

Red Rose Publishing

Dunk & Run
Coffee Shoppe

A Honeybun
and
Coffee

Sam Cheever

Red Rose Publishing

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First published in 2008-12-18, 2008

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A Honeybun and Coffee [Honeybun Hunks Series: Book 1]
by Sam Cheever

A Honeybun and Coffee

Series: The Honeybun Hunks

By

Sam Cheever

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A Honeybun And Coffee by Sam Cheever

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ISBN: 978-1-60435-271-9

Cover Artist: Shirley Burnett

Editor: Bernadette Smith

Line Editor: WRFG

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A Honeybun and Coffee

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Chapter One

Alastair Honeybun stood in a dark corner of the bar and wished he could be somewhere else, anywhere else, other than where he was. His penetrating, blue gaze slid around the noisy bar and he watched the drunken antics of his friends with a slight curl of his lip.

At thirty-two years old, Alastair was growing weary of the constant bump and grind of male ritual that brought them, always and forever, into the same stale venues doing the same, juvenile things, night after night.

His friends suffered from no such disillusionment. They were perpetually happy with their current stage in life and saw no reason to reach beyond into adulthood.

Alastair didn't share their enthusiasm for the drinking and mindless search for the next great pair of tits or soft, round ass to bump against in the night. He was dangerously close to wanting more out of life. A singularly terrifying thing. And something that would most likely cause him no end of grief with his friends if he were ... stupidly ... to confide in them.

So he didn't confide. Instead he moved through his days as a highly paid financial planner with a certain kind of contented glee, and his nights, as one of the guys, with much reluctance and teeth grinding.

He decided he'd had enough "fun" for one night and turned to leave, only to bump into, or be bumped into, by a cute little thing with sparkling hazel eyes and gleaming black hair. She smiled up at him drunkenly and licked glossy, red lips.

"Hiya handsome." She slurred. Then the pretty hazel eyes slid shut and she started to fold toward the floor.

Alastair reached out to catch her but found himself a beat too late.

Two long arms, clad in shiny black suit sleeves, caught the girl under both armpits and reeled her into a broad, over-muscular chest covered by a pink shirt and a shiny red tie. Alastair looked up into dark brown eyes that were cold and empty like a shark's. He smiled. "Had a little too much to drink, eh?"

The man hefted the girl into his arms and stared hard at Alastair, the coldness of his gaze barely warmed by an insincere bend in his lips. "My sister," the scary looking man said unnecessarily.

Alastair, lacking the usual conversational cues to help him out with this, simply nodded and watched the man turn away and leave the bar with the unconscious young woman draped across his arms. A tall, emaciated looking man held the door for the oaf carrying the woman and, after throwing a glacial last look at Alastair, followed him out.

Alastair did a mental shrug and went to find his buddies. Maybe he'd stay for one more beer.

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Angie Peterson ran a damp, soapy rag over the countertop and glanced at the clock above her head for the umpteenth time. The shop had been non-stop busy since six o'clock that morning and she hadn't had so much as a pee break since she'd walked through the door.

The customer queue had dwindled finally to the point where she thought it might be safe to leave the counter to the two teens who helped her out in the afternoons for a five minute potty break. But before she could escape, the door opened and two more customers sauntered in.

Stifling a sigh, Angie plastered on a bright smile as they approached the counter. "Welcome to the Dunk and Run, what can I get for you today?"

The taller of the two men gave her an oily grin and winked. "How about a date, sweetie?"

She forced the smile to stay locked onto her lips and her eyes not to roll and responded as she always did to such unimaginative offers. "I'm sorry sir, that isn't on the menu for today. But I'd be happy to get you a large mocha latte and a muffin instead."

The man chuckled and pulled out a wad of bills that made Angie's eyes go a little googly. "Make that a vanilla latte with cinnamon and extra whipped cream and make the muffin two glazed donuts and you've got yourself a deal."

The shorter man had been studying the menu board above their heads since approaching the counter. Finally his cool, black gaze dropped to her. "I want a small, plain coffee."

Angie nodded, "One Grande mundane coming up."

The man shook his dark head, dislodging the shiny ponytail at the base of his thick neck. "I don't want no Grande, Grande means big don't it? I want a small, plain coffee."

Angie smiled at him determinedly. "Yes sir, the Grande is the smallest coffee we have."

He scowled at her. "Is it small?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

His scowl deepened and Angie fought the urge to shiver. "Why don't you people sell no smalls?"

Angie just shrugged. "Sorry."

He uttered a particularly foul deprecation and turned toward the taller man with him. "Why do you always gotta go to these fancy coffee shops? Look at that shit, it's three bucks for a plain coffee. That's just stupid. And they don't even gotta small."

The taller man rolled his eyes at Angie and smiled. "I'll buy you the damn coffee, Louie. Don't worry about the three bucks."

The man lowered his head and muttered. "It's the damn principle of the thing, Bones. What has this country come to. Three dollar flippin' coffees the size of my head."

Angie fought back a giggle and placed a plain Grande on the counter in front of the grumpy guy. "Here you go sir. I only filled it halfway. That will be a dollar and a half."

Mr. grumpy smiled. "Now that's what I'm talkin' about." He took his coffee and headed for a small table in the back corner of the shop.

The man called Bones threw a twenty on the counter. "Let me apologize for my buffoonish friend, Miss. He doesn't get out much."

"I heard that!" Came from the table in the back.

Angie grinned and thanked the slightly scary stranger, ringing up his purchase and giving him back his change. When he left to join his buddy at the back she turned to Petey, the most senior of her two counter help. "I'm going to the ladies. Hold the fort until I get back, okay?"

Petey nodded and then, as Angie rounded the corner and headed toward the restrooms at the back of the shop, called out, "I forgot to tell you, some lady just told me the toilet's overflowed again. Apparently her kid stuffed half the roll of toilet paper into it."

Angie closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip to keep from uttering foul deprecations. Then, opening her eyes and looking around she said, "That's okay, it's all women in here now except for those two and they just sat down so I think I'm safe. I'll use the men's. Do me a favor and stop them if you see them coming toward the restroom will you, Petey?"

The boy nodded distractedly and turned to help the next customer in line.

Angie opened the men's room door and called softly into the room to make sure it was empty. When she got no response she entered the single stall and sat down with a sigh of relief, leaning over and resting her head in her hands in exhaustion. She'd just sit there for a couple of minutes and take a much needed break. What harm could it possibly do?

* * * *



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The door to the Dunk and Run opened and a small wad of teens bustled noisily through. Petey looked up and saw several of his friends approaching the counter. He smiled at them and offered rock knuckles to a couple of his football teammates. Then he bent to the task of making the complex, sickeningly sweet concoctions his friends requested every time they came to the shop.

He was head down and surrounded by chatty teens a moment later, when the two men sauntered past him and headed for the men's room.

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Angie heard the door open as she was pulling her skirt back down and she leapt onto the toilet seat guiltily, praying whoever it was only needed to use the urinal on the wall.

The deep gravelly voice and the slightly whiny one told her that her two newest customers had somehow gotten past Petey. She swore silently and vowed to restrict his donut consumption for the week as punishment.

The sound of a zipper lowering was followed by a hesitant trickle that told her somebody had prostate issues. At the same time, water started running from the bathroom's only sink. Angie squeezed her eyes tightly closed and prayed they'd just finish up and go. But when the men started talking she forgot to worry about being discovered in the horror of what she was hearing.

"We need to kill the guy." Said the one she recognized as Bones.

One last spurt from Mr. Grumpy and the sound of a zipper sliding back up. "We gotta find him before we can kill him."

Angie heard the rustle of sleazy material that she figured was probably a dismissive shrug from the taller man. "He works for one of them financial planning places, how hard could he be to find with a name like this?"

Angie heard paper changing hands and risked a peek through the crack in the stall door. Mr. grumpy laughed as he glanced at the small sheet of yellow paper in his hand. "What a faggot."

Bones nodded. "The girl's parents will be notified tomorrow so we need to find this guy today. If he recognizes her face he'll know who took her."

Angie leaned away from the crack and placed a fist in her mouth to keep from crying out. When one owned a small business selling coffee and baked goods one didn't generally deal with things like murder and kidnapping. This stuff was so out of her league.

She heard the sound of paper being ripped, multiple times, and prayed harder that the two men would leave without needing to use the stall.

Mr. grumpy flung the paper into the trash can and opened the door. "Let's go. The sooner we find this guy the sooner I can get to the gym. My pecs have shrunk an eighth of an inch since we been on this job."

"You go on out, I need to use the john."

Angle bit down on her fist and almost squealed in panic. Her poor heart was beating a frantic pulse against her ribs and she felt as if she was going to pass out.

He pushed on the door and it didn't budge. "Damn thing seems to be stuck."

She heard the rustling of cloth that told her he was probably bending down to look under the door and then a big hand grasped the bottom of the door and she almost peed herself.

"Come on man, you can take a shit when we get to this guy's place. We don't have time to mess with a broken door."

The hand disappeared from the bottom of the door and the two men left. Angie didn't let herself move or breathe for a full five minutes. When she was sure they were gone, she left the stall and ran to the trash can. Fortunately the trash had been emptied recently and it was easy for her to grab the small pieces of paper at the bottom. Then she left the bathroom, peering carefully around the shop before allowing herself to drop into a chair at an empty table near the restrooms.

She wiped sweaty palms on her slacks and took deep, yogic breaths for a few minutes before turning to glare at Petey. He shrugged and mouthed, "Sorry," before the press of customers made him turn his attention back to work.

Angie's mind roiled. She knew she was the only person in the whole world who could save the man whose name was on that torn up piece of paper. Reaching into the pocket of her smock she fingered the jagged pieces of paper there. Not only did she have to warn this person, but she had to do it fast. Right away. Before those two thugs found him and did their worst.

Pushing out of the chair with a sudden feeling of determination, Angie walked rapidly around the counter and behind it to grab her purse. "I need to leave for a little bit, Petey. You'll need to hold the fort until I get back."

The young man, probably feeling guilty for letting the two men walk in on her, simply nodded without argument, even though it would mean overtime for him.

Angie grabbed her purse and headed out the door. Before she left she called out, "And call the plumber about the woman's restroom."

He gave her a little wave without looking up, his dark head bent over the cappuccino machine.

Angie jogged the two blocks to her apartment and flew up the stairs to the third level where she kept a small, tidy apartment in a historic, three story townhouse. She pulled her keys out of her purse as she jogged up the last flight of stairs, jammed it ruthlessly into the door of her apartment, and flew through the door to the apartment's tiny kitchen.

Her phone book was sitting on one of the bar stools at her kitchen counter. Her niece had used it for a booster seat a couple nights previous when she'd had her divorced sister and two kids over for dinner.

It had a medium sized splotch of something brown and very hard on the front cover. Probably chocolate sauce from the chocolate sundaes she'd served for dessert that night.

Angie yanked the phone book open and then realized she didn't know the name. Reaching into her smock pocket, she pulled the pieces of yellow paper out and dumped them in an untidy pile on the countertop.

As quickly as she could she pulled out the pieces with ink on them and jammed them together into the name, Alastair Honeybun.

Angie thought this must be a joke and tried to move the pieces around to form a more reasonable name. But try as she might the pieces wanted to fit together into Alastair Honeybun. Rolling her eyes she picked up the phone book and searched frantically for the name in the residence section.

The good news was that there couldn't be many Alastair Honeybuns in the phone book. Finding an A. Honeybun in Westbridge, about ten minutes away if she ignored all posted speed limits, Angie punched in the numbers and waited for the phone to be picked up on the other end.

As she waited, tapping her foot and biting the nail of her long suffering right index finger, Angie thought about two things at once. First, it was the middle of a work day and A. Honeybun most likely wouldn't be at home. And secondly,

how was she going to tell the man, a complete stranger, that she was calling to warn him he was about to be murdered?

Angie had lifted the phone away from her ear and was getting ready to set it back into the cradle when she heard a muffled sounding voice on the other end.

"Hewwo."

Angie jerked the phone back to her ear. "Hello. Is this Alastair Honeybun?" She felt silly just saying the name.

"Dat's me." The man sounded awful. A series of violent sneezes followed his brief response.

Angie frowned. "That sounds like a bad cold. I'll bet your throat is killing you isn't it. Have you tried drinking hot tea with lemon in it?"

A long silence greeted Angie's helpful comment. Then finally, "Who *are* you?"

Angie jammed the tortured nail back in her mouth and spoke around it. "Thorry. Ummm. You don't know me but," How the hell was she going to tell him why she'd called? Finally she decided straight up, brutal truth was best. "I'm calling to warn you that two men are coming to kill you."

Another long silence, filled only with heavy breathing of the clogged nasal passage kind. Then he finally said, "Real funny. Who put you up to this? Is this Bob's girlfriend? He's such an asshole. I gotta go." An extended round of coughing was cut off in the middle as he hung up the phone in her ear.

Angie pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at it with disbelief. "Shit!"

Drumming thoughtfully on the countertop Angie considered what to do next. Or if she needed to do anything next. Surely

she'd done all she could for this guy, the ungrateful wretch. It would serve him right if she just went back to work and left him to deal with things on his own.

But he was weak and wimpy and he didn't know he was a heartbeat away from certain death. He hadn't seen those two men. Angie shivered violently. He had no idea what was coming his way.

She briefly considered calling the police but realized they'd respond just as Alastair Honeybun had. They'd think she'd lost her cookies.

Even as her mind told her she should just go back to work and forget about it, her body headed down a different track and she found herself climbing into her burnt orange Edge and gunning it backwards out of the small parking lot onto the street.

Alastair Honeybun lived in a really nice neighborhood, with beautiful older homes, mature trees in the yard, and perfectly manicured lawns. His house was small, but very elegant in red brick with white and black accents. His yard was cut short and outlined by perfect flower and shrub beds. This didn't surprise her at all. The image of a white haired older gentleman who puttered in his yard as a hobby was reinforced in her mind.

She knocked on his door and thought about the fact that he hadn't really sounded old on the phone. The cold was probably just throwing her off.

A guy with the name of Alastair Honeybun had to be old.

The sound of shrill barking greeted her insistent knocking long before she heard footsteps on the other side of the door.

She suddenly felt as if someone was staring at her and waved at the peephole in the door, smiling.

She figured he'd open the door just to find out who the ditz on his doorstep was.

The door finally slid slowly open to reveal a mass of vibrating blankets with close cropped, bright red hair. The blankets sniffled and shuffled toward her. "Whadya want? I'm not interested whatever it is. I'm dyin' and I just wanna be left alone."

A small, black and brown sausage type dog wriggled past the blankets and hopped around excitedly on the small front porch. He barked happily, wagging his entire backend in greeting. The little dog raised himself up on two stubby back legs and put oversized front paws on her knee. Angie reached down to pet the daschund's head and tried to peer under the blankets at its owner.

"Hello, I'm Angie Peterson. We spoke on the phone a while ago."

The blankets gave a jerk and started to turn back into the house. "Go away."

Angie grabbed the edge of the door before he could get it closed and forced her way into the house. "I'm sorry. I know you must feel like hell and I'm not normally this pushy. But you have to listen to me. I really believe your life is in danger."

The man in the blankets sneezed and stared at her. Finally he turned back into the house and headed down a long hallway toward the back of the house. "I don't have the energy to throw you bodily out of the house so if you'll

promise to make me some of that tea you suggested I'll sit and listen to what you have to say."

This extended speech ended in a bout of violent coughing that sounded as if Mr. Honeybun was about to spew a spleen. Angie quickly threw the bolt on the front door and followed him. The happy little dog bounced after her down the hall.

When they reached the kitchen the little daschund flew past her and exited through a flap at the bottom of the back door. She turned the bolt on that door too. Turning to Alastair Honeybun, who was now perched miserably on a chair at the kitchen table, she asked, "Do you have any other doors I should lock?"

The cap of bright red hair was underscored now by blue eyes with a thick fringe of dark red lashes and a pale, sweaty brow. Unlined. Angie did a quick reassessment of the old guy thing.

"What are you some kind of mobile rent a mommy?"

Angie blew out a sigh of frustration. "Humor me."

He jerked a blanket clad shoulder toward another door across the room. It looked like it probably led to the three car garage she'd noticed as she'd climbed out of her Edge.

Angie walked over and locked that door too. Then she turned back toward the shivering mass of blankets at the table. "Tea?"

The bristly red head nodded toward a long cabinet in the corner of the room. "Pantry."

Angie moved briskly toward the pantry and dug out two tea bags. Then she looked at him again. "Cups?"

"Over the sink."

She grabbed one mug that proclaimed, *God's Gift to Discerning Women*, and another that said, *If it Weren't for Bad Love I'd Have no Love at all*. She arched a brow at the quivering pile of blankets at the table and it shrugged. "What can I tell you, my friends are all a bunch of smart asses."

Angie shook her head and added water and the tea bags to the two mugs. Then she put them into the microwave and set the timer for six minutes. She busied herself gathering honey, cream, and spoons until the timer on the microwave chimed. Then carried the mugs to the table, where she handed the God's Gift mug to the blankets.

They silently doctored their cups of tea for thirty seconds and then, pushing aside the blankets just long enough to take a sip of the hot, sweet beverage, Alastair Honeybun smiled at her. "Good. Thanks."

Angie got a jolt of surprise at the extremely pleasing face that she could almost see between the edges of the blankets. Not old. Not at all. And maybe the mug was right after all. But then she remembered why she was there and, setting down her mug of tea, she leaned across the table toward him. "Mr. Honeybun..."

"Alastair." He shrugged. "You made me tea and tucked me safely into my house, we're practically best friends." He sneezed three times.

She got up and grabbed him a handful of tissues from a box on the counter.

"Danks." He said, taking them from her, and then he proceeded to make honking noises into the tissues so loud

Angie wouldn't be surprised if the neighbors came pounding on the doors.

"Anyway, I own the Dunk and Run down town."

"I dnow, I'b seen you there."

Angie was surprised that he'd recognized her and she hadn't recognized him. But then she realized he probably hadn't been swathed in blankets when he'd been in the shop.

"Yes. Well I was using the men's room this morning..."

He arched a dark red brow at her.

Flipping a hand toward him in a dismissive way she hurried on, "The Ladies was out of order. Anyway, these two men got past my assistant and came into the bathroom. I hid in the stall and heard them talking about killing you."

This brought both dark red eyebrows flying up. "Dat's ridigulous!"

Angie shrugged, "I thought so too but they had this." She pulled the pieced together sheet of yellow paper with his name on it out of her pocket. She'd taped it together before she left her apartment.

He took the piece of paper with a well manicured hand that shook just the tiniest little bit as he held the paper up so he could read it. She noticed the hand was tanned and square and sprinkled with dark red hairs. Despite the clean, square nails, it was a very masculine hand. Finally he threw the paper down on the table and picked up his tea again. "That has to be some other Alastair Honeybun."

Angie just gave him a look.

The blue eyes with the dark red fringe just stared at her over the blankets for a moment and then a sigh emerged

from somewhere under the eyes. "Okay, so it's not a very common name. But why would anybody want to kill me? I'm just a financial planner for god's sake."

Angie shrugged. "They seemed to think you saw something you shouldn't have. Something about a girl?"

Alastair shook his head and sipped his tea, staring down at the small, fragmented piece of paper between them. "I haven't seen anything except the inside of this house for days. I've had the damn flu and then I got a sinus infection." He sneezed again as if to prove his point.

Angie stood up and walked over to the wall to grab the phone. "You need to call the police. These men were planning on killing you today. They were going to try your office first but then I assume they will come here."

She offered the phone to him and he stared at it thoughtfully for a moment. Then he took it out of her hand. Angie sat down with a sigh of relief and picked up her tea. She cradled it in her hands, enjoying the warmth the hot mug gave her suddenly cold fingers as he punched numbers into the phone. She sat back and looked around the kitchen as he waited for the police to pick up.

It was a very nice kitchen, filled with very expensive appliances. The floors were covered with wide planks of hardwood in a deep golden color and the countertops were granite. The stove was gas, huge, and looked like something you'd find in a gourmet restaurant. They sat at a small, granite topped table with two chairs in a nook that was surrounded on three sides by a large, arching window that overlooked an expansive back yard. Under the window on all

sides was a deep window seat with cushions tossed invitingly in every corner. A folded newspaper with a partially completed cross word puzzle showing and a silver Cross pen lying across it told her that he actually used the window seat. Imagine that.

Her attention was drawn back to him as he spoke into the phone.

"Allyson. Hi. It's Alastair. Yes, thank you I am feeling a bit better. No, I know I still sound bad. It's this sinus infection..." He threw Angie a look of frustration, nodding as the woman on the other end appeared to blather on.

Angie frowned at him and put both hands in the air, palms up as if to say, "What gives?" She'd thought he was calling the police.

Alastair nodded at something the woman on the phone apparently said and tried to break in several times and then finally instigated a brutal takeover of the conversation, cutting her off in apparent mid-sentence. "I'm sorry, Allyson, but this is important. I need you to tell me if two men came looking for me today."

He listened for a minute and then turned to Angie. "What did they look like?"

"One tall, skinny ... one fairly short and muscular ... one of them cranky, oily, with a ponytail ... the other tall, fancies himself a ladies' man. Yup, got it." Alastair glanced toward Angie. She nodded. "How long ago?"

He thanked the woman on the phone and hung up. Then he picked up the small piece of paper on the table and stared at it as if it held some vital secret. He'd let the blankets drop

to his shoulders as he'd spoken to the woman whom Angie assumed was his secretary. Angie took note of the square jaw that was currently covered in dark red stubble, and long, slightly arched nose. The blankets rested on a very wide set of shoulders that stretched the material of his worn, soft t-shirt in a very nice way. When he bit his bottom lip as he was doing at that moment, two long creases showed up in his stubble covered cheeks. Angie had a serious weakness for dimples.

"They were there?"

He looked up at her, worry had settled in the sexy blue eyes. "About twenty minutes ago."

Where it had been scary before, but a bit unreal, it all came crashing down on Angie at that moment. She suddenly realized the man sitting before her was in real danger. And sitting there with him, so was she. "Call the police, Alastair. Now!"

He nodded and picked the phone back up just as the little dog started barking in the back yard and surged through the doggy door to bounce toward the front of the house, barking frantically.

Alastair looked at her and surged to his feet. "Too late."

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Chapter Two

"Let's go!" Alastair said as he grabbed her hand. He whistled softly and the little dog pattered back up the hallway toward them. Alastair scooped up the doxy and dragged Angie to one side of the back door, peering through. He ran his gaze over the back yard. Then he unlocked it and pulled her through, closing the door softly behind them. "This way," he whispered.

Angie marveled at the change in his demeanor. From nearly dead guy with a cold wrapped in five blankets and still shivering, to super spy extraordinaire. If she didn't know better she'd think he'd done this before.

They ran toward a small shed at the back corner of the property. When they got to the shed he shoved the little dog into her arms and pushed them to the side of the small building that faced away from the street, so she wasn't visible from the front of the house. "Wait here."

Angie opened her mouth to ask questions but he shushed her and she reluctantly clamped her mouth shut. The long suffering fingernail found its way into her mouth.

She hugged the sweet little dog close and got some wet kisses on her nose as a reward. Leaning her head against the metal side of the shed Angie took deep breaths in an effort to keep from going into a full-blown panic attack.

Alastair emerged from the shed pushing a motorcycle and she had new things to worry about. As soon as she saw it her

head started shaking back and forth. No way was she climbing on the back of a motorcycle with this guy. No way.

He jerked his head toward the doorway she hadn't noticed before in the shadow of the shed. She stood rooted to the spot clutching the little dog. She didn't realize how tightly she'd been clutching him until he gave a small whine.

She forced her grip to lighten and kissed him on his little black nose. "Sorry, baby." She whispered to the little guy.

Alastair was at the door glaring back at her and she realized he couldn't open the door while holding onto the bike. She ran to open it and then followed him through.

He grabbed the little dog from her and shoved him into a pouch on the front of the bike and then handed her a helmet. She was still shaking her head when he slammed his helmet onto his head and climbed onto the motorcycle. He turned to look at her. "When I start this they'll know we're back here and we'll need to move fast. I need you to climb on now."

Angie had just about chewed the fingernail down to her first knuckle but she realized he was right and, taking a deep breath, she slammed the helmet onto her head and climbed up behind him. "I'm terrified of these things and I'm not wearing any leather so if you wouldn't mind I'd appreciate it if you didn't slide us across the pavement or anything."

Alastair's response was to turn the key, rev the engine, and yell, "hold on!" over his shoulder before they jerked into what felt like about a hundred miles an hour.

"Shitttttttt!!!!!!" Angie screamed as they took the first turn into an extremely narrow alley without slowing in any noticeable way. The tire under her butt slid sideways until she

thought for sure she was going to be pavement bling but then it finally worked itself out and they were flying straight down the alley.

They whizzed past an overflowing dumpster and Angie saw a couple of sets of beady eyes glowing at her from the middle of the dumpster's aromatic contents and suddenly wished she were a rat in a dumpster instead of a dope on the back of a death trap. Then a fat, orange cat jumped out of the shadows in front of them and Alastair slammed on the brake to avoid hitting it. The bike went into a skid and they started folding toward the ground. Angie thought her eyes would pop from terror as they headed toward a brick wall fast and sideways, but then Alastair threw down a foot and somehow got them upright again.

As soon as they were almost vertical, he revved the engine and they took the rest of the alley at full speed again. Emerging finally from the dark, obstacle strewn passage, Alastair pointed the bike toward the park. He left the street without slowing and as they hit the curb they were airborne for at least two minutes and then landed hard on the sidewalk. Alastair threw out a hand to hold the dog in its little sack and then gunned it again when both tires were on the sidewalk. They crossed the park on the sidewalk with Alastair screaming at people to get out of their way.

When they emerged on the West side of the park Alastair immediately took a sharp left and re-entered it using the road that wove past the war memorial. They followed the beautiful, winding road past pristine white buildings and whipped back out onto the street on the North side of the park. Then he

headed into quiet, pristine suburbia and wove through several streets until Angie was totally lost.

Finally he pulled the bike into another alley and drove through at a more sedate pace. When they stopped at the other end Angie was looking at the front of his house. The thugs' car was gone. Apparently they'd either given up or were giving chase.

He gunned the engine again and they were off, shooting across the street at an impossible speed. He jerked the bike to a stop in front of the garage and reached into a pocket of the dog sack. One of the garage doors started opening.

Alastair pulled into the garage, parked the bike, and immediately hit the garage door button to close the door. Angie sat there, feeling like her mind was mired in cement. Her entire body was vibrating. Alastair pried her arms from around his waist and climbed off. Angie followed slowly, and when she stood up, her knees buckled. Alastair caught her before her butt hit the clean cement of the over-tidy garage.

"Never again. Never again. Never again. Never, never, never, never..." Angie muttered as she forced her knees to lock under her.

Alastair watched her carefully, like you'd watch a crazy person in a room full of knives. "Are you gonna be okay or should I bitch slap you?"

Angie glared at him and took a tentative step to see if her legs would hold her. "Do you think it was a good idea to come back here?"

He shook his head. "No. We can't stay. I just wanted to grab a few things for me and Jaws before we hit the road again."

Angie held up a hand. "Don't ... use that expression in my presence ever again. And if there isn't a car involved in the next leg of the journey you can count me out. I'd rather be killed by the thugs, at least it would be a fast, and comparatively terror free."

He grinned at her.

"And did you say, Jaws? You're kidding me right? You did *not* name that sweet little thing Jaws."

He turned away from her, grabbed the daschund out of its little sack, and headed for the house. "I didn't?"

Angie hobbled after him. "Smartass. I'm gonna use the Ladies before we go. I need to get the bugs out of my teeth and puke. Things like that."

"Okay."

When Angie came back out of the bathroom Alastair was standing by the door to the garage with a large duffle bag in his hand. It appeared to be pretty full. Jaws stood next to him on stubby legs, his deep little chest about two inches above the floor, making goo eyes at her.

"You ready?"

Angie nodded. "Let me grab my keys."

Alastair shook his head and grabbed her arm. "You have to leave your car here. I'm sure they rummaged through the glove compartment and probably know where you live by now. I'm driving."

Angie's eyes popped again. "Oh hell no. I'm not riding in anything that goes over five miles an hour with you behind the wheel ever again. Maybe a go cart ... someday ... when I'm too old and feeble to remember that motorcycle ride."

Alastair dragged her toward the garage. "Technically I was not behind a wheel on the bike. But we don't have time to argue anyway. They'll probably be coming back when they realize you're not at your house or at work."

"At work?" Angie's voice squawked unbecomingly as she realized just how deeply she'd embedded herself in Alastair Honeybun's mess.

No good deed ever goes unpunished.

"Where are we going? Angie climbed into the passenger side door of a shiny, black crossover vehicle.

"No clue." He responded helpfully.

"How about my sister's house? She'll be at work and I have a key. We'll have time to regroup."

He nodded, "Let's go."

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Cinnamon Parker had divorced a very rich, very powerful man. Which explained why she lived in a huge, old, refurbished mansion in the wealthy section of town. Angie had never felt right about going into that house when her sister was married. But now that she was divorced she was

making peace with the place. It was just so elegant and opulent feeling, and Angie prided herself on being more of a practical sort. Somewhere down deep in the folds of her brain she realized this vision of herself was based on a realistic idea that she wasn't going to get rich anytime soon. It saved her a lot of disappointment for the future.

The first thing she did when they entered her sister's house through the back door was to call work. Celeste Springer, her other young assistant, answered the phone after about the tenth ring. "Celeste, it's Angie. How are things there?"

Since the girl was young and prone to dramatics, Angie expected her to respond in exclamation points. Celeste didn't disappoint.

"OMG, Ang, we've just been swamped all day! Where are you?! Petey thought you might have crashed or something! Are you coming back?! Did those two men find you?!"

Angie gulped and her eyes shot to Alastair, who was adding water to a cereal bowl for Jaws. "What two men?" Alastair's head jerked in her direction and his sexy blue eyes widened.

Angie hung up after getting Celeste to promise that she and Petey would stay until closing time and lock up for her. She felt guilty leaving the shop to the two kids but, since they were both always looking for overtime hours she didn't feel all *that* guilty. Satisfied that at least that detail was addressed satisfactorily, Angie turned back to Alastair and the problem at hand. "The thugs came back to the store looking for me. You were right, they apparently know who I am now too."

Angie dropped her butt into a chair at her sister's table and fought panic. Taking deep, yogic breaths to calm herself, she struggled to think.

Alastair laid a large, warm hand on her back and rubbed in gentle circles. "I'm sorry you had to get mixed up in this, Angie. Whatever it is." He frowned.

Angie looked up at him. "You still don't know why they want to kill you?"

Alastair pulled the chair next to her out and sat down, dropping his head into his hands. "I've thought about everywhere I've gone for the last week and nothing. I haven't done much except work. I went to the grocery a couple of days ago, other than one woman who was way too aggressive with a cantaloupe for my taste, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary there."

"How about angry clients?"

Alastair lifted his dark red head out of his hands and focused clear blue eyes on her. She realized he was still pale and a little sweaty. With everything that had been going on she'd nearly forgotten that he was sick. But under the clammy pallor she realized he was exceptionally good looking. "Things have been good at work. The market's strong and I've been making lots of money for people. I can't think of any of my clients who would be mad enough at me to try to kill me."

They lapsed into a thoughtful silence that lasted until Angie's stomach rumbled insistently. She looked up and grinned at him. "You hungry?"

He laughed. "Yeah, that was *my* stomach rumbling."

Angie stood up. "I'm gonna make myself a grilled cheese sandwich, you interested?"

"You got any tomato soup to go with it?"

"I'll see what I can find."

Twenty minutes later they sat munching grilled cheese. Alastair had cut his sandwich into inch wide strips and was dunking them in his tomato soup. Angie grinned every time he did it. He caught her grinning at him and smiled back. "My mother always served grilled cheese this way. It's comfort food for me." He shrugged.

Angie opened her mouth to ask him about his family when the driveway sensor went off. She jumped up and ran to the dining room of the big house, which had the only window with a clear view of the driveway. A dark blue SUV was winding its way slowly up the drive. "Holy Shit!"

Alastair joined her at the window. "It's probably them. They must have good connections if they found your sister this fast."

Angie's heart pounded in her chest and she was suddenly afraid the grilled cheese would come back up. "We can't get to the car."

Alastair's MKX was sitting in front of the garage. The SUV pulled up behind it and they watched the two thugs from the coffee shop climb out. One of them was holding a gun.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!" Angie muttered.

Alastair grabbed her hand. "Let's go!"

She let herself be dragged from the room but panic was making her lethargic and her reasoning functions had all but shut down. "Where are we going? They have us trapped."

"I don't know but we're not just gonna sit here and wait to get shot!"

Angie gasped and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Alastair scooped up Jaws and they flew out the back door into the yard. Running as fast as he could while dragging Angie and holding his dog, Alastair crossed the big yard at a gallop and pushed through the thick line of huge evergreen trees at the back of the property. What he saw on the other side of the tree line made him curse. The neighbors apparently hadn't trusted the tree line to keep them separate, they'd installed an eight foot high wooden fence too.

Running along between the fence and the prickly tree line, they searched for a door into the yard. After what felt like a mile they reached the corner and turned, continuing to follow the fence toward the street beyond. As they neared the street Angie heard voices behind them.

She tugged on Alastair's hand. He nodded, "I know, I heard them. Can you run faster?"

She was already huffing and puffing. Working every day behind a counter and doing power yoga every night apparently wasn't good training for running for your life. But she forced herself to pick up speed and, when they hit the street they saw a taxi idling at the curb.

"Thank God!" Angie gasped. They ran toward the cab, threw themselves into it, and Alastair yelled, "Move, now!"

The little old woman in the front seat turned to them and smiled, her little gray head bobbling dangerously on a scrawny neck as she saw the little dog and started making

automatic cooing noises. "What a cute baby. Hello sweetie, what's your name?"

Alastair's head had been swiveling around frantically as the old woman dithered and fussed, reaching a gnarled old hand toward Jaws and laughing in pleasure as the little dog gave her hand an affectionate lick.

"Lady, we want to hire this cab, but we're in a real hurry. Do you think we could leave now?" Alastair's pale, sweaty face had grown even paler as the two men emerged from the trees behind them. The thugs spotted the cab almost immediately and started toward it.

The old woman was looking back and forth, from the house where the cab was parked to the little dog. Her confusion was obvious. "I told him I'd wait here." She said.

The two men were nearly on them. Alastair screamed, "Lady, drive!"

She jerked and turned around, gunning the engine without putting the cab into drive. Alastair surged over the seat and grabbed the gear shift, plunging it into drive before the engine slowed down so that the car jerked forward immediately, leaving a patch on the road behind them.

The two thugs broke into a run and Alastair screamed again, "Drive this damn cab lady! Now!"

The old woman stomped on the gas and they flew away from the curb, narrowly missing the cars that were parked on either side of the street as they went.

The old woman's hands on the steering wheel were shaking and her eyes were impossibly wide, but after a

moment she let out a whoop and settled in to enjoy the experience.

They lost the two men fairly quickly but then the cab started slowing down until they were nearly crawling down the street. Angie, who had been watching anxiously out the back window, gave Alastair a meaningful glance and he leaned toward the old woman in the front seat. "Excuse me ma'am, can you drive this thing any faster?"

She grinned at him. "Not with a baby on board," she gave Jaws a meaningful glance and the little dog barked in response."

Alastair flung himself back into the seat with a muttered curse.

"No cursing, young man." The woman's shaky voice didn't take away from the note of maternal censure that came standard with all mother models. Alastair muttered an automatic apology and rolled his eyes at Angie. She grinned and shook a finger at him until he smiled.

They creaked and wobbled down the street until Alastair couldn't take it anymore. He finally dug his wallet out of his pocket and told the old lady to stop the cab. He handed her a twenty dollar bill and they climbed out of the back seat. They left her sitting there staring at the bill like she'd never seen one before.

"Who the hell lets an old lady drive a cab anyway." Alastair complained as they jogged up the street.

Angie nodded in breathless agreement. "Where are we going?"

"How the hell do I know, I'm winging it here."

As they ran they kept an eye out for the dark blue SUV. They were just passing the YMCA when they spotted it coming toward them and they ducked inside. Huddled in the entranceway they watched the car roll slowly by, the gun wielding thug staring toward them as they passed.

"Do you think he saw us?" Angie asked, still gasping for breath.

"I don't think so, they'd have stopped if they had." After a couple of minutes they peered out the door and saw that the SUV had stopped beside the cab and one of the men was leaning down, talking to the elderly cab driver.

Angie didn't know if the woman had seen them duck into the building but she wasn't willing to wait around to find out. Grabbing Alastair's hand she gave it a tug. "Come on."

He tucked Jaws into the front of his jacket and followed. "Where are you taking me?"

"I take yoga classes here, there's a door that leads into an alley at the back of the building. We sometimes go out that way because it's closer to the parking lot."

She pulled him down a hallway that smelled like chlorine and past a large room filled with people who were twisted into human pretzels. The woman at the front of the class looked up as they passed and waved at Angie.

Angie smiled and waved back but didn't slow down. Finally they pushed through a battered, metal door into a foul smelling alley. Angie dropped his hand and they stopped. "Now what?" Alastair asked.

She shook her head and tears started to flow down her cheeks again. "The police?"

He stared at her for a long moment and then nodded.
"There's a station right down the street isn't there?"

She nodded and they took off at a jog through the alley. Keeping as much as they could to the alleyways, they managed to find the police station after about a half hour. Unfortunately, when they got there they saw the dark blue SUV sitting in the parking lot.

"Holy Shit!" Angie said, turning to Alastair, "Do you think the cops are in on this?"

He laughed. "You've been watching too many action movies. I'm guessing our guys just figured this might be where we were headed and thought they'd keep us from talking to the cops." He looked around the area.

Angie nodded but still looked worried. "What do we do now?"

Alastair grabbed her hand. "We find someplace to hide and call the police. They can't stop us from calling right?"

Angie smiled. "No. They can't do that."

They slipped back down the nearest alley and emerged on the next street over. "If I remember right," said Alastair, "there was a hotel near here. I think it's a few streets over."

They walked for a few minutes in silence, buried in their respective thoughts, until Alastair spotted the hotel a few blocks away. They started toward the place at a jog. Suddenly, the sound of tires squealing on the pavement behind them made Angie turn and she saw the front end of a large, dark car heading in her direction. She stood rooted to the spot in horror, waiting for impact.

But at the last second the car swerved away and stopped. The front, passenger side door opened into Alastair, hitting him hard in the arm and shoulder as he instinctively turned to protect Jaws and sending him to the pavement. The man called Louie emerged from the front seat, grabbed Angie's arm, and started pulling her toward the car. The back door was open, Bones crouched inside. He looked ready to help haul her into the SUV.

They each grabbed an arm. Angie kicked and snapped her teeth at them and generally made like a porcupine. All prickly and unpleasant to handle. The two thugs grunted and cursed as they tried to pull her into the SUV.

Angie stuck out a foot and wedged it on the frame below the door, then locked her knee. She started screaming, wondering where Alastair was.

Just as Bones reached down to grab her ankle, something small and bouncy shot toward his hand and he jerked it back with a less than manly scream. Then the whirling bundle of fur, teeth, and frenetic energy hit Louie's ankle and he screamed too, dropping her arm in shock and throwing out a foul line of curses.

Angie reached up and smacked the thug hard in the nose with the flat of her hand. His head snapped back and blood spurted from it. "Ow! You bitch!"

Louis growled and made another grab for her but Bones gripped his arm. "We got witnesses. Let's leave 'em for now."

Louie looked her in the eye and smiled a not so nice smile. "We'll be back, honey." Then he jumped into the car and they sped away.

Angie let her head drop to the sidewalk and gave a shaky sigh of relief. Jaws jumped onto her chest and licked away her tears, whining softly. She cradled the little dog's head gently between her hands and gave him a kiss on the nose. "Thanks buddy. You probably saved my life."

Jaws wagged his skinny tail so hard his butt wagged with it. Then Angie heard a groan and looked over at Alastair, who was just sitting up. He was rubbing his head.

"Are you okay?"

He looked at her through narrowed, pain filled eyes. "I hit my damn head when I fell, I think it knocked me out. What the hell happened anyway?"

Angie climbed to her feet and scooped Jaws up safely into her arms. Walking over to Alastair she reached down and offered him a hand. He took it and stood up, groaning and grabbing his head with the other hand.

"Those two thugs tried to pull me into their car. Jaws stopped them."

Alastair reached out and gave the little dog's head an affectionate scratch. "That's daddy's good, little boy."

Jaws barked and his back half wagged happily.

Angie couldn't suppress a smile, which Alastair saw. He had the good grace to blush. "I know, I sound like a dandy man don't I? I can't help it, he brings out the woman in me."

Angie laughed outright while nodding in agreement. "I can understand it, he's so little and cute. But trust me, you don't want to get on the wrong side of him in a fight. This cute little exterior hides a lion's heart and a grizzly bear's attitude."

Alastair grimaced. "We need to get off the street in case they come back." He looked around. "I don't think it's a good idea to go to that hotel after all. They'll expect us to go there now. He thought about it for a moment and then reached into his pocket. "I'll call a cab."

Angie's voice rose a few octaves, "You have a cell phone? Why the hell didn't we use it two hours ago to call the police?"

He looked at her like she had horns and a forked tail. "Are you crazy? They can trace us through a cell phone call."

She stared at him for a minute then shook her head and fell into step beside him as he started walking. "Now who's been watching too many movies," she mumbled.

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Chapter Three

Deciding it made more sense to find a place to hide out and discuss their next steps before calling the police, Alastair called a cab and they took it to the car rental section of the airport, where they rented a midsize car and headed into the rolling hills of Brown County. Exhausted from the events of the day, Angie laid her head back on the seat and dozed off. When she woke up the sun was sinking behind a thick line of trees and they were turning into a stone driveway that wound up a fairly steep incline through a dense line of overhanging trees.

The log house at the top of the driveway was small and quaint and looked like it had fallen out of the pages of history. Angie eyed it dubiously. "Please tell me this has running water."

Alastair grinned but didn't respond. Angie frowned. Growing up in Indiana, her grandparents had owned a rustic lake cottage on Crooked Lake and she had lots of not so fond memories of hauling water into the house to heat on the stove for washing dishes. But even that memory wasn't as bad as the ones where she had to plod sleepily out to the outhouse in the early morning hours and use the facilities with her nose hidden in her shirt sleeve to filter the stench.

Although she was far from wealthy and just fine about that, Angie was just as far from one of those nature loving types who liked to rough it in the woods, slapping at mosquitoes and stomping snakes. No bleepin' thank you.

She stood back and watched as Alastair dug around under a rock looking for the key. "That's so original," she remarked grumpily. Jaws wriggled to get down and she placed his tiny feet carefully on the ground. "Be careful now, little guy, the critters around here probably bite back."

He sneezed and wagged his tail, looking at her through soft, adoring brown eyes. Then he whipped around and took off barking at something. Angie's gaze followed him anxiously. "Will he be all right?"

Alastair turned and whistled. "He'll be back. He roused a den of bunnies last summer and he never forgets. As soon as he sees that they're gone he'll come back."

Angie nodded and followed Alastair into the little cabin. Although it had a slightly musty smell it was clean and well kept. The single room sported a double sized bed and a small, scarred wooden dresser on one wall, with a fireplace directly opposite. The long wall opposite the door held some cabinets, a counter with a sink, a stove, and a refrigerator. The window above the sink overlooked a small lake. A round table with four chairs completed the kitchen area.

The floors were dark, rough wood planks with enough "character" to suit the most rustic inhabitant and were dotted with brightly colored rag rugs. "Cute." Said Angie in a mostly sincere tone. "Whose is it?"

Alastair dropped his keys on the table and headed for the refrigerator, opening it hopefully. "A friend of mine. We come here every year to fish. The fishing down on that lake is the best in the area. Halleluiah!"

Angie jumped, "What?"

Alastair held up two icy brown bottles, "There's beer."

Angie licked her lips, smiling for the first time since climbing out of the car. "There definitely is a god."

Angie took a freshly opened bottle from Alistair and dropped onto a small couch in front of the cold fireplace. She took a long swig of the beer and kicked off her shoes. "God that tastes good."

Alastair slumped down next to her and, closing his eyes on a sigh, dropped his head to the back of the couch. Angie tried to ignore the way his long, muscular thigh touched hers. She turned on the couch to examine him while he wasn't looking.

His cheeks were pale under yesterday's stubble and the thick fringe of dark red lashes. His upper lip glistened a bit with sweat. The telltale redness around his nose reminded her that he was sick, though he'd all but forgotten to wallow in it since they'd been running from the thugs. His long arms dropped wearily toward his lap, one big hand resting on his knee and the other clutching the bottle like a lifeline. His legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. He wore brown leather boots that zipped up the inside and were scuffed and worn looking as if he'd had them for a while. His jeans were faded and had a fashionable tear on each knee. His t-shirt was black, with a few small bleach spots on the edge of the sleeve closest to her. Angie licked her lips again and, this time, it had nothing to do with the beer.

He lifted his head and the bottle at the same time and Angie jerked her head away guiltily. "So what's next?" She asked the question more for something to fill the silence between them than because she really wanted to know. She

was strangely content to sit there on that couch for the moment and sip icy cold beer with him.

The door, which Alastair had left unlatched but pushed mostly closed, shoved inward and a tiny, black and brown head bobbed through it. Jaws pattered across the space and jumped up into Alastair's lap. He kissed Alastair's nose and wagged his butt happily. "Did you get 'em buddy?" Alastair chuckled and looked at his watch. "We fix dinner."

Angie jerked as if stung. "Huh?"

Alastair stared at her for a moment, then gave her a long, slow grin that made her all warm and tingly. "That's what we do next."

"Oh." She looked down at the beer in her hand, suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious.

Alastair sneezed three times and pulled a hanky out of his jeans pocket. Wiping his nose and sounding nasally from the sneezes, he transplanted Jaws onto her lap and stood up. "I'll be back in about a half hour. Keep the door locked."

Angie's eyes grew wide with alarm. "What? No. Where are you going?"

"To the store, we have no food."

She frowned. "Oh yeah, but I don't want to stay here alone."

He smiled again and picked up his keys from the table. "You're not alone. You have Jaws."

He sauntered out of the cabin and she sat there listening as he started up the rental and pulled down the stone drive. Her mind immediately started racing with scenes of thugs and kidnappings and the criminal possibilities of stashing bodies

on the bottom of the small lake outside the cabin. Her palms started itching in alarm. She needed to do something to occupy her mind and squelch her fertile imagination. She got up and set to work making the cabin as comfortable as possible.

When Alastair returned forty five minutes later there was a fire roaring in the fireplace, the table was set for two, candles flickered from several spots throughout the small space, and scratchy musical tones wafted around the room from an ancient AM/FM radio she'd unearthed from the scarred, old dresser.

He smiled.

Angie met him with another cold beer and took the grocery bag from him. "What'd you get?"

Tilapia fillets, twice baked potatoes, and fresh green beans."

Angie tried to keep her face neutral but he noticed the slight grimace at mention of fish. "You don't like fish."

She smiled at him. "It's not that I don't like fish. It's just that I wish it tasted more like chicken."

He laughed. Following her into the kitchen he grabbed the package of fish off the top of the bag. "One chicken flavored Tilapia fillet dinner coming up."

Angie smiled and boosted herself onto the counter to watch him work. She'd always appreciated a man who knew his way around a kitchen. She sipped her beer and felt herself relaxing for the first time all day.

He put the potatoes into the oven and started preparing the fillets. When the fish was prepped he set the pan aside

and starting lopping the ends off the green beans. Then he rinsed the beans, dropped them into a sauce pan, and added chicken broth, diced ham, and assorted flavorings to the pan. He covered the beans and turned the heat on under them.

He grabbed his beer and went into the living area of the cabin. "Do you mind if I put the news on?"

Angie shook her head and slipped off the counter to silence the battered old radio. "The scratchiness of this fine radio was giving me a headache anyway." She joined him on the couch and shifted so she could prop her feet on the scarred leather ottoman and stare at the fire. She felt herself dozing off after only a minute or two.

"Holy shit!"

She jerked upright, nearly dropping her bottle of beer. "What? Did they find us? Are they here?"

Alastair placed a warm hand on her knee and jerked his head toward the small TV. She followed his gaze and felt a jolt of recognition at the face on the screen. "Hey, that's..."

"Shhhh!" Alastair turned the volume up and the wobbly voice of the old woman from the cab filled the room. "I was just sitting there waiting for my nephew and these two young people jumped into the cab and started yelling at me."

The news babe looked appropriately sympathetic as she said, "How awful for you. Can you describe your kidnappers?"

"Kidnappers!"

"Shhhh!"

The old woman's head started bobbing. "One of them was really small, about ten pounds I'd say, and had large brown eyes and big floppy ears."

Jaws cocked his tiny head at the television.

The news babe looked appropriately perplexed and turned away to accost someone else. "Excuse me, sir, are you the victim's nephew?"

"Victim!"

"Shhhh!"

A middle aged man with thinning brown hair grimaced at the camera. "I told her to stay in the back seat but she likes to play with the buttons." He sort of tried to smile but it really just looked like another grimace. He obviously thought the "kidnapping" had been all his fault.

The news babe rescued him. "But in this case it was a good thing she did push a few buttons wasn't it?"

The man nodded and pointed needlessly to the cab. "She pressed the camera I had installed on my dash for security and got a picture of the kidnappers.

A dark, grainy photo flashed across the television screen and there they were, looking wild and desperate and a little like those big eyed dogs and cats you see on greeting cards. "Holy shit!" Angie moaned and dropped her head into her hands.

The news babe's perfectly made up and appropriately disgusted face returned to the screen to announce that the police were following up on the photo and that they were offering a reward for information on the kidnappers, who were considered dangerous, but not necessarily armed.

Alastair flopped back into the couch and ran a hand over his face. "So much for calling the police to get some help."

Angie groaned. "Alastair, we're wanted criminals."

He sighed and pulled Jaws back onto his lap. "At least they didn't get a picture of Jaws. He can stay with my brother while I'm in prison."

Angie shook her head. "No, he'll go to prison too. The old lady gave them his description."

This was too much. They burst into hysterical laughter and didn't stop until the timer for the potatoes dinged and forced them back into the kitchen.

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"This does sort of taste like chicken." Angie told him, surprise in her voice. "You're good."

Alastair grinned at her. "I have to admit you stretched my abilities with that request. I'm glad you like it."

Angie nodded. "We need to have a plan you know."

Alastair swallowed his last bite of fish and wiped his mouth. Standing up he carried their plates into the kitchen. Angie got up to help him.

"Well, the first thing we need to do is call work and tell them we won't be in for a few days." He looked at Angie. "That's going to be a bit more complicated for you I'm afraid."

Angie frowned and nodded. "I'll tell Petey to call a few people. I'll have to promise him a manager's bonus for covering for me." Angie looked up and smiled, "He's very ambitious for a nineteen year old."

Alastair laughed, "A kid after my own heart."

They worked in silence for a few moments, lost in their own thoughts. Alastair washed and rinsed the dishes and handed them to Angie to dry. She managed to find a spot in the cabinets for each of their dishes.

Angie finally broke the silence. "Have you had any luck remembering what you might have seen that would make the thugs come after you?"

He shook his head. "I've gone over it and over it in my head. I can't come up with anything."

Angie placed the last glass in the cupboard. "Okay, let's go over everything you've done over the last two weeks. I doubt it happened longer ago than that."

Alastair nodded and grabbed two more bottles of beer out of the refrigerator. They sat down at the table again, across from each other.

"Okay, weekend before last."

Alastair thought about it. "I got up on Saturday morning, did a couple of hours of work, then cleaned up and took my car to get the oil changed."

Angie picked at the label on her beer bottle. "Then what?"

"I grabbed some lunch..."

"Where?"

He looked sheepish. "Actually I met some friends at Hooters."

"Very classy."

Alastair shrugged, "They love the place, they force me to go there at least once or twice a month."

Angie grinned. "They force you?"

He grinned back, "Kicking and screaming."

"Mmm hmm."

"No really, I hate the place. Those women don't turn me on in the least."

"They don't?"

He shook his head and the ghost of a smile sat on his lips.

"No way. I prefer my women flat chested and ugly."

She smacked his arm. "Ass."

He laughed.

They did a painstaking inventory of each and every day, going over every encounter, every interaction, until they reached Saturday night of the previous weekend.

"We went to The Rock, that new sports bar on East and 21st. You know the place?"

Angie nodded. She knew of it but had never been there.

"I really didn't want to be there. I've been feeling ... I don't know ... dissatisfied with the single male lifestyle lately. It feels so ... desperate I guess." He shook his head and scraped at the label on his beer bottle. Between the two of them they'd amassed an impressive pile of label scraps and naked bottles.

"I know what you mean." Angie offered, liking him better because of the obviously painful admission. "I used to go out with my friends on weekends too. But they were so frantic for attention, and it was all the wrong kind of attention. I finally gave it up for work. At least I know what to expect there and I'm not in danger of getting date raped, or worse."

They sat in morose silence for a few beats before Angie remembered what they were trying to do. She looked up, "so did anything happen that night that you can remember?"

He shook his head and took another swig. "We sat and drank for a couple of hours, then my buddies started hitting on a couple of girls who were playing pool and I thought about leaving. I actually almost did leave in fact but then..."

His eyes widened and he slammed the beer bottle down on the table.

Angie jumped and Jaws gave a startled bark from his cozy spot on the couch nearest the fire. "What?"

"There was this girl." Alastair's beer drenched brain tried to conjure up the girl's appearance. "I think she had dark hair. She was really plastered. And then she passed out. I was gonna catch her..."

Angie felt the small hairs on the back of her neck standing up at attention. "And?"

He turned startled blue eyes on her. "A big guy caught her and carried her out of the bar."

"Did he look like one of our thugs?"

Alastair shook his head. "No. This guy had blond hair and about a seventy two inch chest. He was probably six foot four or close to it."

Disappointment swamped her. "Well, that was close. I thought we had them there for a minute."

Alastair grabbed her hand. "Don't give up on that one yet, Angie. You said you heard the thugs talking about some girl. Whoever these thugs work for there must be more of them."

Who says it couldn't have been a different thug from the same organization?"

She nodded but was less convinced apparently than he was. "Maybe."

They sat looking at each other for a few more minutes and then finally Angie said, "I really need a shower and some sleep."

"Me too. You can go first."

Angie stood up and headed toward the bathroom.

"Hey Angie?"

She stopped, turned. "Yeah?"

He held something out to her. "You'll probably swim in it, but at least it's clean."

She smiled gratefully and took the flannel shirt he held out to her. "Where'd you get this?." They'd had to leave the bag Alastair packed behind when they'd run from Cinnamon's house.

"I picked up a few things in town. I would have gotten you something too but I had no idea what you like ... or what your stats were." He grinned at her.

"Oh, okay, thanks." She closed the bathroom door and leaned against it for a few beats, smiling. Her life might be a mixed up mess of screw-ups and missed chances, but despite the drama of her current situation, she couldn't help feeling that something was just right about her and Alastair Honeybun being there together. Then she wrinkled her nose with disgust. Who the hell names their kid Alastair Honeybun?

Sighing with exhaustion, she headed for the shower.

She was warmly cocooned in the bed when Alastair emerged from the shower. Jaws was tucked up next to her, lying full length along her side with his sweet little face on her shoulder. He was snoring softly.

Alastair was wearing a clean, white t-shirt and the bottoms to the flannel pjs she was half wearing. He was rubbing a towel energetically over his red hair, drying it into bristly spikes on his head, military style. The hair was so short on his well shaped head that just the brisk rubbing with the towel appeared to have dried it completely.

He threw the damp towel over the back of one of the kitchen chairs and headed for the couch. "Sweet dreams."

Angie realized he intended to sleep on the tiny couch. Seconds earlier she had been struggling with the idea that he would join her on the bed. Now she was feeling anxious about him sleeping on the couch. She was an emotional train wreck.

Alastair extinguished the lamp next to the couch and the room fell into relative darkness, lit only by the flickering amber light of the fire. The soft crackling sounds of the wood in the fireplace made the room feel cozy and safe.

Angie fought against lethargy and mentally pounded herself for her reluctance to invite him into the bed. He didn't deserve to be scrunched onto that tiny couch all night. He was just being a gentleman. A truly superior trait that Angie had seen much too little of from the men she'd encountered during the paltry span of her dating experience. And being a gentlemen of apparently the highest order, why *shouldn't* he sleep in the bed and be comfortable. *She* was comfortable in the bed.

She bit her bottom lip.

Weakness was an alien emotion to her. She had always despised weakness and had spent a lifetime stiffening her spine and forging onward through whatever pain life dealt her. But there she was dithering pitifully over whether to invite a really great guy, whose presence on the couch proved he had class, to share the bed with her. It wasn't as if she was going to let him ravish her. Although the idea did have merit. She smiled in the dark. It was just sleeping. Sleeping was totally innocent. She forcefully pushed away all thoughts of how warm he would be and how good he'd feel stretched out on the small bed next to her.

Damn! You stop those nasty thoughts right now Angie Marie Peterson. That's the entire trouble here. You have the mind of a street walker and the experience of a nun. And now poor Alastair has to pay the price because you're afraid you won't be able to control yourself.

Angie frowned into the night and stiffened her spine in anger at herself. "That's just silly." She muttered aloud. Then she opened her mouth to invite him to bed.

A soft snore floated to her from the couch. She slammed her mouth closed and sighed. Then she got up and stripped the comforter from the bed, carrying it to the couch and draping it over him carefully so as not to wake him. She stood looking down at him for a minute while he slept. He looked pale and she wondered if that was his natural color, being a redhead, or if it was from being sick. The end of his nose was still a little red.

She reached down and touched his forehead and he did feel a little warm. But then she didn't know if that was normal for him too. His lashes formed two thick fringes across his cheeks and made her smile. He looked like a cute little boy when he slept. A tender feeling sat lightly on her heart for a brief flicker of time but she shook it off. They were virtual strangers dealing with a calamitous situation that was going to take every ounce of their attention and intuition to fix. She didn't have time for any soft, cozy heart farts.

She reluctantly returned to the bed, resuming the snuggling position with her new boyfriend. Jaws gave a tiny sigh and settled back to sleep on her shoulder. She kissed his soft head and nestled into the pillow with a sigh. She could get used to this.

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Chapter Four

The girl held the newspaper up under her chin and blew a bubble with her gum. She didn't look nearly scared enough for the photographer. "Come on lady, you gotta look scared or I'm gonna haff ta bloody ya up some."

The girl's response was to pop another bubble.

The tall photographer slid his gaze to a short, muscular man lounging near the door and jerked his head toward the girl tied to the chair. Louie Pescatoli walked over and slapped the girl in the back of the head with an open palm.

She gulped and swallowed her gum, then turned to scowl at him. "Asshole."

He raised his hand again and she didn't so much as wince. She stared at him with bold, hazel eyes. "You leave a mark on me and you're dead, loser." She said through gritted teeth.

Louie sneered at her. "I can hurt you plenty without making no marks bitch."

She turned away and shrugged. "You better kill me then 'cause I'll rip your tiny little balls off with my teeth and spit them in your face if you do."

Louie looked disgusted. "Nice mouth. Where'd you learn to talk like that. It's very unladylike you know."

The girl laughed. "So tell Sister Catherine. I'm sure she'll slap my knuckles with a ruler."

Louie whacked the back of her head again and the photographer shot the picture just as the girl's eyes widened in pain. "That oughta do it." The muscular blond man said,

pulling the Polaroid from the camera and setting it down on the table.

The two men stood over the picture and watched it develop like a couple of kids, exclaiming as the girl's outraged face emerged. "It's like frickin' magic," said Louie, and he slapped the photographer on his wide back in celebration.

Behind them the girl in the chair shook her head and muttered, "Flippin' morons."

The tall blond man gathered up the photos and glanced at the girl. "I'll be glad to see the end of this assignment. He turned away and lowered his voice. "Just between you and me, she makes me nervous. Reminds me a little too much of my first wife."

Louie nodded. "I know what you mean, Julio."

"So how's the search going for those two bozos the boss wants offed?"

Louie swore. "They just disappeared. I think the boss is gonna cut off my nuts if we don't find 'em soon."

Julio jerked his head toward the girl, who had opened the paper and was reading it like she was sitting in the dentist's office. "Her face is gonna be plastered all over the news and the papers by tonight. He doesn't want our nosy friends going to the police with any information we don't want 'em to have." He leaned into Louie and his posture was decidedly hostile. "I especially don't want Honeybun to give them any descriptions from that night. I'd have more to lose than anybody if he did."

Louie raised his hands in a sign of surrender and took a step back, away from the towering muscle man. "I hear ya Julio, I hear ya. We'll find 'em don't worry."

Julio headed out of the room. "You better, or you'll have more to worry about than your nuts."

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Breakfast was scrambled eggs with onion, cheese, and ham and melt in your mouth biscuits with honey. Angie popped a large bite of biscuit in her mouth and moaned, closing her eyes. When she'd swallowed she looked at Alastair and said, "Marry me."

He laughed.

"Where'd you learn to cook like this?"

He grabbed another biscuit off the plate in the middle of the table. "I realized at a very young age that with a name like Alastair Honeybun I'd better learn to cook or I'd never get any chicks."

Angie chuckled but, given the fact that he was built like a god and had a face like an angel, she seriously doubted the truth of that statement. "I guess it works, huh?"

He grinned. "You would actually marry me and become Angie Honeybun?"

She grimaced. "I'd have to see what other tools you had in your tool box before I could make that decision."

As soon as the words left her mouth she realized how they sounded and turned bright red.

Alastair laughed and saved her ass. "You should see me shop. I particularly like to shop for women's clothing."

"Done. Let's set the date."

He stood up. "We'll do that first thing when I get back."

Angie looked up, "Where you going?"

"I need a paper to read with my coffee. It's not Sunday without a paper."

Considering that people were trying to kill them ... well him anyway ... and the cops wanted to throw them in jail, it probably couldn't be considered your typical Sunday anyway, but she bit back the snide remark and started clearing off the table. "Keep an eye out for our friends."

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The girl's picture was on A1, top of the fold of the Sunday paper. Detective Brita Muldane squinted at it for a full minute before she picked up the phone. The phone rang five times and then was answered with a brusque, "what?" in an angry sounding voice.

Brita bit her lip, wondering how she should ask what she needed to ask. "Hello. DA Burns? This is Detective Brita Muldane. I'm looking at the paper here."

"I know about the damn paper."

"I guess I don't need to ask you then if that *is* your daughter on the front page of the paper?"

The DA's response was colorful and not to be repeated in a room full of elderly women or children. Detective Muldane listened to a dial tone for a beat and then dropped the phone back into its cradle. "Alrighty then."

Brita's phone rang as soon as she hung it up, too fast for it to be the DA calling back to apologize. Not bloody likely anyway. She picked it up and smiled when she heard a familiar voice on the other end. "Percy, hey. I hope you're calling to tell me you want to see me tonight."

"Of course I am, beautiful. How 'bout I pick you up around seven? I have an incredible hankering for a pizza and a case of icy cold beer."

Brita cradled the phone between her shoulder and her ear and pulled the stack of reports on her desk into a neat pile.

"Only a case? Bad day, huh?"

Percy expelled his breath loudly and then chuckled. "I can't hide anything from you can I, Brit?"

She smiled. "Not that you try all that hard."

"Let's just say I could use some time away from the office. Like about a year."

Brita stood up and grabbed her coat. "The office? It's Sunday, why are you at work?"

"Don't even get me started. See you at seven?"

She smiled, "Absolutely."

Detective Muldane hung up the phone and headed out. She told the dispatcher where she was going and climbed into her beat up, light blue Taurus. The Indianapolis Star wasn't

too far away from the station. She could probably make it there in twenty minutes if traffic wasn't too bad.

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Alastair choked on his coffee. Angie looked up from the crossword puzzle she was struggling to complete. "Are you okay?"

He shook his head and continued to cough until his face was nearly purple. She stood up and went to pound him on the back.

Still coughing, he pointed to the picture on the front page of the Indianapolis Star and said, in a strangled voice, "That's her. That's the girl I saw."

Angie grabbed the paper and quickly read the lead in to the article. "The DA's daughter? Holy shit! No wonder someone wants to stop you from giving information." Angie squinted at the paper the girl held between her hands. There was no visible date. "Isn't she supposed to be holding the paper to show the date? What are these kidnappers, mentally handi-capable?"

Alastair took the page back from her and peered at it carefully. "Apparently the kidnappers wanted the police to know there was a sale at Macy's."

Angie grabbed it back, "There is?" Then she remembered that she had no clothes, no money, and no ability to shop

because she was running for her life and from the law. She dropped the page and gave a long suffering sigh. Life just wasn't fair.

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The reporter was bored, balding, and barely sociable. Brita didn't need to forge a long lasting friendship with the guy, but she did need him to respond in, at the very least, monosyllabic form. "Mr. Bratz, let me try asking this another way, when the picture arrived, was there a note attached to it?"

The man stuffed his ham and cheese on pumpernickel into an oversized mouth with wet, flabby lips and shook his head.

Damn her luck for having arrived at lunch time. Although, looking at the guy Brita decided he was never all that far from lunchtime. She tried again. "What about the envelope, was there any return address..." Yeah right. "...or anything about it that drew your attention?"

He swallowed and stuffed a handful of chips into the wet maw. "Nope." A wet chunk of chip flew out of his mouth and landed on Brita's stylish jacket. She grimaced and flicked it with a well-manicured fingernail.

In frustration Brita blew out a breath and forced herself to lean toward him menacingly, it wasn't something she ever wanted to have to do again but once she was there she

stiffened her spine and stayed long enough to ask the question that had been foremost in her mind since introducing herself to the non-communicative reporter. "Mr. Bratz, when you write your articles, you *do* use words right?" He looked at her for a long moment, his brows drooping in thought. Then he stuffed some more chips into his mouth and nodded.

Brita flattened her hand and sliced it over her head. She stood up. "Thanks, Mr. Bratz." She said to his face, then, "for nothin'," came out against her will as she turned to leave.

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The phone rang and the girl looked up as Julio answered it. "Hey Boss." The big man's smile turned down at the corners as the voice on the other end plowed into him.

"Are you a total, flippin' moron? What the hell is with that picture? The girl doesn't even look scared, she looks like she has gas but she certainly doesn't look like she's terrified of her kidnappers. And what's with the newspaper? Why don't I see a date on it? This picture could be from last year for all I know."

Julio held up an overlarge hand placatingly, as if the person on the other end of the line could see it. "That was Louie's idea, boss. And it's a good one too. He said the whole date on the newspaper thing was too clichéd. We saw that

Macy's was having a sale yesterday so we used that to pinpoint the date. Genius huh?"

The girl in the chair rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Flippin' morons."

"Yeah, that's genius. That really is. Are you two bloated skin bags aware that Macy's has a sale just about every other day?"

Julio's smile dropped away and he shuffled his big feet nervously. "Uh, no."

"Yeah, one day it's a purse sale, in honor of the beginning of summer. A few days ago they had a shoe sale, in honor of the end of winter. The week before that they had a sale to honor the full moon or some such stupidity. SHOPPING STORES HAVE SALES EVERY BLEEPIN' DAY!"

Julio gulped and tried a sick smile. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, Boss."

The only response was a dial tone.

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"So why would she be holding up a page that says, Sale at Macys?"

Alastair sipped his coffee and shook his head. They'd been going over the same information for an hour, ever since they'd seen the picture. "It doesn't make any sense."

Angie stared hard at the picture and chewed on her nail. "Maybe the date's there but you just can't see it because it's too small."

"Then what good does it do to hold the paper up?"

Angie shrugged.

They sat in silence for a minute before Alastair said. "I wonder if, after I went to the police and told them what I saw, they'd be so grateful they wouldn't arrest me for kidnapping the old lady."

Angie frowned. "We didn't kidnap her!"

Alastair shrugged, "We jumped uninvited into the cab that she was in and frightened her into driving it away from where her nephew was. You say potato, I say wild rice. Pure semantics."

Angie continued to frown. The whole kidnapping thing was really pissing her off. The old woman was sitting behind the damn wheel of the cab. Who knew she was just a little old lady without a driver's license. "Well, anyway, I don't think we have a choice. I'd rather take my chances with the police than those two thugs. Wouldn't you?"

Alastair grabbed her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "It'll be all right, I'll get my brother to represent us. He's a lawyer."

Angie sighed, "Isn't everyone?"

Alastair picked up the phone and started punching in numbers. Angie stood up and started toward the bathroom. She needed to get dressed but she had been resisting putting on the same clothes she'd worn the day before. She would

have to insist to Alastair that they stop by her apartment and get her some clothes.

She heard the soft pitter pat of fat little feet behind her and turned to find Jaws following her into the bathroom. She smiled, "Hey little guy." He whined in greeting and wagged his butt. She reached down and picked him up and he immediately snuggled his soft little head under her chin. "You are the sweetest baby aren't you?"

She heard Alastair arguing into the phone and realized their predicament wouldn't be an easy one to explain to loved ones. She didn't relish telling her sister about it. But she knew she'd have to tell her something because Cinnamon and her two kids, Derek and little Annie, were supposed to come to her apartment for dinner on Wednesday night.

At this point it didn't look like she'd be there.

Sighing, Angie set Jaws down so she could dress.

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The news on the radio as they drove back toward Indianapolis was filled with the kidnapping of the DA's daughter. Apparently the police had all but shut Macy's down as a result of the picture in that morning's paper. A spokesman for the store lamented the loss of sales for the day, due to the claustrophobic presence of Indy's best. "We have sales almost every day," whined the metro-sexual

spokesman, "I don't know why the kidnappers had to pick on Macy's but I can promise you our room deodorant sale, in honor of environmental issues everywhere, had nothing to do with this girl's disappearance."

The DA was interviewed briefly. His gruff, disinterested tone was a stark counterpoint to the Macy's representative's whine. Nothing weak or whiny about the DA.

"He doesn't sound exactly crushed by his daughter's disappearance does he?" Angie said.

Alastair shrugged. "Everybody handles grief differently. Some people wail and gnash their teeth, some people get mad and go about their day. I think the DA is definitely a member of the second group."

They were heading toward the law office where Alastair's older brother, Percival, also named for an old English lord of the manor, was waiting to discuss how they could approach the police with their predicament. Although Alastair seemed jumpy and nervous about the meeting, Angie was relieved to be doing something to get them off the streets and back into sane society.

Pecot, Pecot, and Rogers was located in a short, elegant brownstone on, swear to god, Easy Street. With its black wrought iron accoutrements and heavy wood doors, the building looked as if it had been squatting in that well to do spot of the city for centuries. It smelled of old money and power and gave off a feeling of staid maturity that was soothing to Angie in her currently chaotic state.

Percival Honeybun met them at the front desk and gave them both a hug. Angie tensed a bit at the easy familiarity of

Alastair's brother but then realized he was probably that way with everyone. Something about the easy smile on his handsome face and the way he held himself, more slouched than stiff, invited people in rather than keeping them at bay. A unique trait in a lawyer.

They followed Percival down a densely carpeted hallway with creamy gold walls and expensive looking paintings hanging on the walls, and into a well appointed office. Angie assessed Alastair's older brother as they followed. He was very tall, probably around six foot three, with even brighter red hair than Alastair's, cut very close to his head. He wasn't bulky but he moved like someone who knew his way around a gym, with a certain muscular grace. All in all he was a very striking and handsome man.

He motioned them into black, puckered leather chairs and sat down behind a huge, cherry desk. He stared at his brother for a few beats, his dark blue gaze speculative, and then gave them a slow smile. "I have to admit I never thought I'd see you on the other side of this desk in a professional capacity, Stair."

Alistair frowned. "Right back atcha, bro."

Angie fidgeted.

Percival turned to her. "So, you're my brother's heroine on a white horse." His dark blue eyes twinkled. "You really stepped in it on this one didn't you, Angie?"

Angie felt her temper flair and frowned. Alastair jumped to her defense. "Don't tease her Perce, she doesn't know you well enough and, frankly, we're both pretty frazzled by this whole mess."

Percival Honeybun kept his blue gaze on Angie and didn't speak for thirty seconds. But then he lowered his head a notch and became serious. "I owe you a great debt, Angie. Thank you for saving my brother's life. He's not much but he's all I have."

Alastair chuckled and Angie felt herself relaxing finally. "You're very welcome. I'm kind of fond of him too." Then she blushed as Percival gave a delighted whoop.

She stared hard at her hands, terrified to look up and see Alastair's face. That hadn't come out exactly as she'd hoped it would. Even if it was the truth.

Alastair cleared his throat. "Well ... anyway. We need to talk about this mess, Perce. Can you help us get to the police without getting arrested?"

Percival nodded. "I can do you one better than that." He leaned toward the intercom box on his desk and pushed a button. "Becky, you can send her in now."

The door opened and a statuesque beauty sauntered in, her golden brown gaze snapping with intelligence. She strolled over to Alastair and held out a hand. "Alastair, it's nice to see you again."

Alastair stood up and slapped himself on the forehead, causing the tall woman with the short, choppy cap of hair to lean away from him in surprise. Alastair turned to his brother and grinned. "How could I have forgotten about Brita?"

Percival returned the grin and raised his hands out to the sides as if to say, "No clue."

Then Alastair grabbed the woman's still outstretched hand and pulled on it, yanking her into a hug. "Brita, how are you?"

She looked at Percival over Alastair's shoulder and raised two golden brown eyebrows. Percy shrugged, still smiling.

Pulling out of the embrace Alastair turned to Angie. "Angie, this is Detective Brita Muldane. My brother's very special friend."

Brita grinned at this description and turned to Angie. "Hey Angie. Nice to meet ya."

Angie stood up and took the woman's outstretched hand, receiving a friendly palm squeeze from the taller woman. "You're a police detective?"

Brita nodded.

Angie turned to Alastair, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Alastair looked a bit sheepish. "Things have been so weird and crazy I just forgot."

Percival pulled a third chair away from the small conference table in the corner of the office and Brita sat down, pulling a pocket sized notebook out of her jacket. "Now, tell me exactly what you saw that night at The Rock."

Alastair glanced at his brother and Percival shrugged. "I filled her in already."

Alastair went over the bar incident again. Then he and Angie filled Brita in on what had happened since the previous morning, when she'd overheard the two men talking about killing Alastair.

Brita smiled when they got to the kidnapped old lady in the cab part. "So you two are the infamous old lady cab driver kidnappers. There's a statewide manhunt going on for you."

Angie's eyes popped and her hand flew to cover her gaping mouth. "Oh shit!"

Brita laughed.

Alistair frowned. "Don't tease her Brita, she's taking this all very hard."

Angie glanced from one to the other of them, not sure what to think about what Brita had said. "I've never had so much as a parking ticket before, Detective..."

"Please, Brita will work just fine."

"Brita. I ... I don't want to go to jail."

Brita touched her hand. "I wouldn't worry about it, Angie. Most of the cops had an idea you weren't really trying to kidnap the old lady. But the nephew feels guilty about leaving her alone in the car so he's creating quite a stink about it. It'll all blow over in a couple of weeks. You'll just have to keep a low profile until then."

Alistair snorted. "That won't be easy to do with those two guys trying to kill us."

Brita frowned. "You have a point." She looked at Percival. "We need to help them find out who's after them."

Percival nodded. "In the meantime they can stay with me."

Brita shook her head. "Absolutely not. You're his brother. That's the first place they'll look, Percy."

Percy scowled at her. "They're not staying with you."

She stood up. "Just until we can get them to a safe house."

"No! It's too dangerous."

She leaned over his desk, giving him cop's eyes. "I'm equipped to handle trouble, Percy. You're not. Deal with it!" Then she kissed him on the lips and his scowl deepened.

Alistair grinned at his brother and stood up. "Call me later, bro."

Angie gave Percy a little smile. "Thanks for all your help, Percival."

"Oh god! Please, call me Percy."

Angie laughed and waved goodbye.

Percy scowled but kept silent as Brita led them from his office.

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Chapter Five

Brita's house was a little bungalow with a large yard. As Alastair parked the rental behind her in the driveway a cacophony of canine sounds greeted them from the fenced in back yard. She climbed out of her non-descript white car and smiled as little Jaws popped his head out of his sack and returned the greeting.

"Hey Jaws, buddy. How ya doing?" The sack waggled as the little dog worked his tail in enthusiastic greeting. He kissed Brita on the nose when she leaned close to say hi. "That's a good boy, Jawsy. Thanks for the kiss." Brita looked at Angie, who was currently the bearer of the Jaws sack. "I was gonna ask if you liked dogs but I guess I have my answer." She jerked her head toward the back of the house, where several dogs appeared to be joining in a chorus of barking and howling. The wood fence hid them from view. "It can get a little chaotic here."

Angie smiled, placing a hand on Jaws' head and giving him a little nuzzle as he vibrated with excitement. "I'll be fine. I grew up with dogs. I just hope Jaws is up for it."

Alastair pulled the little dog from his sack. "He'll be fine. Once he gets over the fact that he can't be the boss." Alastair set him on the grass and told him to do his business and the little guy promptly squatted.

The house had been completely renovated and felt larger inside than it looked outside. Brita had opened up the ceilings, and brought down interior walls to create a great

room feel to the main part of the house. As they entered she pointed up the stairs. "There are two rooms up there. You can each have one. My bedroom is on the main floor." She pointed to the back of the house.

Angie looked up the stairs longingly. She would love to go up and change into something more comfortable but didn't have anything to change into. She turned to Alastair. "I really need to go to my apartment and get some things."

Brita shook her head. "I wouldn't advise that. I'm sure those guys have somebody watching your place. If you make me a list I'll go over there later. Hopefully they'll think I'm there visiting somebody else and won't think to follow me."

Angie frowned. "I don't want to put you into any danger."

Brita shrugged. "I'm a police detective. My job is dangerous. Besides, I'll take a couple of other detectives with me to hang back and look for anybody who appears too interested in what I'm doing. Maybe we'll get lucky and snag one of them."

Alastair nodded. "Good plan." Then he turned to Angie. "In the meantime you can borrow some of my stuff if you want."

Angie nodded and tried to smile. It was all starting to get too much for her. She was tired and scared and wanted to just go home, put on her favorite sweats and thick socks, and make a cup of tea.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" Brita asked. "Some tea maybe?"

Angie could have kissed her. "I'd kill for a cup of hot tea."

Brita laughed, "I don't think you'll have to kill anyone. Unless I'm out that is." She winked at Angie and turned to Alastair, her eyebrows peaking in question.

Alastair nodded, "Me too. Can I have honey and lemon in mine?" He glanced at Angie and she grinned at him.

"He's been sick." She said. She suddenly realized how much they'd shared in a very short time. No wonder she was feeling so close to him even though she'd known him less than two days. She decided the confusing feelings would fade once the current situation was settled and they were back to their normal lives.

The thought should have made her feel better, but somehow it made her just a little bit sad.

Brita led them down the hall to the kitchen. "Percy will be here in a little bit, as soon as he can get away from the office. He's promised to bring dinner home." She turned to Angie. "I hope you like Chinese food?"

Angie nodded vigorously. "Love it."

Alastair pouted, "Nobody bothered to ask me but I love it too."

Brita laughed, "I'm not worried about you. If you're like your brother you'll eat anything that can't run away from your teeth."

Alastair grinned. "Pretty much." He looked at Angie. "We come from a large family, mostly guys. You ate when you could, whatever you could, as fast as you could, or there was a good chance you'd starve. We called it trench eating when I was growing up."

Angie cocked her head. "Trench eating?"

"Like in a war. You need to eat but you don't have much time and you can't take your attention off the enemy for even a second. You learn to scarf your rations quickly, with one eye on your surroundings at all times. I've had food snatched right out of my hands before. The aftermath isn't pretty." He grinned, his eyes telling them he enjoyed the memory despite how disgusted he pretended to be by it.

Brita filled a teapot with water and set it on the stove to heat, turning the dial to bring a gas flame up under it. "At my house we worked hard to be the one who ate the least. Virtual starvation was a badge of honor for us." She turned back to them with a smile. "It was an all female house. Three generations under one roof; my mom, me and my sisters, and my grandma."

Angie sat at the kitchen table, feeling more comfortable by the minute. "We were totally traditional. It was just my sister and me and two parents, who insisted we all sit down at the table together every night. We bowed to the food pyramid, did our homework before watching a minute of TV, and got the requisite thirty minutes of exercise every day. It was frighteningly normal in every way."

Brita stared at her without blinking. "I've read about you people, but I've never met one of you before."

Angie laughed.

"Aliens." Alastair mumbled, earning a shot in the arm from Angie.

He rubbed the arm. "Ow. That hurt."

Brita snorted, "Big baby."

He looked affronted. "Hey, I'm sickly and feeble right now."

Both women snorted at that one.

"Yeah. Right." Angie laughed. "You're suspiciously choosy about the moments when feebleness overtakes you."

He grinned.

The front door opened and Percy called out. The smell of Chinese food wafted toward them down the hall. Alastair jumped up to "help" his brother with the food. A scuffle ensued in the hallway. Finally, both men entered the kitchen with eggrolls hanging out of their mouths.

Brita put out a hand, palm up, and looked at Angie. "I give you Exhibit A."

Percy crossed the room and swooped her up into a lusty hug, then kissed her with the eggroll still sticking out of his face. Brita bit the exposed end off at his lips. "Hey!" He yelled around the remaining half.

She shrugged and chewed. When she had swallowed she said, "Haven't I told you never to lead with your eggroll?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her and started pulling boxes and little waxed bags out of the large plastic bag he was carrying. Soon there was enough food for a serious bout of trench eating. Brita got out plates and silverware and they all dug in.

The tea was abandoned in favor of a round of cold beers.

The house was silent but for the constant scratching and whining at the back door. Angie kept casting her eyes at the back door until Brita finally said. "It's just easier to leave them outside until we're done. They're begging pros."

When the last bite of everything was gone Alastair jumped up and started cleaning off the table. Brita eyed him as if he were an alien. Percy sat back, sipping his second beer. "He's just sucking up."

Angie shook her head. "No, it's just another tool in his toolbox. He uses the tools to get chicks."

She turned red when Brita and Percy whooped in enjoyment and made the most of the double entendre of her tool box scenario. Alastair just grinned.

Finally Angie laughed with them.

Percy said, "It's the name thing isn't it?"

Alistair nodded.

"Yeah, what's with being named after old, rich English guys anyway?" asked Brita.

Percy shrugged, "Mom claims she named us after her favorite characters in movies. She liked English murder mysteries. But we think she did it to punish dad. There were eight of us boys and the names got weirder with each successive one."

Alastair nodded, "Ask Heathcliff what he thinks of the name thing." The brothers shared a grim look and Percy said, "He's the youngest."

Angie and Brita shared a laugh. "oh my," gasped Angie, "Poor thing."

The brothers nodded soberly, a suspicious sparkle in their eyes.

The scratching at the door reached new heights and finally Brita couldn't ignore it. She got up and went to the door.

Before opening it she looked at them and asked, "Are you ready?"

Percy grinned, Alastair waved a dismissive hand, and Angie's eyes got big but she nodded, clutching Jaws more closely to her chest. The little dog started to vibrate with excitement, his skinny tail wagging frantically.

Brita opened the door and was almost bowled over. Dogs of all sizes and shapes exploded into the kitchen, tails wagging and mouths open in a variety of greeting sounds. Alastair reached over and plucked Jaws from Angie's clutches as the entire group ran over to her and started jumping up trying to sniff the little guy. Alastair stood up so they couldn't reach him, even while fighting with Jaws to keep him off the floor. He wanted to join the happy fray at their feet.

"Hold on, little man," warned Alastair as Jaws almost managed to extricate himself from Alastair's grasp. He glanced at Angie and apparently saw the worry in her eyes. "He doesn't know he's little."

Brita nodded. "That's the daschund for you." She reached down and plucked a happy little dog from the floor. It was another doxie, a pretty, red, long haired girl. "This is Moxie." Brita lifted the wriggling lady up to see Jaws and they touched noses, their tails whipping happily from side to side.

Brita handed Moxie to Percy and called the rest of the mob into the laundry room, where she started filling food bowls from a huge container by the door. When she'd filled all the bowls she put a pet gate across the door and left them, bringing a scoop of food and a bowl into the kitchen. "If Jaws is like most doxies he'll share with Moxie. She put Moxie's

bowl on the floor and dumped the food into it. Alastair placed the little dog on the floor and they greeted each other and then stuck their noses into the bowl, tails wagging while they ate.

Angie smiled at the sight. "Look at that, what a couple of cuties."

Brita nodded, "Daschunds are very social and generally very sweet to their owners and other dogs." She slanted a look at Percy, "They don't always warm up to strangers right away though."

Percy laughed. "Miss Moxie didn't like me all that much when Brit and I started dating. Either that or she thought I was a dentist. She was always showing me her teeth."

"But she's finally warming up to you."

"Jaws likes everybody." Said Alistair.

"Not everybody." Angie grinned, "remember when those two thugs tried to grab me?"

Brita frowned, "Which brings us back to the problem at hand." She glanced at Alastair and Angie. "While I'm enjoying your company immensely..." she grinned, "we do need to figure out what to do next."

"And figure out how to stop them from trying to kill Alastair." Angie added.

Brita looked at her. "Unfortunately the two are connected. The only way to stop these guys from coming after you is to remove the reason they're doing it. We need to find out where the DA's daughter is and get her back."

Alastair nodded. "That makes sense. It would help if we knew why they took her."

They all looked at Percy. He shrugged. "I'll look into his current case load and see if that will tell us anything. But my guess is they're doing it to stop him from prosecuting somebody. He'll be dismissed from all his cases until we know who took her and why. They'll have to be reassigned. Otherwise it's a guaranteed mistrial."

Alastair looked at Brita. "So we just hide out until you find these guys?"

She nodded. "I'll get you into a safe house as soon as I can. In the meantime you can stay here. I think you'll be comfortable in the upstairs rooms and I don't mind the company."

Angie took Brita's hand. "Thank you so much for helping us. I'm starting to feel better now that you and Percy are involved."

Brita squeezed her hand. "You must have been terrified. And all because you tried to help a complete stranger. I wish more people were like you." She laughed. "But I guess I can kind of see why more people don't get involved. You're paying a huge price."

Angie shrugged. "I couldn't just let them kill Alastair. Especially since I was picturing him as a kindly old English gentleman."

Alastair groaned and dropped his spiky red head into his hands.

Percy laughed. "Now you know he's just a dork with a bad name."

Brita bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing and slapped Percy on the knee. "That's right Percival Honeybun. *He* has a bad name."

Percy grimaced, "Touche." Then he stood up and slapped his brother on the back. "Come on bro, we have nightly dog duties to perform."

Alastair drained his bottle and stood up. "Take them for a walk? All of them." Alastair's voice rose a few octaves. He glanced into the laundry room where the floor was littered with dogs in various states of after dinner sleepiness. "How many of them are there anyway?"

Brita stood up and started clearing the table. "Too many. We have our own unique way of exercising them all."

The dogs apparently knew what time it was because they all surged to their feet and started hopping around, barking and wagging their tails. Moxie and Jaws lined up in front of the door, Jaws taking his cue from the pretty little red haired dog.

Percy grabbed two soccer balls out of a basket by the door, a big one and a small one, and opened the back door, giving the little dogs a head start. He threw the smaller soccer ball out and they tore after it, their stubby little legs pumping hard in the effort to get there first.

Brita let the bigger dogs out of the laundry room and they charged out the door, knocking a chair over in their enthusiasm and almost toppling Percy.

Then Alastair and Percy followed them into the yard, with Percy claiming he wanted the biggest dog, Freddie, on his

team. "He's the best defender in the group. With my offensive skills we'll clean the field with you."

Angie just shook her head at them, laughing. Then she went outside to join in the game.

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The phone rang in the quiet office and the man sitting behind the desk swiveled from his view of the city to look at it. After the fourth ring he reluctantly reached out a hand to grab it. "Yes."

"Have you found them?"

The man ran a hand over his face in frustration. "Not yet."

Silence met this admission. "You know it will serve my purposes either way, whether you find them before they squawk or not."

The man behind the desk swiveled back to the window. His thoughts tangled in his head as he quickly assessed all angles of the current, desperate situation. Finally he whispered, "I know."

The voice on the other end lost its belligerence. "Have you talked to the girl?"

"No. I'm going to do that tonight. She won't be cooperative, I know her."

A soft chuckle moved through the phone line. "It would be a shame to have to kill her."

Despite his years of corruption the man behind the desk felt his throat knot up at this. "That won't be necessary."

"Let's hope not. You've botched this one badly, my friend. If you think you're just going to walk away now, after all the years we've been doing business together, you'd better think again. Those men you borrowed from me still know who their first loyalty belongs to. You don't want to cross me."

The man closed his eyes, blocking out the flickering lights of the city beyond the window. "I have no intention of crossing you. I'm not stupid."

Again the soft chuckle. "Well, that still remains to be seen doesn't it? Keep me informed."

The man sat behind his desk for several minutes after he'd hung up the phone, staring into the sparkling night landscape of the city as if for answers. Finally he picked up the phone again and dialed her cell.

The thug that answered was the one who'd been compromised at the bar. "Yeah."

"Give the phone to her."

Sounds of shuffling ensued, then the girl's voice came across the line. "What do *you* want?"

He sighed inaudibly. It would be the same. Always the same between them. "I want you to listen for once." Then, realizing he was just going to antagonize her, he pinched his lips together and started over. "Look, I'm really in a bind here. I just need you to stay out of sight for a while until the right decisions are made and then you'll be released."

"Go to hell."

"Debra..."

"No. You listen to me for once. I don't really care what you've gotten yourself into. I care that you've involved me in it. As soon as you spring me I'm gonna sing like a canary."

"You don't want to do that."

"Actually I think I do."

"I'm not the only one affected by this you know. My partner will have you killed. You'd better think about whether getting revenge on me for my screw-ups is worth dying for."

Silence met this statement. He held his breath, praying he'd gotten through to her.

"That's a tough one. I'll give it some thought."

"You do that."

Long after he'd hung up he sat in the darkened office staring out at the Indianapolis skyline, wondering when things had gotten so complicated.

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Chapter Six

"The girl was hanging out with some pretty screwed up people." Brita shuffled the pages on her desk and pulled up the one that listed the girl's known associates who had danced across the line between law abider and law breaker. The list was fairly long.

"Give me some examples." Percy picked up a pencil and turned the phone on his desk so he could hear her better.

"Well, the biggest one I can see is her boyfriend. He's ten years older than she is and, although he's technically clean, he has some really bad associates."

"Like?"

"Like he works for Mr. Bigg for starters."

Percy whistled through his teeth. "That's pretty bad."

"We'll need to check him out."

Percy's pen slid across the pad of paper in front of him. He frowned. "Mr. Bigg goes on trial this month. We've already lost a couple of witnesses. One was beaten nearly to death and the other just disappeared. Having the DA dismissed will just about quash any chance at a trial for the near future."

"Unless there's a change of venue."

Percy nodded. "That might be what they're hoping for. At the very least it will get Bigg out of an area where everybody knows what a slime he is and whoever gets the case will need to build it again from the bottom up. And to make things worse, Bigg's organization runs so wide and deep that you

can't totally rule out the possibility that he has somebody in place with the police as well as in this office."

Brita sighed. "So we don't know who we can trust."

"That's about the size of it. We'd better keep our investigative team small."

"How small?"

It was Percy's turn to sigh. "Really small. Like you and me."

They were both silent for a moment while they digested this idea. Then Brita cleared her throat. "Um, I hate to say this but I think we'll need to get your brothers involved."

Percy's initial reaction was to reject the idea. But on some level he knew she was right. "We'll give that some thought."

Brita opened her mouth to press her argument but realized it would be futile. He'd come to the right conclusion eventually. She'd give him the time he needed to come to grips with the idea of endangering his family. She wasn't keen on bringing his brothers into a potentially dangerous and politically explosive situation either, but she knew they could handle themselves and she'd trust every last one of them with her life if it came to that.

Finally she said simply, "I won't press it right now but we could definitely use their skills."

"Noted. But for now, I'm going to see the DA in about an hour. Want to tag along?"

She grinned, "Just try and stop me."

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DA Burns' office was large and well appointed. Like DA Burns. He lounged negligently behind a highly polished mahogany desk, glaring at Brita and Percy. His thick, graying black hair was perfectly combed, thick on the top and shorter on the sides, tapering to his neck at just the right length to give him a slightly seedy if not entirely disreputable look. He puffed a fat cigar and refused to answer Brita's most recent question, which was, why did he think his daughter had been snatched.

His fat cheeks puffed in and out around the cigar and he seemed to take great pleasure in sending smoke toward them across his desk.

Brita tried again. "DA Burns, can you think of any reason someone would kidnap your daughter?"

He shrugged naturally padded shoulders and reached a square, olive toned hand up to drag the cigar out of his mouth. He pounded it against the ashtray without speaking, and then laid it down, presumably to finish later. Finally he looked at Percy as if Brita weren't in the room. "I'm guessing they want money. They haven't told me yet."

Brita had met his kind before, she hadn't gotten where she was in a male-dominated world without knowing how to deal with it. "Will you pay the ransom?"

He flicked dark eyes in Brita's direction and gave her an oily smile. "Of course. It's my daughter."

His tone of voice said she was stupid for asking, but his demeanor told her he didn't much care that his daughter had been kidnapped.

Percy nodded. "Of course you'd want to get your daughter back, sir. You love her right?"

DA Burns shrugged noncommittally.

Percy slid a quick glance toward Brita. Her answering look told him they were both thinking the same thing. "You and your daughter have had some problems I guess?" Brita leaned toward him, letting him know with her body language that she wouldn't be ignored.

He turned the full force of his dark gaze on her. "Ms. Muldane, my daughter has been a consummate pain in my ass for years. She does everything she can to embarrass and undermine me and I've been bailing her out of one kind of trouble or another for years. This is just another in a long line of bail outs."

Brita's eyes were incredulous. "Certainly you don't blame her for this?"

He shrugged. "If you'll excuse me I'm very busy."

Percy smiled. It was not a nice smile. "Busy doing what sir? All your cases have been reassigned until this is resolved."

The DA's dark eyes narrowed angrily at Percy and he stood up, his massive stomach barely clearing the desk as he levered himself upward. "My schedule is no concern of yours, Honeybun. I assume you know the way out?"

Percy stood too, but Brita stayed seated. "DA Burns, do you think it's possible that someone did this to keep you from prosecuting them?"

He didn't bother to trim the annoyance from his tone when he turned to her and responded. "I don't see why anyone would do that Ms. Muldane. After all, if I don't prosecute someone else will."

"Your cases are fairly high profile. Maybe someone wanted to limit the limelight on their trial."

His lips spread in a smug smile. "Anything I would say to you at this time would be pure speculation, Ms. Muldane. I'm not interested in speculation. When I hear from the kidnappers I'll be in touch."

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Angie sat on the couch, her lap covered in small dogs, and twitched. She'd never been more bored or felt more restless in her life. She was tired of waiting for other people to bring her stuff and do for her. She'd always been self-sufficient and driven and it dragged on her to be rudderless and unfocused now.

She looked at Alastair for about the hundredth time that morning and frowned. He was bent over his laptop with a phone at his ear, working. Apparently it didn't hurt him at all to be on the lam. It just wasn't fair. She thought about calling

the coffee shop again but the last time Petey had snapped at her that she was driving him crazy and he was too busy to babysit her phobias. After getting her back up at the snotty response, she had to admit he had a point. She knew the coffee shop was in good hands. She was just bored and restless.

Finally she made a decision. Moving the two sleeping daschunds carefully off her lap and placing them in a warm pile in the middle of the couch, Angie headed up the stairs to her room. She was going to get dressed and go to her apartment for her stuff. She was tired of letting a couple of thought challenged thugs run her life. She was taking it back.

When she came back down the stairs Alastair was off the phone. She walked over to him and held out a hand. "Can I have the car keys please?"

He looked up, his sexy blue eyes filled with unspoken questions.

She bristled, not wanting to be talked out of her errand. "I need to get out of here for a while. I'm going stir crazy."

He stared at her for a beat longer and then nodded. "Me too. Let's go get your stuff."

She jerked in surprise. She'd been ready for a battle. "Really?"

He smiled. "I thought you'd never ask. I was going bonkers myself."

Angie grinned. "You hide it well."

He shrugged. "I'm rarely in my office normally. I tend to visit my clients face to face as much as possible. Sitting here all day has put a serious crimp in my style."

Angie followed him out of the house and into the rental car. They pulled away from the curb and started toward her apartment. She turned hopefully to him. "Maybe we can stop at the shoppe too, so I can make sure everything's okay."

He smiled without turning. "Petey will be thrilled."

She punched him on the arm but couldn't hold back a grin. He didn't miss much.

They turned the corner at the end of Brita's street and headed toward town. They sat for a few minutes in contented silence and then Angie started fumbling with the radio. She turned her favorite talk radio show on and sat back with a smile, enjoying herself more than the outing warranted just because she was moving under her own steam again.

Alastair listened to the radio program for a few beats, casting looks at her which she ignored, and then reached over to change the station to something that was more rock than music. He sat back with a smile.

Angie cast him a few looks and then reached over to change it back to AM.

A scuffle ensued as they made it a contest to see who would have the last word. Angie placed her finger on the AM button, giggling like an idiot, and refused to let go. Alastair grabbed the finger and tried to dislodge it, taking care not to hurt her, which she was happy to use to her advantage.

They were deeply engaged in these radio wars when the first impact shook the car, wrenching them violently toward the windshield. Alastair's head jerked around just in time to see the dark blue SUV moving around them to get on the inside lane. "Holy shit!"

Angie's eyes registered the SUV and then took inventory of the highway. There was no one within a couple of miles of them. The thugs had chosen their time of attack well. "They're gonna hit us again!" She screamed.

Alastair hit the gas hard and they surged forward, but the underpowered rental had no chance at all against the powerful SUV the thugs were driving. They pulled ahead for a couple of seconds but quickly lost their lead.

As soon as the SUV came alongside it swerved toward them. Alastair jerked the wheel toward the shoulder and managed to avoid the worst of the hit. The SUV's oversized rearview mirror scraped the driver's side window and Alastair jerked his head back instinctively.

As the big car swerved back for another try, Alastair slammed his foot on the brake pedal and then immediately swerved the car into the inside lane, ending up behind them. Then he accelerated and screamed, "Brace yourself!"

They slammed into the back of the SUV and then dropped back. Alastair swung the wheel and pulled off the highway as the SUV hit the stone shoulder and wobbled, trying to regain control.

They flew up the off ramp and Alastair took a right turn at the top, heading away from the highway so they could get lost in the maze of quiet side streets.

Angie took a deep breath and sat back, relaxing a bit as Alastair slowed down and they put distance between them and the thugs. "Holy crap! Where'd you learn to drive like that?"

He turned to her and smiled, clearly invigorated by the encounter. "My brother Warwicke's a race car driver."

Angie's eyes grew round, "Warwicke Honeybun is your brother!"

Alastair groaned. "Oh here we go."

"Oh my god! You have to introduce me!"

He shook his head and smiled. "And I've officially joined the ranks of yesterday's garbage."

Angie laughed shakily. "Not quite, you still have a use you know. I can use you to get to Warwicke."

Alastair gave a bark of laughter and turned into a large parking lot. Angie looked up and realized they were at the mall. "You're stopping! Are you sure it's safe?" She cleared her throat, realizing her voice had attained a slightly shrill tenor. Her hands clenched the dash and her gaze swung wildly as they drove more deeply into the parking lot and Alastair found a parking spot.

"This is the best place I can think of to get lost. And..." He turned an apologetic look in her direction, "I'm afraid you'll have to buy the stuff you need. Obviously the thugs haven't given up on us and the first place they'll look is our homes. It's not safe to go there."

She sighed, thinking of all the little things she would have to do without. But she nodded, knowing he was right. "That's better than nothing."

They shopped companionably for an hour. Once Angie's heart rate returned to normal, she was pleasantly surprised by Alastair's ability to speak the native language of shopping

and his exquisite taste in clothes. He was right, his shopping skills were definitely a mark in his favor.

They worked their way toward the food court to get a snack. Sitting down at a small, round table in the middle of hundreds of busily moving people they were relaxed as they bit into their soft pretzels. Alastair reached across the table and flicked a large grain of salt off Angie's chin. "You really looked good in those black jeans."

She smiled around a bite of pretzel, flushing warmly. "Thanks." She mumbled when her mouth was empty again. "I like that sweater you got too. It looks good with your eyes."

They grinned at each other, feeling a little bit silly but not entirely uncomfortable. Alastair couldn't help feeling that, had he met the woman across from him under different, less stressful conditions, he would have liked her. Even if she hadn't saved his life and jumped right into the frying pan with him.

They watched the people around them as they ate, occasionally smiling over something and making comments about some unsuspecting shopper in the mall.

Angie enjoyed the way his dimples showed when he chewed and the way the muscles in his neck flexed as he drank his cola. She pretty much just liked everything about the way he looked and she couldn't seem to drag her eyes away from him. She tried not to get caught staring at him, but occasionally his blue gaze would swing her way unexpectedly and, when it did, it would be followed by a slow, knowing smile that made her all warm and tingly.

All in all they were feeling pretty good about things when Alastair's always active mind swung back to the encounter in the car and he gave a start, saying, "I wonder how they found us?"

Angie, who had been watching a young mother try to get a screaming toddler under control, turned to him and felt the blood drain from her face. "I ... I don't know. Do you think they followed us from Brita's?"

Alastair shook his head. "They couldn't possibly know we're staying with her. Unless they know Percy. They haven't been dating all that long and Percy doesn't talk about his love life much."

Angie frowned and stared at her empty pretzel wrapper, her mind churning through the possibilities. "It doesn't seem likely that they just happened to see us on the road."

"No, not likely."

"Someone on either Percy's or Brita's staffs must have told them where we were," Angie said, her heart pounding in her chest, "It's the only explanation."

Alastair avoided her eyes, his blue gaze suddenly intent on the people around them in the mall. He sighed, running a hand down his face. "That's a truly ugly thought."

They sat in silence for a few moments, each reluctant to take the next step in that thought process. Finally Angie said. "We can't go back to Brita's."

His gaze swung to her and he stared, looking for a moment as if he wanted to argue. But in the end he nodded, pulling out his cell phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Cab company. They know what the car looks like now. We need to leave it behind."

Angie sighed, feeling tears threaten. They were on the run again ... with no idea where they would go next. A sudden thought brought the tears forward. She turned to Alastair as he pushed the disconnect button on his phone. "Jaws."

He frowned. "He'll be okay with Brita. It's probably safer for him there anyway." But he didn't look any happier about it than she did.

Angie swiped at her wet cheeks and nodded. She was gonna miss the little guy.

Alastair stood up and held out a hand for Angie to take. She grabbed her bags off the extra chair and took the offered hand. He pulled her close and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Angie laid her head on his shoulder and they made their way to the entrance where Alastair had told the cab to meet them.

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He knocked twice on the heavy Brazilian cherry door and entered the huge office. The man known as Mr. Bigg sat behind an island of a desk and pecked on his laptop. He didn't look up as he told his visitor to take a seat.

He dropped into the buttery leather chair and crossed his legs at the knees, waiting patiently.

Mr. Bigg finally looked up and smiled at the younger man. "Davies, any luck finding your girlfriend?"

Brian Davies shook his head, the fine brown strands swinging away from his head before settling right back into place. "I was hoping you could help, sir."

Bigg laughed. "Oh really? And why is that, Davies?"

The younger man uncrossed his legs and sat forward, deep set hazel eyes narrowing on a silent plea. "I'm really worried about her, Mr. Bigg. I'm afraid her asshole of a father won't pay the ransom and they'll kill her."

Bigg stared hard at the younger man for a long moment and then gave a slight nod. He stood up from behind the huge desk and moved toward the long wall on the door side of the room. He reached small, well manicured hands toward the crystal decanter he kept on the glossy, granite counter. He turned toward the younger man with a matching crystal tumbler in his hand, raising a blond, shaggy eyebrow in silent question.

Davies shook his head.

Bigg poured a couple of fingers of the ridiculously expensive blended scotch whiskey he favored. Davies was pretty sure the Chivas Regal Royal Salute was about 50 years old and cost in the area of \$10,000. The stuff was like drinking diamonds. It gave him gas.

Bigg sauntered over to a wall sized window that overlooked the city below. "Any ideas who might have taken her?" He turned to his executive assistant. "Or why?"

Brian Davies had a real good idea who took her ... and why ... but he simply shrugged. I'm sure it has something to do with one of her father's cases."

Bigg nodded, his small face barely visible behind the expensive tumbler. "I'll ask Julio to look into it."

Davies nodded, knowing the head of "security" had friends in low places who might be able to find out where Debra had been taken. "Thank you, sir."

Bigg smiled. "I'm happy to help, son. I need you focused on your job here. Not worrying about this troublesome young woman."

Davies nodded, stood up, and left, biting his tongue. Big time.

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Angie chewed a fingernail as Alastair punched Percy's number into his cell phone. Percy answered on the second ring. "Where the hell are you guys? Brita just called me and said you were missing from her house."

Alastair glanced at Angie. "Yeah, well, we got antsy and decided to go pick up some stuff for Angie."

Percy swore. "Well get your asses back to Brita's before she pops a vein."

Angie grimaced, Percy was nearly screaming into the phone so she could clearly hear him. Alastair made a cross

eyed face at her and she giggled. "I'm afraid that won't be happening, bro. Apparently somebody you or Brita talked to about us told the bad guys where we were. They were waiting for us when we hit the highway and tried to run us off the road."

"Shit!"

"We agree wholeheartedly with that assessment."

"This is not good, Stair, I need to think. Who the hell could have told them? Let me talk to Brit and call you back. Where are you?"

Alastair glanced at Angie and she shrugged. "We're driving around in a cab, not sure where to go next. We'll stay here until we hear back from you."

Percy sighed audibly, "Okay, hang in there. I'll get back to you as fast as I can." He hung up and Alastair snapped the cell closed. "I'm sure you heard that?"

Angie nodded, her eyes constantly sliding around the streets on every side of the cab as it drove aimlessly through Indianapolis, looking for the dark colored SUV. She glanced again at the cabbie, he had ear buds stuffed into his ears and appeared to be rocking down to something really loud since they could hear booming and twanging from the ear buds all the way in the back seat.

"Do you think they're still looking for us?"

Alastair briefly considered lying to her to make her feel better. Her pretty face was nearly white and she looked so scared. But then he realized he couldn't lie to her, even if it made her feel better for the moment. "Yeah. I think they probably are still looking for us."

She nodded as if she'd known he would say that and hunched more deeply into the seat. She was just about below fingernail level on that one finger and it looked like she'd soon be gnawing on flesh, like an animal in a trap, maiming herself out of fear and a need to escape.

He grabbed the finger she was gnawing on and pulled it out of her mouth. Then did something that felt natural to him but surprised the hell out of both of them. He turned the hand over and kissed the back of it. Her overlarge green eyes widened.

"It will be okay, Angie. Percy and Brita will think of something. I promise."

She swallowed hard and then nodded, pushing tears from her cheeks. "I know, I'm just getting tired of running, that's all."

H nodded and opened his mouth to give her further assurances but his cell phone rang. He looked at the number. "Percy," he told her. "Hey bro."

"Stair, give the cabbie this address..." He rattled off an address, which Alastair repeated to the cab driver, after tapping him on the shoulder to get his attention. When Alastair told his brother they were heading toward the address he'd provided, Percy explained, "You're going to a safe house. Brita pulled some serious strings to keep it to a minimum number of people who have access to the address where you'll be staying. You'll be safe there."

Alastair sighed, "That's great news, Perc. Will you and Brita meet us there?"

"No. We don't want to risk anyone following us to you. There will be another detective across the street. He'll keep an eye on the house and warn you and us if anybody shows up who shouldn't be there. You'll never lay eyes on him but you can be sure he'll keep a close eye on the place. The house has a state of the art alarm system and the best locks money can buy. The code is SOTER ... S O T E R."

Alastair screwed up his face, "Soter, what the hell is that?"

Percy laughed, "I see you neglected your classical studies, bro. Soter is the god of safety and salvation in Greek mythology."

"Oh yeah, *that* Soter." Alastair grinned at Angie.

"Yeah, that guy. Anyway, Brit and I will see you in a few days. You'll need to find some way to occupy yourselves until then." Percy's voice held a smile.

Alastair chuckled. "You're thinking like Monopoly and charades right?"

Percy snorted, "You read my mind. The key for the house will be under the mat on the front porch."

"That's original."

"What can I tell you? Hey..."

"Yeah?"

"Take care of yourself, huh? No more being reckless."

Alastair saluted. "Sir, yes sir!"

"I'm not Clovis, bro. But for good measure why don't you drop and do twenty?"

Alastair laughed and said goodbye to his brother.

Angie, who'd had no trouble hearing Percy's end of the conversation, asked, "Clovis?"

Alastair swung his gaze to her, a smile in his sexy blue eyes, "Third oldest brother, drill instructor, Marines."

Angie made an oh with her mouth and nodded, then favored him with a mischievous grin. "With a name like Clovis Honeybun, I'll bet he's kicked a few Privates over the years huh? Pun intended."

Alastair just shook his head. "You have no idea."

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Chapter Seven

The house was tiny, white, and non-descript in every way. The yard was bare to the point of tacky, with patchy green grass that stood up in tufts here and there like somebody had forgotten to mow for a few weeks ... or years.

Alastair easily found the key under a ratty old doormat that said, "Go away, I have a gun."

"Subtle." Angie said.

Dust bunnies attacked them as they entered the front door and then danced around their feet in the breeze from outside. Angie sneezed. "Well, I guess I know what we'll be doing first." She said with a wry smile.

"It's not really like the movies is it? Where the house is clean and fully stocked and filled with competent looking guys with big guns?"

Angie grimaced, "Who nearly always get killed almost immediately because somehow the bad guys infiltrate the police department and find out where the good guys are holed up?"

Alastair nodded, "There is that. So ... what? You're thinking since the house is dirty and unkempt and there are no guys with big guns we should be safe?"

"That's what I'm thinkin' yeah."

They shared a smile. Walking through the tiny house they quickly got acclimated. There were only four rooms, five if you counted the tiny bathroom. Two bedrooms, a living room with a small, black and white TV, and a very small kitchen

tucked into the very back of the house. The kitchen window had bars over it and the back door was solid metal, no window. "Stainless steel, very contemporary, with a warm patina of high security lock up about it." Angie murmured.

Alastair, deciding humor was the best way to deal with the depressing little house, nodded and cocked his head, placing his hand on his chin as if considering decorating possibilities. "Yes, generally we see the stainless steel on the appliances rather than the exterior door, but I'm kind of partial to the puke green of the appliances myself and wouldn't change them for anything."

Angie cocked her head to mimic him and said, "Puke is not quite right, I think this shade is more snot or booger. With a tinge of Malaria mucus thrown in."

Alastair laughed and walked over to the phone on the wall. "Holy shit! It has a dial."

Angie was busy opening cupboards and didn't look at him. "Well I would hope it's working! It wouldn't do us much good otherwise."

"No, I mean it has an actual dial on the front of it." He picked up the receiver, puke green to match the appliances, and put it to his ear. "Shit! A dial but no dial tone. Perfect."

Alastair hung up the phone and turned toward the front door. "I'd better lock up and set the alarm, just in case."

Angie leaned against the scarred kitchen counter. Tears filled her eyes as a sudden feeling of homesickness swamped her. She hadn't spoken to her sister for days and she'd had to abandon her coffee shoppe, which had been her life up until a few days earlier when the nightmare started. And now she

had to stay in the grungy little pit of a house for days with nothing to do. She heard Alistair returning and quickly turned toward the refrigerator, swiping at her wet cheeks guiltily.

"We're all locked up." He came up behind her and looked over her shoulder as she peered into the refrigerator, more for a way to hide her red eyes than with any interest in its contents.

"Score!" Alastair reached past her and grabbed two bottles of beer. "We have beer, and I have a cell phone. We can call for pizza. The day is looking up." When she just nodded, not trusting herself to speak, he stood silently behind her for a moment. She prayed he'd move away so she could get herself pulled together before turning around.

But instead he moved closer.

When he suddenly slid his arms around her waist Angie stiffened at the unexpected contact. However, she quickly realized that, although the contact was unexpected, it certainly wasn't unwelcome. In fact it felt pretty damn good. She leaned back and allowed him to cradle her for a moment, hot tears rolling down her cheeks.

Alastair leaned his head against the top of hers and sighed. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel bad. It wasn't his fault either. He'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. "I'm okay, I just get hit with these feelings every once in a while. I've been working through them."

He nuzzled at her neck, just below her ear. "You're pretty amazing you know that?"

And here she'd been feeling pretty stupid and weak. She shook her head again, afraid to speak for fear she'd break down into tears.

His lips gently worked the sensitive flesh of her neck, leaving behind warmth and a sense of loss when they moved on. The tears stopped as her body kicked into a new emotion and she found herself holding her breath, afraid that he'd stop. She closed her eyes and let herself relax completely against him, sighing.

His lips worked their way up to her ear and she shivered as the warmth of his breath made a wisp of hair flutter against her cheek. Somewhere low on her body she started to clench and warm. Her mind let go of the fear and grabbed hold of the new, more welcome sensations of lust. Which was why when he whispered into her ear, his voice husky with emotion, she jumped and her eyes flew open.

"Just pepperoni or extra deep meat lover's?"

Angie laughed and Alastair nipped gently at her ear lobe before letting go of her to step away.

She tried to ignore the way her body mourned the loss of him as he punched a single number into his cell phone.

"You have it on speed dial?"

He shrugged, "Hey, come on, I'm a single guy. Where do you think those clichés come from?"

Angie laughed again and shook her head. Suddenly the next few days seemed filled with possibility rather than just boredom and fear. "Thin crust, green pepper and onion."

He made a face, "Bleurg! That's a girl pizza."

She shrugged and grinned at him.

Shaking his head he murmured, "I'll order two pizzas then, a real one and one without testosterone."

Angie continued to grin, "Salad too."

Alastair looked as if somebody had stepped on his privates. But he ordered salad along with the two pizzas. For one.

They ate on plain white paper plates and Angie used the plastic fork that came with the pizza for her salad. She forced a couple of bites of the salad into Alastair's mouth using the threat of his cold worsening if he didn't provide his frail body with enough nutrients.

Other than murmuring something about "showing *her* frail" he chewed the warm, tasteless salad and swallowed it with a grimace. "Real men don't eat salad."

She grinned at him and stabbed at the salad's only cherry tomato. It took a few jabs with the dull tines of the plastic fork to capture the small, red thing but once she had she offered it to Alastair.

He shook his head. "I'm full."

She laughed. "You should be, you ate an entire large pizza all by yourself."

He grinned, "I think I'm getting my appetite back."

Angie stood up and threw the leftover salad and the used plates into a scarred, white trash can under the sink. It had a bag in it that looked older than Angie.

Once they'd eaten they stood looking around, trying to figure out what to do next. They finally decided they'd give the tiny, ancient television a shot. Finding a black and white

movie on one of only three channels the little TV could capture, they settled back onto the couch.

Alastair's arm felt perfectly natural around her shoulders and she soon found herself snuggling in, her head on his shoulder. They watched in silence for a while, each of them thinking about things other than the scratchy, dated movie on the little TV.

Angie inhaled the sexy smell of him that she was coming to recognize as Alastair's own, personal scent and smiled, feeling peaceful and not so peaceful at the same time. His hand on her arm started caressing, sliding the length of her arm and leaving behind a warm trail of tingly skin with each pass.

Angie had an almost irresistible urge to lift her head and offer him a kiss. She didn't do it because she wasn't sure he was really interested in taking their relationship in that direction. Although he *had* initiated a few romantic-type moves, he certainly hadn't pressed the issue. And he'd definitely had the opportunity.

More than once.

Of course they *were* running for their lives. She guessed some men wouldn't be able to think about romance under that kind of duress. But she'd never met one of them. The men she'd met and dated would have been able to think about "romance" with their heads nearly severed from their bodies.

Alastair took a deep breath, pulling the citrus sweet smell of her shampoo into his nose and savoring it like a fine Cabernet. He was becoming incredibly addicted to his curvy

little white knight and it was all he could do to keep from throwing her back on the couch and having his way with her. But she was an emotional wreck and he wasn't at all sure she would be up for it. Even if she *was* interested in him ... and he wasn't at all sure that she was. She certainly hadn't done anything to show she was interested.

And she'd had lots of opportunities.

Sighing, he laid his head on top of hers and breathed in the incredible, sweet smell of sexy woman, enjoying the way she'd allowed herself to mold against his side on the over-soft, musty smelling couch. Before he knew what he was doing his lips touched her hair.

He kissed the soft, fragrant strands and closed his eyes.

She moved and his eyes shot open, finding her beautiful hazel gaze just inches from his own. They stared at each other across the short distance for a moment and then, in unspoken agreement, moved to cut the distance between their hungry lips.

The kiss started out soft and sweet, but quickly grew in intensity as they poured every emotion shared over the last several, stress filled days into it. Angie moaned against his mouth and her hands came up to run through the soft red bristles of his hair.

Alastair reached around her and grabbed her hips, pulling her across his lap with a hungry moan. They deepened the kiss until they were nearly panting from the intensity. Alastair's lips left hers and traveled down her chin, her neck, and into the sweet smelling valley above the low neckline of her shirt. His tongue came out to lap gently between her

breasts and then rose, leaving a hot, wet trail from her breasts to her ear, where he nibbled gently on a tiny lobe.

Angie gasped as his hand slid up a jeans clad thigh and rested in the juncture between her soft thighs. She felt hot through the thick, unyielding fabric.

He was sliding a warm, insistent hand under her t-shirt when the first crash sounded outside the picture window behind where they sat. They jolted upright and Angie cried out.

They dove to the floor in front of the couch. The carpet under their faces as they huddled together between the couch and the scarred wooden coffee table was dusty smelling and threadbare, rough against his face.

The second crash sounded a little closer and a muffled thumping against the door quickly followed.

Angie grabbed his hand. "What should we do?" She whispered, her eyes raw pools of terror in the dim light.

He squeezed her hand, nuzzling against her hair as he tried to think.

His phone. Percy had given him numbers to call in an emergency.

Alastair arched against the couch behind them to pull his body straight and then dug in the tight pocket of his jeans until he managed to extract his cell phone. He punched a single number and a strange, high pitched male voice answered on the second ring.

"Yeah."

"It's Alastair Honeybun, across the street?"

"What's wrong?" The man's voice jerked and Alastair thought it sounded like he was on the move.

"There's a lot of crashing and thumping outside the door. It sounds like someone's trying to get into the house."

"I'll be right there. Stay in and stay down."

The phone disconnected in Alastair's ear and he dropped it under the coffee table, within reach if he needed it. "The man across the street is on his way."

Angie nodded, burrowing more closely into Alastair's body and shivering violently. "The first lamb to the slaughter." She murmured.

Alastair chuckled. "You watch too much TV."

Angie just continued to shiver.

Alastair reached over to shut off the TV so they could hear what was going on outside. Silence slid over the small house as they waited for their guard to check out the grounds. Rather than calming them, the dense silence stretched their nerves to the breaking point. So that, when a pounding suddenly sounded on the front door Angie screamed and they jumped to their feet.

The voice from the phone emerged through the door. "It's Philips, from across the street. Everything's clear out here."

Alastair peeked out the nearest window, seeing the dark bulk of a man standing on the rusty front stoop. "Are you sure?"

The man turned toward Alastair's voice and lifted a huge hand in greeting. "It was probably just a raccoon. The trash cans have been knocked over. You don't need to come out."

Just leave the place locked up tight and call me if you hear anything else."

Angie squeezed up next to Alastair at the window and peered at the dark shape outside.

"Okay, thank you for coming over so fast." Alastair said.

The bulky shape on the stoop shrugged. "It's my job. Have a good one." He turned away and headed back across the street, swiveling his head constantly to assess his surroundings.

Angie stepped back away from the window. Suddenly feeling shy. She looked at Alastair's face and saw he was having similar feelings. She knew they'd never be able to recapture the mood so she gave him a sad smile and said, "I'm really tired. I guess I'll just go to bed."

Alastair frowned slightly but nodded. "I'm a little tired too. Sleep tight okay?"

Angie reached up and touched his cheek with a finger. He surprised her by grabbing her hand and placing a soft kiss in the center of her palm. "Night."

She reluctantly took her hand back and headed for the tiny bedroom in the back of the house, which she'd claimed earlier as hers. Suddenly realizing she was tired, probably as the result of the roller coaster ride of emotions she'd experienced since arriving at the safe house, she prepared for bed and slid under the covers gratefully.

She really didn't expect to sleep very well but the events of the previous several days seemed to have caught up with her and she dropped quickly and heavily into sleep.

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Angie awoke to the smell of bacon and eggs. She smiled, wondering where Alastair had managed to scrounge up real food. Sitting up with a yawn, she scented the air for coffee and found it. It smelled suspiciously like the Hazelnut Vanilla blend she used in the shoppe. Her mouth watered at the thought of a real breakfast and she threw the covers back happily.

Realizing that her day had been considerably enhanced just by the idea of breakfast she chuckled. Nothing like facing death on a daily basis to create a sense of joy in the simple pleasures of life.

She headed down the short hallway toward the kitchen and walked through the kitchen door with a broad smile.

The smile died on her lips.

She jerked to a stop and screamed.

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Brita knocked on the heavy, mahogany front door to the Burns residence and looked around at the immaculate

grounds and expensive landscaping in the exclusive neighborhood. Obviously the kidnappers had struck the mother lode if money was their ultimate objective. DA Burns and his family were doing very well for themselves.

But for some reason Brita didn't think this was about money. She wasn't sure exactly why she felt that way, it was just instinct. And she'd learned long ago to honor her instincts. They were one of the things that made her a good cop.

She heard precise, rapid footsteps on the other side of the door and turned around, anxious to meet the woman who would marry DA Burns. She wasn't expecting the woman who answered the door.

She was young. Very young. So young that Brita asked her, with a question in her voice, "Mrs. Burns?"

The woman nodded and smiled. "Yes. Can I help you with something?"

Brita pulled out her badge and held it up for the woman to see. "Can I speak with you for a moment please?"

The smile faded quickly and an appropriately serious expression settled across her rather plain face. "This is about Debra isn't it? Oh my god! She hasn't been killed has she?"

Brita shook her head. "We haven't found Miss Burns yet. I was hoping maybe you could give me some information to help."

The woman nodded and stepped back, allowing Brita to step into a huge foyer with the expected marble on the floors and a sweeping staircase at the back and off to one side.

"I was just making some tea. Would you like some?"

Brita smiled. "That sounds wonderful."

As Brita followed the tall, excessively slim woman toward the back of the huge house she couldn't help wondering at the matchup between her and her gruff, bad tempered, much older husband. She was rarely surprised by people, but the woman she was about to interview was nothing like she had expected. She was young and intelligent, and wasn't especially attractive. Brita was deeply surprised that DA Burns, a man who obviously had a low opinion of women and a huge ego, would be drawn to a strong, intelligent woman who wasn't exactly arm bling.

What she was, Brita quickly discovered, was highly intelligent and brutally direct. Two characteristics which Brita genuinely appreciated, especially in someone she was attempting to interview. Gentle questioning gained Brita the knowledge that Susan Burns had been a junior partner in one of the firms where Burns had been partner before getting into politics. He had apparently been drawn to her brains and honesty.

Go figure.

Brita accepted the tea, contained within a delicate cup of bone china, and waited for Susan Burns to sit down across from her. Then she pulled out her PDA and prepared to jot down the cryptic notes that helped her track a case. "Mrs. Burns, do you have any idea why your stepdaughter was kidnapped?"

The woman looked momentarily surprised. "Why money of course. As you can see Gregg and I do very well," She smiled

but Brita heard the slight undertone of bitterness in the woman's voice.

Brita immediately tagged her as someone who'd had high ideals about saving the world and raising up all the downtrodden when she'd joined the law firm, and probably now felt as if she'd sold out.

Fascinating.

Brita nodded, "That would seem the obvious reason of course. But I need to look at all the angles."

Susan Burns nodded, sipping her tea. "Of course."

Brita tried another tack. "Had Miss Burns been acting strangely lately? Had she changed her habits? Were there any new people in her life?"

Susan Burns stared at the cup of tea on the table in front of her for a few beats and then shook her head, not meeting Brita's eyes. "Debra has not been easy to live with, Detective Muldane. She and her father didn't ... don't..." sharp hazel eyes swung to Brita's face a bit guiltily, "they don't get along very well."

Brita nodded, making a mental note of the slip. "Had that changed in recent weeks?"

She shook her boy-short, curly brown hair. "It hadn't improved. If anything it might have worsened a bit."

Brita cocked her head. "Why's that?"

Susan Burns took a sip of her tea and gave Brita a strained smile. "She'd begun seeing someone Gregg didn't like. A young man who works for the infamous Mr. Bigg. The boyfriend's name is Brian Davies."

Brita nodded, she jotted the name in her PDA even though she already knew about Mr. Davies. "And her father asked her to stop seeing him?"

Susan Burns snorted. "Gregg doesn't ask, Detective Muldane, he demands." Then realizing the bitter sound of that statement she smiled as if to soften it. "My husband can be difficult too, I'm afraid, though he means well. He and Debra are just too much alike, they fight like cats and dogs."

"Do you think it's possible that this young man could be behind her kidnapping?"

Susan Burns gave a little start, blinking quickly, as if the thought hadn't occurred to her before that moment. "I suppose it's possible. He does work for a known criminal organization so his character is definitely in question." She thought for a moment, one long finger tapping at the edge of her tea cup. Then she looked up at Brita. "To tell you the truth, Detective Muldane, I'd be more inclined to believe Debra'd cooked up this kidnapping herself."

Brita's eyes widened. This was something she certainly hadn't expected. "Do you really believe she would be capable of that?"

Susan Burns gave a sad smile. "I'm afraid I do. If it meant making her father miserable."

Brita thought about this. She jotted "fake kidnapping" in her PDA, with several question marks behind it. That would certainly explain why the DA didn't seem concerned. Going with this train of thought she cocked her head at Susan Burns in practiced sympathy. "How is your husband holding up, Mrs.

Burns? It must be very difficult for him, having his only child kidnapped."

The woman stared at her tea for a long time, the sharp hazel eyes hidden behind a thick arc of light brown lashes, probably Susan Burns' most attractive feature. Then she shrugged. "He's coping. He's a very strong man."

A very unsatisfactory response.

"How about you?"

Amazingly, Susan Burns smiled. "Honestly? I'm worried about Debra, of course, but she's a really tough cookie. The kidnappers are probably more worthy of our sympathy." She chuckled. But then the smile slid from her face and the hazel eyes found Brita's. They were filled with the brutal honesty Brita had expected from the woman. "It's a relief not having the constant bickering and screaming." Then she shrugged, like she knew the statement made her sound cold and a little selfish, but she was unable or unwilling to avoid the admission.

Brita respected her for that at least.

As she left, she couldn't help wondering if the girl's real mother would support the new Mrs. Burns' read on young Miss Burns. It should be an interesting interview to say the least.

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Chapter Eight

A huge man stood across the kitchen, a knife in his hand. Angie looked frantically for something she could use as a weapon against the intruder. He held up his empty hand and she jumped, thinking he meant to grab her. In a blind panic, she reached for one of the lightweight kitchen chairs at the table and lifted it over her head, fully intending to fling it across the room and make a run for it.

The chair came out of her hands as she swung it over her head. She stopped screaming and looked up in surprise. The chair was dangling over her head, a large hand holding it there.

Alastair smiled at the man across the room. "Hey bro."

The big man with the knife smiled back. "It's been a while since I had to fend off a hysterical female wielding a chair." He set the knife down on the counter.

That was when Angie's nose registered the smell of cooking peppers and onions, overlaid by the sweet smell of cinnamon. Her face reddened. The man with the knife, whom she now realized had to be Alastair's brother, given the reddish-blond hair and deep resemblance, grinned at her. "I come in peace. In fact, I came to make breakfast. South of the border omelet."

Alastair set the chair back under the table and crossed the room, taking the big man into a manly type hug, with lots of back slapping. "We were just talking about you."

The big blond man turned to Angie. "Good things I hope." He narrowed light blue-grey eyes at Angie. She quickly made note of the excessive musculature, the military buzz, and the controlled way he held himself and made a good guess.

"Clovis?"

He smiled, "Ma'am, yes ma'am."

She nodded and dropped into the chair in front of her, her hands still shaking. "Sorry. I didn't know you were coming. You surprised me."

He shook his head, clapping Alastair on the shoulder. "Never apologize for taking decisive action, little lady. I'm glad to see Stair's in good hands."

Alastair plucked a sizzling chunk of bacon from the frying pan. "Ha, ha. What are you doing here anyway?"

Clovis shrugged and turned back to his cooking. Angie noticed he was a couple of inches shorter than Alistair, and probably a couple of inches wider. It was all muscle. "Percy thought you might need some rations. I signed up for breakfast."

Alastair opened the refrigerator and made a happy noise when he spotted three icy glasses of orange juice. He handed one to Angie and sipped his gratefully. Sitting down next to her at the table he grinned. "Clovis makes the best breakfast I've ever eaten."

Angie couldn't help smiling, "Better than yours?" She didn't believe it.

Alastair didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely. After all, his name's weirder than mine and he doesn't shop. He's got further to go with the ladies."

Angie laughed.

Clovis turned and gave his brother his best drill instructor look. "Some of us have more manly attributes to attract women. We don't count on girly things like shopping and cooking."

Alastair raised an eyebrow meaningfully. Clovis flung out a big, square hand. "Breakfast doesn't count. That's a manly meal."

Angie grinned. She decided she liked Clovis Honeybun. Suddenly she was anxious to meet all the Honeybun boys. They were certainly easy on the eyes and very entertaining from what she'd seen so far.

Clovis efficiently compiled his south of the border omelets, slid a hefty portion of sweet onion laced hash browns onto each plate, and then placed three plates on the table. He went over to the oven and reached inside to pull out something else before sitting down with them. Angie decided the mound of yummy looking stuff on the plate was probably the source of the wonderful cinnamon smell she'd noticed.

Clovis placed a warm plate full of home-made cinnamon rolls in the middle of the table.

"Oh hell no." Alastair said with a wide smile. Then he helped himself to three of them.

Angie eagerly slid a hot cinnamon roll onto her plate and cut off a small piece, blowing on it to cool it before dropping it into her mouth. The tender, sweet dough melted against her tongue like butter. Cinnamon burst happily against her palate, accompanied by just the right amount of sweetness from the sugar. She closed her eyes and moaned. "Ohmygod! This is

the best thing I've ever tasted." She opened her eyes and smiled at Clovis. "Marry me!"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Forward woman. I'd have to have sex with you first to make sure I like you."

Angie nodded agreeably. "As soon as I'm done eating."

Alastair scowled. "Woman, thy name is fickle."

Angie just shrugged and pushed another bite of the roll into her mouth.

The omelets were almost as good as the rolls. Angie and Alastair shoved food into their mouths like starving people. When both of their plates were empty Clovis stood up and cleared the table.

He rinsed them and stacked them in the sink and then turned back to his brother. "So what's this mess you've gotten yourself into, Stair?"

Alastair leaned back in his chair and belched softly, throwing Angie an apologetic look before turning back to Clovis. "Apparently I saw the DA's daughter getting kidnapped and now the kidnappers want me dead because I can identify them."

Clovis whistled. "Tough kidnappers."

Alastair nodded, "Yeah, leave it to me to bump up against some real assholes."

Clovis looked at Angie, "Did you see her too?"

Angie shook her head.

Alastair flung an arm around her shoulders and grinned at her. "No, she saved my life. She overheard the kidnappers talking about killing me to keep me quiet and she rushed to my house to warn me."

"Unfortunately I wasn't fast enough. They came to the house before I could convince Mr. Stubborn here that he needed to go to the police."

Clovis stood with his arms crossed, glaring at his brother. "You endangered the future mother of my children by being stupid, bro?"

Angie grinned, "We haven't even had sex yet."

Clovis shrugged, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips. "Yeah, but Alastair wants you so that's good enough for me. What's his is mine." He gave Alastair a crooked grin. "Right, Stair."

Alastair scowled at his brother. "Bite me."

"Hey, show some respect for your elders."

Alastair snorted. "Nine months. Three months out of the year we're the same damn age."

Angie looked from one to the other of the brothers. "You guys are only nine months apart?"

They nodded and Alastair snorted. "You'd never know it the way he's always lorded it over me."

Clovis nodded sagely. "It's only nine months in actual time but in mental years I got at least a decade on him."

Angie fought back a grin and shrugged when Alastair scowled at her. "Apparently your mother believed that old wives tale about not being able to get pregnant when you're breast feeding."

The two men laughed, nodding. "Apparently." Clovis' blue-grey gaze swept the small, dingy kitchen. "This place is depressing. I hope Brita knows what she's doing."

Alastair nodded. "Me too. We don't even have decent TV here."

Angie stared at her hands, remembering their attempt at watching TV the previous evening. It hadn't turned out half bad. She snuck a look at Alastair and he was grinning. Apparently he agreed.

"So what are Percy and Brita doing to get you out of this mess?"

Alastair shrugged. "They're trying to find the DA's daughter. Brita thinks if they can find her the kidnappers won't have any reason to come after us anymore."

Clovis frowned. "Do we know why she was kidnapped?"

Alastair frowned. "I assumed it was money."

"Have they asked for money yet?"

Angie and Alastair glanced at each other. "I don't think so." Angie said.

Clovis shook his head. "Very strange." Then he pushed himself away from the counter and pulled a cell phone from his pocket. He punched in a number.

"I gotta get going. I'll see if somebody can get you guys some entertainment in this dump." The person on the other end of his call picked up and he said, "I'm ready to leave. I'll go out the back." He nodded once and flicked the phone shut.

He shook Alastair's hand and gave Angie a hug and then let himself out the back door, turning back one last time before he left, "You two take care of yourselves. Call me if you need anything, Stair, you hear?"

Alastair saluted smartly, "Sir, yes Sir!"

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Selma Burns, the DA's first wife as well as Debra Burns' mother, lived on the top floor of Indianapolis' most exclusive condominium high rise. Brita showed her badge to the red coated door man and waited while he announced her visit to the wealthy socialite. She was almost surprised when the man gave her the okay to go up.

She was directed to an elevator that only went to one floor. The Penthouse apartment.

The elevator ascended the building's fifteen floors silently and stopped with barely a jolt. The mirrored doors slid open and left her staring at a spacious entrance area. It felt like a small, private park, dominated by the soft, rushing sound of water that fell from a twelve foot high waterfall on the outside wall. The area was filled with the scent of flowers and the dense greenery, including some very large trees, that filled most of the open space. A gently curving walkway of stone led to a heavy, wooden door that displayed a gold plated number fifteen hundred and one.

Brita shook her head at the opulence. She pressed the door chime and waited, glancing at the glass ceiling above her head, where the late afternoon sun was just clearing the building to the West of Mrs. Burns' condominium building, leaving the beginnings of shadow on Mrs. Burns own private

park. Too bad the woman wasn't wealthy enough to keep the shade away from her pretty entranceway.

The door opened and she was looking at a middle aged woman in a maid's uniform.

Brita turned her smile to the woman and said, "Hello. I'm Detective Brita Muldane. I'm here to speak to Mrs. Burns."

The woman nodded and stepped back, allowing Brita to precede her into an enormous foyer with black marble floors and fourteen foot high walls covered in grass wallpaper. The foyer was empty except for a glossy, round table in a light colored wood. The table held a huge vase of white roses and had a crystal chandelier hanging directly over it. The grassy walls were filled with expensive looking paintings, each one of which Brita was pretty sure would fetch more than her yearly salary.

"Follow me please."

Brita followed the woman through the foyer and into a much smaller room made up to look like an English library, complete with walls painted a dark green and heavy furniture of deep cherry or mahogany. A large fireplace dominated one wall and, sitting before it, an elegant older woman turned an unlined countenance as Brita entered the room.

She didn't stand but simply motioned toward a matching tufted leather arm chair in front of the fire. "Detective Muldane. I'm so glad you've finally gotten around to me. Have you found my poor little girl yet?"

Okay, thought Brita, so that's how it's gonna be. She sat down and looked at the woman in the other chair. "Mrs. Burns. Thank you for seeing me today. I am working very

hard to find your daughter, Ma'am. Unfortunately we don't have much to go on. D.A. Burns hasn't even received a ransom note yet."

The woman's perfectly made up face opened in surprise. "Why no, of course he hasn't, Detective. The note was sent to me."

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The girl rolled her eyes at the thug standing over her with the paper bag. He bristled. "You eider eat dis food or starve to death. See if I care eider way," threatened Louie.

She smiled. "I'd like to be buried in my skinny jeans please. I haven't been able to wear them for six months. It's almost worth dying over."

Louie scowled at her and then pulled the bag open, sticking his swollen nose into it to sniff. "Whad's wrong wid this shid anyway? I godt you da damn fish. Don'd girls alwavs bant fish?"

She cocked her head at him, "what's wrong with your ugly beak, it's the size of my fist and an ugly red color."

Louis glared at her, "Adnodder stupid bidgh like you. I hade you bidges."

She smiled and then looked into the bag and sniffed. "Fried fish. I don't think so. Join the current century."

Louie stared at her for a long moment and then threw the bag at her. She jerked her head to the side to avoid getting hit in the face by the bag and glared at him. "I'm not enjoying being kidnapped."

"Awwwwb," said Louie. He turned his back on her and sat down at a heavily cluttered table with his partner, who was happily stuffing cheese burgers into his mouth.

"I wasted fibe bucksh on that little bitch," mumbled Julio. A piece of bun flew from his mouth and glued itself to Louie's cheek.

Grimacing, Louie reached up and flicked the bun off his cheek. "I hobe da boss plans on reimbursin' us for dis little stunt."

The girl laughed.

They turned to look at her. "What's so flippin' funny, brat?"

She cocked her dark head at them. "You could always contact Macy's."

Julio swallowed and scowled at her. "Now why the hell would we do that?"

"I'm sure they have a sale coming up, they might pay you for posting another picture of it with me." She snorted in a very unladylike manner and then dissolved into laughter.

The two thugs looked at each other and shook their heads. Louie fondled the pistol he'd laid on the table while he ate. "I tsay we just kill 'er."

Julio laughed. "Works for me."

The girl didn't look particularly worried but she did sit quietly for a long moment. Finally she cleared her throat and they looked at her. "I'll eat my food now."

Julio smiled meanly. "I knew the smell of them fries would get ya." He turned to Louie. "Nothin' like the smell of fries to pique the appetite."

Louie nodded, not entirely sure what pique meant but unwilling to show his ignorance, and stuffed another handful of fries into his overfull mouth. "Ummmb."

She just sat there staring at them. Julio frowned at her. "What now?"

Debra jiggled her hands, which were zip stripped behind her back. "I can't eat without hands."

Julio swore and stood up, swiping at his wide mouth with a paper napkin. "I can't get a minute of peace with this chick here."

Louie nodded his head but made no attempt to get up himself.

Julio pulled a long knife from a sheath he wore on his leather belt and reached over her to cut the strip. She pulled her hands around and rubbed her sore wrists. "Thanks."

Julio slanted a suspicious gaze at her and then turned to Louie with a raised eyebrow. Louie shrugged and went back to eating.

Julio returned to the table but pushed his chair around so his back wasn't to the girl.

She retrieved the paper bag of food from the floor and started pulling wax paper wrapped items from it. Then the room settled into near silence, the sound of chewing and paper crackling the only sounds to be heard. After a few moments the girl said. "I need to go to the ladies."

Julio looked at Louie. "Your turn to babysit."

Louie stood up and went over to the girl in the chair. He pulled out a pocket knife and flipped it open, slicing through the zip strips that held the girl's ankles to the chair. Then he pocketed the knife and pulled out a gun, motioning with it toward the door. "Dno screwin' around like last dime. You ged in and ged out. You don'd need do sdare at yourself in the mirror."

"I don't stare at myself in the mirror," the girl said with disgust. Stuffing her hands into the pockets of her jeans, she preceded him across the room and through the door into a long, carpeted hallway. The hallway was dark except for the small amount of light that came from the room where they kept her captive. The restroom was about two thirds of the way down the hall.

She disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door, moving quickly into a stall. Once inside the stall she pulled the small, plastic knife out of the pocket of her jeans and tested it on her finger. Not very sharp, but with enough force behind it she could hopefully do some damage.

She clasped the knife in her right hand and moved out of the stall. Then, standing to the side of the door she flicked off the lights, took a deep breath, and called his name.

Louie came through the door and cursed. "Where'd da lights?"

She didn't say anything.

"Hey, bidgch, don'd you try nothin' I got by gun out."

"I'll just bet you do," she said as she flicked on the light and rammed the little plastic knife into his throat.

Louie stood there blinking as the little knife broke off in his neck but didn't move other than that.

"Shit!" she muttered and kneed him in the balls.

That time he went down.

She grabbed his gun and took a minute to rummage in his pocket for his cell phone. Then she turned the light back off and headed back out into the hallway. She moved quickly and silently toward the stairs. She opened the stairwell door as quietly as she could and then hit the stairs running. She knew she'd probably have to use the gun on the locks to get outside the building, and she didn't want to do that until she was at the furthest point in the building from the two goons.

It was only a matter of time before Julio got curious and went looking for his girlfriend. She would have even less time if Louis crawled out into the hallway and started screaming in his new falsetto.

When she hit the first floor she headed to the side door that was furthest away from the office where they'd been keeping her. Once there she shot the padlock they had on the door and pushed the door open.

Warm night air swept her face, filled with the smell of fish. She was apparently not too far from the canal. She walked until she got her bearings and then called Brian on Louie's cell phone. "Hey!" She smiled. "I got away, come get me."

"Debra? How'd you escape?"

She laughed. "He had a couple of real chimps guarding me. It was too easy."

"Tell me where you are." His voice vibrated as if he was already moving.

"I'm gonna keep moving and put some distance between me and them. Just pick me up on the North end of the park. I'll hide in the trees until I see you."

"Be there in fifteen minutes."

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"Where are you guys?"

Julio grimaced, knowing that what followed was gonna be ugly. "We run into some trouble with the girl."

Long silence. "You'd better not tell me she got away."

Julio swore under his breath. "Okay."

"She got away didn't she?"

"Yeah, boss. She got away."

Louie better be dead and you better be near dead."

"We're at the hospital. Louie got stabbed in the neck and kicked in the balls."

"Where were you during all this stabbing and kicking?"

"I thought he could handle a trip to the john, boss."

"Where'd she get the knife?"

Julio swore again. "Burger Palace."

"You are a complete bleepin' moron. Who gives a hostage a weapon?"

"Boss, in my defense it was finger food. How the hell did I know they was gonna give us one of them little plastic bags with a napkin and stuff in it?"

There was a long, tension filled silence wherein Julio was pretty sure he heard counting. Then, "Find her you moron or I'll kill you myself. With the fork."

"Okay, boss."

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Angie chewed her fingernail and observed Alastair across the table. He sipped a beer and looked at her, a faint smile on his lips that told her nothing. She was afraid he was holding the left bower. If he was, her king in the suit wasn't going to be enough. But she didn't want to throw the right bower too early, just in case he held the ace. Of course if he had both the left and the ace, she was set anyway. Angie ground into the fingernail and stared at her cards. His face wasn't giving anything away. Finally, she sighed and dumped the right bower onto the table, he glared at her and threw the left on top of it.

"Wheeee!" She screamed and clapped her hands, pulling the pile of cards toward her and adding two points to her counters.

"Hey!" Alastair objected.

Angie grinned and threw down the rest of her hand. "If you'd had the Ace or a smaller card in suit you'd have thrown it instead of the left, and I have nothing but suit left. It's over, baby. O-v-e-r!"

"Damn!" Alastair threw the rest of his cards onto the table and peered at her from under raised eyebrows. "You're a card shark."

Angie jumped up and did a happy dance, clapping her hands enthusiastically. "I love Euchre!"

Alastair scowled.

They both jumped when pounding sounded at the front door. Alastair's phone rang almost simultaneously. He punched the button. "Yeah?"

Angie watched him nervously, chewing the long suffering fingernail. Alastair nodded, "okay." He hung up and looked at Angie. "It's Brita with your stuff."

Angie leapt up and ran to the door. Punching the code into the pad by the door she swung the door open. "Bless you!" she told Brita as she grabbed the large suitcase out of the detective's hands. "Did you get my cell phone off the kitchen counter?"

Brita smiled. "I got everything on your list. It took me four hours. The U-Haul is right behind me on the street."

Alastair came up behind Angie and they both peered around Brita's shoulder to look for a moving truck. Alastair snorted when he saw Brita's dinged up Taurus, alone at the curb.

Brita cocked an eyebrow at them. "Can I come in?"

Alastair took Angie's bulging suitcase from her. "I'll put this in your room."

Angie smiled, "Thanks!"

They stepped back and let Brita enter the small house. She immediately closed and locked the door and punched in the

alarm code. Then she held up a large paper bag. "I brought dinner."

Angie gave her a hug. "You saved me. I was slaughtering Alastair at Euchre and he was getting crabby."

"I heard that!" Alastair bellowed from down the hall.

Brita followed Angie into the kitchen and set the food on the table. "Percy's the same way. They hate to lose at anything. It's a very competitive family." She sat down at the table and started emptying the bag. "I hear you met Clovis this morning." Brita's pretty face split in a grin and she waggled her eyebrows at Angie.

Alastair came into the room and cuffed her gently on the back of the head.

"Hey!"

"I saw the eyebrows waggling."

"That's impossible, I had my back to you."

"Aha!"

"Angie and I aren't dead you know. We can enjoy fine male flesh."

Angie nodded enthusiastically.

Alastair grimaced, "It's flippin' Clovis. He's a Neanderthal."

Brita shrugged, "Have you tasted his cooking?"

Alastair grinned, "You got me there."

Angie sat down and examined the food. It was from a popular restaurant chain that specialized in bread, soup, and sandwiches. "Way to go, Brita. This looks great. I'm gonna gain fifty pounds while I'm on the lam."

"Well you need *something* to look forward to and there isn't much else to do in this dump." As soon as the words left

her mouth Brita realized what she'd said and turned red. Alastair and Angie shared a look and burst out laughing.

Alastair took pity on Brita. "We've gotten pretty good at Euchre."

Brita snorted.

"Well, *I* have anyway." Angie added with a mean little smile at Alastair.

He just shook his head.

They ate in companionable silence and then Brita sat back with a satisfied sigh and took a sip of her beer. "So really, how you guys holdin' up?"

Alastair looked at Angie and shrugged. "We're doing okay. A little bit stir crazy."

Angie nodded. "I'm ready for this to end. But everybody's been very helpful."

Brita set her beer on the table and spun it between her palms. "I've been questioning Burns family members and it's been very interesting." She looked up. "DA Burns still hasn't received a ransom note from the kidnappers."

Alastair frowned. "That's strange."

"But apparently the girl's mother has."

They blinked.

"Oh, then they did get a ransom note?" Angie asked.

Brita made a face. "I'll know the answer to that in the morning, once I give the note to the lab."

Alastair glanced at Angie. "You think the note's a fake?"

"I'd say it's a distinct possibility. I mean, why would the kidnappers send a note to the mother instead of the father. He's the DA."

Angie picked at a piece of bread from her sandwich. "Mrs. Burns number one is filthy rich isn't she?"

"The filthiest."

Angie shrugged. "Maybe that's the only reason. How much money were they asking for?"

Brita gave a sigh and stood up. "I'll just say that it's in the millions."

Alastair whistled. "DA Burns doesn't have that kind of money."

Brita grabbed her keys off the table and started for the door. "He's doing pretty well. But, no, he's not quite in his ex wife's league money wise. If that were the only issue, it wouldn't be a surprise if the kidnappers targeted her rather than the DA."

Angie followed Brita to the door. "But you don't believe it?"

"There are other factors here that need to be checked out that's all."

Alastair joined Angie at the door. "Keep us posted will ya?"

Brita smiled. "Of course."

After Brita left, Angie went to get her cell phone from the suitcase Brita had brought her. She found it in a side pocket after digging through about two weeks worth of clothing. She really hoped she wouldn't need all that clothing.

She gave a little exclamation of delight when she finally found it and sat down on the bed to make her calls. The Shoppe was first on her list.

Petey answered after about eight rings. He sounded harried. "Angie, when are you coming back? This place is

crazy. It's like somebody took a huge ad out in the paper and didn't tell us about it."

Angie frowned. That's strange. I wonder what's going on."

"I don't know but we need some help. Any chance you can come in today? I've had to miss a few classes to cover for you. My grades are starting to suffer."

Angie had been deliberately vague with her employees about her situation because she hadn't wanted to alarm them. She realized now that she was doing them a disservice. They had jumped in to cover for her when she'd asked them to without complaining. But she needed to make some changes ... and fast ... or risk losing them and the Shoppe as the result of the current mess. "I'll call Cinnamon. Maybe she can come in for a few days. I'm sorry to put you through this Petey." She made a sudden decision and took a deep breath. "Listen Petey, I can't give you any details but I've gotten myself in a bit of trouble and I won't be able to come to the Shoppe for a while. I'm going to have to do something more long term there."

There was a short silence. Angie pictured Petey's long, homely face scrunching up in thought. "What kind of trouble?"

She sighed. "I wish I could tell you. I haven't done anything wrong, but I tried to help a guy who some really bad people are trying to hurt and I got mixed up in it. That's all I can tell you. I really appreciate everything you've done to help."

"You're not firing me are you?"

"No! Of course not. I wouldn't blame you if you walked out on me though. I know I'm really messing up your life."

"That's just stupid. If you need me I'm here. I just ... I just need to be able to go to my classes." He sounded almost apologetic.

"I understand. I'll work something out. Hopefully Cinnamon will be coming in today. I'll let you know okay? Oh, and if you see those two guys who came into the men's restroom when I was in there. Call this number right away." She gave him Brita's cell phone number.

"Are they connected to this mess you're in?"

"Unfortunately yes. They're dangerous, Petey, don't do anything except call that number okay?"

"Okay."

"Promise?"

He gave a disgusted sigh, "I'm not ten, Angie. I said I wouldn't do anything stupid."

Angie said goodbye, disconnected, and then sat on the edge of the bed fighting panic. If she couldn't find someone to help with the coffee shoppe she would have to close it. She couldn't afford the loss of revenue. And there was no guarantee she'd hold onto her loyal clientele if she did that.

Tears flooded her eyes as she watched everything she'd fought for slide away from her. She gave herself five minutes to pout and worry and then sniffed and swiped her wet cheeks with the back of her hand. Then she dialed her sister.

Cinnamon Palmer answered on the second ring. "Oh my god, Angie! Where have you been? I've been so worried! And whose car is in my driveway?"

Angie frowned. "Didn't you get my voicemail?"

Cinnamon huffed audibly, "Didn't you get *mine*? All ten of them?"

Angie pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at it. Sure enough, ten missed calls. "Oh, sorry, I left my phone in my apartment and just got it back."

Cinnamon huffed again. "You are so bad with that phone, Ang. You never have it with you and if you do it's almost always turned off." This from someone who sleeps with her cell phone and is on it pretty much non-stop all day ... every day.

"I said I'm sorry, Cin. My life's been a bit scattered lately."

"Angie Marie Peterson I want you to tell me exactly what's going on with you ... right now."

Oh oh, the full name thing. Angie bit her lip. "I can't really tell you everything, Cinnamon. But I'm in a bit of trouble and..."

"I knew it! Damn, girl. Those men were scary looking. I thought they were gonna take Annie right out the house with them. What is going on, Angie! What do those men want with you."

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Chapter Nine

Angie's heart dropped to her stomach. The thugs had visited Cinnamon and gotten their hands on two year old Annie? "Cinnamon, calm down and tell me what happened." When her sister continued babbling Angie screamed through the phone, "Cinnamon! Take a deep breath and tell me exactly what happened!"

Alastair appeared in the bedroom door, looking worried. Angie put her hand over the phone. "Call Brita, get her over to Cinnamon's house right now!" Alastair nodded and pulled his cell phone out, flipping it open and pressing buttons.

Angie listened as her sister explained that they'd just been sitting down to dinner the evening before when the doorbell rang. Cinnamon was dishing spaghetti onto plates and the kids ran toward the front door before she could stop them, thinking it might be their favorite aunt ... who they hadn't seen in several days...

Angie closed her eyes as guilt swept through her, just as her sister had intended.

Then Cinnamon described walking down the hallway toward the front door and finding eight year old Derek standing with his hand on the knob of the open door, looking up at two scary looking men with cold eyes and golf type clothes on. One of the men held little Annie in his arms.

"He asked where you were, Angie. I didn't know what to say. He held Annie like he would take her if I didn't tell him where you were. I panicked, Angie. I'm sorry."

Angie felt herself stiffen in dread. "What exactly did you tell them?"

Cinnamon had started crying. "I didn't really know where you were so I think you're safe..."

Angie closed her eyes, fighting for patience. "Cinnamon, what did you tell them?"

"I just made something totally up. I told them you were in a safe place but I didn't know where. I said the police had you."

Angie's eyes swung to Alastair, tears slid down her cheeks.

Alastair came into the room and sat down on the bed beside her. He put an arm around her shoulders. She sniffed and cleared her throat, not wanting to let her sister know how upset she was. "You did the right thing, sis. Annie was your first priority. I'll be okay."

Cinnamon's response was a sob, followed by sounds of crying.

Angie didn't know how to calm her so she tried changing the subject. "Cinnamon, are you at the house?"

"Yes." The sound of nose blowing came through the phone line.

"We've called Detective Brita Muldane. She's helping us find out who these guys are so the police can stop them. She'll be there in a few minutes. Until then don't open the door, okay? For anybody."

Cinnamon sniffed loudly. "You don't have to worry about that. I don't think I'm ever leaving the house again."

Angie talked with her sister for a few more moments, explaining her situation as well as she could. When the front

door bell rang Cinnamon went to look out the window beside the door. "I think it's her. Is she tall and pretty, with choppy short brown hair?"

Relief flooded her. She slumped against Alastair and nodded. "That's her. Call me later and tell me what she said, okay?"

Angie clicked her cell phone shut and sat staring into space like a zombie. She had so many things to stress about she didn't know where to start. Alastair rubbed her arm but said nothing.

Finally she turned to him, her large green eyes wide with fear. "They went to Cinnamon's house, Alastair. One of them had my two year old niece in his arms. Cinnamon's been trying to call me..." Her voice broke and she burst into tears.

He leaned his head against hers, letting her cry.

Angie pulled herself together quickly and stood up to grab a tissue from the bathroom. She came back in wiping her nose and cheeks and stood with a hip against the door frame, looking at Alastair on the bed. "I'm going to have to close the Dunk and Run."

He frowned, "Why?"

Angie shrugged, "I can't expect my employees to give up their lives to cover for me. Besides, most of them are just kids, I need someone who can make hard decisions, do the ordering, and pay the bills if I'm going to be gone for a while." She walked over and dropped down on the bed next to Alastair again, sighing. "I was going to ask Cinnamon to step in for a while. She knows the ropes at the Shoppe. But now I don't think I can do that."

Alastair thought for a moment and then, with a purposeful look on his handsome face, pulled his cell phone out again. He punched a number and said only two words into it. "Emergency meeting." Then he nodded once, "I'll get back to you on the location." And hung up, grinning at Angie.

"What was that all about?"

"I've just called a Honeybun family meeting." He looked around the tiny bedroom with a slight frown. "We're gonna need a bigger house."

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Debra waited inside a small copse of tall, wide reaching evergreen trees and watched the park road carefully. She smiled when she saw Brian Davies' car cruising slowly up the dimly lit street, obviously looking for her. She stepped out and waved and the car stopped.

She ran over and jumped in, "Let's go!". Then she leaned over and gave him a passionate kiss on the lips.

He smiled at her. "I'm glad you're safe, I was worried about you."

She laughed. "You didn't need to worry. You know I always manage to turn things around to suit me."

He chuckled, turning out of the park and accelerating toward the city. "My place okay?"

She thought about it for a moment and then shook her head. "They might look for me there. Head for the Conrad.

Brian whistled, "That's pretty pricey."

She laughed heartily and gave him a hug. "Very soon now money isn't gonna be a problem for me. I have plans."

He frowned at her, "Now what Debra. Don't tell me you're thinking about shaking down Mr. Bigg. I can't let you do that, darlin'."

She flung a hand out in dismissal. "I know what I'm doing. Don't worry about it, Bri Bri. I have no plans to shake down Mr. Bigg."

Brian Davies drove the car into Monument Circle and headed for the Conrad. He had a bad feeling about whatever his volatile girlfriend had in mind. But until he knew for sure what it was there wasn't much he could do about it. And he knew Debra pretty well. She wouldn't tell him what she was up to until she was damn good and ready. He'd have to wait until she spilled.

He just hoped his boss didn't find out what he was up to.

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Percy had the files spread out over his desk. Brita sat across from him, reading the contents of one of the thick accordion folders. The DA had an excessive number of cases

lined up for the next year. It wasn't going to be easy to figure out if one of them was connected to the kidnapping.

Percy flung a particularly thick file to the discard pile on the left side of the desk. "Why did he have so many cases lined up?"

Brita closed the file she'd been reading and set it on a separate, smaller pile. "We need to do some research on these, they're all stock fraud cases. We'll need to follow the trail to see who owns the companies."

Percy nodded. "I'll have Jessica work them. She's my best clerk. If there's something there she'll find it."

Brita nodded. "I need to go to the lab and talk to Spiff about that ransom letter. Wanna come with, citizen consultant?"

Percy grinned. "A chance to spend some time with my girl, maybe even talk you into some lunch, and get out of this office for a while. Sold!"

Roger Spiffett, affectionately known as Spiff by the Indianapolis Police Department, handed Brita the Burns ransom note. It had been placed inside a clear covering. The note looked like a child's kindergarten homework. The message had been spelled out by cutting words and pieces of words from magazines and gluing them to a thick, cream-colored sheet of paper.

The message on the note was: *Bring \$5 million to the Macy's dumpster on the North East side. Drop money inside. Pick up the girl behind the trees on the South West side of the store. Come alone.*

"Obviously a fake," offered Spiff.

Percy glanced at the short, bristly haired man behind tiny wire rimmed glasses. "Why?"

Spiff tapped a thick finger on the note. "Two things. First, the paper this was," Spiff made quotation marks in the air, "written on is very expensive. I've traced it to only two stores that sell it in the immediate area. It's five dollars a sheet."

Percy whistled.

Spiff nodded. "Yeah. If your kidnappers can afford this type of paper they don't need to ransom the Burns girl. And secondly," He looked at Brita, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

"The message is all wrong." She said with a nod.

He nodded, "Right. No kidnapper is gonna tell you where to pick up the girl in the ransom note. What's to keep us from just going there and picking her up without giving them the money?"

Percy chuckled. "Good point. I guess whoever did this didn't have a very devious mind."

Spiff laughed good naturedly, "You mean like I do?"

Brita grinned, "I've been telling him all about you, Spiff."

The older man giggled, obviously touched by her teasing. "Don't you two have better things to talk about?"

Brita and Percy shared a look and then both shook their heads, "No, not really." Brita said with a grin.

Spiff threw back his graying, bristly head and laughed good and hard.

Percy's phone beeped. He pulled out the Blackberry and frowned. "I gotta go, Muldane."

She looked surprised, "What? No lunch?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, I'll have to take a rain check. I've gotta go to a family meeting."

He gave her a peck on the cheek, studiously ignoring the questioning look on her face, and shook Spiff's hand. "Nice to meet ya, Spiff. And good work on that note."

Spiff flung out a hand dismissively but he looked pleased.

"Percy?"

He grimaced, stopped, and turned to her with a smile.

"What beautiful?"

She stood staring at him, her arms crossed over her ample chest and her beautiful green eyes probing and slightly hostile. "Do you need me at this meeting?"

Percy shook his head. "No. But thanks. I got it covered."

He turned and walked quickly away. He could feel her eyes burning into the back of his head.

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A nerve shattering roar disrupted the silent, waiting atmosphere in the small house. Angie jumped and Alastair leaped to his feet. He was smiling as he punched the code into the alarm pad. Turning to Angie he said, "Our ride's here."

She scowled at him, "Alastair Honeybun, if you think I'm getting on the back of a motorcycle with you again, you are seriously out of your mind."

He grinned mischievously and pulled the front door open. Two large figures in black leather and black helmets with full face coverings were standing on the front porch. They stepped into the house, causing Angie to take a step back in panic.

Then they pulled off their helmets and she was looking at two nearly identical smiles. "You must be Angie." Said the one she'd recognize anywhere. He held out a black gloved hand.

Angie stood with her mouth open, "I ... I ... a..."

Alastair laughed. "You can ride with Warwicke if you'd rather. He's not a bad driver. Not as good as me." Alastair's famous racecar driving brother took Angie's suddenly sweaty hand and scoffed at his brother.

"In your dreams, Stair." His voice was rich and husky and his eyes were a beautiful light grey color that Angie'd never seen before. His hair was a rich red gold and was cut so that it showed off his square jaw and muscular neck.

"I ... I ... um..."

The other man held out his hand too. He had a long suffering look on his red stubbled face. "I'm Godric. I know you probably don't care. I'm not a race car driver. I'm just a heart surgeon. Not very exciting I know." His words sounded bitter but Angie saw the sparkle in his dark blue eyes and the laugh lines that told her he had a finely honed sense of humor.

"I'm nice to meet you, Godric."

He grinned. "Yes. You are. Thanks!"

There was a lot of suspicious throat clearing in the room but Angie didn't even know she'd spoken nonsense. She was totally discombobulated about meeting Warwicke Honeybun.

"Here, you'll need to wear this." Godric handed her black leather. "And this." She took the helmet from him.

She shrugged into the jacket and held the helmet in both hands. The thing felt like it weighed about ten pounds. Then she turned to Alastair and saw that he already had his leather jacket and helmet on.

"I'll ride with Godric." Alastair said in his best Darth Vader voice.

Godric shook his head and dropped his helmet over his head. "That's so overdone, little brother."

"Feel the force, Godric, it's in my foot and headin' for your ass." The two men left the house, laughing like idiots.

Warwicke walked over to Angie and put his hands on the helmet she was clutching in front of her. "May I?"

She released the helmet, praying she hadn't left telltale sweat streaks on the dark plastic.

Warwicke placed it carefully over her head and dropped the visor. "You ready?"

Angie nodded her head mutely and gulped. He even smelled yummy. She followed him out of the house and onto the biggest black motorcycle she'd ever seen. Wallowing in serious star worship, she closed her eyes in pure bliss and wrapped her arms around Warwicke's lean waist.

That was the last moment of bliss she enjoyed for quite a while.

"Hold on tight." Warwicke said. And her eyes jerked open in horror.

Both motorcycles took off so fast that the front tires left the ground and the tire under Angie's quivering butt cheeks swung sideways for a full minute before it grabbed the pavement and decided to follow the tire at the front of the motorcycle.

The twin roars of the huge, beastly machines filled the air around her. Nearly blocking out the sound of her horrified shrieking and the Honeybun boys' delighted laughter.

The Honeybun home was located in a middle class neighborhood with well tended homes on quarter acre lots that were dotted with mature trees. The bikes roared past dozens of children of all ages and several young women in various states of undress, who were standing around in the well kept yards. The women all waved and some of them looked like they might chase the cycles down the street.

The Honeybun boys waved back and Godric gunned his cycle into a wheelie, much to the delight of the squealing females.

Angie clutched Warwicke's waist in desperation and tried to tighten her legs around the cycle, just in case he thought a flashy maneuver of some kind was called for. Fortunately he seemed to take pity on his hysterical passenger and only gunned the machine's massive engine once or twice in response to the girls' obvious adoration. The neighborhood peace shattered completely under the massive explosion of noise.

Angie winced under the helmet and prayed they were almost there. Wherever the hell they were going. She felt like she'd been on the damn cycle for days.

They swung around a corner and drove down a couple more blocks before finally pulling into a wide, cement driveway that was filled with cars. The street in front of the huge house was also clogged with vehicles along both sides. Angie wondered if some of the cars and trucks belonged to neighbors but she suspected most of them were Honeybun vehicles.

When Warwicke finally shut the motorcycle's engine off, Angie's ears took a moment to start working again. Along with a persistent ringing sound, the normal noise of a middle class street in mid-day on a weekend sounded tinny and far away. "Great, my ear drums are shattered," she muttered. Even her own voice sounded like it came from inside a bottle.

She tightened her grip on Warwicke's waist so she could pull one leg over the long, black seat. He grabbed her arm with a steadying hand when both of her feet hit the ground and her knees nearly gave out under her.

He pulled his helmet off and smiled at her. "Adreneline. It can leave you shaky." He didn't let go of her arm, she must have looked pretty wobbly.

Angie pulled her hand away and reached up to remove the Darth Vader hat. "You sound like you have experience with women who can't stand up after a ride with you."

The sound of masculine laughter exploded behind her and Angie turned to find Alastair, Percy, Godric, and another man who was obviously a Honeybun brother standing in a group

on the sidewalk. Every one of them, except Alastair, was laughing hysterically. He had a hand suspiciously over his mouth and his head was lowered. Angie turned beet red, finally realizing what she'd said that they'd found so funny.

Wanting to climb in a hole, she had to settle for dropping the helmet back over her head and pouting in embarrassment.

Warwicke's lips quivered but he was a complete gentleman. "You're not the only one who's afraid of speed, Angie. It's fairly common with all my dates."

Again the masculine bellowing behind them. Warwicke swung a hand at them. "Shut up you idiots."

Alastair joined them and jerked his head at Warwicke. "Mom wants you inside, Wicke. She's putting out the cake."

Warwicke's handsome face split in a grin. "Yummy cake?"

Alastair nodded.

With a final, commiserating look at Angie he turned and joined the group on the sidewalk. With much shared laughter and back slapping the oversized wad of testosterone moved into the big, old house together.

Alastair pulled the helmet off Angie's head and gave her a soft smile. "You gonna hide in there all day?"

Angie was near tears with embarrassment. Alastair leaned down and kissed her. As soon as their lips touched he groaned. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her into his body, dropping the helmet on the grass at their feet.

Angie came to him stiffly at first, not sure she was ready to give up pouting, but his kiss soon infiltrated her crankiness and warmed it away. She allowed herself to melt against him,

enjoying the way her soft parts fit into his hard parts so nicely.

Alastair tilted his head and deepened the kiss, sliding one hand into her hair to hold her in the kiss. As the kiss threatened to take them where she didn't really want to go right at that moment, she pulled away and he looked down on her with a smile. "All better?"

She grinned. "Almost. You'll probably need to do more work later to fix it completely."

His smile widened, "Count on it."

Percy slammed the front screen door loudly to announce his presence. "Hey you two. Do you really think it's a good idea for you to be standing out here in broad daylight all alone?"

Alastair looked down at Angie and she nodded. "I think it was an excellent idea."

They laughed and Percy shook his head, fighting a grin himself. "Get in here or Brita will kill me."

Alastair tucked two fingers into the waistband of Angie's jeans at the small of her back and guided her toward the house. She wrapped an arm around his waist, feeling better about the idea of meeting his family.

"So where is Brita anyway?" Alastair inquired as they joined Percy on the wide, front porch.

Percy shrugged, looking guilty. "At work, I didn't tell her about the meeting."

Alastair stopped dead in his tracks, "Are you serious?"

Percy nodded, opening the screen door for them. But Alastair didn't move. "Does she know Angie and I are out of the safe house?"

Percy winced, "Not exactly."

Angie's eyes widened and she looked up at Alastair. "She's gonna be really mad."

Percy tried to smile. "She'll get over it. I cleared it with your lookout across the street. He's good friends with Clovis so he knows you're in good hands."

Alastair frowned at his older brother. "By 'cleared' do you mean you bribed him?"

Percy shrugged, looking guilty. "Come on, get in the house. I mean it."

Alastair shook his head. "You're gonna pay for this, bro. Big time."

Percy was silent as he followed them into the cool darkness of the old house.

Angie looked around as she entered a large foyer with scuffed wood floors of a color so dark with age it looked black. The floors were covered in old fashioned rag rugs in bright colors. To the right as she stood inside the door, a wide staircase curved to the second floor and ended in a walkway that ran above the foyer. She could see a second staircase, not quite as wide or decorative, on the other end of the walkway above, leading to a third floor.

Straight ahead was a hallway that looked like it led to a kitchen and on either side were smaller rooms filled with good quality but comfortable looking furniture. The scent of fresh

flowers filled the house and Angie took note of the vases of cut flowers in every room.

The house was scrupulously clean, comfortable, and well lived in. Just what you'd expect from a woman who'd managed to birth and raise eight, energetic and successful male offspring.

A female voice hailed them from the direction of the kitchen. "Percy, bring them in here. The cake's on the table."

Alastair put his arm around Angie's shoulders and pulled her close to whisper in her ear. "My mom's cake is to die for. Everyone who's ever tried it has tried to beg, borrow, or steal the recipe but she's kept it as close as a state secret."

They followed Percy down the hallway and emerged into the biggest, brightest kitchen Angie had ever seen. Her heart leapt in panic as she entered. The room was filled to virtual bursting with Honeybuns.

At the center of the huge room was a tall, elegant woman with a soft cloud of curly blond hair around her face. Her smile made Angie feel welcome immediately. It also made her feel like an imposter. It was the smile of a mother welcoming her son's new girlfriend. Angie wasn't sure she fit the profile.

Alastair said, "Everybody, this is Angie."

"Angie, that's my mom." Alastair pointed to his mother unnecessarily, considering she was the only other woman in the room,

"Hello, Angie. Welcome to our home." The woman's voice was deep and slightly husky. Not a frumpy mother's voice by any stretch.

Angie smiled, feeling decidedly uncomfortable as the center of all that attention. Like a bug under glass. "Thank you, Mrs. Honeybun. I'm very pleased to meet you all."

Alastair crossed the room and gave his mother a peck on the cheek. "Hey, mom."

She turned and enveloped him in a hug and gave him a motherly peck on his forehead. Angie was impressed that he seemed to take this in stride. It was obvious the Honeybuns were a demonstrative lot.

"Are you okay?" His mother questioned gently.

Alastair nodded, smiling. "We're fine. Brita's taking good care of us."

Angie couldn't help a guilty glance at Percy. Except that Brita didn't currently know where they were.

Percy caught her glance and smiled like a naughty child. She shook her head, feeling a deep respect for the woman who had not only dealt with the antics of eight headstrong boys, but who had shaped them into eight, strong, capable males who were making a difference in the world.

Alastair turned to the man standing behind his mother. Though he was a tall man, Alastair's father was barely as tall as his mother. "Dad." They clasped a hand and then shared a manly hug, with much back slapping.

Mr. Honeybun was a very good looking man in his mid to late fifties. He had bright red hair that had been muted a bit by nature in the form of grey strands which were sprinkled throughout the red and gathered in force at his temples. His face looked young, virtually unlined, creating a stark contrast to the distinguished grey of his hair. "Son. I hear you've been

very busy." He turned and winked at Angie, making her wonder whether he meant busy trying to stay alive or busy getting a girlfriend.

She tried not to let the obvious supposition that she and Alastair were a couple bother her. After all, she'd certainly walked the tightrope of a physical relationship with him recently. And it didn't feel all that bad having these wonderful people accept her into their family so readily. She just wished she didn't feel like she was lying to them somehow.

"Time for cake," Mrs. Honeybun announced.

It was like releasing a school of piranha into a bowl of floating beef. The Honeybun boys swarmed the table and when they stepped away from it carrying plates with the biggest slices of chocolate cake on them she'd ever seen, there were only four plates left. And a couple of the men were eyeing those carefully.

Angie smiled, remembering Alastair's description of trench eating. Alastair grabbed two plates off the table. Handing one to her, he indicated a love seat off to the side of the huge kitchen, part of a cluster of comfortable looking chairs and loveseats that surrounded a large television. Obviously the Honeybun kitchen was a gathering spot for the family.

When everyone was comfortably seated with cake, Alastair started talking. "I've called this emergency family meeting because Angie needs some help." He looked around the room and grinned. "Actually we both need some help but the immediate need is Angie's coffee shoppe. With everything that's going on she can't be there to run things as she'd like. She's been able to keep track of things a bit by phone. But

her employees can't keep covering for her every day." He looked at his mother. "We need to put together a schedule for covering the store."

Angie's eyes grew wide and she suddenly felt like crying. She had never suspected what he was up to when he'd suggested the meeting. She'd just been glad for the chance to do something ... anything ... proactive about her situation. She shook her head and grabbed his arm. "I can't ask your family to give up their time to help me run the Dunk and Run. It wouldn't be fair."

Alastair's mother set her fork down on her cake plate loudly, pulling everyone's attention to her as if she had shouted. When she spoke Angie could easily see the steel in her spine that had brought her successfully through the years of parenting eight rambunctious males. Her pretty blue eyes sparkled despite her no nonsense manner. "Don't be ridiculous, Angie. We'd love to help, wouldn't we boys?"

They all nodded, even Warwicke.

Mrs. Honeybun looked at her husband. "You'll create the spreadsheet?"

"I will." Moving to an antique oak desk that was nestled in the corner, he sat down in front of a large laptop computer that was surrounded by several neatly stacked piles of paper. Mr. Honeybun began pecking at the keys. Mrs. Honeybun stood up and started pacing. One hand moved to her mouth in a thoughtful pose. "There'll be training required of course." She turned to Angie. "Do you have someone on staff who can perform the training we'll need?"

Angie thought about this for a moment, feeling a bit overwhelmed by everything that would need to be done to get them all on the payroll and scheduled in. "My assistant manager, Petey Bruns could train you all on a Sunday afternoon I guess. We're only open until noon on Sundays."

Mrs. Honeybun's blue gaze slid around the room. "Is there anyone who isn't available tomorrow?"

Only one head nodded. It was covered in spiky, auburn colored hair and had serious dark blue eyes. He was long and lean, with a stringy, flexible looking body, and he wore a red stubble on his square jaw that looked like it was standard issue for him. Angie remembered that Alastair had told her Heathcliffe was a dance instructor with the Indianapolis School of Ballet, and had been recruited by dance companies in New York and Chicago.

Mrs. Honeybun's gaze took on an assessing quality. "You have rehearsals on a Sunday, Heathcliffe?" It was a mother's warning tone of voice. It might as well have been truth serum.

Heathcliffe looked slightly uncomfortable under that gaze. He pulled his long form, which had been lounging casually in a soft looking chair by the fireplace, upright and set his empty plate down on a nearby table. "No ma'am. I have a date."

Mrs. Honeybun's pretty face softened. Angie got the impression the woman was a tiny bit desperate to get her sons married happily off. "That's wonderful. Bring her along."

The room rumbled with male chuckles and Heathcliffe looked less than pleased with this suggestion but he nodded, frowning only slightly as he did.

"Good, that's settled then. Training tomorrow. Starting at...?" She cast that formidable gaze toward Angie and Angie sat up straighter by instinct. "Um, one o'clock in the afternoon? That will give Petey a few minutes to grab some lunch after he closes up the Shoppe."

Mrs. Honeybun nodded and glanced at her husband. "Bob, did you get that?"

He nodded. "Got it."

She nodded too, as if ticking it off her mental list. Angie watched in fascination, getting some idea how the woman had managed through being a mother with eight kids. It was something to behold. Turning to Angie she asked, "What hours do you need to cover?"

Angie made a face, she hated to even ask. "Six am to nine pm."

Mrs. Honeybun nodded, thinking. "I can do six to noon every day, except Sunday." She glanced at another Honeybun whom Angie didn't know. "Edric, can you plan your writing so that you can come in around noon every day and stay until three?"

Edric slouched in a chair at the long, farmer's table in the center of the kitchen. He rubbed the last of the crumbs off his plate with a moistened index finger and nodded. "I can do that," sticking the finger into his mouth and sucking gently. His voice was deep like his mother's and smoky. It was the kind of voice that made women tighten their thighs in self defense. His longish, blond hair was the same color as his mother's, curly like hers, and clearly in need of a trim. His face was a little on the long side, like his father's and he had

brooding blue eyes and a pouty mouth. He wore a tattered t-shirt and scruffy jeans, clearly not worried about how he looked. Angie thought he was probably one of the younger Honeybuns, and he was apparently a writer. She made a mental note to see if she could pull up anything written by Edric Honeybun on the Internet.

Clovis spoke up. "I can do evenings, from five to seven during the week." Mrs. Honeybun nodded and Bob Honeybun called out, "Got it."

Godric raised his hand and they all laughed. Grinning widely he said, "My schedule is too volatile to commit to any work hours, but I can coerce every doctor and nurse at the hospital into buying their morning coffee at the Dunk and Run."

Angie grinned back. "A worthy contribution, Godric."

Mrs. Honeybun rolled her blue eyes. "There's always one." She murmured. Then, looking at Godric she added, "You *will* attend training tomorrow, Godric, just in case."

Godric saluted, making everyone except his mother laugh. She just shook her head and fixed him with a look.

They worked their way through the hours of Angie's work week in similar fashion until they had every day covered. By the time they finished she was nearly in tears. Alastair looked at her, concern etching his features. "What's wrong, Ang? Are you okay?"

She smiled up at him through the tears and nodded. Then, realizing everyone was staring at her again she laughed softly, swiping at her cheeks. "I just can't believe you'd all

help me like this. It's so nice. I'm..." emotion swamped her and she was unable to go on.

Mrs. Honeybun frowned in gentle censure. "We take care of our own, Angie. It's the Honeybun way."

Angie's eyes widened and she looked at Alastair. He simply smiled and shrugged.

Then he announced, "Meeting's over!" and chaos ensued. The kitchen erupted into the deep rumble of male voices and slowly quieted as they dispersed into the yard and throughout the house. She was left with just Alastair and his parents and ... she suddenly realized ... one brother who had been hunched over some kind of communication gadget for much of the meeting, punching buttons and speaking softly into it. Angie didn't remember him volunteering to help at the Shoppe.

The Honeybun parents were studying the spreadsheet Bob Honeybun had created, discussing its contents.

Angie jerked her head toward the gadget obsessed brother. "Who's that?"

Alastair leaned close, speaking softly. "That's Alfric. He's not going to help at the Dunk and Run. He has a more important job."

Angie frowned, "What's that?"

Alastair grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "Keeping us alive."

As if he'd heard them talking about him, Alfric looked up. He said something into his gadget and stood up, walking across the kitchen toward them. Holding out his hand toward Angie, he smiled, "I'm Alfric. I wanted to thank you for saving

Alastair's life. He's not much but he's one of only seven brothers I have."

Alfric grinned as Alastair swung at him and ducked the punch easily. Angie was embarrassed by the family's notion that she'd done something heroic when she'd helped Alistair. She shrugged, "It was nothing anyone else wouldn't do."

Alfric shook his head. "You couldn't be more wrong, Angie. Most people would have just called the police and walked away."

Angie frowned, "That probably would have been the smartest thing to do."

Alfric lowered intense, dark blue eyes on her. "But the police would have thought you were a crackpot wouldn't they? Which is why you didn't do it. And they would never have been in time to save him. From what I understand, you were barely in time to save him and you knew the urgency."

Angie shrugged. She couldn't argue with any of that. It was all true.

She felt an arm slide around her shoulder and was suddenly enveloped in the mama Honeybun scent of lemon and roses. "You saved my son's life, Angie. Don't think I take that lightly. Anything any of us can do to help you ... ever ... you will have it. All you need to do is ask."

Angie was crying again and it was just damned embarrassing. She didn't even try to respond, she simply nodded, smiling at the Honeybuns clustered around her.

Bob Honeybun joined them and addressed Alfric, finally breaking the spell around Angie. "Is everything under control?"

"It is, for the moment, but I think it would be best if we got them back to the safe house. Just in case."

Angie blanched. The motorcycles! She turned to Alastair, a pleading glint in her eye. He laughed. "No, you don't have to go on the motorcycle again. Alfric has arranged alternate transportation for us."

Mrs. Honeybun pressed a large paper bag into Angie's hand. "You didn't eat your cake, and there's dinner in there too." She patted Angie gently on the cheek. "We can't have you starving to death while you're on the lam."

"Thanks Mrs. Honeybun."

Alastair's mother shook her blond head. "Call me Wanda please ... like the witch." She winked at Angie and they shared a laugh.

From what she'd seen so far of the Honeybuns and their Matriarch, Angie could almost believe the woman *was* a witch. It would take nothing short of witchery to keep nine Honeybun men under complete control.

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Chapter Ten

"I'm going to make the call."

"Debra this is nuts. You're gonna get us killed."

She looked at him for several beats, her thoughts flitting across her pretty but habitually angry face, and then shook her head. "He owes me. I'm going to teach him a lesson. This is the last time he'll use me as a pawn in his stupid shit."

Brian shook his head and got up to grab the room service menu from the top of the desk. "I need a drink or twelve. You want one?"

Debra nodded and started punching buttons on Louie's cell. She waited while it rang and smiled when his voice came on the line. "It's me. I'm using Louie's phone. I want you to tell your boss that he's got to pay me the ransom he was demanding. No. Your other boss. Tell him he'll either give the money to me or I'll go to the police."

Bones's voice blasted through the phone at her, scouring her ear with the foulest words the man could think of. She held the small phone away from her head and rolled her eyes at Brian. He shook his head again and flopped onto the other bed in the room.

When Bones finally wound down, Debra tentatively pressed the phone back to her ear. "Are you finished?" Silence met her question and she smiled. She knew she had him. Everything his boss had worked for would be ruined if she went to the police. "Good. Now here's what I want him to do..."

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"Now this is what I'm talkin' about." Angie exclaimed from the huge back seat of Alfric's shiny, black Hummer H2.

Alastair grinned at her. They'd been ushered into the car by another man, who apparently worked for Alfric and whose eyes were just as intense. The man's dark suit coat bulged suspiciously across his chest. Angie was pretty sure she'd seen the handle of some type of gun strapped to his chest when he'd bent over to open the door for her.

Alfric stood outside the Hummer talking to him for a few minutes after they'd been tucked safely into the back seat. She figured he was giving the man instructions of some kind. She watched them carefully, trying to figure out what they were talking about. The man with Alfric stopped talking suddenly and reached into his pocket, pulling out a cell phone. He spoke into the phone and then looked at Alfric, his face darkening with anger. After he hung up he apparently gave Alfric an update and it didn't seem to sit any better with Alastair's brother than it had with his associate.

She leaned toward Alastair, "Who are these guys?"

He grinned, "I can't tell you because I don't know ... exactly. All I know is that Alfric does something top secret with the government and that you don't want to cross him."

Angie's eyes grew wider. "Holy shit!"

Alastair nodded. "Yeah. Now you know why Percy dared to pull us out of the safe house."

"Have they been with us since we left the ... um ... safe house?" Angie felt silly saying *safe house*, the words felt so made-for-TV-ish to her.

He chuckled. "You probably didn't notice the big black car behind us or the big, black helicopter above us because you were so busy screeching at the top of your lungs."

She punched her arm. "You guys drove like bubble heads on purpose ... just to scare me."

He nodded, "Of course."

She punched him again and he rubbed the arm, "Ow, don't forget I'm still feeble."

"Only in the head."

They grinned at each other.

Alfric climbed into the car and immediately pulled away from the curb. "Put your seat belts on." He glanced in the rear view mirror and his intense blue gaze scanned the area as they pulled away from the Honeybun home. In response to his tense mood, they rode in edgy silence for several minutes.

Alfric slid a Bluetooth™ earpiece over one ear and spoke quietly into it. Angie strained to hear his end of the conversation but wasn't able to discern anything except the words "Plan B".

The silence was shattered several minutes later as they entered a quiet intersection and a big, white car shot from a side street and T-boned the H2 on the passenger side.

Angie screamed as the airbag on her side of the car exploded inward and she flew across the seat to land in

Alastair's lap. Alfric struggled with the wheel of the H2, trying to keep it from careening across the road and running up into someone's yard. As he drove he screamed instructions into his Bluetooth™.

He managed to keep the H2 on the road and accelerated into a very tight turn that would have thrown Angie back onto her side of the wide back seat if Alastair hadn't grabbed her around the waist and held onto her. Keeping one eye on the rear view mirror at all times, Alfric threw them into another turn and accelerated down a parallel street at a frightening speed.

Finally he turned his head toward the back seat. "Is she okay?"

Alastair focused a questioning gaze on Angie and she nodded. She felt him relax and his arms, which had been like tight bands around her waist, loosened just the tiniest little bit. "Yeah, she's all right. Just a little shaken up I think."

Alfric's dark blue eyes found her in the mirror. "You should have had your seat belt on, Angie."

She made a face at Alastair where Alfric couldn't see and then dutifully climbed off his lap. They shoved at the air bag that had exploded into her seat until Alfric passed a deadly looking switchblade knife over the seat. "Here, use this."

Alastair covered Angie's head with his arm and ducked as he stabbed the knife into the bag. It exploded in a cloud of white dust and shriveled away. Coughing under the thick haze of dust, Angie slid back into her seat and buckled her seat belt.

Just in time.

Alfric cursed suddenly and started firing instructions into his Bluetooth™ again. "White Escalade. One hundred feet behind us. South on 465. License, six, four, niner, Alpha, Beta, Gamma."

The H2 lurched with a loud crunch and Angie and Alastair were thrown forward against their seat belts as the Escalade hit them from behind.

Alfric had seen the car coming and was ready for it. The H2 only swerved once before gliding back under his control. Alfric shouted into his Bluetooth™, "Notify the State police. We're going into outpace and evade mode. Tell them to stand down if they see us and divert and apprehend the invading vehicle. And call Brita Muldane!"

"Hold on!" he shouted to his wide-eyed passengers.

Alastair grabbed Angie's hand. "You might want to close your eyes, Angie."

All the color leached from her already pale face. "Oh shit!"

Alfric punched a button and the H2 surged forward. Angie squeezed her eyes shut and tightened her grip on Alastair's hand.

As the Hummer picked up speed, jerking from side to side in basic avoidance maneuvers, Angie hunched more deeply into her seat and tried to ignore the frantic honking and the jarring motion when the big vehicle went off-road as the result of one particularly hair-raising evasion tactic.

Her only clue for how they were faring was the constant drone of male swearing and the occasional hysterical shriek of horns on either side of them as Alfric threaded the traffic

needle in his heroic efforts to outmaneuver the clumsy but apparently speedy Escalade.

Finally, with a last grazing impact that made the H2 shudder slightly but didn't affect its forward motion at all, a series of piercing horn blasts and the heart stopping sound of tires skidding across the pavement heralded the Escalade's removal from their trail. Angie opened her eyes at Alastair's heartfelt, "Sweet!" and saw that the big SUV was sitting between the two lanes of the highway, facing in the opposite direction.

As she watched, the Escalade's tires started to spin, but the grass was too soft for them to grab hold. As the H2 quickly widened the distance between them and the thugs in the Escalade, Angie heard the sound of sirens in the distance.

Turning to look back down the road Alastair whistled. "There have to be ten cop cars back there."

Alfric nodded. "They must have gotten hold of Brita."

Alastair turned back around in his seat and narrowed his eyes at his older brother. "Why do I get the feeling you've been in touch with Brita since we first cooked this up."

Alfric grinned at them in the rear view mirror. "You don't think I'd take you out of Brita's safe house without clearing it with her first do you? That would be suicide."

Alastair shared a look with Angie. Percy was dead meat. "You should have told Percy that."

Alfric laughed. "Percy has a lot to learn about women. Brita was testing him by not telling him she knew what was going on and he failed ... big time."

Angie shook her head, "She's never gonna forgive him."

Alfric laughed. "Oh, she'll forgive him ... eventually. He's impossible to resist when he lays on the charm. But he's gonna have to jump through some serious hoops."

Alastair chuckled, "You remember that girl in high school?"

Alfric laughed again, glancing at his brother in the rear view mirror. "The cheerleader."

"Yup."

Alastair turned to Angie. "Percy wanted to take out this girl in high school..."

"But she was the most popular girl in school and she wouldn't look twice at him..." Alfric added.

"Not to mention she was dating the captain of the football team."

"So clichéd." Alfric shook his head in disgust.

Alistair nodded, "So Percy joined the cheerleading squad and paid one of the other guys to let him be the one who held this girl up in the pyramid."

"We thought he was brilliant of course."

"Although the rest of the school thought he was experimenting with alternate sexual lifestyles ... if you know what I mean." Alistair added with a wry smile.

Both men laughed. Angie smiled at the story but was starting to get whiplash in her neck from the double delivery.

Alfric went on, "So he joins the squad, practices with them every day for a week, and then at the first game..."

"He's on the first level of the pyramid, with this girl's leg in his hands..."

"And he looks up and says to her, "How about you and me go out together sometime. I think you're really hot."

Both Alfric and Alistair collapsed into helpless laughter. Angie just looked from one to the other of them, not sure what the joke was. Finally Alastair took a deep breath and wiped the tears from his eyes. "She looks down at him, and her face turns this odd kind of purple..."

"We could see the color change from the stands. It was awesome."

"Percy's looking up at her with her thigh in his hands..."

"And she thinks he's propositioning her because she's wearing this little skirt..."

"And she'd forgotten the little uniform panties that were supposed to go under the skirt."

"And she's wearing this tiny, little th ... thong!" Alfric choked out on a laugh.

"And she's been stressing about this all day but she doesn't have time to go home after school..."

"So here's Percy, completely oblivious..."

"He's been practicing the, let's go out, speech all week..."

"And she thinks..." Alfric dissolved into helpless laughter.

Alistair's not far behind him, "She thinks he's..." and he's gone too. Completely consumed by laughter.

Angie decided to finish it for them. "She thinks he's looking up her skirt?"

They shrieked in renewed hilarity, nodding their heads emphatically.

Angie laughed with them, trying to visualize poor Percy as his well-meant proposal is met with angry rejection.

Finally Alistair caught his breath enough to add, "She let go of the hand of the cheerleader above her to smack him on the head and the whole damn pyramid hit the ground."

They dissolved again, this time Angie joined them, their hilarity completely contagious. When she could talk again she asked, "Then what happened?"

Alfric pulled a hanky out and blew his nose, wiping his cheeks and grinning. "He was a legend at the school after that. He couldn't walk down the halls without getting slapped on the back by all the guys and he constantly had to dodge slaps of a totally different kind by the girls."

Alastair shook his head. "But he eventually convinced the cheerleader that he hadn't meant any harm."

"And she did go out with him. In fact, as I remember, they dated for a couple of years." Alfric's voice was filled with awe and pride of his brother.

Angie smiled. It was really nice that the Honeybuns had such a strong support structure. She envied them that. Her own parents were too busy with their careers to spend much time with her and her sister. And ... looking back ... Angie realized she'd been guilty of the same thing. She'd been focusing all of her time and attention on getting the Dunk and Run up and running. That left all too little time spent with her family. She resolved, if she managed to survive the current mess, to remedy that.

Which reminded her. "So. Where do we go now?"

Alastair frowned, "Back to the safe house, right Alf?"

His brother frowned. "I didn't want to tell you this until we got where we're going."

Alistair groaned. "Now what?"

"The safe house was broken into right after we left. Apparently they found something there that told them where we'd be."

His intense gaze met theirs in the mirror. Alastair frowned, thinking. Then he realized he'd made notes on his laptop about the meeting. "They got my computer?"

Alfric nodded.

"Shit!"

Angie felt her stomach clenching. "How did they find the safe house?"

Alfric shook his head. "That's the big question isn't it?" He sighed, "I'm sorry, Stair, Angie. But Clovis has the perfect hideaway for you."

Alastair's face folded into a doubtful frown. "Clovis?"

Alfric chuckled. "Don't worry. I think you're gonna like it."

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Clovis met them at the gate.

Brita was with him but there was no sign of Percy. She walked over to the car with Clovis and stuck her head in the car. "Are you two okay?" They nodded. "Good. I'll have somebody bring your stuff from the house as soon as I can. In the meantime Clovis can provide what you need. It won't be pretty, but it will be serviceable."

Clovis snorted, "Nothing prettier than Marine uniforms, cop."

She smiled at him, "Right." Turning to Alfric she extended her hand. "Nice work Agent."

Alfric took her hand and shook it. "Take it easy on Percy, huh? He was doing what he thought best for you and the family. He was trying to keep you out of it in case something went wrong."

Her pretty face darkened in a scowl, "How? By making me look stupid and inept?"

Angie grimaced at Alastair. It didn't look good for Percy. Alastair shook his head.

Clovis climbed into the front seat with Alfric. Brita stepped away from the car.

As they drove away, Angie turned in her seat to watch Brita speak to the guard and then climb into her car. Then she turned back around and spoke to Clovis, "A military base?"

Clovis turned in his seat and grinned. "No safer place for you. Especially where we're going to put you."

Angie turned panicked eyes to Alastair.

Alastair touched her knee and warm tremors slid through her at the contact. "Exactly where is that, Clovis?"

Clovis grinned, "You'll see."

They passed through another gate after about fifteen minutes. Angie was surprised at the size of the base and she was equally surprised by the change in scenery as they drove around it. The landscape had quickly changed from the expected one of long, low, brick and cinder block buildings to

wide fields of grass and flowers and then into a densely wooded area split only by a rutted dirt road with the occasional unmarked fork or crossing. Clovis explained that the Marines needed to train for all types of terrain and all types of battle conditions. And while a densely wooded terrain in the US was a vastly different thing from a rain forest in the Congo, the basics were close enough to allow them to train in the special tactics needed to fight in a moist, heavily treed area.

After a while they emerged from the dense, natural forest into a world totally unlike anything they'd ever seen. They passed through another fence line that surrounded hard, parched looking ground which they soon realized was covered in sand. The bright white sand, which started out as just a thin cover over the vegetation free ground, thickened until, as they approached some kind of low-slung structure in the distance, it spread in rolling mounds as far as the eye could see.

It looked like a desert.

Alastair, who had been staring out at the changing landscape silently for several moments, suddenly jerked and looked at his brother. "Middle East?"

Clovis nodded. "Desert training. We even have heating coils buried under the sand to simulate the temps our guys will experience in the desert. We turn them off at night and let the cold take over. Like a real desert. It's really pretty cool."

Alastair nodded.

As they drove further into the desert-like terrain, something large and brown became visible in the distance. After about fifteen minutes, the H2 pulled up to the tall, rocky face of a wide, sharp-edged hill and stopped.

Clovis saw Angie staring at the hill. "One of the things we've had to learn about fighting terrorists in the Middle East is how to do battle in caves. And, since the enemy lives in them, we've learned how to live in them too. Of course our temporary living quarters are a bit fancier than theirs." He grinned. "But other than that we've tried to make the training center as much like a real combat situation as possible."

Alastair nodded. Angie gave the hillside a strange look. But it wasn't until Clovis touched her shoulder and said, "Come on," and started heading towards it that she turned pale.

"I ... I can't go in there." Her large green eyes widened in fear.

Clovis looked at his brother. Alastair put an arm around her shoulders. "What's wrong, Ang?"

She shook her head. Her beautiful eyes sparkled with unshed tears and looked luminous in her paper white face. "I have claustrophobia. I used to have nightmares about being in a dark, tiny underground place."

His gaze softened and he pulled her close, kissing her on the forehead. "I'm a little afraid of small places too. But maybe this isn't that bad. Can you come in with me and check it out and then, if you can't handle it we'll just pull a couple of cots out under the stars and stay outside."

Angie swiped at a tear that had escaped and smiled. "We could do that. That's a good idea."

Alastair grinned back. "It will be just like camping out." She nodded and he turned with his arm still around her shoulders, leading her toward the cave. There was a door set into the wide arc of the cave's natural opening. It was set into cement and stone. From the door, stairs descended into a darker space.

Angie broke out into a sweat.

"I used to have these dreams when I was a kid, where I got lost in this cave and kept bashing my head on those things that hang down from the top..." He turned to Clovis as they hit the first step. "Is that the stalactite or the stalagmite, bro?"

Angie hesitated on that step, her eyes darkening in fear.

Clovis came up and put a large, square hand on Alastair's shoulder, "Stalactite." He gave the shoulder a painful squeeze, "And you dreamed you hit your head because Percy and I were standing over your bed smacking you."

Alastair's eyes widened, "You what? I was terrified of caves and dark places because of that dream."

Clovis laughed and dodged a punch from his younger brother by nine months. "It was your stupid dream, Stair, we just added the special effects."

Angie laughed with them, momentarily forgetting about her fear as they started descending into the structure. "Why did you dream about caves anyway?"

Alastair shook his head, glancing over his shoulder at Alfric, who had been on his phone and joined just in time to hear Angie's question.

"Because we went spelunking one year for a family vacation in Southern Indiana." Alfric answered her with a grin.

Clovis laughed, "And this one cave was full of bats. They were hanging from the ceiling and they were perfectly still."

"Until Stair sneezed and his nose whistled."

Alastair clapped himself on the forehead, "God, I hate when that happens."

"And that stirred the bats up. Unfortunately for Alastair he was standing in the opening and they wanted through it." Clovis laughed, shaking his blond head. "The whole contingent of bats headed right for his head."

Angie covered her mouth with her hand in horror, her laughing green eyes met Alastair's. He shivered theatrically but he was laughing with his brothers.

"You should have seen him dive to the side to avoid them."

Alastair shuddered, "I hit my head on a stalactite and mom and dad thought I was dead for sure."

Alfric smacked him gently on the arm. "But he was just cowering on the floor, his little white girly arms crossed over his head."

Alastair frowned, "Hey, I was seven years old. Cut me some slack."

Clovis laughed, "So after that, every time we'd see him asleep and waving his arms around his head like this..." Clovis and Alfric both made their arms limp and swung them comically around their heads, "we'd go over and smack him on the forehead."

Alfric and Clovis gave each other rock knuckles and Angie screwed her lips up so she wouldn't be caught laughing, "That's awful!"

Alastair nodded enthusiastically, "You see, an unbiased opinion, you're both jerks, and Percy too."

This only made the two brothers laugh even harder.

Angie gave Alastair a commiserating look and shook her head. "I'm glad I never had any brothers."

Alastair muttered, "Tell me about it." But he was smiling.

"So," Clovis said, "What do you think?"

Angie gave a little start and looked around. The Honeybun brothers had succeeded so well in distracting her that she hadn't even noticed she was underground.

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Brita threw the report down on her cluttered desk and scowled at the bulky man sitting across from her. "How the hell did you let this happen, Gates?"

The man lifted fleshy shoulders toward his big, red ears and shook his head. A fat bandage covered the spot on the top of his head where he'd taken a pistol butt to the skull. "I was just watering the pots on the front porch and bam, I was down."

Brita stared hard at him. "Did you really think the damn flowers were more important than your job?"

He shrugged again. "The witnesses were gone and I didn't know it was a choice between the two. Besides, I hate to see flowers wilt."

Brita scrubbed a hand over her face and blew air noisily through her lips. She was already so angry at Percy and now she had to be grateful to him for getting Alastair and Angie out of the house. If they hadn't left an hour before Detective Gates got clocked on the head they might be dead right now. "This is like a damn movie," she muttered, "a bad one."

Gates nodded, "What we need to figure out is how they found out where the witnesses were being held."

Brita screwed up her face, the obvious conclusion making her stomach churn and boil with fear. "I guess we need to consider that we might have a dirty cop on our hands."

Gates looked down at his size twelve feet and kept silent. No cop likes to think that's possible.

Brita dropped into her chair. She sat for a long moment, reluctant to say what she had to say next. But finally she pulled a small pad of lined paper close and grabbed a pencil. "Okay, let's figure out who knew where the witnesses were being held."

Gates lifted his big head and straightened in the chair. "It's gonna be a long list."

She frowned, the pencil poised over the paper. "I know. But it has to be done. And until we figure out where the leak is I'm not going to tell anyone in the department where I'm keeping the witnesses now."

Gates frowned, "Not even me?"

Brita's gaze softened. She'd known Joshua Gates for almost ten years. He was a good cop and an even better man. But at this point she didn't want to trust anyone except Percy's very capable family to keep Angie and Alastair safe. Everyone else was subject to that tiniest bit of uncertainty that made them impossible to trust. She smiled at Gates to soften the message, "Sorry."

He stared hard at her for a moment and then nodded. "I understand, Brita. You're doin' what you need to do." He took a deep breath and then settled his weight forward, resting his thick forearms on his thighs. "Okay ... Clarice would know where we'd stashed them because she had to assign the safe house. As usual, we sent the updated list of protected witnesses to the District Attorney's office. My replacement, Willie Blanks knew, I don't know if he told anyone or not. He knows he's not supposed to but he tends to blather after he's had a few beers so we should probably check out the bar across the street ... see if anyone remembers him coming in there recently and spouting off. The shift cops who've been doing periodic checks of the house knew..."

Brita nodded, writing fast.

Her phone rang and she grabbed it. "Muldane." She frowned. "Did you find it?" She glanced at Gates and rolled her eyes. "All right. Keep looking and let me know as soon as you do." She hung up the phone and dropped her head into her hands, sighing wearily.

"Bad news?"

Brita looked up. "They lost the Escalade."

"Are you shitting me? How the hell did they do that?"

She shook her head. "Apparently a couple of bystanders crashed between us and the Escalade and our perps escaped back down the highway before we could get a car clear."

Graves shook his big head, "Shit, Brita."

"Yeah. Shit it is."

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Chapter Eleven

Other than the arching rock walls and ceiling, the space didn't look like a cave. It was sparse and well ordered, a stainless steel kitchen gleamed at them from one side. Bunk beds, stacked and bolted to the wall, filled the opposite wall. The space between held several clusters of tables and chairs, which created informal gathering areas. The floor beneath their feet was covered in rubber tile and unadorned.

It was cool and just the slightest bit damp in the cave. She thought she could hear water running somewhere in the distance. Angie rubbed her arms and glanced up. The ceiling was natural rock, but bare light bulbs strung on thick, black wire, hung from it to provide stark but adequate lighting in the space. She wiped sweaty palms on her jeans and took deep breaths to calm her rapidly beating heart. "Needs a few rugs, maybe some paint." Her voice cracked a little but she was proud to find that it sounded fairly normal.

Clovis clapped her on the back, not as hard as he would hit his brothers but hard enough to make her stumble forward. "She'll do, Stair. She's a Marine through and through."

Alastair grabbed her so she didn't fall. Angie grinned up at Clovis. "Thanks, Clovis. That's high praise coming from you."

He nodded and motioned toward the bunks. "You'll find a couple of changes of uniform there, and blankets, pillows, towels, etc. The lav's in there," he pointed toward a passageway towards the back of the cave. Soap, shampoo, and toothpaste. The shower's a bit cold but the water's clean

and fresh." He grinned, "There's a natural waterfall a ways back. The kitchen is equipped and there are some basic foodstuffs, but we'll send someone to check in every day to see if you want to go to the NCO club for lunch or dinner." He stood looking around as if trying to figure out what else they would need. Suddenly he headed into the kitchen area. "Oh yeah, and if you're going to be out in the sand at night, use this..." he lifted what looked like a camping lantern off the counter. "It's a black light."

Then he turned to Alfric. "You ready?"

Clovis and Alfric left after promising to return the following day to find out how they were doing. Angie and Alastair stood in the cave for a moment, looking around. Alastair could tell by the pale and sweaty aspect to Angie's face that she was battling her fear of underground spaces. He made a sudden decision. "You know what. Even though you're handling this underground thing extremely well..."

She gave him a quivering smile.

"I think I feel like sleeping outside under the stars tonight. Are you game?"

Angie's face brightened in a wide smile. "You wouldn't mind?"

Alastair shook his head. "I love to camp out. Besides, I think I might have one of those cave nightmares if we stayed in here tonight." He gave her a mischievous grin.

She laughed, "That's almost enough to make me stay underground. It may be my only chance to smack you on the head when you go like this..." and she proceeded to mimic Clovis' and Alfric's imitation of Alastair fighting off the bats.

He laughed. "Cruel woman."

"I'll get the pillows and blankets."

"And I'll get the goodie bag my mom gave you. We'll have a picnic."

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Brita answered her phone on the fourth ring, her breathing harsh as she said, "Hello?" She'd run all the way across the room to grab it before it swung over to voice mail.

"Detective Muldane?"

Brita dropped into her chair, putting her hand over the mouthpiece while she took a couple of deep breaths and settled her heart rate. "Yes."

"This is Selma Burns."

Brita's eyes widened and she grabbed a pad of paper and a pencil. "Mrs. Burns. Have you heard from the kidnappers again?"

"No I haven't. But that's no longer important. I've heard from Debra. She's apparently escaped."

Brita dropped her pencil and sat back in her chair. Her face showing her surprise. "Escaped? How? When? I need to speak with her right away."

"I'm sorry Detective, she won't tell me where she is or who kidnapped her. I tried to get her to tell me ... really I did. But

she's always been so stubborn. Just like her father I'm afraid."

Brita's mind raced. "Mrs. Burns, do we have your permission to trace the phone call?"

There was a thought filled silence, "Trace the phone call? Why, yes, I guess you could do that. I want you to find my daughter, Detective. I'm very worried about her. I'm afraid of what she'll do."

Brita had been signaling for her partner to get him started on the trace but the woman's words stopped her cold. "What *she'll* do, Mrs. Burns? What do you mean?"

Brita heard the woman sigh. "I think she might do something stupid, Detective Muldane. I'm ... I'm afraid she's going to try to blackmail the kidnappers."

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Brian Davies sat in his late model Mercedes sports car and stared up at the window of the room where Debra was staying. He knew she was dabbling in things that were way beyond her ability to control and it scared the shit out of him. The way he figured it he had two choices. He could either go ahead with helping her do what she wanted to do ... or he could do what he knew he should, and save her from herself.

The problem was, he was pretty sure she'd never speak to him again if he did what he knew was the right thing. The

choice really came down to losing her or watching her get badly hurt or even killed.

Brian was under no illusions about the type of people Debra was playing with, and it scared the shit out of him. As usual she wasn't taking the danger aspect seriously enough. She never did. She'd led a pampered and spoiled life and, in some ways, she was still a child. She wanted what she wanted when she wanted it and god help anyone who got in her way.

So despite the fact, Brian reasoned, that she would probably never speak to him again, he cared too much for her to let her set the course she'd laid out for herself. There was only one thing he could do.

He picked up the phone and dialed. When a voice came on the other end he took a deep breath, almost hung up the phone, but then stiffened his spine and said, "Can I talk to the officer in charge of the Burns kidnapping please?"

Debra picked up Louie's cell phone and punched in a number. The line was answered almost immediately.

"What do you want, asshole?"

"It's me."

"Oh. I take it that means Louie's incapacitated."

Remembering what the thug had looked like the last time she'd seen him, bent over holding his balls with a white, plastic knife sticking out of his neck, she smiled. "Yeah. You could say that."

"Good. Have you made the call?"

"I have. I asked for ten million dollars."

The person at the other end whistled. "That's a good number."

She smiled again. "I thought so too."

"Okay. Let's stay as close to the plan as possible. I'll meet you at the plane as soon as you get the money."

"Okay. I'll call you when I have it. Cheers!" She lowered the little, silver phone and started to flip it closed.

"Wait!"

Debra pulled the cell phone back up to her ear. "Yeah?"

"What about Davies?"

She shrugged and moved toward the window. Standing to the side she peered around the curtains. "He's sitting in his car in the back parking lot, under my window. I think he's been watching me. He doesn't have what it takes to do this. I can't count on him. I'm gonna get out of here and find a better place to wait for the money."

"Good. That's smart. You'll have enough money where we're going to buy ten boyfriends if you want to."

Debra grinned, "Now that sounds like a plan." She disconnected and slipped on her shoes. Grabbing her designer leather bag she headed for the door. If she slipped out the front door and took a taxi Brian wouldn't even know she'd left the hotel. Maybe she'd go to her mother's house in Carmel for a couple of days. Her mother wouldn't even know she'd been there. She didn't use the place except when she wanted to throw a large party or impress rich acquaintances who loved dirt, manure, and horses.

Debra shivered. It wouldn't be her favorite place to be. But she could make do for a couple of days. She'd just pretend

she was hiding out in the jungle. With all the flippin' trees around the place it was pretty much like a jungle anyway. Not all that much of a stretch.

As she climbed into the taxi she considered the possibility of snakes and bugs. Sighing she gave the driver an address and sat back to pout. Damn Brian. He ruined everything. Now she had to go fend off wildlife and risk mud puddles. All because he had raisins for balls. It was time to cut him loose anyway.

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Brita waited impatiently until she was ushered into the DA's office. He didn't stand up or even acknowledge her as she came into the room. "DA Burns." She held out her hand.

He glanced up and motioned toward one of the plush, black leather chairs across from his desk, ignoring the offered hand as usual. "Sit down, Detective Muldane. You might as well be comfortable while you tell me you've made no progress on my daughter's case."

Brita sat and crossed her arms over her knees. Her right hand fiddled with the butt of her gun, hidden under her suit jacket. When she realized she was thinking about pulling it out and using it she quickly pulled the hand away to ease temptation. "Actually sir we've learned that your daughter has escaped her kidnappers."

The district attorney looked up, his deep set brown eyes narrowed in surprise. "When did this happen?"

"She escaped sometime last night. Your wife ... your ex-wife ... received a call from her this morning."

He lowered the pen he'd been writing with and gave her his full attention. "Where is she? I'd like to see her. Find out if she's all right."

The words were right but the tone and attitude behind them were just a bit off. Brita prided herself on reading people and, right at that moment, she was reading a lack of real interest in DA Burns' manner. He wanted her to believe he cared that his daughter had escaped. But Brita would bet a year's salary that he didn't. "She wouldn't tell her mother where she was."

The DA slammed a meaty fist on his desk. Several pens flipped into the air. One of them headed toward Brita. She reached up and snagged it out of the air before it hit her face, handing it back to the red faced man behind the desk.

He frowned at her. "Good reflexes Muldane."

"Thank you sir. I played fast-pitch softball in college. Captain of my team."

Burns shook his head. Brita saw his interest in her drain away. She wasn't important enough apparently to keep it.

"I take it you haven't heard from her sir?"

Burns glared at her but didn't respond.

Brita nodded, "How about the kidnappers? Have they tried to contact you?"

He shook his head, "I've been very concerned. I don't know why they haven't called. But I guess if Debra's okay it's not that important anymore."

Brita's intense, golden eyes fixed on him thoughtfully. These Burns folks were certainly a forgiving lot. Just like that they're ready to forgive the kidnappers, as long as the daughter came out of it safely. Very strange. She opened her mouth to tell the DA something along those lines when her cell rang.

Looking at caller ID she saw it was her partner, Bud Shinks. She'd been waiting for his call. "Excuse me, sir, this is important." Flipping it open she said, "Bud. Talk to me."

"The call came from a cell phone. It was registered to one Louie Vittorini."

"Did you run him?"

"I did. He did some time about ten years ago. Just a couple of years for stuff like picking pockets and grabbing purses at bus stops. When he came out he got a job at a company called Black Knight. As far as I can tell it's a security company."

Brita frowned, "Security? As in alarm systems?"

"No. As in bodyguards. They apparently provide protection for visiting entertainers and political folks, in some cases even foreign dignitaries."

"Why not White Knight?"

Bud laughed, "You have the strangest mind, Muldane."

She shrugged, "What can I say. Give me the address please." She punched it into her PDA. "Have you run the company yet?"

She heard him sigh, "First run gave me nothing. The company ownership is obscure to say the least. I've got my best investigator working on it but it's gonna take some time. I think whoever owns the company doesn't want anybody to know he owns it."

Brita frowned, "Okay, let me know if you come up with anything."

"You got it."

Brita disconnected and looked at the DA. "You know a Louie Vittorini or a company called Black Knight?"

The DA picked up a pen and started spinning it between his thick fingers. "Isn't Black Knight some kind of security agency?"

"That would be them. You don't by any chance know who owns the company do you?"

He shook his head, giving her a wry smile. "I barely know of the company, Detective."

She nodded and smiled, "It was worth a try. How about Mr. Vittorini?"

"Don't know him. Is he involved with my daughter's kidnapping?"

Brita stood up. "We don't know yet sir, all we know is that she was using his cell phone. For all we know he could be a boyfriend."

"It's not likely my daughter would be dating a guy like that, Detective."

Brita stared at him. "Really? What kind of guy *is* Louie Vittorini?"

The DA's face flushed and the pen spun off to land in his In Box. "How the hell would I know, Muldane?"

Brita held his gaze, "You tell me. You said she wouldn't go out with his type. How would you know Mr. Vittorini's type, sir?"

The DA stood up and walked around the desk. He stopped just inches away from her, well inside the two foot politeness buffer. "The man's a body guard isn't he? There's a certain type of man who does that job, Detective. That's all I was saying. What exactly are you implying?"

Brita was used to bullies, they didn't bother her at all. She was trained in martial arts, guns, knives, and she was even fairly competent in fencing. She could take care of herself.

Besides, she was taller than he was and he was pudgy.

She leaned into him and spoke softly, enunciating every word. "I wasn't implying anything, DA Burns. I was simply trying to clarify your surprising statement. Goodbye, sir."

She felt his hostile gaze on her back all the way to the door. As she left the building she was calling Bud. He picked up almost before it finished ringing for the first time.

"Hey."

"I need you to get someone to run DA Burns for me. Find out if he's ever used the Black Knight agency. Specifically if he's ever hired Mr. Vittorini as a bodyguard."

"Holy shit, Brita!"

"I know. Just do it."

He sighed, "Yes sir!" and hung up.

Brita disconnected and made a phone call she hadn't planned on making for a while. Percy wasn't at his desk so

she left him a message to call her. She climbed into her car and programmed the address for the Black Knight Agency into her Garmin™. If she got really lucky Mr. Vittorini would be in the office when she arrived.

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"That's the weirdest lantern I've ever seen."

Alastair picked it up and held it in front of her face. "Your teeth are glowing."

She laughed pushing it away. "Why the hell would they have a black light in the lantern?"

He shrugged, "Beats me."

Alastair set it down in the sand and plucked another piece of cold chicken off the plate between them. Then he leaned back with a happy sigh. Angie dropped her freshly stripped chicken leg onto the plate and grabbed an apple. "This tastes pretty good."

Alastair nodded, "My mom's fried chicken is the best. And there's nothing like a little face-off with death to give you an appetite."

Angie nodded. She took a small, thoughtful bite of her apple. Juice ran down her chin and she reached for a napkin. But Alastair reached over and grabbed her chin before she could wipe it. He held it gently between his thumb and forefinger and leaned close. "Let me help you with that." His

tongue slipped out from between softly parted lips and made a slow, warm trail from her chin up to her bottom lip. "Mmm," he said as he lifted his mouth from hers, "I love apple juice, don't you?"

Angie swallowed the bite of apple audibly. Her voice came out in a choked whisper, "I do yes ... but you've just put it in a whole new category for me."

He laughed and captured her lips in a slightly more aggressive kiss. Angie leaned into it, enjoying the way warmth tingled from her lips throughout her body at his touch. She immersed herself in the feel of his lips on hers, his strong arms sliding around her waist, and the way his hair felt soft and bristly at once under her probing fingers.

Alastair reached under her butt and lifted slightly, sliding her smoothly down the blanket until she was on her back half underneath him. The kiss deepened as passion flared between them. Angie wrapped a leg around his thighs and caressed his calf, enjoying the way the soft, red hairs tickled her leg.

Alastair covered her body with his own, taking most of his weight on his elbows so he wouldn't crush her. The lower half of his body pressed hard into hers.

Angie moaned and slid her hands under his Marine green t-shirt to caress the firm, warm skin of his chest. She trailed her nails gently up his ribcage and Alastair sighed in pleasure against her lips. Her fingers tweaked his nipples and then traveled to find the small patch of soft hairs between the perfect mounds of his pecs. She was enjoying the feel of the silky patch as he slid a hand under her Marine green.

Angie gasped as his hand found her breast. He stiffened in surprise and lifted his head to look at her, apparently just realizing she'd gone commando under the t-shirt.

Angie grinned at him. "The dress was casual tonight."

He waggled his eyebrows comically, making her laugh. "I've always liked casual dress."

"Me too." She agreed with a giggle.

His lips lowered to hers again and wiped the smile right off her face. She pulled her hand from beneath his t-shirt and wrapped both arms around his neck, dragging him down into a kiss that was suddenly filled with vibrant need. Alastair inhaled her desire and fed it with his own.

His body pulsed and throbbed with urgency and he thought he'd die if he didn't get naked and embed himself deeply into her very soon. With that goal uppermost in his mind, Alastair broke the kiss and reached for the soft cotton at the waist of Angie's shirt. Lifting it up with the intention of pulling it off over her head, he caught a glimpse of a plump naked breast with a perfect pink nipple and his mind completely drained of every thought but the one where he drew that perfect nipple into his mouth. He allowed this wonderful fantasy to guide him and did just that. Lowering his mouth to the hard, little bud, he parted his lips and covered it, pulling it gently into his mouth on a sigh.

Angie moaned and arched her back, holding his head to her quivering breast as if she was afraid he'd leave before finishing the job. Alastair gently sucked on the soft, fragrant mound and then moved to the other breast, which was just as

delicious and just as eager for his mouth, already peaking with need as he lowered his lips around it.

Angie's hands kneaded his short, red hair frantically as he gently ministered to her breasts. Suddenly she gave the bristly strands a tug. "We need to get rid of these clothes."

Alastair complied by pulling her t-shirt the rest of the way off over her head and then helping her pull his shirt off too.

His nimble fingers made short work of the button and zipper of her camo-pants and he had them over her narrow hips and off her feet within seconds. He stopped for a moment to take in the perfection of her lean form. Angie lay before him on the blanket, caressed by the soft light of a bright, fat moon, her pale skin glowing slightly from the black light lantern at their feet. Her long, brown hair curled softly over her shoulders and around her breasts. A matching patch of brown silk made a perfect triangle between her thighs. "You're beautiful." Alastair breathed.

Angie made a small sound that was suspiciously like a whimper. "Get your clothes off, Stair."

It was the first time she'd used the nickname his family had used for years. More than anything else she'd done, that small thing cemented firmly into his mind how much he needed and wanted to have her, in his bed and in his life for the foreseeable future.

He popped the button on the camo-pants with one hand and unzipped them. Angie helped him drag them down to his knees and he kicked them off. Her hands were on his throbbing erection before he managed to untangle the pants from his feet and fling them away onto the sand.

He nearly groaned at the incredible feeling of her hands on his shaft and balls. She seemed less skilled than curious but her instincts for what would feel good to him were spot on. He leaned his head on one elbow and closed his eyes, allowing her unfettered access to the part of his body he fully intended to bury deep inside her at the earliest opportunity. It seemed right, for the moment, to enjoy the exploration she seemed to want.

Her hands were incredibly soft and felt like warm silk against his taut, over sensitized skin. She held his erection in one hand, gently caressing the fat tip with a finger as she cupped his balls gently with the other hand, squeezing lightly and running a finger over the spot just behind them that sent lightning bolts of pleasure up his spine whenever she touched it.

He was nearly panting after only a couple of minutes and knew he had to make her stop or all the fun would be over even before it had started.

Grabbing her hand, Alastair gently pushed her onto her back beside him, and tucked her tightly against his body. He slid his finger into his mouth to wet it and reached out to encircle the rigid, pink nipple closest to him with the moistened finger, enjoying the way the skin of her nipple puckered under his touch. Then he ran the finger across the soft mound and over to the other nipple, repeating the caress there.

Angie moaned in delighted frustration and tried to grab him again. He twisted his hips away and stuck the finger he'd been tantalizing her body with between her parted lips. She

closed her lips over the invading digit and sucked it into the hot, wet cave of her mouth, wrapping her tongue around it and using her lips to hold it firmly in place as she sucked gently.

Alastair pulled the finger out of her mouth and slid it into another hot, wet spot that eagerly accepted it. Angie cried out as the finger plunged deep into the core of her building pleasure and started moving in the age-old rhythm of the sexual dance.

As he made gentle love to her with his finger, Alastair's thumb found the hard, little bud that held the key to her pleasure and rubbed it in a gentle, but insistent circular motion. Angie's head dropped back almost immediately and she cried out in violent release, her slim body vibrating with intense pleasure.

Alastair lowered his lips to hers as she settled into the aftershocks of her orgasm. He rolled away from her just long enough to slip a condom on and then moved to cover her, rubbing his hard flesh against her belly as his lips found her neck and his hands caressed her slim hips. She arched against him, begging him with her body to join the dance. He groaned as the silky skin of her belly caressed the hard length of him and slid into her. Angie gasped and immediately fell over the edge into another climax.

Her body contracted around his throbbing flesh and he gritted his teeth to ride it out. All he really wanted to do was plunge into her, fast and furious, until he joined her in that incredible ride, but he didn't want their first time together to be marred by a too speedy release so he forced himself to

stay completely still until her body eased into the final, toe curling aftershocks of her orgasm.

Her body gradually softened beneath him. Alastair slid himself into her more deeply, enjoying the delicious friction as her wet heat clenched him with residual tension. When he'd buried himself completely, he stopped, wriggling gently so that his body brushed against the hard bud of her clitoris.

Angie moaned and moved her hips as if encouraging him to move faster, harder. Alastair grabbed her hips with both hands. "Not yet. Relax."

She complied with a tiny whimper that made his blood heat. The tingle of anticipation he'd been feeling surged into a flood of expectation that rushed through his system and left him vibrating with need. He slid his throbbing shaft slowly back out, stopping just before the thick head pulled free, and wriggled his hips to tweak her clitoris gently. Then he plunged back in, deeply, aggressively, and stopped again. He groaned as their bellies met at the end of the thrust. Angie whimpered again, vibrating with the desire to make him move, but she stayed still as he'd asked her to, biting her lip and watching him with need-charged eyes.

Alastair wriggled his hips so that his body brushed against her clitoris again and Angie cried out. Just like that she went over the edge, screaming his name as her body quaked in a violent climax that nearly ripped all reason from his mind.

Alastair realized he was lost as her body clenched his, pulling release from him as easily as her cries ripped away his restraint. He growled and jerked into movement, hard and fast, plunging into her without a thought for anything beyond

the next wave of pleasure, the next shared breath, the next slide of silky, fragrant skin against his.

His nearly frantic thrusts were eagerly accepted by her pliant, trembling body. Her eyes glazed under the buildup of another earth-shattering orgasm. This time when she crashed over the edge, she took him with her. As her body clenched and pulled at his he threw back his head and climbed into the vortex with her, groaning into the black, night sky as his world shattered into a mirage of feelings, sensations, and toe curling emotional bursts.

Alistair's body stiffened under its final surge and then slammed one last time into her soft, grasping haven, erupting into her as she softened in wondrous release beneath him.

They lay there for several minutes, kissing softly and reveling in the aftermath of the violent emotional storm. Then Alastair reluctantly rolled off of her warm, pliant body and stretched out beside her, pulling her against his side so he could continue to touch and explore.

Angie closed her eyes and gave a shuddering sigh. She felt like her bones and muscles had turned to rubber. When she moved she felt a new soreness that made her smile. She felt good. Really good. And she wanted more.

She opened her eyes and looked at Alastair, he smiled down at her. "Hey."

She smiled back, "Hey yourself."

He leaned over her and settled his lips onto hers. Angie breathed in the addictive male scent of him and sighed against his lips. She could stay there, just like that, forever.

But then something brushed against her foot and she broke the kiss, looking down.

Something huge, blue, and glowing stood in the sand beside her feet, looking at her. The thing made a high pitched chirping sound and twitched deadly looking claws.

As she instinctively jerked her feet away, the glowing blue thing lowered its front end and lifted its deadly looking tail into the air. Angie's scream burst through the night like gunfire.

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Chapter Twelve

Alastair threw an apple at the giant bug and missed. The deadly looking, neon stinger on the end of the tail swung toward the apple and smacked it, hard, spraying juice into the air in a barely visible arc.

He looked around for something else to throw at the monstrous bug. Grapes ... no, not likely to do much harm. Napkins ... ah no. A chicken leg? Alastair shook his head, too hard to aim. His head swiveled as the thing chirped angrily at him. Panicking and out of weapons, Alistair grabbed the picnic basket and dumped it out. He flipped it over and flung it toward the ground in front of his feet, just as the angry neon bug started scuttling rapidly toward him.

He gave a less than manly scream and leapt away, but the basket, amazingly, landed over the thing and settled into the sand, safely trapping what Alastair suspected was the world's biggest scorpion. He realized he was shaking and laughed at himself. Expecting the bug to burst from under the basket or do something incredible like burrow its way out, Alastair looked around for Angie, fully intending to force her back into the bunker.

She was nowhere to be seen.

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The phone rang in a dark, otherwise silent office and a figure in a leather desk chair swiveled away from the windows behind the desk to answer it.

"Have you found them?"

"They've been taken to the military base in Ethosburo."

The figure in the dark office swore colorfully. Then he thought about it for a bit and said, "Do we have anybody there?"

"No. But we know of someone we might be able to get information from. He worked on the crew that built the desert training area on the compound. He should know something about getting in and out."

The figure in the chair thought about this for a minute. "Can you get the information without him figuring out why you want it?"

"I think so."

"Thinking so isn't good enough. If he suspects why you're asking you'll need to kill him."

An uncomfortable silence followed this. "Okay."

"Keep me posted." The figure hung up the phone and swiveled away from the desk. The Indianapolis skyline looked beautiful in the clear night. Just on the horizon it looked like a storm might be brewing.

That was very appropriate. Because another kind of storm had been building in Indianapolis for a very long time. And soon, somebody was gonna get very wet.

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Angie emerged from the cave with a large kitchen knife in one hand. Her face was pale but she stalked toward him with determined steps. She was still naked and her firm, round breasts bounced happily as she stalked toward him, Alastair watched her, smiling widely. She had a pair of combat boots shoved on over her bare feet.

"Nice boots."

Angie stopped beside him, the large knife held point upward in her hand and her large, green eyes scouring the sand around them for signs of the enemy. "Where is it?"

Alastair pointed to the overturned picnic basket. "What are you gonna do, filet it?"

She stared at the basket and shivered.

"Come here." Carefully avoiding the huge knife, Alastair drew her into his arms. "Thank you for coming back to rescue me from the demon under the basket. It seems you're making a habit of saving my life."

She shrugged. "What's that motto? Leave no man behind?" He felt her lips curve into a smile against his chest.

Alastair laughed. "Well, thanks, Marine."

Angie lifted her head from his chest and grinned up at him. Then her eyes swung to the basket. "What *is* that thing?"

"I think it's a scorpion."

"Do we have scorpions in Indiana?"

"Apparently we have really big ones."

The first, fat drop of rain hit their heads and they looked up. Overhead the sky had grown dark and roiled with a thick, grey cloud cover. The drops started coming a little faster.

A strong gust of wind had Alastair grabbing up the lantern, the blanket they'd been lying on, and Angie's hand. "Let's go. It looks like we're sleeping inside tonight."

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Brita climbed out of her car and headed toward the house. From the back yard a cacophony of canine sounds greeted her. "Okay, okay, I'm coming," she told the frantic canine crew. This announcement only set them off more. The whole crew launched into song as she turned the key in the front door lock.

Brita just shook her head and smiled.

Her cell phone rang as she was settling her purse and keys on the foyer table. Looking at caller ID she saw it was her partner again. "Talk to me."

"You aren't gonna believe who just called me."

Brian Davies was a big guy. Strong looking, with a square jaw, close cropped light brown hair, and broad shoulders. His pretty blue suit looked expensive and fit him like it was made for him. His white shirt was crisp and clean and set off the gently tanned skin of his face and neck nicely. He smelled good too.

"Mr. Davies." Brita greeted him as she shook his hand. "Thank you for coming in today. We're anxious to locate Miss Burns. Do you know where she is?" Brita slid into a chair across the table from Brian Davies.

He shook his head. "She was staying at the Conrad up until about an hour ago. But I have a feeling she won't be there when I get back."

Brita glanced at Bud and he nodded, heading out of the room to send somebody to the pricey downtown Indianapolis hotel. Then she looked back across the table at Davies. "What makes you think she'll run?"

He shrugged. "Instinct. I have really good instincts about people ... which I should have listened to months ago where Debra was concerned."

Brita cocked her head at him. "What do you mean?"

Davies sighed. "She's just different, Detective Muldane. She always wants ... more. She's never satisfied."

"Greedy? Ambitious?"

He nodded. "I guess you could call her those things." He looked up at Brita. "I thought for a while I was falling in love with her. But this whole mess made me realize it wasn't love." He smiled a bit self-consciously. "I've always considered myself a smart guy, Detective, but I was pretty much a dope on this one."

Brita smiled at him. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Mr. Davies. We're all suckers for love occasionally." Just the tiniest note of bitterness crept into Brita's voice and she quickly straightened her shoulders, refusing to let her problems with Percy interfere with her job.

But Davies had noticed, "You too, Detective?"

She stared hard at him for a moment and then sighed, nodding. "Unfortunately, yes."

Davies grinned at her. "Well," he passed her his card, "if you ever find yourself in need of companionship, I'd love to take you to dinner some time. Just to talk."

Brita's golden brown eyes widened, she'd just been propositioned in the middle of an investigation. Amazing. Shaking her head she focused a newly hostile look on him. "I don't mix business with pleasure Mr. Davies."

He shrugged, looking back down at the hands he had folded together on the table.

"Mr. Davies, if you consider yourself smart and a good judge of character, why are you working for a putrid piece of sewer flotsam like Mr. Bigg?"

Davies' head shot up and his eyes narrowed. "How do you know that I work for him?"

She snorted, "Come on, Mr. Davies, we're not stupid."

He held her gaze for a moment and then gave a humorless, self deprecating laugh. "I joined the company right out of college. I was pretty full of myself and thought I was gonna change the world. I didn't want to believe the things my friends and family told me about the guy. He offered me a lot of money."

Brita gave him a knowing smile, "And now?"

"He hasn't brought me into his inner circle. I don't know anything for sure, but I've been trying to find out exactly what he's into for the last year. I figure if I can help shut the

guy down it might go a little ways toward salvaging my soul for taking the job with him in the first place."

Brita frowned, "Mr. Davies, do yourself a favor and just quit. You don't want to mess around with guys like that. He'll eat you for a mid-morning snack and then hack you up again and give you to his dogs."

Davies grimaced, "Quite the visual, Detective."

It was Brita's turn to shrug. "Not much of an exaggeration though, I'm afraid."

He nodded but didn't say anything, just stared at his folded hands.

"What do you think Miss Burns is up to?"

His head shot up, "Up to?"

Brita nodded. "Why hasn't she come forward and told the police she's escaped?"

He frowned, "I'd rather not answer that."

Brita stood up and walked over to the water dispenser against the far wall. Grabbing a paper cone she dispensed some of the icy liquid into it. She held it toward Mr. Davies and he shook his head. She took a long sip before redirecting her penetrating, golden gaze toward him. "She's going to get herself killed."

He jumped as if jolted with a thousand volts of electricity. Then he sighed. "I know. That's why I came to you."

Brita sat back down. "So?"

He looked up at her, his hazel eyes filled with sadness, "She made a phone call when I was at the Conrad with her."

Brita waited and sipped.

He blew out a breath and stood up to pace.

Brita continued to wait.

Finally he turned to her and shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks with obvious frustration, "I think it was to the kidnappers. She's demanding ten million dollars."

Brita just whistled.

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Percy closed his office door and glanced at his watch. Nine O'clock, Brita should be home. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and punched in her number. The phone rang several times and then her voice mail kicked in. He left a message asking her to call him and disconnected.

She wasn't answering his calls. He would have to go to Plan B. Maybe some roses. Percy took the elevator down to the ground floor and headed out of the building, waving at the security guard on the way out. "Good night Fred."

"Good night Mr. Honeybun." The elderly man nodded toward Percy as he opened the door and walked out into a light drizzle under a roiling sky and some pretty scary wind. Typical Indiana summer weather. His car was parked a couple of blocks down the street in a lot. Normally he enjoyed a brisk walk after a hard day of inactivity in the office but the current weather wasn't exactly conducive to a pleasant stroll. He put his head down and tried to pull his suit coat up over his head, grimacing as fat raindrops plopped onto the expensive

material of his custom made coat. Praying that at least the heavy stuff would wait until he was in his car and headed safely toward home, Percy picked up the pace.

He was only a block from the lot where his lone Mercedes sat under a bright street light when a huge clap of thunder exploded overhead and the skies opened. He didn't even hear the large, dark colored car pulling up beside him or see the big man jumping out of it.

His first awareness that he wasn't alone on the street came when a huge, rock hard fist connected with his jaw and he hit the sidewalk hard, head first. The light of the street lamp faded quickly behind his eyelids as unconsciousness pulled him into its grip.

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"It's a giant desert hairy scorpion." Clovis informed them. "We brought hundreds of them in from Arizona."

Angie gave him an incredulous look, "Uh ... why?"

Clovis grinned, "We've done everything we could to make the training ground as accurate as possible. Of course these are little guys compared to some of the scorpions our guys will encounter in the Middle East."

Alastair grimaced, "This is one big assed bug, Clovis. How big do these suckers get?"

Clovis shrugged, "The long tailed African scorpion can get up to eight inches long. This one's only about five inches long ... squishable."

Angie made a moue of disgust, "Maybe you want to squish that under your boots, but I certainly don't."

The thing looked ugly but harmless in its big jar. Clovis had arrived several moments earlier with a particularly hefty looking Marine who hadn't seemed at all concerned by the giant bug under the basket. He'd simply pulled a pair of gloves out of the jeep and scooped the thing into the jar they'd found in the bunker's small kitchen. The Marine, whose name was Private First Class Linus Jeeves, was currently making pancakes for them in their kitchen.

Alastair stared at the jar and shivered, "I guess I've figured out why the lantern has a black light in it."

Clovis grinned, "I thought about warning you but it seemed like it would be more fun if you figured it out for yourself."

Alastair frowned at his brother, "Gee thanks, we could have been killed."

Clovis snorted at this, "Nah. This fella wouldn't have killed you. Mostly you would have been a little sore and maybe numb in the bite area. Of course you could have foamed at the mouth a little."

Clovis turned to share a grin with Private First Class Linus Jeeves, who was choking back laughter over his pancakes.

Angie scowled at Clovis, "Very funny, Clovis. You know payback's a bitch right?"

Clovis' grin widened, "Bring it sister. I have seven brothers. If you think you can do anything to me that hasn't already been done you're delusional."

Angie favored him with a "look" and the grin slid away.

"Obviously you aren't aware that the female mind can be both devious and vengeful, Master Sergeant Honeybun. We can conjure up methods of torture you haven't even dreamed of. I personally have left many a man quivering and drooling and begging me for pity with nary more than a single glance or a casual word, supplied at the right time in the right place."

Clovis gulped visibly. "You don't scare me."

Angie's smile wasn't very nice. "We'll see won't we?"

Alastair laughed.

Clovis frowned at him, "Right there, in that moment, she looked just like mom didn't she?"

Alastair nodded, "She did indeed, bro."

Angie slanted them a glance, "And did you fear your mother, Clovis?"

He gulped again and nodded. "I certainly did. Still do, in fact."

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Percy's eyes fluttered open on a jolt of pain. He groaned as his head throbbed. Someone was bent over him and he

realized that his cheek stung as if it had been slapped a few times. The figure above him was blurry. As he squinted to try to focus his vision the figure wavered and split in two.

"He's finally coming around. Bastard's got a glass jaw apparently."

Percy tried to push himself upright but a meaty hand on his chest shoved him back down. He landed hard on the cold floor, his head slamming painfully. "Son of a bitch," he murmured. His vision wavered again and it was only through pure steel-headedness that he managed to pull it into focus. Finally he was looking at a short but massively built man with long, slicked back hair and a large bandage on his neck. "Who the hell are you?"

The wide, pock-marked face split in a grin. The man had large, flat white teeth that looked like Chiclets. "I'mb your worbd nightmare, pretty boy."

Percy snickered, "Very original."

The man reached down and slapped Percy. Pain seared through his entire body. His head felt like a bruised tomato, like he'd been pounded several times with a baseball bat. He lay back and closed his eyes. "I think I'll just lie here a while, get some rest."

He sensed movement from above and suddenly he was grabbed under the arms and dragged to a standing position. He sucked in a breath as his head exploded into tiny little pieces around him. As the pain receded he opened his eyes and looked around. Amazingly his head still appeared to be on his shoulders.

Something warm and wet trickled down his face and he automatically went to wipe it. The hand he'd tried to raise jerked to a stop with a painful jolt. He looked down to find his wrists encased in thick zip strips. "Are you shitting me?"

The thug who'd pulled him to his feet gave him a shove that almost sent him sprawling again. He lurched toward a hard, straight backed chair in the center of the room.

"Sid down asshole!"

Percy dropped into the chair. He breathed deeply on a wave of nausea. Sweat popped out across his forehead and his shoulders protested painfully. Apparently he'd been cuffed for a while.

The thug bent over him, bringing his ugly face within a couple of inches of Percy's. His breath smelled like garlic and onions. Percy forced himself not to grimace and lean away. "That's some nose you got goin' there buddy. Run into a wall?"

The thug reached up and touched the red and swollen object in the center of his face. Purplish arcs decorated the space under both of his eyes. "Bitch broke my nose," he murmured, his ugly face turning angry as if he'd just then remembered he was pissed off about it. Probably he had. Percy decided the guy had the intelligence of a very small bug.

Percy watched the guy fondling his nose for a while and bit back a few sarcastic remarks, deciding that his head could do without any more trauma right at that moment. Finally the thug turned his angry face toward Percy again.

Percy decided he could trust himself to speak without getting into more trouble, "Why did you drag me here and truss me up?" He lifted his bound hands toward the angry, tomato nosed thug.

"You have the unlucky distinction of being related to someone we need to kill.

Percy squinted at the battered thug. His head was killing him and he was having a hard time understanding the guy with his nasal infirmity. But he was pretty sure he'd heard the guy say he wanted to kill Alastair.

Suddenly the fog cleared from his brain and he realized he was looking at one of the guys who'd been chasing Alastair and Angie.

Well, well, well. "So you're one of the guys trying to kill my brother?"

The door opened and a taller, even more broadly built man with long, blond hair, slicked back into a ponytail, entered the room. He glanced at the first thug and the smaller man nodded.

The taller thug smiled a mean little smile and advanced on Percy. "Mr. Percival Honeybun. You are a fancy assed lawyer with a fruity name. I think you've tried your last case girly boy. It's time to teach your nosy brother a few lessons.

"Oh oh! I need recruits ... fast!" Percy muttered, just before the man's enormous hand swung toward him.

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Brita was leaving the building when her cell rang again. With a muttered curse she looked at caller ID and flipped it open. "Talk to me, Shinks."

Bud Shinks didn't waste any time. "The DA has been a customer of the Black Knight protection agency for ten years. He's not only worked with Mr. Vittorini on several occasions, but the agency has been a very generous supporter of the DA's political aspirations ... if you know what I mean."

Brita sighed, "I do know what you mean. It looks like our DA may be up to his fat butt in this kidnapping thing. Chances are pretty good it was all a scam. The big question is why?"

"Follow the money, Brit. In our world it's the root of all evil."

Brita thought about this for a moment. "You're right, Bud. Can you run that down for me? I need to go back to speak with the girl's mother. She has a lot of money, and she's the only one who got a ransom letter. She's the obvious place to start."

Brita hung up with her partner and headed for her car. Back to the charmed world of the rich and sort of famous.

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Chapter Thirteen

The pancakes were long gone and the tiny kitchen had been cleaned up. Clovis had given Alastair a tour of the cave and the adjoining passageways, including the one they would take if they needed a back way out. They were sitting around the jar with the scorpion in it and Jeeves was entertaining them with stories of their transport from Arizona and subsequent release into the training area. The sound of another jeep in the distance brought their heads up. Alastair looked at Clovis and he stood. "Something's up. They knew I was out here so there was no need to send another jeep out for you." He headed out of the bunker into the bright, hot sun.

Alastair and Angie followed him. The jeep jerked to a stop in front of Clovis as they came up behind him. The marine inside jumped out as the car still rocked on its wheels from the abrupt stop. He saluted.

Clovis returned the salute, "Stand down Marine, what have you got for me?"

The young, fresh faced soldier cast a look toward Alastair and Angie.

"Report, Marine!" Angie jumped as Clovis used his drill instructor voice.

The young Marine saluted, "Sir, yes Sir! We received a call from Detective Shinks this morning, sir. It appears a man's body has been discovered in Watertown, sir."

Clovis cocked his bristly red-blond head, "And?"

"Sir, the detective told me to inform you that the man has a connection to his current case."

Clovis glanced at Alastair and Angie. "In what way?"

"I don't know, sir. He wants you to call him."

The marine handed Clovis a small piece of paper with a number on it.

Clovis took it and stood frowning down at it. "Why didn't detective Muldane call us?"

The young marine shrugged "He didn't say, sir. Permission to leave."

Clovis saluted, "Dismissed." As the jeep rumbled back through the sand toward the front of the compound Clovis turned back to Alastair. "I don't like this, Stair. Brita's been running this operation from the very beginning. I'm not comfortable with the idea of dealing with her partner now. I don't know him and he doesn't know us."

"I hope nothing's happened to Brita."

Alastair put an arm around Angie and gave her a light squeeze. "I'm sure Brita's fine. She's probably just busy with the case and asked her partner to contact us."

But Alastair shared a look with Clovis. They knew Brita wouldn't have had her partner call them unless something had gone down. The question was ... what?

Clovis punched the number into his cell phone and waited. "It's Clovis Honeybun. I heard you have a dead body that might be connected to my brother's case..."

Alastair grimaced at Angie. They really hadn't thought of their predicament as a "case" but apparently it had escalated to one.

"Unh huh. Yeah. Are you sure? Yeah, okay. I'll be right there."

Clovis pushed the disconnect on his phone and turned to Jeeves, who had been hovering in the door to the bunker. "Stay with them, marine. I need to leave for a while."

Jeeves saluted, "Sir, yes sir!" and then watched as Clovis climbed into the jeep. Clovis turned back to Alastair and Angie. "You two stay buttoned up here. It sounds like things are coming to a head and I don't want you mixed up in this. It could get ugly."

Alastair stepped up to the jeep. "What the hell's going on Clovis? We have a right to know."

Clovis sighed, tapping thick fingers on the jeep's dusty steering wheel. "Okay, but I don't want you to go off half cocked."

Alastair shrugged, "I promise I won't go off half cocked."

Clovis didn't look convinced but he finally nodded, "Percy has disappeared and they've found the body of a man about his age down by the river. I need to go look at the body."

Alastair's face went completely white. Angie's knees buckled in shock and Alastair had to grab at her to keep her from falling. "Holy shit!" Alastair mumbled as he pulled Angie against his chest. Her tears soaked his tan, military issue t-shirt. He looked at his brother over Angie's head. "I want to know everything you find out as soon as you find it out, Clovis."

Clovis' blue gray eyes locked on Alastair's and he gave a slight nod. "You got it, bro. In the meantime. You need to stay here where I know you're safe."

Alastair nodded in reluctant acceptance. He watched the jeep fly away from them and wished he was in it. If Percy had been killed because of him ... well ... Alfric wasn't the only Honeybun who could be a scary SOB.

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Debra Burns flicked a piece of grass off her slim, designer slacks and grimaced at the clump of something brown and lumpy on the bottom of her expensive pumps. Gingerly, with two fingers, she plucked the pump off her slim foot and dropped it into the trash can beside the ornate, mahogany desk in her mother's study. The other pump followed with a loud crash.

"Country life should be reserved for criminals and ugly people," she murmured.

The phone stopped ringing on the other end and a voice answered. "Yeah?"

"It's me."

"Oh," the voice sounded relieved, "I thought it was your mother."

Debra rolled her eyes. "After all these years you're still afraid of her aren't you?"

"I'm not afraid of her! But she did try to cut off one of my favorite parts once when I was sleeping. She's a very frightening woman."

"Yeah, right." Debra shook her head. "Did Bigg agree to the plan?"

"In principal yes, I haven't talked him into using your boyfriend for the pickup yet though. He wants to send one of his thugs."

Debra frowned, "Well, that wouldn't be perfect, but we can work around it if he decides Brian can't be trusted."

A small silence met this statement. "And how do you propose to do that? Have you seen these guys?"

"I've not only seen them but I stuck a plastic knife into one of them. Don't overestimate them daddy dearest, they're just testicles with legs and ears."

"Don't call me that ... I hate it when you call me that."

"Whatever." She smiled evilly, she knew full well he hated it, which was exactly why she did it. "Let me know when the pickup is set. And hurry it up will you? Being in the country gives me a rash."

"I think you'll survive. These things can't be rushed."

She lowered the phone from her ear and flipped it the bird. Then she hung up.

She was surrounded by incompetents and boobs.

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Selma Burns opened the door herself. Brita had been bent over her cell phone, discovering to her dismay that the

battery on it was dead, and looked up expecting the maid. It took her slightly back to see the older woman's face, red and teary eyed. "Detective Muldane."

Brita extended her hand. "Mrs. Burns. How are you? Have you heard from your daughter?"

The woman's response was to step back into the house. Leaving the door open for Brita to follow.

The older woman walked into the elegantly and expensively appointed living room and motioned toward a cream colored leather chair. "Please have a seat, Detective. Can I get you something?"

Brita sat and shook her head, stuffing her useless cell phone into the pocket of her short, leather jacket. "I'm fine, thanks."

Selma Burns nodded and walked to the wall of windows that looked out over the city. She stood looking out, her back to Brita. After a moment, without turning around she said, "My daughter won't return my calls. I have no idea where she is. But I did receive a phone call from her kidnappers." She finally turned and Brita could see tears glistening in her once beautiful, green eyes. "They're going to kill her, Detective. She's trying to extort money from them and they've threatened to kill her if I don't pay them back what she's extorting ... and then some."

Brita scrunched up her face. "What?"

Selma Burns gave a bitter laugh. "I know, it's quite a contorted mess isn't it?"

Brita shook her head. "How much do they want?"

"Fifteen million."

Brita whistled.

Selma Burns nodded. "I'm a wealthy woman, Detective but I can't come up with that kind of money at the drop of a hat. It will take some time. I don't think they'll wait. I'm afraid my daughter is as good as dead."

"When did you receive this call, Mrs. Burns?"

"Last night."

"On your home line?"

"Yes."

Brita nodded. "I'd like your permission to go through your phone records, Mrs. Burns. Maybe the kidnappers were careless and we'll be able to trace the call back."

The older woman shrugged, "Of course."

Brita sat watching Mrs. Burns for a long moment, thoughts swirling in her mind. She'd always prided herself on being a good judge of people. That was one of the reasons she'd become a cop. And her gut was telling her that Selma Burns was an innocent in this mess. For the moment she decided to go with her gut. "Have you had any other communication with the kidnappers, Mrs. Burns?"

The woman shook her graying blond head and sat down as if her knees had given out on her. "No."

Brita decided to do something she'd been wanting to do since she'd first met the woman. "Mrs. Burns, I'd like to speak honestly with you about your husband. May I?"

The tear-filled green gaze swung to her, filled with surprise. "Of course."

"I've been ... confused ... about his attitude throughout all this. And the fact that he didn't hear from the kidnappers. Do you think it's possible he orchestrated the kidnapping?"

The woman looked genuinely shocked. "Detective Muldane, that's an outrageous accusation!"

Brita shook her head, "It's not an accusation, Mrs. Burns, it's simply a question of capability. Would you say that, under the right circumstances, your husband would be capable of this type of thing?"

"Absolutely not, Detective. I know he's a difficult man. I lived with him for twenty years. He can be a consummate ass, but he would never put his daughter in this kind of danger for money. He's just not wired that way."

Brita tried to ignore the pang of disappointment. She'd been building a pretty strong case in her mind against the DA. "What if it wasn't for money?"

"What other reason could they possibly have had?"

Brita shrugged, "What if he was being threatened, or was at risk of losing his position as DA?"

She looked down at her hands, which were twisting in her lap. Obviously this was a different matter. Finally she said, "I still don't think he'd do it. He's a very selfish man, Detective Muldane, but he loves our daughter, despite their differences. He wouldn't willingly put her into danger."

Brita nodded and stood. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Burns. If you hear from the kidnappers again will you contact me immediately?"

Selma Burns stood too. "Of course."

Brita turned toward the door.

"Detective?"

She turned back. "Yes?"

"My husband wouldn't be capable of orchestrating our daughter's kidnapping, but I'd bet my eyes on the fact that his sleazy little wife would."

It was Brita's turn to be shocked. She tried to cover it but was pretty sure she didn't succeed. "Why do you say that?"

The older woman shrugged, "Just call it woman's intuition."

Or jealousy, Brita concluded silently. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Burns."

"Good bye, Detective Muldane."

Brita could feel her probing gaze as she walked toward the door and left.

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Alfric met him at the site as he arrived. Clovis stopped the jeep and hopped out, greeting his brother with a nod. Alfric placed a hand on Clovis' shoulder and led him away from the assemblage of cops and forensics people who were milling around.

"It's not Percy."

Clovis sagged in relief. "Thank God."

Alfric nodded. "The body has been identified as someone from a work crew that does special landscaping projects."

Clovis frowned, "Landscaping? So it has nothing to do with the Burns kidnapping?"

"Actually, I think it has a lot to do with it. He was on the crew that developed the training desert at the base."

Clovis swore. "Okay, that's not good."

Alfric shook his head. "No, it isn't. I suspect they pumped the poor guy for information about access to the base and then killed him."

Clovis' probing blue-gray gaze shot to Alfric's and he swore again, turning away.

Alfric grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

"Back to the base. Stair and Angie aren't safe there anymore."

Alfric shook his head. "I sent some of my men there already. They should be arriving shortly. Whoever killed this guy won't try anything until after dark anyway. They're safe enough for now."

Clovis didn't look convinced. "I'd still like to go ba..."

"I need your help rounding up Percy."

Clovis narrowed his eyes at his younger brother. "You know where he is?"

Alfric grinned, "Of course. You don't think I'd just let him walk around unprotected do you? I fitted him with a mic and a tracking device. The kidnappers have him."

"And you know where they're holding them?"

"I do."

"Then why haven't you gotten him out?"

"I was kind of hoping Percy would be able to get some information about who we're dealing with before I pulled him out."

Clovis nodded. "So did you get that information?"

Alfric grimaced, "Unfortunately no. But I need to get him out of there."

"Why now?" Clovis grabbed Alfric's arm and pulled him toward the jeep.

Alfric jerked his arm away and nodded toward the H2. "Let's take this, it's faster and it's bullet proof."

Clovis swung toward the Hummer. Alfric didn't answer his question until they were seated in the Hummer and roaring away from the murder scene.

"Alf?"

He turned to his older brother and grimaced. "They beat him up pretty good last night, bro. I feel the need to kick me some greasy haired thug ass."

Clovis cracked his knuckles in response. "As long as you leave some of that fairy ass for me."

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By the time Brita got her phone plugged in to her car charger she had ten missed messages. She called her partner first, since he'd logged at least six of those. "Hey, it's me, what's up?"

Brita listened and her face grew progressively paler. "Where are you now? Okay, I'll be there in ten minutes." She was hurrying toward the murder site when her phone rang again. "This is Muldane."

"Where the hell have you been? I've been calling you for two hours."

"Alfric? Sorry, my battery died. What's up?"

"We've found Percy and we need your help to grab him."

Brita's mouth opened and closed. She almost ran a red light and had to screech to a stop that ended her up nearly in the middle of the intersection. She waved at a driver who flipped her the bird and backed out of the intersection before responding. "What do you mean you found Percy? Was he lost?"

"Your partner didn't tell you?"

"Like I said, my phone's been dead. What happened to Percy. Is he okay?"

"He was kidnapped by the thugs who've been trying to kill Stair. He's still alive but we need to get him out of there. I'll fill you in as soon as you get here."

Brita cursed and started forward as soon as the light turned green. "Where?"

Alfric gave her directions and she hung up. Her phone rang again as soon as she disconnected. It was Bud. "Hey, I forgot to tell you..."

"That Percy's been kidnapped?" Anger colored her voice.

"Uh ... yeah, sorry. There's a lot going on here. I tried to call you but your phone was off."

"Yeah, well, we're going to get him now so I won't be coming to the site. You'll need to wrap it up yourself."

"We?"

"His brothers and I."

"Shouldn't the police be the ones to release him?"

Brita scowled. "And what am I?"

Bud stuttered. "You know what I mean, Brit. The Honeybun brothers shouldn't be involved in this mess. They could get hurt."

Brita laughed. "Have you met them? I'd put my money on that family in a fight anytime. No matter how ugly it got. Look, I'll compromise with you. Write this down..." She gave him the address Alfric had just given her. "Come on over when you're done at the murder site."

Brita disconnected without waiting for his response. She didn't have time to screw around with egos and grandstanding. She had to go save the man she loved. Even if he *was* an ass.

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Chapter Fourteen

Angie lay in her bunk staring up at the ceiling, listening to the low rumble of voices outside the cave. Jeeves seemed to have a lot to say to Alfric's man. They'd kept up a pretty continuous stream of conversation since the jeep arrived with the two men a few hours earlier. Mostly they talked about Iraq. It seemed Alfric's man had served a couple of tours there before joining Alfric's team. She knew the second man was off somewhere, scouting the perimeter. She'd heard them talking about it when he left.

She wondered where Percy was, now that they knew he wasn't dead. She'd been trying for hours but was unable to sleep. Beneath her, Alastair snored softly. Nothing seemed to keep him from sleeping. She smiled.

She must have a guilty conscience.

She could hear the two men moving around outside. Jeeves had taken Clovis' orders to guard them very seriously apparently. She was pretty sure he hadn't slept at all. The men's presence both comforted Angie and worried her. She was glad the men and their guns were there, but the reason they were there was a bit concerning. Apparently this "situation" she and Alastair found themselves in wasn't calming down with time as they had hoped.

Instead it seemed to be escalating.

With a resigned sigh, Angie pulled back the covers and dropped to the floor as quietly as she could so she didn't wake Alastair up. She would go outside for some fresh air and

chat with her bodyguards for a while. Maybe she'd have some luck talking Jeeves into catching some sleep.

She was perfectly capable of standing watch for a while. With that thought in mind she switched direction and headed into the galley kitchen. She grabbed the large knife she'd used before when she thought she was going to have to save Alastair from the scorpion and took that with her toward the stairs. She smiled at the memory and her eyes slid to the big, glass jar with its unhappy inhabitant.

Jeeves had poked holes in the lid and thrown some hapless insects in there to keep the scorpion alive. Why she didn't know. If it were up to her he'd suffer an early and permanent retirement from life.

She shuddered and started up the stairs.

As she reached the top step she heard two sharp cracks and a muffled, "oomph!" and the sound of somebody hitting the outside of the bunker door and sliding down. Her instincts kicked into high gear and she had no doubt she'd heard Jeeves and Alfric's man getting shot. She bit her tongue against the urge to call out to them. The best she could hope for at that moment was that they hadn't been killed.

Hopefully the third guard was nearby.

Thinking fast, Angie reached for the door and turned the bolt, temporarily locking them out of the cave. As she ran back down the stairs, holding the huge knife out so she wouldn't land on it if she fell, all she could think about was dying in that underground cave.

As every minute passed the place was looking more and more like a tomb.

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Percy's eyes would barely open. The thug named Julio had rammed his face several times with a ham sized fist just for the fun of it. Then they'd gone after his ribs. Percy forced one eye open to see if he was alone in the room and, when he saw that he was, he tried to roll over and sit up. Pain shot through his ribs and rushed to his head, where it throbbed so hard he thought he would either puke or pass out.

Concussion.

"Awesome," he murmured. "Where the hell are you guys?"

He knew his brothers had to be on their way. Unless the little tracking microphone they'd inserted in his left ear had been dislodged in the beating and been sucked down his ear canal. Percy felt a new wave of nausea on that thought and almost had to lay back down. But he forced himself to sit up and take stock of the room where he was being kept.

It looked like some kind of storage area that had been stripped of anything useful. There was a coffee can in the corner with a roll of TP beside it. He didn't need any imagination to figure out what that was for. There wasn't much else in the room.

He leaned back against the wall and wrapped an arm around his ribs, praying that Alfric was on his way to bust him

out. He wasn't sure he could take another beating like the last one and survive.

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It was all they could do to keep Brita from just storming the place. She'd forced Alfric to describe the beating they'd heard and then to admit they hadn't heard him speak since the beating. She had gone completely colorless at the news and then they'd watched anger suffuse her pretty face in the form of a bright red color that didn't bode well for the kidnappers when she managed to get into the empty office building.

"The building belongs to the Black Knight agency," Bud was telling her over the phone, "They tried to hide ownership under several layers of red tape but we managed to finally dig it out."

Brita nodded and her golden brown gaze swung to the Honeybun brothers standing beside her. "Good work, Bud. Are you on your way?"

"Be there in about ten minutes."

She grimaced, "Take your time, partner. I have some stuff I need to do before you get here."

"Brita, don't even think about..." She flipped her cell phone shut and turned to Clovis and Alfric. She smiled at them in a way that turned their bowels to water. "I'm going in now,

boys. You can either join me or wait here for Bud and the posse. It doesn't much matter to me."

She turned and strode away from them, toward the building. When she hit open space she crouched down, keeping a low profile and leading with her gun.

Alfric sighed. He'd been hoping to get a positive location on the two thugs that had been left in charge of watching Percy before they went into the building. They'd lost them off of the thermal scan about an hour earlier and weren't sure where they'd gone. He had men at every exit and no one had come out of the building over the last hour and a half that they'd been waiting there. Alfric hated going into any situation blind.

On the flip side, they'd been happy to see the still warm lump on the third floor that they'd identified as Percy sit up and begin moving around a bit just moments earlier when they'd done another scan. At least his brother was still alive and reasonably mobile.

Alfric turned and waved an arm and his men scurried silently toward the building in a wide arc. Then he glanced at Clovis and his brother nodded, "Let's go."

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Alastair came awake with a jerk. Angie placed her hand over his mouth and whispered urgently, "They're at the door,

I think they killed Jeeves and Alfric's guy. We need to do something."

He threw back the rough wool blanket and swung his feet over the side of the bunk, sweeping the cave with a ruthless blue gaze. He grabbed her hand and started pulling her toward the back passageway.

Angie knew what he was thinking instantly. She yanked her hand away. "No!" Panic surged into her, coalescing in her eyes.

Alastair blew a frustrated breath out but visibly fought for calm. Above them the door creaked as something heavy leaned against it. "We have to do it, Angie, it's the only way out."

She shook her head, her eyes wide and terrified in her pale face. "I can't. I just can't, Alastair."

He pulled her into a hug, resting his chin on the top of her sweet smelling head and watching the door with anxious eyes. The knob was turning as the thugs outside tested the lock. He glanced nervously toward the small passageway at the back of the cave. He knew they would have to go through it. The passageway led to the back side of the hill, and was the only way out other than the front door. But it would entail several minutes of running through dark, fairly constrictive tunnels and he wasn't sure how he was going to talk Angie into it.

Across the bunker shots rang out and the door flew inward. Two burly figures were silhouetted in the doorway.

Angie gave a little scream and instinctively raised the knife she still clutched in her hand. Alastair yanked her toward the

back of the bunker. A pinging sound preceded the splintering of a thick wood beam not too far from Angie's head and she gave a little squeak and flung the knife in the direction of the two men, who were now on the stairs and quickly descending toward them.

One of the men went down with a cry as the knife, miraculously, embedded itself into his thigh. Angie looked at Alistair and he grinned, "Hello Bond ... Jane Bond."

She smiled and shrugged. "You can call me double oh not if you want."

The thug who was still standing raised his gun toward them and Alastair threw Angie behind the nearest bunk and grabbed the closest thing at hand. It was the jar with the scorpion in it. He threw the jar at the thug just as the man got off the shot. The bullet shattered the jar in midair and the scorpion fell out of it, landing on the man's face.

Alastair grabbed Angie's arm and pushed her toward the low archway of the passage, shoving her into the tunnel in front of him. "Don't look, don't think, just run!" He screamed at her.

Angie took a deep breath and forced her legs into action. Behind her she could hear somebody screaming, probably the guy with the scorpion on his face, but the sounds were quickly muted as they entered the first curve in the horrifying passageway, heading inexorably into the cold, black heart of the small mountain.

They ran for several minutes, until Angie thought her lungs would burst, both from the unaccustomed exercise and the adrenaline fueled panic of being in the dark, constraining

space. Finally, they found the door that led outside and emerged into a comparatively bright, cloudless night.

They looked around, panting,

"What now?" Angie gasped, bending at the waist in an attempt to keep from passing out.

Alastair nodded toward the distant line of trees. "Let's head for the woods, we can hide out there until daylight and then make our way back to the front of the base."

Angie, still gasping for air, gave him a little nod and forced herself into a jog. The deep sand pulled at their feet and caused their muscles to cramp with fatigue after only a couple of minutes. Every step became a living nightmare.

Fueled by their fear they kept moving, glancing over their shoulders every few minutes to make sure they weren't being followed. After a few minutes they spotted a man-shaped silhouette loping toward them at a fairly impressive rate of speed. The second man limped behind him, struggling to keep up.

Alastair grabbed her arm and they ducked down.

"Do you think they saw us?"

He shook his head, gasping. "I don't think so."

"Then I suggest we start running again or we'll lose our advantage."

Alastair nodded and took off.

They ran for another ten minutes before something low-slung and angular appeared in the distance. As they approached they realized it was an ATV.

"They must have left it here and approached the bunker on foot so we wouldn't hear them." Angie said.

Alastair reached over and pulled out a key. Angie could see his smile through the low light. "Lucky for us they didn't expect anyone to find it before they got back."

He climbed on and reinserted the key. "Hop on."

Angie just stood there, looking at Alastair with a worried frown.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm remembering that motorcycle ride and wondering if I want to take my chances with you or those thugs back there."

He shook his head. "You're coming with me if I have to knock you over the head and throw you over my shoulder caveman style."

Angie smiled, "Oooh, kinky."

He laughed, "Get on. Those guys will be hobbling up any minute now."

Sighing, she climbed on behind him and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

Alastair grunted from the pressure she was exerting on his stomach and turned the key. The ATV roared to life.

Angie opened her mouth, "Now promise me you'll take it ea ... ea ... eeeeeek!"

The ATV jerked into motion and they tore off in the direction of the main camp, spewing enough sand in their wake to create beachfront at a Sandals resort.

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Brita stood to the side of the building's wide, glass door and reached for the handle. Predictably it was locked. Alfric appeared beside her like smoke and she sucked breath in surprise.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Honeybun, you got clouds over your shoes?"

Alfric smiled, "What shoes?"

Brita looked down. He was wearing only socks. "Are you kidding me?"

He shrugged, "I learned a long time ago that I couldn't achieve optimum silence with shoes on, so I made adjustments."

Brita shook her head, "Hopefully the bad guys won't throw tacks on the floor."

He laughed, shaking his head, "I doubt these guys watched Road Runner cartoons as children, they were too busy torturing cats."

"Ain't that the truth." She responded with a grin.

Clovis joined them as Alfric attached a small object to the glass of the door and pushed some buttons. The lock on the door clicked and Alfric removed the object from the glass. He opened the door and looked at her, "You wanna go first?"

Brita's face folded into a frown, "How'd you do that?"

He held up the small, digital device. "Government secret, if I told you I'd have to kill Clovis."

Brita smiled and Clovis snorted. She entered the building, gun first. The Honeybun brothers followed close on her heels.

Once inside the dusty, obviously disused lobby they glanced at the elevators and then headed for the stairs.

As she started up the darkened stairwell Brita was aware of several shadow-like figures falling in behind them. She glanced at Alfric, "Keep your men back. I don't want any witnesses."

Without comment, Alfric raised a hand and his agents fell back several feet. When Brita, Alfric, and Clovis emerged from the stairwell Alfric's men didn't follow. They waited behind the door, which was cracked so they would hear if they were needed.

Brita moved quietly toward the room they'd identified on the third floor as being the one where Percy was being held and, when she reached the windowless door of the room she stood to the side and whispered to Alfric, "High or low?"

"I'm surprised you need to ask, Muldane, I'm always low."

"That's for damn sure," Clovis murmured.

Brita shook her head and tested the handle. "On one, two, three..." And then shot the lock out and threw herself through the door. Alfric rolled through and came up holding his .45 out in front of him in both hands. Clovis dropped to his knees in the doorway, a Colt 1911 pistol pointed into the room.

Percy looked up at them, his handsome face swollen and purple and his bright red hair matted with blood. "What took you guys so damn long?"

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The ATV roared up to the gate and Alastair jumped off, ignoring the gun the marine in the booth had lifted toward them in surprise. Angie remained in the seat, her eyes glazed and her body wobbling like a weighted, fat bottomed toy.

"Gunnery Sergeant Honeybun ... where is he? I need to talk to him." Alastair sounded suspiciously like the aforementioned Gunnery Sergeant.

The young Marine lowered his gun and stood there flapping his lips, obviously unsure what to do with an irate "guest" who was related to a very scary Drill Sergeant and seemed ready to do violence to someone.

Angie slowly placed both hands on the seat in front of her and lifted a seriously shaky leg over the seat until she was standing next to the vehicle. She kept her hands on the vehicle for a few minutes, until she was sure her legs would hold her up. She locked her knees finally and turned, sweeping a hand up to her hair, which was rolled back like Elvis's best hair day and knotted into position from the wind. She tried, without much success, to return it to her head and batten it down. She soon realized it was hopeless and gave up.

She was scraping a bug off her teeth when Alastair started screaming at the Marine.

"I don't care what my brother told you. You need to let me out of here!"

"I can't do that sir. I'm under strict orders from Gunnery Sergeant..."

"I don't give a shit about your orders. We'll just blast through this gate." Alastair turned and started stalking toward the ATV.

"I wouldn't recommend that sir."

"Why?" He spun around, his face nearly purple with anger. "You gonna shoot me?"

The young marine, to his credit, didn't back down and didn't get mad. "I can't shoot you sir but I can restrain you." His gaze swung past Angie, and Angie and Alastair turned around.

Several Marines stood in a semi-circle around Angie and the ATV, arms crossed and legs wide in a no-nonsense stance. Two of them held guns.

"Well shit!" Alastair said.

"Um," Angie said, "why don't you just call Clovis and ask him to rescind the order?"

Alastair looked at her. He stood there for a minute and she could almost see the wheels turning in his head. As the purple color faded from his face he finally smiled. "Well der de der der."

He pulled his cell out of his pocket and hit the speed dial number for Clovis.

"Honeybun."

"Clovis, thank god! We think Jeeves is dead and we had to run away. They're going to kill us."

Angie bit her lip and turned her head nervously as the Marines all stood up straighter and looked at each other upon hearing what they apparently interpreted to mean that she and Alastair had killed Jeeves and run away. She rolled her

eyes back to Alastair and lifted her hand to try to get his attention but he was pacing and talking rapidly into his cell phone. The young Marines around her became restless and started throwing hostile glances their way. "Alastair?"

He continued talking, completely oblivious to the drama unfolding around him.

When the first Marine started walking toward her Angie screamed, "Alastair!"

He stopped talking and looked at her, his face clearly showing his agitation. "What Angie? Can't you see I'm on the phone?"

She opened her mouth just as the first Marine grabbed her arms.

Alastair lowered the phone, "Hey!"

The Marine who had been manning the booth slid a pistol up to Alastair's temple and grabbed his arm. "Don't move, sir. You need to come with us now. We're going to go back to that bunker and see what you've done to Private First Class Jeeves.

Alastair dropped the phone, "What? Are you crazy? We didn't do anything to Jeeves. The guys in black did it!"

"Sure they did, sir." Said the young Marine holding Alastair, "And I bet they came here in black helicopters to do it."

Alastair, if it was possible, looked even more confused than ever, "No, you ass, they came in this thing!" He pointed to the ATV.

"Let's go, sir."

Angie was pulled toward a waiting jeep. It took four Marines to hold Alastair as he strenuously objected to being dragged to the jeep. They were shoved into the back seat and two Marines with guns stood on the running boards on either side of them, holding guns in their faces.

Two more Marines climbed into the jeep. The Marine from the gate reached toward the key to start it.

That was when they heard it.

It sounded like Horton the elephant trying to communicate with the Whos in Whoville. "Are you there? Are you there?" A very small voice floated to them across the distance, carrying a very commanding tone with it.

Angie bit down on her lip to keep from screaming, "We are here, we are here, we are here!"

Everybody's heads started to swivel in search of the tiny voice. Finally, pair by pair, all eyes settled on Alastair's phone, lying in the dirt by the gate.

"It's Clovis!" Alastair said. He tried to stand up and was shoved back down into the seat.

"Stay put, sir."

One of the Marines picked up the phone and held it to his ear.

"Thank god for Clovis's big, drill instructor mouth." Alastair murmured to Angie.

She nodded, straining to hear the Marine's end of the conversation.

It didn't take him long to look ashamed. "Sir! Yes sir! Right away, SIR!"

Then the young Marine sheepishly walked back to the jeep and handed Alastair back his phone, motioning for the others to stand down.

Alastair grabbed the phone, glaring at the man who'd handed it to him. "Idiots." He murmured. And then, "Clovis? They tried to arrest us! I know ... I know ... okay ... I said okay stop screaming at me! I will ... yes ... what? Oh thank god, is he all right?" Alastair listened for a moment and then nodded and hung up the phone. He turned to Angie. "They got Percy. He's pretty banged up but basically okay. Unfortunately the guys who were holding him disappeared. They apparently slipped out of the building through a tunnel that leads into the sewers."

"So they knew they were being watched?"

"It looks that way."

Angie frowned at him. "Alastair this is scaring me. How do these guys know so much about what we do and where we are?"

He shook his head. "I don't know but it's time we found that out. We're having a family meeting as soon as we can all get there." He looked up at the Marine behind the wheel of the jeep. "Clovis ... I mean ... Gunnery Sergeant Honeybun wants you to take us into town. But you'll also need to send some men out to the bunker to check on Jeeves and the two government men. There are two armed men loose on the base. We stole this ATV from them so they'll be on foot somewhere."

The young Marine had the good grace to look sheepish at this news. "Yes, sir."

Alastair sat back and waited while the Marines dispatched someone to find an officer. He looked at Angie. "This is really getting out of hand."

"I hope Jeeves and those other two guys are all right."

Alastair nodded and then smiled suddenly. "I wonder if that guy's foaming at the mouth yet."

Angie laughed.

"Nice hair by the way. Is that a bug on your forehead?"

"Bite me."

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Chapter Fifteen

The young Marine wasted no time getting them to the Honeybun family home. He also wasted no time getting the hell out of there as soon as Angie and Alastair exited the jeep. It might have had something to do with the sight of Clovis and Alfric descending from the front porch like a couple of level five hurricanes.

"Are you two okay?" Alfric's James Bond persona was slightly marred by the clump of dark red hair that was standing straight up on top of his head as if he'd been pulling on it.

Angie nodded. "We're fine. But we thought for a minute there we were going to the clink."

"The hoosegow." Alastair added, grinning at Angie.

Clovis frowned, "Idiots." It wasn't entirely clear who he was referring to with this but for the sake of family harmony Alastair chose to believe he'd meant the Marines. "Jeeves is fine. They found him sitting up holding his head, groggy and probably concussed but otherwise okay."

Angie closed her eyes in relief. "Thank god."

"My guys didn't fare so well. They were both shot. But I think they'll live." Alfric shook his head. "I can't believe they let those thugs get the drop on them."

Alfric grabbed Angie's arm just as a spunky little two door Mercedes shot into the driveway. "There's Godric. Let's get inside."

Clovis remained behind to talk to his brother as Alfric ushered Alastair and Angie into the house. They headed for the kitchen which, like last time, was filled with Honeybuns. At the center of the beehive of activity that Angie was starting to recognize as being Honeybun business as usual, sat a pretty banged up looking Percy.

Momma Honeybun rushed over to give Alastair a hug. "Are you two okay?" She threw a glance in Angie's direction and reached out to clasp her hand.

"We're fine. Just a little tired from running through that damn sand."

Clovis chuckled.

Angie grimaced, "I won't need to work out for a week. My calves are killing me."

Alastair nodded, "Thank god the bad guys left their ATV there for us or we'd still be slogging through the sand."

Alfric grinned, "That was nice of them."

Alastair and Angie shared a look, "Well ... since one of them had a knife hole in his thigh and the other was probably swollen in the face beyond recognition and foaming at the mouth, they weren't really in a position to dispute our commandeering of their vehicle."

A deep, almost guttural voice from behind them said, "Sounds like you two have had an interesting day."

Everyone turned to look at Godric, who was wearing a grin and the usual dark red stubble on his nicely squared chin. He walked over and shook Alastair's hand. "Glad to see you're still with us."

Alastair took the offered hand and slapped his older brother on the shoulder. "Glad to be here, bro."

Then Godric caught sight of Percy, still seated at the table, next to a very cranky looking Brita. "Holy shit man!"

Percy grinned and then squeaked as the scab on his lip split open with the movement. He reached up to touch the bleeding cut. "You got any serious drugs in that bag, Dric?" He nodded toward the small, black leather bag Godric held down at his side.

Godric moved toward Percy and took the chair Brita vacated next to him. "Let's have a look at this mess." He said as he reached toward Percy's black, blue, and bloodied face.

Alfric entered the room with a couple of fierce looking men in dark suits. He was talking on his phone contraption and lowered it as he approached the family. He looked at Brita. "My people are in place."

She nodded. "Bud should be at the DA's office right about now."

"Whoa!" Exclaimed Percy. "You're arresting the DA?"

Brita just glared at him.

"Brita's just bringing him in for questioning. He seems to have a connection with the kidnappers." Alfric threw Brita a pleading look.

She sighed angrily. "Not that you deserve to know, but his behavior has been very strange. I think he needs to answer some questions. He feels guilty to me."

Percy shook his head. "You'd better be right, Brit, or the public relations nightmare that's coming will be deadly to your career."

Brita just frowned at him in response.

Mr. Honeybun spoke up for the first time since Angie and Alastair had arrived. "Let's make sure Brita doesn't have any problems then. We need to come up with a plan to ferret out these kidnappers and then we'll get the truth."

Angie perked up. "There are two of them wandering around Clovis' base right now."

Clovis nodded, "My men are looking for them. They'll let me know as soon as they find them."

Godric rolled up Percy's sleeve and began swabbing the inside of his arm with alcohol. "They shouldn't be hard to track down if one of them is bleeding." He plunged a needle into the spot he'd cleaned, making Percy jump and cry out in protest.

Percy scowled at his brother. "You have no bedside manner at all you know that?"

Godric just shrugged and pressed a cotton pad to the spot, cranking Percy's arm up to hold the cotton in place. "That's why we have nurses."

Brita smacked Godric on the back of the head none too gently. "You're lucky I'm busy being mad at your brother or I'd bitch slap you for that incredibly sexist remark."

Godric laughed and rubbed the back of his head, "What? We have male nurses too."

His mother smacked him on the head before Brita could do it again, "Now you're just being a snob."

Godric shook his head and collected his things. "I don't think you need any stitches, Perc. There's nothing there that will ruin your delicate beauty long term. It's just a bunch of

swelling and discoloration. You'll be back to using your looks to try to entice Brita into being able to stand you again in no time."

Percy grimaced and threw his very angry girlfriend a glance. "Gee thanks, Dric."

Godric shrugged and stood up, offering the chair to Brita. She shook her head. "You sit next to him, you two deserve each other."

Percy and Godric shared a grin. Godric offered the seat to his mother. She frowned at him but sat down.

"Okay," said Bob Honeybun, "Let's talk tactics."

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Debra Burns was carefully applying slut-red nail polish to her toenails when the phone rang. She cursed and considered letting it ring. But then decided she'd better answer it in case it had something to do with the deal she had going down.

She closed the bottle of polish and hobbled across the room on her heels, careful not to let her toes touch any more than absolutely necessary. "Yeah?" She answered, cursing as she realized she'd smudged her right baby toe. "What is it?"

"What the hell's your problem."

Debra swore again, this time silently. "Sorry, babe. I just messed up my polish and I'll have to do it again."

"Well that's certainly the end of the world."

Debra frowned, wondering why she put up with the sarcasm. "No. But it is annoying. What's up?"

They just took your father into custody."

While she'd been expecting it, it was still a bit of a shock. Debra took a deep breath. "Okay. It's time to move then."

"I'll meet you at the airport. I already asked them to get the plane ready to leave."

"You filed the false flight path?"

"Of course. You just make sure you get the money before you meet me."

Debra frowned. "I haven't heard from Brian yet."

"Then find him. I'm not going to let that little pansy ass ruin this for us."

Debra frowned. "Right."

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Mr. Bigg handed the leather bag filled with money to Brian Davies. "I hope your girlfriend knows what she's doing, Davies."

Brian frowned. "So do I sir."

Bigg stared at the straight laced younger man for a few beats and then shook his head. "You know, Davies, I didn't think you had it in you. Maybe when you get back from wherever you're going with the girl ... when things die down

... we'll have to discuss getting you involved in some of the, shall we say, more legally complex areas of my business."

Brian looked the older man in the eye and thought about telling him off. But in the end it wasn't going to matter so he kept his mouth shut. He simply nodded and turned away, heading out the door with the bag of money. He glanced at his watch as he drove out of the parking lot. Debra would be waiting for his call. She'd already be pissed that he hadn't called to tell her what was going on.

He'd learned while he was waiting for Bigg to count the money that DA Burns had been picked up by the police. That meant Debra would be moving forward quickly. And it also meant that his own timeline had tightened considerably.

He sighed as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. He'd thought he'd have a bit more time.

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DA Burns huddled like a large, well appointed mountain in a cheap plastic chair in Interrogation Room A.

Brita strode into the room and stood across the table from him, just staring. She finally looked at Bud and inclined her head slightly.

Bud's wide mouth spread in a grin. He moved to stand just behind DA Burns' left shoulder as Brita sat down across from him and folded her hands on the table in front of her. As Brita

stared silently into the DA's hostile eyes, Bud leaned close to the man's ear.

"So, DA Burns. Why *did* you decide to have your daughter kidnapped?"

The DA jumped and then turned his head slightly toward Bud, scowling. "I'm not saying a word until my lawyer gets here."

Bud patted the DA on a well-padded shoulder. "I understand. When you're guilty of extortion, fraud, and kidnapping it's always best to lawyer up right away."

The DA's frown deepened but, to his credit, he said nothing. He crossed his thick arms over his barrel chest and sat back in the hard, plastic chair.

Bud moved to the DA's other side, still staying just behind him so the man would have to crank his thick neck to see the big detective. "Was it for the money? It was killing you that your ex-wife had all that money wasn't it? You've probably been scheming how to get your hands on some of that 'chedda' for a long time haven't you?"

The DA snorted but said nothing.

Bud grinned at Brita and moved to stand directly behind the DA. Then he leaned down so that his lips were just behind the man's left ear. "Or was it something else? What possible reason could you have for kidnapping your own daughter, DA Burns? It takes a special kind of parent to plan a thing like that."

The DA rolled his wide shoulders and shook his head. "You're an idiot, detective."

Bud stood up and arched an eyebrow at Brita.

Brita nodded and he stepped back. Now that he had the DA all warmed up it was time to hit him with the pushy female. It was their own special version of good cop bad cop. They used it with misogynist types all the time, with great success.

She clasped her hands behind her back and started pacing. Back and forth along the table, pursing her lips as if in deep thought. After a couple of minutes she stopped and placed her hands on the tabletop, leaning across the table to get into the DA's space.

"You've got friends in low places, DA Burns. Why is that?"

His eyes narrowed and he smirked, obviously he didn't consider her worthy of his self protective instincts. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about, Detective Muldane. I demand that you let me go, or the department is going to get slapped with a law suit that will destroy your career before you can say PMS."

Brita nodded, straightening up from the table. "You can certainly do that, DA Burns. That's your prerogative of course." She lifted her chin and fixed a hard, golden-brown gaze on him. "But if you are even one fraction as guilty in this mess as you appear to be ... it would be much better for you in the long run if you'd work with us."

His gaze narrowed on her, assessing. "I don't know what you think you have against me, Detective Muldane, but I can assure you that, whatever it is, I had nothing to do with my daughter's kidnapping. I'm not desperate for money and I would have no other reason to do such a heinous thing."

"Then why on Earth would you have the cell phone number of one of the kidnappers in your caller ID? Not once, but several times over the last several days. Starting *before* your daughter was kidnapped."

The DA's wide, stern face paled to a sickly gray-green color. It was not a good color for the corpulent attorney. Not a good color at all.

Brita's cell phone rang and she glanced at it to see who was calling, her eyes widening in surprise. Then she nodded at Bud and left the room to answer it. Behind her, Bud resumed his badgering of the recalcitrant DA. Brita's mind shifted away from the questioning. This was the call she'd been waiting for. With any luck, she wouldn't need the DA's confession after all.

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Debra flicked her little pink cell phone shut and dropped it into a shallow compartment in the console between the seats. She slowed to make the turn onto the dirt and gravel road leading to the small airport that was buried in the countryside about twenty minutes from Indianapolis. She wrinkled her pert little nose as the earthy aroma of cow dung wafted through her little blue sports car.

The wind blew her long, dark hair into her face and she reached up to pull it away, catching a few silky strands on the

hinge of her two hundred dollar sun glasses. "Shit!" She pulled the glasses off her nose and swung them back and forth in the air to close the arm so it would release the clump of hair that was trapped there. The hair fluttered loose and she jammed the sun glasses back onto her nose. When she looked up there was a horse standing in the middle of the road, just about forty feet in front of her fast moving bumper.

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The pilot checked his instruments and made some notes on the clipboard he kept hanging in the cockpit. He checked to make sure the repairs he'd requested a few days earlier had been done and then placed a check mark next to the request. He heard movement behind him and turned, barely stopping himself from grimacing when he saw who had joined him in the cockpit.

"Are we ready to leave as soon as Ms. Burns gets here?"

"Yes. I'll power up when she pulls in."

"No, you idiot! Power up now. We'll need to get underway the moment she arrives."

The pilot nodded, turning away so that his passenger wouldn't see the irritation in his eyes. It was always that way with this passenger. Annoying was the kindest word that came to mind. Downright obnoxious was probably more

accurate. But he had a job to do and he did it well. He could always vent to his wife later.

Some days it was the only thing that got him through.

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Brian took his time driving to the airport. The longer he could delay the better. He felt sure that he had set things into the proper motion and it would soon all be coming to a head. But he didn't feel good about his part in it. Debra wasn't going to be happy with him. She'd most likely never speak to him again in fact. But he'd done what he knew he had to do.

He'd have to take comfort in that.

He saw a bright blue spot in the road ahead and pressed the brakes. He pulled up alongside Debra's little convertible and frowned. The car was skewed kind of sideways at the end of a fine set of skid marks in the gravel and it was empty. Debra was nowhere to be seen. On an impulse he climbed out of his car and searched the convertible, even reaching inside to press the button and pop the trunk. Aside from about a hundred pairs of shoes, the little trunk was empty.

He stood looking down into the car, frowning thoughtfully. That was when he saw the soft, pink glimmer of something on the floor of the driver's side.

Reaching over the door he grabbed Debra's cell phone off the floor.

This was not good. She would never leave her cell phone behind. It was her lifeline.

He stood back up and looked around, really worried now. Something had gone terribly wrong.

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Debra Burns had never experienced anything so humiliating and downright terrifying in her life. She was trussed up like a Christmas goose, with her hands twisted painfully behind her and her ankles strapped together with some sort of plastic thingys, and she was staring down at the rocky ground as they flew along, the hard leather of a saddle cutting her painfully across the middle.

The man who rode behind her had one hand on the strings that led to the horse's nasty mouth, and the other hand rested moistly on her behind. If she could just get a hand free she'd definitely punch him in the family vault for grabbing her butt like that.

Debra was pretty sure all the blood had left the middle of her body and flowed into her head and feet long ago. She prayed that they'd get wherever they were going soon because she was feeling dangerously close to spewing, and she really didn't want to spew upside down, it would be very bad for her hair.

The horse finally slowed and Debra strained to lift her head and look around. She was shocked to see her father's airplane idling nearby.

What the hell?

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Brita looked over at Percy, sitting silently in the seat next to her. His poor battered face was almost enough to make her feel sorry for him.

Almost.

Percy held his cell phone in one hand and stared silently out of the window, his purple, puffy face unreadable. He was communication central for the Honeybun Tsunami.

"Is Alfric clear on what he and his men are supposed to do when we get there?"

Percy turned to her and smiled. Then he grimaced and lifted a hand to his split lip, nodding. "You don't need to worry about Alfric, he's in full James Bond mode now."

Brita nodded. "And Clovis?"

"Almost there. He's got the rest of the family with him. They'll hang back until you and Bud arrive."

Brita frowned, "I really didn't want your parents to come, Percy."

He shrugged, "You know how they are, Brit. Once they make up their minds there's no stopping them. And they've never liked being left behind."

Brita sighed. What a complete cluster. If one of the Honeybuns got hurt it would be her neck. But Percy was right, they wouldn't be talked out of being where the action was. And they had a stake in how this turned out. Their family had been threatened and harmed. This was just not done in the Honeybun world. Brita sighed again and tried to focus on the task ahead.

She was ninety nine percent sure the arrests would go smoothly. It was that one percent that made her punch in Bud's number again.

He answered almost before it finished ringing, "Yeah?"
"You there yet?"

"No. I stopped to check out an abandoned car in the road. I ran the plate and I was waiting to hear back on it."

Brita scowled, there were times when her partner's mindless dedication to the job annoyed her. He seemed unable to prioritize. "Bud, leave the car and call it in. Let a black and white follow up. We don't have time to mess with a broken down car right now."

"I thought it might be connected."

Brita shook her head, rolling her eyes at Percy. "I don't see how it could possibly be. I need you at that airport now, partner."

"Okay. I'm leaving."

Brita bit back a sigh. "Thanks. I'm afraid I won't be there for another fifteen minutes or so. You'll have to hold the fort

for me until I get there. Clovis and Alfric Honeybun will be there. Use them. And don't let that plane leave, no matter what."

"Aye, aye, cap'n." Bud quipped.

Brita clicked her cell shut and blew air through her lips in frustration. She was stuck behind another long line of cars at a light. The traffic gods were against her.

Making a sudden decision, she pulled the magnetic flashing light out of a compartment between the front seats and slammed it into place on the roof of her car. Glancing at Percy she said, "Hold on, we're getting the hell out of this traffic."

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Alastair and Angie sat in Alfric's black Hummer and tried to see everything at once. They were parked in the trees just outside the small airport and Alfric and his men in black had dispersed so thoroughly Angie and Alastair didn't have a clue where they were.

Angie looked at Alistair with larger than usual eyes, "I don't like this, Alastair. It's way too quiet out there. What do you think is going on?"

Alastair grabbed her hand. "I don't know but Alfric told us to stay put. We need to trust that he knows what he's doing."

Angie sighed and allowed Alastair to stroke the back of her hand. Every fiber in her being was screaming. Something wasn't right. Something, in fact, was very wrong.

When the first gunshot rang out behind them Angie jumped and reached for the door handle. Alastair grabbed her arm, "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm getting out of this death trap. We're sitting ducks here, Alastair!"

More shots were fired, initiating what sounded like full scale war. All around them chunks of trees burst off and peppered the Hummer as bullets apparently missed their intended targets and found the first available solid object. When a bullet hit the side window right about head height on Angie's side Alastair finally nodded. "Okay, let's get the hell out of here. We'll find a spot away from the firing to hide."

Angie was out the door before he even finished speaking and was running hard toward a metal building in the distance. It looked like some kind of hangar. Alastair caught up with her and grabbed her hand. They made it to the building without getting shot and ducked inside. It took a minute for their eyes to adjust to the dim light inside the building. They closed and locked the door behind them and felt their way along the nearest wall.

From inside the building, the shooting outside sounded as if it were miles away and Angie found that she could breathe again. She had just taken a deep breath and was starting to get her pulse back into manageable range when a voice from out of the dark said, "Who the hell are *you*?"

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Chapter Sixteen

It was a woman's voice. Angie grabbed Alastair's arm. Alastair placed a comforting hand over hers. "Who are you?"

"I asked you first."

"I asked you second."

"Oh for god's sake!"

Angie finally spoke up. "I'm Angie, this is Alastair. We're hiding from that gun fight out there. Are you hiding too?"

The sound of air blowing through lips. "I wish! I've just been through the most humiliating experience in my life and I'm sitting here trying to get my organs shifted back into place. Can you come get me loose? I need to get on that plane outside."

Angie turned to Alastair and he could just barely see the whites of her eyes as they widened. She squeezed his arm to make sure he understood what they'd just heard. If the person in the darkened room with them needed to get on the DA's private plane then that meant it had to be his daughter. The elusive Debra Burns.

Alastair nodded once to let her know he'd caught it and said, "Keep talking so we can find you. It's really dark in here."

"I think there's a flashlight beside the door, on the floor. I saw that thug cowboy set it down before he closed the door and plunged me into horrifying darkness."

Alastair turned back around and walked carefully toward the door where they'd come in, shuffling to make sure he

didn't step on or trip over anything in the dark. Angie clutched his hand tightly and shuffled along with him. She wasn't about to let him get away from her.

"This place stinks..." the spoiled heiress whined. "and it's dusty. I think I sneezed up a lung a few minutes ago."

"Too bad she didn't sneeze out her voice box." Alastair murmured to Angie.

Angie choked back a laugh.

Alastair reached out and felt for the door and then ran his hand down it to the bottom, where he felt around for the flashlight. His hand bumped up against something big and covered in leather and he knocked it over. It rolled a few inches and bumped against Angie's sneaker. She bent down and picked it up. After a few seconds of fumbling she located the power button and pressed it.

An eyeball searing beam of light shot out of the flashlight and directly into Alastair's eyes.

He threw a hand up in front of his face, "Holy shit!"

Angie quickly swung the light away from his face. "Sorry."

"I think you blinded me."

Angie frowned, "Stop being such a baby." Then she swung the light around the building, looking for Debra Burns. Finally, in the furthest corner of the building, a small, pale face under a tangled sweep of dark hair was captured by the light. "Hi." Angie smiled at the heiress.

Debra Burns frowned back. "Okay, so much for the pleasantries, now can you get these plastic thingy's off my feet so I can get the hell out of here?"

Angie arched an eyebrow at Alistair and he shook his head. "If you want our help you might try being civil, Ms. Burns.

The young woman's eyebrows shot skyward. "How do you know my name?"

Angie lowered the flashlight to illuminate the floor between them and the surly heiress. They headed toward her, sidestepping overturned and hopefully empty gas cans, lawn care equipment, and piles of combustible smelling rags.

As they reached her, Alastair said, "Who else would be climbing onto DA Burns' private plane?"

Debra Burns' pretty face twisted into a mean smile. "His girlfriend maybe?"

Alastair didn't miss a beat, from all those nights spent in bars with his friends he was used to dealing with snotty, self important women. "There is that, but you've admitted that you're Debra Burns so I guess it's a moot point isn't it?"

She made a little peeved sound and jerked her hips slightly but she couldn't do much more than that with her wrists and ankles shackled.

He knelt down in front of the young woman and examined the binding at her ankles, "Hmmm, heavy duty tie wraps. We'll need wire cutters I think. Or maybe a knife..." He stood up and looked around as if looking for something he could use to cut the wraps. It was a futile attempt because the little building was pitch dark beyond the arc of the flashlight beam. "I need to search the building." He turned to Angie with a small frown. "I'll need the flashlight. I hate to leave you in the dark though."

Angie spun the light around the space looking for windows. She saw a thin sliver of light on one wall that looked promising. A quick scan of the area with the light told them that the window had been covered over with metal on the outside. The glass was broken on the inside. Alastair reached carefully through the broken area and shoved at the metal as hard as he could. It didn't even vibrate.

"I guess we're not gonna get that open unless we go outside." Angie said, suddenly feeling a little bit short of breath. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead and she took a couple of deep breaths, trying to get her fear of confined spaces under control.

Alastair moved closer and rubbed her back gently. "You doin' okay." He spoke softly so the angry heiress across the building couldn't hear.

"I'm fine. And we're certainly *not* going back out there where all the bullets are so I'll cope." She walked over to where Debra Burns sat huddled against the wall, all dusty and disheveled, and sat down next to her on the floor, holding the flashlight out to Alastair. "I'll just sit here with Ms. Burns while you look."

"Are you sure?"

She smiled but he couldn't see it so she said, "I'm okay. It's a large enough space I can convince myself I'm not being buried alive." She'd tried for levity but hadn't quite reached it. Her voice quavered a little at the end.

Alastair took the flashlight, stroking his fingers over her hand before he grabbed it. "I'll be right back. Hopefully there's a box cutter or something in here we can use."

The two women sat in silence and watched the flashlight beam moving around the building. Angie could feel hostility coming off the bad tempered heiress in waves. Apparently their awareness of who she was put them on the enemies list.

Alastair kept up an almost constant barrage of chatter as he searched, mostly telling them about all the gross stuff he found. "Dead rat!" He informed them cheerfully.

Debra Burns shuddered so hard her teeth clacked together. "God save me from the frickin' country." She mumbled.

Angie grinned.

"A pair of women's underwear," he held the flashlight beam up so they could see the dusty and chewed looking item of discarded clothing. "I hope these were chewed *after* they were removed."

"Hand me the flashlight real careful now and then put your hands behind your back, crossing your wrists real nice so I can tie 'em up."

Angie and Debra jumped and their heads swiveled toward the sound of the deep, cigarette roughened voice. All they could see was a tall, dark silhouette, and the flash of light off a gun barrel that was pointed at Alastair.

Angie threw her hand over her mouth so she wouldn't scream.

"Oh shit!" Debra Burns said with true emotion. "I told him to frickin' hurry."

Angie suddenly realized the man couldn't see her and therefore would probably not know she was there. She placed a hand on Debra's arm and, when the girl turned to her, put a

finger in front of her lips and moved away, keeping as quiet as she could without being able to see where she was going. She thought she remembered seeing a large, wooden crate of some sort just a few feet away, to the left of where she'd been sitting.

Her foot bumped something hard and metallic and it skittered across the floor, spinning toward the man with the gun. Angie bit her lip, and stopped moving, sure the flashlight would be on her within seconds.

"Damn it!" Debra Burns screamed. "That probably chipped my freshly done pedicure all to hell."

The flashlight swung in the girl's direction and she was standing upright, looking all teetery but managing to keep herself on her feet nonetheless. She glared into the bright light.

A husky laugh rolled across the room and Angie quickly shuffled the last few steps to the crate and slid behind it.

"I knew you was stupid, Ms. Burns, but did you really think you could outrun me with that strip on your ankles."

Debra Burns sniffed audibly and gave him her most haughty voice. "Probably not, but I was hoping I'd at least get the chance to head butt you into something sharp and ugly, so I could stomp on your shriveled little privates for a few minutes."

The husky laugh was preceded this time by the sound of a locking zip strip. "Come on hero, you'll be joining the lady ... and I do use that term extremely loosely ... against this wall. As soon as we get the last of Honeybun's men we'll be coming back for you two."

Angie felt around the ground quickly, looking for something she could use as a weapon. She grimaced as her fingers skittered over dried and crunchy bug corpses and god knew what else. But finally she felt something long, cool, and solid and clasped her hand around it, pulling it close.

She ran her fingers along the object and located the sharp edged V at one end. A crow bar. Probably used to open up the crate and then dropped, forgotten behind it. She closed her eyes in a silent prayer of thanks and then forced herself to peek around the crate.

The flashlight beam illuminated Debra as she hopped backward and lowered herself back into her spot against the wall. Then suddenly Alastair was standing in front of Debra, looking down with a carefully blank face.

The tall cowboy with the gun shoved Alastair in the back and he fell forward, hitting his head hard against the wall before he could get his bound hands up to cushion the blow. Angie panicked when his head smacked hard against the wall and she jumped up, running blindly toward the tall man with the crow bar raised high over her head.

Adrenaline made her stronger than she expected and she hit the man hard enough to make him stagger and lower his gun arm in surprise. But she missed his head so he didn't go down.

Debra Burns helped him with that.

As he stumbled to the side, already lifting his gun toward Angie again, Debra swept her bound legs along the floor and kicked his legs out from under him. He grunted and went

down. The gun went off and dislodged a bullet into the ceiling, raining dust and debris down on their heads.

Angie didn't wait for him to get up again, she brought the crowbar down hard on his stomach and he folded, holding his middle with both arms and gasping for breath. The gun dropped from his hands and Debra kicked it away from him.

Angie saw something long and white sticking out of the man's back pocket and reached for it, quickly wrapping it around his ankles and zipping it tight. Then she took a second one and tried to coral his wrists. Instead he grabbed her and pulled her to the ground on top of him.

Angie gave a little yelp and panicked, flailing her arms and legs wildly. She inadvertently kneed him in the groin and he grunted but still didn't let go of her wrist.

Until the end of the gun was pressed to his forehead and a very angry voice said, "Mister, if I were you I'd take my hands off that woman right now or you're gonna be able to put a pipe through your forehead and flush out your beady little brain."

Angie felt the man's iron grip lift from her wrist and she sat up quickly, climbing off him and snatching up the zip wrap from where she'd dropped it when he'd grabbed her.

"Put your wrists together."

"You ain't gonna shoot me."

The gun went off and the man cried out, grabbing the forearm closest to Alastair. "You were saying?"

Moaning in pain, the man quickly complied and Angie zipped his wrists together.

Then she stood up and looked at Alastair. He was standing in the beam of the flashlight, which the gunman had propped on a box across the room, and his face was dark and scary with anger.

He still hadn't lowered the gun.

She went over and touched his arm. "You can lower the gun now, Alastair, he can't do anything with his wrists and ankles bound up."

Alastair appeared reluctant to lower the gun. "Search his pockets for the knife first. He'd have had to cut our ankles loose to move us."

Angie nodded, impressed by Alastair's clear thinking in the face of a terrifying situation. She found a small pocket knife in the man's shirt pocket and held it up in front of Alastair. He finally lowered the gun, stuffing it into the front of his jeans.

Angie sawed through the heavy zip strip on Alastair's thick wrists and handed him the knife. He had Debra Burns loose in less than a minute.

"Let's get out of here." Alastair said after he'd helped Debra to her feet. "I don't care if there are bullets and bad guys out there. Apparently they're everywhere."

"Amen," Angie murmured.

Debra grabbed the flashlight and they headed toward the door.

As they opened it, they heard the sound of a plane starting to taxi toward the runway.

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Chapter Seventeen

A black Hummer was tearing after the Light Jet that taxied swiftly down the runway. Debra Burns gave off a little scream and started running toward the departing jet.

"Son of a Bitch! Come back here! Where the hell's my money?" Her voice was a piercing shriek that managed to rise above the sharp whine of the small jet, which was quickly picking up speed.

Suddenly a small, black BMW swerved onto the runway in front of the jet and the plane jerked sideways, its flaps dropping in an effort to slow down and keep from hitting the car, which had stopped sideways across the runway.

The Jet jerked from side to side a couple of times, its wings dipping dangerously, and then the flaps went up again and it seemed to be picking up speed, apparently hoping to leave the ground before it hit the BMW. By this time the Hummer had managed to catch up, and was swerving sideways toward the plane in an obvious effort to push the small aircraft off the runway.

Finally the plane's wheels hit grass and stumbled. The plane left the surface of the runway for a moment, and then thudded back down. The flaps came full down and the little plane screeched to a stop, spinning around in the grass beside the runway until it halted with a groan, facing the opposite direction.

As Angie and Alastair ran toward the Hummer, a man in a dark suit climbed out of the BMW. He reached back into the car and pulled out a large, black bag.

Sirens suddenly rose above the drone of the small plane and they looked up to see Brita's car barreling toward them, a flashing light tilting dangerously just at the edge of its roof. Brita threw on the brakes and skidded to a halt mere feet from where they stood.

When they looked back, Alfric had the man in the suit leaning over the BMW, spread eagled, and a man whom Alastair recognized as Brita's partner, Bud Shinks, was rummaging through the black bag.

"Money!" They heard him exclaim as they ran up, breathing heavily, "It's filled with money."

Alfric clapped a set of cuffs on the young man who'd been driving the BMW and turned, nodding. "I figured as much. This guy must be one of the kidnappers."

An inhuman shriek split the night and everyone jumped and turned as a horse, wild eyed and frantic, still saddled and with reins trailing behind as it ran, shot past them and headed toward the far end of the small airport. They'd barely had time to register this oddity when they heard a yelp and turned just in time to see Bud Shinks go down.

Debra Burns stood over him, a gun in one hand and the bag of money in the other. She jerked her head up as Alfric took a step toward her. "Unlock those cuffs and let him go."

Behind them Brita made a noise as everyone turned to look at the man in the suit.

Alfric glanced at Brita and she gave him a small nod.

He released the young man and stood back, allowing him to stride toward the young heiress.

She frowned at him. "What took you so long? I was kidnapped and that piece of shit almost took off without us?"

Brian Davies shrugged, "I found your car and was trying to figure out what happened to you. I finally figured I might as well come here. I saw the plane leaving and panicked. All I could think was to stop it."

She scowled at him, shaking her head. "It's a good thing I wasn't on that plane or I'd have been mighty pissed at you. They almost crashed."

He just shrugged. "It worked out okay didn't it?"

She sighed and nodded, opening her mouth to speak, but before she could get a word out another voice startled them.

"Thanks for bringing me my money, Davies."

They all turned with a jerk to find Susan Burns standing in the doorway of the small plane, a mean little smile on her plain face. "Now if you'll just bring it over here and hand it to me I won't kill your little girl friend."

Brian paled and reached for the bag but Debra Burns yanked it out of his reach, "You're not taking this money and leaving me here, bitch!"

Susan Burns laughed. "You don't think?"

Brian looked from one to the other of the two women, clearly confused as to what to do next.

Then suddenly Debra turned and pointed the gun at her step mother. "You can come here and try to get the money mommy dearest, but you'll have to go through me first."

Susan Burns scowled and looked behind her into the plane, "Get back in that cockpit you asshole or I'll shoot you and fly the plane myself."

Then she turned her hostile gaze back to the crowd on the tarmac before her and swung the gun toward Brian Davies. She pulled the trigger and Brian went down.

Before he hit the ground her gun was trained back on Debra.

Debra gave a little squeal of alarm and dropped Bud's gun.

"He's not dead, Debra. But he will be with the next shot. Now bring the money to me."

Debra Burns gave a shaky laugh. "Did you think I really had feelings for him, Susan? Oh ... and I bet you thought I had feelings for you too didn't you?"

The woman in the jet scowled. "You little bitc..." But she never finished that thought. Suddenly she jerked and her head rolled back, and then she was falling face forward toward the grass below.

A man in a white shirt and navy slacks appeared behind her, his hands in the air. A large flashlight was still clutched in one of them. "I'm the pilot. I'm here under duress. Don't shoot."

Debra Burns reached down and picked up the gun at her feet, turning as she straightened. Brita took two running steps and launched herself into the air. Her sneakered foot connected hard with the wrist of Debra's gun hand and it made a horrible snapping noise.

Debra went down with a blood curdling scream and the gun flew sideways. Clovis, who, along with the rest of the

Honeybuns had arrived during the standoff between the two women, picked it up and engaged the safety. The Honeybuns all stood in a semi-circle behind Alastair and Angie. They watched in silence as Alfric's men moved in to gather up Debra Burns, still shrieking and holding her broken wrist. Godric was the only one missing from the family support system. He was kneeling beside Brian Davies taking his pulse.

Brita walked up and knelt down beside him. "Is he gonna be okay?"

Godric looked up and nodded. The bullet went through his shoulder. It didn't hit anything important."

Brita nodded and turned to Davies. His eyes were open and glazed with pain. "Thanks for the phone call. You did good work today."

Debra Burns screamed as they hauled her to her feet and Davies winced. "Is she all right?"

Brita nodded. "She has a broken wrist, that's all. She'll be able to wash dishes in the prison kitchen in no time."

Brian winced again and sighed. "I tried to help her. But I suppose she's beyond my help now, huh?"

Brita turned to watch the spoiled young heiress being led away by her men, who had finally arrived. She was screaming a truly impressive array of foul words at her officers and trying to stomp on their toes as they walked her to the waiting squad car. "I suppose she has been for a really long time, Mr. Davies." She turned back to him with a sad smile. "You'll want to do a little better job in your choice of girlfriends next time."

Davies just shook his head and lay back as Godric ushered the newly arrived ambulance crew over to him and gave them instructions for his care.

Brita patted him on the forearm and stood up. "I'll talk to you at the precinct tomorrow, Mr. Davies. You can fill me in on the details of what really happened here."

The young man just nodded and kept his eyes shut. Brita thought she saw a tear at the corner of one of them.

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Louis leaned against the limousine and examined his fingernails. He'd been waiting for at least an hour for Mr. Bigg to come down and he was getting sick of waiting. His whole body hurt and he wanted to go home and take a couple of pain pills and drink a cold beer.

Finally the glass doors of the building swung open and Mr. Bigg came out with Julio at his side. Julio held the door for his employer. "The two men you sent to the Marine base have disappeared, sir. We haven't heard from Bones or his crew yet either," Julio informed the little man in the perfectly fitting dark suit.

"I should have fired him a long time ago. Both him *and* his damn horse." Bigg sighed. "There's been nothing on the news about Burns or his daughter. Since we haven't heard from Bones we'll have to assume he's double crossed us again.

He's probably in Mexico with the money by now. Call Gleason in the morning and tell him to find Bones and get rid of him. I'm sick of the man's shit."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as they cleared the door, Julio stepped in front of the smaller man and scanned the area with suspicious dark eyes. Louis felt himself bristling. "I already checked out the area, Julio, about ten times."

Julio ignored him and turned to give Bigg a slight nod. "All clear, sir."

Louis shook his head and swore under his breath. Ever since he'd let the little bitch pancake his balls and stab his neck he'd gotten no respect from the other guys. It was so unfair. That shit could have happened to anybody.

Louis limped around to the driver's side of the car and opened the door.

It was late and all the businesses had been closed and quiet for several hours. The night was dark and very quiet. Which was why the sound of an approaching engine could easily be heard from a couple of miles away.

Louis reached for his gun and Julio stepped in front of Bigg as the roar of a small engine came nearer. They soon realized the sound was from a single motorcycle, its driver dressed completely in black, with a Darth Vader like helmet on his head.

The cycle tore through the night at an impossible speed but it slowed as it neared them. Louis' gun was out and pointed toward the cycle, but it was hidden by the door of the

limo. Looking over the car at Julio he knew that the big man had drawn his too.

The cycle glided to a stop and the driver pulled off his helmet, showing them a smiling face topped by shiny red-blond hair.

Louis immediately recognized the rider. He stuffed his gun back into his jacket pocket and came around the door.

"Warwicke Honeybun! I'll be damned." Louis walked toward Warwicke with a hand outstretched, smiling broadly. "What the hell are you doin' out here at this time of night?"

Warwicke took the outstretched hand and smiled. "I always run the streets at night, it's nice having them all to myself. I'm afraid I took a wrong turn somewhere though. I was gonna ask you guys where the hell I was."

Julio laughed. "Warwicke Honeybun lost? That's one for the papers."

Warwicke laughed too. "I'll be forever in your debt if you don't tell anybody." He reached down and turned the key to silence the big cycle.

In the sudden quiet a faint sound could be heard a few blocks down. The clip clop, clip clop that broke the silence was something the men standing there had never heard in the city before. They all turned to look down the street, squinting into the shadows. The street appeared to be empty, but the shadows at the side of the road split suddenly to show them, unbelievably, a horse, with a rider on its back. The rider wore a cowboy hat and swayed gently in the saddle as if he'd been riding all his life.

Julio looked at Bigg, "Bones? What's he doin' down here with that animal? Has he lost his flippin' mind?"

The rider drew near and they peered closely at him, waiting for him to speak. The cowboy hat was pulled low on the tall man's face and his features were in shadow. He stopped about ten feet away and stared at them in silence.

Warwicke finally spoke. "Hey cowboy, wanna race?" He patted his cycle.

The man in the saddle snorted and reached around to remove a small, black object from where he'd tucked it into his jeans at the small of his back. "I don't think so, bro." Then he shot something into Julio's broad chest. The big man flapped his lips for a few seconds and then dropped like a stone.

Warwicke reached a hand toward Louis and the greasy haired thug jerked and hit the ground hard. Warwicke looked at the taser in his hand and grinned. "Wow, cool."

Heathcliffe pushed the cowboy hat back so his brother could see his smiling face. "Not as cool as this one, it shoots like a gun. We're gonna have to raid Alfric's stash when he's not looking."

Mr. Bigg took two steps and then stopped, quickly finding himself on the business end of another taser before he could get any further. Edric Honeybun cocked his head at the little man. "I don't think so. We need to talk to you for a few minutes."

Clovis Honeybun emerged from the shadows of the alley and grinned at the very pale man. He nodded at his brothers and Heathcliffe slid out of the saddle. He and Warwicke

grabbed Julio under the arms and dragged him toward the black Hummer that had pulled up beside Warwicke's cycle in the middle of the street. Louis was quickly dispatched in the same way.

Clovis reached into his pocket for the pair of cuffs he'd stashed there. "Bigg, I believe you and I have some things to discuss before I call the police and tell them you're ready to talk."

If it was possible, the little man's face lost even more of its color. "You can't do this, I'll sue you for everything you have. I'll have you arrested for kidnapping. I'll make sure you never spend another day as a Marine."

Clovis laughed. "You can try, little Bigg. But I'm betting my lawyer type friends can keep up with your lawyer type friends any day of the week."

Bigg snorted, "What? Your pansy ass brother Percy? I don't think he's quite in the same league as my lawyers."

Clovis nodded, frowning slightly, "You might be right. But hey!" His face cleared as if something had just occurred, "Have I mentioned that my dad's name is Bob Honeybun? You might have heard of him. Legal counsel to President Reagan. Geesh!" Clovis snapped the cuffs on the man's skinny, baby soft wrists. "I can't believe I forgot to mention that."

Edric stuffed the taser back into the waistband of his baggy jeans. "Don't forget Uncle Brick, the Senator."

Clovis clapped his brother on the shoulder. "I *had* forgotten uncle Brick. Thanks, bro."

Bigg looked like he wanted to pee himself.

"Let's just make use of this nice little car shall we?" Clovis looked up at Warwicke, who was standing over a slightly dazed Louis talking to Alfric. "Wick?"

Warwicke turned around. "Yeah?"

"Would you care to drive?"

The younger Honeybun brother grinned, "Would I?" He turned to Edric, "You'll take my cycle where it needs to go?"

Edric nodded, "With pleasure. I thought you'd never let me drive this thing."

Warwicke slid into the driver's seat of the long, black car. "Just don't wrap it around anything or you'll be answering to both me *and* mom."

Clovis settled little Bigg into the back seat and closed the door. "I wonder how fast this thing will take the turns, bro," he asked Warwicke in an offhand manner.

Warwicke grinned, "Let's find out shall we?"

They left half of the tires behind on the pavement when they took off and, by the time they turned the first corner it was hard to tell which was gonna be more annoying to the sleeping neighbors; the squeal of tires as the long car slid and careened around corners and down streets at an impossible speed, or the screeching that was coming from the little man in the backseat. Bigg was definitely gonna need a new pair of tidy whitey's by the time Warwicke got done taking his fancy limo for a test run.

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Angie scrubbed at a tiny spot of spilled coffee on the counter and glanced at Alastair. "Do you think they're all right?"

Alastair chuckled, "The bad guys? Or my brothers?"

Angie slanted him a look.

He shrugged, "Hopefully my brothers won't be too hard on them. Though they deserve everything they get."

Angie nodded, "So, Brita said the DA was finally singing?"

"Like a bluebird on acid."

"And he admitted that he and his wife had Debra kidnapped to throw a wrench into the Bigg extortion case?"

Alastair nodded, "Bigg forced him to do it. Said he'd let out that they'd been partners in a few deals if they ended up in the courtroom together. With it being reassigned, the case won't go to trial until next year most likely. Bigg thought he had an angle to get out of the other deal, he just needed more time to work it out. This will add a whole new dimension to the trial. He's pretty much screwed."

Angie clucked her tongue, "Sux to be him. What about all that money the Burns's extorted from the rich ex-wife."

"That was the only way Burns could get his new little wifey to go along with it. She apparently overheard him talking to Bigg about the kidnapping and threatened to squeal. The original plan didn't include any money. Bigg was just gonna hold the girl for a few days and then, when the DA's case file had been reassigned, give her back. No harm, no foul."

"So tacky."

Alastair took a sip of the hot, wonderfully fragrant coffee Angie had made them. "Extremely."

"But little did the DA know that his wife had other plans for that money."

"And for poor little Ms. Burns too it appears."

"Except that poor little Ms. Burns was going to double-cross her."

"And her father."

"And her boyfriend? Brian Davies?"

Alastair frowned. "That, Brita wasn't sure about. Davies actually loved the little witch. He knew she was headed for trouble and thought he could pin everything on her wicked stepmother and the DA. But unfortunately, Debra Burns wasn't content to just sit on the sidelines and let events unfold. She decided to grab that gun..."

Angie reached into the pastry case and pulled out a couple of fat, sticky looking rolls. She set them on small white plates and put one in front of Alastair. "Honey bun?"

"Yes dear?"

She laughed, "Eat your honey bun. They go really well with hot coffee."

"Yes we do don't we?"

Angie leaned over the counter and gave him a soft kiss filled with promise. "We'll have to find out later. I have this idea that involves dunking and nibbling."

"Mmmm, sounds like something I could definitely get behind."

The door swung open and a small yip greeted them, followed swiftly by the sound of pitter pattering feet. Jaws

leapt onto Alastair's lap and gave him wet kisses on the nose and cheeks. Alastair laughed and stroked the little dog's floppy ears. "Hey boy, I've missed you too."

Angie reached for Jaws and snuggled him up close, happily accepting her own dose of doxy love.

Percy and Brita joined Alastair at the counter.

"Two more coffees?" Angie asked.

Percy nodded, "And two more of those, whatever they are, they look delicious."

"Honey buns."

"Yes dear?"

Brita frowned at him, still angry from the looks of it.

"They're called honey buns. And although they do indeed look good enough to eat, *you* don't. So don't even give me any lip."

Percy pouted playfully and turned to give Angie a wink.

"I'm slowly winning her back over. She's crazy about me."

Brita ignored him and sat down on the other side of Alastair. Looking around she said, "It looks like the place held up okay. Nothing seems permanently broken."

Angie nodded and set two steaming mugs in front of them.

"Thanks to you all. I couldn't have done it without your help. Your family is the best, Alastair."

He had a mouth full of honey bun but he nodded. Percy nudged his arm. "Should we tell her about Edric and Heathcliffe?"

Alastair went pale. "No. I don't think..."

Percy ignored him. "You see, the pastry truck showed up and the delivery guy was really sick."

"He was all pale and stuff." Brita added.

"And he looked like he was gonna throw up." Alastair mumbled with a mouth still full of bun.

"So Edric and Heathcliffe offered to help him unload the truck and the guy was desperate so he said yes."

"Then off he went to the bathroom to throw up."

"Only the toilet backed up."

Angie grimaced, "It does that a lot."

Alastair stopped chewing, "Really? Cause we can get it fixed for you."

"We have a cousin who's a plumber," Percy added.

"So anyway that kid you have helping you here ... the geeky one?"

"Petey."

Alastair nodded, "Yeah, that's the kid. He's helping the delivery guy in the bathroom..."

"And meanwhile Edric and Heathcliffe are unloading the truck..." Brita's smiling now.

"And mumbling about how many damn pastries you ordered for one little coffee shoppe."

Angie clapped a hand over her mouth, starting to understand.

"And then the guy finally comes out of the john..."

"All pale and sweaty..."

"And Edric and Heathcliffe are sitting on a mountain of crates in the back..."

"All sweaty and exhausted..."

"And the guy just looks at the mess of boxes in your store room and he runs to his truck and he looks in the back and it's totally empty..."

Angie shrieked into laughter. "They unloaded the whole truck?"

Alastair, Percy, and Brita were laughing too. They all nodded.

"But the best part," Percy tells her, "Is that the guy says his company has this rule..."

Brita nodded, "Anything that comes off the truck can't be put back in. It's a health issue."

Angie's leaning on the counter now, barely able to breathe.

"So Edric says, 'What the hell kind of a rule is that?'"

"And the guy says..." Alastair is gasping to breathe at this point, "...he says..."

Percy slapped his brother on the back, "He says, 'it's a rule that just made you the happy owner of five hundred muffins, two hundred loaves of bread, three hundred bagels, and fifty assorted cakes. You're lucky the cookies were loaded into the cab of the truck. I ran out of room in the back for those.'"

Angie shrieked again and wiped tears off her cheeks, "Holy crap! Is it all still in my store room?"

Brita shook her head, sniffing, her cheeks and eyes were wet too. "They paid the guy and then sheepishly carted most of it off to their cars. Heathcliffe was gonna give stuff away at the Academy and Edric thought he might be able to get rid of some of it at the college."

Alastair shook his head. Mom and dad told me about it tonight, while we were waiting for them to round up the horse at the airport."

Brita took a sip of her coffee and narrowed her eyes. "Where did your brothers take that horse anyway?"

Percy shrugged and became suddenly very interested in his honey bun. Alastair looked at Angie and she turned away so Brita wouldn't see the guilty look on her face.

"Boys! What are they up to?"

Percy bit his lip. "How do we know, we can't keep track of those bozos." He tried to appear impatient but a smile kept tugging at the corners of his battered mouth.

"Percy!"

Alastair stood up and looked at his watch. "I don't know where they are, Brita, but I was wondering, do you have your cell phone on you?"

The pretty golden-brown eyes narrowed even further, "Yes. Why?"

Alastair shrugged and started gathering up cups. "It's getting late. You ready to go home, Ang?"

Angie avoided looking at Brita and nodded. She allowed Percy and Alastair to help her tidy up.

Brita's phone rang and Percy headed for the door. Brita was talking rapidly on the phone and hurrying after Percy. The last thing Angie and Alastair saw as they headed for Percy's car was Brita flicking her phone closed and flipping Percy the bird.

Angie sighed, "That will probably slow his efforts to win her back."

Alastair came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Yup. But don't feel too sorry for him. Percy digs this stuff. He gets bored if life isn't complicated enough."

Angie leaned against him and sighed, wrapping her arms around his. "How about you?"

"How *about* me?"

"Do you get bored without constant challenge?"

His lips touched her temple and began a trail down the side of her face. "Not in the least. In fact, right about now I'm thinking I'd like things to get really quiet and really cozy for a while."

"You would?"

"Mm hmm." His lips found her neck and his tongue came out to lick the ultra sensitive area behind her ear.

Angie moaned, "My apartment's pretty cozy."

"What the hell are we doin' here?"

Angie grinned, "I can't move when you're doing that."

"I can't stop doing this."

Jaws yipped and they both looked down.

Alastair grinned, "He told us to get a room."

Angie sighed, "He's the boss. Let's go little man. I think you're gonna like my bed. It's big and squishy."

"I know I will 'cause you're gonna be in it."

She flipped the light next to the door and pulled it shut. "I was talking to Jaws."

Alastair frowned, "Oh."

Angie twisted the key in the lock and turned. She gasped and looked at Alastair with a horrified expression on her face.

"What's *that* doing here?"

Alastair gave her a slow, knee melting smile. "Edric must have dropped it off."

"Why didn't he bring one of our cars?"

Alastair shrugged, "They don't know where they are."

"I'm not getting on that thing."

Jaws yipped happily and ran to the motorcycle that was parked at the curb. He jumped up and down with excitement.

"But Jaws wants to ride on it."

"I don't care."

"But you were worried about whether he would like your bed."

"I'm not worried about this. I have an idea, you and Jaws can ride this damn thing home and I'll walk."

Alastair shook his head and handed her one of the two helmets that Edric had left. "That wouldn't be safe." He reached down and picked up Jaws. "Come on, fraidy cat. Climb on."

Angie stood on the sidewalk for a long moment looking at the sleek, black machine and wondering how she could get out of riding on it.

"I promise to drive like my grandmother."

"I don't believe you. Besides, if she's a Honeybun she probably drives like a crazy person."

Alastair shrugged.

Finally Angie sighed and dropped the helmet over her head. It was so big it felt like it was resting on her shoulders. She felt like Dumb Donald of the Fat Albert cartoons. She climbed on and wrapped her arms tightly around Alastair's

waist, dropping her head against his back. "Let's get this over with."

He revved the engine. "What?"

She lifted her head, "I said let's get this o ... o ...
ooooooooohhhhhh shiiiiittttttt!"

The End

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Sam Cheever writes fast paced fantasy and romantic fiction with feisty characters who deal with life's little challenges in unique and often hilarious ways. As a reader Sam is very impatient. She quickly loses interest if a story doesn't have a good pace and snappy dialogue. Sam's inability to focus in a backwash of human angst and subtleties works out well for her readers, since she writes the way she likes to read.

In her real life, Sam lives on a hobby farm in Indiana with 10 dogs, 4 horses, 2 barn cats, 2 daughters, and one husband. Not necessarily in that order.

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Red Rose Publishing:

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Cerridwen Press:

'Tween Heaven and Hell

'Tween a Devil and His Hard Place

Under Contract, late 2008 early 2009 release:

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