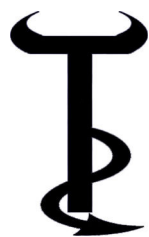




TRUSTING DELILAH

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To all my writing friends and to my critiquers. For the ones who've touched my life and made me believe I could write a story. For those who stand beside me and hold me up when I need a shoulder, a laugh or a place to hide the bodies.

Thanks to Tonya for welcoming me to a new publisher, my editor, Jenna (you're da bomb, chica) and the awesome cover artist and staff who support each of us. Couldn't do it without all of you.

“Posts, check in,” Roman ordered. There was a keen sense of satisfaction knowing he never needed to raise his voice over a low rumble to anyone on his crews. His commands were expected, and the trained responses were immediate. The silence of the receiver in his ear ended with the first replies reaching him.

“Section one, clear.”

“Post nine, clear.”

He listened for several seconds until, one by one, all the guards and lookouts cleared through his earpiece.

“Ten-four. All units, code yellow. Out,” was his neutral response.

Roman watched the constantly undulating throng in the large common room of the mansion with a roving gaze. People moved in slow surges of conversation around him. His stride was slow and purposeful as he moved along the wall, his attention riveted on the smallest detail. He was not a guest.

He owned the private security and defense company employed by Mr. Allen Cassel, and he oversaw his personal and business assets. He was one client Roman took personal care of, and had for a few years. Mr. Cassel had worked from being a southern Florida nobody to a billionaire, and Roman was in charge of the evening’s event. The party Mr. Cassel was hosting was for his youngest child, Cindy, who had recently turned eighteen.

There was so much money in the room that if Roman took a deep breath, he could almost smell the ink on the printed bills. Even a single evening gown, like the light green strapless number on the blonde who just paraded by, would probably pay the monthly mortgage on his ranch in Wyoming. Possibly even twice.

He ignored the sultry, hooded stare she shot him from heavily-lashed baby blues as she strolled by. He wasn’t interested, wasn’t looking. He was working.

There was silence in his ear as he continued to pace through the crowd. It was Mr. Cassel’s ‘A’ list of elite and influential people: from the Governor of Florida, to representatives of some of the most renowned businesses in the country, Mr. Cassel had his fingers in a lot of pies. That was only the first reason he was wealthy as sin. A couple more were good old fashioned luck, and of course, careful planning.

Roman knew about most of Mr. Cassel’s business dealings. The Cassel name stretched from continent to continent, and had earned a reputation for quality in rare gems. He had traveled with Mr. Cassel as his bodyguard to South America to research imports, and to Africa to tour diamond mines. He had been working personally for Mr. Cassel for over four years and a certain level of trust had developed between them. Roman had saved Mr. Cassel’s life twice already, once during one of those mining excursions, which also happened to be scheduled at the same time as a revolutionary uprising. There’s a lot to be said for a life when it’s saved, Roman thought. Mr. Cassel’s gratitude had been very charitable.

Even though Roman worked the same as anyone in his company, he wasn’t completely dependent on the generosity of his most affluent account, but it didn’t hurt any, either. His own private bodyguard and security defense company was in high demand up and down the east coast, but he didn’t want to lose his own edge. He worked by the same standards as his next manager. Roman never wanted to forget how hard it was on this side of the fence. He never wanted to be the one to send a man on an assignment he couldn’t handle.

Thirty minutes later, he’d walked half the front room’s perimeter and did another ground check. He never said a word to the guests, never made eye contact. He flatly ignored the blatant yearning in a few feminine eyes. The flow of champagne and the constant hum of conversation mixed and blended with the orchestral music of the evening. It was second nature to tune it all out, to remain focused.

As he faced one of the carpeted halls into the interior of the house, his gaze locked on a tall woman walking from the other end of the room. She had dark hair swept back in a casual wave and was wearing a subdued yellow gown. She nodded and smiled to a few others as she traveled along, her gaze skimming over his as their eyes met, then flickered on passed him in disinterest. He saw no date, no escort, and no ring either. He didn’t recognize her, but that wasn’t unusual. He didn’t know many of the guests by face

or by name, but he was responsible for everyone's welfare as well as the contents of the home while they were in attendance. He dismissed the tall woman as nothing more than a passing interest, and continued on his course.

Roman's attention carried across the crowd again. There were handshakes, laughter, smiles. Deals being made, and people being convinced. Parties like this were never merely for rubbing elbows, catching up with the Joneses, or portfolio discussion. This was where the kernels of corporate takeovers sprouted, where liaisons started. Morals were left at the door, and for many, the entire evening would be a lie beyond the charade of social camaraderie.

West Palm Beach was the upper crust of the world to many of the guests. Roman, however, was unaffected by the jewelry, the expensive designer gowns and tailored suits, or the money spent for the subtler vanity of personal looks. Houses like Mr. Cassel's could be as large as ten to fifteen thousand square feet and several floors, with the requisite staff and servants to keep it pristine and running smoothly. It took money, a lot of it, to keep it that way.

There was the detailed and artistic gardening of the palm trees and bougainvillea on the manicured lawns and garden. The buffed Italian marble and refined chrome and brass gleamed with care, and the rich leathers and silken fabrics of the inside more than hinted at class and money. West Palm Beach was a fairytale land to those who could only dream of the amount of money it took to keep it going for one day. Yet, all of that money meant nothing to Roman. He didn't work longer than normal hours because he needed to. He worked, ran a company, and supervised with an iron fist, because he could.

He supported over two thousand hard working people with his company. The men and women who worked for him had families, children, and mortgages. He used his training, his knowledge and skills, to keep those men and women and their families, and himself, financially sound. Not everyone was blessed with wealth and riches, himself included. But he didn't hate the people who were. They paid his employees.

When his sweeping vision rolled over the sea of heads once more, he unintentionally landed right on the tall brunette. She had to be six foot tall in heels, he mused to himself, watching how she seemed to glide a touch taller than the rest of the crowd. His eyes narrowed a fraction at a time as he continued to watch her easy striding walk. There was a simple beauty about her. She still appeared to be alone. Her smiles were warm and easy as she slipped by men and women, without real hesitation or intent to converse. She looked like she belonged there as she gracefully moved among the guests and serving people, without being draped in money and jewels. Yet there was something that just didn't feel right about her presence. His stomach started to burn. She was trouble. He knew it as well as he knew his own brother's face.

Eight minutes later, she proved him right. He watched her with surprise as she slipped down a dimly lit hallway with a stealthy backward glance at the crowd, which almost completely devoured her in the press of bodies. A hallway that had been partially blocked from the front of the home with a tall, flowing plant. He knew it led straight to the main center of the house.

"Ground to post three, I have a stray," he said even as he stalked in the direction she had disappeared.

"Ten-four. On my way."

Roman wasn't worried about leaving his own post as he took off after his prey. Steven knew what to do to keep an eye on the commons and keep his own post watched, a cordoned-off upper floor staircase that was definitely off-limits to traveling curiosity.

His path was slow and hindered with the mass of party attending guests. As he squeezed by elbows and gathered couples, it felt to him that everyone was out to impede his progress.

After several agonizing and slow moving moments, he reached the hall entrance and peered down its length. When he did, she wasn't there, which only added to his frustration. The hall bordered on dark with the wall sconces turned down to discourage interest. Rich carpet tones blended with the artistic paintings were hung in precise balanced locations along the wall. He cursed under his breath, knowing the guest restrooms for the evening were not down here. She had no reason to be going in this direction. No good reason, he allowed.

The hallway continued into one of the open living rooms of the mansion. There weren't many places

for her to hide in the hallway. The possibilities were nearly endless once she reached the other end. The burn in his stomach grew.

He uncurled his fist, knuckles popping loudly as he left the low rumbled sounds of the party behind him. He glared at the empty length of the hallway. This was not a night for petty burglary. Not on his watch. His steps were slow, his breathing even, as a hint of a scent hit him. He bared his teeth, his frustration building. It wasn't a scent of perfume, or flowered water. It was the scent of a woman. The pure scent of feminine allure. It drove him forward.

He followed it, her particular scented trail the only thing he had to work with in the dimness surrounding him. He paused for a brief second at an oak door, his entire body tensed, anticipating, but he knew she wasn't in that particular office. He kept moving, his eyes scanning the depth of the hallway until he reached the next living space. Again, it was empty. *Where the hell did she go?* His thick brows pulled together in irritation. Then he heard it. The near silent snick of a door closing.

He scanned the room in all directions, trying to place the faint sound. Three more hallways spread from this room along with a wide sweeping staircase. He trusted his instincts again. Taking a deep breath and finding the essence of her scent on his senses, he turned without hesitation toward the hallway farthest to his right, his body preparing for the coming confrontation. He was getting closer. And angrier. She had headed straight for the private offices of the rest of the family. His lips pulled up into a snarl when her trailing feminine allure stopped at Monica's office door, Mr. Cassel's daughter-in-law.

He paused at the door and listened, his hand poised over the knob for several seconds. He twisted carefully, turning the knob with absolute silence. His heart rate was elevated to a few beats over normal, which was good. He loved the chase, but he refused to be taken in by a potential burglar, female or not.

He swung the door in slowly and was met with an empty room. He stared in stunned disbelief. He knew she'd come in here, he was positive of it. Yet, all he found was a single glowing desktop lamp, a low light illuminating only a few feet of space, empty space. He shut the door when he walked into the office, locking it as a precaution.

Monica Cassel's office was an elegant example of money and taste, a decorator's taste to be sure, but this was lost on him as he walked the room. His lips lifted in an infuriated snarl again. He knew she had come in here! Her scent was still a lingering reminder, and all the proof he needed. *Where the hell did she go,* he demanded of no one but himself.

The plush pile carpeting quieted his step as he paced the wall cautiously, pulling the chair from behind the desk. He slid it back when he found nothing but space. There was no restroom, not even a small closet for this office. He began to wonder if he had missed the trail completely and was searching fruitlessly.

He felt the brisk draft walking around the end of the desk. Shaking his head once, he had to accept grudgingly he'd been outsmarted. She'd slipped out a ground-floor window, and he had no idea if she'd stolen a thing or not. It was apparent she wasn't there now, and that only added insult to injury. She'd managed to elude him, a next-to-never occurrence in his book. He shut the window, cursing roundly if quietly, wondering how a woman of her stature could have slipped right by everyone, in an evening gown no less. He was not going to enjoy making his report to Mr. Cassel about the activities of the evening.

His hand rested on the locked door and he breathed deep, only once, in anger. His entire body, every muscle he had, locked as her scent overwhelmed him. A heady feminine spice filled his lungs and slammed into the recesses of his skull.

It awakened more than the hunger of the hunt, the scent raked nerve endings, striking his primal instincts as well. Her fragrance was like no other and he felt his lips lift in a silent snarl of recognition, but he ignored it for the obvious. She was still in the room. Somehow, someway, she was there. Of course! The runaway cabinet. He didn't know where it was, but apparently his quarry did. A low sound vibrated through his chest. An echo of victory. His dark eyes narrowed in anticipation of the outcome, one he was looking forward to more and more now that he knew with a certainty he hadn't been bested. He swallowed his triumphant grin as he opened the door and walked out.

* * * *

Delilah released a pent up breath. *Shit, that was too close.* She stepped from behind the cabinet. Thank you Cindy, she thought, with a large amount of gratefulness attached to it. Obviously

Frankenstein's son didn't know of it or he'd have looked closer, and the window had been a beautiful decoy. It had distracted her pursuer enough to believe she was gone. That was good enough for her.

She closed the hatch on the cabinet door with a quiet push and moved into the room. No sense in drawing more attention to herself. She had a job to do, and not a limitless amount of time to do it and get out of the house. She pulled a small packet from between her breasts, flipping open the creased envelope lip with a short clipped nail. She had been thrilled when Cindy told her Monica preferred the ornate antique French style of phone; the cover popped off the microphone end with ease. She inserted the bug discreetly, then replaced the cover with a sharp snap. She cringed when it echoed in the office, waiting a breathless second to see if she would be discovered. When it looked like she was still safe, she attached the transmitter link and returned the phone to the desk in its original position.

She did a cursory search of the desk and of the files in the open drawers, optimistically hoping to stumble onto something, but instinctively she knew better. Monica wouldn't do her conniving from here. She was smarter than that. Everything Delilah had already found out about her left no doubt to the woman's character.

Monica was the kind of person Delilah loved to take down a peg. Rich, beautiful, and a self-righteous, self-absorbed pain in the ass. How she could cheat on Brad Cassel left Delilah absolutely confounded. Brad was a sweetheart. A caring, giving man who adored his wife, unfortunately blindly, as she'd discovered in the months she'd been following the unfaithful woman.

Even Cindy, his sister who had hired her those many months ago, could see it. Which was why Delilah was there tonight. Cindy believed Monica was up to something dirtier than her usual games, so she'd hired Delilah to get what Brad refused to listen to—proof. And Delilah was good at getting it.

She'd been doing undercover and investigative work for several years. She never got tired of the thrill, getting in and getting out. She'd just finished giving her aid on a case with the DEA, letting her alias have all the notoriety. No one who knew of her, knew *her*. She'd worked long and hard to keep it that way. Her father had been the type of teacher schools never had, instructing her in the things that weren't written in manuals and definitely weren't considered procedurally correct.

She peeked out the curtains once, deciding it was time to rejoin the party, hopefully for no longer than enough to stride right out the front door. She inched the door open, listening for any activity in that end of the house. Except she found Frankenstein's son leaning against the wall with his arms and legs crossed like he'd merely been waiting for his friend to join him. Or the local party crasher.

"Damn!" It slipped out even as she smoothed her features into an impenetrable mask.

"Come on," he ordered as he grabbed her arm, leading her right back into the room. "What did you take?"

She gave him a blank stare. Silence was definitely a good vow to take in this situation. His hold tightened as her silence lengthened. She fought the impulse to fight free. She would walk away this time.

"Don't make me repeat it."

She glared at him in answer.

"I can search you," he warned, his expression as cold and unyielding as his tone.

His ebony eyes glittered with a banked anger when she shrugged. He tossed her arms out without further warning and patted her down. *God, he has huge hands.* He curved over her shoulders and slid down her front, pressing beneath her breasts into her ribs. She assumed he was searching for bands or tape, or maybe a paper clip as close as he was getting. Her thigh muscles tightened and she bit off the hissed curse of air when his hands slid dangerously high between her legs. She wanted to scream at him—*it's an evening gown, not a flight suit!*

He spun her and repeated the intimate lesson on how to cop a feel while pretending to do a pat-down. She gritted her teeth when he took his time around her waist and rear. Men!

"All right, what were you doing in here?" he demanded when he came up empty.

She brandished an indifferent look as she faced him again.

"Look, unless you want to be arrested for trespassing, you better start talking," he told her.

She lifted a sculpted black brow. Cool. Challenging.

His gaze narrowed at her again and she had to fight to keep her lips still. He wasn't used to being ignored. Good! Let him stew. She could get out of jail. She didn't take anything, and it would be hard to

make any charges stick with a party going on and at least a hundred and fifty guests parading inside like peacocks at the zoo.

His gaze intensified as he crossed his arms and stared back at her. Only their breathing broke the quiet stretching between them.

Nothing in his expression changed when he suddenly started speaking again. "Ground, go."

She listened with a sharp ear. Someone forgot to do his check. What a shame, she silently mocked him. His wide chest rose and fell before her as he continued talking. "Ten-four. I've located the stray. Negative, questioning. I'll report to base when she's escorted off property. Out."

He returned her stare, his steely black gaze hardly blinking as he towered over her. In heels she was six-one, and he was looking down at her.

"Not scared at all, are you?" he taunted softly.

She restrained the flip remark that bounced to her tongue. It was too soon to start giving him that much hell.

"You'll have to talk eventually, when the police book you," he pointed out. His gaze narrowed again when her only reaction was to sigh, absolutely unconcerned. The tension in his frame relaxed a little, attempting tact since he wasn't getting anywhere. "All right, let's do this. I'll give you full immunity—a get out of jail free card—if you tell me what you were doing in here."

She stared at him for a full heartbeat, then blinked. *Who the hell did he think he was kidding?* She almost choked on the bubble of laughter that sprang up. He had to be kidding. Had to be.

"My God, a reaction. So you aren't made of stone," he said, a low vibrating tone of voice she knew was supposed to be intimidating. "Look, either way you're done for the night. Either tell me now, or tell the police in fifteen. I don't care."

Something about his voice and the relaxed stance of his posture told her this was her chance. It was as good as any other to get out unscathed.

"I can't. Confidentiality. And you need to work on your lying."

His dark eyes widened a fraction as he stared at her. "You can't?"

She nodded. "But I wasn't stealing. I'll leave now." She started to walk around him but his hand shot out and captured her again.

"What were you doing in here?" he growled low.

She gave him an icy stare. "Don't back out on your word. I told you, and now I'm leaving."

"Sorry, honey. That's not gonna fly," he told her with a silken threat right underneath the timbre of his voice. "All you told me was what you claim you weren't doing. That's not good enough."

She counted to three and then took a deep breath, silently sorry she was going to have to sack the poor guy. Even as the apology filtered through her thoughts, she twisted and jerked his balance off, centering hers to throw him over her shoulder. He landed with a smacking thud, followed by a deep, gusted groan.

"I said, yes I am," she told him, sauntering out of the room, calmly closing the door on his shocked expression. She had no idea if she would even make it out the front door. Surprisingly, even though she felt eyes on her, no one blocked her escape. She sighed, a heavy grateful breath for nerves of steel as she left the valet lot where her Mercedes Roadster was parked.

She'd walked out, right out of his hands. Mission accomplished. She hoped in the next few days it was worth it. Regardless of how little she'd let him bother her, Frankenstein's son was a handful. She drove with the image of him flat on his back, his dark eyes stunned wide and sent him another apology.

* * * *

Roman lay in a furious rage, his palms opening and closing as he fought for gulps of air, his lungs burning. She'd flipped him! The damn woman had flipped him! He closed his eyes, his chest hurting with his air supply depleted. His ass and back were feeling it too. He sucked in lungfuls as the absurdity of the encounter finally hit him, and then he started to laugh. She'd tossed him!

He managed to issue one order without sounding like he'd just run the Miami Marathon. "Ground to area five. Get the license plates of the Amazon in yellow."

"Sir?"

"Just do it," he repeated as he levered himself to his feet again.

He couldn't remember the last time someone had bested him, and he knew a woman never had. He brushed himself off, his hands falling around the edge of his 9mm. She'd been a cool customer, and except for the initial surprise of finding him right outside the door, she'd showed very little reaction. An ice maiden. Cold and emotionless.

He checked over the room again as he continued to replay their meeting, and wondered how she'd known about the cabinet when it was a family secret. He accepted he had given her the opportunity to get out and that was his mistake, but he was not going to regret his pat-down. The woman had a body. Solid, firm without being over done. Very shapely. And if the slit in the back of her skirt confirmed what he'd found during his pat-down, she had legs to kill.

After securing the room, he strode back down the hall to rejoin the party when he was frozen in mid-stride by the clamoring of his own senses. He inhaled once, finding her lingering feminine scent and felt the reaction he'd been too focused before to acknowledge.

Her heat, her essence filled his head, hammers slamming into his skull, demanding he pay attention. His fingers curled deeply, his blunt nails scraping against his palms as he recalled exactly how she had felt beneath his touch. Sculpted curves, a firm shape, long legs, soft skin. Hair as dark as a raven's wing and azure blue eyes. Unflinching cool blue eyes. He felt his blood begin to heat, to hum with a need he hadn't expected, nor the urgency that rose with it. He forcefully fought it off before he had real problems.

He muttered as he shook his head in denial. That ice maiden was in no way his type. And whatever she had been up to in Monica's office, he was positive it was no good. Yet even as the sultry scent of her tickled his senses and roamed unchecked through his system, he remembered the way she'd stood before him, unafraid and challenging, and he had to wonder who the woman was who didn't quake in fear before Roman Aiza.

Men stronger than she had cowered, not that he lorded the fact over anyone, but he knew he could instill fear with a calculated, cold stare or a soft snarl. Yet the ice maiden hadn't even shivered. She'd met him head on. She was an enigma, a feminine puzzle who was gathering momentum with every unanswered question.

He forced his stride to carry him on again. No matter what or who she was, after finding himself staring at the ceiling as those legs of hers carried her away, she had still been in an office that wasn't hers, and he had absolutely no answer as to why.

He ground his teeth together in frustration as he focused on that. It helped to clear his head as very little could.

"Area five to Ground."

"Ground, go."

"Amazon tracked, sir."

"Ten-four. Later," he answered the unspoken question. "Out."

II

Delilah sat in her office early in the morning a week later, scanning all the information she'd pulled from the public databases, including the office records from downtown. The time had flown by since the party in West Palm Beach, and only three phone calls were made from Monica's tapped phone line. A big risk for such a small payback. Especially after her little tussle with the giant of the valley. She sighed once at the memory.

Her search *was* bringing her closer, though. She'd already discovered one lover, dubbed Mr. X. She had half a dozen pictures on file for him, but there was nothing to prove the infidelity. She needed that money shot. Unfortunately, Monica had broken it off with Mr. X before she'd gotten it.

It was revolting to Delilah how a woman could be so faithless about marriage vows, to walk all over them with such obvious disdain. Women like Monica made Delilah sick, but she wasn't stopping yet. With one already identified and in the file, a second or even a third weren't a stretch of the imagination.

At the hint of a ring, she snatched up the black phone. There were only two people who had the number. "Talk to me."

"Del, it's Louis. I found Mr. Y."

"Oh, goody," she said, only half sarcastically, sweeping her hair back. Cheaters always put her in a foul mood. "Where is he?"

"He's on his boat in the marina."

She rolled her eyes. "Let me guess. Mrs. Cassel is a visiting friend on said boat."

"Give the lady a cigar," came the laughing tone.

"Fine. Do what you need to. I'll be here for a few hours. I'm still researching these other phone numbers." Among other things. She never told Louis everything. She never told anyone.

"See you at quitting time," Louis replied and hung up. Louis Romero was her photographer and only her second employee in the eight years since she'd decided to do undercover investigation on the side. Her first photographer left to have a family. With his gay partner. Go figure.

She shrugged. Nothing wrong with it, gay or otherwise, but after so many people like Monica, if this was how family was regarded now a days, she could live without it.

She continued mapping out the phone numbers and found three that were repeated constantly on Monica's phone bills. One she knew was Mr. X, and probably now that they had him, Mr. Y wouldn't be hard to cross from the list of identified faces.

She spent several hours working on the phone numbers and identification processes, working in the silence of her office. Her building wasn't in a swanky area of West Palm Beach. She'd made it a point to be in an obscure location, tucked away. Just the way she liked it. She never met clients there. She had a P.O. Box for a mailing address. The adjoining empty offices were hidden between warehouses and streets and nothing else. It was a very private world for a private investigator.

She'd kept her life simple. No plants because she forgot to water them. No pets because she was never home enough to care for one. She didn't waste time on relationships or men, and she didn't date. It was safer for her not to. Her work required anonymity.

She worked with only two contacts on the police force. She had one more with the state troopers, all of whom were honest men and would keep her secret. She didn't care if they took credit when she'd helped or was singularly responsible for an apprehension or bust, or if they gave her alias the credit. It all amounted to the same to Delilah. They knew she was thorough and silent as death when she had a case or if they requested her aid. She could take pride in that fact alone.

She'd been surprised when Cindy had contacted her and given her the job of digging up dirt on Monica. She took outside work regularly, but the Cassel name was society, and Cindy was young. Apparently she was old enough to realize she couldn't run to her daddy's guys with what she knew and be taken seriously, and that was a shame. What made Delilah sick was Monica wasn't even trying to hide her affairs, which made it that much more despicable in Delilah's eyes. She was brazen enough to flaunt them around her sister-in-law.

Did the woman have no honor, no self respect? What happened if someone else, like a newspaper, got a hold of this? What would happen to the family if it ran in the tabloids? The Cassels were

upstanding society. The scandal alone would permanently tarnish them.

This was the kind of case where no matter how satisfying it was to watch the fall, there were always innocent victims. The spouses, kids, family. Especially the kids. Delilah hated that. The kids were the most innocent. Like she had been—once.

She shook her head, shoving the thought away. She turned when the fax rang and welcomed the intrusion openly. There was work to do.

* * * *

Roman stopped his motorcycle next to the warehouse, doubting not only his common sense but his own sources. He'd memorized the address, and looking at it, saw nothing there. The vacant warehouse had a closed bay door, and it didn't look like anyone had set foot in it in a decade. It looked like the majority of other buildings and warehouses standing in the old industrial district. Empty skeletons of architecture because the businesses that had been there had moved on to more lucrative locations.

Ever since she'd turned up and then walked right out of the party, he'd been beating his head against the proverbial wall, going back and forth with the whys and hows. Why had she been in Monica's office? What had she been doing there that night? Who was she? Where did she come from? *How the hell did she flip me on my ass?* His brow pulled down in an irritated frown. That, more than anything, was eating him alive.

All right. So his ego along with his ass had taken a hit.

He cocked his head when he heard a muted ringing. It floated down from a window a story up in the warehouse he was watching. So there *was* someone there, he thought with a half smile. He walked cautiously to the door, pushing carefully against the door. It wasn't locked.

The door had the scratching drag of old steel on concrete, not loud, but enough. He let the metal door close slowly behind him as his eyes adjusted to the dust-laden interior. The bay door was to his right and—bingo—one Mercedes Roadster. This time his smile was a little bigger, curving in victory.

He spotted the steel stairs leading to the offices and took them with a slow, cautious pace. He felt the solid weight of his Glock in its holster beneath his leather jacket, and knew if necessary, he could rely on it. He never went in unprepared. Anywhere. He had no idea who was there. He could have stumbled on an underground headquarters for all he knew.

He took a quiet, deep breath and found the woman in the collage of dust and sun-heated concrete and steel, her feminine scent as ingrained as was possible after one encounter. He still didn't have a name for her. That irked him as much as the butt toss. She was careful. Kept her tracks hidden. No name, no address. This one had taken him five days to trace and more time and attention than he should have needed to find a Jane Doe who had one-upped him. If it weren't for the fact that he knew she was a flesh and blood person, he would have believed she was nothing more than a figment of his imagination. Something about the knowledge created a certain amount of respect for her.

He couldn't deny the facts though. He knew why he'd sought her out. The need to know who she was had consumed him from the moment he'd stopped like a deer in blinding headlights in the hallway, her feminine scent clinging to his skin, invading his blood. He was determined to prove that in this case, instincts were not right.

She was not his type for one, not even remotely. He liked his women tall, sure, but he didn't need one with an attitude equal to her height. This one had been a walking attitude problem from the first moment they'd locked horns. Second, he didn't particularly care for black hair. He'd gravitated toward dark blondes and soft brunettes, but when he found her at the top of the stairs, sitting in her utilitarian office, those thoughts and preferences didn't seem to hold as much weight as they once did.

Her head was down as she pored over paperwork, but he would've recognized the thick, silky hair of hers anywhere. An unexpected rush of need blazed through him. The long wave cascaded over her shoulders and back to lay with little concern on the desk, until, absorbed in her work, she brushed the weight behind her. He had instant visions of all her hair lying in far more erotic places and had to clench his jaw. This was not happening. He would control it, and dismiss it.

"You are one hard woman to locate," he said, standing in the doorway, pushing away his thoughts with a firm determination.

Her head snapped up at his voice and her eyes blazed at the intrusion. Her mouth pinched into an

unwelcoming line. For a split second, the ice maiden showed a reaction.

"Still trying to arrest me?" she asked as she sat up in her chair to regard him. Her composure returned quick as a warning light, the ice maiden once again facing him, without a single crack to her veneer. She wore very little makeup today, he noticed, but she really didn't need it. Her lashes were as jet black as her hair, around her cool eyes. Her lips were softly tinted ruby red, naturally flushed from being pressed together at his interruption.

He leaned with equal nonchalance against her door frame. "No, you managed to get out of it," he replied. He reached up and absently scratched at a peeling spot on the door frame, watching her from the corner of his eye. "But I still need to know what you were doing in the office, the one that didn't belong to you."

She shrugged. "Confidentiality. I can't." Her tone was as cool as her gaze.

"Are we going to repeat the whole damn scene?" he asked with a sigh of resignation, dropping his hand and letting his eyes roll. He was taken by surprise when he felt an obvious punch in his gut at the lazy smile lifting her lips playfully. She was doing something odd to his heart rate. He blinked, and made a concentrated effort to calm it.

"Depends. If you want a full reenactment, there's more room downstairs." There was a spark in her blue eyes matching the flippant nuance of her voice.

His entire body tensed. The silence stretched for seconds. Quietly, he said, "Tell me how you did it."

She didn't play dumb. Somehow, he didn't think she was. "I'm a black belt in three forms of martial arts," she informed him in an unconcerned voice.

"Let me guess, you can shoot too." For some reason, her cool indifference was really starting to grate at him. No one was this cool, this self-assured, especially around him. She wasn't even quivering an eyelash.

"I'm willing if you are," she challenged with the spark back in her eyes. Her lips lifted in a smirk. "Pick your poison."

He opened his jacket to show her his 9mm in his body holster with an assurance he knew he could substantiate. His skill was well known between his managers, and his family. No one could beat him with it.

She reciprocated. She opened a drawer and unlocked a Ruger and another Glock like his. "Will these be all right?" she asked in an innocent girl's voice. He nodded.

She lifted the phone and made a call. "Dean, I'm going to practice. About forty minutes ought to do it. Thanks."

"Cavalry?" Roman asked with a dark stare.

"Cops. They get upset when I forget to tell them, even all the way out here," she told him with a roll of her shoulder. As if it wasn't unusual to out of the blue call to warn the local department she was going to be firing a weapon.

When she rose from behind the desk, his mouth went dry. She was an Amazon all right, standing to his chin. She unlocked another cabinet and pulled out two boxes of ammo. "My treat," she told him, placing them on the desk.

"You're a good loser," he taunted her. She only lifted a cool brow. It made him more determined to make sure she lost.

He followed her down the stairs and was surprised to find a fenced mini range tucked between the walls of two of the warehouses. She removed a padlock on the gate and let him enter, then moved to a locked box for ear protection and targets.

He wasn't so sure he was going to win hands down when she mounted the first-round targets a hundred and sixty feet away. He had no idea how long she had been in business there, but by the sight of the range, it was well used. The shield and dirt bunker at the far end were pockmarked from rounds of practice. She looked over her shoulder at him. "Is this all right, or do you need them closer?"

Was she grinning at him? He watched her expressions closely. He growled low in his throat but shook his head. "That's fine." He bit back the retort he felt brewing when he saw her eyes flash at him. *She's laughing at me.* He saw it plainly in the lift of her lips.

Instead of thinking how much she could affect him, he watched her as she prepped the range, her

jeans hugging her long legs right down to her boots. She wore a simple cotton shirt, fitted at her waist and felt the rush again, his gaze lingering on the whole picture she made. He pushed it away with an inner snarl of anger.

This had become more than a mere challenge. He waited for her to rejoin him and she tugged on her headgear, then waved a hand to him. "Guests first."

He double-checked the chamber of his pistol, then grabbed the headgear she offered with little fanfare. With precise movements he emptied his clip, then stood back and let her do the same to the matching target.

Her form was excellent, rock steady. She didn't blink once as her hands worked the weapon in her hands. Pure admiration jumped her up on his list.

She swept away her headgear as she started for the other end. He studied his target. His shots were tight, the center demolished. He grinned as he faced her, knowing there was no way he had been beaten.

He strolled the separating steps, confident in what he would find. Yet, as he stared at her target, he felt the grin slide away and he swallowed. He looked at hers, then at his. "Holy shit," he breathed. He stepped in, searching hers for all ten grooves and damn if he didn't find all of them. Her grouping was a good half inch tighter too, probably more.

"Another round, cowboy?" she cooed at him, those lips of hers lifted in a taunting challenge.

"Damn straight." He tore his sheet down and she pinned up another. When they reached the firing end, he beat her to the punch. "Ladies first," he told her even as he tried to get his blood pressure back down. No one beat him at shooting! It wasn't possible.

When it was his turn again, he concentrated, firing with cool precision, and he knew that this time he had her. There was no way she could do it twice.

He stalked back from the targets, fuming.

"Ready to call it quits?" she asked in that falsely innocent voice of hers.

He knew he was glaring. He could have made nails into shavings, he was grinding his teeth so hard. "One more time."

She shrugged. "Okay. Let's at least make it challenging. Outer ring, six shots."

Challenging? He shot a heated stare right at her back. He reloaded then pulled on his gear. He took a deep breath and fired. He knew this time it was going to be at least a draw. It was the best he could hope for.

* * * *

Delilah hadn't had this much fun in months. Watching the son of Frankenstein lose his cool over her shot groups; it was like taking candy from a baby. A very tall, rather attractive baby, but a baby just the same. And boy, did he hate losing.

Wouldn't he laugh if he knew she'd actually come out expecting to draw? She hadn't meant to pound him into the dirt, but he was so damn cocky, so self-assured, pulling a peg out from under him had seemed like it would be a lot of fun, and she'd been right.

If his stance was any indication, she had this round hands down. He was trying too hard. She felt a small twinge of guilt. She'd pushed him, and maybe for an absolute stranger, it was cruel. Not that she was trying to do anything too intentionally, only give him a run for his money. She knew there were shooters out there better than her. Apparently, someone better than him had never occurred to him.

Del took a steadying breath when it was her turn to shoot. Men's egos were so damn fragile, she thought as she fired. The warmth of the steel in her hands was comforting as she made her six shots. The gun's repercussions were known, the bite of heated metal familiar, and even as she fired her last shot, she knew she had him.

She blinked. She made herself do it. For some stupid reason, the fact that he hadn't been a total jerk through the whole challenge made her do it. She didn't have to prove she could do everything better than him. Although, he'd been the most challenge she'd had in months.

He didn't gloat. He barely acknowledged her final shot was outside the ring. "Nice round."

"I guess I blinked."

"Yeah, sure," he grumbled darkly, not in the least bit convinced by the sound of his voice.

She tore down the pages and stuffed them in a trash can, then grabbed a broom and swept up the

spent cartridges to put in another canister. When she was finished, she looked around once more to make sure nothing was left out. She locked up the headgear and held the gate for him. With it locked, she led him back to the warehouse. She set the weapons on the desk and faced him.

"How 'bout dinner?" he asked, taking her by surprise.

She was speechless for what must have been only seconds, but felt like an eternity. No one asked her out anymore.

"Sorry. Need to clean my guns," she said in a 'need to wash my hair tonight' tone. She pulled out the kit as he stared. He still wasn't leaving. "Was there something else?" she asked evenly. His expression was thoughtful as he watched her, her head tilting to catch it.

"What were you doing at the house?" He narrowed his gaze, studying her. It didn't bother her in the least.

She felt the frown before she could stop it. "I told you. It's con-fi-den-tial." She made sure to enunciate every syllable, since he'd missed it the first three times she'd told him.

His voice raked over her as he walked the rest of the way into her office, eating up the free oxygen in the boxed space. "Who hired you?" *Now* his gaze did plenty. Heated onyx and ebony, he was so close.

"Hired me?" Her heart began to throb. "I don't have any idea what—"

He grabbed her arm, stilling her words in her throat. "Look, I'm not a dumb ox. You had a purpose and now I know you're dangerous. You're a potential threat. So either you start talking or I turn you into the authorities."

She made a shallow, unconcerned sound at him. His eyes narrowed more. "On what suspicions? Because I can shoot and toss your beefy butt over my shoulder, I'm a bad person? Puh-leaze." She yanked her arm free only to find she was limited in space. He'd effectively pinned her against her desk. It didn't help that he was built like a Mack truck and solid as a boulder.

"What's your name?" he demanded inches from her, his expression as harsh as his lowered voice.

"You haven't earned it!" she shot back, her patience slipping.

In a nanosecond, he had his arms locked on either side of her body, trapping her against the sharp edge of her desk. "Look, we can do this your way or my way, but I can guarantee you aren't going to like my way," he told her in a silky voice, his dark gaze flashing like heated coal at her.

She met his snarl with one of her own. "I suggest unless you want a repeat of your acrobatics, you release me. It's a long two stories down," she warned him through clenched teeth. His eyes glittered as she stared back at him, unblinking. He swore under his breath, shoving himself away from her. "Glad to see you're not a dumb ox," she murmured under her breath.

He captured her gaze again, his scowl deepening on his darkly glowering face. "I will repeat this only once more: Who are you?"

She met his stare head on, and for the first time, allowed herself to acknowledge the shiver sliding down her back. This man did not like being thwarted. She relented, to a degree.

"Believe me, I'm not worth knowing," she told him with a careless toss of her shoulder. She leaned against her desk in a more casual way, crossing her arms, prepared for his next attack.

He stepped back, his expression slackened by her answer. "Not worth knowing?" His tone was no less stunned than the shocked light in his dark eyes.

"That is what I believe I said, so if you'll excuse me," she said, trying to move away from the desk but he stepped up again and blocked her escape. She rolled her eyes. Great! Now she was a stinking challenge. She really didn't need this. She didn't have the time for it.

"Let me get this straight. You were at the party for a confidential purpose, can shoot better than anyone I've ever met, you're a black belt in God only knows what, and you won't even tell me your name?"

"I also speak four languages. Fluently," she offered as a last dig. "And no."

"Trade me," he whispered in a husky tone. He'd somehow inched close enough to block her vision of the rest of the office from around his solid body. Her gaze flicked from side to side, but all she found was shoulders filling her vision.

Her breathing hitched. "What?" She searched his handsome angular face directly in front of her.

He had moved in, towering over her, but for some reason her brain wasn't picking up the right

commands. His arms braced her again, but the threat of violence was gone. Now she felt captured. His dark brooding eyes were hooded. She bit her lower lip, fighting to keep the trembling at bay.

His hot breath whispered over her skin as he leaned toward her. "Trade me. Meet me for dinner. I'll tell you mine in good faith. You can tell me yours at dinner."

She fought the heat pooling in her belly at his whispered caress. She'd tasted desire, but had never allowed herself the freedom to experience it. The risks were too high, even as tempting as he was. She focused on his features, knowing what she had to do.

"I've already given you a name," she admitted, putting up her last wall. There was no way she was letting him get anything else out of her. He on the other hand, had ensured she would know everything there was to know about him by the end of the day.

"What's that?" he asked, his lips a scant breath from her neck. Tingles shot down her spine again, and created a wave of awareness making her heart trip for a new reason.

Silently she made another apology for what she was about to say, but he was way too close and way too stimulating. In a way she couldn't afford to become entangled in, not in anything that even remotely looked personal. "Son of Frankenstein."

She kept her face impassive when his breathing stopped. He pushed away from her with a glaring snarl. *Oh boy, was he pissed.*

"Fine," he snapped. "I tried to do this in a nice way. As of right now, you're a suspect."

She fought the wary spasm that threatened, keeping it out of her voice. "For what?" she asked as evenly as possible. His anger was a palpable echo in his expression.

"That's for me to know. Just know, I *will* be watching you."

Her own lip curled up, seeing it for the empty threat it was and felt relief that it was a bluff. This was one man who would never be able to lie to her convincingly. With those dark eyes and chiseled face, he could fool almost anyone, and she knew he knew it. She lifted a hand, catching his heated gaze with her own innocent stare, saying, "Thanks for the warning. By the way, I'm not exactly the kind of girl you can push around."

For a split second his expression, his entire stance, relaxed with something resembling respect. "So I've noticed." His gaze slid down her once more, a quick appraisal and then he pivoted on a booted heel and disappeared out the door, his tread heavy on the metal stairs. She fought the laugh when the door closed with a bang. Even she recognized the energy of nervous relief rather than humor, and she refused to let it out.

It wasn't until the receding sound of his bike reached her that she had to wonder if she'd just made herself the largest enemy on the planet.

III

“Do you have your guard?” Delilah asked the young woman at the table, keeping her tone lowered.

Cindy nodded, frowning. “I have one everywhere. I can’t pee without someone listening at the door anymore.”

Delilah gave her a look of sympathy. “It will pass. Your father is concerned for you. Your party made several of the papers and he doesn’t want anything to happen to you.”

Cindy sighed with a touch of frustration in the sound. “I know, but now that I’ve started this on Monica, I think it’s only going to get worse,” Cindy whispered, her gaze darting around them. “I don’t know what’s been going on that Dad needed to do this to me. I used to be able to go anywhere and only needed Jerome. Now I’m surrounded.” She rubbed hands down her slim arms. “At least, that’s what it feels like.”

Delilah didn’t want to say she was probably the reason, with her break-in to Monica’s office. That security man had taken a definite interest in her and her activities since she’d been able to walk out of the party, and all over him. She shook the memories off. The less connection there was between the two women, the safer Cindy would be. Especially if the kind of information Delilah was finding out about Monica came into light. This was going much deeper than adultery, but she still wasn’t satisfied with the information. There were too many inconsistencies and questions about the woman’s actions. And Delilah didn’t want Cindy implicated once the news was delivered. She was too young to be involved in Monica’s games.

The ladies separated as the waiter brought their lunches. The airy restaurant was in a secluded area of the beach, a little pricey for the tourist’s tastes but not so exclusive that either woman would look out of place. Delilah wore one of her light cotton suits and Cindy was dressed impeccably in a simple skirt and blouse. The young woman had very understated taste. Delilah had never seen her cloaked in jewels or ostentatious designer brands simply because she was rich and she could. That was more Monica’s style.

Delilah leaned in again. “Your brother, he still doesn’t have a clue, does he?” Real sympathy was in her gaze.

Cindy shook her head, her own expression sad. “No. He adores Monica. How anyone can’t see through her, I’ll never know.”

“I understand. A man can be blinded by the pretty wrapping. Women, we know better.” She offered an understanding light pat on the back of Cindy’s hand. Delilah may have never experienced that much blind adoration aimed at her in a relationship, but sadly she witnessed it often enough in her cases.

Cindy nodded once, her mouth firmer. “That about sums it up.” She leaned in across the table. “But the reason I asked to meet with you again is because, lately, I’ve gotten a real bad feeling from her.”

“Oh, like what?” Delilah asked taking a bite of her cobb salad. What she’d give for a steak or even a double burger, but she was on the clock, and rich or not, Cindy was paying.

Cindy paled, saying, “I can’t explain it, but it’s like she’s turned evil.” Delilah caught the shiver as it crossed the young woman’s shoulders.

Wiping her mouth, Delilah set her fork down before she started talking. “Cindy, whether a person is up to no good or not, they’ve always been that way. Something must have triggered her to be less careful around you. To not be concerned about letting her real intentions show.” Delilah barked the other woman’s name sharply. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed. She dropped her voice when it looked like they were still cocooned from the rest of the world. “Does she know what you’re doing?”

Cindy was quick to shake her head, her eyes widening. “I don’t think so. I’ve never discussed this with anyone. I’ve met you only twice and there is nothing to connect us at home.”

“Would someone have reported to her if her office had been invaded?” Delilah forced her tone to remain even.

Cindy made a sound of disgust. “I doubt it. She’s never there. She’s always out shopping, or seeing friends. I think she has a few staying at the marina right now. She was complaining about the gulls the other day.”

“Hmm, yes. The marina,” Delilah agreed, already aware of that particular friend, the picture of the

man in her file coming back to her easily. "Look, you stay and finish your lunch. Leave after I do, at least ten minutes. I have more leads to work on."

"I'm worried about Brad and my dad," Cindy said, lifting searching blue-gray eyes. "I know she's up to something." There was no doubt as to the worried conviction in her voice.

"You have my private number," Delilah reminded Cindy as she stood, lifting a small light purse that matched her suit. "If at anytime you think you need it, call me. Tell me when and where, and I can have the backup you need."

Cindy looked at her with wide trusting eyes. "Shouldn't I let my dad know?"

"Not yet. It's safer for the moment. We don't want to show our hand too early. Don't worry, Cindy, if you call, I'll know it's you."

Cindy appeared to be less than convinced. "How?"

"You're the only person who has the number right now. I only give it out to certain clients, and it's unlisted."

"If you're sure," Cindy said in a quiet tone.

"You've also got all those bodyguards. Don't forget them."

This time Cindy's sound was definitely unladylike. "Like I could."

Delilah wanted to comfort her, to let her know she really wasn't alone in this, but it was a liberty she couldn't take. Instead, she simply told her, "Hang in there. This will all be a bad memory before too much longer."

"Getting close?" she asked Delilah hopefully. One last question.

"Very. There's very little left I need to seal her future," she informed the younger woman. Before Cindy could try for a longer lunch date leaving her open to identification, she slid on her sunglasses and adjusted her hat. She walked into the sunshine with long strides, walking several blocks to retrieve her car where she had parked. It was far from the restaurant, and away from any chance of even a slim connection to their meeting.

East coast weather was beautiful, for the most part. Scratch the hurricane season, she reasoned, but for everything else, she loved it. Typically sunny and sinfully perfect. Done with her meeting, she couldn't wait to get back into a pair regular jeans and her favorite boots.

After a quick change of clothes, she went back to work at the warehouse. She needed to scan the latest photos Louis had taken and identify them. She wanted nothing less than rock-solid proof when she gave her findings to Cindy. The girl had guts to do this, to save her brother's reputation and her father's money before it got out of hand.

She sat at her desk, studying the pictures, and they were very clear. Monica lip-locked with a brawny looking blond on the docks. Monica walking aboard the sailing boat. A sneer lifted Delilah's lips. Monica was so secure she didn't even use a sun hat. Blatant was an understatement.

After running the ownership of the boat, she had Monica's date's name and ran it through the database. She knew how to pick her men, that was for sure, Delilah thought as she glared at her computer screen.

The worst part, evidently 'blond and stunning', was one of Brad's business partners. Simon Letrell was an upstanding, trusted friend by his business records, who was also rich as sin. He worked together with Brad for Mr. Cassel's importing and shipping business. She already had the information on Monica's first liaison, and once Mr. Letrell was sufficiently labeled, she added him to the file. At one point, these same discoveries would have sickened her, but not any longer.

Cindy wanted to help her brother see reason, to know really how far Monica was dragging him and the family name through the mud, because the further she dug, the more and more it became apparent Brad really had no idea of Monica's extracurricular activities. He worked hard and usually long hours, teaming with his dad at the corporate offices in downtown Palm Beach. There was one fact Delilah was assured of; Monica had signed a prenuptial agreement. No one, man or woman, who had so much disregard should be given a single thing. Not as Delilah saw things.

Her own mother had been a prime example. She'd died in an auto accident in Italy, while her lover was driving the car. How appropriate, she thought bitterly, that now she'd all but committed her life to keeping others from being hurt by the same duplicity. She'd devoted her life to public safety in one form

or another, be it as an investigator, or silent law enforcement with no department and no badge. It was only the fact one occupation typically left her feeling more tainted than the other.

She never could understand how her mother with a loving husband and a child at home, could go beyond what was right and wrong. How could any woman have an affair? Or a man? Had being with her and her father been repugnant in some way? Had Delilah been less than a perfect daughter? Less than her mother had wanted? She had no way of knowing. She had been raised almost exclusively by Daniel Roman, even when her mother had been alive. Her mother had always loved Italy and she spent a lot of time visiting acquaintances there. It wasn't until years after her death that Delilah realized those acquaintances were people she'd preferred to her own family; preferred over her.

She slammed the file cabinet closed, hating that her thoughts had once again lingered over her mother's deceiving life. After her mother's death, she and her father moved to Japan. They lived there for fifteen years and after the initial adjustments, she'd loved it. That was when she found a goal, became focused with her life.

She had kept her grades solid, studied in criminology and kept her language knowledge current. Her father remarried and somehow managed to put his deceased wife's unfaithfulness behind him.

Delilah hadn't yet reached that stage of her life.

She shot out of her chair, unable to sit a moment longer with those thoughts clogging her mind like a dark cloud. Thinking of her mother's affair always made her angry, and filled her with a bitter futility. It was that affair which had stolen her from them, from her daughter and husband, and there was only one cure.

She went to her private shower and stripped, to change into her dojo whites she kept nearby strictly for this purpose and tied the black cotton belt snugly around her waist. She yanked back her hair, fitting it with a black band, and taking a deep breath, hit the stairs with an agitated step.

Within minutes, she'd pulled out her stored mats and began her daily workout. Seeking inner peace. Searching through the wisdom of generations and centuries to ease the maelstrom of her thoughts.

She knelt in the middle of her turbulent sea, searching for a balance, listening to the teachings of her Masters. She'd been a wild student at first, torn and disillusioned with her world. She'd been angry at everyone, with her life in upheaval over her mother's death. The constant line of men who never smiled coming and going, questioning her and her father. The move, changing houses, schools. It was endless. Yet, with the influence of her teachers and *Sensei*, she learned her stability required no outside force. Her stability was her inner strength, her ability. With their help, she learned how to harness it, make it work for her instead of against her, until she could make herself feel whole again.

She stayed in her position as she repeated the calming mantras that preceded her rigors. One good thing about working alone and working away from the rat race, was the freedom to do this. She'd slowly go insane if she had to work in a cubicle or an office with constant eyes and ears.

She listened to her heart, her breathing, her life as it raced through her. She was her own fortress. No one could take that from her. Never again.

Focused once more, her concentration as clear as cut crystal, she leaped to her feet with an agile grace her height would have belied. Her last *Sensei* had been impressed with her fluid movements long before he'd begun to tap into her inner ability. By that time, she'd already become an honored black belt in karate, and her *Sensei* had rejoiced in her talents.

She'd been a fast learner once she accepted they were teaching her and not trying to control her. Being controlled had always been a secret fear of Delilah's especially once she realized exactly what she was capable of.

She was adept with a staff and a sword, as well as hand to hand, and practiced faithfully to keep her skills sharp. She could have stayed in Japan but had chosen to take her criminology studies in the States. She knew, eventually, she would have to return to see her father, but for now, she had enough memories to keep her mind and body occupied.

As she began her motions, the soothing activity became at once familiar to her, and she was able to block out the lingering pain of her mother's betrayal. The memory of that year was one she didn't need to concentrate on for it to have its full affect on her.

* * * *

Roman hadn't wanted to come back, not after their last meeting. He knew she was a hard ass. The hardest damn rock of a sharp shooter he'd ever met, but it was becoming impossible to ignore her. Impossible to forget her. She'd begun to infiltrate his dreams, and he didn't like it. He did not want to be interested in this woman.

His father had warned him, had warned all of the children, their time would come, and when it did, there was nothing to be done about it.

Roman was the second born, second son in a group of non-identical quadruplets. The rarity of multiple siblings in a single birth was astronomical. And yet, there had never been an explanation for it either. His mother had never admitted to doing anything to encourage the quadruplet birth, and Roman would be the last person to ask if she had manipulated it.

Still, he was thankful for his family. He loved his brother and his sisters. He adored his parents—they knew how to stay out of his life. But for once, in this instance, deep inside he wished this was something he didn't have to face alone.

It sucked that this was happening to him first. He felt like a damn guinea pig, because now he knew why he was drawn to the raven-haired woman when so many others could be dismissed like yesterday's paper.

This woman, the one he *still* didn't have a real name for after more fruitless searching, was by all of his senses, his mate. The only information he'd found on her was more names and addresses than any one person should be born with. She was a chameleon on paper, but a hot-blooded woman in person.

He swallowed as he leaned his motorcycle to rest, and tossed his leg across with an easy movement as he stared at the warehouse yet again. Maybe this time she wouldn't be here. He could only hope.

He pushed the door open and heard the grating sound again. He held his jaw tight waiting for the expected shout to leave. It never came. His head snapped up instead when he heard a guttural cry in the depths of the building. Instinctively, he pulled his weapon from its holster, searching in all directions, sliding into the shadows as the cry repeated followed by a sharp cracking sound. Every nerve he had went on alert as he followed the sound, nearing a step at a time. He rolled his body soundlessly around a corner, his vision trying to adjust to the flickering light from the overhead windows in the cavernous area of the warehouse.

He drew a breath. She was there. Even as he inched further down the wall making his assessment, the relieved fact that she was alone registered at the same unstoppable instant his wrists were whacked with a rod. Less than three seconds later he was flat on his back—again—staring up at her wide eyed and annoyed expression.

"You of all people should know better than to sneak up on a woman during her exercise. We hate witnesses," she reprimanded him, barely winded. She held out her hand to help him to his feet with hardly more than a passing glance.

He rubbed his ass for the second time because of this woman. "I heard a fight."

He stared behind her when she poked a thumb over her shoulder. "I was playing with my doll," she remarked with a wry twist to her lips.

Her 'doll' was a multi-limbed wooden workout apparatus. She shot him a chagrined stare when she leaned over to retrieve his gun. She handed it to him without comment.

"Thanks."

"No problem. I put it there," she pointed out as she turned to pick up the bamboo she'd unarmed him with. She didn't bother to give him a second glance as she returned to her workout.

All he could do was shake his head at her ability as she started back up again. That made twice she'd gotten the better of him, three with the shootout. He noticed she was taking on a new position on the mats, facing her 'doll'. Well, if she didn't care, neither did he.

He found a spot against the wall to get comfortable and started to inspect his gun for damage and dusted it with his handkerchief as she beat the hell out of the dummy hanging by a chain.

He flinched when a solid kick sent the apparatus spinning on its ground connector. *Damn, she's tough.* He couldn't help the thought as she kept up the robust kicks and slamming hand blocks. She flew through the air, executing a kick that could have decapitated a horse. Her cry echoed wall to wall as she moved through the air, rising high and kicking out again. Roman's eyes widened as she moved. She was

poetry in motion. He watched as she did a back flip and faced the doll, executing a precise slice, knowing anyone who challenged her, would be taking their life into their own hands. She knew what she was doing.

It was some time later when she knelt and bowed her head in the middle of the mat. She was breathing hard and her skin glowed with a rosy hue, damp from both the warmth of the warehouse and from her exertions. Her self-absorption gave him ample opportunity to look at the woman who was, as far as he could tell by his reactions, supposed to be his life mate.

She wasn't gorgeous. Her features were a bit wide. But if memory served him right, with her height, she had a set of legs that were beyond fantastic. She had nice breasts, from the shape formed by her outfit, and her hair still drew him. Raven black with a soft touch that could almost be a curl, but ended more in a wave.

He clenched his fist demanding control, fighting the impulse to touch her as his hand rose of its own accord. He would control this. Just because her scent could almost bring him to his knees and the curve of her body beckoned to him like a lighthouse beacon on a storm tossed night, he would not accept that as his only evidence.

Choosing a life mate was not an easy accomplishment, for anyone in his family. It required finesse for one, and a huge amount of trust. In his business it was hard earned. In his private life, he only trusted family.

He made a small snickering sound, aware she didn't even trust him with her name. Great start, he thought sarcastically as she rose from her knees and flipped the mat back against the wall. She unhooked the ground clamp, then hit a covered button over his head and the dummy rose off the floor. It disappeared into the rafters of the building.

"I like to protect him from vandals. I'm the only one who gets to beat him up," she stated as his stare locked with hers.

He nodded in understanding. His voice seemed to have gone on vacation with those azure blue eyes staring so coolly back at him.

She offered a hand again. "I'll shower and then you can tell me why you're here."

His mouth turned to cotton as the picture of her naked body streaked with water hit him between the eyes. He fought to keep it from his expression as he gamely followed her. He would control this, he ordered himself one last time. He refused to acknowledge anything less.

Ten minutes later she was sitting behind the desk, her damp hair swinging with her movements as he tried to put into words why he was there.

She nailed him with a chilly stare before he'd had a real chance to form his thoughts into coherent sentences. "If you're here to try to make me crack, I won't," she explained in a deceptively calm voice.

No, he'd accepted that already, and he wasn't into torturing for information. "I'm here to see if you would reconsider the dinner invitation." He clenched his jaw, angry with himself for his obviousness. He'd had no intention of asking her out!

Her gaze narrowed at him. "Why?" came her cold and suspicious response.

He sat back in his chair, relaxing. "I want to know your name. You're a better shot than me. You can kick my ass." He offered a grin, forgiving himself when she didn't seem to notice his lack of restraint. "Pick one."

She folded her hands primly on her desk. "First of all, I don't give out my name, I don't date, and I only kick ass when I have no other choice."

He rubbed his chest. "Ouch. Direct hit." She was an ice maiden through and through. Why was he even bothering with her? There were women all over the state, all over the country, he could call and they would jump at the chance to spend time with him.

Then he saw it. Her lips twitched, and it emboldened his attempt. The ice maiden could thaw. He was silent as he considered his next move. He shifted in his chair, still unsure about why he was even asking, why it mattered so much when he really didn't want to have anything to do with her. Well, almost anything, he conceded, as the attraction he'd been battling reformed with a heated rush when she tossed him a challenging cool glimpse of those blue eyes. Only this time he caught a spark in their crystal depths, and felt it clear down to his toes.

“Okay. Let’s say we do dinner. I show you I’m not a hired thug and then you tell me your name?”

Her response was a counter offer. “You take me to dinner, you accept and admit the fact that I’m not a thief and then I tell you my name.”

He nodded, considering. She was a tough customer, all right. “I take you to dinner, prove I’m not a thumb-cruncher and accept, graciously, that you’re not a thief, and then I get to know your name.” His brow lifted at she turned his offer over.

Her gaze was intense. “I have a condition.”

He rolled his eyes, but he forced himself to keep the laughter out of his voice. “Which is?” A condition. He should have expected it.

She leaned in and his breath slammed to a solid stop for several seconds as her breasts pressed against the t-shirt she had put on after her shower. It required physical effort to stay still—they were beautifully outlined and hard to ignore.

“I want to know your name now, and I don’t want to go anywhere local,” she said, breaking into his thoughts.

He gave her an even look. “That’s two conditions,” he pointed out.

“That’s my condition. Take it or leave it.”

He leaned back, crossing his leg over his knee as he watched her. She hardly moved a muscle, her gaze never faltered. *What kind of woman was she?* “You’re a bitch at chess, aren’t you?” he asked her, perfectly serious.

“And poker. I play for bills,” she replied without a hint of humor.

He smiled at her. She would be hell on wheels in Vegas.

Her expression hardened in a heartbeat as a line on her phone began to ring. He watched in curious silence that changed to raging anger as he listened. And watched her every move.

She eased open a drawer behind her and started working a tracer, lifting the phones simultaneously.

“Talk to me,” she ordered in a husky no-nonsense voice. “I’m right here. I told you I would be if anything happened. Where are—” He watched as a pained expression flowed over her face. “I have everything. I’ll...” She closed her eyes as she hung up the phone, looking at the tracer with a bleak look. “Damn!” she shouted. “It wasn’t long enough!” She slammed down the receiver for the tracer.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded, the private bantering mood destroyed. He recognized the equipment immediately and all it did was give him more questions, and renewed his suspicions about why she had been at the house to begin with.

She stood and faced him as she pulled out her Glock and her holster. “Sorry, cowboy. Date’s off. Cindy Cassel has been kidnapped.”

Delilah wasn't too surprised when he leaped from his chair, pushing it back with a hard shove. An icy calm settled over her as she gathered her weapon and a spare box of bullets. She snuck him a glance, perturbed she hadn't taken the time to read the information sitting face down in the tray of her fax machine. Details about the man in front of her.

"What? Kidnapped? When?"

She didn't go into specifics about the harsh curse she'd heard or Cindy's squeal as the phone suddenly disconnected. She prayed Cindy was all right, and that she wasn't already too late. The clock was running now, and it was against her. "By the sound of her voice, I'd say about twenty minutes ago. She was lucky to get a call off."

"By the sound of her voice?" he snapped. She ignored the dumbfounded look he gave her. She didn't have time to explain.

She looked at him, suddenly aware she still didn't know who her cowboy was. "I have to go," was all she offered as she pulled the pocket file on Monica's history with the latest information from her desk drawer and started for the stairs.

His hand shot out, a bruising clamp on her arm. "Oh, no you don't. You tell me right now what is going on and who the hell you are," he snarled at her.

Her gaze narrowed sharply at him. "I'm Cindy's chance of coming home alive. I need to talk to Brad, but I believe Monica is the kidnapper."

His stunned expression showed his disbelief, and she didn't have time for it now. She pulled free when his fingers went lax, his gaze growing unfocused, trying to place her accusations. A second after she landed on cement with a running gait, she was in her Mercedes. She hit the button clipped to her visor to lift the automatic bay door while the car engine revved like an anxious tiger under her fingers.

She didn't blink an eye when he jumped into the passenger seat. She wasn't going to make any apologies if his bike wasn't there when she came back.

"Are you going to tell me anything?" he shouted over the wind a few minutes later on the highway. She never rode with the top up. Then again, she never rode with anyone else in the car, either.

She yanked the car over to the side of the road and tapped her fingers with impatience while the top lifted and locked into place. When she saw him reaching, she let her hand fall to the file before he could grab it, where months of hard work and proof of duplicity, of Monica's betrayals, were exposed. And prayed she wasn't about to make the first mistake of her career, and maybe the largest one of her life. She never shared information, never let anyone get close enough to know her. It was deadly in her line of work. If someone knew of her connections, realized who she knew, what she knew... Delilah let out a slow hissed breath. She couldn't even afford to think that way.

Her gaze met his and for a fleeting minute, she thought her trust was going to be well placed. Delilah almost laughed at the thought. No one was worth trusting anymore.

Her mouth formed a thin, sharp line. "This is extremely confidential. I don't know one thing about you, and if you screw this up, I'm not going to be burned. Do I make myself absolutely clear?" she demanded, as she shot back out onto the road to take them to West Palm Beach.

"You can trust me. I'm head of security for the Cassels. If this concerns Cindy, then I need to know," he stated as he slid the pictures out. She heard as air slid through his teeth, followed by a harsh curse.

He was silent for a long time as she drove barely within legal limits. He didn't even blink when she passed a BMW like it was on bricks.

"How long?"

"Guesstimating, over two years. She has a third, but I haven't found him yet."

He hung his head in understanding. "So you're an investigator."

She almost smiled at the simplicity of his deduction. *As if*. "I'm a maverick, a pain in the ass to law enforcement because I don't follow their rules. I'm one of those rare few who is allowed to slip through the red tape as far as the government is concerned. I'm undercover half the time, finding assholes with the wrong women, or their wives with the assholes." She had to fight the taste of bitterness those words left on her tongue. "The other half doesn't bare describing."

"But why do you think Monica did *this*?" His interest was on what he was reading, intent on the reports she had made against the woman she feared was behind Cindy's kidnapping.

She shot him a sharp look. "I don't need you poking your head into this, cowboy."

"Better than the son of Frankenstein." His attempt at humor wasn't completely lost on her but she couldn't enjoy it. "I can help with this," he finally offered soberly. "I have an entire office of equipment."

"That's up to them. If they call in the cops, I'm out of it."

"But it will be blown sky high if they do," he replied. She nodded once, entirely aware of what he was saying.

"I know." She shrugged even as her hands gripped the wheel tighter, keeping the anger inside. "Not my call. I have the ground work for motive."

"How's that?" he asked as he turned to face her.

"Cindy's the one who hired me to follow her." She caught a glimpse of widened dark eyes. "The girl's more than a pretty face and she knows Monica is up to something. Cindy knew about at least one of Monica's lovers and feared something more behind it. That's why I'm still digging. I think she may be right."

"So Monica pulls a stunt to keep her quiet," he stated easily, not quite dismissively but trying to be rational.

She held up a hand. "It's no stunt." She started to turn into the private drive. "You may or may not know this, but Brad has been pushing for a divorce. From what I've uncovered, he hasn't told anyone in the family he's trying for it either."

He dropped a hand on the photos and bio sheets. "This will get it for him."

"I think Monica is using Cindy for a power play."

"And you got all of that from what you've got here?" he asked with a resounding note of disbelief.

"I have a few other ideas, facts, pictures. I said I wasn't completely done. I'm still waiting on photos." She punched in a private code at the gate, ignoring the lifted brow of her passenger.

"And you do those between party crashing and workouts, right?"

"Don't start. I could be out of this in the next five minutes, and then your work will really begin, because the scanners are going to go combustible when this hits the airwaves. TV and radio crews are going to be swarming this place in less than an hour if the cops get called in."

She heard his volatile curse but ignored it. She marched up the stairs as if she were a valued guest rather than the bearer of bad news.

Her knock was stilled as he opened the door for her. "Come on. I know where Mr. Cassel is, if he hasn't already been contacted." She nodded and let him lead her into the house.

Her tall guide knocked on a solid double door and entered when called. Brad sat at a desk, his head in his hands. Mr. Cassel was standing, facing the windows. Her stomach wanted to slip to her knees when she saw their expressions. There was no doubt they'd been contacted.

"Oh, thank heavens, Roman," Mr. Cassel said as they entered, but straightened immediately when Mr. Cassel saw he wasn't alone.

She shot him a glance. *Roman*? What were the chances of that?

"Sir, I think you need to see these," Roman said as he tugged her forward, trying to get Brad's attention in the process.

"Wait, we already have a situation," Mr. Cassel said. "Who is she?"

Delilah spoke up, interrupting with a firm tone. "Nobody, but I have important information regarding your son." She took a deep breath. "And his wife. I believe they are tied to what has happened to Cindy."

Brad's head popped up like a puppet on a string. "Monica? You know where Monica is?" he whispered in a strangled voice.

"Monica?" Mr. Cassel barked. "How do you know about Cindy? Where the hell is my girl?"

Saying nothing, she handed the file to Brad and stepped back. "I was hired by a third party. I am truly sorry, Mr. Cassel," she said.

"Sir?" Roman began but Brad's curse stopped him stone cold.

He jumped from behind the desk, the chair he sat in hitting the hard floor with a sound that left no

doubt it had broken somewhere. "That lying bitch! I hope she rots on that damn boat!"

"Sir!" Roman repeated louder and with impatience. She watched as he stalked up to the older man and began to talk in low tones. Roman was direct as he explained the situation to his employer. He pointed at her once and Mr. Cassel nodded.

She had to admire Roman at that moment. He was cool, calm and efficient in a situation that could have easily become unstable. Brad's cursing echoed through the room as he looked at each and every picture in the file.

Mr. Cassel spun and strode right up to Delilah. She didn't flinch under his penetrating blue-gray stare. "You know about Cindy? You know what's going on?"

"I believe I do, but if you would rather go to the police, I'll understand." It was a firm option. She had no stake in this.

His next question took her by surprise as he tossed back his shoulders. "Are you bonded?"

"Yes."

He spun on a heel, his voice sharp. "Roman, take this woman and get my Cindy back! If she knows anything, then use it to get Cindy back!" Her heart went out to the older Cassel when he spoke in a strangled voice, "Please, Roman. You've never let me down."

"No, Sir! And I won't this time either." Roman's expression was unyielding when he placed a hand on her elbow and led her to the back of the house even as Brad's curses and exclamations echoed down the hall, following them.

"If he's been trying to get one, I think the divorce is a done deal," he whispered.

She nodded in silent agreement.

He lifted a card key from his wallet and entered a secured door, letting her go first. She gawked at the monitors and equipment. "You weren't kidding. This is loaded," she said.

He sat down, waving her to a chair. "It's my business to know every flea that walks through those front gates and into this house." He paused, and she felt every single sweep of his eyes on her skin. "Look, I know you're adamant about secrecy, but between us, it has to stop. I can't work with you without a name."

Her gaze snapped around to him. "Work with you? I work alone."

"So do I, usually. Two lone wolves, but in this case, you know more about what's happening and the whys than the cops could find out after a week long investigation. This is Cindy's life we're talking about," he offered in a reasoning tone.

For the first time in years, a flash of indecision sliced her deep for even considering it. The only person she trusted her entire life with was her father. Roman was only asking for bits and pieces and it was terrifying. She lifted her head, meeting him head on once more. "Roman, I need to know, implicitly, that I can trust you."

He leaned back, his hooded gaze aimed at her. "Trust you? Right now, I'm at the disadvantage. You've uncovered my name first."

"I won't apologize for it." She swallowed, once, heavily. "Look, this is important. I wasn't kidding." She sat up straight. "Can I trust you?"

His silence was long and patience wrenching. He moved slowly, and she felt the beat of her pulse quicken as his gaze darkened, if at all possible, to a near black. His hand lifted and he barely touched the edge of her jaw with the back of his hand, a caress that sent a shock clear through her system. He inched forward and when she felt his breath on her lips, she knew what he was going to do, knew it was unavoidable. This moment had been building since their first meeting.

His lips were a firm touch, a warmth of flesh, fleeting yet somehow calming in the aftermath of their willful battles.

"You can trust me with your life," he told her when he once again gave her space.

She waited until her heart stopped beating like a trip hammer in her chest to speak. Her arms crossed over her chest, an uncomfortable concession to releasing the secret identity to who she was. "I am Delilah Roman. Del Roman to the world of law enforcement, and to the United States Government." It came out in a gasped rush. It never became easier telling someone her name. She wondered if it ever would.

She knew it would take a few seconds. It always did, and he didn't disappoint her as his expression changed from attention to shock to disbelief. "But you're a woman!" he all but shouted. She rolled her eyes, aware of the misconception. She'd helped breed it.

"I'm well aware of that," she replied. She leaned back, her crossed arms unclenching a little, waiting for the questions. They always had questions.

He surprised her, though, as his expression changed from stunned disbelief to amazed awe. "I get to work with Del Roman."

"It's not that impressive an honor, Roman," she returned flatly.

"Depends on who you ask. You're a damn legend! How old are you, anyway?"

She couldn't help the weak smile his admiration brought from the dregs of her chest. "I will be twenty-nine on Christmas eve." She waved a hand, her gaze direct once more. "Now do you understand? I don't need or want the fanfare. I work best alone. I'm responsible for no one but me."

His face lost some of his excitement. "No, I don't understand. It isn't because of who you are that makes me want to work with you. I've seen you in action. My ass still hurts, and the more I get to know you, I wouldn't trust just anyone with Cindy's life. Plus you know about Cindy, and why this is happening. It's more than I would have even thought to consider," he finished in a matter of fact tone. He stood and pinned her with a stare. "And you and I both know that you are not the type to back down."

"Is that personal experience or my legend superceding me?" She tried to put a touch of flagrant mockery in her tone, to make him reconsider. Unfortunately, it didn't work and he didn't reconsider.

He leaned down, and planted his hands on the arm braces on either side of her chair, his mouth bare inches from hers. "That is purely personal knowledge. No one but the ice maiden has stared me down and won. No one but you has caught me off my guard and unarmed me." His lips captured hers when she was sure he was tempted to say something more, but as desire filled her, she let it go. Sometimes it was the words not spoken that meant the most.

* * * *

Roman had lost all reason around this woman. Why would her kiss be so tempting at a time like this? She'd rocked him back on his heels ever since he'd first found her in Monica's office and she just hadn't stopped. And with her lips curved to his, he felt need burn through him with a velocity unknown in his lifetime.

Having no other choice for the moment, he leaned back again and was stunned at the smoky look in her blue eyes. She took one breath and another, and as easy as turning a page, his ice maiden was there. Time to get back to work and figure it all out later.

"So, where do we start?" he asked her.

She cocked her head, and caught his stare. "We need to find the boat in the pictures. When Cindy called I heard gulls. I'll drive," she stated firmly.

"We are definitely going to have control issues."

She stood and faced the door but at his muttered words, she spun to face him.

"No, we won't. I don't care how you do it, but I'm doing this my way. I already know which marina and the boat." She lifted one of those sexy arched eyebrows at him. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Pick your battles, son. His father had never spoken truer words.

"Lead on." He held the door open for her and pulled it closed, engaging the security lock. They walked in silence back through the house as his thoughts took over and broke down the woman at his side.

Del Roman. The image he had envisioned was not flattering to her. She'd cracked drug cases, tracked vehicles and found missing persons. She was a renowned sharpshooter, with anything, which he knew to be fact rather than fiction. And he'd personally witnessed her physical ability, but she worked alone, always alone. No one he'd ever known had put the name to the face and except for the situation, she would have avoided telling him, of that there was no doubt.

He waited until they were locked inside her car and moving again before he spoke. "You wouldn't have told me at dinner." Even as he said it, he knew there was no question to it.

"No." She didn't even blink, no sign of guilt. It was a flat answer.

"Why not? Why so much secrecy? No one could find out your name, or connect you to *the* Del

Roman, and believe me I tried. He's still talked about for the clues that were available for last kidnapping; the one in the Keys."

Even he had a few reputable law enforcement friends, locals, DEA. He knew what the talk of the town was. Del Roman was always the name of the hour.

She released a soft sigh and for a bare second he witnessed an emotion, something fleeting he could have been pain if she had looked at him. The ice maiden had cracks. That knowledge made her more human, and made him want to know more. A lot more.

"It's better this way. I can't hurt anyone if I stay silent, and I can't hurt my family if I screw up. Right now, my father knows what I do, who I am, and it scares him senseless." She pressed her lips together tightly, stopping abruptly.

He fought to keep his expression blank. She'd said more than she'd planned on. Good. She was beginning to trust him, because it would have to go both ways and deeply before he could tell her everything.

"Where are we going?" he asked when she turned down a street with nondescript apartments lining both sides.

"My place. I need my equipment."

"I don't need to be blindfolded?" he asked, feeling a touch of elation. Why was this woman so compelling?

She shot him a dark look. "I don't care if you know. I move every six months anyway."

"Every six months? Are you crazy?"

She only shrugged, but it became easier to understand when he walked behind her into the apartment. Saying it was sparse was an understatement. Two bean bags in the living room, and a TV, that was it. No tables, no chairs, no clutter of pictures and knickknacks. Nothing.

She didn't even slow down, marching straight to the bedroom. He followed behind her, surprised to find nothing in there either. No bed, no furniture, only a reed mat, rolled and tied up against the wall. Her closet stood open. She had clothes and there were two plastic keepers which seemed to have the rest of her little things. He couldn't help but stand and stare at the absolute lack of...everything.

"Do you live like a monk for a reason?" he asked only half aware he was serious in wanting to know, but she didn't answer him.

The equipment she owned was lined against one bedroom wall. She picked out an amplifier with a recorder, binoculars and a pack to carry it all in.

"Let me get my toothbrush and I'm ready."

He grinned. A toothbrush. Not baggage, not makeup. A toothbrush. He could appreciate traveling light but she was steadily blowing his mind. "What about clothes?"

"I keep a packed bag in the trunk."

"Always prepared," he muttered under his breath and looked up when she popped out of the bathroom with a saucy wink.

"You bet."

He looked around the empty apartment again. Who was Delilah Roman? What kind of a woman lived like this on purpose? Her apartment looked like she'd been robbed, except the robbers had left it neat when they'd left. He hadn't thought about it but he'd never seen her wear jewelry, hardly makeup. There was none of it stashed along a dresser which didn't exist, no array of perfumes or baubles. Her clothes in the closet were neat, but simple. With the exception of a few items he spotted with the open doors, like the yellow gown she'd worn to the party, there was very little. Everything else was simply daily wear. Long jeans and t-shirts and a few pullover blouses that would fit to her perfectly.

He slid a look from the closet to where she'd disappeared into the bathroom, thinking about how she had looked in that particular yellow creation the night he'd caught her in Monica's office. Her skin, her legs as she'd walked away. She was tall, sure, but supple and graceful. She was strong. Beautiful.

He stopped in mid stride, halfway out the front door stunned at his own thoughts. *Beautiful?* When had she become beautiful?

"Come on, cowboy. I need to lock up," she said, kick starting his brain again.

Every time one question was answered, he developed a rash of two more. He walked by her side as

they headed back to the car and she put her things into the trunk. She stuffed her toothbrush into the, yes, one packed bag.

“How do you avoid using your name? Your car, your apartment? It can’t be avoided,” he finally asked as they started out again.

“I have aliases and a hundred and one tricks. Trust me. You are only one of a handful who know.” Her gaze slid into him with an impact that left him gasping for air. “I trust you for now, Roman. Don’t make a fool out of me.”

Her words left him thoughtfully silent on the remainder of the drive to the docks. They parked several cars down from the slip where the boat, *High Sea Love*, was usually berthed at. She was nowhere to be seen.

“I’m going to find the dock master and see if he knows anything,” she stated as she popped out of her car.

“I’ll head the other way. Meet back here?” he asked.

She nodded once and left him, just like that. Fearless was added to his list. A growing list.

Right before she’d slipped out of the car, she’d filled him in on the owner of the boat and his description, and he already knew the women involved. He could only pray he found out something useful. Taking out a boat was like falling off the ends of the earth.

Twenty minutes later he was leaning against the Roadster waiting for her to return. All he’d found was the boat had been gone for about two hours, which would have been about the time Cindy had called Del, and that four people, not three were on board. That didn’t sound good to him in the least.

He turned to the clipped sound of her boots. She motioned to him and he slid in as she started the engine. “They’ve gone to Nassau,” she began without preamble. “Mr. Letrell asked for a slip reservation at the north marina, near Paradise Island. The dock master picked up on his vibe. Edgy, nervous. I’m thinking Monica has help. And I’m not even sure it’s just Simon in this case.”

He nodded his agreement with her assessment, telling her, “There were four, not three that left.” Her lips thinned, apparently not surprised by the news.

“Want to pack a bag while I find us a flight?”

He nodded, and she zipped back out to the highway.

Roman stood in his bedroom while she spoke on her cell phone in the other room—in Japanese. He could only shake his head. She'd warned him—four languages.

He pulled out an overnight bag and was stuffing anything he could think of into it when she joined him at the bedroom door. Her scent still made his blood pound and his body ache, but it was a reaction that was becoming difficult to control. He didn't even have to look now to see how her jeans shaped her legs or the way her hips rounded below her trim waist. It was already ingrained into him, in his thoughts, to his eyelids. He bit back a groan. If he didn't get a grip on this quick, he was going to be in real trouble. He felt torn in two. Fighting his growing desires and worrying about Cindy, praying they found her alive.

"There's a private air strip a few miles west. I've forwarded everything to my cell phone. I hope she has a chance to call again, but with three people watching her, I doubt it." He caught the subtle shake of her head. Del was as worried for Cindy as he was.

He nodded, unable to speak as he fought for control from his earlier thoughts, not trying to look directly at her. But she made the mistake. She walked into the room, and as though it was unstoppable, the concept of control was suddenly lost to him.

He half turned and his hands found her arms as he backed her up the three feet to the wall. Her heat filled him with a savage surge as his mouth devoured hers. She responded like an explosion, her lips a fiery brand searing his thoughts. She was sweet and hungry as she met him. His heart beat with an unequaled intensity when her hands fisted at his waist. He growled low when she yanked him against her, her body melding to his.

The need to take, to possess, overwhelmed him and his hands drifted down and pressed her against him, cupping her through her jeans, lifting her in an obvious statement of need against his body. The beast wanted it. He wanted it. He *needed* her! He wanted his mate.

He stopped a mere thought away from tearing her clothes to shreds. She trembled in his arms even as he sucked in air to replenish his depleted brain. All he could do was hold her, his head pressed to hers as he battled the crying hunger, and finally won.

Her voice was clear if shaky. "I'm glad we got that out of our systems." He nodded even though he knew better. There was only one way to get her out of his system.

"Let's go. The plane is gassed and waiting," she said, bringing him a little closer to reality. He stepped back, once again burning with an unrelenting curiosity about the woman in his arms.

"Del, one of these days, you're going to have to tell me who you are." He had only whispered his heart's desire but her response shook him to his soul.

"I'll tell you when you tell me, Roman." Her voice curled over him like a silken thread, at once a blessing and a curse, pulling him tighter into her.

He forced his jaw closed to keep it from swinging open in shock. He stepped back, stiff from her easy assumption that he had a secret. He refused to accept somehow she could know. No one outside of the family—outside of the pack—knew.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, his voice chilled even as she met his gaze head on. He wasn't surprised when she didn't flinch, didn't even blink. She would never back down.

Her expression had reached a blank coolness now that the kiss had evaporated. When he thought she would say something in rebuff, she lifted her hand and swept her thumb across his bottom lip. He fought against his reaction, held it inside as she studied him.

"Roman, something you'll have to learn about me. You can't lie to me." She leaned closer, whispering in his ear, an even more intimate sensation since she was still standing hardly a breath apart from him. "I see it in your gaze. I've felt it since the first day I met you. You have a big secret, an important secret. I respect that."

She stepped back and released him from her spell. He sucked in a harsh breath, running his hand over his head. How could she guess? "What do you know about me?" he snarled suddenly, feeling his space threatened.

She lifted a shoulder. "No more than you've told me and what I've seen with my own two eyes." Her blue eyes froze him in place as her stance changed. "Roman, no matter what we are, Cindy is still out

there. Let's go," she said with a touch of impatience. Their moment was gone.

"What we are?" he echoed through dry lips. But she was already out the doorway.

* * * *

Damn! She needed to be more careful. Roman was digging through her defenses, making chinks in her armor, and she hated him for it. Thankfully, he had remained silent on the drive to the airfield and only raised a speculative brow as she spoke with Mr. Takanawa about the plane. With their gear in place, she assumed the pilot's chair without a backward glance. Her car would be safe under the watchful gazes of the two people who did know who she was, inside and out. Her circle had grown by one in the last twenty-four hours, though. She still wasn't completely comfortable with that fact.

They had a long flight ahead of them, too long for him to be so close. That last kiss had all but consumed her. Had left her thinking of things she shouldn't be imagining.

She of all people knew those were fruitless wishes, because then he would expect her to share. How would he react if he knew she could almost pick his brain apart? That she could feel his secrets? That she had sentient ability? She shuddered. It was no more than a very strong sixth sense but she'd learned long ago how to harness it.

Her *Sensei* masters had taught her how to control it, make it work for her, and she'd used it to help her in her work to stay invisible. And yet, so many feared what they didn't understand.

His voice crackled over her headset. "What's the hardest case you've ever had?"

His voice startled her at first. She didn't want to let him any closer. She didn't want to let herself like him, either. After a moment of searching, she relented. This was no easier on him. Cindy Cassel was his employer's daughter, a family he'd been in contact with for some time if Mr. Cassel's heartfelt entreaty had been any indication.

"I had to infiltrate a cocaine ring in south Tampa."

"Why?"

"They had kidnapped my target. The cops had been suspicious of the ring, but hadn't gotten any hard proof. I got them their proof and an eyewitness. Once I had him out, I turned it all over. Sixteen hours later, the ring was busted."

"So you had to go in and pretend you didn't have any stake in their operation?" His voice was inquisitive, and she peeked at him. He was resting, his head back and his eyes closed. Only talking.

"Pretty much. I had little more than luck on my side." She double-checked their elevation and judged their E.T.A. Thank God her father kept his contacts happy. Just try to get a Cessna through the local channels without hours of hassle. She grimaced at the thought.

"How did you get in?" he asked in a curious voice.

A lighter smile lifted her lips at the memory. "Grappling hook."

He swung around, his dark espresso eyes glinting at her briefly. "Are you kidding me?"

"I wish I were," she replied, refocusing forward. Those eyes of his... She swallowed, and found her voice. "I studied their operation for a week. I told you. I'm not exactly what you think."

"Will you ever tell me?" he asked again, his voice lowered to match the level of seriousness she could feel in the air between them.

She glanced at him, knowing what he was asking, telling him honestly, "I don't know. No one other than my father knows the whole truth."

He reached over and grabbed her hand, twining her fingers with his for a few minutes. "I know how that feels. No one outside of my family knows, either," he admitted. She heard the clang as her armor took another hit.

The airstrip was quiet when they landed, and then Del was on the phone, hiring a car to take them to Nassau. She waited while Roman called the Cassels to see if anyone had contacted them, but no one had. Together they worked out a plan to find the boat and hopefully, Cindy.

"I'll start at the private marina," she was saying. "I have the description of at least the people and the boat." She waited until Roman nodded.

"I'll start hoofing it I guess."

She ignored his dour expression. "Call in an hour. We can meet up at the hotel." She tapped the driver and gave him the name of the hotel she wanted.

"Del, I don't like this," he finally said in a low tone, his head close to hers to not be overheard. "I don't think they're here to shop."

"I don't think so either." She wished she had put more stock in Cindy's claims about Monica before it had gotten this far. "But I'm not going to risk anything happening to Cindy if we can avoid it."

"Let me go with you," he said.

She shook her head, holding up a hand to soften the refusal when his eyes began to glitter. "I can't. First of all, you're recognizable. I'm not. You're twelve feet tall and I'm only about half that," she said with a grin. She reached for his hand, giving him a quick squeeze. "We'll find her, Roman. I know it."

His gaze was intense as it lifted from their clasped hands to her face. He leaned in and whispered thickly, "The next time I go home for a break, you're going with me. I want to show you my ranch."

Her hand shook in his. She couldn't stop it. The indecision must have been glaring in her expression because he lifted a finger to her mouth and shook his head. She was thankful when they stopped in front of the hotel, because it saved her from saying anything at all.

A half hour later she was heading for the marina, blending in like a tourist, dressed in a newly purchased straw hat, a Bahamas t-shirt and flip-flops. Her concession to her job was her backpack with her amplifier and her recorder. A camera hung around her neck as she sauntered around the docks, gazing with pretended lustful glances at the beautiful boats lining the slips, all the while searching for any sign of Simon Letrell's boat.

There were sailboats, yachts, powerboats and more. Some as large as seventy feet, but no *High Sea Love*, not yet. Where were they? They had a two-hour start at least. After pacing the boards for another twenty minutes, she turned and retraced her steps, deciding to break down and ask the dock master if they had called in their arrival.

All he could say was a slip had been placed on reserve, but there was no way to say when they would be arriving. She was walking away again, doubting her instincts when her phone rang. Her answer was clipped, her gaze raking the boats for the one she wanted.

"I thought you might like to know, Mr. Cassel received his first note on Cindy."

"I'm surprised it took this long. What else?" she replied. His pause made her stomach clench.

"The Coast Guard found *High Sea Love* floundering in the Atlantic. Empty."

Her heart slipped through her ribs. She wanted to curse. She wanted to cry. Cindy did not deserve this. "So I stupidly wasted us five hours," she said, emotionless, tilting her head back to keep the cry of frustration from her lips.

"Del, don't. You and I did exactly what we were trained for. They changed the game half way."

She turned on a heel and marched at a quick pace back up the island. "So now what, cowboy?"

"Get back. We'll tackle it again from both ends."

"See you in ten." She punched the disconnect with an angry jab.

God, how could she be so stupid? She was furious with herself. Five hours wasted, and another trip back to the mainland. She ground her teeth as she kept her pace. But why had they ditched the boat? Engine problems? Had it already been planned to have a pick-up and fly out?

Great! How were they supposed to trace a plane from the middle of the damn Atlantic? They needed to get back and see the ransom. Maybe something else would come to light. Meanwhile she had all that time to berate herself.

* * * *

Roman wanted to tell her it would be all right. Del was not to blame. Hell, she was the one who knew it was the boat to begin with. There was no way she could have known they would ditch the boat in the middle of the Atlantic. It was a tactic even he hadn't been expecting. It was a professional move and was bothering Roman more and more.

The sun had set by the time they reached the Cassel mansion again. Her hands were wrapped with a death grip on anything within reach to suffer her wrath. At the moment he was thankful it was only the steering wheel. His ice maiden was not against showing anger, especially if it was at herself.

She turned the key off on the little roadster, facing him, and he was struck by the fierce light in her gaze. *Woe be to whoever gets on her bad side.*

"Roman, I know what you've been thinking ever since we took off. Quit. I thought I could do it, get

her back without a hitch. The least I could have done was wait for contact.”

“But that took almost all day,” he pointed out, not wanting her to even think about shouldering the blame. “And I would’ve done the exact same thing if I’d known where the call came from. If you want to know, I thought we had her too. I hate failure.”

Her shoulders relaxed a little, some of the heat of her anger seeping out. “In that, we are very alike.” She shot a look over his shoulder to the front entrance of the house. “Let’s go see what else we have to work on. I can go back to my office and see if any other info has come in. I’m hoping Louis got me more pictures.”

“Crap! My bike. I forgot all about it.”

“It’s all right, cowboy. I’ll call Louis and have him put it inside. If it’s still there.”

“Thanks.”

She nodded in answer. “Let’s go face the music,” she said and slipped from the car.

Mr. and Mrs. Cassel were with Brad in the library, all three pale and anxious in their individual nightmares. “Roman, I’m glad you got here as fast as you did. Here is what they sent,” Mr. Cassel said as way of greeting, handing over a sheet of paper.

Roman glanced at it briefly, then said, “I’m sorry we weren’t able to get to her. We had no idea they planned on ditching the boat halfway there.”

Brad looked up, his aristocratic mouth compressed into a thin line. “They didn’t plan it. The idiot, my once best friend, ran out of gas! The Coast Guard found it empty. I can’t believe it! My wife and Simon.” His words drifted into a furious silence.

He saw Del look at him from the corner of her eye, her gaze sharp, the same thought clear in her expression. The departure had been rushed and more than likely, the boat hadn’t been their first choice to get away. He turned to pace, thinking. “Del, if you have anything to say, you have absolute power to do so,” he encouraged her. Her gaze was thankful. She was considerate to not step over any boundaries or on toes. Remarkable.

“Mr. Cassel, I want you to know Simon was not alone in this.” He watched her take a steadying breath. “I’m almost confident Monica was on the boat as well as a third accomplice.”

Brad exhaled an exploitative at that news.

“You’re trying to say my daughter-in-law is in league with my daughter’s kidnapper?” Mr. Cassel nearly shouted. He stood next to his seated wife, who paled dramatically at his outburst.

Del faced him without a sign of fear on her features. “Mr. Cassel, I was hired to investigate Monica. I can only tell you what I’ve found out, but these are my feelings on the situation. I would be willing to say she may be the kidnapper. At the very least, she has helped.”

Mr. Cassel stuck Roman with a glare. “Can she be trusted? Because this is absurd. Monica?” he said, disbelief stressed throughout.

“Yes, sir. She has an impeccable reputation, sir.” He had no problem standing up for Delilah now, not after the last twelve hours. She’d been as steady as a rock, as willing to do her part in finding Cindy.

Mr. Cassel’s once austere bearing crumpled before them. He sat shakily next to his silent, pale wife, holding her hand in his own. Roman waited for him to speak his mind.

“Tell me what you think this is, Roman.” He pointed to the page again.

Roman read the printed ransom note. *She is safe. We will be in contact. Do not alert the police.*

He handed it to Del. She read it too then nodded at him. Somehow he knew they were of the same mind. Instead of facing Mr. Cassel, he approached the desk, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Brad, how long have you tried to get Monica to agree to a divorce?”

Brad’s head shot up from his cupped hands, his expression pale and shocked. “How did you know?”

“My resources are very good. Can you tell me?” he encouraged.

Brad shrugged, meeting his father’s gaze. “I guess it doesn’t matter now. I’ve been wanting it for over a year. She has argued and cajoled me into delays.”

“Can I ask why?”

Brad’s jaw worked back and forth, then he let out a breath, his gaze bleak. “To be perfectly honest, I never loved her. I married her before I made that realization.”

Mr. Cassel was quick to rush to his son’s aid. “It’s all right son. We all make mistakes.” But the look

he gave his wife was caring. Mr. Cassel hadn't made the same mistake. Roman was glad they had each other's support during this crisis.

"And she signed the prenuptial without argument, is that right?"

"Yes, I had agreed to a token settlement, but nothing close to what she would have gotten without it."

"I see," Roman said. "And who is Simon Letrell?"

"He's one of my business partners. He's strong with a lot of our assets."

"Meaning?" Roman cast Del a look. She was listening, avidly.

"He has money, but his accounts are nothing like ours. We carry him."

Cha-ching! Simon might have been playing Monica to get more money. It was a possibility, but that didn't explain why Simon would want to endanger Cindy. But if someone else was involved, they wouldn't care about Cindy's welfare if a ransom was the only goal. That missing link was really beginning to get to him. "All right. This is how it looks from this moment. It appears Monica is involved with Mr. Letrell, and we have every reason to believe they have Cindy," he said, thinking out loud. He paced a few steps when Mr. Cassel's voice halted him.

"So where do we go from here?" Mr. Cassel asked, once again in an even manner.

Del spoke up. "I have more information coming. I don't know if he is the fourth person on the boat, but I'd bet my last two cents on it. I need to run it through my systems. It could get worse if this unknown had an accomplice. There's the possibility someone picked them up when the boat ran out of gas or they left it to run out after they'd reached a second boat waiting for them."

Mr. Cassel agreed without argument. "Very well. In the mean time, we'll see what we have on the ransom."

"How long do you have to gather the money?" Roman watched his boss, the strain apparent in his gray-blue gaze as he sought his wife for support. Their hands clasped together briefly, then he spoke.

"We haven't been told yet. I received that..." Mr. Cassel pointed at the note briefly. "Just before I contacted you."

"That tells me they aren't in a position to make demands or receive payment," Del said to everyone.

"I agree," Roman said. "Contact me the instant you hear anything. We will wait twenty-four hours." He wasn't surprised to see Del give a quick nod in agreement. "After that, we will contact the police," he allowed, his tone dropping. He knew once the police were informed, Cindy's life was going to become incidental.

Roman shared a look with Mr. Cassel, the only man he'd ever thought of as a true boss, and saw the older man nod briefly. "I agree." The older man rose slowly. He shared a look with his wife then approached Roman. When he spoke, it was for Roman's ears only. "Roman, I know we've been together for a few years now. I have faith in you, but if at any time you think Cindy could be in danger because we don't pay, I'll do whatever you say."

Roman clasped his outthrust hand. He knew exactly what Mr. Cassel was saying. "Don't give up on me just yet, sir." His voice was lowered as well. "We'll bring her home."

"You do that, Roman, and I will see you never have to worry about you or your children again." Mr. Cassel turned away, but Roman still caught the shine of grief in his blue-gray eyes.

Roman faced Brad once more. "If Monica contacts you, you know nothing about her involvement. Get details, where, when and with who when she calls you, if you can get anything at all, but don't let her know we know what is going on. And I know it will be difficult, but don't let her suspect you know about her affairs. She might do something drastic. Everything else needs to be done through Mr. Cassel. No one else can be contacted on Cindy's behalf. No one," he stressed as he faced Mr. Cassel again. "We need to control this as much as possible."

"I understand," Mr. Cassel replied.

Brad let out a sigh, his shoulders slumped. "I'll do anything to make sure we get Cindy back. I can fake it."

A few minutes later, they were ensconced once more in Roman's monitoring office. Roman divided the detail, delivering orders to others on the property. He ensured absolute understanding from all involved that no one, other than family, was allowed in or out. Security was tightened on all fronts, including their office building in downtown Palm Beach. Roman exercised on the side of caution with his information but did not lessen the urgency of the situation. He didn't want one mishap to threaten their chances of getting Cindy back unharmed.

He spoke briefly with Mr. Cassel, leaving instructions once more, and then they were on their way to the warehouse.

He groaned when they cleared the corner of her warehouse. "Shit! My bike." It was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm sorry. I completely forgot about calling."

"Not your fault. I don't usually leave it lying around." But it didn't make him feel any better. He watched her hand rise to hit the button to raise the door, furious he'd left it alone for so long. The bike had only been a few years old. "Oh, hallelujah. Who brought it in?" he said, much happier a heartbeat later when he spotted it under the rising bay door.

"It had to be Louis. He's the only other one with access." She drove up the ramp with practiced ease. "Let's go see what's shaking," she said, sliding from her car.

He was right behind her when she hit the door to her office. "Louis, you animal, get off my desk," she said briskly.

The man in question popped up, blinking rapidly. "Oh, hiya Del. Where ya' been?" He yawned loudly, his dark sun-tanned arms rising over his head, making his shirt flap open.

"Working. What do I usually do?"

"I dunno. I saw the bike and thought you had a hot date or something." He was grinning like an ass as he spied Roman. "I guess you did."

"Hardly," she snorted. "This is Roman. You know that lady you've been trailing? Well, we've got a real cooker now." She shoos him off her desk and sat down. "Do you have my photos or not?"

"Yeah, yeah. I was going to leave them but when I got here and saw the bike..." He scratched a shaggy black head scattered with gray. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

He handed her an envelope and she sifted through a half dozen photos. "I don't recognize him." Roman took them from her outstretched hands. He took the metal chair, crossing his leg over his knee to view the photos. "Louis, I'm going to be tied up with this. You can take a long weekend if you don't have anything else in the fire."

Roman sat back and listened as he studied the man in the photos. He didn't recognize him either, but there was something definitely not right about his smile. He didn't trust him. He didn't have to meet the guy to get that gut reaction.

"I have one but the man is out of town. Legitimately," he said. Roman cast him a look but Louis seemed pretty easy reading. He was one hundred percent on the level, and absolutely devoted to Del.

She nodded once in answer.

"If you need me, you know where I'll be," Louis offered as he started for the door.

Roman watched as she shot her photographer a smile. It made his groin tighten. "Sure," she said. "And thanks, Louis."

"*Hasta la vista*, baby," he chortled on his way down the stairs.

"He's a real character, isn't he?" Roman asked.

"Yeah, and he's damn good at staying out of sight, silent and has a great eye."

Roman saw as she reached behind her again and pulled open another drawer. "How much stuff you got stashed up here?" he asked.

"A lot." She hit buttons on a voice recorder. "Well, would you look at that?" she said with a surprised lilt in her voice. "Monica's phone was used today. Let's see what Mrs. Backstabber had to say for herself."

She hit a playback button and listened as the tap on her phone finally paid off.

"*It's me. Everything is ready.*"

"Good. Is she going to cooperate?" came the male voice, coolly excited.

"Completely. She thinks we're going shopping."

"We'll get in motion and then we're home free."

"He'll never know what hit him." Monica whispered with a blatant touch of spiteful glee tingeing her voice, and the phone disconnected.

She shook her head then faced Roman. "Well, there's proof," she said, her voice laden with sadness. "I can't believe she thinks she has it so bad she has to do this to that nice family, or to Cindy. I really wish I had listened better this morning. God, has it only been since this morning?" She groaned.

She lifted a hand and rubbed her eyes, shadowed with disbelief.

"This morning?" he asked. "Cindy didn't go anywhere this morning, did she?"

"Yeah, I had lunch with her earlier."

"I wasn't aware she'd even left." He frowned. Who had let her off property? Would anyone have noticed fifteen hours ago?

"She had said something about Monica acting differently. I guess Monica was trying to butter her up to get her somewhere she'd have to cooperate, and offered shopping therapy as the bait." She had dropped her head into her hands as she finished. "God, what time is it?" she moaned softly.

"After eleven," Roman offered.

"Do you think we should fax a copy of the photo at this hour?" she asked, still not lifting her head.

"No, I'm sure they've settled down for the evening. We'll do it first thing." He paused a beat. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. I might even answer," she told him and he spotted the grin almost hidden by her sweep of her hair.

"Is that why you were there?"

"He scores!" she crowed on a low chuckle. "I bugged the phone."

"I'll be damned."

"You might be yet. I told you I'm not a good type of crowd. I'm every mother's worst nightmare of a bad influence," she told him without a touch of remorse. She was who and what she was, and he knew she'd never apologize for it. She would never have to apologize to him, he knew that without a doubt. She swept her head back and her hair fell in a black wave around her shoulders. She stole his air for a minute with the innocent move. She shook her head slowly, causing black waves to cloud around her. "I knew if I sat down, I was done for."

He grinned in understanding. He wasn't doing too hot himself. "I know exactly what you mean. Where do you want to start tomorrow?"

He realized he could spend hours doing nothing but watching her when she was this relaxed. Her face had softened as her body caught up with her and made her slow down. Even though she was showing signs of fatigue, he'd bet his last dollar if she had a reason to keep going, regardless of the why, nothing would stand in her way. That told him volumes about her.

"I'll run some info on our new guy. I'm guessing he's number three in the triangle. Hopefully we'll get a direction on where the airplane went that picked them up, or if they tagged another boat. I don't know. Maybe Monica will call and let something slip." She rubbed her eyes again.

He didn't miss it. "Look, we're beat. Let's get some sleep and meet up in the morning." He needed to do some thinking anyway. The woman who sat in front of him was really getting under his skin. A good run might be the fix he needed to clear his head, and he had to go out of the city to do it.

"Show up when you're ready. I'll be here," she said, standing.

"You going to your place?"

"Yeah, but I hardly sleep much," she answered as they went back downstairs, after locking her office. "I'm sure I'll beat you here."

He waited until she had locked up and pulled her car out next to him, sitting astride his bike. She nodded once and left him sitting there. He followed as far as the highway then he headed north. He needed to stretch and the best place he knew of was out by the lake.

The ride was calming as his mind went over the day. Who had been Cindy's tail that morning, was one of his first questions. How could they have not known she was meeting Del? He shook his head.

Water under the bridge now, but he was going to talk to whoever was responsible for Cindy's safety. That was definitely lax on their part. Then again, that morning, things had been a lot less stressed. He had to remember it wasn't until afternoon things had changed. It probably also explained how Del had managed to meet with Cindy without being seen. He was positive Del had done nothing to draw attention to herself or to Cindy.

It didn't take him long to reach a strip of the lake where he knew it was heavily shadowed with large trees dripping with Spanish moss. He cut the bike and walked it into the trees, searching for noise and scents, but found he was alone at a little after midnight. It was always a risk but he took every precaution he could when he had to get out, to stretch his mind and his legs.

He tucked the bike between three large cypress trees, pulling down the moss until his bike was covered. He turned slowly, an ear cocked as he scented the surrounding air. He let out a relaxing sigh.

It only took a moment to strip and he glanced up. Another good thing—there was no moon out, buried behind passing clouds on their way to the coast. He closed his eyes and listened for his heartbeat, felt the blood rushing through him. He sought the inner warmth that was his family's heritage, found the change in his center and let it become, let it fill him. In less than a minute where a man had stood, there was a black pelted wolf, obsidian eyes staring off into the night. He started off at a lope, letting his mind wander as the scents and movements of the night soothed him.

This was his secret, buried deeply in not only Roman, but in all of the Aiza children. They were the last known wolf shape-shifters. A bloodline that at one time had counted in numbers large enough to fill a city.

His father was the last surviving elder, and he was an only child. In fact, for Roman to have three siblings at all was an anomaly. Quadruplets was miraculous. Their father had never heard of multiple births.

This was the secret Roman had to find the strength to divulge to Delilah if she were truly his life mate. He would not lie about it, and he would not keep it from her, either. She was a remarkable woman and every minute he spent in her presence pounded home that fact. She'd gone beyond every expectation. She'd pushed herself beyond limits he had no idea anyone other than himself had. He knew of her reputation, but had always assumed Del Roman was a man. The fact she was a woman made the whole package mind boggling.

Grappling hook, he thought as he remembered the short conversation they'd held hours earlier. What kind of a person could put so much into their work with so little recognition? Desiring and demanding anonymity? She was a true shadow—a wraith. If he hadn't spotted her, a head taller than the rest of the birthday crowd, she would have been successful the night of the party. Even with his interruption, he grudgingly admitted she had been.

He stopped running when he reached the water's edge. He looked over its undulating surface, with the lapping of the water against the land only a few feet from his toes. He realized now why she had made such an impact in so little time. He respected her. And he was finding he actually liked her, but there was more to telling the family secret than mutual respect and genuine appreciation.

His head jerked up when he heard a snap a few hundred feet away. He scented the air and found a deer. He would never harm one, but this deer didn't know the difference and it leaped away with a bounding gait. None of them would hunt a live animal in this shape. That was one rule they all adhered to.

He tilted his head back and let out one long soulful song, wishing he had the answers. He turned around to start home, aware they had a long way to go before he would accept the inevitable. The only thing he would acknowledge as he dressed was regardless of earlier arguments, he was finding himself extremely attracted to her, and he had no idea how he was supposed to handle it.

* * * *

Delilah was at her desk before the sun was up the next morning. A few hours rest and a hot shower and she was ready to get back to it. Yesterday had been a kick in the teeth as far as she was concerned. Racing off, thinking she knew it all. Wanting to show up Roman one more time. Why did Roman make her feel challenged so often? If she wasn't physically trying to incapacitate him, she was verbally abusing him. She made a soft sound in her throat. And despite *that*, they had somehow turned into a team. She

swore she would never do this, never allow anyone else to become involved in her fights, but even as she struggled with it, she knew they had a mutual interest. It was her nosing around that had found the parties concerned. The goal was his boss's daughter. Couldn't get much closer involvement than that.

She typed in the phone number she still had and waited. She should have done this yesterday, after her workout or at some point, but definitely before she had let herself get sidetracked by Roman.

How had she ever called that man son of Frankenstein? She cringed even as the memory came back, his shocked face, the flash of anger. So what if he knew how to push her buttons? She hadn't given in, not once, and neither had he. That fact alone made him intriguing as hell. But to call him that? *Childish, Del. Simply childish.*

She scanned the photo while her mind rambled, lining it up with the delineations of the program to get a fit. A match. It didn't take long at all. The man had a record a mile long. Definitely not good people, she thought as she read.

Mark Yeager

36 years

Born: Chicago, Il

Last Residence: Tampa, Fl

The file gave standard statistics, height, weight, and coloring. She scrolled down for the list of prosecuted charges.

Auto theft, arson, then graduating to embezzling. He was currently being searched for regarding a theft case. The file showed no information to tie him to the Cassels or to Simon Letrell, but hey, even a slug can find a friend if he digs deep enough.

She printed the bio sheet and saved the information to her file, noticing light was starting to fill her office through the upper windows. She could hear the sound of a motorcycle coming closer and couldn't help but smile.

Tall, dark and handsome—that was Roman all the way. The man had a sinewy, rock hard build, a butt that didn't quit and eyes that were—

She cut her thoughts off with a disgusted yank. She was not going to become involved, ever, with anyone. So what if he hadn't been intimidated? A man his size wouldn't be. So what if she had relived their kiss several times in her thoughts? A kiss was a long way from a relationship, which was already too close to disappointment and feelings of failure. She was never going to allow herself the opportunity to suffer that failure either.

She had witnessed the damage her mother's affair had done to her father. It didn't matter it had happened over twenty years ago. It didn't matter her father had made peace with it. There were some things Delilah would never be accused of. One would be causing pain of that magnitude to a loved one. The best way to avoid it would be to never allow herself to love like that. She couldn't hurt or be hurt if it was only her.

Her life was fine. Her secrecy was contingent on her continued solitary style. Dean at the police station understood. He was only the second officer she'd trusted, but he'd found out the hard way who she was.

It had been a bust gone bad, and he was the lone man caught in the middle. The firefight had begun by the time she'd snuck in and found him, bleeding from a bullet in his leg. She'd sworn him to secrecy and threatened to leave him there if he didn't agree. All that mattered was he had believed her cold challenges.

For the next week, he talked about the huge guy, Del Roman who had helped him out. She'd been all of twenty-three. Dean had never let her down. Being saved by a woman would really deflate his status anyway, and he'd been so happy to get out of the heat, he'd never thought to ask why she was there.

"Hey, did you even go home?" Roman asked, snapping her thoughts back to the present.

"How long have you been there?" she shot back, perturbed she hadn't heard him come in. Again.

"Long enough to wonder." He stepped in and her annoyed mood deflated.

"Please tell me one of those is for me," she said, eyeing the large steaming coffees in his hold.

"If you admit to how much sleep you got. Truthfully," he amended. He cocked one of his dark brows at her and waited.

“Enough. Does it matter?” She tried to restrain the biting tone. She hated being questioned.

“Do you ever give an easy answer?” he sighed, holding the coffee back.

“It’s ingrained. And no.” When he didn’t move to offer her one, she heaved a disgusted sound. “Fine,” she snapped. “I got my usual—between three and five hours.”

“Is there anything normal about you?” he asked as he handed her a hot cup of flavored caffeine.

She sipped gratefully, licking the warmth from her upper lip, savoring the mocha flavor. She watched as he sat down, his long legs dwarfing the chair, and had to remind herself involvement was not going to happen.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” she said, avoiding the question.

He shook his head as he chuckled at her softly. “Delilah, has anyone ever cracked you? You’ve got to be the toughest nut I’ve ever run across.”

“Takes one to know one,” she shot back playfully. His angular face lightened when she gave him a smile. “And again, the answer is no.”

“You know, when you put it that way,” he said in a quiet, teasing voice. “I could take it as a challenge.”

She swallowed. This was becoming too easy, too comfortable. “It’s better if you don’t,” she reminded him in a husky tone, the coffee warming her voice as well as her body, avoiding the dark hungry depths of his gaze. “I keep telling you, I’m not someone you’ll be proud of. I’m not the kind to invite to dinner at Mom’s. You’ll be disappointed.”

His gaze was intense when his equally rich voice reached her, bringing her vision back up. “Delilah, I don’t know how to tell you this, but you’re wrong.”

She picked up her papers. “Look, this isn’t the right time.”

She watched as his shoulders tightened, his gaze cooling at the block, but his next words made her heart rate double in the blink of an eye.

“You’re right Del, but I promise you, when Cindy is found, you and I are going to have a very long talk. Because whether you want to face it or not, right now I want to kiss you until you can’t breathe.”

Her gaze shot to his, seeing the intensity of the moment in their reflective depths. The man was not joking. Her stomach decided to join her fluttering heart in its excitement, and the reaction frightened her.

VII

He watched Delilah for a second or two more, waiting for her next attempt, but he knew for the moment, it would go no further. Her mouth had thinned and her gaze had fallen to the desk. Back to business.

"Where are we starting?" he asked brusquely, ignoring the pull this lone woman had on him.

"I've found out who our guy is." She glanced at the few sheets in her hands. "I want to check out the boat. It was brought back last night. I also want to run the information I have on number three by the Cassels. Maybe they know why he's involved."

At first, he thought she was going to fight for control again, but she surprised him when she handed him the complete folder without a glance. "You can read it on the way to the marina." She stood without any further indication of conversation. She grabbed her keys, and walked out the door without another word.

He stood up in a snap. The bitch was back. He grinned when he thought about it, his feet following her down the stairs. After his run last night, not much had been worked out, but he had admitted a few things, and he was willing to see where this might end. He'd never backed down from a challenge, and without a doubt, she was a class act challenge.

This time he made sure his bike was tucked inside before he opened the door to her car and joined her. He opened the file seeing for the first time the information she'd dug up on Mark Yeager. He tapped the pages. "How do you get all of this? These databases are locked, guarded and fire walled with kryptonite."

She shot him a lifted eyebrow, her eyes a reflective bright blue in the morning light. She was wearing a black t-shirt with black jeans and he had to swallow when parts of his anatomy were too willing to show appreciation to the picture she made. She was hot in black.

"I have connections. Call it an underground if you want. I have contacts my father once used." Once again, she stopped abruptly, facing forward wearing a grim expression.

This time he wasn't going to let it go unnoticed. "Del, anything you tell me goes no further. You asked me yesterday if you could trust me. I meant it. You can," he told her quietly.

Her shoulders relaxed in degrees. He watched her hands, slowly turning over the steering wheel in thought. "It isn't easy for me," she quietly admitted. "I've been like this for over a decade. Secrecy keeps me alive now."

"Who is your Dad?" he asked, wanting to know more and wondering if she would share. He understood more than she could guess how hard it was to do that.

She snorted softly. "It's more *what* he *isn't*. He's been a contact for the French consulate. He's a contact to the Secret Service."

"Isn't that a conflict of interest?" he asked stunned.

"Not the way he works. And, thankfully, he's mostly retired. He's happily married to his second wife in Kyoto."

That caught his ear. "And your mother?"

"Dead," was the cold response.

If her expression was anything to go by, he knew it was definitely not open to discussion. He'd look into that one later, on his own time. "How did you get into all of this? I'm well trained, I run my own security business. But this," he said, tapping the file again. "Is well beyond anything I've ever had the privilege of experiencing."

At first he didn't think she would answer. Maybe he'd asked too much, especially considering this was the first time she'd been willing to discuss anything. Her silence stretched out for a long heartbeat, and silently he willed her to trust him.

Her voice, when she did speak, was devoid of emotion, sounding like a recitation. "It started when I was a child. When we moved to Japan, I started training. I studied criminology here in Florida and set up shop."

"And you use your many talents like a silent ghost," he offered.

He saw her lips twitch. "Many talents?" She sighed. "Roman, you don't know enough to fill a

thimble.” He looked around when she made a right turn. “We’re here,” she said as they approached the slip where Simon’s boat was now secure again.

“The Guard brought it in, but since there wasn’t any evidence of foul play, it’s just sitting here now,” Roman supplied.

She nodded once. “Well, then they won’t mind if we take a look, will they?” She left the car and walked right up to the boat, marching onboard like an army.

Didn’t the woman fear anything?

He started in the opposite direction, heading straight for the wheelhouse and the below deck bunks. He searched under pillows and behind books to see if someone had left a clue, a ring, a slip of paper, anything to lead them forward. After several minutes, he had to admit there was nothing below decks to help him. The wheelhouse was the same. He left his search to join Del and found her slowly pacing the deck with her head down. He knew she would miss nothing and he thought she had found something when she froze in place. Her movements were slow and sluggish as she turned to lean against the rail her hands holding it in a white knuckled grip.

Color leached from her skin, her hooded gaze unreadable as he approached. The next few seconds happened before he could reach her. Her head flew back and she shouted a cry, her entire body snapping backward with an electric intensity. She paled completely and slackened like a string. He ran to catch her before she crumpled to the deck.

“Del. Del! Damn it woman! What are you doing? What happened?” He held her in his hold, his heartbeat pounding against his ears. “Del! Come on. Snap out of it.”

Her eyes blinked open after several wrenching seconds and he saw such a look of despair, it made his own soul ache. “I’ll be fine. I’ve never had it happen that strongly,” she said in a disorientated voice. Her bloodless hands clutched at his shoulders as he waited for her to get her bearings back. She shivered once, twice, like a reaction to shock therapy as her breath returned to her in stilted gasps.

“Can you stand?” he asked her a minute later.

She nodded and he held her steady until she was braced against the wheelhouse. Her blue eyes were still glassy as she stared at the rail. “Can you smell the blood?” She pointed him to their right.

“Smell the blood?” he asked. “I can’t.”

She shot him a chilling look. “Now is not the time to lie. Please Roman,” she pleaded.

His jaw tightened. “Fine. Then we’re getting you out of here.” She nodded once. He turned and walked two feet studying the rail where she had pointed and crouched. He inhaled and searched. Salty air and seawater. Nothing. He tried once more and almost wound up on his ass when he caught the iron-tainted odor. His hand found the dried drops on the rail post next to him, finding another splatter on the chrome edging at his feet. It made his own stomach tighten to find it.

He sat on his haunches for seconds, thinking, unable to move too swiftly. When he faced her, she’d regained her color and her gaze was sharper, but her breathing was still shallow. He held out his hand and she took it without comment.

Once they were off the boat, he took her to the car and leaned her against it. He raked a hand through his hair. “First, tell me what happened to you, then tell me what you know about me, and don’t lie, damn it! I have to know.”

She nodded. She swallowed slowly, taking a deep breath and began to talk. “I have trusted only a few with this, Roman. Remember that if nothing else sticks.” Her eyes captured his with an intense stare. “I have sentient ability. What happened just now...” She tossed a weak chin in the direction of the boat, still shaking even if she was standing. “I’ve never had that strong of a reaction. I was able to relive it!” She shuddered hard as her cheeks lost their color again.

“What? What happened?” Her behavior left him no doubt she wasn’t playing around with this.

“The shooting. The impact, the pain.” One hand lifted to her head, the other raising to rub at a spot on her chest. He wanted to rip them down. He needed to see everything. “It was Simon. He’s gone,” she whispered. Her expression was bleak when she lifted again to look at him. “There is something very bad going on here.”

He understood what she was telling him. He’d heard of people with degrees of mental ability, he’d never met anyone with them. And what he’d seen through her, what he’d witnessed, he held no doubt

she wasn't lying.

His hands were gentler when he cupped her shoulders again. "How do you know about me? *What* do you know?" he finally found the voice to ask. Even he could hear the roughness in his voice, the raw tone and knew she would too.

"I don't know. All I know is you have a secret," she paused and she sucked in a breath. He was afraid to draw one. "All I know is you're different. Like me." She breathed so quiet, the wind whipped the words away. "I didn't pry," she told him honestly. "I don't do that."

He let out his breath with a rush. "Shh, it's going to be all right." He pulled her into his chest, comforting and receiving comfort. "You're something else, you know that?"

"I can't believe I told you. I swore I never would," she mumbled into his chest.

He could hear the pain in her voice. How many people have turned their backs on this woman? How many times had she been hurt because she was different? He could only imagine. His secret was hidden. Apparently hers was not so easily controlled.

"You've had reactions before?" he asked her quietly. He felt her stiff nod.

"But nothing like that!" she choked out. "I don't know where it came from. I was searching, thinking, walking, and suddenly, I could see him, feel his fear. I saw everything, the gun, the glare on the glass." She shuddered again.

"Probably because it was so recent. The aura is still too hot," he said, stroking her back. She stiffened but he didn't stop his motions.

"You believe me?" It was a cautious whisper.

"Del, I saw it. I saw it through you." He turned her face with a finger, lifting her to let her see his belief on his face. "And I know you. Well, a lot of you. You don't play games," he said. She attempted a weak, grateful smile. "We better get back. This has changed things, and when I left, there had been no news."

Her gaze turned liquid at his tender words, and right there in front of the gulls and God, he pressed his lips to hers, and felt a rush unlike any he'd encountered. He wanted this woman and no matter how or why, he knew the inevitable was going to win.

He deepened the kiss when he succumbed to that inevitability. She whimpered softly as if sensing the loss of his inhibitions, the removal of his wall and returned his passion with a heat of her own. He sought with lips and tongue, feeling a stab of hunger deep and primal when she pressed against him.

He wanted this woman; she would be his mate.

* * * *

Roman drove them to the Cassel mansion, unwilling to let her risk driving in her still shocked state. He kept one eye on her and one on the road, thankful when she gradually returned to her usual demeanor, but he sensed a subtle change in her. The ice maiden was thawing. It was like a wall, one of the many she'd held between them since they'd first tangled, had crumbled. He remained silent as he drove. Now was not the time to investigate what that meant.

Cindy was still missing and now they had a murder involved. He vowed silently when Cindy was back home safe and this was behind them, he was going to delve into the real Delilah. Because no matter how much he fought it, how much she fought him, he knew he was powerless not to learn about her, not to want her. Somehow the idea didn't seem as scary as it first had.

He'd met a woman who was his equal in every way. At every layer he uncovered, he discovered something new. Instead of being disappointed in those discoveries, he was drawn deeper. Her ability was one of those incredible discoveries. He'd never dreamed she could have a secret so sacred. He understood without question what it meant to her, and how difficult it was for her to admit to it.

Tension twisted his stomach with his next thoughts. How long would it be before she would demand to know his secret? How long did he have to gather the courage to show her? Would she be frightened? Disgusted? How much could he trust her? Mental ability was a bit more acceptable than what he had to share.

Once again he knew he would have to resist temptation and ignore fate. It would have to wait. There was no way he was going to show her until he knew she understood what he had already accepted. *She was his*. He swallowed once, keeping his stomach from retaliating as the reverse of that thought rammed

into him.

He belonged to her.

He'd never been happier than at that moment to see the gates of the mansion appear ahead.

VIII

Delilah felt dazed as they approached the gates. She could still feel the burn, the pain of impact, the tearing of flesh as the bullet drove in and drove him back. It was unnerving knowing he had died before he'd even hit the water, shot through the heart.

She kept her breathing even by will alone. She needed a few minutes to find her balance or she was going to be absolutely no good to anyone, and she refused to let Roman down. Not now. He'd stood by her, had listened and accepted. Her damn armor was coming off in rusty sheets around him, and it frightened her how easily she was letting it happen.

After years of self preservation, of protecting her body, her mind and her heart, Roman was well on his way to conquering the whole damn package. And she wasn't sure how she felt about it yet.

She knew whatever he held close was huge. His anger at being discovered was palpable and twice he'd assumed she'd found out something. She hadn't meant to say anything on the boat, but her own mind was having a difficult time digesting what she had experienced. Instinctively, she knew she was with the one man who could find what she knew had to be there, even if she couldn't see it. Somehow she had known she could trust him to do that for her and he hadn't let her down. She'd watched him as he'd lowered to his haunches and closed his eyes.

His hand had risen with absolute certainty and then she'd seen the blood too, and the flash of memory of the shooting became real in her mind. It would take some time and a lot of quiet to push beyond her thoughts.

When his dark eyes had opened, they had held an onyx-like intensity, glittering in the light reflected off the marina water surrounding them. The look was fleeting and more so, it hadn't scared her. Somehow, she knew it was part of his secret. She had told him the truth. She didn't know and would never purposely search for it. It was not her secret to know. She had her own problems.

She rubbed her chest once more, absently. Roman caught the movement as he turned the car to a stop and swung around to face her.

"You going to be okay?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "It'll go away. I need a few minutes."

Then he asked the most surprising question. "Do you need a quiet room?"

She knew even as she saw the reaction in his gaze, how much her slight smile meant to him. "I would like that. A lot."

"I know where. Come on. I'll go talk, you take a few and meet us in the library. You remember where it is?"

She nodded. He grabbed her hand and held her close to his side as they made their way down the halls. He pushed open a solid wood door. She saw an office with a desk and chair and bookcase, but her mind was stretched, she couldn't take in anything else as he leaned in, resting on the doorframe.

"This is my office. You do whatever you need to do. Don't kick anything. I can't replace it," he told her with a teasing grin.

Her hand stopped him as he started to reach for the light. "No. I don't need it. I'll try not to take too long, but I need to get rid of the echoes."

He brushed a thumb against her temple. "I understand."

She searched his face, seeing his faith in her. "Somehow, I think you do." She shook her head, pushing the thought away. "I won't be long."

He nodded once more and left her, closing the door behind him. She turned and found a spot on the rug a few feet from everything and knelt. She bowed her head and let her mind do its work.

She had no idea how long it took to wipe the repercussions from her thoughts, to erase the report of the gun, to forget the bite of the bullet. But as she broke down the action step by step, it gradually relaxed inside her mind until she could push it to a place where all of her subconscious memories were filed. It would never be forgotten. They never were, but it wouldn't have the power to haunt her, either. Several previous encounters had given her nightmares in her youth before she learned how to do this. How to break them down like movie frames, to file them into an unfeeling, unattached part of her mind.

Her breathing started slow and measured only to work up to a hectic tempo as she disassembled the

shooting. She was done by the time she was breathing normally again. She stayed where she was for a few precious extra minutes, repeating her teachings for the day. No sense in wasting the opportunity.

When she recanted the last one, she rose to her feet. For a stolen minute, she indulged in the private life that was Roman. She leaned over his desk and found a card. *Roman Aiza*. So that was his last name. She filed it away. Nothing seen was ever forgotten. She was beginning to suspect she already knew more about the man himself than the report Dean had supplied her with ever could.

She walked to the bookcase that housed a munitions collection along with his books and her jaw dropped. The man was a one-person army. Artillery, weaponry, survival, security and alarms, long range, and so many others that she'd get busted for snooping if she stayed.

She was about to straighten when she saw one she couldn't ignore. Her fingers brushed down the old binding almost reverently, knowing instinctively it held secrets. The title read like an arcane novel. *The Heraldry and Ancestry of the Wolf*.

That so described Roman. Cunning, silent, intense, loyal. She wondered if it was a private hobby. Wolves were quiet creatures with a less than stellar reputation, but it was a reputation given to them. She knew they hadn't earned it.

She made her way back out of the office and found the library, spotting Roman right away. She took a deep breath and almost as soon as her foot hit the doorway, he was there beside her.

"Feeling better?" he asked, a deeper question in his gaze.

She offered him a warm smile of gratitude. "I'm good to go. I got my mantras done for today. Thought I should take advantage of the quiet. I probably wouldn't have had a better chance," she added, in case he wondered about the time she had spent.

"Not the way things are looking. Our friend sent his demand this morning at nine."

"It's almost ten," she said looking at the grandfather clock on the wall. She deliberately looked over his shoulder. "Does Brad know about Simon?"

He shook his head. "I wanted you to back me up. I didn't know how to explain it."

She hissed a breath. "You think I do?" she snarled low. "They aren't going to believe me," she stressed. "No one ever does."

"I do," he told her with quiet honesty.

She lifted her gaze once more and locked with his, intense, deep and mysterious. She was rocked with a shiver before she knew it.

"How much did he demand?" she finally asked, forced through stiff lips.

"Twenty million."

"Not a cheap date." She tilted her head, seeking the other two men intentionally. "All right, let's get this circus up and running. We have got to find her today. I don't want to have to turn this over to the cops. I have a real bad feeling about Yeager if we do."

"You and me both," he agreed, turning to bring her into the discussion between the two members of the Cassel family.

"Brad, I don't care. We will do it if it will bring her home," Mr. Cassel was stressing to his son.

"I don't think Simon would ask for this," Brad snapped, slapping the page in his hand. "It has to be Monica."

"It's neither," Del said without preamble. Roman presented the folder. "You didn't have to wait for me," she admonished him.

"Yes I did," was his only response.

She faced the two other men. Brad looked worse for wear. His hair was destroyed and if he'd slept, he'd done it sitting up somewhere. The elder Cassel didn't look much better, but years of public appearances came to his aide, allowing him to hide the worst of his stress.

Roman pointed to the file as Brad began sifting through the contents. "Those are pictures and the bio on who we believe was the fourth on the boat yesterday afternoon when Simon took it out. Do either of you recognize him?"

Neither Cassel did.

Del started speaking again. "It is our belief that what has happened is Monica was going to use Cindy to try to get something out of Brad since the pre-nup was limited, but someone she or Simon was

partnered with changed the game halfway to Nassau.” She faced Cindy’s brother, honestly torn with the news she was about to give. “Brad, I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Simon Letrell is dead. He was shot on board and probably left in the Atlantic.”

Brad leaped to his feet, his palm slapping the desk as his mouth worked like a fish, veins popping on his neck. “You’re lying!” he finally shouted pointing an accusing finger at her. “Simon is a jerk but he wouldn’t do this! He wouldn’t!” he screamed. “He knows what Cindy means to us.”

“I’m aware of that. After following your family for almost six months, I’m well aware of what your family dynamics are. Mr. Yeager, however, is an unknown.” She looked to Roman waiting for him to collaborate.

She saw his jaw clench when Brad erupted. “Brad, think about it. Who had the least reason to be on the boat? We found blood on the rail,” he explained in a measured voice.

“But what about Cindy? Monica?” Mr. Cassel spoke up, obviously shaken.

“We think Monica may or may not have been involved with Mr. Yeager on the side. His records go as far back as Simon Letrell’s. Why he was on board we don’t know, but the idea here is once he discovered what Monica was planning, Simon became baggage. Yeager can ransom both women, or only Cindy if he and Monica are in on this to the end.”

“Dad, did I ever treat her so badly as to deserve this?” Brad asked in a broken sob. “Why Cindy?” He collapsed onto the desk, completely shaken.

“Cindy is just a pawn,” she explained evenly. “I have every intention of getting her back. Roman and I have a plan, but we can’t discuss it.”

She ignored the look Roman shot her. She’d explain it later. She pointed to the note on Brad’s desk, noticing it was hand written. “Can I see that? It was delivered? Not faxed?” Brad handed it to her without looking up, nodding in answer. “Give me a minute, please,” she said and simply walked away from them.

She took a deep breath as she stood in front of a window. There was no way she should be doing this. This was becoming personal and it was the last thing she needed to stay on top of the situation.

Her fingers trailed down the page on their own. She didn’t want to use *it*. She didn’t want an audience. She’d have to run again if someone found out. Roman already knew too much, it was only a matter of time before she was completely discovered. She also knew there was more at stake than just her being discovered for what she really was.

Her own fears became muted as a tingle shot up her fingers. Malevolence slid up her skin from those written words, and the impulses still implanted on that paper made up her mind for her.

“Hell,” she whispered, and closed her eyes. She’d die before she’d let Yeager hurt Cindy.

* * * *

“What is she doing?” Mr. Cassel demand softly. He stared at Del with a disbelieving eye.

“It’s hard to explain,” Roman said, not wanting to give away her secret. Brad was still collapsed, shaking in his grief and anger on the carved desktop.

“Well, try to,” Mr. Cassel said with a bite to his words. “My daughter’s life is at stake!”

Roman reached for his boss’s elbow and took him to the opposite side of the library, talking in low tones. “You cannot say I told you anything. Her privacy is just that.”

“Agreed, but for Cindy,” Mr. Cassel prompted.

“For Cindy.” Roman let out a breath, anxious for the younger woman and concerned for Del’s continued silence. Her absolute stillness was unnerving. “She has certain abilities. I’ve seen them several times since I first met her. Some are physical, and some are mental.” He leaned in. “That is how we discovered Simon’s disappearance. She relived the shooting. It was awful to see.” His voice became strained as he remembered the anguish and pain that had overtaken her.

“And you think she can do this to locate Cindy?”

“She’s the only reason we’re as close as we are. We should all be thankful Cindy started this on Monica. We’d be nowhere if she hadn’t.”

Mr. Cassel’s shoulders sagged, at once tired and aged before his time. “Please Roman, bring my baby home. I don’t care how. Just do it.”

“I will. I will,” he said, seeing Del slowly turn to face him. The pale cast of her face instantly made his stomach roil.

She walked up to them, handing the ransom to Mr. Cassel but her sightless gaze never wavered from his. "We need to go. Now!" she stressed with quiet emphasis. Before he could ask, she was out the door, nearly running.

He caught up with her outside after alleviating the expressions of the Cassels, both of whom were stunned by her departure. She was on the far side of the car, gagging.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What did you see?"

"Oh, God! Roman!" Her whole body was wracked with shudders as she leaned over. "They set Simon up! He was a decoy! The man died for nothing!"

He shook her once, making her focus. "Come on, Del. Take a deep breath." He gripped her tightly, searching her. He was relieved when she did finally look him straight in the face.

She sucked in lungfuls of air, and her cheeks started to regain their color again.

"I couldn't say it in there. I couldn't," she whispered hoarsely. "Brad's being played. She and Yeager have been lovers for years. She left him for Brad, but it was a ploy." She whimpered once in disgust. "Yeager is behind all of this! Cindy is his guarantee to set them up." Her gaze turned glassy. "She's dead if we don't get to her, Roman."

"Did you see them? Do you know where they are?"

She nodded, panting for air. "But we can't get to her until tonight. When he leaves to get the ransom, I'll have a chance."

"How do you know?" he asked, anxious all over again.

Her expression was bleak. "He's going to torch the place when he leaves. He gets everything and walks away."

"How can you be sure?" He was immediately sorry he couldn't hide his skepticism. This was almost too much, even for him.

She snapped straight to meet his stare. The ice maiden returned like a slap to his face. "I don't expect you to believe me. His thoughts were so deeply imprinted on that page, they glowed once I looked for them." She shivered once more even as she took another step back. "I have to prepare. I need to go to the warehouse."

"I'll go with you."

He fought the urge to take a step back himself when her blazing gaze locked with his. He felt a chill slither down his spine at her expression. "No. You need to prepare for the drop off. Get Yeager tonight. He's not alone in this. I couldn't tell if it's Monica I picked up in his thoughts or not. I'll take care of the women. Come get your bike tomorrow. Louis will let you in."

"Where will you be?" he demanded harshly. "What are you doing?"

"They will be safe and home by morning." She looked away, and she didn't answer his questions.

He reached for her arm but she avoided him. "Delilah! Damn it!"

"Don't." She tilted her chin toward the house. "They need you here. Do what you were hired to do. Protect the family." She jumped into her car, not bothering to open the door, and revved the engine.

She didn't even say goodbye as she left him standing there, his teeth grinding back and forth. He forcefully unclenched his palms. This was not over, not by a long shot, but she was right. Cindy had to come first. He hoped the chill her last words had brought upon him weren't a premonition to what was coming.

Cindy watched with dry eyes as Mark and Monica sat at a table in the little house they'd eventually stopped at. She rolled a tired shoulder and felt the sting of her ropes biting into her wrists. She'd tried fruitlessly for hours to get them to loosen. Mark had done a good job.

She'd stopped glaring, stopped crying, stopped caring hours ago, when she'd heard the gun shot and realized Simon was the one who had been shot. The two at the table made her sick, and if it weren't for the gag in her mouth, she was sure she would have vomited by now.

She didn't know what day it was, or what time. She'd been unconscious since they'd boarded the second boat, leaving Simon's adrift, and it was getting dark outside. She couldn't hear the two at the table very well, their whispers muted by the sound of the cicadas and crickets in the night breezes around them. They'd propped her against a wall and all she could do was sit and hope for a way out of this.

Her thirst and hunger were nothing compared to the anger she felt whenever she saw the way Monica petted and smiled at the dark haired man. His smile made Cindy cringe. Monica, the woman who had married her brother, was a con artist. That much she had learned without too much trouble. Evidently her first marriage had been so profitable, she'd decided to do it again. Except she hadn't counted on Cindy. She still didn't know Cindy had hired Delilah. Monica was going to burn in hell for her lies. If it was the last thing Cindy was sure of on this planet, Monica was going to pay for hurting her brother.

He was older than her by more than ten years, but he'd been the best brother she could've ever had and she loved him. Cindy was going to make sure Brad wasn't hurt by Monica, that was her promise.

She let her head drift back slowly, her eyes lowered, hoping they believed she was still out of it. She may have been a pampered princess most of her life but Cindy Cassel was not a wimp. Not by a long shot. So she sat and waited. She would have a chance soon. She knew Mark had already arranged for the ransom note to be delivered. That in itself made her want to personally see Monica brought down.

Twenty million dollars! How dare he? Who the hell did he think he was anyway, torturing her family for money? And Monica was all over him. She bit the gag once more, fighting the urge to hurl.

Monica laughed at something and Cindy tried to focus on what they were saying but they were too far away, and far too quiet. *Where was she?* She didn't hear any cars, no voices, not even a breeze, and the air smelled pungent and stale.

She groaned softly to hide the gasp when she realized where they were. Neither even looked at her at the slipped sound. Obviously she was not important anymore. That didn't make her feel any better. When she realized where she was, she was surprised she hadn't recognized it before. She hadn't been out here since she was a child, traipsing around behind Brad while he did some service or other for the state. They were in the Everglades.

Cindy fought the urge to cry. She refused to feel helpless. So long as she was breathing and had a thought in her head, she could get out of this.

She watched Mark as he looked at his watch. "It's almost time. Do you want to wish me luck before I leave," he said in a silky tone.

Cindy had to fight the urge of her stomach as his voice filled the cabin.

"Honey, I live for these times. Especially when you come back a millionaire," Monica replied. "It's better than winning the lottery." She walked a hand up the man's chest with manicured nails.

He tossed a cold look at Cindy, still huddled against the wall. "And a hell of a lot easier." Cindy caught the shiver before it began. She did not want them to know she was awake. "Once we have the money, we'll drop her off somewhere and be headed to that little island in the Caribbean we found." Mark wrapped his arms around her brother's wife, grinding into her as he kissed her deeply. "Then it's just you and me baby. Forever."

Monica's shiver of excitement made Cindy bite into her gag. Monica made her sick. She'd been sleeping with this man, and who knew who else, the two years she'd been married to her brother. The room became eerily silent for several minutes as they kissed. Cindy breathed. She ignored them, and simply kept breathing.

* * * *

Delilah returned to the warehouse and locked everything behind her. She had a plan and a mission. Once Cindy was safe, it was time to leave. She'd realized on the drive there was no way she could stay. Too much had been allowed. Roman knew too much. She'd shared too much.

Maybe it was time to go see her father again. It had been so long since she'd seen him, and he would be thrilled to have her home and so would her stepmother, Chiaki. Noticing the time, she'd decide the details later. Evening was fast approaching and she needed to prepare. She needed to get close enough to be of use or they would both die and no matter how much Monica may deserve it, Cindy was innocent.

* * * *

Cindy waited until Mark left, the sound of his vehicle disappearing in the distance. She stamped her foot to get Monica's attention. Monica lifted a brow at her.

"What?" Monica asked, her mouth twisted in distaste.

Cindy stamped her foot again, working her jaw to see if Monica would at least release the gag.

"Thirsty?" she taunted. Cindy nodded yes, with an adamant stare. Monica let out an exasperated sigh. "I guess it wouldn't hurt." Cindy didn't even blink when Monica yanked her up. She pushed her down into a chair, looping a rope through her bonds, tying her to the chair. "Don't get any ideas. No one will hear you out here anyway," she warned. Cindy winced when Monica pulled maliciously on the ropes. "So long as we understand one another," Monica said in a low voice, tugging Cindy back by the length of her hair.

Cindy's jaw clicked shut when the gag was yanked out, her jaw clamping tight in relief. Cindy worked her mouth around several times, breathing for the first time in too many hours through her mouth. "All I want is something to drink," she said in a very dry, reedy voice.

Monica raised a chilled water bottle to her mouth and let her drink, letting a lot of it run down the front of Cindy's blouse, mocking laughter growing as the water spilled. "You shouldn't waste it! It might be your last for who knows how long." When Cindy glared at her, Monica slapped her across the cheek.

Cindy bit back the retort on her lips. She would find a way out of this then she would personally see to it Monica paid. Monica set the bottle on the table and turned to reach for a gun on the counter behind her.

"You know, I never did like you." She ran a polished nail down the side of the gun. "Miss Cindy Cassel. Daddy's girl. Brother's best friend. If you'd been just a little younger, I would have suggested you be sent to one of those boarding schools all the rich people seem to like dumping their kids in. And your sap of a brother would have done it. Because he loves me," she taunted with a sickening smile.

"It would suit me fine to leave you here, bleeding and hurting for being so damn perfect." Monica's gaze sparked with pure spite. "But Mark believes you won't talk after all of this. I have my doubts," she stressed, pinning Cindy with a chilling blue-eyed stare. "He's going to call when he has the money." She waved the gun beneath Cindy's chin. "We've only been hiding for a few hours and I don't care who you are, the police are not going to get you out of this. In fact, by the time Daddy Warbucks thinks to finally call the cops and jeopardize his little girl's future, we're going to be long gone, and twenty mil richer." Cindy could only listen as Monica purred. "I knew Brad was going to be easy. That's why I didn't argue over the pre-nup. Your brother is a *such* a pushover. Trust me honey, good sex will get you everything you've ever wanted in life." There was a lascivious enjoyment in her taunts that made Cindy more determined to see Monica pay for all of her crimes.

Monica lifted her wrist to stare at her diamond encrusted watch, and smiled. "And, in less than three minutes, he'll be at the drop point. So, I guess that means your time is up." She ran a finger down the barrel of the gun in punctuation.

"Monica, you don't want to do this. I won't talk. I swear!" Cindy croaked as Monica leveled the gun at her, without even a waver of conscience. Cindy felt a bead of sweat drip down between her breasts. The humidity inside had to be as hot and sticky as she could have ever imagined it to be outside.

"Sorry, honey. Dead people don't talk," she murmured, reaching for the hammer on the gun with a steady thumb. Monica's head snapped up, her smile wiped away. "What was that?"

"I didn't hear anything." Cindy had seen it, though. A shadow outside. The next thing she heard was a cell phone ringing, the hot heat of an explosion and then there was nothing.

“Post one, do you have a visual?” Roman’s voice was thick. Ever since the demand had come at six to have the money ready by seven and he’d heard no word from Del, he’d been fighting every instinct he had to go search for her. The urge to protect his mate was driving him insane.

“Negative,” came the responding voice.

Roman had taken four of his best trained men and staked out the park where the drop was to take place. Brad was to go to the park and prop open a book, setting a briefcase with the money beside the tree, then walk away ten minutes later, leaving the briefcase like he’d forgotten it.

“Post one to Ground, we have visual. It’s him.”

Roman almost growled. He wanted to tear this man apart for what he’d done to the Cassels. Once he was apprehended, he was going to ensure the law never even knew he was missing. “Ten-four. Wait for the claim. As planned.”

“Yes, sir.” The sharp response was echoed twice more.

The orders were to wait until Mark Yeager palmed the briefcase, and Roman wasn’t in the least surprised when he kept walking once he had it in hand. Mark pulled out a cell phone, dialed a number and tossed the phone in the trash as he passed a receptacle.

“Post two, retrieve the cell. We’ll pick up when he hits the street.”

“Ten-four.”

Roman crouched inside the black van as it inched around the corner, then stopped to block the man’s path. In less time than it took to blink, their would-be murderer was pulled into the van with a slapped door to close them off from the rest of the world.

“What are you doing?” demanded Mark. He was pinned by two of the men Roman had brought with him, struggling in vain.

Roman lifted his pistol and pressed it right against his nose. “You have not one reason to demand anything. Where are they?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mark spat back. When he yanked on a shoulder, the man holding him pulled him back with a sharp warning.

“You have only one chance. Where are they?” Roman said in a very low voice.

“You’re in a lot of trouble! I was taking a walk,” Mark said in a spitting rage.

Roman snarled at him. “Mark, you’re a dead man. You have only one chance to keep from meeting Simon on the other side.”

Roman saw how fast those words hit Mark. It only drew his anger higher.

“But how?” Mark managed, his gaze casting about in confusion, but he recovered. “It doesn’t matter. They’re dead! Blown sky high by now!” He laughed without mirth. “The slut of a cheating wife and the pristine daughter. They mean nothing to me! Monica played it perfectly and Cindy was too sweet to think she was being used. You can’t help them!” Mark shouted at them, still trying to wrench himself free of the men holding him.

Roman stared at him in a silent, chilled rage. Mark’s life was over.

Roman was in his office two hours later trying to find Del, sickened with grief he had failed, not only his boss but his mate. Delilah was nowhere to be found. He refused to believe she had deserted him. Not now. Not when they were so close. Yet, every time he thought maybe Del had left him, saving herself and her privacy, the more likely it became. He had no reason to trust her. He’d entrusted his most influential account to a woman who—for all he knew of her—was no more than a private investigator who could really act.

He slammed a fist down on his desk in anger as his thoughts churned. How could he have let it come to this? Cindy’s life was at stake! He didn’t think Del would put her own secrets in front of Cindy’s life. Would she? All he knew was he was back at square one trying to find Cindy. Mark hadn’t said a single word that was useful. Hours were slipping passed and he had nowhere to turn.

He knew the only thing left to do was contact the police and hope they had a way to find Cindy. He lifted his private line at the first hint of a ring. “What?” he snarled.

“Sir, you better get to the gate. I don’t know how, but Cindy’s home.”

He dropped the phone and was out the door before the man finished talking. He ran the length of the driveway, scouring the scene with his own eyes.

His guard was kneeling on the ground, running a hand over Cindy, searching for injuries. Roman fell to his knees, checking for himself. She was unconscious, burn marks on her clothing and her wrists were severely chaffed. She had a distinct bruise on her cheek. He wouldn't have been surprised if the crescent cut on her skin was a direct match to a ring—the wedding ring on Monica's hand.

There was a tossed look over Roman's shoulder. "Mrs. Cassel is over there."

Roman spun on his haunches and spotted the instigator, bound and gagged and staring off into space. "Get Cindy inside and call a physician. Discreetly. We need to make sure she wasn't harmed." He waited until she was held in his arms and was yards away before he yanked the gag off of Monica.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," he informed the prone woman. She barely blinked at his snarled tone. When Roman tried to untie her hands, she twitched. "I don't know who did this, but they're good," he muttered to himself.

"It was the black ghost," Monica whispered. "I saw it!" she cried. "The house blew up. We died in there. The black..." Roman caught her gaze, spotted her hysteria rising through the fog of her delirium. "Mark was supposed to get the money. We were going to be happy." By the time Roman had finished untying the bonds, Monica had broken down into delirious sobs.

"Yeah, yeah. Come on. You need to rest then I think you're going to need a lawyer," he said as he helped her back up to the house. It was all he could say around the disgust and anger swimming through his veins. He was thankful when he saw one of his guys headed his way in a maintenance golf cart. He didn't want to touch the woman who was clinging to him.

"Take her ahead. I need to walk." He glared to enforce his words. When the gate was closed behind him, he started back the way he had come from toward the house. He only made it three steps when he realized there was only one way they could have gotten out. And Delilah wasn't there. A taste of cold fear sliced down his spine. He picked up his pace, running back to the house. He needed to find her.

He searched all night. A very long, sleepless night. Every number he had, every contact he could think of drew a blank. Even Dean at the north end precinct gave him a blank. Somehow she had fallen off the planet.

He needed to talk to Cindy.

He walked uneasily to the family wing. He'd only been invited down there on special occasions. It was not an open area of the home, and he knew it, but when Mr. Cassel spotted him he received the warmest welcome.

"Thank you. Thank you and that woman, Del? Is that right? God, where is she? She needs to see Cindy is going to be all right," Mr. Cassel said with a beaming look. "I can't believe you two pulled this off. I can't thank you enough."

Roman cut him off, but kindly. "Mr. Cassel, we both did what was expected. I'm glad she's home. Is she unharmed?" He didn't try to hide his concern for the young girl.

"She's a trooper. She's already told us everything once. From the beginning. Your friend was right about Simon," he explained in a quieter tone. "Cindy heard it, and she held Brad's hand when she told him. Strong as steel, is my baby."

Roman had to smile, seeing relief mixed with pride in Mr. Cassel's expression. "Do you mind if I talk with her for a minute? I have a few questions, but I won't keep her."

"Certainly." Mr. Cassel turned and neared the bed. "Honey? Are you well enough to talk to Roman?"

Cindy nodded. Roman promised quietly to not take long. She was still pale and looked worn from her ordeal. He waited until her anxious daddy had moved on, if only for a few minutes.

"Have you eaten anything?" he asked her, lightly brushing back her hair. He was relieved to see her external injuries appeared to be superficial.

"I'm working up to it. Starting slow. Food and water weren't a priority after we launched."

Cindy wasn't the type to complain, but he knew she hadn't eaten since the morning she'd met with Del at the beach, from the retelling she'd given her father and Brad. He reached for one of her delicate hands. "Hang in there. You'll be back up to caviar in no time."

She smiled, but he saw a new maturity in her gaze. "I doubt it. I learned a few things from this—but

that's for me to concentrate on."

He studied her face. "I think I understand. Traumatic experiences have that affect on us."

She returned his stares. "Yes, they do, don't they Roman?" she whispered knowingly, a light of understanding in her eyes.

He fought the tug on his mouth. "You always were too smart for your own good." He cleared his throat when her smile grew.

"That's what Delilah thought too. I wish I could at least tell her thank you."

He took a deep breath. "That's why I needed to talk to you. I can't find her. Do you remember anything about last night?" he asked, careful to keep his face emotionless.

"I don't remember much. I had seen a shadow outside right before the explosion." She squeezed his hand when he unintentionally tightened his grip on hers. "There was a moment of darkness and I could smell smoke, then I was lifted and all I remember really was eyes. Blue eyes. It could have been a man or a woman. They were wrapped head to foot in black. Like a ninja," she said.

Even as she spoke he felt his heart lighten. It could have only been one person, one woman. "Did that person make it out of the fire?"

"I'm sure they did. I don't know how else I wound up in the driveway," she said with a shrug.

He leaned forward and brushed a tender kiss across her forehead. "Get better soon."

"I will. I'm glad it's all over."

"Me too," he said, feeling better by the second.

He locked himself back in his office before he actually let his thoughts start again. Del hadn't let him down. She'd done as promised. She'd saved them. They had worked as a team, and together, they had succeeded. Now he needed to find her. Now it was time for them.

He had the taxi drop him off at the edge of the buildings walking the block or so to get to the interior of the warehouse development. As he approached the warehouse, he couldn't hear anything. He pushed open the door and only found his bike, where he'd left it. He started up the stairs but he'd already noticed the lack of scent. He knew before he reached the door she was gone.

He blinked in surprise. It wasn't just her that was gone, but her entire office. Not even a paper clip left behind. He went back down to the first floor and searched some more. He found the button to lower her workout doll, but all that appeared was a slack chain.

Now that he had his bike he could go to her apartment but it wasn't looking good. On his way around the corner, he almost collided into Louis. The same spot where she'd struck him senseless with her bamboo rod.

"Hey, man. Watch it," he groused. "I heard something. I should've figured it was you." He tossed Roman an irritated shrug. "You ruined my good paycheck."

"What do you mean?" Roman asked, positive he wasn't going to like his answer.

Louis glared at him. "I show up this morning and find my last check and severance pay. I'm out of a job."

"Where was it?" he asked.

"Taped to the office door along with a real short apology. Her stuff was gone before I even got here."

"How did she do that?" Roman's gaze widened.

"How the hell should I know?" Louis told him, scratching his head. "She warned me it could happen, when we first started working together, but hey, whoever listens to a woman who talks like that anyway. Right? Saying she's got secrets and stuff. Don't they all?"

"Yeah, don't they all," Roman repeated. "Have you been by her place?"

Louis laughed. "I don't know where she lived. She was a walking question mark, man."

Roman studied the other man. "Louis, can I ask you something?"

"I guess so," he said sullenly. For a man of forty-something, he was hamming it up.

"Did she ever treat you unfairly, lie to you?"

Louis stopped dead in his tracks and swung around to face Roman. He was shorter than Roman but his chin rose, his eyes staring at him hard. "Never! That woman was the best. She was upfront and honest. She never lied a day in her life."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Roman replied. He pulled a card from his pocket. "Look,

I'm not going to leave you jobless. I did have a part in this. This is the manager at the Palm Beach branch I run. Tell him I sent you. He'll set you up."

Louis stroked his chin. "I thought you were a good type when I met you." He glanced at the card, and slid it into a pocket. "What happened between then and today?"

"I'm not sure, but I think Del and I may have a few things to discuss," he said. "But it's hard to do when she keeps disappearing."

He heard a crack in Louis's voice when he said, "If you find her, could you tell her I miss her? She's a good person. I'm sorry she had to leave."

Roman clapped the photographer on the shoulder. "That makes two of us."

Roman wound his way to her apartment building, walking with little hope. He knew what he would find. The door opened easily when he tried the knob, and for the little there had been, there was absolutely nothing left. Even her equipment was gone. The woman could disappear like a shadow on a cloudy day, that was for sure.

It meant he had his work cut out for him. It had taken him five days to find anything on her last time and that was with her still within the country and in the same state. What were his chances when he had to search the world?

He started his bike with a shake of his head. He was not going to quit. There was too much relying on her. He needed her to accept her place next to him. The longer he was away from her, the more he realized that was where she belonged. He would find her and somehow convince her she could trust him enough to care.

No, he was not going to stop looking. Ever. Some things in life were meant to be. Inevitable. And he had found his.

"Father, you must rest," Delilah addressed the man before her, bowing at the waist with respect. "Your engagement this evening will be very tiring, and I know you do not wish to embarrass Chiaki."

"No, daughter," Daniel Roman replied as he rose from his knees with an agile grace. "I will be ready for the long speeches this evening. I was letting my mind wander." He stopped to stand before her. "But what of you?" he asked softly, lifting her face to him. "You have been here almost a month. Have you still not found your peace?"

She wanted to wipe the frown from his graying brow but knew he was asking with a father's love. Her breathing was quiet in the silence of the room as she looked beyond his shoulder. "I am trying," she admitted. "It was a lot harder to leave than I'd ever imagined."

He let his hand drop from her cheek. "Was it the work this time? Or was it a someone?" he asked as he turned and draped her hand over his arm to walk outside.

"I swore it would never be a someone," she said with quiet dignity, but then she sighed. "And yet I feel I have failed, Father."

"Because this time, it was, wasn't it?" he asked her tenderly as he sat her down on a bench in the middle of their rear gardens. "Delilah, you must learn to let your mother's indiscretions go. She paid her price, and I still have you, as much as you still have me." He sat down and together they faced the pond and the foliage, absorbing the tranquility surrounding them.

"I know. It's well past time," she admitted. "But it's been so hard. I live my life to help those who are hurt, used. How can I dismiss what I have learned?"

He sighed deeply and she knew his wisdom was about to shine through. She'd been feeling out of place and off kilter since she'd returned. For some reason, her father was no longer the home she had relied on for so many years.

"Daughter, you can never dismiss it. It's a part of you because you have learned from it. Maybe it is time to learn more than the lessons you are living by."

"What do you mean?" She turned to face him but he was looking beyond her shoulder. Guilt rose because this was not what she had planned when she'd reminded him of his appointment for the evening. "I'm sorry. I have kept you from your rest." His hand held her firm when she would have risen to walk him back inside.

"No, I think your lesson has come looking for you," he said with a twinkle in his light blue eyes. He rose from his place next to her and she immediately looked down. In her father's home, he would make the introductions.

"I am most honored to meet you, Daniel Roman," came a deep voice and for a terrifying moment of time, she wanted to fall right into the earth. She caught out of the corner of her eye as Roman made a dignified head bow to her father.

"I am pleased to have you enter my home," was her father's response.

"I am Roman Aiza and I am a friend of your daughter's."

She heard her father's soft chuckle. "A friend, hm?" She refused to look up but she knew what he was thinking with that tone of voice! "I'm glad to know she has such a man for her friend." She felt her cheeks heat with fire.

"Father! Please!" she hissed, but to no avail.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I don't usually have guests in my garden." Ignoring Delilah, he motioned to his wife who had halted at the end of the steps of the house. "This is my wife, Chiaki." He introduced the softly rounded woman who was her stepmother.

"Yes, I had the honor of meeting her while I was seeking you. A more charming lady could not be found," he said in soft tones.

She murmured something to Daniel in Japanese that by the sound of his voice, brought a smile to him. She wanted to kick both men in the butt! "Chiaki says she is deeply honored by your esteem. She also says you are at least as tall as her grandmother's favorite flowers. It is meant in the kindest of compliments."

Roman faced Chiaki and bowed again.

Her father spoke once more. "Forgive me, I'm late for an engagement this evening and I must get ready. I'm sure you and Delilah have much to catch up on." Then without a word to her, her father led Chiaki from the gardens. Delilah silently shot daggers to his retreating figure from beneath lowered lashes.

How could he do that to her? Ignore her and then leave her? When Roman sat with her she let out the breath she'd been holding, hoping she'd been dreaming it all. No such luck.

"You're one tough act to follow, you know that?" he said in a resonating tone that sent a shiver down her spine. She'd missed the low, rumbled tones of his voice.

"I prefer it that way," she replied. Her hands were tucked into the folds of her kimono. Which was good. She was envisioning strangling him at the moment. "What are you doing here?"

She spotted his wiggling toes in his socks, and bit her lip to keep from smiling even a little. Obviously some things took some getting used to.

"I thought you might like to know, Cindy made a full recovery."

She did relax some with hearing the news. "I'm very glad for her. She didn't deserve what they had planned."

"No. Monica and Brad are finalizing their divorce. She's walking away from everything. Even the token prenuptial. Not that she had much of a chance after what she did, and who she was in league with. Evidently a ghost scared her so bad at the cabin in the Everglades, she's all but committed herself to the Sisters of St. Francis."

"A ghost? How crazy is that?" She kept her fingers wrapped up tight.

"Cindy got a better look, but even she can't explain how they got out," he said as he leaned forward on his knees. "Would you care to enlighten me?"

"It's not important. They were safe."

She felt his sigh as much as heard it. "Delilah, how can you keep pushing me away?"

"Why are you here?" she repeated. This time his laugh was full.

"Ah, yes. I remember meeting you. That first day. The ice maiden who wouldn't give me her name." He faced her slowly and she felt her heart skip a beat when his hand gently caressed her skin. "Del, I've missed you. Please stop running."

She firmed her mouth, unable to meet his gaze. "I am not running," she informed him.

"Yes, you are." He drifted a thumb against her bottom lip and she felt herself want to melt. She fought against it. "It took me a month to find you. I came to see if you were ready to come home. With me." He leaned forward and brushed his lips where his thumb had been pressed. "I also told you the next time I go home, I wanted you to go with me. I'm going home to Wyoming. I've ended my personal contract with Mr. Cassel for more important matters."

She didn't know what to do. She licked her lips, stalling. "Roman. We had a couple of adventures, a few kisses." That was when she made the mistake of looking up, of looking for his gaze, needing him to understand. "I never wanted to hurt you. I can't fall for you. For anyone."

"Because of your mother?" he asked tenderly even as he slid his hand behind her neck, gently kneading her skin beneath his strong fingers. "Del, I know, and it doesn't change one thing about me, or you."

Her spine stiffened. "You know! You know?" Confusion was running rampant.

"Shh. Yes. I needed to know," he said without regret. "We both have secrets, and you still don't think you can trust me enough, and that I won't trust you enough. Del, I know I can trust you, but I can't show you what you need to know, here. It isn't safe."

"Can't show me what?" she asked even as she fought the pull of his strength, the yearning of her own curiosity. He was offering to openly share his secret and the enticement was alluring beyond anything she'd experienced.

For the first time she witnessed the deep indecision in his gaze. He flexed his resting palm open, witnessing the amount of frustration he was suffering from. "Delilah. I want to show you, more than anything. There is more, but until I can show you, until you can accept what I am, I can't, I won't take this any further." His voice dropped to a husky depth. "And believe me, I really want to." He pressed his lips to hers holding her still. "I won't dishonor your father's home with what I have in mind," he

whispered against her mouth, a devilish gleam in his gaze. "But let me show you how much I'm holding inside."

He seduced her one layer at a time, his lips, his touch, his tongue, his deep moans of pleasure to be holding her. She melted into a quivering mass of need at his touch. His hands wound behind her, holding her steady for the constant pressure of his mouth.

She felt when he let her hair down, pulling the style sticks free then wrapping his fingers through it. Her hands lifted on their own as the kiss deepened and lengthened. In a matter of seconds, the man holding her was the only thing she could think of, was the only sensation she was aware of as her hands framed his face.

She went willingly when he pulled her closer, felt the rough rise and fall of his chest against her as he wrapped his arms around her. He growled low when her arms encircled him. She couldn't have spoken if she'd wanted to by the time he ended the sweet torture. What he began to describe instead, sent shivers up and down her body.

"I want to make love to you, Delilah. I want to cherish every inch of that incredibly tall body of yours. I want to feel you in ways I'm still finding only have to do with you." He laughed a short sound, leaning into her. "Do you know ever since that first night when you faced me with a confidence I've never encountered in another person, I've been completely unable to look at another woman in a desirable way? You've spoiled me and all I've tasted is your kiss."

She moaned, feeling the delicious way his lips traveled down her neck. "Roman," she breathed.

"Yes?" he said against her throat.

"Kiss me again."

He leaned back a little, his gaze soft and hungry in the sunlight. "I have a condition," he said.

Her lips twitched at his words. "All right."

"Tell me about the characters on your neck. What are they?" She blinked, ready to withdraw but he was faster. His hands held her firm. "Oh, no you don't. Not this time, sweetheart. You tell me or I will become your worst nightmare. No more running. It's past time to make a decision about this."

She pressed her forehead into his shoulder. Her voice was weak, but she made herself do it. "You're right. They are kanji script, Japanese language. The left one is the symbol for life. The right one is a symbol of my inner heart."

"Inner heart? Like a sacred spirit symbol?"

She nodded as his hold kept her snug against him. "Yes. Mine was a little different, but since I'm not Japanese by birth, my *Sensei* masters allowed it. It isn't a traditional symbol."

"What is it?" She could hear his curiosity ringing through her head.

"A wolf."

* * * *

Every breath he'd ever taken, stopped on her words. "A wolf?" He managed to get the words out over the harsh pounding of his heart. His grip tightened even as she pressed into him deeper.

"I believe in what a wolf stands for. They are cunning, loyal-

"Mate for life," he said through a mouth that had suddenly turned desert dry.

"Yes. Even nature has a better plan. Humans are fickle and too quick to throw away the right choices," she said. Her fingers tugged at his hair and he had to fight himself again for control. A control that was on the verge of slipping and damn the consequences.

He wrapped his hands through her hair, holding her into him. "Del, please come home with me," he breathed into her hair, brushing his lips against her. He was on fire for the woman in his arms. He needed her like he needed water. The last month had been hell for him. Unable to locate her for weeks. His own instincts telling him what to do, what was necessary but nowhere to lead him.

"The only way is to show you. I have to show you," he said hoarsely. "And let you decide, it's the only way."

"Why not here?"

His answer was slow in coming since air was still a hot commodity. "For one thing, I'm in your father's house, not to mention a foreign country. Some things are better left untouched."

"Is it really that dangerous? Are you dangerous?" she asked, and he felt the quake of her body in his

arms, a subtle tremor.

"No, sweetheart, but if you can accept what I have to show you, then I plan on doing everything to your incredible body I just told you, but it won't happen here," he said firmly even though he shook down to his socks with wanting her.

She sighed against his neck. "If I promise to not disappear, to not run, will you give me some time to consider it?"

"To consider what?"

"I need to make this decision, Roman. I've had a lot of time to make my walls strong." His heart stopped with a wrench when she leaned back and stared at him with those soft blue eyes of hers. Blue jewels.

"Del, I can do that, but hear me on this. I have only so much patience. This last month..." He ground his teeth. "Has been hell," he finally got out. "You may not like the way I say it, you may not like the way I mean it, but you need to understand this loud and clear. You are mine." His jaw hurt by the time he got it out, forcing restraint.

He wanted to take her there, in the soft grass, her hair flowing around them. He wanted to love her until she couldn't separate them apart from each other. Since what he wanted wasn't possible, he did the next best thing. He controlled her mouth again. He met her with a passion that blew his needs wide open as he pulled her close again. She whimpered deeply under his onslaught, and he felt her heat under his touch collide with the flames of his own desire he'd been careful to leave alone.

This time he couldn't. He allowed the strangled hold on his control to slip a little, to let the animal have the taste he demanded, feel her under his touch, have her scent fill him into the very corners of his own secret spaces. His hands were fierce but gentle as he guided her, his lips traveled over her skin, tasting and savoring, slowly devouring her down to the basest of wants and of needs.

He opened the meeting of her kimono with a finger, seeing the soft shape of her breasts and forcefully fought down the beast, tempering it with the taste of her flesh. Her skin was smooth as silk to his touch, his tongue traveling a damp trail anywhere he could reach.

Somehow his hand traveled within the edges of the silken fabric hiding her from him, for the first time feeling the heat of her skin and he nearly lost it. She moaned as his hand cradled her, caressed her weight. He touched everywhere, feeling her, tasting her, smelling her essence, as she grew hot under his touch.

He forced himself to slow down, before he lost all reason. He withdrew his hand and felt her fingers flex where she had dug into his hair. He pulled her kimono closed, gently dropping kisses wherever he saw flesh. His breathing was painful for several minutes as he let the beast return to sleep. He'd nearly forgotten his own promise. She could make him forget everything. Even after the realizations he'd made, that one still had the power to leave him shaken.

"I didn't frighten you, did I?" he managed to whisper. "I'm sorry."

He felt the finger against his lips and wanted to suck on it like candy. "No, you didn't."

"Delilah, how can you not read me, like you did the ransom or on the boat? I know it's right under the surface, or at least it was," he breathed a little ruefully. He rested his head against her shoulder and was grateful when she folded up against him, doing the same.

"I can't get through to everybody," she whispered. "With you, I can feel it, right there, ready to come out, but no, I'm not frightened."

"And you still don't know? Can't tell?" he asked, mystified. The wolf was so close, desperate for his mate. He was desperate for her touch. One and the same. "I'm not deliberately hiding it from you," he told her again, wanting her to understand that.

Her breathing was soft against his skin, her ragged pants no less intoxicating than her kisses had been seconds before.

"I know you're not, and no, I've never been able to tell with you. I would never pry either. I don't know if I'm ready for what you have to show me."

"You don't know if you're ready for that level of trust," he amended.

"No, I'm not."

The silence wrapped around them, calming them again when she asked him, "Roman, what you

know of me, about me, that doesn't bother you?"

He kissed her temple tenderly. His fingers were still twined through her hair. He'd never tire of playing with her hair.

"No, it doesn't. I had my doubts, but you're such an incredible woman. So what if you can see things, feelings, auras? Sweetheart, by the time we get over the hurdle that is me, you're going to feel a lot less sensitive about it, believe me."

She sighed once into their joined silence, a whisper that made his chest swell for her. He thought it sounded like a wall cracking.

"How long before you have to return stateside?"

"I'm here just for a few days." He couldn't hide the sadness. "I really want you to come back with me, but I won't force you."

"Let's worry about the future in a few hours. Stay with me for now." She tilted up and he witnessed a real smile on her. It warmed him, having only been graced with a few that came from her heart. "I would be lying to tell you I'm not enjoying this," she whispered against him.

"I think this is the first time we've been together and haven't been chasing something since we met." He grinned at the simplicity of the statement.

"I know. That's how I feel too." He held her a little closer as she shifted on the bench. A few minutes later he stood and straddled the bench pulling her against his chest.

"Tell me what it was like to grow up in Japan," he said into her ear. He settled his cheek against her as she began to talk, and he listened.

Roman held her hand while they waited for his plane at the Kansai airport. He'd spent four days doing as he'd first explained, spending time together, to convince her to return with him. They'd visited gardens and shrines, even the Nishiki Market for Chiaki, when her father had invited Roman to stay for dinner one night. She'd laughed when he'd made some odd faces at the fresh and raw fish available. Nothing else was mentioned about his secret. She realized he wasn't going to pressure her into making the decision too hastily, but his own desires were easily found in his gaze, in the tender kisses he gave her.

"You're getting some pretty big stares," she teased him as they stood staring out the glass surrounding the airport.

"I'm a pretty big guy," he said, grinning back. She liked the way his dark eyes flashed when he was happy. She really wished she could see it more. She caught herself at the notion then had to wonder when the thought had changed.

"You know, you're probably the epitome of stubborn," he told her gently. "I will keep my word. But don't forget my warning," he said, facing her and setting his hands on her shoulders.

"I won't, but I needed to see this side of you too. I needed to know what kind of man there was behind the suit. Just as much as you wanted to know about me."

He brushed a thumb against her jaw. When his silence stretched out, she feared he was going to make some statement, say something to break the feeling around them. What he did do, surprised her.

He brushed a kiss across her forehead. "I have something for you," he said.

Please, not a ring, she thought silently, suddenly wary.

He lifted a box from one of his pockets and told her to turn around. She felt the weight against her throat, the cool stone against her skin. "What is it?" He stilled her hand as she lifted to touch his gift.

"No peeking. Not until I'm gone," he said, completely serious. "It's a family heirloom, valuable to my family. I trust you to at least return it in person if you decide against us."

"But why can't I look?" she asked, inwardly dying of curiosity.

"It is my mark. Both sons were given one gift to pass down. This is mine. I am giving it to you," he told her, his lowered tone solemn. He turned her to him as the call for his flight began. "I have to go. Give me one kiss to dream about."

She folded against him before she could think about not doing it. It sent a bittersweet ache all the way to her toes, and for the first time the want to go, to be with him almost outweighed her own doubts.

He set her back down on her own two feet. "I'll be waiting for you, sweetheart. Please, don't make me wait too long," he begged her, a sincere light of his needs in his expression, in his dark, hungry eyes.

He started to back away, and her mind overloaded. Her heart pounded, her lungs hurt. "But Roman! I don't know where you'll be!" she cried, suddenly feeling helpless as the sea of passengers moved on, surged forward around her, leaving her feeling adrift in the mass of humanity as she stood still.

He gave her one of those looks that used to make her blood boil, arrogant and secure. Now she really only wanted an answer. "I'm going home. I know when you're ready, you will find me." And for a split second she saw him, both of him, in his gaze. As if for the first time the soul that was Roman was also saying goodbye.

Then he had to turn to face the scanners and in a blink he was gone in the crush. She brushed the tears away angrily. How could he do this to her? Never even telling her where he'd be! Men! Animals!

She stomped down the passageway, annoyed with him and irritated with herself for letting herself begin to care.

She stopped stock still, her hand shooting to cover quaking lips. "Oh, God!" she whispered. The weight of the stone at her neck began to warm against her skin and she shot into a restroom, staring at the mirror.

Lying against her chest was a beautiful onyx carving held on a wide link silver chain. It was over an inch long, glinting easily off of her skin. She watched her reflection as her shaking fingers rose to touch the gift he had placed on her. *An heirloom, to pass down. His mark.* His voice rumbled through her mind. The stone winked back at her with a flat patina of age, of graceful workmanship, speaking of an

age long passed when treasures were handmade and heartfelt.

The profile of a wolf carved out of a crescent moon was staring back at her. No, it wasn't a ring. It was worse. It was stronger. It was un-ignorable.

She rushed from the restroom searching the tarmac for his flight, uncaring of the tears falling easily. She pressed herself against the glass watching as his plane taxied out to the runway.

"Damn you, Roman!" she breathed bitterly. "Damn you." But she couldn't make herself leave until his plane was out of sight.

* * * *

She knelt in the garden, seeking her center, but she couldn't find it. With each day, her thoughts became less cohesive, harder to control. Roman had been gone for two weeks now and she felt like she was going slowly insane.

How could she have let this happen? What fate had decided to play such a practical joke on her? To care!

She exhaled, listening again, but once more, all she could hear was her own angry and distressing thoughts. Roman was the reason. He was not what she needed was the constant silent argument. She was her own fortress. Her own center.

For the first time she realized her fortress was empty, and she hated him more for making her see it.

She heard as her stepmother knelt across from her. Chiaki was a traditional gentle woman who had loved Daniel Roman on sight. She didn't care that he was a westerner, or over six feet tall. She didn't care that he had blue eyes. She was happy with her life and Delilah knew that. She respected her stepmother. She also knew Chiaki had a reason for joining her in her meditations. Sometimes, what a girl needed to hear was a mother's love.

"Delilah," she began in a sincere voice. "You have spent many days seeking, and if you were any other woman, I would not think of speaking my heart."

Delilah lowered her head further. "I know that, Chiaki," she replied.

"Your heart is much like our garden. We watch it grow, we help it when we can, but the flowers will do as they will. As they were meant to. You cannot make an orchid into a rose. You can only help them grow better to enjoy their season."

"I don't want to change him," Delilah whispered weakly.

"Ah, but you do," Chiaki replied. "You want to make him guilty, to protect your heart. You want to be mad at him for making you care, but he didn't force it on you. You can only care for yourself first to care for him."

"But what if-"

Delilah startled when Chiaki made a sound that was *not* Japanese dialect. Delilah bit her lip.

"You can 'what if' until you have joined your father's father!" she said sharply. She took a calming breath, then continued. "Delilah, I love you like you were my daughter. I always have. Could I care *if* I hated the fact that you were not mine?"

The tears had started again, but this time she let them fall without so much as a blink. "Love does not come with rules or boundaries," Chiaki continued. "It comes from understanding. I think it is time you stopped using the rules you have. You are hurting. You are lonely. Go to your Roman. He is a man who you are an equal to." Chiaki sighed. "Even I could see how he felt for you. Your father is proud of you."

Delilah licked her lips, her voice thick when she spoke. "He said I was stubborn when he left."

"And that won't change," she agreed. "But he loves you anyway," she said, laying a gentle hand on top of her hair. She rose silently to stand in front of Delilah. "I will let you rest and think, but don't ignore what you have found. A flower left untended will die."

"Thank you, Chiaki," she whispered as the other woman slipped passed.

* * * *

"Did she listen?" Daniel asked his wife as she reentered their home.

"I think so," she said even as her husband dropped a hand around her waist. "She is still scared."

Daniel sighed deeply. "She has blamed herself for so many years when she wasn't even involved. She never did accept her mother had a human nature like everyone else."

"We all do," Chiaki agreed. "This is her test. I have faith in her," she said, looking up and seeking his gaze.

"I have faith also." He tugged at the edge of her kimono. "Come. We must be prepared for whatever her announcement is."

"Yes. She will make it soon, I think," Chiaki agreed as they disappeared beneath the doorway.

* * * *

Delilah didn't move for well over an hour after Chiaki returned inside. She thought over what Chiaki had said, and what she hadn't said. Her feelings were still raw, still new.

Chiaki had said Roman's feelings were obvious. Had Delilah been ignoring him? Unwilling to face him because she had run for so long? Almost without effort her hand rose and gently cupped the pendant lying against her throat. She'd never removed it, keeping it close to her constantly.

His mark. What exactly did that mean? Was it a family symbol? And why a wolf? Did he hold their values as sacred also? How could he have known? He had brought it with him, she reflected. Was it a sign, she wondered, almost laughing at that. She really didn't believe in such things, like fate. But 'what if', in a good way.

He was expecting her to return it in person. He was expecting to see her at least one last time. He had followed her halfway around the world to give her this chance.

She slowly rose from her knees, knowing as she turned she would do the same. No secret he had could be so bad as to make her change her mind. She felt a smile curve as she sought the flowers in the garden.

"Stubborn. You haven't seen stubborn," she whispered into the wind, and lifted her face to the sunlight.

She landed in Rock Springs, Wyoming after a touch down in Cheyenne, and Delilah was glad to finally be moving by car. The scenery took her breath away, the large cottonwoods starting to change into their autumn colors as she headed northwest toward the Teton National Park range, edging the Yellowstone National Park on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. The car wasn't her roadster, but it was almost as good with the top down feeling the sun on her again as she drove.

She had no idea what kind of welcome she was going to receive after almost another month, but she was there. Roman would know how hard this concession was, how much it would mean for her to be there. He would understand; he was probably the only other person who knew what that meant for her. For her to accept that this time she couldn't be in control.

She held the pendant in her hand, tenderly stroking the bold carving. It was her link to him. She actually shivered in anticipation as the range became clearer in the distance. He was there. He had waited. She had no doubt of his word.

She'd found him with little effort. He was well known and well respected in the area. What would it be like to know you could walk around and feel that safe? She'd allowed her life to become too dangerous. She'd used walls and secrets for too many years. None of it had ever mattered to Roman. None of it mattered to her either, not anymore.

She turned down the driveway where the large wooden arch graced the drive. No name plate, no carving of welcome but it wasn't unwelcoming, either. A man in town had told her how to find him, his ranch. Now she was minutes from seeing him.

Her heart started to beat heavier, her tongue darting out, moistening dry lips. She stopped in front of the large rambler, the peaked roof sharp overhead. She sighed once. She had made her decision. Regardless of what his secret was, she knew she could face it.

She'd realized in the time since Chiaki's talk and her own arguments that she'd fallen in love. Desperately, without reason. She was not there to return the pendant. She could only hope he hadn't changed his mind.

Her hand shook only a little as she slid from the convertible, her breathing expelling her anxiousness softly into the lilting sounds surrounding her. She could see why he would love to live there. The color of the surrounding trees, the beauty of nature at work. She loved it.

Her gaze fell to a rustling in the tree line. A deer? She couldn't tell, trying to pierce the shadows, hearing it run away before she found it in the darkened woods. She must have startled whatever it was in the trees with her unannounced presence.

She started for the front door a few moments later, her step sure when his voice reached out from behind her.

"You came."

After four long weeks without him, his voice sent a shiver down her spine. She turned slowly and saw him for the first time with a heart that knew, could finally recognize what she'd been too frightened to name. He was darkly stunning. Thick black hair and dark, flashing eyes, a strong face of character and a sensuous mouth.

"Yes," she said, even though her own heart was beating like a caged animal against her ribs.

"Have you decided?" His question vibrated through her.

"I have."

His expression remained quiet, calm. "Then I owe you the truth. All of it." He reached for her hand and she let him take her easily.

He led her into the house straight into the living room. It was masculine in décor, but very comfortable, with Apache rugs on the floor and several paintings hanging on the wall. Beautiful paintings of wolves outlined on cliffs with trees and on beaches bathed in moonlight.

"Those are gorgeous!" she breathed, but when he didn't go any further into the house, she watched him curiously. He stilled, staring at the paintings. His expression changed, growing withdrawn and pensive, and she held her breath knowing what he was about to say could change everything.

He began speaking, his focus on the paintings. "Delilah. You are the only woman I've ever loved. I

have never dreamed of finding my mate to share my life with. You're the only one who will know me, all of me." He turned to face her, gently clasping her hands in his, his thumbs dragging across her skin, creating sparks in their wake. "You once asked if you could trust me, and I vowed even then with my life. I ask you now, can I trust you with my secret?"

"Without knowing how I feel?" she asked him, her heart in her throat. The words came out husky because of it.

He leaned down and brushed his lips against her mouth and even then she could feel their trembling. Hers or his, it didn't matter.

"Tell me," he whispered against her.

"You have been everything to me, become everything I could have ever wanted." She lifted one hand to touch his face, feel his skin, warm beneath her touch. "I love you," she finally admitted, saying it out loud, as much for him as for herself. "You are the only one for me," she swore as his lips braced against her once more.

"Delilah, I love you. I have since before I came to find you, but I knew you had much more than I to overcome." He leaned his forehead against hers. "Until now." He took a deep breath. "Can you listen to everything I have to say before you make your judgment? I need to tell you everything to be fair to you. I won't hate you if you leave today, unable to look at me."

"Unable to look at you?" She took a step back and saw a deep sense of pain. "What? What is it?" feeling a frisson of fear as his gaze found hers.

His hands tightened, then let her go. "I'm afraid. For the first time in my life, because I could lose you."

"Roman, if you can't tell me, I can accept you. I do love you," she said, feeling a gulf widen between them.

He shook his head fiercely. "No! I will not lie to you." When he found her gaze, his eyes were blazing with a primal fire. "You are my mate, and to each other we are true." He took a deep breath and faced the wall again. "Those are paintings my father did. We all have versions."

"They are truly beautiful," she said, secretly scared at his tone, unsure of where he was headed.

"I know he will be proud of you, the same as I am." He took one long deep breath and asked her in a solemn tone, "Do you see me up there?"

Her breath caught as her vision blurred, darting between him and the wall of frames. "You?" It was a whispered squeak.

"Yes, me. I am on that wall. I am the second born, second son to a true bloodline. The last wolf shape shifters." His voice had dropped, an echo of a whisper, but he didn't look at her, rather staring straight ahead. She felt tension radiating from him. "I am trusting you with the knowledge of what I am, but I will not, cannot, make your feelings conditional on this secret. I had to make sure you understood before-" He stopped abruptly, his jaw closing with a snap.

She was shaking from her hairline to her toes. "Before?" Her voice didn't want to work.

She shivered as his gaze flicked to her. "Before I made love to you," he finally allowed, a hollow sound. "I want you; the wolf has been howling for his mate since we met, but things become...difficult after." She heard his teeth grinding. "I refused to let it go that far without you knowing. I refused to use your feelings that way, whether you did or did not care." She heard his knuckles pop in the quiet of the house as his fists clenched.

"What happens after?" she asked, her voice thin and breathy. She felt light headed. Something she was not used to at all.

"After? There is no after, Delilah. If I possess you, neither of us will be free. Wolves mate for life, remember?" he reminded her evenly. "I'm going to go outside and let you think. I will understand if you are not here when I return." Before she could blink, the door was open and he was gone, disappearing of the porch into the late morning sunlight.

She sank to her knees, feeling the floor shift beneath her with a heave and the door standing wide open behind her. Her gaze flickered restlessly over the paintings. And then she knew. She found him. She threw her arms over her head, as if protecting herself from the falling sky and bit back a soul shattering sob but wasn't fast enough to hide the wail of pain. The sound of her discovery rolled around

the house to finally fade away to nothing.

He was stunning. There was a gleam in his lupine eye that she recognized standing on the beach beneath the moonlight. Trees outlined his body with arcs of light and shadow, his black pelt shimmering in the moon glow.

How could she have missed a connection like *that*, she silently cried. Was he a werewolf? A monster? What was he! All of it raced through her thoughts. Her arms slowly dragged down, her head falling numbly until her chin came to rest on her chest.

She felt the press of the stone and her hand ripped upward to yank it free. To remove him from her life, but even as her cold fingers gripped the stone, she couldn't make the final tug. She couldn't produce the strength to damn him. She found she still loved him.

It took her several minutes to finally stand, her legs feeling more like they held water instead of bone, she shook so easily. She stumbled the few steps toward the wall to stare at the painting, at Roman. Her finger traced the outline of his body, the robust length, seeing the delicate detail that made him so beautiful in the moonlight. She could see him in this beast. The male beauty, the shine of a heart in his obsidian gaze. She recognized him now; she had seen the beast in him. The cunning, the loyalty. He would not be Roman without the wolf.

She understood his fear, but she wasn't scared of the wolf. She was scared of how much he trusted her with this kind of a secret, and he was leaving the decision to her. She could walk away, with a family's heritage, with a family's secret. Because he loved her. Because he trusted her to keep it silent.

Her head fell forward against the wall as her finger continued to trace the black beast who had stolen her heart. There were no tears this time as she made up her mind.

* * * *

Roman didn't know how long he had ran, nor did he care. He'd stripped with a vengeance at the tree line, needing to be free. Needing to run. Needing to be numb when he returned. Because he knew she would be gone.

The shock had been in her gaze. He had heard the heart-wrenching cry that had echoed from the depths of his house seconds before he could get out of range. He was asking too much, expecting too much for her to accept him as he was. Every fear he held came out in a soulful wail of anger. He trusted her! He loved her. Somehow he had to make her see. He was no less than any other man who walked on this earth.

He had known with a sinking heart this day would come. When he'd almost rushed out of the trees finding her scent on the breeze, he felt a joy like nothing he'd ever tasted, and he'd accepted it would be today. She had been beautiful in the sunlight. She had not smiled. He sensed her nervousness in the way she stood, the way she watched the shadows, in the tilt of her lips. And she had held the pendant with a white hand. Gripping it. Then he knew.

He had believed he was ready to tell her everything, that he could share his secret, but it had been the hardest thing to ever do, to actually say it. How had his father convinced their mother? He had no idea. It was different for everyone. If this was all his father had ever given his children in warning, his warnings hadn't been detailed enough. Roman still hated the fact he was the first to find his mate.

When her scent had reached him in the morning warmth his entire body had responded. Had hungered. He would not force her into anything, and that included his bed. But when he got back and she was gone, he would need to plan again. He would need to find a way to break through to her. To make her see she could love him, all of him, because he loved her so much, he ached with it.

He wanted to share his life, his home, and it could only be with Delilah.

The sun was far overhead by the time he reached the tree line behind his house again. His head was hanging, nearing exhaustion from running endlessly, trying to outdistance the pain, when he emerged through the trees near his house. He searched for his clothing, looking in both direction. Damn! He thought he had left them closer than this.

Then he looked up and saw the car. His ears cocked listening for any hint of her presence. Her scent was clearly in the air. She was still there? Had she fainted? Was she all right? He slipped through the trees until he was almost to the front porch and was amazed to find her sitting on the step, staring off into space, one foot kicking the air as she leaned against a post. He cursed again. There were his clothes,

piled neatly next to her.

What was she doing? He wasn't in the mood for any games. Her head turned slowly at the rustle of sound he created and she found him. Her blank expression ripped his heart in two. Then the oddest thing happened. She began speaking to the wolf.

"You know, that was really rude, to run off on a guest like that," she reprimanded him. "I traveled halfway around the world, blinked in Honolulu and I'm starving. I hope you plan on feeding me."

He took a tentative step forward seeing her start to smile. Her smile still did crazy things to his heart rate. "Funny. You scared I might bite?" she teased him, a wicked little grin flickering across her lips. He snorted into the ground.

Scared of her? Not hardly. He stalked forward until he stood only a few feet from her then gave her a stare, and she was still smiling.

He watched as she lifted the pendent in her hand, looking at it with an honest gaze. "You know, if I'd been two brain cells smarter, I would have figured it out. Especially the way you reacted to my tattoo. I didn't get it then. I do now," she said. "You've known all along, haven't you?"

She returned his stare unafraid. He finally nodded, unwilling to let the happiness he felt inching up on him take over. He almost collapsed where he stood however, when she lifted the pendant and dropped a kiss on the stone.

He watched her, filled with anxious and trembling emotions as she stood to walk toward him, stopping before him. Out of reach. She fell to her knees. "I have given you my heart and my trust, Roman. Share yours with me," she breathed, every bit as sincere as he had been when he'd told her the truth.

He was shaking everywhere as he took the last three steps. When he stood before her, he pushed his head into her chest and her arms circled him in reaction. He could have died of happiness in that moment when her hands sank into his pelt. He had found his mate.

He froze when he felt her lips, her breath against him. She was dropping little kisses all over his head. His eyes closed in bliss. Then she laughed when he swept her cheek with his tongue.

She was going to pay for all those kisses. He pulled himself from her grasp. Somehow by her gaze, she knew what was next.

"Roman, I need to see you," she said without losing his gaze. "I want to understand." He turned away for a second but her hand rose to his muzzle. "Roman, I love you. All of you."

For the first time he showed someone not family. He held his breath, his eyes closed unable to watch her reaction, afraid he would see the revulsion he feared. It took less than a minute until he rested on a knee, her hand still holding his chin as he silently waited for the worst.

"That was beautiful," was all he heard before his arms wrapped her up and his mouth claimed hers.

"Delilah! I love you," he said hoarsely, repeating it between kisses. Her soft whimpers enflamed him more. After several minutes he finally found his voice. "I warned you. I don't want to stop this time, love."

"Don't stop. I've waited for you," she said against his mouth. Her hands dug into his hair with a fierceness that made his blood hot. He cradled her in his chest and strode straight to his room. He laid her gently on the bed.

"I've waited for you for years, sweetheart, but I don't know if I can be gentle this time." He dropped hot kisses along her throat as he stretched out next to her. His body was raging at him in adamant agreement to his statement.

"Don't. Not this time." Her fingers scraped down his back and he arched against her. "I don't need gentle, not now."

She was sweet on his tongue as he kept dropping kisses on her skin. His hand traveled over her body, learning her in a way he couldn't have even imagined in his dreams. She cried out when he pulled back only to sigh in pleasure when he yanked her t-shirt free and found her again with his mouth. Her hands drove him on even though somewhere in his mind he wanted the first time to be tender, but as her hands drifted to his bare hips, all thoughts except the woman he held next to him disappeared.

She was the reason he was there. She was the woman who made him whole. He wanted to love her for hours but the beast needed her as much as the man did. He wanted to claim what was his, the woman

who had stolen into his heart. His hand fell to her waist, as his lips found a sharp peaked breast. She cried and arched instantly, driving him on faster and faster.

Her hands were everywhere, caressing, holding, digging in hunger. He stopped breathing when he pushed her jeans open and found her with a touch.

He groaned deeply, her heat enveloping him as his fingers delved into her silken center.

She cried loudly as she arched into him. He couldn't stop. He ripped her jeans off, sending them somewhere. His mouth found hers, lifting himself over her. She urged him on, rising to meet him as he thrust.

Time stopped. He cried out in shock, feeling her flinch and tighten, then gradually relax again in his hold. "Delilah!" he cried hoarsely. "Why didn't you say something?" He held himself over her, breathing heavily, stunned into an immobile silence.

"Because it was my choice, and right now, I need you," she said against his shoulder. She moved against him, proving her point. He was powerless to ignore it, but he tried, not wanting to hurt her again. She bit him when he didn't take her word for it. He dropped his head and retaliated.

"You are going to pay for that, love," he warned her.

"Make me," came her defiant taunt and he felt himself smile even as his body began to move with hers again.

He lowered his lips to hers, worshipping in their tenderness. "Oh, I will," he told her evenly while her hands ran across his body. "Over and over," he said dropping little kisses on her neck. "And over." He kissed her cheek. "And over." He kissed her lips, and then couldn't find the breath to speak at all.

* * * *

It was early evening when she opened her eyes. She blinked once and stretched and immediately found the warmth of his body.

"Are you still hungry?" His voice rumbled over her nerves.

"How long have you been awake?" she asked back.

His chuckle was kind when he rested his lips against her temple. "One of these days you're going to shock me and actually answer a question." But he sighed when her fingers trailed down his chest. "Only a few minutes," he informed her. His tone changed, dropped to a husky timbre that made her spine tingle. "When I woke up, I was afraid this was another dream. I wanted to savor this before you disappeared in the glare of reality."

She rose and angled herself onto an elbow, staring down at him as he lay in repose, his sleek, muscled body stretched in pure relaxation. She brushed a tender hand across his brow and watched as his face relaxed even more. "No dream, Roman," she told him tenderly. His dark eyes lifted. "I'm here. And I'm going to stay."

"I love you," he said before he lifted to brush against her mouth. She caught a flash of indecision in his gaze.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know how I'm supposed to do this." His grin was crooked when he lifted a hand to loop through her hair. He pulled it to drape over her shoulder.

"Do what?"

"Ask you to marry me," he replied, still playing with her hair. "I should've had all of this planned. Isn't that what women expect? I don't know. I'm the first to find their mate," he told her seriously. "I've never done this."

"Roman Aiza! Are you being bashful?" she exclaimed. She laughed warmly when he grinned up at her.

"Maybe," he admitted. "But it's the truth."

She nipped at his nose and she felt him relax. "I'll tell you what. Why don't you ask me, meaning it, and see what happens," she said with a devilish tone in her voice.

"You're not known for answering questions with actual answers," he said, but she could tell he was secure again. The glimmer was back in his espresso dark gaze. His expression warmed when he caught her gaze and she felt as he stopped breathing for a second. "Delilah Roman, will you marry me? Spend your life with me?" he asked.

She leaned down and nipped at his ear. “Yes.” His arms looped around her and snuggled her back into his shoulder, but he still felt tense. “What’s the matter?” she asked him as her fingers began to trail over his body again.

“I’m torn.”

“Over?”

“Whether I should feed you, or this,” he whispered as his lips and mouth began a course of discovery over her shoulder.

She sighed in blissful delight. “Feed me later,” she offered, and smiled when he groaned his agreement.

EPILOGUE

One month later

Delilah leaned down and kissed her stepmother on her cheek. "Thank you for everything, Chiaki."

"You are very welcome, daughter," she said in her musical Japanese. Chiaki patted the flower tiara gracing her stepdaughter's head and stepped back. "You are beautiful. Your father is very proud of you." Chiaki shot a look over her shoulder. "Roman is a good man."

Delilah ducked her head at the soft praise. "Yes, he is."

"Have you stopped working undercover for him?"

"I was ready," she said nodding softly. "After the kidnapping, I knew it was time."

"I know you will be missed. You and your father will always be respected," Chiaki said warmly. "But even I can say I am glad he has finally retired from all of it. Now we can enjoy our garden and maybe grandchildren?" Chiaki hinted in a whispered voice.

"Maybe sooner than you think," Delilah replied cryptically.

There was a light tap on the doorway. "Can I come in?"

Delilah looked at her father, still stunning in his late fifties in a tuxedo. "Of course. I'm not facing that crowd alone," she quipped.

He leaned down and kissed his wife who left them to join the procession. "Lovely, Chiaki. I'm glad you decided to wear your kimono." His eyes lit up as he perused his wife. She tapped his hands.

"Daniel. This is your daughter's wedding. Behave yourself," she admonished.

"Yes, love," he said, looking for all the world like a happily married, and in love, man. He waited for her to leave the room before he closed the door on his daughter and himself. "Delilah, I want you to know, I'm very happy you have found Roman. I know what happened between your mother and myself hurt you."

She rested a hand on his arm. "Dad, I've made my peace with Mother."

"I had hoped you had, but I was just as guilty for not telling you everything and I should have, long before now. When you were old enough, I thought the truth would change your path too much, and you had excelled far beyond what I had hoped for. You've grown into a remarkable woman."

She looked at him with curiosity. "What truth?"

His gaze was heavy and touched with sadness. "Your mother and I were a team. She was undercover when she died. The man she was with was her contact. It was unfortunate she'd given the impression the night before they died that they were lovers."

Delilah felt her heart stop cold. "You mean she died because of who she was with?"

He gave her a sad look. "I couldn't prove it after ten years, but yes. Because of her death and what she herself ultimately sacrificed, you were protected. I have always held a soft spot for your mother, but my life would have become intolerable without you. And Chiaki. That is why I couldn't let you see the truth before now. I was selfish to let you direct your bitterness solely at your mother. In a lot of ways, you are like her, and that is not insulting. But whether she and he were lovers, she is gone and you are here. I'm sorry I didn't say anything before now, especially at your wedding, but I wanted you to go on from here with a clean conscience. You were not responsible in any way for your mother's behavior. She adored you. She died to protect you."

She curled herself into her father's loving embrace. "Why now? And protect me from what?" she whispered, swallowing the sobs burning her throat.

"Now, because I couldn't keep it from you any longer." He slid a hand up and down her back, soothing her. "We moved to Japan with a little help from my sources. Our names were changed and I stayed connected. When it appeared you had my talents for undercover work, I felt blessed and cursed. I never wanted you to suffer for what she had done, if it were true," he said. "But I wasn't going to hold you back either. And to be perfectly honest, if you had wanted, you could have continued. I know my contacts would have accepted you without a single batted eyelash. Your records are incredible," he said with distinct pride. "But I am glad you have found a better reason to wake up each day than that."

She searched her own heart and felt the truth of his words. Her father wouldn't lie to her. "Is that

why you weren't surprised when I decided to go my own path?

"Mostly. That and I raised you. You are stubborn as a Mississippi mule as my grandfather used to say. I knew you would do what you felt compelled to do. Telling you too soon would have confused the right path for you. It was not my path to make for you."

"Thank you, Dad." She leaned up and kissed his cheek. "It does make sense. It was as if I was born into it."

"In many ways, you were sweetheart." He kissed her forehead. "We better get out there. You have a man who's all but chewed off his own arm over today waiting for you."

She laughed softly. "I'm glad we were able to come to an agreement about the wedding before the weather turned too cold. It didn't feel right marrying in a church being raised a Buddhist."

"I'm sure he's as happy about it. His parent's home is beautiful, and they are, shall we say, unique," he added quietly as he eased the door open from her changing chamber.

"Dad, you can't say anything!" she warned in a hushed tone.

"I won't. Can't divulge what I don't know," he answered with a straight face. She didn't get a chance to question anything else as they made their way outdoors to the waiting assembly. Her gaze flowed over the thirty or so guests in attendance. Most of them friends of Roman's family. Her father and herself and Chiaki were attended by a few of their friends who they had known since moving to Japan. Most had instead sent their wishes rather than traveling to the northern reaches of the Minnesotan wilderness where his parents lived.

When her vision landed on Roman, smiling at her with all of his heart in his gaze, everything else faded away and she felt something she'd never experienced.

A feeling of coming home, and knew that no matter what trials lay ahead of them, because of his heritage or even for her own, they would face it together.

She had found her mate as well. With her hand in her soon-to-be-husband's, she faced the officiating judge and smiled.