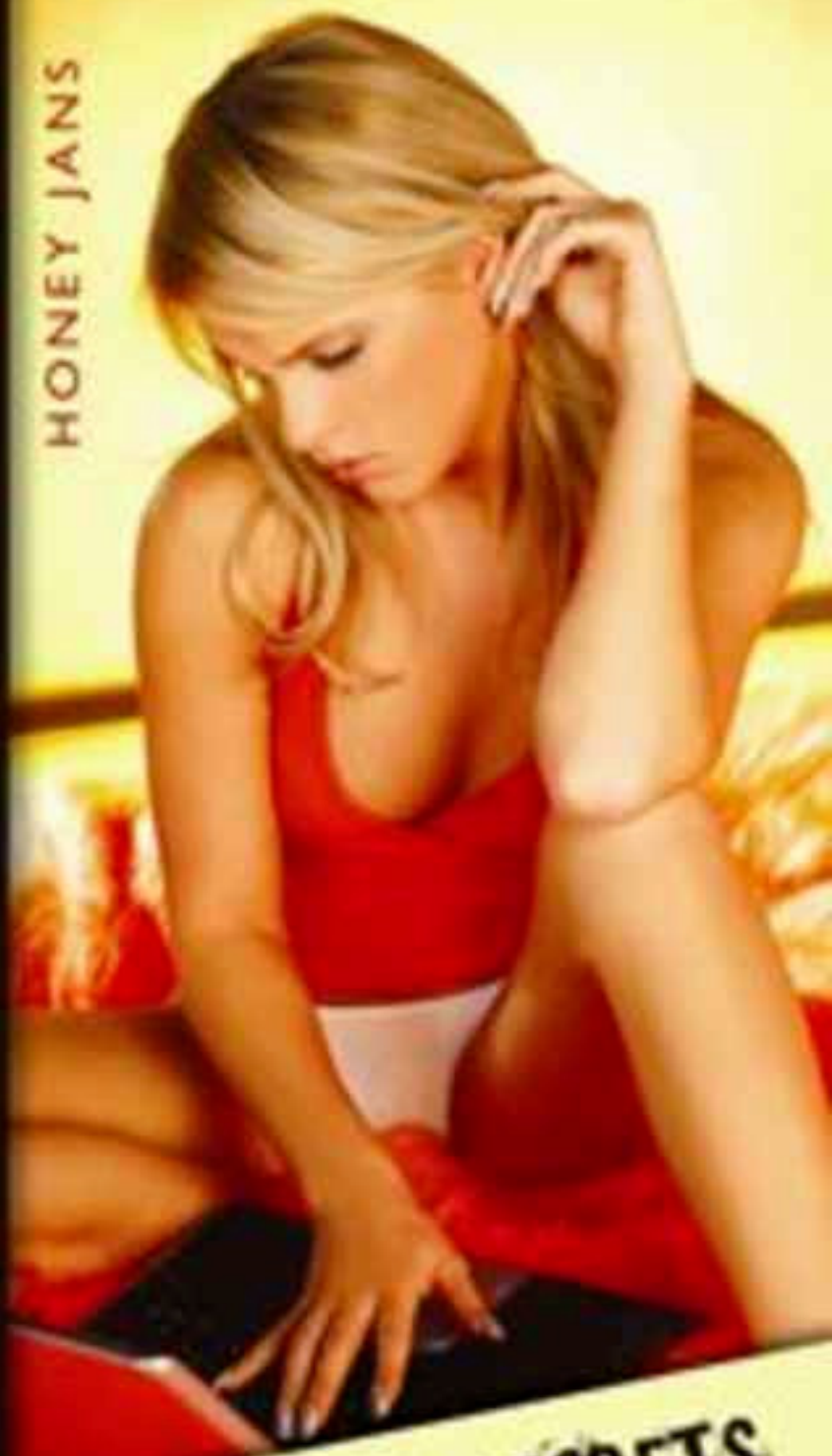


DANGEROUS LIAISONS 3

HONEY JANS



STEALING SECRETS

Dangerous Liaisons: Stealing Secrets
by Honey Jans

Whiskey Creek Press

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DANGEROUS LIAISONS BOOK 3:

STEALING SECRETS

by

Honey Jans

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

DANGEROUS LIAISONS BOOK 1: BOUND TO SERVE

"In *Dangerous Liaisons: Bound to Serve*, author Honey Jans takes the reader on a journey of erotic discovery and danger in equal measure. Bridget is a goal oriented, determined woman with no plan to ever submit to a man. And yet even as she remains stubbornly independent, she is forced to admit she craves the hot loving only Condor can give. Condor is determined to remain free of emotional entanglements, and yet while he does his best to 'train' Bridget, as he administers her punishments her tenacious spirit draws him in ways he has never experienced. He is in turn forced to admit that it is in the beauty of her submission that she gains control over him, even as her sassy ways bring out the Dom in him. The intensity of their passion, combined with the high stakes game they are playing with murderers make this story by Honey Jans a thrilling read."

Fallen Angel Reviews

Five Angels

"Honey Jans writes a great, intriguing story considering the subject matter of B/D. There is action, humor and, sex—lots of sex. The sex scenes are graphic, but very erotic. *Dangerous Liaisons: Book One—Bound to Serve* relates how, even when two very independent people meet and show their fierce autonomy toward each other, love will always interfere. It is an unwritten law, which can never be broken, no matter

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how hard they both try. I am assuming Book One refers to a possible series. If so, I am very much looking forward to its sequel."

TwoLips Reviews

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**Other Books by Author Available at Whiskey Creek
Press:**

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The Gift

Penelope Hart is a lonely librarian—Victor Deveroux, the Dom who's in love with her. Drawn into a world of heady sensuality, Penny learns that submissiveness can be deliciously powerful.

April Love

April Brooks is a twenty-eight-year-old virgin. Fresh from a break up with her cheating ex-fiancé, she bumps into Will Shepard, the man of her teenage erotic dreams. Deciding he's the perfect candidate to deflower her, she promptly asks him if he'd like to take her to bed.

The Commander's Club

Courtney Fox is a journalist on a mission—to save her protégé at The Commander's Club, a white slave ring. Ty Dragon is an FBI agent working undercover as a slave trainer. While setting up the Club's implosion, he teaches feisty Courtney the power of submission, and she shows him that the perfect submissive mate might be right under his nose.

A Wolf's Tale

Gina Sinclair is trying to look after her grandma's best interests. Mitchell Wolf is a creature with only a few weeks to live unless he finds the key to his survival hidden at Xanadu, the Sinclair's Mansion. Find out if Little Red can turn the tables and tame that Wolf.

Monica's Manhunt

Monica Landers aches for someone to see past her provocative profession and savor her sexy wares. Matt Shepard is overworked, sexually frustrated, and bummed that he has to escort Modest Monica on a duty date. When they meet at Spice, Monica literally falls into his arms and Matt decides his date is heaven in three inch heels.

Cindy Revisited

What is a girl to do with an obscene secret admirer, a heard of prolific pygmy goats, and the man of her sexual fantasies back in town, and hotter than ever? Find out by reading, *Cindy Revisited*.

Bound To Serve

Bridget Jones is an agent for Delta Star. When the director hands her pet case over to Condor, she makes a deal to infiltrate a sex club posing as his submissive. Condor knows the feisty redhead will be trouble. He puts her through a crash course on submission. Immersed in the sex club's sensual setting, passion and duty clash as they track their quarry.

Enemy Mine

Rafe Martinez, on a mission to infiltrate a backwoods survivalist group, is forced to rescue Cyn Cooper when she blunders into the camp. A rookie agent, she knows she's close to death, as leering men encircle her. Diablo finds himself falling for the woman he'd only claimed to save. Still, he can't chance letting her see his true colors. Besides, he can tell that she's keeping secrets. Through clouds of suspicion, a mercenary bonding ritual, and enforced intimacy, Cyn

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surrenders to her need for Diablo even as she looks for clues to turn over to the agency.

Once In Love With Laura

Laura Cartwright finds herself stranded in Paris without a cent to her name. Approached with a chance to take a temporary position as a courtesan, she's more than tempted. Desperate and angry with men in general, she sees this as a way to come out on top. Nick Renault a self-made millionaire visits the slave auction out of curiosity and finds himself intrigued by a blue-eyed blond. He buys her services for six months. By the time Laura arrives at his chateau, she realizes she may be in over her head. Will she be able to handle being a courtesan? Will Nick teach her all his favorite tricks and still be able to let her go?

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my husband, Glenn.

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Chapter 1

Melanie Cordova, CIA computer geek, grumbled as she pushed the maid's cart down the dingy hallway in Columbia. The most she'd seen of her new tropical local was a nondescript hotel room. Jeb was using it, in this off shoot of the Sumerian Embassy, as their base of operations. Downstairs, a fancy dress ball was in progress, but she, dressed in a skimpy pink uniform two sizes too small, was schlepping a mop bucket down the hall.

Sometimes life wasn't fair, but she of all people ought to know that. Raised by her mom, after her father died, it wasn't until the agency hired her that she'd learned the truth. Her handsome, loving father had ties to organized crime. Even more shocking, her great Uncle Harry Leone was actually a reputed mob boss, Harry the Horse. She was seven-years-old the last time she'd seen Harry. He'd pulled a poker chip out of his pocket, one of his favorite tricks, and slipped it into her pocket, telling her it was her favor chip. After her father died, she and her mom moved across the country, and she forgot about Harry.

When her family history almost failed to get her clearance with the agency, it came as a shock. It wasn't an auspicious way to begin her career, and it kept her from anything but a subordinate position, until now. Actually, she was surprised the agency hired her, but she figured her straight arrow record had won them over. Breaking the law was abhorrent to her. Still, she'd taken pains to keep her past from her

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coworkers, learning quickly when she'd admitted it to an old boyfriend and he promptly dumped her. Apparently, the field agent she had her brief fling with considered it career suicide to keep seeing her. She didn't care ... who wanted to date a man in black anyway?

Jeb Mason recruited her out of the computer lab two weeks ago, exciting her with promises of adventurous, even exotic, fieldwork. It'd seemed to come at a fortuitous time, as the case she'd been building against the San Sebastian Mines had gone south. When she'd voiced her suspicions that the formerly inactive mine, now supposedly producing emeralds, was actually a smuggling operation, she'd been shot down severely. When Jeb came along, dangling an opportunity before her she'd never thought she'd get, she jumped.

So far, the only action she had was fending off her new boss's clumsy advances. She tugged at the uniform's buttons, strained to the limit over her too generous breasts, wishing she were flat-chested. Damn, he'd done this to humiliate her. It was another in a long list of passive-aggressive moves Jeb pulled since she'd bested him on the rifle range, then kicked him in the groin when he'd tried to make up for it by trying to kiss her.

The mean-eyed creep practically drooled when he'd seen her in the skimpy maid's uniform earlier this evening, and she'd wasted no time squashing any lusty ideas he might be harboring. She might have to work under him, but she wouldn't sleep with him. She had much higher standards, even though men weren't exactly beating down her door. As a thirty-two-year-old, slightly plump wallflower, she wasn't

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holding out for a hero. The truth be told, her vibrator was her only sexual outlet these days and she was happy with it, wasn't she? She ignored the little voice in her head that screamed ... hell no! Coming into this steamy jungle setting had to be warping her brain, she thought with wry self-humor. One thing for sure, it was turning her formerly resting hormones up high. Damn, how she wished she could meet somebody, even if only for a hot one-night-stand, but that wasn't in the cards for her.

She gave her mop bucket a shove and winced when water splashed on her ugly maid's shoes. Right, it just went to show her that she needed to keep her mind on business. She was going to make her first, and probably only, field assignment a success. Then she would hightail it back to the computer lab where she belonged, with the rest of the nerds. But first, she had some clandestine files to find and decrypt.

* * * *

Delta Star Agent, Ace Riser silently assembled his sniper rifle in the dark, as he listened to the footsteps out in the hallway. Whoever was out there wasn't bothering to use stealth, which made him cautious. The collar of his tailored tuxedo was turned up to block out even a hint of white, but it could be turned down if he had to blend in. He raised his weapon and caught his breath, waiting. Another dirty, but necessary job to do ... so why did this one feel different?

Maybe too many years in the field had finally burned him out, like Miles Vance had said. Suddenly he was getting tired of the deadly game he played so well. One thing was sure,

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after this mission, he was taking a well-deserved vacation. A few weeks holed up at the Texas ranch he loved so much would help him refocus. After that, it would take something a hell of a lot more tempting than this crap to make him jump to Bran Frost's bidding again.

He watched the doorknob turn and let out a slow breath, deliberately slowing his pulse, his finger on the trigger as he waited. Take aim and shoot, piece of cake. He never missed, especially when his foolish targets wandered into the kill zone. When a statuesque blond beauty in an undersized maid's uniform stole into the room, he froze in surprise, taking his finger off the trigger. Well hell, he'd encountered female assassins before, but not like her. He knew in a heart-stirring instant she was no pro, as he watched her fumble with the door. Moonlight bathed her curvaceous silhouette in an angelic glow, giving him a prime view of her sexy tits and ass as she looked guiltily about the room.

He grinned in spite of himself. She reminded him of a kid about to raid the cookie jar. He ought to take her over his knee in retribution. His mind wandered as his cock got involved, throbbing in response as he watched her bite her lip. Plump and fully curved, she reminded him of an old-time pin-up—not classically beautiful, but arresting just the same. If she wasn't the assassin he was assigned to take out, then who the hell was she?

In that instant, she spun to look at him, her eyes widening in shock. He looked into her lavender eyes and hit her with a knock out dart as she opened her full sexy lips to scream. The dart hit her on the left shoulder, right above one truly

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impressive Dolly Partonesque breast. She let out a breathy little whimper as she fell. He caught her before she hit the ground, pulling her sweet weight against his hardening body. Dazzled and confused as the mingled scents of strawberries and sweet woman tantalized his senses, he bit out a curse. His gut tightened and his stupid cock twitched as he looked down at his prisoner. Well, hell, what a cluster fuck. One thing was clear; one of them had been set up to take a fall, but which one, and why? Until he knew the truth, he couldn't let her go.

He'd have to take her out the same way he'd come in, because no matter what, he had to find out why she was stealing secrets. After securing his weapon, he tossed his sexy captive over his shoulder and carried her out to the balcony. Jasmine growing outside the window toyed with his senses, but not as much as the woman he carried. Masculine laughter, a spattering of Spanish and the smell of cigarettes told him the embassy's rent-a-cops were making their hourly patrol. He eased back into the shadows, watching them pass by undisturbed. Only when they were out of sight did he shinny down the vines, his sweet-smelling burden over his shoulder, going out the way he'd come. It was a little tricky with the distraction of the pin-up's ample tits pressing into his back, but he did it. His cock pulsed hungrily every step of the way, making him scowl as he told himself to knock it off.

Gritting his teeth, he silently made his way across the grounds with his burden over his shoulder. He laid her down gently in the back of his panel van, stopping to look at her under a streetlight as his lusty cock stirred again. She was

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soft and even prettier close-up, with long dark eyelashes that looked like angel's wings against her flushed cheeks, an impudent little nose, soft pink lips slightly parted in sleep, and long, gold blond hair that didn't come from a bottle. Innocent, he decided, wondering how she'd gotten involved in this mess. She let out a little snore and he grinned, even though he knew they were both in deep trouble. Delta frowned on kidnapping civilians, but he frowned even harder on killing innocents. It was time to get out of Dodge and come up with Plan B, whatever the hell that was.

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Chapter 2

Melanie winced, her head throbbing, as the rasp of her zipper going down jolted her back to consciousness. The fact she was being stripped gradually registered in her foggy mind, but she couldn't seem to work up any panic over it. Her limbs felt weighted down, like they'd fallen asleep, and her body and mind were equally numb. She could barely stir; much less lift her heavy eyelids. Good heavens, she'd been drugged. The realization hit with the force of a tidal wave, making her pulse race. She hated drugs; she didn't even like taking aspirin.

Fighting panic, she deliberately slowed her jumbled thoughts, trying to think, focus on what she could figure out. She'd sensed trouble at the embassy, turned to see a sexy silver-eyed ghost, and now she was lying on a lumpy bed, freezing her ass off. A cool breeze washed over her, making her teeth chatter as it blew over her nearly naked skin. She sucked in a shocked breath; even in her out of body state, she could feel a blush heat her body as she heard a soft male curse beside her. He had fast reactions, she had to give him that, but she was a black belt.

"Fuck, you're awake."

"No shit," she muttered, lashing out with leaden arms, which nevertheless managed to hit a hard target, making her cry out in pain, and earning a muffled growl from the ghost. A heartbeat later, he covered her, his hot hard frame crushing her into the mattress, making the air whoosh out of her

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lungs. For a ghost, he was damned heavy, she thought bemused, as her world seemed to go into slow motion. Pinned under his very male body, the bulge of his hard cock pressing against her oversexed mound, she let out a little gasp as her stupid body tingled with arousal. You wanted a secret lover. But this isn't it, she scolded herself, but her hungry sex starved body wasn't listening. His body heat transferred to her along with his sexy masculine scent, sandalwood and hot man, she'd smelled it back at the embassy. The last thing she remembered was the silver-eyed ghost.

Letting out a gasp at the memory, she opened her eyes and locked gazes with the sexy specter. He'd didn't look very ghostly this close up, as a matter of fact he had a scar that crossed his handsome face from his left eye to disappear into his sexy pelt of dark hair. Lord, what a hunk. A warm lethargy swept through her. Time seemed to hang suspended as she took in his long straight nose, firm sultry mouth, and fierce alchemist's eyes glittering down at her with what ... outrage, curiosity, heat? She read all three and creamed at the confirmation of his sexual interest in her.

Shit, he even looked like he'd stepped out of one of her favorite erotic novels, complete with a tux. Kind of made her feel underdressed, pulsing under him in only her bra and panties. Shit, they were her granny panties, plain white cotton.

She couldn't help feeling a pang that he'd been hurt so badly as she focused on his scar. The fact she sympathized with him was proof she was under the influence of something. Trembling as he pressed intimately against her, she

registered idiotically that his breath smelled like coffee and cinnamon, comforting scents. Some field agent she'd turned out to be, to be taken by the enemy. Where the hell were they? A glance beyond him showed her a full moon outside and what looked like the jungle. Shit, they sure weren't in Kansas anymore, or the embassy.

It was night and she was his prisoner, didn't that bring up a lot of forbidden fantasies? Her pulse raced. Well damn, it definitely had to be the drugs blunting her self-preservation instincts and making her ... horny. "What the fuck did you give me, you sneaky bastard?" she opened her mouth to scream.

He cursed and bent to kiss her, stifling her cries.

Melanie turned into a big puddle of need when his hot mouth slanted demandingly over hers, turning her cries into a moan. His kiss became slow and seductive. She kissed him back, knowing she shouldn't, but unable to resist. He tasted delicious, she decided, savoring his heady blend of coffee, cinnamon, and hot man.

He nipped at her lower lip, demanding admittance, and the last bit of her inhibitions vanished. She opened her mouth for him, her tongue dueling with his as her body throbbed under him. When she tried to wrap her arms around him, he grabbed her wrists, holding them down, frustrating her. Instead, she had to settle for rocking her damp tingling sex against the throbbing bulge of his massive erection, sending shards of pleasure through her that made her toes curl.

Something deep inside of her melted as he ruthlessly claimed her mouth, his cock pressing against her tingling

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mound, pleasuring her more than she'd thought possible. She'd fantasized about masterful men for years, and even had a collection of erotic romance to show for it, along with her toys. A shameful secret, one she'd never shared with anyone but her boss, Dot. They'd exchanged hot reads, but while Dot had an active love life, hers had been pretty much non-existent, until now.

Whimpering as her breasts swelled against his broad chest, she could feel her nipples harden to jewels tingling against him. Was his chest hairy or smooth, she wondered. What's more, what did he look like without the tux? Wild imaginings went through her brain like a roller coaster, and she went along for the thrill ride, pressing closer to him, trying to come. Her sex embarrassingly wet and creamy, she rocked her panty-clad mound against him like a cat in heat. Oh good grief, maybe he'd given her something like Spanish fly, making her insatiable for him. Pleasure rippled through her sex, making her gasp, as her body tightened, and all her inhibitions vanished. She mewled into his mouth at the sweet sensation. She'd never known anything like this wonderful, erotic commotion inside of her as she cried out, whether from fear or passion, she couldn't say.

She shivered, sucking at his tongue, wriggling against him as he bumped against her. She found herself dry humping him as the pressure built up inside her. This was what she ached for, dreamed of. Under his ministrations, she forgot her anger, fear, betrayal, almost her own name. How could she think while in his arms? He groaned into her mouth and pressed tighter.

He broke the kiss, murmured something dark and desperate, as he bent to suck on her neck. Her face burned—her whole body burned. She whimpered against him and tried to put her arms around him again, but he held them fast, effortlessly restraining her for his pleasure. She felt herself growing wetter as she shimmied against him. How sick was it to be aroused by one's captor? It was even sicker that she wanted more of him.

He broke the kiss. Panting, she let out a cry of protest. She lifted her head off the mattress to try to kiss him again, but he drew far enough away to thwart her, his gunmetal silver eyes narrowing. He was breathing hard, sweating ... the pulse in his throat beating along with his throbbing cock. Who was he fighting, both of them?

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Interesting interrogation techniques the man had. By his Texas twang, she knew he wasn't Sumerian intelligence, or Columbian ... so who was he? A private mercenary seemed the likely answer; goodness knew there were hordes of them around the world. She simmered under him, both turned on and frustrated, his gruff tone pissing her off. "I might ask you the same question, kidnapper..."

"I'm asking the questions around here," he said, his voice turning seductive, his hand letting go of her wrist to cup her breast.

Melanie knew it was no doubt a deliberate attempt to turn her on so she'd tell all. She wouldn't blurt out any secrets, but his hot, masterful touch did excite her. She hissed with pleasure when he squeezed her breast.

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"Tell me!" he demanded, his voice low and silky, as he pinched her nipple.

"More," she moaned, arching into him.

"I can make this hurt," he muttered, his voice no longer seductive.

"I believe you," she cried out, arching against him. "Would you believe I'm the maid?"

"No."

"Smart man," she said with a sigh. The fact he didn't believe her was the least of her troubles as her traitorous body throbbed under his hard one. His body heat transferred to her bare skin, making her tremble as he warmed her. It had to be whatever he'd shot her up with, loosening her morals, because she wanted very much to fuck him.

* * * *

Ace felt everything inside him go still when his sexy prisoner gazed at him, her big violet eyes burning with desire. Shit, his cock stirred in reaction against her creamy body, the scent of her arousal driving him crazy, even as his heart softened toward her. It was only the drugs making her want him, he told himself to get his stupid cock in check. In real life, he wouldn't stand a chance with her, not that he'd want to. He didn't mix business and pleasure. Besides, she was good at playing the innocent, but the electronics he'd found stashed in her underwear told another tale. She had some high tech computer gadgets he didn't completely recognize, and was probably a spy, even if she wasn't well trained. Still he couldn't help himself from gazing down at her with need.

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Her eyes were as purple as the flowers in his Austin ranch's paddock, making him think of home, reminding him of his decision to get the hell out of the spook business while he could. He wished to hell he was home and had met her in a conventional way.

His body reacted as she rubbed against him; his throbbing dumb handle nestled between her creamy thighs. He didn't take it personally, the knockout drug he'd used had an unfortunate side affect. The chemicals took away one's inhibitions and increased desire. That had to be why she was catching fire for him, he was too hard-bitten to inspire such a response from a beauty like her without the help of erotic drugs.

The label inside her maid's uniform was the same as the other embassy janitorial personnel, so she had connections. He met her amused gaze, feeling off balance, even though he supposedly was in the dominant position. His jaw tightened as his cock twitched. "Down boy," he muttered to himself. "Who are you?" he demanded again.

"Funny, I know I should try to kick your macho ass, stud, but for some insane reason I'd rather kiss you."

Ace heard the annoyance in her voice, saw the come-hither look in her eye, and knew the time had come to press his luck. "It's a side effect of the drug. Don't worry, it'll soon pass and you'll hate my guts." His fingertips finessed her stiff nipples through her bra, making her moan and his fingers shake. She shamelessly thrust her tits out at him. He was happy to oblige, tweaking them, making her sigh languidly as

his cock throbbed against her. "Give me your name, sweetheart."

"No," she said, gasping, shaking her head.

Ace bit back a growl, as his erection grew harder against her velvety cunt. She wiggled against him, getting off. "You can trust me," he said, pressing his cock against her mound, torturing himself. She thrust up at him, tightening. He ground against her and watched a blush cover her body as her head tipped back and she cried out.

"Tell me."

"Melanie Cordova," she blurted loudly, trembling.

"Come for me, Melanie baby," he coaxed grinding against her, savoring her name, it fit her—soft and sensual. All he could think about was taking her, even though he knew he had a job to do. Under him, she cried out and shuddered, spasms of orgasm wracking her sexy body as she whimpered under him. He felt the vibrations all the way to his cock and fought to hold onto his self-control. He went still atop her, his body stiff as a board, his manhood aching, as he looked into the smoky depths of her lavender eyes. She looked shocked, her cheeks flushed, as if she wasn't used to coming, making him feel very territorial. She was blushing. It told him she was new and inexperienced, and touched him more than he cared to admit. He drew in a ragged breath. "Don't say it. I'm not your type, right?"

He watched her scowl at his snarky comment and was careful to hide his smile, even though it was impossible to hide his hard-on. Still, it didn't mean he had to take her. He eased away from her before he gave in to the urge to fuck

her. "Don't worry; I don't take unwilling women, even if they get their jollies by dry humping me."

She let out a yawn and he knew he was losing her to the drug again. He watched her slump back against the pillows as her eyes drifted shut, and swallowed the lump in his throat. Damn, he didn't want to care for her. A heartbeat later, he forced himself to pull away and roll out of bed, amazed that he hadn't come in his pants. He smiled when she snored lightly. She was going into a normal REM sleep and it would give him the time he needed. Ace ignored his cell phone when it vibrated on his hip again. His handler had been calling every fifteen minutes, but he wasn't ready to answer yet. He flipped it off, pulled open a nightstand drawer, and tossed it in, slamming the drawer shut. Out of sight out, out of mind, he hoped. He needed quiet time to think.

He stalked into the safe house's kitchenette to make coffee; she was going to need it ... buckets of it. When she woke up, he had to get some real answers from Miss Melanie and figure out which one of them was marked for death.

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Chapter 3

The savory aroma of coffee roused Melanie from her slumber. She sleepily opened her eyes and glanced around the shack, appalled as the scandalous events of the evening replayed across her mind. A sexy ghost had captured her, and he'd made her come before he'd made her talk ... or at least give him her name. Shit, some field agent she'd turned out to be. Maybe Aunt Agnes was right, she didn't have the moral fiber to make it in this business.

Memories of his demanding touch still made her toes curl. Her face and body heated, and her nipples hardened to stiff tingling peaks as the spot between her legs pulsed. She stared out the window into what seemed like pitch-dark jungle, fighting off her body's inappropriate lust. Whatever he'd given her was wearing off now, so she should be able to control herself, she decided firmly. It hadn't been an erotic dream and she had to deal with it ... with him. She'd fallen for the oldest trick in the book—swept away by her captor's seductiveness.

But no more she decided, stretching as she tried to clear her head. She cast a wary look around the bedroom seeing he wasn't there. Had he run out on her? Her heart thudded at the possibility. It wasn't that she didn't want him to leave. It was just that she didn't want to be stranded in the middle of the jungle in her scanties.

The sound of a sink running alerted her to his presence in the next room and she relaxed. He hadn't left her after all.

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Melanie couldn't help the foolish surge of satisfaction that washed through her at the realization. She rolled her eyes at her ludicrous feelings of relief. He was a kidnapper, not some romantic hero; she had to remember that.

She managed to push back the covers and sit up in bed; her head swimming with the effort those small moves took. The covers fell away and she shivered in the breeze, glancing down at her semi-nudity, reminding her that he'd stripped her before he ... what ... made her come? Her too big, and now pathetically sensitized boobs were tumbling out of her plain white bra, and she was wearing granny panties, how humiliating. Not the way she wanted to conduct a seduction, but this wasn't that, she had to remind herself. She was a victim, not that you could prove it by her eager sexual response to her captor. She'd practically ravished him. A blush heated her from her face to her toes at the memory. It had to have been the drugs making her insatiable, because she knew she was non-orgasmic with men. A fumble in the backseat of Jerry's car had taught her that when she was eighteen. There was no way she could stick around for round two with silver eyes.

She tried to slip out of bed, and grumbled when her still half asleep body wouldn't cooperate. Great! How could she escape when she couldn't even walk? She sank back against the headboard exhausted; knowing there was no way she could get up and run, even if she wanted to. She'd have to be smart to get out of this. Sweeping a glance around the tumbledown shack, she took in her seedy surroundings, looking for a weapon. The rickety chairs, threadbare rug,

lumpy bed, were all that met her eyes. That and the old nightstand with a drawer not quite shut. The bare bulb overhead cast a harsh light over everything and glinted light off a small rectangular, metallic object in the drawer. A cell phone ... could she really be that lucky?

Her heart leapt at the possibility; if it was a cell phone, she was so saved. All she had to do was call Jeb give him the code word for distress, "Exit," and he'd come to get her. Biting back a groan as she forced her resistant body to move again, she managed to roll to the edge of the bed and dangle her hand over the side. She slipped her hand into the drawer, feeling a sense of renewed power when her fingers closed around cool metal. It was a phone. She wanted to shout out her small victory; instead, she quietly pulled out the phone. By sheer effort, she punched in Jeb's number with a shaky finger.

Holding her breath, she waited interminable rings for Jeb to answer. "Come on, pick up, pick up you jerk," she muttered under her breath. The clink of dishes in the other room told her captor was busy for now. She winced at the audible click a moment later.

"What is it?" Jeb snapped.

Melanie swallowed a groan when his belligerent voice came out at her, sure that it carried. But there was no cry from her captor, so maybe not. Breathing a sigh of relief, she realized Jeb sounded funny, out of breath and distracted, even for him. Was he drunk? She wouldn't put it past him. "Exit," she whispered into the phone, not wanting to alert silver eyes that she was calling for help.

"Speak up, will you, Melons! I can't hear you over the band."

Her jaw snapped shut at his teasing code name for her, an obvious slur at her full breasts. He knew she felt self-conscious at what her Aunt Agnes called her pleasingly plump body, and he loved to take jabs at her, the immature jerk. No shit, comb-over. She could hear the orchestra playing in the background of the call, but what stood out was Jeb's heavy breathing. He was winded, as if he'd been running a marathon. What the hell? Then a female giggle right near the mouthpiece of his phone told her he wasn't alone. Outrage made her suck in a breath. It was either that, or tell the rat bastard exactly what she thought of him. The jerk was screwing some woman when he was supposed to be running their mission. "Exit," she said as outrage grew inside her. "In case you've forgotten, it means I need help."

"Yeah, yeah, as green as you are I don't doubt it. Relax. I'll come upstairs and help you out as soon as I'm done." He let out a chuckle. "I'm kind of busy right now."

"Si, Patron," a female voice cut in, "You are very busy with me, but your Consuela's mouth will make it all better."

Melanie's jaw dropped even as she fought to hold her temper together. Perfect! Jeb was getting a blowjob while she was held captive by a seductive wizard. Gritting her teeth she bit out, "I'm not upstairs, you moron! I've been kidnapped."

"The hell you say!" He let out a roar and then yelped. "Easy, Consuela."

Melanie smiled. She hoped the woman had bit him where it hurt.

"Where the fuck are you, Melons?" Jeb shouted into the phone.

"Keep your voice down, you idiot," she snapped at the end of her patience, adding in a hushed tone, "I don't know where I am. I woke up in a shack somewhere inside the jungle, near as I can tell."

"Of all the incompetent bitches ... I should never have accepted your ass on my team. Well, now that you're awake get out of there, come in, and report ... that's an order."

She refrained from saying that he hadn't any choice to take her on his team, seeing as how he couldn't cut it technically. She resented the insinuation that she was incompetent, although she had been caught. "I can't come in, you fool. I've been drugged and I can hardly move off this bed..."

"Bed?" he asked slowly.

She froze at his insinuating tone, the way he said the word grating on her nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. "Yes, bed. I was knocked out and..."

"If you're fucking around instead of working, Melons, I'll..."

"You're the one who's screwing around on duty, Patron."

He went completely silent on the other end. Telling her supposed rescuer that she knew about his indiscretions wasn't smart. She drew in a breath, trying for a calm tone. "Jeb, do you hear me, damn it? Come and extract me." She listened to dead air and quietly freaked out. He wouldn't leave her stranded, would he? Of course he would, it was just like the passive aggressive loser. But he still had to report to his

lead, Randal Cutler. Something like this, he couldn't sweep under the rug.

"Jeb, damn it all, answer me. If you hang me out to dry I'll let everyone know you were too busy getting a blowjob to do your duty." She let out a shriek when the cell phone was snatched out of her hand. She shot a startled look up at her scowling captor. How the hell had he gotten the drop on her so quietly? Well, she'd been preoccupied fighting with Jeb and her captor was a ghost ... some kind of spook. The forbidding look on his ruggedly handsome face told her how pissed off he was at her. He lifted the phone to his ear and gave her a shrug.

Ace heard the phone click as the poor bastard she'd been reaming out hung up. "He hung up on you," he said, watching her disgruntled reaction. She was pissed but she wasn't surprised ... interesting. He should have never left the cell phone in her vicinity, stupid move, but then he'd underestimated her. She ought to be sleeping, but instead she was glaring up at him like an angry angel. To her credit, she didn't freak out as he scowled down at her. Was it possible she was CIA? "Were you chewing out Jeb Mason?" he asked, watching her eyes widen with surprise at his guess.

"No," she said, glowering up at him as she crossed her arms across her breasts.

It only succeeded in drawing his focus to her voluptuous cleavage. Melanie couldn't lie worth a damn and idiot that he was; he found it charming. His brother, Clark would laugh his ass off if he knew how easily the innocent had played him, not that he was going to tell him. The flutter of her eyelashes,

and the racing pulse in her throat gave her away when she tried to lie to him. Honest women were a novelty where he came from, but he told himself not to be a fool.

He noticed her sympathetic glance linger on his scar for a moment and his gut tightened in reaction. He knew it wasn't pretty—hell, his ex fiancée had left him over it, but he didn't care about his looks. He met her tender look with a determined one of his own, wondering what the hell the CIA were doing setting him up. They'd always had a cordial, if competitive relationship.

"Great, that's all I need, the CIA involved in my business." He waited for her reaction but she didn't so much as flutter her eyelids to show she was upset. Instead, she focused on the steaming cup of coffee he'd brought her.

"That smells good."

Her comment made him smile, even as his fascinated gaze roved over her semi-naked body. Just the sight of her was enough to get him going all over again. Her boobs tumbling out of her lacy white bra, and the old-fashioned panties she wore looked virginal and provocative all at the same time, making his pulse throb and his cock twitch. He watched her nipples harden in reaction as she eyed him back and groaned. She was so damned responsive. Down boy, get out of the kill zone, he told himself. She's a spook or some other replica, even if she is green as grass, and she's not on the menu. Even knowing it, he couldn't stop staring at her charms. The worst part was when she stared back at him, her violet eyes darkening with lust. What would it take to make her look at him like that when he plunged deep inside her honey walls?

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The treacherous part was that he wanted to find out. Was it possible she was still turned on from the drugs, he wondered as he gazed at her pretty blush, or were her reactions real? Didn't matter, he wouldn't touch her. Anyway, she was way out of his league, way too pretty.

"I made the coffee for you," he said gruffly, probably sounding more pissed than he felt. When she reached up for the cup, he saw her hands shaking and gave her a curt shake of the head. To his relief she let her hands drop to the mattress, obeying him. He pressed the cup to her lips cautioning, "Careful, it's hot."

He watched her take a deep breath of the bracing aroma before taking a sip. She drew back to smile at him and he felt his gut, and something that felt suspiciously like his heart, twist. This is not good.

"Delicious," she said in a husky voice. "Thick, dark, and strong enough to give me a buzz."

His cock twitched as her honeyed voice washed over him. "Easy," he cautioned, frowning down at her. Although who exactly he was warning, he didn't know.

"No cream or sugar?" she teased.

"I thought you might upchuck," he said, deliberately tearing his gaze off her alluring body. She was trying to play him mirthlessly and he had to nip it in the bud. This time when she reached out for the cup, he handed it to her, seeing her hands were steadier, and backed off. He watched her drink the coffee, catching her peeking at him over the mug's rim. He couldn't help staring back. Shit, this was getting him nothing but a bad case of blue balls. Firmly pulling his horny

mind back on business, he scooped the electronic gadget from the dresser. He'd found it tucked between her spectacular boobs a moment before she'd wakened. "Tell me about your little gizmo, Melanie," he said, dropping it onto her lap.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, shifting to the left.

He barely restrained his urge to take her over his knee, guessing they'd both probably like it too much, and flicked an impatient glance at the hardware. "Don't try to play me, you won't like the results."

"So now you're threatening me with violence," she said, glaring.

"No, but I am threatening to paddle your sexy ass, don't try my patience."

"I don't have to tell you a thing," she said, her eyes narrowing as a blush covered her. "I know my rights, rank, name, serial number."

Her spunky answer told him all he needed to know. She was CIA and was turned on by the idea of being spanked. His cock throbbed heavily in his tuxedo pants. "Then you are a spook." He watched her bite her lip in reaction.

"The way I see it, you're the only ghost around here."

Her words made him suck in a startled breath. How did she know he felt like a specter lately? Fading into the background on missions had become second nature. "Stop stalling." When she thrust the cup out at him instead of answering, he took it and watched impressed as she shoved the covers back and managed to sit on the edge of the bed. She was a feisty little

thing, he had to give her that; most men would still be out for the count.

She slanted him a demanding look. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"Do you now?" he said, watching the flare of outrage on her pretty face. "Come on then." He reached down to tug her off the bed. She let out a grumble of protest, but clung to him when her knees buckled. He held her a moment, liking the feel of her in his arms, while she got her bearings. When she grew steady, he steered her toward the shack's bathroom. He grunted when she elbowed him in the ribs to make him let go.

"You can let me go now," she snapped. "I can walk on my own."

"Tough," he said, hanging on tight and marching her toward the bathroom. She was the key to this fucked up mess and he wasn't about to release her. Besides, he kind of liked holding her. The sappy thought made him grumble. Damn, he was getting soft, or maybe he was just tired of being alone. As they entered the tiny rust-riddled bathroom, he slanted an amused glance at Melanie, seeing her appalled look. "It's not exactly the Ritz."

"No kidding," Melanie said, glancing around.

He stopped feeling as uneasy with this situation as she did. As soon as she peed, he was getting some answers, even if he had to romance them out of her. Then he was shipping her back to the CIA and getting on with his life.

Melanie eyed the rusty bathroom, taking in the sink, toilet, and dripping shower. Then she saw the open, Melanie-sized window and her heart skipped a beat. An escape route if she

could get rid of her sexy captor, who clung to her like a jungle vine. He didn't trust her out of his sight she knew, especially since he'd caught her with his phone, but she had to convince him to leave. She cast a sour look his way when he just stood there, not budging or giving her privacy. If he thought he was going to stand there and watch her pee, he had another thing coming. "Get out ... now," she added when he hesitated.

He grinned. "Have it your way, Sugar, but I'll be right outside the door."

"I don't care if you're on the next planet," she said, tracking him the wobbly two steps it took to get to the door. When her captor stepped outside, she slammed the door in his face, hearing his chuckle. The damned spook probably thought she was still crazy for him, but he was wrong. So why were her erogenous zones still sizzling? Didn't matter, she knew her duty and she had to escape, report Jeb for being incompetent, and get on with her life.

The lock wouldn't keep him out for long, but it did make her feel a little more secure, and it would buy her some time. She was feeling stronger by the minute and she knew she had to act fast. He hadn't said what he was going to do with her and she wasn't about to stick around to find out.

Rushing to the sink, she turned on the taps to mask any sounds she would make, and then crept to the window. Going barefoot did have its advantages, as she moved silently across the chipped tile floor to the window. It was partly open and a warm breeze blew in through the screen. All she had to do was push out the screen and jump. Easier said than done, she decided gazing up at it. Think Melanie, she scolded

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herself, lowering the toilet seat and climbing up on it. She only hoped the darned thing would take her weight. Holding her breath, she clambered up on the toilet tank, taking a grip on the towel bar, and winced when they groaned but held. She waited for him to pounce...

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Chapter 4

Ace paced outside the bathroom door listening to the sound of rushing water inside the bathroom as Melanie turned the taps on full blast. He felt like a jerk for listening, but monitoring unwilling subjects went with his job description. Feeling as restless as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, his gut told him something was about to go down. Had she been pretty bait to draw him into a trap? If she was CIA, that meant this whole thing was a set up from the word go, but who was pulling the strings?

No matter who was behind this betrayal, he knew better than to trust anyone, especially his captive. She'd already outplayed him once, getting his cell phone—he wouldn't make the same mistake again. Thinking of her succeeded in reviving his hard-on. Hell, he was still primed from sweet Melanie coming all over him, and he knew he'd never forget her hot response. The scent of her arousal still hung in the air, and the primal part of him wanted to plunge himself in her until they were both spent. He knew better. He had to keep it in his pants.

Suddenly, the sound of a vehicle approaching his jungle hideout startled him, putting him on red alert. He hadn't checked in, and his handler didn't know about this place, so who the hell was coming to visit? He rushed to the front room to peer out the window at the winding mountain road leading to the shack. Headlights cut a swath through the jungle and he knew in a heartbeat they brought death. One of them was

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compromised, probably him, he realized grimly. She'd used his sat phone ... had Vance bugged it? The possibility made him want to tear the weasel apart. Then the headlights shut down and the four-wheel drive vehicles kept coming. Shit. He turned and moved like a bat out of hell toward the bathroom.

* * * *

Melanie wobbled on the bathroom windowsill poised to jump into the pitch-dark jungle below. She prayed there wouldn't be snakes. A shudder went through her, and she told herself to suck it up. A moment later, she thought she heard the sound of vehicles in the distance. Jeb with a search party? She wondered, hesitating. The wild burst of hope that bloomed inside her died in a microsecond when she thought about it. Based on his reaction and the fact he'd hung up on her and didn't know her location, she knew he wasn't coming to help her. That meant her captor had friends, nefarious friends, and the time had come to make her move. She had to get out now.

As she hesitated, the bathroom door was unceremoniously kicked open. She screamed, turning a horrified look at her captor as he ran toward her. Their eyes met and she was startled by his approving look. Then he hit her like a linebacker, propelling them both out the window. She hit the soggy turf below with a splat and tried to suck in a breath. Sprawled face down on the wet grass, she hardly had time to think before he landed on top of her. If she had the breath, she'd have screamed, instead she lay under his massive frame, trying to suck air into her starved lungs.

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A millisecond later, an explosion rocked the shack with a boom, shaking the ground, her, and the silver-eyed fiend on top of her. Melanie managed to gasp out a whimper as her captor pressed down on the turf, cocooning her as he spread out to cover her from head to toe. She heard his grunts, felt debris rain down around her, and knew he was taking the brunt of it. Why was he protecting her? And why would his accomplices try to blow him up? None of it made sense. Then, in the distance—male voices speaking in Spanish. He stiffened on top of her, pushing her even deeper into the tall grass.

She grimaced and followed his lead, trying not to make any sounds to alert them. Hell, they'd tried to blow her up too, and she wasn't stupid enough to cry out. If they were looking for him, and he wanted to hide, that couldn't be healthy for her, either. Was there a falling out among thieves? That must be it, if it had been Jeb, he wouldn't have tried to kill her.

As the voices moved off in another direction, her kidnapper wrapped his arms around her and rolled them both under some prickly bushes. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see what kind of night critters might inhabit this place, and waited, knowing that a sound from her would bring the men down upon them. It could be a rescue party, but deep in her heart, she knew it wasn't.

She opened her eyes to look up at her captor. His silver eyes glittered with a keen hunter's awareness as he looked down at her, looking dangerous in the moonlight, like a jungle predator. She opened her mouth, whether to speak or cry out

she didn't know. In a heated rush his mouth covered hers, blotting out all thoughts of rebellion.

* * * *

Ace burned as Melanie's mouth softened under him, her lips flowering open, her body seemingly welcoming his weight. He nudged her legs apart until his aching cock pressed up against her soft mound. She let out a breathy gasp and he took advantage, slipping his tongue into her mouth. She moaned, kissing him back, driving him a little crazy with her fevered response. Hell, it was undeniable. He wanted her.

The part of him that was mission-oriented noted the sounds of the search party had faded, but he didn't stop until she was panting under him, her legs parted wide so his cock nestled against her cunt, and she arched up at him. The sweet friction damned near blew his mind, and his load, as his swollen cock rubbed against her. When he broke the kiss, he was gratified to see the sultry, if shocked look on her face. What they'd just shared didn't have anything to do with the drugs, let her deny it. Amazing, but he wasn't about to argue. Instead, he watched her give him a thoughtful look.

Her brow knitted as she whispered, "Who's out there and why are they trying to kill you?"

Her perceptive response took him off guard and told him to get his mind back on business. Apparently, she wasn't as turned on as he'd assumed, and he'd do well to follow her example. Who had sent the death squad that had just hit them? His thoughts that it might have been Delta setting him

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up could be wrong. Judging by the way she'd yelled at Jeb Mason, and the fact he'd hung up on her, told him the man hadn't been happy to hear from her. He remembered the clod from other missions where they'd passed each other in the night. Jeb Mason was a womanizer, with a bad comb-over, and an inferiority complex. Gazing down at the strong woman now frowning up at him, he wasn't surprised Jeb couldn't handle her. "Who says it's me they're trying to kill?" Her startled expression told him the question had surprised her. "Your pal, Jeb didn't sound too happy to hear from you."

He watched her jaw drop as the intimation sunk in and his gut twisted until he wanted to call back the words. But if she was as new to the game as he guessed, she needed to know the facts of life and apparently, Jeb hadn't filled her in on the pitfalls. Mason would screw her over to get ahead, and he wasn't the only one playing that game. The fact someone had thrown her out in the deep water for him to kill made him furious, and at the same time brought out his protective instincts, but this wasn't the time to go over it. "In our line of work there are shades of gray, Sugar. You need to know that."

"Our line of work," she muttered.

She thought he was a thug and he didn't bother to change her view. Ignoring the semi hard-on he'd had since she'd come into his life, he sprang to his feet and reached down to tug her up beside him. "Come on," he said gruffly, raking a glance up her nearly bare form. She looked like a sex goddess in the moonlight, making him smile despite the danger they faced.

They were so screwed, but he couldn't tell her. "Let's go," he said, tugging her deeper into the bush, and to his relief she followed him without complaint. At least she had the good sense to know he was her only ally right now. He led her about forty clicks uphill to his hidden egress. As usual, he'd given himself a back way out. Some might call it paranoid, but he called it being prepared. By the time they reached the spot at the top of the hill, Melanie was out of breath and he was a little winded himself. The cuts on his back were stinging, but the shirt sticking to the wounds told him his cuts had scabbed over, so he had no fear of bleeding out. He ignored his wounds and pulled back the camouflage net from his second hand jeep saying, "Get in." When Melanie didn't immediately move to obey, he turned to see her mutinous expression. She stood there glaring at him, half-naked and barefoot, as she faced him down.

Her chin rose obstinately. "I don't think so, Buster. I don't take orders from kidnappers who don't even give me their name."

"You've been kidnapped before?" His lips twitched when she glared at him harder, looking like an avenging angel. Night blooms perfumed the air, and birds called in the trees around them. Somewhere in the jungle, an animal cried out. His feisty Amazon didn't even flinch, gaining his grudging respect. He stalked up to her, his body tightening, with mingled arousal and fear. Delaying tactics would only get them killed. "You'll take orders from me, Melanie, or else we're both toast. Got it?"

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Chapter 5

Melanie got it all right, as she stared him down, and she didn't like it much. He was her only hope. She stood there, her toes digging into the wet turf as she stared down her snarky kidnapper, knowing he was right. She wouldn't make it through the night dressed as she was. The thought of being some jaguar's midnight snack made her tremble. And then there was this kidnapper's assertion that Jeb was trying to kill her. That was crazy, wasn't it? Of course it was. This silver-eyed ghost was so bossy he probably made enemies wherever he went. No doubt, lots of people wanted to do him in. But she resented the half-amused look on his rugged face. "I can take care of myself."

He closed the distance between them in a flash, grabbing her bra and tugging her to him, until they were nose to nose. "I'm sorry we weren't formally introduced, Ms. Melanie, you can call me Ace."

His manhandling of her made a mockery of his gallantry, but it contrasted with the warm look in his eyes, and the honeyed tone of his voice. All in all, it was a potent combination and she weakened, melting against him, her nipples budding. "Ace," she parroted back, not bothering to hide the doubt in her voice. The macho hulk didn't even give her his real name, but at least she had something to call him.

"Get in," he said, stiffening and letting go of her bra.

Melanie didn't waste any time clambering into the battered old mud spattered jeep. She was better off taking her

chances with Ace ... for now at least. As her bottom hit the wet seat, still soaked from the afternoon's deluge, she let out a yelp. Of course he would have to keep an open top jeep for their escape, idiot. She slanted him a resentful scowl as he jumped into the driver's soaked seat without a sound. Hard assed bastard didn't seem to notice.

Ace turned to smile at her. "Good girl."

Fuck you, she wanted to say, but settled for slanting him a furious look that said it all. Meanwhile, she did her best to tug her stretched out bra back into place. She wasn't a child, she was a woman, and Ace would find that out after she used him as an escape tool. She'd kick his macho ass at the first opportunity. She wondered what good old Uncle Harry would charge for a hit ... not that she'd ever ask him for a favor. But first, she was going to let Ace get them the hell out of there. As far as he was concerned, he was calling the shots and she'd let him think that for now. "Let's get moving already," she said, getting tense when he just looked at her.

He grinned and put the jeep in gear without starting it up. "Your wish is my command, Sugar," he said, as the jeep rolled down the hill with its lights off, picking up speed.

Melanie bit back a cry and hung on tight as the jeep coasted down the mountainside blind. Was he nuts? Their attackers were behind them, probably combing the rubble. Maybe Ace wasn't such a sure bet after all. All she could make out in front of them in the steamy dark jungle were gloomy shapes. A vine smacked her in the face, making her sputter. She pushed it away and glared at him. "Are you nuts? Driving

like this is sheer lunacy. Turn the fucking lights on, for Pete's sake."

"Pipe down, voices carry out here in the jungle."

If only she could see his expression, but it, like everything else was shadowed. Maybe she could reason with him, she decided, sliding closer to him on the cracked bench seat. When her leg pressed against his, she felt a sizzle right down to her toes, and tried not to pull away. She aimed for a low coaxing tone. "We got away clean, Ace. Turn on the headlights, pretty please." The smile he turned to her was all sex, and she felt a warm shiver go up her spine.

"I like the pillow talk, Sugar, but save it for the next time we fuck."

She sucked in a shocked breath at his deliberately crude words, but saw the need in his eyes didn't correspond with them. This man was complicated, dangerous to her life and her virtue, and a smart woman would pull away, she told herself, feeling the burn. As the jungle whizzed by her at warp speed she bit out, "Turn on the headlights. And we didn't fuck, that's not going to happen, so keep it in your pants, Ghost."

His startled chuckle surprised her. She'd bet he didn't laugh much, but then she didn't really know him.

"Hang on," he said, executing a sharp turn.

She held back a scream when they careened around a sharp bend in the goat path they were blazing a trail across, and slid across the wet seat. Ace snagged her wrist before she fell out of the open cab, and jerked her back inside. Sitting panting beside him as her racing pulse slowed, she

slanted him a look. Damn she'd almost been killed twice thanks to him, and he looked cool as a cucumber, looking like James Bond in his tux. Her very own man in black, like the one she'd always professed not to want, even if he was a cheap knock off version.

Ace slanted her a quick masterful look. "Don't even think about escaping, Sugar. I'll hog tie you if I have to, and I'm damned good with ropes if I do say so myself. I used to ride the rodeo circuit."

Hell, she'd fallen out because of his reckless driving, not because she was trying to escape. But judging from the intense look in his eyes, he wouldn't like to hear that. Instead, she focused on his mention of tying her up. The rodeo reference went with the slight Texas twang she'd noticed when he was rattled. "So you tie women up, do you?" His smile told her that he found her words amusing.

"I've been known to."

Heat flared through her, darned near potent enough to dry the seats. "Jerk," she murmured. "Is that before or after you spank them?" The sultry look he gave her made her toes curl and her breath catch in her throat.

"During," he said with a wink.

Her breath caught in her throat. Heck-fire, she had a whole row of erotica in her bookshelf back home that dealt with BDSM, but she'd never met anyone who actually did it. Her dates were most definitely vanilla, although she hadn't had any for a long time. Whoa ... she lectured herself, he was not a date. This was not the time to get distracted by sex or succumb to Stockholm syndrome.

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Ace looked in the rearview mirror. "Fuck." He dragged the jeep's steering wheel to the left.

Caught off guard, Melanie cried out and smacked into him when jeep careened around another bend in the trail, damned near skidding on two wheels. Tight against Ace's hard body she shuddered as her breasts pressed against his muscular arm and her hand came down on his groin. She heard him groan as if in pain and felt his manhood throbbing under her hand. He was hard for her. Before she could even glance back for confirmation they were being chased, a bullet whizzed by her head shattering the windshield, showering them with little round balls of glass.

She whimpered, looking back at the SUV tailing them. A man she didn't recognize leaned out of the passenger seat with a gun in his hand. "They're after us!" she shouted.

"Hell, yes, they're back!" Ace wondered what kind of price she had on her head. Because whoever had put out a hit on her meant business. "It seems like they don't like me running off with you," he said, starting the jeep as it was rolling. When Melanie turned her shocked gaze on him, his gut tightened.

"Me?" she said with a squeak.

Ace eyed her, cautiously gauging her shock as genuine. Would she tell him her secrets now? The driver's side mirror shattered with a bang, pelting him with more glass, and he winced. They sure couldn't shoot straight. Beside him, Melanie sucked in a shocked breath, but didn't scream. He had to admire her for that.

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"Get down," he shouted, shoving her head down into his lap, regretting it a heartbeat when her warm cheek brushed against his straining cock. Hell of a time to get a hard-on, but some things were impossible to control, like his heat for her. Her quick intake of breath told him she noticed. Good, it would give her something to concentrate on besides the danger they were in.

Knowing a turn off was near, he floored his second hand jeep, hearing the engine whine. The damned thing was ancient, but he'd tuned it up so it should make it. Delta would have paid for better wheels, had as a matter of fact, thinking of the panel van following them at a distance behind the SUV. For what, to haul their bodies back in? No way in hell would he let them get her.

The turn-off appeared in a blink and he cranked the wheel hard left, relying on reflexes he'd picked up the hard way. The jeep spun in a donut before it straightened out, fishtailing down a dirt track. As expected, the SUV behind them wasn't so lucky. It tipped like an ungainly elephant, skidding on its side until it slammed into a tree, the panel van crashing into it. The deafening crash made Melanie spring up out of his lap and turn around to gape.

"Yes! Chalk up one for the good guys," she cheered.

He grinned beside her, for a moment feeling like the gung ho recruit he'd once been. Looking through the rear view mirror, he saw men sprawled outside the disabled vehicle—one of them lying lifelessly in an unnatural angle on the ground. He tried to push her head back down so she couldn't see, but wasn't fast enough.

"Is he dead?" she asked, appalled.

The throb in her voice got to him. Would she care as much if he'd been killed? "I hope the hell so," he muttered, earning another shocked look from her. A volley of shots hit the jeep's rear as they drove out of range. They couldn't afford to stop until he got them to Valdez's little hole in the wall retreat. Hopefully other members of his cartel wouldn't be holed up there. He wasn't stupid enough to believe this would be the end of it. Whoever was chasing them wouldn't give up that easy. He kept his foot on the accelerator.

"They crashed," she said scathingly, adding, "Slow down now, before you kill us, and for heaven's sake put on the headlights."

Keeping a tight grip on the shuddering steering wheel, he kept going over the ruts. "I give the orders around here, Sugar."

"Asshole."

Hearing her mutter the nasty name under her breath, he stifled a grin. It seemed too funny coming out of her angelic mouth. Slowing down, he cruised alongside a field looking for the right spot. Seeing it, he cut the wheel to the right and bumped down the ditch to a goat path heading for the casa.

Screeching in disbelief, she cried out, "Hey, what are you doing? Get back on the road right now."

Ignoring her demand, he kept going. Hearing her gasp as the night closed in around them, he plowed through the jungle, dusky vines snapping off, blanketing the jeep. Good, more camouflage.

"Are you nuts?" She edged away from him, her hands braced against the dash. "We're driving in the dark here. Are you trying to kill us?"

"Shut it," he ordered, scowling at her in the dark as the whoop, whoop, whoop of a helicopter above them became audible. Shit, whoever was behind this had pulled out all the stops.

Melanie sat up and took notice. He felt her stiffen beside him. If she thought she'd be able to ditch him, the chick thought wrong. "Just sit tight or I'll leave you to their not so tender mercies!"

At the warning, she sagged back in her seat, but looked up at the almost black sky through the thick branches

Ace was afraid she'd bolt, even now. Didn't she have the sense to know she was safer with him? He wouldn't put two in her brain if she crossed him.

Searchlights played across the field fifty yards ahead of them. He turned in the opposite direction. Blanketed with greenery, he prayed they weren't visible from the air.

Melanie bit back a frustrated string of choice words while Ace veered away from the searchlights. Whoever was after him was relentless. It might be Jeb above them, but she didn't really believe it. Besides, she couldn't take the risk. No matter who flew up above, she couldn't let her kidnapper drive away with her into the night. She was the pawn they were fighting over and if she took herself out of the equation, everyone would be safe.

Ace, her maddening, sexy kidnapper, wouldn't die. She glanced at him, feeling more connected to him than she

wanted to be. She couldn't be responsible for his destruction even if he'd brought it on himself. He drove with a singular intensity, ignoring her, his big hands wrestling with the steering wheel as they bucked over rough terrain. Good, he underestimated her again and she'd use it to her advantage.

The copter made another swoop, its light changing direction, skimming by them. Ace jerked the wheel to the left, evading detection, but for how long? Keeping a wary eye on Ace, she reached for her door handle with her right hand. He wasn't paying her the least attention, his focus tuned to the searchlight on his left. Knowing she'd never get a better opportunity, Melanie opened her door.

"Goddamn it," he muttered, spinning the wheel back to the right. With his free hand, he snagged her wrist.

A shot from up above deafened her and Melanie stifled a scream, as Ace hauled her back into the vehicle.

"Oh no, you don't. We're in this together, Sugar."

"You idiot, don't you see if I'm not here, you'll be in the clear? I'm not worth dying over." She noticed his shocked look as he stared at her.

"Don't worry about me, Melanie," he said after a moment. "I'm a big boy and I can take care of myself."

"You couldn't prove it by me," she said scathingly. She clamped her mouth shut when he did a one-eighty and drove them into the trees. The thought of smacking into one blindly, made her bite her lip in fear, but she was damned if she'd scream. Turning left, he gunned the motor up onto the road. The car went up a slope, airborne for an instant. Melanie gasped as they bounced down on the other side of a culvert,

between groves of mango trees. It was a plantation, she realized.

Two green mangos dropped into her lap. This was like something out of a bad dream. An erotic bad dream, she decided, gazing at her hunky captor. Stop making this a romantic fantasy, it isn't. He was no doubt going to ransom her off and the sooner he did, the quicker she'd get back to her real life. "Why haven't you demanded a ransom yet?" The startled look he gave her was surprising. What was he hiding? And then he gave her that half smile that made her want to kill him or kiss him.

"Maybe I haven't decided on a price yet." His sultry gaze roved over her body. "How much do you think they'd give?"

His grin told her he was playing with her, pissing her off. "Jerk," she grumbled and then sat up straight when he turned into what appeared to be an old abandoned farmhouse. Where the heck were they? And why had he stopped here? Melanie peered at him in the darkness. He had her where he wanted her. Now what? She knew her strength was no match for his, so she'd have to outsmart him.

He parked under a lean-to shed and cut the engine. "We're here. Get out," he said.

When he opened his door, the inside lights came on. She stared at him. He looked grimly determined, and he was bleeding ... a lot. Glass had cut him. He hadn't even cried out. Maybe hardened criminals like him didn't feel pain. She watched him get out and moved with him, knowing she had no choice. She was at his mercy and he was, no doubt, fresh out.

She didn't want to go anywhere with him. She especially didn't want to shut her door because it would plummet them back into darkness. She preferred to read the expression in his harsh eyes. "Where are we?"

"Get moving," he ordered.

As she stepped outside and took a deep breath of fresh air, she glanced up at the starlit sky and didn't see any sign of the helicopter, one thing to be grateful for on this horrible night.

"Hold it." Ace grabbed her arm, rocking her back on her heels, as he brought her to a halt.

She glanced over her shoulder at him seeing that he looked wobbly, a bit less coordinated now, probably from heavy blood loss. It was the chance to strike she'd been waiting for. She flowed into a karate stance and kicked him, landing a solid blow to his midsection that made him oof. She moaned, his abs were hard as steel against her bare heel. He instantly countered her move, taking her down. She lay on the ground glaring up at him. How the hell had he moved that fast? A heartbeat later, he jerked her to her feet, proving he wasn't as weak as she'd thought.

"March," he said, pointing toward the house.

She was sore, tired, and pissed off at men in general, especially bossy ones like him. She put her hands on her hips and glared at him, refusing to budge. "Make me." She had the pleasure of watching his silver eyes widen with surprise. Apparently, he wasn't used to defiance from his victims.

His mouth twitched. "Don't test me, Sugar. You won't win."

"Oh, won't I?" she said, furious he was laughing at her. Before he could move, she stomped on his instep, before

bringing her knee up into his groin. He blocked her move in an instant, one of his thighs sliding between hers, making her go on tiptoes as his leg pressed intimately against her sex. Well, hell that hadn't worked very well. She knew the blush heating her face had to be neon red and was glad he couldn't see it in the dark. Breathing hard, she met his determined stare, while her pussy throbbed against him and she quivered inside. Damn it all, he fought dirty. Her nipples hardened against him, sending a rush of heat through her that had nothing to do with the tropical climate.

"Is it hot out here, or what?" he teased, a heartbreaker's smile curving his lips.

She frowned back at him, equally determined not to show him how flustered she was. "I hadn't noticed. Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" she mocked, feeling his hard-on growing against her hip. Damn, they could bottle the pheromones he was giving off and sell them as Viagra.

"More like happy to feel you," he said, with an arch of his brow as he pressed against her.

Sexual stalemate ... Melanie clammed up, refusing to rise to his bait anymore. Everyone knew an adrenaline rush could lead to an inappropriate sexual impulse. It had been mentioned in the crash course she'd received before shipping out on this mission. How was she supposed to deal with that?

Instead of pushing the issue, he backed off and her body wept at his departure. Next thing she knew she'd be knocking him to the ground and doing him. That couldn't happen; she'd have to control herself. Then before she could move, he threw

her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Stop that," she shrieked in protest.

"Shut it," he said, smacking her bottom hard with his big hand.

Melanie yelped as his palm print warmed her bottom. Ey up mi ducks. She'd never been spanked. "Beast," she yelled, gasping when he landed another resolute smack. She sucked in a shocked breath as her sex quivered and wet. Who knew getting spanked would make her hot and bothered. Well, she'd kind of wondered. It was like the erotica's she read, but she'd never expected to experience.

Melanie gasped, seeing the old South American farm kitchen upside down, as he carried her into the house. Moonlight filtering through the grimy windows showed her the scene. Old cabinets lined the wall. A big kitchen sink sat under a window, an old fridge and range, a table and chairs filled the room. And then she noticed a closet with a paddle lock on it. A calendar hung on the wall dated December 1998.

"Let me go," she demanded, struggling in his grasp. Suddenly Ace swung her off his shoulder and she let out a frightened yelp as he plopped her firmly onto a hard wooden chair. He just as quickly slapped a silver handcuff on her wrist. Well, he had promised to tie her up, but not this way. He handled the restraints effortlessly, like he was used to using them, like he locked women up every day. The idea made her pussy spasm, but she dismissed it with the disdain it deserved. She noticed him glaring at her from below bloodstained brows and shivered. "Release me ... immediately!"

"Shut up, Sugar, you're giving me a headache." He wrapped the cuff around the table leg, dragging her bodily forward, and then jerked her other wrist up to cuff it. Panting, she closed her eyes preparing for the inevitable. Long quiet seconds passed without a word, without his hands touching her. She opened her eyes and shot a curious look his way. He leaned against the counter, his arms casually crossed, watching her as if she was an exhibit in a gallery.

He smiled. "That ought to hold you till I figure out what I'm going to do with you."

She froze, watching the smile light his handsome face; yes, he looked hot even beaten up. Figure out what I'm going to do with you. He'd said it with a cool smile. She could picture all manner of sexy things as his smoldering gaze lingered on her cleavage.

Instead of pouncing, he went to the kitchen sink to wash his hands and sluice the blood off his face. Then he peeled off his tuxedo jacket, and shrugged out of his shirt and tie. She watched him as if he was her own private Chippendale's show. When his muscular chest and washboard abs came into view, her mouth watered, but when he turned his back on her, she cried out, seeing the bleeding wounds peppered across his back.

"What?" he said, spinning around, gun in hand.

"Your back, it's bleeding."

His eyes widened as he looked at her. "Don't worry about it. It's nothing."

"Nothing, my ass. You need stitched and a tetanus shot."

"I've had worse. Believe me."

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She did. Why she should even care after the way he'd treated her, she didn't know, but she couldn't deny that she did. He turned off the water. Would he pounce now? He turned and went into the other room, saying, "Don't go anywhere, will you?"

Watching him leave, she couldn't believe her luck. She could escape. All she had to do was lift up the table leg and she'd be free. Grabbing the table leg with both sweaty palms, she tugged. Her hands slipped, her head cracking painfully against the table. Pain shot through her forehead, and she let out a muffled cry. The table didn't budge.

Leaning over to peer at the floor, she saw why. He'd actually nailed the table leg to the floor. Why that sly bastard. No wonder he'd been so confident, turning his back on her. Well, she'd outsmart him somehow.

She heard a shower turn on in another room. He was going to take a shower while she fidgeted, feeling grimy on this hard wooden chair, it wasn't fair. She groaned as minutes passed and laid her head on the table as exhaustion won out, and she drifted off to sleep to the rhythm of plop, plop, plop from the sink.

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Chapter 6

Ace gave up trying to sleep and threw back the covers. Damn, he could smell her scent from the other room, knew she was sitting there on the wooden kitchen chair, pissed and uncomfortable. Before he could censor himself, he rolled out of bed and stalked out to the kitchen. He stopped in the doorway, seeing her lying with her head resting on the table and his heart twisted again. He fought back the tender feeling. It was just good business to keep a prisoner comfortable, that was why he was doing this, he told himself. With that thought in mind, he walked up and touched her shoulder. She awoke instantly and looked up at him, her big lavender eyes widening when she saw he was naked.

He burned when her fascinated gaze swept over him to focus on his cock. As she stared, the damned thing pulsed, growing as she watched in seeming fascination. She smiled, and he felt himself flush. Good God, he never blushed. What the hell was she doing to him?

"I didn't know that um ... cocks could be so large." Quickly she added, "Not that I've seen many."

He cleared his throat. "Come on," he said, unlocking her cuffs.

She whimpered, rubbing at her wrists, and he frowned when he saw the slightly reddened marks. It bothered him she'd felt discomfort. Scowling, but feeling badly, he pulled her into his arms and she melted against him. "Don't make me regret this, Brat," he said, giving her panty-covered

bottom a smack. His cock twitched when she softened against him as he gave her three more. Damn it, he wasn't looking for a Sub and if he were, it wouldn't be her. He let her go as if she burned him, because she did, and saw the wounded look in her eyes as his rejection. Join the club, Sugar; he thought grimly, being as conflicted as she no doubt was.

"Come on," he said, marching her to the bedroom. "Get them off," he said gesturing at her underwear, "And I won't have to use the cuffs." He dangled the handcuffs before her. He watched her eyes widen at the demand and tried not to look at her body. This wasn't about sex; it was about security. So much for romancing her. That might have worked ... another time, another circumstance ... anyway his demands would no doubt douse any sexual feelings she had for him.

She frowned back at him. "Fine, but if you think I'm going to spread my legs for you because you heated my bottom, you've got another thing coming, Buster. I'll rack you first."

His grinned at her feisty reaction even though she'd rejected him. With two ex-fiancées, he was used to it. He just wasn't good with women. "I already told you, I don't screw unwilling women and I'm sure as hell not stupid enough to mix business with pleasure." He didn't have designs on her virtue anyway, he just didn't want her to run away, but when she gave him a disappointed look, it surprised him. "Stop stalling."

With a grumble, she tried to undo her bent front bra hook. Struggling with the stretched out hook she glared at him. "This is your fault you know, Caveman."

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He couldn't help smiling; remembering when he'd grabbed her to make a point. "Let me," he said reaching out and unhooking her bra with one hand. She trembled, flushing when his fingers brushed against her hot creamy skin and he felt a jolt inside him telegraph right to his stupid cock. Knowing he was close to danger, he dropped his hands and cleared his throat. "Now the panties."

He didn't want to react but, damn, she was like a match to kindling, making him catch fire as he watched her. She shimmied out of her panties making her breasts swing and his mouth water. "Bed," he bit out and watched a blush travel from her pretty face to her ass. When she climbed into bed, he had all he could do not to touch her.

"So what's your brilliant game plan now?" she asked.

"Sleep," he said cocking an amused glance at her.

"Some plan," she grumbled.

"Works for me," he said with a chuckle, climbing into bed. The little gasp she made as she shifted over to the far side of the bed made him smile. "Slide over, Sugar."

It was fun pushing her boundaries and it seemed she had a lot of them. She got off on the spanking earlier, he could tell, but now she was acting like an untouched virgin. Which persona was real? Did it matter? He couldn't have her. She turned her head away from him when he studied her, making him even more curious.

"I promise I won't run away," she grumbled. "So you don't have to sleep with me."

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He frowned as she tried to toss him out of bed. "I promise you won't run either, and in case it's escaped your notice, this is the only bed."

"But a gentleman would..."

"Who said I'm a gentleman?" he said, capturing her chin with his hand, making her look at him. "I'm a kidnapper, remember?"

"I haven't forgotten. About my ransom..."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," he said, letting her go, sighing when she inched over to press against the wall as if he was poison. "What, no good night kiss?" he teased sarcastically.

She glared at him over her shoulder. "Screw you."

He saw a banked fire in her eyes that left him breathless, and even though he knew there was no percentage in it, he liked knowing he could excite her. It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

Two hours later, Melanie sighed, her head resting on her dream lover's muscular chest. She restlessly threw one of her legs over his hot body, claiming him as her very own. When his strong arms wrapped around her, she smiled against his warm skin, feeling secure. His masculine scent turned her on, hell everything about him turned her on. Cuddling closer, she ran her hand down his rippled abs, kneading his resilient skin, tickling his flat male nipples until they puckered. He groaned and she rubbed against him, her hand drifting down to cup

his cock. It was exquisite, like velvet over steel, and it was hard for her.

"Wake up, Melanie," came the insistent tone from another world.

But she didn't want to wake up. She didn't want the dream to end. Instead, she rolled on top of him in la-la land, hearing his masculine grumble and feeling him go still under her. They were only inches from consummation and she needed him so badly. His manhood throbbed, full and hard and she couldn't resist rubbing her weeping sex against him, earning another deeper grumble from him.

"Damn it, Melanie, wake up."

That wasn't going to happen; she refused to awaken, not until she got what she wanted. With a roll of her hips, she took him inside her and gasped at the sweet invasion. Lord, he was big. Her pussy milked at his steely manhood, and only then did she open her eyes.

Melanie gazed down at her captor's silver eyes, stunned by her wild behavior as her body tightened around his cock. His eyes narrowed in reaction, and he swore like he was in pain. She whimpered as pleasure rocked through her, her pussy tightening around him.

He let out a slow breath, and then slowly regained his smile. "I'm glad to see you're not suffering any aftereffects from being shot at."

At the mention of aftereffects, the horror she'd gone through flashed through her mind like an appalling movie. Tears came to her eyes. After such a wonderful erotic dream about Ace, her reality—the contrast—chilled her. Her breath

caught on an outraged sob. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the ghastly images of being pursued by killers. Thank heaven; Ace had been there to rescue her. She owed him her life. She opened her eyes, feeling warm gratitude toward him, sure it reflected in her eyes.

"Shit," Ace murmured, pulling her close and rolling them over so he was on top of her.

She lay under his rock hard body, gazing up at him, her emotions turbulent and her body still ablaze for him. How could she want him when he was the cause of all her troubles? But want him she did, with a vengeance. When he tried to pull away, she wrapped her legs around his waist and watched heat flare in his silver eyes. Did he look confused? Didn't he realize his appeal?

"You don't know what you're asking for, Sugar."

She ignored his warning and rolled her hips under his, making them both gasp. "Yes, I do."

"I'm not Prince Charming," he growled.

"Say's who?" she shot back, her sex milking at his cock.

"Hell," Ace grumbled, surging inside her.

"Oh yes," she cried, her hips snapping up to meet him.

Ratcheting up on his arms to deepen the impact, he pounded into her again and again, her fevered cries driving him on. He possessed her, his cock thrusting inside her creamy cunt. She moaned out of her head, needing this sexual healing. At least he couldn't lie to her about this.

"Come now," he demanded. She tightened around him like a vise as he spilled high inside her, against her cervix.

Melanie cried softly, coming on command, her sex clutching him while waves of pleasure washed through her, her eyes rolling in the back of her head, her toes curling. She shuddered. Afterwards, he rolled off her, his breathing hard, and pulled her into his arms, his hands tightening around her. His tender reaction told her he cared, just a little bit, touching her heart.

She sagged limply against Ace's chest, totally drained, listening to his thundering heart as her pulse slowed. She felt thoroughly fucked, even cherished. She was his prisoner for goodness sake, but somehow she wasn't scared anymore. And, in a way, she liked being his captive. Was she nuts? At the moment she didn't care. "That was..."

"Intense," he suggested, chuckling a little, amused. He seemed softer somehow.

"Yeah, intense covers it. Weird too. You're making me crazy, you know."

"Good, it's mutual."

She smiled against his chest, feeling a wave of giddiness that confused her. She remembered the explosion and sighed. Whoever had tried to steal her from him would be back. Too bad the hunk she'd just ravished didn't want to talk about it. She might be blissfully boneless right now but she knew it couldn't last.

"Want to talk about it?"

The proposition and the fact he'd read her thoughts shocked her. Mr. Strong and Silent Type was actually offering to talk. The problem was, she probably couldn't believe a word he said. "Not right now," she said, nestling her head on

his chest, listening to the beat of his heart, wanting to put off reality.

"We're safe now."

"That's good to know," she said, stifling a yawn.

"Go to sleep Melanie, I'll watch over you." He smoothed a soothing hand down her back.

"Stop treating me like a horse," she grumbled as he stroked her, remembering his mention of the rodeo. She fought to stay awake and hear his rueful chuckle.

"Sorry, force of habit."

She'd figured that out already by his accent. "I guess we do need to talk, Ace, if that is your real name."

"Morning's time enough for that," he soothed. "I'll fix this mess and then I'll set you free."

She couldn't help wondering how much he'd try to ransom her for. Jeb wouldn't pay, she knew, but maybe his boss would. Then there was Uncle-but she didn't want to bring him into it. Her thoughts made her sigh and she lay against Ace, sexually satisfied and discontent all at the same time. He'd set her free, did she mean that little to him after what they'd just done? A million questions whirled around in her head that she couldn't bring herself to ask. Instead, she decided to focus on the present. She'd enjoy him tonight because tomorrow she'd break away. "Just like that, huh?"

"Sure, standard operating procedure."

"Then you've kidnapped other women," she said, resenting the fact that this was old hat for him.

He chuckled, "Actually, you're my first."

She knew she was sounding jealous and tried to take it back. "Never mind, it doesn't really matter. Like you said, you'll solve it and we'll go our separate ways."

"I will tell you this; there's no other lover in my life right now."

"Oh," she said, feeling mollified and not quite knowing how to respond. It felt better to know she was his one and only, at least temporarily. But why had he confided in her?

"How about you, Sugar? Is there anyone waiting back at Langley for you?"

"No," she said, thinking of her non-existent love life. And before you ask, I've never been tied up and spanked before either."

Hi chuckled, giving her bottom a smack. "That wasn't a proper spanking, Sugar, but keep pressing and you just might get one."

She moaned arching against him, afraid he was right. She craved the brand of sex he was offering. One taste wouldn't be enough. She had to run.

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Chapter 7

She was on a desert island. A balmy ocean breeze wafted across her warm face, while a waterfall trickled down to the beach. A palm frond tickled her cheek, and she smiled. Melanie's nose wriggled when it kept on tickling, bringing her back to reality with a jolt. It slowly dawned on her that palm fronds weren't crawling on her. Little feet were walking across her face. Little feet!

Biting back a scream, she jerked her head off her captor's chest in time to see a mouse scurrying across the room. Shaking, she scowled down at her snoring captor, seeing he hadn't even woken up in response to her scream. Some protector he'd turned out to be ... although he had been wounded. Had Ace lost too much blood? She rolled her eyes at the dopey thought. She didn't have time to play nurse and he'd seemed plenty strong last night when he'd taken her. It was probably the two other times he'd turned to her that had worn him out, she decided.

She quietly sat up in bed, feeling her own sexual aftermath. Her sex was still a little tender, her nipples still felt swollen, and her skin a little abraded from his manly stubble. She took inventory of his magnificent naked body in the morning light, impressed. Ace reminded her of a sleeping tiger, all coiled power and beauty, although he probably wouldn't thank her for calling him pretty. He'd turned out to be a hell of a lover, but she knew it was time to run. Jeb

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wouldn't come looking for her in this godforsaken place; she had to rescue herself.

She peered out the grimy window to see the sun was just rising. As an early riser, she knew she'd be at her peak now. She had to go. Slipping out of bed as quietly as she could, she slid on her panties and picked up her bra, sighing when she saw the shocking mess he'd made of it. She didn't want to struggle with it now, so she tiptoed across the room and put on his shirt. It was long enough to hang half way down her legs and pass for a dress. She grabbed his keys off the dresser, and his cash, and headed out, stopping in the doorway to give him one last fond look. She'd never forget her sexy kidnapper.

Then with a sigh, she left the room and hurried across the yard to the barn, her pulse racing. This had to work. She had to get away. She climbed inside the jeep, stuck the key into the ignition, and turned the key. The car sputtered, but wouldn't start. She cursed, slamming her hand against the dash. "Start, damn it."

Her senses told her she wasn't alone a moment before hands grabbed at her from behind. The gunmen had found them. She screamed, batting at the hands, struggling to get away.

"Cut it out, Sugar."

Hearing Ace's voice, her terror melted like ice cream on the Fourth of July, and she turned to glare at him. He was standing there naked, scowling at her. "You almost scared me to death," she said.

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"Ditto," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Going someplace, Sweetheart?"

"Yeah, as far away from you as I can get."

"Not so fast, Sugar," he said, snagging her wrist and hauling her out of the jeep.

Melanie gasped when his hand manacled her wrist, he didn't need handcuffs to restrain her. He marched her over to a bench alongside the house, tugged her over his knee, and she went with a shocked yelp. Her soft belly and sensitive mound landed on his hard lap and it sent a jolt of pleasure through her. "Stop," she yelled, alarm bells going off as she guessed his intention.

"I told you I'd punish you if you ran out on me," he said, flipping up her shirt, and tugging down her panties, to bare her naked bottom.

A wave of heat rushed down her body, as she blushed, probably telegraphing right down to her exposed bottom. Oh, good heavens. The tropic sunshine warmed her backside, and she tried to wiggle away, but the arm around her waist held her fast. Heat spread throughout her bottom, making her clit stiffen and her sex ripple a second before his big hand spanked down on her bottom with a sharp thwack.

"No!" Her sex quivered, getting wet as her bottom heated. "Stop that, you sadistic bastard."

"Make me," he said with a chuckle.

She moaned as he laughingly referred back to her defiant words the night before. Quivering as he gave her another stinging spank, she tightened her body, trying not to respond. He kept up the stinging blows until she was arching back at

him, whimpering with the need tightening inside her. She bit back a gasp as each spank drove her clit against his leg.

"Count the spanks," he ordered.

Sucking in a shocked breath, she bit out, "No, damn it," and tried to wriggle away, but his arm around her waist kept her restrained, in perfect spanking position. Stinging spanks rained down on her bottom like hot fire.

"Count them," he demanded, smacking her left cheek.

Whimpering as it telegraphed right to her clit, she gave in to the inevitable. "One," she said with a sniff.

"Good girl," he praised drawing back his hand.

She shuddered, feeling strangely comforted. Then his palm landed on her right cheek and she moaned, "T—two."

"We go to five, Sugar."

Five! God, her butt was on fire now and she was so close to coming she knew he could feel it. "I won't make it..." Spank, he caught her from the bottom of her ass making her squeak with surprise and go on tiptoes.

"Sure you will, and bottom down, Sugar," he said, pressing her flat on his lap.

Biting back a moan as the move pressed her belly and mound firmly against his growing hard-on; all she could do was feel the heat. When he drew back his hand and gave her another spank, she cried, "Four."

"No, Sugar, you missed one."

Her jaw tightened as she let out a growl, burning when she heard him laugh. He was getting off on this, damn it. He spanked her again and she sniffed. "Three, you sadistic bastard."

"That's Ace or Master when I'm disciplining you."

No way was she calling him that, no matter how crazy he made her.

"No snappy comeback?" he said, giving her another spank.

She moaned as heat went through her, arching out to accept his punishment. It was instinctive, and embarrassing, but she did it. "F-f-four," she stammered.

"Good girl," he said.

She melted against him, warmed by his praise. His big hand came down on her, making her moan and she sobbed, "Five."

Draped across his lap, butt on fire, gasping for air, she cried silently. She could feel his hard cock getting bigger, practically thumping against her leg. Stunned, all she could do was feel the heat. She'd never been spanked before in her life, discounting the love taps he'd given her the night before. He caressed her sore bottom. She let out a little moan. His big hand rubbing her ass felt soothing, good. Breathless, on the verge of coming, she clung helplessly to him

She arched her hips and her clit rubbed against his hair-roughened thigh. She gasped at the electric sensation. Her clit was stiff, her pussy getting wet. She was more than turned on by the spanking, her body all hot and melted, but she could keep it to herself, he didn't have to know. As he rubbed lower, her legs fell apart a little in sensual abandon. His hand inched between her spread legs to cup her mound and press, and she bit back a whimper as he held her needy sex in his big hand. Only a little more and she'd come. Surely he'd put her out of her misery.

"Good, you're wet."

She froze at the satisfaction in his voice and tried to pull her legs together in an attempt to reject him. He refused to budge, wedging her legs apart further with his big strong hand, and giving her a spank on the mound. "Oh," she groaned, as pain and pleasure shot through her sensitive pussy.

"Full access, victim."

He pulled her up to sit astride him, handling her like a rag doll, making her head spin. She gasped as her bare pubes pressed against the hard-on, and he pulled off her shirt. She arched mindlessly against him needing him so bad.

But his firm grip on her hips stopped her cold, bringing her out of her orgasmic haze. Sunshine licked her body, reminding her she was naked. "Stop," she said half-heartedly, but felt her body melt against his. She gazed into Ace's sultry eyes, both angry and turned on. Her face heated. Probably as red as her ass. She glared back at him. It wasn't fair he was turning her into a sex addict while he remained in control. She looked up at Ace, noticing his half smile. Were his eyes twinkling?

The thought pissed her off and she wriggled against the firm arm he had wrapped around her waist, and gasped when it only succeeded in grinding her tingling sex against his erection. His quick indrawn breath told her he was hurting, too. Good. She wanted him to feel as wild and frustrated as she did. Still she couldn't help burning for him. One night of passion had her hooked. A taste of the real thing had spoiled her for anyone else.

His hands stroked down her back, shaping her form, and he squeezed her bottom. She trembled, as she saw the banked fires in his eyes. He wanted her just as much. "Oh, please," she whispered when he pulled back.

"I will." He pulled her closer, until their bodies meshed, and then he kissed her.

She kissed him back, starving for him, as her bare pussy pressed against his hot cock. Her swollen clit bumped up against him, and her budding nipples tingled as they rubbed against his hair-roughened chest. She whimpered, unable to stop herself from dragging them against him and torturing herself. She hissed at the waves of pleasure building in her, zinging through her sensitized clit. When he broke the kiss and pulled back, she gazed deep into his silver eyes. He was watching her, enjoying her enjoying him. It undid her last bit of restraint. "What are you doing to me, Cowboy?" she murmured, on fire for his touch.

"Damned if I know," he said, leaning forward to nibble her nape as his arms wrapped around her.

Melanie trembled as his hot lips skimmed across her jaw, and she wound up sagging against him, her hands clutching his shoulders because he made her feel dizzy with desire. The fact he didn't sound happy about falling for her charms was demoralizing, but it wasn't enough to make her reject him. She wanted him one more time. His cock was throbbing against her sensitive pussy, making her tremble. "I want you." She rolled her hips again, gasping at the pure pleasure when she pressed against his hard-on. She watched his eyes darken in response.

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His hands slipped down to grip her bare bottom, holding her still against him. "Behave."

"Make me," she said back with a grin when his eyes darkened with heat. He was barely keeping himself under control. His cock grew stiffer against her with every beat of his heart and beads of perspiration broke out on his brow. She was so glad to know she could push his buttons, make him lose control, even just a little bit. It was a balm for her wounded femininity. She might not be a femme fatale, but she could make him want her. She leaned forward to lap at the steady pulse beat in his throat, tasting his salty skin, hearing him groan, she murmured her confession against him, "I want you, Cowboy."

His sexy chuckle drove her crazy on two points, it made her fantasize about what else she could do to make him make that sound again, and it pissed her off at the same time. "It's not funny," she grumbled, nipping at his earlobe.

"I know," he said with a rueful laugh.

She didn't know how to take that, but she didn't care as his erection rubbed against her sensitive mound.

"Maybe you should take me back to bed," she started to say as his hand found the sweet spot between her legs again. "Yes," she said, with a sigh of passion, her head rolling back, her eyes closed. He took advantage of the situation to nibble her ear, suck on her neck and then drop down to capture her nipple in his hot mouth. "Oh my," she said, as he drew hard on it while teasing her clit with his rough fingertip. Her body started to spasm.

"That's it, Sugar, go wild for me," he groaned.

She reached down to touch him, capturing his steely erection in her hand. He was so big; she could hardly hold him. Her thumb smoothed a drop of pre cum off his slit making him hiss. "Nice."

"My thoughts exactly," he said, picking her up so she was perched atop his hard-on. "Yes?" he asked for permission.

Melanie trembled, as she looked deep into his passion dark eyes. "Oh yes. Take me, Cowboy." She whimpered as he eased her onto his erection, sinking inch by inch onto his rampant cock until he filled her completely. When they were fully joined, she sighed with pleasure, her heart racing, even though so far he was doing all the work. "You feel so good inside me, Ace." He groaned like her admission pained him.

"Happy to oblige, Sugar," he gritted out.

Frantic for more, she arched her hips, taking him deeper, her swollen clit pressing against him. He was holding back, trying to be gentle, but she wanted all his wild passion.

"Easy, Sugar," he said, holding her tight to him as he thrust deeper up into her.

Impaled, she could only sob out her pleasure as he controlled the thrusts. She was amazed at the strength that took as he held her pressed to him, and thrust up into her again and again. "Oh my," she said, clutching his shoulders tight. She kissed him then, their mouths joined as their bodies were. Ace's tongue thrust into her mouth, in tandem with his cock's thrusts into her pussy, and she dissolved around him into a puddle of need. His shaft rubbed against her G-spot and she started to quiver, waves of orgasm starting as a ripple and then completely overtaking her.

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He stiffened, his thrusts harder, fiercer, and came high and hard inside her. Melanie clung to him as she came back to Earth, and snuggled against him. He smoothed a hand up and down her spine, and held her tight. Wrapped in the warm cocoon of his arms she closed her eyes, and slumped against him.

Ace held Melanie tight, having the crazy notion to keep her as they drifted in afterglow. But he knew that wasn't possible. Instead, he gave her saucy bottom a little spank, gaining her attention, and regretted it in an instant when her pussy rippled around him. Time to get back on task before it was too late. When she pulled back to look at him questioningly, he asked, "You don't normally do field work for a living?"

She smiled. "Now that's the understatement of a lifetime, Cowboy."

Her quick sassy reply made him smile. She was an intriguing beauty that was for sure, as she watched him just as curiously, like he was just as fascinating. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he intrigued her.

"What was your first guess?" she said with a relaxed smile, adding, "It kind of nice sunbathing naked. I'll have to try it when I get home."

With some other guy. "The way you fucked me last night ... like you meant it," he said to get a rise out of her. Instead, she smiled at him, a smile that hit him in the gut.

"So sue me. I'm not a pro. Heck I couldn't get clearance to do anything before I signed on for this mission."

"How come?" he asked, studying her, and seeing her embarrassed blush. She had secrets she didn't want to tell

him about. Hell she had a whole life he didn't know about. Why was he kidding himself that this was more than a brief encounter?

"Who knows," she said with a shrug and changed the subject. "Once you ransom me off I'll go back to my humdrum life. And never leave the computer lab again," she added with a sigh, not meeting his eyes.

Well that explained the electronics he'd taken off her. The fact she actually didn't sound eager to go back made him feel a little better. "And where does Jeb factor in to this picture?"

She frowned up at him, sobering at his words. "That's right; you'll need to talk to him to trade me. I'm sure you've already figured out he's my agent in charge."

It was the answer he'd expected, but her disappointment that he was going to trade her made him wonder. Did Jeb really want her dead; was she afraid to go back? "Why did he hang you out to dry?"

She rolled her eyes. "Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe because I caught him with his pants down."

"Oh, yeah," he said, stifling a smile when he heard her disdain. "I heard you yelling about him getting a blow job on company time."

"Yeah, like most men, he tends to think with his dick." She gave him a defiant glance, her chin raising a notch.

He tried not to smile, finding her feisty attitude charming, knowing she was probably referring to him. Hell, he was buried deep inside her honey walls, he couldn't deny it. "Touché," he said studying her. "Tell me about your relationship with Jeb, and don't leave anything out."

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She sighed. "There's not much to tell. He swept into my computer lab last month, conned me into this mission, and now he's abandoned me. I can give you his cell phone number to call, but you might have more luck going above his head to his lead, Randal Cutler."

"And what was your brilliant game plan if you'd succeeded in escaping?" He watched her eyes flash with fury.

"Well I sure as hell wouldn't have kept driving into the jungle," she shot back at him. "Your game plan needs work, Cowboy."

He grinned because she was right. He was making this up as he went along. "And you'd have left me stranded, stealing my shirt, jeep, and cash." He watched the guilty flush that colored her pretty face and marveled at it. An honest woman.

"I would have sent help for you, eventually," she said sassily, adding, "And I would have called someone who could help me."

"Who?" he demanded, wondering whom she trusted more than him. Not that he'd given her much reason to trust him.

"My old supervisor, Dorothy is..."

"Your computer lab boss," he said, appalled. She might as well wear a sign saying come get the stupid American wanna-be-spy. Her narrowed gaze told him she read his thoughts and didn't appreciate them.

"So what's your game plan then?" she snapped.

The dare in her voice made him smile. "We throw in our lots with bandits and thieves," he said with a grin. The shock on her face was priceless.

"Why am I not surprised," she muttered.

"By the way, I'm not a kidnapper," he said, waiting for her reaction.

She swept a scathing look down at his hands clamped on her hips, holding her captive. "What do you call this then?"

"Negotiations," he said with a shrug.

Her eyes widened. "You've got a hell of a technique."

"I'm not going to ransom you back." He actually thought he saw excitement in her eyes and then it was gone in a flash.

"Do you mean you're keeping me?"

The question caught him off guard; it was just what he'd been contemplating. He grinned. "Do you want me to?" he asked stupidly, wanting to brand her as his, take her over and over again.

"Of course not," she looked away.

"That's what I figured," he said grimly. "It doesn't matter anyway. I'm Ace Walker of Delta Star and I'm trying to save your life."

She rolled her eyes. "It's the same fake agency you mentioned yesterday. I've never heard of Delta Star."

"I'm not surprised, it's black ops. And lower level..."

"Computer geeks," she filled in sourly.

His eyes crinkled as he held back a grin. "Wouldn't have access or knowledge we existed. I was assigned to take out an assassin. You."

She stared back at him, stunned as she digested the information. "If that's true, Ace, we're both in a hell of a lot of trouble."

He nodded. At last, she was getting it. He watched a frightened look come over her face that troubled him. He made a vow to protect her.

"Either you are a consummate liar, or you believe what you're saying and you're nuts. Why would anyone want to kill me? I'm no assassin."

Her words echoed his thoughts but he didn't want to share that with her yet. "If I knew that we'd both be free and clear and you could run back to Jeb's arms." He watched her glare and it told him the truth. Her womanizing AIC hadn't made it with her.

"I am not sleeping with Jeb," she said through gritted teeth.

"So you said before. Listen up, Sugar, the death squad that attacked us last night was meant for one of us."

"Probably you," she said sourly. "Computer nerds usually don't have people trying to kill them."

He smiled and let go of her hand. "I'm used to it."

"Great," she muttered, seeing his killer smile. Still the thought someone was after him filled her with anguish. "Ey up mi duck, I used your cell phone. It is you they're after."

He nodded, agreeing with her line of reasoning. "Probably, but I'm not letting you go until I know for sure."

"If you don't trust Jeb, or Dorothy, I do have another contact at the CIA we can trust."

"That's not going to happen." He shook his head.

"But I have some connections..."

"Look, Sugar, I've been at this game a lot longer than you have. Whoever is behind this plays dirty and they want you

dead, too. From now on, we become Siamese twins. Where you go, I go."

Melanie didn't like his disapproving tone. Was being stuck with her such a trial? She pushed her way off his lap and glared down at him when he tried to grab her.

"Where are you going?"

He was only worried she'd escape, the bastard. "Inside to get dressed," she said as her chin rose. Damned if she'd let him see her cry. She turned and stalked toward the house, not caring that he was probably ogling her naked body.

"I'll go with you."

She almost jumped when his rough voice came right behind her. Damn it, how did he move so silently? She wished she could learn the knack. It went a long way to backing up his story that he was an agent for an agency she'd never heard of. Of course, he could be handing her a line of bull. It wouldn't be the first time. She'd check him out no matter what he said.

As he fell into step beside her, she slanted him a resentful look. She didn't need an escort, but she realized it wasn't an offer. It was an order. He didn't trust her out of his sight. Smart man, she would have been sorely tempted to steal his jeep, take her chances with the CIA, and save his stubborn ass.

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Chapter 8

Ace went to the dresser and tugged it open hoping to find something to fit Melanie. The sooner he got her dressed the better. That way she wouldn't be so much of a distraction. He smiled when he saw some shiny garments. One of Santos's women had been here. He pulled out a glittery pink tube top, white short shorts, and red thong panties. "We're in luck."

When he turned to look at Melanie, the jealous look on her face stopped him cold. She thought he shackled up here with another woman. It was enough to make him smile. He tossed them at her. "Put them on."

She caught them and scowled back at him muttering, "I think I'd rather stay naked."

He arched a brow, remaining silent and she grumbled. "The shower still works if you want to use it. And there's a spare toothbrush in the medicine cabinet." Her sudden smile warmed him like the summer sun. He watched her rush off to the shower and then turned to do what he needed to do. He dressed in fatigues and went to rifle through Santos's cache of weapons.

Melanie walked out of the bathroom half an hour later feeling more human. The shower and toothbrush had been forms of gallantry from Ace and she treasured them. Whether he was crook or spy, she didn't know, but she knew she couldn't betray him.

She looked down at the scanty tube top and shorts she wore and groaned, reconsidering the thought. Who did these

things belong to? The thought that he'd had some other woman here rankled. He hadn't been forthcoming, not that she'd expected him to be. Men never admitted to their peccadilloes.

She walked into the bedroom and found a pair of high-heeled strappy sandals set out for her. Hooker shoes. To her embarrassment, they fit like a glove. She stood up and went in search of her benefactor. Thuds coming from the vicinity of the kitchen drew her. She came upon him in the kitchen, his back turned to her. He was rooting through the locked closet she'd noticed last night. Her heart sped up as she eyed him and realized she had a thing for soldiers. The uniform did impressive things with his sexy butt. He turned to look at her and she saw he was armed, and sorting through an arsenal. Even with her limited experience, she recognized the automatic weapons, ammo, and a few other things. He could fight a small war from here.

When Ace's sultry gaze swept up her body like a caress, her nipples hardened, and she cursed the fact she couldn't wear a bra with this top. Not that her bra was in any shape to wear, thanks to Ace.

He smiled at her. "Can you shoot?"

She nodded, thrilled he was finally beginning to trust her. "Did I tell you I outshot Jeb?"

"People tell me things all the time," he murmured.

She got the message, just because she may tell him something, it didn't mean he believed her. Who the hell had burned him so bad, made him so distrusting she wondered? Maybe the slut whose costume she was wearing, but she

didn't think so. She waited for him to make up his mind and smiled when he handed her a Glock and a magazine for it. The moment she had it in her hand she felt better, in control of her own destiny. She'd be his wingman and she could protect the both of them if need be. She hadn't been boasting when she said she was an excellent shot.

"Looks like you're ready for your own private war," she said, gazing at the arms packed in the closet.

"Not me, an associate."

A surge of happiness went through her at the confirmation that this wasn't his place. Thus, the slut clothes she was wearing didn't belong to one of his lovers. "I see."

"We do each other favors from time to time," he said, shutting and locking the door. "Know how to load it?" he asked, glancing at the Glock.

She nodded at him and checked to make sure there wasn't a round in the barrel. Then she locked the magazine into place. When she looked up, she saw his approval.

"Come on, let's move out." he said a little gruffly as he took her arm and steered her toward the door.

Melanie followed him back to the barn wondering why he was so subdued now. It was as if they moved one step forward and two steps back. When he popped open the jeep's lid and did something to the engine, she understood why the engine hadn't started. He had the dumb thing rigged.

As they drove down what seemed like a goat path, and deeper into the jungle, she sighed. Up ahead she knew there were mountains and then cliffs that led to the sea. But her captor wasn't in a talkative mood and she didn't much feel

like conversing with him, either. Their bodies might be in sync but their minds weren't. Why wouldn't he let her call Dot, her trusted source? She'd be doing it for both their benefits. How could he be so stubborn? Simple, he was a man. He might be miles up the evolutionary ladder from the likes of Jeb, but he was still thinking with his dick. Macho stubbornness wouldn't get the job done. She'd have to save him from himself. Her stomach grumbled, interrupting her thoughts. "Any chance you have some food in that duffle bag?"

He slanted her a smile, popped open the console to pull out a granola bar. "It's not much but it'll have to do."

She tore it open, inhaling the heavenly aroma, and then felt guilty. He had to be just as hungry. As responsible as he was for her predicament, she couldn't let him starve. She broke the bar in half and handed him his share.

"What's this for?" he said, in surprise.

"Just eat it," she said, not wanting him to think she was weakening toward him. She waited for him to take a bite before she did the same. The honey sweet snack made her groan with pleasure and she noticed him smile as he watched her mouth. Never had she thought of eating as an erotic art. But then she'd never watched her dream man savor a granola bar before, swallowing it down. He'd savored her the same way last night. She heated up just thinking about it.

Deliberately pulling her mind off sex, she swallowed down the last bite and glued her eyes on the path ahead. When he turned onto a gravel road her spirits picked up, civilization at last ... at least sort of, she thought as they drove up to the edge of a village. The smell of food cooking revived her

hunger, but she needed to pee even more. She couldn't help wiggling on the seat.

"What's up with you?" he asked.

"If you must know, I have to use the bathroom," she said, fidgeting on the seat.

He gave her an indulgent grin. "Just so happens I need petrol or else I'd tell you to use a bush."

She shook her head at his humor as he pulled up into an old gas station. The minute he pulled up to the pump, she opened her door. He grabbed her wrist as she started to get out and she turned to look at him. "What?"

His eyes flashed. "Try anything and I'll get out my lasso, and that's a promise, Sugar."

The stupid cowboy would do it too, she decided. "I won't try anything," she said. She thought about getting the Glock, now nestled in the glove compartment, but rejected the idea.

"Neither of us reports in until we know who's chasing us. Agreed?"

She felt his will bearing down as he pinned her with a determined gaze and nodded. "Agreed."

"Good. Then you can go." He let go of her wrist as a teenaged gas station attendant came their way.

"What a gentlemen you are," she said sarcastically and jumped out of the jeep.

"I live to please you, Sugar," Ace said with a grin, watching her go.

Melanie walked past the scruffy attendant trying to ignore his blatantly sexual once over. High tailing it past him, she

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breathed a sigh of relief when she slammed the bathroom door closed after her.

* * * *

Ace bit back a snarl when the teenaged grease monkey turned to leer at Melanie. "How about some petrol," he bit out, gaining the punk's attention. The kid turned wary eyes on him, flicking him an overly macho glance, which showed he'd been in his share of street fights. Ace gave him a steady look back, which soon had the kid backing down.

"You have American dollars, Gringo?" the kid said.

Ace flashed him the wad of twenties he'd already peeled off. "Fill it up. And we'll need supplies, too." He watched the look of avarice in the teen's eyes as he rushed to do his bidding.

"Si, Senior, anything you want."

Ace nodded and walked over to the pay phone while Melanie was out of the way. He dropped a coin into the slot and punched in a number he knew by heart.

"123 Logistics," the gravelly female voice on the other end said.

Ace winced when he heard Mable's voice. What the hell was his former foster mother doing back on the job? "I thought you retired."

"I unretired myself with you getting into trouble and all, Acheron. You're going to be the death of me yet, kid. Why don't you settle down with some nice girl and make me a grandma?"

"Get me Clark," he cut in.

"Is that any way to talk to your mother?" she scolded.

"You're not my mother," he said with a sigh. His mother had done a bunk on him when he was ten, running off with some gambler she'd picked up. Mable had become his foster mother, chief ass kicker, and the biggest supporter for two young hellions like Clark and him, and he hated it when she pulled her guilt trips on him.

"Don't get snippy with me, young man."

"Sorry," he said, feeling her warmth coming through the phone. "Just get Clark for me, Ma. You can yell at me all you want later."

"Bran Frost is beating the bushes looking for you," she said.

He hated the worried note in her voice, but he also knew that she knew he could take care of himself. If Bran Frost was worried about him, it might not be too bad. "I thought you and Weston would be on that cruise right now," he said with a grin, thinking of Ma's latest beau, Hal Weston, an Austin cop.

"We were incompatible."

Ma's sudden reticence made him smile. "Roughly translated he wouldn't let you boss him around..."

"I'll get Clark," she cut in before cutting him off.

"What the fuck is going on in banana-land?" Clark asked a moment later.

Ace grinned at his former foster brother's gruff question. Trust Clark to put things succinctly. "I'm still trying to figure that out, bro." He turned to see the kid washing his windshield and trying to listen in. He didn't know how much

English the kid knew and he wasn't taking any chances. "Get the supplies," he said, making the teen jump.

The teen nodded and hurried back to the station.

"Sounds like you're going off the grid," Clark said.

"You don't know the half of it, bro, and I don't have time to explain," he said surveying the scene, making sure the kid was getting their supplies. "What have you picked up through the grapevine?"

"There are two conflicting stories going around. First rumor is that you fucked up, cracked up, and went into hiding. Second story, certain people believe, is you switched sides or went into business for yourself. Guess which one Vance pounced on?"

Ace didn't need to guess, they both knew that Vance already thought he didn't play well with others. "The stupid bastard."

"No shit. Word has it you took a prisoner ... a female prisoner."

Ace smiled, recalling Melanie's soft curves pressed against him in bed last night. The way she'd taken him in her sleep, like a female Amazon, still blew his mind. Then he'd turned the tables on her and made her his. The realization hit him in that instant. She was his and he was going to do all he could to keep it that way. "Your contacts talk a lot."

"So it's true then."

"I can't confirm or deny..."

"Yeah, I've heard that song and dance before. Listen up, bro, now is not the time to let some broad mess with your head."

Ace tensed, letting out a growl when Clark called Melanie a "broad," and knew in an instant he'd miscalculated when his brother chuckled.

"So it's that way, is it?"

"Looks that way," he said, not wanting to talk about something he didn't understand himself. "It's pretty clear one of us was set up. I was sent in to take out an assassin who turned out to be no more than a glorified CIA computer nerd."

"The woman?"

"Yeah, Melanie Cordova. I need you to do a background check on her. I need to find out why she was targeted." Ace said, keeping an eagle eye out for Melanie. She'd yet to come out of the bathroom. He only hoped she wasn't going to try to split on him. Just the thought made his gut tighten. Didn't she know she was dead without him?

"What a cluster fuck ... um ... fudge."

Ace smiled as Clark instantly censored himself. "Ma come into the room?" Ace asked with a dry chuckle, then sobered. "Listen, a death squad hit my safe house last night. We barely made it out alive. Now I've got to find out who they're trying to hit and shut them down."

"It's clever, really." Clark said.

Ace could practically hear Clark's logistically focused mind working as he muttered, "Diabolical. Who thinks like that?"

"My advice would be to get the hell out of the kill zone and then call me back before you investigate."

"I'm ahead of you. We spent the night at the farm and we're on our way to Rosa's Cantina."

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"Does she know you're taking her to a whorehouse?" Clark asked with a hoot of laughter.

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Chapter 9

Melanie washed her hands thoroughly and glanced at her reflection in the cracked restroom mirror. She looked like a wild woman, her sun streaked blond hair tumbling riotously around her shoulders, curling with the tropical humidity. And she was glowing, sunburned, she told herself, not all flushed from a suddenly hot sex life. Deep inside she knew it was a lie. Ace had released a wicked part of her that didn't want to fade into the background anymore. When this was over, she'd try to get a life, even if it wouldn't be with Ace.

Stepping back, she tried to get a better look at herself, straightening her barely-there outfit. Whoever owned these clothes was either a preteen or a hooker. The clothes were at least one size smaller than her, making the tank top and shorts cling to her indecently. The outline of her nipples were visible through the glittery pink tube top she wore, and the white shorts hung low, baring her belly button, scarcely covering her red thong.

No wonder the teenage gas station attendant's eyes had practically bugged out when she passed him by. This was so unlike her usually buttoned up businesslike persona, it was shocking. So your life has changed, hopefully for the better, get over it already, she told herself, turning to go. She opened the restroom door and was immediately assailed by loud Columbian street music.

Stepping out into the alley, she saw the reason for the ruckus. A group of men clustered around an old truck,

hanging about while another worked under the hood. At first chill, she thought about their pursuers last night, but this old pickup truck was nothing like the SUV that had overturned. Judging by the bottles of beer on ice, the men were here for the afternoon. They all stopped what they were doing to leer at her. What is it about macho men that makes them feel it's necessary to act like apes?

"Si, Jeffe," one of the men said to an older man handing him a beer.

Boss, she realized and glanced at the man. Older, and better dressed, with a thin pock marked face, he wore his authority with a swagger. She looked at them wondering if they were friend or foe, noting the boss was armed. But a lot of men in the country were armed. It didn't mean they were crooks. Then she noticed he had a cell phone and her eyes widened with delight. She could call Dot; get them out of this mess. Or she could call Harry and have Jeb rubbed out, she thought with a smirk, not that she'd ever sink that low. But plotting her revenge was wickedly fun to think about. She let out a sigh, knowing she'd do neither. She'd promised Ace she wouldn't, at least not without talking to him about it, and she never broke her word.

Stupid or not, she was pathetically honest. So she turned and headed back toward the gas pumps to try to talk some sense into her hardheaded lover. When she emerged from the alley and saw their abandoned jeep, she stopped dead in her tracks. Where was he? Had their pursuers captured him? Her heart almost stopped at the thought. She knew he wouldn't

leave her on purpose. Then she turned to see him at a pay phone, and all her soft feelings vaporized. What a liar.

His back was turned to her and he seemed to be tense as he talked on the phone. She gaped at him in disbelief. How could he have lied to her, strung her along? Easy, it was what he did for a living, and he was damned good at it. She'd actually thought she meant something to him. Did this mean he thought Jeb was responsible for their plight? Somehow she couldn't cast Jeb Mason in the roll of a criminal mastermind, a lecher, yes, a killer no. She was going to stop being a patsy right now she decided, the tinny sound of the music in the alley drifting her way.

She spun on her heel and stomped back toward the alley. When the men saw her coming back, they ogled her once more, making dirty comments in gutter Spanish. She ignored the lurid commentary that all added up to look at the gringo whore. Given the outfit she was almost wearing, she could understand where they were coming from, even if she didn't like it.

Forcing herself to relax, she smiled, and they all fell silent. Like most macho bullies, they were afraid of a strong woman. Her confidence growing by the second, Melanie strode toward them, sidling up to the one with the cell phone on his hip. He was a little older than the rest and better dressed, with cold eyes and pockmarks on his thin face. "Señor, I need your assistance," she said, noticing he couldn't tear his eyes off her swinging breasts. What a worm.

"It's Raul, Señora," he said, licking his lips.

Dangerous Liaisons: Stealing Secrets
by Honey Jans

"Well, Raul, it's Señorita," she said, trying for a sexy tone when she'd really rather knee him in the balls. She held out her hand. "Telephone por favor," she said in hesitant Spanish, not wanting to tip them off she was fluent.

He smiled and pulled his cell phone out of its holster. "Of course, Señorita..."

"Donna," she said, giving him a false name. Did he seem to relax a little at the name she wondered, watching his eyes shift right? "Gracias," she said, taking the phone out of his hands before he could change his mind.

The look in his leering eyes worried her and she stepped back out of groping range. Shit, if only she had her gun, but it was lying useless in the glove box. Ace had probably only given it to her to mollify her, she decided, hardening her heart toward him. Well, she didn't need him to save her, she'd save both their asses; she owed him that at least.

With that in mind, she punched in Dot's number. As the phone rang, Raul sidled up to her and thrust a frosty bottle of beer into her hand. "Gracias," she said, startled as she looked up at his friendly expression. Maybe he wasn't so bad after all.

"De nada," he said, winking at her.

When he looked at her top, she knew exactly what he wanted, but knew better than to shrink away from him. They were the kind that would chase her if she ran. Then the phone answered.

"Computers and Logistics, Dorothy Helm speaking."

Melanie felt both better and homesick hearing her old boss's friendly voice and, to her relief, her admirer stepped

back as Dot's voice carried. It was good to know that common phone courtesy held even in these parts. "Hey, Dot."

"Oh my God, Melanie, is that you? I heard you'd been kidnapped."

Melanie winced when Dot's high-pitched voice carried and prayed nobody in the office back home had overheard. Ace was probably making her paranoid, but she knew she had to be cautious. The nosy men who clustered around her in the alley were bad enough, noting they seem to alert to the word "kidnapped." Or was she just paranoid? Still she had to wonder, did they speak English? She looked at them and they stared blankly back at her. Maybe not, at least she hoped not. She didn't need them trying to whisk her away from Ace.

"You heard right. Are you somewhere you can talk?"

"Yeah, I just shut my door. Where are you?"

"I'm not sure where we're at, some little village. Now listen," she said, shooting a wary eye at the men. They were still semi-leering at her, but at the same time seeming to hang on to every word she said. Busybodies, that's all she needed, even if they couldn't understand her. "Being kidnapped is currently the least of my problems. I was set up to be assassinated, Dot." She watched the men give her blank looks when she said it, and relaxed as they studiously looked away.

"Say that again."

"The guy that was sent to take me out, I guess rescued me instead," she said, thinking of the sexy traitor at the pay phone. If you can call being shot at, chased by bad guys,

spanked, and made love to until she melted rescued. She'd been putty in Ace's hands but that was over.

Dot sucked in a breath. "Did you call Jeb? Is he coming to get you?"

Melanie rolled her eyes. "I called him last night but he was too busy getting a blowjob to care. Fifteen minutes later the safe house we were in was blown up and we barely got away with our lives. He thinks Jeb might have set us both up."

"He?"

"The guy that took me, Ace something. Have you ever heard of an agency called Delta Star? He claims to work for them."

"No, but I'll look into it."

"Thanks."

"I can't see Jeb as an assassin," Dot said.

"Me neither," Melanie said with a sigh. So where the hell did that leave her?

"Let me know where you are and I'll go above Jeb's head and send in the cavalry."

Melanie looked at the small village she was standing in, not sure where the hell they were. "Hold on," she said, putting her hand over the phone. She turned to address her eoglers, who looked away, pretending they hadn't been eyeing her. "Where are we, por favor?" All she got for her trouble were a few shrugs and 'no hablo English'. Even Raul seemed perplexed. It made her feel better that they couldn't eavesdrop, but it didn't help. "Here," she asked Raul, pointing at the earth.

"San Felecia, Señorita Donna."

She put the phone back up to her ear. "San Felecia."

"You're headed toward Cali, what the hell is going on?"

"He's taking me to sanctuary," she said, still pissed off that Ace thought he could string her along. "He's gassing up the jeep and I talked him into letting me go to the bathroom."

"Has he hurt you?"

"Not exactly, if you discount being manhandled," she said with a sigh, thinking of him spanking her. There was no way she was going to share that tidbit.

"Manhandled huh, is he good looking?"

"Yeah, if you like tight-assed, military, silver-eyed wizards," she said tersely, because she did. It wasn't fair she was so crazy about him, when she meant nothing to him.

"I'll go over Jeb's head and..."

"Don't," Melanie said, sucking in a breath. "I don't know who I can trust."

"Well, you could always ask the Don for a favor he can't refuse," Dot said with a sad chuckle.

"That'll be the day," Melanie sighed, regretting she'd shared that tidbit with her best friend.

"Hey, he owes you."

"For what? Inadvertently getting my dad killed. It's ancient history and I haven't heard from the man, much less seen him since I graduated from college."

"Your mom called me last night; she's worried because she hasn't heard from you."

"Oh God," Melanie said, her conscience paining her. "Call her and tell her I'm okay, but I'm out on a mission and can't call her right now. I'll contact her soon."

"Will do, but you really should think about calling in that favor."

Melanie was about to reply when she saw the men straightening up, their macho looks back in place, as they glared at a spot over her shoulder. She didn't need to turn around to know Ace was coming. She hung up and furtively shoved the phone into Raul's hand. He gave her a speculative look, slanted a wary look Ace's way, and shoved the cell phone into her short's hip pocket giving her bottom a feel while he was at it. She stifled the urge to rip his arm off as he patted her, and instead forced herself not to react. "Silenceo," she whispered, hoping he translated and he wouldn't give her away.

He nodded, never taking his eyes off Ace.

She sighed with relief. At last, she was getting a break. A second later Ace stepped up to her. He looped a possessive arm around her waist and drew her away from Raul. She slanted a resentful glare up at Ace that was met by his furious silver gaze. He was boiling mad, but he was keeping it under control.

He flicked a resentful look at the beer in her hand. "I thought I told you not to run off, Sugar."

Melanie gave him a defiant look before turning to smile at Raul in time to notice him place his hand on the butt of his automatic weapon. Great, that was all she needed, posturing men. "Gracias," she said, holding up the beer she'd barely touched, hoping to defuse the situation. Ace's grip tightened around her waist and she glanced at him to see his eyes

darken. Was he jealous? A little part of her thrilled to the possibility, even though she knew it was immature.

"Señorita Donna does not seem to want you," Raul said, his mouth curving into a smirk.

So he did speak English. Melanie frowned at the faker.

Ace glared back at him, putting Melanie behind him. "This is none of your business, Amigo."

Melanie saw red as they squared off against each other. That's all she needed, a street fight. Something told her Ace could take Raul, but she didn't want to stick around and find out. "I'm leaving," she said, turning to go. He could follow her if he chose to. She might melt when he touched her, but it didn't blind her to the fact he'd broken their pact. Before she was halfway there, his hand on her shoulder stopped her in midflight.

"Why'd you play with those boys, Sugar?"

The doubt in his voice made her turn around and look at him. The hurt on his face was easy to see and it made her want to blurt everything out. That he had nothing to be jealous of, that she was only trying to save them both. But she knew this wasn't the time or the place. "Who said I was playing?" She thrust the beer at him. "Drink it."

By the time she made the jeep, he was already behind the wheel. She watched as he downed the frosty beer in one pull and then tossed it in the back seat. "Needed that, did you?"

"Around you, yeah I did." He started the car and then motioned to the bag on the floor. "I got you a PowerAde."

Her eyes widened with pleasure and she turned with a cry of joy to pick up the ice-cold bottle. Twisting it open, she

breathed in the heavenly strawberry aroma and took a taste, ambrosia. "Thank you," she said, gazing at him as he drove them out of town.

"Tacos," he said handing her a foil wrapped package.

Her stomach grumbled as she tore open the package and took a bite. "This is the best taco I've ever tasted."

"You're just starved," he said smiling.

It was true, but she savored every bite just the same.

"How about you, aren't you hungry too?"

"I'll wait until you're finished."

The indulgent smile on his face warmed her heart. "I'm done," she said blotting her messy fingers on a napkin. Then she took out another taco and un-wrapped it for him.

"Thanks," he said taking it.

She watched fascinated by him as he chewed and swallowed. All man and he was hers, if only temporarily.

Ace felt his body harden as she tried to come onto him, but he figured it was a diversionary tactic. What the hell had she been up to playing up to those thugs? Did she have any idea what kind of danger she'd been playing with or was it just second nature for her to flirt? Even as he thought it, he rejected the idea. Her natural modesty was clear for him to see even when she was playing with him.

The thought she might have tried to get them to send a message out for her lingered in the back of his mind, prompting him to ask, "So did you enjoy rubbing up against Tres Lobos?" Shit he hadn't meant to sound jealous.

"Like you've got a lot of room to talk jerk ... after I saw you..."

Dangerous Liaisons: Stealing Secrets
by Honey Jans

He watched her as she clamped her lips shut and looked away. What the blazes was she hinting at? She was back to her calling him a liar. He should have seen it coming. He'd deluded himself into thinking she was on his side; he wouldn't make that mistake again. He drove for miles as she gave him the silent treatment. Suited him, he wasn't much good at polite conversation anyway.

"What did you call them?"

"Tres Lobos, they're part of a gang. I recognized their jailhouse tats." When her eyes widened he knew he'd shocked her.

"But they were just kids."

"They start early in these parts. You should choose your allies more carefully from now on. If you were trying to get them to convey a message..."

"I wasn't," she cut in. "I didn't ask them for help if that's what you're getting at."

"Right," he said, having doubts.

"I walked out of the ladies room and they ogled me, thanks to the hooker outfit you found for me. I saw their beer and..."

"Right," he said, knowing she was handing him a line, and took the little used winding road to Cali.

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Chapter 10

Ace approached the city of Cali just as the sun went down. Melanie slept on the seat beside him, seemingly unaware of trouble brewing. He'd been watching their rear hoping the thugs she'd been cozying up to wouldn't try jumping them. Petty thieves, drug dealers, and guns for hire, they preyed on unwary tourists. He hadn't seen them in pursuit, but he wasn't about to let down his guard. "Wake up, Sugar, we're here."

Melanie opened her eyes and looked around. "Where's here, this can't be the sanctuary you meant?"

He smiled indulgently down at her, knowing he ought to paddle her ass for defying him. Hopefully it wouldn't come back to bite them in the butt. "We're stopping here for the night unless you'd rather sleep in the jungle," he said, smiling when he saw her horrified look. "That's what I figured."

"I suppose you'd sleep in the jungle if you were on this mission alone," she said worriedly. "I don't want you to make any special changes just for me."

"That's generous of you, but I think I'd like some clean sheets too." He pulled up to an alley behind Rosa's Cantina. "Let's go," he said, lifting out the bag containing their cache of weapons. "And bring your Glock."

She gave him a funny look. "You think we're going to find trouble in a cantina?"

"I might be a paranoid bastard; I like to be prepared for all comers." He looked at the cantina's seedy exterior and

derelict cars out front, searching for shadows that didn't belong. He couldn't let emotions get in the way of the mission. He learned a hard lesson at the gas station when she'd suddenly crossed him. He'd been falling for her and that was stupid. Delta Star had a non-fraternization on missions rule for a reason. He probably shouldn't have touched her on the job last night, but it happened and now they both had to deal with the repercussions. Now he was backpedaling, getting back to his duty, trying to forget how good it had been with her, how hot she'd been when he'd spanked her. Going to a bordello was probably a suicide move if he wanted to keep it in his pants, but it was the only move he had.

"Okay," she said.

He heaved a sigh of relief when she nodded, and opened the door without asking him questions. At least she trusted him in this area. He got out and walked around the vehicle to join her, glad she wasn't fighting him on the small stuff. He knew he'd overreacted earlier when he'd seen her flirting with danger and he didn't want to ruffle her feathers any more than he had to. "Okay, let's move out."

He escorted her down the alley to Rosa's back door, keeping a wary eye out for trouble. He noticed a couple of vaqueros on the street, but they were harmless. Once they were in the shelter of Rosa's back entryway, he relaxed a notch. The peeling paint on the back door was as ugly as the rest of the building, but it had the best security money could buy thanks to Delta Star. He'd used his connections to see to it personally six months back when he and Santos had rescued Rosa's brother from kidnappers.

He hit the doorbell saying, "Now, don't let this associate of mine disturb you. She's a bit unusual."

"She?" Melanie asked, slanting him a suspicious look.

Shit, he felt himself tense at the question. "Rosa manages the best whorehouse in the area." He watched Melanie blush at the words, but saw her eyes twinkle.

"You've brought me to a brothel," she said with a gasp.

Was she excited or appalled? He wondered, seeing her perk up. A little of both he decided, seeing her flushed face. A naughty innocent and perfect playmate, he thought grimly. The night was going to be hard. "Yeah. It's run by Rosa Vieira, she's very trustworthy, but she's kind of attached to me."

"Attached," she said, stepping back. "Something tells me she's not going to be happy to see me."

The door opened and the minute they stepped inside, the savory aroma of supper cooking assailed them, along with Mariachi music coming from the bar.

"Ace," Rosa called out, pushing Melanie aside to throw her arms around him. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I would have had your favorite dish prepared."

Ace groaned as the Madam pressed her soft curves to his body, squeezing the life out of him, and looked at Melanie over Rosa's shoulder. Petite and passionate, Rosa was very fond of him and the feeling was mutual, but they weren't lovers. Judging from the expression on Melanie's face, she wasn't going to believe that. "I didn't know we were coming."

"We?" Rosa said, pressing a warm kiss to his cheek.

"Yes, we," Ace said, trying to disengage himself from her embrace. "Meet Melanie, my..."

"Ah, you've finally taken a mistress. And here I was worrying about you for nothing," Rosa said, letting go of him and turning to look Melanie up and down. "Very pretty, but she dresses like a street puta."

"Ah, but at least I am not a madam," Melanie said in fluent Spanish. "And you don't need to worry about him anymore, that's my department."

Ace grinned at Melanie's spunky comment and Rosa's husky laugh. His woman had hidden depths.

"Acheron, at last you have found a woman with enough sass to stand up to you," Rosa said putting her arm around Ace's waist to shoo them out of the kitchen. "You will require a meal and a bed," she said, showing them to a table.

Melanie burned at the mention of bed and scowled as Rosa continued to cling to Ace's side longer than necessary. Rosa met her jealous stare, winked at her as if she'd been making a point, and then let Ace go.

"This one takes care of you," Rosa said with a grin. "Sit and relax, while I see to your meals."

Ace watched Rosa bustle off to the kitchen and then turned to look at Melanie. She was frowning at him, but at least she wasn't flipping out about him taking her to a bordello. He pulled out a chair next to the wall. "Sit, Sugar. I know it's a lot for you to take in at once."

"I think I can handle it," she said, amused as she dropped into the chair.

Ace walked around the table and took a flanking position with his back to the wall, carefully placing the duffle on the floor between them. Anyone who wanted to get to her would have to go through him. He scanned the room locking eyes with Hector, the bartender. Massive and swarthy, he acted as Rosa's chief ass kicker, bouncer, and husband. He was a good man to trust with your back in a battle. Hector lifted up two bottles of cold water and Ace nodded.

Ace scanned the patrons looking for trouble; two older rancheros hunkered over their beers while a few of the younger ones draped themselves over the working girls or danced. A couple groped in the corner, Ace discounted them in a glance. They were here to make love not war.

The working girls were another matter, a few of them he recognized from before as they cast speculative looks over Melanie, assessing the competition. He grinned, knowing Melanie would kick his ass over that comparison. Then, Marisol, a waitress sauntered over with their drinks. As usual, she gave him a flirtatious smile, leaning over the table as she placed the drinks before him, angling for a big tip. There was a come-hither look on her face as she crowded Melanie out of the way.

"You like anything else, Señor?" she asked.

Ace refused to give her cleavage an obligatory once over, making her scowl. "Just the aqua," he said. Then he pulled out two extra bills. "And good service."

"Ooh," she purred, reaching for the tip. "Marisol will give you extra special service."

"And my lady, too," he said, hanging onto the bills.

The waitress frowned. "Her, too."

"Buena," he said, letting go of the cash. She tucked the money down the front of her blouse and turned to go.

"I see they like big tippers around here," Melanie said dryly.

Ace weathered her gimlet stare; glad she was taking this so well. "The locals are poor and cash gets you where you want to go," he said. He opened the bottle and slid it across the table to her. "Drink Melanie, you need to keep hydrated."

"Water," she said taking the bottle. "I thought beer was your drink."

"Not when I'm working," he said, taking a thirsty swallow from his own bottle, wetting his parched throat. Damn he needed that. He glanced at Melanie, making sure she did as he said and watched her take a thirsty swallow, mesmerized by the sexy action. Just watching her drink could make him hard. Not good under the circumstances.

Melanie heated up as Ace's warm gaze lingered on her. So what if he hung around with madams, hookers, and thieves, she could handle it. "See something you like?" she asked teasing him.

"You know, I do," he said. "I think I'd like you to make love to you again before we part."

The fact he admitted their affair was temporary should have cooled her ardor. It didn't. In fact, it had the opposite affect. She was just as desperate for another taste of him. "Sounds like a plan." His startled smile made her heart skip a beat. She did mean something to him—she knew it.

He smiled. "I can be had, if you..."

Melanie startled when their dinner arrived.

"Later," he promised.

She blushed, pulling her gaze away from his mesmerizing one to focus on the dinner. The huge, savory smelling platter of chicken and dumplings accompanied by tortillas and beans was enough to feed an army. "Rosa must be worried you're starving to death."

"She tries to mother me and knows chicken and dumplings are my favorite dish," Ace said, tearing a tortilla in half.

"She didn't look particularly motherly to me," she said, recalling the clinch. But she had picked up warm vibes between them.

"I helped her out once and she has a long memory."

"Tell me," she said, tasting the food and groaning with bliss.

"It's good isn't it," he said with a smile. "Her brother was kidnapped by one of the cartels. I helped get him out."

"So you got him released," she said, noting his smile.

"Not exactly," he said.

"You busted him out."

"In a manner of speaking," he said with a shrug.

She knew what he was saying; he'd used force. Given a similar situation, there wasn't anyone else she'd rather have in her corner. She watched him flick a casual glance around the room and knew he was watchful for a reason. A band played in one corner and several scruffy looking locals danced with semi dressed hookers. Two of the girls lingering by the bar shot her dirty looks. Then she saw a passionate clinch in one of the corners by the stairs, and couldn't help staring.

She'd always wondered what one of these places looked like. The other women no doubt thought she was competition. No wonder, considering her outfit. She smiled at them, trying to mollify them and got snooty looks in return. Yikes.

"I'll be right back, Sugar," Ace said, gaining her attention.

"Where are you going to..." she started to ask and saw him head toward the bar as the bartender called him over. At least he wasn't getting in another clinch with Rosa or her girls. She took another sip of water and froze when a man walked up to her. Older and rough looking, his leering stare reminded her of the crowd back at the gas station.

"Dance with me," he said, reaching for her.

She shrank back, eluding his grasp, crept out. "No, thank you."

"You think you're too good to dance with me, puta," he growled, snagging her wrist.

She winced as he crushed her wrist in his meaty hand, and she reached for the Glock on the chair next to her. Before she could draw it, Ace was there pulling the man away, and giving him a shove.

"Touch her again and die," he bit out grimly.

The man held up his hands and backed off.

"Come on," Ace said, pulling her to her feet.

She sucked in a breath, feeling protected. She didn't bother asking him where they were going as he headed her toward the stairway behind the bar. When they climbed the stairs Melanie's heart raced in anticipation. She'd seen a few of the girls take customers up here, so she knew they were heading towards the bordello's bedrooms. She ought to be

appalled. Instead, she was turned on. It added a bit of spice to the evening, and she shivered a little in anticipation. Ace, climbing the stairs behind her, responded by rubbing her ass, making her let out a little gasp. Her pussy was already damp, her nipples tingling and her ass hot, expecting another of his sexy spankings.

"Have fun, you two," Rosa called out from the bottom of the stairs. "I'll make sure you're not disturbed."

Melanie blushed. Did she know what they were about to do? Of course, she did. She'd be sophisticated about this if it killed her. Ace would make it all right. With him at her heels, she hurried up the stairs. When she emerged at the top of the staircase all she found was a shadowy hall, the bedroom doors firmly closed. Well, hell. Then she heard a male groan and female laughter coming from behind closed doors and blushed again. Ace chuckled and put his arm around her shoulders whisking her down the hall.

"Come on, Sugar," he said, heading her toward a room at the end of the hall.

She held her breath as he opened the door, wondering what she'd see and felt a little let down because it looked like an ordinary bedroom. Simpler than what she'd find in the states, but clean. Her panties were getting wet with excitement anyway, because Ace aroused her.

Ace shut the door behind him and leaned against it to watch Melanie take in the room. The innocent had never been in a bordello before, he knew, and judging from her disappointed expression, she was let down. He'd just have to see what he could do to make it up to her. But first, he had to

fight back his rage from that other man touching her. His cock swelled behind his zipper as he looked at her. "I want you, Melanie."

She turned to smile at him. "Yes."

"But first we've got your punishment to get out of the way," he explained, hearing her sexy, quick intake of breath and seeing the excited light in her eyes.

"What makes you think I'm going to let you spank me?"

He smiled, his cock leaking pre-cum as it twitched behind his fly. This was going to be good, he knew. He ached to be her guide in the bedroom, but he was going to call the shots, even if it killed him to slow things down. He pulled out a straight-backed chair, positioning it in the perfect place for her spanking, aware of her eyes following him. He sat down on the chair and patted his lap. "Come here, Sugar."

Biting her lip, she moved toward him. "Can't we talk about this?"

"Later," he said, reaching out to snag her wrist and pull her over his knee. He felt her quiver and his cock throbbed in reaction. Her soft belly pressing against the damned thing almost drove him insane. Then a sigh of surrender hit him where he lived, and he knew he didn't want to give her up as his heart melted.

"But I want to taste you," she complained.

He chuckled. "Baby, you will." He pulled down her shorts, baring her in the red thong, and groaned. God, she was hot. He cupped her jiggling curves, his palm out across her bottom. He lifted his hand and gave her a quick smack, making her whimper.

"Hush," he said, giving her another smack. She moaned, making his cock buck.

"Oh my God, don't stop," she gasped.

He felt just as turned on as he rained teasing blows across her bottom. She arched up, silently begging for more. He ached, giving it to her, about to explode.

"Please," she wailed.

He stopped, and she let out a sob of frustration. "Want more?" he asked, toying with the waistband of her thong panties. She wriggled but he held firm, wanting the words, complete surrender. "Say it," he demanded.

"Please spank me, I want more."

"Do you require a proper spanking, Sugar?" He fingered the thong's waistband, his fingers venturing beneath, to touch her hot flesh. "Do you want me to pull these pretties down?"

"Oh, yes, pull them down." She arched into his touch when his hot fingertips touched her bare flesh. "Spank me properly."

"Excellent," he said, thrilled she was so hot for him, pulling her thong panties down to her ankles. Hobbled as the panties tangled around her ankles, she practically vibrated with excitement on top of him. "That's it, girl, you can loosen up with me." He spanked her harder making her cry out with need.

"I'm a woman, not a girl," she insisted.

"You're a girl in the bedroom." He caught her on the bottom of her ass with his open palm, making her cry out with delight as her mound rubbed against his thigh. "Like

that, do you?" he said, pleased, doing it again, making her shriek with pleasure. "Yes," she admitted, shuddering.

"Now be a good girl, reach down and play with yourself, Melanie. I want you to come while I spank you."

"No," she said, embarrassed.

"Yes," he said, his open swat catching the bottom of her ass harder, driving her higher. Her hand slipped between her legs as she rushed to obey him. He heated up the spanking, catching the bottom of her ass over and over again, making her moan. He felt her body tightening, and then drank in her cries when she came with a shriek. His hand replaced hers on her clit, his thumb pressing into her stiffness, his fingers filling her cunt, his little finger dipping into her juices and pressing into her anus. She gasped, as he loved her that way, wringing an extended orgasm out of her until she went limp. When she lay across his lap, totally drained, he pulled her up into his arms. "We have to set a few ground rules, Melanie."

"Like what?" she asked, leaning against him.

He tugged down her tube top, his hand covering her breast. "No more stunts like you playing games with those guys at the gas station. I have to know I can trust you." Her nipple beaded as he fanned a fingertip over the tingling peak, making her gasp and his cock throb.

She frowned up at him. "You can't make demands on me, besides I told you I wasn't playing with them."

He pinched her nipple making her squirm. "Too bad, I'm making them."

"You're mean," she said, pressing her breast into his hand.

"It's Sir, when I'm disciplining you. You'll comply."

"Or?"

"I'll take my belt to your sweet ass."

"Oh, that sounds sexy," she said, nestling against him.

"I've got demands of my own."

"Such as?" he asked, wondering if she knew she could wrap him around her little finger.

"I get to taste you soon, and then as much as I want."

He groaned at the sexy demand, guaranteed to mess with his head. Instead of answering her, his hand slipped between her legs, making her cry out as he touched her creamy sex. His index finger homed in on her stiff clit and he pressed the sensitized nub, making her moan and melt against him, her pussy leaking cream. He tweaked it, and she muffled her cries against his broad chest, as she came and came.

When she recovered, she peered up at him. "If this is how you conduct missions I can see why you succeed."

He chuckled. "I'm goal oriented." He spread her legs, his little finger probing her ass. She gasped and tightened around his finger, clutching at him.

"Oh my."

"Like that, do you?" he asked, pleased as her ass quivered and her cunt got creamier.

"Mmmm," she said, arcing against him. "So what's stopping you?"

He smiled, and released her to stand on her feet. "Some things are better taken slowly."

"Yeah, but not me," she complained. She grabbed his belt, undoing it, pulling it off him.

"Are you going to use your belt on me?" she asked, running the leather through her hands, and giving him a challenging look.

"Sass me and find out."

"Maybe later," she said, her face flaming because she was curious. "You're wearing too many clothes, Ace."

"So strip me."

It was all she needed to hear. She stepped forward, forgetting her hobbles, and gasped as she teetered off balance.

"Easy love," he said, reaching out to steady her. "Let's finish you first."

"You wouldn't have spanked me so hard if you wanted easy." She burned as she kicked off her panties, enjoying his sexy grin. He was getting off on her eager delight for him, and she didn't mind a bit. Feeling like a predator, she backed him against the dresser. His eyes twinkled, as she started to unbutton his shirt.

"Hungry, are you?" he teased.

"You ought to know, you started the famine." The last button slipped out of its hole, and she opened his shirt to ogle him. His well-defined muscles, tight male nipples, and six-pack abs added up to one irresistible package. She leaned forward to lap at one flat brown disc; it beaded under her tongue. Yum, he was delicious!

He groaned, shrugging out of his shirt.

She licked a path to his other nipple, then sank down to taste his six-pack, and dip her tongue inside his naval. She swirled it around making him growl and jerk. He was ticklish

there, excellent. She did it again, distracting him as she unzipped his jeans. His growl made her glance up at him for approval. The heat in his eyes made her cream. Trembling with excitement, she tugged down his pants, and his erection sprang out at her. He was going commando.

Melanie gazed at his cock for a heartbeat, admiring it. It was huge, long, thick, and heavy enough to hang down at his thigh. The red head was blunt and mushroom shaped. Her cool fingers ran down the hot silky length of him, and he hissed, his cock's head rising up. A drop of pre-cum beaded on the slit. She leaned forward to lap at it and sighed with pleasure, feeling Ace shudder. Suddenly she found her female power. She lapped at his slit again, loving the salty male taste of him, as he leaked more cum, making him groan.

"Lick the head," he ordered.

She didn't need further urging as she swirled her tongue around his cock's hot velvety head, stealing another drop of cum off the slit.

"Shit," he bit out trembling. "Suck on the head."

After another lick, she opened her mouth and took him inside, only able to contain a little. The erotic feel of his hard throbbing cock inside her mouth was addictive. She sucked, and both her hands wrapped firmly around his shaft. He hissed, his cock twitching under her ministrations. She could feel him tightening, getting ready to come, and her pussy quivered with excitement. She wanted it all.

"That's it, Sugar, give it up now."

She gave him a moue of disappointment, her mouth still holding him. He gently rubbed his thumb over her cheek.

"Now," he said gently.

Reluctantly, she let the head slip out of her mouth, giving his cock a final lick of departure. He drew her to her feet, and pulled her into his arms. She went with a hunger, burning as his mouth claimed hers. Then, he carried her across the room to place her on the bed. He came down on top of her, and she welcomed his weight—the promise of his possession.

He broke the kiss to string a line of kisses down her throat, over her collarbone, to one hard nipple. He took the bud into his hot mouth, drawing on it, making her squirm with need as she felt the pull deep inside her. Then he moved to the other, teasing her to distraction, drawing the sensitive bud hard into his mouth, making her cry out. Arching up into his hot mouth, she ran her hands over his back.

He moved down to scatter kisses down her abdomen, and she burned. When he moved south, settling between her spread legs, she couldn't help blushing. Her breath caught in her throat, and she tried to pull him up to no avail; he would not be moved.

"Let me," he said.

When his hot tongue rested against her swollen clit, her eyes rolled back in her head, and she let out a shriek. It was Earth shattering. Pushing her hungry sex against his mouth, she was lost to ecstasy. Ace began to lap at her with his tongue, teasing her, before pressing into her quivering pussy. She rolled on the bed, but his hands reached up to hold her hips fast. There was no escape from the pleasure he made her feel, and she didn't want to escape, as she throbbed with arousal under his rough and talented tongue.

Dangerous Liaisons: Stealing Secrets
by Honey Jans

He'd already made her come so many times, but she felt the pressure build inside her again. He took the bud of her clit into his mouth, and drew on it. Melanie exploded, her sex convulsing, empty. Ace surged up her body and thrust into her in one quick motion. She cried out at the invasion, welcoming it. Ace sealed her mouth with his, silencing her cry.

He lay still, breathing hard-on top of her, his body tense as he waited for her to become accustomed to him. She closed her eyes, feeling stunned by the sensation of his huge cock filling her. Her after-spasms rippled, making her gasp and him growl. She smiled up at him and rocked against him, only to feel his huge cock delve deeper inside.

"Easy, Babe, take it slow." He slowly started to withdraw, and then rock back into her.

Melanie arched up to meet his strokes, taking more of him. He was huge. "More," she moaned, as his hot cock filled her. He rocked into her, harder and deeper, until they both gasped. "Oh yes." She wrapped her legs around him, forcing him deeper, and wincing, but not letting him go.

He lost control, surging into her, again and again, until she tightened, coming, shouting his name. He surged into her once more and exploded, coming hard and fast, tight against her cervix. When he eased off her, pulling her close, Melanie snuggled against him, sated and dazzled. It was everything she'd dreamed of.

Ace stroked Melanie's supple back, enjoying the feel of her soft curves tucked tight against his body. It'd been a hell of a

day and she'd made it brighter. He held her close, feeling possessive.

"Come on," he said, rousing her, forcing himself to let go of her breast as he rolled out of bed. He looked down at her, flushed from their lovemaking, and knew he was a lucky man. He bent to scoop her up.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, clinging to him.

Ace felt honored by the affection and trust he saw in her eyes. At least she trusted him in the bedroom. "You'll see," he said, shouldering his way into the bathroom with her snuggled in his arms. Her breasts tantalized him, the nipples hardening, rubbing against his chest, and making his mouth water with the need to taste her tempting strawberry tits. Hell, she'd tasted sweet all over. He switched on the large walk-in shower, making the spray a little cooler than he liked. He had a sneaking suspicion ice cubes in the North Pole couldn't cool him off when she was with him.

He stepped under the spray with her. He set aside his line of questioning, and instead, luxuriated in the sensual feel of the woman in his arms, as water cascaded over and around them. She closed her eyes in seeming bliss, his cock stiffened again, and he groaned. Would he never get enough of this blonde siren? Probably not, he decided, letting her slip down his body to stand before him.

"That's nice," she said, rubbing her nipples across his chest. He spread his feet shoulder-length apart, and pulled her wet curves into his body. "Oh yeah," he agreed.

She shimmied against him, making him crazy. Reaching behind her, he gave her a sharp spank, so he could think. She

pouted up at him, blushing, her body radiant. Her lush lips were tempting him. He was in deep trouble. "Behave now, so I can wash you."

"Yes, Sir," she said unrepentantly.

He soaped up a washcloth, and swirled it over her lovely body, paying special attention to her tempting tits, watching them tremble, as she inhaled a shaky breath. He rubbed the terry cloth over her nipples, and they beaded, as her knees wobbled. She moaned, leaning into him.

"No fair. How come you don't have to behave?"

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, stilling the washcloth.

"No. Please don't stop." She pressed into him.

"I won't," he said gently, and then turned her around, and spread her feet apart.

"Let's scrub that saucy bottom."

"I'd rather have you take it."

He smiled at her eagerness, his heart tripping a beat. She was hot, adventurous, and altogether perfect for him, but she wasn't ready. He teased her tight portal with a soapy finger.

"All in good time. Arch your back, Sugar."

"But when?" she asked.

He bit back a groan as she pushed her cute butt out at him, and slipped a finger inside, making her gasp. "Fuck yourself on my finger. Try it out." She froze for a minute, and then arched back riding his finger, her tight back passage pulling at him. He groaned, his stiff cock bobbing. She moaned, arching her back to give him better access. He restrained himself. If he spanked her, he'd fuck her. Instead,

he reached out to adjust the body spray, aiming it at her stiff clit. She let out a cry, her backside clutching at his finger as she came. He supported her when her knees wobbled, his finger coming free of her ass. He held her tight until she came back to Earth.

Melanie turned to lay her head on Ace's shoulder, enjoying his touch, the slippery feel of his body against hers. She'd wanted a dream lover, but he was way beyond her expectations. "That was—"

"Sexy," he filled in.

"Earth shattering." She lapped at his nipples, drinking a droplet of water off his skin. His cock pressed hot and hard against her slick thigh. "It's your turn," she said, stepping close enough to let his erection slip between her thighs. It rubbed hot and tantalizing against her mound.

"No." He pulled back. "You're too sore."

"So? Spank me later," she said, taking advantage of his retreat by fisting his cock. He growled, thrusting into her hands, while he scowled at her. She wrapped both hands around his hot cock to hold him. "Let's see if water power works on you." She took the handheld spray, and aimed it at his cock while jacking him off. He groaned, and his balls grew tight against his body.

She watched, fascinated and, playing a hunch, aimed the spray at them. Ace hissed in reaction, his cock leaking pre-cum.

"Interesting," she said, pleased with her experiment.

"Stop teasing the bear," he groaned, but throbbed in her gasp.

She laughed, and kept fisting him harder, as she moved the spray to his anus. He shook, letting out a roar, and spurted. "And I think we just found the sweet spot," she said, crowing with delight.

"Don't get any ideas," he growled, his cock spurting.

She sank down to capture him in her mouth. She drew on his cock, taking it deeper in her mouth. She sucked, breathing deep, felt him tremble and give her everything he had. She drew on him, draining him, and licking him clean. She looked up to find Ace gazing at her with wonder.

He pulled her to her feet "Where did you learn that?"

"My personal library. You're the first chance I've had to put it into practice." His gaze smoldered at the last statement.

"And I'd better be the only."

His possessive statement thrilled her, but she wasn't fooling herself that she could keep him for long. When the mission was over, they would be over too. She saw his irked expression and knew her silence bugged him. Good. It might be good to keep him guessing. Her eyes widened when he slapped off the taps, growled and bodily pulled her out of the shower.

"Now get this, Sugar. I won't share you with anyone. You're mine," he insisted, bending to kiss her.

"I'm yours," she agreed with a sigh, as his mouth claimed hers. She rubbed her tingling nipples against him, drawn into his possessive embrace. His tongue swept into her mouth, mating with hers, as his hands swept down her slick back to cup her ass and squeeze. She moaned, pressing tight to him, her sex throbbing, as his cock stirred.

Dangerous Liaisons: Stealing Secrets
by Honey Jans

He broke the kiss to rub his manhood against her. "You belong to me, Melanie, say it," he hissed.

"I belong to you," she agreed, with a pleased whimper, rocking against him, watching his silver eyes darken. When he set her back on her heels and reached for a towel, she let out a whimper of complaint. His stern glance silenced her as he dried her off. It felt surreal to have him pamper her, take care of her, spank her, but he did it so well. Rubbing a towel over her hair, he made her scalp tingle as he was touching her, then he finger combed her hair back behind her ears.

He smiled, seeing her dazzled gaze, bent to give her a quick kiss, and a teasing smack on the bottom. "Playtime is over, Sugar. Now let's talk."

She blushed. She didn't particularly want to talk. Nevertheless, she took his hand, and let him waltz her back into the bedroom. Gazing at the ruffled bed, she ached to be back in it with him. Things were so simple when they let their bodies do the communicating. A ring followed by loud Tehana music coming from the general direction of her abandoned clothes on the floor broke through her bliss.

"What the fuck?" Ace grumbled.

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Chapter 11

Melanie wanted to die as she heard the cell phone in her shorts pocket ring again. Somehow, she'd forgotten all about it. She sent Ace an apologetic look, but she was too late as he stalked over to her shorts, which were crumpled on the floor where she'd lost them when he spanked her. He bent to pull the cell phone out of her pocket. His arched brow as he lifted the phone to his ear and looked at her said it all. Traitor. She wanted to die, or at least explain, but his suddenly closed off look said he wouldn't listen.

"Que pasa?" he mumbled into the phone in a Columbian accent.

Her jaw dropped at the dead on imitation. It seemed he could throw off his Texas twang when he wanted to.

"Si," he said hanging up.

He turned to frown at her. "Raul was looking for you," he bit out.

She winced. "I was going to tell you about the cell phone he foisted on me."

"Foisted," he said with a smirk. "Tagged you with would be a better term." He flipped the phone over and examined it.

"And it's not a cell phone."

"What do you mean it's not a cell phone?" she asked, bewildered.

"Have you seen any cell towers?"

"Well, no," she said, realizing he was right.

"It's a sat phone. Not as good as the one I used to have. Your Raul has to have pretty good connections to have one."

"As in spy connections," she said, appalled.

"Nothing official, but the agencies recruit local troops from time to time."

"You said he's tagged me. There's a tracking device?"

"A basic GPS is probably built into the unit. Why'd you do it, Melanie?"

"If that isn't a bunch of misanthropic bullshit," she snapped back at him. "I saw you on the pay phone, liar, and I know that pledge you made me take meant nothing to you. It was only then I doubled back and got the cell phone away from them. And yes, I called my old boss, Dot. So you can get over your sulking and leave me if you want. I don't need you anymore. Dot will rescue me."

"She will, huh," he said, doubtfully trying to wrap his mind around her words. He wanted to shout for joy because she hadn't betrayed him, at least in her mind.

"Of course, she will," she said with a sniff.

He weakened when he thought he detected tears, but then he told himself to suck it up. Getting soft wouldn't get the job done. "That doesn't explain why you took the phone with you."

"I tried to give it back when I heard you coming, but then the guy stuffed it into my shorts pocket and I couldn't very well retrieve it in front of you."

"You thought I'd go ballistic."

Her eyes narrowed. "I knew you'd go ballistic."

Ace couldn't help softening toward her. She was so cute glaring up at him. And he had kept her in the dark.

Her chin raised a notch. "As long as we're confessing, Cowboy, how about a little quid pro quo? Who did you call?"

"You're not going to believe it," he said watching her frown. "I was talking to my mother." He watched her jaw drop and grinned. "Bet you weren't expecting that."

"You can also bet I don't believe it. I doubt you've even got a mother."

"As a matter of fact I don't," he said, seeing her shock at his words. "My mother split on me when I was ten. I was talking to my foster mother. She answered the phone when I called Clark at 123 Logistics. I figured he could give us some inside information. He's got links to the agencies, but he's on the outside."

"So he's a PI."

"He prefers the term private consultant. And seeing as how he's damned good, I let him get away with it."

"And why was your foster mother there?" she asked, watching him. "Ah, you and Clark are foster brothers."

Ace was taken aback by her astuteness, but not really surprised. "Yup. I didn't expect her to be there, she was supposed to be on a honeymoon cruise."

"She give you a hard time?" she asked, smiling.

"What do you think?" He rolled his eyes. "How about you?"

"After she realized I was okay, Dot wanted to lead a group to beat up Jeb." Melanie grinned adding, "Then she asked me if you were good looking."

His eyes widened at the question. "And what did you say?"

Her smile widened. "That if you liked tight assed, military style, ghost agents you were a dream."

"And do you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Like your ego stroked, do you? Yeah I do, but don't get a swelled head about it."

He nodded, and started to get dressed. "You'd better put some clothes on."

"Are we leaving?"

He slanted her a forbidding look. "I'm leaving. You'll be safer here."

"You can't go out there alone. They'll kill you."

He cupped her cheek. "I'll be fine, Sugar. You keep this warm for me." He patted her bottom.

"No. You are not leaving me behind."

There was a tap on the door, and she wrapped a towel around herself, embarrassed. He opened it to admit Rosa and Andre from the bar.

"What's up?" Rosa said, puzzled.

"We've got company coming," Ace said, easing out into the hall to talk to Hector.

Melanie stood there frozen, feeling terrible for bringing this trouble to them. Rosa popped into the room, tossing her a frown as she saw her wrapped in a blanket.

"I brought you some clothes," she said, putting a bundle on the dresser.

"Thanks." She wanted to apologize, but knew Rosa wouldn't listen.

"I thought you were going to bring him good luck," Rosa said forlornly.

"But we don't, I mean we don't have that kind of relationship," she said, clutching the blanket to her as she heard the men go downstairs.

"Don't you?" Rosa said doubtfully.

"He's going to leave me at the end of the mission. So no, we don't." She heard the men's footsteps go down the stairs. "Where are they going?" She turned to see Rosa's sad smile.

"To take care of business."

Melanie gasped, terrified. "But he could get killed. I told him to wait..."

"Get dressed and meet me downstairs," Rosa said briefly. "Then we'll see what we can do."

Melanie frowned as the other woman left the room. She slipped into fresh undies and a yellow sundress Rosa had brought her, seeing that they fit like a glove. How could she help Ace? She wouldn't be sure until she talked to Rosa and found out what his game plan was.

She slipped into shoes and ran down the stairs, stopping when she saw the party still raging below. A couple in the corner were practically making love on a stool, reminding her of the clinch she'd just shared with Ace. The thought made her steam up. She had to make up for what she'd done. Save him. But where the hell was Rosa? She glanced around the room but her hostess was nowhere in sight. Neither was Hector, and she realized he was out there with Ace risking his neck. She really had fucked up, but she could learn from her mistake.

Sighing, she turned and headed for the kitchen. Maybe Rosa was hiding out in there. She walked into the warm

homey feeling kitchen, the aroma of supper still redolent in the air. Rose stood at the stove where a teakettle merrily whistled with steam. Melanie frowned at her. How could she stand there calmly making tea when they needed to act? "I'm here, let's get moving."

Rosa turned to look at her. "Good, they fit. I haven't lost my eye yet."

Melanie colored as the madam looked her over, remembering her manners. "Yes. Thank you for the change of clothes. I really appreciate it."

"De nada," Rosa said with a smile. "Get out two teacups, will you please."

Melanie did as she said, hoping she was making the tea for customers so they could get on with saving Ace. She lifted the two painted teacups out of the cupboard and took a moment to look at her pleasant surroundings. Rosa apparently loved bright primary colors and they looked perfectly at home here with the hand painted tiles. You'd never guess there was a bordello in the next room. Who'd have thought Mexican tiles and English china teapots would go together? Obviously Rosa did.

"About Ace?"

"Take a seat," Rosa said, spooning tea leaves into the pot.

Melanie obeyed, a sinking feeling washing over her. Rosa wasn't going to help her. Should she act on her own? Look at how disastrous that had turned out. She had to gather Intel, and she was good at it. "Okay I'm sitting. Tell me, where did Ace go?"

"To ditch the jeep and the phone. Don't worry he'll be back." Rosa turned to give her a stern glance. "He told me to tell you to sit tight, and that's a direct order from your master."

Melanie bristled at her words.

"I told him that would piss you off. But he said you could handle it."

Blushing, Melanie nodded, not knowing what to say. "He did, huh? How about if I just leave and save his macho ass for him?"

"I wouldn't recommend it." Rosa gave her a grim smile. "You wouldn't want to make him careless because he was worried about you. Get him killed."

She felt the wind leave her sails at Rosa's words. "I screwed up, brought this trouble down on us. It's my fault."

"Funny that's what he said."

"What?" she asked, shocked.

"He said he'd brought it down on you by trying to keep you in the dark, that he should have been more open with you. You're both singing the same tune."

Was it possible he really meant it, was softening toward her? "He did, huh? Tell me more."

"They do tend to be hard-headed, but Ace always comes through. Have a little faith in him."

She looked at Rosa, noting the strange dichotomy of the madam in a frilly apron and wondered for a minute if she could take her. Sanity prevailed and she fought back the desire to walk out, knowing it would be suicidal to both of them.

"Join me in a cup of Earl Grey, and I'll tell you all I can about the care and feeding of one Ace Malone."

Melanie nodded, not having much choice. Besides, she was dying to know more about Ace, and Rosa knew plenty. Maybe she could pump her for information. She watched Rosa scoop loose-leaf tea out of its house-shaped caddy and dropped it into a purple and green swirled teapot. Pouring the boiling water over the leaves, she took a long sniff of the aroma of Earl Grey. It was just like having tea with Dot. Almost, she amended, giving Rosa a sidelong glance. She hadn't quite categorized her yet, but she did find her likeable. "Yeah, how much care and feeding have you given him?"

Rosa picked up the tea tray and carried it to the table. "He hasn't been with me, or any of my girls, if that's what you're asking. But I'm glad to see you're jealous. His other fiancée wasn't."

"Fiancée?" she gasped, shocked. But of course, a hunk like him would have had a past love life. "He told me there was no one else."

"That was over two years ago after he rescued my brother Manny. Lori didn't like his profession. Then he got the scar rescuing my brother and she really didn't like that. Said he was ugly and scared her."

"What a bitch. He's the handsomest man I know."

* * * *

Ace doubled back towards Rosa's Cantina, meeting Hector in the shadowed spot they'd chosen. "Get rid of the jeep?" he asked.

Hector nodded. "I gave it to a farmer friend of mine. He promised to keep it out of sight until this blows over. And you?"

"I slipped the phone onto the truck bed of a passing semi trailer. With any luck, it'll be half way to Cartagena by morning. Hopefully it'll confuse the moron troops long enough for us to get cleanly away to The Aerie."

Hector nodded. "I'll arrange alternate transport."

Ace tried to relax as it all came together, but he knew they weren't out of the woods yet. He knew he'd brought this trouble on himself, but damn, how could he have known Melanie had the phone? He'd have to be vigilant to keep one-step ahead of her from now on. It was the only way to keep his valiant little love from getting hurt. When they reached The Aerie tomorrow, he'd wrap her up in security to insure her survival, and then kill the bastards before they killed them. It was a plan, but first he had the rest of the night to spend with Melanie. Funny how he brightened up at that thought.

* * * *

Melanie was going out of her mind with worry by the time Ace and Hector came back. She jumped out of her seat and ran to Ace the moment he entered, throwing her arms around him. He caught her weight, holding her.

"Glad to see me, Sugar?"

"Don't joke. I was scared," she said holding him.

"Come on let's take this private," Ace said, letting her loose to head her toward the stairs.

"You lovebirds have fun now," Rosa cut in.

"We will," Melanie said, feeling bolder by the moment, despite her embarrassment.

"First we've got to take up the topic of you lying to me," Ace said, giving her ass a pat on the way up the stairs.

"You'll just have to paddle me for it," she said, hearing him groan.

When they walked into the room, she turned to look at him, to make sure he wasn't hurt. "Are you sure you're okay?" she demanded.

"Wanna frisk me?" he asked in a snarky tone.

"Maybe later," she said, shivering when he latched the door. She was in for it now and she could hardly wait. The sultry but serious look on his face made her cream.

"I'm going to paddle you, Sugar." Ace stalked up to her.

She trembled with need, nodding. "Did you and Lori go in for kink?" she couldn't help asking, wanting to be different, first in his heart.

"I see Rosa's been gossiping. No, we didn't indulge in kink. You're the one who's bringing out this side in me."

"I'm glad," she said with a smile. "Then you're not still in love with her?"

He shook his head. "I don't think I ever was. In fact, her name doesn't even affect me anymore. Now, strip for me, Sugar," he demanded.

Biting her lip, she did as he commanded, unzipping her dress and letting it drop to the floor. She stepped out of it, completely naked. "I'm yours to command, Sir."

His eyes darkened. "This isn't a game. You need to be punished for helping those men, you risked your beautiful neck and I don't want a repeat."

She nodded, stepping toward him, more turned on than she could say, despite the fact he planned to warm her backside. "Whatever you say, Ace."

He let out a groan, pulling her into his arms, his hands exploring her body, cupping her ass to squeeze.

She trembled, needing him so bad she could taste it.

"Go drape yourself over the spanking bar," he said, letting her go.

Shivering now that she was out of his embrace, she walked to the spanking bar on trembling legs and gently bent over it. Could she really consent to this? A glance over her shoulder told her he was waiting, not overpowering her, and not forcing her. It was an obedience test, she decided, bending over the padded bar. The position pushed out her bottom at a slutty angle, and when she glanced back at him and saw the heated look in his eyes she let out an almost imperceptible, "Ooh."

He walked up to her and picked a black paddle off the rack. He ran a hand over her flanks, caressing her. "Excellent," he said, his hand caressing her as he took the paddle.

She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat as she watched him walk to her side—heard the heat in his voice—and the tension too. Her body shook in reaction and her pussy quivered, she needed him so bad. "Yes, Sir," she said with a sigh, aching for him to touch her, make her come.

"Very good." He drew back the paddle.

Smack, the paddle smacked her left cheek. "Oh," she gasped, arching her hips back at him as her ass burned and her sex creamed. It was more heat than discomfort, and it felt like foreplay to her warped mind.

"Good girl," he said drawing back the paddle.

Smack, he swatted her right cheek and she whimpered, moaning. And then blows rained down, left, right, left, right, and then up from the bottom making her yelp. Her ass, her thighs, were on fire, her pussy too, as her thighs trembled. Sometimes the blows were soft, teasing, as he toyed with her. Each smack made her hotter, stinging, arousing, until she was squirming in tears.

"Do you like being paddled?" Ace demanded.

"You know I do," she shot back, embarrassed and turned on.

He let out a little sigh, as he rubbed the paddle over her hot bottom. "Slave girl, do you have any idea what that kind of response does to a man? Do you know what kind of power that gives me over you?"

"Yes, and I don't care. Do it to me. Do everything to me." She moaned when he laid the paddle on the settee and ran his hand over her paddled bottom. "Oh, that feels so good." When his finger probed into her anus, she arched against it, letting out a little moan. "Oh yes, take me there."

"Quiet," he commanded. "I'm in control. Let's lube up that tight little ass."

"Oh yes," she said with a sigh, as his finger spread lubricant into her anus. She bit back a whimper, burning to be

taken that way. "Oh," she moaned, feeling her pussy walls clench, her anus ripple against his probing digits, but she didn't move, her eyes rolling back in her head. She was so close to coming. She couldn't hold it, couldn't control her orgasm. The ripples started, she arched back at him.

"You can't come yet," he explained, nesting the big head of his cock against her anus. "Not until I'm inside you."

"Oh yes," she moaned arching back at him as he started to enter her bottom.

"God, you're tight," he groaned.

When he slipped his cock into her deeper, her body trembled, clamping down on him.

"You're mine," he said thrusting in to the hilt.

Melanie gasped, her legs wobbling, her middle draped over the spanking bar, his cock buried deep in her throbbing ass. Ace lay still against her, his breathing fast, letting her adjust to the invasion. He reached around her, his big hands cupping her breasts, his fingers pinching and rolling her nipples. Moaning, arching her hips to take even more of his cock, she felt besieged, overwhelmed by sensation. When he moved, rocking into her, her ass quivered around his big cock, she flexed against it, starting to come.

"Easy, Sugar," he said, slowing down.

"Oh." She groaned in protest as he staved off her orgasm, easing her ripples.

"That's better," he said. "No coming until I give you permission. Five more strokes of my cock and you can come. Any sooner and you'll be punished."

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The threat was laughable because she'd love it and he knew it, but she tried to obey, damping down her orgasm. He started to thrust harder, pulling half way out of her bottom, to ease back inside and she cried out. Her pussy and ass both spasming. "Oh," she said, under her breath, her ripples starting again.

"That's one," he said. "Now on the count of five I want you to come, Sugar."

Five? She couldn't come on command. It was unheard of—barbaric. She groaned, as he thrust back into her.

"One."

On fire, her ass gripping him, he suddenly stroked harder.

"Two."

She gasped as he did it again. Her ripples increased, milking at his thrusting penis.

"Three." He plunged deeper.

"Oh," she cried, as his cock vibrated inside her—arching up to it, uncaring of the penalty.

"Four." He intoned.

"Five." He jammed it into her and pinched her clit.

She exploded, crying out as her bottom milked at his cock. She felt him shoot his come high inside her and sighed, feeling well used.

"Perfect," he praised, still atop her, dropping his head to lie against her back.

Melanie sagged, sandwiched between him and the spanking bar. Had she actually begged him to take her ass? It seemed right somehow. When she snuggled in his arms hours later, she knew she could never go back to her tame old life.

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Chapter 12

Ace woke instantly, not sure what had set off his warning signal, but knowing they were in danger. He walked to the window and looked out to see strangers on the street—Raul's rag tag mob. Shit, maybe the GPS tracker in the sat phone malfunctioned, or did Raul have inside information?

Melanie started and woke up. He glanced at her and she stared back at him with wide eyes. The fright he saw on her face made his gut twist. He had to protect her at any cost.

Raul's angry voice shouting orders on the street below was audible.

Ace looked down to see the Lobo's commander spit on the ground angrily after shouting at one of his men. The annoyed leader got back in his rusty pickup truck, and took off inland at a high rate of speed, following the roving sat phone.

"They found us," she said with a gasp.

Ace nodded grimly and watched Raul drive out of town until he couldn't see the dirt cloud anymore. "Relax, he's leaving." Only then, did he turn and walk back toward the bed. The guilt he saw on Melanie's face hurt him. He ran a soothing hand down her arm and she settled. "They're following ghosts. By the time they figure it out, we'll be safe," he said.

Melanie nodded. "Okay. What now?"

Ace felt honored by the trust she placed in him and vowed not to let her down. "Shower, dress, and breakfast. Then we get out of town."

They dressed in silence. Ace slowed his breathing, going into mission mode as he mulled over his options. One look at Melanie helped him focus. "Come on," he said hoisting the packs.

"Where are we going?" she asked in a hushed voice, following him out of the cantina.

"Sanctuary," he said, praying it was true. Based on his breakdown of communication with Delta he wasn't completely sure of his reception. But he had no choice but to trust Santos, after all, he knew where the bodies were buried. Once he had Melanie safely on ice at The Aerie, he'd regroup and kill the bastards that were hunting them.

Melanie slanted him a glance and saw the truth in his eyes. He was as worried as she was, but he was better at hiding it. Bless the macho man. She let out a sigh and followed him, hoping they'd head in the opposite direction of their pursuers. "I thought you dumped our jeep, so how are we going to escape?"

"We've got wheels," he said with a chuckle.

"Where?" She looked over his shoulder to see a dirt bike leaned against the wall. "I've never ridden a motorcycle before."

He gave her a wry look. "You've never done a lot of things before, Sugar."

It was true, he'd opened up a whole new world for her, not that she was going to admit it. She didn't appreciate his amusement. "Just get on with it, Cowboy."

He smiled, and held up the keys. "Right with you."

She put on the helmet he handed her, wondering where they were going. She hadn't wanted to ask, proving she trusted him. It seemed to mean so much to him and she could understand that. But she couldn't shake off the feeling that when he dropped her off, she might not see him again. The thought made her frown, she'd found fulfillment with him and she did not intend to give him up. She let out a disgruntled grumble of complaint, drawing his attention.

His hard mouth twitched with amusement. "Something bothering you, Sugar?"

She scowled back at him. "Yeah, you, I refuse to let you dump me off somewhere, so don't even think about it," she bit back at him, "And stop playing hard to get," she said, stomping her foot.

He reached out to snag her arm when she moved away, miffed. "Honey, I can be had any time you say the word. You've got me walking around with a stiff cock half the time."

"Really?" She looked down at his bulge for proof. It pleased her to no end that she affected him that way. "I thought it only happened when we kissed."

"Sugar, it happens every time I think about you. Satisfied?"

"For now."

"Good. Let's go." He took her arm and steered her toward the dirt bike.

She stared, impressed, as she watched him climb onto the bike. Then he looked at her, his sultry gaze sweeping over her like a caress, and she melted into a big pile of Melanie goo.

He was in a hurry for her, an excellent sign. Her sex fluttered, as she cast a sidelong glance at him, growing creamy for him. God, he was sexy. Come what may, she'd chosen whom she trusted, and she wouldn't look back. She'd as good as severed ties with Jeb after her call to Dot today, and she didn't regret it, even though she knew there might be hell to pay later.

She didn't care. She had Ace for now and she'd keep him as long as she could. She wasn't foolish enough to ask for more. She just wanted to feel the heat with Ace, solve the case, and go back home with some sexy memories.

Maybe Ace would want more like Rosa had intimated. No! She absolutely wouldn't let herself go there, wouldn't torture herself with what might be. She'd just enjoy this adventure to the fullest. At least Ace was keeping her safe. Riding a motorcycle was another new experience. The thought of pressing tight to Ace was intriguing. She watched him stash the duffle in the saddlebags, put on his own helmet, and mount the bike.

Melanie's heart fluttered as heat rushed through her, watching the utterly male movement. Her mouth watered. She so wanted a piece of that. And she'd have him once they got where they were going. Ace turned to see her watching him and smiled.

"Ride with me, Sugar." He patted the bike's leather seat.

She nodded, knowing he'd caught her drooling at him and not caring. She slipped onto the back of the bike, gasping when her spanked bottom touched hot leather.

"Put your arms around me, Sugar, and hang on tight," Ace said.

Rushing to obey, she gasped when her sensitive clit bumped against him, and her sex pulsed against the vibrating seat. Oh lord, it was going to be pure pleasure riding with him. She bit back an orgasmic moan as a spasm went through her.

Ace let out a knowing chuckle. "Enjoy it, Babe, it's one of the perks of riding with a biker," he said as they drove out of town.

After the sultry night they'd spent, she was still primed for action. In short, she needed to come—bad—and his words threatened to push her over the edge. She plastered herself to his back, her arms wrapped tighter around him, murmuring, "You are a wicked man, Special Agent Ace Riser." He chuckled when her hands drifted down to his erection, and she gasped.

"I live to excite you, Sugar."

Melanie let out a yelp as they went over a rut, driving them off the beaten path, and did as he said, hugging him tighter and pressing against him. She gave up trying to watch the tangled mass of vegetation he wove them through, trusting his instincts, and closed her eyes. All sensation seemed to be focused on her vibrating mound pressed against the leather seat. She whimpered, her sex fluttering with each bump.

"You're dying to know where we're going, aren't you, Sugar?"

"Of course not, I trust you," she stammered, squeezing him tighter, making him groan when she accidentally squished his erection too hard.

"Do that again and we might not make it to sanctuary," he scolded.

Her face flamed as she tucked it against him. "Sorry." She sure as hell didn't want to cause them to crash.

"Don't be," he said, reaching down to slide her hand off his package. "But fun and games will have to wait. Keep that up, and I'll be out of commission."

"Okay," she said, with concern and moved her other hand up off his bulge.

Hours later, when they drove up to a thick stone wall, she looked at it in surprise. What a funny sight out here in the wild. Approaching a gate, complete with a guard sporting bandoliers straight out of a Mexican movie, her eyes widened. A sign above the gate read, The Aerie. She shivered right down to her toes. Santos Valdez. Reported cartel hit man and the subject of her mundane computer wiretaps before Jeb Mason had lured her into the field. Talk about life coming full circle. The fates seemed to be laughing at her. When the guard grinned, and asked Ace how it was hanging, in colloquial Spanish, she bit her lip in disapproval. Ace's friendly reply made her bite back a groan as the guard opened the gate for them, and her heart sank. What kind of agent played nice with hit men, thugs, and madams?

Apparently, her lover. Ace drove them down the long gravel drive to a mansion on a hill. Well, Rosa had turned out

to be a good person, so she'd withhold judgment until she met Santos.

"Honey, we're home," Ace said, bringing the bike to a halt.

She sat there frozen for a moment, thinking about the repercussions of dealing with The Saint, as other equally dubious associates had dubbed Santos. She got off the bike when Ace slanted her a curious glance. Did he know she knew?

"Behave," he said, leaning in to pluck off her helmet just as the hit man wandered out of the house to greet them.

She flicked a cautious glance at The Saint, deciding his mug shot didn't do him justice. Handsome, if you liked tall, dark, and suave killers. She preferred her rugged lover Ace, and inched a little closer to him. She watched The Saint smile at the telling action.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming, Amigo," he said, flicking a steady glance at Ace.

"Some morning visitors held us up," Ace said, looping his arm around her waist.

"Ah," Santos said, "Tres Lobos."

"I trust all is in readiness," Ace said.

Santos smiled and then turned to look at Melanie. "First introduce me to your charming companion," he said.

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Chapter 13

Ace got the message, nobody got into The Aerie un-vetted, not even innocent women. The annoyed look he gave Santos was met with amusement. "This is Melanie Cordova."

"Kidnapped CIA agent," she shot in.

Ace wanted to paddle her, but the defiant look she gave him was unrepentant. She'd guessed Santos's identity, or somehow she was in the loop, which surprised him. What she didn't know was that The Saint was a valuable Delta Star ally.

"Charmed," Santos said, taking her hand and kissing it.

Ace burned as he watched Melanie blush. The damned hand kissing Latin lover wasn't going to steal his woman. "Well?"

Santos grinned and dropped her hand. "Follow me. I'm sure your lady would like to freshen up."

Ace ushered Melanie into the shadowed, yet plush recesses of Santos's palatial hacienda and relaxed his guard once they were inside. Beside him, Melanie let out a little sigh of pleasure when the air conditioning wafted over them, and he felt it deep inside. Every male bit of him was in tune with her, but he knew he needed to refocus. The first thing was to talk to Santos and then go to war, and he didn't want to risk Melanie getting caught in the crossfire. He heard the beat of salsa music coming from the kitchen. He sighed. "Manny?"

Santos nodded. "He's on spring break from the college."

A twenty-four-year-old man wearing a loud tropical shirt and board shorts slid into the room and his eyes widened

when he caught sight of Melanie. "Wow your taste is improving, Boss," he said to Santos, earning a growl from the drug lord.

"Did you send those faxes?" Santos said.

"I'm on it," he said and then smiled at Ace. "It's good to see you, Ace. He didn't tell me you were coming or I would have made your favorite dish, but it looks like you've already picked one up." He gave Melanie a playful leer, guaranteed to goad his boss.

For Melanie's part, she lightened up and laughed when she saw the stern look on Santos's face. "Sugar, meet Manny Reyes. Apparently he's on spring break and enjoying it."

"I don't tell you everything, kid," Santos chimed in with a rueful smile, adding, "Don't you have homework to do?"

"Later," he said with a shrug.

"Now," Santos said, as Manny walked away.

"I think that's our cue to go freshen up, Sugar," Ace said, taking Melanie's arm.

"Yes. I'm sure you'd like to get out of Carmen's clothes," Santos said, glancing at Melanie.

She stopped and looked at him after flashing a suspicious glance Ace's way. "I've been meaning to ask, who's this Carmen person and why does she dress like a hooker?" she asked waiting.

Santos smiled. "Carmen is a lady friend of mine. As far as I know she has nothing to do with your man."

"Oh," she said blushing. "I didn't mean to call her a..."

"Stop stammering, Sugar, I'm sure Santos understands," Ace said, taking her arm and steering her toward a hallway.

Behind him he heard Santos chuckle and grumbled. His old pal was going to enjoy ribbing him about it.

"Take the ocean suite," Santos said.

"I intend to," Ace said ushering Melanie down the tiled hall to the suite at the end of the corridor. Only when he shooed her into the well-disguised safe room did he drop his guard. He trusted Santos with his back but he never took chances. He shut the door behind him with a quiet snick and suddenly they were in their own world. He stood still watching Melanie take in the plush surroundings, seeing it through her eyes. Large bulletproof windows overlooked the cliffs and the sea below, a king sized bed and a sitting area. "All the comforts of home and then some," he said dryly.

She turned to look at him. "Your friend lives well."

He didn't miss the disapproval in her tone. "You don't approve."

"I'm sure he doesn't need my approval," she said tightly. "Do you know what he does for a living?"

"Come with me," he said, dropping their bag on the bed and grabbing her wrist. He knew she disapproved of Santos but he wasn't free to talk about their connection.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, willingly going with him.

Ace felt honored by the affection and trust he saw in her eyes. At least she trusted him a little bit. "You'll see," he said, leading her into the bathroom. He grinned at her audible gasp and had to agree as he looked at the palatial marble bathroom. Santos had good, if extravagant, taste he thought, sardonically acknowledging his jealousy. There was no way he

could compete with that ... not that he wanted to. If Melanie ever got to his ranch, she'd find much plainer surroundings. Big if, he told himself firmly, putting thoughts of the future on the back burner. He knew better than most it didn't pay to think about tomorrow, they still had to get through today.

"Ready to come clean with me, Sugar?" he asked, tugging her into his arms. Her little flustered gasp and the heated look in her eyes made him smile. There was no way she could keep secrets from him.

"I'm way ahead of you, Cowboy." She recovered quickly and reached for his shirt buttons. He stood firmly as he let her strip him, heating as her breasts brushed against him. Through the barely-there tube top, he could see her nipples were stiff. Not half as stiff as his cock, he thought, with ironic self-humor. When she reached for his zipper, and tugged it down, he groaned as it compressed his cock. "Easy, Love."

She flashed him a worried look. "Are you okay?"

"I'll probably die if you don't hurry up," he gritted out, seeing her secret smile as she finished stripping him bare. He pulled her to her feet. "My turn." He tugged her tube top up over her head and tossed it on the floor, baring her beautiful breasts. Gazing at them for a long beat, he felt his pulse leap in his veins. He leaned forward to lick one strawberry peak, drinking in her moan. Damn she was sweet. She arched out for him and he obliged, sucking the jewel into his mouth while he pulled down her shorts. When her shorts hit the floor, they both shuddered. He needed a cold shower bad, he decided, turning on the water. But he knew even a cold shower wouldn't cool him off when she was with him.

"I must say, your friend has a fun bathroom," she said, looking at the shower. "The double rain shower with the body sprays was a stroke of genius."

"Santos does things in a big way."

"I noticed," she said dryly.

Her continued disdain made him feel like smiling. Women usually fell into Santos's hands like ripe plums, especially when they saw his wealth. "So you don't like the plush surroundings?"

"It's not real to me," she said with a shrug. "I guess I like something a little more homespun."

The fact he felt like celebrating was a red flag. He was getting way too emotionally involved, he realized fatalistically. It was the first step to disaster for a field agent. "Is that so," he said noncommittally, trying to get his head straight but he knew it wouldn't work. He was involved and he wouldn't change it, even if he knew he couldn't keep her.

"Uh huh," she said locking gazes with him. "Tell me about your life in Texas," she said moving in on him.

The sun came out when she smiled and he backed her into the shower. "Later," he said. "First let's wash the jungle off ourselves." He picked a bit of leaf out of her hair.

She blushed and reached her hands up to her hair. "Lord, I must look a mess splattered with dirt from the road."

He smiled, feeling happy that she wanted to look good for him. "I'm just as muddy."

"Yeah, but it looks good on you," she said, running a hand down his front.

He melted at her touch, heating up all over, especially his cock, which she teased by barely grazing it. She was getting way too smug in her treatment of him and he liked it. Setting aside all his reservations, he decided to relax and enjoy what might be their last moments of bliss together. She probably wouldn't want him when this mission came to an end anyway. Holding Melanie's sweetly curved body against his he felt a possessive wave come over him that astounded him. He was never one for permanent relationships, but she was the kind of woman that could make a man change.

"This is perfect," she said, closing her eyes.

"Absolutely perfect," he agreed not wanting to let her go, knowing he needed to. If she every truly came to him it would be because she wanted the real him. His cock ached as she pressed against him, driving him mad and distracting him from duty. "Behave," he scolded, giving her ass a smack.

"Oh," she gasped, shimmying against him.

Ace felt it right down to his cock as she rubbed her body up and down his, making him a little bit crazy. Reaching behind her, he gave her three spanks. His eyes narrowed when she pouted up at him, her body radiant, and he wanted nothing more than to forget the mission and get lost in her. Dimly he remembered Santos was in his office waiting to debrief him, but he didn't care. "Are you asking for a spanking, Love?"

"What do you think?" she asked unrepentantly, arching against him.

He bit back a groan as she rubbed her tits against him and his balls tightened. "I think you should be careful what you

ask for, you just might get it." He squeezed her ass and she blushed, letting out a breathy little sound that made his cock twitch.

She smiled. "You don't think I can handle it?"

"I think you're all mixed up now and when this is over you'll go back to hating my guts."

She shook her head. "Never gonna happen, Cowboy."

He knew he was in trouble deep when she reached down to take his cock in a confident grip and his knees damned near buckled. Damn! It was all he could do to pick her up and thrust into her wet heat. "Wrap your legs around me, Melanie and hang on tight."

"Oh, yes," she gasped, clinging to him.

Ace groaned as her cunt rippled on his thrusting cock, wetting the head, as he drove into her. He drew back his hand and gave her saucy bottom a smack making her cry out and quiver around him. He groaned as her pussy milked at him. "That's it Babe, take your spanking." He timed his spansks with his thrust making them both groan. Smack, he hit her left cheek, she sobbed, her pussy spasming. Smack, right cheek, she quivered around him. "That's it Babe, let me know you want it," he crooned. He kept up the blows until she was whimpering, her cunt milking at him, as his balls grew tight to his body. He was close to coming, but he wanted her to come first. He arched higher into her and caught her on the bottom of her rosy ass, driving her higher onto his cock, making her shriek. He drank in her sexy cries, drunk on them. "Come now," he said, giving her another upward spank, coming high and hard inside her.

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Melanie slowly drifted back to Earth, still held securely in Ace's arms as the water streamed around them. Showers were always so hot for them, she couldn't help wondering what kind of shower he had back at his ranch ... king sized, she hoped. She held tight to him, loving the feel of his strong arms around her. "Oh my, that was intense."

"Umm," he murmured nuzzling her nape.

When he started to let her go, she held on for an extra moment. He was probably going back into agent mode and she preferred him naked and with her. "You trying to get rid of me, Cowboy?" She leaned back far enough to look him in the eye and saw what she thought was a flash of regret in his eyes. Was he thinking about leaving her? She wasn't about to let that happen. She was going to fight for her man.

"I wouldn't dream of it, Love, but Santos is probably wondering what's keeping me."

Melanie sighed, following him into the bedroom as she sensed him distancing himself again. He was too damned good at playing ghost.

"Why don't you lie down and take a nap while I see about our supper?"

She eyed him curiously, hearing his change of tone as he dressed in slacks and a rayon shirt, sliding his feet into loafers. It transformed him into a clone of their host. He was trying to get rid of her so he could ... what ... meet with his criminal amigo? He was trying to work around her and she didn't like it very much. But gazing at the determination in his eyes, she knew she'd have to be sneaky to stay involved. "Fine," she said, turning back the covers on the bed and lying

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down. His victorious smile made her just as determined to fight her own way. But as she sunk into the warm comfort of the bed, and closed her eyes relaxing, sleep caught up with her.

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Chapter 14

Ace made his way down the corridors of his host's hacienda trying to refocus his mind on business. It wasn't easy with the alluring distraction he'd left sleeping in the bedroom. He could slide between the sheets and dive in deep, but he knew he had to cool it, think for the both of them. If he let her run wild, she'd try to take control and risk her neck. No, it was better this way. A clean break and he'd free her to make her own choice.

He stepped into his office and took in the wall of computers and the man by the bookshelf. Santos held up a bottle.

"Want some?"

"Yeah," he said, accepting a drink. He took a seat.

"Tell me what you need."

"A few answers would be good. Like who set her up and why?"

"I've heard through channels you went rogue. My orders are to apprehend you and bring you in."

Ace looked at his friend, feeling the noose tighten. But Santos's expression didn't waver. "So where are the handcuffs?"

"If I wanted to take you out, I wouldn't need them," Santos said with a smile.

They exchanged a look. Ace was well aware of his talents, and had gone up against him on occasion.

"You got a fax," Santos said, sliding a drink in front of him.

Ace slanted him an amused look. "I take it you think I'm going to need this."

"Could be," he said with a shrug. "Did you know you've been playing with dynamite?"

Ace felt a chill go over him at the words. What now? "Tell me."

"You might want to take out extra insurance seeing that you've kidnapped Don Harry Leone's niece."

Ace winced and looked down at the dossier Clark had compiled for confirmation. "So that's what she's been hiding. Do you think that's why they hit her, hoping to cause a gang war?"

"Doubtful, her lineage isn't common knowledge. The CIA director has kept it under wraps. Apparently she didn't know herself until she went through clearance."

Ace winced, feeling sympathy for her. "No wonder she's so touchy."

"Yeah, she would have been *persona non grata* if it had gotten out."

"So what's your next step?" Santos asked.

"Rattle a few cages and see what rears its ugly head," he said, reaching for Santos's desk phone. "Is this untraceable?"

"Of course," Santos said with a shrug.

Ace punched Mile's Vance's number. He needed to get to the bottom of things now. He heard the man pick up and hesitate.

"Who is this?" Vance asked.

"Guess," Ace said, and waited while the other man sucked in a shocked breath.

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"Riser, why the hell haven't you checked in? I've been beating the bushes for you. I thought you were dead."

* * * *

Melanie woke up feeling cocooned in softness. She lifted her head off the pillows and looked around the plush palace. Santos lived like the robber baron he was. Ace was nowhere to be seen. For a moment she panicked, thinking he'd left her, then she calmed down. They'd bonded; he wouldn't just leave. Besides, they were both on the same mission and she had a job to do.

She hurriedly got dressed, putting on the sundress and sandals Ace had laid out for her. As she smoothed the designer garment over her body, she thought that Santos didn't spare any expense. Of course, being a rich drug lord, he didn't have to. She hated drugs and the people that sold them. Despite her host's charm, she'd happily see him thrown in jail.

She walked to the bedroom door and let herself out into the hall, stopping to listen. Where was everyone? Hopefully, Ace was organizing their rescue. She padded down the hall and heard his voice.

"You figured we were dead, didn't you, Vance?" Ace said sharply.

Melanie sucked in a shocked breath. What the hell was he trying to do, sign his own death warrant?

He let out a grim chuckle. "Funny thing that, someone did try to take us out. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

She tensed, trying to listen without getting caught.

"If you think I'm going to tell you where I am, you're crazy. When we meet, it'll be on my terms. Fire me for insubordination if you want. 'Cause, on purpose or not, you fucked up. Why'd you send me to take out an innocent?" he demanded.

Melanie listened to his deceptively calm voice and knew he wanted to wring Vance's neck. The fact he was putting his life and career on the line for her touched her deeply.

"Hell no, she was no assassin, but I am. Yeah, I'm threatening you. Make one move toward her and you won't live to regret it."

"Now cut the crap. I want to meet ... tomorrow night, eight o'clock at the old fort in Cartagena. Be there."

At last, this would be over. She was almost ready to make herself known, when Ace's voice stopped her. "I want you to keep her on ice until this is over."

"And then?" Santos asked.

"Send her home first class so she can go back to the computer lab."

"Alone?" Santos asked.

"Yes," Ace said gruffly.

Melanie sunk back into the shadows her heart breaking. How could Ace just throw her away like that? Easy, she didn't mean anything to him. She closed her eyes blinking back tears. Suck it up, she told herself. You've still got a job to do. It was then she saw the door standing open to an office across the hall. She slipped inside and quietly closed the door. She made her way over to the computer. Confident now that

she was in her own element, she booted it up and sent a message to Dot.

"My God girl, where are you? I'd about given up hope."

"I don't have time for chit chat," she typed in. "I'm at Santos's mountain hideout, The Aerie"

"You've got to be kidding."

"I wish I was. Ace brought me here. Apparently, they're old buddies who sometimes work together" she typed, her gut twisting.

"I did some checking. Delta Star is real ... and so is Ace..."

"How do you know?"

"A little pillow talk."

Melanie rolled her eyes. Dot and her sex-capades were well known. The confirmation that Ace was telling the truth only firmed her resolve to help him. He was back in agent mode, but she couldn't turn off her emotions like he could.

"What have you found out about Jeb and the mission?"

"Not much. Apparently there wasn't much to be found, and the team is now being scattered while Jeb focuses on finding you."

Melanie shivered at the words. She didn't want Jeb anywhere near her. "It's not true, I saw the computers, they're still encrypting data."

"What a putz."

"Or maybe a murderer."

"Shit girl, you've got to let me talk to the Director."

It went against her heart; she didn't want to put Ace in jeopardy. But she had to save their asses. "Fine. Tell him I'll report in tomorrow. We're going to be on the move." She

heard footsteps out in the hall and stopped typing. When they continued by she let out a breath. "I've got to go Dotty. I'll contact you when I can."

She reached for the phone on the desk and called the number she'd never wanted to use. Her fingers nervously beat on the desktop and she forced herself to stop.

"It's your nickel, start talking," a genial male voice answered.

Melanie sucked in a deep breath. "Uncle Harry."

"Is this my favorite niece, Mellie?" he asked.

"Yes," she said smiling through her tears. She'd forgotten how much fun he'd been when she was small. "Uncle Harry, I'm ready to cash in my chip."

"What do you need? If some low life..."

"It's not exactly me that needs protection. A friend of mine is about to walk into an ambush to protect me and I want you to back him up."

* * * *

Ace walked into their suite hours later to find Melanie waiting for him. She looked gorgeous and sexy in the little black dress Santos had provided. The guilty look on her face told him she'd been sleuthing again, but he chose not to call her on it. He wanted this evening to be perfect, because he didn't know if he'd survive to see another. He could be walking into a trap tomorrow but he wanted this to be over for Melanie's sake. When he looked at her, he forgot all about their issues. "Ready for dinner, Sugar?" he asked with a sultry grin.

"Yes."

He wondered if she was having the same troubled thoughts. "First a gift." He handed her a bag from an exclusive erotica shop.

She took it, eyes wide. "For me?"

Ace smiled as she cast a wondering look his way, knowing what a lucky ghost he really was. He could hardly wait to bed her properly and she had him throbbing behind his fly. "I approve of the dress, love," he said touching her pretty dress's spaghetti straps. One of them skittered off her shoulder, baring the upper slope of her breast. He could smell her cream, as she let out a little gasp. "Did you lube your tight little ass for me?" he asked, the corners of his hard mouth kicking up in a smile as she blushed. He loved it when she blushed for him.

She nodded, trembling, as she nibbled her lower lip.

He bit back a groan, and skimmed his hand over the sultry curve of her ass. He'd loved that she'd worn the thong and matching satin bra. He grinned and flipped up her skirt to check, his hand caressing her bottom. It was warm, and blushing. She moaned, her knees wobbled, and she sagged into him. He laughed, catching her. His whole body primed with need, as he caressed her bare bottom.

Tracing the crease between the round globes of her bottom teasingly, he murmured, "Very nice indeed." He gave each cheek a teasing spank, loving the way she gasped and pressed against him. "You have the sexiest ass, Melanie. It just begs for my spankings."

"Oh yes," she said with a sigh. "I felt extra naughty when I did it for you.

"Good girl," he said with a chuckle, loving her whispered confession. "Open your gift bag and see what I bought you," he said.

She opened it and looked down at the contents of the bag. "Wow."

He smiled, glad she was shocked. "We'll use the gel and your butt plug first."

"Oh good," she said, smiling.

"Bend over, face and tits on the bed," he said, draping her over the bed. He flipped up her skirt. It was enough to jump-start him into blue balls. Biting back a groan, he opened the strawberry gel and slicked it over her tight little rosebud. When his blunt fingertip, he circled her anus, slipping inside. She moaned, her body rippling at him and he almost lost it. Instead, he reached for the small tapered butt plug and eased it inside her, wishing it was his cock.

"Ey up mi ducks," she said, her legs wobbling.

"Too tight?" he asked, seeing her reaction.

"Too sexy," she said, rolling her hips in arousal.

Good," he said, gratified. He fucked it in and out of her, making them both moan. She met the thrusts, arching her ass out for him. He pressed it firmly back in place and she growled in protest.

"You're not going to stop now, are you?" she complained. "I need the real thing again."

"You'll have to wait for it," he said, pulling her up and into his arms. He grinned when she let out a grumble. His sexy Amazon, she took his breath away.

"You're mean," she complained.

He spanked her left cheek making her gasp. He knew the plug inside her enhanced each spank. "Dinner is waiting," he said, taking her arm and leading her out to the terrace.

"What about my other toys," she asked, looking at the bag.

"What the hell," he said. He waltzed her out to the terrace and Melanie's eyes widened with delight. Santos's butler had outdone himself. A table was set under the star lit sky. Plump chocolate dipped strawberries tumbled out of a silver bowl, and there was a chilling bottle of bubbly in a wine holder.

"How beautiful," Melanie said, casting a soft glance his way.

He smiled. "I couldn't agree more," he said, glancing at her. He pulled her into his arms, scorching a line of kisses down her nape. "This place is perfect."

"Not as perfect as your ranch," she said, pressing against him.

"Do you really want to go there?" he asked, pulling back to look at the sincerity in her eyes.

"Yes."

"I've had the urge to take you home and make love to you there ever since I laid eyes on you."

"Did you now?" she asked, with a secret smile.

"Dinner," Ace said, letting her go.

"I'd rather have you." She clung to him for a moment.

"I'm not on the menu, brat." He gave her a playful spank that made her moan. "Sit," he said pulling out her chair.

She sat with a pout, and then gasped.

He chuckled at her reaction as the butt plug hit the chair. "Forgot about it didn't you?"

She slanted him a resentful glance. "As a matter of fact, I did."

He smiled, going to the chafing dishes to fill her plate. Ace sat down and looked at her. "Eat your dinner, Sugar. You'll need your energy to go toe to toe with me tonight."

She picked up her fork at his bidding. "About tomorrow, I..."

He shook his head. "That discussion is off the menu for now, too."

"But I had some ideas..."

"Let's just enjoy the evening, Sugar," he said and she nodded. He watched her eat and then dug into his own dinner. Watching her eat was still a turn on, he decided, as his cock throbbed. He caught her steeling looks at him and knew she was just as turned on.

When he finished, he looked up to see her watching him. "Want to open your other present?" he asked, seeing her eyes light up.

"You know I do," she said, biting her lip.

"Come here then," he said, crooking his finger at her. When she walked toward him, he smiled. "Strip for me, Sugar."

Melanie stopped in her tracks, blushing, and then slowly reached for her zipper, turning her back to him.

Ace's cock throbbed when she lowered it oh so slowly doing a strip tease. Wait until he got his hands on her, she'd be on the receiving end of some teasing before he made her come. When she looked over her shoulder at him, shimmying out of the dress, he groaned. She let the dress drop to pool at her feet and turned to smile at him, cupping her breasts. Her fingertips circled her budding nipples and Ace told himself to slow down as his cock throbbed. It wasn't going to happen anytime soon, he decided ruefully.

"Come here," he said, patting his lap.

She smiled and walked over to him.

Ace snagged out a hand to catch her and pulled her onto his lap, astride him. Not very suave but he was feeling desperate for her. When her open pussy pressed against him, they both moaned. God, he wanted her. "Open your present," he said handing her a jeweler's case.

She stared at the case, wide-eyed. "It's too big to be a ring, not that I expect one, um, that is."

"Open it," he said, enjoying her blush. So she was thinking about rings, permanence. It made him feel like smiling. Instead, he toyed with her nipples, lengthening them making her whimper and wiggle a little on his laps. "Easy, Sugar," he said, when she ground against his compressed cock.

She opened the box and lifted out the two, jeweled clips. "They're beautiful but I don't have pierced ears."

He smiled at her naiveté. "They're nipple clamps, Sugar. Will you wear them for me?" Her eager nod made him laugh.

Melanie moaned as Ace played with her tits. Wiggling on him she groaned as the accursed butt plug moved inside her

again, making her sex and ass quiver. She was just plain starving for him and now. He was going to drive her out of her mind with the nipple clamps. She wondered how the naughty, but beautiful, things would feel. He opened one clasp and clamped it onto her left nipple, letting go to let the jewel dangle down. She whimpered as the weight tugged on her tortured nip. "Oh God, it's better than I imagined."

"I'm glad you approve, and that I'm the one who introduced you to them," Ace said, with a smile and picked up the other clamp, toying with her right nipple and attaching it.

"It couldn't have been anyone else," she said, seeing stars because of the sweet weight tugging at her nipple as he let go. He put on the other clamp and she looked down at the dangling jewels, shuddering, making her nipples seem to swell and burn while her pussy spasmed for him. She gasped when his hand went to her hungry sex, his strong arm supporting her wobbly legs. She moaned as he slipped two fingers into her pussy, while his thumb rode her clit.

"That's it, baby, fuck yourself on my hand."

She tightened, arching against him, spasms rippling through her as she came, shouting her triumph into his shirt. She collapsed against him as he held her. Shit, he was still fully dressed. "You're wearing too many clothes, Ace," she murmured against his chest.

He smiled. "You can solve that by undressing me."

Smiling wickedly, she did as he said, untying his tie and pushing his jacket off his broad shoulders. Then she went for his belt and zipper.

"Hey aren't you forgetting the shirt?" he asked amused.

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"You've got your priorities, I've got mine." She undid his belt, wondering if she'd like it across her backside some time. The paddle had been a stinging revelation. That could wait for later. She undid his pants, making him wince when she banged into his hard-on.

"Easy, Sweet," he said, pushing back the dishes to sit her on the edge of the table and standing up.

He unzipped his pants and let them drop. Her fascinated gaze fell on his erection, hanging huge and hard down his thigh. She was dimly aware of his shucking off his shirt. He opened the gel and handed it to her. "Enjoy."

She smiled, took him in her hand, and squeezed a good-sized bead on his head, fascinated when he hissed. She flicked her tongue out to taste him, whispering yummy as the mingled flavors of Ace and strawberries burst on her tongue. She took him into her mouth and drew on his hard staff. He jerked and she took him deep down her throat. She gagged a little and he pulled back, but she gripped his hips and sucked him off. He exploded into her mouth as she sucked him dry. She grinned up at him, "Now that's dessert."

"Bad girl," he said, pulling her to her feet and into his arms.

She sighed with pleasure, gazing at the sultry look on his handsome face. He could do anything he wanted to her.

"Give me your mouth, and wrap your legs around me"

She kissed him and gasped when his stiffening cock impaled her as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He carried her across the terrace, and she shivered as the evening breeze caressed her bare skin. When he started to

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walk into the pool, she gasped with delight. "You planning on taking me skinny dipping, Cowboy?"

"Oh yeah," he said, walking into the water. He slid her down onto his rousing cock, and strode deeper, each movement making her gasp. Her sex clutched at him feverishly, her ass rippling on the plug inside her. As waist deep water rushed around them he cupped her ass, and rode her harder and faster. She moaned, her sex clinging to him as her ass squeezed the butt plug he'd inserted in her. She cried out, coming long and hard. He held her tight, coming inside her.

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Chapter 15

When Melanie woke up early the next morning and turned to snuggle Ace, he wasn't there. As she looked at the spot where he had been, she got a sinking feeling. Damn it all, he was off playing hero without waking her. Hopefully, Harry would come through, but she needed to be there. She dressed and stormed out of the bedroom in search of Santos. It was time to assert herself. She walked into his office to find him sitting behind his desk. He looked up at her and frowned.

"You can ring for breakfast and Manny will bring it to you."

"Where is he?"

"Manny is in the kitchen."

She frowned at his deliberate obtuseness. "Not Manny, I want Ace. Shit, I can't believe he snuck out without waking me. Maybe he used knock out drugs again," she pondered to herself. She looked up to see Santos smile. "This isn't funny."

"Of course not," Santos said, looking away. "The best thing you can do is sit back and let Ace do his job."

"I've heard that tune before and I'm not buying it," she said, frowning at him

"Rosa told me," Santos grinned. "You are a fierce little thing."

"You have no idea." She stared him down. "You're going to help me," she said firmly.

"And why should I do that?" Santos asked.

"Because I'll blow the whistle on you, if you don't," she said, recalling the data she'd found.

"I'm already a wanted man," he said, with a shrug.

"Ah, but what would your competitors say if they knew you were Delta Star." She watched his brow arch and a twinkle come to his eyes.

"And what would yours say if they knew you were Harry the Horse's favorite niece?" he returned.

Her jaw literally dropped and she leaned against the desk for support. "He did you know?" She watched his gaze flick to the fax machine. "Ace had me investigated."

Santos nodded. "Clark faxed him your dossier."

Shit, what a goodbye gift. He definitely wouldn't be coming back for her now. She was agent poison. "Did he read it before he left?" she asked, appalled.

"No, last night before dinner," he said.

A glimmer of hope bloomed inside her at the words. "You've got to be kidding. Why didn't he say anything?"

Santos shrugged. "He said it didn't change anything."

She hugged the news to her. "Okay, you're going to fly me to Cartagena in your cute little helicopter."

He rolled his eyes. "I told you it's better if you wait..."

"I already called Uncle Harry," she said, shutting him up.

He frowned at her. "You didn't."

"I did. So we'd better make tracks before the shooting starts."

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Chapter 16

Ace staked out the square looking for all the sniper positions that could be used to take him out. He knew he couldn't cover all angles, and what did it matter anyway? He was doing this to insure Melanie's safety. When it was over, she could call her friend, Dot and go home.

A footstep behind him made him spin around. An older man in a trench coat walked up to him followed by several swarthy lieutenants. Ace took one look at him and recognized Harry Leone. "When did she call you?"

Harry smiled. "Last night. If you break my niece's heart, I'll end you."

"Nice to know we have the same goal. I thought she never called you."

Harry shrugged. "I guess I got you to thank for that. Where is she?"

"On ice, at a safe house."

"You sure about that?" Harry asked.

Privately he wasn't, if she'd called Harry that meant she had prior knowledge of this meet. She could have conned someone into letting her go after him. A shudder ran down his spine at the possibility.

"She's a live wire, isn't she?" Harry said, patting him on the back. "Where do you want us?"

"Out of sight for now," Ace said, even as Harry and his crew faded into the shadows. Just then, footsteps rang out on the damp pavement.

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* * * *

"Can't you drive any faster?" Melanie said as Santos drove them down the busy streets of Cartagena. She glanced at her watch, and prayed they'd get there in time. She had to save Ace even if he was planning to let her go.

"Almost there," Santos said, turning the corner to the old fort and turning off his headlights as he cruised up to the pier.

It reminded her of the night she and Ace had run away together, and it made her heart twist. He had to be all right. Had Uncle Harry kept his word? She kept her fingers crossed. When Santos drew to a halt, she tore open her door.

"Don't go in there like gangbusters, you could get him killed," Santos cautioned.

She frowned at him but knew he was right. "So lead the way."

He got out and walked around the car. "So where's your mafia connection?" he asked, scanning the empty lot.

Damned if she knew. She scanned the area, her heart sinking.

* * * *

Ace spun around, hand going for his gun as a shot rang out. He feinted to the left, shooting in the general direction of the shooter. Then a sound behind him made ice go through his veins.

"Drop it," Miles Vance hissed.

He dropped his weapon, hoping Harry's men were expert shots because there was no way Vance could miss this close up.

"Hands up and back up to me," Vance ordered.

"Why'd you do it?" Ace demanded, wanting the truth.

"Why'd you send me to kill an innocent?"

Vance chuckled. "Some innocent. Damned geek was getting too close to the truth. She had to die, and what better way to get rid of my major pain in the ass operative, you. It would have worked if you hadn't started thinking."

Ace suppressed the rage running through him and focused on the clues. "So she got too close to finding the truth about you, on the computer."

* * * *

Melanie let out a gasp when she thought she heard a muffled shot. "Oh, my God, no."

"Stay put," Santos said, pulling out his gun. "I'm going to check it out."

"No, I'm coming with you," she said, but his sympathetic look made her hesitate.

"That's the quickest way to make him lose focus and get killed. Stay here for now."

"I'll give you five minutes and then I'm coming." Melanie watched him go and then paced in front of the car. She smelled Jeb's cologne and stopped dead in her tracks. What the hell was he doing here? She turned to look at him. He looked harmless like always, but she saw the gun in his hand. Either he was scared or ... hunting her? Sucking in a

steadying breath, she thought of Ace and got ready to make her move.

He slunk by her and she stepped out of the shadows.

"Going somewhere, Jeb?"

He practically jumped a mile and then spun toward her.

"Melanie."

"Who were you expecting, a ghost?" she said, thinking of Ace. She only hoped his foe was equally inept.

"What makes you say that?" he asked, looking her over.

"I guess I've been hanging with one too long."

Jeb's leering stare raked over her. "You've changed, Melons, become..."

"Looser," she filled in for him.

"If you'd have looked this way, I might not have wasted you," he said to himself.

"Why'd you set me up?"

"Who said I..." his eyes narrowed and he raised his gun.

"What the fuck?"

* * * *

Ace watched Vance flinch and moved to the side just as the other man took a shot at him. He rushed Vance, taking him down before Leone's men could kill him. He wanted the bastard alive and singing. Wanted to make sure there was no backlash for Melanie. He punched Vance, knocking him out and heard footsteps running his way. He spun around to see Leone come out and walk up to him. The look of rage in his eyes matched Ace's own feelings.

"The bastard will pay."

"Eventually," Ace said with a nod. He was startled when Santos ran into the square. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Melanie wanted to rescue you." Santos said with a smile. He looked at Harry. "Mr. Leone."

"That's my Mellie," Harry said with a grin.

"How'd she get you to cooperate?" Ace asked Santos.

"Extortion. She threatened to blow the whistle on me with my cartel competition if I didn't help her get to you."

Ace smiled at the disclosure. That was just like his woman, and then he realized what else Santos was saying. "She's here?"

"In the parking lot. I convinced her to let me go in alone."

Ace turned to go to her when a shot rang out. "Shit," he muttered and took off running.

* * * *

Melanie tried not to flinch as Jeb fired a shot into the ground at her feet to scare her. "Stop that. Why did you set me up? I never did anything to you."

"You kicked me in the balls," he spat at her. "So back the fuck up."

"Besides that," she said, wincing.

"You were getting too close, so you had to go."

"Close to what?" she asked, puzzled.

"The San Sebastian Mines."

"The data I was in-taking," she said, surprised, recalling the contrary data she'd picked up before Jeb had whisked her away. A supposedly played out emerald mine was all of a

sudden putting out quality gems. She'd been convinced it was a smuggling operation and had passed the data on to those above her, but they hadn't been able to find anything. Still she'd kept a watch on it.

"Bingo."

"But that was just names, bank accounts, and data. Why would anyone..." Then she saw the big picture. "It was a shell, set up by you." She saw him preen and knew he wasn't the head of the operation. "Who were you working for?"

He frowned. "You're too nosy, bitch, that's why you have to be shut up." He looked to the left and she took the chance to dive behind the car.

"Fun and games, sure, I'll play," he said with a laugh, going after her.

She doubled back, pulling out the Glock Ace gave her and waited. When Jeb came around the vehicle, a maniacal glint in his eyes, she raised the gun. "Stop or I'll shoot."

"I'm gonna enjoy this," he said, firing.

She squeezed the trigger as she felt a sting in her right shoulder and saw Jeb gasp before he toppled like a toy soldier.

Ace swept in just as Jeb hit the ground. Ice chilled his veins when he didn't see Melanie. What the fuck had happened to her? She got to her feet behind the car and his heart started beating again. He rushed up to her and pulled her into his arms. "My God, woman, I thought he'd killed you."

"I told you he couldn't shoot straight," she said, shivering in his arms.

His hand came away sticky with blood and he pulled back to see the graze on her arm. "He shot straight enough to count," he said gruffly. "I told you to stay at The Aerie."

"So spank me for disobeying your commands," she said with a smile.

She looked up at her Uncle Harry and Santos as they stood nearby. "You came."

"Would I ever let you down?" he asked cupping her cheek. He pulled a poker chip from his pocket.

"Another poker chip," she said, clutching it, feeling his approval as he glanced at her in Ace's embrace.

"Anytime you need me," he said.

Just then, Santos walked up to the group with Nina Banks and Dot in tow.

"My boss," Melanie said with a smile.

"Mine too," Ace said, looking at the other woman.

Melanie swept a glance over Ace's boss, sensing an animosity between them. "The one that thinks you don't work well with others."

"That'd be her," he said, pulling her into his arms.

"But won't she mind?" Melanie protested, not wanting him to jeopardize his position.

"Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn," Ace said, nuzzling her neck.

"Me neither," she said, kissing him back.

Nina, Dot, and Santos stood together watching.

Nina and Dot looked at each other saying, "We've got to get them on a team together."

"Something tells me they already are," Santos said.

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"Forever," Ace whispered against her lip.

"Forever," she agreed with a sigh of surrender.

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About the Author

Honey Jans lives in a small Midwestern town with her husband and true inspiration. She is a born romantic with an extraordinarily vivid, and kinky imagination. Honey loves writing erotica and hopes that her stories add a little spice to her reader's lives.

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