

Cerríðwen Press

TELL ME *Lies*



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Tell Me Lies

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TELL ME LIES

Jessica Shin

Dedication

To Bill, supplier of endless support, encouragement and caffeine.

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Chapter One

Just when you think a hit is going to be a simple in and out, bullet to the head, off someone and be done with it, some asshole shows up and ruins things. I was cursing this particular asshole as I crouched behind an overturned cocktail table, bullets zinging by my head. Only moments before, I was a breath away from finishing the job. Hal Greenoe would be dead and my happy ass would be on its way back to Atlanta, end of story.

Unfortunately, in this version of the story Chester the Henchman yelled, "Gun!" drew his own and started firing at me. Hal hit the deck, I tipped the table like a sideshow spirit medium and managed to avoid getting a bullet in my ass, or anywhere else for that matter.

The shooting stopped for a moment. I blew an errant strand of blonde hair out of my eye and calculated the risk of sneaking a peek at the world behind the table. The area that used to be the bar was a mess of glass and liquor. It made me thirsty. The bartender, having mixed his last cosmo, lay dead over the top of the bar. That pissed me off. If I'd just been allowed to do my job that bartender could have poured me a stiff glass of bourbon and I'd be on my way.

"Fuck," I whispered. I couldn't stay sitting on the barroom floor, my back to the table bottom forever. I looked to my right. Thirty feet to the closest exit. Two bodies on the floor. *Jesus, I thought, Chester is a really shitty shot.* To my left there was an emergency exit. That would set off the alarm and probably bring the cops.

I listened intently. The band was either dead or too afraid to move or speak. I heard someone breathing hard and fast, so it seemed that at least Chester had managed not to shoot himself. I only heard one other person breathing. Where was Hal?

The sound of the magazine being released from the frame of the pistol was barely audible. It could be mistaken for any number of things. Metal sliding on the floor under someone's shoe. A belt buckle being latched. But I knew what it was. I'd heard that sound far too many times to mistake for anything else. It was my escape.

Two seconds after I heard Chester release his empty magazine, I stood straight up. In one swift motion I turned, raised my Para Ordnance 9mm and fired a single round into Chester's very surprised noggin. Before he hit the floor, I was heading for the exit. I had to find Hal.

He couldn't have gone far, I reasoned. Then I heard the squealing of tires and knew that he could, in fact, soon be very far away, from the perspective of a woman standing on the street outside a shot-up club wearing three-inch heeled boots. But wait—the car was coming around the corner in front of the club. It had to. There was no exit from the rear parking lot.

I stepped back inside the door to the club and flattened my body against the wall. I saw the headlights of a big black Lincoln careen around the corner. It was just enough warning for me to step out of the darkness and start firing at the car.

I blew out two of the tires and capped the driver. The Town Car plowed into a fire hydrant, sending water shooting in all directions and burying the hydrant in the grill. I dashed around the back of the car and came around the other side to open the back door. It wasn't even locked. Idiot.

Like it was meant to be, I slid into the backseat next to Hal Greenoe, Boston's newest crime boss, who had taken an unfortunate interest in the Atlanta organized crime circuit. I shot the two goons who were still alive. I put my arm around Hal's shoulders and lifted the barrel of the gun to rest underneath his chin.

"I'm Adrian," I whispered in his ear. A fat bead of sweat rolled down the side of his balding head. "You're finished."

Pushing the barrel into his chin, I tilted his head away from me and squeezed the smooth, hard trigger beneath my finger. I sat motionless for a moment, the blood and brains splattering practically every window in the vehicle like bright, shining red fireworks announcing my victory.

I crawled out of the Lincoln and walked back into the bar. There was a bottle of scotch that hadn't been shot and so I poured myself two fingers. I knocked it back in a heartbeat, hoping it would fill that dark, empty hollow inside me. Looking down at the blood sprayed on my forearms made that hollow seem to grow. The scotch wouldn't fill the space. It would make me forget for a moment, though.

Two hours later, I had the cab driver pull into a gas station on the way to the airport. I walked around behind the convenience store and deposited the Para Ordnance, wiped clean of prints and wrapped up in a diaper, into the dumpster. Our Boston contact would pick it up soon. I hated to leave the gun. I'd rather liked it.

The Boston spring nighttime air was cool against my freshly showered body. It was still chilly here, but it would be plenty warm in Atlanta. I enjoyed the break from the heat while I could.

The cab driver thankfully was not one of the chatty types. He left me in front of the Delta terminal with my carry-on bag and a receipt for the fare. Standing there in front of the door, holding the bag, I felt an odd sense of déjà vu. For a moment I saw a small white house in front of me instead of the terminal, and the bag in my hands was heavy and wet and paper instead of cool leather. I shook away the thought and walked into the airport.

My ten-hour stay in Boston was not all I'd hoped it would be. I went through airport security check point for the second time in less than twelve hours. I had thirty minutes until departure of my 6 a.m. flight. Just enough time for breakfast. I thought about the four men in the Lincoln, their brains and blood covering the fine leather interior. Maybe just coffee.

I found the coffee unsatisfying. Maybe it was the whiskey still trickling through my system, but it just didn't give me the lift I was hoping for. *Of course*, I reminded myself, *you have been awake for nearly twenty-four hours. Maybe that's the problem.*

I threw away half of the amaretto latte and boarded the plane. I didn't even wait until take off before slipping into some much deserved sleep with the images from the Lincoln still burned into my mind.

* * * * *

I felt young. Very young. And confused. Scared. Not emotions I was used to having. I stared up at the white house in front of me, focusing on the big red door. I was tired. The bag I was holding was heavy. The door started to open. The knob was so close to me. Was I standing on my knees? The big red door was open. Inside was the bar from Boston. The bartender waved at me and lifted up a glass of brandy. He drank it and the liquor poured out from the bullet holes in his chest like it would in the old-time cartoons. There was someone sitting at the bar. His hulking figure turned and looked at me though mostly faceless, meaty tissue and cartilage where facial features should have been.

He opened his lipless mouth and said, "You want truth?" His laughter filled the bar and echoed around me, reverberating through my body. The bartender joined in the laughter and the shaking grew worse.

A seizure, I thought, I'm having a seizure.

A loud pop like a .45 going off jolted me from the dream and back into the airplane. No one was laughing. The turbulence was bad, worse than any I'd ever experienced.

The guy next to me didn't look nervous. He looked over at me and said, "Nothing compared the flight I took over the Alps once. Some kind of storm was moving in, nearly dropped us on top of a mountain."

He smiled at me, his stockbroker-accountant-salesman face showing genuine emotion. He was trying to comfort me. I smiled back as best I could. The turbulence lasted the next several minutes, until just before we began our descent into Hartsfield Atlanta Airport. My seatmate told me all about how great the ski trip was that followed the frightening flight over the Alps. Despite my tired, disturbed mood, I actually enjoyed his story. A cozy little lodge with friends surrounding a fireplace sipping hot buttered rum after a day on the slopes.

I went to a bonfire one time. It was someone's car with that someone in it, but the fire was nice. I had a sip of Tony Litton's champagne instead of hot buttered rum. I didn't think that the guy sitting next to me would like my story, so I listened to him until it was time to deplane. I briefly wondered if he would be so cordial if he knew I had been responsible for five deaths only hours before.

The airport was bustling. It was a Tuesday morning and thousands of business travelers were making their way in and out of the "Gateway to the South" that I called home. They were evenly split between the hurried and the leisurely, depending on how

close their flight times were. They shifted their laptop case straps on their shoulders and typed into their PDAs and chatted away on their cell phones.

I lifted my own cell phone out of my pocket and turned it on. I dialed the only number that mattered to me. The number to the Office.

"Hello."

It wasn't a question. It wasn't a tone of wondering who it could possibly be. It was a statement, just as it had been all my life.

"I'm back," I said. "Tell Drake."

With that I hung up and made my way to the train station embedded within the airport. I sat on the dormant train, waiting for it to awaken and carry me into the heart of the city. The airport was the end of the south line. If you wanted to go north, you had to wait. *The end of the line*, I thought.

My mind drifted back to those business people in the airport. Those people that I could never be like. Them. They had jobs that did not keep the morgue in business. They had families. They had 401(k) accounts and a financial plan. They had cars that weren't stolen. Kids. Credit cards with their own names on them. Electric bills and church memberships. Those people. Them.

I shook my head to myself as the train began to move. Some of them were on the train with me, heading into downtown for a meeting or a sales pitch. They were dressed nicely. I looked down at my jeans and black sleeveless top. Maybe I should start dressing better. Maybe I should wear suits like the guys.

Guys. Shit. I picked up my cell phone and dialed my voicemail, pretty sure of what I would hear.

"You have two new messages," the automated voice said. I hit one to play the first message.

"Um, hey, Adrian, it's Mark," the message began. I knew. He didn't have to say it. *Don't say it*, I thought.

"I guess you had to go out of town again or whatever. I sat at the restaurant for only an hour this time before I left. I know you always apologize and you always have a reason but... I just have to... I hate to do it this way."

No, no, don't say it.

"I was going to say it after dinner, if you'd shown up. But since all I can get is your voicemail these days, I guess I have no choice. I have to move on, Adrian. I can't wait on you every time only be disappointed in the end. I really liked you and we could have had a chance, but...anyway, I wish you all the best. Maybe I'll see you sometime."

Click.

Of course. He had every right. I treated him like absolute shit. I didn't really mean to, it just happened that way. What was I thinking, anyway, trying to have a boyfriend who was one of them? One of those people I could never be. He was a CPA. He was nice. He was reasonably good in bed.

Which is why I stopped calling him. I stood him up the last time on purpose. He needed to be away from me. He deserved a girl who was...one of them. Not me. All I could bring him was death. Knowing all of that didn't make it any easier to be rejected. On voicemail, even.

The voice on the second message brought me out of my downward spiral.

"Yo, Adrian," the voice said with a laugh. "I'm gonna be in town for a few days, hot stuff. Hope I get to see you. I'm staying at the Hyatt. Call me."

I smiled. Tony Litton. Yes, he could bring my spirits up. Mark wasn't meant to be, never would be right anyway. Tony was a far better match. Tony was not a CPA. Tony hadn't killed as many people as I had, but he wasn't a stranger to murder.

The train driver called out the name of my stop, but it was an unintelligible mumble. I stepped off the car and sucked in a deep breath of downtown smog, glad to be home.

I took the escalator up to the street and walked the four blocks to my destination, the Office. A joke of sorts. The Office was Ezra Drake's home. The Office was also the official hang out for all of us who worked for him. A few of us lived there too, in the block of apartments on the third and fourth floors, those of us who had little or no criminal record. Even though I'd never been caught, I did not live at the Office.

I walked up the stairs to the door and walked inside. As I entered The Lobby, the bar located on the lower floor of the Office, I saw Jimmy Dean and waved. His real name wasn't Jimmy Dean, we just called him that because it looks like he ate a lot of sausage. I don't know his real name. He might not have known his real name either. He'd been working for Ezra for twenty-seven years, almost as long as I'd been alive.

The Lobby was a mix of foyer and pool hall with a large, classic style bar complete with stained glass built into the wood. It was half the length and depth of the building, two stories high and filled with original woodwork. Well, as original as it gets in old Atlanta. Original means it was built after the Union soldiers burnt everything to the ground during the Civil War. It was dark and smoky and filled with leather. The portion of the room that held the pool tables had a lower ceiling to accommodate the overhead lighting for the tables. The Lobby was one of Ezra Drake's legit businesses. This one actually had customers who didn't know who he really was.

I walked through The Lobby to the elevator. The doors opened as I approached and I was greeted by Benson. He probably had a first name, but I didn't know it. I didn't care to know it.

Benson leered at me and looked me up and down the way he always did, then said, "Heya, Adrian," as if he hadn't just molested me with his eyes.

"Benson," I said, the most minimal greeting I could think of.

"Ezra's waiting for you upstairs. I heard Boston was a goat fuck."

"Blow me," I said, pushing him aside and hitting the button for the top floor. Benson backed out of the elevator, slid his hand over his salt and pepper hair as he stared me down. The doors closed on our locked gaze. How I hated him.

The elevator reached the tenth floor. The doors opened automatically, but I punched my code into the keypad and the doors closed, taking me up one more level. When they reopened, I walked down the hallway before me toward the two men stationed at the giant double doors on my right. Gray and Dallas nodded at me. I nodded back. They opened the doors, allowing me to walk into the room.

"Adrian, my dear," Ezra said, standing up from behind his oversized desk. He walked around the side, a spring in his step, showing no sign of his sixty-five years holding him back whatsoever. He gave me a big smile and hugged me. I hugged him back. I may not have been wild about some of the dipshits he had working for him, but Ezra's presence was always a comfort to me, like coming home.

"How was the flight?" he said, sitting back down in his chair.

"Bumpy," I said, leaning against the desk. "So the Boston contact told you what happened?"

"Yeah, they told me about the shit storm. What the hell happened?"

"One of Greenoe's guys had a nervous finger. Saw my metal for half a second and started blowing away everyone in the club."

"Jesus. But you got the job done, right."

"Of course."

"Well, not every job is perfect, eh?" Ezra said, winking at me. His blue eyes twinkled like they held a secret. He looked like someone's happy grandpa, his hair completely silver and his lips turned up on one corner in a mischievous grin. His suit wasn't the everyday retiree's shuffleboard suit, however. The three thousand dollar silk Italian suit he had on would not be seen down at the bingo hall.

"Unfortunately," I said slowly. "What's going on? You're awfully happy for this early in the morning."

"I've got a little birthday present for you," he said, his grin widening.

"Really?" I asked, drawing it out, suspicious. "What is it?"

"You'll have to wait and find out," he said, teasing. "You're a day early."

I smiled.

"Do I get a hint?"

"Hmmm," he said, leaning back in his executive chair, pondering. He rested a crooked finger on his chin and said, "What kind of a clue could I give you without giving it away."

I sighed.

"Let me help. Is it made by Glock or Smith & Wesson?"

"That's it," he said, jumping up like he'd been hit by a stroke of genius. "That's your hint. It doesn't use bullets, but it can carry them."

"Well, that narrows it down," I said with a laugh. I was moderately curious but there was something more important on my mind. "So...I heard that Tony Litton is in town."

"Yes, that's right," Ezra said, his jovial tone almost abruptly turning south. "I brought him in for a few days to help take care of some deliveries. He seems to like Miami."

"Except for the hurricanes."

"Ain't that the truth," Ezra said, laughing, the unexpected turn in mood gone in a heartbeat. "Well, you're probably tired, so I'll let you get on home and get some rest."

"It was a long night," I said, standing up. "Can I have my piece?"

Ezra opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out my .40 caliber Glock, which I'd dropped off at the Office in a rush on my way to the airport. He handed to me, the teasing grin back on his face. I checked the chamber. Empty. I checked the magazine. Empty.

"Bullets too," I said with a sigh. Ezra laughed and handed me the full clip I'd given it to him with. I gave him back the empty one and said, "I hope you didn't have any fun with my car while I was gone."

"Would I do that?" he stated innocently, touching his palm to his chest. I shook my head, allowed him a small smile and headed out the door.

The parking garage was attached to the building. I located my black Acura CL on the second level and slid inside. I wanted to go home and rest. I was beat. Tony was going to have to wait.

I lived a few miles from the Office in a three-story townhouse. I pulled into the garage and parked, then let the garage door slide closed behind me. I sat there in the car for a few minutes, just sitting. For no reason. In the darkness, I saw a flash of brain and blood on glass. I shook my head. It never followed me like this. I had training so that it wouldn't. What the hell was going on with my brain?

I got out of the car and disarmed the security system. I would feel sorry for any burglar who tried to break into my place. I had ADT stickers on my windows, but it wasn't a traditional alarm company that would come calling if my alarm was tripped. The signal would go straight to the Office, and they wouldn't call the police.

I passed through the den area and up the stairs to my barren kitchen. I grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and went into my bedroom. It was really supposed to be the family room, but I'd taken over the entire third floor where the bedrooms were designed to be with my training floor and gym equipment. I stripped off my tired traveling clothes and slid between the sheets, nude. It felt cold and warm and cozy all at the same time. I was out almost immediately.

Chapter Two

This man had been in my dreams before. He was kind of like Ezra, a jovial old guy. Except in my dreams he'd always been old, always been the same age. This time when I was standing on the porch holding the bag, he was the one who opened the big red door. For some reason I wanted to call him Grandpa. He looked down at me and started to cry.

It was three in the afternoon and raining when I woke up. I lay in bed for a long time, pondering this sudden recurrence of dreams. I remembered having the doorstep dream a lot when I was younger, nine or ten years old. Grandpa came and went from my dreams often. Sometimes I wondered if he was a real person or just a figment of my imagination, since I knew very little about my real family and certainly had no recollection of grandparents.

I got up out of bed and put on some sweats. I headed up to the third floor and surveyed my arena. Two walls were covered with mirror from top to bottom. There was a weight set in one corner and a one-hundred pound punching bag in the other. The floor was buoyant gymnastics flooring.

I went through my daily routine, which included various martial arts forms and drilling myself on punching and kicking. I did push-ups and sit-ups to failure and lifted weights. I stared at my sweaty, solid form in the mirror, seeing the goddess of death, the angel of darkness. My light golden hair fell in wisps around my eyes. I reached up and fluffed up the damp hair on the back of my head and wondered how I would look in one of those business suits I had seen that morning.

My routine was old. I remembered learning it over the course of six years from ages ten to sixteen. I have no idea what martial arts I know. Maybe it's one style. Maybe it's a combination of a hundred. All I know is that the old martial arts expert who taught me was afraid of me by the time our educational sessions were over. But he wasn't as afraid of me as he was of Ezra. After our last workout Ezra took him away and I never saw him again.

It was lonely training by myself, but I got used to it. I never knew what I was training for or why. I had been taught not to ask questions so well that the idea of asking why never entered my mind for years. Finally I understood my purpose when Ezra gave me my first assignment for my seventeenth birthday.

Purpose. Maybe that was what kept the brains and blood from the night before in my head. I had no real purpose. My existence brought about the end of other people's existences. That is not a purpose.

I walked over to the heavy bag and pounded it once as hard as I could. It almost hit the wall and came rocketing back toward me. I grabbed it and held on. I leaned my head against the cool leather of the bag and stood there hugging it.

"Fuck," I whispered. I let go of the bag and headed for the shower.

It was after six when I wandered back to the Office. I entered The Lobby and found a seat at the bar. I was thinking about one of the suits I'd seen that morning when I felt someone behind me.

Without a thought I reached toward the left side of my torso with my right hand. I quietly unholstered the Glock there and pointed it behind me, all the while my activities concealed by my jacket. I looked over my left shoulder to see who was staring me down. I smiled and reholstered the Glock.

"You almost met your maker, Tony," I said. "You should know better than to sneak up behind me."

Anthony Litton took a seat next to me and said, "But I know you well enough that I know you won't fire blind. How've you been, A?"

"Same old," I said, pleased to be laying eyes on him again. "And yourself?"

Tony was a few years older than me, half Italian and half Southern. He only claimed the Italian side, even though in Georgia Southern isn't just a nationality, it's a religion. His dark hair was, as always, perfectly in place and cut appropriately short. Dark eyes stared out at me from beneath his widow's peak, their sparkle showing me he was also pleased to be meeting again.

"Not doing too bad," he said, his Jersey accent a clear reminder that he didn't claim the South as his home. He lived in Newark for the first ten years of his life before his mother moved him back to Georgia. I knew more about Tony than anyone else who worked for Ezra.

"Can I get something for you two?" the bartender asked.

"I'll have a double Drambuie and I believe the lady here will have..." Tony paused for a moment and looked at me as though trying to judge my mood. I smiled at him. "A glass of champagne?" Tony guessed.

I nodded and the bartender turned away.

"Are we celebrating something?" I asked.

"Of course. My unexpected visit."

"Sounds like good enough reason."

"Of course it's a good reason, are you kidding me?"

Tony flashed his beautiful smile and I felt my own come from deep within me. I wondered if Tony ever thought about those people the way I did. If he ever thought about what it would be like to be one of them.

"I came up from Miami just to see you," he said.

"Ezra says he asked you up to help with some deliveries."

"Yeah, I know what he says," Tony said, looking up in the air for a moment. "You're the only one who calls him that, you know."

"What?"

"You call him by his first name. Anyone else would probably get whacked."

"You know how it is. I may as well call him Dad."

The bartender set our drinks down in front of us and gave us a nod.

"Enjoy."

Tony turned toward his drink and circled his finger around the top of the glass. The amber liquid spun lightly around the inside of the glass.

"I heard you had a rough time in Boston," he said.

"Shit, was it in the fucking mob newspaper?" I said, turning toward my champagne. I took a long drink. It spiraled down inside me, waking up all my tired cells and making them wonder what the hell was going on.

"Just about," he said. He paused, then continued, "You know, it kind of worries me when I hear shit like that."

I stared at my champagne for a moment. He was worried?

"You shouldn't worry," I said. "You know I can take care of myself."

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, seeing that he was staring at his glass too. Then he turned and glanced up at me.

"I worry anyway," he said softly.

I felt something foreign inside me. It was warm and cold all at the same time. It made my heart beat faster. It included lust, but wasn't limited to it. It burned inside me even hotter as I met Tony's gaze. It was fire, but it was soft, like sprinkles of embers within me.

Suddenly Tony's line of sight shifted to someone or something over my shoulder. He stood up quickly and all traces of the heated moment were gone from his face. I turned in my seat to look. Ezra was exiting the elevator, Gray and Dallas on either side of him.

Ezra came toward us and gave me a big smile. I stood up off my chair and turned to him. He hugged me gently and said, "So have you figured out your present yet?"

"Not yet," I said. "Tease."

"That's the best part," Ezra laughed. "Tomorrow night. Come by around eight for the grand unveiling."

"I'll mark it on my calendar."

Ezra turned to Tony.

"Mr. Drake," Tony said with a nod.

"Anthony," Ezra said, his tone less jovial. "How are you this evening?"

"Doing well, sir."

"Entertaining Adrian, I see."

"Just hate to see her sitting by herself, sir," Tony said, stiff and alert.

"Don't make a habit of it," Ezra said, then turned and walked out of The Lobby with Gray before him and Dallas after him. Tony's gaze followed them out the door.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked, settling back into my chair. I took a sip of my champagne.

"He thinks I'm gonna be a bad influence on you," Tony said with a laugh. He took a long drink of his Drambuie and brushed off his at-attention attitude from seconds earlier. I had a feeling there was more to it than that and I doubted that Ezra was trying to play daddy to me, even though I'd always suspected that he'd sent Tony to Florida to keep us apart.

"So how's Miami?" I said, trying to get away from the discomfort of Ezra's power play.

"Muggy," Tony said, shaking his head. "But fun. Beautiful. Plenty to keep me busy down there."

"Lots of work or lots of bikini-clad beach bunnies?"

"Both," Tony said, and I swore I saw a trace of blush on his cheeks. "It's a fast-moving city."

"But you like that. Do you miss Atlanta?"

"I miss some things about Atlanta," he said pointedly, then turned to his whiskey for another long sip.

I took a drink of my bubbly and smiled to myself. I liked this feeling I had—excitement that didn't stem from the discharge of my gun. Things were looking up.

"So what are your plans for the night? Hanging with the guys?"

"I was hoping you and I could do some catching up," he said, the warmth returning to his dark eyes.

"Really?" I said slowly. "What do we need to catch up on?"

Tony raised his eyebrows up and down and said, "Well, it has been almost a year. Don't you have that new townhouse?"

"I do."

"I think it would be pretty rude of you to not take me on the grand tour of your new digs."

"Since when does propriety matter to you?" I polished off my champagne.

"When it serves my purposes."

"Are you going to get in trouble with Ezra if we're seen leaving together?"

"Hot stuff, I'm already in trouble with your father figure. Let's go."

Tony dropped a bill on the bar and took my arm. The cool touch of his fingers sent a shiver down my spine. I felt eyes on us as we walked toward the door to the parking garage. I'm sure it wouldn't take long to get back to Ezra, but I didn't really care. I'd been lonely for a long time. Let him get mad, spank me and take away my birthday present. I didn't really give a shit at all.

I led Tony toward my car, our footsteps echoing through the garage. My boots and his Florsheims clicked in unison, then out of sync, then back together again. *Kind of like our love life*, I thought, my mind briefly taking me back to the day I gave Tony my virginity in the back of one of Ezra's vans ten years earlier. I was eighteen and we'd just killed three people. My brow furrowed despite myself. Something was entirely too fucked up about my life.

"Are you still driving this Acura?" Tony asked with a laugh as I paused by my car. "Why don't you get a Porsche or something?"

"The Acura blends in," I said with a shrug. "Doesn't attract attention. A lot of people have them. It's unmemorable."

Like me, I thought.

"Like me," Tony said.

I looked sharply up at him.

"Why would you say that?"

"Oh, you know how guys like me are," he said wistfully. "Here one day and gone the next, replaced by someone younger and faster."

"I hardly think you're going to be ousted because you're too old. Thirty-four is not retirement age."

I unlocked the car and we got inside. I cranked the engine and pulled the black beauty out into the street. Flashy or not, I loved the car. It felt rich and handled well, and if other people didn't notice it because it was not a Mercedes or a Porsche...well, that was fine with me.

"How long are you going to be in town?" I asked, pulling up to a stoplight.

"I'm supposed to leave day after tomorrow. Tomorrow's the deliveries. Then I'm supposed to drive a vanload of merchandise back to Miami with me."

"Supposed to. Does that mean you have a choice?"

"Everything's a choice, baby."

That was the truth. Right? Every time I was ordered to kill someone, was it really my choice whether or not I did it? Was blindly following directives any excuse for the number of lives I'd ended?

"What's wrong?" Tony said.

"What?"

"Your forehead's all wrinkly like you're pissed off or something."

"I'm having a midlife crisis."

"You and me both, baby. You and me both."

I wanted to ask for more details. I wanted to find out what inklings were being cranked out by the wheels in Tony's brain. I wanted to know if he was feeling like I was feeling. But mostly I wanted to feel his hands on me. And more. So I kept my questions to myself for the moment, driving in silence the few short miles to the townhouse.

"Here we are," I said, pulling up to my garage and hitting the button to raise the door.

"Nice," Tony said. "So normal. You always were sentimental for the regular folks."

"Regular folks don't have a training floor on their top level and an armory in the den."

"Can't wait to see it."

I parked and lowered the garage door, then turned and looked at Tony in the muted light of the garage. The shadows cast over his face made him look even darker, even more dangerous. It was a beautiful sight. I wondered how many people had this as their last vision before dying. It wouldn't be so bad.

Tony reached out to me and touched my cheek. I tilted my head toward his hand and let him caress my skin. Exhaling with a shudder, I closed my eyes. God, I had missed him. I sensed his lips coming toward me before I felt them on my mouth. Tender introduction kisses were bypassed as he pushed my lips apart with his tongue and devoured me.

I grabbed hold of his shirt collar and pulled him toward me. I felt his fingers weaving through my hair, then taking hold of a fistful as he pulled me a few inches away from his lips.

"Let's get inside," he whispered, his voice husky and strained. His dark eyes were glazed with desire and urgency. I nodded in agreement. We got out of the car and I pressed my code into the keypad by the entrance to the house. It both disarmed the alarm and unlocked the door.

We tumbled across the entryway and through the den. Tony pushed me up against the wall at the foot of the stairs that led to the second floor and pressed his body against mine. His lips were soft and moist as he kissed mine and worked his lips down my neck. He pushed my jacket up off my shoulders and pressed his hands against my bare upper arms. I moved away from the wall long enough to shrug out of my jacket.

Tony put his hands on my waist, then ran his hands up along my sides. His hand slid up over the gun on my left side. He hesitated over it for a moment, then let his hands make their way up to my neck, where he leaned in and sucked gently at my skin.

The surge of lust came up from the bottom of my feet and shot through my body in hot fingers in all the right places. I pressed myself into Tony's body and said, "We need to go upstairs."

Tony nodded, his breath still hot on my neck. We managed to make it up the stairs to the kitchen before Tony lost his jacket. His gun was holstered just like mine, on his left side, straps up over his shoulders. He had a Sig Sauer Blackwater Special Edition. Pretty.

"Here's the kitchen," I whispered between kisses. We stumbled toward the next room. Tony pushed me up against the wall again and thrust his pelvis into mine.

"Dining room," I moaned, and pulled his tie off, depositing it somewhere on the floor. I had just finished unbuttoning his shirt when he pulled me away from the wall and toward the adjoining room, my bedroom.

There was just enough light from the kitchen and dining room to illuminate my bed. Tony slid out of his holster and deposited it, gun and all, on the inside of my bedroom door. He lifted me up in front of him, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He carried me toward the bed and laid me down upon the mussed sheets. If I'd known I was going to have company I would have made the bed. Well, no. I wouldn't have.

I ran my hands hungrily over Tony's chest. He loosened the straps on my holster and moved to pull it off my body. I pressed my palm against his chest and stopped him. He went still as I slid myself out from under him and removed the holster myself. I held it for a second as he sat there and watched me. I stuck it, gun and all, under my pillow.

"Paranoid?" he asked.

"Always," I whispered, crawling on all fours back over to him.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you."

I laughed and tackled him. He pulled my shirt off from over my head and ran his hands over my chest. Fingering my bra, he said, "This has to go. I've waited almost a year and my patience has run out."

I took it off myself and tossed it. Tony sat up and took one of my nipples into his mouth. I shuddered and sighed at the sensation of his highly skilled mouth sucking and gently biting, pulling and rubbing. He released me and pushed me down to the bed. My boots and pants were gone a moment later, as were his.

I tugged on the shirt he was still wearing and said, "Off."

"Always with the orders," he teased, pulling it off. He tucked his fingers under the elastic of my panties and pulled. The moment I was exposed, his mouth was there, caressing my most sensitive areas as my final article of clothing was sliding down my thighs, over my knees and then off my toes.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, letting the wash of pleasure come over me. God, he knew exactly what he was doing. He always knew how to touch me like no one else could. I felt his hands rubbing along my thighs and over my stomach. Tony's touch electrified me, sending tiny shocks of heat into my skin. I reached down and stroked his hair as he slid his tongue across my sensitive flesh. Sensations flooded through my body and I couldn't hold in the ensuing cry. He did it again and again and I could feel his enjoyment pulse through me almost as much as the bursts of pleasure he was creating between my legs. As I let out one last sigh, the trembling came over me and I arched my back away from the mattress. The orgasm swept through my body silently, my throat trapped and my tongue paralyzed.

When I could breathe again I let my body relax, but not for long. Tony was over me in a moment, smiling at me in the darkness.

"Was it worth the wait?" he asked.

"You tell me," I whispered.

Tony produced a condom out of the pocket of his dress pants and said, "I will in a minute."

The seconds it took for him to put it on were too long. He kissed me, then I felt him push inside me. It was Tony's turn to shudder as he pushed in and out of me a few times. He leaned on his elbows, looked down over me and said, "Yeah, it was worth it. God, I missed being inside you."

Tony kissed my cheeks and pushed hard into me. I pushed back, sending him deeper within. His hands caressed my face and brushed my hair back away from my eyes.

"I missed you so much," he whispered. "I have all the bimbo beach whores surrounding me...but you're the one I wanted."

I whispered his name, unable to say anything else. I felt a tear slide out of one eye and down my cheek. I'd known for years that I loved him, if in fact it was possible for a heart like mine to love.

Tony rubbed and caressed my hungry body from within. His hands soothed my troubled muscles and comforted my lonely breasts. His lips brushed over my nipples and fed my desire. He pulsed within me and I felt him come, then I was right there with him, letting his pleasure feed my own. My muscles clamped down over him as he cried out in ecstasy. Again I was silent, letting the waves of cresting orgasm quietly consume me.

There was relative peace after that. The initial frantic urgency had subsided. Tony and I lay in my bed, sheets and pillows strewn around us. I curled up and rested my head on his chest. His fingers brushed lightly over my bare shoulder.

"Tell me what's going on, Tony," I said. "I know there's something you're not sharing."

Tony was silent. I wouldn't ask again. If he wanted to tell me, he would. If he didn't want to tell me, what would I gain by pressing the matter?

"Are you happy, Adrian?" he asked softly.

I lifted my head and looked up at him. In all of my life, no one had ever asked me if I was happy.

"I'm happy right now."

"That's not what I mean," he said thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on my bedroom ceiling. "I mean, are you happy here, in general, doing what you do?"

I laid my head back down and pressed my cheek against his chest.

"Does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

"It's empty," I whispered, willing myself to remain in control and not start crying. "And confusing. I feel like I have no control over anything."

"That sounds like a no, then."

"You're probably right. But so what? What difference does it make?"

"You could leave."

"Right. And do what? Get a job? Can you see me taking dictation or serving tables?"

Tony laughed. It was a wonderful sound. Not like some of the other guys. When they laughed it made my skin crawl. His was a genuinely joyful sound. I smiled.

That ended the conversation, and Tony drifted off to sleep. He didn't answer my question directly but gave me enough clues from his own questions to me that I had an idea of where he was going. The question was if he was asking me to go with him or let him leave.

I lay with Tony's warm, sleeping body for a while before quietly leaving the bed. I found my bathrobe and crept into the kitchen. I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of the refrigerator and took one out. They were an expensive French smoke and the only cigarette I was ever interested in. Even then, it had to be at a particular time. Like now, in the darkening twilight hours, my body sated but my mind full of discord.

I stole out onto the deck off the kitchen and silently shut the sliding door behind me. I lit the cig and breathed in its smooth blue smoke. The townhouses around me were relatively quiet. Someone's dog barked. A car started. I took a drag and leaned my head back to look up at the sky. I pushed out the smoke and couldn't tell the difference. Too much light pollution in the city to see the sky. You had to go far, far away from the millions of people in the metro area to see any real stars.

Maybe Tony was right. Maybe everything was a choice and if I wasn't happy then I should fucking do something about it. With or without him. Ezra truly was like a father to me. He wouldn't be happy but he would let me leave. And go where? Do what?

I flicked the used-up butt of the cigarette into a puddle in the parking lot below me. Usually I came away from a session like this with some sort of plan. But this wasn't a usual dilemma and I had no clue what to do about it.

I found Tony still sleeping soundly when I returned to my room. I lay down beside him and got close. He mumbled something from dreamland and laid his arm around me.

Chapter Three

I was standing on the doorstep again, holding the bag. I felt smaller this time, not just like I was standing on my knees. I felt little. The bag was heavier than before. Grandpa opened the door and cried. The blood and brains on the Lincoln's windows flashed before me and made me dizzy. Suddenly I was in someone's living room. It was foreign and familiar all at the same time. There was no shouting or violence going on, only people standing and a feeling of dread. I heard something loud, then saw Grandpa fall to the floor.

I sat bolt upright in bed, scaring the shit out of Tony.

"Fuck!" he yelled. "Who's here?"

I sat, staring straight ahead, panting and sweating.

"What the hell is going on?" Tony asked, looking around.

"Nothing," I whispered. The alarms were going off in my head so loudly I was surprised he couldn't hear them. I'd always thought these dreams were nothing, some concoction my brain made up for God knows what reason, but now...now I questioned that notion. I'd never seen that before. I'd never seen the Grandpa character get hurt. I'd never seen the living room, yet it felt so much like home to me. That feeling of dread...I'd experienced it firsthand. I was beginning to wonder if this dream was a memory.

"Nothing my ass," Tony said. "Are you okay?"

I fell back against my pillow, trying to control my breathing. After a few moments I had calmed down enough to speak.

"What's your first memory, Tony?" I asked.

"What?"

"You heard me. What is your earliest memory?"

"Fuck, I don't know. I think I remember my mom's car accident when I was four."

"I have no memories before I was eight years old. Eight. Before being with Ezra, I remember nothing."

Tony was silent for a moment, digesting, then said, "What does that mean?"

I swallowed the heartbeat pounding in my throat.

"I think I know why."

"Why."

"I think I'm remembering something that happened. And I don't like it."

"Your dream?"

"Yes."

"You're remembering something from your family?"

"I think so. I think I just dreamed a memory about my grandfather getting shot in front of me."

"Shit," Tony whispered. "What has Drake told you?"

"Just that I was the kid of a guy who worked for him who got whacked by Joey Mettruccio's gang. No mention of my mother—he said he didn't know. That's why I always went all-out on hits against Mettruccio's guys. I blamed them for who I am. What I am."

"And now what do you think?"

"I think there's more to it. I think they didn't just kill my father, but my grandfather too. That feeling in my dream...it's the feeling in the room when we're about to do someone. The feeling of impending death. I think I don't remember anything because it's too terrible to remember."

Tony kissed me softly and stroked my arms. He whispered words of comfort to me as I replayed the dream over and over again in my head. Why the hell was all of this coming up now?

* * * * *

I woke up to the sound of clattering dishes and silverware. My hand immediately slid up under my pillow and grabbed my Glock. I lay still for a moment, then relaxed. It could only be Tony in the kitchen. I released the gun and rolled over. I was alone in bed.

I thought about walking out into the kitchen in the buff, but I was pretty hungry and had the feeling Tony was making breakfast. Food first, sex later. I slid my bathrobe on and walked quietly out of the bedroom. I knew I could probably sneak up on him without trying too hard, but surprising people who carried firearms just wasn't a good idea. I purposely made some noise as I approached the kitchen.

"Good morning, gorgeous," Tony said. "Hungry?"

"Definitely. What did you find in my kitchen to make?"

"It was a challenge, but these eggs are good, and you even had salt and pepper. The oil wasn't rancid, so we have scrambled eggs."

"Genius at work."

Tony turned away from his work of art on the stove top and gave me a kiss. It was quick, then he moved to turn back, changed his mind and came in for a longer one. He looked pained to pull away from me and go back to the eggs.

I took a seat at the breakfast table. Tony's holster and gun lay like a centerpiece in the middle of the table. It was a simple little setup, a small table and four chairs. As if I would ever have three guests. Tony dramatically set my breakfast in front of me, followed by a cup of coffee.

"At least I never have to worry about your coffee being bad," Tony said. "You have about eight varieties in there, all new and fresh."

"What can I say, I'm a connoisseur."

Tony's eggs were good. He was multi-talented.

"So I heard that it's your birthday today," he said, hiding a smile. I sighed and looked down at my plate.

"Yes, it is."

I think.

"So I got you a little something."

"Tony," I said, "no one does anything for my birthday. It's just another day."

"That's not what I hear. I had to contribute."

Tony reached into the pocket of his coat, which was hanging on the chair behind him. He must have retrieved it from the staircase earlier. He pulled out a small box. A jewelry box. For a moment my heart pounded in my chest like a jackhammer on crack. He wouldn't.

Tony handed it to me and said, "I hope you like it. I thought of you when I saw it."

I lifted the lid on the box and was greeted by a one carat, round, deep ocean blue sapphire pendant set in platinum.

"It's beautiful...and strong," Tony said. "And it goes with your eyes."

"God, Tony," I whispered. "It's amazing."

"I know," he said with a smirk. "Let me help you put it on."

Tony stood behind me and took the necklace out of the box. The metal was cool sliding around my neck. He latched it, then kissed the back of my neck.

"Thank you," I said, unable to raise my voice much above a whisper. I didn't own any jewelry. The closest I had was a watch, which was a gift from Ezra after I showed up late to a hit once and nearly missed my mark.

"Don't mention it. Finish your breakfast. I've got to shower up. The deliveries are today."

"It's on the third floor to your right," I said. Tony retrieved his holster off the table and walked out of the kitchen. I heard his footsteps cross the townhouse and head up the stairs. I took a few more bites of egg, then followed him. He was not going to be showering alone. I took a brief detour to stop by my bedroom and grab my own gun. Paranoia. It keeps you alive.

Tony already had the shower going and the bathroom steaming when I arrived. I locked the door behind me and set my gun on the sink. Tony turned and looked out of the shower, which was separate from the bathtub, a single unit surrounded by a clear glass enclosure. He smiled. I untied my bathrobe. He smiled bigger. I slid it off my body and he dropped the soap. I smirked.

I opened the door and stepped inside. The spray was hot and comforting against my tired body. I bent down and picked up the soap, then slowly stood up, running my fingers along Tony's legs.

"I was hoping you'd show up," Tony said.

"I have to give you an appropriate thank-you."

I ran the soap in circles on his chest. Tony put his hands on my hips and pulled me toward him.

"That makes it harder," I said with a sigh.

"Does it?" he said, his grin three feet long. I felt his erection pressing against my leg and returned his expression. Tony reached one hand up and took the soap away from me. He started circling it on my chest like I'd done to him, then slid the soap down over one breast and back up over the other.

Tony ran his soapy hands down my sides and up over my stomach, then across my breasts. He looked down at the necklace hanging around my neck and kissed my throat. I don't know if I pulled back or if he pushed me, but I felt the cool glass of the shower siding under one shoulder and the warming tile of the wall under the other. Tony's wet body against me slid up and down, working into position.

Tony reached up to the shower caddy and pulled a condom out from behind the shampoo.

"You brought one into the shower?" I asked with a smile.

"I told you I was hoping you'd show up. And I brought two, just in case."

I lifted one leg and wrapped it around Tony's waist as he slid the condom over his impatient erection. His dark eyes met mine as I felt him pushing into me. His emotion came through his gaze at me, and it was love, pain and heartbreak all at the same time. He closed his eyes and pushed again. I felt his hands on my ass and my hips, sometimes coming up to stroke my breasts as he thrust and pulled. I held onto his side and kept him as close as I could, his flesh filling me and brushing all the right spots in just the right way.

Tony thrust harder a few times as I threw my palms against the walls on either side of me. He whispered my name, which may have done more for my state of arousal than any of his well-crafted techniques. The sound of his voice was a caress to my entire body. I looked up at Tony like he was my dark savior, rescuing me from a cold, lonely existence, and could only wonder if he felt the same about me.

Heat radiated inside me, then burst forth in an explosive orgasm. I let my head bang back against the glass shower wall and didn't care. A single shallow noise and uncontrollable trembling let Tony know he was doing it right. As my body began to crumple from the exertion I felt Tony release hard inside me. He squeezed me between the wall and his body and exhaled a shuddering sigh.

I let my leg slide down Tony's leg until my toes touched the floor. We stood there for a moment, the warm streaks of water rushing across our bodies. Tony leaned his

forehead against the wall over my shoulder. I thought about saying it. I wanted to say it. But the idea of those words coming out of my mouth, the mouth of a killer, seemed insulting. A spit in the face of every woman I'd left a widow or a child I'd orphaned. Every mother who'd lost her son to my bullet. How could I ever speak those words?

So I remained silent. As did Tony. I wondered if he had the same mental conversation as I had.

Instead of speaking, Tony took my face in his hands and kissed me softly. No lustful, burning passion, just a simple kiss. His gaze met my eyes again and we both knew we didn't have to say anything. Tony stepped back under the shower and rinsed off the soap and...other things.

* * * * *

I drove Tony to the Office. It was about ten in the morning. The Atlanta air was already muggy. As we were exiting the Acura in the parking garage, Benson happened to be walking by. He took the opportunity to look me over, then glanced at Tony.

"If I were you, I wouldn't be trespassing on holy ground," Benson said to him.

"If I were you, I wouldn't be pissing her off," Tony said. "Ya fat bastard."

Benson gave him a rude gesture and got into his black Suburban.

"Okay, what the fuck is going on?" I said. "Tell me this time, no bullshit."

Tony sighed heavily and leaned against my car.

"One of my guys is talking to the feds. Turned state's evidence. He's probably going to start pointing fingers."

"Pointing them where?" I asked, suddenly feeling cold despite the Southern heat.

"Probably at me. Sorry, baby. I'm damaged goods right now. Even if I get out of this alive, I'll be locked up for a long time. Miami DA's itchin' for a takedown."

"Has Ezra said anything to you?"

"Just that he 'trusts me' and expects me to 'prove my loyalty'."

"Oh shit," I said, leaning against the car next to him. "They think you're going to squeal on everybody up here."

"That's what they think. I wouldn't, you know. You know I wouldn't pull that shit. But they don't know it. They think I'm going to be looking at thirty years and decide that the witness protection program is startin' to sound pretty fuckin' good. I gotta pull my weight today, big-time."

"No shit. What about the nark? Was he a plant or something?"

"Na. Grew a conscience or something. Had a kid and decided he wanted out, but not before he got arrested for arson. They threatened him with all kinds of shit and he started singing like Aretha Franklin. It's only a matter of time before he gets to me."

I looked down at the parking garage floor. Just when I thought something good was going to happen. I should have known. People like us just don't deserve happiness.

"I'm sorry, gorgeous. I gotta go."

Tony kissed me, quickly but heartfelt. I didn't watch him walk away. I couldn't watch him walk into the belly of the beast that owned us both. The beast that was my friend. The beast that I loved. Ezra Drake.

Chapter Four

I needed a haircut, or rather, I needed to talk to the stylist.

I walked the three blocks over to Atlanta High Style, owned by Ezra Drake but operated by Dallas' wife, Mia. She was the sole stylist and had a very select clientele.

As I rounded the corner to the shop, I saw Dallas and another one of the crew, T.J., walking out. I slinked back around the side of the building and waited. I pulled a compact out of my pocket and pretended to check my makeup while observing the two get into a car that pulled up by the shop. As soon as they were out of sight, I walked up to the store.

I didn't have an appointment. I usually did. Usually I was there because I actually needed a haircut. That day I didn't care so much about my hair as my plan of action. Mia, being privy to certain conversations, sometimes knew more than I did. I walked through the door to Atlanta High Style and knew immediately that something was wrong.

Mia was nowhere in sight. A shelf full of styling products had been swept clean, its contents scattered all over the floor below. Nothing else was disturbed, but it was awfully quiet. I turned and locked the door behind me, then pulled the drapes.

I unholstered my gun and stepped softly around the bottles of shampoo and gel and hair spray. I heard something—intermittent muffled cries. I walked slowly toward the sound, unsure of what I was going to find. I followed the noise down a short hallway. It was coming from the bathroom.

I counted to three and kicked in the door. Mia screamed and curled up under the sink, her forearms covering her face. She looked up at me for a brief moment, then lowered her head and sobbed at the floor.

"Jesus Christ, Mia," I said, sticking my gun back in its holster. "What the fuck happened?"

I knelt down and put my hands on her shoulders. She twitched away from me and sobbed harder.

"Just do it, then!" she screamed. "Just get it over with!"

She thought I was there to kill her. I lowered my head in shame. She was the closest thing I ever had to a girlfriend and she was scared to death of me.

"Mia," I said as softly as I could. "I'm not here to hurt you. Can you tell me what happened?"

Mia looked up at me. Her nose was bloody and both eyes were pink and puffy. I went slack-jawed. Her husband and his crony had beaten her up. I always thought Mia

was a good little mob wife, content to do her thing and spend copious amounts of money. But apparently she'd done something that needed...correcting.

"They didn't send you to finish me off?" she asked in slightly less frantic Texas drawl.

"God, no."

"You don't have an appointment."

I almost laughed.

"I know. This was kind of...a social visit."

Mia crawled out from under the sink and attempted to smooth out her fluffy blonde hair. She turned to the mirror and cursed under her breath, then ran some water on a paper towel and began dabbing at the blood and running makeup.

"I have other customers," she said. "Now fucking look at me. I'm going to have to reschedule everyone since you're not here to kill me."

I smiled. Scared shitless and still making smartass remarks. I knew there was a reason I liked her.

"I saw Dallas and T.J. leaving," I said. "Care to tell me what's going on?"

"I opened my big mouth and said something to someone who shouldn't have heard it."

"Really."

"Apparently so. I'll probably lose a limb just for telling you."

"Shit, Mia."

"I told T.J.'s wife that it looked like she might be moving to Miami."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"What's the big fucking deal?"

"The reason I told her is because I heard Drake telling him he'd have the alarm codes for the Miami clubs in a few days."

"What?" I asked quietly. Those were Tony's clubs. Tony's codes.

"I just figured they were switching people around like they do. I thought she knew. I asked her if she thought she'd like Florida."

Mia held on to the sink and let her new wave of tears drip right down the drain.

"God, I hate this life! This is prison! This is worse than prison! I can't even have a simple conversation with someone without wondering who is listening, who is watching. My own husband just punched the shit out of me.

"They're probably taping this right now," Mia went on. "Probably will tell you to come back and shoot me later on today. And you know what? Maybe I'll beat you to it. Maybe it would be a relief to have a nice chunk of metal in my brain."

"Mia," I said softly. I set my hand on her shoulder and let her cry. I couldn't help her. Not really.

Mia turned and looked at me.

"And you know exactly what would happen if I tried to leave," she whispered. "They'd send you after me."

I looked back at Mia, into her puffy brown eyes and knew that I'd do it. If they told me to, I'd do it. I could tell from the way she looked at me that she knew it too. It angered me that they beat her up, but it wouldn't upset me to shoot her. She was right. I was no one's friend. I was a robot. I was a monster.

* * * * *

I walked back to the Office. The day had turned sweltering. One of the drawbacks of carrying a concealed weapon is that unless you want to wear a fanny pack, you have to wear a jacket to cover up the piece. I wouldn't be caught dead in a fanny pack and I only owned black jackets. Therefore I was hotter than hell every day the temperature rose above seventy-five. I strode into the air-conditioning of The Lobby and breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

I got a cup of coffee from the bartender and spent five minutes stirring cream and sugar into it. I didn't really want it, but it just felt strange to sit at the bar with nothing to drink.

"Hitting it early today, eh?" Jimmy Dean said, sitting down next to me.

"Na, just finishing up," I said. "Already finished off the rum."

Jimmy Dean's fat Santa belly jiggled under his jacket as he laughed. I didn't laugh.

"Jimmy, did you know my dad?" I asked.

Jimmy looked confused and surprised all at once.

"You've worked for Ezra for a long time. Did you know him?"

Jimmy paused long enough for me to assume he was formulating a lie.

"Nah, I didn't know him," Jimmy said, looking away. "Not really. Saw him once or twice. Not enough to tell you anything about him."

"So you wouldn't know anything about how he died, then."

"I can't tell you anything you don't already know," Jimmy said. "You should just forget about it. You know Drake don't like people digging around."

Jimmy picked his ass up off the chair and walked away. Why was he lying to me? Why shouldn't I know more about my own father's death? Unless someone had something to hide. I'd stuck to the code of silence for twenty years. I was sick of this cloak and dagger bullshit.

I pushed away my untasted cup of coffee and slid off my chair. I turned to leave The Lobby and found Perry Parker, one of Ezra's new recruits, heading my direction. I

openly cringed. I didn't care what he thought. Even in his new Italian suit the creepy rodent made me scratch. He walked up to me and smiled his rat-like shit-eating grin.

"Heya, Adrian," he said, practically a wheeze.

"What do you want, mouse?" I said. His nose twitched.

"You don't wanna know what I want, honey," he leered. God help him if I ever got the chance... "But Drake wants to see you."

"What does he want?"

"I said, to see you," Perry sniveled. "What else he wants, he didn't share."

"Where the fuck did he find you, in a maze?"

I turned away from Perry before he could answer and headed for the elevators. I entered Ezra's private floor and found Dallas and Gray at their posts. Only the greatest amount of restraint prevented me from giving the look of death to Dallas. A quick nod and I was through the grand entrance to Ezra's office.

As I entered the room Ezra was stuffing a duffel bag into the cabinet behind his desk. It was hard and lumpy-looking. It looked like cash, and lots of it. He took care to lock the cabinet before he even turned around to acknowledge my presence.

"Happy Birthday, sweetheart!" Ezra said, walking up to me and giving me a hug. He pulled back, looked at my necklace and said, "Oh, I see I'm not the first to honor you on your special day."

That's because you didn't sleep with me, I thought.

I smiled and said, "I won't hold it against you."

Ezra laughed, but I could tell it was a little forced. I was sure he knew who had given it to me and he wasn't happy.

"You got big plans for today?"

"Not really. I thought my dance card would be full, but I guess everyone has prior engagements."

Ezra laughed again, genuinely this time. The average person wouldn't have been able to tell the difference, but years of being with him as his little girl, his student and his hired gun had taught me the tiny nuances between fact and fiction.

"I'm having some lunch brought in," he said. "Stay and have your birthday lunch with me."

"Well, that depends," I said, teasing. "What are you getting?"

"The boys are picking up some special takeout from Tino's."

"Now you're talking. Sold."

"Have a seat, Adrian," he said, motioning toward the cluster of plush chairs and a sofa near the fireplace. It was far too warm for a fire, but the little nook was cozy anyway. I slid into the red one. I'd tried them all and it was the softest.

"What's on your mind, Ezra?" I said, leaning my head back against the velvet upholstery and closing my eyes. I heard him sit down in the chair next to me, the blue one. His favorite.

"Ah, nothing in particular. Just want to hear what's going on in your life these days."

"You know everything that goes on in my life. I have a life because you make it happen. If I have it, it's because you paid for it."

"You make it sound so awful," Ezra laughed. "Are you unhappy?"

I opened my eyes and stared at the cold fireplace. All this sudden concern over my happiness was unnerving.

"Why would you ask that?" I said.

"What, I can't be concerned about my little Adrian's happiness? Come on now, you know I love you like my own daughter. I know life can get a little dull sometimes and you might feel the need to do something...I don't know...out of character, or something that's just not a good idea."

"Oh, I get it," I said. "I might do something that's not a good idea. Or someone. Like Tony."

"I didn't say that," Ezra said. "I'm just looking out for you, you know. And I'd like to think that if something in your life wasn't the way you wanted it that you would feel comfortable coming to me. You're the most important person I have here, Adrian."

I turned my head to look at him. I stared for a moment.

"He gave you the necklace, didn't he?" Ezra said.

"Yes."

"I see."

Ezra nodded to himself and looked down at the Oriental rug beneath us before meeting my eyes and saying, "So what's going on there? Anything I should know about?"

I shrugged.

"Don't know. Doesn't much matter anyway. He's always in Miami. I'm here. What could there possibly be?"

Ezra's nodding sped up.

"Good, good. You're too young to be worrying about that kind of thing anyway."

"I'm twenty-nine, Ezra. You know how many women are carting around a station wagon full of brats at my age?"

"I know exactly how many, and I know that none of them are going to get for their birthdays what you're getting for yours."

"Lunch from Tino's?"

"Smart ass." Ezra grinned. "You still have to wait to get it."

"Why?"

“Cause it’s not here yet. Impatient?”

“Maybe. When, then?”

“When, then?” Ezra mimicked sarcastically. “Eight o’clock tonight.”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Sharp. Be here.”

“Right here in this chair?”

“I want to see you sitting in The Lobby having a drink at 7:59.”

“Got it.”

Ezra’s cell phone went off. It was over on his desk. He cursed and got up out of his chair to answer it. I reached up and felt the warm sapphire under my fingers. My body heat made it warm, but the gift-giver made my body warm. How could I possibly tell Ezra how I felt?

“Okay, bring it up,” Ezra was saying. “And make it quick. I don’t want the food getting cold while we wait.”

Moments later, a covered cart was wheeled into Ezra’s office by Nicky K and Spiro. I stayed sitting in my red chair as Ezra walked over to them and mumbled something.

“On schedule, boss,” Nicky K said. “Deliveries right on time.”

“Good. Tell Benson to give me call when it’s finished.”

Great, Benson was with Tony. If Tony was hoping for a fair shake, he wasn’t going to get it from that asshole. Nicky K lifted the white cover off the cart and wheeled it over to where I was sitting. He moved Ezra’s chair into place on the opposite side of the table from me. We exchanged a neutral nod and he turned away, looking irritated. He probably wasn’t enjoying playing room service.

Ezra settled back into his blue chair and lifted the silver cover off his plate. Veal piccata. I uncovered mine to reveal chicken marsala. Tino’s always created top-notch Italian, so there was no doubt it would taste as good as it looked.

As we started into lunch Ezra said, “Remember that birthday of yours when we torched Eddie Bongo’s Corsica?”

“I was just thinking of that the other day, actually.”

“What a night that was,” Ezra laughed. *He has no idea what a night that was*, I thought, remembering the ensuing three-hour marathon with Tony in one of the back rooms of the Office.

“You gave me a Beretta that year,” I commented. “A nine millimeter.”

“Did I?”

“With custom silencer and a fifteen bullet magazine.”

“You know how sentimental I am.”

“How come we never celebrate your birthday?”

“Because no one knows when it is.”

Ezra laughed and stabbed a piece of his baby cow. I couldn't eat veal, knowing how they tortured those poor calves to get the meat. Me, the heartless assassin, brought down by a six-month-old bovine.

I continued working on my marsala and reminiscing with Ezra about days gone by. It was pleasant. It reminded me of how we used to hang out before the operation got as big as it did and branched out into other cities. *A daddy's career taking priority over family*, I thought.

As we polished off our meals I said, "Thank you, Ezra. This has made my day a lot better."

"Was it going wrong, sweetheart?"

"I was hanging out with Jimmy Dean and Perry Parker. How much worse could it get?"

Ezra chuckled and said, "Well, hope you didn't fill up, 'cause there's one last course to lunch."

Ezra lifted another silver cover off a small dish in the middle of the table and unveiled a single-serving cupcake with a candle stuck in the middle.

"Happy birthday, Adrian," he said.

"No cake for you?"

"Hell, Tino's don't make sugar-free cakes for us diabetics."

"I'll bet for you they'd be willing to try."

Ezra moved his hand like he was waving away the idea. He pulled out a lighter from his jacket pocket and lit the candle.

"I'm not gonna do any singing," he said.

"Thank God," I interrupted.

"But, but," he said, regaining control over his sentence, "you do have to make a wish."

I looked down at the orange flame of my birthday candle. *What does a killer wish for?* I leaned down and blew out the fire without thinking of a thing.

I started in on the cupcake and paused with my bite halfway to my mouth.

"Ezra," I said. "Tell me again about my father?"

"Your father?"

"Yeah, you know, the person who donated the sperm to my existence."

Ezra chuckled.

"Well, I've told you all the best parts. Your father was a good man. A good part of the team. Too bad those fuckin' Mettruccio guys got to him before we even knew they were after him. If I could have, I'd have beheaded and de-balled every one of those motherfuckers. Anyway, ended up the cops got most of them."

Not really the touchy-feely speech I was secretly hoping for.

"What about my mom?"

"Your mom?"

"Yes, she would be the one who carried me for nine months and —"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Don't really know much, what do you want?"

"I want to know something about her. Did you know her? What did she look like, what was her name?"

"You want me to write a book on your family history or what, Adrian?"

"A few answers would be nice. I'm twenty-nine years old and I don't even know my own mother's name. It's just a little weird."

"I know, sweetheart. You're mother's name was Beth. That's really about all I know."

I ate my birthday cupcake and felt unfulfilled.

Chapter Five

After lunch Ezra had business to attend to, so I found myself sitting back down at the bar in The Lobby. I had a martini this time. A couple of the guys were shooting pool behind me. The bartender was reading a novel. I sipped my martini and wondered about those people in the airport again. What did they do on their birthdays?

"Hey," I said to the bartender. He looked up and stuck a bookmark in his novel. "What does your girlfriend do on her birthday?"

"I don't know. I guess she goes shopping," he said, looking bewildered that such a question would come out of the likes of me.

I tossed back the rest of the drink and set the glass down, telling the bartender to put it on my tab. With a new mission, I walked down to the train station and caught a ride to Lenox Square Mall.

Lenox had all the high-end stores. If you wanted to spend a thousand dollars on a pair of shoes, Lenox was the place that could help you do it. I wandered into Bloomingdale's and started looking for a suit like the ones I'd seen on those women at the airport. Women went shopping for their birthday, right? Ezra would shit if he knew I was at the mall. I smiled.

"Can I help you find something?"

I turned to see one of the women from the airport. She had short, demurely styled blonde hair, a gray tailored suit with slacks and black high heels and a name tag that said "Anna".

"I'm looking for a suit," I said, suddenly wishing I was in a biker bar or the middle of a gang fight. Somewhere more comfortable.

"Something for work?"

"Y-yes," I said. "Something nice. I like yours."

"Oh, thank you," she said with a big smile. "I love this one. It's Anne Klein, and actually all of our Anne Klein suits are on sale right now for twenty-five percent off."

"Great. Can...can you show me some? I'm a little new at this."

"No problem at all. Right this way. What's your name?"

"Actually, my name's Anna too," I said. "Well, my middle name is Anna. I'm Kelly Anna."

"Well, what a coincidence," she laughed. "We'll get along just fine, I'm sure."

As I walked off with Anna toward the Anne Klein suits, I felt bad for lying to her. Then I wondered if I would kill her if someone asked me to. Or paid me to. I felt like an imposter.

Anna was a wonderful salesperson. Within ten minutes, she had me in a dressing room trying on four different suits. Two with skirts, two with pants. She told me I could mix and match because they were all colors that worked together. She told me where I could get a manicure and a pedicure. She told me she loved my hair and asked who my stylist was. I lied again about that one.

I hid my gun under my jacket and looked at myself in the mirror. The navy blue suit looked pretty good on me even without being tailored. It fit my shoulders well enough to give me definition without giving away how muscular my shoulders were. The skirt was a modest length. I looked at my reflection and said, "I'm Adrian Ennis. I'm a CPA."

"I'm a realtor."

"I'm a stockbroker."

"I run a restaurant."

"I'm a reporter."

"I work for Coca-Cola."

I tried on the other suits and some other occupations. I heard a knock on the dressing room door and opened it up. Anna stood there, flashing me a huge smile.

"Oh, wow, that one looks the best, I think," Anna said. "That silver really sets off those amazing blue eyes of yours."

"Thank you," I said, not sure if she was flattering me or telling the truth.

"Okay, I know you've been looking at work clothes, but..." she said with a mischievous look. "This is for something else."

Anna pulled a black leather skirt and jacket set out from behind her and held it out to me.

"Now this," she said, "is hot."

I smiled and reached out to take it from her. It *was* hot. The leather was strong and soft. High quality.

"I'll try it," I said.

It fit like a glove. The leather hugged my rear end, shoulders and bust, but allowed me almost full range of motion. I'd have to wear my gun in a belly band or else not button the jacket. It looked awfully hot buttoned, tracing my curves all the way up. The skirt was short, showing off some of my best assets. That would be nice and distracting if need be. I looked myself in the eyes in the mirror and said, "I'm Adrian Ennis. I'm a killer."

I bought three suits and the leather outfit. I bought two pairs of shoes and five pairs of pantyhose. Anna showed me the kind that wouldn't snag on everything I brushed by. Things like filing cabinets. I bought three different colored shirts to wear under the suits and a lacy black top that looked like lingerie to wear beneath the leather suit. I paid with a credit card with the name Kelly A. Nash on it. Anna could take the rest of the week off with her commission.

I left the business suits with Anna to send over to the alterations department. They would be ready in one week. I took my shoes, shirts, hosiery and the leather suit on the train back to the Office and took up a whole section of seats doing it.

I snuck into the parking garage through a side door. It would be humiliating if anyone saw me carrying Bloomingdale's bags. I stuffed everything in the trunk and tore out of the garage, heading for home, like I was leaving the scene of the crime.

I used a horizontal pipe that I hung from the ceiling in the living room-bedroom as my closet. I counted six black shirts of varying sleeve length and neckline, two black cocktail dresses that were almost identical, two pairs of black dress pants and several black jackets. Jeans, socks, bras and panties, mostly black, resided in a small dresser next to the "closet". Miscellaneous styles of black shoes littered the floor beneath the clothes.

I hung up the white, blue and gray shirts and waited for the world to end. When it didn't, I hung up the leather suit and lingerie top. I checked my watch. Three-thirty. Perfect.

I worked out hard. I kicked the shit out of the heavy bag, probably making it wonder what it ever did to me. Three hundred sit-ups had me feeling good and used. I did squats to failure and forms to exhaustion. Finally I lay in the middle of the floor, staring at the ceiling, having kicked my own ass. I knew I would feel it the next day. Aching muscles were always a welcome reminder to me that I was still alive.

I took a long shower. I understood now why women got tired after shopping. It wasn't the workout that killed me—it was making all those clothing decisions. It was stressful. I finished cleaning up and did my hair and makeup taking more time and care than usual.

The black leather suit was waiting for me. I laid the groundwork with lacy black undergarments, hosiery and the lingerie top. I found a belly band to hold my gun tightly against my abdomen. It wouldn't be comfortable, but it would look good. I slid into the skirt and suit jacket and felt like I had come home.

I gave myself a final once-over in the mirror and blew my reflection a kiss. I felt good.

"Happy birthday," I said to myself.

It was just after seven p.m. when I entered The Lobby. As I walked in people began staring. Then they elbowed their buddies so that they too could turn and stare. I don't believe that any of these people had seen me in a skirt and heels since I was fourteen. And even then, the skirt sure as hell didn't look like this. Neither did my legs.

I strode over to the bar. Where there were no empty seats suddenly there were three. I smiled at everyone and slid my leathered ass into one of the newly vacated chairs.

"Can I get something for you?" the bartender said.

"Rum and Coke, please," I said. "With a cherry."

I felt Tony behind me before I heard or saw him. I smiled and began to slowly swivel around in my chair to face him. His flirtatious smile matched mine. He looked incredible in his charcoal gray silk suit.

"You've learned how to make an entrance, I see," he said, appreciating the view in front of him.

"I didn't notice," I said. "How did it look?"

Tony licked his lips and swallowed. The bartender set my drink down behind me. I turned to pick it up. Before I could tell him to put it on my tab, he said, "Five people tried to pay for it. I think you're covered."

I picked up my rum and Coke and turned back to Tony.

"Want to hit some balls?" I asked.

"You read my mind," he said.

I stood up. Tony gave me the crook of his arm and walked me over to one of the pool tables. He racked up the balls while I selected a cue from the stock of nice but used pool sticks.

"They always get so warped after a lot of use," I commented, staring down the shaft of a cue.

"The really good ones don't," Tony said, giving me a pointed stare. I smirked.

"You'll have to prove it to me."

"I have no problem with that. Break."

I set the cue ball at the end of the table and with a quick snap broke the rack up nicely. A striped ball, the twelve, rolled into one of the corner pockets.

"The big ones are yours," Tony said.

I walked over to him, set my palm on his chest and whispered into his ear, "I was hoping you'd say that."

Tony appeared to blush. I turned his face toward me with two fingers and kissed him full on the lips, right there in front of everyone. Fuck Ezra. I would do who I wanted when I wanted. I felt their eyes on us and enjoyed it. I wondered how many cell phones were trying to get through to Ezra at that very moment.

I put the eleven ball in the hole and missed a shot on the fifteen. Tony pocketed the five and six, then turned the felt over to me again after missing the one ball.

"What does the winner get?" I asked.

"A night in a fancy hotel," Tony said without missing a beat.

"Really."

I took a shot at the fifteen and missed it again.

"Here's your chance to pull ahead."

Tony took his cue and nailed the one ball. He took a shot at the two and missed. It looked deliberate.

"No cheating now," I said with a smile.

"You think I would do that?" Tony said, feigning shock.

I pocketed the fourteen and missed on the fifteen again. Tony grinned.

"Still chasing that fifteen?"

"Don't worry, I always get what I want."

"Do you?" Tony asked slowly, leaning over the table. The overhead lamp highlighted his hair creating white streaks through its slicked-back blackness. He focused in on the three and made it disappear. The two and the seven quickly followed suit, then the four found a home in one of the corner pockets. He took a shot on the last ball, the big eight. It bounced around in front of the pocket and came to a rest on the edge.

"A cliffhanger," I said. "You could try blowing on it."

"So could you," he said with a lascivious grin. It was rude and he knew it, but the idea of it made me warm in many, many places. I took a long time to exhale, hoping I wouldn't breathe fire and burn the place to the ground. I took my cue and examined the table.

The nine was too close to Tony's cliffhanger eight to be worth a shot. The ten required a heavy cut shot and the thirteen-fifteen was a Hail Mary combo. I went for the ten. It slid slowly into the pocket, hit the side of the hole and plummeted into the darkness. The cue ball drew back into perfect position to attack the combo. I chalked up my stick, still thinking about Tony's comment, then fired away into the thirteen. It nailed the fifteen straight into the side pocket, then drew all the way back into the corner pocket and sank.

"Damn," Tony said. "You've been sandbagging on me, ya little shark."

"Guess you're going to have to spank me."

Tony took two steps closer to me and set his hand on my leathered rear end.

"Sounds like fun," he whispered into my ear. "When do you want to start?"

I wanted to start right there on top of the pool table.

"I could bend you over the pool table," Tony whispered, "and show everyone what a truly bad girl you are."

"I think we need to finish this game," I breathed. "I have a prize to claim."

I leaned over the table, fixated on the nine but imagining how I looked to Tony, all bent over the pool table like we'd both been thinking about. There was no way I could pocket the nine, but I could make life difficult for Tony's next shot. I hit the cue ball slowly. It tapped the ten and came to rest right next to the eight ball, making the shot to pocket Tony's final ball impossible without sinking the cue ball. Yes, I am a bad girl.

"Now that's wicked," Tony said. "You planned that."

"What are you talking about?" I said, turning around and leaning my butt against the table. "The only way that can be done is on purpose."

Tony chalked up his cue and studied his predicament. He lifted his cue to attempt a masse shot, making the cue ball circle around to tap the four without going in the hole itself. It was a good effort, but the white cue ball tagged along and ended up in the pocket with the eight.

"Looks like I win," I said. "You gonna pay up?"

"You cheated."

I smiled.

"Strategy, my darling," I said, racking my cue and walking over to him.

"I guess I'd better be a man and pay my dues, then."

Tony rested his hands on my hips.

"I certainly hope so."

Tony's grip tightened and I was pretty sure something else was tightening too. His eyes were darkened and overcome with need. I traced my finger along his jawline and brushed my lips across his. He pulled my body into his. Yes, he was feeling the effects of our flirting, all right.

"Adrian."

It was Ezra. Despite all the crap I had told myself earlier, when I heard him saying my name I felt like a four-year-old with their finger in the pudding. He was behind me. Tony was facing him. I pulled back from Tony enough to see his expression and it wasn't a pleasant one. He looked like he'd been caught fondling the four-year-old.

I let him go and turned around. I could play this off.

"Eight o'clock already, Ezra?" I said with a smile.

"Close enough," he said. "I couldn't keep the birthday girl waiting any longer."

"All right, then. Lead the way."

Ezra tried to smile and turned away. I started to follow Ezra when Tony caught my hand. I turned halfway to see him.

"You remember my hotel?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Eight eighteen."

"I'll be there."

I caught up with Ezra and Gray, whom I just noticed was with him. They were heading toward the parking garage.

"Been shopping today, Adrian?" Ezra said, observing my new leather look.

"A little bit. I heard that's what girls do on their birthdays, so I thought I'd try it out."

Gray muffled a laugh.

"Really," Ezra said, sounding amused. "And how was it?"

"It was more fun than I expected. I see why you guys like to go to the tailor for new suits. Lots of ass-kissing."

Ezra laughed out loud as Gray opened the door to the parking garage for us. We walked through and I stopped dead in my tracks. There in front of me was a brand-new silver Porsche Carrera with a giant red bow on it. I let my jaw hang open. Ezra laughed again.

"Like it?"

I almost had to close my mouth with my hand to form a word.

"Are you serious?" I asked. "This is for me?"

"Am I serious? No, it's for Gray here. Of course it's for you!"

I walked over to it in all its majesty and touched it. It's not that I never thought Ezra or I could afford it. Money was the least of the issues. I could barely remember the last time he gave me a gift that wasn't work-related. A gun. A silencer. A gun with a silencer. Heavy duty voltage stun gun. One year he gave me a flame thrower.

"You're growing up now," Ezra said. "It seemed you'd moved beyond toys."

"I guess so," I said, still in shock.

"Go ahead, have a seat."

I opened up the driver's side door and slid in, leather against leather. The keys were in the ignition. I turned it and it lit up the dash board like the cockpit of a jet. The stereo came on sporting satellite radio. Ezra got in on the other side.

"What do you think?"

"It's amazing! Thank you."

"I know you like your low-profile Acura, but I thought you could use a little fun in your life. Keep driving the CL home and leave this one here for when you feel like being flashy. You should try being flashy every now and then. Or maybe my statement is a little late," he said, laughing and indicating my leather suit. "Maybe you've already got that one figured out."

"I love it," I said. "It's perfect."

"Hey, who takes care of you?"

"You do," I said, grinning, but again feeling like the four-year-old.

"Hey, close your door, there's something I need to talk to you about."

Oh shit, here it comes, I thought. *The Tony Talk*. I closed my door a moment after Ezra's fell shut. He reached over and turned down the stereo.

"I hate to ask you for this on your birthday, I know you probably have plans, but..."

Fuck. He wants me to do a job. Even worse than the Tony Talk.

"This needs to be taken care of right away. I don't know if you've heard or not, but we got a little problem brewing down in Florida. In Anthony's territory."

"I heard about it a little bit," I said. "You want me to hop a flight to Miami tonight or can it wait 'til tomorrow?"

"You don't need to hop a flight for this one, sweetheart."

"What do you mean?"

Ezra caught my eye and held it. It hit me like a backhand to the cheekbone. I knew who he was talking about. I knew what he was asking.

"Anthony's been letting shit get out of hand for a while now," Ezra said. "I know you've taken to him, but this is your job and you can get closer to him than anyone else. You have to think about the business and the life that we all have. That could all go down the shitter in a heartbeat."

I couldn't answer him. My mouth had gone dry and my heart was pounding in my ears.

"We got word this afternoon that his leak has become a fuckin' river. Bastard's bleeding info out of his ears and eyes and asshole. Our source says he's already fingered Anthony. You know what this means."

I knew what it meant. I just couldn't make my tongue and mouth work together. I managed to turn my head and stare at the steering wheel. My throat closed up and I felt like gagging. Ezra actually thought that I would whack Tony just because he told me to. He thought my emotions were that shallow.

"Anthony's not an asset anymore, Adrian. He's become a liability. A nuclear fuckin' liability. I know you think you like him, but I know guys like this and he'll squeal on you to save his own skin."

"Tony wouldn't rat," I said, finally finding the words.

"Maybe," Ezra said, then stressed again, "maybe he wouldn't name you. Maybe you'd be the first name outta his mouth. Are you willing to take that risk?"

I was. I was ready to take that risk. I remained silent. The world spun around me.

"I'm not," Ezra said. "Take care of him by midnight, then come back here. We have more to discuss."

Ezra got out of the car and shut the door. I didn't even watch him and Gray go back into The Lobby. The air around me crumpled in my ears like crashing ocean waves. My hands were cold and shaking. Kill Tony? I looked up at the door to The Lobby as a tear slid out of one eye. Gray was standing there. Through the square window in the door I saw Benson, Jimmy Dean and Perry Parker milling around like they had nothing better to do. They all knew. They all knew what I was supposed to do and they would follow me to make sure it was done. Ezra hadn't sent a tail on me since I was seventeen.

I got out of the Porsche and pulled the red bow off the top. I threw it on the ground in front of the car. Fuckers. All of them. Goddamn heartless assholes. I stuffed myself into the driver's seat and cranked the engine. It roared to life, its power reverberating off the walls of the parking garage. I spun out the wheels, turning the corner to leave, running over the bow. I stopped at the exit and looked at it in the rearview mirror. Its

red, glistening surface shimmered under the overhead lights like fresh blood. Roadkill ribbon. I gunned the Porsche and tore out into the street.

Chapter Six

The city seemed twice as dark as it should be. Shadows formed around every corner, pointing, hiding, accusing. I cranked the Porsche into third gear and tore through the back streets toward the Hyatt. Tony's hotel. I wouldn't cry. I couldn't cry. All the dizziness from the garage was gone. I just had to get there.

I parked the Carrera in a parking garage across the street and behind the Hyatt. I made my way across the dim, empty street to the hotel and stole around the outer edges toward the service entrance.

The door wasn't locked, but it was bustling inside. Dressed as I was there was no way I was going to be able to sneak through. I passed it by and headed for the front door.

The doorman opened up the grand entrance for me without missing a beat. Apparently I was not anything special here at the Hyatt Regency. As I crossed the threshold I tossed a look backward and saw my babysitters not far behind. I strode straight through the lobby like I owned it and waited at the bank of elevators.

It seemed an eternity before the doors opened. Finally I heard the precious ding of progress and the doors before me opened. I slid inside the empty elevator. I turned around and watched the doors close on Jimmy, Parker and Benson. They weren't trying to follow me up. Just watching.

The eighth floor may as well have been a mile away. The elevator crept along, stopping at every single floor and I waited impatiently as people loaded and unloaded. Finally I reached his floor and escaped the confines of the elevator. The signs pointed me toward his room.

I stood before his door, staring at eight eighteen. Putting a hand to my stomach, I felt the outline of the gun under the leather. I gathered myself and knocked.

The door opened before I could lower my hand. I looked Tony in the eyes for a few brief seconds before he grabbed my hand and pulled me inside.

He shut the door behind us and kissed me, his lips warm and comforting. Soft and peaceful, he touched me while I cursed my life. I cursed the lives of everyone that ever crossed my path.

I opened my mouth and took a breath to speak. I didn't know what I was going to say. It didn't matter anyway. Tony put a finger over my lips and said, "Shhhh. You don't have to say anything."

Tony pressed my body between his and the door. He kissed me again, harder, sliding his soft tongue into my mouth. I kissed him back, willing the world around us to burn in hell. I touched his face and held him as he caressed me, the soft touch of our

fingertips betraying the countless death and destruction they had caused. Tony ran those precious fingers over the sapphire necklace and kissed along everywhere he had touched.

"Gorgeous," he whispered, his words like warm massage oil on my skin.

Tony began to unbutton my jacket while lightly kissing my cheeks, my neck, my ears. He was so gentle this time, as was I, not the desperate, raving, pawing creatures we were usually were. His breath was a sweet warm breeze on my skin. He pushed my jacket off my shoulders and pulled it off my arms. It fell to the floor. The suit cost two thousand dollars and it was becoming a crumpled mass of genuine leather on a hotel room floor. I couldn't care less.

I began tugging on the buttons of Tony's shirt. He slid his hands up and down my upper arms. His hands made their way to my hips and slid up underneath the lingerie top. He kept slowly pushing until I lifted my arms up and allowed him to pull it up over my head.

There was no room for a bra underneath that shirt. I stood bare-chested before him.

"Beautiful," he whispered, running his fingertips lightly over my breasts, sending shivers down my spine and tingling in my abdomen. I finished unbuttoning his shirt as he pulled me into him and reached around behind me to unzip my skirt.

With little more than a tug the skirt dropped to the floor around my feet. Tony felt the fasteners on the back of the belly band holding my gun against my body.

"Will you be needing this?" he asked. My body grew cold. Did he know? Was I reading too much into it?

"N-no," I whispered.

Tony unlatched the band and carefully placed it, gun and all, on the table between the bed and the door.

"I know how you don't like to be far away from it," he said, then covered my mouth with his.

I felt his hands on the top of my pantyhose. I stepped out of my high heels and let him pull the hosiery down my legs then slowly over my ankles and off my feet.

"No fair," I said. "I'm always naked before you are."

"Not for long," he said, standing up.

Tony slid an arm around my back and another behind my legs. He lifted me like a hero in a comic book and carried me toward the bed. He laid me down gently on the tussled covers and slid his shirt off. His belt was already gone, perhaps in anticipation of my arrival, so I unbuttoned his dress pants and slowly pulled down the zipper.

Pants slid onto the floor. Skin against sheet rustled. Breath and breathless were the same. I felt Tony's lips on my cheeks, then on my neck, then down my chest between my breasts and nestled on my stomach. I ran my fingers through his soft, black hair and felt my body temperature surge.

Tony's hands caressed my thighs and ran up and down my sides. He lifted himself up and crawled further up on top of me. He had been prepared. Nothing under those dress slacks.

The look in Tony's eyes was both passionate and pained. I imagined the look in mine was the same. He knew something. I wasn't sure what he knew, but I wasn't about to let anything ruin this time. Ezra had sent me there to kill Tony, but I sent myself for an entirely different reason.

I pulled him down to my mouth and let all the passion I'd been saving up all my life come out in my lips and tongue. Fire passed between us. Tony pressed himself against me and pushed. I pushed back, teasing.

Tony pulled away long enough to give me a small smile. I stretched my arms up over my head. He ran his hands down the front of me and stopped just short of being between my legs. He smiled again.

"Tease," I said.

"That's not all," he said, and touched me. I was ready for it. Tony's fingertip slid across my moist and anxious flesh and sent my back arching and my fists pounding. How did he know exactly where to touch me?

Tony laughed softly and did it again and again. He touched me and kissed my chest and my stomach. The world reeled around me as I felt the buildup to orgasm clutch my body. It hit and I gasped, pulling a pillow over my head even though I knew I would barely make a sound. The points of pleasure passed through me gently, seeming to hit every area of my body at the same time, a sweet rush rather than a nuclear explosion.

I pulled the pillow off my head and looked down. I had Tony's forearm tightly between my thighs.

"Can I have my arm back?" he asked with a laugh.

"No, you may not," I breathed, relaxing and releasing his arm.

"It'll be okay," he whispered, moving his body up to lay next to me. "I have something else for you."

"I'll bet you do."

I swung one leg over his body and lifted myself up over him. Lowering my face down to his, I kissed him. I almost said it. I wanted to say it. Maybe he wanted to say it. But neither of us did. Instead of speaking those words, I leaned over and picked up a condom off the lamp stand next to the bed. Tony was always prepared. I slid it over his stiff flesh while he caressed my thighs, then I brought the rest of my body down over his, feeling his granite erection press against me. He slid inside me and both of us inhaled sharply. God, it felt like heaven.

I sat up and moved my body slowly, working it smoothly and gently. Tony put his hands on my hips and pulled me further down toward him, pushing him further up into me. I shuddered. I ran my fingertips down his smooth chest as I raised myself up

and down, flexing my thigh muscles, thankful for the millions of squats I'd done over the years. Tony closed his eyes and released a long, heavy breath.

The air around us was heavy and saturated with our lovemaking. With every breath I took in the sensations and with each exhalation I put them back out. They seemed to be participating, encouraging, like invisible, living entities there with us. I inhaled and felt the promise of something good around the corner.

Tony pushed up against me again and I squeezed my body around his flesh. I rocked and lifted. He pressed and pulled. I felt the waves coming like the tide rushing in. Tony made a sound mangled between passion and release and suffering and came inside me. The rush of his orgasm pushed my own over the edge and I came quickly, intensely, rounding my back like a cat over Tony and letting the sensations fire through me. He held on tightly to my hips until I collapsed over him, both of us spent and satisfied.

I lay on his chest for a few moments listening to his heartbeat slow down. Tony stroked my hair and my shoulders with long, slow motions. I pressed my cheek against his skin, enjoying the simple warmth there.

"I know why you're here, A," Tony said.

"What?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"I know that Drake sent you here."

I sat up and looked down at him.

"That is not why I came here."

"I know," he whispered, reaching up to brush a few errant strands of hair out of my eyes. "But he did send you here, didn't he?"

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I stared down at Tony and felt heat rising in my face and the sting of tears threatening in my eyes. He looked so beautiful under me, so perfect. I couldn't lie to him.

"Yes," I whispered.

Tony smiled briefly and stroked my cheek. A tear slid out. I couldn't stop it.

"It's okay," he said. "Don't cry."

He shouldn't have said that. The tears overtook me without warning. Tony lifted me off him and lay me down on the bed next to him. I turned my head into the pillow and sobbed. Tony put his arm around me and held me close to his chest.

"Shhh," he said. "It's okay."

"It's not fucking okay," I said into the pillow. "I fucking hate them all. Everyone uses us and lies to us."

Tony hugged me closer to him and kissed my shoulder.

"I know how you feel," he said. "And now they're going to kill me. I guess I always knew it was going to end up like this."

"No," I said, lifting myself away from the pillow. "I won't do it. They can all go to hell."

"I'm sure they can. But if you don't do it, there's how many guys in this hotel who will?"

I was silent.

"How many followed you here? I'm sure Drake had you followed."

"Three."

"So if you don't do it, I get whacked by one to three guys who won't make my going out nearly as pleasant as you have. I much prefer that you do it here, now. Not them later."

"Fuck that," I said. "I told you, I'm not doing it."

"Get your gun, Adrian."

"Fuck no."

Tony reached up under his pillow and pulled out his Sig.

"Use mine, then."

"Tony, why are you just giving up? We can try to get out of here, run and hide. At least try," I pleaded.

"There's something I haven't told you."

"What? What could it possibly be?"

"There's a few things I haven't told you."

"Jesus, Tony, tell me!"

"The first is about you. The second is about me. Adrian, your father was never part of Drake's business."

"Wh-what?" I stumbled. Of all the things that could have come out of Tony's mouth at that point, my father was dead last on my list of possibilities.

"I don't know much, but I know that your father's name was Caleb Connor and he never worked for Drake. There was an old timer working in one of the Miami clubs for a few months. You came up in conversation once. He said that it was too bad your family went bad. That your father wouldn't even join the team."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. That's all he said, then wouldn't talk about it again."

"I know what it means," I said. "More lies."

I lowered my head, thinking of the few times Ezra had spoken about my father, saying what a good man he was. How could he know that he was such a great guy if he didn't even work for him? Or how he was killed by a rival gang?

"I'm sorry. It never seemed like the right time to tell you."

"It's okay, Tony. I'm not about to hold it against you."

"I wish I knew more, but that's all I can tell you."

"It's enough."

"The other thing I need to tell you...it's why I can't leave this room alive."

I looked up at Tony, his arms still draped over me. His dark eyes were serious, and even a little ashamed.

"I never told you," he said, "that I have a son."

"You have a son? Where?"

"He's been in North Carolina with his mother for most of his life."

"How old is he?"

"Anthony, Jr. is ten years old. The problem is...he's not in North Carolina anymore."

"Where is he?" I asked, suddenly feeling cold.

"I don't know. But he's not with friends. As soon as I got word that the leak in Miami had fingered me, I got a call from Anthony's mom's best friend. The mother of my son was dead from a single bullet to the head and Tony was gone."

"Oh shit," I whispered.

"Yeah. That was not a fun phone call. But the one after that was worse."

"Do I want to hear about it?"

"Want to or not, I have to tell you. It was Drake telling me I had two options. I could try to save my own life, and he'd kill my son. Or I could make sure I wasn't breathing by midnight, and my boy would go free."

"That's bullshit. What is he going to do with him? Put him on the street? Give him to the state?"

"Or kill him anyway. Or keep him. Train him up. Like you."

Tony didn't even have to complete his thought. Like me. Maybe this wasn't the first time Ezra had used someone's child against them. Maybe my father wouldn't play ball and that's why I ended up with Ezra for a dad.

"That's not much for options, Tony."

"Tell me about it. So the plan is...I die tonight. And hope that my son makes a decent gangster."

"God, Tony."

I sat up and tucked my legs underneath me. I set my hand on Tony's shoulder.

"If you want to try, I'll help you."

"Tell me, Adrian. If any one of those guys sees us, a call goes to Drake. He gives the word and my boy is dead. Do you seriously think that it would work any other way? That he would feel bad about killing a ten-year-old and keep him alive long enough for us to show up and save the day?"

I knew it wouldn't work that way. I knew Tony was right. If he walked out of the hotel room, his kid was dead in a matter of minutes. I'd never killed a hostage. Hell, I'd

never taken a hostage. But I knew guys on the team who had. They don't make idle threats, especially not Ezra Drake.

"It's okay, really, it is," Tony said. "You turned out all right."

I let my mouth drop open and wondered if he was saying that honestly. Tony took my hand and pressed the Sig into it.

"You can keep it after, if you want," he said. "It's saved my ass a few times."

"I can't do it."

"Yes, you can. Better you than them."

As if on cue, a loud bang came upon Tony's hotel room door.

"Are you guys fucking done in there?" Benson's voice yelled. "Or still fucking?"

Laughter. More than one of them out there.

"Do it," Tony said.

I looked down at the gun in my hand, horrified. He put my finger on the trigger and pulled it up to his head. He pressed the barrel against his temple.

"Will you do me one favor, Adrian?" he whispered.

"Anything," I said.

"Find my son. Save him from all of this."

Tony put his hand around mine and squeezed his finger over mine.

"Tony," I whispered, looking at what he was doing. He looked at me and tried to smile, then jammed his finger down over mine and pushed the trigger back into the frame. I always thought being that close to the death of someone I cared for would happen in slow motion, but it happened far, far too quickly.

There was blood. Lots of it. Tony's blood. All over the beautiful white sheets that had just witnessed our lovemaking. There was brain. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to, but years of seeing the same thing had hardened me. It wasn't blood and brain that made the world draw to a halt around me. It wasn't the spreading red stain on the sheets that made my head spin. It wasn't the blank expression of the dead on Tony's face that made my insides seize up like I'd been hit by a semi. Tony...was gone.

The inconceivable nature of the thought was what kept me sitting there staring at his body. He'd been a part of me. A part of me that was gone forever. He was dead...and it was Ezra's fault.

Chapter Seven

A loud bang at the door. The Sig Sauer in my hand. Voices saying something I didn't understand. Tony's blank, vacant expression.

Self-preservation kicked in. I released the gun and left it on the bed. In under a minute I got dressed, not bothering to put the hosiery back on but instead stuffing it into my shirt. I grabbed a Kleenex off the nightstand and rubbed down the gun. It was a sloppy job and I knew it. But I didn't care. Strapping the belly band back on, I stuck my Glock in it and grabbed the keys to the Porche. I opened the door with the Kleenex and stepped out into the hall.

I stuffed the Kleenex into my top along with the pantyhose and looked Benson directly the eye. He looked back at me with something between fear and disbelief. They all didn't think I would do it. They all were right.

"Hardcore, man," Perry Parker said from somewhere.

"Gray's bringing the car around to one of the side exits," Benson said. "Let's go."

"Fuck you," I said. "I'm not going with you assholes."

"Take her," Benson directed Parker and Jimmy.

Take her? Parker and Jimmy each grabbed one of my arms. I wrapped one leg around Parker's closest leg to bring him close to me, then rammed the top of my forehead into the bridge of his nose. He let go of me and fell to the floor. I made an angry fist and swung it at Jimmy Dean. He grabbed my fist, still holding on to my opposite arm. His hands busy, he had no protection from my knee, which made devastatingly hard contact with his groin. He let go of me too.

Benson was pulling his gun. I made a fist in the air as I threw a punch directly into his neck. I didn't wait around for him to drop to the floor. I didn't stay to see if he survived the hit. I turned in time to see Jimmy reaching for his piece. Too bad for Jimmy, I wasn't holding onto my balls while trying to pull my gun. I lifted mine out of the belly band and fired. Jimmy's hand disintegrated in a mass of blood and bone. His screams were louder than the sound of the gunshot.

I took off down the hallway, briefly noting that Parker was just sitting there, holding his profusely bleeding nose. He didn't even try to reach for his gun. Wuss. Of course, these guys didn't really think that someone trained for years to be an assassin could be subdued by the likes of them.

I reached the stairwell and shot through the door like a bolt of leather lightning. I never knew I could move so fast in a skirt and heels. I ran down eight flights of stairs without blinking or looking back. When I pushed through the door at the bottom to escape out the back exit, the fire alarm went off.

The street was just as dark and deserted as when I'd arrived. I dashed across the street, making far more noise in my high heels than I was used to as I removed myself from the scene of the hit. I launched myself up the stairs in the parking garage and skidded to a halt by the driver's side door of the Porsche.

My heart pounded in my ears all the way home. Screw Ezra. I wasn't about to go back to the Office after that shit. If he wanted to talk to me he'd have to come and get me. Spank me and take away my birthday present for beating down those three losers. I was just a kid misbehaving to him and after all, the job was done. Mission complete. Ezra could try to play daddy later, after I got done ripping my guts out.

I listened to my heartbeat and watched my hands shake as I turned into the townhouse complex. My garage door lifted and I eased the Porsche inside, its purring engine oblivious to the distress of its driver.

I collapsed just inside the door, in the den. I slammed the door to the garage shut and started choking. I couldn't even get the tears out at first, just choked on my own panic and misery. Then the tears came and I couldn't see. I crawled up the stairs to the main floor, sobbing and gagging. I pulled off the high heels and threw them as hard as I could. Something broke. I threw myself against the wall between the kitchen and dining room and pounded it with my fists.

Pulling off the leather jacket, I grated my teeth and stifled a scream. The last thing I needed was my neighbors calling the cops. I fell to my knees and dragged the jacket along with me into my bedroom. I pulled a pillow off the bed, wrapped it around my head and screamed into it, the feathery down keeping my agony a secret. At first the screams were just that, sounds of emotions, but no words. Cursing followed, then just his name. Tony. Tony. I was alone.

An hour later, dehydrated and hoarse, I lay on the floor of my bedroom in nothing but the leather skirt and lingerie top, the pantyhose and Kleenex still stuffed inside it. I couldn't even move. I just lay there staring at the dim lights emanating from the kitchen. The tears left my eyes sore and crusty. Every inch of my body suffered.

* * * * *

I wasn't standing on the doorstep this time. I was in the living room again. I saw a hand raise up, holding a gun. The man holding the gun wore a ring with a bright red gem gleaming in its center. He squeezed the trigger and I heard the shot. Grandpa's body hit the floor, but first his brains splattered all over the picture window in the living room. I watched the blood and tissue run slowly down the glass.

I awoke. It was daylight out, but I had no idea what time it was. The blood and brain from the dream still in front of me, I thought of the men in the Lincoln. The same thing happened there. Human life splattered across glass. I thought of the ring. I'd never seen a ring like it before in my life. The setting was either platinum or white gold, the ruby so deep red that it looked like dried blood covered it. What was this dream?

I sat up, and the memories of the night before came flooding back to me. I held my head. He was gone and another day had dawned. The world moved on for everyone else. Maybe not everyone. I thought of Tony's revelation that he had a son. *Save him from this life*, he'd said. What the hell did he want me to do? I couldn't even save myself from this life, much less someone else.

I peeled off the rest of my clothes and ditched them in the corner of the bedroom. I walked up to the third floor, nude, to the bathroom. The shower was hot and inviting, but all I could think of was how Tony and I had been there just the previous morning, not knowing that it would be his last. I sat on the tiled floor of the shower and let the water run over me. It was too hot, but I didn't care. Let it scald me. It couldn't make things any worse.

Pressing my cheek against the shower wall, I could almost feel Tony's hands on me again. I sensed his soft touch on my sides and thighs, his warm breath behind my ears. My tears were cooler than the water coming down upon me. I leaned my seated body against the wall and held onto myself. With every memory of his fingertips, a new wave of tears seized me. Every touch from his ghost choked me and tore at my heart. I never even said it. I should have said it.

Time passed. I don't know how long I sat there, but finally the water began to run cold. I stood and turned it off. Shivering, I wrapped a towel around myself and stood in the middle of bathroom. *What to do now?* I thought. *Get dressed and go to the Office? Have a drink in The Lobby like nothing had happened?*

My phone was ringing. I stood there, wrapped up in the towel, and listened to it ring. I stood like I had plans to stand in my bathroom all day long. It rang and switched to voicemail three times, then was silent. My body was almost dry. I ran the towel over my hair and dropped it, then walked naked back down to my bedroom and crawled into bed. I wasn't going anywhere today.

I cried for about twenty minutes, doing nothing but feeling sorry for myself. I pondered the families—the wives and girlfriends especially—of all the men I'd killed. Was it like this for them? Did they feel like they'd had their guts torn out, ground up and stuffed back in? Did they feel like their life was suddenly refuse...a worthless waste of time and space?

When I fell asleep, I dreamed about blood and brain on glass again and again. I dreamed of the ruby ring and the paper bag. The same thing over and over and over again. When I awoke, I was exhausted. I would cry for a while, then go back to sleep where the dreams would start up again.

All time ran together and was the same as I wandered through the rest of the night and repeated it all the next day. Two a.m., ten p.m., noon. In and out of sleep, in and out of the shower, in and out of bouts of tears. I didn't even get a funeral for closure, or whatever that shit is that people talk about needing when someone they love dies. It was just me and the dreams.

It must have been six o'clock in the evening, two days after Tony died, when the doorbell rang. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Whoever it was waited a few moments, then rang again. I didn't move. I didn't fucking care who it was or what they wanted. The click of a key in the door lock sounded too loud in the silence. I reached up under my pillow and located my gun. Somehow, during all my sackcloth and ashes routine, I had still managed to get my Glock where it was supposed to be. Habits. I pulled it out and held it, just letting my arm dangle over the side of the bed. I'd wait until they came into my line of sight, shoot them and go back to sleep.

The alarm didn't go off. That meant it was someone from the Office, and it was arranged. No one would show up to rescue me.

I heard footsteps coming up the stairs to the main floor. I reached over and pulled back the slide, chambering a round, then let my arm go back to dangling. The footsteps paused for a long moment, then continued.

When they reached the top of the stairs I waited to see a shadow or a figure. Something to shoot at. Instead, I heard a voice.

"Adrian?"

It was a little voice. A Southern voice. A woman's voice. Mia. I lay there and waited for her to say something else.

"Adrian? It's Mia. Are you going to shoot me?"

I knew there was a reason I liked her. Very to the point.

"Are you alone?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm alone. They sent me over to...to..."

"Yeah, yeah. If you're alone, I won't shoot you. If I see anyone else, you're dead."

"Okay, okay."

Mia's slight shape rounded the corner carefully, as though she weren't sure whether or not I was telling the truth. I was.

"Can I come in?"

"Be my guest. You've already let yourself in."

Mia nervously cleared her throat and walked lightly through the dining room and into my room. My armed hand still dangled over the edge of the bed. Mia inched out of the line of the barrel.

"I brought you a latte," she said.

I looked up at her. She held out a cardboard to-go coffee cup.

"Thank you," I said, almost genuinely warmed. Mia took a few steps closer to me and I took the cup. Sensing that the gun was making Mia nervous, I stuck it back under my pillow.

"I don't know what to say, Adrian," Mia said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"Dallas says Drake keeps asking about you, trying to call you, but you won't answer. Everyone's worried."

I looked up at Mia's black eye and bruised cheek. I wondered what they had to threaten her with to make her come here.

"I'm sure he is, but I don't really care how he feels. Obviously he didn't care how I felt."

"I can't even imagine what that was like for you," Mia said, shaking her head.

"What do you know?" I asked her, curious as to what others had been told.

"Just that...that you did what you were ordered to do."

"So why is everyone so fucking worried?"

"We all knew how it was between you and Tony. Drake's afraid you're going to... I don't know, go on strike or something."

I almost laughed.

"If I was going to do that, don't they think I would have done so before killing him instead of after?"

"Honey I can't tell what they're thinking on a normal day, much less one like this."

I lay silent for a moment, then propped myself up on one elbow and took a drink of the latte. It was the perfect temperature. Hot and smooth. I let it slide down my throat.

I set the cup on the floor. Suddenly I felt even more alone with Mia sitting there trying to get me to run back to Ezra. I felt empty. Empty except for the well of tears. They started coming out of my eyes on their own command. I felt ashamed, crying in front of her. *Weakness*, part of me hissed.

"Oh honey," Mia said, putting her hand on my shoulder. I cried even harder at her touch. She bent down over me and held me. I turned toward her and grabbed her, wrapping my arms around her and burying my head into her chest. I was naked, but I didn't care. I was naked in more ways than one. Mia didn't seem to care either. She held on to me and rocked me while I sobbed, getting spit and snot all over her shirt.

Finally I pulled away from her and wiped my eyes.

"I'm sorry about your shirt."

"Oh honey, don't worry about it. I have more than one."

Mia bent down and picked up my coffee.

"Here," she said. "You sound like you could use a little something warm in your stomach. It will make you feel better."

"Thank you."

"It's okay."

"I mean...thank you. I know they probably threatened you to get you to come here, but I'm glad you did."

I sighed heavily.

"I have no one," I whispered.

Mia reached up and brushed away some strands of hair that had fallen into my eyes.

"Neither do I," she whispered back.

Mia and I just sat there commiserating in silence for a long while. Our world was a sham. Unfortunately, it was a deadly, dangerous sham. I sipped my latte. Mia stroked my hair and my shoulder, but I felt it was more of a solace to her than a comfort for me. Finally Mia patted my shoulder and stood up.

"I have to get back," she said. "What should I tell them?"

"Tell them the next person they give a key to my house to gets a hollow point kiss."

"Okay. What should I tell them about you coming back?"

"Tell Ezra I'll be back tomorrow night."

"I guess I don't blame you," she said. "After all, I'm going back."

I nodded. We understood each other. Mia left and I sat on the bed, nude, drinking my latte. It was mostly cold when I got halfway through, and I abandoned it on the floor next to the bed.

I walked into the kitchen, naked and not caring who could see me through the window. I pulled the pack of smokes from the fridge and walked back to the bedroom.

I lay down on the floor and stared at the ceiling. I lit the cigarette and watched the thick blue smoke billow up over my head. It spun and swirled like ethereal spaghetti in the air. It turned and moved without meaning or purpose. Like my life. My stomach growled. It didn't want smoke for dinner. I thought about my stupid birthday lunch with Ezra. Him and his stupid Porsche. What the fuck did I want a Porsche for? He should have given me something useful, like gee, I don't know...Tony's life.

I sat up and dropped the smoldering cigarette into the latte. It sizzled and hissed as the coffee doused the cherry. I picked my body up off the floor and got dressed. Basics. Black shirt, jeans, boots, gun. My uniform.

I went down to the den and rigged a booby trap for the front door. A cord tied to the doorknob and to the trigger of a .40 caliber pistol. The cord wrapped around the butt of the gun so that when it tightened it would pull the trigger back. Anyone using their own key to get in would get just what I told Mia—a hollow point kiss.

Chapter Eight

I stepped into the garage and set the alarm. Not that it would do me much good. Anyone breaking in that night would be immune to it. I raised the garage door and revved up the Porsche. It did sound awfully pretty.

I drove to a bar and grill I'd seen a time or two but had never been into. It wasn't owned by Ezra and that was all that really mattered to me. That and I could get a drink there. I needed it. I parked the Porsche around the corner. No need to draw attention to myself by having someone see me get out of it.

Ed's Bar & Grill was dark, a little more bar than grill. I took a seat up at the bar and started perusing the menu. Not your usual pub fare—the menu included stuffed artichokes and lamb.

"Can I get an appetizer?" I asked the bartender.

"What can I get for you?"

"How about a double Drambuie?"

"Coming up."

The bartender delivered my whiskey in short order. I took a long sip and sighed, feeling slightly human. Funny how exhausting emotional trauma is. You lie around doing nothing but cry and have absolutely no energy left over to do anything. You run five miles and you're ready to take on the world. A little adrenaline, like the kind you get while on a hit, and the world seems like a relatively small challenge.

Sitting at the bar with a glass of courage and satisfying my hunger with some random gourmet appetizers, I was thinking much more clearly. I nursed the whiskey as I contemplated my options.

I had to save Tony's kid. How the fuck was I going to do that? I had to find out the truth about my father. Again, how the fuck... How would they do it in the movies? It wasn't like I could go research this shit at the library. Or hell, maybe I *could* do something like that. I had a name. I had an approximate date of death. The sprouts of an idea were forming in my mind. Maybe there was hope for Tony Jr. and me after all.

I paid my tab and walked out of the restaurant. I walked back to my car, feeling watched. Someone from the bar, I hoped. Just a random person. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my car keys, then dropped them on purpose so I could turn around to pick them up. Quickly scanning the area that had been behind me, I found no signs of a tail. Paranoia? Perhaps. Nonetheless, I made my way back to the Porsche in a hurry, trying not to look like it. I slid in behind the tinted windows and almost felt like I could hide there.

Ten minutes passed and I saw nothing unusual. I turned over the engine and slowly let the car roll out into the street, feeling like I was in the belly of a wildcat, calm and unassuming but ready to pounce at any moment.

I drove by the Office one time, not wanting to risk being seen. No one was standing outside the door to The Lobby. I deposited the Porsche three blocks away and walked back to case my own employer's joint.

Circling around the back of the Office, I almost felt bad. It was a sick, unhealthy feeling, and I knew it. Despite everything that had just happened and my suspicions about Ezra's truthfulness with me about my family, I just couldn't shake that daughterly affection I had for him. If a woman finds out her blood father is a bad guy, does she suddenly stop loving him? Do all those good feelings go away? I doubted it.

Ezra's building was tight. Exterior exits were either sealed off or, as I knew from The Lobby, manned on the inside. Fire codes. Pain in the ass. There was one fire escape coming out of Ezra's private floor. I suspected there was a way to the roof, but I didn't know where it was and lurking around on foot was not going to help me find it.

I heard something behind me, like a shuffle or a scrape. Standing dead still, I listened. Nothing. I whirled around and flattened my back against the brick wall of the Office. I didn't like people sneaking up on me. I pulled my Glock and let it hang at my side.

One of my weak points was patience. Ezra never sent me on a stakeout. He sent me in when it was clear-cut, no lines and no waiting, when someone just needed to get a bullet in their ass. I never waited long enough. I got antsy. I failed to let them make the first move.

True to form, I got impatient pressed up against that wall. I rationalized that it was probably a stray cat and I had pulled my gun on Morris or Garfield. I was making a fool of myself. I looked to my right. Parking lot. A dumpster. A few cars, likely patrons of The Lobby. I looked to my left. Stacked up cardboard boxes sporting the names of liquors and beers and wines, then the corner of the building.

I lifted myself off the wall and stepped carefully to the left, keeping a close eye on the boxes. Nothing. No movement, no sound. The corner of the building was closing in. I took two more steps, braced myself and stepped away from the building, looking down the side, my Glock pointed straight ahead, waiting for a Lobby employee, a heroin addict or Garfield the cat. None of the above.

I heard the sound coming from the boxes beside me in time to turn and raise my weapon, but not in time to stop the black mass of movement coming toward me. It knocked the Glock from my hands and my ass to the ground.

"Unh!" I said as my rear end made contact with the cement. I rolled off to the side as my attacker came in again.

"Police, don't move!"

The three words that drive cold fear into the heart of any practitioner of mob-related activity. He may as well as screamed, "I can't wait to rape and murder you and mutilate your dead body!"

I kicked out into his oncoming torso. He made the same noise I'd made hitting the ground, but he didn't go down. I scrambled to my feet, not interested in a grappling match with a man no matter how strong I was. He came at me. I went to one knee and punched him in the solar plexus.

My assailant cursed and grabbed for me. I dodged, but not far enough, and he ended up with a fistful of shirt at my shoulder. I brought the elbow of my left arm up under his chin. I made contact, hard. He grunted. That had to hurt, but he didn't let go of me.

He spun me around and shoved me up against the wall. From the dim outer lights of the building, I got my first glimpse of this fucking tough cop. His skin was dark and his eyes darker, their intensity giving me pause. A strong, rounded jawline and short cropped black hair framed his face. This cop was better-looking than most I'd seen, but he was a cop for sure and he was seeing my face. Not good.

I put my hands on both his arms but saw no good attack or distraction.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Fuck you! Let me go before someone sees us!"

"Who are you?"

"I'm your sister," I spat, and tried to knee him in the 'nads. No good. He saw it coming a mile away.

"Okay, sister. What are you doing, prowling around here? Why shouldn't I take you in for questioning?"

"Oh, go to hell. Question me for what, walking?"

"Try assaulting a police officer. Carrying a concealed weapon without a permit."

"You don't know that I don't have one."

"I will soon enough."

The cop spun me around and pushed me chest-first into the wall. He grabbed one of my wrists and I heard the clink of handcuffs. To hell with that idea. I pushed myself away from the wall and hit him, sending us both to the ground. I rolled, only to have him roll right after me. I tried to push up to my feet but felt him grab my foot.

"God dammit!" I hissed. "Let me go before you get us both killed!"

The cop grabbed my other foot and pulled it out from under me, sending my ass to the concrete again. He launched himself on top of me and held my hands to the ground.

"Let me take you in and no one gets killed."

"Are you fucking kidding me? That's even worse!"

"Who are you?"

"Martha Stewart."

"Martha, were you at the Hyatt recently?"

I suddenly stopped struggling. It was a dead giveaway and I cursed myself for it, but I couldn't help it. Thoughts of Tony rushed in and stopped all other functions.

"Ah, I see that means a little something to you."

"You have no fucking idea, you little bastard."

I rammed my forehead into his nose. He was a tough motherfucker, but as the blood gushed out of his face and all over my shirt, he rolled off me and held his nose, cussing and spitting blood. I jumped to my feet and scanned the ground for my gun. If Ezra's guys found it, I was toast. It lay four feet from the stack of boxes out in the open. I picked it up and stuffed it into my pants. I had to get the fuck out of there before someone saw me.

I started to dash down the side of the building toward the street. No good. Probably someone was standing at the front door to The Lobby. I ran back by the cop, who was recovering quickly and would soon be back on his feet. There was an alleyway between the two buildings on the opposite side of the Office building. It was darker than shit, but I was out of options.

Running through the darkness, I focused on the street lamps ahead of me like the light at the end of the tunnel. I lifted my feet high as I ran and waited to trip over a crackhead and land on a needle. Luckily there were no drug addicts lurking in the shadows and I made it to the street with merely a single beer bottle kick.

I sped down the sidewalk toward where I had stashed the Porsche. I couldn't afford to have a hot tough cop following me. Nearly setting an Olympic record, I slid behind the wheel of the Carrera and blasted out into the street. It was time to hope that he was alone and had no one following suspects.

Just in case, I circled around downtown for a while. I cruised through Buckhead where the car not only fit in but was occasionally outdone. I watched all the people enjoying the pleasant evening with their friends, dining out on the decks of restaurants and walking to clubs. Some of them might go home with the police, but it was my intention to avoid that at all costs.

After about forty-five minutes I made the rounds back to the townhouses. A neighbor was having a party. Someone yelled, "Nice car!" as I drove by. Thank God for tinted windows. They couldn't see how bloody the driver was.

After sliding the Porsche into the garage, I laid my head back against the headrest. I sat there for a long moment before getting up and going to the door from the garage to the apartment. As I punched in my security code, I knew full well someone at the Office was monitoring my coming and going. I just hoped that cop got the hell out of there before someone saw him. The last thing I needed was him giving them my description while they held his nuts in a blender.

My booby trap connected to the front door had not been triggered. Just as an added precaution I left it set up. I needed a shower. I had more cop blood on me than I cared

for. After stripping off my clothes, I stuck them in the bathtub so they wouldn't leave evidence all over the townhouse.

My reflection in the mirror showed no bruises. Good. I didn't want to have to explain anything when I went back to the Office in the morning. I was sure they'd already have more questions than I was interested in answering.

The shower was hot and soothing. I let the water run down my body and wash away the blood, turning the stream a rusty orange color as it trickled down my legs and down the drain. The cop had been tough, but I was reckless. I let down all my guards the moment he mentioned the Hyatt. Now he knew I was somehow involved. Lucky for me, that was all he knew.

But he was hanging around the Office, I thought, rubbing my body down with a bar of soap. That means he has a lead on Ezra. Someone has told him something that led to the Office or The Lobby. Should I tell Ezra the place was being watched?

No, no, I thought, turning my face into the spray. No good. He'd want to know how I knew and that would lead to what I was doing scoping the building for exits and entrances and... No, can't go there. I'll keep watching the cop watch and if it seems like a good idea to make a move, I'll do it.

I ran my hands over my wet hair and stared at the water, now clear, running away from me and down the drain. I found myself hoping the cop was okay. *Who am I?* I thought. *Worried about the police? Yes, he's very hot. And tough. Hot and tough. We have established that. But there are many hot, tough guys around and you don't go worrying about them.*

As the water continued to stream over my body, I realized that I was trying to fill the hole. That gaping hole that used to hold Tony was empty and searching, ready to reach out for the next person who could provide some relief and comfort. Shaking my head, I let the warm water spray over my face and tried not to think about it. Thinking about it would only keep the pain fresh.

After finishing my shower, I wrapped myself up and headed down the stairs to my bedroom. It was early, but it didn't matter. I had nothing to stay up for. I lay in bed and smoked for a while, staring at the ceiling and wondering. My historical fact hunt would start tomorrow. What I would find worried me. What I might not find worried me more.

What if Caleb Connor didn't exist? What if the loosely woven stories about my father were all fabricated to make me feel like I was part of the team? If that was true and none of them even really knew who the fuck my father was, then where did I come from? If there was a Caleb Connor and it turns out that he actually was my father, then why had Ezra always told me my last name was Ennis?

Nothing added up and I was pissed. I'd had it. I was finished with everyone thinking it was okay to tell me lies.

Chapter Nine

I dreamed of the blood, the ring and the bag. Over and over the dream recycled itself. When I woke up, I could still see the living room in detail. There were swirling etchings on the ring that were now engraved into my mind. Grandpa, whoever he was, died again and again before my eyes. I repeatedly watched him open the door and look down at me holding the bag. This time I saw a look of horror on his face.

If this really was a memory, I guess I was scaring people even when I was a little kid.

I woke up late, thought about Tony and cried for a while, then got up and dressed for a workout. I stood in the middle of my gymnastics floor surveying my equipment as though it was going to be able to help me figure out my dilemma. I warmed up with a hundred sit-ups and a hundred push-ups, followed by squats and a round of stretching, hoping for some brilliant stroke of inspiration.

I worked through my forms slowly, but hard and deliberate. Each strike meant something. Each kick, each circle of the arm had a purpose. The fluidity and rhythm I felt were different from anything I'd felt before. My old teacher had talked to me about chi, but I'd never felt it. Maybe because my intentions were dark...or Ezra's intentions were. Was it different now that I was contemplating using what I knew for a higher purpose? I thought of Tony's son. *Save him from this life*, he said.

My heart had started to change, and I could feel it. Losing Tony had caused more pain than I'd ever felt in my life. Some religions believe that purification comes with pain. Maybe they were on to something. Through my suffering, suddenly I had goals and reason. My heartbreak was giving way to emotions. Real emotions. It seemed everything I'd ever felt before was a lie.

I beat the punching bag and did some weights. The phone began to ring on the lower level as I was stretching out. I sighed. No way to make it in time, but it didn't matter. I knew who it was. I couldn't put off going back any longer.

The message was from Dallas. *Call us when you're coming in*, it said. Fuck that. Give them fair warning? Hell no. I'd pop in unannounced if I damn well felt like it. And I did feel like it.

The shower was waiting for me. It felt good and cleansing, and not just in the washing the workout sweat off my body kind of cleansing. I was feeling halfway human. As long as I didn't dwell on my thoughts of Tony, I'd be okay.

It was almost noon when the purring Porsche and I rolled into the parking garage at the Office. I half-expected sentries to be waiting at the door for me, ready to take me into custody. Instead, The Lobby was strangely dead. A few guys were milling around

the pool tables. Some unknown business guy was reading *The Wall Street Journal* and having coffee at the bar. The bartender was reading his novel.

I took a seat at the bar and ordered myself a coffee. I tried to sit there like nothing had happened. I imagined that I was just back for another day and Tony was on his way back to Miami and I hadn't broken the nose of an Atlanta Police Department cop last night. Sipping my cup of joe with cream and two sugars, I waited for something to happen.

I didn't have to wait too long. I wasn't even halfway through my cup when I felt someone staring at me. I slowly turned in my chair to see Benson behind me, glaring. His neck was in a brace. Unable to stop it, I just let the smirk start at one end of my mouth and work its way to the other side.

"Laugh it up, bitch," Benson gurgled from under his brace. "You're the one with a dead fuck buddy."

The smirk was gone. I stood up and got off my chair, heading straight for him. The conceited expression on Benson's face moved quickly to fear as he realized he had pushed me too far. Unfortunately, I was not able to realize my fantasy of beating him to death with his brace. Two sets of hands grabbed my arms when I was mere feet from him.

"Shut your trap, ya fat fuck," Gray said to Benson, tightening his grip on my arm.

Benson made a noise and turned to hobble away, bobbing from one side to the other like a neckless marshmallow man. I looked down at the fingers holding my other arm. Jimmy Dean. His other hand was bandaged beyond belief. I looked him straight in the eye.

"Let go of me."

Maybe there was something in my voice when I was deadly serious. Maybe it was a complete lack of something in my voice. Jimmy released me, quickly followed by Gray.

"Mr. Drake would like to see you," Gray said.

"No shit. Can I pencil him in for early next week? I've had a lunch cancellation for Tuesday if he's free."

"Now."

"Absolutely no respect for my schedule," I said, shaking my head. Jimmy Dean backed off as Gray and I headed for the elevator.

"I really don't need an escort," I said.

"Mr. Drake thinks you do."

"What the fuck am I going to do? Run and hide?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

I often wondered if Gray had a personality. I was pretty sure he didn't have a penis. I wanted to ask but thought those questions were better saved for another time.

The elevator took us up to Ezra's private floor. Gray walked me to the door and let me walk through alone. Thankfully, he trusted me that much. Ezra was sitting in the red chair, smoking a cigar. My red chair. Probably some testosterone driven show of dominance, to remind me that he was still in charge. When I walked in he didn't get up, but gestured me over to come sit with him.

I wasn't sure how I felt seeing him. I knew it was his order that put that bullet in Tony's brain more than anything else. Circumstances be damned, Tony would still be alive if it weren't for Ezra's paranoia.

I walked over and sat down in the blue chair. I stared at the cold, dead fireplace. Ezra looked over at me but I did not meet his gaze.

"You know it had to be done, right, Adrian?" he said.

I didn't respond.

"Ah hell. I know you're upset. It kills me to see you this upset. I wish I could do something to make it better."

That time has come and gone, I thought.

"And even though I know you're pissed at me, and probably rightly so, I just want you to know that I'm proud of you. You handled yourself well. Professionally."

"I almost killed Benson, sterilized Jimmy and broke Parker's nose," I commented.

"Those guys were being dickheads. I never told them to bring you back here by force. You did what you had to. You did what you were trained to do."

That much was true.

"But you were able to put personal feelings aside and get the job done. So no matter what, I'm proud of you."

I imagined a dad telling his daughter, "I'm so proud that you were able to kill someone you love. Good job, honey." The sick reality that I was living was being revealed to me piece by bloody piece. I'd lived for years in a box, believing only what I saw and was told but nothing that I felt or knew.

"Thanks," I said. I didn't know why.

"Hey, how's that Porsche running for you?" Ezra said with an encouraging smile. Yes, the Porsche. Distract her with the car so she won't think about the gaping hole in her heart. Fill that void with gasoline and everything will be okay.

"Fine. I mean, great. Like a dream."

"Good, good. Glad to hear it. You let me know if you have any trouble at all with it. This gift includes all maintenance."

"I will, thanks."

I still hadn't looked at him.

"You're still down. Give it a few weeks, sweetheart. You'll be back to your old self in no time at all."

"I'm sure you're right," I said, almost in a sigh. This was the most depressing conversation I'd ever had in my life.

"I am, trust me. I know about these kinds of things," Ezra said with a wave of his hand. He took a puff on his cigar and shifted in his seat.

"Adrian, look at me."

I did. I don't know what was in my gaze, but it couldn't have been much. Ezra met my eyes. It made me want to cry.

"You know I love you like a daughter," he said.

"I know," I whispered.

"And I wouldn't have asked you to do it if it wasn't the right thing to do."

I nodded. There was nothing else to do. I looked away again.

"I need you to take care of something for me today," Ezra said, his tone shifting over to business.

"Sure," I said, emotionless.

"I need you to take Joey Starke to the airport."

"He can't take the train?"

"And on your way back, pick up Nicky."

"Jesus, what am I, the new chauffeur?"

Ezra laughed.

"That's the Adrian I was hoping to hear. Nicky's car got stolen last night, can you believe it? Dumbass left the alarm off and the next morning she was gone. They threw some of his CDs out the window on their way out."

Ezra chuckled.

"What did he have?"

"One of them new Mustangs. Green. I told him he was begging for a stolen car by leaving it parked on the curb."

"Why the hell didn't he put it in the garage?"

"Wanted people to see it, probably."

"What a dumb shit."

Ezra laughed and nodded. At least we agreed on something.

"When does Joey have to be at the airport?"

"Two. Go get yourself some lunch. He'll be ready when you get back."

"All right. I expect to be heavily tipped for this."

Ezra chuckled again. In a good mood, I guess. I let myself out and took the elevator back down to the lobby. Joey Starke was already sitting at the bar with a martini, his bags next to him. He turned as I stepped out of the elevator and gave me a nod. He was looking rather full of himself.

"What's up, Joe?" I said, taking a seat next to him.

"Moving on," he said. "If you're ready we can take off for the airport now."

"In a hurry?"

So much for getting some lunch.

"Just don't want to miss this flight. I have important business to attend to."

Joey's head swelled before my eyes. The sooner he left town, the better.

"Sure," I said. "Let's go."

Joey knocked back his drink and picked up his bags. We walked out to the parking garage, Joey looking confused as I didn't try to help him with his luggage or open doors for him. What the fuck was up?

"We'll have to take the Acura," I said. "Your shit won't fit in the Porsche."

I stuck my key into the keyhole and opened the trunk of the CL. I stood back as Joey teetered along with two suitcases, a small carryon bag and what looked like a laptop computer.

"You could help me," he said.

"I could, but I'm not going to."

Joey loaded his bags in the trunk with a grunt. I got behind the wheel and brought my old baby to life. The Porsche was nice, but my Acura was comfortable. Joey got into the passenger's side and I pulled out of the parking spot.

As we pulled onto the interstate I glanced over at Joey and said, "So where are you going that's so important?"

"Miami," he answered, looking over at me and staring. I gripped the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. Nice of Ezra to remind me that life was moving on and that no one was irreplaceable. No wonder Joey was so proud. He'd just been promoted. He grinned. Little fucker was rubbing it in too. I accelerated. *Just get him to the airport and get him out of your car, I told myself. You can always kill him later.*

We didn't speak any more. I pulled up to the Delta terminal and waited in the car while he pulled his bags out of my trunk. He slammed the trunk lid down and banged twice on it. I pulled away without so much as a sideways glance back. Too bad I couldn't turn around and run him over. Prick. I'd never liked Joey anyway.

I left the airport vicinity as quickly as I could without attracting attention. I never felt comfortable in places where random searches were performed. Safely back on I-85, I squeezed the steering wheel again. They were replacing Tony with Joey? He was such a little twit. He could never manage the Miami holdings like Tony had.

I relaxed my hands, letting blood refill my fingers and my knuckles turn from white back to peach. *Just relax, I told myself. You'll get your answers. Or die trying.*

It was a small miracle that I even knew where Nicky K lived. I had been by a month or two earlier for some forgettable reason. Nicky had a townhouse too. Not as new as mine, but a little nicer. I thought about calling him and warning him that I was early, but I didn't, just to be rude.

I pulled into the driveway. I got out and shut the door as quietly as I could. The garage door was pulled shut, but Nicky had an end unit and I knew there were windows around the side. I walked around the side and took a peek. There had to be a real reason he was parking on the street.

My curiosity did not go unrewarded. Sitting in Nicky's garage was Mia's BMW. I raised my eyebrows, wondering what Dallas would do if he found out his wife was banging a guy half his age. *Go Mia*, I thought.

Unfortunately, it was time to break up the party. I stood on Nicky's front porch and rang the door bell. I heard a loud thump from one of the upper floors. I rang the doorbell twice more.

"I'm fucking coming!" Nicky screamed. More information than I needed.

A few minutes later, Nicky yanked open the front door. He was wearing a pair of jeans and no shirt. He wasn't a little pipsqueak, that was for sure. His six-pack was well-sculpted and he had this 1950s bad boy look about him. Nice. I took a moment to appreciate his assets, then put my hand on his chest and pushed him aside as I walked inside the townhouse.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm early, dipshit," I said. "I'm also saving your life."

I walked up the stairs and located Nicky's bedroom. The bed was a wreck, sheets and pillows everywhere. Looked like fun. Nicky was hot on my heels.

"What the fuck? Did I fucking invite you in?"

Limited vocabulary, I noted. Usually the super-pretty ones were like that. Nicky grabbed my arm. I turned and gave him that look, the look that said you were inches from death.

"Let go of me and I won't tell Dallas about your houseguest," I said in my lowest, most threatening voice. Nicky let go of me, his I-spent-all-night-fucking flushed face suddenly going white.

I walked over and opened the bathroom door. I stepped inside and yanked back the shower curtain. Mia screamed, pulling Nicky's bathrobe tightly around her otherwise naked body. She looked down in shame, then cautiously up to see who had busted her.

"Oh God, Adrian, please, please don't tell Dallas," she pleaded, practically getting down on her knees. "This is just the first time ever and I..."

"Mia, shut up," I said. "I couldn't possibly care less who you're fucking. Honestly, I don't blame you, I think Dallas is a dickhead and he deserves to be cheated on. However, I recommend that you take a few moments to cover up the windows in Nicky's garage if you plan on coming back. How did you think I knew you were here?"

"You saw my car?"

"Yes, and it didn't take a whole lot of detective work to do it. Please put your clothes on and get the hell out of here before Dallas decides he'd like to find out why Nicky's car is always parked on the curb."

Mia nodded, looking ashamed. I turned and looked at Nicky.

"You put your clothes on too. I'm supposed to take you back to the Office."

"You the chauffeur now after you offed Litton?"

I pulled my gun and pointed it directly at Nicky's head. The barrel was an inch from his skin. I heard Mia suck in a breath and hold it.

"Don't ever," I said slowly, coldly, "ever mention Tony again. I will blow your head right off and piss all over the bloody pieces of brain. Are we clear?"

Nicky swallowed and nodded slowly, presumably not to startle me. Smart move.

"Do you think I'm just threatening you?" I asked.

"No."

"Do you think I'm serious?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that for one moment I would hesitate to put your head and body into two different time zones?"

"No."

"Good then. I'm glad we have an understanding. Put your fucking clothes on and come downstairs."

I put my gun back in the holster and went down the stairs. I walked out the front door and slammed it shut behind me. Prick bastard. I had half a mind to go back in there and blow his brains out, agreement be damned. I settled in behind the driver's seat and waited.

Nicky came walking out of the house about five minutes later, dressed and, it appeared, showered. Quick little bastard. He sat down in the passenger's seat silently. I cranked the engine and drove us back to the Office.

He didn't say a word until I had parked in the Office garage.

"You're not gonna say anything to Dallas, are you?"

"Why the hell would I do that? I'll save it until it's useful information. Right now I just don't give a shit. Ask me later when I need you to do something for me."

Nicky K muttered a curse under his breath and got out of the car. It wasn't the first time I'd threatened to use someone's affair against them, but it might be the first time I was actually willing to make good on it. Nicky had a big mouth. I hoped for Mia's sake that wasn't the only thing he had that was big.

After Nicky had made his way into The Lobby, I pulled out of the parking spot and slipped out of the garage. I took the long way around, paranoid, trying to shake any potential tail. When I felt I was safe, I parked in a small shopping center and headed into the internet café next to the grocery store.

I bought a cup of coffee and a sandwich and settled down in front of one of the computers. I knew there was a tracking bug on my computer at home without really

having proof. Paranoia wasn't always a psychological disorder. In some cases it just meant you were smart.

I pulled up a search agent and typed in "Caleb Connor". I found several newborns with that name, a few CPAs and real estate agents, all in other cities, along with more than two thousand other hits. I added Atlanta. I added Georgia. I searched on the last name only and nearly blew the machine up with the number of hits it generated.

I took a bite out of my sandwich, sipped some coffee and sat back in the chair. On a whim, I typed in "Beth Connor". A bunch of junk hits came up, then I found a link that read, "Elizabeth Connor, thirty-three, of Dunwoody was found dead on Tuesday..." I clicked. The link was to back editions of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Of course, the newspaper wanted me to subscribe to see back issues. I had a feeling my credit card transactions were scrutinized as well. That wouldn't do. I guess I'd be going to the library after all.

Chapter Ten

I felt oddly out of place in the library in my leather jacket, leather pants and high-heeled boots. I got a few stares. Oh well. I had work to do. I got one of the librarians to pull the microfiche of the year I guesstimated my mother would have died, assuming she died the same year I went to live with Ezra. I spent the next three hours going through the history of Atlanta in the late 1970s. Finally I found the article I had located online. Elizabeth Connor. Could it possibly be my mother? It was a short little blurb. Barely a mention. Apparently it was a busy crime year for Atlanta.

Elizabeth Connor, thirty-three, of Dunwoody was found dead on Tuesday morning. The wife of Caleb Connor, who has been missing for three weeks, was found in her home, dead of a gunshot wound. Police officials have declined to comment on the possible organized crime connection to the murder and disappearance. The couple's eight-year-old daughter, Adrian, is now also reported missing. Police are asking anyone with information about the murder or either disappearance to come forward.

Jackpot, I thought, but I didn't feel excited. I felt more deflated than anything. I had confirmation now that my parents were in fact dead. I was pretty sure that my "missing" father wasn't on a Vegas vacation. My last name actually was Connor, not Ennis. My mother was twenty-five when I was born. At my age, she had a four-year-old little girl.

I left the library as soon as I had what I needed, figuring I should get back to the Office. They were probably wondering about me. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd put a tracker on my car while it sat in the garage and already knew I was digging up the past.

A black Cadillac was sitting out front of The Lobby door when I pulled up to the parking garage. It wasn't unusual, but for some reason I was curious about it. I parked the Acura and ran back to the garage opening and peeked around the corner. It was still there. It sat, idling for a moment, then Ezra came out of the building. The car's front seat passenger got out and opened the back door. A small dark-haired boy stepped out of the vehicle.

I caught my breath. It could only be Tony's son. Jesus, he looked just like him. Ezra bent down to eye level with the boy and said something to him. I could hear nothing. The kid tried to get back into the car. The passenger grabbed him and yanked him out. They shut the car door and dragged him quickly into The Lobby before he drew attention.

I turned away from the corner and leaned back against the cool cement of the garage wall. It was Tony, Jr. He was here. Just like Tony had said, they did have his son. Now what would they do to him since Tony was dead? I rested my head against the cement. What did they do to me when my parents were gone?

Save him from this life, Tony's ghost whispered. From assassin to savior.

Suddenly I felt eyes on me. I looked around the parking garage. Nothing. No one. Not even some unsuspecting Lobby patron. I turned my head and looked across the street. There was a bar and grill, owned by Ezra. Some offices and apartments overhead that he may or may not have owned. Any one of them could house the eyes. But who and why? I thought of the detective with the busted nose.

I stepped away from the wall, looked up at the building and waved. I had no clue where they were watching from, but watching they were. No need for them to feel too secure. I wondered if I'd just scared the shit out of someone and smiled to myself, then turned and walked into The Lobby.

I saw Spiro hitting some balls around one of the pool tables by himself. I walked over and said, "Looking for a game?"

"Sure," he said. "Grab a cue, I'll rack 'em."

Spiro was a young guy, maybe twenty-six or twenty-seven, and very, very Greek. Actually spoke Greek. I wondered how someone like that ended up in Ezra's employ. Maybe they traded him from the Greek mafia for someone else. Like a foreign exchange student program for mobsters.

I bent down over the table and lined up my shot. I saw Benson sitting up at the bar. As I slammed the stick into the ball for the break, I imagined my pool stick going straight up his ass.

It was a good break, but I didn't pocket any balls. Spiro chalked his stick and began circling the table, looking for his best shot. As he bent down to line up a shot on the one ball, he said, "I heard about Litton. That's really fucked up."

I figured that was probably as close a sentiment to sympathy as I was going to get out of any of these guys.

"Yeah, it is," I said. "Thanks for noticing."

Spiro took his shot on the one and made it. I was the big ones again—nine through fifteen.

"I don't think I could have done it, if it was me," he said, leaning across the table for another shot.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I guess I mean you got bigger balls than I do."

Or less heart. Adrian, now one hundred percent heart-free.

Spiro missed his shot. My desire to play the game had plummeted. I bent over and took a halfhearted shot on the ten and slopped the twelve in. I let Spiro take the next shot.

Spiro won the game. I was pretty sure he was a better player than me, but my not caring hadn't helped my game any. I looked up at the bar. Benson was still up there.

"Hey, Adrian, Spiro," Nicky K said, walking over to the table. "We're gonna head across the street and get something to eat if you want to join us."

"Nah, I got stuff I have to do here," Spiro said.

It would look good for me to be there.

"I'll go," I said.

There was a small group of us, Jimmy Dean, Perry Parker, Nicky K, Mia and interestingly, Dallas, and myself. It seemed a little too weird to me for Nicky and Mia to be having dinner with her husband. If I were Nicky, I'd be a little nervous.

Perry was standing at the door to the bar and grill as I passed through. We made brief eye contact and he reached up and rubbed his swollen purple and blue nose. Glad to know I'd made an impression on the kid. Jimmy Dean looked slightly nervous around me and kept closing his legs. Finally some respect. With the exception of Jimmy's hand being in pieces, I'd barely touched these two and they knew enough to be cautious. I'd nearly killed Benson and he was all attitude.

We gathered around one of the circular tables and started ordering drinks. The staff, of course, knew us, so we always got top of the line service. If they knew what we did for a living they never showed it. Wise.

I took a drink of my Sam Adams and scanned the pub. I felt the eyes again. They were hidden well as I saw no trace of a spy.

Everyone ordered their entrees. Burgers and fries, steaks and onion rings abounded. I ordered fish. Funny how I could see human blood and not bat an eye, but to watch it oozing out of a steak made me nauseous. Fish don't bleed. If you've got a bloody fish on your plate, you've got a problem, not a meal.

Nicky K and Mia sat across the table from each other. As far as I could tell, they never once made eye contact. Talent. Dallas wrapped his arm around Mia like he loved her. Knowing what he'd done to her and being pretty sure it wasn't the first time, it seemed insulting. I felt sorry for Mia. She was screwed. She wasn't getting out of that marriage alive, I was sure. And even if she did, there was the rest of Ezra's crew to consider. Ezra wasn't fond of people trying to leave.

"So I've gotta go to Sandy Springs tomorrow at five," Perry was saying. "What is that, fifteen or twenty miles? And I'm wondering if I should leave at two or three in the afternoon."

"No shit," Jimmy Dean said. "You get on I-285 at four and you may as well bring a book."

"Fuckin' walk," Nicky offered. "Ride a bike."

Laughter. It was almost like old times.

"Taking back roads can be even worse sometimes," Dallas said. "These crazy assholes running red lights and shit. One wreck and you're fucked."

"Some guy cut me off the other day," Mia said, "then flipped me off, like I did something wrong."

"Did you get his plate number?" Nicky said. "I could cut that finger off for you."

It was the first time they'd addressed each other. I believed it was in my best interest to protect Mia. Plus, I kind of liked her.

"I think that's Dallas' job," I said.

"Yeah, except he'd take the whole hand off," Perry said. "And they'd never find the rest of the body."

"It would show up in Nicky's garage since his car ain't in there," Jimmy said.

More laughter. I drank some more of my beer. It may have been good for me to be seen here, but it was almost turning into a good time. I excused myself to the restroom, hoping the comment about Nicky's garage hadn't sent him and Mia into a tailspin.

The bathrooms in the bar and grill were nicer than the level of the restaurant would warrant. Ezra insisted. He liked very classy, very clean, very polished restrooms. After I got rid of some of the beer I'd drunk, I checked my hair and makeup in the mirror like I cared. I wondered what people thought when they saw me. Just a girl? An average late twenties woman with short and stylish blonde hair? A little too buff, maybe she's a lesbian. Cute, though. I doubted anyone ever looked at me and saw someone who was single-handedly responsible for eight percent of Atlanta's homicides one year.

I began to push open the bathroom door. The door pulled back under my hand, sending me forward, then a dark rush pushed me back into the bathroom and up against the wall. The badass cop from behind the Office had his forearm against my neck, holding me to the wall.

The door next to us shut. He reached over and locked it. His nose was looking surprisingly good for having been broken less than a day earlier.

"Let me go," I said through clenched teeth. "We already know I'm better than you."

"Not at the moment."

He pressed his body against me, making it impossible for me to reach my gun.

"I could scream."

He clapped his free hand over my mouth. Great, glad I spoke first, then thought.

"Listen to me," he said, his rich brown eyes meeting mine. "We can help each other. I don't know what they've got on you, but I can get you out and get you safe. But you need to help me."

I tried to relax. He was a cop. He wasn't going to shoot me for no reason or break my neck. I exhaled slowly.

"Can I take my hand off your mouth without you screaming?"

I nodded. He slowly pulled his hand away. I looked at him, almost amused. He had no idea who I was or what role I held within Ezra's crew. He thought I was a victim. A captive. Held against my will, perhaps, but no one knew that but me. Everyone else apparently still thought I was a loyal follower.

"You can't get me out," I said softly. "If I can't do it for myself, then you sure as hell can't do it."

"We've done it before and we can do it again. You will be safe."

"We?"

"I'm Damon Wyatt, Atlanta P.D. detective."

"I figured that much."

"And I figure your name isn't Martha Stewart either."

I gave a half-smile and a short laugh. The cop's nose had one of those skinny little bandages on it to hold the skin together, but it wasn't as puffy and bruised as I would have expected. Tough son of a bitch, this Damon Wyatt.

"I don't think I can give you my name."

"Why? What is their hold on you?"

"I'm not really sure what my name is."

"What, do you have amnesia?"

I thought of my missing first eight years.

"Sort of."

"Look, we don't have much time. If we go now, we can get you out of here. I know you have information on the Hyatt murder."

I felt my body go stiff. I know he felt it too.

"And I don't think you did it," he said. "But we have a witness that puts you at the scene. That makes you the prime suspect. If you don't go with me willingly, I can bring you in for murder. Against your wishes. You make the call."

A witness? I tried to recall if I'd seen anyone besides the three stooges after I left Tony's room. I didn't remember anyone. He could be trying to trap me.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. It wasn't even a lie. I didn't know what witness he was referring to.

"Was he your friend? Tony Litton?"

At the mention of his name I almost fell apart. My mouth opened and I could feel tears threatening. Wyatt's demeanor softened.

"I'm sorry. I can tell he meant something to you. Don't you want to get back at the people who did it? Don't you want to make them suffer?"

I did. Dammit, I did. But my definition of suffering was drastically different from what I was sure Wyatt's was. Then I thought of Ezra, and my conflicting emotions split me in two. Could I betray him? I looked away from the cop.

Wyatt reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. He tucked it into my shirt and said, "You've got twenty-four hours to think it over. If I don't hear from you, I'm going to bring you in as a suspect instead of a witness."

"Are you crazy?" I hissed. "Get that fucking card off me! I may as well put a bullet in my own head if I get caught with that."

Wyatt paused, staring me down. He seemed to be thinking it over or measuring me up, I wasn't sure. I didn't know whether or not he'd felt the gun at my side. If he was any kind of cop, he probably knew. And I believed that he was a good cop. He reached for his card, his fingertips brushing my skin. *Soft hands for a cop*, I thought, right before a brief wave of heat swept through me and was gone. It was unexpected. How the hell could I, a mob assassin, be attracted to a cop of any kind? It was so wrong. Had Tony's loss really left me that emotionally stripped?

Wyatt pulled the card out of my shirt.

"Meet me at 11 p.m. in Centennial Park tomorrow night," he said. "If you don't show..."

"Yes, yes, I know. Dead or alive."

Wyatt moved to pull away from me.

"Wait," I said, the thoughts coming to me in a mad rush. It wasn't because I was almost beginning to enjoy his body up against mine. I had an idea.

"What?"

"I'll meet you. But you have to bring me something."

"What is it?"

"I want you to bring me information on...on an old murder case."

"What's the name?"

"Caleb Connor. Caleb and Elizabeth Connor. I want as much detail as you can get. If you don't have the information you're going to have to shoot me to get me to go with you anywhere."

"I'll see what I can do. One more question."

"I haven't answered any of your other questions."

Wyatt ignored my statement.

"Who was the kid they dragged in there today? I saw you watching them."

So it was him in the building. My sixth sense was right on the money. I thought about answering him. I wondered if it would help Tony, Jr. or hurt him.

"Bring the information," I said. "And I'll tell you about the kid."

"Fair enough."

Damon Wyatt released me but observed me carefully. I turned to the mirror and made sure I didn't look like I'd just been accosted. Nothing out of place, I turned back to the cop and said, "Do not let any of them see you more than once. I felt that you were here. If I felt it, then someone else probably did too. We all have the same paranoia. Make yourself scarce, Detective."

I turned away from him and pushed open the bathroom door, then walked through, not looking back. The group was still sharing traffic stories when I got back to the table. I had not been missed. I finished off my beer, contemplating my new alliance. I was treading on dangerous ground with this cop. If Ezra got wind that I'd been

talking to a detective, father figure or not, he would send someone to kill me. Or possibly, I wondered, do it himself. He might be the only one that could get close enough to me to do it.

When everyone wandered back over to The Lobby, it was after eight o'clock. We went our separate ways. I sat down at the bar and ordered another Sam Adams. Dallas took the elevator back up to guard Ezra's door. Perry was off to the pool tables. Mia left. I noted from the bar that Nicky K left about ten minutes later. Busy, those two.

I sat with my Sam Adams in front of me, more holding it and staring at it than drinking it. I was trying to come up with a good reason to go see Ezra. Not really to chat with him, but more to poke around. See where they were keeping Tony, Jr. and how he was. Poor kid. I knew exactly how he felt.

I noticed Gray coming out of the parking garage. Surprising that Ezra's door had been left unattended while Dallas was with us at the restaurant. Someone must have been up there. Benson was no longer at the bar. Maybe he was gracing Ezra's doorway while Gray was off doing whatever he did. I didn't meet his eyes as he walked by the bar, but we always seemed to know when the other was around. Gray was not a nice person, I knew, and he was strong. Big. Not someone I would ever want to fight. The perfect bodyguard for Ezra.

"You know that guy?"

I turned to look at the man who had asked the question. He ran his hand over his shaggy blond hair as he leaned over toward me.

"Are you talking to me?" I said.

The man looked around.

"You're the only other person at the bar," he said, his words slightly slurred. Drunk, but not shitfaced.

"So I am."

"Well."

"Well, what?"

"Do you know him? You kind of like looked sideways at him like you don't like him."

"Did I? Maybe I just don't like his jacket."

"Nah, I think you know him. He an asshole?"

"Yes. But most of them are."

"Most of who?"

"Men."

"Oh, I get it," he said, leaning back in his chair. "You're one of those angry chicks, hating men."

"No, not really. Just assholes. Male or not."

The man laughed. He was starting to get on my nerves. He leaned toward me again, closer this time. I inched away from him.

"Are you here a lot?" he asked.

"Never. This is my first time here."

"Ahh, I don't know if I believe you. You look like a regular. You keep watching people."

"Maybe you should mind your own business."

I turned and stared him straight in the eyes. His eyes were steady. He wasn't drunk. *Shit*, I thought. I turned and looked straight ahead, shaking my head.

"Don't be like that," he said.

I stood up and turned toward him. I grabbed the lapel of his shirt and leaned in close.

"Don't ever come in here again, cop," I whispered into his ear. "Tell Wyatt he's gotten everything out of me that he's going to get for today. You can go home to your wife and get a good night's sleep."

I released him, stared him down a few seconds so that he knew I was serious, then turned and strode toward the exit to the parking garage.

"Women!" I heard him say loudly to the bartender. "Crazy! Don't understand them. Hey, can I get another screwdriver?"

I pushed through the door and hoped to God that he never returned. I made my way to the Porsche. Wyatt almost certainly would have someone tail me out of here so I needed a quick getaway.

I let the Carrera purr for a moment before easing it out of the spot. I pulled up to where I could see the street, my headlights off. I didn't know how much good it was doing since there were fluorescent lights overhead, but it didn't hurt to take the precaution. I waited for an opening in the traffic, then flipped on the lights and jetted out of the garage.

The townhouse felt cold and empty. The dirty dishes remained in the sink. I felt anxious and impatient. *That cop better deliver*, I thought. I was ready for some answers.

I rarely watched television. After living a day in my life, nothing on TV could really interest me. Therefore the TV was only for when I wanted to not have to think. I sat in the den and flipped through the channels. It was the usual nine hundred channels with nothing on. I finally settled on a marginally interesting documentary on the Sphinx. Egypt was a place I'd never been and probably would never go, so my den was the closest that I was ever going to get.

Shortly after I learned about how the Ottoman Turks accidentally blew the nose off the Sphinx, I could feel my eyelids dropping. I sat up and shook myself. I was sure I needed the sleep, but the idea that my entire night would once more be filled with blood and brain unnerved me. It wasn't just disgusting, it was scary. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

As the evening wore on I was less and less successful at keeping myself awake. Just as the channel was preparing to move on to World War II weaponry, which would have interested me more than the Sphinx, I couldn't fight it anymore. I let my eyes close and drifted off into the mysterious land of REM.

The bag again. And the door. The door and the bag. Grandpa looking down at me in horror. This time I looked down at the bag. It was a grocery store-type paper bag. Nothing special. But it was so heavy...and leaking. It was leaking red all over the doorstep.

Living room. Gunshot. Grandpa hitting the floor. His blood and brain splattering on the picture window. The man with the gun...his blood red ring. No, wait...it wasn't red. It was blue. Sapphire. The man with the gun knelt down over Grandpa and dipped the ring in the gaping hole in his head. I could only see his back. Now the gem was red. Laughter in the room.

I turned and ran out, but something was stopping me. Hands. Hitting. Spitting. Screaming.

The scene faded away like a movie shifting scenes. I could see myself in a room – my bedroom. I wasn't alone. It felt like my consciousness got sucked into my body and I rolled over to see who was there. It was dark. I said something. The person next to me shifted and looked up at me. Detective Damon Wyatt locked eyes with me and smiled.

He touched me. I felt a rush of passion go through my body. He put a hand to my cheek and kissed me. His touch and his kiss were so gentle, so soothing. He ran his hands down my body, feeling every inch of my torso. He kissed me again and told me I was beautiful. He told me I was safe.

Dream Wyatt crawled on top of me and began to make love to me. It was a beautiful feeling. Peaceful. Blissful. He kissed my neck and said the words that Tony never did, and it felt right. I opened my eyes and my mouth to return the sentiment and saw Ezra standing at the foot of my bed. I screamed.

I screamed for real and sat up on the sofa. The TV was blabbering about M1 Carbines. I checked my watch. Christ, I couldn't have been asleep more than twenty minutes. I wiped my brow. I was sweaty. I was also heavily turned on.

"Great," I whispered to myself. *So, yeah, okay, it might be fun to fuck the detective. But damn, don't even start dreaming about love. My God, Tony's body is barely cold. Are you really that needy? Sex is one thing, but love...love...*

I got up off the couch and walked up the two flights of stairs to the master bath. I started filling the oversized jet stream tub with water. It took forever to fill the giant thing so I walked back down to the kitchen and started going through my cupboards. I found a bottle of port and a small glass. I carried them into the bedroom where I retrieved my cigarettes and lighter. Girl's night in.

I slid into the hot bathwater and sighed. It was always such a relief to be able to take a bath. A bath meant you didn't have to be anywhere. It meant it was time to forget about everything else and focus on your own body. In this particular instance I was only interested in focusing on a particular part of my own body.

I turned on the jets and let one pound into my lower back like a massage. I took a long sip of the port. It was strong and rich. Lovely. The images from my dream floated

through my mind. The blissful feeling of Damon Wyatt's touch. The memory of his fingertips touching my neck that evening were magnified one hundred fold as I touched a finger to the part of my body he was touching in my dream.

I was no stranger to the art of self-pleasuring. I was surrounded by assholes ninety percent of the day. Ezra employed very few fuckable men of reasonable age. Tony was at the top of my short list. Besides him, there were two isolated incidents with a couple of Ezra's guys, one of which didn't really constitute sex. Then there was Joshua, a short-lived server at the bar and grill that Ezra owned, then Mark the CPA during my excursion into the outside world.

That wasn't really true. I met Mark because of Ezra. He sent me to kill Mark's brother. I got the job done, then was assigned to cover the funeral to see who showed up just in case there were stragglers. Mark was, of course, in attendance. He had nothing to do with his brother's book-cooking operation, but I assigned myself to cover him anyway. Once I had his routine down, I arranged a meeting at his favorite lunch spot.

Wicked? Probably. Wrong? Definitely. I killed his brother, then proceeded to fuck him for four months. It wasn't his fault. Maybe it was my way of making up for his pain. I definitely distracted him from his suffering over his brother's death. I held him late at night while he cried, and then when he was done, I made him feel better.

Sitting in the water that night, I pushed away thoughts of everyone else. *Fine*, I thought, *if you want to fantasize about him, just do it and get it over with*. I touched myself and pushed and rubbed. I leaned my head back against the rim of the tub and let the sensations begin to wash over me. Thoughts of Detective Wyatt's fingertips on my skin ran through my mind. I envisioned him using those soft hands on other areas of my body. I sighed heavily and inhaled sharply as I pushed myself closer to the edge. I imagined what it would be like to kiss those icy, determined cop lips and make them melt. I pressed my feet up against the opposite end of the tub and arched my back. It was close...close. My mind's eye showed me Wyatt's softer side, touching me, holding me, entering me and bathing my neck in searing kisses. I breathed in and out in short, hollow gasps before breaking out into short, staccato cries as I came hard against my own flesh.

I rested my arms on the edge of the tub until my hands were dry, then poured myself some more port. Sucking down a long pull, I let my body recover from the adventure for a few minutes before reaching for my smokes. I lit one and inhaled deeply. The good thing about only smoking occasionally was that you still got a rush from inhaling.

I crawled into bed late that night. If I knew how to pray, I would've asked God to keep those blood and brain dreams to Himself for the night. But somehow I knew that even if I could ask, they would still visit me anyway. There was something I wasn't getting and I had the feeling blood and brains would be with me until I figured it out.

I lay awake for nearly an hour contemplating Tony, Jr. Even if I did break him out of the Office, then what? Call the Department of Human Services? Tony would come

back from the dead and throttle me. Grandparents somewhere? Yeah right, and sentence Grandma and Grandpa Litton to death as soon as Ezra's guys found out where he was. What was left? Become a mom? What a fucking joke. The kid was better off on the streets than having me for a caretaker.

My thoughts spiraled downward into oblivion as I entered dreamland. Within moments I found myself in the living room again. *The man with the ring and the gun... God, I could almost see his face. Just a little closer... If I just moved closer... I was suddenly distracted by other men in the room. They were hazy, but I could tell there were three or four of them. One seemed familiar, like the Grandpa figure, and the others similar but unknown.*

Fear seized me. I turned and ran out of the room. I was going for something upstairs, but I didn't know what it was. Something important I'd seen. I ran into a bedroom and woke up.

I sat up in bed. I was drenched with sweat and my heart was racing so fast I thought it was going to run out of my chest and across the floor. I glanced around the room to be sure that my reaction wasn't subconscious to something actually going on. I listened intently and heard only my heartbeat.

I got out of the bed and slid into my holster. I was nude, so I wrapped a bathrobe around myself and walked into the kitchen. I listened again. Nothing. Someone drove by the townhouse. A dog barked. I stepped out onto the deck and set my hands on the railing. The night was soggy with humidity and the air was heavy with smog. The moon glowed hazy behind clouds and pollution.

I surveyed the portion of the parking areas that I could see from the deck. A white Corsica and a dark-colored Ford Explorer, maybe blue or green, sat in front of the block of townhouses across from mine, with only the narrow street between us. I watched them for a moment. Both had tinted windows and it was impossible to see if anyone was inside. I turned and walked back into the house.

Chapter Eleven

Ezra called and woke me up at about ten the next morning. I stumbled out of bed and picked up my phone, which somehow had ended up on the floor about ten feet from the bed.

"Hello," I said, groggy and irritated.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Ezra said.

"Unh."

"Up early this morning, I see. You got plans for tonight?"

I thought about Detective Wyatt.

"Yeah, I've got a date with a cub scout leader. Why?"

"Good, then you won't mind a little assignment."

Shit.

"What is it?"

"I've gotten word that someone's been sneaking around the Office at night. I want you and Benson to run a surveillance detail over the next couple of nights and see if you can catch them."

"I'm sorry, did you say Benson?"

"He's over it. I've got no one else available. Sorry, but you're going to have to deal with it."

"So what if we catch them?"

"Bring them up to my office and we'll have a chat. Bring a change of clothes just in case."

"Great."

"Get some more sleep. It'll be a late night."

And that was the end of the conversation.

"God dammit," I said, ending the call and tossing the phone back on the floor.

I crawled back into bed and tried to decide how mad Ezra would be if I killed Benson and left his body in the Chattahoochee River wearing a pair of good old-fashioned concrete boots. Not only did this screw my opportunity to get some info out of Wyatt, but any time spent with Benson is time I'd rather spend with a proctologist.

I spent the afternoon in The Lobby playing pool by myself and contemplating how much of Ezra's good favor I could use up to get out of that evening's assignment. I was probably fresh out of leash even though he was so goddamn proud of me. This little job was probably more to keep tabs on me than a real need for me to be there. Honestly,

Ezra didn't really need me to put a bullet in someone's brain. There were plenty of his followers willing to do that.

Mia brought me a sandwich from the bar and grill at about six-thirty. She and I sat down at the bar to eat. She ordered a Tom Collins and I got a coffee. Regardless of what happened, I figured it was going to be a long night.

"So how's everything?" I asked her.

"Okay, it's okay," she said, looking like it wasn't at all okay. "Thank you for not saying anything to Dallas," she added in a hushed tone. "I don't even want to know what he'd do."

"You keep it up and he's going to find out," I said, taking a sip of coffee. "You can't hide it forever. Not that I blame you at all, but..."

"I know it."

Mia took a long pull on her drink.

"I'm sorry Nicky said that to you about Tony," she said. "He just wasn't thinking."

"I'm sure he's a real nice guy. But my threat wasn't idle. If he fucks with me like that again, I'll make good on it and send you my condolences."

Mia looked away. I could tell my comment had hurt her but I didn't really care.

"It must be painful for you," she said, but her expression said I don't know how the hell you could pull the trigger.

"Contrary to popular opinion, I do in fact have a heart. What happened in that hotel room was damn near enough to kill me and everyone keeps acting like it must have been no big fuckin' deal. That it's okay to joke about it."

Mia looked at me, her expression puzzled.

"You..." she whispered. "You didn't do it, did you?"

"No one will ever know."

I took a bite out of my fish sandwich. Mia stared at me for a moment, then went back to her buffalo chicken. Maybe I didn't give Mia enough credit. She was rather perceptive.

* * * * *

Ezra sent for me at eight o'clock. Gray tapped on my shoulder and I felt like the grim reaper had come for me. I turned and looked at him. His sullen features and hulking shape made him look like he hated the world and the world hated him. He motioned for me to follow him.

Gray always acted like he hated me in particular. I never knew why. It was useless to ask him, he wouldn't answer. Or he might try to kill me. He seemed unstable like that. A little psycho, a lot angry linebacker.

Benson was in Ezra's office when I arrived. His neck brace was already off. I guess I didn't hit him as hard as I thought. Dammit. He gave me a nasty grin as I walked in.

"Adrian, sweetheart," Ezra said, giving me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Glad you could make it."

I sat down as far away from Benson as I could get.

"Like I said, we've been getting some reports of someone hanging around the outskirts of the building. Don't know who or why, but I want to find out and...discourage them. Here's your coms."

Ezra handed us each an earpiece. I winced. The last thing I wanted was Benson's voice in my ear. We linked up frequencies and tested. Yep, his voice was like sewer sludge in my ears.

"Hang around, prowl, hide, whatever," Ezra said. "Find him and bring his ass here. If he fights, well...it's his funeral."

Benson and I nodded. I let him leave first, then turned to Ezra, my mouth open to protest this shit job.

"I know, I know how you feel," he said before I could say a word. "Just give it a chance. If he baits you, just ignore him. I know he can be an asshole sometimes."

"Ignore him," I said. "Ezra, I'm not eight years old."

"Do it, Adrian," he said with a forcefulness I hadn't heard him use with me since I was twelve. It stung. I backed off, pushed through the doors and headed off toward the elevator.

If the prowler was one of Wyatt's guys, there was nothing I could do about it. If they were stupid enough to keep coming back, they deserved whatever they got. I walked right out the front door of The Lobby, still steamed over Ezra's tone.

The street was busy this time of night. There were a few people going in and out of The Lobby. Twilight had set, giving the city that dim, dreamlike feel it gets when the sun is gone but the streetlights aren't doing any good yet. I circled the building to the left.

"Adrian, you out here yet?" I heard in my ear.

"I'm here." Jerk-off.

"I'm going to circle around the parking lot for a while."

"All right, I'll take the other side."

I turned on my heel and went back around the other way. I'd passed by the front of the Office twice now. If Wyatt was watching, he should know something was up.

I walked down the paved alleyway between the parking garage and the building next door. I sat down behind a fresh pile of liquor boxes and waited, praying for nothing to happen.

"Where you at, Adrian?"

"I'm behind the building."

"Seen anything yet?"

"No, you?"

"I saw a couple of people making out in the parking lot."

"Riveting."

"I thought they were going to strip and fuck right there in front of me."

I sighed. So it began.

"Well, let me know if they do and I'll cover the whole fucking building while you're enjoying the show."

Benson chuckled. It was a disgusting sound.

I sat there for half an hour before my ass started to get numb. I stood up and checked my watch. Nine o'clock. Two hours to make the meeting. I rubbed my butt, trying to get some feeling back into it.

"Stroke it."

"Fuck," I said, spinning around. The voice wasn't in my ear. It was behind me.

"God dammit, Benson," I spat.

"I'm bored with the parking lot. You take it and I'll hang out back here."

"Fine," I said, hauling my numb ass away from Benson as quickly as I could. The parking lot was dead. I circled through the cars a few times then found one to lean against. This was going to be a long ass night.

It was almost ten when Benson got bored again.

"Hey, Adrian," I heard in my ear.

"What."

"Come back here."

"Why?"

"I think I heard something."

"Well, then go check it out. Call me if it actually is something."

"I want backup."

"Fuck."

I took off from the parking lot and headed back toward the pile of boxes where I'd left Benson. If I hadn't been so irritated, I would have been paying more attention. If I hadn't been so driven to get back to those stupid boxes, my usual trouble sensors would have been up. As I passed by the garbage dumpster I felt a hand on my wrist, yanking me backward. I spun around with a punch ready, but Benson had a block ready to counter my attack, and then he hit me across the face with a chunk of wood.

I fell to the ground, dizzy but conscious. Benson had my ankles. I reached for my gun and he threw his body on top of me. He wasn't a lightweight, and it hurt. It especially hurt because he trapped my hand in between our bodies.

"Benson, what the fuck are you doing?" I hollered with what breath I had left.

Benson scrambled on top of me and grabbed my free hand before I could hit him with it. He pulled the com out of my ear and tossed his along with it. He pushed his pelvis into my body and I groaned, repelled.

"I never could figure out why you would fuck Litton at a moment's notice and never took a second look at anyone around here," he said.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Benson laughed. His breath smelled like whiskey. Christ, that was what he'd been doing back here. Drinking.

"Come on, Adrian," he said softly. "Don't you want to find out what it's like from someone else?"

He pushed into me again and I spat at him. He let go of my arm long enough to punch me in the side of the head, nailing my ear. I held back a whimper. He wasn't going to get that from me.

"Get off me."

"How about I get off in you?"

I wanted to throw up. Not only was I being molested by someone I found truly repellant, he had overpowered me with just a couple of hits. Sometimes I really hated being a woman.

"How about if I rip your head off and you can teach yourself how to suck your own dick?"

Benson whistled.

"Such strong words coming from such a bad girl who's in such a terrible predicament."

"It's not so bad. I've seen worse."

"Have you? No one's coming back here 'cause we're on surveillance. I know how to keep you subdued so I think I can do whatever I want."

"Try," I said.

Benson reached down and unzipped his pants. He tried to unzip mine and found it a little more difficult. He lifted himself up and turned his head to get a better look. I leaned my head up and grabbed his ear with my teeth. I bit down hard.

"Motherfucker son of a bitch!" Benson screamed. "Let go, let go! Shit, I was just messing around!"

I pulled. I think his ear was still attached when I let go, but I couldn't tell for sure. Benson rolled off me, crouched close to the ground, holding his bleeding ear to his head.

"Fucking whore!" he screamed. He reached for his gun. I kicked him under his chin, knocking his head straight back. I picked up the piece of wood he'd hit me with and nailed him as hard as I could on one side of his head, then came back the other and

nailed the other side for good measure. Benson slumped to the ground, out cold. His ear was hanging on by a thread.

Dropping the wood, I ran to the parking garage. I managed to slip in without anyone seeing me and made my way to the Porsche. I needed speed. The Carrera and I jetted off as fast but quietly as we could for what it was worth, since I was pretty sure there was a tracking chip in the car. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if there was one in my ass, but I drove to the closest train station and parked it anyway.

My reflection was a mess. I had a giant pink welt from where Benson hit me with the wood. My ear hurt like hell and my mouth and chin were covered in Benson's blood. I looked like a vampire.

I spat on a Kleenex and cleaned myself up as best I could. When I still had traces of blood but no spit left to clean it off, I locked up the Porsche and headed into the station.

Centennial Park was just a stop or two up the rail lines. I bought my ticket and hung back in the small crowd waiting for the train. There were hospital employees heading home, office workers looking exhausted from an extra long day, a few homeless people and some crackheads. The usual mix on Atlanta's public transportation system.

The train was late. After fifteen minutes it finally pulled up and we loaded on. I checked my watch. Ten forty. Twenty minutes to spare.

"You got a date, honey?"

It was one of the crackheads. A nasty, scabby, toothless one at that. I looked up at him without lifting my head, letting him get a glimpse of my bloody mouth and swollen cheekbone. I pulled my shoulder blades together just enough to part my jacket and give him an eyeful of my Glock.

"Damn," he said, shaking his already shaking head. "Can't make friends on the train no ways."

I figured his only friend was in a pipe and went up in smoke. Hell, Ezra probably imported his last high.

I exited the train without further interaction from my fellow riders. I was the only one to get off at the Centennial exit. Not a really popular spot after ten unless you were a heroin addict or there was a sporting event going on.

Centennial Park was built while Atlanta prepared to host the 1996 Olympics. The downtown area wasn't pretty before the games were here and afterward it started sliding back into its pre-Olympiad days. Druggies and homeless people weren't good for the sport-seeking tourists, so the city had them relocated like white settlers moving the Indians. Afterward they started creeping back in. There was always talk of further revitalization but so far little real work had been done. Downtown Atlanta was not a safe place to be for the average person.

I found Detective Wyatt pretending to read the inscription on a monument. I walked up to him on his left. He turned to see me heading toward him, bloody and bruised. He opened his mouth.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Let's get into some shadows," I said. "I can't be seen."

Wyatt and I made our way into the darkness of a corner near a set of concrete stairs. He reached out and touched my chin. I shivered from his gentle touch and looked down at the ground. He mistook it for pain.

"Do you need a doctor?"

"I'll be okay."

"Who did this?"

"It's of no consequence. He doesn't matter."

"Is your life in danger?"

"I don't think so. Not yet. Do you have the information I asked for?"

"I do...Adrian."

I was so busy enjoying the sound of him saying my name that it took me an extra second to realize that he'd said it. I looked back up at him.

"I read about how Elizabeth and Caleb Connor died. I'm so sorry...I didn't realize..."

"What did you find out? What do the reports say?"

"Caleb Connor went missing for about a month before his body was found in a landfill. There were rumors that he had mob connections —"

"Who? I mean, with what mob group?"

"It's a little fuzzy, but the facts point to him working for Joseph Metruccio."

"Metruccio? My God, are you serious?"

"It appears that way."

I turned away from Wyatt, my heart pounding in my ears. My father worked for Joey Metruccio? If that was true, then why did Ezra tell me he worked for him? How did I end up with Ezra?

"Are you okay?"

I slowly turned back toward him.

"Yes," I breathed. "Please, go on."

"Elizabeth Connor was killed three weeks after her husband disappeared. It was a standard execution-style mob hit."

"Who were the suspects?"

"As far as I can tell, and believe me this was a lot of work for twenty-four hours, there were no suspects and no arrests made."

"I see."

"And then there was their missing daughter...Adrian Connor."

I couldn't speak.

"I assume that's you."

I nodded. I guessed that was me.

"I know you work for Ezra Drake, Adrian. Tell me why. Do you believe that Metruccio killed your family? What have they told you?"

"What else do you know? What else did you find out?"

Wyatt paused. He looked around the area surrounding us, then back to me. His dark eyes were serious and pained.

"There was another death connected to your parents' murders."

"Who?" I asked, but somehow I already knew.

"Charles Ennis. Your grandfather. Your mother's father."

"Ennis," I whispered. That was why Ezra called me Adrian Ennis. It was my grandfather's name...my mother's name.

"Was...was my grandfather alone when he died?"

"He was found dead in his home the same day Elizabeth was killed. The connection wasn't made until later since different precincts were working on them. We don't know who else was in the house, but one of the guys who showed up for the hit was shot and killed. He was also found at the scene."

"Who was it?"

"I'm still gathering information on it. Like I said, it's a lot to ask in a twenty-four hour period."

"I see."

"Do you know anything about it I should know?"

I shook my head.

"No," I whispered. "So my mother came from Ezra's house and my father came from Metruccio's house. Just like Romeo and Juliet, huh?"

"Something like that. I'm sorry, Adrian."

"Thank you for telling me."

Wyatt nodded and was silent for a moment, probably letting the news sink in. Finally he spoke.

"Now your turn," Wyatt said softly. "The boy. Who is he? Have you seen him?"

I took a deep breath.

"Not since they brought him to the Office. He's Tony Litton's son."

"Really. How do you know?"

"He looks just like him. And...and Tony told me that they had his son. Before he died, he told me...he told me..."

I turned away from the cop and blinked back tears. Guilt consumed me. I had done nothing to fulfill Tony's request to save his son. So far all I'd done was save my own ass and had done a poor job even at that.

"Adrian," Wyatt whispered. He put his hand on my shoulder as I had my back to him. Few people had done that and kept their arm in one piece. For some reason I trusted him completely. I knew he wouldn't hurt me or betray me. Whether or not his tactics would get me killed, however, was a different story.

His touch did what it was supposed to do. It comforted me. He felt sorry for me. I couldn't think of a single other person in my life who had felt sorry for me. Wyatt knew that I'd been in mob care since I was eight years old. That they had shaped me, molded me into something. Just what that something was, he didn't know.

"The boy's mother is dead. I have no idea who she was, but they killed her and kidnapped Tony's son to use against him. They did a really good job."

"What happened at the hotel that night, Adrian?"

I wiped away tears and turned back to Wyatt.

"I need more information on the murders. Then I'll share with you what happened at the Hyatt."

"Look..."

"No. More info or no dice."

"I can't be responsible for fueling some kind of revenge plot."

"Revenge? All I want is the truth. People have done nothing but tell me lies for twenty years. Meet me tomorrow night at nine at Ed's Bar & Grill on Piedmont. Oh, and call off your dogs at the Office. Ezra's on to you and he will kill anyone he finds snooping around."

"The Office?"

"The building that The Lobby is in. The one you've been staking out. Get your guys out of there. If you have questions, you can ask me."

"Give me your cell phone number."

"Hell no. I can't have you calling me. Don't you know they track my calls?"

"Then let me give you mine. Memorize it and swallow the card, I don't care. Just take it."

Wyatt handed me his business card. His cell phone number was written on the back.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "Ed's Bar & Grill."

I nodded and turned away. I felt his eyes on me as I strode away, and it wasn't all detective curiosity. I couldn't believe that I was now an informant. A rat. A nark. Even more than that, I couldn't believe I had the hots for my handler.

I paused and turned back to look at him. He was still staring.

"One more thing," I said.

I walked quickly back over to him and said, "I want you to see if you can find out the history of something for me."

"What is it?"

"A ring. It's either silver or platinum and it has a big sapphire in it. There's a swirled pattern on the setting."

"A ring?"

"Yes, a ring."

"How the hell am I supposed to find out about that?"

"I don't know, you're the detective. Ask around. Find someone who worked on my grandfather's murder case. I just have this feeling that it's important."

"Can I ask how you know about this ring?"

"You can after you tell me who it belongs to."

I took the train back to my car, the whole way mulling over what Detective Wyatt had told me. My father wouldn't join the team...my father worked for Metruccio and my mother's father worked for Ezra. I'll bet that was a popular union, and a tough one to keep covered up for nine years or so. No wonder they both ended up dead. To think...my mother was a mob little girl too.

I got off the train and drove back to the Office. I needed to handle the mess I'd left behind. I parked and marched straight to the elevator, then up to Ezra's floor.

"Do you have an appointment?" Dallas asked me.

"Fuck you," I said, brushing by him and through the doors without knocking.

Ezra looked up from behind his desk. To my shock, Tony, Jr. was sitting in the big chair across the desk from him. I walked up to them and looked down at him. He looked back up at me with big, brown scared eyes. Poor kid.

"I didn't know you had company," I said, looking back up at Ezra. "Who's this?"

"Great-nephew," he said. "You should like his name. It's Anthony. Say hello to Adrian, Anthony."

"Hello," he said quietly. He looked like a well-behaved kid.

"Hi there," I said. "I need to talk to your uncle for a minute."

"Anthony, why don't you go outside and talk to Dallas for a few minutes, okay?"

The boy slid off the chair and walked out of the room. Great, talk to Dallas. Hell of a role model. I waited until the doors were shut before I turned back to Ezra. I was relieved that Tony's son was okay, but I was livid about Benson.

"If I see Benson again, he's dead," I said.

"Don't mince words with me, Adrian, tell me how you really feel."

"I shouldn't even be here practically asking for permission to off him. I should have killed him earlier tonight."

"What the fuck happened out there? The coms go dead and next thing we know Benson's got his ear torn off and you were gone."

"The motherfucker hit me over the head with a chunk of wood, then tried to rape me. You can imagine how receptive I was to that."

"Tell me you're joking."

"How I wish I was. Look at my goddamn cheek. I'm going to be all purple and shit tomorrow. He punched me in the fucking ear. Where the hell is he? I'm going to kill him right now."

I turned to walk out.

"Wait, wait," Ezra said. "I'll take care of him. Why didn't you come up here right away? Where did you go?"

"I took a train ride. I had to cool down."

"It worked miracles, I see. No one cools down on the train. Everyone hates the train."

"I don't hate the train. I hate Benson. If he's not gone by tomorrow, he'll be gone by tomorrow night."

I turned away and walked out the door. In the hall, Tony, Jr. was sitting on the floor, staring at his clasped hands. Dallas and Gray were staring at him like he was foreign matter. At least Ezra was hospitable.

"You can go back in," I said to him. He looked up at me again with those big, sad eyes and got to his feet. I held the door for him to go back in to Ezra. I turned away as the doors closed, feeling like I had assisted with his brainwashing.

At least I now knew for certain that Ezra was holding him here and he was relatively safe. I didn't see Ezra passing up the opportunity to shape and mold another young child. I took the elevator back down to The Lobby. I wanted to sit and have a drink, but I was afraid Benson would show up and I would shoot him there in front of everyone.

Instead I took off in the Porsche and stopped by a liquor store on my way home. I picked up a case of Sam Adams bottles and another bottle of port. It was going to be another long night. Maybe if I got drunk enough I wouldn't have the dreams.

I was in front of the TV again. I felt safe in the den. Even though it was the only room in the house besides the garage that you could access from the ground level, it had no windows, one exit straight to the outside at the front door, one exit to the outside in the rear through a laundry-utility room and it was armed to the hilt. The fireplace had a false bottom and back in it and was filled with various munitions, including but not limited to handguns, knives, shotguns, two hand grenades, twenty sticks of dynamite and one fully automatic machine gun. It was nice to have a father figure with connections.

I glanced over at the booby trap on the front door. That made me feel better too. I chugged some beer and thought about the bulletproof shield under the sofa. I had weapons of one fashion or another in every room of the house, but this was the only one with explosives. I felt even better knowing that the storehouse in the fireplace was aftermarket. Ezra didn't even know about it, although most of the items in there were gifts from him.

Three beers and two glasses of port later found me in bed. I lay staring at the ceiling, wishing I was drunk enough to make the overhead light spin. Sleep came, and with it, the dreams.

Things made more sense now that I knew the Grandpa figure was in fact my grandfather. I knew that I had watched him die. I knew that if I just watched hard enough I might see who did it.

Chapter Twelve

The dreams started out with the front porch. The bag again. Heavy and moist. The feeling of what may be inside it was starting to terrify me. I could skip this part. Really I could. I didn't want to see. But I looked down anyway. The bottom of the bag was blood-red and leaking. Grandpa's horrified look consumed my vision.

Living room. Blood and brain. The ring. The men. They were clearer now. I could almost make out features, but not enough to identify any of them. Running. Running up the stairs to the bedroom. I crawled under Grandpa's bed and reached for something. It was small and black. A phone? A gun? A small bag of some kind? It was impossible to tell.

I woke up. The townhouse was dark and silent. Dead silent. I got up and grabbed my cigarettes and headed out onto the deck once again. The moon was brighter that night, less clouded by pollution. I lit the smoke and inhaled as I surveyed the parking lot. White Corsica, dark SUV. Same spots. Either someone had moved in across the street or it was Wyatt and his pals.

It was a warm night. I set my cigarette down on the edge of the deck, the burning cherry hanging over the side. I slid off my bathrobe and hung it over the railing. I was wearing a small black tank top and black panties. Little was left to the imagination. I picked my smoke back up and turned toward the vehicles. I wasn't sure if I was showing off to Detective Damon Wyatt or some of his cronies, but it didn't matter. My goal was merely to let them know they were made.

I took a drag on the cigarette and lazily rubbed a hand along my side, then over my panties and halfway down my thigh. Pretending to have an itch on the inside of my thigh, I rubbed it, wondering if the windows in the stakeout car or cars were steamed up yet.

I flicked my used-up smoke off the side of the deck, grabbed my robe and walked back into the house. After I went back to sleep, I dreamed about Wyatt for the rest of the night.

It was almost noon when I rolled out of bed the next day and dressed for my workout. One missed day was enough. I was just finishing up when Ezra called. He had some errands for me to run.

Adrian Ennis Connor, assassin and gofer.

I showered up and checked my reflection. I had a huge blue bruise on the side of my face. It didn't really make my eye swell up, which was a bonus, but it looked awful. I tried to cover it up as best I could with makeup.

I took my own sweet time getting to the Office. I hated it when he made me do stupid bullshit jobs like this. Why did he have jerkoffs like Perry Parker if he was going to send me to run errands? It was almost three-thirty when I arrived at his door.

Dallas looked bored. Gray glared as usual. Pecker. They opened the doors for me and I walked in to find Ezra looking like he'd just woken up, coming out of his bedroom, which was connected to his office.

"Thanks for rushing over," he said.

"Any time."

"There's four boxes by the loading docks marked 'Coffee.' Take them to this address."

He handed me a business card. It was some dry cleaner in the hood. Drugs, I figured. Coffee to cover up the odor from drug sniffing dogs. Old, old trick, but apparently it still worked.

"Fine."

I thought about asking him what was keeping Perry so busy that he couldn't do it, but Ezra seemed to be in a bad mood so I let it slide. Ezra's bedroom door opened and a woman emerged, looking upset and scattered. Judging from her dress she was a hooker or at least trying to look like one, and her right eye was pink and puffy. The beginnings of a bruise. She adjusted her bra, which was probably the wrong size, and said, "Will you be needing me anymore?"

She was staring at the floor. She may as well have said, "Should I kill myself now or later?"

"No," Ezra said quickly. "You can go."

I watched her practically run for the door. I turned and looked at Ezra. He was going through some papers on his desk, not looking at me. I really hoped he was going to share with me a reasonable explanation for what I just saw. If he didn't, then I was going to assume that he'd gotten a hooker and beat her up. Not the type of behavior I was used to seeing from him.

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

"Go make the fucking delivery," he said sharply.

I turned away slowly and walked to the door. I didn't know what to make of what I'd just seen. Why would he do that? Why was he so pissed? I pushed through the doors and walked into the hallway. Dallas was gone, presumably escorting the abused hooker out of the building. *What a shitty life she must have*, I thought.

"Hope you're happy," Gray said to me. I turned. Gray was speaking to me?

"About what?" I asked suspiciously.

"Benson."

"What about Benson?"

"I was busy disposing of his body at three o'clock this morning. You figure out what happened."

"Really," I said. "Well, to be honest with you, yeah, I am happy. Dumb motherfucker deserved to die."

Gray stared me down, squeezing then relaxing his fists like he was pumping on a stress ball.

"I guess none of us better get on your bad side," he said sarcastically.

"Don't hit me over the head with a block of wood and I think you'll be okay."

I spun on the ball of my foot and strode quickly toward the elevator. I was actually surprised that Ezra did it. Maybe that explained his shitty mood. Losing Benson couldn't have been easy on him, dickhead as he was. He was still a business asset. Was Ezra protecting me? I really thought that he would just send him to one of his other operations.

I pulled the Acura around to the back of the Office. I wasn't going to drive the Porsche into drive-by-shooting gang land. Ezra'd be pissed if I got the Porsche all shot up.

Drugs bothered me. Money laundering, guns, whores, bribes, whatever. None of that really disturbed me. But drugs...it seemed so...low. I always knew Ezra had a little bit of heroin going on the side, not a primary interest, but it was a good cash crop. Still, even after all the years I'd known and even participated in the proliferation of America's drug addiction, I hated it. Just let me kill someone. Don't ask me to help someone else kill themselves.

Adrian Ennis Connor, assassin, gofer and moral enigmatic conundrum.

I made it to the dry cleaner before four o'clock. I walked through the front door. It was a small mom and pop operation. Apparently Mom and Pop were looking at their retirement plan and not liking what they saw. A woman in her late fifties or early sixties was behind the counter.

"I have a delivery," I said.

She looked up at me, then down at my empty hands.

"Well, bring it in, honey," she said.

"It's a special delivery."

"Oh, I see," she said, the light bulb going off. "Pull around back and talk to my son Isaac."

I drove the Acura around to the rear of the store. No one was there so I knocked on the back entrance. When the door opened I was nearly knocked over by the odor of marijuana smoke.

"Yeah," a young black man said.

"Are you Isaac?"

"Yeah."

"I have a delivery for you."

"Cleaners is around front."

"I'm not fucking delivering my boss's suits. Now come and get these boxes out of my trunk."

"Oh, okay," he said, nodding his stoned head up and down. "Hang on a second."

The door shut, then moments later reopened. I was leading Isaac toward my trunk when my cell phone rang. Ezra.

"I'm here," I said to him.

"I know. Tell them no dice. Their check didn't clear."

I was pretty sure Mom and Son Cleaners and Dope weren't paying by check, so whatever form of payment they had arranged with Ezra wasn't cutting it.

"Got it," I said. I hung up and said to Isaac, "Sorry. Change of plans. Looks like you're going to have to get your goods somewhere else."

"What the fuck you talkin' about?"

"Your check didn't clear."

"Your ass! This shit is mine. You better open up the trunk, bitch. I paid for it."

"Apparently it wasn't enough. You may have paid for it, but my orders are to tell you no dice."

"This is what I think about your fuckin' orders, bitch."

I felt Isaac pulling his gun before I saw it. I drew my own and slapped his gun out of his hand with my own before he could raise it at me. The gun went skittering across the parking lot and Isaac screamed and cursed, holding his busted hand. I probably only broke one finger.

The door to the dry cleaners busted open and two more guys bailed out of the building, smoke rising, guns in the air. I gave Isaac a swift kick to the head, knocking him to the ground. I knelt down and aimed at the two pals. They were about to shoot.

I cursed myself and pulled the trigger twice. The two went down. I heard Isaac behind me. I turned and capped him before he could pick up his gun. I heard three deafening blasts from the door.

Mom had arrived on the scene with a shotgun. She looked at her bleeding son and raised the shotgun. Lucky for me she was slow. Unlucky for her I was accurate. Momma Dry Cleaner hit the dirt, motionless. I scrambled around to the driver's side of the Acura. The entire side of the car was a mess of shotgun blasts.

I threw myself behind the wheel and tore off before any more survivors could try to kill me. I headed back toward the Office.

"Fuck fuck fuck!" I screamed, pounding the steering wheel. Goddamn Ezra and his drugs. This kind of shit always happened, which was another reason to hate the fucking drug trade. Too many high brains and loose cannons.

I pulled into the parking garage and hid the Acura in a far corner. Ezra was paying for that damage. My poor car.

People in The Lobby parted like I was Moses in the Red Sea. I didn't think I was bloody, so it must have been the stalking death look I had as I stomped through the bar

toward the elevator. Even Gray and Dallas backed away as I came through and pushed through Ezra's door.

"Fucking motherfucker!" I screamed at him. I looked around. No Ezra.

"Ezra!"

I heard the sound of a toilet flushing. The bathroom door opened and Ezra stepped out, still drying his hands.

"What the fuck is going on?" he asked. "Is there a fire? Jesus, Adrian."

"They were real receptive to your no dice offer," I spat. "Everyone started pulling iron and the next thing I know everybody's got a bullet in their ass except me. Even Momma Dry Cleaner. She tried to blast me with a shotgun and tore my car all to shit."

"The Porsche?"

"Jesus, Ezra. No, not the Porsche. Are you at all concerned that you put me in the middle of a fucking gun battle over drugs?"

"I didn't think they were going to take it so hard," he said. "I'm sorry. They seemed like nice people."

Ezra chuckled. I threw my hands up.

"The Acura's in the garage, full of your drugs and their bullet holes. I expect the damage to be fixed."

"Fuck, Adrian, I got you a new car. Let go of the Acura."

"I like it. Plus it's good for jobs where I get shot at."

"I am sorry about that," Ezra said. "But you handled yourself. You're here."

"I think I killed four people and it's very possible that someone saw me. You can be sorry if my face shows up as a fucking artist's composite drawing in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*."

I turned and walked out. I knew he hated it when I did that, but I didn't care. It was almost like he was baiting me to do something.

I picked up deli takeout on my way home. I ate my sandwich on the deck, then sat in the den and cleaned my gun. It really hadn't been fired all that much since I last cleaned it, but somehow it was a comforting activity. Taking care of something that was taking care of me. Something that had saved my life today. I wondered what had been done with Tony's gun from the hotel. He said I could take it. Maybe I should have. I was sure it had my fingerprints on it.

I set down the gun and stared at it. My fingers were covered with black residue and gun oil so I just hung my head and squeezed out a few tears. If only Ezra hadn't taken his son, we really would have had a chance at getting out. Tony and I together, we could have made a break for it. We could have watched each other's back and survived. I wiped away the tears with the back of my hand and wondered, just wondered, if it was Tony I mourned...or my own fate.

I didn't want to chance the Porsche being tracked, so I slipped out of the townhouse at about eight-thirty and called a cab from a pay phone at a nearby gas station. I made it to the bar and grill just after nine. Wyatt was there already. I hadn't seen him yet, but I knew. I felt the eyes again. They weren't his eyes, but he ruled them.

The hostess asked me if I was Miss Connor. I supposed I was, so I said yes. She told me my party had already arrived and led me toward the rear of the restaurant. She opened a door marked "Private Parties". I got nervous and stuck my hand in my jacket. It could be a setup.

"Right in here, Miss Connor," she said, and looked at me. Sometimes people don't have to say, "I'm a cop." You just see that jaded look in their eyes and you know they've seen some shit. This was no Ed's employee. I looked into the room. It was Wyatt only, sitting at one of the tables with a glass of iced tea.

I walked in and quickly turned around to make sure no one was hiding behind the door. I ducked and looked under the tables. Clean.

"Don't trust me?" Wyatt said.

"I don't like this. Too private. They take people to private places to off them."

"No one's getting offed."

No one *else* is getting offed. I cautiously took a seat.

"That bruise looks pretty nasty," he said softly.

"I've had worse."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Who's been doing this to you, Adrian?"

"Is she going to bring me a drink?"

"I doubt it."

"Officer doesn't cherish her hostess role tonight?"

Wyatt smiled.

"Can't get anything by you, huh?"

"Not when it's that obvious. Give me some credit."

"I'll have to have a talk with her."

"Buy her some acting lessons."

Wyatt smiled again and almost laughed.

"About the hotel..." he started.

"You first. More info."

"I went first last time. Hotel information or no information."

"Fair enough. If I have to talk about it, I need a drink."

"What would you like?"

"Scotch on the rocks."

"No messing around here."

Wyatt touched his ear and said, "Clark. Please bring Miss Connor a scotch on the rocks."

Whatever she said made Wyatt chuckle.

"You're not wearing a wire, are you? Is this being recorded?"

"They can hear me, but they can't hear you. Would it upset you if it was recorded?"

"If I wasn't told about it, yes."

Wyatt nodded. Clark entered the room holding my glass of amber courage. She set it down in front of me and gave Wyatt a look. I didn't care how she felt. I took a long sip of the scotch and inhaled deeply. Wyatt gave me a minute, which I appreciated. A few sips later, I was ready.

"I went to the hotel to meet Tony," I said. "I'm sure you already know this but we were...together."

"The evidence was clear on that, yes."

"I was sent. And not sent. I went willingly, but..."

I took a long sip. I had to say it if I wanted answers.

"I was asked to kill Tony. They wanted me to kill him."

"Who?"

I was silent. Could I name him? It was obvious at this point, but I knew that Wyatt needed me to say it. I questioned his honesty about the conversation being recorded. Then again, he really hadn't said anything. I sighed heavily and gave up. I was probably dead anyway.

"Ezra Drake," I said softly.

"Ezra Drake asked you to kill Anthony Litton?"

"Yes."

"Why? Why you?"

"Because I could easily get close to him. He trusted me."

"Tell me what happened, Adrian."

"After we...afterward, Tony told me that he knew they wanted me to kill him. They had taken precautions to ensure the job was done."

"His son."

"Yes. And the three guys who followed me to the hotel."

"I see."

"So he told me that he couldn't leave the room alive or Ezra would kill his son. And we both knew it wasn't an idle threat."

"You believed Ezra Drake would kill Anthony Litton's son if you didn't kill him?"

"Yes."

Wyatt shifted uncomfortably in his seat. I could tell he wasn't expecting a murder confession. I decided to put his mind at ease.

"I didn't do it," I said. "Not really. Tony put his gun in my hand and told me to do it. That he'd much rather I do it than those assholes waiting outside. He put it up to his head, his gun in my hand. And he squeezed the trigger."

I took a gulp of the scotch and wanted to die.

"So Litton basically committed suicide?"

"Pretty much. I didn't want to let him go. I cared for him. It was awful."

I choked and tears streamed down my cheeks. I fucking hated it. I hated feeling like this and I hated Ezra for making me feel that way. I drank some more of the scotch. It was almost gone.

"I'm sorry, Adrian. I really am."

I wiped my hands over my face. Wyatt handed me a napkin.

"So what did you find out on the ring?" I asked, wiping angrily at my eyes and cheeks.

Wyatt paused. Never a good sign.

"Nothing," he said. "I couldn't find anything about a ring associated with any of the deaths. However, there is someone I'm going to talk to and see if they can give me any more info."

"Who?"

"Lawrence Kemp. He was arrested on an unrelated but similar case as your grandfather. He's dying in a hospital right now. Lung cancer. He's under twenty-four-hour police escort."

"He's a prisoner?"

"Yes. He may have info about your ring and about your family's deaths."

"You think he's going to tell you? A cop?"

"No choice. He's not allowed visitors."

"He's on his deathbed and not allowed visitors?"

"He's a dangerous man and no chances are being taken. He's killed at least eighteen people."

Eighteen? Pussy. I got four today.

"Who was he working for when he was arrested?" I asked.

"He was not a talkative prisoner. Refused to testify against anyone else. Got life in prison for four of the murders. So we don't have it from his mouth, but all of the evidence says he worked for Joseph Metruccio."

"I've never heard anyone talk about him."

"I'm sure it's a sore subject. I'll see what I can get out of him."

"I think I could —"

"They would never allow you to see him, so don't ask," Wyatt interrupted. "It won't happen."

"I get it. What else do you have for me?"

"That's it."

"That's it? I gave you info and you gave me nothing."

"The agreement was that I look further into it, which I did."

"Fuck," I said, looking away and shaking my head.

"I will continue to research and share with you. Are you willing to do the same?"

"What do you want to know now?"

"Who is Drake's current hitman?"

I paused with the glass of scotch halfway to my lips. It hovered there for a moment, then made it all the way. I polished off the glass.

"Can't say."

"Can't or won't?"

"What good is it going to do me?"

"I know this is hard for you to believe, but this isn't all about you."

That kind of stung. I looked down at my glass. It was empty of scotch, but a few remaining ice cubes rested on the bottom.

"I'm sorry," Wyatt said. "I know you've gotta be in a shitty position."

"And how."

"Do you still have my number?"

"Yes."

"Call me when you're ready to talk some more. Call me if you need help. We can pull you out at any time. If you feel like you're in danger, call me."

"Sure."

Wyatt stood up and walked out of the room. If he thought I was going to wait around for his cop ass to talk to Lawrence Kemp, he was sorely mistaken. In fact, I decided Mr. Kemp was next on my dance card for the night.

I had little information to go on. I had the guy's name and the fact that he was in the hospital. There were several hospitals in the Atlanta area and they were all big. I walked out to the parking lot and discreetly began checking car doors until I found one that was unlocked. A locked car would have been too much trouble to steal. If I was going to start paying visits to dying gangsters I didn't want Ezra tracking me every step of the way in my car.

I slid behind the steering wheel of the Buick and felt around to see if the keys had been left in it, too, but I couldn't get that lucky. I ripped out the plastic cover under the steering wheel. It was an older model, so I was able to locate the red ignition wires fairly quickly, even in the dim light. The careless car owner had been thoughtful enough to leave his pocket knife in the center console. It was old and dirty, but it was sharp enough to do the job. After stripping the ignition wires, I spliced them together. The dash lit up, telling me I was successful in turning the ignition on.

Glancing up, I saw that people were leaving the restaurant. I had no time to spare before they headed into the parking lot, and I could have been in their car for all I knew.

I pulled the wires out a little further, looking for the lead wire. I found it and stripped it, again checking the progress of the restaurant patrons. They were taking their time. Inhaling deeply to relax myself, I crossed the stripped lead wire with the spliced ignition wires to start the motor. It took a few tries before the engine turned over and roared to life and I almost started to break a sweat. I yanked the steering wheel hard a few times to break the steering lock and put the car in reverse to back out of the parking space. God, it was so much easier stealing older cars. I hoped the owner would take heart that it was being used for the greater good and not headed for a chop shop or anything.

I drove to Northside Hospital where it was well past visiting hours. I walked up to the reception desk and said, "I'm looking for a patient. Can you tell me if he's here?"

"Visiting hours are over, ma'am," the fifty-something receptionist said. "You can come back tomorrow between four and eight, unless you're family."

"Yes, I'm his daughter. I just flew in from California because my sister called and said he was in the hospital, but she didn't say which one. Now I can't get a hold of her."

"What's the name?"

"Lawrence Kemp."

The receptionist typed it in. She didn't seem disturbed by the name. It seemed to me that if there was a dangerous killer in the hospital, everyone would know.

"It doesn't look like he's here. Try Grady or Memorial."

"Thank you for your help."

"You're welcome, sweetheart."

Grady Hospital didn't have a very good reputation. Whether or not it was deserved I didn't know, but a lot of the gang war victims ended up there. Drive-by shootings, knife fights, hit and run...they all seemed to end up in Grady. I sat down and watched the reception desk, pretending to read a magazine and wait for someone. When the receptionist got up to use the bathroom, I casually dropped the magazine and walked over to the desk.

The computer system had a search function for patients. I typed in Kemp's name. He was there all right. There were red flags all over the place on his file. DO NOT RELEASE INFORMATION ON THIS PATIENT. PATIENT UNDER TOTAL POLICE SUPERVISION. NO UNAUTHORIZED VISITORS. But it had the jackpot. Room 312.

"What are you doing?"

I looked up quickly to find the receptionist, back already from the toilet. She looked down at the screen with Kemp's data on it.

"I'm calling the police," she said.

That was the wrong thing to say. I stood up and grabbed her. I took her neck in the crook of my arm and squeezed in just the right way to make her pass out by suddenly

and briefly cutting off the blood flow to her brain. It was the same idea as a sleeper hold, but a hell of a lot faster. Three seconds would do it. She'd wake up with a headache. I sat her back down in her chair and cleared out my search on the computer. I was on my way to the third floor.

There was a guard parked outside one of the rooms down the hall when I stepped off the elevator. I walked by and hid around the corner. It could only be Kemp's room. There could be a cop inside the room too. This was going to be tricky.

I reached up to my face and touched my bruise. This could help me. I rounded the corner and walked up to the cop, who was seated, reading a magazine, just like the movies.

"Hi there," I said.

"Good evening, miss," he said, glancing up. He stared at me for just a moment, then looked back down at his magazine.

"Um, can I ask you a question?"

"You just did."

Sharp, this one.

"If someone gets reported for domestic violence, do they actually get arrested?"

He looked up at me and appeared to ponder my bruise.

"Sometimes. If there's evidence."

"So if they do get arrested and they make bail, they just walk out, right?"

"The victim can get a restraining order. Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"No. No, it just seems too risky."

"I understand, but this is the way the system works. It has to protect everybody."

"Hmmm. It looks like you're protecting someone. Who is it?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, miss."

I took a few steps toward the door and the cop stood up. The window in the door was covered up so I couldn't see in. The cop put his hand between me and the door.

"Miss, please step back."

"Is he dangerous?" I asked.

He was going to be harder to subdue than the receptionist. He was young and well-built. I would have to work fast.

"Miss, please."

I turned to him and smiled.

"Sorry," I said, punched him hard in the nose, then spun around and put a head lock on him. I squeezed the trigger points to cut off blood flow to his brain. Four seconds and he was out. I hadn't really seen the value in learning that move until that night. Before it always seemed like a waste of energy to knock someone out when you could just kill them and not worry about them waking up.

I sat the cop back down in his chair. Sleeping on the job, tsk, tsk. I listened at the door. Either no cop inside or he was half-deaf. I turned the handle. Locked. I searched the cop and found some keys. After several tries, I found the right one. I pushed open the door and stepped inside. I knew why the cop inside hadn't responded. He was actually asleep, as was the aged mobster lying in the bed.

I kept an eye on the sleeping cop as I nudged Kemp. I leaned over him and said into his ear, "Wake up."

His body jerked and his eyes slowly opened. He looked up at me and squinted in the dim light of the room.

"Are you here to kill me?" he gasped. I could tell it was going to be hard for him to talk. The equipment surrounding him beeped and wheezed and blinked. He was on his way out fast.

"Maybe. I have some questions for you, and you'd better answer or I will kill you."

Kemp tried to laugh.

"It would be a relief to die," he wheezed. This was going to be more difficult than I thought.

"Tell me about who you worked for before you were arrested. Did you work for Ezra Drake?"

"Already answered these questions. Not saying anything."

"Look, I'm not a cop. I'm not a detective and I'm not a reporter. I'm an assassin, and I work for Ezra Drake. I want some fucking answers."

Kemp smiled.

"No assassin looked like you when I was working."

"They're breeding us specially now. You should see the latest models. They look like schoolgirls."

Another attempted laugh from Kemp.

"Will you talk to me?" I asked.

"Ask your questions."

"I'm trying to find out who killed three people. Caleb and Elizabeth Connor and Charles Ennis."

The old guy raised his eyebrows, then stared me down hard.

"You," he wheezed. "You're the little girl."

I leaned over him.

"Were you there? Do you know who killed my family?"

"You were a killer even back then."

"What?"

"You...don't remember."

"Remember what?"

"I was there," he wheezed uncomfortably. "Your grandfather."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

"I was the one that killed your grandfather."

I reeled back from the bed. I was not expecting a confession. I didn't know whether I should be relieved or enraged.

"Who told you to do it? Who were you working for? I have to know."

"Who do you think?"

"I don't know. I was always told that Metruccio killed my family."

"Everyone killed your family. I'm surprised they let you live."

"What do you mean? Dammit, redeem yourself, you're about to die! Tell me something I can use!"

"Too late for redemption."

I turned away from him, biting back tears.

"You had a ring. A sapphire ring."

"Yes," he gasped. "You remember that."

"Yes. Where is it now?"

"I gave it...away."

"To whom?"

"To my protégé. The mole. As a thank-you."

"A thank-you for what?"

"A job well done. He had infiltrated Drake's organization flawlessly. He let us into the house to kill your grandfather. He was supposed to protect him...but he double-crossed him."

Kemp shook and coughed. My eyes darted over to the cop. He shifted and snorted, then went back to sleep.

"So you did work for Metruccio."

"Yes. So did your father."

"I heard something to that effect. Was he killed by his own gang? Did my grandfather work for Metruccio too?"

It was a bit of a test. From what Wyatt had told me I could pretty much count on the fact that my grandfather had been Ezra's man. So far it appeared that Kemp could be telling the truth, but I wanted a little reassurance that he wasn't feeding me lies.

"No. Grandfather worked for Drake."

I turned back to Kemp.

"My grandfather worked for Drake and my father worked for Metruccio..."

Kemp nodded. Well, that would explain strife and murder. Kemp's confirmation of Wyatt's information was of little comfort to me, but I pressed on.

"Who killed my parents?" I asked softly, not sure I wanted to know.

"I think you know. What would Drake do if one of his men had a son-in-law working for the enemy?"

I looked down. Probably kill them all. But he didn't...he only had my parents killed. Kemp working for Metruccio killed my grandfather...as retribution, perhaps?

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Who is who?"

"The mole. The one who double crossed my grandfather."

"My son."

"Is he still pretending to work for Ezra?"

Kemp managed a laugh.

"You'll never know. Not giving up my son."

I looked back up at Kemp, my grandfather's murderer, with tears in my eyes.

"Ezra ordered my parents' deaths, didn't he?"

"He did. Punishment for Ennis being unable to control his family. They managed to hide for a good many years, but eventually the truth came out. It always does."

The tears rolled. All the lies. And here I was getting the truth from a dying enemy assassin. I believed him. He had no reason to lie anymore.

"He had the son-in-law killed, then a few weeks later, the daughter. They left you on Ennis' front porch...holding a paper bag...with your father's decaying head inside."

The images from my dream came back in a rush. The heavy, dripping bag. My grandfather's horrified expression. I felt dizzy. I set my hands on the railing of Kemp's bed.

"Repulsive," Kemp said. "Even for our line of work. Metruccio was pissed. Sent me for payback."

I nodded, suddenly fearing I would throw up.

"Hope I helped you, kid. Now help me."

"Help you?"

"Unplug these machines. They keep me alive and torture me. I'm ready to go pay for my sins somewhere else."

This man had killed my grandfather. I would be killing him. I would also be helping him. Letting him live and suffer would be a greater revenge. But somehow I felt sorry for him too. He was just a pawn like me, doing what he was told to do when he was told to do it. And he was the only one in twenty years to tell me something true.

"I can't," I said.

"Why?"

"They would know it was me."

"So what? They don't care about me anymore."

He thought I was talking about Metruccio, when in fact I was thinking about Wyatt. I couldn't have him knowing I was guilty of assisted suicide, or worse, murder.

"I'm sorry. Maybe you can get one of the cops to help you."

Kemp looked at me with respect and nodded.

"You don't have to lie to me," he said. "In your shoes I would do the same thing."

He thought it was payback. That was okay. Let him think it. I had to go.

I turned and left Lawrence Kemp alive. He wouldn't last long, I was sure. I didn't need to play God with him.

I walked out to the Buick feeling numb. I'd spent so many years justifying Ezra's actions in order to justify my own that sometimes I forgot what a wicked world we actually ran. He really was evil. What did that make me? A follower of Satan? Someone who served their own parents' killer?

I sat in the Buick staring at nothing. Detective Wyatt's phone number ran through my head. Should I call him? And tell him what? "I'm sad, hold me?" What could he really do for me?

Finally I drove the Buick back to Ed's and left it in the parking lot. It was a five mile walk back home. I needed it.

Chapter Thirteen

The white Corsica was gone when I got home, but the SUV was there again. You'd think they'd switch cars every now and then to throw me off. It was two in the morning and the townhouse neighborhood was quiet. Not even a dog barking. The sounds of traffic were muted and faraway-sounding, leaving me feeling exposed as I slipped behind the row of townhouses to let myself in the back. Every footstep could be heard. Where the hell were the partiers? Hell, I'd take a stray cat.

I reached the rear door and entered quietly, disarming the alarm. I wondered how closely Ezra was monitoring me. I wondered if he would ask what I was doing going in and out while the Porsche stayed in the garage all night. I wondered what he would do if he knew that I had discovered the truth.

I thought the walk was going to clear my head. Instead, I walked straight to the bathroom and threw up intermittently for fifteen minutes. Betrayal. Deceit. I felt sick again, thinking about how he had probably delivered me himself to my grandfather's doorstep, my father's head in tow. Was what my parents had done really so awful to make Ezra feel the need to do *that*? I pounded my fists against the bathroom floor and screamed into a towel. Then I threw up again.

Thinking of all the times Ezra had hugged me or doled out his fatherly advice made my guts turn. How could he smile down at me and tell me how much he cared when all along *he* was the one who had destroyed my life, taken away my decisions and turned me into his robot? My head spun and I wanted to throw up again, but I had nothing left. I sat on the bathroom floor, propped up against the wall, shivering and occasionally kicking the wall or the toilet, trying to get the rage out of my system.

When the sickness left, the tears came. It felt pathetic, weeping on the tile next to the toilet. With no one there to hold me, I pulled my knees up under my chin and wrapped my arms around myself. My head began to throb as if every lie I'd ever been fed was trying to beat its way out of my skull. The shredded heart within my chest seemed to shrivel and give up.

What felt like hours later, I crawled to the kitchen and tried to calm myself by drinking about a gallon of water. I felt dehydrated and hollow. Freaking out was not going to help me. I had to get out. I had to get Tony's son and get out. I wouldn't let Ezra fuck him up the way he did to me. I couldn't let it happen.

The fireplace had held its secrets for long enough. I opened up the false back and bottom and surveyed my equipment. I loaded up several large and small arms into the trunk of the Porsche. It didn't hold much, but it would be enough. I added several knives and a hand grenade. Half my wardrobe covered up the mobile armory.

At just about four in the morning, I lay down on the sofa and went to sleep. I was hoping it would be a dreamless sleep since I now knew the truth, but apparently there was more to be uncovered. *The living room. Grandpa on the floor. Kemp kneeling over him, clear to me now. The gang in the background. God, I was so close to recognizing one of them. I even tried to get closer, but then the fear took over and I ran, ran up the stairs and under the bed. I grabbed the gun. Grandpa's gun. The one he showed me how to use the afternoon I showed up on his doorstep. I crawled out of from under the bed and hid in the closet. I could hear them coming up the stairs. My heart pounded in my ears and I was crying and shaking.*

I woke up, drenched in sweat. It was like I was truly reliving that afternoon. My heart still pounded. I still shook. It was just after eight o'clock. Eight o'clock on the first day I was a real person, in control of myself because I finally had truth.

I wiped my hands over my sweaty face. The den was quiet around me. Outside I heard car doors closing and engines starting and garage doors opening and closing as the world went to work. I sat up, still exhausted. Four hours of sleep was not enough. I walked up the stairs and to my bedroom. The sheets were cool and comforting to my sweaty, overheated body. I wrapped them around me and stared up at the ceiling. I felt like shit.

My phone started ringing at two in the afternoon. I told it to kiss my ass and rolled over, still curled up in my sheets. It beeped that I had a message. It didn't matter. I could never go back to the Office. At least not as an employee of Ezra Drake.

"Liar," I whispered. "Thief."

I got out of bed an hour later. I didn't know what to do. I was torn between running down to the Office and shooting the shit out of the place and all the evil lying bastards within, and calling Wyatt to come rescue me. It didn't take much thought to determine that neither of those were viable options. I needed time to think.

So I showered and dressed. When I was finished, I still didn't have a plan or an idea of what to do with myself. I had nowhere to go. Even if I did, I would be tracked. If Ezra found out I'd gone to see Kemp last night, which is entirely possible, he might be sending some of his pals to pay me a visit. If he believed that I knew the truth about him and what he'd done to my family all bets were off. No more daddy Drake. I wondered if either of those cops were in Ezra's employ. The sleeping one could have been listening the entire time. I should have knocked him out.

Paranoia. When I had nothing else, I still had paranoia.

I scrounged around in the kitchen and found a can of pears and some saltines. Dinner. I would have ordered a pizza, but I was afraid it could be intercepted and poisoned. I trusted no one. If Ezra killed my parents and Metruccio killed my grandfather, I had no friends. Even Wyatt, if he knew what I was, would find me repellant and take me to jail. Hell, I deserved to be there.

I ate my pears and saltines, then walked out on the deck. No surveillance team. Or maybe they'd moved into one of the townhouses across the street. It would be more comfortable than a Corsica. I looked on down the street a bit. A black truck rested a few

houses down. The other direction I found a dark blue sedan. Maybe I was wrong. Wyatt's guys just got some new cars.

I was sketching out a diagram of the Office to plan my rescue of Tony, Jr. and a side visit to thank Ezra for his role in my parents' deaths when the phone rang again. I stared at it. It was him. I could feel it. I couldn't answer. I could not speak to him without letting loose that I knew it all. Or at least enough to know the truth. Even as I plotted my entrance into Ezra's office, I wondered if I would be able to kill him. He had destroyed my life, killed my family and murdered the only man I ever thought I loved...and yet...he still held that fatherly position. I hated him, but could that overcome years of love?

I set down my pencil and wiped away a few errant tears. Knowing the truth had not made me happy. Sitting here planning Ezra's execution was not easing my pain. I stood up and walked to the kitchen window. The Ford was still there. I had a feeling I knew who was in it.

I slipped out of the house through the back. He may have spotted me. The front door was still booby trapped and I didn't feel like taking it down. I snuck along bushes two sets of houses down and started coming up the street from behind the truck. The driver's side was to the sidewalk.

It was going to be difficult to sneak up on him when he had full view of me in his rearview mirrors, so I took a direct approach. I walked straight up to the window and knocked.

Wyatt nearly jumped through the roof. I heard him swear inside the cab of the truck. He rolled down the window and said, "What the hell are you doing?"

"If you're going to monitor me, you may as well come inside where it's comfortable," I said, figuring if Ezra was watching my place too he'd already made the detective and his pals. "We have things to discuss."

"Yes, we do," Wyatt said, staring at me hard. *Shit*, I thought, *he went to see Kemp*.

I led Detective Wyatt back to the townhouse and let him in the rear door.

"Why do you come and go through the back door?" he asked as we walked into the den. Then he looked at my setup at the front door and said, "Oh."

I took him up the stairs and we had a seat at the kitchen table.

"So," he said. "What do you have for me?"

"Did you talk to Kemp?" I asked.

"It seems that someone got there before I did," he said.

"Sorry," I said. "I couldn't wait. And I didn't think he would talk to you anyway."

"Well, he won't be talking to anyone now."

I looked up at Wyatt, confused.

"What do you mean?"

"Someone," he said pointedly, "disconnected his life support equipment and Mr. Kemp died early this morning."

I stared at the detective, open-mouthed. Who could have followed me? Was it one of the cops?

Wyatt leaned back in his chair.

"It wasn't you," he said. It was a statement, not a question. Wyatt was a perceptive one. Probably a damn good detective, which both comforted and worried me.

"No," I whispered. "He was alive when I left. He...he asked me to unplug him and I wouldn't do it."

I stood up and walked to the kitchen counter. I placed my hands on the counter and leaned against it, staring at the blank wall.

"Someone knew I was there," I said. "Someone...who...did you know the cops that were guarding his room?"

Wyatt stood and walked over to me.

"No," he said. "They're both under investigation at this point because the prisoner died in their care. What happened while you were there?"

"I knocked out the guard outside. The guard inside was sleeping. Or so I thought. It was stupid, stupid of me to leave him sleeping when, my God, he could have been contacting Ezra or Metruccio at that very moment. I'm still a fucking idiot after all these years."

Wyatt placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Look," he said. "When the powers that be at the Atlanta P.D. find out you were there, and I'm pretty sure they will once the cop outside gives them a description of you, you will be the prime suspect in Kemp's death."

"I didn't kill him!"

That would be just perfect. Go down for killing someone I didn't even kill after all the people who'd actually met their end in the form of one of my bullets.

"I believe you. Did you see anyone following you? Anyone who could have gone in there after you?"

"No," I said. "I didn't see anyone. It must have been the cop inside the room."

"Please think it through before you accuse a cop of being on mob payroll. That has to be a last resort."

"Why? Because they're your friends? Do you know how many dirty cops I've known in my days with Ezra?"

I turned and leaned against the counter.

"I have no one," I said. "How can I trust anyone after what I learned last night?"

Wyatt set his hand on my upper arm and turned me toward him.

"You can trust me. Believe it or not, I am here to help you. We can talk about what you heard from Kemp last night and maybe together we can figure out who could have killed him."

"And then what? Witness protection? What about Tony's son? I have an obligation to him."

"What obligation do you have?"

"I promised Tony that I would rescue his son."

I looked down at the floor.

"So far I haven't done a goddamn thing to fulfill that promise," I said.

Wyatt put two fingers under my chin. He lifted my head up. He was close to me. I could almost feel his body heat.

"We will save the boy," he said. "I promise."

Wyatt's head was moving closer to mine. I could feel his soft breath on my cheeks. A wash of warmth ran through me. He put his other hand on my waist and the warmth became a rush of heat. God, it would be heaven to touch him, to feel safe and cared for. My emotional wounds were raw and open. Having a soothing touch to make me forget about the pain was more of a temptation than I could resist. Wyatt opened his hand and cupped my cheek. I turned my head into it and let him touch my lips and nose. His hands were so soft. If we kissed it would change everything. *Change is good*, I thought, lifting myself up on my toes to push my lips closer to Wyatt's mouth.

BAM. Wyatt and I jumped apart. It was a gunshot.

"The front door," I whispered. "My booby trap."

Wyatt pulled his gun, standard issue Atlanta P.D. Glock. I pulled my own. He turned and stared at me, then at the gun, disapproval on his face. I shrugged. He might not like being side by side with a suspected criminal holding a gun, but I wasn't about to give it up. We moved silently toward the stairwell leading to the den and listened. There was a grunt and the sound of a body hitting the floor. It seemed that my booby trap had been effective. A male voice cursed softly, then there was the sound of the door closing.

Footsteps were coming up the stairs. Wyatt flattened himself against the wall. I spun around back into the kitchen and hid around the inside of the door. We watched as the end of a gun emerged from the stairwell cautiously, followed by hands. Hands with one finger wearing a silver ring with a big blue sapphire in it. I sucked in a silent breath.

The hands turned into forearms as they slowly cleared the stairwell wall. Wyatt grabbed the forearms and pulled the assailant into the hallway. They tumbled to the floor. I leapt out to learn who the mole was, but his face was covered with a black ski mask. The mole knocked Wyatt's gun out of his hands, then the two rolled and struggled for the remaining gun. I tried to aim for a good shot at the mole's head, but it was no good—I couldn't risk hitting Wyatt.

I wasn't used to being on the sidelines during a fight. Watching them scramble was more frustrating than anything. I couldn't shoot and I couldn't join in. It looked like the mole was getting the upper hand, pinning Wyatt, and my heart jumped painfully within me. *Do something*, it seemed to scream.

Wyatt had his back to the ground. The mole was on top of him, trying to turn the gun on him. With both of his hands occupied, the mole was left defenseless. I grabbed his head and slammed it into my knee, nailing the pressure point on his temple. I did it a few more times for good measure, then kicked him under the chin. He slumped over, unconscious.

Wyatt pushed him off, grunting, "Thanks."

I reached over and yanked off the ski mask. It was Gray.

"Motherfucker," I said.

"You know this guy?"

"He's a traitor," I said. "He's working for Ezra, but he's also working for Metruccio. This is Kemp's son."

"Holy shit."

Wyatt snapped handcuffs on Gray, then called for uniforms to come pick him up. We carried him down into the den and sat him, barely conscious, on the sofa. That's when I noticed that there was no dead body. The gun had been fired. The trap was sprung but there was no body. Someone had been hit and it sure as hell wasn't Gray.

"Where the hell is it?" I said, panicked. I opened up the front door. There was a trail of blood down the sidewalk that disappeared once it hit the street.

"Oh my God," I whispered. "Whoever it was is on his way back to Ezra with interesting news."

"What will he tell him?"

"It won't take them long to figure out that you're a cop. They expected me to be alone," I said softly. "They were coming to kill me. They're going to send more people to kill me. I'm not safe here."

"Go," Wyatt said. "Get out now. I have to be here when the uniforms arrive. You don't. You shouldn't or they might arrest you too, on Kemp's death. Call me in three or four hours and I will come pick you up wherever you are."

I looked at Wyatt. I had a feeling this wasn't proper procedure.

"I'll tell them I came to help when I saw Gray breaking in and then you ran away. I'll come up with something. Go, Adrian."

I holstered my gun and ran out to the Porsche and nearly took the garage door out backing up. I fired off down the street, formulating a plan to get rid of this tracking beacon I was driving. Then it occurred to me that I didn't have to steal a car. I already had one.

Whipping a donut, I headed back. I parked next to Wyatt's truck and loaded the munitions into the unlocked cab. Abandoning the Porsche in the middle of the street, I

hopped into the truck. I had to hotwire it so I hoped it wasn't Wyatt's personal vehicle as I ripped the dash out from under the steering column.

The engine roared to life and I sped off down the street. I circled the block and came to rest in a dark section of roadway to watch the entrance to the townhouse complex. It took the two police cars ten more minutes to arrive. I waited and watched. Another thirty minutes passed and I was afraid they'd taken the rear exit out, but finally cop cars began emerging. I followed them to the police station, hiding in the shadows on the street outside.

A red Honda pulled out of the station driveway an hour later. I had a feeling it was Wyatt. It looked like a punishment car for losing a police issue vehicle. Unfortunately, that also meant the truck I was driving was an advertisement to arrest me.

I hung back for a moment, then pulled out and followed the Honda. The two of us motored along until the red car pulled into an apartment complex. I followed it in and parked right next to it. Wyatt got out of the Honda and walked around to the driver's side of the truck. He opened the door and said, "Are you trying to get me suspended? I looked like a fool walking out to my truck only to find it had been stolen."

"I had to ditch the Porsche. It was tracked."

Wyatt looked down at the torn dash and sighed.

"You could have asked me for the keys."

"You were busy babysitting Gray."

"I should take you down to the station right now."

"But you won't. You want Drake."

"I do want Drake. I've been on his tail for three years and you're the closest thing I've ever had to getting hard evidence to put him away."

"Does this thing have somewhere to stay besides a jail cell?"

"Shit," Wyatt said, looking around. "Come on."

I slid out of the truck and locked it. Couldn't have anyone stealing my favorite shotgun. I followed Wyatt up two flights of stairs where he unlocked the door to the apartment furthest from the street.

"Welcome to Chez Wyatt," he said, opening the door for me.

I stepped inside. It was a cozy place. Fairly clean. No decorating. Kind of like my place. After taking a few steps in I saw a bottle of nail polish and a woman's razor on the kitchen table. I suddenly felt stupid and disappointed.

"Is it going to upset your girlfriend that I'm here?" I asked softly.

"What?"

I turned to face Wyatt and motioned toward the items on the table.

"Oh," he said. "My sister's stuff. She stays here sometimes when she's working in Atlanta. She lives in Macon."

"I see," I said, still unsure of the situation.

"She left that stuff here last week and I just haven't had the chance to mail it to her. Relax. No woman is going to show up and try to fight you."

I laughed. Wyatt smiled.

"Have a seat in the living room," he said. "Want anything to drink?"

"I'll take whatever you've got," I said, sitting down on the sofa. It was blue and soft. Very comfortable. I rested my head against the back and felt like I could fall asleep right then.

I heard Wyatt walking toward me and I opened my eyes. He handed me a bottle of beer. I took it gratefully and said, "Perfect. Thank you."

Wyatt set a blanket and a pillow at one end of the sofa and said, "You can stay here tonight, but we have to find somewhere else for you in the morning. It's bad enough that you're here now."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Maybe I should get a hotel."

"And take my truck to get there? No."

I smiled and said, "Is it your truck or the P.D.'s truck?"

"It's mine. I expect you to pay for that hotwire damage, you know."

"I'll trade you some high-end firearms."

"Very funny."

Wyatt sat down in the puffy chair adjacent to the sofa and said, "Now. Can you tell me about your conversation with Kemp?"

I blew out a long breath, looking away from Wyatt. I took a long chug on the beer.

"Yes," I said. "Ezra Drake has been lying to me for my entire life. He arranged the hit on my parents."

"Shit," Wyatt said, taking a drink of his beer. "I was afraid of that."

"He had them killed and left me on the doorstep of my grandfather's house holding a bag with my father's head in it."

I could feel the tears of rage and despair welling up. I took a drink.

"Kemp told you that?"

"Yes."

Wyatt sighed heavily.

"Do you think he was telling you the truth?"

"I think he was, yes."

"I was doing some more research for you and got a copy of the death certificate and autopsy on your father. His head was in fact severed. Never found."

"We could ask my grandfather where it is, but Metruccio ordered him killed as retribution for the death of my father. I was there and I saw it. I think I killed one of the men in the house."

"What? Why would you say that?"

The images from my dream flashed through my mind. Running away from the blood and death in the living room to hide in the bedroom. Grabbing something from under the bed...a gun, I was sure of it then...I could almost feel the cold steel in my hands. Hiding in the closet. *You were a killer even then*, Kemp had said. And it was the truth. The buried memory opened before me like a door to darkness.

"I was eight years old. I watched Kemp murder my grandfather. I saw his blood and brains splattered all over the picture window in his own living room. I ran upstairs and got my grandfather's gun from under the bed and hid in the closet. When one of the guys opened the door...I shot him. I was eight years old and I killed someone."

The tears were no longer threatening. They were pouring down my face like they had somewhere important to be. Wyatt set down his beer and sat next to me. He put his arm around me and whispered, "I'm so, so sorry they put you through that. No one should have to see that or experience that. These are terrible people we're dealing with, Adrian. And they do terrible things. Unless we stop them, they will continue to do this to more people."

I couldn't even respond. I choked on my tears and leaned into Wyatt's body as he held me. He smelled like Drakkar. I grabbed hold of his jacket and sobbed into it. I hope he didn't mind the mess.

Wyatt held me until I stopped crying. He brushed his fingers through my hair and held my head against his chest. I almost felt safe inside his arms.

"We'll get them, Adrian," he said softly. "And you will be safe. You and the boy will both be safe."

I tilted my head up toward Wyatt's. He looked down at me and the electricity flowed between us. He held me a little tighter. His eyes were dark with desire but also torn with conflict. I can only imagine what a bad thing I was for him. The hunter desiring the hunted. The cat wanting the mouse.

Wyatt released me and stood up.

"Try to get some sleep," he said. "You'll need your rest. We can put together a plan in the morning when we're thinking more clearly."

When we're not thinking about sex, I thought.

"Okay," I said breathily, rather disappointed. "Good night, detective."

I looked up at him as he gave me a last long glance before turning away and walking down the hallway to his bedroom. I sat there for a few minutes before standing up to disrobe. I stuck my gun underneath the pillow that Wyatt had given me, then took off my jeans and my jacket and my holster. I lay down on the sofa in my tank top and underwear and pulled the blanket over me.

I listened to Wyatt in the bathroom. Water running, the sound of teeth being brushed and the toilet flushed. More water. A door opening and closing. The click of a light switch. The dim light in the hall was gone.

Sleep was not going to come easily to me, I knew. I lay and stared at the ceiling. I shifted and stared at the back of the couch. I turned and stared at Wyatt's blank television set. I closed my eyes and counted. I got to two hundred and gave up.

I lifted my body up off the sofa. A few springs creaked as I moved. I stood and stared at the hallway. I just wanted to see him. I took a few steps and a floorboard creaked. I paused, afraid that I would wake him. Hearing nothing, I moved forward. Proceeding down the dim hallway I could see that the bedroom door was wide open and moonlight streamed into the room at the end of the hall. I imagined him, sheets strewn, muscular, dark chest moving up and down with breaths of sleep, just barely illuminated by the moon. Soft, cautious steps carried me down the hall. I stopped at the edge of the doorstep, held my breath and leaned in to see him.

The bed was empty. I sucked in a sharp breath. Hands grasped my arms from behind me and spun me around. My body was shoved into the wall next to the door frame. Wyatt's hands grabbed mine, then he rubbed his hands all over my sides and my lower back and my stomach. It wasn't a romantic gesture. He was searching me.

"Stop!" I said, insulted, pushing his hands away. His body was mere inches from mine. "You think I'm trying to kill you?"

"Why are you sneaking around trying to spy on me?"

"I just wanted to see you," I said, looking away, ashamed and embarrassed.

"You're not armed," he said.

"I just wanted to look at you," I repeated. "I don't need a gun to look at you."

I felt Wyatt relax in front of me. He was wearing nothing but a pair of white boxer shorts, so he had in fact been in bed when I first got up, or at least planning to be in bed. He reached out, this time with gentle hands and brushed my hair away from my face with the backs of his fingers.

"I'm sorry," he breathed. "I heard you getting up and I got nervous. Paranoid. I had to be sure."

"It's okay," I said. "I don't blame you. Paranoia keeps you alive. I would have done the same thing. I shouldn't have been sneaking around."

Wyatt's hand reached around the back of my head and he weaved his fingers through my hair. I shuddered.

"Why did you want to look at me?" he asked.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I didn't have an answer for that question. Any answer I could come up with would be too embarrassing to say. How could I tell him that I was desperate for a soft, comforting touch and that his noble concern for me touched me in a place I didn't even know I had? Wyatt took a step closer to me, trapping my body between his chest and the wall. He tilted my head up to look at him. He put his other hand on the side of my neck, cradling my chin.

"Why did you want to look at me?" he asked again.

"I don't know," I said.

"I think you're lying."

"I wanted to see you... I wanted to look at you... When I'm around you... I-I feel."

"It looks like I'm going to have to keep a closer eye on you," Wyatt said, then leaned his face over me and pressed his lips against mine. His lips were warm and sweet like honey. I kissed him back and parted my lips to invite him in. As his tongue swept across mine, I felt his hands on my hips, squeezing and slowly moving up my sides.

Wyatt's kiss became desperate, deep and needy. He set his hands on my waist, then spread his fingers apart and pushed up my tank top. He pressed his hungry fingertips against my skin and drew my pelvis forward into his. I moved my lips away from him to gasp at the rush of desire that spread through my body.

Wyatt pushed up harder on my tank top. I lifted my arms and let him pull it off my body, leaving my chest fully exposed to him. Wyatt kissed my neck and brushed his hands over my bare sides, then cupped one of my breasts and let his lips glide over my nipple.

"Oh God," I said, stifling an all-out moan. Wyatt pulled my flesh into his mouth and sucked gently, then released me. He took a step back and stared at me, as if he was trying to decide where to start eating me.

Wyatt brushed my upper arm with his hand and, sounding pained, said, "Are you okay with this?"

"What?" I asked, breathless.

"I know you're very upset right now...and I don't want to take advantage of you."

I stepped forward and pressed my naked chest against his. I looked up at him and said, "I can think of nothing I'd rather be doing right now, Detective Wyatt."

I kissed his lips softly. Wyatt held my head in his hands and returned the kiss urgently. He bent down and picked me up. I set my hand on his biceps, caressing the mass of muscle there. He carried me into his bedroom and laid me down on the bed.

Wyatt hovered over me for a moment, then reached down and started tugging on my panties. I lifted my body up and let him pull them down my thighs. He pulled them off my body, then ran one soft hand from my shoulder all the way down to my toes.

"Jesus, you're perfect," he said, coming down over me. "In the bathroom at that bar and grill I just wanted to hold you against the door and push myself against you."

"You did," I said, then gasped as he put his hand between my legs.

"Not the way I wanted to," he said, and touched me. He touched me just right. I closed my eyes and let the shiver of pleasure course through my body.

"I want to make you feel good," Wyatt said softly.

"That's a good start," I said, releasing a long exhalation.

I reached out and touched his chest. His body was hard from what had to be generous amounts of time at the gym. I'd never really been with a man who cared about his body like that. His skin was tight and smooth over his muscles, but soft like velvet

under my fingertips. Wyatt put his mouth over my breast again, then sucked and rubbed his finger across the sensitive flesh between my legs. I shuddered and sighed, trying to keep my shaking body under control. With his other hand he brushed his fingertips over my other nipple, sending my body into trembling desperation.

Wyatt's touch was a sweet escape from the massacre that my life had become. With each gentle stroke I further separated myself from the broken pieces of Adrian Ennis or Adrian Connor, whoever the hell I was. For those moments I could be someone else, someone with a real, human heart and an attentive lover. Far better than any drug, being with Wyatt took away the pain.

I came hard against his flesh, my body already hungry for more before the orgasm subsided. I arched my back away from the bed and let the sensations escape through my body.

"I want to feel you," I said to him. I reached out and pulled down on his boxers. He pulled them down to reveal an incredibly well-built, gym-sculpted rear end and everything that Mother Nature ever intended in front.

Wyatt lowered himself over me and kissed my neck softly. I lifted one leg and ran my knee along the side of his body, enjoying the smoothness of his skin and the heat radiating from him. He put his hand on the inside of my thigh and gently pushed. He brought himself up a few inches to touch me. I felt his erection nearly brush up against the tender flesh between my legs and sighed.

"Tease," I whispered. I felt Wyatt's mouth on my chest, working its way around in tender kisses until he once again reached my breast. He sucked and I whimpered. I wanted to feel him so badly. My body pushed toward him, almost pleading to be sated. Wyatt just barely touched me. My need overwhelmed me and I put my hands on his hips to pull him down.

Wyatt reached up to his nightstand and retrieved a condom from the drawer, much to my relief. I hadn't thought to pack any with the hand grenades and ammunition. My fingers brushed along his as I made an effort to help him put it on, but really it was just another excuse to touch him.

I pressed my hands across his ass cheeks and Wyatt let me guide him toward me. He pushed inside slowly, gently, looking down at me. His eyes were filled with almost painful tenderness. The moonlight caressed his dark skin and coated our passionate bodies with soft, natural light.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he pressed into me, my body opening up for him every inch of the way. As he pushed full-length inside me, I sighed his name and closed my eyes. He leaned down over me and kissed my lips, then my cheek, then my ear.

Wyatt pulled out of me slightly and started rocking in and out in a slow, rhythmic motion. I pushed back against him, pushing him further inside me, then letting him go only to bring him back in again. Our rhythm pulsated through the room, our sighs and cries and sharp inhalations acting as a chorus. He twisted and pushed in, sending my

nerve endings into renewed ecstasy as his smooth, hard flesh seemed to stimulate every pleasure point on my body.

While deep within me, Wyatt reached his arm around under my lower back and took hold of my opposite hip bone. His muscles flexed as he squeezed my body closer to him. It would have been painful if it wasn't such a beautiful suffering. He did it again, pulling out, then twisting gently as he reentered.

I cried out in unmatched gratification as the orgasm surged through me in an uncontrolled eruption. My mouth opened again with unbridled moans of pleasure as the seemingly endless throes of rapture engulfed me. I opened my eyes and looked up at Wyatt in amazement.

"I never knew it could be like that," I whispered.

Wyatt brushed my hair back out of my face with one hand, still holding on to me in that incredible embrace. He met my eyes and said, "I did."

Wyatt held my gaze as he began pushing into me again. His breath on my body, like a sweet warm wind, increased, blowing harder and deeper as he pushed and retreated and returned all over again. His tender expression was so peaceful and endearing that I found that I couldn't look away. I reached up and touched his face, my fair fingers a stark contrast to the milk chocolate of his skin. So smooth, his skin, his touch, his compassionate gaze and serene yet enflamed lovemaking, I almost felt like a real human. *This is what it's like for someone who's not a monster to make love*, I thought, and then the grips of bliss took hold of me again.

I gave a shuddering exhalation, then whimpered and whispered his name. He looked down at me with a seductive smile as he pulled out and pushed in for the last time to drive me over the blazing edge. I could have screamed, but instead let out a few cries and many, many short, fast sighs. The pleasure spread through me in flaming fingertips, crested in a wave of heat, then ebbed like the tide receding.

Wyatt watched me come down from the cloud, then pressed hard into me, his flesh a concentrated pillar of steel inside me. I cried out again from the sheer pressure of his erection just as he came, crying out himself, pumping in and out in a few short bursts. He shook and held me, his eyes closed in the thrill of release.

For a moment all that could be heard was the gentle hum of the ceiling fan over us and our labored but calming breathing. Wyatt's touch had done all that I'd hoped and more, as my pain was hidden away for a few moments of peace and freedom. I looked up at him and felt my shredded heart mend just a little bit. Maybe...maybe when I was ready to think about love again...he would be there.

Wyatt opened his eyes with a heartfelt look of pure satisfaction. He gave me a small smile, then leaned down and kissed me tenderly on the lips. He moved to pull out of me. I latched my legs around him and held him in place.

"I don't want to let you go," I said. I didn't say it, but I was afraid I would never feel him again.

Wyatt smiled.

“There will be more later,” he whispered. “I promise.”

I released him. Wyatt kissed me again and pulled himself out. I felt like I’d lost something, some vital part of me, with him no longer within me. We lay silent, listening to the hum of the fan and randomly touching each other’s bodies.

I fell asleep for a few moments, then awoke to hear Wyatt in the bathroom. My tired eyes cast around his barebones bedroom. It was a busy cop’s bedroom. Bare essentials. It reminded me of my own. I thought of Wyatt’s incredibly tender touch and gaze, and couldn’t help but wonder if he would make love so sweetly if he knew I was Ezra’s assassin. *Secrets*, I thought. A secret like that could lead to suffering so great it shouldn’t even have a name.

I closed my eyes as Wyatt emerged from the bathroom. He lay down next to me and kissed my shoulder, then draped his arm around me. I listened to his breathing become slow and deep, then drifted off myself.

Chapter Fourteen

Blood. Blood everywhere, all over the bedroom. As I crouched in the closet, the blood seeped out of the man in front of me and all over the carpet. I stared at him, afraid and shocked at what I'd done. I could hear the other men coming up the stairs. They were going to hurt me. I knew it, but I was too afraid to move. All I could do was sit and stare at the man in front of me with the big black and red hole in his forehead. Arms on me. Something ripped from my hands. I'll take her, someone said. I looked up and saw Gray. He looked so young and so tall. He grabbed me by my shirt collar and backhanded me across the face.

I yelled and sat straight up. Wyatt jumped and reached for his gun. He pointed it out in front of us as he scanned the room.

"What?" he said. "What is it?"

I put my hands on either side of my head and wept. Wyatt put his gun down and put an arm around me. He pulled me into him and let me cry.

"The man you arrested today, Gray," I said. "He was there when my grandfather was killed. He's the one that took me to Ezra. He gave me to him. He hit me so hard."

Wyatt squeezed me close to him. He stroked my hair and my arm.

"He'll be going to prison," Wyatt said. "He won't be hurting anyone else."

Wyatt laid me back down and kissed me. I turned toward him and buried my face in his chest, not to cry, but more to hide from my dreams. I knew enough. I didn't want to know any more.

It was seven in the morning when I opened my eyes again. I was alone. The shower was running. Was that what had woken me up? I heard the apartment door opening and closing. My heart surged in my chest. I reached up under Wyatt's pillow. No gun. I heard the footsteps coming down the hall. Nowhere to run.

A figure appeared in the bedroom door. It was the supposed drunk from The Lobby bar who I knew was associated with Wyatt. I sat up and held the sheet over my body. The guy looked at me in shock and said, "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

He turned around and walked back down the hall. I heard the springs squeak in the sofa and presumed he'd taken a seat. I looked around. With the exception of my panties, all my clothes were either in the hall or in the living room. I slid my panties on and found one of Wyatt's t-shirts tossed over a box. It smelled clean enough. I pulled it on over my head.

The shower turned off and moments later Wyatt emerged from the bathroom, which was just adjacent to the bedroom door, towel wrapped around his waist. I met him in the doorway.

"Hey, sexy," he said, touching my face and giving me a kiss. He brushed past me and opened up his closet door.

"Wyatt," I said.

"Yes?" he said, humming a tune to himself.

"We have company."

Wyatt stopped, his body stiller than a corpse. He turned and looked at me.

"What?"

"I think it's your partner. In the living room."

"Shit," Wyatt hissed in a whisper. "Did he see you?"

"Well...yes."

"Aw hell."

Wyatt walked down the hallway and into the living room, still in his towel.

"Jamison, you don't fucking call before you let yourself in now?" he said.

"I'm not the one who needs to be defensive here," Jamison said. "Please tell me that I just had a massive hallucination and that is not your source lying naked in your bed."

Wyatt was silent.

"Jesus Christ," Jamison spat. "I can't believe a hardcore cop like you just fucked your source."

"Look," Wyatt said. "I'm not going to stand here and defend my actions. Yes, I know it was grossly improper. What, are you going to tell on me?"

"Maybe I should. She's a goddamn criminal and the cunt deserves to be in jail."

"Please do not refer to her like that. She is a human being."

"What are you, in love now? She that good? Hell, maybe I should try her."

I felt the punch coming before Jamison did. I heard the smack, then the commotion of him falling into the coffee table.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Jamison screamed.

"I asked you nicely the first time."

"Fuck this. I came over to tell you that Gray made bail this morning. He's back on the street. They did it all before I got there. Maybe while you're humping your source, you can fuck some worthwhile information out of her. Put that bastard back in the slammer."

I heard the door open and shut again. I was standing in the doorway to the bedroom when Wyatt came back down the hall. He took a handful of my hair in his hand, leaned down and kissed me.

"I'm so sorry you had to hear that," he said.

"I've been called worse," I said, but it had stung. In the old days, I would have shot him long before he got to the word "cunt". But now...things were different. I felt like my insides were changing around, making me a completely different person. A person

who felt ashamed when sweet lovemaking was referred to as fucking and dirty when someone called her a cunt. But even more disturbing than Jamison's foul mouth was his foul news.

"Did he," I said with hesitation. "Did he say Gray is out?"

"I'm afraid so," Wyatt said. He hugged me close to him. "I have to go."

Wyatt returned to his closet and began pulling clothes out.

"You should stay here today," he said. "You should be safe here and you can always call me if you need me. You can use my phone. I know you don't like to use yours."

Wyatt pulled on his clothes and turned to me.

"We'll get him back where he belongs," he said. "Lay low for now. I'll call you when I find out what's going on."

Wyatt kissed me briefly but tenderly and was out the door. I looked around the apartment feeling like I'd just been run over.

* * * * *

Wyatt's phone started ringing a little after eleven o'clock. At first I ignored it, then I remembered his promise to call me. I picked the receiver and said nothing.

"Adrian?" Wyatt said.

"Yes, hi," I said. "I wasn't sure if I should answer it."

"You go ahead and answer it. I'll tell all my girlfriends to call my cell phone."

I smiled even though he couldn't see it.

"That's good thinking," I said.

"I'm always on top of my game. Hey, we're working on securing a warrant for Gray's arrest on something unrelated to last night's break in. I have a question for you."

"Okay."

"Is Gray Drake's assassin? Our information says he might be the one who's carried out a whole lot of hits."

My body went cold. My mouth opened and I heard myself saying, "He's one of them."

"That's what I thought. You stay inside and I'll call again when I know more. If we can get the warrant we may be picking him up outside the building you called the Office this afternoon."

"Oh God, be careful Wyatt. That place is crawling with guns who don't care who you are."

"I know, and we will be careful. Don't worry, I won't be alone."

I hung up the phone, feeling like I'd swallowed a giant ice cube. It wasn't a lie. Technically, Gray was one of Ezra's assassins. He'd done jobs. Not as many as I had.

Not nearly as many as I had, as far as I knew. No, I was Ezra's favorite assassin up until yesterday.

I thought about calling Ezra and telling him that Gray was a double-crossing mole. That might have gotten Gray out of the picture by way of a new pair of concrete boots, or Ezra wouldn't believe me and nothing would have changed except I'd have given him an opportunity to track me down. No. Bad idea.

I turned on the television for a distraction as I waited for Wyatt's phone call. I paced up and down the hall. Two o'clock, then three. Didn't he say they might go after Gray that afternoon? I had a compulsion to drive over to the Office and see. *No, no*, I corrected myself. *You stay here and wait. Wyatt will call.*

At five o'clock, the phone rang. Only it wasn't Wyatt's phone. It was my cell phone. I picked it up and stared at it. Dallas' cell phone number lit up the screen. I didn't answer. I threw it down on the couch and paced. It rang again. Parker's cell phone this time. I let it go. At six o'clock it rang again. Ezra Drake. I stared at his name as my phone beeped out its happy little tune. Something was wrong.

I flipped open the phone and did nothing but breathe.

"Adrian?" Ezra said.

I said nothing.

"Adrian, I know you're there. I can hear you breathing. Come now, don't you have anything to say, sweetheart?"

"Go to hell," I said.

"That's a start," he said. "I'm just calling to see if you would come down here and chat for a little bit. I know you have questions and I have answers. Just come down to the Office and we'll get everything sorted out."

"Fuck you."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Ezra sighed. "So I had to take preemptive measures. I have your detective friend here and I will put him back out on the street to do his thing if you just come down for a talk."

My guts tightened up into stiff pretzels. I went cold and clammy.

"Liar!" I yelled into the phone and hung up. I ran over to Wyatt's phone and dialed his cell phone number. It rang once. It rang twice. On the third ring, it picked up. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Wyatt," I said.

"Hello there, sweetheart," Ezra's voice said, sliding through the earpiece of the phone like audible snakes. "As you can see, I'm not lying. We do have your friend here...Detective Wyatt. He wants you to come down and talk with us too, don't you Detective?"

I heard a loud smack and Wyatt yelled, "Motherfucker. Adrian, don't let them push you around."

Another smack.

"No!" I screamed. "Ezra, goddamn you! Stop it! I'll come, I'll come!"

"Adrian," Ezra said. "I never knew you had such a soft heart. Be here by eight. We have much to discuss."

Ezra disconnected. I hung up Wyatt's phone slowly, feeling numb. *This is it, I thought. Do or die. Fuck this up and you lose Wyatt and you lose Tony's kid.*

I carried Wyatt's biggest gym bag down to the truck, loaded it up and carried all the weapons up into the apartment. Back to Wyatt's bedroom, I laid everything out. My buffet of weaponry was like an old friend. It was time for old Adrian, Adrian Ennis, to come out and play one last time.

Like I was suiting up for a mission with the SWAT team, I strapped knives in holsters to both calves and buckled matching knives to both forearms. I fit my holster over my shoulders and stuck my Glock in its slot, then latched a secondary holster under my other arm and inserted a .380 Taurus. A 9mm Beretta, extra magazines and a hook for one of the hand grenades found a home in a belt around my waist. I wished I'd brought the machine gun, but alas, I was out of limbs to hold it anyway. As I tried to prepare myself mentally for what I was about to do, I noticed an ammo box on Wyatt's top shelf. I pulled it down and found a little Christmas present. Three cans of smoke and one of tear gas. As an added bonus, there was a gas mask. I thought I very well could fall in love with Wyatt. I put my jacket on and picked up the ammo box. It was time for a little girl's night out action.

I walked out to the Ford and did a brief calculation. I had enough ammo for every goon in the Office at least twice. If I worked it right, I might be able to plant each of those bullets perfectly in their heads.

I drove to the Office in silence. I didn't even hear the traffic around me. Like I had tunnel vision, I saw only the road, and all roads led to the Office. I arrived at seven. That gave me an hour to plow through The Lobby and make it in time to meet Ezra's deadline.

I didn't even bother to park the Ford. I stopped in front of the Office right in the street and turned off the engine. There was no need for stealth entry. Ezra was ready and waiting for me. I jumped out of the truck with a duffel bag filled with goodies and walked straight up the stairs. Pushing through the doors, I entered The Lobby for the last time.

Perry Parker and his new friend Dan T. were standing as sentries just inside the door. Dan gave me a disgusted, superior look and Perry smirked.

"Hey Adrian," Perry said. "I hear you're fucking a nigger cop."

I stood still for two seconds, then dropped the duffel bag and stuck my hands into my jacket, crossed, so the handle of each pistol fit perfectly into my palms. I pulled them out, aimed and delivered one bullet each into the unsuspecting foreheads of Dan and Perry. Everyone in The Lobby stopped and turned at the commotion.

"That's such an ugly word," I said. I put the guns back in their homes and opened up the duffel bag. The cans of smoke and tear gas popped and went — one, two, three —

into The Lobby. People began screaming. I wrapped the gas mask around my head as I kicked the empty duffel bag to the side, then pulled the guns back out and walked in to say hi.

Two unsuspecting patrons ran by choking and crying and headed out the door. Spiro tried doing the same and received his two bullets, plus the second one that I was unfortunately unable to pump into Perry before he hit the floor. Nicky K was gasping and reaching for his gun. I thought about what he said about Tony. He didn't make it. No one loyal to Ezra was going to make it.

I felt like an emotionless robot in a first-person shooter game. My old coworkers were the targets. No mob member was safe. Thinking about how they probably all knew the truth and laughed behind my back didn't even anger me anymore. I was in the killing zone where feelings didn't matter.

The Lobby was a hazy, smoky mass of confusion. Bar customers didn't know what the fuck was going on and probably didn't care—they just wanted to get the hell out. Ezra's guys were scrambling for guns, looking like they'd all been slapped upside the head with a tire iron. My view from behind the plastic bug-eyes of the gas mask wasn't exceptionally clear, but at least I wasn't tearing up or gagging. Plus I knew where the goons usually hung out when they were in The Lobby.

Someone made a noise behind me. I spun. Mia was feeling her way along the wall. She blinked red eyes at me and started crying. She put one hand out in front of her, I guess as a plea for her life. She really did think I was going to shoot her.

"Just do it then," she sputtered. "Finish it."

I stared at her for a moment, then turned away and moved further into The Lobby. Mia was going to have her wish. She would be free because they were all dead.

Another loser jumped me while Mia was distracting me. We tumbled to the floor and he ended up on top of me, trying to pry the guns out of my hands. I tried to knee him in the 'nads, but he was ready for it.

"Crazy bitch," he spat. "I knew we should have cancelled you years ago."

He squeezed a pressure point in my wrist, forcing me to relinquish the Taurus. I cursed and punched him with my now empty hand. He recovered quickly and started beating my other hand against the floor until the Glock went skittering off into the smoke.

The bastard pulled off the gas mask and backhanded me across the cheek. I spat in his face, which was a great distraction. As he reflexively reached up to his own face to wipe off the spit, I slid one of the knives out of my sleeve and planted it in his chest. He screamed, then gurgled, scooting back away from me. I pulled the Beretta out of my belt and fired. I pushed the body off me and stood up, scrambling to get the gas mask back on just as my red eyes were really beginning to tear up. I wiped the blood off my hands using part of the dead man's shirt and reclaimed my guns from the floor.

Glancing down at the body, I tried to remember the guy's name. After working with him for what I guessed was eight years or so, he was a nobody. A no-name goon. And now he was dead.

"I'm Adrian," I whispered. "And no one cancels me."

Turning, I looked over at the bartender. He cowered at eye level behind the bar. I was pretty sure he was not part of the racket. I lifted the Taurus and capped some punk who had popped up behind him trying to squeeze off a round. The bartender passed out.

I moved on toward the elevator, bar patrons crawling on the ground and gasping around me. They probably wouldn't find their way out with the smoke, but they'd be all right. I didn't care about them.

I heard the shot and felt the searing pain at the same time. I looked down at my upper right arm. A bullet had grazed me, taking off a two-inch strip of the leather of my jacket, the fabric of my shirt and a nice chunk of skin. Just ahead of me Jimmy Dean was wiping his eyes and waving his gun around. I lifted the Glock and put three bullets into Ezra's favorite sausage.

Turning to my left, I saw two more of Ezra's losers trying to make it out of The Lobby. They were running away, but my agenda of destruction knew no rules. I fired twice and they both fell. Joey Metruccio would probably send me a medal. Dropping the spent Taurus and Glock, I turned away from the bodies.

I hit the button for the elevator and waited patiently for the doors to open. They parted. I stepped in and turned. The Lobby looked like a war zone. Bodies and blood, smoke and tears. The doors closed and covered up the mess.

The gas mask came off and was deposited on the floor. I was going up. Dallas would be tougher to dispatch than those morons down there, and Gray too, if he was here. The elevator paused and I punched in my code for the upper floor. It still worked. I was lifted another level and the doors opened once again.

I immediately fired two shots down the long hallway in front of me out of my sole remaining firearm, the Beretta. Dallas scrambled around a corner and fired back. I hit the deck and crawled out of the elevator. There was a long bureau along one side of the hallway opposite the doors to Ezra's main office. I hid behind it and waited.

Dallas was silent. I knew he wasn't running. He loved a good gunfight even when it meant he might get killed. In this case, I was sure of it. I cautiously peered around the edge of the piece of furniture. He was there, at the end of the hall, but I couldn't see him.

"Come out, come out wherever you are," I called. "Dallas? Don't you want to play?"

"It's more fun down here, Adrian," he yelled back. "Why don't you come for a visit?"

I peeked up over the top of the bureau, lining up a shot so that it would nick the very edge of the wall and hopefully scare Dallas into making a mistake. The only

problem was that the hall stretched in front of me almost twenty feet. Long range for a handgun.

I squeezed the trigger gently. The bullet missed the edge of the wall by about six inches and lodged into the wall on the other side. I needed a better long range weapon than this. I thought of the grenade, but I had no idea where Tony, Jr. and Wyatt were being held. It wouldn't be much of a rescue if I blew them up.

I slid out of my jacket and stuffed it under the legs of the bureau so Dallas wouldn't be able to see my feet or rear end planted on the floor. Bullets started zinging down the hallway one after the other as Dallas stepped out of his hiding place and pumped the bureau full of lead. One of them fired past the edge of the desk and missed me by a few inches. Something had to be done.

I rolled out away from the protection of the bureau and flattened myself against the floor facing Dallas' direction. The gun outstretched in front of me, I squeezed off two rounds while Dallas was moving to compensate for my unexpected departure. One of them hit him in the knee. He went down, screaming and cursing. He lifted his gun and pointed it at me.

I rolled again, out of the line of fire but still not safe. The barrel of Dallas' gun followed me. I shifted to the side as he fired again. He'd used a lot of bullets. He had to be out soon. I rolled back and forth, side to side trying to avoid Dallas' angry sweep of bullets. Just when I thought he was pulling rounds out of the air, I felt a searing pain over my left temple on the side of my head.

I'm pretty sure I screamed, not so much from pain but from fear. I reached up and felt blood. I'd been grazed again. My lucky day. I pushed myself up against the wall and leaned against it. Dallas started laughing.

"So you're not untouchable after all," he said, raising his gun. I raised my own a second too late, but when Dallas pulled the trigger the gun did nothing but click. Mine did more than that. The bullet hit Dallas square in the center of his chest and he went down the rest of the way to the floor. I stood and walked over to him.

Looking down over him I thought of Mia's face the day in her salon. Dallas looked up at me and managed to sputter, "Don't..."

I didn't figure him for a begging coward.

"Did you know your wife was fucking Nicky K?"

"What?" he spat. "Lying bitch!"

I didn't know if the bitch he was referring to was me or Mia, but it didn't much matter at this point.

"I guess you shouldn't have been smacking her around," I said, and fired two rounds into Dallas' head.

I dropped the nearly empty magazine out of the Beretta and reloaded. I turned and headed for the doors of Ezra's office, fearing what I may find inside. With the rain of

gunfire in the hallway it wasn't like they didn't know I was here. I kicked open the doors and stepped inside.

I saw Wyatt at the far end of the room, tied to a chair. His face was bloody, but he looked okay otherwise. He looked up at me in horror, then opened his mouth and yelled, "Look out!"

Gray was ready and waiting for me. He slammed his body into mine and we toppled to the floor. The freshly loaded Beretta slid under a sofa by the wall. Gray punched me in the face. I saw stars for a moment and forcefully told myself that I was not going to pass out. While I was convincing myself that remaining conscious was a good idea, Gray grabbed my arm and removed the knife that was secured there. He tossed it off into a far corner and stood up. I pushed myself up off the floor and backed away from Gray.

"Okay, bitch," he said. "Let's see how tough you really are."

Gray took his gun out of his holster and tossed it over by the Beretta. I hated to point out to him that this was hardly a fair fight, a one hundred and thirty pound female versus a bulky two hundred and thirty pound man. Since he didn't seem to care for the fairness that firearms brought to the table, I didn't bother to say anything.

"What's wrong with you, motherfucker?" Wyatt yelled from across the room. "I'll fight you! You big pussy!"

"You'll get your turn," Gray said. He lazily slid off his jacket. I was glad he was taking his time. It was letting me recover from the punch to the face that he'd given me, my reward for making it this far. I made a mental note never to block with my face again.

Gray's hulking shape seemed to overshadow me, dwarfing my form in the room.

"How about if I take my turn first?" Wyatt called out. "Or are you too big a chicken shit? Won't fight a cop?"

Gray ignored him.

Gray was setting up like a boxer. He lifted his fists up to his face and started circling around me. I followed his movements carefully, trying to decide where his most vulnerable parts were. At his size, vulnerable parts were in short supply. I hated to admit it, but I might be fucked.

Gray swung. I ducked and punched him hard in the gut. I got a mild grunt out of him. He swung again and I backed away. He was like a bear. Big, bad and angry.

"Why do you hate me, Gray?" I asked while he was thinking about his next punch. "You've always hated me."

He swung. I ducked and tried to kick him in the gut. He grabbed my foot and shoved me backward. I landed on my ass, rolled and scrambled back up on my feet.

"You're a stupid cunt trying to do a man's job," Gray said.

Was that the word of the day? It was starting to piss me off.

"Well, at least I'm not a backstabbing mole."

Gray swung and I took a leap over a chair to avoid his fist. I took a few steps backward as he advanced on me.

"I wouldn't say that. Looks to me like you were sleeping with the enemy."

He had a point, but it was only because I was backstabbed first.

"Not for twenty years like you," I said.

I rolled right by Gray's legs, jumped up on the chair I'd dodged and jumped on his back. I wrapped my arms around his neck and squeezed as hard as I could. Gray gurgled and swirled. Wyatt yelled something encouraging to me. Then Gray started backing up toward the door. I winced.

Gray slammed my body into the door. That hurt. He took a few steps forward, then fell back into it again. I couldn't hold on anymore. I slid off him before he did it a third time. I got to my feet, hurting like hell. Gray was shaking his head, trying to refill his lungs with oxygen. I staggered a bit in recovery, then took the opportunity to deliver a strong inside smash kick to his head.

The inside of my foot made contact with the side of his head and Gray swore. He staggered a bit. I grabbed his head and smashed it into my knee. That brought back memories. I heard more shouts from Wyatt. I went in for a second knee to the head and Gray grabbed my leg, picked me up and threw me. I hit the floor and went rolling into a bookshelf. I thought it was going to topple over on me but instead it just swayed.

I lay there, staring at the deep mahogany beams on the ceiling, wondering if the was going to be the last thing I ever saw. Gray picked me up and slammed me front first into the wall next to the bookshelf. I turned my head to the side and managed to save my nose, but the side of my head took a nice clunk. I closed my eyes. This was not going well.

Gray grabbed my shirt collar from behind and pressed his body into mine.

"What do you say, bitch?" he sneered into my ear. "I'm just about done kicking your sorry ass. I could make you feel better."

Gray pressed his groin into my ass. I gagged. Why did they always have to make it sexual in the end? That really pissed me off.

"How about if I drag your bleeding ass over to other side of the room and ass fuck you in front of your boyfriend? Sound like a good time?"

Gray shoved his groin into my rear end again. I gritted my teeth. It was not over. Gray laughed in my ear. I really hoped Wyatt couldn't hear what he was saying. Gray let me go and moved to pull me away from the wall. I lifted my left elbow and spun.

The crack of his nose breaking as my elbow made contact with his face was as disgusting as it was satisfying. He took a step back in pain and shock. I pushed my forearm out and pointed my fingers, bent but stiff, directly into Gray's right eye. Gray screamed and cursed, holding his profusely bleeding nose and his eye, which I doubted had burst. The hit wasn't that good. I think people underrate nose breaking and eye poking. It is extremely effective.

Gray's eyes teared up and he blinked to see. His blood was pouring down his face like red Niagara Falls. I took a roll toward his legs, grabbed his leg as I rolled by and took him down to the floor. I jammed my knee into the pressure point in his solar plexus and grabbed his left arm. I straightened it and drew my other knee up from the floor as hard as I could into the joint. It popped. Gray screamed and passed out.

I was afraid to take a moment to catch my breath, but I had to. I rolled off Gray and lay on the floor.

"Adrian?"

I heard Wyatt's voice and wanted to respond. Every muscle in my body felt torn, every bone broken.

"Adrian, are you okay?"

I pushed myself to a sitting position. *Gun. Must get gun.* I drew myself to my feet and staggered over to the sofa where I retrieved the Beretta and Gray's Smith & Wesson. I staggered over to where Wyatt was very securely tied.

"Jesus, Adrian," Wyatt whispered.

I knelt before him and looked at his face. They'd roughed him up pretty good, but there was no permanent damage. I kissed him and lifted one of my pant legs to retrieve another knife. I cut the bonds and Wyatt stood up. I collapsed to the floor.

"Shit," he said, kneeling beside me. Wyatt helped me to sit up. He held my back until I could sit on my own.

"Are you okay?" I whispered.

"Compared to you, I'm having a great day."

I smiled.

"Adrian."

"Yeah."

"It's you, isn't it?"

"What?"

"It's you. You're Drake's assassin."

I breathed out long and slow. After a moment of silence I said, "*I was Ezra's assassin.*"

Wyatt was silent. I didn't want to look at him. I didn't want to see what was in his eyes or imagine what he may be thinking of me.

"I think he started having me trained the day he realized I didn't remember any of my past, probably thanks to the whack to the head Gray gave me the day my grandfather died. I didn't know who he was. I didn't know who Gray was. Ezra was all I had and he seemed to care about me, so I trusted him and I did whatever he said. *I did whatever he said.*"

"And you were so good at it."

Ezra's voice cut through the room like a flying dagger. I jumped away from Wyatt and staggered to my feet, Beretta in hand. Ezra had emerged from the bedroom, Tony, Jr. in tow. He was pointing a Glock at my head. I raised the Beretta and said, "Back off."

Ezra laughed. Wyatt moved into position to reach down and grab the Smith & Wesson that still lay on the floor.

"Adrian, I should have expected this from you. You've got too much heart to do this job."

"Yeah, I'm all soft and touchy-feely," I spat.

"That's okay. I'm sure Tony's son will be a fine replacement for you. It will only take him a few years to get into good shape."

"Let him go, Ezra. You're beat."

"It doesn't look that way from here."

Ezra swung the direction of the gun from me to Wyatt.

"No," I said. "Ezra, deal with me. I'm the one you have an issue with, not him. Don't shoot him."

"I'm not going to shoot him," Ezra said. "You are."

Ezra pulled Tony, Jr. in front of him and pointed the Glock at his head.

"Kill the cop and I'll spare the boy," he said.

Tony, Jr.'s eyes were wide but brave. He really did look like a good kid. He didn't deserve Ezra's brainwashing. He certainly didn't deserve Ezra's bullet.

I was devising a plan when I heard a loud hum over the top of the building. Ezra smiled.

"Hurry up," he said. "My ride is here."

I turned and looked at Wyatt. He was still. Very still. I lifted the Beretta and pointed it at him.

"I'm sorry," I said. I shifted the aim an inch to the right of his head and fired. The bullet grazed the side of his head. Wyatt fell to the ground, knocking his head hard against the wood floor. I was pretty sure he was unconscious, or at least wanted to be.

I turned back to Ezra.

"There. You got what you wanted. Give me the kid and we all walk out of here."

"Giving you the kid was never the arrangement."

Ezra lifted the Glock away from Tony, Jr.'s head and raised it toward me. My Beretta was quick. I turned and fired, hitting Ezra in the shoulder. He cursed and dropped the gun. He pushed the boy to the floor and ran from the room. I chased him through the bathroom door.

Ezra was slipping through a hidden door in the shower when I got into the bathroom. I struggled with him to open it so I could slip through. He let go abruptly, sending me into the wall. I slipped and nailed my head on the edge of the porcelain bathtub. This is why falls in the shower are so dangerous.

A gray cloud overcame my vision. I inhaled and exhaled deeply. I couldn't pass out, not now when I was so close. I stood up, my brain pounding inside my skull. I opened the secret door and started climbing the ladder within. I reached the top of the ladder and pushed up the covering. The orange glow of the Atlanta night sky greeted me.

I crawled out of the chimney-like opening in enough time to see Ezra's helicopter taking off into the night. He half-heartedly leaned out and fired a few shots at me. I curled into a ball and hid behind the chimney bricks of the passageway. In ten seconds, Ezra was gone. I leaned against the bricks. I didn't even have the energy to curse.

I climbed back down the ladder, wanting to cry. I was so close. The bathroom greeted me and let me pass safely. No more bumps to the head.

I walked into Ezra's office feeling like I'd been through World War IV. Wyatt had cuffed Gray, who was now barely conscious and leaning against the end of the sofa. Tony's son was sitting in the chair where Wyatt had been tied up. Wyatt was on one knee talking to him. When he heard me enter the room he turned and stood.

"He's gone," I said. "Ezra escaped. Now I'm going to prison and I'll never have another chance."

Wyatt looked at me long and hard.

"Take him," he said.

"What?" I asked, shaking my pounding head in confusion.

"Take the boy. No one can protect him like you can. If you run now, and run fast, you can get out of here before everyone shows up. I'll just tell them you shot me."

"I did, sort of."

"So it's not even a lie."

We could hear sirens approaching the Office.

"Go now."

Tony, Jr. slid off the chair and walked over to me. He looked up at me and said, "Those men killed my mom and daddy."

I looked down at his big brown eyes, tears brimming in them, and said, "They killed my mom and daddy too."

Tony, Jr. took a hold of my hand, the one that wasn't holding a gun.

"Wait," I said. "We're going to need something before we leave."

Sirens and shouts were audible from below us.

"Make it fast, Adrian," Wyatt said.

I dropped the boy's hand and went over to a locked cabinet behind Ezra's desk. I shot off the lock and opened it. Inside was the bloated duffel bag I'd seen Ezra shove in days before. Opening it, I saw that it was filled with one hundred dollar bills.

"It's not even counterfeit," I said. I slung the bag over my shoulder and went back for Tony. "We're going out the back way, kid."

I took a long look back at Wyatt. He stared back at me, the cat and the mouse, pained to be torn apart. I turned away and ran with Tony out of the room. We dashed down the hall and around the corner. The fire escape was in one of these rooms. I located it and put Tony and the bag on it, then climbed out of the window myself.

"Tony," I said, "I need you listen and hold on tight. Can you do that?"

He nodded. I turned around and he crawled up on my back, the bag of money slung around his torso. I climbed down the first flight of stairs, then pulled the sliding ladder down. It creaked and groaned as it slid, releasing each section of ladder as it went. Ezra was paranoid. He didn't want the fire escape to have access to any other floor but his — people could crawl up it and get to his office.

I pulled off the woven wrist straps that had held the knives and squeezed them in between the metal and my hands on the ladder.

"Hold on very, very tight now," I said. Tony squeezed his arms around my neck. I took my feet off the rungs and gripped the soles of my boots to the metal. I relaxed a bit and we began sliding down the ladder. Faster and faster we fell as we slid down nine stories. I tightened up toward the end just enough to slow us down. It was a five foot drop to the ground.

We scattered as we hit the pavement below. I landed on my side. It hurt, but I was okay. Tony had landed mostly on the duffel bag. Smart. Money was softer than concrete.

"Let's go," I said. I grabbed Tony's hand in one of my hands and the duffel bag in the other. We ran off into the Atlanta night with nothing but each other and a bag full of cash.

* * * * *

For enough money, people don't care how much blood you have on you, how many bruises your skin shows or what jagged holes you have in your clothes. For a fifty dollar tip, the cab driver dropped us off at a no-name motel and forgot about us. For an extra hundred, the night clerk gave us a room, no questions asked. For two hundred, he gave me some of his girlfriend's clothes.

Maybe he thought I was an abused wife fleeing with my child. Maybe he didn't care. All I knew was that dingy little shower saved my life that night. I emerged from the bathroom wrapped up in the motel's aging towel and found Tony sound asleep on the bed, the Cartoon Network playing softly on the television. I stared at him. He wasn't such a bad kid. Maybe there was motherhood in my future after all.

I got dressed in the jeans and T-shirt that were one size too big but weren't going to fall off. I locked Tony in the room and walked down to a gas station where I bought some lighter fluid, some snack foods and sodas. I left the food back in the room and put my old clothes into the convenience store bag.

Three blocks away I found an abandoned gas station. Finding no junkies or homeless people behind it to bear witness to my activities, I poured the lighter fluid in and around the bag. I struck a match from a book of matches I'd picked up from the motel lobby. The orange flame licked up into the air, begging for a little mayhem. I dropped it into the bag and it erupted into flames. I dumped some more lighter fluid on it, then threw the empty bottle into the fire.

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning Tony and I bought a cute little Honda for two thousand dollars in cash. We had breakfast at a fast food joint and he told me that he liked baseball and someday wanted to build skyscrapers. Tony would be okay. I didn't know if he would be staying with me forever, but I would do whatever I could to make his dreams come true.

It was a long drive to Mexico. We were lucky enough to find a border patrol agent who was a compulsive gambler and hard up for cash. Maybe God was looking out for Tony. I had a feeling that little encounter wasn't due to me cashing in any favors on my own.

I rented a house in a small town in southwestern Mexico for Tony and me. The Mexicans didn't seem to care much about us. We bought their goods and ate in their restaurants. I guess we were good for the economy. They didn't even mind our American dollars. Five months after we moved into the house, we celebrated Tony's eleventh birthday on the beach. It was a time of recovery for both of us. A piece of heaven after a lifetime of hell.

I often thought about Wyatt, about what happened after we split. Was he back on the streets, fighting crime? Was he tracking Ezra, or had that been turned over to the feds? Did he get into trouble for losing me? Did he care?

After seven months had passed since the shootout at the Office. I bought a postcard from a little shop in the town and addressed it to Wyatt. It was another two months before I mailed it with no message. Just his name and address and a little ocean scene on the front.

When I made the phone call it was closing in on one year since Tony and I took up residency in Mexico. My heart was pounding in my ears as I listened to the phone ring on the other end of the line. What if he didn't answer? What if he did?

"Hello?"

I opened my mouth, throat stuck.

"Hello?"

He was going to hang up. *Speak, dammit*, I told myself.

"Wyatt."

It was his turn to be silent. I heard him breathing so he hadn't passed out.

"Adrian?" he whispered.

"Yes, Wyatt, it's me."

"I got your postcard. It looks beautiful."

"It is. Tony is really doing well."

"I'm glad to hear that. And you? How are you doing?"

"I'm...good. I feel like a cancer survivor or something. How are...things there?"

"Well," Wyatt said after a heavy sigh, "I got suspended for three months."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry."

"It didn't help that my partner told our superior about finding you in my bed."

"He didn't! Your partner ratted on you?"

"Yeah, prick was just looking for a promotion anyway. So after that they put me back in a uniform, back in a marked car. Been doing that ever since."

"Oh Wyatt. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. They may be able to take me out of the detective role, but they can't take the detective out of me. I've been keeping up with Drake spottings."

I stopped short, surprised.

"Really. What have you found out?"

"It appears that he is in Rio. I was deciding how to go about finding you to tell you. That is, if you're still interested in making him pay for ruining your life. Hell, he's ruined mine now too. I'm ready to kill the son of a bitch."

"Rio," I whispered. "I can get there. Any idea where?"

"My contact tells me he's got some sort of a chateau outside the city. I'm willing to bet we wouldn't have to pump too hard to find out exactly where that is."

"Can you find out?"

"Call me back in a week. I'll have directions for you."

"Okay. Wyatt?"

"Yes."

I sucked in a breath of bravery.

"I miss you."

There was a long pause. I almost thought he'd hung up on me.

"I miss you too," Wyatt said softly, and he hung up.

I sat, listening to the dead dial tone until it started beeping fast and loud in my ear. I hung up. A lead on Ezra and Wyatt missed me. It was a red letter day for me.

I got back to the house and found Tony playing some sort of checker game with Rosalita. I sat down with them and learned how to play the game. Rosalita was about forty years old, a very friendly woman with no husband and no children. I was paying her an outrageous salary to teach Tony and me Spanish, but she hung around a lot and played with him long after lesson time was over.

Rosalita left a little while later and Tony and I were trying our hand at playing the game without her. I took my turn. As Tony was studying the board for his next move I said, "Tony, I might be taking a little trip next week."

"A trip?" he said, looking up at me, concerned.

"It will only be a day or so. I'll ask Rosalita to stay with you and keep you company while I'm gone."

"Where are you going?"

"To Brazil."

"Is he there?"

I studied Tony. We didn't talk much about Ezra or the Office. I think we both just wanted to forget. Even saying his name was like reopening a wound.

"Who him?"

"The bad man."

I took a deep breath. I wasn't going to lie to him. No need, after all he'd seen and all he knew.

"Yes, Tony. He's there."

"Are you going to kill him?"

"Yes," I said, looking down at the game board and brushing away a piece of lint that had fallen on it.

"Good," Tony said. "I keep having bad dreams about him. When he's dead the bad dreams will go away."

"That's right," I said. "They will."

Tony and I finished our game without discussing it anymore.

Over the months we'd been in Mexico, my paranoia had prompted me to obtain a variety of large and small arms to keep in the house. I didn't have to worry much about arming myself for Rio. It only took one bullet, if placed in the right spot. When I called Wyatt back the following week, I even had arranged for airborne transportation.

"Do you have the directions?" I asked Wyatt.

"I do. Before I give them to you, tell me when you're leaving."

"Two days from now. I've got the owner of a small plane giving me a lift. He goes to and from Rio pretty often and his next trip is Thursday so I'm hitching a ride for a small fee."

A small fee that would pay his fuel expenses for two months.

"Okay."

Wyatt spelled out directions to Ezra's new home. I was pleased that I'd forced him out of the States. I just hoped he hadn't jumped ship from Rio before I got there.

"Adrian."

"Yes, Wyatt?"

"Be careful. He's got new friends down there with big connections. Big guns. You can't go in blazing like you did in Atlanta, or you will die."

"I know. I can't take any unnecessary chances. Not with Tony needing me."

"How is he?"

"He misses baseball. But he's just about fluent in Spanish. Further ahead than I am."

"He's a smart kid."

"Yes, he is. Thank you, Wyatt."

"Hey, I have an interest in seeing this son of a bitch go down too."

"I'll be in touch."

"I hope so."

I gave Rosalita three thousand dollars to take care of Tony. She would have done it for free, but honestly I was worried. If I didn't come back, I wanted to make sure she would be okay. I hid the rest of the cash and showed Tony where it was, then swore him to secrecy. He was good at keeping secrets. As I was heading out the door to catch my plane, he came running over to me.

I knelt down and gave him a big hug.

"It'll be okay, sweetie," I said.

"I know," he whispered. "But I'll miss you."

"I'll be back before you know it."

I kissed him on the forehead and was off into the Mexican afternoon heat to hitch a ride on a cargo prop plane to Rio. I didn't ask what the cargo was.

I carried a single bag with me on the trip. Jorge, the pilot, asked no questions and gave me a mere *gracias* when we landed and I gave him an extra hundred bucks. He reminded me that he would be leaving the next evening at six o'clock, with or without me. I acknowledged his schedule and was off in the Rio night to follow Wyatt's directions.

There were people partying all around me. I decided that Rio would be a nice place to visit if I wasn't there to kill someone. I made my way through the crowds to a little place that Jorge had mentioned to me where I could rent a car.

When you have no papers, no passport and no insurance, renting a car is expensive. It wasn't so much the value of the car but how much the rental owner needed to pay off the police if they were to come asking questions. I got a low-end, dilapidated European-made car that I couldn't identify. The rust, however, gave it somewhat of a camouflaged look, so I figured it would be okay.

I followed Wyatt's directions carefully and just as he said, a brilliant white chateau rose out of the Brazilian countryside three miles outside town. I parked the car a mile away and hoped it didn't get stolen.

There weren't many cars driving along the dusty road. This was good in that I didn't get spotted. It was bad because low traffic means no lights. I was stumbling around in the dark with only the moonlight to guide me. I kept looking up at the glowing lights of the chateau, a beacon in the sea of darkness.

I reached the property and it was thankfully much less compound-like than I expected. There were a few guards with guns milling around, but no barbed wire fences or vicious pit bulls waiting to kill me. I was crouched behind a row of hedges watching the rotation of the guards when I heard a twig snap behind me.

I rolled onto my back and pointed my gun up over my body. I saw nothing. I sat up slowly, panning the gun around the area behind me. Finally I heard, "Don't shoot," whispered from behind a bush about five yards away.

"Who's there?" I whispered fiercely.

"Adrian, it's me, Wyatt."

"What!"

I got onto my hands and knees and peered into the blackness. Wyatt emerged from the bush, his dark skin and black clothing completely hiding him. Only when he got closer to me could I see the whites of his eyes. I sat, stunned.

"Wha-what are you doing here?" I stammered.

"You didn't think I was going to let you have all the fun, did you?" Wyatt said with a smile.

"I can't believe you're here."

"Believe it," he said and leaned in toward me. Our lips met in a searing kiss that I'd waited almost a year to receive. Wyatt's touch had not lost any of its gentle flavor. I leaned into him. He held onto me and kissed me again.

"You still care for me, knowing what I am?" I asked.

"I know exactly what you are. You're a tough, persistent woman who risked her life for a kid who isn't hers and a cop who would have put her in jail. That's hard to come by."

I smiled as Wyatt kissed me again.

"And yeah," he said, "I do kind of like you."

I laughed softly and shook my head. We crouched behind the hedge and stared at the house.

When the guards moved to change shifts, we scampered across the lawn and hid behind the garage. The two new guards were busy smoking and shooting the shit in Portuguese. They were distracting each other when Wyatt and I ran across the five or so yards to the rear of the house.

"I'm sure there's an alarm system on the house," I whispered. "I'm familiar with the kind of stuff Ezra uses, so let me try disarming it."

"Good luck," Wyatt said.

I stole up to the back porch while Wyatt kept watch. I carefully unlatched the screen door. Just as I thought, there was a familiar looking keypad. However, there were no screws holding it in, no way to pry off the cover and tamper with it without setting off the alarm. I would have to guess Ezra's code.

He could have used his phone number. He could have used his lucky lotto numbers for all I knew. I stared at the keypad. I punched in the only number I could think of. My birth date – or at least the date I'd been led to believe was my birth date.

I must have used up all my good luck at the Mexican border. The code was wrong. I heard a high-pitched whining sound coming from the keypad and ducked just before the charge went off, blasting right over where my head would have been. I heard Wyatt curse and he came running up to me.

A siren started going off over the property. The guards started screaming at each other in Portuguese. We were out of time. Wyatt and I looked at each other. I fired at the door, blowing the locking mechanism off. With two hard kicks Wyatt kicked in the door and we entered the kitchen.

A guard came running into the kitchen toward us. Wyatt picked up a butcher knife and threw it at him. The knife caught him square in the eyeball. He didn't even scream before he hit the floor, dead. I looked at Wyatt.

"You ain't the only one that knows some shit," he said with a shrug. I shook off my incredulous look and we ran through the kitchen.

"He should be upstairs," I said, dashing up the flight of stairs. The pulsating, deafening sound of full auto machine gun fire pounded in my ears, and the spray of bullets made a line on the staircase after me. I heard two shots and the machine gun fire stopped. I was on a landing connecting two parts of the staircase. I saw Wyatt picking up the gun from the dead guard. He looked up at me with a nod. He was already two ahead of me in body count. Something was wrong with that.

I reached the top of the stairs with Wyatt quickly on my heels. We began kicking in doors on each side of the hallway. Women started screaming and a line of them started running down the stairs. Someone fired a shot. Wyatt returned fire and I heard a slump of a body. Three to nothing. Shit.

I stood in front of a set of double doors. There was a keypad on it. I nodded to Wyatt. This was it.

A thunder of footsteps began coming into the house from the main entrance. The cavalry had arrived. Wyatt looked at me and said, "Go. I'll take care of them, you get Drake."

I fired at the door and blew the lock off. I kicked it in and entered the room just as Wyatt began popping rounds off the machine gun at the incoming guards.

Anticipating immediate fire, I hit the floor the moment I entered the room. I rolled away from the door and got to my feet, gun in front, scanning the room. I heard a sound from the bathroom. Oh, hell no. Not this time.

I kicked in the door. Ezra turned to me and raised a gun. I slapped his hand, sending the pistol skittering into the bathtub. I punched him hard, then grabbed him around the neck with one arm and dragged him out of the bathroom.

"Adrian!" Wyatt screamed. "Hurry! I'm fucking low on ammo."

"You're going to call off the guards," I said to Ezra.

"Go to hell. I should have killed you in Atlanta."

"But you didn't. Now you're going to get us out of here alive."

I pulled Ezra out of the room and into the hallway, holding him in front of me, my gun to his head. The guards immediately stopped firing when they saw him. Wyatt came out of the bedroom he'd been using for cover and put his back to my back. We moved slowly down the hall, then down the staircase. The guards that remained alive parted for us, Wyatt still wielding his stolen machine gun. None of them moved.

I used Ezra as a human shield all the way out of the house. A crowd of guards watched diligently, waiting for their opportunity to blow our heads off without killing Ezra.

"Where's your car?" I asked him.

"Fuck you."

I squeezed his neck and shot him in the foot. Ezra's howl permeated the night like a coyote's pathetic cry. I spotted one of the guard's Jeeps toward the end of the driveway. I put the gun back to his head and said, "Never mind. We'll take this one."

Wyatt and I hauled Ezra, bitching and crying and bleeding toward the Jeep.

"We're going to have to move fast," Wyatt said. "Once we get him in here, they're not going to give us much time."

I shoved Ezra into the passenger's seat and jumped over him to the driver's side. Luckily the keys were in it. No hotwiring required. I cranked the engine while Wyatt hopped into the back. As we sped off, the guards started screaming again and heading for other vehicles. Wyatt reached into his jacket, pulled something out and threw it at the pursuing guards.

The explosion nearly sent the Jeep off the road.

"Jesus, Wyatt!" I screamed. "Where the hell did you get that?"

"Cracker Jack prize," he said, like he blew people up all the time.

We tore off down the road. I heard at least two trucks tailing us.

"You'll never make it," Ezra sneered. "These men will die for me. They think I'm God."

"Well, you're half right," I said, veering the Jeep to the right onto another dirt road.

"Shit, here they come," Wyatt yelled from the back. Moments later he started firing again, this time in short spurts to save ammo.

"You have any more surprises back there?" I yelled.

"I'm looking!"

The ting, ting, ting sound of bullets gracing the back of our Jeep sent us all ducking, Wyatt swearing and my foot pressing harder on the accelerator. Moments later there was another explosion. Wyatt had located another Cracker Jack prize.

"One left!" he yelled.

"One truck or one guard?"

There was a loud pop and the Jeep started shaking like we'd triggered a fault line. We were moving fast and the punctured tire was making steering next to impossible. I took my foot off the gas pedal and let it slow down.

"We have problems here!" I yelled to Wyatt.

"No shit!"

There was another explosion, only this time it happened next to our Jeep. The truck tipped and skidded on the passenger's side. All I saw of Wyatt was him leaping out of the back and into some brush at the side of the road. Ezra and I were holding on to the steering wheel trying not to fall out and get crushed.

The Jeep ground to a halt in the middle of the road. I fell out and landed next to Ezra, who was crawling out of his seat. I punched him hard in the ear.

"God, huh? Well it looks like they just tried to kill you."

"Idiot," he spat, rubbing his ear. I hit him again and he slumped against the truck. I started pawing through the stuff that had fallen out of the back of the Jeep. I could hear the guards coming. Their truck had come to a stop and they were getting out. Three, maybe four of them. I checked the clip in my pistol. I had three, maybe four rounds. I didn't like these odds, especially since I didn't know where Wyatt was and one of those guys probably had a machine gun.

I cautiously stuck my head around the end of the truck. Four. All walking slowly toward the truck. I spotted the one with the full auto. Then I spotted the other one. Shit.

The guards split directions, two coming around one side of the Jeep and two around the other side. One machine gun on each side. I looked at Ezra. I yanked his bathrobe off him and pulled it on. There's no way they would mistake me for him, but it might make them pause long enough to take a few of them out. If only I had another gun.

Three cracks broke the silence of the night. I heard one body hit the ground. The three remaining guards started yelling at each other. They were running around to my side of the Jeep for cover. I heard two more pops and another crumpled body hit the road.

One guard was running around either side of the Jeep. I stood up. They rounded the corners at the same time. They skidding to a halt when they saw me, lowered their weapons, then started shouting and raising them. I hit the ground as they started firing. One of them went down, a victim of his own fellow guard's rounds.

I flipped my legs around, knocking the remaining guard off his feet. I slid out of the robe and threw it on Ezra, then kicked the gun away from the guard. I followed it up with a quick kick to his head.

The guard stood up. I threw a high kick to the side of his head, spun and kicked straight out behind me, nailing him straight in the stomach. He landed on his ass a few

feet away, said something that sounded unpleasant in Portuguese, then started reaching for something behind him.

The shot came from nowhere. It zinged past me and nailed the guard in the head. I turned to see Wyatt lowering his gun, a sidearm pilfered from one of the downed guards. We met halfway and he took me around the waist with his free hand. Our eyes met for a brief moment, the moonlight suddenly much brighter. He kissed me, an oddly gentle, sensuous kiss for someone who'd racked up a body count like he had in a single night.

"Touching."

Ezra coughed and threw the robe off. He sat in his pajamas, propped up against the overturned Jeep, staring at us.

"You're finished, Ezra," I said.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. "You and your cop friend going to take me in? Extradite me back to the U.S.? I'll be out in two days."

I turned and looked at Wyatt, his arm still wrapped around me.

"He thinks we're here on official business," I said to him.

"Amazing," Wyatt said, shaking his head.

I stepped away from Wyatt and picked up my gun.

"Poor Ezra," I said, looking down at him. His expression darkened. Pity was not an emotion he was used to having directed at him. "We're not here to arrest you."

Ezra's demeanor changed again as he realized I was telling the truth. It went from confusion to shock to fear. He knew his name was written all over one of my bullets, and he knew just how accurate my bullets were.

"Adrian," he said. "Please, listen to me. I didn't have a choice. Your parents...they betrayed us. Your mother left us to marry a guy who went to work for the enemy, for Christ's sake..."

"Now why would they do a thing like that? Maybe they found out just what an evil bastard you are?"

"I don't know, I don't know! I'm telling you, my hands were tied! I had no choice!"

"You had no choice but to leave an eight-year-old girl standing on her grandfather's doorstep, holding her own father's severed head. Damn, that's gotta be rough."

Ezra started a few sentences and stopped, sputtering. Wyatt moved behind me, both of us staring down at the fallen mob king.

"Even if you did have no choice but to kill my father, as you say," I continued, "what did you gain from murdering my mother?"

"She...she started it all. She was the cause of it!"

"Go ahead, Ezra," I said, my eyes narrowing. "Tell me lies."

Ezra swiftly pulled his hand out from under the robe, holding one of the fallen guard's guns. He lifted it. I raised my weapon and fired a single shot that went straight

through Ezra's left eye. His arm dropped. The gun clattered to the ground. His mouth gaped open in a dead scream that would never be heard.

I stared at him for a moment, the constant in my life for the last twenty years lying dead at my feet. I stuck the gun in the front of my pants and turned to Wyatt. The Brazilian night around us was silent. We stared at each other.

"It's over," I said. "Thank you."

Wyatt pulled me into him and kissed me long and deep. He put his soft hands on my face and said, "You're a hard one to forget. I couldn't stay away."

"I can't believe you killed all these people tonight."

"Well, we do what needs to be done, right? Even when it's not pretty. Even when we hate it."

"No, I mean, I can't believe you killed all those people and I only got one. Something is wrong with that."

Wyatt laughed, shaking his head.

"You got the one that counted."

I looked back at Ezra's body. He was right...the one bullet that made all the difference lay firmly embedded in Ezra's brain.

"Let's go," I said. "I could use a drink."

"Where's your car?"

"I don't know. Where are we?"

"Don't you have the map?"

I laughed and said, "Well, where's your car? How did you get here anyway?"

"I parachuted in."

"Another Cracker Jack prize?"

"So," Wyatt said, changing the subject, "I hear you have a cute little place in Mexico and it just so happens that I'm out of a job and looking for a place to stay."

"Is that so?" I said with a smile. "It sounds like we have some things to discuss."

Wyatt wrapped his arm around my waist and we turned away from the mess of destroyed Jeeps. We started walking down the dirt road toward something, exactly what I didn't know. I knew my desire to be part of the normal world was a fantasy that would never be realized, but for the first time in my life I experienced an emotion that brought me peace. Hope.

About the Author

Jessica Shin finds writing fiction much more stimulating than her previous writing forte, corporate communications. She loves creating sexual tension with a forbidden romance and digging beyond the surface to find new and fresh personalities to make that tension combust. When not writing or dreaming up her next steamy, adventurous plot, Jessica can be found practicing her other passion—martial arts. Jessica currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband and three cats.

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