



INCOGNITO:

Arresting Victoria

By

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Dedication

Dedicated to Dena Walton, the winner of the Name That Incognito Character Contest. We fell in love with Drake Kavanaugh the second we saw the name.

Also, we must take this opportunity to thank all our wonderful readers who have made the Incognito series such a success.

Chapter One

Drake Kavanaugh headed straight for the bar when he first entered the exclusive fetish club, Incognito. It wasn't often that he got a night off, so he sure as hell wasn't going to pass up a beer or two tonight. He was here to meet with Detective Paul Baxter, but that didn't count as business, not if they were meeting here. And who knew? Maybe, he thought as he glanced around at the various club patrons, just maybe he might wrap up his talk with Paul quick enough to sneak in a half hour or so for some more enjoyable pursuits.

"Hey, Drake," Tyrone said from behind the polished mahogany bar. "What'll it be?"

"Bottle of Bud." He cocked his head toward the other end of the bar. "And that busty redhead down there."

Tyrone's laugh was boisterous as he twisted the cap off the longneck. "Here's the brew, but I ain't playin' pimp to an ex-detective. Sorry, man."

"Aw, I'm outta my jurisdiction. Do a guy a favor," he said with a grin, then winked. He dropped a five on the bar and waved it away, letting the burly bartender know he could keep the change. "You seen Paul Baxter around?"

Tyrone nodded. "Sure have. Over there."

Drake turned to see where Tyrone meant, and Paul raised his hand. "Thanks, Ty," he said, taking his cold longneck with him.

He made his way across the main floor of the club. It wasn't very

busy, since it was before five in the evening and a weekday, but it wasn't empty either. The air was filled with the unmistakable scents of sex and lemon cleaner...not unpleasant. A few couples sat here and there, mostly just enjoying a happy hour cocktail or two. It seldom got exciting until later at night. Then it was no holds barred, and anything Drake might fantasize could become reality. Damned if he didn't wish he had the time to hang out here more often. He'd paid the ungodly fee for membership to the private club but only managed to make it in once or twice a month.

"Hey," he said when he pulled out a chair next to Paul, who sat alone at a small, round table.

Paul clasped his hand in greeting. "Thanks for coming."

Drake turned the chair to face the hall, still unable to stand having his back to the crowd after all of the years spent as an undercover cop. Then he sprawled into it, crossing his ankles and taking a swig of his beer. "No problem. Besides, your message got my curiosity up." He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper that was half serious, half amused. "Why the clandestine meeting in a top secret location?"

Paul flashed a brief smile and took a drink from his own glass. Drake wondered briefly whether his friend's soda was spiked with a touch of liquor or not. Then Paul set the glass aside. "I need some help."

Drake cocked an eyebrow and cast him a glance. "Oh?"

"Mmm hmm. I'm on this case, and it's a real bitch because we can't get any of our guys on the inside."

Drake fiddled with the label on his beer, his question stone cold serious this time. "And you want me on the inside?"

"I'd like you to consider trying, yes."

"Why can't you get your own guys in?"

"Because, as you know, the law limits how far an officer can go. There are lines we can't cross and still hope to make a case that'll hold up in court. Whereas, a P.I. has more...latitude...shall we say, to make things convincing."

When Paul paused, Drake said, "I'm listening."

"We could do a raid, I suppose, if we could get a judge to sign off on a warrant, but if we were to move in right away..." He shook his head.

"No, we need to find the ring leader, the men responsible for this whole operation, not arrest some poor women who'll just be deported and replaced by others."

Drake sat up and leaned his elbow on the table. "Okay, you've definitely pricked my curiosity. What are we talking about here?"

"Sex slave trade."

"Whoa."

Paul nodded and twirled his glass between his hands. His somber expression told Drake how hard this case was for him.

"I suppose the guys doing the trading aren't the 'safe, sane, and consensual' type."

Paul shook his head. "There's nothing consensual about this operation." He scanned the club, licked his lips, and then met Drake's eyes. "A month ago, a body was discovered on the beach about fifteen miles from here. Young girl, around sixteen or so." He rubbed his forehead with his fingertips, and Drake could see how exhausted his friend was. "It was bad, man. Real bad. Beaten, cut, evidence of... Well, it was one of the most horrific things I've ever seen, and I've seen a hell of a lot in my years."

Drake nodded. "Yeah." He'd seen some pretty sick shit while on the force back in Chicago—the things mankind would do for pennies or no reason at all. He sighed and took another swig of beer.

"A week later, we got a call from the hospital. Another girl, young, pretty, cut and bruised and...mangled...a lot like the first. But this one was alive. Of course, our first thought was that a serial attacker was on the loose and trolling for victims along the shoreline. A couple had found this victim on another beach and called for an ambulance."

"Okay, I'm following so far," Drake said, then took another swallow of his beer, not enjoying it as much as he'd hoped. He'd helped bust a human trafficking sex ring in Chicago about six years earlier. It wasn't pretty. In fact, it was downright nasty. Girls from adolescent to barely legal forced to use their bodies to make money for their pimps—their owners.

"The girl in the hospital—gorgeous Cuban girl of

seventeen—actually talked. She was scared to death of us, but more fearful of her captors. She told us about her parents buying her transport into the U.S. She was supposed to work off the rest of the money by waiting tables. They told her father that in two years, she'd have her green card and would be free to live the great American life."

Yeah, same song, second verse, Drake thought. The predators preyed on families in third-world countries or anywhere they could find impoverished neighborhoods where families had trouble feeding all of the mouths in their ramshackle hovels. They always promised opportunities in the big city, an education, a chance to get rich, achieve the American dream—whatever it took.

Paul cleared his throat then downed the rest of his drink. "All of her real paperwork, identification, birth certificate—you name it—had been collected by a man in her village who made these promises to her father. After that, she was flown to another country and eventually brought into the States with a fake identity. She thought she could go to school while she worked in some diner, but when she got here, she was brought to..." He shrugged. "It was a brothel, plain and simple, disguised as a bar."

Drake nodded. "Many of them are." Massage parlors, pool halls, pubs, or gentlemen's clubs. The sign out front mattered little, so long as men with money could pair up with working girls behind closed doors and away from prying eyes.

"Yeah." Paul sighed and folded his hands together on top of the table. "There were other girls there. They were expected to be *friendly* to the bar patrons. Anything was allowed so long as the patron kept buying drinks. But she couldn't tell us where. She never saw the outside of the place. Not until a man, one who worked there, offered to take her away, help her *escape*."

"A test," Drake suspected right off the bat.

"We think so. When she agreed, he took her to the beach and...left her there to die."

"Fuck."

"Yep. That about sums it up. She died a few weeks later from

complications from surgery. One clue she gave us, though, was that it wasn't a long drive from the bar to the beach. She estimated five, maybe ten minutes. But fuck, everything here is near the beach. We've got it narrowed down, we think, to three places in Little Mexico."

There was no mistaking Paul's frustration. Drake sighed. "And your boys can't get in there?"

"Like I said, if we send them in to check things out, they pretty much have to lay out cash and buy a girl, or we won't learn anything. Just by doing that, they're breaking the law, and we can't have that. But if we have an anonymous informant..."

Drake got it. He could lay out cash and buy time with a girl without any departmental politics involved. He could do some digging from the inside which, for a cop, would be impossible, because as soon as he tried to loiter or refused their special services in one of those places, he would be marked as the law, and nothing illegal happened. Money must exchange hands, and illegal activity must go on and be witnessed for there to be anything for the cops to build a case around.

"Okay. So, you want me to check these three places out... Do a little digging... See if I can purchase a girl of my own and find out who's running the show?"

"That about sums it up. Because of the location of these places in Little Mexico, there's no telling if the women—girls—there are of legal age or not, and we don't know if they're working there of their own free will. And because Little Mexico is run like a police state by Hugo Sanchez, the unofficial mayor, and he's always cooperated with us in the past, there's been no bad blood. But if we go in there waving badges and arresting all these women—who would be too scared to tell us anything, anyway—we'll fuck ourselves. We need to know who to go after before we do it. Try to take out the ringleader who's footing the bill to get these girls here—and profiting from them being here. And then pray Sanchez will take our side."

"And if he's in on it? What if he's the money behind it?"

"We'll only know that when we get someone on the inside."

Drake leaned back in his chair and took another swallow of beer.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Paul asked, sounding surprised.

“I was undercover on a similar trafficking ring in Chicago. It was Russian girls there, but I’m sure these fuckers work about the same everywhere. Same story as you told, promising these girls a bright future in America when what they get is stuck in these places, forced to fuck for pay, which they forfeit to their handlers to pay off some obscene, manufactured debt. A few escape, but most die, either by their own hands or some john with a sick twist to his kink. So yeah, if you need me, I’m there. You tell me where and when and exactly what you want.”

Paul sighed in what looked like relief. “I told my boss I was going to talk to you, and he’s all for it. You’ll be an anonymous paid informant for now, I’ll be your one and only contact within the force, but when it goes down, you’ll probably need to testify, which means a big target on your forehead if we don’t get them all.”

Drake absently rubbed the old scar on his chest. Wouldn’t be the first time he walked around with a big, bold bull’s-eye on his back. “I’ve been taking money from people wanting to know if their spouses were cheating on them for the last few years and installing security systems. Maybe some excitement is what I need.”

Paul chuckled. “You miss it, don’t you?”

With a one-shoulder shrug, Drake finished off his beer. “Yes and no.” He missed the adrenaline rush of breaking a case, getting the bad guy—the sense of accomplishment he felt when the drug dealer or pimp or crime boss sat behind bars. But he didn’t miss the fear of being undercover, of always looking over his shoulder, wondering who was ready to slit his throat at any moment.

“I appreciate the help, whatever you’re willing to give me.”

Drake smiled and slapped him on the shoulder. “I’m here for ya.” He yawned and slouched in his chair again. He’d been up most of the night staking out a motel, gathering dirt on a client’s cheating husband. After that, he spent the morning testing the new security system he contracted to be installed at an apartment complex. He was beat.

And all the talk of illegal human trafficking had put a damper on

his appetite for sex. As much as he'd like to put his membership to better use at Incognito, he decided he'd have to take a rain check on sticking around to leash a stray sub for a quickie.

He folded his hands over his middle and scanned the room. Then his heart almost jumped out of his chest when he spotted someone he never expected to see again.

"Holy shit," he muttered as he sat up and swung his chair around, so his back was to the woman.

Paul raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"That woman with Kat." He thumbed over his shoulder.

"Hot babe. What about her? She one of the cheaters you've been following?" Paul's grin was pure humor. "Or one of the *other women*?"

"Neither. Remember I told you about The Pleasure Club?"

"The sex date club?" Paul's expression proved his friend was having too much fun at his expense. Paul's tone changed to mimic an anonymous commercial announcer. "TPC...the pleasurable way to turn fantasy into reality."

"Yeah, yeah... So you remember." Drake rolled his eyes and stayed slouched in his chair. "Quit staring at her."

"What about it?"

"*She* was one of my...nights."

Paul let out a low whistle between his teeth, his attention even more riveted now as she walked about the room with the club's owner. "That's some fantasy, man." When Drake didn't respond, Paul's eyes narrowed on him. "Why're you hiding from her? She couldn't've been that bad."

Drake shook his head. "No. She was...amazing. And fun." *Too fun.* He squeezed his eyes tight, trying to force that night from his memory. The attempt was a lost cause. He'd thought about his witty little "diamond thief" a thousand times in the last few months. He hadn't found anyone so great before or since.

"Okay, so why are you freaking out?"

Drake looked across the table at his buddy. They'd been friends since he moved to Florida, and Paul was the one who introduced him to

Incognito, but TPC had been Drake's thing. Paul didn't need blind dates when he had a cute little redhead warming his bed at home.

"Because it's against TPC rules for two players to seek contact outside of the club, especially for someone like me who has the ability to find just about anyone. I signed a contract, swore to never look for anyone I met through the club. We all use pseudonyms. It's *supposed* to be totally anonymous."

Paul leaned forward and in a stage whisper said, "You didn't seek her out. You two happen to be in the same place at the same time. It's fate, man. The stars aligned."

He shoved Paul's shoulder. "Cut that shit out."

Paul laughed.

Drake couldn't tell his buddy he didn't want to see his diamond thief outside of TPC, because he did. He'd dreamed of it. He'd even caught himself driving by the house that belonged to the real V. Casey, according to the mailbox at the curb. That had been a technical violation of the rules, but he appeased the guilt with a lame excuse that he'd been headed in the general direction anyway. And he'd idly wondered what TPC member had volunteered the home for that night's scene. He figured the club would've prepared her for the night by providing the key and layout so she could stay in character. She'd done a damn fine job, and he'd hoped to see her again, because that one amazing night was something he held precious in his...heart.

Fuck, he was a sap, but it was true. He'd hoped that TPC would hook them up again, even though Pleasure Masters weren't allowed to request a specific member.

Still, he'd hoped she might....

Chapter Two

Victoria Casey followed Mistress Katriona through Incognito, a frisson of excitement giving her goose bumps. Katriona had led her through the entire fetish club, giving her the grand tour, which proved to be quite interesting. Voyeur rooms, public displays of sensuality and affection, a free-for-all of sexual decadence. The place was a treasure trove of lusts and physical frivolity wrapped in a security blanket of discreet privacy and classy style.

She'd have to remember to thank her friend, Angela Patterson, who had suggested this place after Vicky confided in her about The Pleasure Club. Angie even offered to sponsor her. TPC had delivered on its promise, so that wasn't the problem or reason she was in the market for another club, another means to a pleasurable end. No, she'd wanted another night with a Pleasure Master, but she'd been a little afraid. After her first incredible night, she'd realized just how dumb she'd been. They'd wound up at her place, and if her Pleasure Master had been some kind of psycho creep, he could have cut off her head...or whatever psychos usually did with women they got alone.

TPC staked its reputation on its security measures, but the idea of blind dates to the extremes she might be interested in... Well, it warranted extra precautions that only an establishment like Incognito could offer.

"Okay, I'm impressed," she said with a grin when they returned to the bar. "My biggest concern is security, though. I know you showed me the panic buttons in the private rooms, but—"

Katriona held up her hand. "What if you're tied up?"

Vicky nodded. It was a worthwhile question.

"We have a highly trained security team who watches everything and everyone that walks through the doors." She pointed her riding crop to the front entrance of the building. The woman was as flamboyantly dressed as Vicky had ever seen, but she seemed a very down-to-earth businesswoman. With her black latex corset that set the swells of her breasts on display, to her skin-tight miniskirt and thigh-high boots, the woman oozed sex. But she was charismatic and very easy to talk to, which surprised Vicky.

Katriona's words sank in.

"They watch *everything*?"

Katriona's chuckle was deep and throaty. "Yes, Victoria. We have cameras everywhere, and our team of security experts keeps their eyes on all activity in and around the club. But I promise you, our security team is one hundred percent discreet. The safety of my patrons is my highest concern."

Vicky nodded. Safety was why she was here. Her dabble in BDSM with her Pleasure Master from TPC had let her know that she wanted to try more, only she was too cautious to do it on her own or even through TPC again. "Angie speaks very highly of you, your husband, and this club, but..."

Katriona smiled, her full, dark red lips tilting and her kohl-lined eyes showing her understanding. "You're welcome to stop by another night, maybe this weekend, and look around when the club is full—"

It's not full now? Vicky scanned the room to see a pretty nice-sized crowd, not overly large, scattered about the main hall. The bar seemed to be doing a good business. The place wasn't packed, but still...

"Feel free to visit with other club members and see if Incognito is right for you. You won't be able to..." She waved her hand and grinned. "Until you're a full member, you aren't allowed to participate, but you're welcome to look around. I can have Carl brief you on club protocol, as well."

Vicky cast her glance around the room once more. Maybe she

should check it out on the weekend. The atmosphere of such a place could change from one day to the next, and the dues to join were not something to toss away on a whim. She met Katriona's gaze. "I'd like that. I..." She sucked in a deep breath. "I'm very curious, but I'm a little afraid, too. This is all very new to me."

Katriona nodded in understanding. "From the questionnaire you filled out, it's pretty obvious you're a bottom, and if it'll make you feel better, I can introduce you to a couple of Doms who are gentle teachers. The things to remember are to establish your safe word, let your partner know what it is, and make sure you have a discussion about expectations with whatever partner or partners you choose *before* you start a scene. Honesty is definitely the key in any BDSM relationship, whether it's long-term or just a one-hour scene."

That made sense, and Vicky sighed in relief. "And everyone here knows the rules, I assume."

"If and when you're ready to join, there's a five page membership package you'll need to read, which lays out all the rules. Membership approval comes only after a thorough background check. As I said before, our members' safety and security are our number one priority." She glanced over Vicky's shoulder. "In fact, if you'll come with me, I'll introduce you to one of Incognito's finest members. He's a cop." She winked then brushed past Vicky.

Vicky followed her across the wide room, toward a table where two men sat.

"Excuse the interruption, gentlemen." Katriona stopped at the table and turned to Vicky. "Paul, this is Victoria Casey, a prospective member. Victoria, I'd like to introduce you to Detective Paul Baxter."

The detective stood up and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Victoria," he said with a welcoming grin. Vicky glanced at his left hand while she shook his right. He wore a wedding band, and that concerned her. Did married men come here to do naughty things? That was one place she wouldn't go—ever!

"Thank you," she said. "Please call me Vicky."

"And this," Katriona said, as she waved her riding crop toward the

other man still seated, "is another member of—"

The man started to turn toward her, face her, and her heart quickened.

"James? Detective James Drake?" Vicky blurted out. Her pulse pounded in her throat as excitement shot through her. *Oh, holy shit!* Her Pleasure Master from TPC.

Detective Drake looked up at her with a half smile and those oh-so-warm, make-you-melt eyes. "Hello, Victoria."

Paul chuckled and gave his friend a pat on the shoulder. "Once a badge, always a badge, eh, buddy?"

"You two know each other?" Katriona asked with evident curiosity.

Intimately was the answer that came to mind, but Vicky couldn't form the words to respond. Her face grew warm and her hands clammy as she stared at the man who had heated every late-night fantasy she'd had for the last few months.

He was a member? He was a member! Hot damn, she wanted to do the happy dance.

Detective Drake stood up. "We've met...once before today," he replied to Katriona and then held out his hand to Vicky. "Actually, it's just Drake. Drake Kavanaugh."

"Oh."

"I'm a *retired* detective of the Chicago PD."

Her hand slipped into his, a tingle of electricity shooting up her arm straight to her breasts, which made her nipples pebble. She sucked in a breath.

"He's a private dick, now," Paul added, and there was no mistaking the humor in his tone at the double entendre.

Vicky couldn't smile though, couldn't let go of Drake Kavanaugh's strong, warm hand. She'd dreamed about him so many times in the last months. Yearned for him and his handcuffs, which were tucked away in her bedside table, and here he was in flesh and blood. She shouldn't be surprised he was a member of a place like this, but still, seeing him again when the TPC rules stated that no contact was to be made outside of...

Drake withdrew his hand from hers, and she felt the loss of his

touch like a blow. She should lower her eyes. She was experienced enough to know that was required of all subs, but she couldn't take her gaze from those stunning green eyes that had captured her the first time they met. "It...it's great to see you again," she said, pulling herself out of her stupor.

"Same here." His gaze darkened with something she couldn't quite fathom, but it was gone before she could ponder it long. He glanced at his watch. "I'm sorry, but I've really got to be going. Welcome to Incognito." He grinned then, and Vicky's knees went weak. His voice was as husky-sexy as she remembered. "Hope to see you around."

"Me, too," she whispered.

"Kat." He turned to his friends. "Paul..."

"I'll call ya later," Paul answered, and Drake turned and walked away. *Ohh, that butt.* He'd looked good as a rumpled detective in slacks and a white button-down. It had made him look like a mature, street-smart gumshoe. But today, in a dark T-shirt pulled tight over his pecs and biceps, plus those ass-hugging jeans...*Mmm.*

Katriona's chuckle cut through Vicky's thoughts, and she turned back to face the dominatrix and Paul, her cheeks heating in embarrassment. "Sorry. I just didn't expect to," *meet my fantasy*, "uh, to meet..." What could she say? Her cuff-me, spank-me dream-date? It had been obvious that they weren't exactly lifelong friends. She hadn't even known his real name! "...an acquaintance here," she finished lamely.

"Quite all right," Katriona said with a wink. "He is a fine specimen of man, isn't he?"

Oh, yeah.

Someone cleared their throat. She glanced at the now vacant doorway, then at Paul, and noticed the smirk. Discomfited, she lowered her gaze and prayed that the floor had a trap door to make good her escape.

"Specimen, Kat?" Paul teased, and she popped him on the arm with her riding crop.

"I'm married, Paul, not blind."

And I'm neither blind nor married, Vicky thought gladly. She hadn't noticed a ring on Drake's finger, either.

Gathering up what was left of her bravado, she planted a grin on her face and asked, "So, what do I do to sign up?"

Paul raised an eyebrow.

"Come on back to my office," Katriona said, her answering smile one of delight, "and we'll start the paperwork."

Vicky turned to Paul. "First, I do have one question. A personal one if that's all right?"

Paul gave a single nod. "Go ahead."

"You wear a wedding ring. Why do you come here?"

Paul's smile softened as if in understanding. "Yes, I'm married, *happily* married. My wife is also a member here, a submissive who often accompanies me. Tonight, I just dropped by for a beer and to meet up with Drake to discuss some business." He shook his head. "I don't come here to stray."

Vicky sighed in relief. She didn't want to join the club only to unintentionally wind up being *the other woman* for a married member. "Thanks."

"No problem."

As Katriona led her through the club to the back where the offices were located, she explained, "I should tell you that we do have a few married members who attend the club without their spouses. Those that do, however, are usually not seeking sex so much as the harder S and M side of the lifestyle. The side that perhaps their life partners can't give them."

"S and M without the sex? That's common?"

Katriona opened the door to a lavishly appointed office with a huge dark wood desk and oriental rugs, and a view of the back parking lot and the ocean beyond.

"Yes. You'll find that within the lifestyle there are varying degrees. From a little slap and tickle to hard-core punishment both given and received. Sex is common, but not everyone in the lifestyle is in it for copulation." She sat down behind her desk and motioned to a comfortable looking chair in front. "Some need catharsis more than physical gratification. But we are not morality police, either. Part of the reason we

exist is to provide a secure environment without societal prejudices.”

“Well, it seems I have a lot to learn.” She cleared her throat as Katriona drew papers out of her desk drawer. “How often does Drake...attend?”

Katriona smiled and shook her head. “One of the most important things my clients expect, besides safety and security, is privacy. If you wish to know about Drake’s comings and goings at Incognito, you’ll have to ask him.”

She just might have to do that. Katriona handed over a pile of papers. Yep, she thought as she took the pen Katriona handed her. Asking Drake about his time at Incognito sounded like a really good idea.

Chapter Three

One week later

Vicky had just finished a haircut for a walk-in client and was sweeping trimmings into a neat pile for cleanup when Anita Perera reported to work. With a smile, Vicky welcomed the petite, white-haired woman who came in four times a week to cut hair and do manicures.

"*Hola, Anita.*" That was the extent of Vicky's rudimentary Spanish, which made the friendly bilingual grandmother even more valuable, since many of Vicky's clientele were Hispanic.

"Buenos días."

"How was the bus ride today?"

"Entertaining."

Vicky chuckled at Anita's standard reply. The woman was a people watcher and had a buoyant personality regardless of what life threw her way. Anita lived in a rougher part of town known as Little Mexico, with two grandkids she cared for, and rode the city transit to get to Vicky's salon since she had no car of her own and wouldn't dare brave city traffic even if she did. Vicky usually drove her home after closing up so the lady didn't have to walk home from the bus stop, especially when that trek would happen after sunset.

Anita checked the appointment book and gave an approving nod before preparing her station. Vicky's other employee called her to the backdoor where a uniformed man with electronic clipboard in hand stood

awaiting her signature for a delivery.

Ah, the hair coloring supplies she'd ordered. After putting the broom away, she relieved Denise and greeted the driver. As she signed for the shipment, he gave her a smile that was three parts friendly and a dash of flirtation. The man whose nametag identified him as Wayne was tall and not unattractive, but Vicky's mind—when it came to men—was on a single set of tracks, which led her thoughts back time and again to a certain, memorable private eye.

"Thanks," she said with a smile, handing the electronic clipboard back to Wayne.

"You're welcome. You have a good day, ma'am."

"You, too."

After the last of the shipment was put away, she glanced back into the salon to see Denise chatting with the mother of a young boy who was parked in a booster seat and dubiously eyeing the scissors. Anita was washing a woman's hair and discussing who-knew-what in rapid-fire Spanish with the customer.

Vicky slipped into her back office, which also served as a break room. Heading straight for the chair behind her small but sturdy desk, she snatched up the phonebook and flipped through the pages.

Detectives...detectives...detective agencies. Ah!

"Kavanaugh Security and Investigations." The listing didn't give his full name, but it had to be him. How many Kavanaughs could possibly be in security in this town?

Dare she do it? It went against the number one rule at The Pleasure Club—don't seek contact with fellow members outside the club-sanctioned fantasy nights. But she couldn't curb her need to see him again. She'd returned to Incognito three times over the past week, but he hadn't been there.

The phone number in the book taunted her. She reached for the phone, but hesitated. How was she supposed to see him again without breaking a rule or two?

Her eyes closed as she envisioned him the way he'd appeared at Incognito. So tall, wearing those tight jeans, his hand warm as he gripped

hers. His polite smile, the tiny, inviting lines at the corners of gorgeous green eyes, and that rough rumble of his voice.

Hope to see ya around.

She lifted the phone and dialed. Eagerness made her muscles quiver a little when she listened to the first ring, the second.

"Hello. Kavanaugh Security and Investigations. How may I assist you?"

The woman on the phone had a pleasant, all-business tone, making Vicky frown with disappointment. She'd hoped to hear Drake's deep voice answer her call.

"Hello?"

"Yes," she began, "is this Drake Kavanaugh's detective agency?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Kavanaugh is the owner. Are you a client?"

"No, but I'd," *like to be much more than that*, she almost said. "Uh, I'd like to hire him...to discuss a security system for a business. A hair salon."

"I can schedule a free, initial consultation. When would you like to come in?"

"I'd prefer to do it here—the consultation—on site if possible." Her cheeks warmed just thinking about what she really wanted to do once she got Drake here. "Could he come to the salon?"

"Let me check his calendar."

There was a brief pause, during which Vicky wondered if she was pushing her luck. She'd never hired a P.I. before and wasn't sure about proper protocol. But neither did she want to confront him on his turf. If he rejected her advances, she'd be more embarrassed there than in the privacy of her own place.

"He has openings at two and four-thirty tomorrow. Would either of those times work?"

"Actually, I was hoping to meet with him today if possible...maybe after hours when my salon's not so busy. With all the news of break-ins and crime, I'd really like to get a system in place as soon as possible." It was mostly true. The salon was busy during regular business hours, so the *consultation* she had in mind would have to be later. And the media was always airing stories on the crime rate, burglaries, arrests, and any other

sensational misdeed that might interest the viewing population.

"He's out of the office right now, but I'll be happy to page him and check. Can I get your name, address and number, and call you back?"

"Sure. Vi— Uh, tell him to just ask for Jean with First Impressions Salon." She recited the address and telephone number and, after agreeing to await a return call, she hung up and crossed her fingers.

* * * * *

Drake pulled up to the quaint brick building in a nice, yuppie part of town just before seven in the evening and eyed the painted sign that identified it as First Impressions Salon.

His first impression was that the owner was right to want a security system, even if the area wasn't prone to higher crime rates. The heavy shrubbery along a privacy fence at the back of the building and a neighboring, less-trafficked alley made the business susceptible to intrusion from the rear. The large glass window and door on the front didn't offer much security either.

He glanced at the street lamps that illuminated the parking area out front and noted there was nothing similar around either side of the one-story structure. Through the front window, which was partially obscured by signage, he could see interior lights still on, but the OPEN neon sign by the door was off.

Before getting out, he rubbed the stubble on his face and wondered whether he should've shaved. He'd let his whiskers grow out to better fit in with the scruffier crowds of Little Mexico as he'd begun making inroads into the network that surrounded a certain shady cantina. He'd made some progress on that case, too, which put him in a good mood.

But traditional business owners typically preferred doing business with a more clean-cut professional.

Deciding that it was too late to worry about it now and that it wasn't worth making him late, which wouldn't sit well at all, he climbed out of his vehicle and made his way across the lot to knock on the front door.

"Come in! Door's open," he heard a female call out.

A bell jingled when he pushed open the door and stepped inside. There was something familiar about that voice....

His diamond thief stepped into the doorway at the back of the salon, her nervous gaze fixed firmly on him. He damn sure hadn't expected to see her, and he fought to control any surprise that might lift his brows or widen his eyes—although he couldn't say he wasn't pleased by her appearance. If he tried to deny it, his heart rate would make a lie of such foolhardy declarations.

Paul had called him after his encounter with Victoria at Incognito and told him she'd not only joined the club but had eyed his departure with—how had he put it?— "an enlightening and delightful interest."

Though flattered, Drake hadn't been sure how to handle the situation. He knew what he *wanted* to do, or least what his libido demanded he do, but that only made his obligation to the rules of TPC that much harder to abide. Ultimately, he'd been grateful to have Paul's case to work on. He needed something to occupy his time, but it had only curbed his urge to see her again for a short while.

With her standing across the room now, all of his best intentions flew out the window. But then *he* hadn't broken the rules, yet. She had.

He wondered if she ever intended to purchase a security system, but he suspected—based on the way her fingers fidgeted with something in her hand—that it had been a ruse to lure him here. She turned the small piece of paper or business card over and over between her fingers.

His lips twitched. Her stance, eager but shy, was adorable.

"Which is it?" he asked just loud enough for his words to reach her.

"Which, what?"

"Your name. Victoria? Or Jean?"

Her lashes lowered like a black fan, and her cheeks darkened with a becoming pink.

"Both, actually. Jean is my middle name."

He was still amazed that she'd used her real name for their Pleasure Night, and he now suspected that she lived in the home he'd taken her to that night.

"What's that?" He gestured toward the object in her hand that held her attention.

"Your card," she said, the words soft. Her midnight blue eyes met his across the space, and memories of their one and only night together flooded his mind—how he'd gently kissed her forehead as she dozed and left the club's card on the bedside table along with the pair of handcuffs and key he'd used to complete the illusion of the scene.

She'd kept the card. Somehow that warmed his heart, not that he'd admit it.

"Until we meet again," she quoted the message he'd scrawled on the card.

He was supposed to just leave the card and cuffs—a TPC gift, a souvenir to remind the member of their fulfilled fantasy once the night was over—but he'd added those words and signed it Detective Drake.

Maybe subconsciously he'd relayed his own desires to see her again with that message, but it had been unintentional.

"This breaks the rules, you know?" He should leave. Instead, he thumbed the deadbolt lock on the door and took several steps farther into the room.

She flashed a small, tentative smile. "I'm a thief, remember? What are rules and laws for, if not to be broken?"

He narrowed his eyes on her, anticipation igniting new lust in his veins. She might want to reprise her role as diamond thief, but he wanted much more than a repeat performance as dirty detective.

He shook his head and unfastened his belt, noting how her gaze lowered and locked on his actions. "Do you have any idea what we do to those who break the rules?"

Her breath hitched, the swell of her breasts stretching the flimsy fabric of her blouse. Her eyes flared, but she didn't flee.

The defiant tilt of her chin made him smile. He approached her and tugged on his belt, letting it slowly slither from the loops around his waist. He wanted to lower the zipper of his jeans, too, to regain some comfort for his imprisoned cock, especially since her heated stare made the confinement that much more painful, but he didn't.

She flinched when he folded his belt in half and popped the loop across his palm. Her breathing turned ragged, aroused.

"I asked a question, Victoria. I expect an answer."

She shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin line.

He chuckled. "What a stubborn slut you are."

Her mouth dropped open. Her spine straightened with indignation. "I'm *not* a slut."

He grinned at her playful pout, enjoying the exchange. And she hadn't denied being stubborn. "But you are horny." He let his gaze drift over her body while he stalked her into a back room. She wore a white, button-up, cotton blouse, a short sky-blue skirt, and matching sandals. The outfit wasn't as tight or sexy as the sleek black number she wore the last time they were together, but he could just make out the hard outline of beaded nipples under the fabric, which only served to confirm his claim. "A horny sub who lured me here under false pretenses and deserves a good spanking."

He popped open the snap of his jeans and watched her eyes heat with excited passion. Damn if that look alone didn't make him want to bend her over the desk and fuck her until neither of them could breathe. But first, he wanted to redden that cute ass he remembered so vividly and hear her sweet whimpers as she submitted to the punishment she craved.

His cock was so hard he slid his zipper down for some much-needed relief. The action didn't go unnoticed. Victoria's pink tongue swiped across her lips, leaving behind a faint trail of moisture—and images in his mind of those lips and that tongue pleasuring the hell out of him.

Her butt collided with the edge of her desk, and she grabbed it with both hands. Her shaky breaths ceased altogether when he crowded her space and took hold of a fistful of hair at her nape. He gave a slight tug, forcing her head back, and saw her eyes widen. With fear or arousal?

"Scared?"

She scoffed. "Of you? Never."

Chapter Four

Arousal, he decided as he ran the loop of leather in his hand down the side of her neck, along the skin exposed by the V of her blouse, and lower.... He acknowledged her brazen challenge with a slight tilt of lips and then kissed her hard, stabbing his tongue into her mouth, giving her no warning, no chance to prepare.

His memories didn't do justice to the reality of kissing Victoria again. Her taste, her response, that sweet little gasp and soft whimper; they all combined to send his libido into overdrive. When she sucked his tongue into her mouth, he ground his hips against the juncture of her thighs. Her fingers clawed at his back and yanked on his shirt, making him pull away.

With quick efficiency, he stopped the kiss and spun her around before using his body to once more pin her against the solid desk. A push on her back between her shoulder blades had her bending forward across the desk. He gave her a second to move the computer's mouse and a stapler out of the way. Then he nudged her feet apart and flipped her skirt up over her back to reveal G-string panties in pastel blue and two creamy white cheeks awaiting punishment.

"Do you remember your safe word?" he needed to know.

"Yes." She reached across the desk, knocking over a holder of pens as she sought a handhold.

"Tell me."

"Indictment."

"Say it again only if you need to, and I'll stop. Understood?"

Her only response was a quick nod.

He popped her across the ass. Her body jerked at the impact.

"Answer me out loud when I ask you a question."

"Sure thing, copper," she hissed.

"No games this time, Victoria, no pretense. This is between you and me. You're not a criminal, and I'm no cop...not anymore. And I want you to say my name when you answer me."

"Yes, Drake."

Shifting his belt to his left hand, which held her down, he ran his other palm over her buttocks and enjoyed the feel of her smooth skin, the realization that she was his for one more night.

She'd submitted the moment she made the call to his office, and he was determined to give her everything they both desired.

He swatted her with his open hand, once, twice, and then rubbed the rosy flesh again. "Ready for your punishment, Victoria?"

"I can take anything you dish out," she said, triggering a sense of déjà vu. She'd said something similar to him before.

He smiled and switched the belt back into his right hand. "Take off that blouse." He kept one hand at the small of her back so she wouldn't stand straight up. Instead, she rose up a little and made short work of the buttons. As soon as she finished, he pulled the blouse off and ordered, "The bra goes, too."

When her silky bra hit the floor as well, he reached around to fondle a nice breast for a moment, splayed his hand across her bare back, and then applied enough pressure to make her lay down again.

A soft gasp came out when her breasts touched the desk's surface, and he assumed it was a bit cooler than her heated body.

Without warning, he popped her across the ass with the leather belt. She winced and yelped, so he did it again and again, setting up a smooth rhythm. He adjusted his swings enough to strike her across the thighs and butt from different angles and with variable force.

Her breathing became labored, not unlike his, so he paused and ran a finger down the crack of her ass to slip alongside the G-string, over

dewy labia to a swollen, sensitive clit. He flicked the tiny bud and noticed her rise up on tiptoes. She swung her hands out, seeking purchase, and sent a stack of papers flying onto the floor along with a few pens or pencils. He ignored the mess and focused on the woman.

"I'm not so sure that was punishment," he said, teasing her pussy with long strokes of two fingers. "You're so moist, I think you enjoyed the spanking too much." He added a third finger and pushed in deeper with a slow, twisting thrust.

She groaned and wiggled her ass—an unvoiced plea.

"Maybe I should go...and leave this tight cunt empty to teach you the importance of rules and obedience." He withdrew his fingers and circled her clit.

"No! Please, Drake..."

She tried to get up, but he forced her back down.

"Please what?"

She shook her head, her black hair flinging from side to side.

He repeated the question, his fingertip a light, motionless touch against her sensitive bud, and after a deep breath, she answered. "Please, don't leave."

"Are you gonna beg for forgiveness?"

She shook her head again.

"No?"

She made the cutest sound when he fingered her clit once more.

"Answer me."

"I can't ask you to forgive something I'm not sorry I did, but I will if it'll make you stay. Please. I know I'm wrong, that I signed a contract and all with the club, but I'm not sorry. I won't lie; I had to see you again. I wanted—" She cut her plea off, but he refused to allow that.

He finger-fucked her pussy, taking direct aim at her G-spot, his thumb brushing her clit with each penetration. "Wanted what?" he asked in a gravelly murmur. Her sweet admission had turned him on more than he could've imagined possible. When she didn't answer immediately, he increased the sensual torment and repeated the question with every ounce of authority he could muster. "Wanted what?"

"You," she whispered.

He closed his eyes and let her confession wash over him. "Why didn't you go through TPC?"

She was shaking her head before he finished the question. "I'm not permitted to request a certain Pleasure Master, and I couldn't be sure they'd pair me up with you again even if I asked for the same fantasy. I didn't want anyone else."

Her words rang sincere. This was no act. And the truth was he wanted her, too.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you to be careful what you wish for?" he said without pause in his erotic touch between her thighs.

"Oh, oh..." Her fingers splayed and fisted; he knew she was fighting against the sensations he caused, so he tweaked her clit harder and enjoyed the unintelligible sounds she made in response.

"You lured me here, so you're going to get that wish, Victoria. I'm going to take you my way, right here, right now. Where's the condoms?"

Her head shot up. "Oh, fuck!" That had nothing to do with pleasure, more like panic. His hands and fingers stilled.

"What?" he asked calmly. He found her shock amusing. He'd bet his pension she thought of everything but that.

"I, umm...I—"

"You don't have any, do you?"

Her head dropped to the desk with a thud.

He chuckled. She moaned.

He hooked a finger under her G-string and pulled.

"Wait. We can't," she started. She tossed her black hair as she tried to look at him over her shoulder.

"We can. We will. Stay there." He finished removing her panties and pocketed the flimsy scrap of cloth. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I've got it covered," he said, setting the belt on her back and reaching for his wallet. He only had one condom, but that was better than none. He lowered his pants and briefs to mid-thigh and donned the rubber.

When she spied the condom, her muscles relaxed.

He took her hands, brought them together overhead, and bent her

arms so that her wrists overlapped at the back of her head. He slipped his belt around her wrists, ran the end through the buckle, and pulled the leather tight.

She sucked in air through clenched teeth.

"Too tight?"

"No, Drake."

Her proper response made him smile. He quickly finished tying off the belt and gripped the loose end like a lifeline as he aligned his cock with her pussy.

"Rules are made for a reason," he said, even as he broke them by rubbing his sheathed cock along her moist slit. She whimpered so sweetly he damn near came. He ground his teeth together and failed to curb the ache. "Fuck it! I want you, too."

He rammed into her body with a need he'd never experienced before—as if he wouldn't survive another minute apart from her. He had to have her, to be one with her.

She cried out, and her inner muscles squeezed him tightly, an exquisite welcome. He stopped, his cock buried deep inside her, and savored the sensations. He fisted the belt until his fingers hurt, and tried to catch his breath.

Victoria trembled beneath him, her body on the verge of an explosive climax. He reached around, between her legs, and lightly pinched her clit. She squeaked. Her hips jerked. He grinned. Mercilessly, he rolled the tiny bud between his fingers, flicked it rapidly, and then pinched it again. Harder.

Her orgasm was a pleasure to watch...and feel. Her cunt milked his throbbing cock. Her thighs shuddered, and her back bowed while she screamed, "Yes! Oh, *yesss*."

He plucked her clit to keep the climax suspended as long as possible. When she settled down once more, he bent over her and whispered, "My turn."

He fucked her then with renewed vigor, pumping his cock into her over and over, driving their pleasure to new heights until his balls contracted. His climax was imminent. Not wanting to leave her on the

precipice without him, he pushed a finger into her tight ass, catching her by surprise. It was enough. Together they fell over the edge into orgasmic oblivion.

A short time later, they'd cleaned up and were adjusting their clothes. Victoria stuffed her bra in her purse, which hung over the back of the chair behind her desk, and tied the white blouse in a knot centered between her breasts. He'd tossed the condom, finished restoring his clothes already, and sat in another chair at a round table in the corner of the room. Watching her return some semblance of neatness to her desk and then look around, he admired her bare midriff and sexy legs.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"Yes, my panties."

He slid them from his pocket and held them up with one finger. "These?"

She eyed them and headed his way, her hand extended, but he snatched them out of reach and pocketed them once more. "My souvenir."

Her eyes narrowed, so he flashed a grin and shrugged, but the panties stayed put.

"They match my bra. It's a matched set."

When he didn't respond, she caved with a sigh and sat in the other chair at the table.

An awkward silence settled between them, so he quirked a finger at her in a come-hither fashion. She leaned toward him, and he cupped the back of her head, pulling her closer until their breaths mingled. "You're beautiful, Victoria Jean Casey."

Her big, blue eyes glistened with moisture at his murmured endearment and, not wanting to deal with tears, he kissed her. After a gentle brush of lips, she opened for him, and he swept his tongue inside to flirt with hers.

She fisted his shirt and clung to him as he deepened the kiss for one minute longer. Then he pulled away, released her, and sat back.

The moisture was gone from her eyes, and in its place was renewed desire. He liked that look, loved having it directed his way.

"Now," he said, "back to business."

Arresting Victoria by Madison Layle and Anna Leigh Keaton

Confused, she blinked.

He almost laughed.

“About that security system...”

Chapter Five

Drake left his car about a block down the street, the only parking spot he could find in the cramped little area known as Little Mexico.

He'd been doing recon around the neighborhood for almost two weeks now, and this was his last stop. He'd put in multiple appearances at two of the three brothels Paul had given him to check out in the four block radius of Little Mexico. Neither seemed too shady—if you didn't consider selling sex a bad thing. He did, of course, but the women in the other two places all seemed above legal age, most were locals, and they charged a fair rate. Most importantly, he hadn't seen any signs of abuse; the women didn't appear fearful. From the bit of information he could get out of the women he *rented* for an hour, they'd been there by choice.

As one prostitute put it, "the money is great." The women had seemed fairly clean, he hadn't seen any overt evidence of drug abuse, and they hadn't been drunk. He was starting to think Paul might have it all wrong, and they'd have to expand their radius, search elsewhere.

Until he stepped into *Tacto Suave Cantina*. He wasn't fluent in Spanish—in fact, he rather sucked at it being a northern boy born and bred—but he knew what a cantina was, or rather what it was supposed to be.

While the other establishments disguised their more scandalous activities behind a front of respectability, the cantina blatantly flaunted its primary purpose. He doubted he'd need a second or third visit before he uncovered what he needed to know.

A mellow mariachi melody flowed from speakers, the haunting guitar music a more pleasant background than the flatter buzz of conversations throughout the joint. The place wasn't standing room only by any means, but at least a half-dozen females caught his eye. The girls were young, though in the dim light it was difficult to tell exactly how young. The joint was busy enough, considering the day and time, filled with men of all income brackets. Local guys obviously right off construction sites to some rather distinguished looking men in tailored suits.

It made his stomach turn.

Women—girls—he still wasn't sure of their age ranges as he made his way to the bar—sat with the men. Sat on their laps, draped over them. Every one of the girls had a drink in her hand, and most of them had guys' paws on some part of their bodies.

He took one of the few empty stools at the bar and asked for a bottle of Corona. When in Rome and all that...

The bartender popped the top and slid it across to him as he laid a five on the none-too-clean lacquered wood.

One of the girls came up to him, draped her arm around his shoulders, and rubbed her small breasts against his bicep. She smelled of sweat and other things he'd rather not think about. She looked barely as old as his fourteen-year-old niece back in Chicago.

He smiled at her, easily slipping into his undercover role as a john here to pick up a quick fuck. She said something in rapid-fire Spanish, and he shook his head.

"English?"

She shook her head.

"She say you're handsome," the bartender translated in broken English. "And new around here."

He nodded. "Very new to the area. Here on business from Chicago. Do you have any women who speak English?"

The bartender called out, "Juanita!" and then said stuff in Spanish, pointing to Drake. The girl standing next to him dropped her arm with a pout, but moved on to another guy a bit farther down the bar who sat

alone.

Drake turned on the stool to see Juanita coming toward him. She might have been around sixteen, maybe pushing seventeen. She wore the typical uniform of a call girl. Short tube top stretched tight over her breasts—though there wasn't much to fill the thing—that showed off her bellybutton ring, and a hip-hugging skirt that barely covered her crotch.

"*Señor?*" she inquired when she was within a foot or so.

"You speak English?"

She nodded. "Some."

He let his gaze drop below her neck on purpose. "How much?"

The girl didn't answer, but the bartender did. "You buy her drink. Size of drink is how long you have."

This was a new one on him. "Fine. Give her something tall."

The bartender grinned and pulled out a tumbler, which he filled with Coke and then splashed a shot of rum into it. "Fifty."

Drake reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded wad of cash, letting the bartender see it. He pulled a fifty-dollar bill off the top and dropped it on the bar. "Private room cost extra?"

The bartender eyed the cash. "Twenty more."

Drake pulled out a twenty and dropped it on top of the fifty. "How long?"

"'Til drink is gone." He handed the tumbler to Juanita and motioned with his head toward the back.

Juanita walked off. Drake grabbed his beer and followed. They went down a dark, smelly hallway, past several doors, and into a windowless room that held a double-sized mattress on the floor. No covers, no sheet, and well stained. Drake stayed in the role, but it took a lot not to curl his lip in disgust. As soon as the door shut behind him, he turned the lock and scanned the room for monitoring devices. He saw nothing offhand, and there wasn't exactly any place to hide a camera.

Juanita was sucking down the drink as if her life depended on it.

He grabbed the glass from her. "Trying to cheat me out of my time?"

She flinched and stepped away from him. "No, *señor*."

He put both drinks on the floor near the wall. "It's okay. I'm not here to fuck, so there's no need to get toasted. I just want some answers."

She took another step away. "You cop?"

"No."

"I fuck you. Blow you. You fuck my ass. Whatever you want. That all I do. No talk."

"Yes, talk," he said, keeping his voice low and even. He was more convinced than ever that something underhanded was going on, because at the other two establishments he'd visited, the women were glad to talk and not fuck. It gave them a break, and since he'd paid up front, they got a freebie.

"Where are you from?"

"Here," she answered, too fast.

He frowned. "Try again."

She twisted her fingers together and kept glancing at her drink on the floor just behind him. "Mexico."

"Where in Mexico?"

She clamped her lips tight and shook her head.

"Look, I don't really give a shit where. I'm just curious," he tried. "How long have you been here?"

She stared straight ahead, her body trembling. He could tell she wouldn't volunteer anything more along that line of questioning.

He took a step closer, and in the slightly better lighting of the room, he saw faint, fading bruises on her right cheekbone. When he reached out to touch it, she flinched and turned her head.

"Who did that to you?" He sighed when she didn't respond. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen," she answered quickly—too quickly.

"Try again with the truth."

"I am eighteen." She didn't meet his eyes though, and there was no way she was eighteen, no way in hell.

"All the girls here eighteen?"

She nodded.

Yeah, right.

"Who do you work for?"

"*El Jefe*," she said, meeting his eyes and frowning as if he should know.

"Is he the one who brought you to America?"

"I legal. I American!"

Right, and he was Uncle Sam.

"Hey, no problem. I'm not here to see your green card."

She relaxed a little.

"This *El Jefe*... What's his real name?"

She shrugged.

"Does he come here?"

She nodded.

"Often?"

She nodded.

"When?"

She shrugged again. "When he want to." She glanced at her glass again, then went on her knees and grabbed his belt. "I give you blowjob. I do not bite."

He stepped back, gripped her by the wrist, and put his other hand over his belt buckle. "No. Only talk."

She stared at her drink. To his surprise, she didn't even try to struggle free of his grip. Because she didn't fear him? Or because she'd been trained to not fight paying customers?

Disgusted at the thought, he let her go.

"*El Jefe* the one who hit you? You afraid of him?"

She sat back on her heels. "No. He don't touch the older—" She stopped and bit her bottom lip, smearing her plum-colored lipstick.

"So, you're too old for him," he said, jumping in to finish the thought. She didn't respond, and he didn't expect her to since she'd already claimed all the girls were eighteen. Shit, if this *El Jefe* guy thought Juanita was too old, he was one really sick motherfucker.

He had the right place, though. Even if he hadn't gotten the confirmation of the name *El Jefe*, he felt it in his gut. He'd always been one to listen to his instincts. Now it was time to put the second part of his

undercover work into play.

"Is *El Jefe* here today?"

She shook her head.

"Okay." He held out his hand to Juanita, and she stared at his palm for a moment before she slid her small hand into his and stood up. "Thank you for your help, Juanita. We're done."

Her eyes went wide. "No!" Her grip tightened around his fingers. "Too fast. Too fast. No fuck that fast."

He got it. If she got done too quickly with her john, the bosses would know what was up.

"Need to finish drink." She moved past him, picked up her glass, and started chugging.

He slipped it out of her hand again. He couldn't stand here and watch this child drink alcohol. "I'll finish your drink for you."

She nodded, and her shoulders slumped in what looked like relief.

"You get drunk every night?"

She leaned back against the wall, looking small, and so damn young and helpless. "Make it easier."

He took a swig of her drink. It was watered down, and he wondered how many of these it took to make her go numb so she didn't feel. His stomach turned again.

"Have any of the girls ever left?"

She glanced at him then quickly away, but not before he saw a spark of pain in her eyes. Chances were, as he'd seen in the places they closed down in Chicago, the girls were close. All they had was each other. And when a girl went missing, they all knew it wasn't because she'd escaped.

He finished off the drink and handed her the empty glass. He wished he could offer her some comfort, let her know she wasn't stuck here forever, that they'd get her out, but he couldn't. "Thanks," was all he said as he went to the door.

Now he would wait to see what she did.

He went back to the bar and ordered another beer, since he forgot the other bottle in the back room, keeping Juanita's position in the cantina

in the corner of his eye.

"She good?" the bartender asked.

"No complaints." He took a swig of his Corona. "I'm wonderin' how I'd go about setting up a meeting with *El Jefe*."

The bartender's eyes narrowed on him. "Where'd you get that name?"

"Around." He pulled out his clip of cash again and thumbed off a large bill. "I have my ways, but if you can't set it up..."

"What for?"

"Business proposition."

"What kind of business?"

Drake smirked. "That's between me and *El Jefe*."

Juanita sidled along the far wall and was about to pass a massive guy sitting at a table with a skinny girl on each knee. He snatched her wrist and pulled her closer. Drake couldn't hear what the man said to her, but the girl's glance in his direction gave him a good idea. Juanita leaned down and said something in the guy's ear, motioning to Drake. The look she gave him was both apologetic and fearful, so he didn't blame her.

Here we go, he thought as he took another swig of beer. The big dude released Juanita, nudged the girls off his lap, and stood. Fuck, he was huge. This might get nasty. The giant motioned to another guy, much smaller than the first, on the other side of the room. Hopefully, they thought he was small enough they only needed two. Drake knew he'd walk away, but with that one brick wall he probably wouldn't walk away unscathed.

He finished the beer and took a business card from his back pocket. It was plain, just a name and a number. He laid it on the bar, along with the twenty, and then slid off the stool. "Give the card to *El Jefe*, would ya?" he said to the bartender, and then headed for the door. About three steps short of fresh air, a beefy hand grabbed his forearm and spun him around.

"Hey, man," he said, jerking away from the Andre the Giant wannabe.

"You ask lots of questions," the big man slurred.

"So what? Is that a crime?" Drake stood his ground.

"No like nosy strangers." The man shoved him down the hallway and through the swinging door to the men's restroom. The big ape outweighed him by a good hundred pounds and had fists the size of softballs.

He turned to the goons and let his anger show. "Look, dude—"

A fist caught him in the gut. He'd been prepared, but it still hurt like hell. His breath whooshed out, and he stumbled back, slamming into the wall. The big gorilla came after him again, but he ducked the fist heading for his face just in time to hear an unhealthy crunch. The asshole cursed in fast Spanish when his hand smashed into the tile wall. Drake glanced long enough to notice the tile cracked, but he'd bet, by the look on the man's face, the bones in the big guy's hand took the brunt of the force.

Damn, that had to hurt.

"What the fuck's your problem?" Drake shouted when the other guy, shorter, wiry, flipped out a knife and took a swing that he avoided. He felt a little out of practice. Hadn't been in a hand-to-hand fight since he left Chicago. But this had just gotten way too serious, too dangerous.

The little one growled in Spanish, but the only word Drake understood was *policía* and something he thought meant kill.

"I'm not a cop!" he shouted as he ducked another swipe.

The big man's roar of rage or pain didn't bode well for any hopes of a peaceful settlement either.

"Fuck this." He seriously didn't want to get the crap beat out of him. The big guy charged. He faked a jab, spun with the momentum, and put all of his weight into a kick that caught the big guy in the knee with the heel of his biker boot. The leg buckled at an awkward angle, and the goon went down with a yowl of pain.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

The other guy came at him with a straight jab, blade first. A close call, too close. Drake grabbed the guy's wrist and, with a hard twist and strike to the forearm, the knife fell loose and clattered on the floor. Drake kicked it away and narrowly dodged a fist. The dude was swinging like crazy, but he was untrained and unskilled. Drake ducked or blocked most of the blows, but one slammed into his mouth, splitting his lip. That

pissed him off, and he'd had more than enough. He caught the guy on the jaw with a right and in the diaphragm with a left. The guy went down hard, gasping for air.

"Now, you fuckers," Drake said, panting and wiping at the blood running down his chin. "I'm not a cop." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out another business card. The name was fake, but the number wasn't. "I'm a buyer, you morons. I need some Latino girls for my boss in Chicago." He rattled off the name of his so-called "boss", knowing they'd investigate it. His ex-partner back on the CPD agreed to help him out, so he'd be the contact for the bad guys to check him out. He tossed the card down on the little guy's chest. "If your boss doesn't want the business, fine! I can take my money elsewhere."

He turned and stalked out of the bathroom.

"Fuck," he muttered. *That hurt.* He glanced down and cursed again. The little shit had sliced a rip in his shirt.

Chapter Six

As he pulled out of his parking spot, Drake called Paul from his cell.

"Baxter," Paul answered on the third ring.

"Hey, it's Drake. We got it."

"You sure?"

He left behind Little Mexico and rolled down his window for some clean air. That place was rank. Not just the cantina, but the whole area. He'd seen it before, of course, even in Chicago. The names changed, but the neighborhoods were all alike. He always wondered why it was that the poor neighborhoods not only looked that way but smelled like it, too.

"Yep. *Tacto Suave Cantina*. I think some of those girls are barely in their teens. I made contact with a couple of the goons and gave them my card." He gingerly touched his split lip with his finger as he held the phone. "So we wait and see."

"Any other info you can give me?"

"The girl I hooked up with was young. Sixteen, maybe seventeen, but that's pushing it. She claimed to be eighteen, said all the girls there were eighteen, but then let something slip. She'd been smacked around some, and I asked if *El Jefe* was the one who did it to her, and she pretty much told me she was too old for him. He likes them young. So, we've got a verification that *El Jefe* is the one running the place, and that he's—"

"A fucking sick bastard," Paul muttered.

"My thoughts exactly. I wanna see this dude fry, man. I really do."

That place is..." He nearly shivered as he remembered the young girls draped over men.

"With any luck we'll be there when they flip the switch," Paul said, and his laugh was a little sinister. "You wanna stop by for a bite? Heather made a big ol' pot of Texas chili for me, and I can't eat the whole thing."

Drake chuckled. "Thanks. Sounds good. I'll be there in a bit. Gotta go home and change and...uh...ice my face."

Paul made a sympathetic sound. "Made contact, huh?"

"Yep. But I won." He laughed. "That's all that matters."

"Okay. We'll hold dinner 'til you get here."

"Thanks. See ya in a few." Just as he hung up the phone, it vibrated, letting him know he had a missed call. He'd turned it off while he was in the cantina, not wanting any distractions. He punched in the code to retrieve his messages, and his heart did a little flip when he heard the tentative voice on the line.

"Hi, Drake," Victoria said in that sweet, slightly husky voice of hers. "Haven't heard from you for almost a week...not that I—I mean, that's not an accusation or anything. I just thought I'd call and see if you were busy. I...uh...I'm screwing this all up, aren't I?" He heard a self-deprecating and very endearing chuckle. Then she sighed. "Well, I thought you might like to come by or something." A long pause, and he didn't like hearing her so unsure of herself. "I'll be home tonight if you want to stop by." And then she rattled off her address, which, of course, he already knew. "If you're busy, I'll understand. Talk to you later."

He hadn't contacted her all week because he'd been waiting for her to call. She'd made the first move, so she was obviously the type of person who didn't sit back and let others make decisions for her. That had become abundantly clear when they'd debated the need for a security system. She'd hesitated and downplayed the need for one, which gave him mixed signals. He'd thought since she'd used the system to get him there, she intended to use its installation to keep him coming back for a while, but she'd rejected any serious consideration of added security beyond his recommendation for improved locks on the doors.

He'd left her salon still expecting her to call again if she'd wanted

to see him, and he'd given her his card with his cell number on it. The more time that went by, the more he'd convinced himself that she'd had her fun and moved on.

Obviously, he'd been mistaken, if her nervous tone was any indication. His problem as he saw it now was that he liked her way too much. He could easily see himself falling for her even harder than he already had. He wasn't sure that was a good thing. He'd sworn off any kind of long-term relationship after his wife found better companionship with her yoga instructor than he could give her. *Ex-wife* for the last six years. She'd hated his job, the times he couldn't be at home seeing to her emotional needs—or so she said.

Ever since moving to Florida, he'd kept it light with women, which was why he enjoyed Incognito and TPC. Totally no-strings-attached playtime. As much sex as he wanted and no emotional needs to worry about once the scene was over.

Victoria was more than a string; she was a set of shackles around his heart. And now that she'd made this call, it was time for him to stop running and see what could happen.

But fuck, her timing was bad. He couldn't get too involved until Paul closed this case and *El Jefe* and his goons were behind bars. It would be too dangerous for her to be around him while he was undercover. Once *El Jefe* contacted him, he didn't know how long he'd have to play the role, whether he'd be tailed, or...

He checked his rearview mirror just in case.

This was why his wife left him. He was *unavailable*.

He blew out a breath. He at least had to see Victoria to let her know he was interested, and that he'd be *unavailable* for a little while. Maybe, if she could hang in there long enough for him to get through this, there would be hope for a real relationship between them, or at least to see if there was anything between them besides fabulous sex. It wasn't as if he went undercover on a regular basis anymore.

Drake saved the message, just because he was that kind of sap, and called Paul back to tell him he had something come up and would have to take a rain check on the chili.

Paul laughed. "That something wouldn't happen to be a hot little number named Victoria, would it?"

"Fuck off," Drake said around a chuckle.

"Uh huh. That's what I thought."

Drake grinned and shook his head. "I'll call you tomorrow. G'night."

He headed straight home for a shower, shave, change of clothes, and ice for his lip. He didn't want Victoria to see him looking quite this bad.

* * * * *

Vicky sat on the sofa in her little cottage, staring at the phone. On TV was a rerun of one of the *Law & Order* series, but she couldn't concentrate on it. A new romance novel sat on the end table, still closed and unread after a week.

She couldn't believe Drake hadn't called. And it'd been hours since she left him a message at the number he'd given her last week in the salon after they'd debated the worthiness of a security system for the place.

He'd been insistent, but her shop was in a great part of town, and she'd been there for a little over five years without one single incident. She couldn't bring herself to put out a lot of money for a full-blown security system with monitoring services, although she had appeased him by agreeing to at least look into improving the door locks.

Several days later and Drake hadn't called. She wondered if he was pissed off because she wouldn't listen to his advice, or maybe he was ticked because she wouldn't pay him to put in a system.

She'd been sure they had a deeper connection than that. If he was such a jerk that he couldn't stand a woman who said no, then she didn't need him.

Narrowing her eyes at the phone, she tried to work up a good temper. She hadn't dated much in the last few years. She knew what she wanted and would accept no less. But what she wanted was damn hard to find.

Obviously she'd been totally wrong about this guy, because she'd really thought they connected. She'd hoped maybe he was the one. There was a spark between them that wasn't completely sexual, or so she'd convinced herself. Last week, after he'd fulfilled her sexually like no other man ever had, he'd kissed her. In that kiss she'd felt so much more than *just sex*.

There was a tenderness, a longing. She'd felt it, but had he?

Her temper didn't flare. Instead, disappointment weighed her down, and she flopped onto her side, hugged a throw pillow to her chest, and stared at the television.

Oh well. It was nice while it lasted, which had only been one night—two if one counted her TPC fantasy date—but she feared in that short span he'd ruined her for any other man. All she wanted was him. All she thought about was him.

Maybe the folks at TPC knew what they were doing when they made that rule about no outside contact. She sighed.

She must have drifted off to sleep because the doorbell chime startled her so bad she yelped and rolled off the couch, hitting her elbow on the coffee table as she flailed. "Ow. Ow. Ow." She rubbed the offended bone and climbed to her feet as the bell rang again and again with annoying insistency. "I'm coming!" she called, ticked off that someone disturbed her nap. Better not be some religious group or vacuum cleaner salesman, or they were really going get a piece of her mind. Not even a Girl Scout would be safe from her wrath at this moment.

With a scowl on her face, she jerked the door open and sucked in her breath in surprise.

Drake stood there, one arm propped on the doorframe, a finger poised over the doorbell. He raised an eyebrow. "Smart thing would be to ask who's at your door before you open it."

She wanted to jump into his arms and kiss him. Then his words registered, and she wanted to smack him. Instead, because her elbow hurt and he had the nerve to get all high and mighty again, she crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. "Sure. And every burglar's going to stand there being annoying with my doorbell?"

A half grin curved his lips. "Okay, I'll give you that one."

"What are you doing here?" The porch light was off, and she could barely see him, so she reached over to the wall and flipped it on.

He flinched at the sudden brightness. "You called and invited me."

"Oh my God!" She frowned deeper, grabbed his arm, and pulled him inside. "What the heck happened to your face?" She kicked the door shut and all but dragged him through the short entry hall and into the kitchen, where she flipped on the overhead fluorescent light. Then she turned to examine him. His bottom lip was swollen, split, and bruised. "Well? How'd you do that?"

Drake snickered. "Walked into a door?"

She rolled her eyes. "You need some ice." She turned to get some from the freezer, but he caught her arm and dragged her back, pulling her hard against those gorgeous planes of his body.

"I already iced it. It's not gonna get much better than this tonight."

"Does it hurt? It looks like it hurts."

"It's felt better." He smiled. "I've had worse." He cupped her cheek, stroked his thumb over her chin. "I missed you." Then he leaned down and very lightly brushed his mouth against hers.

"You did?" She stuck her bottom lip out in an imitation of a pout. "You didn't call me. I thought you didn't want to see me again."

"You didn't call me, either, 'til today," he said in a tone that made her want to smack him. It was so matter of fact.

She sighed. "I called last time. Thought it was your turn."

"I didn't know we were taking turns," he said with a small smile. "I wasn't sure you wanted to see me again. Thought maybe last week was a one-time thing."

Her heart squeezed. "Is that what you want?"

He didn't answer for a long time, and she started to pull away, but he held her tight. "No, that's not what I wanted—what I want. That being said..." He sighed. "I'm working a case with Paul, the detective you met at Incognito."

She nodded. She remembered the man.

"I've been really busy all week with it, and after tonight, I don't

think I should see you until the bad guys are arrested."

She frowned again. This sounded an awful lot like a brush off to her.

"Don't look at me like that, Victoria," he scolded. "I want to see you, but I'm not about to put you in danger."

"You're serious? What you're doing is that dangerous?" She *really* didn't like the sound of that.

"It might be. I'm doing some undercover stuff for Paul, and these guys are some nasty people." He swiped his swollen lip with the tip of his tongue.

"I didn't realize that being a P.I. was all that dangerous. I mean, I watched *Magnum P.I.* when I was younger, but that's TV. I figured you were more like one of those guys who follow around cheating husbands, taking pictures from the bushes."

He chuckled. "And cheating wives."

She laid her hands flat against his chest, loving the feel of his hard pecs under the soft fabric of his dress shirt. He smelled good, too. Shower fresh with just a splash of citric-scented cologne. Then she raised her fingers to his wounded lip. "And this? That *door* you walked into... It was one of those people you're investigating?"

He nodded.

She went up on tiptoes and kissed him again, very gently. "Okay," she whispered as she laid her head on his shoulder.

"Okay?" he asked, his voice rumbling through her.

She shrugged, trying not to let the danger of his job worry her. "It's what you do. I can accept that. It's just something else that makes me like you more. You wouldn't do it if it weren't important to you, to your friend, Paul. That's very heroic."

He held her tight and rocked her from side to side just a bit. "I'm not a hero, and this really isn't my job. Normally I do follow people around, or look for missing people. Mostly I test security systems and write reports for those who hire me." He rested his cheek against her temple. "But this case deals with something I'm pretty passionate about, and when Paul asked for my help, I didn't think twice before I said yes."

"I knew there was something special about you," she murmured.
"Just be careful, okay?"

"Okay."

"I'll worry, but I'm glad you are who you are." She leaned back so she could look at him. "Do you have to run off, or..."

"Or?" He raised his eyebrows in a look of interest.

She grinned. "My bedroom's just down the hall." She pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. "And I do still have a pair of handcuffs this cop left on my nightst—" She yelped as he lifted her off the floor and over his shoulder.

Then she laughed as he dashed down the hallway toward her room.

Chapter Seven

"Must be a man on your mind," Anita said when she walked into Vicky's office to collect her purse and paycheck.

Vicky sat at her desk, her hand poised over the computer mouse and a smile on her face. At Anita's words, she glanced up. Heat warmed her cheeks. She had been thinking of Drake and the marvelous night they'd spent wrestling around on her bed and making love. He'd been playful, gentle, dominant, and so insatiable.... She sighed just thinking back on it now.

She'd almost called in sick to recoup her missed hours of sleep, but it being payday, as the salon's owner she really had to report to work.

"What makes you think that?" she asked in an innocent tone, knowing her unquenchable smile would give her away.

"I'm old, but not blind, *chica*. I know that look on your face. It was the same one I wore when I met my Eduardo—God rest his soul."

Vicky cleared her throat, not at all sure whether she wanted to consider a comparison between her budding relationship with Drake and Anita's 40-year marriage to her high school sweetheart.

"What's his name?" Anita asked while Vicky powered down her computer and prepared to leave. With it raining outside, she was determined to take Anita home even though she needed to come back to finish up a few more things before calling it a night.

"Drake. And don't go making plans to call for a priest."

"Why? Is he Protestant?"

Chuckling, she handed Anita her paycheck, gathered up her own purse, keys, and flicked off the light on their way out. Anita had made it obvious over the last couple of years that she hoped Vicky would find a man of her own. The well-meaning grandmother had even coaxed a divorced nephew to come in for a haircut once as a way of playing matchmaker.

"We've only been together a short while. Wait here." Vicky ran to her two-door hatchback and drove it up closer to the front door to save Anita from a drenching. They chitchatted about Anita's grandkids, a favored topic, on the drive into Little Mexico, and Vicky dodged a few more inquisitive questions about Drake. The wipers provided a rhythmic beat in the background, and street lamps offered a hazy orange glow across the slick blacktop.

Despite the foul weather, business seemed to be active at the sleazier joints they passed. She glanced at Anita but didn't bother to ask why the sweet lady hadn't moved out of the neighborhood now that it had been overrun by shadier commercialization. The little brick house with the matchbox-sized yard and tiny iron fence had been her home for decades. There were too many memories that kept her there.

Pressing the break, Vicky said, "Here we are," as the car rolled to a stop.

Anita patted her hand on the gearshift. "Thank you, *chica*."

"Stay dry."

Anita grinned. "See you Monday." She got out, and Vicky waited until she'd made it onto the porch and opened the front door before she slipped the car into gear and made a U-turn to head back to the salon.

She'd just adjusted the volume on her radio when a blurred movement and red brake lights in front of her made her slam on the brakes. Her car stopped just in time for her to spot a young, bedraggled girl who'd darted between two parked cars and into the street in front of her.

The girl slapped the car that had braked in front of Vicky's, screaming, "*Ayudame!*" The other automobile slowed to a crawl but didn't stop. The other driver seemed more angered than concerned for the

drenched pedestrian.

Bam! The girl slapped both hands on the hood of Vicky's car and turned panicked eyes toward her. "*Por favor. Help me!*" She screamed the words so loud, Vicky heard them over the radio and the pounding rain on the roof of the car.

Where'd she come from?

A car horn blared behind her. Vicky started to look around.

"Please!" The girl lurched to the side of the car and jerked the handle of the passenger door. Vicky hit the power button and unlocked it.

"My God, what hap—"

The wet and terrified girl dashed into the car and yanked the door shut. She whipped around in the seat to look out the back window. "Go, go, go! *Vaya rapido!*"

Vicky hit the gas.

What have I done?

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel, and she cast alarmed glances at the girl. With as little as the girl had on, she couldn't possibly have a weapon, and by the looks of her, Vicky would guess her age to be mid-teens, no more than fifteen, sixteen *max*. Her raven hair was plastered to her head and neck. Her flimsy, tattered shirt clung to her thin body, and her feet were bare. The girl's tiny fists pulled at the shirt to try and cover herself, but it was evident that she wore nothing else.

As the beams from passing streetlamps swept through the car, Vicky thought she could make out bruises on her wrists, arms, and face. The stranger was just a child! Where were her parents?

"Gracias, señora. Muchas gracias."

Although Vicky understood the thank you, she said, "I don't speak Spanish."

"Sorry," the girl said, twisting around to face forward and ducking down in the seat. "Thank you very much. You saved my life."

Saved— From whom?

Though her accent was thick, she was easy to understand after Vicky had worked with Anita so many years.

"I'm Vicky."

"Carlita."

"My cell phone's in the side pouch of my purse, Carlita. You can use it to call 9-1-1."

"No!"

Vicky looked at the girl and then eyed the road once more.

"Sorry. I cannot go to the *policía*."

"Why not?" Vicky frowned. "If you're running from the law, I can't—"

"No. Run from bad men, but I—" The girl burst into tears, intense sobs, her shoulders shaking. She began to mutter things, but since they were in Spanish, they didn't help Vicky understand anything more than she did already, and her own imagination ran rampant with frightening possibilities.

Vicky's own eyes stung with tears as she navigated the rain-slick streets and let the girl's crying jag run its course. As she wound through traffic, she debated whether to take the girl to the hospital or the police station. Carlita was hurt, scared, and running from bad men. She *needed* more help than Vicky could give her.

"Why don't I take you to the hospital so you can have that looked at?" Vicky gestured toward the darkening bruise that swelled the girl's left cheek.

Carlita shook her head and kept her face lowered. "Please, I cannot go to a hospital."

"Why not? They can help."

"I am..." She shook her head again. "The men. They will find me there."

"Well, I can't just drive around all night."

Carlita looked at her then, an unspoken plea in her moist eyes.

Sitting at a red light, Vicky stared back. The girl's bottom lip quivered as she tried to suppress more tears. When the light turned green, Vicky sighed. "All right. You can come home with me tonight, but on one condition."

"Anything. I do anything. Please."

"You have to tell me and a friend, if I can get in touch with him—"

"No *policía*."

"He's not the police." *At least not anymore.* "He's a good man, and he can help you if you trust me and tell us about who's after you. Can you do that?"

After a lengthy hesitation, Carlita slowly nodded. "I cannot go back to those men. They will kill me."

Vicky's chest constricted, and her stomach turned. What had this poor child endured?

Carlita's fingers tugged and picked at the hem of her soggy shirt all the way to Vicky's home.

* * * * *

Drake yawned and checked the display on his digital Nikon. He had all the evidence he needed. This woman was going down, and boy was she stupid. One would think that a woman cheating on her husband would be a tiny bit discreet. But no, most weren't. They never thought their poor sap husbands would suspect a thing, so having their lovers come over to their houses while the husband was supposedly on a business trip was perfectly okay.

The husband was actually in a hotel downtown for the night. He'd set up this sting two weeks ago, which was the only reason Drake was here. He was tired after not getting much sleep last night because he and Vicky...well, neither of them could seem to get enough of each other. They'd played, they'd made love... They'd really connected. And they'd barely slept. This morning they'd showered together before they went their separate ways—Victoria to her salon, he off to follow Mrs. Lansing around all day.

Of course, he could've napped most of the morning and midday, had he known lover boy wouldn't show up until just before dinner. So he'd trailed the lady to the gym, the different shoe stores, and a day spa where she spent a crazy amount of time—how much time was really necessary to get a massage, a facial, or paint fingernails?

"Lifestyles of the rich and faithless," he muttered as he zoomed in

the high-powered lens and clicked a few more pictures of the adulterers as they stood near the window in the married couple's bedroom and made out while they stripped off each other's clothes. God, they were stupid. At least shut the blinds so the whole damn neighborhood didn't have to watch. He'd already got his "money shot" when the guy planted a French kiss on Mrs. Lansing upon his arrival, so the rest was extra icing on the cake.

Mr. Lansing sold insurance, made a modest living, and seemed like a nice enough man. His wife, on the other hand, was a knockout and, thanks to an inheritance, richer than Midas. Mr. Lansing had told Drake there was a prenuptial agreement that would be totally void if either of them cheated. Mr. Lansing was about to get himself a real nice settlement.

Drake's cell rang, and his heartbeat stalled. He'd been waiting to hear from *El Jefe*, and if this was it, he'd have to go even if he was dead on his feet. He pulled the phone out of the leather sheath at his side and checked the caller ID. It wasn't *El Jefe*, but his heart still beat a little too hard. He flipped the phone open.

"You don't take instructions well, Victoria. I think I'll have to pun—"

"Drake, I'm sorry to call you, but this is important."

He sat up straighter and set his camera on the passenger seat. Victoria sounded distressed, almost panicked. "What is it, babe? What's wrong?"

He heard a shuddery breath. "I didn't know who else to call. I have a...uh...situation I don't really know how to deal with."

"Are you hurt?"

"No—"

"Did something happen at the salon? Did you have a break-in?" He checked his watch; it was just barely after seven. "Are you sick?" he asked, his mind running through every possible scenario he could think up.

"No. I'm fine. I'm okay. It's just that I have..." She paused. "Is there any way you could come over?"

"Victoria," he said calmly. "This isn't another ploy to get me—"

"I have a girl here who needs help."

"A girl?"

"She was beaten and...and possibly more, and she won't go to the police or the hospital. I don't know what to do with her. She said she trusts me enough to tell me what happened, but I wanted someone else here, too, and since you were a—well, you know—and since I—"

"Shh, babe. Okay. Shh. Sorry." He'd actually hoped she was trying to trick him into coming back to her place. He'd watched his six all day, and there'd been no sign of a tail, so he didn't think *El Jefe* had sent any of his goons to check him out, yet. That wasn't good for Paul's case if *El Jefe* wasn't interested in selling him some girls, but it made it safe for him to see Victoria again.

He started the car, checked for traffic through the rain, which was thankfully easing some, and pulled out onto the street. He was all the way across town from Victoria's house. "How did this girl come to be in your house?"

"I'd just taken Anita home after work and was heading back through Little Mexico—"

"What the fuck were you doing in Little Mexico? And how long ago? Tonight? After dark?"

Pause.

"I'm a big girl, Drake. Don't talk to me as if I were a child. Anita is sixty years old, and I often take her home, especially on a night like tonight. I wasn't going to let her ride the bus and have to walk the rest of the way. Now shut up and listen."

He swallowed back a curse and ground his teeth. He'd deal with her impertinence later. "Go on," he said, his voice tight.

"I'd just dropped Anita off and was heading back through Little Mexico when this half-naked girl ran out onto the street in front of my car and begged me to let her in. I did. She's really beaten up, and I am pretty sure she was... Well, anyway, she was wet and scared and hurt. She refuses to let me take her to the hospital or police station. I didn't know what else to do, so I brought her home. I need some help. I called you."

Victoria sounded pissed. He blew out a breath. A young girl,

half-naked, beaten and possibly more, in Little Mexico. A tingle tightened his scalp, and his stomach turned over. *Fuck*. No way had Victoria just gotten involved in Paul's case, had she? Fear trickled through him for her.

"I'm calling Paul. He needs to be there."

"She won't talk to a cop."

"She won't know he's one until she's ready to. Paul deals with abuse cases. He'll know how to handle her." He couldn't tell Victoria any more until he was sure. This might be nothing. A date rape, a domestic thing. Could be anything. Just because she was in Little Mexico didn't mean anything. He couldn't have Victoria involved in this shit.

"Okay," Victoria finally said. "Could you just...hurry?"

"What's she doing now?"

"I gave her some clothes to put on, and she's eating a bowl of soup and a sandwich. I don't know how long she's gone without eating, but she acts as if she hasn't had a real meal in days."

"I'll be there shortly," he said. "I need to call Paul."

"Thank you, Drake."

"You're welcome. And, Vicky, I'm glad you called me." If this had anything to do with *El Jefe*, it was a damn good thing she did. He disconnected the call after he heard her hang up and then hit the speed dial for Paul.

Two rings later, he heard, "Baxter."

"It's Drake. You busy?"

"You get a call?"

"Not what you're thinking. And hopefully not what I'm thinking. Could you meet me at Victoria's?"

"When?"

"Now. I'm across town but on my way. She lives about five or six miles from your place."

"Sure. Was just watching some TV with the wife. What's the address?" He liked how his friend caught the seriousness of his request and didn't need a lot of elaboration. Ask, and Paul was there....

Drake gave Paul Victoria's home address, then hung up when Paul said he'd be there in less than five minutes.

When he pulled up in front of Victoria's little house, Paul got out of his SUV he'd parked on the street. The rain had stopped, and the air smelled fresh and clean, mingling with the scent of the abundant flowers spilling from overflowing planters around Victoria's yard.

Drake extended his hand and shook Paul's. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem. What's going on?" Paul asked as they headed up the driveway.

"Not sure if it's anything, but my gut's telling me Victoria just stepped into your case by accident."

"Oh? How would an upstanding citizen do that?"

"She has an employee at her salon who lives in Little Mexico." Drake stepped onto the small porch and turned to Paul before giving him an overview of everything Victoria had told him on the phone.

Paul nodded, frowned. "It'll be good if she's a cooperative witness."

"Figured you'd be better at interrogating her than I would, since you deal with this stuff every day."

Paul made a face. "Yeah. Let's see what we have." He pressed the doorbell. "Glad she called you."

Drake blew out a breath. "Me, too. She's a smart woman."

Paul turned and grinned at him, opened his mouth to say something, but Victoria pulled the door open.

"Took you long enough," she said as she stood back to let the men into her home.

Chapter Eight

The girl sat curled in the corner of a loveseat, wearing a T-shirt that was too large for her little frame and cut-off sweatpants that came to her knees. Obviously Victoria's clothing. The girl's tanned face was bruised, her right eye a bit swollen, and she held an ice pack to her cheek. When she saw him and Paul, she didn't move, but there was a strong defiance in her glare.

Drake's stomach turned over in disgust that anyone could do that to a child, but he liked that she had the strength to have a look of murder in her eyes instead of defeat.

"Carlita," Victoria said as she sat down next to the girl and took her free hand, "this is my friend, the one I told you about, Drake Kavanaugh, and a good friend of his, Paul..."

"Baxter," Paul supplied.

Victoria nodded. "They're here to help you."

Both men moved to the sofa across the coffee table from Carlita and sat down so they didn't loom over her.

Carlita spat something in Spanish, which made Paul chuckle. He responded in fluent, smooth Spanish, and a hint of a smile touched the girl's lips, but a wary suspicion remained in her big, milk chocolate eyes.

Drake glanced at Victoria, but she shrugged. She was obviously as lost as he was when it came to the language.

Carlita stretched her legs and let her feet touch the floor. She set the ice pack on the coffee table and then looked toward Victoria.

"It's okay, sweetie. I'm right here, and these are very good men. You can trust them."

"I trust men before," Carlita said softly. "They were nice at beginning."

"I know," Victoria agreed as she squeezed the girl's hand with both of hers. "But I know these men. I trust them. I need you to, also, so they can help you."

"Police send me home." Carlita glanced at Paul then back at Victoria. "I cannot go home. They will find me there. They will hurt my mother and brother. I cannot go back."

Victoria was shaking her head as Carlita spoke. "No, sweetie. No police."

Carlita frowned, turned to Paul once again, and spoke in rapid-fire Spanish. Drake picked up the word *policía* a couple of times, and then Paul responded with a sigh and a simple, "*Sí*."

She'd picked Paul out as a cop right off. The girl narrowed her eyes on him and asked, "You?"

He shook his head. He wasn't a cop, not anymore.

She turned accusing eyes to Victoria and pointed at Paul. "He *policía*. Why lie?"

"I—" Victoria frowned. "They aren't here as police. Drake's my friend."

Paul switched to English. "I am not with INS. I, personally, will not send you home. I am here to help you stay safe so those men can't hurt you anymore. If you help us catch whoever did this to you..." He motioned to her wounded face. "If you help us catch them, they can't hurt you or your family, ever."

Carlita was silent for a long time before she asked, "If you get them, I can go home and be safe with my *madre* and *hermano*?"

"*Sí*," Paul said.

"But if I want to stay here...in America?"

"I can't make any promises," Paul said, "but if you help us, I could put in a good word with immigration, see about bringing your mother and brother here, since you're a minor. Maybe expedite channels to enable

you to remain here, if you want."

Carlita's smile was hopeful. She looked back to Victoria.

"It's true, sweetie," she murmured. "If the men are caught and put in jail, they can't hurt you or your family."

The girl took a deep breath. "Okay."

Victoria smiled and touched the girl's cheek. "You tell Paul and Drake everything, okay? Just like you promised. We won't let anyone hurt you ever again."

Carlita looked at Paul, glanced at Drake and Victoria as if dismissing them, then back to Paul.

"It's okay," Paul said, sitting forward and leaning his elbows on his knees. "Can you start at the beginning? Tell us where you're from?"

"Monterrey, Mexico."

"How long have you been in America?"

She shook her head. "A few days."

"Okay," Paul said. "How did you get here? Why are you afraid for your family?"

"My brother, he is sick. My papa, he is dead last year. My *madre* cannot pay for Jesus' medicine. A man come. He say he is looking for women to work in restaurants in America. He say no to *Madre* when she ask for job. He no pay for her to take me and Jesus. I say I go with man and work for him, send money to her for Jesus. The man, he give *Madre* little money and say there will be more. America is land of gold."

"So he brought you here?" Paul asked.

She nodded. "We fly to Miami. He say I am his niece when they ask who I am. He say I no speak English, but I do. My *madre* made sure I learn as child. He had papers for me so I am legal here. Say I get green card soon. I work for one year for him, then I be free in America, and maybe *Madre* and Jesus come."

"How old are you, Carlita?" Paul asked.

She glanced at Victoria, who nodded for her to go on.

"I am fifteen."

"Sonofabitch," Drake muttered.

Victoria glared at him.

"Sorry," he said a bit louder.

The girl had no idea the kind of future the man promised her. Even if he'd been a restaurateur, if he had lived up to his part of the bargain and let her go free in a year, she would be sixteen. No high school diploma. No way to support herself much less afford to bring two others into the country.

"Go on, honey," Victoria said.

The girl's bottom lip trembled, and her big eyes filled with tears. "It is not restaurant." A soft sob broke free, and she swiped away the tears with the back of her hand. "He bad man. He give me to others."

"So he's not the one you were running from?" Drake asked.

"No. He say he go back to Mexico, get more girls."

"Do you know the name of the place where this man took you?"

"Tacto Suave."

Shit! Drake's stomach quivered with excitement and dread. This was it! This was exactly what they needed. Carlita could prove to be the answer to their prayers. She hadn't been in the country long enough to be a witness in the unsolved murder cases, but she could help in the human trafficking case. They were going to take *El Jefe* down, on one charge or another, if...

He glanced at Victoria, and worry marred the elation. He would've given anything to not have her involved, even if what she'd done had been the right thing to do.

"Do you know the name of the man who came to Monterrey?" he asked.

"Peter Valdez."

Most likely an alias, but it was a start.

"But Peter is not the one who in charge here. I do not know his name." Her lip trembled and more tears glistened. "He try to hurt me. Want me to do bad things." Her voice rose. "I good Catholic girl! I do not do that!" She turned those big eyes on Victoria, who had tears shining in her eyes. "You save me. Thank you. Thank you. I do not do things that man want. Not ever!"

Victoria smiled and lifted the girl's hand to her lips and kissed the

back. "You're welcome, sweetie. I'm glad I was there for you."

"Do you know him by any name?" Drake piped in, unable to keep his hope contained.

"*El Jefe*," she said, spitting the word as if it tasted bad. "They all call him *El Jefe*. He is not *my* boss. He is pig!"

Paul asked, "So, Peter Valdez brought you to the cantina and gave you to this *El Jefe*?"

She shook her head. "Peter give me to men who work for *El Jefe*."

"Their names...?" Paul queried.

She shrugged. "I only hear one called Marco. He is brother of big man. Big man is mean, but he is slow. And Marco is *estupido*. That is how I got away. *El Jefe*..." She shuddered. "He tear my clothes. He touch me, and I spit on him, knock drink all over him. He hit me hard...onto floor. I act like I..." She spouted something in Spanish.

Paul said, "Unconscious."

"*Sí*. I hear him tell Marco to take me to his office. He pick me up, carry me down hall. I catch him by surprise, bite his ear and scratch his eyes. He drop me, and I run. Big man see me, but he too big and slow to run. Another man, he was on other side of cantina behind bar, so he no catch me either."

Drake ran his tongue over his healing lip. The little fucker who busted his lip was Marco. Brother of the Andre-the-Giant goon. If the "big man" was still smarting from his bathroom brawl, that might've helped slow him down enough to enable the girl's escape tonight. If so, Drake's busted lip was well worth the price.

"This *big man* you spoke about. Did he have a broken hand, maybe a limp?"

The girl nodded.

Drake grinned, but Carlita's eyes widened.

"You know him!"

"Calm down," he said, trying to reassure her, not wanting her to fear him. "We've met before when he broke his hand. I gave him that limp, so he's no friend of mine. I can't stand the man. Don't worry. You won't ever have to go back there."

The girl breathed a sigh of relief.

"You said you have been here a few days?" Paul asked.

Carlita nodded again.

"What have you been doing until today?"

She frowned. "I was in locked room. I could not get out. Women came and talk to me, tell me it is not so bad if I do what *El Jefe* say. They will not hurt me if I do as he say. I say okay. I do what he say. But I want to leave. I am confused. This is not what Peter say it was like. He tell *Madre* I have little apartment of my own over pretty little Mexican restaurant. I work, I make money, tips, he say, and I send money to *Madre*. This is not right. I sit in little room on dirty bed and cannot leave. They feed me...." She made a face. "It is bad food. I do not eat it. I think it make me sick.

"Then, today, big man come to room and tell me follow him. We go through cantina like when we get there. Man at table tell me call him *El Jefe*. He dressed nice. He smile at me. Ask me nice questions about *Madre* and Jesus. I think it be okay now. He say I be one of his new girls. Ask me if I want to work for him, get money to send home. I nod, and Marco laughed.

"Then man at table tell me to take off clothes. When I do not, he slap me. When I still do not, he hit me hard." She touched her bruised cheek near her eye. "I so scared, I start to take off clothes, but I too slow. He rip my clothes and push me onto table. I spit on him and fight..." Her voice trailed off, and those big child-like eyes filled with tears again.

"So you ran away," Victoria said, finishing for her.

Carlita nodded as the tears spilled down her cheeks. "I run to save my life, I think. I run because I no do that ever."

Paul was nodding. Victoria put her arm around Carlita and held her. Drake wanted to inflict some damage, so he got up and paced behind the sofa that Paul sat on. He wanted to ask Paul if he thought *El Jefe* would write off the girl or search for her, but he didn't want to worry the girl or Victoria. The chances of *El Jefe* tracking them down were slim. He doubted *El Jefe* was powerful enough to have informants on the force, but he'd make sure Paul kept Victoria's name out of police records until they'd

solved the case.

Paul blew out a breath. "Okay, Carlita. This is what's going to happen. You come with me tonight, and I put you in a place called a safe house. You will have police guards with you all the time to keep you safe. You can stay in this place, usually an apartment or motel room, until we catch *El Jefe* and the others."

"Locked in room," she said with a scowl on her face.

"No, sweetie, not like that," Victoria said. "You'll have everything you need, right Paul? Food and clothing. And you'll be safe."

"Right," Paul said. "It's just for a little while until we catch these men and put them in jail. And then, after that, we'll put you with a foster family who will take care of you until the trial. You'll have to answer a lot of questions, more than you have tonight, but once this is all over, you'll be free to go home to your mother and little brother or maybe stay here and go to school."

She turned to Victoria and whispered something.

"Shh, it'll all be okay," Victoria said. "I know it's scary, but you're safe now. You'll be okay. Paul will make sure of that."

"Promise?" Carlita asked, sounding so damn young and innocent.

"I promise," Paul said. "Trust me; no one will hurt you again."

"I trust man before," she whispered.

"Paul is a good man, though, Carlita," Victoria said. "A police man who will do everything he can to make everything right."

"*Policía* are not always good," the girl said. "They do bad things, too."

"This one is good. I promise. I'd never send you away with anyone who would harm you. You trust me, don't you?" Victoria asked.

Carlita nodded.

"It's your choice," Paul said. "Will you come with me now, Carlita, so I can take you to the police station and talk to my boss? We can have you settled into a nice place to sleep in just a couple of hours, and there will be a woman with you at all times."

"Vicky?" she asked with hope in her tone.

"No," Paul said. "Victoria cannot be there, but maybe after you're

settled she can come to visit." He looked to Victoria, and she nodded.

"I'll visit. I promise."

"I can even arrange for you to be able to call and talk to your mother. Would you like that?"

Carlita finally smiled and, with a nod, said, "I go then."

Victoria smiled and hugged the girl before standing up and helping Carlita to her feet. "That's good. You be as brave as you were today. I know you are."

Drake stood back as Victoria walked to the front door holding Carlita's hand.

"I'll call when she's settled," Paul said to them, and Drake nodded.

"Thank you," Carlita said again, hugging Victoria.

"You're welcome, sweetie. Just listen to Paul. He'll take care of you, okay? Oh, hold on." Victoria pulled open a narrow door in the entryway and bent over. When she stood, she held a pair of white, flip-flop-style sandals. "Take these, too. You'll need them until Paul gets you some real clothes that fit."

Carlita slipped them on. "Thank you," she said again, then followed Paul out the door.

As soon as Victoria shut the door, the brittle smile she'd held fell, and she walked past Drake into the kitchen without saying a word.

He watched her close the bread bag and put the lid on a jar of peanut butter. Her shoulders were stiff, her motions jerky. As he approached her, he could see the tense line of muscles in her neck.

"Hey," he said softly, placing his hands on her shoulders.

She stopped her busy work and stared straight ahead at the cabinet door in front of her.

"You did good tonight." He kneaded the knots in her shoulder muscles.

She slammed the side of her fist against the counter. "I want to find those assholes and...and..." She lifted the butter knife from the counter and jabbed the rounded tip into a wooden chopping block. "She's just a *baby!*"

"I know." He slid his hand down her arm and peeled her fingers

from around the knife's handle. Then he turned her to face him. "We're going to get him, all of them."

There were no tears in her eyes, as he'd expected. No, what he saw there was hot fury.

"What do you mean, we? You're not a cop anymore, and I..." Her tone was fierce, angry, had barbs he could have let sink into his skin.

He didn't, though. He understood. She had no one to lash out at but him. "We," he said, his voice low and even, "meaning me and Paul. *El Jefe* is the asshole I've been working with Paul to take down."

Her mouth dropped open. "He's the *door* you walked into?"

He smiled. "Not exactly. That was one of the *other assholes*."

"The big guy," she guessed.

He chuckled. "Unfortunately, it was his little brother, Marco. Lucky punch, but that's not important." He tucked her hair behind her ear. "Listen. You saved that girl's life tonight. We think *El Jefe* has been responsible, in one way or another, for two other girls' deaths. Carlita was very lucky to get away alive."

"You mean he does this..." She frowned and fisted her hands in his shirt. "You mean—"

"They work as whores in his cantina where he holds them captive, keeps them prisoner. Once they're there, there is usually only one way out."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Victoria muttered, but she didn't push him away. She laid her forehead against his shoulder. "Why you? You're just a..."

"An adulterer chaser?" he asked, trying to lighten the mood.

She nodded against his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her. A warm sense of déjà vu settled over him. He liked it, even if the situation wasn't ideal. He loved having her in his arms.

"How did you get involved with Paul on this? Why you?" she asked again.

"Because I worked a very similar case in Chicago. When Paul asked me to do some stuff that the local police can't, I didn't hesitate."

She leaned back and looked him in the eye. Some of the wildness

had settled in hers, but she still looked ready to kill if she had the chance to get her hands on the creep who'd hurt Carlita. "Why aren't you a cop anymore? Why'd you quit?"

He drew in a deep breath. "I'm not sure I want to tell you that."

She frowned. "Did you do something illegal?"

"No." He didn't take offense. A lot of guys who went as deep undercover as he did often stepped too far over the line. He hadn't been one of them, which was why... "My last case was with vice. When the bust happened, I was arrested with the rest of them. Someone in the jail, a nobody I'd busted a year earlier on a minor drug charge, fingered me as a cop. I became a liability to the department, and..."

"And?" she asked, her big blue eyes wide with interest.

"You've seen the scar." He let go of her with his left hand and touched the right side of his chest just above his pectoral muscle and right below his collarbone.

"You really were shot, weren't you? I thought..." She laid her hand over his and interlaced their fingers. "I'd kind of hoped it wasn't what I thought it was."

"A week after that bust, I was coming out of my apartment. Drive-by shooting. I was hit, but so was someone else. A kid on his bike... He'll never walk again."

"I'm so sorry, but it wasn't your fault."

He nodded but still felt the weight of remorse. "I recognized the shooter. He was a cousin of the guy we busted as a major distributor of meth. They got him, but I wasn't left much of a choice. There were too many family members, too many *friends* out to get me. Too many innocents who might get caught in the crossfire. So, I rehabbed, took early retirement, and decided to move south as soon as I could travel."

A part of him still felt bitter about that. He sometimes questioned whether it had been the right decision. Maybe he should've stayed whatever the cost. He looked at Victoria. But then again, he never would've met her...

"And now you're back doing undercover work for a police force you don't even work for." She shook her head, but he saw no censure in

her eyes, only concern. "The more I learn about you, the more I..."

"You...what?" he prompted hesitantly, unsure if he wanted to hear Victoria tell him she couldn't handle it—the worry, the fear, all of the excuses his ex-wife had given to justify her infidelity.

She smiled. "I like you a whole lot, Drake Kavanaugh."

But? He waited. When no *but* came, he released the breath he'd been holding and replied, "Good. The feeling's mutual." He smiled back and kissed the tip of her nose.

Her smile brightened and with it so did his thoughts about tonight, tomorrow, the future.

"We'll get him. I promise," he said after a bit. He just hoped the bastard called soon. If they could take *El Jefe* down during a buy, the same as they would for a drug bust, there'd be a hell of a lot more charges against him, and there'd be no way he'd get out on bail and possibly flee the state or even the country. And he'd go away for life if it could be proven that he was selling humans and murdering young girls.

"Are you sure Carlita will be okay?" Victoria asked, concern in her voice.

He nodded. "Paul works with women who have been through even more trauma than she has. He's good, he's gentle, and he knows what he's doing. That's how he met his wife." He pulled back and took her hand, then headed down the hall toward her bedroom.

"How?" She followed without any hesitation.

Chapter Nine

Drake figured they could both use something to get their minds off everything that had happened tonight. Conversation was good, and that's all he'd give her tonight if she wanted, but they didn't need to talk while standing in the kitchen.

"She hooked up with an abusive Dom at Incognito. Paul was the detective sent to interview her at the hospital."

"Really? Did he know her from the club? And I thought Kat said there was super high security. How could someone get hurt there?"

Drake stopped beside her high, king-sized bed and toed off his shoes. "A lot of things have changed at Incognito over the last couple of years." He climbed up onto the bed and waited until Victoria joined him. When she snuggled up next to him and he had his arms around her, he continued. "Because of Heather getting hurt, Kat upped the security measures to becoming a member. Background checks now for all prospective members." He propped his head on his hand so he could look down at her. "No one's been harmed since then. And then there was a big fire that gutted the place. It was closed down for a bit over six months. When Kat and Dalton rebuilt, they put in a state-of-the art security center that's monitored at all times."

Victoria nibbled on her bottom lip, a motion he found sexier than hell because it was so innocent. "Can I ask you a question, Drake?"

"Mmm hmm. Anything."

"Are we..." She made a face. "I haven't dated in a long time. I don't

know what's protocol, especially with someone like you."

"Someone like me?" he asked, not liking being stuck in some kind of category.

"Someone into places like TPC and Incognito."

"If I remember right, that's where *we* met. Twice."

She sighed. "I'm not criticizing. I admit I wanted to experiment, and I liked it, but I think maybe because it was you." She gave a small, elegant shrug. "You've obviously been doing it a while. Do you date women you meet there?"

He stroked her silky smooth cheek with his fingertips. "Victoria, I haven't dated anyone regularly since my divorce a year before I left Chicago. And I've been here for five years."

"Oh," she said on a little breath and dropped her gaze from his.

He tipped her chin up with his thumb. "Not until now, that is. TPC and Incognito were a way for me to play and not pay. No emotional entanglements. Suited me fine. And then I met this hot little diamond thief and had a night I'll never forget." He grinned. "She doesn't follow rules at all, and if she stays that way, there'll be lots of need for punishment, which I know she likes."

"So we're...a couple? Dating?"

"Aw, babe. I guess it'd be kind of hard to tell, huh, since we've only gotten together for sex?" He shook his head. "I promise, when this crap with *El Jefe* is finished and he's behind bars, I'm taking you out on a proper date, a night you'll never forget. Wine, roses, five-star dining."

Victoria laughed.

"I'm serious. If that's what you want, it's yours."

"I'd like that." She paused then asked, "A couple more questions?"

He nodded for her to go on.

"Are we exclusive?"

He frowned. She wanted to see other people while they were together?

She clarified. "Do you want to do your thing with TPC while we're seeing each other? Are you still doing things with others at Incognito?"

He shook his head. "Nope." Then he grinned. "I don't want to be

with anyone but you. That day I was in Incognito, I was only there to meet up with Paul and have a beer while we discussed business. I haven't been back there for *fun* since before that night." He cupped her cheek and leaned down to brush his lips over hers. "Of course, I'm not opposed to *doing things* at Incognito with *you*."

She smiled, her cheeks pinker than they were a moment before.

"When I'm in a relationship," he continued, "and I hope that I'm not totally off base by thinking that's where we're headed, I'm a one-woman man."

"Good," she said, relief obvious in that one word. "Katriona told me there were often *ménages* and things like that at Incognito, and I can see where some might like that kind of kink, but..." Her gaze captured his. "I don't share well."

Of that he had no doubt. He chuckled and kissed her again. "Me either."

"Another question," she said when he pulled back a bit.

"Go ahead." He was more than willing to indulge her tonight. He liked her curiosity, especially when it was aimed at him.

"How long were you married, why'd you get divorced, and do you have any children?"

"I thought you said *another*," he teased, "not three."

She grinned.

"I was married for five years, we divorced because I worked a lot and was never home, and no, no children."

"You want children?"

His heart stopped for an instant. And in that moment, he could see Victoria with a baby in her arms. His baby. But that was putting the cart before the horse. They barely knew each other—were just now discussing the possibility of a relationship, not marriage and children.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Victoria muttered, backtracking. "It was just a question."

"Yes, it was," he said. "And to answer it, yes, I want kids someday."

"Really?"

He nodded. "With the right woman. My ex wasn't the right woman."

"You said you weren't home. Because of your job?"

He nodded. "With the undercover work, I was gone for days, weeks, and a couple of times for months straight. She needed more."

"Did she find that *more*?" Victoria asked, narrowing her eyes.

He didn't want to answer, but he did. "Yeah."

"While you were married?"

He nodded.

"What a bitch."

Drake leaned back because of the vehemence in Victoria's voice and that killer gleam in her eye.

"You're off doing something good, and she's fucking around on you? Jeez, what a bitch. Good thing you got rid of her."

He raised his eyebrows, but grinned. "So, I take it you're a one-man woman?"

"I've never cheated on anyone in my life. If I don't want to be with you, you'll know before I decide to move on to something else." She sighed and rolled to face him. "Not that I see that happening anytime soon. I kinda like having you around, Drake Kavanaugh."

"Good. I like hanging around, Victoria Jean Casey." He kissed her again, this time a little longer, pressing his tongue between her soft, plump lips.

She pulled back, though. "One last question."

He took a deep breath and let it out as a long, overly dramatic sigh, but he couldn't stop his lips from twitching. "Yeah, sure. Why not?" he said, then winked.

She shoved his shoulder and laughed. "Do you ever have normal sex?"

He burst out laughing, and she shoved him harder, until he tumbled onto his back.

"I'm serious, you jerk. Can you just...can we just..."

He pulled her on top of him so she lay flat over him. She propped her forearms on his chest and looked him in the eye.

"Baby, I love to play. I loved handcuffing you to the bed the other night and tormenting you until you squealed. I love warming your ass with my palm, reddening it with my belt. That's all in fun, a release for the both of us. But if you want vanilla, I can be as soft and tender and gentle as you want...anytime you want."

"Vanilla's nice, too. I would like some soft and gentle tonight," she whispered, her breath warm and sweet against his lips. "After what I saw tonight, heard tonight, I don't think..."

He rolled to the side, his arms around her, and slowly moved over her. "I understand, babe. Totally understand." Then he grinned. "But we will revisit the fact that you mouthed off to me over the phone at a later date."

She chuckled. "Yeah?" Her tone turned cocky.

He nodded and reached for the buttons on the front of her blouse. "You were pretty bossy and obnoxious. Can't let you get away with that."

"Fine. Later," she said with a mischievous twinkle in her stunning eyes. "Now, shut up and kiss me, please. I need you."

Vicky's breath caught when Drake brushed his lips over hers. His touch was so delicate and affectionate, it made her eyes burn with tears. The horrors she'd learned of tonight vanished like a puff of smoke in her mind, and she relaxed into the plush mattress and closed her eyes. She trusted Drake to give her what she needed. He had before, and he would now.

She'd almost said that she loved him, but it was too soon to make declarations. Besides, she'd never been one to leap too early. In fact, most men she'd dated thought she was cold because she couldn't commit. She wanted commitment and love, to give and receive it. She just wanted to be sure, one-hundred-and-ten percent certain, before she made that leap. They'd only been seeing each other a short while. Her feelings for him were strong, but she wasn't the type to believe in love at first sight.

His soft lips tantalized hers. His tongue teased ever so lightly while his fingers finished with the buttons on her shirt. She feathered her hands through his silky hair and sighed when he kissed her cheek.

He was so strong, inside and out. She couldn't believe how lucky

she'd been to find him again, and she hoped with all her might this wasn't a passing fling. Knowing that they were exclusive helped ease some of her doubts. She'd spent too much time getting her business off the ground to seek out emotional ties. Those that she'd stumbled across... Well, better to not think of them while she was here with a man she admired for his heroism, his convictions, putting himself back in danger when he didn't have to.

"You okay?" he whispered against her ear as his fingers trailed over her ribcage.

She grinned and twitched away from his tickling touch. "Yes, I'm good."

"Mmm hmm, you are," he murmured then teased her earlobe with his tongue and teeth, making her tingle all the way to her toes.

His hair was so soft as she ran her fingers through it. His day's growth of whiskers tickled her flesh. His hand was warm and slightly callused when he trailed his palm down her side then back up.

Reaching down his back as far as she could reach, she grabbed handfuls of his T-shirt and tugged, pulling it from his jeans and up higher, so she could touch the smooth skin of his back, run her fingers over it, hold him close.

A rumbling sigh came from him as he settled more fully over her, sinking between her legs. There was no mistaking the hard bulge behind his zipper as it nestled against her pussy. She wanted to be naked with him, but she didn't want to rush this either.

His hot, moist mouth made little nibbles along her neck, her jaw. He pushed her blouse open wide and nipped her shoulder, that super sensitive spot at the base of her neck that made her moan.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered as he traced the lace edge on the top of her bra cup.

Vicky opened her eyes then and looked down at him. He wasn't looking at her breasts, but into her face. She smiled and skimmed one hand over his shoulder and touched his cheek. "I think you're beautiful, too."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Beautiful huh?"

She chuckled and nodded, dropped her hand to his chest, and laid her palm over his heart. "Especially in here."

They gazed into each other's eyes for a long moment, his smile fading, his gaze turning intense. "When you told me you picked up someone in Little Mexico, I wanted to wring your neck. I was so scared for you. It's so fucking dangerous down there, but you did the right thing. You made me very proud tonight, Victoria. I need you to know that."

Those blasted tears came again, and her chin quivered a bit.

"Shh," he said and kissed her, pulled back and gave her a look of mock horror. "Fuck! Don't cry. Don't you know what a woman's tears do to a man?"

She giggled, her tears still welled on her lower lashes. She tried to blink them away, but one slipped free.

He thumbed it away and smiled. "It's okay."

The urge to cry faded, thanks to his timely sense of humor and the sincerity of his gentle words. It was okay; everything was perfect when she was in his arms.

Serious once more, she murmured, "It was the only thing I could do."

He nodded, his mouth brushing hers. "I know, but not everyone would do what you did. And that makes you pretty damn special."

If he kept saying things like that, she'd melt into a pile of weepy putty in his hands. She couldn't remember the last time any man had complimented her like that. Not her body, but her heart. Her mind. The way she was.

"No more talk please," she begged as she threaded her fingers in his hair and then held him against her while she kissed him hard.

Drake groaned when her tongue slipped into his mouth to stroke against his. He reached under her and unhooked her bra then pushed it up out of the way before moving from her mouth down to her chest where he laved one nipple after the other.

Vicky arched into his mouth and sighed. Her tummy quivered as the passion spread through her, melting her, warming her.

Drake made quick work of opening her shorts and pushing them

down her legs along with her underwear. When he went up on his knees to pull off his shirt, she wiggled out of her blouse and bra. The clothes landed in a heap on the floor next to the bed. As he lay on his back to undo his belt, Vicky rolled over and sprawled against him, kissing his neck, licking his hard flat nipples.

"Damn, babe," he said, his breath a little short as he shoved his jeans down his legs then kicked them off.

She grinned when she looked down to see him hard and naked—except for his socks. "Cute."

He chuckled and pulled her up over him so he could kiss her again. When he rolled her beneath him, he settled between her thighs, the length of his cock pressed against her sensitive pussy lips.

Vicky moaned into his mouth and lifted her hips, trying to get him inside.

"Not yet," he said as he leaned up on one elbow to look into her eyes. "Slow and easy, babe." He kissed the corner of her mouth, her cheek. "Like you asked for...just like I promised." He then moved on to her breasts but didn't linger there long, just enough to tease her nipples to aching points. Then he moved down, his soft lips and moist tongue leaving a sizzling trail down between her ribs to her belly button, where he nipped.

Vicky giggled because it tickled a little. Drake looked up at her and grinned, then, still watching her, he dipped his tongue into her navel. She gasped at the zing of sensation that went through her. His cocky grin grew as he moved lower, nibbling over her hipbone, her upper thigh. Pushing her legs wider apart, he wiggled his way down the bed.

She moaned when his warm breath brushed over her curls. He kissed the inside of her right thigh, licked the left. She quivered, knowing what was coming, anticipating his smooth tongue on her.

She didn't have long to wait. His limber fingers spread her open and that glorious tongue of his took a long swipe, ending with a hard flick to her clit. Her hips rose off the bed, and she gripped the bedspread in her fists to keep herself grounded.

His tongue danced over her, keeping her on edge, teasing,

tantalizing. Her breasts ached, her fingers hurt from her tight grip on the blanket, her muscles tensed. She wanted to come, but he kept the pressure just a bit too light, the rhythm unsteady so she couldn't anticipate the next stroke.

She sobbed and bucked against his mouth, which rubbed his stubbly chin against her labia. A soft shout escaped her throat at the shock of sensation that touch caused, and he did it again, this time on purpose.

Bending her knees, she opened herself more fully to him, and he gave a murmur of pleasure, the sound rumbling through her, as he suckled her clit.

"Please," she begged. She needed the orgasm—craved the oblivion it would give her.

The pressure on her clit intensified the moment he suckled harder, and at the same time he slipped two fingers into her cunt.

She bucked again, his chin scraping on the sensitized, swollen flesh of her pussy lips. "Oh, God..." she moaned, unable to stay still because of his coarse whiskers, the deep thrusts of his fingers, and the pulsing suction on her clit.

But it was when he curled his fingers upward inside of her and stroked her G-spot that bright light exploded in a million shards of color behind her eyelids. She cried out as the deep, throbbing climax washed through her and stole her thoughts. It made everything disappear except the man between her legs and the sheer bliss of being able to let go, to be herself, with him.

"My turn," he mumbled against her flesh. He pulled his fingers from her cunt and moved up over her, brushed his lips across hers. "My turn."

She opened her eyes to see his dark, dangerous eyes filled with lust. With need for her. Forcing her fingers to open, she let go of the bedspread and wound her arms around his neck as he settled between her thighs, the tip of his cock teasing her clit.

She shivered and moaned, so sensitive down there. "Your turn," she said in agreement and wrapped her legs around his hips. "I'm all yours."

A wicked grin split his face as he wrapped his arms around her and slowly entered her. He sighed and laid his cheek against hers, held her snug against his body. His cock pulsed within her, reigniting her own pleasure. Perfectly still, he just held her, his warm breath in her ear.

Those blasted tears came again, and she dipped her head, burying her face against his neck. That was it. She knew she'd fallen. She was so in love with him she ached with it. She held him hard and tried to control her breathing, and she almost succeeded, but then he moved inside of her. A long, deep stroke out and back in, he pressed his entire body from pelvis to neck against her. She thought she could bury herself within him and never come out. He made her feel like the woman she'd always wanted to be. With him, she could be anything—be *herself*.

"Drake," she whispered.

He turned his head and kissed her lips, sank his tongue into her mouth with the same sultry tempo he fucked her pussy. It was good...so damn *good*. She clung to him, fought back the rising climax because she wanted to stay right here forever, just like this.

But Drake's soft grunts as he pumped his hips pushed her too close to the edge. The sounds of his pleasure, vibrating through from where their chests pressed together, were too much. And then he reached down with one hand, tilted her hips up at just the right angle for his cock to bump against her G-spot, and she lost the control she'd strived to retain.

With a cry into his mouth, she came, her inner muscles squeezing his cock tight, increasing the friction, and he ripped his mouth from hers, buried his head in the pillow next to her head, and shouted as he came...and came...and came.

Chapter Ten

They dozed for a while, though Vicky wasn't sure how long. The ceiling light was still on, and she was tucked against Drake, half under him. His hand held her breast, and one leg was over her thighs, keeping her pinned in place. She smiled at the proprietary hold he had on her and reached up to pet his silky hair.

He turned his head toward her and kissed her neck. "Hey," he murmured.

"Hey, yourself. I gotta pee."

He chuckled and moved to let her up. She rolled to the side and then slid off the bed to her feet. When she looked back at him, his hair was tousled, his eyes sleepy, and a sweet smile curled his lips. Her heart tipped a bit, and she hurried to the bathroom. Moments later, she rushed back to the bed, flipping off the light as she went, and snuggled against him.

"That was fast," he said as he wound his arm around her and pulled her up tight to his chest, her butt snuggled into the curve of his hips.

"Was afraid you'd leave if I took too long."

A long moment of silence met her admission. He rubbed his stubbled cheek against her head and pressed his lips to her temple.

"I'm not going anywhere tonight...if you don't want me to."

"Stay." *Forever.* She left the last of her plea unspoken.

"Okay." His hand snuck up her belly, back to her breast. He

cupped the weight in his palm, which made her smile.

"My turn."

Vicky frowned into the darkness. "I thought you had your turn."

"My turn to ask questions," he clarified. "You know my life history. Now I want to know yours."

She shrugged. "It's not so exciting." She'd led a rather boring, normal life, as far as she could tell.

"Ever married?"

"Nope. Engaged once when I was nineteen. But I smartened up before it was too late."

"Ah."

"What does that mean? 'Ah.'"

"Your reaction earlier to my ex-wife's infidelity. I figured you'd had a similar experience."

She nestled closer to him. No response was necessary. He'd read her so well.

"Siblings?"

She shook her head. "Only child. Father died when I was little. Raised by my mother who worked a lot to keep a roof over our heads. She's gone now, too."

"Sorry."

Vicky sighed. There were times she dearly missed her mother, but Anita was a good substitute when she needed an older woman's gentle guidance.

Then a thought hit her, and she turned toward Drake. "You're a P.I. If you wanted to know this stuff, why didn't you just—"

"No, babe. This is too important to dig through computer systems to find out."

She frowned at him, though she doubted he could see her expression. "What do you mean by that?"

"That means, Victoria, that I want to know you *through* you. I want you to want to tell me everything about your life. Share your past memories as well as your present with me. I'd never use my skills to find out about you. I only do that for my clients."

"Oh..." Yep. That did it. She was totally in love. And that was really scary.

* * * * *

Drake kissed Vicky, started to let her walk off, but then snatched her by the wrist to pull her back into another embrace. He enjoyed the sound of her joyful laugh even though he stopped it with a longer kiss goodbye.

He leaned against his vehicle and let the kiss linger, until she pulled away.

"I'm going to be late for work."

"The boss won't fire you," he said with a cheeky grin. He slid his hands down to cup her cute butt.

"I *am* the boss." She tried to push away.

"See?" He stole another quick kiss before he let her go and laughed. Damn, she put him in a fine mood, and he'd never been much of a morning person. "No worries."

She huffed good-naturedly and gave his hand a final squeeze. He watched her walk to her car parked in the open garage.

"Behave yourself," he called out and laughed at the smirk she tossed him before she slipped in behind the wheel.

He pulled out ahead of her, since he'd parked in the center of her driveway last night, and headed for his office.

He hadn't made it a mile down the road when his cell phone rang. He didn't recognize the number on the caller ID other than that it was a local call. He slid his wireless earpiece in place and flipped the phone open as he drove.

"Yeah?"

"*Tacto Suave*. You come—" It was the bartender. Drake recognized the voice.

"What about it?" As the potential buyer, he refused to take orders. And the last time he was there, the welcome party hadn't been too friendly.

"You want girls? You be at cantina tonight at eight."

"I don't deal with underlings."

"*El Jefe* wants to meet you. You want to do business? You come."

The line went dead.

Shit. It could be a trap. Had his man in Chicago come through for him with a background story?

On the way to his office, he called his friend and got the low-down on who had been checking up on him. When he walked into his office, his secretary was already at her desk.

"You're late, boss," Kelly said with a smile.

"And you're prompt as usual." He took the stack of mail she held out to him. "And brazen as ever."

"It runs in the family."

If only she knew. Kelly was the second cousin of Rachel Sinclair, former district attorney-turned-defense-council who was secretly married to the Masters of Sin of Incognito fame. Kelly didn't know about her relative's triadic lifestyle, but she hoped to follow in Rachel's professional footsteps. She was a second-year law student who attended classes part-time at a local college and was working for him to pay for the education.

He'd been worried at first because of her youth, but she'd proven herself to be a hard worker, and now he was damn glad to have someone meticulous enough to keep his clutter properly filed. He fucking *hated* paperwork.

"The Colbys called this morning. They're accepting your bid on the security system you recommended for their summer home in the Keys."

"Excellent." He thumbed through the mail as he headed for his desk. She followed.

"These are messages that came in yesterday after you'd left. None were urgent, so I figured they'd wait 'til today."

"Okay."

"And I'd like to have next Friday off, if that's okay?"

He looked up. "Sure. Finals?" He never could remember when those were. Kelly went to school year-round.

"No." She was actually blushing.

He reclined in his chair and smiled. "Mark finally popped the question?"

Kelly grinned, held up her left hand with a shiny new solitaire ring in place, and wiggled her fingers. "Over dinner last night. My mother's gonna drive down from Jacksonville to help me shop for a dress...and stuff."

"Congratulations, Kelly."

She beamed. "Thanks."

"Mark's a lucky young man."

"I know," she said with a wink and headed back to her desk, twirling around once to toss back a quick, "Thanks, boss."

He laughed. The giddiness of first love, he thought, and then the memory of Victoria's smile came to mind. "The giddiness of love," he amended.

The phone rang. He let Kelly answer it while he opened his mail. A few seconds passed, and then she said, "Paul's on hold on line one."

"Okay." He lifted the receiver and punched the button for line one. "Hello."

"Carlita has agreed to testify, and her mother is flying in with the brother to give her statement to the D.A. We can't prosecute the guy on what happened in Mexico, but the mother's testimony will corroborate the girl's. The D.A.'s arranging for a search warrant of the cantina now. We're planning on going in as soon as we have the judge's signature."

"Not before eight tonight, I hope."

"Why?"

"You want to ensure that *El Jefe* and his men are there, right? Otherwise, you'll have a manhunt on your hands, and with the men's connections to resources outside the U.S., well..." He let his voice trail off as his point was made.

"What's at eight?"

"I got a summons from the bartender at the cantina. My background checked out, of course, so *El Jefe* wants to meet to conduct a little business."

"I see," Paul answered.

"I have the chance to go in and collect more on the guy, see how big of an operation he's running here, and more importantly ensure he'll be there when your SWAT team moves in."

"Okay, but I want you wired."

"Not on me. It won't work. That'll be the first thing they check unless they're stupid, and the man doesn't strike me as dimwitted. I'm a stranger. My background might've checked out from afar, but I'll have to earn his trust. They catch me with a wire..." He didn't have to say he was as good as dead. They both knew the danger involved when Paul asked and Drake agreed to this operation.

The girl's testimony would be the ace up their sleeve, but without the rest of the cards, the case could still fall apart. They needed more so it wasn't the word of an illegal immigrant against that of a U.S. citizen and businessman—however shady that business might be.

"Drake, I don't—"

"Don't sweat it. I've done this before. I've got it covered, and with any luck, you'll have more evidence than your D.A. could dream of having...all on tape."

They spoke a while longer to go over strategies and plan B's. When he hung up with Paul, he rang the bank. He'd need a large enough sum of marked bills to be convincing, but not enough to get himself killed.

"Kelly!"

"Yes, boss?"

"Get my briefcase ready."

* * * * *

"Hey, Denise," Vicky called from her office. "If you want to do a final sweep-up, we could probably get out of here early today. No other appointments in the book."

"Sure thing," Denise said as she walked past the doorway of the office to fetch the cleaning supplies. "Hey..." She reappeared, stopped, and leaned her hip against the doorjamb.

Vicky looked up from her file cabinet. "Yeah?"

"Anita said you were seeing someone. Is it serious?"

The smile that curved her mouth was a sure giveaway, Vicky knew, but she tried for a nonchalant shrug. "Haven't known each other that long."

"Uh huh." Denise's tone said she was far from believing.

Vicky shut the file cabinet and stood up. "Plan on sweeping or not?" She motioned toward the broom and dustpan in Denise's hand.

"Come on, tell me *something*," Denise said, following Vicky to the front of the store. "I've had my nose buried in my studies so long, I don't even remember what it's like to get laid."

Vicky almost choked on her laugh. "Denise!" She glanced around the shop to make sure it was empty. "Who says I'm getting laid?" she asked just above a whisper. "I'm just seeing this guy—"

Denise dropped the dustpan to the floor and started sweeping, but turned and cocked an eyebrow at Vicky. "Well, I usually take out the garbage, and the other day..." Her grin was way too smug. "It's not every day that I find a condom in the waste basket."

Vicky groaned, wishing for once that her employees weren't quite so observant. Why hadn't she thought to take the trash out herself?

"And I didn't think it was Anita's," Denise continued, mercilessly. "But if it's not yours then I've gotta ask—"

"All right. It's mine...his...whatever."

"Thought so." Denise winked. "Besides, no one walks around with that goofy-assed grin on their face if they aren't getting any. Come on. Mom's not here, so you can tell me all about him. *Pleassssse*. Details. I'm dying here."

Denise referred to Anita as Mom because both of them were always on their best behavior around the older woman. Vicky saw it as a sign of respect for the woman's age and experience. Denise said it was like working around her grandmother; she always had to watch what she said.

"Really? You're not going to spill even a little? At least tell me his name. Is he's hot?"

Vicky chuckled as she straightened up the magazines on the table

between the dryers. "His name is Drake." She paused. "And, yes, *very* hot."

Denise sighed. "Thank God."

"You're bad. You should go find a man of your own."

"After finals, I will. Which reminds me, would it be possible to take off next—"

The bell over the door jangled, and in came Mrs. Bartlock, a forty-something regular of Anita's who had her nails done every other week. Behind Mrs. Bartlock, in fact being dragged by the woman, was a teenager with clown hair—red, green, blue, orange.

Vicky bit her lip. She had a feeling she knew what was coming. "Mrs. Bartlock, how good to see you. Anita's not working—"

"I'm not here for my nails tonight." She shoved the girl in front of her and gripped her shoulders. "Can you fix this?"

Vicky nodded as she bit her cheek to keep from grinning. The girl looked miserable, and her mother looked mortified. "Yes, I believe I can."

"Mom—"

"You shut your mouth, young lady," Mrs. Bartlock snapped. "She went off to a sleepover last night. Didn't come back 'til an hour ago, and look at this!" She gave the girl's shoulders a shake.

"Denise, why don't you run next door and get Mrs. Bartlock a cup of...?"

"A latte," Mrs. Bartlock said. "Please. Thank you. I'm sorry to barge in so close to your closing time, but I can't take her home. If her father saw this, he'd... Well, I'm not sure what he'd do, but I wouldn't be surprised if he got the dog clippers and shaved her head."

The girl gasped. "Mom!"

"You know he says his roof, his rules, and messing with your hair was one of them."

Denise ducked out the door, most likely trying not to let her laughter out. Vicky was having a hard enough time with that herself.

"Come on over here," Vicky said as she tugged the girl away from her mother's grasp and led her to her workstation. "Have a seat. Mrs. Bartlock, you can just have a seat over there," she pointed to the row of

comfortable waiting chairs near the door. "This is going to take a while, but we'll get her fixed up before you have to take her home."

Mrs. Bartlock sighed. "Thank you, Vicky. You're a good girl."

Vicky grinned and turned back to the daughter. "What's your name?"

The girl slouched in the chair. "Beth. And I figured if I did this, they'd let me cut it." She rolled her eyes. "They treat me like I'm four."

"Is this permanent?" She lifted a few strands of the bright orange.

Beth shook her head. "It's all temporary, but it didn't wash out like it was supposed to."

"Okay," Vicky said, then winked at her in the mirror. "We'll get it taken care of...and maybe a little trim? Couple of inches to even up the back?"

Beth glanced at her mother in the mirror. "Just a little," she whispered. "Dad probably won't even notice."

Vicky ran her fingers through the girl's brightly colored hair. A little layering, a little shaping maybe the girl would be happy enough not to do something stupid like use permanent color on her hair in rebellion next time. Vicky hated it when the kids did something like permanent black dye, and then they came crying to her to fix their completely damaged hair.

"Okay. Let's get this gunk out of there..."

Two hours later, Beth was thrilled with her hair, and Mrs. Bartlock was sure her husband wouldn't even notice.

"Just bring her in every couple of months for a trim."

"Thank you," Beth said, spinning to study the layered back of her long blonde hair in the mirror. "I love it!"

Vicky walked the pair to the door and turned the lock after they left. She yawned and looked around. She'd sent Denise on home at their normal closing time, since most of what she had to do to Beth's hair had been waiting for the color stripper to work.

Grabbing the broom Denise had left by the door, she swept up the trimmings from Beth's hair.

She wanted to call Drake. Just to hear his voice. But she'd promised

she wouldn't, so she didn't. She missed him though, especially knowing it could be days before she heard from him. She understood and even agreed; she really didn't want to be any deeper involved in what he was doing than she already was.

She wasn't sure if it was good to know what he was up to and how dangerous it was, or if it would be better to just be in the dark about the whole thing. Either way, she'd worry about him.

What she still couldn't believe was that someone—his wife—would cheat on him because he was off doing this kind of work. He amazed her. He was the type of man she'd always dreamed of having. He could be funny or serious. Gentle or... She grinned. Or very, very hard.

Vicky swept the hair into the dustpan and dumped it in the garbage. After putting the cleaning supplies away, she went into her office, turned off the computer, checked to make sure the safe was locked, and grabbed her purse. Just as she was turning to lock her office door, the sound of someone trying to get in the backdoor, trying to pick the lock, made her jerk around.

In that split second she had a choice, lock herself into the office and call the police—if they hadn't cut the landline—or race out the front and use her cell to call for help. She turned to run for the front only to come to a screeching halt when the glass of the front door shattered.

A man reached in, turned the lock, and blocked her only exit.

"The-the money's in the register," she said, keeping her voice steady even though she was scared out of her wits. Most of the week's deposit was in the safe locked inside her office, but she'd been so eager to get home, she hadn't bothered to clean out what little cash there was in the register. She hoped it was enough.

"Where's the girl, *puta*?"

The girl?

Vicky blinked, took a step back, then another. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, but realization dawned the longer she stared at the stranger.

I bit his ear, scratched his eyes... Carlita's words came to mind like a wave of arctic water.

The scratching at the backdoor grated on her already snapped nerves, but she inched in that direction anyway, hoping to reach the semi-safe sanctuary of her office in time.

The backdoor's lock clicked open. It was too late.

Vicky lunged at the man in front of her, trying to shove past him, trying to escape.

She failed.

The wiry weasel of a man, still sporting the wounds Carlita inflicted on his face, blocked her path, knocked her off-balance and into another much stronger man, who pulled her up against his body.

A cart toppled during the struggle. Bottles, combs, and rollers scattered.

She couldn't break the man's hold on her.

The weasel grabbed her neck in one hand and squeezed. She froze. He grinned. "You drive same car. Plate matches. So, no play games. Where's the little whore?"

Vicky remembered Carlita's tenacity, and that gave her strength to fight back. No way would she let these men harm that girl again, even if she did know where the safe house was, even if it cost her *her* life.

"Some place safe from the likes of you," she said and then spat in his face.

The man backhanded her across the face and whipped out a knife, the blade looking lethally sharp.

Ow! The guy was stronger than he looked. His punch hurt like hell. With the blade against her skin, terror sank in, and she cringed but didn't struggle.

His breath reeked of alcohol and tobacco. "No tell us now, *puta*? I cut you up, and we see if you talk then, eh?"

"I don't know where she is. I gave her money, took her to the bus station. I swear it," she lied.

Neither man seemed happy to hear that.

They spoke to each other in Spanish, and Vicky feared the worst.

"It look like you owe us a whore. I say you come with us, *puta*. *El Jefe* find way for you to pay him back for loss of girl."

The men laughed.

She screamed.

The brick wall behind her clamped his gloved hand over her mouth.

She bit as hard as she could, but since he didn't pull away, she figured she only got leather. She tried again, opened her mouth, and bit down. This got her hit in the side of the head, but the hand was gone long enough she managed to get another scream out before the hand clamped back over her mouth. Only this time it covered her nose, too, and she couldn't draw breath.

"Shut up," the weasel shouted, "or I think again and cut you up for good." Then he said something in Spanish to the one holding her.

He dragged her toward the backdoor, and any relief she might've felt vanished. No one out front on the sidewalk, passing by on the street, would witness them now. She couldn't scream for help. And no alarm would sound.

She struggled, kicked, tried to scratch the arm clamped around her, but the guy was surprisingly strong.

The alley was empty except for a few trash bins here and there. No one was around. She fought as best she could, trying to get the guy's hand off her mouth so she could scream despite the dire warning, but she couldn't even breathe!

She kicked his shins, clawed at his arms, but still he dragged her along as if she weighted nothing.

The other guy had pocketed his knife and opened the trunk of a dark sedan.

No, no, no! If they got her inside there, she was dead! She watched TV. She knew what happened to kidnap victims if they got shoved in the trunk of a car.

She put up an even stronger fight, gripped the frame of the car when he tried shoving her in.

A sharp pain to the back of her head.

Everything went black.

Chapter Eleven

Drake's split lip had healed enough to be undetectable when he entered *Tacto Suave* later that night, but Marco's big brother still sported a noticeable limp and a bandage around his hand. He growled at Drake as he stepped up to the bar.

Drake smirked. "Nice seeing you again, too. Where's the other guy?" He gestured along the counter to indicate he meant the man normally tending bar.

"Out."

He didn't know if going from strong-arm bouncer to back-up bartender was considered a demotion in these parts, but the big guy didn't seem happy about it.

Drake propped a hip on a barstool and set his briefcase on the counter, its hidden pin-sized camera and mic aimed toward the other man.

"He called. Said *El Jefe*'d be here to meet me at eight." When the big guy didn't respond, he snapped, "I'm here. Where is he?"

"Behind you, *Señor* Logan."

Unsure of whether he'd face the barrel of a firearm, Drake turned slowly, keeping his hands visible, one still on the handle of the briefcase.

The man was a lowlife in a custom-tailored suit, but he seemed unarmed. He was average height with thick, pitch-colored hair and the aged appearance of a three-pack-a-day smoker. The wealth and privilege of his attire was offset by the underlying harshness of his angular features,

the shiftiness of his gaze. His smile though present didn't reach his narrowed eyes.

Drake returned the smile. "You're a hard man to contact...*El Jefe*, is it?"

"Caution is necessary in this dangerous business, wouldn't you agree?"

Drake glanced pointedly at the big man behind the bar. "All the more reason to hire good help."

Marco's brother snarled. *El Jefe* chuckled at the expense of his hired man. "I do not think Raul likes you very much, *señor*."

"Feeling's mutual, but then I never let emotions get in the way of business." He boldly met *El Jefe's* gaze. "It's why my boss hired me."

"Yes, yes. Let's go to my office to discuss this business you speak of." *El Jefe* turned away, and Drake followed with briefcase in hand. Before they reached the hallway, though, the man called out to none other than Juanita, the girl he'd bought and questioned days before. She obediently trailed in their wake.

Her inclusion worried Drake, but he had to stay in his role, not let the concern show. He had to be what *El Jefe* expected.

Now he remembered why he'd gotten out, why the undercover work had almost ruined him. It was like walking a tightrope of dental floss stretched across the Grand Canyon. No room for error.

He noticed *El Jefe* glance over his shoulder, so Drake snatched the girl up to his side. She yelped. "Hey there. Juanita, isn't it?"

"*Sí, señor*."

"What do you say when my business is done here, I buy you drink?"

The girl's eyes rounded then lowered submissively. She didn't try to escape his hold even though it would've been easy to do. "*Sí, señor*."

Her answer didn't matter much. She'd be in protective custody soon, if all went well. He glanced at his wristwatch on the arm he'd draped around Juanita's fragile shoulders. His window of opportunity was still open. All he had to do was get the evidence on tape, leave the briefcase behind, and hit speed dial on the cell phone as he headed for the

door with a girl or two. He could let Paul and the SWAT team take it from there.

And if the window closed before he made the call...

Inside the back office, Drake scanned the room and took in everything at once. The good? No immediate threat. The bad? Only one escape route.

The space held a small desk, three chairs—only the one behind the desk offered upholstered comfort—and a couple of metal filing cabinets that had seen better days. But the real surprise was the picture window along one wall with a view of another room—a sparsely furnished bedroom with nothing more than a bed covered in red satin sheets.

The man's a fucking voyeur, too!

He didn't doubt for a minute the glass was a one-way mirror. His experiences at Incognito were enough for him to grasp the meaning of that window, but this place was no Incognito where members joined voluntarily to engage in scenes for mutual pleasure. No, this was perverted abuse of power over others who needed protection.

Drake recognized with relief that the bedroom was not the dirty, windowless one in which he'd interrogated Juanita. He'd recovered from his momentary surprise before *El Jefe* turned to him and took a seat behind the desk.

"Juanita, pat down our guest for weapons. Be thorough, *chica*."

"Sí, mi jefe."

Drake stopped, kept his gaze on the man behind the desk, and silently cursed him to hell. He still held the briefcase in his right hand, and he didn't set it down. Instead, he slightly lifted his arms away from his body to show he was ready.

The obedient girl started at his shoulders and slowly ran her hands down both of his arms, over his back, sides, and butt. This wasn't the dispassionate, methodical pat-down by a seasoned law enforcement officer. It was a sleazy groping for the amusement of one man.

She squeezed his buttocks, one hand mostly over his pocketed wallet, but she didn't pull it out—not that she would've found anything incriminating if she had. He'd replaced his license with a fake and

removed everything else before entering the cantina. He wasn't a fucking novice.

Her tiny hands circled his upper left thigh, slipping between his legs, brushing his crotch, and then down to safer regions. Drake concentrated on his breathing and fought to keep the anger out of his eyes. If he were a slime ball, he would be enjoying this. He forced his lips into a crooked smile when she repeated the task with his left leg.

El Jefe watched.

Juanita murmured, "A wallet in back pocket and phone clipped to waist. *Nada más.*"

"Now, the front." The man's command was succinct. As she moved around Drake, *El Jefe* added, "Open his shirt, *por favor.*"

Despite the command, Drake stayed the girl's hands while he set the briefcase down and unbuttoned his shirt, grateful to not have the surveillance equipment on him. The audio and video recording devices were small and hidden under a false panel in the briefcase that was secure enough; they wouldn't find it unless they knew what to look for.

He held his shirt open for two seconds and let go, holding his arms out once more. Juanita repeated the entire, agonizingly slow process down the front of his body, even his bare chest as if they couldn't see he hid no weapon there. He knew the man was waiting for a reaction, but the girl was little more than a child to Drake. Getting horny was not what came to mind when she touched him. Committing justifiable homicide against the man who ordered her to do it was preferable.

Play the role!

Drake closed his eyes and conjured up a vision of Victoria, the feel of her hands as they caressed his body, her sweet mouth against his lips, the warmth of her tongue as it swirled around his cock. The tight glide of her pussy...

His erection swelled inside his pants, enough that the girl on her knees before him let out a soft gasp when her hand cupped him.

The vision vanished.

Drake opened his eyes, his gaze collided with *El Jefe's*, and he played his part. "That ain't no gun, sweetheart, but you're welcome to try

it on for size...*after* I'm finished with my business."

El Jefe chortled. The girl's hands moved to Drake's thighs and swiftly completed the pat-down.

"*Nada*," she repeated.

"*Excelente*. Now, the briefcase?" *El Jefe* looked at him.

Drake stopped the girl before she could pick it up. "I'll take it from here, sugar." He approached the desk, setting it flat so that the camera and microphone remained aimed in the general direction of *El Jefe's* chair, and unlocked the two security locks to each side of the handle.

Drake paused and looked back at the girl, who out of curiosity had drawn nearer to peek around him. "You let *them* see all of your affairs?"

The man looked up and dismissed the girl. She scrambled from the room.

"Slowly," he ordered, one hand no longer visible from where Drake stood. Trust was such a fickle thing among criminals. Drake nodded and opened the briefcase to display two layers of money. The bottom layer was made up mostly of ones with a larger bill banded on top to complete the illusion, but the top layer was real enough.

Both hands visible again, *El Jefe*, as Drake knew he would, reached for a stack and thumbed through it.

"Your boss is quite generous."

"He can be," Drake agreed.

El Jefe looked up with a sneer and pulled a pistol from inside his jacket. "And foolish. What's to prevent me from killing you and taking this money?"

Sweat beaded on Drake's nape, slithered down his spine. Otherwise, he gave no outward reaction to the weapon. He held his ground, straightened up, and began buttoning up his shirt as if facing the business end of a firearm was a minor everyday occurrence. When he finished, he met the gunman's gaze with a hard one of his own and answered, "The knowledge that there would be no more money where this came from if you...*acted so foolishly*."

The man's smile became more genuine, and then he laughed. He stowed the pistol, tossed the stack of cash back inside, and Drake closed

the case but left it on the desk between them.

"You're a cool customer, *Señor Logan*. I like that. So tell me, what is it that your boss has in mind?"

He needed to get him to confirm the actual illegal activity already underway to avoid any claims of entrapment.

"My boss isn't interested in a one-time transaction," Drake began as he sat down in the hard, aluminum, folding chair across from *El Jefe*. "From my observations of your business here, I think you would agree that whores can lose their...appeal...after a while. Fresh replacements are often necessary."

"True." The man rubbed his chin. Drake could sense the man's greed.

"Variety is important, too, if one wants to keep customers happy."

"It is."

"Most of the girls we have at present are from other trade routes. I'm here to see whether your operation is equipped to help supply merchandise, similar to what you have here in house, to northerly locations. If you're only interested in your local market, I'll understand and can seek someone else to meet what my boss demands."

"And those demands would be?"

He didn't want to lead the guy too far, but the man was crafty. "Dark hair, pretty..." Drake smiled. "Hard workers. We're not picky."

"Do you have an age preference?"

Drake shrugged.

"Method of submission?"

"What methods do you provide?" He knew better than to suggest the man do something criminal. He'd prefer the asshole volunteer his methods on his own—more information they could use to hang him.

El Jefe leaned back in his chair and smiled, his fingers steeped over his midsection. "Some like to ensure compliance with, shall we say, chemical persuasion? Others enjoy discipline of a more physical variety. As you have witnessed, my *putas* are well trained. I can break the girls in before delivery or supply them *as-is*, if you prefer. Of course, if I do the training, the price will be more."

"Of course," Drake murmured as if discussion of the drugging and battery of unwilling women to force subjugation was of no consequence. "But the question is whether you're interested and can supply such...merchandise. We have several vacancies in various locations. I've seen only a handful of girls here."

The man frowned. "I can sell you three girls from the cantina tonight, and my man in Mexico can have their replacements here within forty-eight hours, sooner if I wish it. I'm sure, with enough cash, we can obtain as many whores as you want to meet your needs."

Drake nodded toward the briefcase. "Twenty-five-thousand for three whores. It's a start."

"I'm sure they'll earn that back in a month's time and plenty more before they'll...require replacement."

The look in the man's eye spoke volumes about how he expected to be called upon to supply those "replacements" when the time came.

"We're agreed then?" Drake had to give the man one more chance to back out.

"Sí. Shall we drink to it?" *El Jefe* reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a liquor bottle and a couple of plastic cups. For someone who went to such lengths to dress the part of a wealthy entrepreneur, he fell way short of high class in so many ways.

Drake grinned a genuine smile for the first time that night, positive he'd just secured more than enough on tape to win a conviction, especially with Carlita's added testimony. Although eager to grab the girls and give the signal, he stood and accepted the cup of alcohol from *El Jefe*.

"By the way, who shall I tell my boss is his new partner?"

"Fernando Antonio Gomez, at your service."

"Pleasure doing business with you, Fernando." He tapped his cup with the other man's.

"*Salud.*"

Before Drake could bring his cup to his lips, a disturbance in the hall outside made him turn.

The door shot open and one of two men stepped in—Marco and the missing bartender. The latter man, stopped in the doorway, had a

squirmy, bound female draped over his shoulder.

Fernando shouted something Drake didn't understand in Spanish. Marco responded, and a heated but fast exchange ensued. Then Fernando apologized to Drake for the interruption. The goons left and carried their bundle into the next room where they dumped her on the bed. Through the window, he watched as she came up fighting.

His heart plummeted through his toes.

They had Victoria.

Chapter Twelve

Victoria kicked at the man who roughly tossed her on the bed and tried to curse when she missed. The bandana tied around her mouth muffled her protest. By the time she'd yanked the offensive material from her mouth, the men had withdrawn and the door was closed.

She inch-wormed her way to the edge of the slippery, satin-covered bed and hopped to the door.

Locked.

Damn it!

She thought about pounding on the door and screaming, but that never worked in movies, so why waste precious energy? Her ankles and wrists were bound. That must be her first priority, so she hopped back to the bed and sat. She had to get free before the weasel and his brick wall came back.

She gnawed at the rope that bit into her wrists. The assholes must've bound them while she was conked out in the trunk. A dull headache throbbed, but under the circumstances, it was the least of her worries.

She chewed as she eyed her cell. Besides the bed, which was nothing more than a box spring and mattress on a simple wooden frame—no headboard, no sheets—there was no other furniture in the room. Not a single thing she could turn into a weapon. Only one locked door. No windows, except for the large mirrored glass built into one wall opposite where she sat on the foot of the shabby bed.

Her eyes narrowed on her reflection. The bastards were watching. She knew it in her bones. She flipped up her middle finger and kept chewing.

* * * * *

God, he loved her! Leave it to Victoria to find a way to make him smile even in the most dangerous of situations. Standing before the one-way mirror, Drake bit his lip to keep from laughing, but couldn't hide his amusement when he asked, "A new girl?"

"A minor problem I must dispose of," Fernando muttered as he stepped up beside him.

"Dispose of?" He shook his head as if disappointed, not pissed off. "Such a waste. She's feisty, I'll give you that, but she doesn't look like that much trouble. You sure she's not for sale?"

A pause met that question, and Drake worried that he'd overplayed his interest.

"I suppose...in place of one of my other girls?" The man's greedy wheels were turning; Drake could tell.

"She's not as young as Juanita," Drake admitted, his gaze on Victoria, "Not Hispanic, but she does have dark hair and is very pretty."

Fernando's attention turned to the captive woman, his gaze one of appraisal more than desire, but he nodded with a sneer. "Those breasts will attract a lot of lusty men." He chuckled.

Drake wanted to smash something—preferably the fucker's face.

"She's not broken in, though, but that can be fixed." Fernando hollered, "Marco!"

Drake grabbed Fernando's arm, but let go almost immediately. He knew the man wouldn't want to forfeit some of the money in exchange for an un-trained whore. But he sensed the man's eagerness to get rid of "the problem" and make a profit in the process.

No way was Drake going to let another man touch her.

"Permit me," Drake suggested, hoping his display of interest wouldn't ruin everything. "No charge. I get to have a little fun. You still

get everything in the briefcase. Three girls, her and two others, as agreed."

"You like to fuck...spirited cunts, eh?" Fernando's grin was pure evil.

It was all Drake could do not to punch him, but the door opened, which saved him from having to respond.

"Sí?" Marco asked when he entered the office in answer to Fernando's shout.

"Let *Señor* Logan into our new guest's room. Lock them in."

Shit!

Fernando turned to Drake. "She's all yours."

Drake followed Marco. A glance at his wristwatch showed his window of opportunity was closing fast. There was no chance he'd be able to walk out of the cantina with Victoria and two other girls before SWAT arrived. All he could do was protect Victoria as best he could, and that would only work if she didn't blow his cover the moment she saw him.

* * * * *

She'd stopped chewing on her wrist binds and had managed to work the ropes around her ankles loose enough to kick them free when she heard the lock snick.

"No!" She leaped from the bed and backed away when she saw the weasel first. If she could dodge him long—

Drake!

"Shut up, bitch," Drake said, loud and angry, making her gape before she realized... *He's undercover*. His expression was serious, tense, his teeth clenched. "Not one fucking word or I'll gag you."

"You need this? She shut up real quick," Marco said, a switchblade in his hand and a smirk on his face.

Drake looked from her to the man beside him. She'd never seen that look on his face, but it made her tremble.

"I can handle the whore without a weapon."

Okay, if he wasn't undercover, and if she wasn't so damn glad to see him, the "whore" comment would've pissed her off. But at the

moment, he could call her anything so long as he didn't leave.

Marco snickered, shrugged, and pocketed the knife. "Suit yourself." With a muttered, "Have fun," he closed the door. The snick of the lock made her shudder, so it wasn't difficult to pretend fear. Even her relief at the sight of Drake made her body quake.

He slid a quick glance at the mirror, and she understood. They had an audience. Then, without warning, he vaulted the corner of the bed, startling her enough that she stumbled into the corner behind her, and pinned her between his body and the walls. His hand was at her throat before she could gasp.

"Dr—"

His kiss cut her off. He wasn't rough so much as he was thorough. His hand held her gently, his thumb a light caress over her pulse.

When he pulled his lips away, his warm breath still bathing her face, her head spun. He thumbed her chin to turn her face away from him and buried his mouth in her hair.

"I love you. Now *fight me*, damn it," he whispered. "Our lives depend on it."

She blinked. He was right. This was a scene, role-playing. Only this time it wasn't their pleasure at stake, but their very lives.

She screeched, stomped on his foot, and shoved for all she was worth.

He grunted from the pain, stumbled back. She had the uncanny urge to apologize. Instead, she dove for the bed and attempted to scramble to the other side.

He lunged after her, caught her ankle, and yanked. She bounced face-first on the mattress, unable to fight much with her hands bound and the slippery sheets beneath her. Her kick missed the mark, and he had her flipped onto her back in another racy heartbeat. Normally, her inabilities would have thrilled her, and to some extent it did now—they'd tussled like this the other night in her bed—but she reminded herself this was not supposed to be fun.

He straddled her hips, which made her legs useless. She swung her tied fists at his head, but he caught her about an inch from success. He

held her fists there, a useful shield to block his face from prying eyes.

"You shouldn't have done that." He winked.

She started to smile, but instead yanked her arms, unable to jerk free. "Only thing I shouldn't have done was *miss!*"

Slowly he lifted his right hand to swing at her, paused, and held her gaze a suspended moment. "And now, you're gonna pay." He shoved her bound hands above her head and swung.

Although he pulled his punch, she timed the toss of her head with the woosh past her face, and let out a cry. He stretched out over her, his left fist around her wrists, his right hand on her breast. His grip was firm but not painful. He moved in close, kissed her neck.

She stared at the mirror, reminding herself of the danger—but this was Drake, and his touch ignited her as it always did.

"SWAT's coming," he whispered. "We just have to bide our time."

She closed her eyes and put up a token, more vocal protest. "Stop, please. Please don't do this."

"I'm so sorry." His lips brushed her ear as he softly said, "I could throttle the bastard who hit you." He ground his body over her, roughly groping her breast.

She buried her face against his collar. "I love it when you talk dirty."

He gave a barked laugh followed quickly by a shouted curse. He jerked away from her and narrowed his gaze on her. Louder, he said, "Don't you try to bite me, bitch. You'll regret it."

She followed his lead, snapped her teeth at him, and ground out, "Let me go, you fucking asshole!"

He wrapped his fingers around her throat. She stilled even though his grip was so soft she could've broken free with little effort.

"You won't have such a smart mouth when I'm finished with you," he threatened.

He yanked her sundress up above her waist and, straddling her thighs, ran his free palm over her bared skin.

She swallowed hard at the arousing touch, turned her face away from him and the mirror, and bucked her hips against him in token

protest. "Get off me!"

"What's the matter? Your body likes that, doesn't it?"

Her gaze snapped to him. She tried to glare, but her desire was too powerful. She wanted to succumb. She loved his warm touch on her flesh. Goose bumps rippled.

"No." Her response had little volume, no authority.

His thumb brushed over her bra, the beaded nipple of her right breast.

She gritted her teeth to fight the moan of pleasure that bubbled up and hissed, "Stop."

He slid his hand lower over her ribcage across her abdomen to her panties. She sucked in a harsh breath. His fingertips dipped beneath the fabric.

And the world exploded.

* * * * *

The flash-bang grenades used by the SWAT team were deafening, but Drake had enough experience with them to react by covering Victoria with his body in case of gunfire.

Screams—including Victoria's—erupted amid shouts of "Police!" It was well-orchestrated chaos, and Drake was never so grateful to hear it. Doors were kicked in, including the locked one to their room. Figures in pitch-black body armor, heavily armed, swarmed in, and Drake played his role. A SWAT member yanked him off Victoria and slammed him against a wall. Since he didn't fight, he was cuffed in seconds.

Victoria was lifted to her feet, her dress dropping to provide a cover of modesty, her wrists still bound in rope. Smart girl that she was, she kept her mouth shut and didn't fight.

"What the hell?" Paul said when he came in behind the first wave, his surprise at seeing Victoria evident on his face.

Drake yanked against the men holding his arms to draw Paul's attention. When he had it, he glared at him and then pointedly looked at the mirror where familiar sounds made it clear that another group was

rounding up Fernando and anyone else in the office.

Paul gave a quick nod. They'd play it out to protect his cover, just in case, at least until they reached the station. "What have we here?" he asked.

"We found him fucking her," said the man who held Victoria's arm.

Since his dick was still safely tucked in his pants, he could argue that exaggeration. He glanced at Victoria.

Bless her heart, the woman blushed. *Now*, she blushed like a virgin. *Un-fucking-believable*.

Drake laughed and caught the butt of a rifle to the gut. He doubled over, and the air whooshed out of his lungs.

"No!" Victoria's word surprised everyone, at least everyone in body armor. She bit her lip and gave Paul a worried look. "I-I just don't like to see people hurt."

Damn, he loved her.

"That's enough," Paul told the cop and then looked at her. Drake saw the moment his friend noticed the discolored bruise on her cheek. Paul's expression darkened with anger, and he didn't try to hide it. "Cut her loose, but take her in for questioning with the other girls. You'll have to go downtown, ma'am." When Victoria opened her mouth to speak, he finished, "We'll take your statement there."

She shut her mouth, cast Drake a glance, and walked out with an armed escort.

Drake's heart started to beat again. His fingers tingled. His muscles relaxed.

It was over. Victoria was safe.

Chapter Thirteen

"We got them all except for the one in Mexico, but Raul sang like a bird when offered a plea deal, and we've got every border and customs agent on alert for Peter Valdez—although he has a half dozen aliases with passports to go with them."

Drake nodded and followed Paul through the police station as Paul filled him in on all the details of the bust. Drake had needed to stay in holding with the rest of the creeps until his turn came up for questioning.

"Anyway, the D.A. is thrilled with the information you gathered. The tape, luckily, wasn't damaged in the bust, and he said he'll clear your money back to you as soon as possible."

Drake chuckled. "That'd be nice, since it was a nice chunk of my savings."

"The chief would like to see you tomorrow, to thank you in person for all your help."

"I wish I'd been able to get some clues on who committed the murders, some link between the dead girls and those at the cantina."

"CSI is still processing the scene, and who knows? Some of the other girls might know something."

"I hope so."

"You'll still have to write out your report tomorrow and go on record as an informant, but I think there's something more important for you to deal with right now."

Drake frowned as Paul pulled open a door to the dark side of an

interrogation room. Through the window—a two-way mirror—Drake saw a very agitated Victoria. The plain-clothes detective, a young blonde, looked thoroughly exasperated as she sat at the table and watched Victoria pace.

Paul hit the volume button on the wall so they could hear what was happening inside the interrogation room.

“Ms. Casey,” the detective said. “If you’d please sit down, I have just a few more things to go over with you. I need you to clear up what was happening when the police found you.”

“I’m telling you, damn it, I’m sick of all the questions. I just want to go home. How much longer is this gonna take?”

“Just a few more questions, ma’am.”

“You said that thirty minutes ago! I’ve told you all I can. I was kidnapped and hauled in there by those two assholes.” She stabbed her finger at two of several mug shots spread out on the table. “I’ve never been in that place before tonight, and believe me, I wasn’t there this time by choice.” She paced and paced, and Drake wondered if she’d wear away the gray paint over the concrete flooring.

“I understand that, Ms. Casey. What I need to know is what was going on between you and Drake Kavanaugh when the raid happened. How did he come to be in the room with you?”

“How the hell should I know?” Victoria all but screeched. “He was there, okay, but he did. Not. Rape. Me!” She slammed her hands down on the table and leaned over, getting into the detective’s face. “The only illegal act that man has ever done to me is steal a twenty-dollar pair of my panties!”

“He-he what?” the young detective stuttered.

Paul snickered and turned toward Drake with an eyebrow raised.

Drake shrugged, but his cheeks warmed. “I didn’t think I’d see her again, so I kept them as a little souvenir of one very memorable night.”

“Nothing. Just forget it,” Victoria grumbled and made another trek across the room.

“Okay, ma’am, I have here an officer’s statement that says Mr. Kavanaugh was found on top of you in a bed, in a locked room, and that

your hands were tied. What was he doing if not—”

“I’m going to be very clear here, okay? *Drake* did not tie me up...or fuck me at the cantina. He did not hit me in the face. He didn’t hold a knife to my throat, stuff me in a trunk, or kidnap me from my salon. He *protected* me from those assholes,” she said, pointing to the mug shots again, “*and* when all hell broke loose.”

Drake smiled. “She’s pretty amazing, huh?”

“She’s got spunk,” Paul agreed.

“Okay, we know he didn’t rape you,” the interrogator said, “but you have a prior relationship with him. Is that correct?”

Drake muttered to Paul, “Why these questions?”

Paul sighed. “I didn’t want Vicky left alone, and Shelli is new. Basically we were keeping them both busy. Why don’t you go rescue your woman and take her home? The two of you can drop by tomorrow to finish your paperwork when we’ve got all the rest of these assholes out of here so there’s no chance of your cover getting blown.”

Drake nodded. He did not want to go through that again. It wouldn’t be totally safe for him to “come out of hiding” per se, until they were sure they had every one of the players behind bars.

“They go up in front of Judge Rolston first thing in the morning. He’s tough as hell on scumbags like this, so we don’t foresee any of them getting out on bail.”

“And you’re explaining my absence at the hearings as...?”

“They’ll all be separated now. They won’t see each other again until trial. Safer that way for everyone involved, not just you.”

Drake clapped Paul on the shoulder. “Thanks, man. And I swear your timing couldn’t have been better tonight.”

Paul grinned. “Or you might’ve had to act out an entire rape scene?” He turned and looked at Victoria who stood still now, across the table from the detective, arms folded over her chest, and glaring at the mirror. His grin faded. “Get her out of here. She’s about to break.”

“I know. Thanks, buddy.”

Paul opened the door to the interrogation room and motioned for the young detective to step out. As she walked through the door and saw

Drake, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Detective Shelli Wright, this is Drake Kavanaugh. He was working undercover for us tonight."

Her eyes narrowed, and her back went ramrod straight. "I see." She obviously thought she'd been tricked.

"It's okay, Shelli," Paul said. "No one knew but me and the chief."

The woman relaxed a little. "Right. She's a mess," she said, waving her hand toward Victoria. "I think she could use some medical attention. She keeps holding her head."

Drake went through the door. It was time to see to his woman.

Victoria turned when he entered, planted her hands on her hips, and glared at him with eyes the color of blue flames. She was *pissed*. "It's about time. What the hell? You were working for them, and they locked you up—locked me up, too, for that matter. What the fuck is wrong with them? Don't they—"

"Victoria, stop," he said, his voice snapping like a whip in the small room. Her adrenaline was still pumping, and any time now, she was going to break. He wanted to get her out of the police station before that happened. Knowing her, she'd hold that against him, too, if she lost it in front of all these cops.

She snapped her mouth shut, her eyes blazing with fury.

"Come on, babe. Let's get out of here." He held his hand out to her, and she stepped forward to take it. Her hand was cold, clammy, and shook within his. The bruise on her cheekbone looked awful under the fluorescent lights, and he kept himself from pulling her into his arms. There'd be plenty of time for coddling once she was home. If he did it now, she'd lose it. He knew it as easily as he noticed the tremble in her lip.

He led her out of the interrogation room, nodded his thanks to Paul when he passed him, and kept going through the station and out the front doors. Paul had told him he'd had Drake's car brought over from the cantina, and he pulled the keys from his pocket since they'd been returned to him along with his wallet and watch when he was let out of the holding cell.

"Fucking idiots," Victoria muttered as he walked her up the street

to his car. "They thought you raped me. *You* of all people. They wouldn't let me see you, and that stupid bitch kept asking the same—"

"Victoria," he warned as he opened the passenger door for her. "Enough. They were doing their job. I was undercover. No one knew except Paul. It's all cleared up now. Get in the car," he said when she just stood there.

With a huff, she slid onto the seat, and he shut the door. He let out a sigh as he rounded the hood to the driver's side. When he got in, she had her hand to the back of her head, her brow furrowed.

"Paul told me the paramedics said you had a nice goose egg, but you'll be okay. How's your head?"

"I'm fine." She dropped her hand to her lap.

"You sure you don't want a doctor?"

"A couple of aspirins, maybe, but no doctors, no hospitals." She turned to him with an agitated scowl. "Those fuckers stuffed me in a trunk! They hit me over the head and stuffed me in the trunk of the car."

He didn't feel there was anything to say, so he nodded and started the car. He'd let her ride out the adrenaline for a little while longer, but when she crashed, it was going to be a doozy. After years working undercover, he'd learned to minimize the effects of the adrenaline rush on himself. He was tired, but that was to be expected. A good night's sleep would fix him. He hoped the same could be said for Victoria.

She kept up her angry banter all the way to her house, disparaging remarks about the police force in general and especially the kidnappers and all men who patronized brothels. He let her vent until he turned onto her street.

"Wait! I have to go to the salon," she said, grabbing his arm in a grip that was surprisingly hard. "The window's broken, the backdoor is open. There's money in the—"

"It's being taken care of, babe," he said calmly.

"No, it's my salon, and I have to go there and make sure—"

"Enough, Victoria!"

She gasped at his shout, and when he glanced at her, her eyes were wide. Her lip quivered.

"I have a friend over there now making sure it's secure. The police headed over there after you told them what happened. They're processing the scene to try to get these guys on a few more charges of breaking and entering and kidnapping. Okay? Your salon will be fine. My guy will stay as long as it takes to make sure it's all taken care of."

He put his hand over the one holding his arm, gave it a pat. "The salon can wait 'til tomorrow. *You* are all I'm concerned about."

She let go of his arm and dropped her hand back into her lap. "Thank you," she said, the first calm thing he'd heard out of her since he saw her wired and pacing in the interrogation room.

"You're welcome." He was glad they'd arrived at her place, because he had a feeling that adrenaline crash was about to happen. He pulled into the driveway, shut off the car, and went around to her side to help her out.

She was silent now, her hand still a bit shaky in his when he took it and led her to the front door.

"Key?" he asked.

She reached to her side, as if going for her purse, then shook her head. "I had it at the salon...." She actually glanced around the little porch as if looking for it.

"Spare hidden somewhere?"

She frowned at him.

She had a double lock deadbolt on the front door, and short of kicking in the door, he wouldn't get it open, but he had noticed the day before that the slider to the back porch didn't have a safety bar.

"Come on," he said, pulling her behind him as he stepped off the porch and walked around the side of the house to the back. It was good for him that her house wasn't secure, but he was definitely going to have to do something about that. If they hadn't gotten her at the salon, they could have done it here. He stepped onto the back patio and let go of her hand.

He tried the sliding door first; at least it was locked. But the door moved slightly, which meant the lock was a cheap piece of crap. He dug his keys out of his pocket, flipped open what looked like a pocketknife but

was actually a handy little pick set, and jimmied the lock. The spring snapped open, and he opened the door with a gentle tug.

When he turned to take Victoria's hand again, she stood there with a death glare in her eyes.

"You broke my door!"

"To prove to you how vulnerable you are. Come on. And it's not broken." He grabbed her hand and dragged her through the door, shut it, and flipped the cheap little lock that wouldn't stop anyone who wanted access.

She twisted and stared at the slider as he tugged her through the living room, kitchen, and down the hallway to her bedroom.

"How'd you do that?"

"One of my many talents," he muttered as he pulled her into the bedroom and shut the door. He didn't stop though. He tugged her into the master bathroom and flipped on the lights.

"Ow," she muttered and covered her eyes.

"Sorry." He twisted on the shower to heat the water and then turned back to her. "Head hurt?"

"No."

He gripped her chin and forced her to look at him. The bruise on her cheek was a nasty purple, but he'd seen worse. "Does your head hurt?" he asked again.

She dropped her hand, squinting into the light. "Yes." She still glared, though, and although he loved her for her gumption, he was done with it.

"Victoria, listen to me. It's all over. Everyone is in jail. The girls are safe. You're safe." He cupped her cheeks between his palms. "You're *safe*."

Those spectacular eyes of hers lightened from the darkest shade of midnight to a softer, gentler color. Her bottom lip quivered next to the heel of his palm. Her body began to tremble all over, and she gripped his forearms.

"You're safe," he repeated. "It's okay to let go now. We're alone. You don't have to be strong and stubborn with me."

That seemed to be all it took. She collapsed against his chest with a

heaving sob. He gathered her in his arms, lifted her, and sat with her on his lap on the closed toilet lid.

She clung to his neck and cried so hard he feared she'd hyperventilate. He murmured soothing sounds against her ear as he ran his hand over her head, down her back. He told her it was all right, but he doubted she heard. Tonight had been too much for her, and he'd known it. It tore him apart that she'd been involved, that those fucking bastards had laid one finger on his Victoria. She was the most precious woman he'd ever known, and he'd spend the rest of his life protecting her.

"Let it out, babe," he whispered in her ear. "Get it all out. You're safe with me. I'll take care of you." He reached over to the toilet paper roll and ripped off a good sized piece when she started sniffing. When he held it to her nose, she blew without hesitation. "That's it. I've got you."

Finally, her sobbing slowed to heavy, shuddery breaths. "I'm...sorry," she said against his shoulder.

"No apologies. You were so strong, and I'm so proud of you, but I also understand. After tonight, you deserve a good cry."

"I don't do this. I *am* strong." She sucked in a breath, which heaved out on a sob. "I don't cry. Not like this." But then her arms tightened around his neck and a few more sob-like sounds came out of her.

He held her snug against him and rocked her back and forth. "I know you don't, babe. I know. You're a tough-ass bitch when you need to be. And I'm so damn proud of you."

A gusty, tortured laugh came out of her. "I was so scared."

"I know."

"The knife...and, and I couldn't breathe. Oh, God..."

Her words tumbled out even as the tears snaked down her cheeks. And he felt each one like a needle to the heart. The *what ifs* plagued him. What if they'd just killed her when they hadn't found the girl? What if he'd not been there at the cantina? What if...

"It's all over," he murmured, wondering whether he said it for her or to convince himself. "You're safe."

"I know," she answered. "I knew it the moment I saw you. Then I knew everything was going to be okay. You'd save me."

His heart tumbled in his chest. "Always, love."

She leaned back a bit and tugged on his shirt, trying to pull it out of his waistband.

He chuckled. "You can't tell me you're feeling feisty after everything that's happened."

She glowered at him and kept tugging. "They hit you with the gun."

She was concerned about that? It had been the least of his worries.

She got his shirt loose and lifted it, ran her warm hand over his abdomen. "Are you hurt?"

He was a little sore, but he wasn't about to admit that to her right now. "I'm fine." He pulled the shirt farther up. "See. Not even a bruise." Just had the wind knocked out of him a second. Paul told him that guy got a good talking down afterwards. Drake had already been in custody and handcuffed when the cop took the pot shot. Although, he couldn't say he wouldn't have done the same when he was on the force if he'd seen an alleged rapist laugh at his victim's expense. The cop hadn't been privy to his thoughts or known the whole story.

She lifted her red-rimmed, puffy eyes and met his gaze. "It was a bad night."

He nodded. "But a good one, too. We took a lot of bad men off the street tonight." And *she* was safe.

She swallowed hard. "Are you sure they won't get out?"

"Positive. And if they do, I'll be here to make sure nothing ever happens to you again."

"Promise?"

He nodded. "I swear it."

"Because you love me?" There was a bit of a twinkle in her bruised gaze, and a slow smile spread over his lips.

"You remember that, huh?"

She slowly nodded, but her brow furrowed in a frown as if the motion hurt. "Right before you told me to fight you. You said you loved me. Did you mean it, or was it just the heat of the moment?"

He lifted his hand from her thigh where he held her secure on his

lap and touched her uninjured cheek. "I meant it with all my heart, babe. I love you."

Her lips curled into a small smile. "Good. I was hoping you weren't lying to me because you thought we were both going to die." She slid off his lap, stood up, and started unbuttoning her dress.

Drake sat in stunned silence as he watched her disrobe. Good? Good? He scowled. It was good that he loved her? No like declaration from her? He'd saved her ass tonight, opened his heart to her, and all he got was *good*?

When she turned to the shower and swayed a bit, he forgot his pique and jumped up to steady her. "Maybe we should take you to the hospital and get your head checked out."

"No. I'll be fine after I get the stench of those creeps off of me and get some sleep." She turned her head and looked up into his face. "You'll stay tonight, right?"

"Of course, I'll stay." *Forever, if you tell me you love me.*

She pushed the curtain aside and stepped under the water, but she leaned against the wall to steady herself.

"Hold on a second, babe." He made quick work of stripping then stepped in behind her and wrapped his arms around her. "I'll take care of you."

She leaned back against him and shut her eyes, letting the water cascade over her face.

Maybe she wasn't ready to make declarations of love after the night she'd had. It was okay. He could wait...a little while.

He reached for the shampoo bottle in the wire holder dangling from the showerhead.

He could wait, but he wouldn't wait forever.

Chapter Fourteen

For the next few days, Drake didn't leave her side, except when they were each interrogated separately at the police station and had to write out their version of what happened that night.

Vicky didn't argue when Drake demanded the salon needed to remain closed for a few days while a new security system and locks were installed and her front window fixed. She was glad for the break, actually, not that she would admit it to him.

He'd invaded her home, too, bringing in his friend, Jace, to install a new security system at her house and put in heavy-duty locks all over the place. She truly hadn't known how vulnerable she'd been. He jokingly told her she should watch the news once in a while.

Other than the locks, some of his stuff had made its way to her house, too. A few changes of clothes she'd made room for in her chest of drawers and closet. His toothbrush, razor, and shaving cream had their own spot on her bathroom counter. It was as if he was slowly moving in with her.

The idea made her smile. She didn't mind at all. She loved having him around. He'd even fixed a strange noise her refrigerator had been making for a while and replaced a burned out light bulb in the hallway she'd been ignoring for months. She had her very own hero and fix-it man all in one. And she loved him with all her heart, even though she hadn't found the guts to actually voice that yet. She'd been on her own so long, there was still a bit of trepidation about letting a man—any man, even

Drake—know how much she *needed* him in her life.

Her headaches had finally faded away, and the bruise on her face had lightened enough that she could hide it with a layer of cover-up. She was almost back to normal. The first time she stepped through the door of the salon, she'd felt a moment of fear, but having Drake there had set her at ease.

All involved in the sex slave ring had been captured, including Peter Valdez, whose real name was Rico Castellano. Hugo Sanchez, the unofficial mayor of Little Mexico, had been helpful in collaring the elusive flesh trader, thus protecting his own reputation...and territory...in the process. Now, every one of the sex slave traders was sitting behind bars awaiting trial. The charges against them were countless, but the best part had been when Paul called that morning to let Drake know the D.A. would be tacking on murder charges against Marco. One of the girls had seen Marco take the second victim, and Marco's prints matched those recovered from evidence at the dumpsites. Paul said he expected all of the men would be put away for life—or possibly death, depending on what the juries had to say.

So now it was evening again, and they'd just stopped and picked up a pizza and a six-pack of beer and were heading back to her place for the night. Vicky couldn't help stealing glances at Drake as he drove through the sporadic traffic toward her house.

She sighed. He was as handsome as ever, but something was wrong, something she couldn't place.

"What's on your mind?" he asked, casting her a glance as they pulled onto her street.

She shrugged. That's what she'd like to ask him, but instead of telling him that, she said, "I'm glad the worst of it is over. I'm ready to get back to work."

"Huh," he said, and frowned.

What was that supposed to mean? Why the frown? "I have to open the salon tomorrow. I have clients waiting for haircuts, and I have to think about Denise and Anita. They need the income they earn there."

"Yeah."

“Won’t you be glad to get back to chasing cheating spouses?”

He shrugged, parked his car in her driveway, and turned off the engine. She frowned at his back as he got out after picking the pizza box off the back seat. He’d been a little quiet and increasingly moody all day, and she wasn’t sure why. The reasons her mind conjured up scared the daylights out of her.

Maybe it had been a good thing she’d never told him she loved him. If he decided to bail, wasn’t it better that he do it before she laid her heart on the line?

She shoved her car door open, grabbed the six-pack from the back seat, and got out. He shut her door for her then headed up the walkway to her front door. Okay, this was weird. The silent treatment was something new and worrisome.

He opened the door, punched in the code on the new alarm, and then went into the kitchen, leaving her to shut the door and reset the alarm. He dropped the pizza on the counter, flipped open the lid, and was taking his first bite when she walked into the kitchen. Wow, he must be really ticked about something. Normally—or at least what she’d seen over the last couple of days—he was the most considerate man, holding her chair for her, making sure she was served first.

So, what had she done?

She set the beer on the counter next to the pizza box and pulled one out, twisted off the top, and took a swig. “So, are we gonna talk about it, or are you going to pout?”

His chewing slowed, and he set the half-eaten slice back in the box. “Are you mouthing off to me again?”

She’d popped off at him at the salon earlier, a little harmless teasing, an attempt to yank him out of his foul mood. Still, indignation shot through her, and she almost dropped the beer bottle. She had to do something! He’d spent the past two days treating her with kid gloves, and tonight came the cold shoulder and sullenness. She was losing him. The invisible gulf was growing between them, and she couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Excuse me? You’re the one with the attitude all afternoon. Been

getting worse and worse ever since we left the salon an hour ago." She set the bottle down none too gently on the counter. "Is this some male form of PMS I'm unaware of?"

His eyes narrowed. "Watch your mouth, woman."

"I will not. This is my house, and I think I deserve to know why you're acting like someone sewed shut your boxers' front flaps."

She'd hoped for a smile, a twitch of the lips, something to show he still had a sense of humor, still cared, and wasn't regretting his admission of love. Instead, he popped the top of a chilled beer and took a swig. His lips thinned, and he shook his head, reaching for his pizza slice again.

She slammed the box shut first. If he wanted a fight, she'd give it to him. "You're the one who's come in here like you think you own the place the last few days. Just who do you think you are?" She poked him in the arm, lifted her chin in challenge, and smirked.

He took the step separating them, grabbed her arm, and spun her around so she was trapped over the counter, her nose just inches from the pizza box. "Don't speak to your lord and master that way, or you'll find yourself in a heap of trouble."

"Lord and— Oh! You are such an ass!" She tried pulling away, shoving him, kicking at him, but all attempts failed. She couldn't believe what was happening! But it beat the hell out of his silent moodiness.

"Haven't I warned you about your impertinence?" He grabbed her free arm, twisted it behind her back, and then the cold metal of handcuffs closed around her wrists with a resounding click. Where the devil had he been hiding those?

"Oh, hell no!" she screeched and used her upper body as leverage so she could lash out with both feet at him. She almost slid off the counter into a heap on the floor, but he caught her around the waist, held her still, effectively pinned between the unyielding hardness of the granite countertop and the brick wall of his chest.

"I've waited for three days, Victoria, and frankly, I'm tired of it."

His voice had that low, commanding quality to it. The one he used with her in bed—when they played. She stopped struggling and waited, wondering what, exactly, was going on.

He lifted the back of her skirt, his slightly rough palms sliding up the back of her thigh. "Three long, torturous days, and you still haven't said anything. I've practically moved in with you, and you've let me. If you didn't want me here, I've no doubt you would've been loud and clear about that before now. So why are you making me wait?"

Wait for what? Did he expect her to *ask* him to move in with her?

Slap.

"Hey!" she protested, surprised by the sting that warmed her butt cheek. But then his fingers glided over the tortured spot, and she had to bite her tongue to keep from moaning in pleasure.

For the last three nights, they'd simply *slept* together. They'd held each other, snuggled up beneath the sheets, warm and sweet.

Was he tired of waiting for sex? Was that what his funk was all about? If that was it, he needed to figure out a better way to tell her because these mood swings were bullshit. "You can't just handcuff me every time you get horny. It doesn't work that way in the real world."

"Oh really?"

Slap.

"Yes," she hissed.

Slap.

"Think again, sweetheart. It works exactly that way in our world—if we have a world together, Victoria. Do we?"

Slap.

"Mmm." That time she did moan as the sting was so sharp, so intense, it made her nipples harden against the countertop.

Yet, her mind reeled. What did he mean by that? She hadn't protested his moving in, so why did he doubt his welcome? He said it himself; she knew how to speak up when she didn't like something, and if she hadn't wanted him here, she would've said so.

"Do we?" he demanded, his voice growing sharp.

"I don't know!" she cried, frustrated by the question, and his touch. He slid a finger beneath the crotch of her panties and teased her curls, lightly tugging on them. "I don't know what you want me to say. You're the one who moved your stuff in. I thought I was what you wanted." Did

he regret it now and want out? Was that why he was drawing away?

Slap.

"You are."

Slap.

I am?

Slap. She squealed and tried jerking away when he flicked her clit with just the tip of his finger. The sensation was too intense after days of nothing sexual between them.

"Never doubt that, babe. I've already told you how I feel about you. But you haven't told me if I'm what you want, Victoria, what you need."

She stopped her struggling as his hand caressed her warmed ass. *Oh.* She swallowed back the emotions that swarmed her mind.

Her big, bad hero had insecurity problems. She bit her bottom lip to keep from grinning. If he wanted to turn this into a game, she was as willing as anyone. "So, you're punishing me because I didn't confess my affections when you did, right?"

Slap.

She flinched, but kept any sound of pleasure to herself. "Did you get away with this stuff when you were a cop? Beating the poor sucker you were interrogating into talking?"

He slapped her again, and her breath came out on a whoosh. Now that she knew it was a game—albeit a serious game— her pussy grew damp, her inner muscles starting to pulse with need of his cock.

"Whatever works."

"Make me come, and I'll tell you what you want to hear."

His hand rubbing her butt stalled for a fraction of a second, but then he continued. "Tell me what I want to hear, and I'll make you come."

"Fuck you," she spat.

He slapped her *hard* the next time, and she screamed. It hurt so fucking fantastically she thought she could come if he did it a few more times. Then he jabbed two fingers into her cunt, and she did almost orgasm, but he didn't move them around, didn't pump them into her, just inserted them and left them there for her muscles to pulse around them.

"Tell me what I want to hear."

"Does this work with all your women?"

"Damn it, Victoria, you're my *only* woman! The only one I ever want for the rest of my life! Now tell me you love me, or tell me to get out."

Game over. "Indictment."

He let go of her so fast she almost slid onto the floor, but she caught her balance and turned to face him. He stood two feet from her, breathing hard, his hands fisted at his sides, a look of desperation in his eyes. Her heart had already belonged to him, but seeing him like this, hearing that declaration from him, tears rushed to her eyes. She moved forward, laid her head on his chest because her wrists were still bound behind her, and whispered, "I love you, you big dummy. No games. No scenes." She raised her face to look him in the eye. "I love you with all my heart. I have since...since I was your diamond thief, I think."

His arms came around her, squeezing her so tight she couldn't breathe. "God, you're a hard woman to crack."

She laughed and rested her head against his chest again. The soft throb-a-throb of his heart made her smile. "But I will never, ever, for as long as we both shall live, call you my lord and master."

"Ha!" He bent at the knees and lifted her, tossing her over his shoulder. "We'll see about that."

She screamed, "No!" around a laugh and didn't really mean it as he hauled her down the hall to the bedroom. "What about the pizza? The beer?"

"I'm hungry for something else." He didn't even slow his strides.

"But—"

He popped her ass, and a breathless chuckle burst from her.

He tossed her onto the bed, where she bounced, and then he stepped back and started stripping. She wiggled to her side so she could see him better, and to ease the pressure of her weight off her still bound arms.

"What?" she demanded, trying to control her laughter. "Just because I said I love you, you think you have a right to fuck me?"

He narrowed his eyes again, but their green depths sparkled with amusement as he shoved his jeans down his legs. "You told me you love me, and now I have the right to have my way with you. Any way I want."

She gasped in mock horror while he climbed up onto the bed next to her completely naked. "I don't think so."

He flipped her over onto her stomach and threw her long skirt up over her head.

"I know so, babe."

Smack!

She squealed and wriggled to the side, but he threw his leg over the backs of her thighs, pinning her into place.

"Who am I?" he demanded in his playful, sexy voice.

"A big jerk!"

Smack!

"Fuck," she cried, but not in pain. The lust, which had cooled a bit, came back full force, and she ground her pelvis into the too-soft bed.

Her lacy thong came off with a hard tug as seams ripped.

"Hey," she shouted. "Come on, those are expensive. You keep—"

Smack!

"I'll buy you some new ones. Or, better yet, go without. I don't mind." He rubbed his palm over her ass, kneading and pinching her flesh.

Her pussy quivered, and she moaned.

Smack!

"God damn it," she yelped.

"Who am I?"

"Someone with a major superiority complex."

She thought she heard him chuckle.

Smack!

She pushed her legs apart, struggling against the weight of his, to give him plenty of unspoken invitation to do more than torture her butt cheeks.

"I am your lord and master."

"Ha!" She burst out laughing at that. "Never."

A single finger slipped between her legs and stroked her pussy lips.

Her laughter turned into a moan of pleasure.

"Don't make me take my belt to this ass, Victoria. Don't make me do it."

She turned her head toward him and lunged for him, catching the arm he propped himself up with between her teeth.

"Shit," he muttered as he jerked away, then was over her in an instant, straddling her thighs, keeping his body parts out of reach of her teeth. "That was a mistake, missy."

Facedown, there was little she could do, and he was way too strong for any struggle to work herself loose. Her breaths came in harsh pants, and the hard length of his cock, pressed snug against her ass, made her so horny she wasn't sure she could stand much more foreplay.

"Wanna bite? Is that what you want?" He nipped her shoulder blade.

The pain was minimal, but the pleasure shot through her so fast she groaned.

"Like that, Victoria?"

"No," she said on a sigh as he did it again. "Stop."

He laughed. "Yeah, I really believe you mean that." He moved up her body a bit, leaning over her more, and his cock brushed the tip of her fingers. As he nipped the back of her neck, she grabbed his dick.

He groaned and stopped moving. She milked his hot, pulsing flesh as best she could at the awkward angle, and he thrust into her hand. "Damn, Victoria. You don't fight fair."

She grinned and released him. "And I thought you were going to put it to good use."

He growled.

She laughed.

In a motion so fast she wasn't sure how he accomplished it, he had her legs spread, her ass in the air, and he surged into her cunt in one hard stroke that stole her breath.

"God, yessss," she hissed.

He stopped moving. "That's what you wanted, isn't it, Victoria?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Oh, yeah."

"Tough." He smacked her ass three times, hard, but didn't move within her.

Her cunt contracted around the hard length of his cock, though, sending sizzling heat to her fingers and toes.

"I'm the boss in this bedroom, got it?"

"Nu uh," she said, trying to concentrate on his words and not the orgasm growing inside of her at an almost alarming rate. She'd come the second he moved; she was sure of it.

Three more hard slaps, this time to the other butt cheek. "I am the lord and master of your pleasure, Victoria."

Shit, he was right. He did hold that power over her. But, fuck it. She'd never admit it. "I can get off with a vibrator just as good."

"Like hell you can." He jerked her hips up off the bed and rode her hard.

She screamed as the climax ripped through her. He didn't stop, didn't slow as he reached beneath her and tweaked her clit.

"Oh, oh, *ohh!*" was all she could manage, and another orgasm toppled through her on the heels of the first.

Then he pressed a finger into her anus, and she saw stars as the pleasure intensified. She couldn't take much more of this; he was going to kill her. Still he pumped into her hard and relentless, his balls slapping her pussy lips. Her legs threatened to collapse from beneath her.

A second finger joined the first in her ass, pumping in opposition to his cock.

"Please," she cried, but didn't know what she begged for. Mercy, maybe. Another orgasm, surely.

"Who controls your pleasure, Victoria?" He sounded a little winded, as if his control might be slipping.

She buried her face in the down comforter to keep from telling him he did.

He let go of her hip with the other hand and slapped the back of her thigh hard. Every muscle in her body clenched, and she screamed into the blanket.

"Who masters it, Victoria?"

She shook her head and thrust backward, against his cock.

A third finger entered her, stretched her. The pain was exquisite. More, she wanted more. She needed him to claim her like this. She needed him!

"Victoria!" He pulled his fingers from her ass with a quick twist.

Turning her face to the side, she cried, "You do!"

He withdrew from her slick cunt and slid his stiff cock straight into her ass. "Damn straight," he said on a grunt as he grabbed her hips once more and fucked her so hard she was sure she'd die.

The last orgasm hit her with such ferocity, her legs collapsed. She screamed as it ripped through her harder, faster, hotter than anything she'd ever experienced.

He fell over her, her arms pinned between them, his cock buried to the hilt inside her body. With his teeth, he nipped her nape, her shoulder, sharp pinches that shocked her and kept her charged body trembling. Propping himself up on forearms, his hands gripping her shoulders, he ground himself against her, shoved his cock deeper.

She reveled in the fullness, savored the warm friction of their bodies, and loved the sensation of his weight all around her.

Drake's grunts were loud and blunt each time he stroked into her ass over and over, and then he stilled. With a roar, he came, his cock pulsing inside her, his fingers digging into her flesh.

He withdrew and collapsed onto the bed next to her, and she turned her head to look at him. His gorgeous chest heaved with his gasps for breath, and his skin shone with a light sheen of perspiration. She tossed her head, trying to get her hair out of her eyes, but it didn't work. It clung to her sweat-dampened cheeks.

When he cracked open an eye and looked at her, she grinned. "I'm still never calling you my lord and master."

He grabbed her and hauled her over him. "Impertinent minx."

She kissed him long and deep as their heartbeats slowed. "I do love you, Drake Kavanaugh. Don't ever doubt that."

He brushed her hair back from her eyes. "I won't. I promise." He kissed the tip of her nose. "But I swear, before this night's over you will

admit—”

She cut him off with another kiss, which turned into a fit of laughter. “You can try. You can try all you want.” She winked at him, rolled off of him, and sat up, her legs bent off the edge of the bed. “In fact, I’d be rather disappointed if you didn’t.”

He reached for her, but she scurried off the bed and headed for the bathroom. He was hot on her heels and grabbed her around the waist about the time she made it to the tub—not that she could turn on the water since her hands were still cuffed behind her.

“You gonna take these things off me or what?”

He jerked her strapless, stretchy sundress off her with a tug, lifted her, and plopped her on her butt into the tub. “Or what,” he said and turned on the water full blast.

She screeched when icy water sprayed from the showerhead all over her. “Jerk!”

“Love you, babe.”

Amidst her curses and disparagements to his heritage, he laughed and adjusted the water so it warmed. When he stepped into the tub, he pulled her to her feet, shut the shower curtain, and wrapped his arms around her. She laid her cheek against his shoulder and sighed.

She’d never been happier in her life.

“So,” he said as he reached for the shampoo bottle.

“So?” she asked, leaning back into the warm spray to dampen her hair.

“How soon can you get a wedding together?”

Her mouth opened in shock, and she nearly choked on the water streaming down her face. He pulled her forward a bit and brushed the water from her eyes.

With a smile, he added, “I’ll give you a month, but I ain’t waitin’ any longer than that.”

She opened her mouth a couple of times, trying to think of a smartass comeback to the most arrogant proposal she’d ever heard. But he had proposed, sort of, and she wanted to say yes. She would say yes. But, shit, she knew he could do better than that!

Arresting Victoria by Madison Layle and Anna Leigh Keaton

He chuckled. "Finally, she's speechless." He kissed her and wound his arms around her, pulling her up against his chest, his already hardening cock trapped between them. "Marry me, Victoria. Please. I don't want to spend another day without you."

She melted. "That's better," she muttered. "A month should do it."

He grinned. "Great. Now, about that other thing..." He spun her around and smacked her ass. "It's gonna be one long night, isn't it?"

She laughed even as the arousal bloomed back to life inside of her—or maybe it had never really died. "Oh, yeah," she agreed, wiggling her ass against his cock. "Long and hard."

The End

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle, and romance can be erotic—even in her own home.

Madison Layle avoided her childhood chores on the family farm by curling up with books and disappearing into other worlds of fantasy, adventure, and romance. With maturity came the love of her own real-life hero (a.k.a. “my darling hubby”), and a real understanding of why her parents locked their bedroom door.

Madison and Anna Leigh first met online through a critique group, a meeting which sparked a strong friendship and a fun partnership. Together, their writing has taken on a spicier flavor, so while their hubbies are off at work, they let their imaginations soar....

Visit them anytime at any of their online haunts:

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