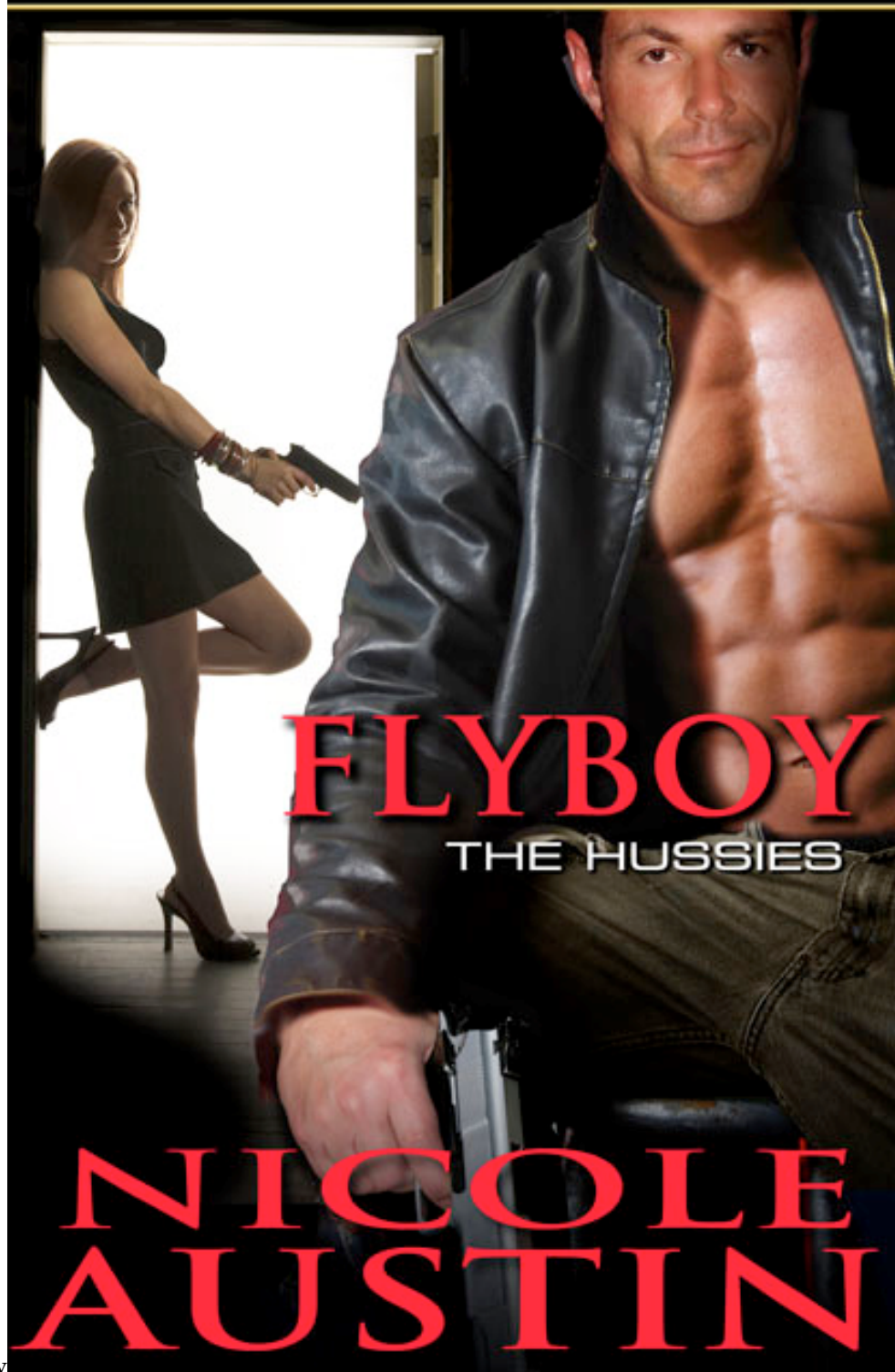


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Flyboy

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FLYBOY

Nicole Austin

Dedication

To all the unsung heroes at work behind the scenes to make this world a better place.

My editor, Shannon Combs, who puts up with my neurotic author tendencies. Here's to many more wonderful years of working together.

And to my Hussy sisters—Ci, Nat, Sahara and Sally—who never fail to inspire, motivate and amaze me with their talent and beautiful souls. Thanks for making me a member of the sisterhood.

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Prologue

Myth, magic or legend? There have been Hussies since before time was measured in days and minutes. Women who fought bravely alongside their mates with sword and axe, warriors whose courage changed the world around them. Led by the first Hussy, Danu, these fierce fighters discovered their inner strengths, summoned reserves they didn't know they possessed and passed into the fabric of legend with their daring exploits.

Since that time, myths have been spun around the Hussy Warriors—tales told by firelight, whispered from mother to daughter—eventually to take their place amongst the mystical fables that shape our souls.

But the essence of a Hussy remains strong in the hearts of so many women. Heroines who don't realize that within them lies the power to make a difference, to effect change, to use their passion every bit as skillfully as Danu wielded her sword so long ago. Warriors in different times and different places, who love as deeply and desire as desperately as any woman ever has, seldom knowing that their desire will impact not just one man, but so much more.

Therein lies the magic of a Hussy. To right a wrong, turn a frown to a smile—to positively change those around her. To love a man with every fiber of her body, to learn from that love and to grow stronger because of it.

Whether in the past, the future or the here-and-now, there are Hussies around each corner. They may not even be aware of their Hussy destiny. But one thing is certain—when passion knocks on their door, lives will change for the better. And when it comes to their one special hero? Well, he's in for the ride of his life.

Which leaves one unanswered question...are *you* a Hussy?

Chapter One

"Damn it. I knew that perky waitress slipped something in my drink. Bitch kept looking at me funny."

No other explanation justified how one moment Twyla MacAlister sat before her computers and the next she stood in a strange place. A spooky place that appeared ancient.

What a total mind fuck!

Twyla's forehead crinkled as she gazed at the gothic castle perched high on a cliff above the turbulent roar of an unseen ocean. Dense gray fog rolled slow and sinuous over the land, tendrils shrouding everything it touched with a dreamlike quality. The scene gave her the impression of having stepped back in time.

Hmm...maybe someone had figured out how to fix the chameleon circuit on the Tardis and she'd somehow boarded Dr. Who's time machine. Or perhaps, on an international flight that she didn't recall taking, the plane had traveled into some weird alternate reality. A freaky Bermuda Triangle kind of thing.

"Yeah, or could be you've been playing too many virtual reality games again." She snorted.

The vivid fantasy of a Scottish warrior riding atop his trusty steed formed in her mind, taking her breath away. What a magnificent sight, horse and man moving as one, the warrior's long dark hair streamed behind him, whipped by the wind. Steam billowed from the great beast's flared nostrils and a thick sheen of sweat covered its splendid black hide.

Tingling sensations started at her fingers and spread through her body to each erogenous zone, which swelled in reaction to the intense carnal hungers radiating from the man and straight into her. His eyes, dark and intense, remained locked on hers.

Silver cuffs banded the tanned skin of his wrists and thick biceps. Sinew flexed and contracted across broad shoulders and a wide chest that was bare of any covering. He possessed a massive body, honed by battle into a precision weapon to wield against his enemies.

Before the horse came to a complete stop, hooves dislodging clumps of earth as they dug into the ground, the rider vaulted from its back in one fluid motion. He strode toward her, each step proud and confident—a victorious hero returning to the castle after defeating a fire-breathing dragon. The sword sheathed at his hip still bore evidence of the creature's blood.

Tremors shook Twyla. Her legs buckled and she fell to her knees. In stunned fascination, she observed the power rippling across his bared chest and abdomen, sparking a sensual heat in her blood. From his hard expression, she knew the warrior would be interested in only one thing after a successful kill.

He'd want to rut.

Since she was the only woman to be found for miles, he'd take her. Hard and fast. Without mercy or reprieve.

Yeah, baby!

Aroused beyond belief, her panties grew damp and hot juices coated her thighs, prepared to welcome the conquering hero with her body. A plaid kilt swirled around powerful legs, further enticing and exciting her lust. Underneath, his naked cock would jut proud and strong above heavy balls. He would approach from behind, never uttering a single word, flip her skirt over her back and fill her in one solid thrust.

Perhaps she'd steal a glance beneath his kilt first and answer the age-old question of whether they wore anything under the garment.

Doubling over, Twyla wrapped her arms around her abdomen as tears streamed down her cheeks and riotous laughter echoed across the countryside. When her hysterics subsided, she straightened and scrubbed away the tears with fisted hands.

"Fantasize much," she chided. *Whew, that was a good one!* She grasped the top of her blouse and fanned the material over her breasts in an attempt to alleviate a bit of the telltale heated flush coloring her pale skin.

"All right, time to be serious." She had to determine what the hell was happening before someone saw the crazy woman and locked her up after figuring she was a few french fries short of a Happy Meal. After a failed attempt to smooth the wrinkles from her clothes, Twyla took a deep breath, put on a brave face and headed for the recessed entryway.

A gargantuan door-knocker thingy sat at eye-level on a massive wood and metal door. "Holy sheep shit!" She tilted her head all the way back between her shoulders to get a glimpse of the top that reached at least ten feet high. "What kind of place needs such a big, solid door? And why?" Did they put the impenetrable barrier there to keep something out, or a far worse possibility, to keep something in? Twyla didn't know if she really wanted to find out.

"Oh just knock already, pansy-ass!" She lifted a trembling hand, for the first time noticing a security camera set high on the stone wall and pointed straight at her. Great, whoever sat behind the monitor had witnessed her conversation with herself.

Just as her fingers grazed the cold cast-iron hoop clutched in the mouth of the gargoyle knocker, the door started to open and she came face-to-face with a wall of flesh. With her hand frozen in mid-air, Twyla's head once again fell back as she looked up...up...way up. All she managed to do was stare, jaw on the floor, mouth agape. The mountain of a man bore a striking resemblance to Lurch, the creepy butler from the *Addams Family* TV show. Hey, she would know. It had been one of her favorite shows.

Lurch encouraged her to come inside with an inarticulate moan and sweeping hand gesture. He didn't wait to see if she'd follow, merely turned his ponderous bulk and lumbered deeper into the gloomy interior.

Stay? Go? Run? Follow? Blast it all, this uncharacteristic indecision was driving her bonkers. The whole situation made her jumpy, even if she were only dreaming. She had to be dreaming, right?

Her inquisitive mind required that Twyla solve the mystery. “Only way you’re going to figure this out is to go inside and talk to these people.” Yeah, she’d do that as soon as she found her missing backbone, courage and sense of adventure. When she finished berating herself a hundred times over for being such a fool, she stepped over the threshold.

“Lord,” she gasped. The castle evoked memories of all the scary horror movies she’d ever watched from between her fingers or from behind the meager protection of a pillow. The fine hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end and chills raced along her spine. Talk about disturbing. Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Anne Rice—they’d all have a field day in this place. Too bad it wasn’t one of them standing here instead of her.

She stepped into the foyer and shot a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure no vampires, werewolves or other scary creatures were sneaking up from behind. Only then did Twyla let out a breath and place a tentative hand against the gray stone wall, surprised to find the surface neither damp nor cold as it appeared. Ornate gas lamps cast an eerie glow around the cavernous vestibule, drawing attention to numerous tapestries decorating the walls.

One in particular captured her interest. Moving closer, she drank in the details of the beautiful wall hanging that featured a handsome man standing on the cliffs before the castle, gazing out to sea. The artistry was so compelling she’d swear the same breeze that caused the subject’s dark hair to flutter around his shoulders glided over her skin. His rigid posture and hard expression revealed a great depth of misery, along with the knowledge of unspeakable anguish.

She traced the square angle of his jaw with her fingertips, trailing the soft caress over broad shoulders to the glorious arch of white feathered wings, which sprouted

from his upper back and trailed to the ground for several feet behind. She longed to comfort him, offer solace. Pull him into her embrace and take on the heavy burden weighing him down, if only for a short while.

Powerful emotions washed over her. Not pity—instinct told her he'd hate that. Unfamiliar feelings that hit her on a soul-deep level—respect, devotion, passion. She cherished him. Depended on him. Loved him.

Twyla whipped her hand back as if she'd been burned. *Lord!* She had no idea what the hell had just happened, but it had felt so real. For a moment, she'd been an active part of the scene. A part of the man.

An exasperated grunt from the eloquent butler snapped her back to reality. "Lead on, Lurch." Difficult as it may be, she turned away from the tapestry to follow the intimidating manservant.

She had not come here to perform an in-depth study of the castle's artwork, no matter how impressive. She didn't know why she'd been called to this foreign land, but had every intention of finding out.

Lurch's slow gait allowed plenty of time to take in her surroundings. She sensed a very surreal property about the structure, a fluid instability that her imagination grabbed hold of and ran with. She began to wonder what would happen if she were to turn around. Would the structure have shifted, morphing into a new form? Would the wall hanging still be there? Although she didn't want to act the part of every horror movie heroine who'd been too stupid to turn around and look, Twyla resisted the impulse, not wanting to know if the hallway had changed and a crazed axe murderer shadowed her every step.

Nope, don't go there, Twyla May. Ignorance is bliss. If you can't see Freddy Krueger or Dracula then they are not there. Seeing them is what makes them real.

The itch to take a look overpowered her internal soundtrack and she spun around, a sharp breath of relief hissed between her clenched teeth. Her head swam and her lungs

burned from oxygen deprivation. No wonder her mind had taken a fantastical trip, she'd been holding her breath for quite a long time.

Reassured, she turned back to find Lurch giving her some serious stink eye. "What? Why are you glaring at me? Doesn't this place ever make you feel like you've stumbled onto the set of a Wes Craven production?" She glared right back at him. "Oh wait...how could I forget? You're the fucked-up reincarnation of Frankenstein monster so you probably feel right at home in this freaky medieval fortress."

With a sad shake of his head, Lurch grunted. Twyla rested her fisted hands on ample hips. "Well, excuse me while I have a meltdown, but no sane person could spend more than five minutes in this joint without feeling like they'd entered the freakin' Twilight Zone."

Yup, no doubt about it—her mental facilities were headed for a total collapse. A flying leap off the damn cliff outside was another possible scenario worthy of consideration.

Lurch sighed and continued down the hallway.

Good job, Twyla congratulated herself. Way to join the freak show. The butler would now tell his Richie-Rich employer she was certifiable. She'd be out of here before even learning why they'd hijacked her to begin with.

She glanced around, only realizing after a brief delay that she now stood alone in the fun house, and raced down the hall. "Hey, Lurch. Wait up, man. I was only kidding. Don't leave me." A supernatural soundtrack played in her mind and her footsteps echoed on the cobbled stones, upping her anxiety. Not willing to be the brainless horror show bimbo, Twyla risked a quick backward glance to be sure nothing chased her and she plowed right into Lurch's back. He seemed to not even notice the sudden impact.

Peering around the too-big man, she gave a stunned whistle. "Holy cow! Looks like someone set Martha Stewart loose in this room." The rabbit hole she'd fallen into kept getting more bizarre by the minute. The room she'd been taken to was decorated to the nines with all manner of fancy little touches. Someone put a great deal of thought and

time into making it beautiful, but Twyla knew she'd never be comfortable in such a space. Heck, she was afraid to even sit on the perfect couch.

An ornate gilded mirror hung above a marble hearth with a fire burning behind the grate to take the chill from the air. The vaulted ceiling had to be at least forty feet high, but estimating was made difficult in the muted lighting since the heavy green drapes were drawn. Dark wood furniture upholstered with lush earth-tone fabrics sat atop a large woven rug. As alternate realities go, this one was pretty damn spectacular.

"So what now —"

Twyla turned toward the empty doorway and staggered, the words died on her lips. Damn it. Lurch had left her...well, in a lurch. The way she saw things, she had two options. Sit and wait like a good little abductee or seize the opportunity to go exploring. She held out her hands, palms up, weighing the two choices, her right hand rising higher than the left.

"Hmm...looks like it's time to reconnoiter the joint." Twyla moved around the room, drinking in the smallest details. From the ornamental rosewood carvings on the ceiling high above her head to a Renaissance painting of knights decked out in full armor lined up on horses, several of the men holding flags. In an alcove, she found a beautiful statue depicting a female warrior. The woman, both striking and rugged, was a cross between the sensual goddess Aphrodite and the kick-ass heroine from the historical fantasy TV show *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

An intense sense of inadequacy filled Twyla as she stared at the inanimate piece of art. And how fucked up was that? Years of intensive physical training in martial arts had made her strong, but instead of becoming toned and thin, her muscles had thickened. At six feet tall she would never appear delicate and feminine. Still she'd hoped to at least attain an hourglass figure. Nope, wasn't in the cards. Twyla had gained comparable physical strength and stature of a man, and while she could be termed as pretty, no one would ever consider her to be beautiful.

She shook off the odd mood, refusing to be envious of a statue. With the intention of resuming her exploration, Twyla turned on her heel, coming face-to-face with a live and in-color version of the woman depicted in stone resting on the pedestal behind her.

"I-I..." Lord, she almost swallowed her tongue. Beyond gorgeous, the woman took her breath away. A shimmering cascade of long blonde hair highlighted an ethereal face. She epitomized everything Twyla thought personified feminine beauty. Not too thin or large, pleasant curves in all the right places, along with defined muscle. And her skin... Oh shit, her skin glowed, appearing to be lit from within.

Darkness closed in at the edges of her vision and her head swam. This major head-trip-of-a-day took a toll on her, overtaking emotions and screwing with her perceptions. She began to float, weightless and no longer worried about unfolding events.

"Kaelin," the goddess yelled. "Get in here!"

Big hands bracketed her upper arms, the grip warm and firm.

Mmm...nice.

* * * * *

"You going to head over to Daytona for Bike Week, Hammer?"

Jhett Ramsey lifted his beer and took a long swallow while considering Mike's question. Leaning back in the lawn chair, he gazed around the campgrounds. This stopover in El Paso had been nice, but he'd started to feel the itch to move on. Hell, he'd managed to stay here eleven days, a whole eight days longer than anywhere else he'd been since returning to the states.

The Navy had cut him loose. *PTSD my ass. Quacks!* He didn't have any post-traumatic stress bullshit. Military docs should stick with fixing physical ailments instead of messing with minds. Just because he had the overwhelming need to live up to his call sign and pound into the ground anything that got in his way. As if there were something wrong with showing enthusiasm for doing your job. Sure he'd been assigned

to a stateside non-combative unit, but damn. He never kicked any ass that didn't have it coming.

He'd gone crazy as a civilian. Jhett craved the action, needed it the same as he needed air, and had signed on as an independent soldier—a mercenary—with a very secretive organization. They'd sent him right into the hottest action zone in Europe. Not to the conflict in the Middle East, but to the dark underground of Russian weapons dealers. What a fucking rush! He had thrived in the new working conditions. No answering to some pencil-necked commander. He had a blast kicking ass however he chose and getting paid a boatload of untraceable money in the process. Too bad he never anticipated the nightmare the job would turn into.

No! He wasn't going to go there. Couldn't think about the past, rip the scabs of painful wounds that refused to heal. A long bike trip would be good medicine.

"Might be nice to sit on the beach, chase some bikinis. Probably warmer over there too." Early March temperatures in Florida would be mild. He hated being cold. Only thing worse was being wet *and* cold.

Jhett shivered and pushed the memories threatening to surface back into the neat little box where they belonged. Allowing them out never had good results. Best to keep them tucked away where they didn't bother him.

"What about you, Mike? You gonna take the epic tour?"

"I think so. Might make a pit stop in New Orleans. Haven't been there in ages and it's not too far out of the way. It's better during Mardi Gras, but there's always something happening in that town."

The loud bang of a trailer door shutting drew both of their gazes. They watched as Cami made her way toward one of the tents. The woman had a great body, soft and round, perfect amount of swing to her ample hips.

"Cami'd score more beads than would fit around her neck at Mardi Gras with those plastic bolt-ons."

Her triple-D implants would make Cami a bead magnet at the wild street party. "True that," Jhett agreed, holding out his beer bottle for Mike to clink his against.

"When're you gonna tap that ass? You do realize she'd give anything to get you in the sack, right?"

"Yeah, but she's not my type." Her body may be exactly his type, but Jhett wasn't going there. She got ridden too often by too many different men.

"You want another beer?"

"Nah, I'm gonna crash. What time you want to head out in the morning?"

Mike smiled. "Seven too early for you?"

"That works. I'll catch ya on the flip side." He harbored a cautious optimism for getting a few peaceful hours of sleep before the dreams found him. They always did. Didn't matter if he drove himself to physical exhaustion, got shitfaced on bourbon or fucked senseless – waking up in a cold sweat and fighting not to scream was a foregone conclusion.

Chapter Two

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Another question he wouldn't answer, formed part in Surzhyk, a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, and part in broken English, preceded another round of electrical shock. The bastards had hooked the sensors to his balls and nipples. Hammer almost didn't feel anything, having long ago let his mind drift away from his body.

Whatever drug concoction they gave him made his body respond to any stimulus, even painful catalyst, in a sexual way. His mind screamed and fought to no avail. Then the blonde interrogator would fuck him, make him orgasm. He knew what she did would amount to rape but he still felt guilty and dirty for the rush of sexual bliss he got from the encounters.

He tried to hold onto hope that someone would be coming for him but knew better. It had been too long and he had not been on a mission with the military. The organization he worked for would keep his capture quiet and continue on. Their only concern would be the possibility of him being broken and revealing information they'd rather the enemy not have. Not that Hammer, or anyone else who worked in the field for that matter, had much more than a general idea of who they worked for. The organization took privacy to the extreme. Rightly so since these sick fuckers were very skilled in torturing information out of the most reluctant detainees.

The blame rested with him. He knew better than to allow a personal or emotional attachment to form with anyone. His line of work precluded something as frivolous as friendships. But he'd done it anyway, become close to his team. Doing so had resulted in distraction and personal sacrifice. At least the others had gotten away clean. That knowledge helped to ease his mind. Had the team been here with him, he would have gone insane trying to figure a way to get them out.

A combination of blood and sweat dripped down and stung his eyes. He felt a momentary reprieve as the restraints were released from where they'd cut into his wrists and ankles, but the respite was short-lived. They dragged him to another room where a video camera had been set up. A man wearing a black hood began reading a statement. He understood enough of the words to know this was the end. They were about to execute him, using him as a message to his employer. Hell, knowing the sick fuckers, he'd be sent back piece by piece.

Ha, like the organization would be affected by his death. Nothing would change. They'd continue their operations same as usual, undeterred.

No one would mourn his passing either. He'd been estranged from his family for too many years to count, and he'd been gone too long for the few casual friends he'd had in the States to even remember him.

Fingers pulled at his hair, yanking Hammer's head up until he became blinded by the bright lights. The cold steel barrel touched his temple briefly then drew back. With his eyes clamped tight, he prayed they make this clean and swift.

The idea of God was one he'd thought proven false by the very existence of this hellhole, but when it came to the end the only solace came with prayer. In a rapid clip, he whispered the words to the Lord's Prayer, knowing he messed it up in places but figuring that was okay. The words were not as important as what was in a man's heart. In this moment, left with no other choice, he prayed for deliverance and forgiveness.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jhett woke with the words still lingering on his lips and his body covered in cold sweat. He gasped and wheezed, struggling for each breath. Even though he'd gone two nights without having the familiar nightmare, he had not slept due to the anticipation.

The horrors he'd faced in captivity were always with him. There was no escape from his mind, which refused to be quiet. Peace would never come. He'd be trapped in this hell on earth until the day someone managed to end his wretched life. An angel of

mercy to deliver him from the madness. An expiration of his misery. The end had become a goal he longed to see reach fruition. A reward of sorts.

* * * * *

"If you are to succeed then you must use every resource available. One such essential tool is lessons learned in past lives."

Twyla's attention vacillated between Danu and pondering the woman's mysterious attributes. The several days she'd spent at Rose Rock Castle on the Isle of Sàbhail felt surreal. Both Danu and the castle were like one long elaborate dream. Hopefully she'd wake up at some point.

Yeah, come on, Twyla May. Time to wake up from this trippy dream now!

Shadows danced over Danu's physical form, giving her an insubstantial essence as if she had one foot in the castle and the other in a different location and time. Even the rooms of the castle were fluid, shifting and changing on a regular basis. You never knew from one heartbeat to the next what tapestries or paintings would be on the walls, where doorways would be found or how it would be arranged.

"Twyla? Earth to Twyla."

She shook her head to clear away the cobwebs. "Huh?"

"Have you heard anything I said or did it all go in one ear and out the other?"

"Umm..."

Danu's expression saddened. "That's what I figured." She nodded, gave a weary sigh then began again. This time the power of suggestion tugged at Twyla's consciousness and she began to wonder if it might work. Perhaps the wise warrior would succeed at putting her into a hypnotic state.

"How do you feel?"

Or not. "I'm fine. Sorry it didn't work. I must not be able to give up control of my mind."

Danu's hearty laughter sent chills racing across her skin and made every hair on Twyla's body stand on end. "It worked well, child. We learned a great deal from your dreams over the last two hours."

Huh? Two hours? "What are you talking about? I didn't go under."

"Yes, you did." Danu chuckled. "And you told me about several of your previous lives. What a pleasure to confirm you were once one of my original Hussies, Catrina. Welcome back." Although warm, her smile managed to prickle Twyla's skin with goose bumps.

No damn way! "Uh, yeah. Right!" Her voice no longer held true conviction, even to her own ears.

Danu's beautiful face became an expressionless mask, eyes hard, jaw clenched. "Is it my word or my abilities you doubt?"

"I...uh—"

"I see you have forgotten much in this embodiment. Your memories are focused on this life." She nodded as if agreeing with her deductions. "Each of us goes through a series of lifetimes. We choose a path that will provide opportunities to learn difficult lessons in the hopes of achieving spiritual growth and soul development. We also work to discern the consequences and results of previous choices.

"Particular memories of significant past lives can provide guidance and information about our life's work, recurrent patterns, life partners, unresolved karma and challenges we have chosen. I have assisted you in reaching your higher self, or soul, to determine which prior lives will be significant to this current one. The higher self is in control of what you will be permitted to remember and will assist in using those individual pieces of information to form a complete picture. As you continue to make discoveries, you will find glimpses and memories appearing more often—lessons, talents and messages from your previous experiences that can help in your mission."

Twyla listened and began to think of times she'd had a strong sense of déjà vu sparked by dreams, places—even sights, sounds, smells and people.

“You may have episodes of spontaneous recall when you’ll remember in fragments or mini movie clips. In other cases, you will meditate to review relevant chapters of previous embodiments stored in the subconscious mind and in your inherited genetic code.”

Danu advised caution. The mind held billions of memories, but few would be of much use now. She would have to learn to access the ones relating to her current life. Turned out her happy place—the one she went to during meditation—involved walking along a quiet path that twisted upward and around the side of a mountain. At the top she’d created a field of wildflowers along with a stunning waterfall cascading into a crystalline pool below. The idyllic setting brought profound serenity and inner calm. She rather enjoyed visiting the private spot, her own personal haven where nothing could intrude.

Through Danu’s guidance and a great deal of practice, Twyla learned of many prior lives. “I don’t get it,” she complained. “What am I supposed to learn from having been a pin-up girl in the thirties? How to strike a pose? And the life of a servant for Cleopatra? Sheesh! I get the ancient Scottish Highlands warrior, but what about the rest?” Trying to figure out what would be important left her confused and agitated.

“The correct lessons will be clear during your mission.”

Ah, the mission. She didn’t get how this was all to play out. “Yeah, let’s talk about this ‘mission’. How the hell am I supposed to find this guy I have to succeed in helping? And forfeiting my life should I fail.” Her hands flew as she spoke, a sure sign of her increasing turmoil—one she had no control over. “That shit seems a bit harsh, don’t ya think? Don’t even get me started on the whole figuring out our purpose on our own crap. I’d like to know how that’s gonna freakin’ work. I mean really —”

“Twyla,” Danu snapped. “Silence. Take a deep breath, close your eyes and find the path.”

“I don’t want to find the stupid path,” she whined, acting worse than a spoiled child, and she didn’t care. Twyla worked best with tangibles. Computers she touched,

programming she saw, concrete logic that had meaning. The complex aikido movements she mimicked, practiced and perfected over years spent in the dojo learning from her sensei. This abstract metaphysical stuff drove her nuts.

"Then you will fail."

Her mouth fell open and she stared at Danu's retreating form. When it dawned on Twyla that the other woman wasn't coming back, she jumped up and ran after her mentor. "Hey, wait! You can't just walk away. I need answers."

"All will be revealed in time, Twyla."

"Ugh!" She stomped her foot in a fit of pique. "All will be revealed in time," she mimicked in a sing-song voice. "That's exactly the kind of shit I can't take."

Danu gave no response as she continued out the door and headed down the hallway. Twyla screamed and cursed as she raced to catch up. "You have to give me some sort of freakin' clue here."

The world shifted on its axis. She reached out to steady herself against the firm rock wall only to watch it become insubstantial and fade away. The massive hall within Rose Rock Castle dissipated, became fuzzy. She caught a glimpse of familiar surroundings solidifying in place of the castle. Her bank of computers. Bookshelves filled with reference texts and programming code. The small window that looked out on a postage-stamp-size yard. And Widget curled up on the seat of her desk chair.

"Here we go again," she muttered. Except instead of falling down the rabbit hole, this time she'd been spit back out. Rudely and without a word of warning. "Damn it, Danu. What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

She didn't expect or receive an answer. Instinct filled in the blanks. As of now, Twyla would be on her own. Just her and the guy she may have to forfeit her life for.

With hands fisted on her hips she stared up at the white expanse of ceiling and grumbled, "Great. Thanks a lot! This is karma biting me in the ass for something I screwed up in one of those past lives, isn't it? The whole 'what goes around comes back around' thing."

Widget mewed in response, rose up on the pads of her feet for a good stretch and yawned. “Didn’t even miss me, did ya?” she accused. Widget slinked over to where she stood and head butted Twyla’s arm. “Fine, I’ll do my duty.” She wasn’t sure whether she referred to giving the cat a good scratching or completing her mission.

Plopping down in the chair the cat had vacated, she opened up an Internet window and Googled “past life theories”. The search resulted in more than eight million entries. “Holy crap! Gonna have to narrow that down a tad.”

Her fingers flew over the keys in a familiar manner. This she could grasp and figure out. Her comfort zone—the one place where she could be herself. A place where what she wore and her Amazonian size didn’t make a bit of difference. Nobody around to laugh or point. No shocked gasps as she walked through the grocery store. In fact, here she ruled—a goddess of information. She controlled this world, manipulated it to her will with a few masterful keystrokes. No one avoided her in cyber world. Instead they sought her out for her legendary skills.

With a sigh, she fell into her work. Processors hummed, keys clicked, various images flashed across the row of monitors. Similar to a conductor, Twyla directed each individual component, a great symphony brought together to play her tune.

Chapter Three

"Oh god, Hammer, yes. Harder. Damn, that feels good."

Jhett rolled his eyes at the woman writhing around on her belly. All her caterwauling would lead anyone within hearing distance to the assumption that they were fucking. A reasonable theory considering her dramatic moaning outshone most porn stars, but far from the truth. Camille, or "Cami" as she preferred to be called, had worked hard to earn her biker-slut reputation and wore the label with pride. Chances were good she had contracted every STD known to mankind and a few doctors hadn't even discovered yet. He wouldn't fuck her with someone else's dick.

He'd landed back in Florida again, this time for start of summer. On an intellectual level he understood there would be no outrunning himself, but that didn't stop the cycle of getting on the bike and hauling ass.

Cami's antics drew his attention back to the woman. She yelped when his hand landed a stinging smack to the plump ass threatening to bust the seams of camouflage shorts that were stretched to the max. The damn things were at least two sizes too small, just like everything else the woman wore.

"Cami, if you don't stop this racket, I'm outta here."

"No, Hammer," she gasped. "Please, I'll be quiet. You can't leave me like this. You've got to finish me off."

Of course, she had to put a sexual connotation on the comment. The woman lived, ate and breathed sex. Hell, her voluptuous body inspired lusty thoughts, even in him. Thoughts he'd never act on. Cami had lived hard and played harder. At the tender age of twenty-four she already looked closer to forty.

He waited until she settled down before going back to work on her misaligned spine. "How the hell did you throw your back out this time?"

Duh! Ask a stupid question... Whoever coined the phrase “There’s no such thing as a stupid question” had to be dumber than a fence post. He rushed to stop any explanation before it started. “Never mind, Cami. I don’t really want to know.”

A few practiced movements followed by several audible pops and loud moans later had Cami right as rain and ready for action.

She rolled over, rising up on her elbows and giving him a lascivious grin. Squeezing her full breasts inward with her upper arms accentuated her cleavage. His cock jerked. The vivid image of his shaft sliding between her soft globes had him biting the inside of his cheek to suppress a needy moan.

“Damn, Hammer. That was better than sex, sugah.”

He had to chuckle at the naughty comment. He glanced down as she rose onto her knees and her lashes fluttered over big blue eyes darkened with desire. The tip of her pink tongue slid from between puffy lips to trace a wet trail over her wide mouth. She scooted closer and placed her warm hands on his upper thighs very close to his cock, which stiffened, pressing against his zipper in a demand to be released.

He wanted to scream, “It’s alive,” but remained quiet. Jhett had not had an erection in too long. Of all the times for his cock to show an interest, this was the wrong one. “Cami,” he gritted through clenched teeth.

“Shh! I just want to offer my thanks.” Bright-red lacquered fingernails scraped over his length, drawing a moan from Jhett and causing his cock to swell.

He’d heard the other guys talk. Cami had become a legend among the informal group of bikers, reputed as being able to suck the chrome off a tailpipe. He met her gaze as she popped the first button. God, it had been so long since he’d allowed anyone to touch him—ages since he had any physical relief. The woman may be easy, but she had a heart of gold and her touch sparked a reaction he’d thought had died in the Ukraine, ripped out along with his soul.

He longed to slide into her warm, damp mouth. First, he had to be sure she knew the score though. Jhett grasped her hands, stopping her nimble fingers at the third button. "Cami, this won't get you into my bed."

Her gaze dropped for a few seconds before meeting his again. "I know, Hammer. Let me do this for you. Let me give you some pleasure. I don't expect anything in return, but I want to do this. You need it."

He nodded and dropped his hands. Cami stared into his eyes a few seconds longer before smiling and returning to her task. She dragged the jeans over his hips and Jhett sighed as his cock sprang forward.

Welcome back, buddy!

"Mmm...nice!" She held his thick shaft in a two-fisted grip, licking her lips as a bead of fluid emerged from the narrow slit.

"Lick it, Cami. Get it nice and wet." He gathered her long bleached-blond hair and held it out of the way so he could watch her work.

Instead of going straight for the prize, she took her time, first spreading the precum over his head and giving several firm strokes, her touch more forceful than most women would dare. One hand drifted lower to massage his balls. He groaned as the sensations spread through his sensitive sac. She licked the shallow line separating his balls all the way down and behind to lap at his perineum, careful not to miss a spot, then sucked him into her mouth. Cami rolled her tongue over his jewels and sucked, hard.

"Christ, woman!" If she kept that up, he'd explode before she even got his cock into her mouth.

She hummed, the vibrations twisted through his groin and slammed straight into his gut. Without conscious command, his hands fisted in her hair to hold her close. When she released his well-pleasured globes, she grasped the base of his dick, licked the head then drew him down her throat. All the way down her throat, until he shot past her tonsils and her lips kissed his groin.

"Holyfuckingshit," he sputtered and locked his knees in order to remain upright. Nothing he'd heard had done her oral abilities justice. Jhett surpassed blown away and headed straight into stupefied, incoherent muttering.

Cami showed no mercy. She sucked hard, head bobbing, firm hands working his balls, one damp finger sliding back to rim his puckered hole.

"Don't go there," he warned in a cold and vicious tone that made heartless soldiers cringe. But not Cami. The vixen just chuckled and continued to trace his anus with one of her wicked fingernails.

Since she took all of him with ease, Jhett didn't hold back. His hips thrust, slamming him into the back of her throat over and over. With a convulsive swallow, her throat tightened around him as her cheeks hollowed. He wanted to close his eyes tight and revel in the powerful sensations, but struggled against the impulse. He had an equal interest in watching the expression of supreme enjoyment softening her face.

He smelled her arousal rising on the air, felt hard nipples press into his thighs and luxuriated in the idea she got pleasure from sucking him. Wet slurps and mumbled praise rang in his ears.

God, she was fucking amazing. "You love sucking it, don't you, Cami. That's right. Suck it all down like a good girl."

A small gasp from near the tent flap drew Cami's attention away from her task. Soon, his own gaze traveled the distance to discover the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen checking them out. No, that wasn't quite right. She was checking *him* out, her bright green eyes focused on his face. Hell, she seemed to not even notice the woman attempting to vacuum suck the cum right out of his balls.

Somehow, having the newcomer stare at him accomplished what Cami's skilled blowjob had failed to achieve. With a harsh shout, hot streams of cum exploded through his cock. Greedy for him, Cami drank down every drop, continuing to suck until he yanked her head back. He gasped for air but did not luxuriate in the release. With quick motions, he restored his clothing and turned.

Jhett didn't look at Cami, not wanting to see any hurt that may be in her eyes. He didn't say a word as he took hold of the new arrival's toned biceps and dragged her out of the tent.

* * * * *

Twyla walked around in a daze, her mental processes still jumbled from the lightning-fast trip through time and space. Damn, she'd have to find out how Danu managed the amazing feat. It would be a neat power to possess. One second she'd been watching a national news report, gasping as she heard details of how a recognized computer genius had been captured in Europe, in the next instant her surroundings changed. "Although it would be nice to be given a little warning before being zapped to another location."

Oh, good job, Twyla May. People who'd already stared now backed up, maintaining plenty of distance between them and the loony Amazon.

In six days spent on the Isle of Sàbhail—equating to only a few hours time gone from home—she'd learned many things from the ancient Hussy warrior hunter. Her lips curled up in a smile. She couldn't curtail the natural response, which had angered Danu. The word "hussy" had a very different meaning in modern society than it had centuries ago when women lined up for the privilege and honor of joining the legion of Hussies. The women wore the title with pride. Twyla did too, now that she understood the historical origins of the word.

Danu's explanation played through her mind. "In the old language, Hussy meant mistress of the household. It was a compliment used to describe orderly, capable women. Sometime during the seventeenth century the meaning started to change, becoming increasingly more negative."

Her pride at being hand-picked by Danu to join the ranks of the Hussies had given Twyla a much-needed boost in self-confidence. She held her head and shoulders higher now, lifted by a sense of purpose greater than she'd ever experienced. Everything she

did had new meaning and importance. The perks that came with the designation didn't hurt any either. Her new clothes brought with them a sensual power and allure she'd lacked. And the car...

Muscle cars had turned her head before, but this car had her creaming her panties. A nineteen sixty-nine Camaro sport coupe in the original paint colors, hugger orange with bold white racing stripes running from bumper to bumper. Getting used to driving it had taken effort, but what a sweet ride. Prettiest damn thing she'd ever seen too. The leather interior matched the exterior colors and the racing seats featured four-point harnesses for safety. She had to climb in over a bar welded at a diagonal next to the seats, which added extra stability to the frame.

An extra gauge and toggle switch wired into the dash had been referred to as "nos" by the car guy. He'd explained that the switch was wired to a tank of nitrous oxide in the trunk, and hitting the throttle at just the right moment would turn the earth-bound machine into a rocket. No way would she touch the switch. The whole concept scared the hell out of her. The fast car taxed her driving skills enough without adding nitrous into the mix. She had to admit though, the appreciative stares the car drew from men did a lot for her ego.

She blinked as she stared at the vehicle that had made the leap with her. "Now that's pretty damn cool." After engaging the alarm system, Twyla followed her instincts, as Danu had instructed, and found herself at the entrance to a large olive-gray tent. She ignored the sounds coming from inside, pulled back the flap then stepped inside, coming to an abrupt halt.

Despite the fact they had not met, she'd have recognized the man she would assist anywhere, knew him on a cellular level. He took her breath away. Tall and commanding, his dark aura radiated strength leashed by a tortured soul. While she didn't know what he'd been through, she had no doubt the painful experience had left deep scars that remained fresh.

A warrior in the truest sense of the word.

Pale blue, almost colorless eyes locked onto her, revealing startled recognition. Twyla gasped as his features contorted into an expression of agony mixed with pleasure. Before she even realized he'd moved, the man had her by the arm, forcing her outside. They walked across the campground in silence until he almost tripped over his own tongue, which hung from a slack jaw, while he stared at the Camaro.

"Yours?" he growled.

At her nod, he held out a hand, palm up. She dropped the keys and his fingers fisted around them. "Get in."

Twyla surprised herself by following the barked command then made quick work of fastening the seatbelt as he gunned the engine and the car shot out onto the road. He handled the robust vehicle with dexterity and expertise.

When they reached the stop sign, he tensed and stared over at her. Undisguised jealousy turned his eyes cold. "You in the habit of letting strange men drive this beauty?"

She pondered what he was jealous of, other people who'd had the chance to drive the car or other men she may have shared time with. Without giving it much thought, she dropped the subject that would only clutter her mind and result in a massive headache. Since returning to the States a few months ago, she had spent a lot of time debating how much to tell him. In the end, she'd decided to keep most of the details to herself, they were too fantastic for the average person to believe, and stuck as close to the truth as possible.

"You are the first and only man who has been in this car since I got it, and no one else has been behind the wheel before." His brow furrowed and Twyla longed to run her fingers over the crinkled skin to soothe him.

"So why me? You don't even know my name."

This time she did not resist the impulse to touch him. She reached across the seat, placing her hand flat over his heart, the steady beat reverberating along her arm. Taking his hand, she placed it over her left breast. One slowed, the other sped up, until

synchronized. His mouth fell open, a comical expression of shock overtaking his handsome features. She would have laughed if the moment were not serious and pivotal to her mission. "My heart knows everything it needs to know about you. If you dig deep, you'll find that you know me too."

"H-how'd you do that?"

Chapter Four

"Do what?" Twyla blinked her eyes and hoped she managed to appear innocent.

"Christ, I don't know."

Jhett raked his fingers through thick black hair and she shoved her hands under her thighs. Damn, how she itched to feel the cool strands slide between her fingers. A bit scruffy, the style grown out, he needed a haircut. No way would she make such an asinine suggestion. The disheveled locks softened his harsh and rigid military bearing. She didn't have to be told he'd been in the armed forces, it was written in each deliberate movement, exposed by his alert posture and focused awareness.

"I don't even know your name."

A multitude of feelings flashed in his eyes before disappearing, making her wonder if they'd been real or imagined. Disappointment and frustration—in himself? She also detected a thirst for knowledge. This man would dig to unearth every facet of a situation until satisfied he'd gained full comprehension. Twyla appreciated and shared a similar drive for knowledge.

"Twyla MacAlister."

He nodded. "First the car. How much do you know about her?"

She didn't even try to hide her wide grin. Danu had said the man she helped would have an appreciation for fine machinery so she'd made a point of learning the proper statistics and terminology.

"She's a sixty-nine, retro-fitted with a turbo-charged short block V8, pumping out more than six hundred horses, hydraulic cams, dual exhaust...more tricked-out performance gear than most drivers know what to do with."

A wicked grin curled over his sensual lips. Twyla almost moaned. She wanted to kiss him so bad, feel those lips pressed against hers, taste the warm recesses of his mouth.

"You've named her." He didn't phrase it as a question, but an irrefutable fact. "Nobody gets that into talking about a car and hasn't named her."

Perceptive. "Her name is Epona, from Celtic mythology. She's the goddess —"

"Goddess of horses and fertility. Very apropos considering the number of horses under the hood."

Perceptive and smart. The combination had a lethal effect on her libido, heating her blood and further stoking her desires. "Color me impressed."

"Eh." He brushed off the compliment with a depreciative wave then tapped his temple. "There's a wealth of useless information stored in here."

She bit her lip, apprehensive to ask questions. Curiosity won in the end. "Tell me about yourself." Twyla glanced over in time to see a wide chasm open between them. She made a mental note of this newest character trait he'd revealed and stored the information away for later contemplation. Personal questions were not welcomed.

"My birth certificate says Jhett Ramsey. Only ever heard bureaucrats and employers use it when on official business. Front of my flight helmet says Hammer, and that's what my friends call me." He shot her a speculative glance. "Which are you?"

"I hope to be both friend and colleague."

"Ah, so it's a job offer that's put you on my six." He gave a thoughtful nod.

"On your what?"

"Sorry, pilot lingo for rear quadrant or ass. You tracked my ass down for a job."

He pulled the car up to a drive-thru window and placed an order suitable to feed an entire army — soda pop, chocolate shake, double order of loaded fries, onion rings, two quarter-pound burgers with the works and a chili dog. He turned to her with a big grin. "You want anything?"

The skin around her eyes stretched as they widened. "All of that's for you?"

"Yup." One big hand patted his washboard abdomen. "I'm a growing boy."

At six-five and weighing about two-twenty, Jhett was big and solid. He had to take care around most women since they were so fragile and small compared to him. He observed Twyla in his peripheral vision. He wouldn't have to wear kid gloves with her. She'd be soft and able to handle whatever he dished out in bed with no protruding bones to worry about, only lots of curvy female flesh to cushion his hard thrusts. *Hell yeah*. Add in those mile-long legs wrapped tight around his hips and Jhett would be as close to heaven as he'd ever get.

She laughed, as he'd intended. "I'll have a diet soda and a bacon double cheeseburger."

"That's it?"

She refused to meet his gaze, staring down at the floorboard instead, and nodded. Interesting. He wondered if it was shyness or embarrassment he witnessed.

After relaying her order they remained silent as a teenager handed over bag after bag of food. The aromas filling the car got her stomach growling.

Jhett drove out to a nearby park overlooking a picturesque lake. He parked, grabbed the bags and headed out to a picnic bench without uttering a word. Twyla would follow or she wouldn't—the choice was hers and at the time he didn't care. The past hour had given him a lot to think about.

None of his extensive training or any of the freaky shit he'd experienced could've prepared Jhett for the odd awareness running between them. The spark of recognition made him think that they'd met at some point when he'd never seen her before today. Hell, if he didn't know better, he'd think she'd been someone special in his life—important and vital. And he wouldn't even ponder the palpable bond he visualized as a string running from the center of his heart on a straight and true path to hers.

Cami may have been able to provide his first hard-on in more than a year, but it had been seeing Twyla who had brought on his climax. Her magnificence defied his

powers of description and woke the man who'd been slumbering. His cock twitched in agreement. He wanted nothing more than to sink into her warm depths and be cradled between her thighs.

"Tell me about this job," he said after she'd joined him at the table. He spread out the food, pushing the onion rings and fries into the center with a nod. "You're gonna help with these, right?"

He stared in fascination as cotton-candy pink lips spread around the burger and a small bit of grease pooled at the corner of her mouth. She hummed in appreciation, grabbed one of the fries and swirled it through the gobs of cheese, chili, bacon bits and sour cream. She followed up by taking a hard pull on her straw. This time his cock did more than jerk, it lengthened and thickened, pressing against the soft material of his jeans in silent demand.

Twyla took her time chewing the food to gather her thoughts. Since she'd been watching a report on the world-famous computer geek, she presumed their mission was to rescue the man who had been abducted.

"Ever heard of Randolph Hillman?"

"Nope."

"He's a major computer guru. Rumor has it he's been working on some super top-secret program for the military. Early this morning he was captured in a foreign country. The mission..." *If you choose to accept it*, ran through her head, but she refused to utter such a clichéd line. She laughed, but the sounds cut off short in her throat when she made eye contact with Jhett.

"The job involves rescuing Mr. Hillman along with any equipment or media his captors may have gotten their nasty little hands on." If possible, the hard blue eyes watching her grew colder. Hell, they became downright frigid and Twyla shivered as shards of ice entered her bloodstream.

"What's he to you? Boyfriend? Lover?" He made a point of glancing at her ring finger. "Husband?"

"I-I...ugh!" He short-circuited her synapses and left her frustrated. "I've never met him, but his work will have a profound impact on the future safety of our country."

"So your motivation is altruistic?" His grin turned lusty, eyes heavy-lidded as his gaze slid down to her breasts. Great, now she was hot. Molten hot and wet. Her breasts swelled and pressed against her T-shirt, nipples hardening as if attempting to draw the heat that had returned to his eyes.

Her thoughts fractured. While he was hard to read, she'd managed to catch small flashes of insight through his expressive features and yet had no idea what to expect next. Jhett "Hammer" Ramsey was a mystery. One she'd enjoy deciphering...or fucking. Yes, she'd love to spend time under him, over him, in front of him – she'd take him anyway she could get him.

Twyla shook her head to dispel the lascivious train of thought. She needed to get back into the conversation. "Not one hundred percent, no."

"Ahh." He gave a sage nod. "Now we're getting somewhere. Spill it, honey."

She'd already spilled a great deal of honey for this man. Her panties were soaking wet and her thighs were damp. Sticky. Ready to fuck. Without doubt, she'd spill a great deal more before they parted ways.

"I...umm. There are personal repercussions I'd rather not get into right now. Look, this is gonna be your typical search and rescue. A walk in the park for someone with your experience and expertise. My job will be to provide logistical support and assist with planning. Your job will be to acquire any resources you deem necessary, including personnel, as well as troubleshoot and execute the plan. Simple." Well, she'd oversimplified things, but he'd get the gist.

"Ah huh, and what happens when everything goes FUBAR? Who backs me up? Or am I to be thrown to the wolves, considered an acceptable loss? Who ensures I make it back home?" He'd risen to his feet and damn if he wasn't intimidating when angry. "No offense, honey, but what the hell do you know about planning a military mission?"

What are your qualifications and why the fuck am I supposed to trust you with my life, the lives of my men?"

She didn't know where the gumption came from, but Twyla rose and stared the big man down. Anger overriding logical thought, she strode around the table and went toe-to-toe with the cocky jerk. Too bad she had to tip her head back to meet his eyes since it would ruin the effect. Lord, what a tall slice of heaven, all concrete muscle and sharp angles she would enjoy investigating.

"Look here, flyboy." She punctuated each word by jabbing a fingertip into the rock-hard muscle of his chest. "I'm taking some pretty big risks here too. I don't know you from Adam, but I'm going to have to rely on your skill and reputation to keep us all safe. I'm also putting the fate of one of the most important men on the face of the earth in your hands. How do I know you won't fuck the whole thing up?"

Oh hell, now she'd done it. His face turned red and a muscle ticked in his clenched jaw. Twyla imagined built-up steam escaping from his ears accompanied with the long blast from a loud whistle.

She prepared herself to be attacked by shifting her weight to the balls of her feet and letting tensed muscles relax. She'd studied Aikido, which taught her how to take on someone bigger and stronger without either of them getting hurt. Twyla felt confident in her abilities to diffuse his anger.

They continued staring for long, breathless moments. His response, when it came, was so completely unexpected that it blew her mind, silencing any protest she may have offered.

Twyla tempted him in the most delightful ways. Jhett imagined how her soft curves would cozy up against his hard planes. Built strong and made for action. She had plenty of lush flesh for him to hold onto, created to cushion a man's body. His body.

He imagined long strands of her chestnut hair gliding over his body, teasing sensitive flesh. Or better yet, his fingers clasped in the locks and those charming sea-

green eyes looking up at him from under thick-fringed lashes while her pink lips stretched around his cock.

The imagery had him groaning, and if he didn't distract himself from such thoughts, he'd act on them.

"Because I never fail." Not true, but no one without clearance above the top secret level would know the truth. Jhett had failed and spent ten long months in hell serving penance for the sin of allowing personal issues to interfere with work. He shook off the treacherous thoughts. They were both better off if he didn't go down that particular path.

The idea she'd distract him from the mission flickered through his mind, but Jhett pushed it aside. He had not accepted the job and wasn't on duty now, therefore he had no good reason not to indulge, take what he needed. What he wanted.

God, did he ever want.

Most men would have backed down from him already, but not her. The bold way she stood her ground, getting right in his face, turned his cock into a steel spike. In his head, he knew Twyla to be strong and competent, but at the same time, he harbored a fierce instinct to offer protection and shelter.

He refused to examine the unaccustomed feelings bombarding him, saving contemplation for later. Much later. The sharp edge of desire became imperative, the center of his focus. The inescapable compulsion to taste her succulent pink lips overrode everything else. The plump curves had thinned into a firm line Jhett longed to tease and suckle until they softened and parted, granting admission into her warm mouth.

He'd intended on a slow seduction, but when their lips touched something snapped the leash of rigid self-discipline that confined his baser urges, swamping him under a tidal wave of wild lust. Capturing her lips, he caved under the force of his hunger and want and need. Her open responsiveness drove away logic. Jhett ate at her delicate lips, pushed along the seam until they parted and his tongue surged forward to claim her mouth. Their tongues touched, twined, tasted. Passion rose along with the ache.

Her fingers dug into his shirt, short nails scoring his skin and sparking a primitive response. This rare and beautiful woman belonged to him. Starving for her sweet flavor, he devoured her. His tongue ran over her teeth, traced every edge before delving deeper, declaring his ownership.

She whimpered as the backs of her legs hit the table, trapping her between the sturdy wood and his unyielding body. He luxuriated in the full breasts pillowing his chest. Ample curves enticed him to linger. Their kiss turned insatiable as his hands roamed and his thick erection pressed against her belly, proclaiming his possession. His aroused length burned and ached with the need to be held snug within the ripe confines of her pussy. It had been ages since he'd fucked a woman and he couldn't remember the last time anyone had stirred his emotions.

Jhett broke the kiss and stepped back. "Fuck!" He cursed himself for being a fool while raking his hands through his hair.

Twyla gasped for breath as she watched Jhett pace and grumble, catching only bits and pieces of what he said. He blasted himself, muttering something about a hard lesson and having shit for brains.

Ugh...men! Just when she found one she liked he had to go and ruin everything. And it was obvious this one had some major issues. She sighed. The kiss had been nice while it lasted, but as she well knew, men never wanted her for more than her brains. When they did, their affections weren't sustained for very long.

Her fingers slid over kiss-swollen lips. Damn if he wasn't a great kisser though. No man had ever shown such a high degree of passion for her. Her friends treated her like one of the guys, a best bud, not a desirable woman. The few men she'd managed to lure into bed had not been there out of attraction. They used her to slake the appetite for a woman who'd turned them down. And they never came back for a repeat performance. The only penis to remain faithful to her was her trusty vibrator.

At an early age, Twyla had come to the painful realization that she wasn't beautiful. Modern society valued petite and delicate women. Gentleness and femininity were

qualities often used for women considered attractive. She held none of these attributes. The terms large, powerful and aggressive were a better description of her. Many times she'd been referred to as an Amazon.

For reasons she chose not to examine, his rejection cut deeper than any previous refusal. A cold, dark cloud of gloom dashed the brief hope that had risen in her heart and thrust Twyla headfirst into a blue funk. Oblivious to her misery, he continued to cuss and pace.

Her eyes narrowed on Jhett and she began to see red and her depression morphed into an uglier emotion. Irritation grew, its insidious fingers spread, boiling her blood, inflaming her battered pride. The last straw came when he swiped the back of his hand over his mouth, his expression one of disgust.

"Fuck this!" She snatched the keys from where he'd left them on the table and stormed off toward her car. Let the bastard find his own way back to the campground.

She glanced around, paying close attention to her surroundings for the first time since her romp across time. She didn't know what state they were even in. The warm air brushing over her skin held a briny tang redolent of an ocean and the heavy humidity characteristic of the eastern seaboard. It was enough information to get her headed toward home. She'd figure out her exact whereabouts eventually.

Twyla flopped into the car in a graceless heap, her hands shaking as she jammed the key into the ignition. She glanced over at Jhett. The comical look of surprise crossing his face as the nincompoop realized that she'd walked away almost made her laugh. Almost, but not quite. The sting of the wound to her pride smarted too much for humor.

"Hey," he bellowed and charged in her direction. "Where the hell are you going? We're still talking."

"Hah! Trying to suck out my tonsils and copping a cheap feel is not my idea of intelligent conversation." She twisted the key and pumped the gas, cutting off his retort with the throaty roar of the engine.

Fight or flight—she decided on flight. His mixed signals—hot one moment, cold the next—confused the hell out of her. The perplexing rake had her twisting in the wind, an emotional state Twyla didn't appreciate. She would retreat now to regroup and fight again another day.

Nodding to herself, she grabbed the shifter and threw the Camaro into reverse, grinding the gears along the way in her rush. "I'm sorry, baby," she mumbled. Great, he had her so riled that she was talking to the car now. She needed to get the hell out of here before she became a total wreck. With a negligent glance over her shoulder, she hit the gas.

BLAM!

The loud crash and sudden impact rocked the car, startling a scream out of Twyla as she slammed both feet onto the brake and the motor stalled. Her head snapped toward the windshield, bulging eyes meeting flyboy's furious glare. His fisted hand rested on the hood where it had slammed down, his chest working hard with each panted breath and tendons standing out from the corded muscles of his neck.

Holy shit!

She slapped trembling hands onto the spot where her heart pounded against her ribs. Frozen, her lungs refused to work, which made her head dizzy and her leaden stomach heave, threatening the reappearance of her lunch. Moisture trickled down her cheek as a cold sweat broke over her hot skin. Twyla put the car in park and took the key from the ignition.

His lips compressed into a thin line as Jhett yanked the door open and squatted at her side, his expression concerned. "Jesus, Twyla. Are you all right?" Tender fingers wiped away what she realized were tears on her cheeks, then soothed across her furrowed brow. "I didn't mean to scare you, honey."

Scare her? More like give her whiplash from trying to keep up with his rapid mood swings. The genuine care and distress drawing his handsome face taut had a crazy effect on her. Twyla leaned out of the car and her arms snaked around his shoulders as

she nuzzled his neck. She murmured words of comfort, although she wasn't sure why she felt the urge to do so.

Damn, he smelled good. Fresh and masculine. Soap and musky cologne combined with his own unique pheromones to create a heady scent.

He shushed her. Her? What the hell?

Scattered thoughts coalesced. She placed both hands on his chest and gave a hard shove, scrambling past him out of the car. It was her turn to pace and curse while her hands flew. Coming to a sudden stop, she stared toward the heavens.

"I can't do this, Danu. He can't be the one. The insufferable beast will drive me bonkers! This has all been some cruel joke, hasn't it? I must have had some pretty fucked-up karma. Come on, damn it. Fess up. I was Attila the Hun or some other heinous monster, wasn't I? This crap is payback."

No answers came, not that she'd really expected to hear from Danu. The ancient, revered Hussy warrior hunter would not respond to a conniption, but Jhett would.

"Christ! And those quacks said I was crazy. They'd have a field day shrinking your head."

Priceless! Twyla wrapped her arms over her belly as huge guffaws burst from her lips. The two of them were quite the pair. Crazier than a flock of loons. Rescuing anyone while keeping themselves out of trouble would be an amazing feat. He exasperated her, but she needed him.

"So are you taking the fucking job or what?"

Jhett raked his fingers through thick strands of midnight black hair, his face scrunched up in an agonized expression. "Yeah, I'm taking the damn job."

Chapter Five

The activities occurring over a four-day span landed them in an impoverished region of the Ukraine with three other ex-military men who Jhett claimed were the best. Twyla hadn't made up her mind yet. She stared out the grimy window to the sparse pedestrian traffic in the alleyway below. The hovel—rented by a dubious contact of Jhett's—by U.S. standards would have been condemned long ago. The place did have its advantages, such as adequate wiring for her electronic devices, many of which she'd yet to figure out. Some of this stuff was cutting-edge equipment still supposed to be in development. How Jhett got his hands on it was a mystery.

She'd given up arguing with him over her role in the mission. He wanted to limit her involvement to behind-the-scenes coordination, but no way would she stay out of the action. When the time came, she'd do whatever became necessary to free Randy Hillman.

Jhett underwent a drastic change as details of their operation were revealed. The most dramatic had come when he'd learned where they were headed. He'd clammed up, turning distant and guarded. Twyla didn't know how to go about it, but she intended to find out why.

The crackle of the miniature communication unit in her ear and Jhett's dark velvet voice drew her thoughts back to the current task, trailing a low-level smuggler.

"Hestia, you got a visual on our guy?" The call name Jhett had come up with for her got on Twyla's nerves. Maiden goddess of the hearth, she gritted her teeth at the image. She'd prefer he think of her as Aphrodite or Venus instead of some homebody, regardless if the moniker fit.

She clicked a few keys, picking up the weasel as he scurried into a local bar. "Just entered Black Sea, Jh-Hammer." Damn it, she'd almost said his real name again. Jhett's harsh lecture still rang in her head.

"Are you trying to get me killed? That's what will happen if you keep using my name over the fucking radio."

This spy shit got confusing quick. They had code words for everything, and what she called their team in person was different from their names during operations. Twyla prayed that she wouldn't mess up if things got stressful.

"Dodger's going in for a blind date," Mike said over the com link, indicating he was going to attempt a meeting. The tense silence that followed allowed her mind to wander again, thoughts turning to her first conversation with Jhett and the kiss he'd laid on her.

She got so hot just thinking about the leashed strength she'd sensed coursing through his muscular body. He'd eaten at her lips then forced his tongue deep, learning every recess of her mouth, teasing her to incredible heights of lust. Lips, teeth and tongue had claimed Twyla. He'd devoured her, demanded a response, and she'd given him everything. If he had not broken the kiss, she would have kept going until his cock had filled her, easing the empty ache in her pussy. But he had stopped and cursed himself for the kiss, which only served to piss her off.

"Got an unsub approaching Black Sea." This from Sam.

"Hestia?"

Jhett's inquiry was unnecessary. She'd already gone to work with the cameras, captured an image of the new player and set the facial recognition program to work. "Analyzing," she replied. Her fingers flew from one keyboard to another. She may long to be part of the action, but this was where Twyla excelled, working with computers. A name flashed on one screen and another began an immediate search for any known information on the subject. In less than ten seconds she had every piece of intelligence available on him.

She relayed the most significant facts. "Lev Mihailov, also Ivann Lazar. He's a friend of Premier. Works in the factory." Her wording let the five-man team know the person in question worked for the group they suspected held Hillman.

"Fuck," Jhett broke in. "Come on home, Dodger. Your date is compromised."

"I'm tangled, Hammer. Tell Mom I'll be late."

Twyla cringed. Mike couldn't make a quick exit the way he'd come in. She redirected a satellite and had a thermal image displayed before he'd finished relaying the message.

"Negative, Dodger," Twyla said while working her computers to find him a way out. Each of the team had GPS chips in the microscopic ear pieces and she had no trouble pinpointing him within the structure. She also had detailed blueprints of every building in the town at her fingertips. "Working on alternate departure."

She directed him through the back of the building, and at the same time coordinated with a team member who was in a vehicle. Taking Dodger on a winding path through back alleys and pedestrian paths, she got him hooked up with the wheelman while issuing directions to the others, finding each a clear route back to their base location.

Adrenaline coursed through her veins and made Twyla jittery. She stood and shoved her chair out of the way. Her eyes scanned multiple camera angles and images from the satellite she'd commandeered. With an ease born of comfort in her abilities, she played the bank of computers, relaxing a bit more as each operative entered the apartment. True to form, Jhett was the last man in, making sure everyone else made it back safe before worrying about himself.

"Nice work, Twyla," he acknowledged with a brief nod then launched right into a post-operative team meeting.

Her adrenaline rush spiked over what would seem to be insignificant to an outsider, but she knew to be a big deal. For Jhett to single her out for praise in front of

everyone using her real name was a rare compliment from the hardened agent. A rare happening to be sure.

And now she was supposed to sit still for what would amount to hours of tedious analysis of every aspect of the short field op. *Yeah right.* She wanted to fuck. Rip off the T-shirt hugging Jhett's fine chest tighter than a second skin and run her tongue over every ripple of muscle. His jeans had to go too. She had to get at the big bulge she lusted after. Wrap her fingers around his length, feel the blood pounding in his veins. Her pussy clenched and fluid drenched her panties.

The utter quiet in the room filtered through her consciousness before Twyla sensed several sets of eyes boring into her. She twisted around to meet Jhett's cold gaze.

"Will you be joining us, Hestia?"

Oh great, that quick and they were back to the hated code name. While it may have been worded as a question, she knew it to be a demand. Yet her focus shifted once again to the guys. They were giving her funny looks. What the hell was up with that?

She took a deep breath to calm her out-of-control nerves and whimpered as rough cotton abraded her taut nipples. Taking stock of her body, Twyla realized her breasts and pussy were swollen. A trail of warmth spread from her face, down her neck and over her breasts. Shit, her skin felt flushed and sensitive with her arousal. And everyone in the room had detected her heightened state of excitement.

Blast it all! She detested being so easy to read.

"I...uh," her gaze darted around the room, searching for an escape route. Too bad she didn't have someone on the com to help her out of a jam. Her focus landed on the closed door down the hall and it may be the coward's way out, but she took it. "Gotta use the head. Go ahead and start without me."

Jhett cursed and someone laughed, but she ignored them all while making a hasty retreat. She had to have a few minutes alone to regroup.

Shifting in his seat, Jhett tried to rearrange his cock to relieve the pressure. Twyla had him tied up in knots and that could get them all killed. He had to push thoughts of fucking her to the back of his mind and get with the program.

"Women," he griped then launched into analysis of the operation. They would spend hours picking apart every action and reaction to pinpoint weaknesses and improve performance. No matter what he did, his mind continued to wander.

Memories of their kiss, along with the way her soft curves fit against his hard angles, plagued his every waking thought. He was dying to get inside her sweet body. To have her under him, over him, bent over before him—how didn't matter. When was a whole other issue. He wasn't sure he'd be able to hold out until they made it stateside before drilling his cock as far between her legs as he could go.

Something one of the men said drew his attention. "What was that?"

"I said why don't you just fuck her and get it out of your system. Then we can all catch a break from the sexual tension."

His temper broke past his restraint. "Why don't you get your fucking mind out of the gutter and in the game," Jhett barked. Not a very smart move considering the man in question was a trained assassin.

"You're the one putting all of us at risk, Hammer. Get your shit together before your problem becomes ours." The others backed Dodger up with stern nods in agreement.

Jhett shot to his feet. Mike did the same, getting right up in his face. "Don't do this, man. Take a walk."

He cursed and scrubbed a hand over the stubble covering his chin. "I'm out of here. You handle the fucking post-op." Mike was right. He had to get his shit together before it became a problem.

He stormed out of the shabby building and stomped down the alley. He may be on edge, but he wasn't stupid. Jhett looked behind him, checking his six for a tail, and then took a circuitous route toward the center of town. Twilight dappled the dilapidated

buildings in shades of orange and red and relieved a bit of the shabbiness. He had no true destination, just pounded the pavement to release his frustration.

The past reached out and grabbed hold of him, plummeting Jhett into the darkest recesses of hell.

A world of trouble bore down on Terry and breaking radio silence would only serve to compromise the rest of his team. Jhett had to do something. He couldn't stand by and watch as his friend and colleague was captured, not to mention the fact she was his lover. Breaking from the shelter of his position, he raced down the hill without glancing back. A very narrow window of opportunity existed in which to save her and he wasn't going to miss the chance.

All manner of hell broke loose at once and in the resulting chaos, he lost track of Terry Davis. The intense firefight drove him down a dark side street, separating him from the rest of the team. He'd taken a bullet to the left shoulder, which slowed him down and left a blood trail. And the enemy followed the trail. Jhett snaked his way from back street to alley and through several empty buildings, but there was no light to be found at the end of the tunnel when he turned into a dead end.

Outnumbered, he still put up a good fight until a second bullet grazed his temple. The force of the impact slammed him into a brick wall and knocked him out. When he came to, Jhett learned the true meaning of hell on earth.

When he managed to push the past back into its proper place, he sat in a strange bar. The woman seated almost in his lap, an obvious prostitute, whispered in his ear, detailing all the different ways she would fuck him. His hands were snaked around her hips, fingers digging into the generous curves of her ass.

He didn't even remember entering the bar.

A roll between the sheets with his very willing companion might have helped him get over his obsession for Twyla, but his flaccid cock took no interest in the whore.

Maybe Mike's idea held merit. Fuck Twyla. Get her out of his system so he could focus on the mission. If the sex was good, they could fuck like bunnies after they rescued the computer geek, when being distracted was no longer an issue.

Time to get out of Dodge. “Sorry, sweet cheeks, not tonight.”

He let her go and started to rise, but a firm hand pressed him back into the chair.

“Leaving so soon, Mr. Ramsey?”

Oh fuck. For someone here to know his real name was not good. The huge side of beef held him down as another man moved in his peripheral vision. The man dismissed the prostitute with a quick flip of the hand and settled into a chair across the table. When he moved closer, Jhett had no problem recognizing the man from his last mission in the Ukraine, Alexi Zelenko. He’d known the man only as Joe at the time, a code word for deep-cover agent. Their inside man on the operation. The bastard who had betrayed him. His nemesis.

When Jhett made no attempt to leave, the bodyguard moved to stand next to his employer. He saw only one way out of this situation. In his rush to get out of the apartment, he’d failed to remove the com device from his ear. A discreet tap of his finger activated the link.

“Joe,” he acknowledged with a nod. “Or should I call you Agent Zelenko now?”

After a few seconds delay the sultry tones of Twyla’s voice filled his head.

“Jhett? What’s going on? Where are you?” He detected the click of her fingers flying over the keyboard and prayed she was using the GPS chip to triangulate his position.

“Since we are old acquaintances, you may call me Alexi. It has been a long time. I’d thought you were dead, so imagine my surprise upon learning of your return. I had to see this miracle with my own eyes.”

Jhett’s dry laughter contained no real humor. “Rumors of my demise were greatly exaggerated. Turns out I’m a bit too sinful for even Satan and the gates of hell refused to open. Didn’t matter that I had a first-class ticket and a front-row seat reserved.”

Zelenko’s hearty laughter skittered over his flesh and made Jhett itch to move, but he reined in the impulse. He sat ramrod straight, his attention divided between the snake and his hired gun.

"The team is on their way but it's going to take several minutes to get them into position. Stall," Twyla instructed.

Her voice did funny things to his insides and gave Jhett the determination to get out of this in one piece. When he did – not if – he intended to follow through on Mike's idea and fuck her ten ways to Sunday. "Since you've chased away the entertainment, I can sit here all night." He hoped Twyla read between the lines to the message intended for her.

"You always were such a...what is it the Americans call a hothead?" The bodyguard whispered something to him. "Ah yes. Thank you, Sergei. You are such a cowboy, my friend."

"Friend? Come now, Alexi. I thought we were past all that bullshit. What do you want?"

"Hammer, that place is loaded for bear," Twyla said. The rapid clicking noises of her working the computers filled his head. "Preliminary scan shows a virtual arsenal of heavy-weight artillery. There's a large group of people held up in the southwest corner. The team is taking up positions outside, but you're going to have to get out on your own."

Zelenko tensed for a moment before relaxing back, confident he had Jhett under his thumb. "Let's not rehash the past. I'd rather discuss what brings you to my homeland once again."

"Can't get enough of the local scenery. It's such a beautiful spot for tourists, don't you agree?"

Alexi leaned forward, hands grasping the edge of the table, posture menacing. "What I think is that you do not belong here and have overstayed your welcome."

"Then I shall take my leave." With a solicitous grin, Jhett rose. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, it's getting late."

Chapter Six

Twyla cursed and chewed on her lip. Her heart beat a frantic tattoo against her ribs and sweat trickled down her spine. Jhett had gotten himself into a bad situation and it was up to her to get him out. She tuned out communications between the team and talked him through the maze of corridors and traps.

Thankfully, the building had been wired with security cameras and hacking into their system was child's play for her. Using their own technology against them, she blacked out their monitors and seized control of the building.

"Stop," she ordered. "Two bogies moving in fast from the west. Three seconds 'til intercept."

Jhett retraced his steps and concealed himself in a small alcove. She switched from one camera view to another as the two men glanced at the spot where he'd stood only moments ago and continued in the direction they'd been headed. When they were no longer a threat, she released a pent-up breath. "Okay, head north again then take the first hall to the east. Good. Now the next one to the north."

She guided him into the empty kitchen and to a delivery door. "Ignore the wires. I've deactivated the alarm." If he made it out of this mess alive, she was going to kill the stupid jerk. Twyla tasted blood but kept chewing on her ragged lip.

"Tank is one klick southeast of you."

Her part in the rescue was far from over, but she breathed a bit easier once Tank radioed that he had Jhett in his sights. One of these days she'd have to ask about the source of their call signs. She kept wondering what they meant.

They made a mad dash through the underbelly of the city and back to the apartment. What the hell he'd been doing so far out by himself was one of the many questions she intended to ask after kicking his ass. Dodger brought up the rear as

Homerun and Tank flanked him. They got within a click of the apartment building and one by one, tapped off their com units.

"You shitheads," she screamed in frustration. They were well aware of the fact she had not only the building but the surrounding two-block radius wired with cameras and had stopped just out of her range. She could still monitor their heat signatures on the satellite though.

Twyla cursed a blue streak as she watched the individual red splotches move closer together. "This isn't the fucking playground. You're fighting. I can't believe you're fighting now." They wouldn't be able to hear her, which gave her a measure of freedom to cut loose and let her own frustration out. "Dumb motherfuckers! I want to kick his ass...right before I fuck him senseless."

She paced a narrow path before the monitors, never taking her eyes off the four red blobs. Her thoughts were too scattered to give the meditative techniques Danu had taught her a chance to work. Nothing would calm her down until she saw him with her own eyes.

The red smears on the screen stayed close together as they started moving again. When they came within range of her cameras, Twyla could only shake her head in amazement. The four men traded pats on the back and friendly punches to the biceps, each wearing a large grin. Then she zoomed in on their faces and gasped.

"Those morons!"

Red blotches marred their faces, some already beginning to look bruised. The boys had taken their playground mentality a step further by using their fists, on each other. And now she wanted to punch something. Twyla glanced at the solid wall but quickly changed her mind. She wanted to punch *someone*. Jhett's name rode the top of her shit list.

Each toothy grin and good-humored slap stoked the fire raging through her from a low flicker to a roaring flame. Her gaze narrowed on the monitors as she considered the team and decided men were very simple. Get mad, throw a few punches then

everything was hunky dory again. They didn't stew over an issue or hold the emotions inside where they built it to disastrous proportions.

"Good idea, boys. I can do that." She would follow their example and let it all out.

Her stomach roiled and muscles tensed until she focused her mind and energies. The men were climbing the stairs as she took cleansing breaths. She shook out her hands at her side and forced her body to relax by drawing on her aikido lessons.

Her nostrils flared as the door banged open. "Honey, we're home," Tank teased.

Dodger must have seen something in her eyes. He was the first one through the door and came to an abrupt stop to give her a wary stare. The other guys didn't notice he'd come to a halt and slammed into his back.

"Jeez, Dodger. What the hell are you...?" Tank's voice trailed off as his gaze met hers. He cursed under his breath, "Oh shit!"

Jhett pushed his way around the other men. His gaze raked her body, taking in the furrowed forehead and narrowed eyes brimming with fire, along with the deceptive relaxation of her body. Long tendrils of hair had escaped her neat braid to frame her face. Twyla stood with her weight balanced on the balls of her feet, a battle-ready posture.

Damn if she didn't look sexy as hell when mad.

Of course, he had to open his mouth and insert his foot. "What's the matter with you?"

Dumbass. Why couldn't he leave it alone? Why did he have to antagonize her?

"What's the matter with me?"

On the surface her tone sounded calm, but underneath he detected the fierce rage simmering. This would not be pretty. She held up a hand and ticked off each point on her fingers. "Let's see. You put the entire mission at risk. Blew your cover with some local talent. Put all the other guys in danger. Had a playground brawl in an unsecured area..." Her hands went to her hips and she glared at him. "Do I need to continue?"

Jesus. The heat of her passion washed over him and Jhett's body responded by tightening. His cock swelled and demanded release from the confines of his jeans. And he knew right where his erection belonged, where he longed to be. Repeatedly.

Playing with this particular fire may get him burned, but he was willing to take the risk. He took a measured step forward. "And?"

Twyla tilted her head to the side and stared at him as if studying an interesting bug under a magnifying glass. "And," she huffed, "you blew it with your macho bullshit. Charging off to be alone, keeping everyone at a distance, remaining silent—"

"Macho bullshit?" Now he was getting irritated.

"Yes, macho bullshit. Like the four of you fighting. Such total macho crap!"

Desire to take action flashed in her eyes. "And you wouldn't take a swing at me right now, Miss Holier-than-Thou?"

A sexy growl rumbled up from her chest. He must be pretty damn warped for that sound to turn him on considering her anger, but it did. His cock jerked and his abdomen clenched. Stupid as taunting her may be, he took another step forward and noted the signs of arousal the fiery woman tried to keep hidden. She may conduct most of her battles from behind a computer monitor, but there was no doubt Twyla was a warrior who enjoyed a good fight.

Her nipples had elongated into hard little points stretching the front of her shirt and her breasts appeared swollen, heavy with need. A delightful pink flush spread from her face and down her neck to disappear beneath her collar. As he took another step her nostrils flared and her breathing quickened, causing those gorgeous breasts to rise and fall faster. Her pupils were wide with only a sliver of green ringing them. Unable to keep her hands still, her palms rubbed from her hips to upper thighs in a constant motion and she seemed to lean a bit forward.

Jhett gave a slight nod. "You were worried...about me." A sense of awe made his voice tremble. "I'm fine, honey." He opened his arms wide, letting her get a good look to see he was unharmed.

The punch came out of nowhere, smashing into his gut and knocking the wind out of him. Twyla packed one hell of a wallop. He stumbled back a step and doubled over, wrapping both arms over his abused abdomen. Damn, he should have anticipated her striking out. “What the fuck did you do that for?” he wheezed. Now he sounded wimpy and pathetic.

“You were being a jerk!” His eyes watered as he watched her back away from him, not stopping until more than halfway across the room with a wary look flashing in her eyes. As if he would ever hurt her.

The off-handed comment and her reaction fired his temper. No matter how much he wanted to hold back and allay her fears, it just wasn’t possible. “Watch it, hellion!” The words came out harsher than he intended, almost a growl. He glared at her in warning and right before his eyes something appeared to break inside Twyla. She closed the remaining distance between them at full speed and launched herself into the air, slamming against his chest and knocking the breath from his lungs. He caught her in an unyielding embrace as she wrapped herself around him tighter than a python, legs clasped over his hips, arms around his shoulders, lips sealed to his.

There was nothing tentative in her kiss. She unleashed every emotion held in check for too long in a voracious and ravenous blast. Her kiss was full of hunger and want and need. Fingernails dug into his back as she tried to burrow beneath his skin. The small bite of pain fired his libido, prompting Jhett to respond in kind.

Lips parted, teeth clashed, tongues surged, laying claim. He captured the soft mewl from her mouth and pulled the sound into his body while his tongue tangled, searched, tasted, conquered. There was no denying the intense desire coursing through them and no turning back. Heat pulsed, hands ripped at clothes, bodies pressed closer but they couldn’t get close enough.

The door slammed behind the team as they made a hasty retreat, catching his attention. Jhett spun around to find they were alone. He hadn’t cared if the guys were there—had forgotten them in fact—but was relieved to have Twyla alone. If he didn’t

get inside her soon, he was going to self-destruct. The door was the closest hard surface. Jhett propelled them against it, letting his forearms take the impact.

"I need..." she cried then sucked on his tongue with hard and insistent pulls, showing him without words just what she wanted. What they both had to have.

"Yes. Now." She'd reduced him to monosyllabic replies. "Clothes off."

Their efforts were hampered by the unwillingness to let go for even a second. Fisting the thin material of her shirt, he ripped it straight down the center. Having no patience for the bra, he shoved the cups beneath her breasts.

"Aw, Christ!" He was a goner. They were more perfect than he'd imagined. The soft globes quivered with her erratic breathing. Her rosy areolas puckered tight around ripe nipples he had no ability to resist. Burying his face in her cleavage, he took a deep breath. She smelled of honeysuckle blooms—feminine, warm and inviting.

"Jhett," she gasped as his lips closed over her nipple and he suckled the firm bud. Damn, she tasted even better than she smelled—soft and sweet. And one hundred percent his.

The primal urges of a caveman raged through him. Jhett wanted to mark her, put his indelible brand on her skin so every other man knew she'd been claimed, was owned by him. While it scared the shit out of him, it was an undeniable compulsion. Releasing her nipple with a wet pop, he allowed Twyla only a moment to yank the shirt over his head before reclaiming his prize. He raked his teeth over her tender nub, celebrating in her moan.

Switching to the other breast, he clawed at the fastener of her jeans. "Down," he ordered, shoving her legs from his waist and pulling the denim and silky panties away with a hard jerk after she complied.

He didn't waste any time fighting with his pants. After popping the button, he yanked down the zipper and shoved the material past his hips to release his throbbing length.

Twyla's legs wrapped around him again and he became lost in the consuming warmth of her soft mound cradling him as hot cream coated his cock. The evidence of her arousal seared him and shot his need higher.

Jhett grasped her hips, lifted her until his broad head snuggled up next to her damp opening. He thrust forward and pulled her down onto him, stopping when their groins crashed together. Collapsing with his head burrowed beneath her hair, he took great gulps of air and gritted his teeth to try to regain some semblance of control.

The walls of her pussy pulsed and clenched around him, squeezing his cock like a damp velvet fist. She flexed her legs, pulling him tighter into her, his chest pillowed by her lush breasts. "I can't do slow," he warned.

"Fu-fuck slow." Her legs contracted as she wiggled, grinding her pelvis to his. "I want hard. Fast. Now, damn it."

"Yes, ma'am." He aimed to please them both.

Twyla's head spun and her senses reeled as she tried to take it all in, absorb every detail. Burn each touch into her memory. Her pussy ached and became hotter than molten lava. The sensitive tissues felt stretched to the max. It was too much and not enough.

Jhett pulled back and she cried out, the sound cut short as he thrust hard and fast, rattling the door within its frame. He initiated a steady pace, pounding her against the door and she loved it. The harsh propulsion of his cock forcing her body to accommodate the thick invasion, ending in a solid thump against her cervix. She fought his withdrawal—the empty ache left behind. Rejoiced in each forward charge—the complete joining of their bodies.

So full. Raw. Hammered by Hammer.

Hysterical laughter burst from her lips. She couldn't hold it back, wouldn't attempt to. He paused and shot her a quizzical glance before resuming his thrusts.

"I'm gettin'...hammered...by Hammer."

Only two words did justice in describing the grin that spread across his lips, feral and wicked. In response, he swooped in, sealing their lips in a carnal kiss that made her toes curl. When Jhett bent his knees, she canted her hips, causing his pubic bone to grind across her clit as they came together.

“Ah yes!” The storm front gathered and burst over Twyla. She gave herself over to the sensations as lightning exploded behind her eyelids. Jhett never slowed or faltered. He powered through her orgasm, not letting it fade but instead driving her higher, battering into her. Harder and faster.

Deciding that breathing was highly overrated, she stopped struggling to draw oxygen and focused on delivering the same amazing pleasure she’d received.

“Yes, Jhett. So good,” she encouraged with her voice and body, meeting him thrust for thrust, surprised as a second, more devastating orgasm started in her core and spread outward through her entire body.

Thrusting two, three more times, Jhett yelled her name and joined her in ecstasy. She felt the heat of his cum filling her and Twyla dropped her damp head to his shoulder in repletion. No longer able to hang on, she trusted him not to let her fall.

Chapter Seven

Jhett couldn't move and his legs were numb. He held the two of them upright by collapsing against Twyla, his weight pressing them to the wall. "I'm paralyzed." She must not have killed him since he was still capable of speech.

"You and me both."

He had to be crushing her. "Give me a minute and I'll try to move."

"Don't rush on my account."

He laughed. She sounded sleepy and sated, well and truly fucked. If he had the strength, he'd pat himself on the back. "Did you happen to catch the name of the train that hit us?"

A knock vibrated through the door. "Is it safe to come in yet?"

"No," they both groaned.

"Well shit," Dodger complained. "It's not fair to fuck each other's brains out and not let us watch."

A loud clap was followed by a chuckle from Homerun. "Let's go to a bar and see if we can't score some action."

Jhett swore under his breath. "Don't mess with the locals."

"Hah, too bad you didn't follow your own advice." Twyla spoke softly so the others wouldn't hear.

"Well, that pretty much eliminates all the possibilities," Tank grumbled. "That's so not right. He gets some and we walk away empty-handed."

"Um, Tank. I don't think any of us are going to be empty-handed for long," Dodger teased.

"Shut the fuck up, peckerhead. You're in the same sinking boat."

Jhett listened as heavy footsteps stomped down the stairs, the men grumbling the whole way.

"Poor babies. Maybe we should've let them watch."

"No!" Jhett snapped. "I'm not about to share." He felt a smile stretch her lips where they rested in the crook of his neck.

"I like the sound of that."

He didn't take the time to worry about this strange possessive streak she brought to life in him. "Hang on, honey. I'm gonna try to get us to the bed." The apartment had only the one bedroom, which they'd assigned to Twyla. The men slept in shifts on cots spread around the small space when not out scouting for information or acting as sentries. When you served time in the military, you learned to sleep anywhere. He'd slept standing up more than a few times.

With a grunt, he shoved away from the wall and waited for his shaky legs to stabilize before sweeping Twyla up in his arms. Tender emotions tugged at his heart when she curled into him with a contented purr. Somehow, she got past all his defenses and had a profound effect on him. How did she do that?

After he laid her on the bed, his hands became gentle as Jhett removed her bra. He stood back to enjoy the view for several long moments. Divine.

She nodded in his direction. "Your turn. Ditch the clothes."

Twyla's palms itched in anticipation as he doubled over to first remove his socks and shoes. He remained bent while pulling the jeans over his feet then rose in a fluid motion.

Oh fuck yeah. Tall, dark and sculpted to perfection. Saliva pooled in her mouth. Hopefully she wasn't drooling. Her gaze slid over wide shoulders and the huge expanse of his chest with its squared pectorals, lingering over dark male nipples she wanted to lick. A light smattering of hair trailed down his partitioned six-pack abdomen to form a soft nest at the base of his cock, which was already rebounding.

Sucking her lower lip between her teeth, Twyla ignored the twinge of pain in the mistreated flesh that she'd gnawed at too much when Jhett had been in danger.

Topped with a broad, plum-shaped crown, his considerable erection had a distinctive upward curve. Numerous veins twisted around the ruddy length. She wanted to taste him.

"Keep worrying your lip and I'll have to spank you."

She met his concerned gaze and released her tattered flesh.

"If you're hungry, I've got something a bit more satisfying for you."

"Mmm...indeed you do. Can I have a taste?"

"As long as you sheathe those fangs." He climbed onto the end of the bed and crawled up her body, pausing to place light kisses everywhere but the places she most desired the press of his lips. The warmth of his breath slid over her clit and caused her hips to roll forward in a sinuous movement. His lips pressed to her thigh, lingered then he continued to move higher, no longer interested in delaying.

The crisp hair covering his thighs rasped against her nipples as he moved higher. Jhett settled a knee under each of her arms and sat back, compressing her breasts under his firm ass. She sucked in a hard breath, hissing between her teeth, not caring for the sensation of being trapped, caged by his powerful body as he straddled her chest. She was completely at his mercy. Helpless.

Panic slammed into her. She wheezed and struggled for control, not letting the irrational claustrophobia take over. "No!" Reaching up, she grabbed his hips and shoved, failing to shift him.

Jhett's eyes turned dark with menace and a muscle in his jaw ticked. Twyla rushed to reassure him. She intended to deliver on the blowjob, but not like this. "On your back."

"Fine, but I want you to undo the braid."

At her nod, he took a breath and rolled to the side. When his weight lifted from her chest, the fear eased and she calmed. She flipped over and straddled his hips. Leaning down, she rewarded his compliance with a sultry kiss that made them both purr.

Twyla pulled back from the kiss and let her gaze slide down to where their pubic hair joined to cradle the root of his hard cock. The sight struck her as odd, almost appearing as if the shaft jutted from her pelvis instead of his.

A shiver of need made her thighs tremble. She wanted to devour him, capture his essence and be greedy, keep his unique musky scent and masculine taste all to herself. Take him into her body and never let go. Mark him in a clear and visible way as a deterrent to other women.

She slipped the elastic from the end of her braid, unwove the strands and gave her head a shake, delighting in the cool waves flowing over naked skin, the ends trailing over his thighs. She wasn't sure why she kept her hair so long. The thick mass required a lot of upkeep and she didn't show it off. Most of the time it remained in the functional braid.

"Exquisite," he breathed.

Giving in to temptation, her fingers strayed across his chest, over the ridged muscles of his stomach and down to his groin. In no hurry, she sifted through their hair, mingling and blending the rich blacks and browns, then took hold of his cock in one hand and caressed it, slow and easy. His head lifted to watch and lust shone in his pale eyes.

Her palm circled over the broad head and his cock jerked against his belly. Reaching beneath the crown, she traced the sensitive area, enjoying his heavy sigh. As she ran her hand down the full length and back up again, the muscles of his abdomen corded and a shiver raced over his skin.

Fisting him tight, she began to stroke him with purposeful and steady movements, firmer at the base and lighter near the head. He groaned and dropped his head back, his eyelids closing. A warm glow gave his skin a rosy tint, ascending from taut nipples over

his neck and face. Her other hand slid lower to cup his balls. She rolled the sac in her palm and stretched her middle finger out to caress the shallow groove leading to his anus. Jhett's thighs tensed, his cock pulsed and he cursed.

So beautiful and perfect and hers...for the moment anyway. And she planned to suck every last bit of enjoyment possible from the experience. Her desire rose to a level Twyla could no longer ignore. Sliding her free hand along her thigh, she fingered damp folds, pushing swollen lips apart with two fingers to circle her clit. Hot juices gushed over both of them, coating her fingers and his balls.

Sweat beaded on Jhett's forehead and his face had drawn into a tight grimace. His hips thrust in wild abandon and she rode his body as if he were a mechanical bull, thighs holding his hips in a tight grip. Tension built between them and electricity arched until she worried they may spontaneously combust.

"Christ, honey. Suck me!"

"Mmm..." She'd become distracted from her ultimate goal. But what a wonderful sidetrack she'd taken. "I believe I will." Her tongue snaked out to wet her lips and a pearl of fluid beaded from his slit.

She wiggled down his body, rubbing her hungry clit along his leg, and captured the drop of cum on the tip of her tongue. The salty and bitter flavor exploded over her taste buds and she shivered, needing more. More of his taste and musky scent. Twyla dropped her nose to his groin and took a deep breath of their combined scents. Damn, did they smell good, the two aromas combining in the tantalizing fragrance of sex.

The thick length of his cock bobbed, enticing her to continue. Twyla's tongue traced the crooked and curvy trail of veins from root to tip. Each beat of his heart pulsed against her greedy lips as she placed an open-mouthed kiss to the center of his shaft and sucked hard.

Jhett's fingers clasped in her hair and he guided the head to her lips. She met his gaze over the length of his body, succumbing to the pleading in his eyes. Cum dribbled over the tip and she lapped it up, humming as she let him push forward. He filled her

mouth, pressing against her palate when she laved the underside with her flattened tongue.

Letting go, she allowed him to dictate the pace, only gagging once when he slid too far down her throat. To prevent that from happening again she fisted the portion she couldn't take. Twyla sucked hard and his soft skin stretched, sliding over the contrasting steel of the solid flesh below.

"Oh damn. That's good. So good."

Her hips rocked on his leg, drenched pussy matching the rhythm he set. She let him feel the scrape of her teeth and Jhett went crazy, thrusting farther down her throat, mumbling incoherent praise.

Each sound he made sent sharp jolts of pleasure shooting from aching nipples straight to her deprived clit. Her pussy spasmed, empty and clenching on air, longing to be filled. Twyla tightened her lips, concentrated her efforts.

His spine stiffened, hips arched, mouth dropping open in a soundless bellow as spasms shook his body. They started in his balls, sped through his cock and exploded in hot jets of cum, which she hungrily swallowed. Insatiable, she sucked until he had nothing left to give. She continued bathing him with tender licks until he softened before letting go with a wet smack of her lips.

Their eyes met for a brief second, his vulnerable expression radiating intense emotions of love and tenderness. Then he blinked and the moment slipped away, making Twyla wonder if she'd imagined the whole thing. The steady pulsations in her excited clit made close scrutiny impossible. She fell in a heap over his legs, panting harder than a racehorse and longing for an orgasm.

Neither prude nor innocent, she'd blown previous partners but without the profound echo that beat in her body now. While not her favorite sex act, sucking cock didn't repulse her. She had the distinct impression that with Jhett it could become an obsession. Already she craved another taste.

Yet something nagged at her consciousness. Twyla's thoughts kept returning to the odd claustrophobic feeling she'd gotten from Jhett kneeling over her chest.

A dream hit her while wide awake and without warning. She was herself but someone else at the same time. She still lay in bed with Jhett but also felt as if she had skipped back in time to another place.

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Sadie pulled at the ropes holding her by wrist and ankle to the brass bed. The bodice of her new dress had a ragged tear down the center to her waist. The laces of her corset had been cut, the constricting garment shoved to the side to bare her pale breasts. Her thighs trembled as rough hands lifted her skirts over her hips. Fancy bloomers were no match for his strength, giving way with a loud rip.

The big redskin would take whatever he wanted. She was at his mercy and so far he hadn't shown any signs of having a lick of kindness in him. Oh, she could scream, yell for help, but it wouldn't do any good. Everyone would presume that she was acting her part in a sex game. Saloon girls trading favors for money didn't warrant white knights rushing in to save them.

A menacing growl rolled up from his chest once he bared the delicate folds of her sex. Entranced, she stared as he peeled tight buckskin pants down slender hips to reveal a massive shaft. The skin of his engorged cock held darker cinnamon tones, the head half covered by the foreskin. He stroked it once and groaned as fluid beaded on the tip then rolled down the length, making her think of a teardrop trailing down a cheek.

She expected him to drive his rather handsome cock between her legs without delay, but the Indian surprised her by crawling over her belly, stopping when his knees hit her armpits. He sat back on his haunches, firm ass coming to rest atop her breasts, and he pressed the tip to her lips.

Oh lordy. His weight compressed her breasts and stole the breath from her lungs. Sadie coughed and sputtered. She went wild, bucking her body in an attempt to toss

him off. Blackfeather ignored her protests. His fingers dug into her jaw, adding sharp pain to what had become a panicked fight for survival. Sadie's lips parted as she panted and he thrust straight down her throat, cutting off the small stream of air.

She gagged, choked and struggled harder. With his head tossed back, eyes clamped shut tight, the Indian didn't realize she couldn't breathe. *This must be how it feels to drown.* Why the thought, complete with vivid pictures, raced through her brain at a time like this she had no idea.

How poetic for a saloon girl—a paid fuck—to die with a man's dick shoved down her throat. She would laugh were it possible. Hell, she'd bite the bastard but the fingers jammed in her jaw socket kept her mouth wide open and immobilized.

Her battle against the bonds made Sadie's wrists bleed. The trail of warm fluid tickled as it ran down her arms. She clawed at the ropes, but her vision had started to fade and narrow. Strength and will left her. Blackfeather cried out and salty cum pumped into her throat.

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Twyla came back to herself in a sudden rush, clawing at her throat, wheezing and gasping for air. Jhett attempted to soothe her by stroking her back, his warm body tense at her side. She scanned the room, taking in her surroundings, gaining a measure of calm from the now familiar space.

Crap! That had been beyond intense, bordering on a fucking surreal hallucination. She struggled to wrap her mind around the phenomenon.

"What the hell just happened?" Jhett's eyes were wide, the pupils dilated, the corners crinkled with concern.

Good question, now if she only had an answer. The fog began to lift and she had a moment of clarity. Twyla remembered Danu telling her past life memories were sometimes triggered by an event or through a specific sensory stimulus—sight, sound, scent, taste or touch. No matter how she explained the episode, telling him she'd been

caught in a memory from a previous lifetime, it would come off as hokey. Unbelievable. Irrational.

Guilt gnawed at her, but once again, she held back the truth, opting for a cover story and partial honesty. "Panic attack. I'm not sure what sparked it. Haven't had one in forever." She'd never had one, but he didn't need to know that. "I'm fine now." At least the last part was true.

"Christ! You scared the hell out of me, honey."

You and me both! And talk about shock...shit. Twyla just found out she'd been a two-dollar hooker who fucked men in a room above a bar. This freaky shit got weirder by the minute.

How the hell am I supposed to use the lessons from a past as a hooker who was killed by oral sex, Danu?

Chapter Eight

"Any sign of trouble...hell, anyone even looks at you funny, I want you to get the fuck out of there, Hestia."

Twyla stopped dead in her tracks, pivoted around and glared into the camera. "Do you doubt I can handle this?"

Shit, now he'd pissed her off. Again. "No—"

"Then zip it, flyboy. I can't focus on what's happening with all this damn armchair quarterbacking."

Jhett stared at the monitor and rubbed at the stubble on his chin. Of course, she was right but that didn't stop him from worrying. He shouldn't have let the guys talk him into this messed-up scenario. Putting someone accustomed to operating behind the scenes in the thick of danger had been a stupid move, regardless of how much sense it had made when they'd pleaded their case. They were all frustrated and grasping at straws because of almost ten days on the scene with no progress. Sending Twyla in was a desperate move.

"Walks like a damn marine," Tank's comment provoked a hearty round of laughter. Her walk did border on masculine, the steady clip military in its precision, yet somehow still all woman. Even through the monitor, he got a sense of her extreme self-confidence. Damn if he didn't find it sexy as hell too. Judging by how she held the other team members' attention, so did they.

Jhett's need for her ran soul deep. Regardless, he hadn't touched her since the day he'd fucked her against the wall, followed by several times in bed and once in the shower. She scared him. In those stolen moments, he'd felt the palpable connection between them strengthen even though she had held something back. Considering their mission, fostering anything resembling a relationship could be a death sentence. He'd

go insane if anything happened to her because he let himself become distracted by emotion. Not again!

Jhett gritted his teeth when she paused just before stepping out of camera range. His fragile hold on his patience snapped.

"For fuck's sake, what now? What are you idiots laughing about?" Twyla snarled.

Christ! His balls tightened and his cock swelled, blood throbbing through his erection. Even her anger turned him on, which made him one sick puppy. "Nothing," he muttered then keyed off the mic.

"Stop screwing around and get into your positions." Sensing his mood, the men switched gears and became serious. As planned, Dodger had taken up a position inside the bar over an hour ago. Tank and Homerun would provide backup from outside, one at the front entrance, the other man in the back alley.

Jhett's nerves were shot. He didn't know how Twyla dealt with running the operation from a distance and not being part of the action. Being stuck in the apartment manning the sophisticated computer equipment made him feel hemmed in, trapped within an electronic world, almost as if his hands were tied. He needed the action, the adrenaline rush of being in the field, a gun in his hand, relying on his sharp intellect to pull off what others would call impossible.

"If anything happens to her —"

"Yeah, we know, Hammer," Homerun interrupted. "You've pounded all the painful ways you'll take it out on us into our thick heads. She's part of the team, man. We'll take good care of her."

"You handpicked us for a reason. Now you have to trust us to bring her back safe and sound."

Tank was right. He'd worked with all of them on various missions. They were the best of the best and he had to trust them. "I know. Now get your game faces on and focus."

She didn't have to see them to feel the weight of the team's gazes touch her while scanning the area. Presented with their plan, she'd agreed without hesitation. They were all well-trained, competent and she believed in them enough to put her life in their hands. Tank, Dodger, Homerun—any one of them would take a bullet for her. Despite the mixed signals she'd been getting from Hammer, she held firm to the conviction that he'd be the first man in line.

As she moved from the bright sunlit street to the dim confines of the bar, Twyla tuned in to her inner voice, what she'd always considered to be gut instinct but Danu had said was her higher self offering guidance. Whatever it was, wherever the voice came from, it had never steered her wrong and she depended on what it said. While the voice cautioned that danger surrounded her, any fear was dispelled by the assurance no harm would come. Not with the ever-present team of men, who she considered to be friends, watching over her.

Dodger slumped over a table, a glass of dark amber liquid held in a shaky fist, telling tall tales to his female companion. Jerky movements made the liquor slosh over the rim onto his hand and his voice slurred. For all appearances, the man was drunk as a skunk. Twyla had to fight back the natural urge to nurture and care for the friend who didn't make eye contact. He played a role, same as she did. And here, in this foreign environment, surrounded by potential enemies, he was nothing more than a drunken stranger.

"Don't let your gaze settle on anyone for longer than a few seconds. Take a seat at the bar, far from the entrance, and place your order."

She took a breath, thankful for the reassuring velvety tones of Jhett's voice rolling through her head, soothing her nerves. He'd taught her some phrases in Surzhyk, but her current role didn't call for her to speak the language. Since many of the establishment's patrons were smugglers, they spoke English.

Twyla used great care as she sat down to ensure her short skirt did not ride up too far. She loathed wearing what she called “girly clothes” even if they did go with her cover story. The bartender appeared before she’d gotten settled on the padded stool.

He glared at her for long, breathless moments. “Sweetheart, let me give you some advice. This is not the kind of place for the likes of you.”

“Nonsense.” She dismissed his concern with a casual flip of the hand. “I’m on holiday and intending to see everything there is to see while I’m here.” She met his hard brown gaze. “I’d like a glass of red wine, please.”

“Wine,” he sneered. “We don’t have anything fancy here. Just beer, vodka and whiskey. Go find yourself a nice restaurant in the city.”

“No thanks, I like living dangerously. I’ll take a beer and a shot of vodka.”

He continued to glare at her with contempt. Twyla met the fierce expression with a brilliant smile until he relented. He filled a mug with beer, poured vodka into a glass and set both on the counter then leaned back on the wall behind him, arms crossed over his immense chest.

She took a sip of the warm beer without flinching and lifted the icy glass of vodka. Interesting, they chilled the vodka to arctic temperatures but didn’t refrigerate the beer. With a shrug she held the shot over the beer and let go, waiting for it to hit bottom. The bartender cringed as she lifted the mug and took one big swallow after another until both glasses were empty.

“Ahhhh!” The frigid glass of vodka lowered the temperature of the beer to a drinkable level. The concoction revived her, gave her new energy. The drink also brought back fond memories. She hadn’t indulged in a boilermaker since college. Many late night hacking sessions had involved a group of so-called computer geeks sinking depth charges – shots of whiskey, tequila or vodka dropped into a beer. Twyla had been no stranger to this game and developed quite a high threshold for the mixture, even drinking a few jocks under the table during a drinking contest. Now that had been fun.

Getting the locals to relax didn't take long. By the time she chugged her second drink, they were gathered around, enthralled by tales of her fictitious exploits. She tuned out the intermittent chatter on the com link, ignoring Jhett's colorful cursing and Dodger's play-by-play of the action that had everyone but their leader laughing.

"I wish y'all could see this. She's got every man in the place wrapped around her finger and the few women are green with envy. If I didn't know it was Hestia, I'd swear it had to be someone else. It's like she's been transformed."

The trick, she decided, was to maintain an outgoing, gregarious attitude opposite her normal reserved personality. Her admirers gathered around gave her the perfect excuse to turn and cast a surreptitious glance around the room, noting that even Dodger had moved closer to where she held court. Only one man remained at a distance, a large figure in the back corner, cloaked in shadows.

Many hours and drinks later, well after dark, she walked out of the bar on her own two feet, managing to stagger only a little. She bumped into something and muttered an apology, almost rolling with laughter over Dodger's comments.

"She's completely shitfaced. Apologizing to a lamppost for crashing into it."

"Just get her the fuck back home," Jhett snarled.

Dodger moved around a corner, his voice low and dangerous through the com link. "Can't. She's got company."

The sudden silence grated on her nerves. Staying in character, she stopped in the middle of the road, pressed a fist between her breasts and cut loose a loud, rumbling belch that would make her brothers proud. Her shadow waited until she stumbled a few more blocks, singing a drinking song at the top of her lungs, making a mess of the lyrics on purpose.

"Eighty-four bottles of beer on the wall, uh...forty-eight bottles of beer. Take one down, pass it around...um, I forgot how many bottles of beer are on the freakin' wall."

A firm hand clamped down on her biceps and pulled. Going with the motion, Twyla spun, crashing against a solid wall of muscle encased in a fine silk shirt. She

grasped at the lapels of his linen jacket to regain her balance, leaning heavily on the man. Relaxing the muscles in her neck, she let her head roll drunkenly and looked at the stranger through squinted eyes.

"Well, hello there, handsome."

Jhett cursed a blue streak, which she ignored.

The jerk now held her by both biceps and shook, hard. Damn, that didn't feel very good. She handled her liquor well, but there were limits, and he was making her brain slosh around in her head. "Hey!"

"Silence." He had a thick accent. Twyla thought she should recognize the voice, but couldn't place it. "You must listen now. The game you are playing is very dangerous and is not for silly girls. Go back to the States. You will not find what you seek in the Ukraine."

Yeah right. Bozo.

"Wanna buy me a drink?" She batted her eyelashes.

"You've had too much drink. Sober up then you and your friend need to go."

Interesting.

"I don't wanna go. We just met." She let her fingers slid suggestively over his chest.

The moron shook her again. Damn it, he needed to stop doing that. "You must listen to me. What you seek is in a very bad place." A choked, gurgling sound filled with pain filtered through the com link. She wasn't certain, but thought it had come from Jhett. "You don't want to go anywhere near Stark. Not if you want to live."

Stark? What the hell is Stark?

She struggled to maintain the appearance of drunken miscomprehension. "Have a drink at your place? Sure, but I need to make a stop first."

Jhett kicked the chair, which he'd overturned when Twyla had been grabbed seconds after stumbling within range of the camera. He would kill Alexi Zelenko,

strangle the bastard with his bare hands for touching Twyla, scaring her. If there was one bruise on her creamy skin...

"Fuck!" He tried to focus, listen to the conversation, but the image of Twyla being held by the slimeball and roughly shaken made his blood boil. Any scrap of restraint, objectivity or control he'd had flew out the window as Alexi's head lowered until their lips were millimeters apart. Then the soon-to-be-dead son of a bitch nuzzled her unbound hair.

"Move in. Now. Get her the fuck out of there. Everyone engage. Kill that motherfucker if necessary."

Twyla looked over Alexi's shoulder and straight into the camera. "No! Scratch that." Green eyes that had appeared glassy and dazed now were as crystal clear as her message. Still, Jhett debated for several long moments before confirming her order. Of course, his word didn't seem to matter. The team had listened to her refusal and no one had rushed to the rescue. He made a mental note to deal with that problem later.

"Stand down. Follow Hestia's lead." As if they weren't already.

She mouthed a thank-you into the camera. When Alexi drew back, her face went lax again and she squinted at him. "There's a great bar down the street where we can have a drink."

He grumbled in frustration. "You've had too much drink. Shut up and listen." He leaned forward again, this time whispering in Twyla's ear. Jhett heard every word over the link. "What you seek will not remain in place for much longer. The work is almost completed. Once it is, he will be disposed of."

Twyla's body jerked, but Alexi held her still. "You will leave here. Now! Don't be a fool. Stay away from Stark."

Cutting his mic, Jhett cursed as he listened to Alexi give Twyla explicit details of what would be done to her if she were captured anywhere near Stark. The name of the place alone was enough to rack his body with tremors and bright bursts of remembered pain.

Jesus Christ, no! Not Stark. Anywhere else he could handle, but not that particular chamber of horrors. The past threatened to engulf him. He sensed its jaws tightening on his mind, drawing him back to relive the nightmare of torture and captivity in the depraved pit of hell. Only one thing allowed him to stay in the present.

Alexi's knowledge of what went on there was too accurate and intimate. He spoke from having witnessed the events he described, the betraying bastard!

"Stark is a place where women are not spared. You would be stripped bare, tied down and drugged. Then you would learn the true meaning of pain and discover how fragile the human body and mind are. Women captives have male interrogators." Alexi chuckled, but there was no humor in the harsh sound. "Such a deficient word for describing the people trained in the most heinous of methods for extracting information from an unwilling subject.

"Your drugged mind will twist the pain into something different, giving you a dark and warped feeling of pleasure until you break, spilling all your secrets. Skilled hands that previously worked as a healer, a medical professional, will use those talents for more sinister purposes.

"Electrical charges will be applied to your sensitive nipples, clitoris and other spots where sexual pleasure is felt. Your vagina and rectum will not be spared. You will be raped, forced into orgasms your body craves and your mind fights against. Those who make it out of Stark alive are mere scarred, broken shells of a person, no longer quite human or whole. Sex will no longer provide orgasm or pleasure without subjecting your body to pain and forced intercourse."

Jhett wanted to scream, cover his ears and block out the horrible words. Claw out his own eyes that stung from the images now flowing within his mind. Visions of Twyla beaten, bruised, broken. The idea of her facing the things he had firmed his resolve. He had to keep her working behind the scenes, far away from any danger, even if doing so meant confronting his past.

Her body shook and tears streamed down her cheeks by the time Alexi stopped talking and released her. When he stepped away, Alexi gave her a look full of regret, turned and disappeared down the street.

Jhett vowed to make the sorry motherfucker pay. One way or another, Alexi would get what was coming to him.

He tapped the com. "Get Hestia back home." His voice sounded almost as defeated and tired as he felt, but a new sense of purpose filled Jhett. He would protect Twyla at all costs.

Chapter Nine

To say the team became a bit tense over the next few weeks would be a major understatement. All joking, fun and playtime were cast aside as they all focused on completing the mission. The steady rise in anxiety had everyone on edge. The constant sexual friction arcing between her and Jhett only made matters worse. If something didn't give soon the pressure would make someone snap.

There were no two ways about it—they all needed some physical relief. A good fight or fuck, either one would do the trick. She preferred the latter option but doubted that would happen any time soon. Jhett didn't look at her anymore, much less touch her. In fact, he avoided her as though she had a deadly plague.

With each new piece of intel gained, they formed an action plan. Once the location where Hillman was being held had been determined, the team moved closer. A whole lot closer. The grimy windows from the back bedroom provided a clear view of the compound. Blueprints, diagrams and aerial satellite photos covered the walls around the new apartment. Guard schedules and routines were recorded down to the second.

She had tapped into the closed-circuit security cameras at Stark. To say she learned a great deal about the situation through the images would be a supreme understatement. Interrogation at the compound involved both pain and sex. The beautiful interrogator appeared to be very successful in using her body to get male captives to reveal whatever she wanted to know. In the evening, when the higher-ups left for the day, the guards brought in whores to make the night shift go faster. She was getting an interesting education in sexual kinks. Some of what she witnessed turned her on while others had her shivering in disgust.

With everything in place, all they waited for was Jhett to issue the extraction order. Why he waited had become a subject of great debate and stress among the team.

"I've got a plan. This one is foolproof."

Tank always had a plan. The man kept coming up with wild ideas and the rest of the team kept shutting him down. At least his detailed ideas helped to keep the boredom at bay. "What is it this time? Shall we use the satellites to signal an alien space ship?"

His expression turned serious as the fool considered the idea. Twyla groaned. "Well, what is it?"

"Okay. Jeez, Twyla. You're no fun anymore." The genuine disappointment in his voice was dispelled a moment later by a new rush of excitement. "Hammer doesn't sleep much. When he does, it's a soldier's sleep with one eye open and one hand wrapped around the grip of his sidearm."

Now if that wasn't the pot calling the kettle black. None of them slept more than a few hours at a time, and they all kept a gun within easy reach. Jhett had turned into an insomniac though. If he got an hour of sleep each day it was a miracle. When he did manage to sleep, more often than not it was fitful and disrupted by nightmares. And that damn gun. He even took the Sig Sauer pistol with him when he showered. She felt certain it would start showing signs of rust soon. "No one around here sleeps." *Including me.*

He continued on as if she had not interrupted. "Homerun is about the only person on this planet who has a chance of getting close while he's asleep. We send Homerun in with some rope, have him tie Hammer down. Dodger and I will assist. Once we have him secured then you come in and fuck him senseless."

Her mouth hung open, catching flies. Twyla knew it had to be, but was helpless to do anything about the situation. Tank's outrageous plan left her speechless. Even more shocking though, his plan made her horny. That quick, her blood heated, her breasts swelled and her nipples ached. A rush of arousal dampened her panties.

Oh great, they'd rubbed off on her. She'd become as sick as the rest of this rag-tag crew. That she considered his insane idea gave testament to her decreased lack of mental balance.

Two warm fingers lifted her chin to close her mouth. "You okay, Twyla?" Tank's big hands rubbed her upper arms. While her internal temperature had exceeded the boiling point, her skin had turned cold and he attempted to rub some warmth into her chilled flesh. "You're freezing."

She shook her head then shot to her feet. "Holy shit. You are freakin' certifiable, Tank." She caught sight of his accomplices peeking around the corner. Both wearing long faces. "You're all nuts. No way in hell will I rape Jhett."

Dodger threw back his head and laughed. The other two were quick to join in on the joke, which she must be the brunt of because Twyla saw nothing humorous about the whole thing.

"R-rape..." Homerun sputtered.

"Yeah right!" Dodger chimed in.

"Come on, Twyla. You're not that dense. It's obvious to anyone with eyes that the two of you are dying for another go at each other. What the hell's wrong with some mattress calisthenics if it will relieve some of the tension around here?"

Exactly what was wrong with the idea of getting busy with Jhett? Oh yeah, he didn't want her. Once had been enough to prove the point since he'd done everything shy of quit the mission to avoid touching her since the day they'd fucked.

She shook her head again, trying to dispel the image of Jhett tied to the bed – naked and at her mercy. When it didn't work, she turned on Tank. She had to force her clenched fist open and held it palm up before the idiot. "Give me some cash. I need a fucking drink...or ten."

"Jhett will have a fit if you go into a bar alone. We'll come with –"

He must have seen a strong indicator of her anger flash in her eyes, because he cut off his words, reached in his pocket then stuffed a wad of cash in her hand. "Be careful, Twyla. Jhett will have our asses if anything happens to you."

With a harrumph, she turned and stormed out of the room. "Keep an eye on the security monitors," she tossed over her shoulder and slammed the door behind her.

Hours later, Twyla tossed and turned on the small, too-soft mattress as sleep eluded her. The only thing she'd proven was that no amount of alcohol would cure insomnia. Quite the opposite. While her body may be exhausted, her mind refused to be calm. She tried meditation but wasn't able to shut off her thoughts, which continued to race in circles back to the same thing—sex. With Jhett. Hot, sweaty, raw and primal sex. Fuck-each-other-through-the-mattress sex.

Maybe the guys weren't the ones who were warped. Perhaps the true culprit had been her all along. If she wasn't completely gone yet, the sexual fever raging through her body would soon drive her over the edge.

The time had arrived to take matters into her own hands in a very literal way. Tossing aside the light blanket, Twyla pulled her cotton nightshirt over her head. Her skin felt stretched tight, every inch sensitized by need, and electricity hummed from one excited nerve ending to the next. Running her palms over turgid nipples elicited a moan. Oh yeah. An orgasm was just what the doctor ordered. Too bad she hadn't packed some toys.

Her legs shifted against each other, full of restless energy. She pinched her nipples, shivering as a bolt of pleasure-pain shot straight to her pussy, making the inner walls tremble with distress at being empty. She itched to be filled. Since Jhett wouldn't cooperate, he left her no choice other than to take care of herself.

While she longed to draw out the sensual experience, making the most of each caress, urgency pushed her forward. She would go for the quick fix right now and save lingering play for when she wasn't in such desperate need of release.

She spread her legs wide, letting her knees fall to the side. Her swollen labia were tugged apart, opening her damp folds. With no further preparation or finesse, she thrust two fingers, twisting her wrist to achieve maximum penetration. Her pulse pounded as Twyla fucked herself hard and fast, fingertips abrading that special spot along her upper wall. Her other hand remained busy pinching and tweaking her nipple.

“Ah, yes!” Each thrust of her hips met the punishing drive of her fingers and the heel of her hand pressed against her clit, showing no mercy. Regardless of how hard she chased the orgasm it remained just out of reach, requiring more. Needing Jhett.

She didn’t give up. Twyla tucked her chin to her chest, tightened her abdominal muscles and performed an abbreviated crunch while tugging her breast forward. Soft lips opened over the puckered areola and teeth clamped down on her nipple. A flick of her tongue over the sensitive bud flooded her fingers with a correlating flash of hot juices.

Oh dear Lord. Still not enough. She knew nothing other than Jhett’s cock would be able to quench her burning need. Twyla whimpered his name, her mouth vibrated against her nipple. She fingered herself hard, lashed her nipple with her tongue, reached for the precipice.

The door slammed against the wall. A tall figure in the hall, illuminated from behind, watched her struggle for the orgasm.

“Jesus H. Christ!”

She had no problem recognizing the owner of that growl. Jhett stepped farther into the room, his gaze traveling over her body, igniting new fires. She could see him well now. Sexual energy rolled off him in waves, buffeting Twyla, driving the ache higher. The door banged closed behind him.

With a wet pop, her nipple slipped from between her lips. “Either help me or get the fuck out.” He didn’t move, didn’t respond for what felt like an eternity. When he finally did, he thrust her efforts into overdrive.

“Suck your nipple. Bite it with your teeth.”

The order, spoken in a harsh tone, sent shivers racing down her spine. Powerless to refuse, Twyla sucked her nipple into her mouth. The intense scrutiny and passion darkening his blue eyes made every muscle in her body clench. Before she realized his intention, Jhett's thick fingers wrapped around hers, one fucking into her pussy on the next thrust and dragged along her sensitive tissues.

"Come for me, honey."

That was all it took. His sensual demand tossed her over the brink into a mind-blowing orgasm that curled her toes. She barely heard his words as the earth shook beneath her.

With a primal roar, he pulled their fingers from her pussy. She detected the rustle of clothing, then the mattress dipped and his warm skin covered Twyla. For the space of several frantic heartbeats he merely stared into her eyes before his hands slid beneath her ass, lifting her pelvis from the bed. The broad head of his cock slid along her slit, coming to a rest at her still hungry entrance.

Leaning forward, he took her lips in a savage kiss. Their tongues danced and twirled as he plundered the deepest recesses of her mouth. He kissed her with more passion than she'd ever imagined possible. With a sudden plunge, his cock forced its way to her core, hard and fast. He didn't break the kiss or give her time to adjust. Jhett mounted an all out balls-to-the-wall attack, pounding her body with brutal force. Their bodies slapped together as each strained to breathe.

"You're so wet for me. So hot and tight around my cock." His praise melted something in the vicinity of her heart. Twyla trembled, cried his name, begged for more.

Unexpected, a second, more powerful orgasm slammed into her. She cried his name, fingers digging into the flexing cheeks of his ass as her body shattered. Jhett kept fucking her, propelling her higher than ever before, drawing out the pleasure.

With one hard thrust, he slammed balls-deep, parting the walls of her still convulsing pussy. His thick shaft swelled, ripping a scream from her lips. That's when

the most amazing thing happened. Jhett's iron-clad control snapped. He threw his head back and an animalistic howl rose from the back of his throat.

She lost track of how many times she came as he powered into her, fucking her as if their lives depended on it until he had a forceful climax.

Then it happened. In that vulnerable, unguarded flicker of an instant, Twyla understood what Danu had alluded to on so many occasions. Incandescent light and love shone bright enough for the whole world to see. Embodied inside Jhett lived the beautiful soul of her love. The man she'd loved in each and every life she'd lived. Her past, her future—her everything.

Twyla may have fallen asleep or passed out, she wasn't certain. When awareness returned, she found herself alone in the bed, shivering. The most heart-wrenching cry shattered the quiet. She raced naked through the apartment, ready to battle what had become a familiar opponent. Prepared to do whatever it would take to save her man.

She found him crouched in a corner of the small kitchen rolled into a tight ball, head tucked down and covered by his arms. This nightmare must have been worse than normal. A glossy sheen of sweat covered his bare chest, combined with blood from a cut on his left shoulder. His entire body was tensed and jerked as if he was being struck, yet a hard-on tented his pants. No matter how much he muttered about drugs, pain, rape and sex, she didn't understand what had happened. Did the atrocities Alexi had told her about have something to do with his nightmares?

"Oh Jhett. What have you done to yourself? I wish you'd let me get a look at that cut. You might need stitches."

Over the weeks they'd been living in close quarters the team had learned not to touch him when Jhett got caught in the past. He would not recognize anyone and responded by fighting for his life using lethal force. Twyla had become the only one who could get close and reach through the terror of his frequent nightmares. What she said didn't matter. She just had to be patient and simply talk or sing until her voice pulled him back to the present then watch him limp away to lick his wounds in private.

That was the hardest part – witnessing the beating his ego took and not being permitted to help.

None of the team members had worked with Jhett after his discharge from the military so they didn't know what had happened to him. They all had theories though, some more plausible than others. She knew only one thing for certain—horrible, unspeakable trauma had messed up his psyche.

“I'm here, flyboy. You're safe. Those old demons can't touch you.”

She wished he'd let her touch him, hold him, but knew better. The one time she'd tried had resulted in a black eye. Afterward, when he'd returned to the apartment, he'd pushed until she told him what had happened. Finding out he'd hit her had been a heavy burden to bear. He'd fallen in a dark funk that lasted several days longer than her shiner had.

With each episode, he was slower to rebound. Twyla stayed close until he finally let her bandage the wound before he slipped off into the night. She knew he wouldn't be back for at least twelve hours, refusing to discuss whatever tormented his soul. He had to face this down before it grew big enough to affect the mission.

Her heart bled for him. She loved him, would give her life to spare Jhett from the past, but the cost of failure would be far reaching, having a profound impact on all mankind. How was she to balance the love of her life – her very heart and soul – against the fate of the entire world?

She hugged herself, wishing Widget were with her instead of with her parents. She had a serious need for the comfort of his companionship right about now.

Chapter Ten

Jhett whistled as he strolled back to the apartment. He wasn't surprised when Tank fell in step with him, felt grateful for his silent presence and discretion. His friend didn't question where he'd been for the past three days or what he'd been doing. "If I had a damn lick of common sense, I never would've agreed to this job."

"Yeah. We all know they hired you because of that boyish charm. So when do we go in?"

Chills raced over his skin. Tank possessed some weird supernatural radar and never failed to know when action was headed their way. Jhett found it creepy and had to shake off the disquieting sensation. "Tonight. I found an inside man. Gotta act fast before he gets cold feet."

Waiting would give his informant time to reconsider his newly found conscience, and Jhett would not allow that to happen. They had to go in fast, extract Hillman before the captive outlived his usefulness. Of course, saving the computer geek had become a secondary consideration to Jhett's personal, less altruistic goal—survival. He had to ensure Twyla and the team made it home safe. If possible, as a secondary consideration, he'd save his own skin too. Not that he deserved saving.

Knowing he'd physically hurt Twyla several weeks earlier was slowly killing him. He couldn't get the image of her bruised and swollen eye out of his head. Being trapped in a nightmare was no excuse for hitting her. Jhett had never caused intentional harm to any woman, especially not one under his protection. The flashbacks were getting worse the longer he spent in this godforsaken place. Getting out soon would be best for everyone involved.

He tapped the com link. "Be home for supper in ten." Everyone except Twyla acknowledged the order.

As they reached the building, Tank placed a hand on his shoulder. "Talk to her. She's worried."

Worried? About him. Why the hell would she be worried about him? That would indicate she cared about him. His heart went into an inverted flat spin, the negative Gs pulling his body one way and leaving his stomach somewhere far behind. He got the transient sense of disorientation that came from seeing the horizon and not being able to distinguish up from down anymore. *Whoa! What the hell was that all about?*

Damn if it didn't make him want to turn and run, take the coward's way out so as not to experience anymore of the confusing emotions assaulting him. Hide somewhere far away from the possibility of Twyla MacAlister reaching in and ripping the still beating heart from his chest.

Jhett sighed. He didn't know how to deal with a woman's concern. Had never let one get close enough to fret about him. "What the fuck am I supposed to say? Sorry for losing my cool, fucking you like a wild animal whenever the mood hits me and decking you?"

"It'd be a good place to start."

"Yeah, then she'll dropkick me out the door. She'd never understand and I don't deserve her forgiveness."

Tank shook his head and took a deep breath. "You're such a blind fool. Don't be so stubborn. Open your eyes. The two of you have a lot more in common than either of you realize."

"Like what? So we both crave being smack-dab in the middle of the action, kicking ass. We both have this thing about trying to save everyone but ourselves. We're both hotheads with volatile tempers. What else? Am I forgetting anything?"

"Scares ya that much, huh?" Tank howled with laughter, making Jhett wonder if someone could actually bust their gut by laughing too hard. "Big bad Hammer's afraid of a cream puff. Oh this is too good to keep to myself." He tapped the com link. "Hey you guys. Guess what—"

"Shut up, Tank," Jhett roared and smacked the side of his friend's head. "Twyla is no damn cream puff and I'm not afraid of anything." So he lied. One thing frightened the hell out of him. The thought of going into Stark, of his own free will, and trying to get the computer geek out without losing his mind in the process.

"We have to finish this. Tonight. Get your game face on."

* * * * *

"Tank, you and Homerun will come in from the north." Jhett pointed to a spot on the schematic spread over the table they'd gathered around. "Dodger will enter here." He pointed out a spot to the southeast.

Twyla wondered why the hell she had to go and fall in love with him. The damn idiot freaks out, disappears for three fucking days, strolls back in as if nothing has happened and expects them to all follow his orders. Lord, if she didn't need him to get Hillman out of Stark and complete her mission so she didn't have to forfeit her life, she'd kick his ass. She imagined how much fun it would be to give him a major ass whuppin'. The vivid images racing through her mind had her mouth pulling up at the corners and she had to bite her lip to suppress an evil grin.

She hated the fact she'd be stuck in the apartment during all the fun stuff. All her life, computers had been her freedom. Her escape. Somehow the tables had turned and they were a prison, limiting her, holding her back. She wanted to be out there with the team, part of the action. "Fuck me," she mumbled.

"Excuse me?" Jhett stopped in the middle of giving his briefing. "Do you have something to add, Hestia?"

Hestia. She despised the cursed call sign Jhett had given her. "Nope, not a thing." She flashed an innocent smile at the group of men she'd become closer to than her own family, and that was saying a lot. Her brothers may be overprotective jerks, but she loved and respected them. This group of lethal men—hardened warriors—they made her feel truly alive. They valued her knowledge and skills, treated her as an equal. In

her mind, staying behind would be the same as stripping them of their weapons. The same as sending them into battle without a vital asset.

And they were all scrutinizing her expression. *Shit!* She placed her finger on the diagram. "I'll take the laptop—"

"No!" All four of them shouted the denial.

"Why the hell not? I've proven that I can handle field work—"

Jhett held up his hand. "Yes, you can handle gathering information, but you've never been in combat—"

"I can fight!" she shouted defensively.

"Yes, I know all too well how powerful of a punch you pack. You have no weapons training. What are you going to do when someone comes at you with a knife?"

Twyla choked on a scream as a thick arm closed around her waist and the steel edge of a knife pressed against her windpipe, cutting off the sound before it fully formed. She hadn't even seen Tank move, hadn't heard a sound. She'd been focused on arguing her case with Jhett.

The flow of warm breath next to her ear raised goose bumps on her skin. "What now, Twyla? How do you get out of this with your pretty little head still attached to your shoulders?"

Her knees trembled and she let herself collapse, shifting so she leaned back into Tank. She didn't move far. He'd anticipated the move, braced his body and supported the added weight, easily countering her attempt to get free.

"Not good enough. It takes years of hard training way above and beyond your aikido skills to be ready for hand-to-hand combat. You will stay here in the apartment where it's relatively safe. End of discussion."

"Sorry, honey!" Tank spoke low so only she heard him this time. "I love proving him wrong, but in this case he's right and you know it. If you were out there, none of us

would be able to focus on the mission. We'd be too busy worrying about you and trying to make sure you were all right."

Damn it all to hell. They were both right, but her pride wouldn't let her admit it. Tank's hold on her had loosened and she twisted in his arms, shaking him off. "Let. Go. Of. Me."

Tank lifted both hands in surrender and eased back to his previous position a few feet away. They may be right, for the most part, but Twyla knew she'd be an asset in the field. For the rest of the briefing she scowled at them. The jerks ignored her irrational behavior and carried on as if nothing had happened. *Ugh...men!* They were just like her brothers. Overprotective idiots.

Thinking about her brothers brought a pang of homesickness. Once the briefing wrapped up she sent an email, bounced it off a few satellites so it wasn't traceable, letting the family know she was okay. The team went off to catch a few hours' rest. They would go in after dark when the guards were changing shifts.

"If you are to succeed then you must use every resource available. One such essential tool is lessons learned in past lives." Danu's words flowed through her mind and gave Twyla a wonderful idea. She closed the bedroom door, propped some pillows against the headboard and got comfortable on the bed, wondering how much she'd be able to learn about combat from the ancient Scottish warrior she'd once been in only a few hours' time.

"Hell if I'm going to stay in the nice safe apartment like some silly nitwit."

* * * * *

"What's up with Twyla?"

Tank's question took Jhett off guard. He'd been focused inward while arming himself, concentrating on the mission and getting them all out of here alive. "Huh? I don't know. What makes you think something's up with her?"

"Are you blind?" Tank's brow furrowed. "She's banging away on those infernal damn machines wearing the most evil grin. The hellion is plotting something."

Jhett shrugged. "So what? She can be cooking up a twisted plot to seize control of alien spacecrafts, blow up any planets that resist and gain universal domination for all I care, as long as it keeps her busy and tied to that electronic leash." Going into Stark was going to be hard enough. He didn't need any more distractions.

"Hey, whatever." Tank tossed up his hands. "Just wanted to let you know there are storm clouds brewing on the horizon, but if you're not worried —"

"Shit, Tank. Let's deal with one thing at a time. We can debate the female mind tomorrow on a jet somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean on our way home." His old friend's expression held obvious concern, but he shut up and continued to prepare for the fight ahead.

Jhett performed one last check of his weapons and tapped his com. "Hammer mobile."

"Dodger's in the game."

"Slow pokes. Homerun's rounding first base."

"Damn overachievers," Tank grumbled, heading down the stairs on his six.

When they were all in position, he gave final orders. "Lock and load, gentlemen. Watch your asses and I'll see you on the other side." He glanced toward the dark, moonless sky and made a wish this would be over quick with all of them in one piece.

* * * * *

Twyla grew bored with waiting. The men had all moved into position, but no one would enter the compound until the guards changed shifts, which wouldn't happen for another twenty minutes.

She was so stunned by the pounding at the door that she stared at it for a long moment. People in this neighborhood minded their own business and didn't make

social calls so she figured it wouldn't be anything good. She didn't move until a second barrage shook the door within its frame.

"Um...just a minute."

Her heart galloped in her chest as she stared at the wooden door. There was no peephole. Anyone could be on the other side. "The only way you're going to find out is by opening the blasted thing." Before she could change her mind, she reached out a shaking hand and pulled the door open.

"Alexi," she gasped, recognizing the man right away.

He pushed past her into the room. "Where is he?"

"Uh...who?"

His dark gaze captured her and he grabbed her upper arms, giving a hard shake. "Don't play stupid. Where the hell are Jhett and the rest of the team? Tell me they haven't gone in."

Oh shit! He knew about the mission? "Uh—" He shook her harder. She really didn't enjoy it when he did that.

"They can't go in. You have to stop them."

"Who—"

The loud crack of flesh hitting flesh reached her ears before the bright slash of pain ripped through her cheek. Oh, now the bastard was making her mad so she swept his legs, taking him down to the floor. Only problem, he didn't let her go and Twyla went down with Alexi. Something hard and thick rested under her hip, a weapon of one sort or another. She shivered, wanting nothing to do with the weapon tucked into his pants.

"There's no time for this," he complained as she scrambled to get away. "The inside man Jhett found changed his mind. He reported the impending attack to the guards. If they go in now, they're all going to die."

"NO!" Her scream sliced through the fog clouding Twyla's thoughts. She pushed up onto her knees and landed a solid right hook to his jaw, delighted by the resounding

crack of his head banging against the cement floor. He may be tall, dark, handsome and have a sexy-as-all-get-out accent, but he'd brought bad news she didn't want to hear.

She shouldn't trust him. Jhett believed Alexi had stabbed him in the back and considered the Ukrainian to be his enemy. Twyla didn't know if it was something in Alexi's concerned expression or simply her intuition, but he did not seem to be working against them. Danu had told her to believe her strong feelings. They'd never failed her before.

She tapped the com link even as she scrambled to her feet and raced for the bank of computers. "Abort, abort, abort."

No response, only static. "Son of a bitch!" She typed in commands fast and furious. All four dots on the GPS screen sat in place, waiting to go in. "This can't be happening." Something blocked their communication channel and since the men were all on radio silence until Jhett gave the go-ahead, nobody would know their link had been severed. Hell, Jhett wouldn't even know because he would give the command and they'd move. No one would give or expect a response.

Lord help her, the only way to reach them was to go mobile. First she had to get rid of the trash. "Thanks for letting me know. Now it's time for you to go." She ran to the door and yanked it open. "Buh-bye now."

The idiot didn't even look up from brushing imaginary dirt off his clothes. "Yo! Commie spy dude. Get. Out."

His head snapped up, his expression one of annoyance. "How rude. That's what I get for trying to help out an American cowboy."

"Yeah, uh...whatever. See ya, bye, gone." She shoved him out the door, slammed it shut and returned to her computers.

Twyla kept track of each team member's GPS locator, checked over her gear and packed her laptop into a special papoose. She'd been dying to try out all this crazy spy gear Jhett had somehow managed to get. With the wireless satellite aircard, she'd be able to manage the systems here in the apartment remotely while on the move. Stupid

bad-boy warriors thought their fighting skills made them superior to everyone else. Ha! She'd show them. Her intelligence was much more potent than their brawn.

Never underestimate the power of a smart, pissed-off woman!

A soft voice in the back of her mind warned maybe she should listen to the men and stay put. *Yeah, like that's gonna happen.* "I've got all this wonderful technology at my disposal. Hell if I'm not going to use it and save their asses. Besides," she rationalized, "there's no other way to pull them out. I'll get there in the nick of time and save the day. Simple." And how cool that she'd get her chance to see some action.

She caught sight of the clock on one of the monitors and cursed. In six minutes the team would go over the wall. She had to hurry. Twyla raced down the stairs and jogged through the night, sticking to the shadows. Jhett would be angrier than a wet hornet, but at least he'd be alive to bitch her out if she could make it there in time.

No could about it. She would! She had to.

Chapter Eleven

I'm going to make it. Just one more block.

A surge of adrenaline tingled along her nerve endings as she jogged down the street. She considered and discarded the possibility Alexi had given her false information when unable to determine a motivation for him doing so. There would be nothing for the double agent to gain by delaying the attack. She trusted her gut, which still insisted he was on the up and up.

"Umph!" Something hit her from the side as she crossed the point where an alley entered the main street and sent her flying. No, not something, rather someone. Their bodies rolled and slid over the rough dirt road and pain raked the left side of her body as skin tore. Damn, she was going to have some nasty road rash from shoulder to ankle. They slammed into an abandoned car and came to an abrupt stop, her on the bottom of a twisted tangle of assorted body parts, the laptop jammed into her ribs and making it hard to breathe.

Twyla shook her head to clear away the daze and looked up into a pair of eyes that were becoming all too familiar – Alexi Zelenko.

"What the fuck? You idiot. Get the hell off me." She shoved at his chest with both hands but he didn't budge.

"You cannot go to Stark! Everything I told you before about the facility was true."

She shivered. Damn if that accent didn't do something to her insides, however now was not the time to think about the dark tones sliding over her battered skin. "I have to warn them before it's too late. Get off me," she cried.

"No! I won't let you go there. Stark is a very bad place."

"Duh! No fucking shit, Sherlock. That's exactly why I have to go there." Why did men have to be so stupid at the most distressing of moments?

Her com link came alive, Jhett's voice issuing the order to go in ringing through her head. *Sure, now the fucking thing decides to work.*

Soft pops sounded in the distance. In comparison, the rapid report of automatic gun fire through the miniscule earpiece was almost deafening. Her heart sank down low in her belly as the team members' voices shouted to one another.

Twyla's mind screamed for her to run, get out there and help. These men were her friends. She wasn't paralyzed, but her body froze like a statue, struck by the resounding staccato bursts of gunfire, screams and chatter. Tears streamed down her cheeks and someone let loose an agonized wail – such a horrible sound of helplessness.

When she gained movement, she lashed out at Alexi, her small fists landing ineffective punches on his shoulders. "Letmegoooooooo!"

THWAP!

Her head snapped to the side from the hard slap.

"I cannot. Jhett would kill me if I let anything happen to you. The man is smitten." He shot her a wicked smile. "Not that I don't understand why. You are truly amazing." His fingers traced the path of her tears down her cheek. "Beautiful, smart, sexy and not afraid to fight."

What the hell? This man talked as if he knew her. Alexi didn't know her. How could he? And how would he presume to know what Jhett would feel for her when she wasn't even sure? She'd have to puzzle it out later. Right now, she had to do whatever it took to get to her men.

He glanced over his shoulder for a moment before looking back at her. "I have to go. Stay away from Stark, Twyla. Go back to the apartment. Someone will come and fill you in as soon as possible." He gave her a stern look. "Promise me, sweetling. I won't leave until you do."

Fine, lying to this scumbag was the least of her problems. If that's what it took to get him off her, she'd tell a million lies. "I-I promise. Just let me go. Please!"

"Do not worry. He will be back with you soon."

She longed to believe the words, the assurance in his softened gaze. Twyla wasn't stupid, even if she pretended to be. "Yes. I'll wait in the apartment for him," her voice cracked as she continued, "where it's safe."

The schmuck must have bought her act because his weight lifted away and Alexi helped her to stand. He brushed at the dirt on her clothes but realized the futility and gave up. "Go now, sweetling."

Turning and heading in the opposite direction she'd been going was one of the hardest things Twyla had ever done. Alexi's gaze burned into her back as he waited to be certain she followed his instructions. Even when she no longer felt his gaze, Twyla kept walking, only glancing back to make sure he'd left as she turned the corner and broke into a run. She channeled every ounce of energy into her pumping legs and arms, throwing on a burst of speed as she looped around the block.

As the compound came into sight, Twyla came to a shattering halt. Lord, it looked like a scene out of a James Cameron movie with shit blowing up, guns blazing and people running everywhere, illuminated by bright security lights. She dropped to her knees in a dark corner and opened up the battered laptop. Everything continued to get worse.

The cameras had all gone dark and the GPS locator offered no help. The red dots blurred as they raced around the screen, making identifying which dot represented who impossible.

Twyla shoved a shaking fist into her mouth to prevent a scream from escaping when Jhett's weak voice echoed through her head. Her heart pounded and icy fingers of dread sliced through her body.

"I'm hit. I'm hit."

"Doubling back," Tank responded.

"No! Get the package out, pick up Hestia and keep your date." The date he referred to was with the jet that would take them back to the States.

"Homerun, cover the package," Tank ordered. "I'm going back for Hammer."

"That wasn't a request, Tank. Get the package and Hestia out. I'm going to be tied up for a while. Situation FUBAR. I'm down and totally naked." He paused before continuing. Twyla felt as if she was dying inside. Being down meant he'd sustained a bad injury and being naked meant he'd become exposed, had no cover. "Gonna try to avoid getting ill and slip out the back. If I don't make the rendezvous by twenty-two hundred go without me. I'll find another ride." She searched her memory for the codeword ill, biting harder on her fist when she realized the implications. He was about to be captured.

"Negative, Hammer. No can do."

"Tank," Jhett's tone turned harsh. "You double back and it'll be two instead of one. I *need* you to take care of the package and Hestia for me. If..." his voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "Tell her —"

"That's a negative, my brother! I'm not telling any tales. You're gonna get your ass to the rendezvous and tell her yourself. Understand?"

"Copy. Now get going."

"Hestia," Tank's voice had softened. "You copy?"

She had to pry her teeth from her hand before she could reply. "Putting on my dancing shoes now." Another lie. She was really racking them up, but no way would she be sitting in the apartment waiting to leave without Jhett. Unh-uh. Somehow, someday, she was going in there and getting her man out.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath then went for a mental walk on the wildflower path to her mountaintop waterfall in search of guidance from the past. When she reached the top, Twyla met up with the pin-up girl.

"Use the natural assets God gave ya, sugah."

A dangerous plan formed in her mind, one she had no doubt the entire team would object to. She didn't have many "assets" to work with, but did her best to vamp up her

normal sedate appearance. She wasn't sure if she could pull it off or convince the guards she was a hired whore if confronted, but she'd give it her best shot.

After tucking her equipment behind a dumpster, she set her hair free from its braid, the long waves trailing along her back, brushing the upper curve of her ass. She unbuttoned her shirt, rolled up the tails and tied it beneath her breasts. There wasn't much to be done about the jeans or shit-kickers she wore. The damn abrasions would show too. Twyla fluffed her hair, sucked and nibbled on her lips until they swelled and reddened, put some major swing in her hips and walked straight toward the front gates of hell.

No one was around to stop her or question why she was there. The guards were occupied, busy handling the security breach. The fight seemed to be centralized in the rear of the compound, which worked well in her favor. Shell casings littered the ground and there were several dark pools of fluid she presumed to be blood. She approached an area of the concrete building with a huge hole that had charred edges, figuring one of the explosions had created the portal. As she stepped through, a hand grabbed at her ankle, surprising a strangled gasp from her throat.

She had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from screaming at the abomination dragging itself with one remaining arm. Blood covered what she could see of the guard's flesh and half of his face appeared to have melted off. She hated to cause him further injury, but shook off his weak grasp and kicked out before racing down the corridor in the opposite direction. Yanking open the first door she came to, thankful to find the room unoccupied, she collapsed against the wall and cried. The guys had been right—she wasn't prepared for combat. Too bad she didn't have the luxury of not facing its horrors.

* * * * *

If there is a God, please, take me now! Jhett repeated the prayer for deliverance over and over again in vain. No merciful entity came for him. For the second time in his life, he'd been cast into the pits of hell. He feared there would be no escaping. Most people

didn't experience that kind of luck once. To do so twice would be a true miracle and he'd run clean out of those.

He never should have given in to the call of the action and the lure of a beautiful woman. Still, the brief period he'd spent with Twyla would sustain him through what he now faced. He planned on immersing himself in memories of long brown hair flowing over his skin or fanned out over his pillow, legs that went on forever wrapped tight around his hips and falling into mesmerizing green eyes. He'd dream and plot his escape.

All in all it was a great plan, but then the blonde devil herself walked through the door and incandescent sparks of remembered pain screamed through his shivering body, combining with the very real pain of torn flesh in his thigh.

"Akh! Zaichik," she crooned.

Fuck, he hated those words. He wasn't her bunny rabbit or any other damn thing. He held still as she tested the chains and straps holding him to the metal table then gave his flaccid cock a rough squeeze. Zoya leaned over his chest to whisper in his ear. "Soon, I will fuck you and it will be like old times, *zaichik*."

Jhett closed his eyes as the needle pierced his right leg. She depressed the plunger, releasing a burning stream of drugs into his muscles. He tensed, waiting for the heat to fill his veins, whimpering as his cock began to rise no matter how he willed it to resist. His will lost the fight and his body betrayed him, skin becoming so sensitive and charged that the very air in the room created waves of pleasure.

A crack rent the quiet, followed by a painful lash from her whip over his balls, his sac tightening as the zing rolled through his flesh, turning into pleasure. His hips tried to thrust, but she had him strapped down too tight.

The routine was one he knew too well. First the escalating pain the drug tricked his body into deriving pleasure from, then the sexual teasing and finally the rape. What his body longed for his mind would battle. His mind would weaken until she won and he broke. She hadn't gotten him to that point before and saw him as a challenge. Zoya

would use paddles, probes, cock rings, electricity and medical devices including urethral sounds, among others. She probably had a few new tricks up her sleeve too.

Please let death come before my mind fractures! The familiar prayer whispered through his head. Jhett held no false hope of being saved. At least he could count on Tank to follow his orders and get Twyla stateside where she'd have a shot at a safe and normal life. Something a lot better than he could give her.

Just thinking of Twyla brought both misery and joy. He'd never hold her again, kiss her sweet lips or drink her pleased moans into his body. Never get to tell her how wrong she was in thinking of herself as a computer geek when in truth her beauty outshone the sun. Twyla was perfect. Full of strength, courage, and for whatever reason, she believed in him.

Realization hit him hard, electric pulses arcing through his body, jolting him before Zoya had attached the first electrode. He loved Twyla, with all his heart and soul. A difficult idea to believe since he'd never felt the powerful emotion with anyone before.

Knowing he'd never get to tell her hurt worse than any torture his skilled interrogator would deliver to his body. His only regret was that he'd waited too long to figure it out and would never have the opportunity to say those important three little words.

Chapter Twelve

She had no clue how long it took to get her emotions under control. When Twyla emerged from the room, she raced from one doorway to another for any sign of where they held Jhett. “You’d better hang on, flyboy, or I’ll kick your ass myself.” She would not leave here without him. He would not be left behind again. She’d have none of that history-repeating-itself bullshit.

Racing around a corner, she ran right into one of the guards. He shouted questions at her rapid fire. Twyla only managed to catch a few of the words, but enough to let her know he intended to stop her. She spied a fire extinguisher hanging from the wall to her right, took a breath and grabbed for the metal canister. The guard, apparently stunned by her actions, failed to react in time to prevent the hard blow to his skull. The sickening crunch of bone churned the bile in her stomach and a blast of warm liquid hit her face. She lifted her arm and rubbed the blood from her cheek onto her shirt sleeve.

With precious seconds clicking away, she didn’t allow her conscience to kick in. Twyla dropped the canister and kept moving. Along the way, she picked up a weapon from an armory room. Either she’d use it to hit the guards over the head or if all the shit hit the fan, she figured it couldn’t be that hard to operate—point and shoot, right? Piece of cake.

The stress got to her and she pictured herself as one of those Hollyweird action heroines wearing not much more than a bra and panties, one of those thingies with all the bullets strapped to it slung over her chest like a beauty pageant sash, hair flying wild around her and with a gun in her hand as she struck a pose. A buff A-list actress like Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* or Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*. The image in her mind almost drove her to fits of hysteria.

Lord, she had to find Jhett and get them the fuck out of here before she lost what little of her cool still remained.

Stark gave her the creeps. The halls of the compound were empty and silent. There were some bizarre and wicked-looking devices in several of the rooms she came across. She presumed they were for torture. In fact, one of the damn things looked pretty similar to an electric chair.

"Sick fuckers!"

An idea took form in her mind. She remembered Jhett telling her he'd been to the Ukraine when working as a mercenary. Tank had said he'd heard rumors of Jhett winding up in some enemy torture facility, which jibed with his nightmares. Add in the increasing distance he put between himself and everyone else since they first learned where Hillman was being held and she didn't like the conclusion.

Oh crap! Could Stark be the place where Jhett...

Nah! If it were, he wouldn't have been able to force himself to come back here. Hell, nobody in their right mind would.

She came to a room filled with monitors and controls. The name written on the door was in a foreign language, but she didn't have to read the words to get the idea. *Hot damn!* She'd discovered the computer core of Stark. This would be a natural for her.

One no-so-little problem, a beefy guard sat before the console. Lifting the gun, she swung, aiming the stock for the base of his skull just as the man turned. The momentum swept her off balance. Before she realized what had happened, the guard had her pressed against the wall, one hand at her throat. With each word the angry man bellowed a disgusting spray of spittle hit her face. She couldn't get adequate oxygen through her compressed airway and into her lungs. Twyla wheezed as her vision began to narrow and darken.

Oh fuck no! This Hussy was not going down without a fight.

Her arms flailed, grabbing at anything she could reach, gouging his face and pulling out a tuft of wiry black hair. Focusing every ounce of remaining energy, she

slammed her knee into his groin. The second he let go of her neck, she lunged forward, teeth bared, and bit into his vulnerable neck.

He collapsed, clutching his balls with one hand, and still managed to drag her down with him. Lucky for her, Twyla landed on top. She ground her knee against his abdomen and held on with her teeth, tasting a combination of salty sweat and the bitter copper flavor of blood.

The guard let her go and rolled into a tight ball. Staggering to her feet, she picked up the gun and aimed. She held the barrel in a two-fisted grip and feeling like Tiger Woods lining up the crucial shot needed to win that butt-ugly championship jacket, she swung with all her might, knocking her opponent out. She could almost hear the polite round of soft golf applause for nailing the birdie, or whatever the hell they called making the shot.

Twyla grabbed the handcuffs conveniently attached to the unconscious guard's utility belt. After she had him restrained, she turned to glance at numerous switches and dials, hoping something would stand out. Pressed for time, she opted for experimentation and hit buttons at random to see what would happen. Before long she landed on a row that affected the monitors. Switching from one view to another, her heart nearly leapt from her chest when she stumbled across an image of Jhett.

"Oh. My. God."

Shock chilled her body and froze her feet in place as she tried to comprehend what she witnessed. Her mind struggled to assimilate the image.

The metal table reminded her of the ones used for autopsies with a channel extending around the periphery to drain fluids, collecting them in a basin at the foot of the monstrosity. He lay naked on the cold steel, secured by chains, cuffs and straps. Blood seeped from various wounds and ran into the channel. A nearby cart on wheels held scary shit she didn't want to consider. Some of it looked to be medical devices, the rest were definitely implements used for torture.

Wires ran from different points on his body—nipples, several points on his erect cock, his scrotum and one disappeared beneath the sac. The wires connected to a box that sat between his spread knees. Someone outside the picture reached in, turned a dial and pressed a button. Jhett's entire body tensed and bucked against the restraints. They were administering electric shock.

"Oh Lord, help me." A diagram she'd found of fire exits showed there weren't many rooms she had not checked yet. Twyla raced out the door with a general idea of where to find him. Seeing through the tears was a challenge and she made several wrong turns before finding the right room. Of course it had to be the last one, although a higher power must be working in her favor because she didn't encounter any guards along the way. If her luck continued, the door wouldn't be locked.

Holding the gun at the ready, she turned the knob and thrust the door open. It hit the wall with a resounding bang. A very different scene from the one she'd seen on the camera met her stunned gaze.

Jhett gasped as Zoya stopped moving over him. "Who the hell are you?" she screeched. He glanced toward the door, shocked and distrusting the reliability of vision, thinking his stressed mind had created what he wanted to see, what he hoped to see. But deep down he knew she was real.

Twyla looked amazing, a kick-ass seductress, armed and ready to fight. Jesus, how'd she get here, inside Stark? Where the hell was Tank? And she'd caught him with his dick in another woman.

A compromised and defenseless position.

Busted.

He was so fucked, and not in a good way. She would never believe he'd been drugged and raped.

"I'm your worst nightmare, bitch. A Hussy warrior. Now get your scrawny ass off *my* man before I knock you into next week!"

Holy shit! She didn't condemn him for a response he had no control over. Instead, she fought for him. He'd never been more proud or felt so loved before.

Zoya tossed back her head and laughed, thrusting her hips for emphasis. The move further blurred the lines between pain and sex, making it more difficult to not let either show in his expression. "Idle threats. I bet you don't even know how to fire that weapon."

Twyla firmed up her grip on the gun, obviously irritated by Zoya's comment, as she'd intended. A grin pulled at the corners of Jhett's mouth. Zoya had made a huge miscalculation though. Twyla wouldn't back down from a challenge. "Not a very smart move. She means business."

His interrogator clucked her tongue and waved a dismissive hand. "I am no afraid of her." Her accent thickened and Zoya confused some of the English words, telling him she felt more stressed than she admitted. *Good!*

"Big mistake, bitch. Time to pay the piper." Twyla pointed the muzzle just over Zoya's shoulder, squeezed the trigger and laid down a line of fire that had the woman diving for cover. She didn't relent. Twyla stalked Zoya around the room, giving her no opportunity to get away.

Green eyes glowing with rage focused on Zoya. He almost felt sorry for her. *Pshaw, yeah right.* Anxious for her to get what she deserved, he didn't want to be left out of the delivery. "Twyla...honey." He yanked at the restraints. "Cut me loose."

She didn't take her gaze from Zoya. "In a minute. This cunt and I have a few things to work out first...with our hands."

He pulled harder, creating a racket of metal against metal. "I want to help."

"Cool your heels, flyboy. You'll get a turn."

He tried to follow the two women but they moved past the head of the table and no amount of contortion allowed him to see them, however, his hearing worked just fine. Each blow and grunt made him cringe. Twyla MacAlister had a pure heart, the one person he'd ever met with an untainted spirit. He prayed God would protect her. If

anyone were to receive a bit of divine grace when most needed, he figured she may just be the one He would take the time to protect.

The distinctive sound of breaking bone followed a hard crash and someone sobbed. Jhett struggled, feeling useless. He had to get off this fucking table and help her. Straining hard, grunting, he began to sense a bit of give in the straps at his hips.

"Whoa! Calm down, tough guy. You're liable to rupture something." Twyla's sweet face moved into his line of vision, her lower lip split open and bleeding, but otherwise appearing no worse for the wear. He'd never seen a more stunning vision. "Give me a second to get these clasps undone."

"Wh—" Emotion strangled his voice. Jhett cleared his throat and tried again. "What about the team? And Hillman? Did they all get out?"

She cursed as she fought with the chains and straps holding him down. "Relax. The team has the package and is headed for the rendezvous point. They are all fine, no major injuries, although getting out wasn't a walk in the park."

He released a pent-up breath. At least something had gone right with this fucked-up mission. "You have to get out of here. Get to the plane," he encouraged.

"Unh-uh! Not without you, flyboy."

"You are way too stubborn for your own good." The smartass had the audacity to laugh. "That wasn't a compliment, Twyla."

She stopped working on the restraints and met his gaze for a brief moment. The love he saw in her eyes nearly stopped his heart. "Shut up and let me concentrate on getting us out of here. You can tell me how stupid I am later."

As she worked his arms free, her fingers first brushed the underside of his wrists, then the side of his chest. Intense waves of rapture made his skin tighten and his cock throb, swelling to excruciating proportions. He bit the inside of his cheek to arrest his climax. When she got to the straps over his pelvis, Jhett almost lost the battle.

He groaned. "Careful, Twyla. The drug...it makes me very sensitive." Jhett closed his eyes and tried to think of anything other than her touching him, but it didn't work. He needed to come. Her fingers brushed his skin in a delicate caress and he bucked against his bonds. "Fuck, I hurt so bad."

"Tell me how to help. What do you need?"

He'd love to ease the painful erection, but getting out was the only thing that mattered. "Just help me get out of here. Anything else can wait."

A wicked gleam filled her eyes as the minx became aware of what her casual touch did to him. "Mmm...you being tied down is giving me some kinky ideas." Rooting through the cabinets, she found a basin, filled it with water and picked up a towel. They had to get moving, but his wounds needed to be cleaned. She washed him off, paying special attention to his hard cock and wiping away the evidence of his rape. She had no doubt it had been a rape, and she wanted to ease the bad memory, replacing it with a pleasant one. "If you need to come in order to feel better, I can accommodate you. Doing so will be my pleasure."

"Twyla," he barked. "Honey, now is not the time to play. We have to make our date, remember. You can play later."

She glanced at her wristwatch and grimaced. "Okay...for now."

After releasing the restraints, she helped him to his feet, offering support when his legs wobbled. Her brow arched in inquiry. "Any idea where your clothes are?"

"Not a one." They made a quick search of the room, finding his things in a trashcan. Twyla helped him ease into his pants, careful of the bullet wound to his left thigh.

"Tore me apart when you said you'd been hit," she sniffed.

Jhett cupped her chin in his hand and stared into her eyes. "I'm okay, honey. It's not as bad as it looks."

She nodded and went to work on his boots. The laces had been cut so she held them closed by winding some medical tape around them. The drug still raced through his veins, making every brush of her fingers the sweetest agony.

He wanted to go to Zoya, rip her to shreds and give the woman an education in pain, but he didn't. No matter how he'd enjoy killing her slowly, getting Twyla out of this horrible place mattered more. Revenge would come, just not today.

Twyla nudged her way under his arm, wrapping one arm around his waist. She managed to get him out of the building, but each step became more difficult between the leg wound and his arousal. He didn't know or care what had happened to the guards. Either they followed after the team or his men had killed them.

His heart pounded, pumping adrenaline through his veins. They were almost to the gate, freedom within their grasp, when his leg gave out. Jhett crumpled to his knees and pain detonated in a firestorm to steal his last remaining ounce of strength. So close, but so far away.

His eyes widened as a dark van screeched to a halt in the street, the side door sliding open. Alexi Zelenko ran toward them and helped pull Jhett to his feet. Pulling a small black box from his pocket, Alexi opened it and flipped a switch. Jhett counted in his head and when he reached five, a loud explosion rocked the compound. He wavered and fought to stay upright as the ground rolled beneath his feet. Twyla gasped but managed to keep both her cool and continue to help support him as they all picked up the pace.

"Come, comrade. You have a plane to catch." Twyla tensed and scowled at Alexi, but together they managed to get him into the van. The door slammed and the vehicle rocketed down the street before more fireworks erupted. Alexi had the whole place wired and it went up in a spectacular bang.

"What the fuck are you doing back here?" Her tone was filled with acid.

"Ah, sweetling. I am here to help, as I have done since you arrived in my country."

She gave a terse chuckle. "Yeah right. You backstabbing piece of shit. All you did was help get him captured."

"Not so, Twyla." Alexi shook his head.

Jhett took her hand and drew her attention. "Honey, I'll explain everything when we're in the air, but Alexi turned out not to be my enemy after all. He gave me the information that helped us find Hillman in the first place."

She still appeared unsure.

"Call the team, honey. Tell them to meet us at the plane."

Tapping her com, she relayed the orders. Not until they were on the plane with the rest of the team and in the air, Alexi staying behind on the runway, did she finally relax.

"It's a clean wound, through and through," Homerun assured him while cleaning and bandaging his leg. "Should heal well. You might have to do some physical therapy though."

He nodded in acknowledgement, glad one of the team had first-aid training. He'd hoped not to require that particular skill set during this mission. Thankfully, his visible wounds were not bad. Going into Stark, facing Zoya again had healed a few of the internal scars too.

The rest of the team moved to the front of the plane, finally giving them a bit of privacy to recuperate on the makeshift bed. Some of the concern had left Twyla's eyes and they took on a wicked gleam as she cuddled up next to him. His still painfully erect cock jerked in anticipation. "What devious ideas are brewing in that nimble mind of yours, hussy?"

She gasped. "Why did you call me that?"

Jhett shrugged. "I don't know, just popped into my head. You've got this look on your face. All fierce determination and sex."

"Mmm!" The moan vibrated through his neck where her lips pressed a tender kiss. "I have some unfinished business. Remember...you told me I could play later. Well, it's later."

Jhett folded his arms behind his head and smiled at her. "I'm all yours, honey." He spread his legs as she slid over top of him and fit herself into the space. The drugs still pumped through his bloodstream, making even the soft curve of her belly hurt, but he would not stop her this time.

Twyla dragged his shirt over his torso, her fingernails lightly scoring his skin. She licked a taut nipple and the damp sensation shot straight to his erection where it strained the fly of his pants. Gritting his teeth, he bunched the material, pillowing his head behind his neck, and watched. She kissed her way down his body, her face reflecting totally absorption in her task. When she reached his waist, she made quick work of releasing his cock from his pants.

Her fist wrapped around his shaft and stroked him. "Fuck, honey. That feels so good." Too good. He wasn't going to last long. Already he had trouble holding back his climax. Once she took him in her mouth, he'd be history but what a way to go.

Her lips parted and the tip of her tongue licked at the fluid escaping his slit. "Aw, fuck." The thrust of his hips may be involuntary, but he didn't fight the incredible sensation of her warm mouth sliding down his length. If anything, he tried to burrow deeper into the welcome haven. Any ideas of Zoya, torture or rape fled his mind. He no longer cared about anything other than who was with him.

Jhett struggled to talk. He had to tell her how he felt, although considering his cock was currently in her mouth, she might not believe the words. "Tw – Ah, yeah. Suck me harder!" She did, applying greater suction, her cheeks hollowing with each firm draw.

"Twyla," he gasped. "Honey, I...love...you!" His eyelids clamped tight and bright arcs of white light exploded in his head as her fingers teased his balls. His sac convulsed and cum blazed a scorching trail through his shaft and erupted down her throat.

Because of the drug, his cock remained erect, almost at full length. Twyla continued to lick and suck until not a drop of his seed remained. When she finally let him go, he glanced down as she licked at her lips with the satisfied grin of a cat that had devoured a bowl of cream.

Once again she curled up along his side, resting her head on his shoulder, exhaustion pulling at both of them.

Succumbing to the adrenaline crash, Twyla fell asleep tucked in close to his side. Her soft curves and warm body increased his arousal and kept him hard. His thoughts raced, circling back to the same thing. When he'd professed his love, she had not responded. Did that mean the emotion was not shared? Did she love him back? Wondering would get him nowhere. When they got back home, the two of them would have to talk about where this thing between them was headed. Decision made, he finally managed to turn off his mind and fall asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Luxuriating in the firm mattress and fine linens beneath her, Twyla stretched sore muscles and giggled, thinking she must look similar to Widget when the cat woke from a nap. As her mind began to catch up, she became aware of the familiar scents of Rock Rose Castle. She peeked from her cocoon of covers to glance about the room she'd stayed in last time, a sense of peace washing over her. Being in Scotland felt good, like coming home.

She rushed through a shower, brushed her teeth then dressed in comfortable workout clothes. Walking down the halls was always a unique experience due to the castle's ever-changing nature.

In the entrance to the kitchen, she came to an abrupt stop. Kaelin, Danu's servant and friend, worked at the stove. The giant man wore a bright peach-colored apron to protect his clothing while preparing breakfast. The domestic scene should be out of place for such a large man with his hard countenance, but it fit with his personality. During her time here, Twyla had discovered the sweet, caring man had a fondness for cooking.

"Kaelin," she squealed and raced forward, throwing herself into his open arms.

"Welcome back, Twyla May." He hugged her tight, lifting her feet right off the floor. "How did your mission go?" What a trip it had been to learn the man could hold an intelligent conversation instead of just grunt like Lurch.

When he set her down, Twyla rubbed at her chest. "I believe it would be considered a success. We extracted the computer guru and the team got out with only one injury. Last I remember we were on our way home." She clutched at her chest as a sudden horrible thought occurred. "Oh Lord. I hope we made it home. The bad guys didn't

come after us with fighter jets or something, did they? Jhett...the team...they're all right, aren't they?"

"I don't know, but if you're here the mission is completed, one way or another."

She grabbed at his apron, searching Kaelin's eyes for any clue. "Where is Danu? I have to know if the mission was a success."

"Calm down, my bonnie lass. Danu is in the practice room." He gave her another brief hug. "Go on and find her. I'll give you two a chance to talk before I bring in breakfast."

Twyla ran along the shifting hallways, a knot of dread forming in her abdomen. The only reason she could figure for Danu bringing her back to the castle was failure. If she'd failed at the mission...

No! She had not failed and would not allow herself to consider life without Jhett.

A familiar wall hanging captured her attention as she neared the library. Twyla paused to study the handsome man standing on the cliffs before the castle, gazing out to sea, the breeze ruffling his dark hair around his shoulders. She remembered the subject's posture being rigid, his hard expression filled with misery and anguish. The tapestry had changed since she'd last seen it. This time he appeared relaxed and at peace, almost wistful.

As she'd done before, Twyla traced his square jaw with her fingertips, trailing the soft caress over broad shoulders and the glorious arch of white feathered wings sprouting from his upper back, trailing to the ground for several feet behind. She no longer had to wonder about him because she knew well who the art represented. A man born to fly among the heavens, Jhett Ramsey. The man she respected, trusted, desired and cherished. The man she loved.

Seeing him changed in the tapestry, revitalized and serene, had to mean she'd had a positive effect on his life. With all her heart she prayed that the wall hanging represented his well-being back in their reality.

Entering the room, she found Danu sitting on the exercise mats, explaining the life of a Hussy warrior hunter to a woman with short, spiky blonde hair. Upon seeing Twyla, Danu excused herself and guided her outside to walk in the beautiful gardens.

"How are you feeling? Did you rest well?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm fine." She stopped walking and turned to face her mentor. "Please, Danu. Tell me what's happened. Was the mission a success? Is Jhett..." Her voice trembled and words failed Twyla.

Danu's hand cupped her face. "What does your heart tell you?"

"My heart..." She blew out a frustrated breath. "Right now it's beating about a million times a second. Please, Danu..."

"Focus, Twyla. You have a strong connection to Jhett. Reach out through the connection and tell me what you feel."

Twyla sighed, closed her eyes and calmed her mind. When she thought of him, she felt contentment and the easy relaxation of slumber. Her heart slowed, resuming a more normal rhythm.

"Ah, see. There's your answer."

"Then why am I here, instead of where I belong, with Jhett?"

They began walking again, but the scenery was lost on Twyla. As much as she loved Scotland, she longed to return to Jhett.

"I won't keep you long, but we have a few things to discuss."

"Like what?"

"While your mission was a complete success, your work is far from over, my dear. Your flying man...what is it you call him? Oh yes, your flyboy still has need of your services. You see, his work is not complete, therefore neither is yours."

She sighed. "All right, Danu. What do I need to do now?"

"Jhett is a mere mortal man. He has high hopes and dreams, along with all the faults that go along with being a man. You must be patient with him. Guide him when

you can or provide a swift kick in the butt when this is what he needs. Stay with him, the two of you working as a team."

The whole thing sounded fabulous to Twyla, but she wanted to stay with Jhett on a permanent basis, make a life with him. "For how long?"

Danu grinned. "For eternity, of course. You are soul mates, Twyla. For many incarnations now, the two of you have danced around each other but never made a solid commitment. This trend must come to an end. You must put aside fear and hold on tight. Don't ever let him go. Share your heart with him. Accept what you feel."

She could not have held back the wide smile if she tried. Twyla knew it was a goofy, foolish grin, but enormous joy overcame her. "Woohoo!" she shouted and danced around her more stoic mentor, then hugged the ancient woman with all her might. "I can do that!"

"I thought the mission may appeal to you."

Twyla would have never guessed Danu had a playful, teasing side. It came as a pleasant surprise, but a more pressing need filled her. "Danu, as much as I love it here, I need to go back."

"Yes, fine. I understand and will let you get back to your man. There will be other opportunities for us to chat."

"I get to come back?" A note of hopefulness filled her voice.

"Oh yes. I insist you do. There will be more training and future missions. And I will always be no farther away than a thought if you need my assistance."

They had a nice breakfast. Although anxious to get back, Twyla knew time passed quicker here. The team wasn't likely to even notice she'd left.

Chapter Fourteen

Leaving the back hallway of the diner, Jhett paused to watch Twyla. She tossed back her head and laughed at something Tank had said.

God, she's so beautiful. He often took a moment to reflect on the three months since completing the mission that had brought them together. Twyla had become his world. She amazed him on a daily basis with her kind, giving heart, but she was no marshmallow. When push came to shove, Twyla fought for what she believed in and didn't hesitate to tell him when he was wrong.

He fingered the small velvet pouch in his pocket. Tonight, when the time was right, he planned to make her a permanent part of his life. No way would he be stupid enough to let her get away. They were perfect together and he wanted her at his side always. He planned a romantic ride on the bike and making love under the stars. If his luck held, she'd say yes to his proposal. He couldn't imagine anything better than settling down, establishing some roots and starting a family with her.

Words from a conversation off to his side caught his attention. He felt no shame for eavesdropping on the waitresses since they were talking about Twyla.

"How does a huge Amazon like her wind up with two buff hunks? I mean really, she doesn't even wear any makeup."

"Yup, and look at her hair. Ugh! That braid is so old-fashioned, like one of those homely girls from *The Waltons*."

The two women chuckled. "It's just not fair."

Not fair, huh. He leaned against the wall, calm and casual for appearance's sake, legs crossed at the ankle and his arms crossed over his chest. "Well, ladies," okay, so he used the term loosely, "let me fill you in on her secret."

The waitresses' attention jerked to him in surprise, mortification at having been caught filled their expressions.

"She got two hunks because behind that wholesome exterior lurks a sexual goddess. Whew, she can wear both of us out and leave us begging for mercy. I tell ya, she is a dynamo."

He held their rapt attention. "Can kick some ass too – beat the hell out of this tough Russian chick one time. Damn, that woman wasn't very pretty when Twyla got done! You'll want to make sure she doesn't hear you talking about her. It would be a shame to see all the effort you put into making up your faces go to waste if she turned you black and blue."

They gasped and shivered and Jhett figured he'd had enough fun for one day, but couldn't resist a parting shot. "Never judge a book by its cover." He nodded at the rather average-appearing cook behind the counter. "He could have a ten-inch cock and be very good at using it."

The women glanced at the man with new appreciation gleaming in their eyes and Jhett had to bite back his laughter. Who knows, maybe the three of them would have an interesting night and possibly even find love...or not. Didn't matter to him. He'd gotten his point across.

He moved over to the table, chuckling over their conversation.

"So Tank got his name because no one can stop him at football, Homerun was named because he never strikes out with the ladies, Hammer's name is about kicking ass, but what about you, Mike?"

"Dodger is named for his ability to fly under the radar and never catching any flack for his wild stunts. No matter what he did, he always got out of it unscathed – dodged the bullet."

He reached out and shook Tank's hand. "We're outta here, man. Thanks for lunch."

Tank rose and pulled him into a one-armed hug. "Anytime, my friend." Then he spoke softer so only Jhett could hear. "Good luck tonight. If she turns you down, send her my way."

"When hell freezes over!"

His friend laughed, walked them out to the bike and gave Twyla a hug. Jhett smiled when he heard their whispered conversation.

"Hold onto him tight, baby girl. But if he ever treats you bad..."

"No worries there, Tank. I'm not letting him go and if he behaves badly, I'll kick his ass."

"That's my girl."

Jhett cleared his throat. "If you're done copping a feel on *my* woman, we're hitting the road."

Twyla punched his arm, hard. He had to tuck his hands in his pockets to keep from rubbing the abused muscles. Damn woman packed one hell of a punch. "Don't be a jerk," she admonished. "You know Tank's like a brother to me."

"Well, hell. That sucks!" Tank teased. "How about a distant kissing cousin?" He gave her a dirty grin, earning a punch for himself. "Ouch, I was only joking," he said while rubbing his biceps.

Jhett pulled Twyla close and they shared a searing kiss. "Come on, honey. Let's get going. I've got a surprise planned for tonight."

"Mmm, I hope it's a good surprise, flyboy."

"The best, honey. Only the best for you."

Tank groaned. "If y'all are gonna get all lovey-dovey then I'm outta here." He walked away, waving over his shoulder. "Catch you two later."

Chapter Fifteen

The road they traveled twisted and turned around the mountains. Summer wildflowers wilted under a smattering of gold, brown and rust-colored fall leaves shed from trees as they prepared for the coming winter. The idyllic setting created a feeling of déjà vu, almost as if she'd been here before. She shrugged it off, determined to live in the moment.

Twyla rested her head on Jhett's broad back and wrapped her arms tighter around his waist. She loved riding on the bike with him. Between being pressed close to the warmth of his body and the vibrations rolling through her, riding made her horny. Actually, she only had to be within a mile of Jhett to be in the mood. He kept her in a perpetual state of sexual arousal.

He turned off on a side road as the sun began its descent. When they reached their destination, she climbed off the bike and stretched. The throaty roar of the motor was replaced by the equally loud and thunderous sound of rushing water. Excitement hummed through her body. Twyla remembered telling Jhett about her special spot and wondered if he'd remembered.

She shot him a quizzical glance as he moved up next to her. "Come on, honey. Let's go see your surprise."

They didn't have to walk far before they reached a beautiful field, and on the other side was her waterfall. A deluge of water flowed over the rocks and into a small pool below. In the distance, the sun dipped behind the mountains, painting the misty sky in vibrant shades of gold, red and purple. The spot had a distinct feeling of peace and serenity. A private place tucked away unspoiled and safe from the rest of the world. Their own special haven.

"Oh Jhett, it's beautiful!" The words were the barest whisper. He moved in behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She leaned into the warmth of his strong body, his heat kissing her entire length. "My happy place."

"It's our place, honey. I bought it."

"You what?" She turned in his arms, cupping his handsome face in both hands. Her heart went into erratic palpitations. He'd bought her happy place...for them?

"I bought this small slice of heaven for us. Seems like the perfect place to build a house. Think Widget will be okay with moving?"

Twyla chuckled at the reminder of her cat's attitude toward her lover. Widget still resented Jhett taking his place in her bed. No matter how hard Jhett tried to get the cat to like him, Widget remained disagreeable. Even now, the big-hearted man thought about her fickle feline.

Such a good man!

She had the wild urge to throw herself at Jhett, knock him to the ground and devour him with voracious greed. Draw him into her until they were fused together, two becoming one. His eyes turned dark and lustful as they roved the angles of her face, drinking her in as his mouth fitted over her quivering lips. Rising up on her toes, her arms went around his neck. Their lips fused, tongues tasting, teeth nipping and she couldn't get close enough.

The hard ridge of his erection pressed into the soft swell of her belly. Jhett's fingers spread over her ass, pulling her in tighter. They clung to each other until her patience snapped. Twyla needed him, longed to be filled with the heat of his shaft, completed.

Jhett was drawn in by Twyla's heavy-lidded eyes, seduced by her anxious need. Tugging at their clothes, they stripped away the layers. The crisp mountain air didn't cool the frenzied need, if anything it intensified. They rushed toward culmination, which is not at all what he planned. He fought his body. Jhett wanted this to be perfect and had to slow down. He broke the kiss and they both gasped.

"Hang on, honey. Let me get a blanket."

Pulling away from her turned out to be harder than he'd anticipated. It took tremendous effort, but he managed to separate their tangled limbs and get to the bike. The darn thing had supplies strapped to every available surface. He'd brought a tent, sleeping bags and other supplies for a night in the wilderness, but all that would have to wait. He grabbed a soft blanket and spread it out at her feet.

Twyla made her dissatisfaction apparent with a perturbed scowl and her rigid stance, her hands fisted on her hips. "Are you done setting the scene yet, because I'm dying to get laid here?"

Jhett tossed back his head and laughed. He couldn't help it. She looked so fierce and determined then comes out with a zinger of a side-splitting statement. "Yeah, honey, I'm done. Now scoot your sweet ass over here and let me make love to you."

She froze. Oh boy, he'd gone and said it. They never called it making love. Both of them had skirted the "L" word since he'd said it at Stark, and he had no idea why. Their love for each other was obvious.

Her pout intensified and she huffed, "I want to fuck!"

Before her intention became clear, she stepped forward and swept his legs out from under him. Jhett landed with a loud whoosh as the air was forced from his lungs. She gave him no time to recover. Twyla moved over him, straddling his hips. She swooped forward, sealing their lips together in one hell of a kiss that blew his mind.

Her hips began to rock, rubbing her slick folds over his erection. The puffy lips of her pussy flowered, opening to envelop more of his length as she covered him with the liquid fire of her arousal. She grabbed his hands and he allowed her to pin his wrists to the blanket. "You can have slow later, flyboy. Right now I want hard and fast, raw and carnal."

On the next pass she rocked forward until the bulbous head of his cock lined up with her entrance then slammed her weight down, sheathing him in her tight clasp and moaning. Twyla let go of his hands and flattened her palms on his chest to support her movements. Strong legs closed on his hips as she lifted almost all the way off him only

to slam back down even harder. Her clit ground against his pelvic bone as their flesh met with a wet slap.

“Jesus, honey.”

He grasped her hips in an attempt to slow her down, but she would not relinquish control. Each rapid thrust made her breasts jiggle and bounce, enticing him. Jhett answered the seductive call, rising up on his elbows to suckle her swollen nipples.

“Ah, yes,” she cried and increased the frantic pace. “Yes!” Up and down, she rose and fell, riding him for her gluttonous pleasure. God, she was killing him but what a way to go.

“That’s it, Twyla. Take what you need. Fuck me.”

She panted as her body tensed, paused then shuddered. The walls of her pussy convulsed around his cock, milking his shaft, demanding the release he held back. He watched her face contort as she flew apart, screaming his name until her voice turned raw. It was the most delightful sound he’d ever heard.

Twyla barely withheld the words she yearned to say. Her heart wanted to shout her love to the world, but she was afraid. Would stating it aloud change everything? She’d never been in love before or made such a declaration. Perhaps in the past, but not in this lifetime. The very idea made her tremble inside, so instead, she gave herself over to the rapture that catapulted her body to the heavens, soaring on a long rolling wave of satisfaction. It felt so good and right. Perfect.

As she floated back down, his mouth found hers. Jhett leisurely nipped at her lips, his tongue slipping past them to tease her, reigniting her passion, but this time in a slow simmering blaze. She welcomed his kiss, stroked the velvety softness of his tongue with hers. Their lips moved in fluid brushes she found both soothing and arousing.

“My turn.”

With tender care, he reversed their positions, rolling her under him on the blanket. As she glanced at the sky, Twyla gasped. Night had settled around them and created a dazzling display of bright twinkling stars sprinkled liberally across the dark heavens.

She wondered if anyone else was doing the same thing, making love under the stars, enjoying the freedom they too often took for granted, thanks in part to soldiers like Jhett – men and woman who gave of themselves to defend the liberties of all.

And what the fuck was she doing getting all sentimental when a gorgeous man was prepared to worship her body. Sheesh, she was turning soft or something. Twyla decided that information would remain her secret. She had a reputation to uphold, after all.

“Are you gonna get on with it already or what? Keep me waiting here –”

Jhett handled her rant with aplomb. The wicked devil feathered the most wonderful kisses over her lips, then her eyelids, and even placed a delicate peck on the tip of her nose. Lord, if she didn’t love him by now, she’d fall head over heels with him tonight as, without words, he showed how much he cherished her.

She arched her neck, granting him complete access to the vulnerable column, her blood heating as he trailed kisses down to her collarbones. His warm tongue made a damp sweep into the hollow of her throat before taking a slow journey over each arm, teeth nibbling on her fingertips and returning to her chest.

Twyla writhed beneath him. Fire arced through her veins and cream coated the folds of her sex. “Jhett, I need...”

“Mmm...” he murmured into the upper swell of her breast. “This isn’t about what you need, honey. You had your turn and now it’s mine.”

Oh shit! He intended to torture her, keep her in suspense, hanging on the edge. Why had her heart chosen such an evil, devious man?

“Relax, honey. We have all night.”

“All night?” Yup, he planned to make her suffer. Well, two could play that game. Knowing how much he loved dirty talk, Twyla saw a light at the end of the tunnel. She would get him so hot and horny he’d give in to what they both wanted.

"I want your cock buried deep inside me. Fuck, I need that. Bad! Slamming into me hard until hot cum drenches us both. Please, I need to come!"

He didn't deviate from the excruciating, slow pace so she upped the ante. "God, the way your thick shaft forces my tight pussy to accept all of you. Ohhhh, yes." Twyla took her breasts into her hands, massaging the full globes, offering her nipples to his warm mouth. "Just think of my muscles clamping down, my pussy sucking at your cock, holding you inside."

Fuck, she wanted that. All of it. This whole sex-talk thing may just backfire on her. She was turning herself on, voice growing raspy, panting for breath, but Jhett never faltered. He seemed unaffected but had to be hurting since he had yet to climax.

"Thrusting your hips, powering into me, your cock dragging along my walls, creating the most extraordinary friction. My hips bucking, meeting your thrusts, our bodies grinding together, crying out for more. My back arching, anxious for the abrasive brush of your chest hair on my aching nipples."

He moaned and Twyla was ready to jump for joy. Finally, a sign her words had an effect.

"Keep going, honey. This is getting good."

Getting good? "Ugh! Jhett Ramsey, would you just fuck me already? I'm dying here."

He had the nerve to lift his head from her belly and laugh.

"Fine," she harrumphed. "Don't forget...paybacks are a bitch."

"I look forward to every minute!"

Twyla desired nothing more than to strangle him, but she tried turning on the charm instead. Whenever her brothers became irritating and she complained to her mother she'd heard about using honey to catch flies. Her father would ramble on about needing to learn how to win friends and influence people. She had plenty of friends, thank you very much. What she wanted was for her lover to get with the program.

Since sarcasm was more her style, she had to ponder the problem. How does one go about charming a lover into getting it on? She tried putting syrupy sweetness in her voice. "Jhett?"

"Hmm?" he mumbled, lips vibrating against the skin of her inner thigh.

Meeting his gaze, she fluttered her eyelashes. At least, she hoped she did.

"Got something in your eye, honey?"

Shit! "No, I'm fine. More than fine, actually," she purred. "Your lips feel so good. Lord, you get me so hot all I can think of is getting you inside me."

"Soon, honey."

Fuck, fuck, fuck! She sucked at charming. She threw her arms over her head, huffing out an exasperated breath. "Damn it, flyboy! What the hell's it going to take for me to get your cock pounding into my pussy?"

"Patience."

"Fuck patience," she snarled. "How do I get it now?" Twyla scooted down the blanket, trying to get those sexy lips where she needed them, on her clit instead of her leg. The jerk merely laughed and slid with her.

"About the only thing I can think of that will get you what you want is to stop holding back and give me three little words."

Three words? Pretty please with sugar on top. No, that's six. "Fuck me, please."

"Not even close."

Damn!

"You're the greatest!"

"Getting colder."

Blast it all.

She took a breath and regardless of being in the middle of her happy place, she sought it out in her mind as Jhett kissed her legs, sucked on her toes and continued to torment her. She let centuries-old memories fill her mind.

What she wouldn't give for a pair of pants. Society standards dictated women were to wear layer upon layer of clothes. Horrible corsets laced up tight and preventing air from entering the lungs, the stays digging into her ribs. A chemise and drawers, along with all the scratchy frills, and stiff crinolines under two petticoats. Stockings held up with garters that cut into her skin.

Catrina sighed. The duties of a Hussy warrior huntress would be much less complicated if she were permitted to dress like a man. Holding yards of material clenched about her hips, she raced along the wooded path. It would not do to be seen in such a state, whether she were completing her task of saving a certain gentleman's handsome behind in order for him to save the world or not.

She didn't drop her skirts as she raced into the clearing. Catrina remained focused on Gabriel and the impending duel. Propriety forgotten, she flew into his arms, the words flowing from her without requiring conscious thought. She knew what she wanted to say, had to say.

"Gabriel, please. I love you!" She knew he wanted the rest, all the little pieces of herself she held back, such as the truth of being recruited into the Hussies. She didn't feel ready to give that just yet.

His blue eyes brightened in a moment of unguarded vulnerability that Catrina felt deep in her soul. Incandescent light and love shone, illuminating the strength of their emotions.

Twyla was ripped from the scene and thrust across time and place into a memory of her current life. Lying on a bed in the Ukraine, masturbating, fighting to obtain release. Jhett stormed into the room, took over, brought her to orgasm. Afterward, he'd fucked her as she'd soared, again and again until his control had snapped. She'd caught the same flicker in his eyes and understanding dawned.

They belonged to each other, Jhett's beautiful soul tied to hers by their love through every different lifetime they had lived. He was her past, her future—everything.

And now she knew what he needed to hear. The words she'd been reluctant to speak for fear of scaring him, driving him away. They were the very words that would bind them together for eternity. Three words with the ultimate power, when wielded with care and honesty.

Twyla had no doubt of her love for Jhett, which gave her the ability to give him what both their souls needed.

“Jhett...stop!” She grabbed at him, fingers tangling in silky dark strands of hair and pulling his gaze to hers. Sensing the change in her, he held still as a statue, waiting, not even breathing.

“Jhett...I love you!” She sighed and went on to tell him all about Danu and the Hussies, taking the final leap of faith—the one that would change everything.

Twyla never imagined she’d ever see such a strong man cry, but tears swelled at the corners of his eyes and a fat droplet rolled down his cheek. She felt the warmth of his love rolling over her, cradling her and holding her close to his heart as their souls brushed up against each other then joined, binding them together for all of eternity.

“Oh...honey,” he floundered for only a moment before rocking her world on its axis. “I love you so much!”

The torture ended as their bodies joined. This time there was no race to the finish. They cherished each other, basked in the glow of their love and christened the mountaintop haven, their future home in this last incarnation together.

The moment was poignant. Success would end the need of dying and repeating the cycle of rebirth and attempting to correct their mistakes. This lifetime would be their greatest and longest lasting, filled with endless love.

About the Author

Nicole Austin lives on the sheltered Gulf Coast of Florida, where inspiration can be readily found sitting under a big shade umbrella on the beach while sipping cold margaritas. A voracious reader, she never goes anywhere without a book. All those delicious romances combined with a vivid imagination naturally created steamy fantasies and characters in her mind.

Discovering Ellora's Cave paved the path to freeing them as well as manifesting an intoxicating passion for Romantica®. The positive response of family and friends to her stories propelled Nicole into an incredible world where fantasy comes boldly to life. Now she stays busy working as a certified CT scan technologist, finishing her third college degree, reading, writing, and keeping up with family. Oh yeah, and did we mention all the hard work involved with research? Well, that's the fun job—certainly a labor of love.

Nicole welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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