, I can set up a sting operation which will result in evidence that can. Besides, the ISP is going to hand me a nice little side sum once they receive my report on their security operations." Gira's grin was a mile wide.

Raquel raised an eyebrow. "Are you always this mercenary?"

Gira shrugged her shoulders. "Can't be anything but on a cop's salary."

Raquel narrowed her eyes. "I was wrong. Edward's going to love you."

Gira's look was distinctly feline in nature. "As long as I get some time with that bod, he can do whatever he wants with his emotions."

Hayden's deep voice cut in. "What did the information from the ISP tell you?"

A corner of Gira's mouth kicked up into a semblance of a smile. "Who it is."

"Well."

"Does the name Davy Pinarella mean anything to either of you?"

They both shook their heads. Raquel's brow furrowed. "Not really, but there's something prickling the back of my mind."

Gira leaned back in her chair. "Just relax because it will probably hit you in the middle of the night and wake you up. I'm going to keep my meeting with Mr. Lightfoot tomorrow and I'll try to pin down who this guy is." She swiveled in her chair. "I'll also call a couple of guys in from the precinct and see if they can do a background check for me on this guy. If he's this good, he's got to have a record somewhere. I'd have come across him otherwise."

"What do we do until tomorrow?" Raquel played with a pleat in her skirt.

"Go home, sleep and kill the circles under your eyes. You've got a staff meeting tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You don't want anyone sniffing onto possible trouble. That could make this guy burrow deep and disappear or become bolder. Until I can pin him down, I don't want to spook him one way or the other."

Raquel nodded. She looked at Hayden and he smiled.

"How are your acting skills?"

Chapter Ten

The meeting had gone well and Quill was off to Paris to be with his wife. Raquel breathed out a sigh of relief. Please god, let her have just five minutes to decompress before the staff meeting. Louise's pinched face came up on the all-one screen. "Raquel. There is a *gentleman* here to see you."

Raquel frowned. "Who is it?"

"A Mr. McNally. From Scotland."

Raquel's eyes bugged. "Niall?"

"I believe that is what I understood his first name to be."

"Oh my god." Niall here. Hayden was going to be big-time pissed if he ever found out. She took a deep breath. "Send him in."

The door opened to a redheaded Viking god. There was no other way to describe Niall. He'd set her system humming the day she met him, but no trace of that visceral attraction was left. Only Hayden did that to her nowadays.

Niall crossed over and took her up into a bear hug. "And how's the big bad city been treatin' my wee lassie?"

Raquel gave him a quick hug back, but then pushed out of his arms. "Niall, it's good to see you. This is a huge surprise, though."

"I was in town and I couldn't resist stoppin' by to see if you might be up to joinin' me at the pub tonight."

"I wish I could, but—"

"She's got plans tonight." Hayden's voice cut in. She looked over to the doorway and saw him glaring at them.

"Honey, do you mind introducing us?"

Raquel narrowed her eyes. "Remember the last time you got testosterone poisoning? Don't let it happen again."

Hayden's nod of assent was short and quick. He strode over to them and held his hand out to Niall. "I'm Hayden Campbell. Her lover."

Raquel gasped, astonished by his rudeness. "That's it. I refuse to deal with you when you're like this. Niall, if you'd like to follow me." She stalked out of her office and down the hall. She briefly knocked on Edward's door, opened it, pushed Niall inside, said "I'll be back in a moment," and closed the door in his face.

She turned back to where Hayden was waiting for her, his arms crossed against his chest and shook a finger in his face. "I warned you. No testosterone poisoning. You do not have the right to come into my office and state those things in that manner."

"I think I have every right in the world, darling." He nodded over her shoulder.

Raquel looked behind her and saw Louise avidly watching their exchange. She took Hayden's arm and pulled him to the glides. "Louise, please let the staff know I'll be about fifteen minutes late. Have catering bring up extra breakfast items, and I don't care where they get them from."

Louise blinked. "I'll take care of that immediately, Raquel."

A glide pod door opened, and Raquel pushed Hayden inside. "First floor."

"Descending to first floor."

Raquel rounded on him. He grasped either side of her head and claimed her mouth. She moaned, her panties immediately soaked. *Damn him*. She wanted to let her mad out, not be seduced.

He hitched her up against the wall, tugging up her skirt. His fingers plunged into her, their progress aided by her wetness. "You said you wanted to be taken in a glide pod. I'm taking you. Pause descent."

"Pausing descent." The lilting voice mimicked his command.

She gave in and bit his lip, sucking on it. "Stop talking and undo your pants." She hooked her legs around his slim hips, impeding his progress in getting rid of his coat and shirt. He settled for undoing his fly and pulling his engorged cock out before moving her panties to the side and plunging into her.

She groaned. Her breasts were tight, aching for his attention, and she started to undo her blouse. He pushed her hands out of the way, completing the job for her.

"Hayden..."

He roughly palmed her breast, kneading it. She pressed against him, countering every stroke of his lower body. His fingers found her nipple, pinching, tugging, pulling, sending sparks racing through her.

He ground his pelvis against hers. She squeezed him with her thighs, needing to hold him deeper within, as she raked her nails down his back. His mouth attacked hers, tongue plunging deep, echoing the thrusts of his cock.

Every time he pulled back, her inner muscles protested until he surged deep again. She could hear a faint dinging in the background, but was too focused on the cycle of invasion and retreat by his body.

Her hands tore at the buttons of his shirt, desperate to feel the hardness of his pectoral muscles against her sensitized breasts. His calloused hand moved down, cupping her ass, tilting it. She could feel him hitting her G-spot with every penetration. The head of his cock dragged against it as he pulled out.

She moaned into his mouth, tasting orange juice on his tongue. Her breath panted in and out and he slipped one hand from her butt. Her eyes flew wide as he pressed his finger onto her engorged clit and she strained against him, drawing him deeper with every spasm of her inner muscles.

His mouth moved down to the side of her throat and bit her on the corded muscle there. A second orgasm washed through her and she felt him join her in release.

They both were panting when he disengaged from her. Her legs slid down the side of his thighs, scraping against the material of his pants. She shivered in reaction.

She smiled up at Hayden. "I think you fulfilled that fantasy just fine."

He grinned back and ran a finger down her cheek. "So, am I forgiven for the testosterone poisoning?"

She pouted. "No, you are not."

He scowled. "I don't like coming in and finding some strange guy hugging you."

Raquel bit her lip, not willing to admit Niall was also a former lover of hers, especially as the musky scent of sex swirled in the air around them. Hayden would really flip his lid.

She poked his chest. "Listen. Do you trust me?"

He tugged down her skirt, and buttoned her blouse. "Of course I do. It's the other guys I don't trust. I'm a man, I know how they think."

Raquel blew out a breath. "Listen up. Get. Over. Yourself. Nothing is going to happen." She petted his chest once more before doing up his buttons. "I can take care of myself and the only guy I want to be with is you. Got it?"

He leaned down and kissed her. His lips massaged hers. In apology? He lifted his head when her tongue peeked out. "I get it. Resume descent."

"Descending to first floor."

"Should I go apologize to Louise for disrupting her day like that?"

Raquel shook her head. "No." She frowned. "What on earth are you doing here anyway?"

"I had a message on my all-one you needed me for something. It was a text message, though. I called Gira to let her know I was coming over."

"I didn't send you a message."

"I realized that right away. That's why I called Gira. She told me to come over anyway as she had laid some traps last night. So if our little friend decided to visit, he's going to be in for a nasty surprise." Hayden straightened his tie and ran a hand through his hair.

"What kinds of traps?"

"I have no idea and I didn't want to ask for fear of getting horribly confused. It's bad enough talking to Tommy about this stuff."

Raquel laughed. "It is, isn't it? Why don't you come back and sit with Gira and Edward while I run the staff meeting? If my employees see you there, they'll expect for us to be doing some kind of deal. Since we haven't finalized that yet, I don't want to get their hopes up."

"Understood. Actually, I think it would be better if I just sat in the café in the lobby."

"Why not my office?" She traced a finger down his chest to the waistband of his pants and hooked it inside.

He raised an eyebrow. "Because your pit bull of an assistant would have my head?"

Raquel batted her eyes. "You don't want to fight the dragon for me?"

"I burn easily."

Raquel rolled her eyes. "Excuses, excuses."

He swooped in and pecked her brow. "I'm of no use to you burned. Don't worry, I'll just grab a cup of coffee, a roll or two and enjoy my morning while my woman goes off to lead her troops."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm not sure if I'm insulted by that phrasing or not."

He rubbed her shoulders and shook his head. "Nope, you're one hell of a businesswoman and I wouldn't dream of interfering."

"First floor. Thank you for visiting and please come again."

"And here's my exit." He kissed her lips once more and got out of the glide. "Thirtieth floor. I'll be back up in an hour. See you then."

The doors closed in his face as he gave her a little wave. She waved back, even though he couldn't see her. She fell back against the wall and sank to the floor as the glide began its ascent. God. She felt a goofy smile tilt up her lips.

That had been everything she'd imagined and more. She scrubbed her face, trying to scrub away the smile. There was no way she could conduct a meeting if she went all nutty thinking about this. She pulled herself up just in time for the glide to coast to a halt.

Louise was waiting for her when the doors opened. Her eyebrows rose. "I think you will need to take a quick trip to the ladies' room if you wish to appear in any way presentable. The natives are getting restless and I have already brought your things to the conference room."

Raquel could feel her cheeks turn rosy at the implied admonition. "Please tell the staff I'll be there in ten minutes."

Louise nodded and turned down the hall, her back poker straight. Raquel fanned her cheeks. She knew Louise was thinking only of her best interests, but her relationship with Hayden was too precious to her. She scurried into the washroom to repair her appearance, patted down her cheeks with a wet towel and headed back out to the meeting with her head held high.

Raquel tossed her papers onto her desk and slumped into her chair. She held her hands over her eyes, wanting to block out the light.

"How did the meeting go?"

Hayden's voice sent a rush of warmth through her. "I've had better. How was your coffee?"

"Pretty good. I brought some up for you and it looks like you need it." She heard a soft plop as he set the cup down. Opening her eyes, she reached for the cup. The scent of the vanilla-laced coffee wafted up her nose and she let the caffeine rush take hold of her as her eyes closed in bliss.

"Mmm. This is good. I think I'll have to direct our catering guys to getting hold of some of this stuff."

"Couldn't hurt. The idiot still around?"

Raquel arched a brow. "If you're referring to Niall, he's left. I did promise him we would join him for dinner before he headed back to Scotland."

Hayden's brow furrowed. "We?"

Calling up the image of her mother scolding her father about some social function, Raquel gave him her sternest look. "We."

Hayden sat down across from her and squirmed in his seat. "You really need to change these chairs."

She let him get away with the change in topic and gave him a wicked grin. "We only pull them out when you're visiting."

He scowled at her. "I thought that was the case. Tell me about the meeting."

She shrugged. "Nothing much to tell. It seemed the usual bitch session between the departments. I swear they save it up all month long, so that when we have these meetings, they can dump it all into my lap."

"Chin up, it means they consider you to be their fearless leader."

She took another sip of the decadent stimulant. "I wish they'd take care of some of these problems on their own. The one bright spot was when I announced the size of the bump in the company's contribution to the pension trust."

"That's always a good thing." He crossed one leg over the other and leaned back.

"I know. That's one of the things my dad did right when he started this company, making sure every year a bump in the pension trust was budgeted." She sighed after she swallowed the last portion of coffee.

Hayden stood and came around her desk, his warm hands cupping the balls of her shoulders. She leaned back into his massage.

"Have you heard anything from Gira?"

She shook her head. "No, I haven't. I was just going to wait here for you and then go to the systems room."

"Sufficiently revived to face unintelligible computer lingo?"

Gnawing on her lip, she glanced up at him. "As ready as I'm ever going to be."

She stood and walked out of her office with him close behind. Louise had yet to return to her desk. She was probably still cleaning up from the meeting. Raquel shook

her head. It didn't matter how many times she insisted the cleaning staff was there to do the job, Louise could not leave the room until it was cleared of the remnants of a meeting.

Raquel knocked briefly on the door to the systems office and opened it. Edward and Gira broke away from each other. She looked closer and saw a faint stain of red across Edward's cheeks. "Everything okay in here?"

Edward's nod was short and he turned away.

Gira grinned. "Welcome. How are the two of you doing?"

"Fine, and yourself?" Hayden closed the door behind him and leaned back against it.

"Just fine." Gira winked at Raquel. "I was able to breach a few walls and lay some groundwork."

Edward turned back around and scowled at them. "Why don't you just explain what you've found, Detective?"

"Basically, our boy here has private access codes to your server." She nodded to Hayden. "Your brother was right. I'd bet he personally knew whoever created the original program that's running on these machines."

Raquel's brow furrowed. "What do you mean? Private access codes? We don't have that kind of thing."

Gira leaned back in her chair. "Yes, you do. The original programmer built in a couple of back doors to the system. They've been masked by other required directives in the code, but they're there. Since the back doors have been integrated into the base code, they haven't been messed with when you've done upgrades. The only way you'll be able to get rid of them is by having completely new code written. Otherwise, they're here to stay."

Raquel shook her head. "This is crazy." She met Gira's gaze. "Have you been able to figure out who created the code?"

She nodded. "I went over the personnel records in your system. The code itself was wiped of identifying marks, but I was able to come up with a couple of likely candidates. Edward said your head of IT gave him a similar list. However, none of them are currently employed."

Hayden straightened. "Who are they?"

Gira turned around and keyed up four files. The pictures showed men all in their late twenties, the hairstyles dating them to approximately when MI was first incorporated. "Do any of these guys look familiar, Raquel?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry."

Gira nodded. "Okay. I need to send these to a couple of my guys to do background research and see if and how they tie into this Davy Pinarella."

"Have you heard anything about him?"

Gira frowned. "No, I haven't. Give me a moment." She pulled out her all-one and dialed a number. "Mercia, have you gotten anything on Pinarella yet?"

The tinny voice echoed in the room. "You're not going to like this, Gira."

"Tell me what it is and I'll tell you if I will or not."

"He's dead. Been dead for over thirty years."

"What?" The exclamation echoed throughout the room by four different voices.

"He was seven years old when he was killed in a nasty car crash that killed or injured twenty other people."

"Shit." Edward's soft voice broke into the stunned silence.

"Send the file to my link, Mercia."

"Will do."

Raquel leaned into Hayden. "What are we going to do? This isn't a ghost that's attacking us."

"You're right. At this point, we just dig deeper." Gira brought up the files again. "One of these guys is going to be our linchpin."

The rest of Raquel's day passed in a fog. She did her work like an automaton, and when Hayden showed up in her office at five o'clock, she didn't bother arguing about leaving early.

He handed her into the car, and she just sat there, numb.

Hayden climbed in and started the car. He didn't bother to speak until they had exited the garage. "What do you want for dinner?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have no clue. I honestly have no clue."

Hayden took her hand, squeezed it and drove. He eventually called in an order to an Italian place by his house for carryout.

Her mouth watered as the scent of garlic and tomato suffused the car when he brought the food out. She dug through the bags and pulled out a breadstick, chomping a bite out of it.

"Hungry?"

The corners of her lips curled up. "Just a bit." She blew out a breath. "I feel like I'm frozen in time, just waiting for the next blow."

He reached over and squeezed her knee. "I know what you mean. I'm sure we're close, though. Gira said she expects to have a solid lead on this guy by tomorrow morning."

Raquel nodded. "She is good."

Hayden pulled into his garage and took the food bags out of her hands. Grabbing the chunk of uneaten bread from her hand, he plopped it back into its bag.

"Hey, I wasn't done yet."

"You can finish in the kitchen. Come on."

She climbed out, grumbling. "Haven't you ever learned it's rude to take food from a starving woman?"

Hayden just looked over his shoulder and continued on into the house. "Stop being so cranky."

Raquel huffed out a breath and walked in. He laid out the food and they ate.

Twirling spaghetti around his fork, he laid his hand over hers. "When this is all over, where would you like to go on vacation?"

"That idea of an island all to ourselves still is appealing." She ran a foot up his leg underneath the table.

He reached down and captured it. Massaging her foot, he met her gaze. "Stop teasing or I'm going to sweep this food out onto the floor and have my way with you."

"Promises, promises. You're lucky I'm really hungry and I don't want all of this lovely food to go to waste."

Hayden patted her calf and set her foot down.

Raquel sighed and dug into her fettuccine Alfredo. "What's Tommy up to tonight? A hot date with Sarah?"

Hayden shrugged. "No idea. He didn't tell me."

Raquel's all-one went off in her purse. She frowned, not expecting anyone. She got up and pulled it out. "Hello?"

"Um, Raquel, is Hayden with you?" Tommy's pale face took up the screen.

"Yes, he's right here. Hayden, speak of the devil, it's Tommy." He got up and came around the table. She passed him the all-one when he held out his hand. Hayden held it so they both could see the screen.

"Hey, kid, what's up?"

Tommy swallowed. "I'm supposed to tell you that you need to get Detective Gira and be at MI in twenty minutes."

Hayden frowned. "What's going on, Tommy?"

"Just do it, okay?"

The viewer zoomed out and Raquel saw Tommy tied to a chair.

"Please, Hayden."

"Tommy!" Hayden's knuckles turned white against the all-one as the connection was broken.

"Shit." He whirled around and jumped for his coat. He pulled out his link, stabbing at the connection button with his thumb, but completely missing it. "God damn it."

Raquel took the all-one from his shaking hands, though hers were no better, and dialed Gira's private line. "'Lo?"

Raquel realized they'd interrupted a private moment between Gira and someone, as her hair was tousled and face flushed. "Gira, I'm so sorry, but we just got a call from Tommy. He was tied up in a chair, and said we were supposed to get you and meet at my office in twenty minutes."

Gira's gaze sharpened. "I'll be there. Are you calling from the all-one you received the call at?"

"No."

"Good, don't use it. We can trace the call from it easier that way. I'll see you at your office. Is Campbell there?"

"Yes."

"Let me talk to him."

Raquel handed the all-one to Hayden. She could plainly hear Gira's voice. "Do not get into an accident. Do not flip out. I will get your brother back. Do you understand?"

"Yes." His voice was terse.

"Good. I'm on my way."

Hayden handed the all-one back to Raquel and they hustled out the door. The ride was even more of a roller coaster than when he had brought her to his office after the meeting with Edward. She didn't bother saying anything this time, not wanting to break his concentration. The car squealed to a halt at the entrance of the MI building.

Hayden got out and speared the doorman with a look. "Leave it."

The man met Raquel's gaze and nodded, holding the door open for them. Hayden stabbed the call button for the glide.

Raquel heard a commotion at the entrance and looked over her shoulder. Gira strode in, followed by Edward. He was dressed in the same clothes he had been wearing earlier, however, much more rumpled.

Raquel's brows rose. Apparently the woman *was* a fast worker. The door opened, and they piled in.

Gira held out her hand. "Let me see the all-one you got the call from Tommy on."

Raquel pulled it out of her purse and handed it over.

Gira retrieved her all-one and synched it with Raquel's. No one bothered to say anything so as not to disrupt her concentration. The glide ride took what felt to be only hundredths of a second, but Gira held them back when the doors opened. "Let me sweep first."

She checked the lobby and let them out. "Stay here while I check the offices."

She called out after each one was cleared. Raquel tried to keep track of her progress, but both Hayden and Edward were blocking her view.

Raquel sighed at their macho maleness, but appreciated the feelings behind it.

Gira quickly returned and they filed into Raquel's office. Her monitor blinked on moments after the office door closed and they all turned to face it. Tommy was shown, still tied up and gagged this time. An electronically altered voice greeted them.

"Ah, you're all there, and Lightfoot too, I see. Good. Listen well, as I'm only going to say this once."

"What do you want?" Hayden's voice rasped out, his gaze riveted on the screen.

"Why, what I've always wanted, Mr. Campbell. The complete and utter destruction of MacLendon Industries."

"But why? What have we ever done to you?" Raquel gripped Hayden's arm.

"Dear sweet Raquel. Such a point of pride to your father. I should have taken care of you years ago."

Chills raced up and down her spine at the menace in the voice.

"It would have been fitting if you were not allowed to live your life as Davy wasn't. Unfortunately, you were too well guarded."

Raquel looked at Gira and mouthed Davy's name. "Davy? As in Davy Pinarella?"

"Ah, caught onto that did you? Yes, Davy was my brother. An innocent not allowed to live."

Gira spoke up. "He died in a car accident. Tragic, but an accident."

"It was no accident." The voice was harsh, broken. "If you looked any further, Detective, you would know it was caused by MacLendon Industries."

"How?"

"A driver of one of their shipping vehicles lost control and rolled, striking the car Davy was in."

Gira crossed her arms. "I did look further. What I saw was the driver of the car your brother was in swerved in front of the truck, trying to pass another car. The shipping driver lost control while he was trying to avoid an accident. So really, you need to be blaming the driver of the car. But wait, that would have been your mother, wouldn't it?"

They could all hear wheezing. "Do not ever talk about Mama like that. Mama is sacred. Mama is perfect. Davy was perfect. It was the truck driver's fault."

"No, it wasn't. It was your mother's fault." Gira's voice got harder. "And it's going to be your fault if anything happens to Tommy Campbell. He's just as innocent as Davy was. You must release him."

"No. No, he's not innocent. He was able to track me down." The voice paused, as if collecting itself. "If you want him to remain alive, Dr. MacLendon will transfer all available cash and powers of attorney to the company whose information I am transmitting now. You have two hours."

The screen went black, but quickly lit up again with the promised information. Gira sat down in Raquel's chair and keyed in commands to the unit. Hayden's grip crushed Raquel's hand, but she just patted his arm.

"He's going to be okay. He's strong, Hayden, and we'll have him back soon. Right, Gira?"

Gira nodded. "I've got a fix on where he's located." She flipped on her link. "Mercia, I want you to take a hostage recovery team to the following address." She punched in the address to her link.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Go in low and quiet. Do not spook the suspect. I want her taken alive and with no damage to Tommy Campbell."

"Her?"

Gira looked up and met Raquel's gaze. "Yes, her."

Hayden's grip tightened. "Sarah?"

Gira shook her head. "No. Raquel, I'm sorry, but it's Louise DiVollo."

Raquel flinched, the words as powerful and breathtaking as Hayden's tackle the other night and shook her head. "No. No, it's not. You're wrong. Louise was my father's confidante, his lover. She would never do something like this. She would have had to be planning this the entire time she was with him. I don't believe you."

Her knees buckled and Hayden caught her. He led her over to a chair, and she sank down into it.

Spots danced in front of her eyes and someone pushed her head down between her legs. The spots disappeared. She waved her hand when she was ready to be let back up. "I'm okay." Tears ran down her cheeks in rivulets. "How do you know it's Louise? It could be anyone."

Gira's gaze was steady. "When we ran the background checks on the four possible men, we discovered one had been in a very brief relationship with a Loreen Darcy. Ms. Darcy changed her name to Louise DiVollo approximately twenty years ago and came to work for your father at that time."

"I remember. Up until then, I had never been able to keep track of my dad's secretaries. It seemed as soon as I got used to one, she changed jobs and he hired a new one. Louise was the first one to stay after I got her name down." Raquel bit her lips and looked down at her clasped hands. "She's Davy's sister?"

"Yes. Davy Pinarella was her half-brother. Her mother was an actress who apparently made some money on the side by doing call girl jobs."

Raquel looked up at Hayden into a face ravaged by worry and fear. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

He crouched down and took her face into his hands. "You have absolutely nothing to do with this, Raquel. She's the one who's done everything. Only her. It sounds like her mother programmed her, so if anyone is at fault besides Louise, it would be her

mother. I love you, Raquel. We're going to get her, and free Tommy. We don't have to worry about anything after that, okay?"

Her vision clouded by tears, she nodded. She tried wiping the tears away, but fresh ones quickly replaced them. "You love me?"

He smiled. "Trust a woman to focus on that."

She smacked his arm and sniffled. "Don't mock me."

"Have anything to say back to me?" She saw a trace of vulnerability in his gaze and she couldn't leave him on the hook, as much as she wanted to.

She smiled. "Yeah, I love you too."

He helped her up and handed her a tissue. They were soon in the backseat of Gira's squad car, racing to where she believed Louise to be holding Tommy.

Raquel held on to Hayden's hand, muttering prayers for Tommy, and Louise, under her breath. She just couldn't believe she and her father had taken Louise into their lives and hearts, only to be betrayed like this.

If it really was Louise, it wasn't the Louise she had known. This Louise was a monster.

Hayden stared out the window, not seeing the buildings fly by. He felt Raquel's pain reach out to him, but he didn't know how to ease it.

He rubbed her back with his free hand. Jesus. For as much as he thought DiVollo to be a pain in the ass, he had never expected this. His gaze was caught by Lightfoot.

The man's gaze moved to Raquel and back to Hayden's. Hayden nodded.

He tipped her chin up to force her gaze to meet his. "Hey, Raquel, what's the one thing that sticks in your mind about Louise?"

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what immediately pops into your head when you think of Louise?"

Her brow furrowed. "Orderliness. She's not anal by any means, but she likes everything in order."

"I would think that usually does mean anal."

Raquel shook her head, her expression intent. "No. She doesn't harp on anything in particular, and if I tell her to lay off on something, she does. But she always has exactly what I need at the exact moment I need it. She's orderly."

"Would you call her calculating?"

"No, at least, I wouldn't have before. She always seemed a little freer with me. When she and Dad hooked up, I never felt like she tried to replace my mother, but in a lot of ways, she did. I always felt like I could go to her with questions like I used to with my mom before she died."

"How long after your mom died did she and your dad hook up?"

Raquel nibbled on her lip, and Hayden resisted the urge to do so himself. "I think it was maybe a year after Mom died. It could have been shorter or longer. That whole time is kind of a blur for me, and I was out of the country on a dig for most of it."

"Did you ever think your dad made a play for Louise before your mom died or vice versa?"

Raquel vehemently shook her head. "No. They always appeared very proper and businesslike when I was visiting the office. I never noticed a change in my parents' relationship either."

"You just said you weren't home most of the time."

"Yeah, but a kid can tell these things. I talked with my mom and dad often enough it would have come through if they were having problems."

"You can never fully know what's going on in another's relationship, Raquel."

Her expression got mulish and she sat up. "Listen, Hayden Campbell, I knew my parents a hell of a lot better than you did, so don't you dare presume to tell me what my parents were or were not going through."

He reached over and smoothed a hank of hair behind her ear. "You're right. I couldn't know what your parents were going through. I just thought it might give us some more insight into Louise by how she reacted to your parents' relationship."

Raquel took a deep breath and blew it out. She closed her eyes and nodded. "I'm sorry for blowing up at you. It's...it's just been so much coming at me way too quickly."

He pulled her into his arms, her soft body molding to his. "I understand, baby." Flashes of light caught his attention. "It looks like we're here." He pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her."

She sniffled, but took the handkerchief and wiped her eyes with it. "Thanks...for everything."

"You're welcome." The car came to a smooth stop behind a squad car. "Are you ready?"

She nodded against his chest and he opened the door.

The scene was one of controlled chaos. They weren't allowed to move more than ten feet away from Gira's car. Uniformed officers swarmed the area, locking it down. The brownstones were refurbishments dating from the last century. Hayden had been in a few over the years and the only thing original to them was their façades. They'd been remade so many times over the years, much like New York in general, you were comforted by the illusion of their steadfastness.

He could see Gira standing with about five other plainclothes cops, huddling over what looked to be building plans. One officer was wildly gesticulating his arms, while Gira stood relaxed, her hands at her hips.

The guy punched the air twice and Gira nodded. She turned and came back over to them. Twice she was stopped by officers in raid gear, but managed to keep moving toward where they waited. Pausing a moment, she looked at Lightfoot before meeting Hayden's gaze. "We've got intel your brother is being held in the basement, but we haven't been able to locate where DiVollo is. Her neighbors haven't seen her for the last twenty-four hours. We've decided it's best to insert now and retrieve your brother. Intel has reported no apparent injuries to your brother, nor have they found any booby traps."

"Booby traps?" Hayden felt his chest clutch at the thought that Tommy might be injured due to some unknown quantity.

Gira laid a hand on his arm. "Just forget that bit. We're going to go in five minutes and you'll have your brother back out here with you in ten. Okay?"

Hayden nodded. Raquel wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. He clutched at her back, needing the comfort of her warm body and soul.

He watched the gathering of the force and the flow of it, like a well-choreographed ballet. The lead team broke down the door and the secondary teams flowed in behind them. Within five minutes, as Gira promised, Tommy was being led out. He appeared dazed, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

Hayden hugged Raquel and then ran to where Tommy was handed over to medical personnel. Tommy looked up and smiled. "Hey, Hayd."

Hayden took a deep breath before replying. Even then the choking sensation didn't quite leave his throat. "Hey, Tommy."

"Fun times, huh?"

Hayden crouched down and ran his hand over Tommy's knee, the only part of his body not being claimed by the med techs. "You tell me."

"Why don't you tell both of us, Tommy?"

Hayden looked over his shoulder to where Gira was standing, an all-one in her hand.

"Oh hey, Gira." Tommy shook his head. "I'm not quite sure what happened. I was on my way to visit Sarah at the office. I remember getting off the glide at MI, but nothing after that."

Hayden gripped Tommy's knee. "Don't force it. It will come back to you." He stood and looked around for Raquel, sure she would have been straight behind him. He couldn't make her out in the crowd and turned to Gira. "Did you take Raquel somewhere?"

Gira frowned and shook her head. "No, I thought she was with you."

"I don't see Lightfoot either. Maybe they decided to get out of the way of things."

"I told Edward to stay close. I wanted the police around you at all times."

Hayden's heart skipped a beat. Lightfoot would have followed Gira's instructions, if only to ensure Raquel's safety. "We've got to find them now." He was going to paddle Raquel's ass as soon as he found her. No way was he dying of a heart attack at the age of thirty-three.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing pulse and looked at Tommy. "You going to be okay, kid?"

Lines that hadn't been there before now creased Tommy's face. "Yeah, you go find Raquel." His frown turned into a smirk. "I can at least tell Mom now I've had my yearly physical after these guys are through with me. I probably won't even have to turn and cough."

Hayden snorted, but followed Gira back to her car. Raquel's purse was still in the backseat and Edward's coat in the front. Hayden frowned. No way could they have gone far. He stuck close to Gira as she pulled out her stunner. She swept down the nearest alley.

A low moan sounded from around the corner.

Gira held up a hand. "Stay back."

Hayden nodded and hugged the wall of the brownstone.

"Freeze." Gira pointed her stunner at the moving form.

"Damn, woman."

Hayden's blood froze. Lightfoot pushed himself onto his back. He raced over and helped the man sit up. Blood seeping from a cut on his head ran down the side of his face and dirt covered his body. "What the hell happened to you?"

Lightfoot cradled his head in his hands. "I don't know. Raquel and I were right behind you when she just halted. She turned around and ran down the alley. I tried following her and I almost caught up with her. Shit."

Gira ripped off a corner of her shirt and held it against Lightfoot's wound. "What?"

"I saw Louise. She came out from behind the garage, right over there, after Raquel had passed her. I don't know what the hell happened next, other than I saw Raquel collapse, and I shouted out. Louise turned to me and the next thing I know I'm waking up to you pointing a stunner in my face."

Hayden lifted Lightfoot's arm around his shoulders and helped boost him up. "You didn't see where they went to?"

Lightfoot groaned and leaned heavily on Hayden. Hayden staggered, but was able to brace himself after a moment.

"No. All I saw was Louise and then a flash of light." Lightfoot extracted himself from Hayden's supporting arms, braced against the wall and let his head hang down.

Hayden ran his hands through his hair, clutching at it. "We've got to find her now. Who knows what the hell that bitch is going to do to her?"

Gira pulled out her link. "Mercia, I need an APB on Louise DiVollo now. She has taken another hostage and all care must be taken if spotted."

"That information is being sent now. Is there a description of the hostage?"

"It is Raquel MacLendon, five-feet-eight-inches tall, brown hair and brown eyes."

"APB has been released to all units."

"Thanks Mercia." She pushed her all-one back into her pocket. Walking over to Lightfoot, she ran a finger along the cut that sluggishly bled. "Need a med tech?"

"I'd like to say no, but my brains feel a bit scrambled."

Gira nodded and met Hayden's gaze. "I need to get him back and you cannot go after them by yourself. As soon as I've got Edward taken care of, you can come with me. No arguments."

Hayden grunted, knowing it would be of no use to do so. "Let's get going then."

Lightfoot was taken in by the same med techs who had been on hand for Tommy. They promised to have him as good as new within the hour, and Hayden took small comfort in that. He didn't know if he'd ever be friends with Lightfoot, but the guy was solid.

Gira pulled her all-one out again and tapped in something. She frowned a moment, but then turned to Lightfoot. "Can you think of any place Louise would run to?"

He frowned. "We didn't talk much, but as far as I know this is the only building she lived in."

"What about in the name of her brother, or her mother for that matter?" Hayden paced in front of the open doors of the med vehicle. He spotted Tommy a few yards away in a squad car being interviewed by one of Gira's team members.

"Give me a moment." Gira furiously punched in commands to her link. Her brow furrowed and then cleared. "Gotcha."

Her smile was as wide as the Brooklyn Bridge. "There's an apartment building, conveniently vacant, in the name of one Davy Darcy three blocks over. How much you want to bet we'll find Raquel there, along with Louise's equipment?"

Ferocity edged Lightfoot's features. Hayden decided then and there he never wanted to be in a back alley brawl with this man on the opposing side. "All of the tax breaks MI is due for the next fifteen years. Give me a moment. I want to be there when you take her down."

Gira blew out a breath. "If they release you in the next five minutes, you can come with us. Otherwise, I'll have one of the squad cars bring you. We've got to get there now." She turned to Hayden, dug into her pocket and pulled out a slim card. "Here's my passkey. Get in my car and buckle up. I've got to round up some people and then we roll. Be ready."

Hayden took the tossed key and hurried over to her car. He was ready to go when she climbed in and he handed her the key. She swiped it and they were off, sirens blaring. "I want her to know we're coming. She's waited this long to do whatever she intended and probably isn't going to panic."

Hayden took a deep breath. "How are you going to get Raquel out?"

"I'm going in."

"What?" He braced himself against the dash as she took a turn sharply.

"I'm going in. She's seen me, and I'm a woman. I have a feeling I'm probably not as threatening to her as another officer would be."

"What makes you think she'll deal?" Hayden forced himself to keep his eyes open. He'd never have thought it possible, but he'd come across a driver who managed to scare the bejeezus out of him. She should have been a race car driver for the control she had over the car.

His breath shuddered back in as they came to a stop. The building was like the others on the block. Neat, tidy, but with a hint of decay along the edges. Nothing that would turn off the average middle-income tenant typical for the area.

Two other squad cars pulled up behind them and Gira got out, conferring with the drivers. Hayden looked around and he could see faces poking out the windows of the other buildings and quickly turning back inside once they saw the flashing lights of cop cars. No one came out of the buildings to watch the proceedings.

Gira walked up to the building's door, weapon drawn. She hit the buzzer. Hayden went to stand beside the other plainclothes officer to hear Gira's reports. "No one answering the buzz. Do we have a warrant yet?"

"Affirmative. We are clear to enter the building on suspicion of kidnapping."

"Ten-four." She looked up at the upper windows, and stood back a step. "Louise! If you are in there, be aware I am entering the building. I am an armed New York City police officer. Any resistance will be dealt with as I see fit."

Silence reigned. "I'm going in." Gira pulled out a keypass and swiped it against the door's lock. "Damn. She's blocked the police override. I'm going to need some force here."

One of the uniformed officers pulled a battering ram out of his squad's trunk and brought it to her. They made short work of the door.

"Detective Gira entering the building of suspect Louise DiVollo, also known as Loreen Darcy. Recorder is on. Suspect is believed to have kidnapped Dr. Raquel MacLendon and currently holding her hostage. Suspect is also believed to have previously kidnapped Thomas, aka Tommy, Campbell and also perpetrated acts of corporate espionage against Campbell Holdings and MacLendon Industries. There are no signs of occupancy on the first floor. There is a fine layer of dust over everything in the rooms and I believe it has been at least a month since this area was last occupied. The hallway seems to have been regularly tended to as there is no dust to be seen. There is also no indication the suspect is in residence. I am moving to the second floor. Officers behind me are securing the residence."

Hayden watched as more cops pulled up and entered the building. He could feel Raquel in there and he was absolutely helpless to do anything about it. It was a feeling he hoped never to be subjected to again in his life.

"I am entering the second-floor hallway, there are two doors leading off of it. I am opening the door on the north side."

Hayden held his breath. "The north side living quarters are clear. Again, there is no sign of recent occupancy. I am moving to the south side."

The results were the same.

"Where the hell are they?"

The other plainclothes detective—what the hell was his name?—turned to him. "Are you going to be okay or do I need to have you sit in the car?"

Hayden grimaced. "I can handle it. Is there a basement to this place?"

The detective studied his link. "According to the floor plans on file for this place, there's an attic as well as a basement. What the—"

Hayden looked at him. The detective was shaking his link.

"What's going on?"

The detective ignored him. "Gira, can you hear me?"

"Yeah. Are you getting what I am?"

"Looks like. How do you want to proceed?"

"Send in the rest of the officers, I'm heading down."

Hayden growled. "I asked what the hell is going on?"

The detective looked at him, his mien serious. "It looks like your girlfriend is definitely in the building, but is tied up."

Hayden turned and kicked the tire. Whirling back around, he held out his hand. "Let me see that link."

The detective sighed and handed it over. Hayden inhaled swiftly as he saw the image of Raquel, blindfolded with her hands tied in front of her. It looked to be a live feed.

"How can you tell she's definitely here?"

"Gira would have told me if it was somewhere else. Since she said she was heading downstairs, I'm going to assume she traced the feed to the basement."

Hayden nodded and handed the all-one back. "How much longer?"

"A minute, no more." He pressed a button on the link. "Gira?"

"I'm in the basement, but she's not here."

"Are you sure it was coming from the basement?"

"Positive. She bounced it off a reflector in the attic, but I could tell it was an echo. She's down here, I just can't see her."

The detective pulled up the floor plans on his all-one again. "I'm only showing one basement here. The city infrastructure doesn't allow for a subbasement in this area. She's got to be there somewhere if you're tracing the feed to a basement area."

"Give me a moment."

Hayden watched the detective's face, but it never changed as they waited for Gira to report back. Another squad car pulled up alongside of them and Lightfoot climbed out of the passenger side.

He looked a lot worse for wear, but there was a concerned light in his eyes. "Any word yet?"

Hayden shook his head, unable to give voice to his fears. Lightfoot only nodded.

"Mercia, I need a crack team in here now. I think I've got a hidden room. Possibly a panic room."

"Understood." He turned to where a group of officers were waiting for instructions. "Get in there and open up."

They nodded, grabbed their tools and hustled in.

"Can we go in?" Hayden shoved his hands into his pockets to avoid grabbing the man's weapon and going in after Raquel.

The detective, Mercia, shook his head. "No. We've got to secure the building first."

"The crack team is opening the room." Gira's voice echoed from the link.

Hayden held his breath.

"Hostage is secured. I repeat, hostage is secured."

Hayden closed his eyes and said a quick prayer of thanks before looking at Mercia. "Is she okay?"

"Gira, does the hostage need medical assistance?"

"It doesn't appear so. Raquel, Raquel, it's Gira. Are you okay?"

Hayden could hear her muffled reply. "What was that?"

"Gira, please repeat hostage's answer."

"She said she was okay. Shit."

"What?" Hayden grabbed Mercia's arm.

"Suspect is contained. Appears to have self-induced death. Please send med techs down to confirm."

When Gira led Raquel out five minutes later, Hayden sank against the car in relief, before running to meet her. She jumped into his arms as soon as she saw him.

"God, Hayden, I never thought I'd see you again."

He held her as tight as he could until she squeaked. Rubbing his nose in her hair, he was grateful to be able to smell the sweet scent of her strawberry shampoo again.

"I'm here, baby, I'm here." He looked up and met Gira's gaze. "Thank you."

Chapter Eleven

Raquel sat in the pajamas provided by the hospital. She'd tried to convince Hayden to go home, change and get her a pair of her own on his way back, but he refused to leave her by herself in the hospital. Edward and Tommy were no better.

"I'm telling you three I'm perfectly fine. I can go home."

"The doctors want to keep you overnight for observation for mental trauma. You can go when they're ready to release you." Firm resolve rang through in Hayden's rough voice.

Raquel knew she wouldn't get away with rolling her eyes, so didn't even try. She pleated the edge of the sheet covering her and looked from Hayden to Edward. "Did Gira say when she expected to be back? I know she was helping to go through that room they found me in."

Both men shook their heads before Edward spoke up. "She did say she would definitely stop by tonight to see how you are doing. I've gotten permission for all of us to stay until she comes by so we can all be updated at once. I still can't believe it of Louise."

Raquel closed her eyes. She couldn't either. When Louise had stepped from behind the garage with the stunner pointed at her stomach, her mind had gone blank. It just didn't seem possible.

She sighed. Hayden took her hand, his thumb rubbing over the back of it. She turned her hand around in his and clutched. His strength flowed into her from the contact and she warmed. When she had woken up, blindfolded and bound, she thought she'd never feel that warmth again and would go to her death feeling only cold.

Hayden smiled at her and leaned in, kissing her lips.

"Hey, I'd suggest you guys get a room, but as you're already in one, do you want us to clear out or do you want to hear about what we've discovered?"

Raquel broke the kiss and looked toward where Gira was framed by the doorway, a cocky grin decorating her face.

Hayden pulled his chair closer to Raquel's bed, giving Gira space to squeeze into the room. Raquel smiled at her. "I think we can sufficiently control ourselves. What did you find out?"

"It looks like she really has been planning this for the last twenty-plus years. Not to kidnap you, but to bring down MacLendon Industries. Her mother brainwashed her that if it hadn't been for the MI driver, and therefore MI, Davy would never have died." Gira snorted. "The ones who do the most damage to innocent lives are never willing to take responsibility for their actions."

Raquel closed her eyes. "Then why did she become my father's lover, a part of my family?"

"Because it put her in closer contact with you and able to do more damage. Raquel, she was a sociopath."

Raquel felt tears gather behind her eyes and one fell down her cheek. Hayden wiped it away for her. "It's just so hard to grasp."

"I'm afraid there's more bad news, Raquel."

"What can be worse than this, Gira?" Raquel gestured to the hospital room as a symbol of what had put her in this place.

"We know she's been planning the takedown of MI for twenty years because we found diaries. She described all of the steps she had taken in her quest. We still need to confirm, but she confessed to the murders of your parents in the entries, Raquel."

Raquel inhaled and clutched at Hayden's hand. She bit her lip and fought back a moan. The tears poured down her cheeks and she was unable to stem the flow. "How?"

"I'm sorry, Raquel, I know this is a shock, but I can't tell you at this point. We need your permission to exhume your parents' remains to confirm what the entries described."

Her grip on Hayden's hand tightened. "Why didn't anyone detect this before?"

"Simple answer, they weren't looking for it. Your mother exhibited all signs consistent with a degenerative disease, and all eyewitnesses said your father's accident was just that, an accident."

Hayden's fingers ran up and down her arm. The constant comfort from them helped her to regain control of her emotions. "Do it."

"Detective, how was she able to crack into Campbell Holdings?"

Raquel looked at Tommy, who had remained silent. He appeared more grown-up compared to the last time she had seen him. She was sorry he had lost the kernel of childhood that had colored his outlook on life until now.

"From her relationship with Raquel's father, she had found out his plans to merge operations with Campbell Holdings. She knew if it were to happen, her plans on destroying MI would never come to fruition because of the strong base Campbell Holdings had. She had to sabotage the merger at all costs." Gira sighed and leaned back against the wall. "With computers, she was elite, but managed to disguise her presence from the rest of the world by always letting others take credit for her work."

"What did she do?" Raquel sat up.

"She cracked the UN's system so that whenever the USA proposed something in the Security Council, all of the translators would be triggered to indicate goaltending."

Tommy laughed. "I remember that one. All of those politician guys were pissed off."

"Basically, she did stuff that came off as being funny rather than malicious, but it was high-level security she was bypassing. Frankly, by the time she got to your system, she probably didn't consider it much of an effort on her part."

Raquel noticed Tommy's pout, but didn't bother commenting on it.

She drew Gira's attention back to her. "Gira, you had me out of the room before I knew what was going on. What happened to Louise?"

Gira reached over and laid her hand on Raquel's shin. "She self-induced death."

Raquel bit her lip. "But I didn't hear anything. I would have heard something, wouldn't I?"

"Not necessarily. It looks like she took some kind of fast-acting poison, and her body didn't have time to react before she died."

Raquel shivered as she read the look in Gira's eyes. Louise had intended for Raquel to die there also. With Louise's death, there was no way for sure she would have ever been found in time.

Hayden's hand stilled on her arm and she knew he realized that too. "Thank you for everything you did today."

"I won't say I was just doing my job, but I'm glad I was." Gira stood and came over and hugged Raquel. "Take care and I'll check back with you in the morning."

Edward stood and leaned down, kissing Raquel's forehead. "I'm glad you're here. We'll talk tomorrow about how to handle this."

Raquel nodded, her eyes tearing. She clasped Edward's hand and squeezed. "Thank you, Edward."

He nodded, shook Hayden's hand and left.

Raquel's fingers traced random patterns on the blankets. Tommy cleared his throat. "Well, I'm starving. I'm going to head down to the café and see if there's anything edible there. Give me a shout when you're ready to go, Hayd." He shuffled over to the bed, lifted a hand, but then stuck it into his pocket. "I'm sorry about Louise, Raquel."

She reached up and placed her hand over his forearm. "I am too, Tommy. We can talk later if you want."

He nodded and opened his mouth as if to say something, but closed it. Hayden patted his shoulder as he passed by him on his way out the door.

Raquel blew out a breath. "So, this is it."

Hayden sat down on the side of her bed facing her. He took her hand into his. "It doesn't have to be."

Raquel turned her palm over and gripped his. "I know I want to be with you, Hayden. When Louise was holding me hostage, all I could think about was that I hadn't had enough time with you."

"Me too. I love you, Raquel."

The pressure that had slowly been banding around her chest since she realized Louise couldn't hurt her anymore released, letting her heart take flight. "I love you too."

"Good. That's good. So, when can I spring you out of this joint?"

"Tomorrow morning."

He leaned down and kissed her. "Good, because when I get you home, you aren't leaving the bed for the next week."

A shiver ran through her at the statement. "There's no other place I want to be."

About the Author

Kelly Maher has spent time in eleven countries, traveled all over the United States, at one point could name all 206 bones in the human body and can still tell if a femur is from the right or left side of the body. A multi-published author, Chicago native Kelly now spends her time in the wilds of Iowa putting her Masters of Science in Library and Information Science to good use, knitting, collecting books for her own private library and exploring the world of erotic fiction in her writing.

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