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A PAIR OF JACKS

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A PAIR OF JACKS

BLAZE BALLANTINE

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Chapter One

“Damn it. I can take care of myself, Xavier.” Marie Maxwell dropped into a chair opposite the man who had been her case officer for the last three years. She recently returned from France where she’d been running a deep cover intelligence operation in Europe. “Tell me this is a bad joke.”

Xavier Jenson shook his head negatively, his light hazel eyes regarding her with a mixture of amusement and concern. “I assure you, Marie, this is not a joke. I have orders from the White House. You’re to be protected at all costs. The President suggested I assign Jack Benson to your personal safety detail. He’s on his way here as we speak.”

“The President is a pain-in-the-ass,” she retorted. She could say things like that about her uncle without fear of retribution. “I don’t need a babysitter. Yuri Yanukovich hasn’t caught on tumbled to me yet.”

“Maybe,” Xavier said noncommittally. He straightened an imaginary wrinkle in his conservative Brooks Brothers tie while carefully avoiding direct eye contact by looking everywhere but at her. Marie wondered what he was trying to hide.

“Trust me, I would have known,” she insisted. “I wouldn’t be alive and sitting in this chair if Yuri knew I worked for the agency.

I've posed as an international smuggler for the last three years, and I've helped Yuri transport roughly two million dollars' worth of contraband into countries all over the world. *He doesn't know I'm an agent.*"

Xavier finally impaled her with a stare, signaling he'd had enough of her protests. "Then explain this call we intercepted."

Marie knew whatever happened next wouldn't be good. She steeled herself for the bad news, and Xavier pushed the play button of an unseen sound system. Yuri's guttural voice filled the room from speakers placed in strategically concealed locations throughout the office. The effect was chilling. It sounded like the man spoke from inside her head. Marie stifled a shiver of apprehension.

The transmission picked up Yuri's conversation in the middle of a sentence. "...she ships through a distribution center located in Paris. I think it's an attempt by the agency to crack my organization. I've been toying with her, sending shipments of no real importance. I've shipped only enough to keep the GSA patiently waiting for more serious charges until I can finish our deal with the Iranians."

"How does she get these shipments out of the country?" an unidentified male voice asked.

"It's brilliant, really," Yuri answered. "She's built quite a reputation as an antiques dealer. The wealthy clientele to her gallery keeps her from being scrutinized too closely, and the fragile nature of the cargo keeps the crates from being examined as thoroughly as you might expect." Yuri chuckled. "No one wants to be responsible for destroying a three thousand year old vase. Especially one slated for a prime minister."

"Pardon me, but are you sure she's not being watched, Yuri? We can't afford a failure at this point. If you were to be arrested for some minor..."

"Not to worry," Yuri interrupted. "Ms. Maxwell is selling illegally smuggled antiquities to heads of government all over Europe. Custom officials tend to look the other way in her case."

There was a long pause before the unknown voice spoke again. "Perhaps she is legitimate."

"Perhaps," Yuri agreed, "but I'd rather not take a chance with this shipment."

"Then what do you suggest we do, my friend?"

"I won't divulge my hand right now, Victor. I'll continue shipping with Ms. Maxwell until our contract is complete, and then I'll take care of the situation."

"Is she a pretty woman?"

"Quite," Yuri answered.

"Pity," the unknown voice said before disconnecting the phone.

Xavier turned the sound system off, sitting back in his chair. "You did a good job, Marie. We know he's going to ship weapons to the Middle East soon. That gives us somewhere to begin looking. We have more intelligence on the process than we did at the beginning. The operation should be considered a success, not a failure. You need to remember that."

Marie had trouble dealing with the fact it was over. They still had so much to learn about Yuri's organization. She'd invested too much time and energy in this assignment to let it slip away from them at the threshold of success. She pushed Xavier a little harder, hoping she could make him cave in to her wishes.

"He's not certain I'm agency. I could go along with him," she suggested, knowing her voice sounded a little desperate. "I could do something that will convince him I'm legitimate. Xavier, we knew this was going to be a long-term assignment to win his trust. We went into this with the knowledge it would take months, or years, before he trusted me enough to ship weapons through my service. If I drop out now, he'll be positive I'm GSA. Maybe he's testing us. I could..."

Xavier held up his hand to cut her off. "There's more. Someone hacked into classified files at the agency. The only documents known to be compromised were those dealing with current maneuvers in Europe. We can't take the chance you weren't made. If Yuri is

positive you're involved in trying to infiltrate his operation, he won't quit until you're dead. Worse, if he finds out you have a connection at the White House level, it could produce international ramifications that would cause embarrassment to the United States."

"I know." Marie fully understood the political backlash her identity could generate, especially during an election year. "This had to be an inside job, Xavier. Our little unit is so classified, most of the people working in this building don't know we exist. Outside of a handful of people in Washington, who knows the Global Security Agency is anything more than a myth?"

"You know what they say, Marie. If two people know a secret, no matter how classified, it's no longer a secret. In Washington, D.C., that goes double," he paused before adding, "and your uncle has enemies who would like to see him lose his bid for reelection. I'm sure you know that."

"So you think it's an inside job, too?"

Xavier held out his hands palms up in the universal 'who knows' gesture. Marie knew he wasn't about to commit himself. The man was on a fast track up the political ladder. She doubted he would ever let a misguided word slip from his mouth to come back and haunt him later.

Marie glanced down at the stylish and expensive Parisian clothes she wore. Giving up the designer rags would be one aspect of the job she'd hate to lose. During the years of her assignment, she'd grown accustomed to the best of everything. Like every other day in her most recent assignment, Marie had dressed with the intent to impress.

Jean-Luc of Paris designed the ivory pantsuit Marie wore. She fingered the single strand of pearls, so warm against her skin, remembering the auction. They'd once belonged to Princess Grace, but Marie's Parisian lover had insisted she was worth any price. The hint of a smile played across Marie's lips as she thought of Philippe. He really had tried to buy her love, but try as she might, affection seemed to be the most passion she could conjure up for him. At their

parting, he remained a good sport, insisting she keep the pearls to remind her of his generosity should she find herself in need of a lover in the future.

To complete the look, Prada pumps dangled from her toes, and Marie carried a handbag that would cause a Saudi prince's eyes to bug out at the cost. Sometimes undercover work had its perks. With the exception of her pearls, Yuri had purchased the complete ensemble for her, just as he'd paid for her operational budget. He wasn't aware of that, of course, but his funds were channeled back into the Paris operation to be used in whatever manner Marie deemed appropriate to keep up appearances.

It was inevitable that it would all come to a crashing halt. She just hadn't expected it to be so soon. It wasn't like she hadn't enjoyed living the lifestyle for awhile, but it wasn't her. She'd never let herself get too comfortable in the role. "I'll have to change my looks in case any of Yuri's men happen to cross my path here in the States." She smiled wistfully at Xavier, reaching up to pat the elegant chignon she'd styled her platinum hair into. "I wanted to cut it anyway and go back to my natural color."

"I'm sorry. I know you've worked hard at this." Xavier stood up from his desk to fix them both a drink. He poured himself a scotch and Marie a measure of American Honey Bourbon. She took a sip, enjoying the hint of vanilla and citrus flavoring that made the strong liquor unique. Xavier stood at his window, looking out over the city, while they both reflected on the time and effort lost on this assignment.

Marie wondered where she would be stationed next, hoping it would be somewhere less pretentious than Paris, but not as volatile as Africa.

Xavier's secretary, Tina, buzzed into the office announcing Jack Benson had arrived. Xavier set his drink down, turning to face Marie again. "Jack's a good man. Hard as nails, but I can't think of anyone I'd trust more. Don't give him a hard time."

"I'll behave," she promised, finishing her drink and standing to greet her new, and unwanted, bodyguard. She told herself it was only a matter of time. Surely, she could handle a couple of weeks. By then, Yuri would make his move. Never a patient man in the best of circumstances, he also had to deal with time constraints. By the nature of his line of work, he would be forced to solve his problems quickly and permanently. He'd come after her soon.

The double doors of Xavier's office opened slightly, and a muscular man wearing a dark suit stepped through onto the plush beige carpeting. Despite the fact he did nothing more than step inside the room, Marie could tell Jack Benson was coiled energy. She felt it radiating off him like a force field of power. His blue eyes missed nothing as they examined the room, and her, with a seemingly dispassionate interest, before settling on Xavier.

"Good to see you again," he said to Xavier, and Marie's heart speed up. Honest to God, the man had the sexiest voice she'd ever heard. It was low and husky, pitched barely above a whisper.

"Good to see you, Jack. This is Marie Maxwell. She's been undercover in Europe three years. Her assignment to infiltrate the Russian crime syndicate was nearly completed when someone breached our security barriers and downloaded all our European operations files. We have to assume Marie has been compromised along with all the other ops we were running. Our agents have been called home, and safety precautions are being taken. As you know, the President has asked that you personally handle Marie's case."

Jack held out his hand to her and Marie took it, curious to feel his skin against hers. She wasn't surprised to find his fingers were callused from work and martial arts conditioning. "Nice to meet you."

"You too."

He didn't mean it, of course, neither did she, but they were both playing nice for the time being.

"Like a drink, Jack?" Xavier went back to the bar to pour himself another one, no doubt trying to numb the loss of his European theater.

Marie didn't blame him for being upset. Everything was up in smoke with no way to get back in. GSA would have to start over again, building new contacts from the street up. It would take years to rebuild the system of street intelligence they'd lost.

"Not while I'm working, sir."

Marie figured Benson as former military, special ops of some kind, by the look of him. He had that alert, hard-edged control men develop when they live under constant danger.

With his short, tousled brown hair and stern face, he wasn't a man Marie would call terminally handsome, but he *was* utterly masculine, and therefore attractive because of the testosterone he exuded. By the way her body reacted to him, she wondered if it leaked out of his pores under the suit he wore. Jack Benson had rugged, alpha male down to perfection. She could understand why her uncle picked him for this mission.

Like a caged animal waiting to be released, powerful muscles rippled under the layers of clothing he wore. It crossed Marie's mind that she'd like to see him undressed before she managed to give herself a mental slap back into the reality at hand. Jack glanced over at Marie as if he could read her thoughts, and she gave him a challenging smile that he didn't return. Okay, so his personality sucked. He was still a sexy man.

Get a grip, Marie.

'He's not that sexy.'

Yes, he is.

'He's dangerous.'

Ohhh, yes, he's very dangerous.

'The badass action hero is not your type.'

No, but he could be.

Pouring himself another small measure of scotch, Xavier gave a little shake of his head as if he needed to let his anxiety go, then he turned to face Jack and Marie, holding his glass up in a toast he didn't get to verbalize.

One minute he was standing, the next, blood sprayed the room and he fell forward, spilling the scotch. The tumbler rolled out of his lifeless fingers, stopping just a short distance from where he fell. Then all hell broke loose.

Jack put himself between the window and Marie, positioning his body to take any stray bullets while he rushed her out of the room. He didn't pause in the reception area. Instead, he hauled Marie toward the elevators, half lifting her off the floor with one arm while he pushed her along in front of him at a run. His right hand held a black plated automatic pistol that he'd carried in a concealed holster under his suit jacket.

"Xavier's down. Get the hell out of here, Tina," he yelled to Xavier's secretary while sprinting for the elevator. "Take the stairs and go. You know the drill. I'll be in touch."

A man dressed in a conservative suit rushed out of his office when he heard Jack's shouted warning. He headed for the elevators at a dead run, sliding across the floor in his slick bottomed dress shoes. From the panicked look on his face, it was obvious he wasn't a field agent. At least not one used to dealing with operations that involved personal danger. The man cut in front of Jack, blocking his view of the elevator and surrounding area.

"Take the stairs," Jack ordered with a look of annoyance on his hard features.

"No, I want out of here now." The man's voice came dangerously close to sounding like a spoiled child's whine. "What if there are gunmen in the stairwell? I have a right to use the elevator. I'm getting on whether you like it or not." Positioning himself squarely in front of the doors, he glared arrogantly at Jack, mustering up what Marie imagined was his best bureaucratic attempt to look threatening. She thought it might work with the clerks and secretaries in the office, but she doubted the glare would carry much weight for Jack Benson.

In a lightening quick move, using the butt of the pistol, Jack smacked the office worker on the side of his head, sending him

sprawling face down on the carpet. “I said take the stairs,” he growled in his gravelly soft voice.

The elevator opened with a soft *whooshing* sound, and the man scrambled back to his feet, lunging forward one more time. Jack shoved Marie inside the open doors with enough force, she stumbled against the back wall. He steadied her with one hand while aiming the pistol straight at the bureaucrat’s chest to stop him in mid-step. Jerking back in surprise, the frightened office worker sputtered as the metal doors slid closed blocking his protests.

“Damn it,” Jack muttered. He frantically dug a cell phone out of his pocket while glancing upward to make sure no one was riding on the top of the elevator car.

Marie knew the elevators had been designed with Plexiglas ceilings and strategically positioned lights that would show a silhouette of anything attached to the car, human or otherwise. Bombs were considered one of the most dangerous threats to government offices dealing with national or global security. Therefore, a great deal of effort had been put forth in designing the building in a way to make hiding explosives difficult, in not impossible. Obviously, satisfied they were alone, Jack punched a speed dial number and waited.

Marie looked down at the droplets of red splattered across her ivory suit. She wanted to cry. She began to tremble, and tears welled in her eyes as she stared at Xavier’s blood. He had a wife and kids. He had been a good man, and she would miss him.

Jack watched her as he waited for an answer to his call. She thought she saw a quicksilver flash of compassion in his eyes. His mouth formed a word, and he started to reach out to her. Then his call was answered, redirecting his attention back to the phone. Marie wondered what he wanted to say before the male voice on the other end distracted him.

“Reno, I’ve got a situation. I need you to pick me up at the rest stop on Interstate 66. I’ve got luggage.”

He listened for a second then flipped the phone shut, shoving it into his pocket before he edged into the corner of the elevator, pushing Marie behind him. "You okay?"

She nodded, realized he couldn't see her, and choked out a whisper. "I'm okay."

"Good." He slipped another gun out of his jacket handing it to her butt end first. "Don't use this until you have to. Trust me to take care of you, but if I go down, use it."

Marie took the gun out of his hand, flipping off the safety as the elevator doors opened into a long, narrow corridor. The shrieking alarm masked all sound that might give warning of someone nearby. Jack inched his head out the door checking for hostiles.

It took Marie a second to realize they weren't in the parking garage. Jack had stopped them one floor up on the maintenance and housekeeping level. He stepped out into the hallway, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure she was following.

Marie held the gun ready, keeping an eye on their backs as she followed closely behind Jack, mimicking his every move. Her head throbbed from the deafening alarm system as they made their way down the hall, checking doors for one that had been left unlocked. At last, halfway down the corridor, a large supply closet finally opened and they stepped inside.

Jack locked the door behind them. He immediately began searching the shelves and cabinets in a frenzy. "What are you looking for?" Marie asked. She glanced around, thinking he was searching for chemicals or something that could be used as a diversion. There wasn't anything in the room but linens and surplus uniforms for the maintenance staff. Short of starting a fire, Marie couldn't see any way to cause a diversion with what was available to them.

"Here." He shoved a bundle of clothes at her. "Put these on and take your hair down."

She frowned, thinking of all the pins holding the chignon in place. "It's not that easy to get loose."

“Then put a hat on,” he snapped, impatiently dumping the clothes in her arms and turning away from her.

Jack set his gun on a nearby shelf, beginning to strip down as she peeled off her ruined clothes. The navy blue uniform he’d handed her was approximately the right size, and the color designated her as one of the senior level housekeeping staff. Marie slipped the shapeless dress over her head in time to see him shrug out of his shoulder holster, placing it beside the gun on the shelf. Like a quick striptease, he loosened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt, and dropped his pants, stepping out of them without hesitation.

Marie’s mouth went dry and her pussy got wet. His legs were solid muscle—and his ass...well, it took a lot of control not to reach out and slide her hands over the tight muscles that were so invitingly near, covered in nothing more than thin blue cotton boxers.

Jack tossed the clothes they had been wearing into a hamper full of dirty linens. He placed a stack of uniforms over the gun and holster he’d taken off, but only enough to conceal them. They were still easily attainable. As he reached for the folded maintenance worker’s uniform he’d selected for himself, a loud pounding came on the door. “Open up in there!”

Marie jerked at the command, looking at Jack for his reaction.

“Put the hat on,” he whispered urgently, stepping into the pair of brown uniform pants.

“Just a minute,” he called to the door. Jack hurriedly shook the folds out of the khaki work shirt. Utterly confused by his actions, Marie watched as he tossed it on the shelf, making no effort to pull the trousers up over his bare legs. She silently wondered what the hell his problem was, because he sure couldn’t fight, or run, with his pants down around his ankles.

Whoever knocked on the door wasn’t waiting a minute. Marie heard the jangle of keys and her heart lurched. Just as the closet door slammed open, Jack shoved Marie back against the shelving. He pulled her leg up around his hips, kissing her with the passion of a

man starved for sex.

Her traitorous body responded to the urgency of Jack's kiss. Despite the awkward situation, a gush of warm liquid dampened her panties when Jack's hard cock pushed through the opening of his boxers and thrust against her, grinding her between him and the shelves.

"What the fuck?" a voice said from somewhere behind Jack and a ripple of male laughter filled the room.

Jack jerked back guiltily, immediately holding his hands up when he saw the weapons pointed at them. He didn't try to shove himself back into his boxers. "Don't shoot us. We were just making out a little. We didn't do anything wrong." He made eye contact with the team leader. "I don't want to lose my job."

The security team lowered their weapons, still laughing. They looked a bit uncomfortable standing in the tight area with Jack still semi-erect and making no attempt to hide the situation.

The leader looked pointedly at Jack's face to avoid his escaped erection. "Get some clothes on. I'll give you one minute before I drag your ass out of here, naked if I have to. There's a security breach. Can't you hear the fucking alarms?"

Jack looked contrite. "I thought it was just a drill. We have 'em all the time. I don't pay much attention anymore."

The team leader ground his teeth in frustration. "It's not a damn drill. Get dressed."

Like the team, Marie tried to look everywhere but at Jack's cock. She didn't seem to have as much willpower as the men. Despite her best intentions, her gaze strayed to the front of his boxers, fastening on the thick male appendage that stood proudly semi-erect. *Impressive*. Maybe the reason he hadn't put it back in his pants was because he had nothing to be ashamed of.

If he'd been trying to keep the situation awkward and off balance, Marie thought he'd accomplished that. At the command of the leader, they backed out of the tight storage room to give them some privacy.

While they waited, the guards stood on each side of the doorway with their weapons ready. Their collective attention was focused on the elevator and stairwells at each end of the hallway. Jack took advantage of their distraction to slip into the janitor's uniform, hiding his weapons under the baggy clothes. He took Marie's hand in his giving it a little squeeze.

"They'll walk us safely out of here," he whispered. "Don't say a word, no matter what smartass remarks they make. If I can stand my dick out there flapping in the breeze, you can handle a few rude comments. And trust me, we'll hear them."

Chapter Two

Marie wanted to think Jack's kiss was the last thing on her mind during the occurring events, however it wasn't. She couldn't help but wonder how a man could put that much feeling into acting. He should be on stage winning an Oscar for that performance. Her lips still felt swollen from the pressure of his mouth and she wanted to taste more of him, but the security team's leader marched them down the hall and into the employees' cafeteria, motioning for them to take a seat in the back.

"Is everyone accounted for now, Robbins?"

"We've got seventy-five names on the roster. Seventy-five people seated, sir."

Jack cast Marie a sidelong look. If their presence made seventy-five, where were the other two people who should have been in the same spot?

"Listen up," the leader of the team said. "Each of you signed a security agreement when you took this job. If you want to retain your employment, you will not discuss any details of what has happened here today. Is that clear?"

Everyone nodded. Marie was aware the support personnel believed they worked for a high security computer firm doing contract work for the government. Only a handful of people knew the building housed the GSA and ran a team of covert operatives in addition to the other government contracts.

"I want you all to exit the building immediately. You will proceed to your cars and leave the parking garage in an orderly manner. Is that clear?"

A few people nodded, some said, ‘*Yes, sir,*’ as if answering a drill sergeant, but most remained quiet. Jack and Marie stayed in the silent group, hoping they wouldn’t be noticed by anyone who asked who they were.

“Dismissed,” the team commander said.

The room immediately emptied in a mass exodus toward the parking garage. It would be nearly impossible for a sniper to single any one person out in the clot of uniforms and flurry of activity. Marie admired Jack for his quick thinking to get them safely out of the building.

He hurried her to a dark colored SUV with tinted windows. It seemed to Marie everyone in Washington wanted anonymity. There must have been a dozen similar vehicles parked in the nearby vicinity. Jack started the powerful engine and eased his way into the string of cars cleared to leave the parking garage. One by one, the employees passed the guard station before pulling onto the street, getting caught by the light on 25th. A traffic jam built as the overflow of cars coming out of the parking garage caused a minor buildup of stationary vehicles.

Jack glanced in the rearview mirror while waiting for the light to change. “They’re releasing the building one floor at a time,” he explained. “Doesn’t look like they’re too worried about hostiles being inside. The shooter was across the street, probably on the roof of the Colfax Building. Who knew you were back in Washington?”

Marie shrugged. “Xavier, Tina, the President...I can’t think of anyone else.”

Jack shot her an impatient look. “Think again.”

“Well...all the people I came in contact with. The people at the airport that processed my ticket would have known I was on a flight to the States. The cabdriver...”

“This was an inside job,” he interrupted.

“I think so, too,” Marie admitted. “And so did Xavier, but he wouldn’t come right out and say that.”

"I'm sorry about Xavier." Jack shifted gears while he edged into the heavy traffic, apparently confident the car he was cutting off wouldn't hit him. "I know he was your friend."

Marie nodded, turning her face to look out the window, so he wouldn't see her tears. His sympathy was unexpected, making her that much more emotional. She could handle her grief, but not his pity. It made her feel vulnerable, though she didn't understand why.

"Where are you taking me until we get this sorted out?"

It seemed like a reasonable question to distract herself with. As long as she didn't think about Xavier, she'd be okay. She would deal with the grief later, in her own way, but not here, not now, and definitely not in front of Agent Jack Benson. It was a matter of professional pride. She didn't want him to think her weak. Or think that her job was nothing more than a whim of the president's niece.

"We're going to meet Jack Reno. He's someone I trust with my life, so I trust him with yours."

"But where are you taking me?" she repeated.

Jack's face tightened into an unreadable mask. *Stubborn*, Marie decided. *Control freak*. So why did she harbor this the attraction to him? The last thing in the world Marie needed, or wanted, in her life was a man trying to control her. She'd made her own decisions since her teenage years, and she wasn't about to fall into some needy relationship at this point in her life. She slammed the brakes on her wayward thoughts. *Whoa! Relationship?* What the hell was she thinking? She'd just met Jack Benson. Xavier had been killed. Her life had been threatened. How did the word relationship even enter her mind? Obviously, she wasn't thinking clearly. She must be suffering from some sort of stress factor.

"I'll tell you when we get there."

His answer pissed Marie off. She had the right to know. It wasn't like she'd be calling anyone to tell them where she'd be staying. Not only did he have zero personality, he was a macho bastard. She would show Jack Benson what she was made of before things got totally out

of control.

Two could play this game, she decided. Her hand tightened around the gun he'd given her in the elevator, but before she could level it at him, Jack yanked the SUV to the curb. He grabbed her wrist and squeezed.

"*Give that to me.*" The harsh whisper of his voice caused chills to dance down the center of Marie's back. His face was so close, she could feel his breath against her skin. He applied more pressure and the gun dropped from her hand. "If you try something like that again, I'll handcuff you and put you in the back."

"You're supposed to be protecting me," Marie reminded him a little breathlessly. She tugged at the firm hold he had on her wrist.

Jack yanked her up against him, dropping his mouth over hers for a harsh kiss that demanded she surrender to him. When he drew back, his eyes glittered like cold blue diamonds. "I *am* protecting you, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep you alive. I don't give a damn whether you like my choices or not. Understand?"

"I'm an agent, too." Marie jerked her hand out of his grip, trying to pretend her mouth wasn't burning from the pressure of his kiss. Something in the feral strength of this man robbed her of all logical thought. She should be furious. She should be insulted. Instead, she wanted him to kiss her again. How pathetic. Ignoring whatever errant hormones were eating at her brain, she tried to make a stand. "You don't need to treat me like a civilian."

Jack dropped the gun into the drink compartment of the console, glancing out the side window before steering the SUV back into traffic with a reckless vengeance. "I wouldn't have kissed a civilian."

Marie sat quietly after that, watching him from the corner of her eye. She'd been right about Jack. He was lethal. He moved quicker than she'd ever seen anyone react when she pulled the gun on him.

"What are you thinking?"

It surprised her that he cared enough to ask. She gave a shrug. "I'm thinking you're a dangerous man, Jack Benson. You're hard,

you're stubborn, and you're the kind that won't give up when you're under fire."

He leveled another stare in her direction. "I'm your worst nightmare, Marie. Don't forget that."

Despite the coldness of his words, his voice poured over her like warm honey, all the more powerful for the husky murmur and unemotional delivery. Marie knew at that precise moment she would break Jack's iron clad will. She considered it a challenge, a personal mission, a desire. She wanted to know who he kept buried deep inside the tightly controlled soldier. And what sort of passion he held under that cold exterior.

* * * *

Jack wondered what the hell he'd been thinking when he gave in to his need and kissed her. *Damn, but she tasted fine.* Looked fine, too. Even in the maid's uniform, she still looked like Parisian elegance wrapped in an untouchable package that invited a man to unwrap her.

Geezus. Her mouth tasted so fucking sweet. He wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to feel the soft points of her breasts flattened against his chest. He wanted to feel her soft skin and hear her unconscious sigh as she responded to his touch.

The woman smoldered like a fire waiting to be stoked into a flame, and he felt hot enough to ignite her by his thoughts alone. If she only knew what he wanted to do to her, she'd be aiming that gun and pulling the trigger.

Get yourself in line, Jack. She's not a fucking gift for you to open. She's an assignment. Remember you're dealing with President's niece. Above all, she's the kind of woman who requires high maintenance attention. She is definitely not for a simple cowboy from Wyoming. You're responsible for her safety. Nothing more.

Jack figured with her mom being the President's sister, her dad

would have to be successful at whatever field he worked in. He didn't have a prayer of a chance with Marie Maxwell, but that didn't keep him from wanting her naked under him, moaning his name.

He shook his head in frustration, trying to clear his thoughts.

"What are you *thinking*, Jack?"

"Trust me. You don't want to know, Marie."

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Jack sighed, wiping a hand across his face. No way would he tell her the truth.

"How the hell did you get into undercover work being the President's niece?"

Marie hesitated. "It's a long story. You sure you want to hear it?"

He nodded, changing lanes to head westward out of the city.

"My mom and the President were half-brother and sister. He didn't know about me until after my mom died. I was already in government work before a background check revealed my connection to him. We had a somewhat...dysfunctional family."

"You didn't know you were related to the President of the United States?"

Marie grinned. "Can you believe it? I was an Army brat. My mom was career military. We moved from base to base when I was a kid. I never met my grandparents. We pretty much stayed on the move in foreign countries."

"What about your dad?" Jack asked with a little frown. He couldn't picture Marie living anywhere but an upscale neighborhood. He wondered if she was telling the truth or giving him a cover story. Easy enough to check out, he decided, questioning why it mattered to him. He hoped she trusted him enough to tell the truth, because it would make his job a whole lot easier.

Marie turned her face away, biting her lip before she answered. When she did reply, her voice was quiet and unemotional. "There wasn't a daddy in the equation, at least none I can remember. I stopped asking about him when I was six years old. Mom refused to

tell me anything, and when I got older, I realized it was because she didn't know who he was."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

Marie shrugged. "You might as well know if you're going to protect me, Jack. By the time I graduated high school, I found out I was a surprise package from a weekend leave in Mom's early years before she made the rank of Major and settled down."

"We talked about it a little back then. She confessed she was a party animal in her younger days. My grandmother kicked her out of the house because she couldn't control her. With no place to go, Mom joined the military. She excelled at it, so she stayed."

"And she never took you home to visit your grandparents?"

Marie shook her head. "By the time I came along, my grandmother had been remarried several years and had another life. She had a second set of kids." Marie folded her arms, leaning back in the seat, turning her attention to the traffic surrounding them. Jack noticed the rigid set of her shoulders even though she tried to look relaxed. Obviously, the subject of her family made her uncomfortable. "I guess Mom thought we wouldn't be welcome."

"You must have been lonesome."

Marie's eyes grew distant as she thought about it. "Yes and no. You can't really miss what you've never had. Mom and I had a different relationship. She acted more like an older sister than a parent. We didn't have any of that mother/daughter tug-of-war going on when I hit my teenage years. She told me I was responsible for myself, and if I made the wrong choices, I'd have to live with them. She gave me the wings of freedom, but I never flew too far from the nest. I had nothing to prove. She'd given me a vote of confidence by allowing me to run my own life. I guess I felt I owed it to her to live up to the challenge."

Jack tried to imagine the details Marie had left out. He couldn't envision her living the life of an Army brat. She looked, and acted, like finishing schools and old family money. He wasn't sure he

believed her, but it would be simple enough to check her out when he had a free minute. “You said she died?”

“In Iraq.” Marie studied her fingernails. “Friends were fleeting when I was growing up and I learned not to get too close to anyone. That way it didn’t hurt so much when we moved on to the next assignment. But she did teach me skills that were useful in other places. Xavier was a friend of my mother. He sort of adopted me after her death. That’s how I got into the agency.”

Jack watched a silent tear track down Marie’s face. He reached over to wipe it off her cheek with the back of his hand, using his thumb to dry the moisture on her chin.

“We’re almost there.”

* * * *

The rest stop on Interstate 66 was just a few miles outside of Manassas. Jack hit the first exit ramp, checking his mirrors to see if they were being followed. Apparently convinced no one trailed them, he pulled into the truck stop and drove behind the long block building. He parked the SUV in the shadow of several big rigs left idling while their drivers got food, took a shower, and called home.

Marie put her hand on the door, preparing to exit the GMC for a bathroom break. Jack caught her other wrist, holding her firmly in the seat. “Not yet.” His gaze searched the shadows for any sign of trouble. Marie stayed put, admiring his fieldwork. He knew his stuff.

Even though she was about to pee in her pants, she knew there would be no point in arguing with him to hurry. He’d get his own way. She couldn’t risk handcuffs. She really needed to use the facilities and get a cup of coffee. It had been hours since she’d had anything to eat. Once she debarked the plane from Paris, she caught a taxi straight to GSA headquarters without bothering to stop for lunch. It was well past dinner now.

A tall man stepped out of the shadows, wearing nondescript street

clothing—jeans, a blue button down shirt that hung loose over a dark tee and black tennis shoes. He looked like just another guy at a truck stop, except for the way he blended in with the night and moved with the stealthy grace of a tiger. Marie assumed he was Reno since Jack didn't pick up the pistol lying in the console between them.

The man walked to Marie's side of the vehicle and Jack slid the window down. "Reno, this is Marie Maxwell. She's going to be staying with us for a while."

Her heart gave a crazy little beat. Reno was the looker of the pair. Dark eyes surrounded by sinfully long eyelashes gave his dimpled face a quality of friendliness that was definitely missing in Jack Benson's. Running long fingers through his unruly black hair, he aimed a lazy grin at Marie, deepening the dimples in both of his cheeks. "Ready to get out? I know Jack's effervescent personality can be a little overwhelming at times."

She laughed at the look of resignation on Jack's face. Could two men possibly be more different? Reno opened the door, standing back for Marie to step out past him and she motioned toward the building. "I'd like to stand here and chat, but..."

Without a word, both men closed in on either side of her, escorting Marie to the door of the ladies' room. For a minute, she thought they might go inside, but Jack slipped the gun he'd taken from her earlier into the pocket of the uniform she still wore. "I want it back when you come out."

They were waiting in the corridor with coffee, donuts, and sandwiches when she returned. For a moment, Marie thought she'd seen Jack smile at something Reno said, but she chalked it up to a trick of the light. She couldn't imagine him smiling about anything, especially under the circumstances. Jack looked like his face would break if he smiled.

"You hungry?" Reno handed her a deli ham sandwich while Jack offered her a cup of coffee.

"Starved." She peeled the paper back and shamelessly wolfed

down a bite before she fainted. “And can I get a change of clothes while we’re here?”

Reno reached out to dab a bit of mustard off the side of Marie’s mouth. “We were just talking about that. There’s a western store next door.”

“*Western?*”

Shocked, Marie watched as he actually did it again. Stone faced Jack Benson grinned. He must find the thought of her wearing blue jeans funny. He had wonderful features when he smiled. The hardness left his face and his tight mouth relaxed into a kissable Cupid’s bow.

The memory of his mouth on hers unfurled in her mind. Marie wanted to kiss him once again, just to be certain she hadn’t imagined how skillful he was with his tongue or how he could kiss with passion in the midst of anger.

Reno glanced from Jack to Marie with a knowing look. “There’s some history between you two I don’t know about?”

“No.” Jack wadded in the last of his sandwich while the smile vanished from his face. He gulped down the coffee like it wasn’t hot, and tossed the empty container in a nearby trashcan. Marie got the feeling he did everything with an economy of movement just in case he wouldn’t get another chance again soon. She thought he must have lived a hard life because it showed in every efficient movement he made.

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, Marie left the store dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, and a matching hat. She took time in the dressing room to take her hair out of the chignon, bushing it out with her fingers to let it fall across her shoulders. She stood transfixed, staring at herself in the mirror for a moment. She wondered if the sassy image staring back could really be her. How long had it been since she wore jeans and let her hair down? She thought she might like this new casually

dressed woman staring back at her.

With a slow curl of her lips, Marie turned around to look at her ass in the mirror. *Not bad*. The jeans hugged her like a second skin, accenting the roundness of her hips and the curve of her waist. Not that she could ever pass as a fashion model. She had too many curves for that, but she was happy with herself. She'd never be the type to starve her body into a shapeless toothpick.

Leaving the uniform on the bench of the dressing room, she walked out the door to where Jack and Reno waited for her. Her mouth dropped open. Three words immediately came to her mind, '*Drop dead gorgeous*,' quickly followed by '*Sex on the hoof*'. And any other number of tired clichés she could think of. The two men had transformed into cowboys with the blink of an eye, a pair of quite delicious looking cowboys.

"You look ravishing, darlin'," Reno drawled, giving Marie a roguish wink.

Jack said nothing, but he looked her over from head to toe. He did a slow perusal of Marie's body, lingering on the spots that interested him long enough to bring a blush of color to her cheeks. When he met her stare again, his eyes held a heat that nearly melted her bones.

"Let's get on the road." Jack gave Marie one more glance before resolutely turning away, but not before he could hide the stiff bulge in the front of his tight jeans from her appreciative eyes.

She watched him walk in front of her, the cowboy boots giving him a cocky swagger that the flat dress shoes didn't. Marie thought she could really do with a piece of that. But she didn't think he would be easy. Reno, on the other hand, was a player. From the confident way he handled women, to the sexy dimples in his cheeks, he had seduction written all over him. He knew how to seduce a woman, and she bet he was damn good at it.

Marie wasn't sure which of them would need protecting the most before this assignment ended, her or the men.

Chapter Three

“You want to climb in the back and take a nap?” Reno asked, opening the rear door of the SUV for Marie. “We’ve got a long drive ahead of us.”

“Really?” she asked, feigning innocence. “Where are we headed?”

“Ghost Moon Ranch, Wyoming.”

Marie shot Jack a smirk of triumph before turning back to Reno with what she hoped was an innocent grin. “Sure, I’ll get in the back.” She knew he was onto her when he winked conspiratorially before shutting the door.

On the road, Marie found herself nodding off, despite her intention to stay awake. She wondered belatedly if one of them had slipped something in her coffee, or the food, but she decided there was no reason for them to do so. Giving in to her tiredness, she slept. When she woke again, they were pulling into the graveled parking lot of a small private airstrip.

A dying moon hung in the pre-dawn darkness. Reno turned off the driving lights and sat for several minutes before edging the car around the end of a concrete hanger housing four or five small planes.

“Which one?” Reno asked, glancing over at Jack.

“Cessna.”

Reno nodded his agreement.

Marie watched the interaction between them curiously. They’d worked a lot of missions together if their easy camaraderie was any indication. She’d noticed how the pair could communicate without words. A nod, or a flick of the eye, and they responded immediately. Marie wondered what it would be like to have that sort of bond with

another human.

“Earth to Marie,” Reno said in her ear. She jumped half out of the seat, muttering a curse under her breath. She berated herself because that kind of inattention would get her killed in a hostile environment. She needed to quit thinking about the men and focus on staying alive. Yuri was out there somewhere looking for her, and she didn’t think he’d stop until he found her.

“Which one of you is the pilot?” she asked, placing her bets on Jack.

“Both of us have a pilot’s license,” Reno answered. He stowed their gear in the back of the tiny plane while Jack made a pre-flight check of the aircraft. “But Jack says I fly like a stunt pilot.” He gave Marie a dazzling grin. “He has no sense of adventure.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Get in the plane, Reno. I said you fly like a drunken crop duster. A stunt pilot has some finesse.”

Marie laughed, until she felt Jack’s hands around her waist. Without warning, she found it difficult to get her breath. Looking into his blue eyes, she wondered how she ever thought they were cold. With a wink, he lifted her onto the wing, balancing her until she stepped inside the small cabin and settled herself in the backseat.

Reno turned around to face her, pretending to yawn. “Get settled in for the most boring flight you’ve ever experienced.”

“I think I could use some boring in my life right about now,” Marie said, smiling at Jack.

He gave a small grin in return, taxiing the plane onto the short runway. Just as the sun popped over the horizon, he leveled the plane westward in the direction of Wyoming.

* * * *

Jack set the plane down on a private landing strip in the most beautiful country Marie had ever seen. She pressed her face against the window wanting to take it all in. After years of living in a

crowded metropolis filled with pollution, this unspoiled land, with its endless blue sky, seemed like paradise.

Rolling green meadows filled with wildflowers ran along a wide stream to the nearby bluffs jutting into mountains high enough to still have snow on their peaks. She could smell the fresh scent of pine and the spice of wild herbs mixed with evergreen shrubbery when Reno opened the passenger's door.

As the plane touched down, she noticed a tan jeep sitting off to the side of the runway with a sole occupant wearing what looked like a battered Stetson. As soon as Reno stepped out of the doorway, the jeep came closer. A tall, middle-aged Native American stepped out of the vehicle, doffing his hat in greeting.

He had gray hair pulled back in a ponytail that nearly reached his waist. His faded jeans, denim shirt, and scuffed boots with their silver toe protectors looked worn and comfortable. He was a workingman and it showed.

Reno held up his hand to help Marie out of the plane. As soon as her boots hit the ground, he turned her in the direction of the driver. "This is Walter Eagleman. He takes care of the ranch while we're gone."

Holding out her hand to Walter, she watched him engulf her hand with his big rawboned fist. His skin felt rough from years of hard work, but his touch was surprisingly gentle. Marie could picture him breaking horses and mending fences like cowboys in the Old West.

Jack came around the side of the plane, giving Walter a genuine smile and a quick hug. He looked up toward the sky, drinking it in, his face suddenly relaxing like a man who had come home to a place he felt safe and secure. "Good to be back, Walt."

"Been too long, Jack. Ranger's waiting for you."

"I'll take him for a ride after dinner."

Marie studied Jack with unabashed curiosity. He seemed different here, relaxed and comfortable with himself. She had never imagined him the type to have an attachment to any living thing. Yet, there was

an obvious and deep friendship between he and Walter Eagleman. And there must be a favorite horse waiting for him to ride. If she wasn't careful, she'd think Jack Benson was capable of harboring real feelings for someone other than himself.

Now you're being unfair. Just because Jack takes his job seriously doesn't mean he's a cold-hearted bastard. So he didn't show a lot of emotion. Come to think of it, her mom hadn't either, but she'd been a compassionate and loving person. Marie decided it all came down to her lack of experience dealing with people. She had trouble determining coldness from natural reserve.

They piled into Walter's jeep, heading across the meadow, heedless of the riot of colorful flowers he crushed under the knobby off-road tires. Marie winced at the waste of such beauty, remembering that she had paid a small fortune to buy flowers from street vendors in Paris, and none were as pretty as any of the flowers growing in the meadows they traveled through.

The closer to the mountains they got, more rocks dotted the soil, replacing the beautiful vegetation. The hardy tall stems growing here resembled blooming weeds more than flowers. The terrain grew rugged with a wild beauty of its own. Two picturesque wood fences came into view, making a large corral with an inner ring for horse training. A huge two story wooden barn sat at the far end of the fence.

Nestled against the bluffs was a rustic cabin with a tin roof and wide porch filled with handmade furniture. Marie's gaze settled on the swing, and she wondered what it would be like to sit between the pair of Jacks on a cool mountain night with a full moon playing hide and seek behind the bluffs. Just the thought brought a blush to her cheeks and a rush of warmth to her pussy. Which one would she choose? Or did she want her cake and to eat it, too?

Chapter Four

Walter showed Marie to her room. It had a full sized bed with loads of lace pillows propped against the headboard and a homemade pink flannel comforter that looked thick and inviting. A wide double paned window looked out over the meadow and stream toward the bluffs that seemed close enough to touch.

“They’re farther away than they look,” he explained when she went to stand in front of the window. “If trouble comes to the ranch, you take a horse and head for that outcropping that looks like an arrowhead.” He stood behind her positioning her shoulders, then pointing out an extension of rock that did indeed look like an arrowhead.

“See the lower edge? If you look in that area, you’ll find supplies enough to keep you alive in the hills for several days. Food, camping supplies, extra clothing.”

Marie turned to look at Walter who had stepped back a respectful distance from her. “Do you expect trouble?” She watched him closely for his reaction.

“Better to be prepared, little lady,” he said without directly answering her question. “You come on down to dinner when you get hungry. My wife fixed up some homemade biscuits and fried chicken.” He gave Marie a friendly grin. “You don’t want to miss her fried chicken.”

When Marie stepped into the kitchen, Walter and Reno sat at the table with a plate of biscuits between them. A small dark haired woman fussed round the stove and Jack stood at the old-fashioned pump sink in the corner of the room with his shirt off, washing what

looked like hay particles off his arms and upper torso. Marie's mouth went dry at the expanse of chest and the bulge of muscles that rippled above the snug fit of his jeans. He had a tattoo of the rising sun on his right arm that she hadn't noticed back in D.C. because he'd been wearing a t-shirt that concealed it.

He caught her staring at him and blushed adorably, toweling off before pulling a fresh blue t-shirt over his head. Surprised at his reaction, Marie kept watching him, lost in the captivating blueness of his eyes and the endearing way he avoided looking at her. Finally, unable to resist, he glanced back at her with a vulnerability that squeezed Marie's heart.

Obviously still feeling a little awkward, Jack sauntered over to the table, brushing against Marie as they both headed for the same seat at the table. Marie's breasts barely brushed his arm, but she felt a jolt of electricity at his touch, and Jack gave her another vulnerable glance that stole her breath along with her heart.

A new sort of confusion settled over Marie as she took the seat Jack held for her between him and Walter. He carefully avoided looking her way, turning his full attention to Walter's wife as she carried the platter of fried chicken to the table and placed it between him and Reno.

"These two used to fight for the drumsticks." Sallie gave them both a motherly smile, lightly placing her hands on each of their shoulders. "They were always competing for something, but you couldn't separate them, no matter how hard they argued. Closer than brothers, I told Walter."

Marie looked from one of them to the other. So they were childhood friends. That made a lot of sense. Now she understood why they had such a rapport. She could almost see the two of them in childish competition, yet bonding together to fight the world if one of them was threatened. Marie hoped she'd find out more about their background, but figured she would have to work on Reno if she wanted any details. Jack just didn't seem like the kind to give any

information away despite his sudden thawing.

“Sit down and eat with us,” Walter told his wife. “You’ve done enough fussing over these two. You’re going to spoil them.”

They all laughed, obviously sharing a long-term joke. Marie unexpectedly felt very much the outsider. With a little pang of jealousy, she wondered what it would be like to belong in a tight knit family group. Watching the comfortable interaction of the family with interest, she reminded herself it wasn’t worth getting upset over. She’d be back on the job in a few weeks, and this would be nothing more than a pleasant memory on the lonesome, sleepless nights.

* * * *

Walter proved to be right. His wife’s fried chicken tasted excellent, but the biscuits were what finally did Marie in. She slathered them with butter moaning softly a couple of times as she let the warm, home baked bread send her into a near orgasm.

“These biscuits are wonderful.” Marie paused, thinking if someone had told her the woman’s name, she couldn’t recall it.

Reno quickly came to her rescue. “I forget that everyone in the world doesn’t know Sallie. This is Sallie Eagleman, Walter’s wife, our adopted mother, and the best cook in Wyoming.”

He reached over to give her an affectionate hug. “Sallie, this is Marie Maxwell. She’s been living in Paris for a few years and now she needs to hide out on the ranch for a little while.”

Marie could tell by the look on Sallie’s face she didn’t miss the unspoken implication of Reno’s words. The elderly lady gave Marie a motherly smile. “You’ll be safe here with my boys.”

Marie thought that statement was debatable, but she smiled at her, nodding her agreement. Marie watched Reno glance over at Jack and the two of them shared a private smirk before returning their attention to the heaping plates of food. That look said it all. Marie wondered how many times they had caught her staring at them. How many

times she'd been so lost in her erotic daydreams, she hadn't heard one of them ask her a question.

After dinner, Marie offered to help with the dishes, but Sallie shoed her away. "You just make yourself at home, Marie. Do a little exploring and get used to the surroundings. It makes things a lot easier when you're away from home if you feel comfortable with a place."

Marie didn't want to feel too comfortable. In fact, it would have been a lot better if she were itching to get back to civilization, but she kept those thoughts to herself.

Chapter Five

Marie was on the porch swing drinking a cup of coffee when Jack led a gleaming black stallion around the side of the house. He patted the horse's neck, murmuring encouragement as it danced skittishly, tugging at the reins.

Stopping in front of her, Jack gave a soft laugh when the horse yanked his head back and whinnied, obviously impatient to be off on their ride. "I'm taking Ranger out for a run. Reno's staying here with you. Don't leave the house without letting him know."

"I won't."

Marie watched Jack saddle up, swallowing as his powerful legs straddled the horse. He eased into the saddle with a comfortable grace, holding the reins in one hand while resting his left hand on his thigh. "I'll be back soon."

She nodded, her heart doing odd little flips as she watched his body sway in the saddle like an extension of the stallion as the powerful beast danced and sidestepped with an excess of energy. Letting Ranger have his head, Jack loosened the reins and the horse galloped off like it had wings. She watched him ride out of sight, thinking it was going to be a very long night with that image burned into her mind.

Marie felt restless. Too many thoughts flooded her mind. She wasn't used to the quiet, or the slow pace of nothing to occupy her time. For three years, she lived in a whirlwind of deceit, society functions, and criminal activities. She'd become an adrenaline junkie. If danger didn't find her soon, she'd be forced to go looking for it. Fortunately, she didn't have to go far. She didn't even have to move

from her seat on the swing. Jack Reno stepped out the door giving her a killer smile full of unspoken suggestions. Marie watched him approach.

Sometimes fate gives you just what you need.

Marie smiled back at Reno. He would be the perfect vehicle to let her release a little tension, she bet he knew the rules. Reno was a player. He wouldn't take a kiss seriously. It would all be fun and games to him, and that's exactly what she needed at the moment. A man she felt safe with. She didn't need a man that would make demands she wasn't capable of fulfilling.

"Sallie and Walter went home," he explained, dropping down beside her. "They have a cabin about a mile down the valley."

The cool evening breeze ruffled Reno's hair, inviting Marie to run her fingers through the disheveled curls. Instead, she played it cool, looking out over the barren landscape before she turned back to look at him. "So, how do you pass the time here?"

Reno licked his lips in a suggestive smile. "Depends on whether I'm by myself or with a beautiful woman."

Marie knew the game was on and Reno had played the first hand. "Why don't you show me what you do when you have a woman with you?"

"Oh fuck, baby. I'd be glad to do that." Reno put his hand on the back of Marie's head, threading his fingers through her hair and pulling her into a breathless kiss. At some point, she leaned into him, resting her hands against the broad expanse of his chest. He felt so right, so natural, and yet Jack stayed on her mind, too. She kissed him back harder, trying to wipe away the confusion in her mind, or was it the confusion of her heart? How could she feel this way? How could she want them both, even as she kissed the other one?

Reno slid his face down the side of hers, twisting his head so that he could lower his mouth over her lips. He kissed gently, exploring her, tasting her as his tongue darted out to flick over her mouth before demanding entrance.

He was working his hands up Marie's back and sides, exploring every curve with infinite patience as he worked his mouth over hers, slipping his tongue between her lips. Marie gave into his touch, letting her own hands explore the hard planes of his body, slipping under the hem of his t-shirt to stroke the heated flesh that rippled under her touch.

Reno found the bottom of her blouse and ran his hands under the stretchable material, gliding his thumbs upward until he'd reached the peaks of her breasts. His hands cupped her, his thumbs brushing across the sensitive nipples as he worked his magic with a kiss.

Marie lost herself in the moment, shutting down her thoughts, letting herself simply feel the sensations that coursed through her pussy at Reno's expert touch. He tugged her back against his chest so that his hand could slide down the front of her jeans. It was a tight fit, but he positioned her across his lap, letting the snug fabric mold his hand against the curve of her body. His fingers dipped between her legs to explore the moist entrance to her pussy.

"Does that feel good, darlin'?" he whispered, curling his fingertip over the swollen nub of her clit.

Feel good? No. It feels fucking better than good.

Marie shoved her hips upward to meet his measured strokes. "Hmmm. You're talking too much, cowboy," she whispered, pushing back against his wide chest and feeling the light stubble of his beard as he planted kisses along her hairline. He chuckled at that, rubbing her faster now, teasing her with a light pressure that had her body stretched out in a trembling mass of nerves and need.

"Relax. I'll take you there." Reno breathed in her ear. "I'll fuck you anyway you want, Marie. Just tell me what you need, and you've got it." He kept his movements unhurried, putting just enough pressure on her clit to bring her to the edge of an orgasm, but he held back enough to let her leisurely enjoy the release. When she was at the doorway of her climax, he withdrew his hand and slid out from behind her, getting up from the swing.

"If you leave me now, or try to be noble, I will shoot you," Marie threatened.

"Shhhh, you're talking too much," Reno countered, dropping his face to kiss a trail of fire down her neck and into the opening of her blouse. He pushed the material aside with his chin, dropping hot kisses on the exposed skin above her bra line. Even the lace didn't stop him from drawing her nipple into his mouth. The fabric was such a flimsy barrier, it detracted nothing from the feel of his teeth scraping over the nub of her nipple. Marie arched upward, drawing his head down to her. She tried to reach his erection, to stroke him through the jeans, hoping she could coax him to move faster.

"Let me take care of *you*. We got plenty of time for me later." He gently moved her hand up to the center of his chest where she unbuttoned a couple of buttons to swirl her fingers into the light patch of hair that sprinkled his skin.

Reno kissed and teased her until she trembled again, ready to beg him for release. Ignoring her impatience, he lay her back on the swing while unfastening her jeans. With a sharp yank, he had the denim around her ankles, letting the night air cool her fevered pussy. The fresh mountain air wasn't enough to quench the fire burning inside her, and Marie was ready to offer him anything he wanted if he would just bury his cock into her dripping cunt. She needed to feel him stroking deep inside her, hard and fast until the world ceased to exist any longer.

With another tug at her jeans, Reno had her legs free. Kneeling down so he could bury his face into her pussy, he lifted one of her ankles over the back of the swing while placing the other over his shoulder. Marie felt herself being stretched wide open to his mouth in the position he placed her.

"I'm going to eat your cunt until you scream, Marie."

A whimper of anticipation escaped her as she fell back limply on the swing, letting him pleasure her. She felt him lick a path from her clit to her core, stopping only long enough to bury his tongue deeply

into her, lapping at the sweet cream she'd produced. He sucked at her, taking her clit between his teeth, holding it there while his tongue flicked the tender point until Marie gave a tortured sob.

"That's right, baby." He lifted his head enough to speak as he inserted two of his long fingers into the wet channel of her pussy. "You're going to scream. You're going to beg me, and when I've decided you're ready..."

"Shut the fuck up, Reno, and make me come."

"Little girls like you need a spanking when you talk like that." He threatened, dropping his face to her pussy. She clutched his head, holding him tightly against her as she pushed against his mouth, twisting and moaning while her orgasm began to build into an unstoppable flood. His fingers thrust into her slick pussy, in and out, in and out, finding a rhythm that matched the dance of his tongue on her clit. Then he pulled his fingers out of her body, moving them lower, pushing into the tight confines of her ass while his teeth fastened onto her clit with a determined force meant to drive her crazy.

It worked. She was out of her mind with need.

"*Reno!*"

She was there, unable to stop if she wanted to. Her body gushed its pleasure while Reno's insistent finger stretched her ass and his mouth worked at her until she collapsed with a long moan of satisfaction and her body clenched and tightened around the sensations that racked her core in a shuddering release.

Caught up in the feeling of Reno's mouth against her pussy and his finger in her ass, her heart stuttered when a shadow fell across them. Jack walked past them on the porch, giving one bitter glance in their direction before he rolled his eyes upward with an angry shake of his head. He let the door slam behind him when he went inside.

"Fuck," Reno whispered. His face dropped against her thigh for a moment and then he maneuvered up her body to give her a leisurely kiss. He stood up, pulling Marie to her feet. She scrambled into her

jeans, zipping them with trembling fingers. "He's pissed."

"Why?" Marie's gaze darted to the door. She half expected Jack to be standing there, looking out at them.

Reno's eyes widened and he looked at Marie like she was crazy. "Why?" he repeated in disbelief.

"*Reno, get your ass in here,*" Jack shouted.

"Because he wants you, Marie. That's why."

"He doesn't act like it." Marie fought her conflicting emotions. This type of scene had been exactly what she'd wanted to avoid. And why did she feel guilty? She thought both men were attractive, but Reno had made the first move. She didn't owe Jack anything just because he'd been kind to her. He was only doing his job, nothing more. If he had truly been interested he should have spoken up. But then, he wasn't the type to do that. He had shown an interest in her, more than once. But he wasn't the kind to verbalize his feelings, especially while working on an assignment.

"*Now, Reno!*"

Reno shook his head, sighing as he went to the door. "What the hell do you want?"

"You're supposed to be protecting her, not fucking her."

"For your information, I wasn't fucking her. We were just fooling around." He pointed at the screen door. "It could have been you, Jack. If you weren't so..."

"So what? Professional?"

"Uptight. If you weren't so fucking uptight, it could have been you."

"We just got here, Reno. How the hell can you justify that?"

Reno gave a quick glance at Marie. "Don't go away, we need to talk about your discipline issues." Opening the door, he stepped inside, lowering his voice, but Marie could still hear the sympathy in his words. "She's lonesome, Jack. She's had a fucking stressful day. She needed to relax."

"You fucked her because she's lonesome, or because she needed

to relax?”

Reno sighed. “I didn’t fuck her, Jack. We just...”

“I don’t want to hear it. Do what you want. She’s made her choice.”

“It’s not like that, Jack.”

“Sure as hell looked like it to me, Reno. You had your head buried between her legs and she was moaning like...”

Marie walked away, unable to listen anymore. Less than 24 hours and she’d already brought trouble to the ranch. The two men were arguing because of her. As much as she enjoyed Reno’s kisses, and the pleasure of his skillful hands and mouth, she felt like she’d let Jack down in some way.

Now, she just wanted to be alone for a little while. It had been a long day filled with painful experiences and she needed to think things through. She could still hear the angry voices of the men and blamed herself, wishing she could take it all back. Wishing she wasn’t attracted to both of them. Wishing she didn’t think it would be heaven to be a part of that little family no matter how unconventional it was.

The night offered her solitude and she took it, walking away from the ranch until she couldn’t see the house any longer. In the shadows of the pine thicket, the isolation felt right. Marie wondered if she was one of those people meant to be alone for the rest of her life. Heavy hearted, she sat down on a boulder, looking at the sky through a canopy of pine branches. The scent of pine and unfamiliar forest plants was restful and pleasing.

It seemed safe enough, she told herself, knowing Yuri couldn’t find them here, at least not for awhile. They had time to plan, time to decide how to handle Marie’s future if Yuri Yanukovich wasn’t killed. As long as he drew a breath, Marie knew the Russian would keep coming after her. Her life was pretty much fucked as she saw it for as long as Yuri Yanukovich lived.

She lost track of time as she sat thinking about her future, or the lack thereof. She thought she could have stayed all night if she hadn’t

heard the stealthy padding of feet circling her in the underbrush. Marie didn't have much experience in the wilderness, but she didn't think an animal circling her classified as a good thing.

She didn't know what she faced. Out here in the wilds, it could be a bear, a coyote, or maybe a wolf. She shuddered at the thought. Wolves terrified her. Ironical, she could face down an international assassin in the crowded slums of a city, but she grew close to losing it as she heard the stealthy footsteps of an animal to her hiding spot. Her panic continued to bubble inside her chest and her heart beat so fast, she thought she might pass out. Fainting would be bad, she thought. *Really bad.*

"Jack." His name came out as nothing more than a choked whisper.

Through the trees, she watched the shadows darken and move with liquid stealth. *Oh, God!* Several shadows melted into the night. It was a pack of wolves. She would be torn to pieces just like the two men in the story. Why hadn't they attacked yet? If she remained frozen with fear would they still assault her? As if to answer to her unspoken question, one of the wolves snarled in a low threatening growl that sent ice through Marie's veins.

"Jack!"

She screamed so loud, the shadows stopped moving forward, disappearing back into the thicket of trees. For good measure, Marie screamed again. Her throat muscles burned from the raw power of her shriek.

A wolf howled in the distant night and Marie leaped from the boulder, running as hard as she dared through the thick underbrush in the dim light. Tears blurred her vision as she continued to scream Jack's name. She made it to the clearing before she heard the pounding of hooves bearing down on her and turned to see Jack galloping toward her on Ranger.

He was pushing Ranger to the limit as he ran him hard in her direction. As he drew close, Jack leaned over, scooping her off the

ground with one arm, knocking the breath out of her as he pulled her up onto the saddle, settling her on his lap. Once she was secure in his arms, he gently eased back on the reins, pulling Ranger to a slow trot. The horse could sense the wolves nearby and it pranced nervously, jolting Marie against Jack with uncomfortable jerks that would have knocked her off the saddle if it hadn't been for her clinging around his neck like a frightened child. Which was exactly what she felt like with tears leaking uncontrollably from her eyes and her heart beating much too quickly.

His large hand cupped the back of her head, pushing her into his chest, holding her tightly against him until he got Ranger slowed to a walk. "Good boy," he encouraged the horse, turning him toward the nearby stream to let the animal get a drink of water after the long run.

"It's okay," he murmured into Marie's hair. "You're fine."

She was trembling violently. Jack dropped the reins and put both arms around her. "They've gone. You're safe. They were just curious about you."

Marie nestled her head under his chin, feeling the stubble of a day's beard beginning on his chin. She reached up to touch his face, running her fingers across the roughness, searching for something to bind her to normalcy.

"I'm afraid of wolves," she confessed. "I know it's silly, but I'd have rather faced a bear."

Jack chuckled. "A bear, huh? Well, you don't want to go tangling with either bears or wolves, okay? I told you to stay close."

"I know." Marie tilted her face up to place a kiss on the underside of his jaw, feeling the roughness of his beard stubble against the softness of her lips. "Thanks for coming for me."

Jack tightened his grip on her and she felt a swelling in his jeans making a hard lump under her butt. She squirmed against him, trying to relieve the pressure, her heartbeat quickening for a different reason as she felt him strain against the material at her movement.

"I'll take you back to the ranch," he said hurriedly, the sound of

his voice provocatively raw with need.

“Not yet,” Marie whispered, touching her lips to the stubble on his chin one more time. She licked her tongue across his jaw, enjoying the coarseness.

Jack swallowed, and she felt him tense as her hands began to lift the bottom of his t-shirt.

“Marie?”

“Shhh,” she murmured, running her hands over the warmth of his body under the shirt, and feeling the ripple of his muscles as they danced under the tips of her fingers.

* * * *

Jack told himself she was using him to erase the memory of the day. She needed the mindless escape of sex, and he could almost forgive Reno for giving her comfort at the ranch. Sometimes, just to feel was enough. No emotional attachment, just the physical touch of another human to chase away the thoughts. He could understand that, he'd done it more than once himself. But could he live with it this time?

Marie looked up at him. Her cinnamon colored eyes were still luminous with the aftermath of tears. Jack's heart slammed against his chest trying to avoid the inevitable. He wasn't going to escape this without getting hurt. He told himself he couldn't have fallen for her this fast. But the shaking of his hands let him know he was only lying to himself.

Gathering her face in his hands, he used his thumbs to wipe away the last traces of moisture before lowering his mouth to kiss the corner of her lips. His kiss was gentle this time, tasting the salt of tears that had gathered in the corner of her rosebud mouth.

She wrapped her arms more tightly around him under the softness of his t-shirt and her hands stroked his back with encouragement. He moved his lips over her mouth, nudging her with his tongue and

slipping inside as she opened for him with a sigh of enjoyment. Jack felt her body relax, melting into him. She was as pliant as a kitten when his hands found her breasts and caressed them, feeling the weight and the firm softness.

He didn't want to wait any longer. While she placed kisses on his face and neck, he unbuttoned her shirt, opening it wide for his viewing pleasure. His breath caught when he found the center clasp of her bra and freed her breasts to the moonlight. *God, she is beautiful.*

He simply stared at her for a moment, watching her nipples harden under the cool night air. Dipping his head, he flicked one taut nipple with his tongue, and she flinched with the sensitivity of a woman already aroused.

Sitting back in the saddle, he watched her face as his fingers rolled her nipples gently, playfully squeezing them between his thumbs and fingers. It was erotic to watch her eyes flicker shut as the sensation became so strong she shuddered with the joy of it, arching her back, inviting him to do more.

Jack dropped his head to take her in his mouth, sucking hard as he steadied her with a firm hand on her back. She dropped her head back against her shoulders, moaning softly as his teeth scraped across the swollen tips of her full breasts.

When he withdrew his mouth, her hands found the buckle of his belt.

"Wait."

He pulled her into his arms and dismounted, dropping lightly to the ground like she weighed no more than a feather. He kissed her once before setting her feet on the ground so that he could pull a blanket out of one of the saddlebags. With an expert flip of his wrist, he tossed the blanket onto the grass.

"C'mere, Marie." He held his arms out to her as he settled onto the woolen blanket. She melted into his embrace, drawing a sigh of contentment as he lowered them both to the ground.

Rolling half on top of her, Jack kissed Marie from her mouth to

the rosy tips of her breasts, pulling at each nipple with a deliberate tug of his lips while his tongue rolled her against the roof of his mouth. She bucked up against him, moaning his name softly, nudging him with her hips.

Jack lifted her enough to slip her shirt off her back before he began unbuttoning her jeans. She was impatient, moving under his hands, pushing against his fingers as he combed through the tangled softness of her triangle, brushing one finger against the swollen nub of her clit.

She sucked in her breath and stiffened, wanting more, but Jack left her pussy to tug the jeans down over her hips, giving his hands freedom to roam where they pleased. When she was naked, he drew back from her, enjoying her beauty as he pulled his t-shirt over his head, tossing it down on the hat he'd set aside.

Next, he toed out of his cowboy boots and shucked his jeans, leaving him naked and ready for her touch. His cock was so hard, it hurt, pushing upward, straining with the need to thrust inside of her.

Fuck. She held up her arms for him and his heart did a double flip of anticipation. *She is so fucking beautiful.* He hadn't wanted a woman the way he wanted her in a very long time. It was more than her beauty. It was her spirit. She'd been devastated by Xavier's death, but she held up and didn't make herself a burden. When she told her story, she didn't see herself as a victim of a lonely childhood. She had inner strength that Jack admired. Not to mention the woman had sexy in spades. And here she lay with her arms upraised and her angel face waiting for his kiss.

Jack lowered himself to her, taking her mouth with his while his hand cupped her pussy, feeling the moistness of her need and the heat of her desire. His fingers traveled the seam of her body, gently pushing her apart so he could explore.

He knew the second he hit the right spot. She gasped, arching her back, shoving her hips tighter against his hand as his fingers did a slow, stroking exploration of her. She twisted and sighed, breathing

out his name as her hands cupped the back of his head, drawing him into a nearly painful kiss.

He let her come apart as his fingers pinched the swollen bud of her clit. He knew he'd timed it right when she clawed at his shoulder with an urgency that made him shiver as her nails scored his skin.

"Ohhhh, Jack, don't stop...please don't stop," Marie begged, spiraling into an orgasm that left her breathing ragged as Jack coaxed the last bit of sensation out of her body. He watched her swim in the climax he offered her, thinking he'd never seen a woman so open to pleasure without the need to make it a relationship.

When she opened her eyes to smile at him, Jack settled over her, nudging her legs apart, so he could cradle himself in the V of her legs. His erection found its way home, pushing between the sensitive folds of her pussy to enter the tight confines of her body.

Marie liked it hard, Jack read that early in her reactions. He gave it to her like she wanted, without hesitation. When the engorged head of his cock pushed through the outer barrier of Marie's cunt, Jack shoved his hips forward, hard, burying himself in her liquid heat.

Marie returned his passion, straining upward, helping him as he shoved into her. *Fuck, she's tight.* She clamped around him with every thrust he made. Her legs wrapped around his waist and her heels dug into his hips, pushing him deeper into her pussy with every stroke.

Jack groaned low in his chest and Marie did some little thing with her inner muscles that made his head spin. He plunged into her with a controlled passionate violence and she whimpered in pleasure, her legs tightening their hold around his hips. Unconsciously, she dug her fingernails into the skin of his shoulders, sinking deep enough to draw blood.

"*Fuck, woman.*" He was breathing so hard, he could barely speak. His balls ached to be released and he stroked faster, groaning as she deliberately worked those inner muscles again, contracting on him until he thought he'd explode.

“Jack.” She screamed, and he came, his climax tearing through him, slamming into Marie as she jerked up to meet him, pulling his head down for a kiss. Her body twisted against his on the knife-edge of her orgasm and Jack felt his own body begin to shake, his muscles tense in response, and he gave her everything he had, collapsing against her when they both had reached their limit.

Chapter Six

Reno was waiting for them on the porch when they rode back to the ranch. Jack dismounted with Marie in his arms, refusing to put her down. He carried her up the steps and into the house like he might a small child.

“She okay?” Reno asked worriedly.

Jack pushed past him, heading upstairs to the bedroom. “She’s fine. Got a little scare from a pack of wolves.”

Reno’s eyes narrowed when he got a good look at Marie under the house lights. “Yeah, I can see how scared she is.”

Jack glanced down at Marie, giving himself away in the process. She didn’t look scared. She looked like a woman who had been well fucked and thoroughly satisfied. Her lips were swollen, her cheeks flushed pink and her eyes looked dewy and unmistakably content.

“Leave it alone, Reno,” Jack warned, glancing at the man who had been his brother for the last twenty-five years. He knew Reno wanted her too, but hell, Reno wanted every beautiful woman he came in contact with. And he usually got her, too. Marie was different. Jack wasn’t going to let Reno have a fling and then move on like he always did. Except, in all fairness, none of the ladies Reno left behind seemed to complain. He’d stayed friends with most of them. Well, maybe not with Debbie Branson. She still wanted to cut his balls off, but she was the exception.

Jack carried Marie all the way to her bedroom, setting her down gently, smiling once before he lowered his face to kiss her goodnight. “You get scared, or have bad dreams, you yell, okay? I’m next door.”

“I’m on the other side,” Reno said dryly, standing in the doorway,

leaning his shoulder against the doorframe with his arms crossed. “If you don’t want to wake up Jack, just thump on the wall, honey. I’ll hear you.”

The men glared at each other, but it was a good-natured challenge. Marie laughed, stepping forward, hugging them both in turn. “I’ll be fine. Thanks for everything, guys. See you in the morning.

* * * *

Reno settled into bed, putting his hands behind his head. He should back off. It was obvious Jack wanted the woman, but damn, something about her made it impossible to just hand her over to his brother without a fight.

He thought back to the times he and Jack had shared everything in their lives. He could remember being four years old and staying with his grandparents while his mother and father went to the hospital to bring him back a new brother. Reno was pretty excited about having a brother. He really wanted an older brother so he could hang around with him in the park and play ball without Mom watching him, but he’d take a younger one. In a year, when he was a big kid, he could take his little brother to the park by himself.

It had been a miserable winter night, cold and rainy with a lot of snow coming down. That excited Reno even more because he knew it was close to Christmas and he’d get to show the baby all the lights and presents. His mom told him the baby wouldn’t understand, but Reno hadn’t known how anyone couldn’t understand what Christmas was.

He lay awake for hours, worrying his grandma half to death by repeatedly asking when they’d be back with the baby. She finally got firm enough with him that he stayed silent, but as soon as she left the room, he went to the bedroom window, watching for the car to return.

He fell asleep with his head on the windowsill when flashing red and blue lights woke him up. He first thought his dad had made a

surprise for him, bringing the baby home in a police car. Sometimes Dad did stuff like that. He was a cop, and once in a while, he took Reno for a ride, letting him turn on the lights and siren when they reached the town limits and no houses were nearby for the noise to disturb.

Reno jumped up, planning to greet them when one of the officers looked up at the window where he stood and it wasn't his dad. A woman officer looked up at him with tears on her face. Reno got a really bad feeling. When his parents thought he was asleep, they'd talked about things they didn't want him to hear. He remembered his dad talking about going to people's houses to tell them someone had died. Reno wondered who had died that his grandma knew.

After Christmas, he went to live with his aunt and uncle, Sallie and Walter Eagleman, because his grandma said at her age she couldn't raise him. Grandma explained that Aunt Sallie and his mom were sisters. She promised him Aunt Sallie would care for him like his mom, too.

Despite the love he found in the Eagleman home, Reno talked a lot about the baby brother that had been killed in the car wreck that also took both of his parents' lives. If he couldn't have his mom and dad back, he still wanted a brother.

Reno smiled to himself remembering that's what he'd asked for the next Christmas. He remembered the shocked look on Sallie and Walter's faces, and the whispered conversations he'd overheard when they thought he wasn't paying attention, but it wasn't long before seven-year-old Jack came home to live with them and be his older brother.

Jack took the job of being an older brother way too seriously. And that was the problem. Reno owed Jack a lot, even more than Sallie and Walter knew. He fixed just about every mess Reno got into as a kid, and Reno managed to get into several. Jack took the fall when Reno stole a car in their high school days. He sat silently, taking all the blame while Walter berated him for doing such a stupid thing. The

car belonged to a friend of Walter's and that was the only reason it didn't go on Jack's record. The man refused to press charges when he found out about Jack's involvement.

Now, Reno thought his brother wanted this woman and he should just step out of the way and let things progress in their normal fashion, except he couldn't. Something in Marie's striking cinnamon colored eyes held him captive. She wasn't like the other women he had toyed with. If he had to put his finger on the difference, he couldn't have explained what it was. But he'd find out. Given time, he'd know exactly what made Marie Maxwell so special.

* * * *

Jack flung the sheet away from his naked body, letting the cool breeze from the open window drift over his heated flesh. He remembered the feel of Marie under his body, her tiny frame passionately giving him back as good as he gave. He knew this tryst could be nothing more than a temporary arrangement and he would get his heart broken. It happened once before, years ago, and he vowed it would never happen twice. But once again, he found himself in an impossible situation, and despite what his head told him, his heart followed its own path. He knew there would be no hope for a long-term commitment. Not in their line of work. Commitment created its own dangerous vulnerability. Something neither he nor Marie could afford in their high-risk careers.

Jack closed himself down, stopping the pain before it started, shutting off his feelings like he had learned to do when he was a kid. He remembered the hell his life had been before Walter Eagleman stopped beside the road that day and put him in his battered old Ford truck, eventually taking him home to Sallie.

It had been a cold February day. A thick snow lay on the ground and Jack's mother put him outside because she was turning tricks to get enough money for groceries and drugs.

Pregnant at sixteen, kicked out of the house and with nowhere to go, she picked up work in a local strip club. The owner kept her hidden from the law until the baby came, but as soon as she could service the customers, he pimped her out for a neat little profit, letting her keep Jack upstairs in a crib so she'd remain pliable to his demands. When she asked to become a dancer instead of a whore, he got her hooked on the pills. It went downhill from that point on.

Outside, seven-year-old Jack tried to peek through the windows of his mother's bedroom to see what she and the stranger were doing. He held on to the edge of the windowsill, hopping up and down as he tried to catch glimpses without getting caught.

He heard a lot of noise and his mother's screams a couple of times. She warned him that while she entertained, he couldn't come back inside for anything, but Jack had a feeling something was wrong. He'd never heard his mother scream before. He looked around the house until he finally found an old water pail that might serve as a footstool. Carefully placing it under the window, he stepped up with one foot, balancing himself by holding onto a long forgotten rose trellis that was now rotted and hanging only by the few rusted nails that survived.

Squinting to peek through the battered mini-blinds, Jack saw a naked man leaning over his mother, beating her with the buckle from his belt. Her face looked like a battered mess. She held her hands up, trying to protect her eyes, but obviously she was too weak to defend herself. Without care about the noise he made, Jack dropped off the bucket and went tearing into the front door of the house, stopping only long enough to get the gun his mother had hidden under the edge of the sofa. He wasn't supposed to know it was there, but he'd found it one day by accident when a ball he'd been playing with rolled under the couch.

With trembling hands, Jack held the heavy gun out in front of him, running into the bedroom to scare the guy. He didn't know how to shoot the gun, but he knew people were afraid to have a gun

pointed at them. They always stopped what they were doing and held up their hands. That's all he wanted, to make the guy quit beating hitting on his mother.

"Stop hurting my mom," he screamed. The man turned to him in a cocaine fueled rage. His eyes were so glazed over, they looked like varnished black pits of anger. Even at his age, Jack knew something wasn't right. He'd been exposed to his mother's drug addiction all of his life, and while he didn't know exactly what drugs the man took, he did understand he was high. His mom acted funny sometimes when she used drugs. She would change from a sweet mother to an impatient and sometimes cruel disciplinarian. Jack didn't know any other way of living, drugs were just a part of life.

"Put the fucking gun down, you brat." The man turned to him, lurching off the bed. Something about the look in the man's eyes scared Jack so badly that he pulled the trigger when the man lunged toward him. Instinctively, he knew if that man got hold of him, he would die. All these years later, Jack still remembered his confusion and fear as the man kept coming while blood spurted from the small hole in his chest. The bullet should have stopped him, but as a child he didn't know what the kick of a cocaine high could do.

Jack pulled the trigger again, his arms swinging wildly as the recoil from the pistol painfully jolted his wrists. He missed, steadied his aim, and pulled again, just like he'd seen on the cop shows. This time, the man went down and didn't move.

Dropping the gun, Jack ran to his mother, but she was out cold, blood streaming from the cuts on her face. He turned back outside then, waving down the first vehicle that passed, which happened to be Walter Eagleman in his battered old Ford truck. Thank the fates for stone-faced Walter with his soft heart.

Walter calmed Jack down, then checked on his mom, called emergency services and dialed the sheriff's office. And all the while, Walter made him feel he hadn't done anything wrong in killing a man. When Jack asked him if the man inside his mother's bedroom

had died, Walter soberly told him the truth. When Jack asked if it was his fault that he'd killed the man, Walter put his hand on Jack's shoulder, looked straight into his eyes, and said, "Son, it's a plain fact of life that some men deserve to die. You saved your mother's life and yours, too. You're a hero."

Jack never saw his mother again after that day. Walter and Sallie told him she went to a hospital to get better and when she healed, she'd come back for him. Years later, he found the adoption papers she signed over to the Eagleman's less than a month after Walter had taken him home.

Suddenly, the cool breeze felt colder than Jack's memories and he shivered, tossing the sheet over himself again. He hadn't thought about his mother in a very long time. He wondered if Reno ever thought about his parents, or if he'd outgrown the memories of a four-year-old child.

Chapter Seven

Bright sunlight spotlighting her face through the sheer bedroom curtains woke Marie from a restless, dream-filled sleep. She was dreaming of Jack and Reno, unable to make a choice between them. In her dream, they had agreed to share both her love and her bed. *Keep on dreaming, Alice. Wonderland is right around the corner.* She grinned, stretching languorously like a cat. Blinking a couple of times in the bright sun, she thought of her Parisian friend, Giselle Reynaard.

Both beautiful and cosmopolitan, Giselle was excessively French, down to her penthouse with a view of the Eiffel Tower, and her ménage a trios lifestyle. She had often told Marie she needed to take two men into her bed. “It *ees* the spice of life, darling,” Giselle often said when Marie protested she could never consider a ménage. And here she was in mainstream USA thinking about just that, two lovers. If Giselle could see her now, she would laugh delightedly at Marie’s predicament.

Unable to stay in bed with her wayward thoughts, Marie got dressed and wandered downstairs to find Reno at the stove frying eggs and bacon, while Jack sat at the table drinking coffee. He had his feet propped up on a chair watching a news program.

“Nothing on the DC incident,” he commented. “It was contained before the reporters could get a story. Now it’s only a rumor that no one dares substantiate.”

“Do you think Yuri will know what happened?”

Jack nodded his head, taking another sip of black coffee. “The shooter was probably ex-KGB. He’ll report back to Yuri that the mission failed. Not to mention, someone inside GSA is working with

Yuri. There has to be a traitor. He couldn't have broken into the data base without inside help."

"We have to presume he has someone influential on his payroll," Reno agreed. "By now, he'll know you're on the run and he probably knows you're under government protection. The biggest problem facing Yuri at the moment is how to locate you."

"That won't take him long." Jack took his feet off the chair. "We think he's going to try to make a hit on you here. That's a little tougher. He's not familiar with this terrain and he's got the added burden of trying to keep out of sight. A foreigner in this neck of the woods still stands out. People talk."

Marie grinned, knowing what he meant, but she had to ask, "By foreigner you mean...?"

"Anyone that's not local."

"So, I'm ..."

"A foreigner," both Reno and Jack said in unison.

"And that's why you flew us to the ranch? You didn't want the locals to know I'm staying out here?"

Reno shoveled what looked like half a dozen scrambled eggs on a plate, handing it to Marie. "Partially, but it also beat the long drive."

Marie raked half the eggs off, splitting them between his plate and Jack's. She sat down at the table, scooting her chair over so Reno could join them. "Do we just wait for him then? That seems anticlimactic."

"It won't when he gets here," Reno answered. "We figure it's easier to take him on our turf, away from civilians."

"Yuri won't show, he'll send an errand boy," Marie said. She couldn't imagine Yuri leaving his deal with the Iranians unfinished while he hunted her down. He'd send another one of his specialized killers, maybe a whole team, if necessary.

Reno glanced at Jack. "We think he'll show."

Marie put her fork down, staring at the two of them intently. "What aren't you telling me? Why do you think Yuri will leave

Europe and his arms deal to come after me when he can send a skilled assassin?"

"Because we baited him." Jack pushed back from his plate to return her stare. "We let him think you want to talk to him, that you have intelligence he needs to know before he finalizes the deal."

"Then why didn't you just give him a map and tell him how to find me? That would have made it so much simpler for all of us." Marie felt her cheeks flush.

Jack hit the remote on the television, sending the room into instant silence. "He has to think you're doing this on your own, without our knowledge. If he has to search for you, he'll think you're going behind our backs."

Marie lost her appetite in a hurry. The food she ate turned into a hard lump and now lay like a stone in her belly. Yuri was not a man to bait for any reason. She didn't doubt Jack and Reno's abilities, but they were limited by working within the law. Yuri would have no such limitations placed on him.

Both men watched her expectantly while she wrestled with her anger. Finally, she controlled herself enough to speak in a low measured tone that belied her inner turmoil.

"I'm going to need a tour of the property." Marie looked from one to the other of the men. "I'll need to know how to get into town if things go down wrong. And I want someone to take me to the arrowhead ridge that Walter told me about, so I know where the supplies are without wasting time looking for them."

"You don't think we can protect you?" Reno asked. His dark eyes narrowed with what might be considered disappointment.

Marie sighed. "I think you declared war with one of the most dangerous men in the world. It's best we be prepared for anything, and I do mean anything, because he's got it all at his fingertips and he'll use it."

Jack's easy confidence said he didn't think Yuri Yanukovich would be a match for them on home territory. He pulled his plate

close again and began eating. “We may have a few tricks of our own,” he said between bites of scrambled eggs and bacon.

“I hope you do, Jack. *I really hope you do.*” She got up from the table.

* * * *

Reno took a sip of coffee, watching Marie’s angry stride as she left the house to stand on the front porch. “That didn’t go so well.”

“What did you expect? She’s out of her element here. She’s never seen us in action, but she’s seen Yuri, and knows what he’s capable of. I’d be pissed, too, in her situation. If someone were using me for bait, I’d want a fighting chance.”

“So what do we do to distract her? It’s going to be pure hell if she’s pissed off until Yuri gets here. That could take a while.”

“You’re right,” Jack agreed, shooting Reno an uncharacteristic brotherly grin. “Got any ideas?”

Reno thought his brother should get laid more often. He was positively mellow this morning. “Yeah, I got an idea, but if I tell you, you’ll be more pissed off than she is.”

Jack looked from his brother to the woman standing on the porch, letting the cool morning breeze blow her hair around her small shoulders. He snorted with amusement. “Yeah, I bet I know what your idea is, Reno, and it won’t fly.”

“Listen to me, Jack,” Reno said. “Remember when we liked Anna Thompson in school? She liked both of us, and you said we outta give her what she wanted. I asked what you meant and you told me in great detail what you were talking about.”

“Fuck, Reno. We were kids. I was showing off. I’d seen a book that had a ménage scene and it was weighing pretty heavy on my mind.” Jack chuckled. “I can’t believe you still remember that.”

“Hell, Jack, I stayed awake at night for weeks just thinking about the mechanics of that,” Reno admitted, causing them both to laugh.

“When you got hold of a copy of that magazine and brought it home, I thought it was the most seductively forbidden act I’d ever seen in my life. I never dated a woman after that without thinking about a threesome.” He gave a slight grimace. “Thanks, bro.”

“What are big brothers for?” Jack pointedly looked out the screen door at Marie. “And now we have our own sophisticated Parisian, straight from ménage a trois territory, standing on the porch, pissed as hell at both of us, and you want us to go out there and tell her we both want to fuck her?”

“Well,” Reno hesitated, “yeah. Basically. We might work on the wording a little, and polish the delivery.”

“She’d take our heads off.”

“Maybe not,” Reno insisted. “Come on, Jack. You got to admit she would be a sweet little morsel between us. Ummmm.”

“And when this is over?”

Reno sighed, giving an impatient shrug. “She’ll go home. Wherever home is. You know she’s not going to stick around, Jack. She’s been on the move since she was born.”

To Reno’s surprise, his brother seemed to be giving it some thought. It was a piece of brilliance on his part bringing up the memory of Anna Thompson. He and Jack had spent a teenage summer talking about what it would be like to get in her pants in every conceivable way possible. The two of them had finally digressed to lurid fantasies involving Anna pleasuring them simultaneously, because in those younger days, it had been all about what they wanted. The pair naively assumed if it pleased them, the woman was bound to enjoy it.

Reno’s way of thinking had changed since then. He knew without a doubt he and Jack could satisfy Marie Maxwell. She was a woman who needed physical comfort and attention. Hadn’t she shown that by reaching out to both of them already? The woman needed loving like a flower needed sun.

* * * *

Marie was lost in thought when Jack and Reno came out to stand on either side of her. They hemmed her tightly between them, standing close enough she could feel their hard bodies down the length of her own. She became immediately aware of the subtle difference in their attitude toward her. It seemed almost as if a new layer of awareness had settled around them, something territorial, male, and vaguely aggressive.

Reno put his hand on her back, slightly above her hips, his hand massaging her with a lover's familiarity. Jack put his hand at the back of her neck, gently wrapping his fingers around her throat, kneading the tense muscles with firm strokes of his powerful thumbs.

Marie jerked back from the two of them so quickly that she stumbled and would have fallen if the rail hadn't been there to support her. "Okay, stop now." She put her hands out to ward them off. "I'm still upset with both of you and you're not going to distract me. What's going on?"

"A ménage. Up for it?" Reno arched one eyebrow in challenge. "One time offer only, two for the price of one. Take it, or leave it."

Surprised, Marie looked up at Jack and he lowered his face to kiss her, holding her trapped within his grip. Reno's hand slid over the curve of her butt again, taking intimate license to explore her ass as his brother's kiss deepened. Reno's teasing fingers made Marie eagerly open her mouth to Jack. She trembled excitedly with the forbidden thrill of both men touching her. *Oh, my God, am I really going to do this?*

Unconsciously, Marie widened her legs to give Reno access to the throbbing core of her femininity. She wished he would breach the barrier of her clothing and put his fingers deep inside her pussy. Instead, he stroked her clit through the layers, putting just enough pressure to make her weak kneed and trembling.

Jack's hand left her neck and his fingers found her breasts. Now,

she had two pair of hands touching her, playing with her nipples, stroking her clit, and leading her to a dark fantasy filled with pleasure she'd never experienced. *Yes, I am so going to do this.*

"Guys," she whispered breathlessly.

Jack drew back to look at her face. "Yes or no. That's all you have to say, Marie. Yes or no."

"Yes, oh God, yes." She breathed. She slumped against Reno's body as he ran his hands up her sides and slightly under his brother's hands giving her the feel of two men supporting her, touching her, paying attention to her needs.

One of Jack's hands swept her hair away from her neck, allowing Reno to lower his face to her skin, breathing hot kisses on her neck and shoulder while their hands roamed her body, touching everywhere, teasing, pulling, stroking, and eliciting such a need in Marie, she thought she would faint from the sensation.

"Let's go inside," she pleaded. She reached out to touch both of them with her hands, gripping their shirts in her fists.

"Uh, uh." Reno reluctantly stepped back from her. "Walter and Sallie will be over today. We don't want to be interrupted, now do we?"

Jack glanced up at the craggy bluffs in the near distance. "We could take a picnic out to the arrowhead rock. Tell Marie how we baited Yuri and show her where the supplies are stored. Then we should check on the cabin while we're up there."

"Cabin?" she asked hopefully.

"Not really a cabin, baby, more like a few rough boards and pieces of tin nailed together, but it's shelter in a storm," Reno explained. It was also where he and Jack had hid the magazine with the enticing ménage photos and talked for hours about the technicalities of both of them doing Anna Thompson at the same time.

"And it does have a single bed." Jack cast Reno a glance that confirmed the memories were on his mind, too.

“You saddle the horses,” Reno said. “I’ll pack the lunch.”

* * * *

“Her name is Myst.” Jack leaned down from the saddle to hand Marie the reins of a dappled gray mare that looked sleek and fast. “Do you know how to ride?”

“Of course.” Marie took the reins from him and easily mounted the horse, settling herself into the saddle like a pro. She’d had riding lessons over the years, including a year at the exclusive Spanish Riding School of Vienna, training on descendants of the famous Lipizzaner Stallions during her mother’s tour of duty in Europe.

Marie sat gingerly on the saddle, she was still aroused by the touch of Jack and Reno. Her clit seemed so sensitive that a light breeze of air could send her into an orgasm, and now she sat mounted on a horse, sure to feel the rocking sway of the saddle caressing her swollen nub through the jeans she wore.

Holding her weight off the saddle until her legs couldn’t take the pressure any longer, Marie settled against the leather, letting her body rock with the gentle motion of the horse’s gait. Her clit bounced lightly against the seat with every step. It was an exquisite sort of torture, building a need in her belly that couldn’t be denied. She gave a low sound of frustration, causing Reno to look at her with a knowing grin.

“Some women like to ride a horse for that reason,” he teased.

“Fuck you, Reno,” Marie said with a breathless little laugh. “Paybacks are hell, you know.”

“I owe you one after last night, babe.” His eyes darkened in anticipation of whatever payback he might deem appropriate.

Marie looked over at Jack. He winked at her and she felt her pussy clench with anticipation. “Okay.” She conceded. “I guess you do, cowboy. But not till you tell me how you baited Yuri. He’s not an easy man to fool, you know.”

“To give you the condensed version, we sent him an email that said you needed to speak with him.” Reno explained. “We got the information from the database at headquarters. They have a record of the correspondence between you two.”

“He’s not going to fall for that.”

The two men exchanged glances. “We gave him a few classified details of a deal gone bad for Mufid Elashi’s previous two suppliers. If that’s who he’s doing business with, and we think it is, he’s going to want to hear the rest of your story. He thinks you’re offering him the details in exchange for your life. Let bygones be bygones and all that.”

“Sorry, guys, I’m still not getting the picture here. Why would Yuri care about Elashi’s past deals?”

“Because Mufid Elashi double crosses his suppliers after he purchases the weapons,” Reno explained. “When the weapons are en route, a partial payment is sent electronically to the supplier’s bank account. The weapons get hijacked as soon as they cross the border into Iraq, and the supplier’s soldiers are massacred. Of course, no more funds are deposited into the supplier’s account. Elashi accuses the supplier of negligence, or outright fraud.”

“And Elashi has his weapons, most of his money, and has damaged the supplier’s integrity on the black market,” Marie finished.

“You get an A+.” Reno continued. “Now the war is on. So far, Elashi’s team of assassins has been better than the weapons suppliers’ teams of assassins. Go figure.”

“Terrorists over gun runners, two to one. That doesn’t really surprise me.” Marie thought the plan just might work to draw Yuri out of his safety zone and into their orbit. Maybe they would have a fighting chance to take care of the Russian before he destroyed them all. But they still had to find the internal leak.

Chapter Eight

The cabin wasn't as bad as Reno made it out to be. It was tiny and utilitarian, but it had a sort of antique charm with its pot bellied stove and handmade furniture. A miniscule attached porch kept stacked firewood dry under the shelter of the tin roof.

"It's in great shape." Marie looked back and forth between Reno and Jack. "I expected to see nests in the middle of the bed, or something equally disgusting."

"One of us comes up to check on the place weekly." Jack moved in close to take the hat from her head. He tossed it on the table with a grin. "You won't need that for awhile."

A little thrill went through Marie's body at the touch of his fingers brushing her temples when he removed the hat. It surprised her that Jack had made the first move. Reno caught her gaze over Jack's shoulder and smiled, showing his dimples.

Suddenly, the cabin felt very small to Marie, and the men overwhelmed her with their presence. It seemed as if they took up all the space. She found herself having trouble finding enough air to breathe.

"Relax," Jack said. His voice was warm enough to melt ice. "We're going to make sure you enjoy this as much as we do."

Reno stepped around Jack to be within touching distance of Marie. His pupils were dilated with desire. Staring at her, he took his hat off, then pulled his shirt out of the jeans he wore.

This is really happening.

Marie didn't know whether to cut and run, or to grab them both for a group kiss. She wasn't really sure how this would work. Would they

be jealous of one another? Could she handle these two men invading her body simultaneously?

Marie watched, mesmerized as Reno's hands worked the buttons on his shirt, opening each one to reveal a softly furred chest and sculptured abs.

Jack turned Marie so she could watch his brother undress as his hands undid the buttons of her shirt, echoing every move his brother made. When Reno pulled his shirt apart, Jack pulled Marie's shirt open with a small groan of satisfaction. When his fingers confidently flipped open the front clasp on her bra, she turned back to face him, tugging at his shirt. "You're overdressed, cowboy."

Jack grinned at her, nodding at Reno to take over while he got more comfortable, or at least less dressed. Reno dropped down on his knees to undo the button of Marie's jeans. Something about him being on his knees made the act that much more sensual. When he unzipped her jeans, he buried his head in the opening he'd created to kiss her abdomen. As he got closer to her core, he breathed deeply to drink in the scent of her arousal.

Jack tugged his boots off, dropping them on the floor while he hurriedly peeled the jeans from his legs, leaving him standing naked, fully erect, and ready to take over again. "Get undressed, Reno," he told his brother.

Marie took a minute to enjoy Jack's body. He was rippled with well toned muscles developed from years of hard work. His chest had a smattering of hair that tracked a thin trail to his erection. His penis pointed toward the ceiling, hard, thick and straight as a sword.

Reno stepped back to finish undressing while Jack helped Marie out of her boots and jeans. She stood with her hand on his bare shoulder for balance as he tugged the boots from her feet and peeled the jeans down her legs until she stood naked as the both of them.

Reno reached out to turn her face his way, taking her chin between his thumb and finger. He guided his mouth to hers, kissing her leisurely, dipping his tongue inside her mouth for a breath stealing

kiss.

Jack let his brother enjoy the moment, and then he stepped behind Marie, pulling her back into him as he dropped kisses on her shoulders and ran his hands over the front of her body.

Reno watched the play of his brother's hands over the swollen globes of Marie's breasts. He watched as Jack lightly pinched her nipples then smoothed his hands lower, over her ribcage, and still lower into the vee of her body, where he drew her hips back against him with a hard tug.

"Made your choice?" Reno asked with a knowing grin.

"Unless you've got an objection?"

"No," Reno shook his head lightly. "I'll do whatever the lady wants."

"The lady wants action," Marie said a little breathlessly. "Now."

Jack sat back on the bed, pulling Marie down onto his lap for a kiss. He ran his hands over every inch of her satin skin as he plundered her mouth with his tongue. Breathless with need, he scooted to the edge of the bed on the far side, pulling Marie into the center so that Reno would have room to fit, too. Reno lowered himself on the bed facing Marie.

She felt their bodies on both sides of her. Jack's strong body warmed the length of her back, his cock pushing into her hips, eager to stake a claim in her ass. Reno faced her, the soft hairs on his chest tickling the tight nubs of her sensitive breasts, making her pussy leak fluid in anticipation of his cock sliding into her dripping hole. She wanted them badly, and the thought of both of them taking her body together had her wet and ready.

Collectively, they knew the first time would be over fast. They were too aroused, too eager, wanting nothing more than to just fuck each other senseless at the moment. Reno pulled Marie's leg over his hip, so that his cock nudged at her entrance. With her leg bent at that angle, she felt vulnerable to Jack. The position parted her hips, inviting him to penetrate the small dark hole now exposed to him.

Marie gave a soft intake of breath when Reno's engorged head pushed past the pink folds of her pussy. He was large, and hard as steel. He held her leg behind the knee, drawing her tightly around his hips as he shoved inward, feeling her body struggle to accept him. He pushed hard and she moaned, clutching at him with eager hands that pulled him to her.

"Deeper," she encouraged, trying to open her legs wider, giving him access to more of her body. He pulled her forward as he pushed, driving himself to the limit. She worked her pussy muscles around his erection like a hand job, squeezing as tightly as she could while her core lubricated him with her musky sweetness.

* * * *

Jack watched his brother pump her for a few strokes. His gaze was fastened firmly on her ass as it moved back and forth with Reno's heavy movements. He heard Reno groan deep, like he was in pain, and Marie echoed with a soft moan of contentment. Jack's stomach tightened at the raw need he heard in their voices.

"Jack?" she whispered softly, casting a glance over her shoulder to see what he was doing.

"Right here, baby," he said, surprised she remembered him despite the fucking Reno was giving her. Jack pulled her hips apart with his thumbs and she arched back for him. He nudged his cock against the tiny dark hole, pushing lightly to get her attention. "Do you want it fast? Or slow?"

Marie moaned softly, riding his brother's cock so hard, she could barely answer. "Slow, Jack. Put it in slow. I want to feel you all the way. Every inch of your big cock spreading my ass."

"Shhh," Reno warned. "Keep that up and I'm going to shoot. Damn, woman."

"I'm not sure I can go slow, Marie. I'll try."

Jack stroked the head of his cock up and down the crease of her

ass a couple of times, enjoying the anticipation of shoving it into her tight dark hole. When he couldn't wait any longer, he pushed at the entrance and she stiffened, pushing hard against Reno in an unconscious effort to escape the assault of her forbidden territory. Jack held her hips still and shoved, breaking the barrier of her outer ring. She moaned loudly, jerking as if she'd found her orgasm, and Reno echoed her moan. Jack could only imagine what her pussy muscles were doing to his brother's cock. She must be nearly squeezing it off by this time. She was working him like a vise, her anal muscles clamping down on his cock with a squeezing motion that had him so fucking near to shooting his wad he felt like a teenager on his first fuck.

* * * *

Reno opened his eyes, looking straight at Jack before he pushed forward slow and steady, impaling Marie back onto Jack's rigid shaft. Marie gasped at the pressure, wiggling between them, making sounds of pleasure-pain as Reno relentlessly pushed her toward his brother.

Jack returned the favor, pushing her back toward Reno, burying themselves in her body until she was incapable of taking anymore.

Marie experienced the heat of Jack's cock as he slid into her ass, pushed along by his strong thrusts and Reno's steady pressure. She felt both of their erections filling her to the breaking point, threatening to tear her body apart with their size and strength. Somehow, she managed to accept them, her body burning with desire for them. They lay still, fully sheathed in her cunt and her ass while her body adjusted to them.

Marie felt both penises throbbing with the need to move inside her. She felt them pulsate, twitching with their heartbeats, until, in a single motion, both Reno and Jack began to move. Back and forth, in and out, and her pussy exploded with the pleasure. With her climax, tears streamed down her face. Wild with the overwhelming sensations

coursing through her, she moved with the men, trying to bring them to their orgasms as she rode her own.

“Now,” she pleaded. “I want to feel you both come at the same time. Please.”

Her breathless plea worked its magic. Reno released a heartbeat before his brother, jerking so hard that Marie imagined she could feel the instant his balls freed their fluid in a hot burst that flowed through him and into her. Her vaginal muscles contracted hard at the sensation, squeezing her anal muscles painfully tight around Jack. He cried out a strangled sound that could have been a moan, or a curse. Grabbing Marie’s hips to hold them steady, he thrust into her over and over, emptying himself until there was no more to give.

It was a shattering climax for the three of them. For a moment, they lay silent, clutching each other without words, without movement, wondering if it would ever be this good again, wondering if sex would ever be the same from this moment on—knowing full well it wouldn’t. They had crossed a line that would change their lives forever.

Chapter Nine

The following days became a blissful haze of horseback riding and lazy evenings filled with sex and laughter. Jack lost his brooding attitude and Marie didn't care if Yuri ever made an appearance. Surprised at herself, she found she had no real desire to leave the ranch. It no longer seemed boring or remote to her. For the first time in her life, she felt like she belonged to something bigger than herself.

She and Jack had been up to check on the cabin while Reno stayed at the house. A rare day the three of them weren't together. Now she was anxious to get back to the house where both of her men would be around making her feel loved and needed.

Leaving Jack to finish up the evening chores, Marie led Ranger and Myst into the barn where the cool darkness was a relief from the heat of an unusually warm day. Ranger hesitated, pulling back against his reins. It was obvious he didn't want to enter the shelter. Marie turned to stroke his neck, whispering encouragement while leading him forward. He tried to jerk away from her, whinnying softly.

"What's the matter, boy?"

Ranger could be playfully high-spirited, but now he just seemed nervous. Marie checked the surrounding area for a snake, or anything else that might make the horse feel uneasy. Nothing appeared out of place as far as she could see. Myst, on the other hand, didn't seem reluctant to go into the barn, but Ranger's uneasy prancing made her antsy. Now she snorted and rolled her eyes, too.

Afraid she wouldn't be able to hold them one handed, Marie switched the reins so that she had a good grip on both horses. She knew that she had to calm Ranger first. If she could get the stallion

inside the barn, Myst would follow docilely.

“Come on, boy. Let’s get you some food and water. Don’t be difficult.”

Turning back to grasp Ranger’s halter, Marie realized she was too late. He reared up, yanking the reins out of her hand before she had a good grasp on the bridle. As he bolted for the hills, Marie felt the cold steel of a gun barrel placed against her temple.

“Do not move, Marie. Do not scream. Do not breathe.” Yuri’s gravelly voice sent a bolt of fear into the pit of her stomach. She still held tightly onto Myst, who pranced nervously at the tension she sensed between the two humans and the panicky dash of the high-strung stallion.

With the gun still pressed against her head, Yuri moved back only far enough so she could pass by him and into the soft shadows of the barn. Out of the doorway, he stepped back keeping the pistol trained on her head. “Tie the horse. Slowly. Slowly.” He cocked the trigger of the gun to let her know he was serious. “Do not go into the stall. Stay where I can see your hands.”

Marie looped Myst’s reins through the slatted wood of her stall door, reaching up to pat her apologetically when the horse looked askance at not being put into the stall with fresh food, water, and her normal brushing.

“Very touching,” Yuri said with his thick accent. “Now step over to the wall and we will chat. I hear that you wanted to talk to me. Is that true? Do you have information that would make me spare your life?”

“Yes, I do, but I want your assurance you’ll leave me alone after we talk. I’ve had a change of heart about my ideology. What you do internationally makes little difference to me any longer” Marie faced Yuri directly, keeping her gaze locked on his in an effort to show her sincerity. She knew it was important that she get him out of the barn and into the open where Jack and Reno would have a chance to capture him, or failing that, pick him off from a distance with the

rifles. “We can’t talk here. As soon as they notice the horse is running loose, someone will come out to investigate.”

On cue, a high-powered rifle shot echoed across the meadow. Yuri gave a soft chuckle, raising his eyebrows arrogantly. “I don’t think we will be interrupted. You didn’t expect me to come unprepared, did you?”

Marie couldn’t hide the trembling of her body. She jerked involuntarily when another blast shattered the silence. Yuri turned his head as if he were listening to the resulting silence. Even the birds had stopped singing. With a wolfish smile, he turned back to Marie, marginally relaxing the grip on his gun. “And now I know we won’t be interrupted. My men are good. Two shots, two kills. Which of your cowboys will you miss the most, little one?”

Tears streamed down Marie’s face. She couldn’t stop them. She didn’t try to. She knew the tears made her look vulnerable, when in fact her anger was boiling up to the point she had no fear. She would attack Yuri at the first opportunity and to hell with the consequences. She wanted to hurt the bastard. She wanted to make him pay. “You didn’t have to kill them, you son of a bitch.”

Yuri looked impatient. “Don’t be an idiot. Of course I had to kill them. And I am on a tight schedule here. You have something to tell me? Something this change in your ideology has prompted you to share with me?”

“What if I’ve changed my mind?” Marie asked defiantly. “I was willing to bargain with you, so I could have a life. Now you’ve taken too much from me, Yuri.” His pale face reddened and his arctic cold eyes took on a glacial shade of blue. He reminded her of a cobra, full of death and ready to strike at any second.

“You know who I am, Marie. You know what I am capable of. You will talk to me. We can do it easy. Or difficult. I think you will much prefer easy.”

“I prefer you to drop dead.”

Yuri backhanded Marie so hard, her head bounced off the rough

boards of the wall behind her. For a few moments, she saw stars and tasted blood inside her mouth. Good. His violence kept her anger elevated higher than her fear of him. She needed to stay focused and watch for an opportunity to attack him. Fear was an emotion that froze action. Anger released the need to react. Marie needed that fury to build until she had no fear of death. It would be the only way to fight the Russian.

“Last chance, Marie. What are you going to tell me about Mufid Elashi?”

Marie glanced around the barn. Damn Jack’s obsessive compulsion to keep everything in its place. There wasn’t anything she could use as a weapon. Yuri watched her with hooded eyes, obviously enjoying her realization that this was the end. She would die right here.

He chuckled. “Come now, Marie. Don’t make this painful for yourself. You tell me what I want to know, and I will make sure your death is easy. I will protect you from Sergey and Viktor. A good bargain, don’t you think?”

Still, Marie defied him. She would never tell him what he wanted to know. Not now.

With the speed of a cat, Yuri lashed out, throwing a punch to Marie’s stomach. She stumbled against the wall, sliding down the unfinished boards. Painful splinters imbedded themselves in her skin through the soft material of her shirt as she sunk to the floor, trying to draw air into her lungs. She wasn’t a wuss, but Yuri was unbelievably strong. Another punch like that, and he’d rupture something. She needed to come up with a plan to take him out now.

Yuri shook his head at her stubbornness. “Have it your way.” He lowered the gun to point at Marie’s stomach. “This is a painful way to die. You know that, of course. But since you will not talk to me...”

He got no further with his threat. The sound of pounding hooves distracted both Yuri and Marie as Ranger came galloping through the backside of the barn with his usual enthusiasm. She’d forgotten that

Jack locked the outer corral. When the horse bolted, he ran through the small holding corral and into the large fenced in area, giving him access to the back of the barn. It was Ranger's usual shenanigan to make several loops around the outer corral, blowing off energy before allowing himself to be settled for the night.

Startled that the horse was nearly upon him, Yuri threw his hands up to ward off the oncoming collision. He barked a sharp order in Russian, flailing his hands in a flapping manner as if shoos off a bird.

Marie watched as Ranger nearly skidded to a stop, rearing up in alarm when he saw the quick movement in front of him and the loud voiced stranger blocking his path. Panicked now, his hooves came down on the top of Yuri's head. The sound was like a ripe watermelon being thumped hard. Yuri's fingers clenched reflexively, discharging the pistol into the wall somewhere above Marie's head.

The loud report of the gun inside the building spooked Ranger even further. He attacked the source of his fear, continuing to bring his hooves down on the offending object in front of him. Yuri lay still, even while the horse's hooves cut his skin to shreds. He was incapable of movement. His neck had been broken with the first strike of Ranger's hooves.

Marie glanced around her. She needed to calm the stallion enough so she could get him out of the barn before Yuri's two thugs showed up. She wouldn't have a chance with them once they found her, but if she could ride Ranger into the hills, it was a safe bet she could escape. No other horse on the farm could keep up with him when he wanted to run.

Marie's training kept her from giving in, but it didn't stop her heart from breaking. How could she live without Jack and Reno now that she felt like she truly belonged somewhere? How was it possible to love two men equally? She didn't know. She only knew that she did, and now they had been taken from her, leaving a hole where her heart should be. A fresh set of tears tracked down her cheeks. She

would make Viktor and Sergey pay with their lives.

A sharp whistle halted Ranger's fury. The stallion backed up, quivering, listening for the distant sound again. When he heard it the second time, he pounded out of the barn, running over the top of Yuri's broken body in his haste to exit through the front doors.

Marie recognized the whistle, too. It was Jack. She scrambled to mount Myst, ignoring the pain in her stomach from Yuri's unexpected punch. Kicking her heels gently against the horse, she let Myst follow Ranger. At the gate, she leaned down from the horse's back to unhook the single strand of rope Jack had tossed over the post to lock the entry. Before the gate swung fully open, Ranger galloped through the opening, heading into a grove of pine on the south side of the ranch.

Could it be possible the guys survived?

She prayed they had.

Racing along after Ranger, she practically fell off the horse when she saw Jack standing in the cover of a circle of pines with a rifle in his hands. Sprawled on the ground at his feet lay one of the Russians. The man had a gunshot wound to his leg. He'd live, but he wasn't going to be walking for a while. Someone had tied a tourniquet around the wound to slow the bleeding. Still, Jack wasn't taking any chances from the looks of it.

Dropping out of the saddle, Marie hit the ground running, throwing herself at Jack. She wrapped her arms around his waist, holding on tight for a minute, fighting the urge to laugh and weep at the same time. "I'm so glad you're safe, Jack. Where's Reno?"

"He's okay." Jack held her tight with one arm while keeping the gun trained on the man at his feet. "What about Yuri?" He risked looking at her, his eyes flaring with anger when he saw the bruise on her face and blood at the corner of her mouth.

"He's dead."

Jack's arm tightened, drawing her closer. "I heard the shot." His voice sounded huskier than normal. "Oh, God, I thought I was too late to help you." He dropped his face to her head planting a kiss on her

hair, holding his mouth against her for a moment. Marie felt him tremble and she held him a little tighter.

“The shot you heard was from Yuri’s gun.” Marie looked up into Jack’s eyes, trying to reassure him she was fine. “He spooked Ranger. The horse reared up bringing his hooves down on the top of Yuri’s head. I think he must have died at the first hit, but he was holding a gun on me. When Ranger’s hooves came down, he fell and the gun went off. That sent Ranger into a fury, he kept stomping him over and over.”

“Shhh.” Jack comforted her, and then stiffened when he heard a sound in the underbrush. He shoved Marie behind him, leveling the gun in the direction of the noise.

Reno burst into the clearing with sweat pouring from his long run. “Where’s Marie? I stopped in the barn and Yuri’s dead. He’s shredded. Honest to God, I almost lost it. There’s blood everywhere and no sign...”

Marie rushed to him, wrapping her arms around him as he crushed her against his chest. She could feel his heart still racing. “Oh, girl,” he groaned, pulling her face up, so he could look at her. “You okay?”

Marie nodded, laying her head back against his chest, clinging to him like she might never let him go again.

“Where’s the other one?” Jack threw a hard look at his brother as if to make sure he was truly okay.

“Didn’t make it.” Reno glanced down at the Russian on the ground. “Looks like you’re the lone survivor, comrade.”

The wounded man shot Reno an insolent smile. “I’m not your comrade, cowboy.”

“Still, you’re going to talk to us like we’re old friends, Viktor.”

The Russian’s eyes widened at the mention of his name. “I know nothing. You are American cops. You have to give me my rights. I want a lawyer.”

Reno chuckled. “Oh, yes, Sergey lived long enough to tell me his name. And yours.”

With a gentle push, Reno moved Marie back from his embrace so that he could squat down to look at the tourniquet on the Russian's leg. "Looks like you've lost a lot of blood. You need to be taken to a hospital. Probably need to be flown out pretty quickly if you want to have a chance of making it."

"I know nothing," Viktor insisted, squirming around on the ground to get distance from Reno.

Reno leaned over to put his hands on the knot of the tourniquet. "Of course, if I loosen this just a little..."

"No!" Viktor yelled, slapping his hands over the wound and pushing himself even further away. "I will tell you what I know. What does it matter, anyway? Yuri can't kill me from hell."

Jack moved closer, cradling the rifle in his arms as he leaned over to hear Viktor's words. Reno sat back on his heels, giving the man some space. Marie held her breath, waiting for what she would hear.

The Russian wearily dropped his head back against the pine needles. "It was your handler, Marie Maxwell. He sold you out."

Marie stepped over to the man, steadying herself by putting a hand on Reno's shoulder. "I don't believe you. Xavier would never sell out. He wanted a higher political position. He worked hard to have a perfect track record."

"He had no choice," the Russian explained, looking at her through half closed eyes. "Yuri found out about his wife. She was Russian. Born here in America, but her parents were KGB. They were part of a deep cover operation to put agents in foreign countries as sleepers until they were needed. I doubt she knew about them herself."

"That would have showed up when he was vetted for his job at GSA. He would have never been allowed to run the organization with that sort of liability," Marie protested.

Viktor shook his head back and forth against the ground. "That's what Yuri did for him. He wiped the records clean in Russia and America. He was much more powerful than anyone knew. Xavier didn't ask for this favor. Yuri did it to have control over him. Once

the files had been altered, Xavier had to keep quiet. Yuri made sure that Xavier would look guilty no matter how it went down. He would have been prosecuted along with his wife and her family. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"But why would Xavier set me up in Paris to try and capture Yuri? That makes no sense."

The Russian's eyes snapped open and he glared at Marie. "Do you still not understand? Your uncle wanted Yuri prosecuted and he set Xavier up at the GSA to take care of it. Xavier needed someone he could control. Someone that would be loyal and report back only to him, stretching the law if necessary. But someone who was above reproach with the President of the United States."

"So he used me."

"If your President had known everything Yuri had on his cabinet members, I doubt he would have been so eager to capture him. But now it is over, da? I can tell you nothing more. Xavier Jenson was a pawn to Yuri. All of us were pawns to be used in his global game of chess."

"But why did he kill Xavier? Couldn't he have used him in a higher position? And why would he try to kill me?" Marie persisted.

The Russian's voice was growing weaker. "With you and Xavier dead, another investigation wouldn't be happening soon. That would give Yuri time to put pressure on the President and convince him that if he wanted to keep the rest of his family safe, he would let matters drop. And if he still was convinced he wanted to pursue the matter, Yuri was prepared to start leaking secrets that would shake the world with their global implications. It was all a game to him. Nothing more. It was a power play."

Marie looked at Jack with pain filled eyes. "I really thought Xavier and I had a true friendship. I don't understand why he did this to me."

"I don't think he could stop it," Jack said in his defense. "Once his path crossed with Yuri's, the Russian owned his soul. I think Xavier

tried to do some damage control, Marie. You must have been a damn good friend because he sent me to protect you.”

Marie dropped her gaze from Jack, squeezing Reno’s shoulder as she turned away. “Viktor needs a doctor. I’ll get the jeep.”

Chapter Ten

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. President.” Jack closed his cell phone disconnecting the call from Washington, D.C. “The President wants me to convey his appreciation.”

“Ummmm, nice,” Reno answered around the kiss he planted on Marie.

“Is that nice to the President? Or nice kiss?”

“Both.” Reno broke away from Marie with a grin. “So, what are we going to do with ourselves for the next few days till we get reassigned?”

Marie stared past Reno into Jack’s solemn blue eyes. He was pretending her answer didn’t matter, but she knew differently. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you guys about that.”

Jack flexed his shoulders and Marie knew he was trying to loosen the kink he always got when he tensed up.

Taking Reno’s hand in her own, Marie pulled him over to where Jack stood. “Group hug?”

The two men obliged, holding her sandwiched between them with a pressure that might be considered desperate.

“I asked for reassignment in the States,” Marie said. “I’m going to be working with your team, Jack.”

She felt him shift. “The President didn’t say anything about that.”

Marie looked up with a smile. “That’s because I asked him not to say anything until I talked to you.”

Jack blinked rapidly a couple of times, seemingly at a loss for words. He ran his fingers through Marie’s hair and waited for her to explain.

"I want to stay with you." Marie tiptoed up to brush a kiss across his lips. "You and Reno."

Jack shot Reno a look over Marie's head before he crushed her against his chest, holding her like he might never let her go. "Damn, baby, you just made me a happy man."

"How happy?" Marie shot a mischievous wink at Reno.

Jack's chuckle rumbled in his chest. "Do you want me to show you?"

"Actions do speak louder than words," Marie reminded him.

Without another word, Jack picked Marie up, heading up the stairs with her. "You coming, Reno?"

He didn't have to ask twice. Reno was right on their heels.

Jack took Marie into his room, dropping her gently into the center of the bed. "Showtime," he said, unbuttoning his shirt.

Reno was already getting undressed. Neither man seemed in the mood to take it slow as they dropped their clothes and joined Marie on the bed.

A light rain began to fall against the tin roof, whispering out a lazy beat to accompany the distant thunder echoing over the valley. Marie was aware of the rain, of the breathing of the two men as they lowered their faces to her skin, each choosing an area of her body to lavish individual attention to.

Jack chose her breasts this time. His mouth clamped over a nipple and he sucked hard, nipping her with his teeth until she squirmed, opening her legs wide for Reno's mouth to fasten over her clit. Like Jack, he spared her no sensation. His mouth was relentless as he sucked firmly, scraping his tongue back and forth over the inflamed nub until she whimpered.

Marie gave a breathless sob, bucking upward into the two men who were now using their hands to gentle her as their mouths teased and tortured her into a climax.

"Aaaaaa'aaaa."

"Ride it out, baby," Reno whispered. His tongue found her inner

lips, pushing through till he could lap her cream as she gushed from the sensation of their mouths pleasuring her simultaneously.

Jack barely gave her time to catch her breath before he got on his knees, straddling her face. Reno sat up in bed between her legs, pulling her over his lap until his cock hovered at her pussy while Jack waited at her lips.

Marie put her fingers around Jack's large cock, pulling it forward into her mouth as Reno changed game plans and shot his erection into the tight confines of her ass, burying himself with a low groan that elicited spasm contractions from Marie's inner muscles.

She clamped down on Jack's penis, driving him into the back of her throat until she swallowed the large head, working her throat muscles around him like swallowing a glass of cool lemonade on a hot summer day.

"Fuck, Marie," Jack groaned. He held back, letting her set the tempo to match the sensation Reno provided in her ass.

Aching with the burning pleasure Reno's cock produced, she sucked at Jack with an intensity that made him twitch. It wouldn't be long. She could tell he caved into the feeling of her tongue licking the precum off his erection. Unrelenting, her fingers stroked and lightly squeezed his balls until she knew he was in physical pain with the need to release.

Reno put his thumb over Marie's clit, rubbing in circles as he stroked in and out of her forbidden zone. She felt as if she might be ripped apart if Reno grew anymore aroused than he already was, and then, his thumbnail raked over the sensitive bud of Marie's clit and she screamed around Jack's erection.

The vibration of her scream sent Jack into a climax. He groaned like a man being tortured and let himself empty into her mouth while she lapped him up, swallowing every ounce he had to offer.

Reno couldn't fight it any longer. When Marie squeezed down on his cock with her anal muscles, he grabbed her hips, pulling her closer, shooting hot jets of come into her ass. She squirmed, thrashing

against the overpowering orgasm that threatened her sanity. At last, she lay quiet, touching both men with her still trembling hands.

“I love you both,” she said quietly.

Jack gave her a leisurely kiss before dropping his head back to the pillow. “You want to show us just how much?”

“Enough to stay as long as you want me to,” Marie answered.

“I was thinking about forever.” Jack rose up on his elbow to look at her.

Reno propped himself up on the other side showing his dimples.

“I don’t know, Jack, forever doesn’t seem long enough.”

THE END

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Blaze Ballantine is a paranormal investigator whose hobbies include staying over night in haunted hotels, or bed and breakfasts. She has visited numerous haunted sites from New York to California. Her interests include photography, historical murders, spelunking and travel. She is a member of the International Women's Writing Guild and her local chapter of RWA.



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