

Loose Id

Devil Take Me

Betty Womack

Praise for the writing of Betty Womack, writing as P.J. Womack

The Secret

P.J. Womack writes a delightful romance with *The Secret*. Enchanting characters, an engaging storyline, and profound lovemaking, make this book hard to put down.

-- Sinclair Reid, *Romance Reviews Today*

P.J. Womack's *The Secret* is a wonderful emotional tale. The chemistry between the two is very intense. The author has written a tale that will catch you from the first word and will not let go.

-- Tewanda Hardy, *The Road to Romance*

Author P.J. Womack hits the bull's-eye dead on with this sultry, sweet and sexy story.

-- Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

The Secret is another excellent story from P.J. Womack. Ms. Womack excels at making the most unreal of situations seem normal, and that's what she does with the will and subsequent marriage. It helps of course that she has also created two very likable and memorable characters.

-- Sarah W., *The Romance Studio*

Ms. Womack has written a highly charged book that draws you in from the first page to the last. An adrenaline rush all the way. This book sizzles in every page. I could not put it down.

-- Cherokee, *Coffee Time Romance*

The Secret is now available from New Concepts Publishing.

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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and some violence.

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Chapter One

Bone-chilling wind whistled into the dark alley, slicing through Agent Ali Donavon's leather jacket as she huddled against an overflowing trash dumpster. The stench of rotting garbage filled her nose and would be with her for weeks. She couldn't wait to head back home to New Orleans. Damn. Why had she turned down that agent's offer of a parka?

Being sent to St. Louis to work with the Homeland Security Department's most elite covert task force, Black Bird, had been a welcome diversion from her grinding, paper-trail routine of the last year. Her briefing on what to expect had been just that. Brief.

The supervisor of her unit, Milton Hamm, had laid out the reasons she had been chosen for a hush-hush assignment with this group and not much else. She was at the top of her class in intelligence and physically able to carry out a tough mission, a three-year veteran of HSD.

She had been told the mission was to be carried out in Bogotá, Colombia. Her part of the job was not immediately clear. The group was waiting for the final orders and several important agents to join the unit. One thing Hamm had said bothered Ali. Her partner preferred to work alone. While the loose strings were being tied up, Supervisor Hamm kept her busy on local stings with the other agents. The group was a small, secretive slam team that operated under the auspices of HSD.

The assignment in St. Louis should have provided a fresh and exciting exercise in law enforcement training. Instead, comments from several agents made her aware they considered her a nuisance, especially Rance, the agent she'd been partnered with.

Rance moved closer to her. He touched her shoulder and got in another jab about her recent drug bust. "Remember. We're not rounding up the councilman's kid tonight. We're after *real* criminals."

She grimaced under his verbal punch. "The little bastard was buying blow. He's a criminal. I arrested him." She looked at her partner over her shoulder. "Get off my ass."

He laughed softly. She noticed little puffs of vapor from his mouth in the eerie glow of a dying security light. "I noticed you shivering, Donavon. If you're cold, go sit in the car."

She barely afforded him a glance. "No, thanks, Rance. You go ahead. I know you guys try to avoid shrinkage at all cost."

He chuckled and jostled her shoulder a little. The agents saw her as a skinny, useless brunette, and probably wouldn't change their minds even if they'd known she was a black belt in Muay Thai kickboxing.

Their grousing didn't matter. Right now, she wished something would happen. She was in no mood to listen to any more of the tight-knit group's razzing. On top of that, she was freezing her ass off, waiting to collar some two-bit malcontent selling military small arms to the highest bidder.

She blew her breath on her icy fingers and watched the back door of the bar the team had staked out. Her patience eroded when she heard Rance mouthing off. He was such a sexist jerk.

"Maybe you should move to the rear of the group, Donavon. When the action starts, I'd hate to see you get trampled in the rush."

"Why don't you get the hell out of my face?" Ali elbowed him in the ribs, and he eased out of her striking distance, still laughing.

"Quiet." Supervisor Milton Hamm held his hand up, and everyone stopped talking.

Five men walked into the alley. Several of them lit cigarettes, talking and laughing like old friends. Their words were indistinct, but their actions said they were pleased as hell with themselves, slapping each other on the back and laughing like a bunch of hyenas. One of the men gestured toward a black sedan, went to it, and popped the trunk. The others joined him and stood looking inside.

As if on cue, they brought out an olive drab, three- or four-foot-long cylinder, sighting it like a kid with a BB gun. Ali's heart hammered. A Stinger missile.

All hell broke loose. Supervisor Hamm's order to go penetrated her brain and fired her blood. *Go, go, go* screamed in her ears and spun through her tensed muscles.

The sound of boots on wet brick and the jingle of equipment on belts echoed in the icy air. She heard Hamm yelling at the hoodlums.

"Stop. Federal agents. You're under arrest." The guy holding the missile dropped it and turned to run. Hamm shouted rapid-fire orders at him. "Get your hands up. Walk backwards to the sound of my voice. Don't turn around."

Action became a blur. One of the men turned to fire a shotgun. He was brought down by Supervisor Hamm and fell face forward onto the bricks. Another hoodlum fought being

arrested and struggled violently while being subdued. The rest of the gang took off with a trio of agents in pursuit. She sprinted down the alley to nab the tallest one.

“Stop. Federal agent. You’re under arrest.” Ali could’ve sworn he shrugged.

She kept a wary eye on the man she had singled out. He had the chance to get away, but he stayed where he was, barely lifting his hands in surrender. She briefly wondered why he showed little concern at the prospect of spending life in a federal penitentiary, such an arrogant calm.

Had he heard her over Supervisor Hamm’s yelling and the general mayhem? Her hand was steady as she aimed her Walther PPK at a spot between her target’s broad shoulders. She yelled at him again.

“Freeze. Put your hands on top of your head.”

The tall one looked over his shoulder, and her adrenaline spiked.

“Kiss the wall, mister.”

Her palm hit the center of his broad back, and she pushed against him. For a fraction of a second, she hesitated. Her senses devoured his incredible scent. Her taste buds quickly identified the exotic blend of cedar leaf and something oriental.

Disgusted by her momentary lapse of sanity, she pushed him closer to the grimy wall and then ran her hands over his narrow hips and hard rear. She carefully slid her hand around the lean expanse of his waist.

“That’s getting close to sexual assault.”

Ali couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She raised her head and yanked on his arm, trying to touch the back of his neck with his thumb. Her reward was his grunt. She had done hundreds of body searches and knew she had not violated her prisoner.

Anxious to be rid of the wiseass, Ali snapped the cuffs on his wrists behind his back, checking twice to make sure they were nice and tight. “Spread your legs.”

A well-placed kick to his ankles and he obligingly parted his long legs. An evil whisper touched her lips and she did the unthinkable. She made the arrest personal. “Your perfume is nice. What do you and the rest of the girls call it?”

Damn. If she were lucky, he hadn’t heard her dumb comment and she wouldn’t have to explain the blunder. She looked up, able to clearly see the guy’s profile in the glaring security lights. His features were chiseled under a bronze complexion, lean cheeked and masculine a’ la one of those cultivated two-day-old-looking beards. On him, the scruffy look was sexy.

She clenched her teeth and went on with the frisk that seemed to take forever. He coughed and she reacted.

“What did you say?”

He laughed softly. “That’s twice.”

She leaned closer to hear him.

"My nuts. You squeezed them, not once, but twice."

"Keep your mouth shut."

His easy laugh should have made her angry, but it didn't. Rich and smooth as vintage whiskey, it conjured up memories of deep, passionate kisses in the shadows of a late summer afternoon. Somewhere in the past, she had experienced that. She hated him for guessing her dilemma in deciding if she wanted to feel him up or frisk him.

Thankfully, he submitted mutely to the rest of her search. While her hands explored lean, hard muscle and sinew, she wasn't thinking of a lowlife creep.

As she checked between his legs, Ali noticed the heat radiating from his inner thighs. Thinking like that could bring about her immediate dismissal from the agency. That had been one of the first things she had been taught at the academy. He's not a man. He's a criminal.

Would this damned search ever end? She clenched her teeth and shoved her hand up under his jacket, pressing her fingertips into warm, firm flesh, fighting the urge to go ahead and enjoy the feel of a hard, tight man.

When she roughly turned her prisoner around, she stared in fascination. *Hello, Lucifer.* Someone had told her the devil was beautiful. They had been right. Deep, dark sin smiled down at her from eyes black as midnight. Straight black lashes framed his fathomless gaze, a slash of ebony brows tying it all up in an enticing, sensual dream.

Disgust registered as she realized her mistake in focusing on his face. His gaze locked with hers, forcing her to identify the unmistakable gleam of male interest and challenge there. She returned his penetrating gaze with what she hoped was complete lack of emotion. Just like she had been trained to do. But, that had been so long ago. Maybe she was starting to lose her edge.

The ploy hadn't worked, if she read his wolfish smile correctly. The bastard knew she was shaken to the core. She jumped when Supervisor Hamm yelled at her from across the parking lot.

"Donavon! Get your man ready for transport."

Grateful to be moving on, Ali grabbed her prisoner by the handcuffs. "Walk."

He didn't resist; more like he leaned against her and sniffed her neck.

"You son-of-a-bitch." Furious, she pushed him ahead of her. "I hope they fry your ass."

She stepped back to watch as Rance shoved him in a car. He looked back at her before the car drove away. Her pulse hammered. What was her problem? Policy said no personal feelings allowed on the job. Ali had never found that a hard rule to follow. Until now. She turned away from the epitome of temptation and wondered if this sting would ever end.

* * * * *

Three in the morning, and Jack Gunnison still cooled his heels in an interrogation room with nothing going for it. Steel furnishings with everything blurred into one beige scene of ugly. He had been taken there and left to pace the small room after the tight-assed female agent had manhandled him.

She had gotten close enough for him to guess she was shoulder high to him and had a strong grip. Strong hands and a soft southern drawl made her irresistible. Damn, she had almost broken his arm. Thinking about her, he laughed.

“Tell me the joke and we’ll both laugh, Gun.” The comment came from Hamm. “Did they take a report on your gun-running friends?”

Gun nodded and stretched his arms over his head. “An hour ago. Now, I’m ready to get some sack time.”

“All in good time.” Hamm sat down at the barren desk and crossed his arms over his chest, staring at Gun for several seconds. He opened the folder that he had tossed on the desk. “Got your next assignment. Take out Rodriquez Armondez.”

Gun sat down on the edge of the desk. “Why now? I volunteered for this last year.” He knew without asking the second-rate murderer had gotten next to someone important. Otherwise, Gun wouldn’t be getting the nod to take him out.

“It just got personal. He sold a cube of black tar heroin to the daughter of a prominent Washington figure. She threw a party, overdosed, and now her father finally sees the need to get fucking medieval with this son-of-a-bitch.”

A scowl creased Gun’s brow. “As long as this bigwig knows it’s not only the drugs that make Armondez a necessary snuff.” He picked up the folder and thumped the photo of Armondez. “This guy is the lynchpin of a new terrorist operation right on the Pentagon’s back doorstep. Not to mention the forced prostitution trade, especially little girls and the drug cartel he uses to pay for it all. The agency’s lost count of the bodies he’s dumped in the Amazon.”

“He knows.” The two men fell silent, the only sound that of Hamm’s lighter. He nodded and puffed on his Cuban cigar. “There won’t be a backlash. They have been alerted to the fact that Armondez has set up a thriving halfway house for terrorists in Washington, DC. No trouble from them, I’ll make sure of that.”

Gun shook his head. “Better not be. I’m not taking the fall for anyone too girly to do a job themselves.” He leveled a steady gaze on his longtime friend. “What’s the chance of the extraction team being there after the hit?”

“It’ll be there. My personal guarantee.” Hamm puffed once more on his cigar before laying it in an ashtray. He leaned back in his old-fashioned swivel desk chair. “One more thing, Gun. You’ll have a companion. You’ll be a rich guy and his favorite lady out to have a good time.”

"Not that, Hamm." Gun voiced his dissent. "This is not a place to be saddled with a female."

"She won't be any trouble. She's an agent, just like you. She's trained, been on similar missions and held her own."

Gun didn't hide his displeasure over the plan. "Where have I heard that line before? Lucas and his female partner were both killed two years ago trying to do the same job. By myself, I know the job will get done. Dragging a skirt around is going to slow me down."

"It's unfortunate about Lucas and Mendoza. That's why we went to great lengths to pair you with a partner who can handle herself."

"Any chance I could go alone?"

"None. You don't have a choice. Plans are in motion, and she's prepared to get underway."

Gun was tired and pissed off, not a good combination for a restful night's sleep. Hell, he couldn't remember the last time he'd slept peacefully. He gestured to the cigar burning up in the ashtray.

"Enjoying that Cuban cigar, Hamm? I had to leave an Italian suit behind to get them in my gear." He tapped the ashtray meaningfully. "You owe me."

"Now look, Gun." His supervisor sat forward in his chair. "It won't be that bad. One week and you'll be back, ready for a new assignment."

Gun spread his hands on the desktop and shook his head. "And it's snowing in Brazil right now."

Hamm grinned. "We'll have the initial meeting and outline your mission in the morning."

"Just curious. Who will I be chained to?"

"Donavon." Hamm got up and took the folder with him. He paused at the door. "Agent Ali Donavon."

"Not the chick that cuffed me tonight?"

"The same."

Hamm left Gun alone to remember Donavon's rough frisk. He hadn't gotten a good look at her, but he recalled that the perfume on her neck sent him back to a summer night under a mock orange tree with the girl next door.

He worked his arm, touching his shoulder, and thought about the way she had nearly broken it. He shook his head. At least she was tough and didn't back off from insults. She wasn't scared of him. Yet.

He paced to the window and sat on the wide sill, leaning against the frame. It could have been interesting, him and Donavon, but she wasn't going with him if he handled things

right. Someone opened the door and let it fly back to hit the wall. He turned to look over his shoulder and into the ice-blue stare of his next mission partner.

Chapter Two

Ali dragged the knit hat from her head and glowered at the man gazing at her with a smartass grin.

"Hello, Donavon."

"Don't hello me, Gunnison." The man disturbed her deeply. Disturbed and angered her. By his cocky attitude, she guessed he thought women didn't belong in the department. And he didn't want her as a partner.

"Gun." He didn't bother getting to his feet. "My friends call me Gun."

"Am I supposed to ask why?" She threw the hat at his face. "Hamm says you don't want my company."

"He didn't lie." He examined his watchband.

The damned undercover creep. She glanced away from him, looking around the dreary room. "Some guys don't want a female partner, afraid she'll see what a wimp he really is." She slid a contemptuous gaze over him before finishing her insulting diatribe. "I know you brag it up, adding inches to everything from fish to hotdogs." Her smile taunting, she combed her fingers through her tangled hair. "You don't have to worry. I won't tell the guys the truth."

He eyed her with a sarcastic smile. If her jab had bothered him, he concealed it under dark silence. She experienced a flashback to the bitter-cold parking lot. His body was lean and hard, and she remembered her icy fingers warming against his heat. He was close enough to touch, but this time she kept her hands well away from him.

He got to his feet, leaning over to pick up her hat. When he looked at her with his midnight eyes, Ali felt her body tense in preparation of escape. She mentally shook herself for being a fool. But she couldn't lose the feeling that Jack Gunnison was a cold, dangerous man. Her mouth felt dry when he spoke at last.

“Hell, you’re still pissed off about what happened in the alley.” He laughed a soft, teasing laugh, tossing the headgear back to her. “I enjoyed it, and I thought you did, too.”

Acting was not her forte, but she couldn’t let him know how much he shook her reserve. She kept her remarks on a level that suited him and the subject. “Okay. You and the good old boys had your little joke, Gunnison.” She scrunched her cap in her cold fingers and made her intent clear. “I’m going to Colombia with or without you.”

He didn’t address her comment, chose to treat her like a skirt.

“You’re shaking.” His smile was close to being sympathetic. “It’s okay to be afraid.”

Damn him. The devil had called her a coward. He made her feel like she had to save face, and that didn’t sit well on her empty stomach. “Get this, hotshot. We’re supposed to be going as a team, but if you pull anything stupid to prove what a real man you are and endanger the mission, I’ll leave your ass hanging in a banana tree.”

“Ouch.” Gun ended his long study of her mouth to her eyes and grinned. “That’s mean talk. You look like a soft kitten. Not a tiger.”

“I’m a Black Bird agent. I’m not one of the guys, and I’ll not be treated with anything less than respect.” To hide her frustration at his attitude, she yanked a pair of gloves from her jacket pocket and tried to ease the tension between them. “Do we leave for Colombia together, or do you want to meet up in Bogotá?”

His silent and steady gaze made her nervous. What the hell did he see that fascinated him so much? She shifted from one foot to the other, listening to her handcuffs jingle softly on her belt. She quieted them with her palm.

“Can you put a bullet in a guy’s head and kick him after he falls?” His single, telling question crashed through the lengthy silence.

“Before you can spit.” Her voice had been strong. She felt strong.

He turned back to stare out the window, drumming his fingertips on the frosty pane of glass. Humor vanished from his voice. “If you screw up, I’ll leave you where you fall.”

She believed him. “I’d expect nothing less.”

He looked at her over his shoulder before walking back to stand face to face with her. “This is no joke, Donavon.”

“I never joke about killing a man.” She leaned back a millimeter after catching a hint of his exotic scent.

“I don’t want to see you sunbathing or checking your bikini wax job when we are setting up our position.”

“Ditto for you on shacking up with the ladies or getting loaded in the local bars.” Damn. She tasted his scent, and it trickled over her nerve endings. “Anything else?”

“I’ll expect one-hundred-percent cooperation from you. No matter the situation, no matter what I ask.” His brow lifted. “Get my meaning?”

Now he was speaking to her like he would his pet spaniel.

"Loud and clear, and you'll get exactly what you deserve." She still wanted to roll in his sheets after he slept in them.

He seemed to be moving in on her. Pressing her until she stepped backwards to plaster herself against the wall. He didn't touch her, but his male presence seeped into her skin like the heat of the sun. She couldn't look away when he spoke.

"Let's get this straight between us. You haul your own weight. I won't be pulling your ass out of fires, and you had better not be a screamer."

Her lips twitched in telltale amusement. Hell, yes, she was a screamer, but that wasn't what he meant. "I'll be there to pull the trigger if you can't."

He moved away from her and headed for the door. "I'll see you in the morning, Donavon. That is, if you decide you really want to go."

"Go to hell, Gun."

Gun couldn't believe the discussion he'd just had with Donavon in the conference room. Talking with her about whether she really wanted to die in the jungle or not. It wasn't his usual ending to an evening with a desirable woman like Donavon.

He sat in his restored '68 muscle car for a few minutes, hoping the cold engine would turn over with one more try. The key turned, but the engine remained quiet. Damn it. The car looked hot as hell with its apple-red paint job, but was cold as a witch's tit. Now he remembered the antifreeze. Since he had parked in the agency's lot, he wasn't worried about his stalled car at the moment. Borrowing one from the agency would be no problem.

He got out and locked the door before walking back toward the front of the agency's building. A woman hurrying down the snow-covered steps caught his attention. It was his new partner.

"Hey, Donavon." He grinned at her stare of contempt. "Give me a ride to my place, okay?"

"I'm probably not going in that direction." She pulled her borrowed parka closer about herself against the biting wind and tried to walk past him.

"I'll pay you."

"Call a cab."

He liked sparring with her. "Come on, honey. I live five minutes from here."

"I don't give a damn, and don't call me honey."

Gun turned the collar of his jacket up and laughed. "I thought of another name, but you'd be pissed off."

She scalded him with her glare. "You won't mind walking since it's so close, will you, honey?"

He laid his hand on her shoulder, giving some thought to the idea that she might bite it off. He wanted a better look at her face, partially hidden by the fur collar of her coat. "Okay. I'm a bastard."

"You don't say?" She bunched her shoulders and stamped her snow-covered feet. She looked miserable.

"Let's start over."

"No."

"Hi, there. I'm Gun. I'm stranded."

"I'm Donavon, and I don't give a damn."

"Have a heart. Please."

She flung his hand aside and grumbled under her breath. "All right." She looked him in the eye and drew up the rules of the ride. "Don't say a word in the car, or I'll kick you down a ravine."

He nodded, grinning behind his cupped hands he warmed with his breath. He wouldn't push her anymore. Tonight.

He was impressed with how quickly she picked up his hand signals. She drove fast and chewed fruity gum, but didn't offer him a piece. A woman after his own heart. Donavon was hard as nails and probably lean and mean in bed. Gun liked her hands on the wheel of the luxury sedan. They looked strong, and there was no ring except on her left thumb.

She glanced his way and caught him staring at her. He didn't care if she knew he liked her looks. Didn't mean a fuck. Never would the two meet in the sack, unless she insisted. He leaned in a little toward her and inhaled the light drift of orange blossom that plucked the strings of his sensory glands.

He gestured to the right, and she drove the big car into the icy courtyard of his apartment building. She scanned the area for a second. Without a word, she flipped the door lock and waited.

"Can I speak now?" Damn. He'd love to plant a big one on her mouth. It was wet and glistened from the lick of her tongue. "I have instant coffee. Wanna come up?"

"Get out."

He opened the sedan's heavy door, giving her a final look to see if she had weakened. "How about giving me your phone number? In case our plans are changed."

Ali touched the alarm on her key chain. "It's not much, but it draws attention."

"Thanks for the lift, Donavon."

He stood in the windy driveway until she left in a cloud of exhaust vapor and what he figured was a fit of laughter. She handled herself damn well. He still wondered if she could stand up to the hell they would be getting into.

Chapter Three

When she woke, Allie's first thought was of food. Her second was of Gun. He wasn't hard to figure out. He didn't like her much, but would've had sex with her. Typical male. She grimaced.

She climbed out of bed to grab a pair of faded jeans and a cable-knit sweater from the closet. Noticing the hangers swinging in the empty closet reminded her she wasn't home, but in a mediocre hotel room.

Uppermost in her mind was the early-morning meeting to hash over the plans for her assignment. Humph. *Their* assignment.

Gun. Gunnison. Jack Gunnison. What a bastard. His take-it-or-leave-it attitude was typical male, give nothing, ask for nothing. Ordinary male. Okay, so he wasn't ordinary. She couldn't believe how easily and quickly everything he said or did got under her skin.

While she showered, Ali tried to think of ways to avoid being alone with Gun. That, of course, was inane. He was nothing special, and she'd known her share of Jack Gunnisons. Had one of them, gave him her all. It hadn't been one of her better choices. An especially ugly scene had erupted when she found him with her cousin in the canopy bed that Great-Great-Grandma Donavon had brought from Ireland.

Damn, the man had torn her heart out and stuffed it down her throat. Never again. Ali dried her body and dragged on her clothes. Rummaging around in her suitcase, she found heavy wool socks to wear with her waterproof ankle boots.

In a hurry, she brushed her shoulder-length hair away from her face, catching it up in a yellow banana clip. In forty-five minutes she had to be in the briefing room at the agency. First things first, though. The nice little family-style café down the street served pancakes. She decided to walk to work and hoped she wouldn't be assigned another late-night sting.

Hurrying around the room, she grabbed the borrowed parka and her keys before strapping her weapon on. She located a warm neck scarf, picked up her wallet, and left for work.

Outside, it was damp and gloomy, cold enough to make her pick up her pace until she saw the welcome sign in the café's steamy window. She opened the door and went inside. A crowd made up of men and a few women having a bite before they went to work ignored her.

The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee and crispy fried bacon made her stomach growl. She sat at the counter and draped her coat over her legs. The waitress brought a cup and a carafe of coffee to where she sat, then took her order. Great place, Ali thought, glancing at the pile of glazed donuts in a glass case.

While she waited for her food, Ali read the newspaper someone had left. She didn't look up, but searched her memory for the identity of the masculine laughter coming from a table in the back of the room.

"Gun." She shook her head. What were the chances of running into him at this tiny café? Pretty damned good since he lived two blocks east of her hotel.

As she sipped her coffee, Ali covertly checked Gun out, leaning to one side to look at him. She almost grinned. He wore faded jeans and western boots. Just what she wanted to be hooked up with. A cowboy.

Once her food arrived, she didn't look his way again until half the stack was gone. Glancing to the back of the room, she noticed several of Gun's companions putting their coats on, preparing to leave. Shit. He was getting up too, pulling money out of his wallet. Not wanting to trade shots with him this morning, she took a ten from her billfold and slipped it under her saucer.

Grabbing a paper cup from the stack provided for carryout, she filled it and quickly jammed a lid on it. When the waitress came over, Ali smiled. "Hey, thanks. I forgot I have to be somewhere else right now."

"Better take some of these donuts." The waitress grinned and dropped several in a brown paper bag.

"Thanks. I owe you."

Some bozo bumped her, and she turned around to face him. Oh, hell. Gun. And he had shaved. *So what? You've had better.* His smile was evil, a perfect match to his personality.

"Why didn't you come back to our table?"

"Didn't want to intrude." Hell. She wanted him to leave, but he continued to gaze at her and the sack of donuts the waitress held out.

"You'd better take those sinkers. Hamm doesn't let us take a morning break." He handed the waitress a bill and paid both their tabs, sticking Ali's ten-spot back into her coat pocket.

He took the parka and held it up, waiting for her to relent and put her arms into the sleeves. She shoved her arms in and shrugged out of his reach. Once they were outside, she would have to blast him for assuming too damned much. She walked by him and out the door, clenching her teeth to keep from cursing out loud. She might have to anyway.

"Hey, Donovan. Wait."

Glancing over at him, she took the brown bag and coffee he held out to her. Now was as good a time as any to tell him how she didn't like men taking care of her.

"I would rather pay for my own food."

"I put on the little show of manners for the waitress. Been trying to date her for a month." He picked up her neck scarf that had fallen at his feet and draped it over her shoulder.

"Don't tell me your troubles. I could give a rat's ass." She quickly stuffed the scarf in her coat pocket.

"I could use one of those things." He pointed to her paper sack.

"Forget it. I saw the mammoth plate of ham and eggs you ordered." He had a great laugh, rich, warm, and male. If she didn't watch it, he would be in her jeans before they got to work.

She pulled a donut from the bag and ate it, ignoring the hand he held out to her as they quick-stepped to the agency two blocks away. To emphasize her lack of concern for his feelings, she crumpled the top of the bag and crammed it into her coat pocket. Damn, she sure had wanted the rest of those pancakes.

The short flight of steps to the entrance was iced over again. How happy would she be to leave the cold weather behind? Her toes had been frozen for two weeks. She hurried to open the heavy glass door without help from him. Gun followed, close on her heels.

She scanned her card and signed in under the watchful eye of the guard in the lobby. His smile was a nice change from some of the goons she had been spending her time with lately.

While Gun talked with the guard, Ali hurried into the operations room. The place wasn't vacant. Supervisor Hamm was there, writing on a wall-sized blue message board.

"Donavon." He went back to writing on the message board after the cheerful greeting.

"Good morning, sir."

The rising murmur of male voices outside the door made her wonder how he stood all the craziness of the business. Picking Gun's voice out of the mix wasn't difficult. She listened carefully, placing the soft accent in the southwest. He was a damned West Texas cowboy.

Ali spread her belongings out and hunched over the oval table, taking up two spaces. From the corner of her eye, she could see Gun walking around to her side of the table, taking off his heavy coat. Crap. He was going to sit next to her.

He made a huge show of draping the coat over the back of her chair, leaning over her shoulder to smile into her eyes.

"It'll keep you warm. Gets kind of cold in here." He dropped easily into the chair next to her. "I got my car started. You won't have to wait for me tonight."

"Thank God," she hissed through a hard grimace. How should she handle this -- stomp his instep, or play dumb? He didn't give a damn about her comfort, and he had brass balls to assume she would be giving him another ride. Then, it hit her. He was trying to charm her out of the assignment. "Gun, I'm going to Colombia."

He leaned back in his chair and eyed her with some irritation. "Just what I like. Blood and guts."

"What's wrong? Do I scare you?"

"Damned right." He tapped her wrist. "But I like it."

Ali considered being friendly to him, but she closed the feeling off.

Supervisor Hamm sat at the head of the table and put a disc in the DVD player. He began laying out the plans for the special-ops assignment, glancing over his shoulder at them.

"Pay attention." The horseplay and personal comments ceased, and then he continued. "Agents Gunnison and Donavon will be flown to Bogotá in the department's private jet. Rance is their handler. He will fly with them, stay in Bogotá to relay any changes in their plans if there are any. The present administration of that country and the military are friendly with us. Our agents are security cleared with the local law enforcement. The military has given them permission to use their private airstrip. They won't have any problem moving around the country. Rance will separate from Donavon and Gun at the airport and go to his hotel. Gunnison and Donavon will be registered under the names Mr. Greg Sweeney and Bambi Malone at the La Fontana hotel."

Ali didn't bother asking. Yes, she would be sharing a suite with Gun. If he had an opinion about the arrangement, he kept it to himself. She slid a sidelong glance at his profile. Nothing. He was taking notes. What a cold fish. She shrugged, understanding that was a necessary trait in a top agent.

He looked up only occasionally while Supervisor Hamm took them through dozens of photos. Ali sat forward when a slim-faced man's image appeared on the screen. She knew his identity before Supervisor Hamm said his name.

"Rodriquez Armondez." The supervisor looked around the room, enlarging the photo to full screen size. "He likes money, parties, fast cars and women. You'll be provided with enough cash to impress him, get his men's attention. Having agent Donavon with Gun will get them into the party scene faster."

The men all gave her the business with wolf whistles and big grins. Everyone except Gun. He looked up at the screen and went back to writing in his notepad. The supervisor scowled, and the hubbub stopped.

“Gun and Donavon will spend money, party with the big boys. Ask around about drugs to be bought, and his men will lead you to him. He’s like a snake. Hard as hell to see. He also swallows young girls without chewing.”

Ali tensed up to stop the shudder running over her body.

“Armondez can’t resist a classy woman. He is extremely partial to blue eyes. Donavon fits that profile perfectly. Donavon will be outfitted with all the trappings to attract the Anaconda. It will be Gun’s job to keep the son-of-a-bitch looking, not touching. In case it comes down to that, Donavon can handle herself, but we don’t want them to know she’s tough as they are.”

The boss’s voice seemed far away while Ali thought about the snake thing. Shit. She hated snakes.

“Okay, wrapping things up here, don’t get separated at any cost. If you have to go to the latrine together, go together.”

From the corner of her eye, Ali could see the faint grin on Gun’s face. She bunched her shoulders together in what she knew was a defensive posture, forcing her attention back to Supervisor Hamm.

“You’ll be studying maps and logistics for the next week.” The supervisor flipped off the player and handed out large envelopes filled with pictures. “I realize you are both veterans of this type of mission, but you can’t underestimate this man. Rehash your cover stories and get familiar with your new names. You have to be razor sharp on this one.”

Ali realized she was clutching her coat like a life raft and looked around the room. No one showed any emotion at all. Gun slowly unwrapped a piece of gum, folded it into his mouth, and chewed while looking at the pictures of brutally murdered and tortured corpses.

Her gaze focused on the horror of one photo showing a very young girl being beaten by two brutes. She flipped it over to Gun. She checked out his expression. It didn’t alter. He leaned over, brushing her shoulder with his, pointing to the picture in his hand.

“Nice car.”

“Car?” Ali could only see a bloody body lying beside an older Cadillac. “Is that all you see?”

He looked carefully at the photo, then at her. “Yep.”

“Yep?” She knew better, but Ali couldn’t stop the need to know. “How long did it take?”

“Take? For what?”

“For you to become so damned caring?”

He exhaled as if she was a nuisance and he didn’t care what she thought. “What difference does it make to that stiff lying in the mud?”

He was right, of course, which made her wonder if he would feel the same way about his partner. Enough! She had to stop thinking that way. She had to trust him.

“Do us both a favor, Gun. Pay a little attention to what Supervisor Hamm is saying.”

“Don’t need to.”

“Aren’t we just full of ourselves?”

“No. I’ve been there. It sucks so bad, once you’ve seen it, you never need a refresher.”

“Damn. That’s encouraging.”

“It’s not meant to be.”

She scowled at him and then shielded her face from his close scrutiny. “You’re so giving. I didn’t ask for encouragement.”

“You’re a wiseass, and if you need encouragement, you’ll have to ask for it.” He bumped her knee with his.

Catching Supervisor Hamm’s look of irritation, Ali cupped her hand to her mouth to muffle her angry response.

“I’d rather sleep with Armondez and all his men before asking a frigging thing of you.”

Supervisor Hamm tapped his pen on the table, the sharp noise grating on the edges of her raw nerves. “You two can jaw later. Grab your belongings. We just got news the schedule has been accelerated. We’re going to the rifle range, where you can really get under each other’s skin.”

Chapter Four

Gun stared out the van window until the driver turned off the highway and drove down a narrow, weed-choked road. He'd been here before. The rifle range was a wind-driven piece of dirt surrounded by bunker-like berms and bullet-riddled mock-up buildings.

They were there to test fire the weapon he and Ali would use to take Armondez out. Donavon sat with Rance in the middle row of seats. She hadn't spoken for thirty minutes. He liked that she wasn't chatty.

The van rolled to a stop near a dilapidated shell of a building, and the agents climbed out. It was hammer time. Gun fell in behind Hamm, who carried a dark leather case. He set the case down on a battered wooden table and motioned for the agents to gather around.

"Donavon, Gun. Over here." Hamm opened the case and brought out the weapon he had chosen for them. He held up the sleek, no-nonsense .338 Lapua Magnum sniper rifle. "This weapon is a rotating-bolt, manually operated rifle with a Zeiss scope. It will bring down a water buffalo at 15,000 meters." Hamm lowered the rifle and looked at his team. "This weapon is the T-76 longbow, tactical engagement rifle. Vastly superior to .30 rifles without the weight of a .50 caliber. The weapon's failure ratio is zilch. It won't let you down."

Ali seemed to be impressed, edging closer to Hamm. All Gun could see was the top of her head and strands of hair that were caught up in the blustery wind. She still wore the big old parka she'd snagged from the lost-and-found. The thing swallowed her slim figure. Come to think of it, he'd never seen her figure.

"Gun, you want to join us over here? Maybe fire this weapon a few times?"

"Be glad to, sir." Gun appeared nonchalant, but he felt pissed off at himself. He'd been checking out his partner.

He checked the magazine, worked the bolt to lay a round in the chamber. "Nice action, sir."

"Let's see how accurate it is." Hamm signaled for the target boards to be raised. "Start anywhere you like."

Gun knew weapons, and he liked the feel of the Beretta. Just enough weight to remind you it was there, but not enough to weigh a man down. Just the way he liked his women. An odd sensation made him look to his left. Ali was staring at him, her icy-blue gaze serious as hell.

"Don't worry." He figured she was grading him. "I never miss what I aim at."

She gave him the bird and smiled at him with her teeth. "Famous last words."

He pulled the cold stock to his shoulder and cradled it against his cheek. Sighting the 500-yard target, he pulled the trigger. The kick should've loosened his molars.

"Let's see what you scored." Hamm signaled for the target. He studied it with a shake of his head.

Gun wasn't concerned. He knew he'd hit it dead center and finished taking his shots. All bull's eyes. He turned around when Hamm called for Ali to fire.

She took the rifle from him with her strong-looking hands and immediately worked the bolt to drop a round in the chamber. She shrugged the parka off and raised the rifle to her shoulder. He liked her moxie, but her fine ass got most of his attention. While her jeans worked up between her butt cheeks, he was getting hard.

The way she took aim was exactly what he would have told her to do. He realized she had been holding her breath until she pulled the trigger.

"Dead Eye Dick," Rance yelled from the trench under the targets. "Perfect center shot."

Gun was impressed. She was an ace. While Ali reloaded and blew hell out of the target, he gained some decent respect for her. She was a top gunner, but would she hold up under a drug dealer's crazy shit?

The supervisor obviously liked her. Hamm crowded around her along with the other agents to slap her on the back, helping her into her coat. She had to have been cold as hell, but too proud to let on. Yeah, she was lean and mean. He liked that. When he joined the group, she glanced over Rance's shoulder, giving him a wiseass grin.

The agents all climbed in the van and headed back to the agency. This time, Gun claimed the seat next to Ali.

"So, Donavon." He appreciated the blank stare he got for his audacity in sitting beside her. "How's a chick learn to shoot like that?"

"What's the matter, Gunnison?" She brushed at her flyaway hair. "You jealous?"

"Who, me?" He draped his arm across the back of her seat. "See, I just have this need to know everything about the person who's going to be covering my ass."

Her snort of derision was funny as hell to him. "It's not your ass I'll be watching." She went into her silent mode again.

He nudged her knee with his. "I'll be watching yours."

She gave him the deadpan expression.

"What?" He knew what. She wanted to slug him.

She shrugged away from him and leaned against the side door. He liked her. That wasn't part of the deal, but he wouldn't fight it if she didn't.

* * * * *

After the group arrived back at the agency's building, Ali gave the guys time to settle in to their places before going in to join them. She needn't have gone to the trouble. Gun didn't appear to know she was anywhere around. Damn. She had to quit running and meet him head on, or they would crash out there in the jungle.

Putting her perturbing partner out of her thoughts was easy as she looked at the super-sized maps of Colombia and the city of Bogotá. Gun looked bored while she took in every tree and mud hole.

"How far is Armondez's plantation from our hotel?"

Hamm studied the green-shadowed, whitewashed villa. "Ten miles of twisting, flooded, snake-infested trail. Kept that way to deter the authorities and thieves."

Gun looked at her while he questioned the supervisor. "Show us the trail again. Is that a new one?"

Hamm nodded. "It is. The old one washed out last year." He tapped the enlarged photo. "This one is exclusively for Armondez's runners to carry orders back and forth from the coca farmers."

He handed out more pictures of the trail as well as the extraction site. All the directions and times of predetermined events were neatly drawn up on each photo.

"Donavon, you and Gun hunker down over this map. You leave in two days."

Two days. She had expected more time to work on her relationship with her partner. Hamm added a final note.

"You two talk about this. Get your new names straight and act like you like each other, Goddamn it."

She laughed, but her heart wasn't in it. The scraping of a chair on the tile floor alerted Ali that Gun was coming around to her side of the table. He leaned over her, and his shoulder holster bumped her head.

"Either stand on my left, or take that cannon out of its holster."

"Complain, complain." He moved to lean over her left shoulder and eyed the spread of photos in front of her. "Those don't tell about the heat, stinking water holes, flies, and

mosquitoes big as small children.” He sat down next to her. “It gets real the minute you step off the plane.”

Ali faced him. “I know you’ve been there. What can you tell me about it?”

He looked at her through a dark scowl that hardened the contours of his mouth and chin. His voice was controlled, but she read the powerful undercurrent.

“Yeah. I’ve been there.” He picked up her coffee cup and took a sip. “Didn’t like it much. You won’t either.”

She shrugged and took the cup from him. “I don’t plan on feeling anything while I’m there.”

Ali understood that’s how Gun handled everything. No frills, no emotion. Maybe it was best.

Hamm interrupted the hushed conversation with an announcement for her only. “Donavon. My secretary will accompany you to a local boutique not far from here to buy your working clothes. Lola will help you select items, and she has been given use of an agency debit card. She’s ready to leave now, I believe.”

Ali looked around and saw Lola motioning to her from the doorway. Lola was five-foot-nothing and probably weighed ninety pounds. But her smile was tremendous.

The boutique was around the corner from the agency and next to a newsstand/video place. The windows were covered with iron bars, and a buzzer sounded to let them inside the place. Ali took in the scene of rack after rack hung with dresses made of the sheerest material thinkable. Of course there was the low, sensuous thump of strip music in the background.

She nudged Lola’s arm. “I don’t see any long-johns.”

Lola laughed and inclined her head toward several girls looking through the racks. “It isn’t John’s underwear most of these chicks want.”

Ali laughed and picked up a micro-mini of pink eyelash fabric. “How’s this?”

She thought Lola would laugh, but she nodded. “Put a black tee with it, and yeah. It’s perfect.”

While Lola picked things off the racks and tables, Ali tried them on and modeled the revealing fashions. She had to admit the white jersey with the huge blue floral print was kind of okay.

Having on few undergarments worked well with the mini-dress and its slashed ruffled neckline and flirty little skirt. “Hey, Lola. Can I keep this stuff?”

Lola gave her a knowing look. “What’s his name?”

“Don’t know his name yet.” What a lie. She knew exactly who she wanted to wear the dress for. Exhaling in exasperation, she looked in the three-way mirror, liking the way the

skirt drifted about her thighs. The fabric was like cream moving over her bare skin. She stepped out of the fitting room.

"That's perfect." Lola handed her another armload of dresses, skirts, and tops. "I tossed in a swimsuit, too. Never know when you and Gun might get to take a few laps."

"I won't hold my breath. He's not the playful type."

Lola shook her head, rummaging through the stack of bras and panties spilling off the edge of a table. "Still waters, my momma always said."

Tired of trying on the hooker-style clothing, Ali waved off the next pile of extraordinary junk. "Lola, I don't plan on being there any longer than absolutely necessary. Enough already. No more."

Lola's mouth pouted momentarily. "Okay. I guess you're right." She went to the counter to pay for the dozen outfits. They left with three shopping bags filled with everything from panties to platform heels.

When Ali walked into the conference room, the guys were still hard at work. She felt left out. Dropping the shopping bags on the floor, she sat down. Every man in the room turned to look at her. Even Gun.

"What? What's going on?" She kicked the bags under the table.

"Now that you're back, Donavon, we can set the plan into motion." Hamm pulled down the large viewing screen.

There were more pictures of the plantation and the surrounding jungle and trails. At one side were figures, detailing exact placement of the hovels and trees. Most important, the extraction site and the time the chopper would arrive to pick them up were marked with a large red X.

She wrote furiously in her notebook. All the notes in the world wouldn't save her ass if she screwed up. With that sober thought, she looked in Gun's direction. He looked like he was falling asleep. Shit. He'd probably been out partying all night.

"All right. Donavon and Gun. We have reliable information that Armondez is planning to leave Colombia for a while. Your departure time has been moved up. Be here and be prepared to leave in the morning at ten o'clock. Your flight and hotel reservations are confirmed. There will be a Jeep for you at the airport." Hamm nodded at them. "That's all, except stay on your toes. Both of you."

Ali had a horrible sinking sensation in her stomach. All the bravado crap with Gun, and now the time had arrived. She was his for the next shitty period of her life.

There wasn't even time to pop in to visit her crazy family in New Orleans. She hadn't seen them for several months. Considering who her partner was now, she figured it best she stayed away from them while he was in the picture. Her father wouldn't understand him, and her cousin would have him unzipped before the door closed.

Shrugging into her parka, she grabbed the shopping bags and started to leave the building.

“Hey, Donavon. Want a ride to the hotel?”

“Sure.” She loved Gun’s look of genuine shock at her quick acceptance.

He held his keys in his fingertips and grinned at her. “Okay.” He took the shopping bags from her hand. “Let’s go, Ace.”

She walked beside him, wondering how long the camaraderie would last. They left the warm building and crossed the windy parking lot to get his car.

“Is that your ride?” She eyed the red sports car with some surprise.

“Sure. What’s the problem?”

She erased the mirth from her face. “No problem. It’s lovely.”

“Cut the shit, Donavon.” He opened the door for her. “You’ll learn to love her.”

She got in, looking around for her seatbelt. Ali felt him get in beside her. Yeah, felt. She didn’t have to see him to know he filled the space with male body heat and cursing. The motor wouldn’t turn over.

“This cold bitch.” He turned the key one more time. “Die, you strumpet.” He hit the steering wheel with his palms.

Ali hid a smirk under the fur of her collar. “Why don’t I just walk to the hotel?”

She moved back to press against the door panel as he rested his arm on the back of the seat.

“You making fun of my car?”

“Would I do that?” She pushed the door handle down and got out, reaching in to drag out those damned shopping bags. “Why don’t you get a *real* car?” She glanced up at the icy-looking moon. The night didn’t seem so cold now.

“It’s not just a car.” He locked the doors, and they began the short walk to her hotel. “Let’s get a decent cup of coffee while I explain how sweet she is.”

He steered her toward the entrance of the café where she had almost gotten to enjoy pancakes. She thought about the million things waiting to be taken care of before they left for South America, but she would enjoy a cup that didn’t have the consistency of tar.

“Okay, but we’ll have to drink it while we walk.” Her brows lifted in surprise as he grabbed the heavier shopping bags and led the way to the café’s door.

Gun was an experience all his own. He charmed the waitress with a smile and a compliment on her hair before ordering a cup of coffee and a soda to go. Too bad he was so much like the bastard she’d kicked out of her apartment back home. They left with their to-go cups and sipped as they walked.

"This hits the spot." He took a sip, looking over his shoulder a second before two kids on bikes whipped around them, bumping him backwards. Ice-cold soda sprayed up in the cold air, soaking his shirt and the front of his jeans. He yelped and grabbed his crotch.

"You little bastards."

Ali caught his arm and tried to see the area he was gripping. "Are you okay?"

"Hell, no. I need to get out of the cold before my dick freezes solid."

"I suggest you go sit in the café until it thaws out." Ali brushed soda off her shopping bags.

"What? You mean you're leaving me behind? You never leave a partner behind."

"Bullshit, Gun. I'll call a cab if you want one."

"No." He shivered and wheezed. "You go ahead. If I can't go to your hotel, I'll warm up somewhere."

"Great." Snuggling deeper into the warmth of her coat, she gathered up the shopping bags and started walking toward her hotel.

"I'll remember this."

"Me, too."

He followed and hollered after her as she crossed the street. "I'm serious. I'll remember this."

"Gun, shut up before you're arrested for soliciting."

"Hey, that's an idea. I don't suppose you'd be ..."

"Go to hell, Gun."

Chapter Five

The wheels on her suitcase squeaked as Ali pulled it across the wet tarmac. Wind-whipped snow melted on her bare legs, and she gave Gun a quick glance. He didn't offer to help her. Why would he? She'd told him she could take care of herself. He sauntered ahead of her in his Italian suit made up of black slacks and a long, charcoal, fine wool overcoat. He even wore one of those mobster-looking rolled-brim black homburgs.

He finally looked at her when she walked up the steps ahead of him to board the plane. What a change. He looked dark, mean, and dangerous. That easy smile had vanished, and his chiseled mouth had set in a hard line.

"Didn't get enough sleep, Gun?"

He took off his coat and followed her to the last row of double seats. "I can sleep after I'm dead."

She breathed in a gulp of air that held a mix of his exotic scent and her cheap perfume from the boutique. What a pair they made. Him with his Jack-the-Ripper attitude, and she with her hooker's-delight wardrobe. Putting on the hooker clothes had seemed like a good idea back in the hotel. In case someone was tailing them, they would look the part of two people out for fun. Christ, what a pair.

She caught a glimpse of his reflection beside her in the small window. He was sleek, dark evil planted next to her frizzy big hairdo, gaudy clothes, ton of makeup, and jewelry image. He obviously wanted to sit with her and stood aside to let her take the seat by the window.

She had lain awake most of the night, running the assignment through her head over and over. Maybe he had, too. The thought made her snort. He looked at her briefly, then went back to whatever world he lived in. He spoke again, irritating her with his deep voice.

"Donavon."

Ali steeled her shoulders against a shudder of expected trouble. "Gun?"

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"Some. How about you?"

"Yeah." He pulled the hat down over his face.

He was apparently through with her for the time being, already breathing deeply and looking totally relaxed, using his fancy hat as a shield. Up front, Rance settled into the seat nearest the bar and refrigerator, not to mention the washroom. Why hadn't she thought of that? Now, she'd have to crawl over Gun to go pee.

She caught Rance's little salute as he walked back to where she sat. He grinned at her and leaned over, purposely dragging his coat over Gun's head. "You got any questions to run by me, Donavon?" He moved his coat and laughed. "Man, you need to start sleeping at night."

Gun brushed at Rance's hand as he tried to take the hat from his face. "I have something you can kiss, Rance, and it's not my foot."

The comment seemed to please Rance as he chuckled and winked at Ali. "He really likes me." He grinned, gesturing toward her hair. "By the way, you look pretty damned good." He ambled back to his seat.

She nodded and leaned back in her seat, tormented by tremors of tension in her stomach. Anxiety, the doctor had told her. She had known plenty of that in her life, and it damned sure looked like there was plenty more on the way.

The pilot called back to the cabin, telling them to fasten their seatbelts. After a stop to refuel in Miami, it would be ten hours to Colombia. That long with two males who seemed to butt heads at every turn. Plus, her partner was still pissed off because she was going with him. Lord.

* * * * *

Her eyes, shuttered by long black lashes, didn't assure Gun his partner was sleeping. Asleep or not, he checked out the wild, curly hairdo that made her look a lot like a Barbie doll. Man, how sexy was she? Her lips always looked good enough to suck on, but today they were super pouty and slick-looking under pink lip stuff.

He let his gaze drift off her lips to play around with her breasts. Nice, round breasts that jumped up to perch high under her black sweater. She had crossed her legs, and the red suede mini crawled high up on her trim thighs. Damn. Donavon was hot.

"If you want something, Gun, you'll have to ask for it."

He enjoyed the throaty laugh that accompanied her comment.

"Lady, I never have to ask for it." Ali's soft laugh of derision said she wasn't impressed. He leaned closer to her. "You snore, Donavon?"

Her lashes fluttered up, her steady gaze revealing a somber mood. She had something to say, and he would give her plenty of room to say her piece.

"I'm not asking if you snore. It doesn't matter."

He wondered briefly why he pursued the damned woman so hard. Hell, didn't matter. She was a momentary diversion. "It does matter. I want to know what to expect."

The calm of her voice didn't show in her narrowed eyes. "Nothing." She pushed on his shoulder. "In case you have forgotten, we're going to be killing a man. Nothing else."

"You worried?"

Her expression was bland and cold. "I'm not looking forward to it. But don't get your shorts in a twist, Gun. I'm tattooed."

Tattooed. He quieted, understood what she had said. Donavon had made kills. "Yeah."

He curled his fingers around her wrist for a second before getting up. Not really knowing what to say to a woman on the subject, he walked to the front of the plane to play a hand of poker with Rance.

The game had just gotten interesting when Ali decided to join them. She nudged his elbow. He moved over to make room for her at the small table.

"Five-card stud okay with you, Donavon?"

"Deal."

Gun shuffled the cards and watched her drink from his cup of coffee. The pink stuff showed up on the rim in the shape of her full lower lip.

She looked at the cards he dealt her and fanned them in her fingers. "Wonderful hand, Gun."

Ali handled her cards with some skill, but he palmed several face cards undetected. He grinned at her after his third extraordinary hand. She tossed the cards down and walked back to the small sidebar near their seats.

That suited Gun. He could use a cold drink and a nap before they refueled in Miami.

"I'll have one of those."

She handed him a bottle of Coke and a glass. "How long is the layover in Miami?"

He shrugged. "An hour or so. Long enough to stretch our legs."

She swallowed her Coke. "I want to pick up some cigarettes."

He didn't comment, but followed her back to their seats, settling in for a little shut-eye. She took out a black leather-bound notebook and studied her scribbling. Before putting his seat into a reclining position, he glanced at her profile. Donavon's lips moved when she read.

He dropped off quickly, only to be punched awake by Ali's elbow to his arm. "Damn it, Donavon. It's not like I don't need the sleep."

Her gaze openly questioned his validity as a human.

“Who usually wakes you from one of these nightmares?”

“Whoever’s in bed with me.” He hadn’t figured on being visited by the bogeyman in a short snooze. That normally happened when he was in a deep sleep.

“Did I get rough?”

“Yeah, but you let go of my arm quick enough when I bent your thumb back.”

He worked his aching thumb and gave her a wry smile. “You almost tore the damned thing off.”

Ali laughed and looked away for a second before turning to level her sexy blue gaze on him.

“I pity your wife. You’re dangerous.” She rubbed her wrist.

“My ex-wife’s waking our ex-attorney these days.” He glanced at her unadorned left hand. “So, what’s your story? Got some nonviolent guy worrying about you in some sweet little nest?”

“I evicted him, the nest, and the dirty sheets.” Her lips were set in a resentful pink line. “He didn’t come back for his clothes until I tossed them over the balcony into the street.”

“Hell, Donavon. The bastard was probably pissing down his leg.”

Their moment of sharing ended and she went back to her notes, moving her lush lips a little and narrowing her eyes in an intent gaze. Gun inhaled with a kind of contentment he rarely experienced. Not surprising. He was with a woman who didn’t require anything but backup, and he could give her that.

His contentment led to sleep with no horrors to freeze his blood or paralyze his legs. Just the smudged whining sound of jet engines and voices under water.

“Gunnison. We’re in Miami.”

Donavon crawled over him and stood in the aisle to tug on the hem of her mini. She wiggled her hips inches from his face before speaking to him.

“You sure you want to go out there armed, Gun? We have security clearance, but these airport security people would love to nab a big boy like you.” She arched her brows in a sort of dare, checking her PPK in her handbag.

“Stop, Donavon. You’re scaring me.” He yawned and patted her ass. “Practicing, are you?” She had the scent of a sexy woman about her, and he considered the payoff of getting in her pants. She fluffed her awesome hair and walked a few feet away.

“Gun. You coming?”

Shit. “Not yet.” He grinned at her. “Later, for sure.”

Chapter Six

Ali opened the pack of cigarettes she'd bought from the bandit vending machine. She sniffed the tobacco and then dropped the pack onto the bar.

Not wanting him to know she was interested, she sipped her virgin Mary before looking around the bar for Gun. She caught sight of her partner where he browsed the magazines at a small newsstand. His lean physique looked damned fine. The tailored black slacks he wore hardly disguised his admirable buns. He touched the front of his jacket several times in an absent manner.

Ali read the tension in his body language. Out in the world without his weapon was out of the question. He wore it like another appendage. He felt naked without the cold weight of steel. Several young women gawked at him, probably thinking he was way too cool. Sure, they were right. The guy was a babe. That impression lasted until you became acquainted with the devil.

He took several magazines from the stand and smiled at the giggling girls. Son-of-a-bitch. Was nothing beneath him? The realization that he never flirted with her galled Ali. Not that it meant diddly to her.

He walked to the bar and sidled up next to her. She stared at him as he tossed the magazines onto the counter and drank from her glass.

"Got you *Playgirl* and *Back Door Johnnie* magazines." He motioned for the bartender and ordered a bloody virgin. "I kind of favor *Better Gardening*."

Ali didn't really see humor in his comment. "When do you get serious about our work?"

"When it's time." He drained his glass and laid several bills on the bar. "The plane's probably ready to go."

She took another whiff of the cigarettes before crumpling the pack in her fist. "Let's go. I saw Rance heading out the door."

Gun picked up his magazines and grabbed her hand. She stopped cold and frowned at him.

"What the hell is up with you, Gun?"

He didn't answer, only hugged her waist tight and walked her quickly through the terminal. "Listen, I just got serious about my work."

"Knock it off. You have my skirt up to my ass."

"Shut up. We're being tailed."

Ali didn't turn around. If he was telling the truth, she had to act the part of his bimbo. He practically carried her across the gleaming tile floor and out to the hot tarmac. He let her go and turned around to scan the faces still visible in the distance. She had stopped walking, but he motioned for her to get on the plane.

"What's up? I won't be mad just because you felt me up in front of complete strangers."

He shrugged and followed her, boosting her up the steps with a hand on her ass.

Her warning look drew a foxy smile from him. "Gotta get used to me touching you, Barbie doll."

He was almost cute in his mean-as-hell attitude. But not so cute she didn't want to slap him silly. "Don't do that again."

"What?" He took the magazines from her hand and handed her a fresh pack of cigarettes. "Lighten up."

While they fastened their safety belts, he leaned over to smile at her. "There were two thugs checking out your ass. I didn't want to take any chances."

"Stop blowing smoke, Gun. You're a natural-born liar, like most men." She grabbed one of the magazines and turned her back on him.

"Hey." He squeezed her shoulder. "I think you're under the impression you're irresistible."

She set her face in a cold mask and shook his arm from her shoulder. It was time the devil learned he was not the master of the game and she could tell fascinating lies, too.

"You're right, Gun." She flicked her tongue out to moisten her lips. "I have been awfully tight-assed. Just had to be sure you were okay with everything about me. You know, the real me. My being tattooed puts a lot of guys off. Leary of me, I guess."

As she'd hoped, he seemed to be all ears, turning toward her.

"So, what are we talking about here?" He opened the cigarettes and took two out, lighting them with an old-fashioned flint lighter. "You like killing?"

He handed her one of the lit cigarettes and drew on his.

“That and other things.” She gazed at the small stream of smoke rising from the cigarette, grateful they were allowed to smoke on the private jet. She was trying really hard to give them up, but Gun made her crave them.

His ebony brows lifted slightly. “Larceny?”

“That and some jewelry recoveries I couldn’t account for.”

Gun blew smoke rings above her head and smiled at her. “Don’t tell me you got caught making it with a detainee.”

“Made it with him and let him escape.”

“Go on.” His dark gaze played over her face like a searchlight while he took a deep drag on his cigarette.

“The bureau only kept me on to use in the bunko squad. I was given a second chance in St. Louis.”

He stubbed his cigarette out and laughed. “That guy you let escape. Ever hear from him?”

Ali took a puff of her cigarette. “Let’s forget about him. I want to get into my bimbo character after we’re in the air.” She leaned back and propped her heels on the armrests of the seat in front of her.

Gun eyed her with a wry smile. “I can hardly wait.” He nodded and pressed his shoulder against hers. “You lie almost as good as me.”

Ali held her laugh back, deeply amused by his check and re-check of her legs. She wondered if he was more of a leg man than an ass man. All of the above, but more partial to ass, she decided.

The plane lifted off the ground, and her fate was sealed, meshed with Gun’s until they were picked up by Black Bird agents at extraction point zero.

The momentary concern evaporated, and her professional calm took over. Gum. She devoted a long time to unwrapping three sticks under Gun’s steady gaze. Licking her lips, she slowly folded the fragrant, fruity-smelling gum into her open mouth and began to chew. She looked at him through half-closed eyes and exhaled as if she had just reached climax.

His midnight eyes were shuttered as he leaned close to her. “Is this your other personality?”

“Are you crazy? That only happens during stakeouts or during a risky sweep, say, like, a drug dealer’s crib.” She snapped the gum in her back teeth several times. “No, this one is your lady friend from Miami. Out for a good time.”

He grabbed his crotch as she released her seatbelt and crawled over him. “You wanna watch where you plant those knees?”

“Okay, Gun.” She struck a pose fit for any gun moll and flounced her hair several times, turning her back to him. “Is this it?”

Spreading her legs in a stiff stance, Ali leaned over to check her thigh-high stockings. She could see his dirty little mind churning as she looked at him between her legs. Straightening, she walked down the aisle toward the front section, swishing her hips from side to side.

The stripper anthem played in the back of her mind as she walked back to him. She shimmied her shoulders and blew a bubble with her gum. "How's that?"

"How's what? I wasn't looking."

She grabbed the magazine from his hand and slapped the top of his head. "You didn't miss anything."

"Let's play tourist now." He accidentally grazed the underside of her breasts, helping her climb back over him to her seat.

She didn't mind getting in some practice on her Spanish. "I'm game. You start."

He faced her and then touched a curl that moved around her earlobe. Her attention riveted on his mouth, and she loved his deep, foggy voice. "*Hola, hermosa. ¿Cómo se llama?*" Hello, beautiful. What is your name?

"*Mi nombre es Ali Donavan. ¿Qué haces aquí en Bogotá?*" My name is Ali Donavan. What are you doing in Bogotá?

"*Soy el Fusil y estoy aquí para divertirme.*" I'm Gun and I'm here for some fun.

She stepped into the bear trap. "*¿La diversión? ¿Y qué sería eso?*" Fun? And what would that be?

"*Para entrar sus pantalones.*" To get in your pants.

She stared at him for one second before finding her voice. "You're the biggest bastard I've ever met. Stay away from me."

He tugged on the wispy curl. "Just trying to help."

Ali punched him in the arm.

"You go to hell, Gun. I don't want to hear your voice again until we kill that son-of-a-bitch, Armondez. Come to think of it, you can keep your yap shut after that."

He rubbed his arm and laughed, trying to look at her when she turned her head. "Aw, come on, Donavan. I was just making sure you understood Spanish."

She answered with a pillow to his grinning face before climbing over his legs to take the seat behind Rance.

Damn him and his warped sense of humor. Get in her pants! She slumped in the seat and gazed down at the patchwork scene below. Good cover, Ali. Anger leaves less room to feel self-doubt.

Gun walked by her seat a few minutes later and drummed his fingers on the headrest, winking at her when she made the dumb mistake of looking up at him. He went to the bar and got a cup of coffee. Would he treat her differently when they landed?

She needed to move around and put him in the proper perspective. He was just a man and her partner. *So, there it is. You don't have to prove yourself to him.* Inhaling deeply to fortify her resolve, she got up to retrieve her notebook.

"Hey, Donavon." Gun held the cup of coffee up. "Want one? I'm buying."

Ali wanted to knee him. He must think she had the memory span of a mouse. He irritated her more than her ex-fiancé.

Notebook in hand, she went into the washroom and closed the door. It seemed to happen more frequently these days. Shaking hands, a little cotton-mouthed. She was nervous. Proving her ability teamed with a guy like Gun wasn't going to be a picnic.

Not that she hadn't taken down men before. She had three kills on her record, and all done in defense of herself or a partner. You pull the trigger and hope the bastard falls before he gets a bead on you. She was no natural-born killer. She was a trained, tested agent with a job to do.

She washed her hands and went back to sit beside Gun. He didn't make eye contact or speak to her, only grinned when she pulled her skirt up to the edge of her thigh-high stockings. His soft chuckle mixed with the clink of his signet ring on the coffee cup. This story had the plot of the century. A coward paired with a cold-blooded, opinionated egomaniac.

Chapter Seven

Gun killed time playing cards with Rance, napping, and in general being bored out of his mind. With each hour that passed, his nerves coiled tighter. The thought of going back into that green hell where his best friend had died still ripped holes in his gut. His heart had been torn out long ago. Now he had sexual frustration to put up with.

Thirty minutes before their scheduled landing, Donavon had gone into the washroom and made a few changes. She had freshened her lip color and put some sparkly stuff on her cheeks. If that was supposed to be the cheap look, he had a taste for it.

He eyed the hem of the skirt that barely covered her ass. Nice, very nice. She leaned over to get her makeup bag. Holy shit. Her knockers were roaming around in there, free as two fat puppies.

Everything about her turned him on. Forcing his gaze away from Donavon's legs, he wondered if Carmella was still taking clients in Medellin. Shit, looked like he would have to call on Mrs. Palm and the Five-Finger sisters.

Hearing the clink of metal and getting a whiff of Donavon's perfume, he went back to studying her. She was looking in a mirror, but not especially at herself. She closed her eyes, taking a bottle from her handbag, and sprayed perfume over her hair. He dumbly voiced his opinion.

"How much of that you going to put on? You don't need that shit on."

The look he got reminded him of her desire to never hear his voice again. He nodded, satisfied to stare in mute fascination while she played around in her makeup bag. He thought about the scent of orange blossoms that usually trailed after her. Now, she was wearing something heavy on musk. It turned him on.

Carmella smelled like musk. Not clean musk like Donavon. Damn, he must horny to be thinking of Carmella. Okay, first chance he got, he'd whip off some of his tension.

Something else had changed. Rance no longer ignored or teased Donavon, but stopped to talk seriously to her, sitting on the armrest of the seat across the aisle.

“You all set, Donavon? Any questions or ideas?”

She waved a skinny pencil around as she talked. “How soon will we hear from you?”

“Give us a few hours to check things out.” Rance grinned at her. “You and Romeo are free to disco all night tonight and meet us in the market tomorrow evening. We can compare notes then.”

Gun didn’t like being called Romeo. “Rance, I don’t care how you make the final decision on the extraction time. Just don’t waste our time.”

“You getting nervous, Gun?”

“No. Tired of sitting on my ass.”

Donavon dropped all the war paint back in the kit and snapped it shut. “I don’t know about the disco crap for tonight. I can barely feel my legs.”

“You going to make me go alone, Donavon?” Gun wondered if she would answer him. She did.

“That shouldn’t bother a wiseass like you.” She added one more layer of lip-gloss to her lips and then eyed him like he was a roach. She looked pissed off and stubborn. “Okay. We’ll go.” She stretched her arms over her head and glanced at him. “The sooner we make our connection, the faster we get the job done.”

Gun liked the way she minimized everything. “The locals don’t get started until after eleven in the evening. It’s the heat thing, I guess.”

“It’s going to feel great to me.” She took her wallet from a beaded red handbag she had hung on the seat in front of her.

Rance handed her a sheet of paper and tapped it several times. “Shred this before you leave the plane.” He looked pointedly at Gun. “Memorize this, and don’t alter it by one second.”

The extraction time. Gun couldn’t forget how a deviation of one or two minutes could mean disaster and death. Donavon was staring at him with doubt in her eyes. There was a possibility she’d heard about his screw-up three years ago.

He hated himself and couldn’t see her feeling any differently toward him. Sure, that was the reason for the upfront dislike and open hostility to his attempts to be kind of nice to her. What the fuck did he care? He didn’t, as long as she kept the bit in her mouth and followed orders.

“We more than got it, Rance.” Gun didn’t feel like remembering his failures at the moment. They were ten minutes out of Bogotá, and he could already smell the rotting vegetation of the swamps.

Everything changed from that moment. Gun recognized the thunder of blood in his veins as desire to get the job started. He loved the hunt. He looked forward to dusting Armondez. Rid the world of a stinking virus and maybe ease the constant ache of guilt in his gut.

"Here, Donavon." He handed her a cell phone from his duffle bag. "Hamm's idea. We can call each other on these toys."

She took it and nodded. "Good idea."

He liked the way she held it in her hand and studied the number pad on the damned thing. His phone rang, and he answered with a grin. "What's the matter? Don't believe me?"

"Are you going to give me the code?"

"You don't need one. Any number will work."

She tossed her phone into her open purse and sat down, looking at him from the corner of her eye. "Those could be a lifesaver. In case we get separated."

Okay. So, he was thinking the same thing and she read his mind. That was a definite plus for partners. His mood changed from playful to brooding as he took a look down below at the sea of emerald. Dark, stifling hot emerald and waiting hell. To ease his tension, he joined Ali in a last-minute flurry of gathering up their belongings.

Gun packed his gear tight and left his heavy coat and hat in a locker. He took the case holding the Beretta and checked the time on his watch. He shook his head when he noticed the load of junk Donavon intended to drag along to the hotel.

"Why don't you leave some of that in one of these lockers? If you need more things, you can get them in Bogotá."

She shook her head. "I don't know which of the lovely ensembles I want most, so I'll take them all. It's no bother, really."

He nodded. "Okay. Looks like we have everything tied up here."

The pilot's words added finality to the moment as he told them to prepare for landing. They got into their seats and buckled up. Gun eyed Ali with amusement. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

"Hey, you all right?"

"Bring those damned cigarettes with you."

He didn't find any humor in her new personality. Donavon was going through some transition, and he hoped it didn't include blowing his brains out should he fall asleep. One damned thing for sure, he would not forget her smokes. Son-of-a-bitch. Which one would kill the other one first? His lips twitched in a suppressed grin.

The plane circled the airport several times before setting down on the tarmac of the nearby private airstrip. While the whine of the engines idled down, the group filed out into the steamy night.

“Ah, just like I remembered the stinking place.” Gun worked the collar of his shirt open and spit on the hot concrete. Her stare made him laugh. “Superstition.”

“Okay.”

She allowed him to take two of her floral tapestry bags and followed him to the rental car area. The Jeep that had been reserved for them was ready, and he climbed in after throwing his bags in the back.

He fiddled with the keys while listening to her cuss. She threw her junk in the back with his and tried to get her foot up on the running board. The damned shoes and skintight skirt she wore were giving her a fit, and she gritted her teeth as she tried to get in. “Hey, Donavon. Hurry up.”

Her glare told him to keep quiet. He leaned across the seat and grabbed her hand, pulling her into the Jeep with him. “There you go.”

Her hair waved in the humid breeze, and her mouth set in a resentful pout. “Gun, you’re nothing but an animal.” Flopping her handbag on the floor, she turned a cold gaze on him. “You could have helped me in first.”

“Animals don’t help other animals.”

She must be tired. No smartass retort, not even glaring at him when he accidentally brushed a hand over her thigh. While he drove, she lit a cigarette. She held it to his lips, and he gladly took a puff. He liked the hint of her cherry lipstick that went with it.

“I think I see the hotel.”

She sat forward and nodded. “We should live so good at home.”

He laughed and nodded. “I hear the La Fontana is pretty damned ritzy. Seven floors of brick and glass and hot-and-cold-running maids.”

“Christ, Gun. Don’t tell me you have an acquaintance or two in this city.”

“One or two, maybe.”

“Don’t plan on bringing either one to our suite. Not tonight, not ever.”

Driving the Jeep around the circular driveway of the brightly illuminated hotel, Gun laughed at her comment.

“Hell, Donavon. You’re confusing me with James Bond.”

Several smiling, uniformed young men ran to the Jeep and opened the door to help Ali out. Gun tolerated the attention lavished on them and glanced at Donavon as they were escorted up the wide sweep of stairs to the entrance. He’d never been so damned mooned over by men unless he was patrolling the red-light district in St. Louis. The guys carried all the luggage and smiled while they did it.

Inside the cool lobby, the doorman blinded them with his smile and snapped his fingers at the two bellhops. They waited while Gun spoke with the desk clerk. He held Ali’s hand and gazed at her with convincing adoration.

“Honey, what do you want to do about dinner? And how about a wake-up call?”

She fell into character. “I think we should have dinner in our room. You can call room service later.” She touched his collar and smiled. “And forget that wake-up call.”

He kissed her fingers and relayed her wishes to the smiling desk clerk. They followed the two bellhops to the elevator and waited. Gun hugged her waist and kissed her cheek. Her soft laugh was perfect, pure aphrodisiac.

He made sure the bellhops saw him squeeze the cheek of her ass as they walked into the elevator car. He caught her sidelong glare. Oh, yeah, he’d hear about it later. No time like the present to get her to accept his method of setting up a front. He leaned over to catch her chin in his fingers and kissed her lips, tasting the cherry stuff and her sweet breath.

She didn’t close her eyes when he kissed her. Yeah, he kept his open to see her face. He couldn’t read her reaction. But, she sure as hell hadn’t kissed him back.

“I can’t wait to be alone with you, Bambi.” His pet name for her got a reaction, and it was loathing. Her blue gaze darted to the two bellhops who watched from the corner of their eyes. She became soft and a perfect Bambi type.

She giggled then, the trilling sound piercing his eardrums and shrinking his sac. “I’ll just bet you can’t, you big old stallion.” Her hand went to her forehead. “But, honey, I do have a migraine coming on, so maybe we ought to sleep in separate rooms.”

Acting the concerned boyfriend, he hugged her to his side. “I have just the cure for that. And you’ll sleep a lot better in my bed.” He chuckled, adding lots of ribald winking and messing with a strand of her hair.

Gun couldn’t believe it took so damned long to get to the seventh floor. He was tempted to send the bellhops on their way and take matters into his own hands. Just getting the door open to their suite was a grand production of stupidity. The key didn’t seem to fit, and the bellhops took turns trying to open it. At last, the lock gave it up.

“Okay, guys. Here’s your tip. We want to be alone. You understand.”

The young men grinned and nodded, hurrying away with generous tips in their hands. Gun ignored Ali’s squeak of surprise as he caught her arm and pushed her inside the room.

He kept an eye on the two bellhops until they disappeared down the back stairs. When he shut the door and turned to look at her, she stared at him with blue ice in her eyes. She rubbed her arm, and he could see she was getting revved up to chew his ass out.

“Damn it. I’m getting tired of you touching, pawing, and pulling on me.”

She was starting to be an issue in his life, and he didn’t want to like or feel anything for her. He had to set her straight.

“Those two are worth a lot to us if we stay on their good side.” He took her arm and rubbed it briskly. “I’m just going to say this once, Donavon. Get over trying to take my head off at everything I do, or I’ll put you on the next transport home.” A large reserve of experience with females told him he’d made a mistake.

He liked the way her eyes narrowed as she thought over what he'd said. She turned and looked at the enormous bed and then him.

She shrugged negligently. "Okay."

That was it? He doubted he'd heard the last of this, but he would settle for the peace and quiet for now. He tried not to watch her as she took off her shoes and threw her red carnival-bead handbag on the bed. He looked twice as she unzipped her dress and slipped out of it, letting the thing drop to her hips.

Sirens went off in his head, and his cock stretched two inches. Her legs were slim and well toned, with calves that were sculptured exactly right above trim ankles. Shit, she even had a tattoo at the base of her spine. He couldn't tell what it was. Yet.

He picked up the phone, developing an awful and sudden thirst. "Yeah, send up two steaks with the trimmings, and a fruit salad plate. Throw in a couple bottles of mineral water and an ice-cold pitcher of sweet tea."

He hung up and checked her expression. She was stretching like a tall, lean cat in the bathroom, not bothering to close the door. He could swear he had developed x-ray vision as his gaze burned through her tiny lace briefs. His ears were probably beet red when she spoke to him. It finally sank in, the method Donavon would use to make a point. Sex. Not giving him any, more precisely.

"Gun, you still want to go out tonight? I can be ready in a flash."

"No hurry. Let's give the privileged party crowd time to get a line or two up their noses." He opened his duffle bag and pulled out several shirts, a pair of casual slacks, and changes of underwear. "We can have something to eat and still have time to check the place out."

"Fine with me." She turned the water on in the outlandish toga-party-sized bath and looked around the door. "Join me?"

He gripped the floor with his toes to keep from vaulting into that damned tub. Of course she had been joking. "I'm a shower man myself." He grinned at her in spite of the tightening of his sac and cock. Relief was his only thought at the moment. There was another bathroom, and he headed for it. Son-of-a-bitch. Now she was yelling at him about something she wanted.

"What?" His hand was on his sex, and he fought for control.

He hesitated at the bathroom door, looking at her from the doorway. She pointed up and splashed the water to get his attention.

"Would you mind getting that bath soap in the upper rack?" She laughed in a sly, womanly way. "I'm in no position to get it." She eyed him like a royal Sumatran tiger that sized up prey while lounging in her private jungle pool.

Gun pulled his shirt from his slacks to cover his growing problem and went inside the plush bathing area. He couldn't help gawking at her form under the water. Lean and curvy

hips that looked wide enough to cradle a man. And then there was that great-looking patch of dark hair at the fork of her long legs.

He didn't have a lot of time to make a deep assessment of her looks, but quickly determined she had an awesome body. She hadn't put soap in the water yet, just lolled back in complete relaxation while a hard stream of water gushed from the beak of the swan-head fixture. He would be doing the same thing in a heartbeat if he stayed with her.

"Which one?" He leaned over, bracing his knee on the wide ledge of the tub while he rummaged around in the array of fancy bottles on the shelf above her head. "This one?"

"No. The one with the red carnations."

Damn it. Of course it would be the one in the very back. He found what looked like carnations to him and dropped the box into the hand she held up.

"Gun." She was smiling seductively, her voice like a cat purring. "You're never putting me on or in anything I don't want to be put on or in." Her long fingers clenched around the soap. "I made up my mind a long time ago, no man rules me or treats me rough." She didn't blink. "Are we clear on that?"

Well, hell, yes. She'd conned him into a sense of false confidence, and he'd swallowed bait and hook. She wasn't ever going to let him have the last word, or the first one. Right now, that didn't matter. He had time to set her straight before things got serious.

Before he could figure out how to do that, he slipped on the wet porcelain, hurtling down like a winged buzzard to sprawl on top of her and get a slap for his trouble. Water splashed over his head and down his throat. He choked, after snorting half her bath up his nose, and wheezed in surprise at her attack.

"What the fuck, Donavon?" He coughed and swiped at his hair. "You could've got me in here a lot easier if you'd just asked me to jump in."

"Do I have to say what I'm thinking, Gun?" She caught him around the waist with her thighs and held tight.

There was something mean and hot gleaming in her blue eyes, but he wasn't about to probe anything just yet. Pretense was his best defense at the moment, and he braced his hands on either side of her, assuming a confused expression.

"I have no idea what you're thinking." He lowered his head to gaze at the droplets of water falling from his hair onto the exposed mounds of her breasts. "I can only think about those things in my line of vision right now."

Her knees came up to clasp against his waist. "Have you heard of the alligator squeeze and roll?" Her smile was evil while she explained. "I can squeeze the air out of your lungs and roll over to drown you in one minute flat."

He didn't believe her, but no use taking chances. "Nice, Donavon. Something the academy teaches babes now?"

Her hands pushed against his chest, and she twined her ankles with his. “Hell, no. That’s a trick all New Orleans papas teach their daughters to ward off creeps.”

They were quiet for a time, moving a little like buoys in the slosh of the water. He glanced down at her legs and sized her up as a perfect fit to him. The need to find out for sure hit him as he moved against her. Her eyes narrowed, and a grimace touched her lips before she whispered, “Get out.”

The erection was no longer a matter to hide. He didn’t care if she knew he was hard. Hell, she had caused the damned thing, and now he would have rock aches, too. He backed one leg over the tub and smiled at her.

“Enjoy your soap.”

Her foot pushed him the rest of the way out, and he couldn’t help taking one last look at her. She was unwrapping the damned soap and sniffing its perfume. As if none of the rousing, silly dunking had happened, she glanced at him and smiled. Not a sex smile, just female pleasure.

He stood dripping and gawking, and she didn’t seem to know he existed.

“Donavon.”

“You still here, Gun?”

“Yeah. I was wondering if you ever had to use that gator thing.”

Her face glowed, wet and tanned, and her lips looked soft and supple while she laughed. “What do you think?”

Chapter Eight

Ali stayed in the fancy bathtub longer than she normally would have. Gun's weight and his hard body sliding back and forth between her legs against her sex had lit a blaze that demanded relief. She never had been much on self-service, but the need was immediate. Relaxed and hungry, she put a robe on and turbaned a towel around her wet hair before padding out to see what Gun was up to.

"What are you doing?"

She sized him up where he stood on a chair, reaching over his head to shove the rifle into the space a ceiling tile had once covered. He worked the tile back into place and looked down at her.

"Putting our toys away before we go out."

Toys? Ali wished they had time to get some toys. Maybe ... No, she was on an assignment, and screwing her partner was not in the job description.

He dusted his hands off on the seat of his navy lounge pants and gazed up at the square of tile he had replaced. Ali noted his nice ass and great-looking bulge at the front of his pants, remembering the press of his hot steel erection in the bathtub. She couldn't remember ever being so worked up about sex.

Now he was stroking his nice, plump pecs, idly touching his belly button when his loungers fell a little. Hair black as jet peeped out at his waistband and drew her gaze until he slowly pulled the damned pants back up over his trim hips. Man, he was tall and gorgeous, chiseled out of polished granite and warm muscle. She was licking her lips when he stepped down off the chair.

"The food came a minute ago." He tugged on the towel covering her hair. "You better have a bite before it gets cold." His gaze moved slowly over her while he talked. "One other thing. I hired one of those bellhops to be our driver/guide. Okay with you?"

He was asking her? Hell, he was human after all. "Sure, why not."

His smile made her think of tangled sheets before he gestured toward the serving cart. "Let's eat."

She took the domed lids from the serving dishes and put a steak on her plate before sampling a bite of avocado. "Hey, nice fruit plate. Looks good."

"I didn't figure you for a fruit eater. Since you know so much about gators and drowning men, I thought you were probably more of a meat eater." He offered her a bite of orange.

"That's my secret." She took her plate and sat on the bed, drawing her legs up under her. "You never tell me any personal things about yourself. I'm sure there's plenty of dirt to dish."

He sat by her, Indian style, balancing his plate on his knees. "Met my first woman in the first grade. Had my first woman in seventh grade. Swore off women in the Army."

Ali made a scoffing sound in her throat. "You don't have to brag it up for me. Remember, I have six brothers. They all lie to get out of pleasant conversation. You don't want to talk seriously, just say so." She gestured at his plate with her fork. "Can I have a bite of your pepper?"

He picked up a slice and fed it to her, tracing her lower lip with his finger. She wanted to suck on it. His lips and on down his hard, flat belly and into the no-fly zone and do lots of tasting, teasing, and tantalizing things to him. Oh, hell, she had to get a fulltime lover and soon.

"When we go out, the first thing we do is make sure the locals see how loaded we are with money and love." He leaned back against the pillows and chewed a bite of steak. "They probably won't approach us tonight, just look us over."

Ali removed the towel from her head, not caring if he saw her with hair that looked like a tangled bird's nest. "Better let my hair start drying."

He didn't say anything, and she liked the hint of a smile on his mouth, as if he didn't think she looked bad at all. She got off the bed to take a bottle of water from the cart.

"Here, you open this. I'll get the goblets."

"Don't do that. Let's drink like the redneck I am." He twisted off the bottle cap and tossed it toward the window. "Salute."

He handed the bottle to her, and she tipped it up to take a large swallow of the clear, cold liquid. "That's very good." She wiped the neck with the sleeve of her robe and handed the bottle back to him, licking her lips as he took his drink. She crawled back onto the bed with him. "You look like a sultan with that bottle in your hand."

His dark gaze told her he was not immune to being that close to her. "I don't know if I like looking like a sultan, Donavon. Don't they have potbellies and short dicks?"

Ali squelched the silly giggle that pounded on her throat to burst out. Instead, she picked a grape out of her salad plate and popped it into her mouth.

He went back to his steak and ignored the greens on his plate. When he finished, he poured two glasses of the sweetened iced tea from an etched crystal pitcher. He looked at his watch several times.

“Are you late for something, Gun?”

He shook his head and handed the nearly empty bottle of water to her. “Never happen.” He slid down to lie flat on his back and closed his eyes.

Ali sipped from the bottle while looking him over, mentally touching his black hair and lean cheeks. What would his tongue feel like, playing with, making swirling circles around her clit? Too wonderful to think about. She groaned so softly, she didn’t think he could possibly hear.

“Something wrong, Donavon?” He sat up, propping against the pillows again, and yawned. “You okay?”

“Sure. I’m fine. Just too much food.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of you.”

She laughed and slid from the bed. The plates rattled as she gathered them up and set them on the service tray. “I’m going to go get dressed.”

He sat up. “Hey. I don’t dance that shitty disco stuff.”

Ali kept walking, looking at him over her shoulder. “Gee, what a surprise.” She paused at the bathroom door. “What are you good at?”

“Slow, steady, and deep.” He stood and walked toward her. “I’ll show you later.”

That was exactly what she had in mind, fool that she was. She was a sorry case of deprivation, and he was probably laughing his ass off behind her back. She hated men. Even when she tried to make one feel used and unwanted, she always came out the loser. Gun couldn’t possibly miss the heat coming from her. She was relieved when he went to the closet instead of following her.

The mission. Keep your mind on the mission and out of his shorts.

* * * * *

The heat slapped Gun in the face as he walked his date down the steps of the La Fontana. Midnight, and the damned air was still like warm coffee. He looked down at the beauty beside him. She looked cool and sexy.

Donavon had redone her hair and looked good enough to eat. The outfit she had on was a barely-there pink thing with no back until it hit just above her nice, round butt. As far as he could tell, the soft-looking double ruffle floating across her breasts was the outfit’s only means of support. Looked easy enough to get off her curvy little body.

As he helped her down the steps, his hand moved along the soft, lean line of her bare back until he reached her waist. He grinned. Yep, the slightest hint of an elastic ridge confirmed she did have underwear on. Damn it. Probably a good thing since her skirt hit around her upper thighs and sure wouldn't hide much if she bent over.

A glimpse of color just above her panty line held his attention. That damned tattoo again. Later, baby. One thing at a time. Looking around the courtyard before climbing in with Donavon, he heard the sound of distant gunfire. It had come from the fucking jungle.

He hated the grip of anger and stress that hit him after catching the scent of the green hell, never far away in this place. Ali didn't seem to notice the odor and smiled at him like his best girl would. What the fuck. Right now, she *was* his best girl.

Everything was going in the right direction. Ramón, the more devious of the two bellhops, was now in Gun's employ, driver and guide around the city. Gun made a mental note to bust Ramón's balls for hawking Donavon.

She stumbled on the last step and laughed at her own clumsiness. He knew she wasn't really drunk, feeling a buzz, and ready to party. But Ramón seemed to think she was and showed her his gleaming white smile while offering to assist her. He didn't know he was playing with a cobra.

Gun helped her into the backseat of the rented Jeep and then got in beside her. He tapped Ramón on the shoulder.

"What's the holdup?" He pointed to the street. "We want to party tonight, not tomorrow."

Ramón turned to grin at his passengers in the backseat. "Okay. You got it."

The Jeep's tires smoked and the motor roared as Ramón gave it the gas. The guy must have been a getaway driver on the side, busting down the circle drive of the hotel and bouncing over speed bumps in the straightaway on the street.

Gun hit his driver on the shoulder. "Ramón. Buddy, I said get there, but I meant alive. Okay?"

Ramón laughed and slowed the Jeep to a more reasonable speed. Gun leaned back and gave his full attention to Donavon.

"So, what's on your mind, lady?"

He wanted to look out the window to see if they were being followed, but she hooked her arm around his neck to pull his face closer. He barely caught her whisper. "Where are you wearing your weapon?"

He leaned closer and cupped her chin in his hand. "Want to search me?"

Hot, raw, deprived need gripped him while she chewed her gum and checked under his arm for the small-caliber pistol he carried.

She murmured something around her chewing gum. "Cute."

"Think so? Wait until I show you the really big one."

Gun glanced up and found Ramón watching them in the rearview mirror, ogling the goings-on in the backseat.

"Eyes front, Ramón."

Ali laughed and rubbed under his arm, squeezing the pistol. "I love it, Gun. You feel awfully good."

"You just have good taste in men."

He wondered if there was any chance of not having a hard-on the entire evening. Shit, now she was practically lying on him. She sniffed his shirt collar.

"You smell divine, you devil."

"The better to seduce you, my lovely."

He never heard the answer to his comment. The Jeep was careening into the noisy parking lot of the club. He caught Ali's arm when she started to get out.

"Are you really turned on, Donavon?"

"Hell, no, so don't get weird."

Okay. Things were back to normal. He motioned for Ramón to follow them. He might need help with names in the den of some of the wealthiest, most dangerous drug dealers in Colombia.

Getting Donavon inside the nightclub was an adventure. She drew fans like a rock star. Every guy watched as he guided her across the crowded area to the entrance of the club. To get things off on the right foot, he handed the guy at the door a fifty.

There was nothing but hostility for him in the men's dark eyes, even though they had balls enough to lick their chops while eyeing Donavon. He remembered being the recipient of hate in this country. Burning in his memory was the way his friend had been butchered by men who looked very much like them. His blood boiled. Desire for revenge saturated his emotions. For a split second, he felt nothing but the crushing desire to kill one man. Armondez.

Loud music from the club blasted through the door as he opened it, gripping Donavon's hand in a viselike grip. He didn't want to lose her in this throbbing nest of snakes.

What a place. The floors gleamed, reflecting light from the wall of glassware behind the enormous curved bar. Gun figured the teakwood bar had to be worth a couple million. Looking at Donavon, he liked what he saw. She gave the damned disco joint class.

They hadn't been there more than a minute when he saw the change in her. That normally aloof, bored expression had changed to sultry excitement. She looked around, her gaze darting from him to the dance floor. Oh, no. He wasn't getting out there with those humping idiots.

Noticing Ramón snapping his fingers and swaying in time to the music, Gun made a seemingly unselfish suggestion while pressing a fifty into his driver's hand.

"Ramón. I hate dancing. My girl, Bambi, likes it for some goddamn reason. I'm sure she'd love to dance with you."

He didn't know if she was acting or not, but Donavon's face lit up like an angel's while she gushed womanly excitement.

"Sweeney, you doll. You know I love to salsa."

Gun liked the cute little smile on her lips as Ramón led her to the mess on the dance floor. She waved at him while doing some fancy steps to that salsa stuff with Ramón.

Now, he was alone at the damned bar and feeling strangely lonely. It was a sign of weakness to miss your partner. The atmosphere hung heavy with a dozen layers of perfume, loud laughter, and pot. The place felt wrong to him. He couldn't put a name on it, but it probably meant trouble.

He ordered a beer and pulled out a wad of bills, nothing smaller than hundreds, and dropped a hundred on the bar, then leaned back to rest his elbows on the bar between two thugs in matching outfits. Black as night, just like their damned personalities. They hadn't missed his easy way with money. The game had begun, and he forced himself to temper his breathing.

When the two pricks weren't staring at him, they mentally licked Donavon while she played around with Ramón. Gun was interested in her, too. She was sexy as hell, and evil, to boot. She didn't want anything from him, and she never asked those female questions. His life was private. *Yeah, a private hell.*

Uh-oh. Trouble. Ramón was having a problem explaining to another guy that Donavon only danced with him. Time for the big dog to bark.

Chapter Nine

Ali looked up, relieved to see Gun pushing his way through the crowd on the dance floor. He didn't excuse himself, shouldering several Don Juans aside as Ali reached for his arm.

"Hi, baby doll. It's time you came back to your man."

He grabbed her hand and kept her close as he led her away, stopping in the semi-dark near the bar, where they had a hurried conversation.

"What's going on?" The heat of his intense gaze held and warmed her.

"It's time to see if we can convince the two characters at the bar we're hot for each other." His grip on her arm tightened, and his smile was forced. "I remember being told on my last visit here this club is a known hangout for Armondez's men."

"I'm a great actress, Gun. Are they players?"

"The ugliest one, I recognize from the prep photos. He looks harmless, but is one of Armondez's most skilled killers. He asked if I was looking for an after-hours party. Said a friend of his who liked to party might show up later."

Her skin crawled. "Armondez, maybe?"

"Could be. We'll wait and see." He rubbed his jaw in agitation.

"Okay. I'll let you have a few privileges."

"All right. Let's go. We won't grease his can too hard tonight."

She couldn't believe his nonchalant reaction to her agreeing that he could feel her up. "Is he going to make a move tonight?" She smiled at him, but the sparkle of tease was not in her eyes. "You can play with my ass, but keep your fingers out of my pussy."

"What's wrong? You getting turned on?"

He could talk to her that way and never blink. He was nothing to her. She meant nothing to him. He wasn't her boyfriend, and he could talk that way because to him she was just one of the guys. They were working. Reality. It meant nothing.

She met his steady gaze, making sure her voice was strong. "Okay, we act real friendly and show them what a rich jackass you are." Ali grinned, unable to hide the pleasure of calling him a donkey's rear end.

He'd caught her comment and her grin, shaking his head as he grabbed her hand. "Remind me to tell you who's boss of this outfit."

"Sure, Sweeney. But that won't be necessary. We already know."

Ali relented and put herself in Gun's hands, literally, letting him lead her back to the crowded bar. His hand fastened to her hip as he propelled her through the crowd. As if he went to the club everyday, he pushed his way back into the space he had taken earlier.

She didn't comment when he ordered her a slow comfortable screw. Ali had an idea he knew damned well she hated those syrupy fruit things. He sat down and pulled her between his legs, handing the silly drink to her with a wink.

He swallowed half his drink and checked out the scene while looking over her shoulder. He used her as a shield while his hand squeezed her upper thigh. His black gaze traveled over the gyrating crowd, and he chuckled.

She felt everything but humor. A current of danger hummed through the crowd, making her more receptive to being controlled by her partner, even if she was still irked with him. She couldn't relax while the prickle of expectancy crawled along her nerves. His arm tightened around her waist when the guy next to them finally struck up a conversation.

"May I buy you and your lady a drink?" The guy didn't look like he was doing hospitality work. Not waiting to see if they wanted anything, he rattled off his order in Spanish to the waiter, then began looking them over.

Ali hugged Gun's neck while the guy introduced himself.

"I am Jorge Gomorra."

Gun shook hands with him and began a casual conversation as if they were in a bar in Texas. "Mike Sweeney, and this is my fiancée, Bambi Malone."

Jorge smiled at her and nodded, his gaze like black ink as it trickled over her face and body. "You are a lucky man, Sweeney. Bambi is beautiful."

Gun's arm tightened around her waist. She couldn't tell if he was pissed at Jorge, or being protective. The bartender brought the round of scotch Jorge had ordered.

Ali tipped her glass up, pretending to sip, and licked her lips. "I knew I would like Bogotá. Everyone is so nice."

She smothered a gasp of surprise that shot through her when Gun's thumb grazed her breast. Probably his cute way of telling her to shut-the-fuck-up. She would have to put a lid on her reaction for now. It was imperative to think clearly. This was business.

Gun kissed her cheek, licking her chin for the dribble of sweet liquid he had caused her to spill. He asked Jorge the all-important question. "What happens around here after the clubs close for the night?"

"What did you have in mind?" Jorge's hands were well manicured and his skin like polished copper. Definitely not a farmer.

"My lady and I like to get a buzz before we turn in for the night." Gun patted her ass for emphasis. "You know, kick up the action in the sheets."

Jorge nodded. "You are welcome to join me and a few friends at my home later."

"That's damn nice of you, Jorge. Just let us know when you're ready to leave." He caught her chin in his fingers and smiled at her. "You do want to go, don't you, Bambi?"

She laughed playfully and let her hand trail down between his legs. "You know I do. Anywhere you go is fine with me."

Her heart pounded crazily as Gun whispered in her ear. "Sweeney's going to make you the happiest woman in Bogotá for being so easy to get along with." His words made her wet.

There was no reason to swell his head to bigger proportions by letting him know how turned on she was. "Easy, honey. Your implant might pop out."

He grinned at her, calming her dread some with his good mood. Her nerves were like tinfoil, crackling and ready to crumble. Gun clearly liked the tension and game-playing with criminals. He was having a good time. She was tense as hell and wanted to get out of that bar. She caught on to the fact that Gun was sliding his nearly full drinks to the back of the bar when a new round was delivered.

She had been nuts agreeing to this, coming with him to this noisy dope market when her head spun from fatigue. What the hell? Give in and let him handle things, like he's handling you. She tipped her glass up and lapped a tiny dram from the sweet drink.

He bought the next three rounds of drinks and paid with hundred-dollar bills, tossing them on the bar like confetti. Plus, his hands were roaming to areas she'd always designated as off-limits to any man she wasn't currently screwing. Gun hadn't earned that privilege yet.

She considered the change in her situation, remembering that earlier in the evening, she had forced him to keep drawing her back to him. But the crowd had grown to crushing levels, leaving her no choice but to stay between his legs. She tried to relax, but he drove her nuts with his adventurous hands that traveled over her hips and thighs.

Her legs stiffened under his newest technique. He slid his hand between her legs, brushing the damp crotch of her panties. He wasn't thinking about her, apparently absorbed in conversation with his new Colombian friend.

She leaned against him to murmur in his ear. "Sweeney, baby. What's all the chit-chat about?"

"Just guy talk so far. You know, how long's your dick? Mine's longer." He laughed and rubbed her lower back with slow, circular pampering.

His nonchalant attitude made her edgy. "Sweeney. Remember you're taking me shopping tomorrow." She pressed her palm to the pistol under his arm. "Are you getting directions to the best bargains?"

He slid his hand up her thigh, stopping at the edge of her panty. "Not yet, Bambi." Gun radiated excitement and the feel of danger. She couldn't help the tingle of pleasure his wildness sent through her. His smile was pure sexual enticement as he gazed into her eyes. "These things take time. Relax."

"Don't take too long, honey." She tensed her body, trying to fend off sexual excitement while he touched and stroked her into near climax. Her voice sounded high-pitched to her own ears when she managed to comment against his ear. "Our friends here must like the looks of your money, if their staring means anything."

She pulled slightly away from him and brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead. He immediately pulled her back.

"It's you they're looking at, baby. You're real hot tonight, and they're not blind."

He tugged her onto his lap to kiss her. She got the idea he might be enjoying it. The strong search and thrust of his tongue in her mouth pushed the button to her libido. Insanely, it instructed her to open her legs for him.

He ended his foreplay to nibble her earlobe and explain his plan of action for the night. "Let's stick with the barflies. It'll look better if we don't seem too smart or anxious."

"We look like a couple of turnips, just fell off the truck." She relaxed in spite of the stares from people who wouldn't hesitate to cut her throat if she even looked like the law. A new realization came home to her. Something had obviously gone screwy in her head. She couldn't think straight while he played around with her.

Damn. She didn't want him to see the fuck-me tattoo in her eyes every time he looked at her. Too late. He ran through her blood, hot and fast, setting little shivers of fire all the way to her crotch. If he didn't stop, his tongue in her mouth would have her clawing his back in glorious, wild orgasm.

To her disappointment, just like a coldhearted goon in a gangster movie, he let her go and ignored her, going back to bullshitting with Jorge, keeping the second goon in his line of vision. While Ali controlled her breathing, she tried to look bored and accepted the sherry Gun put in her hand. She could take a little drink. No more. This was it.

Her head cleared instantly when Gun let her know what was happening. They were leaving for another round of drinking and whatever else presented itself. Damn. She wasn't going to survive this crap.

"We're right behind you, Jorge." He sounded thick-tongued with booze, but she knew better. Moving her off his lap, he paid for the drinks with another big bill. "I think Bambi's anxious." He rubbed her ass. "Right, honey?"

Her sultry laugh seemed to please Jorge, and he took her hand to kiss her knuckles. She wanted to punch him in the gut, but would settle for a hot, soapy hand wash as soon as possible.

She cooled her disgust with something akin to normal conversation. There was nothing normal about this character. "So, where is your home, Jorge?" Her lashes shuttered her gaze in a game of hide-and-seek with him for a second. "Not too far, I hope."

He made a silly tight bow and gestured to the entryway of the club. "Not far at all. A few blocks, perhaps." He arched his dark brows and smiled, displaying his remarkably white teeth. "Shall we go?"

"Of course." Ali took Gun's hand and moved closer to him. "Anytime. Right, honey?"

He pressed his thumb into her palm and nodded, taking on that fascinating, hypnotic demeanor once again as he walked beside a probable murderer.

A bass drum pounded in her ears as they moved away from the bar on the floor that seemed to be bouncing from all the action. Gun held her back and studied the crowd. He touched Jorge's arm and spoke over the crowd noise.

"Hang on while I get my driver off the dance floor."

Jorge nodded in his mortician-polite way and walked ahead of them to wait at the entrance.

Ali didn't like it and whispered harshly against Gun's ear. "Why? He might get hurt if crap starts and he's with us."

"No, he won't, if I give him the rest of the night off." He squeezed her fingers. "I'm taking the keys to the Jeep. I'm taking you home tonight, baby."

She slid her hand inside her purse to touch the cool steel of her weapon and waited while he got Ramón's attention.

"We're leaving the dance? It's so early." Ramón was outwardly disappointed, looking a little like a sad kid.

Gun held his hand out. "The keys, Ramón. You stay and have a good time."

The young man's initial disappointment seemed to change into confusion. "Will you need me tomorrow? I'll be ready anytime."

"We'll let you know." Gun handed him another fifty. "Bambi's tired and we'll be in the sack all day. Maybe not get out of bed at all tomorrow."

Ramón nodded and grinned, hurrying off to show his friends the easy cash two crazy Americans had laid on him.

Chapter Ten

Ali used her compact like a periscope to keep an eye on Gomorra. He stood at the front of the club, looking almost lifeless. The strange aura around him reminded her of the old vampire movies. Ali nudged Gun's arm.

"Jorge's waiting." She was no coward, but something about this situation smelled. A trickle of apprehension slithered down her spine when she saw the thin slash Gun's lips had settled into. He was too damned crazy to be worried. His comment was brief and icy.

"This should be fun."

He held her hand as they followed Jorge and his morose companion. The music inside was replaced by shouts and laughter from couples milling around outside in the clammy darkness.

Jorge paused by a Lamborghini and touched the cherry-red automobile with his fingertip. "We will take my car."

Gun shook his head. "It'll be easier if I take the Jeep. It's a rental, and I'd hate for anything to happen to it."

Ali wanted to smear him with kisses. The thought of being at Jorge's mercy for wheels was nerve-wracking. He'd stared at them for several seconds before he shrugged and slid into the driver's seat of his fancy ride.

Gun had already hopped into the driver's seat and sat eyeing her with a hint of a grin. That smirk worked like a miracle drug. She wasn't going to let him in on the ridiculous and uncalled-for misgivings she was experiencing. Forcing the debilitating stiffness from her legs, she climbed in beside him and grimaced at his comment.

"It's party time."

Her voice came from her throat, deep and husky with sarcasm. "Yeah, and I forgot to pick up a gift."

He said nothing, just reached across the seat and patted her thigh in a gesture that seemed almost caring. No, he just liked the feel of a woman.

He drove like a madman, too, exiting the lot on Jorge's tail and smoking the tires when they cleared the speed bumps. She couldn't complain; it was reminiscent of her own driving.

While he drove, she openly observed him and the comfortable way he leaned back in his seat and drove fast to keep up with the speeding Lamborghini.

Late-night revelers and shoppers strolled the streets of Bogotá. The heat was still intense, thick with a heady blend of aromas, some desirable, some not so much. Ali caught the scent of something wildly pungent ... intoxicating. Like Gun, the scent fired her imagination, teasing her with images of untamed, shadowy places.

They drove past their hotel on the way up into the wealthy northern section of Bogotá. Behind the lush gardens and iron gates were luxury homes rivaling anything Beverly Hills offered.

Gun was forced to stop when they came to a traffic signal, and he leaned over to tug on the ruffle on her shoulder.

"When we get there, stick close to me."

"Like glue."

"Are you drunk?"

"A little."

"Just enough to be sexy." He lit a cigarette, taking a puff before handing it to her. "Don't drink anything at this freak's place."

Ali blew a thin stream of smoke toward the sky and nodded. "I wasn't planning to."

He flicked at a curl that humidity had pasted to her cheek, and then took off after Jorge. Ali leaned her head back to drag in reviving air, knowing she had to be alert. These boys meant every word they hissed.

She sat up straight at the touch of Gun's hand on her knee. Her voice was hoarse with tension. "Holy hell. I haven't seen that much artillery since I was at Fort Dix."

He gave her a quick glance and nodded. "Yeah, and I'll bet the bastards don't mind firing it, either."

"Look over there." She couldn't believe the military-green uniforms the guards wore. "It's a luxury prison."

Ali counted the guards with monster-sized mastiffs on leashes. Seven. Gun had connected with her thought waves.

"Probably a few more around back and some in the house."

Obscenely expensive cars filled the circular drive, but several spaces had been reverently left for Jorge and his guest. Gun pulled in behind their host, leaving several good getaway feet between them.

He got out and came around to help her. She unconsciously patted the side of her handbag, getting a bit of a zing of reassurance while her fingertips traced the outline of the Walther PPK.

A distant rumble of thunder seemed to carry an ominous warning, and she shivered. Would she ever stop thinking like her superstitious granny? Ominous, her ass. This was Colombia, and it rained all the time in this season.

She didn't miss Gun's glance at the sky. He must have felt a twinge of apprehension, too. He caught her hand and closed his big, strong paw around it. The simple act bolstered her nerve and she breathed easier, managing to smile at Jorge as he walked toward them.

He held his hand out, looking at her alone when he spoke. "Come inside. You'll enjoy yourselves." His black-as-pitch gaze lingered on her legs for a long, disturbing moment. With the air of a prince, he led the way to the entrance of the mansion, his entourage of silent pimps close behind.

"Man, what a whorehouse."

She looked at Gun, who seemed unimpressed. Ali rolled her eyes in warning at his low comment, but she was grateful for his arm around her waist. She dredged up all the sincerity she could muster while praising the garishly decorated house.

"It's beautiful, Jorge."

He smiled as if she had said he was her favorite lover and did that silly bow over her hand again. "I love beautiful things, Bambi." A quick kiss to her fingertips and he guided them into a massive room dominated by a bubbling, three-tiered fountain. "Come. Let me get you a drink."

He snapped his fingers at a skinny young man in black slacks and a starched white shirt. Ali was struck by the waiter's pallid complexion and lack of spirit. He carefully averted his gaze and bowed his head. His hand shook, and a drop of wine spilled onto the snow-white doily covering the silver tray.

"You will please excuse my servant's poor manners. He will not be here tomorrow."

She burned to come to the guy's defense, but only took a glass from the tray and met Gun's hard gaze. He took a glass and quickly fastened his attention on something across the room. She could tell he was pissed by looking at the knots in his clenched jaw.

Jorge seemed to momentarily forget them, more interested in browbeating the unlucky servant for being slow and stupid. He followed him across the huge room and through a wide doorway, still hammering him verbally.

"Real nice son-of-a-bitch." Gun looked in the glass and then grinned at her. "Just a habit I picked up in college. Never drink anything at a whorehouse. You never knew what would be in your drink when you got back from the head."

She nodded. "Best thing is, just don't drink it." She inclined her head toward a group of young people seated around a coffee table, taking turns snorting lines of coke. "Party favors," she murmured.

He smiled sardonically and touched her nose. "Some party favors, huh?"

Ali looked around, mentally mapping out escape routes in the place, staying by his side as they moved around, mingling without getting too involved with the other guests. She grabbed his arm, forcing him to slow up. Her gaze burned into a wall-sized movie screen across the room. He gripped her hand, putting pressure on her fingers.

"Chill, Donavon." His voice was rough and commanding. "That's old film."

"Old or not," she hissed. "He's strangling that girl."

He clenched his jaws and shook her a little for emphasis. "Pipe down. We can't help the girl now." He pulled her close, pressing her face into his shoulder. "Focus, Donavon."

She gripped his arm until the raging anger subsided. "I'm focusing, all right. This bastard needs to be put out of his misery." She pushed around him and took a cigarette from her handbag. Lighting the slender cylinder took her mind off the film for a few seconds. She lit another one for him.

"Let's check out what's going on over there." He took a deep drag off his cigarette and hugged her waist. She wanted to choke the dumb bitches that sprawled on couches and let these guys do whatever they wanted to them, all for another hit of coke.

Gun had been right. What a whorehouse. The garish decor of the house repulsed her. Walls hung with black and red velvet topped off with silver stars and other celestial images. In complete and disgusting contrast were beautiful ocelot and leopard skins draped over the backs of couches and in glass display cases.

She smiled at Gun, tapping her left cheek to direct his attention to the open door leading to the patio. The crowd parted enough for him to see the main attraction.

Shaking his head a little, he laughed. "Christ. I thought I'd been to some wild parties."

Ali leaned against him to whisper in his ear. "I'm sure if you think real hard, this won't be anything new for you." She met his amused gaze with a hint of a smile.

The entertainment was a slender girl stripped naked, bending over for the buck-naked guy taking her from the rear.

Gun set his wineglass down on the first table he could see, taking her glass from her hand. "Let's move around. See what the rest of the crowd is doing for fun."

She nodded. "I'm right behind you." She was looking forward to getting back to the hotel and a few hours sleep, but her warm and fuzzy plans went out the window the moment Jorge located them in the crowd.

Chapter Eleven

“My friends.” He touched Ali’s cheek. “I have what you want over here.” Jorge walked over to a round table set with everything a gal would need for a fix. Coke was the main item on the menu. “For Bambi.”

Gun moved her back a step and shook his head. “I need it more than she does.”

Ali looked around Gun’s shoulder and smiled at Jorge. “I want the stuff, but Sweeney is funny about me doing it in front of a lot of people.”

His gaze picked her apart, and Ali tensed for trouble. He had to be the most suspicious character she’d ever met, and one of the most frightening. “Very well. Salina will go with you.”

Gun caught her wrist and glared at Ali. She smiled and patted his cheek. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere, honey.”

“I’ll be your hound dog, baby.” He grabbed her and whispered urgently in her ear. “Don’t. Let’s go.”

“I can handle it, lover.” She placed her mouth to his ear, speaking rapidly. “Focus, sweetie. We can’t act like virgins now. Sit tight.”

It was a small sitting area with blue satin couches and glass-topped tables on gold legs. Ali flicked a careful glance around the room, sliding her hand inside her purse when Salina closed the door.

“Lovely room,” she commented, trying to spark a sort of camaraderie with the zombie doll staring at her. It didn’t work. Salina placed the tray on the table and went back to watching her.

Ali looked at the nice snow-white line of dope on the crystal tray. No way she was snorting the shit. With her penchant for picking up bad habits, she couldn’t mess this up. Being an addict was not in her plans.

“Okay, Salina. That is exactly what I need.” Ali sat down and leaned over the tray, looking up to smile sheepishly at her companion. “I need to use the powder room before I do this. Weak bladder, you know.”

Salina’s expression altered slightly, a bit of suspicion narrowing her onyx eyes. Ali wondered if the girl was mute when she didn’t speak, merely turned and pointed to a door across the room.

Ali got to her feet and walked to the door, turning her head to find her watchdog eyeing her every move. “In here?”

The girl didn’t answer, just stared. Ali closed the door and listened to see if Salina was pasted to the door. The lock was flimsy, but Ali turned the small handle anyway. It might stop a woman Salina’s size trying to barge in if she decided to see what Ali was doing. The gold-leafed vanity became her workstation. She dumped the contents of her handbag and searched through them. *Damn, where is it?*

Her pulse skipped several beats before going on a rampage of desperation. Her eyes dismissed everything she picked up. Nope, not the lipstick, not the brush, not even the damned pistol. Oh, saints be praised. There it was, the lip balm container filled with Vaseline.

With a quick check of the door lock, she took the lid off the tube and jammed her pinkie into the cool, slick contents. This would be tough, having never been a mouth breather. She had to leave enough air passage to suck the dope into her nostril. Damn. She wished now she had practiced this trick.

Her nose felt like a watermelon on her face with the thick Vaseline in it. After carefully wiping any telltale shine off her upper lip and flushing the toilet, Ali pasted on a smile and went out to join Salina.

The girl hadn’t moved. Ali tried again. “Hey. Want to share a line?” She used the tiny silver knife on the tray to make two sections of the powder, making sure Salina got the lion’s share. “And I usually always have a big scotch with my hit.”

Salina hesitated, then, like someone dying of hunger, sat down and picked up one of the short straws and inhaled the line nearest her. Ali smiled at Salina when she leaned back and pinched her nostrils.

“My scotch?” Ali could almost smell escape, but couldn’t get too confident yet. The girl was no fool, just a slave to a bad habit and a worse man. She wasn’t budging.

Ali’s hair fell forward and shielded her inexperience as she leaned over and took a straw, nearly shivering when it went into her nostril. She drew some of the powder up into the left side of her nose, fighting the shudder that ran over her body. In one try, she sucked up the last of the stuff in her other nostril. She felt nothing, thank God.

Okay, Ali, move out of here. Now. She pinched her nose to paste the Vaseline to the inside of her nostrils, scared as hell it would fall out if she forgot to breathe through her mouth. She didn't have the excuse of the bathroom left now to blow her nose.

"Hey, Salina." Ali waved her hand and grinned at her hostess. "I feel great and need my man real bad. Let's go have that scotch."

Damn, all Ali wanted was to find Gun and get the hell out of this pit. She opened the door and was immediately hit by the heat and crowd noise. Gun. Where the hell was he?

Salina pushed her out of the way and disappeared into the melee without saying a word. Being on her own had never been a problem for Ali, but at that moment, she would have given a month's pay to see her partner.

She eased her way around the crowd, staying close to the wall, forced to stop when the crowd went into a frenzy of yelling and clapping. There was new entertainment on the floor. Two guys this time, dressed in tiger-print jock straps and enormous dildos. She almost felt sorry for the little guy getting it in the ass, but she couldn't waste her sympathy on them. She needed it for herself.

Someone grabbed her wrist, and she ground her teeth in pain and anger. Her hand came up in a fist as her attacker spun her around to face them.

"Sweeney?"

Oh, God, it wasn't Gun. The glittering gaze of Jorge licked its way over her mouth and fastened on her breasts. He smelled of sex -- not fresh, male sex, but acrid, old, murderous sex -- and he wanted her.

He was in his own territory and could damned well fuck her if he wanted to, pump her full of morphine or anything he so desired. That is, unless she broke his nose with the heel of her hand first. But that would be stupid until she found Gun. She relaxed her fist. Where was that bastard?

Jorge gripped her wrist, infuriating her. "Now, Jorge. You really should ask first."

He pinned her with his gaze, the glitter in his eyes seeming to reach clear to hell. "I've been waiting for you, Bambi." He hooked his finger in the fragile neckline of her dress. "Are you ready for me?"

"This is so sudden." In Ali's eyes, he was an insult to men, and it wouldn't take much to put him on the ground. Shrugging off his seeking hand, she smiled and laughed softly. "Let's watch the floor show."

He pressed closer, enveloping her in his scent, and she closed her throat against a gag. His voice was a hissing whisper. "You enjoyed my drugs, and now, you will enjoy me."

"I have to get Sweeney's okay. He doesn't like it if I don't get his approval first." She smiled seductively in spite of the nausea churning in her stomach. "He likes to watch." She couldn't imagine what he found so attractive about a woman with a nasal problem.

"Don't concern yourself." Jorge wasn't discouraged. "He's content." With the touch of a spider, he slipped his arms around her waist. "Come. My private quarters are comfortable."

She pulled away and hugged her purse close to her side. "Maybe later. I don't feel like partying right now."

His mood darkened. "Your feelings don't matter."

Ali held her hands up and pushed against his bony chest. "Okay. I have syphilis."

She almost laughed at his stunned expression. Her mirth evaporated quickly as he spoke through clenched teeth.

"I have protection." He pushed her forward.

Ali barely controlled her anger. Here was a pipsqueak pushing her around, and she couldn't do anything. Yet. She shot a hurried glance around and picked her partner out of the mob.

Her elation whipped into mental preparation for a battle when she recognized his slim-faced companion in a dark silk suit. Armondez.

"Sweeney." She pushed her way through couples in various clinches and reached out to him. "Sweeney, are we ready to go to the hotel?"

Armondez was looking at her with his endless gaze. Damn Gun's evil hide. He'd made friends with the guy.

"This is my sweet thing, Bambi." He slurred his words. "Honey, Armondez is my pal. He runs things around here." Gun laughed drunkenly. "I mean, he *runs* the whole damn country."

She smiled and put her fingers over his mouth. "Shush, you little nut. I'm sure he doesn't care what you think." She pinched his earlobe. "We've overstayed our welcome. Time to go to bed."

Armondez stepped closer to her, smiling a nice smile. Not like a murderer, just friendly. She didn't like making nice with a guy she was going to kill in a few hours. It was ghoulish.

"Sweeney exaggerates about me, Bambi." Dressed in a dark silk suit and looking totally mild, Armondez would have been the last person she would consider arresting in the group. The feeling slipped away after a look at the slashing set of his lips that screamed, "I have tasted blood." She steeled herself against a shiver tingling around her backbone.

"He tends to do that when he likes someone." She draped Gun's arm over her shoulder. "We really have to go. Lovely party, and thank Jorge for us."

"Wait." Armondez touched her shoulder, smiling with his killer lips. "I have invited Sweeney to my small villa a few miles from here. Very relaxing and private." His all-seeing gaze slithered over her. "The invitation includes you, of course, Bambi."

He must like saying her name. It slipped out of his mouth in his softly accented way like hot satin. Gun looked at her with pure demon dare in his eyes.

"We'll be there, Armondez. Old pal." He pushed her away when she tried to yank his arm, "Damn it, Bambi. Okay, we're leaving if you're gonna be a big old bitch."

He was pretending, but that only gave him a pass for so much bullshit. "Sweeney. I'm going to the hotel. I'm taking the car. Get back anyway you can."

She didn't slow up when she heard Gun setting up a meet time with Armondez while he staggered after her. A tray piled high with napkins caught her eye, and she scooped up a handful as she passed by it.

"Yeah, we'll be there. She'll be over being pissed off by then. I'll get her some Midol. See ya, buddy."

Gun caught up with her outside. He looked back at the house without speaking to her.

The air was wet, but at least the ear-splitting noise had stopped. Ali hurried to keep up with him as he walked to the Jeep. Her heart lightened some as he touched her wrist, looking for her hand. She slipped it into his, grateful for the extra bit of companionship he offered.

The crowd had spilled outside, and couples made out in their cars or leaning against them. They didn't stop what they were doing except to change positions.

Gun maintained his hold on her hand until they reached the Jeep. For the first time, he helped her into the damned thing.

"Nice, Bambi."

"Nice is not my job." She scowled at him and blew her nose until she was sure the drug was gone. "What the hell did you two talk about?"

"Maybe we were talking about you." He sent one of his arrogant smiles in her direction.

He got in beside her and drove away from the house without saying anything. She was bursting with curiosity to know what he and Armondez had talked about, and couldn't keep quiet.

"So tell me." She tapped his arm to get his attention. "Was it a kick in the ass to cozy up to your next hit?"

"What are you ... a cop?" He took a cigarette from the pack on the dashboard. "You can do better than that. What do you really want to know?"

Ali fought to control her anger, but he had pissed her off. Too much blunt speech for her liking. "Go to hell, Gunnison. I know all I want to know about you."

He nodded and pointed to the traffic light at the end of the street. "You'll change your mind by the time that light turns green."

"Yeah, I have changed my mind. Instead of the dedicated hardliner agent I thought you might be, I find myself paired with a freak who likes to play with people's minds and take insane risks."

"Yeah, maybe. But you still want to fuck me."

There was no advantage in getting bent out of shape over what he'd said. He was right. Ali leaned back and let the rushing night wind clear her head. She didn't want to miss a second of the next round with Gun.

He looked down as she laid her hand in his lap. But he didn't speak. He didn't have to. He was hard. No use giving him too much of a thrill. She pulled her hand back and yawned.

She grinned when he gassed the Jeep, taking corners on two wheels and gripping the steering wheel in what looked like desperation. Several evening strollers stared after the flying Jeep as they sped through the steamy Colombian night.

Openly studying him as he drove like a crazy man, she gave consideration to the length of his hair, the dark stuff as wild as he was. And there it was, the scruffy five o'clock shadow, accenting the contours of his chiseled lips and lean jaw. Thinking about that beard scraping her inner thighs struck a sizzle of heat between her legs, and her tongue tingled. Hot.

She stopped ogling him as the Jeep whipped into the driveway of the hotel, where he parked near the entry steps. The damned thing was still rocking a little when he jerked the keys from the ignition and pointed toward the hotel.

She entertained the idea of playing hard to get, but her sex drive wouldn't quiet down. Get out of the damned Jeep, get upstairs, and toss him into that Texas-sized bed.

Knowing if he touched her, she would make a fool of herself, Ali jumped out of the Jeep and hurried up the steps to the entry door. Her senses were set on high voltage as she walked in front of him, making sure he got the full message sent by her swaying hips.

She laughed as he caught up with her in the quiet lobby and grabbed her hand, practically running for the elevator. He lifted her off her feet to carry her into the empty car and leaned on the button panel until the door slid shut.

How long does it take to move up seven floors when you're hot enough to rape the man with you? Ali pressed her naked back to the cool walnut paneling and breathed in shallow huffs, catching his erotic scent and male heat. Cedar, violet, and the western sagebrush were all there.

Her gaze slid up his long legs and played around his crotch before slipping on up to lock with his warm, penetrating stare. She shook with excitement, noting the slight flaring of his nostrils as he leaned toward her, trailing her like some hungry wolf.

The elevator bumped once, then stopped. The door opened smoothly, and they stepped out into the hall. Ali forced herself to walk, not gallop, to the door. Gun was a step behind her, hopefully getting a charge out of the extra bump and grind she put in her hips for him.

He had the key, giving her reason to look over her shoulder at him with nothing hidden from him in her gaze. His body brushed against hers as he reached around her to slide the key into the hole. She absorbed his scent and heat without touching or tasting him. Tiny bells jingled in every vein, and her thighs ached to grip him tight to her body. She was alive with anticipation.

The door swung open, and the first thing she saw was that monster-sized bed with the dozen plump pillows and lofty mattresses. Her bed of many pleasures waited. But not for long.

Gun took her arm, holding her in place until he shut the door. He hadn't spoken, simply touched her bare neck with his fingertips and traced her spine with the same gentle touch. No, wait a minute. He had unsnapped two of the tiny hooks that held the dress together over her rear.

Ali couldn't stand to be that close and not wrap herself around him. She turned to face him and draped her arms around his neck. Still, she wanted to tease him a little longer.

"What's your hurry?" Her hips bumped against his.

He cupped her ass in his hands, molding her to his cobalt-hard cock. "I thought we might play alligator, now that we're alone."

She let her lashes lower for a second before meeting his hot gaze. "You'd lose, Gun."

Chapter Twelve

Gun's words crackled with pent-up desire. "Hell, I'm used to losing."

He jerked Ali away from the door and hugged her to his chest, her arms hanging limp while he clamped his mouth over hers. Getting enough of her wasn't going to happen in one night. Donavon was hot, too, and wasn't coy about it, moving her hips against his and jamming her hands down the front of his slacks.

Moving her backwards across the plush carpet slowed up the process of getting in her pants. He wondered if his nuts would stand the delay. A familiar pressure under his arm reminded him there was a fully loaded weapon on his body.

"Don't go anywhere, Donavon." She looked at him with annoyance when he let her go and began to unbutton his shirt. "Gotta get rid of the rod."

"Let me do that." Ali clenched her teeth and moved his fumbling hands aside.

She gripped the collar of his shirt and yanked until buttons ricocheted off in all directions. Hell with the buttons.

"I didn't like the damned shirt anyway." Reaching around her, he released the final small hook at her waist. The sheer bodice of the dress slipped off her shoulders and settled precariously on her hips. "I want to see your legs."

She pushed the dress over her hips and shivered when it slipped to the floor. Lord be praised. The woman was perfect. Nice, handful-sized breasts, trim little ribcage, and great, rounded hips.

He leaned to one side and grinned as he took in the shapely length of her tanned legs. "Hey, Donavon." He couldn't let this chance go by without making his request. "Don't take those shoes off just yet."

It must have taken her ten minutes to turn around. Her smile struck up a jazz band in his balls, making his cock stretch another inch while she skinned her lace panties off. He got his slacks and shirt off in one ripping frenzy, kicking his boxers across the room.

Her fine brows lifted slightly. "I hope you don't intend to keep your shoes on."

He stepped out of his shoes and yanked his socks off, grinning at her. "I'll be wearing nothing but a smile." For the first time, he had trouble getting the damned snub-nosed .38 out of its holster, and a spark of frustration burned in his gut. He settled down under her firm touch.

She pressed her hand to his chest, caressing the pistol as if it were part of him. "There's something so sexy about a man with a gun."

"I'm not stingy. You can play with mine all you want." His wolfish grin urged her to be more aggressive. "Wanna hold it?"

"You're scoring points, mister. I like sharing, too." She wrapped her fingers around the grip of the pistol and pulled it up an inch. "Hmm, I like the feel of it."

He chuckled and rubbed her ass a little before bragging to her. "It gets better when it's warmed up."

"Where do you do that?" She gave him a hot come-hither smile.

No use getting in a hurry. Donavon wanted foreplay. "You got a warm place to put this thing?"

Her pink lips opened, and her tongue peeked out for a second before she breathed, "Yeah."

His body went into a flameout mode. His animal instincts howled for him to simply throw her on the floor and go at it. *Slow down; take it easy.*

Urgency to have her drove him into going the extra mile to do whatever she wanted. He couldn't slow down. He was too horny. Damn, she was sweet, playing games with him, not caring if he didn't know where he would be tomorrow or when he was coming back or that he hadn't mentioned love. Time to find that warm place.

"Show me where, pretty lady."

"Here."

He slid his hand between them, moving it to the down-covered slit between her legs. "Here?"

He liked the tiny waver in her voice when she affirmed his find. "Yeah, that's it."

"Feels sweet out here."

"Hot enough to heat up your nice big rod?"

"Mighty damned perfect." His finger teased the plush lips of her cunny; the feel of woman drove him nuts. Holding her still wasn't easy, not while she climbed him, clamping her mouth to his.

Her hips bucked against him as he slid a finger inside her slick little heater, moving it in and out in rhythm with his tongue in her mouth. He groaned as her fingers gripped his cock.

“Gun,” she murmured under his lips. “Don’t stop with one.” She held his hand to her, helping him insert a second finger, whispering encouragement. “You’re a Titan.”

A guy’s legs were supposed to be strong, but right now, his were putty. Her laughter struck new fire in his balls, and he couldn’t stand up against the pressure much longer. She had taken over his cock again, gripping his shaft and thumbing the head until he put his hand over hers.

“Here, let me help you.”

She leaned back and smiled at him, a real seductress with sex on her mind. “My first time.”

“Getting a guy off?”

“Getting help.”

He laughed and grabbed her in a hard embrace, kissing her taunting mouth. Deep, marauding kisses that left him wanting everything. He was too hot to wait much longer and picked her up. His stride was swift, long, and strong as he carried her to the bed to drop her onto the bouncy mattress, following her down to lie between her legs as she obligingly opened for him.

She wasted no time driving her fingers into his hair, seeking his mouth with feline licks and nibbles, finally biting like a wildcat. Her sweet-tasting tongue forced itself between his lips to probe every corner and hiding place. She stripped him of any secrets he might have had. All the while she claimed every inch of him, she moaned and made hot, sexy sounds loud enough to bounce off the walls and ceiling.

He liked it, the way she stroked his ass and thighs, tangling her fingers in his coarse pubic hair and working her fingers up and down the length of his dick. He winced when her teeth settled around his nipple and closed. But she didn’t bite down, just sucked until his cock quivered and bounced against her belly. He couldn’t remember ever being so damned hot.

“Donavon, are you ready to put it in the oven?”

She tried to grab his arm as he rose up to look at her stretched enticingly beneath him. He cupped her breast, squeezing the small, rosy nipple until it beaded like a ripe raspberry. Her laugh was like a drug, pinching his balls with its teasing sound.

“No, you haven’t licked the bowl yet.”

He growled in male frustration and slid down to fasten his mouth on her belly button. “Okay, gator-gal, I’m going to see if your box tastes as good as it smells.”

She laughed aloud and sat up to slap his cheek. “It probably tastes better, damn you.”

Her laugh of delight spurred him hard and made him want to give her his best. She was soft and firm at the same time, satin skin and curves and hollows in all the right sexy places. He gripped her knees, pushing her legs up and apart to get at her cute twat. He heard no more arguments as he licked and nibbled her hot little slice until her thighs quivered and tightened around his shoulders. Her moans quickly gained enough volume to shake the drapery moments before she pulled a pillow over her face and let loose a scream. Man, she reached climax like a Texas cyclone.

“I’m going for it, baby.”

She jammed her fingers in his hair again and it hurt like hell. Images of being scalped burned in his brain. He forgot that pain when she put her feet on his shoulders and arched her back, lifting her hips up to his chin. Shoes. Damned shoes. He grabbed her feet and pulled the platforms off, throwing them across the room. Cupping her ass in his hands, he bent to taste her, dipping his tongue deep inside her, alternating between thrusting into her slick, warm center and sucking the sassy clit in her rosy folds. Her next climax came with a wild rush of laughter and gasping moans.

She went limp for one second before clutching his upper arms.

“Gun.” Her eyes narrowed, and the muscles of her flat stomach spasmed when he stuck his tongue in her belly button. “Show me all of that again.”

“Damn, if you keep me working all night, I’m going to have to call you chili pepper from now on.” He eagerly gave her everything she wanted, pushing her legs apart to nuzzle her slit, licking and mouthing her clit. She came again, a powerful, electrically charged orgasm that rocked her into submission. She fell back, smiling at him.

“Are you ever going to put that longhorn in the corral?” She straightened her legs to rest on either side of him and lifted her arms above her head.

He slid up to brace his weight over her, eyeing her sleek body. “You’re one fine woman, baby. Fine.” His voice was husky, rough with desire. He wished he knew what the hell she was thinking. “You’re just waiting to attack me, aren’t you?”

Before he could react, she tangled her legs with his, clamping her arms around his waist. She whispered against his mouth.

“You had better give me what I want.” She slapped his ass and laughed.

“Yes, ma’am.” He covered her nipple with his mouth and sucked hard until she issued a soft warning.

“Don’t make me wait, Gun.” She sealed the statement with a nip to his lower lip.

Her hand gripped his cock, ending the keep-away game, especially when her warm palm cupped his balls. He was too excited to breathe, but managed to wheeze out a final comment. “It’s gator time.”

He’d had plenty of sex lots of ways, but this was something brand new. Blood-pounding excitement no drug could deliver. His cock jumped like a toy on a string at the first

touch of her silky, slick pussy and swelled in girth and length until he figured it would explode. Hot need surged through him just feeling her beneath him, the arching of her hips to take all he had. He thrust deep, shuddering when he thought he could feel her heartbeat.

The need to come gripped his entire being, but he didn't want to stop moving against her, or end the press of her legs around his waist. It was all too good, too good to pull from the tight, slick warmth between her legs. Way too awesome to end all that while she moved under him, sliding her sexy tongue in his mouth every time he plunged into her. Her cries of ecstasy were like hot lead in his blood. *Not yet, not yet*, his libido snarled. *Fuck her all night.*

He couldn't hold out. Desire for relief won and he pumped harder, his effort moving them several feet across the bed until her muscles clamped and her nails raked his back. He caught her scream of delight in his mouth, kissing her until the shock waves of the tsunami quieted.

Two hours later, Ali lay on her back, eyes closed and wearing a tiny smile of victory on her full pink lips. She sighed when he moved a strand of hair from her cheek.

Gun didn't have enough strength left to move when she plopped her leg across his waist. Fuck. She couldn't want to screw again. He groaned and laid his hand on her knee.

"Easy there, chili pepper." He figured she would hit him, but he didn't care. "Go to sleep."

She draped her arm across his chest and tickled his ribcage. "Talk to me, Gun."

"No. I'm tired." He caught her hand and kissed her thumb, sucking it into his mouth.

She tightened her grip on his waist and hissed in his ear. "But there must be talk after sex."

"Okay. What?"

"What do you mean, what?"

"I never talk after knocking off a piece."

Her silence told him he'd made a mistake. He exhaled and sat up to look at her. Damn, now she was his bed partner. She was going to expect stuff. "Okay. We'll talk."

She flung his hand away and rolled onto her stomach. "Go to hell."

"That your final answer, Donavon?" His gaze latched onto the inviting mounds of her ass, hard as nails, glutes perfectly defined under smooth skin. He grinned, leaning over to inspect a curiosity at the base of her spine. The thing he had barely glimpsed earlier. "What's this?" He traced the tattoo of a small pair of handcuffs before leaning over to kiss the artwork. "Tying them together with that red ribbon is a nice touch."

She rolled onto her side. "I didn't ask for your okay. Maybe I don't like the scars on your legs or the one on your ribs." Her hand covered the pale, jagged scar on his pec, and the expression in her eyes was close to sympathy.

Gun regretted he had chosen to cut her off from himself and tried to make amends. “Yeah, they are pretty bad. Do I gross you out?”

She got to her knees and put her arms around his neck. “Don’t be stupid. We all have scars.”

He hugged her close, enjoying her warmth. Sometimes it was nice just being with someone who cared a little for you. “There’s not a damned thing wrong with you, Donavon.”

Chapter Thirteen

Ali slipped out of bed and went out on their small balcony to listen to the morning rain. It rushed off the overhangs and splashed down to spray the brick courtyard in the back of the hotel. The humidity and sound of heavy downpour made her think of New Orleans and its warm summer morning rain. She wondered if she would ever get back there.

Rustling of the bed sheets and an audible groan made her look over her shoulder at Gun. He had tangled up in the sheet and lay on his belly, face turned toward her. She rolled her eyes, thinking about the rowdy sex they'd had a short time ago. Leaning around the doorway, she grabbed the half-full pack of cigarettes off the dressing table and lit one. She blew the smoke out toward the rain, watching it disappear.

Regret squeezed her hard while she thought of all the sane reasons to avoid such crazy behavior. Not because he didn't give a rat's ass about her. Hell, no. She didn't exactly like him, either. Well, that was a bald-faced lie. She did like him, damn it. He was a man wanting no ties, no soft emotion, and she knew all that. After all, she was in no rush to feather a new nest with some lying son-of-a-bitch anytime soon.

Not wanting to think about how fast she had jumped in the sack with him, she snuffed out the cigarette and went back into the room. Making as little noise as possible, she went in the bathroom and brushed her teeth. No wonder she was hungry. Seven in the morning was a late start for her.

No telling when "dream man" would regain consciousness. She had her robe off, ready to shower, when her cell phone rang. Not wanting to wake Gun, she grabbed it.

"Yeah."

"Come back to bed."

Gun. She peered around the door to see him kicking the tangled sheets off and trying to sit up and hold the phone to his ear. He yawned sleepily and gazed around the room as if he were lost. She crooned into the mouthpiece.

“Go to sleep, little baby.”

He stunned her when he finally broke his silence. “Speaking of babies, I don’t recall taking time out to get rubbers for our party.”

Ali had never expected Jack Gunnison to spend time reflecting on the night before. “Gun. You’re not my first.”

The silence was long, and she eyed him through the small space left between the door and the wall. He looked at the phone with a grin before speaking to her again.

“Damned right, I’m not your first.” He threw the sheet aside and sprawled on his back. “I would have taught you a few things.”

Resentment brewed in her stomach. What did he mean by that crack? It would be a cold day in hell before she let him touch her again. Not caring that she was nude, Ali opened the door. She walked to the bed to look at his smug face.

“Not that I give a damn, but just exactly what did you find objectionable or lacking in my sexual performance?” Her narrowed gaze sought out his cock. He was rigid; his cock pressed so close to his belly, she might have a hard time getting her fingers around it. “Looks like part of you thought I was pretty good.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the bed. “I don’t know. You’ll have to talk to him.” His gaze flicked over his member and back to her face.

“Him? That has a gender and a name?”

“Donavon’s jelly roll.” His chuckle was sweet aphrodisiac, deep and rough, just like him.

She stayed on her knees and braced her weight on his belly, avoiding the warm length of dick near her hand. Sex wasn’t on her mind at the moment. She didn’t know if she liked him well enough for another romp. The tips of her fingers grazed his chest, and she didn’t smile when she spoke.

“Are you ever serious about lovemaking?”

“Donavon.” He ran his hand up her arm and met her serious gaze, gesturing in a show of exasperation. “We fucked. That’s it. We fucked.”

The slap of her palm to his belly rang in her ears. “You fucked. I made love.” She slapped his cheek for good measure. “You’re a pig, you know that? No wonder your wife left you for a lawyer.”

She only had time to gasp before she felt her hair flying around her face and the wind jolting from her lungs as he grabbed her and tossed her onto the bed, pinning her with his leg.

His voice remained level, but there was ice in his tone. "She didn't leave me because the sex was bad. She left because she wasn't getting it often enough."

He was grinning, but Ali heard self-deprecation in his words, no matter how big his grin. He had just admitted he had failed life's hardest test. Being married. Still, that didn't excuse his horse's-rear attitude toward her.

"You're bragging again." There was no grin on his face now. The pitch black of his gaze was unreadable, like the set of his chiseled lips.

"You like me, Donavon." His mouth curved into a half-smile. "But, don't."

Her lips quivered in a maddening show of nerves. "No need to take that attitude. You don't meet my standards."

She didn't like being pinned and quickly freed herself from his leg hold, pressing him down with her body. He laughed and spanked her ass, making her growl with resentment. She stopped struggling when he whispered against her cheek.

"It's okay. You can like me." He caught her face in his hands and covered her lips in a deep, hungry kiss. She barely heard his next words. "Just don't count on me for anything past this job."

Ali couldn't avoid the hard slam to her gut, that sick, cold feeling of losing something you love. No, oh, no. That wasn't what she felt for him. He made her mad as hell, insulted her, made her laugh, and was a phenomenal lover. But, no, she couldn't feel anything else for him. Gun had no place in her life after Colombia was history. Okay, so right now she was in bed with her partner. Nothing that hadn't happened a million times before. Just not to her.

He didn't try to stop her as she sat up and tugged on his arms, trying to get him in a sitting position. He eyed her with some suspicion.

"You going to try to hurt me, chili pepper?"

"Shut up and enjoy it while you can."

His big, strong hands caught her waist and pulled her close to his beautiful, scarred chest. "Do whatever you want, baby. I'm ready."

She relaxed against his warm body, hugging his strong neck so hard, he pushed her away a little to look at her face. To cover her feelings of unwarranted emotion, she bit his earlobe and tightened her grip again.

No, God. She couldn't love a guy like this. He would be off and running in another week, in another country with another woman and she would be wearing sackcloth and ashes if she didn't get hold of her runaway heart.

She caught his earlobe in her teeth, gently sucking and nursing until he squeezed her breasts. The quickening in her body flashed through her like wildfire, and she couldn't force herself to be demure, not when he mouthed her nipples and worked his fingers inside her, sliding them in and out until she raised her hips in response. Her murmur was urgent. "Gun, fill me and I'll ride."

“Up a little higher, Donavon. I’m not that damned long.”

She heard a grin in his voice and lifted her hips more, nearly bolting through the ceiling as the head of his cock touched the sensitive folds around her clit. Losing control was a new experience for her, and she gave all credit to Gun. He just knew all the best areas of her body and caressed and licked them all.

The silly little moan she heard had been hers, and she clung to his warmth and strength as if she were drowning. He filled her arms and her body, making her foolishly think it could last forever. She opened her eyes and found him staring at her. “What?” Her voice had been a miserable croak.

“You really do like me, don’t you, Donavon?”

“Shut up and make me happy.” She strained against him, taking him in, gripping with all her might. He clasped her thighs and rocked into her, finding the most sensitive spot of her neck to suck voraciously until she cried out in her release.

While she struggled to catch her breath, he smiled at her. Ali knew he hadn’t climaxed, but she was too tired to offer any help. He wasn’t tired, nibbling little kisses along her neck.

One last sniggle of need made her accept some more physical exertion. “Let’s do it another way.”

He stopped his movement and laughed. “Is there one we haven’t tried?”

“Standing up is good.” She toyed with his flat nipple. “Come on, lazy boy. I want it.” She made that clear, hanging on to him like a sex-starved idiot.

He grinned and pulled her close. “You think I can’t do it. Right?”

The thought had not occurred to her, but she went along with the idea. “Well. Can you?”

“Hell, yes. I can fuck standing on my head.”

Her gaze touched and kissed his lips as he yawned. He was stubborn and proud. “I’m glad to hear you are so talented.”

“I’ll show you that one later.” He got off the bed, pulling her with him. “One standing fuck ... coming right up.”

Ali would never challenge Gun again. The stand-up, as he had called it, had been a physically demanding, loud affair, starting against the bedroom wall. It had moved out to the tall potted plants on the balcony and back to the bedroom. He had the strength of two men in his legs, holding her up on his cock with no problem. For the time being, she was sexually satisfied.

Two hours after the start of Gun’s party, Ali crawled back onto the bed with him. She remembered their neighbor banging on the wall in protest of their noisy lovemaking.

Lovemaking? Gun had been right. They fucked that time. Nothing fancy, just raw, physical going at each other.

He looked wiped out after their long shower together, sprawled in apparent relaxation, eyes closed, squeaky clean and smelling sexy as hell. She lay close to him and yawned. Nothing like a warm, clean, lean man to help her sleep.

He hooked his arm over her waist and groaned. She lifted her head to look at him. "What?"

He grinned at her. "Talk to me."

She flopped back down. "You're kidding."

"Okay. You don't want to talk." He stroked his palm over her hip a few times before saying anything else. "You hold your own damn good."

Praise from this guy? She covered her surprise with humor. "I do my best."

"You know that bad-ass trick with the coke you played on Gomorra? Don't do anything like that again." He pulled her close and breathed deeply against her hair. "We'll work our way out of trouble together from now on."

She was too weary to answer, but stayed awake long enough to lock her fingers with his.

Chapter Fourteen

The rain had stopped, leaving behind steaming humidity thick enough to choke on. Gun couldn't believe how long they'd slept. He glanced over his shoulder at Ali and scowled. Damn, she had whupped his ass, and that bothered him. As long as she didn't know that, he didn't have to explain why he did things the way he did, or tell her when he was going to do them.

Man, take it easy. You're talking to yourself and answering, too. You have to get back to the real world as soon as possible.

"Donavon, let's speed it up." He had intended to sound aggravated. Her look of surprise hit him in the gut. He wanted to soften his attitude. But, no. Goddamn it. He would defend her with his life, but she could not cling to him. No Goddamn way.

"Hold that lovely expression, Gun." She averted her face and slung a fringed white silk shawl around her hips, tying it in a knot under her belly button. The sheer pink blouse and pair of low-riding white hip-huggers she had on missed covering her skin by a mile.

Why the hell did she always have to be half-naked? "We're going to miss Rance if you don't move your ass."

Son-of-a-bitch. She gave him the finger.

"I'm ready." Ali shoved past him and opened the door, stomping into the hallway. She stomped all the way to the Jeep, speaking only to Ramón as he helped her into her seat.

The wall she'd raised between them would probably last until he made an effort to apologize. Cold day in hell would come before he did that. He had to admit, her nice Southern accent was easy on the ears, but he wasn't going to hear it for a while. Just one more thing he couldn't take a liking to.

Her attitude abruptly changed when a small dog ran out in the street and he swerved to miss it. He looked at her, catching her look of relief and tears brimming in her eyes. "Hell, Donavon. I missed the little bastard." *Damned glad, too.*

Ignoring her was a challenge. Soft-looking, with her sheer pink blouse that took his gaze right to her nipples, plus her pink lips and curly hairdo. He knew there was the same kind of soft curls around her pussy.

Okay, she was hot to look at and a great lay, but that was as far as his interest went. His head was splitting, and he remembered the threads of an old nightmare. Had he given away his suffocating pain while he slept? If he had, Donavon hadn't questioned him.

The market was crowded and parking scarce. Gun found a space next to a wagon loaded with flowers and fruit. They would have to walk a ways to get in the main area, but he needed to work some kinks out. He inhaled and stifled a groan. The scent of decaying vegetation and discarded rotten fruit hung thick in the damp air, bringing up the nightmare he'd tried to obliterate from his brain.

Ali seemed to lighten up as she walked through the rows of junk the vendors offered. She chatted with them and fawned over a heavily embroidered blouse from one. Her eyes were smiling as she turned to speak to him.

"This would make a great Christmas gift for my niece." She was a beauty when she smiled.

"Yeah, that's real nice." He did well to force himself to visit his family at Christmas. They expected too much, expected him to find some nice little girl and get married again. Fat fucking chance.

Donavon hadn't stopped smiling when she touched his arm to get his attention. "There's Rance. Over by that fruit vendors' hut."

She was right. Rance was either drunk or putting on a hell of a show for the girl laughing at him. "Okay. Let's go see what the hell's going on."

Donavon looked over her shoulder.

"Gun, I keep seeing the same guy everywhere we go. Tall, thick-set, with a paunch." Her hand went into her purse. "You think he's a watchdog for our Colombian friend?"

"Could be, but more like a local cop. He's too fat to be a cokehead and run his ass off in the jungle for our new friend."

She nodded. "You're probably right." She laughed then, holding on to his arm and looking at him with a flirtatious smile. She was back in Bambi mode again.

Gun noticed a new sense of urgency in Rance's attitude when he spotted them walking toward him. He waved goodbye to the young woman that he apparently had told to move on and leaned against a soft-drink vending machine.

"Hey. You got a light, man?" He staggered a little for effect. "Too much food and drink." His grin was wide and sloppy.

Gun flipped his lighter open and fired up Rance's fat cigar. "Yeah, you gotta watch your diet, man." He grinned. "One way or another, you're gonna be in the john all night."

"You're right on the button, fella," Rance said over a huge hiccup. "Let me buy you nice folks a drink at that little cantina over there."

Rance took Donavon's arm while they chose a table away from the crowd, eyeing Gun like her big brother probably did after every date she had. The reason for his curiosity was plain enough. Hickies on Donavon's neck and a beard burn that would take days to fade, plus the nice big bite on his lip.

Gun wondered what Donavon was thinking about at that moment. Her lids looked a little puffy, and her lips reminded him of ready-to-split ripe cherries. He grinned, remembering their sex had been a lot like an undeclared war. He hadn't had that much fun ever.

Rance hailed a waiter and ordered three scotches on the rocks. Donavon hid a yawn behind her hand, and Gun leaned back to gaze at her. As much as he trusted her ability to handle any situation, he didn't want to take her into the Armondez pit. He turned over several possibilities of going in without her.

Rance interrupted him. "There's been a little change in pick-up time."

"That's really great news, Rance." Sarcasm etched Gun's comment. "How long have we got?"

Ali sat forward and tapped Gun's arm. "Tell him what you set up. That might have to be changed."

He caught her fingers in a light squeeze. "Won't change a thing. I'm going."

Rance lifted a brow in question. "What's going on?"

"Nothing I can't handle. I'm going to the site to figure out his routine, his habits. The best spot to be when I take him out."

"I think Gun meant to say *we're* going to the site." Ali smiled, quieting until the waiter set their drinks down and left. "He can't do it without me."

"That's the plan, Gunnison. Don't get too crazy on us." Rance swallowed most of his drink. "We're not leaving anyone this time."

Cold rage threatened to swallow Gun, drown him in his own anger and remorse. Didn't he have to live with those five minutes everyday of his life? Five minutes of everything turning upside down and ending life as he knew it. And now, his partner was staring at him for an answer.

"Rance is a prick. Don't let him scare you."

She nodded and sipped her drink. That nod was as good as a touch. She trusted him.

Rance snarled. "She's not scared. I'm not so sure about you."

Pure fury radiated from Gun. He gripped the heavy glass in his fist as if he wanted to crush it. Animosity between the two men flowed hot and thick. Gun had looked at her as if he expected her to question his reliability.

She set her glass down, brushing her fingers against his white knuckles. "Mind telling me what this is about?"

Gun leaned closer to her, his gaze capturing hers in its midnight snare. "He's trying to tell you I'm a coward."

"You're a *what*?" Maybe she hadn't heard him correctly. "What's going on, guys?"

"Later, Donavon. I'll fill you in on everything later."

"Everything?"

"Later." He finished his drink and smiled sardonically at Rance. "Anything new from Hamm? If not, we're leaving."

"Listen, Gunnison. Take chances with your hide, but you're not in this alone."

"If you mean Donavon, she can take care of herself." Gun leaned over to tap her arm. "Tell him how you can kill a man in one minute flat."

"Shut up, Gun." Ali recognized the old, sick feeling welling up in her stomach. Men at war over nothing. "You, too, Rance."

"You want to get the job done, or fight your way out of this hole because of this guy?" Rance eyed her with a slight scowl. "Why did we go over all those maps, pictures, timetables, and shit if it wasn't to get you two out on time? Have you even talked about getting to the extraction site? This is serious."

"Enough." She pushed her drink aside and grimaced. "So what if we make a few changes? Nothing is written in blood. We'll make our hit and get out."

"Don't bet on it." Rance stood up. "Get on that chopper, Donavon. No matter what. Fourteen hundred hours is the new extraction time."

"We'll both be there, Rance." Why the hell did she not feel as sure as she sounded? "We'll see you back in St. Louis."

Gun didn't look quite so angry now ; a hint of a grin tugged at his lips. "Thanks for worrying about us, Rance." His gaze traveled over the lush array of flowers on a nearby table. "But, no need. We both went to the Agent-r-Us school."

"Smart son-of-a-bitch to the end, right, Gunnison?" In a surprise move, Rance hugged Ali, kissing her cheek in a quick, gruff show of affection. "Didn't do you any good, though, did it? Just don't get Donavon killed because you can't resist being a hard-nosed prick." He patted her arm. "Don't miss your flight."

Ali wanted to scream at them to shut up, to stop the fighting over God only knew what. She damn well intended to find out the source of the anger. Right now, she could only

dread tomorrow and being in the Anaconda's private pit. The numbers she'd drummed into her brain added to her worry. One hour less to get the mission completed.

Damn, she was getting to be superstitious. Her bayou upbringing made her susceptible to the possibility of spells and hexes. But it wasn't superstition hissing in her ear. She shuddered, jumping when Gun spoke to her.

"We do need to get our gear ready to bail out of here." He didn't look worried, just sexy as hell, luring her with his daredevil smile.

"Maybe Rance would like to have dinner with us." She admired the tough-as-nails guy who had been her partner, even if he'd given her a rough time. "You game, Rance?"

He gave her his trademark crooked smile. "Naw. I have to catch a flight out of here in an hour." He touched her shoulder. "You take care. Keep your head down, and listen to the sounds. I'll see you."

He barely nodded in Gun's direction, walking away, looking at his watch. Time was of the essence to them. She absently looked at her wristwatch. The crazy squeeze in her stomach muscles was nothing but loneliness. Damn, she was losing it.

"Gun, let's go have something to eat. Now."

"Yes, ma'am."

He clasped her hand and took his sweet time moving along the aisles, stopping once they were outside. "Just a minute, Bambi." He went to the nearest flower cart and picked up a bunch of white flowers, grinning at her after he paid the vendor.

Ali didn't know how to react. She chose sarcasm. "Those go perfect with your outfit."

He thrust the fragrant bouquet of carnations toward her. "Don't get too excited, Donavon. It's all for show, not because I like you."

"Umm, okay." She brought the spicy blooms to her nose and sniffed before leveling her serious gaze on his face. "I would like to know why you and Rance want to rip each other's throats out."

"I said I'd tell you everything."

"Don't worry about it. This is not the place for it."

She didn't say anything more, watching the crowd and hurrying to get away from the noise and growing crush of people.

He eyed her with the same look he had on their first meeting in that cold St. Louis alley. Pure amusement. "Can't we discuss this in the shower?"

He still saw her as a toy -- wind her up and watch her spin. Fuck her enough to keep her quiet and out of the way.

"You'll be lucky if I let you stay in the same room with me." She slapped the flowers against his chest, petals falling like snow, and then tossed them on the ground. "You know what you can do now, don't you?"

“Drop dead, maybe?”

“You got it.”

Chapter Fifteen

Donavon hadn't said more than a dozen words to him all evening. Not during dinner in the hotel dining room and especially not now in their room. Normally, that's what he wanted from a woman, but it was different with her. She wasn't his usual date. She was independent, tough, sexy, and intelligent. Plus, she didn't need him or his approval.

He groaned and rolled onto his side, trying to get comfortable on the chaise lounge. From where he lay, Donavon looked untroubled and comfortable in her diagonal stretch across the bed. She didn't want company tonight.

He knew where he'd gone wrong, forgetting she was not to be messed with. There had been a time he hadn't given a damn about her opinion of him. Somehow that had changed.

He dropped the magazine he'd been staring at. It made a rustling sound when it hit the floor, and Donavon sighed loud enough for him to hear. The ache in his back forced him to his feet. He stretched to relieve the kinks in his muscles. Didn't she know he was too tall for that sofa thing? What the hell had gotten into her?

His gaze went to the water tumbler full of ratty-looking carnations that he'd salvaged from her bouquet. Hit with how ridiculous he must have looked buying them, he tossed the maltreated flowers in the wastebasket.

Boredom set in, and he took a bottle of water from the small refrigerator and went out to sit on their small terrace. A cold drink and a cigarette should have taken care of all his needs, but they didn't.

There was a need so deep inside him, he couldn't name it. It couldn't be satisfied with tobacco. What he felt was not going to be allowed to take root in his blood. No fucking way. He wasn't able to feel romance or anything close to love. His longest affair since his divorce hadn't lasted more than two dates.

"Gun?"

"I'm out here."

He waited, but she didn't ask him to come to bed. Why the hell would she? He was just the partner who'd happened along at the right time. He crushed the cigarette out and stood up, listening to the drip of rain from the roof.

He closed the double doors when he went back into the bedroom. Something about the night was really lonely, and he didn't want the music from the passing cars to bother Donavon. Just thinking her name made him want to talk to her.

"Donavon."

Silence. She had really gone back to sleep.

"Donavon." Humbling himself like he'd never done, Gun sat on the bed and touched her shoulder. "Are you awake?"

"You want sex?"

That had not been an invitation, but a dare to him to find out just how pissed off she was. He didn't feel like trading shots with her. "No. I want to tell you why Rance thinks I'm a coward."

There was a second or two of scrambling until she had crawled next to him. "Here." She sat up and piled pillows high behind his back for him to lean on. "Want another bottle of water?"

"No. You were faking sleep, right?"

"That's the only thing I have faked with you." She worked her warm curves up close to him and looked into his eyes with calm expectation.

"Five years ago. Same reason, just another drug-dealing freak." A cold rush of self-hatred choked him.

Her soft voice chased it away. "You don't have to tell me." She pulled the sheet over them and quieted.

"Teke wasn't just my partner. He was my best friend. And Rance's brother. We went through college and the training for the agency together." Gun rubbed his jaw with his knuckles, searching for the right words. There were no right words. "HSD sent us down here to snuff a guy. We lay out in a coca field for a week before getting a real chance to make the hit."

Gun took a drink of the water she'd left on the nightstand. "They surprised us, using night-vision glasses to locate us."

"Gun, that doesn't sound like anything you could control."

"Yeah, well, I was supposed to keep us on time. You know, down-to-the-split-second way we're trained to do stuff."

"Want more water?" She sounded concerned.

He pushed away the glass she offered. "I wasted precious time going to the guy's house to get a good look at him. You know, be sure I got the right one." His laugh was cynical. "Been like that all my life, Donavon. I have something loose in my head. Gotta get it right or I can't do it."

"That's not a loose screw, Gun. You're a good agent."

"Well, after they flushed us out, they started using their machetes. We killed some of them, but I couldn't watch the rear, and one of them caught me across the leg and chest." He rubbed his thigh, recalling the pain and spewing blood. "We were both cut up pretty bad, but we drove them back long enough to make a run for the extraction site. They followed, shooting at us while we ate mud, crawling on our bellies in blood and snake tracks."

"That still doesn't make me think you're a coward."

He cupped her face in his hand, pulling her close to his chest. "Teke was cut across the gut and bleeding like hell. I tried to get him on board, too, but I didn't have enough strength to pull him up. The rope ladder was slick with blood, and he fell back onto the ground."

Gun clenched his teeth against the vivid crimson scene. Her hand stroked his back, and he let the comforting touch ease his agony.

"That must have been a nightmare, Gun. But not your fault."

"All of it was my fault. Rance has reason to hate me. I killed his brother."

"No, you didn't." She touched his hand. "Rance doesn't hate you. He just needs time for the grieving to let up."

She sounded so sure. She couldn't understand the pain and shame of letting another person be killed in your place. He would never discuss it again. "Okay. Tell me what makes you so damned hardheaded."

"Not much to tell, Gun." Ali sat up and rested her arms over his shoulders. "I was the only girl among six boys in my family. I learned early that being a *gal* wasn't going to get me far in this man's world. If I got anywhere, I was going to have to fight for it." She smiled at him as if something in her memory amused her. "I finished college and joined the Army. My dad was furious, didn't think it was fit for his daughter. Not until I got out and into the HSD. Now he thinks I'm super-fine."

Gun got up and opened two ginger ales, handing her one. "Well, I'm the seventh son of a seventh son. I guess I disappointed a lot of people that believe being a seventh son has some kind of mystical power in it." He sat down by her. "Now, what about that son-of-a-bitch boyfriend?"

She laughed and drank from her bottle. "That's all over. I'm in love with the HSD now. No time for anything else." She didn't stutter when she pried into his life. "Were you terribly in love with your wife? Did you try to make her understand your job?"

"I loved her through college and the Rangers and after I got into the HSD. I had to leave her a lot after that. She couldn't wait to hit the sack with our fucking attorney back in

Dallas. He was dependable and safe.” He threw the empty bottle at the wastebasket. “And, yes, goddamn it, I did try to fix it.”

She didn’t ask any more questions or make any comments. Donavon knew when to talk and when to shut up.

Chapter Sixteen

Ali thought about the deep remorse that had been in Gun's voice last night. He hated himself. No need for anyone else to waste their time doing that when he was so damned good at it. But right now, in the light of day, he seemed completely at ease, as if the revealing conversation had never taken place.

He combed his wet hair with his fingers and drank coffee that he had made in the suite's coffee pot. Ali fought the tug at her soul. The sweet pain hit with regularity lately. There wasn't a damn thing she could do about it until there were miles and time between them.

"What are you thinking about, Donavon?" He eyed her as if she had popped out of an egg. "You trust me enough to go with me, or not?"

He succeeded in pulling the firing pin to her temper. "Is that a macho way of asking for a vote of confidence?" Her hands shook, but she hid their tremble in the clothing she held. "Get over yourself."

If she could have, Ali would have bitten off her tongue. Why couldn't she be a nice, sensitive woman who slathered on honey and kisses no matter what?

"Well, aren't we a bitch this morning?" He held the coffee out to her and grinned. "Here, suck on this. It'll take care of those nerves."

"Sorry." She took the cup and swallowed some of the bitter brew. "I'm not a morning person." He seemed distant when she handed the mug back to him.

He changed the subject. "Keep what clothes you need for today and tomorrow, and we'll leave everything we don't absolutely have to have."

She didn't reply, choosing to play his game. Strange how the job had gotten lost for a few hours, but now she was Agent Allison Marie Donavon again, and whatever he said wasn't personal.

Her gaze lingered on the pretty but cheap clothes, and she wondered at her desire to keep them. Did this mean she was cheap? Her lips twitched in a grin of self-deprecation. Maybe she was a slut, had got lucky and made it in a job reserved for men. Yep, that's where she wanted to be. A horny slut in the middle of lots of angry conflicted males. Just like every man she had ever come in contact with. How the hell had her tiny mother lived through raising six of the little animals?

She didn't want him to know, but she was checking to see if he was clear on their extraction time. "I wonder why the pick-up time was changed to fourteen hundred hours."

"Don't make any difference. We'll make it."

"We'll have to leave before daybreak to make the hit and get to the red zone."

"We're not going to mess up. We know our job." He cocked his head and eyed her with a half-smile. "You having doubts about this now? About me?"

"No. Just letting everything jell in my mind."

He went back to cleaning the rifle, lovingly breaking it down and cleaning it until the metal glowed in the lamplight. During the hours he'd had her in bed, she couldn't recall him looking at her with such tenderness. Her soft harrumph escaped him. Ali admitted to the shameful fact that envy was what she felt.

He only looked up when she threw the last of her gaudy luggage toward the door. "Got everything you need?"

"Sure." She held her choices up for him to see. "Cute little jumpsuit for today and good old olive-drab cargo pants and jack-boots for tomorrow." She tossed a short-sleeved T-shirt and a long-sleeved button shirt on the pile.

He shrugged and went back to reassembling the pistol. Armed and dangerous. Just how he looked best. She hurried to the closet after he looked up to catch her staring at him.

"Looks good to me, Donavon." He pulled his blue cotton shirt on and rolled the sleeves up to his forearms. "You make damned sure we don't get separated at Armondez's place, but if we do, use that cell phone."

She rolled her eyes and ignored his bossy comment, wrapping the cargo pants and shirts around the boots. Satisfied with the compact bundle, she pushed it under the bed. The jumpsuit was modest compared to the rest of the wardrobe she'd brought. It was made of creamy yellow French terrycloth; the cap sleeves plus a concealed zipper in front appealed to her desire for comfort.

She let her bathrobe fall to the floor, not concerned that she was wearing nothing but white silk panties. His voice didn't stop her while she stepped into the suit.

"That all you're wearing under that thing?" He sounded irritated.

"I didn't exactly come prepared to attend mass."

He snorted in amused derision, pulling her into his arms. "Maybe we should knock off a good one before we leave. What do you think?"

Damn it. What was she supposed to say? Her body reacted instantly with heat and heart palpitations, but her brain screamed, *no!* God help her, it was not fair to tease her with Jack Gunnison right before a life-or-death mission.

He nuzzled her neck, breathing in her scent. "You smell so damned good." His approval was evident by the nice hard-on he pressed to her belly. "You don't have that hooker-smelling stuff on this morning. Ummm, orange blossoms. Damn, woman."

Her salty reply would never be heard, cut off by his burning-hot kiss and seeking tongue. It devoured all reason and resistance, if she'd had any. She leaned against him, helpless and weak with the intensity of her passionate response. His hands swept aside her self-control, squeezing her breast, cupping her ass, pulling her flush against his erection.

Her eyes opened, and she looked into the dark gaze that had been her downfall. Gun was her weakness, her drug of choice. That hint of a smile was nothing but the devil's self-assurance, the call to his playground. What did she care if he knew how hot she was for him?

Oh, but she did care that he was pushing the suit off her shoulders and over her hips. Her soft outcry of hot pleasure at the touch of his fingers to her damp crotch seemed to add to his determination.

"Shall we stand up or hit the floor?"

"I don't ... give a damn ..." she rasped, shuddering with want. She flung her arms around his neck when he picked her up. He hesitated, and she demanded, "What's wrong now?"

He nodded toward the door. "Ramón's out in the hall, knocking." Gun looked stricken.

Like a cold winter rain, reality took control. "Go see what he wants, and I'll finish dressing."

"Right." His face was highly colored with ruddy undertones after the heat of unfulfilled sexual desire. He set her down and went to the door.

Ali caught scraps of Gun's conversation with Ramón while she zipped up the jumpsuit and slipped her sandals on. Something about Armondez. Just what she wanted to hear on an empty stomach.

He closed the door and came back into the bedroom, his expression closed and cold as marble. He sat on the bed to tie his shoelaces.

"Okay. What gives?"

"There's a big, fancy SUV, complete with chauffeur, waiting for us downstairs."

"Our man being nice to us?"

"Yeah."

"What do we do?" She applied a fresh layer of lipstick.

"We could refuse, saying we would rather drive ourselves." He lit a cigarette. "Or we accept the bastard's hospitality."

Ali couldn't ignore the tingle of concern in her stomach. "He's controlling us with his kindness."

"If we don't do things his way, it might queer the whole deal. He's already suspicious as a wild dog."

Her question didn't seem to bother Gun. "Have you given any thought to our being frisked? Armondez's goons will check us out."

"Yes. They probably will pat me down. I don't think he'll let his goons touch you. What ever happens, I'll go along with and be real humble."

She glanced at him and clipped her hair back in a fall of ringlets. "Better do it his way."

He patted the small-caliber pistol strapped to his calf under his trouser leg. "Yeah. He's like a kid with a new toy. The bastard thinks he's getting in your pants." Gun poured a little of his cologne in his palm and roughly scrubbed it over his face and neck. "As long as you lead him on a little, keep him interested and thinking he might get in Bambi's pants, he'll stay out in the open, where we can find him. Wouldn't want him to disappear."

Ali nodded and lowered the zipper of her jumpsuit to just below her breasts. "Can't have him doing that." Her brows arched with her provocative action. "Can we?"

Chapter Seventeen

Gun hated the knots of tension in his gut. The ride to Armondez's home in the jungle was taking way too long. Ten miles of varying colors of green and occasional red dust if they happened to hit a rare dry spot in the twisting trail that passed for a road. The summer heat in St. Louis was pure heaven compared to this soggy hole in the earth. Jesus, it was hard to breathe in this fucking steam bath, even with the air conditioner working at full tilt.

He never could stand being a mere passenger in a car, especially stuck in the backseat. He glanced at Ali after she pressed her knee to his. She was staring out the window, but he could tell she was smiling. Her playfulness lowered his blood pressure, and he eyed her with a grin.

Like any man crazy for his lady friend would do, he winked at her.

"Hi, baby. Enjoying the scenery?" He slid across the wide leather seat to put his arm around her shoulders. "Green, isn't it?"

She sighed and grinned. "Like the sea." Her brows lifted in a flirty arch.

He didn't take time to be cautious in his choice of words. Her heady scent was distracting. "Hey, you don't have to wear that perfume to get my attention."

His low comment made her laugh. "You're turned on, aren't you?" Her smile was wet and soft, like he figured she was right then.

"Like I got fire ants in my shorts."

They muffled their laughter, holding on to each other until the big car barreled over a deep rut. Gun sensed a real possibility something was going to happen. He stayed close to Donavon. Through a break in the underbrush, he caught sight of a vast field of coca and a dozen laborers working the crop. They all carried machetes.

He leaned forward to speak to the driver. "Hey, Mac. How far to the Armondez place?"

The driver shrugged. "Close."

"Sure." Gun sat back, hating the struggle breathing had become.

Donavon offered him a piece of gum. She popped a piece in her mouth, clamped her teeth down on it, and then lit two cigarettes, handing one to him. "Go ahead. Chew and puff."

Her eyes widened in surprise when six guys on horseback broke through the tall grass along the roadside to watch the big automobile roll by. Gun's hand was on the .38 under his pant leg before he thought. The damned driver had slowed to a crawl.

"Hey, buddy." Gun's voice wasn't friendly. "What's the deal? You know these guys?"

With an exaggerated shoulder lift, the driver muttered. "They belong here. Keeping strangers out for Senor Armondez."

The guards rode so close to the SUV, sweat on the horses' withers rubbed off on the windows. The riders all wore Spanish-style spurs, and their mounts were scarred from constant spurring.

They were armed with pistols and high-powered rifles that looked like they were locked and loaded. There were guards on every side, hemming them in as they moved along at a snail's pace. Some of them leaned over to stare at the occupants of the SUV. Gun recognized their glares as a warning he was not welcome.

He was ready for a fight if it became necessary, although he would have liked more of an arsenal. His moment of concern quieted some as the guards reined their mounts off the road to allow the driver to turn onto a graveled lane.

The stressed look on Donavon's face softened. He knew she had relaxed her hold on the weapon in her purse when she leaned in to him. "I hope our host has plenty of iced tea." She licked her lips as if they were parched.

"I'd settle for piss-warm scotch."

Their fingers brushed and laced for a second before the chauffeur barreled under an arbor and around a curve at a fast clip. As if by magic, a low-slung, sprawling house rose up from a backdrop of somber, hovering trees and ten-foot iron fencing. Ironically, the heavy gates were yawning open as if security really wasn't a high priority. That was a joke.

They drove past beds of crimson flowers and several cool-looking reflection pools. Gun saw nothing attractive about the opulence. The place had cost lives.

The ride ended under a wide portico at the front of the palace. Double doors swung open, and immediately several maids and houseboys ran out to stand at attention, apparently waiting to see to their needs.

"My Lord," Ali murmured. "Just like *Gone With the Wind*."

"Yeah, maybe we can get a decent meal out of these here folks."

The chauffeur opened the door and helped Ali out of the SUV. At the same moment, Armondez strolled out to greet them. He looked like any other average guy, except his eyes. The barren emptiness seemed to hide real evil. The scene was completed with two guards in nice suits and stony expressions. Gun was nervous now and wondered how he would protect Donavon if they did a search. The best he could do was keep her close. Gun smiled and nodded just as any tourist would do. Lord, he had no idea what the outcome would be, and it was his fault if it blew up in their faces. Another nightmare because of him.

Ali hesitated for a split second and then walked beside Gun. Her calculating gaze took in Armondez's self-assured smile and slightly arrogant stride. His clothing was flawless, fitting his lean, muscular body with the look of extravagant pampering. His petal-pink shirt draped easily over his shoulders and reed-thin waist.

She smiled warmly when he caught her eyes with his stare. "Rodriquez, your home is beautiful." She placed her hand in his. "Do you mind if I use your first name?" His porcelain smile was meant for her alone.

"Bambi, my dear. Welcome to my home. It is yours to enjoy. And of course I want you to use my name." Armondez flicked a glance over Gun. "Nice of you to come, Sweeney."

"Hey, really nice of you to have us." Gun drew Ali back to his side.

"Look, Sweeney." A shrill whinny came from the horse stretching its bowed neck over the corral fence a short distance from the house. She attempted to interest Gun in something he knew and probably liked. "Horses."

"You like horses, Bambi?" Armondez's eyes glittered like black diamonds while he commandeered Ali's attention. "After we have a drink, perhaps you would like to see them."

She wanted Gun to stay in her line of vision. Right now, he was looking around, casing the joint. She reached out and hooked her hand in the crook of his elbow.

"Come on, honey. Let's have a drink." She pushed against him for emphasis. "Rodriquez is being so thoughtful, offering to show us around his lovely home while we're here."

The moment came, and Ali had never wanted to pee so badly as she did right then. The two guards stepped in front of them and stood like rock walls. The bigger of the two reached out to touch Gun's shoulder.

"Don't insult my friends. That won't be necessary." The two characters walked away, and Armondez took control, turning her toward the entryway.

"Come inside. It is too warm for you to be out here." Ignoring Gun, he led her to a shadowy enclosed porch off the entry hall. Ali was stunned by the room's cool beauty, its pale blue windows splashed with opalescent orchids of fine glass.

She couldn't help the smile of appreciation as she sat down on a white linen-covered wicker couch. She was still recovering from the search scene. Gun's reaction to the serene

room was what she expected. He sat in a chair and glanced at the gun cabinet behind a small teakwood bar.

"Do you have a lot of animals, Rodriquez?"

He chuckled and handed her a crystal glass filled with sherry. "I have several animals I keep as pets." He smiled into her eyes and sipped his sherry. "The horses are my favorite. While the jaguar is special, he is still wild and would tear my throat out if he could."

Ali almost choked. "A jaguar?"

Gun sat up straight and tipped his glass, emptying it. "Never known anyone who owned the real cat."

The gleam in Armondez's eyes made Ali nervous. The man was a collector. He took Gun's empty glass and refilled it.

"Whenever you're ready, I'll take you to see my pets."

"How about right now?" Gun stood, leaving his drink, then took Ali's hand. "Leave your drink."

"Of course, honey. That sounds great."

Eyeing Gun's untouched glass, Armondez nodded. "Very well." He went to the doorway and held his hand out to Ali. "This way, please."

He strode off in a leisurely gait and glanced back at them when Gun held her back. Her soft smile seemed to reassure him.

"Gun." She murmured as low as possible. "Stay where I can see you. You're the one that wanted to be here. Straighten up."

Her little browbeating made him grin. "Yes, dear." He lightly smacked her ass and squeezed her butt cheek. "I still have fire ants in my shorts."

"Best you drown them, buster."

He wrapped his arms around her to murmur in her ear. "Don't get too caught up by this guy's good manners. We gotta snuff him, and it's easier if you don't get too friendly."

"I know my job. A couple of drinks or a little sex has never made me change my mind."

He laughed aloud and drew a questioning look from Armondez.

"Nothing wrong, I hope."

She laughed in what she thought was an airy fashion. "Oh, my, no. Just enjoying the lovely artwork." She gestured to the rare Monet miniatures on the wall.

He smiled pleasantly and opened the door to the shady garden. "They are very old, but their age only adds to their beauty."

"They must be priceless," Ali said in a serious tone.

"Rare beauty has no price, Bambi." Armondez tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow.

Oh, hell and damnation. This had to be a crazy dream and she would wake up in her own bed in safe and wonderful New Orleans. But, no. The warm body next to hers wasn't anyone she knew or wanted to be near.

Crushing indecision took her breath. What in Hades was she doing here? Gun took her free hand. He grinned at her as they strolled down the shaded path toward the sound of horses raising hell. The stables were similar in color to the rambling house, low to the ground, sturdy-looking brick and cream stucco. The first thing she noticed was the lack of dung lying around and no killer horseflies. The trickle of flowing water took her gaze to a crystal-clear trough of water. The place was clean as the house. A heavy rail fence closed the area in securely.

"Armondez. Something wrong in your stable? This heat must be driving them loco." Gun looked concerned about the horses.

Striding ahead to open the corral gate, Armondez gave Gun a look of scorn. "These horses are bred here. Heat does not bother them." He made a kissing sound, and the biggest, wildest of the bunch trotted to his master.

He took Ali's hand and lifted it to the shimmering mane of the horse. The strength of his fingers belied his serene, non-intimidating appearance. She caught the scent of wisteria and moss. Did she like the scent? How could she? There was no telling how many women had caught that aroma just before he killed them.

She gasped when the stallion snorted and sawed his head up and down in a spirited action, grazing her shoulder with his head. Showing surprise had been the wrong thing to do. Her regret was instant and deep as Armondez grabbed a whip from a gatepost and brought it down several times on the horse's neck, cursing the hapless animal.

"Please," she finally cried out, too upset to hide her anger. "It was my fault. Don't hit him."

Gun's strong hand on her arm pulled her back.

"Come on, man." Gun held his hand out to the skittish animal. "No need for the rough stuff."

Worried that he would say something to get them killed, Ali hugged his waist and pinched the tight flesh above his belt. "I'd like to see the rest of the herd." She nodded to an enormous shed near the stables. "Is that your horse barn?"

"No." Armondez was still looking at Gun with real speculation in his hooded eyes. "That is nothing." He waved his hand, and the stallion bolted away to the far end of the corral. "Let me bring out my best. He's magnificent."

While Armondez strode off to enter the stable, Gun turned to gaze at the barn she had asked about. "That sure as the hell isn't a horse barn. Probably a kitchen for cocaine."

Ali hugged his neck, pretending to kiss him. Her lips moved rapidly against his. "Gun. He's our target, that's all we need to be sure of."

"Keep him entertained for fifteen minutes? Fifteen minutes! I want to see just what all is in that shed." He hugged her close. "Pretty damned sure the DEA would love to destroy this place. It would be a big help if you can do it."

Ali listened and then nodded, not happy with the plan. "This is the last time, buddy. We're supposed to stay glued to each other." She groaned and straightened her face as Armondez led a giant sun-red horse out into the sunlight. "What makes you think he won't notice you're missing?"

Gun shook his head and murmured in her ear. "He can't see anything but you right now. This is important, Donavon."

Armondez beckoned her to his side with a glistening smile. "Here is my favorite. Come, stroke him. He will not hurt you."

Hell, this guy needed to get out more. "I can see why you like him. He's beautiful." Ali hoped her performance was stellar, moving closer to Armondez, making sure he was looking at her and not at Gun. She didn't have to worry about that. The man never took his eyes off her.

She became wary as his hand covered hers and slid easily down her arm. He was giving her a mini feel-up. Always ready to defend herself, Ali had a tough time not giving him the knee. The jungle must be affecting her in a weird way, heightening her need to react to every look and touch. Oh, Lord. Now his rich, smooth voice vibrated near her ear.

"He's like all animals. A woman's touch makes them her slave."

God, what a jerk. The man was an absolute macho pig. Covering her disgust, she leveled her gaze on the top pearl button of Armondez's pink shirt. "He's cute." That was about the zaniest thing she could think of, and he took it like a fat catfish to dough-ball bait. His smiling gaze touched her lowered zipper and snaked on down a few inches, sliding inside the jumpsuit to mess around with her braless boobs.

Before she could bat her lashes, he called for the young man standing near the stable door to bring tack out for the horse. Oh, hell, he was having the big-assed horse saddled. She was going for a ride.

"You ride, don't you?" He wasn't really asking her, but telling her to get her rear in the saddle. "Here, let me help you."

Ali grunted when he picked her up and set her astride the nice English saddle. Damnation, he was swinging up behind her. He made no bones about getting as close as possible to glue his thighs against hers. It reminded her of being plopped on Santa Claus's lap at Christmas. She didn't like it. Only now, she couldn't squall and raise hell to get out of it. His arms went firmly about her waist and pressed to the underside of her breasts. He turned in the saddle to speak to Gun.

"I won't keep her away for long, Sweeney."

She was amazed at the humble reaction from Gun. "Sure thing. I'll be here, waiting."

She considered accidentally elbowing Armondez in the gut, but changed her mind. Fifteen minutes. That was what Gun had asked for. Armondez's well-manicured hands gripped the oiled reins, and they were off at a nice, smooth trot.

She turned her head to see Gun give her a hint of a smile. Okay, here she was on top of a horse, killer's arms around her and his nose in her hair. If this guy's hand got any closer to her breast, she would at least have to bloody his nose. There was some big payback coming and soon. *Damn you, Gun.*

Chapter Eighteen

“Pay dirt.” Gun rubbed a quarter-sized spot of dust off a window he’d located at the back of the shed and squinted to see inside. He had been right about the kitchen. He could see huge cooking tanks and tables loaded with neatly stacked packages of tar and what looked like pure coke. They weren’t even disguised as loaves of bread yet.

Sweat trickled down his spine to soak the back of his shirt. He stopped to wipe his face before trying to find a way inside. Damn this hot place. He glanced around. Nobody but him and a kitten that was busy covering its crap.

“Come on, cat,” he mumbled, reaching down to pick up the limber kitten. If he had to leave in a hurry, he didn’t want to squash some damned cat underfoot. “We’re going in.”

Meow.

“Quiet.”

Meow.

Gun stuck the kitten on his shoulder, wincing a little when its small claws pierced his skin. “You’re name wouldn’t be Donavon, would it?”

He chuckled when the tiny gray-striped kitten swatted his ear with its paw. Fun stopped while Gun searched for a way into the building. Dry twigs snapped under his shoes, making him stop and listen for trouble. Nothing.

There it was, a narrow door with a rusted latch holding an even rustier lock. The doorframe splintered neatly under a well-placed kick. The noise startled the kitten and it dug its claws in, yowling for comfort.

“Damn it. Take it easy, fella.” Gun pushed the door open, peering inside. “Okay, keep your eyes open.”

He pulled the mangled door back into a semblance of its former shape, disguising its splinters. The gloomy interior of the building was quiet, but he could see there had been plenty of activity recently. There was another door at the far end of room. He didn't hear anything to scare him off, so he took his time looking around. Plastic wrap and heavy cord, plus containers filled with white powder. These folks felt completely safe in their dirty business. What he couldn't do with several sticks of dynamite or at least some glycerin paste.

A grating sound sent him to the floor to crawl under a table. His heart hammered almost as loudly as the kitten purred. A sliver of light showed under a door, and he could hear people talking. Too bad he didn't have a full squad of agents with him. The conversation on the other side of the door was clear. These bastards talked about moving a half-ton of blow tomorrow night like most people talk about a barbecue. If his plans went well, theirs would be changed and the feds could come down on this place like a hammer before they could move the stuff out.

The drowsing kitten slipped off his shoulder and clung to his collar until he unbuttoned his shirt and stuffed the kitten inside. "Don't think I'm taking care of you if shit starts."

He covered the kitten's muzzle with his hand when the door opened and one of the guys flipped the lights on. Oh, shit. The damned splintered door. If the guy looked at the back of the room, he couldn't miss it. Gun could have reached out to touch the guy's shoe. Apparently satisfied with their lousy security, he shuffled back the way he had come. The lights went out and the door closed. Gun heard something else. A woman's giggle and a deep grunt from a man. Somebody was going at it in the next room.

They were probably too involved in their party to hear him leaving. He slid from under the table and headed for the door. The moment he pushed the sagging door open and stepped outside, the heat hit him full force. Making it worse was the animal inside his shirt.

He sucked his breath in and gripped the sleeping cat, dragging it out of his shirt. "You little fur ball. I'm not keeping you." The sleepy eyes only opened a slit. "I'm serious. Your momma's meowing for you." Holding the soft, warm innocence seemed so out of place here, where nothing good ever happened.

There was no way he could explain to Donavon if she got back from her ride and found him gone. Gun couldn't understand her being so timid with Armondez. He'd never ask the reason 'cause she probably wouldn't tell him.

"*¡Parada!*" The sharp-edged order to stop from an Armondez guard sliced through Gun's nerves.

"Who, me?" He grinned and held the kitten up for the nervous guy to see. "I heard him crying and thought he might be in trouble." Holding the animal out to the short, skinny guy, Gun attempted to be nice. "Is it yours? Damned nice cat."

The kitten squalled in fright when the guard hit Gun's hand with the butt of his semi-automatic rifle. "*¡Pendejo! Es solo un gato. Salga y no regrese aquí.*" Jerking his oiled head in the direction of the stable, he gave more orders. "*¡Márchese y no mire detrás!*"

Holding the frightened animal to his chest, Gun moved ahead of the asshole guard. "You been in the army, friend?"

He was shoved for his attempt at conversation. "*¡Cállete!*"

"Hey, think I could have a drink of water ... a bottle of beer?"

"*¡Cállete!*"

Gun held his tongue. He could make hamburger out of this character, but he had Donavon to think about. Nope. Keep it shut.

The crunching of his escort's footsteps quieted, and Gun looked over his shoulder. The rifle butt slamming into his left shoulder was his reward for disobedience. Rage and a desire to retaliate were stronger than his fear of the gun-toting prick. Not since his fourth birthday had he let another guy hit him and walk away in one piece. He couldn't accept an ass-kicking, especially from a son-of-a-bitch like this one. But he had to take it.

Gun leaned down to toss the kitten out of the way before moving ahead. The gun butt to the back of his neck sent him to his knees and blinded him for a few seconds. Everything in him screamed fight back, but he couldn't. *Donavon. Where the hell are you?*

"*¡Párese, cabron!*"

Gun crawled and groped for the side of the building, trying to stand, fighting the reeling and buzz in his ears. "Hold on, fella. I'm going."

Was that his voice, a croak? Gun focused on the corral, hoping Donavon would be there and he could make sure she was okay. Nobody around but a couple of stable boys. That warmth crawling down his neck and under his collar wasn't sweat. The son-of-a-bitch had drawn blood. He shook his head, and blood spattered in a wide arc.

"*¡Idiota!*" The guard hissed and hammered the gun butt to his kidney. He couldn't help it; Gun dropped to the dirt and sucked air. *Donavon!*

He didn't know how long he had sprawled in the dust. He opened his eyes and managed to look around from his prone position. He was alone. The kitten had abandoned him and sat staring at him from an overturned basket. He sat up and rubbed the back of his head. The cut, oozing blood, stung like hell.

Getting on his feet, he yanked his shirttail from his pants, tore off a hunk, and pressed it to the back of his head. Oh, yeah, a water pump near the corral. He staggered to the pump and worked the handle up and down until water splashed out, leaning down to let the water run over his aching head. He let go of the handle and straightened, combing his hair with his fingers. Christ, what a headache.

His heart did a little squeeze thing when he thought of Donavon being alone with Armondez. All he wanted to do was grab her and run straight back to Bogotá. Man, he had turned into one soft wussie.

* * * * *

Ali knew perfectly well why he'd ridden into the jungle when there was a very nice clearing nearby. His hand on her thigh confirmed her suspicion about what was on his mind.

"Come with me, Bambi." He dismounted and held his arms up to help her off the horse. "Just over there is a lovely place I want to show you."

He pushed the low-growing branches aside and held his hand out. "Come. It's lovely."

Ali squinted, trying to see through the dense grass and trees. What a fool. She wouldn't do something like this with a hometown boy. Okay, this was different. If he tried anything funny, she was perfectly able to render him unconscious. Plus, men with sex on their minds usually were an easy takedown.

His hand on her upper arm kept her from tripping over a weathered log.

"Thank you. Sorry to be so clumsy."

His hooded eyes had become glittering slits. "Not clumsy at all. You're beautiful, passionate, and very desirable."

"Well, thank you again." She bit back a smart remark describing the unlikelihood of him ever knowing that. "So, where is that beautiful scenery?"

Ali knew that smile, warm with a hint of snake-oil-salesman cunning. He was sizing her up, wondering if she would resist or participate.

He grasped her hand and led the way under fragrant, blooming trees. They smelled like a jar of warm spice and coffee. "It's quite steep here, but the scenery is worth taking the risk. I'll keep you safe."

Well, hell. He hadn't been lying. Below her was a carpet of emerald green barely visible beneath a mantle of white mist. The view was spectacular.

"This is wonderful." Ali couldn't help but smile with genuine pleasure. The place was beautiful, and at the top of a cliff. She looked down in fascination, forgetting for a time where she was and who stood beside her. "I can't believe it." She found it hard to keep from testing the echo quality. "A waterfall tumbling off the cliff over there. I love it."

Armondez put his arm around her waist and pointed to the trees below. "There are wonderful birds and exotic animals on the forest floor. I want to show you the beauty of the jungle."

What the hell was he doing? "I have to tell you. When I'm with a man, I am faithful."

"I like your loyalty." His gaze of hot interest clicked over her face and body. "But loyalties change with enough persuasion."

Okay, this sounded like a direct hit at her ability to resist his charms. And there were some. He just had no idea of how to use them. Why would he, when it was easier to take what he wanted and toss the leavings aside? She tried tact again. "I appreciate your hospitality and your compliments, but I think it's time to go back. Sweeney will worry."

Ali hadn't expected a possessive reaction from Armondez so quickly. He caught her in his arms and covered her mouth with his. He wasn't a big guy like Gun, but he was strong and forceful. She clamped her teeth together to keep him from slipping his tongue down her throat. Ali stared wide-eyed into his inky gaze. He didn't close his eyes, either, gazing at her as if he was gauging her response.

He pulled back, but held on to her. "Sweeney isn't intelligent enough to worry. He has no idea what he has to worry about."

What the hell did that mean? Concerned as she was for Gun, it was imperative to appear strong for her man. "You could be right, but I'm a woman of strong loyalty. If I were your woman, no man on earth could come between us. Right now, I am with Sweeney. Until he gives me up, not even you can come between us."

Her resistance seemed to fuel his need to possess her, like some animal he chased. What he said next made her hair sizzle to the roots. This guy scared her. "I don't want you to leave. You would be very happy here."

She put extra effort into her trembling-lip look. "Maybe I could come back."

"I'd rather you stayed. You wouldn't come back. Sweeney would stop you."

"No." Any fool could see her eye twitching. It always did when she lied. "I'm sure he wouldn't even try. I'll come back." She wasn't lying.

He perked up, his eyes glowing with pleasure. "Perhaps I can do something to make sure he won't forbid it." His straight black lashes lowered to hood those evil eyes again. "You won't regret coming back to me."

Ali's heart didn't beat in rhythm for several seconds. Yes, she was coming back. To take his life.

Chapter Nineteen

Gun heard Donavon and Armondez coming back. He could hear the horse's hoof beats before it burst through the tall grass on the far side of the pasture. He leaned against the gate and breathed deep to fight off the vertigo. As he reined the horse in, Armondez looked damned well pleased with him self. Donavon appeared calm, but that didn't mean anything. He figured the prick had been pretty aggressive and she was pissed off. The idea of her having to fend off the guy was like swallowing battery acid. And, it had been his fault.

"Hey, there. You're back." His greeting to the returning couple had been warm, but it was hard to be cheerful when his head pounded like a jackhammer.

Gun read the assessing glance Armondez whipped over him. His expression almost revealed amusement as he gestured to the rag in Gun's hand.

"What's happened to you, Sweeney?"

"I fell. Hit a rock." Gun shrugged. "It's nothing. Just careless."

He could see Donavon's mind dissecting the situation. But she stayed cool and let Armondez help her off the horse. She calmly walked to him and looked at the bloody piece of shirt in his hand.

"You probably need stitches. Maybe we had better go back to the city and find a hospital."

"You worry too much, honey." He gazed into her eyes and for the first time noticed they were tilted up at the corners. "I could use a cold drink."

She turned to Armondez. "I want to look at his wound, and he needs aspirin." She arched her brows on the last part of her statement. "And a cold drink."

Armondez seemed to realize he needed to be attentive to her partner as well as to her. "Of course, of course." He took Gun's arm and attempted to sound sympathetic. "I'm very

sorry, Sweeney. What a terrible thing to happen. Come inside and my staff will see to your injury.”

As if he entertained them every day, Armondez jawed continually as they walked away from the corral and around a stone pathway into a side garden. Tree boughs leaned over the path to lace into each other. The temperature dropped fifteen degrees.

Even with his eyes feeling like burning coals, Gun noticed the abundance of color along the path. Orchids seemed to flow from the trees and every pot for miles around. Of course, it might be that his brain was temporarily scrambled.

Donavon’s expression wasn’t hard to read. He would have bet his next paycheck she was dying for a piece of that gum she always carried. She looked anxious and disgusted by Armondez’s lack of concern as he handed her a purple bloom. Her smile was fixed as he rambled on.

A half-hour later, they sat comfortably in the heavily shaded garden. The pain had subsided enough for Gun to enjoy his cold water. Donavon was still inside the house, on the phone talking with a doctor, asking if she should bring him in. She had been gone long enough for him to be concerned with her absence.

Armondez apparently was waiting for her, too. “I appreciate your help on my problem, Rodriquez.” The slender man smiled at the forward way Gun had addressed him.

“I would be remiss in my duties as a host if I didn’t. Besides, a man always comes to the aid of a friend.” He gestured to his own head. “How is the pain now?”

“Bearable, thanks.” He touched the bandage one of the many maids had taped to his skull after cleaning the gash. Why the hell was he being so nice to him? The bastard wanted something. “Well, that’s damn nice of you.” He took a swallow of the icy water and nodded. “If there’s anything I can do in return, let me know.”

The heat seemed to have dropped another ten degrees in the garden. Gun almost dozed off while the self-confident drug lord talked. He spoke of the country being taken over by outsiders and the plight of the poor. Gun almost choked on his water after that line.

The steady tick-tock of an old standing clock reminded him Donavon wasn’t in the chair she had been in. He began to worry about her. The concern lifted when she came back to the garden.

She sat in the chair next to Gun and checked his bandage. “The nurse at the hospital said it would be wise to bring you in, especially if you felt nauseous or dizzy and light-sensitive. Are you feeling any of that?”

Gun grinned at her, liking her less-than-tender way of questioning him, but her eyes reflected her concern. Damn. She liked him. “Naw, I’m fine. We’ll go back as soon as I finish my water.” He arched his brow and looked at Armondez. “You okay with that, Rodriquez? I really would like to hit the shower and get into clean clothes.”

“Yes, I’m fine with that.” Armondez leaned forward to stare at Donavon’s bodice. “You’re carrying Sweeney’s blood.”

She lifted her hand to her breast and nodded. “He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“I’ll have my driver take you back shortly. Relax until he returns from another job.” He leaned back and gazed at her with possessiveness blinking like a neon sign in his eyes. “This is my favorite place to spend the early morning hours.”

He opened a crystal cigarette box and offered one to Donavon. He smiled indulgently when she declined, and lit one for himself with a gleaming gold lighter. “I can hear the wild cats while they make a kill.”

“That must be great on the old appetite.” Gun looked out at the area Armondez had pointed to, a narrow clearing through the damned jungle. “I hear one now.”

“That’s my leopard, Pizzaroh. Mealtime for him.”

Ali had been quiet, and that had bothered Gun. She ended her silence with a sage remark. “As long as he doesn’t have the run of the house.” She stood and glanced around. “I’d like to wash my hands.”

Jumping to her tune, Armondez moved to the doorway and gestured with an artistic motion of his hand. “The facility is three doors down on the right, Bambi.” His black gaze followed her. “Shall I show you?”

“Oh, I believe I can find it.” She lowered her long lashes and looked demure. Demure, his dying ass. Her voice was low and silky. Hell, he knew she could scream like a wildcat. “Excuse me.”

Gun was close to tripping Armondez, knowing the bastard’s mind was probably still in Donavon’s jumpsuit. He appeared to be in deep thought and dropped down into the chair she had been sitting in.

The lovely garden sitting area took on a supercharged atmosphere in Donavon’s absence. The heavy wine decanter clinked against crystal as Armondez filled two glasses. “I know why you’re here.”

The air collapsed around him while Gun reached for the right answer. “Just a friendly visit between friends. And we’re grateful for your hospitality.”

“Very good, Sweeney.” Armondez’s eyes glowed like black fire. “And to show you how much I appreciate you bringing Bambi to me, I’ll send you home with a gift to your liking.” A sip of wine, a brief smile, and his offer. “I’ll see that you have any drug you want for the next five years.”

Gun exhaled in relief. “That’s one hell of a gift to give a stranger.” He had to ask. “What do you want?”

“Bambi.”

“My Bambi?”

"You're surprised?"

"No, but I'm not letting you take my lady for a pissy five-year supply."

"Not enough?"

"Not even close."

"One million dollars." Armondez didn't disguise the anger in his voice. "And the drugs."

"I have a million dollars."

"I'm running out of ideas and patience."

Gun set the water glass down and smiled at his agitated companion. "I think you'll have to take this up with Bambi."

"She's afraid of seeming disloyal to you."

"You've talked about this?" No wonder she'd looked so hot under the collar when they came back to the stable.

"Briefly. She believes she owes you an allegiance of some sort."

Gun rubbed his jaw and looked toward the hallway door. "Okay. I can't speak for her, but Bambi isn't for sale. At any price." He could see all kinds of reasons to hit the guy in the mouth and kick the hell out of the narrow-faced snake. "You want her, you ask her. Nice."

A gleam of attitude found its way into Armondez's eyes. "You're not committed to each other? A couple?"

"Not exactly."

"You don't love each other?"

"I don't know how she feels, but yeah, I guess I do."

His heart jumped crazily in his chest. The light footstep in the hall echoed out into the quiet heat. She'd been listening. There was no way in hell he would allow this freak to ever touch her again.

"Don't let me interrupt." She glanced from one to the other, but smiled at him. "Are you feeling better?"

Armondez answered for him. "He's fine. A light lunch should perk him up considerably." He snapped his fingers, and several young girls appeared as if they came out of the walls to do his bidding. "Inform the cook we are ready for our meal."

The smallest of the pair stared at him and stumbled to her knees as she tried to leave. Armondez leaned down to grab her arm and hiss into her face as he moved her to the doorway. "You are leaving tonight, or I would punish you until you begged for mercy. But your new employer wouldn't want lash marks on your tender hide."

Gun caught Donavon's hand when she stood up. She fully intended to intervene. He would spend the next thousand years remembering the mix of pity and rage in her blue eyes. Squeezing her fingers, he would give her something else to be mad about.

“Did someone say lunch?”

Chapter Twenty

What was Gun made of, this dark rogue with hot metal for blood and a darker sense of humor? Ali had wanted to deck him a short time ago for being an uncaring pig. But his whisper that everything would be all right exposed his softer side.

Even at that, she fought the ache of being helpless to aid the terrified girl. Instead, she had to sit in mute acceptance while pretending to enjoy Armondez's company. Eating the food on his table was out of the question. Her only desire was to get away from this man who should be hissing instead of incessantly talking.

She wanted to see him cry with pain and fear and be photographed in the act. Like the pictures she had found while rummaging around in his bedroom on her current trip to the facilities. She had taken a detour. There was a pair of bloodstained cotton panties on the floor, partially hidden by the comforter. A very small pair of panties. After a fast, angry search, she found hallucinogenic drugs and hypodermic needles in a drawer, along with a huge dildo and a Taser. She rewashed her hands and went back to the dining room.

Her stomach churned with anger and anxiety. She worried about Gun. Of course, the big jackass would swear he was in great shape, but his sleepy appearance told her he was injured.

"Doesn't the food suit you, Bambi?" With the sleek grace of a python, Armondez picked up a small gold bell and rang for a staff member. A solemn-faced woman in a starched white uniform hurried into the room to stand near him, gaze fixed on the floor.

He spoke to her like any slave owner would. "Take the senorita's plate away. It's unfit for the dogs."

"Stop it." Ali stood before she thought. "The food is fine. I'm simply not hungry." She wouldn't back down. "If you'll be good enough to call your driver around, I have to get medical attention for Sweeney, and he has to be in Bogotá for that to happen."

Nothing but freezing silence came back for several seconds. Slowly, his lightning-struck expression faded into a smile. He stood and went to her side. "I can see you are in distress, my dear. Forgive me for being so blind to your worry." His oily gaze slid to Gun, who observed them from his chair.

"The car, please." Saying please to Armondez burned her tongue.

"Of course." Armondez stabbed Gun with a slanted glare. "I'll arrange it immediately."

Ali nodded, unaware she had twisted a fine lace napkin into a shredded rag. "Thank you."

He left them alone for the first time in hours. Gun stood to wrap his arms around her. "You're a keg of dynamite." His chuckle was a balm to her quaking heart. "I want to show you something."

"Don't do anything brave, Sweeney." She kept her voice low, worried her words might be overheard in this eerie place. "I want to get the hell out of here. In one piece."

He kissed her lips before walking her to the edge of the patio. "See that?" He inclined his head toward a break in the trees and murmured in her ear. "A riding trail. The snake warms his blood out here every morning. Bingo."

"I understand." She touched the bloodstained bandage on Gun's head. "We're going to the hotel and get our crap together. You really do need stitches, and when was your last tetanus shot?"

He laughed softly. "I'm fine, and you're *really* fine." She wanted to cry with relief, thinking how close they were to getting out of this frightening place.

A sixth sense alerted her to Armondez's return, his footsteps in the hallway echoing into the jungle as he crossed the stone patio. "Your driver is waiting." The man had a renewed look of arrogance about him, his chin held high and his smile confident. "I'll see you outside."

"Thank you." Ali grabbed her handbag before he could feel the weight of it. "We're ready." She fought back a shudder, knowing Armondez's obsidian stare drilled into her back as she walked ahead of him and Gun.

She realized the sound was her imagination, the tight cadence of a snare drum counting every step they took. Shoulders back, head up, and eyes to the front. Her gaze swept the lush grounds of the entrance, and it appeared to be non-hostile. A tiny part of her rejoiced. Thank God, the driver waited and had the back passenger-side door open.

Apprehension hit her, and she stepped back to hold her hand out to Gun. "I'll help you. You look a little wobbly." Gun smiled at her, slid across the seat, and stared out the window.

She got in and tried to close the door. Armondez caught the door, leaning in to speak to her. "Your promise means a great deal to me."

Ali nodded and stared at his smiling mouth, answering slowly. "Yes, I'll do what I can."

They didn't cross paths with the guards again, but Ali couldn't shake the worry they would be stopped. She sat next to Gun, holding her breath at every twist in the narrow road.

Gun took her hand to get her attention and nodded toward the sparse underbrush along a short stretch of the road. He had been right; a sandy trail bordered the road, wide enough for several riders. She squeezed his fingers, letting him know she had seen it.

As the miles fell behind them, Ali gave her full attention to Gun. His cocky grin let her know her open concern and bit of coddling were a joke to him. He couldn't stop being tough long enough to accept gentleness.

The moment they arrived in Bogotá, Ali directed the driver to hurry to the nearest hospital in town. He didn't question her, and they sped off to find help for Gun. The driver weaved through the unyielding traffic and evaded the cops while doing it.

Ali heard the wailing of sirens before she realized they had arrived at the emergency entrance of a hospital. Her pulse slowed a fraction.

The driver looked over his shoulder at her. "I'll wait for you."

"No. Thank you." She leaned over Gun to open the door. "We'll catch a ride back to the hotel."

Case closed. They got out, and the big car took off. Ali gave Gun a little push toward the door.

"Come on, cowboy. Let's go see what the damage is."

He hung back and shook his head, pressing his hand to his eyes. "Hey, I'm fine. I don't need looking at."

"Be a good boy and do it for me." She put her arms around his waist.

"And if I do it, what happens?"

"You'll get so lucky tonight." She kissed him and slipped her tongue into his mouth to tease the underside of his upper lip.

He chuckled and patted her hips. "I'm all yours, baby."

"Remember that when playtime starts getting hot and you're tired and cranky."

They went into the emergency room, and Gun was penciled in to receive attention. When he was taken to an examining room, he sat still for the probing and questions and even winked at the elderly nurse who eyed him with piercing black eyes. Not surprising, he spent a lot of time bullshitting with the young male intern who examined him. They shared a common bond -- both loved muscle cars.

Ali took in the sterile room's furnishings. Fine cotton sheets covered the examining table, and an antique, doublewide glass-door cabinet held an array of colorful bottles and gleaming instruments. She liked the crystal apothecary jars that held everything from cotton balls to tongue depressors. Her favorite held small lollipops of every color. Her attention was drawn back to Gun when the intern handed her a bottle of pills with directions written in

Spanish. After a few stitches and instructions to take it easy, they hailed a taxi and headed back to their hotel.

She didn't care that he grinned like a cocky jackass when she kissed and hugged him repeatedly during the ride to the hotel. She would have him for the rest of the night. For the last time.

He sobered considerably after they were back in the privacy of their suite. Ali dug his prescription out of her purse and handed him one of the pills. After studying the blue pill for several seconds, he looked up with a crooked smile. "This Viagra?"

"No. Do you need some?" She poured him a glass of water.

"I might if I take this."

"Swallow that. We'll talk about getting it up later." She picked up the phone. "I'm ordering lobster and hot chocolate. Want that double chocolate torte I saw on the menu?"

He shook his head and took the receiver from her hand, placing it back on the cradle. "Let's have a late dinner."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed his mouth, trying not to let him know her heart trembled with emotion. He wouldn't say it, but he wanted her.

Gun knew he shouldn't be doing this. Getting cozy with a woman who wasn't nearly as coldhearted as she wanted him to believe. Donavon made him feel too many things. Like, ashamed of his lousy way of treating her most of the time. Once she got back to the States, she'd be damned glad to be rid of him.

That was good because he wasn't the type to make her happy, to give her what she deserved. Loyalty. He wasn't sure he had that in him anymore.

He held her close, her perfumed warmth easing his troubled mind. If he got out of this alive, he would never take on another partner. He didn't want to be responsible for anybody's head but his own. Damn it. But that was in the future. Right now, he had Donavon.

"Something wrong?" She looked at him with her fantastic blue eyes.

"Not a thing, baby." He pushed away the negative thoughts that threatened to ruin the night. "Did I tell you how great you feel with all that hard, trained muscle?"

She slapped his ass with no mercy. "I can show you just how trained it is." She reached up to feel the bandage at the back of his head. "Want a fresh one of these?"

He chuckled. "Fresh gash?"

"Either one you want." Her smile was sexy as hell.

Together, they removed his bloodstained clothes and tossed them out of the way. Her exploration of his body warmed and pleased him, erasing any lingering concerns he may

have had earlier. She turned him into a regular guy with a super-woman to entertain. He was one lucky bastard.

“Okay, chili pepper,” he said with a grunt, picking her up to carry her into the bathroom. “I’m stripping you and taking you in the shower.”

Just the way he liked it, she pressed her full lips to his and sucked hard, thrusting her tongue inside his mouth, leaning back to grin at him. “You’re taking me into the shower or taking me in the shower?”

“Both.” He couldn’t surprise her. He had always been able to control his emotions and his body, but Donavon had taken the key and could turn him on at her pleasure. Right now, his blood screamed through his veins and surged in his cock, leaving it standing tall.

“Pill not hitting yet?” She couldn’t miss the fact his dick was poking her in the ass as he walked. He set her down and stood with his legs apart, smiling, waiting for her appraisal. Her smile and sultry voice answered his question.

“Well, well. Is that for me?” Her eyes narrowed, and her lips parted in a provocative smile.

“You know it is.” He caught the zipper of her jumpsuit and lowered it to her crotch, pushing it from her shoulders to her waist. “I want to give it to you right now.”

Damn, he was glad she was into the game. His head hurt, but playing around with Donavon made him forget it pretty damned quick.

“Gun, are you ready for this?”

“Ready and wishing you’d quit talking and start doing.” Her hands worked magic, reinforcing the steel gauge of his hard-on.

“Now, I’m ready for that beautiful eight inches of happiness.”

Dizzy or not, he had to be inside Donavon. She could drive him nuts while insulting him. “Nine, Donavon. Nine.”

She laughed as he leaned over to kiss and lick her belly. While he tongued her belly button, she spanked his ass and made him even harder. Getting her clothes off was a hard task. With her help, she was in his arms, naked and luscious.

Hooking his arm around her waist, he stepped into the luxurious shower stall and turned the water on, not caring that the water wasn’t warm. He needed to cool down, or he was going to come before she’d had her fun.

The woman was phenomenal, relaxing against him and holding her arms out to the sides while he squeezed her nipples into his mouth. Yeah, he was nuts, but her nipples tasted like cherry gumdrops, sweet and firm. He sucked hard, trying to get every bit of the taste. She moaned and smacked his cheek.

“Did that mean stop, or harder?”

“You figure it out.”

“Okay.” He slipped two fingers inside her and nodded. “Yeah, that means harder.”

There was nothing like the feel of a woman ready for sex -- hot, slick, and tight, quivering around his fingers. And nothing like Donavon. She moved against his fingers and took his cock in her hand, imitating his movement inside her. She used his pre-come to slide her hand up and down his length. Her finger formed a cock ring and squeezed the head out of its cover until he groaned.

“I’m going to wash you.”

“The hell, you say.” He couldn’t believe anything but fucking was on her mind. “You’re kidding.”

“Relax, Mr. Agent. Let me shampoo that fine nine.”

“Oh, hell, Donavon.” He fought the urge to climax in her hand. “Let me go down on you first.” Son-of-a-bitch. It was hard as hell to hold back with her touching him. And he wasn’t. She had poured shampoo in her palm and worked it along his dick and over his balls. She didn’t forget his ass. His hips bucked against her, and he moaned in a powerful release of passion.

“Nice, huh?” Her smile was so damned sexy, and her hair was getting big and frizzy. Damn, she was so hot he couldn’t stand it. “Gun, you have a really nice hard-on.”

“No shit.” He gripped her under the arms and pushed her against the wall. “I can’t wait any longer.”

She knew what to do. She locked her legs around his waist and clung to his shoulders while he pushed into her hot pussy. She ground her slick cunt against his cock and leaned her head back while she worked, moaning in wild, passion-driven sounds.

He let her slip down so he could mouth her nipples and kiss her in a hungry way that took his breath and sent him off on a new journey of dizzy pleasure. Her ass fit in his hands like a brand-new pair of fine gloves, tight and smooth, sensually warm and flexible.

The memory of her clit teased his brain, and he braced her on his thigh to find her tight little bud in her folds. Standing rigid and hot, the pink flesh quivered under his fingers, swelling into a delicious candied-peanut-sized sugar tit. Three strokes and one squeeze, and Donavon began climaxing against him, her inner muscles gripping him hard and milking him until he came in a lightning bolt of sweet heat, then the agony of letting go.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ali tapped her fingertip on the small map they had spread out on the bed. "The extraction site is exactly a half-hour from Armondez's place, on foot and walking fast." She didn't like the way Gun exhaled and ignored her comment. "You have doubts, now?"

"No, but the riding trail crosses some shitty wet area, and it gets pretty hairy before we hit the mark."

Her apprehension lifted some when he kissed her ear and spoke with his usual command. "Okay, we run through it again, then flush the stuff. Check?"

"Check."

"We use the same road Armondez's driver took. Leave the Jeep and cross the field to the trail. Set up on our sighting area. When the target shows, I take my shot. We wait ten seconds to confirm our kill, then move out toward our pick-up."

"I should maybe take the shot."

"Why the hell do you think that?"

"You have a better sense of what's happening around you. I have to give total concentration to my target."

"No." He met her resentful stare without blinking.

"You don't think I can do it, right?"

"Didn't say that." He lit a cigarette and rolled off the bed. "I need you to watch my back. Okay?"

Ali nodded and folded the map. The way he could get out of situations when he didn't want to explain himself was awesome. She sat up and kept an eye on him while he stood on a chair to take the rifle and ammunition from their hiding place in the ceiling.

There wasn't time to be resentful or feel anything close to personal emotion. This would be their last night alone. He had closed the door on the subject of which of them would make the hit. It wouldn't be brought up again. Her only concern was to keep him alive until he hit the target. After that, they would run like hell and wait for the chopper to pluck them from certain death.

She didn't mind the silence in the room. They were comfortable in their arrangement. Occasionally, the quiet was broken by the soft sounds the bolt action made as Gun checked over the rifle. The weapon worked smooth as silk, with no resistance.

The need to move around hit Ali, and she got out of bed to wrap herself in a sheet, walking by Gun to touch his hair. He took her hand and kissed her palm, then went back to inspecting the rifle.

Gazing at his hands that held the deadly weapon made her shiver. The hour of reckoning hurtled toward them. She wondered if her nerves would have been pulled this tight if Rance were here instead of Gun. Hell, no. There was an astronomical difference between the two men. Between any man and Gun.

What made him tick still eluded Ali. She was no closer to knowing that than she'd ever been. She knew he could be snide, boastful, and rude. His saving grace was the ability to make fun of himself, unwittingly revealing a small portion of his carefully hidden heart.

He glanced up and smiled at her, propping the rifle on his thigh. "Just like me, Donavon. Hard steel and primed."

Ali didn't comment. She knew the truth. He was a warm and totally giving lover, making her long to be in his arms again. Time to get real. *He can't help it if you lost your mind and broke every rule in the manual and gave the agency plenty of reason to drum you out the door.* Lord, she would pay for her stupidity for years to come.

She laid her toothbrush and toothpaste on the nightstand, doing her best to sound matter-of-fact. "I'll pitch all this stuff down the trash chute on the way out tomorrow."

He nodded and then put the rifle in the tote bag. "Sounds like we're finished here." He stood and perused the dinner on the service cart that they had ordered and not touched. "Did you order all this rice?"

"Hell no. You did." She reached under the bed, pulling out her bundle of clothing. "I'll share the chocolate sauce and cake with you."

He picked up the cake plate, small container of chocolate sauce, and two forks. "Come on, Donavon. Let's relax and hit the sack."

How could she possibly turn that down -- chocolate cake and, if she got lucky, more sex?

"Sure." She didn't give a hoot that she sounded eager. She was. "Let's have the sangria, too."

“Just what I was thinking.” Gun placed the plate on the bed and took the pitcher of sangria from the serving cart. The drink was now room temperature.

She climbed onto the bed and lounged idly, sampling the cake frosting while he poured their drinks. The bed was high off the floor and comfortable, made even better by all the pillows and fine linen. The desire to never leave this room sang through her blood. Cold reality slapped her full in the face. She had to stop thinking like a kid. Right now, he was taking a hell of a long time getting her a glass of sangria, clinking a spoon against the crystal.

“What are you doing, cutting up the fruit?”

He didn’t turn around when he answered. “In a hurry to get me back in the sack?”

“Okay, fine.” She smirked a little when her gaze skimmed over his fine rear, which at the moment was bare as sin. His smile was wonderfully indecent as he came to the bed and handed her a glass of the ruby-red drink. To her great disappointment, her head managed to take charge of her palpitating heart.

Tomorrow at this time, you will be separated from Jack Gunnison and you will both be in HSD custody, being debriefed, spilling your guts. Then you’ll be shoved on into preparation for the next mission.

“Hell, Donavon.” Gun grinned at her and held a forkful of cake to her mouth. “Time to celebrate and think about getting out of this roach motel.” He kissed her lips and licked the extra icing from them. “I have six weeks of vacation, and South Beach, Florida, sure sounds good right now.”

Like some naked god out of a fanciful tale, he sat on the bed beside her, unconcerned his dick lay against his thigh, looking fat and healthy.

He was thinking of sunning himself? In South Beach? To cover her dark thoughts, she tipped her glass up and drank deeply of the wine. “Home sounds damned good to me.” Jealousy over unseen competition gnawed at her stomach.

He laughed his most irritating macho laugh. “Yeah, home with your horny cousin and the alligators.”

She yanked the cake plate from his hands. “It wouldn’t hurt you to see how your family is, Mr. Wiseass.” After stuffing a huge bite into her mouth, she added. “You’re not going to get the chance to use that vacation time, and you know it.”

“Yeah, I know that.” He filled their glasses again with the fragrant drink and handed one to her. “When are you going to give up all this luxury, Donavon?” He grinned at her look of surprise.

“As soon as I make director. Or get an appointment to the White House.”

He lay on his side, gazing into her eyes. “You won’t like that. Too tied down.” He took a sip and pressed his mouth to hers. Unable to stop herself, she let the sangria trickle into her mouth while he kissed her, lapping the sweetness from her lips and tongue.

“Oh, Lord, Gun, you’re such a bastard.” The statement wasn’t meant to upset him, just an expression of her feelings for him. He smiled and tipped the chocolate-sauce container to dribble some of the warm syrup on her breast.

“Let me show you how many ways there are to enjoy this.”

The desire to grab him by the ears and suction his mouth to her nipple while he licked around it grew to mega power. She wiggled her hips and whispered roughly to him.

“Gun, you ...” She didn’t want to sound weak, but she was. “You’re so damn talented.”

“Wait.” He spoke around her nipple. “There’s more.”

“More?” she murmured. “I won’t be able to handle more.”

He looked at her and grinned. “Want to talk after we finish?” He spilled a few drops of luscious syrup onto her belly, leaning over to suck from the small well of her belly button. Whatever he did with the chocolate sauce he now held over her belly would be just fine with her.

“That would be different, but I don’t think I’ll be able to talk.” She couldn’t form coherent sentences any longer, not while he poured a stream of sweet, warm chocolate sauce between her legs. She wanted to let go and faint dead while he licked every drop from her swollen folds. “Gun, you wonderful bad boy.”

The rest of her praise was silent while he tongued and nibbled her to the brink of orgasm. She arched her back to catch the full thrust of his tongue, relaxing to allow him full access to the sensitive flesh along her inner thighs. His thumbs opened her, and he pressed his tongue flat against her clit, alternating gentle nips and sucking to wear down any resistance she held on to. She caught his hair in her fingers and twisted, locking her knees to his shoulders and crying out for him to hurry. He moved back up to lie over her. She was glad she’d held back, kissing his scarred chest, his broad shoulders, tasting his special scent of eastern flowers and dark woodland, imbedding it in her brain.

The way his mouth tasted and fused perfectly with hers would be her secret for the rest of her miserable life. She’d want to die, but she wouldn’t. She would be somewhere else, be with someone else then.

Right now, Gun was with her, covering her like a blanket of extreme intimacy and pleasure. She couldn’t, nor did she want to, see any further than the moment. Hold him, touch him, need him. That’s all that mattered.

“Donavon, my hands are full. You want to help me out?”

She bit his lip before sliding her hand between them to grip his cock. “I don’t mind showing you how to use this nightstick.”

He laughed and caught her butt in his hands, pushing into her until she gasped and bit his lip again. “Teach me, baby.”

His hard chest against her breasts pressed into her like a warm hand, massaging and teasing her nipples until they ached for his mouth. She centered her thoughts on the

strength and size of his thighs and hard, defined shape of his ass. A glorious man with a glorious libido.

Denying herself the hot flash of pleasure wasn't going to hold much longer. He knew how to move inside her, pull away a bit, then slowly slide back against her sensitive clit and grind firmly against her, slipping his tongue deep into her mouth to tease her tongue and pulsing lips. His low moan stroked her body and created a spark of fire that coursed over her and flared in a tower of flames at the fork of her legs.

She tried to sit up, clawing his shoulders and wrapping her legs around his waist, screaming. She had to ... the pressure in her body would kill her if she didn't. That wild noise still circled the room when he climaxed, his arms squeezing her so tight she couldn't move. She loved his moan that sounded as if he had paid dearly for his fun.

He dropped down to rest on her for a few seconds before rolling off to groan like a satisfied lion. Damn, he was still full of play and wouldn't be quiet.

"Hey, don't go to sleep."

"Go away, you devil. I'm too tired to talk or anything else."

Gun hauled her up to lean against the stack of pillows. "I promised after sex, talk, and we're going to talk."

"I've had all of you I want for now."

He laughed and nuzzled her breast. "If I'd said that, you would be mad as a wet hen." He exhaled roughly and lay down beside her. "I'm tired, too. Want me to turn the lights off?"

"Um-hum. Just let me close my eyes for a few minutes."

"Go ahead, baby. Gun's here to watch over you."

"What time are we leaving?" At that moment, she didn't really care.

"Early."

"Okay. I'll be ready."

He poured a small amount of wine in her glass and held it to her lips. "Have another drink, Donavon."

She opened her eyes and smiled at him, thinking how beautiful he was, how thoughtful. "This is so sweet of you."

"Anything for my woman." He licked a drop of wine from her lips and set the empty glass on the nightstand. "Donavon, have you got the alternative plan down pat?"

Okay, he was making no sense now. Alternative plan? He was messing with her head again. "No, you horse's ass. There is no alternative plan." If she could have raised her arm, she would slug him. Where were her arms?

"Listen, this is serious." He caught her close when she tried to sit up. "If things blow up, go to the military base here in Bogotá. They'll be taking up the slack if things go south. You'll be home free."

Damn him. She resisted being held down, but her limbs were made of lead and his voice lulled her into a semi-coma. “Gun, why would things go ... south?” She thought her voice sounded strong and commanding. “Don’t you dare leave me. Please, don’t leave me.” She could feel her mouth curving up in a goofy smile before she slumped into her pillows, issuing a last request. “Devil. Take me.”

Ali opened her eyes, the dull roar of being in a too-quiet room pounding in her ears. Still dark. Why had she wakened so suddenly? It was pitch black outside. Gun must have turned over or laid his arm across her waist.

Reaching back to touch him, her hand didn’t feel the warmth of his firm body, but the unwelcoming cold of a pillowcase. The air was too quiet, no sound of his breathing or those low groans he made when those ugly dreams came visiting.

Suspicion pushed her from the bed. She wondered why the drapes were closed on all the windows and the terrace doors, with his insistence for fresh air. Yanking the drapes apart, she wanted to scream. It was still dark, but the sky was blue-gray with predawn light. She hurried to the bathroom, pushing the door open. Nothing, not even his razor. Crushing realization that she was alone took her breath. Gun. The bastard was gone.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” He’d made the decision to leave her behind because he didn’t trust her. The dirty devil had been screwing her over the whole time, making plans to ditch her. “Bastard.”

Ali raged inwardly as she ran back into the bedroom. The things on the nightstand made her twice as angry. The bigheaded bastard had left her all of the cash, the agency credit card, and both cell phones. Very cute. Oh, yes. There was a note, too.

His scrawl said she was to go to the military base outside Bogotá and they would get her back to the States. They were aware of the mission and would take up the slack. The end. Not even a so-long or kiss-his-ass. Damn him to hell.

She couldn’t take this quietly. “Who made you lord and master, Gunnison?” She crumpled the note in her fist. She was a trained agent. Fully qualified and capable. This was her mission, and she was damn sure going to finish it.

The clothes she had laid out were neatly folded at the foot of the bed. She growled in contempt of the man who proclaimed her incapable. Pulling her pants on, she stuffed the money and credit card into one of the larger pockets and then pulled the short-sleeved T-shirt on. While she jammed her feet into her lace-up jack-boots, she looked at her handbag, noticing he’d had the decency to leave her with a weapon and his shoulder holster.

After she pushed the cuffs of her pants down into her boot tops, Ali ran into the bathroom to scrub her teeth and throw water on her face. Her hair got only a slap of the brush as she ran back into the bedroom. She put the holster on and shivered as it embraced her body. Too big, but it would do. Shoving her Walther PPK into the well-oiled holster, she quickly pulled on the long-sleeved olive-drab shirt, tying it at her waist. As a last-minute

survival option, she sprayed herself and her clothing with the insect repellent the agency had issued before they left. That could only mean they expected them to survive. Fat chance with Gun abandoning her. The asshole.

Stark, cold reality weighed heavy even while she raged in silence. Whining wasn't her style, and blaming him was stupid. *Sure, he left you, but you should have been on to him.*

Gathering everything up in her arms that would say she had been there, Ali hurried across the room, cautiously opening the door. She stepped into the hall, locking the door behind her. The clothing and grooming aids clattered down the chute, and she bypassed the elevator to take the stairs. Seven flights, and she was still a little foggy. Hell, no, she wouldn't give in to the sleepy buzz in her ears. Go, damn it. She slowed her mad flight when a door opened into the stairwell on the floor below. Just one of the maids. If she didn't fall on her face, she would catch up with the idiot.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“What do you mean, he told you to tell me not to follow him?” Ali had little patience as she questioned Ramón and pretended to be ignorant of Gun’s reasons for leaving her. “Did he really say he was tired of me?”

He looked as if he might run away any second. “I’m sorry, but that is what he said.” Ramón took several steps back. “You are to go to the military base. I will drive you there.”

Pride of being put in charge resonated in his voice, but fired a blaze of hot resentment in Ali’s blood. She was aware Gun had cooked up those instructions, giving them to Ramón to control her. That was why the young man had been waiting in the lobby for her.

“Is that right?” She shook her head and held her hand out. “Loan me your car, please.”

“My car?” He appeared to be thunderstruck. “Oh, no. Not my car.”

She reached down to unfasten the pocket that held the cash. “I’ll buy it.” She didn’t care what the cost; she had to have it. “How much?” He looked unsure, and she grimaced with impatience. “Please help me, Ramón. I have to go after Sweeney. Please.”

On cue, her eyes filled with tears. Ramón didn’t have to know they were brought on by anger.

“I don’t know, Bambi.” He glanced at the cash in her hand. “Sweeney said to make sure you didn’t follow him.”

“Ramón. He’s going to be a father.”

“What?” His eyes lit with interest.

“That’s right. We’re having a baby, and he doesn’t know.” She peeled several large bills from her stash. “Will a thousand be fair?”

He pressed his car keys into her palm. “More than fair. Go after him. Sweeney will be proud.”

She had a hard time hiding her smirk of pleasure.

"Oh, yes. You can't imagine."

Ramón walked her to an older Honda. "It will do a hundred if you want it to." He helped her into the car and smiled proudly.

She started the engine and waved to him as she backed the compact out of the parking spot. "Thanks, Ramón. I'll remember you."

"Goodbye, Bambi."

She drove away in the bleary light of dawn, turning off the stereo that was set on extra-loud. Getting out of town was no problem at this hour, but time was getting away. Once the market and fancy homes fell away in the distance, Ali gassed the compact car and swung south onto the dirt trail that was supposed to be a road.

Of course it started to rain, huge drops that splattered onto the windshield. Getting past the farmers and big-wheeled carts and overloaded pickups was a navigational trick. At times she was in the ditch, making room for them and their goods. They ignored her for the most part as she drove by.

She would be facing murderers on horses pretty damn soon if she didn't get a move on. Slowly the parade of farmers dried up, and she pushed the accelerator to the floor, not caring if the brush whipped the paint off her car. Damn, did that stuff grow overnight?

Coming to a shallow creek that ran over the roadway, Ali eased up on the gas and made her way across the ford, not worried about the ankle-deep water in the floorboard. Funny, she didn't remember the creek. Of course, she hadn't been driving then. She saw nothing that said Gun had come this way ... Yes, she did.

Fresh tire tracks in the mud off to the side of the road and a crumpled cigarette package at the head of the ford caught her attention, and she stopped to check it out. The scent of fresh tobacco speared her nostrils after she sniffed inside the wrinkled packaging.

Prints of jump boots told her he had spent a few minutes here, to smoke and kill a little time. At least a size thirteen. Placing her foot in the prints, she knew they were his.

Surety of being on the right road eased her worries slightly, but knowing what waited out in the tangled vines and marshes made her nervous. Killing Armondez would be a necessary and quick act, but the slime and crawling shit in the darkness would be a real living nightmare. *Stop it. Get to where you're supposed to be before hell breaks loose.*

Jumping back into the car, Ali drove as fast as the rough road and rain would allow, afraid of breaking a spring or a tie rod in the hellish roadway. The wipers didn't work now, and she screamed in outrage. How could anyone live in this country and not have working wipers? Damn it! The rain alternated between showers and torrential downpour.

Her heart thudded to a stop as a man on horseback appeared from nowhere. She swerved to the side to miss him, but didn't stop. She couldn't see him the rearview mirror. Lord, if she got out of here alive, never again would she be caught in this kind of mess.

The windshield inside had fogged up, and she had to lower the window. Crap, the visibility was zero. Forced to a crawl, she leaned out the window to look for any identifying landmarks. Nothing, damn it. No, wait a minute. There was something there.

Glints from the first rays of sun struck metal, hitting something a short distance off the road. Ali pulled off the road and drove into a grove of low-growing trees. There sat a lovely, mud-spattered, battleship-gray Jeep. With heart beating at a dangerous pace, Ali drove in beside the Jeep and parked.

No use looking for Gun. He was already at the sniper site, waiting for the Anaconda. Hurry, damn it. The site was a hard three miles from here, and she would have to run every step.

By the time she shut the door, she was soaked to the skin. Her hair plastered to her face and drove her crazy. She took off running, following the road until she could identify the riding trail across the road. Running toward the barbed wire fence, she fell face-down in the mud. *No time to cuss. Get up and find Gun. He needs you.*

Crawling up the rocky, slick embankment, Ali rolled under the barbed wire, getting to her feet and running on down the trail. How many miles was the place from here? *Stop thinking about distance. Suck it up and go.* Her stride lengthened, and determination forced her legs to flex.

The sound of pounding hoofs startled her, and she dove into the tall grass that grew along the trail. A riderless horse wearing a bridle galloped by, almost stepping on her leg. She waited several seconds before daring to move. No one followed or yelled at the fleeing animal. *Okay, get up and get going.* She hated herself for behaving like a first-class coward.

Stumbling back onto the trail, she sprinted ahead, sticking to the edge and looking around like a hoot owl. Well, hell.

She pulled up, thinking she recognized the rail fencing along part of the trail. If she was right, Gun was close. Her gait loosened and she ran all out now, falling several more times before seeing a spot in the tall grass growing along the fence where it looked like something had crawled through recently. The attempt to cover it was pretty damned good, but not good enough to fool her.

"Gottcha, boy." Her whispered comment quickly washed away in a fresh wave of rain. Off in the distance she heard dogs barking. Armondez's kennel of guard dogs.

How far now? Couldn't be much farther. Inner turmoil threatened her sensibility. Her reasoning. Stop. Look. The form refined in her rain-blurred vision, and she breathed deeply, quietly. A few yards off the trail, a man leaned against a tree, his tall frame well disguised by rain-heavy branches drooping low over him.

Great. Letting him know she was behind him could be tricky. She leaned over to pick up a hefty rock, hurled it at the tree he leaned against, and then quickly dropped to her knees. The rock smacked into the tree with a dull *whump*, narrowly missing his head. He didn't have the decency to so much as turn around, only bunched his shoulders.

"Goddamn it, Donavon." His voice was low, but traveled well.

How the hell did he know she'd thrown it at him? Animal. Pure animal. She remembered his desertion as an act of contempt and got to her feet, moving closer to him.

"Shut up, Gun. You're pissed off because I'm good enough to find your sorry ass."

He didn't turn to look at her, but continued to gaze off in the distance. "I should have taken you out, wiseass. I heard you coming all the way from the road." A note of humor crept into his voice. "Sounded like a hippo busting down brush."

Ali made herself as small as possible and crossed the clearing to where he was. Gun resumed his vigilant watch. She followed his gaze while berating him through clenched teeth.

"Stop with the bossy shit." She hated that he grinned at her rant, hating more that she had to keep her rant to a whisper. "You drugged me!"

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Only way to shut you up." He didn't flinch at her punch to his shoulder.

"You're glowering at me! You bastard. You have no right to be pissed off at me."

She stepped in front of him and stared down the narrow clearing toward Armondez's home. She could barely distinguish it through the mist and rain-laden tree limbs, but there it was. Looking damn small in the distance.

Gun grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the tree brace he apparently claimed as his.

"Fuck off, Donavon. Get your worthless ass back to Bogotá."

He looked so cold and unfeeling at that moment. Ali considered backing down. But, hell, no. He was just another agent, and he earned his paycheck bullying people. She wouldn't be bullied.

"Not likely, you son-of-a-bitch. I'm here to keep your worthless ass in one piece." She yanked her arm free of his grasp. "Don't manhandle me again."

He sneered over his laugh, wiping rain from his face with his sleeve. "Really tough, Donavon. Every man wants a tough broad backing him up." He clenched his teeth and got in her face. "Now, beat it."

She exhaled hard and pulled her Walther PPK from the holster. "Beat this, Gun."

"Damn it, Donavon." Gun looked at the deadly weapon in her hand. "What the hell you going to do? Shoot me?" She gazed at him as if he were a tick that needed squashing. "See, that's why I left your ass."

She made one of those superior woman's faces at him. "That's Agent Donavon to you, Gun, and you just proved you need a keeper." Shrugging dramatically, she pointed the muzzle of the pistol at the ground and took over his propping place against the tree. Her hair

looked like a sheepskin rug, tangles of brown curls and dripping waves that got in her face and made her cranky, but not too cranky to give him orders. "Quit being a prick and get on lookout."

The cutting comment he was about to make froze on his lips. He heard a sound that didn't belong, a clinking noise. Maybe a chain hanging from a gun belt. *What the hell is it?* His blood seemed to rush to the top of his damned head, and his ears thundered. *Hell. Breathe, you bastard. Listen.*

Donavon had heard it, too, hunkering down at the base of the tree, her blue gaze sweeping the perimeter of the area and her PPK in her fist. Off to the side, the tall grass quivered without a sound. Something or someone pushed their way through.

Gun moved to shield Donavon, taking the .38 from his belt. His blood cooled and ran back to his toes. A goat. A stinking black-and-white goat looking for breakfast.

"Shoo, you little bastard. Get out of here." Gun waved his arms, hissing under his breath at the animal, but the beast merely stared at him, in no hurry to leave. "Get the fuck out of here." After crapping a pile, the goat took off, bleating as if it had been insulted.

Seeing the animal worried Gun. Where there were farm animals, there were farmers. Concern and doubt took over where there had been confidence and a cockiness he had worked hard to maintain. He thought about the cold, impersonal note he had left for Donavon, trying to explain what he was doing.

He couldn't explain to her that he figured this was his time to be whacked. And he wouldn't take the chance on being the reason she was killed. As he had written it, he could almost hear her soft, accented voice screaming his name in vain. He knew everything she would yell at the empty room. Of course she was trained and more than competent. She knew her job. But she didn't know he cared too much to risk seeing her be cut up like a melon.

And yet, here they were. His duty was to cut Armondez down, not to be worried about his partner. Partner, his ass. She was his lover, and her body wasn't built to take bullets or slashes from a machete. Damn it, why wouldn't she listen to him?

"Donavon." He spoke softly, leaning easily against her. "You're driving me nuts, lady. And, being a pain in my ass."

And now, she had something new on her mind. "Gun. He's on the veranda." Her lips were compressed and eyes narrowed. "Our target is visible." All business, she touched her lips and pointed toward Armondez's place.

Gun had already seen him. Armondez was on the veranda, looking over his kingdom. Like an apparition barely visible through a shroud of mist, the slim, dark man paced slowly across the covered patio. He paused to drink from a white cup. The scene was almost pleasant, but that would soon end.

Jamming the .38 back into the waist of his Levi's, Gun pulled the cover from the rifle and steadied it against his shoulder. Breathe in. Squeeze slowly. Breathe in. *Whop*. No mistaking the droning sound of a bullet missing your head by inches. How could he have missed that son-of-a-bitch?

Gun's ear burned from the kiss of the slug that had gone astray before it smacked into the tree trunk. Roosting birds exploded from the upper branches and flew off screeching in fear. He yanked the pistol from his waistband and whirled to see the guard from Armondez's place. *Where did that son-of-a-bitch come from?* The rain had muffled the guard's movements. He had Donavon in his sights, a finger curled around the trigger of his semi-automatic rifle. For a second, the guy looked as shocked as he was.

Misty silence quickly gave way to angry shouts from their attacker as he backed off a few steps, lifting the weapon to fire at Donavon. She faced her attacker and took aim on him, but her shot went wild when Gun threw himself over her and sucked in air as hot, deep pain screamed through his shoulder. Another one in the thigh. Oh, Jesus, not Donavon. He gripped the .38 to his chest and tried to sit up. She pushed him down and struggled to her knees, firing at the guard. Quiet again.

"Donavon?" His voice sounded like a strangling man's. He opened his eyes to find her standing over him, straddling him like a huntress protecting her territory.

She had taken up the rifle and was going to finish the job. No hesitation, no second looks. She touched him and went back to the tree.

He heard the shouts of men in the distance. "Donavon. Get out. You still have time. Beat it."

He wanted to gasp in pain, but he wouldn't let her know how damned bad he hurt. Was she trying to be the perfect agent? "Fuck the mission. Get outta here."

"Shut up."

"I'm not going to make it. Not this time."

Ali heard Gun talking, and shook off his words that meant he would simply die alone, here in this stinking jungle.

"Donavon, if you have any brains at all, get the hell out of here. I don't want your Goddamn help. Get out. Now!"

"Forget it, Gun. We're leaving together."

She mentally removed herself from the noise and shouting, completely involved with checking the magazine of the rifle. Primed and ready to work.

Ali found Armondez in the riflescope. The overconfident man stood at the edge of the patio, no thought that he could be in grave danger. Apparently he felt secure in the belief that his guards would make short work of anyone trying to harm him, and paid little

attention to distant gunfire. He drank from his white cup and stared in her direction. She shivered.

Several of his henchmen walked around and waved their arms as if wanting him to wage a war. He moved a few steps away, and she followed him in her sights. By this time, the dogs were going crazy, wanting to sniff out the source of the noise in the jungle. Several more guards appeared on the patio and barely restrained the excited dogs.

Ali inhaled deeply and braced against the tree, her target standing still and smiling. Steadying the stock against her shoulder, she fired. Her finger still curled around the trigger when Armondez lurched backward. He didn't fall, but dropped his cup to touch his shoulder. She didn't hear the crash of the china hitting the wet flagstone, but she could see shards of glass flying around him. How could she have been so far off the mark? Stupid! The sights and range were set for Gun. Her hands moved smoothly and precisely as she worked the bolt-action lever to drop another shell into the chamber and adjust the range and sights. He didn't have time to wonder what had hit him. Five ... six. The second bullet found its mark, and Armondez pitched backward with a hole in his forehead.

Seven ... eight ... The mission was complete ... Nine ... ten.

The Anaconda was dead.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Get to the pick-up zone. The words ripped through her brain with every heartbeat. Get to the pick-up zone. No, she had Gun to worry about first. Gun. So badly injured and so damned arrogant.

She threw the rifle aside and knelt by Gun, lifting him up enough to look into his half-closed eyes. "Get yourself ready, Gun. We're getting out of here."

His wounds looked plenty bad, torn flesh and lots of blood. No bandages. Her shirt would do. She moved with studied desperation, unknotting her cotton shirt and ripping a large section from the bottom. Tearing that in half, she made a thick pad for his leg wound, tying a strip around his thigh. She bit into her lower lip at the sight of his shoulder wound. A tree branch had blunted the force of the bullet before it tore through flesh. But not enough to keep it from blasting through muscle and leaving a free-bleeding open wound behind.

"Gun, I'm going to move your arm out of the sleeve."

"Think so?" He clenched his teeth and nodded, letting her pull his arm partially free of the sleeve. Lifting his arm, she quickly fastened the cuff to a chest-high button.

She heard the guards and their dogs. There wasn't time to be neat. After considering the weight of the rifle and keeping Gun on his feet, she threw it into the tall grass, then knelt down to grip him around the waist. She strained and pulled him to his knees.

"Put your arm over my shoulders."

"Hell, no," he ground out between clenched teeth. "I'll follow you in a minute."

She shook her head. "Put that damned arm around my neck."

"Get the fuck away from me, Donavon." He swayed as he laid profanity on her. "I don't want to be responsible for you. Beat it, sister."

He shouted pretty good for a dying man. Ali wasn't letting up on him. "Get up." She deliberately tried to provoke him. "I'm saving your bacon. Get used to it."

No snide counter-remark. Gun was in serious pain. He didn't resist much when she hugged his waist and hauled him to his feet. He was wobbly, his strength seeping through the lousy bandages. With his arm over her shoulder, she gripped his hand and steeled herself for a hard journey.

"Let's go home, cowboy."

He did his best, trying not to lean too heavily on her. She forced herself to pretend he wasn't hurt and she cared nada about him. He was a fellow agent in need. That's all.

They'd gone a short distance when Gun stopped. "We can't use the trail. It's bound to be crawling with Armondez's men. We have to cross that flooded field." He glanced at her and gave her a weak grin. "That okay with you, ma'am?"

She rejoiced that he could muster up a sense of humor at this point. "Sounds terrific. Let's move."

Progress was slow, and she sweated every sound and form in the steaming undergrowth. The steady rain proved to be a blessing. Silencing their movement, and their scent, as well. Ali felt every bite and sting from the countless, tiny insects that flew around them. Drawn to the smell of blood and sweat, they honed in on them in merciless pursuit. If it stopped raining, the mosquitoes would suck them dry.

Gun didn't notice the swarm, but Ali did. She spent a few precious seconds to remove the rest of her shirt to drape around his shoulder. He attempted a smile, but it looked more like a grimace.

On the move again, Ali became aware of the pungent scent of the rain-soaked jungle. Like the docks of New Orleans, but a thousand times worse. The smell was concentrated moss stew, emitting an unforgettable odor. The smell sat at the back of her throat and would never leave her tongue.

Finally on the narrow trail leading to the field, Ali struggled to keep her footing and hold Gun up straight. He moaned and pointed toward a tree. "I'm going to rest. You go ahead."

"Not a chance. Keep moving." She knew he was tired and getting weaker. His warm blood ran through her T-shirt and under her breast. Insects attacked them both in force now.

A small amount of luck stumbled across them on the narrow, muddy trail. A nice stick for Gun to use as a crutch. "Here you go." Ali put the stick in his hand and he tested his weight on it, stumbling when it broke in half.

He kept the longer piece, using it to probe the low branches as they moved ahead. He pointed to something in a small clearing. "Donavon. There's our ride if you can catch her."

She figured out what Gun meant when the horse nickered. It was the horse that had nearly run her down earlier on the trail. "I'll try." Ali walked slowly toward the animal, glad

it was a filly and not a mean-assed stallion. Making a kissing sound, she held her hand out, palm up. "Nice girl, pretty baby." Damn it. The mare eyed Ali with suspicion, jerking her head up and down in agitation. "Come on, pretty girl. Please."

The pleading in Ali's voice caught the mare's ear, and she walked slowly to her. Gripping the animal's bridle in desperation, Ali walked her to where Gun leaned on his broken crutch.

Wanting Gun to be able to ride out of this hell, Ali squeezed his fingers around the bridle and then struggled to boost his weight up onto the mare's back. "Hang on, partner." She wanted to cry as Gun leaned over the mare's back and looked pale as ash.

Now she could run, and she did, leading the filly and covering some serious ground. How much time had passed? Her watch had stopped, and she couldn't see Gun's. No matter. They wouldn't take time to look.

Ali stifled a scream when the mare whinnied and reared. A fat, slick snake wriggled across the trail and buried itself in the muddy water beside the path. Water! Oh, no. The flooded part of the trail loomed up and grinned at her. "God, help me," she prayed aloud.

Her voice of reason spoke calmly in her ear. *Nothing to fear. Pretend you're back home in New Orleans. You played in the water all the time there. Saw alligators and cottonmouths. It's no different here.*

Like hell. These were the toys of Armondez and would eat them alive. *On the other hand, dogs and rabid men are coming after you.* She guessed the voices were a mile or so behind them. Turning to look at Gun, she really had no choice. Fresh blood ran down the horse's flank. Gun was dying.

Gritting her teeth, she stepped into the putrid-smelling water that hit above her ankles, trying to keep her eyes on the tree line across the frightening span of water. Gun slipped low on the mare's back, and Ali fought desperately to hold him in place.

The filly didn't like the situation and bolted away from Ali, throwing her rider. Stopping the scream in her throat, Ali ran to where Gun had fallen and lay face-down in the murky water. When she pulled him up, he coughed, and blood pumped with renewed force from his shoulder. "Gun, stop bleeding, damn it." What did it matter if she cried now? He couldn't see the tears of anguish dripping down her cheeks.

She looked up in time to see something that looked like a huge rat swimming toward them. She instinctively smacked the surface of the water, and the huge rodent turned away to avoid the spray.

What would she do now? "Gun." She bent her knees and hauled him up against her legs. "Get up. We're almost there. You want those Army kids to see you goofing off?"

"Mfffuk no." His muffled, garbled reply was encouraging, and she leaned down to get him on his feet.

"Lean on me, Gun. I don't mind."

Biting fish and frogs the size of dinner plates were nothing compared to the feel of things squashing under her boots. Ali held on to Gun with all her strength and tried to move soundlessly. No need waking up the long-ass snakes.

Her eyes widened and focused on the fat form that undulated along the surface of the shallow water, then sank out of sight. She hesitated, but was given new reason to forge ahead when a dog yapped not too far off in the distance. The guards were getting closer; the dogs were showing them where to look.

She remembered Gun's words about this place while they were still in safe, warm, homey St. Louis. Right now, she was in hell. Oh, how right he had been. But she couldn't choose the location of her missions.

A thunderous splashing behind her announced they had company on their tail. Daring a glance over her shoulder, the source of the noise could be seen galloping along the shoreline. The mare ran from the yapping dog, churning up the water. Maybe that would throw the guards off their trail.

Stepping firmly and as quietly as possible, Ali looked up and guessed the exit from this hell was a few hundred yards away. Gun groaned and tried to stand up straight, his eyes closed.

"I see the trail now. Gun, move your feet, man. It's right there."

He gave up. Oh, hell, no. He had passed out, sagging to the water and looking like death.

"Son-of-a-bitch," she hissed into his ear. "Crybaby, weak-kneed pussy."

She hated herself for goading him, but it seemed to work.

"Bitch ... I'm no ..." He held on to her waist and pulled himself up, her arm doing most of the work.

"Good, just remember that." Ali cried openly now. Gun didn't know what was going on. Time to be tough later.

Things were going pretty damn good. He was moving those size-thirteen clodhoppers. Her legs were strong, holding up well under the stress. She couldn't help but glance around, checking on anything that moved.

Oh, God. The python rose to the surface and made a whipping motion toward them, his huge mouth open, evil as hell. Ali no longer cared about the noise. She yanked her handgun from the holster and put a bullet in the serpent's head. The terrifying thing instantly jerked back, shaped itself into a dozen glistening brown coils in the throes of death, and rolled away from them. Every living animal for miles around squawked or flew off in a clatter of deafening noise.

The business of getting out of the bloody water became all-important. With only a few yards left to cover, Gun sagged like two hundred forty pounds of rock. She wanted to hold him and carry him, but she couldn't. "Do you want me to die, too, Gun?"

His eyes opened a crack, and he frowned at her. His words were indistinguishable. He grabbed the waistband of her pants, almost ripping them from her tired body. She got her shoulder under his arm and moved on, crossing the last stretch of the demon's watering hole.

Her heart pumped with pure joy at the first feel of muddy but solid earth under her boot. Now Gun would have better footing and no unseen danger to worry about. Everything was out in the open now.

The barking sounded as if it were a few feet behind her. Ali snapped her head around to see a lone dog at the far side of the floodwater, barking excitedly at them. Obviously a pup, or he would be coming after them. She felt bad rushing Gun along, but it was necessary.

He coughed again, probably from that nasty water. She had a noseful herself. She noticed him trying to pull the .38 from the waist of his Levi's.

"I'll take that." She pulled the weapon from his hand, and he groaned in protest. "Sorry, Gun. I had to." The sound of men talking forced her to move off the trail and under the cover of a stand of tall grass.

Armondez's men looked for tracks on the far side of the floodwater. Gun was totally out of it, laying his cheek against her head. She patted his hand and adjusted his weight to relieve the ache in her back. The action on the other side of the shallow lake moved away, the dogs leading the group in the direction the mare had gone.

Gun touched his waist. "Donavon. My weapon."

"I'm carrying it for you."

She caught the unforgettable, metallic scent of his blood and wanted to break down again. She wouldn't allow herself that weakness. They were too close to getting out.

He never gave up. "If anything happens, give it to me."

"Sure." She licked her lips, thirstier than she could ever remember.

Gun must be dehydrated. Lord, she needed a miracle. She sucked it up and found new courage deep in her tired soul.

"Gun, come on. They're waiting for us."

He hobbled along beside her for a few steps, but soon sank to his knees. Okay, so she would carry him on her back. She squatted in front of him.

"Hug my neck. I'll get us home."

His arm went around her neck and then slid away. She turned and unbuttoned his makeshift sling, letting his arm droop. What a foolish move. He couldn't hold on to anything with that arm. He was trying to help, hugging her neck again with his right arm, groaning as she straightened and struggled to walk stooped over. He was six-foot-four and two hundred forty pounds of deadweight, everything that made carrying him impossible. Ali was determined to carry him until he slid off her and fell back into the muck.

Desperation devoured her when the high-pitched barking of dogs split the fragile silence. Too wet. Too green and too much everything. Desire to live motivated her now. She grabbed Gun's hands.

Wounded or not, she had to drag him. She held his wrists in her grip and trudged forward. Head down, Ali didn't see the low branch before ramming her head into it.

The sudden weight that fell onto her shoulder and chest was eerie, and she instantly recoiled in paralyzing terror and dropped Gun onto the ground. A snake began wrapping around her shoulders and neck, slowly, as if it had all day. She screamed in panic. She couldn't help it. "Oh, God, help me!"

She didn't see Gun lift himself up to pull the pistol from her waistband. She could only feel the slick muscles of the serpent writhe slowly around her arms and neck. Screaming, she tore at the slithering ring that worked around her body.

Falling down next to Gun, she fought to rid herself of the horror sliding over her. Gun was only a blur in her eyes. Only a vision as she felt the weight being pulled away and then heard the wonderful explosion of gunpowder and steel. Gun reached out to her and then dropped the .38 onto the muddy ground.

"Gun." She lay over him as much to seek comfort as to give it. He touched her hand and nodded, then closed his eyes. "No, no, you don't." Pressing down on his bandaged shoulder, she spoke quietly, amazing herself. "Sleeping is not an option, not yet."

She got up and pushed the snake aside with her feet, then grabbed Gun's hands again to walk on toward their fate. She paused and looked down at his dark head.

"Gun. Do you have the compass?" She was confused about the directions now. She couldn't think clearly.

"My ... pocket ... left pocket."

She tore the bottom of her T-shirt off and stuffed it under the first bandage on his shoulder. "Okay. I'll check to see if we're moving in the right direction, and we'll be okay."

He didn't move or speak while she dug deep in his pocket. His body temperature had dropped. Ali lay over him for a few seconds, thinking she should try to warm him. *Stop it! You're wasting precious time.*

Her fingers touched the compass, and she pulled it from his pocket to stare at the needle. Which way? South? Okay. They had been traveling south.

New resolve burst through her.

"We're almost home, Gun." He didn't answer in his state of unconsciousness. "That's all right, cowboy. Sleep. It'll be easier on both of us."

She tucked his pistol back into her waistband and took his hands again. She moved ahead, forcing herself to not look back or stop to check on Gun. The dogs were following them again.

Her heart stopped. She couldn't feel it beating. *Don't be crazy. You're moving. You're still alive.* Her lips were cold, and her ears roared with the tension in her nerves. Taking care of Gun was uppermost in her mind.

Hurry. Something told her to hurry and she would be safe. *Whop-whop-whop.* The sound of chopper props filled her with such emotion, she sobbed, struggling forward, following the helicopter as it flew overhead.

The crew would hover for as long as it took, dropping down a rope ladder and a small gurney seat. *God help me. I have to get him there.* The aircraft hovered several hundred yards away. Ali renewed her hold on Gun's wrists and tried to run, dragging him closer to the chopper. She stopped only once when she looked down to see the agonized expression on Gun's face.

The cords in her neck stood out in her effort to pull Gun to the center of the clearing. The turbulence kicked up by the chopper blades whipped a storm of waving grass and bushes, plastering her soggy hair against her face. She held onto Gun's hands and looked up, staring into the friendly face of the United States Army.

Standing under the force of the wind, she reached skyward to grab the rope ladder that fell along with a leather swing. "Gun. Please sit up!"

He lifted his hand and promptly dropped it. She knelt beside him and worked the sling under his arms. Signaling the guy watching to lift him, Ali started to climb the ladder. One foot on the rope and all hell broke loose.

She heard the ping of the bullets hitting the chopper before she turned to see a dozen hostiles and three dogs barreling toward them across the field. She didn't wait for the Rangers to start firing. She pulled her weapon and fired at the leader. He fell and three more took his place. The pain in her arm wasn't rope burn. She'd been hit. Firing her own weapon, her aim improved and she dropped the three without blinking. Too weary to fight any longer, she let her arm hang limp at her side, and the military took out the rest of the pack. She looked down to see the few men who were left take off, dogs running ahead of them.

They weren't home free yet. The hostiles stood at the edge of the clearing, waiting. Gun hung precariously in the swing, which appeared to be twisted. Ali climbed up to where he clung to life and reached out to pull him to her. "Just like the good old days, Gun. Gator-gal is here."

Her strong legs wrapped around Gun and held him secure as they were hauled up into the belly of the chopper. When a medic tried to check her arm, she waved him away and tried to hover over Gun. He'd lost so much blood his clothing was dark plum, just like hers. The medics worked over him in rapid efficiency and wouldn't let her stay by him.

She went to the rear of the chopper and found a place to break down and lose it completely. She sobbed until there was no more fear. That had been replaced with a numb ache. She didn't flinch as the medic cleaned her flesh wound and bandaged her arm.

The medic didn't question her, just asked if she wanted anything. "A pack of cigarettes and coffee. Is Gun going to make it?"

"Can't say, ma'am. But he's holding his own." He handed her a plastic bottle filled with cold, clean water. "They'll take good care of him at the military hospital."

Ali had never known such dread. Concern for Gun filled her heart and soul. She wanted to be with him. Edging closer to his stretcher, she saw intravenous fluids being pumped into him, and the bandage on his shoulder was snow white and thick.

"Ma'am." A young captain sat down next to her. "You handled that damned well." He gestured toward Gun. "Gunnison wouldn't have made it much longer."

She nodded, not feeling the least bit reassured by the young man's words. Gun still looked too pale and too quiet. When they got back to the States, she would tell him exactly how she felt. If she could think of the right words to say.

Chapter Twenty-Four

During the flight to the military hospital outside Bogotá, Ali stayed as near Gun as she was allowed. Funny, even at death's door, he looked tough, kind of cocky. She studied him with a gentle gaze, knowing he would laugh at her for being so worried. But right now, his deep slumber seemed untroubled.

Being careful to not touch the equipment she prayed would save his life, she sank down on the floor at the head of his stretcher to keep an eye on him. She thought about how much he had impacted her life in such a short time. And how different life would be without him. Empty.

Thinking like that wasn't professional. But, oh, God, she couldn't help herself. A woman meets a Gun only once in her life. A lifetime of emotion had passed between them. She never expected to feel so alive again. Gun would stay with her in spirit no matter who or what happened to her.

A monotone radio message from the base took her mind off herself. Ali dreaded getting off the chopper. The questions would start, and she wasn't sure she had the answers the brass wanted to hear.

The helicopter set down in an abandoned soccer field. Getting Gun ready to be moved seemed to take an eternity in Ali's mind. At last, he was lifted off and put into a waiting ambulance. Ali climbed in when he was secured, and they were quickly on their way to the hospital.

The antiseptic scent was strong, the place squeaky-clean. The corridor was quiet except for the whirl of the gurney's wheels as it was pushed down the hallway.

Ali wasn't given time to work herself into a frenzy over Gun's condition. The moment her wound was bandaged, an aide escorted her to an office a few doors down from surgery to

speak with a debriefing officer. She rapped her knuckles on the door and stepped inside the room.

“Agent Donavon?”

“Yes, sir.” She didn’t sit immediately; something in her head clicked into military protocol. *No, don’t salute. You’re not in the Army.*

He took in her filthy, rag-tag appearance before gesturing to the chair near his desk. “You haven’t had a chance to clean up.”

He was Mr. Clean, with his shaved head and just-washed shine on his generous nose. Ali figured he’d been promoted quickly up the ranks with those steely blue eyes and chiseled jaw. GI Joe model, probably. She wanted to roll her eyes in disgust. “No, sir. Agent Gunnison and I have been too busy to think about our appearance.”

He smiled. “No. I appreciate what you’ve been through and what you have done. I won’t detain you long.”

Yeah, I’ll bet. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’ll get right to the point. Was Armondez terminated?”

“If you mean, is he dead. Yes.”

“How did you make that deduction, and are you sure the man killed was Armondez?” The tone of his voice was a blueprint for a robot game.

“Sir, we both knew the target intimately, had dinner and went horseback riding with him.” She had been stretched to the limit. “He was a nice-looking man with fine manners and a taste for torture. Yes, I know he’s dead.”

“How many shots were fired?”

What the hell was wrong with this guy? “I missed with the first round and cut him down with the second.”

“Ah, you made a good hit.” He looked at her with a kind of desire that men have for a new fishing rod.

“Yes. Agent Gunnison was down.”

The damned room was too small and too quiet.

“Did he miss his target?”

Ali stomped down the rage boiling in her gut. “No, sir. He took a round meant for me.”

That gaze of desire heightened. “And you were left to finish the mission?”

She glanced at his nametag. “Major Cantrell, is it?” He hadn’t bothered to introduce himself earlier. “Agent Gunnison acted in a manner duly reflecting his training, sir. He saved my life, risked his own to stop Armondez from selling his poison to kids.” She lifted her chin. “Will the HSD take steps to stop the slavery trade of children taking place in his home?”

Her interrogator nodded. "It's in the works right now." He got up and held his hand out to her. "Excellent job, Agent Donavon. I will personally put your name in for a commendation and advancement in the department."

Wonderful. Right now she wanted nothing but to get back to Gun and get home. Maybe quit the department. Ali looked down at her battered hands and arms. What the hell was she thinking? Of course she wanted the advancement. *Remember the White House.* Taking a deep breath, she stood and clasped his hand. "Thank you, sir."

Ali gratefully accepted the Army-issue clothing from the same aide who had taken her to the interrogation office. The young man had no eye for women's weight and height; the creased slacks hugged her every bump and curve. Her youngest brother could have worn the small short-sleeved shirt. The thing gaped open a bit, being stretched over her breasts. At least she had a T-shirt under it.

Being hustled along to get ready for the long flight home helped Ali keep her sanity. Sign papers, have a mini-physical, and answer more questions. She figured her inquiries about Gun were wearing the hospital staff's patience thin. The answer was always the same: "He's holding his own." Knowing the military, that meant he was close to, or was, dead. Cold fear gripped and held her in icy fingers, inflicting a pain deep and never to be forgotten.

After getting the aide to promise she would be informed of any change in Gun's condition, Ali retreated to the waiting room next to the ward he'd been taken to. The aide brought her a pillow and a blanket. At least she would be warm and dry. A deep shudder at the remembered horror swept over her.

She couldn't sleep, not while Gun teetered precariously on the precipice of death. *Damn. Stop thinking like that. He'll be fine. He's holding his own.*

She knew where she had to go. Tossing the blanket aside, she went out into the corridor and approached a nurse at the desk. "Where is the chapel?"

Nodding her head toward a hallway, the nurse got to her feet. "Straight down the hall and turn left. The steps take you right to the chapel." She sat down. "They say mass there every morning."

"This can't wait until morning."

Ali walked double-time to the hallway and turned left, running down the short flight of steps. The stained-glass door was open and she walked inside the small chapel. Oh, yes, she was not alone in her fear.

She went to the front of the chapel to light a candle. Crossing herself, she knelt at the communion rail. Her prayer was repentant of being slow to attend mass. Unwise in her choice of mates and conducting her life with devious choices.

Finally, her prayers became a request to spare Gun's life, to give him another chance. A wish for Gun to know she wouldn't really live if he died. *Oh, God, I can't really feel so*

deeply for him. I can't. He can't return that emotion, and I can't bear being just a friend to him.

Pressing her hands to her face, she wept bitterly at her own foolishness.

* * * * *

Gun lay propped against his pillows after another round of drugs and opened his eyes to see what he considered an angel. For three days he'd thought he was dreaming, but she was really there.

He wasn't sure his voice or anything else on his beat-up body worked. His attempt to say her name came out a raspy whisper. She didn't hear him. Hell, what was she still doing here? She needed to get out of this place and pick up where she'd left off. Look up that son-of-a-bitch in New Orleans. Not be sticking around here out of pity or thinking he might straighten up his act. Marriage, cottage, roses, and all that crap.

Gun wanted to be upbeat, but he couldn't. The reality of her flying away to a happy, safe relationship made him ache inside. She stood looking out the only window in the room and appeared to be deep in thought.

He held his reaction down to a low simmer when she finally turned around to look at him. God, she was beautiful. Face scrubbed clean, no makeup, no big hair. Just a gleaming, shiny face and enormous blue eyes.

"Donavon. You still here?" *Great start, you dumb bastard.*

A soft light filled her eyes, and she smiled at him. Her soft, warm-as-a-kiss smile.

"Gun." She came to his bedside and touched his hand. "Of course I'm still here."

"When are you leaving?" *Yeah, tell me when I should start getting nervous and lonely.* His thoughts were pretty damned crazy, but she made him nuts. "You look great, Donavon."

She eyed his full upper torso bandage. "You look good, too."

He managed a laugh. "Sure." He had to say it, get it off his chest. "Thanks, Donavon. I owe you."

"We're even." She pulled a slip of paper from her pants pocket. "My telephone number and address in New Orleans."

Her phone number, for Christ's sake. "Sure." His voice had been nice and flat. "What else do you want?"

Fight charged into her fabulous eyes, and he wanted to squall like a kid.

"Oh, I see. Now I'm supposed to cry like a baby because you're being an asshole." She sounded tough, but he read hurt in her eyes.

"You know how I am, Donavon. I don't want any ties to hold me down."

"You misunderstood my meaning. It was only a gesture of friendship. Ex-partners and all." She stepped back from his bed, looking bored.

He tossed the slip of paper toward the nightstand and waved at her. The damned paper floated to the floor, and he wanted to dive after it. "Get out of here, Donavon. These flyboys won't wait for you when they get ready to leave."

She looked as if she would like to slug him, but turned on her heel instead and walked out of his room, out of his miserable, fucking life.

From his bed, he could look out and see the military cars and vans coming and going from the hospital. True to his natural good luck, he caught sight of Donavon walking to a car with a driver. She was on her way to Bogotá and a plane ride home.

What he had said and done to her in the last few minutes was the lowest thing he'd ever done. He didn't want to hurt Donavon. But she was too much woman to stay with a fuck-up like him, so it was best to sever all connections now.

Sever had been the correct word. His wound was bleeding again. Hell, the blood was probably coming from his heart. What heart? He was over her. *Get back in the race, man. Too many women to pine over one.* He hit the nurses' call button.

"Hey, good-looking. I'm bleeding to death in here. Want to come in and fix me up?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ali made the long flight back to the States in stone silence, speaking only when necessary. She isolated herself from the huge transport plane's crew. The men were respectful and allowed her the privacy she needed to meditate on the useless ache in her heart.

Now, back in New Orleans on three weeks' leave, she tried to be part of the family fun, but eventually wound up alone, drifting away in her private misery. She couldn't believe the tingle of restlessness had already begun to set in, making it impossible to lounge idly under a quilt and stare at the big old-fashioned Christmas tree in one corner of the living room. There were things on that tree she and her brothers had made twenty years ago.

Out of boredom, she wandered into the hallway, where the ancient answering machine blinked red. She pushed the button on the message center and then grabbed the table for support. A voice she didn't recognize informed her she was expected to check in at the number the voice rattled off. Her fingers numbly gripped a pencil while she took down the number.

Her mother called from the kitchen, "A gentleman called for you this morning." She dug in her pocket and handed Ali a slip of paper. "Oh, dear, I forgot to tell you when I got busy in here."

Ali's heart thrashed around in her chest. Gun!

She took the paper in trembling fingers. "Okay, Momma. Thanks. I'll take care of this later."

Forcing herself not to run from the kitchen was a tremendous strain on Ali, but she managed to get a short jacket from the hall closet and leave the house in a sane manner. Her emotions whirled in a crazy spin of joy and anger, embarrassment and a rabid eagerness.

Gun! Holding the folded paper in her hand, she got into the rented sedan and shut the door, leaning back to take in a good lungful of air.

Hands shaking, she opened the note and read her mother's perfect penmanship.

Supervisor Hamm called and asked you to return his call at your convenience.

Being run down by a semi wouldn't have hit her any harder. Hamm, not Gun. Ali couldn't keep pulling herself from the gutter of self-pity. Her body moved and she spoke, but she wasn't alive.

Stop it, don't you cry; don't you give in. You're making a fool of yourself. Ali reached in the glove box, found some stale Chiclets gum, and popped three pieces into her mouth. Maybe some day when her life wasn't such a mess, she wouldn't want to smoke.

From the corner of her eye, she saw her brother's truck parked in the driveway. He always had a bottle of Jack Black under the club seat for snakebite. No, go get your shopping done, and then you can knock back a jolt. *Listen to yourself, damn it. You're not a drunk or a mental case that needs drugs. Face it, you have to get yourself in gear.*

In a last-minute lunge at self-respect, Ali backed out of the double driveway and headed for the downtown shopping area of New Orleans. The drive wasn't far, just horribly quiet. She pushed a CD into the player and wanted to scream when Aaron Neville cried the words to "Don't Go." Unable to stand hearing anyone else in pain, she yanked the CD out of the player, opened the window, and sailed the wretched disc into the roadside ditch. That didn't stop the tears from gathering in her eyes. *Okay, you can't drive in this condition. Pull over.*

She pulled into a rest area and got out of the car. Knowing what she had to do, she carried her cell phone to a picnic table and sat down. Inhaling hard, she punched in the numbers on the slip of paper.

"Supervisor Hamm." She could hear familiar sounds of men talking and laughing in the background. "Agent Donavon here."

His voice made Ali feel worse, too much of a reminder of being with Gun.

"Donavon." He sounded pleased. "How's the vacation going?"

"Too fast, sir." She forced her voice to lift. "How about yourself, sir?"

"Great, Donavon. Just great." There was a short pause. "I hear congratulations are in order for you and Gun."

The thunder in her ears was her own blood roaring through her veins. "I don't understand, sir."

"I probably should have waited and let the big brass tell you." He chuckled. "Just seemed more in line for me to tell my two best agents."

"I'm not following you, sir." Ali sensed he was going to bring Gun up and want to talk about him. She simply couldn't.

"Good news, Donavon." He rattled some papers around before speaking again. "You and Gun are getting commendations and booted up the ladder. Congratulations."

The lead in her heart could be the reason she didn't care about the praise or the rung in the ladder. "Thank you, sir. I deserve it."

His booming laughter was soothing. "Yes, you do, Donavon." Now there was something new in his voice. A cheery teasing, "You're being assigned a new job in Florida."

"Florida? I thought I'd just been promoted."

"Not officially taken place yet." His voice took on its no-bullshit tone. "The department wants you to handle this job. When can I expect you back in St. Louis?"

"As soon as you need me, sir." She could only hope her voice didn't reveal the weight of her deep disappointment. She listened while Hamm rattled off mundane details of her expected arrival in St. Louis. "Got it, sir. I'll see you in three days."

"The department appreciates your cooperation."

She burned with curiosity to know her contact's identity. "Any use asking who I pair up with this time?"

He cleared his throat. "I don't have that information, but I'm told he speaks Russian, French, German, and Spanish fluently. Plays the tuxedo crime scene really well, kind of a dandy."

Ali didn't realize she was frowning. "Just as long as we get the job done." Ali heard him say his goodbye and closed her phone, murmuring. "Just as long as it isn't Gun."

* * * * *

Gun relaxed as the talkative tailor measured his shoulders. The tux and four sport coats the agency had sprung for needed alterations. A tux was not Gun's idea of work clothes. He thought back to the ratty duds he and Donavon had worn when she dragged him out of the jungle. She crept into his thoughts with regularity. Of course, he wondered what she was doing. And yes, by damn, he missed her.

"Relax your shoulders, sir. The fit will not be perfect if you stiffen up." Exasperation threaded through the tailor's voice.

"Just habit, man." Gun figured he should tell the guy his shoulder didn't want to relax. Hell, would his Colt fit under this monkey suit? He exhaled in his own frustration. What a job. He was itching to take a mission in the Middle East. The action was in that part of the world now, alive with terrorists and people wanting military weapons. *Fat chance of going until he wrapped up this dirty-bomb sting in France.*

"Spread your legs, sir."

Gun looked down at the balding head of the tailor and scowled. "I have a thirty-six inseam. No need to measure there."

The look of cold disgust on the guy's face made Gun relent. Like most men, he didn't like another guy fiddling with his crotch. He spread his legs and hummed a tune until it was over.

"We're all done, sir." The guy looked as relieved as Gun felt. "Your garments will be ready by Thursday."

"That's good news." Gun walked around the shop, checking out the display cases. Six ties, a dozen shirts, and some fine underwear later, Gun left the shop.

He'd been set up in the ritziest hotel in St. Petersburg and liked the perks that came with it. Plush accommodations, free liquor, hot-looking maids, and a gym near the pool.

His suite was more like a home, with its fine carpeting and high-end furniture. The bar would accommodate a dozen people, and the entire wall behind it glittered with crystal decanters and bottles of booze. The glassware was Fostoria, and the fancy bar mops were linen. Hell, this was the way to live.

Looking in the closet, he shook his head at the assortment of pussy-looking shoes on the shoe racks. Tassels, for God's sake. Well, at least there were a couple pairs of wingtips and a good pair of loafers.

Shutting the door of the closet, he looked at the clock on the wall. Too early for dinner and too late for lunch. His need for action made him look in his shaving kit. Under all the razors, aftershave, and toothpaste, he found a box of gum.

Slowly, he opened it and took out a piece of the white-coated gum. It was smooth and cool, but warmed quickly in his fingers. Desire to see Donavon rolled over him like a monster wave. He lay down on the bed to close his eyes. Fuck! Would he ever get over her?

Holding the gum in his fist, he knew he was in deep trouble. No woman had ever stayed on his mind so much as thirty minutes after sex. Angry with himself for being a fool, he tossed the gum into his mouth and chewed. He figured she had gotten into his blood because of the jungle thing. They had gone through a bad time, and she had gone to the mattress for him. Okay, she had saved his life. He owed her, that's all. It would fade, and he could have sex again.

He laughed at the memory of the one time since his recovery that sex had been offered to him. A sweet lady lieutenant from the base in Bogotá had seen to it he had plenty of rehab on the walking trail on the hospital grounds. Trouble was, either he had lost interest in women, or Ali was too fresh on his mind. He played dumb and let her suggestions of a quickie in her office slide on by. Whatever, he needed to get laid before long.

Gun rolled off the bed and left the room, headed for the bar in the lobby. He was to meet a buyer for a dirty bomb that evening. The guy was a real class act. Gun had met the guy and wanted to kick his finicky ass then. Hopefully a couple drinks would make the guy

more likable in his discerning eyes. When his cell phone rang, he grimaced and moved to a quiet corner of the plush lobby.

“Yeah.” He listened to the voice he knew as well as his own. “You don’t say. Okay, Thursday night. I’ll be there.”

Hamm had been instrumental in getting him on this beginner’s job. He planned to have a long talk with Hamm.

Clipping his cell phone back onto his belt, Gun strode into the bar. Pretty damn quiet this time of day. The regular trust-fund drunks would stagger in later, and the millionaires’ hookers were still asleep. Ah, the TV had sports on. He sat down at the bar and looked around.

In the mirror, he caught a glimpse of a slender woman who made his blood race. He swung around to get a better look at her, but she was gone. He laughed when the bartender asked if he was okay.

“Sure, just thought I saw an old friend walk by.”

The bartender brought the shot he’d ordered, and Gun tried to watch the rerun boxing match. A whiff of strong musk assailed his nostrils, and a soft voice tugged his earlobe. “Hi. Need company?”

Gun turned his head to look at the walking ad for Revlon. Not that she wasn’t pretty. She was a knockout. “Hey, good-looking. Better not. My lady is meeting me here in a few minutes.”

Her smile was wobbly, like her saunter, as she left the bar.

The bartender had stayed away for most of the conversation. When he moved back to his end of the bar, he grinned knowingly at Gun. “She the one you nearly broke your neck trying to see?”

“No, just my imagination working overtime.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ali walked into the hotel lobby at exactly seven fifty-eight on that Thursday evening and took the elevator up to the luxury-only sixteenth floor. The young elevator operator eyed her in the mirror at the front of the elevator car.

Being a gay mobster's paid date required a certain amount of capital, and her sugar daddy had laid out plenty in the past couple of months. Splendid as it was, she would never in a thousand years have bought the black fox wrap draped around her shoulders.

Gaining Frankie Labonte's attention hadn't been too difficult. A search through the records of his favorite escort service provided all the information needed to mold her into his perfect woman. Sophisticated, educated, quiet, and clean.

She spent hours at the spa, enjoying full-body massages and mud baths. Facials, manicures, and pedicures topped off the hard day of blissful spoiling. The glitzy beauty salon had become her second home. Ali had quickly adapted to the extravagant pampering.

The horny young man spoke, bringing her back to the serious world of being a traitor's cover to hide his sexual preference.

"Your floor, ma'am."

Ali nodded and walked out into the hallway. She checked her appearance in a large gilded wall mirror, making certain her makeup was flawless, the hem of her short black cocktail dress was straight, and her hose looked smooth as bare skin. She did love the black brocade pumps on her feet.

Feeling a certain amount of excitement that night, she lifted her hand to press the doorbell. Her contact and partner was supposed to be on the guest list, a guy with rich tastes and a bevy of women. Hell with that. All she knew was that his name for the sting was Martin Armstrong.

Frankie opened the door personally when she rang the bell. "Hello, beautiful Sophie." He hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Come in and meet the others. Some of them you may know."

Ali didn't doubt that. Her taste in friends seemed to run to killers and drug heads these days. She had to say something to make him happy, feel needed in front of his pals who stared their way.

Looking at him without blinking, she quietly explained her tardiness.

"I'm a bit late, but there was a lovely dress in Queen Anne's dress shop window."

"You should have gone in and bought it." He kissed her knuckles. "Shame on you for not getting what you want." He smiled at her like a boy just discovering his crotch. "You're too lovely, Sophie. Too lovely."

She didn't blush or acknowledge his compliment. He didn't like that in women. Confidence was his game. He also liked to show that she was a good four inches taller than him. The higher the heel she wore, the better he liked it.

He took a glass of champagne from a waiter and took a sip, then handed it to her. His way of showing the real men in the group he was as real as they were, that she was his.

"Come with me, darling." He skillfully guided her through the crowd to stand near a group of men engaged in quiet conversation. He leaned into the circle. "Gentlemen. Surely you're not too involved to meet Sophie."

Her smile dazzled and set as he drew her forward. For a moment, she focused on the wall of tuxedo shirts and the masculine rumble of greetings. She glanced at the outstretched hands. Nice wide, long-fingered hands. Above all else, her brain sifted through the scent of cedar and oriental oils. The scent too exotic to ever forget.

Tensing her muscles to stop a hard shiver, Ali slowly lifted her gaze to look into the depths of blackest seduction and downright seething trickery. Gun. Hold it together, Ali. You and the devil need each other once again.

She held her hand out, and each man gently touched her fingers. The devil only smiled while she moistened her lips. "Gentlemen. Are you enjoying yourselves?"

If he had been surprised at all, Gun recovered smoothly, nodding like the playboy he was reputed to be. "Very much, Miss ...?"

"Sophie Petori."

"Miss Petori."

The man was a chameleon, blending perfectly in the glitter of his present surroundings or the muddy jungle floor of Bogotá. As luck would have it, Ali heard one of Frankie's men ask him to step into the private office area. The moment Frankie excused himself to take care of the problem, Gun pushed himself onto her goodwill.

"Miss Petori. Would you mind showing me the view from the terrace?" He took her arm and walked her through the crowd toward the open doors. "Show me the way to the casino."

He was smooth, all right. He talked and smiled like a guy with nothing on his mind but getting in her pants and partying. Never mind that her heart beat against her ribs at the very thought of letting him do just that. HSD couldn't do this to her. She cursed her luck, but maintained her brilliant smile.

As Gun led her along, Ali glanced over her shoulder several times to keep tabs on Frankie. Gun easily moved her through the open terrace doors and out into the semi-darkness. His voice was rough as he questioned Ali, and her nipples pebbled instantly.

"We are on the same side, aren't we?"

Couldn't he have forced her to kiss him, to have rough, fast sex, and then question her? "Keep your voice down, mister. The couple kissing in the corner could be watching and listening."

Gun glanced at the pair and laughed sardonically. "I don't think they know we're out here." He braced his hand on the rail, effectively fencing her in. His smile was sexy as ever. "So. Sophie. How have you been?"

"Shopping. Frankie is extremely generous." Ali took the cigarette he lit for her and took a deep drag. "I'm leaving for Paris Saturday morning."

"What a coincidence. Me, too." He dragged his fingertip down the row of tiny jet buttons on the bodice of her dress. "We're going together, it seems."

"I don't see how that can be." She lied, but it felt so good to put him down. "My contact is sophisticated, elegant, and educated."

Gun chuckled. "That's me, baby. That, and a hell of a lot more."

"Could there be a mix-up?" She knew there was no mistake and would follow the plan to the letter. She would fly to Paris with Gun, set a guy up to buy his dirty bomb, and be back home before the guy was cold in the morgue.

Her sexual awareness of him bloomed when he leaned down to murmur in her ear. "Where do you live, beautiful Sophie?"

My God, hadn't they just acted out this scene a few weeks ago? Different names, same actors. She couldn't change the script too much. "A few blocks from here."

He inhaled roughly. "Want to show it to me?"

His lips brushed hers in a feather stroke, and her mouth quivered. "I don't know. Last time I let you look at my place, you took your pants off."

"I was young. Inexperienced."

Inexperienced, hell. His hands were an encyclopedia of ways to touch, stroke, hold, and squeeze. Just like those traitorous lips.

"You'll have to okay it with Frankie." Crap. Why had she laid out such a hard ultimatum? But, maybe a feigned headache would get them out of his place and into hers. Please God, just an hour.

"You make it hard, baby, and I'm not just talking about my cock." Gun's smile was an all-out dare.

"How bad do you want me?"

He eyed her from head to toe and nodded. "Pretty damned bad."

She opened her mouth to tell him she might be coaxed into helping, but he walked away too quickly.

"Wait, damn it," she rasped out. He ignored her and went straight to Frankie.

Frankie looked her way and smiled. *Headache. Yes. He believes you suffer migraines.* She furrowed her forehead and touched her temple. Hellfire, Gun was looking her way and gesturing to his stomach. Frankie looked sympathetic, and Gun turned to walk back to her.

"We can go screw all night."

"Who said anything about screwing?"

Gun hugged her waist as he led her out to the elevator. "Your eyes told me."

Okay, so he could read her mind and her body language.

"Gun, just out of curiosity, what did you tell him?"

"I told him you needed a meal, hadn't eaten all day." He nuzzled her hair. "That okay?"

"Fine." Somehow she didn't believe a word Gun had said.

Ali didn't want to think about Frankie for the next few hours. Gun. That's all she would allow into her world, and time was ticking away.

In the elevator, the operator watched them from the corner of his eye and used the mirror skillfully while Gun played with her breast. Movement under the fox wrap was a dead giveaway that his hands were roaming around under it.

Ali slapped his hands and hurried through the lobby and outside, where the doorman hailed them a cab. She managed to keep her clothes on until he opened the door of her hotel suite.

"Donavon, did you miss me?" He shut the door behind them and locked it.

"Hell, no." She looked into his eyes and couldn't play hard to get any longer. She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him, spilling her guarded admission. "Hell, yes, I missed you, you devil."

He caught her face in his hands and kissed her, holding her so close she couldn't breathe. His mouth was sweet and tasted of good liquor and mint, his tongue sliding against hers, sucking on her lips as if he were starving. Gun pressed against her, warming her to the bone; the sheer luxury of feeling his large frame moved over her nerves like a vapor of smoky, forbidden aphrodisiac.

No time to undress, no time for foreplay. None needed. She was wet and pulsing, ready for him. The fancy lace-top stockings she wore required no garter, leaving her free for his pleasure, free for him to slip two fingers under her panty leg and inside her as he covered her mouth in a deep, hungry kiss. She sobbed with emotion. This was no wet dream. Gun really was holding her up and bringing her to orgasm, once, then twice. "Gun, please don't make me wait. I want you, damn it!" Her breath was stilted and painful.

Gun still had it, the strength and will to get the job done and take care of her. She rocked against his fingers while he unzipped, nearly jumping out of his socks as she helped herself to pulling his cock from his shorts.

"Oh, hell, yes, Donavon." His voice was rough as a rock on a cheese grater, and she loved it. She had Gun back, and he filled her with hot lead that swelled inside her, begging for her slick pussy to work him free of his suffocating need.

Ali clung to his hip with her thigh and rode his shaft until her lungs threatened to burst. She had lost the ability to reason by the time she reached a tumultuous orgasm. She heard his rough intake of breath and groan when he came immediately after. His heart pounded just like hers as he slowed his breathing.

She rested against him, her cheek pressed to his chest. The tranquility lasted such a short time, assaulted by the ringing of his cell phone. The thing rang several times before he eased her down and punched the talk button. He seemed a little perturbed with Supervisor Hamm for interrupting.

"Yeah. All set ..." He kissed her head and finished his conversation. "Yeah, I know I'm gasping for air, damn it. Had to run to answer the phone, Hamm."

Gun tossed the phone onto a chair next to the door and picked her up to carry her to the bathroom. She combed his hair with her fingers and kissed his chin as he walked. The moment was theirs to savor, and she couldn't touch him enough. But she had to know.

"Are you spending the night with me, or expected somewhere else?" Did she sound as needy as she felt? Oh, God, she hoped not.

"I'm good for all night. Hamm knows we're together." Gun's kiss was so gentle; Ali was shaken by the touch of sweet tenderness.

"How did he know?"

"While we were talking, I told him we had met up and were spending our free time together."

What was he trying to tell her? Oh, hell, she knew. He was not offering anything more than the last day she had seen him. God help her, she would play by his rules.

"Oh, that's nice." Ali smiled and nodded toward the floor. "Want to put me down?"

"Not really." He rocked her a couple times before letting her down. "I suppose you have plans to go find that son-of-a-bitch in New Orleans and make a fresh start."

Damn it. Why did he have to be so wonderful to be with, yet so damned hateful at the same time? He was subtly telling her she should make up with what's-his-name. *Okay, you invited him in, so live with it.*

"Shut up, Gun. Get in the shower. We only have a few hours." He undressed slowly, smiling at her like one of those hunks that please women in ways they only dreamed of. "I missed you, Gun. You're so entertaining."

She stood still while he slipped her dress off her body and removed her stockings, then her bra. The slow lovemaking with him was new and thrilling, yet it nearly shattered her heart. Why did she allow him to completely own her? Her sob caught his attention, and he gazed at her with a half-smile.

"Donavon, am I wrong to think you want me to stay?"

Ali couldn't believe he asked the dumb question. *Don't cry, for God's sake. He thinks you like things the way they are. He likes the way things are.*

"Don't be silly, Gun. You're not going anywhere until that alarm clock goes off."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The alarm had gone off on schedule, and Gun had been forced to stop in the middle of a body lick he'd been giving Donavon. They hadn't slept at all last night. Sleep? Who needed sleep when the most inventive sex partner he'd ever had was in bed with him. Ah, Donavon. Leaving her had been a real kick in the balls, but duty called, and he had an appointment with that scrawny crook Frankie.

An hour after he left Donavon, he was getting last-minute instructions and a sealed letter of intent to the owner of a Goddamn dirty bomb. Good morning, America. What a life.

"Are you clear on all this, Martin?"

Gun nodded, solemnly. "Perfectly clear, Frankie."

He slipped the sealed letter into his inside jacket pocket. Donavon was in charge of the authorization of a money transfer to the bomb owner's Swiss bank account. The scrawny little bastard trusted Donavon completely.

Frankie eyed Gun for a silent moment. "Did you get Sophie home safely?"

"Safe as a baby in her cradle." What the hell was on this guy's mind? "She felt better when I left her."

Frankie smiled and checked out Gun's tailored, dove-gray sport coat. "The two of you make a beautiful couple. Perhaps we can arrange a party one evening."

"Party?" Gun didn't grin, but he was dying to. This guy couldn't be serious.

"Of course. Just the three of us." Frankie smoothed his perfectly groomed hair. "My bedroom is spacious and terribly comfortable."

Gun couldn't wait to drop this invitation on Donavon. "We'd better talk this over with Sophie. Maybe when we get back. Make it a celebration kind of thing."

Frankie's smile widened. "Yes, that will be wonderful." He gestured toward the bar across the room. "Care for a coffee before you leave?"

Gun shook the soft, perfectly manicured hand Frankie held out to him. "Sophie will wait, but the plane won't."

A chortle similar to that of a half-drunk woman came from Frankie. "Such a sharp wit, you have."

Gun tried to look embarrassed. "You're too nice." Looking at his watch, he prompted Frankie. "Time's wasting."

He couldn't believe the guy was trotting after him to the door, waving goodbye.

"Contact me as soon as the agreement is reached."

"You bet."

At last, out of the confining hotel suite, Gun could breathe like a man with a pair of balls. While the doorman whistled for a cab, Gun contacted HSD headquarters to inform Hamm the mission was on track.

He stopped at his hotel to pick up his luggage and personal items. He sure as hell wouldn't need it for any more parties with Frankie. The cab was waiting, and he left the room behind with no regret.

Ali reluctantly got out of bed and slipped back into her role as Sophie. Sophie didn't like sex or have Gun for a lover. But Ali did. Thinking about Gun made her worry about the outcome of this last togetherness. If he thought she would always be waiting with open arms and legs every time he went off to some foreign country to do whatever he'd be doing, well ... he was wrong. She wanted someone who would be there when she needed him.

She stood in the shower and thought over the whole situation. What did she really want? Hearth and home, or footloose and fancy free? Maybe a combination of the two. The image of Gun and her in a cozy home with a fireplace was nice, but the wind in her hair as she chased down a loser made her blood rush hot and sweet. There were too many places and missions she wanted to go on before chaining a biscuit pan to her ankle.

And would the department assign her to the White House with a baby on her hip? No. She thought about being true to one man. Yes, she'd always been true-blue to every man in her life. She also had some horrible photographic memories of catching boyfriends with other women, stealing from her purse, using her telephone to call their mommas for money. Oh, yes, she had a knack for picking bad apples, as her mother had so aptly said.

Forget it, Ali. You can't have Gun. He doesn't want that condo with a couple squalling little Gunnisons. Neither do you. Resigned to simply living life as it came, Ali finished her shower and dried herself and her hair. Getting into all that sophisticated gear was a pain in the ass.

Brushing her hair smooth as glass was a chore, and working it up into a sleek twist was painful. After the look was achieved, she applied her makeup and then slipped into an ice-blue long-sleeved dress. The material shimmered, glinting softly as she put on her powder-blue suede pumps.

Time flew by, and she rushed to gather the items she wanted to carry on board the flight. This would be a turnaround trip, and she wouldn't need much. Her handbag, the letter of authorization from Frankie, credit card, and her weapon. She slipped the PPK into her handbag. Thank God they wouldn't be hassled at the airport after getting clearance from HSD.

She looked around the suite one last time. Taking a white mink walking-coat from the closet, she left the room and closed the door. There was a definite spring in her step. *Fool. He didn't even have the decency to come by for you.* Grimacing, she lifted her one suitcase and took the elevator down to the lobby.

Gun held his gait down to a fast trot through the crowded airport terminal. The place was packed. Lots of people on winter vacation. Vacation, his ass. He'd had three weeks off in three years and only because of a banged-up shoulder and leg.

Right now, he didn't really care. There was a new adventure on the horizon, and Donavon to share it with. Hell, he had a new life, and it felt good to be alive, for the first time in years. Gun didn't fight the surge of pleasure that bombarded his midsection when he thought of her. Only natural. She was a big part of his life now, and they would be simpatico forever.

He looked over the crowd, not seeing her at first. She would be hard to miss, with that beautiful face and great legs. Then, he saw her.

The guy in the suit talking to her had to be security. She laughed at something the guy said, and he shuffled his feet. Did he do that around her? Probably. No wonder she looked at him as if he was an idiot sometimes. But he didn't care. He had a natural weakness for Southern ladies.

She glanced up and found him in the crowd. A soft smile curved her lips up, and she moved a step toward him. Gun maneuvered around baby carriages and luggage, clearing the distance like a speed racer.

She waved and held her hand up. "Over here."

When the truth hit him, it might as well have been a ton of rocks. She was so important to him that he'd chosen to take hot lead for her. He wasn't the unfeeling fool he'd wanted her to see. Had he pushed that image too hard?

But did he want to commit himself to never doing anything without checking with the little woman first? They wouldn't last three weeks in a domicile for two. She wouldn't

hesitate to throw his clothes out the window if she got mad. Besides, she wanted the White House. She deserved it. He wouldn't try to be a detour for her.

"Hey, Sophie."

She smiled so pretty and held her arms out to hug him.

"Hello, Martin." He thought he saw real affection in her eyes. "Shall we go?"

"All cleared to board and ready to get underway." He hugged her and kissed her, looking forward to being in her company again.

Damn it, his phone was ringing. He hadn't been fast enough turning it off. "Yeah. You're sure?" He pulled Donavon close while he talked with Hamm. "All right. Hell, no, I'm not happy about this. Right." He folded the phone and clipped it back on his belt.

"Martin." She gazed at him with some trepidation. "What's happened?"

That ton of rocks he'd felt earlier was sitting on his chest now. "Got to delay the flight to Paris. I've been called back to Tampa. Some screw-up in the arrest of a major gunrunner. I set that sting up last summer."

"Will you attend this party? I'll have to contact my benefactor to keep him calm." She looked unhappy, then smiled. "Go ahead; I'll take care of things."

"Sorry, baby." He hugged her close and murmured in her ear. "You'll be fine without me."

"Take care, Gun."

He turned to leave, walking fast, not because he was late for anything, but hurried to get away from the pressure building in his blood. He was going to explode if he didn't say it to her. Fuck it.

He did an about-face and trotted back to where she stood watching him. "Okay, Donavon." He didn't pull her close, only touched her face and gazed into her eyes. "I'm not good at making pretty talk. I know I want to be with you. I want to make you coffee in the morning and read the paper in bed with you."

If she didn't say something soon, he would go into cardiac arrest.

"Gun, you just like the way I wear my weapon." She caught his fingers and laughed.

"Hell, no, that's not the reason I came back. I just love having a woman rip my balls out." *Hold it, you fool. You're trying to run her off.*

"Gun, that's exactly what I mean. We'll never get along. We kill people for each other, but we can't make it for ten minutes without tearing each other apart."

He grimaced in disappointment and frustration. "Okay, I know you want that appointment in D.C. That's great. You want that, and I want to go to the Middle East." He pressed his palm to her cheek. "But, hell. Can't we have a home base? Just know we'll be there sometimes when the other one comes home?" He jiggled her shoulders. "Ali, say yes."

Her eyes widened, and her mouth smiled sweetly again. "You called me Ali. You really must like me."

"I'll call you a lot better things when I get the chance." He saw the crowd filing down the loading chute to her plane. "Donavon, is it a plan or not?"

"Only a crazy woman would miss that wild ride." She kissed his mouth and nodded. "I'll think about it, Gun."

"That's all I ask."

She left, and the weight of new commitment weighed heavy on his chest. It would never work.

* * * * *

Two hours later, and miles away from Florida, Ali silently condemned herself for even considering settling again. Gun would never be happy or a complete person tied down with her and her idea of home. She didn't cook, didn't count pennies, wasn't crazy about having kids. And most of all, she damned sure didn't like the idea of sitting at home waiting, while her mate was out having a good time.

Damn, she'd left her gum at the hotel. She pressed back against the seat and looked out at the gray clouds the plane plowed through. Who was she kidding? He was too deep in her blood to miss the chance he offered. Settling or not, she wanted him.

She used the plane's phone and punched in his cell phone number. When he picked up, her answer was brief but powerful.

"Hello, Gun. Yes."

 THE END 

Betty Womack

Betty Womack writes her spicy stories on legal pads before they go into her word processor, a hard habit to break after learning to scribble a few hasty paragraphs on her lunch breaks. Now a full time stay at home writer, she still clings to the legal pad and pen.

School was a scattered affair, spanning from the wide Missouri and over the plains of Kansas and Oklahoma, crossing the Rocky Mountains and back to the Midwest. Quite a trip for someone that is a homebody. Frequent childhood uprooting has made her resistant to leaving her home in the Midwest that she shares with her husband.

The bug to write bit when she was a little girl, before she knew it took discipline and paragraph breaks to write a book.

The need to read hit even earlier; she devoured everything from comic books to Zane Gray westerns borrowed from her brother's stash. She graduated from Barbara Cartland to Rosemary Rogers and has never regretted a word of it.

During all those years, she married, had a beautiful daughter, Patty, and a gorgeous son, Bob. They are busy making great lives of their own now, remarkably doing quite well without her expert advice on everything they do.

Her books reflect a great deal of her philosophy of what every woman should get from life: Fun, excitement, adventure, a great-looking man to love and an awesome love life. Good luck, ladies!

You can visit Betty and her alter ego P.J. Womack on the Web at <http://www.pjwomack.com>.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Bounty Hunters, Inc: For Love or Honor

By Melissa Schroeder

Available Now from Loose Id

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: For Love or Honor

Del 's body throbbed with a want so strong she almost passed out from it. Her mind spun with denials she could throw at him. This would complicate things. They were wrong for each other. They would drive each other to murder within a day or two. But all those thoughts dissolved when he smiled, a dimple winking at her. She couldn't think beyond wanting to touch him. And have him touch her.

“O'Farrell --”

“You called me Dylan just a few minutes ago.” His smile widened. “In fact, you moaned my name.”

She blushed. She wasn't the most experienced of women, but neither was she ashamed of her sexuality. One thing she wasn't ready for was Dylan's flirting. A man that lethal should come with a warning on the package. She could feel his heart beat, the heat of him, against her and the only thing that came to mind was yes. But she pushed it back, trying to be logical.

“Dylan. Are you sure --”

He bent his head and kissed her. Quick, hot, it melted her knees. It was more request than demand and she felt it to her toes. When he pulled back, both of them drew in an unsteady breath.

“Oh, I'm sure, Del. ”

She knew, somewhere back in the logical part of her brain that seemed to have gone to sleep, that she should say no. That she should deny this because it would just end up a mess. But as she looked up at him, she couldn't form the word. She wanted him. Even if it was for this one night, she wanted to touch another person, feel close to him, feel wanted. He must have seen the answer on her face, in her eyes, because without a word he grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hall.

As soon as they were through the door, he pulled her into his arms. His lips were on hers, his hands slid to her rear end, urging her closer against the thick length of his cock. She moved against him, eliciting a groan from Dylan.

“You'll be the death of me, Del ,” he said against her lips. His voice held a hint of amusement but it was overpowered by the sexual need she heard. Never in her life had she heard anything so sweet.

She cupped his face as he lifted her off the floor. Wrapped her legs around his waist as he stumbled to the bed. They fell with an oomph, neither one of them paying much attention. It was as if both of them knew that they didn't have anything but this short time together and they were going to take all they could.

He broke from her lips and kissed a path down her neck to her chest. His fingers deftly flicked open each button of her shirt as his mouth moved over her skin. His tongue darted out, wetting her skin, sending heat coursing through her veins. When he reached the last button, he drew back from her and pushed the fabric aside. His gaze fastened on her breasts. Cool air washed over her already sensitive, hardened nipples. Heat flared in his eyes as he skimmed his fingers over her breasts.

“Lord have mercy, Del. If I'd known what you were hiding under all those horrible clothes, I'd have stripped you months ago.”

She should have been mad. But a curl of pleasure warmed her belly at the admiration she heard in his voice. The backs of his fingers slipped teasingly over one nipple then the next. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself the pleasure of having his hands on her. The light touch drove her almost over the edge of sanity. She allowed it. Del had never felt anything so blissfully erotic in her life. Virginity wasn't something she could remember. It had been too many years, and too many forgettable encounters. Dylan made her feel as if this were something different, something for the first time.

He pinched her nipple lightly and her breath caught in her throat. She felt it all the way to her pussy. She squirmed as a gush of liquid wet her lips. Her clit was already sensitive, wanting attention and they were mostly clothed.

“Like that, do you?”

The chuckle in his voice slid down her spine and curled into her heart. He slid his hand to her nipple and bent his head to take the other into his mouth. The moment he pinched one nipple, he swept his tongue over the other.

Jesus. He continued the same movements as she tangled her fingers through his thick hair. He moved back over her, not breaking his ministrations. Before she was satisfied, he moved away, kissing a path down her belly. She came up on her elbows and looked down at him. Dylan was already unbuttoning her pants, kissing the skin he revealed. When he had them undone, he looked up at her, and the grin on his face wasn't one of a seductive, trained lover. It was pure pirate. As if he were the conquering hero and she the treasure he sought.

“You have the most amazing skin, Del. All soft.” He bent his head and nipped at the skin just above her thatch of hair. Oh, God. “I'd never thought you would feel like silk under that tough exterior.”

“Dylan.”

It was more a demand, or maybe a request. Either way, he apparently knew what she needed. He stood up, grabbed her pants, and tore them off her. Dropping to his knees at the foot of the bed, he latched onto each of her legs and pulled her to the edge of the bed. Slipping his hands between her thighs, he pulled them further apart.

He pressed a kiss against her inner thigh. His tongue darted out, his breath was hot against her, and every nerve ending in her body shivered.

“Hmmm. You are definitely a delight, Del. All this muscle -- great legs, by the way -- but the skin of a goddess.”

His lips moved up her thigh, and when they reached their destination, he paused. Frustrated, she looked down at him. He caught her gaze and then leaned forward and licked her slit.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: For Love or Honor

I truly enjoyed this quick read from the beginning to the end. Ms. Schroeder has created a wonderful beginning to the Bounty Hunters saga and I look forward to her next installment.

-- Contessa, *Romance Junkies*

Melissa Schroeder is well known for writing a tight, exciting, hot story, and this one is no exception... Plenty of action, hot loving and a twist or two will have the reader on the edge of her chair waiting for the climatic end.

-- Valerie, *Love Romances*

This erotic mystery will entrance you from the first word...The author has blended romance, mystery and a futuristic tale that will have you anticipating the next book in the series.

-- Tewanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*