



ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*

KATIE REUS

Dangerous
DECEPTION

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Dangerous Deception

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DANGEROUS DECEPTION

Katie Reus

Dedication

Dedicated to my wonderful critique partner, Dara Edmondson. Thank you for all those wonderful brainstorming sessions!

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Java Joe's: JMJ Coffee Roasters, Inc.

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Prologue

Sage Miller opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the dimly lit bedroom wearing heels and nothing else. If Trent's smile was any indication, she'd chosen the right "outfit".

"I thought you were going to change into something more *comfortable*." He sat up in bed, shoving the sheet off his body, exposing his naked form.

Her eyes fell to his pulsing cock. The shiny condom was visible from where she stood. She lifted an eyebrow in amusement and half turned back toward the other room. "I can go put something on if you'd prefer."

"You better get your ass over here," he practically growled.

She placed a hand on her bare hip and walked toward him, devouring the sight of his body, knowing she'd be missing him for a long time to come. The man didn't have an inch of fat on him. He was all sharp lines and lean muscles.

Her nipples immediately tightened and pebbled as his dark gaze swept over her. That's how he'd hooked her into staying with him nearly a week ago. Those damn eyes. Drawing her in like a siren's song.

What was supposed to have been a single night of passion, a way to exorcise her demons and simply feel something again, had turned into a week of nonstop sex. The best sex of her life if she was honest. Unfortunately it was about to end.

But not before one more night with him.

Slowly, seductively, she moved toward the bed, loving the way he devoured her with his eyes. Never before had a man made her feel so treasured, so desired. He looked at her as if he could eat her whole.

As soon as she neared the bed, he grabbed her hips and flipped her on her back before settling between her legs. Looked like he wasn't going to let her tease him.

"Heels on or off?" she asked as she locked her legs behind his back.

"Don't care." With one quick thrust, he drove into her like a man who'd been in prison for the past couple of decades.

They'd just finished making love barely an hour ago so her body was primed and ready to go. Her hips rose up to meet his. Wrapping her arms around his back, she met his mouth with hungry need.

"Mine," he murmured as he kissed a trail down her jaw to her neck. His dark hair tickled her face as he nipped. "All mine."

For now. When he bent his head to her breast, all coherent thoughts fled. This was the here and now. She'd enjoy their last few moments together.

He circled her hardened nipple with his tongue while he rolled his palm over the other. Gripping his backside with her nails, she drew in ragged breaths at the blissful torture he was inflicting.

She was so close to climax, it bordered on pain. Her body was so sensitized from their last bout of sex, it wouldn't take her more than a few minutes. Somehow this man, this virtual stranger, had learned what her body needed to find release in record time. She'd actually had complaints from former lovers on the amount of time it took her to climax.

Not with Trent. And oddly enough, he didn't feel like a stranger. He was like a long-lost friend.

"Come home with me, Sage," Trent's deep voice reverberated through her as he slowed his strokes.

He pushed up on the bed, his hands caging her in as he moved in and out, bringing her to the brink of orgasm but not giving her what she needed.

"Talk later." She reached between her legs and started stroking her clit.

"Did I say you could touch what was mine?" he growled. Grabbing her hand, he hooked it with her other wrist above her head and increased his movements.

"Then quit teasing and fuck me," she whispered into his ear.

It was like her words set off an atomic bomb. When he resumed his thrusts full force, liquid fire spread through her entire body.

Her nipples brushing against his bare chest was the only other stimulation she needed. In seconds, her vagina was fiercely milking him, pulling him over the edge with her.

They'd never come together before but in that moment, he emitted a loud moan as shudders racked through her body. After a couple more thrusts, he finally collapsed on top of her. After a moment, she pushed against his chest.

Groaning, he pulled from her body and rolled over. "Damn," he muttered.

Despite the conflicting thoughts racing through her head, she chuckled. "Damn is right," she murmured in agreement.

Still breathing hard, he propped up on one elbow to face her. In the dark, his features were fierce, feral and possessive. Internally she squirmed under his intense gaze.

"I meant what I said. Come home with me Sage. You said yourself you're taking a lot of time off work."

She knew that after twelve years of being in the service Trent had just gotten out of the Navy six months ago and was going to visit a friend in New York. She also knew his father was Native American and that he was a machine between the sheets.

What she didn't know however, was where he lived. And she planned to keep it that way. If he told her, she was likely to look him up later when she was feeling weak and needy.

“Can we talk in the morning?” She traced a finger over his chest, drawing small circles, hoping he’d drop it. She hadn’t been entirely honest with him. She wasn’t just taking time off, she’d quit her job.

His dark eyes flashed with something she couldn’t put her finger on but he nodded and fell back against the sheets. She curled up next to him but was careful not to entangle too many body parts.

After a decent amount of time had passed, his breathing was steady. Normally he woke up at the slightest sound but they’d had sex three times in the past couple of hours. The man should be exhausted.

Relief flooded her when the bed didn’t creak as she eased off it. She picked up a towel she’d discarded earlier and wrapped it around her body. Her room was directly next to his and she’d already packed her bags.

She risked one last glance at his still figure before quietly slipping out of the room. Thankfully the hallway was empty. She hated leaving like this, like some kind of coward but it was the only way. The man was an addiction she could get used to. And she couldn’t afford to let anything or anyone get in the way of her life.

Now that her sister was dead, she was all alone in the world. She owed it to herself to grieve and do all the things they’d always talked about. Having a brief – albeit hot – affair with a man was not in her plans.

And that’s all it would be. He wasn’t the type of man who did long-term. Even she knew that. What they had was hot but it was only temporary. And she wasn’t looking to get her heart broken. Her heart was already in a shambles after Marie’s death. She couldn’t handle having those pieces shattered irrevocably. Trent was the sort of man a woman could fall hard for. Really hard.

Hell, she wasn’t a masochist. As she rolled her suitcase out into the hall, a brief twinge of guilt pinched at her heart but she brushed it away.

He'd be over her in a week. She had no doubt that a man like him would find someone to warm his bed quickly. Her stomach roiled at the thought but this was the choice she had to make. And it was no time for second guessing herself.

Chapter One

Eighteen months later

Sage Miller glanced up as the bell to the main door sounded. Margo, the secretary wasn't in yet so she started to rise. Before she'd taken two steps, the door to her private office opened. Immediately she smiled. "Hey boss man. Good to see you here bright and early."

It was barely past seven and her boss rarely made it into the office until nine. Jason Beckman, her boss of six months, gave her a weary smile and dropped a stack of papers onto her desk. "You might not say that once you see what I have in store for you."

She picked up the first batch. Scanning the first few pages, she groaned. "Is that inspector giving you grief again?"

"You got it. Won't sign off on the walk-through unless I get him reservations at Le Coq Au Vin." He rubbed a hand over his face and sighed.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah."

"Then why not just do it for him?"

"Because I don't want to give in to that corrupt bastard...and because I've tried."

She waved a hand in the air. "My paperwork is piling up thanks to you, so I'll take care of the reservations. When did he want them?"

"Friday." His sandy brows rose as if he doubted the possibility.

"Okay. Are we still on for the walk-through today?" They were supposed to do the final inspection of one of their biggest warehouses. They'd managed to build a packaging and manufacturing warehouse for one of the top producers of soda in record time. *If* the inspector would sign off on everything.

"Yes but only if –"

"Don't worry about it." She picked up the phone and shooed him away. As he shut the door behind him, she dialed a number she knew by heart. Her friend Chelsea picked up on the third ring.

"What the hell are you doing calling me so early?" she grumbled.

"I have a huge favor to ask." Before her friend could respond, she continued, "I need a reservation for two this Friday at eight."

"Are you seeing someone and holding out on me? You better dish, girl." Chelsea was now wide awake.

"It's not for me. It's for a client." Technically the man wasn't a client but she didn't feel like getting into the dirty details.

"Fine, whose name do you want it to be under?"

"Put it under Jason's name."

"And how is your sexy boss?" Chelsea practically purred.

Sage inwardly smiled. Jason definitely had that tall, dark and handsome thing going on but she didn't understand why women fawned all over him. The man was totally scatterbrained. He'd forget his head if it wasn't screwed on. "He's good. He asked about you." She added the last part merely to torture her friend.

"Really?" A loud thump sounded in the background.

"Yes. What's going on over there? Are you okay?"

Chelsea cleared her throat. "Yeah, I fell out of bed. Did he really ask about me?" Now she sounded breathless.

"I'll talk to you later." Laughing to herself, she clicked off before her friend could respond. Chelsea was five foot two, had huge breasts, was as adorable as hell and men were always asking about her. It never ceased to amaze Sage that her friend didn't realize what a great catch she was. In the short time she'd known her, it was like Chelsea had a jerk magnet. Maybe she *should* set her up with Jason.

Pulling up her online calendar, she scanned her boss's meetings, making mental notes to remind him. She'd set up a calendar for him and even attached automatic reminders to his cell phone but he ignored all of them. Not that she was complaining. The man had given her three raises and she'd only been there half a year. He was brilliant when it came to designing and building but totally clueless about anything related to technology.

Just as she pulled out another post-it to stick on his computer, her door flew open. "Grab your coat. We're heading to the site now."

"Wait...what? I thought we were going this afternoon. I brought clothes to change into." It was a requirement to wear pants, close-toed shoes and hardhats on site at all times.

He gave her a once-over. "You're fine. Besides, Sharpe will probably be a lot easier to deal with if you're dressed like that."

She glanced down at herself. Maybe she should be offended by his comment but there was nothing offensive or sexual in the way he said it. Hell, he was probably right. Her pencil skirt was totally appropriate for work and came to her knees but Sharpe was always staring at her legs.

Tom Sharpe was the inspector for most of their jobs within the city limits. Compared to a lot of the people they worked with down at the city, he wasn't bad to deal with. If their work was subpar, there was no way in hell he'd sign off on it, no matter what kind of reservations or gifts they got for him. Deep down, Sage thought Sharpe just liked to give her boss a hard time.

She grabbed her purse and sweater from the hook on the back of her door and followed him. Her peep-toe slingbacks were totally inappropriate for the job site but somehow she doubted the inspector would care. "Fine, but you're taking me to lunch if that moron hits on me again."

"Then I think it's safe to say I will be. Wait a minute..." He patted his pants pocket and turned back toward his office.

"I've got the punch list in my purse," she said, walking toward the front door.

A blast of fresh fall air hit them as they stepped outside, making her thankful she'd grabbed her sweater. Beckman's Construction Company was located directly in the middle of the growing coastal town. Most of their work was on the outskirts, or neighboring cities but she loved that their corporate office was downtown.

"Heads or tails?" Jason asked as he pulled a quarter out of his pocket.

"Neither. You're driving." Normally they flipped for it but she'd had a rough night and didn't feel up to making the trek to the edge of town.

"All right." He pulled out his keys and unlocked his black SUV.

Of course he'd managed to find a spot right in front of the building. She'd shown up half an hour earlier than him and had to park two blocks away. Once she slid into the front seat, he started the ignition but didn't pull away from the curb.

"You forget something else?" She pulled out her keys, ready to head back in.

"No, I just... Is everything all right? I know I'm not supposed to say this to a woman but you look tired. Did you get another phone call or something?"

Sighing, she tossed her keys back in her purse. "Yeah. This time he called my cell phone. It was that same stupid mechanical voice too."

"What did he say?"

"Same as always. 'Your time is coming bitch'. I think it might be a recording or something." She forced her voice to remain neutral, even as a shiver snaked down her spine. At first she'd blown the calls off but now they were coming in with more and more frequency. She'd already called the District Attorney back in New York to make sure the monster they both despised was still in jail. He was but she still couldn't shake the unease that maybe these calls weren't pranks.

Jason pounded the steering wheel. "I think we need to involve the police. It's been a couple of weeks since all this started and —"

"Can we please talk about this later?" Massaging her temple, she leaned back in the seat.

"Fine but this isn't over. Not by a long shot. I can't sit by and do nothing when some maniac could be —"

"I got the builder's risk insurance started for the new plant job. We'll have everything ready in a week or two." Maybe interrupting him and changing the subject would force him to drop it.

He let out a labored sigh but at least he didn't give her any more grief. "Good. Oh, speaking of which, you'll get to meet my brother today. He's going to be the foreman on this next one. I told him to stop by the site today so he could meet his new team."

"New team as in me?"

"That's right." He chuckled and took a sharp right turn, completely ignoring the stop sign.

"You know, you're going to need to hire someone soon because I can't keep covering the phones in the mornings and afternoons when Margo isn't there."

"I know, I just can't let her go. You know that." Margo worked part-time because she was a single mother, another reason Sage loved working for Jason. He was always trying to help people out.

"I do know that and I agree with you. I'd hate to lose Margo. I think we should hire a high school student to come in during the afternoons. Answering the phones isn't brain surgery and it'll give me a break. The mornings are normally quiet so I can still handle that."

"Hmm. That's not a bad idea. My brother, Trent, might know someone. We can ask him when we get to the site." Jason took another quick turn and Sage nearly lost her breakfast.

Not because of his maniacal driving though. No, she was used to that. "Your brother's name is Trent? I thought his name was James." Her voice shook when she asked but Jason didn't seem to notice.

He shrugged and steered onto the highway. "Trent is our youngest brother. Thought I told you. He's been up in New York for the past year doing some freelance work. I've been trying to get him to move down here and now that I offered him a partnership, he finally took it."

An irrational wave of nausea swept through her until reality knocked her in the head. Jason's last name was Beckman so it couldn't be her Trent. Well, not *her* Trent but either way, it couldn't be the man who haunted her dreams. Besides, Jason wasn't Native American so there was no way he was related to the man she was thinking about.

Letting the momentary tension ebb away, she stared out the window and watched the passing trees. A kaleidoscope of colors flashed past her. A mixture of yellow, orange and reddish hues lined the highway as they sped to their destination.

Sage risked a peek at Jason and shook her head. The man thought of traffic rules as a guideline. One day they were going to take his license away and she'd be stuck chauffeuring him around.

"What?" He glanced at her.

"Nothing. Just thinking that I'll be lucky if I get out of your vehicle alive."

"You sound like my mother." He shook his head as he pulled off the upcoming exit. "We'll be there in a few minutes so don't get your panties in a wad."

"You know, where I come from, talking about panties or any type of female lingerie could be construed as sexual harassment." She pursed her lips to keep from laughing.

He shot her a sideways glance. "Bring it up at the next staff meeting and we'll see what the boss says."

"Ha ha."

Steering into the makeshift clay parking lot, he pulled as close as possible to the front entrance. He knew she hated getting her shoes dirty and she couldn't help but smile. He was a little old school and sometimes a bit of a chauvinistic pig but the man was thoughtful.

"Thanks." She didn't explain herself because she knew he'd understand.

He grunted in response and jumped from the vehicle.

As they walked under the metal roll-up door, she couldn't help but wonder if his brother was as laid back. She'd been lucky finding this job and hoped the other man was just as easy to work with. Combined with everything she'd gone through the past couple years and now these stupid phone calls, she didn't think she could handle any more complications.

Jason's phone rang the instant their feet hit the concrete floor of the warehouse. "That's Trent. Can you get the inspector started, then go find the owner?"

She nodded and went in search of Sharpe. His truck was outside, so she knew the man was making a nuisance of himself somewhere in the building.

Her heels made a sharp clicking sound as she hurried across the expansive warehouse. She found the inspector behind a stack of packaged bottles, jotting down notes about only God knew what. He was only there to make sure the fire detectors were up to code and the outside elevations were correct. He had no business being back here and she was surprised he hadn't heard her approach.

"Mr. Sharpe, good to see you again."

He swiveled from his crouching position and stood at the sound of her voice. His eyes widened slightly but he quickly recovered. "Sage! So good to see you again. And how is the prettiest girl in Hudson Bay?"

"If I see your wife I'll ask her." She couldn't help herself. The man's attitude pissed her off sometimes and once he found out they'd gotten him those reservations, he'd sign off on the report even if she was a smart-ass.

He cleared his throat and had the good grace to look uncomfortable. "Uh, yes, Jason said we'd start inside so —"

"He's on a call so I'll get you started with the fire detectors." She turned and headed back toward the front, forcing him to follow her. He stood about five feet ten but with her three-inch heels, she was a solid inch taller. For some reason, that extra height made her feel powerful, more in control. Just the way she liked it. "Oh, by the way, I managed to swing a reservation at Le Coq Au Vin. Everything's under Jason's name."

He chuckled and shook his head. "I don't know how Jason survived without you."

Nodding politely, she pointed to the east corner of the building. "Think you can manage without me for a second?"

"No problem." Pulling his notepad back out, he turned away.

She retrieved the punch list from her purse and went in search of her boss. She found him outside still on his phone. When he saw her he held up a finger and kept nodding. "All right buddy, I'll see you in a minute."

"Sorry about that. Trent got lost. How's Sharpe doing?"

She rolled her eyes. "Good I guess. I found him snooping behind some crates but he's actually doing his job now."

"Sneaky bastard," he muttered.

"My sentiments exactly." The inspector was a hopeless snoop, but at least he was harmless.

A loud rumbling compelled both of them to turn toward the chain link entrance. "What the heck is that?"

"That would be my brother. His truck needs a new muffler apparently."

"No kidding," she mumbled. A dusty, beat-up looking vehicle careened through the access gate and pulled up on the other side of Jason's shiny SUV.

"You mind sticking around for a second to meet him before you run off to find the owner?"

"Of course not." The owner wanted to do one final run through now that it looked like the inspector was finally signing off on the legal stuff. Tucking the list under her arm, she glanced down at her feet and grimaced. The clay was murder on her new shoes.

"What's he doing?" Jason mumbled.

The windows were tinted so she couldn't see inside. She risked a quick glance at her watch. If he didn't hurry, she was going to have to leave. "I don't know but..."

Whatever she'd been about to say was lost forever when the door opened. She could feel her eyes widen but was helpless to stop herself.

It was *him*. How that was even possible, she didn't know. "*That's* your brother?" The question sounded hoarse and scratchy to her own ears and she doubted Jason missed it.

"Yeah. You know him or something?" She felt her boss's gaze on her but she couldn't tear her eyes away from Trent.

Broad-shouldered, midnight black hair, perfect bronze coloring and standing about six foot one. He yanked his sunglasses off and stalked toward them. Yep, he still looked good enough to eat. Staring at him now, she couldn't believe she'd ever willingly walked away from him. The man was walking sex appeal.

Heat involuntarily pooled between her legs as his dark eyes roved over her body in a blatantly appreciative manner. She might be fully clothed but the way he stared at her brought back too many memories. Naked memories.

Her body alternated between hot and cold. His heated gaze made her feel like he was remembering the same things she was. Her nipples strained painfully against her bra but she was thankful she had one on. At least he wouldn't see the effect he had on her body.

Every instinct she possessed told her to run and hide but her feet were leaden. The man who visited her dreams on a regular basis was walking right toward them. Well, stalking like an angry bear was more like it.

Despite her resolve to stand her ground, she took a small step back as he joined them.

“Sage?” Trent spoke, the deep timber of his voice just as sexy as she remembered.

Somehow she found her voice. Clearing her throat, she said, “Yes. I’m Sage Miller. Nice to meet you.” When she held out her hand, he stared at it for a confused moment before enveloping it with his much bigger one. She didn’t know why she’d pretended not to know him. The words had just popped out. The thought of explaining to her boss exactly how she knew his brother was beyond embarrassing.

After a few seconds, she tried to pull away but he held firm, tugging her a step closer. As if drawn by a magnet, she stared at their clasped hands. His darker skin against her ivory coloring painted an erotic picture. It shouldn’t but when she stared at their hands, all she could think about was what their bodies had looked like intertwined. Despite her resolve to stay strong, she could feel heat creeping up her neck. And with her fair skin tone, it had to be obvious.

“Wait a minute. Do you two know each other?” Jason’s confused voice interrupted them.

She jerked her hand away. “No.”

“Yes,” Trent said at the same time.

Jason let out a nervous laugh and out of the corner of her eye, she saw him take a few steps back. “Okay then. I’m going to catch up with Sharpe. Find me when you need me.”

Without looking at Jason, she couldn’t be sure who he was talking to but at that moment, she didn’t care. She and Trent stared at each other for what felt like an eternity. She broke away first and found an interesting spot on the ground to stare at. Yeah, she was a total chicken.

“What the hell are you doing working for my brother?” His harsh words forced her to look up.

"I uh...I've been working for him for a few months now. I didn't know you were related, I swear. You said your last name was Takoda." This time she held his gaze but shifted under his intense scrutiny.

"That is my last name. We have different fathers. I thought you lived in New York," his voice deadpanned.

"I did." *Before my sister was murdered.* But, she didn't voice the last part. No sense in bringing that up.

When he didn't say anything, she continued. "Well, I've got to do a final walk through so I guess I'll talk to you later." Her insides were shaking and if she didn't get away from him soon, she was going to be a puddle of Jell-O at his feet. She turned and took a few steps but he stopped her with two words.

"That's it?"

Chapter Two

Trent Takoda stared at the backside of the sexiest woman he'd ever met. A woman he'd spent months trying to find. To discover she was working for his brother was almost too much irony. He didn't know if he should laugh, cry, or get a drink. Maybe he'd do all three later.

She paused, mid-stride but didn't turn around so he asked again. "That's it? Is that all you have to say, Sage?"

Her long, jet-black hair cascaded down her back in perfect waves, drawing his gaze lower. The slim-fitting skirt accentuated her ass perfectly. She was tall, slender, with just enough curves for a man to hold onto. And her sinfully long legs had a little more muscle than he remembered. And he remembered them well. Those legs had wrapped around his waist and shoulders so many times he got a hard-on just thinking about it. He shifted his position but it didn't matter. His balls were pulled so tight, it hurt to move.

After what felt like an eternity, she half-turned toward him but wouldn't make eye contact. "We'll catch up later."

He gritted his teeth, mainly to keep from saying something stupid. Something he'd regret seconds later. If she thought she could keep him at arm's length, she was out of her pretty little mind. He'd lost too much sleep over her. Now that he'd found her, he'd be damned if he didn't get some answers. They had a lot of catching up to do.

She hurried away without waiting for him to respond.

"Tell me that's not *her*. Please tell me it's not." His brother spoke as he walked up next to him and slapped him on the back.

Trent flinched. "I could but then I'd be lying big brother." Wrenching his gaze away from her ass, he turned to face Jason. "Why didn't you tell me about her?"

"I told you I hired someone new. Didn't realize I needed to send you the backgrounds of everyone in my employ," Jason snorted.

"Have you slept with her?" His brother had never let on that they had that kind of relationship but if they did, he might have to kick his ass.

Jason's eyes widened, then his face split into a devious grin. "Hell no. Not saying she's not hot or anything." He held up his hands in defense when Trent took a menacing step toward him. "Look, she's an employee, that's all. The best damn employee I've ever had so don't do anything to run her off."

"Why the hell would you say that?" He ground the words out.

"She ran from you once didn't she?"

Talk about a sucker punch. "You son of a —"

"Listen, all I'm saying is there's obviously a lot you don't know about her so be cautious."

"Do you know something I should?" The thought of his brother being more aware about her life than he was burned a hole in his gut.

He shook his head. "No. I do know that someone hurt her. She alluded to it once but she's a private person. Doesn't date much as far as I can tell. Or if she does, she doesn't talk about it."

Trent glanced back across the parking lot but she'd long since disappeared into the two-story building across the way. He understood what his brother was saying about her. When they'd met, he'd sensed a deep sadness in her. Her life force was vibrant though. Anyone in a ten-mile radius would have to be blind not to see it but in the depths of her green eyes, he'd witnessed grief.

"There's something else, Trent." The tone of Jason's voice set off all his warning bells.

He turned back to face his brother. "What?"

"Someone's been bothering her. Harassing calls, that sort of thing. I've been trying to get her to go to the police but she refuses. Maybe...hell, maybe she'll listen to you."

Someone was trying to hurt Sage? *His* Sage? His hands balled into fists. The pain digging into his palms detracted from his anger. Yeah, he'd talk to her and if she didn't listen, he'd put her under lockdown himself.

* * * * *

Sage packed up her bag and headed for the exit of the school gymnasium. Every Monday she volunteered at Hudson Bay High School to help with their literacy program. She was one of the last tutors to leave for the evening. Normally she enjoyed it but today she couldn't keep her head on straight. And Kyra, the young girl she was helping, had no doubt noticed. Next week she'd make it up to her.

It was dark when she stepped outside and the lights in the parking lot were a joke. Glancing around, she slipped her pepper spray and keys out of her purse and hurried across the lot. When she'd arrived it had been full but now it was dark and virtually empty and of course her little car was isolated near a cluster of trees.

"Just great," she muttered under her breath.

As she neared the vehicle, a shadow stepped out from one of the trees and she opened her mouth to scream until she realized who it was.

Heart beating erratically, she marched over to Trent and pounded him square on the chest. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack? What the hell are you doing lurking around here like some kind of weirdo?"

He shrugged, obviously not the least bit apologetic. "There was some guy hanging around here earlier and I just wanted to make sure you made it to your car safely."

"Okay, well you still didn't answer my question. What are you doing here? And how did you even know I'd be here?"

"I think that much is obvious. You left the office today before we could talk. It didn't take much to convince Jason to tell me where you'd be." His deep voice enveloped her and she realized her fist had flattened against his chest.

Common sense said she should walk away now but her body just reacted around him. Against all reason. He was like a drug. Leaning forward, she inhaled, savoring his musky scent. She couldn't quite describe it but he smelled of earth and man.

Without thinking, she fisted his shirt, feeling his muscular chest. A chest she'd kissed too many times to count. They'd only spent a week together but it had been the best week of her entire life.

He advanced, his features positively feral under the dim lighting. His movements gave her no choice but to retreat.

"What are you doing?" she breathed out as her back and legs hit the car.

"Catching up," he murmured and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.

Her nipples strained painfully against the sheer bra, reminding her of everything he could do to her body. She stared at his lips, wondering how she'd ever walked away from him. Momentary insanity. That was her defense.

"Why'd you leave, Sage?" He leaned down and nipped her earlobe, his deep voice an aphrodisiac, caressing her skin.

"Hmm?" She arched her back, needing to feel his body against hers. Automatically, she spread her legs as far as the restrictive skirt would allow. More than anything, she wanted to wrap her legs around him. Feel him against her body again.

Feathering kisses along her jaw, he didn't stop until he found the sensitive spot on her neck, just above her collarbone.

They were right out in the open, for anyone to stumble upon. The thought registered in her brain but she quickly dismissed it when his finger delved under her blouse. In fascination, she watched as he popped open two buttons with one hand.

Tracing along the edge of her lace bra, he probed under the cup. He raked a finger along the sensitive skin until he finally shifted the covering away.

Cupping her breast, he rubbed her nipple in small, erotic circles. "Sage?" he spoke near her ear again, as he popped the rest of the buttons, completely opening the blouse with his other hand. Then, he unclasped the front hook, freeing her breasts. Exposing her.

She shivered as the cool air washed over her. Her nipples peaked painfully. But it had nothing to do with the weather. "What?" she murmured. How he could think or talk now, she couldn't understand. His cock strained against his jeans, pushing up against her lower abdomen.

His hands might be calm but she knew he was just as turned on as she was. And they really needed to find somewhere private.

"Come on sweetheart, tell me why you left."

Shifting against him, she wiggled her skirt up a few inches. He didn't need another incentive. He bunched her skirt up around her waist. She was already soaked and when he traced a finger along the edge of her panties, she thought she'd come right there. Right in the parking lot of the local high school.

He cupped her mound, then moved the thin shred of material away. One finger probed gently while his thumb massaged her clit. It was too much and too little at the same time. Her body screamed for release but he was taking his time. Grinding against his hand, she tried to force him to increase his tempo.

"Tell me why you left." This time his words were more demanding. And his caresses less gentle. He withdrew his hand from her pussy and moved to her breasts. A little roughly, he pinched and palmed her nipples as he crushed his mouth over hers. She'd missed his kisses. More than she should have. As he tugged on her bottom lip with his teeth, she moaned aloud. Her panties were damp and they needed to find a more private place or she was going to let him take her up against the car.

“Talk later. We need to go somewhere private,” she muttered, her eyes half closed as she pressed up against him. She wanted him inside her. When she reached around his neck with her hands, he grabbed her ass, tugging her tight against him. Instinctively, she wrapped a leg around him, rubbing her swollen clit over the fabric of his jeans, trying to pull him closer.

Oh yeah, this is what she’d been missing the past year and a half. Way too long to go without sex. Fumbling, she reached for his belt. She couldn’t wait any longer. And it’s not like she worked at the school.

He pulled his head back and immediately she missed the warmth of his mouth. “You feel what you do to me?” he growled.

Mutely she nodded as he took a step back. Her leg fell and immediately she felt exposed and a little vulnerable. “What are you doing?”

“Tell me why you left, damn it.” Breathing heavily, he crossed his arms over his chest.

“What?”

But he stood there. Like a mime.

Gritting her teeth, she yanked her skirt down and tugged her shirt together to cover her breasts, then turned her back to him. She didn’t bother to button her top. The only thing that mattered was getting out of there.

Embarrassment flooded her veins. How could she have let him get under her skin so quickly? They’d almost done it up against her car. Hell, she was still turned on and willing. Pathetic.

“Sage, listen —”

She shrugged his hand off her shoulder and jumped in the front seat. He tapped on the window but she slammed the locks into place. She couldn’t believe he thought he could use sex to get what he wanted. More than anything though, she was angry that he’d turned her on hotter than a jalapeno pepper but didn’t give her any release. She’d

been able to temper her desires down for a while. Why did he have to show up and remind her what she'd been missing? The ache between her legs was growing by the second.

"Bastard," she muttered as she started the ignition.

"Damn it Sage, open the fucking door." She could see him in her peripheral vision but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking at him.

He knocked on the window again, harder this time, so she kicked the car into drive and steered out of her spot. Through the rearview mirror she saw him jog toward a truck. It wasn't the same vehicle he'd driven earlier that day or she would have recognized it. She didn't think he was crazy enough to follow her home but past experiences had taught her that she was a bad judge of character.

Gunning her engine, she peeled out of the parking lot and took a few random side streets before heading back downtown. She lived in a town house right in the heart of the small town center. Sometimes she missed the noise and bustle of living in New York but her current home reminded her of the town house she'd shared with her sister.

As she drove down her street, her heart jumped when she saw a prime parking spot. Usually she had to walk a few blocks but she found one right in front. Hudson Bay balked at building parking garages in their historic downtown and she really couldn't blame them. At least her day was ending better than it began. After adjusting her clothes, she grabbed her purse and rushed up the few steps to the front door. When she tried to slide the key in the lock, the bright red door swung open.

A shiver of unease ran down her spine. She always locked her doors. Hell, she was obsessive about it. Glancing around the quiet block, she clutched her purse a little closer and bolted down the sidewalk. Running in heels felt ridiculous but if someone had broken in, she wasn't going to stick around. Just around the corner was a coffee shop and they were open for at least another hour. Once inside and around people, she dialed her friend Chelsea.

When it went straight to voicemail, she chewed on her bottom lip. She didn't want to call the police before she knew anything and waste their time. And she couldn't risk going inside by herself. She refused to end up like those bimbos in cheesy horror movies. After dialing Chelsea again with no luck, she bit the bullet and called Jason. She knew he'd freak out and probably call the National Guard but she didn't have a choice unless she wanted to sleep at Java Joe's.

He picked up on the third ring. And he sounded out of breath. "Sage? Is everything okay? Why are you calling so late?"

"Uh... I think someone might have broken into my house and —"

"Don't go inside!"

She rubbed her temple. She wasn't stupid. "I know. I'm around the corner at Java Joe's and —"

He cut her off again. "Stay there. And keep your phone close."

Before she could respond, he hung up. After a few minutes passed and he didn't call back, she ordered a hot green tea. Just as she was sitting down at one of the high top tables, Trent walked in. Well, marched toward her like a general was more like it. His dark eyes were unreadable but he was homing in on her like a heat-seeking missile.

"Are you stalking me or something?" she ground out and stood as he neared the table.

His lips pursed into a thin line. "Jason called me."

"Oh." Well crap. She hadn't counted on that.

"Have you called the police?" His dark brows snapped down in concern.

She shook her head.

Without giving her a hint of what he intended, he slid his cell phone out of his front pocket and punched in a number. At first she assumed he was calling his brother back but after a few seconds into the conversation she realized he must have a friend on the police force.

"Who was that exactly?" she asked immediately after he hung up. She'd heard most of the conversation but it was one-sided.

"Sergeant Steve Graybar. He's an old friend of mine and he's in the neighborhood. He'll be at your place in sixty seconds. We can meet him there."

Sage fought the irrational and childish urge to stomp her foot. She should be grateful he was helping her out. Instead, annoyance bubbled up at his commanding attitude. "Why did Jason call you?"

"He was at...a friend's house. He knew I'd gone to see you this evening so he guessed I'd still be close. So, you want to walk back to your place?"

"How do you know where I live... Never mind." Of course Jason must have told him. She'd have a few choice words for her boss later.

As if he read her mind, he said, "Jason told me you were here. I didn't see your vehicle in the parking lot so I figured you live close."

She picked up the Styrofoam cup and slung her purse over her shoulder. Without waiting for him, she strode from the small establishment. It was a little rude but she couldn't help it. Being near him put her on edge and she'd about reached her limit for the day.

Trent fell in step next to her as they headed down the sidewalk toward her place. To the outside world they probably looked like a couple on a date. He didn't try to make small talk and she appreciated it. As soon as they made it to her place, a police car arrived. Thankfully, the lights weren't flashing. She didn't know her neighbors well and she didn't want to give them an excuse to come out and talk to her.

One of the two police officers immediately got out of the car and strode toward them. Despite the circumstances, he grinned when he looked at Trent.

His nametag read Sergeant Graybar. "Good to see you man. Didn't know you were back in town."

Trent's mouth curved up in what she knew to be his version of a smile as he held out a hand to him. "Good to see you too. We'll have to grab a beer later this week."

The man nodded, then turned his attention to her. "I'm Sergeant Graybar but you can call me Steve. I take it you're Sage?"

She cleared her throat and glanced uncertainly between him and Trent. "Yes. This could all be a mistake but when I got home and the door was open, I didn't want to go inside."

"You did the right thing. You two stay out here okay?" Even though he formed it as a question, it sounded more like a command. Not that she was inclined to argue.

"I won't let her out of my sight," Trent said quietly.

As the officers disappeared inside, she blew out a long breath. "Look, I'm sorry if I was rude earlier. I really do appreciate you coming over." The thought of dealing with cops again by herself made her want to vomit. Too many painful memories assaulted her.

She didn't consider Trent a permanent part of her life or anything but it was nice to have a strong presence around.

A couple of minutes later, the men exited. By the grim expression on both their faces, she didn't want to guess what was inside.

"Uh, Trent, you better see this." Steve motioned to him, completely ignoring her.

Uh, hello? This was her house. Rolling her eyes, she followed Trent up the steps. He frowned when he realized she was right behind him but didn't say anything. When they got to the front door, he moved back so she could pass and placed his hand at the small of her back as they walked in.

The front door opened into a foyer but immediately to the left was a sitting room. Steve spared her a worried look before gesturing to the room. When she walked in, she wondered what he was so worried about until she turned to the right.

Across the periwinkle blue accent wall she'd painstakingly painted herself, written in a garish crimson color was the word "whore". The paint dripped down across her pictures and onto the hardwood floor, creating a horrific display. Her stomach rolled once and she automatically took a step back. Right into Trent's strong embrace. She didn't fight him when he placed steadying hands on her hips. If anything, she welcomed it.

"Come on." He led her back to the foyer.

"Is there anything else?" she asked once they'd all exited the other room.

"We don't know yet," Steve said.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"Are you a messy person?"

"Huh?" What the hell was he asking that for?

"Well, your room. It's ah..."

Pushing away from both of them, she raced up the stairs. She could hear them close behind but the rush of blood in her ears thundered louder than anything.

Her bedroom door was open but she halted in the doorway. Clothes were strewn everywhere, her lingerie drawer had been tossed but something else drew all her attention. The picture of her and her younger sister, which normally sat on her nightstand, was face down on the floor.

Aware of the two men behind her, she took a few steps inside.

"Careful, you could disturb evidence." Steve's voice.

She ignored him. The person who had done this was smart. Too smart to leave behind fingerprints or anything else. She picked up the frame by the edge and turned it over.

Written across the glass in her red lipstick were the words "you're next". Her gut dropped. It couldn't be the same man. It just couldn't. He was still in jail.

"What is it?" Trent asked as he walked up behind her.

Wordlessly she set the frame back on the stand so they could both see it.

"Is she related to you?" He stared at the picture, then looked back at her.

She knew why he was asking. The woman in the picture was about half a foot shorter and more delicate in appearance but it was obvious they were related. Her jaw clenched and she forced back tears. Now wasn't the time to completely break down. "Her name's Marie. She was my sister."

"Was?"

She nodded. "She was murdered."

Chapter Three

Trent's gut clenched. The thought of losing any of his brothers was unimaginable. As he stared at Sage, he could almost see her pulling inside herself. Blocking out the rest of the world. The most primal part of his being wanted to reach out and comfort her. Nurture her. Take care of her because she was his.

His brain however, told him now wasn't the time. Her ivory skin had paled to an almost ashen gray and she looked ready to fall apart at any moment. Her jaw clenched furiously while she tried to hold back tears. No, she needed to gain control. Something he understood.

Steve interrupted the silence and fired questions at her like a machine gun. "How long have you been living here? Do you have any enemies you can think of? Any ex-boyfriends who might want to exact revenge?"

She quickly glanced at Trent and he wasn't sure what was going on inside that pretty head but she looked back at Steve when she answered. "I've been living here for about six months and I've been on a few dates but nothing serious."

A knife twisted in his gut at the thought of her dating but he pushed those thoughts away.

Or he thought he did. That knife screwed even deeper when Sage spoke again. "If you don't mind Trent, I'd like to talk to Sergeant, uh, Steve alone about this."

Steve looked at him and spread his hands out in a helpless gesture. He swallowed his pride and gritted his teeth. "No problem. I'll be downstairs."

Instead of dwelling on the blatant rejection, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed an old friend. Other than his two brothers, Trent had a handful of men he called friends and they were all from his time in the Navy. Most lived scattered across the country but thankfully a few were located in North Carolina. After twelve years in the service, he'd

retired two years ago. But he'd stayed in contact with his old team and hoped one of them could help him out. Some were still in the service but almost everyone who had retired was in some sort of law enforcement.

Everyone but him. If he never had to take another human life, it would be too soon.

He'd met Sage a scant six months after he got out but she'd disappeared before they could truly get to know one another. He thought he'd known her. Hell, he thought he'd known everything a man needed to know about a woman when he'd met her but tonight's revelations had been a rude awakening.

Sighing to himself, he walked outside and sat on the front stoop. The phone had rung four times and he was about to hang up, when his friend picked up.

"Tell me you don't need bail money," Jack Romero boomed.

Trent chuckled to himself. "If I did I wouldn't be calling your cheap ass."

After a few minutes of bullshitting, his friend finally gave him an opening. "What's up man?"

"I need a security system for a friend of mine. It's residential, so I know it's not normally your thing but I want the best." Jack was owner and founder of Romero Security. He lived in Wilmington, a few hours south and while he normally set up large, commercial accounts, Trent knew he'd come through for him.

"What's her name?"

Trent smiled to himself. "Sage."

"No problem. Email me the details and I'll get a guy on it. Two days max."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

After they disconnected, he moved from his sitting position to lean against her car. The other officer was on the phone, presumably trying to find someone to investigate the crime scene. Hudson Bay wasn't exactly crime-ridden so they might have to call an outsider in.

He clenched his fists at his sides. He wanted to be doing something. Anything. Before he could contemplate a useful way to help, Sage and Steve walked out. She was carrying a huge suitcase and smaller travel kit. Good, at least she wasn't going to be stubborn and insist on staying at her place.

Steve handed her a card, then leaned in closer than was appropriate. He said something too low for him to hear and Trent saw red. He took a few steps forward, then tempered his anger. Acting like a jealous boyfriend wouldn't do anything to help Sage right now. The other man waved at him, then pulled out his cell phone. Sage walked toward him, a little uncertainly, until she stood next to her car.

"I wasn't sure if you'd still be here."

He actually laughed, though the sound came out dry and harsh. Was she serious? "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Her brows snapped down in confusion. "Well, I'm certainly not staying here tonight. I'll be finding a hotel so you can rest easier."

"The hell you are." Now, he didn't try to hide his anger.

"What, you expect me to stay with you?" Her shoulders straightened defiantly.

"That's exactly what you're doing. At least until your security system is installed." He took a step forward and retrieved her suitcase. She didn't even try to fight him. He guessed because she was too stunned.

"Security system? What are you talking about?"

"I called a friend. He'll be sending someone out this week. He's the best, trust me."

"You can't just barge into my life and start making decisions," she snapped.

He ignored her outburst. "Do you need anything else or are you ready to leave?"

"I am ready to leave but I'm not going anywhere with you." She moved to grab her suitcase but he sidestepped in front of it. Now if she wanted her things, she'd have to touch him. And he knew she wouldn't. Not after what had happened earlier.

Her jaw clenched and she placed manicured hands on slim hips. "Move. Now."

"I can but if you do go to a hotel, I'm just going to follow you and stay in the next room." When she didn't respond, he continued, "What happened in there isn't a typical prank. You know it and I know it. You need me."

A few seconds ticked by, then her arms fell against her sides in defeat. "Fine. I'll stay for one night. And I'm sleeping by myself."

Yeah, we'll see about that. He could see in her eyes she didn't quite believe her own statement though.

The drive to his place was quiet. He wanted to draw her out of her shell but he knew her well enough that he guessed she needed to mentally regroup. Something told him she had an idea who might be behind what had happened. She'd been shocked but she'd also handled things uncommonly well. He'd probe deeper later. Now all he cared about was getting her into the safety of his house.

And his bed.

He lived a few minutes outside the city limits, right on the beach so the drive didn't take long. As he steered down his street, she surprised him.

"What happened to that other piece of junk you were driving?" Sage's voice broke through the silence.

He risked a quick glance at her. She was turned away from him, staring out the passenger window but at least she was talking.

"It's at my house. It's my work truck."

When she didn't continue, he decided to push. "So what did Steve say to you as you were leaving?"

Her head whipped around as he pulled into his driveway and he couldn't help but notice as her cheeks tinged pink. But, she ignored his question. When he shut off the ignition, she unsnapped her seat belt and jumped out.

After retrieving her bags, they walked to the front door in silence. He inserted the key in the lock but didn't open the door.

"What's wrong?" Startled, she looked up at him, her green eyes almost black in the dim light.

"Did he ask you out?" The question came out surprisingly calm. He didn't know why he was pushing. Now wasn't the time but it gnawed at him.

She chewed on her bottom lip, before throwing her hands up in the air. "He asked if I was dating you and when I said no, he gave me his phone number."

Steve had a lot of fucking nerve but he'd deal with that later. "You're not dating him." He twisted the lock and stepped inside before clearing the way for her.

She marched into his foyer and swiveled to face him as he shut and locked the door. "I'll do anything I damn well please, Trent. You don't have any say over my life."

"That is where you're wrong." Before she could respond, he dropped her bags and advanced on her.

He had to play this right. If he didn't make a move now, she'd have time to think about whatever it was that had chased her off before. And he wasn't making the same mistake twice. He'd run through their last night together a million times in his head and he realized he must have done something to scare her. When he'd asked her to come home with him, he hadn't given her a reason. Hell, he technically hadn't asked, he'd ordered. Now that she was in the same zip code, he was getting her into his bed and keeping her there.

He fisted his hand in her dark hair, cupping her head. In her heels, she was only a few inches shorter than him. She tried to pull her head back but he refused to budge. Her eyes narrowed and instead of pulling away this time, she leaned forward until their faces were almost touching. "I'm not answering any questions tonight Trent so you can forget it."

"Talking is the last thing on my mind."

Surprise and something hot flared in her eyes. He knew he'd been an idiot back at the school but she'd been inside his head for the better part of the last year and a half. Now all he cared about was getting inside her.

Her breathing was just as labored as his, her breasts rubbing against his chest with intensity. With wide green eyes, she stared at him. Waiting for him to make a move? He couldn't decide. At least she wasn't shoving him away.

He flicked his gaze down to her blouse, then returned her gaze. It took all his self control not to rip her blouse open and take her right then. She needed to let him know she wanted it though.

Her hands moved to his belt but they stilled at the button of his jeans. "Are you going to finish what you started earlier?" Her words came out as a whisper.

That was the only signal he needed. "Hell yes." Wrapping his arms around her waist, he promptly unzipped her skirt. No way was he pushing it up this time. He wanted to see all of her. Including her sexy-as-sin legs. The skirt pooled at her feet before she kicked it away.

He slid his hands down her back and over her ass. He squeezed when he reached the part her bikini-cut panties didn't quite cover. In response, she clutched his shoulders and draped her silky legs around him so he headed for the stairs.

"What are you doing?" There was a sudden undertone of panic in her voice.

Even though he wanted nothing more than to fuck her up against that wall, on the floor and the couch, this time was going to be in his bed. He wanted to do too many things to her body that required a comfortable surface. "Relax," he spoke against her lips, before nipping her gently.

She gripped him tighter as they ascended the stairs. Seconds later they were in his room. He didn't bother with the lights. His blinds were turned slightly open, giving them illumination from the moon and stars. After placing her on the bed, he stripped in record time.

Lying back on the bed, she looked like a pagan offering. Long, dark hair pillowed around her, legs splayed open. The only problem was, she still had clothes on. As if she read his mind, she tugged off her sweater, unbuttoned her shirt and slid it and her bra off. Leaving only her panties and heels on.

Without warning she kicked her shoes off and his cock jumped. He'd wanted to give her plenty of foreplay but that wasn't going to happen. Not the first time.

She leaned back on her elbows and stared at him with a lustful look he remembered well. The bare grip on control he'd had, snapped. Grabbing her ankles, he pinned them to the mattress. He raked his teeth and tongue over her inner calves and thighs, moving his way up. Hell, he'd been thinking about this all day since seeing her.

Longer than that actually. He deserved a fucking medal for what he did at the school. Or a kick in the ass. If he hadn't restrained himself, he'd have been with her when she got home. No, he mentally shook his head and reached up to grip her hips.

She let out a little yelp when he grabbed her.

"You're so fucking beautiful woman," he murmured against her leg.

Not exactly poetry but coming from Trent, she knew he meant every one of those words. And she desperately needed to hear them. An unexpected shudder raked through her body. She hadn't realized how much she'd needed this kind of release until now. When she was with Trent, the outside world ceased to exist. And she actually felt safe.

It was an illusion but she'd indulge for the night. After that however, she was walking away from him. For his own sake.

"Yeeess," a moan escaped when he pushed her panties to the side and sucked on her clit. The abrupt tug shocked her out of the clouds and nearly vaulted her off the bed. Her hands dug into his shoulders, gripping him, begging him to finish what he started this time. If he didn't, she'd kill him.

He lifted his head and she didn't miss the satisfied, male grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He yanked the last shred of material separating them down her legs, then moved on top of her. His dark hair was longer than she remembered. When he slanted his mouth over hers, it tickled her face, the light brushing only adding to her heightened sensations.

Arching her back, she rubbed her breasts against his chest, savoring the feel of skin on skin. His lips teased and caressed hers, while one hand worked its way between their meshed bodies. "Condom," she murmured against his mouth.

He lifted his head. "I was trying to give you a little foreplay."

"Screw foreplay." She dug her hands into his backside and gripped the firm muscles. Her body had been ready to go hours ago. She was completely soaking just thinking about what it would be like to have him inside her again.

She hadn't thought it possible but his midnight eyes darkened as he leaned over and retrieved a condom from the dresser drawer. He used to like her to roll it on but he ripped into the foil and sheathed himself before she could blink.

"Are you ready?" For some reason, his words sounded ominous, dangerous and a lot sexy. She knew what she was getting herself into though.

This was only the beginning of the night for them. Sex with Trent had always been hot and intense. The first time he'd fuck her fast and furiously, almost like he needed to prepare himself. Then, they'd make love for hours.

He lifted one of her legs and positioned it over his shoulder. Kissing her ankle and inner calf, he poised himself at her entrance.

Without giving him a chance to tease her, she shifted her hips, partially impaling herself on him. Wet and slick, her body gratefully accepted him. For a split second, his eyes widened but then he took her other leg and looped it over his other shoulder before completely pounding into her.

The abrupt intrusion bordered on painful but quickly turned to pleasure. In this position, she could handle him as deep as she wanted.

Tracing her hands over her breasts, she rolled and pinched her nipples, caressing herself until they were rock-hard and aching with pleasure.

Using muscles she'd forgotten she had, she lifted her hips, meeting him stroke for stroke. The walls of her vagina milked him, clenching him tighter and tighter. Her

climax was coming hard and fast. And so was his. She could feel him about to break. He gripped her hips so tightly she knew he'd leave bruises.

She tried to keep her eyes open, wanting to watch him come but when he reached down and teased her nub with his thumb, she pushed right over the edge. It happened so fast she wasn't prepared for it.

Head thrown back against the bed, she grasped the sheets and bed as if it could somehow ground her. Her legs bowed as the final waves washed through her. Just as she came down from her high, her body relaxing, he let her legs drop to the bed. He leaned forward and began thrusting with quicker, less controlled strokes.

He didn't like to lose control. In bed however, she'd never had a problem getting him to let go. Now was no different. His face was positively feral as he crushed his mouth over hers. His tongue stroked her mouth as he reached his climax in one final thrust.

Panting, he collapsed on top of her. Their slick bodies stuck together. She traced her hand down the familiar lines of his back as he nuzzled her neck. Grinning, she finally shoved at his chest. "You're gonna kill me," she murmured.

He rolled over and propped himself up on one elbow. A wide, satisfied grin spread across his face. "Still thinking about dating that cop?"

Still out of breath, she chuckled and shoved at his chest. "I never planned to. I just don't like you telling me what to do."

"Stubborn woman." He rolled his eyes, then shifted so he could discard the condom.

She sat up and moved to the edge of the bed. Her feet hit the carpet and she dug her toes into the plush material as she stretched her legs out. She was a little sore but it had been worth it.

Like lighting, he reached out and snagged her by the waist, tugging her back against the mattress. Sage stared up at him as he once again covered her body.

“Where do you think you’re going?” He pinned her to the bed, his legs encasing her thighs in an unrelenting embrace.

Her eyes widened when she realized he was hard again. It usually took him at least thirty minutes to recover. “You’re...” She swallowed and forced her gaze away from his cock. From his half-sitting, half-laying position, it rested on her abdomen instead of teasing her pussy. She couldn’t believe he’d already put on another condom. Apparently she’d underestimated him.

“Damn right I am. It’s been a year and a half since I’ve had this sweet pussy.” He leaned down and gently touched his lips to hers, still making no attempt to shift down and slide into her.

He didn’t actually say it but something in the way he said the words “a year and a half” told her he hadn’t been with anyone since her. Even if he had, it wouldn’t have mattered. Still, the thought jerked at her heartstrings in a way she hadn’t thought possible.

No longer was there an urgency in his caresses. His tongue stroked hers as he reached between her legs and gently inserted two fingers. Slowly, he dragged his finger against her inner wall, drawing a moan of pleasure from her. When he pushed back in and rotated them, she squirmed.

She was already slick and perfectly stretched from their recent bout. Her body clenched around his thick fingers. She linked her hands through his hair, reveling in the fact that she was actually touching Trent again.

Even in her most ridiculous fantasies, she hadn’t dared to hope she’d be able to touch or taste him again. A few stray tears escaped, spilling down her cheeks. Fate was either very kind, or seriously fucking with her head. Either way, she wasn’t going to balk at her second chance. However short she knew their time together would be. If someone was after her she couldn’t drag Trent down with her.

Trent lifted his head and when their gazes met, his eyes searched hers for an answer. He must have tasted her tears. She was thankful when he didn't question her further.

Instead, he kissed her forehead, both cheeks, her nose, then her mouth again. Each kiss was done with such tenderness she could practically feel her heart swelling.

Damn it! He wasn't supposed to be like this. This was going to make it a thousand times harder if she had to walk away from him.

"I want you inside me," she whispered, almost hating to break the quiet moment but desperately needing that extra connection.

Wordlessly he withdrew his fingers and used her juices to trace her clit in a sensual pattern. Shifting, he readjusted so he was cushioned between her legs, then buried his cock inside her.

She gasped and her back automatically arched at the intrusion. It seemed it didn't matter how often they had sex or how wet she was, her body always needed a moment to get used to his size.

"I've missed you, Sage." His words weren't a whisper. It was as if he was declaring it for the world to hear.

He held her gaze as he began to move inside her. Her throat clenched, barring her from saying she'd missed him too. The thought of admitting it aloud terrified her. The good things in her life were destined to be torn from her.

With his thumb he lazily traced the tip of her breast. When it was apparent she wasn't going to respond to his declaration, his head dipped and he raked his teeth over her other nub. His tongue played an erotic dance, sending a chord of pleasure straight from her nipple to the pulsing between her legs.

It shouldn't be like this. Had never been like this with anyone before Trent. She didn't understand how he could bring so much pleasure to her body again so quickly after her toe-curling climax.

“Faster. Please.” The words sounded like begging, even to her own ears.

His hands moved to tighten around her hips. Her vagina convulsed as he increased his speed. She could climax alone from the emotions echoing through her body.

Trent hungrily drove himself into Sage. His woman. He couldn't stop the possessiveness that threatened to overwhelm him just being near her. Even now, he was inside her and he wanted more. More than just the physical connection.

She was holding back from him emotionally and he hated it. She didn't physically though. No way in hell she could hide that kind of lust.

Those emotions poured off her in almost tangible waves. Every time she looked at him, he could feel her desire. The wanting. The need. Unfortunately, she kept everything else locked up tight.

That wasn't going to work. He wanted everything from her. And he planned to take it.

The tight walls of her slick sheath were squeezing around him. His balls were pulled up painfully with the need for another release. But he restrained himself.

He gritted his teeth, holding back. Beneath him, Sage's body glistened with a light sheen of sweat. She was so close. Her contractions were coming quicker, a sure sign she right there.

“Yesss,” she hissed out. Her eyes were half closed and her hands dug into the sheet beneath her as she arched her back higher.

He cupped the perfect mounds she presented to him like an offering. Sucking one of her hardened peaks, he teased the other, pinching and rotating it with little gentleness.

Almost immediately, her legs locked around his waist in a vise-like grip. She clawed at his back before her hands rested on his ass. She dug in hard, then shouted his name as the orgasm rushed through her.

That's all he needed to let go. Just hearing his name on her lips drove him insane. With driving need, he rocked into her, jetting his semen into the condom, wishing it was directly inside her. His legs trembled with the force of his climax.

When he was sated, he stayed inside her a moment longer, his body fighting the withdrawal of her warmth.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," she mumbled so quietly he wondered if she was even aware she'd spoken.

Trent shifted and stretched out beside her. He placed a protective hand over her waist and pulled her close. When she smiled at him, his heart stuttered.

Actually stuttered. Like some lovesick fool.

After ten minutes, both their breathing had returned to normal. She pushed up and dropped a chaste kiss against his cheek. "I think I'm done for a while."

"We'll see about that." He playfully smacked her gorgeous ass as she slid from the bed.

* * * * *

"Mind if I take a shower?" Trent's grin grew even wider but she shook her head knowingly. "Alone, Trent." After everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, she needed some serious alone time. Time to think about her next move. And she really needed to figure out how to tell Trent this couldn't happen starting tomorrow. If she was in real danger, he couldn't be hanging around her.

"Extra towels are in the linen closet." He followed suit and got out of bed.

"Thanks," she murmured, watching him walk across the room toward his closet. Standing in the bathroom doorway, she paused, staring at him. She'd forgotten how sexy he looked naked. Okay, maybe she hadn't forgotten. Maybe she'd forced herself to bury the memory.

Long, muscular legs. Wickedly broad, tanned back. She bit her lower lip as he bent over to pick something up. She sucked in a deep breath and her abdomen clenched. The

man had the most perfect ass she'd ever seen. Definitely magazine worthy. She bit her bottom lip.

"Keep staring at me like that and it's time for round three." The laughter in his deep voice was unmistakable.

Embarrassed, she realized he was looking at her over his shoulder. She stepped inside the bathroom, shut the door and sagged against it. With everything going on it was wrong to even be with Trent right now. Spending one night with him couldn't hurt though, right? And for all she knew, the late night calls could be a prank. Although the break-in certainly wasn't. That was serious.

A shudder racked her body but she shook it off. She raked a hand through her tangled hair, then pulled out two towels from the cabinet. As she started to twist the shower knob, the door swung open.

"I said I wanted to be alone, Trent." Even though he'd just seen her naked, she held a towel against her chest in self-defense.

The muscles in his neck corded tightly as his eyes roved over her barely covered body. She was close to dropping the towel and yanking him into the shower with her when he held out her cell phone. Mutely, she stared at it.

He answered her unspoken question. "This was in your sweater pocket. It keeps ringing and I thought with everything that's happened it could be important."

Clutching the towel against her chest, she held it there until he shut the door behind him. She started to flip open the phone to check her messages when it rang. Private number. *Not again.* She contemplated ignoring it but after what had happened earlier, she decided not to possibly piss off whoever was harassing her even more.

"Hello?"

"Hello, whore." This time it wasn't a mechanical voice but a man's. One she didn't recognize. Something vaguely familiar tickled at the far recesses of her brain but she couldn't have picked out the voice if her life depended on it.

"I'm getting tired of this. What do you want?"

"I think that much should be obvious."

She leaned against the counter for support. Her throat closed, making it impossible to speak.

He continued though. "You're going to pay for tonight."

"What?" To her horror, her voice came out as a whisper.

"Don't be stupid. I saw you tonight, putting yourself on display for anyone to see. Did you enjoy letting him fuck you up against your car?"

Humiliation washed over her but she jerked upright when she realized he hadn't stuck around. If he had, he would have known they hadn't had sex. Which meant he was probably the person who broke into her house. Her hand fisted around the phone.

She asked again. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm going to do to you what I did to your sister but first I'm going to kill your boyfriend."

She tried to push down the terror threatening to overwhelm her. "He doesn't mean anything to me! He's no one!"

"It doesn't matter. He dies too. Maybe I'll let you watch."

Before she could respond, he disconnected. Tears slipped down her face and she was powerless to stop them. The man who had raped and murdered her sister was behind bars. It couldn't be him calling. It just couldn't. Even if this was some sick prank, she had to warn Trent, then get as far away from him as possible.

Angrily swiping at her tears, she started the shower. No one was safe around her. And she wouldn't risk someone else dying simply because they knew her.

Chapter Four

He didn't mean anything to her? Trent pushed away from the door. He hadn't heard the shower start so he'd gotten worried and wanted to check on her. Now he wished he hadn't. He grabbed her suitcases from downstairs and delivered them to the guestroom. If that's all she considered him—a good fuck—then she could go to hell.

He needed to get over her, get her out of his system for good. Something told him that might be damn near impossible though. After tossing her stuff in the other room, he found himself back in his room, pacing outside the bathroom door.

No matter that he told himself to walk away, his feet had a mind of their own. “Screw it,” he mumbled to himself. They were going to have this thing out now. He wasn't going to be some easy lay for her whenever she felt like it. Opening the door, he slipped inside.

“Sage?” He saw her phone lying on the bathroom counter and his blood boiled. Just who had she been talking to anyway? An old boyfriend?

“Yeah?” The wobble in her voice made him pause.

“Are you okay?” Despite his anger, the sound of her upset primed all his protective instincts.

“I'm fine.”

“We need to talk.”

“Okay. Just give me a few minutes.” The curt, broken answer was enough for him.

The hooks jingled against the rod as he yanked back the shower curtain. Sage stood under the streaming jet. When she heard the rustle, her eyes flew open and her hands quickly flew to cover her breasts. “What are you doing?” Her voice was shaky.

Her eyes were red and glassy and even though water flowed down her face and body, it was obvious she'd been crying. Instead of responding, he reached out and stroked her cheek with his thumb. And that's all it took. Her face crumpled and her hands fell away from her chest to cover her face. She twisted away from him but there wasn't anywhere to go in the shower.

"Aww, shit," he mumbled.

Crying women had never bothered him before. In his experience, women usually turned on the waterworks when they wanted something. That wasn't the case now. All his earlier anger ebbed away to be replaced by an overpowering desire to take on her pain.

He leaned over and twisted off the water, ignoring the spray of heat on his arm and upper body. "Come on sweetheart." He guided her by the shoulders until she faced him.

Blindly she stumbled toward him, stepping over the small ledge. She wouldn't meet his gaze but her entire body shook as she buried her face in his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, holding on to her as she silently cried. For a woman she was fairly tall and he'd always thought of her as strong and lean, but naked and crying, she felt delicate and breakable.

His heart clenched as she shook against him. Whoever had upset her was going to pay. He stroked a soothing hand down her back until the trembling in her body slowly subsided. It didn't completely disappear though.

After a few minutes, she stepped away from him and wrapped her arms around herself. Her cheeks tinged red. "I'm sorry. This is so embarrassing," she mumbled and wiped at her eyes.

"Here." He grabbed one of the towels she'd laid out and wrapped it around her. "Let's go." He started to steer her to the door but she motioned toward the pool of water on the floor, then met his gaze. Her green eyes filled with tears, ready to spill over again at the sight of the mess.

He couldn't help himself. A small chuckle escaped as he gently led her out of the room. "It's fine." All he cared about was getting her into bed.

Once outside the bathroom, she made a beeline for the bed and slipped under the covers after discarding her towel on the floor. Her eyes closed as her head hit the pillow and he knew her body was basically shutting itself down. He'd seen it happen too many times after battles. What she'd been through wasn't as strenuous of course but maybe she'd reached her limit.

"I'm so tired," she mumbled and rolled on her side, curling up with one of the pillows.

Too many things had happened to her today and her body needed rest. Someone had upset her though and pushed her over that edge. She'd been fine before going to take a shower, joking around even, but after that phone call, something had happened.

And he planned to find out what that something was.

Without shifting her too much, he lifted her head and positioned the discarded towel to soak up the water from her hair. No need for her to get sick on top of all this. Minutes later, her breathing was no longer erratic but steady and rhythmic.

He cleaned up the bathroom, checked all the doors and windows and reset his security alarm for good measure. The alarm was standard and the only reason he even had it was because the system had been installed before he moved in. Hudson Bay was one of the safest towns in the country but with Sage staying with him, he planned to keep it on at all times.

Back in his room, he retrieved his cell phone and slipped out into the hall to call his brother. He should have called hours ago.

Jason picked up on the first ring. "Hey man, how is she?"

"I honestly don't know." He rubbed a hand over his stubbly face and leaned against the wall as he relayed everything that had happened right up until the mysterious late night phone call. Well, almost everything.

"Tell her to stay home tomorrow."

Trent snorted. "She won't listen."

"You're probably right. She's a stubborn ass woman."

There was no denying that. Sage was as stubborn as hell and they both knew that she'd be at work bright and early if she could help it.

Jason continued, "Fine, tell her to come in late then."

Knowing his brother wouldn't mind, he'd already planned on fucking her into a coma. That was the only thing that guaranteed she wouldn't wake up. He'd turned off the house phone and her cell so nothing would disturb her in the morning. "No problem. Uh, listen...I need a favor. A big one."

"What is it?" There was a cautionary note in his voice and Trent didn't blame him.

"I want to have a friend of mine run her social security number, find out a little more about her past." What he was asking was pretty much illegal. Until he was officially a partner in his brother's construction company, he didn't have access to employee records and even if he did, he wasn't supposed to use them for his own purposes. It didn't matter if he wanted to help her or not. Trent hated putting his brother in this position but the police weren't going to put all their time and resources into her case. And he had much better and faster avenues to get answers.

Jason blew out a long breath. "I was afraid you might ask that."

"So is that a yes or a no?"

"You knew I'd say yes."

"I owe you."

After they disconnected, he stripped off his shirt and as quietly as possible, slipped into bed. Sage was curled on her side so he moved in behind her and pulled her tight. Her body instinctively leaned into him. Whatever was going on in that head of hers, her body at least knew it was safe with him.

She shifted against him, rubbing her backside over his already growing erection. He inwardly cursed his attraction to her. The sheet between them gave a basically nonexistent barrier of separation and it did nothing to squelch his burning need.

Before meeting Sage, sex had been a very active part of his life. And wearing that Navy uniform had always gotten him plenty of ass. All he'd had to do was head to the nearest bar. Something he hadn't given much thought to before. He'd never been into long term commitments. Or any commitment really. One-night, or even two-night stands had been it for him.

Until he'd met her. Then he'd thrown everything he thought he knew about women out the window. Most of his friends weren't married but the few that were, seemed content to be with one woman. He'd never understood how that was possible until Sage.

Then he'd understood exactly why a man gave up being a bachelor.

It had nearly ripped his heart out when she'd decided to run out on him. In the middle of the night no less. He pushed the thought away and pulled her closer. If he thought too hard about it, he'd work himself up for no reason.

Her ass moved again and his cock surged painfully. She wasn't waking up for a few hours at the very least and he certainly wasn't getting to sleep like this. Not when he was this wired. Sighing, he tried to relax against the pillow and inhaled her scent. It was something coconut, fresh and completely intoxicating.

Yeah, it was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

Sage opened her eyes and started to jerk upright but a heavy arm draped across her waist. For a moment, she almost panicked when she realized she was naked but the night before came rushing back with a vengeance. The vandalism, the phone call and what had happened with Trent.

She cringed when she remembered the way she'd blubbered all over his chest. Moving slowly, she tried to slide off the bed when his hand clamped across her abdomen.

"Going somewhere?" Trent murmured. His low, seductive voice sent shivers throughout her body.

She tried to roll over but he kept her immobile. His erection pressed into her back. The man was a machine. "Oh." The word was out before she could rein in her big mouth.

"Yeah, *oh*." His slid his hand up her waist to one of her breasts and palmed it, rubbing in erotic little circles. Liquid fire coursed through her blood, sending shocks straight to her pussy.

Her vagina pulsed in tune with her heart, completely wild. She clenched her legs together as he alternated between breasts. The man certainly knew how to bring her from zero to sixty in milliseconds.

When she made a move to stroke herself, he abandoned what he was doing to grip her arm and tug it back. Instead of returning to teasing her breasts, he slid his hand down her back and spread her cheeks apart, tracing along her crease. She started to tense when he feathered across her tight rosette but relaxed when he playfully nipped her ear. He wouldn't hurt her or do anything she wasn't comfortable with.

She knew that on every level.

Continuing his onslaught from behind, he moved further and probed between her slit but didn't completely penetrate. Instead he swirled his fingers right at her entrance, using her juices to circle her clit, then dip back inside her. He pushed inside but not deep enough that she could clench around him. The effect and different position was deliciously torturous. She was already wet and willing for him, something he had to feel.

When he immersed his finger a little farther, she scooted back, trying to force him deeper. He resisted, pulling away, keeping his probing shallow.

She groaned in frustration. "Quit torturing me."

"Hell no." Laughter rumbled deep in his chest as he withdrew and rolled her over. The cool sheet against her back was the only thing grounding her. Something lurked in the depths of those dark eyes. Lust, possessiveness and an indefinable emotion.

His head dipped to one of her breasts, his tongue gliding over them. Tasting all of her. He licked and laved her in sensuous strokes, making sure not to miss anything. The sides, the sensitive underside of her breasts, her areolas. She fisted her hands through his hair, wanting to pull him closer, knowing it was physically impossible.

Without warning, he sucked hard, tugging her nipple deep in his mouth. The area ached as he lightly raked his teeth over the sensitive flesh. While continuing the onslaught with his tongue, he pinched her other nipple, rolling the rosy bud between his calloused fingers.

She clenched her thighs together and arched her back, ready to propel herself off the bed. If he kept this up, she wouldn't be surprised if she did just that.

He placed a calming hand on her stomach, urging her body to relax. She was so close to climaxing and he wasn't even inside her. He was the only man who'd ever done that to her.

She clutched his shoulders and understanding her need, he shifted and moved so he was completely on top of her.

He really was beautiful. A perfect specimen of man. Not an inch of fat on that muscular, toned body. A drop had formed at the tip of his cock and immediately she stiffened. "Condom."

But he was already leaning over, taking one out. Greedily, she ripped it from his hands and tore it open. She'd never taken particular pleasure in putting one on before she'd met him but she savored the feel of rolling it over his cock. When he shuddered under her touch, his abdominal muscles rippling, she couldn't help the smile spreading over her face.

She loved the alternating experience of power and surrender she felt when she was with him. Her body was so responsive to his touch but his was the exact same way. As he hovered at her entrance, she raked her nails down his chest. His skin was smooth, with a smattering of dark hair. He let out a growl and slammed into her.

Her ankles locked behind his back, her legs moving in tune with his thrusts.

"Sage." Her name was a deep rumble in his chest.

Tongues and teeth clashed in a furious need. Her body trembled under his kisses, his caresses.

When he rubbed over one of her nipples with his thumb, her nerve endings felt as if they would explode. She cried out but the sound was muffled by his mouth. If it was possible to die from pleasure, she was sure she was close.

His calloused hands rubbed down her rib cage, waist and back up again, sending her already sensitized skin into overload. He touched her like a man possessed. Like she belonged to him.

That thought pushed her over the edge. Without warning, her vagina milked him rapidly, uncontrollably. She clutched him tighter, forcing him deeper as the contractions came in sharp, violent waves.

Grabbing his back, she drew him tight against her, rubbing her nipples against his chest. The erotic motion combined with his deep thrusts extended her climax.

Trent felt as if he would come apart. Sage clawed at his backside, digging into flesh as he pumped into her. She was so sensitive to every slight touch or caress and it was taking all his self control not to let go. Time seemed to slow as he buried himself in the essence of Sage.

Before Sage, he'd been able to fuck for hours but with her, it was like sticking his cock in a socket every single time. Just being inside her was enough to make him lose it. Hell, simply thinking about being inside her was enough for that.

Sweat dripped down his face as he slowed down, trying to gain a semblance of control. As if she read his mind, she slid her hands up his back and clutched his shoulders tightly.

“Come for me Trent,” she murmured, low in his ear.

The sound of his name on her lips and he was done. From somewhere deep inside him, a guttural moan tore free as he exploded. The orgasm seemed to go on forever. He gripped her hips, afraid he’d hurt her but the primitive side of him pushed those thoughts away.

All he cared about was his release. The creaking of the bed and their pants were the only sounds tearing through the quiet night. With one last thrust, he lost himself inside her before crumpling onto the bed. He took off the condom and blindly tossed it toward the trash can, not really caring one way or the other if it hit the damn thing.

“Wow,” she muttered about ten minutes later as they both still lay on their backs.

Wow was right. His cock, which had been at half-staff, was already lengthening again. Which was ridiculous. He should be sated.

And normally he was after a thorough fucking. Around Sage though, he was like a bull during mating season.

The bed shifted as she turned and propped up on one elbow. “I forgot what a machine you are.” Her lips curved into a small smile as she stared down at his cock.

“What are you going to do about it then?” He lifted her so she straddled him.

“What do you want me to do?” She bent down and sucked his earlobe, sending shocks straight to his core.

If he died right then, he’d die a happy man. The realization hit him with such force, he physically jolted. That’s when he decided that he wasn’t going to let her keep shying away from telling him the truth. If she had a problem, he was placing himself right in the middle of it.

And if she had a problem with that too damn bad.

Chapter Five

Sage pressed her intercom button. "Margo, I've got a few sets of plans I need sent overnight to the architect."

"No problem. I'll make sure they go out before I leave today. Also, there's someone holding on line one."

"Who is it?"

"A man named Anthony Deal but he wouldn't tell me who he was with. Want me to send him to voicemail?"

"No!" She cleared her throat. "Uh, no I'll take it." She'd been waiting on this call. Anthony Deal, District Attorney in New York, was a hard man to get a hold of but he always went out of his way to be kind to her.

"Sage here."

"Sage, I received your message. Is everything all right?"

She sighed and nervously smoothed a hand over her skirt. "I don't know anymore."

"Well, Max Lucero is still in jail so rest easy."

She knew that. He'd told her the same thing a couple of weeks ago when she'd called. "That's not why I'm calling. I told you about the weird calls but this most recent one was disturbing. The caller said... He said he was going to do to me what he did to my sister. If Lucero's still in jail it doesn't make any sense though, right?"

Silence greeted her ears.

"Anthony?"

"Shit," he muttered.

Panic seized her chest. "What are you not telling me?"

He sighed. "I guess it could be a prank but...damn it Sage, I'm sorry to tell you like this."

"Tell me what?" The vise around her heart twisted tighter.

"They found two semen specimens at the scene but there wasn't enough to identify the other one and it was older than Lucero's."

"What the hell does that mean?" She had a pretty good idea what he meant but she wanted to make sure they were on the same page.

"It had been in her system about twelve hours before Lucero. For all we know, it was from a date the night before."

"What the hell are you talking about? Why wasn't this covered at the trial?" Now she was shouting. Her sister had been held captive for a day and a half and even she knew time stamping DNA wasn't an exact science. What if they'd gotten the time line wrong? The police had decided that her sister had been taken in the early morning hours but Sage hadn't come home from work the night before so for all they knew, she'd been taken that night. No one had wanted to listen to her though.

Margo popped her head in, worry plain on her face but Sage shooed her away.

"We had it suppressed. All the evidence pointed to Lucero. He practically confessed and he never mentioned an accomplice. It was a slam dunk."

"And you didn't think it necessary to tell *me* any of this?" Her heart pounded mercilessly against her rib cage. If she'd known all this, she'd never have brushed off the late night calls.

"I wanted to wait until after the trial but then you disappeared."

That was a pathetic excuse. The man who'd killed her sister had done it to get to her. He'd admitted it. "I can't believe you!"

"I'm going to contact the local police and brief them on the situation. For all we know, this really could be a prank but I'm not taking any chances. You'll have security

twenty-four hours a day. I'm also going to send a team to interview Lucero, see if we can get something out of him."

"And why didn't you do this two years ago?" she snapped.

"We didn't think it was relevant." He sighed.

"Why not?"

"Your sister was..."

"What?" She wanted to hear him say it.

"You know what kind of lifestyle she led. We just assumed it was from one of her lovers. And for all we know, this could all be a prank." He sounded like a broken record.

In her gut she knew it wasn't a prank. The phone calls she could brush off but the break-in and the writing on that picture frame. That was personal. "Someone wouldn't track me down a year and a half later, talking about my dead sister if this was simply a prank! The fact remains, you should have told me everything you knew."

"We didn't think it was relevant...and we didn't want to prejudice the jury."

She noticed he kept using the word "we". Whenever he put the blame on other people, he used we but when he won a case, he used "I". What a bastard. She couldn't believe she'd ever put her faith in the man.

"So she liked to date and party. Big deal. What twenty-something girl doesn't? You should have dug deeper. At the very least, you should have told me about it. I've been walking around thinking this was some fluke because that bastard's in jail. Until the break-in last night I wasn't even truly worried. You're lucky I'm not fucking dead!" *Or worse.* She clutched the phone tighter against her ear, wishing it was his neck. Just because her sister had loved to party didn't mean she'd deserved what happened to her.

No one deserved to be raped and strangled to death. Especially not someone as carefree and full of life as her sister. And now it looked like some lunatic actually was after her.

"I'm sorry Sage. That's all I can give you right now. If Lucero did have an accomplice, we'll find him. I promise."

"Go to hell." She slammed the phone into the receiver. Her body shook with rage and a healthy dose of fear. How had this person found her? She'd started using her mother's maiden name, moved hundreds of miles away and worked at a mid-sized construction company as opposed to a multimillion dollar magazine enterprise.

She glanced at her wall clock. It was almost three. "Thank God," she muttered under her breath. Despite all her inner turmoil, the day had flown by quickly. At least that was one thing to be grateful for. She chewed on the end of her pen. Now she was actually glad Trent had insisted on purchasing her a security system. And she was going to pay him back. For how she felt, he could argue all he wanted, it didn't matter. She was taking back control of her life.

Trent had been amazing last night and this morning. Which only worried her even more. She kept trying to push him away but like a damn magnet, the man wouldn't leave her alone. Tonight she would tell him everything. Then he'd go away for sure. And she wouldn't blame him. She couldn't let anything happen to Trent. He was much too special to her and the longer she was around him, the more attached she got.

After a few minutes of deep breathing, she swiveled around from her desk to her work station and spread out her notes. It was time to focus on work. She had to update both her calendars if she wanted to keep Jason squared away. So much was happening so fast with the company it was only a matter of time before they needed to hire a couple more people. And if she could focus on work, maybe she could forget the other bullshit for a couple hours.

The next time she glanced at her clock, an hour had passed. Most of her anger had dissipated but the fear still lurked at the surface.

The door to her office opened but she didn't bother turning around. "The outgoing plans are rubber-banded, Margo." The other woman was sweet and Sage didn't want her seeing her upset. Margo would inevitably ask questions. And she didn't have any answers.

A heavy hand came down on her shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her skin until she realized who it was. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the job site?" She couldn't handle seeing him now. She felt weak and vulnerable and around him she had to be strong and secure enough to push him away.

Trent rotated her chair so that she faced him. Then he placed both hands on the armrests, caging her in. "I came by to drop off some paperwork for Jason." His voice was low, deep, intoxicating.

"He's not here," she breathed out, hating the inviting tone of her voice and hating the way her body was turned on at the mere sight of him. It was like a light switch when he came around.

He grinned wickedly as he leaned closer. "I know."

Before she could respond, he crushed his mouth over hers, probing, pushing, taking. As he deepened the kiss, he slid a hand up her leg, pushing at her skirt and toying with the edge of her panties. Rapid heat pooled between her legs at his teasing caresses. An alarm sounded in her brain to stop when she heard the sound of her office door opening.

She pushed at Trent's chest, trying to jerk away but it was too late. Margo stood in the doorway, her mouth a perfect "O", staring at them.

"The plans are over there." Trent nodded toward one of the tables as he slid his hand down but not completely away from her leg.

Too mortified to speak, Sage shoved at his hand. His eyes danced with barely contained amusement but at least he stood and had the decency to step back.

The other woman averted her gaze, grabbed what she needed and shuffled toward the door.

"Margo?" Trent spoke.

"Yes?" She wouldn't meet his gaze.

Sage wished the floor would open and swallow her whole. This was mortifying. How was she ever going to face the woman again?

"As soon as those go out you can lock up and leave." Trent's words were a command.

She shut the door behind her without a response, though Sage was fairly positive she heard muted laughter from the other office.

Sage immediately stood, ready to give him hell. "Damn it, Trent, now she's going to think—"

He advanced, pushing her against the desk. He attempted to silence her with another kiss but she pressed a hand to chest, forcing him back. "No."

Groaning, he lifted his head. "What is it woman? I've had a hard-on all day thinking about you." As if to show her, his hips surged forward, grinding against her. Then, as though he thought she didn't get the hint, he grabbed the hand she'd placed on his chest and moved it to his cock.

"Feel that?"

"Yes...no, damn it, stop for one second. We need to talk." She wrenched her hand away and he sighed in frustration.

"Can it wait until tonight?" He traced a finger down her cheek and jawbone and settled deeper up against her, spreading her legs apart with his thigh.

She swallowed but found her voice. "It's important."

"Are you married or dating someone?" His finger delved lower, to her collarbone, playing with the edge of her blouse. Her breasts grew heavy with need.

She shook her head. He knew she wasn't.

"Are you planning to quit here?"

She shook her head again.

"Then it can wait until dinner."

No. The voice in her head screamed to stop but that noisy bitch was silenced when he nipped her jaw.

"Fine," she breathed out. She *would* tell him over dinner. Inwardly she cursed her own weakness but rationalized another hour or two with him wouldn't affect anything.

In the distance she was vaguely aware of the bell attached the front door dinging.

"She's gone," Trent murmured before claiming her mouth in such a possessive, demanding way she had no choice but to grab onto him for support.

She clutched at his shoulders and when he moved to nuzzle her neck, she let out a low moan. He raked his teeth over her sensitive skin, drawing another gasp from her. They were at work, something she'd had general fantasies about in the past but nothing compared to the reality.

"I want to fuck you long and hard over this desk. When you come, I want my name on your lips," he whispered, his words sounded ragged and almost forced, as if he found it difficult to even speak.

Her pussy spasmed at what he was saying. He'd never been a big talker during foreplay and though his words weren't particularly dirty, they set her on fire.

When his hand made its way back up her skirt, she thought she'd come the moment he touched her. Pushing her panties away, he rubbed a thumb over her engorged clit, drawing a moan from somewhere deep inside. She'd worn a looser skirt today but hadn't imagined they'd be doing it on her work desk.

Trent made her feel things she'd never thought possible. When she was with him, everything felt right and she hated that it couldn't last.

"Stop thinking," he murmured against her neck.

"What?"

"Your entire body is tense. Relax and focus on the present." Though spoken low, his words were said with authority.

Forcing herself to focus on his hands and mouth, she eased back until she was perching on the edge of the desk. One finger, then two delved inside her slit while his thumb continued the onslaught against her clit. She moved her hips against his hand.

When he increased his momentum, she blindly reached out and started working at his belt buckle, tugging until the blasted thing came free. He shifted to give her better access. She slipped her hand under his jeans, pushing them down. She felt his cock spring free and sighed in appreciation. With one hand she started working him and traced the underside of his shaft, enjoying the feel of it pulsing beneath her.

Yeah, his finger wasn't going to be enough right now. She wanted him inside her. She grasped his cock tighter and started pumping him.

Trent jerked under Sage's erotic touch. He could feel himself close to the edge but he didn't want to come in her hands. Though his body fought it, he pulled away from her for a second.

He yanked a condom out of the pocket before shucking his pants and T-shirt. As he quickly rolled it on, he felt like a randy teenager again. In a few seconds he had her skirt and top pooled on the floor with his clothes. She'd worn another one of those button-up type tops and he was thankful they seemed to be her normal work attire. Easier access for him.

His hands shook—actually shook—when he'd drawn her top open this time. Somehow he managed not to rip the buttons free. The only thing stopping him from acting like a total animal was the fact that they'd have to go out in public after this. Just as quickly, he tossed her bra to the side.

Emotionally, she seemed determined to keep him at arm's length though and after all the stuff he'd discovered today, he thought he knew why. Not that he gave two shits about that. If she thought she could scare him off, she was one hundred percent wrong. He was going to be in her life and it was about damn time she got used to it.

She'd run from him once and even though he might have an understanding why, it wasn't happening again. She was his.

Now she stood in front of him wearing a simple black thong and three-inch come-fuck-me heels. His balls pulled up so tight he was ready to spontaneously explode from pure lust. When she raked her nails down his chest, he thought he actually might do just that but somehow he restrained himself.

“Lay back.” It wasn’t a request.

One dark brow lifted but she did as he said, shoving papers and file folders out of the way. Her back arched as she spread herself out like a sacrifice for him.

Staring at her, he had to remind himself to breathe. He traced his finger along her opening and smiled when she jumped. Her sweet aroma accosted him as her leg muscles tightened and her hips shifted, scooting closer to the edge of the desk.

He thought about teasing her a little longer but when she moaned he buried his tongue deep inside her. She tasted sweet and if the mewling sounds she kept making were any indication, it wouldn’t take her long at all. He smiled against her pussy.

Moving his tongue in and out of her warmth he took pure satisfaction from the small, jerky motions she made each time he stroked her. Shifting her body, he pulled her closer to the edge so he could taste more.

With a long swipe, he started as far back as she’d allow him and licked from her tight rosette back up to the pulsing nub. He flicked across her clit, earning him another yelp.

The soft hair between her legs tickled his face. Inhaling, he savored her smell and taste simultaneously. God, she was fucking perfection.

Her legs trembled almost violently so he placed a strong hand on her inner thigh when she started to crush his head. When he chanced looking up at her, her eyes were closed but she was touching herself. Rubbing over her breasts and stomach.

He increased his tempo against her clit and inserted two fingers. Her inner muscles clenched as a rush of cream soaked his fingers. When she started climaxing, he stood and joined with her, pushing balls-deep.

Her eyes were glazed over as she rode through the last waves of her orgasm. And he wasn't far behind her. Gripping her hips, he thrust forward as she milked him. The suctioning sound of his cock moving in and out of her was the only noise in the quiet office.

His abdominal and thigh muscles clenched as he emptied himself into the condom. When the unbidden fantasy of being inside her with no barrier played in his mind for the second time in twenty-four hours, he groaned and thrust one last time before falling onto the desk. The slender legs around his waist shifted when he moved but she kept her ankles secure behind him.

With his hands, he braced himself on either side of her head, staring down at her. A satisfied smile played on her lips. "I can't believe we just did that," she chuckled.

"Are you on the Pill?"

Still breathing hard, she shook her head.

"Well set up an appointment or do whatever you need to do."

Her eyes darkened and she swallowed. "We'll talk about that later."

"Why?" He shifted and pulled out of her as he stood back up.

She quickly scrambled to grab her clothes. After they were both dressed he stared at her expectantly.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked.

"You still haven't answered my question."

"I don't recall an actual question. I remember you ordering me to go on the Pill." She crossed her arms and leaned against her desk.

If she didn't have sex-tousled hair and her lips weren't beautifully swollen, he might be able to take her seriously. "Is there a reason you can't?"

"Can you let me close down my computer and we'll talk about this once we get out of here?" She avoided meeting his gaze.

His jaw clenched as she turned away and started cleaning up the fallen papers. "Sure. I'll meet you in the lobby. Listen though, you're not the only one who needs to talk. I know your last name is Radford."

She was bent over but her spine straightened at his words. Which was sort of the effect he'd been going for. He was sick of her half-truths and figured taking her off guard was the only way she'd be straight with him.

Sage swiveled as she stood and almost lost her footing. He made a move to help her but she backed away. "What the hell did you just say?"

"I know your last name is Radford, not Miller."

Her green eyes narrowed to slits as they spit fire at him. "Get out of here."

Okay, he hadn't been expecting that. "What?"

Completely taking him by surprise, she charged at him. She pushed her finger against his chest until he was in the outer lobby. "Get the hell out of here," she ground out.

He'd never seen her so angry before and wasn't quite sure what he'd done to warrant it. She'd been the one lying to him. Not the other way around. "Sage—"

"Now." She turned on her heel and slammed the door to her office.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face when he heard the lock slide into place.

"Fucking women," he muttered.

Chapter Six

Sage re-buttoned her blouse when she realized she'd missed two but her damn hands wouldn't stop shaking. She couldn't remember ever being so pissed. For a split second, when he'd said her last name, the possibility that he was her stalker crossed her mind but the ludicrousness of that made her laugh.

She had no idea what was going on but he'd obviously done a little investigation. After shutting off her computer and setting the phones to voicemail mode, she grabbed her purse and readjusted her skirt. Hell, the phones had been quiet all day and she was just lucky no one had called during their little escapade.

She'd had enough of manhandling and people invading her privacy to last a lifetime. The last thing in the world she'd expected was for Trent to do the same thing. She hadn't heard the door alarm go off so she assumed he was still out there.

Well, she couldn't hide in her office forever. Taking a deep breath, she opened her door and sure enough, he was still there. "What are you still doing here?"

"Giving you a ride home. You don't have a car remember?"

Damn. She'd forgotten about that. He'd insisted on driving her to work that morning instead of taking her to her place to let her pick up her car. Without responding, she fished her keys out of her purse and walked out the front door. Silently, he followed and waited until she'd locked up. She kept stride with him as they walked down a couple blocks to where he was parked.

When he opened the passenger door for her, she glared but decided to get in. With everything going on, she wasn't going to be stupid. Once he'd gotten in and started the ignition, he twisted to face her. "Are you planning to talk to me?"

"I'm still too mad." She averted her gaze out the window, trying to ignore what his scent was doing to her. She could smell him on her body and despite her anger, she was still a little turned on.

"The alarm system I was telling you about is being installed today."

Her head whipped around. "Then you can take me home."

"You're out of your pretty little mind, sweetheart. They won't be finished until later tonight." He glanced over his shoulder as he switched lanes and headed out of town.

"Supposedly the alarm system is the best, right?"

"Yep." His jaw twitched but he didn't look at her.

"Then why won't you take me home and I'll wait until it's ready?"

"Not until I do a few test runs. If everything is satisfactory, you can move back tomorrow." *And I'll be staying with you.*

He didn't voice the last part but she could practically hear the words roll off his tongue.

"Trent, someone is stalking me. Someone dangerous. He knows about you and threatened you last night. Don't you understand, you need to stay away from me."

A bark of laughter rumbled deep in his chest.

Her hands fisted in her lap. Why was he so stubborn? "Are you listening to a word I'm saying? The longer you're around me, the more danger you're putting yourself in. That's what I wanted to tell you...before," she finished lamely. She could feel heat creeping up her neck, wishing she hadn't started that thought.

His cell phone rang and he actually answered, completely ignoring her pleas. She wanted to scream in frustration.

"Yeah, I've got her with me right now...okay...okay...I'll contact you if anything comes up but we'll be staying at my place tonight...yep, they'll be finished with the installation by tomorrow."

"Who the hell was that?" she asked the second he hung up.

"Officer Graybar." He shot her a sideways glance, annoying her even more when he didn't elaborate.

"Will you please tell me what's going on?"

He pulled into his driveway. "Wait until we get in the house."

And now he was ordering her around? Fuming, she jumped down from the truck and stalked behind him. As soon as they stepped through the front door, she started firing questions at him.

"Damn it woman, let me reset the alarm."

When he flipped open the key pad cover next to the hall closet, she continued down the hallway to the kitchen. If there was ever an excuse to drink, today was it. She smiled when she found a six pack of light beer in the refrigerator.

"Will you grab one for me too?"

She glanced over her shoulder as Trent entered the room. "Depends. You ready to give me some answers?"

"I was ready at the office, until you decided to have a tantrum."

"A tantrum?"

He took the beer she handed to him and leaned against one of the counters. "What would you call it?"

She ignored the question and fought the urge to wipe the smirk off his face. "Can you please tell me how you know my real last name?"

"I had a friend run your social security number. Combined with what you'd already told me about your sister, it wasn't too hard to figure out who you are."

She gnawed on her bottom lip. Well that certainly didn't make her feel better. It hadn't taken Trent long at all.

"Do you finally feel like telling me why you ran out on me before?"

How had this gotten turned back around to her? She was supposed to be pissed at him but even though he'd gone behind her back, she was a little grateful she didn't

have to explain everything to him. "You obviously know what happened to my sister?" At his nod, she continued. "The day after the trial I quit my job, packed up what little I hadn't donated to charity and left New York. There's no way to say it other than I was really messed up when I met you, Trent. I hadn't been able to grieve until I knew that bastard was going to pay for what he did. Then I met you at that silly little bed and breakfast and you made me feel alive."

"So why'd you leave then?" His expression was hooded, unreadable.

"Partly I felt guilty, being so happy with you. But mainly, I needed to start over somewhere. Start fresh. I'd only planned to stay there a night...then you came along and..." She shrugged.

He set his beer down and stalked toward her. Immediately she tensed but when he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close she allowed herself to fall into his strong embrace. A small part of her felt liberated that she could finally admit what had happened. The other part was simply depressed rehashing the darkest time in her life.

"I'm sorry about your sister," he murmured into her hair. His deep voice reverberated through her veins, soothing every part of her.

Not trusting her voice, she nodded into his chest. She'd done enough crying already and didn't want a repeat of last night.

After a few moments, she took a small step back. "There's more."

"I know."

"Uh...how could you possibly what I'm going to say? I just found out this morning."

He cleared his throat. "I stopped by the Sheriff's Department right before I came to see you to check on your case. Steve had just received a call from a very agitated District Attorney in New York with instructions to protect you. I told him what I'd found out and he filled me in as best he could."

"That was fast."

"You better believe it. They've got two undercover guys watching your place and later tonight they're sending someone to stake out my place."

"Really?" Anthony had told her he'd take care of it but after the way he'd lied to her before she hadn't been so sure she could depend on anyone but herself.

Trent stared at her as if she'd grown two heads. "The DA knows he fucked up and from the way Steve told it, the guy wants to make it up to you. Why are you surprised?"

"I'm not. I guess this all feels surreal, to be dealing with this again." She grabbed her drink and went to sit at the kitchen table. Her legs felt as if they might give way at any moment. Stuff like this wasn't supposed to happen twice in a lifetime.

Trent sat across from her. "For the record, you're not leaving my side until this is figured out."

She clasped her hands around the cold beer. He shouldn't be around her. Hell, he shouldn't *want* to be around her. "Listen, I agree that I need protection but don't you think it's smarter if I have someone less involved stay with me? You might as well paint a big target on your forehead. This guy already knows that we're—"

"It's not up for discussion. Someone will be with you at all times, including at work."

"Does Jason know about this?"

"Yep and he's going to handle telling Margo."

She traced small circles on the table. She hated bringing Trent into this but he wasn't giving her much of a choice. Old memories resurfaced and she tried to smother them.

"What are you thinking about?" His deep voice grounded her.

She sighed and met his gaze. "Lucero."

Trent's brows snapped down, so she continued. "He was admittedly obsessed with me but he never hinted about having a partner. I don't understand how everyone missed it, myself included."

"He was a photographer right?"

She nodded. "At *En Vogue*, where I worked. He was actually an assistant photographer and it was like overnight he developed this weird obsession with me. They finally fired him and even then I had to take out a restraining order." It had been a nightmare. The man had shown up everywhere she went. At parties, clubs, even her damn gym. She'd moved twice and changed her number at least five times but it didn't matter. Somehow, he'd always tracked her down.

"When was the last call you received?"

Something told her he already knew the answer. Maybe he was testing her. "Last night."

His lips pulled into a thin line.

"What's that look for?"

He shook his head and stood. "Nothing. You hungry?"

She paused at the abrupt change of subject. "Don't you want to talk about this more?"

"What's there to talk about? Someone wants to kill you and I'm not going to let it happen. I'll worry about you and let the cops worry about him."

"So that's it?" She watched as he pulled a couple chicken breasts and vegetables from the refrigerator.

"Is there something else you wanted to talk about?" He glanced up as he pulled a cutting board from one of the cupboards.

"Why are you doing this?"

He shrugged. "It's been a long day and I'm hungry."

"Don't be a smart-ass Trent. Why are you doing this?" She spread her hands out in front of her body. "Why are you helping me?"

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just ask that." His neck muscles corded and his jaw clenched but he wouldn't meet her gaze.

"Fine, I'm going to take a quick nap before dinner. Is that okay or do you need my help?"

Still not looking at her, he spoke, his words curt. "I'll wake you in an hour."

She wanted to continue their conversation but stopped herself. He'd talk when he was ready and right now, her brain was close to being overloaded.

* * * * *

Trent pulled out a rectangular pan and slammed it down on the counter a little too hard before greasing it. Did Sage really not know how he felt about her? Hell, even if he didn't love her he'd be staying with her, protecting her. How could he not? He didn't know what kind of men she was used to but her perception of the opposite sex was about to undergo major surgery.

After combining all the ingredients, he set the timer to forty-five minutes and slid the chicken vegetable casserole into the oven. He started to go join Sage and catch a few minutes of rest but stopped when his phone buzzed against his hip.

It was Steve so he picked up immediately. "Yeah?"

"Everyone is in place. So far there's been no unusual activity at Sage's."

He walked down the hall to his living room and peered through the blinds. Sure enough, a car sat across the street. "I see your guy."

"Good. I'll probably make a drive by later. Can Sage talk right now?"

"She's taking a nap."

"When she wakes up ask her about a man named Graham Hartigan. He was the head photographer at *En Vogue* and worked closely with Lucero."

"So?"

"I just got a call from New York and Lucero's now claiming Hartigan was his partner."

"And they don't believe him?"

"The DA thinks he might say anything to get moved."

"Moved?"

"Yeah, he wants to move from Cell Block A to C. Apparently he doesn't like being the bitch to a bunch of neo-Nazis." Steve grunted.

"Have they cut him a deal?"

"If his story checks out they will. Everything okay on your end?"

"She's taking everything as well as can be considered." Stress lines had started to form around her eyes but Sage was a strong woman.

"I'll call you with any updates."

After they disconnected he bounded up the stairs. In the middle of his bed, Sage lay curled on her side clutching a pillow. He hadn't gotten much sleep the night before but he knew if he joined her now, he wouldn't get any either. His cock lengthened painfully as he watched her.

With her face relaxed, she actually looked peaceful. The desire to feel her naked body against his and admit how much she meant to him nearly overwhelmed him but he shut the door and left her alone instead.

* * * * *

Sage opened her eyes to a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Has it been an hour already?"

Trent nodded, his lips pulled up into a slight smile. "Afraid so. You want me to hold dinner for you?"

Stretching her arms above her head, she shook her head. "No, if I don't get up now, I'll wake up at three this morning and won't be able to go back to sleep." Her body screamed to stay under the warm covers but she forced her legs to obey and get out of bed.

He'd turned the heater on high but her yoga pants and matching tank top didn't help the chill that had descended on her so she threw on the sweatshirt she'd discarded earlier.

A small frown marred Trent's face as they walked toward the door.

"What?"

He shrugged and his frown turned to a mischievous grin. "I can't see your nipples through that thing."

"Pervert." Chuckling, she nudged him with her hip. Her stomach was growling and if she let him, they'd end up in his bed before she got some sustenance.

"Steve called while you were sleeping and wanted to talk to you about a Graham Hartigan."

She shrugged as they descended the stairs. "What about him? He was one of the top photographers where I used to work."

"Lucero claims he was his partner."

She stumbled on the bottom stair but Trent steadied her. "What?"

"They don't know if he was actually involved or if Lucero's lying to get a transfer."

She was silent as she digested the information and when Trent pulled out a chair for her, she gratefully sat at the kitchen table. "He did ask me out a few times but he was harmless." Or at least she'd assumed he was.

Trent placed a plate in front of her. "Eat."

Nodding, she took a bite. She felt too nauseous to eat but forced herself to chew and swallow. After she'd eaten a little more, Trent spoke again. "What else do you remember about him?"

"Not much except that he used more product in his hair than most women I know."
He couldn't have been involved, could he? It just didn't seem feasible.

"How did he take it when you turned him down?"

"Okay I guess. The first time he obviously didn't get the hint but the second time he actually asked me out in front of other people so I was pretty firm. He didn't bother me after that. In fact, he kind of avoided me." The second time he'd asked her for a date had been at the company Christmas party. She'd felt a little bad at embarrassing him in front of people but she'd also been pissed that he'd tried asking her out in front of others. Maybe he'd hoped she'd say yes since they weren't alone.

Trent started to speak when his phone buzzed. He glanced at the caller ID. "It's Steve," he said to her before answering.

Sage pushed her chicken around her plate while they talked. Trent wouldn't look her in the face and all his answers were one word. Curt and to the point. Whatever was going on, she knew it wasn't good.

As soon as Trent disconnected, she started firing questions at him. "What did he say? Good news? Bad news?"

He rubbed a hand over his face and pushed his plate away. "Both. The good news is it looks like Hartigan was Lucero's partner."

What little food she'd eaten rolled around in her stomach. The sick freak should be rotting in jail. Not free, enjoying his life and trying to ruin hers. "Why is that a good thing?" She couldn't understand the brief glimpse of satisfaction she'd seen on Trent's face.

"Don't you get it? At least we know who we're after now. He's not some faceless monster we're looking for anymore."

"Okay, what's the bad news?"

"He's gone missing."

"Missing?" She pressed a hand to her stomach, afraid she might be sick.

"He hasn't shown up for the last few photo shoots he was scheduled for and when they sent a couple officers down to question him about his involvement with Lucero, he was gone."

"He could be on vacation." Even to her own ears, the excuse sounded lame.

"I don't think so, sweetheart. He had a virtual shrine set up to you at his apartment."

"What?" All the air left her lungs in one whoosh.

Trent nodded, his expression grim.

"Why did he wait so long to come after me?"

"You moved here what, six months ago?" At her nod, he continued. "What were you doing the year before that?"

"Travelling. My sister and I always talked about taking a road trip, so after...after everything, I did all the things we'd ever wanted to."

"It sounds like you were never in one place long enough for him to track you. Contrary to popular belief, unless you're with the government or you're a hacker, it's not easy to track someone's credit card movements without shelling out a boatload of cash. My guess is he sporadically ran checks on your social security number, maybe he had a friend helping, who knows but he probably got a hit here not too long ago."

"So why not just come after me? Why all the stupid calls?"

"According to Steve he's been in Australia the past month working on a contracted shoot. And, he might want you but he hates you, which means he wants to make you suffer. He probably got off thinking he was terrifying you."

"And now he wants to kill me." It wasn't a question.

"We're going to stop this guy. I promise." Trent's reassuring words did little to reassure her. How could this be happening again? A slow ache spread across her skull. She thought she'd finally come to terms with her sister's death. Now the nightmare was starting all over again.

She racked her brain, trying to think if she should have seen the signs. Maybe if she'd paid closer attention, she'd have realized he was crazy. And maybe her sister would still be alive.

"Stop," Trent commanded.

"What?" Her eyes focused on his face.

"Stop playing the what-if game in your head. This is his fault, not yours. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

Too late for that. Somehow she managed to nod politely but guilt assaulted her in potent waves, reminding her that she hadn't come through for her sister when she'd needed it most. She should have seen the signs. She'd worked with the man for God's sake. What if her rejection had pushed him over the edge? An involuntary shudder racked her body at the thought.

Chapter Seven

Trent lay on his back staring at the ceiling. Sage lay next to him, curled up against his chest. Her breathing was finally steady but she'd been tossing and turning the past couple of hours. After dinner she'd been unusually quiet. He guessed she was blaming herself for what happened.

And she was pulling farther and farther away from him. He could see it in her eyes with every glance.

"Sage?" He shifted his body, feeling a little guilty at waking her.

"Hmm?" Her head stirred against his chest.

"Sweetheart, I need to talk to you."

This time her eyes flew open. She pushed up on her elbow, her breast brushing against his chest. He tried to ignore his acute physical response. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." Even to his own ears, his voice came out hoarse and scratchy.

"What's going on then?" She laid her head back on his chest and threw a silky leg over him.

"Earlier you asked why I was helping you." In his thirty-two years on Earth he'd never said this to another woman but he knew it was true. The words felt foreign on his tongue but it was time to be honest. "The answer is simple. I love you."

She stiffened against him and wouldn't meet his gaze. "You don't mean that," she mumbled against his chest.

He expelled a deep breath. The woman was going to drive him mad. "I don't huh?" he murmured into her hair.

Wordlessly she shook her head, her hair brushing against his face.

"I looked for you in New York." The words cut through the air like a fifty cal sniper rifle.

She jerked upright, meeting his gaze, her eyes wide. "What?"

"When you disappeared, for the first time in my life I felt...lost. I'd been offered work up there and even though I knew it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, I had to try." He'd never been this honest with anyone before and the feeling was fucking terrifying. Especially since she didn't appear to be reciprocating.

He could navigate across any terrain on the planet blindfolded, could kill a man twenty different ways and knew how to operate practically every type of firearm imaginable. Yet telling this sexy woman he loved her was the most intimidating thing he'd ever done. During his formative years his mother had "loved" a lot of men, hence the fact that he and his brothers all had different fathers.

Hell, he'd never admitted to anyone, including Jason, why he'd stayed in New York as long as he did. The work had been steady but he could have come back to North Carolina anytime and done just as well.

Sage stared at him with those bright green eyes and his gut clenched. He couldn't read what was going on in that head of hers. Silently, she leaned forward and touched her lips to his.

The movement was tentative at first, then she kissed him with an urgency he hadn't been expecting. Hell, he hadn't been expecting anything at all. He just wanted to get this off his chest so he could finally get some peace. And maybe a couple of hours of decent sleep.

Shifting, she straddled him but continued her greedy assault on his lips. Grasping her hips, he wanted to just plunge forward and impale himself inside her but managed to refrain. "Condom. Now," he ground out.

She leaned over and grabbed one from the drawer but she didn't make a move to put it on him.

If he didn't put one on now, he was liable to do something stupid. Not that he'd ever intentionally do something to hurt Sage. The only thing he cared about was being with her forever.

Forever. How could that word not scare him?

His Sioux ancestors had clear beliefs about certain souls being destined to meet. Until recently, he hadn't put much stock in it. Now he knew better. It wasn't a coincidence he'd found her again.

Her dark hair pillowed down around him as she kissed him. She rubbed her folds over the length of his cock but didn't take things any further.

The teasing was torture but something he gladly endured.

Since she seemed content to sit there all night, he palmed both of her breasts. In this position they fell perfectly into his grasp. She swatted his hands away as she delved lower, kissing his neck, then chest.

That's when he realized what she was doing and his chest swelled. She might not be ready or even able to tell him she loved him but this was about him right now.

Using her tongue, she swirled around his nipples, alternating back and forth before she trailed kisses down his stomach.

His cock throbbed so painfully all he could think about was flipping her over and mounting her but he restrained himself. If this is what she wanted to give him, he'd let her. Hell, he'd let the woman do damn near anything if it made her happy. Clutching the headboard above his head was the only way he could hold back.

Slowly, she raked her teeth over his abdomen, causing his entire body to jolt. He was all for foreplay but he wanted her mouth on his cock like he wanted his next breath. Her hand fisted around him, then she glanced up to meet his gaze.

When she moistened her sensuous lips, he thought he'd die. With a mischievous smile, she bent over him, her dark hair creating a veil around her face. At first she

flicked her tongue over and around the head of his cock, then she lightly blew her hot breath on him.

His hips jerked up, searching for release. Enough was enough. Apparently she understood he'd reached his limit because she cupped his balls and took him as deep as her mouth would allow.

Quickly, she fell into a rhythm. One that had him closer and closer to exploding. He slipped his fingers through her hair and lifted it back. He wanted to see her face as she worked him.

He groaned aloud when she shifted up higher on her knees to take him deeper. Her eyes were closed as she sucked and just when he felt his balls pull up impossibly tight, she slowed her movements.

She withdrew him from her warm mouth and licked down his length. Starting at the bottom of his shaft, she stroked up in one arousing motion before doing it again.

"No more torture, woman," he ground out.

He could feel, more than hear the laughter come from her body as she leaned lower and sucked his balls into her mouth.

His entire body jolted at the sensation. Before he could reconsider, he scooted back, out of her grasp and grabbed the condom. Somehow he managed to roll it on without ripping it.

She sat back on her legs, watching him through veiled eyes. Her lips were pink and puffy and while he'd love nothing more than to let her finish what she'd started, he needed to be inside her body.

"On your knees," he ordered.

Her eyes widened but she did as he instructed. On shaky legs, she swiveled around and repositioned herself. He ran a palm over her smooth ass and an involuntary shudder raced through his body. The woman was pure perfection.

When he adjusted himself behind her, he tested her slickness with two fingers. Good. She was drenched and ready.

He pounded into her, loving the feel of his cock dragging against her tight walls. In this position he could go as deep as possible. She mumbled something he couldn't make out.

"What was that?"

"Harder." This time there was no mistaking her request.

He fisted her long hair, slightly tugging her head back. "Touch yourself." He was close to climaxing but he wanted her to find pleasure first.

Reaching around he tugged sharply on one of her nipples, earning him a gasp of surprise, which quickly turned to a moan. Her pussy milked him even harder.

As he'd instructed, she had one hand between her legs but her other gripped the sheet so tightly he could see the whites of her knuckles. He let her hair fall from his hands. It glided down her back like a waterfall.

He increased his movements, knowing she was close. Her inner walls clutched him tighter each time he pounded into her and her sweet ass protected her from the heavy weight of his movements.

Her sighs and moans mixed right along with his.

"Come on, sweetheart. Come for me." He needed her to come first.

There was so much he wanted to give her, it scared him. For a reason he couldn't put his finger on, tonight felt different. Like they were finally on the same page. Like she'd finally come to terms that she belonged with him.

"Trent," she moaned out his name as violent shudders racked her body. Now both her hands clutched the sheet as she writhed underneath him.

Her vagina clenched around his shaft so tightly, he lost it. His grunts and the sound of his balls slapping against her was now the only noise in the otherwise quiet room.

After what felt like forever, he emptied himself then collapsed forward, forcing her to do the same. He kept his weight on his arms though, not wanting to smother her. She shifted and twisted underneath him. His cock made a popping sound when it withdrew.

She maneuvered and flipped so that they were facing each other. "Trent." She paused before starting to speak again but he covered her mouth with his.

Whatever she was going to say could wait. It was too soon for her to return his feelings. He could deal with that for now.

She'd been running from her past for so long and now that she'd finally gotten settled somewhere, her nightmares had started all over again. The feel of her skin against his was the only thing he cared about at the moment. As long as she didn't run out on him again, he could handle anything.

"Get some sleep." He discarded his condom before falling back onto the bed.

She didn't respond but wrapped her arms and legs around him instead. Soon her steady breathing permeated the quiet night air. Once he was sure she was asleep he inspected the doors, windows and alarm system one more time. His system was nothing compared to the one she now had. Tomorrow he'd pack up his stuff and head to her place.

A quick glance outside eased his worry a fraction. Steve's cruiser sat next to the original cop car. He grinned to himself. He should have known Steve would do more than just a drive-by. He'd probably stay staked out the entire night too.

Once he was sure everything was as secure as it could ever be, he chambered a round in his forty and laid it on the nightstand underneath an open book.

Then he let sleep finally overtake him.

* * * * *

Sage opened her eyes to the feel of a hand over her mouth. Immediately her body went into fight mode. She started to struggle when she realized it was Trent.

When he saw understanding in her eyes, he removed his hand and placed a finger over his mouth.

She nodded. The house was quiet. Much too quiet.

And that's when it hit her. The room was dimly lit thanks to the stars and moon but the light from the digital clock on his nightstand was off.

Her stomach roiled. There wasn't a storm so someone must have cut the power.

Trent handed her a gun and using hand gestures, motioned to the bathroom. Once they got to the entryway, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Don't come out for anyone but me."

She wanted to argue but knew it was impossible. Once inside, she threw on a discarded T-shirt and crouched down near the tub. The weapon felt foreign in her hands. After everything that had happened, she'd actually gotten a concealed weapons permit and had taken plenty of classes but she'd never gotten used to the feel of a gun.

And she prayed she'd never have to use it.

Light from the two small circular windows gave her enough illumination to see herself and make out shapes and figures in the room.

Her heart pounded mercilessly against her rib cage. Never before had she felt so helpless. She didn't know what Trent was doing, if he was even okay. Nothing.

If anything happened to him — no, she wouldn't think like that.

She should have told him how she felt about him earlier. The words had stuck in her throat though. Growing up, her parents hadn't been big on affection, so she'd learned from their example.

That was a lousy excuse though and she knew it. He'd manned up and told her how he felt. And something told her those few words had taken a lot for him to admit. Which made her feel even more crappy, if that was even possible.

Gunshots reverberated through the house, jerking her back to reality.

She jumped to her feet and rushed to the door. For a moment she paused with her hand on the knob. He'd told her to stay put but if he was lying bleeding to death and she could have done something to stop it, she'd never forgive herself.

Easing open the door, she peeked outside. The room was empty. Hurrying, she tugged on a pair of sweatpants.

If she was going to be coming up against her stalker, she wasn't doing it half-naked.

Holding her breath, she opened the door to the hallway. Also empty. Though she wanted to expel a loud sigh, she held back. Shadows created grotesque figures down the hall leading to the stairs but she forced herself onward.

If Trent was hurt, maybe she could get outside. And why hadn't the cops responded anyway? They should have heard the shots.

A flash of heat surged through her body. Maybe they were dead.

Her feet were silent against the floor as she inched toward the stairwell. She could hear Trent's voice and it sounded like he was talking on the phone.

Still clasping her gun as if it was a lifeline, she rushed down the stairs. His voice grew louder and she could tell he was talking to the police now.

"Been shot...I need an ambulance...I don't know if they're all right...yes..."

She rounded the corner at the end of the stairs and crept toward the kitchen, toward Trent's steady voice.

"Trent?" Her voice came out shaky.

His back was turned to her. Guarding the doorway with gun in hand, Trent was on the phone. But at least he was alive and unharmed.

He spared her a quick glance. "Sage. Don't come in here."

If he was able to talk, then he was fine. Ignoring his order, she continued toward the kitchen.

Peeking around Trent, she saw Graham Hartigan lying on the floor. A moonbeam illuminated his still figure. A big-ass gun was a couple of feet from his body and with the exception of the ski mask pulled back on his head, he didn't look scary.

His sprawled figure looked smaller than the man she remembered. He was only a couple of inches taller than her but on the floor and bleeding, he looked so non-threatening. She clutched her gun tighter.

"Is he dead?"

"Damn it woman, don't you listen to anything?"

She ignored his question. "Where are the cops?"

"On their way. I don't know if Steve's okay though. He should have heard those shots."

"I'll go check on—"

"You'll do no such thing. Stay behind me and don't move until reinforcements arrive. I'm serious." This time he met her gaze.

The tone in his voice left no room for argument. Nodding, she started to shift back when movement from her peripheral vision caught her eye.

The previously immobile man pulled something from behind his back. She didn't think. She just reacted. Trent lifted his gun but she couldn't take a chance.

Losing Trent was not an option. Using the full force of her body weight, she moved to tackle him.

He was faster though.

Realizing what she was doing, his arm shot out as he threw his body over hers, propelling her backward and into the hallway.

Loud booms erupted as they flew through the air. It was as if everything was happening in slow motion. A few bright flashes surrounded them and she was vaguely aware when something ripped through her shoulder.

When they hit the floor, pain fractured through her entire left side. She didn't know if it was from the fall or worse.

Trent rolled over her. "Damn it woman, what were you thinking."

When she tried to sit up, he hoisted her into his arms and rushed for the front door.

"What are you doing?" She tried to struggle in his arms but he held her closer.

"Getting you the hell out of here." As they stumbled into the front yard, two police cruisers, an ambulance and a fire truck, all with flashing lights zoomed up onto the lawn and into his driveway.

Men and women emptied from the vehicles and swarmed the house like locusts, brushing past them.

"What about him?" She didn't need to specify.

"He's dead, trust me."

"How do you know?"

"Half his body is gone."

"What—"

"Son of a bitch rigged his body with explosives."

Holy shit! That's what that noise had been. She thought he'd had a machine gun or something. "Oh my..." Words failed her then. Her throat clenched with pent-up tears but she held them back.

He put her on her feet but gripped her shoulders. "Are you okay to stand?"

Mutely, she nodded.

When he turned from her, she grasped his arm. "What are you doing?"

"I'm finding you a medic."

As if on cue, a woman wearing an EMT uniform rushed up to them. "Is anyone hurt?"

She shook her head but Trent intervened. "I want her checked out."

The woman nodded and took Sage by the arm.

Sage turned to Trent. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"I need to find out if Steve is okay. He hasn't been responding to my calls."

Nodding at him, she allowed the other woman to lead her to the back of the ambulance. She hadn't realized how wound up she was but once she sat down near the rear door, her muscles relaxed against the cool metal.

Her nightmare was over.

* * * * *

One Week Later

Trent opened the front door to Sage's town house and stepped inside. He shed his jacket and hooked it on the coatrack. Immediately he was accosted by the appetizing aroma coming from the kitchen.

"Sage?"

"In here."

When he stepped into the bright room, he was almost disappointed to find her wearing clothes. Yesterday she'd been wearing an apron and nothing else when he walked through the door. After dropping a brief kiss on her lips, he collapsed onto one of the chairs.

Today she still wore the apron but it looked as if she was actually cooking. "Is that what I think it is?" He motioned toward the stove.

She grinned and his heart skipped a beat. He couldn't imagine ever getting tired of that smile. Something she seemed to be doing with more frequency. "I hope it turns out okay but I've got a menagerie of stuff here. Blueberry Wojapi, frybread, wahu—okay, I'm not going to even try to pronounce it but they're basically corn fritters."

The correct term was Wahuwapa Wasna but he was surprised she even knew what it was. "How'd you learn to do all this?"

"Your mother." The words dropped like a grenade.

He nearly toppled over in his chair. "My what?"

"She came by to visit Jason today at work and boy was she pissed when she found out you were living with a woman and she didn't know about it." Sage made a tsk tsk sound before turning back toward the stove.

"My *mother* is in town?" Last he'd heard she was living in Vegas with a new boyfriend. At least she hadn't married this one. Not yet anyway.

"Yep. She said your father used to make this stuff all the time and that it was your favorite. Oh, I invited her to dinner tonight."

"What?" He knew he was practically yelling but he couldn't stop the raising pitch of his voice.

She smiled demurely over her shoulder at him. "How's Steve doing?" The little vixen ignored his question.

Standing, he moved to join her by the stove. "He's driving the doctors and nurses crazy but he's going to be fine." He'd been stabbed three times while doing reconnaissance around Trent's house but none of the wounds had proved fatal. He'd been knocked out cold for an hour before the paramedics arrived but since he didn't die immediately, they'd been optimistic he'd make it. Thankfully he had. The other officer hadn't been so lucky.

"Good. Now why don't you help me set the table in the dining room?"

"Bossy much?" He chuckled as he started to retrieve plates from the cupboard.

"Trent?"

He turned around from what he was doing. "Yeah?"

She twisted a dishcloth in her hand when she met his gaze. "I should have told you this before but...well...damn it, I love you."

His eyebrows rose in amusement. "That's an interesting declaration."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I've been trying to think of the perfect way to tell you. Don't give me a hard time."

"Oh, I plan on giving you a very hard time later."

Her cheeks flamed a delicious shade of red. "I should have said something before everything happened but I was afraid if I put the words out there, you'd be taken away from me. The coincidence of us finding each other again was almost too much. I didn't want to mess things up."

He took a few steps until he stood toe to toe with her. Placing his hands on her hips, he drew her close. "It's not a coincidence that we found each other. The Sioux believe all souls are on a journey and some souls are simply destined to meet each other no matter what you do or where you go in life. What happens when those souls meet, however, is up to the individuals."

"Free will and all that?"

"That's exactly right. The future isn't written."

"Then I'm glad destiny gave us a second chance." She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest.

He breathed in her scent and pulled her close. "Me too."

About the Author

Katie Reus fell in love with romance at a young age through books she'd pilfered from her mom's stash. Years later, she still loves reading romance almost as much as she loves writing it. When she's not plotting or writing, she loves to travel with her husband. In addition to writing erotica, she also writes romantic suspense and light paranormals. No matter the genre, Happily Ever After is always a must.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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