



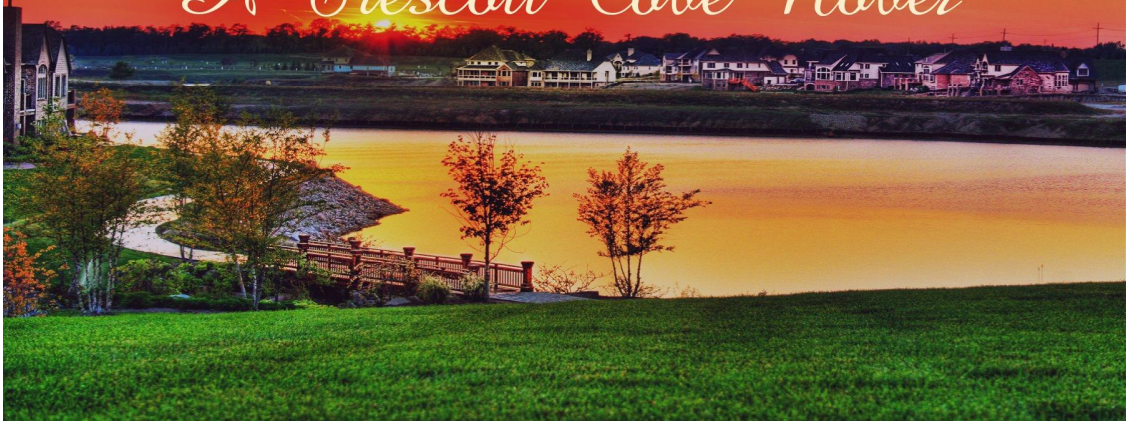
Break Every Rule

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A Trescott Cove Novel



Break Every Rule

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A Satin Notes Free Novel

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Dedication

To our fans who have supported us. We give you this free read in appreciation for all your support.

Aliyah, McKenna and Taige

Prologue

Silently, she waited for the man to pass her, then came out from behind the tree and snuck up behind him. She slid her knife between his ribs and up. She caught him as he fell, so he wouldn't make a sound, and pulled him back. Lowering him to the floor, she gritted her teeth as she ignored the pain of her own injuries and the blood soaking her side. As she stood, a lightheaded feeling swept over her. She took a breath and clamped down on the need to pass out.

A sound made her look to her left. The glint of a gun made her heart stall. Quickly, she flipped back just as the bullets let loose. Cursing her one moment of weakness, she blocked out the pain and silently ran through the trees, then slid behind some brush. Heart racing, she knelt in the foliage and let her mind go blank. They had been ambushed, and she had sent her coordinates to the backup teams. But she knew it wouldn't matter. She needed to take care of them herself.

Dark chocolate eyes narrowed. On silent feet, she stood and moved through the foliage, slow and steady, until she was behind the man with the gun. The man didn't move at all to betray his position. He was good, but she was better.

Dropping to her belly, she crawled toward him. The man tensed and turned. It was too late. She was on him and fought him for his weapon. He was strong and punched her in her already throbbing side. Ignoring the pain, she pivoted and lashed out with her leg. The man stumbled back. She used it to her advantage, taking her knife out of her hip sheath and throwing it. It embedded between his eyes. He fell backward, dead. Before he landed on the ground, she had melted into the brush and waited to see if there were any more. One by one, she picked them off, battling her weakness and pain. She clamped down on the fury bubbling inside of her. After some time, she realized there were no more.

Standing, she staggered back toward the river where they had been ambushed. Oblivious to the dark night, she trudged on for miles, running, walking, and crawling.

Finally, she saw the glint of the river and, slowly dragging herself to her feet, walked over to where she had hidden him.

"Cameron, I'm back. They're dead. We just have to wait for help." She knew she wouldn't make it. The loss of blood from her side told her that, by the time help arrived, it would be too late.

But at least he would live. She had made sure to hide him before she led the men away. She stilled, realizing it was silent. Too silent. Cautiously, she uncovered him. His caramel skin was pale and cold. His green-eyed gaze had a film. Hand shaking, she reached out to touch him. A sound whispered from her right. Turning, she saw the man sneaking up on her. The man took in her condition, the blood and paleness.

He smirked and came toward her, brandishing a knife. She saw the glint of the topaz in the hilt and knew it was her knife, the one she had left with Cameron to protect himself. Closing her eyes briefly, she growled low in her chest, and then her eyes flashed open. The man paused, fear leaking over his face. Smiling coldly, she got up and advanced on him. The man stumbled back, fearful. She showed no mercy. In quick precision, she sliced at him. The man roared and rushed her. She twisted, grabbed him, and twisted his body into hers. She raked her knife across his throat. The warm gush of blood flew into the air. She grabbed her knife out of his hand and let him drop. A continuous growl filtered out of her lips. She padded back to Cameron and dropped beside him.

With a swift movement, she embedded the knife into the ground beside his body. With gentle hands, she uncovered him and pulled his body into her lap. She growled as she cradled and rocked him. Throwing her head back, she screamed in pain and agony. The jungle went silent except for her screams. After some time, the screams turned to whimpers.

"I love you. God, Cameron, I love you," she mumbled over and over again.

Weakness made her fall sideways. She glanced at the knife laying next to her hand as she curled against him and held him. Darkness claimed her.

When consciousness fluttered into her again, she grabbed her knife and spun, resting it against the neck of the man who'd crept up on them. The man watched her out of calm aqua eyes. He moved. She pressed down, drawing blood. He stilled.

"We're your rescue," a voice purred.

She could swear his lips hadn't moved. Blood loss made her unsure what was real. The man moved his hand slowly and pulled down on his Velcro on his sleeve, showing her the emblem of the rescue forces. Her hand shook, but she held her knife on his throat.

"Captain, who are you? Who do you serve for, and do you know where you are?" he asked.

She knew they were standard questions, but resented them. She jerked her knife away from his throat and answered.

"Captain Dominique Rule. My unit is classified, and we're in the Congo."

The man nodded and asked, "Are there any more survivors?"

Survivors. I'm dead already. Dominique looked down at Cameron, and the pain of his loss almost made her pass out. Steeling herself, she looked back into aqua eyes and replied, "All my men were killed."

The man nodded, his face grim. He motioned to someone over her shoulder. Dominique turned and saw two other men come out of the brush behind her.

Surfer dude and bad ass, she thought. Dominique glanced back at the man in front of her, and his aqua gaze was intense. *Most dangerous*, she added about him. The men looked as if they were related.

"Are you able to walk, Captain Rule?" the man asked.

Dominique raised her head and looked him in the eye. "Yes."

Gritting her teeth, she stood and wavered. The man stood beside her and waited for her to get her bearings. After a few moments, Dominique nodded. She glanced at the other two and saw the bad ass had Cameron slung over his shoulder.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The man next to her replied. "Heller Sidorov." He gestured at the surfer dude. "Killian Sidorov." Then the bad ass. "Dane Sidorov."

His introductions confirmed that, as she suspected, they were related. She noted he hadn't given her a rank, and she didn't ask for one. His not doing so told her all she needed to know. He didn't want her to know what agency he worked for. Dominique nodded, and Heller looked at the others. He took the lead. They set off at a brisk pace. Dominique knew she wouldn't last.

It doesn't matter. I'm dead anyway. Cameron is dead and so am I.

She heard a sound. Instinct took over. In a quick move, she slid from behind Heller, turned, and threw her knife into the trees. A cry followed, and a body fell from the trees. It happened in seconds. Dominique could feel them looking at her. She looked at Heller. The heat in his eyes confused her. She looked away, and the one he'd called Killian had a weird grin on his face. The other, the one he'd called Dane, had the same burning hunger she saw in Heller's gaze. The men exchanged a look she didn't understand.

"What?" Dominique demanded.

The men didn't reply. Heller started forward again. Killian gestured for her to follow. She scowled and went after Heller. As the miles accumulated, Dominique felt each step, but stubbornly refused to say anything. She knew she would die, but would be damned if she would let them carry her. They reached a clearing and started across. The sound of gunfire barely registered in her brain, and then she felt the bullets rip into her body. Sound became suspended as she the force of it threw her backward into the air. She waited for the hard crunch of the ground, but it never came.

Strong arms caught her, and then she felt the air on her face. Dominique tried to make sense of what she was seeing. They were moving too fast for him to be running. It couldn't be. She glanced up into the aqua gaze of Heller Sidorov. He looked at her.

"You won't die today, Dominique Rule. You saved my life, and I'll save yours." Heller's tone brooked no argument.

Dominique stifled her laugh. Like he had a say on her dying. Her breath rattled in her chest. She felt the blood choking her.

You'll live. I'll accept nothing less, Heller's voice whispered.

We will accept nothing less, another voice added.

You're now under our protection, Dominique, a third voice said.

The sounds of the voices seemed to echo in her mind. She knew it was Dane and Killian who'd added to what Heller said, although she hadn't heard them speak. Dominique shook her head to clear the buzzing.

Who do these arrogant bastards think they are?

Your protectors, the three voices replied.

I'm already dead, so it doesn't matter. Cameron, I'm coming to join you, my love. Inky blackness claimed her.

Chapter One

Three years later...

With a step outside the door, Dominique Rule raised her head and took in the beauty of the sunrise. As usual, all the tension she hadn't even realized she had leaked away. She smiled, pulled the door closed behind her, checked to see it was locked, and stepped further outside. Slowly, she walked across her back deck taking in the lush greenery before her. The sun glinted off the lake behind her house, making it look even more inviting. The few trees at the two edges of the lake rustled lightly in the early morning wind.

Dominique walked down the stairs, off her deck, and onto the ground. She gave one more stretch, put the earphone for her I-Pod in her ears, and then set off jogging. She had already stretched in the house. She glanced once more at the lake, then focused forward on her run. In seconds, she was in the groove of running. A small smile of happiness curled her lush lips.

The beauty and solitude is why I bought the house over two years ago. That, and the privacy it affords me.

She reached the path she usually took, the one that went around the lake she shared only with one other house on the other side. That house had been empty for as long as she'd lived here, and Dominique was grateful she didn't have to be polite to neighbors. Reaching the house in question, she slowed and took in the back of the massive structure. It was a similar raised ranch style house, like her own, but way bigger. The house was done in a pale yellow and burnt orange. There were seven bedrooms, each with its own individual bath, and five suites of room which included baths and sitting rooms, spread out on the third and fourth floors. The second floor was the master's floor, with a massive suite and office, gym, study, and library. Dominique

had looked at the house when she was searching for a place to buy, but decided it was too big for her. It was a house for a family.

A shaft of pain filled her. A house like that one would be a painful reminder that she wouldn't have a family. She had chosen the house on the other side of the lake and made it her own. She loved her house, which was pale yellow and deep red. The third floor had three bedrooms, each with its own individual bath, and one suite of rooms which included a bath and a sitting room. The second floor was the master's floor, with a massive suite which included an office, gym, study, and library. She'd had the extra space renovated to make an in-house shooting range. Dominique gave one last look to the house, then speed up to finish her run. Reaching a set of trees, Dominique put on a burst of speed, just like she usually did going around the corner.

She gasped as she hit something solid. The solid mass grunted, and hard hands grabbed her as they fell. Absently, she noted the hands shielded her head from hitting the ground. Instinctively, Dominique pushed, and they rolled over. She rested her hand on her side, where she had her knife hidden. Breathing hard, Dominique raised her head and shook some hair that had come loose back out of her eyes. She stilled, and her eyes widened as they met heavily lashed eyes so dark grey that they were almost black. His gaze amused, the man lay still below her as she studied him. His chocolate skin had a light sheen of sweat. A broad forehead, high cheekbones, and firm chin were put together to form a strong, handsome masculine face.

Oh God., I want to suck on his full, smiling lips. They're begging for it.

Dominique's head cleared at the thought. She stiffened and moved to pull away. The man tightened his hands around her arm, holding her in place. Warily, she gripped her knife handle.

"Hey, are you okay?" His voice was a deep, rumble bass that seemed to resonate through her body.

Dominique stilled a shudder and looked at him. The concern in his gaze made her heart beat faster. The man raised an eyebrow, then looked at her face and loose hair. A small smile curled his lips, and he met her eyes once again.

"Can you speak? Or did my knocking you over harm you in some way?"

His hands started to run across her body gently. Dominique stiffened and jerked back. Again, he stilled her by gripping her arms. She tested his hold and found he was strong. She looked into his eyes, then down at where his hands held her arms, then back at face.

"Let me go," she said firmly.

The man seemed to get more amused, and before she could even blink, he shifted her off him, stood, and pulled her up behind him.

He's moves fast. Dominique watched him narrowly.

The man cocked his head to the side and watched her. The silence between them lengthened, and then the man laughed softly.

"Do you always give people that cold 'don't mess with me' look, or am I just special?" he asked.

Dominique bit back a snort. He was blunt. She liked that.

"Maybe," she replied.

What are you doing? No, no flirting with the man who knocked you over.

The man threw back his head and laughed. His eyes sparkling, he glanced at her and ran his hands down her arms. Dominique jumped, startled to realize he was still touching her. She took a step back. The man stilled her again.

"You're still touching me," Dominique growled.

"I know," the man replied in a growl of his own.

Dominique stared at him, and then pointedly glared at his hand before returning her gaze to his. The man didn't even seem fazed, just continued to hold her arms. She could easily break his hold, but for some reason she wasn't doing that. The man ran his hands over her arms, then her sides. His hand stilled when he found the knife, and there was a question in his eyes, but he didn't ask. He just kept touching her.

"Is there a reason you're feeling me up?" Dominique asked drily.

The man laughed another of those sexy laughs and continued to touch her. He knelt and checked her legs; his hands didn't go any higher than her knees. Dominique

sighed. He looked up at her with a wicked look in his eyes and a smile on his lips. The man stood quickly. Dominique stepped back, startled at his swiftness once again. She was used to people moving fast, but this man unnerved her.

"Yeah, there's a reason," the man said.

"Huh?"

His lips twitched as he spoke again. "A reason I'm feeling you up." The man chuckled. "Well, actually, I'm checking you for injuries. I'm a doctor."

"Really? A doctor?" Dominique was surprised. She never would have pegged him for a doctor.

"Yep. Doctor Taggart Blade at your service, Ms. -" He stopped.

Dominique continued to study him, debating why Dr. Taggart Blade had such a strange effect on her. He stood silently and waited for her to supply her name.

"Umm... Dominique Rule," she said.

"Nice to meet you, Dominique Rule. Well, nice to run into you, anyway." He gave her a smile.

Dominique couldn't help but laugh. Something about Dr. Taggart Blade was endearing.

"So, Dr. Blade, do you treat all your patients with such a tender touch?"

His eyes widened, and then he laughed again. Dominique knew she'd surprised him. She was blunt herself.

"Call me Taggart. And yeah, patients are usually very skittish and need a tender touch to calm down." He chuckled, then continued. "So, Ms. Rule, what brings you out this way?"

"It's Dominique. And I should be asking you that question. After all, you're the one trespassing," she countered.

Taggart had the same amused look on his face. He rocked back on his heels. Dominique's eyes dropped, and she bit her lip to stifle a moan as she took in his tight tee-shirt stretched over a broad chest, and scandalously short shorts that showed his

rock hard thighs. She had been avoiding looking, knowing how delicious it had felt all pressed up against her when they were on the ground.

Have mercy! I want to be his shirt. No, no--the shorts. Hell I want to be all of it.

Cursing herself, she dragged her eyes away from his body and back to his face. The hunger in his gaze made her shudder lightly, and she shifted to cover the involuntary movement. She didn't want him to know the effect he was having on her. It wouldn't matter that she always avoided entanglements. Dr. Taggart Blade was one big walking entanglement if she ever saw one. He watched her move, then licked his lips.

"What are you doing here on my lake?" she asked.

Her voice came out harsh. Taggart raised one eyebrow, and his look clearly said he knew she was attracted. She braced herself for his bluntness.

"You're lake? Funny, since I live here, which would make it my lake." Taggart gestured toward the house behind them.

That surprised her. Dominique glanced back at the house, just visible through the trees. She saw what she had missed before. The deck had furniture, and the windows of the house had curtains. She turned back to Taggart.

"You're living here? I live across the lake." Dominique waved her hand in the direction of her house.

She didn't let her disappointment show. With a house that big, he had to be married.

"You're my new neighbor? Good. So it's *our* lake," Taggart said.

She thought she heard an emphasis on *our*, but that was foolish. He was married. Dominique didn't want to think on why that bothered her. It was time to go.

"Well, nice meeting you, neighbor. I'll make sure to change my running path so I don't disturb you and your wife-" Dominique cursed herself and changed what she was saying. "I mean your family."

She nodded at him, then walked around him to go.

"Dominique!" he called.

She cursed herself again, then turned back to him. Taggart smiled that wicked grin again, then spoke.

"You don't have to change your running path. Actually, I'd like permission to run around your side of the lake, too. Would that work?"

She nodded, keeping her mouth shut since she seemed to have blurt-out-what-you're-thinking disease.

Taggart cocked his head to the side and studied her. She refused to shift under his perusal.

"As for my wife, since I don't have one, you won't disturb us." He walked over to her and ran his finger down her cheek. "I'll be seeing you soon, Dominique Rule."

It sounded like a promise. He turned and walked away. That's when Dominique noticed his hair. It was in a single tight braid which hung down his back, topping just below his shoulder blades. She clenched her hands. She was sucker for long hair on a man. Taggart glanced back at her over his shoulder and winked, then continued on. Realizing she was standing there like an idiot, Dominique turned and walked away.

Oh no, Blade, we will not be seeing each other soon, Dominique vowed.

While she walked, she tried to understand what had just happened. Usually, she wasn't attracted to anyone, or if she was, she shrugged it off and went on her way. Taggart Blade was dangerous to her control, and she didn't like it one bit.

You're such a liar. You liked how he made your heart race. You haven't felt that way in a long time, her inner voice mocked.

Shut the hell up. You don't know what you're talking about, she countered.

Liar, liar, panties all wet, her inner voice sang continuously.

Growling, Dominique continued on. She stopped, looked up, and cursed. She had passed her house. She turned back and went up on her deck and to her back door. She paused in her open doorway and glanced back at the house across the lake. A figure stood on the deck looking her way. She knew it was him. He raised his hand and waved. She returned the gesture, then continued into her house. Closing the door, she leaned against it.

"What am I going to do?" Dominique's voice echoed in the kitchen.

A soft woof made her look down. She dropped to her knees and looked into the parti-colored--half brown and half blue--eyes of her pure white Siberian Husky.

"Giada, you're so right. Avoid him at all costs." She rubbed the dog's lush coat.

Another soft woof sounded, and then a tongue licked her hand. Dominique laughed and shifted to her other, identical Siberian Husky.

"Racquel. Hey, girl. Giada is giving me some good advice." She glanced at her watch. "Oh, we have to get going so I can go to the office, then I have to go to my appointment with -- " she tried to remember the doctor's name she was going to see. She shrugged and continued. "my new gynecologist. I can't even remember the name now. I'll have to look it up later." She looked at Giada and Racquel. "Then I have to take you to your appointment."

The dogs whined, then took off running into the house. Dominique stood and laughed.

"Come back here, you two. I know you liked Dr. Almud, but he's retiring. I should have gotten a vet here in Trescott Cove for you years ago instead of traveling two hours to your vet. Hell, I'm getting a new doc closer to home too and I'm dealing with it."

She walked deeper into the house, glancing into rooms that held their favorite hiding places, looking for them. Reaching the atrium, Dominique got down on her knees and looked under the padded couch-like bench. Giada and Racquel's eyes glowed out at her. They woofed softly. Dominique shook her head.

"You all are so spoiled. " She chuckled. "Come out of there, my babies. I promise, if you don't like Dr. Simmons, we'll get you another vet."

They woofed again and came out. They draped over her lap, one on each side, giving her pitiful looks. Dominique rolled her eyes.

"You are so not fooling me, or getting me to cancel the appointment. Come on. We have a lot to do before your appointment." Dominique stood and walked back to the door.

She glanced back at the dogs standing by the chair. She snapped her fingers and they came to stand behind her. Walking back the way she came, she went upstairs to get ready. An image of dark grey eyes filled her mind.

"Go away, Taggart. I'm not getting involved with you."

She pushed the image away and got ready for the day.

* * * * *

Taggart Blade watched as Dominique disappeared inside her house. Clenching his hand over the rail, he tried to calm his pounding heart.

Where's your usual reserved cool, Tag?

He didn't know, but one look into Dominique's chocolate brown eyes and he wanted to get to know her a lot better. He had finally moved into his house last night. For years, he'd had his eyes on 1815 Calblis Lane, or the house by the lake as the locals of Trescott Cove called it. He could have bought it at anytime, but kept telling himself he shouldn't. He'd grown up in Trescott Cove and remembered the parties that Ms. Liane had thrown here for years. Ms. Liane had owned both houses, using the other one for the overflow of any of her visiting families. Ms. Liane had invited the whole town to her parties, and it was always fun. When she'd died ten years ago, her family had put the houses on the market. They were reasonably priced, but the main house, which he now owned, was so big that most people felt it was for a family. And most of them didn't have families large enough to fill it.

Although he had no wife or children yet, he wanted the house. With his siblings and other family members, he could fill the house many times over. Thank God he didn't have to. His family all had homes scattered throughout Trescott Cove. Almost two and a half years ago, he'd heard that an outsider had bought the smaller house out at the lake. He hadn't met her, at least not until today. Taggart smiled. He was glad he'd finally stopped second guessing himself and bought the house. His delectable neighbor made it a great investment. He remembered the sensuous feel of her body against his

as they fell. He frowned as he thought of how she had rolled them so she was on top. He'd wondered why, but then it all went away when he got a look at her eyes the color of sweet chocolate. Eyes that were wary and interested. He was a man who'd learned to read body reactions. And Dominique was defiantly interested, but leery.

Her long, curly hair had shaded her eyes until she had shook it back out of her face. It had taken everything he had not to reach out and grab her hair and sink his hands into it. The scent of strawberries in her hair had almost driven him crazy. The rest of her was just as enticing. Her flawless sienna skin flowed over an exquisite, heart-shaped face with high sculpted cheekbones and full, lush lips, and firm chin. From how she was pressed against him, he could feel all her curves. His hold on her arms let him know she was muscled. He had checked her to see if she was okay.

When she had demanded he let her go in that smoky voice, his cock had come to attention. He knew it was time to get up before he embarrassed himself. He had stood and helped her up. That was when he realized she was close in height to his own six-foot-two. The surprise in her gaze was sexy. When he had asked her about the cold look she was giving him, she had responded the way he liked it--blunt and without any sugarcoating. Usually, it took people a while to get used to his bluntness, and some didn't know how to take it. Yet Dominique hadn't hesitated at all. As he was checking her again, he wondered at the knife on her waist, but didn't ask. Her curiosity and questions, and then the smile that revealed she had dimples on each side of her mouth... his knees had almost buckled. He wanted her badly.

It was weird. He usually was the most reserved and contained member of his family. They called it affable and quiet. His mother said he was her thinking baby. He thought before he did anything. That's why it took him so long to buy the house he'd always wanted. The rest of the family was more outgoing. Yet, with Dominique, he found he couldn't help but want to make her smile or laugh. Which she had done. His cock got harder just thinking of it. She had studied his body, and the hunger in her gaze made him want to kiss her. He had resisted, although it had taken all his control. It wasn't his style to move that fast with anyone.

Taggart chuckled as he remembered her comment about a wife. Dominique had blanked her face and acted like she wasn't attracted. She might put on a front like she didn't want him, but her body betrayed her. The racing pulse in her neck, her breathing, the shudder that racked her body...it all pointed to her wanting him just as much as he wanted her.

What are you going to do about it?

Taggart didn't know, but first he had to think on why he had such a primal reaction to Dominique. Until he sorted it out in his mind, he would keep away from Dominique Rule. He cast one last look at the house across the lake, then went inside to get ready for work.

Later that day, thoughts of sexy chocolate eyes filled his mind. Sighing, Taggart threw his pen on his desk and spun his chair around to face the window that looked out on Caspain Avenue. The street outside was busy with people passing by his one way glass. He could see them, but they couldn't see him. Taggart liked that watch scene outside his office for even a few moments in his usually hectic day. A knock sounded on the partially closed door.

"Doc, your next patient is here. Room Seven," called Kelin Matters, his nurse.

Turning back to his desk, he stood and went to the door. He opened it and looked at Kelin's smiling face.

"Daydreaming again, you slacker," Kelin teased.

"You know it. No work to do." Taggart opened his empty hands and pouted.

Kelin laughed and rolled her eyes. "I know better. You would sleep here in your office if we didn't kick you out at the end of the day."

"What would I ever do without you?" Taggart chuckled, and they walked down the hall together.

"You'd be so disorganized, patients would run amok," Kelin answered promptly.

They stopped in front of Room Seven.

"Very true. I'd be lost without you and Silvia keeping me straight."

Kelin chuckled and handed him the file. "We'll need to do a blood workup I'll go get the things to take the blood panels."

Taggart nodded as she left. He pushed open the door as he opened the file.

"Good afternoon, Ms. - " Taggart sputtered to a stop as he read the name.

He looked up into Dominique Rule's startled chocolate brown eyes that had been in his thoughts all day. Taggart studied her. This morning, she had been in a cute little jogging suit, but now she was all business woman. Her dark gold jacket over a pale yellow shirt set off her sienna skin beautifully. The skirt was the same color as the jacket, and she was sitting so it showed off her sexy knees. Strappy sandals that matched her jacket and skirt covered delicate feet. The pale polish on her toes made him want to nibble on them. He raised his eyes to her face again. Her hair was pinned back, letting him see all those lovely angles of her face.

"Hello, Dominique," he said.

She shivered, then stood, raising her chin. He bit the inside of his lips as her skirt fell just above her knees, leaving much of her toned legs bare for his eyes. She looked even better standing up. He wanted to bite right at the rounded point of her chin, then lick it.

"Nice to see you again," he said. "We're meeting sooner than I expected. It's a pleasure, a real pleasure, to see you again so soon. "

It looked like avoiding her hadn't been in fate's plan, and Taggart wasn't one to question fate.

Chapter Two

Taggart saw the surprise in her eyes then they narrowed.

"You said you're a doctor," she accused.

"I am a doctor. I just didn't say what type of doctor." Taggart stifled a smile knowing she probably wouldn't appreciate it.

"You're a vet. An animal doctor not a people doctor." Two barks interrupted her. She looked behind her and said, "Yeah, I know you think you're human." She looked back at him rolling her eyes.

Taggart chuckled. He looked at his patients. The two pure white Siberian Huskies looked at him out of leery parti-colored - half brown and half blue – eyes.

He put down their file on the desk and dropped his tone to the soft voice he used with animals as he approached them. "Oh, you all are so beautiful. No need to be skittish. I'm Doc Tag." Reaching the table he held out his hand and waited for them to smell him.

The two Huskies looked at each other then Dominique.

"He's okay girls," she said grudgingly. "Although he's not Dr. Simmons as we were expecting." She paused. "Unless he also lied about his name."

"Laurn - Dr. Simmons was called out of town unexpectedly I'm taking over her patients until she gets back. So I never lied about anything." He glanced at her a smile on his face.

Dominique made a rude noise. He didn't say anything else turning back to the Huskies. They still looked at him cautiously. He didn't move just waited patiently for them to decide what they wanted to do. The one on the right cocked her head and studied him. She nodded and put her head down on the table. Taggart thought she looked like a queen granting him leave to kiss her hand. He stepped closer to her and petted her head. He quickly checked her over as he stroked her. The Husky's coat was soft and silky. The dog whined softly and leaned deeper into his hand.

Wish your owner was would ask me to touch her too. And kiss her. He looked at Dominique out of the corner of his eyes.

She was studying him closely as he touched her dog. A bark captured his attention. He glanced at the other dog on the left who had come closer. The dog put up her paw. He chuckled and took her paw and shook it. The dog sat back and studied him. Taggart stroked her nose. The Husky barked then licked his hand. He ran his hands over her body checking her out also.

"What's your names?"

"The shameless one laying down to your right is Giada. The more cautious but licker is Racquel," Dominique answered.

"They're beautiful. Do they ever run with you?" he asked as he gently had Racquel lay down and checked her feet. He also checked Giada's.

"Yeah, usually. They were feeling lazy this mor-" Dominique trailed off.

He glanced at her from under his eyelids. There was a frown on her face and she was biting her lip. He removed his hand from Giada and clenched his fist to resist the temptation of licking where she bit it.

"Good, maybe I, Mario and Flay can join you ladies."

"Who's Mario and Flay?" Dominique looked confused

"My dogs, they're Huskies like these two. Except they are males with a black and white coat and ice blue eyes." He chuckled and feeling more under control he continued his exam.

The dogs let him look them over without any squirming. They were very well behaved. Kelin came into the room with the shots. He stepped back and read through the last notes in their file from their previous vet. He glanced at Kelin she handed him the shots. Taggart checked them over and made a few notes in the file. He handed one shot back to Kelin then turned and went back to the table. Dominique had moved to stand closer to the dogs. She eyed the needles.

"The notes from Dr. Almud said they are due their shots," he said.

Dominique nodded still looking at the needles. Taggart bit his lip not to laugh. She was hovering like a mother hen. It was cute but he wouldn't tell her that. From the brief meeting he knew she wouldn't appreciate it and take offense.

"I'll give Giada her's first." He moved to Giada.

Dominique went quickly to Giada's side. Taggart kept his face bland. Quickly he found a spot and administered the shot. Dominique murmured to Giada and stroked her fur. Taggart turned, took a step and handed the empty syringe to Kelin then took the other. Kelin winked and smiled. He turned to Racquel and Dominique was next to her stroking her fur watching him. He repeated the process with Racquel. Dominique murmured and stroked. Finished he turned and gave the other syringe to Kelin. Kelin bustled out. Taggart went back to the desk and made some more notes then looked at Dominique.

"They are very well behaved and in good health. Since you were here to see Dr. Simmons whenever you come in again you can set up appointments to see her."

The dogs barked. Dominique shook her head then looked at her dogs her look unsure. She took a breath then sighed.

"You're so spoiled." She said to the dogs before glancing at him. "Since we've already seen you, we'll like you to be our doctor."

The dogs barked again and gave him canine grins. Dominique gritted her teeth and glared at the dogs.

"Spoiled rotten," she muttered.

The dogs came closer to her on the table and butted her in the side and shoulder. Dominique made a humph sound.

"Well," she said combatively.

Taggart didn't know if he wanted to kiss her or sigh.

Sighing since he wasn't sure if he could stop kissing her once he started.

He rolled his eyes. "Whenever you need to see me make an appointment."

The dogs looked smug while Dominique looked pained. Closing the file Taggart picked up the file and tapped it on his hand.

"So, when can we schedule a run for all of us?" he asked.

Dominique stiffened. Turning she picked up her bag and the leashes. Without her saying a word the dogs jumped off the table. They flanked her one on each side. Quickly she bent and snapped the leashes on the dogs. Dominique stood and walked towards the door. She stopped, opened it and went outside the door. Taggart followed her. Dominique sauntered down the hall her high heeled sandals clicking in the hall.

"Dominique," he called.

Dominique looked at him over her shoulder. Her dark chocolate brown eyes steady.

"I prefer to run alone," she stated firmly.

Dominique turned and continued down the hall. Taggart leaned against the open doorway.

"Preferences are made to be changed Dominique," he replied.

Dominique stiffened and stopped. She threw him another look over her shoulder. Taggart's cock hardened at the challenge in her eyes.

"I only change my mind when it is convenient. My convenience. See ya Doc Tag." Dominique strode down the hall then turned the corner disappearing out of sight.

Taggart laughed. Dominique Rule was a spitfire and he liked that. He walked down the hall and around the corner to his office to get ready for his next appointment. He stopped in front of his door as Kelin came down the hall towards him.

"Your next two appointments rescheduled," Kelin said.

Mentally he flipped through his appointments. "They were the only two left this morning. "

"Yep. You're clear until 2 o'clock," Kelin stated.

He nodded, walked into his office and behind his desk. Taking a seat he thought of the paperwork he had to do. He shook his head. He wasn't in the mood for paperwork.

"So what do you want for lunch?" Kelin asked.

Taggart jumped not realizing she was still there. He thought of what he wanted. Making a quick decision he stood, shrugged out of his coat and picked up his briefcase.

"I'm going out to run some errands and will grab lunch," he replied as he walked towards the door.

The surprise was clear on Kelin's face. He usually ordered lunch in and didn't leave the office until he was all done for the day. Taggart smiled at her and chuckled her playfully under the chin.

"Hey, I can be spontaneous," he teased.

"Yeah, right and a glacier moves like a locomotive." Kelin laughed.

"It does, I didn't know that." Taggart wiggled his eyebrows.

Kelin laughed. He chuckled continuing out the door then down the hall a little. Taggart stopped at the door that led to the back lot of the practice and glanced at Kelin.

"If you need me call me on the cell."

"I know, now go on and have fun." Kelin made a shooing movement of her hands.

"No wild parties." He shook his finger at her.

Kelin reached around him and opened the door. She pushed at his shoulder.

"Go on."

"I'm going," Taggart said.

He stepped outside and the bright sun blinded him momentarily. Swearing softly he reached into the pocket of his case and took out his shades putting them on. He glanced back at Kelin and waved. She waved and started to close the door.

"Whoo hooo, party." Kelin laughed as closed the door.

Taggart chuckled and walked over to his dark blue SUV. Going around to the driver's side he stopped then swore. Stepping forward he glanced at the deep gorges in the side of the car, the broken driver's side window and busted side mirror. He looked around the open parking area then onto Spencer Avenue. People were walking up and down the sidewalk while cars were driving along the busy street. Taggart looked back at his busted car. Between the times he came in a few hours ago and now someone had

messed with his car. He should call the cops. Taggart glanced up at the beautiful day and didn't want to waste the time it would take. He wasn't stupid to get into the car without checking it over first though. Putting down his bag he circled the car and checked it over. He got down on the floor and looked under the undercarriage. Taggart stood and dusted off his hands.

Sure that it was safe he pressed his button to open the doors. Getting in Taggart was glad his first stop was someplace he could get his car fixed and wasn't too far away. He glanced the side window and side mirror. Starting the SUV he backed out of his space and went to the exit. Pausing he checked traffic then merged with the cars on Spencer Avenue. In seconds he made the right onto Caspain Avenue and drove for ten minutes. Pulling into the parking bay he glanced at Gold SUV that was pulling out. He blinked and looked again. The person had already pulled out into traffic and was too far away for him to see.

You need to get Dominique off your mind. You're seeing her all over now.

A knock on the side of the car made him jump. He pressed the button and rolled down the passenger side window.

"What the hell did you do to your car?" Hancock Blade, his brother demanded.

Taggart got out of the car and waited for him to come join him. Hancock came around the car and stood beside him, his hands on his hips. Hancock frowned and studied the car then looked at him.

"Who the hell did you piss off? Where did it happen? Did you call the cops? I'm surprised Ulrich would let you come here without him," Hancock demanded.

"If I can get a word in. I didn't piss anyone off. I was at the office. Probably some teens being stupid. And I didn't call Ulrich." Taggart refused to feel guilty.

Hancock gave him a look then unhooked his phone from his belt and walked to the front of the car. Taggart followed him.

"Bu-" Taggart stopped what he was about to say when Hancock put up his finger in warning and gave him the patented big brother look.

Taggart leaned against the hood.

"Rich we need you here at my garage." Hancock gave him another look. "My brother's car was messed at his office." Hancock chuckled. "No, not Rigger. It's Tag." Hancock looked at him again. "Yeah I expected better of him also. Okay see you in a few."

Hancock closed his phone and put it away. He crossed his arms over his broad chest and stared at Taggart. Taggart refused to let him make him feel guilty.

"That doesn't work anymore."

"Baby brother - , " Hancock started.

Taggart cut him off. "You're only three years older than me. You're the sib right before me. Hell you aren't even the oldest and I'm not even the youngest."

"Don't matter you're still younger than me. So you're the baby brother. Just like I'm the baby brother to Alton and the others," Hancock replied.

Taggart sighed and looked at his brother with similar features to his and height. It was more habit to protest being called baby brother than anything. It was the same argument they had whenever any of his sibs who were older called him baby brother. He didn't even know why he wasted his breath. He glanced at Hancock; he had a devilish look in his dark grey eyes. Taggart smiled knowing what was coming and it was the reason he protested. He straightened away from the car and took off in a sprint toward the garage. Hancock whooped and chased him. Taggart dodged. Hancock swore as he knocked into a rolling tool box. Laughing Taggart looked behind him. It was a mistake. Hancock tackled him. Grunting Taggart hit the floor with Hancock on top of him. Hancock grinned evilly then shifted grabbing his head. Hancock gave him a noggie.

"Say you're the baby brother," Hancock taunted.

"No, get off me you big lug." Taggart rocked up trying to break his hold.

They rolled around the floor knocking over various tool bins and other things. Hancock was laughing like a lunatic. Taggart grunted. They rolled outside the open bay garage door. Hancock held him down laughing.

"Say it."

"No."

"Do I need to call your mother?" A languid voice asked.

"No." They said simultaneously.

They looked up at Ulrich Willis. Ulrich pushed back his shades to the top of his head and looked at them shaking his head.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't call her about this – " He motioned to them and continued, "or that." Ulrich waved at the car.

He and Hancock disentangled and stood quickly. He and Hancock exchanged a look with perfect understanding then back at Ulrich.

"No caramel bread pudding for you," They said together their tone smug.

Ulrich winced and growled. "Don't get between a man and his pudding."

They crossed their arms over their chest and returned his look. Taggart knew if they told their sister Rissa not to give Ulrich any of the bread pudding he loved she wouldn't. Well for a price of course but she would abide by their request. Ulrich glared at them and grunted.

"You should have some respect for the law."

"Please, you usually jump in when we're playing around. You have a mean elbow jab." Taggart snorted.

"Shh... don't say that to loud. I swear your mom is clairvoyant or physic or something. She knows everything." Ulrich laughed then sobered. "So are you going to tell me what happened, Tag?" He motioned to the car.

The sound of a ringing cell phone interrupted them. They each pulled out their cells. Taggart showed them it was his. He checked the number and winced. It rang again. He answered it.

"Hello, Mom," Taggart answered.

Hancock and Ulrich eyes widened then they laughed. Ulrich mouthed, "Psychic." They walked away to his car.

Taggart listened then spoke. "Nothing, I'm at Hancock's garage." He paused. "I'm feeling okay. I didn't leave work because I was sick." His mom interrupted again. "I'm fine. I love you too. Bye." He hung up.

"Tag get your butt over here and explain," Ulrich called.

Taggart sighed and went over to them. To think his day had started so well with a look at an ebony goddess.

Maybe fate will let you see her again. Taggart snorted.

He wasn't that lucky but one could hope.

* * * * *

Dominique tapped her nails one by one slowly against the table as she stared across at the laughing woman. Hunter Willis looked at her then continued to laugh. Tears fell from Hunter's pale grey eyes wetting her thick killer lashes that surrounded her eyes. Hunter shook her head making her ponytail that fell behind her back swing over her shoulder. In a graceful movement she pushed the ponytail back behind her back. Hunter's rich café-au-lait skin was flushed with her mirth.

Hunter seemed to calm then looked at Dominique. Hunter's full lips twitched then she started to laugh again. When she had finally got Hunter out of the office to come with her to her favorite restaurant for lunch she hadn't expected to provide her entertainment too. Dominique had waited until after they had ate, paid the bill and were enjoying their teas before she had told Hunter about her day. She was glad she had, if Hunter had laughed like that as she was eating she would have choked. Dominique humped and looked around the Rissablu dining area. The restaurant they were having lunch at was very popular in Trescott. The service provided gave you an intimate feel but the restaurant was actually medium sized and hectic. The tables were spaced far enough away from each other to give you privacy. The food was excellent and the décor homey yet sophisticated.

Dominique studied the low hung stained glass lamp-like looking lights and again wondered as she usually did each time she came here where they had gotten such

a unique and beautiful lighting. It was the first thing that caught your attention. The various colors on the lamp shades were in a unique design which the table below the light matched from the tablecloths, plates and other decorative items. Each table had a different one of a kind design on the shade and the décor of the table flowed to match with it.

She looked back at the other patrons and realized they were looking their way and some had smiles on their faces. Hunter had an infectious laugh. Dominique looked back at Hunter and studied her. A stray curl had escaped Hunter's ponytail and rested against her smooth forehead. Her high sculptured cheekbones made her look aristocratic. Dimples surrounded her full laughing lips. Even if Hunter's laugh wasn't infectious, her beauty would draw attention.

Although if she mentioned it to Hunter, Hunter would claim it was Dominique who turned heads. Even their other friend, Sienna Zain tried to downplay her own beauty and claimed it was all Dominique. They both acted like they were the ugly step sisters but Dominique knew it was a lie. They all had their own form of beauty. Put them in the same room together and they were all bombarded with offers from men and women. They turned down all the offers. They all had their reasons and due to their close relationship they each knew why but didn't discuss it. This close relationship is why Dominique had chosen to discuss what had happened to her all day with Hunter. After Hunter's reaction she was rethinking telling Sienna who didn't live in Trescott but was supposed to be moving there soon. Watching her laugh at her, Dominique debated if she should kick Hunter's chair from under her.

Nah, although it would be fun, I don't want to hurt her leg.

"Are you done yet?" Dominique asked instead.

Hunter bit her lip and held up a finger for her to wait. Hunter looked away and composed herself. She looked back at Dominique and her lips twitched.

"If you laugh again I will kick you out of your chair," Dominique warned.

"You can try but are you ready for the consequences?" Hunter gave her a look.

Dominique blew out a breath and leaned back in her chair and glared at Hunter. She didn't ask what Hunter meant; she already knew that Hunter had no compunction of retaliating at the most inopportune times.

"Fine, are you finished laughing at me?" Dominique asked sarcastically.

"With you, not at you," Hunter corrected.

Dominique didn't believe her for a second. Hunter shrugged and spoke again.

"Now, Niq, you're usually level headed but come on. This hot guy who made you remember what need is like –"

"I didn't say all that." Dominique interrupted.

Hunter continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Seems to be stalking you. First you bumped into him on your run, on his property I might add. And by the way I know more happened that you are telling me." She paused and looked at Dominique.

Dominique refused to squirm or say anything else.

"Humph, be that way. Next, he's your new vet for the princesses. So he was at his job. You think you saw him at the garage you went to make an appointment to get your car checked. At the hairdresser when you went to get that special shampoo and conditioner you use. You might have seen him. Then again at the jewelers, Moore Gallery, and again at the bakery - Synclair's Sensations." Hunter ticked off a finger as she listed each point. "Now mind you. You might have seen him at all those place but you can't be sure." Hunter put her hand down and looked at Dominique.

Dominique glared. "You don't have to say it like that. I know you don't believe me and it probably wasn't him but damn each place I went today I could swear I saw him."

"Of course I believe you, Niq," Hunter said.

Dominique mouth dropped open then snapped shut. "You believe me." Her eyes narrowed. "If you believe me then why are you laughing at me?" She reached over and smacked Hunter's arm.

Hunter rubbed her arm and made an exaggerated groan. "Don't hurt me, I'm sensitive."

Dominique snorted at that whooper. Hunter was anything but.

Hunter shrugged. "It was the way you said it like you were confessing something illicit. And your expression was sort of befuddled and longing like." Hunter studied her then said softly, "I haven't seen that look on you since Cam-" Hunter stopped regret on her face for what she had almost said.

Dominique bit back a wash of pain. She couldn't think of him. She looked at Hunter and saw the understanding in her gaze. Without Hunter, Sienna and her extended family she would not have gotten through that time. Hunter reached across the table her hand resting over hers. Hunter squeezed her. Dominique turned her hand and returned the gesture. Hunter leaned back and cleared her throat.

"I know you're afraid of the feelings you have all of a sudden."

Dominique opened her mouth to interrupt. Hunter waved a hand stilling her words and continued to speak.

"Don't try to make excuses. I know Niq and it's time for you to start living again. Stop punishing yourself for living."

Dominique crossed her arms over her chest and said nothing. Hunter sighed then spoke again. "We all have demons to face Niq. Some scars are external." Hunter waved her hand to the side of her face where her hairline hid the scar on the side of her scalp. Then Hunter motioned to her body which her clothing hid her other scars then put her hand on the table. "While others are mental. They have the same power and need to be dealt with."

"Have you dealt with yours?" Dominique snapped out. She regretted it the minute she said it. Hunter face shuttered and went cold.

"Fuck you, Niq," Hunter said expressionlessly.

"Fuck you too, Nutter," Dominique returned in the same tone.

"Don't call me that." Hunter's eyes narrowed.

"Why not Nutter like butter." Dominique made a rude kissing noise.

"You know I hate you," Hunter growled.

"Please, you love the very ground I walk on." Dominique shrugged gracefully.

"God, you're arrogant." Hunter shook her head.

"Take's one to know one. Ms. Arrogant," Dominique countered.

Hunter suddenly grinned. "I know. Aren't we the bestest?"

"That is so not a word."

"So what I like it." Hunter pouted.

"See why I call you Nutter."

Hunter rolled her eyes. "Whatever. What was his name again?"

Dominique knew her too well to fall for that innocent look or casually asked question.

"I didn't say. Why?"

"Damn you're too sharp for me."

"Uh, huh, I am now spit it out." Dominique made a give me motion with her hand.

"I want to run him. He had you rattled and I want to know who this man is." Hunter smiled a baring of teeth.

Dominique groaned she should have seen this coming. Hunter had the same tools at her disposal as she had. Hunter along with Sienna and herself were owners of Cerberus Associates. Although Sienna didn't live in Trescott she ran her part of the business which was computer technology and security from her home in Chicago. Once Sienna stopped making excuses and moved to Trescott they would finally all be in the same place.

Yeah but then it would be two against one.

Dominique sighed knowing that Sienna and Hunter were relentless when they were in protective mode. Hell she was the same when it came to those she cared about. She glanced at Hunter's patient look. Although Dominique ran the investigations part of Cerberus Associates, Hunter was almost as good as her in ferreting out information.

So why haven't you run a check on him? At the thought Dominique thought on why she hadn't.

It had felt like an invasion of privacy. Taggart had her off kilter but she couldn't bring herself to initiate the check on him. If she wasn't going to do it she wouldn't let Hunter either.

"No, I'm not telling you." She shook her head.

Hunter shrugged. Dominique narrowed her eyes. Hunter didn't give up that easily.

"And no looking up his name off of property records. Don't make me block your access to the system," Dominique warned.

"Like I can't hack my way back in. Fine, I'll leave it alone for now." Hunter glared.

"Thanks for butting out of my life," Dominique replied sarcastically.

"You butt in all the time in my life 'bout time I can return the favor," Hunter quipped.

Dominique laughed knowing she was right.

Hunter chuckle then said, "So you ready to go?"

Dominique nodded and picked up her bag. She stood and looked at Hunter who hadn't moved.

"Come and help me up." Hunter grinned sheepishly.

Dominique frowned. When she had seen Hunter at the office earlier before going to her appointments that day Hunter was limping slightly no more than usual. And when she arrived Hunter was already sitting waiting for her. Dominique went around the table and held out her arm for Hunter to use to get up. Hunter gripped her arm and stood. Hunter gritted her teeth and sweat popped out on her forehead.

"What the hell did you do? You were fine earlier." Dominique frowned.

"I had a training session earlier." Hunter grinned at her fiercely.

"Did you hurt them badly?" Dominique asked rolling her eyes.

"Not much just their pride." Hunter chuckled nastily.

Hunter leaned heavily against her as they started walking to the door.

Dominique knew what that meant. Hunter was one of the best combat trainers in the

world. She was a sharpshooter, tracker, knew a variety of hand to hand fighting styles and was a master at strategic planning. Many private and military agencies sent their people for her to train. Hunter took the jobs she wanted and turned those down she didn't.

Usually there was always one or more in her classes that thought because she was a beautiful, delicate looking woman with a limp she couldn't teach them anything. Hunter had trained Dominique and she knew firsthand what Hunter was capable of. Besides that Dominique had seen Hunter in action and had almost felt sorry for those who didn't know what they were up against. Once she had seen Hunter lay out a group of men who assumed because she looked so feminine she was easy pickings. They had been in the hospital for a while.

"You've taught the doubting Thomas or Thomisian a lesson before without being like this so what happened. Hell where is your cane?" Dominique demanded.

"It wasn't that. I stepped into a hole in the sidewalk with my weak leg. After the workout it got today I couldn't catch myself and fell wrenching it. I was closer to my car to come to lunch with you and didn't want to go back for the cane." Hunter grinned sheepishly again.

"Next time go back for the cane," Dominique said.

"Yes, Mother." Hunter made kissing noises.

"You're lucky I'm not your Momma or I'd beat you."

"Wait until I'm better then you can try." Hunter grinned.

"I won't be that stupid to wait until you're better," Dominique countered.

Reaching the door she opened it and absently glanced back. She stiffened and blinked.

"What are you looking at?" Hunter said.

Dominique looked back at her and saw Hunter glancing around cautiously her hand under her dark grey jacket. She knew Hunter's hand was on her gun.

"It's him. The man I've been seeing all day. He's at the fourth table against the windows," Dominique hissed.

Hunter lowered her hand from under her jacket and looked around.

"Well if that's him. I'd be befuddled myself." A wicked smile curved Hunter's lips.

Dominique's hand clenched into a fist at Hunter's tone, she refused to call the shaft of emotion going through her jealousy. Slowly she took a breath and unclenched her hand. She glanced back at the table and frowned then looked at Hunter.

"Who? He's not there anymore or maybe I imagined him again." Dominique shook her head.

Taggart was taking up to much of her thoughts today.

"He's not that tall sexalicious man over there. " Hunter motioned then continued. "If not I'm glad. I wonder who he is. Why does he look so familiar?" Hunter frowned.

Dominique looked back at the table and the dark sienna skinned broad shouldered man. She couldn't make out his face but his hair flowed around his shoulders. It reminded her of Taggart. She shook off the images of Taggart and looked back at Hunter. She shook her head at the look on Hunter's face.

"Stop ogling the man and let's go."

"Please, he's ogle worthy material. Wish I could see his face clearer but damn that hair will give me fantasies for months. Can you imagine what he can do with that hair?" Hunter shivered.

"You're such a pervert." Dominique laughed.

Hunter looked at her and grinned devilishly. "Come on tell me you didn't entertain fantasies of your nameless man's hair."

Dominique whistled and looked away from her. Hunter smacked her arm and laughed.

"See, see." Hunter looked back at the man again then back to her. "Besides it's not like I will go over there and ask him out. "

Hunter tone was matter of fact. Dominique didn't even ask her why. Hunter was even more leery of getting involved that she was.

Is that what you're planning to do with Taggart? Dominique ignored her inner voice.

"Come on let's get out of here," Dominique said.

Hunter nodded and held tighter to her arm and they went out the door.

Taggart approached the table and glanced around at the busy dining area.

Glancing at the door he blinked and took a step towards the door.

"Tag, where you going?" A voice called.

He glanced back at the table where Darryl Blade, his brother, was waiting and then back toward the door. The woman he could swear was Dominique was gone.

Shrugging he went back to the family table. He took a seat next to Darryl.

"What's with the frown?" Darryl asked.

"Um... nothing," Taggart replied.

No way was he going to admit he kept thinking he saw a woman he had only met this morning. It was disconcerting that each place he went he saw someone who looked like her.

"So, is Rissa able to get away to join us?" Darryl asked.

Taggart shook off thoughts of Dominique and glanced at Darryl.

"She said and I quote 'how can I get away when my lazy chef decided to have lunch in the dining room with you'."

"Lazy my ass, I deserve a lunch out here for a change. Soak up the ambience. Damn, slave driver. I usually take it in my office and everybody comes and bothers me. Oh yeah I am taking a long lunch today." Darryl snapped open his menu and studied it.

Taggart knew it was all for show. Darryl knew everything on the menu. He had created it personally for Rissablu. He and their sister Rissa were joint owners of the restaurant. Rissa ran the business end and Darryl handled the food. They liked to bicker and tease each other about taking a break and switching jobs. The family knew it wouldn't happen. Darryl and Rissa were good at what they each did. Taggart closed his menu knowing what he wanted. He waited to see how long it would take someone in the kitchens to come fetch Darryl. Darryl raised his hand and in moments a waiter took their order. They chatted about the restaurant, his practice and other things. When their

food arrived they dug in to eat. Darryl had barely touched his food when one of the waiters approached and cleared his throat. Taggart stifled a laugh as Darryl swore then looked at his beef tenderloins over garlic mash potatoes. Darryl glanced at Taggart's chef salad then glared.

"You think you're funny," Darryl said.

"Gimmie," Taggart said pushing his salad to the side.

"I should take it with me to the kitchen." Darryl threatened.

"Please, it'd be a while before you even get to eat it anyway. How many times have we done this?" Taggart grinned.

"It that why you came to lunch today to get my food." Darryl demanded as he pushed his plate over in front of Taggart.

"Nope, it's a side benefit," Taggart said picking up his fork and knife cutting a piece of meat and popping it into his mouth.

Darryl humphed and stood. "Next time order what you want and save me the trouble of doing it for you."

"Why, you always pick the best meals you never get to eat and I get to enjoy them." Taggart took another bite and hummed.

"Next time I'll order liver." Darryl cuffed him upside the head.

"Don't matter I like the way you all prepare it." Taggart shrugged.

Darryl sighed. "No winning with you."

"Nope, now back to work." Taggart waved him away.

"I'm going. Next time we'll eat at your house so I won't get called away," Darryl said.

Taggart nodded and watched as he strode away disappearing into the kitchens. Returning to his meal, Taggart ate and watched the other diners. When he was done he stood and didn't try to pay. Rissa and Darryl would pitch a fit if anyone in the family tried to pay for a meal there. He made his way to the front and waved at the hostess as he left. He glanced at his watch noting the time. He had just enough time left to make his last stop before going back to work. Quickly he strode to where he had parked the

loaner SUV that Hancock had given him to use until his car was fixed. In moments he was on back on Spencer Avenue and made a right onto Caspian Avenue. Taggart grinned as he passed the other stops he had made earlier. It was convenient that he and those of his siblings who had businesses in this area were all less than a half an hour from each other.

Pulling into the parking area, Taggart shut off the car, and got out. Briefly he glanced at the various businesses in the area. All the businesses were multi level shops and other businesses with various floors. He strode toward the building that said Unveiled. Taggart opened the door and stepped inside. In a glance he took in the area closest to him and didn't see who he was looking for. Absently he noted the shop had a good many people. A woman smiled at him then looked at the teddy she was holding. Taggart looked away and avoided looking at any of the other women in the store as he strode forward. The first floor of Unveiled was for the women. It had lingere ranging from simple to sexy. Normal to extremely naughty. Taggart silently cursed himself for not avoiding this floor and taking the elevator outside that took you to one of the other floors. The second floor was the men's section, the third the custom designers floor and offices. He should have gone to the office and just called down to get her to come to him.

It was too late now. Strolling down towards the back where the sales associates were he hoped he found her there. Absently he looked around and stopped.

"No way," Taggart said.

He grinned and walked over to stand behind her.

"Fancy meeting you here," Taggart said.

Dominique whirled, her hand under her jacket. When she saw him she lowered her hand and stiffened.

"Christ, you are stalking me," she growled.

He didn't have a clue what she meant but he wasn't about to miss this opportunity. She had been on his mind all day.

"Its fate we keep meeting like this," Taggart said.

"I'd like to meet this fate," Dominique countered.

"Why?"

"So I can punch her in the eye and tell her to leave me the hell alone," Dominique grunted.

Taggart blinked then laughed. Dominique lips twitched. She glanced at him.

"Blade." She nodded and turned walking way.

"Hey, you don't have to leave on my account," Taggart called.

"Don't flatter yourself." Dominique stopped and looked over her shoulder.

His hands clenched. It was the same look she had given him in his office. It made him want to kiss her. She quirked an eyebrow and turned her head and continued on her way. Taggart watched her walk. She had an innate grace yet her walk made him think of power and sensuality.

"Tag, stop watching Niq's ass." A hand slapped his arm.

Glancing away from Dominique he looked at his sister Layla Blade. "Who?"

Layla gave him a weird look then looked at Dominique. "The woman you were ogling." She gestured to where Dominique had gone.

Layla studied him then grinned. She didn't say anything else just walked away. Taggart knew that look but couldn't resist looking to see if he saw Dominique again. She was gone. He followed Layla and found her standing by the associate desk. She snapped her cell phone closed.

"Who did you call?" Taggart demanded.

"I didn't call anyone. What's the matter with you?" Layla glared.

Taggart ran his hand through his hair. "Nothing. Promise me you won't call anyone about this."

"About what?" Layla asked looking innocent.

Taggart knew better. Her catching him looking at Dominique was cause enough to tell all their siblings and worse their parents. None of them had ever seen him checking any woman out. Yeah he might have been attracted but he was usually more controlled.

Except where Dominique is concerned.

He ignored the thought. Taggart knew if Layla told any of the rest of the family what she had seen they would all want to know what was going on and he had no answers.

"You know good and well what."

"Your ogling a woman in public or looking as if you want to kiss her senseless?"

Layla's dark grey eyes twinkled.

Taggart groaned. He hadn't realized his thoughts had been so clear on his face.

"Whichever one. Promise me."

"I won't say anything now," Layla agreed.

"Okay."

"What are you doing here anyway? The sibs said you're been making rounds. You sick? You usually don't leave your office until the end of the work day?" Layla asked.

Taggart sighed. He had heard the same thing all day. They knew him so well. It was a shame he was so predictable.

"Just checking out the sibs is all," Taggart said the same thing he had to each of them.

"We just saw each other at Sunday dinner." Layla pointed out.

He resisted rolling his eyes. They had all said the same thing. It was a tradition that they all got together for Sunday dinner. Only those married or seriously involved brought their significant other. You didn't bring a random boyfriend or girlfriends unless you were serious.

"Yeah, I know but I still am making my rounds." He checked his watch and saw the time. "I have to get back to work anyway."

"Me too, see you later." Layla stopped and kissed his cheek.

Before he could ask her what she was about to say she was gone to help a customer. Shrugging he left and returned to work. As he went through the rest of his day thoughts of Dominique filled him. Making him restless. Getting home later he was

still on edge. Walking up his front walk he glanced at the still bright day and figured he still had time to a run before the sun went down. He went inside quickly and put on his running clothes. Going out onto the deck he glanced at Dominique's house across the lake. It was dark. Quickly he stretched then started off for his run. Rounding the corner by the tree he hit into a soft body. Reaching out he grabbed her and was able to keep them on their feet.

He glanced at Dominique.

"You know stalking is against the law."

"What?" he asked.

"See at first I thought I was imagining it but as I thought about it. I did see you at the Hancock's Garage, Eden Garden, Klarion Jewelers, Moore Gallery, and again at Synclair's Sensations." Dominique ticked off a finger as she listed each place.

Taggart eyes widened. "That was you I kept almost seeing. I was vi-"

Dominique put up her hand. "I don't want to know. I just want to finish my run and we can keep almost seeing each other and out of each others way."

Dominique turned back the way she had come.

"Why are you so afraid of this, Dominique?"

She stiffened, stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. Dominique turned to face him and put her hand on her hips.

"What did you say?" she asked softly.

Taggart didn't know why but suddenly he felt threatened. He didn't care. He wasn't about to back down.

"You're attracted to me, Dominique. Why are you afraid of it?"

Dominique studied him. She looked at him from head to foot then walked towards him in a lazy stroll. Taggart mind screamed at him to run but his pride made him stand his ground. Dominique stopped a hairsbreadth from him.

"I'm not afraid of you, Taggart Blade but you should be of me," Dominique purred.

Her hands flashed up and cupped his head sinking into his hair and she pulled him to her. She kissed him. Taggart braced himself but it was for naught. The first brush of Dominique's lips made his knees weak. She swept her tongue along his lips seeking entrance. He opened letting her in. She didn't enter tentatively. Her tongue flowed into his mouth and conquered him. Her taste was addictive and utterly sensual. His knees buckled. Taggart stumbled back against the tree to keep standing.

Dominique didn't let up her kiss following him. Pressing her lush body against his. She growled softly and nipped on his tongue. He gasped and shuddered. All his instincts screamed for him to take over the kiss but he didn't. Something made him wait. He wanted her with an ache that was unbearable but he wanted her to trust him and take a chance. Slowly he dueled his tongue with hers.

She murmured softly and the kiss gentled. Dominique suckled on his tongue pulling it into her mouth. Gently he licked the roof of her mouth. She purred and returned the caress. Taggart shuddered and felt her quiver. She nipped at his tongue again and then slowly released his lips. She stepped back disentangling her hands from his hair. Dominique's look was hungry. She licked her lips.

She turned and walked away saying, "Be ready at seven-thirty."

Taggart cleared his throat before he could get the word out. "What?"

She looked at him over her shoulder. "For our date."

He tried to follow the conversation but his body was still buzzing from the kiss. "You're asking me out."

"Actually, I'm telling you. Be ready at seven-thirty. I'll pick you up then." She arched an eyebrow daring him to disagree.

His lips twitched. "Since I don't have a choice. I'll be ready. Do you want to tell me what to wear too?"

Dominique studied him then replied. "Wear something sexy and leave your hair down." She winked, turned her head back forward and walked around the other side of the tree going back towards her house.

Taggart stayed resting against the tree. He needed a few moments to get his strength back. He watched in the direction Dominique had gone. He would be ready for their date. And at the end of the night he would be the one to initiate a kiss. Dominique better be ready. Straightening, Taggart whistled as he turned and towards his house.

Chapter Three

Stepping inside Taggart was bombarded with loud barks and the sound of running feet. He kneeled and opened his arms. The Huskies hit him and he fell back on his butt. Laughing he rolled on the floor with them. After a while he pushed them away and they sat looking at him. Ice blue eyes stared at him.

"Mario and Flay, you reprobates where were you hiding when I came in earlier."

He studied them. They gave him a sheepish doggie grin. Taggart shook his head as he stood.

"Sleeping or watching Iron Chef in the family room." Taggart wandered through the kitchen, down the hall and past the atrium.

Reaching the family room Taggart leaned against the side of the doorway and saw the TV was playing Iron Chef. He glanced down and Mario and Flay who barked and then went back to sit in front of the TV. Taggart followed them and picked up the remote from the floor next to them.

"What did I tell you about turning on the TV?" He wagged a finger at them.

Flay gestured his head to Mario. Taggart turned his attention to Mario. Mario barked and nudged Flay. Flay laid his head on his paws and gave Mario sad puppy eyes. Taggart laughed at their shenanigans. They barked at him then moved further away from each other. He knew they were making space for him so they could watch the show together.

"Not tonight boys. I've got a date." Taggart grinned.

The dogs looked at him. If he didn't know better he would swear the look was of shock. They walked over to him and leaned against his legs. He petted them.

"Yeah it's been awhile." He stopped and said softly, "And she may be special."

The dogs barked.

"I know you have to check her out but you'll like her. She has two beautiful Huskies who are white with parti-colored - half brown and half blue – eyes."

They barked and wagged their tails.

"You'll get to meet them don't worry. Now let me get ready for my date," Taggart said and walked towards the door.

The dogs barked again capturing his attention. They were standing under plate in the family room that housed the communication/security system for the house. He walked over to it. A couple of his sibs had gotten together and given him the custom designed security and communication system by Cerberus Associates as a housewarming gift. When they had told him about the system he had been excited. He loved gadgets. The system was high tech and secure. There were various access panels for the system set throughout various rooms in the house as well as one hidden in the back and front of house. The front and side of the house had sensors. He had decided to not do the back since you couldn't get there without going across the front or around the side with the sensors.

The main access panel was by the door but all the rest in the house and outside had almost all the same functions. Taggart looked at it and saw the light for the answer machine was on. Pressing the button he entered his code then listened to the message. Hancock's voice filled the room.

"You owe me big, little bro. I convinced the others not to descend on your house."

Taggart frowned not sure what he was talking about. Hancock's voice cleared up his confusion.

"I thought you had better control than that. You're usually the cool one when it comes to woman. You knew Layla would tell everyone you showed such interest in a woman. "

Taggart winced and swore softly.

Hancock's chuckle came through the answering machine. "Who is this woman anyway? Expect to be interrogated about it when you come get your car later this week. And be prepared to explain at Sunday dinner. Maybe you should bring Dominique Rule with you."

"Not on your life," Taggart said.

Hancock's message continued. "Only if you're serious about her of course. You can thank me for making the others not come to your house to start questioning you. At least you have until Sunday. Night, Tag. Sweet Dominique dreams." Hancock laughed as he hung up.

"Christ, Layla who did you tell?" Taggart wondered.

The messages continued. Taggart leaned against the wall and shook his head in stupefaction. Layla had called all the sibs and cousins.

"At least Mom and Dad doesn't know. Yet."

The machine beeped again and a voice spoke.

"Thinker baby, what's this about a woman."

He groaned at the sound of his Mom's - Reba Blade - voice. Even her calling him by his nickname didn't make him want to smile as it usually did.

"Son, you should know not to let these women see you going ga ga over a woman. Hey, no need to hit me it's true," His dad, Gideon Blade said.

Taggart could imagine them each on a phone talking to him. His mom probably hit his dad for what he said. A sound came through the phone.

"Ummm... that'll make up for it." Gideon laughed. "Now woman wait until we get off this machine before tempting me."

Taggart put his hand over his eyes and groaned. His parents were not making out on the phone again while leaving him a message. He had told them about not doing that anymore. Heck all his siblings had told them about it. His parents couldn't keep their hands off each other.

"It's not like Thinker and the others haven't seen us kiss," his mom said.

"You got that right," Taggart agreed.

"True but we need to find out about this woman. So focus," his dad said.

"Fine, but if you want me to focus then get you hand off my ass," his mom countered.

"Never, my love. You're butt is too cute," his dad said.

His mom squeaked then laughed. "Squeeze it again."

Taggart groaned, turned his head and pounded it against the wall.

"Tag, we'll expect to hear more 'bout this young lady on Sunday. Hell, bring her along." His father's voice was hoarse.

"Yeah, so we can meet her. Ummm... bye Thinker." His mom's voice was breathless. "You're so bad Gid. Ummm... don't stop-"

Taggart heard fumbling as they hung up the phones. The machine made a noise depicting there were no more messages. He was thankful for that. He walked over to the phone by the couch. He dialed and listened as the phone rang.

"Hello, Tag, took you long enough," Layla said.

"Thanks a lot for not keeping your word, Layla."

"What are you talking about?"

"You promised not to tell anyone."

"And I didn't."

"Liar, I have calls from the sibs and cousins. Hell I even have one from Mom and Dad which by the way they were making out on again."

"Please they do that to all of us. So live with it. What can we say our parents love each other. And I didn't call anyone. By the time you asked I had already texted all of them. So I kept my word when you asked."

Taggart remembered what she had said.

I won't say anything now.

He blinked shocked. "You texted everyone that fast. You're good."

"You're not the only one who is good with gadgets," Layla crowed.

"You know I'm going to get you back for this. I hope it was worth it." Taggart looked down at Flay and Mario who had leaned against him almost toppling him over.

"Yeah it was so worth it. So bro, what ya up to tonight?" Layla asked.

"I have a date," he said absently.

Taggart swore realizing what he had said.

"Language Tag, language. So you have a date huh. Do I know who with?" Layla laughed.

"I'm hanging up now," Taggart said.

"I'm texting now," Layla said.

"Lay-"

She hung up on him. A buzz sounded. Taggart unclipped his cell phone from his hip, flipped it open and read the message.

Tag has a date with D. Be on the look out.

He sighed and shook his head. He knew his family would be looking for him at one of their businesses for dinner or something. Thankfully Dominique was the one who had asked him out and would be planning where they went. He glanced at the clock over the mantle and noted the time. He had a little under an hour to get ready for their date. Walking out of the room he grinned thinking about her telling him they were going on a date. He took the stairs two at a time to get ready. Reaching his bedroom he went to his closet and opened the door. Taggart stood back and studied his clothes.

"What the heck am I going to wear?"

A bark sounded behind him. He looked back at Flay and Mario.

"You all are no help." Taggart said.

The dogs lay down on either side of him and watched him. Taggart turned back to his closet and debated what to wear.

Dominique rubbed her hand down the side of her peach floral spaghetti strap dress. She shifted on her peach heels and debated if she should have worn a different outfit. The dress was just below her knees and hugged her curves.

Admit it you want his eyes to get hungry when he sees you.

Dominique smiled devilishly. She wanted Taggart to drool and forget his name when he saw her. The same way he made her feel. Now that she had decided to go on a date with him she was going to enjoy it. Dominique glanced back at the two lane road that snaked up between the lush trees to Taggart's house. She could barely make out

the lights to the other house some distance away that was also surrounded by trees. Only the two road and trees separated the two houses. If you went to the left you would be going to the house across the way instead of Taggart's. It was the same set up as her house except her house was the one on the left. She and her closest neighbor knew each other well although he had recently moved in and wasn't home that often.

Dominique studied the other house that shared Taggart's small forest and tried to remember the name of the neighbor. She didn't know the person who owned the house that well. She kept to herself. Shrugging she glanced at the ornate high-back bench that was in the garden. She recognized it as one of the custom pieces they used to hide the outer controls for a Cerberus Associates security system. She hadn't known Taggart was a client. She turned back to the door, pressed the bell and waited.

The door opened and Dominique's breath stalled in her lungs. Taggart's hair was loose around his shoulders. Her eyes lowered and she licked her lips as she took in his pale grey loose button down shirt, matching slacks and dark black loafers. She raised her eyes and stilled a shiver. Taggart eyes were lowered taking in her outfit. He raised his eyes back to her, hunger blazed in his eyes.

Success. Dominique stifled a small smile.

"You ready to go?" she asked.

Taggart cleared his throat. "Yeah."

Twin barks sounded. Taggart looked behind him then back at her.

"But I want you to meet these two first." Taggart gestured.

"Oh, they're beautiful." Dominique knelt and put out her hand.

The two Siberian Huskies studied her out of ice blue eyes. They came forward and pressed against her. She sank her fingers into their plush black and white coats. They made sounds of pleasure. Dominique laughed and petted them once more and stood. She looked at Taggart and he had a look she couldn't describe on his face.

"What?" She asked.

"They usually don't take to people that easy. Even my nurse at my practice can't get near them without them growling at her."

"Really, I'm good with animals." Dominique shrugged trying to hide she was pleased.

What does it matter if his dogs like you?

She didn't try to answer the question.

"Okay guys, enjoy Iron Chef," Taggart said stepping outside.

"Iron Chef?" Dominique queried as they walked down the stairs and walkway.

"It's one of our favorite shows." Taggart grinned sheepishly.

"You named them after the Iron Chef's." Dominique chuckled then admitted.

"It's one of mine and girls too."

"Yeah they're names after them. Really, you like the show too." Taggart laughed then looked at her. "You cook?"

"A little," Dominique answered.

She couldn't tell him she had studied in France on one of her assignments. It was still classified. They reached her SUV.

"Don't forget to arm your system." she said.

Taggart looked at her then took his keys out of his pocket. He pressed a button and a set of tones sounded. Dominique watched as a white light flashed on the bench. She walked around to the driver's side and reached for the door. Taggart hand covered hers.

"You plan on driving?" she asked looking at him.

"Oh, no. You asked me out so you're driving." Taggart shook his head and winked.

Dominique chuckled and released the handle. Taggart opened the door for her and she got in. He closed the door, jogged around to the passenger side, got in and buckled in. Dominique buckled in started the car and backed out of the parking space. She turned and went around the circular drive back to the road leading to the main street.

"How did you know about the system?" Taggart asked.

"My company made it."

"You work at Cerberus Associates?" Taggart sounded surprised.

"Own it." She flashed him a smile. "Actually, I'm part owner."

"I dealt with a woman named Sienna Zain who said she was part owner of Cerberus Associates. She mentioned she handled the comp security division. We talked by phone and email but I never met her. A tech by the name of Stein installed the system. Which part do you own?" Taggart asked.

Dominique chuckled at the way he said it.

"There are three main divisions of Cerberus Associates. I handle the Investigations part of things."

"Like private investigation."

"Well that is the simplest explanation. Can't tell you anymore." She added stopping his question then continued. "My other partner Hunter Willis handles the bodyguards and other types of security."

"Hunter is part owner of Cerberus Associates. I didn't realize that. Haven't seen Hunter in a while."

"How do you know Hunter?" Dominique frowned.

"We're friends with Ulrich and the Willis clan. Our parents have dinner together at least once a week. And our two families get together at least once a month. Well, the more social of us that is. Usually Dakota and Hunter from the Willis' avoid it. And my brother Jareau and sister Kaley always find some excuse. Our parents let them since they at least come to Sunday dinner."

She nodded as she heard Hunter's older brother name and his explanation. At least now she could tell Hunter his name and tell her to butt out. Hunter already knew him and his family.

"Sienna does handle the comp security division. She didn't install the system because she doesn't live in Trescott, at least not yet, anyway. Usually she only designs systems on a special case basis. And for her to send Stein one of her best techs to install it is rare. He's booked solid." Dominique glanced at him.

"We know McGee." Taggart smiled.

"Well that explains it. The pain in the butt is one of the reasons Sienna hasn't moved to Trescott yet." Dominique rolled her eyes.

"We'll Hancock my brother would say it more colorfully but that's a good description of McGee." Taggart chuckled then frowned. "Until Sienna called I've never heard of her from McGee. It's got us curious who she is to McGee. Why is McGee stopping Sienna from moving here? "

"Yeah, I have many descriptions of McGee. Him and Sienna's relationship is their business and you'll have to ask them. As to how he is stopping her from moving. She doesn't want to leave him alone. She afraid he'll become a hermit." Dominique shrugged.

"McGee is already a hermit but Hancock usually goes to see him when he has been in his lab too long. He drags McGee out somewhere so at least he'll remember how to socialize with people," Taggart said.

Dominique frowned as she heard the name Hancock again. Realization dawned.

"Hancock as in Hancock's Garage. Hancock is your brother."

"Yep, that's what I was trying to tell you. I was visiting my sibs. They own all the places you mentioned that I was stalking you at." Taggart voice sounded like he was trying not to laugh.

Dominique eyes narrowed as she turned onto Spenser Avenue. "Your sibs." She thought about it. "That would mean Layla, Hancock, Shana, Nicolas, Moore and Synclair are your family."

"Yep they are owners of Unveiled, Hancock's Garage, Eden Garden, Klarion Jewelers, Moore Gallery, and Synclair's Sensations." Taggart voice was strangled.

She looked at him and saw his face was flushed and he was biting his lips. Dominique sighed. Taggart looked at her laughter in his grey eyes.

"Go ahead." Dominique motioned with her hand then returned her attention to the road.

Taggart started to laugh. Dominique turned into the parking area, spotted a space pulled in, shut off the car and turned to look at him. Taggart head rested back

against the seat as he laughed. Tears rolled down his face. Dominique lips twitched then she laughed with him. After a few moments they calmed.

"Okay, so you weren't stalking me," Dominique acceded.

"No, visiting family," Taggart supplied.

Curious Dominique had to ask. "So how much family do you have in Trescott?"

"Too many to count."

"Really. As much as the Willis'. That I find hard to believe. I swear until I met the Willis' I never knew there was so many of them. Hunter always seems to be introducing me to another cousin of something." She raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, almost as many. And most of us live here in Trescott Cove or in the neighboring town Savoy Valley." Taggart laughed. "You already know a few of my fam from their businesses and I'm sure now that you've actually realized it you'll meet even more of us."

An uneasy feeling filled Dominique's stomach. She wasn't sure how she felt about him talking like it was a given she would be meeting more of his family. It seemed as if he was thinking long term. She stifled the fear that tried to choke her. Dominique didn't want to think about anything more than now.

"I bet you're going to tell me one of your families owns this too." Dominique gestured to the front of the restaurant.

Taggart looked out the front window and chuckled. "No."

"Good, let's go." She reached for the door handle.

His hand on her arm stopped her. She looked at him and Taggart gave her a look and squeezed her hand. Following his silent signal she let go the handle and waited. He got out of the car, came around to her side and opened her door. He put out his hand. Dominique put her hand in his and swung her legs outside the door. Taggart helped her out, stepped back and closed the door behind her. He held her hand as they walked across the lot.

"You know since I asked you out I should be opening your door." Dominique pointed out.

"No," Taggart said firmly and looked at her.

Dominique raised an eyebrow and didn't let her face reveal how him being a gentleman affected her. They were almost to the door of the restaurant when he stopped. She stopped with him and looked up at him curiously.

"How often do you come here?" he asked gesturing to the restaurant.

"A couple times a week. It's my favorite place. Why?" Dominique asked.

Taggart eyes twinkled. "Have you meet Rissa and Darryl?"

"I've meet Rissa the owner and heard of Darryl the head chef but never met him."

"Actually Rissa and Darryl own Rissablu jointly."

Dominique looked back to the entrance of Rissablu then back at Taggart's twinkling eyes. She thought of what she asked in the car then grinned. She has only asked if one of his family owned it not two.

"They own it jointly. They're your brother and sister aren't they."

"Yes."

"Oh, God we'll be on our first date with them watching us all night." Groaning Dominique turned into his body and put her face against his chest. "Let's go somewhere else."

She stiffened as she realized she was in his arms. She went to pull back but Taggart stopped her holding her shoulders gently. Dominique looked up at him. The hunger in his gaze made her throat dry.

"The first of many more dates," he said huskily.

She opened her mouth to speak. He put a finger on her lips.

"Shh... don't deny it. There will be many more," Taggart said softly.

Dominique gulped and said nothing already knowing she wanted to see him again. He put his hand back on her shoulder and looked at her. Dominique stepped closer to his heated body.

"I want to kiss you Dominique but not here. When I kiss you I'll need privacy to kiss you the way I want to." His eyes traced her lips. His look was almost a caress then

he meets her eyes again. "Let's go have dinner. Rissa and Darryl don't work the night shift tonight so no one will be there to look at us."

Dominique studied his lips and wanted to taste them again. She dragged her eyes away from them and stepped back. Taggart released her and smiled. Dominique studied him then held out her hand. Taggart smile widened then he took her hand in his. He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. Dominique shivered and looking in his eyes she brought his hand to her lips and did the same. His soft groan reached her ears. With a smile she lowered their joined hands and tugged him. They continued to the doors of Rissablu.

Four hours later Dominique walked Taggart to his door. They had a wonderful dinner. The service was spectacular although they were under scrutiny. Taggart's sister and brother may not have been working but the rest of the staff knew Taggart as well as herself from her dining there so often. They were curious and watched them. Dominique was sure Taggart's family would know all about their dinner. She glanced at Taggart who was holding her hand as they walked to the front door. They had talked about so much. He was funny, smart, and not to mention sexy. The little brushes of his fingers on her hand drove her crazy all night. She had done the same to him and was pleased at his low groans. Their attraction for each other was almost tangible. They had argued over who would pay for the check. When she pointed out this was her date since she asked him out he had given in grudgingly.

Dominique knew she was in over her head but could do nothing to stop the way she felt. Climbing the stairs she waited as he unlocked the door. Taggart turned to her and smiled looking at her. The silence lengthening. Dominique raised her hand to his face and brushed her fingers against his hair. The soft strands tickled her hands. Stepping closer she sank her hand in his hair then raised the other and did the same. She leaned in to kiss him. Taggart hands cupped her face stopping her.

"Uh uh. My turn," he murmured as he lowered his head.

"Oh yes," Dominique moaned.

She expected hunger but was unraveled by the tender sweep of his tongue against her lips. Dominique moaned and Taggart's tongue swept inside and stoked along the sides of her tongue. She stepped in closer to his body. Taggart shifted and his hands on her cheeks stroked along the side of her face. Dominique snuggled into his tall frame. He groaned into her mouth and suckled on her tongue. The taste of him was a mix of chocolate they had for desert and him. Male and sex. Her eyes slammed closed.

Taggart continued his soft sultry kiss. It made her heart race and her pussy ache for him. A whimper leaked from her lips surprising her. Taggart sighed and his hands tightened on her face. The kiss changed becoming hungry and carnal. Dominique knees weakened. Taggart shifted and she felt the hard bite of the doorway against her back. Taggart crowded against her. Dominique purred at the feel of his hard length against her. His tongue speared inside of hers. In a slow glide he licked along the roof of her mouth and outside her lips. His tongue circled her lips wetting them. Dominique moaned and followed his tongue with her own. Taggart chuckled darkly and captured her tongue pulling it into his mouth. Dominique eagerly followed and suckled his tongue hard. She tightened her hands in his hair tugging. Taggart growled and pressed against her. Dominique shifted her body against his and felt his hard erection pressing against her.

I want him now.

Taggart gentled his kiss and slowly released her lips. Blearily Dominique opened her eyes. He licked his lips and cleared his throat.

"Tomorrow is my turn to take you out. Be ready at seven o'clock." Taggart voice was deeper than usual.

"Uh huh." Dominique replied.

Taggart nodded then kissed her gently. He pulled back but stopped. Dominique realized she still held his hair. Slowly she ran her thumb along his hair line. His soft growl thrilled her. She let go of her hold on his hair running her fingers down his cheek, around his lips and then down his jaw. Taggart quivered. She continued down the side

of his neck and rested her hands on his shoulders. Taggart hands were loosely around her waist. He lowered his forehead to hers.

"Are you going to let this play out or run away Dominique?"

Dominique eyes narrowed then she growled. Grabbing him, she kissed him thoroughly. Taggart knees buckled. She turned him and pushed him against the doorway. She held him there and kissed him. His groan filled her mouth. Dominique pulled away stepping back and walked down the stairs. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she looked back at Taggart still leaning against the doorway looking at her.

"I usually take my run at six-thirty am. If I don't see you then I'll see you at seven tomorrow night." She turned and went back to her car.

Getting in she looked at Taggart and saw him standing in the doorway looking at her. She waved and backed out. Driving down the road she turned away from the way leading to the main street and went towards the road for her house. Pulling in seconds later she locked off the car and got out. Quickly she walked up her walkway, the stairs and unlocked the door going inside. Leaning against the door Dominique slid down the door and sat on the floor. Pulling up her legs she rested her cheek against her knees.

"What am I going to doing?" Her voice echoed in the house.

The click clack of feet came to her. A warm body pressed against each side of her. She looked down at Racquel and Giada. She put her hand on their heads and laid her head back against the door.

"I'm afraid to do this again. Leave myself open," she said.

The dogs whined and pressed against her.

"Yeah I know it's already happening and I don't want to stop it. Not yet." She stood and walked down the hall pass a few rooms through the darkened kitchen and looked out the window at the house across the lake. "Not yet."

She stood in the window for a bit then looked down at the dogs who stood next to her. "Time for bed."

Dominique turned and went back toward the open kitchen doorway. She stopped and glanced back. "I'm going to give this a try, Taggart. I just don't know for how long or if I can let myself go." Heading out the kitchen door she locked up the house and went upstairs to her bedroom.

Taggart watched as Dominique's car disappeared down the road. Her taillights had long disappeared before he went inside and closed the door. Absently he glanced towards the family room and could hear the TV playing. He walked towards the stairs and took them to his room. Quickly he got ready for bed. A half an hour later he slid between his sheets and turned to look out the floor to ceiling window with a door in the center that was right wall of his bedroom. The balcony and furnishings had an eerily glow from the night sky. The moon glinted off the trees surrounding the lake below that he could not see from where is laid in bed.

He thought of the date with Dominique and smiled. She had been fun, intelligent, sexy and leery at times as they talked. His body hardened as he thought of their kiss. The kittenish purrs she made in her throat as he kissed her were sensual and almost drove him to the edge. He had to ask her if she was going to back away or let them get to know each other. He hadn't expected her reaction. The lush kiss that made his knees weak.

A woman who makes you weak in the knees is a keeper. But will she let me get close enough to keep her.

Taggart didn't have an answer if she would but he was planning to try his best to get to know Dominique Rule. Sleepiness claimed him and he went under.

Whistling Taggart petted Mario and Flay as he stood in front of the door. He went outside the door and the sun was bright. Chuckling he still felt the adrenaline of him and Dominique's early morning run. Quickly he went down the stairs and walked down his path. He glanced around and stopped. Taggart pushed up his shades to the top of his head. In disbelief he stared at his yard. The lush oasis of yesterday was now shriveled black flowers and trees. As soon as he saw it he smelled something strong. He

coughed and covered his nose. Going down the path to his loaner car, Taggart pressed the button and got into the car. He turned on the air, took out his cell and dialed.

"Rich, someone poured something in my gardens and killed all my plants. It smells acidic." He listened and answered. "Okay, I'll be waiting."

He hung up and placed another call.

"Yo, Tag. How was the hot date last night?" A deep voice asked playfully.

"So, not going to tell you Rigger," Taggart replied.

"Aw, come on. Share with me bro."

Taggart could almost picture the pout on Rigger's face.

"Forget about last night. I have a question for you. What could you pour in a garden to kill all the plants over night and turn everything black?"

"What the hell do you want to know that for?" Rigger paused then swore. "You did not kill my garden, Tag. You so-"

"No, I didn't kill the garden. You put it in but it is my garden by the way," Taggart interrupted.

"Then why do you want to know?" Rigger demanded.

"Just come by my house Rig," Taggart said.

"I'll be there in a few minutes." Rig said.

"You're still home." Taggart looked over at the house some distance through the trees.

"Yeah, I'm doing some plant splicing today. Be right there." Rig hung up.

Taggart sat in his car and waited. He got out as he saw Rigger strolling through the trees. Taggart didn't go to meet him but went back behind the car. He knew better than getting within striking distance of Rigger at a time like this. Rigger was very protective of the gardens he put in.

"What the fuck? Chirs-" Rigger proceeded to curse in five languages and a few dialects Taggart didn't recognize.

"Tag you better have a damn good explanation for this shit." Rigger called.

Taggart looked around the car at his brother who had his hands on his hips. Rigger's hair was in a ponytail and swishing as he shook his head studying the garden. He was surprised that Rigger wasn't already digging up the plants. Taggart came from behind the car with his hands palms up.

"I didn't do anything to them. They were fine last night. They were like this when I came out this morning," Taggart said.

Rigger looked at him his grey eyes flashing then back at the destroyed garden. "Who the hell did you piss off?"

That phrase rang a bell. Taggart swore then looked back at the garden. "Shit. Nobody that I know off. They-"

A car drove into his driveway interrupting him. He glanced back surprised that Ulrich had gotten here this fast. Ulrich got out and answered his unspoken question.

"I was still at home." Ulrich shrugged.

Taggart nodded. Ulrich lived a few houses down the road. Ulrich walked up and joined them.

"Rig," Ulrich said.

"Hey, Rich. Tag was about to tell me who he pissed off." Rigger gestured to the garden.

Ulrich studied the garden then looked back at Taggart. Taggart shifted under Ulrich's scrutiny.

"That's a good question. First your car and now this. You have something you want to tell us Tag?" Ulrich asked in a deceptively mild tone.

"His car!" Rigger said and looked back at the SUV. "That's a loaner from Hancock. What happened to your car?" Rigger demanded.

Before he could answer Ulrich filled Rigger in. Taggart looked at his garden and tried to figure out who could have done this. A punch in the arm made him look at Rigger.

"What?"

"Why didn't the alarm sound when whoever was doing this?" Rigger demanded.

Taggart bit his lip. "I forgot to arm it."

Ulrich and Rigger exchanged looks. Rigger looked at him then took a step to him.

"You did what?" Rigger voice was soft.

Taggart backed up a step knowing Rigger was pissed. He looked at Ulrich for help; Ulrich crossed his hand over his chest and arched an eyebrow. Taggart glared at Ulrich. Ulrich shrugged and gestured to Rigger as if telling Taggart to answer his question.

"It's not like we have much problems out here. I don't always arm the system everyday," Taggart defended.

Rigger looked at him then took a step to him. Rigger growled then started to pace away then back to him. He glanced at Taggart each time he came close enough to him. After a few minutes Rigger stopped in front of Taggart.

"There is a reason we bought you the system for the house Tag. It only works if you fucking use it. Wait until I tell the others about this." Rigger smiled nastily.

Taggart knew it was useless to ask him not to. He glanced back at the gardens and sighed. Leaning over he leaned closer to one of the blackened flowers. Rigger grabbed him yanking him back.

"Hey." Taggart said looking at him.

"I don't know what they used to make it like this over night but it is something nasty. I wouldn't get to close. Keep Mario and Flay away from here also," Rigger said looking pained as he looked at the garden. "As soon as Ulrich and his team are done with whatever they need to do, I'll get started on redoing the gardens." Rigger looked at him. "And this time I'll be adding some things I wanted to and you didn't."

Rigger look dared him to disagree. Taggart smartly held his tongue. Although he hadn't actually killed the garden he knew Rigger partially blamed him. He hadn't armed the security system which would have sounded if anyone came to the garden or approached the house.

"It'll be fun." Rigger chuckled and smacked him on the back.

Taggart didn't reply. He turned and looked at Ulrich who had moved away to meet the team he had called in. The team got to work taking soil samples and dusting for prints and other things. Ulrich came back to them.

"Now, Tag. Who did you piss off that they wreaked your car and the garden?" Ulrich looked back at the blackened garden. "Although arming your system would have avoided this at least now we know your car wasn't an accident."

Ulrich looked back at him and waited for him to answer.

"I don't have any idea," Taggart replied.

He couldn't figure out what was going on. Absently he listened as Ulrich and Rigger threw out idea of what could be going on. He thought of Dominique and wondered if he should cancel his date with her or stop seeing her until he knew what was going on. The leery look she wore on her face flashed before his eyes and he discarded the thought. If he pushed her away now he wouldn't get near her again. He would just be careful when he saw her.

You could ask Dominique for help.

As soon as he thought of it he decided not to. This was his problem and there was no need to involve Dominique.

This is probably nothing but a prank anyway.

He looked back at the gardens and amended the thought.

A vicious prank.

He focused back on the conversation in time to hear Ulrich say.

"Tag, we'll let you know what we find. Rigger you can have access to the garden's tomorrow." Ulrich slapped him on the back and went to join his team.

"What the hell is going on?" Rigger glanced at him.

"I wish I knew," Taggart replied.

He and Rigger stood watching the forensic teams gather evidence.

Chapter Four

Weeks later, Taggart still had no idea what was going on. His office had been trashed. A dead cat had been put on the front seat of his car. There had been a variety of other incidents as well. Ulrich still had no clues, and Taggart still had no idea who was doing these things. Ulrich had warned him to be careful. His family had gone into overprotective mode until he told them in no uncertain terms to back off.

Taggart glanced out his office window at Caspain Avenue and sighed. The only good part of these last few weeks was Dominique. They had gone out at least four times a week, and they ran together every morning. He smiled. They had shared hot kisses and some heavy petting, but hadn't had sex yet. Of course, there had been opportunities to, but Dominique had pulled away each time. Something was holding her back, and he was waiting for her to work through it. It was a test of his control to be able to let her go. Each time he wanted to seduce her and forget about whatever was making her keep him at a distance. Yet he didn't. Some instinct told him to wait. The phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. Turning he glanced at the Caller ID and grinned.

"I was just thinking about you," he said, swinging back to look out the window.

"Really? I was thinking about you too." Dominique's husky laugh made his cock hard.

"Good. What are you up to?" he asked.

"I'm in my office getting ready to leave for an appointment. I wish I could see you tonight," Dominique moaned.

"Hey, I'm free. You're the one who has a late appointment," Taggart replied.

"Don't remind me. Gotta go. See you tomorrow for our run." She hung up.

Taggart chuckled. He was used to Dominique's abrupt goodbyes.

His intercom buzzed. "Doc, your next patient is here."

He put down the phone and pressed the intercom. "I'll be right there."

Taggart stood, stretched, and went to his patient.

Dominique strode out of the building, bypassing the elevator to the garage. She had parked her car in the lot instead of inside since she was going out anyway. Whistling, she walked to her car and pressed the button, disarming the vehicle's security. Opening the door, she threw her briefcase in and stepped closer to the car. A feeling made her look down. Frowning, Dominique looked at the liquid soaking her shoes. Lifting her feet, she swore softly. She hadn't been parked there long enough for this much oil. It had to be a big leak. Looking at the time, she sat in the seat with her legs out the door and took out her cell. She called to cancel her meeting, then called the garage. Dominique took out her palm comp system--Sienna had designed one for each of them--and did some work while she waited.

"Hey, Niq."

Surprised, Dominique looked up at the grinning face of Hancock. She checked the time and saw it had only been fifteen minutes since she called. Dominique put down her comp system and slid out of the car. Hancock's hand came under her elbow to steady her. She smiled her thanks, then stood beside him and her car.

"I didn't expect to get the boss coming to tow me," Dominique teased.

She had known Hancock from going to his garage to get her car fixed. But ever since she and Taggart had started dating, Hancock had been trying to find out what was going on between them. When that didn't work, he had started teasing her. His dark grey eyes twinkled devilishly when he was up to no good. She had returned the favor, and Hancock had laughed, and they had become fast friends.

"Special service for a special lady." Hancock winked, then looked at the puddle of oil coming from under her car. "That's quite a leak. Let's hook it up and I'll take it back to the garage to take a look. I'll--"

"No, I'll go with you. It shouldn't take too long to fix it, should it?" Dominique asked.

"I won't know until I check, but you're welcome to come along. If it needs more work than can be done quickly, I'll give you loaner," Hancock said.

Dominique nodded. Hancock walked to the tow truck, and they were shortly on their way. Twenty minutes later, Hancock had her car on a lift and walked under the carriage of her car. He looked up and swore viciously.

"What's wrong?" Dominique said.

Hancock came over to her. "Your brake line is cut. First Taggart, and now you. I need to call Ulrich."

Hancock turned. Dominique reached over and grabbed him.

"What do you mean, first Taggart and then me? Why do you need to call Ulrich?" Dominique asked, an uneasy feeling in her stomach.

Hancock studied her, then said softly, "He hasn't told you."

"Told me what?" Dominique's eyes narrowed.

Hancock looked uncomfortable. Dominique squeezed his arm.

"Tell me, Hancock."

Hancock sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Look, I don't know why he hasn't told you. Hell, that's a lie. He's probably trying to protect you, which is admirable."

Dominique crossed her arms under her breasts and tapped her foot.

Hancock looked at her, then cleared his throat. "But stupid."

She gave him a grin, baring her teeth. Hancock glanced at her cautiously. Dominique didn't need to see her face to know what Hancock was seeing. She knew her eyes were cold and her face blank. Hancock continued.

"It first started with them busting up his car. Then his garden had acid poured into it, killing everything. His office was trashed, a dead cat put in his car, and -"

Dominique listened in disbelief as Hancock told her all the things that had happened.

"You remember a few weeks ago when he cut his hair?" Hancock asked.

Confused, Dominique nodded. She had been surprised when she had gone to pick him up and seen his hair short. It was still sexy, but she'd liked his long hair. She remembered that, after dating him for a few weeks, she had asked Taggart if he was

mixed because of his dark grey eyes and long hair. She had been blown away with the regal bearing of his family. His siblings—at least, the ones she'd met-- had similar eye color and hair texture. He had laughed and said no, he was African-American.

"Someone put some kind of adhesive in one of his surgery caps and it messed up his hair," Hancock was saying, bringing her back to the present. "Other things have happened, too. Ulrich doesn't have any leads, and Taggart has no idea who is doing these things. We've been trying to help him watch his back, but he's being stubborn." Hancock ran his hand through his hair again.

Dominique saw the frustration on his face. She could imagine what the Blades were going through. From dating Taggart, she knew they were close knit. At various times, she had met some of his sibs. They were all loving, outgoing, and close. From the conversations she had overheard him having with his parents, she knew they were close to him. The first time she had heard them call him Thinker, she had asked him why. He had explained they called him the Thinker because he planned before he did anything. Then he had looked at her and said, "Except where you're concerned." He told her she made him unable to think. The look in his eyes had made her melt and kiss him silly.

Dominique's eyes narrowed. To think he had been hiding this from her.

"Give me a car," she told Hancock softly.

Hancock gave her a cautious look, then went and got the keys. He handed them to her and held her hand.

"Can you handle this?" Hancock asked.

Dominique knew he wasn't asking her if she was pissed, but if she would keep an eye on his brother. She smiled, and he blinked.

"Oh, I've got this," Dominique said softly.

"Can I come with you?" Hancock asked.

"No. Why?" Dominique asked.

"Cause I so want to watch you kick his ass." Hancock chuckled.

"Nosy." Dominique shoved him playfully. "Maybe next time."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Hancock warned.

"Go call Ulrich and let him know what happened. I'll talk with him later. Don't warn Taggart," Dominique said.

"I wouldn't even think of warning him. Baby brother is about to realize we care 'bout him." Hancock nodded and went to call Ulrich.

After he left, Dominique looked at her car. The only place the person could have gotten to her car was when she parked it in the Cerberus Associates client parking area. She hadn't done as she usually did, parked in her assigned space in the parking garage adjacent to the building. All Cerberus Associates employees had parking in the garage, and it was highly secure and monitored. The client parking area wasn't as secure, but they had cameras. Dominique strode to the seat where she had put her briefcase and laptop. She picked them up and went out to the loaner car.

In seconds, she was inside and online. She shot off a message to Stein to check the cameras in the parking area. Then she picked up the phone.

"Hey, Niq. You found me a house yet ,or ready to sell you yours?"

Dominique's thoughts came away from the problems Taggart had been suffering

"You know, someone else might be concerned that you are lusting after their house. But since my house is fab, I don't mind." Dominique chuckled.

"Very true. So when are you going to sell it to me?"

"In your dreams."

"Hey, dreams are a good thing. So since you're not selling me your house, have you found me one yet?"

"Are you packed to move yet?" Dominique countered.

"Not yet," came the sheepish reply.

"I thought so." Dominique paused. "I need your help, Sienna."

Sienna Zain's voice lost the teasing and got serious. "Anything. What do you need?"

Dominique closed her eyes. Sienna hadn't even asked what it was, just offered to help. She opened her eyes and looked out at her car on the lift.

"Let me get Hunter on the line." Dominique put Sienna on hold and called Hunter, connecting them.

"Hey, Niq. Thought you were in a meeting," Hunter said.

"I was on my way, but had car trouble," Dominique replied. "Someone cut my brake line." She couldn't keep the rage out of her voice.

"What?" Sienna said softly.

"Fuck!" Hunter said at the same time then continued. "What do you need from us?"

"Seems Taggart has been having some problems and didn't tell me," Dominique replied, then filled them in on what she knew.

As she spoke, she typed on her computer. After telling them all about the incidents, she told them what she wanted.

"Sienna, I need you to make some modifications to Taggart's system and have Stein out there today to install them."

"Done," Sienna replied.

Dominique could hear her typing.

"Hunter, can you pull Prentiss from whatever case he's on and have him and his team shadow Taggart?"

"Consider it done. Are you going to tell Taggart he has bodyguards?" Hunter asked.

"Why? He didn't tell me about his problems," Dominique said.

"Niq, he cares about you. Besides, you know he probably has the 'me man, protect woman' syndrome," Sienna said.

"Exactly, Sienna. Which is not only stupid, but dangerous. Niq can take care of herself," Hunter countered.

"I know she can, Hunter, but that still doesn't mean she should use this as the excuse she was looking for to push him away," Sienna replied calmly.

"Oh..." Hunter paused, then asked, "Is that what you're planning to do, Niq? If it is, you're an ass."

Dominique sighed at her friends. Although Sienna hadn't met Taggart, when Dominique had mentioned she was dating him, Sienna had said she'd enjoyed talking with him when she was working on his system. When Sienna called Dominique or vice versa, Sienna had talked about getting to know him better. When Sienna had figured out he was a gadget crazy, like she was, they had formed a friendship. Now, because of Sienna and Taggart's love of gadgets, she had some weird things that did things she didn't think she would ever use.

Hunter, on the other hand, had made it her business to go to Taggart's house and invite herself to dinner one night when she knew Dominique would be busy. When Dominique had gotten home, she had found Taggart and Hunter on her back deck. Hunter had hacked her system and broken into her house. The two of them were a little tipsy. Racquel and Giada, the traitors, were watching "Iron Chef" in the family room. Dominique had rolled her eyes, walked Taggart home, and made sure he at least made it to the couch before closing up his house and going back home. At her own house, she had put Hunter in one of the spare rooms. To this day, Hunter and Taggart had refused to tell her what they had talked about. All Hunter or Taggart would say is that they liked each other.

"Then I'm an ass. Until I talk with Mr. Blade, I have no way of knowing what I plan to do," Dominique replied.

"You haven't spoken to him yet?" Hunter sounded shocked.

"Oh, crap. I feel sorry for him. Be gentle, Dominique." Sienna chuckled.

"We'll take care of what you asked," Hunter said.

"The person was able to get through the security system I designed on your car." Sienna's voice was calm, but Dominique knew she was pissed.

She winced and admitted, "I only armed the main one, not the whole thing."

Sienna was silent.

"Oh, boy. You have some major begging to do," Hunter chided.

"Sienna-" Dominique started.

"The systems were designed specifically for each of you for a reason. Use them."

Sienna hung up.

Dominique winced.

"I hate when Sienna gets snippy. She starts running security drills, hacking systems, and locking you out of shit. Better go warn the employees." Hunter sighed.

"Let them know it was my fault, Hunter," Dominique said.

Hunter made a rude noise. "Please. I was already planning to. I so don't want to be on the receiving end again of those nasty looks, pranks, and emails." Hunter hung up.

Dominique hung up her phone and knew she would be bombarded once the employees found out Sienna was pissed. She shrugged it off and finished typing. Turning on the car, she pulled out and onto the road. Her phone chirped.

"Rule."

"Now, Niq, why am I getting an alarm that someone hacked into my computer system?" a languid voice asked.

"If I didn't want you to know I had done it, you wouldn't have gotten an alarm, Ulrich."

"I should arrest you." Ulrich sighed.

Dominique made a rude noise. "Why waste your time? Besides, I'm sure you don't want Sienna to plant a bug in the system she created."

"Threatening an officer is not a good thing, Niq."

"Not telling me about Tag isn't a good thing, Ulrich."

Ulrich was silent, then said softly, "You didn't know."

"No."

"I thought you did. I wondered why you hadn't come and asked me, but I thought you all were doing your own research."

Dominique sighed. Ulrich wasn't to blame. He was right. She would have been doing her own investigation...if she had known.

"We are now," she said. "From your files, you don't have much to go on. No suspects."

"None." Ulrich's tone was frustrated.

"Things have happened at his house, work, and various places, but no one has seen anything?"

"No one. It's weird, as if it's a ghost."

"Or someone local, who everyone knows and wouldn't think anything of seeing."

Ulrich was silent.

"You've thought of that."

"Yes, but with so many residents, we don't even know where to start looking," Ulrich said.

"Well, Taggart will have someone looking after him. "

Ulrich swore, then said, "Tell Prentiss and his men not to get in the way of my men."

"One little incident and you're touchy about Prentiss and his men." Dominique sighed.

"My men ended up in the hospital, Niq!" Ulrich roared.

Dominique held the phone away from her ear, then put it back.

"Don't scream at me. They should have told them who they were. Christ. At least you didn't end up there alone."

"Yeah."

Dominique stifled a smile at the dark pleasure she heard in his voice. Ulrich had held his own against Prentiss. The two of them had looked like bloody warriors when she had arrived. They had almost taken her head off when she had gotten between them. Thank God Hunter had been there and knocked Prentiss out, while she had knocked Ulrich out. If Dominique had been alone, she wouldn't have been able to handle the two enraged men.

When the men had woken up in the hospital, they had been furious and ready to go again. She and Hunter had their hands full trying to calm them down. Ulrich hadn't arrested Prentiss and the other. His men hadn't identified themselves, and when Ulrich arrived, all he had seen was his men fighting, some of them already down, while these unknown men seemed to be beating the rest of them silly. Ulrich had jumped in, and he and Prentiss had gone hand to hand. Although they would never tell Ulrich, Prentiss and his men hadn't been serious, or Ulrich's men would have all been out by the time Ulrich had arrived. She and Hunter had laughed when they told them what happened. Dominique could imagine the two usually contained men fighting it out and not besting the other. Prentiss and his men had been a sore point for Ulrich and his men ever since, and vice versa.

"So, you promise not to arrest them if you see them shadowing Taggart?"

Dominique said.

"As long as they don't break any laws," Ulrich said grudgingly.

Dominique chuckled and pulled into the clinic. "That's all we can ask for. Now I have to have a talk with Mr. Blade."

"Uh-oh, I know that tone. You haven't spoken to him yet."

"No."

"Do I need to send a squad car and an ambulance?" Ulrich sighed.

"No, I don't plan to hurt him too much," Dominique said.

She hung up. Dominique armed her computer to protect the loaner car so no one could get near it without her knowing. She got out of the car and strode across the parking area to the door. She opened the door and walked inside. The waiting room was empty. Going to the desk, she met the eyes of the receptionist.

"Oh, boy. You looked p.o.'ed," Penelope Reid - the receptionist - said.

"Blade around?" Dominique asked.

She tried to figure out how someone who worked in a vet's office could be so immaculate. Penelope's burgundy suit was without a crease, and every piece of her hair was in place. She didn't wear makeup, but her face looked fresh. Penelope's smile was

warm. In the times Dominique had visited, she hadn't seen Penelope without a smile or frazzled. The woman was always calm and smiling.

"He's back there in his office. The last three patients cancelled, so he's catching up on paperwork. Go ahead." Penelope waved.

"Thanks," Dominique said.

She walked down the hall. Absently, she waved at Kelin, who called out a greeting. Reaching Taggart's open office door, she studied him. His hair was now short, but his features were still the same. Carefully, she stepped inside and closed the door. He looked up, grinned, and then his smile faded as he frowned and went to stand.

"Sit down," Dominique said softly.

Taggart sat and looked at her.

Slowly, she walked over to his desk and pushed her hands under each side of her coat to show him her sidearm and knife on either side of her waist.

"I'm very good at what I do, Blade."

Taggart winced and opened his mouth.

"Shut up," she said mildly.

Taggart stared at her, then subsided.

"This "--she tapped a finger against the butt of her gun and knife--" may not convince you that I am qualified at what I do. But --" In a smooth motion, she stepped back and swung her leg in his face. The tip of her heel was inches away from his nose.

Taggart didn't flinch, just watched her steadily.

"I'm trained to protect people, and to find out things when they have problems.

"

She swung her leg and lowered it to the floor, then went around the desk to his chair. Taggart turned to face her. She stopped and put her hand on her hip, pushing back her jacket, making her sidearm on the right and knife on the left visible again.

"Yet, my boyfriend didn't think enough of me to let me know he was being stalked, his property destroyed, and his life possibly in danger." She lowered her eyes,

then raised them again. "Your lack of trust hurts more than anything else." Dominique stiffened her shoulders and turned away.

Taggart grabbed her arm. Dominique stopped and slowly raised her head to him. Taggart didn't look away. He pulled her to him. Dominique's hand flashed up, and she pushed him. He refused to let go. She let him pull her into him. He held her close and looked into her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Dominique. I didn't want you to get involved," he said.

She pushed away from him. He held her.

"I'm already involved. Are we not dating?"

"Yes, bu-"

"No buts. If it involves you, it concerns me. Now, this is what we're going to do. Sienna will be sending Stein to your house to upgrade your system-"

Bu-" He tried to interrupt.

"Shut up and listen to me," Dominique gritted out.

Taggart fell silent.

"The system will be upgraded, and you will be careful. You will have a tracker on you at all times," Dominique finished.

"Can I speak now?" Taggart looked at her.

"Yeah."

He cupped her face, then kissed her nose. "Okay. I 'll do as you say for now, but I will not let this control my life. Our lives."

Dominique leaned into him. She stilled the shudder of fear that coursed through her. The thought of anyone wanting to hurt him was more than she could handle. She put her hand over his heart. The steady beat of it soothed her. Slowly, she pulled back and looked at him.

"Don't ever keep anything from me again," she stated firmly.

Taggart nodded. Slowly, she raised her head and kissed him softly. Taggart's hands tightened around her, and they kissed lazily. She pulled away.

"I've got to get back to work. I cancelled my appointment tonight. Shh..." She put her finger on his lips to still his words. "We have to talk and figure out what's going on. I'll take you out to dinner."

Taggart shook his head and removed her finger. "No. Come to my house, and I'll cook us dinner. Bring Racquel and Giada. It's about time they meet the boys." Taggart watched her steadily.

Dominique knew it wasn't just dinner he was talking about. In all the time they had been dating, she hadn't brought her dogs to meet his. She had been running with him and his dogs, but always left hers home. To her, it was equal to a step of commitment, letting his boys and her girls meet. Looking into his eyes, she made a decision.

"Okay, we'll be there at six," Dominique replied.

Taggart smiled and kissed her. "Good. And I want you to come to Sunday dinner with me tomorrow."

Dominique's eyes widened. He hadn't invited her to his family day before. From the way he described Sundays at his parent's house, it wasn't actually dinner, but more like a get together. They met at noon, cooked together, and talked. Since she and Taggart had been together, they hadn't made any plans except for a run on Sundays. Dominique followed her usual Sunday routine of church, cleaning, and sometimes she went to Sunday dinners with Hunter's family, the Willises. Hunter had mentioned to her that if you bought someone who you were involved with to Sunday dinner, it was a declaration of being serious.

That can't be possibly what he means. We've only know each other a few weeks. We haven't even done it yet.

"Why are you inviting me to Sunday dinner?" she asked suspiciously, and narrowed her eyes.

"It's just dinner, and I want you to meet the rest of my family." Taggart squeezed her and kissed her nose again.

Maybe it means something different in his family. A weird feeling of loss filled her. Dominique refused to believe it was disappointment.

"Who all will be there?"

"My family and a bunch of others. We eat, laugh, and have fun." Taggart grinned.

She couldn't resist that smile. "Okay. What should I bring?"

"Just yourself." Taggart hugged her hard.

Dominique rolled her eyes. Men. She would have to think of something to take with her. Taggart kissed her softly, and she kissed him back. Pulling back, she sighed.

"Gotta go back to work. See you tonight," she said as she kissed him once more, then went back to the door.

"Dominique, how did you find out about my troubles?" Taggart asked thoughtfully.

She stopped. She was hoping he wouldn't ask that question. Turning, she looked at him standing a few steps away from her. She walked back over to him. She took his hand and cupped his cheek.

"Hancock told me after he found out my brake line was cut."

Taggart stiffened, then swore. He tried to jerk away. She held his hand.

"We need to stop seeing each other for a while, until—"

"Shut up," Dominique said mildly, interrupting him.

Taggart stopped.

"We're not letting this control our lives," she told him, just as he had said earlier.

"This is not the same." Taggart's eyes narrowed.

Dominique sighed. "Do we have to have the conversation about me being able to taking care of myself again?"

"No, but—"

She put her finger over his lips. "I'm not letting some whacko break us up. I'm not going anywhere." Dominique paused, dropped her hand from his cheek, and stepped back. "And since you don't believe me that I can take care of myself, let me

give you a demonstration." As she said it, she changed her hold on his hand and used his body as leverage.

Dominique flipped him over her shoulder. Taggart grunted as he hit the floor. She stood over him as he blinked up at her, his mouth open.

"See, I can even protect myself in three inch heels." Dominique showed him her heels.

Taggart continued to look at her, and then he started to laugh. Dominique chuckled and put out her hand to help him up. He grabbed her hand and stood, pressing his body close to her. Taggart lowered his head and said against her lips, "Protect me, Ms. Strongwoman."

She swatted his chest. "Stop it."

"Umm hmmm... I like strong women. You're going to be wearing a tracker too." Taggart kissed her gently.

Dominique nodded and moaned. He held her in his arms loosely and studied her.

"I expect a massage for my aches and pains." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Dominique laughed. "I'll give you the Rule Special."

"What's the Rule Special?" Taggart looked at her.

"Oh, yeah. I've never given you a massage. Be prepared." Dominique laughed.

Taggart chuckled and let her go. Dominique kissed his fingers, opened the office door, and walked out. She looked at him over her shoulder and winked. Taggart chuckled and waved at her. Dominique walked back the way she came, waving at Penelope as she went across the waiting room and out the door. Quickly, she went to her car and got in. The smile faded from her face. She would find out who was stalking Taggart.

Who could it be that can get so close to him and no one would think anything of it?

Hours later Dominique snuggled into Taggart's arms and was still thinking of who could it be. Nothing she had looked into had given her any clues.

"What are you thinking of?" Taggart asked softly.

She looked up at him and saw the smile in his eyes. She didn't want to bring down the great night they'd had so far. The dogs had met and, after checking each other out, they had liked each other. Dominique looked at the dogs, curled up next to each other watching "Iron Chef" on the TV.

"That you made our dogs dinner, too." She looked back at him.

"It was kind of their first meal together. So it had to be special." He shrugged and grinned sheepishly.

Dominique kissed his cheek. He had the same endearing look on his face as he'd had when he had shown her the meal he'd made for the dogs. It was set on a nice white cloth. When she looked at him, he had babbled the same thing, and then led her to the table. The meal he had set out before them was divine looking. He had seated her, and they had eaten. Each dish was more delicious than the last. Dessert was scrumptious--a coconut and raspberry tart. Two of her favorite fruits. She had been speechless that he had created such a special dinner for them. Looking at him now, Dominique was still surprised at all he had done.

"You're a very special man, Taggart Blade. Adorable," she whispered as she kissed him.

Taggart kissed her in return, but pulled back. "Adorable. If that's the word you use to describe me, I'm doing something wrong."

He pouted. Laughing, she kissed his pout, then looked at him.

"That's just one of the words to describe you." She kissed him again. "Kind... smart... thoughtful..." She kissed him after each word, deeper and deeper each time. "Delectable..." She licked his lips. "Biteable." She bit his lip gently. "Sexy." She speared her tongue to duel with his. "And mine." Dominique kissed him hungrily, pouring all her want and need into the kiss.

Taggart growled and hugged her tightly, pulling her into his lap. She ground herself against his hardened shaft. Her pussy flooded with moisture. Drawing back, Dominique watched his eyes. His hands clenched into fists against her side. His jaw

tightened as he gritted his teeth. His body shuddered. She could see his struggle for control. She leaned forward until her lips almost touched his.

"Make love to me," Dominique rasped.

Taggart's eyes flashed with hunger, and his arms tightened.

Chapter Five

Taggart almost lost it right then and there, with those four simple words she'd uttered. Every primal instinct within him roared to be set free, but he tamped them down. He'd been given permission, and he planned on learning all of her secrets. Closing the remaining bit of distance between their mouths, he kissed her gently. His tongue skimmed across her lips before seeking entrance. He hardened as she opened in response to his searching tongue. She tasted so divine.

She purred and arched against him, her breasts rubbing along the smooth fabric of his shirt, searing his skin. Her teeth nipped his tongue, and the jolt from her action shot all the way through his body. He shuddered and pressed her closer to him, loving the way her curves fit against him. When she pulled back, he almost protested, until she straddled him and allowed their lips to rejoin.

His heart felt like it was ready to burst out of his chest. Taggart's hands moved up her thighs and under her loose skirt as the kiss intensified. Her skin was so damned soft and silky smooth. *I could lose myself in all this woman has to offer.* Sliding his hands around to her derriere, Taggart stood, keeping her tight against him. The feel of her satin panties sent another wave of lust through him.

Ignoring the dogs on the floor, he strode through his house and headed for his bedroom. He wasn't going to have his first time with Dominique on the couch or the floor, despite his urge to claim her as his own. Her legs wrapped tightly around him as he carried her up the stairs, her shoes left somewhere on his living room floor. Her teeth nibbled along the skin of his neck, sending shockwaves on a fast course right through him. His cock strained at the confines of his slacks.

Stepping into his room, he walked to the bed and lowered her onto the soft coverlet. His body covered hers, pushing her deeper into the mattress as he joined their mouths for a fiery kiss. Moving his hand down her side, he traced her shape as he imbedded her taste within his soul.

Dominique whimpered beneath him and shifted, as if she wanted to get closer to him. Her hands moved up across his back, nails scoring him through the shirt. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth and kissed his way along her jaw line. Each touch to her body earned him a mewl of appreciation.

"Off," she muttered, tugging at his shirt. "Take it off."

Sitting up, Taggart did as she ordered. He pulled his polo off over his head and dropped it on the floor. Her eyes grew smoky with pleasure as she looked at him, and Taggart was pleased he took such good care of himself. Sucking on her lower lip, Dominique sat up and reached for him. Her small yet strong hands moved across his torso, fingers moving through his chest hair. He shook with the amount of willpower it took to remain still under her searching digits.

He inhaled sharply as she moved lower across his abdomen and toward the button on his slacks. Grabbing her wrists, he halted her hands. Her eyes flashed back up to meet his, and he could see the question in them easily.

"Let me undress you, Dominique Rule."

She blinked once, slowly and coquettishly, before saying, "Go ahead then, Taggart Blade."

Taggart felt as if he'd been given the key to the universe. He wasn't surprised to see the slight tremor in his hands as he reached for the shoulder ties on her shirt. There was nothing he wanted more in the world than this woman watching him with fathomless sultry eyes.

Dominique shivered as his gaze moved over her; there was such raw desire in it, it was tangible. The feelings Taggart Blade evoked within her were damn near off the charts. She licked her lips in anticipation of more pleasure with him. His skin had felt so warm beneath her touch. The coarse chest hair had teased her palms, and she couldn't wait to feel it sliding across her breasts. Her eyes moved over his naked upper half, and she bit back a groan. Taggart Blade was in amazing shape. Well-defined muscles were present everywhere she looked.

So damn tasty.

When his callused fingers skimmed her shoulders as he undid the ties of her shirt, she trembled. There was such emotion in his gaze, and when he lifted off her body, it was nothing but appreciation. She gulped and her pussy throbbed, demanding not just for any touch, but one from the beautifully handsome Taggart Blade.

"Jesus," he bit out as his eyes moved over her naked body. Dominique felt her nipples harden even more under his hungry stare. Grabbing the hem of her skirt, he gently pulled it down, and she lifted her hips to allow him to remove it unimpeded.

Dominique lay there in only her sheer panties and watched the flames in Taggart's eyes flare up into an inferno. She smiled as his tongue snuck out to wet his lips. He moved with reverence as he leaned forward, placing his hands on her hips, and slipped his fingers under the band of her underwear.

"Dominique," he said reverently on a low timbre.

"Planning on just sitting there staring at me?" she asked in the same tone.

"Oh no, Dominique Rule, never that."

She moved her hips, and smiled again when his eyes dropped from hers to where his hands rested against her skin. Her smile vanished when he leaned forward and kissed her, moving along her jaw and down over her chin. Dominique whimpered as he licked down her sternum and the valley between her breasts. Her back arched, and she bit back a scream of pleasure as his mouth closed over one breast and he grazed her nipple with his teeth. It felt like her skin was on fire. She writhed beneath him as he moved from one breast to the next.

"Taggart!" she gasped.

"All in due time, baby. All in due time."

That said, he went back to feasting upon her sensitive breasts until she felt like she was going to explode. Taggart moved down across her belly, kissing his way over her bellybutton and stopping at the edge of her panties. His tongue swept under the band, and she shivered again and pressed up toward him, but he settled one arm across her waist to hold her in place.

Dominique felt boneless. Logically she knew she could get the upper hand, but she didn't want to. Her body was crying out for more of Taggart's touch. She squirmed a little more, but stopped when his tongue moved down the inside of one thigh. Her pussy pulsed and, as his facial hair abraded her skin, she whimpered aloud. Her fingers clutched into the comforter that lay beneath her, knowing full well if she touched him she'd lose what little control she had.

His warm breath flowed over the juncture of her thighs and she mewled. "Taggart," she begged, desperate to have him touch her.

"Spice. You smell like an exotic spice, rich and heady." His tongue snuck out and licked at her through the fine and already damp material. "And you taste even better." Taggart tugged on her panties and pulled them down, moving only so he could remove them totally.

As he stood there, she groaned when he undid his pants and lowered them to the floor. His boxers were plain white, and they stood out starkly against his dark skin. She licked her lips again, eyes closing slightly as she allowed them to linger over the obvious erection he was sporting. Her breath hitched as he pushed the boxers down over his lean hips. He was as large as she'd believed when he'd been pressed against her. She longed to curl her fingers around his length and taste him.

Two steps and he was lowering himself back over her. His heated flesh pressed against her moistness. She spread her legs wider and slid her tongue into his waiting mouth. Her eyes closed as he moved through her mouth like a river, unstoppable. Dominique drew hard on his tongue, wanting desperately to quench the need that had erupted within her soul. He nipped along her jaw and murmured words she didn't understand in her ear.

Her fingers dug into his skin as he pulled back. "What?" she asked breathlessly.

"Protection," he murmured in her ear.

She waited while he reached for a condom. It didn't take him long to sheathe his rigid erection. Their eyes met and held as he once again lowered himself between her spread legs. Dominique whimpered as he slid the head inside her. Inch by torturous

inch, he filled her. She bit her lip as he came to a halt, surrounded by her wetness and unable to go any deeper.

"Are you okay?" he rasped out.

Pleasure blossomed throughout her as she came hard, and it took a few seconds before she could bring herself to answer. "Oh yeah," she answered, her voice deeper with gratification.

"So fucking tight, Dominique. You're so fucking tight around me."

"Taggart," she begged, arching against him. His words sent more electricity across her skin.

He withdrew and sank forward again. She shuddered as he did it again and again.

"Put your feet up on my back, baby. Good girl," he said once she did.

His strokes were faster and harder. Dominique stared at his face. It was set in a grim line of concentration. She dug her nails into his shoulders and met him thrust for thrust. Blinding pleasure erupted throughout her body as he continued his relentless pursuit. Unable to keep her eyes open, she closed them and gave herself over to him.

Taggart took her so close to the edge of bliss, and then brought her back to start all over again. Her skin was burning--air seemed to be just out of reach--and she still wanted more. More of him and what he allowed her to feel.

Her muscles clenched around him as he plunged inside her. "Look at me, Dominique," he ordered. His voice, a low rasp, dragged over her skin like raw silk.

Her lids were heavy, but she managed to do what he commanded. His eyes were swirling with passion as he moved within her and stared down upon her.

"Good girl," he said. "Come with me."

Her body could do nothing but what he instructed. Stars blazed before her eyes as she screamed her release to the room. She heard his grunts before his low roar echoed her cry. As his shaking body collapsed on top of hers, she felt his heart pounding at the same irregular pace as hers, Dominique smiled as she stared up at the ceiling.

Nothing could be more perfect than this.

Taggart held her close as they lay in bed. He glanced at bedside table, saw the clock read 9:17 a.m. Biting back a groan of disappointment, he propped himself up against the headboard. This was the first time he could ever recall wishing he wasn't expected to show up for Sunday at his parents' house. If they didn't leave soon, they would be late. He wanted to remain right where he was, in bed with one Dominique Rule. She'd been so damn responsive to him all night long.

Her body shifted against his, making him well aware of how much he still wanted to explore her body. The sun shone through his wall of windows, casting the bedroom in lots of light. He looked out at the balcony beyond the window on the one entire wall. He wanted to make love to Dominique outside under the sun. She teased his skin, her fingertips full of enticement and promise as they moved across his chest.

"Tell me who you think is stalking you," Dominique's voice broke the companionable silence.

Well, there's a mood killer. "I've already told Rich and Rigger all I can begin to think of, and it isn't much."

"I'm not them, so tell me." Her tone was all business.

"I don't know," he bit off, his voice hard as his frustration at the situation rushed to the surface. Immediately he felt bad for losing his control. He wasn't like that. "I'm sorry-"

"No need to apologize," she interrupted, her palm resting over his heart.

"Anyone that sticks out as being a disgruntled patient?"

Taggart scrunched his brow as he ran through his clients. He should have known she wouldn't let go of her line of questioning. All he could think about was how smooth her skin was pressed against his. Not to mention how soft she was, given what she did for a living. Holding her, he wouldn't imagine her doing what she did.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to concentrate on that when I've got you in my arms, Dominique Rule?" he countered.

"Focus, Blade. We need to figure this out." Her nails skimmed along his skin.

He moved his hand across her back. "I know," he murmured, kissing her forehead. "But *right* this minute?"

Her sultry chuckle reached out and stroked his rigid cock, making him shudder in anticipation. "No, not this second."

He groaned aloud as she sat up, reached for a condom, and sheathed him before rising over him and lowering herself upon his hard shaft. They could be late to his parents'. "Ohhh," he moaned in pleasure.

"I'll drive home and you follow. Then we'll take your vehicle," Dominique said.

Taggart felt like pouting. "Why are you going home?" He watched her slip on her shirt, covering her firm breasts from his lecherous gaze.

"So I can change and take my dogs home. Meet me there," she ordered and walked away without another word.

Glancing at his dogs, he shook his head in dismay as he noticed their canine grins. "Traitors," he muttered affectionately. Their expressions didn't change one bit, and Taggart sighed dramatically before heading toward his closet to pick out his outfit for today's dinner.

It didn't take him long, and soon he was standing at Dominique's door waiting for her to answer it. When she did, he did a double take at the vision before him. She wore a red dress with spaghetti straps that tied behind her neck. The plunging neckline allowed him the slightest glimpse of her breasts. The skirt portion had designs on it and was a handkerchief hem. On her right wrist, she wore three bracelets, two red and one larger black one in the middle. Her hair was pulled back from her face allowing him full access to her beauty.

"Wow," he breathed, "you're absolutely beautiful." Taggart wanted to strip her bare and love her like she deserved. His will was tested as he pressed his lips to hers. Everything within him screamed, "Take her!"

Her smile was almost shy as they separated. "Thank you. You look pretty nice yourself."

He grinned, glad he had picked what he did: nice jeans, a white dress shirt, red tie, and a tan leather blazer with a matching red pocket handkerchief. They complimented each other very well.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Actually, can you take a quick look at Racquel? When we got back here, it looked like she was favoring her front right foot."

He frowned. Taggart was extremely impressed with her dogs. "Of course. Where is she?"

"In the back. I'll be right there. I just have to grab my shoes."

Taggart glanced down and smiled at the sight of her pointed toes shining up at him.

She grinned. "Had to make sure they dried fully."

Taggart clenched his fist to keep from sliding it through her hair and kissing her until they forgot who they were, his family Sunday be damned. "I'll be with the dogs."

"Be right with you."

Taggart placed Racquel's leg back on the ground and looked up to see Dominique standing there watching them. He sent her an encouraging smile. "I don't think there's any reason to worry. Maybe she stepped on something sharp. I checked her out and can't find a thing wrong, not even with the pad of her foot." He caressed Racquel's head and moved toward his blazer where he'd placed it on the rail. "Ready then?" he asked as he slid it on.

"Ready," she said with a nod. As he walked toward her, she pressed a quick kiss to his lips, "Thank you for looking at her."

He groaned as his body tingled with the desire to kiss her again. "You're welcome," he muttered. Praying for strength, he gestured for her to go ahead.

The dogs led the way back into the house and, as they left, Taggart could hear the alarm system on her house arm. He held the door for her and smiled at the flash of one brown leg as she climbed into his SUV. As he started the engine, he stole another glance at the woman beside him. She made his heart skip a beat and his pulse race. If this was what his father felt when he looked at his mother, then Taggart finally understood. Understood the constant touching, kisses, heated looks, all of it.

The drive to his parents' house was filled with light conversation. However, Dominique fell silent as he pulled up into the large circular drive and parked in his usual spot. Taggart got out and was very pleased she waited for him to get her door. After he helped her out, she opened the back passenger door and pulled out a covered container.

"What's that?" he asked, unsure of how it even got into his vehicle.

Dominique arched a brow, but declined to answer. He was about to ask her again, but he heard a noise behind him. He turned in time to see the front door open, and out stepped Layla. Dominique closed the car door, and he put his hand under her elbow. They walked up the stairs onto the massive porch. Taggart watched as Layla greeted Dominique.

Dominique smiled at seeing a familiar face.

"Hi, Dominique. Welcome to mayhem." Synclair laughed, her light blue eyes twinkling.

"Now, you shouldn't talk about yourself that way," Dominique returned.

Synclair laughed and took the dish out of her arms and handed it to Taggart.

"Take this, little bro," Layla said.

Taggart sighed. Dominique bit her lip to stifle a laugh. She knew from experience the Blade sibs playful bickering, calling each other "baby" or "little bro" or "little sis." When Taggart and she met some of his sibs, she was curious and asked him why

the teasing bothered him. She had pointed out that he did the same to those younger than him. He had grinned and said it didn't actually bother him and the others, but it was tradition to make like it did. Dominique had thought it was cute and funny. Watching Taggart and Layla tease each other, Dominique again felt as she did each time she saw the Blade sibs interact--a sense of regret and sadness. She had cut off ties with her parents, and by extension, with her own siblings. She didn't miss her parents. They had a volatile relationship. She did miss her sibs, but knew it was too late after all these years to try to mend fences. Dominique started as a hand landed on her shoulder.

"You okay?" Taggart whispered against the side of her face.

Dominique shook off the feeling and focused back on the present. She turned her head to Taggart.

"I'm okay," she replied.

She stared at his concerned eyes, then dropped her gaze to his lips. Taggart leaned into her, and she met him, kissing him softly.

"Come on, break it up." Layla's voice intruded.

Dominique groaned and jerked back. She had forgotten they weren't alone. Taggart's hand slid behind her neck, pulling her back to him. He kissed her again, thoroughly. Dominique moaned and melted against him.

"Damn, Thinker. Get a room," Hancock's voice boomed.

Thick arms slid around Dominique's waist and pulled her away from Taggart.

"Hey, you're just jealous," Taggart growled.

"You know it. Hell, if I'd seen her first, she'd be my woman." Hancock laughed, turned her to him, and kissed her cheek. "When are you going to leave this louse and give us other Blade's a chance?"

Dominique leaned back in Hancock's arms and looked at his dark grey, laughing eyes. Hancock winked at her.

"You wouldn't be able to handle me, Hancock." Dominique patted his cheek.

Hancock threw back his head and laughed, and the others joined them. He picked her up and swung her around. Dominique gasped and held onto his arms.

"Welcome to the Blade clan, Dominique Rule," Hancock said, and kissed her cheek again.

Dominique opened her mouth to protest. Hancock passed her into another set of arms. She stilled her words as she locked eyes with fathomless dark green.

"Shhh... Dominique, protesting won't do you any good." Moore Blade's deep voice rumbled out of a massive chest.

Dominique found she was again enraptured by his very presence. It had been that way from the first time she met him, even before she started dating Taggart. There was something mysterious, sensual, and aloof, yet gentle, about him. The combination made for a very intense man. A small smile curved Moore's lips. Then he kissed her cheek softly and shifted her to another set of arms.

A warm brush of lips on her cheek drew her gaze from Moore's.

"Yeah, he's a handsome man. But damn, darling, at least look at me. I'm darn sexy myself." Rigger pouted playfully.

"You sexy thing, you." Dominique laughed and kissed his cheek.

"Hey! I got a kiss in return. Eat your heart out, boys," Rigger crowed, and winked at her. "So when are you going to let me come redesign your gardens?" Rigger asked.

"I can't afford you," Dominique said.

"Who said anything about money?" Rigger looked offended, then grinned. "I'll be by soon."

"You better watch out, or you'll find your garden dug up and redesigned without your permission," an unfamiliar soft voice said.

"Pash," Rigger said, and winked at her. "This is Alton, the oldest, who thinks he's the boss." Rigger passed her to another set of arms.

Dominique looked at Alton and blinked. He looked exactly like Moore. Taggart had mentioned there were seven sets of twins in the family. Three of those were identical. Alton was the oldest by three minutes. Moore, his twin, was the second oldest. Dominique narrowed her eyes and studied Alton Blade. Alton grinned.

Dominique's instincts kicked in. He and Moore may look alike, but she already knew she would never mistake them for each other. It was in their eyes and presence. Moore made you want to confide in him, while everything about Alton screamed danger. She held still and let her eyes show she understood what he was. A warrior. Alton's smile widened, and he nodded his head slightly.

"We'll have to talk later, about Taggart's problem," Alton whispered in a voice so soft, she could have imagined it.

Dominique knew she hadn't. It was the same tone she used when she was in hostile combat. She nodded her head, and she saw they had a perfect understanding of each other.

"You will do, Dominique Rule. You will do," Alton said.

"Come on, stop hogging her," another unfamiliar voice said.

Alton brushed his lips against her cheek and turned, handing her to someone else. The first thing she noticed was the blue tipped hair that hung to his shoulders. She blinked, then grinned.

"You must be Jareau," Dominique said.

"The hair gave it away." Jareau grinned.

"Yep. That, and you look like the male version of your twin, Layla," Dominique said.

"Hey, I'm offended by that," Layla said behind her.

"She jealous she's not as handsome as me." Jareau looked behind her and made a rude noise.

"Don't make me take you out, little bro," Layla warned.

"Also, I'm less violent than she is." Jareau looked back at Dominique. "They said you were beautiful." Jareau studied her. "You're much too good for Thinker. You haven't met Thayne, because he was out of town. But what I can't understand is why you visited some of the sibs, but never me, Alton, or Kourtnei?"

Dominique tried to make sense of the rapid change of conversation. Taggart had warned her that Jareau tended to change conversations midstream. As far as Alton and

Kourtnei were concerned, she just hadn't had an opportunity to make time to meet them yet. Dominique bit her lip, not wanting to admit why she hadn't gone to see Jareau.

"I haven't had a chance yet," she said instead of the truth.

Jareau cocked his head to the side and studied her, then grinned. "Don't believe them. I don't make everyone who comes by glow." He looked at his family. "Only those who I don't like, or who need to be taught a lesson." He grinned fiercely, then looked back at Dominique with a playful expression on his face. "You, I might like. Come by my lab sometime."

"No," all the people on the porch said together.

"Don't make me come by you all's houses," Jareau warned.

"No!" the voices on the porch said frantically together.

"That's better." Jareau grinned. He looked at Dominique again. "Really, I'm harmless. Come by and I'll show you how to make a car float in the air." He waggled his eyebrows.

"I'll be by. Can you show me how to make Taggart's float?" Dominique laughed.

"Definitely," Jareau said, and kissed her cheek.

"Now, none of that," Nicolas said as he took her from Jareau. His green eyes twinkled. "You should not aid and abet the scientist in the family. He's already enough of a problem."

Strong arms plucked her out of Nicolas's grasp.

"You just won't stop prodding him," Darryl countered, kissed her cheek, and looked at her. "My twin likes to live dangerously."

"At least I'm the better looking one," Nicolas griped.

"Says who? I'm glad I don't have your ugly mug," Darryl fired back.

"You wish you did." Nicolas made a rude kissing noise.

"Now, now, children. We want to make a good impression. Well, at least those of us she hasn't met yet would like to. The rest of you, we already lost hope for," a familiar voice said.

Dominique was passed to strong arms. The bickering continued behind her. Twinkling dark grey eyes met hers, and her eyes traced the features of Taggart. He still made her breath catch each time she saw him. Dominique frowned. Something seemed different about him. He smiled, and dimples popped up on each side.

"So, are you going to kiss me?" he asked.

Dominique's eyes narrowed. The bickering stopped, and the others on the porch went silent. She studied him carefully, and then it dawned on her.

"Sure. But then I'll have to deck you, since you're not Taggart. Thayne, I presume."

"Yeah, Taggart's twin. Nice to finally meet you, Dominique. I see big bro told you about me." The man laughed and kissed her cheek.

"He talked about you a lot, but never mentioned you were identical. We'll be talking about that." Dominique looked behind her at Taggart.

He blew her a kiss and winked. She gave him a look. Thayne laughed, and she returned her attention to him.

"Tag's a pain in the butt," Thayne said, then looked at her somberly. "He's yours now."

Dominique opened her mouth to protest.

"Don't lie to me, or to yourself, Dominique. I know my brother." Thayne shook his head and put her down.

Before she could say anything, she was hugged.

"These Neanderthals, passing you around like a doll." Shana glared at her brothers. "Wait until I tell Mom."

The men groaned and started to make excuses. Shana looked back at her and winked.

"Tattle tail. God, Shana, we might be the last of the family, but don't live up to being the baby and telling," Rissa said as she hugged Dominique. "Nice to see you again, Niq."

"Since I was the last born, I am the youngest, and proud of it," Shana countered.

"Only by five minutes," Rissa said, exasperated.

"So?" Shana said, then they looked at each other and laughed.

Dominique looked at the two identical women and shook her head. She didn't know what was so funny. It must be a twin thing.

"Don't worry. We don't get the joke either," a sultry voice said.

Dominique looked at the stunning woman who was studying her carefully. The woman's light blue eyes met hers again, then she put her hands on her hips.

"Am I going to like you?" she asked.

"Maybe, but the better question is, I'll like you, Kaley." Dominique raised an eyebrow.

Kaley's face didn't change expression as she continued to look at Dominique. She arched an eyebrow.

"Taggart mentioned that you, Alton, Thayne, and Jareau own Eclipse. Maybe you'll think of coming to work with Cerberus." Dominique took out a card and handed it to Kaley.

"Why would we come work for the competition?" Kaley took it and flipped it behind Dominique.

Dominique didn't look behind her to see where it went. She studied Kaley.

"You think you're our competition," Dominique smiled.

Kaley gave her a false smile. "Not think. Know."

"Okay, so you are. But I said with, not for. Talk it over with your partners, and we can set up a meeting with mine," Dominique said.

"You've got balls. I'll give you that. *Maybe* I will like you. And don't worry. I tend to grow on people," Kaley smiled genuinely.

Dominique laughed, because she had the same effect on people. When Taggart had mentioned that his sibs were owners of Eclipse, she had been shocked. She had never put it together. Her and her partners had been watching Eclipse. They were well run and would be a perfect fit to become part of Cerberus. If Eclipse joined them, they would not only get Jareau Blade, a brilliant scientist, to help boost their Research and

Development division, but also Alton and Kaley. She glanced back at Alton, and he was watching her. Dominique could practically hear Sienna in her head, saying the only person who came close to what she could do was Alton Blade.

Watching Alton, Dominique figured he would probably say he was the best. It would be interesting to see if he or Sienna was right. She returned her attention to Kaley, whom she felt like she knew because of Hunter's comments about the woman. If Kaley and Hunter had to work together, it would at first be them trying to out do each other. Yet, in her gut, Dominique knew once they realized they would be an unbeatable team together, they would be in sync and help build Cerberus even more. She glanced at Thayne. He did the investigations for Eclipse, just as she did for Cerberus. From the research they had done on Eclipse, Dominique knew Thayne was also the decision maker for the company, just as she was. It was impulse that had made her give Kaley her card. When Kaley flicked it behind her, she knew it was directed to Thayne. Her partners trusted her to do what was needed to make them grow. If Thayne was any good at what he did, he would have all the details on Cerberus soon, and they would be talking.

"Uh-uh, no business," Synclair said as she smacked Kaley's arm.

"Ow! Twin abuse," Kaley said, rubbing her arm.

"Like that hurt your hard hide." Synclair snorted. "See, what I told you before is true. I am the nice twin." Synclair rolled her eyes.

Kaley pushed her. Synclair countered and swung her around.

"Yeah, we're all big children when we get around each other," Layla intoned.

"You have to excuse them. They don't know how to act."

Layla hugged Dominique again, then released her. Dominique chuckled and walked over to Taggart. He put her in front of him. She leaned back against his chest and watched the rest of the Blade sibs. They were leaning, sitting, and in Kaley and Synclair's case, trying to trip each other. Looking at them, you could see they were related. Their features were all similar. She looked to her right, at Thayne, who was chatting with Taggart. She made a mental note to ask Taggart why he hadn't mentioned

he was one of the identical twins. Dominique studied the family. The twins, whether consciously or not, had paired up into matching sets. She looked around at them by age order.

The oldest, Alton and Moore, leaned next to each other in an intense discussion. Layla and Jareau sat next to each other on the porch with their heads bent over some gadget Jareau was holding. Rigger's lanky frame shifted out of the way of Hancock's punch. They were play boxing with each other. Taggart and Thayne were still engrossed in their conversation. Taggart looked down and leaned forward, kissing her softly before returning to his conversation.

Dominique went back to studying the rest of them. Kaley and Synclair leaned against the side of the house, talking. Nicolas and Darryl had their arms around each other shoulders and were singing some song into their hands they held like a mike. Rissa and Shana were sitting on the rail next to Taggart. They were laughing.

"Hey, Niq." Shana motioned for her to come over.

Dominique disentangled herself from Taggart and joined them. They shifted, making space for her between them. She took a seat.

"So, you ready to meet the parents?" Rissa asked, her eyes twinkling.

The look on her face made Dominique uneasy. "It's no big deal. From the way Taggart has talked about them, they seem nice."

Rissa and Shana exchanged a look, then looked at her, eyes still sparkling.

"Love the outfit," Shana said, and then touched her hair. "When are you going to let me do something fun with your hair."

Dominique rolled her eyes. Shana had been her hairdresser for years and was always trying to talk her into something.

"I'm not letting you dye my hair," Dominique said firmly.

"You're no fun." Shana pouted.

They laughed.

Shana put her arm over Dominique's shoulder and leaned closer to her.

"We all get together every Sunday here at the folks'. As you can tell, we're a fairly large family, and this is only the sibs. In the house are the aunts, uncles, and cousins." Shana waved to the house. "It's time for the family to connect and just have fun."

Dominique got an uneasy feeling. Shana laughed. Rissa spoke, catching her attention.

"Did Taggart tell you it was no big deal, coming to Sunday?" Rissa asked.

"Yeah," Dominique replied.

Shana and Rissa exchanged a look again. The feeling of unease increased.

"Nicolas brought Kourtnei to Sundays, and I brought Marquis," Shana said.

"You mean Marquis, your husband, and Kourtnei, Nicolas's wife?" Dominique asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Yep. We brought them when we knew it was serious," Shana said gently.

"Uh-oh. That's the look Hancock mentioned when he told you about Taggart's 'mishaps'. It's better than he said it was. Teach me that look. Please." Rissa laughed.

"Hey, this is where you all went," a jovial voice said.

"I should have known you all were ganging up on poor Dominique," a husky female voice added.

Dominique looked back at the open door. Marquis and Kourtnei came out onto the porch and looked around. Marquis smiled a soft grin as he looked at Shana. Dominique looked at Shana and saw the same soft look of love on her face. Shana held out her hands, and Marquis came over to her. He kissed her softly on the lips and leaned on the rail next to her. Dominique looked back at Kourtnei and saw she was heading for Nicolas. Nicolas straightened from his brother.

"Are you behaving?" Kourtnei asked.

"Like I ever behave." Nicolas gave her a rougish grin and pulled her into his arms, kissing her.

The rest of the siblings whooped and hollered. Kourtnei laughed breathlessly and smacked him on the chest, pulling away.

"You yahoos have been keeping Dominique out here to yourselves. Wait until Mama Blade finds out." She looked over at Dominique. "Oh, it's the look. What has Taggart done now?"

The rest of the people on the porch looked at her. Taggart came over and stood before her. Dominique glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest.

Chapter Six

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Shana and Marquis move.

"It's safer over there." Rissa said as she jumped down and walked away.

"What's going on? Why does she have the look?" Hancock asked.

"Thinker didn't tell her that bringing someone to Sunday dinner was as good as a declaration of intent," Shana volunteered.

Taggart winced after Shana spoke.

"Uh-oh," the voices on the porch said, then fell silent.

Dominique was uncomfortable being the center of attention, but didn't let it show. Taggart stepped closer and put his hands on the rail to each side of her.

"You mad?" Taggart asked.

"What do you think?" Dominique rolled her eyes.

"I think you need to stop trying to act as if this doesn't mean anything," Taggart said softly.

Dominique turned her head away from his gentle gaze. He turned her head back with his right hand.

"There is more here, and I want us to take it as far as it will go. Neither one of us expected a serious relationship, but that's what we're having. If you would be honest with yourself, you'd admit it," Taggart said in the same soft tone.

Dominique opened her mouth to respond, then looked behind Taggart at his siblings, shamelessly eavesdropping. They caught her looking and all smiled at her.

"We should have discussed this before coming here," she said, turning her attention back to Taggart. "You told me it wasn't a big deal, and now you spring this on me here with your family, your siblings listening to each word we say." She waved behind him.

Taggart looked behind his shoulder. "Leave."

The siblings looked at each other, then at him.

"No," Alton said smugly.

He leaned against the wall. The rest of the sibs mimicked him.

"Big bro, the spokesman for the Blade sibs. Nosy butts," Taggart growled.

A round of "yeah" and "yeps" went down the line of the Blade siblings.

Taggart sighed, then looked back at her. "Ignore them. Focus on us."

"Fine. You should have told me what today would mean, Taggart, and let me decide if I wanted to come or not," Dominique insisted.

"Would it have mattered if you knew or not? Would you have not come if you knew?" Taggart asked.

Dominique thought about it, then sighed. "I would have still come, but at least I would've known that it mattered. That it was the next step for me. What it meant to us," she said softly.

"Ah, baby, everything we have matters to me. To us." Taggart smiled, then kissed her softly.

"I don't like to be pushed, or rushed," Dominique whispered against his lips.

"I know, but I like to push and rush." Taggart chuckled.

Dominique pushed him. Laughing, he held her and kissed her thoroughly. Dominique ignored the chorus of "Ahh..." behind Taggart, and the hollering.

"What's going on here?" a mellow voice asked, cutting through the noise.

Dominique looked around Taggart. The woman looked curious and was scanning the faces on the porch. Her features were like theirs, and her curly hair hung down her back. The sibs started whistling and looking at their nails. Dark grey eyes met Dominique's. Dominique gulped. She knew who she was looking at and wondered how much the woman had heard.

"Move," Dominique hissed, and pushed at Taggart.

Taggart didn't move, just looked over his shoulder. "Hey, Mom. They were acting out, as usual."

'Turncoat," "Liar," and "Uh-uh. I have nothing to do with it," came from the sibs.

"Hush up. I'm your mother, and I know what he says is true." She looked at each of her kids. She looked back at Taggart and said, "Introduce me to this woman you brought to Sunday, Thinker baby."

Taggart looked back at Dominique and winked. He helped her off the rail, then picked up the large bowl she had brought off of the table close by. He guided her over to his mother.

"Mom, this is Dominique Rule. Dominique, this is my mom, Reba Blade," Taggart said, pride in his voice.

Dominique gulped to clear her throat. "Mrs. Blade, thanks for having me. This is for you."

"Pash, none of this Mrs. Blade stuff. Call me Reba." Reba Blade waved her hand and took the dish from Dominique. "Oh, thanks for bringing something. What is it?"

"Tarts. They're for dessert. I wasn't sure what you all would like, so I made coconut, pineapple, and guava," Dominique replied.

"You made them? When did you have time?" Taggart whispered.

"Yesterday afternoon after seeing you. I cook when I'm pissed," Dominique hissed, and gave him a look.

Taggart grinned sheepishly and said nothing else. Reba spoke, drawing Dominique's attention.

"You made them." Reba sounded pleased. "Oh, I can't wait to try them."

"She made them," Darryl said, coming closer.

"He's the chef in the family, so excuse him. You can take it, Darryl, but no tasting until later." His mother rolled her eyes.

Darryl took the bowl from his mom and went back to lean against the house. He held the bowl and looked tempted to peek inside.

Reba pulled Dominique into a hug, then leaned back and looked at her.

"He didn't tell you what him bringing you here meant, did he?" Reba asked.

Dominique's eyes widened. "You heard?"

"Heard what?" Reba frowned.

Dominique quickly backtracked. "Um, nothing." Curiosity got the better of her. "How did you know he didn't tell me?"

"She's the mother," the sibs said together.

"I'm the mother," Reba laughed and winked.

"Now, honey, don't scare off Thinker's lady," a gruff voice said.

"I'm not. Your children have her out here on the porch while their poor mama was slaving over a hot stove." Reba looked back over her shoulder.

"Why are they *my* children when they're getting in trouble?" the gruff voice asked, laughing.

A man came through the door behind Reba. He stopped and put his hand around Reba's waist. Dominique held back a gasp. She was looking at what Taggart would look like when he got older, except for the man's eyes. Still devastatingly handsome, but older.

"They get their mischief gene from you," Reba replied.

'Big fat lie," the man said, green eyes twinkling.

"This is my dad, Gideon Blade. Dad, this is Dominique."

"I won't try to hug or pick you up. I'm sure my sons and daughters" --he looked around at his kids, then back at her-- "have already done that. Besides, you're looking a little overwhelmed." Gideon put out his hand to Dominique.

"Not overwhelmed. Hunter Willis is my best friend." She laughed and shook his hand.

Gideon held her hand. "Ah, so you know about large families. We go way back with the Willises. For a time, people thought we were competing to see who would have the most kids. The Willises have us beat, hands down." He laughed, then tugged her away from Taggart. "Since you aren't overwhelmed."

He hugged her and picked her up off the floor. Dominique gasped and chuckled. Gideon winked at her, then said to the others, "Time to work for our dinner." He laughed and, still holding Dominique, walked back into the house.

Dominique's eyes widened as she took in all the people in the house as they passed various rooms.

"This is Dominique, everyone--Thinker's Lady," Gideon called out as he passed each room.

People called out hellos. Gideon didn't stop, just kept going. Before she knew it, Dominique found herself in the kitchen. Gideon put her down on a stool and handed her a knife.

"Now, you stay there and cut up some veggies." Gideon winked at her. "Me and the boys will work on the grill. Come on, gents." Gideon, his sons, and the other men coming into the room from other parts of the house, exited through the door off the kitchen. Dominique blinked and looked at the women in the room, who had come in from the other rooms--Taggart's sibs, his mom, and other unfamiliar faces. One by one, the women introduced themselves. Dominique stopped trying to remember after the sixth person.

"Don't worry. You'll know everyone soon enough," Reba said, and patted her hand.

Dominique smiled at her and started to cut veggies. She remembered when she had met the Willises, whose family was larger than this one. It took her some time to get all the names straight. Heck, it seemed that each time she went over to the Willises, she was meeting someone new. Dominique cut veggies as she watched the women cooking. They moved around the kitchen effortlessly, laughing and teasing. Someone asked her a question, and she answered and found herself pulled into the conversation. Absently, she watched as Gideon, who had come inside, snuck up behind his wife. He swung her around and kissed her.

"Get a room!" the women yelled.

"Jealous." Gideon raised his head and winked at Dominique.

He swung Reba against him and started to dance in place, his head against her hair. Reba curled into him and held him. Dominique stared at them. She could see they were in love.

"They're always like that." Layla nudged Dominique. "Hell, they even make out when they leave us messages on the answering machine."

Dominique looked at her in surprise. Layla laughed at her expression.

"Oh yeah, they do. But they're in love." Layla shrugged and went back to fixing the salad. Dominique looked back at Reba and Gideon. A sense of longing filled her.

Is that what Taggart will look like with his wife? I want it to be m-

Dominique cut off the thought, looking away from the dancing couple. She couldn't afford to open herself like that. Not again.

"Time to eat," Gideon's voice boomed.

Dominique looked up. Gideon held Reba, still dancing. He picked up a bowl, and they held it together. He put up their joined hands, and they sashayed to the door leading to the yard. Reba laughed. The women in the kitchen had an indulgent look on their faces. Men came back into the kitchen. They went to various women, picked up a dish, and they danced out of the room.

Shana laughed, winked at her, and let Marquis lead her out of the room, dancing while she held a bowl of peas. Kourtnei rolled her eyes and grabbed a dish before Nicolas grabbed her and spun her into his arms, swaying before they left the room. The women left looked at each other, then each grabbed a dish and linked hands and shook their hips, heading out the door two by two. Dominique shook her head and put the rest of the veggies in the bowl she had, picked it up, and stood.

"Shall we?" Taggart asked.

She turned, holding the bowl she had, and saw him holding out his hand. She put her hand in his, and he took the bowl with the other.

"Is this some weird sort of ritual?" Dominique asked.

Taggart pulled her close and swayed with her. "Ummm... not really. It's a way to cop a feel." He grabbed her butt.

Dominique yelped and smacked him. Taggart laughed, and then he sobered.

"It's showing we care, playing, and being together." His eyes were heated.

Dominique's heart pounded, and she let him hold her close. He swayed with her, and they went outside. Someone took the bowl from her. She glanced around the yard with the adults still paired off and dancing. Those she assumed were single were putting the food on log tables. She recognized most of Taggart's siblings. She looked back at Taggart as he continued to dance with her. He was watching her. He lowered his head and kissed her. Dominique's hands clenched on his shoulders, and she reveled in his taste.

"Get a room!" voices screamed.

She jumped and looked around. Those getting the food ready heckled.

"Jealous!" the couples dancing and kissing called back.

She looked back at Taggart. His eyes were twinkling.

"My family." He shrugged.

"They're sweet."

"Let's eat," Gideon called.

"Yep. Crazy too. Come on, before they eat it all." Taggart grinned.

Dominique laughed and joined him in the buffet line. She picked out lots of different foods, and then they went to a table set up in the massive yard and sat. As she ate, she laughed and talked with Taggart's family.

Hours later, Dominique sat in one of the lawn chairs and looked around the yard. Taggart, his brothers, and a few of his cousins were talking a distance away. Taggart looked at her and winked. She blew him a kiss.

"So you're Thinker's lady?" a raspy voice asked.

Dominique looked over at the older man who sat next to her. She tried to place his name.

"Yes, Mr. Joshua," she replied.

Dominique glanced down, then looked up quickly.

"It's GraUnc, baby. I'm the oldest living Blade." He chuckled.

"Okay, GraUnc." Dominique bit her lip, unsure if she should say anything.

Finally, she leaned into him and whispered, "Your fly is open."

"Don't worry. It has to get up before it can get out." He grinned irreverently.

From her experience of the Blades who she knew already, and those she'd met today, Dominique knew the perfect reply.

"If it comes out, GraUnc, I might have to shoot it off," Dominique said.

GraUnc's mouth fell open, and then his eyes widened. He started to laugh.

"You fit right in, girly." He chuckled.

Dominique joined him in laughing. Suddenly, GraUnc looked over at the tables and stood abruptly.

"Dessert. Gotta get some before these vultures," he said, and took off at a fast clip across the yard to the table where they were putting out the desserts.

GraUnc and Darryl arrived at the table at the same time. Dominique laughed as GraUnc smacked Darryl on the arm as he reached for cake, then gestured to himself. Darryl picked up another plate and put dessert on the two plates. GraUnc pointed out what he wanted, and Darryl put it on the plate.

"GraUnc is a trip," Reba Blade said.

Dominique looked to her right in time to see Gideon sit in the same chair GraUnc had left and pull Reba into his lap.

"He's your family," Gideon said.

Dominique looked at them, confused.

"I can see we've lost you. Blade is Reba's family. I made a sacrifice and gave up my name and took hers when we were married."

"Liar. I had to bribe you with lots of sex." Reba smacked his chest.

"It was worth it, too." Gideon captured her hand and kissed her fingers.

"Stop, before you scandalize Thinker's lady." Reba cuddled into him, laughing.

"I think hanging out with the fam today already did that," Gideon said.

"No, it's nice to see," Dominique said.

Reba leaned into her husband and looked at her. Dominique held still, trying not to squirm under her perusal.

Reba spoke. "I'm sure by now GraUnc has told you he's the oldest Blade."

Dominique nodded.

Reba continued. "Before I married Gideon, I wanted to keep the Blade name and asked him if he would change his. He agreed. Thankfully." She kissed Gideon, then spoke again. "The Blades are one of the founding families of Trescott Cove. My Blade ancestors, along with twenty other families, founded Trescott Cove. You probably know a few of the families. The Willises, Montgomerys—"

Dominique raised an eyebrow, shocked. She only knew one Montgomery family.

Reba, reading her expression, answered her unspoken question. "Yes, the Montgomery sisters who own the law firm that is in the Caspain Towers adjacent to your offices." She smiled sadly. "I knew their parents. They were lovely people." She cleared her throat. "The Chadwick and the Douglass families are also part of the founding families. It's a shame what that bitch James Douglass married tried to do to Jem Maxwell. He should have stayed single after his first wife died, instead of marrying that she-devil. Jamie would roll over in his grave to see what she did."

Dominique's eyes widened. She hadn't known that Taggart's family knew the Douglasses or Chadwick's. She also didn't know they were among the founding families of the town.

Reba smiled. "Yeah, we know about what you did to help out with Jem. We're glad the she-devil failed." She paused, then continued. "It's a shame. Before the elder Chadwick's got so caught up in making money, they had time to appreciate life."

"Reba," Gideon said.

"What? It's true. At least now they realize life is too precious and are starting to try to reach out again."

Dominique was confused.

"Usually, we and the the elder Willises meet once a week for lunch at one of our houses. These last few months, the elder Chadwicks have reached out to restart our friendship. I had missed them. Me and Bobbie Sr. went to school together. Our kids went to school together and are friends. It was us, the older ones, who grew apart. Not by our choice, but the older Chadwicks." She looked at her husband. "At least now we

can rekindle our friendship." Reba looked at Dominique again. "You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all of this."

Dominique wondered, but wasn't about to say so.

Reba and Gideon looked at each other again, then back at her. "The Willises speak highly of you, and the Chadwicks told us what you did to help Chad and Jem. Thinker is the middle of our seven twins. He and Defender--Thayne--are the middle of our family. Without a middle, the beginning and end would fall." Reba leaned forward and took her hands. "Can you help find out who is doing this to our baby?"

Dominique was surprised. Taggart had told her his parents didn't know what was happening to him.

"The kids think they can hide from us what's happening. They didn't even tell Thayne at first, since he was away on a case, but at least they told him, eventually," Gideon grumbled. "We knew something was wrong. Once we cornered the rest of the kids, they told us what Taggart has been going through, and that you didn't know about any of it until last night. We'll be talking to him before the night is done." Gideon looked over to where Taggart was with some of the family, then back at her. "But we wanted your opinion."

Dominique looked at their concerned faces. She gripped Reba's hands and reached out for Gideon. She told them the little she knew. They listened and didn't interrupt.

"I will find who is doing this and deal with them," Dominique said firmly.

Reba and Gideon nodded.

"Thank you, Dominique. I know he's a man now, but he'll always be our baby. Our middle baby." Reba turned her face against her husband, then looked back at her. "I'm pleased my Thinker has chosen you as his."

"He has very good taste, and always goes after what he wants." Gideon winked.

Dominique didn't know what to say.

Before she could form any words, Reba glanced away, then said, "Ah, here are your gifts."

Dominique glanced over, startled. Reba and Gideon stood. Confused, Dominique looked at what Moore, Alton, Darryl, and Hancock had put on the lawn just a little distance from her. The cherry wood gleamed in the sun. Intricate carvings were all over the frame. She glanced at the four cushions in a dark brown and pale yellow pattern held by Layla, Kaley, Synclair, and Rissa. She looked back at Taggart's parents in awe.

"I can-"

"Now sweetie, you can't refuse the swing. It's a gift that Gideon made especially for you. If your back deck is anything like Taggart's, it will look great there," Reba said.

Dominique looked back at the swing, then at Gideon. She stepped over to him and hugged him.

"Thank you." She turned to Reba. "Thank you both." Dominique hugged her too.

Reba laughed and returned her hug, patting her back. Dominique stepped back and looked at the swing in awe. She and Taggart had spent many nights in the two-seater he had on his back deck. It was a similar design to this one. He had mentioned his dad made it, but she'd never expected them to make her one. She glanced up as Taggart slid his hand around her waist from behind. He kissed her cheek softly.

"Now for my gift," Reba said.

Dominique looked back at her, confused.

"That was from Gideon, the show off." She said it lovingly. "Mine isn't as snazzy, but-" She motioned.

Nicolas and Rigger came forward holding a massive canvas. Dominique gasped and took a step forward. The colors on the painting seemed to reach out to her.

"How?" she asked.

"Taggart gave me a pic of your dogs. He talked about them so much. You should have brought them. We were looking forward to meeting them. Bring them next time." Dominique could hear it wasn't a request.

She glanced at Reba.

Reba shrugged. "The rest was easy. I just imagined his dogs and yours, frolicking by the lake together."

Dominique looked back at the painting that showed the lake Taggart and she shared, and their dogs. Racquel and Mario were chasing each other, while Flay and Giada lay next to each other, watching them. Reba had gotten them all so perfect, it was lifelike. The sun on the lake drew you in. Overwhelmed, Dominique looked back at Reba and grabbed her hands in hers.

"Rami B, you're Rami B! I recognize your style. I have a few of your pieces. I'm in Moore Gallery and the gallery in Savoy Valley that carries your things often, looking at your pieces. The *Living on the Edge* sculpture is my favorite, and its in my office. Someone didn't tell me their mother was the artist Rami B." Dominique slapped her hand back into Taggart's stomach.

"Yeah, he takes after his father that way. Telling me things after the fact." Reba rolled her eyes.

The others laughed.

"Hey, I tell you," Gideon defended himself.

Dominique looked back at the swing, then at Gideon. "I knew I recognized the carving, but I wasn't sure. You're Chi, the furniture maker. I love you pieces."

"Guilty. Shh... don't tell anybody. They don't know," Gideon said in a loud fake whisper.

"Give it up, honey. We all know," Reba said.

The others laughed. Dominique looked at the swing and the painting, biting her lips. She wanted them badly. Chi rarely made custom pieces anymore. You could buy his non-custom pieces in the C & N, a furniture showroom on 22 Zaro Place. C&N carried lots of other furniture makers' pieces, including Nasheka, who's work she also admired.

She opened her mouth to refuse. Reba looked at her again.

"Don't make me take you over my knee. Now, say thank you for the gifts."

Dominique smiled and replied, "You can try, but I can't promise not to defend myself."

Reba and the others laughed.

She looked again at the painting and furniture. "Thank you for the gifts. Thanks."

"You're welcome, Dominique. We'll call you to have someone deliver the painting and install the swing for you. Welcome to the family," Gideon said.

She opened her mouth to protest. Taggart squeezed her waist. She looked up at him; he shook his head and kissed her softly.

"Now that all that's taken care of, come and meet my niece, Nasheka. She does some fabulous things," Gideon said. "Let her go, Taggart. You can have her back later."

Dominique was pulled out of Taggart's arms. She continued to look back at him. He winked, and she smiled. She turned her attention to a woman she had met earlier. The woman's hazel eyes twinkled.

"Dominique, we met earlier in the kitchen. I'm Nasheka Blade, one of Taggart's cousins. So many faces and names, huh? Those tarts were delicious. Although, I almost didn't get any. Next time, make more." Nasheka laughed.

"I will. I didn't realize there would be so many of you." Dominique chuckled.

"There are a lot of us. I've seen you in my store, C&N," Nasheka said.

Dominique nodded and started chatting with Nasheka. Some of the other family came over to join them. Strong arms encircled her waist. She recognized his scent. Dominique leaned back into Taggart's arms and continued her conversation with his family.

Later that night, Dominique watched Taggart as he drove them away from his parents' house.

"Thank you for coming with me today," he said in a low, sensual tone.

"I had a wonderful time. You have a very...large and engaging family." Her insides flipped as she made out his gentle smile in the light from the instrument panel. It was true; she'd really had a great time. Dominique grinned as she recalled the shock

on Taggart's face when she'd handed the dish to his mother. *Men. How can they think that just because a woman may do what is considered to be "men's work," that we can't cook anything?*

"Stay with me tonight," Taggart said, as he drove them closer to their homes.

"I can't. Tomorrow is an early day." She glanced at him.

She needed time to think about all that had happened today. His family welcoming her like she would be in his life forever. His parents giving her such personal gifts and making her feel at home. All their expectations were weighing on her. Dominique looked at Taggart's eyes. Especially Taggart's expectations.

"You'll get some sleep," he cajoled.

"Nope. Take me home, Taggart Blade." Besides thinking about things, Dominique had some things she needed to look into, and it would be better done without Taggart Blade looking over her shoulder. His sigh was extremely audible, and she stifled a chuckle. "Not swaying my decision. Take me home."

"Will I see you tomorrow for the run?"

I wish. "Sorry, no. I told you, tomorrow is going to be a very early day." *I probably won't even get any sleep tonight.*

"Tomorrow, later on in the day, then?"

She grinned and looked out her window as he pulled up to the front of her house. "Sure. We can meet for dinner, say around seven?"

"I'll be here."

She waited while he got out and walked around to her side of the vehicle. Hand in hand, they walked up to her front door. Dominique faced him in the glow of her porch light and reached up to touch his face.

"I had a really good time today, Taggart Blade. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your family for a day."

"Good night, beautiful Dominique Rule." He leaned in and pressed his lips to hers, lightly and tenderly. He pulled away, and she bit back her whimper of frustration. "If I don't leave now, I won't be going at all."

She smiled softly, both admiring and hating his restraint. "Good night," she whispered.

"Lock the door behind you."

"You as well."

He took her hand and bowed low over it, pressed his lips to it, met her gaze and winked. "Yes, ma'am."

Dominique remained silent as he stood and walked back to his vehicle and climbed in, gave her a little wave, and drove off toward his house. Standing alone before her door, Dominique spoke softly, "You are a man one could easily-" She clamped her mouth shut and entered her home, determined not to let her mind travel down that road. No matter how much being with him and his family today felt like it was coming home.

Taggart sighed as he went over the chart before him. Mr. Sanders had blamed him when his dog had died on the operating table. Despite all the warnings and the low percentage of success, Mr. Sanders had asked him to carry on with the surgery. The dog just had a severe reaction to the anesthesia, even with the blood work that had been run beforehand. It was rare, but it did happen on occasion. When he had given him the news, Mr. Sanders had gone ballistic. Not that he blamed the man. If something untimely happened to Mario or Flay, he'd most likely react the same. He'd done his best to explain it all again, but the man had just started swinging at him. Once Taggart had restrained him, the man began issuing threats against his person. He'd told his receptionist not to call the cops, believing the man was just venting.

Now he wasn't so sure.

Flipping through the notes from the surgery, he frowned. Something just wasn't adding up. A knock came on his door. "Enter," he called without looking up. Holding a pencil in one hand, he began making notes on a pad of paper beside him. "What do you need, Kelin?"

"I'm not Kelin, but would you like me to get her for you?"

The smile had filled his face before the voice had faded from the air. Dominique stood there, waiting for him to look up at her. She had an arched brow and an amused look on her face, and in her hands was food from Rissablu.

"Oh no," he muttered as his cock swelled just from looking at her. She wore a business pantsuit, and it fit her like a dream. He couldn't see her weapons, but knowing her, she was packing somewhere. "Is that for me?"

"Us," she corrected, setting it down on his desk. "I was told this is your lunch hour, so I figured I'd come down and see you."

He waggled his brows at her and grinned. "Well, let's clear off this desk, then."

"Not that kind of lunch." He frowned, and she shook her head. "We're going to go over who you think could be after you." Dominique opened the containers of food. "And so, for the next hour, Mr. Blade, you will answer my questions."

"Where's Kelin?"

"She was on the phone when I came in. She waved me back here."

Dominique pulled up a chair to the other side of the desk, and Taggart bit back a groan of frustration. Seeing her before him, he wasn't thinking of whoever was out to get him. He was imagining Dominique, spread across his desk, pinned up against the filing cabinet, or the wall, as he thrust in and out of her firm thighs. He shoved all forms of those thoughts to the back of his mind as she picked up a fork and dug into her salad, staring at him with those killer eyes.

"Okay, Ms. Rule. You win this round."

Her brown eyes sparkled like diamonds as she flashed a brilliant grin. "I prefer to win, so this works for me."

Pointing his fork at her, he warned, "Don't get too used to it."

"Oh, too late. I'm already used to it. But I look forward to you trying to change the outcome. Now, stop stalling and answer me. I want names you can come up with off the top of your head, and once you're done eating, I want you to go through your files, and if you see some that toss up a red flag, let me know."

Taggart watched her pull out a pad of paper and a pen without taking a break from her salad. He really wished she wouldn't do this. It had scared him more than he wanted to admit when he'd heard about her brake line. But one of the things Taggart Blade prided himself on was his ability to never lose his cool.

Chapter Seven

Taggart smiled as he headed toward Dominique's house. This past week, she'd been almost too busy to see him. Admittedly, he was feeling a bit jealous and put out that he wasn't at the top of her list. She looked tired, and the protector in him was concerned. But the one time he'd mentioned anything, she'd stared him directly in the eyes and said, deadpan, "Fine, I'll just cut out spending any time with you, then." That had shut him up right quick.

So he'd decided to stop by and surprise her. He frowned as he saw another vehicle in front of her house. And another, and another. Taggart counted eight of them by the time he'd stopped and shut off his vehicle. As he climbed out, he smoothed the frown off his face. Jogging up to her front door, he pressed the doorbell. Feminine laughter reached him as the door was opened, and he looked down into the face of a woman he knew only from passing. Or, at least, he thought it was her. She did have a twin. But if this woman was who he thought, the brightly colored micro braids gave her away.

"Zora?" he asked, unsure.

"That's me. Hello again, Taggart Blade. Come on in." She stepped back and waved him in.

Taggart moved past Zora and headed toward all the voices. They were coming from the backyard. A noisy, busy one that fell silent as he stepped out onto the porch. Fourteen women stared back at him, a mixture of amusement and open perusal on their faces. With Zora, there were fifteen in all. *Shit, I've fallen into a pit of estrogen.*

In the middle stood Dominique. She looked like a pixie standing there in a cute little green sundress. Once his eyes landed on her, the rest of the women, although very beautiful in their own right, faded into the background.

"Something you needed, Taggart?" Her voice floated to his ears.

He swallowed and glanced around at the other women, who were still staring at him. "I was just seeing how you were doing. I didn't know you had company."

"Such a shame all those cars out there didn't give you a hint." A sharp tone filled the air.

"Be nice, Cami," Zora said, as she brushed back by him again, holding what he assumed was margaritas. "I would have thought being with Robert would have made you kinder. Guess he needs to fuck you some more."

Taggart listened, amused and slightly embarrassed, to the others laugh while Cami flipped Zora off. He noticed Dominique's dogs lying beside a table, and part of him disappointed they didn't run over to him and greet him. His eyes settled upon Dominique as she walked toward him. The sway of her hips, the gentle motion of her hair in the gentle breeze, along with the fluttering of the dress, held his attention. Such beauty.

"Thanks for stopping by to check on me," she said, as she halted in front of him.

"I've missed you," he replied.

She smiled and led him back into the house. He released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when she shut the door on the women outside.

"I'm fine, really. We're having a get-together. Sorry I didn't invite you." She shrugged. "It's women only."

"Well, you deserve some time with your friends. Can I see you tomorrow?" He pulled her willingly against him, his hands caressed her bare arms.

"I think that could be arranged," she whispered, putting her head against his chest.

Tilting her face toward him, Taggart covered her lush mouth with his searching one. Immediately, his body responded urgently to being so close to Dominique Rule. Hunger surfaced, and he held her close, his hands kneading her ass through the thin material of her clothes. She purred in the back of her throat and pressed closer, brushing against his hard erection.

Taggart deepened the kiss, ready to lower her to the floor and slide deeply into her, when he heard snickering.

"Five bucks says he shags her right here," an accented voice said.

"I'll take that bet. I don't think Dominique will let him, although she does seem to be into him."

Taggart released Dominique's mouth and looked at the door. A bunch of faces were staring at them, eyes alight with amusement as they gazed upon him and the woman he held. Dominique turned her head and hissed, "Go away."

They laughed, and another one said, "I'll take you up on that bet as well."

Looking down at Dominique, Taggart spoke softly. "I think that's my cue to let you get back to your get-together."

"Sure is," someone else hollered.

With a smile, he kissed Dominique one more time and said, "I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes. If you'll excuse me, I have some asses to kick."

"I'll leave you to it then."

One more kiss, and he headed for the door. As he pulled it shut behind him, he heard her yell, "Camilla Maxwell!"

Dominique sat out on the back porch, listening to the relaxing sound of night. All the women had gone, and she was just sitting still, not doing a damn thing. The smell of charcoal lingered in the air, teasing her senses even though she was stuffed to the gills. Even if she were hungry, there was nothing left over.

She ran her bare feet over her dogs, one dog per foot. They were stretched out on their sides, just as worn out as she was, without the alcohol buzz. "That was fun, girls. Just what I needed to take the edge off. Too bad Sienna wasn't here. That was the one thing that would have made it better." One of the dogs woofed, as if in agreement.

A smile filled her face as she thought of everyone who had been here. Hunter Willis, twins Zora and Kenya Nicolette, Cami and Jem Maxwell, Lewa Staller, Bryndis Sidorov, Layla Blade, Jenisha Vincent, Aliana Deen--a chef who worked with Cami and Zora, Demi Richards, and Vivica Andrews from *On The Vine*. Nicola Holland was also in attendance, along with a woman she didn't know but who had come with Zora. Her

name was Kainda Whittaker. And she'd even invited Kelin Matters from Taggart's clinic.

It had been nothing short of chaotic, and endless fun. Everyone had gotten along with one another. But now she was exhausted. She took some deep breaths and just allowed the cool air flow across her skin. After a while, Dominique got to her feet and padded inside her house to go to bed.

As she sat at the table at of the Blue Moon Café where she was having lunch, Dominique nodded while she jotted down the information she got from the man sitting in the chair across from her.

"Thank you for doing this," he said.

"No problem, McQueen," she responded. "I like her, and as soon as I find anything out on this Jon Sili person, I'll be sure to give you a call."

"More tea, Dominique." A voice asked.

At the interruption, Dominique looked up. She smiled at Dean Harold. His boyishly smile matched his looks. With long slim fingers Dean pushed back his hair shaggy dark brown hair as it fell in his eyes. He held the tea pot in his hand. Although his duties as manager of Blue Moon Café kept Dean busy with lots to do he tended to serve her personally whenever she came in. Hunter and Amara teased her that it was because he had a crush on her. She brushed it aside. Since Blue Moon Café was in the base of Caspain Towers North, Number 4 which was adjacent to her own offices at Cerberus Associates which resided in Caspain Towers North, Number 2 it was convenient for meals. She tended to have breakfast most morning as well as lunch occasionally there. Sometimes even dinner if it was a late night. The food was good and filling.

Even Taggart had admitted it was good. Although he had her promise not to tell Darryl he had said so. Darryl and Nina Osborne - the owner of Blue Moon Café had a friendly rivalry going on. Once in a while Darryl and Nina switched places and took over the each others kitchens. They wanted to prove who the better chef was. Last time

they switched they even went so far as to have ballots for the patrons of Rissablu and Blue Moon Café to vote on the food when the other was cooking in there place. Rissa had snatched the ballots before they could be counted and burned them. She had let Darryl and Nina know in no uncertain terms she didn't mind if they switched but no way was she subjecting her patrons to their craziness. Darryl and Nina had been chastised and sheepish about it but people were waiting to see what they would come up with next. It was entertaining and they got even better food as Darryl and Nina tried to outdo each other.

"No Dean. I'm good." She looked at Taylor.

He shook his head. She returned her attention to Dean and smiled.

"No more tea but send a mixture of pastries up to my offices. Charge our account for it." She paused then thought about something. "Is Nina in the back?"

She hadn't seen Nina Osborne the owner of Blue Moon Café when she came in.

"Yeah, she in the back baking." Dean replied.

Dominique mouth watered at his words. Whenever people heard Nina was baking whatever she made tended to go quickly. No matter what she made it tasted heavenly.

"Include some of whatever she is making in with the pastries for the office."

Dominique remembered last time. "Put some of whatever she is making in a separate box for me. Last time those greedy beasts in my office ate it all and I got none."

"Will do, I'll deliver it personally." Dean chuckled and patted her hand.

"Thanks." Dominique replied.

Dean walked away back to the counter and put down the tea. He continued on and went through the door into the back.

"Don't you want to know what she is baking?" Taylor asked curiously.

Dominique chuckled and looked at him. "It doesn't matter. Whatever it is will be decadent. And no way will I pass it up. Since you are new to Trescott you wouldn't know. If you can whenever you hear Nina is baking stop whatever you are doing and come get some. Or if you hear the Rivalry is on. Hightail it to Rissablu or here and get a

table if you can. They are usually packed with people when they go in Rivalry mode. But if you get a table then be prepared to be dazzled."

Taylor looked confused. Briefly she explained about the Rivalry between Darryl and Nina.

"Better food than this. I can't believe it." Taylor shook his head.

"Believe it. It's dangerous to the waist line but worth it." Dominique chuckled.

"He is infatuated with you." Taylor studied her.

Dominique rolled her eyes; she didn't have to ask who he meant. "You've been talking with Hunter. He doesn't."

Taylor said nothing. She sighed.

"Okay, a little one but it's harmless. I've been coming in here since we opened Cerberus. He's just friendly. Nina on the other hand I've known for a long time. To bad I couldn't convince her to come work for Cerberus when we opened." She gave him a look.

She saw understanding in his gaze. Taylor would know Nina was in a similar line of work as she had been and to an extent himself. He glanced speculatively towards the kitchen then back at her. He didn't say anything else.

"Thank you again. I don't want to involve the locals anymore than they already are." Taylor stood and sent her a sharp nod. There was almost no emotion on his face anymore. She remembered when he'd had more cheer about him, but now he was extremely reserved.

Dominique could understand. And even though she truly liked and respected Ulrich Willis and his department, there were some things that were just handled better privately. "You know we're very discreet." They stared at each other and smiled. She shrugged and amended, "Most of the time."

"He's a good man for you," Taylor said as he slid his jacket on.

She arched a brow. "What are you talking about?"

"I know the signs, Dominique Rule. I'm glad you're giving someone a chance." He walked to the door and looked at her over his shoulder. "Now, walk me down."

She stood and obediently walked with him to the elevator and got in when the doors opened. Dominique had long ago learned to listen to Taylor and not argue when he sounded suspiciously shaman-like. She knew he had visions and was very much in touch with his Native American ancestry, and there were just some things you didn't fight him on. Besides, she happened to agree with him. Taggart was a good man for her.

They exited the building, and before she could say a word, Taylor kissed her cheek and seemed to just vanish right before her eyes. She knew it wasn't so, but the man was so fluid and quiet. She was good, but he made her look like an amateur. Looking across the parking lot, she headed for the sidewalk after glancing at her watch. Nothing like a brisk walk to help her think. And she had some time before her next meeting.

As she walked up Caspain Avenue, her skin began to tingle. Not in a bad danger way, but in a Taggart-danger way. She cast her gaze around and tried to spot him. She found him on the other side of the street, and he was in the middle of a confrontation with another man. There was something about the other man that struck her as familiar. Immediately, she shifted into bodyguard mode. Dashing across the street, she headed for the two men, who were beginning to attract attention to themselves.

"I told you I wanted it by yesterday, Blade," the man growled, and stepped closer.

"And I told you to forget it, Goran. I'm not doing it." Taggart didn't back away. He held his ground and glared back at the man.

"I warned you," Goran bit off nastily.

"Is there a problem here, gentlemen?" Dominique asked, deceptively calm as she inserted herself between the two of them.

"Dominique," Taggart said with a snap. "This doesn't concern you."

Eyes narrowing, she refused to look behind her and shoot daggers at Taggart. "Actually, it does." She ran her eyes over the man before her. Not seeing any hints of concealed weapons, Dominique felt a little better, but not much. "I think you should

just leave." There was no warmth in her tone. She knew it, and knew both men knew it as well.

The man he'd called Goran looked between her and Taggart before narrowing his eyes and pointing one lean finger toward them both. "I mean it, Blade. Don't fuck with me on this." He spun around and strode away.

"Damn it, Dominique," Taggart swore. "I didn't need you to save me."

She snapped her head around and shot him a cold look. "We need to talk." At his hesitation, she ground out, "Now!"

"Where?" he questioned, as if realizing how close she truly was to losing her cool.

"Your office." She sent a tightlipped smile to those around watching before they fell into step together. No conversation flowed between them, just the sounds of their footsteps and breathing. Casting a glance to the man beside her, a new wave of rage flowed over her as she took in his nearly unaffected attitude.

He held the door of Caspain Avenue Veterinary Hospital open for her, and she walked into the building to find both Penelope Reed and Kelin Matters standing up front, watching.

"Hi, Dominique," Kelin said with a smile. The smile faded as she glanced between Dominique and Taggart, noticing the tension between them.

"Kelin, Penelope." Dominique nodded at them. "Your office, Blade," she ground out.

"Ladies," he said, with way to much charm. "Excuse us, please. We'll be done by the time my next appointment shows up."

Both women had "I doubt that" looks on their faces, but neither said a word as she pushed him down the hall ahead of her and into his office, where she slammed the door behind them.

"Well?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against his desk.

Why the hell is he so fucking calm? Does he not get the seriousness of this situation?

"If you ever talk to me like that in public again, I will kick your ass so fast, you won't even know what hit you!" she snarled.

"That was none of your concern, Dominique."

"Tell me who he is and what that argument was about," she demanded.

"He's no one."

Dominique sighed and walked over to his window and stared out at the street. Forcing herself to calm down, she relaxed her fists, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath before turning around and looking right at him. He turned to face her. "You are something else, Taggart Blade. Arrogant, self-centered, and stupid." She shook her head, disappointed, and headed for the door.

Taggart couldn't believe the way he felt when he heard her disappointment in him. *Lower than a snake's belly, you ass*, his brain taunted.

"Where are you going?" he questioned, not wanting her to leave.

"Away from you, before I lose my temper and hurt you myself."

"You're this upset because I didn't need your help in the street?"

He could see one hand clench in a fist before it smoothed out to rest, palm down, against the door. She turned, and he nearly stepped back from the anger in her eyes. "No, I'm this upset about your disregard for your own safety. It's like you're taking this as a big joke, and not worth your time."

"I don't see why someone would want to hurt me."

"That's not the point, Blade. If they see they aren't making their point with you, they could very easily start going after your dogs, your siblings, or even your parents. You aren't untouchable, and your apparent reluctance to try and help us figure out who is behind this grates on my last nerve."

"Are you this concerned about who cut your brake line?" he demanded.

"Absolutely. And I'm working on it, but to try and get information from myself isn't like trying to get the damn buffalo on a nickel to poop."

She stepped toward him, and he was covered by her subtle scent. It went straight from his nose to his groin. Taggart had no control when it came to the woman before him. Even now, when she was reading him the riot act, all he was thinking about was pressing her up against that filing cabinet and having his way with her. Taggart moved toward her, noticing how her cute little nose flared the closer he got to her.

"If I said I was sorry, would you stop looking at me like you want to neuter me without anesthesia??" he asked, pulling her into his arms.

Dominique stiffened, refusing to relax against him. He lowered his face to hers and kissed along her jaw before slanting his mouth over hers. He nibbled along her lower lip, sliding his tongue along the crease of her lips, seeking permission to enter. A primal roar of frustration rose within him as she clamped her lips tighter. Taggart wrapped his hand around the ends of her hair and pulled, once, sharply. When she gasped he slid his tongue deep into her mouth and thrust in and out. Flames exploded, racing up his skin, enflaming him.

One hand undid her slacks, and he gloated internally as she stepped out of them when they hit the floor. His fingers skimmed across her lace boy panties, and he groaned. Moving up along the inside of her thighs, he teased the juncture, thrilled to find she was just as wet for him as he'd hoped. Sliding up under the edge of the panties, he trailed his finger up her slit, inhaling her whimper of pleasure. He flicked his finger against her clit, and loved the way her hips thrust toward him, seeking more of his touch.

"Take your shirt off," he ordered.

Her eyes blazed defiantly. He drove two fingers home, deep in her sopping pussy. Her internal muscles clamped down around him, doing their damndest to keep him inside her.

"I'm not asking again, Dominique. Either you do it, or I'll rip it right off you."

She unbuttoned the dark blue shirt, and shrugged out of it before tossing it to the side. Her gaze was still angry, but there was more than just a bit of passion lingering in it. He inhaled sharply as he looked down at her. She wore a low-cut lace push up bra

the color of a purple hibiscus. Her lace boy panties were the same color. His eyes moved over the rest of her, and he groaned as he saw her ankle-strap high heels, the same shade as her shirt. Her toenails were also painted to match the blue.

Releasing her hair, he removed his fingers from her and brought them to his nose, inhaling deeply her exotic scent. Holding her gaze, he licked them clean before he put both hands along her waistband and jerked. Her mewl reached him as he dropped the two scraps of her panties on the floor.

"You may want to hate me, Dominique, but your body can't help it."

"I never said I hated you, Taggart Blade." She gasped as he palmed one breast and returned his fingers to her velvet warmth.

Taggart lowered his mouth over one breast and drew it in, lace and all. He could feel her pebbled nipple and he nipped at it, her groan filling his ears. He couldn't get enough.

He let go of her breast and undid his own trousers, freeing his hard cock from its confinement. Plunging his fingers into her two more times before pulling them out, he replaced them with the head of his erection. One slam and he was buried balls deep inside her. He bit the inside of his cheek as he felt her holding him--like they were made for each other. Taggart gripped her ass and began powering into her.

She leaned forward and dug her nails into his shoulders, and the heels of her shoes dug into the lower part of his back. Carrying her, he maneuvered them so her back was against the filing cabinet he had in his office. It was a five-drawer, wooden lateral cabinet that was in a corner, and there was no chance of it moving as he thrust into her.

Her low pants combined with his grunts. In and out he moved, her wet heat gripping him each time he withdrew. "Jesus, Dominique," he uttered, his face buried deep in the side of her neck. "So fucking tight. You're so fucking tight around my cock."

She pushed him up from her and slid her hand between them. His dick throbbed again as he watched her begin to finger her clit.

Taggart watched her eyes close in pleasure and her breaths come quicker and shallower as she grew nearer to the pinnacle. Never before had he seen anything so beautiful. His gaze slid to her clit again, and then he dragged his eyes back to her face. Beads of sweat dotted his upper brow as her fingers moved faster and faster. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth, and her eyes were squeezed shut. Dominique's breaths turned into an endless mewl, rising up from the back of her throat. He knew she was close.

"Come for me, baby. Come all over my cock."

The small of her back arched more, and she bit her lower lip to stop the scream erupting from deep within her throat as her internal muscles clamped around him. Taggart thrust within her two more times before he came with an intense rush; the feeling was so powerful, stars flickered before his eyes. She milked him until he had nothing left to give.

Exhausted, Taggart locked his legs so they wouldn't collapse to the floor. She shuddered in his arms, but her eyes opened and locked onto his. He was drawn deep into her stare, loving the way her eyes made him feel. He didn't like watching the sleepy, passionate look dissolve and give way to the professional one. She unhooked her legs, and he pulled out of her and set her on her feet.

Head high, Dominique walked to his private bathroom wearing only her bra and heels. When she came out, she put her shirt back on, followed by her pants. As she was tucking in her long shirt, her eyes snapped over to him.

"I'm leaving this room as soon as I'm put together again. So you might want to fix yourself there."

It was like being doused in cold water. Taggart wanted to shake her. He hated how she seemed so indifferent to what had just transpired between them. He headed for the bathroom, and when he came out, she was slipping out the door.

Furious, he stomped after her. "This isn't over, Dominique Rule."

She was with Kelin, but looked at him over her shoulder and sent him a cold smile. "I know that. If you ever do what you did today again, it'll take them over a

month to find all your body parts." Dominique glanced at Kelin and sent her a smile before walking out.

Taggart just stood there, while Kelin looked between him and the door Dominique just exited through. She forced away a smile as she looked down at the papers in her hand. "Your first appointment is in exam room two. It's Mrs. Stotteron."

He smiled. Mrs. Stotteron was a lovely older woman who had an oversized, yet adorable pair of Shih Tzus. "I'll be right in."

Kelin just nodded and walked off without a word. Taggart went into his office again and slipped on his white overcoat, then headed for exam room two. "Good day, Mrs. Stotteron. Hello, Dennis and Mr. Chu. How are we all doing today?"

Dominique walked back up Caspian Avenue to where she'd parked her vehicle. Her body still quivered with anger. Flipping out her phone, she called Sienna.

"What can I do for you?" Sienna's voice asked.

"Do you remember that time when we were working the Stavros case, and there was that guy who kept hanging around?"

"The creepy one who kept staring at you?"

"Yes, him. Do you remember his name?"

The sound of fingers clacking over a keyboard reached her. "I'll have it in a second. Where should I send it?"

"Email." Dominique smiled as she sidestepped a couple.

"What are you asking for?" Sienna sounded concerned.

"I could swear I saw him today in a confrontation with Taggart Blade," she told her without hesitation.

"Everything okay, Niq?"

"Fine. I'm just a bit confused." She unlocked her vehicle and climbed inside. Securing her seatbelt, she started the engine. "I want to make sure it's who I think it is before I do anything. I just didn't have my stuff with me, since I was at lunch when I saw him."

"So you had lunch with Taggart, did you?"

"No, actually, I had lunch with Taylor McQueen."

"I think I remember you mentioning him. Tall, handsome, black hair, and green eyes."

Dominique chuckled as she pulled out of her parking spot and got onto the street. "You would remember that, wouldn't you?"

"Well, I haven't met him. I'm just going on what you told me. For which I thank you, since you painted a very nice picture of him for me in my head."

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Love me, of course. What else?" Sienna retorted.

Rolling her eyes, Dominique kept her eyes on the light and waited for it to change. As she listened to Sienna ramble on the other end of the line, her gaze drifted to the car beside her. In it sat a couple, and she could see their two kids in the back. A moment of wistfulness swept over her.

Will I ever find that? Taggart's face flashed before her briefly, before it was replaced by Cameron's. "Cameron!" she gasped, as his green eyes stared down at her, full of love.

"Niq! Niq! Is everything okay?" Sienna's voice rang in her ear.

Blinking rapidly, Dominique swallowed and realized the light had changed to green. Horns were honking behind her, and Sienna was still hollering in her ear. Pressing on the gas, she drove on, her shaking hands on the wheel. "I'm okay, Sienna. Sorry, got distracted for a moment there."

"You mentioned Cameron. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine," she muttered. "I have to go, Sienna. I'll call you soon. Thanks for pulling up that information for me and sending it to my email." Dominique ended the call before Sienna could say a word. Then she scrolled through her recent call list, found the number she wanted, and called it.

"You got some time?" she asked when the person on the other end picked up.

"Of course," he responded.

"I'll be there in a few." Dominique ended the call and took the next left, heading out toward her new destination. Along the way, she called her office and told them she wouldn't be in, and to please reschedule her remaining appointments for the day. She knew, deep down, that she could call Hunter, or could have talked about this with Sienna. But she just wanted to be with someone who'd been there, who's loved one had died in their arms.

She pulled into the driveway and sat in the vehicle for a moment, gathering herself. Dominique shut off the engine and stared at the man who leaned against the pillar on the porch, beer in one hand with another beside him. She climbed out and walked toward him. He said nothing, just handed her the second beer. In silence, they both sat down on the wicker furniture and drank. On the table between them, there was a platter of sandwiches.

Dominique closed her eyes as the cool liquid slid down her throat. Opening them, she looked at the man who just sat there, feet up on the railing, turning the bottle in his fingers.

"I'm-"

"There's no need to force it out of you, Dominique. Just because you're here doesn't mean you have to tell me a damn thing." He cut his gaze over to her, and she was taken aback by the intensity in his green eyes. So similar and yet, at the same time, so entirely different from Cameron's.

"Thank you, Taylor."

"I've been there." He shrugged and took a long drink. Her eyes watched his throat move as he swallowed it. "I'm still there, most days."

His simple statement allowed her to relax. She propped up her feet on the railing and took another swig of beer. Propping the bottle up on the arm of the chair, she turned her head so she could look at him again. He was staring out across the yard.

"I was thinking about Natalie. I know a lawyer who could more than likely help. She's amazing, very cutthroat. Her name is Amara Montgomery, of Montgomery,

Gilmore, McCoy, and Montgomery. Her law office is in Caspain Towers North, Number 4. I'll stop by on my way home and ask her."

"Thank you. You know, she had a great time the other night at your house. She was all aglow when Zora dropped her off."

"I'm glad." She ran a hand over her eyes and leaned back in the wicker chair, keeping them closed. "Do you dream about her?" Dominique asked.

"Only every night. I keep running over it in my head, all the what-if's."

She reached for a sandwich and bit into it. It was just right with the beer--not too heavy, but not air either. "Are you ever worried feelings may get in the way again?"

"You've fallen for this man you're helping to protect."

It was a statement.

"Not saying that," Dominique retorted.

"I think you need to let yourself feel again, and if this man is the one to do it, go with it. Don't fight it."

Dominique looked at him. He grabbed a sandwich and bit into it before he met her gaze. "Sage advice."

The barest hint of a grin filled his face. "I have my moments."

"Maybe you should listen to it, as well." Dominique set down the beer bottle and stood as Natalie and her son Malik stode up the walk. "You know, in case you're experiencing the same thing."

"Taylor!" the young boy hollered and ran to him, jumping in his lap. "Guess what I did in school today?"

"Just a second, Malik. Say hello to Ms. Dominique here," Taylor corrected.

"Hello, Ms. Dominique," the little voice said.

"Good afternoon, Malik. Natalie." She smiled at the other woman. "Thank you, Taylor, for everything, and I'll get back to you about Ms. Montgomery after I go talk to her." She stared down at Taylor, who had a hard time keeping his eyes off Natalie as she walked to the door of her house. Dominique said, "Think about what I said, Taylor."

It truly was good advice." With a final smile for the boy, she headed down the steps and to her vehicle, got in, and drove away.

Slipping into her parking spot in the garage, Dominique sighed. Taylor's words had been echoing in her mind the entire trip back. Shaking her head, she cut the engine and climbed out. Swiping her keycard, she got access to Tower 2 and headed for the elevator to take her to the fourth floor, where Cerberus was located. As she got off, she didn't go to her office. Instead, she walked in the other direction until she reached the glass walkway that would take her over to Tower 4 and the law offices of Montgomery, Gilmore, McCoy, and Montgomery.

She waited patiently while the receptionist alerted Ms. Montgomery she was there. When she was waved in, Dominique walked quickly to the door and let herself in. Amara Montgomery sat behind her large mahogany desk.

"Well, well," Dominique teased as she closed the door behind her. "Long time, no see."

Amara Montgomery looked up at her and smiled. She had her headset on and was currently listening to whoever was on the other end instead of talking. She waved Dominique to one of the large leather chairs in front of her desk.

Dominique gazed at her friend. Amara was beautiful; honey-toned skin, high cheekbones, a chocolate gaze. She was the dream of many men. Like usual, Amara's hair was swept up in an intricate twist, showing off her graceful, swanlike neck. Men flocked to her like moths to a flame, but Amara rarely smiled at any of them. She was very reserved with those outside her group of friends and family.

When she said goodbye and took the headset off, Amara groaned. "Corporate law can really suck some days."

"Hello to you, too," Dominique quipped.

"I'm sorry, Niq. It's been one of those days. By the way, I'm so sorry I missed your cookout. Been swamped dealing with negotiations. How are you?" Her chocolate eyes twinkled impishly. "You're looking good. Getting some?"

"Amara!" Dominique gasped.

"I'll take that as a yes. So, what can I do for you?"

"I want you to know that if you're really too busy, it's okay. I'm just asking." Her gaze drifted back to the large desk, and visions of Taggart laying her back on it popped into her head. She shifted on the leather seat, realizing she still had no panties on, thanks to Taggart ripping them.

"You gonna sit there and get all flushed, or tell me what you need?" Amara questioned, leaning back in her tall chair, a smirk filling her face.

Damn it. I hoped she wouldn't see me flushing. Composing her face, Dominique arched a brow, and couldn't stop the laughter when Amara sent her the exact same look.

"What a pair we make," Dominique said, shaking her head. "Okay. I know you do mostly corporate, but I have a friend who could use a kickass attorney."

"What's up?" Amara sat forward, placing her arms on the smooth top of her desk.

"She's a single mother of one, and her ex is basically stalking her. I know you know Taylor McQueen." At Amara's nod, she continued. "Well, he's acting as her bodyguard for the moment, but Jon just won't quit. I think she needs a lawyer who will kick some ass in the courtroom."

"He's stalking her? What are the cops doing about it?" Amara demanded.

"Nothing, really. He's always gone when they get there, which is why Taylor's with her now."

"Give me her number, and I'll give her a call." Amara gestured for her to start talking.

After giving her all the pertinent information, and getting a promise that Amara would attend the next get-together, Dominique headed for her office to grab a few things and head home. She wanted a shower and some dinner. Plus, she needed to see her dogs. They always helped her relax after a long day.

There was a vehicle in her drive as she pulled in. The man waited for her as she got out and headed toward the door, a warm smile blooming on her face.

Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries and Taige Crenshaw

"I was wondering when you'd get here," he said in a slow drawl.

Stopping before him, she looked into his eyes and asked, "What are you doing here, William Chadwick?"

Chapter Eight

Taggart reached up to knock on the door, but before his hand could make contact, it swung open, and he found himself looking into a pair of pale gray eyes. The corner of one side of the man's mouth was turned up in a satisfied smile, and as he looked down, he was greeted by the sight of a bare, slightly sweaty masculine--very masculine--chest.

A wave of anger washed up through him. *What is he doing here? And why is he shirtless?*

A flash of white teeth showed against tanned skin. The skin was marred only by the intricate swirling tattoo on the man's left shoulder. "Evening, Blade." William tossed his red shirt over the shoulder, hiding the tattoo from Taggart's gaze.

"Chadwick," Taggart said with a snap. "What are you doing here?"

"Leaving, but you seem to be blocking my way out."

The man's smugness grated on his nerves. Taggart wanted to punch him in those gray eyes. He knew women were drawn to William Chadwick, and while he personally couldn't understand it, he sure as hell did *not* want Dominique to be included in that group.

"What *were* you doing here? And where's your car?" Taggart demanded.

William's eyes skimmed over him. "My car is parked by Niq's. And it really isn't any of your business what I was doing here."

"Don't push me, Chadwick."

Another smirk flickered across William's face. "Am I supposed to be intimidated? And if I am, is it by you or your name?"

Taggart knew he was being baited. The Chadwicks were a big name in Trescott Cove, the same as his family was. "Stuff it, William."

"Do you mind getting out of my way? I'm tired and sweaty."

That phrase evoked a ton of images in Taggart, and not a single one good.

"So help me God, Chadwick, I'll kick your ass if you've so much as touched her." Taggart stepped into William and glared at him. The urge to rip the man to shreds moved over him with the force of a gale wind.

The humor in William's eyes vanished, and they were a flat, cold gray when he spoke again. "Don't make this ugly, Blade. What's between me and Niq is our business."

Taggart bristled over the way William acted, as if he had the right to be there. Narrowing his eyes, he growled, "Time and place, Chadwick. Name it, and I'll be there."

William opened his mouth to respond, but closed it as a brown hand settled upon his shoulder. Taggart frowned over the easy familiarity Dominique had with William as she popped her head around him and said, "Oh. Hi, Taggart. Didn't know you were here."

Obviously.

"Can I have a word with you, Dominique?" he bit off.

Her eyebrows rose at the tone, but she just nodded. "Sure. Come on in. William, I'll see you later."

"Of course." His smooth voice grated on Taggart's nerves even more. William arched a brow, and Taggart stepped to the side to let him pass. "Blade," he said as he walked toward his vehicle.

Taggart didn't respond. Didn't even turn around to watch him leave. He just kept his eyes on Dominique, and more fire flowed through his veins. She wore a scarlet and white body fitting tank top and a pair of black low rise workout shorts. Her dark skin was covered in sweat, and she had a white towel gathered in one hand.

In the back of his mind, he heard William start his car and leave, and that's when he erupted. "What the hell is going on here?"

She dabbed at her face with the towel before asking, "What are you talking about? And I think it should be 'hello'-- that's the first thing you say."

Her subtle reminder was as friendly as a mama grizzly protecting her cub.

"What's going on between you and William Chadwick?" he thundered.

"Excuse me?" Dominique tossed the towel over her shoulder and glared at him.

"Not that it's any of your business. There's nothing going on between us."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. "Then why is he leaving here, carrying his shirt and all sweaty."

All emotion was wiped off her face. "One, you need to let go of me." Her eyes moved from his hand pointedly up to his face, and he did as she commanded. "Two, William and I spar on occasion. Three, you need to leave because I don't want to talk to you right now." Gesturing to Racquel and Giada, who were poking their heads out, she stepped back into her house and slammed the door in his face.

Taggart stared in shock as the noise from the door being shut with such force reverberated through the night air. Fists clenching, he struggled to find his long lost control—a fight he lost when he heard the turn of a deadbolt. The sound was almost ominous and didn't sit well with him at all.

He reached for the doorbell, but her voice, clear and cold, reached him first.

"Go home, Blade. Don't make this unpleasant."

"It already is," he snapped. "Open this damn door."

In a second, he was shrouded in darkness as the porch light was extinguished. A loud primal roar of anger rose up within him, and somehow, Taggart knew he had to take a step back and reevaluate how things were going to be handled.

As he slipped into his bed, his mind was still racing with images of William standing shirtless beside Dominique as she wore next to nothing. It was a very restless night, and one that didn't get any better since he ended up running alone the next morning.

Dominique lay on her living room floor, a dog on each side, her fingers cocooned by their thick, soft undercoat. One light was lit in the corner, and she closed her eyes and tried to relax. She had experienced a hellish day, and when she had been given the opportunity to spar with William, she'd jumped at it, knowing that was a great way to

work out frustrations. All her excitement at seeing Taggart at her door had vanished the second he'd begun acting like an ass. She didn't want a man who yelled and demanded instead of asking, and there was no reason for him to have that reaction.

"Come to think of it," she muttered to the room, "I don't think I've ever seen him so out of control."

Racquel sighed and thumped her tail against the floor as if in agreement. Dominique smiled and opened her eyes before patting the dogs one more time, then getting to her feet and heading toward her room for a much needed shower.

Standing under the multiple jets, Dominique allowed the pulsing water to soothe her tight muscles. Bracing her hands against the smooth tile of the shower, she just stood there and accepted the massage.

Closing her eyes, she mentally ran over what she'd accomplished today. Putting in a full day's work felt good. Always had, but lately she'd found her attention going toward Taggart Blade. She would check where his tracker was numerous times a day, and found herself driving by the vet clinic when she was out. It was getting crazy. And today, she hadn't had time to even leave the office. Normally, her staff was excellent about keeping up on paperwork, but she'd been neglecting her end and, combined with the reports Sierra sent her on Goran Zybeck, she'd just not had time.

With a roll of her shoulders, she began soaping herself up. Again, Taggart Blade's face popped into her head. Expelling a mild curse, Dominique made short work of her shower, which she wished was a cold one now. Stepping out, she wrapped a large towel around her and walked into her bedroom, sitting down on her settee.

The phone rang, and she got up to answer it. Hunter was on the other end. Dominique got dressed after hanging up with Hunter. She wanted to meet and talk over a meal. That worked for her, since she was famished. Making sure the girls had plenty of water and some snacks, she headed out the front, locked her house, and set the alarm. She jogged to her vehicle and, as she drove off toward the restaurant, she realized that before leaving her kitchen, she'd snuck a glance through the back door across the lake to where Taggart Blade lived.

"So," Hunter asked, "how's things with you and that handsome Blade brother?"

"Damn. Can't I even get out of the vehicle?"

"No," Hunter retorted without remorse.

Arming her SUV as they walked toward Benevuto's, an Italian establishment, Dominique just shook her head. Hunter walked beside her, twirling her cane.

"I see you've remembered to bring it with you."

"Yes, Mom," Hunter griped. "I did." An impish look filled her dark face. "Do I get dessert, huh, do I? Do I?"

Dominique snorted. "Shut up."

The women walked in and were shown to a quiet table in the back. It wasn't long before they had warm breadsticks placed before them, along with their drinks. Dominique held her tongue as they placed their order. When they were alone again, she looked at Hunter and asked, "What's up?"

"What's going on with you and Taggart?"

Picking up a steaming breadstick, Dominique ripped off a portion and stuck it in her mouth, chewing slowly as she stared across the table at her friend. She knew better than to try and pass on the question. There was that rare fire in Hunter's pale gray eyes that told her not to even try.

"Dominique?" Hunter queried, telling her she'd hesitated to long.

Taking a sip of water, Dominique swallowed and met her friend's gaze.

Hunter and Dominique were laughing as they headed out toward where their cars were parked. Dinner had been a blast, and Hunter seemed appeased by her explanation of what was going on with her and Taggart. One time, Hunter had almost brought up Cameron, but had stopped when Dominique tensed.

Leaning against her vehicle, Hunter looked at her. "I hope you give him a chance, Niq. I really like the two of you together." Hunter leaned in and hugged her before climbing into her car and starting her engine.

Dominique remained silent as she watched her friend drive away. Two people who could be very cynical had told her that this man was a good one for her. Perhaps it was time to stop ignoring what she was feeling and face it. Getting into her SUV, Dominique started it up and drove up the street. Something had her turning onto Caspain Avenue and heading down toward Taggart's business.

As she pulled into the lot, she noticed a light was on. Through the front window, Dominique could make out the figure of a person rummaging around inside. Shutting off her headlights, she coasted to a stop and silently climbed out. Staying low and out of sight, she moved toward the building, making a mental note about how the light over the parking lot was also out. As she got closer to the building, a frowning face appeared in her head. Pulling out her phone, she dialed a number with one hand as a resigned sigh left her.

"Ulrich Willis," the voice on the other end of the phone said.

"It's Dominique."

"Hey. What's up?"

"A problem at Taggart's clinic. I'll wait for you to get here, unless whoever is inside leaves. So you'd best haul ass down here." She hung up on him and dialed another number.

When the person on the other end answered, she said without preamble, "Get down here to your office. There's someone inside going through things. And I really don't think they should be in there."

At those words, Taggart jumped out of bed and drew on a pair of sweats and a cutoff tee shirt. He shoved his feet into a pair of slip-on shoes as he ran out the front door and jumped in his vehicle. As he sped along the roads, he tried calling Dominique back, but there was no answer.

"Shit!" he swore, and pressed harder on the accelerator.

Gunning the engine to make sure he made the yellow light, Taggart arrived at the veterinary hospital in record time. The first thing he noticed was the cop cars. Off to

one side stood Dominique and Ulrich, standing toe to toe and most likely arguing about something. Screeching to a halt, he jumped out and ran over to them.

"What the hell is going on here?" he demanded as he looked at Dominique. She wore a plum and gray colored pantsuit. His cock stirred as he stared at her.

"We caught someone vandalizing your clinic," Ulrich said.

"Was anyone hurt?" Taggart questioned, glancing briefly at Ulrich before returning his eyes to Dominique.

"No, but you need to go in and do some inventory to make sure what we got off him is all that was taken." Ulrich pulled on his sleeve as another deputy hollered for him. "Excuse me," he said then walked off.

"You should go inside, Blade." Dominique's voice was unusually gentle.

Nodding, he skimmed over her outfit one more time before heading for the entryway door, which was propped open.

"I have to check on the animals."

"They think he's just a junkie, not anyone tied in with everything else going on." She had fallen into step beside him.

Taggart let her go through the entryway first, but walked into the clinic before her. There were two more deputies standing over a huge mess behind the receptionist desk. He groaned as he took in all the files on the floor. Obviously, they had been looking for money as well.

Pulling out his cell phone, he dialed a preset number.

"Dr. Tag, is there an emergency?" Kelin's voice asked as she answered.

"Sorry to bother you at home, Kelin. Yes, in a way. The clinic was vandalized. It's going to take most of the night to put the files and stuff back in order. I haven't even checked the drugs yet."

"Jesus. I'll be right in. Would you like me to call Penelope?"

"No, I think the two of us can handle it. If need be, we can call her in early before we open."

"I'll be right there," Kelin said before she hung up.

Slipping his phone into the pocket of his sweats, he walked back to the pharmacy and groaned aloud as he stared at the disarray. It looked like a tornado had swept through. All the cabinet doors were open, and bottles lay on the counter and floor. Some were broken, some not.

"Can I help?"

Taggart turned at the sound of Dominique's voice. She stood there looking so serene in the middle of all this chaos, it nearly broke his heart. Reaching out with one hand, he cupped the side of her face and sent her a small smile. "You're doing it, Dominique. Thank you." Leaning in, he brushed their lips together. "Thank you."

Releasing her, he stepped around her and headed off toward the animals that were staying over. Checking each patient, he smiled with satisfaction that none of them had been bothered by this. They were all lying there quietly. Making sure the IV bags were good on the two dogs that needed them, he headed back up toward the front and smiled as he saw Kelin walking through the door. She carried a bag of coffee beans in one hand and some food in the other. Behind her was Penelope, who shot him an evil glare.

"Damn," Penelope expelled as she placed the items on the counter. "I'll begin on these files after I start some coffee." She pointed at him. "Don't you ever assume because I'm a little older than you, I need to get more sleep than you. This is my clinic too."

Holding up his hands in surrender, Taggart shrugged apologetically. "Won't happen again, Penelope."

"Damn straight," she snapped before marching off with the bag of coffee from Kelin and disappearing into the break room.

Kelin looked at him and sent him a gentle smile. "I'll get started on the inventory, so we know if and what we lost of everything."

"Thank you. I'll finish up here with the cops and then come help you. I've already checked the animals, and they're all fine. Thanks for your help with Penelope," he remarked sarcastically.

"You should know I'm not about to go against Penelope." With a wave over her shoulder, Kelin disappeared.

"So I guess that means you don't need me?" Dominique asked.

Taggart glanced to the woman beside him. Despite all her attempts to hide it, he could see the disappointment lurking in her gorgeous brown eyes. As much as he wanted her with him, he knew there wasn't anything she could do to help. In the time it would take him to explain the filing system, how they categorized their medications, or anything like that, it would have been faster to do it himself.

"I think we've got it. Especially since Penelope is here. But thank you for the offer, and thank you for calling me."

Her gaze grew shuttered, but she nodded once and spun around. "Just doing my job, Blade."

He waited until she was by the door before he yelled, "Rule!"

She turned and stared at him with eyes as hard as diamonds. One eyebrow rose as she waited.

Striding across the floor, he bore down on her. Not stopping, Taggart just grabbed her around the waist and kissed her. He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, not giving her a chance to refuse. Her taste was so damn addictive, and he could feel himself getting hard. Forcing himself to retreat, he pulled away from her mouth. Her eyes had that wonderful glazed look in them that he loved to see on her so much.

"I'm not just a damn job." Taggart swiped his thumb pad over the softness of her lower lip and turned around, walking away to go speak to Ulrich, who had come in earlier.

Dominique groaned and ran her hands over her face. At her sound, both dogs raised their heads and stared at her. She smiled slightly over their concern.

"I'm fine, girls. Just tired."

Last night, after the whole fiasco at the vet clinic, Dominique had gone home and tried to get some sleep. Tried being the operative word. It had been a long night, full of

distressing dreams and nightmares. So this morning, she'd decided to bring her girls with her to work. They were lying quietly on the floor beside her desk as she returned some calls and did a bit more paperwork.

Rolling her shoulders, she turned and faced the computer. Goran Zybeck's face stared back at her. *What did he want with Taggart?* Hand on the mouse, she scrolled down through his information.

Page after page, she read things she'd already committed to memory. Somewhere around the eighth page, she hesitated and frowned. Narrowing her eyes, she went back up the page a short distance. There was a name that rang a bell in her subconscious. Melton. James Melton.

Picking up a pen, she jotted the name down. "Damn it all. I've heard this name somewhere. Why can't I think of it?"

Giada woofed softly, and Dominique looked at the door. Two seconds later, a knock sounded. "Enter," she said.

Natalie Varimis stood there with her son. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I wanted to stop by and thank you for giving Taylor...I mean, Mr. McQueen...Ms. Montgomery's name."

"Come in," Dominique said, waving them forward. She noticed Natalie's son, Malik, glance at her dogs before looking up at his mom. If she hadn't been watching so close, she would have missed the near nonexistent nod that Natalie gave.

"I don't want to take up any of your time. But I really wanted to thank you for your help."

"I'm glad I was able to be of some assistance." Dominique shut her mouth as Racquel got to her feet and padded silently across the carpet to stand in front of Malik. Her fox-brush shaped tail moved gently as she sniffed his shirt.

Dominique was amazed, for Racquel was the more standoffish of her two females. She looked at Malik, who stood there with a huge smile on his face. Slowly, he put his hand out, and a lighthearted giggle left him as Racquel licked him. The

suspicious sting of tears tinged the back of Dominique's eyes as Malik dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around Racquel's neck.

Natalie had a kind smile as she met Dominique's gaze. "He loves dogs so much. Just can't get one for him right now."

"Well, it looks like my girls are fond of him," Dominique said as Giada joined Racquel.

"We should get going. I've taken enough of your time." Natalie looked at her son, who was hugging both dogs. "Malik, we need to go. Thank Ms. Dominique for letting you pet her dogs."

"Thank you, Ms. Dominique. They're very beautiful."

More of those damn tears threatened. "Thank you, Malik. Have a wonderful day. And Natalie, if you ever need anything...anything...you call me."

"Thank you, for everything."

Natalie took her son's hand, and they walked out of the room silently. At the door, Malik turned back and waved, giving her a big grin. The door closed with a click, and Dominique watched her dogs go lay back down and flop over on their sides, sighing heavily. To all appearances, they both fell back asleep.

Dominique turned her attention back to the computer screen and cross referenced the name James Melton with all the names that had been presented in Taggart's case. As it ran her criteria, she took a drink of her bottled water and picked up the phone to return another call.

A while later, a knock came on the door to her office. "It's open," she said as she checked the computer, adjusted the search parameters, and started it again.

Through the door stepped a man who took her breath away. He wore a shale colored suit with a white shirt. Business casual sure looked good on Taggart Blade.

"Hey, gorgeous," he said as he closed the door behind him.

"Hey, yourself. You're looking very hot today." Her body reacted as it always did in his presence.

"Got some time?" he questioned as he moved toward the desk.

Every second for the rest of my life. "Sure." She watched the dogs get up and allow him to pat their heads for a moment, and then they went past him to the door and whined. Taggart opened the door and let them out. She knew they wouldn't go far. The rest of the office was used to the dogs wandering around. Glancing at the time, she was surprised it was so late. There were probably only a few people left on her floor anyway.

"Nice of you to bring them with you."

"They like to come on occasion." She put her pen down on the desk and stared at him, fighting the urge to cross the flat surface and plaster her lips against his. "What can I do for you?"

Unbuttoning his suit coat, he sat down, crossed his legs, and sighed. "I came to thank you again and make sure we were okay."

She arched a brow. "Make sure we're okay? Is there a problem?"

"For last night. At the hospital."

Dominique struggled to keep her face emotionless. "That's it, just at the hospital?"

"Well, and for earlier with my bad attitude."

"With William?" she asked, wanting to let him know she hadn't forgotten his behavior toward her. Dominique fought down a smile as his expression soured.

"Yes," he bit off, "with William."

Leaning back in her leather chair, Dominique stared at him for a while. She picked up her pen and twirled it in her fingers. "You know, I've known him for a long time, and I don't need you being rude to people I like."

"How well do you know him?"

Dominique shivered from the coldness of his tone. It was like summer changed to winter. "Very well, thank you. That's not the point." Using the pen, she tapped the computer screen. "I have something to tell you, but I'm not sure you're really going to like hearing it."

Taggart ran his tongue over his lips, and she shuddered as her nipples hardened. She blinked once, and when she opened her eyes, she saw that Taggart had removed his suit coat. She bit back a groan. The fabric of his white shirt hugged every luscious inch of his upper torso.

"I don't want to hear it. Not right now," he said in a low voice.

With one fluid motion, he stood and moved toward her. Her pen fell from nerveless fingers as he turned her chair to face him. Bracing his hands on the armrests of her chair, he murmured, "We can talk later. Right now, I have something else in mind."

She looked up at him and asked, "And that would be what?"

Taggart pulled her out of the chair and against his hard body. She could feel his erection pressing against her. Dominique licked her dry lips.

"We can't do this now. Not here," she objected weakly.

Taggart chuckled, a sinful sound. "I locked the door behind the dogs. You just have to be quiet," he whispered against the side of her face. "If you can. I plan to make you scream and let everyone know that I'm taking you. Laying claim to my woman."

Dominique shuddered and struggled ineffectually. "Taggart, w-"

He kissed her, stilling her protest. His kiss stole her breath away and made her pussy clench.

"Dominique, what you do to me," Taggart growled against her lips.

He sealed his lips to hers again. His impatient hands stripped her of her clothing. The air in the room was unbearable against her heated skin. Gasping, she pulled her lips from his. Taggart groaned, turned, swept his hand over the desk, and then laid her down. The cool feel of the desktop against her back made her gasp and arch. Taggart laid against, her his shirt abrading her nipples.

"Shh... I want to taste all of you," he murmured.

His tongue licked along her hairline, forehead, ear, cheeks, nose, mouth, and chin. He nibbled his way down her neck, across her collar bone, and then the valley between her breasts.

"Your scent drives me wild. Your taste is all over my tongue. All I can imagine is you," Taggart spoke against her skin.

He was flooding her senses. He licked the firm globes of her breasts, going in circles until he reached her aching nipples. He played around the nipples, not touching the hardened nubs. Dominique looked down at his head resting on her. Taggart looked up, then opened his mouth. She shivered at the first scrape of his teeth along the sensitive tips. Taggart murmured, sucking them into the wet cavern of his mouth. Dominique's hands scrambled, and she gripped his head.

"Yes," she hissed, throwing her head back.

"Moan for me." Taggart chuckled darkly.

He licked across the valley of her breasts to her other nipple, sucking it deep. She moaned, closing her eyes. Remembering where they were, she put her hand over her mouth, trying to stifle her cries. Taggart gave her no sympathy. He continued his sexual journey of her body. His tongue ran from side to side along her rib cage, swished in her navel, down her stomach, and across the apex between her thighs. His tongue licked along the bare skin. She shivered. Slowly and deliberately, he flicked his tongue on her labia. She moaned and shifted her legs wider. Taggart chuckled, and then she heard a sound that made her look at him again. The sound came once more. Taggart inhaled deeply and growled. He rolled his eyes to meet hers.

"You smell so good. Wet with desire for me." He leaned in and swiped his tongue from top to bottom of her pussy.

Dominique bit the side of her hand to still her cries. Taggart licked back and forth along her wet, sensitive inner lips. His tongue circled her clit, and then he suckled it into his mouth. Dominique groaned. Delicious tightness filled her belly. He withdrew, and she groaned in protest.

"Shh... I want to feel you come on my tongue, but I need to have you," Taggart growled.

He impaled her in one thrust. Wetness gushed from her as she came. Taggart grunted and pounded into her. Dominique tightened her legs around him. The fabric of

his slacks rubbed against her legs. His hips moved fast as he rode her. Blearily, she felt him everywhere inside of her wet cunt. Shaking off the lethargy she felt, Dominique pushed at him. Taggart held her tighter. She pushed back at him.

"Let me," she demanded.

He growled. Smiling, she licked his lips and pushed his back. He released her. She slid off the desk and pushed him into her chair. She knelt before him, then untied his tie and held it in her hand. Kissing him ravenously, she gripped his right hand and tied it with the tie. Blindly, she searched the floor, and her hand felt her bra strap. Releasing him from the kiss, she quickly tied his other hand.

Gasping, she looked at him. His shirt was still on, and his pants were unfastened. His erect member jutted straight out from the coarse hair surrounding it. The head dripped pre-come. His erection bobbed, the veins along it throbbing. Greedily, she sat forward and sucked his cock down her throat. His musky, salty taste tickled her taste buds. Taggart grunted and cursed. She pulled at his pants and felt them fall.

"Damn... yes.... Fu...please, Dominique."

She enjoyed his words as she tasted him on her tongue. He had given her such pleasure, and she wanted him to beg for his. She showed him no mercy. Relaxing her throat, she went all the way down until her mouth met the end of his erection. Taggart stiffened and breathed fast. Dominique swallowed around his cock. His balls drew up against her chin. Reaching down, she held the base of his cock and released his erection from her mouth.

"Not yet. I won't let you come yet," she murmured.

"Dom... please... i...ne...t.." Taggart murmured incoherently.

Smiling, Dominique waited a few moments to make sure he wouldn't come. She took off his pants the rest of the way, throwing them to the side. Standing, she unbuttoned a button of his shirt, then held the sides and pulled. Buttons flew, and his shirt lay open on his bare, glistening dark brown chest. She leaned over and licked his nipple, bit it, and then repeated the same thing on the other side. Taggart shuddered and swore.

"Soon," she said.

Straddling him, she put the head of his cock against her pussy. She laced her fingers behind his head, then sank down onto his hardened shaft. Taggart hissed, and she moaned as he filled her again. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

"Look at me," she ordered.

Dazed dark grey eyes met hers. "Scream for me, Taggart."

At her words, Taggart couldn't control the twitch of his cock embedded in her plush pussy. Dominique rose up off him and sank back down.

"Scream," she whispered, a dark, decadent demand.

He gritted his teeth and held it back. When he'd arrived, everyone else had left already, but Dominique didn't need to know that. Dominique smiled, a sensuous grin. She undulated her hips. His cock tightened, and he couldn't hold it. Groaning, he snapped his hips forward in time with her undulations. She creamed around his cock, making it slick and wet. Sounds of their bodies meeting filled his ears. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard. Jerking his hands, he swore as they were stopped by the restraints. She had tied him, and he'd wanted her to. He wanted anything, everything she could give. Dominique fumbled and released his hands. He gripped her, then ran his hands up her back and into her hair. Her hair tumbled down, and he gripped it, pulling back her head.

He scrapped his teeth gently over her neck. Dominique shivered and moaned. Her pussy tightened around his aching cock. He continued to thrust into her, moving forward in the chair. Her legs came around him, gripping his back. He shifted his butt further forward. The chair moved, and he grunted as his butt hit the floor. Dominique chuckled and spread her thighs onto the floor on either side of him. Using the floor as leverage, she impaled herself on him. Gripping her hips, he held her as she ground their bodies together. Her clit spasmed and then her pussy clenched as she went over again. The pressure in his cock was unbearable. Dominique murmured and kissed him hard. She nipped his tongue. She undulated her inner pussy walls. A blast of heat flooded

through him, and he roared as he came. His cock pulsed continuously inside of her. Dominique spasmed around him, milking his release from him.

Trying to learn to breath normally, he fell back.

"Ow," he said as his head hit something hard.

Turning his head, he realized it was the handle of the two drawer file cabinet behind the desk. Dominique laughed and fell against him. She cuddled into him.

"You think that's funny? I could have a concussion."

"Serves you right for seducing me in my office," she replied, her eyes twinkling.

"You didn't take that much seduction," he countered.

"You're the one who screamed. Now everyone will know I claimed my man," she said smugly.

"You and theses four walls. When I came in, everyone had already left." He chuckled.

"You think you're funny." Dominique smacked his chest.

He grabbed her hand. "I have enough bruises."

Dominique crossed her hands on chest and put her chin on them as she watched him.

"Do you have a fetish for office furniture?" she asked.

"Huh?" He frowned.

"First the file cabinet in your office, and now my desk and chair," she said.

"Maybe. But hey, the chair was all you. *All* you." Taggart grinned.

"Yeah, it was." Dominique smiled in return.

"So, you want to go home, or do you have anymore office furniture you want us to try out?" she asked.

She waited a few minutes, then said, "*Taggart.*"

He shrugged, grinning. "I'm thinking about it. That credenza is calling me."

Dominique's mouth opened and closed. She rolled her eyes.

"Definitely an office furniture fetish." She laughed. "Well, before you give into the call of the credenza, let me remind you I have an office at home too. So do you."

Taggart saw the lustful spark in her eye.

"Race you home." Dominique jumped off him and started to get dressed.

Groaning, he sat up. He leaned back on his hands and watched her luscious breasts bobbing. His mouth went dry. Dominique stopped and put her hands on her hips.

"Come on. Don't just sit there."

Taggart almost swallowed his tongue. She had on her skirt and heels with no bra or shirt.

"Just enjoying the view," he rasped out.

She looked down at herself and back at him. "Pervert."

"Get it right. I have an office furniture fetish. You sure you don't want to try the credenza?" He was hopeful.

"Sure. Let's try it."

Before she could finish, he was up and reaching for her. Dominique moved out of reach. She shrugged on her shirt, buttoned it, then headed for the door. Stopping there, she looked over her shoulder.

"The one in your home office," she purred.

She opened the door and walked away. "Giada and Racquel! Time to go home."

Quickly, he got dressed, looking longingly at her credenza.

"You coming, Blade?" she called.

"Not yet. But soon." He hustled to the office door.

Dominique's laugh trailed behind her as she ran down the hall, going around the corner. The dogs barked. Taggart took off after her.

* * * * *

Taggart pulled into his driveway, turned off his car, grabbed his files, and got out. It had been a busy week. He sighed and leaned against the door of the SUV. As usual, his thoughts turned to Dominique. He hadn't seen much of her. They ran together in the mornings, but the rest of the day, they hadn't had time to even meet for

lunch. At night, when they had tried to get together for dinner at one of their houses, one emergency after another, either hers or his, had kept them apart. His thoughts flashed to the last time they had been together in her office. He could still envision her laid out on top of her desk for his taking. They had gone to his home office and made good use of his credenza. They hadn't made it to her home office yet, although they had plans to. His cock hardened. Taggart chuckled at himself. He was horny and missed spending time with Dominique. He had gotten used to their nights cuddled up on the couch, watching TV with their dogs. Standing, he shook off the thoughts.

He had some files he needed to work on, but with his partner Lauryn back, he at least wasn't on call for any emergencies. Although he loved what he did, it had been a relief to finally tell everyone to call Dr. Simmons if they had a problem. He frowned, remembering Dominique had never gotten around to telling him that something she wanted to tell him. Something he wasn't going to like. He made a mental note to ask her. Well, ask her after he kissed her senseless.

I'll get a little work done, then go see my lady.

Whistling, he walked up his path and absently glimpsed at his garden. It looked good. Rigger had done an excellent job of making it even better than before. He paused and looked at the fountain with an ivy design in the middle of the right side of the garden. It was more ornate than he would have picked, but it looked good. He would never admit it to Rigger, because he knew he had put it there to annoy him.

His thoughts flashed to the blackened shell the garden had been a few weeks earlier. Frowning, Taggart thought of all the things that had been happening to him and, because of him, to Dominique. They had sat down and tried to figure out who was doing this, but with no luck. He heard the dogs barking behind the door.

"I'm coming." He continued up the path and up the stairs, two at a time.

Juggling his papers, he unlocked his door and pressed the button on his keychain to disarm his alarm. A movement on the porch startled him. Whirling, he saw who was waiting for him and laughed.

"God, you scared me. What are you doing here? Di-" The sound of the ringing phone interrupted him. "Come in while I get that."

Taggart rushed inside and down the hall to the kitchen. He dropped his files on the table by the door and pressed the panel on the wall.

"Hello."

"Hey baby, you home yet?"

His body flushed with hunger at the sound of Dominique's sexy voice filling the kitchen. Conscious of his guest, he reached up and grabbed the cordless from off the wall. Confused, he looked at his keys in his hand. Absently, he put them in the pocket of his slacks. He pressed another button, and the com system clicked off to the phone. Taggart wandered over to the glass door leading to the back deck and looked across the lake at Dominique's house.

"Yeah, I just got in. It was hectic at the office. I had to bring home some files with me. H-"

Dominique interrupted him. "Uh-uh. No working tonight. I'm coming over and making you dinner." Her voice dropped, getting husky. "A nice romantic dinner, and then I'm going to have my way with you."

All thoughts of work left his mind as his cock hardened, and he spoke softly into the phone. "You're way with me, huh. What do you have planned, Ms. Rule?"

Dominique laughed wickedly. "You'll just have to wait and see, Mr. Blade. Wait and see. See you in a few." She hung up.

Taggart laughed and clicked off the phone. Suddenly he remembered the dogs. He put down the phone and rushed back down the hall.

"Oh shit. Sorry. I forgot about the dogs. Th-" He stopped as he came into the living room.

Shocked, he looked at the prone dogs. Rushing to their sides, he dropped to his knees.

"*Flay! Mario!* Oh my God. What happened?" He checked them over. "Why didn-" He looked up, then stopped speaking.

There was madness in the eyes looking at him. The various accidents and things that had been happening all clicked into place.

"It was yo-" A hand reached out for his.

Taggart put up his hand to deflect it. A sting on his skin made him look down. The syringe held in the hand confused him. He stood and stumbled back, his head woozy.

"Why?" He looked back into those dark eyes.

A frightful smile curved the lips, and a voice came as if from far away. "You're mine."

Taggart's mouth felt like cotton. He turned and stumbled forward to the wall. His legs gave out before he could reach it. His thoughts clouded. *I need to get help. Oh God. Dominique. Warn Dominique.*

Distantly, he remembered his keys in his pocket. His hand shook as he reached for them. Fumbling, he pressed against the outside of his pants. *Did I hit it? Please let me have hit it.* He tried again. Hard hands grabbed his and jerked them away.

"Uh-uh." The voice he should have known was not like itself.

The hands grabbed and pulled the keys out of his pocket. He heard the keys hit the wall across the room. The hands grabbed him and rolled him over. The rage in those eyes made his blood chill.

"Now we wait for Dominique." The laughter that followed was an ugly sound.

Taggart reached up to grab the face above him, even as it wavered. Blackness flittered across his sight. His hand dropped onto the floor. *Dominique. Must warn Dominique.*

The inky darkness rushed up and claimed him.

Chapter Nine

Dominique hung up the phone from Taggart and chuckled. Going back to the center island, she continued to pack the things she needed for the dinner she planned to cook for him. In minutes, she was finished and went back to the phone. She dialed a number.

"Hello," a gruff voice answered.

"Prentiss, you all can go home for the night. I've got him now," Dominique said.

"Someone was waiting for him when he got home," Symon Holland interjected.

"Did you see who it was?" She frowned.

She had called the com unit for the entire team that was protecting Taggart.

"No, it was too dark on the porch to see, and then they were blocked by the door. But he let whoever it was in. The person didn't stay long and went the other direction, further up the road on Calblis Lane," Nigal Winfrey replied.

"Oh, okay. Well, I'm heading over there now, so you all are off until tomorrow," Dominique said.

"Don't hurt him too bad," Rico Salvador teased.

"Hush up, you," Dominique said.

She waited for the rest of them to razz her. The other members of the team who hadn't said anything just made kissing noises.

"Go home, you bozos. See you in the morning." Laughing, Dominique hung up.

She wandered over to the glass door leading to her deck and looked at Taggart's house. The lights were on at the back of the house. She had spoken to Taggart, so at least she knew he was okay. Smiling in anticipation, Dominique turned from the door and went down the hall to the closet to put on her shoes. She cocked her head and listened. The house was silent. Curious, she went to the TV room. The TV was off. She could swear she had left it on for the girls to watch while she went to Taggart's. She glanced around, but didn't see them. Shrugging, she went back toward the kitchen, calling out loudly.

"I'm going to Taggart's. Don't watch too much TV." Arriving back in the kitchen, she picked up the bag she had prepared.

Skirting the island, she looked into the bag as she headed for the door. Glancing up, she stopped.

"Uh-huh. You all are picking up bad habits learning to lock off the TV from Flay and Mario. Get from in front of the door, Racquel and Giada." She said it firmly.

The dogs looked at each other, then back at her, and shifted, blocking the door even more. Their look was stubborn. Dominique stared at them. The dogs returned her look, not budging. She sighed and shifted the bag in her arms.

"Fine, you can come too. I'm sure Flay and Mario would like your company, and they can teach you some other things to torture me with." She rolled her eyes, then grinned wickedly. "I have plan for their daddy, though. Nasty, dirty plans."

The dogs barked. She looked at them. They put their heads down and placed their paws over their ears, giving her a pained look.

"Hey, you're the ones who want to come, so suffer as I talk about my man," She teased.

The dogs humphed and whined.

"If I wasn't so anxious to see Taggart, I would tell you all about what I want to do to him." Dominique laughed.

The dogs growled. Dominique growled back at them playfully.

"Exactly. I want to devour him. Come on, ladies. Time's a wasting." She continued to the door. The dogs moved, and she opened it. They took off across the deck, down the stairs, and toward Taggart's house.

"You could have at least waited for me," Dominique called.

They barked, but didn't return. She locked up and followed after them. In moments, she was on Taggart's back deck. The door was open already. She went inside and put the bag down on the center island.

"Hey, where is everybody? You all could have at least met me at the door. Racquel and Giada left me all alone to walk over here. Don't I get some love?" Dominique asked as she walked into the living room.

In a glance, she took in a gagged Taggart, tied to the chair in the center of the room. He was looking at her. The dogs were all laying on the floor, spread throughout the room. Instinctively, she turned and raised her hand.

"I'll give you some love," a voice hissed.

Dominique looked into crazed eyes. She pulled her hand back and punched out with her fist. Her assailant took the blow and hit her arm. The sharp sting of a needle registered a second after it plunged in and the depressor pushed.

Dominique's surprised look was met with a chilling smile. "Welcome to my party."

A woozy feeling filled Dominique. She shook it off and jumped at her attacker, but her aim was off. The target moved, then lashed out with a fist, catching Dominique on the side of the head. She fell back, then rushed the individual again, sustaining another hit for her trouble. Dominique lashed out, grunting as her fist hit flesh. She gripped a hand, twisted, and felt the arm break. A voice shrieked, and then another blow hit her in the chest. She stumbled back, but righted herself. Her head swam. Dominique refused to give into it. She swung and hit flesh again. A kick in her leg made it buckle, and she fell onto her back. The enraged face filled her vision.

"You broke my fucking arm! You cunt!" her attacker screamed.

Dominique smiled, a nasty grin. "I'm going to break more than that, Kelin." She laughed.

Kelin roared, then punched out. Dominique caught her fist, then decked her. Blood spurted out of her nose. Dominique laughed again. Kelin growled and lashed out with her broken hand. Dominique grabbed it and twisted. Kelin howled, then kicked her. Pain blasted through Dominique, and blackness filled her vision. Gasping, she released Kelin, struggling for consciousness and breath.

"I'm going to kill you. Kill you," Kelin sang in a broken voice.

Dominique fought to stay awake, but it was useless. *Oh God, not again. I have to protect him.* The darkness claimed her.

Dominique bit back a groan as she woke. Cautiously, she kept still and tried to figure out where she was. From the feel of it, she knew she was lying on the carpeted floor. She shifted slowly and felt the bite of ropes on her wrists, tied behind her back. A hysterical voice broke the silence.

"This would never have happened, Taggart, if only you'd have noticed me. We were so good together. All those late hours working as a team. A couple. Then you had to get all wrapped up in that bitch. You didn't pay attention to the warnings I gave you. You should have left her!" Kelin raged.

She paused, then paced. Dominique heard the drag of her shoes on the carpet.

Kelin's tone softened and went sickly sweet. "But I know you didn't mean it. She had you in her trap. Once she's gone, we can be together. You, me, and the dogs. They'll learn to like me. We'll have to put hers to sleep, of course."

Kelin made a humming noise. Dominique opened her eyes to slits. Kelin's back was to her as she straddled Taggart on the chair. Kelin made the sound again.

"I want a real kiss. I'm going to take off your gag." Kelin laughed, attempting to sound sultry.

Dominique realized Kelin was kissing Taggart. She tamped down her rage. Kelin reached up, then swore as her left hand hung uselessly at her side.

"That bitch broke my arm." Kelin looked over her shoulder.

Dominique closed her eyes and regulated her breathing. She heard the drag of Kelin's footsteps on the carpet. Holding still, Dominique poised herself to spring.

"He's mine, and he'll forget you," Kelin spat.

Her voice sounded too far away for Dominique to take her out.

A brief pause, and then her footsteps hurried back to Taggart. "Now for that kiss."

Dominique silted her eyes again to see her. Kelin stood to the side of Taggart as she used her right hand to take off the tape from his mouth. Blood ran down the side of Taggart's face. He looked at Dominique, his face calm, then turned to look at Kelin.

"Kelin, let me go so I can check on Dominique. She's-"

"Forget her!" Kelin screamed, lashing out and hitting him across the face.

She will pay for that. Dominique's body tensed.

Taggart shook his head and spit the blood out of his mouth.

"Look what you made me do," Kelin whimpered, and cleaned at his face.

Taggart jerked his head away from her. Kelin's eyes narrowed, and she grabbed his chin. She smiled, then kissed him. Gasping, she drew back and hissed.

"You bit me!" She raised her hand to hit him again.

Dominique couldn't let it happen. She laughed, a nasty sound. Kelin whirled and looked at her. Dominique made sure their eyes met, then let all the contempt she felt for Kelin show.

"You're pathetic, Kelin. Wanting a man who doesn't want you. Even if you kill me, he'll never be yours." Dominique could see the rage in her eyes.

"Shut up." Kelin's body quivered.

"To think, all this time you were pulling those juvenile pranks to get attention. We laughed at them, Kelin. Laughed at you, hanging around, waiting like a dog-" Deliberately, Dominique paused, then continued. "Actually, that would be an insult to the dogs. They are so much smarter." She laughed again.

Kelin roared. Dominique tensed, waiting. Kelin ran to the side table, grabbed a knife, and ran at her. When Kelin reached her, Dominique lashed out with her leg. Kelin's knee buckled, and she screamed. Kelin slashed down with the knife. Dominique rolled into her. The knife embedded in her shoulder. Ignoring it, Dominique butted her head into Kelin's chest. Kelin fell back, then scrambled to her feet. Dominique kicked out and flipped to her feet. Kelin moved. Dominique mirrored her. They circled each other.

"You missed. Can't even do that right," Dominique taunted.

Kelin growled and rushed her. Dominique waited until she was close, then sprang up in the air into a back kick. Kelin flipped back and crashed to the floor. She whimpered and tried to rise. Dominique walked over to her, then looked down.

"Stay the fuck down." She kicked out with her leg, knocking Kelin in the side of her face.

Kelin made a sound, then went slack. Dominique watched, making sure she was out. Then she turned and made her way to Taggart.

"Are you okay?" Dominique demanded.

"I'm fine. I'm not the one with a knife in my shoulder," Taggart growled.

He struggled to get off the chair to which he was tied.

"Stay still. I don't know if you have any other injuries," Dominique snapped.

"You're bleeding more than I am." Taggart looked at her like she was crazy.

Dominique sighed. "I know, and it'll get worse."

"Wha-" Taggart started.

Knowing it was going to hurt with the knife in her shoulder, Dominique knelt and moved her hands, which were still tied behind her, under her legs until they were in front of her. She battled back nausea and the desire to pass out. Her sight wavered. Closing her eyes, she fought it. After a few moments, she opened her eyes. There was a look on Taggart's face she wasn't sure of.

"What?"

"Badass. You're a badass. My hero," Taggart said.

"Shut up. Let me get you loose," Dominique grumped.

She went around behind the chair and worked on the ropes. Her hands, slick with blood, kept slipping on the knots. Cursing, she gritted her teeth, then reached up with her bound hands. In a quick movement, she pulled the knife from her shoulder. Gasping, she sat down hard on the floor behind him.

"*Dominique!*" Taggart called.

She shook her head and looked at him. His face was grim and concerned. Quickly, she used the knife to cut her ropes off her wrists, then crawled to him and cut

his. Weak, she fell back, leaning against the couch, and let the knife drop from her hand to the floor next to her. Taggart flew off the chair and threw it out of his way. He reached for her. She batted his hand away.

"Go tie up Kelin before she wakes."

"You didn't kill her?" Taggart ignored her order, still trying to get to her shoulder.

"I want her to suffer for all she did. Now, go tie her up," Dominique growled.

"I'm seeing to your shoulder first." Taggart glared at her.

"Fine. I'll tie her my damn self," Dominique huffed and tried to stand.

"You're so fucking stubborn. Stay there. I'll do it." Taggart put his hand on her leg, stilling her.

He went across the room to Kelin. He looked around and spotted the rest of the rope she'd had and tied her with it. Dominique looked at the dogs, who seemed okay, but were still out cold.

"Check on the dogs, too," she called.

Taggart went out the door, but was back in seconds with strips of cloth. He ignored her instructions and came back to her. Dominique tried to stand again.

"Stay right there, or I will beat you," he growled.

She looked at him, pursing her lips. Taggart knelt next to her and started to bind her shoulder. He was muttering about stubborn pains in the ass. Dominique stifled a laugh. He tightened the cloth on her shoulder, and she gasped.

"Now that you're fixed up, I'll go check the dogs. Sit there and do *not* move," he snapped.

He went around the room and checked on the dogs. Dominique breathed a sigh of relief when he nodded his head.

"They're okay." Taggart stood, then went toward the panel on the wall. "Let me call for help."

"Taggart, come here," Dominique ordered.

"I don't appreciate being ordered around, Dominique," he bristled.

"Just come here, now," she growled.

Taggart walked over to her. Dominique stood to meet him. She wobbled, unsteady on her feet. Taggart gripped her.

"Damn it, Dominique. I told you to stay put," Taggart admonished.

"I need to say this standing up." Dominique replied, then continued. "You remember a couple of days ago, when I said I had something I wanted to tell you?"

"What? That doesn't matter now. We need to get you to a h-"

"It matters," she said, cutting him off.

"Christ, you're bleeding and nee-"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Shut up, Blade. I need to say something."

Taggart glared at her and made noises.

"Blade, just shut up so I can tell you I love you!" Dominique screamed.

Taggart stiffened, then stilled. Dominique removed her hand from his mouth. He studied her. Dominique shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny.

"That is what you wanted to tell me, and you thought I wouldn't like it?" he asked curiously.

"Well, I know I'm not that easy to get along with. And, well, I can be opinionated. Don't you dare agree with that." Dominique narrowed her eyes.

Taggart put up his hands, then grinned. "I wouldn't think of it."

Dominique looked at him and waited. Taggart continued to grin like a fool. Finally, she couldn't take it.

"Is that all you have to ask or say?"

Taggart rocked back on his heels. "Yep."

Disappointed and pissed all at once, Dominique turned away from him. Taggart caught her and pulled her to him. She refused to look at him. Gentle fingers raised her face to his. Her breath caught at the tenderness in his dark grey gaze.

"I love every opinionated, hard-to-get-along-with bone in your delectable body, Dominique Rule," Taggart said.

"You couldn't leave all that out and just say, 'I love you'?" Dominique asked, exasperated.

Taggart chuckled. "Yeah, but where's the fun in that?"

She smacked him in the chest with her hand. Taggart caught it and raised her fingers to his lips.

"I love you, Dominique Rule, with all my soul." Taggart's husky voice stroked along her sense.

He kissed her fingers one by one. Looking into his eyes, Dominique saw her future.

"I love you, Taggart Blade," she said, and licked his fingers.

Taggart laughed in joy and picked her up. Laughing with him, she cupped her hand behind his head. She ignored the pain in her shoulder and kissed him. Taggart murmured and deepened the kiss.

The sound of clapping broke them apart. Dominique looked up and stiffened. Taggart turned his head and went rigid. She slid down his body and stood in the circle of his arm

"How touching," a snide voice said.

"Dean," Dominique whispered, looking down the barrel of the gun pointing at them.

Dean Harold smiled nastily. "The hero has won the fair maiden. They defeated the villainess. Then they declare their love. How quaint." He glanced at Kelin, who was stirring on the floor close to him. "You're useless." He pointed the gun he held at her, then shot her between the eyes.

Dominique stepped forward.

"Uh-uh. Don't move." Dean turned the gun on her, stilling her movement.

He glanced at Taggart, then back at Dominique. "There's only one problem. The villainess is dead, but what about the second act? Dumb, dumb, dumb. We have a villain also, but unlike the villainess" --Dean kicked Kelin and walked closer to them-- "I don't take chances of failure." He shifted the gun and pulled the trigger.

Taggart gasped and fell back. Dominique turned and saw the blood as he fell back onto the couch.

" *Taggart!*" She fell to the ground at his side and reached for him. " Oh God, please don't take him from me."

A mocking laugh came from behind her. " Come now, Dominique, I expected better of you. Whimpering like a pussy after a man."

Rage filled her. Still whimpering, she reached down and felt the handle of the knife.

" Come here, Dominique," Dean called, a warning in his voice.

She shifted the knife to the hand of her uninjured shoulder. In a swift movement, she turned and threw the knife at him. At the same time, a shot rang out, and then another. Glass shattered from the front window. Dean gurgled as the knife entered his throat. Blood blossomed from between his eyes. He stumbled forward and fell. The back of his head shot off. Dominique looked at the doorway. Hunter's face was cold as she lowered her gun. Dressed in high heeled sandals and a pale gold sundress, she stepped further into the room. She kicked the gun away from Dean, then went over to Kelin and checked her pulse. She shook her head, then stood. Dominique glanced at the window, and Alton Blade, Taggart's brother, lowered his gun. He climbed in through the now glassless window.

Turning, Dominique ran her hand over Taggart. His face was pale, and blood flowed over his shirt. Tears rained down her face, and she could hear someone screaming. She didn't realize it was herself. A hand gripped her shoulder, pulling her away. Lashing out, she fought.

" *Dominique!*" a harsh voice called as firm hands gripped her.

She looked at Alton's grim face. " I need to help him," she said.

" You've done all you can, honey. Let the EMTs help him," he said gently.

Confused, she looked around and realized the room was filled with people. Prentiss and his team were helping Ulrich and his men. Some of Taggart's brothers and sisters were there. The EMT workers were trying to get to Taggart. Another pair of

hands gripped her shoulders. She looked back and met Hunter's worried gaze. Hunter helped her stand and pulled her out of the way. The men moved in and tried to stop the bleeding.

"Taggart pressed his panic button, and we came as soon as we got it."

Dominique looked at Hunter, confused. Hunter continued.

"I was out to dinner with Alton when we got the page from Prentiss. He and his men were already at their homes, but still had their coms open to Taggart. They called Ulrich, and they all came, too. Alton and I got here first." She looked at Taggart.

Dominique followed her gaze. They were lifting him onto a stretcher. Hunter spoke again, catching her attention.

"Who would've believed it? There were two of them. No wonder we couldn't pinpoint who it was. It wasn't a who, but two whos. It's finally over." Hunter squeezed her hand.

"Yeah, I guess you all were right after all. He had a crush on me." She glanced at Dean Harold. The coroner was zipping him into a body bag.

Pain filled Dominique, and fatigue. She looked back at Taggart. They were wheeling him out. She took a step toward them, and her knees buckled. Hunter caught her and lowered her to the floor. Blackness threatened to overwhelm her. Nausea rolled in her stomach. Her ribs started to ache. Coughing, she tasted blood in her mouth. Her whole body started to ache.

"*Dominique!*" Hunter screamed. "We need some help over here!"

Dominique gripped her hand. "Take care of Taggart. Promise me."

"There no need for that. You're not going to die. Damn you, Niq. You're not going to die!" Hunter cried.

"Prom-"

She slid into unconsciousness, welcoming relief from the pain.

"Don't you die on me! Where are you hurt?" Hunter screamed.

From a great distance, she heard Hunter. *Take care of Taggart for me.*

Dominique jerked awake and groaned as pain ripped through her. She raised her hand and realized it was hooked to an IV. Memories of what had happened flooded her.

Taggart. What happened to Taggart? Panicked, she tried to sit up. Hissing, she fell back.

"Hey. Don't injure yourself after all the hard work the doc did," a sweet voice said.

Turning her head, she locked eyes with dark gray. His tender loving gaze roamed over her.

"I thought I had lost you," Dominique said, her throat dry.

"You're not getting rid of me that easy," Taggart said.

Dominique looked at the man she loved, laying the hospital bed across the room from her.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm better than you are. Just a shoulder wound and a few bruises," he replied.

"I need to touch you," Dominique said. She moved to get up.

"Christ, woman. Don't go injure yourself. Stay put," Taggart growled.

"I need to touch you," Dominique gritted.

"Bossy, bossy. I'll come to you," Taggart said.

He got up and, grabbing his IV, made his way slowly across the room to her. Taggart reached her and grabbed her hand.

"Come up into bed with me," Dominique ordered.

"We can't do any of that for a while." Taggart looked at her, his lips twitching.

"Doofus." She rolled her eyes.

Taggart carefully lay next to her. Dominique ignored his caution and leaned over him, putting her head on his chest. The steady beat of his heart made her know he was there and real. She put her hand over his chest and looked up at him.

"What happened while I slept?" she asked.

Taggart's eyes twinkled. "From the way I heard it, you passed out. Hit the floor like a sack of potatoes."

"You know you're wrong to make fun of a sick woman," She grumped.

"Please. A badass sick woman," he snorted.

"My badass rep is gone now that I--how did you say it?-- 'hit the floor like a sack of potatoes.'" Dominique grimaced.

"Honey, you are still super A badass. And that's from the doc here and everyone who knows what happened. You fought with a broken tibia, three cracked ribs, bruises all over, and a knife wound in the shoulder. You're still a hero. My hero." Taggart kissed her cheek.

Dominique chuckled, then sobered. "Did they find out anything about Dean and Kelin?"

Taggart looked serious. "Yeah. Ulrich came by. It seems Kelin was obsessed with me. Her house had pictures of us. She had replaced your head with her own. Some of the various things that happened to me and you she did."

"And Dean?"

"There it gets a little weird. Dean couldn't seem to decide whether he hated you or wanted you. They found a journal which talked of his feelings for you. The entries he wrote either raged or were loving toward you. He knew your schedule inside out. Somehow, he found out about Kelin and was watching her to see what she would do. From his journal, he hoped she would kill me, then herself, and leave the way clear for him. Since Kelin had already started sending me warnings, he picked up on that and did some, too. He actually undid some of the things she had done to you. One that he stopped I will be grateful for. Kelin had set out poison meat for Racquel and Giada. The dogs are all fine, by the way. When we get home, I'm going to hug them tight." Taggart shuddered and held her closer.

Dominique closed her eyes, sick at what Kelin had wanted to do. She couldn't imagine not having Racquel or Giada. Opening her eyes, she could be thankful to Dean

for stopping it, but couldn't find it in herself to not hate him for shooting Taggart. She was relieved he was dead and could not hurt them anymore. Taggart spoke again.

"But he had a backup plan that he thought would protect you from her and me. He had planned to blow up the clinic. Kelin made her move to take you out and kidnap me before he could. When he realized what she had done, he came to my house to save you, but you had already done it yourself. Ulrich thinks he snapped when he realized he had no chance with you, even if I was dead."

Dominique shivered and clutched at him. In all the research she had done on Taggart's stalker, she had never figured she had one of her own.

"I love you, Taggart." She put her hand on his cheek.

"I love you, too," Taggart said, and then his eyes narrowed. "But no matter what you think, you are staying your ass in bed until you're better. I'm going to take care of you, Dominique Rule."

"Be prepared. I'm a terrible patient," Dominique groaned.

"It doesn't matter. I want to take care of you. Marry me, Dominique," Taggart said.

Dominique's heart stilled, and then she looked deep into his eyes. "Yes, I'll marry you. We'll take care of each other." Dominique leaned into him.

"Each other," Taggart echoed.

Dominique moved to meet him as he lowered his head. The soft brush of lips on her own made her groan. He deepened the kiss.

"I knew they lied when they said you were sick. If that's sick, check me in now," a voice teased.

Gasping, Dominique pulled away from Taggart and looked toward the door. The tension left the dark caramel face watching Dominique. Twinkling violet eyes met hers.

"You had us worried, Niq. Don't do it again." Sienna Zain rushed to the side of the bed and kissed her cheek.

"Sienna, what are you doing here?"

"Like I would be anywhere else. We just flew in." Sienna gestured to the great bear of a chocolate skinned man behind her.

Dominique looked at McGee in disbelief. "You went on a plane. You let someone else fly you in."

McGee snorted. "I flew us. The copter is on the roof of the hospital. Glad to see you're doing well, Dominique. Hunter made it sound as if you were at death's door."

Dominique looked at Taggart and grinned. "Did I ever tell you I love your house?" She looked back at Sienna. "And Sienna has a hard on for mine."

"Um... no... you didn't," he replied.

She looked back at him.

"Uh-oh. I know that look," Taggart said cautiously.

"I'm moving in with you, Taggart. We'll get around to planning our wedding, so you can make an honest woman of me."

"You're getting married!" Sienna shrieked and hugged her.

Dominique grimaced.

"Oh, sorry." Sienna stepped back next to McGee. McGee gave her an arrogant look. Dominique smiled, a baring of her teeth.

"When are you moving to Trescott, Sienna?" she asked.

McGee raised an eyebrow.

Sienna looked confused. "You're asking me this now? I don't even have a house yet. Your hur-"

Dominique cut her off. "You do now."

McGee grinned at her.

"Dominique, really. We don't have to do this now. You're ill and need to concentrate on getting better. We'll talk about this later. A house isn't imp-"

She interrupted Sienna again. "My house."

Sienna continued as if Dominique hadn't spoken. "-ortant. I only c-" Sienna sputtered to a stop, and her eyes widened. "You're selling me your house?"

Dominique leaned against Taggart and nodded. McGee winked at her.

"Oh, my God. Your house. Well, it's going to be my house soon." Sienna smiled.

"When are you moving to Trescott?" Dominique asked.

Sienna looked at her. "Soon. I'll be here while you get better, and then plan for-"

"Uh-uh. Get your hinny back to Chicago and pack. It's time you stop stalling and letting others keep convincing you to wait." She looked pointedly at McGee. "Besides, I need you here to help me plan my wedding, with the Eclipse merger, and any number of things. So leave now and start packing." Dominique waved her hand.

Sienna looked at McGee, then back at Dominique, uncertain.

"McGee is a big boy and can take care of himself." Dominique sighed.

"*Dominique*," Sienna said sharply her dark caramel face drawn in harsh lines.

"What? He is." She looked at McGee standing next to Sienna. "Hell, he could always move here, too. That way, you'll be in close proximity."

Dominique knew McGee wouldn't move. He was a hermit and hated change. McGee's smile widened, and she got an uneasy feeling. McGee rocked back on his heels. Suspicious, she watched him. He glanced at Taggart. Dominique looked at Taggart and caught the guilty expression on his face.

"What did you do?"

"Me? Nothing," Taggart replied, then glared at McGee. "Tell her, McGee."

She looked back at McGee. Sienna was watching McGee, her eyes narrowed.

"What did you do?" Sienna asked.

McGee shrugged his massive shoulders. "I knew it was only a matter of time before you moved here. So I'm moving, too. Hancock found me a place the size I needed."

Sienna turned to him and grabbed his hands. "You don't have to do that, McGee."

McGee looked at her tenderly and cupped her cheek in his large hand. "I'd do anything for you, pipsqueak."

Sienna's dark caramel skin became red tinged. "Ah, GG, you don't have to move. You -"

He put his finger over her lips. "Shh... it's done."

Sienna hugged him. "Thank you."

They looked back at Dominique and Taggart. Sienna's grin was wicked. "We'll be moving as soon as you get out of the hospital and go home."

"Oh, no. I don't need you hovering. Go now." Dominique looked at McGee.

"Maybe this is a good thing. You could come to work for Cerberus Associates."

McGee snorted. "I don't like people, and you deal with them. Stop trying to recruit me."

"You would if you socialized more." Dominique snorted in return.

"Not worth the effort." McGee shrugged.

"Where's your house, GG?" Sienna asked.

"1817 Troilus Lane," McGee said, watching Dominique.

"You're right next door to me," Dominique accused.

"Technically, since you're moving in with Taggart, he'll be my next door neighbor." Sienna laughed.

Dominique humphed. "Just get going and get ready to move."

Sienna came back to her bedside. "I don't want to leave until I know you're okay."

"See, I'm fine." Dominique gestured to herself. "Now go."

Sienna smacked her hand. "Rude woman. I'm going." She walked back to McGee.

McGee took her elbow and guided her to the door. Sienna looked back at her over her shoulder.

"So when are you going to vacate my house?" Sienna asked.

Dominique narrowed her eyes. "Don't be smug. It's not attractive."

Sienna made a moue of her lips. "Yes it is. I told you I'd have your house." She made a mad cackling sound.

Dominique laughed. "Crazy woman. Go get your stuff organized to move, and I'll be out by the time you get back."

"It'll take us a few months. But we'll push to get moved quickly." Sienna waved.

"You could lose him on the way." Dominique looked at McGee.

McGee blew her a kiss. Taggart laughed. Sienna winked, and she and McGee left.

"You could have told me McGee got a house in Trescott," she griped at Taggart.

"Oh, no. I didn't want anything to do with the house hunt. Hancock was about ready to kill McGee. He's demanding. The list he gave Hancock for his needs and the amount of pictures he wanted of each place was ridiculous. Thank God he found a house before Hancock flew to Chicago and beat him."

Dominique could picture the two big men going at it. She grinned, imagining McGee bloody.

"Don't you get along with McGee? I still don't get their relationship. When we asked McGee, he just growled at us to mind our business. And why does Sienna call him GG?" Taggart's curious voice drew her from her thoughts.

"Oh, I like McGee. We just have a certain way of showing it. GG stands for Gentle Giant. Sienna has always called him that. I've seen McGee lift a car with his bare hands, but he's gentle where people he cares about are concerned. It's not my place to tell you about them."

"Why did you rush Sienna out of here so fast?"

Surprised, Dominique looked at Taggart.

"Fess up, Dominique. I know you too well. There's a reason you wanted her out of Trescott Cove." He looked at her expectantly.

"There's someone in Trescott I don't want Sienna to see until she moves here permanently." She snuggled into Taggart.

"What are you up to, Dominique?" Taggart asked.

"Nothing. Yet. Let me get better first, and then I'll give you the night I promised." She looked at him from under her lashes.

Taggart growled and kissed her.

"Christ. Even in the hospital, you all can't behave," Hancock's voice boomed.

"You big lug. Move out of the way," Rissa said.

"Thinker, baby, you and Dominique will come stay with us when you get out. We'll take care of you," Reba Blade said.

"They'd be better off with a gun and vodka to hold you crazy people off," Camilla Maxwell interjected. "Hey, Dominique, who was that big dude and the woman who left a minute ago? The woman looks familiar."

"Oh boy, Dominique. I'll bring you some rope so you can escape through the window." Hunter laughed.

Taggart started laughing.

Dominique groaned and burrowed her head into his chest. "Do your job, Blade, and take care of me."

"Hey, what happened to us taking care of each other?"

She glared at him. "This is no time to argue. I'm letting you take care of me."

Taggart's eyes started to twinkle devilishly. She knew whatever he came up with wouldn't help her.

"Umm... I changed my min-" she started.

"We're getting married." Taggart spoke over her, and the others in the room.

Everyone went silent. Dominique looked at the Blade family, her friends, and the others crowding the room. They all started talking at once.

"Thinker, baby. A wedding. Dominique, we have so much to do." Reba clapped her hands.

"Elope!" Cami and Hunter called together.

"Run!" Hancock called.

Dominique glared at Taggart.

"That's taking care of me?"

He shrugged. "That's my way of doing it."

"Well, your way sucks."

"Not yet, but later, when you're up to it," he whispered in her ear.

Break Every Rule

Dominique shivered and laughed. The others kept talking, some planning their wedding and the rest plotting ways to help them escape the mayhem. Taggart kissed her. She returned his kiss and felt the steady beat of his heart under her hand.

We hope you enjoyed Break Every Rule. Check back next week at Satin Notes ~ <http://www.satinnotes.com> for our new story.

For more about Trescott Cove and Satin Notes check out the site.

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