



Catrina
Calloway

Kissed
by the Sun

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By Catrina Calloway

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Kissed by the Sun
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Chapter One

“Oh my God, Carlee, you’re as white as a sheet!”

Carlee Davis lifted her hand and wiped away the perspiration lining her upper lip.

“And your hair, damn, the pins are coming out.”

“You only put two hundred of the damned things in my hair.” Carlee huffed in reply. Sliding a foot out of one of her high heels, she wiggled her toes. “My feet are killing me.” She stepped back into the shoe, wincing when pain shot through the arch of her foot. “How much longer do I have to stand here like this?”

Marlene shrugged. “Probably until every last turkey is sold.”

“That’ll take all day.” Her shoulders slumped.

Threading a hairpin through Carlee’s long, thick, curly tresses, Marlene replied, “Honey, it’s the day before Thanksgiving. What do you expect?”

“I swear if one more person asks me—”

A woman approached, holding two screaming toddlers. Carlee resisted the urge to throw her hands across her ears to block out the noise. The tighter the frazzled mother held their hands, the louder the children screamed.

“Where can I get a fresh turkey?” The harried mom asked.

Carlee pasted a smile on her face, her lips cracking from the heat in the poultry store. “They’re right over there.” She pointed toward several young men standing behind a counter, handing out turkeys. People stood nearby in a line, three deep; an endless sea of customers. “You can get any size turkey you want.”

“Even a thirty pound bird?” The woman asked with a hopeful look on her face.

“Holy sh—” She swallowed the words, her stomach rolling and churning, imagining what it must have felt like when that size bird met its demise.

Poor thing! Just to be someone’s dinner.

Tears sprung to her eyes. She blinked rapidly.

“Just ask one of the clerks behind the counter.” Her voice was just above a whisper. “They’ll uh, get you the size you want.”

The woman tugged on each toddler’s hand, then joined the milling throng of customers lined up by the sign that read ‘Fresh Turkeys—All Sizes.’

“What’s wrong?” Marlene placed an arm around Carlee’s shoulders, giving her a good shake.

Carlee balled a hand into a fist, digging it into her thigh. “Why did my Aunt Ida think I was cut out for this? I hate working here.”

“It’s obvious that your Aunt Ida saw something in you, a quality that maybe you haven’t seen for yourself yet.”

Carlee folded her arms beneath her breasts, grateful the falsies in her bra remained in place.

So far.

She blinked again, but her lower lid stuck to her upper lid.

“Oh!” she wailed. “I can’t open my eye.”

Marlene peeled Carlee’s false eyelash from her upper lid. “It’s okay now; just relax.”

“I wish I could, but I can’t. If I didn’t need the money so much, I’d walk right out of here.”

Marlene smiled, lifting a hand to tug on one of Carlee’s errant curls—one that sprang free from the elegant up-do Marlene fashioned earlier. “That’s the spirit. I know you can do this. If you want that money to—”

“I know, I know.” Carlee slashed a hand through the air. “Ida was crystal clear on that point in her will. If I want the money to continue my art education, to live in that apartment in the city, then I’ve got to take over the reigns of the Davis Poultry Farm.”

Marlene nodded. “And that means doing what your Aunt Ida, your mother and your Aunt Beatrice loved to do. You know how much they enjoyed being in the poultry store during Thanksgiving.”

“What they loved,” Carlee said under her breath. “Was the money.”

Marlene nodded, glancing at the sea of customers around them. “It’s a gold mine, that’s for certain. A landmark, too. The town of Montauk wouldn’t be the same without it.”

“Todd should have taken over, not me.” Carlee said, referring to her estranged cousin. She felt like crying all over again. “Do you think he’ll come around and start talking to me again?”

This time, Marlene’s eyes misted. “I’m sure he will, but, then again, he’s got to start talking to me first.”

She gripped her friend’s arm. “Please don’t tell me that you and Todd are having problems.”

It was Marlene’s turn to paste a smile on her face. “All right, I won’t.” She patted Carlee’s hand. “He’ll come around, you’ll see.”

“I told him he could run it—the poultry farm, the store, everything. He’s just so stubborn.”

Marlene raised a brow. “Ida’s will is firm. She wanted the poultry farm and store in your capable hands.”

“I don’t know a damned thing about running a business.”

Marlene smiled. “You’ll learn. You come from the same stubborn stock as Todd.”

She gave Marlene a hug. “You’ve always been here for me.” Her throat constricted, she swallowed back tears. “Ever since we were kids.”

“And now, we’re family. We’ll get through this.”

“I hope so.” Carlee sighed.

Marlene nodded. “I know so.”

“I wish I possessed a tenth of your confidence.”

“Go on.” Marlene reached for Carlee’s shoulders, turning her so that she faced the crowd. “Ida would be proud of you. She always knew how to read people, and she saw something special in you. Something that, well, she obviously didn’t see in any other member of the Davis family.” She smiled and patted Carlee’s cheek. “You go be the woman Ida knew you could be.”

Carlee squared her shoulders, grateful for her friend’s support and determined not to let her down.

For the next hour, she stood near the cash registers, greeting people, answering questions, and watching each customer hand over wads of cash or credit cards, their purchases of turkeys and Davis' Poultry Farm famous side dishes in their over-flowing shopping carts.

She glanced outside at the parking lot. A continuous parade of cars pulled in, and it seemed that few left. The line of people waiting to buy turkeys and trimmings spilled out the door.

Would this day never end?

She shifted from one foot to the other, her feet hot and cramped in her high-heeled pumps, a smile pasted on her face. Nausea swirled in her belly from the smell of roasting turkey and fried chicken. She reached into the pocket of her skirt for a peppermint candy, hoping it would calm her stomach.

Smoothing a wrinkle from her skirt, she felt another hairpin spring free from the curls piled high on her head. Catching her reflection in one of the security mirrors on the opposite wall, she still couldn't believe that Marlene transformed *her*, Carlee Davis, the ugly duckling of the Davis family, into a swan.

"Well, well, if it isn't my little cousin, the starving artist."

She turned around quickly, bumping into Todd.

He raised a brow. "Having fun?"

Carlee shook her head, feeling another pin come loose from her hair. The metal bobby pin fell to the floor.

He looked down at the pin then raised his eyes to hers. "How does that old saying go? You can't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse?"

"Todd, look, we can work this out. If you want to run the farm and the store—"

He drew his dark brows together. His cheeks flushed bright red. "And violate Ida's will? That's all I need." His voice cracked. "I'm her son." He pointed a thumb at his chest. "She didn't give a rat's ass about me, only about her precious niece." He shook his head. "You were always her favorite."

Carlee moistened her dry lips. A bead of sweat trickled down her back, the heat filling her pores. She watched steam rising from the catering trays nestled in the counter nearby.

“I just don’t get it. You were always the wild one.” Todd’s voice shook with anger. “Why in hell did Ida think you could do this?”

Carlee clenched her hands against her sides. “Maybe, Ida saw something...”

No, she would not go down that path and repeat Marlene’s words. They would only add more fuel to the fire. “Look, we can do this together. You can do the books; you’re good with numbers. I-I can’t seem to get the hang of it.”

Todd tipped back his head and burst into caustic laughter. “So now you want my help? You’re some piece of work.”

Carlee reached out and snagged his arm. He pulled away. “I didn’t mean it like that, I meant—”

“What you meant,” he said, aiming a finger in her direction. “Is that you don’t know your ass from your elbow when it comes to running the family business.”

He took a step toward her. Carlee tried to move, but there was nowhere to go.

Todd trembled with fury, aiming his finger at her chest. “Just make sure, cousin, that if you run the Davis family business into the ground, *you* run, too. Because I’ll come after you with everything I’ve got.”

He turned on his heel and walked away. Carlee’s eyes never left his tall frame until he sailed through the door marked, ‘Exit.’

Chapter Two

“No, the catering department is right over there.” She nodded at some customers awhile later, and then pointed at the counters lined with steam trays. “The line to get fresh turkeys is that way.”

She blew out a breath. The puff of air pushed the dangling curl over her eye sideways. “No ma’am, side dishes are right there.” Carlee pointed to the refrigerator cases. “You don’t have to wait on line, just help yourself.”

Her feet throbbed. Marlene wouldn’t let her wear her favorite pair of flats because it wasn’t what Ida would have done. Hours on her feet in heels made her wonder how in hell her mother, Ida and her other aunt, Beatrice, ever did all this.

They enjoyed dressing up, getting their hair done—wearing tons of make-up.

In their later years, the three Davis sisters resorted to plastic surgery to enhance their looks. They had cheek implants, breast implants, tummy tucks—hell, every surgery possible. They looked like walking, talking caricatures of themselves.

People came from miles around to get the best fresh poultry on Long Island, and to see one of the Davis sisters in person, standing where Carlee stood now, with their hair perfectly coiffed, their long artificial nails painted a garish red, their spray tans highlighting bodies a super model would kill for.

Carlee’s energy drained. She bent her head, pinching the bridge of her nose while memories swirled in her mind. The Davis’ sisters clothing allowance cost enough to feed a small nation.

Sadness engulfed her. It swallowed her up, threatening her valiant effort to fill her mother and aunts’ shoes.

Their Gucci shoes...

Bracing a hand against a nearby counter, she decided Todd was right. She wasn't cut out for this.

She shut her eyes, picturing the beach in Montauk on a summer day.

She'd much rather be roaming those rocky shores right now, dressed in cut-off jean shorts and a t-shirt, instead of standing in elegant high heels, a fancy skirt and blouse, greeting customers.

Carlee shifted her stance. Her damned pantyhose felt like they held her stomach, hips and butt in a vise grip. They also pushed the back of her thong into the crack of her ass.

She looked around, hoping no one would see. Sliding her hand around to her backside, she fingered her thong, desperately trying to pull it out of her backside, but the pantyhose kept it firmly in place.

Shit!

The damned thing wouldn't budge, no matter how she twisted and pulled.

PING!

Another hairpin came loose. She blew at the offending curl dangling across her eye.

PING!

"Damn it! I've had enough." She said under her breath.

Making her way to the back of the store, she spied a door marked 'Office.' She opened it and looked around.

No one was there.

She looked at the wall behind the desk, where a portrait of the three Davis sisters hung. Their smiling, collagen-filled lips and artificially lifted eyes gazed down on her.

She walked in and shut the door behind her.

Carlee laughed, the sound bitter.

"Well, ladies..." She said to the picture hanging on the wall. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I just have to do this."

She reached under her skirt, stripping away her confining pantyhose, pushing them down her hips, her thighs, across her knees, until they bunched at her feet.

When she looked down, she realized her thong joined the pile of nylon gathered around her high-heels.

She sat in chair and kicked off the shoes, pulling the pantyhose off her feet.

Next came the thong.

She tossed it all in the garbage can next to the desk.

“Ahhhhhh.” She sighed, the sound filled with comfort.

She rose from the chair and tugged down her skirt, grateful for the cool air swirling up her bare legs.

Shoving her feet back in the high-heels, she winced.

“Damn!” She wiggled her toes. “My feet swelled.” She moaned.

Carlee left the office, walking on shaky legs, knowing she had to get back into the store.

When she arrived, the store was packed to the rafters, with customers spilling out the doorway.

A little smile crossed her face, knowing she had some measure of freedom beneath her skirt. It was probably the *only* thing her judgmental, money-hungry, artificially altered family couldn’t take from her.

If she wasn’t careful, they’d swallow her whole and leave nothing to spit out.

Maybe, they already had...

“Excuse me, miss, but do you carry—”

Carlee blinked once, the man’s face swimming in front of her eyes.

He angled his head, drawing his dark brows together into a frown. “Are you okay?”

Her vision cleared.

The man stood there, waiting for her answer, a pensive look gracing his angular face. His high cheekbones accentuated reddish-bronze skin, kissed by the sun. The light coming in through the store windows glinted off his dark brown, shiny, chin-length hair, swept back from a high forehead.

She moistened her parched lips with the tip of her tongue.

He removed his sunglasses. Small crinkles lined the skin of the outer corners of his dark eyes as he looked down on her. His eyes didn't stray from the movements of her tongue.

Her breath caught and held in her chest. What she wouldn't give to have a pencil and sketch pad right now! A true Native American Indian stood before her—one of the Montauks, the tribe her hometown was named after.

Her mind drifted. The summer night she turned sixteen, she and some friends roamed the sandy shores of Montauk. Carlee heard the far-off sound of drumbeats coming from the Montauk Indian reservation...

Another man approached.

"Hey Ben, did you find it?"

Carlee covered her mouth with shaking fingers.

Ben!

That summer night, she snuck into the Montauks' reservation, lured by the sound of the drums' low, melodic beat. She watched two young Indian braves dance, their tall, lithe bodies glistening in the light of a nearby campfire...

"No, Dan." Ben shook his head. A few strands of dark fell caressing the side of his lean face. He grinned, his smile wide. "I think I've found something much better."

Carlee's hand strayed to her throat.

Dan!

The Indian boys saw her. Carlee's heart pounded. She crouched lower in the bushes. How she longed to dance with them...

Dan stood a few inches shorter than Ben, but both had to be at least six feet in height now. Dan fixed his dark eyes on Carlee. He angled his head first one way, then another, but his eyes never left Carlee.

On reflex, she reached out to touch the long, dark hair that flowed past Dan's shoulders. Realizing what she was about to do, Carlee dropped her hand to her side, lost in thought again, her mind filled with memories.

The boys laughed, inviting her to join them. "I'm Ben Strong, and this is my friend, Dan Swift." They grinned. "Come...dance with us." Tall, lanky, they moved with grace, in tune with the drumbeats. Each time they lifted a foot and placed it back down

on the ground, the fur lining their boots shook, their loincloths covering their most private parts. Carlee joined them in their native tribal dance, a feeling of freedom and light filling her soul...

Carlee's eyes lowered. She gazed at their lean hips and long legs, recalling her youthful curiosity, wondering what lay beneath the snug-fitting jeans they wore now.

She lifted her head. Two wide chests met her direct line of vision.

Raising her eyes, she looked at their faces, her heart pounding just like it did all those years ago...

"Little warrior," Ben murmured, a corner of his mouth lifting. "We meet again."

Chapter Three

“We heard you were back in town.” Dan whistled low, the timbre of his deep voice held an appreciative note. He tipped his head to one side, studying Carlee. “But we didn’t believe you actually turned into Ida Davis’ clone.”

Carlee hated his derisive tone. Her mind drifted once more...

She managed to sneak into the Montauks’ reservation again, but this time, she came with a different purpose in mind. That night, she dared to kiss Dan first, while Ben watched. Dan’s lips met hers gently, coaxing her mouth open. The tip of his tongue teased her lower lip. She felt a tingle there—it traveled lower—to her belly, then down her thighs...

“Why are you doing this?” Dan asked.

The sound of his voice, laced with censure, brought Carlee back to the present.

He reached out, snagging one of Carlee’s unruly curls, winding it around his finger. When he let go, the curl bounced against her cheek.

She shoved it behind her ear.

“This isn’t you, Carlee.” Dan stated.

A decadent thrill shot through her while she kissed Dan. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Ben's shift from one foot to the other. Did he enjoy watching her kiss his friend? Would Dan enjoy watching her kiss Ben? Filled with anticipation, she broke away from Dan, moving toward Ben. He stood tall and proud, waiting, watching her every move. She could see the rise and fall of his chest the closer she got...the force of his desire evident. She never saw a man’s private parts before, and now, Ben’s hard cock pushed against his loincloth. Carlee could see the outline, her pulse racing, her mind filled with salacious thoughts...

“I’m not Ida’s clone,” she replied, her tone defensive, but the truth hurt just the same.

Maybe it stung a little more, coming from Dan.

Ben folded his arms across his chest. “You really do look like Ida.” He shook his head and dropped his arms. “I thought you moved away from Montauk.” He looked around the store. “Why did you come back to this?”

She shrugged, trying to calm the racing beat of her heart.

“I came home when my aunt died. My family needed me.”

Did she sound as lame to them as she did to herself? Why didn’t she just tell him the truth—that her Aunt Ida’s dying wishes forced her back to the place she hated?

Her thoughts drifted again...

Ben reached for her; she fit easily within his arms. He kissed her until she had no breath left in her body. She leaned into him, feeling his hot, hard length against her thigh. Dan stood off to the side, a smile on his face. Oh, how she enjoyed it! She wished Dan would join them. She reached out; he took her hand, stepping closer to her and Ben. Dan kissed the nape of her neck, his lips trailing across her shoulder...

Dan’s face grew taut. “Seems to me your family still has that same hold on you.”

“There’s no crime in helping your family.” She angled her chin at Dan.

Hoping to perfect her lofty performance, she raised her right eyebrow. When she tried to lower it, she couldn’t move her eye. Panic clawed at her insides. Blinking rapidly, she managed to dislodge the false eyelash stuck to her upper lid, but it hurt like hell.

Carlee glanced at Dan’s leather jacket. Her eyelash lay against one lapel.

Dan followed her gaze, plucking the eyelash from its hiding spot.

“Lose something?” he grinned, holding up the strip of false eyelash.

She snatched it from the tip of his index finger.

Carlee’s face heated. She couldn’t be sure if it was the warmth from the steam trays near the catering counter or embarrassment.

She remembered the last time Dan and Ben made her feel small.

Ben ended the kiss, pushing her away. Dan stepped aside, too, he wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Don’t you like kissing me?” she cried, looking at the two of them.

Ben's face softened. He ran a finger down her wet cheek. "You don't know how much, Carlee."

She smiled, her young heart filled with joy. "Then don't stop. Let's do it again." She took a step toward Ben.

He backed away.

She looked to Dan for support. He held up a hand. "No, Carlee. This has to stop."

"Go home." Ben told her. "And stay there."

"But why?" She shook her head. "I don't understand, I—"

"You're too young for us." Dan's voice brooked no argument.

"I am not!" She challenged, folding her arms under her breasts. "I'm sixteen."

"You've got your whole life ahead of you." Ben told her. "Besides, what does your family think of you hanging out with two Indians?"

"They love the idea." She lied.

Dan's face flushed. His jaw tightened. "I'll bet they do."

Ben's voice was tight, angry. "You've been sneaking in here all summer and—"

"I don't care what my family thinks." She lifted her nose in the air. "I'll tell them the truth, I will, you just wait and see."

"And if they don't allow you to see us anymore?"

"I'll fight them," she swore. "I will."

"Ah, little warrior," Ben's voice held a tender note. "You've got your whole life ahead of you; don't waste it on us ..."

Carlee shoved the sticky, glue-covered false eyelash in the pocket of her apron.

Ben shook his head, his eyes fixed on the Davis Poultry Farm apron that Carlee wore now. "Orange isn't your color." He grinned.

She wanted to smack the arrogant smile from his face.

"When I want fashion tips, I'll make sure to ask you."

This time, Ben laughed. "Still the fighter." In the next instant, his face turned serious. "I would never have imagined you doing what Ida did."

She squared her shoulders. "Sometimes, life doesn't always turn out the way you plan."

Her heart skipped a few beats when she remembered their parting all those years ago...

"I don't care about my family! I have plans for myself. Big plans."

"And what would those be, little warrior?" Dan asked her.

"I'm going to be an artist. I'm going to art school and study art."

"We've got plans, too. We won't be staying on the reservation."

Her eyes widened. "But, it's fun. It's—"

Ben's face tightened, the angles and planes prominent. "For you, maybe, but not for us. Life is difficult here, Carlee. You're not around all the time, you have no idea."

She reached out a hand to Ben, then to Dan. "I could get you jobs on my family's poultry farm."

They didn't take her hand. She felt them slipping away, little by little.

"We don't want to work for your family." Dan's voice held a mocking tone. "We have our own plans."

His smug tone hurt.

"What's wrong with working for my family?" Her eyes filled. Damn, but she wouldn't let them see her cry.

"It will always be like this." Ben's voice was soft. "You'll always defend them."

"No, I won't!" The lie slipped from her lips, the corner of her eye trembling whenever she fibbed.

Dan and Ben's sharp eyes saw it.

It was Ben who spoke. "You're a lousy liar. You'll always stick up for your family."

"They won't accept us, you know they won't." Dan added.

Now, she held on fast to her dignity, pushing aside the painful memory. "Look, if there's something I can help you with, let me know, otherwise—"

"There is." Dan told her. "We're looking for a turducken."

She shook her head. "A what?"

"A turducken," Ben chimed in. "It's a—"

"Yes, that's it! We're looking for one of those, too." An elderly couple on line behind Ben and Dan echoed their request. "Do you carry them?"

Carlee didn't want to appear ignorant, but damn, she had no idea what in hell they were talking about.

She put on her best Ida voice. "Of course we do, Mrs.—"

"Carmichael." The older woman smiled at Carlee. "It's nice to see you carrying on Ida's tradition. It's nice to see a member of the Davis family in the store."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Ben and Dan snicker.

"So, where can I get a turducken?" Mrs. Carmichael asked.

"Just a minute," Carlee held up a finger. "I'll be right back."

She raced over to the fresh turkey counter. "Are we selling turmuckins?" She asked the young man behind the counter.

He scratched his head, a puzzled look on his face. "Tur...whats?"

"Turmudgeons." She looked back to where Dan, Ben and the Carmichaels waited patiently. Giving them a jaunty wave and a big smile, she turned her attention back to the young man behind the counter.

His eyes widened. "Oh, you mean turduckens! Don't you know what those are?"

"If I knew what they were, I wouldn't be asking you." She replied through clenched teeth.

"It's a turkey, with a duck shoved inside."

Carlee felt the blood slowly drain from her face.

"...Then they put a whole chicken inside the duck." He turned and reached for something.

It looked to be the biggest bird she'd ever seen.

He opened the cavity wide. "We've got a nice, fresh, Long Island duck inside the turkey, and see this?"

She glanced at the birds nestled together, grimacing all the while. "There's the chicken!" He shoved the duck aside to show the yellow skin of a chicken.

The room spun, her stomach churning. Carlee braced her hands against the counter in an attempt to steady her body, but her knees betrayed her, buckling when she caught sight of the young man holding the turducken up by its legs.

Her legs gave way.

A strong arm slid around her waist.

She heard the murmur of voices. “Is she okay?”

“Look, Miss Davis fainted.”

Oh, crap! She couldn’t, *wouldn’t* give in to the dizzy feeling—not in front of all those people.

Not in front of Ben and Dan.

She shoved at the arms supporting her, but they remained steadfast.

“Stop fighting.” Ben told her. “And just sit.”

He eased her into a nearby chair. Cold teased her lips. When she looked up, she saw Dan squatting in front of her. He had a water bottle in his hands.

“Here, drink it.” He tipped the bottle against her lips. “You’ll feel better.”

The icy cold water trickled down her throat, reviving her. She raised a brow when she noticed Dan staring.

A smile teased his mouth. “Brazilian?”

She frowned. “What’s that, some kind of bird?” She sighed. “If it is, I have no idea if we carry it.”

He raised her chin just a bit, holding the bottle to her mouth, urging her to drink more. She didn’t want to admit how good his coddling felt.

Again, his eyes dipped lower, to her skirt...her knees...

She looked down. “What?” she asked.

“No landing strip.” His voice held the faintest trace of humor. “Nice.”

Her eyes widened when she realized the direction his eyes took.

Dan had a great view of her parted legs...and a nice peek at her naked pussy.

She should be outraged. Offended. Mortally embarrassed. However, it was the first time in the entire miserable day that she felt free, like herself.

Moreover, maybe, she wanted him to see.

She glanced at Ben. He stood there, smirking.

“Enjoying the show?” She mouthed to him.

He winked.

Her face heated. So did her body. Ben’s hot look could have burned her alive.

Then she looked at Dan's bent head. He looked up at her, smiling all the while. "I guess nothing really changes after all, does it, little warrior?" He shook his head. "You're still the same wild child, looking for kicks."

She rose from the chair, almost toppling Dan.

He stood, too, placing an arm on her shoulder. "Just stay put. You still look pale."

She lifted her nose in the air. "I'm fine." She let go of a breath. "Thank you."

"What in hell happened?" Ben frowned. "One minute, you were standing there, and the next minute you almost hit the floor."

"It's the heat." She lied.

"Is that why you're wearing no panties?" Dan grinned.

She looked around, and then answered in a low, seductive voice. "For your information, I don't wear panties."

He nodded, still smiling. "So we noticed."

"I meant I wear..." She waved a hand through the air. "Forget it."

Dan folded his arms over his chest, angling his head. "We thought you were going to faint. It happened when you looked at that turducken."

"The what?" She frowned. "Oh, that." The corner of her eye twitched. She could feel it tremble.

Ben stepped toward her. In a low voice, he said. "Are you ill?"

She stepped away, his closeness and concern threatening to make her cry. "No. And stop asking me so many questions, you sound like the police." The corner of her eye trembled again.

"You always were a terrible liar." Ben reached out a hand and smoothed the skin near her eye with the tip of his index finger.

She flinched, trying to decide if it was her reaction to his knowing she lied, or the sight of his long finger. Carlee imagined it sliding across her clit.

Dampness seeped between her legs.

For once, she wished she really wore a pair of panties.

Ben's eyes traveled to her chest.

Her breasts felt heavy. She sucked in a breath, then released it quickly.

Ben raised one brow. "Um, Carlee?" He cleared his throat.

“What?”

“I, uh, well—” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m not quite sure how to tell you this—”

“Well, don’t bother.” She huffed.

She started to walk away, but stopped when the falsie hidden in the right side of her bra slipped. Carlee glanced at her reflection in the polished metal side of the tall freezer case next to the counter.

Her chest was lopsided.

Crap!

She tried to straighten it, but that didn’t work. Her reflection now included Dan and Ben. They watched her attempt, with Ben trying hard not to laugh.

No matter what she did, her chest still looked cockeyed.

Maybe a hole would appear in the floor and swallow her up.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. “Carlee, look, I—”

She turned and faced Ben holding onto the last threads of her self-respect. “The turduckens are over there.” Carlee pointed to the counter. “Help yourself.”

She walked away.

“Carlee, wait!” Dan caught up to her. “Look, we’re sorry, we—”

She put on her best ‘Ida’ voice. In a haughty tone, she replied. “There’s nothing to be sorry about.” Squaring her shoulders, she held out her hand. Dan took it. “It was nice seeing you both again. Have a great Thanksgiving.”

She pulled her hand back and walked away, her head held high.

She stopped when she reached the cash registers.

Pasting a smile on her face, she resumed her responsibilities.

Ben walked over to her. “What changed you, Carlee?” He shook his head. “What happened to our little warrior—the girl with the long curly hair and the cut-off shorts, the young girl with big dreams?”

She lifted her chin, angling it in his direction. “*This* is my dream,” she stated, her voice flat. She held out a hand, gesturing toward the crowds mingling near the registers. “And I was never yours.” She glanced at Dan. “Or Dan’s.”

The corner of her eye trembled. She hated that he saw it.

Ben didn't say a word.

She realized, he didn't have to.

Chapter Four

Dan waited outside the poultry store. A few minutes later, Ben joined him.

“That went well.” Dan stated with biting sarcasm.

The wind scattered the remaining dry, crisp leaves of a nearby tree. Ben pulled the collar of his jacket up around his neck. “I wanted to apologize to her,” he mumbled. “But I blew it.”

“Yeah, you did a great job.” Dan zipped up his jacket and started to walk away.

Ben ran to catch up with him. “I didn’t expect to see her.”

Dan raised a brow. “*I* didn’t expect no underwear.”

Ben shook his head, a corner of his mouth lifting. “Hell, neither did I.”

“She was always outrageous. Always doing things for attention.”

“Well, she got mine today.”

Dan snorted. “Nothing’s changed, yet, I feel like it has. It’s like time’s frozen, in your mind, then, you’re hit with reality.” He gave Ben a sideways glance. “Did you have to laugh at her lopsided chest?”

“Well, you seemed pretty damned amused when her false eyelash ended up on your jacket, so don’t blame all this on me.”

After a prolonged silence, the two of them erupted into laughter.

“False eyelashes...” Ben snorted.

Dan grinned. “...*and* don’t forget those crazy things she had in her bra.”

“Falsies. I can’t believe she was wearing falsies.” Ben replied. His body stiffened. “And no goddamned underwear.” He sighed. “Shit.” He started to pace back and forth.

“No underwear.” Dan repeated, lowering his head in his hands. He lifted his eyes to Dan. “No fucking underwear.” He shivered violently, easing his body onto a bench

near the barbershop. "After all this time, I still have the same damned reaction to Carlee Davis."

Ben plunked down next to him on the bench. "I can't figure out what I want to do more." He looked away, then back. "It's like I want to haul off and spank her, but at the same time, I want to screw her until we're both spent."

For a few seconds, he watched the patrons and visitors of Montauk walk by on the busy main drag.

Dan looked at him. "What happened with you and Marjorie?"

Ben shook his head and picked at a thread on his jeans. "Nothing. It went nowhere."

Dan nodded. "I know what you mean."

"What would you say, if I told you, I think I'll always be hung up on Carlee?"

Dan lifted his hands to his mouth, blowing air on them. He rubbed them together then stuck them back in his pockets. "I'd tell you, so am I."

"Well, she hates us. That's obvious." Ben rose and stood stiffly on the sidewalk, all trace of his smile gone. A passerby bumped into him, so he moved aside. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he replied. "Quite honestly, I don't blame her."

Dan looked up at Ben. "I just kept picturing her the way she was. I-I couldn't reconcile this new Carlee with the old Carlee." He dropped his hands between his knees. "I should have never called her Ida's clone. What in hell was I thinking?"

"It was like being a kid all over again." Ben ran a hand through his hair. "I always knew Carlee was beautiful, but dressed the way she was today... wow!"

Dan smiled. "With her hair all done up and that outfit. Wow." He let go of a breath. "Wow."

"The summer we met her was the best time of my life." Ben's voice held wistful tones. "It made living in that hell-hole of a reservation seem like paradise."

"I don't know how she kept it from her family—sneaking in all those times to see us."

Ben sat down on the bench again. "Her old man was still alive then." He blew on his hands to warm them. "If he found out, he would have tanned her hide." He shook his head. "Hell, if I was her old man, I would have done the same."

Dan gave Ben a sideways glance. "The last thing I feel for Carlee is anything...fatherly."

Ben smiled again. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"We could tell her."

Ben raised a brow. "What?"

"The truth. That we tried to go our separate ways and be with other women, but it always comes back to her, to Carlee."

"Oh, yeah right."

"It's better than living a lie. Sharing Carlee is what we both wanted ever since she snuck into the reservation that first time." He sat up straight, turning to look at Ben.

Ben rested the back of his head against the cold cement wall of the barbershop and shut his eyes. "She was a kid then. A wild, curious kid. That's all."

Dan shook his head. "I don't believe that. Carlee knew what she wanted."

"She's changed." Ben's voice was tight. "And the last thing we need to be doing is fantasizing about a wealthy white woman like Carlee."

A man walked out of the barbershop.

Ben rose to his feet; so did Dan.

"Hello Running Bear." Ben addressed the elderly man.

Running Bear leaned on his cane, his long, gray hair trailing his shoulders. His tan suede jacket looked well worn, the fringed pieces curling and frayed at the ends. They hung down from stitching just below his shoulders. There was a stain on the pocket, but Running Bear stood proud, if a little stiff, his cane his only support.

He squinted. "Oh, it's you two."

Ben sighed. "We have names, Running Bear."

The elder Montauk Indian replied, his tone clipped.

"It's just too bad you don't use them."

"We can't expect people at our jobs to call us 'Swift Wolf' and 'Strong Eagle.'"

Dan replied.

"That's because you've assimilated too much." Running Bear rapped his cane on the pavement. He jabbed his index finger at them. "You have no respect for the

Montauks. You have no respect for yourselves.” Running Bear gave Ben a searching look. “Tell me something, when was the last time you visited the reservation?”

“We’re going there for Thanksgiving.” Ben replied.

“That’s not what I asked. I asked when you visited last.”

Ben’s face flushed, so did Dan’s.

“At least you know enough to feel shame. I’ll give you that.” Running Bear replied, his tone harsh. “And you should be ashamed, because you haven’t been there in months.” He angled his head. “This Thanksgiving, be sure to bring food.”

“Of course.”

“And show up. Montauks need to stick together, particularly now.”

“Why?” Dan asked, shoving his hands in his pockets. “What’s going on?”

Running Bear rested both hands on top of his cane. “You would know if you came to the council meetings. We’re asking the United States government for financial help. To get it, we need to show that we are a strong, unified, tribe, with true Montauk blood in our veins.”

“We can trace our roots back to Chief Wyandanch.” Ben answered proudly.

“I don’t need a history lesson, boy; I just need you and Dan at the next council meeting.”

Ben nodded. “All right.”

“And visit the reservation more often.”

“We will.”

Running Bear lowered his voice. “I’m asking you to curtail your association with the white world.”

Dan scowled. “How are we supposed to do that? We work with—”

Ben elbowed Dan in the ribs. “We’ll do it.”

Running Bear grunted. “You grow too far from your roots.”

He walked away.

Ben didn’t speak to Dan until Running Bear was out of sight.

“I know, I know.” Dan held up a hand, palm-out. “You don’t have to say it.”

“But we do.” Ben replied. “And maybe if we say it enough times, it’ll get through our thick skulls.”

Dan sighed. "Stay away from Carlee." His voice had a catch in it.

"She's off-limits. I won't let Running Bear accuse us of screwing up all this financial help for the Montauk tribe."

Dan stalked away.

Ben caught up to him. "It's the only way, you know that."

"When are we going to stop paying for making our lives better, for leaving the reservation?"

"When hell freezes over?" Ben retorted.

Dan let go of a bitter laugh. He didn't say another word.

He didn't have to.

Chapter Five

That evening, Carlee walked into the office at the poultry store. Shutting the door, she leaned against it and closed her eyes. She slipped out of her high heels, gingerly placing her feet on the tiled floor. The cool tiles felt heavenly against her burning, aching soles. She sighed, the sound filled with bliss.

Bending down, she grabbed her shoes, and walked over to Ida's desk. She sat in the high-backed leather chair and surveyed the pile of papers in front of her.

She had no idea of where to start. Ida had her own filing system—she probably knew where everything was, even though it seemed like chaos.

It was nine o'clock, the sun set long ago. Carlee switched on the desk lamp, the soft light shining down on the cluttered desk. She snatched an envelope from the top of one of the piles. It looked to be a bill. Then again, when she glanced through the rest of the stack, it appeared to be a hodgepodge of bills, letters and other correspondence.

"Aunt Ida." Carlee sighed. "What a mess you left me."

PING!

Carlee snapped her brows together. Glancing down at the floor, she saw one of her errant bobby pins.

PING! PING! PING!

Several curls popped free of their restraint.

Tired and disgusted, Carlee pulled every pin from her hair, tossing them on the desk. Her tresses fell around her shoulders, a mass of long, corkscrew curls. She unfastened the first three buttons of her blouse, and pulled out the uncomfortable falsies lining her bra.

"Ahhhhhh," she sighed with relief. She threw them in a nearby garbage can, a corner of her mouth lifting when she saw her pantyhose and thong still in there.

She continued the task-at-hand, separating the tall pile of mail and bills. It soon became apparent that the money owed overshadowed anything else.

She shut her eyes and leaned back in the chair, resting her head on the soft, well-used leather.

“Tough day?”

Her eyes popped open. Todd stood in front of her desk, a nasty smile on his face.

“Do you really care?” She asked. “Or have you come to torture me some more?”

He walked over to the side of the desk and settled a hip against it. Crossing his arms over his chest, he replied. “I heard you almost fainted in the store today.”

“You heard wrong,” she snapped, but a corner of her eye trembled. She massaged the delicate skin next to her eye.

“What’s the matter? Twelve-hour days don’t appeal to you?” He angled his head. “You probably never worked so hard in your life.”

“Look.” She placed both palms on top of the desk and rose to her feet. “I’ve got a lot of work here.” She pointed at the piles of correspondence on Ida’s desk. “So if—”

Todd picked up an envelope, looked at it, then tossed it back on the desk. “You’ve got your work cut out for you, cousin.”

She rubbed the back of her neck, hoping to quell the ache. “I do. And since you’re here, I need you to give me the pass codes to the accounts on the computer.”

He laughed. “Yeah right.”

Her temper snapped. “Damn it, Todd. Don’t make this difficult.”

“What?” He raised a brow. “And spoil all the fun of watching you screw things up?”

“From the looks of all this,” she pointed at the piles on the desk. “It seems you certainly didn’t care about it.”

Dropping his arms from his chest, he replied. “For your information, *cousin*, I was taking care of my mother.”

“Marlene took care of Ida. I’ve heard she never left her bedside.”

His face darkened. “If you weren’t *my* family, I’d—”

Her heart raced, but she wouldn’t back down. “Go on. Don’t let me stop your tirade.”

Todd walked away, his body trembling. At the door, he said, "I'm not going to let you force me into saying things I'll regret later."

"Then help me. This business belongs to the family, it—"

"My mother cut me off without a dime." His voice cracked. "And you expect me to help *you*?" He shook his head. "You're some piece of work, Carlee."

"You'll get an allowance; you know I wouldn't let you go without money. How could you even think a thing like that?"

She felt like crying.

"An allowance?" He let go of a bitter laugh. "A fucking allowance?" He aimed a finger at her. "Go to hell."

"You'll have to come with me to the bank; you'll have to sign over permission for me to have access to the books." His voice cracked

"Fuck you, Carlee."

"I'll get a lawyer. I'll do whatever it takes."

"You fucking do that."

He slammed the door back against the wall, rattling the frame.

She watched as Todd strode through the doorway, the door closing behind him.

Frustration filled her. She swung the door open until it crashed against its hinges. Then she slammed it shut.

CRASH!

Carlee jumped, her skin prickling when she turned and saw the picture of the Davis sisters lying on the floor, the frame broken, the glass cracked.

The split in the glass lined Ida's face, her artificially enhanced features distorted.

Oh, Ida, why does your son have to be a fucking prick? None of this is my fault...

Or was it? Was her need to become a successful artist overshadowing everything else? She wanted that money Ida promised her, more than anything.

She walked over and grabbed the picture, placing it on a table. Running her fingers over the Davis sisters' faces, she let her hand linger over her mother's.

Her mother never understood her need for freedom. She was like a wild animal, her need to roam as important as eating and breathing.

Ben and Dan understood it.

Carlee's hand traced the outline of Beatrice's features. She and her mother died too young, but maybe, it was better that they had...

No amount of money could save them from suffering. The Davis family curse—heart disease—got them in their prime. A corner of Carlee's mouth lifted, her grin rueful, filled with irony. The very thing the Davis sisters loved—fried chicken and roasted turkey—had done them in. They could suck out the fat from their thighs, but not from their arteries.

So when, Carlee wondered, did she become Ida's favorite? All Ida ever did was lecture her...

"You should tame that mess of hair. You shouldn't wear those old jeans. Don't you have something better in your closet?"

Yet, Ida would slip Carlee her favorite cookies, and she was the only one to take her to the museum when Carlee exhausted her pleas on everyone else.

She hung her head in her hands, trying to make sense of everything.

She spent another hour sifting through the correspondence on Ida's desk. Ida was, indeed, an enigma. While she appeared frugal on the surface, there was a huge pile of letters from charities—which she donated to regularly.

Carlee read aloud from one of those letters. "Thank you for your past contributions. Can we count on you this year again?"

She tossed it aside, shaking her head, glancing at the mountain of invoices for poultry feed, utility bills, catering supplies....

If she paid off all that, she'd tackle the charities.

If she didn't have to battle Todd to do it.

Her conversation with Marlene drifted through her mind. It was the first time Marlene had ever mentioned problems between her and Todd.

Carlee glanced at the unopened bills.

Money problems? Had Todd mishandled the poultry farm funds?

No, Marlene looked impeccable—as always.

She wore clothing well...

Expensive clothing.

Carlee never cared about what she wore, preferring the comfort of a pair of well-worn jeans.

A corner of Carlee's mouth lifted. No wonder Todd married Marlene. They fit together perfectly. Todd fussed with his appearance. He was always a lady's man...

Her eyes widened. *Was he cheating on Marlene?*

She let go of the breath she'd been holding.

Glancing at the mound of bills, she spied one with the return address of a local travel agent. She grabbed the metal letter-opener, and slit open the envelope.

Again, she read aloud, "Eight thousand, three hundred and forty-two dollars..."

It was the amount owed for a cruise.

Ida had been too sick to travel.

Did Todd book it?

She narrowed her eyes and read some more.

Why didn't it say 'Todd and Marlene Davis' on the invoice? Why did it say 'Mr. Todd Davis and Ms. Angela Graff?'

The piece of paper slipped from her fingers, fluttering to the desk.

She stared at it for a long time, not believing what she saw.

No wonder Marlene was unhappy. She had loved Todd from the time they were kids.

"Bastard," Carlee hissed through clenched teeth.

Anger bloomed inside her. She rose from her chair, disgusted, and pulled the chain on the desk lamp, shrouding the room in darkness.

She made her way out of Ida's office, the only light coming from the moon outside the windows. Continuing her trek down the hall, she walked toward the front of the poultry store.

Next time, she'd park her car in the back, closer to the office. She gave herself a mental shake. No, she'd never park it around back, because she'd have to see where they kept the live chickens, ducks and turkeys.

Seeing them alive only reminded her of where they'd end up.

When she entered the darkened store, she sniffed, her stomach rolling.

The combined odors of fried chicken and roasted turkey drifted by her nose. She'd always hated those smells, ever since she was a kid. If she didn't get out of there soon, she'd...

Carlee stopped when she heard footsteps behind her.

She turned, glancing at a tall, shadowy figure. "Todd!" She called out. "What are you doing back here?"

No answer.

The figure moved toward her, the face shrouded. Carlee's eyes widened when she saw its raised arm, and a long, shiny object clenched in its hand.

Sharp pain radiated through her head.

Her body slid to the floor, directly under the sign that read, 'Fresh Turkeys, All Sizes.'

She heard footsteps, but couldn't see anything, unable to focus her blurry eyes.

Carlee didn't know how long she sat on the floor, cradling her head. Nausea rolled in her belly. She attempted to stand, but her legs would not support her weight. Crawling on her hands and knees, she made her way to the front door. She rose up on her knees and felt for the security keypad.

She pressed the panic button, then slid down, her bottom hitting the floor.

Carlee sat there, her body shaking, her head throbbing.

Then she heard the sound of a police siren in the distance.

"You're okay, y-you're okay," she repeated. "You're *okay*."

She felt something warm and sticky trickle down her neck.

Reaching up, she winced when pain shot through her head. Carlee wiped the wetness from her skin then glanced at the palm of her hand.

She swallowed, hard.

A dark red smear of blood stained her palm.

"Y-you're okay," she whispered.

Her voice wobbled, the corner of her eye twitching in response.

Chapter Six

That same evening, Ben and Dan walked into the Montauk Police Department. Lieutenant John McGee met them at the entrance to the squad room.

“I need you to check out a break-in.”

Dan shook his head. “You assigned us to that hit-and-run on Montauk Highway.” He aimed his thumb at the other detectives sitting at their desks. “Can’t you ask one of them?”

“No, I can’t, and *now*,” McGee removed his eyeglasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You’re assigned to another case.” He held out a piece of paper. “Here’s the address. The break-in occurred about an hour ago.”

Ben reached out and took the paper. He glanced at the address.

His hand shook as he passed it to Dan.

Dan’s eyes widened when he read it.

The lieutenant frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” Ben called out.

They ran out of the squad room, toppling a chair in their wake.

“Damned crazy Indians.” The lieutenant shook his head, righting the chair.

He watched until they were out of the room.

“But good detectives,” he muttered under his breath.

* * * *

“You’ve got quite a lump there, and that cut needs stitches.”

Carlee winced when the paramedic probed the wound on her head.

“You really should go to the hospital.”

A cold chill passed through Carlee. The lights blazed in the store while two uniformed police officers stood nearby and four more combed every inch of the interior and exterior.

One of the officers stood before her. “You’re positive you didn’t see who did this?”

Carlee winced when the paramedic dabbed something wet on the cut on her head. It stung like crazy. “It was dark. I-I can’t be sure of anything.”

“Maybe you could convince her she’s got to go to the hospital,” the paramedic told the officer while she aimed her thumb at Carlee.

“You should, Miss Davis. You could have a concussion,” he chimed in.

Carlee glanced outside and noticed another car pull into the parking lot.

The paramedic gave her an ice pack. “Here, hold this on your head. I just have to get a butterfly bandage. It’ll keep the wound closed until we get you to the emergency room.”

Carlee held the cool pack to her head, watching as two men entered the store.

The ice pack slipped from her hands.

What were Dan and Ben doing here?

The officer bent and picked up the ice pack, handing it to her, but he followed the direction her eyes took.

“Those are detectives, ma’am. They’ll just need to ask you some questions.”

Carlee groaned. “They really *are* the police.”

He angled his head and frowned. “Huh?”

She glanced at the police officer. “Nothing.” She shook her head. It hurt like hell. “I-I didn’t say anything.”

“Don’t move your head so much.” The paramedic told her. She applied the bandage to the gaping wound on Carlee’s head.

She couldn’t keep her eyes off Dan and Ben. Ben walked toward her, his steps wide and filled with purpose, while Dan spoke to one of the officers. Every so often, Dan would turn his attention to her. Even though he stood near the registers, she noticed that he seemed tense, his body filled with restless urgency. He continued to gaze back at her.

“Well, hello there, Ben.”

Carlee turned to see the paramedic looking at him.

“Hello, Marjorie,” He replied, but he didn’t take his eyes off Carlee.

The skin across his high cheekbones looked tight, his lips a thin, grim line.

“Maybe you can convince her that she needs to be seen by a doctor.” Marjorie patted Carlee’s shoulder. “If you change your mind about going to the emergency room, let me know.” She glanced at him and winked. “See you around, detective. Catch you at the Blue Moon.”

He didn’t reply. He waited until Marjorie walked away.

The chill Carlee had felt earlier snaked down her spine once again. She shuddered in response.

Ben reached down, removing the ice pack from her hand. He placed it on a counter, and then removed his jacket, tugging it around her shoulders.

“What happened?” His voice was tight.

She tried for some levity, hoping to quell the racing beat of her heart, and the tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

“The ‘Blue Moon’ still packs them in?”

“I didn’t come here,” he said in a low voice, “to talk about the Blue Moon. I repeat...what happened?”

Carlee looked at Marjorie, who stood chatting with another paramedic. “Known her long?” she quipped. “Or did you just happen to run into her at the uh, Blue Moon bar?” She hated the spurt of jealousy she felt.

He leaned down, placing his palms on either side of the counter, caging her in. “I came here to investigate a possible break-in, and I find *you* here, injured. I—”

She angled her chin at Ben. “Sorry to screw up your evening.”

“Damn it, Carlee.” He rose to his full height and ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t mean it that way.” He softened his tone. “I need to know what happened, everything you can remember, at least.”

Carlee took a deep breath and replied. “I-I was working in my aunt’s office—”

He raised one dark brow. “At this hour?”

She blinked once, registering the censure in his voice. “Yes,” she answered, her tone defensive. “I had a lot of paperwork to go through. When I finished, I left the office and walked into the store. That’s when someone hit me on the head.”

The jacket slipped from her shoulders. Ben grabbed it before it fell to the floor, pulling it snugly against her chest. His nearness, coupled with the surly tone she heard in his voice, made her throat clog with tears. Her head ached. The last thing she needed was Ben...

Oh damn, she needed him, more than she cared to admit.

He leaned down while he zipped the jacket. She tried to shrug him off, but he made quick work of the jacket.

“Don’t fight me,” he commanded, yet his voice held gentle tones. He grabbed her hands, placing them in his own.

Heat enveloped her fingers.

He didn’t let go.

She needed to break the tension. “So you’re the police.”

He nodded, but didn’t reply.

Carlee glanced at Dan, who was still talking to a uniformed officer. “And what’s he doing here? Is he along for the ride?”

“Dan and I are detectives for the Montauk Police Department.”

“Well, fuck me,” she replied. She blew out a breath. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I want you to listen to Marjorie; I want you to go to the hospital.”

She squirmed in the chair, but each time she moved, a dull ache mushroomed inside her head, an explosion of throbbing pain.

“If she doesn’t, I’ll carry her out of here myself.”

Dan’s surly voice pierced the veil of pain surrounding her fuzzy brain.

She looked up to see him standing next to Ben.

Pain, fear and the feeling she was badly outnumbered won out.

“All right,” she muttered. “You two win.”

“Little warrior.” Dan shook his head. A corner of his mouth lifted. “We always do.”

* * * *

The following morning, Carlee sat on a wide, comfy chair in the den of Ida's old house, her feet on a footstool.

Marlene fussed with two pillows behind Carlee's head. "There, is that better?" she asked. "Do you want some tea?"

Carlee snuggled back against the pillows. "You don't have to stay here, I'm fine."

"Nonsense!" Marlene shook her head. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be." She sighed. "Why didn't you call us last night when it happened?"

"It was late. I didn't want to bother you or—"

Marlene raised a brow. "What?"

"Nothing." Carlee swallowed. "M-maybe I will have that tea."

"Coming right up."

Marlene walked out of the room. Carlee switched on the television set and heard the announcer's voice.

"Last night, there was a break-in at the popular Davis Poultry Farm. The owner, Carlee Davis, was injured when an unknown assailant attacked her in the store after hours. Ms. Davis was not available for comment..."

Carlee switched off the television set.

The doorbell's chime was quickly followed by raised voices and the sound of footsteps.

Marlene stood before her a few seconds later. She cleared her throat then spoke. "There are um, two Indians here to see you."

Carlee hid a smile when she saw the shocked look on Marlene's face.

"They say they're Montauk Police department detectives. They claim they were at the poultry store last night. I-I saw their badges, but...Indians?" She shook her head.

Carlee blew out a breath. "Ben and Dan are detectives, and they *were* at the poultry store last night."

"They want to talk to you." Marlene sniffed, lifting her nose in the air. "I said you weren't up to it."

Carlee sat up straighter in her chair, adjusting the woolen throw Marlene placed across her lap earlier. "It's okay. I-I'll see them."

Her heart pounded in time with her head.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. You still look pale.”

“Tell them I’ll see them.”

A few minutes later, Dan and Ben entered the room. Carlee’s nipples peaked against the fabric of her t-shirt. She pulled her hoodie-style sweatshirt across her chest, hoping they didn’t notice her body’s reaction to them. Alternatively, she hoped they would. Damn, but she was getting so mixed up! Maybe her brain really was addled.

Her desire for both men didn’t fade, even after all this time, but she was a grown woman, and it was time to act like one.

“How are you feeling?”

Dan’s deep voice washed over her. She squirmed in the chair, her thong growing damp, her clit pulsing.

Carlee kept her voice steady. “I’m much better, thank you.”

Ben folded his arms across his chest. “You should have stayed in the hospital for a few more days.”

She picked at a piece of lint on the blanket covering her legs. Raising her eyes to both men, she replied. “The doctor said I could go home, just as long as someone stayed with me.”

Ben opened his mouth to reply when Marlene made her entrance, bearing a tray filled with goodies. “I believe these are still your favorite.” She gestured toward the cookies on a dish.

Carlee looked at them and smiled. “Yes, they are. Carob chip, applesauce, nut—I love them.”

Ben screwed up his face. Carlee almost laughed at his pained expression.

“Marlene, these are detectives Ben Strong and Dan Swift. Detectives, my cousin Marlene.” She held out a hand toward Marlene.

Marlene placed the tray down on the table in front of Carlee, her hands shaking, her face pinched. It was the usual look—one Carlee knew well. Her mother, Ida and Beatrice had always done that when they thought someone was of a lower class.

Damned judgmental family!

Carlee’s hackles rose, hoping Marlene wouldn’t say something untoward.

Marlene aimed her nose at both men. "I'll just leave you to discuss..." she waved a hand in the air. "Whatever it is you need to with my cousin." At the door she said, "I hope you find who did this horrible thing."

She exited the room, leaving Carlee alone with Ben and Dan, and her traitorous hormones.

Ben watched Marlene's exit from the room, waiting until she was out of earshot before saying, "Your cousin seems to think you're not up to visitors."

Carlee leaned over and poured some tea into a cup. "She's just protective, that's all. We were friends long before we were cousins."

She saw Dan take a small pad and pen out of the pocket of his jacket. He flipped open the pad and started writing.

Carlee craned her neck to see what he wrote, but he lifted the pad from her prying eyes.

A chill ran down Carlee's spine when she saw Marlene's name.

Ben took a step toward her. "We won't stay long, but we need to investigate what happened last night."

"Someone broke into the store, I-I guess they tried to rob it, and—"

"No one broke in."

"Huh?" She screwed up her face.

Ben took a seat across from her. He raised her chin just a bit, the tip of his finger caressing her jaw. He studied her face for a few seconds, his eyes traveling to the bandage on her head.

"Someone tried to make it look like it was a break-in or a robbery," he dropped his hand. She felt bereft at the loss of contact. "We found a broken window in the back of the store—"

"You see?" she interrupted. "It *was* a robbery. Or an attempted robbery."

Dan eased his tall frame into a chair. "Whoever attacked you broke the window from *inside* the store. We found most of the glass on the pavement, right outside the window. It means they smashed that window from the inside, hoping to make it *appear* that someone broke in."

She didn't like where any of this was heading. She took a big gulp of tea, swallowing hard.

"You could be wrong," she told Dan, then looked at Ben.

Ben shook his head. "We're not wrong about this. I feel it in my gut. Someone planned this attack on you."

Her head started to ache again. She massaged the bandage over the cut.

"We questioned the workers who were in the store yesterday. One of them said, they saw you speaking with a man. It looked as though—" Dan leafed through his notebook. "As though you were having quite an angry exchange." Their gazes locked. "Did you?"

Carlee rubbed her forehead. Then she tossed the woolen throw off to the side and rose from her chair. Pulling the sweatshirt around her body, she said. "I think you both should leave."

Ben glanced at Dan; they rose to their feet.

The room suddenly felt too small. Carlee started to shake.

"What's wrong?" Dan reached out a hand toward her.

She batted it away.

"Did you have an argument with someone yesterday?"

She dug her toes into the plush carpet beneath her feet.

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Yes, with my cousin, Todd."

Dan scribbled something in his pad.

She wanted to snatch it from his hands, rip it to shreds.

"What was it about?" Ben questioned, his voice gentle.

Damn, why did he have to be so nice now?

"Todd feels he should be running the Davis Poultry Farm."

She glanced toward the open door, walked over to it and shut it.

Dan frowned. "Why'd you do that?"

"Marlene is married to him."

Ben and Dan exchanged glances.

"I-I don't want Marlene to hear this." She tucked some hair behind her ears. "Last night, when I was going through my Aunt Ida's paperwork, I found a bill for a cruise.

Marlene's name wasn't on it. Instead, it was for Todd and a...let's just say a female friend."

Dan continued to write.

"Yesterday, in the store—is that the only time you've seen Todd since you've been home?" Ben asked.

She shook her head. "I saw him again last night."

Ben raised a brow.

She folded her arms under her breasts. "He came to see me while I was in my Aunt Ida's office. We...had another argument."

"Over the same thing?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Carlee plunked down into a chair. "I-I can't believe that he would do something like this, or that he would hurt me." She blinked back tears then glanced toward the closed door. "And if Marlene knew, it would kill her."

Chapter Seven

Later that week, Ben and Dan sat in Lieutenant McGee's office.

"So, where do we stand on the Poultry Farm case?"

Ben answered. "We questioned the workers and staff at the poultry farm and store; we've gone over the entire place."

"We questioned the family, too, particularly Todd Davis, that cousin of Carlee's." Dan added.

McGee drummed his fingers on his desk. "And where has all that gotten us?"

Ben sighed. "Absolutely nowhere, Lieutenant."

"But you told me Miss Davis argued with Todd Davis and..." McGee frowned. "Why in hell are all the cousins named Davis?"

A corner of Dan's mouth lifted. "Three sisters married three brothers. The Davis brothers, in this case. They owned a poultry farm in Canarsie—in Brooklyn. They moved out here back in the nineteen fifties and tried their hand at poultry farming here in Montauk."

McGee got up and poured himself a cup of coffee. He took a sip and winced.

"Lousy crap."

"Huh?" Ben frowned.

"I meant the coffee." McGee put his cup on his desk then sat down again. "My wife's friend did that—she and her sister married two brothers." He grunted.

"Unfortunately, they're just not as rich as the Davis bunch." He picked up a pencil and tapped it on the desk. "What about that cousin of hers, Todd Davis? She argued with him about the money, right?"

"She did." Ben got up and started to pace. "But there is this: We questioned Todd and Marlene Davis' neighbors to corroborate Todd Davis' story about being home by

nine thirty that evening. He admitted being with Carlee, even owned up to the arguments, but...”

“Go on. Tell me.”

“One of the neighbors claims he was walking his dog that evening at nine fifteen.”

“The neighbor saw Todd Davis pull into his driveway.” Dan stated. “Carlee Davis was attacked at ten o’clock.” He flipped through his notebook. “That’s when she managed to hit the panic button in the store.”

“And this neighbor is sure it was Todd?”

Dan nodded. “Positive. He even stopped to talk with Todd.”

“About?” McGee raised a brow.

“Just general chit-chat.”

McGee frowned. “How do we know Todd didn’t go back out again?”

“The staff—two of the maids at the Davis residence—claim he was home all night.”

McGee grunted. “They’d swear to anything to keep their jobs.”

“Yeah, well, one of the other neighbors we questioned said they saw Todd Davis outside on his patio at ten p.m.”

McGee angled his head. “What was he doing out there?”

“Supposedly, smoking a cigar.”

McGee shook his head. “Probably like my wife...won’t let me smoke the damned things in the house.” He eyed Ben first, then Dan. “What about Todd Davis’ wife?”

“She was out to dinner that night with friends,” Ben answered.

McGee raised a brow.

“Came home at nine o’clock that night and stayed home, as per the maids.”

“And let me guess.” McGee replied sarcastically. “The neighbors saw her, too.”

“Yup.” Dan answered. “She was walking her...” Dan checked his notes. “Bijan that night, at precisely ten o’clock.”

McGee snorted. “Wouldn’t the maids do that?”

“The neighbors all say that Marlene Davis loves the dog. She won’t let anyone, not even her husband, walk it.”

Ben folded his arms across his chest. "That's a close-knit, wealthy little neighborhood they live in. It's right next to that church on Jackson Avenue. Pretty isolated."

McGee held up a hand. "I know where it is." He thought for a while, scribbling something on a piece of paper. He broke the tip of his pencil then tossed it aside. McGee didn't look up, he just asked. "What about the other cousins?"

"The rest of the Davis cousins don't live here. Three reside in California...two of them live in Scarsdale."

"We confronted Todd with that eight thousand dollar cruise bill. He claimed he knew nothing about it."

McGee leaned back in his chair. "Did you check with the travel agent who booked it?"

"Yeah, we did." Dan answered quickly. "But the girl who booked it is no longer there. And no one else at the travel agency remembers him coming in."

"Shit." This time McGee ran a hand through *his* hair. He glanced at Dan. "Didn't you say he was cheating on his wife?"

"Yeah, I did. However, when we tried to track down the girlfriend, Angela Graff, it's as if she fell off the face of the earth. We can't find any trace of her."

"Maybe Davis broke it off."

"Maybe," Ben murmured. "We're still waiting on the results of the fingerprints. What we're really curious about are any prints from around that broken window."

McGee looked Ben square in the eye. "I've got Carlee Davis breathing down my neck."

Ben narrowed his eyes. "How so?"

"She wants to open the store again. Claims it's her busy season."

"Did you happen to mention it was a crime scene?" Dan spoke through clenched teeth.

"Of course, but I can't keep it closed forever."

"Just give us a few more days." Dan pleaded.

McGee rubbed his chin. "She's coming in here this morning. Maybe I can convince her otherwise."

“How are you going to do that?”

McGee nodded. “I’ve got a theory of my own about all of this.”

Ben and Dan looked at each other.

“What’s your theory?”

“I’ll tell you. If you agree, Carlee Davis will be out of our hair, and we’ll be able to continue our investigation in peace.”

* * * *

The following day, Carlee walked into the Montauk Police Department.

“I’m here to see Lieutenant McGee,” she told the desk sergeant in her best ‘Ida’ voice.

“I’ll show her to the Lieutenant’s office.” Dan walked up to the counter. Placing his hand on Carlee’s lower back, he guided her down the hallway.

She couldn’t decide if he was herding her or, just being protective.

They continued walking down the corridor until they stopped in front of a closed door. Carlee looked around. “Where’s Lieutenant McGee?”

“*I’ve* got a few things to say to you before you see the Lieutenant.”

“But—”

She didn’t get a chance to say another word. Dan ushered her into a small room and flipped the power switch on the wall. Soon, light flooded a small space that contained a table and two chairs. Only one little window sat high up on the opposite wall.

“Have a seat.” He swept his hand out toward one of the vacant chairs.

She looked around, her heart racing. How many times over the last several years had she dreamed of being alone with Dan?

Stuck inside the small room with six feet of rugged maleness made her squirm.

Damn, if her hormones didn’t betray her again!

Her body flushed, her clit pulsed, too. She opted to sit, hoping to quell her body’s reaction to him.

A barely discernible tick in his jaw made Carlee wonder just how angry he was.

Good. He should be! He and Ben insisted on keeping the poultry store closed during Thanksgiving. She had a bunch of angry customers—people who couldn’t get

their Thanksgiving catering orders. She owed them all refunds, and it was more fuel to add to Todd's mounting bonfire of strikes against her.

Mainly, she was frightened that someone had tried to kill her—probably a member of her own family.

If only she could have seen her assailant's face.

The thought that one of her own tried to harm her weighed on her heart like a crushing stone.

She wasn't about to admit it to Dan, who looked madder than hell at that moment.

"I can't believe that all you care about is that goddamned store." He spoke in a tight, controlled voice.

She lifted her nose in the air. Crossing her arms across her chest, she replied. "It's my livelihood, what do you expect?"

"That you'd have the good sense to be scared. Then again, what else could we expect from a spoiled girl like you?"

Carlee's chest heaved. "How dare you say that to me?"

"Right now, Carlee, I'd dare just about anything."

"That's very big talk coming from someone who can't seem to find out who attacked me."

"Ben and I would love nothing more than to solve this—to find out who attacked you, but we need your help. The store has got to remain a crime scene until—"

"I lose every last penny?"

He sighed. "Is that all that matters to you now?"

"That and you harassing Marlene. She isn't speaking to me, thanks to you and Ben. She was my on—"

"We have to question everyone." Dan pitched his voice low. "Even if it hurts. That's the only way we're going to find out who did this."

Her voice cracked. "Why did you have to tell her that Todd was cheating on her?" Tears spilled from her eyes.

"We didn't say that, we just questioned her about that cruise invoice."

She rolled her eyes. "It doesn't take a genius to figure out what it meant." Her lips trembled. "She's so upset."

He reached out and grabbed her shoulders. “If there was some other way to do all this—if there was some way we could avoid touching your precious family, we’d do it.”

“Todd hates me enough already, and now, your questioning is going to make it worse. Just leave him alone, already.” She tried to shrug away from him.

Dan narrowed his eyes. “Why are you defending Todd?”

Because I don’t know if it was him who did this...because if he did, I don’t want him to come after me.

I’m scared. So scared—a frightened little rabbit.

The corner of her eye twitched. “I’m not defending Todd.”

Dan released her shoulders. “I’m not going to argue with you.”

She angled her chin. “You started it.”

“Still the same little warrior. *That* hasn’t changed.” His lips curved into a tiny smile, then his face turned serious again. “I’d like to shake some sense into that brain of yours.”

“Believe me, detective, it’s addled enough already.”

He snapped his brows together. “This isn’t a joking matter, Carlee.”

“My mother and her sisters always said, ‘If you can’t look life in the eye and laugh, then you’re not living.’”

Dan’s frown turned into a scowl. “Ben and I are trying to make sure that you remain...*living*. What you need is a—”

Her heart raced, and anticipation flowed through her. “What?” she whispered. She was so close—barely an inch from his mouth. Carlee stood on the tips of her toes and slid her lips across his.

Dan reached out and tugged her close. Threading his fingers through her mass of wild curls, he tipped back her head and kissed her—hard.

Carlee clung to his shirt, her nipples peaking. His mouth felt like a fiery hot brand, yet, it wasn’t enough. She needed more. Grinding her mound against him, she teased his lower lip with the tip of her tongue. Her body leapt into flames, she felt the throbbing of her clit right down to her toes.

He released her abruptly. She landed in the chair behind her, her bottom connecting with the seat.

“That shouldn’t have happened.” He said in a strained voice, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

It felt like he'd plunged a knife through her heart.

“Go see the Lieutenant.” Dan turned his back on her.

She was sixteen all over again.

Carlee exited the room and made her way down the hall, the taste of Dan still on her lips, the wound to her heart freshly opened.

She wouldn’t be anyone’s mistake.

Not even Dan’s, no matter how much she wanted him.

Chapter Eight

Carlee stood in Lieutenant McGee's office. McGee propped a corner of his hip against his desk. Folding his arms across his chest, he told her. "Miss Davis, we can't arrest Todd. He has an airtight alibi. So, it seems, does the rest of your family. The only other theory we've got to go on right now is that someone tried to kidnap you."

"What?" Her body shook.

He dropped his arms and pushed away from the desk. "I don't mean to frighten you, but it does make sense. You're a very wealthy woman now and—"

"I don't even have the pass codes to the bank accounts." She rolled her eyes. "I told Todd I would get a lawyer if he kept refusing to give them to me."

McGee angled his head. "Your aunt's will trumps everything else. You should have no problem with the banks."

"Todd's contesting the will. He's fighting me on everything." She raised her eyes to the lieutenant. They felt gritty. "So I'm not exactly swimming in money right now." She rubbed her left eye.

"But the kidnapper wouldn't know that. All they see—particularly on that goddamned Channel 12 news..." A sheepish look crossed his face. "Um, excuse the language, Miss Davis, but what I'm trying to say is, all the alleged kidnapper knows is that you, Carlee Davis, have come into quite a lot of money."

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"We'll give you around the clock police protection."

She raised a brow. "You mean you'll post a police officer in the store? And at my aunt's house?"

"No, the store has to stay closed for a few more days, until we finish our investigation. What I have in mind is this: You go away."

She snapped her brows together. “Exactly where am I supposed to go?”

“There are these old, out-of-the way cottages called Seaside. We’ll put you up in one of them. No one will know you’re there, except me and the people I assign to watch over you. It’s safe—secluded, yet, not so much, which is good. It’s sort of like a little community unto itself.”

Carlee’s heart raced.

She’d be safe, under police protection...and she wouldn’t have the pressure of working in the damned store.

She felt as though a weight lifted from her shoulders.

She nodded. “If you think it will work, I’m in.”

“Our aim is to keep you safe. Tomorrow, I’ll send a car for you. Be ready to leave from your aunt’s house at six.”

Her mouth hung open. “In the morning?”

“Yes, six a.m. Sharp.”

She frowned. “How will I know the car is from you?”

“Don’t worry.” McGee smiled. “You’ll know.”

* * * *

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

Early morning came a lot sooner than she expected.

BUZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

“Damn,” she mumbled while reaching over to shut off her alarm clock.

She brushed the curls from her eyes with the back of one hand. Rising from the bed, she stretched and padded into the bathroom.

Glancing out the window, she noticed how dark it was.

“Brrrrrrr...”

She shuddered once then turned on the hot water. Mixing it with some cold, she splashed a liberal amount of warm water on her face, washing the sleep from her eyes.

By five forty-five, she was dressed and ready, waiting for her police escort.

She paced back and forth, sipping on a cup of steaming tea, her nerves frazzled. Would she be able to survive one of those cottages in Montauk’s forgotten little community of Seaside?

November on Long Island's North Shore could be frigid, particularly by the beach.

She ran upstairs and grabbed another warm sweater.

When she walked back into the den, the hum of a car motor drew her attention. She pulled back the drapes lining the windows, just enough so she could see.

A dark sedan pulled to the curb. A man got out, strode up the walkway and rang the doorbell.

Her hand trembled. She gripped her tea mug tighter, her knuckles white.

He rang the bell again.

"Coming!" she called out. Her heart pounded. Through the window, she saw him press his police badge against the pane of glass. He raised a finger to the doorbell but didn't press it this time.

She opened the door. "You?" she asked, pointing at Ben. "Are my escort?"

He scowled, placing his badge back in his pocket. "Don't sound so excited."

She glanced at the car.

"Dan's waiting. Let's go."

She held up a hand. "Wait a minute. You expect me to just take off with you and Dan?"

"You don't have much choice." He replied, his voice surly. Lowering it, he said. "And talking about it *now* is not the brightest thing to do." He looked around. "The longer we stand around out here, the more you risk."

Her heart skipped a few beats.

"You and Dan really wanted to do this?" Carlee bit her lower lip, half-anticipating, half-dreading his answer.

He looked like he was weighing his words. "Dan and I are assigned to keep you safe."

"Thanks for that insight." She gave him a sour look. "But I asked if you and Dan *wanted* to do this."

His face tightened. A muscle in his sculpted, lean jaw twitched. "It's just another assignment. We're doing our duty." He glanced her way. "And that's all it is. Whatever we all shared, it was a long time ago." His tone sounded wistful.

She swallowed, hard, her throat tight. “People don’t change.”

He frowned, looking at her, surveying her outfit of jeans, t-shirt and sweater. She had left her hair free, wild—her long tresses curling around her head, shoulders and neck. In a nervous gesture, she pushed some back behind her ears.

“Maybe they don’t change on the outside. But on the inside they do.”

Her face fell. “Just give me a chance to show you that you could be wrong.”

Ben grabbed her arm in a firm grasp, but he didn’t hurt her. “Just get your things. We need to leave before sunrise.”

Carlee walked over to her one bag, sitting by the fireplace. She took a last look at Ida’s house, a part of her glad that she wouldn’t see it again for a while.

Ben reached for the bag, jostling it. “This is all you’re bringing?”

“Despite what you and Dan think, I’m a rather simple girl.”

“Right,” he replied, his voice filled with sarcasm. “You’re not high maintenance at all.”

She wanted to smack him. She wanted to kiss him. Oh hell, she just wanted *him*. She needed to show him that she hadn’t changed, despite her precarious circumstances.

She walked to the car parked at the curb.

Ben opened the back door for her and tossed her bag on the seat. “Get in.”

Oh hell! If he was going to be so darned surly...

“Say ‘please.’”

Shadows remained, some light from the rising sun shone through. She could see his face flush with anger.

She grinned, happy to get a rise out of him. “It’s not hard you know. As long as we’re all going to be together, you could try a little courtesy.”

“Carlee, I swear, if you don’t get in that car, I’ll—”

“Is that a threat? You’re supposed to be protecting me, not bullying me.”

He leaned down until they were nose-to-nose. “If you don’t get in that car right now, I’ll—” He clenched then released his hand. “Make sure you don’t sit for a week.”

She grinned; she couldn’t help it. He was so deliciously male, so...damn, but her hormones spun out of control. The thought of being across his wide lap was just too much.

She creamed her thong.

“While that might be fun,” she replied, keeping her voice low, “I think I’ll just get in the car.”

He nodded. “Smart choice.”

She managed to have the last word, enjoying the scowl on his face. “I’d hate for you to wear out your hand.”

She scooted across the seat. He shut the door, shaking his head, but a corner of his mouth lifted.

“Morning!” she called to Dan.

He turned to gaze at her, his eyes heavy with sleep.

“I guess you’re not much of a morning person, either,” she said brightly.

He didn’t answer.

“If you’re still angry about kissing me that day at the police station, I’ll—”

“Whatever you do, Carlee, don’t, and I repeat, *don’t* bring up that kiss.” He shifted in his seat.

She flopped back in the seat. “Fine.” She glanced out the window. “I won’t.”

Ben got in and started the car. The engine roared to life.

“But I won’t forget it,” she said, her voice soft. “Ever.”

Chapter Nine

The minute Carlee stepped foot in the old cottage, she felt as though she was home for the first time in her life. It was a gem of a place, sitting high on top of a hill. She craned her neck to see that a small wooden deck jutted out the side, wrapping around the back of the house.

What a great ocean view!

She couldn't wait to get inside.

Dan followed her in, carrying a box filled with food. He placed it on the kitchen table. While he went into another room to check something, she rummaged through the box, eager to see what they provided. There was milk, eggs, bread, a jar of peanut butter then she spied a familiar package.

She pulled it out, a smile on her face.

Dan walked back into the room.

Carlee held up the package. "Where did you find these?"

Two bright spots of color appeared on his high cheekbones. "Ben and I found them at that specialty market in town."

She placed the package on the table. Running her hand across it, she said. "They're my favorite cookies."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, well, we remembered, that day we came to see you. You seemed to enjoy them."

That memory surfaced. She winced slightly, fingering the small bump that remained on her head. Carlee walked over to the windows, touched by their thoughtfulness, afraid her misting eyes would betray her. She glanced outside.

The view was spectacular! The rolling crashing waves hit against the rocks, the gulls flew high above the sea.

Dan walked over and drew her away from the windows.

“Rule number one.” He turned her to face him, holding her shoulders between his hands. “Stay away from the windows. Rule number two: You don’t leave this house. Rule number three—”

“Just how many rules are there?”

“Rule number three,” he repeated. “Give me your cell phone.”

She frowned. “Why?”

He held out his hand, palm out, wagging his fingers. “Just give it to me.”

She sighed, reaching in a pocket of her sweatshirt. “Here.” She gave it to him.

“Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” he replied, his voice laced with disdain. He hit a button, shutting it off.

“It’s mine now.”

“But what if I need to call someone, or—”

“We don’t want you talking to *anyone*, got it?”

“Not even you and Ben?” she asked, her voice snide.

He didn’t miss a beat. “We should only be so lucky.”

She rolled her eyes.

“That’s why we got you the cookies. From the way you wolfed them down, we figured if you’re eating them, you can’t talk to us.”

She stuck her tongue out.

He angled his head, looking at her for quite some time.

He took a step toward her.

She didn’t back down. Her heart racing, she walked to him, the tips of her sneakers touching against the toes of his boots.

“Why did you agree to watch over me?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I didn’t. Neither did Ben.”

“Right. You’re just following orders,” she quipped. “Ben already said that. Maybe *you* can give me the real answer.”

“That is the real answer.”

Her heart plummeted. It felt like a lead weight in her chest.

“Then it’s a lousy one.” Her voice trembled.

“It’s the only answer that you’re going to get.”

He walked out of the kitchen.

“Oh!” She lifted the package of cookies and tossed them at his retreating back, but her aim was off, and the package landed on the floor, the cookies crumbling into pieces.

Dan just kept walking, but she heard him laugh.

* * * *

Later, she followed Ben down a hallway just outside the kitchen. He carried her bag. She hurried past him, and managed to dodge his long, wide steps. Blocking his way, she grabbed hold of her suitcase.

“I’ll carry it.” She huffed. “Don’t bother.” She tugged, but he didn’t let go and walked past her.

She ran to catch up with him. Stopping halfway down the hall, he placed her bag on the floor and opened a door to a room. He swept his hand inside the open doorway.

“Your suite awaits, princess.”

Carlee poked her head through the entrance. A quaint, charming room greeted her, simple yet, homey.

“It’s the largest of the three bedrooms.”

She smiled at Ben. “And you and Dan thought I should have it. That’s very sweet.”

“That’s us,” he quipped. “Sweet.”

She raised a brow, hoping for a haughty effect. “Am I to stay in my room like a good little girl for the duration of my confinement?”

He angled his head. “That would be wonderful.”

Her face fell.

“But as long as you follow the rules, you have the run of the house.”

“Ah, yes.” She held up a finger. “The rules. Stay away from the windows, no going outside—”

He folded his arms across his wide chest. Leaning against the doorframe, he said, “I see Dan’s already taken care of that.”

“Quite well. Let me just tell you what I think of your *rules*.”

“I can’t wait to hear.” He rolled his eyes.

She lifted her chin. “Rules are meant to be broken.”

He dropped his arms from his chest and scowled. “Not these. We’re talking about your life here, Carlee.”

Her blood pressure skyrocketed. “My life...” She aimed her thumb at her chest. “Was my own, until you two stepped back into it.”

“Believe me,” he growled. “We’d gladly leap out of it, if we could.” His voice shook. “The last thing we need is to baby-sit a spoiled rich, brat like you.”

Her eyes stung, but she held back her tears. “Is that what you and Dan really think I’ve become?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s what we always knew you were.”

“That’s not true!” she cried. “I hated every second with my family.” Her voice wobbled. “I never fit in.”

He raised a brow. “You sure managed to wheedle your way back into their good graces.” He shook his head. “‘Ida’s Clone,’ that’s what you are.”

“I’m not.” She balled a hand into a fist at her side. She took a step toward him. “If you always thought I was a spoiled rich girl, then why did you and Dan want to hang out with me at the reservation?”

He didn’t answer.

She laughed, the sound caustic. “You didn’t seem to mind kissing me all those years ago.”

“That was a mistake, so we sent you away. We knew better then, and we know better now.”

She raised a brow. “Oh, really?”

He nodded. “Really.”

She poked him in the chest. “Then why did Dan kiss me when I came to see Lieutenant McGee?”

His eyes widened. “What do you mean Dan kissed you?”

She gave him a cheeky grin. “Have you forgotten what a kiss is? It’s the act of joining one pair of lips to another, the idea being to incite lust.”

“I know damn well what a kiss is! And you had no business kissing Dan. Christ almighty.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“Did you ever consider that he kissed *me*? And not the other way around?”

His face darkened. “Don’t think you can start trouble between me and Dan. It won’t work.” He slashed a hand through the air. “You’re still a spoiled-rotten kid.”

“And you’re still singing the same tune. It’s getting rather boring.” She licked her lips. “Why don’t you ask Dan about that kiss?”

She didn’t wait for him to answer, just reached for the door and slammed it in his face.

“Open this door!” he banged against it. It rattled in the frame.

“Go to hell!” She shouted back, tears filling her eyes. This time, they spilled onto her cheeks.

She swiped them away with her fingers.

She heard a muffled curse come from the other side of the doorway.

Then she heard footsteps.

She waited until they disappeared.

Bracing her back against the door, she reached for the lock, turning it with a loud ‘click.’

She did the same with her heart.

* * * *

Carlee spent the rest of the day and night in her room, but sleep eluded her. When she could finally drift off, she kept having dreams, the same ones, tossing and turning each time the images flashed through her mind.

A shadowy figure loomed over her. She couldn’t see its face, but something about it seemed familiar. Then she’d feel it—that moment when she would slip into a black void. Frightened and alone, Carlee could never seem to escape the eerie figure. It followed her everywhere...

She woke with a start, her eyes swollen and gritty. She glanced outside, watching the sun stream through the curtains. Padding toward the window, excitement built inside Carlee. What a breathtaking view!

She remembered Dan and Ben’s first rule.

“Fuck it,” she said aloud.

She took a few more steps then stopped.

“Oh, damn them anyway.” She brushed back the hair from her face.

They were right—this *wasn't* a game. This was her life, and someone was intent on taking it from her. She trembled at the thought. If she kept looking out the window all the time, no matter how wonderful the view, someone would see her...and know where the police hid her.

She shuddered against the cold.

A rattling noise made her jump. She turned when she felt warm air swirl around her feet. It traveled up her legs.

She rubbed her arms. “Must be the heater,” she grumbled.

She had to stop being such a scaredy-cat.

The last thing we need is to baby-sit a spoiled rich, brat like you.

“Screw you both,” she said aloud.

Her shoulders slumped.

Yeah, that would be nice, wouldn't it? That would solve everything. It would end the burning desire she had for Ben...for Dan, too.

However, it wouldn't solve their differences.

Right now, there was an enormous mountain of them. It lay smack between the three of them.

She thought of how she goaded Ben yesterday, and the trouble she'd thought she could cause. It was only fair, after all they've been putting her through.

She sighed. No, it wasn't them—it was her. She opted to take the easy way out—to take the money her aunt offered in her will. Ida dangled it before Carlee like a carrot in front of a rabbit.

Carlee took the bait.

She had only herself to blame now for her circumstances.

Ben was right. She always had her family's money to fall back on, one way or another.

This time, it got her in trouble.

Maybe it always had...

It suddenly dawned on her that Todd's jealousy couldn't possibly be new. He must have always felt it, and probably lived with it. Ida showered what appeared to be a lot of attention on Carlee when she was younger, it was just that Ida did it in her usual, gruff way.

Todd had been aware of it.

And it ate away at him now—fueled by his mother's obvious disdain. She must have disliked him so much that she chose to cut him out of her will.

But why?

What had Todd done that was so awful?

And why allow Carlee, who had no head for business, run the poultry farm?

She dropped her head in her hands, scrunching her fingers through her hair, wondering if she'd ever find the answers.

Walking over to the bed, she sat down and pulled on a pair of warm, wooly socks. She opened her bag and retrieved the few food items she had tossed in—one of them being organic green tea bags.

Maybe a cup of her favorite tea would clear her head.

And maybe...she'd apologize to Ben.

No, damn it!

She shook her head.

Her shoulders slumped. What did they need to make amends for? Spouting the truth?

She was spoiled. She had acted like a total brat, too.

Yeah, well, they were no better. Acting like big, tough macho guys.

Screw them.

She marched out of her room heading down the hall, stopping when she heard Ben and Dan's voices coming from one of the rooms.

Leaning her ear against the door, she listened as they spoke.

"You kissed her!" Ben's voice shook. "Are you out of your damned mind?"

A corner of her mouth lifted.

"I know, I know, I'm an asshole." Dan replied.

She bit back a grin.

“Remind me,” Ben replied, his voice surly. “Why we agreed to baby-sit her.”

She lifted her chin. *She was no baby, damn them.*

“Because we couldn’t argue with McGee? Because it would mean our jobs?”

She heard the shuffle of feet.

One of them was pacing back and forth.

“Why do we always have to prove ourselves, Ben? We’ve been doing it our whole lives.”

She swallowed, hard.

“When you’re the only two Native American Indians on the Montauk police force, it comes with the territory.”

“I want to be recognized as a good cop, and I want people to stop seeing me as an Indian first.”

Ben laughed, the sound derisive. “So then we should cut our hair. Look more—white.”

“Yeah right. That’ll just piss off Running Bear and the rest of the tribal elders.”

There were a few moments of silence.

“We’ll always be caught between two worlds—the Indian and the white. It’ll never change.”

“Whatever we do,” Ben replied. “We have to remember: It’s hands-off Carlee.”

Her eyes widened.

“Christ! I’m so fucking turned on every time I see her.” Dan’s voice filled with frustration. “Then she opens her mouth, and I get so damned mad at her. And all that anger just turns into...lust.” His voice lowered. She strained to hear him. “Cooped up with her like this - how in hell are we going to stand it?”

Ben sighed. “Our dream of sharing Carlee is finally here—within our reach—and life turns all ironic on us.”

She clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her cry.

They wanted to share her?

Holy shit.

“Just remember—” Ben said.

“Yeah, I know. Hands-off.” Dan sighed. “My dick’s so hard right now just thinking about her.”

“Then think of something else.”

Dan’s voice shook. “I’m trying.”

She scooted down the hall, making her way toward the kitchen.

She couldn’t help but smile.

Chapter Ten

Much to Carlee's delight, the small cottage had a wonderful kitchen. She rummaged through the cabinets, searching for a pot to boil water in. She found a battered, aluminum teakettle in a cabinet near the stove.

Her stomach rumbled. She glanced at the box filled with food that Dan brought in the day before. Searching through it, she decided that about the only thing she could eat was the peanut butter. She opened the fridge to see that either Ben or Dan must have placed the eggs and milk inside, to stay cold.

However, there was nothing in the fridge that she could eat.

She glanced back at the box on the table and noticed a loaf of bread.

Okay, so she'd have toast and peanut butter.

Her stomach rumbled again.

Maybe she'd have one of those cookies!

She remembered how she threw the package of her favorite treats at Dan yesterday.

Yeah, she was a brat. A spoiled, hungry brat.

Grabbing the bread and jar of peanut butter, she walked over to the counter by the sink.

There she noticed two more packages of her beloved cookies.

Her eyes stung. Ben and Dan obviously replaced what she tossed in anger.

Brat.

Yeah, she owed them an apology. A big one.

She turned the knob on the sink marked 'cold' and waited for the water to run from the faucet.

Nothing happened.

She turned the cold water off, then on, waiting again for it to start running.

Nothing.

Damn!

She did it again. This time, she heard a rumbling noise, then...

BANG!

BANG!

The ominous noise came from the pipes under the sink.

Water spewed from the faucet—an endless deluge spurting in every direction.

She screamed as the force of the water hit her square in the face, the rest of it soaking her shirt. Carlee tried to turn off the water, but no matter which way she twisted and turned the knob, it just kept coming. She slipped once, a cry of pain escaping her mouth. She fell flat on her ass in a pool of icy cold water that seeped through the kitchen and was now making its way down the hall.

When she tried to rise, her wet flannel sweat pants weighed her down.

She managed to get up, and that's when she heard a shout.

It sounded like Dan.

Sliding a mass of wet hair from her eyes, she was greeted by the sight of Ben and Dan, guns drawn.

Dan wore only boxers, which didn't cover much, his long dark hair trailing over his broad shoulders and back.

Ben had on a pair of jeans, and no shirt, his chest bare. Smears of shaving cream lined his lean, sculpted face. His wet hair was slicked back, as though he had just gotten out of the shower.

"What the hell is going on?" Ben shouted, reaching for the faucet.

Dan lowered his gun and waded through what seemed to be an inch of water.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Ben shut the water off with one twist of his hand.

"I was trying to do that." Carlee said, her voice sheepish. "But the damn thing wouldn't cooperate." She stepped out of the water, her woolen socks heavy.

Sloshing across the floor, she stood on the other side of the room and wrung out the ends of her shirt.

“Why in hell didn’t you just wait for one of us?”

“Huh?” She looked up.

“Well?”

She screwed up her face when a lock of wet hair fell across her eye. She swiped it away. “Well what?”

“Why didn’t you just wait for one of us to help you?” Dan asked her, his voice clipped.

She raised her brows. “Wait for one of you to do what? Make me a cup of tea?”

“Christ!” Ben flopped down in a chair at the kitchen table, his body shaking. He looked over at Carlee. “I thought someone was murdering you.”

She wrung her shirt out again. “Sorry to disappoint you,” she replied, her voice testy, her temper soaring. “And I don’t need someone to wait on me hand and foot. I can make my own tea!”

She glanced down at the water pooling around her.

“Well, at least I thought I could.”

“These cottages have old plumbing.” Dan stated. “You can’t just turn on the water and expect it to magically appear.” He sighed. “But you’re used to everything being easy, aren’t you?”

That did it!

She clenched her hand into a fist at her side. “Anyone could make a mistake like this. *Anyone*.” She advanced on Dan, jabbing her index finger into his solid wall of chest. The tip of her finger bent back—it hurt like hell, but she didn’t care, that’s how mad she was. “I was trying to be courteous, something you two should learn. I was afraid I’d wake you if—”

Ben rose to his feet. “You hear that?” He aimed his thumb toward her, but he looked at Dan. “*That* she’s afraid of. Waking us. But someone who’s trying to kill her?” He slashed a hand in the air. “*That* she thinks is a game.” He turned and faced Carlee. “You don’t have the sense God gave a flea.” He shook his head. “And you don’t care what you have to do to get attention, as long as you’re in the center of it.”

It was too much.

She felt the tears flow from her eyes. They ran down her already wet face.

She smacked him square in the chest. He reared back.

She sniffed, her throat clogging with more tears. "I'm scared to death. Every minute of every day. I'm frightened, all right?" She bit her lower lip. "Happy?"

Ben's face softened. He took a step toward her. "Carlee, don't cry, please, I—"

She looked around the wet kitchen, water still seeping into every nook and cranny. "I would never do something like *this*..." she swept her hand out in front of her, "just to get attention."

Dan shook his head. "We heard your scream." He sighed. "We were scared, too. For you." He held out his hand. "Come here. Get out of the water."

"Leave me alone," Her voice filled with defeat. "Just leave me the hell alone."

Silence reigned.

Suddenly, their dark eyes were on her. She followed their path, glancing down at her chest. Her brown nipples pushed against the thin fabric of her t-shirt, the outlines of her bare breasts visible through the wet fabric.

She grabbed both sides of her hooded sweatshirt in an attempt to cover herself.

Carlee felt vulnerable, exposed, but more than her body, she felt as though she had just released a mountain of worry, and now, they saw the real her.

A scared, frightened little rabbit.

Ben swallowed. She watched the rise and fall of his prominent Adam's apple. "I...we're sorry," he said, his voice soft. "I didn't mean what I said."

Dan walked over and took her hand. "I didn't mean what I said, either."

Her lower lip trembled; she dropped the ends of her sweatshirt. "You spoke the truth. I am used to everything coming easy." She sniffed. "That's why I went along with my aunt's will. It's what I've always done. *Always*. I take the easy way out."

She started to cry, the tears coming fast and furious.

The events of the morning, coupled with everything else she screwed up in her life, hit her like a ton of bricks.

"Carlee, no, don't...stop, don't cry, *please*," Ben intoned. He reached over and grabbed a handful of napkins off the table. He shoved them in her hand.

She rolled her eyes and hiccupped. "*Now* he says 'please'."

A corner of his mouth lifted. "Smart ass."

She tried to smile, but a sob escaped her. She clamped a hand across her mouth, her chest heaving.

“Don’t.” Dan whispered. “I—” he glanced at Ben. “We can’t bear this.”

In the next instant, she was in his arms, cradled against his chest.

His bare chest.

She felt the heat emanate from his body, his coiled, tense muscles. He stroked her back, slipping his hands beneath her t-shirt and hoodie. The more his hands soothed her, the more his body eased against hers.

His long, thick cock pressed against her thigh. Carlee’s body throbbed with need.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Ben watching, his big dark eyes brooding. She reached out a hand to him, wondering if he’d take it.

He did.

Her heart did a little flip in her chest.

Dan turned her so that she settled against Ben.

He cradled the back of her head with his large palm. Placing his other arm across her waist, he tugged her closer, until she felt his long, hard, length push against her thigh.

“Little warrior,” he murmured, easing her away. She felt bereft at the loss of contact. “I’m sorry for everything.”

She gazed into his eyes. So dark. So compelling.

She sniffed back tears. Glancing at the wad of paper napkins in her hand, a corner of her mouth lifted. She gulped then laughter bubbled up inside her.

“What am I supposed to do with these?”

Ben snagged a crumpled napkin from her hand. He stroked it across her cheeks, gently wiping the moisture from her face. He placed it over her nose. “Blow,” he said.

HONK!

Dan laughed, the sound rich and warm. “You still sound like goose when you blow your nose.”

“When did you *ever* hear me blow my nose?”

“That time you snuck into the reservation. It was autumn, and the start of a bout of cold weather. Somehow, someway, you knew we were sick. We both had bad colds.”

“I remember,” she said softly.

Slowly, the door opened again. Bitterness washed away, quickly replaced by something else. Something warm and wonderful. The way she always used to feel when they were teenagers.

Careful, Carlee, you can't go back...only forward.

"I caught your colds."

"Yeah," Dan answered. "That's the first time we ever heard you blow your nose. You still sound like a crazy goose."

She smiled. "Thanks a lot."

"Yeah well, it's the truth."

Silence intruded again.

She licked her lips. Their eyes followed her every move.

"As long as we're speaking about truth..."

Ben groaned.

"I heard what you said this morning."

Dan's face turned scarlet.

"What were you doing? Pressing your ear up against the wall?" Ben shook his head, his face tight.

"It was the door," Carlee answered brightly.

She plunked down in one of the chairs at the kitchen table and took a good look at both of them.

"Very nice." Her eyes traveled lower to their groins. She placed her elbow on the table and cupped her chin in her hand. "*Very* nice, indeed."

"Cut it out," Dan nodded toward Ben. "Let's get out of here."

They started to walk away.

"You spoke about *sharing*." She drew the word out. "I believe in reference to me."

They stopped near the counter by the sink.

Ben turned around and looked at Carlee. Over his shoulder, he replied. "We were talking about Agnes Kowalski. About sharing a meal at her diner."

Carlee burst out laughing. "Oh really?"

A muscle in Ben's clenched jaw twitched.

“Now who’s lying?” she asked softly.

Dan strode over to her, his feet sloshing through what remained of the water. “For your information, *little warrior*...” He leaned down, resting both hands on the table. “Listening through doors will get you into lots of trouble.”

She glanced over Dan’s shoulder, winking at Ben. “That’s right; Ben seems to think that I deserve something.” She craned her neck further to see Ben standing by the counter, his arms crossed over his chest. “Wasn’t that what we were discussing yesterday morning?” She wagged her fingers at Ben. “Before I got in the car to come here?”

He stood there, his face a mask of tight, angry lines. “Yeah, and I still think you do.”

Her eyes lit up. “Really? When will you dole out the punishment?”

Dan rose to his full height. “Knock it off, Carlee.”

“I will, as soon as you and Ben admit that you’ve always wanted to share me.”

“We’ll own up to no such thing.” Ben strode over to her, his steps wide. “We’re here with you on a purely professional basis.”

She smiled. “Guarding me is just a job, is it?” She tapped her fingers on the table. “I wonder what your boss would think of your little conversation this morning—and how you’re both standing here now, half dressed, one of you...” She glanced at Dan. “...in just your um...underwear.”

Dan looked at Ben, then at Carlee. “Why you little... If you say one word to Lieutenant McGee about what we said —”

She reached out and ran a finger over his jaw. “About sharing me?”

Ben groaned, running a hand through his hair.

Carlee sobered. “I wouldn’t say a word to your Lieutenant. It’s none of his damned business how you both feel about me, or how I feel about the two of you.”

“Which is,” Dan growled. “Nothing.”

She angled her head. “We could dance around this all day and all night, but let’s face it: I’ve wanted both of you in my bed since I was sixteen.”

“Stop it!” Ben thundered.

His body shook, his arousal apparent, even through the heavy fabric of his jeans.

She rose to her feet, looking at Dan first, then Ben. “Let’s just get it out of our systems, once and for all. That’s all I’m asking—one time—with both of you.”

“Oh, Carlee.” Dan shook his head. “You have *no idea* what you’re asking. No idea at all.”

She snapped her fingers. “Maybe you really want to share Agnes Kowalski.”

“No.” Ben shook his head. The ends of his dark hair flowed around his neck. “We are *not* doing anything of the kind.”

She untied the string on her sweatpants. A shudder tore through her—she wasn’t sure if it was from the damp cold clinging to her body or the little zing that snaked down her back. It traveled across her body, settling between her thighs. “You are *not* sharing horse-faced Agnes Kowalski. You’re sharing *me*!”

She continued to loosen the string on her pants.

Dan held up a hand. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I was told I had the run of the house, right?” She glanced at Ben, pulling down her sweat pants to reveal her hips and bottom, covered in a skimpy thong.

Ben’s cock stood ramrod straight.

Dan whisked her pants off the floor. He shoved them at her. “Put these back on.”

She tossed them right back and shrugged out of her hoodie-style sweatshirt.

“Oh no.” Dan backed up, the wall behind him halting any further movement.

“Don’t do that.”

“Carlee, this is...insane,” Ben mumbled.

“What will be crazy is if you don’t give in to my demands and make love to me.” She glanced at Dan. “Both of you.” She lifted the ends of her t-shirt and started pulling it up. “I have the run of the house, so I’ll run around the house—nude—until you give me what I want.”

“Shit.” Dan looked at Ben. “Do something!”

Ben walked over to Carlee, reaching for her hands.

She slapped his away.

He leaned down and kissed her.

“No more, little warrior.” His voice was strained. “Please.”

She stroked his jaw then answered in a saucy tone. “It’s amazing how much courtesy you can learn in such a short time.”

“Fuck courtesy,” he growled.

Then his mouth crashed down on hers.

Chapter Eleven

Ben's hands strayed to every part of Carlee's body. He stroked her back, her bottom, her hips, pulling her closer, as though he couldn't get enough of her. Carlee stood on the edge of a dark precipice of desire, her body quaking with need. He grabbed hold of her bottom, pulling her up until she stood on her toes.

She ground her pelvis against his swollen cock. He pushed against her, the tip of his stiff dick sliding between her thighs, nudging her entrance through the thin silk of her thong. Carlee held on fast, afraid she'd slither to the floor, boneless from the exquisite torture he inflicted upon her body.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Dan watching, his dark eyes intense, bright with desire. It heightened the excitement, making her juices flow. Moisture flooded her thong; she could feel it seep down her legs.

Dan's wicked smile made her clit throb again.

She pulled Ben's head down for another fiery kiss, melding her mouth with his.

He moaned into her mouth. "Carlee, *Carlee*."

Ben tore his mouth from hers, holding her away from him. "No more, little warrior, I can't take it."

"Then give her what she wants," Dan uttered softly.

Fire leapt into Ben's dark eyes.

She smiled. "Please."

Ben turned to look at Dan. Dan raised one dark brow and swept his hand out in front of him. "Give the lady what she wants." He winked at Carlee. "Give her what she needs."

She reached out and stroked Ben's cock. He tipped his head back, a low groan escaping his chest. She could hear the rumble. In one swift move, he picked her up, cradling her against his chest.

He walked to the small kitchen table and chairs and sat down with her tucked into his lap. She squirmed once, her body burning, her mind filled with anticipation. Ben stripped the thong off her hips, tossing it to the floor. Then he raised her shirt exposing her bare breasts to Dan.

Dan stepped closer. Carlee creamed again when Dan gazed at her breasts. He leaned down and tongued her nipples, while Ben fingered her clit. Her orgasm was swift, hard, and left her breathless.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" she cried when she found her voice.

She slumped against Ben's chest. This time, Dan picked her up, but when he placed her feet on the floor, she couldn't stand.

Her legs felt like two wet noodles.

She sagged against him.

He leaned forward, digging his shoulder under her breasts. A whoosh of air exited her lungs, and all she could do was hang on for dear life while Dan trotted down the hall with her slung over his shoulder. From her upside down position, she saw Ben directly behind them.

Dan stopped at a closed door. He opened it and walked in, striding over to the other side of the room, where he deposited her gently on a wide bed.

Carlee stretched her arms in a wide arc above her head. She turned on her side and watched the two of them strip away their clothing.

They stood tall, proud and naked, their wide bronzed chests kissed by the sun, their cocks sticking straight out, paying her tribute.

She smiled. "Oh my, you are both magnificent."

She shook her head, marveling at their size.

Holy crap, will they fit?

This was no time to be afraid! She'd dreamt of this, fantasized about it all her life, and now...

Ben and Dan were hers.

She wouldn't let fear take hold.

She was so tired of being the scared little bunny.

So tired of being the outcast, so tired of wanting what she couldn't have...them.

She didn't intend to waste another second on doubt or unfulfilled dreams. Carlee intended to make this one come true.

They walked over to her.

Ben knelt on the bed, digging both of his fists into the mattress. "If you don't want this, say it now, Carlee."

She swallowed and looked at Dan.

He nodded. "Say the word, and we're out of here."

"No." She shook her head.

Dan raised a brow.

Ben frowned.

"I-I mean, I don't want you to leave me."

Dan sat down next to her on the bed. His penis lay against his thigh, midway between his hip and knee. Even at rest, his cock was breathtaking.

She glanced at Ben's.

Yikes.

She felt that familiar sweet ache bloom between her legs.

Lifting one of Dan's hands, she placed it against her breast. His fingers kneaded her flesh, the pad of his thumb stroking her nipple.

"I want you," she whispered.

She took one of Ben's hands and placed it between her legs.

"And you." She sighed when Ben's fingers caressed her little nubbin of flesh.

"I've never wanted anything more in my life than the two of you...right now."

"Then say no more, little warrior." Ben palmed her between her legs.

She leaned back and placed her feet flat on the sheets, digging her heels into the mattress.

Dan settled next to her. He put his wide palm on her belly, stroking her gently, sliding his hand up until he wreaked sweet havoc on her breasts.

She could feel her orgasm rise when Ben stroked her clit with the tip of his index finger. She raised her head just enough to see Ben looking at a drop of moisture on his finger. He placed it in his mouth.

“Sweet,” he uttered.

She squirmed on the bed, bunching the covers in her fists.

Dan’s lips closed over her right breast. She pushed it into his hot, warm mouth. He sucked hard, pulling her nipple into his mouth, his teeth scraping against the tender flesh.

But he didn’t hurt her.

She felt nothing but exquisite torture combined with tenderness.

She came hard and fast, pushing against Ben’s hand, her breast shoved into Dan’s mouth.

“No more!” she cried. “More.” She sighed.

Dan chuckled. “Which is it, little warrior?”

Ben laughed. “Do you want us to stop?”

She sat up and smacked him on the chest. “Don’t you dare!”

Both men dissolved into laughter.

Ben rolled her over and gave her bottom a tap with his open palm.

She stretched out, cupping the side of her head in her open hand.

Ben nuzzled the back of her neck, playing with her curly hair. With his other hand, he stroked her between her legs.

Dan buried his head between her breasts, laving them with his tongue.

Carlee arched her back, feeling that great tide of longing as it built inside her again.

“Carlee, I want to be inside you, now,” Dan whispered in her ear.

He tongued her nipple.

She felt a zing of pleasure snake down her back.

“I’ll watch,” Ben told them.

Carlee’s clit throbbed, her body responding to Dan’s need and Ben’s desire to view it all.

Dan slid his body upward, until his head was on level with hers. She grabbed hold of his cock, placing the tip against her clit, rubbing the head of his stiff dick against her little pearl of moist flesh. He pushed inside her, filling her, her gasp of pleasure echoing through the room.

Ben stayed behind her, stroking her breasts, leaning over her shoulder to watch Dan make love to her. He threw his arm across Carlee and Dan, forcing them closer. Dan started with long, slow strokes, building a fire inside Carlee. She matched him, stroke for stroke, her body responding to his rhythm.

“Faster!” she cried.

He placed a finger against her lips.

“Please,” she whimpered.

She ground her pelvis against him, but Dan continued with slow, even strokes, making sure to slide the tip of his cock against her clit.

He stopped.

She cried out. “No!”

“Easy,” he crooned, turning her so that she faced Ben.

They switched, with Ben inserting his cock inside her. He settled there, leaning his forehead against hers.

“Carlee,” he murmured, kissing her forehead. “You’re so tight, so hot so...wet.”

Dan reached over and fondled her breasts, rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He kissed her shoulders, her neck, holding back her mass of curls to nip her skin gently with his teeth.

“I love your breasts, little warrior,” Dan murmured.

Ben pumped into her. Dan reached over again to stroke her labia, fingering her clit while Ben moved inside her.

She lost her breath again. When she came, it felt like a flood of white, hot light filled her, sending her over the precipice of need and desire.

She let go of a sigh then settled against Dan.

Ben curled an arm around her waist.

They all fell asleep with Carlee nestled between them the only sound her soft little snore.

* * * *

Carlee woke a little while later.

She brushed the hair from her eyes, only to discover she was alone in the bed.

Then she heard noise coming from the kitchen, the sound of pots banging—and Dan and Ben's voices.

She rolled over and noticed her clothing hanging on the back of the closet door.

Climbing out of the bed, she grabbed her jeans and t-shirt and dressed quickly.

Then she made her way down the hallway.

She stopped near the entrance to the kitchen.

Dan was busy making breakfast—it looked as though he cooked a mountain of scrambled eggs.

She screwed up her face but her stomach rumbled when she smelled the odor of toasting bread.

Licking her lips, she mustered her courage and walked into the kitchen.

Dan glanced her way, his face solemn.

She blew out a breath. "Well, I guess this is the part where it becomes awkward and strained."

Dan put down his spatula. A lock of dark hair brushed his shoulder.

Her heart did a little flip in her chest.

"No, little warrior, it doesn't." He walked over to her. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he drew her forward, kissing the breath from her body.

She shut her eyes, savoring the feel of his lips.

When she opened them, Ben stood on the other side of the room, watching every move.

Carlee walked over to him.

Ben placed an arm around her waist and tugged her forward. He placed a kiss on top of her head.

"No regrets, little warrior," Ben murmured.

"Never," she replied, but her stomach did a strange little flip.

Doubt crept in but she pushed it aside. This situation was temporary—until the police figured out who attacked her.

She told Ben and Dan that one bout of lovemaking would get the urge out of their systems. Rubbing the delicate skin near the corner of her eye, she felt a familiar twitch. Carlee wondered just how long she could lie to herself, and to them.

One time with Ben and Dan was better than any fantasy she ever had.

She felt a stirring in her loins.

Crap! She'd have to get them both back in her bed... soon.

"Well, what's for breakfast besides—" She glanced at the pan of eggs on the stove. "That?" She pointed at the skillet.

Dan raised a brow. "You don't like eggs?" He mounded them into a bowl and placed them on the table.

She looked at them, her stomach lurching. "No, not particularly."

Her eyes strayed to the toast lying on a plate. "But I'll have toast."

Ben shook his head. "You just can't have toast for breakfast." He frowned, assessing her appearance. "You're too damned skinny, woman."

She laughed, snatching a piece of toasted bread from the plate, smearing it with jelly. "I am *not*."

Ben reached out and licked a bit of jelly from the corner of her mouth.

She dropped the bread, the side of her mouth buzzing from the touch of his lips.

Ben picked up the toast and placed it in the trash, his mouth split into a wide grin.

"Sit," he told her. "I'll handle the toast."

Frowning, she read the label. "This isn't organic orange juice, is it?"

Ben shrugged. "Does it matter?"

She pursed her lips. "It's better for you."

Dan rolled his eyes as he sat down and dug into his plate piled high with eggs. "We've got a real health nut on our hands." He aimed his fork at Ben.

She munched on a fresh piece of toast, slathered liberally with jelly, courtesy of Ben. "What's wrong with eating healthy?"

Ben sat at the table, placing his own plate filled with eggs in front of him.

"Nothing, but I just want to know one thing."

"What?" she asked around a mouthful of toast.

He buttered a piece of toast and asked. “You grew up on a poultry farm, so why don’t you eat eggs?”

She chewed and swallowed. Brushing the crumbs from her hands, she replied. “I uh, never developed a taste for them.”

He shook his head. “Surrounded by all that food! All the time.” He jabbed a piece of egg onto the tines of his fork. “Dan and I would have gladly eaten eggs, chickens, turkeys, whatever it was your family raised, and we wouldn’t have—” He frowned and placed a hand on her arm. “Why are you so pale?” he asked.

Dan angled his head. “That’s exactly what you looked like that day in the poultry store. Your face got all pasty.”

She plunked the toast down on her plate. “I-I’m fine.”

Ben leaned back in his chair, wiping his hands on a napkin. “No, you’re not. You’re white as a sheet.”

She dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “All right. If you must know—”

She swallowed. Hard.

“Go on.” Dan told her.

“Forget it,” she mumbled.

“Oh no, no, no, no, *no!*” Ben sat forward again. He jabbed another piece of egg onto his fork and placed it in his mouth. “You’re not getting away with that,” he said around a bite. “What were you going to say?”

Carlee gagged.

“What the hell?” He plunked his fork down on the table. “What is wrong with you?”

She put her hand over her mouth.

When she felt her stomach settle, she replied. “I-I don’t eat eggs, or chicken or meat or...or anything with a face.”

The room became quiet.

Dan raised a brow. “Do you mean to tell me that you grew up on that poultry farm, and yet, you never touched one piece of chicken or turkey?”

She nodded.

Ben shook his head. “You must have driven your family crazy.”

She placed her chin in the palm of her hand. “To say the least.”

Dan snapped his brows together. “That’s why you nearly fainted at the poultry store that day we saw you there.” He pushed his plate aside, folding his arms on the table. “When we asked about that turducken.”

She held up a hand. “Please! I’m nauseous just thinking about it.” She shrugged. “I’ve been a vegetarian all my life.”

Ben rose and took his plate and Dan’s to the sink.

“What are you doing?” She watched as he deposited the scrambled eggs in the garbage. Her eyes widened. “Oh, no! Please don’t do that.” She glanced at Dan. “Eat them.”

“Oh yeah, sure, riiiiiiiiiiiiiiight. Like I’m going to enjoy eating eggs in front of you while you gag.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m sorry.”

“So, what do you eat, if I may ask?” Dan leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Well...tofu and beans and wheat berries and...”

“Wheat berries?” Ben said from his position by the sink. “What in hell are wheat berries?” He dried his hands on a towel, turning to face her.

“Un-cracked wheat kernels. They’re delicious,” she replied.

He screwed up his face.

“Well, make a list of what you want to eat, and we’ll get it at that little market down the road.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

Ben walked over and placed a pad and paper in front of her. “Write down everything you want.”

She scribbled.

They watched.

Ben snatched the pad from her hands. “What the heck is Tofu Frutee Frozen Dessert?”

“Exactly what it says. It’s ice cream made from tofu.”

Dan groaned. He hung his head in his hands. “I *will not* go into that market asking for Tofu Frutee Frozen Desert.”

She laughed. “Why? Is the big, tough, macho guy afraid of...tofu?” Carlee winked. “If you are, I’ll just go myself.”

She rose from his lap, only to collide with Ben.

Her nose brushed his chest. She looked up to see him scowl. “Don’t you ever smile?” she quipped. “Or is that frown permanent?” She batted her eyes. “You were smiling earlier, when you made love to me.” She glanced at Dan’s surly face. “You both did.”

She brushed her fingers across Ben’s chest. Then she dipped them lower, between his legs.

He placed a hand over hers. “Cut it out.”

She reached up and ran a finger over his jaw. “Smile.”

He snapped his brows together.

She reached for his groin, stroking his balls.

A corner of his mouth lifted.

“Enough.” He leaned down and kissed her.

Dan pulled her back into his lap. “Finish the list, little warrior.”

She wiggled her bottom against him.

“Quickly.” His sharp intake of breath made her realize she had hit her mark.

She completed her shopping list. Dan ripped the page from the pad then shifted her off his lap. “I’m only doing this because I’m crazy about...,” he mumbled.

Carlee’s mouth hung open. “What did you say?”

Her heart pounded in her chest.

Dan looked over at her, two bright spots of red glowed on his high, sculpted cheeks. “I uh...” He looked over at Ben.

He shrugged in a helpless gesture.

“I said I must be crazy to be doing this.”

Standing on her tiptoes, she brushed a kiss across his mouth. “I know what you said, Dan Swift.”

He shrugged into his jacket, making a quick exit.

He came back in.

Snatching Carlee's list from the table, he walked out again.

She just smiled.

Chapter Twelve

Carlee followed Ben out of the kitchen, her heart swelling with happiness. How could she get the two of them to admit that they cared for her?

She was not about to back down from *that* challenge.

“Dan said he was crazy about me.” She tugged on the waistband of Ben’s jeans. “Why can’t you say it, too?”

He stopped abruptly. Carlee careened into his broad back.

It was a nice back...wide, muscular. He had such a nice ass, too. Tight. Round. She liked how he looked in a pair of jeans.

Ben turned around. Folding his arms across his chest, he replied. “He did *not* say that.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re both stubborn.”

She loved his frown. Reaching up, she smoothed the deep creases between his brooding, dark eyes. “You really have to learn to smile. If you don’t, you’ll get permanent wrinkles there.” She grinned when his scowl deepened.

“You’re like a dog with a bone, aren’t you? You’re just not going to let this go.”

She nodded. “Uh huh.”

“You choose to hear what you want to hear.”

“I know what I heard. He said he’s crazy about me.” She took a step toward Ben. Running a hand across the t-shirt that spanned the broad angles and planes of his chest, she asked. “Are you?”

“What?”

She tugged on the front waistband of his jeans, dragging him closer. “Crazy about me?”

He nodded.

Carlee poked him in the chest. "See? I knew you would admit it. I—"

"I *must* be crazy to be having this conversation with you."

He turned on his heel and strode down the hallway. She ran after him, undaunted.

"You're afraid, that's what you are, Ben Strong. You're a coward."

When he turned around this time, he looked positively furious.

She walked down the hall and stood with him, toe-to-toe. "Was making love to me what you always imagined it would be?"

Her heart raced. She could feel its quick beat.

He ran a hand through his hair, a frustrated look on his face. "Okay, you asked for it, Carlee. Making love to you was a mi—"

Her lower lip trembled. She placed a finger against his mouth. "Please don't say it was a mistake."

He reached for her hand, taking it in his own. Ben gave her fingers a squeeze. "If you would let me finish."

She pursed her lips to stop their trembling.

"Making love to you was only a small expression of how I feel about you." He turned on his heel and trekked down the hall.

She stood there, her mouth hanging open.

She ran after him.

He stopped at a closed door.

"You can't just drop a bombshell on me like that and leave me standing here."

He reached for the doorknob. So did she.

Carlee felt her temper soar. "You and Dan are the most frustrating men I've ever known!" She balled her hands into fists and dropped them to her sides. "Ben—" She put her hand on top of his. "Don't walk away. Stay and talk. Please."

"Nope." He shook his head.

"Why not?" She stamped her foot in anger.

He looked down at it, then back up at her. "Because I'd like to use the bathroom."

"I...oh." She stepped back. "I-I didn't realize."

He rolled his eyes. "Well then I guess what we'll do from this day forward is this: I'll inform you of every time I need to pee. Will that be okay?"

“You don’t have to be so, so, damned...annoying.” She huffed.

“I’ll work on my shortcomings.” He opened the bathroom door. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not budging from this doorway.”

CLICK!

Carlee banged her open palm against the door. “Oh right, like I’d follow you in there.”

She swore she heard a snort or some such noise come from inside the bathroom.

A few minutes went by. She heard the toilet flush and the sound of water running.

The door swung open.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I told you I wasn’t budging.”

He studied her for several seconds.

Without warning, he lunged. Carlee yelped when his arm circled her waist, lifting her feet from the floor. He carried her tucked against his side.

She smiled up at him. “Did you and Dan plan all this ahead of time? He carries me like a sack of flour, and you carry me like football?”

Ben pushed open her bedroom door, kicked it closed with the heel of one foot, then walked to the other side of the room and tossed her on the bed. She bounced once, laughing all the while.

He placed one knee on the bed. The mattress dipped from his weight. Covering her with his big body, she could feel the heat of his skin. He smelled delicious, like musky citrus.

Yum.

Ben yanked up her t-shirt. Covering her right breast with his mouth, he kissed and sucked her nipple. He did the same to the other one.

Carlee could barely catch her breath.

“You’re the most infuriating woman, Carlee Davis.”

She sighed pleurably. “I know. It’s my only failing.”

Ben nipped her right breast, scraping his teeth gently across her flesh.

She couldn’t get close enough; she wanted more, so much more...

While he feasted on her breasts, he unsnapped her jeans, pushing them down her legs. She lay on the bed, her legs dangling over the side, her thong and jeans draped around her ankles.

He slid his tongue down her body, his mouth trailing a fiery path along her abdomen. At the start of her mound, he tongued her, licking his way down her labia.

Carlee moaned, grabbing his head full of dark hair.

He licked her clit.

Her little bud pulsed and throbbed. She almost came right there.

He licked her again then blew gently on her swollen bud. She squirmed, lifting her hips, so she could push further into his hot, moist mouth.

In the next instant, he rose from the bed, a wicked grin on his face.

She leaned on her elbows and looked up at him. “What are you doing?”

He made a beeline for the door.

“Hey! Wait a minute.”

She attempted to rise from the bed, but got tangled in her thong and jeans.

Carlee lost her balance, landing on the carpet—right on her bare ass.

CLICK!

She glanced at the door, her eyes wide when she saw the lock turn.

She fixed her clothing and ran to the door. It wouldn’t open.

“Oh!” She banged on it. “Ben Strong, you let me out of here!”

She heard him whistle down the hall.

“And I didn’t come, damn you.” She rested her forehead against the door.

She looked around for something she could use to open it.

Yanking open the desk drawer, she found what looked to be a letter opener.

Carlee jabbed it into the lock, twisting and turning the tip of the metal letter opener until she saw the latch release.

She opened the door.

“Ohhhhhh, you just wait, Ben Strong, my revenge will be sweet.”

Carlee marched down the hallway.

She stopped at the entrance to the kitchen, her heart in her throat.

Ben stood at the window, his attention focused on something going on outside. He removed the gun from his holster and drew the curtain aside with the tip of the revolver.

Carlee started to shake.

“Wh-what’s going on?” she whispered, her hand at her throat.

He raised a finger to his lips, urging her to be quiet. “Stay there.” He mouthed to her.

She scooted closer to him, her legs rubbery, like Jell-O.

His eyes blazed. “Do you *ever* listen?” His voice held low, menacing tones.

Carlee hugged his back. “I listen; I just don’t pay too much attention.”

“I swear,” he hissed. “I’m going to—”

She heard voices coming from outside. Peeking over Ben’s shoulder, she asked. “Who’s Dan talking to?”

“Goddamn it! Get down.” He turned and shoved her under the windowsill.

“Well who is it?” Her question came across muffled.

Considering she had her face buried in his thigh, she was lucky she could even speak.

“I don’t know.” Ben answered.

He aimed his gun toward the window.

Carlee started to shake again. She gripped his leg.

“Easy, little warrior,” he whispered.

From her vantage point, she could just about see through a slit in the curtain.

She saw Dan speaking with a tall, thin man dressed in fashionable clothes.

Her eyes widened.

“Ben. I know the man Dan is talking to.”

Ben looked down at her with his usual frown.

“He’s Graham Marks, a very famous artist.” Carlee could barely contain her excitement. She touched the curtain intent on pushing it aside, but Ben shoved her back down under the sill.

“Cut it out,” she wailed. “I’m stuck!” She tried to wiggle her body into an upright position.

“You’re just lucky I don’t tan your backside right here,” Ben growled.

“Promises, promises.”

Ben glanced outside again, careful to stay behind the curtains. “How do you know this guy?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve only been to all of his shows and gallery openings.”

Dan came in a few seconds later carrying a large bag filled with groceries, and a potted plant perched precariously on top of the bag.

Ben holstered his gun then drew Carlee to her feet.

“What’d he want?” Ben nodded toward the windows.

Dan placed the bag of groceries and the potted ivy on the table. He shrugged out of his jacket. “He uh, stopped to talk, and give me the um...greenery.”

Ben snapped his brows together. “He lives here in Seaside?”

Dan nodded.

“Carlee says she knows him, that he’s an artist.”

She clapped her hands together. “Oh my! What did he say to you?” She sighed. “I wish I could have talked to him. Was he discussing his work?”

“Not exactly.” Dan dug through the bag, extracting the groceries. He seemed very intent on what he was doing.

“What did he say?”

“Here’s your damn tofu fruity crap.” Dan shoved an ice-cold pint of frozen dessert in her hands.

She opened the freezer and tossed the container inside.

Carlee practically jumped out of her skin with anticipation. “Oh, I’m dying here! Please tell me what he said.”

“Nothing much,” Dan mumbled.

Ben folded his arms across his chest. “You stood there talking to him for at least ten minutes. Don’t tell me he didn’t say anything.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I had my gun on him the entire time.”

“Yeah, well—” Dan took the last of the groceries out of the bag. “You didn’t need it. His reason for stopping to speak with me was, well—”

Dan’s face turned beet red.

“What?” Ben asked.

“He asked if I was free for dinner.”

Carlee’s mouth hung open. Then she erupted into peals of laughter.

“Oh no!” She hiccupped once then started giggling again. She stopped laughing, the wheels in her mind turning. “Wait a second.” She held up a hand. “Is this Seaside place some kind of ‘artsy’ community?”

Ben nodded. “You could say that.”

She raised a brow. “And could you also say that it is largely a gay community?”

Dan looked at Ben. This time, Ben’s face turned red.

“You could say that, too.” Dan murmured in response.

She took a step closer. “What did you say to him, when he asked if you were free for dinner?”

“I uh, told him, that...oh hell, it isn’t any of your business what I said.”

He started to walk away.

Carlee jumped in front of him, blocking his exit.

“Did you tell him that you’re committed to someone else?” She grinned and glanced at Ben.

Dan ran a hand through his hair. “I should be *committed*. To be standing here discussing this with you, I—”

She laughed so hard she bent over, her belly cramping.

“Oh no!” She pointed at Dan. “Graham Marks thinks *you’re* gay!”

She stopped giggling long enough to look at their faces.

Their deep frowns told her that they did not find this as funny as she did.

She blew out a breath. “Um, you’re both not really gay, right?” Her heart pounded.

“It’s our cover,” Ben told her.

“Your cover?” She angled her head. Her eyes widened as light began to dawn in her brain. “Do you mean to tell me that you and Dan are posing as two gay men?”

“I’ve had enough of this.” Dan brushed past her.

“Wait.” She snagged his arm. “But why?”

Dan looked directly into her eyes. “It was the only way we could think of to keep you safe. Bringing you here, and well, you know the rest.” He sighed. “We’re the laughingstock of the Montauk Police Department right now.”

She blinked once, trying to register his words. “Oh.” She pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and dropped onto the padded seat. “That’s got to be the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.” Her voice had a catch in it. Her eyes misted.

“Yeah, that’s us.” Ben shook his head. “We’re real *sweethearts*.” He finished in a mocking tone.

She reached out a hand to him.

“I’m sorry for laughing, I’m—” Her voice clogged with unshed tears. “I’m sorry,” she managed.

Carlee realized in that instant the depth of their feelings for her.

Ben hauled her to her feet. He leaned down until they were nose-to-nose. “And when I tell you to stay put, you listen to me.” He grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake. “Protecting you is *not* is not a game. It’s not ‘sweet.’ It’s serious. It could mean your life if—” He snapped his brows together. “Are you even listening to me?”

She melted inside. They cared! So much so that they had risked becoming the object their colleagues’ scorn and...

“What did you say?” she asked dreamily.

“That’s it!” Ben threw his hands up in the air. “I’ve had it. You’re going to listen to me, or—”

“What?” She sighed.

“Carlee.” Dan grabbed her face between his large palms. “What if it wasn’t me outside? What if it was someone who came here intent on doing you harm?”

She shrugged her shoulders, happiness filling her. It felt like bright, white light shot through her body.

It felt like she’d been kissed by the sun.

Chapter Thirteen

“I was afraid for you,” she told Dan, then looked at Ben. She angled her chin and folded her arms across her chest. “When I saw Ben pointing his gun out that window, I didn’t care about me. I only cared about you.”

Dan ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident on his face. “Damn it, Carlee. This is not about Ben and me, it’s about you and your safety.” He placed his palms down on the table, trapping her. “You’re going to do as we say.”

She raised a brow, prepared to have a little fun, now that the danger has passed and Dan was safely inside the house.

“And if I don’t?” She gave them a saucy glance.

“That’s it!” Ben’s voice boomed inside the small kitchen. “I’ve had enough.”

He looked madder than hell.

She ran out of the kitchen, laughter bubbling up inside her, with both men hot on her heels.

It was time to bring out the big guns if she wanted to get her heart’s desire.

She flung open her bedroom door and ran to the bed.

“That’s good.” Ben growled. “Because that’s where I’m going to paddle your ass.” He walked toward her.

“Make love to me instead.” She tore the clothes from her body. “Take your frustration out on me that way.” She grinned.

“Oh no, no, no, no.” Ben shook his head, his dark hair flying around his face. “No.” He tried not to look, but his eyes strayed to her nude form.

“Once.” Dan held up his index finger. “That was the deal.”

She snapped her brows together. “What deal? We didn’t have any deal.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder, her breasts jutting out.

Fire leapt into his eyes. “You said that if we made love one time--which, may I remind you, we did--that it would be out of our systems.”

She angled her head. “Well, it is *not* out of mine.”

“Oh fuck me.” Ben slumped down into a chair.

“My pleasure.” Carlee replied saucily.

He dropped his head into his hands.

“You *owe* me, Ben Swift.”

Dan scowled and looked at Ben. “What is she talking about?”

Ben flopped back in the chair. “Nothing,” he mumbled.

She pointed at Ben. “He had the nerve to make love to me, and I didn’t even come!”

Dan looked at Ben. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“All right, so I made love to her. Sort of. Just to shut her up, and then I locked her in her room.”

Dan tipped his head back and released a bark of laughter.

“May I remind you...?” Carlee wagged her fingers at Ben. “That I managed to thwart your nefarious plan and escaped.” She lifted her nose in the air. “Well, if you’re not going to make amends, then I guess Dan will.”

“Me?” He raised his brows. He squarely met her gaze. “Oh no, I’m not falling for this, Carlee. There’s nothing you can do to me or Ben—” He looked back at Ben. “—that will make us break our no touch rule.”

She rolled her eyes. “You already broke that rule.”

“Well, I meant...” He slashed both hands through the air. “That we got it all out of *our* systems. Making love to you. We’re done.” “Finished. Over. We’re with you from here on in on a purely—”

“Yes, yes, I *know*.” She gave him a cheeky grin turning so they could see her ass. She gave it a pat. “You’re here with me, guarding me, keeping watch over me, on a purely *professional* basis.”

Ben nodded. “Now you’re getting it.”

“That’s the problem.” She folded her arms across her breasts. “*I’m not*.”

She walked over to Dan. “You’re both willing to face scorn from everyone on your job, masquerading as two gay lovers. Why, I ask? For old times’ sake?” She shook her head. “You’re doing this because you care about me. You always have. And I’m willing to do anything for both of *you*.” She pushed some of her wild curly hair behind her ears. “Do you know that when I used to sneak into the reservation to see the two of you, that I felt free?”

“Carlee...” Ben started.

She held up a hand.

“I felt like I was unfettered, that I could practically fly, that...I had come home,” she whispered.

She took a step toward Dan.

“It’s the way I feel now.”

She reached down and fondled his cock, rubbing his balls through his pants. “The only mistake I ever made was denying it all. I let my family rule my head—and my heart.”

Dan leaned down, his forehead touching hers. “Carlee,” he whispered while she stroked him. “Carleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.”

She held out a hand to Ben. He took it, rising from his chair.

“You can lecture me.” She glanced at Dan. “You can tell me I’m crazy. But whatever you do, please, say you want to make love to me.” She stroked Dan’s cock, then Ben’s. “Say it.”

“I want to make love to you.” Dan’s breath left his lungs on a whoosh.

She looked at Ben and fondled his balls.

“Say it,” she commanded, a feeling of power filling her.

“I want to make love to you.”

That feeling of control, of knowing the pull of her own sexuality, made Carlee bold.

All her life, she had given in to the demands of her family. Even her dream of becoming an artist had to fall in line with the wants and desires of the Davis clan. She had to live in a certain apartment, in a specific part of New York City...attend a certain school.

No more!

Her life might be in mortal danger, but the threat to her heart—of being without Ben and Dan—was more than she could bear.

“You’re mine now.” She eyed both of them.

Their hot look could have burned wood.

They made quick work of their shirts, jeans and underwear.

A decadent thrill shot through her body. Carlee stretched out on the bed.

“Come to me.” She patted the mattress.

Ben slid behind her, with Dan on the other side. Nestled between them, she sighed, the sound blissful. Dan stroked her labia with his fingers. She ground her bottom against Ben’s cock, feeling the head of his stiff dick kiss the cleft between her bottom cheeks.

Ben pushed back her wild curls, whispering in her ear. “I want to take your bottom.”

She stilled.

“But I won’t, unless you want me to, Carlee.”

She thought about how big he was. Could she even handle Ben’s cock in her ass?

Dan kissed her lips. He slipped lower, his mouth teasing her cunt. “I’ll pleasure your clit. It will be a double sensation.”

Wetness seeped between her thighs.

She arched her back, her bottom sliding against Ben’s stiff cock.

Dan went to work on her clit. He sucked on it, drawing it into his mouth, releasing it just enough so he could slide his tongue up and down along the little jewel. Carlee thrashed her head from side to side, her orgasm roaring to life.

Ben reached over and fondled her breasts, his hands working their magic. He gently palmed her nipples, bringing her to the brink of euphoria. Each pass of his open palm across her distended nipples made her cry out, “More!”

He chuckled. “Anything you desire, Carlee...anything.” He pushed the head of his cock against her bottom hole. “Do you want me?” he whispered.

She leaned her head back against his shoulder. “I do, but...”

“What?”

She squirmed, opening her legs, allowing Dan more access to her clit. He licked her slowly, his tongue sweeping from her bottom to her clit.

Carlee's face heated. "I-I want—" She pulled a pillow close to her face, burying her nose in the soft covering.

Ben grasped her chin, turning her to face him. "Say it. Tell me...tell us...what you want."

"Spank me. Hard."

Dan stopped what he was doing. He looked up at Ben.

"Please," she whimpered, clutching the sheets in her hand.

"Little warrior." Ben whispered in her ear. "You really want a paddling?"

She nodded.

Dan slid up her body. Sitting with his back against the headboard, he commanded, "Suck my cock."

She drew in a breath.

"If you want your spanking, suck my cock."

She got to her knees and bent over Dan's cock. Taking it in her mouth, she sucked it deep.

"Harder." He leaned his head back and groaned. "Again!" he roared.

She drew his dick into her mouth again.

SMACK!

Her bottom erupted into flames.

"You naughty girl." Ben leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Sucking his dick like that."

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" She gasped, her ass burning.

SMACK!

Dan pushed her head down to his cock again. "Take it all. Now."

SMACK!

It wasn't enough.

Ben reached between her legs and stroked her pussy. She whispered, "Spank me again. Harder this time."

Carlee pushed Ben backwards. She crawled into his lap then sprawled across it, face down.

She raised her bottom in the air.

SMACK!

Carlee moaned and gripped the sheets in her fisted hands. Her pussy throbbed.

SMACK! SMACK!

Each time Ben's hand connected with her backside, the flames he ignited on her ass traveled between her legs.

SMACK!

"More!" she cried.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

She squirmed against his cock.

Dan grasped her around the waist, lifting her from Ben's lap and sliding her across his thighs.

They felt rough, hairy...wonderful. She rubbed her breasts against them.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

Carlee creamed against his thigh. One of them slid their fingers in inside her, but she couldn't see who it was. It didn't matter.

"Our little warrior is wet." She turned her head to see Ben massaging his cock with her essence.

A gasp escaped her when a feeling of exquisite fullness filled her bottom.

She rose up on her knees and writhed against Ben, grinding her backside into his groin.

"Easy, little warrior," he crooned in her ear.

"Fuck me!" she cried. "I want you both. Now." She glared at Dan. "If you don't fuck my pussy, I'll...I'll..."

He tipped his head back against the headboard and laughed. "You'll what?"

"I'll cry," she moaned.

He sobered. "We can't have that now, can we?" He leaned over and kissed her nose. "No tears, little warrior."

Ben eased out of her bottom. She felt empty.

He brushed back the hair trailing down her shoulders. “I’ll slip back in once you get settled on Dan.”

She straddled Dan, her knees on either side of his legs. Dan grasped her hips and positioned her so that her pussy covered his swollen cock. Slowly, she slid down onto his stiff member, sighing with pleasure.

“Place your hands on either side of my shoulders.”

She did as he told her. He pushed all the way in, settling his cock deep inside her.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh." She let go of a sigh.

He pumped into her, moving his hips up and down.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

She felt that familiar sting of Ben's palm on her ass. Then he filled her, pushing his cock in until her body and mind were filled with nothing but the two of them.

“I love your ass.” He whispered in her ear.

She didn't know which way to move. Should she push back against Ben or slide down on Dan?

They took their cues from her. When she slid down on Dan's cock, Ben pushed into her ass. She rose on her knees, just until the tip of Dan's cock kissed her wet pussy. Ben moved, pulling out of her bottom hole.

She slid down again.

Ben pushed into her bottom.

Ben and Dan stopped pumping into her, long enough so that Ben could play with her breasts. Dan reached for her clit, brushing his finger over the sensitive little peak.

She came hard, grinding her bottom against Ben.

Dan palmed her breasts, sliding the pads of his thumbs across the hard little nubs.

Ben placed a hand over her swollen clit.

“Hard!” she cried. “Rub it again...*hard.*”

He obliged, pressing against her clit with the tip of his middle finger. He massaged it, rotating his finger in a circular motion.

She came again, her orgasm leaving her breathless.

Dan's cock grew inside her pussy, while Ben's widened and filled her ass. They pumped into her again.

She cried out as another orgasm took hold. "Ben! Dan!"

Then she felt their essence pour into her.

They held onto her for several minutes.

All she heard was their mingled breathing.

She collapsed against Dan. He reached over and kissed the top of her head.

"Little warrior." He murmured. "We've worn you out."

"The hell you did," she replied saucily. "I've worn you out." Carlee yawned, spoiling the effect.

He rolled onto his side, placing an arm over her waist. Her wet pussy glistened with his juices. She wiggled it against his cock.

Ben crawled up the bed, and lay beside her. She pushed her bottom against his dick.

She let go of a contented sigh.

Dan stroked the side of her head, tangling his fingers in her long curls.

Ben stroked her face.

A feeling of peace and contentment washed over her.

A powerful, savage love beat in her breasts.

It sounded like the drums she'd heard on the reservation all those years ago.

Chapter Fourteen

Carlee was happy. For the first time in her life, she could feel comfortable in her own skin and do as she pleased without any censure.

Well, almost.

Ben and Dan watched over her like two hawks guarding their baby. She once read somewhere that red-tailed hawks mated for life.

Smiling at that thought, she drew up her legs while sitting on the window seat in her bedroom. The day dawned sunny and cold, but Dan was outside, chopping wood for the fireplace in the den. She managed to sneak a peek at him, without moving the curtains and without divulging her hiding spot.

He was magnificent. His long, dark hair trailed across his massive shoulders and wide back. She liked his ass, too. Outlined by his jeans, it was as tight as Ben's. Round. Firm.

She sighed, clutching her hands around her knees, her clit throbbing.

She wished she could be outside there with Dan, and grab hold of his butt.

...plus a few other things.

Carlee got up from the window seat and took her sketchpad and pencil from the desk. By the time she settled back in her hiding spot, she noticed he had removed his shirt. The sun shone high, his naked torso gleaming from the rays of light cascading from the sky.

She sketched quickly, not wanting to miss one second of the wonderful portrait Dan's body made. A few minutes went by, and the sun chose to scoot behind a cloud. Dan shrugged back into his shirt. He reached down and grabbed an armful of logs.

Carlee grinned, for she got an excellent look at his tight, round ass.

She heard a knock on her bedroom door.

Jumping off the window seat, she stashed her sketchpad under her bed.

“Come in!” she called.

Ben walked in, the sight of his shoulder holster and gun a constant reminder of exactly why she was hiding in a cottage in Seaside.

He angled his head. “What are you doing?”

“I was uh, um...” She shoved some of her long, curly hair behind her ears. “I was resting.”

He nodded.

“Dan is inside. I’m going to take a break for a little while.”

She walked over to him.

Ben. So serious. So brooding.

She ran a finger over his lips. “Aren’t you going to smile today?”

A corner of his mouth lifted.

“There,” she murmured. “I like it when you smile.”

He walked toward the door. “I’ll be right next door if you need me, but for now, Dan’s in charge.” He rubbed his eyes.

She pursed her lips. “You must be very tired.”

He looked over at her. He had his hand on the doorknob. “A little.”

“You were up all last night. Did you get to sleep much today?”

He opened the door. “You’re not to worry about me, Carlee.”

“Ben?”

He turned and looked at her.

She gave him a little smile. “I like to worry about you.”

* * * *

A few minutes later, she was downstairs in the kitchen, fixing her favorite dish.

Dan walked in, his holster and gun strapped on his shoulder.

“Hi there,” she greeted him cheerily. “Hungry?”

“Not really,” he murmured.

She went back to flip over the pieces of tofu sizzling in the hot oil. “You know, you and Ben have big—” She removed a piece of tofu that looked to be getting too brown.

“Big what?” he asked, a grin on his face.

She batted her eyes. “Guns.”

He just shook his head then glanced outside. “Here, let me finish that. You shouldn’t be standing by the stove in full view of the window.”

She sighed and placed the tongs on the counter. “The curtains are closed, no one can see in.”

Dan walked to the stove, moving her aside by bumping his hip into hers.

“I’m not taking any chances,” he told her. He removed several pieces of fried tofu from the pan. “And this stuff looks...” He wrinkled his nose. “Pretty gross.”

“It’s delicious.” She huffed.

He gave her a dark look. “If you’re going to stay in the kitchen, go sit down by the table. That’s not by any windows.”

She walked over to the table, rolling her eyes.

“And quit rolling your eyes.”

She plunked down in a chair. “I wasn’t.”

“You forget.” He aimed the tongs at her. “I’ve known you since you were sixteen. You can’t fool me.”

She heard a piece of tofu sizzle in the pan. Carlee rose from her chair and walked over to the stove. “Hey! Watch what you’re doing. It’s going to burn.”

Dan snapped his brows together. “If you don’t sit your butt in that chair over there, I’ll bust your little ass for real.”

She patted his. “You mean, that spanking I got yesterday wasn’t real?” She reached around and grabbed his balls.

“Cut it out!” He tried to move, but she held on fast. “It’s dangerous to fool around by hot oil.”

“Ben’s upstairs, we could always fool around up there—you, me...him.”

She felt his cock swell in her hand.

He shook his head and sighed. “That’s dangerous, too.”

He turned around and grabbed her arm. Swatting her bottom, he led her over to a chair at the kitchen table. He leaned down, his nose brushing hers. “Now sit here. And stay put.”

She gave him a mock salute.

He smirked. “Wise ass.”

He went back over to the stove and finished the tofu. Grabbing the plate full of fried little pieces, he brought them over to her. “Enjoy,” he told her.

“Aren’t you going to have any?” she asked.

“Tofu’s not my thing.”

She put some of the tofu on another plate. “Yes, I know all about your um...thing.” She grinned.

It felt wonderful to tease him.

“Will I get some more of your thing, and uh, Ben’s, tonight?”

He folded his arms across his chest. “We can’t spend every minute of every day making love to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “More’s the pity.” She raised a hand to her mouth, covering it. “Oooooooooooooooooops. I forgot. No eye rolling. Hmmmmmm...now, let me see. Is that rule number four or number five that I broke?”

“We’re going to have to devise some punishment that you don’t enjoy.” He grinned.

She got up from the table, plate in hand. Walking out of the kitchen, she said over her shoulder. “You could always spank my pussy.”

Carlee heard his sharp intake of breath then something banged and crashed to the floor. “Goddamn it!” he growled.

She kept walking, smiling the entire time.

* * * *

When she reached Ben’s room, the joke was on her because her body responded to the image in her mind of Dan actually spanking her pussy.

Crap.

She rested her head against Ben’s door, trying to calm her throbbing clit and racing heart.

Carlee snapped her brows together when she heard the sound of running water.

She turned the knob on the door. It opened. She walked in, careful not to make a sound. Placing the covered plate filled with fried tofu on the table next to his bed, she sat

down on the mattress. The covers were rumpled. She grabbed one of Ben's pillows and held it to her nose, inhaling his masculine scent.

She tossed the pillow back on the bed and stretched out on it.

The next thing she knew, Ben walked into the room, a towel around his lean hips.

"What are you doing in here?" He snapped his brows together

She raised her head. "I was waiting for you." She sat up and motioned toward the plate on the nightstand. "I brought you some lunch."

He nodded. "That's very nice, but you don't need to wait on me. I'm a big boy."

She grinned, her gaze lowering to his towel-clad hips. "So I noticed."

Ben scowled. He turned and strapped a watch to his wrist. Carlee loved looking at his naked back. His feet were big. Long. Narrow.

What was that old saying about the size of a man's feet being equal to his cock?

Damn, but she wished he would drop the towel!

"What's the matter, did you drive Dan insane? Is that why he sent you up here to torment me?"

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He just shook his head.

Carlee wanted to have a little fun. "Why uh, no." She glanced down casually at the nails of one hand. "As a matter of fact, Dan and I were having a very serious discussion."

He ran a comb through his hair. "Really?" He opened one of the drawers in the bureau and took out a t-shirt. "About what?"

She smiled. "We discussed spanking my pussy."

He turned around so fast, his towel slipped. He looked down. "Shit!"

Carlee reached out and snagged the towel. "That's much better."

He dove for the bed, grabbing his jeans. She snatched those from him, too, clutching them to her chest.

"You can have them if you say, 'Dan and I will spank Carlee's pussy.'"

"You're nuts!" He rose to his full height, his cock stiff and straight.

She saw him shudder.

Carlee shoved the jeans at him. "Here. I can't stand seeing you shiver."

He grabbed them from her outstretched hands and shoved his feet into the legs.

She angled her head. “That watch you're wearing looks old.” Carlee got up on her knees, fingering the dial and gold band. The white face of the watch stood out against the bronze of Ben’s skin. “Where did you get it?” she asked softly.

“It was my father’s.”

Ben grabbed the t-shirt from the dresser and shrugged into it, pulling it over his head, shoulders and chest. Then he strapped on his holster and gun.

“Are your parents still alive?” she asked him, suddenly filled with curiosity—she wanted to know everything about him.

She curled her feet under her bottom and settled on the bed.

“No. I actually grew up with Dan’s family. My parents passed away when I was a teenager.”

“Oh. I-I never realized...” She tucked some hair behind her ears.

“Dan’s family became mine.”

She frowned. “Your parents couldn’t have been that old when they died.”

“They weren’t.” He plunked down on the bed.

Carlee bounced from the added weight. She scooted over to give him room while he put a pair of socks on his feet.

His long, narrow feet.

She chewed her lower lip. “How did they die?”

He didn’t reply.

“Ben?”

“What?”

“How did they die?”

He looked directly into her eyes. “Influenza.”

She started to reply, then shut her mouth.

“Remember when you snuck into the reservation—that time me and Dan had those colds? Well, we had the flu, but not half as bad as what a lot of other people got.”

He rose to his feet. “Help came, but not soon enough. At least, not for my parents.”

“Oh Ben.” She held out a hand to him, but he didn’t take it. “I-I didn’t realize and...I’m so sorry.” She wrapped her arms around him. “But why didn’t you ever talk about it back then? Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged, pulling away from her. “I never wanted you to know, didn’t want to bother you with it, and now, its water under the bridge.”

“But still, it must have been...terrible,” she whispered.

He nodded. “It was, but, that only spurred me on—gave me *and* Dan—the impetus to get the hell away from the reservation.”

A corner of her mouth trembled. “You were more like brothers than friends.”

“We still are.” He stood and pulled her up from the bed. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to rest.”

“Sure.” She glanced at the plate. “If you’re hungry, you can have the fried tofu.” She made her voice sound light.

But inside, her heart felt heavy, like a lead weight.

“I’ll uh, let you know how I like it.” He winced.

“Don’t bother. I already know.”

She walked to the door. Ben followed behind.

Turning to face him, she said, “Have a nice nap.”

“I will.” He stretched up, resting one hand on the door. “Oh and Carlee?”

His voice sounded deep, seductive.

“What?” She whispered, taking a step toward him.

“Closer.” He crooked his finger.

She took another step.

He leaned his head down, pushing aside some of her hair. His lips trailed a scorching path down her throat, settling by her ear. “Dan and I will spank your pussy later.” He whispered.

She sagged against him.

He kissed her hard then shut the door.

Leaving Carlee standing there, the taste of him on her lips, her mouth agape.

Chapter Fifteen

Back in her room, Carlee sketched Ben's nude body from images she'd saved in her memory.

His form took shape on the paper, her quick strokes fashioning him into a tall, bronzed, Native American version of Michelangelo's David. When she finished, she sat back and admired her work, knowing that she captured the essence of Ben—in his serious face and tall, muscular body.

She leaned over and kissed his cock, stroking her hand across it.

She did the same thing to his face.

Carlee wished he were there with her so she could do it in person.

She angled her head, studying her work, remembering how she learned that Gauguin, a famous artist, did his best work directly from his imagination. Maybe she liked to do that, too, because memory was so much better than real life.

She stored the memory of Ben and Dan's colds all those years ago, when in fact, they had been very sick with influenza.

Carlee had been lucky—very fortunate not to catch it.

Then again, her family could afford doctors and vaccines...

She shoved that thought aside, choosing to gaze at Ben's nude body.

The tick of the clock on the wall was the only sound she heard.

Ben was sleeping right down the hall. Dan was probably downstairs, in the kitchen or den.

The only person she really missed being Marlene. It weighed heavily on Carlee's mind that Marlene must be frantic with worry, not knowing where Carlee was.

Carlee chewed her lower lip.

Another thought popped into her head.

She would call Marlene and at least ease her anxiety.

“That’s what Marlene would do if she were in my shoes,” Carlee said to the empty room.

She got up off her bed and opened her door a crack. Peeking outside, she saw the hallway was deserted.

Remembering that Dan confiscated her cell phone, she thought he probably still had it somewhere—maybe in his room.

She padded down the hall, stopping by his door. Glancing right, then left, she opened the door and walked in, shutting it behind her.

Carlee did a quick search, a smile lighting her face when she found her cell phone stashed in a bag in the closet.

She reached for it and dialed Marlene.

“Hello?”

“Marlene,” Carlee whispered. “It’s me, Carlee.”

“Oh my God! Carlee. I was so worried.”

“I thought you might be.”

“When you didn’t answer your cell phone and when you didn’t answer at Ida’s, I went to see that Lieutenant McGee. He told me not to worry, that the Montauk Police Department was keeping you safely hidden, but he wouldn’t say where.”

“And I can’t, either. I just wanted to tell you that I was okay, and not to worry.” Carlee took a breath. “How are you doing?”

“Todd and I are probably getting a divorce.”

Carlee heard the catch in Marlene’s voice. “Oh Marlene, I-I’m sorry.”

Marlene sighed. “It was coming. I knew he was cheating, I just didn’t know the extent.”

Carlee heard a door close, then footsteps.

“I have to go, Marlene.”

“All right. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yes. Hopefully, I’ll see you soon.”

Carlee ended the call then tossed the phone into Dan’s bag.

She opened his door just a bit to peek out. She didn't see him, so she scooted into the hall, closing the door behind her, being careful not to make noise.

She stayed in her room for quite some time, listening while Ben and Dan switched their shifts.

It was Dan's turn to sleep.

She hoped and prayed he wouldn't notice anything out of the ordinary.

She settled on the bed and drifted to sleep, her mind filled with the image of Ben's nude body.

Now, she just had to sketch Dan that way.

* * * *

That night, Carlee woke to the sound of wind howling through the trees outside. She looked out her bedroom window to see rain pelting the glass.

She sat up and hugged her knees.

A flash of lightning lit up the sky.

BANG!

She looked out to see a shutter hit against the house, then the wind tore it loose, sending it high in the air.

Her door opened. Dan stood at the entrance to her bedroom.

"You okay?"

She shuddered. "I-I'd feel much better if I wasn't alone."

He held out his hand.

She tossed back the covers and ran to him.

He led her out of the room. "You'll stay with me. Ben's doing a once around the house, then he's coming in."

"Someone would have to be crazy to be out on a night like this."

"We're not taking any chances, Carlee. A night like this is perfect for someone who might want to do you harm. They would hope you would be thinking what you just said—and it would give them the opportunity."

She shuddered. Carlee wasn't sure if she was cold or scared.

"But this is a 'safe house.' I thought nobody knows where I am."

"Better to be *safe* than sorry."

She squeezed Dan's fingers. His hand felt wonderfully warm and protective.
He brought her to his room.
She got into his bed and drew the covers around her. "I like it here." She smiled at him.

"Well, don't get used to it, it's only for tonight."

"Right."

"Carlee..." He raised a brow. "Don't get any ideas."

He walked over to a chair and eased his tall frame into it.

She snapped her brows together. "What are you doing?"

He sighed. "I'm trying to get some rest, but if you keep talking, I won't."

"In that chair? It must be so uncomfortable." She drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them.

He laid his head back and shut his eyes. "Go to sleep, little warrior."

"How can I sleep when you're crammed into that chair?"

"I'm not crammed into it."

She tossed back the covers and patted the mattress. "Come sleep here. I promise I won't bite."

"It's not your *bite* I'm worried about."

"I promise not to break any rules."

"Hell, you broke them all, woman. There's none left."

She started to roll her eyes then stopped.

This would be the perfect opportunity to see Dan naked again. This was a study in art, after all...

Oh, who was she kidding? She just wanted to make love with him again.

Ben knocked on the door. "Everything okay?"

"Come in!" she called out.

This time, Dan rolled his eyes. "Would you mind if I answered?"

She just gave him a sour look.

Ben strode in. He stopped when he saw Carlee in the bed.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked, frowning.

"She was scared." Dan replied around a yawn. "I told her she could sleep in here."

“Okay.” Ben nodded. “I’ll be downstairs.”

Dan looked at his watch. “I’ll relieve you in three hours.”

“Perfect.”

He walked out.

Oh, yeah! This *was* perfect. She had plenty of time with Dan.

He tipped back his head, letting go of another yawn.

She couldn’t interrupt his sleep. He needed it. She glanced at his crotch, at his muscular legs, his wide chest, his...

Fuck sleep.

“Dan, please come to bed. I-I won’t rest if I know you’re squished into that chair.”

“All right, all right!” He bounded up from the chair and got into bed.

Yanking the covers up to his chest, he said, “Now go to sleep.”

She snuggled down next to him.

Placing a hand on his chest, she skimmed her fingers across it. The muscles rippled, he felt so...hard.

“You’re tense,” she whispered.

He opened his eyes and looked into hers.

“I know one way we can relax.” She smiled at him, massaging his balls through the fabric of his sweat pants.

He pushed her hand away.

She put it back.

“Carlee, I’m trying to sleep.”

She placed a hand on his chest and rolled him onto his back. “But it won’t be a truly restful sleep unless your body is stress-free.”

She straddled his crotch and untied his sweat pants. He helped her pull them off, then they went to work on his shirt.

Carlee took a few minutes to view his naked form.

He placed his hands behind his head. “I’ll never win this argument.”

She gave him a mocking look. “You certainly didn’t try all that hard.”

He lifted her nightshirt and grasped her hips. His cock brushed her entrance. She squirmed against him.

He snapped his brows together. "Where in hell are your panties?"

"I don't sleep with panties on. And for your information, I don't wear *panties*. I wear thongs." She remained straddled across him, but folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Does this mean you want me to go put on panties--I mean my thong?"

He shifted, reaching for his cock. He placed it inside her.

Carlee threw her head back and moaned when the tip of his dick slid inside.

He moved once, twice...

"Just make sure that in the future, you're displaying that adorable bare ass and pussy just for me and Ben."

She smiled, moving her hips, matching his rhythm, reveling in the fact that he even mentioned the future. "Only for you...and Ben," she agreed.

He pulled out of her and flipped her over on her belly.

"Get on your knees," he whispered in her ear.

She did as he bade. "Are you an ass man, too?"

"Nope."

She frowned. "Then, what are you...oh!"

He pushed into her pussy from behind, riding her doggie-style.

"I like your sweet cunt too much to go in the back door," he replied, his voice low, his lips right next to her ear.

He held her around the waist, trailing his fingers down her abdomen. He rubbed her clit, massaging it gently in a circle with the tip of his index finger.

Carlee ground against his hand.

"Harder," she begged.

Her juices flowed. Dan used them as lubricant, sliding his fingers across her wet little nubbin of flesh.

He kept riding her, pushing in and out with long, slow strokes.

"You're right." He chuckled. "I have no stress at all."

She felt all the anxiety! If she didn't come soon, she thought she would shatter into a million pieces.

The last thrust of his cock put her over the edge.

She fell down the great wide abyss of sexual pleasure while Dan stroked her wet clit with his fingers.

He pulled out of her, swatting her pussy with the flat of his hand. That only started the tailspin of desire all over again. Her clit throbbed sweetly from the contact.

“I’m strictly a pussy man,” he told her.

She felt him smile against her neck.

Tugging her nightshirt over her hips, he settled her body next to him in the crook of his arm.

“Now, I’ll sleep like a baby.” He smiled into her hair.

Great! *She* was wide-awake and listening to every sound outside.

He tugged her closer. “Get some rest.” He yawned.

His heart beat against her back.

It was the last thing she felt before she drifted off to sleep, the howl of the wind right outside the window.

Chapter Sixteen

Carlee thought only a few minutes had passed when she heard Dan up and moving around the small room.

He stood by the bureau, fully dressed, his ever-present gun and holster strapped to his shoulder.

She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the darkness.

Outside, the wind still howled.

He glanced in that direction. "There's a high-wind advisory until six this morning."

She yawned and sat up. Scrunching her fingers through her hair, she replied. "Do you and Ben have to go outside in this weather? You might blow away."

He chuckled and walked over to her. "We won't."

She hugged her knees. "I-I don't know what I'd do without the two of you."

Silence filled the small room.

Dan removed her hands from around her knees and pushed her back down under the covers. "Go back to sleep, little warrior." He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "Stop worrying."

She rolled over onto her side. "Please be careful."

He nodded. "I'm always careful."

Dan walked out.

She could hear noises coming from Ben's room.

Carlee got up and padded over to the door, a blanket bunched around her shoulders. Cold air snaked up her bare legs, so she pulled the blanket tighter across her body.

She crept down the hallway to Ben's room and knocked on the door.

“It’s me,” she told him. “Can I come in?”

He opened the door, his hand on his gun. “What’s wrong?” His scowl was deep.

“N-nothing. I mean...Dan left and I can’t seem to fall asleep again.”

He opened the door wider allowing her access.

She stepped inside and he shut the door behind her. The cold air swirled around her again. She tried to adjust the blanket, but it slipped and fell to the floor.

Ben reached for it and draped it around her body, tucking the ends together across her chest. “Better?” he asked. Then he scowled again. “You should be wearing something warmer.”

She grinned. “How about I wear you?”

He just shook his head and walked away.

Carlee prowled around his room, touching the bureau, fingering his watch. It sat on top of the bureau, along with his wallet.

“I want to ask you something.”

She turned to see him sitting in the chair on the other side of the room.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about your parents dying?”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I knew the minute those words left my mouth that you wouldn’t let it rest.” He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Maybe, you had to. Maybe...you needed to unburden yourself.”

“I told you, it’s water under the bridge.”

“Is that why you and Dan sent me away that summer?”

He nodded. “It was part of the reason. We didn’t want you mixed up in, well, we didn’t want you to know how bad it really was on the reservation.”

She shook her head. “You were protecting me.”

“I guess.” He got up from the chair and walked over to her. “A rich, white girl like you—”

She held up a hand. “Enough with that.”

“You asked.” He aimed a finger at her. “So I’m going to tell you. Dan and I figured a rich, white girl like you shouldn’t see what we really were.”

“I saw two nice Indian boys who I thought were my friends.”

He stopped walking and raised a brow. “Your *friends*?”

Her voice cracked. “You didn’t think enough of our relationship to tell me about your parents.” She shook her head. “I-I could have offered you comfort.”

He snorted. “I got plenty of comfort, from Dan’s family.” He ran a hand through his hair, frustration making his face taut. “You have no idea, Carlee, what that influenza epidemic was like.” He narrowed his eyes. “Dan and I never figured out how you managed to sneak in during that time. The reservation was quarantined.”

She shrugged, lifting a corner of her mouth. “I had my ways.”

“Of course. A spoiled, rich kid like you could always manage to get her way.”

She balled her hands in fists at her sides. “Stop calling me that.”

“It’s the truth!” His eyes blazed.

She aimed her chin at him. “People have a lot of sides to them, Ben. Many layers. You and Dan just didn’t bother to stick around and peel mine away. Instead, you both passed judgment and that was that.” Her throat filled with tears. “You broke my heart,” she whispered.

Silence ensued.

“Maybe you’re so hung up on the differences between us that you can’t see the similarities.” Her voice shook. “You never gave me a chance.”

“A chance for what? To comfort me? That’s the last thing I needed.” He paced back and forth, his body stiff with anger. “You talk about chances. What Dan and I needed more than anything back then was a chance to get the hell off that reservation permanently.” He stopped pacing and faced her, his eyes sad. “If we hurt you in the process, all I can is, I’m sorry.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “You hurt me all right.” She lifted her nose in the air. “And I’m sure you found comfort with lots of other women, like Marjorie—that paramedic who seems to know you *quite* well.”

A corner of Ben’s mouth lifted. “Jealous?”

“Certainly not.”

But inside she quaked. Insecurity bloomed—it felt like a hundred moths beat their wings deep in her gut.

He took a few more steps toward her then grabbed her shoulders between his hands. “Marjorie’s kid brother got into some trouble awhile back—vandalism, petty theft. I did her a favor and gave him a good talking-to, then I took him on a little tour of the Suffolk County jail.” Ben released her shoulders. “He’s been on the straight and narrow ever since.”

Her body relaxed. “Oh.”

“I didn’t sleep with Marjorie.”

Carlee stuck her chin out. “I’m sure there have been plenty of other women.”

He laughed this time. “Typical female. You want to know everything”

She nodded. “That’s right. I’m a female. Just not your typical garden variety.”

She licked her lips. “Maybe you’ll stick around this time and find out just how a-typical I am.”

He gave her a sour look. “To answer your question—yeah, there have been a few women for me and Dan. Very few. Our profession doesn’t exactly make for a great love life.”

She took a deep breath. “Or maybe you’ve always been holding out for me.”

Silence filled the room.

“Yeah, maybe there’s that, too.”

“Would you promise me something?”

He frowned. “What?”

“Please don’t feel you have to protect me from the big, bad world.”

He shook his head, no. “I can’t make a promise like that. I’m sworn to protect you.” He drew his police badge from his pocket and showed it to her. “Remember? I’m a cop.”

She gave him an exasperated look. “I’m talking about...sharing something as important as your parents’ death.”

A shadow crossed his face. For a few seconds, she couldn’t discern the look that came over him. “All right. I’ll try.”

“Promise me.”

“Carlee...”

“Promise!” She held up a hand.

He took it and kissed it. "I promise."

Her heart skipped a beat when he leaned down and turned her hand over. He placed a tender kiss on the pad of her thumb.

That little zing of pleasure snaked down her spine again, settling between her legs.

"I'm glad we got that settled," she murmured.

"So am I."

He slipped the blanket from her shoulders. Sliding his hands up her nightshirt, he squeezed her bare ass with his fingers. "Nice. No panties."

"Thong."

He scowled.

"I wear thongs, not panties."

"I'm glad you're wearing neither right now."

He got down on his knees and lifted the front of her shirt. "Hold this," he told her.

She grabbed the ends of the shirt in her hands.

Ben went to work on her clit. He licked and sucked until her legs shook.

She could barely stand.

He rose to his feet and stripped the shirt from her body. Placing his hands beneath her bottom, he lifted her. Carlee wrapped her legs around his waist.

He moved to the wall, resting her back flush against it while he fumbled with his zipper and fly.

"Let me." She grinned.

She loosened his pants and freed his cock.

He pushed into her.

He didn't stop pumping until she opened her mouth.

"Ben!" she cried when her orgasm consumed her.

His mouth slammed down on hers, swallowing her cry.

Carlee's clit pulsed and throbbed.

"Again," she whispered.

"You're insatiable, little warrior."

"I told you I had lots of layers."

That made him laugh.

Ben slid his hands under her bottom. She kept her legs wrapped around his waist while he walked over to the chair on the other side of the room.

He sat down and positioned her over his cock.

Carlee rode him again.

Ben gave her bottom a few taps with his open palm.

That sent her over the edge.

She threw her head back and moaned. Ben leaned forward and sucked her nipples.

She came again, but this time, she collapsed against him.

Ben tipped her chin with his hand and kissed her lips.

“I like this layer, Carlee,” he whispered. “I like it a lot.”

She smiled against his chest. “So do I.”

Chapter Seventeen

Carlee spent her time during the day sketching. Her family spent big bucks to put her up in the city in that apartment—sending her to the finest art school. Bending to Ida’s will, Carlee wanted to keep that life, thinking that’s where her dream of becoming an artist lay.

She was wrong.

Tucked away in the little cottage, Carlee spent more time sketching than she ever had in her entire life. She learned more than all the fancy art classes she took.

She had thirty sketches in all—most of Ben and Dan. But she also had sketches of things from her past—like the reservation.

There were sketches of a tall, elderly proud Indian—Running Bear. Carlee remembered him from the few times she’d seen him when she snuck into the reservation. She wondered how old he was now and if he was still one of the chiefs.

She rose from her chair and stretched her arms high above her head.

It was time to take a break.

She left her bedroom and walked to the kitchen.

Dan was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the paper, sipping a cup of coffee.

“I thought you’d be sleeping,” she stated. Turning on the cold water, she filled the teakettle.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

She placed the teakettle on the stove and glanced his way. His expression serious, he stared back at her.

Her heart skipped a beat.

“About what?”

She took a seat at the table.

“Ben and I have to go to a tribal council meeting tonight.”

She chewed her lower lip. “Okay...”

“Which means there will be someone else here to watch over you.”

Carlee sucked in a breath. “Who?”

“Two other detectives.” His next words came out rushed. “You’ll meet them of course, before Ben and I leave.”

“Leave,” she repeated, her voice flat.

“I meant, before we go to the meeting.”

A few minutes of silence intruded.

Carlee asked, “Are you and Ben coming back?”

“Of course,” he answered, but his eyes didn’t meet hers.

Carlee tried to ignore her racing heartbeat.

“What is the meeting about?”

“The Montauks are looking for financing from the United States Government, so this is a meeting to discuss that.”

“I see,” she murmured.

He reached over and took her hand. His felt cool.

“You know what I always wondered?” she said to him.

He raised a brow. “What?”

“What does the word ‘Montauk’ mean?”

He swallowed. Hard. “It means, ‘uncertain’.”

She released his hand. It suddenly felt...frigid.

“Carlee, you have nothing to worry about. The two detectives who’ll be here are very capable of keeping you safe.”

“It’s not that, it’s just...” She chewed her lower lip again.

She refused to let old insecurities surface. He told her they were coming back.

“I understand.” She jumped when the teakettle whistled.

Dan rose to his feet. “I’ll do it.” He fixed her a cup of her favorite green tea and placed it in front of her.

She looked up at him. “Do you and Ben really want to go to this meeting?”

“It’s more like, we have to.”

She nodded.

“We’ll see you tomorrow morning.” He bent to place a kiss on top of her head.

Carlee sipped her tea, watching his broad back and nice ass. He walked out of the kitchen.

She took another sip of her tea. This time, it tasted like crap. She got up, dumped the contents of her mug down the kitchen sink drain and set the cup down in the sink. The handle broke off. When she picked up the pieces, she cut her thumb.

“Ow!” She put it to her lips.

Tears flowed from her eyes.

She looked down at the cut.

It wasn’t that big...

But then again, when you cut an appendage as important as your thumb, it always bled a lot.

...always.

Humans couldn’t function without a thumb. She remembered a doctor saying that to her many years ago, when she broke hers. She wore a cast for weeks.

She looked down at the cut.

It still bled.

Like her heart.

* * * *

That evening, Ben and Dan took seats in the back of the Montauk’s meeting hall. The room was crowded with attendees. Ben and Dan recognized most of the Indians—many they hadn’t seen in years.

Like Ed Light Foot’s crowd.

Ben leaned over and whispered to Dan, “They’re still a fucking trouble-making bunch.”

Dan leaned back, looking over Ben’s shoulder. “And it seems like they’re looking for it tonight.” He narrowed his eyes, taking in the tattoos blazoned on Ed’s arms.

“They’ll get away with it...” Ben whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

“Because Ed is Running Bear’s nephew.” He shook his head. “Same old story.”

“Yeah, well, I hear he’s still got it out for us. Ever since we arrested him last year.”

“Ed and his gang are nothing but a shit-load of trouble.” Ben frowned, his scowl deepening when he saw that Ed noticed him watching. “They robbed that liquor store last year. Hurt that clerk. I’m just glad they got it all on tape.”

“Speaking of tapes,” Dan stated. “McGee called. He says they were finally able to view the tape from Carlee’s store.”

“And?” Ben raised a brow. “What did it show?”

“Precious little.” Dan said on a whisper. “It was so damned dark, it was hard to see much of anything.”

“Fuck,” Ben said under his breath.

A woman turned around, a finger over her lips. “Shhhhhhhhh!”

Ben and Dan settled back in their seats, but Ben gave Ed Light Foot another look.

Running Bear spoke, “As I stated earlier, we’ve already begun the process of applying for financial help from the government. It is important that we all stick together as a tribe and show unity.”

“The same old crap.” Dan shook his head. He glanced at Ben. “And why do I think he’s speaking directly to us?”

“It has come to the council’s attention that there are some of us who don’t feel they have to abide by the council’s wishes.”

Running Bear’s eyes met Dan’s.

Dan elbowed Ben. “See what I mean?”

The woman turned around and glared. “Will you shut up already?”

“Sorry,” Dan grumbled.

“There are those among us who choose to flaunt a lifestyle that, shall we say, makes us all look bad.”

Ben shifted in his seat. People began to murmur, a low hum of voices filled the hall.

“You two!” Running Bear rose to his feet and pointed to the back of the room. “Ben Strong and Dan Swift. Are you so far above the rest of us that you feel you can embarrass our entire community?”

“What the hell?” Ben looked at Dan.

Dan rose to his feet. “Explain yourself Running Bear.”

“Sit down,” Ben hissed. “Don’t make it worse.” He grabbed hold of Dan’s sleeve.

Dan shook him off. “I want to know what you mean when you make that accusation, Running Bear.”

“All right. If you choose to shame yourselves more, I will spell it out for you.” He aimed his finger first at Dan, then Ben. Leaning heavily on his cane, he said. “You’re flaunting a lifestyle the council cannot abide!”

The crowd erupted. All eyes locked on Dan and Ben.

Dan flushed. “That’s not true!”

“Isn’t it?” Running Bear took a step forward. “We’ve heard evidence to the contrary.”

“Evidence?” Ben rose to his feet. “What are we—on trial?”

“Your actions are certainly on trial. Tonight, we decide if you’ll remain part of the Montauks.”

Ben remained standing. “What we do with our personal lives is no one’s business.”

“Not when it shames us as a tribe.” One of the other council members spoke.

The color drained from Dan’s face. He whispered to Ben. “How do they even know this?” He shook his head. “It’s all supposed to be our damned cover.”

Running Bear rapped his cane on the floor. “It makes us look like irresponsible, immoral Indians. It gives everyone a bad name.”

Again, the room erupted.

“That’s right, Running Bear!” someone shouted.

“We need that money.” Another person stood. “We can’t afford to let them screw it up.”

“I’m not staying here and listening to one more minute of this shit,” Dan growled. He walked out, with Ben right behind him.

“Stay here and act like men, defend your actions, prove us wrong!” Running Bear called out. “If you leave now, we will have no choice but to eject you from the tribe.”

“You do that.” Dan said over his shoulder. “You go right ahead and do that.”

Once outside, Ben grabbed hold of him. "Stop."

"Of all the goddamn, fucking...I can't believe this!" Dan's body shook. He started to pace.

"Hey look...it's the gay boys." Ed Light Foot approached.

His gang stood on either side of him.

Ed took a step toward Ben. "Which one of you is the woman?" He laughed; so did the rest of his gang. He glanced over at Dan. "Must be you." He spat out a long brown line of saliva. It landed on Ben's boot. "You like screwin' him?" Ed asked, tilting his head toward Dan.

Ben chose to ignore him. He started to walk by, but Ed grabbed his arm. "Then again, I heard you two have a nice little arrangement with that Carlee Davis, too." He laughed derisively. "Nice little setup you got going there."

Ben schooled his features, keeping his voice low. He peeled Ed's arm off his sleeve. "Shut your mouth. And get out of my way."

"Ya got yourself some nice threesome."

Dan walked over. That's when Ed pulled his knife.

In one swift move, Ben kicked out Ed's left leg. Dan jumped on him, trying to wrestle the knife from Ed's hand, but he was bigger than Dan. Ed aimed the blade of the knife at Dan's chest. Ben jumped in, twisting Ed's arm.

"Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" He yelled. "You broke my fuckin' arm!"

The knife clattered to the ground.

Ben rolled Ed over, clamping his hands together in a pair of handcuffs behind his back.

He hauled him to his feet.

One of Ed's gang members reached over to pick up the knife. Dan saw, and stamped his booted foot over the man's hand. "I wouldn't if I were you." The man squirmed under Dan's foot. Dan leaned over and grabbed the knife, careful to pick it up by the very end of the handle. He wrenched the young man to his feet.

Running Bear and a crowd of people came outside. "What is going on here?" His voice thundered. He rapped his cane on the steps of the hall. He looked over at Dan and Ben.

“You two!” He shook his head, his long gray braids trailing down his back. “I should have known.”

Dan dragged the young man over to Running Bear. “Is this what you’re teaching these kids?” Dan’s voice shook. “That it’s okay to carry knives and threaten people?”

Running Bear looked over at Ed Light Foot. He struggled against the handcuffs Ben put on him.

Running Bear’s face twisted in disgust. “I’m in no way responsible for this.”

Dan snorted. “You turn a blind eye to what you don’t want to see, and tell yourself you aren’t responsible. How is that working for you?”

Sirens blared in the distance. Soon, two Montauk Police Department squad cars pulled up, along with an ambulance.

Lieutenant McGee arrived soon after.

“We’re fucked,” Dan whispered under his breath.

The uniformed officers got the crowd under control while Ben and Dan searched Ed Light Foot and his gang member. By then, the others had fled.

“They’re some real, true friends you got there, Light Foot.” Ben shoved him against the police car. “Where are your buddies now?”

“Fuck you, gay boy.”

Ben growled low. “Shut your mouth.” He tossed him face down on the hood of the police cruiser.

Ed turned and looked at him, his smile nasty. “Maybe I’ll get me a piece of Carlee Davis, too.”

Ben leaned down, his face an inch from Light Foot’s. “You won’t be getting a piece of anything, Ed, they’re going to be getting a piece of *you* in the county jail.”

He shoved him into the police car. Then he went over to join Dan, who just pushed the other young man into another waiting patrol car. The cars sped away.

McGee stood nearby, speaking with Running Bear. Running Bear turned and walked away, a crowd behind him.

“What in hell happened?” McGee growled. “I give you leave to come to this meeting, and you wind up fighting?”

Ben sighed. “Ed Light Foot started it. Him and his gang.”

McGee ran a hand through his hair. “Meet me at the station. *Now.*”

Ben and Dan watched him get into his car and drive away.

“Shit!” Dan cursed. “Shit, shit...*shit.*”

Ben narrowed his eyes. “When we get back to the station, I want to question Ed Light Foot.”

Dan just looked at him.

“I want to know how in hell *he* knows we’ve got anything to do with Carlee.”

Chapter Eighteen

“You two better have a goddamned good explanation for all of this.” Lieutenant McGee’s voice thundered through his office. He shut the door and pulled the blinds across his office windows.

“That safe house we’ve got Carlee Davis in isn’t secure anymore.” Ben told him.

McGee shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it on his desk. Rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, he asked. “Well?” He looked at the two of them. “I’m waiting. Am I supposed to guess or are you going to tell me why?”

Dan ran a hand through his hair. “Ed Light Foot started with Ben and me outside the meeting hall.”

McGee didn’t say anything for a few minutes. Finally, he replied. “Ed Light Foot’s garbage.” He aimed a finger at them. “He’s still carrying a grudge against the two of you.”

“Right now...” Ben stated. “Ed Light Foot’s sitting with that piece of shit legal-aide lawyer Running Bear knows. They’re screaming, ‘Indian injustice’ again.”

“Great.” McGee shook his head. “That’s all the department needs.”

“Light Foot had a knife. He pulled it on us tonight. We were only defending ourselves.”

McGee sighed. “Okay, but it’ll be your word against his. I’ll back you.”

Ben nodded. “There’s still the matter of Carlee Davis’ safety.”

“Yeah, go on. I’m listening.” McGee picked up a pencil, tapping it on the desk.

“Tonight, Running Bear made mention of the fact that Ben and I are living a lifestyle that’s ruining the Montauks’ chances of getting financial help.”

McGee shrugged. “So what? You two agreed to that particular cover. That’s not my problem.”

“Yes, but, Ed Light Foot says he knows that we’ve been...” Ben looked away.

McGee scowled. “Come on, come on! I haven’t got all fucking night.”

Ben looked him square in the eye. “That we’ve been...” He sighed. “Fooling around with Carlee Davis.” The last sentence came out in a rush.

Dan stood off to the side, his arms folded across his chest. He stared down at the tips of his boots.

McGee sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers beneath his chin.

He took his cell phone from his jacket pocket and made a call.

“...yeah, that’s right. You and Higgins are to stay with her until further notice. No, that’s all for now.”

He ended the call.

McGee eyed Ben first, then Dan. “Do you have any idea how Light Foot knows?”

Ben shook his head. “I got nowhere questioning him.”

“And now, for my second question. Is it true?”

Dan sighed. “Yes.” He looked at McGee. “You’ve got to move Carlee Davis. She can’t stay in that house.”

McGee rose from his chair. “You’re in no position right now to tell me how to do *my* job.”

“All I’m asking...” Dan dropped his hands to his sides. “Is that—?”

“As of this second, you are both off the case.”

“But—” Dan started.

McGee gave him a dark look.

“We deserve to be removed,” Ben stated. “Just don’t take us off the case completely.”

McGee shook his head no.

“Please, Lieutenant,” Dan begged.

“You’re lucky I don’t take your fucking badges.” McGee growled. He sat back down. “You’re not the first two cops to ever succumb to temptation. You won’t be the last.” McGee aimed his finger at Ben, then Dan. “But I can’t keep you on the case.”

Ben ran a hand through his hair. He looked at McGee, his eyes bleak. “Despite what you think, and how all of this may look, we did our jobs. Everything was secure.” Ben sighed. “At least up to this point.”

McGee motioned with his finger toward the door. “You told me everything I need to know. Now get out of here. I need to think.”

Ben and Dan walked out.

Outside, Dan kicked a lamppost. “Shit. Shit, shit *shit!*”

“Come on.” Ben pulled him away from the police station.

They got in his car.

Dan banged his fisted hand on his thigh. “We’ve got to find out who ratted us out.”

“We’re off the case, remember? If McGee discovers we’re snooping, we’re going to lose our jobs.”

Dan raised a brow. “What about Carlee?”

Ben gripped the steering wheel. He pulled the car to the side of the road. Glancing outside, he said. “If we do this, we’ve got to do it so no one finds out, and so far, we’re batting zero in that department.”

Dan snorted. “No kidding.”

“As long as she’s still got a police guard, she’ll be okay.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Dan looked out the window. “I told her we’d be back.” He shook his head. “She’s going to be upset.”

“Well, it’s the best we can do until we find out who sold us out.” Ben drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Maybe it was someone in the department?”

“Yeah, like who?”

Ben shrugged. He pulled the car away from the curb, easing it onto the road. “We were the laughingstock of the entire department, remember? They all knew what our cover was. Maybe one of our own said something to Light Foot.”

“Why would they do that?”

Ben looked at him. “Spite. They just wanted to stir up trouble for us, make our jobs harder. Maybe someone’s jealous—after all, we became detectives when a lot of the others didn’t.”

Dan shook his head. "But it makes no sense, none at all. Doing that only puts Carlee in danger. They'd lose their job, if they did." He looked out the window. "No, I don't believe there's a leak in the department. I just don't." He leaned his head back against the headrest. "Someone's been watching the cottage; someone's been watching our every move with Carlee." He lifted his head and looked at Ben.

"Well, if you don't believe it's one of our own, then who?" Ben asked as he pulled in front of Dan's house.

"I haven't got a clue." Dan got out of the car and slammed the door.

Ben rolled down the window.

Dan leaned inside. "But I'm going to find out. Are you with me?"

Ben nodded. "All the way."

* * * *

The next morning, Carlee woke to an overcast, dismal day.

It matched how she felt inside.

She didn't get much sleep; she kept listening as the cottage settled, hearing the creaks and groans. Then again, she was usually snuggled next to Dan or Ben or...both. Those noises never bothered her.

She tossed back the covers and rose from the bed.

When she was dressed and feeling a little more like herself, she walked down the hall toward the kitchen.

Her heart beat wildly. Dan said they'd be back today...

She stopped at the entrance to the kitchen.

The female detective, Melanie Higgins, sat at the table, leafing through the newspaper.

"Good morning." Carlee said, trying to keep her voice even. "Are detectives Swift and Strong here yet?"

Higgins shook her head and closed the paper. "No Miss Davis."

Miss Davis.

"I'll be here until further notice, as well as detective Samuels."

Carlee sucked in a breath and released it, her pulse beating erratically.

"I, oh." She tried to sound casual. "I didn't realize."

Detective Higgins smirked.

Carlee didn't like her nasty little smile.

What in heck was going on?

"Were the other detectives reassigned to another case?" Carlee asked while she filled the teakettle.

Higgins shrugged. "I can't really say."

Or you don't want to say!

Damn it.

Detective Higgins tossed the newspaper aside. "If you need me, I'll be in the den, Miss Davis." She started to walk out of the kitchen. "Oh, by the way..."

Carlee's hand shook. She placed the teakettle on the burner.

Higgins leaned a shoulder against the wall. She crossed her arms over her chest. "There's a very interesting story in the paper today." She nodded toward the kitchen table. "You may want to read it."

Carlee swallowed. Hard. "Why?" She could hear the swift beat of her heart, felt it pound in her chest. She wondered if Higgins could see it.

"It's about the Montauks' council meeting last night." Higgins gave Carlee another snide grin. "It makes for good reading."

She turned on her heel and walked out.

Carlee worked quickly then took the mug of tea and newspaper to her room. She sat down on the bed, cross-legged and started to read:

"...the Montauk tribal council meeting generated excitement last night. It was the first time in the Montauks' long history that the tribe had expelled two of their own members. In speaking with the council members, many refused to shed light on the unprecedented course of action. However, some of the meeting attendees were quick to mention that Ben Strong and Dan Swift, members of the Montauk tribe, were asked to leave the Montauks due to their 'unseemly' living arrangement with one of Montauk's most prominent and wealthy citizens, Carlee Davis, owner of the landmark Davis Poultry Farm. Many are against this course of action—some of the younger members of the tribe feel the council's actions are unfair, that the expulsion of Ben Strong and Dan Swift was an act of spite and nothing more.

“Council members remain firm on their decision, citing behavior such as Ben Strong and Dan Swift’s detrimental in their quest to receive financial gain from the United States Government...”

Carlee’s tears fell hard and fast. She swiped them away with the back of one hand. She placed her tea mug down on the small nightstand next to her bed.

She wished she could have been at that council meeting! She wished the council members were here right now...what she wouldn’t say to them!

She wished Ben and Dan were here now, too.

However, that’s what got them in trouble—her. It probably did all those years ago, too. She had been nothing more than sweet temptation for them, a white girl looking for kicks from two Indian boys. She was a foolish kid back then, her heart and mind filled with romantic notions, thinking Ben and Dan loved her.

They had pushed her away, claiming they wanted to better themselves, telling her she had no idea what life was like on the reservation...

They were right. She had no idea what kind of pressures they lived under with their tribe.

She did now.

She flopped down on her back, throwing an arm across her eyes, feeling like she was sixteen all over again.

Some things never changed.

She snapped her brows together, another thought blotting out the rest.

She grabbed the newspaper and read the article again. One sentence stood out among the rest:

However, some of the meeting attendees were quick to mention that Ben Strong and Dan Swift, members of the Montauk tribe, were asked to leave the Montauks due to their ‘unseemly’ living arrangement with one of Montauk’s most prominent and wealthy citizens, Carlee Davis, owner of the landmark Davis Poultry Farm.

She closed the newspaper, her hand shaking.

How did the Montauks know that she, Ben and Dan had an ‘unseemly’ living arrangement?

Someone knows I’m here!

She raised her shaking hand to her lips.

The scared, frightened rabbit returned.

* * * *

That same morning, Ben and Dan spoke to one of the fingerprint experts in the Montauk Police Department's forensics unit.

"Come on, Charlie, just give us the results. That's all we're asking for."

Charlie Lyons fixed one eye over the lens of a microscope. "No can do. You two aren't on the case anymore."

Ben stood on one side of Charlie. Dan on the other.

"That's true, but then again, we sure as hell wouldn't want to make things uncomfortable for you."

Charlie pulled his eye away from the microscope. "What in hell is that supposed to mean?" He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

Dan rested a hip against the counter. "Ben and I would hate to mention to Lieutenant McGee that, well..." He raised a brow. "How you're still seeing his daughter, even though it's common knowledge that he really, really hates your guts."

Charlie stiffened. "That's great, real nice. Considering the two of you are up the creek without a paddle around here. *That's* what I've heard." He gave them a nasty smile.

Dan didn't miss a beat. "Race relations are tough around here, aren't they Charlie? When you're the only two Indians," he glanced at Ben, then back at Charlie, "and when you're one of the, let's use the right word here, 'person of another color,' it can become quite sticky."

"Look!" Charlie aimed his finger at Dan. He leaned forward and shoved it under his nose. "McGee isn't my boss, and even if he was, it's no business of his who I see or when I see them."

Ben grinned, his smile feral. "Unless it's his own daughter." He sighed. "People are funny, Charlie. They can seem like such good sports—real nice people. They can spout lots of things like equal rights and all that bullshit, but then, when you're dating their daughter—their only child? Well, that can be quite a different story, if you know what I mean."

Charlie fumed, his face tight, angry. “I haven’t seen Sherry McGee in a long time.”

Ben shook his head. “Why, just a few days ago, I saw you both in the Blue Moon, huddled together at a back table. You looked mighty cozy to me.”

Charlie looked around, his eyes darting everywhere. Under his breath, he said. “So? You saw us. Big deal.”

“Don’t get all defensive, Charlie. Why not try using all that energy you’re wasting being on the defensive, and instead take a nice, pro-active stance. Just give us the fingerprint information. That way, we all get what we want—you get to keep seeing Sherry McGee on the sly, and we get, well...let’s just say, we get what *we* want.”

Charlie ran a hand through his hair. “All right, all right. Here!” He shoved a piece of paper at Ben. “But I swear if someone finds out...”

“No one will find out Charlie, our lips are sealed.”

Ben scanned the report. “Look at this.” He told Dan.

Dan’s eyes widened when he read it. “Let’s go.” Dan tossed the report on the counter.

“Hey!” Charlie called after them. “You better not say anything.”

Ben called out over his shoulder. “You have our word.”

Charlie grumbled in reply, “Yeah. For whatever *that’s* worth.”

Chapter Nineteen

Dan prowled his living room, pacing back and forth like a caged tiger.

"I just know it. I feel it in my gut that she's involved."

Ben sat on a chair, sipping from a mug filled with coffee. He put it down on the table in front of him. "Okay, so what are we supposed to do? Go to McGee and tell him, 'Lieutenant, we feel it in our guts that Marlene Davis is involved in the attack on Carlee Phillips.'"

"Maybe we should."

Ben snapped his brows together. "And when McGee doesn't buy our 'gut instinct' theory, and says give him evidence, what do we do? Tell him we practically blackmailed Charlie Leffert in forensics?"

Dan gave Ben a dark look. "We *did* blackmail him."

"Then we can't say a fucking word." Ben replied.

Dan shook his head. "Then we've got to go about this some other way." He sighed. "We could question her."

"We already did. Marlene Davis had an airtight alibi. She dined with her friends that evening—they all corroborated her story. Her maid said she was home at the time of Carlee's attack. She said Marlene was home with Todd—sitting right next to him on the couch, watching television." He shook his head. "The only time she was out of the house was to walk her damned dog."

"But her prints were the only ones on that wall by that broken window in the poultry store."

Ben raised a brow. "That's not conclusive either, and you know it. She was in the poultry store the day before Thanksgiving. Witnesses said she was helping Carlee."

"Fine. Great. So then, what was she doing over by that wall near the office?"

Ben rose to his feet. "She could have been getting something from the office. She easily could have touched the wall."

Dan snorted. "Yeah. Right."

"Look, if we stick out necks out here, we had better have more than her prints and gut feelings."

"Does Carlee mean so little to you?"

Ben's eyes blazed, his face tightened into angry lines. "She means more to me than you could ever imagine."

"I'm sorry." Dan lowered his voice. "I shouldn't have said that."

Ben slashed his hand through the air. "Forget it. Let's just concentrate on what we're going to tell McGee."

Dan walked into the kitchen. "Want another cup of coffee?"

"No." Ben called out.

Dan poured another cup for himself, then glanced at the small shelf above the sink. Carlee's cell phone sat there. His face warmed, knowing that he kept it there as a reminder. He reached for it, putting it next to his nose. The small phone held the faintest trace of Carlee's smell. Sweet. Seductive.

He placed it back on the shelf.

Grabbing his mug full of coffee, he started to walk back into his living room, stopping dead in his tracks.

Ben frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Her cell phone..." Dan stated.

"Who's cell phone?" Ben asked.

Dan hurried back into the kitchen, the coffee sloshing over the side of the mug. He slammed it on the counter and reached for Carlee's cell phone.

He marched back into the living room. "Look, just look at the damned screen!"

Ben narrowed his eyes. "It says: 'One message.'"

"Yeah." Dan flipped open the cell phone. "That message wasn't there when I took it from her at Seaside. I hid the damned phone in the bottom of my bag, in the closet of my bedroom." He looked at the recent messages. "Look at the date." He showed the phone to Ben.

Ben snatched it from his hands, reading the number aloud. "Eight five two, seven four zero six." He gave the phone back to Dan. "Call it."

Dan hit one button, then put the cell phone to his ear. "I got Marlene Davis' voice mail." He hit another button.

"What are you doing?" Ben walked over to him.

"Checking to see when the last call was made on this phone."

"But you just said you took it from Carlee the minute she walked into the cottage at Seaside. The last call on there would have been before she was at the cottage."

Dan raised a brow. "Yeah, well, look at this." He showed the phone to Ben.

Ben's eyes widened. "Son of a bitch! That minx. She made a call while she was in the cottage."

"Look at the number."

Ben's body shook. He looked at Dan. "It's Marlene Davis'."

"Yeah, well, what do we say to McGee now?" Ben's voice filled with defeat.

"That somehow, someway, Carlee managed to get her cell phone and make a call. After we told him we never took our eyes off her."

Dan started to pace again. "I can't stay here, I need to see Carlee."

"Me too." Ben nodded. "But it'll mean our jobs if we do."

Dan snorted. "Our own tribe hates us, Ben. We admitted to McGee that we fucked up, if he doesn't take our badges, I'd be surprised. We have nothing to lose." He pursed his lips, then spoke again. "Let me rephrase that. We have nothing to lose except for Carlee, and right now, if something happens to her, I'll never forgive myself." Dan patted his chest. "She's in trouble, I feel it. Here." He eyed Ben. "If you don't feel the same way then—"

Ben grabbed his jacket.

Dan followed behind, shrugging into his coat as they sailed out his door.

"Should we tell McGee?" Dan asked while he got in on the passenger side of Ben's car.

Ben started the car. The engine roared. Gripping the steering wheel, he replied.

"Yeah. Call him. Tell him what we found out." He looked at Dan, his eyes bleak. "I don't

give a rat's ass what McGee does to us. And I'm beginning to realize, I don't give a damned about the Montauks, either."

A corner of Dan's mouth lifted.

Ben didn't say he cared about Carlee.

Then again, Dan thought wryly, he didn't have to.

* * * *

Evening settled over the cottage at Seaside.

Filled with restless energy, Carlee prowled the confines of her bedroom.

Remembering Dan and Ben's 'rule' of staying away from the windows, she plunked down on the bed, crossing her knees, tucking her feet under her bottom. Their departure made the cottage feel like a prison. When she did venture out of her room, it was to see the sour faces of her two new guardians.

She particularly despised Higgins. The woman didn't stop smirking the entire day.

Bitch.

Carlee shook her head, wishing she could erase Higgins' nasty smile from her mind.

Pushing her hair behind her ears, she sketched quickly, fashioning a portrait of Ben and Dan. She sketched them this time in their native dress, imagining what they would have looked like when the Montauks ruled the east end of Long Island, hundreds of years before.

This time, her creative spark didn't quell the misery she felt.

She tossed her pencil aside, and got up from the bed.

Her reflection greeted her in the small mirror above the dresser.

Carlee didn't like what she saw.

The spoiled, rich girl got what she wanted—Ben and Dan in her bed. By doing that, she screwed up their lives, causing them expulsion from their tribe.

She probably screwed up their jobs, too.

Ben and Dan worked and studied hard for that.

Carlee turned from the mirror, her lips trembling, tears threatening to fall again.

She glanced over at the sketches lying on the bed. All her life, she'd wanted to be an artist. But for the first time since her dream took shape, she felt like a half-rate artist—a sham.

Crying and feeling sorry for herself, she seemed to do well.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and walked back over to the bed, her fingers itching to rip the picture to shreds.

Who in hell was she kidding, anyway? Herself?

She excelled in that department, too.

If and when she left Seaside, she'd do everything in her power to make it up to Ben and Dan.

Then she'd get the hell out of their lives—forever. She'd go back to the city, to her apartment there...

THUMP!

Carlee snapped her brows together, the noise interrupting her morose thoughts. She heard voices—one sounded like it came from Higgins' partner, that male detective. He hadn't said too much to her since he arrived, choosing to do his job, a stoic look on his face.

Carlee heard a door open, the bottom scraping the floor.

Then she heard the floor squeak, as if someone was walking around the kitchen.

She wrapped her sweater around her body to ward off the chill that snaked up her spine.

She opened the door to her room, peeking into the hallway.

It was deserted.

She left her room and headed toward the kitchen.

The first thing she noticed was the wide-open door, and shards of glass everywhere. There was a hole in one of the small panes of glass that made up the window on the kitchen door.

Marlene stood there. She had the strangest look in her eyes. Hollow. Vacant.

Carlee walked toward her friend, then stopped.

How did Marlene know Carlee was in a cottage at Seaside?

Carlee's heart started to pound.

It nearly came through her chest when she saw legs sticking out from behind the kitchen door.

“Wh-what are you doing here, Marlene?” Carlee placed a hand at her throat, rubbing her neck, her skin filled with prickly goose bumps.

“Why I came to see my dearest, most wonderful best friend in the whole world.” Marlene answered, her voice snide.

Carlee glanced down at the gun in Marlene’s hand. Marlene raised it just a bit, enough so that she aimed it at Carlee’s chest.

Carlee felt like she'd spiraled into the vortex of a deep, bad dream.

“How did you know I was here?”

Marlene shrugged. “You’re a little fool. Your cell phone has a GPS tracker on it.”

“A what?” Carlee shook her head.

“Your cell phone is paid for out of Davis Poultry Farm funds. Funds that *I* handled the entire time Ida was sick. I had the trackers put on, mainly to track my lying, cheating husband...”

“Marlene, stop. Please, I—”

Marlene laughed. “You don’t like to hear that? Well, it’s the truth. He’s a lying, cheating bastard. I had the trackers put on all the phones we use, so that he wouldn’t get suspicious. I told the idiot it was for his own good, and mine and uh, yours. Just in case someone might think to kidnap one of us.” She laughed again, the sound filled with derision. “He bought it all—hook, line and sinker, the asshole.” Marlene raised a brow. “What?” She made her face look innocent. “After all that you don’t want to give me one of your silly, simpering, stupid hugs?”

“I can’t very well do that with a gun pointed at me.”

Marlene gave a small, bitter laugh. “Still the kid. Still the *kidder*. My rich, spoiled little friend.”

“I’m your cousin, too, Marlene. We’re family, we’re more than friends.”

Carlee didn’t know why she stood there talking when Marlene looked like she’d pull the trigger at any moment. When Carlee tried to move, fear made her frozen. Her feet felt like two lead weights. She couldn’t lift either one.

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat.

Her hand strayed there, her fingers massaging the skin on her neck. “What did you do to him?” She nodded toward the two feet jutting out from behind the door.

They belonged to Detective Samuels.

She heard him moan.

Marlene inched toward him, shutting the door behind her. Keeping the gun trained on Carlee, she rolled him over onto his back.

Carlee’s eyes widened when she saw his two hands bound together by metal handcuffs.

She glanced at his shoulder holster.

His gun was missing.

Marlene leaned over and smacked him quickly in the head with the butt of his own pistol. He moaned again, his head rolling to the side.

Carlee’s stomach flipped. She opened her mouth, ready to cry out. She tried to run, but she couldn’t move.

Damn!

Marlene rose to her feet and shoved the gun into Carlee’s gut. “Shut your mouth, and start walking.”

Carlee looked around. “Where?”

“To the back of the house.” Marlene pressed the tip of the revolver into Carlee’s gut. “Move. Now.” She said through clenched teeth. “Or I’ll kill you right here.”

From the corner of her eye, Carlee saw a door open down the hallway.

She didn’t say a word; she simply walked into the den.

Marlene held the gun in her back.

“Keep going.”

Carlee’s heart pounded violently.

Marlene made her walk through the small French doors leading to the deck in the back of the house.

Once outside, the cold wind whipped Carlee’s hair around her face. She could barely see.

She shivered violently.

Carlee shoved her hair aside and saw the shadow of movement in the den beyond the sliding French doors.

Detective Higgins was in the den. She placed a finger over her lips.

Carlee realized she needed to stall; she needed to keep Marlene distracted. “I don’t understand how you got in here.” Carlee shook her head. “And why you hurt that poor man.” Tears came to her eyes when she thought about how Marlene butted Samuels in the head.

Marlene used her free hand, gripping Carlee’s shoulder, roughly turning her around. She shoved the gun under Carlee’s nose.

“He wasn’t fast enough. I broke the pane of glass, and before he knew what hit him—” She pushed the gun against Carlee’s nose.

She cried out in pain, the gun pressing against her nostril.

“I hit him.”

Carlee glanced at the smear of blood on the end of the gun.

In her mind’s eye, Carlee saw Marlene pound Samuels’ head with the gun. She recalled the blow she’d taken on her head that night in the poultry store.

“It was you.” She whispered. “You attacked me that night in the store!”

“Shut up.” Marlene said through gritted teeth.

She moved the gun, pressing the tip into Carlee’s temple.

Higgins moved closer to the French doors, her gun drawn.

Carlee prayed she could keep Marlene facing her. She had to keep her talking!

“Buy why?” Carlee whispered. “Why, Marlene?”

“I wanted to be the next Ida. Me!” Using her free hand, she aimed a thumb at her chest. “Instead I had to watch you standing there in that poultry store...” Her voice caught on a sob. “Doing what I wanted to do. You got all the money.” She sucked in a breath. “You had all the goddamned glory, too.” Her voice shook.

“I didn’t want it.”

“Yeah, right.”

She cocked the gun.

Carlee’s heart raced.

“I had it all planned.” Marlene rushed on. “I had all my bases covered—went out to dinner with friends that night—made sure lots of people saw me in town. Todd came home that night at nine o’clock and I was home—I took precautions so that our maid saw me come in. I settled down next to Todd on the couch. He fell asleep after he told me what went on when he saw you.” She shook her head. “That’s when I decided I had to kill you. It was the only way.” Marlene pressed the gun harder into Carlee’s temple. “Todd fell asleep. The last thing he remembered was me sitting next to him. I had just enough time to get to that poultry store—to kill you and get back to him. He never realized I was gone.”

Carlee’s voice wobbled. “You screwed it up, Marlene. You should have killed me when you had the chance.”

She didn’t know where her courage came from, how she could still converse with Marlene.

Little warrior...

Ben and Dan’s pet name for her lay on her lips, unsaid. Carlee only wished she’d live long enough to see them again, to taste their lips for herself, to hear them utter her name.

Carlee’s eyes strayed toward the French doors. Higgins placed her hand on the handle. She pushed the doors open, keeping her finger against her lips, urging Carlee not to let on.

“If only you hadn’t turned around in the poultry store that evening.” Marlene shook her head. “I was thrown off-guard. I had that meat-mallet in my hand, the one they use to pound the cutlets.”

Carlee gagged, her stomach rolling.

“But this time, I won’t mess it up.” Marlene uttered low, her voice menacing.

WHOOSH!

The French doors slid open. Higgins raised her gun.

So did Marlene.

BANG!

Carlee’s eyes widened when she saw Higgins crumple to the ground.

Chapter Twenty

Ben and Dan ran up the steps to the cottage.

BANG!

They stopped, guns raised.

Approaching the front door, they stopped.

“Christ, the window’s broken.”

They raised their guns and kicked the door, but something blocked the entryway.

When they got inside, they saw Samuels on the ground, his eyes closed, his mouth slack.

“Shit, shit, *shit!*” Dan’s voice shook.

Cold wind blew through the house.

Dan shuddered, then saw the reason why.

His eyes widened when he looked through the open French doors in the back of the house.

Carlee lunged at Marlene, grabbing the pistol. Her attempt to aim it failed when Marlene wrapped her hands around Carlee’s throat, bending her back over the railing. Carlee’s arms flailed in the air, her feet leaving the ground while Marlene choked the life out of her.

The gun slipped from Carlee’s hands, landing on the deck, her body just about over the railing...

Guns drawn, Dan and Ben ran through the den, out onto the deck.

* * * *

Carlee felt the relentless pressure on her throat.

She was no match for Marlene.

Whipped into a frenzied anger, Marlene held Carlee in a vise grip, her fingers digging into Carlee's neck.

In the next second, air filled her lungs. The pressure was gone!

She thought she saw Dan, thought she heard sirens in the distance.

Her brain felt fuzzy, she couldn't form an entire coherent thought...

When her vision cleared, she saw Dan wrench Marlene to the ground.

Marlene bit down hard on Dan's hand.

"Argghhhhhhhhhhh!"

His cry of pain echoed around Carlee.

Marlene ran for the gun. Picking it up, she aimed it at Dan.

Carlee saw a spark. Then she heard the sound of a whip slinging through the air, its tip making a crackling, popping noise.

The next thing Carlee saw was Marlene laying facedown on the deck, a pool of blood oozing from her head.

Ben stood there, breathing hard, the tip of his revolver smoking.

She slithered to the ground.

Dan reached for her arm.

"Carlee!" He gave her a rough shake. "Carlee..." He crooned pressing her against his chest.

The sirens were closer now.

So close...

Carlee drifted, her mind hazy.

She inhaled, taking in Dan's scent, her fingers digging into his chest.

"Is she okay?"

Ben!

Yes, it was Ben...it sounded like his voice.

Dan led her inside the house.

Soon, lights blazed. The house filled with uniformed officers.

And Lieutenant McGee.

Carlee managed to speak. "Is she, I mean...?"

"Marlene's dead." Dan answered, his voice flat.

Carlee shook her head. She couldn't seem to stop. "N-no, I mean, Detective Higgins."

Ben squatted next to her. He took her hand and rubbed it between his own. "No, she'll be okay. Marlene got her in the shoulder."

"Oh God." Carlee pursed her lips. Tears spilt from her eyes.

"She'll be okay." Dan narrowed his eyes. "Right now, I'm concerned about you."

Carlee followed the direction of his eyes. They zeroed in on her throat.

She raised a hand to her neck. It felt sore.

When she swallowed, it hurt.

She started to shake.

"Hang on." Dan patted her arm. "I'll go find you a sweater."

He was gone for a few minutes, leaving her alone with Ben. He sat next to her on the couch, rubbing her hands, her arms.

Dan returned and helped her into the sweater.

Carlee's teeth chattered. "Wh-what about that other detective?"

"Looks like he's got a bad concussion." Ben answered.

Carlee nodded.

Barely.

She slumped back against the couch.

After a few seconds, she found her voice.

"Thank you." She whispered, looking at Ben and Dan. "Thank you."

* * * *

A few days later, Carlee walked into the Davis Poultry Farm Store.

The cashier behind the register greeted her. "Hi Miss Davis! It's nice to see you." She grinned.

Carlee wet her lips, hoping to calm the queasy feeling in her stomach when the odor of roasting turkey and fried chicken drifted by her nose.

"Is my cousin in the office?"

"Sure is." The cashier replied, ringing up a customer's order.

"Thanks."

Carlee walked into the back of the store.

Standing in front of Ida's old office, she knocked on the door.

"Come in!"

She took a deep breath and entered. Todd sat behind the desk, the portrait of the Davis sisters on the wall behind him. It was whole again, the glass fixed, a new frame rimmed the picture.

He looked up. "Carlee!" He rose to his feet. "What are you doing here?"

She shoved some hair behind her ears. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Of course." He pointed at one of the chairs in front of the desk. "Have a seat."
He settled back into his.

She eased into the chair.

A few minutes went by, the room filled with nothing but the sound of the clock ticking on the wall.

Finally, they both spoke at one. "I wanted to say I'm sor—"

Carlee gave him a small smile. She held out her hand. "You first."

He tapped a pencil on the desk, then tossed it aside. He got up and walked over to the windows. With his back toward her, he folded his hands behind it. Then he turned and faced her. He had tears in his eyes.

Carlee's mouth hung open.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive myself."

"For what?" Carlee's voice was just above a whisper.

She'd never seen Todd cry.

"For what Marlene did to you." He balled his hands into fists at his sides. "I blame myself, for not realizing, for—"

Carlee shook her head. Her throat constricted. "She had us all fooled." She shook her head. "I just can't figure out, though, how she could attack me in the poultry store without you knowing."

He shook his head. "I was the biggest fool of them all." He sighed. "The police told me that Marlene admitted to forcing one of the maids to don a blonde wig and one of Marlene's coats and take the dog out for a walk."

Carlee shook her head. "No wonder the neighbors were so adamant about seeing her."

“Yes, well, I just wish I...I was feeling sorry for myself. I went home, had a scotch and sat in that back yard smoking a cigar, nursing my wounds.” He blew out a breath. “Had I not fallen asleep that night, I would have known what she was up to.”

Carlee wet her lips, they felt dry. “It’s not your fault.”

“I wasn’t cheating on her, you have to know that.”

Carlee held up a hand. “You don’t have to convince me, Todd. It’s okay.”

“Marlene booked that cruise, used a phony name for the guest—Angela Graff. When the police questioned me about being with an Angela Graff, I had no idea what they were talking about.” He shook his head. “Marlene was willing to let me take the fall for all of this.”

“I never realized how much it meant to her—she wanted to be the next Ida.”

He snorted. “Yeah. Well, Marlene was about as far from being the next Ida as...well, my mother didn’t trust her. It’s all clear to me now. I think that’s why my mother turned everything over to you.”

Carlee rose to her feet. For some reason, Ben popped into her mind. That happened on a lot over the last several days. Thoughts of Dan would intrude, too.

She wondered if it would always be that way, when she thought of one, the other would always be there, too.

Carlee took a deep breath. “Someone once said to me, and I think it’s true, ‘It’s all water under the bridge.’”

She smiled, recalling Ben’s words.

“I don’t think I can be as forgiving as you.”

Carlee shrugged. “I’m alive. That’s all that matters.”

“And it matters very much to me.”

She felt her throat constrict.

“Is there something else, anything, I can do for you?” Todd walked back to his desk and took a seat in his chair.

Carlee angled her head. “There is one thing.”

“What?”

“Buy me out, Todd.” She swept her hand out in front of her. “This way you can take the whole damned store, the poultry farm, everything.”

He raised a brow.

“Just give me one hundred and fifty-two thousand dollars.”

“That’s nothing, Carlee. If I buy you out, that doesn’t even come close to the money you deserve as your portion.”

She held up a hand. “It’s all I want. The rest is yours. It always should have been.”

“Our cousins in Scarsdale and California don’t want a damned thing to do with the Poultry store, either.”

“Beatrice’s kids never cared. And quite frankly, I never did, either.”

“Well, if I’m buying them out, I guess I can do the same for you.” He leaned back in his chair, placing his hands on the arms. “What are you going to do with your uh, one hundred and fifty-two thousand dollars?” He smiled, his first, she thought, in quite some time. “That’s an odd amount to ask for.”

She smiled back. “I’m purchasing a small, run-down cottage in Seaside.”

“You’re crazy.” He shook his head.

“I know.”

He rose, and held out his hand.

She took it and squeezed his fingers.

“It’s a deal,” he replied. “We’ll go to the lawyer and draw up the papers.”

“Thanks.”

She started to walk out.

“How about some lunch?”

She turned to face him. “I can’t. I’ve got a stop to make.”

“Oh really? Where?”

“The Montauk Indian Reservation.”

Chapter Twenty One

Carlee walked along the beach in Seaside several weeks later. She pulled her woolen hat down over her ears, the cold wind blowing around her. She didn't really care, for the sun shone high in the sky. Walking along the rocky shore, the gulls flew overhead, squawking all the while.

She bent to retrieve a few shells, stopping long enough to toss them into the water.

When she got to the jetty, she walked onto it, standing in the wind, inhaling the fragrance of the ocean.

She didn't know how long she stood there, but it felt good, as though the crisp air and salty tang that drifted by her nose cleansed her soul of the horrible events of the last few months.

Now, if only she could rid her soul of Ben and Dan.

She hadn't seen them in quite some time. It was better that way.

She had been so wrong about so many things.

Ben was right about one: there was a huge pile of differences between them.

It was time to move beyond them.

But it was hard, especially at night. She managed to turn the cottage into a home, but without Ben and Dan, something would always be missing.

She shivered against the cold.

Pulling the collar of her jacket around her, she walked back toward shore, climbing down the rocks lining the jetty. When she neared the cottage, she saw two people walking on the beach.

Her heart skipped a beat.

She'd know those two, tall forms anywhere...

Ben and Dan.

She had no right to show them how much she wanted them, needed them in her life.

She had screwed up theirs' enough.

Carlee stopped walking.

Soon they stood directly in front of her.

"Thought we'd find you here," Dan quipped.

Ben raised a brow. "Aren't you cold?"

She managed to find her voice. "The sun's out." She shielded her eyes from its rays, focusing on the two of them.

Her body temperature rose. Carlee knew why—it wasn't the sun's rays—it was Ben and Dan.

"Can you stay for a little while?" she asked, moving closer to them.

Dan shoved his hands in his pockets. "Sure."

Soon, all three of them walked toward the little cottage.

"I can offer you green tea and fried tofu."

Ben's face twisted into a look of pure disgust.

She smiled. "What? You don't like green tea and tofu?"

"Yuk," Dan grumbled.

She laughed. "Okay, okay...you win. I guess I'll have to make you a pot of coffee."

"Is it organic?" Ben asked, the corners of his mouth curving upwards. "You know I don't drink anything but organic coffee."

"Smart ass." Carlee squashed the urge to run her finger along his sculpted chin. "And of course, it's organic."

They followed her up the path leading to the cottage.

She walked across the deck, remembering how Marlene tried to kill her, nearly ending her life. Yet, as with all things, a strange irony existed.

Carlee felt her life had truly begun that night on the deck.

For she realized what was truly important.

She pushed open the sliding French doors.

Warm air swirled around her.

She pulled off her hat, letting her wild curls spring free. They cascaded down her shoulders and back. Leaving the guys in the den, she headed for the kitchen.

"The coffee will be ready in a few minutes!" she called out.

No answer.

She slipped off her coat and grabbed a can of coffee off a shelf.

"Did you hear what I said?"

Silence.

Carlee frowned. She walked back into the den.

Ben and Dan stood there, staring at the paintings that graced the walls.

She folded her arms under her breasts and smiled. "Like them?"

"Carlee..." Dan shook his head. "They're magnificent."

Ben was staring at the nude pictures of him and Dan. His face turned scarlet.

"That's some likeness."

Her grin widened. "I thought so, too. Funny thing is, though, I would never have turned all those sketches into paintings if it wasn't for Graham Marks."

Ben looked away, but Carlee saw a muscle twitch in his jaw.

Dan shoved his hands into his pockets.

"When I moved in here a few weeks ago, Graham came over to see me, my sketch book in his hands." She ran a finger across Dan's chest. "I can't seem to figure out how he got it."

He looked away.

Carlee grabbed his chin between her fingers and made him look at her. "You gave him my sketches, didn't you?"

His eyes widened. "Are you nuts? It wasn't me."

She glanced at Ben. "Okay, then it was you."

"No." Ben held up a hand. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Graham Marks."

"Well, he's out of his mind," Dan grumbled.

She laughed. "You're just mad because he didn't ask you out to dinner again."

He gave her a dark look. “Don’t remind me,” he grumbled.

“Graham told me that he received several sketches of mine, sent to him in the mail, with a note saying that they were being given to him anonymously for his expert opinion.”

“That’s terrific,” Dan replied. “And what did he say?”

“That he feels I’ve got great talent.”

“You do,” Ben stated, his voice soft. He glanced at the paintings.

“Yes, well, he encouraged me to paint all the sketches. He brought several to a gallery owner he knows. I should be hearing from him soon.”

Dan smiled. “That’s wonderful, Carlee. You deserve it.”

Her eyes misted.

“Well, whether I deserve it or not, remains to be seen. New York’s a tough crowd, they want the best. I just hope my paintings show that—my best work.”

“It is.” Ben stated, his voice firm. “I feel it here.” He patted his chest.

“Still, I’m wondering how you managed to get the sketches to him.”

Dan swallowed. She saw his Adam’s apple rise up and down.

“Okay. Out with it.” She held several of her fingers together, crooking them in their direction. “How’d you do it?”

Dan blew out a breath, then looked at Ben.

“Go on.” Ben motioned with his head. “Tell her. She’ll be like a dog with a bone—she won’t let this go.”

She almost laughed out loud, but kept silent, her curiosity piqued.

“That night Marlene tried to kill you, I realized you had to be in shock. You were so cold, so...well, to make a long story short, I went into your bedroom and found a sweater for you.”

“I remember.” Carlee answered.

“I was about to leave your room when I saw this pad of paper sticking out from the floor underneath your bed. I took a quick look, saw it was the sketches.”

“Oh, Dan.” Her voice cracked. “I-I can’t believe it.”

“Yeah, well. After all the craziness passed, and Ben and I had a chance to really look at them, we mailed them off to Graham.”

She shook her head. "You know, I just couldn't figure it out. I searched and searched for my sketchpad before I left the cottage and went back to my Aunt Ida's house. I thought I must have misplaced it." She drew her brows together. "I should be mad at the two of you. Stealing my work that way."

Ben raised a brow. "Are you? I mean, mad at us."

She smiled. "No. I'm not. I'm...grateful, for that and so much more."

Tears clogged her throat, but she held them back.

She walked up to the two of them, kissing each one on the cheek.

"Come on, I'll get you that coffee." She led them into the kitchen.

"Sit." She motioned toward the table and chairs.

They did as she bade.

She fussed with the coffee, willing her hands to stop shaking.

"So, how are you getting on here?"

"Truthfully?"

Ben nodded. "Truthfully."

"I love it. The local college offered me a job teaching art classes. I'll start in a couple of weeks."

But I wish you two were with me!

"That's great." Dan stated.

Silence ensued.

Carlee didn't know how to fill it.

Dan spoke. "As long as we're speaking about the truth, there's something Ben and I want to know."

Carlee poured water into the coffee pot. "What is it?"

Dan patted his thighs. "Come over here, *little warrior*."

At the sound of her pet name, Carlee melted inside. She felt a familiar a zing of pleasure snake down her back. It settled between her legs.

Carlee walked over to him and slid into his lap.

He shifted her on his legs, causing her to brace her hands against his chest.

"That's better," he murmured.

Ben leaned his elbow on the table, cupping his chin in his hand. His hot look burned through her, making her all warm inside.

She swallowed. Hard.

“Here’s what we’d like to know: How come the tribal council let us back in their good graces?” He drummed the fingers of his other hand on the table. “Why did they allow us back into the tribe?”

She shrugged. “W-well, I’ve heard, and this is the rumor going around town, mind you, that because of your heroic actions here in Seaside the night Marlene tried to kill me, the Montauks feel you’re well, just that. Heroes.”

“Uh huh.” Ben nodded. “Riiiiiiiiiiight.”

She angled her chin. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dan’s warm breath tickled her ear. “We ran into a friend of yours.”

She frowned, turning her head slightly to look at him. “Who?”

“Running Bear’s granddaughter.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.” Carlee put on her best Ida voice. “I’m not friends with Running Bear’s granddaughter.”

“Oh really?” Ben nodded. “That’s funny, because she thinks very highly of you.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake.” Carlee tried to rise, but Dan pulled her back down.

“Sit there, *little warrior*.” Ben’s voice brooked no argument. He pointed at Dan’s lap. “You had your turn to ask us something, now it’s ours.”

“Fine.” She folded her arms under her breasts.

The little muscle near the corner of her right eye twitched. She rubbed it.

“Something wrong?” Ben asked.

“Nothing,” she mumbled, waving a hand toward him. “Go on.”

“Well.” Ben leaned back, folding his arms across his chest. “We ran into Running Bear’s granddaughter in the emergency room at Montauk General Hospital. She works as a nurse there.”

She could feel Dan’s cock swell under her bottom.

Her thong became wet.

Damn!

“So um, why were you there?” she managed.

“One of those hit-and-runs that always happens on Montauk highway. We were there to question the victim who was brought into the emergency room. As it so happens, we saw Running Bear’s granddaughter.”

“What a coincidence,” Carlee murmured.

“Yeah, well, after we did what we had to, we stayed and chatted with her for a little while. Had a cup of coffee together—just the three of us.”

Carlee stiffened. “Is that all?”

Ben released a bark of laughter. Then he sobered. “Yes, little warrior, that’s all.”

“Okay.” She waved a hand at him. “Go on with your story.”

“So, we chat with her, and she tells us that you paid Running Bear a visit at the Reservation. She was there too, it just so happens.”

Carlee tried to move again. Dan pulled her back down.

“She’s mistaken.” Her voice wobbled.

“Is she?” Dan kissed her shoulder.

Carlee shuddered pleasurably.

The muscle near her eye twitched again.

Ben got up and walked over to her. He lifted her from Dan’s lap. She stood toe-to-toe with him. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he tugged her close.

And closer still.

She could feel his hard cock push against her thigh.

“Carlee Davis, you tell us the truth. Were you at the Reservation? Did you go and see Running Bear on our behalf?”

She shoved him away, afraid she’d dissolve into tears.

“Yes, I was.” She sniffed. “Happy?” She walked over and poured two cups of coffee. Turning around, she walked back over and placed them down on the table.

“Here’s your damned coffee.”

Dan shook his head. “No changing the subject.”

“I’ll tell you what happened, *little warrior*,” Ben interjected. “You went to see Running Bear, to beg him and the council to return us to the tribe. He refused. Running Bear’s granddaughter just happened to be visiting. She had a big fight with him, told him he was wrong. And then she reminded Running Bear of something.”

Tears flowed from Carlee's eyes. She couldn't stop them.

"She reminded him of the time you snuck into the reservation. You were about sixteen. It was the influenza epidemic. You brought food, warm blankets..."

"Medicine." Dan interjected.

Ben folded his arms over his chest. "Running Bear's granddaughter also reminded him that you convinced your Aunt Ida to donate flu vaccines. The following year, and for many years after that, Ida Davis gave the Montauks free flu vaccines. She even donated to the clinic on the reservation."

Carlee placed a shaking hand to her lips. "I-I couldn't stand knowing that you suffered so." She sniffed, her throat constricting.

"Carlee." Ben reached out, stroking her face. "At this last tribal council meeting, Running Bear's granddaughter got quite a few of the Montauks together. They all petitioned the council to let us back into the tribe, they agreed that all this animosity between the Montauks and the whites had to stop."

"It was you, Carlee," Dan whispered. "You did it."

She raised a brow. "Are you mad at me? For doing that?"

Ben motioned toward Dan with his head. "What do you say, Dan? Are we angry?"

Dan sat for a few seconds, drumming his fingers on the kitchen table. "Steaming," he replied.

Carlee's mouth hung open. She fisted her hands at her sides. "Of all the nerve! Why I—"

She narrowed her eyes when she saw them dissolve into laughter. "What's so funny?"

"You." Ben wiped his eyes. "You are such a little fighter."

"So that's funny?" She huffed.

"No, what's funny, or maybe so damned ironic, is how life turns and twists," Ben replied.

"So, you're not mad?"

Dan rose from his chair.

"Nope."

She raised her fingers and skimmed them across Ben's chest. "If you're not mad, then what?"

Ben looked at Dan. She thought she saw them exchange a wink.

"Well, there is *one* thing we need to get settled," Ben told her.

"What's that?" She held her breath.

"It's this tendency you have not to follow orders."

"What are we, in the army?" she wisecracked.

They advanced, one step at a time.

She backed up toward the counter by the sink.

"You little minx!" Dan pointed his finger at her. "You found that phone and called Marlene."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know?"

He looked madder than hell. Carlee scooted away from the counter and ran down the hall.

Ben was hot on her heels. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. You're not getting away so fast."

She ran into her bedroom and tried to shut the door, but she wasn't quick enough.

Ben strode in, followed by Dan. He leaned back against the door.

CLICK!

"You're going to get the paddling you deserve, Carlee Davis." Dan told her.

She practically skipped to the bed.

"Promises, promises," She batted her eyes. "I thought you told me you weren't an 'ass man.'"

Dan just shook his head. "You're going to listen to what we say..."

"...even if it hurts us in the process."

Carlee slid onto the bed. Rising up on her knees, she patted her backside. "Okay, fire away."

Dan folded his arms over his chest. "Take off your clothes."

Her heart quickened. Moisture seeped between her legs.

Damn, but she creamed her thong again.

She wiggled her bottom. "All right. I will."

Ben walked over and patted her ass. "Seems like you're learning your lesson."

She rose up on her knees and stripped her clothes. All except for her thong.

She snapped the waistband. "You two can have the pleasure of removing *this*."

Carlee sat on the bed, crossing her legs, tucking her feet beneath her bottom, watching while Dan and Ben stripped. Her clit throbbed, her breasts felt heavy. Each time they removed another piece of clothing, Carlee's breathing quickened.

Finally, they stood before her, nude. Tall, strong...proud. Her brave Indian warriors.

"Make love to me," she whispered. Smiling, she sat up and rose to her knees, placing her hands on her bare breasts. Carlee fingered her nipples. "Start with these."

Dan's cock grew, followed by Ben's.

They slid in next to her on the bed, the mattress dipping from the combined weight.

Ben went to work on her right breast, taking her distended nipple into his mouth, flicking it with the tip of his tongue.

Dan concentrated on pleasuring her other breast. He kissed and licked his way down to her nipple. He blew on it so that it peaked. She writhed on the bed.

Ben continued to make love to her breasts, while Dan slid the thong from her hips. He tossed it aside. Using his fingers, he spread her labia, then bent his head and licked her clit.

Carlee came within seconds.

"Again," she pleaded. "Do it all again."

"Our pleasure," They replied in unison.

"But first, you're going to get that spanking." Ben told her, his voice deep.

"Spread your legs," Dan whispered in her ear.

His soft command melted her insides. She almost came again, just from the sound of his voice.

"Wider," Ben told her.

She placed her feet flat on the mattress, stretching her thighs wide, exposing her freshly waxed pussy.

Dan reached over and swatted her clit with the flat of his hand. It was a light tap, with most of the pressure centering on her sensitive little nubbin of flesh.

She moaned in pleasure.

Ben leaned over and smacked her clit, too. Then he rubbed it, placing all four fingers of his left hand against her little jewel.

“There’s your spanking, little warrior,” Dan whispered in her ear. His grin was positively wicked.

“More,” she pleaded, tugging his head down to her mouth for a heated kiss.

He chuckled and did what she asked. Carlee’s hips jutted up when he smacked her clit.

She looked at Ben. He gave her clit a swat, then massaged it with the pad of his thumb.

“God, Carlee! You’re so wet.” Ben took her essence and rubbed it across his swollen cock.

She rolled onto her side. Ben filled her bottom. She pushed back against his groin, allowing him to settle inside her.

Dan kissed her face, starting with her forehead, moving his lips across her cheeks, nose and jaw. He settled them on her collarbone. His hand strayed to her pussy. He inserted a finger inside her while Ben pumped into her bottom.

Dan matched Ben’s rhythm, pushing his finger in and out, in tune with Ben’s strokes in her backside. Carlee’s orgasm rose, she could feel it grow inside her. Her clit throbbed. She needed release—fast!

Dan slid his finger out of her front hole, quickly replacing it with his cock.

They pumped into her from both ends.

When Carlee reached her peak this time, she felt whole, complete, her mind and body one with theirs.

Carlee fell asleep between Ben and Dan, a smile on her face.

Epilogue

Spring graced Long Island's North Shore.

Carlee walked into the kitchen one afternoon, hoping to stretch her legs after sitting in her chair, painting.

She smiled, knowing Ben and Dan would enjoy the portrait she labored on—a picture of the three of them together.

This one, she wouldn't sell, she would give it to Ben and Dan for their six-month anniversary present.

She couldn't be happier...

Except, Ben and Dan never said how they *really* felt about being with her. Men! She sighed. One day, she'd get them both to admit just how in love they all were.

Entering the kitchen, she saw Dan at the stove, frying up what looked to be a mountain of...tofu.

"Not only are you a great lover..." She patted his nice, tight, round ass. "But you can cook, too."

He shook his head. "Don't fool around by hot oil."

She gave him a mock salute and turned around.

"Ow!" She rubbed her ass, but it really didn't hurt. "What was that for?"

Dan aimed the spatula at her. "How easily you forget."

"What?" She raised a brow.

"That time you called Marlene. *I* haven't forgotten."

She wiggled her index finger. "Uh uh. No way. You already took out your frustration on me when you made love to me. Besides..." She lifted her chin. "That was months ago."

He turned back around and removed some of the tofu from the pan. “You’re going to get a smack on your ass every day for the next. Hmm...let me see.” He waved the spatula in the air. “Six months.”

“Is that all? Six months?” She quipped. “I thought you could do better than that.”

He placed the spatula on the counter. Grabbing the plate full of fried tofu, he brought it to the table. “I think I could manage that.”

“I think you just enjoy spanking me.”

He laughed. “Not half as much as you enjoy getting them.”

She rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out.

“And don’t roll your eyes at me, Carlee Davis.”

Her mouth hung open.

“...or stick your tongue out at me, unless you’re going to use it.”

She laughed, she couldn’t help it. Dan made her feel as though everything would be all right.

“Speaking of using your tongue—” He walked over to her and grabbed her face between his hands. He ran the tip of his tongue on her lower lip, coaxing her mouth open.

Carlee wrapped her arms around his neck, returning his heated kiss.

His cock swelled and pressed against her thigh.

“By the way, I have something for you,” he whispered near her ear.

She laughed, massaging his balls through the fabric of his jeans. His cock swelled.

“So I noticed,” she replied saucily.

He reached around and swatted her bottom.

“You said one swat per day. That was two.” She pouted, sticking out her lower lip.

He studied her for a few seconds, his face serious.

“What?” She angled her head.

“Reach into my pocket.”

He took her hand and slipped it into the right pocket of his jeans.

She fingered something hard. Pulling it free, she saw it was a small box, wrapped in silver paper and a red bow.

Carlee frowned. “What’s this?”

“Open it.”

She sat down at the table and unwrapped it. Inside the box was a ring—a white gold band with three diamonds. They caught the light coming in through the kitchen window, sparkling brilliantly.

Dan got down on one knee. “I know you might think I’m crazy, Carlee, but will you stay with me—forever?”

Tears streamed down her face.

She nodded and whispered, “Yes.”

Dan slipped it on her finger. “I’m crazy about you, *little warrior*. Simply crazy about you. I have been ever since that first time I saw you, since that first time we kissed at the reservation. I was a fool then, to send you away. I didn’t follow my heart’s desire.” He looked away then back. “But I’m following it from now on.”

“Oh!” she cried out.

Carlee bent down and wrapped her arms around him. She kissed him, burying her face in his neck.

She hiccupped once.

“You like the ring?” he asked, his voice low.

“I love it, but not as much as I love you.” She pulled away from him. “Where’s Ben?”

“Outside. He said he was going for a walk on the beach.”

She bounded up from the chair. “I want to show him.”

“Of course.”

She stopped at the door. “Did he know you were doing this?”

“No.” Dan said smoothly. “I didn’t say a word.”

She ran out of the kitchen, through the front door. Carlee bounded down the front steps and turned right, following the path around the house. In the backyard, she trailed down the small slope to the beach, her feet flying over the sand.

She saw Ben in the distance, standing on the jetty that led to the water.

“Ben!” she cried, waving her arms. “Ben!”

He turned and looked at her.

“Ben!”

He climbed off the rocks then ran towards her.

“What’s wrong?” he shouted back.

She felt so happy, so...free.

Finally, they met. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“Look.” She shoved her right hand under his nose. “Dan gave it to me.”

He whistled. “Looks like he came into quite a fortune.” He grabbed her finger and held it out. “That’s some bling you got there, woman.”

She grinned. Then she sobered.

“Dan wants me forever, how about you?”

Ben slid an arm around her waist as they walked. “Hmm...I’m not sure.”

She stopped abruptly.

“Ben Strong, how can you say that?” Her throat constricted.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked to where she stood. Shrugging, he replied. “Because I don’t know if forever is long enough, Carlee.”

“What?” she whispered.

He reached into his pocket and drew out a long, black box, wrapped with a pink ribbon.

“Here.” He handed it to her. “Maybe this will explain it.”

She untied the ribbon and opened the box.

Inside was a diamond bracelet with three bezel-set diamonds gracing the white gold band.

Her hand shook again. “Oh Ben.”

She tried to put it on her wrist, but her hands trembled too much.

“Here, let me.”

Ben slipped it on her left wrist. He fingered the clasp, snapping it closed.

He held her arm up to the light and whistled. “Now, that’s *really* some nice-looking bling.”

She swatted his chest. “Cut it out,” she whispered. “It’s beautiful.” Carlee narrowed her eyes. “I’m going to kill Dan when I see him.”

“Why?” Ben shook his head.

“He said you had no idea he was giving me a ring.”

Ben grinned. “You fell for it. Good!”

Her mouth hung open.

He leaned down and kissed her chin.

“Your face.” He shook his head.

“What?” She asked dreamily. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“Nope.” He replied. “It’s a face I’d like to look at forever—longer if possible.”

She reached up and kissed him. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He placed his arm around her waist.

“Hey!”

They looked over when they heard Dan shout from the deck in the back of the house.

“Let’s go, you two! This damned tofu is getting cold.”

Ben threw back his head and laughed.

Carlee stopped. “I need to know something, please.”

“All right,” he said. “Shoot.”

“You once said that making love was a minute part of how much you felt for me.”

He nodded. “That’s right. I did.” He reached out and tucked some wayward curls behind her ears. “This is hard for me to explain Carlee, but I’ll try.”

He looked toward the ocean, toward the waves crashing against the rocks lining the beach. Then he looked at her. “From the day I first laid eyes on you, from that very first time you sneaked into the reservation, I felt as though I’d been living in darkness up until then. But when I was with you, light would fill me—a bright, white, wonderful feeling of...light.”

“Oh, Ben.” She pursed her lips to keep the tears at bay.

He ran a hand through his hair. It was longer, shaggier.

She loved it.

“I know this isn’t making much sense.”

“Oh, believe me, it is.”

“The best way to describe how I feel for you is...” He glanced at the sky, pointing to the light streaming through the clouds. “See how the sun shines down on the sand,

blinding you to all else? Well, that's how I feel, as though...as though I've been kissed by the sun."

She stilled, her feet rooted in the warm sand.

"I'll always feel that way, Carlee."

She nodded.

"Always."

He took her hand and led her to the house where Dan waited for them.

She walked inside and shut the sliding French doors.

For just a second, the sun glinted off the flecks of sand on the beach.

She felt warm, happy...

For she knew deep down, that wherever Ben and Dan were, as long as she was with them, she'd be...

Kissed by the sun.

About the Author

Catrina Calloway adores writing romance, and her motto is two, hot, hunky heroes are better than one. Born in Alaska, the land of the midnight sun, and now currently residing in New York, Katrina was an avid reader of romance for many years before penning her first erotic ménage romance story, 'Eight Erotic Nights. Katrina loves to hear from her readers and fans so please feel free to email her at www.myspace.com/catrinacalloway

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***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her *Battery Operated Boyfriend*, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the “living” world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he doesn't seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention...using any speed necessary.

***Cuff Me Lacy* by Demi Alex**

Three months is way too long to wait for some simple, low-down, straight forward sex. It's not like Officer Chrissie Hansen is asking for prince charming to offer her the love of a lifetime. All she wants is a good orgasm that she doesn't have to work for alone.

At least with “The Bull” she knows what to expect. But when Patrick MacKlick returns to her life and tempts her with new options, she discovers that lace can imprison a heart better than handcuffs can.

***Search Me Baby, One More Time* by Melinda Barron**

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now

he has just the tools to do it: A police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren *assume the position*.

***What the Cuff?* By Celia Kyle**

God really should have reconsidered making werewolves. That, or Lyssa needed to get better taste in men and stay away from those with wandering eyes—and other things. Drunk as a wolf, she stumbles to her best friend's house to sleep off her whiskey induced haze and wakes to...*cuffs*?

Caleb sees his chance and takes it. His buddies on the force ribbed him but good for buying silver plated cuffs. But with a werewolf in his bed, the woman he's yearned for since they were teens, he wasn't taking any chances. Lyssa was his. She just didn't know it yet.

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning where the DJ's are discussing "going commando" —*a.k.a* wearing no undies. Captivated by their conversation, she decides to shed her panties in favor of the freedom that wearing no underwear brings.

Enthusiastic, Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the send key...to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter has sent him an erotic, enticing message about going commando. Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra that it's almost painful. Working day in and day out with voluptuous woman has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's... GOING COMMANDO.

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***Two Plus One* by Brynn Paulin**

College math teacher, Briony Swift, lives life on the straight and narrow. After all, one plus one always equals two. But when two of her adult male students visit her office one afternoon, she soon discovers that one plus two might be a new and better equation to explore...

***Body of Art* by Bronwyn Green**

Art professor Seth Granger has two problems—an absentee life drawing models and a case of unrequited lust. Luckily his troubles have the same answer—his colleague, Dr. Callie Sullivan.

The trick will be getting her out of her clothes and into his studio...and hopefully into his bed. However, she's intent on keeping her mind on her art and ignoring him. Now he just needs to convince her she should be his body of art.

***Sense and Sensuality* by Cara Hart**

Eleanor McLaren leads a subdued life. She hates parties, avoids social interactions, and she cannot talk to men. But within the shell of her timidity lies the heart of a siren. Afraid of her own boldness, she hides her desires. Especially from the man who stars in her dreams of passionate encounters and works in her department.

Eddie Harrington has never lacked for partners in his pleasure games. But for some reason, Eleanor is the one woman he can't get out of his head. She is definitely not the type he usually pursues. Then he sees her at a bar, looking like his wildest fantasy. And one night with her is not going to be enough. The man who never commits just might have met his match-until a mistake from his past forces her to choose between trusting him or walking away.

***Sex Ed* by Mia Watts**

Mina Lasky has a pesky crush on Biology professor, Derek Link. They've worked in tandem in the same University facility long enough that even the sound of his voice makes her hot. It's time to put the fantasy to an end. Mina signs up to be his guinea pig in a female sexuality lab for those on the doctorate track. She hopes to work Derek out of her system while enjoying some much needed sexual stimulation.

Dr. Derek Link has been itching to get his hands on the quiet, sexy Chemistry professor. He can't believe his luck when she signs up to be his lab. But one night isn't enough and Mina won't admit they can have something a lot more long term.

And when one of the students recognizes Mina, her heart isn't the only thing on the line. With her career in the hands of a blackmailer, and her heart begging to trust Derek, she's beginning to think the lab was a very bad idea.

Also Available from Resplendence Publishing

***Taken With the Enemy* by Tia Fanning**

My captor tells me that I'm not a prisoner of war, but how else can I see myself? I was abducted and brought to an unknown location in the middle of the desert. I'm sequestered behind a locked door and bars cover my windows. I even have an armed guard who takes me for walks.

But he, the nameless captor responsible for my care, claims otherwise. He tells me that he's not my enemy, that if he was, I'd already be dead. He promises to release me when the time is right. He says I'm safer now—with him—than I was before.

Despite his reassurances, I do not feel safe. Though he has treated me kindly, given me every comfort a prisoner could ever want or need, I have to find a way to leave—and soon. I don't understand how it's possible, but my captor knows me. He knows my past, he knows my secrets, knows just what to say to move me... and what to say to break me.

I have been taken by the enemy... and I must find a way to escape before I'm *taken with* him.

***Sinful Temptations* by Cassidy McKay**

Jennifer Amante calls a phone sex line on a dare from her childhood friend, and encounters "Naughty Nick", the self-made man who runs Sinful Temptations. Tempted out of her normal repressive shell, Jenn lets loose, safe in the knowledge she'll never encounter Naughty Nick. Yet, when the handsome, successful Nicholas Germaine walks into her office wanting to buy a house, she redirects her fantasies on the phone to include the man she lusts after but denies herself in person.

Nick is determined to have Jennifer as his own—no matter her silly rule to never date clients. Now he just has to find a way to reveal who he really is and what he does, without scaring her. As passion tempts them both beyond their previous boundaries, Nick and Jenn must confront the deceit, jealousy, and death that stalks them.

Can they survive their *Sinful Temptations*?

***In For a Penny* by Carol Lynne**

What's the old saying...you can never go home again? Raven Black resigned himself to never returning after being ordered from the only real home he'd ever known. Now, seven years later, Raven is back to face the man who sent him away.

Zane Conner is not only Raven's foster brother but the only man Raven ever loved. Despite his mixed feelings about the situation, Raven can't deny Zane when the older man asks for his help in saving the Lazy C Bar Ranch. A boy found dead on the ranch clinches Raven's decision.

Why did the young boy look so much like he had at that age—the same age he'd been when his own father had beaten him and left him for dead?

***Rough Edges* by Jannifer Hoffman**

When Julia Morgan M.D. miscarries twin girls, she divorces her husband, believing he is to blame. He forces her out of her position at the hospital and threatens her credibility as a doctor if she attempts to practice medicine. Without mentioning her medical degree, Julia accepts a position as nanny on a Colorado ranch 900 miles away.

Dirk Travis is in trouble. His wife has gone missing, and his housekeeper is threatening to quit. He is in desperate need of a reliable person to look after his four-year-old twins. Even though Julia appears to be the answer to his prayers he can't help but think she's a bit too perfect.

Both insist their relationship will be business only. While those plans start to go awry, other things begin to happen. People are getting killed and Dirk is the prime suspect, but that doesn't stop the heat index from rising between Dirk and Julia, even as she appears to be the next target.

***Brilliant Disguise* by JL Wilson**

An undercover FBI agent in a tiny Iowa town finds you can't hide anything from a woman who's determined to find out the truth...

Nick Baxter, an undercover FBI agent, thinks his brilliant disguise will fool the hicks in New Providence, Iowa. They won't suspect he's there investigating widow Shannon Delgardie, under suspicion of treason. What Nick doesn't know is that everybody in town is conspiring to protect her and investigate him in return.

Shannon needs help. The men her late husband blackmailed are closing in and the FBI might be involved. When Nick approaches her, can she trust him? With the aid of computer hackers and hair stylists, she uncovers the truth, finding a love she never expected in a tiny Iowa town.

***Nowhere to Run* by JL Wilson**

M.C. 'Mac' Shefflington thought she'd finally escaped Tom Donaldson and her terrible past. But just as she's starting to relax at her new home in Minnesota, the hang-up calls start again. Then someone tailgates her several times on the way to work, in exactly the same way that Tom used to, and Mac knows he's come back into her life.

Retired Sheriff Harry Mortonson is willing to help Mac because he hopes it might alleviate the guilt he feels about his own past, and the woman he didn't help years ago. But when he gets involved with Mac, he gets far more than he bargained for.

In the end, it's up to Mac to lure Tom into a trap on one of Minnesota's frozen lakes for one final confrontation. If she succeeds, she'll save Harry and their chance for a new life together. But if she fails, Mac will have to live her past—again.

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