

Devil's Heart



Betty Womack
Loose Id

Praise for the writing of Betty Womack

Devil Take Me

Enhanced by a tantalizing plot, *Devil Take Me* gives us an intriguing couple with Ali and Gun. The sexual tension between is so hot the pages smoke.

-- Elise, *EcataRomance Reviews*

Ms. Womack has written an edgy, suspenseful tale with *Devil Take Me*. This book offers up enough danger and excitement to make you squirm on the edge of your seat; descriptions of the dark, wet jungle and its deadly inhabitants will make your skin crawl, and passionate love scenes will have you fanning yourself.

-- *Romance Junkies*

This is a story that I will definitely recommend to anyone looking for an adventure in and out of the bedroom. *Devil Take Me* has earned itself 5 Angels!

-- Jessica, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Devil Take Me is another thrilling story that pits both an Alpha female and an Alpha male against each other, and the sparks are going to fly...A wonderfully gripping story!

-- Angel, *Enchanted in Romance*

Ms. Womack... has mastered the delightful blend of comedy, romance, and eroticism into a book that will bring you to the edge of your seat with suspense and leave you with the sweet aftertaste of a reality based romance when you're finished.

-- Marissa, *Novelspot*

Devil Take Me is now available from Loose Id.

DEVIL'S HEART

Betty Womack

Loose Id
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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-270-7

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Sherri Lynne
Cover Artist: Jet Mykles

Dedication

These few words don't begin to express my gratitude to the members of Romance Writers World. I also happen to have the best editor. They all have my deepest respect and never-ending appreciation. Ladies, you know what I am trying to say. Gracias.

Chapter One

Ali Donavon knew she appeared to be living her dream, living large, living the good life. Almost thirty-one, and she had it all. What a lie. She had nothing to anchor her life. A woman needed more than a baby-sitting job in her life.

She'd had a reason for every breath a few months ago. Jack Gunnison had been far more than just her partner in the Homeland Security Department. He'd taken her from a world of mundane existence to blood-sizzling excitement. Now, he was off on a new mission, and she was waiting for her heart to start beating on its own again.

Keeping the First Family out of danger wasn't exactly what she'd hoped it would be. Standing around at galas, evenings at the opera, trips to the weekend home, and even a State dinner or two didn't ease her need for action.

Now she stood in the hallway outside her supervisor's office, holding transfer orders back to her old group in Homeland Security located in St. Louis. She'd been reluctant to ask for the transfer, not wanting to appear undisciplined and a quitter, or worse, not having a goal in life. Glancing around, she focused on the group of tourists filing out of the empty press room.

The young visitors were always a source of concern with their rambunctious ways and curiosity. She took a few steps in the direction of the side exit door, but stopped when a particularly hefty male of about seventeen decided to break ranks. He calmly removed his cell phone from his pocket and began to take pictures. Pandemonium erupted. The group escort yelled, and the horrified teacher shrieked.

Probably scared out of his wits, the kid vaulted a red velvet rope and sprinted off toward the east wing.

Ali charged after him, hoping she wouldn't lose her footing on the slick marble floor. She caught up with him before he could open a side door.

"Hold it, mister." She looked at the teenager and wanted to cry. He could have been her silly-assed brother on a field trip, getting into trouble. "Are you lost? Your group's waiting over there."

Another secret service agent took over the job of questioning the frightened young man, leading him into a side office and shutting the door. The kid had just had his first run-in with the law.

There was no way she could stay in this job. Chasing high school kids through the halls of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Lifting her shoulders, she looked around the hallway for the last time. She couldn't lie to herself. She wasn't going to miss it at all. In fact, she wanted to skip down the quiet hall and slam the door on her way out. Good-bye, boredom. Hello, blood and guts.

* * * * *

Gun waited for Ali's answering machine to stop with the greeting crap. Shit. He had to leave a message or do the cowardly thing and hang up.

"Donavon. I'm in Camp Lejeune, waiting to hop a flight out of here, and I'll get into D.C. by midnight. Everything all right with you?" He hesitated and rubbed his forehead. "My

clothes won't be on the sidewalk ... will they?" He held the receiver away from his mouth while he cursed his stupidity. She wouldn't think that was funny. This was Donavon he was trying to talk to. She'd wait until he got home to toss him and his clothes out. "See you in awhile."

He placed the receiver on the unit and looked around the mess hall. Saturday night and almost empty, except for the unlucky few guys doing KP. He spoke to the nearest one who swabbed down the stainless steel coffee urns.

"Thanks a million for the sandwich, man. Damned nice of you to do that for me."

The young man held up a fist and pumped several times. "We aim to please, sir."

"Mission accomplished." He left the large dining hall to get in the van waiting to take him to the airport.

* * * * *

Ali had dinner with several friends in a favorite bistro before going home. And not until after she had turned down several dates with very eligible men. The only thing stopping her was the ever-present memory of Gun.

She was completely insane to equate her life with him. He wasn't even in the picture anymore. Only embedded in her crazy heart.

Getting free of him would be a lot easier once she had real direction and a new assignment with HSD. She couldn't help but think of the way he always warmed her hands with his breath when the car was cold. She put her hands inside her coat, almost feeling his touch. For a split second, she felt the sensation of tight muscles clenching in a mini-orgasm. A soft groan slipped from her throat. *Next mission. Find a way to take care of this problem.*

By the time she pulled into her parking spot next to her apartment, she felt hot resentment toward the man creating confusion in her life. Gun.

She didn't want to go into the quiet apartment with all her memories of his presence. Finally, unable to put it off any longer, she pulled the keys from the ignition. When she opened the car door and got out, she noticed strings of brightly colored Christmas lights strung in the windows of several apartments. Crap. Christmas season already, and of course she was alone.

She locked the car and used the brick pathway that circled around the rear of the building to the front entrance. The path ran by her apartment's bedroom window. Something was wrong. The lamp on her nightstand was on. She hadn't touched the lamp before leaving that morning.

Stepping onto the small stoop, she turned the key in the door. It swung open to reveal an empty, quiet entry hall. The area around her apartment looked perfectly normal. Ali shrugged, realizing she had a suspicious nature.

Still, being cautious was to err on the side of good judgment. She grimaced as the key to her door grated like a car starting on a cold morning. Her Walther PPK was in her hand as she pushed the heavy oak door open.

Damn. Someone was ripping her off. The creeps were in the kitchen, using the refrigerator light to see by.

Sliding around the doorway and pressing close to the wall, she got a better look at the intruder. "Gun?"

She put her weapon back in her handbag and gazed at him with catapulting emotions. Two in the morning, and here he stood, looking in the refrigerator. Tall, dark mystery and monumental sex appeal.

He didn't appear moved at all, just like the first time she'd seen him, and his nonchalance still irritated her.

"Hey, Donavon. This all we have to eat?"

"How was I to know you were coming back?"

He shrugged and tossed the salami back into the meat keeper before turning around to look at her.

"Hi there, sweet thing." He braced his hand on the open door of the fridge, a half-smile on his lips. "Did you miss me?"

In three months, he had gotten pretty lanky for a guy over six feet. Thin or not, he was sexy as hell and getting him bulked up would be the most fun she'd had in a long time. That would have to wait until she wore him completely down with lovemaking.

"Miss you?" She dropped her purse onto their small dinette table. "Were you gone?"

Her world came together as he reached for her, pulling her into his embrace, moving her to stand in front of the open refrigerator. He kissed her into total rapture, the kiss clean and sexy, with a taste of the beer he'd been drinking.

The chill from the fridge didn't bother her. He pushed her further inside and slowly slipped his tongue deep inside her mouth, groaning loud enough to let the neighbors know he was home.

His body was still warm as a tropical wind and tough as nails in her arms. And his desire for her became easier to feel the longer they stood in that icy little space. A wave of vapor bloomed around them before he pulled her close and reached around her to slam the refrigerator door.

He caught her chin in his fingers and whispered, "I'll bet you did miss me, Donavon."

"Hell yes, you devil." She hugged his neck, smiling provocatively as he picked her up. "Do you need more light?"

"You have to be yanking my chain, hot stuff." He covered her lips in a hungry kiss. "I remember the way."

Chapter Two

Ali loved the rustle of the sheets and the scent of his aftershave that rendered her helpless. How could she be indifferent to the man with slow hands and warm kisses? She locked her ankles over his lean waist and lifted her hips to take him in, biting his lip, trying to feel and taste every inch of him.

He slowed for a second to murmur in her ear. "Donavon, tell me you're not holding back on me. I haven't had sex in three months." He groaned like an animal in agony.

"Gun," she gasped. "Don't you dare let go yet." She clenched her teeth and arched to him, clinging to a thin line of sanity and pure pleasure until her climax overwhelmed her into submission. "Okay, now! Oh, yes! Yes!"

She relaxed and raised her arms above her head, while he grabbed her legs to drag them back over his waist. He hadn't come yet, and she stared up at him in fascination. He was getting harder by the stroke, and she was ready to enjoy a second climax.

He held her tight; pumping deep and steady, letting her feel him to her belly button. A little praise might keep him going longer. "Did I ever tell you what a bad boy you are and how much I like that?"

He said something that she didn't hear, but that didn't matter, not when she was lifting off the bed in a blaze of wildfire pleasure.

Rolling around in the damp sheets with Gun topped anything she'd ever experienced. Her body was becoming super-responsive and supple in his hands.

She knew he was coming, by the grip of his fingers on her hips and the drive of his body while he devoured her lips in a scorching kiss that lasted until he groaned and fell on her. With his face pressed into her neck, he moaned and gasped, murmuring choice words.

"I'll never fuck again ... I'm drained, and it's all you, Donavon. The most fantastic pussy in the stratosphere ..."

"Gun." She moved under him and smiled. "You don't have to say that. I'm satisfied. For now."

His knee pressed into her thigh when he rolled off her.

"Gun!"

"Sorry, beautiful." He released her and dropped onto the bed beside her, reaching out to stroke her breast. "Forgot what sleeping in a bed was like."

She laughed and caught his hand. "Don't go to sleep yet."

He made a sound of irritation, one she recognized as a desire to be left alone. She sat up to gaze at her weary bed partner. "I'm serious. You've been gone three months. Talk to me."

His hand covered his eyes. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

"No, you're not." Was he already snoring?

"What do you want me to say?"

"If I have to drag it from you, then screw you." She wished she didn't sound like a possessive bitch.

His dark gaze burned into her when he lifted onto an elbow to stare at her. "I don't know what you need to hear, Donavon."

Turning onto her side to face him, she named one item from her list of complaints. “Okay, for starters, how do you feel about ... things? Us?”

Damn, why had she let all that out? His eyes hooded, his mouth a slash of cold resentment.

“Why do you have to have words for it?” He caught a tendril of her hair and twined it around his finger. “I fuckin’ like you, Donavon. Okay?”

Okay. How could she be pissed off about the attitude she’d had to accept from their first meeting? Gun was not the man for her. Or, not the man who wanted her. She knew better than to get misty-eyed and needy over him.

Hell, in a few days, she’d be the one not answering letters or making phone calls. Lighten up, and drink him in. Eat him up while he’s here in your bed, in your life. They were government operatives, and she accepted the fact there was no real possibility they would ever have a conventional relationship.

No, they would meet occasionally, grabbing their pleasure on the run. That didn’t matter right now. Ali knew she preferred their brief, frenzied, passionate reunions to never being with Gun at all.

“Good enough, you hard-ass.” She rolled on top of him and plastered herself to his lean body. “We still have time to try out your stamina before the cock crows.” She patted his hip and kissed his chin. “You up for it?”

“Keep rubbing that on my dick, and I’ll be up for anything.” His touch kindled the flow of hot desire through her. “Did you really think I wasn’t coming home?”

Of course, she wouldn’t tell him how worried she’d been. “Never gave it a thought.”

Ali moved up to straddle his hips, guiding his rock-hard cock to her and fitting herself over him. She loved his hands touching her and teasing her into a fast climax. She always derived as much pleasure from his orgasm as her own.

She dropped to his chest and worked her fingers into his hair, kissing his mouth to imprint his taste in her memory. The faint aroma of sun-warmed sagebrush and crushed mint leaves mingled with oriental spice. Tomorrow they probably would go in opposite directions, doing things that would scare most people to death.

Was something wrong with her to prefer this life over predictability? Hearing his murmurs of surrender reassured her that this choice was the only one for her.

* * * * *

There must have been one hell of a party in their bedroom last night. The country flowers comforter Ali prized so highly was balled up and tossed against the wall along with the pillows and his clothes. The top sheet was missing, leaving him naked as a baby in her space.

He worked his shoulders, knowing the time had come to tell her he was only flying through, not staying long. She was the only person in the world who intimidated him, made him worry just a little about what he said and did. What the hell was his duffle bag doing on the bed?

He kicked it aside and grinned as he remembered Donavon searching its contents. He wondered if she really thought he'd been fucking around and left some incriminating evidence in his gear. He should tell her about the countless hard-ons he'd suffered through without female assistance.

"Gun."

He propped himself up against the fancy padded headboard. "Damn, baby. You make this mess?"

"Only half of it." She looked at him from the kitchen doorway, drinking a glass of orange juice. "Want a bite to eat?"

"No. Come on back to bed and let me nibble on you."

His blood ran hot and fast just watching her lick her lips. She was beautiful with her crazy curly hair and blue cat eyes. He'd known from the first she was a hot babe, but as time wore on, she had become something big in his life. The thought nearly gave him a coronary.

She strode across the floor to flop onto the bed and onto his empty belly. She looked dangerous and hot, ready for another tussle if he could redirect her energy into having more sex. "Ready for another round, hot stuff?"

Her soft laugh worked like a warm mouth to his balls. "Have I ever said no?"

"I'm going to wind up whimpering like a beat dog this time." He pulled her down to lie beside him, kissing her with an unexpected sense of desperation. Damn, man. Ease up.

The woman definitely had an effect on him. A short year ago, he'd have thought of her in terms of nothing more than a phenomenal piece of ass. Now, he couldn't think about her in such simple terms.

Lost in the taste and feel of Donavon, he almost didn't hear the voice mail on her answering machine. A distinctive male voice addressed her as Ms. Donavon, but she didn't ease up in the business of making his cock hard as a steel beam.

Goddamn it, the guy was telling her he was secretary to the director, and she was to report for a new assignment with Homeland Security tomorrow. "Hold it a minute, gator gal."

He pressed his hand to her shoulder.

"You want something different?" She was so damned great to be with, he just might ought to keep his mouth shut. He couldn't. He didn't want her to go back to that dangerous job.

"Naw, just wondering when you were going to tell me about going back to that shit job with HS."

Chapter Three

Ali stopped catering to Gun's needs and stared at him, not liking the tone of his voice or his macho attitude. "You have a problem with my decision?"

He grimaced in apparent disgust. "You're really going to do it?"

Pushing away from him, she sat up. "I don't need anyone's permission to change my mind. What's bothering you?"

His dark glower didn't intimidate her, just made her resent being spoken to as if she were a naughty child. He groaned deep in his throat and stood up, looking around for his clothes, talking through clenched teeth.

"It doesn't matter to me. Just makes me wonder why you want to chase murderers and risk your ass every minute of every day."

Keeping a grip on her temper presented a problem where he was concerned. "I can handle it. Why can't you?" She glared at his makeshift robe and yanked it from his hips. "I don't need your okay, and damn it, you have my best silk blouse around your ass."

He held his hands out in a show of surrender. "Okay, so I don't give a fuck." He searched through a pile of discarded clothes that had been tossed against one wall. He found his wrinkled slacks. "It's your ass."

Ali took the slacks from his hand and went to the closet, tossing a freshly dry-cleaned pair at him. The hint of a smile on his lips eased her worried heart. She picked up on his mood.

"You're worried about me, Gun. That's cute." She leaned against the closet door, watching him dress. "I know you like me."

He eyed her with a speculative smile. "That's pushing it some."

Her heart skipped a beat or two, not sure and steady like her voice. "I know you spent a lot of time trying to get me out of your hair while you were gone, but it didn't work. Did it?"

"Hell no, it didn't work. You're still a big pain in my ass." He zipped his slacks and listened to the second message that played on her answering machine.

The voice of smooth sophistication issued an invitation she couldn't refuse. The message was brief and crisp. The president would like to thank her personally for her fine job while being with them. That afternoon on the veranda near the Rose Garden.

Ali stared back at him from her corner and waited for his macho remark. It didn't happen.

He shrugged and grinned at her. "Hell, you can't turn that invite down."

Ali locked her arms around his neck and met his steady gaze. "Come with me. Please."

"I didn't hear my name mentioned, baby. This is for you."

"I need you with me."

She had sworn to never utter a weak, needy statement like that again, but there it was.

"They won't let me in." He sounded hopeful.

"Put on a nice sport coat and tie. I'll get clearance for you, and we'll be on our way."

* * * * *

Gun whistled, a long, low wolf whistle in appreciation of Donavon's dress. She'd tried on and modeled three outfits before deciding to wear a sage-green silk suit.

She looked happy, and he felt good just being with her. "Donavon, you're going to give those old farts a heart attack with all that great female flesh showing."

She turned to the wall mirror, checking her hair for the tenth time. She looked to him for reassurance on her outfit, and he didn't know what to say. She looked beautiful to him.

"Gun, is my skirt too short?"

"Hell no. Maybe needs to be a little shorter."

"Stop making fun of me." She had a case of nerves. Her hands, usually still and sure, darted to her hair and then back to her skirt. "I don't know why I care. It'll be hidden under my coat."

He touched her shoulder. "You're perfect, Donavon."

He wanted to start taking off all those clothes while her gaze rested soft and sexy on his face. *Damn it, baby. I don't want you to be soft on me.*

Resting her hand on his shoulder, she gazed at the knot in his silk tie. "You're not sorry about coming back, are you?"

"Are you serious?" He pulled her close to plant a noisy kiss on her forehead. "Can't think of another place I'd rather be." Patting her ass, he added a little something for good measure. "Plus, you look great naked."

Her arms were a safety net that he hated to jump out of. He had to stop thinking like a pussy, maybe ease up on the bad-to-the-bone thing for a few hours.

He dreaded the outcome of what she was dragging from him.

"While you're here, maybe we can run upstate for Christmas."

Okay, face it like a man. "Sorry, gorgeous. I'll be shipping out in a few hours."

The air was heavy with her disappointment.

She said nothing, just let her silent gaze assure him he would feel lousy for a long time.

Her pretty nose twitched a little before she met his gaze again. "Let's go. We'll have time for pizza and sex before you take off."

* * * * *

Ali hoped the tears in her eyes were mistaken for a show of sadness about leaving her job. She didn't want to admit that the source of those tears went far deeper than silly emotional distress. Knowing Gun could walk away from her again with no problem hurt more than her pride.

"And we want to show our appreciation to agent Donavon with this letter and plaque of commendation for a job well done."

She barely heard the commander in chief's words of praise, her gaze drifting to where Gun stood a few feet away. His smile tore at her poorly contained emotions.

The president shook her hand, and the first lady hugged her. Wait. Something was wrong. An audible threat, low and evil, whined past her ear. The razor-sharp crack of shattering glass exploded the wintry-crisp air. Women's screams acted as a whip to Ali's take-charge instincts. The situation was deadly. Her attitude instantly altered from humble guest to Secret Service agent in charge.

Gripping her Walther PPK nine millimeter, Ali shielded the first lady with her own body, standing in front of her while scanning the area for a nut with a weapon. The shooter had obviously already made his escape. Moving her charge toward cover, Ali spoke to her firmly, "Go back inside, please. As quickly as possible!" The first lady was no fool and hurried across the veranda and inside to safety.

Looking over the deceptively serene garden of barren rose bushes, she had seen Gun vault over the flower beds and jump onto the veranda, stand in front of her, and look like the sniper he was, on point, ready to take someone's head off with his forty-five.

She gave over her responsibility to the president and first lady as another Secret Service agent took charge, cordoning off the area and moving people away from the scene. She was free to take a breath.

In the crowd, whispers floated fast and furious. One thought it was a gangland-style hit. Another was sure a terrorist had tried to kill the president. Ali wasn't convinced. The whole thing was off-kilter.

Gun stood beside Ali and eyed her with a tight smile. "I have a theory about that bullet."

"I do, too. It was too reminiscent of Colombia."

He took her aside and waited for security to open the door for them to leave. "Bingo. The slug was too close to your head to be meant for the first lady." He put his hand at the small of her back. "By the way, good job of taking charge."

She couldn't make jokes now. Her heart wasn't in it. "Just doing my job, you prick." She laced her fingers with his, letting him hurry her away from the buzzing crowd, anxious to discuss the sniper. "What have you heard?"

"Armondez had a younger, crazier brother who took over the family business. The one major difference is that he uses his mother's maiden name, Conteguez."

"And of course he's taken over his grudges, too." She wasn't frightened, yet.

The limo that had brought them to the ceremony drove under the wide portico, and the driver hurried around to open the door for them. Inside the fancy automobile, Gun hugged her shoulders, the act comforting to Ali.

After raising the glass partition between them and the stone-faced driver, Gun spoke conversationally. "The FBI agent who gave me the lowdown on the Armondez family said the half-brothers hated each other, were bitter enemies, in fact."

Ali was puzzled. "Then what would his motive be to take the risk of killing me?" She glanced back at the commander in chief's residence. "Especially here at the White House."

Gun exhaled heavily. "Appearances. My guess is that all this bravado stuff is to send a message to his enemies. Anyone who dares cross him might as well go underground."

She had developed a professional attitude about her hits, but this was going to be an ongoing thing apparently. "What makes me so important? The world hated his brother."

Gun leaned near her, turning his face to gaze at her as he spoke quietly. "Taking you out would be the perfect message to send. It would convince his competitors that no one is safe if he wants them dead. A great ego massage for the fucking little rodent."

Her answer was cryptic.

"I wonder if he'll die as well as his brother."

Chapter Four

Gun could see their luggage neatly lined up by the front door. Four bags were Donavon's; one belonged to him. The apartment would be empty this time tomorrow. He felt ridiculous over the attachment he'd developed for the place. He scoffed at his reluctance to leave home. Home. What a laugh. A two-by-four efficiency. Strange thing was, it seemed like a palace because he had shared it with Donavon.

He moved closer to her and breathed in the soft orange-blossom scent of her perfume. "Hey, Donavon. You awake, baby?"

Aw, shit. She made one of those female sniffing sounds. Was she crying?

"I'm awake."

He knew her well enough to realize she would sooner eat worms than show a sign of remorse because they were being sent to different corners of the States. Right now, he wanted to hear her voice and see her smile. Nights were awfully long with just a memory to snuggle up to.

She quieted and burrowed closer, making his heart thump like a tricked-out motor. He cradled her head on his shoulder and kissed her forehead. Lulled into a drowse, an indistinct

sound alien to the usual apartment noises he remembered bristled his nerves and roused him to full alert.

Something was going on. He sat up, reaching across her to turn off the small bedside lamp. He slid off the bed and pulled her to the edge, then off onto his lap.

“What’s going on, Gun? You crazy?”

She grunted as he rolled her off his lap and onto the floor.

He reached up to pull his weapon from the holster hanging on the headboard, keeping her still while he whispered, “We got a visitor, hot stuff.”

“How many you think?” The way she asked made it sound as if they were discussing a lunch menu.

“I figure one -- two at the most.”

He dragged her sneakers from under the bed. “Get your shoes on. We’ll probably have to go outside if this turns out as shitty as I expect.” He yanked her sleepshirt off the bed and dropped it over her head.

She didn’t comment, just stuck her feet in the shoes and jammed her arms in the sleeves of the pink waffle-knit shirt. “I’ll need a coat.”

She’d whispered, but her comment ripped around the dark room like ice falling from the roof.

“Perfect time to think of that.” He crawled on his hands and knees to the closet and yanked her coat off its hanger, tossing it back at her before rolling back across the floor. “Stay down, Donavon.”

He automatically took charge, temporarily forgetting who he was with. She was up before he could stop her, diving across the bed to grab her weapon from the nightstand. A second later, she crouched beside him.

Muffled sounds slipped under the door. The doorknob squeaked as it was tried. Who the hell was out there? Son-of-a-bitch wasn’t much of a cat burglar. Noisy and slow as hell.

Donavon looked formidable, waiting for a shitload of trouble, her hand filled with a government-approved pistol that could take out anyone dumb enough to mess with her.

Gun was positive now that he knew their visitor's identity. It made complete sense. Conteguez was back to finish the job he'd botched at the White House.

The bastard had come for Donavon.

This would be the prick's last trip anywhere. Gun was no longer just a Special Ops agent. He had someone to protect with his life. "Get down." He stood, ignoring her grunt of resistance, and pushed her back to the floor.

"Let go," she grumbled fiercely and shoved his restraining hand aside.

God damn it ... she was on her knees, leveling her weapon on the door.

He wanted to reach back and smack Donavon for following him as he stood and moved into the living room.

Before he could breathe again, the door exploded inward, splintering under the foot of an intruder bent on murder.

Flashes of white explosion from the thug's weapon deafened him in the small room. Hot slugs smashed into walls and dishes in the kitchen seemed miles away as Gun bent his knees and crouched, making himself a smaller target. The shooter flattened up against the busted door and sprayed the room with a nine-millimeter semi-automatic, not hitting either of them in the darkness.

Donavon's pistol barked like a bulldog, and he could hear the metal smacking into the heavy oak door. Several had to have hit the guy in the chest. He had reeled only slightly.

What was going on? Why wasn't the guy dropping like a dead moose? Son-of-a-bitch had on full armor protection. He aimed for the thug's head, but the man ducked out of his line of fire. Instead, his slug caught him in the shoulder, and the expected scream of pain bellowed through the building.

“Aw, shit!” Gun yelled in frustration as a tiny, fragile-looking female resident scurried down the hall past the gunman. No way could he fire again. The killer ran, the entry door slamming against the stoop wall behind him as he bolted out into the darkness.

Two minutes later, six squad cars roared up in a screeching show of authority, stopping at the front of the apartment building. Curious neighbors stared out through the small space provided by the chain locks on their doors.

Gun was accustomed to those stares, knew they were because of him and his strange habit of showing up in the middle of the night and the noise that always followed. Wisely, none of them came out into the blood-splattered hallway. The sidewalk in front of the building quickly filled with curiosity seekers.

Gun hooked his arm around Donavon’s waist, looking her over for injuries. “That was one hell of a wild party.” He didn’t want her to realize how scared he’d been that she might be killed. To lighten the mood, he nodded to the noisy activity out on the sidewalk. “I’ve only had this much attention from the cops when I ran a stop sign.”

He was grateful Donavon knew the score and didn’t fold under pressure. He almost laughed trying to visualize his ex-wife in the same situation. Pissing her fancy panties and clawing him like a scared cat. A warm touch against his side made him look at Donavon.

“Hey, gator gal. You put a few in him. I saw the guy buck a couple times.” Gun couldn’t help it. He laughed and hugged her, grateful she was still in one piece.

“Damn it, Gun.” She still had her PPK in her fist. “I say we trail him.”

“We’ll find him.” Gun leaned down to pick up a spent shell casing. He nodded toward the patrolman coming up the steps to the front door. “Right now, we explain ourselves to the cops.”

She touched his shoulder. “You okay?” She answered her own question with her usual touch of irony. “You’re not bleeding. You’re all right.”

“Sure. You worried about me?”

"No. I just think you have way too many holes in your hide already."

She didn't fool him. Donavon had saved his ass in the Colombian rain forest after he'd eaten hot lead. He knew she wasn't a cynic. She cared way too much about him.

* * * * *

Ali hung up the phone and frowned. "Hamm wants me to go home for a while. Lay low, like some cowardly rat."

Gun neatly changed the subject. "I need some help here." He took her hands and placed them on the tie that hung loose about his neck. "I think Hamm is right. You haven't had any R and R for a while. Go see your family."

Ali didn't like his dismissive attitude. She should have known he wouldn't be sympathetic to her resentment. "I have an idea." She pulled the knot of his tie hard against his throat. "You go see my family."

His grin irritated her. He wasn't one to gloss over his lack of worry in any situation. "Donavon. You're getting that tense look again. I thought we'd worked that out. Need to have one more quick fuck before I leave?"

She pointed to the patched-up door. "Get out. I'm serious."

He grabbed her and held her tight, burying his face in the curve of her neck. "You know I have to go. Otherwise, I'd stay just to make you miserable."

His strength seeped into her bones, and her anger dissolved. "I'm not scared, if that's what you think."

"Hell, I know that." He nibbled on her neck. "I haven't forgotten the night we met."

Neither had she. She had been his prisoner instead of the other way around. The arrest had been a setup, and she'd had no idea the terrorist gunrunner she slapped handcuffs on was really Jack Gunnison, an HSD undercover agent.

The excitement had never stopped after that. She knew her actions sometimes could be seen as unprofessional and overstepped department regulations, but she'd gladly take her chances to stay with Gun.

Even so, he was never going to earn the privilege of bullying her out of something she wanted. She reminded him of his minimal power in her decisions.

"Gun. I'm going to report to the office in St. Louis and get back to work."

"I figured you'd say that." He gestured to the busted-up drapes and glass spread around the small apartment. "Get your suitcase and war paint together. I'm taking you to a hotel. This door won't keep that prick out if he decides to come back."

Ali understood. The situation was serious. "I'll be ready in a minute."

She raked her cosmetics off into a small quilted leather pouch and grabbed the few remaining items of clothing from the bedroom closet.

A tug of sweet memory slowed her as she looked at the bed. They might never sleep in the comfort of the big old mattress again. This had been a haven while it lasted. Okay, move on, lady. You had your time in the sun with him.

Wearing a soft wool lounge pajama outfit and floor-length black coat, she draped a fringed scarf around her shoulders and then picked up her purse and gloves. He was looking at her with a half-smile and a shrug.

"Donavon, you can't regret leaving places. Takes the fun out of moving on." Gun took the apartment keys and waited for her to walk out into the hall. "What the hell. I'm gonna miss it, too."

Ali heard the keys jangle and thump their way down to the safety box below after he dropped them in the return slot. She had told the super they would maintain their residency at the place for a time. Their lease would be up in six months.

The walk to the back of the building to get their cars seemed like a dream to her. Gun constantly looked in all directions and gripped her arm, holding her back until he decided it was safe to move ahead.

"I have a weapon, too, Gun." She couldn't help the smile accompanying her comment.

"Christ, I know that, lady." He took her keys and opened her car door. "Get in. Let's talk a little before we leave."

Oh, hell. This was it. The old "Can we be friends?"

"What's up? We're going to miss our deadlines." Her heart pummeled her ribcage and she wasn't nearly so calm as she sounded. "Where'd you say you were going?"

He ignored her question and got in and closed the door, leaning over to pull her across the console and onto his lap. "Just wanted to try this with you. We've never made it in a car."

She managed to keep a straight face. "Too late to relive your high school days." She relaxed in his arms and gazed intently at the infuriating, heartbreaking man.

He pushed the scarf off her hair and gazed into her eyes for a time. "If you need me -- for anything, you'd better get in touch with me. Okay?"

She was afraid a show of emotion would break free to embarrass her. "You'll be too busy to hear my problems." Her fingers grazed his cheek. "I'll probably be buried so far back in some third world country, getting messages out won't be possible."

He took her hand and slid it inside his jacket. "Listen, Donavon. If you're trying to tell me to fuck off, I'll be fine with that. But, be sure you mean it."

His lips, warm and firm, closed over hers, softening in a declaration of a thousand feelings words couldn't express. Ali couldn't protest under his kiss, the kind he always gave her in the heat of passion. She loved the feel of his long fingers in her hair and the crush of his chest against her heart. Before she was ready, he took away the warmth and strength to grin at her.

"Okay, gator gal." He set her off his lap and got out of the car. "You'll hear from me."

Chapter Five

Two weeks later in New York, Gun combined his current assignment of interrogating an informant with a much more important one. He was going to root out Conteguez, or at the very least, one of his flunkies. He had a good address and was ready for the takedown. On the sixth floor of the dingy apartment building, he looked around the dank hallway and stepped back from the door of apartment 666. The metal numerals were gone, leaving only deep scratches in the wood.

He reached up, twisting the bare bulb over the door until the light went out. The hallway instantly became dark as a tomb and seemed to smell twice as rank. The squeak and shuffling gait of a rat running down the hallway didn't bother him. His only concern was whether the bastard renting that apartment was home and would open the door.

After he laid three more heavy thumps on it with his fist, the door opened on dry hinges, the grating sound fitting the fleabag tenement building. The guy standing in the doorway stared at him before opening his mouth to share his foul breath, a putrid mix of garlic and last week's booze.

"What the fuck you want, man?"

As he expected, the guy was a prick. Gun forced himself to nod cordially. "I'm looking for an old acquaintance. He used to live in this neighborhood." The picture of Vicente Conteguez held the guy's attention.

He spat to one side in a show of contempt. "I know the cocksucker." He stabbed the picture with his finger. "Moved into one of those fancy new lofts and ran around in fine cars and with cheap women."

Gun dug for information. "Does he still come around?"

The man's expression was incredulous. "Hell no! He ambushed some of my friends. We ran his fancy ass out of here. Word is, he got a little nervous after his big brother bought it in Bogotá." The man's laugh was evil. "I heard this punk is living in the south somewhere. He left some thugs here to take care of his enemies."

"Well, shit. Sounds like half of New York should take cover." Gun wasn't worried about New York. He was digesting the words "down south," which probably meant New Orleans, Donavon's family home. The fucker was dead set on taking her out.

Obviously tired of jawing, the guy tried to close the door. Gun caught it with his hand. "Care to share where in the south he went?"

"Fuck you. I didn't say nuthin'. Get the hell away from my door."

"Calm down, friend." Gun caught a glimpse of a tall, skinny girl, watching them from a doorway inside the apartment. For her sake, he let the conversation drop. "Thanks for your time, buddy."

"Beat it, gringo."

He took the rickety stairs down to the lobby, where two hookers were in a hell of a fight. He walked by them, holding his hands up, palms out to ward off a hefty punch to his gut.

"Pardon me, ladies. Don't want to horn in on your party."

The glares he got confirmed his suspicion the women were not interested in him. They immediately resumed their slugfest.

Outside, he lit a cigarette, trying to relax his shoulders. Which way should he go? South? West? He had to stick with the mission he was assigned to, but since he was in the neighborhood, nothing said he couldn't ask questions about Conteguez. He saw no harm in keeping an eye on the bastard and keeping him away from Donavon. She still needed him to watch her back, and if that meant taking the guy out, he would.

Donavon.

Now there was a situation he'd fought long and often. Getting soft on one woman. Pure insanity for a guy living on the fringes of civilization. Ali thought she could handle the crazy, shit style he catered to. There was no way in hell she could stand him for the long haul.

She was a gutsy woman with the ability to withstand a lot more than most women, plus she was in the business, but she would eventually want the normal life, and he couldn't give it.

The mess with her had to be straightened out the next time they were together, if they were ever together again.

The wind had gotten colder, and he turned up the collar of his leather jacket. Catching furtive movement near a huge pile of trash, he put his hand inside his jacket to grip his thirty-eight.

"Hey, mister." The hissing voice belonged to the girl in the apartment. "You got money?"

He didn't want any trouble. "Get lost. Your boyfriend's probably tailing you right now."

She sidled up to him like a slug in the grass. "I need crack. You need a guy's address." Her head cranked around like an owl's.

"What are you scared of, girl?" He figured he knew the answer. Men. "What do you know that's worth cash?"

She lit a menthol cigarette and shivered in her short jacket. "He's staying in a place over on West Fifty-seventh, real expensive, and no whores from the street allowed. He comes down here for what he likes."

Gun hoped she wanted that fix bad enough to tell him the truth. She would likely sell her kid for it.

"Okay." Seemed the bastard was still in New York. A well of eagerness bubbled in his gut. "Give me a good address."

Her hand trembled noticeably while she held it out and recited a short ritzy address on West Fifty-seventh. He didn't have to write it down. "Thanks. You'd better get out of here now."

He stuffed a couple of twenties in her hand and then walked to his car parked at the curb. *Surprise. The wheels are still on it.*

With some help from a traffic cop, Gun found the upscale address where Conteguez was supposed to be staying. Like his brother, Conteguez liked his life on the classier but perverted side. Gun intended to send him into more austere and painful surroundings.

Somehow he would justify this sidetrack to the director if it went sour. He had several hours to kill before his meet with a guy trying to sell very good phony passports. Hell, he had plenty of time to keep Donavon out of trouble. All he had to do was find Conteguez and take him out -- problem over. By the time he parked near the address the chick had given him, Gun was not caring if he was in the Department guidelines. Donavon was worth the fall if he got caught.

No doorman in sight at the moment. That made it simpler to get past the guy polishing the lobby floor. Gun hesitated. What floor should he try first? Damn it. He didn't have time to waste on guessing games. He opted for a time-worn trick on the sleepy-eyed janitor.

“Hey, fella.” He smiled, trying to appear friendly. “Has Conteguez left yet?” Gun glanced at his watch, pacing a few steps in a show of agitation. “We’re supposed to meet up here. Fucker owes me money.”

The janitor jerked the dust mop across the marble-tiled floor. “Haven’t seen him leave all day.” He gave Gun a slanted look before adding to his comment. “I’ll call his apartment for you.”

Always suspicious, especially of weasel-faced pricks, he declined the offer. “No. Won’t be necessary.” He took his cell phone from his belt and punched in a fake number, leaning on the front desk. He shrugged, grinned at the janitor and closed his phone. “Aw, hell, I’ll just run on up there. What was his apartment number again?”

Gun had seen expressions like the janitors before. No emotion. Void of any feeling. “Yeah. Why don’t cha?” He nodded toward the elevator. “You know the number already.”

“Sure. Third floor -- apartment ...” Gun garbled the numbers, lowering his chin as he answered the guy.

“316. At the end of the hall.” Propping up the dust mop, the punk reached for the desk phone. “I’ll let him know you’re coming up?”

Several seconds spun by, the only sound that of a *Sopranos* re-run on a television in the background.

“Don’t bother. I’d rather surprise him.”

The son-of-a-bitch was being too fucking helpful. Probably being paid pretty damned good to keep Conteguez informed on all movement downstairs.

Gun took the stairs, three at a time, glancing over the handrail as he moved to check out what the janitor was up to in the lobby.

He stepped up onto the third floor landing and looked down into the empty lobby. The guy had disappeared.

Damn it. Probably calling Conteguez while he stared like a jerk down at a vacant hole. He moved quickly to the end of the hall to number 316, and listened for a second. Stone silent. His hand went automatically to his weapon as he tapped on the door.

The door flew open, and the gaze stabbing into Gun flashed through his memory like gunfire. The killer, animal stare -- just like his brother. The face of a corpse, a carbon copy of his dead brother Rodreguez Armondez.

Enough fucking reminiscing. Mentally jerking himself back to the present, Gun moved a half step inside the doorway. Bracing his shoulder against the door jam, he filled the doorway with his formidable frame. He wasn't surprised when the guy spoke, the same deceptively soft voice.

"What is it you want?"

"Like you don't know." He grabbed Conteguez's arm, twisting it up behind his back. "I should blow your fucking brains out right here."

He jerked his prisoner's arm up again, hard enough to hear Conteguez cry out in pain. Funny, the pain was exactly like the one in his head, and he was falling into a sea of exploding copper pin-lights. Wait ... wait ... he wasn't about to fall into that sea of fog ... was he ... oh, hell yes ...

In Gun's mind, he was still falling when someone kicked him in the ribs, and then it was over.

* * * * *

He didn't know who or where he was for most of the past day or two, only that his body protested with every breath he took.

"Gunnison."

Who the hell was bothering him when he couldn't fucking breathe?

"Gun! Wake up."

Enough! Gun flung his arm out to drive away his tormentor. "I'll kill you, son-of-a-bitch."

He groaned and struggled for life-giving oxygen. Some bastard asking questions didn't care that his ribs were caved in, and he couldn't see.

"You're lucky, Gunnison." The voice continued to irritate him. "I'm Detective Spillane. You got anyone you want us to contact? Family? Girlfriend?"

Gun searched his bleary memory bank, and only one face appeared. Donavon, gazing at him, worry etching her beautiful face. No. He wouldn't load this on her. She was off to a new start in life and didn't need him fucking up her chances. "No. No one."

His eyes finally opened to more than a miserable slit, and he focused on Detective Spillane. The man was the stereotypical, cigar-chomping, hulk in all the mystery novels. He talked around his stogie, squinting one eye as he talked.

"We've notified HSD that you're alive and doing damned well. There's an agent coming in to question you, to see how you're doing."

"Great." Gun wanted to tell the dick what he really thought, but held it in. The nicer he was, the sooner the guy would leave.

"I hear they're keeping you here a while for observation. You're such a good patient." His laugh grated on his nerves. "I'll get out of your hair." He stood and reached for Gun's hand. "Take it easy, man."

The urge to scream like a girl hit Gun in the gut as his burly visitor shook his hand, jarring every broken rib and his cracked skull.

"As soon as I can stand up -- I'm going to kick your ass!"

After the detective left, Gun struggled for lucid moments and fought to stay sane. What was his problem? His head hurt like hell. But he wouldn't give in to sleep until he figured out where he had been and who he was supposed to be.

He put his hand in the tray table placed across the bed and cussed. "Who the fuck took my smokes?"

His thumb hit the nurse call button and stayed there until a tall, red-haired nurse thundered into his room.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Gunnison?" She glared at her patient who had been dubbed the Bad-Assed Hunk in room 321.

He leaned up on his elbow and reeled to one side. "There'll be plenty going on in here if I don't get my smokes back."

She steadied him, gripping his shoulders and speaking like a top sergeant. "Gunnison, you know that isn't allowed in the hospital. How about a nice hot, strong cup of tea?"

Gun closed his eyes, finally reduced to letting her lay him against the pillows. "I don't like tea. Didn't Donavon tell you that?"

"Donavon? Someone special?"

"Is the sun special?" He tried to get out of bed. "Help me find my clothes."

"As soon as you get your medication."

He had become used to the constant rounds of sedatives. He didn't want drugs. He wanted his freedom.

There was the familiar sting of the needle in his ass and then blissful silence in the room when she stopped talking. Nursezilla checked his room for anything pleasurable and threw his second dessert from lunch in the trashcan. Finally, she covered him like he was some damned kid and then left him alone.

Gun waited a couple minutes before getting out of bed. He took off the thin gown that barely covered his ass and threw it on a chair. He was dizzy and weak, but he found his clothes in a narrow steel closet.

He took them into the bathroom and closed the door, pulling on his shorts and slacks, fumbling with zippers and buttons. Getting socks and shoes on was the hardest, but he managed to tie the laces into reasonable knots.

A splash of cold water on his face revived him some. He combed his fingers through his hair and then dragged on his leather jacket. The weight of the coat made his shoulders hurt, and he winced with the new pain.

His wallet was still in his jacket pocket with all his cash. He checked his shield, feeling foolish having to be reassured of his identity. Yep, he was Jack Gunnison all right. Now to find his weapon.

Chapter Six

Ali put her foot on the longing in her heart, the ache that never eased up. Tonight she planned to go out and mingle with the crowd at Dooley Glen's Emporium, a local pub for the unattached crowd. She knew some of the patrons, but had never been interested in any of the guys that came on to her. Didn't matter if they weren't Gun's caliber. As of here and now, she was making herself available.

Why not? She hadn't heard from him in weeks. The lease on their apartment in D.C. would soon expire. She had a new, one-year lease on a nice townhouse in Atlanta she'd found before going back to St. Louis. Nice and new with no memories of Gun.

Right now, she was deep in the process of taking on a new identity and a new mission. The job would take her to Italy on her own. Not too exciting busting a high official for espionage at an exclusive spa, but she loved Italy and would be free to move around on her own. She planned to do some power shopping to perk up her wardrobe at the same time.

Her mood was as low as it had ever been. All the former bravado of putting herself back on the meat market was crap. She'd never be able to look at another guy as a lover, never kiss another man, and certainly not have sex with another man. Pretty damned pitiful, Ali. Loser.

“Donavon.”

She jerked herself back to the present, looking at the group leader, Supervisor Milton Hamm.

“Yes, sir?”

He seemed to be purposely keeping her time filled and meant to run her ass off with paperwork detail. Not to mention daily weapons firing and films to watch.

“Something’s come in that may cut you out of that assignment in Italy.” His expression rarely altered from serious to dead serious. Right now, he seemed worried about something.

“What’s changed?” She shoved her disappointment under the table at the news she was getting bumped off a good mission.

“We’ve been hearing chatter for a couple of months. Nothing confirmed. Just chatter. Until now.” He carried a manila envelope to where she sat and laid it on the conference table front of her. “Seems we left trouble in Bogotá.”

The clicking in her brain brought a stream of ugly memories back. “Armandez’s brother?”

“Yes.” Hamm sat down across from her, tapping a pencil on the table, his one nervous habit. “Gun flushed him out in New York.”

“What happened?” That isn’t what you want to know, fool! Ask him how Gun is ... is he alive? Her stomach clenched in waves of cold fear.

“While he was arresting Conteguez, Gun was bushwhacked by several of Conteguez’s flunkies and beaten pretty badly, pistol whipped and kicked in the ribs repeatedly.” Hamm’s expression was grim. “Someone in the building heard the disturbance and called the authorities, the only thing that kept Gun alive.”

Ali modulated her voice even though she was desperate for information, looking down as she spoke. “Gun got out okay, then?”

"This time." Hamm probably wasn't aware of the cryptic tone of his words. "He was in the hospital in New York, but refused to stay. That was two weeks ago, and he's being transferred."

Should she ask more questions? No. Just be grateful that the wild man was still breathing. Gun. He would drive her crazy.

Hamm pointed to the folder in front of her. "Conteguez has been real busy from D.C. to New York." Hamm grimaced and lit one of the South American cigars he reserved for times of great stress. "He's wanted here in the States for the murder and torture of the Colombian ambassador and his entire family. Pregnant wife and four little girls."

His words were devastating. Gun injured, not sure how bad. Conteguez, mad-dog killer, loose on the world. Heart racing, she put personal concerns aside and forced herself to be calm. "We have to throw a net over that animal."

Hamm exhaled heavily. "The department feels this is your case, or the wrap-up of the original in Bogotá. You've been tapped to finish the mission."

She was defiantly interested in getting the mission started. "Is this mandated live capture or permanent removal?"

"We'll of course try for a live capture, but if that isn't possible, you are at your discretion to arrive at your safest conclusion."

Ali nodded, remembering another job that ended in a bloody jungle scene, running for her life after the mission was completed. Right now, that wasn't important. She realized the pursuit of this insane murderer would be lengthy and dangerous as hell.

While she read the latest data on Conteguez, her thoughts burned with questions and worry about Gun. She berated herself for having a less than professional attitude and letting Gun ruin her concentration.

A commotion in the hallway barely roused her curiosity. Probably one of the guys coming back from a long mission out of the country and happy as hell to be back in the USA.

She had gone back to her files when the kiss of a dark velvet voice claimed her heart. The voice she had longed to hear and feared she never would again.

Be calm. He's not here to see you.

She sucked it up and tried to appear only minutely interested, not overjoyed like she really was.

He works here, just like you.

She stood and walked casually to the door, setting her expression to mild surprise when he finally looked her way. He was damned gorgeous, even with a black eye and a row of fresh stitches on his chin. He smiled at her with that same devil gleam in his midnight eyes.

Dear Lord, he really is okay.

"Hey, Donavon." He sauntered toward her, in no damned hurry. "I think we're working together again."

She shrugged and stayed where she was. "I can stand it if you can."

Chapter Seven

The St. Louis office hadn't changed at all while he'd been gone. Matt Hamm was still the group leader, and Donavon had signed on for another tour of action. Gun couldn't take his eyes off the only thing in the world that he wasn't able to shake from his life. Donavon.

They were back in the very place they had begun their firestorm relationship.

She was thinner now, but it only gave her a sexier, tougher look. How could he still want her so badly? He wasn't ever going to settle down with one woman and raise kids. His world didn't allow for such luxuries.

Remembering his failed marriage and the ugly attempts of trying to pound himself into his ex-wife's kind of life still made him shudder with fear of repeating the mistake.

In the final minutes before he'd left Donavon in St. Louis, he'd almost asked her to marry him. He couldn't mess up her life just because he wanted to be sure she'd be waiting when and if he decided to come in to roost.

Fuck it. Donavon wouldn't be alone very long. She probably has someone she can depend on now.

"Damned right, I can stand it." He caught her hand and gave her a big brother-type hug. "You ready to hunt with the old hound?"

Clever as hell, Gun. She's looking at you as if your dick is hanging out of your pants.

Her eyes were bluer than he remembered, and her smile was warm and welcoming for only a second. She quickly went back into that "I'll kick your ass" attitude. Her voice with its occasional little scratches worked its way into his blood and teased his balls. Man, nothing changed around here.

"We're ready for you here." She opened a thick folder of information sheets and leaned over the table to point at something. He never did see what that something was. When did she start wearing her hair up? He liked it.

"Okay, Donavon. What's the final order?"

She sucked her cheeks in a little while she thought about his question. "Live capture, if possible."

"Hell, we both know this fucker is too dangerous and jack-batty to come along nicely." Gun couldn't forget the bullet that should have killed Donavon, but her luck had held one more time. "We'll do our best."

He grinned at her and tried to sniff her hair.

"Gun, you went to jail for that the first time we met."

"Worth every minute, too." Okay, he didn't want to start the relationship again. Leave her alone.

"Hamm is waiting for us in the hall." She drew back, out of his reach.

"I'm ready." Of course she didn't want him moving back in on her. What woman would? "We can grab some coffee in the conference room, or don't they allow that anymore?"

"It hasn't been that long, Gun." Her hands shook, and she quickly filled them with a stack of folders, hugging them to her chest while she gazed at him. "Not that much has changed."

Now, what did that mean? She had someone decent, or was she still interested in him? She would tell him if that was the case. Right now, he didn't see anything standing in his way.

"Want to have dinner with me? I'm staying at the same fleabag." He couldn't drag his gaze from her mouth. "How about you?"

"I didn't change hotels either. Same one I stayed before we left for Colombia." Her smile was wry and brief. "The place is clean, and I get fresh linens three times a week ... I'm on a different floor now." The color in her cheeks heightened, and she licked her lips.

Gun stepped back. "Okay. Am I supposed to ask what floor, or lean over and let you kick my ass?"

Hot resentment glinted in her eyes and crimped her lips. "We work together, Gun. You didn't care what floor I lived on for weeks on end, and now it's uppermost on your mind?"

He gestured in resignation. "Just thought I'd save you some pain."

"You kiss my ass, Gunnison."

"But, in the meantime, we can work well together. Right?"

"That's what they pay us for."

* * * * *

Ali steeled herself against falling into that warm, fuzzy pit. Oh, hell yes, the excitement was unbearable and the sex too good to ever want to quit. But Gun was bad medicine. Bad mojo. His needs were sensual, fast, and temporary.

Working with him in Bogotá had brought out the animal in her, wild and hungry. Damn it! She felt the same thing right now. She would be crazy to deny herself the dizzying flight through hours of exquisite foreplay and coming in a cosmic heat. She wanted it. Letting her resistance go, she looked around for a place they could use for a fast, hot tryst.

Her mouth curved into a secretive smile. There wasn't a place big enough for her to let go of her boatload of arousal.

"Stop being a slut," she murmured under her breath.

"What's that?" He gazed at her with his incredible dark eyes.

"It was nothing." She stepped around him and headed for the conference room. Being alone with him was exactly what she wanted. But that was nuts. He would slip back into her libido again, and the pain would be twice as bad when he left again.

He walked beside her in silence, his big body throwing out electric charges of orgasmic invitation. Ali tightened her thighs, trying to forestall the invading tingle of pleasure, angry that she was so susceptible to his special brand of sex games.

"In here." She hated the sharp tone of her voice, especially while his hand grazed her back just above her hips, making her want him like a drug. He probably knew it was caused by sexual frustration. "We're ready to start working out the schedule."

"Hey." Gun touched her waist to slow her retreat from him. "Lighten up, Donavon. I'll help you ease that tension with the Gun special."

All bets were off. He had struck the spark, and the ever-present desire for him roared to life. "You're the last thing I need, Gun."

He gazed at her with his damned annoying, stoic expression. "Hell yes. I can see that, but you want me. Don't you?" His scent drew her into his magic sphere. Cedar and something oriental. What kind of man smelled like that? Oh, damn it, he did, and she wanted to rub herself over him like a big, hot-blooded jaguar.

She had the irrational desire to see him on his knees, begging for her favors. Damn him. He wasn't getting in her pants, not this time.

"I hear you got into a scuffle in New York." She turned and walked back into the small file room.

"No, I just paint up like this for fun."

Ali wanted to kiss the black eye and the stitches on his bruised chin. He grinned at her, and she looked away, not wanting him to see her sympathy for his pain.

The rest of the day was quiet, the silence broken only by the rustle of paper or a desk drawer closing with a hollow thump. That, mixed in with an occasional brief exchange of information.

Gun took every opportunity to touch his knee to hers under the table, his arm coming around her shoulders as he reached for something. He was driving her wild with his constant covert caresses.

Hamm worked alongside them until there was a real and workable plan of action. He studied the chart Ali had made of her tracking plan.

“Donavon, this is going to work. Conteguez is still in New York according to CID informants, and that is the logical place to start.” He held his hand out to Gun. “What have you come up with, Gun?”

“I don’t like Donavon’s ideas or route.” He gave his papers to Hamm who looked dismayed.

“Not New York?” Hamm glanced at Ali and caught her frown.

Gun gestured toward the map of New York’s Wall Street. “New York, yeah, but not the plush side of Fifty-seventh Street. That bugger is in the tenements. If he’s still there.”

Ali took the paper from Hamm and studied it for a moment. A completely different plan from hers. “What are you talking about, Gun? That ego freak is accustomed to fine things, not squalor.”

“So, he knows Donavon will think that way.” He didn’t meet her hard stare, but she could see he was grinning.

“Gun could be right, but I don’t buy it.” She thumped his thigh with her fist under the table.

Hamm lifted his hands and leaned back in his chair. "Talk this over, and we'll get back on it first thing in the morning."

Gun stretched and eyed her with his dark gaze, his sexy mouth set in a half-smile. "You thought any more about our earlier conversation?"

"We conversed?" She hadn't thought of anything else. "Refresh my memory." She gathered up the files and map books. "And I'd like to know how you plan on finding Conteguez."

"I figured I'd just follow you." He glanced at his watch and then out the window. "Looks like it's going to freaking snow."

"I don't give jack-shit if there's a blizzard. We work this out first thing tomorrow. When we have a set plan, we tell Hamm we're ready." Ali finished putting her information sheets in an orderly stack and held her hand out for his files. "Well?"

He held them out toward her. "Right." He stood and leaned over her shoulder, grazing his cheek against hers. "I'll order pizza, and we can lie on the floor and watch it snow from my balcony doors." He didn't move back when she stood. She wasn't budging, doing a fucking great job of a face-off, close enough to press her nice melons -- as he called her breasts -- against his chest. "You need those cold feet warmed up. I still have those big old heavy socks you like."

She laughed wryly and calmly stepped around him. "That'll never happen."

He laughed and stayed close to her as they signed out for the night. "I'll wait up for you."

Chapter Eight

Ali stared out the window of her hotel suite and wondered what Gun was doing. She wasn't going to call him. That would seem too anxious, and he'd love that. He said he'd wait up -- but that didn't mean he'd meant for her to show up at his door. Knowing him, a few broken ribs and stitches wouldn't slow him down. Damn it.

She turned away from the window, and paced the floor, yearning to feed the hunger gnawing at her. Grabbing a bag of M&M's, she munched a handful as she paced. What would he do if she really did show up at his door? And if he had female company? She wanted to find out. No, she couldn't be silly enough to spy on him.

Tossing the bag onto the bed, she went to the closet and took out her heavy, long coat along with fresh jeans and a gray sweatshirt. You're a fool, Ali. But, you have to do it.

Revived by the prospect of having some fun, she stripped off her bra and panties before pulling on her jeans and sweatshirt. The bare-butt feel excited her, and she hurried to lace up her ankle boots.

She clipped her weapon onto the waist of her jeans and wondered how many women went to call on their men armed to the teeth. Didn't matter. He wouldn't know her without the arsenal.

Time to pay a call on Gun. His pad was four blocks away and The Fat Boy Pizza place happened to be on the way. Right across the street from Mabel's Fun and Games Adult Trinket shop.

Total time wasted getting out on the street was minimal. She didn't lose a second of time she could be with Gun, the plus factor pushing her along came down in big, heavy flakes, swirling down fast and piling up quickly. The street hummed with an eerie silence, lending a mysterious feel to the night.

She stopped in the pizza joint and bought two large pizzas, one triple cheese and double pepperoni and sausage for Gun, the meat eater. He'd better damn well have some soft drinks waiting. She huffed at her thought. The man only knew about instant coffee. She added two packs of cola to her tab.

Trudging through the crystal snow, she made her way to the adult novelty shop. It was empty except for the garishly painted-up clerk. He grinned when she explained what she wanted, selecting several new and supposedly exciting items. A glow-in-the-dark cock ring and some tingling condoms. She'd let Gun be the judge of their performance rating.

The night was perfect for a surprise visit to an unsuspecting man, cold, eerie, and with an armload of gifts for the jackass.

Holding the pizza close and with her bag of toys loaded on top of the boxes, she trotted the rest of the way to his apartment building. The small courtyard was being covered up fast with the dazzling snow, and the lights in the windows looked inviting. He'd said the third floor. She went to the heavy front door and pushed it open, bringing a shower of snow in with her.

Checking the mailboxes, she found him. Joe Gunther -- his alias in apartments and hotels -- apartment 333.

Getting on the elevator, she began to rethink her reason for being there. He deserved being intruded on, even if he wasn't alone. She scowled. He isn't your property.

She was a fool. So what? She had been hot to get back in his blankets ever since leaving Washington. And, sister, he is yours tonight!

The elevator door slid open, and she stepped out, looking for 333. Yep, there it was, at the end of the hall. A nice umbrella stand filled with plastic flowers and reeds had been placed near the door. Perfect for a man who didn't give a damn about trimmings. A deer rifle would be a better choice for getting his attention.

The fact that here she stood at Gun's door proved her to be an easy mark. His pigeon, as he would say. So what? Go in and have a nice chat, eat some pizza, and see what comes up. She rolled her eyes in self-rebuke. *Pathetic woman. You know what you want and damned sure won't leave without it.*

Ali knocked on the door, quietly, looking around the hall. She knocked again, louder this time. Be sensible, lady. Give him time to get to the door. Several seconds ticked by, and her disappointment deepened.

Damn it! He'd probably gone out. She turned her back to the door and whacked it several times with her boot heel. From inside the apartment, Gun snarled.

"Yeah?"

Ali kicked the door again. She felt the suction of air as the door flew open. She turned to see Gun, standing in the doorway, the tiny towel knotted around his hips hanging low over awesome abdominal muscles.

Six foot four of clean, hard, scarred male. Gun was polished bronze, everything about him bragged of power and pleasure.

Of course, he'd expected her to show up. He wouldn't be leaning casually against the doorjamb, smiling knowingly at her, if he wasn't confident of his hold on her.

Be casual. He's only a temporary fling.

"You were in the shower?"

"You the girl I sent for?"

She wanted to slug his flat gut and stomp his bare toes. Instead, she pushed him aside and strode into his apartment, tossing the packages on the coffee table. He'd known it was her at the door, probably watched her plowing through the snow to get there.

"I'm the only girl you're getting tonight, you bastard."

Shrugging off her coat, she proceeded to come out of her sweatshirt. He hooked his thumbs in the towel and observed her with a slow smile and a leading question.

"You planning on spending the night or something?"

"You planning on closing that door?"

The security chain rattled against the wood after he slammed the door. "Any more questions?"

Ali burned with need as his pitch-black gaze lingered on her breasts. "What's taking you so long?"

He stepped toward her, and she unclipped her weapon, holding it in her right hand. His height concealed everything in her line of vision except him. She reveled in the shocking thrill of grazing her tits against his chest.

"Let's go have sex. I know you like that sex word better than plain old fuck." He put his arms around her, locking his hands at her waist.

Weak with desire to open to him, she couldn't be coy. "Fuck is sounding awfully good."

She released the knot in his towel, and it fell from his hips.

He glanced down at his cock, which stood up against his belly. "Think you can take care of that?"

His dick pushed at her like something with a will of its own. Large and hard, hot with throbbing life, and a man of deep passion attached to it.

"I'm cutting those jeans off you so you get my meaning." He walked her backwards to the bedroom door. "On the other hand, I'm so hard, maybe I can get through those little pants. That's how hot I am for you." His voice held the gravelly rasp of arousal.

No need to say anything when he took her weapon and laid it on the bedside table with his forty-five. He moved her hands to take over the job of pushing her jeans down her legs.

"Gun, wait." Intent on the business of tossing her onto the bed, he hesitated. "My shoes." He yanked them off her feet, tugging her jeans off to toss them over his shoulder. He quickly dropped down to wedge himself between her legs.

"Now, let's start over." His mouth covered hers roughly, possessively, the warmth and texture of his lips sending shock waves of heat quickening to her crotch.

She parted her lips to take his tongue into her mouth, touching his face to feel the heat from wounds on his chin and eye. Not telling him how much he meant to her was painful. She should just come out and reveal her feelings.

She turned her face from his kiss, fighting to keep her mood light and noncommittal.

"I brought gifts."

"Don't tell me. Some of those goofy shorts or an ass plug."

She spanked his ass. "How did you know? And I spent so much time looking for them." She rolled him off her and got out of bed. After looking at his beautiful hard-on, she smiled in appreciation. "Hold that thought."

"Something wrong, gorgeous?"

"No."

Her answer obviously didn't satisfy him. "Tell me what it is, or we'll go back to just plain old fucking."

"I brought something to add to your fun." She went into the living room and opened the bag from the trinket shop.

He answered with his normal cocky attitude. "I don't need anything." He had gotten up and followed her, looked over her shoulder, and murmured, "You're all I need to have fun."

"Um-hum."

He was being macho, but curious. "What's in the bag?"

She turned and held up the lime-green cock ring. His smile was crooked and revealed hunger to match hers.

"That looks way too big for my finger, honey."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of your finger." She wasn't quite sure of the vibrator part, only that he was in perfect condition to be ringed. "Let me know if you like this." Her fingers had never shaken in this kind of situation before. But, she'd never wanted to please anyone so much.

His groan of pleasure banished her earlier worry and urged her to take him on a fiery joyride. In her hand, his cock was heavy and warm with fast-running blood, veined and wide. A handful of ecstasy. His quickened breathing told her to hurry.

She squeezed, holding him back while her fingers worked the ring over his length. She glanced up, and he was grinning at her, literally putting himself in her hands. The man trusted her implicitly to allow such a device to hold his most prized possession.

His sudden grimace startled her, and she tried to roll the ornament off. He caught her hands and laughed, pulling her close and backing her up to rest against the wall.

"Damn you, Gun. I thought you were in pain."

"I am."

His mouth hovered a breath away from hers, and she moistened her lips in anticipation of his kiss. Sweet, scarlet desire leaped higher as his lips settled over hers, exploring in hot demand.

She underwent a rush of emotions that brought out something strong and wild in her. The feel of the ring around him pleased her in an odd way. Like the ring in a bull's nose.

"Donavon, you want to open those sweet legs, or do I go down on you first?" His hand was between her thighs, long fingers stroking and seeking. He had no trouble sliding two inside her and used her wetness to pleasure her, teasing her swelling clit.

She reached behind her to hit the light switch and looked down. "Incredible," she murmured. "Your cock's lime green and moving on its own."

"I don't care if its tangerine." His voice was rough and sexy, words running together. "It's moving because you're what I want."

She wiggled her hips and spread her legs further apart, hugging his neck and pressing against his hot hard-on. This had to be the greatest pleasure in her life. Gun holding her, kissing her, lifting her onto her toes, and entering her with a thrust that rendered her insane with pleasure.

"Lift me up," she gasped, while her legs clamored to wind around him. "Higher, Gun."

In her wildest, most heated dreams, this had happened. Gun, bracing her up against him, stroking deep inside her, touching the places that ached for him. Charges of wonderful heat coursed through her, mingling with the sweet emotion of her feelings for him.

Her man was with her and giving her his best. Hard, deep, and steady. He was strong, and his touch unforgettable. The cock ring added pleasure, warming and enticing until it was body temperature. She raised her hips each time he thrust, and held him in for a breath each time before letting him pull back.

She didn't want to come. She was experiencing bliss, bliss of being one with him, while her starving needs were being fed. Need to be locked in infinity with him with no possible separation was screaming through her brain, consuming her with talons that sunk deep in her flesh. "Gun!"

She cried out in her passion, no longer fighting the climax that blazed over her. Gun held her tight, his movement ceasing while she trembled in the last waves of emotion.

"Donavon." He kissed the curve of her neck and nibbled her shoulder. "I don't think you're finished. Want to fuck on the bed this time?"

That Gun was trying to do things her way was an earth-shaking proposition. She held back her soft sob of happiness and hugged his neck hard, longing to tell him how sweet his

comment had been. "Yeah, I'd like that." She hadn't succeeded in disguising the emotion in her voice and hoped he hadn't heard it.

"Okay, hot stuff. Anything you want." He carried her toward the bedroom, stopping long enough to grab the sack of toys she'd brought. "I'll bring this bag of goodies along."

Ali knew she'd done well, bringing her mate gifts. He hurried into the bedroom to lay her on the bed and then dropped down to warm her with his powerful body. The crackle of paper bag mingled with her moan of ecstasy as he parted her legs and slid into her, still hard and still wearing his cock jewelry. Caught in a tide of his making, she caught his face in her hands and forged her lips with his, drawing his breath into her lungs.

She didn't want him to ever forget this night. He was the worst thing that ever happened to her, and yet she was grateful for the few moments in his arms. Gun was in her blood.

Tonight he wasn't bringing the house down with his noisy comments and praise of what a great fuck she was. No, his hands spoke for him, cupping her ass to hold her up higher for his penetration, caressing her hips and her breasts. Gun was going to come, his thrusts deeper and faster until he held her so tightly she gasped for breath.

He was heavy when he relaxed and lay on her, sweet and heavy. Ali ran her hands over his hard ass and kissed his neck while he recovered.

He lifted his head and groaned, but reached for the sack she had brought. "What else you going to do to me?"

Her heart padded happily in her chest, and she hugged his waist to hold him still. "Not yet."

"You better get that thing off me, Donavon. My dick might fall off."

His muffled comment made her laugh.

She slid her hand down, feeling for the adornment. Now that he was finally soft, it slipped off without too much resistance.

“You’re fine now, big guy.” She raised her legs to squeeze his hips between her thighs. “Let’s get a shower and maybe have a party in the terrace doorway.”

His smile was lazy and seductive. “Aren’t you glad I waited up for you?”

“I think you’re a lot gladder than I am.” The time had come to convince the overconfident man that she could have gone somewhere else. She glanced at her watch and then at the door.

He caught her wrist and shook it a little. “You going somewhere, Donavon?”

Ali rose to her knees, shaking out her hair like a Burmese tiger getting ready to hunt. “Convince me to stay.”

Chapter Nine

Gun hadn't thought about his age in a long time. As always, their sex had been too good for a bastard like him, and now he was tired, leaning on his elbow to watch over Donavon. Gazing down at her while she napped on the floor beside him made him feel every day of his thirty-seven years.

Donavon was in prima shape, sleek and way out of his class. And she brought to the fore that he was losing a step in endurance. The woman was wearing him out.

Age was only a number, but if that was true, why did he suddenly begin to think past today?

With Donavon being so close, he experienced a gnawing need to gaze into her eyes and feel her hands on his body. He wondered if she was comfortable, warm enough, satisfied. It would be a shame to wake her up. She looked awful sweet sleeping on her belly, leaving nothing to the imagination. Yeah, she sure had a nice, round ass.

A sense of cold urgency came from the dark, firing up his growing need to keep her close.

Time was running out, and he wanted her awake, talking to him, insulting him. "Donavon." He spoke softly, having learned quickly in their relationship that was the best

way to wake her. Having grown up in a house with a passel of siblings had instilled the desire to fight if her sleep was disturbed. It had to be done carefully. "Gorgeous? You asleep?"

Her groan was soft, a veiled warning to leave her alone, but he went on with his attempt to rouse her. He smoothed his hand down her back and over the curve of her hip. His hand grazed the soft skin of her back until she sat up.

"It's late. I have to go home."

He laughed, her headstrong attitude not unexpected. "You can't go home. There's a blizzard going on out there."

"Don't care," she mumbled. "Gotta go to work in the morning."

Donavon could be a pain in the ass, but tonight he found her extremely attractive and he didn't want her to leave.

His gaze lingered on her hair that formed a windblown halo around her face and shoulders. "Relax, baby. I'll take you home when the storm lets up."

She relented, letting him pull her close. They lay face to face, gazing into each other's eyes, until she made a calm observation.

"Your hair's dark. Your skin's dark." Her tone didn't alter from quiet observation. "Just like the devil's heart."

He laughed. "You've never had anyone like me, have you?" What a woman. She knew him inside out.

"Think I'd admit it?" She combed her fingers through his hair and yawned. "Have you been asleep?"

"No, I was thinking about nailing Conteguez."

"Anything new I should know about?"

He caught her hair in his fist and lifted the silky curls to his face and sniffed. "Our accommodations." He could see the speculative wariness in her eyes. "We get to New York and hole up in some low-rent kitchenette."

"No, we don't. We take two suites at a moderately priced hotel."

"You don't want to stay with me?"

"The mission doesn't require those arrangements. So, no, I don't."

"You will."

He grunted when she pressed her knee to his belly. He probably deserved that for trying to hold her down. She was on her knees, glaring at him. "I hate you when you act like a grunting pig."

Now you've done it. He rarely ever felt it necessary to apologize for being himself, but with Donavon, it was major. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'm a hog."

"Pig."

"Okay, that, too." He stroked her arm and took her hand, kissing the soft palm. "Want to hurt me or something?"

She didn't seem to notice as he slowly pulled her back down to lie beside him, or that he was covering her with the blanket they had brought into the living room. He did hear her sleepy sigh as he spooned her against his thighs.

He allowed himself the luxury of enjoying complete surrender to her warmth and the cozy silence surrounding them.

A powerful gust of wind pounded the balcony doors and swept the snow already piled up out there, knee-deep against the glass.

"And you want to go home," he murmured. "Better stay with me."

She stretched out to lie on her back, turning onto her side to look out at the storm. "It's not that bad, and I am going back to my hotel."

"What is this sudden rule that we don't spend the night together?" Gun caught her chin in his fingers and stared intently into her eyes. "I don't like it."

Would he ever learn? No. He was, after all, only a dumb prick who couldn't ever catch onto her mood changes. He needed time to figure out what she wanted to hear and why he seemed to tick her off so damned often.

Now she was getting up, looking for her clothes.

"Donavon. Wait a minute." He flung the blanket aside and followed after her. "Hold it, damn it!"

She ignored him and pulled on her jeans and sweatshirt, then yanked on her socks and boots. "You go back to bed. I'm going home because I want to."

He found his jeans and a heavy shirt, getting dressed quickly. She was really pissing him off this time.

"Like hell, I will." He stomped his way to the closet and yanked his parka off the hanger. "Here. Take my gloves." He wanted to shake her for the look of disdain she blessed him with. "Okay, I see you have some of your own. Wow. Why didn't I already know that? God damn it!"

She wrapped her heavy shawl around her head and started for the door. "I don't know what all the drama is about. Oh, of course. You have to be macho." Her blue eyes narrowed on his shrinking countenance. "All this because I asserted myself and chose to spend the rest of the night in my own place, my own bed. Alone."

He knew the possibility of ever knowing what brought this shouting match about was nil. Why was it she looked her most alluring when she was chewing his ass out or trying to take his head off?

"Donavon. You're being a stubborn little chick right now. Talk to me."

The woman was gorgeous in her rumpled shirt and bird's-nest hair, absolutely no makeup, and fire in her eyes. He couldn't take his eyes off her while she buttoned her coat.

"If you don't get it by now, you're just plain simple. You do not tell me anything outside work. I depend on no one but myself. I do what I want with my time and my body."

She booted the blanket out of her way. "I don't have to stay anywhere or do anything with anyone I don't choose to. I have a place of my own. I'm going there now."

Okay. He was paying for some sin he'd committed in the past. The answer hit him like lightning. Not contacting her at all while he had been in New York was his crime, and he probably deserved whatever she threw his way. But damn, he didn't want her to leave.

Donavon was showing him how big an ass she thought he'd been. He could try to explain the thousand reasons for his weeks of silence, but he wouldn't. That would only make matters worse.

"Okay, let's go."

She took the stairs two at a time, not slowing up at the door. She yanked it open and flung herself out into the teeth of the nor'easter.

"Donavon," he yelled over the wind. "Give me your hand."

She didn't fight it, but grabbed his fingers and hung on. They started up the street toward her hotel, heads down to hide from the bitter wind.

"Damn snow's two feet deep, Donavon. You're nuts."

"Fuck you, Gun."

"What's that?" He yanked her along behind him.

"You heard me. If you're cold, go back." She jerked free of his grasp. "I don't need you to get anywhere." She ran by him and yelled. "Get away from me."

Any other time, he might have laughed at her anger, but this was getting serious. Aw shit, she'd fallen and almost disappeared in a snow bank.

"Donavon, give me your hand. Now!"

She struggled to her feet and lunged at him, taking him down with her this time.

Now, this was funny. He laughed and rolled with her. "Donavon, you're too much, baby."

Her answer was a handful of snow in his face. He caught her hand and held her tight; noticing the way her warmth seeped into him at a time like this proved he was nuts. Gun let himself drift on the night wind, smell the delectable perfume coming from her. He caught her hands, lifting them to his shoulders. "Damn, I really want you, gator gal." He didn't miss the lifting of her hips and the tightening of her embrace. She was looking at him, opening her mouth the way she did in passion. Gun smiled at her, letting the idea soak in that they were sprawled out in a drift of snow on a deserted street thinking about having sex.

Ali seemed to soften her attitude and let her body fit snug to his. "You don't really want sex right now, do you?"

"I'm hard as granite, and you're asking me that?" A blast of wind showered them with snow and she sucked her breath in with surprise. He covered her as much as he could, enjoying her snuggling to him. "I want you anywhere, anytime, and under all conditions. What do you say?"

"We'll be lucky if we aren't arrested for lewd conduct."

He groaned and nuzzled her neck. Cold reality tapped him on the shoulder. Get up, fool. You're out in a blizzard.

She didn't resist when he stood and hauled her up to trudge ahead. No more fighting, no more shots traded. He just wanted to get her safely out of the storm.

By the time they reached the lobby of her hotel, Gun could barely see Donavon's face. Snow had drifted into the folds of the shawl she'd wrapped about her head and shoulders.

He brushed the icy crystals away and walked her to the elevator. "You okay?"

The way she lowered her lashes was Donavon's method of hiding emotion. He'd seen it a thousand times. "I'm fine. And thanks for walking me home."

"Come here." He walked her to the far end of the hallway and pulled her close. "Sorry about the way I acted."

When she looked up and smiled at him, his heart bolted like a jackrabbit. “Forget it.” She touched his chin. “Maybe you’d better stay with me tonight.”

Well, hell. In that moment, he couldn’t have loved her more. The emotion squeezed his heart into a ball and bounced it. Love her! Damn, he’d lost his mind.

Gun kissed her deeply, gently, not pursuing sex or a quick good time. This was a kiss of devotion, a new beginning -- or the end, if he didn’t deal with his feelings. Her mouth felt like honeyed silk and parted to let his tongue explore the tender underside of her lips.

He broke the kiss and took the shawl from her head. “Donavon, I ...”

The woman had no idea what trauma he was undergoing, her smile sweet and untroubled. “What were you going to say?”

He let her go and reconsidered his move. It would be lunacy to spring that on her. “The elevator’s here.”

Chapter Ten

Ali managed to grab a couple hours sleep before fighting her way to the office through snowdrifts that could hide a body. Street-cleaning crews were making little headway against the howling wind and heavy snow.

Because of inclement weather, most businesses were closed. She found herself virtually alone on the streets until she reached Homeland Security's office.

She was safe and warm, supplied with hot coffee, tea, and three boxes of doughnuts and Ho Hos, thanks to the guys that arrived before her.

She munched on a powdered doughnut and concentrated on a new file Hamm gave her. The file meant for Gun lay unopened on the table next to her.

When she had accepted the fact he was elsewhere for the day, Gun finally strode in, cloaked in the fresh, clean air of winter.

"Morning, Donavon." He took off his snow-covered parka and dusted melting flakes from his hair.

Ali sat still while Gun draped his coat over the back of the chair next to her. She crossed her legs as he leaned over to murmur into her ear. "I want you to know, I fell in a drift and nearly froze to death before the street crew uncovered my fucking remains."

She shrugged to fend off warming emotions because of his nearness. "So? Why are you late?"

"Thanks for the deep concern." He picked up her cup and took a long drink. "How did you sleep? Nice and warm with feelings of guilt?" He grabbed the last of her doughnut and grinned at her.

"Stop bellyaching. You did all right last night." She snatched what was left of her doughnut from his hand. "Where were you?"

He rubbed his chin. "I stopped by the hospital to get the last of my stitches out. Thought they might be bothering your sensitive skin." He winked at her before turning his attention to their group leader, who entered the room with a new stack of files in his arms. "Hamm, how you doing?"

"Glad you got here, Gun." Hamm sat down at the table and waited for him to take the chair next to Ali. "This storm system could work to our benefit. All flights from the eastern seaboard have been terminated for the next twenty-four hours."

That meant Conteguez probably wouldn't be flying out of their trap for at least the next week. Ali opened her mission file to explain their plan of action.

"Gun and I are ready to go after him. The only thing left to do is set up base camp."

Hamm studied the papers Ali slid over to him. "I've checked with the travel liaison. Your key hotel has been set up along with credit cards. The department has found decent accommodations for you on the Upper East Side."

Gun penciled a circle around the Bedford-Stuyvesant area. "How about me rooming in one of those crack houses? After I scare him into running for the airport, Donavon can take him down."

What was he doing? Deliberately slapping down her credibility in front of Hamm. Stopping herself from knocking him off his chair took all her strength.

"That's a damn good idea, Gun. Here's my plan. We flush him out as a team and take him down before he gets to the airport where thousands of people are!"

Damn him! His expression was exactly the one he'd had on his face the first time she ran into him. Arrogant son-of-a-bitch.

He twirled a pencil over his coffee cup, eyeing her with open ridicule. "That's why I should head up this operation. You're talking typical 'lets not hurt anybody' female stuff."

He might as well be cutting out her heart as to say he doubted her. She stood and pointed to Gun. "A few words in private, Gunnison." She gave Hamm a tight smile. "Would you mind if we step out for a short talk?"

Hamm nodded, but his scowl revealed he wasn't happy. "Take five."

Ali stepped toward the hall door before turning to see him still relaxing in his chair. The jerk! She longed to show him how hard she could hit with her right fist.

"Gun! Out here, please."

He followed her into the hall. She led the way to the deserted conference room, slamming the door after he sauntered in. She turned to face him, ashamed that anger probably showed on her face in bright red blotches.

"You're doing it again." She glared at her devious partner. "You've tried to get rid of me from the start."

Gun shrugged and smiled at her. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"Because you still don't have faith I can handle the job. You have to be the only one, the big dog in the pack." She spoke quietly, but her words were bitten off with a snap. "Here's what isn't happening. I'm not being shunted off to wait until Conteguez runs. I don't work that way. It would be like shooting ducks in a carnival game."

He was quiet for a moment, but then calmly unleashed his insulting opinion. "Truth is, lady, picking him up would be a hell of a lot easier if I were alone." Gun leaned against the wall and eyed her with cool speculation. "All you female agents get that feminista attitude."

She sucked her breath in to ease the claws of ice around her gut. Don't let him see your pain.

"It's good we got this out in the open, Gun. And I'm not discouraged, just reminded of something I forgot. You have no discipline or normal feelings."

He moved away from the wall to look out the window. "Bullshit, Donavon." He turned to stare at her. "I don't like dragging a rock around my ankle."

"You've never dragged me anywhere. I didn't slow you down in Bogotá."

His expression hardened, dark gaze iced over, making him unreadable and more intimidating. "If it hadn't been for you, hot shot, I'd have popped Armondez and beat it out of that pit without a couple of slugs in my hide."

"If you'd done the right thing to begin with, you wouldn't have taken those slugs, and I wouldn't have been forced to drag your sorry, ungrateful ass out of the jungle." She hated the tremors of hurt in her stomach, but held up under the assault.

He released her arm and gestured to the door. "All done? Or do you want to rag on me some more about how much I need you?"

Nothing had ever hurt her so badly as Gun talking down to her like a weekend piece of ass he was trying to unload.

Tears she would die before shedding burned her eyes.

"Nothing else, Gun. Not now or ever."

Donavon opened the door and walked away from him, head high and shoulders squared. He hated being the one to cause her pain, realizing her heart was probably aching almost as bad as his.

Getting her to see what a prick he was took some doing. The woman had done the very thing he'd warned her not to do. Want him. He wasn't sure why he couldn't break the rope of fear around his heart, fear of loving her.

Not that she wasn't perfect for him. Hell, Donavon was the best thing that had ever come into his crazy life. That was the sum total of the problem. He had no life to offer her. Nothing.

If she kept hanging around him, she was going to suffer for it. Now, they were going on another mission together, and she was the target of the maniac bastard they were hunting.

It would be Gun's pleasure to stop Conteguez from taking his next breath and get Donavon out of danger, at least while she was with him. What she did after they split was strictly fate.

He forced himself to think far into the future. The scene was bleak. After the mission was finished, he would step out of her life. She wanted a normal relationship and would quickly find a guy she could depend on.

A few minutes later, feeling like a cur, Gun returned to the room where Donavon pretended not to see him. Hamm stared at him like her father probably would if he'd kept his only daughter out all night. The director thought highly of Donavon, and his stare expressed his displeasure.

Their group leader would have to be blind and deaf not to know they were more than feuding partners. Right now, he crossed his arms over his chest, and looked from one to the other.

"Are we finished? I want this mission given the go-ahead without you two snarling at each other." He leaned forward, gathering his papers. "I want your assurance this mission won't be jeopardized by your differences. Understood?"

Ali and Gun answered in unison. "Yes, sir. Perfectly."

The mini-brawl obviously didn't shake Hamm's faith in his agents. He went on with his instructions.

“You have clearance to move about the airport and surrounding property. A car has been reserved for the mission and is available right now.” He scanned the itinerary page. “A pilot for the department Learjet is on alert, ready to go when we set a time.”

Gun didn’t offer any opinions or ask questions. He just wanted to get out of the gut-wrenching relationship with Donavon.

She went to the window. Gun could feel her resentment from across the room. She came back to the table and picked up her handbag. “I’m ready to go, sir. If the weather allows, I say we get on the trail in the morning. Before Conteguez takes a quick trip back to Colombia.”

He glanced at her, nodding in agreement. “The sooner the better.” He took his coat from the chair and got to his feet.

Donavon pulled her coat from the small locker near the door, and put it on. She tucked her pant cuffs into her boots. “I’ll get everything settled at the hotel. Okay if I take off now?”

Hamm nodded. “Go ahead. Want Gun to drive you home?”

Gun was hit by the blast of frost in the gaze she leveled on him. “No, thank you. I make better time on my own.”

This wasn’t a good time to question her meaning or insist she ride with him. Besides, his car was buried in a drift. “Wouldn’t be a problem. I’m going your way.”

Sometime after the soft slap of her boots in the hall faded away, he left the building and headed for his hotel. His mood darkened to black when he thought of the long night ahead of him. Devious or not, he wished he’d been a little slower telling her those lies.

You’re the world’s biggest fool, and now, the loneliest.

Chapter Eleven

His timing couldn't have been better for a break in their relationship. The weather echoed Ali's emotions. Bitter cold with a shroud of deep, gray morning fog hung over the city.

She spent a lot of time folding her clothing military style, square and small with no corners hanging out. Damn it! Was this to be her life? Small and square and murderously lonely?

The phone on the night table jangled, and she picked up the receiver. The cheery voice of the desk clerk informed her it was seven o'clock.

She looked at her watch. "Thank you for the call."

There was more to the wake-up call. The desk clerk told her Gun was waiting in the lobby.

Wonderful. Of course he wouldn't give her any breathing room. He didn't need any for himself. She had two choices. Haul her butt down to the lobby and go meekly off with him.

Or she could make him wait.

She slowly finished folding a pair of slacks and loaded her few cosmetics into a small bag. She experienced a current of jubilation as she repacked the last of her clothing. Nothing

fancy, jeans, silk undershirts, and sweatshirts. No need taking anything sexy. She wouldn't need the trappings on this mission.

Just like St. Louis, New York weather at this time of year could be cruel. She threw in several extra pairs of heavy socks and then zipped the bag.

Ali looked around, figuring Gun had cooled his heels long enough to be plenty pissed. She put on her long black Cossack coat and the matching hat of curled wool and carried her heavy leather jacket over her arm.

Ready to go face the man she least wanted to be with, she turned off the lights and stepped into the hall. She locked the door, leaning against it for a moment.

For the first time in her career, she hesitated to leave on a mission.

She mentally shored up her nerve, pulling in any emotions that would betray her broken heart to Gun. She headed for the elevator, taking the long, slow ride on the snail-like conveyance to the lobby.

Gun didn't even possess the decency to not be glaring at the elevator when the damned doors parted to let her out. There he stood, gazing at her with dark fury in his eyes.

He had completely done a flip in his appearance, now wearing a black wool overcoat and navy-blue suit. The white of his shirt collar blazed against his dark skin. Gun could be the too-handsome mafia figure most women orgasmed over. Not her. She saw inside his devious soul.

Suck it up, Ali. He's waiting to dine on your heart.

She carried her bags with no problem, and he didn't make a move to take them. Instead, he tapped his watch. Ali waited until she'd walked by him to comment.

"Put that watch where it will be less of a problem for you, Gun."

He opened the heavy glass doors and grabbed her suit bag. "You're in a violent mood."

She grabbed her bag away from him. "From now on, you don't get freebies to comment on my personal life, my job performance, or my religion." The taxi driver opened the trunk, and she threw her luggage inside on top of what he'd put in earlier.

Her inner turmoil almost blinded Ali to the world of reality around them. She stared at the cab's red taillights, seeming mystical and far away in their coating of frost and fresh snow. The white plume of condensation from the exhaust reminded her of a dragon.

She was ashamed of being so caught up in thinking about Gun and flights of fantasy, especially when she glanced up to find him staring at her as if she had wandered away from a mental facility.

They climbed inside the warm taxi, and she dropped her handbag between them on the seat. Gun ignored her, telling the driver to get to Lambert as fast as possible. He leaned back and stared out through the crystal-lace pattern on the cab's window.

Explaining her pain at that moment wouldn't be possible. She sat so close to him, she could feel the heat from his body, smell the aftershave that drove her to the limit of restraint. But worst of all, she wanted to hold his hand and feel the weight of his arm across her shoulders.

Damn him! This must be the curse an old hag in New Orleans had thrown at her years ago. Her prophecy that no man would ever love her was coming true. Pish! She didn't believe that crap.

Slumping against the door of the cab, Ali thought back to the moment Hamm had told them not to jeopardize the mission. She should have refused to go with Gun right then. At least told Hamm about her feelings toward her bastard partner.

That would have gotten her pulled from the mission and all fieldwork in the future. Probably drummed out for conduct unbecoming.

A familiar, almost sweet fragrance forced her to speak to Gun. He was firing up a cigar.

"I thought you stopped that!"

He took a long drag and then blew the smoke up in a thin stream to the roof of the cab. "You thought wrong."

She coughed and lowered her window, cold wind slapping her in the face as the taxi barreled down the street.

The ride was rough on the icy pavement, and Ali wondered if they would make it to the airport without crashing into another car on the way.

They arrived at the terminal with seconds left to meet their scheduled departure.

Already cleared with security, Ali and Gun were still required to go to a special screening area because they were carrying. They quickly filled out papers declaring their destination and their agency identification, one copy going to the pilot and the other to airport security.

As she signed her papers, she couldn't help but notice the woman at the counter took an awful long time looking at his rod. Why the hell did she want to see it?

He slowly finished up at the counter, smiling like a frigging Romeo as the counter girl told him to take care. Ali distanced herself from him, holding her arm away as he tried to help her cross the icy tarmac to board the plane. By the time her unwarranted resentment cooled, they were airborne.

The tension hovered over them with no sign of letting up. Ali kept the complimentary headphones on and studied maps and notes she had brought with her.

Across the aisle, Gun didn't miss the slanted glances she shot his way when she thought he was distracted by something else. She sat stiff and isolated, her purse and the leather jacket she'd carried on board piled onto the seat next to her. He had fallen a long way down from the guy he used to be. When they first met, before he really knew Ali, he would have removed the junk and sat down by her. Now, he could read her mind and interpret what she expected from him. Most of the time.

I get the message, baby. You don't want company.

He drank black coffee and wished for time to fast forward. Whatever happened, his life was in a downward spiral, and he wanted desperately to haul the past back, to hold it in a tight, comfortable ball. God damn it! He couldn't stand her silence.

"Donavon."

Well, hell. She obviously couldn't hear him. He got up to lean over her barricade and lifted the headset on her ear.

"Want coffee? It's pretty damn good."

"No, thanks."

Okay. Complete failure, man.

He went back to his side of the plane and sat down. The crackle of paper jolted his memory, and he pulled the newspaper from his jacket pocket that his mother had sent from Dallas. She had circled with a red pen the announcement that his ex-wife had given birth to twin girls and was taking them to a fine new home in the country.

He read the part about the twins again. The thought had crossed his mind more than once since meeting Donavon. She'd make one hell of a good mama. The way she'd hovered over him when he'd been wounded told him Donavon's heart was big and warm as Texas. He'd seen her turn to syrup whenever a kid came near them. Wonder what she'd think of the name Teke Morgan Gunnison? The boy would be named after his best friend and his father.

He was glad for his ex-wife, really. And thankful it wasn't him being hauled to that place in the country. Truth was, he would rather live in a pup tent with Donavon than a palace with his ex or any other woman.

Nothing new to Gun, but he couldn't take his eyes off his partner. She had put down her notebook and now fiddled in her purse. He groaned and looked down at the gray under the planes wings.

He couldn't believe his ears when she spoke to him.

"You all right?"

"Yeah. Fine." He tossed the paper aside and got up to move over to her side of the aisle.

"Donavon."

He couldn't make the words fall from his mute tongue, the words that would tell her how screwed his life was and how much he wanted to spend it with her. But, he couldn't.

Talk about the job, fool. The job.

"Want to hear my ideas?" Gun moved her coat and purse and sat beside her.

She met his gaze and released a ragged breath. "Gun. We watch each other's back." She held her hand out wanting to shake on it. "Pax?"

A truce was better than a knee to the nuts, and Gun caught her hand to solidify the peace accord. "Damn good idea."

I really want to kiss you right now, until I pass out from the passion.

He was encouraged. She had melted a little. Gun figured it was safe to forge ahead. "We'll be in New York in about thirty minutes." He glanced at her. "Maybe we should hop on over to Bedford-Stuyvesant section as quick as possible. Try to get a lead on Conteguez." He took another glance in her direction. "What do you think?"

He breathed easier after she nodded and really looked at him, not at the wall behind him. Her voice broke the cold barrier between them.

"I think we should do that, Gun."

She stood and made her way to the washroom. In her wake, the scent of orange blossoms lay soft in the air, reminding Gun of her true vulnerability. The gravity of their mission slammed home.

A chill of worry swept over him. He touched the weapon under his jacket. Nothing would get in his way until the threat to Donavon was silenced by death. It had to be that way.

Chapter Twelve

They escaped the agony of waiting in line to get through LaGuardia. She relented to Gun's insistence that he carry her large suitcase, walking fast to keep up with his long stride to the rental car.

Gun's behavior toward her had taken a dramatic turn. She estimated the new-guy act would last about fifteen minutes or until someone crossed him. That would be her.

"Get in. I'll take care of the luggage." He unlocked the doors, and she got into the passenger's seat.

He was too quiet. Ali tried to keep her mind on the hours of cold walking ahead of them, but right now, her reason for living got in beside her and started the big sedan, looking grim and too damned good to ignore.

"Feel like having a bite before we take off?" She didn't expect much from him ever, but his quick acceptance of her suggestion startled her.

"Sure. The hotel has a decent restaurant." He kept his eyes on the traffic, glancing at her from time to time. "That okay with you?"

There it was again. "Any place is fine. A hamburger sounds great." The day Gun was submissive she would shave her head. "We can eat and walk."

He grinned at her. "Naw. We'll eat at the hotel."

Okay, that was more like it. He'd returned to normal. She looked away and smiled, grateful he wasn't acting like a smooth operator any longer. His true personality reeked of profanity and grabbing control, allowing no one to show him the door until he was ready to leave. This Gun she understood.

Out in traffic, Ali let him do the driving and kept a lid on her desire to tell him he was going in the wrong direction or exceeding the speed limit. No need to start a fight yet.

Arriving at their hotel on the Upper East Side had taken twice the time as necessary after he took a wrong turn, forcing them to back track for miles.

Ali maintained silence after clamping her teeth together. No use telling him what a stubborn ass he was. Not yet. They finally reached the hotel, and he parked under the fancy green awning. A bellhop ran out to take the car to the underground garage, and they went inside to register.

The lobby was crowded with guests leaving after being stranded by the storm. She registered and stood next to Gun while he signed in. The arrangement was perfect. Separate rooms.

Ali couldn't help but remember the crazy, hot way they had gone into their hotel room in Bogotá. They had never given "getting to know you" a chance. Now, she was paying for her impulsive actions.

Here she was, a woman in love with a man who had made it clear as day he was not to be had! Period.

He held the door open, waiting for her to go inside her suite.

What was she supposed to say or sound like? The situation was awkward and painful. *Suck it up, woman.* "Well, here we are."

He smiled a little, a far cry from his usual sexy grin. "Yeah." He walked the few paces to his door. "See you in a few minutes. For lunch."

She nodded. "Right. I'll just ..."

He didn't wait to hear the rest of her comment, but went into his suite and closed the door.

Inside her own suite, Ali quickly hung her extra slacks and blouses in the closet. She put her cosmetic bag in the bathroom before testing the mattress. Perfect. Too bad she would be alone.

Considering the long, cold day ahead of her, she quickly traded her dress slacks and cashmere sweater for jeans and a heavy cable-knit pullover. Before she could grab her leather jacket and soft wool hat and gloves, Gun was knocking.

"I'm coming." She took her key and hurried to answer the door. He looked more like the Gun she saw in her dreams. Black leather jacket, dark blue sweater, and jeans. His gleaming black leather dress shoes had been discarded for scuffed Texas country boots. He took her breath and wasn't even aware of it. "Hi."

Oh, how hokey was that? When would she be able to remember they were no longer lovers, just partners?

His voice touched her with its deep cowboy timbre. "Hungry?"

"Yeah. How about you?"

"Fucking starved."

Oh, yes. He was definitely back, foul mouth and orgasm-causing hot looks.

By the time they walked into the cozy restaurant, Ali had reminded herself a dozen times there was no future for them except this mission. Pull your heartstrings in and tie them tight. You're in danger of being in love alone, forever.

They sat at a small table near the outside entrance and ate steak burgers and fries. She loved the way Gun enjoyed his food, his bites man-sized and chewed thoroughly.

Face it Ali, you love everything about this man, the good and the evil. Look at something else, before he sees your crazy, aching heart. Smothering a sigh, she forced her gaze away from temptation to the window.

Gun wondered how she did it, that I don't remember a thing look in her eyes. He was in painful distress with the need to talk of lovemaking stuff. He needed to hold her tight, to kiss her sexy lips until she clung to him for release from the sizzling desire he built in her body.

He had filled his belly, but he could never satisfy the hunger for her passion and warmth. Right now, she looked remote, far away. He had to pull her back.

"Donavon. Are we ready to go hunting?"

She focused on him again and nodded. "Ready."

He helped her with her coat and patted her back as she walked in front of him. Outside, a gust of cold wind rushed up to meet them as they headed back to the hotel's parking garage. He hugged her out of habit and hurried her down the driveway tunnel to get out of the wind.

He scanned the rows of parked cars and steered her to the dark blue sedan they had rented. "Over here."

He didn't know if he liked her new, accepting personality. Didn't have the mean sparkle Donavon should have. She reached over and opened his door. That much was like her. He got in and cranked the engine. From the corner of his eye, he saw her check under her jacket. Just like him, she expected trouble.

Getting out of the immediate area was a trick. He hated heavy traffic and horn-happy drivers. Plus, Donavon was pressing her imaginary brake to the floorboard most of the time. She was hot, but she could piss him off, too.

"You want to drive?"

"Yes."

"Forget it. I want to get there in one piece."

"Better let me drive, then."

She smirked. He looked at the bridge they were about to cross and saw long lines of cars inching along. "Next time we take the train."

She shrugged. "Good idea. They don't get lost."

He let it pass. Some bastard pounded on the trunk of their car and gave him the finger. Ignoring the prick was hard, but he managed, and the traffic moved ahead a few feet.

"God damn it! It'll be sundown before we get over there."

She reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigar. She lit it and stuck the fragrant cylinder of tobacco between his teeth.

He clenched it tight and grinned at her. "Thanks."

"Better than a Valium, huh?"

"Yep."

At last, the line moved with some meaning, and he let his mind work on the method they would use to flush that son-of-a-bitch out of the woodwork. The area would be a pretty small section of Bedford-Stuyvesant, the last section to undergo a gentrified facelift.

When they reached the other side of the bridge, Gun turned down a residential street and hunted for a sign directing them to the historic district. Donavon craned her neck, staring up at the grand old buildings of brownstone and brick. She looked a little put out about something.

"Damn, I wish I'd brought my camera."

Gun pointed to a drunk reeling against a light pole and barfing on his own shoes. "That's a great picture."

She scowled and hit his arm. "You didn't have to point it out." Her head snapped to the left, and she yelled at him. "Here! Turn here!"

"Hellfire, woman. I saw it."

Truth was, he would have missed the street sign for Stuyvesant Avenue. Made more notable for the honor of having the last of the wooden tenement housing.

He didn't like this part of the city. The further they went into the old district, the more he disliked it. What little sun there was, the tall, bleak buildings blocked out. Damn, it would be dark soon, and they hadn't made one contact.

At the corner, he noticed a rundown drugstore, camouflaged by the two dozen, droopy-drawered hoods loafing in front of the building. He pulled up to the curb and checked the gang out.

"I'm going to ask these fine young hoods a few questions. They usually know what's going on if it's illegal."

"I'm coming with you." Donavon started to release her seatbelt.

"No. Let me talk to them first. You cover my ass from here."

She frowned at his telling her to stay put, but Gun saw no need to risk both their necks just to get some information. She would get over it, eventually.

She unbuckled and sat forward, probably counting the gang and imprinting faces in her memory. "Okay, but don't piss them off for the fun of it."

He wanted to laugh, but held it in. "These are young killers in training. You don't make them mad if you can help it." He opened the door and got out to look around, keeping an eye on the young men. "Lock the door. Now."

He didn't move until he heard the metallic thump of the lock catching.

Once again, he thought back to the night he met Donavon. He had been a carefree man with nothing on his mind but taking out terrorists and drug dealers.

Damn it! He couldn't be worried about her. She was an agent and could take care of herself. Yeah, well, why was his heart pounding in real life, fearing for her safety?

His nerves crackled and the hair at the back of his neck bristled. Time to test the testosterone, boys, and I'll bet I win.

Chapter Thirteen

Watching Gun saunter off as if he belonged to that grim-faced group scraped Ali's nerves raw. Going against Gun's warning, she opened the car door. She got out to lean against the front fender, observing the body language of the men.

Whatever they were saying, the noise level allowed her to only hear parts of the conversation. Most of it was filth and crazy laughing. She grimaced when one particularly skinny thug grabbed his crotch and shook it at Gun.

The punk stepped forward to get in Gun's face while the rest of the mob circled him.

Okay. Enough! She eased out of the car and unlocked her Walther PPK, gripping the handle as she walked toward them.

The guy in Gun's face looked over his shoulder to stare wide-eyed at Ali. The smirk vanished off his pale face. He hadn't missed the fact she was armed.

She pointed to him and gestured to his right. He took the hint and moved back. The rest of the pack followed suit.

Gun waited until she stood beside him to acknowledge her presence.

"Hey, men. This is my backup. She's tough as God and wouldn't mind kicking your asses.

She didn't blink. She didn't want to fight these guys. If it came to that, she'd have to shoot them, plain and simple.

Gun glanced at her before going back to his conversation with the gang members. "Okay. While I'm looking for some good blow, I won't be having any trouble with you, will I?"

The skinny one leered at her, shaking his head. "No trouble." His expression transformed into a flirtatious grin. "Hey, lady. You want to go get a coffee or something?"

She met his insolent stare. "No, thanks. We don't have the time."

Thug number one laughed. "I don't mean him. Just you and me."

Wary, Ali touched Gun's arm. "My partner and I have several places to go. We have to get moving."

She kept her eye on the entire group and waited for him to back her up. He did, after making her wait for what seemed like a lifetime.

"Yeah. She's right. Gotta lot of people to see, but we'll probably run into you again."

There was a round of loud guffaws and catcalls from the gang. Ali went back to the car and got in, lowering the window as she drove up to where Gun stood. She hissed out the window at her infuriating partner. "Let's go!"

To her complete irritation, Gun walked to the car and motioned for her to move into the passenger's seat.

She shifted over to let him drive, seething with a dangerous mixture of anger and fear.

Topping it all off, he slowed the car down and honked, waving at the group as he drove by them.

"Gun! I'm going to try and describe what a big, dumb son-of-a-bitch you are!" He ignored her. What had she ever seen in him to make her think she was crazy for him? "What were you thinking? They were going to put a tag in your ear for the coroner."

He laughed. "They were just blowing off steam." He went around a car, driving too fast to suit her. "Pogo said there was a high-class dope dealer in the neighborhood. A Cuban or something like that."

She was interested now. "Maybe a Colombian?"

"My thoughts exactly." He touched her thigh. "Buckle up."

Ali thought about telling him to watch his hands, but knew that would sound bitchy and insincere. *Keep your mouth shut.*

He hit the gas, and she fastened her seatbelt. He'd lit another cigar, but she didn't mind. Things went more smoothly when she made a few concessions to him. Besides, she liked watching him enjoy his cigar, the way his lips looked as he drew on the cigar, all kissable and sexy as hell.

"Hey, Donavon." He turned down a side street and parked in front of a gray, rundown, three-story tenement. "Let's get out and knock on some doors."

"Sure." She put on her knit hat and gloves, none too eager to be hit by the icy wind again. They got out, and he locked the doors. "Want to split up, me on one side of the street and you take the other?"

He gave her a dark stare. "Fuck that. We stick together."

She was floored. "What? Is this the king of 'I'll do it alone' talking?"

He dropped his cigar in the crusty snow bank. "We don't split up. Got it?"

"See that you remember that."

"Yes, ma'am."

She gave the dreary surroundings a quick study, figuring out a quick exit if the need arose. The apartment building sat a foot or so away from the sidewalk on a postage stamp-sized yard. Three steps led up to the stoop. Garbage cans overflowed with trash where two stray dogs feasted on moldy pizza.

Gun growled at another pair of scavenging dogs that were fighting over a chicken carcass. They both ran away, the winner dragging the smelly prize through a hole in the screen of the stoop next door.

Touching Ali's arm, Gun stopped her. "I'll do the knocking. You keep the wolves off my back."

"Check."

Like he owned the place, Gun went inside the small foyer and opened the front door of the dingy-looking residence. He stopped on the hallway looking around, waiting for her.

She moved up behind him and put her hand on his back. She spoke softly. "The hall's clean. Go."

He knocked on the door, and she mentally prepared for trouble.

Ali rested her right hand on her weapon, her fingers curling around the grip. He rapped on the grimy door again and squared his shoulders. Seconds ticked by and then several minutes. He resorted to pounding on the flimsy wood barrier.

Ali's blood pumped fast as the door opened a few inches. Half a face was visible in the narrow opening.

Gun forced the toe of his boot in the space and smiled at the wary guy. "Hey, man. Got a minute?"

"What you want?"

"A few directions, maybe?"

"I don't know nuthin'."

Gun pulled a roll of bills from his jeans pocket. "Will you spill for a hundred?"

The door squeaked open a bit more, and the guy's face became fully visible. Pockmarks pitted his swarthy skin and a spider-web tattoo covered his shaved head. He nodded.

"Maybe. Depends on what you wants to know."

She usually had a cast-iron stomach. The odor drifting out from the apartment was a cross between rotting flesh and old sweat. She held her breath, the gag reflex threatening to make her retch. "What the hell are you cooking in there?"

Gun poked his head inside the room. "You from the Middle East, man?" He spoke over his shoulder to her. "Goat with lots of garlic."

She looked inside the cluttered room and knew she didn't want to go in. "I'll take your word for it."

The guy stared at her, then Gun, and held his hand out. She wanted to laugh. "He wants his payoff."

He snorted with disgust. "No information, no money."

The threat pried the guy's tongue loose, and he couldn't talk fast enough. A hundred dollars could buy a lot of booze and some weed. "What do you want to know?" He grabbed for his prize.

Gun held the money away from the suddenly talkative man. "Not so fast, buddy."

Ali heard a sound she identified as rutting. She looked up to see a couple having sex on the stair landing. "Holy shit!"

Neither of the pair wore clothes, and they had a built-in audience of a wino sitting on the floor, gazing at them with alcohol-reddened eyes. They didn't pose a threat, and she looked around to make sure no one sneaked out the door at the end of the hall.

Gun was too busy to check out the sideshow. He showed the informant a picture of Conteguez and several of his thugs. Ali wasn't surprised to hear their target had been hanging around a strip joint late at night, looking for hookers. She could hear the guy spilling his guts and asking for more cash.

The crescendo sounds of ecstasy from the stairway finally caught Gun's attention. He shook his head and looked at the guy smelling the hundred he had slipped him. "They know each other?"

The man shrugged. "She's a whore."

"No kidding." Gun stepped away from the door. "Thanks, man."

The door slammed in his face, and Ali laughed. "Grateful, wasn't he?"

She couldn't believe her mouthy partner remained so quiet while the couple up the stairs was reaching what sounded like a hell of a climax. At the moment, they were pounding into the wall. She heard Gun's low whistle and comment.

"He's going for it."

A long, guttural curse of excitement from the male of the couple upstairs filled the hall.

"Let's get out of here." Ali couldn't wait to get a breath of fresh air.

He followed her down the steps, stopping to look at his watch. "We'll try the address the lying bastard gave us."

The wind had taken a cruel, northerly shift and screamed straight out from the Canadian border. She pulled her jacket closer and nodded, hurrying to get into the car. "Where to?" She turned the heater vents downward to warm her toes.

Gun tossed her his neck scarf as he drove away from the tenement building. "There's a good chance somebody in the local bars deals with Conteguez. We'll try the strip joints, too."

She responded with an eye-roll and a grimace. His stare forced her to explain her reaction. "I have a cousin who strips. For fun."

Gun wore a knowing grin. "She's the bad one?"

"She's the hot-pants one."

Ali hadn't thought about her devious young cousin in a while. Not since she'd met Gun. He'd fulfilled every need in her life, and the past didn't matter. Now, she wasn't sure of the future.

Gun reached over to take her hand. "She did you a favor."

She met his steady gaze. "Yes. She did."

Because Gun knew all about her slutty cousin, she wasn't embarrassed to talk about her cousin's part in the breakup of her engagement.

The way she had opened up to Gun amazed Ali. He knew more about her than her own mother. She knew he still kept things from her. His nightmares came infrequently these days, and his temper had cooled some.

Thinking back to their initial meeting, she wouldn't have given them a chance of being friends, much less lovers.

Okay. So that was as good as it would ever get. No surprises, no tears. He had never lied to her about his philosophy of never being halter-broken by another woman.

The slowing of the car brought her back to the present. He pulled over to the curb and parked.

He gestured to a blinking neon sign on a nondescript building with shutters on all of the windows. "There's the joint, Pussy Galore. What a fucking name."

Ali smirked. "You love it." I love you, but you'll never hear it from me. "Okay, let's go see who's in there."

They picked their way through beer cans and liquor bottles strewn over the cracked sidewalk to get inside the club.

Illumination must have been low on the priority list for management of the bar. The place was dark and smelled of spilled drinks and bodily functions. A half-dozen patrons sat at the bar and tables, hunched over drinks and talking to themselves. Two dancers entertained their captive audience from the low stage.

Ali nudged Gun's arm. "I'll stick to bottled soda."

"Got it." Gun led her to the end of the bar and kept her close to his side. She kept a watch on the dark corners and exits, listening while Gun chatted with the barmaid.

The two girls on stage used the metal poles as non-participating sex partners, humping and grinding the inanimate objects, then started on each other.

Leaning closer to Gun, she made a caustic observation. "Such talent is wasted on this crowd." Ali took the bottle from Gun and sipped. "Did this lady have anything to say?"

He dug in his pocket for cash and tossed several bills on the bar. "She says this Mexican guy comes in here late, several times a week, just before closing time. He always takes a couple of girls home with him."

She set her bottle on the bar. "Then he's still here?"

"She hasn't seen him for a few days. He may have given us the slip."

"Shit!"

"Relax. Could be the snowstorm keeping him at home."

Ali spun around to face the person tapping her on the shoulder, hand on her weapon. The pair of naked dancers stood looking at her. The blond one did the talking.

"We get off work in a few minutes. You and good-looking want to have a party with us?"

Ali put her arm around Gun's waist. "Thanks for asking, but me and good-looking only do each other."

The girl brazenly played with her own over-enhanced breasts and shrugged. "Change your mind, let us know."

He squeezed Ali's waist. "She's all I can handle at one time. Anytime." He couldn't possibly know how much his touch affected her. She forced the sweet, warm sensation away, discreetly moving his hand off her waist.

Normally, Ali would issue a blatant invitation to Gun on a comment like that. Not this time, not when he'd made it crystal clear his future didn't include her.

Chapter Fourteen

Ali had to be as tired as he was. Gun didn't miss her scowl of impatience. She wanted him to get out of her suite. Hell, it was two in the morning. Like it or not, he was going to make sure her rooms were clear of uninvited guests before he turned in.

She leaned against the door and yawned while he made a sweep around the place, checking in the closet and behind the shower door.

"Okay, lady. You can go to bed now." With her half-closed eyes, she looked sleepy and all too feminine. He couldn't stop the foolish words that formed on his tongue. "Come sleep with me."

Her eyes narrowed. "Gun, go to bed so I can."

"I wasn't trying to get in your pants. I'd just feel better knowing you weren't alone."

Her independence flared as she pushed him toward the door. "I've spent plenty of nights alone. You, of all people, should know that."

He wanted to shake her for that damned stubborn streak. "You didn't have a freak after your head."

She pointed to the door. "Take off."

The truce was over. He leaned against the door and shook his head. "No. After this mission is finished, you can run naked with the wolves if that's what you want, but not until we have that fucker in a cage!"

She made her "you suck" face and flipped him the bird. "You finished?"

"No. I sleep in here, or you come to my room. Your choice."

As if he wasn't there, she began to strip, tossing her sweatshirt and undershirt back at him. "Suit yourself. Take the wingback chair, and goodnight."

Gun wanted to grab the sweet, naked body she paraded so casually in front of him. Damn, she turned him inside out and into a fireball of sex drive. "Donavon, don't go to bed yet. I'm going to my room and pick up my gear. I'll be right back."

She answered into the pillows. "Hurry up."

He went to the door. "Lock this after I leave."

She wasn't happy with his idea and slammed the door so hard, he felt the wind hit his back. Gun didn't care if she was pissed off. The door was locked.

In his room, he hurried to gather his toothbrush and lounge pants, rolling them into a tight bundle. Hearing a sound coming from the room next door, he stopped to look at the double walnut panels behind a fancy privacy screen.

What the hell. He'd promised himself to keep away from the connecting doors, but this was necessary. He liked the idea of sleeping in a bed and not in a damned chair.

He rapped on the door and called her name. "Donavon. I'm coming in."

He didn't like her answer.

"I'm in bed."

Shit. He pushed the fancy brass handles down, and the doors swung open. "We'll leave these doors open from now on."

Her muffled response sounded like she was really excited. "Whatever."

Donavon must be tired, not locking the door between them.

Accustomed to sketchy sleep, he read the comp newspaper and broke into the mini bar. Yeah, this was going to cost him, but worth every cent.

The small bottle of red wine went down smoothly and warmed his belly. He glanced at Donavon's door, wondering if he should ask her to have some wine. She was in the process of shutting the door to keep him out of her life, and he would leave her alone, no matter how it hurt.

Okay. Get yourself together. Taking care of Donavon is your only job and your only thought until Conteguez is exterminated.

Gun reached for his weapon and checked the ammo. Full clip and ready for vermin hunting.

Traffic noise drew his attention. He got up to look out the window. Did these people ever sleep? Across the street, a gang of young people partied in front of a bistro that stayed open all night.

He recalled running the streets all night when he was a kid, drag racing and screwing someone else's girlfriend. He'd never hooked up with one girl, until he went to college. Love hit him hard and then hit him in the mouth.

Now look at you, man. Right back in the soup, and the lady of choice is pitching you out.

Donavon coughed, and he went to check on her. She'd kicked off the comforter and lay bare-assed in the middle of the bed.

Being quiet as possible, Gun picked up the comforter and covered her, tucking her in like a kid. She mumbled, and he patted her back like she was a baby. He grinned when she quieted and went back to sleep.

Damn. How had he fallen into this trap again? Fuck it. He wasn't going to let his guard down just to take another ass-kicking and, in turn, make another woman crazy because of his wild ways.

With that in mind, Gun finished his wine and flopped into bed, facing Donavon's room. Rolling onto his back, he let reality take over his mind. Maybe he'd call his parents tomorrow if he got time.

He didn't go to sleep, witnessed the bleary slashes of dawn creeping into his room, and catnapped until Donavon coughed again.

"Hey, Donavon, you coming down with something?"

He got up to see if she was awake. Ali sat up and rubbed her face, answering in a gravelly voice.

"I need coffee. No, make that tea and honey."

Hell, now she was sick, and he had wanted to move fast today. "I'll call room service." He picked up the phone, pointing at her with impatience. "Cover up."

She coughed. "Go to hell."

"That's my girl."

Ali got up to go to the bathroom, dragging a blanket with her. Where the hell had she gotten a cold? Couldn't be from all the lowlifes she'd been around. Coming down with anything infuriated her.

Ali's reflection startled her. Hair gone crazy, standing in a bird's-nest haystack around her flushed face. *My God, you're a mess.* From the corner of her eye, she noticed Gun staring at her from the doorway.

"Gun!"

"Well, hell. Don't shoot me."

Ali swiped at her hair, flustered under his scrutiny. "Shut the door and let me get ready."

"What's the idea? I've seen you look like that before."

She faced him, embarrassment making her quick-tempered. "Do me a favor. Just stay in your room." She talked over the splash of water filling the washbowl. "I'm going down to get a bite before we take off. You don't need to go with me if you'd rather sleep for a while."

He tossed a cotton ball at her. "Forget that. I'm hot on you like tar on a country road in July."

She ignored him and brushed her teeth. When she looked up, he was gone.

After a quick shower, she found the mundane job of drying her hair a struggle. Heavy and curly, her hair had never been too much to handle, until today. The truth was, it had been going on for several weeks. She had taken to wearing it up in a casual French knot most of the time.

"Screw it," she grumbled and tossed her brush and curling iron aside.

He pushed the door open and poked his head inside. He glanced at the cluttered vanity. "When did the storm blow through here?" He carried a tray with a pot of hot tea that room service had brought and set it on her vanity.

She wrapped a bath sheet closer to her body. "That would be me. My hair has gone to crap, and I can't find my razor."

He grinned and pointed to her hips. "Put on a couple of pounds, too. Better hit the gym."

Ali wanted to evaporate with embarrassment. "I'll do that, right after you see about that hair loss."

"What?" Gun automatically touched the top of his head. "You mad or something?"

"Or something." Ali pushed her way past him, and went into her bedroom. "Please haul your svelte carcass out of here so I can dress."

Gun laughed, moving out of her way as she went from closet to dresser and back again. "Donavon, I was teasing."

"I wasn't." She took a powder-blue sweater from the closet. "I'll be ready in a couple of minutes."

"No hurry."

Ali had put up with guys teasing her for years. What was her trouble now? Yeah, she was hurting because of the end of their relationship, but that wasn't what drove her sudden inability to cope with small problems. Time to cut out the bitch stuff and stand up to whatever was thrown at her.

Pretending Gun wasn't watching her, Ali put on the sweater and a pair of cotton briefs. Being warm mattered more than feeling sexy today. The zipper on her jeans refused to budge, and Gun was on the spot, helping her pull the stubborn thing closed.

He was a smart man. He'd seen her frustration and exited the room without any other reckless comments.

Damn, he'd been right. She had bulked up a couple pounds in the waist. No more double-chocolate cake for her.

She looked around the door of his room to see him checking the cash in his wallet. She couldn't help but smile. He was so damn good-looking and so damn male. *Go ahead, love him, but don't hug that feeling too close.* A tingle of loneliness played through her heart and she had to say something to break its grip.

"Hey, Gun. You fixed okay for money?"

She had never seen it before, but Gun seemed a little embarrassed. "Well, sure I am." He grinned and shoved his wallet in his back pocket. "You offering a loan?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, sure. We look out for each other, don't we?"

He picked up his weapon and buckled it to his waistband. "I'm fine. How about yourself?"

“Never better.” Now how stupid was that? He wasn’t asking about your health. “Where do we start today?”

She went into her bedroom and put on her socks and boots, tucking her pants into the tops to keep out the snow. He followed, telling her his idea.

“I thought we might check out a few more porn shops and bars.” He looked ill at ease for the first time since she had known him.

She grimaced, remembering the foul places they had gone to yesterday. “Sounds like a plan.”

He nodded and went back to his room to wait. Ali could hear him flushing the john and getting his coat. Mundane sounds to almost everyone but her. This was all she would have left to keep his memory close for the rest of her life.

The crazy mood she was in vanished, and she looked forward to getting back on the job.

“Let’s go.” She grabbed her long coat from the closet, clipping her weapon to her belt as she crossed the room. Gun rapped on the door before entering. He held her coat while she slipped her arms into the sleeves.

“Donavon, sorry for being a prick earlier.”

There was no way she could hide her shock at his unexpected humility. “It’s all right. I was just being cranky. Won’t happen again.”

He touched her hair, leaning over her shoulder to tickle her ear. “You’re hair looks great.”

God damn it! He kept her mind so messed up she couldn’t think straight. What did he want? Sex? No, he’d be up front if that was it.

Forget it, Ali. Get back on your feet and end this warm and dangerous moment.

“Okay, Gun. Shall we hit the bricks?”

He came around to stand in front of her and tugged her coat together, buttoning it for her. It's cold out there, baby. I won't have time to keep you warm."

Damn it. He'd winked at her!

Ali moved his hands away and walked to the door, opening it with a flourish. She managed a scowl even he could appreciate.

"Don't worry about me. I've got my fat to keep me warm."

He laughed that rich, dark-chocolate laugh of his and hugged her shoulders as they left their rooms. "Want to ride the train this time?"

"Sure." She nodded, but felt nervous about the idea. "Sounds like a picnic."

"You're the best, baby."

"Oh, shut up. I said I'd do it."

He playfully jostled her, his grin fueling her heart into a rapid-fire race to keep up with her hormones. They were going wild.

Chapter Fifteen

Gun was eager to get the hunt started. Filth and cold didn't bother him. He'd seen and been in worse situations. Donavon being in a decent mood for a change helped also.

Hell of it was, he wanted her to think he didn't give a fuck about her other than being his partner. Crazy, but he wasn't ready to look past this mission and never seeing her again.

He slowed his stride. She would never say anything, but he could tell when she was in a quick step to keep up with him.

She looked sweet as hell with her hair sticking out from under the black knit hat pulled down over her ears. "Donavon, you sure you want to do the train thing?"

She nodded. "Sure. We'll get over to Bed-Stuy a lot quicker."

He grabbed her hand and held on tight as they hurried down the steps to catch the train.

The place was crowded with a zillion different types of people going to work, bumming, whoring, or just staring. Gun steered Donavon out of the path of a crazy-acting guy obviously looking for trouble.

The odorous bastard leered at her and mumbled, "Pretty mish."

Gun felt her press close against him and put his arm out to block the encroacher.
“Move on, buddy.”

Not in the least discouraged, the drunk persisted, “Kish me, honey.” He hiccupped and farted, the smell rotten enough to kill a rat if it came too close.

Gun tried diplomacy. “Maybe next time, fella.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, sumbitch.” He reeled closer to Donavon. “I want pretty to do me.”

That was it. Gun couldn’t hold back. “Jesus, man! You really want a beating?”

“Nope. A kish.”

The overpowering smell of sweat and booze seemed to be making Donavon sick. She gagged and covered her mouth, then muttered, “Sorry, but this guy reeks.”

Right then, Gun was in no mood to consider the asshole was drunk and maybe a little nuts. He grabbed his collar and forcibly moved him away from Donavon. After he slammed the drunk to the wall, security hustled up and took charge, hurrying the guy away.

He went back to take her hand and thank God he hadn’t been arrested for being a bully. Donavon looked around as if nothing had happened. He wondered for the first time, why he had chosen this line of work. Maybe it was time to do something less crazy and a lot less dangerous.

Their train was loading when they finally found the right platform. Gun locked his hand on Donavan’s arm, trying to keep her from being crushed. They had to stand and hold onto the straps like experienced commuters.

Damn. She looked pale again.

“You gonna be okay, babe?”

Her voice had taken on a wavering sound. “Must be the motion of the train. I’ll be fine.”

“Motion, hell.” Gun leaned down to murmur against her ear. “It’s all these God damn smells. We won’t do this again.”

The rest of the ride was uneventful. People got on and people got off, shoving each other like the place was on fire. Keeping Donavon away from gropers wasn’t easy.

She seemed to take it in stride after he stood in a fortress position behind her. After a few minutes of being pressed to her warmth, he told himself it was for her protection. That was bogus crap.

Having her close enough to smell the orange-blossom perfume in her hair lifted him off the ground. Regret stabbed through him, the thought of his empty future tore his heart to shreds. Gun turned his head to stare at the blur of advertisement flying past the train’s windows.

The train stopped at their station, and Ali looked around the winter-dulled street with some trepidation. She remembered the streets looking forbidding and cold. Reality of the moment was worse. Maybe it was the raw, cold wind and sleet biting her cheeks. Gun didn’t appear to notice the miserable weather and surroundings of Chauncey Street.

She couldn’t relax in the sub-zero weather and silently vowed to move to Arizona the first chance she got.

They walked a few blocks, not talking. Her mental planning was put on hold when Gun stopped and touched her shoulder.

“This is one of the places the bartender mentioned.” He looked through the grimy window in the door of the bar and shook his head. “Let’s see what we can scare up.”

She unbuttoned her coat and followed him inside the joint. The smell that hit her in the face held years of accumulated body odor and cheap booze. The sewer smell made her wary.

This place was worse than the first. Dimly lit and extremely narrow, Ali wondered if the dive had ever passed a fire code. The dark, lacquered bar ran the full length of the wall. Bar stools were the only place to sit.

She didn't like the dark green-painted trellis separating the bar from the poolroom, at the back of the place. The lights were off in the gloomy back room. That made her nervous.

She stood at the end of the dreary-looking bar while he questioned the bartender and several patrons. He bought drinks and passed around his pack of cigarettes.

Watching his expression and body language, she knew Gun loved what he did. He was relaxed, animated, and hot-looking. Ali reminded herself of a horny cat, arching her back at just the thought of his strong hands on her.

"Donavon."

She jerked herself out of a looming climax. "What?"

Gun's smile was mischievous. He had the uncanny ability to read her emotions, could see the lift and fall of her desires. "Want a cola or something?"

She shook her head and moved closer to him. "I'm good."

His sexy grin echoed the depth of his blazing ego and total male arrogance. "I know."

He turned back to his newfound friends and ordered them another round.

Ali waited a little impatiently for him to wrap up his questioning, but he knew what he was doing. She recounted the customers. Four -- and now someone was in the poolroom. She unclipped her weapon from her belt and held it down against her thigh.

There wasn't time to alert Gun to trouble. The mirror behind the bar splintered and blew out in a crystal spray. Ali caught a fleeting glimpse of two men in dark clothing, using the grillwork screen as cover while they fired several rounds into the bar.

The street-smart customers dove onto the floor.

Gun ducked and motioned her to hit the deck, but she ignored his directions. She would never let these two creeps go without a fight.

Another spray of slugs tore into the wall behind her and demolished the lighted beer ads in an explosion of glass and smoking wires. The sound nearly deafened her. Gun had reloaded and edged toward her.

She hunkered down, aiming her weapon at the privacy screen, and fired. Sliding along the wall, she fired several more rounds into the dark room, hearing things shattering as the slugs left her nine-millimeter automatic.

Close enough now to see what they were reloading, she yelled at him. "They're out of ammo. Hit them now."

She charged toward them, firing with the intention of taking them down. Something forced her into the wall, knocking the breath out of her. She realized Gun was running by her, not waiting for her to back him up! "Damn you, Gun!" He didn't answer, but emptied his weapon into the dark where the two men hid.

Gun shouted in frustration. "God damn it! They're running!"

Without waiting for her, he busted through the screen and out the wide-open back door.

Ali tore after him and slid on the icy bricks.

She heard Gun a block away, ordering the shooters to put their fucking hands up, identifying himself as a Federal Agent.

Her blood seemed to freeze in her veins. She fought to fill her lungs and cried out in anger, refusing to fall on the thick ice that covered the bricks underfoot.

The bitter wind grappled with her long coat, working against her like a sail, holding her back.

"Damn it!" she cursed in frustration, but ran on.

The muscles in her legs tensed, and relaxed, pushing her into a breathtaking sprint that carried her the length of the desolate alley.

Another firefight broke out and quickly quieted. Regaining her footing, Ali raced to the end of the passageway where he stood, rage flushing his face.

"Fuckers tricked me by throwing their heavy coats aside. They probably mingled with the bums hanging around that fifty-gallon drum they use for heat while I backtracked a few doors." He turned to look at her. "I have an idea they ran between those two buildings."

She reloaded her PPK, and he pushed another full clip in his automatic. "Let's get after them before they leave the area."

He grimaced. "They won't walk out if I can help it."

They moved fast, following the hoods for several blocks. The rush of blood in her ears deafened Ali when they stopped.

The place could have been a scene straight out of an old movie. Dark and wet with steam rising from sewer grates and trash tumbling ahead in the frigid wind.

An open side door meant someone had gone through in a hell of a hurry. She followed Gun inside the apparently vacant building, struck by the amount of trash littering the long hallway.

She steeled herself against a natural distaste for rodents, keeping quiet when two large rats skittered over her feet.

Most of the doors to the first floor apartments had been kicked in or were missing all together. She tensed at every sound, and plastered herself against the wall, constantly watching the sagging doors and stairs ahead of them.

Turning to keep a rear guard kept her busy, hearing every sound in the long-deserted building. Her head hurt from craning her neck and looking in every direction, rarely blinking.

Checking all the units took time and turned up nothing except liquor bottles, used condoms, and hypodermic needles. The lull had to end, and it did so abruptly. They checked

the apartments, moving on to each next unit, until she caught the scent of something familiar and frightening.

“Where’s the smoke coming from?”

He sniffed the already foul air and looked out a broken window. “Come on! They’ve torched the place!”

Fire! Ali’s mind raced with the fear of burning alive. The odor of ancient, moldy wood afire filled the narrow hallway. She didn’t quibble with him when Gun shouted at her.

“Give me your hand. Hurry!”

His fingers closed around her wrist like a steel glove as he pulled her along the smoke-filled hall. She coughed, attempting to see through the blue-gray haze billowing from floor to ceiling.

Panic hit, fear of being locked in the blazing trap by the two thugs they had chased into the building.

“Gun!” She yelled at him, worried he couldn’t hear her with things starting to fall from the upper floors. “Around the corner. I remember the door!”

He was close to dragging her behind him, his long stride getting them to the main entrance and closer to escape.

She choked again, the air thick with a stench she couldn’t take into her lungs, and cried out in surprise and pain when she ran face first into a wall. He jerked her back against him and ran toward the light a few yards away.

“Donavon, we’re almost out.”

She stumbled. He pulled her up to stagger along beside him, toward escape and life. He tried to cover her head with his jacket, but it was of little help. He gave up and worked on opening the heavy entrance door.

“Donavon.” He was coughing now and moving her away from the chain-locked door. “We have to find that window again.”

Ali could hardly breathe, not hearing all of Gun's words as he called for help while they searched for a window. He led her around a corner and stopped.

"There it is, Donavon."

"What if it's blocked, too?" She was close to heaving now. She wheezed and ran toward the window.

"Get out of the way!"

He acted quickly, taking powerful strides as he ran toward their only hope. He yelled at her again. "Move!"

She stumbled back, barely able to see him. He ran past her, leaping up to kick out the window. The shattering sounds of breaking glass seemed far away, but his loud command jarred her out of a fog.

"Donavon! Wake up, and let's get out of here!"

Smoke barreled out the gaping hole in a thick cloud, spiraling as it rushed for freedom.

Ali ran for the window. Gun caught her in his arms and tossed her outside where she landed in a snow bank. She gasped and sucked in the clean air. He quickly followed and crawled to where she lay.

He pulled her up, and they ran down the alley to the front of the building. Sirens wailed a short distance away and several winos stared at the smoke billowing from the tenement building.

Ali knew why Gun was in a rush to leave the scene. They didn't have a reason to be there that they could share with the local authorities.

A city bus stopped for them, and she clambered aboard, grateful to have a way out of hell.

They found a seat near the rear exit door. Ali sensed his stare. Would he ever stop looking at her? She knew her face was grimy and her hair full of ash. She pretended to study the graffiti-scrawled advertisements along the walls.

Gun gazed at his scrappy partner with new appreciation after they settled into their seat. He also couldn't believe the shit they had gone through in two short days. What was wrong with him?

Letting those fuckers catch them in a crossfire that had taken him completely by surprise. Not only had he failed to figure it out quickly, he had been damn close to getting Donavon killed. Twice in a matter of hours.

Looking at her right now, he knew how hard his future was going to be. Causing her more pain and risking her life again was not an option. If he tried to take off on his own, she'd just tail him. No, there must be a better way of handling the problem.

Gun caught her quick, sidelong glance and figured the time was perfect to break the long silence.

"We'll catch a cab once we get out of the neighborhood."

Her cheeks were streaked with smoke, and her hair sported a fine net of soot. On her, it was stunning. Her answer was a nod and a fleeting smile.

He took out his cell phone and dialed Homeland Security's regional number. He wanted assurance they were not chasing a dead man and being shot at for their trouble.

Thinking over their latest narrow escape, Gun was more determined than ever to find Conteguez. The bastard wasn't about to leave the country. His only goal was to kill Donavon.

Chapter Sixteen

New York City's Homeland Security office was huge and impersonal compared to the smaller, more intimate setting in the St. Louis office.

The looks she and Gun received from the well-groomed, well-fed bunch of agents in the halls didn't surprise Ali. They were dirty and disheveled, looking more like a target on the run than a couple of agents.

Gun took her hand, the gesture comforting. She hated feeling like Alice in Wonderland, but the echo of their footsteps in the spit-and-polish hall rang eerily in her imagination. He paused and pointed at a fortress-like door of solid mahogany.

"Must be the supervisor's office."

"Yeah." She brushed several times at her hair and coat. "I'm sure he'll be glad to see a couple of his agents looking like hobos from Bumsville."

"Can it." Gun caught her shoulders to look in her eyes. "Doing your job is all he cares about."

"Right." She grimaced, wishing she had at least washed her face and hands.

Too late to be concerned about the little things. Gun opened the forbidding door and led her inside the outer office. This had to be the plushest government office she'd ever seen.

Maroon carpeting and cut-velvet drapes dressed the floor to ceiling paneled glass windows. The elegance was reflected by cut-glass cases holding vases and figurines that must be worth a fortune.

She nudged Gun's arm. "Damn. Are we in the right place?"

A deep male voice answered her question. "If you're Alison Donavon and Jack Gunnison, you're in the right place."

She turned to face a formidable man of medium height and tremendous male confidence. "Yes, sir. I'm Agent Donavon, and this is my partner, Agent Jack Gunnison"

He stepped forward and held his hand out. She knew what a specimen felt like under the microscope now. His clear blue eyes seemed to dissect her and cut through Gun like a chain saw.

They weren't offered chairs or refreshment. The greeting was far from cordial.

"Haver Winston." His voice penetrated her head, yet was modulated for clarity. "We got a call this morning, advising that your target had come under some fire at the hands of his own people."

Gun frowned. "He's still breathing, isn't he?"

The supervisor nodded. "He was at the last communication." He casually eyed Ali's hair. "We would offer assistance, but this is a continuation of a mission started by the two of you in the St. Louis office. You will be expected to finish it."

She read the blaze of anger in Gun's stoic glare toward Winston. The man looking them over didn't realize how pissed off agent Jack Gunnison was and stupidly continued talking down to them.

"We don't like leaving our people out in the cold, but at the moment, we are stretched beyond our budget." Haver fiddled with the cuff of his fine cotton shirt. "Just exactly what do you want us to do? This unit doesn't chase drug dealers unless they are carrying a bomb. Perhaps, if you were to put in more time and effort, you'd get your man."

Gun stepped forward blocking her complete view of the important man insulting them. "We didn't come here for help. Just some information."

Ali held her breath. He was an eyelash from getting drummed out of the agency. But, no! He was too damned hard-headed to let things slide. Right now, he had to plunge into dangerous waters with his hot temper and big mouth.

"You think he's not dangerous? He took the heads of ten Americans and trades the people of his own country like cheap commodities on the market." Gun pulled Ali closer to the supervisor. "I wouldn't chase the fucker so hard if he wasn't trying to whack my partner. She's the biggest target on his list."

She touched his arm. "We got what we came for. Conteguez is still here and having problems of his own." She nodded at Winston. "We won't take up any more of your valuable time, sir."

He obviously thought she was showing reverence to his position. "No imposition, Agent Donavon. We try to take care of our own people."

At her side, Gun was building a head of steam. "We don't need to be taken care of. Conteguez is still alive, and we just want to know we aren't wasting our time looking for a fucking corpse!" His glower should have melted the Supervisor's fancy tie tack. "That's all we need."

Ali stuck her hand out to distract the red-faced supervisor. "Thank you, sir. We appreciate you taking the time." Willing to crawl from the room, she tugged on Gun's coat. "We'll be on our way. Won't we, Gunnison?"

He grabbed her arm and propelled her toward the door, waiting for Winston to open it. Their departure was swift and accompanied by Gun's low, growling comments. "Son-of-a-bitch! What's he think we're doing? Gold bricking? Partying?"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Shut up, you lunatic! He's still watching us."

Gun turned and saluted the supervisor. "Thank you, sir."

Her comment was barely audible. "I don't see how you have stayed alive all these years."

"What?" He sounded incredulous. "How old do you think I am?"

"Old enough."

They eyed each other with amused understanding, then headed for the entrance, leaving well enough alone.

Gun laughed soft, under his breath. "Can you believe that guy? I've gotten more help from the enemy."

Ali agreed completely, but didn't want to throw fuel on his temper. "Forget him. He probably just had an ass-chewing from his superior."

He nodded in agreement. "You're right. We'll handle this alone." His jaw was set in a hard line, eyes narrowed. Gun was visibly angry. "Let's get out of here before we have to talk with another asshole."

"Hey! Gunnison."

She cringed, turning to see who had thrown another roadblock in their path.

The man walking toward them with a big smile was about Gun's age and cocky as hell, going by his lingering stare at her. Gun caught the guy in a hug, and they pummeled each other like two bears playing.

"Hey, Donavon." Gun's face lit up with pleasure. "Meet my kid brother, Ram."

Ali almost bit her tongue off. Where the hell did they get those testosterone names?

"Nice meeting you, Ram." She liked his handshake. Just like Gun's. "Are you in the department, too?"

Ram eyed her with complete male exploration and smiled at her. "Not me. I'm Navy."

Just like that. He was as self-important as his big brother. He hugged Ram again and, to her amazement, kissed him on the cheek, questioning him like a delighted father would.

"What the hell are you doing here? You're in trouble, right?"

The grin on Ram's face must be a family trait. "Not this time. I was invited back here to make a statement in an inquiry."

Gun nodded and gazed warmly at his brother before bringing her back into the conversation.

"Donavon, he won't tell you, but his name is Rameses. Mom loves Egyptology." Gun was alive as she had never seen him before. "You staying in New York long, Ram? Where you off to next?"

The younger Gunnison smiled a bit arrogantly. "Little conflict outside Mosul."

"Damn, man." Gun jostled his brother's shoulders. "I just got back from that sandbox."

They both laughed and hugged again.

The two men were in a world that only brothers could enter, and Ali waited patiently while they talked and exchanged addresses and itineraries.

They included her at last, and Gun pulled her back into the circle. He put his arm around her waist, holding her close. "Ram wants to have dinner with us when this mission is wrapped up. He can jump off in St. Louis before going back to Lejeune. Maybe stay with us for awhile."

What was he trying to pull? Covering up the fact they were no longer sharing a domicile and especially not a bed.

She didn't want to embarrass him in front of his kid brother. "Sure, that would be great. I wouldn't miss it."

Ram wasn't bashful. He caught her in a hard embrace and kissed her on the mouth. "He doesn't deserve you, Donavon. But try to keep the stubborn fool out of trouble, okay?"

Ali couldn't believe it. The Gunnison boys all smelled of cedar and violet leaves, a deep, dark, sensual scent of faraway places and erotic touches.

“Well, yes -- of course I will.” No need to feel her cheeks. They were hot and probably crimson. She was flustered. “What else would a partner do?”

Ram looked confused, but only briefly. He hit Gun’s arm. “Okay. We’ll all get together when we can.”

Ali knew how close brothers could be. She didn’t want to keep them from having some family time alone.

“Hey, you two go ahead and have dinner tonight. I need to catch up on my sleep.”

Gun shook his head. “No can do, Donavon.” He gazed at her as if she were being a rebellious child. “We stick together.”

Ram cleared his throat. “No problem. I’d love to spend time with both of you, but I have to hop a flight in less than an hour.” He looked at his watch, then grinned at Gun. “You’d better call Mom. She’s threatening to hunt you down if you don’t report in pretty damn soon.”

Ali smirked behind her sooty glove. A momma’s boy after all. He didn’t seem to notice her amusement. He hurriedly scribbled his latest home address and phone number on a card and handed it to Ram.

They were all quiet until parting became inevitable. Gun shook his brother’s hand, then gave him a bear hug. “Watch your ass, little brother.” He roughed up Ram’s hair. “I mean that.”

As he walked away, Ram called back over his shoulder. “See that you keep in contact a little better, fella. Mom and Dad both get on my ass when you forget to check in.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” Gun returned his brother’s farewell wave. His look of dejection lasted for a split second. “Damn, I’ve missed that punk. I’ve been away from home a long time.”

Ali arched her brows, recalling her own brothers loving rivalries. “Yeah, I understand, Gun. Hell to be with and worse being apart.”

He draped his arm over her shoulders in a companionable way. "Yeah. Damn straight." He rubbed her cheek with his knuckles. "What do you say we go back to the hotel and get a fast, hot shower?"

She bit the tip of her tongue. No, she couldn't say she wanted to take that shower with him, hot and fast. Instead, she rubbed her nose and stared back at the nice clean people casting furtive glances their way.

What was he really thinking at that moment? He wouldn't know how much she wanted to slam the damn door on the fucking world and just hold him. Ali no longer fought the ache of dread at the coming separation from him.

The past few days had driven home the futility of him ever being in love with her. She thought over what she would bring to a solid relationship and found her inventory pretty meager.

She had to give him her best or nothing. With his appetite for the fast and loose lifestyle, asking for forever was out of the question.

Right now, she just wanted to touch him. That deep yearning shook Ali to her core.

The mood was getting softer, and he might be getting anxious in such an intimate embrace. Even if it was only her feeling that way. "Gun." The depth of his eyes was like midnight under the deep-summer Milky Way when she looked at him. "Let's pick up some good Italian for dinner and eat in our room."

Had that been too pushy?

"Great." His grin was awesome and natural. "That little bistro across from the hotel looks like a good place. Okay with you?"

"Yeah. It sounds heavenly to me." She licked her lips.

In a hurry, he took her hand. "Come on. We gotta get a ride out of this hellhole."

Chapter Seventeen

He had to know that his exhibitionist nature stoked her sensualist blood to boiling. She was quickly turned on just watching him dry his lean, hard body. Ali could hear a faint, throbbing bass and alto sax, the kind of music heard in smoky dives and strip clubs. This meant extra time in the shower for her to relieve the growing ache between her legs.

The minute they'd returned to their hotel, he'd stripped and gone to his shower. Of course, she'd taken time to set out their meal and get fresh clothes from her suitcase.

Her own desire for comfort evaporated the moment Gun emerged from his steam-filled bathroom, coming out in a cloud of vapor around his awesome body. She could look all she wanted while his back was turned.

Oh, no! Don't turn around. Damn it!

The sight of his naked, hard ass was enough to tickle her into a delicious yearning for everything he could give her. Meticulous in his toweling routine, he'd dried his neck and shoulders first, then moved down his glistening pecs and flat, rock-hard belly.

Her fingers flexed. His half-hard cock swung like a heavy pendulum between his strong thighs. The odds of not being caught ogling him were getting slimmer while she stood salivating over forbidden fruit and nuts. She grinned and did an about face to leave the crime

scene, with no class at all. Her elbow brushed the silver teapot Gun brought her that morning, and the damn thing hurtled to the floor.

Well, too bad! Scurrying into the bathroom, she reached behind the shower door to turn on the water, skinning off her clothes like she'd been hit by lightning. She didn't want him to know he was the lone weakness in her armor, or that her blood ran hot for him.

"Donavon!"

Ignore him.

Through the frosted glass of the shower, she could see Gun walk into the bathroom.

Be quiet. Keep on scrubbing.

A shiver of expectation raked her body. He opened the door slowly, grinning at her through the shower spray.

"Hi, baby. Just wanted to make sure you hadn't hurt yourself running away from me."

Hell yes, he was wise to her every move. "Please leave." His hesitation was rewarded by a splash of water. A rivulet of water streamed from her hard nipple. There was no damned way she would turn away, her gaze direct and unflinching. "I'll be out in a minute."

He wiped his face and shut the stall door. Ali leaned against the wall for several minutes. Closing her eyes proved to be a mistake. His image stepped into her thoughts and re-ran his drying routine, several times, until her breasts grew heavy, and her hand covered her throbbing vee.

Her body almost jackknifed at that light touch, hot fingers of desire slithered over her swollen folds. The hunger in her blood drew a moan from her throat. Stroking her sensitive clit shot off red flares in her brain. No, stop it! You're not that desperate. Yet!

Gritting her teeth, she soaped up and rinsed, avoiding her crotch as much as possible. Ali fought back hot frustration. She had to be the horniest woman on earth.

Drying quickly, she pulled on knit loungers and a long sleeved thermal undershirt, letting her damp hair have its freedom. She paused at the door to his room and tried to

regulate her breathing and assume a sensible attitude. Gun was probably hungry, and she had no right to delay his meal.

“Okay,” she called out cheerfully. “Let’s chow down.”

His gaze brushed her nipples and settled on her lips. “I’ll second that.”

He had put on a pair of light gray lounge pants, and as usual, no shirt. How could she keep her eyes off his chest and the nice directional arrow of black hair leading down to a hell of a party for any woman lucky enough to be invited.

She looked up. He was staring at her hard nipples. Obviously, she wasn’t the only one in distress.

He handed her a plate with a generous helping of lasagna and olive salad before they sat down on the sofa to eat their meal.

Her mouth watered. She loved his hands, couldn’t take her eyes off them as he pulled apart his hefty piece of crusty bread. Her heart thumped with rare contentment, a gossamer-thin happiness she would soon lose forever.

Of course, there would be other women. His lofty sex drive wouldn’t let him be celibate long.

Screw that. She didn’t want to think about tomorrow or his ease of finding someone else.

Gun leaned back and smiled at her. “Feeling better now?”

Was she? No. “Sure. I’m doing fine.”

He took her empty plate and placed it on the coffee table with his. “I’ll give you a massage.”

Ali licked her lips. “I don’t ... I feel okay.”

“I didn’t say deep massage.” His smile seemed to play with her nipples. He stood and leaned over to pick her up in his arms. “Trust me.”

She harrumphed, even though her nerves tingled with excitement. Having his hands on her always meant a blissful, erotic buildup to sizzling climax. He arched his brows and nuzzled her cheek. "Trust me?"

"Why not?" She sounded confident and calm, nothing like the quaking going on in her heart. Why did she always come apart at the seams if he simply looked at her?

She yawned and met his gaze, casually putting her arm around his neck as he carried her to his bed.

Desire bloomed and spread shamelessly through her. With his mouth above hers while he gave orders to lie on her stomach, Ali couldn't deal with the shock waves of approaching climax between her legs.

He noticed she held her breath and squeezed her thighs together.

"Lighten up, Donavon. I know what I'm doing."

Ali rolled onto her stomach and stretched her arms out, relaxing as much as possible.

Okay, this was fine, the way his big, strong fingers rolled and pressed her tense muscles. She did relax and groaned with pleasure when he hit a particularly tight knot in her lower back.

"Feel good, baby?" His voice was warm dark seduction.

"Like heaven." Her legs stiffened while she reached out to grip the edge of the mattress. Every move took her closer to the roaring hot fire of orgasm.

Beneath her, the bed moved a little as he changed position, moving to straddle her.

"I won't crush you." He placed his hands on her waist and used his thumbs to press into the first rounding curve of her ass, sliding them up to go under her shirt. "You've got a fine-looking back, Donavon."

The cool air had tightened her nipples into even harder peaks, and she wanted him to suck them until they relaxed. "You can't have a bad back and be in the department." That was so idiotic.

“They got the best with you.” He ran his palms down to press on her lower back. “The best ass I ever saw.”

Shit! She tightened her ass cheeks against a quiver of hormones on fire. “You don’t have to compliment me to feel me up, Gun.”

He hooked his fingers in the flimsy band of her loungers and pulled them down to kiss her ass. “That’s no idle compliment, lady. It’s the God-awful truth. Lord.”

Be casual, her brain coached. “I think you mean that.” *Gun’s big on casual.*

“But,” he drawled before nipping her ass again, “I’m kind of partial to your super-fine tatas.”

She buried her face in the pillow as he kissed her crack and tongued her cheeks. *If you have a speck of decency, stop him! But, you don’t, not when it comes to Gun.*

He made a soft, growling sound in his throat, sucking on the tender flesh of her waist, telling her what he wanted as he made his way up her tingling back. “They’re especially sweet when I get to unwrap them.”

With the ease of a sensualist, he skimmed her loungers off her quivering legs.

Ali couldn’t control the sweeping emotion tumbling through her. *Let it go or vaporize.*

The moan she’d been smothering poured free, and she stifled it in her pillow.

Well, what’s it to be? Stop him -- or lie back and enjoy it to the hilt?

A hint of a devious smile lifted the corners of her lips when she conceded that her libido was pure wanton. “Ummm. You have the touch of a cat burglar.”

She released a breathless cry of excitement as he flipped her onto her back.

His deep voice touched her between the legs and hovered over her crotch. “You like that?”

The time had come to toss out false pride and disinterest. She was hot for Gun and didn’t give a damn that he knew. “Hell yes. So ... burgle!”

His rich laugh bound her with a rope of pleasure, banishing all resistance hovering in her mind. Why lie to herself? Fucking Gun was the only thing she wanted.

Why did he hesitate? She burned to plunge her tongue in his mouth, wrap her legs around him, and meld to him like warm honey.

Ali arched her back, attempting to press her breasts to his chest.

Yet he held her captive, continuing to torture her with the sweet pain of foreplay. She was his prisoner, hands locked above her head, breathing rapidly as his lips brushed wild seduction on her ears and down her neck.

At last, he freed her hands. She touched his hair, marveling at the cool, crisp thicket of ebony. Coarse and thick, he kept it cut short and neat, yet it still had the stubborn will to fall onto his forehead and spike at his crown. God, she loved his hair.

Especially while he moved down to push her legs apart and drag them over his broad shoulders. Oh, yes! He was going to use his tongue and mouth to shoot her to the moon.

But not like that! His lips whispered over her throbbing mound of pulsing heat, then pressed to her inner thigh. *Please, Gun. Don't tantalize me too long.*

The evil man moved up to plunge his tongue into her belly button, then licked his way over her stomach. In his hands, her fevered breasts swelled and flamed with need.

Powerful waves of want rocked her hips and lifted them off the bed. She wanted him inside her, being one with her.

"Not yet, baby." He took her hands and kissed her palms. "Let's not miss anything tonight."

There it was again, the little message in her brain, written in a field of twinkling stars. Damn! Ali! You're crazy in love with this man.

"Gun, come up here."

Poor, unsuspecting man. He obligingly moved up to lie over her.

“You want to bypass my specialty, the full-body lick?” He sounded incredulous at the thought.

Her voice lowered in timbre, the beat of her heart strangely sedate. “This won’t take long. Just lie with me for a minute.”

He seemed aware of some new piece in their personal relationship puzzle being ready to drop. “Okay, gorgeous. What’s more important than getting your pussy kissed?”

How very Jack Gunnison. He fought the serious nature of her love to the bitter end. Thunder rumbled across the roof. A warning she didn’t heed.

“You may as well hear this before we move on to the next part of our lives.”

“Holy shit! What’s going on? You getting fucking serious on me at a time like this?” His firm lips set in a sensualist smile, the lashes of his ebony eyes lowered to make him appear languid and deep in the pool of erotic desire.

“I think it’s time I told you up front -- the way I feel about you.” The cords in his forearms tensed beneath her palms. “You’re scared, aren’t you?” Her voice shook with tension.

Casually, obviously bent on ignoring her comment, he leaned down to suck her earlobe, his exotic scent seeping into her blood, teasing her tongue.

She sighed, flinching but enjoying the hot little flames that flickered where he touched her. “So, you’re going to ignore me. Pretend I don’t love you.”

His heavy exhale spoke volumes. Not meeting her direct gaze galvanized the meaning of his comment. “You don’t mean what you’re saying.”

Philosophy! After she’d spilled her heart full of devotion for him. Okay, she deserved that. He’d told her not to go soft on him. Don’t you dare cry, not now. Grab tonight, grab now!

Bullshit! That wasn't good enough anymore. No way to call it back, not her ignorant declaration of love or her hand that sliced through the quiet air to collide in a jarring slap to his cheek.

He glared at her, hot disbelief in his eyes. "Really nice, Donavon."

"Well, hell, Gunnison. You should have expected that." She sneered, squelching the crying jag that pushed against her throat. "This is enough to make a gal wish she'd pleased herself in the shower. Want to get your carcass off me?"

The quick blaze of embarrassment flaring in his eyes pleased her, made her want to crush his ego a bit more, but no. She would wind up the loser no matter what, and she'd done that well enough. He was pissed off to the hilt. So was she.

"Yeah, sure," he gritted out in a splintering oath. He sprang from the bed and stalked toward the door. "I'm outta here."

"That's right. Run away, you damned coward!"

Fury borne of rejection blazed over her like a desert storm. Jumping off the bed, she trotted after him.

She caught up with Gun and hooked her arms over his shoulders. He exploded with anger.

"Back off, Donavon." He tried to shake her loose, only managing to collide with the wall in his angry rush.

"You have a lot to learn about me, boy!" Her voice was loud, a habit created by shouting over a houseful of males. "I'm not ashamed of being in love with you. I'm a full-grown woman. I don't do anything halfway. Especially love."

He pried his face off the wall and pried her loose, turning to grab her arms. She missed kneeling him by inches. "Knock it off, Donavon."

Her teeth were clenched in determination to grab the waistband of his pants. "Where do you think you're going?"

He stopped to glower down at her. "You're pulling my pants off my ass."

Laying her weight on the cloth, she shot back. "I've seen your ass before. Talk to me."

His body tensed with suppressed anger, his gaze icy while watching her slide down his leg to the floor.

"We've talked. Get back to your room."

"Like hell, Gun. You're going to listen for once, not run away like a lacy-pants, sniveling coward."

Oh, my God!

Wind rushed around her in a furious roar, nearly bursting her eardrums. He clutched her upper arms to pull her from the floor. Ali couldn't see, her head spun, the air jolted from her lungs after he pressed her against the wall.

The lava-hot anger glinting in his eyes startled her. "Listen to me, and listen good." His face was flushed. "Shut your mouth and get out of my face."

Ali opened her mouth to comment on his manhood, but decided to stop the kid stuff. "Why are you so afraid of allowing someone to love you?"

His voice grated like broken glass and razor blades. "Donavon. You don't know what you're talking about."

Well, yeah. His voice could freeze her nipples off, but Ali refused to wither.

"Is that your best threat, buster?" She couldn't camouflage the grunt from her belly when her back smacked against the wall again. "All this because you're afraid to love me?"

Gun clenched his teeth over his comment. "Terrified, you little bully."

The pressure on her arms forced her to blink. "Okay. Put me down, and I'll get out of your life, coward."

Maybe she was pushing him too hard, but anything worth having was worth a good war. Right now, Gun looked like a battle-hardened warrior, ready to bolt for freedom. She didn't care. He would have to talk to her if he was pissed off.

He crowded her, all six foot four of him, moving in to press her to the door. Dangerous and intriguing, his gaze glittered like wintry, midnight stars.

"I thought you were smart. But, you're not." Catching her hands in his, he pinned them above her head. "I'm not fit to wipe your feet on."

Now, he wants to talk.

"You're also dumb, Gun"

"One more of my qualities."

"You're too dumb to let go of your past and let yourself fall in love, even when you know it's right and the best thing you'll ever have a chance at."

He eyed her with a wry smile. "Oh, yeah. I'll be getting a hell of a bargain, but what about you?" His face contorted with frustration. "Why the fuck can't you see what a lousy fit we are?"

Ali couldn't beg for his love anymore, like a cat at his back door. "All right." He dropped his hands, and she turned to walk away from her heart.

"Wait a damn minute. You never had to hear the word love when we fucked before."

He told the truth, but it hurt just the same to hear him tell her she was cheap, an easy lay, and he simply couldn't love her.

Cover up, Ali. You're not weak, just in love.

"I don't need to hear it now." She looked back at him, eyes barely seeing him. "I'd know you were lying."

What else was there to say? With her last dignity in shreds, she found her loungers and pulled them on, trying to ignore him and his deep voice.

“Aw, hell. Where are you going?” He got up and followed her to the connecting doors. “I thought we talked about this before, Donavon. So this wouldn’t happen.”

She turned to look at him, wanting to run for the bathroom to cry, but standing her ground. “It’s okay, Gun. You’re right. Just remember, nothing is free.”

His expression altered from anger to humor, ticking her off to the explosion point.

“Name the price, Donavon.”

“Love is expensive.” She was shutting the door to her emotions. “You can’t afford it.”

Gun expected to suffocate in his frustration, his heart slamming against his ribs. He intended to follow her.

No, this is best. Leave it alone.

His heart wanted to yell at her to stop when the heavy doors shut, closing her world against intruders. Had she barred the door to keep him out?

He jumped up, racing to test the lock. Pissed off or not, she wasn’t sleeping in a room with the doors closed. No fucking way.

The sleek handle moved down under the pressure of his hand, silent and efficient. The doors opened, just enough for him to see her getting into bed.

Okay. At least she wasn’t throwing knives at him. So far.

An ottoman against the door propped it open, and he turned away from her and the crazy reasons he wouldn’t admit how much she meant to him.

Drawn to the window by the sudden blast of snow against the glass, Gun fell into a grim mood, one to equal the scene outside his window. A new storm system was barreling its way up the Eastern Seaboard, dumping another foot of snow in its wake.

His shoulders sagged with the weight of regret and longing. He wanted to tell her to wipe him from her life, like a smudge on her shield. Damn it!

He hit the windowsill with the heel of his hand. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Not the way he handled sex.

Okay. Time to lay it out and be honest with her. She's only going to give you one shot.

Oh, man, she deserves something so much better than you.

Gun turned and took a ragged breath, his stride quick and sure, taking him through the passageway to his quest.

"Donavon. We have to talk."

Like a coiled spring, she sat up to stare at him. "You are kidding!"

"Never more serious." He sat on the edge of her bed. "Don't love me, Donavon. I'd only make you hate me down the road."

Her stunned expression quickly crumpled under a floodgate of tears. "You're right. Damn you!"

He dodged her fist aimed squarely at his nose. "You need a guy who likes parties and going to church and nurseries. You'll be wanting babies pretty soon, Donavon." He caught her hands. "I'm just a little slow. I should have backed out of the relationship after Bogotá. You would've been in a good life by now, not thinking you loved a paid killer."

She was strong and yanked her hands free. "Shut up, damn you."

The hurt in her blue eyes cut him to shreds. "No, I won't shut up. We should have hashed this out long ago."

She hit him in the chest. "My God. You top it all for arrogance, you complete prick."

"See, Donavon. You know me better than anyone else." An attempt to hug her was met with a glare of fury. "Okay. What would keep us together? How long before my ways drove you to someone else?"

He'd seen her angry, but there wasn't a word to describe the fire in her eyes. She pushed him away to slap him twice before he caught her close to his chest. She screamed out her rage.

“Someone else! I wish I could look at someone else. I’ll die alone because of you! You’re a bastard that no one can understand. No one but me!”

What the hell could he say to her? What was left except the truth? He didn’t want to crawl through life without Donavon. She made him a complete person, not a hollow shell with no reason to take the next breath. Maybe, with luck, they could make it.

“I’ll break your heart and make you crazy.”

For a split second, she eyed him like an injured tiger, wary and grief-stricken. “You’ve done all that.”

That didn’t assuage his guilty heart. “You know our lives would never jibe with anyone else. You couldn’t count on Christmas at Granny’s, and Gun Junior would be graduating college before he got to know his old man.”

“Gun Junior?” She stopped crying and wiped her eyes. “I’m really impressed with all the great excuses for you to not love me.”

Well, there it was. Crunch time and nothing to hang on to except a sheer cliff that began to crumble in his clutching fingers. “But I do.”

“Do what?”

“Love you.” For the first time in his dealings with women, Gun knew what it was to be a stumblebum. Elated and clumsy. “Like crazy. With all my heart.” She was being awfully quiet, no tears or shouts of jubilation. “Well, babe. Am I still what you want?”

Her silken voice slid over his burning ears, colliding with his racing heart. “You’ve just made the commitment of your life, Gun.” She was up on her knees, hugging his neck. “Don’t ever think I’ll relax my claws and let you go. No matter what you say or do, I’m in your blood like a permanent fever.”

Gun fought the dizzy feeling of success. “Okay. You’re trying to scare me, aren’t you? Well, damn right I’m scared, but you’re stuck with me until death do us part.”

For a split second she scowled, obviously not liking what he’d said.

"Don't ever say that again." Quickly as it had come, her frown vanished, replaced with a sweet smile. "Say it again."

"Which one?" Her coy smile pleased him. She was flirting with him.

"Don't play stupid with me, I know your games."

"I love you, Donavon. Really, damn well love you."

Her soft lips parted under his, soft and sweet like a good sherry. He kissed her with a gentle searching touch until her tongue flicked out to seek the warm interior of his mouth.

His loud groan surprised him, but she paid no attention. How could he be so lucky, a moron with no culture or plans for the future? A new thought sneaked in to worry him. What if she woke up one morning and realized what a poor choice she'd made?

"Baby," he whispered. "I'm going to be damned good, you're going to love me forever." Her sweet floral scent caused his gut to clench tight with fear, a surprising reaction. He was a pussy, afraid of commitment, but Donavon was his choice for life.

He knew that light in her eyes was love. Her sweet lips moved enticingly as she spoke.

"I think I've always loved you. I have nothing in my life without you."

Chapter Eighteen

Morning brought more snow in its dreary gray cloak. No sun would pierce the thick clouds and blustering skies over New York that day.

Let it rage and storm outside. Ali didn't care. She was in love. She locked her arms around Gun's neck while they showered together. The scent of his soap and shampoo draped over them, the aroma imprinted on her heart.

Gun, her lover-man. Sounded strange after being afraid for so long to admit how much she cared for him. How foolish she'd been.

His voice cuddled around her like a soft, warm blanket. "What's on your mind, babe?"

She exhaled, not wanting to sound childish. "Just thinking how warm it is in here and how much I don't want to leave this heaven."

He drew her closer against him. "How about just skipping work today? We can loll in bed and run room service crazy."

"Tempting." She sighed and traced the outline of his shoulder with soap. "And too good to happen." Her finger trailed down his chest to his stomach. She found the real reason for not leaving the warm water. "Oh, my. What have we here?"

His cock was hard and strained upwards, tight against his belly. No, she couldn't ignore that, especially not when his fingers slid deep inside her. Surely they had time to mess around a little longer.

His groan sounded good, and his voice triggered the soaring of her libido to an exotic world. "Donavon, you're going to be the death of me, baby. You feel better every time I touch you."

"You're just saying that, but I like it."

He kissed her in his sensual fashion, lips and tongue stealing her strength and breath.

She relaxed her legs that quivered while she straddled the knee he'd wedged between her thighs. She rose up on her toes, clinging to him for support, tightening herself around his cock that he buried deep inside her.

He pretended to wash her breasts, squeezed their weight, then slid his hand down to stroke her sensitive, swollen clit.

She moaned with unrestrained pleasure, tensing her body until there was no choice but to let it burst free in a shattering hot orgasm.

Through a passion-clouded mind, Ali heard the jangle of the suite's telephone. She steeled herself for bad news. It was always bad news on their cell phones. No, wait, the suite's phone would be just another wrong number. No matter, Gun had to see what it was.

"Damn it." He groaned and stepped out of the shower to pick up the phone on the vanity. "Yeah. Joe Gunther here."

She wrapped a bath towel around herself, handed one to him, and listened to his conversation. "What's going on?"

He cupped his hand at the back of her neck, kissing her several times before continuing his phone call. "Yeah, sure. I'll come down for it." He groaned in apparent pleasure as Ali dried his hair and questioned the person on the line. "Did they leave a name or phone number? No, no. I'll come down to pick it up."

He hung up the phone and scowled. "Don't know what's going on, but I'm going down to the lobby to find out."

Ali knew that expression. He was wary about the situation. "Wait, Gun. I'll go down with you."

He nixed her idea. "No use. Probably a mistake." He went to his room and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. "Come lock the door."

She followed him, calling it her crazy, superstitious nature, but the odd feeling of melancholy was heavy. "Hurry back, handsome."

He turned to look at her before getting in the elevator. "Just be waiting for me, baby."

"I will. You can count on that."

Then, she was alone. Ali went back to her bedroom, absently pulling on a long-sleeved thermal top and gray sweats. She put on heavy socks and her boots. True to habit, she didn't lace them up immediately.

She shivered at the thought of going back to search the forlorn, empty tenement buildings.

No more morose thoughts. You're in love, and your man loves you. Nothing can mess that up.

She looked forward to a future with Gun and couldn't wait to be finished with this part of their lives.

What was that? Gun! Her smile vanished. He wouldn't rap on the door like that. He would have called her before knocking.

She picked up her weapon and walked to the door, stopping a few feet from it.

"Who's there?"

The reply was muffled, indistinguishable.

"Who is it?" Ali released the safety on her PPK.

"Housekeeping ... to clean your room."

Ali looked around. The place was a wreck. "Okay. Just a second."

She concealed her weapon at her side and unlocked the door, opening it a few inches. A young woman with an armload of sheets and towels stared back at her.

"Cleaning. Your room, *señorita*." Her sunny smile seemed sincere, lifting some of Ali's suspicion.

"Sure." Ali smiled and let the woman into the room. "I'll be out of your way in a flash."

The woman was not like the usual housekeepers that cleaned for them. Talking fast she hurried to the bathroom. Too friendly and way too early.

After clipping her weapon on her waistband, she turned to pick up her jacket, but dropped it on the floor. Pain radiated through the back of her thigh, deep and paralyzing.

She fought to stay on her feet, but couldn't, pleading for help when she couldn't see through the sudden darkness. "Help me. Please."

The damned woman had hit her.

Was that her voice, a pitiful mewl in her splintered brain while rough hands moved her, slapped her? Through squinted, almost blind eyes, Ali couldn't distinguish if the shadowy figures were real or not. What was wrong with her? Buzzing ears allowed her to pick out heavily accented voices and words she only partially understood. She didn't know these people and flailed her hand to tell them so.

Terror ripped through her. The shadows were going to kill her. He would help her.

Gun. Her call for him lay silent on her numbed lips.

Someone pulled her hair and jerked her backwards until she fell, only to be yanked to her knees. A loud, ugly voice told her she would be dead if she balked again.

I wasn't balking ... I ...

The words wouldn't form on her tongue, and she put her hands out to touch the person talking to her. A slap to her cheek forced her head around, sending her off balance.

Gun. Help me.

She was on her feet now, being jerked and dragged along. Something heavy covered her and her feet slid on the floor. No, she was cold and in the dark, falling onto a hard surface.

She finally slid into a deep, cold silence.

* * * * *

Gun couldn't shake the growing lump of worry in his gut, the damn slow elevator didn't help alleviate the dark feeling.

He thought about taking the stairs back to his room to check on Donavon. He should have insisted she come down with him.

This whole deal stunk. The elevator door finally opened, and he jogged through the lobby to get to the front desk.

"I'm Joe Gunther. There's supposed to be a letter for me." God damn. Why was it taking so long for the clerk to focus on his comment?

"I'll check on that for you, sir."

The guy obviously didn't give a damn about no letter. Gun wanted to jump the counter and have a look for himself.

As if he were in a sleepwalk mode, the clerk rummaged in the wall of pigeonholes, and came back at a sloth's speed, empty-handed. "I'm sorry, sir. Nothing is in your suite's personal mailbox."

Gun clenched his teeth for a second. "Someone called my room saying there was a message for me. Are you sure there's nothing?"

"Positive, sir." The clerk's smile was benign. "Perhaps a friend playing a prank."

Gun didn't try to hide his annoyance, looked around at the crowd that chatted and milled around the lobby. No, he didn't know anyone here, and this was no prank. He sucked in a cold breath, the cogs of reason clicking in his brain.

Donavon.

He wasn't especially religious, but the phrase "Dear God" rang loud and clear in his heart. Cold fright gripped him, and he seemed frozen in place, his legs heavy until reality slammed him in the face. Sounds of happiness, people, laughter, and warm greetings from people who had no idea how scared he was. He plowed through the herd and vaulted up the stairs, desperate to reach the third floor.

"Donavon, baby. I'm coming. Please, honey."

His murmured plea was still warm on his lips as he burst through the stairwell door, slamming it back against the wall.

Silence. Deep, ominous silence as he ran down the empty hallway. His door was closed tight. Her door opened by simply touching it.

Why the hell had she left her door open? Wait until he could give her a good piece of his mind. Donavon.

He stepped inside the room, unable to breathe. The place seemed to be held in suspended animation, quiet and forlorn.

She was gone.

Blinding desperation rendered him into a wild animal, feeling only rage and fear of what had happened in his absence. Pain as real as any mortal wound speared his heart and clutched him in death's embrace.

A glint from across the eerily quiet room caught his eye. He choked with emotion, the empty, vicious-looking hypodermic needle ignited in him. She hadn't left. Someone had taken her.

Screams of anger pounded against his throat as his gaze raked all four walls, seeing everything and nothing he wanted to see. *Calm down. You have to get hold of yourself.*

One thought took precedence in his brain. He had to find Donavon. She depended on him. Images raced through his mind, scenes of dirty streets, and numbers, rundown tenements, and a heartbreaking image of Donavon crying for him.

Stop wasting time. His brain shouted that command over and over. On his way out of the bathroom, he tripped over a pile of sheets and towels on the floor.

The scattered linen jogged his memory. The maid he'd seen in the hall on his way down to the front desk. God damn it! Of course Donavon would have let the housekeeper in. Son-of-a-bitch!

Fired with a dangerous cocktail of rage and fear, he ran to her closet. The long coat was there. Near the bed, he saw her leather jacket where she'd dropped it on the floor. She was out there with no protection.

Murder gripped his heart when he found the absolute challenge left by her kidnappers. Her badge and weapon were placed on the pillows with another hypodermic needle.

He couldn't breathe, simply stared numbly into space and wanted the blood of Conteguez on his hands.

Gun whirled around, weapon in hand when a sound behind him pierced his tumultuous thoughts.

"Whoa!" Ram stood in the doorway, hands up. "It's just me, big brother."

Gun held his emotions on a tight leash, grateful Ram had decided to stop by the hotel before leaving New York. Not daring to let go or he'd drop to his knees, consumed by grief.

"I need help, Ram. Right now."

Ram's eyes narrowed. "Hell yes, just name it. I'm on it."

Gun picked up Donavon's shield and weapon and forced himself to speak, not roar like an enraged lion. "You don't know how grateful I am to see you, Ram."

Hooking his arm over Gun's shoulders, Ram spoke calmly. "I decided to put off going to Tahoe. Looks like I made the right decision."

Gun stared at Donavon's left shoe that she'd lost near the door. Aw, Christ, her feet were always so cold. Murderous intent took over his soul as he explained the dangerous situation.

"Okay, our mission target snatched Donavon while I was drawn to the lobby by a phone call." Gun choked back the knot of guilt in his throat. "We have to move fast, or he'll take her out of the country. I'll lose her forever."

Ram clasped his hand to his arm. "Where do we start? I'm ready."

Trying to keep the desperation from his voice, Gun told Ram about the search they'd done, the gun battle, and fire. "I'm not fucking sure where to look now. The tenement section, maybe. We heard Conteguez has a place on West Fifty-seventh or near there. We hit the bars first. He loves whores and picks them up in the lowest parts of town."

Ram handed Gun his leather jacket and nodded at the door. "Let's go. We'll get a lead on this son-of-a-bitch."

Gun grabbed the coat, putting it on as they ran down the hall, and pushed the rear exit door open. The snow had been trampled and several sets of shoes had left prints. Someone had fallen; one bare foot had hobbled along until, apparently, Donavon had fallen again. He forced his eyes away and ran with Ram to the underground garage to get his car.

Ram kept up a line of sensible talk, trying to keep his brother sane. "Got plan A set, brother?"

"Yeah, I'm going back to the last bar we were at." Gun checked his weapon, shoving the cold steel into his shoulder holster. "The prick that runs the dive knows something about Conteguez. I'll beat it out of him. He'll talk if he doesn't want to die. Makes no difference to me."

Chapter Nineteen

Ali wondered what she was doing back in training camp. Yes, that's it. She was being put through the hard eight drill again. Sure, her knees hitting concrete hurt, but it eased up during the dizzying sensation of free falling.

Yeah, she was falling again. Down -- thump onto something hard and cold. Then oppressive quiet and pitch dark.

Think, Ali. Think! You're in trouble. You're alone.

What was that? Clang ... clang. Someone running and shouting. Too far away to hear what they shouted.

Dear God, the silence again.

How long had she been huddled on the icy rock? No, you can't sleep again. Stay awake.

No, I can't. Don't want to. I'm cold and afraid.

"Who's there?" Her voice was alien to her, distant and unfamiliar. "Someone -- help me."

A grating sound and the slosh of water to her left made Ali try to stand. Pain forced her flat on her face, flat on the freezing floor.

The clink of metal striking metal sounded nice to her ears. Soothing. Someone touched her. "Please. Who's there?"

Deep silence, just rough hands putting something cold around her ankle. A leg iron! Oh, God! No! She was being dragged across the rocky surface, and her head bounced with every step her tormenter took.

A person, a real human being was in that place with her.

"Where are you? Can I see you?"

Her words trailed off in a half sob, half sigh. Sleep. Yes. She wanted to escape into sleep. The sound of retreating footsteps, light and quick moved away. Then the sound of a door being slammed.

No. The person couldn't leave her. She would freeze. So cold and afraid.

Running her hands over the stone flooring, she touched something like cloth. Instinctively, Ali grabbed it, pulling whatever it was closer.

Warm! Oh, thank you Lord. Only a scrap of dirty cloth, but not frigid like the floor. Shivering violently, Ali huddled against the wall, clutching her covering.

What seemed like hours passed, and she continued to shake uncontrollably. Nausea set in, and she retched, emptying her stomach as far from her meager covering as possible. Vertigo sent her into a tailspin of illness and fright.

"Gun. I'm here." Her voice trailed off into soulful quiet.

No reassuring answer came, just long spans of soundless gray fog, broken only by a glaring light in her swollen eyes. The harsh brilliance stabbed deep. Ali covered her face, then reached out to the light.

"Who's there?"

She knew fear, unreasoning, suffocating fear. Maybe she was drowning. "Dear God. I don't want to."

She turned her head to locate the source of a shuffling sound.

“There is no God for you, *puta*.”

The hoarse male voice cutting through the gloom froze in her heart.

The owner of that ugly voice kicked her in the side. Pain radiated from her ribs to her shoulder and sent her sprawling on the floor.

She didn’t scream. That would hurt too much. “Who’s there? Let me see ... your face.” For her curiosity, a savage kick to her lower back left her gasping for air and semi-unconscious. An instinctive desire to live screamed at her to cover her head, and she drew herself into the fetal position.

It went on, the evil person delivering a volley of blows to her head and back, grunting as he labored. A tiny flicker of resistance flared in her brain. Who is this fool beating you? Fight back, damn it! Fight.

She crawled to her knees, blindly clenching her fists. A blow to her neck smashed her defiance. The familiar cold of the floor was no comfort as she fell back down.

How long would she have to stay in the dark? Maybe the person would tell her if she didn’t say too much. Careful to make no noise, Ali searched the floor for the scrap of cloth, retching anew when her hand ran through her own cold vomit.

The crushing weight of despair and confusion silenced her. She mustn’t speak while the punisher was there. No, she would be quiet. Think of good things. There was a big, dark man with a sweet smile. Her drug-induced thoughts drew the image close.

The clang of a door slamming eased her fear. The torturer was gone, and she gave into the floating darkness.

* * * * *

Gun realized with no concern that his heart hadn’t resumed beating yet, and probably wouldn’t, not until he found Donavon.

My God, nightmares have chased you all your life, but this will bury you.

He refused to let Ram drive, and steered the sedan with a death grip on the wheel. He wanted to roar at time for slowing him down.

The shabby bar where they'd had the firefight was still in the same place, just as if nothing had changed. Even though his life had been torn apart. Nothing was the same, and he wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who tried to stand in the way of taking back his life. Donavon.

Beside him, his brother had a stabilizing effect on him, enough to allow him to plan and keep his fraying sanity.

He parked the car at the curb, a few feet from the bar's front door. Jerking free of the seat belt, Gun jumped from the car and stormed through the front entrance. Ram was on his heels, securing the rear from sneak attack.

Gun's gaze raked the room with angry suspicion, picking out the bartender. "Hey, you!" He crooked his finger at the startled man. "Get over here."

The ashen color of the man's face expressed terror. "I don't know anything, mister."

"You know plenty, cocksucker." Gun vaulted over the bar, chasing after the fleeing man. "Where's Conteguez?" He caught the man's collar and twisted it tight, paying no attention to the gurgling sound. He twisted harder until the choking man spoke up.

"I don't know what you're ..."

He didn't finish his sentence. Blood spurted from his nose, covering the wall his face was now pushed against.

Gun hit him in the kidney, jerking him away from the wall. "Conteguez?" He barely controlled his fury.

A fit of coughing by the bartender was followed by a plea for mercy. "Don't kill me."

Infuriated with the delay, Gun twisted the terrified man's collar, hissing into his ear. "Motherfucker, you're good as dead if you don't spill your guts. Now!"

The accelerated gagging didn't move him. He tightened his hold.

“Brother,” a quiet voice said nearby. Ram walked across the room and gestured at the startling scene behind the bar. “No need killing the guy. Just yet.”

Taking his hand from the bartender’s throat, Gun thought over Ram’s words. “This freak has ten seconds to talk, or I’m blowing his cock off.” He aimed his pistol at the wet spot in the guy’s pants. “Okay, dead man. What’s it to be?”

“Big apartment.” The sweating man spoke in hushed tones caused by fear of his possible demise. “He stays there sometimes. Please don’t kill me!” He lifted his hands in supplication. “I don’t know what you want.” Gun shoved his face to the wall, and he loosened his tongue. “He comes here for girls, the younger and dirtier the better. That’s all I know. I even take them to him if he says to. Please.”

“An address, son-of-a-bitch!”

“Corner of West Fifty-ninth ... white rock front ...”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“Yes, sir, I swear! The truth.”

When he shoved the coughing bartender away, Ram waited at the door, holding it open. “Let’s find Donavon.”

They left and were halfway to the address on Fifty-Ninth before Gun could talk. He smoked the cigarette Ram handed him. Donavon had stopped smoking. Now, why the hell had he thought of that?

“Ram. There’s the building. White rock like the son-of-a-bitch said.”

Leaning forward for a better look, Ram nodded. “Let’s walk from here, in case he has friends to warn him.”

Gun glanced around. “Yeah, Conteguez has eyes everywhere.” He opened his door.

Ram adjusted the weapon under his jacket. “Want to hit him alone or as a team?”

“We go in as a unit. If he’s there, we get him to talk no matter what it takes.”

"Agreed." Ram got out and looked up. "What lie do we use to get in the place?"

"Have the doorman call him. His friends have a Cadillac full of hot pussy waiting down here for him."

Ram grinned. "That'll work."

They tromped through the knee-deep snow and walked calmly to the lobby door. "Let's hope the doorman isn't stupid or brave."

They shouldered their way past the worried-looking doorman.

Gun could feel time ticking in his blood, rushing ahead and taking Donavon further away with every pump of his heart. He wanted answers now.

The doorman's eyes rounded with shock when Gun opened his jacket.

"I'm a good friend of Mr. Conteguez. I got a birthday present for him." Leaning closer to the frightened man, Gun gave him the semblance of a smile. "You going to call him down here or what?"

The doorman swallowed convulsively. "Who shall I say is calling?"

"His fucking father! Call him."

"What are you bringing, sir?"

"Cooch! You know what that is don't you?" Impatience hit Gun, and he opened his coat again.

The frightened doorman couldn't look at anything else but the pistol strapped under his arm. "Oh, yes, sir. Indeed."

Flicking his fingers at the phone, Gun growled. "Tell him the girls are starting without him." He grabbed the sleeve of the doorman's fancy coat. "Snap to, boy."

Dialing the number on the desk phone, the man perspired heavily under the collar of his uniform, staring at Gun, who leaned on the desk, wearing a cold smile. The man began to tremble. "He doesn't se-seem to be in."

Gun put his hands on the frightened man's tie and began to tighten the knot. "You won't mind if I go see for myself, will you?"

"Oh, my ... no." The doorman wiped his forehead.

"Which apartment does the rat hide in?"

Pointing, the doorman rasped, "Three ... twelve."

Glancing at Ram, he led the way up the winding flight of stairs, Gun taking them three at a time. Reaching the third floor, they ran to Three-twelve's door, both kicked it off its hinges, and the heavy door crashed to the floor.

They stormed inside, commando-style, covering all sections of the empty room.

"Damn it!" Gun swore savagely after realizing their quarry had left a short time before they arrived. A cigarette still smoked in a large crystal ashtray.

Ram pointed to the clutter on the coffee table. "Look's like a party in the making, half a dozen lines of coke and lots of needles."

Gun grimaced and rubbed his forehead. "How the hell do I keep missing that bastard? He has to light sometime."

Ram had been checking in drawers and closets, but abruptly stopped, motioning to the balcony door.

Getting his brother's signal, Gun assumed a look of resignation and took several steps toward the entry door. Desperation gave him quick reflexes, and he was out the door in half a heartbeat.

"Hold it, motherfucker!"

The person hiding behind a tall potted fir tree tried to run, but was yanked back by the collar. Gun threw his captive to the floor, jamming his forty-five against the skinny neck of the smaller man. "Where's Conteguez?"

A loud scream was definitely feminine. Ram put his hand on his shoulder.

"Easy, man. It's a chick."

He no longer differentiated between male and female. They were all guilty of hurting Donavon. His teeth were clenched as he hissed.

"Makes no difference. She'd better tell me something quick." He tapped the barrel of his weapon to the girl's skull. "*¿Dónde está ella? ¿La mujer Conteguez tomó?*"

She was wide-eyed with fright and shielded her face with her trembling hands. "Don't say, you English." As if to avoid being struck, she ducked her head and whimpered.

Gun never slapped women around, but he was sorely tempted right then. "Conteguez? Is he coming back?"

She glanced at Ram for pity, but he looked away. "The *señor* is at other place."

Holstering his forty-five, Gun exhaled with exhaustion and irritation. "Where?"

"Don't know. He don't say."

"Yeah, and you didn't help him get the woman! Right?" He pushed her aside and motioned for Ram to take her. "Drop her over the railing."

Shrugging in apparent nonchalance, Ram reached for the terror-stricken woman, carrying her to the rail. "This a good spot, man?"

Gun gestured impatiently. "Toss her."

Her screams ripped through the flurry of wind and snow whipping over the terrace. "No! I'll tell. Don't throw me. Please!"

Gun gripped Ram's arm. "Hold it a second. Let her speak. If she says the right thing, she won't go over the side."

The woman spoke like machine-gun fire. "An old building on the docks." She licked her lips and rolled her eyes. "A place ... Burton Cigarette ... no ... no, the tobacco building."

"What river?" He fought for breath and temperance. "Toss her, Ram."

“No, no! I’m being true. I remember -- East River, he said. Where some boats come in. Please!”

Catching her face in his hand, Ram shook his head. “Damn good thing you talked.” He grinned at her. “I was curious to see if you could fly.”

Chapter Twenty

"You killed my brother."

The statement was delivered devoid of inflection or emotion.

Ali prepared for a new assault of fists and feet. Her throat was parched, and she dared ask for relief. "Water. A sip ... please."

A shadowy figure moved in the distance. No, it was near and the features of a human were clearer now. It gestured in her direction and spoke again.

"Not that I was too disturbed over his death. Perfectly understandable owing to his loose security." There was a coarse laugh. "You saved me the trouble of getting it done."

The human touched her hair. Ali cringed and squeezed her eyes shut. "I didn't mean to. I didn't see him." The person laughed loudly at her rambling.

"I wasn't chastising you. In fact, you handed me a new and better position in life and the power I deserve."

She clutched her blanket to her chest. Should she ask the person's name? "Are we friends?"

His laugh grated and scraped over her nerves. "I considered killing you quickly, but I want to see you suffer. A lot."

Ali tried to focus her eyes, trembling as her blood chilled. "I'm cold. Please. Something hot."

The heat came from his fist in her face. Stunned and reeling with pain, she shrank away from her attacker.

"You get nothing. I want you alive long enough to get that cop of yours in my sights." The figure cackled. "You'll get your heat. Hot lead."

Threats of being killed didn't penetrate Ali's brain any longer. He'd mentioned her cop friend. A wisp of an image drifted through her shrinking bit of memory. She whispered a name in her confusion. "Gun. My cop ..."

She cried out for the first time, his foot lashing out delivered a brutal kick to her lower back.

"I'm Conteguez." He kicked her once more. "You must die, you see. Killing you will prove to my enemies no one can escape me. I am powerful and have no fear of any country's laws."

Memories of a flower-scented rainforest and snakes whirled in her mind. "No. I won't go there. Too wet."

A snort of disgust preceded the man's reply. "You're not worth much to your cop. Twenty-four hours have come and gone, and he still hasn't come for you." He slapped her, once and then twice. "If he's smart, he won't look too hard."

Another voice came from the dark corner to join his. "She's dying."

"The sooner the better."

"What will become of her?"

"I'm hanging her from the Brooklyn Bridge." His foot prodded Ali's hip. "Give her another shot."

His casual talk about killing her didn't alarm Ali. Her survival instinct warned her something was wrong in her body. The stabbing tearing pain had gotten unbearable.

Keeping quiet until the people left her alone was almost too much for Ali to pull off. Her cries of agony didn't ring through the darkness until they were gone.

Unbearable cramping tore through her body while she knotted herself into a ball, hiding under the wet square of cloth.

In her misery, she recalled the arms of strength that were refuge and joy.

Smells of cedar and sagebrush.

Warmth? A rush of hot warmth flooded from her, soaking the sweat pants she wore. Ali sobbed with aching pain and fear.

* * * * *

Gun now had a starting point to take Donavon out of the viper's hands. He was thrown from absolute euphoria to total desolation. She loved him and he loved her. The cloak of fear about what she was being put through was suffocating. If only she'd gone to the lobby with him. This was his fault, and he didn't want to live if she didn't make it.

His thoughts raced madly as Ram took over driving duties. The internal clock that normally guided his waking/sleeping tilted crazily. His mind refused to rest.

Through his tired eyes, the docks were dismal stretches of windswept desolation.

Ram targeted the building fronts with the car's searchlight and braked to a stop.

Out of patience, Gun opened his door. "I'm going nuts here. I'm walking."

Ram tried to grab Gun's arm. "No, damn it. Wait a minute." He pointed to the buildings almost hidden by swirling snow that disguised them in white beauty. "Let's not go off half-cocked here."

Gun shook off the restraining hand. "Fuck you, Ram." They both got out of the car and plowed their way through the drifts, using their flashlights to read the names of the old buildings.

The wind was merciless and he turned up his collar against the biting cold. Worry over their hastily formed ideas plagued him. They needed a different plan. "This isn't working. Too much time, and Donavon is probably becoming a problem for that slime bag, Conteguez. He'll kill her."

Ram bunched his shoulders against the bitter cold. "Want to hear what I think?"

Gun turned away from the stinging, wind driven sleet. "Can I stop you?" He wanted to hug his brother but Ram looked too serious for a show of affection as he talked.

"That storage company is supposed to be three buildings down."

Gun got the idea Ram wasn't sure about the address and was making plans of his own. "What? You don't think we're on the right track?"

Ram took the map from Gun's hand. "I didn't say that. Maybe just take a slightly different route." He looked down the street. "I think we hit the tobacco storage building first." He tapped the map they had worked up earlier.

"We don't have time to work as a unit now." He raked snow from his hair and then stuffed the map into his jacket pocket. "We split up here. You take the tobacco place. I'll take the furniture storage building."

"Check." Ram pulled his Glock from his shoulder holster. "Keep that damned cell phone open, man. I'll probably need your help."

Gun grunted. "Wouldn't be the first time." He took his flashlight from his jacket pocket. "Watch yourself, little brother."

Laughing as he walked away, Ram lifted his hand in apparent dismissal at the comment. He disappeared into the tobacco warehouse after shouldering an entry through the sagging doors.

Gun rethought the separate search situation. That was his kid brother being swallowed up by that menacing building.

He grimaced and forged ahead. Ram could take care of himself. His mission was to find Donavon. He felt it in his bones. She was near. He took off down the middle of the snow-packed street, trying to keep his pace steady.

Don't run. You can't afford to mess up and miss that building.

The crunch of snow under his feet was the only sound. Snow fell light and clean and cold. He picked up his pace.

Doubt worked its ugly claws around his mind. Was this the right block? Was it a real address? That woman could have lied her ass off. Damn it! Why hadn't he choked her a little more?

Stop it! You have the right address. Run now. You have to!

His breath froze in the frigid air with each labored breath he took. He thought of Donavon and her need for him to warm her feet.

Stop it, man.

He stumbled and went down on his knees. The toe of his boot had collided with a discarded tire and thrown him down. Rotten snow.

He got to his feet, looking up in anger. That emotion dissolved in an instant. The Burton Furniture Storage Company building was looking down at him.

He clenched his fists and pumped them in silent victory. His heart hammered with joy and a bit of trepidation. The few yards to the front entrance seemed more like miles.

No one had used the front door for a while. The snow against the door was as deep and pristine. The huge padlock meant nothing to Gun. He pulled his weapon and stepped back, firing twice. The lock and hinge dangled impotently. Gunfire wasn't a new sound in the area and it roared through the valley's between the buildings.

Before the thunderous echo stopped bouncing in the frigid air, he'd pushed the heavy door open and slipped inside. He stood still, listening to the sounds that the old building made. Cold and the moan of the wind through broken windows was all it had to offer.

His small flashlight was minimal help, but the bleary light revealed most of the musty interior of the room. Crates and boxes took up most of the space and left a narrow aisle to walk through. The thick layer of dust was unspoiled. No one had been through here.

Gun couldn't ignore the fresh load of despair that rode his shoulders as he picked his way through the crates. Where to start? Which floor? He paused, trying to locate the source of cold air pouring through the hall.

The light from his flashlight haloed a door that stood ajar. Snow blew in on the freezing draft and Gun shivered.

Some damn fool left the door open.

He walked a few paces before the meaning of what he'd seen registered. Open door. People leave doors open.

Blood rampaged through his veins, the flood deafening him. This could be right. Careful now. Don't screw this up.

Gun hunkered down to check out the footprints. They had been made by several people. A male with smallish feet and women. One -- no two. Were they coming in or leaving? He shined the light over the entryway. No snow or puddles of water. They had just left.

His hair bristled as he digested the idea that the man he hated most could be in the building. Killing wasn't something he enjoyed. But this was one he'd have no second thoughts about.

Extinguishing the flashlight, he slid along the wall, paused to listen, then moved ahead. Which way to go? Up the wide flight of wooden stairs, or down into the inky darkness of the musky smelling basement?

He chose to take the least likely and climbed the stairs, slowly gripping his forty-five as if it were a life-preserver in a stormy sea.

At the top, he stood on the landing and took a breath. Silence and empty space. This floor had been cleaned out. From nowhere, something swarmed him in a ghostly frenzy. He threw up his arms and leaned over to escape the fluttering that whipped about his head and shoulders.

Feathers flew and his lungs screamed for oxygen. Fucking pigeons!

He squatted down to get away from the frenzy of flapping and terrified birds. His heart had stopped and restarted, causing his ears to pop with pressure.

The furor had almost made him fire his weapon. How close had he come to getting Donavon killed with his stupidity?

Lord. Just let me find her and I'll give up everything. I mean everything. Nothing held back. I give it all to You for her life.

Seconds passed before he regained control and got to his feet. Checking his weapon he worked the safety. Off.

He walked as quietly as he could across the floor and hesitated on the landing. Hell yes. He climbed on the thick oak stair railing and glided noiselessly to the bottom.

The floor didn't squeak underfoot, and he crossed the floor quickly. The door to the lower floor was closed, but the doorknob turned easily. The door opened, and he held it steady, pushing it open by degrees. He couldn't afford to let a squeak or crash alert whoever was down there.

Being cautious was so foreign to Gun that he sweat blood to control the urge to storm in.

One foot, then the other. Step lightly, step slowly. Lord, this can't be real. He couldn't see much of anything. He had to chance the light being seen. Now, he could see a small boot tossed to the side. Donavon's boot!

The world had turned blood-red. Fury ripped through Gun and exploded over him like a phosphorous bomb. In two strides he found the heavy iron door to the basement and yanked it open.

There were no lights, just the smell of blood and vomit.

“Donavon!”

Nothing. He flipped the light around the stinking place and tried to see anything along the walls. Then, he heard it, the tiny cries.

To his left, low, on the floor. No, that couldn’t be Donavon huddled on the floor. He choked on remorse, running to where she lay.

“Donavon, baby.” He paid no attention to the filth and smells as he uncovered her and tried to reassure her. “I’m here, honey.”

She turned her head, trying to see him. “Gun, I’m here.”

He crushed an outcry of anguish. Her eyes were swollen shut and her nose, probably broken. “I found you, babe. You’ll be okay now. I’m taking you home.”

He gently pulled her onto his lap, holding her to his heart. She shivered uncontrollably. Working his arms from the sleeves of his jacket, he blanketed her securely in its warmth.

“Donavon, can you hear me?”

She might hear him, but didn’t understand. Her hand still held a putrid piece of tarp. It was soaked with blood. The feel of warmth coming through her clothes to his jeans alerted him to a horrific problem. Donavon was hemorrhaging.

“I’ll fix it, babe.” He tore off the bottom of his T-shirt and pushed it between her legs. “Okay, we’ll get help right now. Stay with me, Donavon.”

He tightened the coat around her and reached for his weapon.

“Hey, *cavrone*. That is my woman.”

Gun jerked his head around to see what he considered supreme evil. Conteguez. He stared at the cocky little man with cold control for several seconds. "You didn't take very good care of her, Conteguez."

Laughter rattled through the stinking semi-light and stopped abruptly as Conteguez hissed like a serpent. "She's your whore, cop. You don't take care of her."

Gun closed his hand around the forty-five, pulling Donavon closer when she whimpered and flailed her arms, struggling to free herself. "Okay, honey," he whispered to her. "Just one more thing to do, and we'll get out of here."

Her struggles took his attention, and Gun looked away long enough to lose sight of his target. When he looked up, Conteguez was pointing an automatic weapon at him.

The next second, Conteguez turned to fire at something at the top of the stairs, firing again and hesitating to stare at whomever he'd fired at.

That was all the chance Gun needed. He shouted at him. "Conteguez! Look at me."

He lifted his weapon and fired at the man, who even at the hour of his death postured in a courtly salute, tapping the barrel of his pistol to his forehead before pointing it at his adversary. His theatrics ended in a spray of blood.

The first slug went into his forehead, sending his arms out to his sides like a rag doll, flopping crazily. The second slug blew through his heart and left him with no expression on his dead face.

Chapter Twenty-one

Gun couldn't take time to enjoy seeing Conteguez fall and die. His sole concern was getting help for Donavon, and now his kid brother was probably dead on the stairs.

Keep your head straight, Gun. They're depending on you.

He lifted her up in his arms and quickly carried her to the door. What he saw on the stairs ripped his heart out.

His brother sprawled in a crazy puzzle of arms and long legs where he'd fallen.

He sat down on the steps beside Ram, holding Donavon as close as possible, and checked Ram for a pulse. Yes, there was one. Weak, but there. Blood seeped from a head wound, but the worst came from his chest. He'd caught one in a really bad place.

Gun's hands shook like his voice as he called 911 and requested help.

Ram fought for breath, and Gun leaned over him to breathe into his mouth. That seemed to help Ram in his struggle to live. He took a rattling breath, then another. Reaching in his pocket, Gun found a heavy neck scarf she'd forced him to carry. Quickly wadding it up, he pushed the scarf under Ram's collar, and pressed it against the wound. She made a crying sound, then quieted, putting new fear in his heart.

Donavon was limp in his arms and pasty white. Gun prayed for help. It had to arrive soon. Donavon no longer responded to his voice.

He hovered over Donavon and Ram. Body heat generated by the three of them might possibly save her and his kid brother. Gun made a silent vow to live a much quieter life if they pulled this one off. "I mean that, Lord."

He had all but given up hope when the bobbing light came down the steps and a pair of burly police officers called out to him.

"You the one needing help?"

"They do." He gestured toward Ram, but not budging. "They're both losing a lot of blood. My brother has a chest wound, and my partner is hemorrhaging." He was too worried to be strong. "Please, man. Where's the EMT crew?"

One officer looked Gun over. "They're right behind me." He glanced at his partner after checking Ram's wound. "This guy needs help like yesterday."

"He'd better get it, and damn fast." He tried to close Ram's jacket and comfort Donavon. "I'm sorry, babe. I'll never let you down again."

He was barely aware of the sirens or the trampling of feet on the stairs, and finally the EMTs rushed in to take Donavon and Ram from that tomb of a building.

Gun rode in the ambulance with Donavon, his mind racing with doubt and hope.

The ride to the hospital was a long, dangerous one. Snow and ice, plus vehicle accidents, slowed the ambulance and caused several delays. Every snag added to Gun's anxiety of knowing he could lose Donavon and his brother. How was Ram doing? He should be with him.

He looked out the frosty window after the siren stopped. The ambulance ran over the curb with a jarring bump as it turned into the driveway of the emergency room.

Everything went warp speed after that.

A crash team whisked Ram off to surgery, and Donavon was taken to a room where a team of doctors and nurses worked to stabilize her.

There was nothing for Gun to do but pace the hall and wait for information.

Several hours later, a doctor in green scrubs approached him.

“Mr. Gunnison.”

Gun tried to swallow. His throat was parched. “How are they? My partner, Agent Donavon, and my brother, Ram Gunnison?” This was no time to hide his emotions. He couldn’t anyway. He’d never been so scared.

The doctor led him into a small waiting room. “Ms. Donavon was badly beaten. The massive amounts she was given of the drug known as scopolamine very nearly killed her. She’s suffering from hypothermia and dehydration.” He paused and pulled the mask from around his neck. “Her broken bones will heal, but the psychological wounds will take a good while longer.”

Gun wanted to be with her, but held himself in check. “And my brother?”

“He’s stable, and the surgery went well. Youth was on his side. A few weeks from now, and he’ll be good as new.”

Gun shook hands with the doctor, stopping him before he walked away.

“Doctor, hold on a minute.” Gun caught up with him. “You mentioned something about Donavon’s psychological condition.”

“That’s right. Ms. Donavon miscarried. The fetus was between eight and ten weeks of development.” The doctor patted Gun’s shoulder. “She’s young and healthy. She’ll have a houseful if she wants them.”

He crashed to earth, his body dead and his thoughts raging with “what ifs” and useless sorrow.

The world would never know their child. They would never hear its cries, and it would not seek comfort or love in their arms.

* * * * *

Ali stared at her reflection in the hand mirror a nurse held up for her. She got constant attention from the staff of the posh convalescent facility Gun had brought her to. She touched the discolored skin around her eyes and grimaced. The blue and green would be with her for a while longer.

All this because she had not been vigilant and had let her pie-in-the-sky emotions make her careless and an easy mark. The cost of her hormone-driven mistake had been too much to fathom.

She touched her nose cautiously. It was pretty much back in its original shape. The nurse who watched over her during the day left the room to answer another patient's call.

"My God." She looked up to see Gun strolling into her room. "I must have scared everyone for miles around when you brought me in here." She released the breath that had stopped just above her heart. What was he thinking when he looked at her now?

He leaned in to press his lips to hers. "Baby, you looked damned good to me."

Was his passion the mission or the relationship? She loved him so much she shook and covered her telltale tremble while touching his hair. "You should start wearing a hat, Gun."

The melting snow on his jacket reminded her of the horrors she'd been through. She shivered and pulled her blanket up to her chin.

Gun took off his jacket and laid it over her legs. "I'll warm you up."

Ali smiled and patted the mattress. "I'll make room for you any time."

He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned down to kiss her. "Donavon, hurry up and get out of this bed. We have a vacation to take."

"Vacation?" She welcomed his kiss and the touch of his hands, but couldn't stop her soft moan of pain after he pressed a mending rib.

He pulled away and looked nervous. "Aw, hell. I'm sorry, Donavon. I'm a horse's ass." He moved to the chair near her bed. "Well, yeah. Texas. Remember?"

"That's okay, Gun." Her heart thumped noisily in her ears. "I need to toughen up."

He held her gaze with his. "You're plenty tough, Donavon." He looked away for a second, then centered his attention on her face. "We need to talk about what happened. All of it."

Why did he want to talk about something that was dead and gone? He needn't bother himself with it. She didn't blame anyone. Only herself, and he was certainly going to leave her again. Gun couldn't give up his work, and she couldn't keep settling for vacations when she wanted commitment. No, she was going home to Atlanta as soon as the release papers were brought to her. Now there he sat, staring at her, waiting for a sensible answer from her. Providence stepped in to give her a stay.

"Mr. Gunnison." Ali's nurse called to him from the doorway. "You have a phone call at the nurse's station."

Turning to look at the intruder, Gun scowled. "Damn. She has great timing."

He got up and went out of the room.

Ali couldn't stop a rush of relief. The call had ended their moment of closeness. She didn't want to talk about the baby. She died every time her thoughts went to her greatest loss.

While Gun talked on the phone just outside her door, she let reality replace fairytale wishes.

Gun had been in her room when she'd recovered enough to understand his words. He was there for her every need, and he told her about their baby. He was crushed over the loss. At times, when he thought she was sleeping, he wept.

After all they had gone through, he'd still not mentioned a future or commitment for them. She was afraid any talk about those things coming from him now would be the result

of pity. Ali could face anything except being the wife of the man she loved, knowing he was merely being noble.

So now the plan was set. She would make her choices and not wait for the future like she had been for several years. After all, what more would it take to get her tough lawman to show real interest in a family home and life with her? Way more than she had left.

He walked back into her room, and she straightened her face. He smiled and took out his cell phone. "I'm calling to make reservations for our flight to Dallas."

"No."

Fine lines of suspicion set in at the corners of his eyes. "No? What the hell does that mean?"

She laughed, hoping it sounded confident. "I have a wonderful town house in Atlanta."

"Texas is better."

"Texas is too dry."

"It's not moldy."

He had a comeback for everything, but, not this time. "I'm going home. It's time I settled in somewhere and figured out what direction I have to take."

The silence closed in around her. His stare was direct and calculating when she finally looked at him.

He slapped his phone shut. "Sounds like you're going alone."

Why did he have to look at her as if he could see into her heart? "Yeah, I have to."

He stood by her bed and appeared uncertain of himself. "Donavon. Are you sure about this?"

"If you mean, try for a real life, then yes. I'm sure." She picked at the satin edging of her blanket.

He picked up his jacket. "I'm not." His kiss was soft and coaxing, but he didn't press for more. "I'm sure you won't find what you're looking for alone."

Her damned lower lip quivered, and she almost choked on her tongue. The words that would have made it all worth while would be forever lost. Just as well. He was gone.

Chapter Twenty-two

Gun sprawled in naked relaxation near the lazy surf. The South of France was perfect for watching a parade of nice asses and mega-sized tits. Perfect, except he was bored and buck-naked with a bunch of people he didn't give a fuck about.

He couldn't believe how stupid he'd been, letting Hamm set him up in this mess. Vacation alone, God damn it!

The thought hit him that Hamm might not be too happy with his work. This crap freebie nude-beach trip wasn't going to make him look any better. Jesus, his life had gone to hell on a fucking toboggan.

He looked around at the selection of nude sunbathers, showing their goods to the world, and decided that some of them should have stayed covered.

Glancing down at his own body, he had no fear of showing his stuff. Buff is what Donavon had called it. He shrugged. The only thing bugging him about being naked was Fantasia, an over-endowed, over-pampered guest at the hotel. The chick was doing any guy who had time and had to be the horniest trick he'd ever met. She had become a nuisance. She wanted to be oiled -- and often. By him.

Too bad he couldn't get it up for her. Gun was carrying four months of pressure, and it was getting tougher to play handball by himself. That no longer satisfied him.

Okay, he was just horny. Hell no. He was lonely.

Glancing off to his left, he caught sight of Fantasia, slogging out of the surf of the Mediterranean. Damn it. She could smell a hard dick.

The woman didn't excite him. No surprise. His mind wouldn't let go of Donavon. He remembered everything about her. In his drifting thoughts, fingers of soft warmth played over his naked hide and brushed his cock. Oh, yeah. Now he could get it up when the lady of his affection was half a world away.

How had he missed the boat so completely? There was Ram, out of the hospital and shacking up with his hot physical therapist. He grinned at the idea of his kid brother being a horn dog. Lifting his drink to his brow, he silently saluted the youngest Gunnison.

He laid a towel over his ridged cock and tightened his muscles in private torment. Donavon had left her imprint on him, and he longed for her with deepening fervor. His groan of torment startled several scrounging sea birds.

What was she doing, feeling? She'd surely grown to hate him for everything that had gone wrong. She had to know he was so crazy about her and had wanted that baby as much as she had. He got up and walked to his private quarters, pausing at the bedroom door to gaze out at the blue water shimmering in the sun.

They should be here together, talking and loving.

He nearly took the door off the shower in his haste to relieve the painful ache for her.

Ten minutes later, he emerged from the bathroom, frowning with disgust. This wasn't working. He opened his shaving kit and pulled the bottom up. His cell phone and weapon were wrapped in a T-shirt.

He locked the door and sat on the bed to place his call. While he waited for Hamm to pick up, he went to the closet to get a pair of slacks and a shirt. "Hey." Hearing a familiar

voice was like honey to a starving bear. "Hamm. I'm calling in my markers. You have to get me out of this hell. Give me a new mission."

Hamm laughed before giving him some good news. "You have a new assignment, and I want you to come back to the States. You're going to the Bed-Stuy area again." He must be lighting a cigar. One of those Cuban cigars that Gun had confiscated from a whorehouse during a raid.

Gun rubbed his jaw with impatience. "So, spill it. What's the job?"

The metallic ping meant Hamm had lit that cigar with a military style Zippo lighter. The man was driving Gun to the edge with his constant delaying. "You're going to infiltrate a new group dealing in uranium or trying to buy it. We want to take them all in a wide sweep. You ready to get back to work?"

A rush of excitement burned through Gun's veins, a familiar feeling missing for months. "Now that's a bust. When do I leave?"

"I'll expect you to be in New York within a week."

The jolt of tension in his blood felt good. The hunt he knew. Three days. Life was okay, not good, but okay.

"Gun." Hamm had something else to say. "They're holed up in a tenement, stockpiling weapons and cash there. You got reservations about any of this?"

"None." From where he stood, he could see Fantasia indulging in some self-pleasuring on his patio. "And I'll be back in two days."

They ended the conversation, and Gun replaced his weapon and phone in the kit. He closed the drapes on the unappealing sight outside and lay down on the comfortable bed. Remembered sensual delights and long sessions of unbelievable sex with Donavon kept him company that night.

He dozed and woke in a sweat. A baby crying? No, you fool. You're dreaming again. That sound had taken over where nightmares had once tortured his sleep.

Fantasia finally gave up on him joining her and sauntered off toward the beach. Gun left the bed and went to the patio, breathing deep and wishing he had some peace in his soul. He'd always brushed off the little whispers in his mind, telling him that he needed to get on the path to a real life, not chase through the rainforest and sand dunes like a savage with nothing to offer the world.

He'd always been at the front of the pack when it came to chasing trouble and women. That had all been easy for him. Until Donavon. She'd never surrendered, even when she'd spelled out that she loved him. Love him! He didn't want her to love him. He'd brought nothing but trouble and heartache for her.

He shook his head and thumped the wall with his fist. *That's all bunk, and you know it. Quit this wild-animal life and ask Donavon to marry you. You want her so much it's eating you alive. She's a grown woman with lots more stamina than you. If she gets tired of you, she'll let you know. You have enough money to make a good life for her and a great place to take her home to.*

You scared she'll say no? Well, maybe she will. But man, you have to risk it.

Gun braced himself against the wall and made his decision. He wanted Donavon and he wanted another chance at having babies.

"Agent Donavon, I'm coming home."

* * * * *

The crowd was getting noisier and more boisterous at the birthday party for Bernardo Marchi.

Ali stood at the edge of the crowd, made up mostly of young and well-heeled Brazilians. The guest of honor didn't seem worried that his life was in danger.

She wanted to shake the smiling caballero for being so cavalier. He was twenty-one today and reckless as an infant, hiding from his security crew to knock off a piece with one

or more of his girlfriends. It mattered little to him that a hard-core drug dealer wanted him as a hostage and wouldn't return him alive.

Something was wrong here, and Ali edged along the wall to scan the crowd. Her backup. Where the hell was that jerk? Concern eroded into being pissed off.

She touched the tiny microphone in her ear. It might be on the blink. Great.

Fluffing her hair to conceal the earpiece, she moved away from the entrance door. Her backup was nowhere to be seen, but she could hear static in her earpiece. He was talking to someone.

She grimaced and picked her way through the crowd, catching a glimpse of the birthday boy. He was taking his shirt off and doing a great bump and grind.

Lord, she needed to get out of the smoky, noisy place. Keep moving, lady. This silly dress is too short and your feet hurt, but you have to keep moving.

She took a glass of pineapple juice from the bar and carried it with her. She ignored the warm stares and wolf whistles from the young men in the crowd. Her one desire was a hot shower and her big old soft socks Gun had given her. The bastard.

Glancing down at her fashionable red cocktail dress, she remembered the gaudy outfits she'd worn as Bambi Malone in Colombia. Her first mission with Gun. She'd fallen so hard and so fast for him.

Forget that stuff. All water under the bridge. She smoothed her skirt and moved to the edge of the crowd. What the hell? Static distorted the voice in her ear. It teased her ear again.

"You're sexy as hell, lady."

She bristled. "That's not part of the job, Santiago!"

Ali scanned the faces in the crowd, anxious to set her current partner straight. "Santiago?"

“Forget him.” The deep voice came through clear as a summer day. Husky, gravelly, mixed with a soft Texas drawl.

How could she assume a sane appearance with his voice taking her prisoner? Her hand shook, and her drink sloshed over the rim of the glass. She managed to take a sip, searching the crowd for his dark visage and big, tall frame. “I’m on a job, Gun.”

He laughed.

“Gun, what are you doing here?” She hissed her question while trying to spot him in the crowd.

“I’m your point man.”

She glanced from side to side. “What did you do with Santiago?”

“He’s okay. I paid him off.”

“What?” Ali tried to be angry. “Get him back here right now. Our job is to keep the birthday boy from being knifed and dragged out of here.”

“Tsk-tsk.”

“What did you say?” She walked quickly to the hallway and waited. Nothing. Why couldn’t she see him? *Gun, you’re evil as ever.*

He teased her senses again. “I’m hurt, Donavon. Is he more important than getting naked with me?”

That sent a thrill through her. “You’re not playing games with me just for a quick romp, are you?”

He made the sound that always made her orgasmic, a soft, low groan that worked over her body like fingers of persuasion. “No. I’m not playing, and I want all your romps, quick or slow, from now on.”

What did he mean? Was he just screwing with her again? “Show yourself like a man, damn you.”

She saw him then, a dream in faded jeans, with a white pullover under a black leather jacket. Lounging against the wall across the room, he grinned at her.

Still wearing those damned boots. He was the hottest thing in pants. She couldn't resist the temptation. Gun was a bad boy through and through, and she loved it.

What had he done to find her? Told lies and broken a few rules. Oh, baby, she was glad he had. He was so deep in her blood, her heart got a new jump-start. No surprise her dress didn't seem too short and her feet no longer hurt. She wasn't tired. She was sexy. All because the bane of her existence was looking at her.

She sat her drink on a table and listened to him seduce her.

"I love you, Donavon."

Ali bloomed with glowing warmth. Should she be so moved by him? He'd said sweet things before.

He remained on his side of the room, moving whenever she did to keep up with her, talking to her. "I don't have a lot of things to offer, but baby, I love you. I'll give you everything I have. I offer my heart, my love, my body. You like my body, don't you?"

Lord! He'd grinned when he said that.

"Gun, what's up with all this sudden confession? You been to mass or something?"

He laughed and her body tensed in automatic preparation for his touch. He looked around the room and finally raised his hand to motion to someone.

So, they were in cahoots, Gun and Santiago. Her backup was talking and laughing with Gun. Damn. That man would be the end of her after all.

Gun looked across the room at her and inclined his head to the entrance, then walked out of the room. What the hell? Did he expect her to follow him? Of course he did. After an affirmative signal from Santiago, she hesitated for a fraction of a second and then walked briskly from the room.

The lively music and crowd noise followed her out into the dimly lit hallway. Opening her evening bag, Ali slipped her hand inside, instinctively curling her fingers around the cool metal of the PPK. What was he doing? Playing games, when all she wanted to do was kiss him and hold him in her arms. The wonderful fool.

“Donavon.”

Her senses sharpened and crackled as the sensual, rough Texas whisper teased her ear. She turned to see Gun silhouetted in the courtyard entrance, his tall frame haloed by the garden lights behind him. Only a few feet away, he waited with open arms and a promising smile. He was her life, and he was here.

“Gun. Damn you.”

She ran to him and fell into his arms, surrendering to the thrill of being with him. He caught her face in his hands and kissed her, not teasing, not playing with her. He savored her lips in a delicious slow kiss that meant he had limited time to spend with her.

There was hot urgency in his body, and his words licked over her most secret spots. “I need you, Donavon.” No time to ask questions as he led her out into the heavy mist of the garden. “Damn, you’re the sexiest woman in the world, baby.”

Ali gave into the screaming desire to have him touch her in all the forbidden places.

She must have been insane at the time. “Don’t stop. My breasts ... they’re so hot ... ache so much.”

He ended her hunger with his kiss, making her gasp with exquisite yearning, kissing the sensitive flesh of her shoulder, following the delicate line with his tongue and sucking until she quivered with the headlong charge toward a fast-approaching climax.

“I won’t quit. I’m ready to go off, baby.” He bent to her breasts, lifting them from the soft fabric of her gown, and cupped his mouth over a nipple, nursing with barely discernible suction.

One at a time until she was going mad with the electric tremors crashing around her, she pulled his face to her fevered breasts, clenching her teeth while her fingers unzipped his pants and greedily locked around his cock. She didn't want to wait and gave in to the flash of ecstasy that made her cry out.

His mouth closed over hers to quiet her scream. He must have remembered she could never be quiet while they made love. She couldn't silence the raw need that whipped around her body and triggered a blaze of pulsing flame in her throbbing pussy.

"Donavon. Let's get married." He seemed so sincere and a little unsure of himself. "I've got a lousy twenty minutes here to convince you that I'm the one you want."

This was her most deeply held wish, but after all she'd learned about this man, she knew to move cautiously, making herself clear. "That's nothing to play around with, Gun. When I marry, it's going to be forever."

"Me, too." He kissed her cheeks so sweetly. "I want you forever."

He lifted her skirt, moving his hand up between her legs and easily worked his fingers inside her panties, tantalizing her with quick strokes to her clit, sliding his fingers back and forth along the sensitive swollen flesh.

Ali didn't question his motives. She didn't care. She wanted him to take her right there against that wall and do it now. She bit his ear to stop a noisy exclamation while accommodating two fingers as he pushed them inside her.

Gripping his shoulders, she whispered instructions to him. "Deeper, yes, deeper ... and pull out to touch my clit ... oh, yes! ... keep ... doing it!"

She didn't mind the rough stucco pressed to her naked back, the texture reminiscent of the deep exploration of his long fingers, deep and rough, coming free, slick and greedy, driving back inside until it was no longer possible to bear the sweet agony.

He held her close, kissing her, tongue probing, licking her lips and throat. He asked her something again.

“Will you marry me?”

She was light as air as he lifted her up and pushed his cock into her pussy, one stingy inch at a time, moving his hips in tight circles, groaning as if he was starving.

He murmured, sounding as if he strained to control himself. “Sweet, oh, Lord, so sweet. Marry me, Donavon.”

This wasn’t fair. Her brain was blazing with nothing but need to come again, and he was ... plunging into her, pressing her to the wall with every stroke. She knew if she didn’t come soon, she would die with the ultimate pleasure of reaching climax again.

She had heard right, and she had to answer him, had to be sensible.

“You won’t be happy saddled with a housewife and four kids. You’ll leave me.”

He was still breathing hard, handing her a handkerchief, glancing at something that moved in the shadows across the courtyard.

“No, it won’t be like that at all, Donavon.” He looked into her eyes and grinned. “Four kids? Is that how many we’re having?”

“I’m serious, Gun.” She pressed into him, taking in his warmth and strength. “It wouldn’t be three weeks before the call of the wild hit you. You won’t like being domesticated.”

She watched the young couple in the shadows who were having their own intimacy, just long enough to make sure they weren’t some kind of nuts bent on trouble.

Gun tipped her face up and seemed hard pressed to express his feelings. “Look, I’m a bastard, prick, and all those choice things, but I know what I feel is good, right for us. I love you.” He squeezed her tight. “I’m quitting the game. I’m staying home with my family. Four kids need me at home.” He rocked her gently. “My woman needs me at home.”

It was Ali’s turn to groan. “Stop it, Gun. I wouldn’t let you give up your life. You love what you do, and I’m sure not going to try to take its place.” She patted his rump several times. “So, don’t be a silly ass.”

He pulled her onto her toes and closed his mouth over hers, taking her breath with the fire of emotion. His kiss lay claim to her last resistance, and Ali surrendered to him. This would be the last time they would question the love and devotion between them.

He touched her breast and groaned softly. "We have plenty of backup in there. Want to go fool around for a few more minutes?"

"That's so romantic." She shivered. The thought of being in his arms for even that short time would revive her life. Ali pressed her hips to his and hugged him tight. "Keep that in mind, because we're going to spend a month locked in our bedroom when we meet again."

He pulled back from her, and snapped his fingers. "Hey, you never said yes."

"Yes. I will."

"I'll be back in a week." He took charge as usual, and she listened, not sure this could be happening. "We'll head for Texas, get married, and have a long honeymoon."

As suddenly as he'd arrived, Gun was being called away from her. His cell phone rang and he had to answer. While he talked, Ali studied his face, held his strong hand and worried.

She followed him to the entrance portico. His kiss was hard and the sweetest she'd ever had. He walked away to get inside the dark blue sedan with his partner, and she lifted her hand. "Don't you get hurt!"

He rolled down the window and waved. "What?"

The car was moving out of the driveway. She rubbed tears from her eyes and trotted after it.

"Don't you be late for our wedding! Don't you dare."

The car stopped and Gun got out, running back to her. "Baby, I love you. I won't be late. It'll take a hell of a bullet to stop me."

"Don't ever say that!" She hugged him fiercely, slow to let him go. "Just remember what I said, Mr. Cocky. Don't show up late."

“Aw.” He kissed her hard, smiling as if he was off for a day at the golf course. “Babe, you worry too much. We’re a team for life. Nothing is going to happen to me.”

She clung to him until he had to get back in the car. No longer trying to hold back the tears, she murmured as he drove away. “Don’t take me for granted. I won’t wait forever.”

A shooting star blazed through the inky sky, a mocking reminder of her relationship with Gun. “You’ll wait forever.”

 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>.