



Banged Up

Jeanne St James

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Blurb

Mace Walker can't wait to get home.

Being buried deep undercover for the past two years, on the most complex case of his career, has torn him down physically and mentally. Now the FBI agent has come home to recover after having his leg badly injured from a gunshot wound. Arriving home late one night, his relief is short-lived as he's faced with a stranger pointing a gun to his head, acting like he is the one who doesn't belong there!

Colby Parks, a biochemist at the local university, had come to town a year earlier to escape an abusive relationship. She vows never to put herself in that situation again.

Then the perfect opportunity comes along: house-sitting for Mace's sister while making the house she purchased habitable. But she couldn't anticipate this big snag: the one wearing the tight Levi's and worn leather jacket, looking like he had just escaped prison.

Being forced to share a house creates sparks between them in more ways than one. However, things take a turn when their pasts catch up to them, threatening to pull them apart forever.

Chapter One

Home.

Relief flooded over Mace Walker as he twisted the key in the lock, gave the front door a shove, and stepped over the threshold. Finally home. About time.

Time to heal.

The foyer was dark, but he didn't need to hit the light switch. Even being gone for as long as he had been, he still knew the house well enough. He made his way to the stairs and set down his bags. Those two small duffels didn't hold much evidence of his life for the past couple of years. Just some toiletries and a few basic items of clothing.

As he straightened, the foyer lit up, blinding him for a second. He blinked when a young voice rang out from the top of the steps. "Hold it right there! Put your arms up and back away from the stairs."

What the fuck?

Mace had expected to see his sister bounding down the stairway of his two-story colonial, excited after not seeing her brother for the past two years. Actually, more like one year, eleven months and fifteen days. Not that he was counting. But instead, he stared up into the deadly eye of a Glock. And from his viewpoint it looked like a model 23, a .40 caliber. A compact but still a decent sized gun in a very small, very uneasy hand. Instantly, the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

Damn. He'd dealt with crime bosses and their flunkies—from drug to porno rings—and had managed to survive. Now he was going to be killed by some measly punk he surprised while burglarizing his house? The cruel irony made him want to laugh. Instead, he did as he was instructed. With caution, he raised his hands above his head before stepping back toward the middle of the foyer. He avoided standing directly under the light, trying to get a better view of the top of the steps. But he didn't have much success; the upstairs hallway and the upper section of the stairway were hidden in shadows.

If he played his cards right, this little *situation* would be under his control in no time at all. He just had to keep the kid calm and make the skinny punk believe he was the one in command. From experience, Mace knew the Glock didn't have a conventional safety. All the kid had to do was pull the trigger and pull it again and again until all the rounds in the clip emptied into Mace's body. And from what he could see in the limited light, the kid's fingers were twitching from nervousness.

Not a good sign.

Where had a young punk gotten an expensive handgun like that? It certainly hadn't been in the house. And if it had been, it would have been locked up in the gun safe.

If only he could see the boy's face. He needed to see the eyes. Without seeing his eyes, Mace couldn't even begin to predict what the kid would do.

"Don't you dare move or I'll blow your face off!" The kid's voice raised an octave, making him sound more and more like ... a girl.

Tension ran through Mace's body as the person started down the steps. At first he could see bare toes, a slim calf, then another. His gaze flicked to the gun, before returning to the shapely naked thighs which couldn't belong to a kid—no way. Especially not a boy. Those smooth legs definitely belonged to a woman—and he couldn't wait to see the

rest of her. So far, the view almost made it worth being held at gunpoint. Almost.

He was disappointed when an oversized T-shirt—*shit*, was that Marmaduke on it?—blocked his view of creamy flesh. His arms were tired, his leg throbbed painfully, and his patience was wearing thin. But he still wasn't going to move, since he had no idea who this woman descending the stairs was. His curiosity piqued when she stepped down into the light, which highlighted her long, curly red hair and made her wide, green—glaring—eyes sparkle and snap.

A twitch shot through his lower stomach and landed in his groin. Fear or pain didn't make him suck in his breath. It was her unrestricted breasts bobbing under the cotton shirt with each step she took. Her nipples stood out like two beacons under the worn cotton.

Jesus.

He had to clear his throat twice before he could ask her, "Are you robbing this house, dressed like that?"

If he was lucky, she would perform a body search on him for valuables. A very thorough body search, one involving body parts. He could wish, anyway. It might make this all worthwhile. He tried not to smirk. Irritating a woman with a gun wasn't smart. Experience, and he had plenty of it, had taught him that much.

She hesitated halfway down the staircase, still pointing the gun at him. A look of uncertainty crossed her features, before disappearing as quickly as it had come. She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "Am *I* robbing this house? The question is: What are *you* doing here?"

His leg began to throb again, the way it had earlier on his long drive into town. But he preferred the ache to no feeling at all. He was glad to even still have his leg. Hell, he was lucky just to be alive.

"I live here." She didn't believe him; he wasn't surprised. "Can I put my arms down now?" His fists clenched high above his head—fighting the pain and fighting the urge to drop them to rub his thigh.

"No! Don't move! I'm going to call the cops. Back up." She jabbed the gun in his direction.

Mace didn't move, instead he let out a long, very loud, impatient sigh.

"Back up, I said! Or I'll shoot you."

"It's happened before," he said dryly.

The redhead looked at him in surprise, her feet faltering on the last step. "What?"

"I've been shot before. So go ahead. I'll probably survive again. I'm pretty lucky."

She squeezed the gun tighter in her hand, if that was even possible. "Well, your luck has run out, buddy."

"Hmm. Especially if you have hollow points in that clip." She glanced at the gun; it was a just a quick flick of her eyes, but he caught it. "Did you ever see anyone shot with a Black Talon? It's pretty nasty. Slugs go in and come out. Hollow-points go in and blow out—usually half your body. Makes quite a mess."

The arm holding the black, lightweight gun, trembled.

"Did you ever hear of the saying, 'Don't pull it, unless you're going to use it'? If you decide to use it, make sure you use both hands. Be sure you kill me, not maim me."

"Shut up!"

Mace did. The woman placed her free hand underneath the gun to support it. At least she was open to suggestions. His talking had unnerved her, and he didn't need her to

squeeze the trigger by accident. Hollow-points or not, all bullets tend to hurt. He frowned at the thought.

“Lie on the floor! Your hands behind your head! Now!”

Christ, the bitch was starting to get annoying now. But at this point she was close enough to kill him, even if she was a bad shot. He’d had enough with the games for tonight. He was tired and just wanted to go to bed in *his own house*.

Mace judged the distance. “Can’t.” He just needed her a few steps closer.

She waved the gun at him recklessly, her left foot moving forward. “Do it!”

One more step...

“I can’t kneel easily. I’ve got a bum leg.” The bum leg was true enough, but he exaggerated a bit on the kneeling part. He’d been known to lie when he had a gun directed at him. Sometimes lies came easier than truths. And he’d had a lot of practice.

“From all those times being shot, huh?”

“Actually, yeah...”

“Down on the ground or I’ll blow your brains all over this foyer.” Her slow words, muttered through gritted teeth, made him think she might be serious. Her right foot moved to keep her balance.

Now was his chance.

Mace lunged. He cracked her extended arm with his fist, causing a cry of pain. As she grabbed her injured wrist, the gun dropped, skittering across the tile floor. He grasped both her flailing arms, pushing her. She fell back against the stairs, air whooshing from her lungs. Her head had missed the edge of the steps by a fraction of an inch. He planted his knees on the outside of her bare thighs, pinning them together.

Mace looked down at the woman trapped beneath him. His weight crushed her into the carpeted steps. And he didn’t care. He was in pain, so why shouldn’t she be?

“Oh, God, please. Don’t—” she whispered, her voice catching. Eyes wide, she sank her teeth into her bottom lip.

Mace scowled. “Don’t what? Hurt you? After you just had a gun pointed at my head, you don’t want me to hurt you?”

The pulse in her delicate neck pounded against her creamy skin—like it wanted to escape.

“If ... if you leave now, I won’t call the police. I’ll forget this ever happened.”

Liar. If she got the chance she would run into the kitchen and dial 911.

Mace chuckled at her discomfort, even though he felt a little of his own. Damn, not just a little but a lot. His leg muscle burned like hell. “If you call the police, the only person they are going to be taking away is you.”

She twisted underneath him, making him wince with pain. He gritted his teeth to avoid groaning out loud. That groan would not have been a pleasurable one. No, what a pity. It had been a while since he had been with any beautiful females like the one underneath him. He’d have to make an effort to change that soon. But right now he had a problem to deal with and the problem continued to squirm underneath him. Even though he wasn’t feeling at all charitable right now, he was going to have to let her up. For his own sake.

Mace stood, lifting her with him, careful not to release her wrists. He angled away from her slightly, making sure a knee or foot didn’t connect with any of his vital areas. He was in enough pain already. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same.” She exhaled loudly, visibly regaining control of herself.

Mace shook his head, tightening his grip on her wrists—a little reminder of the change of power. “No. I’m in charge now. Unless you want me to have you toted out of here with handcuffs on, you’d better answer my fucking questions.”

“I’m not going to tell you, a ... a criminal, who I am.”

Oh, brother. “I’m not a criminal.”

She eyed him skeptically through the long mane of red hair falling over her face.

“Okay, so what are you doing in this house?”

Mace let another impatient sigh escape. Maybe he should close his eyes and count to ten... *Nah, fuck it.* “I told you, I live here. And stop trying to screw with me. Just answer my questions.”

“I’m not *screwing* with you. Go ahead and call the police.” She flattened her lips together and tilted her chin toward the ceiling.

Christ, was she stubborn! He would have to try another tactic to get her to talk. He was trying to be reasonable, but ... he didn’t have many options. He really didn’t want the local police involved. Not if he could avoid it anyway. And it wasn’t necessary; if he couldn’t handle one skinny-assed woman by himself, he needed to give up his day job.

Hell, that wasn’t fair, she probably wasn’t skinny-assed. She probably had a nice rear on her, one which matched the nice front. He wouldn’t mind checking it out, just to make sure. He loved a woman who was nicely balanced—tits and ass.

“If you don’t tell me who you are and what you’re doing here, I’ll strip off this skimpy shirt of yours and anything else you’re wearing—which probably isn’t much.” He raked another look down her long, supple, hot little body. *It has been too long.* “And drag you out onto the front lawn. I’ll start yelling like a carnival barker until all of the neighbors come out and look at you buck naked. They might enjoy a nice little side show.”

It was an empty threat, but Mace contained his smirk when what little color she had drained away from her face. What she didn’t know was if he made the effort—even as small as it would be—to get her naked, there wouldn’t be anyone looking at her but him. His cock was already at half-mast.

She remained silent. He couldn’t believe it, she actually wasn’t going to talk. He grasped both her wrists in one hand and with the other began to slowly pull up the hem of her nightshirt, revealing pink satin panties. *Hot damn.* His dick was at complete attention now, but unfortunately caught in an uncomfortable position. He was not going to adjust himself right at the moment, proving what a horny shit he was.

Before he could raise the soft cotton shirt above her flat belly—*Goddamn, she was an innie*—she squirmed her hips away from him, the color returning to her face in full force. “Okay, okay! My name is Colby Parks.” In what looked like defeat, she closed her eyes.

Mace reluctantly released the shirt, pushing away the feeling of regret, and watched the fabric catch on her hip. For half a second, he wished she would have been more stubborn; she was obviously not wearing a bra. He would have liked to see what was under the big dumb Great Dane. He gave himself a mental shake. “Colby Parks? Is that your real name?”

“Yes!” She tossed her head, flipping the hair away from her face.

A dusting of freckles crossed her nose. He knew better than to be distracted by

something so simple like freckles. He wondered where else she had freckles. Okay, he needed to concentrate! This woman had pulled a gun on him. In his career he couldn't afford to lose his focus. "It must be. Who could make up a name like that? What are you doing here?"

"House sitting."

"Yeah." Mace chuckled again. "And doing a very good job at it." His humor quickly vanished to deadly seriousness. He pushed his face close to hers. His attempt to intimidate her once again failed when her soft breath, coming quickly through those full, parted lips, sidetracked him once more. For a split second. Or two. "Who hired you?"

Colby Parks' green eyes shot daggers at him. Now he knew where the saying "if looks could kill" came from. "If you truly live here, you should know that!"

Mace squeezed her wrists tighter. His eyes narrowed as he muttered, "Lady, I'm not here to play games. Answer the question."

Colby hesitated a second before Mace saw the resignation cross her expression. He was almost disappointed she was going to give up. He liked her fire. Okay, he more than *liked* it.

"Maxi ... Maxine Walker."

Ah, so that's why his sister wasn't here to greet him. Maxi hired this little gun-toting vixen to watch the house. She was out of town.

Mace released her without warning and Colby stumbled away, rubbing her wrists. She turned and ran into the kitchen. Mace followed right behind her, making sure he stayed between her and the gun. She was predictable. He depressed the hook switch on the phone while she frantically dialed.

"Don't call the police. It would just be more of an embarrassment for you."

Colby held the phone to her chest like a lifeline. She stared at him, wide-eyed. A rabbit cornered by a wolf. The pressure of the handset against the thin, worn cotton only emphasized what he was trying not to notice. Okay, what he didn't want to admit to noticing. He turned away, picked up the gun, stuffing it into his jacket pocket, and limped to the kitchen table. With a groan, he slowly sank into a hard wooden chair. "I'm Mace Walker. Maxi's brother." He didn't bother to look at her, he assumed she would make the right choice at this point.

From behind, Mace heard the receiver clatter onto its base. Huh, he was right. He massaged his right thigh, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"Maxi's brother." The whisper had come from behind him. But within another second she was standing in front of him, hands jammed on her hips, eyes narrowed. "She doesn't have a brother."

Mace looked at the gathered cotton at her waist, trying to ignore—but failing miserably—the way the hem of the shirt was now cockeyed and almost flashing those pink panties. Those panties probably smelled so sweet. He massaged his thigh harder.

"Well, if she doesn't, then I'm just a figment of your imagination."

She shot him an incredulous look. "I've known Maxi for over a year and she has never—not once—mentioned a brother. And she certainly didn't tell me he'd be visiting."

She stood for a minute, appearing undecided what to do. With an exasperated huff, she pulled out the chair across from him. With a tug on the hem of her nightshirt, Colby settled into it. The tug was a sad attempt at covering her long length of thigh, but it

certainly covered that sweet little package wrapped in pink satin. *Okay, concentrate, damn it.*

“She doesn’t tell anyone she has a brother so no one asks questions.” He stood and left the kitchen, returning a few moments later with a prescription bottle and her gun. He released the full clip and unloaded the round in the chamber. A chill ran up his spine as the lone hollow-point bullet rolled across the kitchen table. She really could have shot him. He tossed the empty gun in her lap, making her jump. Leave it to a woman to be more dangerous than the Mafia. *Fuck.*

“I hope you have a license for that.” He stuck the clip in his jacket pocket, and went to the cabinet for a glass.

He was relieved the glasses were still in the same place where he left them two years ago. He had horrible visions of his sister taking over his house and redecorating it all girly-like. He was glad she had enough sense to leave things be.

When he crossed to the sink, he realized he was wrong. Maxi *had* changed some things. He frowned at the little yellow ceramic duck with a blue ribbon tied around its neck which held a sponge. That would have to go.

After filling the glass with cold tap water, he swallowed a pill and took a drink. On second thought, he popped another. He settled across from Colby again, studying her while he waited for the painkillers to kick in. Her mouth was pressed into a tight line, a shame for those luscious lips, and he could see the wheels turning in her head.

“Why wouldn’t she want anyone to know she has a brother? Were you in jail?” Her eyes widened for a second. “Are you an escaped convict?”

Mace couldn’t help but smile. She had to be kidding. “Yeah, I’m an escaped convict and you’re my hostage. You have to do what I say. Get naked and lie on the table.”

Mace watched for a reaction. Nothing.

Colby Parks looked stone-cold, not even a twitch of a smile. “I want to see some proof you are who you say you are.”

Lady, someone must have burned you good to make you so mistrustful you have to interrogate a friend’s brother. Oh, and carry a gun. He couldn’t forget that. But, honestly, he couldn’t blame her. It was like looking at his reflection; he would be just as cautious and suspicious if he were in her shoes—he glanced down at her naked feet—or in those cute, pink painted toes.

“What, knowing which cabinet the drinking glasses are in isn’t proof enough?”

“Don’t toy with me. I want to see some ID.”

Her determination fascinated him. Determined, not afraid of guns, one hell of a hottie ... a redheaded, green-eyed, freckled one, to boot. Colby reminded him of an uptight school teacher. The kind who, at night, would let her hair down and get wild. She could be a sex kitten under her stubborn exterior. His type of woman. Mace grinned. His mind drifted back to their conversation and he realized she waited expectantly. “ID? Like my inmate’s ID card with my mug shot and number on it?”

“An ID would do.”

“Sorry, I left it behind when I scaled the walls. Had to pack light. It was a long swim from Alcatraz to land.” Unfortunately, she didn’t seem to appreciate his sense of humor. He sighed, the pain in his leg was slowly easing. His relief was short-lived, for some reason he now had a headache. He looked over at the reason. “Where is my dear sister, anyhow?”

“Away.”

“Hmm. I figured. She wouldn’t have needed a house-sitter if she was only on a date.”

“She’s on her honeymoon.”

Mace straightened up, his eyes narrowing. “Honeymoon?” He tried to read her expression but it was nonexistent. At the moment, she was a rock.

“Yes, you know, the trip you go on after you get married?”

He ignored the dig, thinking her humor was no better than his. “She got married? To who? When? Where did she go?”

Colby leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. Mace wanted to protest because he could no longer see the hard pebbles of her nipples through her shirt. “If you’re her brother, why don’t you know about this? Why weren’t you at the wedding? Did you have a falling out or were you really in prison?”

“Neither. We were separated by necessity.” The half-assed explanation sounded lame even to his ears.

“Separated by necessity,” she said slowly, the words rolling around in her mouth like she could taste them. “And how long was this so-called *separation*?”

“I don’t know.” Of course, he knew. But saying it out loud made it sound worse.

“Two years,” he mumbled.

“Two years,” she repeated with a frown. “Then you’ll just have to wait until she gets back. I don’t feel I should tell you her personal details.”

With a weary sigh, Mace rubbed a hand over his eyes. Too tired to argue, he said, “And when will that be?”

“In two months.”

Mace cursed softly. Two months? Who goes on a honeymoon for two months? “I might not be here that long.”

“You won’t be here at all. I wasn’t given any instructions about letting visitors stay while she was away. So you’ll just have to hide out somewhere else.”

“Think again. I own this house.”

He grinned when Colby stiffened in her chair and her hands landed back in her lap. Her knuckles whitened, her grip tightening on the empty gun.

*

Colby stood and laid the gun on the table, studying the man across from her. Mace Walker’s presence alone was enough to rattle her at first, but now she was torn by conflicting emotions. He said he was Maxi’s brother. This house was his, not hers. Why hadn’t Maxi told her? Could she trust him? He certainly didn’t look trustworthy.

His intensely dark, almost black eyes and his unshaven face unnerved her. His dark clothes seemed suspicious since his bulky leather jacket was oversized, perhaps large enough to conceal something. Creeping into the house after dark made him even more suspect. Maybe she should call the police anyway. Possibly he was just trying to get her to let her guard down, only to rape and murder her in her sleep. Then again, maybe he was telling the truth. He did sort of look like Maxi, but in a more beefy, masculine way.

“I still want to see some ID,” she repeated, more firmly this time.

With a grumble he pulled out his wallet, flipping it open. A photo ID was tucked in the clear plastic front pocket, but he didn’t remove it and she couldn’t see it clearly from where she stood. He dug until he found something specific. He handed her an old,

expired driver's license, one in which he looked much younger ... and his expression was worry-free. No frown lines marred the man looking at her from the photo, but it did prove he was Macen Jeffrey Walker and the address was for the house they were sitting in.

"What, you haven't had a driver's license since you were..." Colby glanced at the date. "Eighteen? Been in the slammer that long?" She did some quick figuring. He was thirty-six. She now had serious doubts he had ever been imprisoned, but she wanted to pay him back for scaring her earlier. It was only fair.

"No. Not any with my real name on them."

"Ah. So what do you do," Colby read his name off the license, "Mr. Macen Jeffrey Walker, that you haven't seen or even talked to your sister in two years, don't have a current driver's license with your own name on it and have to creep into your own house after dark?" She flipped the license back to him. She couldn't wait to hear his explanation.

He caught the license in midair, taking his time tucking it back into his wallet before answering her. "Oh, this and that. You know, a lot of traveling."

"No, I don't know."

"That's too bad, Colby."

Colby wasn't sure what he meant. But one thing she was sure about was her name on his lips bothered her, for more reasons than she wanted to admit. "Not really. Your job wouldn't have anything to do with manufacturing license plates, would it?"

"Sort of. I do the hiring, in a way." Mace stiffly pushed himself up from the chair and swept long fingers through his coffee-colored hair, the kind of coffee he probably drank. Black and strong. "Well, I'm beat. I'm going up to bed."

"Wait..." Colby followed him into the foyer, realizing he had two bags sitting by the staircase. She hadn't noticed them earlier in the tussle. "I still don't think this is a good idea."

As he leaned down to pick up his duffel bags, his hand gripped the banister tightly, so tight she wouldn't be surprised if there were indentations from his fingers in the wood.

"I don't care what you think. I'm tired. This is my house. I'm going to my bed. Those are the facts. Live with them."

Clearly, he was struggling to keep a blank face. He was in pain just walking up the steps, evident by the white brackets around his pressed lips. She wondered how old his injury was. She stood there helplessly while he carried his bags up the stairs.

He couldn't just walk away leaving her unsettled. Should she stay? Should she go? And if he wanted her to go, should she leave now or in the morning? Colby followed him up the steps. She decided to test him. "If it's okay, I'll gather my things in the morning."

Mace stopped abruptly at the top of the stairway, before turning to tower over her. Colby halted in her tracks, instinctively grabbing the banister for balance. "You don't have to leave. Maxi hired you, so you can stay and finish your job. I don't know how long I'll be in town anyway. I'd hate to have to find another house-sitter on a moment's notice when we have a perfectly good one already."

Colby tried not to show her relief. She had nowhere else to go; the house she was renovating wouldn't be habitable for at least another two months. That's why she was so grateful to Maxi for letting her housesit. The timing had been perfect ... well, except for this little snag.

Little wasn't the word for him. He had to be six-foot-three with his boots on. She

was sure his jacket made him look heavier than he really was. But his legs were long and lean, especially encased in those sinfully snug, worn blue jeans. Damn, but she could appreciate a man with a good ass in well-fitted jeans.

Mace turned away suddenly to continue down the hall. Maybe he didn't like women staring at him. It was only fair after feeling his eyes burn her bare skin earlier.

She trailed him to the end of the hall, keeping her distance when he pulled out a ring of keys, inserting one into the first door on the left. She had wondered why the room across from hers was locked. She had attempted to open it one day when she was vacuuming. Maxi's room was down the hall and Colby was sleeping in what she assumed was a guest room. Now it made sense—the secret room of the secret brother.

She tried to peer around him when he swung open the door, but only saw the dust rising behind him when he flipped on the light. She was prepared to follow him in to see the locked sanctuary, but he blocked her view and her way when he turned to face her.

“Well, good night.”

Colby extended a hand to stop the door from slamming in her face. She showed him her empty gun. “What about my clip?”

Mace frowned. “You'll get it back when you show me you know how to properly handle and shoot the thing. Good night.”

The terse parting and the shutting of the door in her face was a sure sign of her dismissal.

Colby stood, her fists planted on her hips, staring at the closed door for a few minutes. She listened to the rustling behind the door, wondering what he was doing. *Getting ready for bed, most likely, genius.* She should be asleep herself.

She would find out more about him tomorrow. Especially if they were planning on staying under the same roof, she thought, crossing the hall to her room.

After climbing into bed, still ruffled from when she had jumped out of it earlier, she placed her gun on the nightstand so it would be within arm's reach. She was tempted to put her gun under the pillow, but she'd probably blow her own head off if she ended up tossing and turning. It might be empty at the moment but...

A wicked smile crossed her face as she opened her dresser.

Inside it lay another clip. Along with three more boxes of ammo.

* * * *

Mace threw his bags on the bed and sank down beside them. He ran a hand through his already tousled hair while letting out a long, soothing sigh. He gazed around the master bedroom. The furniture had a layer of dust. Pictures of his late parents and his sister dotted the room. His alarm clock had never been set after the last power outage: it flashed 12:00 incessantly. He glanced at this watch. It was almost midnight.

He was home. Really home. Not in some strange motel in some unknown town surrounded by people who shouldn't be classified as human.

He was sick of the city life: the noise, the rush, and the constant wariness. He had felt a lot of the tension in his body dissipate the moment he had driven into Malvern. This town was quite different, more laid back, and even though it was a large college town, its population was only a fraction of New York City's.

He was disappointed, though. He really had been looking forward to spending time with his sister, Maxi, the only person who really understood him. He wanted to run things

by her, bend her ear a bit. Hell, more like a lot. He needed to figure out his future. But now he'd have to wait. Wait to be around someone who loved him for who he really was.

Not loved or even hated him for whom he pretended to be.

He didn't know how long he was going to last, doing what he did. The job was taking a toll on him. He was tired of spending time with people he reviled and couldn't trust. He was tired of having to agonizingly memorize details of a made-up life. An existence where one slip-up could cost your life or a colleague's.

He rubbed his thigh. His last assignment had been a killer, both emotionally and physically. He just needed time now. Time to forget.

Time to heal.

He thought about the redhead just across the hall from him. He felt a twinge of guilt about his brusqueness toward her. On the other hand, it was hard to be nice when you're being threatened with a loaded weapon. He had to admit he was impressed with her guts and determination—whether it was real or just an act to cover her fear.

Mace had originally thought his time home would be boring. Dull. Uneventful.

Colby Parks just might have changed that.

Chapter Two

Colby stirred the eggs around the fry pan, scrambling them.

She was tired, which was to be expected since she hardly slept last night, too busy listening to every creak in the night. Each time she thought she heard footsteps, she'd sat straight up in bed, reaching for her gun. It ended up being nothing, and this morning she felt like an idiot. A huge one.

She glanced at her watch. Since it was Saturday, she had her normal plans to go over to the house to check on the status of the renovations.

She was sinking her life savings into the old house and she wanted to make sure everything was going smoothly. Plus, she wanted to finish painting the kitchen. She had already done the cabinets, but the walls were only spackled and primed, ready to complete. She hoped the yellow she had picked would help cheer up the dreary kitchen. She wasn't sure. The only thing she was sure of was she stunk at interior decorating. But she just couldn't afford to hire—

"Mmm. Smells good. Got enough for one more?"

The spatula clattered into the pan, flinging bits of egg onto the stovetop. She took two deep breaths to try to slow her heart rate before retrieving the utensil and turning to face the intruder.

The reason why she hadn't gotten more than a few winks of sleep last night entered the small kitchen, pushing his slightly damp hair away from his face. He was wearing an old, threadbare black T-shirt and black sweatpants. Since when did ratty sweatpants ever look sexy on a man? And he was barefoot, his long toes wiggling against the cool linoleum floor. "Sure."

He looked at home grabbing the freshly squeezed grapefruit juice she had set on the table earlier and pouring himself a glass. Well, he should, she guessed, since it really was his home. Whether she liked it or not.

"Sleep well?"

"Of course," she lied. She hid a chuckle with her hand when he made a disgusted face after the first swallow. She knew the juice was a little bitter; she preferred it that way. It was one reason why she squeezed it herself.

Mace wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist. "Jeez, any coffee?"

Colby shook her head. "Don't drink it."

"Yeah? You're probably the only one in the county who doesn't." He moved around the kitchen, opening cabinets until he found an old, stained coffee maker. He dragged it out, cleared some counter space, and plugged it in.

"I try to eat healthy," she said.

She couldn't help but notice he looked quite healthy himself this morning. And, in the light of day, quite edible. The cotton shirt clung to the curves of his chest, accentuating how nicely fit he was. His pecs were noticeable beneath the black tee. Quite noticeable. His arms were sculpted just right. Not too bulky, his biceps looked lean and strong. His shoulders were wide, meeting a neck not huge like a body builder, but corded all the same. She hadn't been able to tell any of those details last night when he was wearing his bulky jacket. She turned her attention back to the pan before he caught her

drooling.

Mace dug up some filters from a drawer and then went to the refrigerator. He let out a low curse and slammed the freezer door. "No coffee! You'd at least think my sister would have left some." Suddenly he was behind her, peering over her shoulder into the frying pan. "I thought eggs were bad for you."

The scent of fresh soap wafting over her, combined with his close body heat, caused her pulse to quicken. Even though he hadn't shaved his face this morning, he looked much less like the criminal she thought he was last night.

Unless it was a crime to look that good.

"Only if you eat them a lot. A couple a week aren't going to kill you. They're good protein." She removed a loaf of multi-grain bread from the breadbox.

"That's good to know. I think I'm more worried about the gun you have killing me than a couple of artery-clogging eggs."

Colby heard a chair scrape the floor behind her.

"I slept well too, by the way. It was nice to be in my own bed," he said.

"Yeah, I bet those prison cots aren't too comfortable."

She heard a half-assed groan. "When are you going to stop with the prison cracks?"

Colby shrugged and bit back a smile, popping four slices of bread into the toaster. "When I run out of them."

She schooled the humor from her face before turning. He was studying her from where he sat at the table. He was probably wondering why she was dressed the way she was. She wore her denim overalls over a plain white T-shirt with the oversized short sleeves rolled up. The clunky, steel-toed boots she had on weren't very feminine either. Definitely not a sexy look for her, but you wouldn't know it from his heated gaze.

"Are you a construction worker?"

"Sort of," she said, echoing his equivocation from last night. She plopped a tub of "heart healthy" margarine on the table.

"It's a sin to keep that hair of yours pulled back."

As she neared, he tugged on her long, heavy braid. The sight of his large hand sliding along her hair made her breath catch. And it wasn't from fear. That was the scary part. She yanked her head, releasing her hair from his grasp. She stepped back, giving herself a cushion of safety. "Well, if I want to keep this hair the way it is, I have to tie it back to keep it out of paint and plaster." She pointed the spatula at his hair. "It's a sin for a man to have such long hair like yours. Long and full. I bet some women are envious. Men too."

He ran a hand through it. "It needs a cut," he admitted ruefully.

Colby didn't think so. It fit his personality. At least what she knew of him already, which really wasn't much. She wondered again why he had kept out of his sister's life for two years. When she was unable to sleep last night, her head had filled with too many questions. A strange man sleeping just across the hallway didn't help either. Yes, the lack of sleep was because she was being cautious with a stranger, not because he disturbed her in other ways. Ways she didn't want to admit.

Mace cut into her thoughts. "What are you painting and plastering?"

"A house," she said absently, scooping eggs onto two plates and adding the toast. She slid a plate in front of him. "Don't bother to ask for bacon."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He speared the eggs with his fork. "Whose house? Is that

what you do for a living?"

Colby rolled her eyes. "No way. It's a dirty job."

She sat down and grabbed a small container from the center of the table. A swig of grapefruit juice helped her down a couple of vitamin supplements. She offered him the bottle. "Want some?"

Mace shook his head and pulled out his own bottle from his sweats' pocket—the same bottle from last night. He popped a couple of white, oblong pills.

"I have my own."

"What are they?" Colby looked at the prescription curiously. Before she could read the label he tucked them back in his pocket.

"Strong vitamins."

Colby lifted an eyebrow at him but refrained from commenting. His business, his problem.

"So whose house are you're getting dirty over?"

She swallowed a mouthful of eggs. "Mine. I bought an old house. I'm fixing it up."

"By yourself?" He looked intrigued.

Colby didn't think it was very fascinating. "No. During the week I have a contractor doing most of the work. On the weekends I like to go out there and dawdle around. Do little things here and there. Most of the time I end up sitting in the middle of a half-finished room, daydreaming about what it's going to look like when the house is completed."

Mace polished off his breakfast, and then eyed the lone piece of toast remaining on Colby's plate. "Sounds like quite a project."

She offered the piece to him and he accepted, sinking his white teeth into the crispy toast while she still held it, barely grazing the tip of her finger. He had done that on purpose. His grin gave it away.

She refrained from trembling by curling her fingers into a fist while trying to keep on the subject at hand. She didn't want him to know how he affected her. "It is. It's all I've got. All my money—all the money I've earned—is in that house. I can't wait until it's finished."

She took the empty plates over to the sink and washed them. Mace helped her dry.

"Why not build a new house?"

"Never. The house needed saving. I felt it in my bones the first time I saw it. I don't think it's right to tear down an old building just because it needs a little work. The house has history. Many lives have gone through it. That place has housed and comforted many people throughout its existence. If only walls could talk."

"Maybe it's better they can't. Otherwise, I'd be blackmailed by many, many walls by now."

Colby leaned her hip against the counter, drying her hands. She considered his strong, angular jaw covered by light olive skin and dark stubble. "Ah, so you *have* done many bad things in your life, huh, Macen Walker?"

"Just call me Mace. To answer your question: not necessarily. I just wouldn't want anyone telling everybody what I've done in my lifetime. Good or bad. It's my decision to tell."

"Like why you've kept away from your sister for so long?"

"There was a good reason and I'd rather not talk about it." He stood directly in front

of her. "Instead, I'd like to come along with you and see this house which needs so much work."

His offer caught her off guard. That was the last thing she expected. He stepped a little closer and for a moment she thought he was going to grab her. He was way too close for her comfort. She wasn't used to being around strange men, especially ones she was attracted to.

Colby smacked herself mentally. What was she thinking? She'd just met this guy and all she could think about was how dangerous looking and exciting he was, all wrapped up in a sexy package. My God, just looking at him was making her lower body twinge, her panties dampen and her nipples pebble almost painfully. She was going to hell. She never had feelings like this so quickly. This was not like her. Not at all.

But he was Maxi's brother. She trusted Maxi. And so far this morning, he had been nothing but kind and, for the most part, non-threatening. There was no reason for her not to trust him. Well, maybe she wasn't quite sure why he had disappeared for two years. That *was* a little weird.

It had been a while since she'd been alone with such a man's man. And there was no doubt he was that. Men who caused a sexual reaction for her were few and far between. But this morning, that's all she could think about when she looked at Mace.

She opened her mouth to turn him down, but instead the words escaping her mouth were: "Great, but we'll have to take your car." She assumed he had one, though she hadn't bothered to look. "I was going to ride my bike over."

"No problem. We'll take my truck." He gave her a quick smile. "I'll go get ready."

Colby stared as Mace left the kitchen to change. The last thing she expected in life was for a mysterious man to come walking into it. And she felt she should be afraid, very afraid. Suddenly, her quiet little life, one she had worked very hard for, was going to get flipped upside down. She wasn't sure she was ready for it.

And if he thought he was going to remain mysterious, he was wrong. She wanted to know more about Macen Jeffery Walker.

* * * *

Mace parked his F-150 extended cab in front of the huge, looming old house. It took all his strength to close his dropped jaw.

The monstrosity was surrounded by overgrown, weedy rose bushes. The lawn was barren in some spots and overgrown in others. He tried not to cringe when he saw it, but Colby caught him.

"Oh, it won't be so bad after a fresh coat of paint and the wrap-around porch is repaired. I have a landscaper coming in a couple of weeks to take care of the yard."

Mace didn't have the heart to tell her it needed more than that. The old copper gutters—blackish-green from weathering—hung away from the eaves in places, some of the shutters were missing and the rest—well, the rest should be just torn down. Hell, he could see the porch roof sagging from where he sat.

"You'll have to see inside to really appreciate it." She jumped out of the truck, and he followed reluctantly.

"Hmm. I'm sure."

He really doubted it. What he didn't doubt was how she felt about the place.

Colby's face lit up when they walked through the wrought iron gate. Well, beauty

was in the eye of the beholder. And that eye wasn't in *his* head. He thought the house looked like it was the set of a horror movie. A "B" movie at best.

The only beauty on this property was the slender redhead walking in front of him. He was mesmerized by the swing of her hips. Even in those god-awful denim overalls she was fuckable. His cock got hard just thinking about it. Sliding into her tight dampness—

"Careful." She took his elbow when they reached the porch and guided him cautiously, apparently knowing just where to step to avoid the rotting floorboards.

He was glad she was there to show him the way, because he was sorely distracted by her lips. When she ran her tongue across them unconsciously, he bit back a groan. Damn, he never got this out of control. But there was no denying he wanted those lips on a certain hard part of his anatomy. Hell, anywhere on his body would be good.

When they got to the entranceway, Colby stopped short, the smile on her face widening. Mace closed his eyes for a second, willing himself to behave. When he opened them again, the first thing he saw was the front double doors needed a good scraping and a fresh coat of paint. Even so, Colby ran her fingers lovingly over one of the oval, stained glass panels. His cock twitched with every slide of her fingers. He desperately wanted to reach down and adjust himself. But he fought it. Hard.

"Just look at these. I can't walk into this house without stopping to admire these beautiful doors. I had the stained glass replaced in them. When I bought the place, almost all the windows were broken."

Once he could think straight, Mace admitted the doors were pretty nice. But he couldn't base his opinion on the house by the front doors alone; he was curious about what lay behind them. Curious whether the interior would be better or worse. Hell, it couldn't be worse and not be boarded up and condemned.

"How long have you owned it?"

"The bank and I have owned it for five months."

"I'm surprised the bank would mortgage a project like this."

Colby turned to him in surprise. "Why?"

Mace felt like eating his words. "Uh, because it..." *Because it was a dump, and any loan officer in his right mind would...* "Because of getting insurance on it. I bet it was difficult to insure something this old."

"No. No problem." She unlocked the door and stepped inside.

She had insurance on it. Good. The best thing, in his opinion, would be to burn the place down and start from scratch. *If only insurance fraud wasn't a federal offense.* He shook his head, following her over the threshold.

Later, Mace had to admit the place had character and understood why Colby loved it so much. She was doing a good job restoring it with the help of the contractors. But it was obviously going to be a long, slow process.

They sat on the floor in the empty, oversized dining room. Their "picnic" lunch was spread out on a drop cloth in the center of a wooden floor which was in desperate need of refinishing. Colby had packed leftover fried chicken and some homemade potato salad. From what he could tell from the two meals she'd fed him, she was a great cook. He could get used to eating like this very easily. He was tired of eating by himself in greasy dumps or fast food restaurants. They ate in companionable silence until they were both full. But he wasn't fully sated ... yet.

With a food-induced contented sigh, Mace stared up at the intricate woodwork

bordering the ceiling and the walls. At least the stained wainscoting, which lined the walls below a chair rail, was in decent shape and was not in need of painting. "This is a big house for one person."

"Yep. But I love big houses. And I don't mind living alone. I'm quite capable of taking care of myself now."

He wondered about the "now" part, but he let it go for the moment. "I've noticed," he answered instead, thinking about the gun she had stashed in her purse. She had brought it along, thinking he wouldn't know. But Mace knew. It was part of his inherent survival instinct. Not to mention, experience.

He wondered why she felt compelled to carry it in the first place. He didn't know many women who carried weapons unless they were law enforcement. So why Colby? Did she feel unsafe around him or was there some other reason?

That would be something he would have to look into when—if—he got to know her better. Nothing like the present to start to get to know her better... "Are you going to fill up these rooms?"

He forced down another bite of salad, it was just too good. He looked up in time to catch Colby licking chicken juice off her finger with the red, pointy tip of her tongue. Mace felt a throbbing pain suddenly, and it wasn't in his leg. He thought about ripping his clothes off and showing her how hard she made him, but he knew it would scare the hell out of her. He had to be patient. Patience, ha, that was one virtue he did have with all the time he had working undercover. He knew how to manipulate and "work" a situation to his favor. However, he wasn't on the job at the moment, and his cock was begging for release.

"I attend estate auctions whenever I can, along with the occasional antiquing. I think that's the best way to find furniture to match this house. Don't you?"

He blew out a breath, clearing his thoughts. He struggled to stay on the topic at hand and fought the urge to scream "Let's fuck!"

"That's not what I meant. I meant fill it up with family, with kids." Talking about the future, family and kids was enough to get his horniness under control. Somewhat. He'd take what he could get.

"Oh." Colby picked up a paper napkin to wipe her lips. "Someday, I guess."

Mace wondered about her. Most women dreamed of their own home and filling it with family, right? Why not her? She didn't really seem to care about the family part. Maybe she was just too independent. That "now" part was really nagging in the back of his mind. He just didn't want to push his luck and make her clam up.

She packed up the cooler and collected the garbage. She stood, brushing her hands on her overalls. "Ready to help me finish painting the kitchen?"

He wasn't really. His leg was beginning to ache. And he enjoyed sitting back, watching her touch with a paintbrush; sweeping the walls with bright yellow paint like an artist on a canvas.

His painting wasn't as neat as hers. After the first few smears, she had insisted on him rolling the center of the walls while she brushed the edges. He admired her though; she worked hard and never complained. He had wanted to complain, but didn't. He could stick it out as long as she did.

* * * *

The light was receding quickly in the kitchen as the sun disappeared below the horizon. Colby stood in the center of the now bright yellow room, contemplating their efforts. Mace had better things to look at, like her fiery hair spattered with yellow paint. Her body was reed-like even though she had matched his appetite bite for bite at lunch. Her wrists were delicate and her fingers long and slender. It amazed him she wore no jewelry except a very small pair of gold studs in her ears. Her hair was the best accessory she could have. Jewelry couldn't do her justice next to that mass of crimson fire. Fire he wanted to feel burning all over his body.

As she stood there, the thought of stripping her naked and fucking her hard, so hard, on the drop cloth, engulfed him. He turned away so she wouldn't see any evidence of his unruly cock. This was not like him. He never was this out of control. Yes, it had been a while since he'd been around a female as innocent as Colby. No, not quite innocent, more like unjailed. A woman not involved in illegal activities.

"What do you think? I think it looks great." When Mace didn't answer, she continued. "Just wait until the new appliances come in, and the new counter tops. Boy, I hope yellow was the right choice."

Insecurity laced her voice. For some reason her life seemed to depend on something as simple as whether or not she had made the right choice in paint color. If sunshine yellow wasn't the perfect match for the new sink and countertops, she would be a complete failure.

"If it's not, we'll repaint it." Complete silence enveloped him. He turned to look at her. Her expression of horror concerned him; almost like he'd just attacked her. He moved behind her to place his palms on her shoulders, rubbing them softly. "Yellow's going to look great." He trailed his hands up to her neck, his thumbs stroking the slender muscles under the soft skin.

Her smile returned as quickly as it had left and she pulled away from him to walk out of the room. She chattered away about the wall colors of the other rooms. Mace just shook his head and sighed. She was either oblivious or trying to ignore the fact some sort of spark existed between them.

But one thing was clear; she was burying herself in this house for a reason. It was the same reason she added the "now" to her *she could take care of herself* declaration. There was a fresh wound there somewhere. Physical, mental, he couldn't tell yet.

Of course people took pride in their homes, but she was a little too fixated. He was determined to find out why. He wanted to know more about Ms. Colby Parks. In more ways than one.

Chapter Three

Mace slept through most of Sunday morning. He awoke sore from the previous day of painting, and by the time he got his lazy, aching bones out of his comfy bed, the house was empty. Colby had left a note on the bathroom door, which he found during an early morning piss. The message said she had gone out to an estate sale with a friend and they were going to hit some yard sales on the way. She hoped he didn't mind her borrowing his truck. Well, hell. That was pretty ballsy of her.

At the same time, Colby absconding with his truck just gave him an excuse to crawl back in bed. Now, a couple hours later, he was still just being a lazy shit in his cozy nest of covers. If she was smart, she would have slept in too. Hell, if he was smart, he would have woken up with her in his arms, preferably naked, and started the day off right. But no. Instead, he lay on his mattress by his lonesome; his only company his morning, or more like mid-morning, wood.

He slid a hand down past the elastic of his boxer briefs and straightened out his hard-on. Damn. Doing it himself just wasn't the same. It was like settling for an after-dinner mint when you really wanted dessert.

He rolled over toward his nightstand and came face-to-face with the photo of his late parents. He cursed and slammed the framed picture face down. Just what he needed: his parents watching him relieve some sexual tension. He'd worried enough about them catching him when he was a teenager. He was never quite caught in the act; there had been some close calls, though. Too many to count.

He yanked open the drawer and shoved his hand deep until his fingers bumped against a small box. He pulled it out. Condoms. He turned it over and read the date. Hell, these were so old, not to mention probably so dry, they would break just trying to roll them on. Useless. He made a mental note to stock up next time he was out running errands. He planned on needing fresh ones. Hell, he could just add them to Colby's grocery list, the narrow pad of paper attached to the fridge by a magnet. Milk, eggs, bread, condoms. Yeah, it might be a tip-off.

He tossed the box next to the picture frame and continued his search. Ah, success. He lifted out the tube of water-soluble lube and sighed with relief. He smirked, relief was what he needed and relief was what he was going to get. He felt like he'd had a perpetual boner since walking in the door the other day and going face-to-face with that redheaded piece of ass.

What was worse, every time he tried to touch her, even innocently enough, she would pull away. He was getting nowhere fast. He thought maybe volunteering to help her out at that horrendous house would soften her up to him a bit. And he guessed it had, somewhat, but not enough. Definitely not fast enough, for his liking.

He lifted his hips and slid out of his underwear, tossing it over the fallen picture frame. No risk of peeking for the parents. He plumped his pillows behind him so he could sit up, leaning against the headboard. A perfect position.

He popped the lid on the tube and squirted a healthy amount in his palm. His cock twitched against his lower belly in anticipation. He threw the tube aside in his haste and grabbed his cock with his slick hand. He squeezed.

The head was deep red and the vein running down his shaft throbbed. He squeezed harder until the crown was almost purple and then, only then, did he slide his hand up. He ran his thumb around the head until it was well lubed. He fisted it, sliding his tight grip all the way back down to the base of his shaft.

Holy shit. He shuddered slightly. How long had it been since he'd even taken time to do a good jerk-off? He couldn't even remember.

He closed his eyes, and leaned his head back against the headboard. He let out a shaky breath. He'd only stroked it once. Just one stroke and he wanted to blow his load already. He adjusted his grip, making sure every finger encircled his girth, before stroking slowly once again.

It felt so good, but he wanted it to be Colby on top of him right now. He could sit there and she could straddle him and press her tight, but plump and definitely wet, lips around his cock. And slide up and down. Up and down.

His hand moved faster along his length, creating a steady, smooth rhythm. His fist was slick and warm and he so wanted it to be her riding him, slamming her ass cheeks against his lap, taking every inch of him in her and asking for more. *Fuck.*

His fist contracted and he quickened his pace. Up to the edge of the crown, squeeze, before a solid stroke back down. His balls tightened. He wanted to come in her pussy. Her ass, her mouth, hell, he didn't care. He repeated his stroke, over and over, his hips lifting with each down stroke, pushing against the mattress with each upstroke.

His chest heaved, trying to catch his breath. He was close. So close. He grabbed the root of his cock harder and squeezed all the way to the top. Then down once more. On the last upstroke, a throaty groan escaped his lips while hot come spurted all over his stomach and chest. He leaned back, panting, unable to move, his cock twitching with release. He squeezed his cock one last time, milking it of any remaining fluid.

He laughed softly. He'd needed that. He would have to do it again. Sometime soon.

He padded to the bathroom naked, only a slight limp hindering him due to his self-indulgent actions. Sometime soon became there and now. While he was showering, he soaped himself up and gave himself another hand job, a little more leisurely this time.

He finally got out of the shower when the water turned cool. With a large towel wrapped around his waist, he stepped out into the hall—and smack dab right into Colby.

They both jumped back in surprise, Colby squealing an “oh” at the same time Mace was apologizing.

“Sorry, sorry. I didn't see you there. Are you okay?” Jesus Christ, had she heard him whacking off in the shower?

If so, there was no indication of it. She stepped back and gave him a shaky smile, her hand over her heart. “I'm fine. I should have been more careful.”

“No, it was my fault.” Lack of oxygen to the brain. More like lack of blood.

She turned slightly and stepped back again. She had pinned herself against the hallway wall. She was probably uncomfortable he was bare-chested and only sporting a towel. Self-consciously he checked the tuck of the towel to make sure he didn't lose it. He wanted her, but wanted to be careful not to scare her away. “How was your bargain hunting?”

“Oh, uh, good. We had fun. I found a couple of nice small tables at the estate auction and picked up a few kitchen items at the yard sales.”

“So the truck came in handy?”

A blush rose up her throat. "I'm sorry. I should have asked. The keys were down by the front door and I didn't want to wake you. I filled up your tank."

"Hey, no problem. At least you left a note."

*

Colby had been trying to avoid staring at Mace's chest. It was just like she imagined it would be. Sculpted, but not too hard. Just right. He had small, dark nipples peeking out from a dusting of dark hair on each pec. A trail of hair went from circling his belly button to disappearing into the towel. No six pack but damn well close enough.

His damp hair was curling slightly around his face. It was long enough to almost brush against his shoulders. She curled her fingers against the urge to comb through it.

She studied the angle of his jaw, the curve of his upper lip, and the edge of his brow before looking into his eyes. She realized he was just standing there quietly, letting her check him out. Omigod. She wondered how long they had been standing there without saying a word. The heat already licking at her throat rose into her cheeks.

He reached out and when he did, she automatically flinched. He must have seen it because he hesitated a long second before brushing the back of his fingers over her cheekbone. Even though his face stayed neutral, she had caught the quick flicker in his eyes before he had quickly schooled that reaction also. Her face got even hotter. She couldn't believe her own reaction. To a touch that ended up being so gentle.

"No reason to be embarrassed."

Her mouth opened to say "I'm not," but instead she said nothing. He had no idea her blush wasn't from his physical contact but her humiliating instinctive reaction to his sudden movement toward her.

When he moved closer to her, only a breath away, she pushed her back against the wall, wishing she could disappear into the drywall. He was wearing a towel. Only a towel. *Only a towel* kept running through her mind. Even though it was long enough to cover him to his knees, one little slip and he would be totally exposed.

She licked her dry lips, the motion drawing his gaze. With lowered eyelids, he ran a thumb along her jaw line, then over her freshly moistened lower lip.

His face lowered, just a few inches away. "Can I kiss you?"

Colby swallowed hard. The lump in her throat remained. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

His hot breath mingled with hers. Almost as if their life breath was already intimate, kissing each other. "We don't know each other that well."

"A kiss might remedy the situation."

She shook her head slightly, still captivated by how close his lips were. If she shifted just a bit, just the slightest bit, their lips would touch. "I don't want things to be uncomfortable between us. We have to share a roof right now. A kiss might complicate things."

"It's just a kiss. A simple, quick kiss. Two people putting their lips together."

Somehow she didn't think it would be so simple. Or quick.

She reached out to push him away; she needed some breathing space, some clarity for her boggled brain. But when she did, her fingers encountered his heated skin, his muscles, the light, wiry hair along his chest.

She sucked her breath in from the contact, but when she did he closed the

infinitesimal space between them. His lips brushed hers lightly. Since her lips had already been slightly parted, he breathed her in and she did the same with him. He grazed her lips again. So soft. No pressure at all.

On the third sweep, he grabbed her shoulders and crushed his lips to hers. She opened her mouth to protest, but he slanted his against hers, dipping his tongue in, searching. Her objection was quickly forgotten.

Mace's tongue invaded her mouth, skimmed along her teeth, and tickled her tongue until she groaned and tentatively drew her tongue against his. Their tongues met, dueled and fought, twisting and pushing against each other. Her hands moved up his chest to around his neck, one moving up to hold his head in place, before pressing, pushing him even closer. She couldn't get enough of him. He wasn't close enough. Not nearly close enough.

He tasted good. His minty freshness was combined with his own flavor. Very male. She couldn't put a finger on what it was. But she was savoring it. She liked it.

Very much.

He slid his hands along her waist, one moving to her lower back, the other to her ass. He pulled her against him so she could feel his cock through the cotton towel. He was heavy with need and ready. She let out a small sound but it was lost in their kiss. He tilted his hips slightly, just enough so she could feel him hard against her lower belly.

Mace slipped his left hand from the small of her back to grab her other ass cheek. He gave them a quick squeeze, and lifted her without breaking the kiss, pressing her against him.

Panic started to set in, to cloud her mind, when Colby realized she wanted to rip the towel off him and throw him to the floor. This was wrong. Wrong. She had only known him for a couple days at best.

They needed to slow down. Take a breath. This shouldn't be happening.

Colby released his hair she held in a tight grip. She broke the kiss and gasped for breath. He was automatically moving to nuzzle her behind her ear when she said, "Stop."

He did. Immediately.

He released her ass, which allowed her to lower her heels to the carpet, so she was standing on her own. He shifted slightly but hadn't backed away yet. He tried to look into her eyes but she turned her head away.

"You didn't enjoy that?"

"No... Yes... Yes, it was fine. It was very nice." She couldn't look at him yet. Not yet. He was still too close. Too hot. Too tempting.

"Nice?" He caught her chin with his thumb and tilted her head to face him. He wore a lopsided smile. He wasn't being cocky; he actually seemed a little worried about her reaction. And his response alone made her relax.

"Fishing for compliments?"

"Always." He shook his head. "But seriously, I'm sorry if I came on too strong."

She didn't answer. She didn't know what to say. Even though she had enjoyed every second, just as he did, she shouldn't have. She shouldn't have. She didn't do these things with strangers.

"Colby—"

The house phone rang, making Colby jump. "The phone."

"Yes, I recognize the sound. Ignore it."

“What if it’s Maxi?”

“Unlikely, but if it is, she’ll call back.”

On the fourth ring, she said, “It might be Martin.” She slipped past him and hurried into her room. She climbed across her bed to reach the phone which was on the far nightstand. “Hello?” For a moment there was dead silence on the other end. Absolutely nothing. Then she thought she heard breathing. “Hello? Anybody there?”

Her question was answered by what she now knew to be breathing. The hair on her neck stood up and she gripped the phone harder. Her heart frantically pounding, she shouted into the phone, “Who is this?”

Mace apparently followed her into her room, because he was suddenly there in front of her snatching the phone out of her hand. “Hello?” A second later he slammed it down on the receiver. He stared at the cordless phone for a long moment, a muscle jumping in his tight jaw, before turning to her. “Must have been a wrong number.”

He was probably right. It had to be a wrong number. No one knew where she was except for work. Even so, she couldn’t stop the tremors.

Without a thought, she leaned past Mace to open the nightstand’s drawer and check for her gun. She removed it and yanked back the slide to make sure a round was in the chamber.

“What the hell? You had more clips?” Mace ripped the gun out of her hand and put it back in the drawer, giving it a good slam shut. “Colby, answer me.”

“Yes. Of course.” She looked longingly at the closed drawer. She needed her gun in her hands right now; she needed to feel the security it gave her. But there was a big man standing between her and her Glock.

“What are you going to do? Shoot the phone? It was a wrong number, that’s all.”

He was right, he was right, he was right. She was being stupid. It was either a kid prank calling or just a wrong number. It was as simple as that. She was making a mountain out of a molehill. She focused on the man in front of her. “Sorry. You’re right. I’m just being...” Crazy. Paranoid. “Silly.”

He settled on the bed next to her and reached for her hand. She was torn. She wanted him to grab her and hold her tight. Make her feel safe. Secure. On the other hand, she didn’t want him to get closer to her. She didn’t want to rely on him or anyone. She was responsible for her own life and her own actions now.

The only one she could rely on to protect her was ... well, herself.

She stood and slipped her hand out of his. She backed up a step toward the bedroom door. She couldn’t resist one more look at him. He looked so sexy on her bed in just a towel. If she wanted him, she could have him in a second. After the kiss in the hallway, she was sure if she suggested they get naked, he wouldn’t think twice about tossing the towel to the side.

She needed some uncomplicated loving, some tenderness and maybe even some hot, sweaty down-and-dirty sex. But sex wasn’t her priority.

Right now, she needed to survive. She needed to get out of the bedroom. “I’m going downstairs to start a roast.” She turned and fled down the hall.

In her haste, she barely heard Mace’s disgruntled question. “By the way, who’s Martin?”

Chapter Four

Mace was towel-drying his hair Monday morning when he heard the shrill ring of his cell phone. He could work highly technical surveillance equipment but he couldn't even figure out how to change the damn ringtone. Not that he had given it any great effort, either. He limped into the bedroom and looked at the "private caller" which came up on the display. He reluctantly answered it before the voice mail could pick up.

"So, how are you feeling?" a very familiar male voice asked.

Mace sat on the bed and threw the damp towel over his naked lap. "Lousy. Are you calling for a reason?"

"Not really. I'm just checking on one of my best men. Did you shave that mess off your face yet?"

"No." Mace rubbed a hand self-consciously over his bristly chin. "I like it. I think I'll keep it for a while."

"It makes you look—"

"Like a criminal. I've already heard. Flattery will get you everywhere. Hey, did you call the house phone yesterday?" It would be like his boss to hang up if a stranger's voice answered. To avoid any questions, his superior would say.

"I have your cell."

Yeah, that was the perfect answer to his question. But he was right. He had Mace's cell, there would be no reason to call the house.

"Is there a problem, Walker?"

"No. No, nothing." Nothing but some kiddies prank calling the house.

"If there is, I'm sure it's something you can handle."

"Yeah. In that case, I'm glad you waited until now to call. There's a woman staying here. Fortunately, she's at work right now."

"I know. You're speaking of Ms. Colby Parks."

Mace gripped the phone tighter. "You know?"

"Of course. I wasn't going to let you walk unknowingly into a situation which might be dangerous."

"Don't make me laugh. Everything I do, every situation you send me into, is dangerous." Mace glanced at the full gun clip still sitting on his nightstand. He picked it up and studied it. Out of habit, he pushed the top round with his thumb, testing the tightness of the clip's spring. It was a motion he'd done thousands of times, for some reason it gave him comfort. "Speaking of dangerous, she almost shot me thinking I was a burglar. It would have been nice if you'd warned me."

He thought he heard a chuckle, or it might just have been choking, on the other end.

"It wouldn't have been any fun, though. Maybe she'll keep you on your toes, keep you from getting fat and lazy during your little recuperation." His next response was dead serious. "I had her checked out."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me? Actually, you beat me to it. I was going to call the Bureau today." He placed the clip next to his parents' framed picture. "So you know my sister is married and on her honeymoon?"

"Yes. She married over a month ago. She told me, but I couldn't inform you. It was

sort of bad timing. First, you were too deep undercover. And then with your little mishap, well, I didn't want you to be bothered."

Little mishap.

"Right." Mace gave a dry laugh. "Do you at least know who she married, where she went?"

No matter how many times he'd tried to coax the information out of Colby, she'd clam up and tell him to find out for himself. She believed if Maxi wanted him to know, she would have told him. It was untrue. He wanted to explain it had to do with the circumstances of his career, but Mace decided it wasn't worth arguing over. He had to pick his battles and he preferred the one where he worked on getting Colby comfortable enough with him to get naked.

He smiled at the image. But his boss' voice broke into his thoughts, ruining his fantasy.

"Of course. I know everything. She married the banker who backed Ms. Parks' atrocious project, the one on Shady Lane. That's how your sister met Ms. Parks. Do you like her?"

Mace ignored the question. "She's horrifying with a gun."

"Yes, a Glock..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know everything. You're too thorough."

"I have to be. Our lives depend on it, Walker. I assume you don't want me to tell you everything about her. A mysterious woman is so much more exciting." Mace heard papers rustling on the other end of the line. "I hope you'll keep up your physical therapy—and I don't mean naked romper room with Ms. Parks. Try to heal quickly. I might need you to replace another agent on assignment. He's getting too personally involved."

"A woman?"

"Mmm. Unfortunately, she's on the wrong side."

"A fatal mistake," Mace said. "But, of course, *you know that*. If possible, I'd like to stick around for a couple months."

"Until your sister returns from abroad?"

"Is that where she is?"

"Yes, her new husband has family in England. They decided to tour Europe." The man laughed. "It has to be you want to wait around to see your sister. I can't imagine you'd want to stay just to help Ms. Parks fix up her ugly, old house."

"It really isn't so bad." Did he actually just say that?

"And she's worth it even if it is, right? Maybe she'll help you feel better. Have her help with your leg exercises."

Mace heard him chuckle. Perhaps a couple months around Colby would make him feel better. *If* she was willing. "Does Maxi even know what happened?" There was a telling silence. Of course not, otherwise his baby sister wouldn't have gone off to Europe. She would have been worried sick. She would have put off her wedding, put her life on hold. Maybe it was better Maxi didn't know.

The man cleared his throat. "I'll keep in touch."

Mace stared at the cell for a moment before snapping it shut and throwing it on the bed.

Now that he knew his boss hadn't called yesterday, he thought about Colby's

reaction. Why was she all shook up from one hang-up? Okay two; there had been one later in the evening. But he had gotten to the phone first and it had been just a quick click and a dial tone.

Mace had played the second one off as another wrong number since Colby had been in earshot. He ended up telling her someone was trying to order Chinese food and had misdialed. Whether she believed him or not, who knew, but at least she hadn't freaked like the last time.

When he'd asked her whether the hang-ups had been a reoccurring thing before he'd come home, she changed the subject. He had let it go. For now. But he was going to get to the bottom of it one way or another.

* * * *

Late in the afternoon, Mace heard a car drive up and opened the front door to see who it was. He surprised himself; he never even looked out the peephole first. It felt good to be able to open a door without fear of some thug blowing holes in him. Three days home and he was starting to relax.

He was pleased to see it was Colby. She parked a bright red, but older, convertible next to his not so bright, old Ford truck. He spotted the groceries in the back seat and went to help her.

"Sharp," he said, snagging a couple of the brown paper bags.

Colby handed him a third and grabbed one herself. "Me or the car?"

"Both. I didn't think you had a vehicle."

"It was at the garage. Needed a water pump."

He followed her into the house. "Yeah? Too bad I didn't arrive sooner. I'm great with cars."

"And women?"

"Them too."

"Did you learn your mechanical skills at—"

Mace dropped the grocery bags on the kitchen table in time to cover her mouth with his hand. "Don't. I've had enough of your jailhouse wisecracks."

His fingers against her warm, moist lips immediately sent a shock wave down to his groin. He wanted to run his thumb along her bottom lip and then dip it into her mouth. In and out. Until it was wet. He would follow his thumb with his tongue. And other things. Or just one other thing: his aching, swollen cock. His eyelids lowered with need until Colby stepped away from him, breaking his contact. Breaking into his thoughts.

"Too close to home?" she asked, her voice a little shaky.

Good. Maybe he was getting to her like she was getting to him. "No."

"So tell me what you do for a living."

He broke eye contact first, because if he hadn't he would have pushed her Miss Proper skirt up and slammed his cock home very improper-like against the kitchen cabinet. Frontward, backward, he wasn't going to be picky.

He concentrated hard on the subject at hand. "You first. What do you do with your days, Ms. Parks?"

"I think you're avoiding the question. Finish carrying in the groceries while I unpack them, and then, and only then, I might play your little game, Mr. Walker."

If she only knew what game he really wanted to play with her...

He behaved himself and brought in the rest of the bags. Settling into a chair, he regarded Colby while she started dinner.

“Are you a chauvinist? Don’t you cook or clean or do laundry?”

Mace smiled. “I try to avoid it at all costs.”

“So who normally does all your domestic duties?”

“Here we go with the questions again. You still have to answer mine.”

She gave a little shrug. “Fine.”

Mace moved behind Colby and saw her start when she turned around, finding him so close. He was close enough to feel her heat. It was almost enough to make him lose his mind.

“What are you doing?”

The tremble in her voice caught his attention, and threw a little cold water on his steaming hot libido. “Helping. I assume that’s what you wanted when you started in on the chauvinist crap.”

Colby looked relieved.

Three days had gone by. They’d eaten meals together, watched TV and he had even helped her paint her yellow kitchen. Not to mention the make-out session in the hallway yesterday. *But she still hasn’t relaxed around me yet.*

Thinking about their up-close and personal time on Sunday made his libido snap right back up to attention. But he had to watch his step. He wanted to get down and dirty with her, discover all her secrets, but he couldn’t push too hard. Not yet. He didn’t want to scare her away. Hell, if he wasn’t careful the sexual tension was going to kill him.

“You’ve read my mind. You can make the salad.”

If they were reading each other’s minds, he was in trouble. Because right now his mind was dirty, dirty, so fucking dirty. He imagined digging his fingers deep into her fireball mane of hair while she sucked him off. She would be on her knees and he would be guiding her head back and forth, back and forth. The wet mouth around his cock, little moans escaping her lips...

Mace bit off a groan and removed the rinsed vegetables out of the colander, where they’d been drip-drying. He grabbed a cutting board and sat back down at the table to chop them up. He had to concentrate on something else. Like lettuce.

“Can’t you chop them here at the counter?”

“No. Sometimes, I can’t stand on my leg too long.”

Mace felt her eyes on him, studying his legs. Damn. He wished it were her hands following the lines of his jeans instead. She was not helping him get his mind out of the gutter. Although she didn’t know what he was thinking, thankfully. Or not.

“Why?”

He raised an eyebrow in her direction.

“Okay, I’ll tell you about me first, you big party-pooper.” After Colby placed two thick steaks on the broiler pan and got some baby red potatoes boiling, she turned to face him, leaning back against the counter. He was glad to see she seemed a bit more comfortable.

“I’m a biochemist.”

“Wow, that’s impressive.” Mace clumsily peeled a carrot, attempting to keep the long orange strips in a pile. Concentrating on the vegetables was helping to relieve some of the tension within him. “What’s that?” He looked up from his detested work when he

heard her laugh.

Hands planted on her hips, she looked at him in astonishment. "How could something impress you when you don't know what it is?"

"It's why I'm impressed. I never said I was smart."

"I thought all inmates had a right to an education." She raised her arms up in surrender at his grimace. "Sorry. I promise, no more digs." She grabbed the dishtowel which hung over the oven door handle and wiped her hands. She drifted over to the table and snagged a stalk of celery to munch on. "I specialize in the chemical composition and behavior of living organisms. I work for Malvern University."

If she was trying to dumbfound him, she succeeded. He couldn't have felt dumber. "Can you elaborate a little more? I think you lost me."

"I study the effects of food or hormones, or even drugs, on living things."

Ah, clarity. "Like people?" *I could tell you about the effects of drugs on people.*

"People, animals, plants. Whatever." Colby pointed the ragged stub of celery in his direction. "Whatever the University wants me to do, I do. They're the ones paying my salary."

"I bet it's a pretty nice salary too."

"It could be better. I only have my masters. To earn more I'd need my Ph.D."

Only has her masters. Shee-it. "Are you considering it?" He took the two salad bowls Colby handed him and filled them with the unevenly chopped veggies. "Going back to school, I mean."

"No. I enjoy working in the lab and in the field. I don't want an administrative position. No matter how much they earn."

"I can understand. I wouldn't want to be stuck behind a desk either." Mace caught the towel Colby tossed to him and wiped his hands. "How did you get to work this morning? I would have given you a ride. The University isn't very close."

"Martin, my assistant. He was kind enough to pick me up this morning and drop me off at the garage after work. He's a nice guy."

"Just nice, huh?" Mace wondered if there was more. He waited, but she said nothing more on her co-worker.

Malvern University. He truly was impressed. It was a prestigious school and he was sure her job paid well. His parents had moved to this college "town" when he and Maxi were young. Their professor father taught there until he died. Maxi also ended up going to school there. Mace had different ideas when he went to college; he found the farthest college from home in the lower forty-eight to go to. Like he could have gotten into Malvern in the first place...

"So what's with the leg?" Colby asked, jolting him back to the present.

"I was shot." Her question was so unexpected he answered before he could think about it. Damn.

Her brows lifted in surprise. "So you weren't kidding? What, in a prison riot?" The color in her cheeks darkened when she realized what she had said. "I'm sorry. If you would just tell me what you do for a living, I'd knock it off."

"Why is it so important? What if I just like to travel around like a bum?"

"Why would you want to when you have a nice home here?"

"I don't know. I get bored?"

"No. I don't know what you're hiding, but I won't tell anyone. Promise." She

crossed her fingers and made an X with them over her heart.

Mace smiled at the gesture. He wanted to trust her. He really did. But after years and years of getting good at lies, it was hard to tell someone the truth. It was hard to step back into his “real life.” Or what he thought should be his real life.

“Can I see your leg?”

The question caught him off guard. Again. Mace put down the paring knife he was absently playing with—before he accidentally sliced off his finger. Did she want him to pull his pants down in the middle of the kitchen before dinner? Not that he minded stripping down for her, but he wanted to show her something besides his injury.

As if she read his mind, she quipped, “I don’t mean now. Later.”

“I thought you were a scientist. Not a doctor.”

“I’m still interested. A scientist is interested in all living things. And in this particular instance, I’m interested how metal affects human flesh.”

“Not very well, I can attest to that. It hurts and looks like hell. But if you really want to see it you have to promise to kiss it and make it better.”

She probably thought he was joking. He wasn’t. He believed if she would only place her sweet, luscious lips on his healing leg, all the hurt would disappear. Hell, it was worth a try.

“I promise.” She laughed.

Mace laughed too. She didn’t know he would make her keep her promise. “So tell me more about this Martin.”

She gave him her back. “He’s a nice guy I work with.”

And spent last Sunday morning with him at an auction and bargain hunting. Who knows what else. “Yeah, you already said that.”

“That about covers it.”

* * * *

Colby looked up from the sitcom she was watching. The popcorn bowl she had balanced on her lap tilted dangerously. She caught it in time and placed it on the low coffee table which sat in front of the couch. “Oh, my God.”

Mace limped across the den toward her. He was wearing a pair of cut-off denim shorts. And nothing else. “I told you it wasn’t pretty.”

“Who did this to you?” she whispered. She reached out when he neared. Wanting to touch, but unsure, afraid. Without hesitation he stepped into her touch, his eyes closing.

“Please be gentle with me.”

Colby looked at his face to see if he was teasing. He wasn’t. She could see the pain etched across his face. The muscles flexed in his jaw. She returned her attention to his leg, pushing the denim higher to get a better look. His thigh was little more than hamburger meat. The inner thigh muscle was half missing and she could see the outline of his thighbone. She could see what looked like seams to her, where the doctors had sewn the remaining skin together.

It must have been a hell of a big gun. She bit her lip, wondering how he could have endured the pain. “You’re lucky it wasn’t amputated.” Colby didn’t realize she had spoken aloud until she heard his snort and bitter words.

His dark eyes opened and bored into her. “I’m lucky the gun wasn’t pointed a few more inches to the left. I would have been missing something a little more important than

a thigh muscle.”

He gritted his teeth and a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead when she cautiously, but lightly stroked the angry red skin with her fingertips. It was the softest touch but it still bothered him. Surprisingly, he didn’t pull away.

“Excuse me if I’m not very receptive to your soft touch right now. Normally I’d be at full attention.”

Colby immediately glanced at the V of his shorts, before looking away, heat crawling up her neck. She had fallen right into his trap. “Is that what I see you popping all the time—painkillers?”

“Do you blame me?”

“No. But there are more natural ways to ease pain. Herbal ways.”

“If you’re talking about holistic medicine, forget it. I’ll stick to the good ol’ American ways of popping a pill for every ache.” Mace dropped down on the couch beside her, dislodging her hand. He propped his leg on the table and picked up the remote control. “What are you watching?”

Colby snagged the remote out of his hands and switched the television off. She tossed it on the recliner a few feet away. Out of his reach. “No way. You are not getting out of this so easily. I want to know who did this and why.”

“Well, the *why* is easy. I’m sure a rocket—I mean biological—scientist can even figure that one out. He was trying to kill me.”

“Who? Why?” Why would anyone be trying to kill this man?

His hand dug harshly through his hair, leaving it looking like he had just gotten out of bed. “I can’t tell you the details, Colby. I can’t.” He grabbed the *TV Guide* from the coffee table, thumbed through it without really seeing its contents, before tossing it restlessly back onto the table.

“Are you a cop?”

Mace shook his head. He gave a longing look over at the remote.

“Are you in the armed forces?”

“No.” He looked up at the ceiling and let out a long breath. He was so searching for a distraction.

She wasn’t going to give it to him. “Am I going to have to play twenty questions with you?”

“No. I can tell you this.” He twisted toward her and pinned her with a stare. “I work for an agency.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it. Yeah, right. This guy was a secret agent. Like James Bond, right? He had to be pulling her leg. She’d play along. “Agency? What kind of agency? A travel agency? A talent agency?”

“Come on, Colby,” he said, frowning. “It’s sort of secret. I do things which are classified. I can’t talk about.”

My God, it was true! Colby sank back into the couch. She couldn’t straighten out her thoughts. What did he mean? A “sort of” secret agency? No one was “sort of” a secret agent. Either you were or you weren’t. Was she living with some kind of spy? Was he working for some kind of government agency?

“Do you go undercover? Is that why you haven’t had contact with Maxi for two years?” Maybe he was undercover now. Who was he really? Was she in the middle of some sort of sting? Her heart started racing.

Mace groaned. "Colby, please don't ask. I won't be able to tell you and it's better if you don't know anyway."

Colby turned to study his face. "Are you really Macen Walker, or is this some kind of alias? Are you really Maxi's brother?"

Mace rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm really Macen Walker. I thought we went through this the first night."

Colby suddenly felt horrible about the way she had treated him in the beginning. "And I thought you were a criminal! Here you are risking your life—"

He placed a finger over her lips. "Shhh."

She jerked her head away. "No, don't shush me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for thinking you were a ... a..."

"Colby, it's all right. I'm a big boy; I can take a little ribbing."

"No, it's not all right. Here you are in constant pain. And don't lie to me and say you aren't. I wondered why you limped every once in a while. I wondered why you struggle to do something as easy as walking up the stairs..."

Colby felt the sting of tears. She was not going to cry. She was not. She did not want to look like a baby. An overemotional big baby.

Damn it. She tried to catch a runaway tear but one escaped before she could brush it away.

*

Mace caught the tear on his finger and stared at it. He was touched by Colby's emotion. No one but his sister had really cared about him in a long time. Or cared what happened to him. An unfamiliar ache swelled in his chest.

But he didn't want to do this right now. He couldn't do this. He didn't want to open up an emotional Cracker Jack box. He'd only known this woman for a few days. He really needed his sister. This was the reason why he'd come home. He needed an emotional and a physical Band-Aid. "Don't cry for me, Colby. I survived. Otherwise, we'd never have met. For some reason I think we can help each other right now. I'm trying to heal and I think you are too, in some way."

Colby shook her head, but looked away.

Mace grasped her chin and turned her to look deeply into her eyes. "Yes, there's something in there. Some kind of pain of your own. I think it's the reason why you're getting so involved in your house. Every little thing about that house is a crisis needing to be solved." He stroked his thumb over her cheek. He caught her teary gaze before lowering his voice to just above a whisper. "Why? What has happened to you, Colby Parks?"

"N-nothing."

He didn't believe her. She had been hurt—maybe not like him, physically—but maybe mentally or emotionally. Not just hurt, but hurt badly. He had been hurt by people who hated him, could care less about him. He assumed she was hurt by someone she loved. Or cared for. Someone close to her.

Her reddened eyes matched the tip of her nose. A couple more tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. He desperately wanted to lean over and kiss those tears away. He wanted to haul her against him and hug her hard. To clasp her until the demons were squeezed out of both of them. He wanted to lose himself in her and just feel; forget everything else but the two of them. But he didn't want to overwhelm her either, since he

was so desperate for her touch. He didn't trust himself if he reached out first. She had to make the first move.

She did.

Colby brushed the back of her fingers along his whiskered chin. Tilting her head, she followed her hand with her eyes.

Mace reached up and grasped her hand, bringing it to his lips. "You promised to kiss it and make it feel better. I can understand if you don't want to. It's pretty hideous."

Colby shook her head slightly. She stared at his misshapen thigh for a few seconds before leaning down and placing her warm lips against his skin.

Mace leaned back, closing his eyes. His hands dug into her hair, gripping her braid firmly. As Colby's lips fluttered to different areas of his thigh, he released a groan. She turned her face and rubbed her soft cheek against his scarred skin.

"Oh, God, Colby. Don't stop," he whispered brokenly. "Please don't stop."

Colby turned her face again, until her other cheek rested on his leg. She looked up at him. Mace felt it and opened his eyes, looking into hers. Her tears had stopped. She looked and felt so good lying across his lap. He wanted to stay that way forever. His body had other ideas.

He took her hand, which was gripping his good thigh, and moved it over slightly until she could feel how much he wanted her. God, he wanted her. Right here, right now. He wanted to plunge deep and hard into her softness and just lose himself.

Colby's fingers closed around him through the soft worn denim of his shorts and he thrust upward. His breathing deepened and his head fell back against the couch. "Colby ... let me go if you don't want this to continue. It's been a while since..."

"For me too."

Her words caused hot lightning to shoot to every part of his body. He hooked his hands behind her elbows and drew her up. She was careful not to lean on his bad thigh.

Mace rolled the elastic band off the end of her French braid, releasing the cords of hair one by one. Her breathing had become shallow and her nipples were like pebbles ready to be touched—by his tongue, his lips and his hands. When he was finished undoing her braid, he spread her deep-red hair around her shoulders, holding a few strands to his nostrils and inhaling the sweet scent he was beginning to recognize as her own. "God, I want to feel this soft, glorious hair all over my body."

With trembling hands, he slowly unbuttoned her blouse until it hung open, exposing her white, lacy bra. Her large, dark nipples were just visible through the delicate fabric. Just enough to torture him. He drew a finger along the edges, barely touching her skin. And when she arched her back, he couldn't resist releasing the front clasp. Her breasts escaped and he sat back to just look at them. They were perfect in his eyes. Round and full, puckered with need.

He gently brushed a finger against one dark tip. Colby squirmed, whispering his name. She reached up, her hands delving into his hair, and pulled his face toward her. She showed him what she wanted, what she desired, but was unable to ask for.

Mace flicked his tongue out, tasting one flushed bud, then the other. Slowly he drew a nipple into his mouth, savoring the taste and feel. Colby gripped his head tightly, holding him where she wanted him. She tilted her head back to give him full access. He used the advantage, loving one, then the other, over and over until Colby bucked against him and cried out. She was on the brink of release.

It wouldn't take much for him either. His cock was so hard, wanting to get out, wanting a release of its own. He knew he had to keep control but it was hard. So hard. "Colby, I don't know if I can..."

Colby placed her lips against his, stopping his words. He savored her sweet mouth, drawing her lower lip in and nibbling on it. His tongue dipped in, swirling against hers. He moved his hands to her hips. He wanted her on top of him, straddling him. He wanted her hot pussy pressed against his cock, even if there was a layer of clothes between them.

Mace was easing her closer when he stiffened and cursed. "Damn it!" He leaned back away from her, breaking their contact. His attempt to laugh it off failed miserably. The cramp in his thigh was too overwhelming; the pain was sharp, shooting through his remaining muscles like lightning. He dropped his head. In regret, in embarrassment. In frustrating unmet need. *Fuck.*

"I'm sorry, Colby. There's one feeling which overcomes desire and it's pain."

Colby shifted away from him, her eyelids still heavy from need. "Are you all right?"

"No." He made a fist, cursing again. "Oh, God, I want you so much."

"I know, I know." She brushed his hair off his forehead. "We've got to take it slow. Maybe it's better this way."

"No, it's not, believe me. I've got two places that hurt. One we can ease. The other we can't. The problem is the one we can't help is the one ruling my life right now."

"Should I get your pills?" Colby stood, refastening her bra and closing her shirt.

Mace felt like screaming. Not from the pain, but from the hurt on Colby's face. From the way she was trying to hide it. From having to give up, when he was so close to fucking the hell out of this beautiful woman.

Damn the bastard who shot him. Hopefully he was rotting in hell where Mace had sent him. On a one-way ticket.

He didn't argue when Colby helped him up the stairs and into his room. He lay on his bed, clenching the comforter, his thigh muscle going into spasms. He wanted to scream every curse in the book, but ground his teeth instead. He was one who didn't like to lose control of a situation. And he was damned if he was going to let this pain control him.

But he admitted to himself he was relieved when Colby returned with a glass of water. She grabbed the pills from his dresser and, after reading the label, gave him two. She sat down by his side and waited until the spasms subsided.

A few minutes later, Mace unclenched his jaws enough to thank her.

"Do you need me to help you undress?"

"No. I think you've helped me enough," he snapped. He instantly regretted his tone when she made a little wounded sound. He grabbed her hand, halting her escape. "Colby, I didn't mean it like that. I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at myself. I appreciate the help you've given me. I would love for you to take my clothes off," *and see you with your shirt off again; I would love to suck and lick your breasts, those nipples,* "but not right now. Not in this type of situation. I hope we would both enjoy it a lot more." Mace still felt like a heel. He didn't want her to leave him just yet. "Please. Stay with me a little while." He patted the bed next to him. "Lie next to me."

Colby looked at him skeptically.

"Come on. I'm harmless right now and it'll make me feel better."

"Just for a little while," she said, carefully lying down next to him. She lay in the

crook of his arm, her head on his chest.

This woman felt so right in his arms. She was so warm and soft. Perfect.
His breathing deepened, and before he knew it he was asleep.

* * * *

Mace jerked awake. A heavy weight pressed down on his chest. His hand automatically moved to push it off, but connected with hair. And skin. Warm, smooth skin.

He turned his head toward the alarm clock on the nightstand. 12:15. He wiggled his fingers into the plait of her braid and he heard Colby sigh in her sleep. The room was dark, but he didn't remember turning off the light. Had she? Had she gotten up and turned it off and still felt comfortable enough with him to cuddle up next to him? She had to have gotten up at some point. Her hair was back in the tight, controlled braid of hers.

Oh, yeah. Her still being in his room meant she was definitely more at ease around him. He didn't mind the dark. Lose one sense and the others make up for it. He might not be able to see her, but he could feel her and smell her sweet scent.

Her head was settled on his chest, her hot breath going in and out of her parted lips. It rustled the hairs around his nipple, making it pebble and tighten. Suddenly he was very aware of where the rest of her body was. Her shoulder was tucked under his armpit and her breasts were pushed into his left side. Her lower body was away from his legs, probably to not cause him any further pain in his thigh.

She had one arm draped over his bare waist, her hand resting on his right hip. He reached over and stroked her arm from shoulder to fingertip. He grasped her fingers and slid her palm over his bare lower stomach, letting it settle on the V of hair inversely rising out of his cut-offs. Her fingers twitched in her sleep and he was suddenly very, very hard. And crooked. He adjusted himself which brought the head of his cock so close to her fingers. So close.

His left arm was draped behind her and he brushed his fingers along the small of her back, dipping them into the gap between her shorts and her skin. He spread his fingers until he brushed the tips along the top of where her ass cheeks met. He was so tempted to stroke along its crevice until he found her tight hole. He would guess it had never been touched by any man. Instead, he traced the skin along the edge of her waistband to the front. To her soft belly. He circled his thumb around her navel. And with the third pass, he stretched the rest of his fingers out. They were long enough to slide between her shorts and panties. His fingertips brushed against the thin elastic band—he wondered if they were pink satin.

Colby shifted, and her breathing quickened. It felt like little puffs of steam crossing his skin; a telltale sign she was awake. Either that or her body thought she was in a really, really good dream. He rolled onto his left hip, gently laying her on her back. He folded her arms over her head onto the pillow. He couldn't see if her eyes were open, but he drew a thumb along her jaw line and then over her lips. They were parted and he swore he felt her tongue against the pad of his thumb. He dipped his thumb in and ... she nipped him. His cock twitched against the tight confines of his boxer briefs. It wanted to come out to play so badly.

Mace drew one hand down her neck and traced her collarbone, one side and then the other before he followed the outer curve of her breast. He used his other hand to pop the

top button of his shorts and slide the zipper down. He shoved his underwear out of the way, his fingers sliding over the head of his cock, slippery with pre-come. He fisted the head and pushed hard into his palm, arching his hips off the bed.

He stroked himself; long, slow strokes with his left hand, while using his right hand to continue its course around the curve of her breast. He circled and circled, smaller and smaller, until he was just tracing the edge of her areola through her shirt and bra. He brought his finger and thumb together to pinch the hard center. She gasped and he felt a hand on top of his. She said nothing, and he wasn't sure if she wanted him to continue or stop. But she pushed his hand, not off, but to her other breast. He squeezed that one too. Her breath came broken through her lips and she gave a small moan.

One palm stayed on his left hand to encourage while the other found his right hand still stroking the length of his erection. Her fingers felt along his wrist down to his fingertips, and she worked her own underneath his to take over the stroking. Her hand was smaller, so much smaller, but, damn, it felt so good. She circled the head, collecting some pre-come, using it to lubricate the rest of his shaft while she stroked from root to tip.

Without breaking contact, he settled above her, catching her lips, her warm breath, and her gasps as he twisted and plucked her nipples. Their tongues tangled and fought, stroking against each other until they were both gasping for air.

He pushed her shirt and bra up over her breasts, moving down to replace his fingers with his mouth on her exposed nipple. He suckled and nudged and licked until she squirmed. She pulled on his cock harder and faster and more pre-come leaked out, making her fist slick like a tight little pussy. He was losing his mind. The faster she stroked the faster he sucked her nipples. He raked his teeth against the hard tip and felt her body convulse. Her fist squeezed down on his cock so hard, he thought the head would pop off.

With a groan he yanked away from her, quickly going to his knees between her calves. He ripped her cotton shorts and panties down and she kicked them free from one leg and then the other. He shoved his shoulders into the backs of her thighs, pushing them up while spreading them wide, opening her up to him. He wished the light was on; he wanted to see her flushed, plump flesh. Just by feel alone, he could tell she was trimmed, but not shaved; he really wanted to see the fire red hair framing all her goodies. *Next time*, he promised himself.

She smelled hot and ready, a musky scent which made him want to come right then and there. He pushed the thought out of his head and stretched out between her legs. He was going to enjoy the feast. He ran a finger along her wet slit, up and down, up and down, a little deeper each time until the tip of his finger brushed against her swollen clit. Her hips jerked. He used an arm to wrap around her thigh and across her hips to keep her in place.

He dived right in; his lips finding her little pleasure button and he plucked at it, sucked at it. His tongue danced along the edge and flicked, making her squirm against him. He ran two fingers over her slick folds, dipped them in quickly before continuing on to her anus. He circled the tight hole with his damp fingers. He so wanted to break that barrier, but it was too soon. He made his way back up and slid them home into her pussy, as deep as he could get them. His lips, tongue and teeth continued to play with her clit.

Somewhere in his foggy mind, he heard her whimpering and crying out. Her fingers

dug into his hair, grabbing tightly, causing pain, clenching and unclenching. He moved down and licked the folds of her labia, his fingers driving in and out. Even though he was holding her down, her hips fought against him to match every thrust.

He couldn't take anymore. His balls were so tight, his cock so hard, it was the most painful pleasure he'd ever experienced. She tugged on his hair, lifting his head up. She grabbed him under the arms trying to lift him over her, but he was too heavy. He gave her clit a last lingering lick, savoring the taste, and rolled away from her, feeling his way in the dark for the nightstand drawer. He located the drawer and soon found what he was looking for within it. He gave a silent thanks to himself for remembering to buy a new box. He ripped open the condom and rolled it down his length.

Mace rolled onto his back, his cock sticking straight out from his body. He didn't think it had ever been this hard in his life! He felt out in the dark and found Colby's arm, moving her closer. He reached over, grabbed her waist with both hands and lifted her up and over him. She settled, straddling his thighs, his cock brushing against her wet curls. She moved forward and rubbed her pussy along the length of him. The warm folds nestled his balls, rode along his cock until she slowed and paused when the head prodded her opening. She raised herself up, wiggling her hips until the crown was lined up perfectly. Just the tip was tucked into her wet heat.

He reached out to touch her breasts. She had finished removing her shirt and bra so they hung unhindered. He palmed the weight of them, pushing them together so the nipples were touching. He snagged both tips and rolled them between his fingers and thumbs.

She collapsed onto him with a moan, burying his cock deep within her. She continued to writhe around him as he twisted and plucked her nipples. She rode him hard, wildly, easing all the way up before slamming herself down, taking every bit of him and clearly wanting more. The harder he pinched, the deeper she ground herself against him.

He released her nipples so he could grab her ass cheeks. His fingers dug in, controlling her movements, slowing her down. He thrust up as she came down. He reached underneath her from behind and could feel the wetness and her folds spread, the delicate skin stretched, engulfing his cock. He ran a finger between the strip of skin between her pussy and her anus and back again. And once more. His finger was wet with her juices and he circled her virgin hole. He was so tempted, so, so tempted. He pressed against the tightness. He fought against the urge because he didn't want to scare her.

She was riding him frantically, squeezing his cock with her pussy muscles. Her inner walls were hot, silky and tight. Shit, he was going to blow his load soon. Colby appeared to be on the edge once again, herself. He stroked her tight rim and felt it relax a bit, before making his move. He slid a finger in and she screamed and convulsed around him, spasming with orgasm. With his finger deep within her ass and his cock even deeper in her cunt, he let go. He came and came and came while her vaginal muscles milked him dry.

As she collapsed, he let her go, tucking her limp body against his. His heart was pounding frantically and his cock was still twitching. He slipped off the condom and wrapped it in a tissue. He'd get rid of it later. He couldn't move even if he tried. That was un-fucking-believable.

Before losing consciousness, he realized neither of them had spoken a word.

Chapter Five

The sun felt warm on her cheek. Colby wondered why she was sleeping in the park with her dog. Had she just eaten a picnic lunch with her parents and fallen asleep?

Colby opened one eye and was blinded for a second. Her childhood dog was *not* lying next to her. It was Mace. She was in his room, not the park, and was on his bed. Naked.

She did a body check. It was true. She didn't have a stitch of clothing on. There was an equally naked, but hairy, leg thrown over her thigh and a hairy arm across her chest, pinning her to the bed. Worst of all, one hand cupped her breast possessively. She snuck a peek at the owner of the appendages. She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized he was still asleep, his breath softly escaping his parted lips in a steady rhythm.

She had made a big—no, no, no, *huge*—mistake letting her emotions—or was it her hormones?—get away from her, and sleep with a man she hardly knew. She realized she had only known Mace for three days. Okay, four now. And there was still so much she didn't know about him.

She had promised herself she wouldn't get into this type of situation again. Never again.

But here she was...

Dumb, dumb, dumb. She slowly eased out from under his arm. It would be best if they both forgot about last night. She was not prepared to enter another relationship. With this man, or any other.

She had to get out of his room before he woke up. She would leave her snooping around his room for another time. One when she wasn't buck naked—not to mention a little stiff and sore. She had used muscles last night she had forgotten about or never knew she had. Just thinking about some of the moves they had done made her pussy damp all over again.

When she spotted the clock her heart jumped. 8:28!

Crap! She was supposed to be at work at nine. She still had to shower and dress. As it was, she had a twenty-five minute drive ahead of her to get to campus.

Colby couldn't drag the sheet along with her without waking Mace up, so she rushed down the hall with only her pile of clothes pressed to her chest. Once in the bathroom, she locked the door behind her and jumped into the shower.

Her hair still damp, she pulled on her work clothes in a rush. One shoe on, she attempted to slip on the other while she raced down the hall, only to stop short at the sight of Mace leaning against the wall next to the stairwell.

He only wore his cut-offs. His chest was still bare, making her breath catch. Were those teeth marks near his nipple? Oh God, she remembered biting and licking and flicking her tongue along those tight, hard rosettes sitting amongst a smattering of dark hair.

"Mace..." She cursed herself for sounding so breathless. It had to be the fact she was rushing, not the sight of his muscular pecs. Yeah, right.

"Late?" he asked nonchalantly. He acted like he had no other care in the world than to watch her rush around like a fool.

“More than late.” She finally got the troublesome shoe on her foot. She stood up straight but avoided looking into his eyes. Not to mention, anything else.

“I wanted to thank you...”

She started down the steps, tucking her blouse into her slacks. “Not now, we’ll talk later.”

She didn’t want to blow him off, but she had no choice. Not if she wanted to keep her job. And she needed it. Desperately. And the last thing she needed right now was to rehash what had happened. Hurrying through the foyer, she snatched her briefcase, glad she remembered it.

“I’ll make dinner,” he called down the steps. “What time do you get off work?”

“Five.” She slammed the front door behind her. Standing in the entranceway, she realized she had forgotten her car keys.

The front door cracked open and Mace’s arm reached out, her key-ring jingling on the tip of his finger. “I’ll have dinner at six. Don’t forget.”

Colby snagged the keys and raced to her car, calling, “Okay! I’ll be there.”

* * * *

The scent of dinner immediately wafted over Colby when she opened the door. God, she felt bad. She was so late. Calling had never even crossed her mind. She wasn’t used to having someone waiting for her at home anymore. And really, she hadn’t thought he was serious when he said he would cook dinner.

After setting her briefcase on the foyer table, she kicked off her shoes to pad silently down the hall to the kitchen.

He was probably really mad at her. And he had every right to be. Damn, damn, damn. She’d screwed up again. It was getting to be her life story.

She peered around the doorway to see the table set, the glasses filled with what looked like red wine and Mace nowhere in sight. For now, the coast was clear. Colby stepped cautiously into the kitchen. She could see a few pots in the sink and an open cookbook on the counter. “Mace?”

Silence.

Colby compared her watch to the clock on the wall to make sure it was right. It was. The time really was 8:15. “Damn, I’m so sorry,” she whispered to the empty room.

“It’s okay.”

Colby jumped, her heart stopping for an instant. Mace had come up behind her. She spun around to face him, hoping he would understand, hoping ... just hoping she hadn’t hurt him. Not too badly, anyway. “Mace, I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “You’ve already apologized.”

“I should have called. I just didn’t think. I’m not used to coming home to—”

Mace cut her off, brushing past her. “It’s no big deal.” He reached the sink and turned to face her. “Really.”

Colby swept her arm toward the table, indicating the place settings and the now cold candle stubs. They must have been burning for a while because the wax had dripped all over the tablecloth.

She couldn’t look him in the eye. He didn’t seem angry, or hurt, but... “No, it was a big deal. I should have realized you were going to make a big meal. More than spaghetti...”

“I did.”

“What?”

Her gaze had flicked to his face, but Mace abruptly turned to the sink and began to scrub the pots. He was putting a little more effort into it than was necessary. “I made spaghetti—whole wheat, by the way. With clam sauce and great garlic bread. I kept some warm for you, do you want it?”

Colby felt so awful she didn’t know if she should eat it. Maybe she should pretend she ate earlier. She wanted to make the choice which would hurt him the least. “Do you want me to have some?” she asked carefully.

Mace smacked a wet pot into the drain pan. “Of course. I made it for you, didn’t I?”

If he could make her feel any worse, he was accomplishing it. “Yes, I’d love some. Let me just go and change. I’d hate to get sauce all over my work clothes.”

“I’ll have it set out when you come back down.”

Colby raced up the stairs, and changed in a flash. Dressed in a pair of khaki shorts and an old Elton John T-shirt, she hurried back downstairs.

Mace sat across from her while she ate. She ate every last piece of spaghetti on her plate. She complimented his cooking between mouthfuls of delicious pasta. She smiled between bites and kept the little conversation they had as light as she could. It seemed to loosen his mood a bit. Just the effect she was striving for. But she had to admit, the spaghetti was good. And he had been thoughtful enough to make the garlic bread out of a whole grain loaf.

Before she could stand to wash her own dishes, he was there, brushing her hands away from her plate. He had them washed and rinsed and carefully placed in the drain pan before she could bring herself to move, since she was so full. He was wonderful.

Too wonderful. She kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. She was not used to this controlled anger. She must have really hurt his feelings. She swore to herself she would never do it again.

Colby poured herself another glass of wine. She sipped at it, waiting for him to make the next move. She wished he would scream at her for being late or so callous for not calling. She wished he would yell at her for something. But he didn’t.

She was used to men expressing themselves loudly. She didn’t know how to deal with a man who was silently brooding.

Maybe it wasn’t such a big deal after all. It was possible she was only imagining the undercurrents between them. Yes, that was it; it was all in her head. Unnecessary paranoia.

*

Mace watched Colby refill her wine glass for the third time. He wondered if she truly was sorry for missing his—*their*—dinner. It was the first time he had ever cooked like this. She hadn’t even seen the dessert he had stashed in the fridge, yet. Yes, she had apologized, but...

When he had sat alone at the dinner table at six, at seven, then until eight, he’d realized Colby had better things to do with her life than to come home to a cripple. They had no ties; they just had some casual sex. That’s all. She had her own life to live.

Most likely, she had eaten dinner before coming home. Maybe with her assistant Matt, or whatever his name was. She had probably only eaten his meal after seeing the table he had set. She had felt sorry for him.

Well, he wouldn't let her know how it had affected him. He'd just blow it off.

She was sucking down the wine, though, wasn't she? He wasn't sure what to make of it. One would think after their amazing sex session last night she wouldn't have to get drunk to spend a little time with him. Maybe she had all day to think on how she didn't want to be stuck with someone who was damaged goods.

They had done it in the dark last night; maybe she couldn't bear the thought of doing it again in the light, when she could see his shortcomings. *Whatever*. He was a big boy, he could get over it.

But when Colby suggested they go relax in the den, Mace picked up the half empty wine bottle, grabbed his glass, and followed her.

He stopped short in the doorway separating the kitchen from the den. What was he doing? Following her around like a lost, lonely puppy?

He was about to turn around and leave when Colby patted the couch next to her. He obediently sat, placing the bottle on the coffee table. Look what a little sex could do to him. Make him pussy-whipped.

And ripe for another letdown.

"So how does your leg feel?"

Mace grimaced. His leg was the last thing he wanted to talk about. "A little stiff."

Colby turned toward him, after putting down her glass. "Why?"

"I started physical therapy again this morning."

"Physical therapy? Where?"

Was she really interested? Or was she just trying to make small talk? "Community General."

"Will you go every day?"

"No. Three times a week, but I have to work out here at home every day."

"Is it painful? No, don't answer that, I know it has to be."

His fingers clenched around the stem of his wine glass. Goddamn it. He did not want her sympathy. "I don't care. I want to walk. I want to *be* normal again. I don't want to walk with a cane or a walker like an old man. I don't want to be handicapped for the rest of my life. I need to redevelop my muscles as much as possible."

"You're not handicapped." She placed her warm fingers around his forearm.

He studied the contrast of her delicate, white hand next to his darker skin. He said, "No? I feel like it," with a little more force than was necessary. He took a deep breath before continuing. "In my line of work limping is a handicap."

"It's not so bad."

"I'm surprised you say that after you saw it last night."

Colby shrugged. "It doesn't bother me."

"Well, it bothers me."

She gave his arm a slight squeeze. "Mace—"

"Colby." He hesitated for a split second before the rest of the words escaped in a jumble. "Will you help me with my physical therapy?" *Damn*. He wanted her help, but he hadn't wanted to ask her like this. Not after the dinner fiasco. Well, now it was too late. He'd have to just hope she'd say yes.

She looked at him in surprise. "I don't know. I don't know what to do."

Her answer gave Mace hope, it wasn't a definite no. It would be good for her, for him. For them. "Come on, it's not hard. Look, the hospital is only a few miles from the

University. Why don't you come over to the hospital on your lunch hour the next time I have a session. The therapist would be glad to show you what to do."

Mace could still feel her hesitation. He had to pull out all the stops. He wanted her help, needed her help. Hell, he just wanted her in general. Just see her red hair spread over his pillow while he was pounding her until she cried out. He could hear her small mewls in his head all over again. He wiggled into a more comfortable position for his growing cock. He let out a long, slow breath, bringing his thoughts back to the topic at hand.

"I'll make you a deal. You help me out with my exercises and I'll help you out with your house." He knew she couldn't turn that one down. His desire to walk normally was just as strong as her desire to finish her house. Whatever the reason. Mace raised his wineglass to her. "Deal?"

After a slight hesitation, her glass rang against his. "Deal."

Chapter Six

“You know, tomorrow’s Saturday and there’s a lot to be done at the house.”

Mace looked up from the treatment table to see Colby headed toward him. His heart thumped a little harder while he watched her slender figure work her way across the PT room. He was relieved she had showed up.

Robin, his physical therapist, finished the set of exercises with him before asking, “Is this the woman you want me to teach?”

“Yep, that’s her.” He leaned over closer to his therapist and whispered loudly, “She’s pretty smart, she should catch on quickly.”

“Hey, I heard that!”

He introduced Colby to Robin. She shook hands with the older heavyset woman. “From what I’ve seen so far, it doesn’t look hard.”

Mace just caught the color rushing up her neck and over the freckles which sprinkled her small nose. He had to stare at Robin, who was about three times Colby’s size and twenty years older, to keep from getting a huge hard-on.

“It’s not. The point is he has to do a certain amount of each exercise each day and he needs help. It’s not easy doing it alone,” Robin admitted. “He’s an easy patient; he wants to get better, not like some others I’ve worked with. And if you forget anything, I’m sure he’ll remember. He knows the routine. Whoever he had therapy with before did a good job.”

“You know, I’m still in the room here. I may be crippled but I’m not deaf.” Mace towed the sweat off his brow. Some of it was from his PT and some... Well, he fought to keep his thoughts from the other night.

Robin leaned over him to say, “You need to put a dollar in the jar for using the C word again.” She was all bark and no bite.

He chuckled. “Robin, explain the exercises to her while I take a break.”

“No way, no how. I’ll use you to demonstrate. Colby, will you grab the blue exercise band over there?”

Mace faked a groan. He really didn’t mind the extra exercises. The more he did, the better he felt—until later, when it caught up with him. Colby watched Robin put him through his next set of stretches with the wide rubber band. At least, concentrating on the exercises kept his thoughts clean.

For forty minutes, Robin explained and demonstrated different stretches and exercises. The therapist would switch places with her, making sure Colby knew how to assist Mace correctly.

Mace was drenched with sweat, and Colby looked like he felt. Tired.

Robin threw Mace a clean towel, and left to grab a pad of paper to write down notes for Colby. While she was gone, Mace took full advantage of their alone time.

He raised himself up on his elbows when she said, “It’s a lot to remember.”

He wanted to erase the uncertainty from her expression, but he knew his PT was daunting at first. “Between Robin’s notes—and me—it won’t be a problem. I know this is asking a lot of you.”

“Don’t be silly. I want to help.” She gave him a tentative smile. She ran a hand down

his arm and squeezed his fingers. The gesture reassured him.

“There will be other exercises we can do also, ones which won’t be in Robin’s notes.”

“Oh, like what?” Colby looked down at him, still lying on the table. A fraction of a second later the blush returned in full force. “Oh.”

“Those exercises are much more fun.”

“I’ll bet. Mace—”

He already knew she was regretting them fucking the other night. It was too obvious not to notice. Not to mention, she had avoided any intimate contact since. But he wasn’t going to give up on getting her underneath him again. Or on top. He wasn’t choosy. He just wanted to feel her hot, wet, tight pussy sliding over his cock. Slowly at first. Slow and teasing. Then hard and fast and desperate. He imagined their bodies connected, slapping together hard. Over and over. Until his balls tightened and convulsed and...

Robin was suddenly standing over him again. He threw his damp towel over his lap. Colby’s ears were almost purple from embarrassment. Christ, she must have been imagining it too.

She put a shaky hand against her throat, and it took three attempts before she asked, “Is it really necessary for him to take those painkillers? Aren’t they addictive? I would like to try some herbal remedies on him.”

Just her asking those questions was enough to cool his ardor. “You are not taking my pills away,” he warned. He wanted to fuck her until she screamed. Hell, until *he* screamed, but he would not tolerate her controlling his life. She was not his mother ... or his wife.

“Mace, you can try the herbs without getting rid of your Vicodin,” Robin assured him. “And to answer your question, Colby, yes, any painkillers with hydrocodone can be addictive. But pain has a way of bringing someone’s self esteem down. We think it is more beneficial for healing if the patient feels better. Getting rid of the pain does wonders for people, it rids them of the constant reminder they are ill or injured, it gives their body a chance to really heal.” Robin indicated to Colby they should switch places.

Robin continued, “Painkillers are his choice. You don’t have to take them, Mace, you know that. Colby, if you can help him with herbs or whatever, more power to you. I like to keep things natural myself. But it has to be Mace’s decision. As long as you continue your rehab, Mace, that’s the most important thing, redeveloping your muscle tone and keeping it flexible.”

Mace lay back on the table and smiled. “I think I like having two women’s hands all over me.”

Robin rolled her eyes. “Take your pants off; it’s time for your favorite part.”

Mace grinned when Colby’s face turned the same color as her hair once more.

* * * *

Colby could feel the heat in her face. She didn’t need to look in a mirror to see she was beet-red. But she had made a deal with Mace. More like a deal with the devil. He had kept up with his part so far, now she had to stick with hers.

Mace had helped her all day at her house, not complaining once. Well, maybe once. But he had worked hard beside her. They had accomplished more than she had ever thought they would. They had pulled and scraped all the old wallpaper off the walls

upstairs. She had hoped to get one bedroom stripped and prepared for paint. They ended up doing all four.

Now she had to do the things Robin had taught her yesterday. Like it or not.

They were both damp with perspiration. Mace's sweat was more from pain than exertion. They had worked through his exercises using his bed as a make-shift PT table, and were now at his "favorite part." He had removed his sweats in anticipation and lay there on the sheets in only his boxer briefs and a T-shirt.

As she leaned over the bed, Colby was trying not to zero in on areas she needed to keep her eyes—and hands—off. But she was going to be working so close to the area her eyes kept flicking back to. And it wasn't as if Mace hadn't responded to her closeness. The long, hard line of his cock against the cotton was unmistakable. She swallowed hard.

"You don't have to do this, Colby. You worked hard all day too. I'll understand if you don't want to."

Colby realized she was chewing on her lower lip and released it. "No. I ... I'll do it. Robin said it would help relax the muscle and keep it from cramping."

"I don't know how my muscles will relax with your hands all over me."

Could she get any redder? She was probably turning purple now. "Not *all* over you." Boy, was she feeling lightheaded. Perhaps it was the ringing in her ears.

"Well, if you're going to do it, do it. I feel—" Mace gave her an over exaggerated frown. "Exposed. Like a sitting duck."

She laughed, feeling a little more relieved. So, she wasn't the only one feeling uncomfortable about this. In more ways than one. "Okay. Tell me if I hurt you."

Colby held her breath, timidly placing her hands on the remains of his inner thigh muscle, and began to massage. She had no problems putting her hands on his body the other night, but this felt different tonight. She felt differently. She was beginning to really ... *like* the man, instead of just lust after him.

She liked his company and his sense of humor. She thought he looked really sexy with his shadow of a beard and long, dark brown hair. He reminded her of a renegade. A loose cannon, completely opposite to her staid, boring scientist self.

She needed to loosen up. Ever since that dark night Mace Walker had crept into her life, she felt a little bit freer, a bit more content. Maybe it just was her imagination, but those multiple orgasms the other night had released something in her, something she didn't want to admit—

Mace groaned. Colby glanced down; her hands were way too high, too close. She had been desperately trying to ignore his hard-on. She pulled away in dismay. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't. It just feels good. You were massaging so intently." He caught her hands in his. It was enough to emphasize how much more delicate she was than him. Her hands were half his size. Colby thought back to how those thick, masculine fingers had dipped into her, strummed her, made her body tremble and writhe in pleasure. She pressed her lips together to capture the groan which so wanted to escape.

Mace brought her hands back to his thigh, giving a slight squeeze before releasing them. "Keep going."

Colby did so, tentatively. She would make sure she paid attention to what she was doing.

"What were you thinking about?"

“What?” Colby looked up to see Mace’s dark eyes attempting to peer into her soul. His heated stare burned her, leaving a sensation of hot liquid flowing down to her toes, making her knees wobble. The words caught in her throat. “Work,” she tried again, “I was thinking of work. Martin and I are close to completing a project.”

Colby was surprised when the spark in his eyes suddenly flickered and died. She was boring him.

“Oh, how nice. Do you and Marty work closely together a lot?”

His muscle suddenly tightened. She kneaded a little faster. “His name is Martin and, yes, we always work together. I told you, he’s my assistant.”

“That’s about all you told me. Do you often work late on projects together? Like the other night?”

All of a sudden he was interested in her work? She kept her rhythm going even though her fingers were beginning to tire. Not to mention, the topic of work cooled the heat between her legs. “Not usually. We try not to do too much overtime. First of all, we’re both salaried and second, we don’t want to burn out.”

“Yeah, you need to keep your energy level high for those special projects. Is that right?”

His tone was hostile and Colby was caught off guard. *Once again.*

She stopped massaging the tight muscles in his leg and stepped back from his bed. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating. But if you’re accusing me of something... Do you think ... I... We...” Colby picked his sweat pants off the floor and whipped them into his lap. She sneered at him. “I think you need a shower. You stink!”

Colby had turned to leave his room when Mace caught her arm, spinning her back toward him.

“Colby.” He looked apologetic, but Colby was too angry to even think of forgiving him.

She ripped her arm from his grasp. “No, Mace. I think I understand now. Perfectly. Even *if* Martin and I are having a relationship or whatever...” She stabbed her finger into his chest. “It’s...” *Poke.* “None...” *Poke.* “Of...” *Poke.* “Your...” *Poke.* “Damn business.”

After a few more jabs for good measure, Colby stormed out of his room and down the hall, leaving Mace rubbing his chest.

Slamming her bedroom door, Colby asked it, “Who the hell does he think he is?”

The door didn’t answer her.

Chapter Seven

“You know, our deal was we would help each other out.”

Colby dropped the paintbrush, watching in dismay as it sank like an ocean liner into the can of forest green paint. She muttered a curse. She picked up a paint stirrer and used it to try to fish the brush out. Unsuccessfully.

“Here. Let me help you.”

He had the nerve to stand there looking handsome and sexy in a snug black T-shirt, his dark eyes pleading with her to forgive him. She pushed his hand away. “No thanks.”

“Are you still mad at me?”

His voice was low, causing tingling sensations down her spine. He was trying to make her feel bad for being angry with him. It wasn’t going to work. Well, she was somewhat sure it wouldn’t. “Why would you think I was mad?”

Mace pulled his shirt up and showed her the small purple bruise on his chest. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe I had a good reason to.”

Colby admitted it to herself—she did feel bad. As much as she didn’t want to, she did. She was supposed to be helping him with his rehab, not injuring him.

“I’m sorry for being a jerk last night. You’re right; it’s none of my business. Your life is your own.”

“Yes.” Colby gave up on the lost brush and looked around for a new one.

“Yes?” He looked at her in confusion.

“Yes, you were a jerk. Yes, it’s none of your business. Yes, it’s my life.”

Mace smiled and gave her a sideways glance. “Do you forgive me?” He located another brush first and picked it up. He knelt down on one knee and brandished the brush like a jeweled sword, a peace offering for a princess. “My Lady, if I finish painting thy wicker furniture this lovely shade of green, will you forgive me? Or will it be off with my head?”

Colby studied him for a moment, wondering if she should let him off the hook. After all, he let her off the hook the other night when she missed dinner. Eventually.

She looked at all the pieces of wicker furniture which had been delivered earlier from the secondhand shop in town. They littered the living room. She wanted to get them painted so when the porch was done, she could put them outside. “I’ll think about it. Maybe if the coats are even and there are no runs.”

“Boy, you’re tough.”

She was. She’d be the first to admit it. Not out loud, though. But she had to be tough. She wasn’t going to let this man walk into her life and turn it upside down and inside out. She had had a relationship like that before. She had been the one on the losing end. She wasn’t going to get burned ever again. Even if it meant she might never find someone for herself permanently. One of those “forever” type of men. She’d rather be alone for the rest of her life than be hurt again. It was too humiliating. Too painful.

She had been lucky to have secured her position at Malvern U. It had given her a fresh beginning and had put a good distance between her and her ex-boyfriend Craig. Craig was truly a mean, mean man. He had been controlling. She couldn’t even believe she had wasted two years with him. Two years! It was that final time in the hospital

which made her really wake up. She was tired of being blamed for things she didn't do. The day she walked out of the hospital, she had walked out on Craig. She got on a bus with a restraining order in hand, and headed toward Malvern. That had been over a year ago. She was sure he was too busy with his new girlfriend—the one he had been fucking while living with, and supposedly in love with, Colby—to care she had disappeared.

The more she thought about it, the more she felt the fool. She swept the memories out of her head like cobwebs.

As Colby watched Mace, involved in painting the chairs, she thought she could always get a dog to keep her company. A dog would be more faithful and love unconditionally. A dog wouldn't be fucking someone else on the sly. At least, she hoped not.

“Hell-ooooo?”

Colby shook her head, clearing her thoughts. “What?”

“I just asked you where you're going to put this furniture three times. If you haven't decided yet, I suggest the porch. After it's safe, of course.”

“The porch is exactly where it's going to go. The contractor said it should be completely repaired and ready for paint by the end of the month.”

“Should I dare to ask what color, or is it going to be an awful shade of pink?”

“No one calls pink ‘pink’ anymore. It's either rose or blush. Get with it! But no, it's going to be cream.” Colby smirked at the obvious relief he didn't bother to hide. “I've decided to paint the house exterior cream and accent with this forest green. And maybe some gold.” She brushed a piece of flyaway hair, an escapee from her braid, away from her face. “Or possibly red.”

“Not sunshine yellow like in the kitchen?”

“I know you hate that color. But I was looking for a bright color for the best and most used room in the house. A kitchen is where people gather. It should feel sunny. It's where people meet and enjoy meals together or a late cup of hot cocoa on a cold winter night. I think it's the center point of a home.”

“I prefer to have something hot late at night in bed. But the kitchen table would do.”

Typical man, Colby thought, *with only one thing on his mind*. But after he said it, she couldn't shake the thought of having sex with Mace on the kitchen table. Would it be fun? Uncomfortable? It was something she'd never tried before. It might be a great prop—

Colby jumped when Mace placed his hands on her shoulders. He leaned in close to her, murmuring in her ear, “Are you thinking what I'm thinking?”

His breath stirred the loose hair by her ear, tickling her, sending a shiver up her spine. Her vaginal muscles squeezed in anticipation. His lips were so close. If she tilted her head just slightly...

She shook it instead. “Only if you're thinking how perfect this furniture is going to look on the porch.”

Mace ran his hands down her arms, taking the paintbrush out of her hand. He placed it on a lid and turned Colby to face him. His large, warm hands cupped her cheeks. “I've been having fantasies of taking you on these drop cloths. In some of them I paint designs all over your body, slowly swirling the brush in places which are sensitive, like your lips, your breasts, your...”

“Mace...” Colby's breasts tightened, her nipples coming to hard points. Her heart

stopped. A split second later it resumed beating violently. She felt a warm rush between her legs. Her panties were going to be slick, hot, damp. She needed him to touch her. She wanted to feel his lips against hers, so male, so warm. And they were. Colby reached up and pulled Mace's head down to her, capturing his lips. She smothered his sound of surprise.

Mace released her face to grip the small of her back, pressing her against him. She was aware of his body. Aware his desire matched hers. She was shocked at herself for wanting him so much, but she couldn't deny it. Even if she wanted to, her body gave her away.

The scientist in her tried to rationalize what was happening, but the woman only felt and wanted and desired to be closer. She wanted to be so close to Mace they were...

One.

Trembling, she yanked the T-shirt from his jeans, inserting her hands underneath the thin cotton, running them over the scorching heat of his chest. Her fingers followed the contours until she reached his small male nipples, her thumbs circling the tight nubs. She wanted to rake her teeth against him there. Wanted to hear a quick intake of breath when she nipped his skin. Maybe leave another love bite.

"This isn't fair; I should be doing this to you. Take it off," he ordered, his voice so low it sounded nearly painful.

Colby complied, tearing his shirt over his head and tossing it aside. All the exercises he did kept his muscles hard and lean. Just to see them excited her; except now she got to touch them, feel the searing silkiness of his skin, the roughness of the dark hair disappearing into his jeans.

Mace reached for the button on his jeans.

"No." Colby stopped him, brushing his hands away. "Let me."

He dropped his arms to his side, his eyes dark, clouded, as he watched her release the top button and slowly slide the zipper down.

Mace growled softly when the back of her knuckles grazed his hard length, "God, woman, you're going to kill me." He grabbed her by the back of her arms, pulling her against him. "At least," he murmured against her lips, "I'll go with a smile."

He lowered her down to the drop cloth, slowly following her, unbuttoning the baggy work-shirt hiding her curves.

Colby closed her eyes, feeling the cool air against her hot skin. She opened them when he released the front clasp of her bra. Mace was kneeling over her, staring at her breasts.

Colby felt a sudden need to cover herself, to pull her shirt over her exposed chest, until he grasped both breasts with his hands and softly kissed each nipple. His caress caused her to arch her back, thrusting herself closer to his mouth, his lips, his tongue.

"God, they're so beautiful. You're so beautiful. You shouldn't be allowed to wear clothes."

His words made Colby shake her head in disbelief. She wondered how the University would react if she did scientific tests naked.

"No, forget that. I don't want anyone to see you, except me. I want to see every part of you, every nook and every cranny."

Colby shivered and was once again lost.

Mace buried his face between her breasts. "Colby... Colby... Stop me now if you

have any doubts.”

Colby swept her tongue over her lips and whispered, “Mace, please...” He paused. “Touch me.” His body molded against hers. He nuzzled her neck, nibbling her earlobe. Stroking the outer shell of her ear with his tongue, he murmured wicked ideas, making her head spin.

She wanted to try every one of them.

Mace captured her lower lip between his teeth, tugging slightly, before kissing each corner of her lips. “Sweet ... so sweet. I want to taste you everywhere.”

He released the buttons on her jeans, shucking them and her panties off with a practiced move. He tossed them into a corner, quickly followed by his own.

“Done that much?”

Mace stopped her words with his mouth, their tongues sparring fiercely. Colby’s nails left half-moons in the skin of his back, while her hips danced against his. His cock was like hard steel encased in satin. Smooth, the head slick with pre-come. She quickly forgot what she had just asked when his cock bumped and slid and bumped again against her hip. Her pussy called to it, opening wider, getting wetter. Beckoning.

The roughness of his thumb stroking her nipple was enough to make her clench her thighs together to keep control. He pinched and plucked one, then the other, making her cry out. She pressed her lips against his damp neck, and she couldn’t stop herself—she sank her teeth into those corded muscles. His neck bowed and he threw his head back, gasping with pleasure. He shifted, ramming his very ready cock between her thighs, just teasing, sliding against her swollen clit.

Before Mace, it had been a long time since she had actually enjoyed sex, and she was going to get pleasure from every second of it. She would take as much as he wanted to give. She wanted the chance to give back, to savor every inch, every hard curve and every tight line of his body. She wouldn’t forget those soft places either.

One hand left her breast and brushed against her wet curls. Just a slight brush and she almost came just with that alone. She ran her tongue over the teeth marks she left on his throat, and with a curse he shoved two fingers deep within her and circled his thumb against her clit. Her back arched and she released a low wail.

With a stroke to her pussy lips, she opened to him. Fingers weren’t enough; she needed his hard length deep, so deep within her.

“Fuck me,” came out in a tortured moan. But desperation made her scream, “Now!”

He pinched her nipple even harder and pulled out his slick fingers only to slide them along her braid. He clenched his fist and tilted her head back, exposing her vulnerable throat. It should have hurt, but didn’t. It just stoked her fire.

He licked along the hollow of her neck before leaning back to ask, “Are you ready?”

His grimace showed his fight for control, but he was teasing her. Teasing her!

“Damn you!”

He still held back, his cock leaking on her thigh, twitching against her skin. “I want to make sure you are ready.”

She reached down, grabbed his cock and drew him to her slick opening. She bared her teeth at him and said, “Now.”

From where he got it, she didn’t know, didn’t care. But he held up a condom and waved it in front of her face.

“Need something?” he teased.

She ripped the foil package out of his hand, tore it open with her teeth, and without even a hesitation, rolled it over his hard shaft, lingering for only a fraction of a second. She didn't want his cock in her hand, she wanted it elsewhere.

She scooted back onto the drop cloth, bent her knees and spread her thighs in anticipation as he settled between them. She looked down between their bodies and saw the head of his cock right there, right near her opening, ready to fill her up.

She glanced up, wondering what he was waiting for. Once she looked at him—really looked at him—he drove deep with a sharp tilt of his hips. Once. She waited for the second thrust.

She writhed and cried out, begging, but he stilled. He stilled while he was buried as deep as he could be, sucking oxygen painfully, struggling to keep himself together. However, it was only seconds before he relented and met every thrust of her hips with one of his own. Over and over, until he could bury himself no deeper. She dug her fingers into his buttocks, controlling his thrust, controlling the angle of his hips. Suddenly, he was brushing that sweet spot, and she closed her eyes and screamed. Her body pulsed from the center outward, and it was then she also felt him pulse within her. His arms were shaking and his body curved like an archer's bow.

They were conscious of nothing but each other, the resulting pain and pleasure.

Colby closed her eyes, a shaky sigh escaping her. "Oh, my God," she whispered.

"I think I saw him too."

Her eyes opened at his husky words and she looked at Mace directly above her. He gave her a crooked smile. Colby blinked and focused on him. He pushed himself up, relieving her of some of his weight.

She frantically grabbed his arm. "No, don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere, Colby. I like where I'm at. I just don't want to crush you."

Mace shifted onto his side beside her, breaking their intimate contact. Colby stretched leisurely, savoring the tightness of her hard-worked muscles and the dampness between her legs.

He caressed her braid and drew circles around her navel with the end of it. "It's a mess." He tugged gently on it. "Next time I want your hair loose so I can bury my hands into it. I want to feel the soft, silkiness against my skin. I want..."

"What about what I want?"

Mace propped his head in his hand and searched her face, wariness creeping into his expression. What was he expecting her to say, they would never do this again? That it had been a big mistake?

Not likely. Not right now, anyway.

She trailed a finger down his damp chest, following the dark line of hair circling his navel. Then she reached up and undid her braid, freeing the silky strands. "I want you again. Now."

A wicked grin spread over his face. "I'll do my best to comply."

He pushed himself to his feet, and without a care he went into the kitchen to dispose of the condom. When he returned, he paused in the doorway. He was clearly not ready for a second round.

Colby raised an eyebrow and gave him a meaningful look.

"Don't worry. It won't take me long."

"Promises, promises."

After finding where his jeans had landed earlier in his haste, he pulled a fresh condom and a small tube of something out of the pocket, and slowly approached the drop cloth where she was still lazing. She felt tired and boneless, but she had an itch deep inside her only he would be able to scratch. He was magnificent naked; his only flaw was his injury and even that didn't take away from him.

"Are you okay?" She eyed the tube which he had tossed to the side when he dropped to his knees. She wasn't sure as wet as she had been—and still was—why he'd need that.

"I'm fine," he responded, automatically knowing what she meant when she asked that question. He probably wouldn't admit it if he wasn't fine, but she wouldn't push it.

She crooked a knee up, breaking his view of her most intimate parts. He came over and settled on his knees between her legs. He put a hand on each knee and spread them apart. "Don't hide yourself."

"I wasn't."

He just shot her a look. He ran a finger up both sides of her inner thighs until they met in the middle. He slid his palms around to her hips. "Flip over." He pressed on her hips and helped her turn over until she was lying on her stomach, legs spread.

She didn't want to see what he was doing; she just wanted to enjoy the sensation of his touch. Lips brushed along the back of her knees up to the tops of her thighs. Teeth and tongue scraped along her ass cheeks, making her flex her muscles there. She heard his deep chuckle behind her. "Jesus, your ass is so sweet." He palmed her cheeks and squeezed them together, the sensation making her even wetter.

Colby finally turned to peek at him when he yanked her hips up and back, leaving nothing of her pussy to his imagination. He held her hips in place and just looked. And looked ... until she got paranoid. What was wrong with her? Why was he just staring at her?

She tried to wiggle away but he just gripped her harder. "Uh-uh." She noticed he was no longer semi-erect. And he released one hip just long enough to roll on a condom. "Keep your head down and point your pussy toward the ceiling."

She tucked her head in her arms and bit her lip. She wanted him inside her already. What was he waiting for? "Are you going to fuck me or not?"

"Quiet."

She felt him shift until his thighs pushed against her inner thighs, spreading her just a bit more. Still nothing. She let out a long, frustrated breath, trying to keep the whimper from escaping her. If he didn't fuck her soon, she was going to come just from anticipation!

She felt him slide between her ass cheeks, all the way up until his balls pressed against her pussy lips. She couldn't help it, she couldn't hold back the whimper. He did it again; pulled back and then slid between her crease again, pushing her ass together as he did. It was a sensation she had never felt before, him sliding across that forbidden place. It felt so good. But she would never, could never do that. Never.

He slid over her again, her ass cheeks still pinned together, and he let out an explosive breath mixed with a curse. He released one cheek just long enough to plunge two fingers into her wet pussy, and before she could even fathom what just happened he was pressing his now slick fingers to her anus. Rubbing the natural lubricant over it, circling her tight hole with his large fingers.

She whimpered again, from fear, from anticipation, from want.

No. She couldn't.

"It would be mine and mine only," he said as if he could read her mind.

She closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip harder. He started a rhythm again with his cock, sliding between her cheeks, brushing against her. And every pass he took, she relaxed a little more, loosening, wanting.

He stroked his tongue up her spine, making her shiver. "Do you want me?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me in you?"

"Yes."

"How bad?"

"Bad."

"I'm going to start in one and finish in the other."

No. No. Ahhh. He plunged his cock into her pussy, slamming his hips against her. Again and again. It was hard and deep and she loved it. She could come just like that, but he changed his position, bending over her back, keeping his cock fully seated, while he reached around and grabbed her breasts. Mace made shallow movements inside her, and she came. He pinched her nipples and she screamed, bucking against him, wanting him to fuck her even harder. But he was relentless, continuing the grinding movements deep within her. Rubbing her nipples, pinching, and just when she thought her orgasm was over, it wasn't. She convulsed around him again, squeezing his cock. He would last longer this time, and she thought she might just die of pleasure before he was finished.

With a kiss to the back of her neck, he raised himself back up and took long strokes, reaching underneath her to circle her clit with his thumb. Again she bucked uncontrollably against him, but he wouldn't stop. His other thumb ended up at her rear entrance, stroking at the same rhythm as the one at her clit.

She let out a low, tortured moan. The thumb at her tight ring pressed harder. Circling, circling, while pressing harder and harder. His cock slid out of her and he returned to sliding it between her cheeks—slow, careful strokes. His other thumb still played with her clit. He adjusted himself again behind her, and two fingers filled her empty pussy, keeping in time with the thrusts of his cock.

Colby rocked back and forth on her knees, her head still tucked in her arms on the floor. She knew what was coming. She knew. She didn't even want to stop him.

Though he did. Just for a moment. Now she knew what the lube was for.

When he pulled back his hips to ready for another stroke, she felt a slick finger slip into her tight ring. She screamed and shuddered.

Mace tensed behind her, stopping his movement. A shudder ran through him also.

"Holy shit, you are so tight. Are you going to let me in?"

Was she going to let him in? Was she? She nodded against her arms.

"Colby..." He sounded as if he was in pain. She couldn't look at him, she couldn't. Her heart was going to burst...

"Yes! Yes! *Do it!*"

He slipped his finger back out, creating the strangest feeling. And before she could suck in another breath, the head of his cock was there, pressing. Slowly pressing, almost asking for permission from her body to enter. His command of "relax" sounded like it came from between gritted teeth. The cool sensation of lube being liberally applied against her heated skin made her jump.

But even so, she tried to relax, and when he started stroking the insides of her pussy again with his fingers, she did automatically. The crown of his head broke through and he slid slowly into her, stretching her, filling her up.

She heard his ragged breathing over her and a drip of sweat fell onto the small of her back. For a fraction of a moment he was fully seated in her. His whole length was deep in her. He slowly retreated and she cried out.

“Are you hurting?”

“No ... fuck me.” It was the weirdest sensation, but it felt so good. He picked up a gentle pace. She knew he shouldn’t go any faster, but it drove her crazy. One of his hands controlled her, stopped her from impaling herself on him, while the other continued to fuck her pussy.

The buildup was slow this time; slow, but so intense she screamed and tensed her whole body, tightening up on him. He took one more thrust, calling out her name as he pulsed inside her.

He held her hips still until he recovered, then helped her down to the drop cloth, as his cock slipped out of her.

He lay down beside her and took her into his arms, turning her to face him. He brushed a light kiss over her nose and sighed. “Tired?”

Colby could only nod slightly while she mentally did a body check, making sure she was still whole after that.

“That was unbelievable.” He flopped onto his back and dragged her over his chest.

Colby stuck her tongue out to taste the saltiness of his chest. She rolled her eyes up to see him staring intently at her.

“Are you okay?”

She gave him a smile. She was more than okay. “Perfect.”

Chapter Eight

Colby jerked awake to a shrill ring. Her heart pounded fiercely when the phone rang a second time. She blinked, staring at where it sat on the nightstand.

It could be the person who kept hanging up.

Or maybe it was Mace...

Even though she knew the phone would ring again, she still started. She let out a long breath, trying to calm her nerves. Until a second later the doorbell rang.

Colby let out a little squeak.

She had to stop jumping at every little thing!

When Mace was home, she never worried. She had the sense of safety whenever he was around, which surprised her since her first impression of him was he appeared dangerous.

Dangerous to whom? The jury was still out on that one.

She rolled out of bed and grabbed the silk robe she had thrown at the foot of it. She inserted her arms into the sleeves and tied the belt tightly around her waist, trying to ignore the still ringing phone. Someone must have switched off the answering machine. It could have been her, but she couldn't remember. It didn't matter at this moment anyway, because whoever was at the door was still ringing the doorbell. Damn.

She yanked open the nightstand drawer and removed her Glock. It was ready to go with one in the chamber and a full clip. But, looking down at her robe, she didn't have anywhere to hide it on her person.

Hidden or not, she wasn't going to answer the door without protection. One never knew who could be lurking outside the house. She shook her head; she was going loony. She was way too paranoid. But just the feel of her heavy gun in her hand soothed her, made her not feel like a victim.

She went downstairs and, at the front door, she peered through the peephole. A young man stood on the other side, dressed in a brown uniform. His baseball cap had a patch on it advertising "Ellie's Bouquets."

Behind the kid, she noticed the business name was also plastered all over the parked delivery van.

Mace. He must have bought her flowers. How very sweet!

Colby unlocked the door and swung it partially open, just enough where she could keep her left hand, which held the gun, hidden behind the door.

"Hello, ma'am," the kid said. He shoved his clipboard toward her. "I have a delivery of flowers."

The young man's eyes immediately drew to her cleavage, which was slowly being exposed as her robe slipped open. With the clipboard in one hand and the gun in the other, she didn't have any hands left to close it.

"Who are they for?" Colby asked. She signed awkwardly on the line next to the address of the house. She had used the doorjamb to hold the clipboard up while she signed. She handed it back to him before pinning the lapels of her robe together tightly with her free hand.

The kid did a lazy half shrug, his eyes still focused on the point where she was

gripping her robe. “There’s no name on the delivery, just this address.”

Colby looked down. Nope, nothing was showing.

She waited.

He stood there, a dumb look on his face while he continued to stare at her, like he was just hoping to catch a glimpse of something.

She cleared her throat, catching his attention. “The flowers?”

“Oh. Yeah. Here.” He shoved the wrapped bouquet at her.

She had to quickly release her robe to grab the flowers, but pressed them against her chest, making a shield from his eyes.

He stood there for a moment more. Until he got sick of waiting for a tip, she guessed. Not that he was going to get one from her since she didn’t carry money in her negligee or robe, of course.

“Sorry,” she called out as he trooped away mumbling.

She closed the door and locked it before moving into the kitchen. She dumped her gun on the table and quickly unwrapped the green paper covering the bouquet. A little thrill ran up her spine. She couldn’t believe Mace had bought her flowers!

As she peeled the paper away, she uncovered beautiful blood-red roses. They smelled delicious. She loved roses: the feel, the scent, the soft, silkiness of their petals.

Wait! What?

At first Colby thought she was seeing things. She wasn’t. In the center of the dozen red roses, a single black rose stood out. It was just as gorgeous as the red ones, except it was a deep purplish-black color. And a black rose meant death.

Why would Mace include a black one? Maybe it was just a mistake made at the florists. She laid the bouquet on the table and dug out the attached card. It read: *Thinking about you*. Without a signature line.

Not thinking *of* you, but thinking *about* you. That was odd. The card had neither a *to* nor a *from*. Not only was it a bit out of the ordinary, the single black rose mixed in was as well.

Colby heard the front door unlock and open. “Mace?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m in the kitchen.”

“Good. Did you get coffee started? If not, I brought—” He stepped into the kitchen, his hands full of a pastry bag and a drink carrier with two large disposable cups in it.

“What’s the matter?”

“They delivered the flowers.”

“Uh. Okay.” He dumped the food and drinks on the table and put one of the cups in front of her. “Chai tea.”

Colby nodded her thanks.

Mace pulled a chair away from the table and settled into it, stretching his leg out. He looked a bit pained, a white ring circling the press of his lips.

“Is your leg bothering you?”

He nodded, kneading his knuckles against his thigh. “A little bit.”

She had a feeling it was more than a little bit. When he reached for his bottle of pain medication, which was in the middle of the kitchen table, she made a noise. His fingers curled into a fist and he grimaced. But he left the pain pills alone. Not that she enjoyed his suffering. She didn’t. She just didn’t want to see him end up addicted to pain

medication.

He moved away from the pill bottle and brushed his fingers over the petals of the roses instead. "So, what's up with the roses?"

"You tell me."

He pursed his lips, clearly fighting with himself whether he should take credit for the flowers or not.

Well, if he had to think about it that hard, he didn't buy them. "If you didn't order them, who did?"

"What does the card say?" She tossed the card at him. He glanced at it and frowned. "That's weird," he said, after putting the card aside.

"My thoughts exactly."

"Could it be your Martin?"

Colby sighed. "He's not *my* Martin. Anyway, I doubt he'd be sending me flowers."

"Why?"

"He just wouldn't. Maybe this is some sort of joke."

"An expensive joke." He took a long swig of his coffee.

She wrapped her brain around a more puzzling thought. "Hold on. How do we even know these were meant for me? The delivery guy just said they were for this address. Maybe they were sent to you."

He choked and wiped his mouth with his hand. "No one knows I'm home except for you and my boss."

"And your physical therapist."

"Yeah, but—" He pushed away from the table and grabbed the phone which hung on the wall. "We can solve this easily enough. What was the name of the florist?"

She gave the information to him, but there wasn't a phone number on the card, so Mace called 411.

A few minutes later he hung up. "Well, that was pointless." His attempt to not sound frustrated didn't go unnoticed. He sank back in his chair, running a hand through his hair.

"Sounded like it." She popped the lid off her tea and sniffed at it. The soft aroma of spices tickled her nose. She took a tentative sip. It tasted sweet and creamy and oh so good. Maybe it would calm her nerves.

"Whoever bought the bouquet paid in cash. They have no record of who sent it and who the intended recipient was. Fuck." He dragged his hand through his hair again.

She was tempted to smooth it down for him. "Hey, it's just flowers." Though she wanted to believe him, she had this niggling feeling there was more to it. The people who knew she was staying at this house were limited and Mace could say the same.

"Look, no point in worrying about it, I guess." He didn't sound so convinced. He pushed the pastry bag toward her. "I brought breakfast. Croissants and a couple of danishes."

She gave the bag of food a look of distaste. She didn't know if she could eat now. What was once the pleasant scent of the roses, now turned her stomach.

Chapter Nine

Colby spread her legs and slowed her breathing. Mace reached around her to steady her arms, leaning into her back. His breath tickled the hair by her ear. "Steady, steady. Okay, squeeze."

The gunshot made Colby flinch, but her shot was dead-on.

"Ouch." Mace groaned, looking at the target. He pressed the button and the paper target glided toward them. "You were supposed to go for center mass."

She grinned. "Close enough. I got him where I want him."

Mace stuck his pinky through the hole in the target and wiggled it. "Yeah, right in the crotch. Sorry, buddy, there'll be no more lil' baby targets running around. She just neutered you."

With a laugh, she said, "Put another one out there."

He clipped a new target on, then pressed the button to send the silhouette out into the range. "Okay, this time..."

"This time, I can do it myself."

Mace lifted his hands in surrender and backed off. "Fine. Whatever. I only wanted to help."

"Mace, I wouldn't own a gun without knowing how to shoot it."

She barely caught the roll of his eyes. "Do you know what this world is filled with? People who buy firearms and can't—"

Colby gave him a quick elbow to the stomach. "Don't group me with them."

"All right, show me what you can do, Miss Biochemist." He brushed a kiss along her temple before backing off.

"That's *Ms.* Biochemist to you." She flashed him a big smile before turning to concentrate on her target. She supported her trigger hand and carefully took aim. *Inhale, exhale all the air out; steady.* She kept an even pressure on the trigger and squeezed. The sound of the shot made her flinch again but when she opened her eyes, she had once again hit her target.

"Nice. I want to see that again. But faster. Who is going to give you time to aim and shoot? A bad guy," Mace pointed to the target, "isn't going to wait around for you to shoot him. He's either going to be running at you, running away from you or blowing your head off."

Colby smiled wickedly. "Shut up and put your ear protection back on." He slid his hearing protectors back over his ears as she raised her Glock again. She called the body parts off as she aimed. "Head ... heart ... lung ... trigger arm ... groin ... leg..." Every bullet met its mark, one after the other, in quick succession. When the target was nothing but a tattered piece of paper, she slipped the clip out and double-checked the chamber was empty. "He isn't going anywhere," she stated.

"Damn right he's not." He shook his head. "Okay, we don't need to waste any more time here at the range. Let's go home, you're getting me hard." He chuckled and took off his shooting glasses. "Wow, a woman who can shoot and who's good in bed. How lucky can I get?"

"Don't push your luck." Colby popped out her orange earplugs and put the gun away

in its case. "Wait a minute, just good?"

He reached around her to snap the case shut, then snagged her wrists before she could pull away. He yanked her arms above her head, and with his hips he maneuvered her against the concrete wall of the shooting booth. He let her feel how much he wanted her.

She glanced quickly to the opening of the booth. Anyone could pass by at any moment. "Mace, someone is going to see us."

"Maybe."

She should be embarrassed at the thought of being caught. Mace pinned her against the wall and thrust against her. But she wasn't. The possibility of someone seeing them excited her.

He nuzzled up her neck before moving up to ear. He whispered, "I could fuck you right here." He kissed her, slanting his lips over hers and burying his tongue in her mouth. He tasted so good. He shifted both her wrists to one hand. Drawing his fingers over her breasts, he brushed over her nipples. "Are you still sore?" he asked against her lips, referring to her tender backside, a result from their afternoon delight at the house the day before.

"A little." She was, more than a little, but it had been worth it—even if she had suffered with a case of discord for a little while afterward. She ended up telling herself to just live for the moment, to just enjoy what Mace offered. Even if it only lasted for a little while.

Mace was not offering, but taking it upon himself to pop open the top of her jeans. He unzipped them completely, giving his hand enough room to plunge underneath her panties and right into her pussy. Colby gasped at the sudden invasion of his fingers, but tilted her hips to give him better access.

He stroked and tweaked her, playing along her moist labia, inserting a couple fingers before moving on to her clit. Where he started the pattern over again. When she started to cry out, he placed his lips over hers and caught it, muffling it. He kissed her deeply while he played with her, breaking away only to say, "This is my thank you for yesterday."

He curled his fingers inside her and found her sweet spot, taunting and teasing it. He added his thumb into the mix, pressing and flicking her clit. She could take no more. She thrust her hips against his hand one last time, gasping and groaning into his mouth. He only released her, her pussy, her mouth and her wrists, when she quieted.

He brushed a light kiss against her lips. "Damn, I'll have to thank you more often."

Colby pulled herself together while he gathered their equipment. It took her a few minutes to be able to move away from the wall and stand on her own. She had to be wearing the dumbest smile on her face.

On their way out of the gun club, Colby said, "I've got to stop and check on the contractor, do you mind?"

Their feet crunched along the graveled lot, and she took note of the cars parked around her. There were at least a dozen. How could they have gone undetected? Maybe they hadn't. She had been so caught up in the pleasure there could have been a huge audience and she wouldn't have even known. Or cared at that moment.

"No." He unlocked the truck and opened the door for her. "I want to meet him anyway."

She gave him a funny look. What was with the sudden testosterone surge? "What

for?”

“Why not? I can’t meet the man who’s doing the majority of the work on your house?”

“Well, I didn’t think you were so interested in my house. I know how atrocious you think it is.” She climbed into the passenger seat.

“Maybe I just want to meet my competition. I know how much a man with a paint brush excites you.”

Only you, she thought. She tried not to laugh out loud. Wait until he meets the contractor.

When they drove up to the house a crew of men was busy at work on the porch. Colby’s eyes widened. She hardly waited for Mace to stop the truck before leaping out.

“Hey, wait a minute,” he called out.

“My porch! They’re working on my porch!” She smiled at him through the windshield, and laughed. She practically ran up to the front steps. The hammering was loud and glorious. She loved it. The sound of those busy, busy hands pleased her.

“Hi, Ben!” she yelled over the racket.

The older man turned to give Colby a slight wave. “Hello, Ms. Parks. Things are going real good here.”

Colby was so excited she hopped in place and wrung her hands together. She was doing the happy dance. “I see! You’ve got almost all the floorboards replaced.” She probably looked like a crazy loon, but she didn’t care.

“Yep, soon you’ll be able to paint.”

Music to her ears. Colby heard a groan behind her. But not to someone else’s apparently. “Did I hear the ‘P’ word again?”

She turned and trotted up to Mace. “Hurry up, Mace! Look how far they’ve got.” She grabbed his arm, tugging hard.

Mace slowly trudged up the overgrown walkway in mock misery. “I see. That’s nice.”

She tugged harder on his arm, to pick up his pace. “Ben, this is Mace Walker. Mace, this is Ben Fine, he’s my contractor.”

“Oh, hell, I just thought he was collecting scrap wood for his fireplace.” Mace turned to eye up the gray-haired man. “Hello, Ben.”

Ben had deep creases surrounding his eyes and mouth; his skin was weathered from age and years of working in the sun. Colby watched Mace’s expression relax, almost as if he was relieved. Why he would find her contractor a threat was a mystery to her.

Mace extended his hand and the older man shook it firmly while returning his hello. “Is the bedroom finished yet?”

The hammering stopped dead, and the crew’s heads, all five of them, spun in unison to look over at Colby. Her face burned hot and she turned on Mace. “Stop it,” she whispered fiercely.

“What? I was just asking a question.” He smirked, draping an arm around her hips and drawing her to him.

Colby jerked away impatiently. Men!

Deciding to ignore him and his childishness, she wandered around the outside of the raised porch, eyeing all the new repairs. The crew had replaced broken spindles and rotted posts. The floorboards would eventually all be new. The steps still needed repair,

but it looked like they would be finished by tomorrow. She hugged herself, hardly able to contain her delight at the progress, and thought about how it was going to look with a fresh coat of paint. And the new porch swing she wanted. *Oh, God, soon. Soon.* She'll be swinging on her own porch, with a glass of lemonade, reading a novel and listening to the birds chirping, and the...

A hand on her shoulder startled her. "Come back from wherever you are," came the low murmur next to her ear.

Colby blinked twice, coming back to reality, and turned to look at the man next to her. Where did he fit in the picture? "Oh, I was just doing a little imagining." *Did* he fit into the picture?

"Yeah, I could see that. You went off to Never Never Land."

"Mace, you just don't understand. This house is everything to me. It *is* me."

Mace laid an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "I believe it. Now, how soon do we need to start painting?"

* * * *

Mace wandered around the back of the old house. Colby was still talking excitedly to Ben in the front, so he decided to get a little work done. He had borrowed a carpenter pencil and measuring tape from one of the men and snagged a scrap of paper out of his truck. He needed to measure the rear entryway to the kitchen since Colby wanted to order a new storm door.

As he climbed the two wooden steps to the small covered entrance, he paused. Something wasn't right. Instinctively, he froze, searching his surroundings. Muddy footprints came from the overgrown bushes to the left of the house. Not from the right, where the driveway was. And the empty paint cans he had stacked in a corner of the porch were scattered. The knocked-over cans he could attribute to a curious, wild animal. But the footprints were definitely human. And fresh.

He would have to ask the crew whether any of them had been doing some exploring of their own. But a niggling feeling at the back of his neck told him something was off.

He was letting his past experience overrun him. It could have been just a teenager looking for an empty house to party in.

Just like it was kid's prank calling the house.

He finally moved, opening the outer storm door to inspect the inner wooden door carefully. He looked closely at the small rectangular windowpanes. There was no doubt there was a handprint on one of them. Like someone had been peering in the back door, looking for something or someone.

Teenager, crewmember or not, he had a bad feeling about this. But he wasn't going to jump the gun and tell Colby. He didn't want to frighten her without reason. He would just keep a close eye on her and her house.

* * * *

Colby glanced at her watch. 1:13 a.m. She never meant to stay this late at work. But she had gotten involved in an experiment and had wanted to finish it. She hated leaving ends untied. As it was, she wanted to make up time for leaving early last Monday to go with Mace to the shooting range.

She expected Mace had probably had gone to bed a few hours ago.

Her house keys jingled softly when she inserted them into the door and slowly turned the doorknob. She didn't want to wake him if he was asleep. The foyer was dark; the only glow came from one of those lighted plug-in scents she had stuck in one of the outlets. She slid her hand along the wall by the door until she found the switch. She flipped it.

A small, surprised cry escaped her when she turned to find Mace sitting at the top of the stairs in only sweat pants. How long had he been sitting there?

Okay, there wasn't a problem.

"I didn't mean to wake you. I was trying to be quiet. Sorry."

She was whispering, but it wasn't necessary; there was no one else to awaken. The only thing she could think of was to ignore whatever problem he perceived. She was an adult and she was single and she had a job. She was allowed to work late without feeling guilty.

Closing the front door behind her, she locked it and carefully put her briefcase on the foyer table. Slipping her feet out of her shoes, she straightened up to face him. His eyes were narrowed and dark. Colby cringed.

"I couldn't sleep."

Damn it, she didn't have to answer to anyone. "Oh, do you want some tea? I'm going to make myself a cup of chamomile."

She headed into the kitchen, listening for his bare feet to pad down the stairs. But she didn't hear anything and assumed he just went back to bed.

She grabbed a mug and a box of herbal tea bags out of the cabinet. After putting the kettle on the stove, she turned to take a seat at the table. Mace was already there. Colby jumped, her hand clutching her chest. "God, you scared me. I didn't hear you come in."

When her heartbeat slowed, she grabbed another mug and tea bag and placed it in front of him. Then she settled into a chair across from him, waiting for the water to boil ... or the other shoe to drop.

But, there was no problem.

"Do you know what time it is?" His voice was low and grumbling.

There was no problem.

"Yes, unfortunately, I do."

She pulled her hairpins out, letting her hair fall around her face and down her back. It felt good to release her hair out the braid after a long day. She combed her fingers through the thick mass, untangling some snagged strands. "I'm beat. And to think I have to get up in a few hours and do this all over again."

"Do what?" His eyes pinned hers and she felt like a moth caught in a flame.

"Do what? Work, of course." She unbuttoned the top button of her blouse.

"You were working?"

Colby stood to get the whistling kettle, breaking his eye contact. *There was no problem!* She filled both of their mugs with the steaming water. "What else?"

"I don't know, why don't you tell me?"

She put the kettle back on the stove and turned to him. Okay, there *may* be a problem. "Mace, what are you getting at?"

"I was just a little worried about you."

"Why? I'm a big girl."

"It was getting late, or should I say early. I thought you normally didn't work this

late.”

Colby stirred a little honey into her tea. “I don’t. But, Martin and I…”

“Martin!” he spat.

Colby looked at him incredulously. There *was* a problem. “Yes, Martin. We got involved in a project we are working on, and before we knew it, it was late. At this point we decided to get a late supper and—”

He held his hand up. “Enough. I’ve heard enough. You don’t have to explain.”

Colby slammed her spoon down on the table. *You had better believe there is a problem!*

“You’re damn right, I don’t!” She stood, pushing her chair back. “I’m going to bed.”

She stomped out of the room, trying not to spill her tea. As she carried it upstairs, she could have sworn she heard, “Been there, done that.”

Once in her room, she locked her bedroom door. She wanted to scream but instead she settled for some quiet fuming. She called him every name in the book, though only in her head. Who did he think he was? Did he think he owned her? Just because they slept with each other—even if it *was* a few times and included stuff she had never done before—he now owned her body? No. She had already had someone who thought he owned her body and soul—and everything else. Look where it left her. She didn’t need another man treating her like that.

She sat on her bed and sipped her tea, but not enjoying it. There wasn’t enough chamomile in the world to calm her down right now. Her doorknob slowly turned. She grinned smugly toward the door. She waited for him to knock on the door and apologize. But the doorknob released and she heard nothing else. He must have gone to bed. Good! Let him stew in his own juices for the rest of the night.

Though, if he hadn’t acted like such an ass she could have used the company. And everything that would have gone along with that.

* * * *

The next morning came too soon for Colby. She was exhausted after getting barely three hours of sleep. She’d be lucky to be able to function at work.

After showering, she crept downstairs, trying to avoid running into Mace. She decided to skip breakfast, instead grabbing her car keys and her briefcase. She snuck out the door undetected.

Unfortunately, her smooth escape was hindered when her convertible wouldn’t start. After pumping the gas pedal over and over, she finally gave up. Fighting back stinging tears, she rested her forehead on the steering wheel. She’d just had the water pump fixed, *now* what was wrong? She couldn’t keep putting money into this car; she needed the funds for her house.

A slight tap on her window made her look up. *Mace*. She groaned. The last thing she wanted to do was face him this morning.

“Car problems?”

“It won’t start.”

“Pop the hood.” After Colby did so, Mace lifted the hood and peered into the engine compartment. After a few seconds he said, “Why don’t you call in sick and I’ll check it out for you today.”

Colby’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t call in sick.”

He peered around the hood. "Today you will. In fact, I'll do it for you."

"No. I'm in the midst of a special project. I'll get a ride."

"Who? Marty?"

Mace had told her he knew about cars. He could have done something so her car wouldn't start. Would he do something so sneaky just to keep her away from Martin?

"Yes," she said, glancing at her watch. "I can probably catch him before he leaves." She climbed out of the little sports car.

If he wanted to play games, so would she. She knew Martin had most likely left for work by now. His drive to work took a lot longer than hers. But she wasn't telling Mace that.

Mace cursed. "Don't bother. Here." He tossed his truck keys to her. "Don't wreck it."

Colby caught the keys. She quickly turned away from him to hide her smile.

"Thanks." She jumped in his truck and left before he had the chance to stop her.

* * * *

Mace knew how to become almost anyone. He could blend in anywhere and he could sweet talk a woman into doing just about anything. Colby was being a little difficult. But he was working on it.

Unfortunately, his plan this morning had backfired. He had desperately wanted her to stay home with him, especially after getting gypped out of his time with her last night.

However, he hadn't expected her to try to hitch a ride with Martin. When she had driven away in his truck, he had retightened the battery cable on her convertible. It had been a stupid, meatheaded thing to do. He was not that desperate. His idiotic jealousy was getting in the way and could possibly ruin things with Colby, if it hadn't already. And that jealousy had driven him to where he was standing.

Mace leaned over the intern's desk, flashing his bright white teeth as he gave her a big smile. She was a young college student who looked like she had put on the "freshman fifteen" and then some.

Mace wouldn't take no for an answer. "C'mon. I just need to go talk to my friend."

She gave him an uneasy look. "Sir..."

"Mace," he corrected her.

"Sir," she insisted, flushing. "I can't let you into the lab. Even if you *are* Martin's friend."

Mace never countered her idea he was Martin's "friend" but he wondered why she was putting the emphasis on "friend" every time she said it.

"C'mon ... I need to surprise my buddy. It's his birthday!"

The girl's eyebrows rose. "I didn't know it was Martin's birthday. And I didn't even get him a card." She stuck a thumbnail between her teeth and gnawed.

"I'm sure he won't mind. If you let me go in, I'll let him know you wish him a happy birthday."

"I'm sure you will..." She pursed her lips. "Okay, but if I get in trouble..." She nervously smoothed down her skirt as she left her desk and went over to the forbidden door. The locked door to the "secret inner sanctum."

"I promise you won't." He hoped he could keep his promise.

She held her keycard against the card scanner mounted on the wall, and the lock

clicked. Mace leaned over and gave her chubby cheek a quick kiss. He turned away before he could finish watching the flush crawl up her neck.

He went down the narrow hallway, reading doorplates as he went. He hoped he didn't stumble across anyone, since he didn't want any questions on why he was skulking around the lab. Finally he came across an open doorway. He smiled. The nameplate said "Martin McConnell."

He slipped into the office before being detected and softly closed the door behind him. Martin looked up from his desk in surprise.

Just who Mace was looking for...

"Can I help you?"

Martin looked up startled. He was nothing like Mace expected.

The man's dirty-blond hair was tousled as if he had been running his hand through it over and over. In fact, on one side a part of it stuck straight out. And it looked like it had a purple tint to it.

On his desk was what looked like a half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich on a paper towel. Some of the grape jelly had squirted out of it, partially missing the paper towel. Mace didn't have to be an investigator to realize this was one messy dude. A large plop of jelly teetered on the formerly white lab coat which Martin wore. It looked as though he would end up wearing more of his lunch than eating it.

Martin's glasses were perilously perched on his face, the bridge riding down toward the end of his nose. Under the lab coat, he had a robin's egg blue button down shirt with a deeper blue tie, but the tie showed old stains. Being a messy eater wasn't something new for this guy.

Pushing his glasses back up his nose, Martin rose to his feet. "Can I help you?" he asked again, sounding annoyed this time—as if he wasn't happy about the interruption.

"I'm Mace Walker."

After a slight hesitation, a look of knowing replaced the puzzlement in the other man's face. He cleared his throat and extended his right hand. "Martin. Martin McConnell."

Mace stared at Martin's extended hand. There was peanut butter stuck between his fingers. Martin followed his gaze.

"Oh. Sorry." He wiped his hand down the side of his lab coat, leaving a smear of the peanut spread. He extended it again, a bit cleaner this time.

Mace grasped his hand and gave it a firm shake. Martin's hand was limper than a man's should have been and reminded him of shaking hands with a woman.

"You're Colby's ... uh..." A flush rose up Martin's neck.

"Yes, I am." Mace perched a hip on the cluttered desk. "Sit. Sit."

Martin sat. "What are you doing here? Visiting Colby?"

Mace gave him a crooked smile. "Actually, I came to see you."

"Oh." Martin's eyebrows drew together. "Why?"

Mace spotted a corner of a photo frame buried under a pile of papers. He dug it out. A kneeling man who was not Martin was in the photo, hugging a Golden Retriever. The dog was handsome. The man? Not so much. Not that he was any judge of how good-looking men were. Mace barked out a loud cough—one deep enough to remind himself of his masculinity. "Brother?" he asked a second later, turning the frame toward Martin.

Martin shook his head. "No. I'm sorry, why are you here?"

Mace tossed the frame on top of a mountain of files at the corner of the desk. "I just wanted to meet the man Colby ... hangs out with all the time."

"Well, I don't know if I'd call it *hanging* out. We work together."

"And hang out together."

"Occasionally."

"Yes, you like to go to flea markets."

"Auctions," Martin clarified. "We both appreciate antiques and good deals."

"Marty—"

"Martin," he corrected, his glasses slipping precariously close to the end of his nose.

"Martin. Do I have anything to be concerned about?"

"I don't understand."

Apparently so. The guy's eyebrows were pinned together so hard they looked like a unibrow.

"Why did you send the roses?"

"Roses? I don't know anything about roses."

"You didn't send a dozen roses to Colby?"

"No. Why would I?"

He wanted to say "to get a piece of ass" but instead he said, "She's a beautiful woman."

"Yes, she is. But..."

Mace waited. And waited. He watched the color in Martin's cheeks turn darker. The other man cleared his throat and fidgeted in his seat. If Mace kept silent long enough, Martin would spill the beans. Silence was a more effective investigation tool than drilling someone with questions.

Martin closed his eyes and blew out a breath. He grabbed the photo Mace had earlier and held it up. "If I was going to send *anyone* flowers, it would be him."

Shit. The guy was certainly quirky. But that was not what he had expected to hear. "Oh. Well..." Mace stood up and paced in front of the desk. He had misjudged the relationship between Martin and Colby big time. Crap, he was getting rusty. Sloppy. He had thought maybe Colby had a thing for nerds. Though Mace was relieved he was wrong since *he* certainly didn't fit in that category.

Mace stopped directly in front of the desk. Martin gave him a disapproving frown. "You thought Colby and I ... That—"

"No. No." Mace dragged a hand through his hair. "Okay, maybe. I wasn't sure."

"We're just friends and co-workers."

Mace grimaced. Okay, now he had to do damage control. Martin was sure to go running to Colby with this. And she was not going to be happy.

Fuck!

He was going to have to tell her first.

Damn. So Martin wasn't the one. Now Mace didn't have a freaking clue who sent those flowers. That message. The subtle threat. He hoped it wasn't anyone in his past. No one should know he was back in town. Unless someone was looking for him. Or someone was looking for Colby.

Either way, he was going to keep an eye on her, make sure she stayed safe. He'd just have to suffer through it if it meant spending more time with her. Mace smiled.

* * * *

A hot, steaming bag appeared beside Colby. It smelled wonderful. Lunch. Her stomach had been growling all morning since she'd skipped breakfast. "Thanks, Martin," she said, without even pulling her eyes away from the microscope. She slipped a pencil out of her lab coat pocket and jotted down some notes on a pad.

Martin didn't answer. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. She sat back and looked straight up at Mace. "What are you doing here?"

"What, no hello?"

"No!" Colby stood. He caught her chair before it could fall backward.

"I came to bring you lunch and deliver your car. I fixed it. Now I want my truck back."

"Fine." She dug into her lab coat pocket and held out his keys. "Here. Take them." Mace reached for them and seized her hand instead. She tried to move away, but he held on tighter. "Who let you in here? This area is off-limits to visitors."

"Martin let me in. We had a long talk."

"Why? What about?" She had a sinking feeling what it was about.

"You. You didn't tell me about his sexual preference."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "And he told you?"

Mace looked a bit guilty as he said, "I don't think I left him a choice."

Colby finally tugged her hand away from his. "Oh, Mace. What's wrong with you? He's a good friend and co-worker. That's all."

"I realize that now." He pinned her with an accusing stare. "Why didn't you tell me he didn't like women? I mean—well, you know what I mean."

"What does it matter?"

"I thought—"

"You shouldn't have thought! You were thinking with the wrong part of your body. Men!"

"Ouch, that's not fair."

"Fair? Is it fair you terrorize my co-worker?"

"No. I'm sorry." He took a step closer, making her take one back.

"Sorry!" She took another half step back until her butt was pressed against the counter. She had nowhere else to go, no way to escape.

"Yes, and believe it or not, I apologized to Martin. Hell, I even bought him lunch. He'll be gone for a while. I told him to take a nice, long lunch break." He moved closer, making her widen her stance to accommodate his larger body.

"You had no right." She put a hand against his chest when he leaned into her. She was mad at him. No matter how sexy he was or how he got her blood pounding, she had to remember she was angry with him for ... for ... interfering, that was it!

Mace leaned in enough to place his lips on the shell of her ear and whisper, "I know, but I told him how hungry I was myself and I think he understood." Colby felt the heat in her cheeks. She'd never be able to look Martin in the eyes again.

Mace's tongue barely brushed the edge of her ear, but just enough to make her wet. His thigh was nestled between hers now. When had he moved? His cock was hard and pressing against her stomach. She shifted her hips and her pussy brushed against his good thigh. She bit her lip and muffled the cry she wanted, so wanted, to scream.

"You look really sexy in that lab coat. Have anything on underneath?"

"Yes," she hissed and twisted her head away.

He snagged her braid and turned her head back to him. His breath mingled with hers as he murmured, "Not for long," against her mouth.

Colby melted against the desk. He took the opportunity to grind his thigh tight against her mound, just making enough movement to rub her clit. "Ah... What are you going to do?"

Mace ran his tongue over her lips, dipping it for a quick touch of tongues before retreating. "Do you want me to tell you about it first or just do it?"

She had to get control. She was a professional, for God's sake. "Mace. This is a lab!"

"I know. I'll bet it's one of your fantasies, isn't it?" He ran his hand under her lab coat and along her blouse until his thumb found one of her hard nipples. He circled, circled, circled, then pinched.

Colby's toes curled in her shoes. She was going to come and she was still fully clothed. Not possible... "N-no. The door—"

"We're alone." He worked his other knee between her legs, making her spread them. My God, she had to be dripping. Her skirt shimmied its way up to the top of her thighs the farther he spread her legs apart. He pinned her to the counter with his hips, thrusting against her once. Twice. His hands moved behind her thighs and he lifted her up so the edge of her ass was on the counter. He adjusted his hips once more so she could feel the length of his shaft against the soaked line of her panties.

"Mace ... oh, *oh shit* ... if we get caught—" Her heart thudded against her chest and her breathing was coming in quick pants. "This is *not* like the shooting range. I *know* these people; this is my place of employment."

She tried to slow her breathing, clear her head, but the hard line of his cock was pressed in just the right spot.

"That's the excitement. Colby, I want you. I want you so bad it hurts."

Her thighs quivered and she felt a fresh rush of warmth between her pussy lips.

"Your leg..."

"Forget my leg. That's not what hurts."

"Oh, God." She groaned, "Mace..."

"I know, honey."

He unbuttoned her lab coat and then her blouse. He nuzzled her neck, right at the delicate spot behind her ear, before unclipping the front clasp of her bra, releasing her breasts. Her nipples were so puckered and so hard they hurt. He lowered his head to stroke one with his tongue. A moment later he gave the other nipple just as much attention. The warm wetness combined with the rough texture of his tongue once again almost drove her over the edge. She dug her fingers into his hair and kept him there while he sucked one then the other into his mouth. Softly nipping, kisses quickly followed where his teeth had just been. She released a low, drawn-out moan.

This was torture. But torture never felt this good.

He impatiently pushed Colby farther back on the worktable, knocking her paperwork to the floor unnoticed. She wanted to protest, but when he slid a finger along the soaked edge of her panties, no words would come out of her mouth. And when he drove one and then a second finger deep into her, she gasped. To hell with her paperwork.

"I'm," his fingers slid out and slid along her pussy lips, "just," they drove deep again, "going to," he curved his fingers deep within her, "take you," he stroked that spot, "right here," that sweet, sweet spot, "right now."

Colby gasped and was going to come. Just when she felt the beginning of the contractions, his fingers disappeared. Damn! He ripped her panties down past her knees. She tried to kick them off but they got caught on one ankle. She was in no position to fix the problem and frankly she didn't give a damn at that instant. She heard the zipper of his jeans then, *Oh* ... the naked head of his cock slipped over her swollen clit, making her shudder. One tiny shift of her hips and he would be in her. He'd read her thoughts, he had to have her, because he suddenly shifted, instead sliding his whole hard length against her heated flesh. His cock was shiny and slippery with her juices.

"Do you want it?" He plucked once more at her nipples.

"Yes."

"How much?"

"I—"

"How much?" he gritted out through clenched teeth.

Why was he delaying? "A—a lot."

"You are so fucking wet. Lift your hips." He leaned back slightly when she did.

Colby tried to grab his hips with her legs to drag him closer. But he was fumbling with his jeans which were pulled down his hips. The denim was framing his rigid cock, the dark curly hair and his balls so nicely. But she didn't want to see how hard he was; she wanted to feel how hard he was. Inside her. "Now," she moaned.

"Not yet." He dug for his wallet.

"Now!"

"No." He grimaced when the foil wrapper refused to tear open.

"Mace..." She snagged the condom, ripped it open between her teeth and impatiently rolled it over his hot, steely length, stroking while she did it. When she reached the root of his cock, she cupped his balls and squeezed slightly.

"Christ, Colby!" he panted. He fisted his cock once, twice. His whole body shuddered in response. He grabbed her wrist, breaking the contact of her nails lightly raking his balls. "Fuck!"

He held her hips tightly, tilted them a little higher, and with a grunt he buried himself deep. The breath whooshed out of both of them. Colby forgot how to breathe. He kept himself buried to the hilt and made small thrusting moves against her so his balls teased against her anus, while his pelvis ground against her clit. The tiny thrusts drove her nuts. She had to come. She couldn't take it anymore.

With a grunt, he said, "Hold on."

"I can't ... *aaaah*."

"Hold it..." He dropped his forehead to her chest and gasped for air.

Her heart was going to thump right out of her chest if she didn't come soon. "Mace!"

He cursed, threw his head back while arching his back, and slammed his whole length into her again and again and again. Colby clawed at the counter, grabbing at nothing, and she let out a low wail.

"Now!" He came with force and her contractions drew him even deeper. He struggled to catch his breath. His chest heaved against hers as he lay collapsed over her, the majority of his weight held up by his forearms on the counter.

He kissed her nose, her eyelids, her lips, before licking the hollow of her collarbone. She was sure it was damp and tasted salty.

"My God," she whispered when she caught her breath. "That was a hell of a lunch

break.”

Mace chuckled softly against her shoulder, still deep inside her. “Your food’s getting cold.”

Colby brushed the damp hair off his forehead. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

Chapter Ten

He had promised Colby he would meet her at the house. They were going to start painting the porch today, but Mace was running later than he thought. The hardware store had been understaffed and overworked. Even worse, his order of eight cans of paint didn't make them any happier, especially when he wanted them put in the shaker machine first. *After* they had to mix the custom cream color Colby had fallen in love with.

At least she had enough paint at the house to get her started before he got there. He could picture her already splattered with paint. In her fiery hair, on her clothes, covering the freckles on her cute nose.

As he steered his truck around the corner onto Colby's tree-lined street, he noticed the back end of an old car sticking out of her driveway. The overgrown brush lining the property's border concealed the rest. But there was enough of the vehicle exposed allowing Mace to recognize it was an early 90s primer-gray Caprice.

He fought the urge to slam his foot on the gas. To hurry to the house, to get to Colby as soon as possible. Instead, he pulled over to the curb and collected himself. He jammed the gearshift in park before hopping out of his truck.

His instincts kicked in and he lurked along the edge of the property, staying close to the neighbor's side of the shrubbery. When he got to the back corner of the neighbor's property, he climbed through the vegetation and carefully snuck through the back door of the house.

* * * *

Colby kept thinking about Mace. She couldn't help it. She was happy. *Really* happy. At least for now. Every time she thought about having sex with him—the best sex of her life—at his house, at her house, at the lab, wherever, she practically melted into a puddle.

But, he was frustrating. One minute he would do something to anger her, the next minute he would turn around and make her heart—and pussy—ache. She was falling deep.

She tried to resist it. Resist him. But after only a couple weeks, she couldn't. She had never felt anything like this before. Never. It was wonderful. She was in love ... with his lovemaking. Only that, she tried to convince herself. She wasn't going to fall into a similar trap again. She swore it to herself over a year ago. She wasn't going to break the promise to herself.

She would permit herself to enjoy Mace and all he offered, for now. That's all. Enjoy his tenderness, his wildness, and his roughness. He didn't think he'd be around for more than a couple months. She would take those days. *And* those nights.

As she painted the porch, she took long, sensuous strokes. Long, deep lines of color. Back and forth. Back and forth. Colby shut her eyes and took a deep, shaky breath. She pictured Mace's body above her, his cock hard and ready, nudging against her, opening her up...

"Hey, babe."

Colby froze, the paintbrush falling from her fingers. She helplessly watched it fall on the new porch floor and splatter. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Nothing. But she closed her eyes once more and forced herself to take another deep breath. A slow, deep breath between trembling lips.

"What kind of welcome is that?"

The familiar male voice made her world start to spin. She clutched the doorjamb she had been working on. She steadied herself, her nails digging into the wood.

"Aren't you even going to turn around and give me a hug?"

His hand gripped her upper arm and, with force, spun her around. Colby opened her eyes and looked straight into hell. *Craig*.

His dirty blond hair was still short and neatly trimmed. He had blue eyes and lean muscle making up his six-foot frame; it was what had attracted her in the first place. But it was mean muscle. And like Mace, he could sweet-talk anyone wearing a skirt. When he wanted to.

"I've missed you something fierce."

Fierce wasn't the word for him. Evil was more like it. He was the reason she had purchased the gun and learned how to shoot it. He was the reason she had left her hometown—where she had been born and lived her whole life—to move here. Her little newfound heaven was fast becoming her living hell. Once again.

"Cat got your tongue?" he purred. He reached out, brushing a knuckle down her cheek.

Colby bit back a scream of terror. If she showed fear he would only be more brutal. He liked fear. He fed off her terror. She shook her head, dislodging his hand.

This was not happening. She had been painting too long and the fumes had gotten to her. She was imagining this. Right? Right? Right!

Wrong.

Craig Jones lowered his head, bringing him only a hair's breadth away, and inhaled deeply. "Your hair smells so good, babe. God, have I missed you."

"C—Craig. What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

He laughed. To Colby's ears it was a cruel, biting sound. "It wasn't hard. There aren't too many places where a biochemist can find a job."

"Why?" She pinned herself against the doorjamb trying to get as far away from him as she could. He shifted closer, tilting his head. He planted one hand on the doorjamb, fingers close enough to be able to grab her French braid in a split second.

"Why? What a silly question. I just told you. I miss you." He gave her a cold smile.

"What happened to Rhonda?"

"Oh, I don't care about her. I don't want her anymore. I want you back."

Colby's heart squeezed. She was going to go into cardiac arrest. She *wanted* to have a heart attack. Anything. She had to get away from this man. *I want you back.*

I want you back.

I want you back.

"N—no!" Colby whimpered and slid down the jamb to the floor.

Craig grabbed her wrists cruelly and dragged her back up, his face just inches away. He continued to pull her arms until they were stretched out above her, her wrists pinned to the door molding. He held them so tight, her fingers were becoming numb.

"No? Why not, honey? We were good together. You loved me! I loved you. I still

do.”

Something inside her snapped. She shouldn’t provoke him, but she couldn’t help it. God help her, she couldn’t help but poke at the beehive. “Craig, you loved me? Is that why you hit me? Kicked me? Broke my ribs and my arm? You were loving me to death!”

“I only hit you, babe, because you frustrated me. It was all your distrust and your accusations!”

Colby laughed; the laughter sounding even insane to her own ears. “Oh, God, Craig. You had other women behind my back. Why should I have trusted you? All my accusations were true.”

“But, babe, I only loved you.” He said it so slowly Colby fought to keep the nausea in her stomach down. This man was psychotic. Fate had played an evil trick on her when he brought him into her life.

Craig released her wrists so suddenly she fell back against the house siding. Her head cracked against the corner of the jamb. She fought the pain; she had to show she was strong. Otherwise, she was finished. He would never forgive her for leaving him, for sneaking away during the night from the hospital.

He strode away from her before spinning around to pin her with his stare. “You don’t love me anymore?”

Colby wanted to spit in his face. “No. I haven’t loved you since the first time you blackened my eye.”

“Colby, baby, I apologized for all that. I told you I’d never do it again. I promise.”

She laughed again, almost hysterically. *I promise*. Oh, God, how many times had she heard those empty promises? Well, she had heard them until her ears were ringing from his slaps.

She looked wildly around to the driveway. Her car was there. Inside her car was the gun. And she wanted to blow this son-of-a-bitch away.

She would never make it to the car. Never. She took a deep breath to fortify herself. “This is my property, Craig. I don’t want you on it.”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “Babe, please, you don’t mean it.”

“Craig, I’m warning you. Get the hell off my property before...”

“Before what? What are you going to do? Who’s going to stop me?”

“*Me.*”

That single word—those two little letters—brought a sense of salvation to Colby. Thank God. Thank you, God! Mace’s deep timbre never sounded so good. She could feel his presence behind her in the open doorway. His strength, his presence, was all she needed. She never needed him as much as she needed him this moment.

She needed him and he was there. *He was there.*

“And who the hell are you?” Craig shouted. His chest puffed out and he slammed his hands on his hips, taking a step closer to her.

“Your worst nightmare. Believe me, loser, I’ve dealt with more low-life, scum-sucking pigs than you. And guess what? I’ve squashed them like bugs, and if you don’t believe me, just try me. I’ll enjoy breaking every goddamn bone in your pansy ass body.”

Mace stepped around Colby and right into Craig’s face. He blocked her with his body. His voice lowered to a deep grumble. “If you ever, *ever* come or ever even think about coming on this property or bothering Colby again ... I swear ... you will never walk again. Never. And that’s no idle threat.”

Colby didn't doubt his words. Apparently, neither did Craig.

For the first time, she saw Craig shrink in fear. She had done it so many times herself. Now the tables were turned.

"Now, you just better get the hell out of here. If I ever see your face again, it'll be the last time you see mine." Mace's words cut like cold steel. Clearly, he was not a man to be messed with.

Colby shuddered listening to the overwhelming strength in those words. She fed off it, causing her to stand straighter and giving her the nerve to look Craig directly in the eyes. "You'd better go, Craig, if you know what's good for you. Let me make something real clear before you go. *I'm not interested.* Stay out of my life."

"Yes, I see. You've got yourself a new man." Craig sneered as he backed down the porch steps. If he'd been a dog, his tail would have been tucked between his legs.

They stood silently until he was out of sight.

The silence was tense, though, and violent energy still permeated from Mace's body. She waited.

"*Who the fuck was that?*"

Colby recoiled. She couldn't deal with his anger. Not now. She wanted to clutch him to her and sob until she couldn't cry anymore.

"Colby! Look at me! Why didn't you tell me about him? Why didn't you warn me?"

"I ... I didn't think he'd find me. Or even want to find me."

Mace stood stiffly, clenching and unclenching his fists. "Unbelievable. What if I hadn't been here? What then, Colby?"

"Oh, my God." Her lips trembled. "I don't know. I was too far away from my gun."

He shot her an incredulous look. "Your gun? Is that why you have one? Oh, Christ! I mean... I knew someone hurt you. I knew it." He fumed and stomped around the porch. "I just didn't realize it was physically. The sick bastard!" he ground out. "What were you going to do, Colby? Shoot him?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. You would have killed him if you had the chance."

"Yes."

Mace groaned and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her and rocking her back and forth. Her body shuddered, stiffened, then finally melted as she sobbed aloud.

"I hate him."

"I know," he whispered into her hair. He smoothed his hands up and down her back, hugging her tighter. "He's gone now."

"He might come back." She shivered and sniffled. She was getting his T-shirt damp with her tears. She was acting foolish but she couldn't help it.

"He won't. I promise." Mace placed his lips on her forehead. Colby knew the promise was good, Craig would never come back. She was sure being a federal agent he could "make some calls." She didn't care what happened to Craig.

She attempted to wipe her tears away with the back of her hand; he stopped her and brushed them away with his lips. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough." He sat down on the top porch step and enveloped her in his arms. "You should have told me."

"I couldn't."

"Why?"

“I...” new tears rolled down her cheeks, “was ashamed.”

“You told no one?”

Colby shook her head.

Mace’s jaw clenched, she heard him suck in a breath, then felt the tension suddenly leave his body as quickly as it had come. “Colby, let’s go home.”

I am home, she thought when he held her even tighter.

* * * *

Mace leaned back against the living room couch, his bare feet propped up on the coffee table, the evening news blaring from the TV in the background. Colby sat next to him quietly while he finished scanning the legal document in his hands.

He gave a bitter laugh and threw the PFA onto the table in front of him. “What a fucking joke. You know those protection orders are useless, don’t you? What do they expect you to do? Throw it at him? Give him a paper cut?”

“It’s better than nothing, I guess.” She’d been told the *Protection From Abuse* order would, well, *protect* her. She’d been grossly misled.

“Yeah, shit, it really helped you out today, didn’t it?” He made a fist in his lap. “Even if you could have dialed 911, he could have seriously hurt you or even kidnapped you before any local donut-lover would have arrived on scene. Those pieces of paper couldn’t stop a bullet.”

“It was stupid of me not to have had my cell phone nearby.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make this worse. Don’t blame yourself. You’re doing what you should be: moving on and living your life.”

He picked up his beer bottle from the side table and took one long swig and then one more, before placing it back on the “FBI: Female Body Inspector” coaster. He had said the coasters were a gag gift from his sister when he had graduated from the Academy.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

Without even asking, she knew what he wanted. She leaned over and picked up the folder she had thrown on the floor next to the end of the couch. She offered it to him without a word. He took it and laid it in his lap, not even opening it. Instead, he just studied her face.

“Are these copies or originals?”

“A little of each.”

“Do you really want me to see them?”

“No.”

“But you’ll let me look at them.”

“Yes.”

She grabbed her wine glass from the table by his feet, and she finished off the two swallows left. It was false hope; she didn’t think the alcohol was going to help her get through this. This amounted to picking at a healing wound.

She didn’t want to relive it. He finally tore his gaze away from her face and opened the folder. He picked up the first photo, and Colby looked away. She didn’t need to look at the pictures to remember. All she had to do was close her eyes and she couldn’t forget.

She turned her attention to the TV, trying to concentrate on a news piece about a town councilman getting into hot water.

“*Jesus Christ.*” What started out as a shocked whisper ended up not a minute later an

explosive, “That *motherfucker*.”

He whipped the folder across the room, the dozens of photos spilling out of it like confetti all over the carpet. One landed at her feet, and her own face, hardly recognizable due to the swelling and discoloration, stared back at her. Colby closed her eyes, willing back the tears.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He pushed himself up and went around the room collecting the photos, jamming them back into the folder. He picked the PFA off the coffee table and shoved it into the folder as well, before throwing the whole thing onto the seat of the nearby recliner.

He settled back beside her on the couch, taking another long pull at his beer. “I’m sorry, Colby.”

She wanted to ask him for what, but she wasn’t sure she really wanted to know. He was probably sorry she made herself a victim. He was probably sorry she didn’t leave Craig sooner. He was probably sorry she was too weak to protect herself from harm. He might have been sorry she had been so desperate to love somebody she had picked the wrong person. Maybe he was just sorry he lost his temper and threw her folder, her painful reminder, across the room.

“I’m sorry you were hurt like that. I wish I could have known you a lot sooner.” The last was said softly. So softly it tugged strongly at her. She wished she had met him a lot sooner also.

“*Your* battle scars are much worse,” she said.

He hesitated for a few long heartbeats, a little sadness softening his eyes. “I got mine from someone who hated me enough to want me dead. Yours came from someone who was supposed to love you.”

“Maybe we’re all misled.”

“About what?”

“About love. Maybe we’re so desperate for someone’s affections, we see a connection where there isn’t any.”

“Maybe. But I think love’s possible. I think it’s out there for the right people.” Running a hand down her jaw line, he tucked some escapees from her braid behind her ear. “My parents loved each other deeply. I saw it every day in how they acted and talked to each other. It could have been something as small as just a look between the two. It was enough even a teenage boy would notice. After my father died, my mother was so heartbroken she died not two months later.”

“She died of a broken heart?”

“Something like that.” He cupped her face and leaned in to kiss her.

“I didn’t think it was possible.”

“I’m starting to think it is.” He kissed her lightly, just nudging her lips open, his tongue playing along her teeth and tongue.

She didn’t want to read into his comment. She didn’t want things to become complicated. She didn’t want to admit they had already. She kissed him back, her tongue wrestling with his before she broke away, kissing down his chin. His shadow of a beard was rough against her lips.

*

Colby’s lips moved along his jaw, then her tongue ran a line down his neck, leaving a warm, moist trail.

This was exactly what he needed after this afternoon's incident. He just needed to get his mind off what might have happened to Colby. If he hadn't been in the picture...

Shit.

She nipped at where his shoulder met his neck, and he leaned his head against the back of the couch, enjoying every second, giving her every opportunity to do what she wanted with him. He was all hers.

She kissed, nipped and licked here and there over his neck. She pushed his T-shirt up, exposing his chest to continue her teasing pattern over and around his nipples. He leaned forward a bit, grabbed the back of his shirt and ripped it over his head. He tossed it on the recliner, covering that fucking folder. Once again, it reminded him of what might have, could have, possibly happened.

But it hadn't, and here they were: about to have a little bit of fun with each other. Or a whole hell of a lot of fun with each other, if it was up to him.

He lost his train of thought when she raked her nails lightly over his nipples.

"*Fuck.*" He grabbed the end of her braid as she was diligently rubbing and kissing all over his stomach and chest. He pulled the small elastic band off the end and combed his fingers through the plait, untangling her hair from its confines. He worked his way up while she worked her way down, following the line of his dark hair to the top of his jeans. The top button was already unsnapped; he'd never finished securing his jeans after his shower earlier.

He caught her looking at him while she slowly unzipped his jeans. He probably looked as dumbfounded as he felt. He felt like he had no blood left in his brain, it had all headed south into his shaft.

Colby sat back suddenly and gave him a stern look. "Take off your pants." It wasn't a request. Hell, no, it wasn't. "Now."

Damn, if he could get harder than he was ... no, it was impossible.

He pushed himself to his feet, catching himself as he lost his balance. His injured thigh was protesting. But he didn't give a shit. Not tonight.

Tomorrow he would pay for it. But tonight he was getting his money's worth, even if he had to do PT twice a day for the next week.

He pushed his jeans down to his knees before sitting back on the couch to yank them the rest of the way off, tossing them somewhere into the room. He had gone commando, skipping the boxer briefs tonight in hopes of getting lucky. So he sat there naked, his cock standing like a flagpole. All he needed was someone, preferably the redheaded vixen in front of him, to raise the flag.

His flag raiser wasn't saying a word. Her eyes had softened momentarily when he'd stumbled, but had quickly gone back to stern. It reminded him of the first night he came home. He pictured her again like the school teacher: stern, prim and proper on the outside, wild as hell on the inside.

She pushed herself off the couch and moved to stand in front of him. She was between his open knees, not touching, though. She stared at him, no smile, eyes serious. Her expression alone kept him from running his own fist over his aching cock.

A moment later she shook her head. Her hair flew wildly around her shoulders and down her back. She undid her jeans, slipping out of them, but he couldn't tell if she was wearing any panties since her collared shirt was long enough to cover her halfway down her thighs. But it was still sexy as hell.

He just wanted to fuck the shit out of her. But he didn't reach out. He waited to see what her game was. The anticipation was going to kill him, but he loved it.

She licked her lips, and he thought it was more out of nervousness than teasing. But when one hand went up and started unbuttoning her shirt and the other went to her mouth, he started to question his own theory. She slid one finger into her mouth and sucked on it while slowly drawing it back out.

He didn't know where to look: the finger between her lips or the fingers working the buttons out of their holes. Her shirt was gaping enough now he could get a glimpse of a dark green bra, almost the same color as her eyes.

He didn't have to decide what to look at when she slid her wet finger down her gaping shirt and into what he supposed were her panties.

Mace twitched on the couch and his fist wrapped around his shaft. He was leaking already, the pre-come flowing hot and steady.

Colby paused what she was doing and gave a sharp "No." Mace jerked at her tone, surprised it had come from her, and in his surprise he automatically released his cock.

Damn.

But he was not going to complain. If she wanted all the control tonight, well, he was not going to fight it.

She went back to unbuttoning her shirt one-handed, and when the last one was released, her open shirt revealed enough he could see her other hand was definitely, *definitely*, down her panties. Her panties were the same color and fabric as her bra, but he didn't care about that. He only cared about what was going on underneath the green fabric. He could see her fingers moving, knuckles shifting, her wrist sliding under the cloth. She ran her free hand over her bra, pushing the shirt to the side more, giving him a better view. She threw her head back and gasped.

Her legs buckled. Before he could reach out to keep her from falling, she lowered herself to her knees and freed both her hands to grasp his ankles. Mace jerked at the unexpected contact.

She traced her fingers up both of his calves, past his bent knees and over his thighs, being careful of his injury. She moved herself closer so she was pressing in between his legs, while she slid her hands around his hips, over his clenched stomach, and lower, once again. She circled the root of his cock with two fingers and squeezed.

Mace pressed his lips together to keep from cursing, while his stomach clenched even harder. His fingers dug into the couch cushion. One reason was he was trying not to come. The other was to keep from dragging her up and over his lap, to impale her. Deep.

The two fingers circling his cock became her whole hand as she leaned over his lower body.

Christ, there was nothing which excited him more than seeing all her fire-red hair in his lap. It brushed against his thighs, it swept against his groin, and it tickled his lower stomach. He was sure he would come if she kept brushing her hair against his cock. It was just so silky...

He sucked in a breath and his hips rose off the couch when her hot little mouth enclosed over the head of his cock. Her tongue whisked away all of his pre-come, like a kitten lapping up cream. She took him all the way in, almost to the root. Her lips bumped against her own fist before slipping back up to the top, her tongue teasing the small slit for a moment before her hot, hot, hot mouth enclosed almost his whole length again.

Oh. Fuck. Me.

When she shot him a look, he realized he might have said that out loud. Not even a moment later, she picked up a rhythm with her tongue and her lips, stroking his length while her fist squeezed his root.

He leaned his head back and couldn't watch, if he did he was going to lose it. He didn't have to watch to see what she was doing. It was burned in his brain. He would remember this forever.

When her other hand gently cupped his balls and squeezed, his eyes flew open and he heard someone cry out. It had come from him.

His brain was so addled, she could tell him to jump and he wouldn't even ask her how high. He would do anything, *anything*, she told him to. Especially when she started to lick the head like a Tootsie Pop, trying to see how many licks it took to get to the center. He was either very tasty or she was very hungry...

Her steady rhythm down his length began again and he couldn't resist: he sank his fingers into her hair and began to thrust. His hips rose to meet her at every stroke. His fingers tightened in her hair and he tensed. He wanted to blow his load. He needed release. His balls were so freaking tight, and it didn't help she was playing with them, squeezing them, rolling them between her slender fingers.

She pulled her head away and, when her mouth was free, said, "No, I want you to come in me."

Her cheeks were flushed and her lips swollen and glistening. He would have been happy coming right where he was. But she wanted to be the boss.

And so she shall be.

She came to her feet and stepped back from the V of his legs, just out of reach. She slipped her opened shirt off her shoulders and stood, looking *oh so* edible in her shiny, matching green bra and panties. Her panties looked a little darker at the apex of her legs. That made him smile.

"I need help."

Mace lifted one eyebrow in question. He wanted it to look roguish, but the truth was he couldn't get any words past the lump in his throat.

"I want you to take these off," she said, turning her back to him. She stepped back closer to him before lifting her hair up and out of the way.

The clasps of this bra were in the back, which was not the norm for her. He reached out and smoothed his fingers over the smooth, fair skin of her back, along the edge of her shoulder straps before reaching the double clasp. He popped one, then the other, her bra falling away to the front.

He ran his palms down her sides, reaching the top of her panties. He slid his fingers under the edge of the elastic and around to the front, so he was almost hugging her waist. Sliding his hand back to her hips, he pushed them down. Slowly. His touch lingered here, there. Over her hips, down her thighs, past her knees, until the green scrap of fabric dropped to her ankles. She lifted one foot out before kicking the panties away with her other foot.

She still stood facing away from him, her arms now crossed over her breasts, her hair covering her back like a cape. She couldn't be shy now. She lost her inhibitions during sex, she didn't get more. So she couldn't be hiding herself from him.

And, oh shit, she wasn't.

When she turned to face him, she was kneading her own breasts, plucking both nipples, her lower lip caught between her teeth. She released one breast and worked her hand down her stomach, once again to the fiery patch below. She parted her pussy lips...

"Don't—" he blurted out, making her pause. "Oh, God, don't."

"You don't like?"

"Oh, no, I like. I like a lot. But I will end up losing it all over myself."

"Scoot back."

He did. He pressed himself to the back of the couch and offered his hands to her. She accepted and used his arms to balance while she climbed over him, placing a knee on each side of his hips. He caught a whiff of her scent, it was hot and musky and so freaking female. He wanted to bury his face between her legs and taste her. But that wasn't how it was going tonight. Tonight, she was in charge.

She lingered above him, putting her weight on her shins. She was so far above him. Too far. She needed to be closer. Much closer. "Condom?" he squeaked out. He held onto her upper arms making sure she didn't lower herself yet. Not until some important business was taken care of first.

"It's taken care of."

"Okay, uh..."

Colby leaned forward and placed her lips by his ear, whispering, "I've been on birth control, but I wasn't sure before... Now, I am. I want just you, only you, inside me, nothing in between."

Mace groaned in anticipation; it sounded like a good plan to him. His cock jerked and it brushed against her damp curls, which in turn made him thrust his hips up in response.

Colby laughed huskily. "Down, boy."

She spread one open hand against his chest for balance and grabbed his shaft with the other; she rubbed it against her slit, making it even slicker, if possible. She lined it up in perfect position, and he was ready, so ready to send it home.

She made small circles with her hips, lowering herself. She'd go down one inch, come back up until only the tip was in her, go down two inches, and come back up. Then down three inches before coming back up, all the while keeping her inner muscles tight and circling her hips.

He was going to pass out. Any second he was going to just drop over dead. With the biggest fucking grin on his face, too.

When she sank down on him, swallowing him whole, he lost his train of thought. He wrapped his arms around her back and held her there. She ground circles against his lap and he pressed his face between her breasts, air hissing from his lungs. He struggled to catch his breath when she started rocking against him, letting out little mews and gasps. Her sounds vibrated through her chest against his cheek as he nuzzled her breasts, moving until he caught a nipple in his mouth, drawing down on the tight, hard nub. She rocked faster and he sucked harder.

Suddenly her movements became frantic, and within seconds she stiffened, clenching her inner muscles around him and letting out a long wail. He thrust up and felt the heat rolling through him. He released himself deep within her, his cock jerking along with her orgasm.

Colby collapsed against his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck and sighing.

“Wow,” she whispered into his hair.

He chuckled. “Ditto.” He nuzzled her neck and kissed her damp skin.

She said, “I need to get off your leg.” But she made no effort to do so.

“No. You’re fine. I don’t want you to move.” His leg was only spasming slightly. It would settle down soon.

The phone rang, making Colby jerk against him. She eyed the phone worriedly.

“How about now?”

“Still fine.” He stretched over and plucked the cordless phone from the side table.

“Hello?” Silence greeted him. He tried once more time. “Hello?” A soft laughter answered him before he heard a click and the dial tone. Mace’s stomach dropped.

He pushed the “end” button on the phone and slammed it on the tabletop. “Well, we know now who *wasn’t* making those calls.”

Colby’s arms tightened around him and she buried her face against his neck. He traced his fingers up and down the crease of her spine.

At first, he’d been hoping it was some stupid kid pranking the house. After Craig had showed up, he’d just hoped it had just been the bastard. But he was getting a very bad feeling about this. He was at the point now where he was going to have the Bureau trace the calls.

He cupped Colby’s ass cheeks. He wanted to get to the bottom of this soon.

Chapter Eleven

Colby walked through the aisles of what, at first glance, looked like junk. It wasn't, though. Antiques and other household items lay in long rows on the grass. Every so often, something—a unique piece of furniture or knickknack—would catch her eye and she would hesitate, investigate, and inspect.

If she liked it, it would go on her list along with what she thought it was worth or at least what her limit was while bidding. Since her funds were limited when it came to furnishing the house, she had to keep herself under control. Renovations were her priority. Having a non-leaking roof over her head was more important than an antique settee.

As it was, auctions had a tendency to get her caught up in the moment and before she knew it, she had spent way too much on an item. Auctions were fun, but addicting.

She couldn't believe Mace had wanted to come with her and Martin today. Recently, Mace seemed to want to stick close to her. Any time she had to run an errand, he would either insist on doing it for her or at least want to go along.

She didn't know if he was trying to be helpful or just being overly possessive. Either way, he had tagged along today. Not long after arriving, Martin and Mace had wandered away talking about what pieces of furniture would go nicely with the wainscoting and wood molding in her house.

She preferred the auctions held during the week and during the day, because those usually had less competition for an item she wanted. However, this auction was loaded with people, because it was a beautiful Saturday morning.

The property was only about a mile away from hers and the auction was being offered by the estate of the late owner. The house itself was being auctioned off, but it was in very bad shape, even worse than hers had been when she bought it. Whoever bought it today would most likely have to tear it down and start over. But though the house was in disarray, the old wood furniture had been kept up. Classic, stunning pieces littered the yard.

She strolled down another aisle until she found a particular piece she had seen listed in the auction catalog. It was a beautiful Victorian dresser made from a burl of walnut. She pulled open a drawer to inspect the dovetailing. The mirror was large and the wood around the glass was hand carved. The top was made of molded and variegated marble, white in color, a stunning contrast with the rich walnut color of the wood. It was in excellent condition for a piece of furniture which had survived since the 1860s.

Colby stepped back to stare at it. She really wanted it. But knew it was going to bring a hefty price. She sighed in disappointment. Some collector would snap it up at a price way out of her range.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Colby jumped at the deep male voice which came from right over her shoulder. She turned quickly to face the stranger. "Yes. I'd love it, but I don't think I'll be able to afford it."

"How do you know you can't afford it? This is an auction. Deals can always be found at an auction."

The tall but stocky man had dark brown eyes and his hair was just as dark. His complexion was darker than Mace's, more olive-toned, and unmistakably ethnic even though he didn't have an accent. Something about him made her uncomfortable. Maybe it was just because he was standing too close; he was invading her personal space.

Colby had to sidestep to put a little more room between them. She shrugged. "I know what similar pieces like this have gone for. I'm not holding out hope to win this."

"But you will bid?"

She thought a moment. "Yes, until it passes my budget."

"Which is?"

She didn't feel comfortable talking money with a complete stranger, so she skirted the question. "What things are you interested in?"

He gave a slight shrug. He buried his hands into the pockets of his slacks. But not before she saw the expensive watch on his wrist. Rolex. Could be a knock-off.

"I'm just here to observe."

Observe? That was a bit weird. Most people who came to auctions came because they either wanted a good deal or a particular item, not just to observe. "Are you related to the estate?"

"No. I was just driving by when I saw the cars and the auction sign. I figured I'd check it out."

Yes, there were a lot of cars parked haphazardly. On the street, on the lawn, blocking the neighbors' driveways. Just a typical auction day. But this wasn't a thoroughfare. This road wasn't a cut-through or even a typical road used for commuting. "So you are from the area?"

Those dark eyes, suddenly cold, pinned her for a moment and Colby fought the urge to shiver. Why would a simple question like that bother him?

"No. I'm just visiting ... friends." He tilted his head and slowly ran his gaze over her as if she was one of the precious antiques up for bid in the auction.

Unable to fight it this time, a shiver ran up her spine. And it wasn't from him showing an interest in her. A "something was off" feeling overcame her. Something was just not right. She just couldn't put her finger on it. She feigned interest in the dresser's mirror, running her fingers around the serpentine carving.

"Exquisite woodwork, yes?"

Without answering, Colby looked up into the mirror. The man was directly over her right shoulder, but over her left she spotted Martin and Mace. They were now only two aisles away, deep in conversation. In fact, it looked like they were debating over a clawfoot tub.

Would it be really obvious if she turned and started frantically waving them over?

But luckily she didn't have to. Mace glanced up suddenly, as if he had felt her gaze and her silent plea. He spotted the man near her, straightened, and began walking quickly toward her, no indication of a limp in his determined stride.

If she wasn't concerned before about this stranger, she was now. Mace's expression looked a bit panicked and his body language showed a bit of urgency. He was struggling to hide both, but was failing miserably.

For him to be an undercover federal agent and to have his emotions shown so clearly...

Which just proved she needed to move and she needed to move now. Standing there

like a dope wasn't going to do her any good, if this man wanted to hurt her. But... what the hell? Why would this guy want to hurt her?

She turned to face the man. He was gone. Just like that, he was gone. She looked around and he wasn't even in the nearby aisles.

Mace rushed up to her and grabbed her upper arm—more firmly than was necessary.

“Ow. What’s going on?”

Mace’s gaze searched the nearby aisles and crowds also, pulling her tightly against him. Martin was still making his way toward them, dodging other auction attendees who gathered near the podium in anticipation of the start of the auction.

“Who was that?” Mace asked her, finally giving her all of his attention.

“I have no idea. Just some auction attendee, I guess.” At least that was what she had thought. Now she wasn’t so sure.

“Did he tell you his name?”

“No. Should he have?” Mace didn’t answer. He went back to eyeballing the crowd.

“Mace, what the hell is going on?”

He visibly relaxed and gave her light brush of his lips on her forehead. Placating her. Like something so simple would do it. “Nothing. A bit of jealousy.”

He was lying. He was good at it, but it was obvious he was lying. He was not the type of man who would ever admit he was jealous. Never.

“Martin and I had an interesting conversation,” he said suddenly.

He was trying to change the subject. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” He grabbed her elbow and steered her away from the crowd. He moved her toward a stretch of trees and a bit of privacy. Once there, he pinned her back against a tree, out of the view from the rest of the crowd. “He told me something that disturbed me,” Mace said, his face close to hers. He was just fractions of an inch away from her.

She was still trying to wrap her brain around the sudden change in subject.

Distracting her wasn’t going to work. “Okay, are you going to keep me in suspense? Or are you going to tell me?”

“He knew all about Craig.”

Crap. Maybe distracting her *would* work. “Mace, he’s my friend, my co-worker. I confided in him.”

“But you couldn’t tell me about him. You couldn’t warn me.”

“I told you why.” Craig was not a topic she liked to talk about since he was an embarrassing part of her past. One she wanted to forget, especially now Mace ran him off.

“You didn’t feel comfortable enough with me to tell me.” It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

Okay, this was bothering him more than she ever would have thought. “Jesus, Mace. Are you really so bent out of shape about it?”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment, just studied her face. He lowered his head until their lips met. At first it was a soft kiss, but it became more urgent. He buried his fingers into her braid, twisting his mouth over hers, dipping his tongue between her lips. His knee worked its way between her thighs, until it was pressed against her mound. In an instant, he was pushing against her clit, grinding his thigh against her, making her moan into his mouth.

He pulled back a fraction, his breath mingling with hers. “Damn it, Colby, I want

you to trust me.”

She didn’t answer. She wanted to trust him too.

“Come on. We have to see if we can get some stuff to fill up that big, empty house of yours.” Mace pushed away from her and walked back toward the crowd.

He was trying to cover up his fear about something. It was more than her just having a random conversation with a stranger. And not knowing what he was afraid of worried her.

Chapter Twelve

Mace reached out to beat on the annoying object. The vibrating cell phone once again danced over the smooth surface of the bed stand. He picked it up reluctantly and put it to his ear. “What?”

He was greeted by dead silence until he realized he held the phone upside down. He righted it and repeated his gruff greeting.

“Keep an eye out, Walker. We’ve been getting reports—reliable ones—Spinozi and his men are looking for you.”

If that wasn’t a wake-up call, Mace didn’t know what was. He sat up slightly, leaning back against the headboard. “Wait, wait.” He glanced over at the pillow next to him to make sure Colby was still asleep. Cupping his hand around his mouth and the cell, he whispered, “Okay, what the hell is going on?”

“There’s a price on your head.”

Well, wonder of all wonders. “A hit? What’s the prize?”

“You’ll never guess...”

“So just tell me.”

“Two and a half.”

“Thousand?”

The man on the other end chuckled.

“Hundred thousand?” Mace still didn’t get a response. He shook his head in disbelief. “No.”

“Yes. I’m almost tempted to kill you myself.”

Mace dragged a hand through his disheveled hair. “Two and a half ... million? Holy shit, Spinozi must be really pissed.”

“Hmm. I’d say that’s an understatement. I hope you’re healing rapidly. I hate to tell you, but you’re on your own, buddy. I was going to send a couple men out to cover you, but I don’t have anyone to spare. And anyway, you’re twice as good as my second best man. I figured you’d be able to handle this little snag on your own.”

“*Little snag?*” A little snag was *not* being shot in cold blood by a Mafia kingpin’s goon.

“For your sake and hers, get rid of the girl and think about getting yourself to a safe house. The contract is fresh, so if they don’t know about her already, she’ll be okay. But don’t wait. It’s only a matter of time.”

Mace softly cursed when the phone went silent. He snapped it shut and turned to watch Colby sleep. Her breathing was deep and steady. He had no reason to think she had heard any of it.

Damn. How was he going to get her out of his life? These last few weeks had been the best weeks he’d ever had. She was great. She was sexy and smart. Hell, the sex was unbelievable. Biochemist by day, sex kitten by night. She was open to his suggestions, willing to try something new every night. Every morning too.

However, he paid the price of their daily romper room. During the day when she was at work, his physical therapist worked out the intense leg cramps he had due to the increased activity. Robin told him he ought to stop torturing himself; he told her to forget

it. The cramps were worth it, even if Colby didn't know what a strain it put on him.

Shit. What was he going to do? Break it off with her? He couldn't do it. He had to think. How could he keep her safe but still in his life?

He couldn't.

That little run-in with the stranger at the auction was proof enough he couldn't protect her 24/7. He might have been some random stranger, but...

He didn't want to think about the "buts."

Damn, he was going to have to separate himself from her, and in a way she wouldn't figure out the real reason either. He couldn't tell her he had a contract on his head. The last thing he wanted was to panic her. If someone just pranking the house was stressing her out the way it had...

Well, maybe it was to be expected. She originally thought it had been Craig doing it. He couldn't blame her for being scared of the bastard after what he'd seen in those photos.

It would be better for her not to be frightened. For herself. For him. She needed to live her life safe and securely. She finally had Craig Jones out of her life. But now, with Spinozi putting contracts out on his head, her little safe world might come crashing down. She deserved better.

If Spinozi had any idea what he felt for Colby, the fat bastard wouldn't hesitate knocking her off. Or worse.

Okay, think, think, think. How could he suddenly distance himself from her?

What would be plausible after everything that had happened between the two of them? They had gotten into a routine: her working during the week while he went to PT, dinner together at night, down and dirty dessert later in the evening, weekends at her house fixing it up.

Mace groaned. He was going to have to be a cold-hearted bastard. He was going to have to get into character, play one of his parts. He would have to become something, someone she hated.

He would have to become Craig. Fuck! Why did he have to do this? If there was any other way...

Colby's arm reached over him as she stretched. The sheet slipped away exposing a bare breast. Mace closed his eyes against the temptation. Maybe he could wait to... No, he had to do it now. She didn't deserve to be tangled in his mess.

She rolled on her side and gave him a wide smile. "Good morning."

Oh, God, he didn't want to do this. He really didn't. He took a deep breath, looking down into her glowing face. He reluctantly got into character.

"Is it?" He kept his voice clipped and cold.

A look of confusion crossed her face, her eyebrows knitting together. "Is something wrong?"

"What could be wrong? Everything's just perfect. Everything is just going the way you'd like it." He got out of bed, turning to point a finger at her. "Why don't you just move your things in here? Why do you even need your own room? Hell, why are you even bothering to fix up that deathtrap of a house?"

Colby tugged the sheet up over her chest. "Mace, what's wrong? Does your leg hurt? Did I do something?"

"I've got to shower. Aren't you going to be late for work?"

Colby glanced over at the clock. "No."

"Then why aren't you downstairs making me breakfast?"

Mace stormed out of the bedroom, leaving Colby alone in his bed, her jaw hanging.

He slammed the bathroom door behind him and began to pace. He needed time to get a plan together. He had to make this believable. If he fucked this up it could be her death sentence. Or his.

After he'd got out of the shower and dressed, he stomped down the stairs and into the kitchen. Colby was pale, her hair uncommonly loose around her shoulders. She had missed a button on her blouse and it hung on her crookedly. He wanted so badly to straighten out her shirt and re-button it for her, but he just clenched his fists instead.

A second after he sat at the table, she placed a plate of food in front of him. He stared at the veggie omelet and the dry whole grain bagel, before violently pushed the plate away from him. It skidded down the table with a clatter, the bagel shooting onto the floor. Colby spun around from pouring him coffee, crying out when she sloshed the burning liquid over her hand.

"Do you call this breakfast? Can't I ever have normal white toast? And bacon? Why are you such a damn klutz? You spilled coffee all over the floor. Now clean it up before it stains the floor. I'm going out for breakfast. I won't be home for dinner either."

"Mace..." Her voice was shaky and breathless.

He left Colby cooling her burned fingers off under the faucet. He hadn't missed the tears filling her eyes. He couldn't let it affect him. He just couldn't. It was for her own good. Even if she didn't know it. It had to be this way.

It had to be.

* * * *

The house was so quiet. Mace really hadn't come home for dinner last night. Or tonight either. He hadn't come home at all.

Colby needed to talk to him. She wanted to know what was bothering him. Why he had acted that way yesterday morning. Had she done something wrong? Was he mad about the episode with Craig? She needed to know.

Maybe he didn't want a woman who came with baggage. Maybe after seeing the episode with Craig and, not to mention, the PFA and horrible pictures, he had realized she was more trouble than she was worth. Maybe his anger was finally catching up to him; he was pissed off about her keeping Craig a secret from him. He made it clear he wasn't happy Martin knew about her past. She had shared personal matters with her assistant but not with Mace, her lover.

Or maybe their relationship was becoming just too complicated too quickly for him and he needed to step back.

Now, at only a half hour until midnight, she stood facing his closed bedroom door. She tried the knob and was surprised it wasn't locked. The room was dark as she closed the door behind her. She felt her way over to the bed and turned on the lamp. The light reflected off the empty foil wrappers strewn hastily over the top of the nightstand. They reminded her of the pleasure she had found in Mace's arms. Only now it was turning into hell.

He had chased one hell—Craig—out of her life, only to bring in another.

She hadn't been able to concentrate at work for the past two days. Her stomach had

been clenched in a tight ball. She might as well not have been there at all. Martin had shown concern, but backed off quickly when she snapped at him.

She looked at Maxi's framed picture. She missed her friend, but she refused to bug her, and put a damper on her newly-wedded bliss. Even so, she needed someone to talk to. To ask what went wrong. Maybe he'd been in miserable pain. She hoped that was it, even though she didn't want him suffering.

Colby ran a hand over the rumpled sheets. They were so cold. Just the opposite of all those hot nights together.

She wandered over to his dresser and picked up his cologne. She sniffed at the bottle, the recognizable scent tightening things in her lower body. She gathered his sweats off the floor and folded them, placing them on the end of his bed. She wondered if he had done his physical therapy today. Maybe he would come back feeling better and everything would be back to normal.

She drifted around the room, touching the frames hanging on the wall. They were more than just pictures, though. Among them were his high school and college diplomas. Colby stepped closer to read them; he had his BS in criminal justice.

She noticed a dark line in the wall, an opening. It was a very small closet with its door ajar, not the normal closet he hung his clothes in. She had never noticed this one before. The two-foot high door was painted the same color as the walls and there was no knob or hinges to give it away.

She crossed the room, but hesitated as guilt washed over her. She shouldn't be snooping, but she wanted to know more about this man. More about the man she knew so well but really hardly knew at all. He was so full of secrets, never talking about his work or past relationships. Nothing.

So he couldn't be mad she had kept Craig a dirty little secret. He couldn't be; that wouldn't make sense. She had to stop guessing. She just had to clear up this misunderstanding, if that's what it was, when he got home.

The little door creaked when she slowly pulled it open. She peered into the dark compartment, attempting to see what was inside. It looked like a few boxes of files and a small file cabinet. Colby tugged on a drawer. They were all locked. She grabbed the closest banker's box and dragged it out of the closet and into the light. She knocked the lid off. It was stuffed full of manila folders; each one had a name on the tab.

One thick file lay on top, like it had been recently removed and just tossed back. In black block print was the name "Manni Spinozi."

Spinozi. Why did the name sound familiar?

She opened the file and was shocked to find a picture clipped to one side of the sleeve and a profile on the man bound on the other side. She studied the photo of a dark complexioned man, very well dressed. It was an obvious candid shot; he didn't know this picture was being taken. She remembered hearing his name on the news, but couldn't recall what it was about.

As she began to scan the profile, she heard voices coming down the hall. She recognized Mace's but the other—a woman's—she didn't know at all.

Her heart racing, she tossed the file back into the box and slapped the lid on it with shaking hands. She shoved the heavy box back into the closet and quickly shut the door. She was standing when the bedroom door banged open.

Mace stood there in the doorway, his arm draped around a bottle-bleached blonde.

Colby stared at them in surprise and they stared back at her. No one breathed until the blonde giggled.

“What are you doing in my room?”

Colby blinked. “I...” And blinked again, at a loss for words. Her brain didn’t comprehend what she was seeing. “I...”

His eyes raked her. She suddenly felt self-conscious in the oversized T-shirt she sometimes slept in. The woman who was smiling up at Mace had on a short, black leather skirt and a *little* shiny, gold halter top. One which did not contain her breasts. The outfit was a little trashy. No, very trashy, but way more sexy than Colby’s shapeless tee.

“Were you waiting for me like some lonely—”

Her attention went back to Mace. *Think, think, think.* “No! I... I forgot something of mine. I came in here to get it.”

“Did you find it?”

She watched Mace’s dangling hand brush against top of the blonde’s breasts. They were hard to miss, hanging out like that. She nodded, unable to get any sound past the lump in her throat.

“Good. Now, we want to be alone.” He sneered at her. “See ya.”

She couldn’t take her eyes off the two of them standing hip to hip in the bedroom doorway. Mace leaned down and kissed the blonde’s bright red lips. It was a long, wet kiss, causing Colby to look away.

“Can’t you take a hint?”

She neared the couple blocking the doorway. She sniffed the air. “Are you drunk?”

Mace let out an explosive curse, pushing the blonde aside and reaching for Colby. He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the hallway. His tight grip hurt her arm, but she couldn’t escape. He was frightening her. This wasn’t the man she thought he was.

It was Craig all over again! She had vowed she would never be in the position Craig had put her in ever again. She would never allow herself to be beaten down, mentally or physically. And now...

His low, menacing words scared her even more. “You’re suffocating me, woman! I can’t take it! I want you out of this house. Tomorrow.”

Colby finally yanked her arm free. “Don’t worry, I’ll be out of here tonight.”

She rushed down the hallway and into her bedroom. Flinging herself on her bed, she smothered her wrenching sobs in her pillow. When they subsided, she felt empty and angry. At herself. She had fallen. Hard. There was no one to blame but herself. She had told herself many times not to get involved—especially with a man like Mace. But she had gone and done it again. And once again she was the loser.

Colby clenched the bedspread. It was her own stupidity.

She was stupid enough to...

Oh, God, she had fallen in love with this man! The one who was in his bedroom down the hall with another woman this very moment. It ripped Colby’s heart out. She sniffled and reached for a tissue to blow her nose. She had to get a grip. She had survived a rotten relationship before, she could do it again. She had to.

She would just gather her things out of her—no, this was *his* room, and move into her own house. It might not be ready, but she had nowhere else to go. Ironically, she had more done than she had originally planned to by this time since Mace had helped complete a lot of the work. She would make do.

She packed her clothes into her suitcases. She only had to get her personal items from the bathroom—which was across the hall from Mace.

As she crept down the hall she heard giggles and groans, passionate cries.

Colby wanted to cover her ears with her hands, but she didn't. She needed to know the truth about what a sneaky, low-down man Mace was. There was no better way to do it than listen to the man she loved have sex with another woman.

She closed the bathroom door behind her before she sobbed out loud.

* * * *

Mace heard the squeal of the convertible's tires. She was gone.

"Okay, knock it off."

The blonde looked up from what she was doing. And what she was doing was trying to get his pants unzipped. "What's the matter, baby?"

"Nothing. I paid you to play the part. Not actually do it." He jerked away from her and stood.

"I don't mind, honey, if you want to play a little." She reached for him with her red painted nails. "You're kind of cute."

He stepped back away from the bed and tucked his shirt back in. "I do mind."

The last thing he needed was this woman getting her claws in him. Who knew what diseases she carried? But she was the best he could find in this town; there weren't too many strip clubs to choose from.

"Oh, come on. You can't blame a girl from trying."

Mace dug into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He threw a fifty on the bed.

"For fifty bucks, you can get a little more than play acting." She smiled at him, licked her lips, and gave him an over-exaggerated wink.

He looked at her in disgust. She was not for him. "No thanks, I'll call you a cab."

"Party-pooper."

He closed his eyes. Colby had called him a party-pooper once. Yeah, maybe he was. But he was in no mood to "party" with this woman. He wanted Colby. He wanted her so badly his heart squeezed. She needed to be in his arms where she belonged. She needed to fill his empty bed.

But now she was gone. It was for the best.

Yeah, her leaving was for the best.

Chapter Thirteen

Colby strolled around her newly painted porch, enjoying the evening breeze. She looked out over the front yard. She was extremely happy with her landscaper. The grass was beginning to look like a real yard. The bushes were all pruned and the trees were cut back to allow more light around the house. Soon there would be little patches of flowers around. Like miniature gardens around the trees, up the walk, around the light posts.

She sighed. It was going to be beautiful.

Too bad there was no one to share it with.

At work, Martin had noticed her melancholy and had suggested she go out on a blind date. Even though she had refused each time, he wouldn't let up. He knew the perfect guy and what do you know? He was straight too. Colby had to laugh at his remark, making Martin smile. He had finally broken her sad streak.

Eventually she had said yes to the blind date. There was no point in just sitting around the house moping every night. It had been three weeks since she had left Mace's house.

Three weeks. God, three long, miserable weeks.

She missed him.

Hell, she loved him. The idiot had made her go and fall in love with him. Damn him!

He was probably fooling around with every bimbo he could find. She had been nothing but a distraction for him. A temporary plaything. Convenient, since she lived in his home. She had cooked and cleaned and even done his laundry for him. And not to mention helping with his physical therapy. Fool! What a damn fool she was.

Once a fool, always a fool. How many times had she heard women who are abused always look for another abuser. Whether they mean to or not.

Mace might not have been an abuser, but he was definitely a user.

Now she stood here, waiting for a blind date. What was wrong with her? She should give up the male race completely.

A silver four-door sedan pulled up the driveway. A smartly dressed man got out and gave her a slight wave.

"Robert?" Approaching him, she gave him the once-over. His hair was brown, but not nearly as dark as Mace's. He was much shorter and stockier, but he had a nice smile.

"Hello, you must be Colby." He took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. A real gentleman. "You are more beautiful than Martin said."

Colby blushed. "Thank you."

"Are you ready?"

Colby nodded and gave him a forced smile. Robert opened the car door for her and she slid in. "Ready as I'll ever be," she murmured.

* * * *

Mace paced back and forth in front of the restaurant. He paused to peer once more in the window.

What was she doing? Fuck! Who was that with her?

What the hell was he doing here, anyhow? Christ, he was being stupid. Not to mention careless.

He stepped away from the window, disappearing into the darkness. He leaned against the brick building, his fists clenched. He had to make sense of this. When he pushed her out of his bed, his house ... his life, he hadn't expected her to fall into another man's arms so soon.

How could she be on a date with that guy? And it looked like she was enjoying herself. She kept smiling up at him. The guy looked like such a nerd. *Like a fellow scientist...* He groaned.

Mace had to refrain from rushing into the restaurant and yanking her out of there. He wanted to throw her over his shoulder and carry her home. Back to him. Back to his bed.

He sucked in a deep breath, tilting his head to look up at the night sky, partly concealed by the street light. He shouldn't be here. He had to stop tailing her. This wasn't accomplishing anything, except grief on his part. And it was unsafe for her.

He pushed away from the wall and looked in the window one last time. That's when he noticed the car. Not only was his dumb ass reflected in the window, but so was a long black Town Car with dark tinted windows.

He tensed. A bullet could strike him any second and he was caught with his pants down. Just like he was following Colby, he had been tailed. Spinozi's men knew where he was.

They knew he had followed Colby here.

They knew.

Colby would be in danger and he had done it. It was all his fault.

He had to get out of there and lead them away from Colby. He couldn't risk warning her on the slight chance maybe they didn't realize Mace was following her. Maybe.

He could only hope.

Fighting a last glance into the restaurant, Mace slipped away into the alley.

* * * *

Robert escorted Colby up the porch. At the front door she turned to face him. "Well, thanks for a nice evening."

He cradled one of her hands in his. His hand was much softer and smaller than Mace's. Not one callus. "It was a wonderful evening. I hope you enjoyed it. I certainly did."

He was eyeing her mouth, and Colby realized with a start he wanted to kiss her. She tugged her hand away gently and stepped back. "Good night."

Robert looked as though he wanted to say something but refrained. He smiled at her and nodded knowingly. "Yes, good night, Colby. If you don't mind, I'd like to call you again."

She nodded slightly and watched him return to his car. She didn't unlock the front door until he drove away. She released a loud sigh.

Robert couldn't hold a candle to Mace. She'd really tried to like Robert tonight. She'd laughed at his jokes, smiled at his compliments. Everything. She'd tried. But there was nothing there. Not even a hint of a spark. Damn Mace for making her want him. Only him.

She opened the door and reached for the light switch.

“Colby,” came the whisper near her ear. She yanked her hand back and squealed in surprise. “Shh. It’s me.”

“Mace!” Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dark, but she could barely make out his figure in the foyer. “What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“I’m not going to play twenty questions right now. I need to talk to you.”

“If you’re here to beg forgiveness—”

Mace’s vehement curse stopped her cold.

I guess not. “Why can’t I turn on the light?” she asked, annoyed. She needed light to make sure she hit her target when she kicked him in those cheating nuts.

“Because I don’t want anyone to see I’m in the house.”

“Who’s going to see?” She was losing patience with this game he was playing.

“Nobody, hopefully. That’s the point.”

“Will you tell me what is going on?”

“Is there somewhere we can sit down?”

So, he had noticed the living room was still free of furniture. She hadn’t gotten that far yet. “The stairs.”

Mace grabbed her arm and directed her through the darkness to her stairway. “Sit.”

She sat. “Mace—”

“Colby, let me speak first. This is very important. I came here to warn you.”

“Warn me? About what?”

“About a case I was working on.”

“Manni Spinozi.” The sudden silence chilled her. She wished she could see his face. She felt him settle on the step beside her.

“What do you know about him?” His cold tone cut her to the quick.

“Not much. I’ve heard he’s a big mob boss. On the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list. The ATF would also love to get a hold of him.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“The news. He was on the news a few times. Is he the one who shot you?”

“No. His brother.” He cursed again, savagely. “I’m sorry, Colby. I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” Why couldn’t she turn on the light? Not being able to read his expressions was driving her crazy. It was scaring her. She felt she was missing half of the story.

“For getting you involved.”

“With you?” It was about time he apologized.

“With this. This mess.”

“How—”

“Just by being with me could put you in danger. If they have any idea how I feel about...” His voice drifted off. He released a long tumultuous sigh.

“Feel about what?” she prodded.

“Hopefully, they don’t know about you. I hope I got you out of my house in time.”

“Out of the house,” she repeated. Slowly, things were becoming clearer. “You drove me out with that ... that woman? You mean to tell me it was because of that guy?”

“He’s reason enough. Colby, you don’t know *that* guy. I do. I infiltrated his ‘family.’ He knows it now. He’s out for me. I can take care of myself, but it’s going to be hard to protect you unless I keep you locked in a room.”

Colby sat straighter. “I hope you’re not—”

“No. No. I’m not going to. I hope I didn’t do anything stupid tonight to jeopardize your safety.”

“Like what?”

“Like ... like following you on your date.” The words came out in a quick tumble, catching Colby in surprise. “I tried to stay away, but I failed. I wasn’t going to tell you anything. I wasn’t going to warn you. Damn it, I wanted to keep you uninvolved. It’s risky for me to be here now as it is. But I had to warn you. I had to.” It sounded as though he was trying to convince himself more than her. “I did something stupid and you need to know.”

“You followed me.” It wasn’t a question; it was a statement of disbelief. She stood up and wandered away in the dark, feeling her way around.

“Colby, I made a mistake.”

“A mistake. Am I the mistake? Was bringing the blonde bimbo bitch home a mistake? Or are you just mad you had to admit to following me?”

In the dark she could see he held his head in his hands, but not much more. He didn’t answer her. She didn’t know if she really wanted to know the answers to her questions anyway.

“Mace, you were sloppy. Even me—what would you agents call me?—a *civilian* could see that. No wonder you got shot in the line of duty. Careless people get hurt.” She wanted to hurt him, hurt him badly like he hurt her. Her spiteful words didn’t make her feel any better. She felt worse.

“I... I’m going to bed.” She brushed past him up the dark stairs. At the top of the stairs, she paused. “You know your way out.”

Chapter Fourteen

Mace had remained frozen in place while he listened to the click of her heels as she went down the hallway. Not surprisingly, he heard a door slam.

This hadn't gone exactly like he planned. Though what had since meeting her?

He sure fucked everything up tonight. He couldn't afford any more mistakes. She was right. He was careless, and that same carelessness was what had gotten him injured and almost cost him his career. He had to get his act together. His feelings for Colby were making him reckless, putting them both at risk.

After dead bolting the front door, he methodically went around the first floor, making sure all the windows were secure. He would be calling an alarm company in the morning.

After fighting the temptation to run up the stairs and into her arms at least a half dozen times, he slipped out the back of the house a few minutes later, making sure the door was locked behind him.

He drove home, more determined than ever to extract himself from Colby's life.

The only way Mace knew to get Spinozi's men away from Colby, short of killing them all—impossible for even him—was to get out of town. They would follow him, like good little goons do. And there was no doubt he was being followed. Mace knew they were just waiting for the right moment to swoop in.

He knew they were not going to make him a quick, easy hit. Spinozi wanted him to suffer.

He was a sitting duck if he stayed in his house. The hit proved they knew his real name. They knew where he lived. He needed to get lost. Now.

Back at the house, he threw a few things in his bag. He needed to get in touch with his boss. He needed an assignment.

He would no longer be Macen Jeffrey Walker, but somebody else. Joe Schmoe if he needed to be. It would be a few more years before Mace Walker showed up again, if ever.

He would make sure Maxi was warned before coming back from her trip. He would have a real estate agency sell the house for him. He, and even Maxi, would never be able to live here again safely.

His biggest regret was not having the chance to see or speak to his sister. He would have to find a way to contact her in the future. When, and if, it was ever safe. With her new married name Spinozi and his gang might not realize they were even related. He'd like to keep it that way.

The home phone rang, jerking him out of his thoughts.

Lifting the receiver to his ear, he was about to say "hello" when he heard uncontrollable sobbing on the other end. This wasn't Colby just upset with him about tonight. *Christ*. He broke out in a cold sweat and sank to the floor, clutching the phone so tightly his knuckles turned white.

A gruff voice ordered, "Say something, you fuckin' bitch!" The sobbing got louder. "Damn you, *say something!*"

Mace heard a loud slap and then silence. Some murmured curses were heard in the background.

“Son of a bitch,” Mace muttered. “*Son of a bitch!* You hurt her and...”

Suddenly there was laughing over the phone line. “What? What will you do, call the cops, *Rico*? I mean Macen Walker. Your name really isn’t Rico, is it?”

Mace didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He would never tell his secrets. Never. Even if it meant death. But Colby hadn’t taken the oath. Colby didn’t deserve to die. “Where are you?” Mace ground out.

“Aah. In a pretty, yellow kitchen. Too bad it was just freshly painted. It’s a shame our explosives will implode this house upon itself, burying your little lover girl. Is she good, Rico? In bed, I mean.”

Mace slammed down the phone. Grabbing his gun, he tucked it into the back of his waistband as he ran out of the house.

* * * *

Mace’s truck skidded to a stop a block away from the house. It hadn’t even been an hour since he was there earlier. Not even one freaking hour! He should have stayed.

No, he should have stayed away.

He scrambled out of the truck cab and moved quickly down the sidewalk, sticking close to the shrubs, his gun in hand. Just as he got to the corner of her driveway and the shrubbery, he stopped and took a deep breath. *Slow down and think.* He couldn’t just rush in; he’d get them both killed.

Spinozi’s men wanted *him*. *That* was the game. Colby was just the bait. He had to get in there without getting her killed. They would think nothing of taking her life. They could do it just for the sport of it. He stepped away from the shrubs into the dark driveway, determined to remain undetected until the last second.

The sudden bright, red hot flash blinded him; the impact knocked him off his feet. He landed on his back, unable to breathe, no oxygen left in his lungs. His gun had flown out of his hand and skidded down the pavement.

He lay there for a second, gasping, fighting for breath. Finally, he pushed himself up to his knees. Using both hands on the ground for leverage, he unfolded his body up until he was standing. But looking at the devastation, he struggled to keep his feet underneath him.

The house was gone. Totally gone. Flames shot up from the rubble. Only burning splinters of wood remained of the house Colby had loved so much.

The house was completely gone. *Colby.*

Mace sank to his knees, digging his fingers into his hair and pulling, trying to relieve the agony clawing the inside of his head. He was screaming. But no sound escaped. He ran out of air and he dropped his head in his hands.

The heat from the burning timbers reminded him of what he had to do. Who he was. Damn them. Damn them all to mighty hell. They were going to die. All of them. Every single one of those mother-fuckers.

Unseen hands grabbed him from behind; on his arms, around his neck. He tried to jerk away. He looked for his gun. His struggling got him nowhere, there were too many of them. Suddenly he was kicked in the head from behind.

The world went black.

* * * *

Mace heard it. Moaning. It was getting louder. He shook his head to clear it but doing so only brought a shard of pain.

His eyes were swollen and he struggled to open them. Through the slits he could see he was tied to a metal chair. Warm liquid oozed down his forehead, trickling into his eye. His tongue felt twice its normal size and his mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. Blood soaked cotton.

He did a mental body check. The intense pain in his side made him wonder if his ribs were broken. He could feel a burning at the back of his head. His hair felt stiff back there, so most likely he had a nasty gash. His face, well, besides dripping with blood, some of it was crusting already, one side he couldn't even feel. Maybe it was better that way. He tried to lick his dry, cracked lips but it was impossible. His tongue was cut, probably from his own teeth.

He scoped out the area as best as he could with his limited vision. Whoever had him here was sitting behind him, talking quietly. Mace tried to make out what they were saying through the ringing in his right ear. He slightly turned his head, not enough to draw attention to him, so his left ear could pick up the conversation.

"He'll be here soon. He wants us to wait until he's here. He wants to watch the man who killed his brother die."

"We better be gettin' that damn prize money."

"We'll get it. He's good for it."

Mace heard the loud moan again. He turned his head a fraction toward the sound, and damned his vision when it blurred for a moment.

Colby! Oh, God, she was alive!

His relief was short-lived. They were in a bad, bad situation. One he doubted he could get them out of. They were fucked. Fucked was putting it mildly, knowing Spinozi's men.

She sat tied to another metal chair across, but at an angle, from him. Duct tape sealed her mouth. Her face was distorted on one side from swelling and was already turning purple. Her head hung, like it was too much effort for her to lift it. That or she was blessedly unconscious. He could only hope.

"Colby!" he yelled before he could stop himself. He just had to know if she was ... all right. It was stupid but true.

Her head lifted slightly and, as she noticed him, her hollowed eyes widened in surprise and then grief.

Mace heard a scuffle of feet before a deep voice right behind him said, "Shut up!"

He managed to get "Fuck you" out before everything went black again when something hard met the back of his head.

* * * *

The world cleared again, somewhat, when a hand slapped his face. And slapped again.

"Wake up! Wake up, you worthless piece of shit!"

The throbbing in his head pounded even harder as he opened his eyes and the lights temporarily blinded him. "Christ," he moaned.

"No one asked you to speak. At least, not until you are spoken to." The man himself stood in front of him. Mace was in deep shit. "Who are you working for?" Spinozi asked.

“No one.”

“Okay, you’re going to be loyal to the end, are you? We’ll see about that.” Spinozi nodded to the goons who were somewhere behind Mace. “Cut off his left pant leg. I want to see the damage my brother did before this asshole killed him.”

One of Mace’s captors took a knife to his jeans, exposing his mangled thigh.

“I’m impressed you still have use of this leg, Macen Walker. We might have to do something about that. Does it hurt?”

Mace said nothing; instead he looked over at Colby. She was fully conscious and watching what was going on. Her eyes were wide. She was very, very afraid. He didn’t blame her. He wasn’t feeling too brave, either.

He was going to die and he knew it. It didn’t matter what he said tonight, he was still going to die. The only thing which could change was how long it would take. Mace had a feeling it might take a while.

Spinozi put the heel of his shoe on Mace’s exposed thigh and twisted it back and forth, as if he was trying to grind out a cigarette. Mace gritted his teeth, which caused more pain in his swollen jaw. He would not cry out. He would not.

He. Would. Not ... ever ... give that satisfaction to the bastard.

Mace kept eye contact with Colby. Even with the distance between them, he couldn’t mistake the tears trickling from the corners of her eyes. She tried to say something but her voice was muffled behind the tape. She tugged at her ties but it was useless. Even if she could get loose, what could she do?

Not satisfied with Mace’s response, Spinozi cursed and stopped. He turned to study Colby. Realizing his worst fear, Mace knew Spinozi would use Colby against him. The fat bastard would use her to break him down. Mace would rather have the bastard torture him forever than touch her.

“I’m assuming she was more beautiful before my men got to her, hmm? It’s a shame to mess up a pretty face like hers,” Spinozi said with a slight upturn to his mouth. He stepped over to Colby, but made sure he didn’t block Mace’s view. Spinozi ran a finger down her cheek, smearing her fresh tears with the dried blood already there. “Look, Walker, she’s crying for you.” He laughed, causing Colby to jerk against her bindings. “She’s got a nice little body, doesn’t she? Would you mind sharing her with my men?”

Mace tensed and ground out, “You fucking touch her and—”

Spinozi and his men laughed. The laughter boomed through the large empty warehouse, echoing back to him. Emphasizing what he already knew. He’d fucked up. He should have kept his mouth shut. What he’d said had been stupid. He could do absolutely nothing. Nothing but watch whatever they decided to do to Colby. Now he actually wished she was dead. It would be better to be dead than tortured.

Spinozi grabbed Colby’s blouse and ripped it open, the buttons flying off in different directions. The laughter quickly died around him. The goons knew what was to be next. He held out his hand for the knife. When he got it, he sliced open Colby’s bra, exposing her breasts. A thin line of blood appeared where the knife nicked her sternum. By accident? Nothing Spinozi did was an accident.

Colby had her eyes closed. Mace felt her humiliation; it overwhelmed him, only frustrating him more.

“How would it be to watch your lover being fucked by six men in front of you, huh?” Spinozi gave a wicked grin. “You just might enjoy it. Both of you. Is she sweet,

Walker? Have you tasted her honey?” The crime boss walked around behind Colby and placed a hand on her shoulder. A gun appeared in his other and he pressed it into her temple. “Maybe you’d like to see her brains splattered all over you.” Spinozi bent down and whispered something in Colby’s ear. The duct tape covering her mouth puffed out, then was sucked in as her breathing became faster, frantic.

Mace tugged against the ropes binding his hands until he felt a trickle of blood run down his fingers. It was useless. “Damn you! If you’re going to kill her, just do it. She knows nothing; she’s got nothing to do with this! Don’t torture her for nothing!”

Spinozi lifted a dark eyebrow. “Are you begging for her life?”

“You want me, you’ve got me. Torture me if you’re going to torture anybody!”

“There’s no *if* about it.”

“So torture me, you shit-for-brains, not her!”

Mace’s attempt to piss Spinozi off seemed to work. Spinozi left Colby to step closer to him. He jammed the gun against Mace’s lips. “Watch your mouth, before I blow it right off your face!”

“Do it,” he goaded between pressed lips.

“It’s not going to be that easy, Walker. No way. I’m not in a rush and you and your girlfriend have nowhere to go.”

*

Colby squeezed her eyes tight. Any moment she was going to wake up and this was all going to be a bad nightmare. She had seen scenes like this in the movies. This does not happen in real life.

This could not be happening.

It was.

Colby opened her eyes when she heard a noise she didn’t even want to guess at. She fought down the bile threatening to rise into her mouth.

The half dozen men behind Mace kept staring her bare breasts. They had sick, wicked grins on their faces and it didn’t change when they went back to watching Mace suffer. She couldn’t figure out which excited them more. But her exposed chest was the least of her worries.

Mace was in trouble. They were both going to die. But not without being tortured first. She was sure of it. How the hell could she help him or herself? Even if she could free herself, she didn’t even know where they were. A garage or a warehouse, maybe. It could be in another state or even another country. She didn’t know how long she had been passed out before waking up tied to this damn metal chair.

Colby watched the continued violence against Mace through a haze. She didn’t know how long it lasted. An hour. Two? It could have been twenty minutes for all she knew. She had lost track of time. She pinned her eyes shut against the horror and slowly rocked back and forth, as far as the bindings would allow her.

There were too many questions, too many silent answers. The only answers Spinozi got for his questions were the slight sounds of pain occasionally slipping from Mace’s lips. He was beaten and stabbed, sliced and burned. Again and again. *No man could take this*, she thought wildly. Mace either refused to, or could not, answer the questions.

She knew, even if he did answer, they wouldn’t have given them mercy anyway. She wasn’t foolish.

“Now for the best fun of the night,” Spinozi announced with a great flourish. “Untie

his right hand. Leave the other bound.”

She heard a scuffle and then a groan as one of Mace’s hands were freed.

“Take it,” Spinozi ordered. “Take it!”

Colby didn’t want to look, but she couldn’t help it. Mace, his face swollen almost beyond recognition, slowly reached out to take the handgun.

Shoot the bastard, Mace! Shoot that fat bastard!

“Point it at her.”

“Fuck you.” The words were no more than a pained whisper. His voice was unrecognizable. There was not much left of the man she knew. And loved.

Spinozi put a knife to his ear and drew blood. “Point it at her. It’s easier to kill her than to watch me slice off her luscious body parts while she’s awake. Isn’t it, *Rico*?”

Mace raised the gun, his hand shaking. The six men stationed behind him had their guns drawn too. Half were pointed at her, half at Mace. They were doomed either way.

“Shoot her. Shoot her! Now.”

Mace stuck the gun to his own temple instead.

He wouldn’t do that. It had to be a ploy.

“Stupid man.” Spinozi growled. He circled Mace. “Will you leave her alone with us, then? Pull the damn trigger, you coward. Do it!”

Colby watched his fingers tighten on the gun and his finger slide in front of the trigger. He would not desert her like that. He wouldn’t.

Mace looked into her eyes. He was empty, a shadow of his former self. Colby wanted to scream, but the damn tape kept her lips together. She wanted to scream at him to stop. Not to pull the trigger.

“I love you,” he mouthed.

Colby squeezed her eyes shut. Fine time to tell her now—when they were about to die. She fought back the hysterical laughter bubbled up from her throat. She couldn’t watch. She couldn’t. God, she loved him. She loved him. *She loved him.*

*

He was going to die.

The gun exploded. Colby jumped, her ears rang painfully. It was over.

It was her turn to die.

The ringing in her ears wouldn’t go away. Neither could she open her eyes. They burned with tears and smoke and hatred. She didn’t want to see the gun pointed at her. She couldn’t hear anything, but after a few moments she felt the body heat of someone near her. The duct tape was ripped off her mouth. The stinging pain was nothing compared to the pain in her heart.

Colby opened her eyes to see men swarming around her. They were wearing dark blue wind jackets and baseball-type caps with ATF and FBI on them in big yellow letters.

They were too late. Too late!

Someone cut her ropes. The sudden circulation to her feet and hands caused a stinging sensation. An awful prickly pain. But the pain of knowing Mace was dead was worse.

Her hearing must have been still muted from the gunshots because it took the dark-haired man in front of her a couple times before she could make out his words. “Ma’am. Here, put this on.”

Colby tried to reach out for the offered jacket, but her arms refused to move. “I

can't." Her voice was hoarse and she tried to clear her throat.

The agent helped insert her arms into the sleeves and he buttoned the jacket closed, covering her nakedness. She wanted to stand but her legs were shaking so badly. She tried twice before the man reached out to lift her up. She was grateful for his help, but she couldn't say thank you, for if she opened her mouth again she was going to start wailing uncontrollably and they would have to sedate her. Or put her in a straight jacket.

From outside the building she finally heard the sirens. She hadn't noticed them earlier due to her hearing loss. But those high pitched wails sounded good to her now.

She looked around to see the officers dragging Spinozi's men out of the door, shackled like the animals they were. She wished she had her Glock; she would shoot every one of them between the eyes. She spotted the gun in the agent's holster. It was within reach.

He must have noticed her gaze, since he turned his hip away from her and said, "The ambulance is here, ma'am. Do you think you can walk? I'll help you."

He took her arm and supported her while she walked out the door, careful to keep her on his left side, away from his weapon.

"There's only one ambulance left, ma'am. So you'll have to hitch a ride." The man gave her a gentle smile as he handed her over to the EMTs, who helped her climb into the back of the ambulance.

"Sit here," one of them said, pointing to a seat next to the gurney.

Colby sat, in a daze, and looked to see who she was riding with. If it was Spinozi, she'd kill him right now, before they could get to the hospital. She didn't need the agent's gun; she'd kill him with her bare hands. "My God..." she whispered. She turned to the EMT next to her. "Is he alive?"

"Yes. He's been in and out of consciousness—look."

Colby leaned forward. *Mace*. He hadn't shot himself. Those deafening gunshots must have all come from the agents' guns.

He was alive. But... "Is he all right?"

"He's in a critical condition, but—"

Mace slowly lifted a hand to Colby's face. He couldn't quite reach, so she leaned closer, crying out with disbelief when he touched her skin. His bottom lip was split and blood trickled from his mouth, but he tried to speak.

Colby leaned closer until her ear was a breath away. "What?"

"Will you marry me?"

She was hearing things. Why would he ask her that? Here, now? While he was fighting for his life?

The EMT pulled her back. "Ma'am, please. Sit back, give us some room to work."

Colby sat back. And wept.

Chapter Fifteen

“Why won’t they let me see him?” Colby yelled to no one in particular while she paced the hospital hallway. She was frustrated and angry. Just plain spitting mad. She had been waiting for six hours—time enough for doctors to clean her up, stitch her up and officially release her—and now they refused to let her see Mace.

“Probably because you aren’t family.”

Colby spun toward the voice. “Who are you?”

The man was short, bald and stocky but wearing a well-fitted, deep blue suit and dark glasses. *Why did he need sunglasses inside?*

“I can’t tell you who I am. Just think of me as a concerned citizen.”

Concerned citizen. She damn well knew he was Mace’s boss. She was sick of this secret squirrel shit. It had landed them both in hospital. “Why won’t they let me in to see him? I’m his fiancée!” Maybe he had enough influence to get her into Mace’s room.

The man raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Colby swore she heard “The SOB finally got the best of me” under his breath.

Before she could question him on it, he continued louder, “Well, Miss Parks, congratulations. And for your wedding present, I’d like to give you Mace’s walking papers.”

He handed her a thick manila envelope. The outside was free of writing, but a federal government seal was printed in one corner. She tore her eyes away from the official looking envelope to catch her reflection in his sunglasses. “Walking papers?”

“Yes, Mace is officially retired as of midnight tonight.”

Colby sank down in a chair, staring at the packet. She flipped it over in her hands a couple times before saying, “Retired? Honorably, I assume.”

The man laughed. “There are no honors in his line of work, Miss Parks. Just be glad we got there in time to keep him alive.”

She picked at the sealed edge of the envelope. She glanced up. “May I?” He gave a slight incline to his head, enough of an answer for her to tear the flap open. She slid the paperwork out she asked, “How did you know where we were?”

She started to scan the cover letter when she realized he hadn’t answered her. What was he waiting for? Colby looked up. He was gone. If it wasn’t for the paperwork she held in her hands, she would have thought she had imagined him.

She finished scanning the letter, before flipping through the rest of the package which included details of his pension, retirement benefits and a lot of legalese.

A nurse quietly approached her. “Miss Parks, you may see him now.”

“What? I thought—”

“Mr. Smith explained your situation and we realized we had been mistaken.”

Colby silently thanked *Mr. Smith* as she rushed past the nurse and raced down the hallway. She couldn’t push the door open fast enough to enter Mace’s room.

His head was cushioned by a pillow, his upper body in an upright position due to the medical bed. He had ugly black stitches crisscrossing his face, one ear, his arm... She stopped searching. There were too many sutured areas to count. He reminded her of Frankenstein, though not as scary. His eyes were closed and his breathing was steady. He

had an IV in his left arm and some sort of machine was hooked to him, beeping every second or so.

She dragged one of the blocky hospital room chairs next to his bed and perched on the edge. She reached out for his right hand, which was unencumbered with tubes, and he met her halfway. His warm, large fingers enveloped hers. Her eyes flicked back to his face and he was staring at her through swollen, purple eyes. They were unreadable, but he gave her fingers a slight squeeze.

Without letting go of her lifeline, she placed the packet of papers gently on his chest.

He lifted his head off the pillow a little, asking “What’s that?” through puffy, bruised lips.

“Your tour of duty is officially over. You’re retired.”

Mace didn’t say anything. Colby didn’t know if it was a good or a bad thing. He couldn’t want to continue getting shot and beaten up. How much could a body take? After tonight, she couldn’t take anymore. She didn’t want to say, “It’s me or your career.” She wouldn’t do that to him, but she could not stand by and worry about him. Or worse, lose him for good.

“Good. Now I can concentrate on other things.”

Colby let out her breath, not even realizing she had been holding it while waiting for his response. He was letting his job go. “What other things?”

“Building you a new home. Somewhere far way from here. Somewhere safe.” His words were slow and it took him effort to get them out, but she understood every one of them. He gripped her hand harder. “I’m sorry your house is gone, Colby.”

“I know.” She smiled. “I can replace a house. I can’t replace you.”

He gave her a gentle tug and she slid over to the edge of the hospital bed, careful not to jar him too much. “I know how much it meant to you, what a haven it was for you.”

“You are all I need now.” Colby brushed a finger lightly down his bruised, broken features. He laid her head lightly on his chest. She felt it rise and fall softly with his steady breathing. “I love you, Mace.”

The movement of his chest hesitated under her cheek, and a moment later it surged and continued on with its soothing rhythm. He brushed her hair away from her face with his free hand. “How soon can I get out of this place? I’m sick of hospitals.”

“Soon,” she answered, but truthfully she didn’t know. He had a lot of healing to do before he could ever build their home. *Their* home.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Go?”

“Yes, where do you want to build our new house and our new life?”

“Anywhere, Mace. Anywhere you go, I’ll follow.”

He chuckled softly, then groaned in pain. “No, I think you’ve got it backward. I’ll follow you. To the ends of the earth, if necessary.”

Colby sighed as Mace tightened his fingers around hers. He lifted them to his mouth and pressed them ever so lightly to his lips.

She leaned over and laid her cheek against his, careful not to hurt him. She needed him, needed to feel him against her. God, she loved him and she never wanted to let him go.

“You never answered my question,” he murmured in her ear.

Question. What question?

Oh.

“Yes.” She laughed through her tears. “Yes, yes, *yes!*”

The End

About the Author:

I started writing around 13 years old and found it great therapy. Over my high school years I wrote my first novel, a young adult novel that was pretty raw about a young girl growing up in a gang. That manuscript is now forever lost (and that might be a good thing). During this time I read loads of books, most of them historical romances and category romances (contemporary). I fell in love with the genre. And have been writing ever since...

I now concentrate on the erotic romance genre. Why? Because it's a blast. There's nothing like a hot, hot romance to get your juices flowing. But I still like the HEA (Happily Ever After) ending.

I currently reside in South-central Pennsylvania with my dog and the love of my life (yes, he has two legs, not four). I am an emergency dispatcher and have my AA and BS in Criminal Justice.

My first published erotica piece was a fantasy short story in the July 2006 issue of *Playgirl*, which was titled “The Hot Ride.”

My website is at <http://www.jeannestjames.com> where you'll find info about my presence on MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and my blog. I update it when I have a chance because I'd rather be writing hot stories.

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