



# DANGEROUS SURRENDER

By

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## Chapter One

The rich strains of the tenor's powerful voice filled the air with *Mattinata*. His second cup of freshly brewed espresso rested precisely four inches from the right of the laptop. It was a perfect day, the kind that made him glad he paid the extra money for the penthouse unit with its view of the waterfront. His hair was still wet from the shower. At home on the terrace, wrapped in a thick terry robe, he was comfortable, safe, and secure.

The only thing missing from his life was Mattie. All the money in the world wouldn't bring her back. He found grim satisfaction in making the system that robbed him of his happiness pay.

His wife had died coming home from work. In the wrong place at the wrong time, a coked up punk broadsided her car. The small time criminal responsible for killing his wife had also died at the scene.

Shoving the bitter memories into the seething pit of pain he carried inside, he logged on to the internet, and then his bank's website, a purely routine transaction, allowing him to verify that the funds he had transferred earlier in the week had hit his checking account.

A polite little notice flashed as he clicked on balances from the main menu. *Account last accessed at 9:00 AM.*

The sky changed to an irritating, mocking shade of blue. The espresso developed an oily film. The tenor's sweet voice taunted him with the serenade to a wonderful morning when his day had turned to shit.

Inside his head, the alarms screamed, accelerating his pulse. The cursor blinked with infinite patience, waiting for his instructions.

From then on, nothing was routine.

The first coherent thought, which made it past his steaming outrage, was—what else had been hacked?

Someone could be tracking his keystrokes. If they were, they'd gotten nothing except confirmation of his password and account number. Information they obviously didn't need. A second, colder, assessment of his bank balances assured him there was no money missing. How big a problem was this unauthorized access?

Stuffing his anger, he put first things first, limiting any further damage by turning off the laptop. Next, he went into his home office, shut down the desktop computer, and then unplugged the unit. An after thought made him disconnect the broadband.

From the adjoining dressing room, he selected today's clothes, a suit of English superfine in an almost invisible chesterfield plaid. After tucking in his shirt—pale blue, Egyptian cotton, custom tailored, the only way to go—he picked out a tie, Italian silk, and draped it around his neck. Sticking to his routine brought back some order and kept fear in check.

Once armored in the clothing of success, he called his computer expert.

"My bank account was accessed this morning."

"Yeah?" Sam mumbled sleepily.

Wonderful tech support. His system had been violated while Sam slept. Good help wasn't hard to find—for him it was impossible.

"I didn't log in until five minutes ago," he said slowly, waiting irritably for Sam to catch up with the conversation.

"You got hacked? Wow. They must have penetrated the firewall and backdoored the bank's security, too. Awesome."

He got no reassurance or comfort from Sam's enthusiastic response.

"Fix it," he enunciated the words through a locked jaw.

"Right, I'm on my way. Gimme fifteen minutes," Sam said with a stab at sounding business-like.

"Make it twelve," he snapped, slamming down the receiver.

Sam was twenty-two, old for this kind of work. Probably some fourteen year-old pimply faced nerd was behind the leak.

If he had any choice, he'd do away with the computer altogether. The system required skills he didn't have the time to master. Using the computer meant relying on Sam, an unavoidable evil.

He called Mike, the man who handled more traditional security issues for him, asking him to sweep the place for bugs. He hated the idea of anyone, even a trusted associate, in his personal sanctuary, but he couldn't afford to risk invasions that were even more hostile.

A chill stiffened the hairs on the back of his neck.

What if the hacker wasn't some nerdy teen?

Now wasn't the time to slack off. He'd sweated every detail for the last three years. Since he'd acquired the club, his life had been a high-wire juggling act in a three-ring circus.

He finished the espresso he'd brewed to replace the ruined cup and felt marginally better. Stupid to let some techno-punk ruin his day. It wasn't as if the account was in his name. He'd kept a separate identity for all of the club related financial transactions. The timing was unfortunate, now when his hard work was finally paying off. No one was going to ruin what he'd paid for in blood, sweat, and sobs for mercy.

Not always his own.

The timing on this little crack in the firewall made him nervous. Everything made him nervous. In his line of business, paranoia was a smart practice.

For a few seconds, he conceded he might be overdoing it. He would need to make a chemical adjustment soon. Not yet. He needed to stay sharp. There were still a few loose threads to tie off, a few dollars to bank, and a lousy little hacker to catch.

What the fuck was the point of breaking into a bank account and not stealing money?

Sure, kids could do things purely for the challenge. But this?

This was like blasting into the US Mint and then taking pictures of the currency.

Possibly, the hacker had downloaded his information. They could be studying it—following the money. Running a worse case scenario in his head, he concluded it was not disastrous. Unless the club accounts were compromised, too.

Rubbing the side of his nose, he tried to remember when he'd accessed the business bank account last. Yesterday or the day before? Probably the day before. He always let the money sit for at least twenty-four hours before transferring funds offshore.

Before Sam arrived, he cleaned the espresso machine, made the bed, and wiped down the

bathroom. He always tidied up after himself, because he liked things orderly. He did not like people in his private space.

The hacker was one more mess he needed to clean up. Whoever was snooping around his business wouldn't live long enough to learn from the mistake. He dabbed at his nose, staunching the trickle of blood.

## Chapter Two

“Detective Longstreet, nice work on the Villalon bust,” Chief Logan said, clapping Zach on the shoulder.

Zach was tired, furious over missing Santini yet again, and in no mood for congratulations.

“Thanks,” he muttered through a jaw numbed by fatigue and frustration, too exhausted to muster a smile, or any semblance of good manners.

Chief Logan smiled affably, apparently oblivious to Zach’s lack of enthusiasm.

“Walk with me. I’ve got someone I want you to meet.” The Chief strode down the florescent-lit hallway and selected an interview room, holding the door for Zach.

The Chief reminded Zach of sharper dressed, slimmed down version of a portly circus conductor with his scrub-brush hair and walrus mustache. An expensive looking suit squared off slopping shoulders, and skimmed over a slight spare tire. The comic iron gray hair didn’t disguise a savvy political mind.

“Sure, why not,” Zach muttered, too low to be heard. He would much rather get cleaned up, unwind, get something to eat, and have a good night’s sleep before getting into whatever the Chief had in mind. But when the boss spoke, detectives listened and obeyed.

The room had a blend of industrial disinfectant overlaying the rank smell of fear that lingered throughout this part of the precinct. A large reflective window allowed unseen observation. The small window in the door was the wire mesh reinforced glass typical of a law enforcement facility. The walls were finished in a medical mint green combined with the merciless lighting to reduce the occupants to their most basic components.

Zach wiped his filthy palm on dirt-encrusted jeans and then shook the clean hand his new boss, Lieutenant Pauline Connelly, offered. The woman was lanky, dressed in a good quality dark blue suit and white blouse. The jacket was unbuttoned. A small silver seagull soared from one lapel. No earrings, a utilitarian stainless steel watch, chin length brown hair, serious gray eyes, and no distinguishing marks. Her handshake was dry, firm, and fast.

“The customer we arrested along with Villalon and his men offered some potentially explosive information in exchange for dropping the charges against him,” she said with carefully banked excitement. “Because he’s alleging police involvement in a wide reaching ring, I went directly to Chief Logan.” She looked at the Chief, who nodded confirmation, but remained silent. “You were my next idea.” Connelly’s clear alto voice fired words in rapid bursts that took him a few seconds to interpret.

“Why me?” he asked, leaning back, ostensibly at ease.

“Your undercover assignments have kept you out of the loop for several years. I believe your chances of being part of a police cover-up are, statistically speaking, minimal.”

“Thanks,” he said dryly. “Why not take whatever you’ve got to Internal Affairs?”

“I did some checking. There have been several complaints and alleged cover-ups over a three-year period. Internal Affairs was part of two of those investigations. I have to assume that

department might be compromised, as well,” she said with her features set in deadly earnest.

Zach shut up. Nobody in Internal Affairs was on his buddy list. But he’d counted on them keeping their own ranks clean. He should have known better. All assumptions were dangerous.

He’d learned that lesson the hard way, a very long time ago, when he’d assumed his sister was safe at home with their stepfather while he was out getting busy with some chick, who meant nothing to him.

“Lieutenant Connelly will be your contact on this case. She’ll keep me in the loop. I’m going to leave you two to work out the details.” Chief Logan stood abruptly, crossed to the door, leaving Zach alone with his new supervisor.

“What’s the plan?” he asked cautiously.

“You’re going to apply for a job as a waiter at the *In Place*, using my cell number for your contact information on the employment forms.”

The longer he listened to Connelly’s clipped sound bites the better he felt about working for her. He’d do some research on her later. That was a given. He would have done the same with any new boss. But so far, he liked her approach.

\* \* \* \*

Gathering her courage, Ciara straightened her spine then knocked softly before entering her father’s office. As always, she glanced at his framed Pulitzer, which dominated the wall behind his desk, reminding all who entered of his achievement.

He was on the phone. She let out the breath she’d unconsciously held as she crossed to the windows. A few dark bottomed clouds moved across the water, matching the direction of her cowardly urge to flee from the coming confrontation.

While waiting for him to finish his conversation, she stared blankly at the darkening waters of Puget Sound, using the extra minutes to rehearse what she wanted to say. *Dad, I’ve kept my end of our deal. Two years in news was the agreement. I’ve done that. Reporting has had its good try. Now it’s time to move to the business office, where I can make a real contribution. News is your thing, and I respect that. But finance is mine. The time I’ve spent learning about journalism will make me that much stronger a team player in any department.*

She walked back and forth by the windows, lost in her thoughts and absently rubbing her stomach to ease the nervous clenching.

Should she remind him that she’d minored in business?

Perhaps she should explain some of her ideas for improving their bottom line. No, she didn’t want to irritate him, or worse bore him. It was best to stick to her main points. Their agreement, her fulfillment, and her transfer to the business office.

A change in his tone caught her attention. His back was to her so she couldn’t see his expression, but the lilt in his voice told her he was smiling.

That tone zapped right through her defense mechanisms. She bowed her head as if that had some power to block the words, which made her wish she heard approval when he talked to her. It was a pointless, cruel, wish because she wanted him to be happy with her as she was. She longed for his acceptance. She didn’t want him to love her as a payment for writing an award-winning news story, or any other impossible achievement. She wanted his affection simply because she was his daughter.

More ruthlessly honest, she wanted his approval even though she was not the son that

he'd wanted, a slightly less likely possibility than her bearing an alien's lovechild. Dad did love her, but he wasn't satisfied with her. She'd fallen into the pattern of trying to please him, playing the part of surrogate son, majoring in journalism, and agreeing to a news apprenticeship. Insanity did run in families.

Although she'd fulfilled her side of their bargain with a two-year stint as a non-age reporter, she still felt guilty. It was ridiculous to feel bad about not being male, and equally useless to regret not being a newshound. Yet, the weight of her father's disappointment lodged between them like a heavy debt load, one she had failed to repay.

Would their relationship have been different if she'd been his biological child? Instantly, she chided herself for the disloyal thought. No, Angus Donovan had faults, but he would have been just as tough on her if she were his own blood. She had never doubted his love for her was genuine. Though, it would be lovely if he expressed his affection once in while.

Rubbing her left shoulder blade helped firm her resolve. The chameleon tattoo concealed by her peach silk blouse was a tangible reminder that she could adapt. Like the creature, she had the capacity to change her patterned responses to healthier choices.

He hung up the phone and regarded her for a moment. The residual smile, lingering from his conversation, reversed into a scowl. "Sit down, you're making me nervous pacing around."

Ciara perched on the edge of one of the two visitor's chairs facing his desk. Her seat was, purposefully, much lower than his, making her feel even more childlike.

For a second a wave of longing for her mother swept over Ciara. Her mother had been dead for a dozen years. The loss wasn't as piercing as at first, but it never left her.

"Go ahead and take a look." He shoved a manila envelope toward her. She obediently opened it, slid the contents onto his polished mahogany desktop, and then examined the items which spilled out—a DVD, bank statements, incorporation papers, business license, and property tax records. She picked each up in turn, scanning it before replacing it inside the manila package. Nothing jumped out at her as significant.

"Is there a context to all this?" She waved toward the scattered material.

"You bet there's a context, little girl. That's the smoking gun. Now all you have to do is tie this evidence to the dirty cops running the *In Place* and we've got a hell of a scoop."

"The last time you sent me to cover a hard news story I wound up in the hospital suffering from smoke inhalation."

"You learned your lesson right? No running into burning buildings," Angus said gruffly.

"Wouldn't Marge be a better choice?" Ciara asked, hoping in vain for agreement.

"Her mother had a stroke. She's on an indefinite family leave." His words were brusque. She knew how much he loathed illness, his or anyone's.

"I'll give her a call and see if she needs help," she spoke softly, almost to herself.

He dismissed her offer to help Marge with a chop of his arm. "Never mind that, get started unraveling the evidence and getting us answers we can print."

"Dad, I know Lisa is tied up with the election coverage, but it's a member's only club. I've never even been there." *Not to mention it's a meat market. Which was so not her style. Not that she had a hook-up style. Maybe that was why her sex life was non-existent.*

A wave pushed aside the rest of her objections. "So get yourself invited."

Ciara crossed her arms over her chest. "By whom?"

"Try your exercise buddies, the rich and spoiled sisters."



She narrowed her eyes, considering whether to argue about his unkind summary of women she didn't know well. "Are you talking about January and April?"

"Yeah, them."

"I hardly know them," she objected, balking at his bulldozer tactics.

The Cabell sisters were glamour, glitz, and a gazillion light years away from her safe, orderly, and mundane life. The fact that they volunteered at the same youth center did not qualify her as their friend. Barely an acquaintance.

He stood, planting his palms on the desk, and then shot her a hard glance over the top of his rimless glasses. "Believe me, young lady, when I was your age I would've given my right arm for this kind of chance. Hell, for one tenth of the opportunities you've had handed to you."

Ciara knew he'd struck the aggressive pose partly to hide the tremors from early onset Parkinson's disease. The other reason was to intimidate her.

It didn't work, but familial duty did. She couldn't just walk away when he needed her.

Taking a slow, cleansing breath, she let it out to the count of eight. While she worked on staying calm and rational, she reminded herself that her father truly cared about her and wanted what was best for her. Even if he wasn't very good at expressing his feelings. If she wanted their relationship to change, then she needed to set new boundaries.

"Dad, I do appreciate everything you've done for me. I'll do my best to investigate the club. But I'm not you. I'm never going to be the next boy wonder of news." *I'm never going to be any kind of boy. You should have figured that out by now.* "I'll follow up on your leads. But this is my last news assignment. If you aren't willing to give me a chance in the business office, I'll be searching for a new employer."

"Listen here young lady ...."

Her phone rang. Grateful for the interruption, she stood, taking custody of the envelope, and then read the caller's number.

"I need to take this. Are we done?" She kept her tone calm but assertive. That, plus growing a spine, was the key to dealing with her father.

He sank back into his chair. "Yes. Just get me the story, damn it."

Ciara hurried out of his office, setting aside her feelings of frustration and inadequacy as she answered the call. "So what's up?"

"What makes you think anything is up?" Regan's voice instantly slipped into paranoid cop mode.

Ciara's lips curved. Recognizing her best friend's edgy mood, she promptly explained. "I don't know. Maybe the fact that you called me while you're on duty?"

"I'm a little stressed. You don't want to know about the DUI from hell and that's the worst of it."

"So, tell me the rest of it," Ciara urged, pleased to be able to provide her self-sufficient friend with anything, even a friendly ear.

"Have you ever had feelings for anyone you worked with?" Regan asked tentatively.

Even Ciara's weak investigative reporter skills zeroed right in on the change of subject. "Such as you-man-me-woman type feelings?"

"Yeah, hypothetically speaking. Working together would really complicate things. If there was anything, which there isn't, because that would be a colossally stupid idea."

"If you're asking if it's okay to get involved with someone you're working with, then

sure. You work all the time. Where else are you supposed to meet someone?" Ciara asked with unassailable logic.

"Yeah, but what if it doesn't work out and I'd still have to see him everyday?"

Ciara put one and one together and nailed her friend's problem. "This is about your new partner isn't it?"

"Am I that transparent?" Regan's horrified tone pleaded for reassurance.

"Only to me." Ciara smiled at the phone, wishing she could give Regan a supportive hug. "Is he being a total jerk?"

"He's a sweet man," Regan said, her words coated with misery.

Ciara turned the sentence over for a few seconds. "Okay, so tell me. What's happening and why is it a problem?"

"Aside from the fact I have to work with him? Or that he's five years younger than me? Or ...."

"That he's totally hot?" She couldn't resist the gentle dig.

"Yeah, there's that." Her friend let out a lusty sigh. "Speaking of Officer, I'm-too-sexy-for-my-uniform, he's headed this way. Enough about him, what I really called about was to invite you for dinner on Sunday."

"Who else is going to be there?" Ciara asked suspiciously, and then winced at her own ungracious response. Regan was her best friend and a wonderful human being. But the woman was a dangerous, determined, and truly awful matchmaker.

"Just you, my neighbor Nick, and," Regan coughed unconvincingly, "around six PM."

"Are you trying to set me up with some poor man who's hot for you?"

It wouldn't have been the first time. How a woman as smart as Regan could even think that would work was an unsolved mystery.

"Absolutely not," Regan sounded self-righteous. Ciara could picture her stretching her regal neck an extra inch. "Just my brother."

"Let me guess, this is your badass-relationship-phobic brother?"

"That would be the one. Trust me, he's ready, and he needs a good woman."

Ciara wavered, torn between protecting her friend's feelings and getting stuck with a totally unsuitable man for the evening. Before she came up with a semi-believable excuse, the sounds of Regan's shoulder-mounted radio crackling to life cut off her chance to reply.

"Damn! Sorry, I've got to go. Call me later okay?"

A trickle of fear for her friend's safety skittered down Ciara's spine. It would continue to niggle away in the background of her awareness until she heard from Regan again and knew she was safe.

Pushing through the heavy front door, Ciara scanned the evening sky. Rain-laden clouds gathered across the harbor.

\* \* \* \*

Zach hated turning down his sister, so he hadn't. He should have. She kept setting him up with unbelievably bad mismatches. The last one, Linda Lou, had been dying to cast him in her own sick version of *Extreme Improvement*. She'd actually asked him if he'd try a little bronzer to blend that scar. Like there was something wrong with a little damage to a guy's hide.

Hell, she'd probably been a nice woman. Most of his sister's friends were. That didn't change the facts. He was not in the market for a relationship. Domestic life wasn't for everyone.

Regan should concentrate on finding a great guy for herself and quit trying to fix his love life.

This afternoon, his sister had called and invited him for dinner, home fried chicken with all the trimmings. He knew the catch was going to be one of her friends, knew what he should say. He'd said yes anyway. He liked his sister, and it had been too long since he'd had time to cook. Real food would be good for a change. He would be tactful, careful, and no one would get hurt.

Turning on the shower, Zach adjusted the temperature before stepping in. He squirted shampoo, lathered up, rinsed, and repeated the drill. Admittedly, he wasn't doing all that great of a job of finding a woman for himself. But then he wasn't looking.

His last try at a real relationship was over a year ago. A freaking train wreck. He thought he was so smart, good at reading people, and spotting trouble.

He'd been totally clueless. Taken in by a pair of pretty eyes, a mop of red hair, and a great rack. He'd failed to notice her missing heart. When she had the chance to join the home office in New York, she'd accepted without even calling him. She'd dumped him for a better job. He'd learned his lesson—never get involved with a woman who put her career first.

Zach had never made the same mistake twice in his life. He sure as hell wasn't going to start with his heart.

Following the shampoo with a thorough scrub of his body, he used a brush on his nails, wishing he could scrub off the stain on the shield around his heart as easily. He stepped out of the shower and towed off.

After lathering up, he began shaving. While pausing to rinse off the razor, he stretched his neck to inspect the just shaved section, then tilted his head to get a better angle for scraping the other side. He took his time, enjoying the simple tasks of grooming and being home.

An hour later, Zach tucked a bottle of his sister's favorite zinfandel under his arm, strode up the walk, and then rang the doorbell.

The door opened, revealing a long-legged goddess with red hair. His heart accelerated into action range. Then he noticed that she wasn't his ex-girlfriend, Joanne. His pulse eased back to lazy appreciation.

The evening took on new possibilities as he drank in the scenery. He'd always had a weakness for redheads. Her eyes were big, but they were brown instead of green and she had way fewer freckles. Like none. A fast glance south, revealed perky breasts. Not that he considered size the only mark of a good breast, not at all. No ma'am. Further south, a narrow waist, and a sweet curve of hip lured him on to amazing legs.

"Hi. You must be Zach." A cool water voice issued from a plump mouth, touching zones he'd thought permanently frozen. He tore his gaze away from that x-rated mouth only to fall into the caramel eyes shimmering with sexy secrets.

"I'm Ciara, a friend of Regan's." She sounded tentative, as if she wasn't certain he'd believe her.

He liked her name—soft, feminine, like the rest of her.

"May I take that for you?" She smiled a heart-flipping arc of perfect lips that zinged straight through his body armor. Then he noticed that she was holding out her hand, presumably for the wine.

It dawned on him that he wasn't holding up his end of the conversation. His sister's entrance into the room covered his lapse.

"Hi, you made it," Regan said as she moved toward him. Then she turned to smile at Ciara. "I see you've already met my brother. Come on in, you two. Nick just came in the backdoor."

Zach followed Ciara into the living room.

His sister kept the ball rolling. "Nick, you remember my brother Zack?"

"Of course I do. And Ciara, too, another beautiful woman, I'm developing hetero-envy." Nick smiled, casting a sad glance in Regan's direction.

Regan gave Nick's arm a pat. "Pretty, but it won't get you out of kitchen duty."

Ciara smiled at Nick. "Nice to see you again, I love the gray-blue of that shirt. It's perfect with your eyes." She kept the smile, when she glanced at Regan. "Can I help with anything?"

"No, I think Nick and I've got it covered." Regan glanced at him over her shoulder as she towed her friend toward the kitchen. "Why don't you fix Ciara a drink?"

"What would you like?" Zach asked dutifully as he crossed the living room to the chrome bar cart where Ciara had deposited his contribution to the party. Normally tucked behind the overstuffed sofa, the portable bar now gleamed proudly in front of the fireplace.

He itched to touch Ciara. She was so fresh, clean, and feminine in a sleeveless dress that reminded him of sunsets. She smelled as good as she looked, like summer, warmth, and woman.

Thank God, he had a face that didn't reveal his thoughts. He could see she was already edgy. She was as easy to read as a rap sheet. His appearance had that effect on some women. The nice ones. As he stared at the pulse beating in the hollow of her throat, color raced up her slender neck to light her face. Maybe his thoughts weren't as hidden as he'd assumed.

"A glass of that wine you brought, please." Big brown eyes met his, and then locked. She issued a challenge on some primal level, which he couldn't access or explain. But he sure as hell knew it had happened.

He felt as if he'd been sucker punched. He tried to tell himself that she'd hit him so hard because his love life was the pits. A rotten mood and a killer work schedule had combined for the longest celibate period of his adult life. Even before that, he couldn't remember the last time he'd looked forward to a woman's company.

Considering his sister's matchmaking record, he'd expected nothing tonight beyond good food, a few awkward moments, and getting away without any hard feelings.

Now he had new problems, but none of them involved getting away from Ciara.

"So you're a police officer too?" she asked.

"Yeah." *That's the ticket-- dazzle her with your wit.*

"Regan said you work undercover. Narcotics-- right?"

"Usually but I'm on loan right now ...." He shut up just in time. Damn, he'd almost forgotten he was talking to a civilian.

"It must be exciting work."

He noticed that she was watching him with caution, which was at odds with her friendly warmth toward Regan and Nick.

"Nah, its ninety eight percent boredom and two percent adrenaline rush." Zach tore his gaze away from that sinful mouth.

"So what do you do when you're not bored or rushing?" Ciara asked.

"Blend in, keep in shape for the next rush." Damn, he'd missed a chance to say

something good, like—*wait for a beautiful woman to show up*. No, he could do better. *Hang out at my sister's hoping like hell one of her girl friends would turn out to be you*. No, coming on too strong. Just as well he'd kept quiet. Getting involved with one of his sister's friends was a bad idea on lots of levels.

Still, he could see she was studying him and he would've given a fair price to know exactly what she was thinking.

Using the wine as an excuse, he brushed her arm with his knuckles. An electric spark arced between them, and she whirled toward him, eyes wide with alarm.

He offered her the glass. "Your wine."

"Thank you," she said softly, blushing. She was very careful not to touch him as she took her drink. He decided to view her reaction as a compliment.

He almost smiled. The blush did nice things for her pale skin. Just watching her was entertaining. Before he had a chance to take the game any further, his pocket buzzed and vibrated. Stifling a crude expression, he pulled out his cell and clicked receive.

"You're in." Lieutenant Connelly's clipped alto was instantly recognizable.

"When?" Zach asked, striding out to the front porch where he could talk freely.

"Your shift starts at eight, better get moving."

"I'm on it. Any last minute instructions?" *Like any instructions at all. What the hell he was supposed to be doing would be a good start.*

"Keep your head down and pants on. If at all possible."

*Had his iceberg boss just made a joke?*

"Seriously, use your best judgment. Stop by the station tomorrow night on your way in—I want a daily briefing."

"Gotcha."

"And Zach? Try adding a little sugar to that 'Me Tarzan' tone. You need to charm the members in order to find out what's going on at the *In Place*."

"Yes, ma'am. Whatever you say," Zach responded with a deep-throated drawl.

"Better. Now move, and watch your back," she warned him.

A glance at his watch confirmed Connelly's assessment. It wouldn't look good to be late his first night on a new job.

Ciara stole another glance at Zach as he left the room, admiring the long powerful lines of his frame. The back view showed hair that was long, and as straight as his nose. The thick black mass was caught at the back of his neck in a neat ponytail. He was a large man and seemed even bigger because of his intensity. Barely contained power radiated from his taut frame. She'd never met anyone who seemed so alive. Her cheeks flooded with color as she imagined what all that energy would feel like if he really touched her. She'd probably incinerate on the spot.

Too bad he was Regan's brother, the one who didn't do relationships. She had finally met a man who lit her up with nothing more than a smoldering glance, and he came with a caution-hazardous-to-your-happiness warning label.

Three minutes later, he returned and ducked his head into the kitchen. "Sorry Sis—I've got to run. Nice meeting both of you," he said blandly directing the words to her and Nick.

And strode out of her life.

A sinking sensation of disappointment settled in her chest. Which was beyond silly on

two counts—first, he'd never been in her life, and second, she'd been all set to pull away from a man who was completely wrong for her.

Given her difficult relationship with her father, there was absolutely no way she'd ever date a controlling man. When she did date, the men were charming, smooth, and even courtly.

If she'd known the impact Zach would have on her, she would never have come. How could she have guessed? The most that ever happened to a Regan introduced couple was hysterical laughter. For the first time, she'd succeeded in generating sparks.

Ciara had felt definite sparks, more like the sizzling fuse that led to the big fireworks. Meeting him had left her longing for things, which would never happen. Seeing him again would be planned disaster.

The next morning, Ciara waited for a decent hour before taking the offensive and calling Regan, reasoning that it was better to get the obligatory dissection of last night out of the way.

"Nick seemed so sad the other night. I didn't want to make it worse by asking about Dennis ...." Ciara paused, leaving her girlfriend room to fill in the blanks.

"He is sad, that's why I begged him to come over. He thinks Dennis is cheating on him," Regan said with offended sympathy.

"What a pig," Ciara proclaimed stoutly. Nick was such a sweetheart, but he did have a thing for men guaranteed to break his heart.

"You're right, but Nick's in lust and won't listen to reason. God knows I've tried to talk sense to him often enough."

"He's such a nice man," Ciara commiserated sincerely with the affable Nick's man troubles.

"Speaking of nice guys, what's happening with you and my brother?" Regan asked with enough avid curiosity to reawaken Ciara's uneasiness over the subject of Zach.

He was Regan's brother, but nice? Not exactly the way she would've described him but there was no way Ciara was going to debate his decency rating with his sister.

"Absolutely nothing, this can't be a shock. We're hardly a good match. He couldn't get away from me fast enough. He practically ran out of your place," she raced through her response with fake boredom.

"That was just work. Give him a chance." Regan dismissed her brother's disappearing act with the easy confidence of a natural beauty.

"He barely said three words to me. I don't think he liked me." Ciara paused, unable to stop herself from hoping for a rebuttal. "He never asked for my number, or a date, or ...."

"Want me to talk to him—tell him you're interested? I can give him your phone number," Regan volunteered helpfully.

"No!" Ciara took a big breath and let it out to a slow eight count, and then found a lighter tone. "I mean, he's a big boy. Let him make up his own mind. Don't pressure him, please. If you did, it would make me feel terrible."

*Worse than I do already.*

"Okay, but I bet he calls you." Regan's words were sturdy with loyalty.

*I hope not.*

"So how's your day going?" Ciara changed the subject away from the disturbing Zach, who'd already taken up way too much of her thoughts.

"I need a twenty-six hour day. I've got a new partner who's driving me nuts and a

Sergeant whose sense of humor is MIA. How about you?"

"I've got you beat in the bad boss game. You haven't lived until you've worked for my father. I went in to talk to him about moving to finance last Friday and wound up agreeing to follow up on some hot lead instead."

"I can imagine how that conversation went." Regan's voice dripped sarcasm.

Ciara laughed. "Guilty as charged. You're right. I was a complete weenie. I never got out one word of my prepared speech about the fine contribution I could make in the business office. He's a hard man to turn down."

"And you are a softie," Regan scolded, but there was no bite to her words.

"This story means a lot to him. The club I'm digging in to is women only and I'm the only woman available. Marge is on family leave and Lisa is overloaded with all the political races. I'm all he's got." Ciara kept her worries about her father's health to herself, knowing how adamant he was about his privacy.

"So tell me about your plan of attack. Which club are we talking about?"

"The *In Place* is the suspect operation. And no, I don't have a strategy yet. I'm working on it."

Regan whistled. "The club is hot stuff, how are you going to get in? You're not a member—are you?"

The clear assumption, that there was no way Ciara would be a member of something so in-your-face sexy was slightly insulting, but true. "I'm going to ask January to take me."

*And hope that she doesn't blow me off.*

January and April both volunteered at the *Street Angel Center* a couple of times a week, as did Ciara. Thursday was the only day they were both there. The fact that they both worked for the same charity did not make them close friends no matter what her father thought. April, January's younger sister, was much more approachable. Ciara had actually exchanged a few minutes of pleasantries with her. But April's broken wrist was keeping her out of the center for the next month. So January it was.

"Good luck with that."

Ciara could picture her friend rolling her eyes. "You know her better than I do. How about you put in a good word for me?"

Regan sighed. "Okay, I asked for that. I'll give her a call. No promises, though. We aren't all that close. When do you want to talk to her?"

"Tomorrow we're both at the Center, is that too soon?"

"I'll try." Regan sounded distracted.

"Did something happen? Are you busy?" A fresh trickle of fear ran down the back of Ciara's neck—danger was part of Regan's job description. Worrying about the hazards her friend faced came along with caring about a cop.

"Hold on." Regan voice got fainter as she turned away from the cell phone, speaking to someone else. "Get me a latte, non-fat and tell them to make it drinkable." Regan paused. "I don't know, they add ice or something, I just don't want it scalding." Regan's voice returned to normal volume. "Okay he's getting me a coffee. I need it. I've already got a headache."

Ciara's worry evaporated, curiosity taking its place. "What is he like?"

"Gorgeous," Regan said.

Ciara laughed and teased. "I want to meet him."

“No, that is not a good idea. You’ve got a face like a traffic light. You would spoil everything.”

“You’re going to tell me all the juicy parts anyway,” she coaxed.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Regan gave a resigned sigh. “Okay, he’s a kid, twenty-four-years-old, tall, dark, delicious, and the bane of my existence.”

“I want lots more detail. Call me when you’re off,” Ciara insisted.

Regan dropped the call. The kid must’ve made it back with her latte.

Somehow knowing that gorgeous, smart Regan had man problems made Ciara feel more optimistic about her own future. So what if she didn’t interest a man like Zach? At least she recognized when she was out of her league.



## Chapter Three

Sam, the computer wizard, took most of the day to trace the system breach back to someone at the *Seattle Daily News*. The kid kept his MP3 player plugged in, so he didn't have to listen to that shit Sam called music, or talk to him.

Not that Sam was disgusting, his job required decent grooming, and instilled a nice respect that was lacking in many of today's youth. However clean cut and polite, Sam was, he was another person in his space.

Sam sat in his cordovan leather desk chair and touched the computer keyboard with bare hands. Contamination was unavoidable. Since Mattie's death, nothing had ever been truly clean. The saddest part was that he didn't know her secret. He cleaned. Shit, he sanitized things, but the dirt seeped in, no matter what he did.

He would disinfect the keys.

A palm rested on the glass-topped desk, leaving a smudge. He hid a shudder and strolled out of the room. Retreating to his well-ordered kitchen, he warmed a scone in the microwave oven, and then prepared a bowl of fresh organic blueberries with a dollop of crème fraiche. After arranging his snack on a tray, he transferred the dishes to the silk draped table, serving his meal in the dining room. Normally, he would've enjoyed dining al fresco on the terrace. Instead, he scanned the cloudless sky from the relative safety of the inside windows for new threats.

Normal was still a long ways away.

According to Sam, aside from being hacked, everything else in his system was clean. No keystroke tracker, no viruses, and no worms. The sweep for electronic listening devices had shown that the house was clean, too. As a precautionary measure, he could forego the convenience of wireless internet. The alternative was leaving the system open to attack.

Originally, he'd wanted Sam to make his system an impenetrable fortress. The kid explained that to catch the hacker it was better to leave the virtual door open a crack.

Reluctantly, he agreed. He needed to deal with the hacker. Soon.

There were new traps imbedded in the system, techno shit, which would trace and notify him of any further attempt to hack into his files.

So far nothing.

What was the hacker trying to do? What else did they find?

How many people were involved? Scary shit.

All the careful layers of separation between him and the club. The years of watching his back. There should not be a problem. Even if the lousy media nerds got lucky and exposed his ownership that was still miles from tying him to anything illegal—like the real source of profits.

How easy would it be to for someone to trace the money? Not easy. He was careful, very careful, but there was no such thing as impossible.

Could someone have gotten to Sam? No, the kid was too sharp to cross him and risk singing soprano.

He would have to get Sam to install traps on the club accounts, too. It meant giving him temporary expanded access. He weighed the risk against the added security, deciding to take the chance.

A clean bill of cyber health was a good thing, but it did not lessen his system's vulnerability problem, or his need for security.

Anger roiled through him. He tamped it down, needing to stay in control.

What was he going to do about the sneak attack on his system?

Nothing.

He couldn't blow up the entire *Seattle Daily News* to get rid of some junior reporter. There was no guarantee that the hacker would even be there. With his luck, the little geek would've called in sick.

First, he needed a name.

\* \* \* \*

It was 3:00 AM, yet he was awake. Since he'd taken a couple days leave, he could sleep in tomorrow. But that wasn't the point. The point was—his routine had been disrupted. The longer the interruption was tolerated the more exposed he became. If it continued, then he would become progressively less functional until chaos reigned. Reassertion of his schedule was critically urgent.

He got up and poured himself a tumbler of water to wash down a couple sleeping pills. Carefully he dried the heavy glass, and then set the crystal back three inches to the upper right of the gleaming black porcelain sink.

He frowned the tumbler should be four inches from the rim. Turning the linen towel, he used it to adjust the tumbler. Then he scanned the area for any missed smudges or water spots before depositing the sullied linen in the gleaming chrome hamper.

Having regular habits, being careful, that was what kept his high-wire act from crashing.

A month ago, the feelers he had sent out had netted a qualified buyer for the club. A consortium of Middle East businessmen had tendered an offer to buy the *In Place* as an entertainment venue.

The ancillary business of pornography and extortion was not part of the deal.

Extortion and blackmail were coarse terms. He preferred to think of the money as a gratuity paid in appreciation of his discretion.

It was not pure profit. He had expenses. Everyone, no matter how distantly connected to the operation, had a hand out for a cut.

Did any of them worry about insuring the operation stayed safe and profitable? Fuck no. He was exhausted from supporting all the bloodsuckers.

The consortium planned to convert the club to a men only establishment immediately after the deal closed. As long as they paid his price, they could turn it into a tearoom. The closing date was thirteen days away. It was set in stone.

A little patience, the hacker would come back. And this time they'd spring one of the traps. He'd get a name. Then he'd resolve the problem permanently.

## Chapter Four

After the last of her students left the self-defense class, Ciara tucked a sweaty curl behind her ear and entered the day room where January held her image enhancement class, where she taught the girls about makeup, hair styling, dressing for success, and how to present themselves in the workday world.

Part of Ciara was nervous about asking a favor of the famous heiress. Another, nosier, part was dying to ask a few of the questions any journalist would've sold her soul to ask. It would be unforgivable to take advantage of her friendship to invade January's privacy. Therefore, she wouldn't pump for details about the notorious Sean McKenzie. Though she'd love to know exactly what had happened when his fiancée crashed their very private party.

January slipped on her raincoat, ready to leave. Her blue-gray eyes and silvery blonde mane were much more impressive up close than in the grainy tabloid shots.

"Thanks for agreeing to sponsor me at the club. Would tonight be too soon for you?" Ciara said, keeping her tone light.

"You don't seem like the *In Place* type," January said in a tone that made her doubts painfully clear.

January's assessment was no doubt accurate, but it still chafed at Ciara's self-esteem. She felt her cheeks flare and hoped the other woman would ascribe her high color to the class.

"I'll do my best to fit in," she said, keeping her voice pleasant while resenting January's negative evaluation of her image.

*Note to self: plenty of eyeliner, and find something slinky to wear.* She needed to blend in, not stick out like some kind of junior league prude.

"Regan says you're a reporter, but you're trustworthy." January sounded so skeptical, that Ciara would've been offended if it had been anyone else.

"I promise not to quote you on anything without your express permission," Ciara said slowly, intending to reassure January.

The woman's expression announced she wasn't buying it. Ciara was starting to develop a complex. What had happened to the journalist as hero? Hadn't this woman ever heard of Woodward and Burnstein?

Hating the need to lie, but she couldn't tell January that she was really investigating a blackmail-pornography operation run by corrupt cops—she worked to keep her voice friendly. "No quotes, no pictures, nothing at all will be attributed to you. It's for background on the club. Strictly g-rated filler, there'll be nothing that would make your grandmother uncomfortable."

"You don't know Grandmamma," January muttered, still sounding dubious. "I guess it'll be okay then." She shifted her weight from one leg to the other, preparing to leave. "The dancers are hot."

"Great," Ciara said with forced excitement.

"Anything for another *Street Angel*." January's tone was drier than the tax code. "I'll see you at the club."

Ciara swallowed a momentary panic. "Uh, how do I get in?"

"Just tell the doorman you're with me and show him some ID. Do not flash your press pass. Your name will be on the guest list."

Less than three hours for her to work out how to get confirmation of illegal activity, find something sexy to wear, and learn how not to blush.

There was still a long way to go to get a real story, but she had a promising start.

Ciara glimpsed herself in the tinted mirror that hung in the Club's entry that evening. Quickly, she tucked the glasses she needed to see anything further than three feet away, into her itty-bitty purse. Without them, her reflection blurred as she stepped away. But surely, it was a more attractive blur. A slightly fuzzy cover-boy handsome attendant approached and offered to take her coat, making her wish that she could wear contacts.

She handed over her evening coat. While waiting for him to return with some hint of which way to go, she took a business card from a crystal holder on the door attendant's desk. She fingered the heavy stock, holding it close to read the engraving. *In Place, Members Only—Private, exclusive, discreet.* Just the inscription gave her an illicit thrill. Maybe she was more of an adventuress than she realized? She slipped the card inside her tiny beaded evening bag.

The coat taker returned, still as fuzzily good looking as ever. She followed his sculpted behind to an elevator, swaying precariously on her truly high heels. Glamour was inconvenient, uncomfortable, and downright dangerous.

Coping with tipsy shoes and poor eyesight proved too much of a challenge. She gave in, putting on her glasses. "Have you worked here long?"

"Six months." His smile was unbelievably white, bright, and as vacant as his eyes. Ciara swallowed a sigh. When he looked that good, who expected brains?

"How do you like it?" she persisted, strictly for the sake of the story. Pretty was great, but seriously, she needed a man with *some* verbal skills.

Well-defined shoulders shrugged. "Tips are good."

Ciara knew a hint when she heard one. Adonis would just have to hope he was the one who returned her coat, because that's when she tipped. If she had any money left over after bribing any susceptible boy-toys.

Anticipation rose inside her along with the elevator's ascent, quickening her pulse. She concentrated on absorbing the ambiance and acting nonchalant. The lift's interior was a couple of notches over standard office building issue, with silk wall covering, soft recessed lighting, and thick plush carpet. Soft lyric-less versions of recent hits smoothed away the edges of reality.

A few floors later, she left Adonis behind, stepping out into an area that reminded her of the entry to a twenty-second century palace. The ceiling sparkled with tiny star-like lights, giving the impression of infinite distance.

To her left, a backlit bar sparkled with crystal. Polished brass fixtures gleamed like gold above a dramatic arc of black granite. A modern day Rhett Butler tended the bar, giving rapt attention to a pair of elegant legs dangling from one of the high-backed bar stools.

On her right, a dramatic arch led to dens of inequity, or so she imagined. Bamboo in hammered brass pots framed the doorway.

Planted in the center of the archway was the dark side's version of magic lamp genie on steroids. Except something told her those muscles had all been made the old-fashioned way. The man was so tall he'd have to duck to clear a standard doorway and so dark his skin had blue

highlights. A three-carat diamond beamed from one ear, giving him the appearance of a highly successful pirate.

An usher, dressed in black slacks, a cute bow tie and great tan, appeared from the edge of the floor in front of her. When she tore her gaze away from his gleaming chest, she noticed the devastating grin dimpling his cheeks as he approached her. Clearly, the management, no matter how nefarious, took their scenic responsibilities seriously.

“A table for one, Miss?”

“No, I’m meeting a friend, Ms. Cabell.”

His eyebrows lifted briefly in surprise. *Reassessing?* Then he grinned again. “Please follow me.”

A few steps later, she realized they’d been standing on a hanging balcony. The main theater lay below them. Steeply terraced steps led past curved booths, all arranged to view a half circle stage.

*What’s A Guy Gotta Do To Get Some Lovin’?* cranked out of an impressive sound system. Ciara paused to watch an energetic cowboy, dressed in chaps, boots, a big hat, and little else, demonstrate his lassoing skills, impressive swivel hip action, and a truly fine body.

Her usher waited, passive as a robot, while she stopped and gaped at the spotlighted dancer. She snapped her mouth closed, trying to act as if barely covered men were a regular occurrence in her life. “Lead on.”

One tier of pink velvet booths appeared exactly like the others to her, but there must be secret distinguishing marks, because her escort led her unerringly to January’s booth. Ciara slipped her librarian glasses back in her purse.

Her hostess for the evening surveyed her thoroughly before returning her attention to the show. “Nice dress.”

Ciara beamed as if she’d been handed a portfolio of blue ribbon stocks. “Thanks, you look great, too.”

Up close, January’s features lacked the perfect symmetry of true beauty, but the camera loved her and the force of her personality gave her an aura more riveting than classic proportions could ever match.

“Let me know if you want to talk to one of the entertainers. I’ll set it up for you. I know most of them.”

“How well do you know them?” Ciara asked innocently.

January rotated her head slowly. “Are you asking if I’ve slept with all of them?”

“Good grief, no!” *Had she slept with some of them?* Curiosity, not strictly professional, sent heat up her neck and pricked her conscience.

“Well, that’s good then.” January dismissed Ciara’s denial, returning her attention to her Midori sour.

Why would January, who had enough money to buy a dozen boy-toys, if that’s what she wanted, choose this kind of club? The *In Place* was tasteful and luxurious, but from what Ciara had observed, most of the patrons were older women. The exceptions were larger parties made up of several women taking a celebratory walk on the wild side.

A hush settled over the audience as the cowboy began a second number. Ciara donned her glasses to admire the oiled six-pack abs, engaging grin, and swaggering self-confidence blended with just enough ah-shucks-ma’am to keep him appealing.

\* \* \* \*

Zach took one glance at the man-thong and decided commando was a better option. What was sexy about cramming your package into a couple of square inches of fabric? Get real, no matter how silky or stretchy the stuff was supposed to be, it took only a look to figure out if he ever got excited, there would be a problem. The rest of the waiter's uniform, silky slacks and a prissy button-less shirt, were bad enough.

He'd been here a few days and he hadn't gotten even a glimpse inside a private room. Clyde, the bouncer kept an all-seeing-eye on the entrance to the club's backrooms. It took a willing woman to get by his blockade. The dancers two-stepped by regularly. Once in awhile a waiter got the nod. A member, or guest, had to make the first move.

None had moved in Zach's direction. Unfortunately, the manager had warned him about hitting on the paying customers, thereby ruling out ignorance of the rules as a defense.

If the Chief hadn't been part of his initial briefing, he would've suspected the whole damn operation was a joke.

Before his stint as an undercover waiter, Zach had been happy in narcotics, playing with the bad guys. Then Lieutenant Connelly, his new boss, recently transferred from gangs, had tapped him for this hush-hush operation. He still wasn't entirely sure what he was supposed to be investigating. Aside from vague instructions to find out what went on in the back rooms, he was to use his best judgment.

He didn't have a problem relying on his own instincts. But, letting him in on the operation's goal would boost their chances for success.

Earlier that evening when he had first clocked in, a VIP had stopped by. Zach didn't know his face, but he would've been willing to bet his next paycheck the man was a cop. Mr. Big hadn't bothered to disguise his status. His shoes, haircut, and body language all shouted cop.

That had been the first confirmation of his Lieutenant's suspicions.

For now, he turned his attention back to the act on stage. The cowboy's routine seemed corny to him. But what did he know about male entertainers? He swept the room with his eyes, waiting until the usher had seated the most recent arrivals, before heading down to take another round of drink orders.

A tumble of red curls bounced past, snagging Zach's attention. She turned and he caught her profile. The tortoise shell glasses didn't fool him.

The usher sat Ciara in Zach's section.

An odd disappointment at seeing her here tightened his jaw. He'd thought about calling her, but never had—thinking it was best to save both of them the pain of a relationship that wouldn't be going anywhere. He sure hadn't figured her for a no-strings-hookup and see-you-around kind of woman, the only kind he could handle. Maybe he'd misjudged her? The *In Place* wasn't the scene for the all-or-nothing-at-all type. *So why did feel let down?*

For a few seconds, he considered swapping tables with one of the other waiters, but he was under orders to keep his head down, and he didn't have a good reason to switch. Besides a private part of him didn't want one of the club Romeos waiting on Ciara. She might be looking for action, but she'd have to find it when he wasn't on the job.

"What can I get for you Miss?" he greeted Ciara with an easy smile while he waited to take her order.

She studied him as if she were going to be picking him out of a lineup.

Holding his smile with grim determination, he tensed for the inevitable blast of questions—questions that would blow his cover. He removed the other woman's empty cocktail glass, replacing the pink napkin with a fresh one, and then smoothly followed with her Midori sour.

He crossed behind the booth to Ciara's side and repeated his question. "What would you like to drink?"

Rashly, he met her stare. It got harder to hold the easy smile.

After a few days at the club, he was used to being invisible. A guy had to be airing out his ass to get noticed around there. So her heated gaze carried a double whammy. He used his professional pride to remain in character. His lips grew rubbery from holding the phony grin.

Cleaned up, he usually got a warm reaction from women. Ciara's response wasn't just warm—she scorched him. His tension level eased back from full-threat alert. She'd read between the lines, staying quiet. He gave her grudging points for not blowing his cover.

The cowboy leapt off the stage, taking his act up close and personal, to each booth. There were three booths ahead of them.

Zach held himself still with an effort, and then repeated his question. "What can I get for you, Miss?"

"I'd like a ... Cosmopolitan, please." Ciara's plump mouth puckered as she angled her torso to give him another heated head to toe inspection.

Damn, why'd she have to show up here? He didn't know for sure what was going on at the club, but he was damn sure that he didn't want her involved.

The other woman turned toward Ciara. "Regan said you were a big tequila fan."

That's where he knew the blonde from—his sister's celebrity friend, January.

"I've sworn off tequila. That stuff's evil." Ciara's cheeks colored.

January laughed. "What brought about this religious conversion?"

"It's a long boring story," Ciara evaded, trying to dodge the question.

"Now, I have to hear it." January leaned closer.

He was with her. He wanted to hear the story, too. But he was on double duty and had to miss out on the explanation.

Ciara was a wild card. One he couldn't afford to play.

Zach stopped three steps away from the booth and turned back for another glance. He zeroed in on Ciara. Her slender body angled closer to January as she talked, presumably sharing the tequila tale. The skimpy gold dress was missing its back. Her creamy skin glowed, flawless, highlighted by a four-color chameleon tattoo on her left shoulder blade.

For a second, she met his stare, zapping him with awareness. Awareness he had no business feeling. Awareness that was dangerous on so many levels.

He turned his thoughts away from Ciara with the sexy tattoo, long legs, and tempting lips. Stubbornly, he focused on his real job—getting inside one of the private rooms. Keeping his mind on the operation took enough effort to worry him. Too easily, he imagined Ciara with him in the private room.

A very bad idea.

After placing his order, the soft ding of the elevator drew his attention to a woman's arrival as he crossed from the bar. She was in her early forties, traveling solo and sporting a designer bag that cost more than a waiter made in a good month. An usher seated her in Chad's section.

Zach hesitated for all of twenty seconds before seizing the best chance at a back room he'd seen all week.

"Trade you, my bachelorettes, for your vintage number," he causally offered Chad.

He could almost smell the smoke as the other waiter weighed the certainty of the double tip, against the more lucrative possibility of a private party.

"No way."

Zach shrugged, accepting the dismissal. Part of him was pleased to keep Ciara to himself. He hefted his tray of drinks. Unless another high probability showed up soon, he'd struck out another night. He should feel worse about blowing a chance to get in on the backroom action, but he couldn't manage genuine regret.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara told January her tequila shot story, the cute version. January laughed in all the right places. By then she was on her fourth Midori sour and was an easy audience. Ciara left out parts. Getting mauled in the parking lot and retching miserably after a cop scared off her date would spoil the funny bits.

She refused to waste time beating herself up over old mistakes. Instead, she spent the next few hours avoiding whiplash. She was a little dizzy, whether from the two Cosmopolitans or from keeping an eye on Zach, who seemed more irresistible with each sip. He smiled engagingly and served their drinks like a pro. But his eyes were full of dangerous secrets.

For a few moments, she panicked, thinking he might be part of the dirty cops allegedly running the club. *But if he'd been an owner then he would not be serving drinks. If he were part of an internal police investigation.... No, that didn't make sense. They would use internal affairs, the FBI, or even the State Patrol.*

*Zach had to be undercover. He was here investigating something. His presence was a form of confirmation. There was criminal activity at the club. The question was what was he working on? Drugs, prostitution, pornography, blackmail, or all of the above? Maybe he'd be willing to talk to her, off the record.*

*Maybe he'd kiss her senseless.*

She tried to shush the inappropriate thought. But her concentration frayed as she chatted with January, watched the dancers, and tried to catch every move Zach made.

After meeting him at Regan's she'd hoped he'd call, knowing he probably wouldn't--she wasn't experienced enough or sexy enough to attract a man like him. Besides, he'd be controlling and unreasonable, she could tell. But that didn't keep him from haunting her thoughts ever since the first time she'd seen him.

January introduced her to all six of the dancers performing. None of them compared to Zach. It was almost two AM when her hostess covered a yawn and announced she'd had enough fun for one night. As they waited for the elevator, Ciara spied Zach heading for the men's room.

An ace reporter would not hesitate. She'd find a way into those backrooms and get the story. Ciara always followed the rules and never took chances. But even as she justified the action in her mind--she knew the truth. She was only using the story as excuse to see more of Zach, lots more if she didn't chicken out. Her internal debate ended when she made up her mind for once in her life to go after what she wanted.

She swiveled toward January. "I'm stopping at the ladies' room. Then I'm going to talk to a man about women. Please don't wait on me. I'm parked in the valet lot."



"Be careful," January said with deadly seriousness.

The warning words echoed ominously in Ciara's head, stealing her courage, as she slipped into the women's restroom, used the facilities, washed her hands, and then peeked outside. Had she missed him? Her chest tightened and her heart beat faster. She held the door open just enough to allow her a peep view of the men's room door.

Seconds trickled by, her arm muscles started to quiver. She should sign up for weight training next session. Sooner or later, someone else would want to use the facilities and she'd get smashed. Just when she was positive that her arm had sustained permanent injury, the men's room door swung out.

*Why hadn't she figured out what to say?* Ciara stepped out and plastered on what she hoped was a seductive smile.

Zach moved faster than she'd expected. He darn near knocked her over. Lucky for her, his reflexes turned out to be as quick as his feet.

She covered a nervous giggle with a fake cough. His gaze met hers. Her smile faltered. His dark as sin eyes held her in a spell. One corner of his mouth quirked and for a moment she thought he'd smile. She took a brave step closer.

From behind her, a sexy drawl issued. "You lookin' to get lassoed little lady?"

Ciara turned her head enough to identify the cowboy. "What I want ...."

"Is me." Zach, cut off the cowboy's approach by wrapping a protective arm around her waist. His heat warmed her side and his closeness sent sparks of awareness tingling throughout her body.

Zach said something to the cowboy. She realized he was jealous. His stance, his words, everything said he believed she'd been approaching the cowboy. Her heart beat even faster with the heady thrill of his possessiveness. After that, he might as well have been speaking in tongues. She was too excited to register a word. But the cowboy must have ambled off because they were alone.

The happy buzz from the Cosmopolitans stepped up a notch as Zach held her hard against him. Reality melted away. One of her arms snaked up his back without permission. A deep rumble permeated her trance, and she registered new tension in his hard body.

The bass rumble formed words, which drifted down from afar. "Off limits, boy."

"She came on to me, Clyde." Zach's voice was smooth and relaxed, but his muscles tensed along her side.

"Not how it appeared to me." The gravelly voice moved closer.

Zach tried to untangle her. She hung on stubbornly, and then his body stilled. Without taking her eyes away from Zach's face, she turned her head ten degrees closer to the deep voice.

"But I want this one." Ciara pouted. Actually, she wanted him and a story. But she was willing to improvise.

"He's just a waiter." Clyde's rough voice questioned her taste.

"Really?" Ciara glanced at the man who put her bad boy fantasies to shame. She gave it a couple of heartbeats. "Can't I have him anyway?" She exaggerated her simpering expression. "Pretty please?"

She turned to Clyde. She tilted her head back to see his face, and then worked to keep her vacuous moue in place. She'd never seen anyone as awe-inspiring. His even, white teeth looked capable of catching bullets and his muscles had muscles.

“Follow me,” Clyde rumbled as he strode off without waiting for agreement. Zach tucked her hand in his and kept it. She took quick steps to keep up. Clyde stopped, reached down and opened a door.

Zach flashed a grin at Clyde before tugging Ciara inside. His grin disappeared the second the door shut behind them. First, he parked her against the door, motioning for her to stay put. For the moment, she went along with his order because she wanted to see where this was going.

He prowled through the room, whistling and rummaging like a man with nothing more than a friendly interest in the amenities.

After a few minutes, he returned.

“That mirror is way too convenient. There’s probably a video camera aimed at the bed. We should be fine here as long as we keep it quiet.”

“What fun would that be?” she murmured.

His eyebrows slanted together, he leaned against the closed door and folded his arms.

She studied him through her lashes. He smelled as great as he looked, a hint of sandalwood mixed with clean man. Even his ponytail worked for her. Everything about him worked for her. The only thing wrong about him was his clothes. Aside from the fact, he still had them on—they didn’t suit him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” His words came out low and dangerous.

If she didn’t count his attitude, he was everything she wanted. In her dreams when she met the right kind of wrong man, he’d been strong, confident, and totally hot for her. She’d gotten the strong and confident part right. But his lack of enthusiasm was a mood killer. What’s more, he reminded her of all the reasons she avoided domineering men.

She met his glare with one of her own and raised an eyebrow.

“What kind of seduction line is that?” Her delivery was smooth and cool. Best of all, she hadn’t stuttered. Her confidence grew. She straightened her spine, adding a half inch of extra height, bringing her eyes even with his lips.

His mouth quirked in an almost smile. Then she saw a small muscle twitch in his left cheek. He was wound up as tight as a forensic audit.

“Keep your voice down. Now isn’t the time, and this isn’t the place, for games. What the hell are you doing here?” he asked in a raspy whisper, so quiet she had to lean forward to catch his words. In spite of the low volume, it sounded more like an order than a true question.

“You first, what are you doing here?”

“Nothing I can tell you about.”

The crossed arms rippled with tension, calling her gaze to a truly great chest. Too bad, he didn’t seem even a tiny bit grateful she hadn’t blown his cover.

“So, you are undercover ...,” she whispered, and then waited in vain for him to fill in the blanks.

His glare stayed in place.

“I guess I made a mistake.” She darted another quick glance at him. The happy buzz from the Cosmopolitans was wearing off fast. His glare was doing nothing for her confidence. She should’ve known this whole set up was too good to be true. She should’ve known he wouldn’t cooperate. No story, and no sexy interlude either.

“So you’re not interested in an exchange of information ...?” She let the question trail off before answering herself. “No, of course not.” She laughed, and then swallowed the bubble

of nervous giggles threatening to escape. "I'll leave quietly."

"Hold it right there." His glare got harder.

"Hold it?" Ciara halted, afraid to hope.

"You can't leave yet."

"I can't?" Good grief, she sounded like a bad parrot.

He shook his head. "Uh uh, Clyde thinks you've hired me."

Ciara felt cheered. Good old Clyde. "So we need to stay here for how long?" She flashed him her best smile. Erotic possibilities that would never happen in this lifetime tumbled through her head, heating up her cheeks.

"Twenty to thirty minutes."

Ciara studied him. Even without glasses, she could see tension radiated off him.

"I hate to bring this up, but you have to pay me." He cleared his throat. "I have to split it with Clyde."

"You've got to be kidding me!" She gaped at him indignantly.

"I'll pay you back," he said it with a straight face and plenty of sincerity.

But still .... "I'm not that gullible." She cocked her chin at him, *nice try buddy*.

"I swear I'll get it back to you tonight." He stroked her arm. Then he played really dirty. He smiled.

After all, she knew his sister. She opened her purse. "How much?"

"A hundred dollars." His words crackled crisper than the new twenties she felt for with tingling fingers.

"Is that for the half hour or ...." She tried to think of how to phrase what she wanted to know.

"It's the minimum." He gazed over her head. The seductive smile nothing but a memory.

She should've stayed with her interview questions, even background information on an honest to god undercover operation would put her miles ahead of where she was now. Not smart. But she understood why. She'd read somewhere, a woman's IQ dropped ten points when sexually aroused. This made Zach's affect on her the equivalent of a frontal lobotomy.

"I see." She swallowed, trying to act as if she knew what she was doing. She handed him the money and he rammed it into his pocket.

They both started to speak.

"Is this ...?"

"What ...?"

"You first." He tipped his head, as if granting a boon.

"Okay." This wasn't even close to the kind of steamy encounter she'd pictured, but as long as she'd shelled out a hundred dollars, she would at least get some background.

"Is this part of an ongoing investigation? How long have you been here? Can you ...?"

"Hell no." He stopped speaking immediately after he'd cut her off. The glare was back and better than ever.

Her temper flared. "So you don't want to sleep with me. I get it. But skip the phony excuses about what you're doing here. You can give me general background."

"I can't talk about it." The small muscle in his cheek twitched again, teasing the corner of his mouth.

His finding any humor in the situation made her seethe. She spoke without thinking. “Right. Because this is such a high-risk operation. Come on, you can be off the record. What’s going on? Drugs? Prostitution? Blackmail?”

As she watched, Zach’s jaw clamped and the skin around his eyes seemed tighter. What had she said? Something had hit a nerve. She replayed the last couple of sentences in her head. High risk. Off the record. Bingo.

He hadn’t known she was a reporter.

So what had he thought? Oh, right. The image of her plastered against him telling the bouncer she wanted ‘this one’ came back, flooding her face with heat.

“Who’re you working for?” No more friendly glares, he was in cold efficient cop mode.

“*Seattle Daily News*,” she said, way too breathy. She had tried for a jaunty girl reporter tone and failed.

He looked as if he’d been force fed a centipede.

The expression on his face splashed cold reality all over her silly fantasies. “That’s pretty low, even for a reporter, using my sister.”

“Hold it right there, Officer Longstreet. Your sister is a friend of mine and she has no problem with my job. What’s going on anyway? Is your investigation so secret you couldn’t even tell your sister about it?”

“Where’d you get that idea?”

“I’m right aren’t I? Regan doesn’t know a thing about this case. If she knew there was an active investigation going on then she would have warned me to keep away.” She tilted her chin, determined not to let his highhanded manner rattle her.

“You’ve got a smart mouth. You should try shutting it now and then,” Zach growled.

“Thanks for the tip. Give me my hundred back, you ....”

Her fine vocabulary deserted her. All she could think of was cad—not nearly strong enough. A golf ball sized lump lodged in her throat. She’d blown her chance for a story. And she couldn’t even pay him to be interested in her.

“J-j-just ....” She swallowed. Damn she hated to stutter. She’d conquered that problem in Junior High. Not even one of her father’s rants made her lose control to that extent.

Angry, she lashed out to hide how much he had rattled her. “Why didn’t you let me go with the cowboy if you weren’t up to the job?”

Something dangerous flashed in his eyes.

“I want my money back.” Ciara met his stare, shaking inside.

“No. I’m not giving your money back.” He met her gaze with hard flat eyes. “I’m going to earn it.”

## Chapter five

The second attempt to hack into the system happened the next day, in the early evening. He called Sam at work.

The kid took an early lunch, came over to the condo, and then tracked the breach back to the *Seattle Daily News*. The trail led all the way to Angus Donovan, the owner.

"Some geek could be using the big man's computer without his knowledge or permission," Sam pointed out.

"It is possible," he conceded. However, he doubted it.

He preferred the sure thing, and he had a flair for stacking the odds in his favor. His talents hadn't changed, but his goals had. Now he wanted the kind of life he'd never been able to offer Mattie. Years of working for law and order had meant nothing. A worthless piece of scum, who wasn't fit to kiss the ground under her feet, had killed his wife. That single act had squeezed the kindness out of him. There was no way to get even. All he had now was getting rich.

Staying calm, he kept the irritation off his face and waited until Sam left before disinfecting the keyboard with alcohol wipes.

The secret to getting away with any crime was planning, discipline, and attention to detail. He had to assume the old newshound was sniffing after his well-hidden trail. Clearly, Donovan didn't have enough evidence to put his suspicions on the front page. Yet.

So what was the old bastard's next logical move? Confirmation. But how? His manager, Tony, vetted every club employee. No junior reporter was going to infiltrate his organization. He dismissed the possibility and then revisited his assumption. Arrogance didn't serve him well in this case. Better not to assume. Better to double check.

He dialed Tony's direct line. The manager picked up after two rings. The fat fucker was always sitting around the office.

"I need you to fax over the applications for any employees you've hired in the last month." He snapped at Tony.

"Is there a problem, Boss?"

He heard the manager opening the bottle of antacid. Tony carried the medicine as if it were a lucky charm that warded off evil.

This was another grating thing with Tony—he was a nervous man. All of Tony's mannerisms irritated him. His pulse rate increased in direct response to the stress of dealing with the club manager.

"Fax the records. While you're at it, send over the paperwork on any new members, and the guest log for the past thirty days," he issued the orders with enough bite to keep Tony from asking more idiotic questions.

Tony crunched down on a tablet, right in his ear. "Right Boss, employees, members, and guest log. Is there anything else I can help with?"

Rudely severing the connection gave him a moment of satisfaction. He paid Tony

enough that he didn't have to be nice to him.

There would be no sitting around the fax machine waiting for Tony's transmission. He had other business to take care of first. A couple of hours went by before he had a chance to check the home fax machine. Nothing.

Loosening his tie, he sat in his office chair. The buttery leather failed to soothe him. He called Tony again.

"Where are the records I asked for?" he barked in the manager's ear.

"Sorry Boss, I don't know where Martin keeps them. He's got his own filing system. Thing is, he's already left for the night. You want for me to call him at home?"

He let Tony sweat for a couple of seconds. "No, tomorrow is fine." He reined in his disgust and then allowed himself the satisfaction of slamming the receiver down.

The office was in good order. He had sanitized the keyboard, and yet he felt the contamination. There were days he regretted moving from the old place. Mattie had never set foot in this luxurious unit. Maybe that was what was wrong with this place? It lacked her magic.

Leaving the home office, he strolled out to the terrace. The evening was soft, the sky aglow with a flamboyant sunset. There was something malicious about the sun's decent that he had never noticed before. Leaving the disciplined topiary decorated balcony, he sought sanctuary in the serene interior of the condo with its luxuriant ivory and ecru upholstered surfaces.

Detecting no hint of infection in the living room, he sank into the welcoming sofa and allowed the reins of control to loosen.

Because of the record delay, and because tomorrow was already full, he wouldn't see the faxed data until tomorrow night.

Another day lost. He didn't like it. However, it was preferable to getting Martin out of bed to come across town. That would wave flags under Tony's nose, which was permanently twitchy, and worse, alert Martin that something was wrong. He didn't want a suspicious accountant added to an already volatile mix.

The club had a low employee turnover rate, membership was stable, and there couldn't be that many guests in one month. There shouldn't be much to go through. He'd scrutinize every single record personally.

He knew guests were the weakest link. Members, who paid through the nose for exclusivity, expected to be able to invite an old friend from out of town, or client they wanted to impress, to their club. One prying newsman, one tiny crack in his fortress wall, and he was stuck with hours of extra paperwork. However, he couldn't afford loose ends.

Delegation was way overrated. He didn't trust anyone else to use the same degree of due diligence that he practiced.

Twelve days left, and then he pulled the plug. The payoff was worth every damn hour he had spent babysitting morons and cleaning up other people's shit.

## Chapter Six

If her tongue hadn't been glued to the roof of her mouth Ciara would've told him something. She wasn't quite sure what. Either, take a flying leap, or take me. The second option sounded undeniably good. Her lips parted and small shallow breaths escaped, but no words formed. He stood so close she couldn't think clearly and her intention to explain about the research for a story evaporated like advertising revenue in a recession.

He studied her as if she had the winning lottery numbers etched inside her pupils. "Tell me what you want."

Apparently, small talk was over already. Some inner vixen must've possessed her, because she heard herself asking him, "What do you do?"

She licked lips gone suddenly dry.

"Everything, except kiss on the mouth." He sounded sullen.

"You're kidding, right?" She hoped he was joking. She wanted kisses.

He grinned. So he'd been teasing. Was that the same as flirting? Was he serious? How far would he go? He was on duty, right?

"Yeah, I do everything."

She loved his matter of fact tone, as if nothing shocked him. Her pulse leapt into aerobic range. "Great," she squeaked her nerves skittering with anticipation.

He appeared disappointed. Did she sound too eager? What was the correct protocol when hiring a man for pleasure? If she ran over the minimum, then what? Was it strictly cash, did he expect a tip? She only had a twenty left.

Then a nasty thought hit. Was this whole thing a setup to bust her for solicitation?

Dad would understand. Heck, he'd probably applaud, thinking it showed grit, or something. But what about Aunt Maureen and her Junior League friends? What about Regan?

What about January? After all, she'd gone out of her way to sponsor her. And now she was about to get herself arrested, embarrassing everyone who had ever cared about her. A quick replay of the conversation they'd just had confirmed her fears. She'd watched plenty of cop shows. They always made the John, or in this case Jane, commit herself first by asking for a particular sexual act and offering money.

"What's the matter?" Zach watched her with that same odd intensity. He was probably worried that she was going to resist arrest.

She risked another peek from under her lashes. He had insisted on getting paid first. That supported her prostitution bust theory.

"Are you going to cuff me?" she whispered, fear making her voice small.

He leaned closer, resting one arm on the doorjamb next to her. Something flickered across his face, but when he spoke, it was in a sexy drawl. "Is that what you want?"

"Certainly not." She frowned at him. She needed information and he was still flirting. She asked him plainly. "Are you going to arrest me?"

He straightened and crossed his arms over his impressive chest. "For what?"

“Hiring you for sex.” She was breathing too fast and her words ran together, sounding too much like panic.

“Who is asking the question, the reporter or the woman?” His drawl got a little crispy.

“Who is answering, the cop, or the man?” Still too breathy, but better.

“Let’s leave the jobs outside that door.”

For a second there he’d sounded cynical. But he smoldered well and smelled wonderful. His clothes might be from disco nights, but the body underneath was prime beefcake. She trailed one finger down the front of his shirt. A small electric current moved from the tip of her finger straight into her feminine core. She let her gaze follow her caress and saw the muscles under her touch ripple in an enticing display.

They still stood by the door. The room offered the usual amenities. The furnishings were mid-level hotel grade. The plants were real, lush, and a bit incongruous with the urethane finished nightstands and economy carpeting. But at least the room didn’t smell funny.

A king size bed dominated the space. How did she get him into it? Did she want that?

She wanted him, but the only good sex she’d experienced had been solo flights. Did she really want to complicate her life on the slim chance things might be different this time?

Yes. Make that, hell yes.

Maybe the Cosmopolitans she’d had earlier had fueled her optimism, or maybe she’d developed courage since she’d met him. She only knew that she’d hate herself if she didn’t grab this chance to walk on the wild side. Zach, strangely, made her feel safe and daring at the same time. Her precarious situation combined with erotic anticipation, whipping her into a froth of nervous lust.

If she tried to talk, she’d stutter and any possibility of this being a totally hot encounter of the closest kind would go right out the window. She kept quiet, letting her fingers do the talking.

Absorbed in the feel of him, she traced a line across his chest to a flat, dark nipple. She blazed the same trail with kisses, allowing her touch to drift lower, past the open neckline of his shirt. Pausing at the waistband of his pants, she lessened the pressure. Her nail barely grazed the erection straining the front of his slacks. She heard his ragged intake of breath. Sweet tension coiled deep inside her belly, winding her another notch tighter.

\* \* \* \*

Zach didn’t know what game Ciara was playing, but she sure as hell didn’t need to pay for sex. She could take her choice of men with a crook of her finger. His instincts told him she was trouble, but his body hadn’t gotten the memo.

He was on duty, with orders to find out what went on in the back rooms. Sure thing, but Ciara was looking for the same information. Or was she?

He should be getting hazardous duty pay for this assignment.

How much did she know about the club? How far would she go with the seduction game? The possibilities had him as hard as a felon with two priors. He tried to think about something else. Then she reached out and touched him. The bold action contrasted with her innocent blushes and sweet scent. The reasons for not touching her faded into the background while lust fogged his brain and shredded his control.

She only used one finger, hardly made contact. Yet, it was the most erotic thing that had ever happened to him. She started at his throat. When she reached his cock, he thought he’d lose it right then and there.



He captured her hands, pinning them over her head against the back of the door, dipped his head, and then slowly brushed his mouth over her plump lips. His thought process ground down to a single need. To taste. Her.

Zach took his time, savoring the warm velvet of her lips. Keeping her arms trapped with one hand, he tilted her head back, and tugged her chin. She melted, flowing into him, and then opening for him. His tongue surged in. Traces of her cocktail still lingered, teasing him with tangy cranberry and lime. Underneath was the sweet hot flavor of an aroused woman. One taste wasn't going to be enough. For far too long he loitered, tasting, and enjoying. Then instead of pulling away, he traced the long line of her neck with his lips.

It took a serious effort, more than he wanted to think about, to move his head back enough to study her face. Her eyes were closed, dark lashes arced against pale skin. Flushed cheeks, and wet, swollen lips made her look innocent and hot. She was so soft everywhere. So damn fine.

A surge of pure possession roared through him. He trembled with the strength it took him to control himself. Her eyes locked with his. The desire he fought stared back at him.

That look, the one of hundred proof hunger, took him to a level of need he'd never suspected existed. If he hadn't been on the job ... things ... but he was on the job. And even incredibly sexy redheads had to be handled with care.

His palm molded over one breast, teasing, and being teased by the determined thrust of an aroused nipple. She wanted him. He thumbed the hardened evidence of her desire. He let go of her hands and lifted her, aligning the soft vee where her legs ended with his erection. Using his hips to keep her between him and the door he staked his claim on her mouth. Sweeping. Thrusting. Swallowing her breath. Stealing her very essence. Making her his own.

He held on to the thinnest possible veneer of control. The need to explore her, claim her, pulsed through his blood, a primal driving force. He pushed down the draped front of her dress. A lacy bra barely contained the straining mounds. He freed one dusky pink nipple, and then the other, first pinching them tenderly, and then rolling the tightened tight tips between thumb and finger, earning a needy whimper.

"Don't," her breathy plea charred his strained control, "stop."

Her hips tilted invitingly. He lowered his head, fastening his mouth over one tight nipple. She jerked against him in response, filling him with strange satisfaction. He suckled more strongly while teasing the other nipple with his fingers. Then he abandoned the first to suckle the second, toying with the lonely wet peak.

One hand went on an undercover mission and found the edge of her panties. He burrowed in, stroking the curls guarding her secrets, relishing their texture, and the intimacy. He skimmed her slick folds, reveling in her hot jellied center. She whimpered again, soft sounds that ratcheted his hunger.

He ached to be inside her. He left her breasts, pressing them, shielding them with his chest, caught her mouth, swallowed her cries as he worked his middle finger into her core. Feminine muscles clamped around the invasion. His thumb brushed across her tightly swollen clit. She went rigid, tried to pull away. He kept her anchored easily, gently teasing the knot of pleasure with tender firmness. Her hips bucked, and her spasms clenched his finger. He lifted his head, drinking in every detail as she came apart in his arms.

Already dark with desire, her pupils widened further, leaving only a rim of golden brown.

The possessiveness he felt before had only been a prelude to the need to claim rocketing through him now.

Ciara's eyes drifted shut, as aftershocks of pleasure continued to roll through her slender frame. His balls tightened. His cock pulsed with the urge to join her.

Her body still trembled in his arms. An unfamiliar instinct he didn't want to examine made him straighten her dress and smooth her hair.

Before he had a chance to worry about his own strange behavior, a half-heard sound snagged his attention. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled, a signal of menace. Something primitive, buried deep inside him, warred with duty.

He clenched his jaw, took deep breaths and tried to focus. Regrets slammed hard. He'd screwed up royally and put both of them in danger. He'd kick his own ass later. Right now, he had to get her out of here.

"I want to see you again," he said, meaning it more than he wanted to admit. But also knowing it was the fastest way to get her out of there. So far, so good, she smiled at him. "I get off in half hour. I'll come to your place." He ran his hand down her arm, because he could. Her skin was warm silk smoothed over lovely bones.

"Do you know where I live?"

"Yeah, I got it covered."

He leaned down and brushed her lips with his. He savored the musky smell of almost sex mingled with her sweet scent. He took a small nip of her plump bottom lip. She gave a tiny shiver. He lingered over that small thrill, rolling her taste in his mouth, even as he set her away from him.

"Go." Zach nudged her out.

Three minutes alone in the room and he spotted the second video camera. Damn. The camera was tiny with a short transmission range. The receiver was somewhere on the premises, but where?

\* \* \* \*

Ciara floated down the hall unconcerned with trivia like location or direction, her lips still buzzing from Zach's kisses, her body humming from his caresses. Details drifted in. She heard a door open and voices too low to make out words. Then the quiet whoosh of elevator doors opening. She picked up her pace, heading toward the sounds. She cleared the corner and glimpsed a shapely leg in a familiar sandal, before it disappeared through the open doors. Hadn't January worn a pair just like that?

"Please wait," Ciara called as she hurried to catch the elevator.

January, if it even had been her, must not have heard. The elevator doors shut. Ciara slowed back down.

"Problem?" The bouncer, she searched for his name, Clyde—that was it, startled her. For a big man he sure moved quiet.

"No problem, I thought I saw a friend." She kept her voice low, her words slow and deliberate. The last thing she wanted was to stutter and betray her sudden nervousness.

"This isn't a good place to notice friends."

Ciara mumbled something that passed for agreement, allowing him to guide her to the elevator as if she had a choice.

The drive home didn't dim her anticipation. She fluffed the bed, then brushed her teeth,

smoothed on lotion, and put the picture of her parents in a drawer. That took her all of ten minutes. She checked her supply of liquor. Vodka, and wine, but no beer—was it enough of a choice? Maybe she should run down to the all night grocery and pick up a six-pack? No, it wasn't that big a deal. He'd brought wine to Regan's dinner party. Wine should be fine.

Another ten minutes passed, then a half hour. He'd had plenty of time to get here.

She'd had her first non-solo orgasm and he'd watched. But he certainly hadn't made any move to take it further. He'd been aroused, but he hadn't lost control. An erection was just biology. It certainly didn't mean he cared.

It shouldn't bother her whether he cared or not. It did, but not enough for her to act this stupid. Why would she even imagine that he cared? He probably thought she was some lonely, desperate pervert. She'd certainly given him enough cause.

What had she expected, that her little-miss-need-to-be- perfect conscience would take a night off, so she could have fantastic, guilt-free sex? Okay, so it wasn't going to be painless and guilt free, but now for the tough question. Did she want him anyway?

Oh my goodness, yes.

But that did not mean she was going to compound her mistake, unless he had a real good reason for being late.

The drinks, the entertainment, the whole sin-is-in ambiance—it was understandable that she'd overreacted. She was a modern woman and sober now. She could resist Zach and his delicious brand of pleasure.

He wasn't some fantasy she'd dreamed up. He was a man of actual blood, bone, and bad attitude. There was nothing sweet about him, except his kisses, his caresses ....

Experience was fine in a lover, but she drew the line at a man who got paid for it, especially when he was really a cop. A small voice, imitating her conscience, whispered that she hadn't drawn the line earlier. But that didn't matter, she'd had time to think and she wasn't going there again.

Then the doorbell rang and she practically tripped over her own feet racing to answer it.

She met his gaze. His face held an expression of such naked hunger she almost forgot her plan to blow him off. She swayed toward him, before she caught herself—steeling her heart against him. She wasn't going to get involved with a man who got paid for sex, not even a talented one who knew things about her body she'd never guessed.

Ciara needed to concentrate. The man was standing way too close. She had to make up her mind and stick to her own rules. Could she handle no strings sex with Zach? She was in deep and sinking fast. She tried to shut out the distracting memory of his touches shimmying through her body.

She cocked her chin at him. There was no point in lying. "You're good. But I'm not going to pay you for sex, so you may as well leave."

"You already paid me." He reminded her, his deep voice teasing all her erogenous zones.

"Yes. Well, that's only a technicality." She forced herself to meet his gaze. It got harder to keep from melting against him with every breath she took.

"You weren't satisfied?" His direct gaze dared her to lie.

He took a step closer. She could feel his heat and smell his woody aftershave. The memory of his caresses had her nipples saluting and her panties growing damp.

\* \* \* \*

Zach knew he should leave now. He'd been screwing up since he saw her at the club. He should've stayed away from her. He'd fed himself a load of shit about needing to get into a private room. It'd been pure rationalization.

When he'd bumped into her in the hall, he'd acted without thinking. He'd told himself not to meet her after work. He'd repeated the advice while he showered, listed all the reasons why it was a bad plan in his head—while he waited at the drugstore to buy condoms. Told himself to turn around and go home—as he drove to her place.

He needed to start thinking with his big head again. She was a friend of his sister's, and he wished she'd never set foot in the club. No one had ever accused him of being Mr. Sensitive, but why'd she have to be an irresistible redhead, and a reporter? She was the world's worst possible combination.

He'd met a woman he wanted to get to know. They had fantastic chemistry. She was sweet, vulnerable, and he was wild about her body. She had to like him, too, or she'd never have gone with him. He'd be willing to bet she'd never done anything like that before. He seesawed between anger at her for taking such a reckless chance, and being privately thrilled by her sensual reaction to him.

For all of three seconds, he considered telling her the truth. But she was a reporter, he couldn't. He wouldn't risk compromising the operation. And there was no way they could build anything on lies. He loved being a cop, loved working undercover. He'd never been crazy about this particular assignment, but shit cases were part of the job. And the job came first. Personal preferences weren't even in the running. But, all things considered, finding out more about why she was at the club would be a smart move. She was a reporter. She might have pertinent information.

Taking some personal pleasure while he investigated a possible lead was legal.

He enjoyed playing a role, even this one, but she changed everything. She was full of contradictions, one minute cool and the next hot.

She whirled on him now, all flashing eyes and attitude, telling him she wouldn't pay him for sex. Damn, she looked hot.

Hell, she'd already paid him—he'd promised her he'd earn it.

He'd given the Benjamin to Clyde. Partly for ego. He hadn't wanted to admit he'd only gotten the minimum. Partly for pride. He didn't take money for sex, especially not from sassy, freaky redheads. He told himself it didn't matter what she thought, but he'd lied. She mattered. More than she should.

Ignoring her 'don't touch' signals, he cupped the ball of her shoulder with his hand. Her bones felt like tinker toys under his palm. She glowed as if her small body could barely contain all her energy. He let his hand slide down, barely touching the side of her breast, ignoring the pointed invitation of twin peaks eager for his attention. She stood poised. Her tension radiating in waves of barely suppressed quivers.

He held his position, letting his arms drop to his sides. She'd been bristling since she answered the door. He needed her to be clear about this, about them.

"You want me to go or stay?" Zach waited for her decision. Promised himself that he'd go if she said go. It might kill him, but he wouldn't stay without her consent.

She reached for his jacket, shoved the leather aside and fisted her hand in his tee shirt, pulling him toward her. "I want my money back."

He forced himself not to step back. Shit, he'd promised to pay her back. He felt in his pocket for his wallet, but it was a stall. He'd forgotten about her money. He had broken his last twenty at the drugstore.

"I'll be right back, don't leave," he said.

*Where would she go?* She was already home. At least she hadn't laughed in his face. It took him a half hour to find a cash machine, get her hundred and drive back to her place.

It was enough time for him to cool off, but somehow he didn't. Images of Ciara flashed through his mind. The feeling of her warm silk skin buzzed on his lips, his fingers. Pretty much on every part of his body, which no longer fit all that well in his clothes. He shifted.

Two blocks from Ciara's house, he heard an officer needs assistance call on his scanner. His ear picked out the location coordinates. A rush of adrenaline kicked in. He turned off the music without even thinking about it. After a quick u-turn, he kicked in the afterburners. He was on site in under five minutes.

The call turned out to be a routine traffic stop gone bad. A patrol officer lay on the ground. His body much too still.

Zach jammed safety goggles on, wishing he'd worn a vest. Slipping his police ID around his neck before checking his gun, he wished he'd kissed Ciara one more time. He shook his head to dislodge a distraction he couldn't afford.

It was after four AM before he got through the paperwork. Zach headed for the hospital. He got a big hug from the uniform's pregnant wife after someone told her who he was. She looked about sixteen and ready to pop. Christ, he was getting old.

He drove by Ciara's place on the way home. The lights were off. He couldn't blame her for not waiting up, by the time there'd been a break in the action it had been too late to call. She probably thought he'd stiffed her on top of everything else. He told himself it was for the best as he pulled another u-turn and picked a parking spot where he could keep watch over the front of her place.

\* \* \* \*

Three hours later he saw a light flip on in her house. He gave it five minutes before deciding she was up for good. He headed across the street, whistling.

She answered the door wrapped in a bright pink robe. Her face was clean and still soft from sleep, her hair a jumble of flaming curls. Her feet were bare with sexy little round toes. He worked at keeping his thoughts away from tumbling back into her still warm bed.

"Remember me?" Zach aimed his best grin at her, and then dug out the money he owed. He offered her the small stack of twenties. "Thanks for the loan." He feasted his eyes on her curves, keeping his hands to himself. "Now I have a request."

She nodded, blinking slowly.

"Could we start over?"

She laughed. He hadn't expected it and the sound tugged at his heart.

"Hi. My name's Ciara."

"I'm Zach, Regan's brother." He figured the relationship counted in his favor.

"Regan's told me so much about you." Ciara's lower lip came in for a round of punishment, and then her eyes sparkled at him. "She didn't describe you very well."

"She told me you had a great sense of humor."

That got him a real smile.

"I'll bet she did." Her wonderful laugh teased him.

He liked her. He couldn't help it.

"So you're Zach." Her eyes met his, softening

"Tell me about your job." As soon as the words left his mouth, he remembered Ciara was a reporter and he did not want to hear about her job.

"I think not." She said it softly, making him feel even more like a clumsy jerk. He wasn't used to being read so well.

"Right, no shop talk." His words came out harsh, but she smiled at him anyway.

"No shoptalk." She agreed, extending her hand.

"Deal." He reached out and enclosed her hand with his. She felt soft and trusting. He held on and she didn't pull back. He gave her hand a slight tug. She stepped closer. He inhaled her soft fragrance. The scent carried memories of silky skin and heated kisses. He tamped down the provocative images and savored the sweetness of this moment.

His stomach growled. He grinned at her like a fool. "How about a breakfast date?"

"You want to go out now?"

"What's wrong with now?" He stepped closer, murmuring into wild curls that felt surprisingly soft.

"You're up pretty early for man who works nights." She stepped back, covering a yawn.

He didn't press her. "I haven't been to bed, yet."

\* \* \* \*

Ciara agreed to Zach's breakfast invitation, a reckless decision that might lead to more and even better sex. Not that what happened between them hadn't been great, it had been, definitely. Still, more would be lovely—unlikely, but even the remote possibility made the giddy flutters in her stomach move lower.

Their jobs loomed between them like a force field. His being Regan's big brother, made it even more complicated.

Amazingly, for the next two hours, nothing to do with work, his or hers, entered her mind. She learned vital information about Zach, such as how he liked his coffee—black and fresh ground from Jamaican beans. She found out he shared his sister's fitness obsession.

"What do you like to read?" *Could she have sounded any geekier if she'd tried?*

"Cereal boxes."

He gave her that kind of hard ass response all the time, but she was catching on to little signals, like the way the corner of his mouth quirked when he was teasing her.

"No I meant ...."

"I know what you meant." He took a sip of coffee and then set the cup down. His darker-than-sin-eyes met hers and he gave her a slowpoke grin that started a fire down low in her belly.

"Mostly non-fiction, true crime, biographies that kind of thing."

"Like?" She should let it go, but she needed to know things. Always had.

"For the last couple of months I've been working my way through *War and Peace*. Kind of a personal challenge. I got by with the classic comic version in college. I'm dyslexic. Audio books are the easiest for me. When I do read a novel, I try to make it something worthwhile."

Now he'd ask her about what she liked to read and she'd sound sooo shallow.

“So what’s your all time favorite movie?”

Oh good she was off the hook, except she’d already forgotten the question. Ciara concentrated to make sense of the sounds that came from those mobile lips. Lips that ....

*“Love, Definitely.”* Maybe. Close enough. It was a movie and she liked it.

“A chick flick.” Somehow, it didn’t seem like an insult when he said it. Zach reached out and tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. The simple gesture sent ripples far from the point of contact.

“My turn. What’s your favorite movie?” Too breathy. Easy girl.

*“Cheap Fiction.”*

“Did you like *Get Short Stuff*, too?”

Typical male. She wished he were the typical resistible type male. It’s no fun getting all gooey and sentimental by yourself.

“It was good, too, but I’m staying with my first choice.” His voice held a husky note.

*Was he still talking movies?*

“Favorite food?” she asked.

“Hey watch it. It’s not your turn.”

“I got carried away.”

“I take the rules very seriously.” Zach grinned, but his eyes stayed cold.

“Or what?” Ciara couldn’t ignore his implied ultimatum.

“You’ll face the consequences of your actions.”

*Oh my goodness, this man knew how to light a fire.*

“Does that involve punishment?” What *had she gotten into?* Well, *she knew what she’d like to be in her.*

Zach lost the battle to keep a straight face. “Yes, my little pervert, punishment will definitely be involved.”

He called her a pervert and she got hot. Even his threat of punishment sounded sexy as hell. She met his hungry eyes. He wanted her. Her body hummed with lovely urges. Her gaze dropped to his mouth.

*Why were they still sitting here?*

He picked up the tab, which she hadn’t noticed arriving. “I’ll take care of this then let’s go.”

## Chapter Seven

Shit, shit, shit. He folded into his leather office chair, and then read the records Tony had faxed over more carefully. There was no mistake. One new employee. Zach Longstreet, AKA Detective Longstreet, sure as hell wasn't moonlighting at the club hoping to pick up extra change.

Unless he did something, and fast, Longstreet would become a critical problem. He was already three moves ahead. Always. He was keeping it that way, too. However, there was no point in getting any closer than absolutely necessary. He fed the faxed records into the shredder next to the desk, making sure every sheet was confetti.

After restoring his office environment, he washed his hands, drying them thoroughly with a fresh linen hand towel. Then he used another towel to wipe down the sink and counter.

What did he pay those bums at the club for—to make his life more miserable? The fresh evidence of their stupidity had him grinding his molars in frustration. Why was he the only one who used his brain? The only one who ever noticed they had a problem? The only one who did a fucking thing?

When he returned to the office, he called Tony. "You've got a problem."

\* \* \* \*

Tony recognized the number on the caller ID display. Instantly, his gut knotted up like overcooked pasta, but he kept a smile in his voice and left his feet on the desk. After all, the boss couldn't see through the phone line. "What's that, boss?"

"I reviewed the videos from last week. Did you upload any of them?"

Tony took a second, searching for the hidden trap in the boss's words. He was *supposed* to upload the videos every Sunday night. He rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the tension forming there. "Yeah, sure. A couple, January what's her name, like you said, and another chick, young, nice ass. What's the deal? Is there a problem with the video?"

"The other *chick*, who took care of her?"

Typically, the boss didn't answer his questions, just asked more of his own. Tony stayed helpful, nice, and polite. But the boss's sarcastic attitude wasn't doing his gut any good. "Give me a second, and I'll check it out. You want for me to call you back?"

The boss snorted in his ear. "I'll wait."

Not a shocker, the boss never wanted for him to call. Like he thought that Tony was too stupid to read caller ID and didn't already know all his phone numbers, or something. While the website was loading, he got nothing but silence from the boss's end of the call.

"Just a second, it's hard to tell. Hang on, there's a clear shot of his profile. Hey, it is the new guy, Zach something. Now can you fill me in on what's happening? You're making me nervous here." Tony turned his wife, Patsy's, picture to the wall. Then he planted his feet on the floor and sat up straighter in his executive model vinyl chair and rummaged around in the drawer for a fresh roll of antacid tablets.

"She's a reporter for the *Seattle Daily News*," the boss sniped in his ear.



Tony waited for further enlightenment, but none came. So he started talking, thinking out loud. "That might work out good for the business. Could give us a little free publicity." Tony tried to put a dash of optimism into his voice as he worked the foil wrapper off the medicine.

"I don't think so. She's not going to write a whimsical account about being exploited on the WetnWild website. Besides, she's Angus Donovan's daughter. She didn't drop by to do a color piece on a local nightspot. And your new waiter, Longstreet? Is a cop. I'm not paying you to make my life more complicated. Pull the video, wire her for sound, and get rid of him. Do I need to make any part of those instructions clearer?"

Tony winced at the slam in the ear he knew was coming. Before he had a chance to ask politely for clarification on a few points, like where he was supposed to find this Donovan chick, and who Angus was, the boss ended the call.

Bosses. They were all the same, unreasonable and ungrateful, bastards. Tony had been running this cash cow for three years. Did he ever get anatta boy? Hell no. And whose idea had the porn site been? His. Couple of video cameras and nothing but profit. The gritty home movie style had actually been a plus with the voyeur crowd. The stars were better than free, since most of them paid to keep their faces blacked out. The paying public didn't care about faces anyway. And still the boss treated him like a fucking retard. If he weren't getting paid so well, he'd have been out of here a long time ago.

Staring at the one-way window, which gave him a view of the bar, didn't offer any distraction from his worries. The bartender wore a vest and bowtie to distinguish him from the waiters, who had open to the waist shirts, and the ushers who wore nothing above the waist except for their trademark black bowties. The staff made nice eye-candy for the customers, but they didn't do anything for him.

Only a few lonely broads hung out, sipping their drinks and flirting with the bartender. A pair of chicks dished the dirt on the other end of the bar. No nice scenic bachelorettes with fire in their eyes this time of night. The club was quiet. The first act didn't start till ten.

Tony had a bad feeling about the boss's orders. Why had he asked him to bug the chick's house when the boss had ten times the resources for setting up surveillance?

After all, he wasn't getting any younger. Didn't seem right, the boss expecting him to crawl around and wire the Donovan's girl place.

He should've gotten a clear answer on what he was supposed to do about Zach.

Was he supposed to fire him? Or ....

Sweating like a racehorse, Tony had to mop his forehead with a handkerchief, just to keep his eyes clear.

When he'd offered Zach a chance to dance, the guy'd said he'd get back to him. When the guy hadn't jumped all over the opportunity, he should've smelled something right then. When was the last time a waiter had needed to think about getting ten times the tips?

He used his thumb to pop the lid off his antacid prescription.

What had the boss meant? For him to off Zach? Holy mother of God! Killing a cop was a risky move. Maybe the boss had just meant he should fire him. Now, he was waiting for further instructions. The boss would be pissed. That was a gimme.

Tony covered his mouth with a fist and belched to relieve a little gas.

He'd like to leave early, but he couldn't count on the boss not calling ten times more to

check up on him. God help him if he wasn't on duty.

Better give Sam a heads up, maybe there was something he could do on his end. The kid was as devious as a Jesuit priest.

The fuzzy orders might be for the best. Tony munched on a tablet. He needed to think about covering his own ass. He was getting too old to be taking shit for a living. Maybe it was time to pull the plug, scale back a little, and make time for the grandbabies he didn't have yet. He decided to talk it over with his wife, Patsy. Get her take on things, before he took any steps that might be fatal.

## Chapter Eight

Zach splayed his hand possessively across the small of her back while he guided her to the car. He settled her in the passenger seat and closed her door firmly. After sliding into the driver's side, he angled his shoulders toward her, and then slid his arm along the top of her seat. He looked behind them before backing out the car.

Ciara was beautiful, hot, and smart, too smart to imagine this was going anywhere. Fast and easy was all he could handle. So why did he ache with the need to simply touch her?

He'd paid back the money he owed her. They'd enjoyed a few nice moments. Time to walk away.

As soon as he saw her safely home, he'd take off. He needed to get some chores done. Make real food. Go for a run. He was so wired now he wouldn't sleep.

Walking up the stairs to her front door, his steps slowed. No matter how slow he moved, they got there too soon. She put her key in the lock and opened the door, turning toward him with a smile. "Do you want to come in?"

His intention to leave took a long hike off a short pier.

She had him at *do you*. He wasn't going to make the woman beg.

He scooped Ciara up. She felt good in his arms, too good. There was no problem carrying her. The trouble would come when he had to let her go. The house was small. He got lucky at the first door.

Sunlight seeped in around the edges of the mini-blinds, adding a sultry layer to the room's privacy. The same soft fragrance he already associated with her lingered. The furnishings surprised him. After their encounter at the club, he'd expected leopard pillows and satin sheets. Instead, the furniture matched his first impression of her, romantic and feminine. A bamboo bed plump with pillows and a fluffy comforter coaxed.

Any horizontal surface would've looked good.

Zach ran his hungry gaze over Ciara. She met him with a killer look, full of dark desire. He set her on her feet, his hand lingering at her waist. She shed her raincoat, letting it puddle on the floor. Removing the box of condoms from his jacket pocket, he set them on the bedside table, watching her for a reaction. She stared at the box, then back to him, her eyes widening.

He shrugged off his jacket, folded it once, and then sat it on an ivory striped armchair. Toeing off his boots and socks, he prayed she wouldn't balk.

She pulled her dress over her head, giving him a great view of a tiny peach lace bra and panties. Right then, part of his heart warmed in her soft hands.

His t-shirt went the way of her dress. Then he reached for his belt.

"Let me."

Zach had no problem with that. He tried to look cool while she fumbled with his belt and the fastening of his slacks, which had a hook on one side and button on the other. Right that moment the pants seemed needlessly complicated.

He hated putting on previously worn underwear. Unfortunately, he hadn't brought a

clean pair to the club. Hell, he probably didn't have any clean shorts. Laundry was one of those things he should be taking care of, but it hadn't made it to the top of the priority list for a while. Going commando didn't bother him, but right now, he wasn't sure it'd been a good call. He hoped like hell she didn't find it a turn-off.

Ciara unhooked, unbuttoned and unzipped him. He still hadn't figured out how to word a suitable warning, when his cock leapt into her hand.

She gave him a warm, squeezing stroke, his favorite kind. A pleased groan escaped his lips. Crouching down, she tugged his pants lower. He pulled her up before she started anything that would push him over the edge, and then ditched the slacks, adding them to the pile of his stuff in her chair.

Now that she'd passed the point of no return, which she'd crossed the second she wrapped her hand around his cock, he dedicated himself to pleasure. Hers, and then his.

There was no obvious release mechanism to the peach bra. His fingers followed the lacy edge to the garment's low point between the twin distractions. After bumping into the vertical hook, he worked it out of the cloth slot, freeing her breasts.

For the first time, he got to look his fill. He took his time. Treating her like the gift she was by unwrapping her slowly and appreciating each new revelation. His breath caught as he stared at the perfection of her nude form. High and round, beautifully shaped with tender deep pink nipples already scrunched into tight buds, her breasts made him reverent.

She gave a nervous laugh. "They're ...."

"Shh, they're perfect."

That simple truth earned him a narrow-eyed look.

"I'm a trained investigator sworn to find the truth."

Ignoring her skepticism, he cupped her breasts tenderly in his palms, keeping them uncovered for his viewing pleasure. He leaned in and captured one tightly furled bud in a deep sucking kiss. Then he blew on the sensitized peak. He soothed that aching tip with his thumb while he treated the other breast with the same attention. She whimpered and pulled his head closer. A good sign.

Her pleasure heightened his as he learned her using all of his senses. He touched her gently, letting her responses dictate his moves. He lavished attention on her sensitive breasts until she pulled his head back and kissed him. She spread her fingers wide on his chest and began to trail kisses down his neck. Again he stopped her, unwilling to let her strip what was left of his control.

Zach shoved down the comforter and laid her in the center of the bed. Propped on one elbow he traced an imaginary line from her throat down to the dip of her waist with torturous slowness. Then he went even slower—finally stopping at the peak of her mound. He gave a low growl of pure male satisfaction when her thighs eased and she tipped her hips in welcome. A small port wine birthmark in the shape of a heart decorated one inner thigh. There was something about her which drew out an oral fixation—urging him to make a matching mark on the opposite creamy thigh. It took discipline to stick to his plan.

He rose up and started again, tracing the same line, this time with his mouth. She whimpered with need before he got to her waist. This time he didn't stop.

He used his fingers to part her outer lips and his mouth to sooth and tease tissues already slippery and swollen. Using fingers and mouth, he brought her closer to the peak she sought

with mindless need. Her hips rocked, seeking more pressure. His control stretched beyond experience, every muscle clenched and quivered from fighting the instinct to thrust into her. With the last of his shredded self-discipline, he reached for the condoms. He tore open the fresh box. Isolating one packet, he dispensed with the foil wrapping and rolled it down his eager cock in bare seconds.

Ciara propped herself up on her elbows, her legs open in invitation. Her eyes raked over him like a caress. "You're beautiful."

Her voice made him ache in places he never knew existed. He'd been prepared for sexy, even for sass. But her sweet generosity touched something soft and tender deep inside. She deserved more than he could give her. But he'd give her everything he had today.

He lifted her hips, positioned himself and nudged into her heated core. He came to an abrupt and aching halt. She was too tight for a smooth plunge.

The unrelenting snug heat of her as she writhed, forced him to use his weight to keep her still. He pulled back the tiniest fraction and felt her ease slightly. He inched back in and she took a little more of him. He ground his teeth and blanked his mind, fighting for control. After long minutes, he was buried completely, his pubic bone hard against her clit. He held himself rigid, painfully aware that any movement would trigger his climax, wanting to make it last.

Even pinned to the bed, she bucked under him, creating sizzling friction where they joined. The contractions of her feminine muscles became faster and stronger as she found release. He held himself still, his muscles quivering from the effort. When her spasms eased, he began a gentle rocking rhythm intended to tease with every slow stroke. His reward came fast as her inner spasms began again. Impossibly tighter around him. Milking his cock. Every muscle in his body strained beyond endurance. He exploded in a mind-numbing climax. Made all the hotter and sweeter by her gasps of pleasure.

A faint warning siren wailed inside, reminding him this was just sex. He thought about staggering out of here while he still could. But she felt so damn fine he wasn't ready to leave. Besides, every muscle in his body was slack and needed time to recover. Two minutes, maybe five, ten tops. Then he'd get up.

Right, he was all over that. Clean up and go home. Absolutely. Sure thing. As soon as he had the strength to move. But the need to possess her was stronger than his self-preservation instinct. Before he found the strength to leave, his cock hardened back into hunter-seeker mode.

He rolled off her for the second time, intending to ignore the orders from headquarters. Then her creamy butt nestled against his hip. He ran a hand over the warm skin. Ciara's skin was so smooth, satin sheets had nothing on her. How was it possible for him to still want her this much?

She'd drawn him from the moment he'd first seen her. The closer he got the stronger her pull. He'd lost the capacity to leave her. For a second, fear trickled down his spine. It'd be a super-sized mistake for him to think this was anything other than a one-night stand. He should get out here while the getting was good.

Ciara gazed at him over her shoulder. Her plump mouth curved and she made a happy little humming sound. She had that sexy, flushed, just-got-laid look that would tempt a saint. His doubts faded. Why had he thought about leaving?

He was here. She was here. And he'd bought a whole box of condoms.

Eventually, he slept for a couple of hours. When the sky started to lighten, about five the

next morning, he dragged his sorry ass out of her bed. He pulled on pants, scooped up his jacket and boots. He turned back for a last look at her from the door and damn near didn't leave. She lay on her stomach with the sheet draped low over her hips. Her hair spread like flames against the ivory linen. Her skin gleamed with silky richness. Her breasts hidden, except for round sides, begged for his touch. He knew how they looked, felt, and tasted.

After he'd kissed every inch of her and made love with her five times, he should be dead. Or at least completely sated. But it hadn't happened yet. He locked his knees to keep from going back to the bed. Why was it so damn hard to leave her?

\* \* \* \*

All right, she wasn't being smart. But it was impossible to feel anything but happy when Zach stared at her with his I've-got-to-have-you-now smoldering gaze. Other men had wanted her, but none of them had made her feel safe enough to seek her own satisfaction.

Why him? Aside from the sexy body, the talented tongue, and the knowing fingers, there was a basic decency about him. He never just took. He paid attention to her responses. He took time to lavish her with caresses, finding hot spots she hadn't known existed, and the man could kiss. She loved his kisses. Sometimes they were tender, or sweet, or hot, or sexy. Each one seemed better than the last.

Drifting into sleep she snuggled against the heat of him, her back nested against his chest anchored by a powerful arm at her waist. Safe in the magic of being wanted.

The next morning, Ciara felt reborn. She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept without dreams. She stretched slowly while still prone and reveled in the afterglow of bone-melting pleasure.

All this time she'd thought the rumors of multiple orgasms had been wishful thinking, or worse, a case of her lacking the sensory equipment other women had. But all she'd needed was the right man. Her mouth curved against her pillow. One day, all right, one fabulous day and night, and she was hooked on hot sex.

Remembering the pleasure, a lick of desire unfurled in her belly. She reached out with one leg intending to rub it against Zach.

Her seeking toes felt nothing except smooth cool sheets. She sat up. Beside her, the bed was empty. Maybe, he'd stepped into the bathroom. She scanned the bedside table. The condoms were gone. His clothes had disappeared. Nothing of him remained.

Tears of shame and anger trickled down her cheeks. She wouldn't regret yesterday, couldn't regret it. Even though ... damn him.

She couldn't even sin well. Shedding clothes and inhibitions opened her heart. And then she'd gotten dumped. It felt as lousy as it sounded.

A glance at the bedside clock jolted her into action. She didn't have time for self-pity. She climbed out of bed, aggravating seldom-used muscles.

The room was a perfect seventy-two degrees. Still, she shivered as though she were chilled. She covered her vulnerability in a shockingly pink chenille robe and padded to the kitchen to get a diet cola. Retrieving the newspaper from her doorstep, before heading for the bathroom, Ciara popped a couple of aspirin, chasing them with half of the cola. She left the rest of her drink on the bathroom counter while she showered. After washing away all traces of Zach's scent, she let the hot water ease the unfamiliar tender spots.

More hot tears, for a too brief intimacy, and a loss much sharper than their scandalously

short affair warranted, slipped unnoticed in the steamy spray.

After patting herself dry, she used the towel to wrap her hair tightly, squeezing out more of the dampness. With the morning paper propped against a vase of yellow silk roses on the bathroom counter, she scanned the headlines while she blow-dried her hair. The print kept blurring. Blinking back the tears that pooled, she turned off the blow dryer, and then slammed the rest of her cola.

Time to toughen up. She'd had a memorable night of great sex. Definitely not a tragedy, so why the leaky faucet imitation this morning?

Hormones. Had to be. It was the only logical explanation. Apparently, great sex released so many endorphins a blue spell followed.

If the universe held any justice, he'd suffer the same backlash. That thought brought her first smile since she'd discovered Zach had sneaked out of her life like a cat burglar.

Get-the-red-out eye drops, mascara, gloss. Clean clothes. Now for the important choices. Practically new yellow Italian pumps, only sixty dollars in an on-line auction, or no-name tan sandals?

An easy call. The plain vanilla shoes. There was no point in wasting the great shoes on a lackluster day.

She listened to her cell phone messages on the drive to work. There was one each from Regan and her dad and the last one was from January.

January might be the story break she needed.

So far, she had nothing for her article, except some steamy sex scenes that would launch her into the unemployment line and probably get her cut out of her father's will if she tried to include them.

Wanting to get the worst over with first, she returned her dad's call. After the fourth ring, she got his voice mail. She left an obnoxiously cheery message, saying she'd see him at work in a few minutes.

With her duty out of the way, she pushed Regan's number. "Hi, it's me."

"Hi you." Regan's voice was warm. "You doin' alright this morning?"

"Nothing caffeine and aspirin can't handle. How about you?"

"I'm cool, heading for the Center in a few. Come on, tell me about last night, what happened. Did you get your story?"

Hesitation would be fatal with Regan. She'd zoom in on it instantly. Ciara equivocated. "I talked to a couple of the employees. They were pretty closed mouthed."

She wasn't ready to talk about Zach, especially not to Regan. Besides, the wounds were still too fresh.

"You'll put a great spin on it and have us all dying to know more."

Regan had believed in her even when she hadn't believed in herself. She didn't want her friend to know how fragile her self-esteem was. She was a big girl. She could handle this mistake solo.

"Did Zach call you yet?" Regan asked, eager for good news.

"No." Ciara bit her lip to keep from whimpering he'd never even asked for her number.

"Sorry, I really thought ...."

"Hey, no biggie. We already knew he's not into relationships—right?" Ciara tried to brush it off, but her voice caught.

"I saw the way he watched you last week, he was definitely interested." Regan persisted. *Great, he'd rejected her on much more personal grounds.*

She gave herself a good virtual shake, and tuned back in on what Regan was saying.

"... I can't even request that he be reassigned because then he'd know how much he's getting to me."

Regan was talking about her hunky new partner, Ian. Ciara knew this subject chapter and verse. "How about I cruise through your sector doing about seventy and you pull me over and let him write the ticket?"

Regan laughed. "You want to meet him that bad?"

"Definitely," she said with her tongue tucked firmly in her cheek.

"Okay. Meet me at the precinct when I get off. I'll introduce you, but you have to act casual." Regan didn't bother hiding a dramatic sigh.

"A much better plan than my getting a moving violation."

"See you tonight." The smile was back in Regan's voice.

"Want to get something to eat after?" She could definitely use some company.

"Yeah, sounds good."

At the next red light, Ciara returned January's call.

"January?"

"Yes?" The voice was low and cautious.

"This is Ciara, Regan's friend. Is this a good time for you to talk?"

January wasn't bubbly, but Ciara was surprised she'd called at all. Her cautious tone was still a lot more than Ciara had expected from the heiress. For all her fame and notoriety, January had seemed pretty together at the club. Certainly, her reserved manner had been a long ways from her public image of spoiled, stupid, and sexy.

Ciara couldn't help wondering what had prompted the call. Whatever it was, she was grateful. She wasn't going to question a talking gift horse.

After a few minutes, they set a time to meet. Ciara had a hunch about January. She sounded too wary to be a dead end. With any luck, she might have a clue as to what was really going on at the club. Unlike a certain undercover cop, who played fast and loose with a woman's dreams, but shared no information.

Okay, back it up. She wasn't being fair. Anger wouldn't heal her bruised ego.

Zach had done nothing but give her pleasure. Heat added color to cheeks already blushed with peach glow number two. Casual sex had been her mistake, not his.

Ciara shoved the empty-inside feeling to the back of her mind by planning questions for January. She'd picked up a few tantalizing hints from studying the data her dad had given her. The club was remarkably profitable. Impressive amounts of cash ran through the accounts, but it didn't stay long.

There were still unanswered questions. Such as the fact that January didn't fit the profile of an *In Place* Member. She'd been distantly pleasant the other night, but Ciara couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to her relationship with the club than she'd shared.

Considering January's reasonable media phobia, Ciara called for lunch reservations at the *Carleton*. The restaurant was a little stuffy, but very discreet, and the food was excellent.

A whole morning spent keeping thoughts of Zach out of her head and digging through copies of old bank statements left her with more questions than answers. The most troubling of



all of her questions was—where had her father gotten the bank records?

The list of entities involved continued to grow but, so far, each had led to the same blank wall—a shell company with the same low-rent attorney and his secretary as the principal officers. A morning of fine print and no headway made lunch sound good.

The heavy oak doors of the *Carleton* swung closed behind her and the outside world disappeared. The room was as dark as a movie theater. It took her a minute to adjust. Then she saw high backed booths lining either side of the massive bar.

A hostess led her to the table she'd reserved. She found a friendly grin for her possible source. January answered with a dazzling smile. The heiress appeared elegant and serene in a mossy green silk camisole over ivory slacks that flattered her toned shape.

January certainly had cause to avoid the press. She'd been fair game ever since she and April were cast on their own reality show, *Just Folks*. A camera crew had followed them twenty-four hours a day for six weeks, filming everything. Young, January had been twenty-three and April twenty-one, they had looked like exactly what they were, beautiful and immature.

The frat party had been a mistake, though January maintained taking her top off was just her way of livening up the occasion.

Ciara had noticed the way January's neck stiffened every time the press made another innuendo about her love life. This made Ciara all the more curious about why she had initiated this meeting.

"I'm in a tough spot," January spoke through her wide smile, keeping her bright expression fixed. Her tan fingers gripped the water glass so hard her knuckles paled.

Ciara felt instant sympathy for the besieged heiress. She wanted to reassure her that not all reporters were insensitive hounds. Leaning closer, she asked, "What can I do to help?"

\* \* \* \*

As ordered, Zach reported to Lieutenant Connelly an hour before his shift at the club. The secretary's station, which barricaded her office, was vacant. At seven, the woman who usually worked the desk would've been home for more than an hour.

He knocked.

"Come in," Connelly said.

He entered, closing the lightweight door behind him.

Lieutenant Connelly nodded an acknowledgement of his entrance and then returned her attention to the conversation with Chief Logan, Lieutenant O'Brien, and the local FBI Field Agent Abrahams. The Chief perched on the window ledge. The other two men occupied the Lieutenant's visitor chairs.

Zach's earlier fatigue vanished. He felt underdressed and overwhelmed by all the brass in the room. The office, only a few square feet larger than a cubicle, reeked of testosterone. A few reference books were arrayed in a blonde bookcase, framed degrees, and citations decorated the back wall. The matching desk and chairs with sincere navy blue cloth seats blended inoffensively with a dark green tweedy carpet, the modest touches giving away nothing about the woman who worked here. The exception was a silver framed group photo of eight young women sporting big grins as they all leaned on the oars of a racing scull.

Before he figured out where to park himself, Chief Logan rose from his window seat. "I've got to go, but I want to be kept in the loop. I expect a daily report Connelly—tomorrow,

my office, seven AM.”

“Watch your step son.” The Chief clapped Zach’s shoulder and met his eyes with a kindly glance before leaving the room.

It was odd seeing the local FBI agent in the precinct. Even odder for his current boss and his old boss to share the same turf. Maybe one of them would let him in on his objective. So far, he’d gotten vague advice about keeping his head down and eyes open, and the old standard—use your best judgment.

Great advice, but useless without communicating a specific goal.

Connelly was new to narcotics, but she had a rep for being straight up. True, she’d given him a shit assignment, but he’d hold off condemning her until he knew more. It helped her credibility that she’d forged an alliance with O’Brien.

“Agent Abraham with the FBI and Lieutenant O’Brien from Vice.” Connelly indicated the men sitting across from her. “Detective Longstreet.” She tipped her head toward Zach.

O’Brien rose with wide grin splitting his lumpy face. Zach took a couple of steps to close the gap, and then shook the hand his old friend offered. A hundred years ago, he’d been a rookie and O’Brien had shown him the ropes.

“Always a pleasure sir,” Zach said with real warmth.

O’Brien’s face was round, at odds with his lanky body. There was some slight softening under his chin, and his forehead was higher than it used to be. He had to be pushing fifty. His eyes were plain blue, currently slit in professional assessment. His suit, either a custom number or a damn fine imitation, added to his player style.

“Abrahams,” Zach extended a hand to the FBI agent, who shook it after a brief hesitation.

“Detective,” Abrahams acknowledged him succinctly.

“Longstreet,” Zach supplied dryly. They had only met on a half dozen occasions. Obviously, Zach had failed to make an impression. Or maybe he’d made the wrong sort of impression on the local feebee. Abrahams dressed as well as the Chief and O’Brien, but more conservatively. He had no visible means to support his expensive lifestyle, which meant little. The man could be the pampered husband of a wealthy woman, like the Chief, prior to his wife’s death. It was possible he’d inherited money as O’Brien had. Or he could be involved in something illegal, and too stupid to hide his supplemental income.

While Zach greeted Abrahams, both O’Brien and Connelly studied him. Whatever they saw seemed to reassure them.

“You’ve been at the *In Place* for a week?” O’Brien asked mildly.

“Almost,” Zach turned toward his old friend.

“And you’ve seen nothing out of the ordinary?” Abrahams injected sharply.

Before Zach answered, Connelly gestured to the recently vacated window ledge. “Have a seat, Zach. I take it you know our guests?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, perching his ass on the vacant window ledge.

She turned toward the other two men. “Zach hasn’t given me an update on last night. He can fill us all in.” She glanced at Zach, tacitly instructing him to ignore Abrahams’ question.

Zach hesitated for a half a second. “I got into a private room.”

“With a club member?” O’Brien prompted, jiggling his foot.

“No, a guest,” Zach said firmly.

“How do you know she was a guest?” Abrahams asked belligerently.

Connelly interrupted. "What difference does it make?"

She leaned back in her chair.

"None at all, I'm just curious. I've never been to the club. Have you?" Abrahams flashed Connelly an expression of wide-eyed innocence.

"It is my understanding that the club is for women only. And to answer your question, Agent Abrahams, no, I have not been there. It's not my kind of scene." Her tone was dryer than a detox unit.

"Of course not. A woman with your looks would never have to pay for male attention," O'Brien interjected gallantly.

Zach thought O'Brien was laying it on too thick. Connelly was slender and well preserved, but he would've called her standard issue features handsome rather than pretty. But after O'Brien's flattery, Connelly's lids lowered and a faint blush highlighted her cheekbones. For a minute, she seemed softer—prettier.

Abrahams angled his slim frame toward Zach. "Go on. Tell us about the back room."

Zach glanced over at Connelly. He had no interest in getting involved in a big brass pissing match. He had nothing to prove.

Zach waited for the slight tilt of her head, signaling permission, before he continued his report. "The rooms are standard hotel issue, a cut above the No Tell Motel but not as plush as the bar or the main room. The bouncers take fifty percent of whatever the customer pays. I'd heard about that, but last night was the first chance I had to confirm it."

"Did you ...?" Connelly gave a polite cough. "I hope you were safe."

"Yes ma'am. I followed your advice. I let her take the lead. There was no .... Things didn't go that far. Protection wasn't an issue"

His lieutenant didn't need to know everything. He'd only gotten to third base at the club. The home runs hadn't come until hours later and had nothing to do with the operation. He kept the lid on images of Ciara sealed tight.

Connelly's smile came and went so fast Zach couldn't have testified that it had occurred. "Go on," she said encouraging him to continue.

"After the customer left, I checked the room. Nothing except an assortment of condoms, sex toys in the nightstand ...," he said, fully intending to explain about the camera when he was interrupted by the barrage of questions.

Both lieutenants and the FBI agent peppered him with a laundry list of questions. By the time they'd finished he had described the room in enough detail to earn him credit for Hotel 101. Then they started asking about the bouncer, Clyde. They asked very little about the customer. Zach was grateful.

He didn't want to lie.

As he reported the same details for the third or fourth time, Zach watched the power play between the three paper-pushing suits.

A lull in the conversation gave him the opportunity to ask his own questions. He didn't, figuring he'd learn more by keeping quiet. He listened, and filed everything away for future analysis.

Clearly, O'Brien would prefer one of his vice squad's detectives on this assignment. But he hadn't made an overt protest. Why not?

And what was Abrahams doing sticking his nose into a local investigation?

“What time are you supposed to clock in?” Connelly shot Zach a cool glance that said she already knew the answer.

“Eight.”

“Better get a move on.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Zach took the stairs. If the lights were with him he’d make it on time.

He pulled out of the garage’s exit. Then he had to wait for a leggy redhead to finish sashaying past the exit ramp.

Ciara looked as cool as a bubbling fountain on a hot summer day. She’d been anything but cool last night. His body automatically tightened in response to seeing her again. He wished .... But he was on duty and wishing didn’t mean squat. He watched her from behind his shades and held his breath.

She never glanced in his direction.

## Chapter Nine

It was raining when he left work. Fat drops smeared the car's finish. Each one leaving a blob of pollution behind, spoiling the detail job he hadn't gotten the bill for yet.

Fucking traffic was a bad joke. It took him thirty minutes to move across town. He let himself into his condo. For a few seconds he breathed the clean air provided by his subatomic particle filters. The tendons in his neck, which had been stretched tight, relaxed. The shell wall sconces softened the white walls. A spotlight glowed on his Durant etching. It was going to auction, along with the rest of his artwork and furnishings. Sentiment was the one luxury he could not afford.

Automatically, he tossed his keys onto the entry table and hung up his suit coat. Then he checked the office. Nothing in the fax, which was fine. He wasn't expecting anything. There were messages, mostly nothing.

One was from Tony, his numb nuts manager. His blood pressure built as he listened to Tony whine about how he'd done nothing. This might be a good thing. He'd been excited when he'd told him to get rid of Longstreet. He'd meant fire the cop's meddling ass. But he could see how Tony might have misinterpreted his comments to mean something else. That would've been a royal cluster fuck.

This in no way excused Tony's failure to get Donovan's kid wired for sound. It had been four days since the original breach, five before he expected to get anything useful, and he was operating blind.

Typically, he wound up finding her address, and then spoon-feeding Tony the directions.

In his business, loyalty counted for a lot. He couldn't afford to fire Tony. Not now. Tony running around loose, with a grudge and too much information, would be a major liability. He told Tony to hold off doing anything about Longstreet while he did some damage control on his end.

There was an old saying about keeping your friends close and your enemies closer. He didn't have friends, so he liked to keep his enemies real tight.

Longstreet infiltrating the club, Donovan's daughter dropping by, and the two of them happening to get together for a private party, might be one big old fucking coincidence. But he wasn't betting on it. This wasn't paranoia. This was a survival skill. Stuffing his anger into the empty pit of pain inside, he considered his options. Donovan's kid had entered the club searching for dirt and deliberately seeking for a way to hurt him. How much did she really know? And how connected was she to Longstreet? That was typical of his shit life—plenty of questions, no answers, and no help.

He was prudent. He was in control. He was bone tired. Answers first, then action.

If she wasn't connected then she suffered a tragic accident. Drinking and driving—it happened all the time. If she was connected? Then everything got more complicated.

How much would it take to make the blackmail connection once the porn site was nailed? Should he kill the whole website? Probably. However, that meant cutting off the Cabell funds.

One more payment was all he needed, plus the sale, and the last week of receipts from the club. More would be nice, but real genius knew when to walk away.

His mood lightened, thinking of how close he was to winning. Whistling *O Sole Mio* he opened the refrigerator and removed the crisp rinsed and dried romaine leaves. He ripped them tenderly into bite-sized pieces for his salad.

Leaving the porn site up was a ballsy move. If he liked safe, he wouldn't be playing in the fast lane. All he had was the excitement of the game. Indifference to his survival gave him a wicked edge.

## Chapter Ten

Ciara crossed in front of the garage exit, heading for the precinct's front door, her head still buzzing with January's dilemma. After the young heiress had filled her in on the situation, Ciara had suggested getting a more experienced reporter involved. She knew two trustworthy news people. Both of them knew tons more than she did about how to investigate a crime story. But January had been adamant about not involving anyone else until she was ready to go public.

Her next suggestion had been to talk to Regan. Again, January wouldn't budge. She made her promise not to discuss the blackmail with Regan or anyone else. January believed the police were behind the extortion. She trusted no one. She was counting on Ciara to expose the law enforcement corruption using the power of the press.

The idea excited and terrified Ciara. She was a quick study and persistent, but she lacked the experience and contacts to expose a broad reaching criminal conspiracy.

Smiling at the sergeant on duty at the front desk, Ciara pushed into the precinct's public entry. For a few seconds, her imagination ran amuck. The life sized pig statue with its laughing face and top hat, seemed to find her fears hilarious.

She wondered if the sergeant was part of the conspiracy. What if January was right? What if corrupt cops were behind the extortion? What if Zach was part of it? Or was January jumping to conclusions and over reacting to a small time shakedown?

And how on earth would Ciara find the truth?

"I'm Ciara Donovan, here to meet Officer Regan Longstreet," she announced herself to the sergeant on duty.

"I'll let her know you're here."

Shortly, a uniformed officer entered from the precinct's interior. Ciara watched his approach with covert appreciation. It wasn't everyday she saw a man who made the uniform look good. Usually, it worked the other way around. Amazing dark blue eyes, nearly as hypnotic as Zach's met hers.

"Ciara?"

Startled, she glanced at him again. She wouldn't have forgotten a man who looked like that, but if he knew her....

"Regan...." Faint color warmed his chiseled cheekbones. She guessed the color related to the presumption of using her friend's first name.

He corrected himself, starting over. "Officer Longstreet sent me to see if you were here yet. She's doing paper."

Ciara held out her hand. "And you are?" *Completely adorable, he even blushed.*

Insert paragraph indent "Ian McKnight, the bane of Officer Longstreet's existence," he said with painfully sincere regret.

His self-deprecating humor—intended or not, made her laugh.

Privately, Ciara thought Regan should resign herself to the inevitable. No matter how cool and serene she appeared on the outside, Regan was a warm, loving, and very human

woman. She was crazy to think she'd be able to work side by side with a hunk like Ian McKnight every day and stay immune to his charms.

She followed Ian to a room full of utilitarian tables and folding chairs. The tables along the outside wall were equipped with computers. Three of the screens glowed blue around the edges of an electronic form. One active station's chair angled back and away from the untended keyboard. A uniformed officer with a cell phone pressed to one ear, pecked one-handed at the most distant of the computers. Regan diligently transferred details from the small notepad to the left of the keyboard into the department's system.

"Hang on a minute." Her attention didn't waver from the squiggled notes.

"No problem. Take your time I'll just chat with Officer McKnight," Ciara said sweetly.

Regan stiffened, her data entry speed slowing down to a crawl. Then she snapped back to her task, fingers blurring on the keyboard.

Ciara saw the longing in Ian's eyes when he watched Regan in an unguarded moment. She empathized with his severe case of unrequited lust—not all that unrequited in his case. Though she'd never betray Regan's trust by telling Ian how her friend felt. Nope, he'd have to find out about that on his own.

She watched as her friend clicked on the save and close icon, pushing away from the computer as she stood. "Come on. Let's get something to eat."

"Would you like to join us?" Ciara turned to Ian impulsively and offered him a friendly smile of inclusion. Her invitation would steam Regan, but she needed some distraction to keep her off balance. The woman was way too perceptive.

"I sure would." He grinned at her, dimples and all. "Give me five minutes to change."

"I'm starting the stop watch." Ciara squinted at her bare wrist. "Now."

Ian raced off into the officer's locker room.

Regan shot her a sub-zero glare. "You will be explaining yourself later, Ms. Donovan."

"Yes ma'am. Do I salute now or just curtsy?"

Regan didn't answer, or even glance back, as she strode away.

Ciara wasn't intimidated. What were girlfriends for? Regan and Ian were getting nowhere smoldering at each other. Nudging them in the right direction was the least she could do, she thought with self-righteous rebellion.

Ian was back in under his allotted five minutes, looking even cooler with still wet hair. He was preppy in a gray polo and well-worn cotton slacks. Shortly, Regan reappeared, transformed from no-nonsense Officer Longstreet into an exotic beauty. The uniform was gone, replaced by a slinky wrap dress in an abstract floral print so bold that only a warrior princess could carry it off. Scarlet toenails, no one would've guessed had been inside those thick cop shoes, winked from strappy stiletto sandals that brought her to Ian's chin.

Ciara, decidedly un-warrior like, and no kind of princess, glanced down at her plain khaki skirt and olive tank top that had seemed cool and feminine up until a minute ago. Her boring jacket, which wouldn't have helped anyway, still lay on the back seat of her car. Comparing herself to her exotic friend was always a mistake.

Envy never improved anyone's appearance, certainly not hers. She twisted her mother's lucky bamboo bracelet. The gold bangle always seemed to impart confidence. The clasp was broken and she'd put off getting it fixed, not willing to be without her talisman for the two weeks the jeweler said he needed to make the repair.



"Since you were so kind as to include Ian in your invitation to dinner, you're buying," Regan said with an angelic smile.

It hadn't been a question, but Ciara felt compelled to agree.

"No problem," Ciara lied bravely while mentally clutching the remnants of her budget. A tendency toward thriftiness was not the sin Regan believed it was. Wisely, she kept her thought to herself. Matchmaking was proving an expensive avocation.

"I'm hungry. How does a steak at *Finnegan's* sound to you, Ian?" Regan asked with sweet malice, daring Ciara to object.

She swallowed her whimper of protest, imagining the triple digit dinner check. The chance to push her friend into happiness made the extravagance a worthwhile investment.

When they got there, *Finnegan's* was already in full tilt, rollicking with a noisy crowd, mostly male and mostly yuppie. A few local sports celebrities added to the sound level, dedicated public figures, willing to forego peace and quiet for the city's best steaks. Or the chance to be seen.

Under the influence of the surroundings, Regan's mood lightened. Soon she and Ian were entertaining her with an account of their day.

Ciara reciprocated with a family channel version of her latest news assignment. "I got some great background. January introduced me to half a dozen of the dancers. I could do a fun piece, exploring the whole role reversal thing, women as customers and men as the entertainers."

"I thought you said you barely talked to one of the staff guys?" Regan commented, arching an elegant eyebrow.

"Him? Oh right, that was only for a few minutes." Ciara raced on before Regan asked her anything more. "I was more interested in the women actually. The aggressive tipping, their reactions to the dancers, that kind of thing."

"Speaking of women, Zach's new boss is a woman. She transferred from the gang unit. Word is she's hard-nosed but cool."

Ciara's stomach clenched in unbecoming jealousy while she listened politely. "What's her name?"

"Connelly," Regan said while carving off a dainty bite of filet mignon.

"Have you worked with her?" Ciara asked, torturing herself with thoughts of what a perfect match a savvy cop would be for Zach, which was certainly none of her affair.

"No, she's way ahead of me on the totem pole. She's a rower."

"Rower?" Ian asked.

"You know, boats--she won an Olympic medal back in college."

"That's impressive," Ciara said, not feeling one teensy bit happier.

"Maybe it will help her fit in the boys club," Regan said dryly.

"Things are changing. Take us for example," Ian commented.

Regan arched an eyebrow, but she didn't contradict him.

Dinner lasted another long hour. Regan and Ian made an effort to ignore each other, which had the effect of raising their awareness to the boiling point. Ciara stuck it out until the waiter brought the bill. Then she apologized, claiming an early morning appointment as she dutifully paid the check. They both insisted they were ready to leave, too. Ian went ahead to bring around his SUV.

Once he was out of earshot, Ciara said, "He's gorgeous."

Regan gave a deep sigh. "Yeah, he is."

"You won't be able to resist him forever," Ciara teased.

"I have to." Regan turned away, scanning the street.

"Why?" Ciara persisted.

Regan's laughter had a razor's edge. "Ian's old fashioned." She looked away. "He wants commitment. It gets worse. He wants a stay-at home wife and babies."

"Oh honey, I'm so sorry." Ciara knew Regan's feelings on that subject.

"Right." Regan smiled, but a glimmer of pain flashed from her dark eyes. She raised her chin. "I'm never having children, so there's no point in starting something with him. Plus, if we got involved, it'd make working with him even more uncomfortable. I don't want to torture a nice man when there's no future in it. It's already bad enough."

Ciara thought her friend's words had the ring of an oft-repeated litany. From Ciara's viewpoint, the reward of a loving relationship offset the risk of finding out if Ian would be willing to compromise, but she wasn't wearing Regan's stilettos.

She squeezed her friend's hand. "I didn't realize you'd fallen for him."

"Me either." Regan slipped on a pair of unneeded wraparound shades. "Let's talk about something else. You're bringing dessert for the barbeque on Sunday, right?"

"Is that this Sunday?" she teased, but a horrified glance from her girlfriend made her relent. "Kidding, I'm making brownies--vast quantities, delicious, homemade. I'll even come early and help you get everything ready."

"Thanks, I knew I could count on you."

"Certainly." Ciara thought for a few seconds, considering all the topics she needed to avoid. "I'm teaching the *Street Angels* self - defense class again next quarter. I'm counting on you to come in for the law enforcement lecture."

"No t a problem," Regan said absently.

Ciara tried harder to distract her friend. "I managed to dodge my dad most of the day. Ever since he discovered the World Wide Web, he can't be pried away from his techno-snooping. I think it's gotten to be an addiction. He's probably compiling a new batch of leads for me as we speak. I just hope you don't wind up having to arrest him for invasion of cyber - privacy."

Regan laughed harder than Ciara's weak attempt to lighten the mood deserved.

\* \* \* \*

By the next afternoon, Ciara would've jumped at the chance to be miserable watching Regan and Ian pretend not to thrill each other with sizzling glances.

During the weekly news meeting, her dad had laughed at her idea for a cute girls-just-want-to-have-fun piece, demanding a serious story that tied crooked cops to the club by next Wednesday, or else she'd be writing obituaries until she retired. If the newsroom had a dog, he would've kicked it.

She barely had any time to even think about what January told her, let alone confirm it. She'd called the heiress earlier, leaving a don't-worry-I'm-working-on-it message, which made her feel even guiltier now when she'd accomplished nothing.

She'd given her word not to tell anyone about the blackmail. Even thinking about it made her feel a little nervous.

Of course, there'd been no call from Zach, which shouldn't have been a surprise since

they'd never gotten around to mundane things like exchanging phone numbers. Still, a hurt voice in the back of her mind said, a hotshot detective, who happened to be her best friend's brother, could get her number, if he really wanted to.

Worse, her lucky bamboo bracelet was missing. Her wrist was naked, and her heart was sick about the loss of her mother's heirloom.

A session of retail therapy, in the form of window shopping—perfect for the woman who kept a tight purse, gave her a break from her worries. After working off some of her frustrations touring the city's shops, she returned to the paper.

When she stopped by her cubicle to pickup her laptop, she noticed the lights still on in her dad's office. He should be home resting.

She didn't want to see him, especially not after the public chewing-out he had given her in the news meeting. In less than three minutes, she'd be out of the newsroom. All she needed to do was clear her messages.

Five of the ten messages were from her father, including the last one. "Call me."

Simple, direct, and not something she could ignore. He was still her boss.

She would call him from her cell phone when she'd put a comfortable distance between them. Considering the news meeting, a state or two felt about right, but home was as far as she went .

"Hi Dad, you called?" She opted for unrelenting good cheer.

"The girls just want to have fun story, it's really not all that bad. I gave it a second read this afternoon. I'm going to run it in Saturday's *Making the Scene* section."

*Dad had nearly apologized. Where had that come from?*

"Thank you." She had meant to talk to him about how he'd gotten the banking information, but his change of attitude took her by surprise, whisking her questions out of head.

"If you want to bounce ideas around, talk about where you see this story going....," he said gruffly.

"Not yet," she said too abruptly, and then tried to repair the effect of her harsh tone. "I'm working on it my own way for now. You'll be the first person I ask when I need help."

*Unless I'm still sworn to secrecy.*

Tracing the club ownership banged her into one stonewall after another. Wallowing through the property tax records, and the liquor license archives, repeated the exercise in frustration. The only name she had uncovered was that of a low-rent attorney.

The cheap lawyer seemed an odd choice to handle a business generating cash like a high tech IPO. She noted his name and his post office box address on the legal pad, paused to rub her eyes, and then kept going.

The next morning, Ciara padded out to the kitchen. She groaned when she read the microwave clock. It was already time to leave. She'd offered to come early to help Regan get set up for the barbeque.

Popping the top on her morning cola, she guzzled most of it on her way to the shower. She wasn't any closer to being ready to talk to Regan about Zach today. She should get over him and move on. It wasn't as if they'd had some big relationship. But she was afraid that she would dissolve into a puddle of self-pity if she tried to explain what had happened to his sister.

After getting clean, she smoothed on a generous coating of sunscreen, pulled on undies, khaki shorts, a cute knit cami with a touch of lace, and then scuffled into tan sandals. Puttering

back to the kitchen, she boxed up the brownies she'd made for the party.

Perching her prescription sunglasses on top of her head, she retrieved her keys from the half-moon table, and then glimpsed her reflection. This was exactly why she'd hung a mirror there, so that she would never leave the house looking like she did right this minute.

The bruised shadows under her eyes practically screamed 'dumped chick'. She didn't need to advertise her wounds.

The brownies waited while she strolled into the bathroom. The now un-steamed vanity mirror reflected the same too pale, naked face, invisible eyelashes, and untamed hair. Glancing down, she saw even her toes were unpolished. Pity, she didn't have time for a complete makeover.

Rummaging around in her makeup stash, she dug out bronzer, dark brown mascara, and sheer lip-gel. Rooting through her hair toys yielded a large tortoise shell clip. Using it gave definition to her scary hair. She took twice as long as usual to polish her face, adding a spritz of her best cologne to her cleavage. Changing gold stud earrings to flirty hoops, and brushing a little of the shimmering bronzer she'd used on her cheeks on her chest helped.

She leaned closer, squinting at the mirror to get the effect of her improvements, and then added a touch of umber eye shadow. None of these efforts made her tall or exotic, and it all would've worked much better if she had her bamboo bracelet. But at least she didn't look like an abandoned waif.

She peeked over her shoulder at the rearview. Her behind was her best feature, a little jiggly, but heart shaped. The chameleon tattoo added mystery and daring as it peeked out from under her camisole strap, reminding her she was capable of healthy change. It also said this chick might be hotter than she looked. All in all, she'd do.

Zach's sneaking out of her house while she slept was a slap in the ego that still stung. Not that she'd ever let him know how much he had hurt her. But, if he happened to show up for his sister's barbeque—then she definitely wanted him to regret dismissing her so casually.

\* \* \* \*

Ian answered Regan's front door. Judging from his face, Ciara had interrupted something interesting. Before she got a chance to put her investigative skills to work, he dug her missing heirloom out of his pants pocket.

"Does this belong to Regan?" he asked with a hopeful smile.

"You found my lucky bracelet!" Ciara plucked it from his fingers.

"Be a good idea to get the catch fixed," he said. The optimistic smile slipped into a disappointed frown.

She gave his arm a quick squeeze of thanks. "You're right. I've been meaning to do get it repaired," she said, grinning at the narrow rim of gold.

He mumbled an excuse and escaped out the back door. Making her own way to the kitchen, Ciara sat the brownies on the table and helped herself to a diet cola. She sipped while she enjoyed the newly improved scenery in Regan's backyard from the kitchen window. Turning her bamboo bangle, she smiled kindly at Ian puttering around the outside.

Ciara tore her gaze away from admiring the sights when Regan sauntered into the kitchen, appearing as serene as usual. If the spots of color on her cutting edge cheekbones didn't count. Regan sank into a kitchen chair.

Silently, Ciara poured coffee, added ice, and then handed the cup to her girlfriend.

"Thanks." Regan took the cup, and immediately gulped half of the lukewarm contents.

"Hungry? You've got raspberry yogurt and a really tasty hunk of meat in the backyard." Ciara pulled her head out of the refrigerator to assess Regan's mood, fully aware that her tone was obnoxiously chirpy.

Regan gave her a haughty glare, but didn't comment.

"Or for the less health conscious, we've got a choice of blonde bombshell brownies or the old fashioned high octane chocolate kind." Ciara pried off a covered container, and then dug out a pie server, confident of her friend's choice.

\* \* \* \*

The encounter with Ciara had been the highlight of Zach's year. Hell, maybe his decade. He knew where she lived. He could track her down. He could make up for having left. So she was a reporter, hell maybe she wrote fluff. Maybe he'd gone off half-cocked. He could get her number from his sister. Regan would be at home since she had today off. She'd said something about Sunday. Damn, she was having another party. She'd mentioned it last week.

A half hour later, Zach tucked two cases of cold local beer under one arm and reached for the latch on Regan's backyard gate. Ah shit, the blonde from the club, the one from that TV show, was twirled around some slack-jawed actor.

A flash of red hair snagged his attention away from the celebrity couple. Zach homed in on Ciara. She was laughing at something a pretty boy with a shit-eating grin said to her.

Zach saw the vulnerable line of her throat when she tilted her head to meet the turd's eyes. He was too far away to hear what they were saying. The turd nudged at the burgers and dogs, earning their grill stripes, but his mouth kept moving and Ciara kept laughing. He fought an urge to go over and grill pretty boy's face.

Coming here had been beyond stupid. Most of the time he loved working undercover. But right now, he wished he were back in patrol. Waiters were next to invisible, but he couldn't count on the blonde not recognizing him from the club. The case came first. His hand drifted away from the gate.

A few minutes later, heading nowhere, at a law abiding twenty-five miles per hour, Zach dialed his sister's beeper and keyed in his cell number.

In seconds, she called him back.

"Who's the pretty boy manning your grill?" he cut right to the chase.

"Where are you?" she demanded mildly.

"The pretty boy...?"

"I heard you," Regan interrupted him with laughter edging her words. "That would be Officer Ian McKnight."

"Your new partner?" Zach frowned at the road.

"Yes," Regan drew out the syllable.

"I thought he was all hot for you. Why's he hitting on your friend?" he growled at his only sister.

"I never said ... hold on, you're jealous! Come on spill it. I want to know everything. How long have you been seeing Ciara?"

"You're mental." He scowled uselessly at his phone.

His sister didn't bother responding to his rude assessment.

"She thinks you're not interested," she said with deliberate provocation.

*Sneaking out of her house must have given her the wrong impression.*

"Maybe she's right." Zach pulled to stop at a yellow light. "How about you? How do you handle being friends with a reporter?"

"I'm not letting one ugly episode rule my life or choose my friends," Regan said, serene in her decision.

Zach said nothing, what could he say in rebuttal to Regan's courage?

He shifted the subject. "What'd you tell her about me?"

"Just that you're brilliant, brave, kind, and could walk on water, except you don't like to show off." Regan sucked in a breath. He could imagine her angelic grin.

She probably had. Not how he'd describe himself, but maybe that was the kind of stuff women liked. Kind? He let it go. No point in raking his little sister over the coals for saying nice stuff about him.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara tried to ignore her disappointment that Zach hadn't stopped by the party. She told herself she didn't care. But she wasn't buying her lie.

Ian kept up a steady stream of friendly chatter and watching the guests was entertaining. January came on to every male over ten at the party, but she was so blatant about it that not even her date got upset. Graceful flirting came as natural as breathing to January. Ciara wished she could take notes.

The discreet chime of her cell phone interrupted her admiration for the heiress's technique. She glanced at the caller ID but didn't recognize the number.

"Hello," Ciara answered her phone with a hopeful smile.

"Forget you ever heard of the *In Place* or you will regret it." The words were recited in a chilling, synthetic voice.

"What did you say?" Her stomach tightened into a knot.

"You heard."

The connection ended. She tried to analyze the speech patterns, or distinguish any background noises that would give a clue to the caller's identity. She failed.

Then her phone chimed again, making her nerves jump and jitter.

"What do you want now?" she snapped defensively.

"Exactly what I want to talk about. Where are you?" There was no mistaking this voice. Zach had her number.

"Who wants to know?" Ciara tried to stay cool, telling herself her relief was only because it wasn't another creepy call, but every portion of her anatomy sang a hallelujah chorus.

"Officer Longstreet, the other one."

He had her there. "I'm at Regan's."

"Meet me at the Ballard Library." He ended the call.

Not an irresistible invitation, except she really wanted to see him again. And a man who knew where the library was couldn't be all bad. Ciara mumbled something vague about a lead she needed to chase down to her hostess.

"Have fun." Regan gave her a smile filled with wicked innuendo.

So much for playing it cool.

After parking at the library, almost immediately she heard a car pull up behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to be sure it was Zach. It was. There was no one else like him.

Though he wore sunglasses, she felt the intensity of his gaze.

\* \* \* \*

Zach knew no operation lasted forever. Sooner or later, the perps would screw up and he'd go back to narcotics. Not that dating would be that much easier then. He should stay away from her, but he didn't want to. This was only the second day since he'd seen her, and he was already bending his rules.

Since he'd sneaked out on her the other morning, what were the odds she'd want to pursue a relationship? Not great, but he loved a challenge. Plus, she really liked him. The sex had been fantastic. That had to work in his favor.

She leaned against her car, watching him park. He got out and leaned against his car, waiting. She didn't seem happy. But she strolled over, stopping almost within reach.

"How did you get my number?"

"Regan gave it to me."

Her lips parted. Nothing came out except her pretty little tongue. She licked the top lip with quick little darts. Then she repeated the sequence to wet the lower lip. Damn fine mouth. She worried the fuller bottom lip. He was riveted.

"I'm surprised she gave you my number without talking to me." Her voice was low, the words slow and deliberate.

"Being my kid sister and all, she owes me a few."

"Regan admires you, the whole big brother thing, plus your military record. I never figured you'd ...." She censored whatever she'd intended to say.

*What? Be an asshole?*

"You never heard of clay feet?" His words sounded bitter, even to him.

She studied him openly. He wished he knew her well enough to tell what she was thinking. She stepped closer, backing her butt up against his car, within reach.

"So what kind of story are you working on?" he asked, crossing his arms to keep from touching her.

"Uh uh, you'll have to wait and read about it along with everyone else."

"Okay. When will I be reading this breaking news feature?"

"When I get confirmation of the facts."

He tried his last hope. "Do you hate it?"

"Being a reporter?" She stared at him as if he'd gone mental.

He nodded.

She spoke slowly, weighing her words. "Hate is too strong. I'm not wild about the reporting end of things, but considering my father owns the paper it'd be tough not to be involved in the news business."

Her dad owned the paper. Shit. So she wasn't just a reporter. She was a born and bred newspaperwoman. He avoided eye contact for a few minutes.

The silence between them swelled, anything but comfortable.

"Not all reporters are slime balls. Regan told me about ...." She started again. "I can understand why you'd hate the media." She paused but he didn't pick up the conversational ball.

Temper roiled through him. His sister had stepped way over the line. Hell, she was in the next county. If she wanted to spill her guts to some blood-sucking reporter fine, but she should've left him out it.

Damn, why couldn't Ciara have been anything else?

Zach's shoulder muscles felt leaden. He rolled one, trying to loosen the tension.

He checked his watch conspicuously. "Damn."

"What?"

"I didn't realize what time it was."

"Oh."

He pressed his lips together making them into hard line. "I've got to be somewhere else."  
*Anywhere else.*

Ciara nodded.

Zach's hands tightened on the driver's door handle. He wondered how she'd react if she knew the whole truth. Would she run off to file her hot scoop? Or would she choose him? Stupid question. The truth wasn't one of his options.

The night they had spent together still burned in his memory, making it hard for him to remember she was a reporter with no more conscience than his cock. It was her job to seek and destroy, using information instead of explosives. She'd damn near seduced him into a rookie mistake. He knew what she was. She'd confirmed it. Why was he still trying to find a way to make this work?

He glanced at her using his peripheral vision. Her wholesome beauty disguise worked flawlessly. The wounded tone and averted face added authenticity to her act. He reminded himself that last Thursday she'd handed him a hundred dollars and got ticked off when he hadn't jumped her bones instantly. Then she acted flustered when he touched her. The woman was a hell of an actress.

She'd been tighter than a dealer's fist, but all that proved was she had lousy taste in men. It wasn't the first time he'd enjoyed sex with someone temporary. Hell that was the only kind of sex he'd had in too long. Maybe forever and that was the way he wanted it to stay. Especially with a reporter. Maybe his sister could forget about the past, but he wouldn't.

When he'd been with Ciara, it had felt like there was more than sex going on between them. He'd been wrong. Physical release lost appeal now that he knew she was using him. They'd used each other—he corrected himself. So far, just for sex.

Anger at his own weakness calcified his resolve. He still wanted her, knowing what she was. His body hadn't caught on to her untouchable status. Since his big head was back doing the thinking, Zach hardened his heart against her.

"I've got to go," he repeated, angrier now.

"Then go." Ciara's soft hands balled into fists.

He'd made her mad. That was good. It made leaving her easier. In fact, he should thank her for the reality check—she wasn't just another reporter. Her father owned the paper. If she'd been anything else .... He cut off the thought. He wasn't into self-torture.

Leaning against his car, she worked over her lip, making him want to kiss her senseless, which only made him more furious.

What the hell was she waiting for anyway? If he had to touch her, he wasn't sure he'd be gentle. He clenched his jaw and seethed behind his stony mask of indifference. He could out wait a rock. He kept his eyes straight ahead. The moment stretched. Finally, she left.

Zach drove the wrong way down a one-way street.

He drove three blocks before anything registered. Then the blaring horns signaled the



rest of the traffic moving in the wrong direction. After a few seconds, he figured out he was the directionally challenged driver. Shit. Not that it mattered. He was the police. Still, he hated acting stupid.

Traffic was light and a fast u-turn fixed his driving problem. Too bad, he didn't have an equally effective cure for a rampant libido. What really worried him was that it wasn't plain old lust.

If that was all it had been, then he would have gotten her out of his system after the other night. She'd crawled under his skin. For the last two days, he'd thought about seeing her again. Way too often.

Hell, he'd already gotten involved. It would've never happened if his sister hadn't set him up.

He snapped his cell open and pushed the buttons to ring Regan.

"What's up?" his sister drawled.

"My temper and your number."

"Oooh, I'm scared now," she trilled in mock terror.

## Chapter Eleven

Adjusting the new, lightweight headphones, he played the first audio feed from the Donovan kid's place. After three hours of listening, a big fat zero. The only conversation was a phone call to her father, which told him exactly nothing he didn't already know. The old newshound told his kid that he might run the entertainment piece she'd submitted.

They didn't fool him. Perspiration pooled under his arms, adding the acrid smell of fear to the stale air, which was what he had to breathe.

The rest of the tape was normal house sounds. She didn't even snore.

The recording ended. He removed the headgear, setting it on the desk. He pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly tired, and tipped back in his chair. He was absolutely nowhere.

Nine days left.

Everything he'd worked for could blow up in his face any second.

They wouldn't win.

Two lines of coke filled him with energy and purpose.

There was no substitute for the personal touch. He wasn't getting any rest anyway. He might as well tail Ms. Donovan. Besides, he didn't need any more players in the mix at this stage of the game. A phone call got him a generic white delivery van.

After showering with his antibacterial soap he pulled on silk knit briefs, a matching undershirt, and a plain white dress shirt. Methodically, he removed the transparent polyurethane bag from a cotton blend navy jumpsuit. Discarding the wrapping and wire hanger, he draped the garment over the back of a chair, reluctant to have the cheap cloth touch his skin. He selected over the calf socks in an elegant black shadow stripe, finally stepping into the navy coverall, and then donning black, thick rubber-soled shoes.

Anyone would assume he was a service tech. People saw what they expected to see. He played the part well, friendly, but humble. He brought a metal toolbox and a clipboard with a pad of work orders for props, in case he needed to leave the van.

He parked up the street from the kid's house and amused himself surfing on his cell phone. It was early Sunday morning. The only thing moving in the quiet suburban neighborhood was a calico cat with a weight problem, probably crawling with parasites, and an automatic sprinkler watering a lawn and sidewalk with indifferent efficiency.

It was almost eleven, before the Donovan kid made an appearance. Wearing shorts and sandals, she juggled an armload of food saver containers along with a straw purse and keys as she left the house. She had dark red hair with fiery highlights that caught the sun and filled his eyes with tears. Mattie's hair had been like that.

A couple of miles later, she parked in another well-kept middle-class neighborhood. Then she repeated her departure process, gathering her containers and the rest of her things before exiting the car. The house she entered was a narrow Victorian. A potluck party of some sort, which meant more dull hours.

Selecting a spot with a good view of the nicely restored house, he stopped the van, and

then settled in the back. With nothing but time to kill, he made himself as comfortable as possible in the cramped quarters and ran a reverse search on the address.

As it happened, the Donovan kid was visiting Regan Longstreet, aka Officer Longstreet, Detective Zach Longstreet's sister. Clouds filtered the sun, turning the day dingy. His pulse accelerated as the sinister implications sank in to his mind.

He didn't believe in coincidence, which was why he was healthy, wealthy, and free to enjoy his empty life.

Eliminating the Donovan kid would be the smart move. However, she wasn't his biggest problem. And she had Mattie's hair. He elected to try the flyswatter approach, rather than immediately breaking out the heavy artillery.

After a short while, the party warmed up. His favorite gold mine arrived with one of her anemic boyfriends. He'd been on the verge of leaving when Detective Longstreet showed. He got as far as the gate to the backyard before pulling an abrupt u-turn.

Less than ten minutes later, the Donovan kid was driving down the street. He followed her to the library's empty parking lot. Lurking under the hemlocks, she and Longstreet were having a *tête-à-tête*. The sight of the two lethal threats to his plans tightened a steel band around his chest.

The generic van was still too memorable to risk stopping, or even a second drive by. He parked a block and half back and watched the driveway.

They were working together—had to be. They would compare notes and share information. She had accessed his accounts, or her old man had—same difference. Donovan didn't know what to do with the information. Longstreet would know exactly what to do.

The steel belt constricting his chest got tighter.

However, he wasn't feeling any heat, not even a rumor. He paid enough to the Vice Squad to ensure he was in the loop. Over the past few years, the club had been the subject of numerous investigations. His friends on the force had never let him down. Not once. He'd sailed through every time, not even a slap on the wrist.

He dragged in a deeper breath, forcing himself to ease away from panic. Reviewing the facts, he came to a surprising, but logical conclusion. The Donovan kid was not telling Detective Longstreet what she knew.

She had to realize the detective was in a position to do her some good. So why wasn't she offering to trade information? Was it that she didn't trust him?

Interesting possibility, but not enough surety for him to relax.

There was more than one possible solution to his hazardous puzzle. Which one should he use? He could lean on her a little more and see if she would back off. Or he could plant a few seeds of mistrust in Longstreet's ear. Maybe, he would do both. He liked double coverage.

It shouldn't take much to keep them apart. He was an undercover cop and she was a reporter. They were like cats and canaries, natural enemies.

## Chapter Twelve

Zach decided to return Regan's meddling favor. Nothing like poetic justice.

He'd check out pretty boy first. Even rightfully steamed, he wasn't irresponsible. When he directed events in his sister's life, it was in her best interests, not for some misguided matchmaking scheme.

Zach stopped by the precinct to run McKnight's name through the system. It wouldn't tell him much, but it'd give him a starting place. He debated trying to sweet talk one of the human resources chicks into getting him a copy of McKnight's file and then ditched that plan. For one thing, it would mean waiting till tomorrow when they came back to work. Besides, if there had been anything alarming in his file Regan would've already known about it. Was McKnight good enough to trust with his sister? Hell no. No man was. Even if she was an interfering brat.

Zach tipped back in the secretary's chair and contemplated the Department of Licensing data on the screen. He rummaged around and came up with a post-it and pen. Damn sticky notes, didn't anyone use regular paper?

What was so convenient about sticky paper anyway?

He printed the address then double-checked it by reading backwards. His dyslexia coping mechanisms were so ingrained that he seldom noticed them. He'd learned to scan fast enough that no one was aware of the redundancy.

He logged off the system the same way he got on, using Lieutenant Connelly's user ID and password. Paranoia was an old and loyal friend. He was twenty feet from the garage door and a clean getaway when he spotted his boss heading his way. Connelly always skipped over the Hello-nice-to-see-you shit. He liked that in a boss.

"Great, you saved me a call. Follow me," she said.

Right, like he wasn't off duty. His fault for stopping by the precinct. He had figured he could slip in and back out undetected since his LT took her downtime seriously. The way things were going, if it hadn't been for bad luck he wouldn't have any at all. He followed, as ordered. When Connelly entered the media room, he figured one of his favorite theories—that no matter how bad things were they could always get worse, was about to get fresh proof.

Connelly nodded to the tech already in the room. "Detective Zach Longstreet, Specialist Sam Moreno."

"Sam." The tech offered him a friendly hand.

"Zach," he responded with the obligatory shake, automatically taking stock of the computer specialist. He was young enough to pass for a juvenile, but he had to be older than he appeared to be part of the city's Information Technology Department. The kid didn't fit the stereotype of a computer nerd. His tropic tan, dark curls and a well-conditioned body made him more plausible as a beach hustler.

"We got a break." Connelly slid into a swivel chair. "They're filming the backroom action. Your comment about spotting the video camera reminded me of the possible

pornography connection. Nice catch by the way,” she slipped the compliment in like a pickpocket.

He hardly felt the bump.

Connelly shrugged a shoulder toward the tech. “Sam did a little trolling, and I came in to see what we caught.”

The tech sketched a salute and started keying in commands. The lights in the room dimmed and an impressive flat screen flared to life.

A woman’s soft whimpers broke the stillness. The pictures were black and white, the lighting poor and the resolution worse. He watched for a few minutes, damn she was hot. Long muscles in her legs trembled. Then a man’s hand pushed up her dress, revealing more of those nicely toned thighs. A small heart shaped birthmark hit him like a fist wrapped around a roll of quarters right to the gut. His breath caught.

“Can you fast forward to her face?” Connelly’s cool alto registered tenser than usual.

Zach didn’t share her feeling of urgency. He saw that woman’s face every time he closed his eyes. What the hell had happened? Had she set him up? He thought back to his smooth assurance that no sex had been involved. Sitting still got harder.

Sam looked up from his keyboard and glared at the screen. “Wrong frigging vid.”

The picture stopped. The lights brightened. Zach let out the breath he’d been holding.

Connelly glanced in his direction. Zach forced himself to hold his face immobile.

“Got it.” The tech keyed in a new sequence.

The lights dimmed, and Connelly swiveled back to the screen.

Different chick, different sounds. Thank god. Zach would never look at porn the same way after seeing Ciara exposed. He reviewed his mental image file and tried to estimate exactly how much of her he’d revealed to the camera.

“Freeze it right there.” Connelly stood and leaned closer to the screen, pointing. “Recognize her?”

Zach focused on the screen. The woman’s face was partially revealed. If he’d seen it out of context, he wouldn’t have known her, but having just seen Ciara on the same display device his thought track was already at the club. “Yeah, she was at the *In Place* last Thursday.”

“Got a name?”

Zach started to shake his head. “Hang on. Yeah, January Cabell. She was on that show with her sister, what was the name of it?” He closed his eyes to concentrate and yanked it off the mental image of a tabloid headline. “*Just Folks*.”

Connelly narrowed her eyes at the screen. “You’re right. I see it now.”

“She was at my sister’s barbeque earlier today.”

“Excellent.” Connelly gave him a smile.

“She didn’t see me.” Zach stiffened.

“Good, but I don’t have a problem with bringing your sister into the picture. From everything I’ve heard she’s a damn fine cop.” Connelly turned back to the video. “Any more pics like this?”

The tech turned toward the flat screen. “No, a couple of more frames. Same angle. You want me to start it again?”

“Can you go one frame at a time?” Connelly leaned forward, examining the lurid display dispassionately.

"Hang on a sec." Sam hit keys.

The video moved forward at slide show speed. "Let me know if you think of anything else. I doubt her number's listed," Connelly muttered, keeping her eyes on the screen.

"She drinks Midori Sours. She's a flirt. She keeps in shape."

"I can see that," she said dryly. Connelly's eyes flickered over to his face and then back to the video. "Can you get me a hardcopy of that frame, the one that shows her face?"

"Sure. I can clean it up if you want, zoom in, tighten the resolution." Sam sounded pleased by the prospect.

"Thanks." She turned her attention back to Zach. "I still want to keep a low profile while we can. Talk to your sister. Find out if she knows anything about Ms. Cabell's involvement with the *In Place*. Since they're friends, Cabell may have confided in her."

"It's getting late ...." Zach let the words hang, unhappy with involving Regan.

Connelly waved her hand. "Tomorrow's fine."

She'd all but excused him. Ten minutes ago, he'd have bolted for the door. Now he needed more information. "So it's pornography ...."

"And extortion," she quietly condemned the perpetrators.

"Scum and scummier."

"You got that right. The *In Place* has been a popular spot for a long time, but a few years ago the club changed hands. Shortly after that what used to be the dining room and kitchen became a backroom operation."

"Why didn't vice clamp down on them?"

"Vice checked it out a couple of times, but got nowhere. They've got to have an inside connection." Connelly stood, wiping her palms against her tailored slacks.

"That's where I came in," Zach said calmly, hiding his regret.

"Right I needed someone who had no contact with Vice."

"And you didn't know I used to be partnered with O'Brien ...."

"No, but it wouldn't have mattered, he was the chief's choice to run the show from the start. Your history with him would've been a plus," she shot him a quick smile of reassurance.

Just his lousy luck. The fates had it in for him, and they chose to bait the trap with one tempting redhead.

"We can't get a fix on who controls it. The only name we've got is a slimy lawyer. No way is he running that show. Whoever is in charge is real careful. None of the other videos showed a face, until the one you watched with me tonight. My guess is Ms. Cabell refused to pay."

Welcome to the world of technology. So that was the *In Place*'s secret. Free porn stars. And cops were connected. The pieces started to mesh. He rolled it around. Everything fit.

How many guys would watch Ciara? The idea knotted his stomach into an icy fist. She might be a bloodsucking reporter, but she was his bloodsucker. He kept his face carefully blank, letting Connelly's voice run on a background track in his head.

"And vice cops are running it." He'd guessed. Her face confirmed it.

"I can't prove it." Connelly's rigid shoulders told him that she would personally correct that situation.

"What's O'Brien say?"

Connelly averted her eyes. "They're his cops. He thinks I'm wrong."

“Any way for me to observe the vice squad without them knowing?”

Connelly was instantly alert. “Why?”

“A hunch. A suit who made me think cop,” Zach said reluctantly.

“When was this?” Connelly asked sharply.

“Same day that she ...,” Zach dipped his head toward the screen, “came in.”

“And you’re just now telling me about it?”

“There was nothing to tell. A suit showed up. One of the other waiters said something about him being a honcho. I took him to mean owner. The guy looked like a cop, but it wasn’t like he flashed a badge.”

Zach could’ve added he hadn’t been told what to watch for. He could’ve reminded her of how damn vague her instructions had been. Instead, he was reasonable and kept quiet. Connelly was no fool. She knew how to connect the dots.

“I’d reported that entertainers got side action,” he said, keeping his tone neutral. But giving her a nudge in the right direction.

“You thought I wanted prostitution busts.” She dropped her voice.

Zach shrugged. “You kept asking if I’d gotten into a backroom. I didn’t have any back up to make a solicitation charge stick. I didn’t know what the hell to think.”

“My fault. I played it too close to the vest.”

Zach gave a nod to signal he’d heard her.

Connelly sat straighter and met his eyes. “Start at the beginning, and this time I want every detail.”

By the time his LT was finally satisfied, Zach’s throat felt hot and dry. For the second time in one day, he stopped to buy beer. An icy swallow of a cold brew soothed his scratchy throat and dulled the edge of tension bunching his neck muscles.

Twenty minutes later, Zach drove by McKnight’s while he listened to *Huge Red Rocket of Love*. The only lights on were upstairs. The garage door was down. Nice set up for a rookie cop. Too nice?

That’s when he spotted his tail.

It took Zach the better part of a half hour to lose the tail. Forty minutes before he was convinced it was safe to pull into McKnight’s drive way. Now the house was completely dark. But he wasn’t about to leave until he’d learned something about McKnight.

He scoped out the manicured front yard. The backyard was fenced, but without a watchdog, the enclosure presented no problem. His gas grill had a cover, for God’s sake. The outdoor furniture was sturdy and well cared for. Landscaping consisted of one graceful tree in a corner of the lot and neatly cut lawn. It was too dark to tell, but Zach would’ve bet money that the grass was weed free and emerald green. Underground sprinkler heads were evenly spaced and flush with the severely mowed grass. If McKnight didn’t make it as cop, he had a future in lawn care.

The house was as pristine as the yard and better secured. Zach was thinking about giving in and ringing the doorbell when his small pick connected with the deadbolt’s tumblers. The door eased open on well-oiled hinges. Picking the lock had taken him far too long. He’d gotten rusty.

He should break and enter more often. Zach eased inside, aiming his pocket flashlight around the entry.

“Hold it right there.”

The ominous ka-chung of shotgun rounds being chambered backed up the mild words. An unpleasant nudge from heavy gauge steel prodded his back. Rusty and careless.

“Hands on your head—turn around nice and slow. You get confused about which house was yours?” McKnight sounded calm, but not friendly.

“Nah, liked the look of this one though. Real tidy. What tipped you?”

“Who are you?” McKnight’s calm tone left and was replaced with edgy curiosity.

“Longstreet.”

“Detective Zach Longstreet?” Ian asked incredulously.

Zach wasn’t sure whether he should be insulted or flattered.

“Yeah. Don’t rub it in, I already feel like a jerk,” he muttered.

The ka-chung of the shotgun being unchambered eased Zach’s ripcord tension. Slowly he brought his hands down. McKnight switched on a lamp, revealing a brown leather sofa, a respectable sound system, and tribal rug hanging on one wall. The living room fit his pattern, simple and unnaturally clean.

“I’d still like to know where I went wrong,” Zach, mentioned politely.

McKnight examined the exterior face of his door lock. He took a good minute, finishing off his inspection by rubbing the gleaming hardware with the bottom of his tee shirt. Briefly flashing a six-pack of hairy abs.

“At least you didn’t scratch the faceplate. Its solid brass. The stuff’s not cheap.” He frowned at Zach. “You tripped my security system. Actually, it was kind of cool. It has never really been tested.” For a second or two, the frown vanished, and Ian’s face lit with boyish enthusiasm. The mood didn’t last. Soon his dark brows lowered back to suspicious. “How about you tell me what you’re doing breaking into my house?”

“Mind if I get myself something to drink first?” Zach spread his arms to show his harmlessness.

The kid was in shape and he was careful. Zach resisted an urge to sigh. There was always someone younger, tougher, faster, but not tonight. The shotgun, now that deserved respect.

“Knock yourself out,” Ian said, ungraciously.

“You want anything?” Never hurt to be thoughtful, especially with an armed host. Besides, he kind of liked the guy.

“Yeah, bring me one of whatever you’re having.”

Zach left the front door open to reassure his fellow officer. He retrieved the cold ones and reversed his route. McKnight was waiting for him, the shotgun still draped over one brawny forearm. The guy looked like an obsessed skeet shooter out for practice in his boxers.

“Sorry to wake you.” Zach handed him an open brew.

“I hadn’t dropped off.” His bed head made him a liar but Zach didn’t point out the obvious discrepancy in his story. He already had enough problems. Instead, he opted for aggressive courtesy.

Patience and politeness paid off. McKnight forgot he was the wronged party after a few beers and showed him his security set up. Forget the lawn care career. The guy could go straight into security systems. Zach had never seen anything like it in a personal residence. The mystery of the instant detection of Zach’s presence got cleared up in a hurry. He’d tripped a



sensor when he'd made connection with the front door. No alarms, just a light flashing on McKnight's bed and an alert to his pager.

No surprise visitors for the rookie.

"Actually, I came by to do you favor." Zach offered his new friend another beer.

"Yeah?" McKnight sounded irritatingly skeptical.

"I was just scoping out your set up—getting a read on you. Nice place, by the way." Zach planned to stay polite, to a point. "How do you pay for it?"

"Are you joking?" Ian scowled at him.

"I've got a good reason for asking," Zach stayed reasonable, persuasive.

McKnight crossed his brawny arms. "Go ahead, sell it to me."

"Regan."

The rookie's posture softened. Zach had his answer. The poor guy had it bad.

He scrambled all over himself to qualify in the Regan sweepstakes. "I have a trust fund. It's not as if I'm a billionaire or anything. But I'm comfortable. What did Regan say about me?" Hope lit his features.

"Nothing."

*You poor jerk. You can't even see what's in front of your nose. All I needed was two seconds of seeing the way she watched you and I knew.*

Oddly, McKnight's sorry state cheered Zach. Made him feel easier to know someone else was worse off.

"Yeah, then why are you here?" Ian's jaw clenched.

"Just doing my good deed for the day."

The hope was back on McKnight's face. "She wants me."

Damn, the kid had to toughen up or Regan would chew him up and spit out his bones. "Yeah, well I didn't say that," Zach glowered at him.

"Yeah, yeah got it. But she does, right?"

"Maybe not quite the way you're thinking. Nothing to do with promises, white dresses and organ music. But nothing sleazy either," Zach laced his words with warning.

McKnight studied him, searching pointlessly for more clues. "I thought that's what every woman wanted."

He liked the rookie. He couldn't help it. His plan to payback his sister fizzled into petty sibling stuff. One of these days, he'd have to grow up and leash his temper. He made an effort to smooth things over before leaving.

"Look fellah, I've already said a lot more than I should. Just keep your antenna up and listen to whatever she tells you with an open mind. I've gotta get going."

\* \* \* \*

The steady drizzle meant her hair was downright kinky and her spirits soggy. It was Tuesday, 10:30 AM. Ciara had a calendar and clock so she was sure about the day and time, but nothing else. She sat in her cubicle at the *Seattle Daily News*, staring glumly at her laptop. Aside from an amusing screen saver, which she turned off with an irritated tap of the spacebar, nothing but the blinking cursor showed signs of life. Certainly not her article.

The Wednesday meeting with her dad loomed like the gathering summer storm clouds. She would have to admit she didn't have a story. She had lots of research notes, vague bits of conversation, all off the record, and a tentative second interview with January this afternoon. In

the plain English that every editor preferred, nothing.

Her father was counting on her to come through with hard proof that cops were involved. She'd never been optimistic about confirming January's allegations, but now it seemed hopeless. Every attempt she'd made had been stonewalled.

Zach Longstreet was no help at all, and he was a blockheaded jerk. Of all the asinine reasons for rejecting someone, career choice seemed so flimsy she wasn't sure she believed that was really the reason. So he'd had a negative experience with the press, big deal. How could he write her off because of her job? She had as much, or more, reason to object to his line of work.

Following Zach had yielded no leads. The other day at the library, she'd sped after him, instantly stymied when he turned into oncoming traffic on the one-way street.

She hid a yawn with the back of her hand. The system timer dinged, reminding her to get back to work, except she still didn't have anything good to work with. Ciara checked her email, nothing. She ruffled through her notes from her encounter with Zach, slipping back into bittersweet memories.

Zach might be a first class jerk, but she was not going to blow his cover without good cause. Besides, she had plenty of psych baggage of her own. The last thing she needed was to get involved with a man who came with more issues than she did.

"How's the story coming?" Her dad's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Not great," she admitted with a good measure of frustration.

He parked his hip on the edge of her desk, his head jerked randomly. "Why don't you set up an appointment with Chief Logan? He has more invested in cleaning out the bad apples than anyone. He could be a valuable source for you."

"Thanks, I'll call him," she said agreeably.

"Are you coming over for dinner?" He rose, and backed away.

"That would be lovely," she murmured, dreading the strained evening.

"Good, I'll see you tonight then."

After making a call to Chief Logan's office, she began tracing bank transfers between accounts, seeking patterns. Matching amounts were non-existent. But the longer she worked with the numbers the stronger a tantalizing pattern became. Small, medium and large deposits in the club accounts offset periodic transfers to a private bank account. The money rested briefly before transferring in a steady, almost uniform, stream out of the country.

The foreign bank was in the *Cayman Islands* where bank secrecy was a fetish. Once out of the *United States* the money could transfer again and again. The funds would be virtually untraceable.

The chime of her cell phone pulled her away from the money trail.

"Happy birthday," Regan croaked.

"Thank you. You sound like you're still half asleep."

"Had trouble sleeping the last couple of nights. Serious lust problem."

Ciara laughed. "I noticed him. He's even hotter in shorts and sandals."

"Can you believe it?" Regan muttered, almost unintelligible.

Ciara heard running water, swishing, and spitting. "You're brushing your teeth while talking on the phone?"

"What, Miss Manners wouldn't approve?"

Regan was the only person who could tease her about her etiquette obsession without

offending her. Growing up as she had—over-compensating—following the rules of good manners had given her a sense of security as a teenager. She wasn't entirely past the obsession. There was nothing wrong with being polite. It was only a matter of making everyone more comfortable.

"Tell me what I interrupted Sunday morning." Deftly, Ciara shifted the subject back to her friend.

"You saved my life, or at least my career. Same thing," Regan said matter-of-factly.

"Sorry."

Regan sighed. "Coffee's brewing."

"So tell me again why you're not having an affair with Ian. He's eligible, adorable, available, and very interested."

"Look who's talking. What about you and Zach?" Regan challenged her. "Don't try to blow me off by changing the subject. My brother practically broke my arm to get your number."

"I foolishly reminded him I'm a reporter. It was kind of a mood killer," Ciara admitted, unable to keep her voice acid-free. She had to bite her lip to keep from blurting out the details of her wounded feelings.

"That bad huh? Damn, I thought you two were past that." Regan's commiseration side-railed Ciara's drifting thoughts.

"It went over like a condom salesman at a nunnery," she assured her friend dryly.

Regan laughed. "You should've saved the whole I'm-a-reporter confession for after he'd fallen madly in love with you."

Ciara held the back of hand to her forehead dramatically, a wasted gesture since Regan couldn't see it. "*Now* you tell me. He didn't make the sign of cross with his fingers to ward off the evil eye or anything, but I think he was just holding back to spare my feelings."

"He needs someone who'll push his envelope," Regan insisted.

"He wouldn't let me lick the flap," Ciara declared glumly. Everything he hadn't said made her transgression plain. Ciara understood why, but it still hurt. She didn't want to care what he thought, but she did. Way too much.

"Uh huh. Tell it to somebody who doesn't know you."

"I know the press did a number on both of you, but that doesn't make the entire profession scum." There was silence on the other end of the phone. The words had escaped along with a good measure of frustration before she'd thought of how they would sound to Regan. Ciara instantly regretted mentioning a subject she knew still hurt her friend.

"For what it's worth, here's my bubble wrap psych theory. Zach's media phobia got mixed up with his sense of responsibility. The whole 'white knight' complex. It's crazy, because he wasn't even there. He should be talking to his shrink about it, except he's phobic about shrinks, too."

"But I thought he was the one who got you to ...."

"He did. That's how he coped, by taking action and protecting me." Ciara almost heard Regan's shrug. "But he was so busy making sure I was taken care of that he didn't take care of himself. Still doesn't."

After they hung up, Ciara spent a few seconds trying to reconcile Regan's view of her brother with the man she knew. Then she wasted another few minutes feeling guilty about her plan to follow him.

The cursor continued to blink and aside from the system clock being a half hour older nothing else had changed.

She'd interviewed one blackmail victim. If she could confirm what she'd learned then she'd have a real story. But how?

Clearly, Zach was going to be zero help. She'd have to go over his head. All right, so he'd hate that ... but he already hated her, so what difference did it make?

Her cell rang again and she answered it absently. "What'd you forget?"

"Stay away from Detective Longstreet." The metallic voice huffed menacingly.

"What are you talking ...?" The dial tone blared in her ear. The caller had already hung up.

*He could've saved his breath. Detective Longstreet was staying away from her.*

Paragraph indent Clearly, she'd rattled somebody's cage. Her stomach wavered, but then settled. Threats were easy enough to make. A couple of phone calls weren't frightening her. She would have to ask Regan if there was a way to trace incoming calls to her cell.

Ciara got busy and started to write. She'd wanted to start with the Cop's version of events, and then follow with the victim's. She glanced at the laptop's clock, another five minutes burned off. Her fingers jumped on the keys.

January's story etched on to the screen in clean black type. She stopped and listened to her recorded interview at semi-regular intervals. Words flowed into sentences and the story began to come together. After an hour and half she stood and stretched.

When she glanced at her cell, she noticed she'd missed a call, but didn't recognize the phone number displayed. She pressed call back, reasoning that she could always hang up. The number turned out to belong to the Seattle Police Department.

Insert new paragraph indent Chief Logan's secretary had returned her call, offering an appointment later that afternoon. So as far as the story went, there was some progress.

Two hours later, Ciara strolled through the metal detector at the *Criminal Justice Center*, reclaimed her tote bag, and then rode the utilitarian elevator to the fifth floor. The Chief of Police's waiting area lacked current reading material. The Christmas edition of *Sunrise* and the October issue of *Seattle Today*, didn't relieve the boredom. After ascertaining Ciara's right to be there, the secretary, who screened the Chief's visitors, wandered off with an armful of documents, leaving Ciara to wait.

She expected the Chief to pat her hand and reassure her that Internal Affairs rigorously maintained the police force's integrity.

Twenty minutes after she arrived at the Justice Center, and ten minutes past their scheduled appointment, Chief Logan stuck his head out of his office, inviting her in. He was shrugging into a beautifully tailored jacket as he returned to his desk. Instead of sitting in his executive chair, he parked his behind on the corner of the lacquered desk. The effect was to make him seem even more folksy and approachable.

After an exchange of pleasantries, Ciara broached the subject she'd come to discuss. "During the past three years there have been five investigations of the *In Place*. There were no charges, citations, or even a recommendation for follow up action. Are you satisfied with this result?"

"We take every citizen's concerns seriously. However, I'm sad to say that a great many complaints are filed without any actual basis in law. In a club situation, such as this one, where

the clientele are largely lonely women, there is a greater than average chance for unrealistic expectations and hurt feelings.” The Chief met her gaze with a regretful smile, spreading his hands in a sincere request for her understanding.

“There are current complaints alleging extortion. That sounds like more than wounded feelings to me.”

“I am sorry. You know I can’t comment on any active cases,” he said with more sincere regret. Or what passed for it.

“Is there an active investigation?” she persisted.

“As I said, I can’t comment. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t warn you that this investigation isn’t for you. I don’t know what your father was thinking. Clubs like the *In Place* may seem glamorous, but they have a rough side. Go home and tell your dad to move you to a nice desk job in administration .” He smiled at her glibly.

The Chief nearly echoed her thoughts on the subject. She did not share that small fact with him. “Let’s talk about the most recent closed investigation. Lieutenant O’Brien was listed as the primary officer. Isn’t it unusual for such a high - ranking officer to investigate an unsubstantiated complaint?” she asked, determined to come away with something.

“I really couldn’t comment without knowing more of the facts.” The Chief’s voice grew cooler and more remote.

“Perhaps I could talk to Lieutenant O’Brien, if he’s still with the department?” she asked with plenty of sugar.

Already dialing the phone, the Chief seemed pleased with the prospect of fobbing her off on the unsuspecting Lieutenant. “Let me see if he’s available.”

“Jake, I have the daughter of Angus Donovan, an old friend, here. She has a few questions.” He shot Ciara a conspiratorial grin. “Yes, the editor .... That would be great.... By the way, thanks for the opera tickets. Wonderful seats.... I’ll send her down to see you then.” The Chief beamed at her with blatant relief.

Minutes later, Ciara approached the open doorway of the Vice Squad lieutenant’s office. Low voices emanated from the room.

“I thought you were running this show,” an angry man said accusingly.

“That is my understanding, too,” a second male voice said with mild irony. “Is there a problem I need to know about?”

Ciara veered off course, approaching the entrance to the office from an angle, which allowed her to stand just outside the room, but concealed her presence from the arguing men.

“Damn right there’s a problem. Connelly’s running wild. She’s already held at least one briefing without bothering to include my agency.”

“When was this?” The second voice asked more sharply. “So you weren’t included either?” The first man sounded mollified.

“I was not. Have you informed the Chief? He needs to be in the loop on this. He’s the only one who has any real control over Lieutenant Connelly.”

“Maybe I’m overreacting.” A sigh of frustration escaped man number one. “I found out the home office inserted a special agent into the club months ago. No one saw fit to let my office in on the decision. I happened to intercept an intra-office envelope, which contained an expense reimbursement check. I thought it was a mistake, so I called about it ... made me feel like a damn fool, then when I heard about the latest briefing ....”

“Dwight, I appreciate the heads up on this. We’ve worked together before. You know that’s not how I operate. Talk to Logan. I only wish I could help you with FBI politics. Shit, I’m up to my ass in this department’s alligators. Just know that you’ve got company in the swamp.”

“You’re right. I’ll pay Logan a visit next.”

A chair creaked and Ciara scooted away from the doorway.

“Lieutenant O’Brien?” she asked the older of the two men who emerged from the office. He nodded an acknowledgement. “I’ll be right with you, Ms. Donovan.”

Turning back to the conservatively dressed, handsome man, the Lieutenant led his other visitor toward the elevators.

The room was smaller than the Chief’s office. The desk was simulated wood and the visitor’s chairs armless. The desktop was immaculate, and his office window was clean to the point of invisibility. The rain had stopped and ray of sunshine outlined the lieutenant’s space. A black and white wedding photo of a younger O’Brien and a laughing beauty was the only personal touch in the tidy room.

“Sorry about that, a spate of inter-agency politics,” he said, grinning with weary comradery.

“You were listed as primary on the most recent investigation of the *In Place*. What can you tell me about that case?”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” he said, with what sounded like real regret.

He admitted the *In Place* had been the subject of investigations in the past, emphasizing that those investigations had not led to any charges against either the club’s owner or employees. He declined to discuss any current operations. Not even to the extent of confirming there was an active investigation. He tactfully suggested she contact public affairs for further information about past investigations.

The only effect of Lieutenant O’Brien’s smooth reassurances was to increase her curiosity about the club. And the case that had offended the FBI agent, Dwight, was even more tantalizing. Was the case in question the *In Place* investigation?

Reflecting on her interview, she realized, to her chagrin, with every question asked, she had enlightened him about the extent of her knowledge. She’d gained almost nothing in return. If she’d actually known anything to give away, she would’ve been upset. She skipped the offered visit with public affairs, deciding to do some more digging on her own.

Cramming her arms into her raincoat, Ciara pulled her hair into a hasty ponytail and pulled on sunglasses. Not much of a disguise, but better than nothing. She walked briskly uphill, pausing half way up the block to pull out a mirror to study the Criminal Justice Center’s entrance covertly. Nothing.

She reached her car without anything exciting happening. Starting the engine, she scanned for traffic before pulling out of her parking spot. A glossy red muscle car zoomed past her.

Ciara’s heart rate accelerated enough to match the racy car when she spied sandy styled hair through the driver’s window. O’Brien.

## Chapter Thirteen

Connelly operating outside the box was not acceptable. Not to him.

She'd explained the briefing had been unplanned. That she'd bumped into Longstreet at the precinct within minutes of getting a call from the tech. On a Sunday night? Not likely. Thanks to Longstreet's presence, the setup had been a waste of time.

Before he had a chance to formulate a new strategy for clipping Connelly's wings, he had learned that the FBI had inserted a special agent in the club months ago. How many months? He shuddered with involuntary revulsion. It could be almost anyone. He'd been religious about keeping his distance from the club. He'd never entered the establishment during business hours. There was no way the plant had ever seen him.

He locked the office door and left the light off. A few moments of quiet to assess all the angles and he'd formulate a new plan.

However, the thought of a second spy on his payroll brought a dangerous red haze of rage to the edge of his vision. Should he tell Tony?

No. Tony was the perfect patsy.

The Donovan kid was as green as a four-leaf clover, but damn near as lucky. She was either too brave, or too stupid, to respond to his threats. His phone calls hadn't had any effect on her. Stronger measures would have to be taken to persuade her. His nose wrinkled fastidiously at the necessity. She was lovely with hair that reminded him of Mattie. However, she needed to be taught a lesson. A broken arm, painful, but not disfiguring.

Was he getting soft?

Not yet. He smiled, fingering his erection through his slacks, imagining his wife's welcoming mouth around him, her beautiful hair spread across his thighs as she loved him.

What did an animal like Longstreet know about how to enjoy a woman?

After his climax, he used a tissue from the bottom desk drawer to remove any evidence. Then he inserted the used tissue in a plastic bag, tucking the package into his jacket pocket for proper disposal later. After unlocking the office door, he resumed his thankless duties.

Eight more days, and he could forget about mundane chores.

However, he still needed to arrange the Donovan kid's remedial education. Tommy would be perfect for the task. A fast look at his watch said he would be coming on duty soon. If he hurried, he could catch him before work. He let his secretary know he'd be available by cell before leaving the building.

It had stopped raining. A beam of sunshine lit the road in front of him. However, the road would be treacherously slick from the summer shower. He drove defensively.

## Chapter Fourteen

Ciara scrambled to join the line of cars waiting for green. If O'Brien had been in a less conspicuous car, she would've never been able to follow him.

A couple of miles later he parked and went into the *In Place*. Checking on Zach? But Zach's shift didn't start for hours, the club wasn't even open.

Ten minutes later, she was still circling the block and worrying about missing him. He re-emerged. A dozen blocks down the road, she spotted him pulling into a drycleaner's small parking lot. She turned off onto a side street. A familiar black bullet-shaped car joined him. Lining up their driver's windows Zach and O'Brien talked without leaving their cars. Her heart thumped harder in her chest. It shouldn't have been a surprise to see him talking to Zach. After all, they were both cops, working on the same case.

Ciara ignored the sinking feeling of disappointment and re-examined her facts. Including the new and improved information that she'd just garnered. Zach's cover at the club took on new complications, and frightening possibilities.

Why had he interfered when the cowboy had approached her?

Had he really been jealous of her?

Reality check, there had to be another reason. To protect her because she was a friend of Regan's? He hadn't known she was a reporter so he wouldn't have been worried about her investigating the club.

For the first time in her short news career, a story excited her.

January had been threatened with launch of an explicit video on an internet site if she didn't pay. Images from her own encounter with Zach in one of the private room zoomed through Ciara's head. Was she in danger? She forced herself back to the problems at hand. How could she confirm it? Zach had answers about the current investigation. He was part of it. Was he part of the blackmail, too?

Her excitement fizzled to depression.

Zach hadn't faked his media phobia. He hated reporters. His feelings weren't likely to change, especially not if she were able to confirm her story. She was in a classic no-win situation. If she exposed him and his rotten cop buddies then she confirmed every horrible thing he believed about the media. If she passed up this chance for a real exposé then she broke faith with her father, something she could not do.

She decided to follow Zach and see where he led her. Now that she knew who O'Brien was, and where to find him, she could always catch up with him later.

\* \* \* \*

Zach headed for the club. It had been good talking to O'Brien. He still valued his mentor's advice.

After shooting the breeze with O'Brien, Zach headed for the club. It had been good talking to his old friend and he valued the man's advice.

What he'd asked his mentor about was how to handle the club manager's offer to dance.



So far, Zach had managed to avoid giving an answer. He'd told him he needed to think about it. What he hadn't had was a viable reason for declining one of the lucrative dance spots. O'Brien had suggested a rash. Not pretty, but workable.

The subject wasn't one he wanted to discuss with his LT. Not that Connelly couldn't handle it. The longer he worked for her the more he respected her judgment. It was strictly a matter of his own weirdness. He'd always been too fussy. He wouldn't eat garbage and he sure as hell didn't want to screw someone he didn't know from Eve. He had standards. He'd always been lonely and horny, too. Maybe his standards needed adjusting.

He still wanted Ciara, which was so stupid it should be illegal. To be honest with himself, he had to face that the wanting was about more than sex. Aching for a woman, whose job was to ruin his life, made him certifiable.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara's head was still full of Zach and O'Brien and a zillion possibilities, each one scarier than the last when Agnes, her father's housekeeper welcomed her.

"Happy Birthday Ciara." Agnes hadn't changed in the past fifteen years. Wavy brown hair parted in the center and wound into tidy chignon at her nape. The complexion framing her modest smile was smooth and the laugh lines at the outer edges of her hazel eyes seemed no deeper than ever.

"Thank you Agnes. Is he in the library?" Ciara handed over her raincoat.

Paragraph indent insert Agnes deposited the garment in the guest closet before answering. "He is. Would you like something to drink?"

"A sherry would be lovely."

"I'll bring it," the housekeeper assured her, and then disappeared.

Out of excuses to linger in the entry, Ciara made her way to the library. It was her favorite room in the old house. The furniture was ancient, mostly old leather club chairs grouped in small clusters around centered tables. One held a chess game in progress, another held tottering stacks of books and files, one was neatly arrayed with a pristine copy of today's issue of the *Seattle Daily News*.

Her dad's desk, barely visible under the combined weight of the computer, reference volumes, periodicals, and correspondence, was the room's natural focal point.

A flat screen TV, tuned to an all news station, blared from the alcove directly in front of him. She raised her voice in order to make herself heard over the news program. "Hi Dad."

He fumbled for a remote, grasped it, and then muted the news show. "Happy Birthday, Little Girl."

"Thank you. I have a few questions," she said in her best interviewer voice, knowing it would please him tremendously.

"Now you're sounding like a reporter." He beamed at her. "Go ahead, shoot."

"What made you start investigating the *In Place*?"

Pushing away from his desk, he stood and crossed to the globe suspended in a stand that allowed him to twirl it. She watched him disguise the tremors that made his hands or head jerk, pretending to be suddenly riveted by another part of the miniature world. "It was a couple of things." He spoke haltingly, his voice quavering on long sentences. "Almost four years ago I saw a notice of proposed land-use posted. I followed up on it—one of those whims." He waved vaguely to excuse his hunches. "Playing with my new toy, learning my way around the web."

He paused again, this time to bestow a fond smile on his computer. "The new owner was a corporation, one that I'd never heard of. When I checked out what I could find in the public records there was an odd pattern, but no story."

He paused to spin the globe and then returned to his desk chair before continuing. "A few months later the club opened, with no advertising. None. We pitch them an ad in the *Making the Scene* section—an offer to do a piece on their business. No sale. The *Northwest News* didn't run any space ads for them either. No radio, no TV, and yet there was a nice buzz going on for the hot new night spot."

The housekeeper glided into the room, bearing a tray with a welcome glass of sherry for Ciara and a single malt scotch over rocks for her dad.

He'd risen and taken a couple of steps toward Agnes before Ciara had even noticed she was in the room. Unless she was very much mistaken, he was holding in his stomach.

"Agnes, tell us where you would go if you wanted to get wild and crazy?" he grumbled at his housekeeper.

Her hazel eyes flickered over him, crinkling with mischief. "Excuse me?"

Sinking into the chair next to Ciara, he gave up on his stomach for the moment. "Come on, sit down for a minute. Pretend that you're going out on the town to do the wild thing. Tell us where you'd go."

His housekeeper followed his instructions so far as to perch on the arm of one of the club chairs. "I do not go out to do the wild thing. If such an unlikely urge seized me, then I might go to the *In Place*, presuming that I knew a member."

"And you do know a member don't you?" he prompted, apparently delighted with her answer.

"Yes," Agnes admitted, coloring faintly. "Now if you two want a memorable meal then I'm needed in the kitchen."

"Fine, go rattle your cleavers." Dad sipped his scotch. "See, even Agnes knows about the club. So. I asked myself—how do they get that kind of buzz going without advertising?"

"So that's what made you investigate them?" Ciara asked, giving him the encouragement he clearly wanted to continue his story.

"There was one other factor." He paused dramatically, but she swirled the golden sherry and ignored his bid for further audience participation.

"Tony Serrano, the manager for the newly remodeled club came from Las Vegas. He's a minor crime family member. Minor or major, he's connected and he brought talent with him. When I found out Tony was involved that triggered all kinds of flags."

"So you investigated," Ciara murmured, half to herself. "There's something I still don't understand. How did you get the bank records?"

He sat down the heavy tumbler and then stood. His head jerked toward his desk. "I believe the popular term is hacking."

"You hacked into the bank's records?" Her chin dropped and she sat down the sherry.

"Yes." His voice was a mixture of pride and embarrassment.

"You know that is illegal ...."

"Don't even think about lecturing me on professional ethics young lady. Why ...."

She held out a hand. "Slow down, I'm just ... surprised." Stunned was closer to the truth. She knew he had gotten hooked on surfing since his doctor had limited his office hours. But

she'd had no idea that he'd turned into a hacker.

"Well it was before they installed the new encryption code. I probably couldn't do it today." He all but scuffed his toe with misplaced modesty.

"I meant that I'm surprised you've turned to a life of crime in your mature years." She did her best to sound properly repressive.

"Oh, you're right, of course. It was the wrong thing to do," he muttered without any real contrition in his voice.

"You need to talk to an attorney about this, Dad."

"Are you planning on turning me in?" He fixed her with a piercing look over the top of his glasses.

"No, because you're going to do the right thing. You always do."

He snorted and took a sip of his scotch, hiding his pleasure at her compliment.

\* \* \* \*

For the next two days, except for brief stops at the paper, Ciara followed Zach. She spent early evenings across from the precinct. She spent the rest of the nights, noting arrivals, departures, and license numbers at the *In Place*. The man barely slept. She smothered an ear-popping yawn.

The only variety had been a series of calls on her cell phone. Crank calls would've been pleasant compared with the ones she was getting. The most recent had threatened to mess her face up so bad that her boyfriend wouldn't recognize her. Obviously, her caller didn't know her that well. She didn't have a boyfriend.

A couple of scary phone threats by some mechanical voice were not going to deter her. She regarded the threats as proof that she'd made somebody nervous. That meant she was closer, though to what she wasn't certain.

The longer she watched Zach the more completely hooked she became. The man should be labeled as a controlled substance. Watching him run qualified as aerobic exercise because it made her heart rate accelerate. She shouldn't even watch him breathe if she wanted to stay detached. The very fact that she needed to stay away from him added the extra appeal of forbidden delight to his already potent charms. This qualified as a genuine problem.

Lamentably, she had no solution.

When not watching Zach, she got excited in a different way. Dad was right. There was a juicy story here, somewhere. While the scoop remained out of reach, she was making progress. January's allegations of blackmail seemed more plausible with each piece of the puzzle she uncovered.

Lieutenant O'Brien lived above his pay grade. As did Chief Logan. Yesterday she'd found the attorney registered as the agent for the holding company owning the club was the FBI agent's second cousin. It wasn't a compelling connection, but it was a suggestive coincidence. There had to be a traceable connection and real evidence. All she had to do was find it.

More upsetting, Zach almost certainly had to be in on the blackmail. If he'd been innocent, he would've busted her for prostitution at the club. Every time she thought about him being one of the extortionists it made her feel sick.

It was just possible that he was as conflicted about her as she was about him and that's why he hadn't arrested her. Despite the improbability of her theoretical justification for his behavior, she clung to it, stubbornly hoping.

If Zach were part of it then Lieutenant O'Brien was suspect, too. In fact, for her purposes the whole police force was guilty until proven innocent.

Her cell phone chimed, interrupting her speculation.

"Hi. It's January. Have you gotten anywhere identifying the blackmailers?"

"Nothing concrete enough to put in print." Ciara set down her binoculars.

"I was hoping ...," January said, her voice falling with disappointment.

"Did he call again?" Sympathy warred with excitement in Ciara's head.

"Yeah, he wants fifty to keep my face blacked out." January's voice bottomed out to match her spirits.

"Fifty?" Ciara echoed vaguely.

"Fifty thousand dollars," January explained edgily.

"Of course." Ciara swallowed a gasp.

"I'm not paying." January sounded weary. "What's the big deal? It's just skin. It'll probably turn out to be a total non-event. Could you come over?" The last sentence quavered. Clearly, the heiress's just skin comment was sheer bravado.

"Certainly, I'm on my way," Ciara said staunchly.

Shoving her dad's old bird watching binoculars into their case, she hustled to her car. Stopping by January's to lend moral support was the least she could do. She couldn't help caring about the lonely woman who hid behind the empty-headed flirt act.

Ciara spent two hours at January's place. The story remained tantalizingly unconfirmed. She needed serious proof, from more than one source before she could run a story accusing police officers of being involved in a criminal conspiracy.

Ironically, she had enough to go to the FBI. But the local FBI agent was on her suspect list, which ruled out asking him for help.

If she couldn't nail down hard evidence, then she had no story. Meanwhile, the extortionist continued to bleed January and who knew how many other women.

The story would run, if she were smart enough to get the proof she needed. It had it all—sex, scandal, and money. And as an added attraction, right at the heart of the story—Zach Longstreet, dirty cop.

She had to put all thoughts of Zach giving a damn about her out of her lust-soaked brain. She had a plan and she was sticking to it. She'd gotten the journalism degree. She'd served her two years in news. This story was her last payment on her father's dream of training her to be a newshound. Once this report was filed, it was her turn. Her father would have to adjust to having a bean counter at the helm of his empire.

After leaving January, Ciara headed straight for the paper. Already on day three of following Zach, she had his schedule down cold. He got up around noon. Either, he worked out, or ran, depending on what he'd done the previous day. Afterwards, he cleaned up, changed clothes, and headed for the precinct. He usually spent at least an hour there before moving on to the club. Once at the *In Place* he stayed till closing. Ciara brought along her laptop and worked while he was at the precinct. She crammed the rest of her life into the eight hours he spent at the club. That's where he was for the next couple of hours. She had plenty of time to get a start on her story.

\* \* \* \*

Thursday night Zach spotted her. His temper flared. What was this, tail Zach week?

First the white service van and now Ciara. She might've been following him for a week. If he hadn't had his head jammed up his ass, he'd have made her instantly. Since she'd scared the hell out of him, the least he could do was return the favor. Retribution was one of his favorite things.

After excusing himself from work on the grounds of flu symptoms, he left by the rear entrance and settled in to keep an eye on his watcher.

Ciara didn't stay put, which made for sloppy surveillance technique. He didn't plan on complaining, since it made watching her much more entertaining than being stuck staring at her binoculars. They looked heavy in the cumbersome case. Amateur hour in full swing.

Tailing her as she headed for a plush set up on the east side gave him time to cool off and time to wonder what she was doing there. Two long hours later, she left. She never checked her rearview mirror. She didn't bother to verify he was still at the club either. More sloppiness. His temper rose in measure with her carelessness. At a minimum, she should've ascertained his car was still at the club.

She drove past the *In Place* without a sidelong glance and headed for the paper. She pulled into the employee's parking lot, took off the glasses she had to wear to drive, tucking them into her purse before she got gathered her things and got out, bumping her car door closed with her hip.

Zach planned on cruising by, then parking, figuring she would never make him.

He was right. A hooded figure came out of nowhere, catching her in a headlock. She had her hands full with the lowlife creep.

How had she managed to get into that much trouble in the two minutes she'd been out of his line of sight? He parked and then doubled back, approaching them from behind. The man was trying to cut off her air.

Zach tensed—seconds from taking out her assailant, when Ciara fought back. The man cursed and loosened his hold on her long enough for her to drag in a ragged breath.

Itching to punish the low life bastard who would assault a helpless woman, Zach's hands shook with tension. But he held off, standing back and blending into the shadows.

"I liked the whimpering, that was the best part. I want to hear you whimper like that for me, baby." The creep's voice was harsh as he grappled with her, panting for air.

"Let go of me or you'll be doing your own whimpering," Ciara threatened, punctuating her comment with a sharp elbow jab to the creep's gut. She won a grunt for her efforts.

Zach adjusted his estimate of her self-defense capacity upwards.

"Stay away from the Cabell bitch and keep your nose out of our business or next time I'll mess up your pretty face." Only the fact that the lowlife was definitely breathing hard, kept Zach from leaping into the fight.

Ciara didn't waste breath on a retort. She held her own, wielding a wicked elbow and dangerous high heels.

The small muscle in Zach's jaw jumped to life.

"January is a friend of mine. You don't pick my friends, jerk," Ciara said angrily.

Atta girl. She wasn't panting and she hadn't stuttered. So she wasn't scared. Zach eased back a notch from full throttle attack mode.

The creep grabbed a handful of Ciara's hair, yanking hard enough to snap her head back. "Don't play games with us."

That did it. Lowlife needed an attitude adjustment. If Ciara didn't kick his sorry ass then

Zach would.

"I'm not the one attacking innocent people," Ciara grunted. "And I'm not playing games." She drove her point home with a stomp on his instep.

She followed the spike to his foot with a bash on her assailant's elbow, using her laptop and plenty of body English.

Zach winced. That had to smart.

Lowlife yipped and rubbed his injured arm. She turned to face her attacker, leading with her chin. The creep hauled off, popping her with a left hook before she had a chance to defend herself. She went down hard. Rather than pressing his advantage, the creep split, saving Zach from the choice of rescuing Ciara, or blowing his cover.

He offered her a hand, which she batted away, scrambling up on her own.

"Aren't you going after him?" Ciara glared at Zach, picking herself up.

He shrugged. "He's long gone."

Ciara shot him a filthy look. "How long were you standing there?"

"You seemed to be holding your own," he said reasonably.

"Thanks for nothing," she tossed her head, dismissing him.

*He tried to do the right thing, and what did he get? Grief.*

She winced, gently massaging her scalp where it had connected with the ground and making him feel even more like a jerk.

"What are you doing here anyway? You're supposed to be at work." Ciara's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

He captured her chin and turned her head gently from side to side. "Let's get a cold pack on your face, and then we can talk."

It must be his turn to be nice and reasonable. He gathered up her things, tucked them under one arm, and then steered her toward his car with the other. A quick glance over his shoulder assured him the creep had split. He tucked Ciara into the car, getting the instant cold pack out of the trunk and activating it.

After witnessing the assault, Zach had lost interest in getting even with her for following him. Watching her getting assaulted had frayed his nerves, but now wasn't the time to rake her over the coals. She didn't need a lecture. She needed his comfort and protection, and she was going to get it.

Whether she wanted it or not.

Ciara sat very still. Suddenly, her shoulders rounded and her chin puckered. She didn't make a sound, but she was shaking and a juicy tear rolled down her cheek.

A delayed reaction to the attack. The small muscle in his cheek twanged as he thought about what could have happened.

He'd wanted to go drag that lowlife jerk out of whatever hole he'd crawled into and turn him into a bloody pulp. Still did.

He had become a cop to protect people. When a thug assaulted Ciara, he did nothing. Because he was a cop and therefore couldn't blow his cover. It sure as hell didn't make him feel like one of the good guys.

He felt more like something he'd scrape off his shoe.

"Did you get a good look at the guy?" Frustration constricted his voice to a growl.

"No." The word was muffled as she struggled to regain her control.

"Maybe you should stop by the precinct, file a complaint and look at mug shots." He scraped out the useless suggestion, having nothing good to offer her.

Ciara shook her head and turned toward the window. He shut up, giving her time to get herself back together. His muscles clenched uselessly, helpless anger eating at his control.

Politely, she handed him back the now warm cold pack, put on her glasses and reached for the door handle. "Thanks for the first - aid." She cracked the door.

His rough hand covered her soft one, halting the door opening progress.

"Hang on a second." His voice sounded as sandpapered as his nerves felt.

He stole a glimpse of her from the corner of his eye. She hadn't moved her hand. She stared straight ahead. The fine muscles around her made-for-sin mouth were white with tension.

He held his breath waiting for her to push him away, more vulnerable than he wanted to be, and trying not to show it.

She caressed the hand that covered hers, lightly, as if he were some half-wild creature that she didn't want to startle.

The idea that she was reassuring him disconcerted him, and left him clinging to resistance that was melting fast under her soft touch.

Images of her naked and hungry flooded his mind and heated his blood. "Come to my place." The words sounded as if he'd dragged them out some long buried pit.

His muscles tensed as he readied himself for rejection. The fingers stroking him trembled and he didn't know what scared him more, his needs, or hers.

She met his eyes with trust he knew he didn't deserve. "All right."

Fifteen minutes later, he ushered her into his house. He stood, holding himself stiffly, pretending not to care what she thought.

The place was Spartan.

He built things to last, not to look fancy.

Simplicity appealed to him. At least in the realm of home furnishings. The clean lines of his functional, well-crafted furniture weren't softened by throws, pillows, and fluffy items the way her things were. A small stack of mail he'd sat on the counter this afternoon was the only thing in the house not serving a purpose. Part of last Sunday's paper and the books he was currently reading decorated the map table he'd finished a week ago. A basket of dirty laundry sat in front of the utility room door. He crossed the room and nudged it inside.

A lone sock slipped out of the basket. He stooped down, captured the stray, and tossed it in with the rest of the dirty clothes. He wasn't set up for guests. He hadn't shopped recently. He knew the refrigerator held little except a lime, some local beer, and coffee beans. The freezer had meat, he was pretty sure he had cereal, but no milk. The guest room held a weight set, his tools, and not a lot else.

He'd acted on instinct bringing her here. He should've thought things through first. She was still a blood-sucking reporter. Not even that chilling thought slowed him down as he retrieved a real ice pack for her face.

She smiled shakily at him, took off her glasses, slipped them into her bag, and sat the purse on top of the oak table. She accepted the ice pack, placing it gently against her face. Last Sunday's *Making the Scene* section fluttered to the floor. He didn't bother with pretense, studying her openly.

"Sit down. Tell me why you were following me." He gestured toward his comfortably

worn leather couch. He'd calmed down enough that he didn't sound like a rusty gate.

"Wh-wh-why do you think?" The 'think' finished with that tiny ick sound, as if she'd coughed it out.

She was more nervous than most of the suspects he'd questioned. Why? The question ate at him. He deliberately gave her no indication he'd noticed the stutter. He crossed his arms, leaned against the breakfast counter and waited. She picked at the crease of her jeans and gnawed at her lower lip.

"C-c-could I have a drink of water, please?"

He filled a tumbler with ice and added water from the tap, grabbed a coaster from a kitchen drawer, and then set the glass in front of her. Refraining from repeating his question, he resumed his post by the breakfast bar.

"This is lovely." She trailed her fingers over the edge of his table.

Pride welled in his chest.

"I've never seen one quite like it."

Hell, it didn't hurt anything to talk about his hobby. "I made it."

"Like from a kit?" she asked guilelessly.

"No, like from wood," he growled deeply, unreasonably offended.

"It's a remarkable piece. It will be a handsome heirloom for your children." Her voice soothed his prickly feelings and awakened impossible dreams.

Ciara let out a sigh. "I was following someone else."

It took him a minute to switch topics. "Who?"

Her plump lips pursed into a stubborn pucker.

"If you won't give me a name there's not much point in talking is there?"

She ignored his question, continuing as if he hadn't spoken. "You talked to that person, the one I'd followed. It made me curious. When you went in two different directions, I had to choose." She shrugged. "I stayed with you."

Zach made an effort to keep his face blank as he ran through everyone he'd talked to in the past couple of days. "What day?"

"Tuesday."

What the hell had he done on Tuesday? He pulled a small notebook out of an inside jacket pocket. Flipped back to the date in question.

Checked in at the precinct, and talked to a couple guys on the squad. Went to the club. The manager, Tony had talked to him about a promotion. Nothing.

He closed his eyes and scrolled through the day. He'd run at the academy track. Had he talked to anyone there? Not really, a nod to one of the instructors. Came home, Mrs. Reynolds, his gray panther neighbor had waylaid him to discuss trimming her birch.

Then what? The precinct. Had she followed a cop to the precinct? That had to be it. "Describe him," he demanded.

"I never said it was a man."

She had that prim schoolgirl look on her face.

"So was it a man, or a woman?" Zach kept an eye on her as Ciara took a drink of her ice water. She studied the room as if his simple house was intriguing. There was nothing for her to see since he hadn't turned on the TV. She'd clammed up on him. Interviewing was an art. There was a time to push, and a time to ease up and establish rapport. Like now.



"Are you hungry?" He was, but he was prepared to wait.

She shook her head.

"Tell me about your tattoo," he coaxed. His interest half-calculated, half-genuine.

That jerked her pretty eyes back to him for a about a nano-second.

"The Chameleon?"

"Yeah." The only one she had. He knew because there wasn't a square inch of her he hadn't seen, hadn't .... He yanked his thoughts away from the yawning canyon.

"I bought it for my birthday last year." She inspected the crease in her jeans with a tiny frown, as if it had misbehaved.

That was an excellent example of why he should always stick to questions he already knew the answer to, he'd gotten nowhere except distracted.

"You buy yourself birthday presents?" Disbelief seeped into his tone.

"Yes." Her silly chin came up a notch. "You were it this year."

"Me?" His cheekbones heated. Hot damn, when was last time he'd blushed?

"Correct, but I guess you don't really count, since you gave me a full refund. You had taken my money under false pretenses." Her chin came up another notch and he saw the faint bruising along the delicate bone.

"Tell me more about the tattoo," he coaxed again.

She rolled her eyes. For a minute, he thought she'd give him more sass.

"It was a reminder, that I can change, not to suit every man who comes along, but that I'm capable of reinventing myself. I can choose who and what I am. I had a list, things I wanted to change." She lowered her voice like it was a secret.

He listened while she talked, not really processing what she said, but riveted by her. She kept leading with that bruised chin. She was sweet, sassy, and so young. He wanted to lock her up somewhere snug and safe. He had to keep reminding himself she was a hungry reporter who'd do anything for a story. Even if she were a beginner, he'd best remember junior vampires could do plenty of damage.

"So have there been a lot of guys who wanted to change you?" *All he wanted to change was her job.*

"This is a nice table." She stroked his map table. He had to work to keep from showing her the hidden map drawer, telling her how he'd made it.

Focusing on the here and now, he noticed she hadn't answered his last question. Strictly speaking, it didn't have much to do with the case, but he still wanted to hear her response. He was pretty damn sure there hadn't been a lot of guys, but he expected an answer.

"You can't keep me here."

She was wrong about that, but if he did, there'd be a lot of trouble.

"Maybe we could work out a trade," he said cautiously.

Her eyes snapped to his. He had her attention now.

"Like what?" Hope mixed with doubt in her pretty eyes.

"You tell me about whoever you tailed and I'll answer a question for you."

"Or, you can answer a question for me and then I'll answer one for you," she said with a sweet smile.

Right. Well, it had been worth a try. "Go ahead." He could always refuse to answer anything he didn't want to discuss.

“What’s going on at the *In Place*?” she asked without any hesitation.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.” He relaxed marginally.

Ciara’s caramel eyes narrowed at him.

“Man or woman?” he asked, ignoring her pointed glare.

“I’ll give you this one for free, but then I want a real answer,” she warned him.

Zach nodded.

“Man.” She gave him a second to run with it, and then asked her question. “What do you think is going on at the club?”

“Extortion.”

“Seriously?” She leaned forward and her eyes flashed with excitement.

Too bad, all she wanted was information.

“My turn,” he reminded her.

She blushed. He kept his butt glued to the breakfast bar. The last thing he needed was more temptation.

“Describe him.”

She thought that one over. “A bit shorter than you, medium to slim build. Sandy hair and blue eyes.”

She paused, drew in a deep breath, drawing his eyes to the most perfect.... “Do you have sex with lots of women, at the club?”

## Chapter Fifteen

Strolling through the plush luxury of the club, Tony was immune to the seduction of the sparkling lights, gleaming fixtures, and pink velvet. He calculated the night's receipts automatically while cutting a hard look at a waiter leaning on a booth. The brief corrective glare didn't interrupt his addition. The lazy server straightened up instantly, giving Tony a shit-eating excuse for a grin.

Last night the new waiter, Zach-the-cop, had left early, said he was sick. At least, he'd never leaned on the booths, but Tony was relieved not to have to deal with him. The boss hadn't called, thank God. So he hadn't had to say anything about the cop, or explain about the promotion that he'd offered him the night before.

That was embarrassing. But the guy had the moves and the badass looks. Still, Tony kicked himself for not spotting him. He'd believed he could always smell a cop. Even now he couldn't think back and say, I should of made him for a cop because ... nothing. Zach had been aloof, a little on the quiet side, but he was slick with the chickadees and that was the name of the game at the club.

The cop hadn't showed, or bothered to call, tonight.

Tony finished his tour, returning to his office behind the flashy bar. Maybe somehow he knew his cover was blown. Maybe the boss would call back and this time he'd give him clear orders. That could be good, or it could be bad.

Tony thumbed out an antacid, chewing it thoughtfully.

For sure, he'd get another load of crap about how stupid he'd been, but what the hell, it all paid the same.

Every week his bank balance grew more impressive. He'd planned on hanging in there for the rest of the year. A few more months, and he and Patsy would be on easy street. Then the scary boss, sneaky cops, moody dancers, and limp dick waiters could all take a flying leap.

At least, he'd gotten the chick's place bugged without anything unfortunate biting his ass. He'd borrowed his brother-in-law's, the florist, delivery van, just in case she was home. She wasn't, but a smart guy thought ahead.

He'd planted two trackers on her car, a broadcaster on her landline, and noise activated bugs in every room. The only thing he hadn't wired for sound was her cell phone. Maybe the boss planned to handle that one himself. He'd even rented an apartment right down the street to house the recording equipment. It had a view of the chick's place, in case the boss decided he wanted closer surveillance.

Personally, Tony thought the boss was freaking over nothing. But he'd done a real professional job. His ass was covered.

Paragraph indent insert Except for the cop.

Nobody had ever given Tony a damn thing. Every dollar he had he'd hustled for one way or the other. The only people he owed anything to were Patsy and Sam.

He'd talked to Patsy about the heat he was taking. She was for pulling the plug right

now. Thinking about his wife made him feel good. She was his solid gold anchor.

Sam wanted to hang in as long as they could, but he was a good boy. He'd go with whatever his folks decided. Tony crossed himself. Then thanked the saints and his clever wife for giving Sam her maiden name. Extra protection paid off, big time.

Not even the boss knew Sam was his son.

\* \* \* \*

He paced from one end of the living room to the other. Every third turn, he stopped and scanned the balcony, checking for fresh omens of menace, expecting to find stress cracks in the massive tiles, or some worse disaster.

The clouds moved in, obscuring the full moon. Abruptly he hit the switch to darken the windows, wishing he'd opted for the barrier of drapes.

How much could the Donovan kid know?

Not enough, hell she was nothing but a kid. Unfortunately for her, a kid with a sweet ass, who had hooked up with Longstreet. The detective had the personality of a pit bull, complete with the same single-minded determination.

If she stumbled across the money trail and whispered about what she'd found to Longstreet, it would be a disaster.

His whole week had been bad, getting worse.

The Donovan kid had ignored his warnings to get her nose out of his business.

So he 'd arranged for a new message—turning up the volume. He had sent Tommy over to disable her car and rough up her up a little. Nothing crazy. It didn't take much to scare off a pretty woman. All he wanted him to do was break her arm, an assignment that should have been no problem. Except the Donovan kid had kicked Tommy's ass.

Then the Cabell bitch called his bluff and refused to pay. That was the problem with the new generation—they didn't give a damn.

For once, Tony was right on the uploads. No cash payment from Cabell and he released the video with her face revealed.

Shit, the one time it would have helped for Tony to be a little lazy and the fucker turned into a speed freak. None of these problems was anything he couldn't fix. However, so many loose threads at once made him nervous.

The key to solving all of his problems was one green-as-shamrocks reporter. He sat on the soft couch. Suddenly, the luxurious silk developed a subtly malevolent odor. He rose, retreating to the office and the safety of his leather chair.

He needed to drive a wedge between the Donovan kid and Longstreet. It shouldn't be tough. The detective had always been a paranoid bastard.

His nose was bothering him again. He rubbed it.

Then he would find a pressure point for the Cabell bitch and squeeze. All it took was a little imagination.

Nothing to it. Wedge, then pressure.

## Chapter Sixteen

Zach leaned against his breakfast counter, keeping an eye on Ciara's cheeks. They were red enough to start smoking.

"No," he answered her question about women honestly but didn't elaborate. "Do you have sex with lots of men, for research?"

Turn about was entirely fair. She got even redder. He bit back a grin—enjoying questioning her. But he was serious about exchanging information.

"No," she squeezed the word out between tight lips.

She'd started it by asking the first sex question s, but she'd burn up if she kept blushing like that.

"So what's a narcotic's cop doing working a blackmail case?"

Score one for the junior vampire. Good, he needed the reminder of how lethal she could be. His pocket vibrated, he retrieved his phone, read his sister's number, and then flipped it open.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Can you talk?"

Stupid question, if he hadn't been able to talk he wouldn't have taken her call. He grunted an affirmative.

Regan's words tumbled together. "Ciara isn't answering her phone, and I'm worried. She's been getting threatening calls. Could you ...?"

"Since when?" he interrupted with a frown.

"For a couple of days. She thinks it's a sign she's getting closer, but I'm ...."

"Man or woman?"

"Man, I think. He uses a synthesizer of some kind. Could you do a drive by? Just check that she made it home okay?"

"Actually," he cleared his throat, and then lowered his voice, angling his back to Ciara. "She's here."

\* \* \* \*

Since Zach obviously wanted privacy for his phone call, and she didn't want to think about why, Ciara went in search of a bathroom, finding it on her first try. She made a production out of running cold water and holding a wet washcloth to her face in a hopeless effort to cool her roasting cheeks, the bruise wasn't nearly as bad as she'd expected. The ice had helped.

Resisting the impulse to peek behind his mirror to see what his medicine cabinet held, she allowed herself to soak up everything visible. A tube of toothpaste lay on the counter, neatly rolled from the bottom. A couple of toothbrushes rested in a bottom heavy tumbler. Stacks of fluffy white cotton towels filled brass shelves next to a walk-in shower. A lush Boston fern hung under a skylight. She touched the delicate fronds, expecting silk, and bruised the soft leaves.

Zero for two, she'd been attacked with nothing to show for it except tender spots that would turn ugly colors, and now she'd wounded Zach's plant. She didn't regret fighting back.

The self-defense classes, which she'd both taken and taught for years, had kicked in. She'd always wondered how she'd react to real threat. Her body's automatic response to the mugger had been good. But she regretted having the melt down aftermath in front of Zach.

Now she had bigger problems, he was being nice. She almost wished he would go back to interrogating her about Lieutenant O'Brien. There was no problem keeping that piece of information to herself. They were friends. No way would she risk alerting O'Brien that she suspected him.

She patted her face dry and meandered back to the living room, giving him plenty of time to wrap up his personal conversation.

"The lowlife scum punched her," Zach grumbled.

Her efforts to avoid eavesdropping failed. She should have bathed her face for a little longer. At least, he wasn't arranging a romantic interlude.

"I tried, she wouldn't cooperate."

Ciara started backing away.

Zach scowled at the floor as he listened to his phone. "Hey. She's your friend. She's nothing to me."

The remark stopped her cold, slicing her like a razor, clean, sharp, and deep.

What had she thought? That she was special to him? Reality check, she'd paid him to have sex with her. Even if first impressions didn't count, he hated reporters. And she was all through re-molding herself to suit the man of the minute. Before she'd met Zach, she'd given up on men, but that was a separate problem. Or maybe not.

This time she waited until she was certain he'd ended his conversation. She squared her shoulders, pasted a friendly smile on her face, and then strolled into the living room, moving fast enough to appear purposeful.

Zach's gaze scanned her face. Ciara kept her expression warm and pleasant, not betraying that she'd heard a single word of the hurtful conversation.

"Thanks for the ice pack and the water," she said politely.

She'd mistaken basic decency for interest and wound up thanking him for kindnesses rendered. With grim determination, she turned up the wattage on her smile. "Do you have time to take me back to my car or should I call a cab?"

"I'll drive you."

There was no argument, but she thought he sounded a tiny bit disappointed.

He held the door for her, and then turned to lock it. She took advantage of the delay to scoot down the walkway to his car. If it had been unlocked, she would've been inside with her seat belt fastened by the time he got there.

Zach's loose stride erased her safe distance in seconds. He opened the car, insisting on handing her inside. She felt seared where he'd touched her elbow—so aware of him she ached. How could she still want him after she'd heard him telling Regan that she was nothing to him?

A good psychiatrist was going to be her next major investment. Maybe then she'd figure out why no one ever loved her back.

"I'm getting hungry, you want anything?" His voice was the same sexy rumble that cut right through her good-girl defenses and lit a fire in her core. She crossed her legs, and then darted a fast glance to see if he'd noticed.

"No thanks." No way could she swallow anything around the lump in her throat that

refused to dissolve.

"You want me to drop you off first?"

"Yes, please."

The tension sparked in the confined space until she wanted to scream. A distraction would help, but she wasn't up to exchanging quips. Zach hadn't said anything for blocks. He pushed play and *She's Putin' Me Under Pressure* filled the car. Ciara darted another glance to see if the song's message had been deliberate, but his face told her nothing.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice when he stopped the car. Then it dawned on her that they weren't moving, she fumbled with her seatbelt release. Scrambling to get out of the car while he held her door, her face heated. He left his motor running.

"Thanks for the ride, and the answers," she tried to keep her voice even as misery threatened to overwhelm her.

"You okay?"

"Little headache," she lied bravely. Wounded ego mainly, but he didn't need that much information.

"I've got some aspirin." Zach hooked a thumb toward his car.

He probably did, too. His car seemed as well equipped as his house. She'd been impressed when he whipped out an instant cold pack. But then he was a cop, he was supposed to be prepared for anything.

"No thanks, I don't take aspirin. It upsets my stomach." She kept saying things that didn't even make sense. She did take aspirin and some would be good right now. She shut up.

He kept watching her, making her edgier.

"I'll run along then. Thanks for everything."

She scurried for her car. The last lonely one in the lot. Fumbling through her purse, she finally connected with the keys, unlocking the car manually. Then she slid underneath the steering wheel, clicked her safety belt, and mashed the start button. Nothing. The hybrid was always a quiet starter but the reassuring dashboard lights remained dark. The relief of being secure and mobile, that she hadn't realized she'd been counting on, slipped away. Fear stirred the fine hairs on the back of her neck.

Automatically, she checked her rear view mirror and sighed with relief. A minute ago, she couldn't wait to get away from him. Now she sagged with gratitude because he'd waited.

Zach leaned against his car, in a familiar pose, with his arms folded across his chest. He looked reassuringly solid and capable. As she watched, the arms unfolded. He switched off his motor, and then headed her way.

"Pop the hood." The order came along with an unneeded lifting motion.

Men. English was her first language. She graciously opened the hood anyway. A large flash light played over the engine compartment. The hood closed with a bang, the flashlight turned off, and then he yanked her door open.

"Come on." He tugged at her arm. She snagged her purse and laptop, allowing him to propel her to his car. By taking quick steps, she kept pace with him.

In the short time since she had met Zach, she had seen a variety of moods from him. Angry, irritated, even playful. This was something new. His tension spilled over, infusing her with nameless fear.

Her instincts said he only wanted to protect her. Suddenly, that was something she

wanted, too.

“Your vehicle has been intentionally disabled.”

Ciara translated the cop speak to someone had messed with her car. She shivered, clenching her teeth together to keep them from chattering.

“You’re s-s-sure?” Silly question, of course he was sure. She was sure and she didn’t even know what had happened.

“I’m absolutely sure. Someone removed your service plug.”

Ciara rubbed her arms and nodded. She didn’t know a service plug from an advertising plug, but she understood that it was essential equipment.

“We’ll stop by and get whatever you need for tonight. You’re staying with me.”

Ciara took a measure of his hard jaw with the small muscle flexing and decided to surrender to the inevitable. “All right.”

For a second she thought his mouth softened, but she must have imagined it.

It was going to be a long night at Zach’s, knowing he lay sleeping only a few feet away. She sighed quietly .

\* \* \* \*

Zach stayed close behind her as they climbed the steps to her house. Memories of the last time they’d been here kept crowding in. She tried to stay on task and organize what she needed . But even with Zach’s solid presence, worries nibbled at her frayed nerves. Someone had attacked her. Someone had disabled her car. Her investigation threatened someone.

Shadowing her from room to room, Zach stayed within an arms length. He touched her frequently. But not in a sexual way. Gentle touches, her back, her arm, her shoulder. Easy touches, meant to comfort turned her on anyway. But then, just him breathing did it for her.

She slipped into the bathroom, swallowed two painkillers, and then polished off the glass of water. Distance helped. She needed to remember what he’d said to Regan. The echo of ‘she’s nothing to me’ combined with the suddenly very real threat to dampen her usual reaction to Zach’s presence.

An overnight case was quickly filled with skin care, make up, and hair taming paraphernalia. A second suitcase held clean undies, three pairs of shoes, a few basic outfits including a sensible non-sexy-over-sized team jersey for sleeping. Then a tote bag to handle a couple of diet colas, and her laptop—just the bare essentials.

He stopped at a pizzeria, getting a kitchen sink special to go. The aroma made her stomach rumble, which he politely ignored. He picked up all her baggage without complaining. She’d brought too much, making it seem as if she planned on an extended stay.

Busying herself with getting out plates, she avoided him. A discreet search revealed two sets of napkins and placemats in a linen drawer. She thought the red more suitable for pizza and left the blue for another occasion. His dishes were restaurant-style thick white china. She set places on his lovely table and resisted the urge to fold the napkins into nesting bird shapes.

To keep her hands busy, she tidied the books and newspaper, stacking them neatly on one end of the table, and then carefully centered the pizza box between the two place settings.

Zach had shed his jacket before he ambled back into the living room. He unhooked a leather gun case and set it on the counter, followed it with a set of cuffs, a spare magazine, a ring of keys, cell phone, pager, change, and his wallet. There was something intimate about watching him shed all his accessories. She swiveled around and adjusted the position of the



plates, not wanting to get caught staring.

But she couldn't resist another peek.

He stuck his head in the fridge and emerged with two beers—lifting one in her direction in a silent question.

"Yes, please."

Gee, didn't she sound like Little Miss Manners? She swallowed a groan, now he knew she'd been watching him.

After sitting down next to her on the sofa, he raised an eyebrow at the placemats. "We're using the good stuff, huh?"

It had never occurred to her that the placemats were for special occasions.

"Would you prefer the blue ones?"

"Red's fine," he chuckled.

She had no idea what to say to him. Lots of things came to mind. *Thanks for letting me invade your life. I think you're incredible in bed and out. Want to have sex again, soon? Why don't I mean anything to you?*

On the other hand, she could go for the throat. *Please tell me you're not a dirty cop, because I think there's something bad going down at the club and I don't want to believe you could be part of something really wrong.*

Most of all she wanted to know why he made her all gooey inside while he stayed as cool as a winter day.

Practicing frosty thoughts, she focused on the pizza box. After all, he didn't know what was going on in her head. She could act cool and detached.

A beer appeared next to her plate. She swallowed a healthy swig and nearly choked. Good grief, what was that stuff? She eyed the bottle warily. That was her all right, just one of the boys. Choke. Cough. Gag.

The pizza, piled high with every topping she'd ever heard of, did not include a kitchen sink. She should be grateful for small favors.

Zach turned on the TV. They caught the tail end of the local news, which enlightened them about tomorrow's weather. This helpful information was followed by an announcement to the effect that they could count on KNOW for traffic coverage first thing in the morning. While the anchors were still saying good night Zach clicked over to a recorded Mariner baseball game.

Ciara sank back into the couch and imitated Zach by kicking off her shoes propping her bare feet on the coffee table, which seemed like sacrilege. The pizza made her thirsty, and the beer tasted much better. So much so that she had a second one when he offered. It felt wonderful just sitting here and winding down with him. She had to keep reminding herself that he didn't care about her or she would have just melted into him.

At the next commercial, she asked him how he got the scar on his jaw. He'd tensed instantly. Seconds ticked by. She thought he was going to ignore her.

"Knife fight, long time ago." He tipped his head back to accommodate a healthy swallow of the dark beer.

"How old were you?" Curiosity was either an asset, or a character flaw, depending on how she felt about it at the moment. Either way it was part of her. She had a need to know that bordered on obsession.

"Seventeen."

A reluctant source. Her finger traced the scar. Soothed the small muscle that had twitched to life in his cheek. "So young."

"Old enough." He spit the words out as if they were bitter seeds.

The timeline wavered then sharpened in her mind. If Zach had been seventeen, then Regan had been fourteen. Ciara knew how he'd gotten that scar and how many of the others? One shattering night, so much pain. She felt sick thinking about it. She took a sip of her own beer. It didn't settle well in her queasy stomach.

Zach still sat next to her, but a wall had been erected, shutting her out. Ciara didn't have the skill, or the courage, to breach his defenses.

\* \* \* \*

It was late, after midnight, way past her bedtime. Her eyelids felt weighted. She needed to brush her teeth. She waited for her turn in the bathroom. The shower ran and ran and ran. She couldn't complain. It was his place. Besides, she liked a nice leisurely shower herself. Visions of Zach naked with water caressing all those hard planes with their roadmap of scars and interesting parts teased her. She didn't feel all that sleepy any more, so she opened up her laptop.

She woke with a start. She must have dozed off waiting for Zach to finish his shower. She rolled her head gently working out the kinks. She listened closely. The house was silent. He'd probably gone to bed. She glanced at the system clock, almost one AM. She grabbed her toothbrush and tiptoed down the hall, listening for any sign that Zach was still up. Nothing.

She walked into the bathroom. He stood there shaving, wearing only a towel that rode low on his narrow hips. The springy black hair covering his chest grew straighter and narrower where it disappeared under the towel. His hair, combed straight back, was still wet. His feet were large and broad, with hairy toes and neatly trimmed toenails. She stared at them for long seconds, finding them, by far, the safest thing to focus on.

He finished the stroke he'd started on the underside of his chin, his head tipped back in an exaggerated pugnacious angle. He straightened, and then rinsed his razor. Her eyes followed his deft movements as he turned it, carefully rinsing off all the lather. He held the razor carelessly, meeting her eyes in the mirror. One heavy eyebrow cocked in silent question. She felt her mouth dry up as she stared back.

Zach continued to study her reflection as he asked, "Do you want me to step out for a minute?"

Ciara shook her head, whipping the wild hair around her head and shoulders. Smoothing her curls, she peeked at him through her lashes.

He continued to regard her with the same grave inquiry.

"I just needed to brush my teeth," she explained.

He nodded solemnly and gestured toward the sink.

Shoving her toothbrush under the faucet, she managed to wet it and apply toothpaste without incident. She brushed her teeth with admirable thoroughness while he waited to continue his interrupted shaving.

Never once had he acted as if there was anything unusual about her walking into the bathroom while he was mostly naked. She wore her Mariner's team jersey, but it was clear to her that it wouldn't have mattered if it had been a fancy negligee. He saw her as someone he was responsible for, another victim.

She turned her mind away from the yawning cavern of personal inadequacies that would suck her into the black hole of depression. She wasn't going down that road.

Zach pointed at the sink. "May I?"

"Sure." Ciara took a step back to give him room.

Moving in front of the sink, he rinsed his razor, and then resumed shaving.

There was no reason for her to stay, but she couldn't make herself leave. Watching all those lovely muscles play as he performed such a completely male task mesmerized her.

She knew he didn't love her, or even care about her. His conversation with his sister had made that clear. But he'd been as hungry for her as she'd been for him. Her gaze drifted down his chest, following the trail of silky hair.

"Did you get your story finished?" Zach asked as he scraped the skin under his chin.

"Huh?" She blinked at him.

"The story you were working on after dinner," Zach prompted her.

"Uh no, I've got more to do tomorrow," she said, distracted by the razor's progress down his neck and a dangerous attack of lust.

She didn't have the nerve to come on to him. There had been some progress in the courage department. My goodness, she'd fought off an attacker. Also, when Zach had sneered at her career choice, she hadn't fallen all over herself to promise him she'd work in daycare from now on. Not that there was anything wrong with caring for children. Though she wasn't a journalist, she was still her father's daughter. The *Seattle Daily News* was a fact of her life. There was no way to change something so integral to who she was. She petted the chameleon on her shoulder for courage.

"Did you want to use the shower?"

Ciara hesitated as if she were considering it. "No, I'll take mine in the morning."

When it came down to it, she wasn't brave enough to try seduction. Her heart would be on the line. Correction, not her heart, she was a modern woman, only her ego. She wanted him and Zach was definitely a Mr. Right Now. But, she already cared about him, a little too much.

The truth was she was afraid he'd say no. And even more afraid he'd say yes.

Nope. She didn't have the nerve to grab his towel and jump his great looking bones. She'd have liked to. Even the thought started that core meltdown thing.

Now that she was considering it, which she was, she couldn't stay here with him. What had she been thinking? Nothing, she'd regressed to reacting, and avoiding the issue.

"Could you take me to Regan's?"

Zach's dark eyes met hers in the bathroom mirror. He stroked the razor down the last foamy section of cheek. "Now?"

"Um, yeah." Ciara backed up a step.

"Mind telling me why?"

His voice was silky smooth but that small muscle in his cheek jumped.

Of course, she minded telling him why. Then he'd know she was a completely infatuated silly woman, which she already knew that she was. She shook her head slowly, heat adding unwanted color to her cheeks.

"You don't mind telling me?" He cocked one eyebrow at her. He released the towel at his hips with a twist of his wrist, using it to wipe off the last of the shaving lather.

Her eyes would not obey her. They insisted on staring at what the towel had concealed.

If a sculpture were made like him, no one would ever visit the rest of the exhibit.

He reached out and captured her chin, holding her steady while he lowered his head and staked his claim on her mouth. No sweet brushes this time. Hot, hungry man swept in and ravished. He tasted like beer, minty toothpaste, and passion. A heady combination that stoked the licks of fire already sparking everywhere.

"You look warm. You've got too many clothes on." His voice flowed over her like dark melting chocolate.

He was right. She was hot. She had on way too many clothes, and way too little sense. The team jersey flew off over her head.

He moved forward, a man with a mission, picking her up and striding off to his bedroom. She let her fingers roam, enjoying the entrancing ripple of muscles at work.

His bedroom was simple, almost stark. Like the bathroom, it held hints that a deeply sensuous man lived there. The oak bed frame was functional and sturdy. But it was not strictly utilitarian. She recognized Zach's fine workmanship. What had he said when he had talked about the furniture he made?

*He built things to last.*

What a lovely thought. They made the short trip to his big bed. The sheets were a pure white that was all silky luxury, smelled sunshine fresh and were off the thread count chart. She tried to picture Zach building furniture, making a bed, or cleaning his pristine bathroom. A wave of wanting to know him in intimate ways that had nothing to do with sex washed over her.

The wanting came with a powerful undertow of sadness. She wanted to talk to him for hours. Wanted to see him for breakfast. Wanted a future together. She was doing it again. Getting involved.

Hoping for more than he offered was insane.

He wanted her for sex. Just sex. She'd be a fool to say no. She'd be a bigger fool if she let herself dream about anything more.

Sex, kindness, and protection. It was a killer combination. She couldn't help falling for him a little. It had started the first time she saw him. She wouldn't be able to help getting her heart broken either. It'd be silly to spoil her brief time with Zach by regretting a parting that hadn't happened. It wasn't as if this was the first time that someone hadn't wanted her love.

Sliding down his body, she was distracted by the intimate contact. Her thighs parted. The heat of his erection rubbed against her most needy place. She stood on tiptoe, too short to ride him. All she managed was to tease both of them. Last time he'd led the way, this time she wanted more.

*Wanting more was always a mistake.*

A rough hand soothed down her back. The simple caress undid all her plans for staying sophisticated and keeping this about sex. A humiliating tear escaped, rolling down her hot cheek, and then evaporating on the heat of his chest. He brushed her face with his thumb, erasing the possibility that he hadn't noticed.

"Did I hurt you?"

Ciara shook her head. *Not yet.*

"Why the tears?"

Did he have to sound so warm and worried? "You make me come undone." A totally unsexy choked sob added to her humiliation.

“And this is a bad thing?”

Damn him for sounding concerned when she knew she was nothing to him. She was screwing this up big time. Great sex, that’s what she was tossing away. She shook her head again and another tear escaped.

“Come on, sweetheart. Talk to me.”

She shook her head harder.

“Why not?”

He picked her up and settled both of them on the bed, cuddling her in his lap. Even though she felt the eager bump of his erection against the back of her thigh, it still felt comforting, rather than sexy, to be held. Definitely worse for her composure. She spread her fingers against his chest feeling the steady rhythm of his heart.

“Why not?” His tone was gentle, but insistent.

“Because I’ll st-st-stutter.” A third tear trickled down. Controlling her stutter had been number two on her original hundred-point self-improvement list. The fact that the stutter was only a problem when she most needed to sound in control made it all the worse.

“Sweetheart, I know you stutter when you’re upset.”

That was the second time he’d called her sweetheart. She loved the way it sounded. Honesty couldn’t make her appear any sillier than she already did.

“I heard you talking to Regan.” Ciara tilted her head enough to see his face. The little muscle in his cheek twitched, but the arms around her continued to hold her gently. “I didn’t like hearing I meant nothing to you.” Her tears trickled faster.

“Hells bells, sweetheart, don’t cry. What kind of tough hard-boiled newspaper reporter cries?”

His words just made her cry harder. He hated reporters. Then she started to hiccup. Why even try to pretend she had any pride left? There was zero dignity in scrambling off a bed completely naked accessorized only by red eyes and a runny nose. She was so pitiful that she didn’t even mind how jiggly she looked from the back.

Once she was safely in the bathroom, she slipped on her discarded Mariner jersey. She blew her nose and washed her face. She considered getting all the way dressed and sneaking out. But that seemed too cowardly, even for the devout chicken she’d dissolved into. He’d been kind, decent, and he had to be at least a little disappointed since she’d turned into a puddle of self-pity instead of a wanton woman.

Her track record with disappointed men wasn’t splendiferous. The humiliation of her tequila date still haunted her. She’d nearly blurted out the whole sordid story on Zach’s sculpture worthy chest. Next, she would’ve been telling him she hadn’t had sex since ... well, never mind she wasn’t about to tell him that. Wouldn’t that have made her sound nice and desperate? Just what every man wanted to hear.

Thank goodness, she’d started the hiccupping before she’d totally embarrassed herself. While she stood around second-guessing what she should or shouldn’t have said, Zach strode into the bathroom.

The tic in his cheek jumped. He glowered. This wasn’t going to be pretty. Her hair had gone native—turning into a wild burning bush. Her nose glowed redder than her eyes. Worst of all, she’d used up all her good girl manners.

While she was still busy figuring out how to get out of her messy situation, Zach moved

in and wrapped himself around her. The tears she thought were through began to flow all over again. She stood in his immaculate bathroom sobbing, and he held her snugly. Eventually she stopped. He carried her back to bed. He tucked her close, nestling her spoon fashion with one hand on her hip anchoring her in place.

“When I told Regan you meant nothing to me.” He sighed against her neck. “I lied.”

Her breathing slowed. He cared, love seeped into her bones along with the warmth from his body. “Thank you.”

‘Thank you’ was inadequate. But what could she say? He’d never understand the magnitude of the gift he’d given her. He cared, at least a little, maybe a lot. It meant so much, way more than she should let it, but she couldn’t stop the love pouring through her. He’d seen her, the real Ciara, the one with all the flaws and the big empty hole in her middle. Yet she meant something to him. He’d broken the pattern. Exhausted by all the tears and tension, she began slipping into sweet dreamless sleep.

She needed to say something more. But she couldn’t find the courage to speak about the shiny new feelings swelling in her heart.

“I love your bed. It’s unusual, but beautiful,” she murmured, burrowing into his bone-melting heat. It was far from what she wanted to tell him, but the most truth she could manage.

A few hours later, Ciara woke when he shifted. He’d dozed off. He looked like a fallen angel. She propped herself on one elbow, watching him sleep.

Hungry eyes opened and met hers, held. His hand cupped her hip in silent invitation. Her body responded instantly, the aching hunger she’s felt all night throbbing to insistent life.

She never considered anything other than yes.

## Chapter Seventeen

The whole world was conspiring to ruin his life. His condo, his sanctuary was contaminated. The hacker had been stopped. The place had been swept for bugs. However, the menace had permeated all of the soft surfaces, the carpeting, the upholstery, even the food. He'd had to toss out all the perishables in the kitchen.

Then he was forced to camp out on the leather couch in his office. He'd lost seven pounds in a couple of days. Fortunately, his stash was well sealed.

Six days until the sale. He could hold it together. Squeeze one last payment from the Cabell lemon. Bank a few more dollars from the club. Show up for the closing with the consortium, and then game over. He won.

He'd been doing the same shit for three years with hardly a ripple.

Now, when he was right next door to the pot of gold, the shit hit the fan.

First, the Cabell bitch decided she wasn't taking his calls. He had to send her a wakeup call—her little sister became the unfortunate victim of a mugger. Now that her precious sister was sporting a new set of stitches, the bitch was willing to answer her phone.

He had already deposited her final payment. Plus she'd agreed to help with the reporter. Imagination, strength of purpose, and attention to detail. Those were the real secrets of his success.

The message Tommy was supposed to deliver to the Donovan kid had backfired. According to Tommy, she fought like a tigress suffering PMS. If he had believed Tommy, then he'd be impressed. He didn't, and he wasn't. He was disgusted.

However, revolted or not, didn't change the facts. The Donovan kid was still a time bomb ticking louder every day. Every time he'd made a move to neutralize her, Longstreet showed up. It was as if the detective was permanently tuned to her frequency.

He needed a new plan, one that would address both problems.

\* \* \* \*

Tony munched on an antacid tablet. He hadn't heard from the boss all day. It made him edgy. When the phone rang, he almost tipped his chair over. For a second, his hand hovered over the receiver.

"You stupid fucker ...."

The boss started raving right off the bat. Tony thought about hanging up.

"Is there a problem?" he asked the boss nice and polite.

"Yeah, you hired a federal agent this time."

Tony just listened. Every word the boss said made him surer that he'd made the right choice. The man had always been a mean bastard, but now he was losing it.

Earlier that day, Sam had gotten a call from the boss to get some doctored video ready to go. What Sam was telling him about didn't sit right. He had a wife. He went to church. Maybe he bent the rules now and then, but that didn't mean there wasn't crap that turned his stomach.

Sam felt the same way. After a family conference, they'd all agreed it was time to

make the jump. Although it meant taking some serious chances.

The next afternoon, making sure the coast was clear first, he and Sam broke into the boss's place. Sam had been there before, but Tony had never set foot inside the fancy condo. The boss had always been an anal bastard, but his place was freakily clean. His clothes were lined up like a store's display. The air was odorless. There wasn't a fleck of dust, a water spot, or a stray hair. It could have been a robot's storage unit.

It took only minutes for Sam to install a keystroke tracker. Forty-eight hours, and then they'd retrieve the data.

They weren't greedy. Tony figured they'd hit the boss's account for two million. One million for him and Patsy, and another for Sam. Along with the rest of the money, which Tony had skimmed over the past three years, they'd be fine.



## Chapter Eighteen

Retrieving a condom from the nightstand, Zach sheathed himself with Ciara impeding his efforts more than helping. Then hooking her leg over his hip, he positioned himself at her entrance. She gasped with a thrilled shudder as he pushed in, the satin head of his erection slowly penetrating her tender folds. She clamped down on him instinctively. Zach stilled, giving her time to soften, to accept his intimate invasion. He pulsed and she eased—stretching, surrounding, and possessing. Loving him.

This time the pace of lovemaking was leisurely. The tempo was a slow steady drumbeat from far away, searing Ciara's body, seducing her soul, and stealing her heart. It was enough for now that he wanted her. She loved the feel of him, of being joined as he stroked her with heated caresses. Her inner muscles rippled, caressing him, and all the while, their intimate connection grew stronger under his touch.

Nothing could've stopped the feeling growing inside her from blooming. She couldn't even slow it down. Love flooded all her empty places, bringing light and joy—making her stronger, braver, and surer of herself than she'd ever been.

Slowly the tempo increased, becoming more demanding and more urgent until she slipped over the peak into a cascade of glorious surrender.

She'd never be a warrior princess. But she'd been chosen by a warrior, and that might be even better.

Zach's hunger was the drumbeat deafening her to anything else, riveting her soul with demands for more. For everything. Ciara's defenses shattered, she cried his name as another climax stole her breath and left her deliciously spent. He tucked her back against him. He had to be as exhausted as she was, yet he was still protecting her. She snuggled into the warmth of him, surrounded by strong arms and love. He hadn't said the words, but that wasn't important. He must've felt the magic that she felt. He had called her sweetheart. He had touched her soul. He must love her.

\* \* \* \*

The following day, Zach knew he was in big trouble. He'd turned out to be a total softy for a woman's tears, something he hadn't known about himself until last night. Maybe it was just Ciara's tears. Even if that were true, Ciara having power over him didn't improve the situation. It made it worse.

Zach figured he'd made a mistake. Right along the lines of adopting a baby Bengal tiger. Cute, cuddly and purrs like a tabby, but they get big and hungry in a hurry. Then he'd be kitty food. He'd better smarten up and remember the female was always the more deadly of the species. A lot like reporters. He'd just never met a baby one before. Hadn't recognized the danger. Sure, she was cute and cuddly now, but what about when she had a byline?

He wasn't a kid. He'd been bitten before, and he knew better. The scars from his last encounter with the press weren't visible, but they were as real as any of his exterior wounds.

Ciara had already followed a cop to him. He figured it had to be one of the vice cops.

He'd have to tell Connelly about it. He wasn't sure how he was going to word the report since he didn't have a name to go with the description.

More detail would be good, but getting them from Ciara would be tricky. She caught on fast. He didn't want to give her any ideas she didn't already have. What a mess.

When he'd seen her getting shoved around by some lowlife punk, he'd been stuck. No way could he have walked away. The assault was his fault. He'd set her up for it when he'd taken her into a private room at the club. He hadn't known they were being filmed for sure. But he knew it was a possibility and he'd known the club was under investigation. He'd been on the job. He clenched his fists and blew out a breath of frustration.

The incident with the lowlife confirmed the video of Ciara was up and running. The idea of her picture on some damn web site with one horny pervert after another jacking off while watching her, listening to her, ate a hole in his gut.

The fact that she wasn't completely nude in the video didn't cheer him up. Nothing was more erotic than glimpses of a sexy woman in ecstasy. She was that and more. On a scale of one to ten, she rated a fifteen. The image of her climaxing while they made love should've stayed his personal property.

Pulling on running shorts, he stomped into sneakers. He needed to get out of the house. He needed to blow off steam. He needed to get a sassy little redhead out of his system.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara drank a diet cola and called it breakfast. Afterwards, she took a shower, and then made herself presentable. It was a good thing she wasn't big on the morning meal, because Zach didn't do mornings at all. It was twelve thirty before she heard water running in the bathroom. When he emerged all tousled, unshaved and dressed for running she told herself to stay cool, but her silly heart picked up the pace. He lowered his head for a kiss that promised afternoon delights, and then left her, slightly breathless.

After a few moments, she remembered she had things to do. First, she wanted to talk to Regan while Zach wasn't hanging around addling her thoughts. She rummaged around and came up with her cell phone.

Settling herself into the corner of the couch, she turned on her laptop before selecting Regan's number from her phone list.

"Regan's phone." The deep voice answering definitely did not belong to Regan.

"Ian?"

There was a long, cautious, pause before he said. "Yes?"

"It's Ciara. Where's Regan?" she asked impatiently.

"She's outside the car, talking to some man." His voice was heavy with unhappy tension.

"Why aren't you with her?" Curiosity prodded her to ask, despite her wanting to tell Regan about the latest threatening call.

"She told me to sit tight."

Ciara could almost feel the heat warming Ian's ears. She knew how being shut out felt. She tried to think of something reassuring to say and came up blank.

Ian filled the silence. "Regan said you'd had some car trouble. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No, I've got it covered. Thank you for the offer, though," she automatically refused his offer of help, needing to stand on her own.

"Is Zach taking care of you?" He asked with a note of what? Wistfulness?

The question caught her off guard. "I'm not sure." The words slipped out before she'd had a chance to censor them.

"He won't let you down. He's a good man," Ian said, sounding certain.

"How can you be so sure?"

Silence filled the airwaves. "Sorry, there's nothing I can tell you without breaking somebody's rules. But I know. Isn't that good enough?" His tone admitted it wasn't.

"Please tell Regan I got another call, she'll know what it's about."

"Will do."

"Thank you Ian. I'm sure that you're one of the good guys. Bye."

Maybe it was just as well that Regan hadn't been available. Talking to Ian had forced Ciara to face how unsure she still was about Zach. Her heart wanted to believe he was the real thing--a genuine good guy. But her heart had a lousy track record and she couldn't trust it. She'd been burned before and she needed hard facts, not mushy feelings, before she could trust him. She'd think about all that later. Much later. She still had a story to investigate.

She listed everything she needed to do. Item one was a follow-up call to January. She deserved to know that Ciara was working on her case, even though there was no concrete progress to report.

She hadn't expected to get her and had already rehearsed her message. When January answered her phone with a wary 'hello'.

"Hi. This is Ciara ...."

"Oh, you poor thing. Are they bleeding you, too?" she asked with empathy.

Ciara's head swam as she tried to make sense of the question. *Why would January ask her that? What was going on?*

"I'm not sure ...." Ciara held her breath, wondering if January would fill in the blanks.

"Expect the worst. He's a bastard. I checked the WetnWild site, just to see if it was true and of course, it was. But up until today, I didn't realize they'd picked on you, too."

"I see," she said, keeping her voice neutral. She didn't see at all, and wasn't completely sure that she wanted to understand.

"You'll be lucky if no one who knows you sees it. My Grandmamma heard about it and she's livid. She's having a spell." Laughter, a register above frantic, shrilled in Ciara's ear.

"I'm sure she'll get over it." Ciara tried for lame reassurance.

*She was on the website? Oh my goodness.* For a moment, she felt lightheaded.

"Yeah, but who knows how long that'll take?"

Privately, she thought January was lucky to have someone who cared what happened to her, but she kept that opinion off the record. Instead, she asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm lying low today. Discretion being the better part and all that. Tomorrow I'm heading for the gym. Nothing interferes with my Dominique appointments. Why don't you meet me for lunch at the Westlake Plaza? You could keep me company and get the inside scoop."

"I'd like that, but ...." *I need time to have a hysterical fit.*

"Good, let's say two then, unless you can't make it." January's voice took on the metallic tinge of offended royalty.

"I'll be there."

Facts swirled and theories kaleidoscoped in her head. January assumed that she was being blackmailed, too. But why would anyone want to exploit her? She didn't have any money, well not Cabell kind of money. It had to be related to her investigation. Had they gotten video of her paying Zach for sex?

Zach told her he was working on an extortion case. Could she believe him? Had they found out he was a cop? If January was right about the police being behind the extortion—if Zach wasn't part of it—then he was in danger.

The phone calls, the heavy breathing, raspy voice, telling her she'd be sorry—was the WetnWild website what they'd been talking about?

Oh my lord. She was on the World Wide Web. Not for some notable achievement. Oh no, not her. She was making her debut as the writhing, moaning, star on a sleazy porn site.

The assailant's snarky comments made sense now. He'd seen plenty.

Exactly what words had he used?

"I liked the whimpering, that was the best part. I want to hear you whimper like that for me, baby." His words replayed in her head. Good grief. Sight and sound. Her stomach roiled. She forced herself to take slow, deep, cleansing breaths.

How many people had clicked on that web site? She had to see it for herself.

She needed to confirm the website's content. Ciara bristled at the thirty-dollar membership charge. January had been right. Thankfully, she wasn't life size, but there she was, with her most jiggy parts on display, in un-glorious black and white.

She wished that she had never seen the video.

The sudden realization that Zach had to know hit her hard, knotting her stomach into a ball of pain. He hadn't said anything. Hadn't warned her.

Why would he?

Because he'd arranged it. It all fit. He'd stayed fully dressed, while he'd exposed her, arranged her, manipulated ....

A fresh wave of stomach clenching nausea washed over her. Did he have cameras here? In the bedroom? In the bathroom? He'd been ultra - fast whipping off that towel. Heat raced up her neck, flooding her face to the hairline.

Zach had arranged for her debut as porn star.

Ciara's stomach gave another sickening lurch. She drew in deep breaths of fresh air, letting them out slowly while she tried to think.

At the club, he'd deliberately cut off the cowboy when he'd approached her. Even the bouncer had tried to discourage her from choosing Zach. But, fool that she was, she'd insisted she wanted him.

How clever he'd been warning her that there was a camera aimed at the bed. Never mentioned the one filming them against the door. How could he have done this to her? He was a cop. Time for her to smarten up and face reality. That night at the club, she'd halfway expected him to arrest her for solicitation. Or whatever they called it when a woman hired a man for sex.. But he hadn't been there to investigate, or enforce laws, or even to entrap lonely women.

Technically, he *was* there to entrap lonely women, just not as an officer of the law. He had a sweet setup. He got porn stars for free. Even better, women paid to be exposed to a worldwide viewing audience. Then they paid more to keep their identities private.

Her hands shook as she gathered the items she'd unpacked. She dug a credit card she kept for emergencies out of its secret compartment. She had to get her car towed to the dealer and she needed to rent a car.

By the time she got home and settled inside, with her own walls keeping the world out, fresh anger at Zach's betrayal thrummed through her veins. He'd arranged for all this to happen to her.

She'd thought some of her previous boyfriends were slimy. He was far worse. There was no doubt about his involvement. She watched the video clip a second time, her fury hiking along with her hemline. His fingers disappeared under the lace edge of her panties. She'd burn that damn thong. She'd sure as hell never wear it again.

She wanted to reach through the screen and drag the webmaster into her territory for a good old-fashioned flogging—delivered by her, and her band of hired thugs. Since there was no chance of realizing that particular fantasy, she slammed shut the laptop and went for a long jog. The fresh air improved her thinking.

Forty-five minutes later, she returned home, hotter, sweatier, and more determined than ever. She guzzled a tall glass of cold water and hooked the laptop to the old printer. She re-read her notes. She knew she had to be missing something. She'd rattled someone enough to attack her and disable her car.

Hours passed. Her stomach rumbled. She fixed a peanut butter and chocolate chip sandwich. The niggling feeling that she was missing something important wouldn't let go, but the connection refused to surface. She's done something, rattled someone. But who?

\* \* \* \*

Zach crossed his arms and glared at January, playing his bad cop part. Connelly leaned forward sympathetically. "We can help you, but you have to give us something to work with."

January met Connelly's eyes for a fast second. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said with plenty of blue-blooded disdain.

Connelly didn't seem to notice the heiress's attitude.

"We can keep your name off the record. No one has to know a thing," Connelly said with so much calm assurance that Zach believed her.

"I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do to help you," January said evenly. She scooted her chair back and stood. "Am I free to go?"

Connelly nodded and Zach signaled for a uniform to escort the heiress out of the building. Dwight Abrahams, the local FBI agent, Lieutenant O'Brien, and Chief Logan all crowded into the small room to rehash the interview.

\* \* \* \*

The next afternoon, Ciara watched from the lobby as January zipped across two lanes of traffic before pulling up in front of the *Westlake Plaza*, and then skidded to a stop in front of the main entrance, tossing her keys to an excited parking attendant. She towed Ciara through the double doors of brass and glass.

An elevator ride later, they perched atop surprisingly comfortable stools at Sato's, a sushi bar backed by a view of the bay framed by the hills of West Seattle. The mist obscuring the islands beyond grew thicker as she tucked her glasses away.

Up closer, immaculately uniformed chefs deftly created sushi to order. The sparse

English version of the menu didn't have prices, never a good sign for the thrifty minded.

"My treat," January volunteered with a faintly cynical smile.

Her expression made Ciara squirm. "No, we can split it."

January gaped at her, completely nonplussed, making her laugh.

"Really," Ciara insisted. She considered offering to treat January to lunch, just to see her new friend's reaction, but a more conservative voice prevailed. "Thanks for inviting me, everything looks delicious."

More like strange and skimpy, but she could hope. "So tell me more about the *In Place*, why are you still a member?"

"I doubt I am since I refused to pay." January turned away, ostensibly to study the fog-shrouded horizon.

"Good for you," Ciara applauded her courage.

A silent sushi artist presented their selections with a bow.

January smiled, quick and bright. "You're right. It's time someone said enough. I can't believe I let them bleed me for months. And over what? A little T and A? "What's the big deal anyway? Everyone's got them." She bit into something strange and pink. Chewed. "Grandmamma will get over it. She gets all high and mighty, but April and I are the only family she has," January said, and then muttered under her breath. "Good God, I hope I'm never that old and lonely."

"Why did you keep going to the club for so long?" Ciara asked.

"It was a man—isn't it always? He was special." January's blue-gray eyes shone with sudden tears threatening to spill. She blinked rapidly and patted carefully at the inside corners of her eyes. "At least, I thought he was special. He did this sheik number ... God, it sounds so corny to talk about it. But I'd had this fantasy forever ...." She sat down her chopsticks and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "I fell like a shooting star. At least he wasn't part of it. He left months ago. Someone else scooped up the rewards."

"Bastards." Ciara bristled with shared outrage for her friend's fantasy turned nightmare. Then her thoughts turned to Zach, a man who didn't need a costume to make magic.

"... the silk scarves took it to the next level. I didn't know that ...." January shivered, her expression dreamy and unfocused.

Ciara missed a good part. Her mind zoomed into the scarf department, and then she nearly lost the thread of January's next revelation.

"This detective talked to me. She kept telling me she'd keep my name out of it. What a joke! My boobs are all over the internet and she's going keep my name out of it? "How dumb does she think I am? Don't answer that."

Ciara shook her head in a silent agreement with January's request.

"I know that I'm the reigning poster girl for Airhead of the Year. Which is so unfair! April's much blonder." January's white teeth ground another bit of sushi into expensive pulp.

"Do you remember the detective's name?" Ciara held her breath.

"No, but I knew the man with her. You know him, too. He's Regan's brother. His name's something strange. Zach. That was it. Like Jack, but not quite. I knew it was something funny."

*Hilarious.* Her hopes sank into the cold water of Puget Sound.

"I was *so* not falling for their routine. The deep-throat creep, the one who calls to give

me instructions, warned me he'd know it instantly if I talked to the cops. He wasn't bluffing. My phone was ringing when I got home." Her eyes closed for a minute, and then January gave an almost imperceptible shiver. "He thanked me for keeping my mouth shut."

"You don't think it might've been a coincidence?" Ciara asked quietly as she clung to a strand of hope.

"No. He said other things. Things ... he had to have been there." January's words were as flat and bleak as the expression in her eyes. She angled her head and shoulders away from Ciara. When she turned back, her face wore her default expression, the engaging smile full of self-deprecating humor, which enlivened her famous features, hiding her private pain.

\* \* \*

Squinting at her laptop's display, Ciara logged the results of her lunch with January sans editing, simply pouring in every detail she could dredge up.

Until her lunch date, Ciara had been leaning toward O'Brien as one of the extortionists, or Dwight, the dapper FBI agent, or maybe even Chief Logan. Especially if Zach was innocent. Whoever ran the operation had advance notice of the police investigations. But January had contact with a woman detective ....

Every time her thoughts veered toward Zach's involvement, they bounced back off. She couldn't accept it. She'd slept with him and he was a generous lover, tender, passionate, holding back nothing. How could her heart be wrong about him?

Her inability to accept his involvement in something so sleazy was based on more than his bedroom prowess. He was Regan's brother, and a real life hero—a man who'd spent years protecting the public. The man's record was so upright he squeaked. How was she supposed to reconcile Zach's impressive history with a dirty cop?

One who used his job to ruin lives.

His possible guilt undermined her judgment on a primal level and left her numb with fear. How could the man she was wild about be an extortionist? Or maybe the real question was how could she be so clueless?

Ciara chewed on her bottom lip. She'd lost all objectivity about him. If she couldn't trust her own instincts ....

Disgusted at herself for still racking her brain for excuses for his inexcusable actions, she focused on the facts. What facts were certain?

She did not have any proof Zach was the blackmailer. He had told her the case was about extortion. Confirmation he knew about the blackmail. Chief Logan admitted the club was the subject of earlier investigations. No charges were filed. January refused to pay the blackmailer, and then her face was revealed on the WetnWild website. Another fact verified.

Ciara couldn't prove officer involvement, yet. The ineffectiveness of multiple police investigations was suggestive of an inside connection. It was certainly enough to raise questions.

Then there was the video of her, an incontrovertible link between the club, the website, and Zach.

She wasn't going to be intimidated by a couple of phone calls and an attempted mugging. Big deal. Sure, it had been scary at the time, but now that she thought about, Zach's sudden appearance when she was being attacked had been amazingly convenient.

Even the bits of information she'd unearthed threatened someone.

It had to be someone who knew about her investigation. It was a short list, but those

were just the people she knew about. There were others. There had to be. Someone had filmed her. Someone had edited the tape. Someone had uploaded the footage to the website .... Her stomach rebelled. The chocolate chips sat untouched.

This wasn't about playing favorites, or protecting anyone involved, no matter how much she cared about Zach. She'd promised her dad, but beyond that, she was a part of the press. She had a professional duty to expose the corruption she'd uncovered. It was news, but it was also the truth—a truth that would free January, and who knew how many other women.

Someone was trying to shut her up—intimidate her. A woman with the power of the press was not unarmed. Words were her weapon of choice.

The air-conditioning hummed. Everything was cool and orderly. The normality of being in her own place made her marginally more secure.

She was terrible at picking men. Not exactly news. She could cope with her personal challenges. She was definitely better off alone than with a controlling, manipulative ... hang on. Use the anger.

Anger was good. Anger evaporated the tears that threatened. All the tender feelings she'd felt for Zach made his betrayal slice all the deeper. He'd wounded her. It's not as if he was the first person she had loved who had let her down, but this time she wasn't helpless.

Detective Longstreet was about to get a lesson in the power of the press.

She typed like a speed demon and then saved the file. The article poured out of her. The story wrote itself in strong, clean language, holding to the right side of the thin line between libel and guilt by implication.

She re-read her scathing indictment of the police department. She'd lambasted them for wasting taxpayer's money by setting up elaborate sting operations targeting the city's most vulnerable citizens, lonely women. With a cold bloodedness, any con man would envy ....

It was good—really good.

But would her father think it was worth printing?

She'd deal with that when the time came. Right now, she had more work to do.

She guzzled a tall glass of cold water and hooked the laptop to the old printer. She re-read what she'd written earlier. Polishing, editing a word here, and adding clarification there. She honed the article into an elegant weapon. Hours passed. Her stomach rumbled. She printed the story, and then saved the document to a CD.

\* \* \* \*

"How much of this is true?" Connelly waved a hand toward the Sunday paper decorating her desktop, meeting Zach's glare with cool determination.

"None of it. As far as it applies to me. I don't know who runs the *In Place*, that's what you sent me to find out. Remember?" Bitterness seeped into his gruff words.

Zach wanted to jump up, prowl around the room, and punch something. His Sunday had started with Ciara's article, a sucker punch straight to his gut and it kept getting worse.

"For the record, I believe you." Connelly gave a laugh, short, not sweet. "That and five bucks will get you a decent latte."

"Appreciate it," he muttered. His Lieutenant's faith meant a lot to him.

He'd screwed up. Getting involved with a reporter had been an epic mistake. Connelly's support could mean the difference between patrolling a super market parking lot and continuing to carry the badge that meant everything to him.



"You're off the case."

Zach had seen it coming. It still hurt.

"Your undercover role is blown. There's nothing more you can do."

The hell of it was, she was right, at least about the undercover part.

"You have time coming, why not use some of it?"

"What if I don't feel like taking a vacation?" Zach knew he sounded surly, but it was hard to give a damn.

"You're still off the streets. You'd be working admin."

"For how long?"

"Don't know." She watched him, her expression hard. "Take the time."

"Can I get back to you on that?" Stupid, she'd already made it plain that it wasn't his call.

"Absolutely, take your time. I'll put you down for leave until you decide," she said with clipped efficiency.

Pride kept his helpless resentment off his face. "We done here?"

She dismissed him with a brief wave.

He wanted to beat the shit out of someone. Ciara would've been his first choice, except that would make him as bad as his stepfather. He was almost as mad at himself as he was at her. He'd known what she was and he'd let her in anyway. How could he have been so wrong about her?

This wasn't like the last time he'd been disappointed by a woman. It was much worse.

The current disaster had little in common with his last run in with the press. When headline hungry reporters had spilled his family's disaster secrets all over page one. Ciara had implied he was exploiting women for fun and profit.

The article nearly made him sorry he'd stepped up when the cowboy was chasing her.

If she'd been acting the other night at his place, then she should forget journalism and set Hollywood on fire. When she had taken off without a word, he hadn't gone after her because he was getting in too deep. He should've listened to the little voice of caution, which turned out to be his self-preservation instincts sounding the alarm. On some level, he knew she was a reporter first and last. It was a mistake to care about her. His heart hadn't gotten the memo.

The night stretched out in front of him like the gaping black maw at the entrance to hell. Ciara wasn't a problem he could solve with his fists, or his gun. That didn't mean he had to give up and watch his life flush down the toilet. He had a good head on his shoulders. Time he used it for something other than keeping his ears apart.

An hour and half later, he rewarded himself with a beer. He'd had a good weight training session and pounded out a five mile run, working off some of his mind - numbing hurt and anger.

He read Ciara's article from start to finish. Twice. She'd had at least one inside source and probably two. January Cabell was a given. Pretty, wild, and rich, she might as well have carried a sign that said, *bleed me*. The implication that January had been harassed by cops was baseless. Hell, they'd only questioned her once. He'd been there with Connelly. January had flat out refused to cooperate.

The tops of his ears burned as he realized that he was Ciara's inside police source. She knew he was there undercover. Hell, he'd told her it was an extortion case. There was no direct

mention of blackmail in her article. She hadn't specifically identified him by name. But she'd effectively ruined the operation. Because of her innuendos, his job was on the line.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara saw Regan's number. She very nearly let the call go to voice mail. But she answered after the fourth ring. "Hi."

There was a long pause, followed by a short throat clearing, on Regan's end. "I think I understand why I haven't heard from you all week. But tell me why I shouldn't come over there and kick the shit out of you."

Ciara felt tears well. "Cause it's my job. And damn it, you'd have done it yourself if you were me. You've always stood up to do the right thing." She covered the phone before blowing her nose.

"Dear God, I don't even know how to feel. I'm mad at you, but I want to believe you had some kind of reason for running that story. You know Zach isn't dirty." Her voice made it almost a question.

"I never said he was." Ciara dabbed at her nose with her hankie. She was splitting hairs and they both knew it.

"Yeah but, you talked about undercover cops at the *In Place* and he's the only one there." Ciara nodded too miserable to say anything.

"We'll talk later, when I'm not so upset," Regan's voice cracked.

\* \* \* \*

Regan turned to Ian. "I know Zach's not guilty. And I know Ciara wouldn't lie. So I must be crazy."

"There's got to be another answer. Maybe someone from vice who knows about the operation ...."

"God, I wish. But I don't think so. When I met with Zach's lieutenant, she made it clear there was no chance of a leak. The whole operation had been run really tight. A tech, Zach, Connelly, Zach's old partner, the local FBI agent, Chief Logan, and me."

Ian pulled his rig into Regan's driveway. "Doesn't leave a lot of suspects. So how'd you get included on the short list? Not that you're not brilliant, and a perfect choice for anyone's operation, any time, anywhere."

Regan shot him a considering glance. "She wanted background on January Cabell."

"How well do you know her?" he asked mildly.

"We both volunteer at the Street Angels Center. There are a half a dozen regulars, women working hard to make a difference in the lives of throwaway kids. The six of us take an extreme approach to exercise. We formed kind of casual female-jock club."

"Then January is the woman in Ciara's article, the one alleging that police harassed her?"

"Got it in one."

## Chapter Nineteen

After removing the synthesizer from the lower desk drawer, he secured it to the phone before he dialed January's private line.

"Time to pay the piper sweet-cakes," he said cordially.

"Or what? You'll show my face on your dirty little video site? Oh. I forgot. You already did. And forget about threatening to hurting April, Grandma hired a bodyguard. You can't get within a hundred feet of her," January snarled at him.

"Picture you and a couple of sweet kiddies getting nasty. Going to laugh about that? Think about it. What with you being the spokesperson for the Street Angels. However, you might not care. After all, they're just dumb brats, throw away kids," he said with regret the synthetic voice machine diluted.

"You're a sick bastard, but you're shooting blanks. There aren't any pictures like that of me."

"You wound me sweet-cakes. What's reality got to do with it? Guess you haven't heard about the amazing results you can get with the new media software. I'll have to send you the beta version. Watch your email. I'll be in touch."

Sam had taken a few days of personal leave, claiming a family emergency. Fortunately, he'd thought ahead and had doctored video ready to go.

Five more days and flakey employees were going to be a non-issue.

He returned to comparing benefits and features on different insect screening devices. Who knew what kind of crawly things lived in the tropics?

He needed to prepare.

\* \* \* \*

Tony was walking on eggshells, afraid to breathe as he made his rounds at the glitzy club. He checked receipts, signed off on timesheets, and approved purchases. He and Patsy talked into the early hours of the morning, going over every angle of their plans. Sam had taken personal time from work, explaining it was a family crisis, to fly down to the islands and get their accounts set up.

One more day and Sam would be back. Then they'd recover the data. Another day after that to transfer the money. Tony uncapped the Maalox bottle and then tipped it up, taking a stomach saving swig.

## Chapter Twenty

Two hours later, Zach shifted, already tired of sitting in his car. His little bloodsucker still hadn't come home. He scowled at her postage stamp front lawn. The sun was starting to set. She hadn't even left a porch light on for security.

Where the hell was she anyway? It was Sunday night. Even muckrakers had to rest now and then. She'd probably had a real busy day with all her highflying media friends congratulating her on making the cops look like a bunch of assholes.

Headlights turned the corner and slowed as the car approached her driveway. This was the ninth vehicle that had driven past in the past half hour. He caught the streak of bronze as the hybrid passed his position. He scanned the license plate. Gotcha.

For a second, when she first backed out of the car, he thought she was topless, but it was one of those slinky itty-bitty tops, the kind held on with invisible straps. Technically decent, but not. Her bottom half wasn't any better. Shorts that barely covered her ass. They rode low on her hips leaving at least four inches of soft creamy torso on display. He could see her delicate hipbones, way too much skin for the street, and flip-flops.

Good God almighty, what if she had to run? His temper rose with each of her offenses.

She dove into the backseat and then backed out, gathering groceries, laptop, purse and keys. The woman never traveled light. She straightened, shifted her load, and bumped the door closed with a hip.

"Proud of yourself?" he growled at her, aiming for sarcasm. He heard the layer of hurt in his voice and cringed.

Her keys hit the pavement first, and then the groceries started to slip. Zach grabbed the sliding sack instinctively. Damn, this wasn't going the way he'd planned it.

Shoving the bag back into her keeping, he folded his arms, and then leveled his best tough guy glare at her. "How does it feel to get a byline and wreck my life in one easy sweep?"

Ciara jerked her chin up, stopping the slide of her owl-eyed glasses down her nose. "You're mad at me? That's rich."

She didn't have any problem with sarcasm. Was there a note of pain underneath her words? What the hell did she have to be hurt about?

"What'd I do to you? Rescue you from some scummy lowlife? Feed you. Give you ...." He shut up. No way. He wasn't going to talk about what else he'd given her.

"How c-c-could you?"

Definitely hurt. Damn, even knowing what she was, what she'd done—she got to him.

"I saw the video. Did you come to c-c-collect your extortion money? That's the d-d-deal isn't it? I p-p-pay you and you don't reveal my face." She glared at him.

The ice hardened around his heart. She was a damn reporter and she'd hurt him. She'd learn. He always gave better than he got.

"What the hell are you stuttering about?"

Pretty caramel eyes blinked at him from behind those silly glasses. Then she recovered.

“Next time, stick with unarmed women. I may st-st-stutter, but I write just fine. You and your whole d-d-dirty cop clique are going d-d-down.”

He took a step closer to her, glowering and snapping. “I’m not a dirty cop. The way things are going I’m not going to be any kind of cop. Thanks to you.”

Ciara glared right back at him. He had to give her credit for standing up to him. He had a good twelve inches and a hundred pounds on her and she held her own. Was she brave or crazy? Either way she was red hot, angry, and sexy as hell. God, he was a sick bastard, how could he still want her?

“Right. You’re totally innocent. Tell it to the FBI. That’s who they bring in to investigate dirty cops isn’t it? Or are they in on it, too?” She paused, and then tipped her head back far enough to meet his eyes. “Tell me who forced you into that room with me? Who made you take my money? Who made you film me? Did you get lots more good footage at your place?”

That got his mind off his crotch and took him a step closer. “I didn’t film you. Us. I’m not freaking crazy.”

He studied her face. Long seconds ticked by. She’d believed he was in on it, had orchestrated it. Her expression was easy to read and damn him for a fool, but he’d bet her hurt was genuine. His own mistakes ate at his reasonable anger. Ah shit, he should’ve told her about the video himself, done a little damage control.

There were reasons why he hadn’t and they were still valid. But she’d never believe him. Why should she? How could he explain that there were cops involved? But not him. That would be breaking one of the unwritten rules.

“If you mean that ... we need to talk.” Ciara’s face paled. It wasn’t the kind of reaction anyone could fake.

Too bad, she hadn’t talked to him before she wrecked his life. But then he should’ve found a way to tell her about the video instead of letting her get blindsided by it. Hell, there were plenty of should-haves to go around.

A strand of her hair blew across her face. He reached out, smoothing it back in place, watched her eyelids drift lower, like they’d gotten too heavy to keep all the way open. He was still touching her hair. Unwilling to stop, he slid his hand to the back of her head. He crushed his mouth against hers. Half punishment, half apology, hell, he had no idea what he felt.

By the time, he remembered they were standing in the driveway and forced himself to stop, she had that look, that swollen, bruised lips, heavy-lidded eyes look, the one that begged him, do-me-now-big-boy.

He followed her up the steps. Images from the first time he’d been here crowded his head. He kept his hands to himself. Discipline defined the man. He’d already made serious mistakes with Ciara, mistakes he’d pay for indefinitely. He couldn’t afford to add to that tab. His body hadn’t gotten the memo his heart had already ignored. The one about her being an untouchable little bloodsucker. Even his big head wavered. Terminally stupid.

She’d already written him the biggest drop-dead message of his life.

From behind her, he watched her calf muscles stretch and bunch, moving her up the stairs. Lagging behind improved his view. His thoughts shifted to how good it’d feel to have those long stemmed beauties wrapped around him. Wouldn’t happen, couldn’t happen, he shouldn’t let it happen.

Hell no. She'd screwed up his life.

There weren't any extenuating circumstances that could make him ignore what she'd done. Then why was he working so hard to hang on to his anger? It shouldn't be this hard to stay mad at Ciara.

She shed her packages in the kitchen, walked past her table for two and stopped more than an arms' length away from him. He bit back a grin. She wasn't taking chances. That told him she felt the magnetic pull of attraction, too. Good. It cheered him not to be the only member of the unwillingly-hot-for-my-worst-nightmare club.

Loose notes and paper copies of something were piled on a dining room chair. He picked them up so he could sit down and glanced at what he held. Bank statements for the *In Place*.

He waved the evidence at her. "Where did you get these?"

"I can't tell you that," she lied, blushing and refusing to meet his eyes.

*She was protecting someone.*

He scowled at her. "It's illegal to steal bank records."

"Not if you had a warrant it wouldn't be," she said smiling at him encouragingly.

"I'd need probable cause."

"I wouldn't know about that, but if I explain what is in there, I'm certain you could figure out how to arrange a warrant."

"I'm listening." Shit, she had something, but not a name. Not one she was willing to share with him anyway. Could he trust her? Hell of question. He wanted to and that was a big problem. Forensic accounting wasn't his department but he could smell dirty money heading south. She made a convincing case.

"I'm keeping these," he warned her.

"Fine," she said agreeably. Her tone telling him that she had copies somewhere. Not on her. But he'd enjoy a good old-fashioned strip search.

"Speaking of evidence, tell me you didn't know about the video of us." Her hands curled into fists at her sides.

How the hell had he wound up on the defensive?

"Tell me you didn't trash my life on page one." He countered with equal attitude.

"That article was accurate and your name isn't in it anywhere. Not one word of the article was a quote from you." Ciara was breathing fast. Was it from temper or arousal? "Don't bother trying to tell me all cops are perfect and all reporters are scum—get over it. Your prejudices have nothing to do with this story. The *In Place* is party central for a ring of extortionists."

"Yeah, well."

She interrupted his brilliant rebuttal. "Women are being blackmailed. And there *are* cops involved." Her whole body shimmied with righteous indignation.

She was right. What she'd missed was the glaringly obvious fact that he was trying to catch the guys that were doing it.

"You knew about the video." She stomped one flip-flop. "Admit it."

He glowered at her, but she refused to back down.

"I didn't know about the camera. Until ... it was too late," he admitted part of the truth, willing her to believe him.

"Then why did you take me in there?" Her chin lifted. Ciara never learned. She

sounded tough. But he heard a note of hurt in her voice and it clawed at his heart.

"Stupid," he muttered.

She flinched as if he'd hit her. He knew she'd heard him. Her hurt was easy to read, she thought he meant he was stupid for being attracted to her. He couldn't let the mistake lay, festering between them.

"I was jealous," he admitted reluctantly. Narrowing his eyes to weather the angry rebuff he expected. It never came. Instead, he caught a hint of her fragrance as she leaned closer. The soft smell instantly evoked sensuous memories.

Thankfully, he'd worn new jeans. They were the stiff denim, already tight and getting tighter. Painfully tight, but at least the heavy material obscured his growing hard-on.

He met her bewildered eyes.

"Jealous of me?" Her chin puckered.

He wanted to fold her into his arms and kiss her crazier than she already was. How in the hell had he wound up here? Damn it, he was the injured party. She'd hurt him.

She took a step closer and pushed the tortoiseshell glasses on top of her head. So, she was nearsighted. How nearsighted? Ciara edged closer. Still wary.

Zach watched her eyes, saw the instant they focused. Had his answer. Really nearsighted. She was close enough for him to reach her. He forced his arms to stay down.

He'd already lost the battle with his cock. The poor guy had probably suffered a permanent injury straining against the jeans. He resisted the urge to try to adjust himself.

Zach's heart skidded across the thin line between rage and passion so fast that he didn't even notice the new territory.

Ciara set her glasses on the counter and moved a half step closer to him. She reached out, and then set her hand on his chest. She touched him gently, like a wild bird lighting. It was like she was testing him in some elemental way.

Trusting him didn't seem to come any easier for her than trusting in her did for him. Old wounds and new injuries stood between them. A damn near impenetrable barrier. But she'd reached out, passed all his defenses. His heart began thawing under her soft hand. There wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it. He might as well have tried to stop breathing.

Every breath increased his awareness of her. The warmth of her hand resting on his chest held him more securely than handcuffs. His reasons for staying away from her vanished like a felon with warrants outstanding on a routine knock and talk.

Ciara's fingers curled inward, bunching the fabric of his old tee shirt into a knot. Along with every muscle in his body. Using the fabric, she leveraged herself upward. No sense, but, by God, she had courage. He cupped her ass and gave her a boost. She crushed her mouth on his. Fierce. Hot. Demanding. He rammed back. Using everything he had. Restraint smoked off down the same road as self-preservation and good sense.

Long legs wrapped around his waist. Her heated core dampened the cotton of her shorts and burned a hole in his gut. Ciara leaned back, tugging his shirt off over his head before pulling hers off. Soft arms wound back around his neck. Ripe breasts pressed against his chest. Her nipples teased him as she rubbed herself against him. Oh yeah.

She arched her back, offering him her throat. He nipped at her and then soothed the tiny hurt with his mouth. Wanting. Needing. More.

The table for two beckoned. He parked her ass there for a few seconds--long enough to

get rid of her shorts and that scrap of lace underneath them. Nice, but in the way. He paused to lick the heart shaped birthmark on her inner thigh. Undid the top button on his jeans. Eased the zipper open. Pushed them down. Briefs too. Much better.

Kneeling to attend to her, he noticed the birthmark wasn't the only thing that was heart shaped. God she was lovely. Dark red curls covered plump outer lips. She had layers, ruffled like some mysterious sea creature. He sipped and sampled. Teased. Tasted. The secret of life pulsed under his tongue.

Her thighs clamped down on his ears. To keep him out? Keep him there? Didn't matter. She'd lost her vote along her shorts, but she could beg. He'd like that. Suddenly, begging was what he wanted from her more than anything else. He wanted her desperate. He wanted her wanton. He wanted her writhing with need. For him.

He nibbled. Slowed down. Stopped whenever he felt her tightening. Small demanding hands tugged his hair. He pulled back, freeing himself. Then swooped back in, stringing kisses down the inner surface of her thighs.

Checked her progress with two fingers. Still too tight. His thumb grazed across her swollen clit. She opened further. Got wetter. Let go of his hair and arched against his hand.

Hard work. Man's work. Teasing her. Teasing himself. Waiting. Damn. Hard.  
new paragraph "Please. Come with me."

Begging or close enough. Oh yeah.

Then he lost control. Suddenly, he was standing. Knees flexed. Positioning. Rubbing the head of his cock all over her hot jellied center. Blind. Heat seeking missile. Primed for launch. Rolling into position. Count down. Thrusters on.

Hot damn. His rocket was lo-jacked.

As he nudged her entrance, she softened. Suckered him right in. He was thrusting like a piston. Her dangerous legs wrapped around his hips, urging him deeper. She tilted. Letting him slip past her barriers to get deeper yet. Clasped his cock. He slowed, prolonging the pain and the pleasure. She levered herself upright.

He held himself rigid. She held out a hand. He pulled her against him. Good plan. More contact. He ground against her. Lost the battle. He had to thrust. Now. Oh. Lord. She was making those throaty moans. With no memory of moving them, he found a vacant patch of wall, pressing her back up against it. Smashed against her. Into her. Oh yeah.

Never mind thrusting. Those hot little hands kept stroking him. Touching him. There she went. Silken inner muscles milking him into a dangerous surrender. She opened to him, accepting him deeper into her hot, wet, tight sheath. His rockets launched, hitting the target. Mission accomplished.

Miraculously, he was still going. Make it last, sweetheart. It's the best feeling in the universe.

\* \* \* \*

Oh my goodness gracious. She'd gone crazy on him. All over him. Had she begged? No. Of course not. She'd asked nicely.

A tear slipped out. Damn it, she wouldn't be sad. Well at least not now. Maybe later. Before she had a chance to think too much, they were moving. Without breaking their intimate connection, he carried her to the bedroom. Zach was hard-again. Maybe still?

Then he sat her gently on the bed and positioned her on her knees with her butt in the air.



She could imagine how really awful his view of her was. Then she heard his throaty groan behind her. Suddenly, she was sexy instead of exposed. If he thought this was a good pose then that made it all right. Better than all right. Fine. She almost smiled. The urge to smile vanished into a gasp of delight as his heated erection penetrated her tender center.

She whimpered greedily, it was everything and still not enough ... she needed more pressure, more friction. Oh my gracious, she'd been wrong about the friction. Her breasts brushed the soft cotton of the duvet. Even that slight abrasion sent bolts of sensation straight to her core. He held her hips in an iron grip as he pumped into her from behind. She felt him stroking some new pleasure point, and then her shudders started. She heard someone moaning, begging him for more, and then realized those sounds came from her. His rough fingers found her needy little nub, rubbing with exactly the right amount of pressure. She exploded into a million bits of light, disintegrating, and then, miraculously, reforming.

The night grew late. Time moved slowly, measured in heartbeats and her lover's breaths. What a marvelous thing his body was, part hers. He connected to her in ways no one had, fitting her so exquisitely, hard where she was soft, rough where she was smooth. His taste different and yet familiar—tangy and intoxicating. His smells differed too—musky, warm, and dark. She loved his textures, scratchy, rough, and smooth scars. There'd been so many battles. He had such strength. It was comforting to snuggle against his broad chest, to feel protected and cherished.

His lovemaking grew slower, sensuous, and possessive. Ciara felt herself drawn into those midnight eyes. Melting before he said a word. Before he touched her. Helpless to resist the pull of his hunger. He was so strong, yet he needed her. The combination was irresistible. She surrendered to the passion, to him. Offering him her heart and soul, along with her body, glorying in his possession.

\* \* \* \*

When she opened her eyes the next morning, he'd already pulled on jeans, but hadn't fastened them yet. She eyed his ridged abdomen with its silky arrow of hair disappearing into the unfastened pants. She sighed with appreciation.

His gaze snapped to her face. She sat up, careless of the sheet, heard his quick intake of air. Her lips curved, hoping. "Morning."

"Morning."

The deep cautious voice, his guarded glance, told her everything. She'd gotten too close and he was back peddling out of her life as fast as those really sexy big feet could carry him. Sex with Zach was incredible. But it wasn't enough.

Ciara would rather hate Zach for being a first class commitment phobic jerk, but she couldn't, because even she could see that they would never work as a couple. As much as she hated to admit it, sex, even wonderful as he made it, wasn't enough to bridge their differences.

Not now, when she'd fallen in love with him. Sex actually made things worse. Because it was impossible to guard her heart when she welcomed him into her body.

What a rotten deal. She had finally met a man who not only knew where her G-spot was, but actually pressed it. Then he turned out to be the one man on the planet who hated her. Even worse, she'd fallen for him. She wanted to howl. Why did he have to be so wonderful, so caring, so everything—including jerky?

She didn't howl, much as she wanted to. Even brokenhearted girls had pride and jobs.

She allowed herself another sigh, and then she did what she had to do. She pulled herself together. He wasn't in love with her and he wasn't a morning person. Fine, some of the world functioned during daylight hours, including her. She had a job and she wasn't going to ignore her professional commitments.

Not bothering with a robe, she sashayed past Zach, heading for the kitchen. After all, it wasn't as if he hadn't seen it all before. She grabbed a diet cola out of the fridge, popping the top and downing half of it before returning to the bedroom.

Sunshine filtered through the blinds softly lighting Zach's bronzed torso as he straightened from pulling on his socks. He was beautiful in his own rugged way, but he was all wrong for the feminine room. For her.

When she passed Zach on her way back through, his pants were fastened. The zipped jeans helped, but he still looked way too good. His gaze traveled over her. Turn about was fair. Let him stare all he liked.

She tried to ignore his erotic pull. But she lingered too long, and felt the warmth trickling between her legs. He held himself stiffly, completely unaffected.

She knew damn well he was attracted to her. His pretended indifference made her want to bop him on his stubborn head. A closer inspection showed the skin over his cheekbones stretched taut. But the eyes that raked over her bare skin stayed guarded.

If she didn't know better, she would say he was scared.

But that didn't make any sense. Why would a big tough cop be afraid of her? She dismissed the fleeting impression of fear. Whatever his problem was, she was not going to allow his surly behavior to affect her manners.

"You are welcome to help yourself to a diet cola or juice. I don't do coffee," she kept her tone light and casual.

No big deal, she had hot, crazy, incredible sex with men, all the time, well, with this one man anyway, the big jerk sitting in her peaches and cream bedroom, the one who couldn't wait to leave.

In a weird way, this was normal, for them.

He shot her a glance that questioned her sanity. "No coffee?" He snarled.

"No coffee," she confirmed her answer with a brief, but still gracious smile, holding on to the flare of anger that he stirred with his incredulous attitude.

*What did she look like? A flight attendant?*

"Not even instant?" His voice went up an octave, the same as it would have been if she'd announced chocolate covered ants were for breakfast.

For some reason, he had to keep pushing her temper button.

"No, as in none, zilch, zero, nada. Got it? Oh, by the way, you can quit worrying about me expecting a relationship. I don't do those either. No coffee, no relationship." Her smile slipped a little. She was aware that she sounded way too strident and defensive, but she wasn't going to lie down and let him steamroll over her.

Regan had suffered from the press's coverage of their family tragedy. But she didn't harbor a grudge toward all reporters. Perhaps it had been harder on Zach watching his sister's pain without being able to protect her. Ciara didn't fully understand his attitude, but she'd had some glimmers since he'd told her about his history with the press. The rape, the fight, the murder charge, and the trial had all scarred him. There was no doubt in her mind that the trauma

had been exacerbated by the media's sensationalized coverage of the murder trial.

His memories were different from Regan's, not on the facts, but in the interpretation of those facts. Zach blamed the press, with some cause, for real and lasting damage inflicted on Regan. And on him. Though he had never mentioned his own internal wounds.

Understanding why it was so hard for him to trust her in particular, did not make it any easier for her accept. His distrust still hurt.

Crawling into bed with him made it harder for her to tolerate his suspicions. It certainly had done nothing to make him more open-minded. His assumption that she had no moral compass hurt much more than his complaining about the absence of coffee.

So he was a marvelous lover, admittedly a slight understatement, still his amazing talent didn't change anything. Even if she'd wanted to, she could not remake herself to fit his prejudices. She was Angus Donovan's daughter, heir to a media empire. While she wasn't crazy about reporting—she wasn't going to throw away her legacy. The news was an honorable business no matter what Zach thought. And she was worthy of love just the way she was.

It was clear she wasn't going to get the love she deserved from Zach since he couldn't leave fast enough. She had to find the strength to let him go. She wasn't certain she *could* fall back out of love, but she had to try.

She stood under the hot spray of her shower. The water didn't wash away her doubts. Had she ruined Zach's career for nothing? If he'd really been there investigating, then why hadn't he told her about the video? Because he couldn't discuss an on going operation. It was possible.... He hadn't tried to extort money from her.

What if...? Oh my goodness, what had she done? Her heart sank. Grimly, she determined to renew her efforts to find out who was behind the extortion.

\* \* \* \*

Zach heard Ciara's shower starting as he left the premises. He pulled the flimsy front door closed behind him, checking that it locked. Not that the door, or the pathetic excuse for a lock, would keep out a determined toddler. She needed a deadbolt. She needed a better door. She needed a better neighborhood. Like his.

He hadn't stuck around because it was way too early for any kind of discussion. There was no coffee, for God's sake. What's more, she'd dumped him. Hell, he'd been on his way out the door anyway .... But still. No guy likes getting dumped first thing in the morning. Especially not by sassy, sex freak redheads.

He tried telling himself it was all those months of celibacy, tried telling himself a whole slew of lies. None of them made it past his bullshit meter. He'd done something beyond stupid. He'd gone and fallen for a reporter hungry for a story—his worst nightmare.

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon, Ciara sat third from the end at the big conference table with her back to the sixth floor windows. She had sacrificed the view for the comfort of not squinting into the sun. Everyone set their cell phones to silent, checking incoming messages discreetly.

It was her second real news meeting. Being included with the real reporters was still new and exhilarating. Dad even asked her opinion at one point.

It would've been more fun if she hadn't been tortured over Zach. After the meeting broke up, several reporters stopped by, complimenting her on her article. It should've been a wonderful moment, getting professional recognition from her dad and from peers.

Her father actually smiled at her when he asked for a follow up piece. There'd been talk of a possible series—if her investigation panned out.

There had also been lots of questions, which she didn't have the answers to, and others she hadn't even thought about asking. But he hadn't ridiculed her. He'd listened to her ideas and acted interested. A memorable first.

She should've been jumping up and down, at least on the inside, but her doubts about Zach kept re-running through her head. She wanted him to be one of the good guys so bad she couldn't trust her own instincts. Regan was positive of Zach's innocence, but he was her big brother. Regan's partner, Ian, seemed equally sure Zach was on the right side. But Ian was another cop. Their tendency to stick together was legendary.

She was on her own here. She needed answers. For the story. For herself.

\* \* \* \*

After listening to her messages, Ciara pressed delete as soon as she heard Zach's terse 'We need to talk'. No way. She'd talked to him plenty already. If she wanted to regain her objectivity, then she had to keep away from him.

She pressed next. Vague sounds, like a wrong number left on open air, had her finger on the delete key, then she heard Zach's hoarse 'Sweetheart'. Bile rose in her throat as she continued to listen unable to hang up. Every small groan and endearment confirmed the recording was of last night. She had desperately wanted to believe Zach wasn't involved, but she had to face facts. Who else had the motive, means, and opportunity to bug her apartment? Or for that matter, to make the original video tape from the club.

Coincidence? She wasn't that naïve.

A sickening lurch of her stomach told her extortion had to be what he wanted to talk to her about.

She'd gotten confirmation. Zach was the blackmailer.

The victory was bitter, the price was very high, and he hadn't even issued his demands. What would he ask for?

A chill of fear sliced through her. Sure, she was scared. How had the others felt?

Empathy for the women who'd been victimized surged through her, muting her own dread. What was worse than dealing with an extortionist? Dealing with an extortionist who hid behind a badge. As much as his betrayal hurt, she had to stay objective, she wasn't the only victim, but she was the only one with a chance to expose the dirty cops.

She closed the still open cell phone with fingers gone icy. Whom could she trust to help? She couldn't trust cops, except for Regan and Ian. They were the only officers she was certain were not involved. She'd been friends with Regan for too many years. She'd bet her life her friend wasn't in on the blackmail.

Her phone chimed. She read Zach's cell number on the caller ID with a sinking heart. With nothing to gain by refusing to talk to him, she answered the call. "Hello."

"We need to meet, somewhere public."

"Of course. Small used b-b-bills, right?" Fear made her stutter and she hated stuttering.

Zach set her speech pattern back to junior high level. Since he'd obliterated her hopes for a relationship when he slammed out of her apartment, she put normal speech to the pro side of the dumped by Zach list. That made two items, keeping her integrity intact was the other biggie. The gains didn't really cancel out the humungous con side. But she would deal with her broken

heart later.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asked, his voice cold and impatient.

He sounded so mean. What had she expected from an extortionist? She closed her eyes, wishing she could shut out reality as easily. “Where do you want to meet?”

“Sorry, sweetheart I’ve got another call coming in. Catch you later.”

*Sweetheart?* The word sliced her wounded heart. How could he? But she knew the answer. The endearment was meaningless to him. In the past, she had read something that simply wasn’t there into his words, something like real caring. Time passed, but he didn’t call back. She certainly would not call him. She wasn’t that needy.

Her previous boyfriends were singularly unimpressive, but at least none of them had tried to extort money from her. After the initial sting of his betrayal passed, she reconsidered. Why would Zach want to extort money from her? She wasn’t rich. The only way she could get money was to ask her dad for it. Zach knew enough about her family dynamics to know that would never happen.

Blackmailing her didn’t make sense. Unless he planned on forcing her to stop investigating, and reporting on, his sick operation. That made so much sense that it plunged her back into gloom.

She knew there were audio recordings from last night. Video? She shuddered. Maybe. If there was video then she’d be exposed, but so would he. Last night hadn’t been like the time at the club when he’d stayed fully dressed. Would he care? No. She wouldn’t, well not as much, if she were like him. Not like him literally, but all perfect like him.

Who cared how fabulous he looked? Certainly not her. He was blackmailing scum, the lowest of the low.

Then why did her heart still ache for him?

Ciara ignored both the ache and the anger, keeping her mind on the immediate problem. So what was the worst thing that could happen? He’d put video of her on the WetnWild website. Well, so what? It wasn’t as if it was the first time. She’d live. She didn’t have a sweet little old Grandma to be shocked. If Aunt Maureen saw it, then Ciara would be embarrassed. If anyone saw it, she’d be hurt and humiliated by what should have been private being made public.

After the initial exposure of her body, the threat lost much of its deterrent value. Of course, in the earlier video, her face was blacked out, but who watched porn for the faces?

Stupidly, she still cared what Regan thought, but somehow she didn’t think even an amoral jerk like Zach would expose his sister to that kind of graphic sex. Her chin quivered, but she ignored the pain. He’d miscalculated if he thought he could intimidate her this easily. She wasn’t out of options. She just needed a little time to figure out what they were.

## Chapter Twenty-One

He left the hastily called conference, hurrying to make his next meeting. For four more days, this was his life—paperwork and meetings. Neither one had much to do with law enforcement. Neither did he, these days. There was a time, when Mattie was alive .... Sadness forced him to blink rapidly as it filled his eyes and washed out the industrial grays and beiges of the *Criminal Justice Center*.

There was an upside for him in the turmoil caused by the news story. The Donovan kid had put an end to her relationship with Longstreet when her exposé went to press. Now he didn't need to worry about them comparing notes.

Heads were rolling over this one. Connelly's ass was in a sling since it was her idea to send Longstreet in solo. One more strike and Longstreet would be off the force.

It felt good to be in control. He had the means to ruin the detective. He could upload the uncensored version of Donovan's visit to the *In Place*. The video showed Longstreet accepting her money and engaging in a sex act while on duty. Longstreet's career would be over.

However, why bother? He didn't need the video. There was no point in wasting the effort. Longstreet's career was royally fucked. He didn't need to push him out of the department. He needed to remove the detective permanently. It was the only way to stop Longstreet.

Getting rid of the nosy reporter was a priority, too. Preferably, before she stumbled across anything pointing to his involvement.

The vice squad knew about his connection to the *In Place*. None of them would talk. They couldn't. They were all getting a piece of the action. Tony was a pro. He wouldn't slip. However, if the Donovan kid dug deep enough, or got lucky, she'd find clues. He couldn't take the chance. Eliminating her made sense. It wouldn't be a challenge with Longstreet out of the picture. However to plug all of the cracks, he needed to bring Longstreet back into the game, which made the solution more complicated, but ultimately much more satisfactory.

Pushing the door to the big conference room open, he stood in the back, unable to resist listening to the public relations stooge field questions about police corruption. He hid his delight in watching the department that had screwed him over scramble to justify their organization.

That evening, after going over surveillance tapes for hours, he leaned back in his leather chair and stifled a yawn. He hadn't slept well all week, and these were the same as the last batch of boring audio playback . The refrigerator hummed, the air conditioning whirled as it cycled on and off, and now and then water ran. Those were the high points. He pressed the fast forward button, again.

He expected boring. He'd listened to the Donovan surveillance tapes for days. Nothing ever happened at the reporter's place. Now, suddenly, he hit the jackpot. Moans, panting, obscene endearments, loving profanity and groans.

He was as hard as a whore's heart, and he hadn't taken anything. It was a shame that he hadn't had video cameras installed.

Then he recognized Longstreet's voice and all the fun went out of the playback as the ramifications slammed home. What if she and Longstreet compared notes? Luckily for him, they weren't comparing anything except pleasure.

How the hell did they get back together? Shit! What the fuck else could go wrong? The Cabell bitch hadn't come to heel either, but she would.

What to do about the Donovan kid? He had to drive a wedge between them, buy some time. She needed a nudge. Maybe a slap in the face would be better. The thought made him laugh for the first time today.

An hour later, he dropped coins into a payphone. He got the Donovan kid's voice mail and hesitated. The call couldn't be traced to him. He had selected this public phone at random. He positioned the handheld recorder close to the mouthpiece and clicked play.

That would put an end to their kissy-face games. Poor little reporter, time to learn about the rough side of true love.

Last night's track from her bedroom continued playing. He let it run for two minutes, enough for her to identify what she was hearing.

Longstreet had called her sweetheart. He smiled to himself. Who would've guessed?

Catching the detective's call to the reporter that evening was a nice piece of luck, helped along by excellent preparation. The extra money he'd invested in the cell interceptor paid a handsome dividend.

Then the stupid Donovan kid got snippy. She refused to call the detective back. Shit, she was difficult. When he wanted her to keep away from Longstreet, she was all over him. Now that he needed them together, she had decided to play hard to get.

Time to pull one of his other strings.

"Hi sweet-cakes, keeping it wet for me?" he asked in his mechanically altered voice.

"What do you want?" January asked flatly.

"A little cooperation and a friendly attitude wouldn't hurt," he said, irked by her uncooperative tone.

"Hard to feel friendly toward leeches," she snapped.

Anger shook him. He gripped the phone tighter. "That's going cost you extra, sweet-cakes."

"It always does." January's voice sank with weariness. "Forget about it. I've had it with the whole slimy mess. You go ahead and publish your disgusting doctored porn. Who's going to watch it? Nobody but a bunch of stupid perverts."

"Before you say something you'll regret, stop, and think about your baby sister."

"What about April?"

"Have you ever heard of snuff films?"

"Oh my god," she choked out the words.

"How much sympathy do you think there's going to be when everyone learns she was deep into the autoerotic scene?"

"But she's ...."

"Not? So? Everyone's quick to believe the worst. Especially about those wild Cabell girls. Why should I care? When you can't be bothered to do a simple favor for an old friend?"

"What do you want?" January capitulated. He heard it in her voice.

He loved it when they broke. Complete power over another person. What a rush. Better

than cocaine. No, better with coke. Everything went better with coke. He smiled at his own joke.

\* \* \* \*

One more day before Sam was due back from the *Cayman Islands*. Tony didn't dare take a day off. He was living on antacid and the BRAT diet.

Then the boss called him complaining about Sam being gone. Damn near gave him heart failure. Something must have happened on the boss's end, because he dropped the call. He didn't call back. But Tony was still pacing around the club all night, waiting for the shit to hit the fan.

Tony had been thinking that two million each was a more practical amount. Unless the boss had sucked more up his nose than Tony figured, there should be at least four million in the offshore account. There was no reason for the boss to move it or even check on it. But he couldn't count on anything, and that was eating a hole in his belly. Tony decided not to bank tonight's cash receipts. The idea of a little extra traveling money soothed his pain.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Zach laid out the bank statements on Connelly's desk like a game of blackjack. "What's this?" Connelly asked skeptically.

"Unusable evidence. But it is the money trail from the *In Place* operation ...."

"Show me," Connelly said, leaning forward and scanning the accounts.

"It's more a pattern than a straight line. Start here with the club's business account. See the dates and the deposits? Pretty much what you'd expect, the biggest numbers are Friday and Saturday. Compare those with the Monday transfers out to the Marshall's account. They match, less forty percent, exactly." Zach tapped the relevant numbers to emphasize his point.

"Who's Marshall?"

Zach shrugged. "No idea. We need a court order to get the bank to give us the information they have about the account and the customer."

"Where'd you get these?" Connelly asked, with deceptive calm.

"Confidential source."

"Not good enough. If I'm going after a court order, I need credible details to back up my request. What do you want me to say? My detective took up hacking in his spare time?"

Zach stared straight ahead. Ready to take whatever heat was required. The financial spreadsheets had carried Angus Donovan's initial and date on each page. It hadn't taken Zach long to guess who'd given Ciara the information, or how the old newsman had come by his data. She'd confirmed his suspicions, clearly worried about the consequences of her father's infraction.

"Is that it? You're a hacker?" Her voice squeaked indignantly.

He flicked a glance in her direction. "No ma'am."

"So what do you suggest I do with this?"

"Talk it over with the district attorney's office. Explain that an anonymous source mailed it to one of your squad members. If I have to I'll step up and take the heat."

Connelly pushed back from her desk and stood, turning away from him.

"Okay, I'll try it," she said, meeting his eyes. "And if it gets ugly, I'll throw your ass to the wolves. Sit down. You're going to walk me through every entry on these sheets. And by the way, you don't follow orders for shit, Detective, I told you to take some personal time. Someday you and I are going to come to an understanding about the chain of command."

"Yes ma'am."

\* \* \* \*

That evening Zach called Ciara's cell phone from home and left a terse message. "We need to talk." If he was even half as smart as he thought he was that was exactly what he'd do. Talk. This time. He'd had good intentions last night.

Meaning to do the right thing was the new theme song to his life.

He'd meet her somewhere public, then he would stay on task. When she'd explained about the bank records, he made sure she'd understood he would need to pass them on to get a

warrant, and that would involve his Lieutenant. Now, he owed her the chance to convince her father to come forward, before he was exposed as a hacker. If Donovan cooperated then he would get a slap on the wrist for invasion of privacy—a great tradeoff for the bank records, which forged a solid chain of hard evidence.

Before he met with Ciara, he needed a witness and back up, someone who was not on administrative leave, the kind of guy who'd say yes before he even knew what the favor was. O'Brien would be perfect. They went back a long ways.

Zach called his cell but he must have been in a no service zone. Zach didn't get even his voice mail. A prerecorded message announced his party was unavailable.

Zach ran through the roster of men he'd trust and the ones who would return the compliment. It was a short list and two of them were working. McKnight answered his phone on the second ring. His sister's rookie partner had turned out to be a stand up guy. The only drawback to McKnight was that Ciara knew him. So the rookie would have to stay out of sight. Not ideal, but workable.

He glanced at his watch, time for dinner, but he wasn't hungry. He pocketed his cell phone and headed for the shop. A chest for extra linens waited to be hand sanded. Woodworking would ease the tension knotting his neck and shoulders.

Running his hand over the already smooth wood, one small snag bothered Zach—Ciara hadn't called him back. He sat down the sanding block and called her again, repeated his request that they get together. She said something dumb about used bills. He'd been trying to get some sense out of her when he'd had another call coming in from McKnight and he'd ended his conversation with Ciara.

Zach's cell buzzed, caller ID showed as blocked. Could be Ciara calling back from one of the paper's sales lines.

It wasn't.

The voice was female, probably. That's as far as he'd be willing to testify. She used one of those voice modifiers that made everyone sound sexless and mechanical. She promised to give him the blackmailer, identity, location, everything.

He was disappointed it wasn't Ciara. He'd become terminally stupid. Thoughts of irresistible redheads took a back seat to solving the case. He left a message for Connelly on her precinct voice mail, filling her in on the details.

Since Zach had arranged for Ian to watch his back earlier, the only things he needed to change were the venue, his clothes, and the stakes.

The call sounded like an extortion victim who'd gotten fed up with her cash cow role. Most likely January, since she'd have access to his cell from Ciara. He wasn't complaining. It was a break for the good guys.

The timing could've been better. It would've been nice to bust the case before getting himself pulled from active duty. But this would make a nice collar for McKnight, and would go a long way toward getting Zach back in action.

Connelly hadn't confiscated his gun or his badge, but he'd be in deeper shit than he was already in if he had to use either one. He kept them in reserve, arming himself with a knife strapped to an ankle and his backup piece, a smaller version of department issued Glock, fitted against the small of his back. A loose sweatshirt covered the slight bulge.

A check of his watch showed a half hour before show and tell time. It'd take him twenty

minutes to get across town. He headed out. McKnight knew the territory. He'd catch up. Besides, Zach wanted to get there early—scope things out.

Five minutes ahead of his estimate, the lights had all been green, Zach parallel parked between a pair of dumpsters. The narrow alley two blocks from the meet offered handy concealment. He checked around, including over his shoulder, before he eased out of the alley, blending into the night shadows.

Zach stood for a few seconds, eyes closed, to maximize his night vision. A patrol unit cruised by. He avoided looking directly at their headlights, automatically noting the car's number. Several minutes passed before another car, a late model SUV with a middle-aged male driver, illegally tinted windows, traveling south past his position.

If he'd had a radio, he would've run the plate. He counted on McKnight picking up his slack. From Zach's point of view, caution ran the gamut from sloppy, to careful, paused at paranoid, and went the final distance of staying alive.

A chill tickled the back of his neck. He'd had been undercover most of his career, but he'd always had the comfort of the force behind him. Not tonight. He was a soldier without orders or an army. Lucky for him McKnight had agreed to cover his back.

He knew the neighborhood. There used to be a meth lab out behind the convenience store on the corner, the one with the barred windows and the pre-pay-only-self-serve gas. Two blocks down there was a pharmacy. The small boarded up stores in between were abandoned shells or else closed for the night behind the steel plate roll-downs.

A wino meandered toward a sheltered doorway. Then four teenage boys moved down the opposite side of the street, each jostling for head of the pack, hitching their low-slung, and slipping lower, pants every few steps in an awkward ritual dance.

A change in the air next to him registered. Heat maybe, or a disturbance of the currents. A person and far too close. The knife from Zach's ankle pressed against the man's throat before he recognized McKnight, and released him.

"Glad we're friends. Hate to think how you treat guys you don't like," McKnight said as he rubbed his neck.

"Guess I'm wound up a notch." He grinned at his backup. "Or two. Did you get the plate on the SUV?"

"Yeah, I called it in. Data's stacked up right now. They'll get back to me. So what is the plan for tonight?"

Zach filled him in on their operation. McKnight added a few thoughts of his own before they split up, each moving to his assigned sector.

The punks moved on. The wino settled in his doorway. A stray dog moved east, tail between its legs. The moon lurked behind thickening clouds.

Zach blended with the night as he prowled toward the designated intersection. A clap of thunder presaged large wet blotches of rain hitting the cracked sidewalk like paintball misfires.

Nothing stood out as a threat. But something was wrong. The hairs on the nape of his neck and the clenched muscles in his shoulders whispered danger.

\* \* \* \*

The phone was ringing as she unlocked the door. Ciara juggled her laptop, purse, and keys to retrieve her cell.

"Ciara, I know who's behind the blackmail. I need you to meet me," January said it as if

she were reciting a memorized piece of propaganda.

When they'd talked in the past January had been funny, sarcastic, and on occasion, angry. Now she sounded like an automaton.

Ciara felt a bit mechanical herself, like a wind up doll that had wound down. A glance at the wall clock confirmed it was after eleven. It had already been a long day.

"How about tomorrow? I could meet you ...," she started to offer.

"No it has to be tonight," January's words echoed, flat and evenly spaced.

"What's so special about tonight?" Ciara pulled off one of her new yellow Italian pumps and massaged the ball of her foot.

A high-pitched laugh prefaced January's reply. "I'll lose my nerve if I have to wait. It has to ... you have to come tonight."

Ciara heard something clicking in the background.

"All right. We'll do it tonight." She kept her voice low and calm. "Tell me where to meet you, and I'll be there, or you could talk to me now." She added a smile to her nice-reasonable-person voice, hoping to convince January that she could rely on her.

"No, I ... it has to be in person. Meet me ..."

That was the second long pause in as many sentences. Ciara's stomach hardened into a compact ball of miserable nerves. Who was scripting January's side of the conversation? It would have to be the blackmailer.

Ciara might crack the case.

She might get herself killed.

"I won't use your name. No one will ever know we talked." Reassurance oozed from Ciara's words, but January's answering laughter grew even edgier.

Then came the odd clipped, wooden tone. "Meet me at sixteenth Northwest and Trenton Avenue. Half hour."

The line went dead.

Ciara didn't know the intersection, but the internet mapping service came through with an impossible to follow purple squiggle on a pale lime street grid. Lucky for her, driving directions were included.

She'd promised January she wouldn't talk to Regan, but she was the only cop Ciara knew for sure wasn't involved. Regan never discussed police business, getting anything out of her was like trying to get something quotable from a bunch of razor clams. Ciara hadn't even tried to pump her about this case. She hadn't spoken to her in days. Even so, she was still her best friend. She called her on her way to the car.

Regan's voice mail picked up after a few rings. "It's me. I know you're mad at me and you're probably asleep anyway, but I wanted some insurance. I'm meeting January Cabell in fifteen minutes at ..."

It wasn't much. She'd feel safer with a handgun, if she knew how to shoot. Since she didn't and she was fresh out of nine millimeters anyway, the phone call had been her best idea. Voice mail suddenly seemed scant protection.

She followed the directions to an unfamiliar section of town. Broken streetlights, boarded up storefronts, and a lack of parked cars added extra tension to her snap-crackle-pop nerves.

January's luxury sedan was nowhere in sight. Big surprise. She felt like a kid in shiny

gold costume who'd accidentally tumbled on to the sound stage of a forties gangster movie, painfully aware that she was conspicuously in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Driving all of five miles an hour, she rolled closer to the intersection. She gripped the steering wheel so tightly she feared the column would bend. She read the street sign swaying from the traffic light's cable. She'd found the right address, but nothing felt right.

She wished January would pull up laughing, ready to share the joke.

Nobody came. What now? Wait ? For how long?

Her heart galloped and her teeth chattered. She clenched them to stop the irritating noise. Tension made her sweat and shiver at the same time.

She parked, left the car running, but shut off the headlights, wishing that the hybrid had a noisier idle. She waited, feeling as if she couldn't get a decent breath. Needing more air, she lowered the passenger window. The atmosphere was heavy with ions. She smelled the coming rain. Her eyes strained to see details in the dark. Her ears harked to hear anything over the thuds of her racing heart.

There, across the street, something moved between the doorways. A car drove past, briefly illuminating the scene. A raggedly clad man rolled his back to the street. She shifted in her car seat, twisting her head without easing the tense muscles. Thunder clapped, making her jerk. Large splotchy raindrops hit the car's hood.

She scanned the area in a pattern. Craning her neck and twisting in her seat to see as much of the territory as possible.

Movement.

She stilled, leaning forward in her effort to distinguish the shape. Debris tumbled by the wind? No. Too purposeful. She saw it again. A man.

\* \* \* \*

*What the hell was Ciara doing here? Stalking him? Ridiculous, she couldn't have known he'd be here. Unless she'd been the one who'd called him? Nah. It didn't add up. If she knew who the blackmailer was, she'd have run with the story or used the information for leverage with the police. He'd have heard about it. The Seattle Police Department grapevine operated at speeds NASA only dreamed about.*

Grimly he concentrated on the shadows in front of him, ignoring Ciara, and trusting Ian to cover his back.

Zach knew this was a trap. The disguised voice and deserted street screamed ambush. The trick was to flush out the trap setter without getting dead.

His nerves, already on high alert, frizzled with the added distraction of Ciara's presence. Ian took up his post across the street. Zach had no way to signal him to get rid of Ciara. Not that getting her to leave would be easy, or even possible, without a lot more time and attention than he had to spare. He turned his back to her, forcing his attention on the scene.

The low growl of thunder boomed closer, louder.

No warning, just the bark of a handgun too loud, too close.

Deadly force slammed into Zach's back, knocking away his consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara heard more thunder claps, closer. No, not thunder, something else. The sound crisp. Like a car's backfire, or fireworks, but not. Gunshots!

The loud bangs still echoed in her head as her gaze locked on Shadow Man staggering

and falling. A car leapt to life. Squinting at the flare of headlights, she saw it racing straight for the crumpled body.

Instinct grabbed her steering wheel and engaged the drive function. She didn't think at all. Her movements ground down to a basic stimulus-response pattern. She had to protect the helpless man. Her car charged forward, a small bronze missile, blasting toward the dark threat of the looming SUV.

Her daring forced the other driver to choose hitting her head-on or turning aside. The big vehicle swerved to miss her a half second too late. A sickening screech of crumpling metal signaled a mangled rear quarter panel. Her car spun out, tires squealing. She fought for control, steering relentlessly into the direction of the skid.

She prayed for the brakes to work, pressing them with desperate force. Finally, the car lurched up on the sidewalk with a teeth-rattling jolt. Clawing free of her safety belt, Ciara tumbled out onto pavement.

She dashed to the downed man, fear clutching her throat, making it hard to breathe. Seeing long dark hair spilled against the sidewalk, she pressed her fist hard into her mouth, wanting to deny the evidence in front of her, but knowing it was Zach who was lying inert on the cracked cement. A gun lay on the ground next to him. Another weapon still clutched in his right hand. Her limbs afflicted with a strange weighty malady. She was too slow, too clumsy, too scared, and she had no time.

She held her breath while checking him for a pulse, stifling a sob of relief when she found it, muttering prayers for strength and help.

She heard Ian's voice, steady and reassuring as he talked to a dispatcher. "I need help. An officer's down at the intersection of Trenton Avenue and Sixteenth Street ...."

Concentrating on Zach, Ciara examined first with her eyes, and then carefully with her hands. Fear had paralyzed her for only a few seconds. Now those moments felt way too long. Her fingers trembled as she tugged off her tee shirt, and then used it as a makeshift tourniquet on Zach's wounded arm.

The puddle of blood under him smelled coppery and shimmered in the flickering streetlight with deadly menace. Spreading stains of red bloomed on both sides of the tourniquet. The wound to his upper arm didn't explain his stillness. Where else was he hurt? Why wasn't he moving?

She heard sirens and thanked god for the fast answer to her prayers.

Within seconds, Ian was kneeling beside her, shadowing her actions. She kept pressure on Zach's arm wound for long minutes.

Then the deserted intersection exploded with light, noise, and action. Patrol cars, an ambulance, and a medic unit roared up, all with sirens wailing and lights flashing. Each parked haphazardly, spilling people into the controlled chaos.

Rough hands pulled her away from Zach. She didn't protest. Medics took her place. A big tent of tee shirt slipped over her head. The garment, still warm, felt comforting. Someone reeled off her Miranda rights. He sounded like Ian, but that didn't make sense. A hand closed around her upper arm, not painfully, but with enough force to convince her cooperation was her best choice.

"Gun's right here," a voice pronounced with a mix of excitement and disgust.

She wanted to ask about Zach, but the words weren't forming. She felt cold, heard a

buzzing sound, and then saw stars, which she'd always thought was only an expression. Then nothing.

\* \* \* \*

Regan watched as Ian swiveled, scanning the area, and then locked in on her. Perhaps stray pheromones had announced her presence. She hadn't needed hormone markers to zone in on him the moment she'd entered the surgery waiting room.

Ian would draw any woman's attention. He had on black jeans, but his shirt was missing in action, his torso protected by the thin body armor vest. For a second she thought he was injured. She sprinted toward him, searching for signs of damage. None. Gratitude flooded into her system along with oxygen as she grabbed a huge breath, right before she threw herself into his arms.

He caught her. Held her tight. Whispered a litany of reassurance as he ushered her into an empty office. He handed her a clean hanky, giving her time to regain her composure while he kept one arm around her.

"Zach's been shot." She raised her tear-stained face, needing to see him more than she needed to hide her vulnerability.

"I was there."

Regan's gaze flew to his at the cautious tone of his voice. "You were there?"

"Yeah, but I didn't see the shooter."

"What were you and Zach doing there?"

"Anonymous tip. Zach called me for backup."

"Put me in the picture."

Ian closed his eyes and thought for a couple of seconds before he started.

Regan didn't interrupt. When he finished she could've diagramed the scene for a jury with complete confidence.

"After the shooting, then what?"

"Ciara must've run right to Zach."

"How'd she beat you?"

He smiled. She realized he'd taken her question as a compliment.

"Somebody whacked me, took me a couple of minutes to find my feet." Ian admitted.

"Dear God. Are you all right? Has anyone checked ...?" Her hands threaded through his hair probing gently until she found a significant lump.

He pulled back with a minor grimace as her fingers found the tender spot. "It was the noise from the crash that roused me. A late model black SUV roared through the intersection hitting Ciara's car. He scraped her rear fender hard enough to spin her completely around. She barely missed running over Zach with her car. The impact didn't even slow the SUV down, but her quick response kept him from hitting Zach."

She asked her next question without words.

He paused meeting her gaze. "Yeah, I got the plate. I called it in. Stolen, been on the hot sheet for two days. When I turned back Ciara was on the ground working on Zach."

"Wrapping Zach's wound," Regan murmured, assessing Ian with a practiced eye, and then deciding it wasn't worth the argument it would take to get him checked over. She turned her thoughts back to the scene he had described. "Tell me about the weapon."

"Don't really know much. One of the uniforms spotted and bagged it."

Nothing made sense. Her head already ached from tension and from trying to understand. Why was Ciara being held? She wouldn't shoot anybody and especially not Zach. She didn't know anything about guns, didn't even own one.

"So Ciara didn't actually have possession of the weapon?" Regan asked, still trying to understand the situation.

Ian shook his head. "No, it was on the sidewalk."

"Concealed?"

"No, the piece was in plain sight ...." Ian frowned. "Where it would've been if she'd dropped it on her way to Zach."

"You think she tried to kill him." Just saying the words made her want to gag.

"No, I don't. If Ciara shot him then who drove the SUV? If she'd brought a gun and lured Zach there then it couldn't have been accidental, or even a crime of passion. It had to have been premeditated. She used her top to wrap Zach's wound. It's hard for me to picture a cold-blooded killer whipping off her shirt to treat her victim."

"You loaned her your tee-shirt," Regan murmured letting her hand rest over his heart. She felt his pulse beat reassuringly against her palm.

The door opened behind her.

"Ms. Longstreet?"

Regan turned and nodded.

A nurse in pink scrubs greeted her with a polite smile. "Come with me. The doctor will talk to you now."

\* \* \* \*

When Ciara regained consciousness, a medic was leaning over her, using a small penlight to burn her pupils.

"You might want get her checked out later, but she looks good to go to me." The medic's words were clipped, his touch brusque beneath the latex gloves.

Paragraph indent insert Nothing made sense and she was too weary to struggle with understanding. The next time she regained consciousness, she was being pulled from the backseat of a patrol car. Her arms were cuffed behind her back. Lights flashed without warning, and the concrete sidewalk lurched alarmingly. Voices buzzed in a confusing layer of noise barely audible over the ringing in her ears. Her head throbbed. Bile rose to the back of her throat, and then she vomited on her shoes, sending white sparks of pain lancing through her head.

This humiliating episode was followed by more pulling and prodding into harsh lights. She was in a part of the precinct that she'd never seen. Someone removed her handcuffs, spraying, scanning, and then painstakingly examining her hands. The next stop was a photo op, then an intrusive personal search. It got harder to act brave and dignified without her clothes.

Feeling sub-human, needing to brush her teeth, and with her head throbbing mercilessly Ciara stumbled along. She tried to follow the directions given when she understood them. Still numb, she hoped for a moment of enlightenment, the one where her captors exclaimed, "Oh my goodness, what a horrible mistake!"

It didn't happen and sooner than she'd thought possible she found herself missing the nice restful blackness. Even vomiting took on nostalgic overtones. Misery settled hard and cold in her chest, stealing her breath, but not numbing the pain of her loss. Pain resonated on a single



word, howling ceaselessly inside her heart—Zach.

She asked for, and was granted, a bathroom pass with an attendant. Her arms were released, and she rinsed the foul taste from her mouth, which helped calm her gag reflex. Her reflection in the lavatory's polished steel mirror was scary. The black tee shirt Ian had loaned her wouldn't have been a good color for her, even if she hadn't been so pale that she could pass for one of the undead.

After the restroom mercy stop, she was placed in a bare room. It smelled faintly of disinfectant and not a nice pine scented one, more like straight bleach. Under the acrid odor other, less pleasant, scents seeped through. The room was plain, done in operating room green. The effect was pale and bright, like sickly moonlight. A few splatters that didn't bear thinking about marred the perfection of the paint. She shuddered.

It was impossible for her to measure time inside the green room. She'd been there long enough to be tired of sitting on the metal folding chair. Long enough for the numbness to have worn off completely, leaving her a throbbing lump on the side of her head, stinging scrapes on her knees, one elbow, and the side of her face. And worst of all, a gaping hole of pain and fear for Zach's safety ate into her heart. How could she have ever doubted him for even one minute? Guilt over having suspecting him of being the blackmailer assailed her, adding another layer of misery.

\* \* \* \*

Getting dressed with one arm took patience that was in damned short supply. Zach broke out in a clammy sweat. His hand trembled from what should have been a snap job before he was halfway done. Regan had gone to get his prescription filled. Then he could leave the hospital, as soon as he managed to clothe himself.

McKnight stood, watching whatever sights the seventh floor window offered, tactfully ignoring his struggle. Zach's feet were too far away. He skipped socks and pushed into already laced running shoes.

"You sure about this?" the rookie asked, rotating to face him.

"Yeah," Zach growled through clenched teeth.

"The doctor said ...."

"I got shot in the arm, not the ear," Zach barked, and then counted to ten before continuing. "I've been wounded before. I know the drill. The faster I get home, the faster I'll get well."

"I hear you," McKnight said equably.

Zach pulled his shirt over his head, shoving his good arm through the sleeve. The other sleeve flapped over the bad arm under the shirt. Good enough. He stepped back, grateful for the chance to sit on the hospital bed for a few more minutes.

He eased himself down, forcing himself to take slow, deep breaths. No panting like a dog. No groaning like an old man. Getting shot aged a guy. He sure as hell felt old enough to groan. It would get better. It always did.

The trip from the hospital bed to Ian's rig took a lot more effort than it should. Once situated, his breathing evened out fast, and thoughts beyond the logistics of moving a too large body with one bad arm resurfaced.

He wasn't in the best of moods. Things hadn't been going all that well lately. First, he got to choose between vacation, or administrative leave. Next came the ambush where he got

shot twice. Once in the back. Then he lost blood he was very fond of, he'd suffered a concussion, and had a large nasty hole in his left arm.

The only bright spot on the horizon was that he didn't have to worry about being attracted to a reporter. Funny how a woman shooting a guy turned him right off her.

Or at least, it should.

Putting his perverse taste in women aside, her serving time would put a definite kink in their relationship. Apparently, he'd been a lot less fussy when he was unconscious. He still hadn't assimilated what McKnight had told him about Ciara giving him first aid. It made no kind of sense. Why would she shoot him and then try to save his life?

There were infuriating blanks in his memory. He remembered going to the meet. Remembered thinking it had to be a trap. Remembered Ciara peering into the night from her car. Remembered the noise and getting slammed in the back.

Thank god, he'd worn body armor. He'd gone down hard. The second shot must've clipped his arm, but he had no memory of anything between the first shot and the ambulance ride. The doc said he'd hit his head hard enough to give a thinner skulled guy serious problems. The bad news was he'd likely never remember any more than he already did.

McKnight had been suckered punched and had holes in his memory, too. By the time McKnight had regained consciousness, Ciara had already been applying a tourniquet to Zach's arm. The rookie maintained Ciara couldn't have been the shooter. Zach wanted to believe that way too much to trust his conclusion.

On the way to his place, Regan tried to sit in the back with him. He'd been forced to claim he wanted to stretch out to keep her from mollicoddling him for the whole trip. She'd sat up front, but spent most of the time twisted around to face him.

McKnight didn't say much. After Regan had swiveled to check on him for about the fifteenth time, not that he was counting, McKnight caught her wrist and said something too low for him to catch. Then his sister flushed and stayed facing forward like a good passenger.

"Mind stopping by the precinct?" Zach asked.

"Sure thing."

McKnight altered their direction and they proceeded on course for the station. Zach figured Regan had to be biting her tongue. To give her credit, she kept quiet.

He wasn't sure why he'd asked. Closure? Maybe even forgiveness. It seemed like a good idea. He didn't plan to waste the next ten years of his life kicking himself over falling for a headline hungry reporter.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara blinked hard and tried to get in touch with her inner warrior princess to keep the tears from falling. The only problem with her plan was her inner spirit seemed more wounded waif than warrior. She reminded herself O'Brien couldn't know how she felt inside. Every woman was part actress. She straightened her spine and raised her chin. Bring it on.

She shouldn't have been surprised to see Lieutenant O'Brien, but she had been. She stood when he came in, instantly wary. He held out a chair for her as if he were seating her in some fancy restaurant. She sat back down and damned if he didn't help when she scooted her chair closer to the table.

"Lieutenant Jake O'Brien badge number..." he intoned the details that identified him and the date and time of the session enunciating carefully for some unseen recorder. A check

around the room showed a small video camera, mounted in a corner, like a spider in a web, so perfectly situated, she missed it on her first scan of room.

“State your full name for the record,” O’Brien directed flatly.

Oh, goody, a question she knew the answer to. She complied.

“Your address.”

No problem with that one either.

She asked what she was being charged with, even though she had a good idea.

O’Brien explained the indictment process with exaggerated patience, emphasizing she hadn’t been charged. She was being held for questioning.

“Am I f-f-free to go then?” She hated stuttering, hated even more the wishful note, which crept into her voice without permission.

“Not at the present time.”

It wasn’t the answer she wanted.

He began asking tougher questions. “What were you doing at the intersection ...?”

“Meeting a friend,” Ciara answered, thinking it sounded lame, even to her.

“This friend’s name?”

She hesitated for a few seconds, deciding there was no reason not to answer. After all, meeting someone wasn’t illegal. “January Cabell.”

All the while O’Brien questioned her, she tried to make sense of his role. Was he part of an elaborate sting operation? Or was he part of the extortion ring?

He studied her for long minutes. His steady regard made the scrape on her cheek burn all over again. While he examined her as if she was a DNA slide, she worried about what had happened to Zach.

“How’s Detective Longstreet?”

O’Brien ignored her outburst, asking her to tell him everything again starting from January’s phone call.

She tried to read something in his expression or manner that would give her answers to her questions about Zach. No luck. After reciting everything for the umpteenth time, she lapsed into silence.

The detective committed her features to memory then he began studying a file he’d brought with him. Briefly, she saw his eyes widen in surprise. What had he seen? His unexplained reaction bothered Ciara so much she quit worrying about Zach for maybe a minute. What could’ve surprised a hardened cop? There couldn’t be anything all that shocking in her file. She’d only begun her criminal career a few hours ago.

“How long have you been involved with Detective Longstreet?” he asked.

Ciara met his eyes, hoping for human understanding. No luck again. All she saw was freezing cold cop regard. She’d seen the same kind of expression on Zach’s face. The one that said yeah technically, you’re a human so I’ll keep this clean, but you’re not even the same species as me.

She ignored his question. He did it all the time with her questions. He repeated himself a bunch of times, but she could be stubborn, too.

His questioning went on and on. So did his refusal to acknowledge her repeated requests to know how Zach was doing. Being stonewalled had made her frantic. She was willing to return the favor.

“Let’s start at the beginning ....” It was one of O’Brien’s favorite phrases.

Ciara started to shake her head, but stopped because any movement aggravated her headache. “I’ve told you everything I know at least ten times already.”

“It’s in your best interests to cooperate with us. If you’re innocent, then you have nothing to hide. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by answering my questions. Let’s start at the beginning,” he said with maddening reasonableness.

Ciara sat straighter, meeting O’Brien’s cool gaze. Her chin came up another notch as she stared back. Her head hurt, and he wouldn’t tell her if Zach was dead or alive. She made up her mind. She wasn’t saying another word. Let them arrest her. A lot of investigative journalists got arrested.

“I’ve ....” Damn, she’d already forgotten her resolution to shut up. “I want an attorney,” she demanded, pressing her lips together to keep anything else from escaping.

O’Brien frowned and read through his notes. Finally, after what seemed like more hours, he left.

Ciara closed her eyes for a minute. Much too soon, he was back. The pattern was already familiar. Though the familiarity allowed no respite from the tension. Studying the detective through her lowered lashes, she saw taut muscles had tightened his mouth into a slash and a vein pulsed on his temple. He wasn’t holding up all that well either. The realization acted like a tonic, infusing her with energy.

“How long have you been living the lie?” she asked coolly, praying she wouldn’t stutter and spoil the effect.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Tony popped another antacid and reached for the office phone. Calls could be traced. But he didn't have time to fool around. The boss was coming apart. He knew the signs. Too much nose candy and a guy started thinking his shit didn't stink.

"You okay to talk?" He twirled the phone's curly cord.

"I'm alone—for the minute," Sam said cautiously.

Tony stopped fiddling with the cord. "The boss is having a meltdown."

"I've noticed. He left for the day right after the inter-agency meeting this morning. We need to get that tracker."

"That's what I wanted to ask you, can't we just leave it?"

"Sorry Pops. I used a hardwired package so there'd be no trace on the boss's system. We've gotta go back."

"Yeah, I'm thinking. Maybe we go sit on him. Hit his place the moment he leaves." Tony burped gently. Now it was real.

"Sounds like a plan. I'll swing by the club after work to get you."

"Give me a call first and I'll wait for you on the corner."

"See you soon."

"See you."

Leaving the club a little after five, Tony slipped the cash from the bank deposit and his antacid pills into a jacket pocket. He didn't need anything else from the club. He didn't bother locking his office door behind him.

He and Sam pulled up to the condo as the boss was leaving. They were in and out of the unit with the tracker in less than five minutes.

The one thing he hadn't planned for happened.

The boss called him at home. He wanted a side job handled. Strangely, there was no mention of why he was at home while the club was open, which went to show how out of it the boss was.

Leaving him out to dry crossed Tony's mind, but it was too risky. He told Patsy and Sam to catch their plane and handed over all but a couple of hundred of the cash he had on him. He'd catch a later flight.

\* \* \* \*

Tony pulled on a pair of latex gloves before touching the monster SUV. He was wearing all black, even his watch cap. Stealing got his juices flowing and his mind off his stomach for a nice change. The SUV's side windows were so darkly tinted that he didn't expect anyone to be able to see him well enough to identify him.

It had taken him more than three minutes to steal the car. He'd slowed down. A short drive to a sheltered driveway, and then he replaced the license plates with those the boss had given him to use. After tossing the original plates into the cargo area, he checked the rig over—no problems and it came with half a tank of gas, plenty for this job.

Following the bosses instructions, he parked in a Gas 'n Go lot north of the intersection and waited for the boss's signal.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Ciara had been guessing, hoping to provoke a response. When O'Brien turned off the video recorder, a fresh wave of fear made her shiver. He came back fast, planting his hand on the table and leaning close enough for her to smell his breath. The aroma of fresh mint over black coffee wasn't offensive, but she flinched. Instantly, she regretted the show of weakness. She wished his breath had been bad. It would've given her an excuse to wrinkle her nose, screw her eyes shut and push away from him. She pretended to be brave, holding his gaze.

"What did January say?" he snapped at her.

*O'Brien was the blackmailer!*

She sat stunned. Clinging to the pretense that she wasn't terrified. Ciara examined her cuticles, praying her hand wouldn't tremble.

\* \* \* \*

Zach glared at the scrape on Ciara's left cheek. What the hell had happened to her? Watching her in the interrogation room, she seemed smaller and a lot less grown up. His intimate connection to her made the whole mess that much more painful. For a few seconds, a picture of her caramel eyes wide with delight, as he'd taken the ice and .... He forced the erotic image out of his head. Anger rushed in, filling the fresh vacancy. His fury had no focus and no outlet. Hell, he'd wanted to kill her a time or two himself. But he hadn't shot her, and he was the one with a gun and badge.

He was losing it. Abused muscles clenched as he ground his molars in frustration, grappling for control, burying the pain deep inside, trying to grow a new layer of protection around his wounded heart.

Ian and Regan stood slightly behind him, observing O'Brien question her through the one-way glass.

Ciara was as white as virgin copy paper, except for caramel eyes too large and dark in her pale face, her terror an extra, palpable, presence in the room.

She damn well should be petrified.

She could be charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and intent to kill a police officer. If found guilty, the second charge carried a mandatory minimum sentence of twelve and half years. She'd be past prime childbearing age by the time she was released. She'd never have children, unless she was already pregnant with his child. The possibility plowed over him like a tank.

Christ, what a mess. A tear leaked out of one eye—he scrubbed it away with an angry swipe at his face. Zach tipped his head back, fighting for composure.

\* \* \* \*

A uniformed officer held the door for Ciara. One minute O'Brien was repeating questions about why she'd shot Zach while she kept demanding an attorney, and then the next minute she was free to leave. She followed her escort to the garage. She spotted Zach approaching Ian's SUV and broke into a run.

"Thank goodness, you're all right," she sang out, relief flooded in, making her lightheaded.

Zach stiffened and rotated to face her. She saw the flash of pain in his gaze then his expression went rigid, becoming the glacial thousand-meter cop stare.

Ciara skidded to a stop a yard away. Her chin puckered and tears blurred her vision. There were a hundred questions buzzing in her head, but his expression silenced her as effectively as a slap.

"Sorry," she croaked out, spinning around, and reversing her direction.

"Wait." Zach's voice sounded creaky.

She didn't slow down.

The Officer who gave Ciara a ride home kept blessedly quiet. She could tell he was uncomfortable. If she'd had any capacity for empathy left, she would've felt uncomfortable, too.

The most she could manage was thin sympathy for his awkward position. Miss Manners hadn't outlined the protocol for treatment of persons suspected of capital offenses.

Ciara directed him to her house, the longing for her own four walls so strong it had become a new tangible part of her being.

When they got there, he started to apologize. "Sorry about ...."

She lifted her hand, palm out, signaling she didn't want to hear it. . "You were just doing your job." She gave him a weak smile.

He nodded, came around to open the rear door, and then released her from the patrol car.

Ciara let herself into the cool house. She'd been away less than twenty-four hours, but the place seemed unfamiliar, as if she'd wandered into a stranger's life.

\* \* \* \*

The following day, Ciara got proactive, meeting Regan and Ian at Eriksson's Coffee shop before their shift started. At the corner table, she laid out her plan to lure O'Brien into incriminating himself.

Ian started shaking his head before she'd even finished. "No way. I already went along with one half-baked renegade scheme and it almost got my future brother - in - law killed." Ian folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, tilting it to a precarious angle.

Regan shot him a Taser glance, but she didn't contradict him.

"That's because it was Zach's idea," Ciara sniped out the words. Instantly regretting how bitter she sounded.

"That's persuasive. A veteran police officer's plan didn't work. So naturally we'd be so much better off going with the junior reporter scheme," he said.

"I'm not saying that I know more than Zach or even you ...." Ciara tried to soften her stance .

Ian cut her off, clearly on the defensive. "Thanks."

He didn't have to be sarcastic about it. Ciara paused to glare at him. "My point is I don't know who all is involved."

"Let me lay it out for you—either someone official is included or you're on your own."

Ian crossed his arms, the pose reminding her too much of another unreasonable macho cop for her comfort.

"But ...."

"No buts. This isn't negotiable. No vigilante action or I'm out."



Ciara turned to Regan for support.

Regan shook her head. "He's right Ciara. You don't have a choice." She was softer about it, but it still smarted and Regan's refusal made it final.

"Who would you involve?" Ciara asked Ian in her most conciliatory tone.

Paragraph indent insert Ian dropped a few dollars on the table for a tip as he stood and then held out a hand to Regan before answering. "I'll have to get back to you on that."

"All right, but if even a hint of this gets back to O'Brien, we're screwed." Ciara muttered gloomily.

\* \* \* \*

Regan buckled her safety belt. "What made you decide she was right about O'Brien?"

"Boss." Ian checked his blind spot before pulling into traffic.

"The designer?"

"The cologne. The bum in the doorway was wearing Boss. I recognized it because my father wears it, so does O'Brien."

Ian pulled to a stop and opened the patrol car door.

"Where are you going?" she asked, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

"Tell you later." Ian promised as he headed for the payphone.

She waited with the patience born of long hours of practice, sipping her completely cold coffee and appreciating the great view of Ian's butt. There was nothing in the regs about not enjoying the scenery.

When he returned after finishing his clandestine phone call, he was excited.

"Well? Tell me what's happening."

"My bud has it covered ...," Ian filled Regan in.

When he finished giving her in on the details, she sat processing for few seconds, sifting the information before asking her first question. "Just how well do you know this man?"

"We were in the same class at Quantico."

*Ian had never mentioned that.* "You were an FBI agent?"

"No," Ian looked away. "I never finished training. My grandmother got sick, I dropped out, and then moved back here." He tossed off the answer as if were no big deal, when clearly it was huge.

"I'm sorry." Regan started to reach for his hand, then, remembering the need for distance, she pulled back. She took another sip of her coffee which was now not only cold but also bitter.

"It was a long time ago." Ian shrugged off her empathy.

She nodded, fitting new pieces into the Ian McKnight puzzle. "We've got to bring Zach up to speed on this."

"Right after shift," Ian agreed.

She met his gaze, a single glance all she needed to be reassured that he understood everything at stake.

\* \* \* \*

Zach faced his sister and her partner, who were taking up space and spouting nonsense in his living room. He widened his stance, rolling his bad shoulder, and wincing. "That's bullshit. O'Brien was pulling in perps when you two were passing notes in junior high. You should know better." He glared at his sister, ignoring the sinking feeling in his gut that told him she was right.

"Times change, people change," Ian said, stepping closer, and inserting himself to block Zach's access to Regan.

Zach would've laughed at the kid for protecting his sister from him, but he couldn't. Shit, he probably looked crazy enough to do anything. He shook his head, unwilling to listen. All he accomplished was making it throb again.

"Think about it, why would we make this up? The FBI has had O'Brien under surveillance for weeks, since before you started at the club." Regan's eyes pleaded with him to listen to Ian.

"Yeah sure. Then why haven't they taken him into custody?" Zach rubbed his temple, refusing to look at Regan, already more convinced than he wanted to be, but resisting the inevitable.

"They wanted to tie it up tight, nail down everyone involved. There's no question about O'Brien's involvement. They tapped his phone, and ...." Ian stopped mid-sentence, distracted by something Zach couldn't see.

Ian pulled out his phone, opening it. "Hi, right." He paused and searched Regan's face for an answer to some silent question. Funny thing was, he seemed to find it. "We're there." He tucked the phone back in his pocket. "We gotta roll, babe."

*Babe? The rookie called his sister babe?*

He'd figure out if he needed to do anything about Ian later.

New paragraph Right now, he had other concerns, like getting his gun to stay inside his sweats. Hopeless. No time to change. He carried the gun, stuffing his wallet into his one pocket, and grabbed his car keys on his way out.

The skin on his skull had shrunk, and the guy with the jackhammer inside was growing. It wasn't a good combination. Nausea staggered in, settling uneasily in his gut. He swallowed the gall threatening to gag him, and then started his car. Ian's SUV was easy to tail. A couple of turns later, Zach had run through the last of his small store of patience. They were headed for Ciara's place. He knew a faster route.

What if they were right?

O'Brien would be a deadly enemy. If he wanted to hurt Ciara, she wouldn't have a chance.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara stood in the coffee shop, staring blankly at the forest green coffee shop door, which had closed behind her friends when they left. She hated being passive and helpless but what other options did she have? If she tried to tackle O'Brien on her own, she'd wind up at the bottom of Puget Sound. Waiting and trusting Regan was her only good choice.

Even harder to accept than her own powerlessness was Zach's blaming her. All her hopes for redeeming herself with him had ridden on her plan to get O'Brien to incriminate himself. Since Ian and Regan had turned her down, she needed to find another solution.

In the meantime, she still had a job and it was time to put in an appearance. Six hours later, she left the paper and the workday behind, feeling even worse without the buzz of the newsroom to distract her from her troubles.

She climbed into a sun-baked car for the trip home. The muggy summer evening did nothing to cheer her. Her spirits sank down to shoe level. Zach believed she'd shot him. He hated her. When she'd run to him in the precinct garage, she'd been shocked to a standstill by

the coldness of his gaze. Every time she closed her eyes, his flash of pain followed by the thousand-meter cop stare replayed in her head.

She had let her dad down, too. She was going to be a one-story wonder, unable to follow up on her first big break. She didn't even turn on the CD changer as she drove home. Slowing to make the sharp turn into the driveway, she noticed headlights coming toward her.

While juggling her paraphernalia, she bumped the car door closed with her hip. Keys clutched in her right hand, she hit the lock button by feel, and then heard the reassuring beep. Too bad, she didn't have keyless entry for her front door. She heard footfalls on the walk behind her and scurried up the front steps, a sudden nervous chill making her move faster.

After fumbling her first two tries at unlocking the door, she breathed a sigh of relief when the key slid home.

Before she twisted the house key, what felt like five bags of cement slammed her face against the door, bruising her already scraped cheek. Her laptop fell, hitting the porch floor. She strained against the weight pinning her to the door and twisted enough to see her attacker.

O'Brien grabbed her arm, wrenching it behind her back with vicious force.

Using her free arm, Ciara gouged at his eye. O'Brien jerked his face back and her nails tore down his cheek.

His erection pressed into her lower back. Fear spurred an extra rush of adrenaline into her bloodstream blood stream . She kicked backward, connecting solidly with his shin. She took grim satisfaction in his grunt and in the bright coppery smell of his fresh blood from where she'd ripped his face.

The minor triumph was short lived. O'Brien pushed harder on her bent arm, forcing it past the breaking point. With a sickening snap of bone, she lost the small bit of leverage the kick had gained her, slamming back against the door. Panic began clogging her brain and slowing her reactions. She opened her mouth and got out one yell. Not nearly as loud as she needed it to be, before he stuffed a cloth in her mouth. A dull thud followed by sharp pain signaled the rap of something hard on the back of head. She saw the stars for the second time in less than a week before losing the fight to stay conscious.

When she woke up, her face rested on carpet. The faint smell of industrial rug shampoo lingered, assaulting her nose. Her aching arms were secured behind her. Duct tape covered her mouth. The side of her face, which had hammered the door, hurt, a throbbing reminder of her peril.

She swallowed the fear threatening to swamp her, scanning the room through her lashes. She kept her breathing slow, counting to eight for each breath in, and the same steady count of eight for every breath out.

O'Brien's expensive Italian loafers came into view. She held in a groan, which would gain her no mercy. The shoes came closer. She willed herself limp. He prodded her with an elegantly shod foot. Nausea roiled in her belly, posing a real danger. Swallowing hard, she fought the gag reflex, which could be fatal in her current duct-tapped state.

She kept her eyes closed for three rounds of carefully counted inhales and exhales. She strained to hear anything that would tell her where O'Brien was, nothing registered except the too rapid tempo of her own pulse. She risked another scan of the room. The loafers were out of her line of sight. She maintained her breathing exercise, half for the calming effect, half to maintain the illusion she was unconscious.

Keeping her nausea from overwhelming her took as much effort as staying awake. Rotating her head with exquisite slowness, she glimpsed a card table loaded with electronic equipment. A single, empty folding chair sat at an angle near the table. The sound of running water gave her enough warning to resume her unconscious pose.

Nothing happened for four rounds of breathing. She ventured another peek.

O'Brien was directly over her.

"Welcome to the party, honey."

Her gaze ran up his legs, stopping at an obvious erection. If he left on the duct tape, she'd choke to death on her own vomit. It wasn't how she wanted to die.

He jerked her upright, the sudden movement stabbing pain through her skull and her vision blurred to black.

The next time consciousness returned Ciara didn't know how much time had passed. A tentative inventory didn't yield any obvious new injuries, but the current level of pain made it hard to tell. She peeked cautiously toward the voice she could barely make out over the buzzing in her ears.

O'Brien was leaning against the kitchen counter, watching her while he chatted on a cell phone. He stroked his still present erection absentmindedly while he talked. She swallowed and the roar in her ears muted to a dull buzz.

"Sorry you feel that way about it, son. It's just business, nothing personal involved. Can't say as I blame you either, she's a real handful."

Before Ciara fully considered the implication of his words, a couple of strides brought O'Brien next to her. He leaned over and ripped off the duct tape. "Say hi to your lover."

She Ciara writhed away from the phone he held to her ear.

O'Brien slapped her with stunning force. She gritted her teeth and refused to cry out. He twisted her broken arm and a cry escaped this time. The blackness beckoned, and she struggled to stay awake. There was something important she needed to do .... "Don't listen ...," she managed before O'Brien's soft palm covered her nose and mouth.

"Like I said, a real handful." O'Brien chuckled, dropping the phone.

She couldn't breathe. Air moved up her priority list like a screaming bullet.

She heard a distant crash, but didn't feel the blow she'd expected. The darkness won—awareness winking out.

\* \* \* \*

Regan's gaze locked on Ian. He turned his head, automatically checking his blind spot before changing lanes.

"What?" he asked, scanning the traffic.

She shook her head. His ability to read her thoughts was downright unnerving. More worrisome was her increasing reliance on his ability to do exactly that. "You don't think Zach would do anything stupid?"

Ian frowned. "He might. I would if it was you."

Regan nodded, acting as if their only bond was the naturally strong loyalty of partners. "That's what worries me."

Ian's response was to press redial on his cell. "Thought I'd better give you a heads up. Detective Longstreet might come rolling by you. He'll be trying to include himself in the action. He's driving a black coupe...." He paused, listening to the other side of the conversation. "

Hell. It was worth a shot. Thanks anyway, buddy. We'll see you in less than three minutes." Ian ended the call.

"Sorry, Zach must've taken another route. He passed Clyde a few seconds ago."

"Damn, he's in no shape ..., " she worried aloud.

"Let it go, babe, nothing you can do until we arrive on scene."

Ian's powerful SUV rolled through the late night traffic. Regan leaned forward impatiently, guiding him, tension honing her edges. They were minutes from Ciara's place.

When they arrived on the scene, there was no time for introductions, but from Ciara's description, Regan was sure that Ian's friend Clyde was the same man as the club's bouncer.

The big man nodded briefly in Ian's direction. "Glad you could make it. Nice to see a familiar face on the local yokel squad." His grin flashed like a toothpaste ad. "You made good time. He's got her in an apartment he was using for surveillance, second floor, right hand side. Sing out if there's something you don't like. Here's how I see it going down ...."

Ian glanced at Regan as if he expected an objection to Clyde's plan of woman-waits-here-while-we-men-kick-the-doors-in. But she had no quarrel with his friend's strategy, s mashing doors had never been a favorite of hers.

The men divided duties, Ian taking the front. She followed him in, finding Zach locked in a deadly struggle with O'Brien. Before she or Ian had a chance to take action, Clyde came through the back—nice and quiet. Then he tapped the back of O'Brien's head. He folded like a wino's sack, sinking to the carpet.

Ian stepped in, quickly cuffing O'Brien.

While Regan moved to where Ciara lay crumbled on the floor. She released her plastic restraints with a careful slash of her knife, and then felt for a pulse. One of Ciara's arms was swollen, red, and hot to the touch.

"Ian?" she called for her partner without taking her eyes off Ciara.

There was no answer, and then Regan heard her partner talking to Zach asking him to stay still.

Zach shook off Ian, stumbling toward Ciara. Dropping heavily to his knees, he hovered, touching Ciara's face.

"I didn't believe her. She damn near died because I couldn't see ...." Zach's voice clogged with emotion.

In the background, Regan registered Clyde reciting Miranda rights. Suddenly, he switched to imaginative profanities. She swiveled her gaze toward the big man, who'd had gone silent because he was giving O'Brien the kiss of life.

Walking over to his friend, Ian crouched beside him, putting a hand on Clyde's shoulder. "Let the pros handle him, bud."

Clyde stopped, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I hear you."

O'Brien's chest was still, his affable features contorted in to a grimace. He didn't look like the kindly cop on the corner or a poet or an uncle now. He looked tortured. Despite the pain on his face, Regan couldn't find any pity in her heart for him, not after seeing Ciara's battered body. The only thing she felt was bitter betrayal for a man who'd broken their code of honor.

She was too engrossed in what was happening with Ciara to watch the conclusion of O'Brien's deadly struggle until she heard Clyde's complaint. "I didn't hit him that hard."

Ian patted his friend's back. It wasn't you bud. Look at his nostrils—it was suicide by coke.

Still angry with O'Brien for breaking their unspoken rules, and for hurting her friend, the only thing Regan felt at his death was relief that he'd saved the taxpayers a lot of time and money. Turning her attention to her brother, she frowned to let him know he had no business being out of bed. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "I'm fine. Where's ...?" He didn't finish his question because the EMTs arrived. The first pair headed for O'Brien.

"Her first," Zach demanded and the team rerouted to follow his instructions.

He waited, clearly impatient for information, finally prodding the techs. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Contusions, possible concussion, probable fracture of the left radius, please stay back and let us do our job, sir. She should be fine."

"You're taking her to a hospital." Zach didn't make it a question.

"Yes sir, Soundview. Now if you can stand back and let us do our job."

"I'm coming with you."

The medic s ignored his belligerent insistence, continuing to do their job.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara hadn't wanted Zach at her house. She knew she owed him her life, but she couldn't be grateful to him for saving her body, not when he held her heart prisoner. Plus, she knew how little willpower she had when it came to him. She didn't think she could stand another round of intimacy and rejection.

But he hadn't asked for her permission—he'd just brought her home from the hospital, and then stayed. Now that he was here, she was too weak-willed to shoo him out of her bedroom. Besides she didn't want to worry her father and it was nice to have someone taking care of her. Zach dozed beside her bed, sprawled in the striped chair. Unlike his furniture, which for was built to last, she chose hers for the way it looked. He had to be miserable--in the dainty seat, which was woefully inadequate to hold his big frame.

Maybe he sensed her gaze on him. His eyes opened to painful looking, bloodshot slits. His face bristled with dark stubble and his clothes were wrinkled. Her body softened, her heart yearned, and her brain turned to mush.

It was nothing new. It happened every time the man came anywhere near her. He sat close enough for her to reach out and touch him. She kept her hands fisted to keep from caressing his scratchy face. Even that small bid for restraint failed, because he was close enough for her to be seduced by his musky scent. She took shallow breaths and began to feel dizzy. She fought to stay put. He filled her senses, erasing her good intentions without even trying.

She focused on his stubborn chin, but that led to his sensual lips. One corner of his mouth quirked in the barest hint of a smile and she felt her core heating another ten degrees closer to meltdown. She forced her gaze higher and got lost in his hungry eyes. She loved him with all her heart, but it hadn't been enough. She ached with wanting him. Why had she fallen for a man who couldn't trust in her? Because she couldn't stop loving him any more than she could stop breathing.

"Tell me what it'll take. There has to be a way. Come on, sweetheart. Don't throw away something special because I screwed up. Give me, give us, a chance." His words pulled at her already heavy heart, but this wasn't a fairy tale. And Zach was definitely not Prince

Charming.

She paused, thinking back to the horror of the night just past. She'd awakened in the emergency room with her left arm already in cast. She was just in time to add her plea to the doctor's, who was trying to evict Zach so they could examine her.

He'd grudgingly left for a few minutes. Ciara was grateful because she needed to know if she'd been raped and she wasn't ready to deal with Zach's anger, or worse pity.

After an exam and the steps required to document rape were completed, the doctor assured her there was no visible evidence of sexual assault. She bent over, putting her head to her knees, dizzy with relief.

The door to the small examining room whooshed open. "What's going on?" Zach glowered at the doctor.

"Nothing, your, uh ...," the resident paused to scan his paperwork. "Ms. Donovan suffered a broken arm along with some contusions and abrasions, but there's been no lasting damage." The doctor used his middle finger to push his glasses back up an aquiline nose.

"Come with me." Zach held the emergency room resident's upper arm in an iron grip. He spoke to Ciara over his shoulder. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

Ciara pulled back on her panties, taking far too long. She rested before she pulled on her bra. She sank back to the yellow molded plastic chair, letting her lids drift shut. When she opened her eyes again, Zach was fastening the back of her bra like a pro. His lips brush the nape of her neck. She lost this round. She needed the comfort of his arms, needed his warmth, and needed his protection.

Now he was asking her to trust him, how could she say no? She'd never stopped believing in him deep down. Even when she'd thought the worst of him, a part of her loved him unconditionally.

\* \* \* \*

More than a week later, Ciara finally had Zach to herself. Her arm still ached a little but she was getting good with the new smaller cast. She was certainly healthy enough to enjoy him. In fact, he was exactly what the doctor ordered.

Just looking at him made her breaths come faster. All her senses leapt to alert. Her body, already slippery with wanting him, softened even more.

She saw the telling gleam of desire widen his pupils. Zach offered her a chance to lose herself in his arms, to choose him, to choose life in the most fundamental way. Should she ignore happiness because he didn't come with a shiny ring and promises of love? Because he wasn't perfect either?

She might still be a little insecure, maybe she'd always be a little insecure, but she wasn't crazy. If the last few days had taught her anything, it was that life was about reaching out and grabbing happiness, not waiting for perfection.

But since this was positively the last time they'd be together, she planned to make it a night she would remember forever.

"You could ...." She licked powder-dry lips sitting down on her fluffy peach bed to hide her trembling legs. "Let me be in charge for once." It'd be silly not to wring every advantage out of the moment. How often was she likely to have a chance to negotiate with an accommodating Zach?

Never.

She shook off the feeling of sadness, determinedly concentrating on now.

He stared back at her flatly, his harsh features revealing nothing.

Meeting her eyes once again he asked, "Is this one of your fantasies? Not part of some old list you're working on ...?"

The way he said it made it sound like there was something wrong with having a list, but now wasn't the time to fight over the merits of planning, not while he was still considering letting her take control.

"Pure fantasy. Sexual fantasy," she amended, sweetening the deal.

"You want to be in charge?"

She coolly ignored the unspoken challenge. "We could take turns, one of my fantasies, then one of yours," she offered, making another pass at her too dry lips with the edge of her tongue.

He was going to agree to it, she could tell.

"One of your fantasies, then one of mine. That's the agreement, nothing barred?" His voice was deep with the clear and present danger of male challenge.

She stilled, suddenly no longer sure.

Talk about sweetening the deal. She'd left herself wide open for that one, and he'd called her on it. Now what? Did she dare? What if he asked for something really kinky? But then, she'd asked him to trust her, to literally give her control over his body. Oooh boy. Fair's fair.

"All right." Her heart plunged into an exhilarating free fall of danger mixed with wild excitement as she took the giant step.

His expression flashed with another quick flare of heat, and then settled back into his normal harsh inscrutability. "Good."

"Um, mind telling me what your fantasy is?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah."

*Oh Great.*

He frowned at her. Her face must've broadcast her disappointment.

Then he started talking again. "I haven't decided which one to go with yet. I've got so many. I should've brought the leg irons." He shook his head, regret tugging at his features. "But there's always ... Hey, have you got an ice pick and some rope around here?"

"You're kidding, right?" Her voice shook. Silly to be nervous, this was the last time she'd ever be this close to him. She should savor every second.

"No." He kept his features absolutely flat.

She watched his eyes, worrying about what kind of fantasy involved rope and an ice pick. Then she glimpsed a spark of fun, gone in a flash, as if he could control his emotions with the flick of some internal switch. She knew that wasn't true, but he hid his feelings well.

"All right, I can see you're nervous. I'll keep it simple." His eyes stayed hard. "You have to trust me."



## Chapter Twenty-Five

O'Brien woke up in the ambulance, immediately aware that he needed to move fast. Every inch of his body ached, his head most of all. Someone had hit him from behind. The attendant with him had scooted forward, facing the driver, both men enmeshed in a heated rehash of last night's Mariner's ballgame. Rapidly, He took off the oxygen, removed the IV from his hand, and then undid the straps holding him to the gurney without attracting either medic's attention.

Waiting for an opportunity to escape, anger flooded him with new energy. There'd been only two fucking days until the sale. However, he had no time for regrets. He had more than five million parked in the *Cayman Island* account. Time to get the hell out of Seattle.

The ambulance crawled toward a red light. O'Brien got off the gurney, unavoidably attracting the notice of his attendant.

"Hey man, you can't do that you're going to ...."

A simple clip to the medic's jaw knocked him unconscious.

The driver drifted into oncoming traffic as he angled back toward his friend.

"What the hell?" he yelled.

A warning blare of horns cut off his outrage.

O'Brien leapt from the back of the still moving vehicle. Quickly finding his balance, he took off at a steady jog. Behind him, more angry horns joined the chorus as the ambulance clipped the nose of a car, blocking the intersection.

\*\*\*

As the massive jet lumbered down the runway, Tony pulled upward on his armrests, doing all he could to overcome gravity's pull. Miraculously, the aircraft shuddered and left the ground. He crossed himself.

The traveler next to him, a woman close to his age, glanced away as he finished his prayer. If they hit an air pocket then she'd be on her knees quick enough, he thought. Though she proved herself a reckless flyer, by unpacking her laptop and tapping on the keys even before the safety belt sign was turned off. After five hours, thirty minutes, several antacid tablets, one sappy movie, and minimal chit chat, he landed in New York.

There was no visible ground to kiss. So instead, he bought a carton of milk and headed for the ticket counter to line up a seat on the next flight to Jamaica. The first available departure time was the next morning. He found an unoccupied seat in the terminal's lounge and called Patsy, feeling better the moment he heard her voice. The interim hours until morning he spent camped out in the airport waiting room. He had limited cash with him, and no interest in leaving a credit card trail.

The next morning he had a hot tea with plenty of milk, and then made use of the men's room and his shaving kit to clean himself up as best he could before the last leg of his journey home.

\* \* \* \*

That same morning, a few hours later, in the *Cayman Islands*, O'Brien stepped up to the teller's window and presented his withdrawal slip.

The teller smiled stiffly. "Excuse me sir, one minute please."

He straightened his shoulders, hanging on to his patience. He'd asked for fifty thousand dollars. He told himself that the teller would need to visit the vault, perhaps arrange for a cash transfer. A delay was normal and to be expected. Then the furtive acting teller reappeared with a suit in tow.

"Mr. Marshall?" The suit extended a moist hand.

O'Brien ignored the offer to shake. "Yes."

"Please come with me sir, a moment of your time"

The man's oily voice squeezed his patience to the breaking point. "Is there a problem?"

"Right this way, sir."

O'Brien followed the suit to a small dimly lit office. A fan turned overhead, too slowly to do anything except waste electricity.

"May I ask if you are dissatisfied with our service in anyway sir?"

*You all move as if you're dragging chains.* "No, not at the moment."

"Perhaps there is a timing problem then?" The banker's oily voice slid away.

"Not on my part," O'Brien said pointedly.

"Let me be plain, Mr. Marshall. When you transferred the five million dollars last week you depleted your account. There've been no deposits. An oversight I'm sure." The little man smiled at him with deliberate cruelty.

Ten minutes later, O'Brien was walking away from the bank with eight thousand dollars. The last of his bank balance rattling around in the gear bag he carried.

A phone call to the club simply rang. There was no response at Tony's home number, or his cell, which gave O'Brien his answer. An icy rage roiled through his veins.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Ciara nodded slowly in agreement with Zach's demand that she trust him. She worried her bottom lip, painfully aware that trying to negotiate with him after she'd already invited him into her bedroom put her at a big disadvantage.

"Say it," Zach insisted.

"I trust you," she promised him, recklessly setting aside the last of her reservations.

"Okay." He let out a full-bodied sigh. "Me, too. You're sure the doctor said you're okay?"

"I'm healing great--faster than he thought," she assured him, holding up her new, smaller cast as evidence, touched by his concern.

His eyes met hers with new heat. "Good. What do you want me to do?"

"Lay down on the bed."

"Don't you want me to get naked?" He sounded so disappointed it was her turn to keep a sober face.

"No." Undressing him was one of the best parts. Ciara drew in a deep breath. "Just lie down."

He did it, toeing off his shoes and socks first with a wicked grin of defiance, and then peeling back the bed covers. But finally, he stretched out, keeping his limbs loose, letting her undress him except for his pants, and then secure his arms to the curved bamboo bed frame with silk scarves. Her cast made the knots more time consuming, but she wasn't about to forego any of the good parts. She checked carefully that nothing was cutting off circulation. His eyes closed. His breathing was slow and even.

Her breath came in short pants, and her heart beat like a flamenco dancer's heels. She'd considered changing into a cat suit, but had discarded the idea since getting it off would be a mood breaker.

Taking advantage of his inattention, she slithered out of her roomy sweats. Quickly stripping down to bra and panties. The sheer chiffon concealed nothing, only tinting the territory to a better-than-reality warm blush. Kneeling next to him, she saw his eyelids open to narrow slits. He drew in a labored breath.

Ciara straddled his hips, his erection harder than deadline between her thighs. She settled against him, willed herself to patient stillness.

Her hands trembled, adding extra time to the simple task of unbuttoning his shirt. She'd seen his chest before, but this time she was calling the shots. It made a heady difference.

As she played with the short hairs decorating his well-defined pec, she teased the flat dark nipples into beaded peaks, bending to nibble him, and then rubbed her hardened nipples against his. Electric. Finding her bra a hindrance, she unhooked and discarded it, reapplying herself to the thorough breast massage.

She made throaty sounds, heard Zach's answer. His voice pulled new and urgent hunger from deep inside. The emptiness between her legs pulsed with need.

His features strained, the small muscle twitching in his cheek. His eyes shot danger signals from under the thick-fringed lashes. Recklessly, she kissed the mouth daring to growl at her. And not gently, she plundered, wild with wanting him, and intoxicated with power. She moved her head enough to break the deep kiss. Moving on from that wondrous mouth, she licked the angry tic in his cheek. As she nipped her way down along the taut cords of his neck, she was deliciously aware of muscles, already tight, that tensed further at her touch.

“Condom?” Ciara lifted her head enough to ask.

“Right front pocket.” His slacks were tight, the zipper near bursting. She grazed the hot length, endangering the fabric with her nails.

Relishing the intimacy of the act, she slipped her hand inside his pants pocket and took her time extracting the foil packet. She set it aside for the time it took her to dispense with his slacks.

Ciara opened the thin package, using her teeth and fingers, and then tossed the wrapping. Treating the latex wafer like a gourmet delicacy, she placed it on her tongue then closed her mouth around it, teasing them both.

Insert new paragraph indent . Pushing herself up, she stood over him before rolling her panties down her legs. She lifted one foot, dipping the mattress precariously, and then had to widen her stance to stay upright. The muscle in his cheek quit jumping and his mouth opened. His facile tongue tested the edges of a dangerous smile. Her legs quivered as she lowered herself with torturous slowness, ignoring the great view he was getting of her butt. He seemed to enjoy it and that was all that mattered.

His erection rose proudly from a cushion of surprisingly soft pubic hair. It thrummed with tension above his hips. She touched, licked, and then tried to roll on the condom using only her lips. It didn’t work, but he didn’t seem to mind. Her inexpert attempts appeared to please him. Nevertheless, she made eager and lengthy oral amends, reveling in his groans of pleasure, before ultimately rolling the thin sheath over him.

She maximized the opportunity to explore, learning his textures. An old lightning bolt of scar tissue puckered one inner thigh. She paused to kiss it, feeling a knot of muscle ease. As she watched, his erection grew even thicker and longer. She weighed the puckered mystery of his testicles in her palm, first one and then the other—wanting, needing to learn what pleased him. The odd blank of skin behind them so different from her body. She tried to squeeze his butt. No go. Returning to the strange blank spot, she kneaded. A noise like rusty hinge being dragged open against its will pulled her back to her mission. She fastened the last scarf over his eyes.

The blindfold robbed Zach of delicious sights, but it might be for the best. He thought he might’ve sprained his neck earlier while watching her round ass. Unable to stop hoping for another peek of her auburn curls and dusky pink vulva. When she’d rolled down her panties and he’d glimpsed her secrets, he’d come damn close to disgracing himself. She was slick, swollen and so ready. He had another close call when she’d tried to sheath him using only her mouth. His butt muscles clenched, he silently recited crime statistics.

A beaded velvet nipple brushed his lips. Crime statistics went all to hell. He fastened on. Sucking her into his mouth, wanting to rev her engine up to his speed, but not sure she could handle the velocity. He strained to listen to her over the thumping of his heart, caught a soft moan, nuzzled the other breast, drawing the eager peak into his mouth. He gave

himself up for lost. He was past saving. At least he'd die happy. The breast pulled away, leaving his mouth lonely. He clamped his jaw to keep from begging.

"It's not working." Her voice broke. "You don't fit."

He heard her frustration in those two sentences and found fresh patience. Her desperation tugged at his heart. Almost mindless with the need to be completely inside her, he reached deeper for controls he thought she'd stripped.

"That's right, slide on down, sweetheart. All the way. You feel so good." She was hot and still so tight. He fought his urge to thrust, holding himself rigid. After an eternity of throbbing, mindless, desperate need, his cock bumped the mouth of her womb. "Tilt your hips." The ridge became firmer. "Other way, sweetheart."

While she worked in the last couple of inches, his muscles rebelled against the control, which kept them locked tight, the need to thrust into her eroding his will. At last, she seated herself firmly against the base of his cock. Gasping and whimpering, she wriggled, working herself against him. She'd done it. A feeling of pride and tenderness radiated in his chest.

A tightening of his balls signaled a powerful release building. He surrendered to the exquisite, almost painful, sensations. Destroyed, and then reborn as her willing sex slave. She rocked and ground against him, pushing him past pleasure into a never glimpsed sensual paradise of ultimate soul-fusing union.

She gripped his hips with soft thighs and used him for her pleasure. A guttural cry of release tore from his throat and he spurted deep inside her in a mind-melding climax. The power of it stole his breath and filled his head with a meteor shower. Awareness blurred on the edges of ecstasy. He could only feel. His entire being centered on her, on the slow quivering pull of her thighs, on the inner spasms milking the last drops from his cock, on her sobbing his name as the same burning joy shuddered through her and she tumbled over the edge into him and the magic.

No wonder everyone raved about make-up sex.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, after his doctor appointment, releasing him for active duty, he stopped by a jeweler his sister had recommended. , after his doctor appointment, releasing him for active duty. He was handing the clerk his credit card when the phone in his pocket chirped to life.

"Longstreet," he answered his cell, cradling it between his ear and shoulder as he signed the sales slip.

"Connelly here. How'd it go at the doctor's?" Her clipped tone managed to convey genuine concern.

He waved away the jeweler's sack and pocketed the dark blue velvet case. "I'm good to go."

"Glad to hear it. I'm holding a briefing at nineteen hundred. Be there."

"I was thinking of taking some personal time."

"Santini's favorite go-to man is being held without bail. Word on the street is he's in the market for new connection ...." His LT paused, letting the news sink in.

Zach swore silently at the lousy timing. He'd been searching for a way in under Santini's radar for years. "I'll be there."

He ended the call and then tried Ciara's cell. His call went straight to voice mail. "I've got to work—damn. I hate these message things. I'll call you as soon as I can shake loose."

\* \* \* \*

After Ciara stopped the car in front of her dad's place, she turned off her cell phone, placing it in the car's glove box. She didn't need any distractions during this meeting with her father. Taking a fortifying breath, she let it out to a slow eight count, and then she got out of the car.

Agnes opened the door at the first rap of the knocker.

"Please come in." The housekeeper's serenely resigned expression told Ciara that Her father remained adamant in his position. There wasn't going to be a reprieve.

The short walk to the library felt longer than usual as she took comfort from the familiar hall—the faint smell of the lemon-scented furniture polish, the banister she'd never had the nerve to slide down, and the framed copy of the first issue of the *Seattle Daily Times* that had hung in the hall for as long as she could remember.

"Angus? Ciara is here," the housekeeper announced.

The library was different. It took her a moment to isolate the changes. The windows were open to the summer air and the scents from the rose garden perfumed the book-lined room.

"Sit down, little girl." Her father stayed seated at his desk. His hand jerked and he pulled it into his lap. Swiveling toward Ciara, he met her gaze. "How much trouble are you in over my hacking those bank records?"

She shrugged. "Don't worry about it, Dad, since O'Brien escaped and the club manager disappeared, there's no one to prosecute."

"I don't want you taking the rap for me." He looked over her head. "I talked to Judge Feinberg, completely hypothetically, he thought a fine and some community service hours would be the likely result.

"Don't borrow trouble. There aren't going to be any charges filed against me."

"Have you gotten over this business office fixation?"

His abrupt change of subject caught her off guard, after an awkward pause she found her tongue. "No, Dad. I haven't. I'm sorry."

Insert new paragraph indent This time, she didn't need to rub her tattoo or rotate her bracelet. She loved her father, but she couldn't fulfill his dreams.

His head jerked, but his gaze was steady. "Don't be sorry, be sure."

"I am certain," Ciara said softly but firmly. She was prepared to pay heavily for this decision, but independence was worth the cost.

"For the record, I would never have approved a transfer. It would have been a waste of damn fine newshound to stick you in with the bean counters."

"Then we have nothing to discuss," she said quietly, standing, prepared to leave.

Her father ignored her gesture, continuing his discussion as if she hadn't spoken. "Since I sold the paper, transfers between departments are no longer my decisions to make. I'm sure the new owners will be more flexible," he said with a wry twist of his mouth.

Ciara eased back down to the leather club chair she'd vacated. "You sold the paper?"

"Didn't I say that?" he asked gruffly.

"Goodness, this is a surprise. What made you decide to sell so suddenly?"

"It's not that sudden. The doctor wants me to cut back on my hours even more. Absentee owner isn't my style. You've tried real hard to please me, but I'm not blind. You don't want to run the paper and I don't want to force you into a life you'd resent."

“When did you get so smart?” Ciara blinked back the tears threatening to spill.

“I want you to find your own passion. Be happy, little girl.”

A few steps closed the distance between them, and then she hugged her dad.

She stayed for dinner, listening to her father’s plans for retirement. It was after eleven when she finally drove home. Once inside the house, she locked up, and then checked her messages.

She listened to the one from Zach several times. Each time it sounded more like a kiss off than the time before. “I’ll call you as soon as I can shake loose.” *Translation, maybe I’ll call someday when I’ve got nothing else to do. Don’t hold your breath.*

Zach didn’t do relationships and she couldn’t handle casual sex. There was nothing casual about her feelings for him. They’d been heading for disaster from the moment they met. It was what she’d expected. His message just confirmed the impossibility of them having a future. She would have traded every other dream she held dear to have been wrong.

The next week, she decided that there was no reason at all for her to procrastinate. Now was the time to make a fresh start. She’d listed her house with a local real estate agent, who’d assured her it would sell quickly, she was anxious to get the place ready to show before leaving. She was counting on the proceeds from the sale of her house to give her at least enough capital for a healthy down payment on a condo convenient to the new job.

As soon as she found one of those.

After she’d resigned from the *Seattle Daily News*, she’d applied with several media giants with openings in finance, or accounting. Two weeks and half a dozen interviews later, she’d finally accepted an offer from the *Bay Guardian*. San Francisco was a charming city, or so she told herself repeatedly.

It has been three weeks since Zach’s message. He’d never called back.

She’d miss Regan, January, and the rest of her friends and family but she’d only be a couple of hours away. Not that she would be springing for weekend airfare every week on her new assistant treasurer salary.

Ciara began the arduous task of deciding what things would be put in storage until she sold the house and found a new place, and what she couldn’t live without for even a few weeks.

Deciding to leave Friday evening, in order to have a weekend for getting acquainted with her new city, and perhaps some preliminary condo shopping, she arranged for movers to arrive Friday morning.

\* \* \* \*

The last three weeks had gone by like time in the dentist’s waiting room. He’d been deep undercover, living inside Santini’s compound for most of that time. Finally, he was able to sneak out long enough to set up the bust.

He had a few days off before he had to report for the next assignment. He checked his cell phone when he got home at two am. Not one call from Ciara. He drove by her place. The realtor’s wooden sign in her front yard was his first clue that there was something wrong.

*What the hell? She was moving? Abandoning him, without a single word of good-bye? When it had happened to him before, it had hurt. This time was like a knife piercing his heart.*

\* \* \* \*

Friday morning, it was still cool outside, but Ciara was already damp with perspiration from packing when she heard the knock and hurried to let in the movers.

There was Zach, filling her doorway, and overwhelming her defenses. He'd always been large, powerful, and so very male. She'd seen him angry before, but now he looked mean. Possibly violent. Certainly dangerous. For the first time she was afraid of him. But she held her ground, reckless with the need to be close to him.

She studied his angry face with her heart as much as her eyes, memorizing every line, every scar. She burned the cruel set of his sensual lips into long-term memory.

He looked like a bum, a deliberate choice, she assumed since he was working narcotics again. His scruffy appearance just added to his potent appeal.

"Do you want to come in?" She hadn't stuttered. Her spirits floated up from her ankles to calf level.

"Yeah." He shifted his weight, waiting for her to step aside.

"When do you have to be on duty?" she puffed out the words, way too breathy as she backed up.

He closed the door behind him. "I've got some time," he said, his voice rougher than his beard.

"I'm glad you stopped by," she said, giving him a bright superficial smile. "It gives me a chance to say good-bye."

"Good-bye? That's it?" he growled at her.

*Why was he so angry? She wasn't the one who had called up and left a kiss-off message.*

"What else would there be?" A tiny bit of her pain and anger seeped into her voice. She fisted her hands against her hips. "I haven't heard from you in three weeks. Oh excuse me, I got one phone message -- *I'll call you sometime*. What were you expecting?" She paused to blow a stray curl off her forehead. "That I'd sit home knitting until you had nothing better to do than drop by? Welcome to the real world. I needed a job and I found one -- in San Francisco."

He scowled. "Why do you need a job? I thought your father owned the paper."

"He's selling it," she said succinctly.

"Fine, get another job here."

*How dare he show up without a word of explanation or apology and start issuing orders?*

"So you can ignore me for weeks on end? No thanks." She took a step back, folding her arms over her waist.

"I wasn't ignoring you. I was working." He sounded way too patient, as if he were talking to a cranky toddler.

She was not a naïve child.

"Of course you were, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In twenty-one days you didn't have one minute to make a phone call, send a text message, or write a note?"

"No, I didn't. I was undercover," he said it as if that were an adequate explanation.

Watching her with grumpy patience, which soothed her, despite her determination to hang on to her hard-won pain.

"Doing what?" She sounded shrewish, but she didn't care. He'd hurt her.

"I can't talk about it." He took a step back, his shoulders stiffening.

"Can't talk about it to a reporter, or can't talk about it to a friend?" *Is that all I am to you a friend?*

"Can't talk about it to anyone," he said warily.

She cocked her chin. "That's convenient."



"Damn it! You know what I do. You know it isn't a nine to five, Monday through Friday kind of deal. You know I can't give you details."

He had a point, but she wasn't ready to surrender.

"I can't handle no strings," she issued her ultimatum, and held her breath.

"Who said anything about no strings?" He glowered at her.

Her hopes soared. "I thought that was what you wanted."

"That's your problem. You think way too much." He stepped closer.

"B-b-but ...." Oh no! *Please lord, don't turn me into an inarticulate stuttering mess. Not now.* "I didn't hear from you for three weeks."

"So you thought it was a good idea to sneak out of town? I called you and told you I had to work. I've already explained what happened."

"How long should I wait patiently to see if you were going to come back into my life?" *Tell me you want me. Tell me you love me. Tell me forever.*

But there was no pleading, no declaration of love, Zach stayed grumpy, and stubborn. She was way too familiar with his pattern—his way or the highway.

"I never left you. I went to work." He frowned as he explained the obvious.

She didn't want reasonable. She didn't want controlling. She wished she didn't want him.

The doorbell chimed.

"That's the movers," she said coolly as her heart shattered.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello Ciara?" January's finishing school delivery, confirmed what her caller ID had announced.

"Hi January." Ciara swallowed a mouthful of guilt for not taking the time to call and update the heiress.

"I wanted to say thanks bunches. A really cute FBI agent told me it'll take time, but they're trying to get back most of the money I paid O'Brien. They've shut down the WetnWild site. The entire Vice squad was suspended from duty with charges pending. All thanks to you."

"More like thanks to the FBI, Zach, Regan, and Ian. I'm glad you're not angry about me breaking my word to you."

*It almost hadn't hurt saying Zach's name. Someday she'd get over him. When she was ninety-five and too ancient to miss him.*

"Are you kidding? I'm glad you told Regan. I almost got you killed. You were so brave. Woodward and Bernstein have nothing on you."

"Thanks." Ciara laughed, slightly cheered by the outrageous exaggeration. "To tell the truth, it wasn't bravery, more like desperation. I'm not cut out for investigative journalism."

"What are you talking about? You did great."

"You're sweet to say so. But it was too scary for me. I'm looking forward to moving to the finance side of the news business." As Ciara said it aloud, she realized how hard that decision still was.

"Suit yourself, I just called to say thanks and wish you luck with whatever you decide to do next." January's voice trailed off diplomatically.

"I appreciate that more than I can say." Ciara felt her throat clogging with unshed tears. Leaving Seattle was hard, but it was the smart choice.

After saying good-bye to January, she pulled a diet cola from the fridge and decanted it into a crystal highball glass, adding ice for good measure. The cold sweet liquid soothed her constricted throat and she took the drink with her into the bedroom to finish packing.

\* \* \* \*

Zach sank against his front door. His first instinct, to stay the hell away from her, had been on target. His heart bled from his last run in with the human buzz saw, Ciara. She looked like the girl of his dreams, and happened to be the world's sexiest woman. She was also selling her house and accepting a job in another city.

*She had abandoned him.*

When had he lost his self-preservation instincts? But he knew. It had happened at the same time he'd fallen in love with Ciara.

A stupid tear dribbled down his cheek. He didn't even bother with scrubbing it away, and trying to act tough. He slid down the door.

Long minutes passed before he found the strength to stand. A glance at the cable box's clock showed he only had time for a fast cup of coffee before he needed to report in at the precinct. He needed the caffeine. It was going to be a long night.

He could do this. After all, he was a tough cop. Tough guys don't cry. Nah. They stared the enemy straight in the eye and spit.

Then he got mad. She was not walking away from him without a fight.

What kind of man gave up at the first little bump in the road?

Hell, what a jerk he'd been, refusing to apologize, and not telling her how he felt. He was going to be late for work. Real late. He called the station.

After arranging to take personal time, he cleaned up. Regretting that he couldn't shave made him realize he'd become an optimist. He packed a small kit, heavy on the condoms. He figured he might as well go for broke and slipped the ring box into his jacket pocket.

He didn't know how, but he'd make it up as he went along. He was an undercover cop—he knew how to improvise. He had to make her believe in him. He drove straight to her place, keeping the music loud enough to drown out any second thoughts that tried to crowd in.

What good was being a hard ass when your heart was bleeding?

He pointed the car toward Ciara's place. He'd apologize, hell he'd beg if he had to. He'd been without her for less than an hour and he'd caved. He didn't give a damn.

Loving Ciara was worth unconditional surrender.

He was prepared to kick down her door, but she opened it. Her pretty eyes were red from crying and her nose was pinker than her cheeks. She wore those over-sized sweat pants, the ones that came off so easy, and a baggy tee shirt with a big red heart on the front. Incredibly sexy.

"Come in." She stood aside, giving him plenty of room. After closing the door behind him, she padded to the kitchen. Grabbing a paper towel, she blew her nose.

He waited for her to say something, anything.

She stared at him like he was acting mental.

"Talk to me." He'd growled at her, demanding, and wished he could take it back. He cared so much and it made him prickly as hell, overreacting to everything. Afraid of her rejection, he clamped down on the words he wanted to say.

"Uh uh." She folded her arms under her breast. No bra, he jerked his mind back to

telling her how much she meant to him. But the right words refused to come. She waited. Seconds crawled by.

“Don’t move.” He croaked the words out, willing her to hear more than he said.

“You want me to stay, because?”

“I want you to stay.” It made sense to him, but it didn’t sound compelling.

“You want me?” The smile started in one corner of her mouth and spread.

He confirmed it with a wary nod, and then added some words to make it official. “I want you.”

“Not so fast, I have requirements.”

She held him off with one soft hand placed over his heart.

He plowed ahead. “About these requirements of yours, where’s great sex on the list?”

“There’s n-n-no sex on it.”

She was scared of him. Her stammer cracked the last of the shield around his heart. He searched her face, unsure how to bridge the chasm between them. But knew he’d die trying.

\* \* \* \*

Ciara searched his face in turn, still unsure about his change of attitude.

“I thought if I did everything perfectly then I’d be worthy of love.” She’d rushed to get the words out because if she slowed down and thought for two seconds she’d chicken out. She might have regrets later, but not telling him how she felt wasn’t going to be one of them.

She raised her chin. “But I know better now. Worthiness has nothing to do with real love.” Tracing the faded scar along his jaw-line Ciara’s voice dropped to breathy whisper. “I don’t love you because you’re perfect. I just do.”

She darted a peek at him from under her lashes. Nothing of what he thought showed on his face. But she’d said it. She’d been brave and she deserved love. Worthiness was a non-issue.

Zach’s gaze turned away from her. Ciara knew what that meant. She was an expert in rejection. Her heart should’ve stopped beating, but it didn’t. She took another breath. Her lungs still worked, too. The old unworthiness tapes whirled to life in her head. If she tried harder ....

With great sadness, Ciara shut down the if-only loop. She couldn’t make him love her. It hurt, a lot, but her pain didn’t change anything. She deserved unconditional love and she wasn’t settling for anything less.

His head turned back, his eyes seeking hers. She notched her chin up, determined to take whatever insult he hurled without flinching.

“Now there’s where we’re different.” Zach erased the space between them with a single step. He crossed his arms and intimidated her with his terminator glare.

“Great sex is definitely one of my requirements. In fact, it’s pretty much number one through one hundred, what with the variations and all.” He held the hard-ass pose, but his eyes flashed with hot sparks of desire. “You love me, huh?”

How many times did he need to hear it? However many it was, she was going to tell it to him. “I love you. I love you. I love you.” She punctuated her declarations with tender nipping kisses. “Better?”

“Oh yeah. Much better.” He growled and tried to hang on to the badass glare, but his lips curved into that slow grin, and she recognized the light in his eyes. It was her favorite.

“We can’t stay here.”

“What’s wrong with here? I’ve got some real fond memories of that table.” He stroked her shoulder with a slow caress that sent happy messages zinging through her body.

Ciara felt her cheeks warming along with several intimate areas. “The real estate agent is bringing people to see the house.”

“Let’s get you packed then.”

“I need to organize the movers ....”

“Sweetheart, you need to work on me. I’m a real hard case and it’s going to be a lifetime project.”

She narrowed her eyes at him assessingly, trying to figure out whether he was serious or not. He kept a straight face as he reached into his pocket and extracted a blue velvet box.

He cracked open the case, offering her the sparkly inside. “Will you marry me?”

“Marry you?” Her gaping mouth wasn’t the romantic answer he wanted.

He held his ground, waiting for her answer, an unfamiliar vulnerability on his face.

“You have never even told me you loved me,” she said, her words barely audible.

“Never told you I loved you? Are you crazy? I told you I loved you with every look, every touch, every kiss. I didn’t sweet talk you with empty promises. I shared my heart and soul with you every minute we’ve been together.”

“Oh Zach.” Tears escaped and slipped down her cheeks.

“Oh hell, don’t cry sweetheart, I thought you knew.” He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her softness against his hardness, and then buried his face in the corner where her neck met her shoulder.

“I can’t help crying,” she sniffled. “I love you so much and I’m so happy.”

Ciara surrendered the last of her fears that he wouldn’t love her back as he slipped the ring on her finger and wiped away her tears with a clean handkerchief. Every time he touched her, she got a tingle of pure joy. This was what she had longed for—true and lasting love.

\* \* \* \*

Five months later, Zach stood at attention in his dress uniform. The public affairs auditorium teemed with department officials and a few civilians. They were all on hand to witness his official promotion. Chief Logan stepped up, the first in line to welcome him to his new rank.

The Chief clapped his shoulder. “Congratulations Lieutenant Longstreet. I know you are going to be a credit to the department. I can’t think of anyone better to head the Vice-Squad. Not that you have a squad, but think of this as an opportunity to build the unit from the ground up—make it yours, so to speak.”

“Thank you sir.” Zach shook the hand he was offered.

He’d never seen himself as a desk jockey, but he’d never seen himself as a husband, and father, either. He stole a glance at Ciara from the corner of his eye. No one else knew, but he could see a little roundness to her flat stomach. The thought of his baby growing safe inside her made him proud, nervous, and obnoxiously protective. He knew that, but he couldn’t help it and he silently blessed her for tolerating him.

He shook hands with a whole row of other department heads welcoming him to their ranks. Then Ciara was standing next to him, making him calmer and more centered with nothing more than her arm through his.

He pitched his question for only her ears. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” She patted his arm, and so was he.

With everyone else he was still guarded, but not with Ciara. There were benefits beyond his imagining to unconditional surrender.

The End