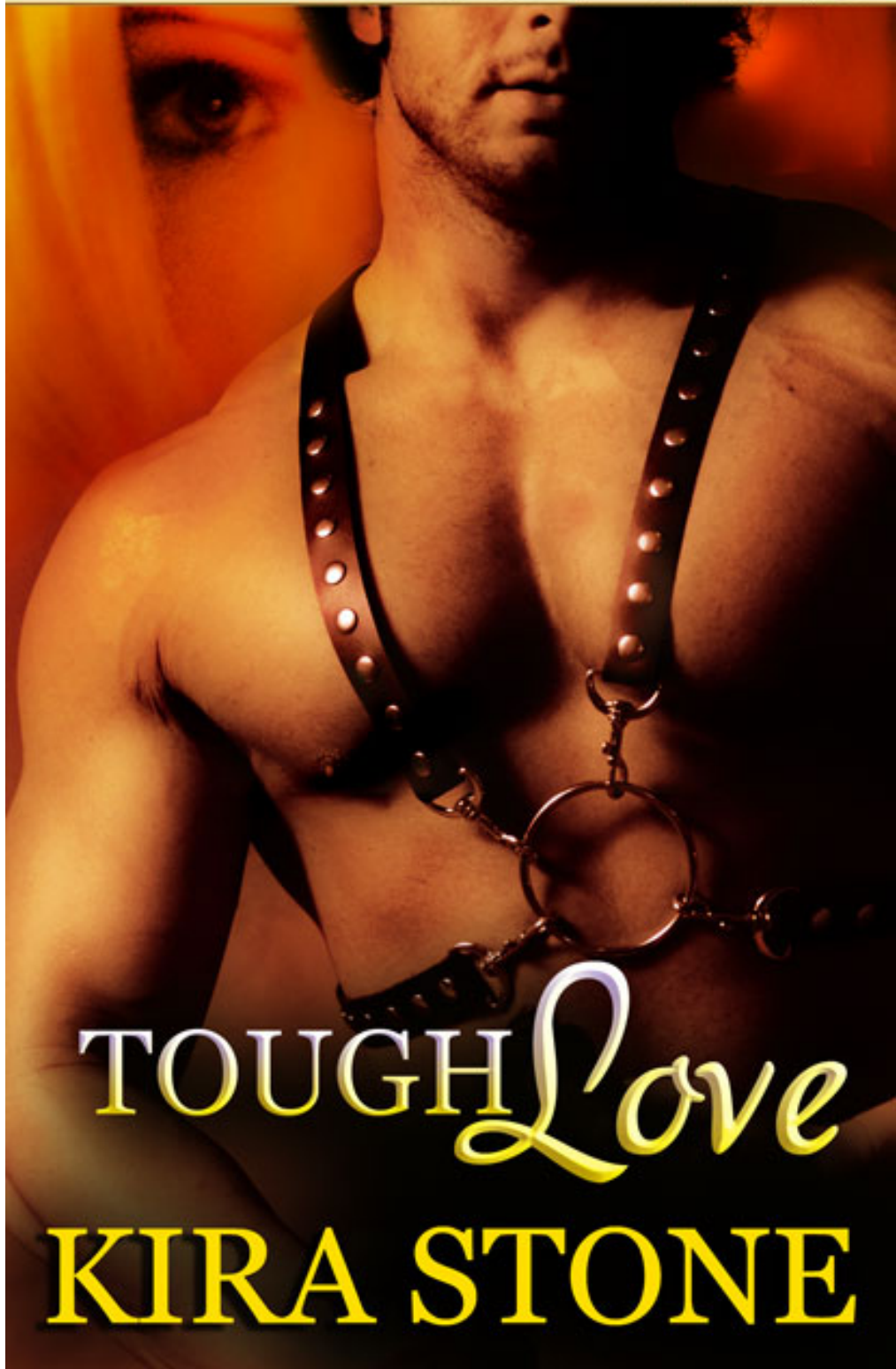


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



TOUGH *Love*

KIRA STONE

Tough Love

Kira Stone

Jade fears the deadly inner demons consuming her life. In a last-ditch attempt to beat them, she goes to Blossom House, a place that specializes in treating people with unusual problems. That's where she meets Cas, a man whose sole job is to love Jade until she is able to love herself again.

Tough love is what it takes to bring Jade back from the dark wasteland of her daily life. Cas is just the man to give it to her, in long, passionate doses. The road back from hell isn't easy, but with Cas' loving ways and lust-filled touch, Jade becomes whole again.

Or so she thinks. When Cas' ex-girlfriend returns to Blossom House to harm the people Jade has come to care for the most, Jade's erotic connection with Cas could be her salvation—or lead to her destruction.

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Tough Love

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TOUGH LOVE

Kira Stone

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Alum Dagger, who held my hand through every page. And to my editor Briana St. James, for having the patience to work with me through it all.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Author Note

Many of the scenes in this book are constructed from my own personal experiences. I have verified with two independent psychologists that the actions taken by the characters in this book are not only plausible, but do happen in real life. Also, please keep in mind as you read this work that Blossom House is not a psychiatric institution but a highly specialized resort for people who have lost their way along life's path. In other words, they can break traditional rules if they feel it's justified.

Prologue

A New Beginning

It was going to be one of *those* nights. Caspar Milokovich kicked off the thin white sheet covering him, his body already damp with a light sheen of sweat. One hand stroked the length of his lean torso while the other reached for the light on small table beside the bed. The glow illuminated the face of the woman in the picture just under the lamp. She was gorgeous in a hometown girl way and Cas was sure he loved her. It was, after all, part of his job.

However, only finding release for his body to ease himself into sleep mattered tonight. The picture of the beautiful woman, his next special guest at Blossom House, would certainly help with that.

He gazed down at the hands clasped in her lap, imagining what her slim fingers would feel like trailing over his hot skin. His legs fell open as he ran his hands over his inner thighs, a featherlight tentative touch that he suspected she would have.

He moved his fingers toward his cock. The thick vein on the underside of his shaft pulsed under his fingers as he stroked the length with slow, smooth movements.

Lubrication. He needed her to wrap her mouth around his aching erection. He could almost feel her lips and tongue on his cock, enveloping him. Practicality merged with fantasy as he reached for a half-empty tube of lube from his bedside table drawer. He squeezed out a large dollop and tossed the tube aside. Making a fist, he thrust his cock through the thick gel warmed by his hand. *Ah yes...*

Visions of the beautiful woman devouring his aching erection filled his mind. He could just see her lying between his legs, his cock straining toward her, barely touching her chin. Her eyes would be locked on his and a grin on her beautiful face. In his mind, he waited for her to lower her head, and he was soon rewarded with a sudden lick of her tongue that traced his cock from base to head. Several licks followed, which bathed the length of his cock over and over again, her eyes never leaving his. He shivered.

He continued moving his fingers up and down his already hard erection. He visualized her stopping just above the head to lap the pre-cum oozing from the slit. Several quick strokes of her tongue took care of that and she dipped her head once more to suck his balls.

He moaned, cupped his balls and gave them a light squeeze as he imagined her trapping one of them in her mouth, closing her eyes and swirling her tongue over his sac. She stroked the sensitive orb with her tongue, sucked it gently and then released it. She trapped the other one with her lips and proceeded to do the same, tongue working with such precision and care that he groaned.

She opened her eyes and lifted her hand to massage his cock. Her fingers worked rhythmically over his shaft while she continued to suck his balls. He visualized putting his own hand over hers and their combined movements increased steadily. He could feel the heat of his body rising and sweat began to bead on his forehead.

His breathing intensified as he imagined her raising her head up once more. She rested her mouth over his cock head. The need to have her mouth wrapped around his cock became too much. He laid a hand over the top of her head and gently pushed her down. His cock entered her mouth slowly, giving her time to adjust to his thick and heavy erection. He could hear her gag, but her throat worked fast to allow the muscles to relax. She began swallowing his cock, making room in her throat to accommodate it. He watched as the whole of his shaft disappeared inside her mouth. His hand held her there for a few seconds, her nose on his pubes tickling him.

The muscles in his right arm burned as his fist moved continuously over his throbbing shaft. His heart pounded in his chest as the pleasure built.

He went back to visualizing her between his legs. He grabbed her head with both hands. She moaned around his cock as his hands kept her head still while his hips snapped and he began to fuck her mouth. Her lips were so tight around his shaft, her mouth so wet, so warm. His throbbing cock hit the inside of her cheek over and over again. She sucked it hard, bathing it in her saliva, looking at him. The speed of him fucking her mouth intensified.

His own hand moved over his shaft at the same frantic pace. The urge to come gathered in his balls, spread out across his abdomen and down his thighs, turning his tan skin to a ruddy hue. Each stroke of his cock brought him closer to the climactic edge.

His eyes sought out the picture once more. "I...love...you," he gritted out between clenched teeth. His cock hardened to the point of pain. And then nothing on this earth was going to stop him from coming. His body bowed from the strain. Orgasm tightened his balls, causing him to gasp. Within seconds, huge drops of pearly white cum rained down on his chest, dotting him from chin to bellybutton.

His body shuddered as it expelled several more bursts of the salty liquid from his engorged cock. His muscles shook with tremors from head to toe, then melted into a river of molten pleasure. Finally the orgasmic tide ebbed and he collapsed against the pillows, his breathing shallow and fast. Beads of sweat mingled with the small white pools, spreading them across his heated skin. He ran his fist over his reddened shaft one more time, squeezing the last pearly drop from the purpled head.

He reached out and traced the face of the woman who had helped to bring him so much pleasure. Even if she was unaware, he wanted her to feel special. He bought the picture to his lips and kissed it. "I love you..."

* * * * *

The voyeuristic woman cut the live feed from Cas' room with a click of a button. She'd gotten what she wanted. A little digital magic, and she'd have the perfect prize to drive her pet wild. Best of all, Cas would never know about his part in her plan until it was too late.

"Payback's a bitch," she told the figure on the screen as she watched his erotic movements on replay. She lifted her glass of wine toward him in a mock toast. "Here's to your suffering."

Chapter One

Cas' Next Assignment

Several months later...

After saying goodbye to his last client in the relaxation rooms, Cas skirted the administrative offices, then let himself out the side door of Blossom House's massage building. He paused for a second to inhale a lungful of the fresh, cool fall air, a treat after spending his day in the heavily perfumed pampering rooms.

Clients could spend hours in the luxurious mineral baths, wrapped up in pore-cleansing steam or soaking in hot mud. One-on-one workouts were a favorite, as were the deep tissue massages. Just about anything a person could ask for from a health spa was offered at Blossom House's main campus.

There was, however, another section of Blossom House, a far more important one in Cas' opinion. Sometimes it wasn't a person's body that needed pampering, but their mind. That was his main job, helping people tend to the needs of their mind and soul. And because this was Blossom House rather than a psychiatric facility, they went about caring for their guests in a very special way.

Dense ivy filled the gaps between the slats of the ten-foot-high wooden fence that separated the public area of Blossom House from the private side. Cas followed the expertly tended dirt path until he reached an isolated, unremarkable metal gate.

"Password?" a familiar voice echoed over the hidden speaker as he came to a stop.

"Boyd?"

Orin Boyd, Blossom House's roving troubleshooter, rarely staffed the security desk. His services were in constant demand in virtually every other part of the campus. The fact that he was manning the surveillance cameras meant either one too many people had called in sick or he was tackling a new problem. Cas' gut said it was the latter.

Boyd's height—five-feet, three-inches—wasn't likely to make the average person feel secure. Or intimidated. But appearances were deceptive. Boyd was more than a chief security guard in the same way that Blossom House was more than an upscale day spa. Cas liked the guy, had liked Boyd even before the troubleshooter saved his butt from certain death.

"Hey, Cas. How's it hanging?"

"Loose and low, my friend. Loose and low." His voice now was quite different than the one his recent clients had heard. No slow, careful phrasing and just a fraction of the Slavic accent he'd used with them.

"Done for the day?"

“Done for good. I’m officially back in R Block, as of right now.”

“Your next guest arrives tomorrow. You up for it?”

Cas rolled his shoulders, shrugging off the lingering ache from eight straight hours of giving rubdowns to the wealthy masses. “I was ready two weeks ago. This stint in the relaxation rooms wasn’t my idea.”

“I’m your Hawk on this one. I’ve got a right to know where your mind is.”

If Boyd had assigned himself the job of looking over his shoulder while Cas attended to a private guest, then something was definitely going on inside Blossom House—or he was being overly paranoid. Neither option was good. “Yeah, Boyd, I can handle it. Want to tell me why you’re taking on a low-level security assignment?”

“Dr. Scott’s idea of damage control.”

Cas formulated many responses to that news, but he bit them all back. For one, it wasn’t right to take out his anger on the messenger. Secondly, anything that did pass his lips on the sensitive subject could be recorded and used against him later. He wasn’t giving his critics more ammunition to use against him.

And honestly, there was no one better than Boyd to watch his back. If Cas was pissed because the facility’s director found the extra precaution necessary, he had no one to blame but himself.

He kicked at the dirt path with his shoe. “So you gonna let me in or what?”

“Password?”

“Oh, come on.” Like Boyd really thought he was a spy or a too-curious guest.

“Password,” the troubleshooter repeated in the same flat tone.

“Fine, fine. It’s relic.”

“Approved.”

Twenty feet further down the garden path, the ivy parted and the wire-thin electrified gate behind it retracted into the wooden slats. Cas passed through the opening and then sprinted over the grassy rise to R Block, a set of single story buildings in the hundred-acre private sector designed to resemble military barracks. Colorless and drab, the units were identical except where the occupants had taken the trouble to liven up their homes.

His own suite remained as bland as the day he’d moved into it, both inside and out. People colored his world, not things.

The door opened at his voice command, leaving his hands free to discard his sweat-stained clothing as he strolled inside. He took a quick shower to rid his skin of the heavy floral scents his last guest had chosen to aid her relaxation and then tugged on a pair of lightweight drawstring pants and a matching gray T-shirt. He finger-combed his wavy black hair out of his eyes, making a mental note to get it cut soon. Though he had a few minutes to spare, he abandoned the idea of a hasty dinner and stepped through his back door into a narrow passage.

The trip to the R Block staff's underground common area was a short one down a steep tunnel, and through another key-coded door.

"Hey, D—" The rest of his greeting ended abruptly as Cas stopped to stare at the sight before him. "What the—"

Digger Graves, a beefy black man who had the heart and soul of a kitten, lifted his nose from the science fiction book he was reading. "Be glad Helen didn't decide to redecorate by filling the conversation pit with a mud bath."

"That'd still be better than the time the twins made each of us life-sized clones to sit with because they were tired of being the only identical pair around," Cas replied. "That just plain freaked me out." He kicked his way through the fluffy gray throw pillows until he reached the center of the seating area. There were no other obstructions to get his in way. Not even a foot stool. Where the hell were they all supposed to sit?

The only other person in the room didn't utter a word to him, so he returned the favor. Dana Goddard had come to Blossom House as one of their special guests, but she'd been in residence so long she was now part of their inner circle. Cas thought of Dana as the black sheep of the family because she usually stuck to the shadows. She had her own set of rules for social interaction. Memories of the few times he'd accidentally broken those rules lingered in the back of his mind, a warning to the future. Out of necessity, he'd developed his own method for dealing with her. When in doubt, avoid.

Cas chose a spot near Digger that had, until Helen Monroe redecorated for her month as den keeper, held his favorite chair. He was just about to comment again on the lack of functional comfort inherent in Helen's new design when the door marked with a large, black "4" opened.

Dr. Matthew Scott tumbled into the room on the heels of the twins, Ella and Alle Kopf. Limbs and pillows spun through the air as the three of them rolled to a halt and attempted to make sense of the decorative changes in the room. The fact that several months ago Digger had installed green carpet on the ceiling and painted a cloudy blue sky on the floor didn't help them figure out which end was up.

Predictably, Helen made her appearance while everyone else milled around, dazed and confused. This time she did so in a hip-swinging gait reminiscent of the leading ladies in the film noirs that she loved.

Not bad for a woman approaching sixty, Cas silently mused.

"Damn it, Helen, where the hell am I supposed to sit?" Dr. Scott complained.

"On your cute bottom."

"I should sit on your lap," the psychiatrist retorted. Though young in age, he sometimes acted as if he were a generation older. Cas didn't pry into why. The doctor would share his reasons if he ever felt it necessary.

Dana left her secluded corner and approached the group. She wore a rough woolen dress, gray and shapeless, that hid her boyishly slim body and pooled around her feet. Her shaved head glowed under the ambient lighting. She looked like a fallen angel who'd been singed by her halo.

“I did it. I said it was okay. I’m sorry.” Her musical voice made the very air hum with happy feelings, even though the expression on her face could only be described as anxious to please.

“Understood, Dana,” Dr. Scott said with little inflection. He then addressed Helen one more time. “Henceforth, Helen, please take into consideration the comfort of your block-mates when you redesign. We’re not all as spry as you.”

Helen nodded, a queen accepting sage advice from a peer of the realm.

Having settled that point, Dr. Scott moved on to the reason for the gathering. “Tomorrow we will receive a new guest.”

The twins burst into enthusiastic applause. Dana continued to study the fabric covering her body as though clothing was a new experience for her. Digger turned to the next page of his book. Cas, however, gave the doctor his full attention.

Helen’s voice became strained as she placed her ankle behind her neck in an attempt to practice her yoga position of the week. “What can you tell us about her?”

“Her name is Jade Rue.”

The psychiatrist fished around in the sea of pillows until he caught his prize, a thin manila folder. He removed a picture and handed it over to Digger.

When the photo made its way around the group to him, Cas studied it. A professional pose touched up by an artist’s airbrush, he suspected. Real women were seldom as beautiful as this one. Ash blonde hair, pixie short. Green eyes that reminded him of rolling Irish hills. A swanlike neck exposed for the camera, her lips curved into a stunning smile.

She wouldn’t be smiling when she arrived at Blossom House. Cas would bet on it.

He handed the picture to Helen as Dr. Scott spoke again. “The first one was taken three years ago. This is Jade today.”

Digger made a choked sound and tears filled his eyes as he gazed upon the second photo. Cas waited for his turn with much less patience this time. What he saw nearly broke his heart. In the newer version, Jade looked like a poster child for a concentration camp. Her face was thin to the point of protruding bones. Hanks of lusterless hair fell to either side of her pale face wearing an expression that dared the camera to capture her. There was no joy in her wintergreen eyes, no bright smile. No sign that she’d ever once been the happy, laughing woman in the previous picture.

Ella and Alle crawled into the circle created by Digger’s huge arms. Whether they were trying to comfort him or wanted his comfort was debatable. Cas passed Jade’s second photo on. Dana accepted it with both hands as if the glossy paper were fragile and subjected it to the same intense study as she had her dress.

“She needs you,” Dana said softly, looking Cas in the eye.

Though shocked by her direct comment, Cas nodded in agreement. Jade needed someone, that was for sure. Despite what he’d told Boyd, Cas could only hope he was up to the challenge. He read that same hope on the faces of the other team members to

varying degrees. They were the supporting cast for the drama ahead, but he would take the lead. The team's success in restoring Jade to health depended largely on how well he played his part.

"What's her story?" Digger asked.

"Not a huge departure from what we've dealt with successfully in the past," Dr. Scott replied. "Been in and out of traditional psychiatric facilities for two years. No one has been able to help her. Now it's our turn."

"She's been hurt," Dana said, caressing the "after" photo with her finger.

"Inside and out," Ella murmured.

"But we'll heal her," her twin finished.

They continued to talk for a few minutes, but they couldn't accomplish much in terms of concrete details until Jade arrived. Everyone reacted differently to Blossom House's unorthodox methods of rehabilitation. Cas might be taking the male lead in her recovery plan, but Jade herself would write the script.

After Dr. Scott declared the meeting over, Digger took the Russian twins to his room for their nightly reading lesson. If it sometimes consisted of words like kiss and tickle rather than dog and run, no one would hear the women complain. It had been Cas' task until the big pacifist moved into R Block. There was a tinge of healthy jealousy every time Cas watched the three of them leave together.

Helen retreated to her own quarters, but she'd probably head to town for a last fling before Jade's arrival. If the pattern of behavior displayed by new R Block guests held true, there'd be little rest for any of them during the first few days of Jade's stay. Helen was smart to take advantage of the lull while it lasted.

Dana also disappeared, so quietly that Cas never saw her go.

"Guess it's just you and me, Doc. Interested in a cup of tea?" Cas despised the stuff himself, but for Dr. Scott it was comfort food, so he made a point of always having some around.

"This place exists because it fills a need," Dr. Scott said once they were seated at Cas' kitchen table with a steaming cup in front of him. "But sometimes I wish we had no more work to do."

Cas' mug held plain water because no one enjoyed drinking alone. "It's a big, bad world out there. Nothing much we can do but take care of those who enter our small corner of it."

"That's the thought that keeps pulling me out of bed every morning."

Cas sipped at the rusty tasting tap water and waited for the psychiatrist to say what was really on his mind.

"How did things go in the Relaxation Rooms?"

More pointless chatter. Cas hid his sigh in a small yawn. "Fine. No problems. It's been a while since I've done that kind of work. I forgot how simple it can be."

"But not as rewarding?"

Something in the doctor's delivery of the question caused Cas to take a deep look into the man's blue eyes. There were questions there, ones Cas needed to answer straight from his gut. "There are times I think life would be easier if I went back to working in the public area full-time. Then I think of those we've helped and I know that I do my best work here. Easy or not, this is what I want to do."

"Are you sure you're ready to greet a new guest so soon?"

Dr. Scott didn't trust him. Cas withstood the implied insult, but couldn't keep the defensiveness from his tone. "You're asking because of Aimee?"

"I'm asking because I have a duty to our guests as well as to my staff. I don't want Jade to suffer more than she has already, nor do I want to put you in a position you're not fully prepared to handle."

How could Dr. Scott think that he'd jeopardize another person's happiness, particularly that of one of their special guests? "I took a break after Aimee's departure because you ordered me to. I admit I enjoyed the change of pace more than I expected, but now I'm ready to get back to my real job."

"Resting your mind is only a part of the recovery, as you know. You need to come to terms with your emotions as well. That takes time, perhaps more time than you've had."

"Is that why you saddled Boyd with this babysitting job? Because you're worried about me?"

Dr. Scott shook his head. "You're not the only one who got stung by Aimee's betrayal. Boyd won't get over it until he scouts out the situation, sees for himself what impact it had."

In a series of debriefings following Aimee's turbulent departure, they'd chewed over the facts until Cas could recite the events in his sleep. The troubleshooter knew damn well the toll Aimee's irresponsible actions had taken on the group. "Can't I just send him a memo?"

The doctor gave him a faint smile. "There are many ways people can be hurt, just as there are many ways for them to deal with it. None of them are typically accomplished by a memo."

Tired of dancing around the issue, Cas banged his mug down on the table, sloshing water over the rim. "I can do this, Dr. Scott, but if you have doubts, then reassign me."

The psychiatrist winked at him. "I have faith in you. I wanted to hear that you have faith in yourself." Dr. Scott finished off the dregs of his tea and put his cup in the sink. Turning around, he said casually, "Jade Rue won't be easy to deal with."

"She wouldn't be coming here if she was, Doc."

Chapter Two

House and Home

There were some things, Jade decided, that not even her grandmother's considerable wealth could make tolerable. Leaving the comfort of her Philadelphia apartment currently ranked number one on Jade's list. Mercifully, she'd slept through the first part of the trip.

Not that she'd give them the satisfaction of admitting they'd done the right thing by extracting her from her comfortable nest the way they had. She never would have gone willingly if they had tried to remove her while conscious. Drugged the chicken satay she'd ordered from the nearby Thai place, the bastards. She hadn't regained consciousness until the small private plane was in the air.

Learning that she'd been kidnapped hadn't improved her mood.

The transfer at the piss-poor county airstrip hadn't gone quite according to their plan, though. The guards had acted as if she wore a label across her forehead that said, "Warning—Dangerous Animal Inside" as they shepherded her from the plane to the chopper. Instead of biting and clawing as they apparently had expected, Jade had gone completely limp. They'd had to carry her dead weight across the tarmac, and then buckle her into the backseat of the chopper without any cooperation from their charge.

It was the least she could do after all they'd done for her.

The situation would have been amusing if she'd had the interest to be amused by anything these days. But now Jade regretted not fighting them every inch of the way. She was trapped, strapped down in a flying bubble with two other humans breathing down her neck. Watching her. She could almost smell their fear.

And until they were back on the ground, Jade had to trust them with her life.

Fucking bastards.

Land sped by under the belly of the flying beast. Jade didn't know whether to pray for the trip to end or beg the guards to return her to Nana's care. Both options had unpleasant ramifications. If she rejected this latest offer of so-called help, Nana would insist that Jade do *something* to reclaim her life and act her age, a grown woman of twenty-seven instead of the withdrawn, ill-mannered child she'd become. What Nana didn't seem to understand was that Jade didn't have a choice about how she behaved. She was what she was and there wasn't a single thing on God's green earth that could change her back into the happy, rational person she'd been two years ago.

Landing, however, meant another round of therapy, of that Jade was sure. No matter what treatment plan the doctors and her grandmother had cooked up this time, it made no difference. She'd learned she could survive just about anything.

That was the problem. She no longer wanted to survive. Nothing this new set of doctors said or did would change her mind about that. So why spend a month or two as a psychological test subject for strangers when she could accomplish just as much by spending that time alone in her apartment?

But, of course, Nana knew what was best for her granddaughter. She had a legal note signed by a judge that said so. Wishing she could go home was just that, a useless wish. Which meant, like it or not, Jade had to endure whatever this new insane asylum chose to do with her in the name of therapy.

Therapy. What a crock. In her next life she was going to come back as a psychologist, earn millions by listening to others whine about their problems. What a scam. As if by talking long enough and throwing obscene amounts of money around, all the bad things in her life would just disappear. It wasn't talking that had caused most of her problems, so how could mere words solve them?

Better not to even try whatever these jokers had planned. Better to face the fresh disappointment in Nana's eyes, the anger in her voice, when Jade returned to Philly like a boomerang child, no better off than when she'd left.

Jade was just about to inform the pilot of her feelings when the helicopter began its descent. Though there was no hint of a rollercoaster drop involved, bile rose in her throat and her palms turned sweaty. She feared if she looked down at her body, she'd see her own heart beating out of her chest. She couldn't do this. No way. They had to turn around and take her home. Now!

Too late. The skids settled upon a secluded cement pad with barely a thump. Her throat spasmed as she tried to inhale with fear and exhale with rage at the same time. Did Nana know that her trusted employees were dumping her granddaughter off in the middle of a cow pasture like a rejected newborn left on the stairs of church? Except, from what Jade could see through the windows, she didn't even rate the church.

As the rotors slowed, her paid chaperones scrambled out without so much as a friendly wave, leaving Jade alone. Learning to fly was one of the things she'd planned to do some day, and then her life had ended before she'd found the time. Now, in her meaningless afterlife, she couldn't even come to her own rescue and fly off into the sunrise.

Could she sink any lower?

Jade unbuckled the safety harness and shifted her body into a less uncomfortable position. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the seat. All she could do was wait. Sooner or later, someone would show up and then she'd demand that they return her to Nana.

Sooner came and went and Jade was nearly asleep when a muffled knock next to her head drew her attention. Jade reached over and popped open the air vent. "Yes?"

"My name is Helen. Welcome to Blossom House."

"Thanks, but I'm not staying. Consider me stamped 'return to sender' and get me the hell out of here."

Jade closed the window before the handsome, well-dressed woman could retort. She resumed her imitation of a sleeping woman and waited for another knock to come so she could ignore it.

It didn't come, and it didn't come. Finally she raised her lids a fraction. Yep, good ole Helen was still there. But she wasn't trying to get her attention. She merely hovered nearby, smiling.

What an idiot. Did she really think all she had to do was wait? Jade's life was over. She had nothing but time until her body caught on to what her brain already knew. The old woman would turn to dust before Jade gave in.

Jade shifted in her seat until Helen had nothing to look at but her backside.

Come on, Grandma. Just send the pilots back here so we can get out of this burg, Jade pleaded silently.

No such luck. The pilots were permanently MIA. She couldn't even see their olive drab jumpsuits on the horizon.

Helen made another attempt at conversation. "You don't get many beautiful fall days like this in Ohio," she screamed politely through the closed window.

"Fuck off!" Jade screamed back. "And get me a one-way ticket back to Philly while you're at it."

Helen smiled as if Jade had made a more socially acceptable response but made no move to leave. Jade gave her the finger just to be sure that the woman got her drift.

Jade didn't know how the pilots could just abandon the chopper—and her—the way they had, but it was obvious that the only one who was going to get her out of this situation was the brainless old bat. The last remaining question was how long Jade could make her wait for it.

Jade intended on stretching that time out to the very limit.

* * * * *

If there was an onboard clock, Jade couldn't find it. Therefore, she could only guess it was sometime in the early afternoon when pressing personal needs overrode her determination to hold out against entering the care of yet another *mistreatment* center.

She waved to summon her hovering attendant, and then cracked the vent so she wouldn't have to convey her change of mind at top volume. "Let's get on with this."

"By stepping out of the helicopter, you're agreeing to live with us for a period of no less than one month. Do you understand?"

"Do I have a choice?" Jade replied, mimicking Helen's sweet tone.

"You have more choices than you can possibly image. You're just too tired of fighting with everyone, including yourself, to see them. We'll help you with that."

Apparently daft old Helen didn't recognize a rhetorical question when she heard one. "How can I resist an offer like that? Never mind. Don't answer that. Just take me to your nearest restroom, and then to your leader, or whatever you guys do here."

"The man in charge of the special guest program at Blossom House is Dr. Matthew Scott. You'll meet him later. Before we continue, I must ask you again. Do you consent to stay with us at Blossom House under the terms I outlined?"

A month? She'd find some way out long before then. "Yeah, sure."

"I'm so pleased. Would you follow me? I'll get you settled into your new home."

Jade thought about saying no, just to see what the old girl would do about it. Her bladder warned her that she didn't have much time to play around unless she was prepared to make a public disgrace of herself. She wasn't that far gone, not yet anyway.

She followed Helen across the grassy field to a collection of battered buildings. They halted in front of a structure at the end of the horseshoe arrangement. "This is it," Helen informed her. "This is where you'll stay for as long as you're with us."

The cabin listed with nothing but a wish and a prayer to keep it from toppling over. It more resembled a collection of discarded building supplies only of interest to a junk hauler than a home. If the structure wasn't already condemned, it soon would be. Jade felt uncomfortable looking at it, embarrassed by it even, although she'd have a hard time explaining why she felt that way.

Good thing she wasn't here to talk about her feelings.

"I'm supposed to stay here? Inside that...place?"

Silver curls bobbed up and down as the woman nodded. "Why? Is that a problem?"

"Not for me." If this was some kind of test, Jade was determined to fail. Squalor didn't bother her. Having others tell her how she should feel did.

"Good. Let's go in and get you settled."

Jade followed her guide inside. The decorator had certainly created a mood. Early Flop House. Or Crack House Modern, maybe. Jade dropped her butt into a low-slung monster of a couch, then cursed when her tailbone bounced off the hardwood floor. "Springs are optional, huh?"

Helen stood in the center of the scratch-and-dent-special dining room, a blaze of color in her baby blue suit amongst dark shadows and gray walls. "Options are all around you."

"Is that supposed to be some cryptic way of saying I'm here because I choose to be? If so, you're wrong."

The woman gave her the smile equivalent of a pat on the head. "If you say so."

"I'm not the one who's upset with my behavior."

"Yes, you've made that clear."

Jade shifted around on the couch, hugging her knees to her chest. "Good, then give me the house rules or whatever it is you're dying to say so you can wander off and spread your words of wisdom to those who actually give a damn."

"House rules are up to you, Jade. After all, this is your house."

Hardly. Her place had better couch springs and fewer people. "Fine. Whatever. Next?"

"You'll find clothes, food, toiletries, whatever you need, in the usual places."

"Given the condition of the house, I won't get my hopes up there."

Helen looked around, and then dismissed the atmosphere with a shrug of her shoulders. "As I said, it's your house. If you don't like something, change it."

"Yeah, I'll get right on that." Like in about a million years. "So what's the flavor of the day?"

"Flavor?"

"Meds. You know, the chemical cocktail you'll use to keep me dazed and numb while you ask me boring questions that have no real purpose except to add a line item to Nana's bill?"

"No, we don't prescribe psych medications."

"Right." Jade settled back on the sofa and crossed her arms. "Look, there's really no point in lying about it. I promise to eat my special treat like a good little patient. I just prefer to know what I'm putting in my body."

"Well, that's something at least."

"So what's it going to be? Xanax? Prozac? One of the mood modifiers?"

"None of the above or any others. You don't need them."

No mind-numbing drugs, no cushy digs. Did the great Dr. Scott believe that harsh treatment would return her to her former senses? Jade had a news flash for him if he did. She could rough it with the best of them and still feel sorry for herself in the morning. "So when does therapy start?"

"It already did, the second you agreed to join us."

Christ, what a waste of Nana's money. She'd gotten better advice from some of her co-inmates of the jail back in Philadelphia. "Are we through here? Cause I really have to pee."

Helen looked completely unaffected by the base pronouncement. "Then I'll leave you to settle in. Should you require anything, there's always someone around to ask."

Ah, now this crazy mess was starting to make a little more sense. Talk to your neighbors. A not-so-cute way of suggesting she get into group therapy. Like some mental case would understand how she felt. "I'll keep that in mind."

Helen sailed out the door on a gentle breeze rather than under the gale-force wind of Jade's anger. It only made Jade more furious. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to get better. She just wanted to be left alone so she could lay down and die,

eventually, in peace. Wasn't there a law against forcing a person to accept help against their will? Nana's lawyer probably gobbled up that right too.

Jade waited to hear the click of the lock turning, giving her yet another reason to feel justifiably enraged about her current situation. The sound never came. The footsteps faded and the door remained unlocked. Perhaps Helen was smart enough to know this flimsy collection of boards and nails couldn't hold Jade if she was truly determined to go.

For a split second, she reverted to her former self. Where was the weakest point, the hollow door or a battered section of the wall? Kick through it or use a series of board-breaking punches to escape?

She mentally worked out a bit of the preparation and planning such a feat would require. She could do it. She knew she could. In fact—

And that was when Jade shut her brain down. The house could collapse around her before she'd use her martial arts skills again. That was part of her previous life, not her afterlife.

A drummer began a heavy tattoo at the base of her skull. Great, a headache. As if the day wasn't sucky enough.

It took several failed attempts before she figured out the physics involved in extracting herself from the bottomless couch. Helen said she'd find everything she needed. Jade hoped that included aspirin.

The bathroom was institutional green with unhealthy accents of rust stains and mildew. In the little medicine cabinet over the chipped porcelain sink, Jade found a bottle of her usual pain remedy. For no particular reason at all, finding that medicine—the same damn brand she had at home in the same damn place she normally kept it—brought tears to her eyes.

She swallowed a double dose of the chalky white pills without a drop of water, and then turned her back on the haggard, too-slim face reflected in the tarnished mirror. She took care of her other pressing business, then stomped back to the living room to carry out the next step in her hastily drawn plan to be the model unwilling patient.

Sleep was at the top of her list. Her body craved it, but she couldn't give in to that dark oblivion yet. They might be willing to let her out of this rickety cage, but that didn't mean Jade wanted others coming in. If this was her house, then protection was its primary rule—no uninvited guests.

She secured the two external doors by putting mismatched chairs from the dining room under each knob. The windows took a little more ingenuity. Locking them wouldn't be enough, given the way they rattled in their frames. She could pry abandoned nails from the walls, markers of pictures long removed, and pound them into the wood with a frying pan, but then she'd have to extract them from the sash if she ever wanted to open them.

Never take permanent action when a temporary measure will do.

She opted for a trick she learned from one of her former students, a cop. Shortening from the kitchen, the type of artery-clogging lard used in deep fryers, spread over the sills and the floor directly under them would be hard for an intruder to spot and thus avoid. A person might get in, but at least she'd hear them coming.

Satisfied that she could sleep without fear of being caught by surprise, Jade sank into the couch and closed her eyes. Maybe if she slept long enough, this nightmare that had become her life would finally end.

* * * * *

Cas walked into the Common Room, noticed that Dana was the only occupant and skirted the conversation pit on his way to the Hawk's Nest where Boyd was waiting for him.

"Saw you."

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Dana spoke behind him. Maybe she was finally starting to warm up to him. He turned and tried a slow, friendly smile when he replied, "Yeah? What did I do?"

Dana focused on his crotch. Her gaze lingered there until he thought its contours had been permanently engraved on her brain. Then, as if a chord had snapped somewhere deep inside her, Dana let out a strangled gasp and dashed out of the room.

Weird. But at least she'd let him get out more than two words before she bolted. That was progress. Of a sort.

He knocked on the door to the secured chamber marked with a giant X.

After a few seconds, Boyd jerked it open. "What?"

"Got something to show me?"

"My hairy ass?" Boyd backed away to let Cas enter a dark warren of black cables, monitors and security logs.

Cas shook his head with a smile. "Just show me what the pretty lady has been up to."

They sat down in front of a long console that controlled a bank of twelve monitors. Boyd's fingers tapped various keys causing the focus of the cameras to glide in and out in a visual ballet. One screen flickered, drawing Cas' attention. He watched a montage of frames. Jade's face as she approached her temporary lodgings in R Block, the uncertainty firmly brushed aside by indifference. The defiance in her body language as she talked back to Helen. The pain—more emotional than physical, Cas suspected—behind her eyes as she removed pills from the bathroom cabinet.

The fortifications Jade had made to her temporary home added another layer of complexity to his first task. He admired her resourcefulness, but it created a bitch of a problem. He had to get past her defenses, both physical and mental. Slow and easy wasn't going to work with this one.

"Any suggestions?" he asked the troubleshooter.

“Watch your back.”

Cas chuckled. “That’s your job.”

He leaned over to touch the sleeping woman on the screen. Jade’s face had lost most of its fierceness. She now bore a thinner resemblance to the woman in the first picture. He wondered how long it would take to revive that beautiful smile.

Usually it took several days for him to warm up to a new guest and them to him. What he felt for Jade Rue bordered on genuine sexual interest. It had happened with one or two other women, usually at the end of their stay when he had learned all there was to know about them. The fact that he was getting stiff just by watching her sleep triggered a warning siren in his brain. Definitely something to analyze, later. He had no doubt that he could put her needs before any of his.

“Page me when she starts to show signs of consciousness.”

He let himself out of the Hawk’s Nest and walked across the communal area. His mind was on the knotty problem of how to get close to Jade so he wasn’t paying attention to the potential obstacles in his path until he ran into one.

Dana, who apparently had returned as quickly as she’d fled, must have felt his semi-aroused state during the brief contact. She instantly reacted with a sultry glare. For a bald woman who dressed in a style that brought new meaning to the word bland, she could do a very credible sexpot with little more than the tilt of her head.

“Is that for me, big boy?”

“Ah, no,” Cas said, backing away from her as quickly as he dared. An aroused Dana wasn’t a good, safe Dana. “I have to piss. Don’t let it bother you.”

Her amorous, angry gray eyes gouged his back as she watched him go, but she didn’t pursue him, thank God. That would have precipitated a disaster that none of them needed right now.

Still, Cas didn’t relax until he got inside his own quarters, then he immediately put in a call to Boyd letting him know about the encounter. The tapes would have to be preserved for Dr. Scott to review. Since nothing further could be done about it except for Boyd to keep an extra close eye on Dana, Cas concentrated on his latest assignment.

Jade Rue would never know what hit her.

Chapter Three

Sweeter Than Honey, With a Bee's Sting

Jade slept fitfully, waking every few hours to change position, only to sink back into the same deep pocket of lumpy foam once she drifted off again. Finally, when she could no longer ignore her body's call to nature, she rolled off the couch.

Half asleep, she made it to the bathroom and did her thing. She took a swig of tap water to wash out her mouth, ran her fingers through her hair and tried to imagine the disappointments the day held in store for her.

Too many to count, starting with the fact that she had to endure another twenty-nine similar nights and mornings if she couldn't come up with some way to spring herself from this loony bin.

Unsure of how to deal with that yet, Jade wandered back to the living room with the intent of catching a few more hours of sleep. That thought scattered when she found a stranger sitting on her couch. A quick check of the front door proved her security measure was still in place. However he got in, he was here now and she had to deal with him.

His gray sweats blended with the décor so well that, except for his head, he should have been nearly invisible, yet she saw him so clearly as if he were outlined by a ray of sunshine. Dark curls followed the contours of his masculine face. Eyes that she should have shrugged off as dull and boring brown got labeled brown sugar. They followed her as she walked toward him, studying her as she did him. The only thing she couldn't make up her mind about was how much of his bulk was muscle and how much was fat. The fact that she felt a curl of curiosity that wasn't entirely analytic almost sent her into a panic.

"Who—? What—?" No, no. *Take control. Don't let him see you sweat.* Adrenaline trickled into her veins as she stared him in the eye. "Get out. Now!"

"My name is Cas and I love you."

He couldn't possibly have said what her ears reported to her brain. Gesturing in case he couldn't comprehend simple sentences, she ordered, "Take off the same way you came in or use the door. I don't care which, but leave. Now."

Her words had no effect on him except to sweeten his boyish smile. "As much as I wish to please you, I can't leave. I love you."

He'd said it again. What were the chances that she'd misunderstood him twice? Not high. She had a lot of problems, but hearing loss wasn't one of them. That meant one of them was brain damaged, and she'd had enough medical scans to prove it wasn't her. "You're nuts and I want you out of my house."

Slowly, he shook his head, that bright smile never slipping. "I'm not going anywhere without you. I love you."

"Stop saying that!" Her voice hit the upper registers. She was letting him shake her composure, making her care. She couldn't let that happen. She took a deep breath and then aimed for a reasonable tone. "You must have a home of your own to go to."

"Home is where the heart is, and my heart is with you."

For a crazy man, he looked damn good. Not her usual type, but still she found him attractive... Sunlight now came through the cracked yellow shade and caused his mahogany wavy hair to glow with red highlights. He spoke through a wide mouth framing a set of straight white teeth. His brown eyes latched on to her, pleading with her to believe his words.

That last thought scared the hell out of her. She hadn't been attracted to a man—any man—in two years. It figured that when lust did strike, she'd come down with a case of the hots for the least stable man around. Apparently experience had taught her libido nothing where the opposite sex was concerned.

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him her least friendly glare. "Okay, let's try a new approach. What do you want?"

"For you to love yourself as much as I do."

And just when she thought he couldn't get weirder. "Great. Might take awhile though. Think you can wait outside while I do that self-love thing?"

He shook his head, his half-smile promising wonders that she'd never known. She longed to tell him that she wasn't impressed. She'd seen it all and done most of it twice. But a smiling lunatic could also become an unsmiling lunatic. If she was going to burst his bubble, she wanted more room to do it in.

"Well, I'm going for a walk. Feel free to tag along."

She didn't know what reaction she expected from him, but she was further confused when he did nothing. He didn't try to stop her, nor did he get up to follow.

Jade got to the door, moved the chair out of the way and held it open. She issued an unmistakable invitation to exit with a sweep of her arm. "Come on. Come with Jade. Let's go."

This time he was openly grinning. "Sorry, but I can't leave right now."

Well, what the fuck? His complete lack of common sense was really starting to piss her off. "Uhhh...do you know how long you're going to need that couch? I've kinda got plans for it later."

"I'm sure we can work something out."

Jade didn't share his confidence. To negotiate, he had to be rational, a state that currently eluded him. Looked like she was going to have to hunt up one of her neighbors after all. And if this guy turned out to be one of them, she was going to demand that Nana get a refund.

“Don’t feel you have to wait for me to come back, okay? You just wander right on out when the mood hits you. I won’t mind.”

He nodded agreeably, then settled more firmly in place.

She left the door open for him, in case he found opening it a problem too complicated for his simple mind to solve. Later she’d figure out how he got in without her hearing him and plug the hole.

She could see other units similar to the one she was assigned. In the distance, a small but human shadow moved in between the buildings. From the opposite direction, she heard the sounds of laughter. They seemed much closer although she couldn’t see the people involved. Jade picked the shorter walk.

She found a couple playing a game of lover’s tag in the yard. Just as she discovered them, the slender young woman tackled her much larger, dark-skinned mate in a frontal rush. The air rushed out of his lungs in a grunt as he hit the turf, but he fell just right so the woman landed across his broad chest. Jade wasn’t sure that he’d provide a softer landing than the hard ground. He looked as solid as a rock.

He wrapped his arms around the willowy woman and took her lips in a kiss that promised less civilized behavior if she didn’t escape his clutches soon. The woman didn’t seem all that eager to evade her fate. As a pair of rescuers, these two didn’t fit the bill.

Jade decided to back away and attempt to reason with the unreasonable man in her quarters once more when the woman came up for air and spotted her. “Oops. Looks like we’ve been caught in the act, Digger.”

She scrambled off her lover and they both got to their feet. He stood behind her, his beefy arms wrapped protectively around her waist. He was a good head taller than his playmate and she was close to Jade’s size of five feet, nine inches. However, not even at her best had she resembled that woman. Blue eyes, glossy black hair that hung halfway down her back and a friendly openness put her way out of Jade’s league. There was only one thing in the world Jade was good at—

No. Not going there. Not now, not ever.

“Hi. I’m Ella. This is my friend, Digger. You must be Jade. Helen told us you’d moved in.”

Good. That cut down on the explanations. Unless they were also mutants in this mental zoo. Helen hadn’t been too clear on how to tell the difference between the inmates and the staff, and it seemed everyone wore the same uniform of drab gray sweats except for the lady herself. “Yeah, I’m Jade, but my place seems to have come with a roommate. I was hoping you could tell me how to evict him.”

“Him? What’s his name?”

She quickly filtered through what little facts he’d given her. “Cas, I think. He claims to be in love with me. The man is seriously delusional.”

Digger rubbed Ella’s arms from shoulder to wrist. “Because he loves you?”

"That's pretty much it, yeah." Had all the men in this place been smacked by the dimwit brick? Jade focused her attention on the woman, who seemed to have a glimmer of intelligence. "Helen said I should ask if I need anything. Well, I need him gone."

"Are you sure about that? Cas isn't such a bad guy when you get to know him."

"Good, bad or indifferent, I want him out of my house."

Ella and the big moose behind her exchanged a questioning look. Digger's hands slid to her waist and pulled his woman against him, as if he thought Jade might try to snatch her away. "We'll pass your request along. Helen will probably get back to you later today."

"And what do you suggest I do with him in the meantime?"

* * * * *

Boyd patched him into the open mic, so Cas could listen in on Jade's conversation with Digger and Ella. He had a few suggestions for Jade in answer to her last question, but he had to rely on the others to pass the right prompts along.

Jade didn't want to hear what they had to say any more than she wanted him in her house.

Her house. She acted like she owned the place. That was good. More than he'd hoped for at this stage, actually. If he had to argue with her about hanging out in her relatively private space, it was a step in the right direction.

As she came stomping across the lawn, he began to brew a mug of tea the old-fashioned way, with tea bags in a pan of water on the stove. He had no trouble finding what he needed because he'd stocked the place himself, based on specifications provided to them by Jade's grandmother. By the time Jade stormed in, he had a steaming cup of her favorite herbal tea sitting beside a plate of buttered toast.

"Make yourself right at home, why don't you?" Her tone would have made an Eskimo shiver.

He backed away from the table, keeping his hands where she could see them. "I made you breakfast."

"What for?"

There was definitely a "the fuck" in between those two little words. "For you. You need to eat."

Her hands and arms did almost as much talking as her mouth. "What I need is for you to get out my hair, out of my sight and out of my life."

"I didn't drug it, if that's what you think."

"Forget about the damn food. I don't want it."

"You really should eat something."

Boyd chirped a little warning in his ear. He appreciated the reality check, but Cas had already figured out he'd just become a prime target for Jade's next assault. He tensed his abs and waited for the hit.

Jade didn't disappoint him. The plate came first, catching him under the rib cage. As it crashed to the ground, the mug hit him a shade below the plate. Toast didn't hurt much, neither did the fake china. The hot liquid burned like a bitch.

"I'm okay," he said, for Boyd's benefit as well as Jade's. Not that she looked terribly concerned about his well-being, but sooner or later she'd feel guilty. He pulled the gray shirt out of his pants and fanned his stomach with it. He needed to strip off the T-shirt, but he couldn't do that without blinding himself, if only for a brief second. A second that he'd be vulnerable to her.

Bad idea.

Jade instinctively poised her body in a defensive position. She did it so naturally, he didn't think she'd noticed.

"I'm so glad," she replied. "Now get the hell out."

He sighed. "I can't. I love you."

Jade growled, a low frustrated sound that bordered on pain. She fled the room. Cas took advantage of the breather to remove his shirt and toss it in the sink. He didn't have any spares here, so she was going to have to deal with his bare chest until someone brought him a replacement. He left the mess on the floor where it had fallen, and dutifully trailed after her.

Jade had curled up in a corner of the couch. He sat on the floor across the room with his back to the wall. Even from that distance, he could see tears shimmering in her eyes and his heart lurched. Day one, and she was already expressing more emotion than her grandmother had witnessed in months. Perhaps she wasn't as far gone as they'd anticipated.

But Cas didn't take this observation as an indication that the road to a full recovery would be any easier. Jade Rue was one tough woman.

He didn't say anything. Neither did she. She sucked the tears back inside and stared at an empty space that existed only in her mind. He wished he could tap into her brain, see what she saw in there. At this stage, it could be almost anything.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and clean up the kitchen?" she suggested, after nearly half an hour of silence.

"I can't."

"What *can* you do?"

Though his body ached from sitting in one position for so long, he didn't move a muscle. "Take care of you. Love you. Help you find your way out of the dark hole you've crawled into."

"You? A shrink?" Jade snorted. "Now I know you're nuts."

"No, I'm just one of the worker bees."

“And sitting around on your ass, eating my food, making messes that you refuse to clean up is work to you?”

Cas chose not to argue the fact that he'd made the food for her, not himself. And he couldn't clean up the mess because he hadn't made it. Not directly, anyhow. He knew how unfair it seemed to her, but the rules of engagement would change as she started to heal. At the end of one's stay, almost every guest could look back and understand the logic behind these first confusing days. Still, that didn't help Jade now.

“Some aspects of my job are more difficult than others,” he said.

Jade made a choked sound. More amusement than derision, he thought. “I bet. So what exactly are you, if not a doctor or a patient?”

“I'm your self-respect.”

Disbelief momentarily froze her features, and again Cas caught a glimpse of the beautiful woman she'd once been. His heart lurched in his chest. Images of rolling around with her on tangled sheets, naked, sweaty and smiling, breezed through his brain. He didn't let them linger for long. He had to focus on the woman she was now, and they had a long way to go before she'd be that carefree.

“That makes even less sense than you loving me.”

“Give it a few days.”

“You won't be here that long.”

Footsteps on the cement walk outside heralded a visit from one of the other staff. Cas suspected it would be Helen and Boyd whispered in his ear to confirm it.

At her knock, Jade barked out, “Now what?”

“I don't know, dear. You asked to talk to me, not the other way around.”

Jade must have recognized Helen's voice. She jumped up and wrenched the door open. “You took your time getting here. I thought you were around 24/7.”

“I can be reached any time. Whether or not I'm immediately available is another matter.”

Helen entered with her usual grace. Cas admired her outfit, a classy combination of red and gold. He'd have to leave her a note to tell her so.

Jade stormed after the older woman, who breezed past him as if he didn't exist. Cas took that as his cue to leave. Helen would stay with Jade until he found a clean shirt and put something on the mild burn.

Once he'd returned to his place, Cas consumed a hasty meal of several peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a handful of raw baby carrots, then checked his messages to be sure there were no other matters that required his immediate attention. Dr. Scott checking in. His brother calling about getting together for dinner the following week. Nothing earth-shattering.

That disturbing message was waiting for him in his bedroom. He hadn't been in there since he'd started working his way into Jade's place at the crack of dawn. What he saw now confused the hell out of him.

Whoever had spent time in his bed really tore up the sheets. Literally. The pillows were on the floor, as were most of the blankets. The carnal scent of sex lingered on the fabric.

Okay, he could think of a couple reasons for that. However, anyone likely to use his private room as a sexual playground would also leave it the way they found it. And this was definitely not his usual housekeeping style.

Solving the mystery would have to wait. He didn't have time to work it out right now. Helen would stay with Jade until he returned, but it wasn't good for them to spend too much time together. He was the one Jade needed to bond with.

Since the bathroom remained the way he'd left it, he took a hasty shower, dabbed some cream on the burn and changed clothes. He decided to leave the bedroom the way it was for Boyd to dissect. He grabbed his cell phone, locked up his quarters and headed back to Jade. He walked and talked to the troubleshooter at the same time. "Got a situation."

"Dana?"

"Nothing new there."

"Jade?"

"No. This is more personal." He ran through the little info he had and dumped the mystery in Boyd's lap.

"No one said anything to you about staying there?"

"No, but it's common knowledge that when I'm out, the room is open to anyone who needs it." There were so few private places on campus and everyone needed to escape reality now and then. Even the staff. "Maybe they figured I'd be gone a few days and didn't bother to make the bed."

"Dr. Scott and I are going to have to have another chat about putting cameras in the staff areas," Boyd said. "If there'd been one in your room last night, we wouldn't have to play this guessing game."

Boyd didn't like having a corner he couldn't peer into, but the staff needed a place off camera, to be themselves out of the spotlight. Cas knew he couldn't win this particular argument with the security expert, so he dropped it. "The mess isn't a big deal to me. There's just something off about it. Check it out, will you?"

"Bet your ass, I will."

"Thanks." Cas suddenly remembered one thing he'd forgotten to do. "Oh, and tell Helen I said she looks hot in red."

Boyd disconnected with a grunt, but Cas knew Boyd would do what he asked, on all counts. When he got back to Jade, he found the ladies sitting on the front porch. Jade was sipping tea instead of tossing it and Helen was telling her a story about a farmer and a cow. Cas arrived in time for the punch line.

"And the cow said, 'It tastes just like chicken!'"

Jade didn't crack a smile or indicate in any other way that she'd caught the joke. Her green eyes tracked him with the intensity of a laser beam. There was another silent changing of the guard as Helen said her goodbyes to Jade and left without acknowledging him at all. Cas climbed up on the porch and sat where the older woman had been moments before.

"She says I'm stuck with you."

That was hardly news to him, so he didn't bother to reply.

"I'm going inside to take a nap. When I wake up, assuming you haven't figured out that you're dumber than a stump for wanting to hang with me, I'm going to pretend you don't exist. Don't talk to me, don't touch me and don't cook me breakfast. If you see me coming, get out of my way. Are we clear on that?"

She expected him to argue. That's what this whole day – and quite likely many of the next few – was about. Establishing dominance. She thought she was taking charge by refusing to deal with him.

She was wrong.

"Sure. I can do that."

Chapter Four

Tearing Down the Walls

Sleeping a lot over the next three days made Cas' task easier, Jade admitted to herself. While her goal was the opposite, she didn't intend to live with herself any more than she had to. Sleeping was the easiest way to avoid both.

When her eyes were open, he always seemed to be in her field of vision. He didn't step out of line or do anything contrary to what she'd asked of him, but he was just so *there*. A shadow she couldn't shake, a constant reminder there was one person in the world who loved her for no good reason at all.

What a freaking idiot.

Finally bored with herself and her endless stream of self-pity, Jade decided to take a walk. She left the dreary house and ventured out into the sunlight. The brightness of the day made her feel extra grubby. She'd taken a bath the day before, mostly because she couldn't stand the stench of her body any longer, so she wasn't all that unclean. But there was something about being touched by the sun that reminded her of all the failures in her past, as if she didn't have a right to stand under its warming rays with the rest of humanity.

She turned to go back inside, but her human shadow blocked the doorway. The original idea had been to escape him and the house for a bit, and she couldn't do that if she went inside. So instead of retracing her steps, she retreated to the rear of the building.

Green-brown hills peppered with autumn colored trees bubbled up in the distance. It seemed as if she could walk for miles and miles without seeing another soul. Although she'd never been warned about attempting to leave the grounds, Jade figured there was a guard or a fence or some other method to prevent her from straying too far. The thought of being caged like a disobedient dog grated on her raw nerves. She had the sudden urge to challenge the strength of that cage, attempt to free herself from it.

Jade broke into a jog. That lasted for only a few strides before she picked up speed. Within a hundred yards, she was running flat-out, her legs pumping as fast as she could make them go. She ran and ran, until she thought her heart would explode.

Her break for freedom was short-lived. After barely half a mile, she tumbled to the ground, her past training kicking in to make it a controlled fall. Her body was drenched in sweat and her head pounded with the surge of blood her racing heart sent along. She never should have run, not without stretching, working up to it so that she didn't damage her muscles.

But, God, it felt good.

She'd given up exercise along with her former life. At first she reveled in the physical discomfort inactivity brought her. And then she'd lost even that satisfaction when she could no longer recall what it felt like to be a happy, healthy person. That was when she knew she was truly dead.

So what had possessed her to break the ban now? Jade had no idea. Perhaps she should ask The Shadow. Wasn't that tag line of the old radio show? "Ask the Shadow. The Shadow knows."

"Ask me what?"

She hated that, the reminder that she wasn't completely alone, as much as she tried to fool herself into believing it. To add insult to her injury, the man wasn't even breathing hard after chasing her around.

"Nothing. You don't exist, remember?"

Jade struggled to rise. Her lungs hadn't caught up with her body's demand for oxygen, so she swayed unsteadily. Cas grabbed her waist to support her.

The unexpected contact, the warmth and strength in his hands, rattled her and she jerked away. "Don't touch me!"

He released her so quickly that she fell backward onto her butt. She'd let herself go, but she hadn't realized how much her physical fitness had deteriorated until now. She could no longer count on her own body to be strong when she needed it most. That was going to have to change. Even dead, she wasn't going to be vulnerable, weak. A victim again.

Jade propped her arms on her raised knees and hung her head between them, gulping air and giving her lungs a chance to refuel.

"Let me help you," Cas pleaded from a spot not too far away.

"No."

"At least let me make sure you didn't injure yourself."

"No."

"What if I arrange for Helen to check you out instead?"

She'd like to know how he'd do that when there were no neighbors or phones lying around in the grassy open field, but that would indicate more interest in her surroundings than she'd already betrayed. "No, no, no. I am not hearing voices and I am not talking back to them. I am going to loathe the sucky view and then I'm going to take my ass home. Without help. Even if I have to crawl the whole damn way."

It took an hour for her to recover and make the long walk back but she did it under her own steam. Given the slow pace, she had ample opportunity to study the collection of houses Helen referred to as R Block. She'd spent more time looking out the window lately, basically because it was the only view guaranteed to be free of a certain non-entity. It wasn't an endless block party, but she was getting to know the habits of her neighbors.

The one called Digger spent a lot of time with Ella who lived next door to him. Another woman lived with Ella. The two were so similar in appearance that it was hard for Jade to tell them apart. In fact, she'd suspected for a while that only one woman really lived there until she saw the two of them talking together one day. The black man and the twins mixed and mingled, reminding her of a time in her own life when hanging out with a friend brought her as much joy as conquering a new form.

But it was the third woman in their enclave—Dana Goddard, according to the plate beside the door—who'd sparked Jade's interest. Jade had seen her working in a flower garden early in the morning. The young, bald woman seemed content to live life on her own, without human contact.

Just like Jade.

She'd thought about prying the woman's story out of Cas, but that would require her to acknowledge his presence. No, this was something she'd have to do herself. So when she saw the plain woman outside, Jade detoured to introduce herself.

"Hi."

"Proper women should sit with their knees together at all times," Dana informed her. Then she coolly collected her gardening tools and retreated indoors.

Before Jade could process what might have brought on that strange comment, a new voice said, "Don't mind her. She doesn't mean anything by it."

Jade spun. Her shadow was nowhere to be seen. In his place was a twin. Jade couldn't tell them apart so she didn't try to greet her by name. "What's her problem?"

"That's her story to tell." The woman tossed her ebony hair over her shoulder in an imitation of Ella's habitual gesture. "I'm Alle, by the way. Ella's my twin sister."

"You mean I'm not seeing double?"

The woman smiled. "Only if you think there are four of us."

Alle took Jade's arm and guided her out of Dana's yard. Jade noticed that the sisters were touchy-feely people, at least when it came to the big man. Jade preferred not to be physically handled, but there was nothing coercive or threatening in the gesture, so Jade let it go.

"So what do you do all day?" Jade asked, just for the sake of tossing something into the yawning abyss of silence that had grown between them.

"The same things you do, I guess."

Jade highly doubted that. Alle and her sister were too upbeat, too lively, to spend most of their time dreaming about how much better off the world would be if they weren't in it. "Then you're patients?"

"Since this isn't a psychiatric facility, none of us are patients."

"What about Cas? What's he?" She'd heard his bizarre explanation, but it couldn't hurt to hear how another *guest* would describe him.

Alle gave her a strange look. "Why don't you ask him? I'm sure he'd tell you."

“He’s like the white elephant. Everyone knows he’s sitting in the corner, but they feel much better if they don’t confront it.”

Alle grinned. “I don’t think anyone has called him an elephant before.”

“Elephant or not, I’d prefer it if he found another living room to lurk in. Isn’t there some way to get rid of him?”

“Why would you want to do that? He loves you.”

Didn’t any of these people get it? “I don’t like him hanging around all the time. I’d much rather be alone.”

“So would Dana.” Alle cast a sad look over her shoulder. “I’m not sure that’s what’s best for her.”

Jade didn’t want to end up like the weird chick. Her head was entirely the wrong shape for going bald and she’d turn everything in the garden brown in a week. And then there was the whole puritan attitude that Jade definitely didn’t qualify for in any respect these days.

“She wears skirts,” Jade said, plucking at the fabric of her sweats. “I couldn’t get into that.”

“Neither would Cas. See, you’re perfect for each other.”

Jade started to protest, but Ella opened the door to their rather pretty house and called for Alle to come in. With an apologetic smile and a promise to talk again soon, Alle jogged to her sister’s side and they both went inside. Jade stomped back to her barracks alone, noting that her shadow had left the door open, making her feel welcome and expected. It was something even Nana rarely accomplished these days.

The bastard.

Besides why shouldn’t she feel welcome in that hovel? It was old and decrepit and it suited her perfectly. No one expected her to clean, or answer the phone, or teach them how to kick ass.

They just expected her to live with a crazy man who claimed to love her.

And there he was, sitting on the pile of pillows he’d dragged in from somewhere to sit on in the corner of the living room he’d claimed for himself.

“You okay?”

He sounded genuinely concerned. She decided it couldn’t hurt to pump him for information, even if she had to share some about herself to get it. Familiarity bred contempt. Wasn’t that how the saying went?

Another possibility was that he’d take her new openness as a sign that he was welcome to do anything to her that he damn well pleased. At least then she’d have some real ammunition for getting rid of him.

It was a win-win situation as far as she was concerned.

“I’m fine. Just pushed too hard.”

“A bath or massage might help.”

No way was she letting any man put his hands on her now. No fucking way. And a bath, well, she could probably use one of those, but it could wait until her audience left. She wasn't putting on a show for him or anyone else. "Why don't you tell me how this place works?"

"What do you want to know?"

How long am I going to have to put up with you? She couldn't expect him to answer that one honestly. "What's the game plan? When do I get the miracle cure?"

He gave her that smile, the one that made her insides crawl, in a good way but in a way she'd rather not feel. How could she possibly be attracted to someone when she couldn't stand the idea of letting someone get close to her?

"Your recovery plan started the second you climbed out of the helicopter."

Somehow she didn't think he was referring to her urgent need to pee. "Helen said something like that too, but I haven't seen a doctor or been to therapy or drugged beyond comprehension. It's like no one cares that I'm here."

"I care."

"That doesn't count. You're nuts." Jade went into the kitchen and got a can of diet pop from the refrigerator—her preferred brand. When she came back, she sat down on the couch where they had a good view of each other from opposite ends of the room. "Seriously, what's the deal? I can't believe the patients are expected to cure themselves just by sitting around on their asses all day."

"First, Blossom House doesn't treat patients, we entertain guests. Those who aren't guests are staff. Secondly, you pretty much summed it up. Since we're not a psychiatric facility, we can spend time with our guests in any way that makes sense for them. In your case, you're free to sit on your ass or do anything else you want."

"Then why be here at all? I could accomplish the same thing without ever leaving my apartment in Philly."

"There, you wouldn't have me to love you."

A point in Philly's favor as far as Jade was concerned. What did she need him for anyway? It's not like his acceptance meant anything to her. "Whatever. Since I'm stuck here for a month, there's no point in complaining that I have it so easy."

"Being alone with the person you hate most in the world isn't easy."

Hate was too strong for how she felt about him. He was a pest, an irritation. "I don't hate you."

"I meant you, Jade. You hate yourself and no matter where on earth you are, you can't escape. Until you come to terms with that knowledge, there's nowhere for you to go. No way for you to be truly free."

The fact that he was right only made her angry. "Go to hell."

He winced at her sharp retort. "Touched a sore spot, did I? Sorry about that. I love you and would never intentionally bring you pain."

“Stop saying that!” Panic took flight from her stomach. She could almost feel her throat closing, as if death had its cold hands tightly squeezing her neck. Lightning bolts of pain shot through her chest.

“Why? It’s true. I’m sure you have what seem like good reasons for disliking yourself so much. Will you let me show you what I see when I look at you?”

“Who are you to judge me? You know nothing about me!”

“I know enough, Jade. I know you’re tough and strong and stubborn. I know you killed two men and permanently injured several others despite your deep conviction never to use your marshal arts training to intentionally harm another human being. I know you can’t love or trust yourself because you’re afraid now that the line has been crossed, you’ll do it again. I know you’ve pushed everyone away, friends and family and students and teachers, to protect them from the monster you think you’ve become. I know all that, Jade, and I love you.”

“Shut up! Shut up!” she screamed at him. His words were like hammer blows against her numb emotional walls. They wobbled under the relentless pressure. Panic continued to rise, causing her hands to shake and her vision to darken at the edges. She vowed she wouldn’t black out, not in front of him, but the need to physically strike out at him rode her back. Why the hell couldn’t he just shut up and leave her alone?

“Why? I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

“Get out! I never want to see you again!”

She curled up in the furthest corner of the couch and huddled there like a frightened child. If that was his idea of inner strength, he needed psychiatric services more than she did.

Resolutely she shut her eyes, blocking him out, and reached for the inner peace she’d trained so hard to obtain, in another life. She hated him now. If that was his goal, he’d succeeded admirably.

She’d been horribly wrong earlier. This wasn’t a situation she could win at all.

His voice continued, soft and sweet. “I’ll go for now, but I’ll be back and I’ll keep coming back. There’s still a lot of good left in you, Jade. Give me a chance and I’ll help you find it.”

She heard his footsteps retreat, then the sound of the door closing. Once she was certain he was gone, she raced across the room and canted the chair under the knob. She wasn’t sure how he’d managed to get in before and cursed herself for not asking that question before he’d left.

Deciding peace of mind was worth a little toil, she hammered the windows shut using abandoned nails and a frying pan as she’d considered before. If that didn’t keep him out, then he’d get what he deserved next time he surprised her.

She had no intention of letting him get near her again.

Chapter Five

Sex as a Weapon

Cas left Jade alone for the next two days. Boyd kept a close eye on her and it gave him time to reconnect with the other guests and life outside of R Block.

However, his heart remained inside Jade's tiny house. Usually at this point in a guest's recovery, Cas remained objective. One had to feel hurt so one could deal with it, grow beyond it. He was, in fact, doing them a favor by making them face that pain, even if they weren't in a position to appreciate it.

With Jade, it was much more personal. When she broke down and cried herself to sleep each night, he wanted to be right beside her. She wasn't like most of the guests he'd met. She didn't consider herself a victim as much as she did a monster. Her biggest fear revolved around the fact that she'd killed two of her assailants during their brutal attack. She'd taken their lives to save her own, a life she now felt unworthy of living because doing so had violated some of her deepest beliefs.

He'd read the police report, the hospital records that documented the extent of her physical injuries and the transcripts of the trial, both hers and those who had tried their best to end her life. The gang members who'd attacked her were also trained in martial arts. Some of them had been her own students. She'd had no choice. It was kill or be killed. Luckily for Jade, it just so happened that she was better than the combined skills of her opponents.

In the end, the only person who found Jade guilty of any wrongdoing was herself.

He hoped that by leaving her alone with the emotions he'd stirred up that she'd begin to examine her actions in a new light. He didn't expect an overnight miracle, but he thought she'd take another step in the right direction. Instead, she'd pulled back to hibernate. He couldn't allow that to go on too long. Tomorrow he'd have to interrupt her quiet world with another shakeup, if only to shift her anger back to him.

But that was tomorrow. Tonight, all he wanted to do was relax.

And get laid.

Any of the staff—and even a few of the long-term guests—in R Block would be willing to join him in that activity. In the past, Cas had joined their cuddle-piles-turned-soft-porn orgies. Sharing one's body was sometimes easier than sharing one's heart, but the group play still let the participants know they were accepted, loved even.

Now, there was no one he wanted more than Jade. The woman she could be. All fire and passion, with smiles brighter than the sun. Smiles just for him.

Good thing my current assignment doesn't require emotional detachment or I'd be screwed.

He let himself in to his quarters. The mysterious mess in his bedroom from a few days back had been removed to some secret place where Boyd could practice his sleuthing skills on it. Since there hadn't been a repeat, Cas wasn't too worried.

That changed when he walked into his bathroom and saw that another message had been left for him on the medicine cabinet mirror. Etched into the glass with some sharp object. "Saw you. Did you see me?"

Saw you. The phrase Dana had used a few days ago. Did that mean anything? With Dana, it was hard to tell. Nor was it his call to make.

Since his room wasn't bugged—yet—he dialed Boyd's number. When he'd completed his explanation, the security expert said, "Damn, man. You sure you haven't pissed someone off lately?"

"Just Dana."

"Dr. Scott talked to her. Said when your name came up, she got real quiet."

No surprise there. Dr. Scott seemed to be the only person who really understood what went on inside her head. As hard as Cas tried, he never got close to figuring out what made her tick. And after a few scary attempts, he'd given up altogether. "What does he think?"

"That you better avoid her like the plague. The doc and I are keepin' a really close watch on her, but it would help if you made yourself scarce when she's around."

"Since I'm hooked up with Jade for the next few weeks, that shouldn't be a problem."

"You're not with her now," Boyd pointed out.

"I will be tomorrow." He went into his bedroom and began to pack a few personal items in an overnight bag.

"Where are you bunking down tonight?"

"Wherever you tell me to."

"Good answer. Take my bed. I won't be using it. You're also on 24/7 live feed as of right fucking now, so if you take a piss, I'm gonna know about it."

That wasn't much different from the way things were normally. R Block was wired for sound—and sight—in all the guest rooms, for their protection as well as that of the staff. Giving up his personal privacy for a few days wasn't a big deal at the moment. He'd rather find out who was messing around with his mind and his stuff.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Boyd sounded surprised.

Cas chuckled. "Yeah. Just as long as I don't have to listen you to snore when my boring nightlife puts you to sleep."

"Deal."

He finished packing and moved into the kitchen. He turned on the bright overhead light to be sure there weren't any unpleasant surprises. He made himself a bowl of

cereal, ate quickly and then sauntered across R Block's central courtyard to the little house Boyd called home.

The door popped open to admit him, telling him he was already on screen and expected even though the master of the house was currently working at his station in the Hawk's Nest. Cas stepped inside and let his eyes adjust to the dim light and Boyd's unique style of decorating.

The security expert was a packrat. Everything from orphaned buttons to outdated computer hardware to broken chairs found a home in Boyd's personal space. After fifteen minutes of excavation, Cas located the couch, crawled onto it and closed his eyes. With visions of a happy, emotionally healthy Jade fucking him senseless, he drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

A buzzing in his ear alerted Cas to the fact that something wasn't right. He would have missed the change in the open channel broadcast if not for the slight electronic hiss. Like an old record that had been played to the end of the track, the needle scratching against the edge.

The block environments were designed to keep outside interference of any kind to a minimum but the occasional snafu did happen. He waited for Boyd to correct the problem or cut in with an explanation. When, after several minutes, he hadn't, Cas knew the situation was more serious than a bug in the electrical system.

Jade.

His first priority was to see that she was okay. Without a connection to Boyd, Cas was unsure of where she might be. He got to his feet, navigated his way to the door and let himself out.

Since she'd made a habit of barricading the door with a chair under the knob, he wiggled through the low, dirty crawlspace under the cabin floor to reach the trap door in the bedroom closet that Jade never used. He didn't take the time to strip off the grimy clothes and slip into the clean set he'd stashed there. He just paused to see if he could hear where she was in the house. She wasn't making a sound so he suspected she was asleep on the couch.

He was wrong. He found her standing in front of the dining room window, arms crossed and wide awake. In the moonlight streaming through, he saw her bottom lip disappear between her teeth, then slip back out.

"I heard you this time. You won't be able to sneak up on me again."

Since he hadn't been trying to sneak up on her, the declaration didn't bother him a bit. "Are you okay?" he asked, stopping just short of brushing his shoulder against hers.

"That's a trick question, right?"

He angled his body, making sure she had a clear escape route out of the room if she felt threatened by his nearness. From that position, he could see the lights on across the

yard. So Dana was up. While that didn't relax the anxiety in the back of his skull that screamed for him to investigate the electronic disturbance further, it did give him a couple extra seconds to make sure Jade was stable enough to look after herself. Or get her hooked up with one of the others if she wasn't.

Tension fairly radiated off her. The urge to comfort her had him reaching for her before the thought was fully formed. Instead of bringing her into his embrace, he brushed the backs of his fingers against the side of her neck, then followed the curve of her shoulder, stopping only when she shrugged him off. Softly, Cas asked, "What's got you spooked?"

She sidestepped away from him, pulling out of range of his touch, but she didn't deny his observation. "Something isn't right over there."

"At Dana's?"

"Yeah."

Jade couldn't possibly know that the communication system was on the fritz. "What makes you say that?"

"The shades are down."

"So are most of yours," he pointed out.

"Yes, but usually hers are up at this time of night."

Jade was very perceptive, a blessing and a curse. "Maybe she forgot. Maybe she went out with friends."

"Dana?" she scoffed. "She doesn't have any friends."

Cas knew otherwise. Dana and Aimee, a former staff member, had been close friends. Another reason that Aimee's betrayal of them all had hurt so much. He'd thought he was doing the right thing by letting the safety tech get close to Dana. They'd all had such hope that her unusual friendship with Aimee was the breakthrough in Dana's treatment they'd been waiting for.

And then they learned it wasn't a friendship that had grown between the two women, but rather a twisted variety of sexual domination, which had caused Dana to regress back to the days when her foster brother had hired out her well-trained, underage body to the highest bidder.

Thankfully, Dana hadn't exhibited any new signs of psychological damage once Aimee fled the facility. Dr. Scott had spent a lot of time with Dana to make sure of it. Now Cas worried that Dana had hidden her new scars from all of them.

And Jade was going to have a ringside seat to whatever happened next.

Jade wrapped her arms around her chest, her hands rubbing up and down her arms as if she were cold. It was chillier than usual, but she had a sweat jacket on over her thin T-shirt. He didn't think the temperature was causing her goose bumps.

"Want me to go over there and see if she's okay?" Since that was going to happen whether Jade gave permission or not, he really hoped she said yes.

"It'll get crowded over there. I saw Digger go inside a couple of minutes ago."

Oh, no. Please let her be wrong about that. If his own relationship with Dana was tenuous, the one she had with Digger could only be labeled a disaster. "Are you sure?"

Jade met his probing stare. "I think I can tell the difference between John and Jane."

"Right. Sorry." Cas fought down his rising panic and tried to reason out what was going on. Digger must have noticed the radio silence and gone over to check on Dana. However, he had yet to hear an explanation for what caused the frown between Jade's lovely green eyes. "If you're not worried about Dana, then what is it?"

"I didn't peg Dana as the type to go in for whips and chains. Didn't seem to fit her personality, ya know?"

Oh, shit. Panic surged in him again, and a cold trickle of sweat ran down his spine. Jade didn't know enough about Dana to be making up one of R Block's worst nightmares, but Cas prayed Jade had misinterpreted what she'd seen. "What makes you think Dana has a taste for S&M?"

"Silhouettes on the shade."

His heart in his throat, Cas grabbed Jade by the arms and spun her to face him. "No games, Jade. I need to know right now. What did you see?"

She struggled against him but this time he held on tight. "Hey, if you're into that kind of stuff, then go get yourself an invite but don't expect me to feed your sick fantasies!"

He clamped down on his fear and tried one more time to pry the information he needed out of her. "Tell me what you saw. Please, Jade. It's important."

Jade shrugged, as much as she could in his unrelenting grip. "Little Miss Priss put on some heavy leather and chains before she pulled the blinds. A couple minutes later, Digger went in. Then I saw her shadow against the shade and it looked like she had a whip in her hand. The kind with extra tails. She kept flicking it over her shoulder."

Cas dashed across the living room and punched through a section of wall to reach the main security panel under it that each guest house had for scenarios just like this. Between the broken boards he could see the flashing red light. He jabbed it with a finger, turning it into a solid signal for help. Boyd's voice came over the hidden speaker. A direct line to the troubleshooter's private cell, a route outside the main communications system.

"Code?" the troubleshooter snapped.

"R4. Class 5." Cas darted back into the dining room where Jade watched him with wary eyes.

"Sure you don't have those numbers backward, boy?"

"Damn sure," he shouted over his shoulder at the open speaker. "Get Dr. Scott up here ASAP. Dana's got Digger under the whips." Cas tuned out Boyd's swearing and grabbed Jade by the wrist. "Out we go."

Chapter Six

A Trip to the Dark Side

Jade dragged her feet, slowing him down. She wasn't the one with the problem. In fact, he had yet to convince her there was any real problem at all. Nothing of what she'd witnessed in the last half hour seemed any more real than his declarations of love. Why should she have to go anywhere? "The hell we are."

"I don't have time to explain. I have to go and I can't leave you here alone."

Jade didn't go with him willingly, but she did move when he tugged her off balance. He used that momentum to get them out the front door and Jade decided she was too apathetic to fight him. Sooner or later this crazy behavior—his, not hers—would end. And when it did, she had a few things she'd share with him about how to treat a guest.

Ella and Alle, wearing matching bronze silk teddies, huddled together in the middle of the patch of asphalt the crazy crew called a street. About the same time as Jade emerged with Cas, Helen flew out of her house, attempting to tie shut the flaps of a red silk robe on the run. They all gathered together with the twins, grave looks on each sleepy face.

"How long has he been in there?" the older woman asked.

"Ten minutes tops," Cas replied.

Jade didn't understand this at all. Who cared if Digger and the skinhead were getting it on? Okay, so the whip was a little kinky. Kinky, but not criminal. Why did Dana's preference for them require a midnight Block meeting to discuss? The unnecessary drama just fed into her belief that this whole situation was some act being staged for her benefit, and she couldn't really see the point of it.

Cas released her hand and started stripping off his clothes. The twins aided him by tugging down his drawstring pants. Each inch of his skin that was revealed expanded that tiny ball of lust in her belly. That was intolerable. If this was going to turn into a group orgy, Jade definitely needed to bail. "I think I'll just—"

"No." Cas shook his head as he kicked off his unfashionable white underwear. "You don't have to watch, but you need to stay here. It's not safe for any of us to be alone right now, not until we know what the hell is going on."

Jade felt mutinous, but she was sure she'd be forced to witness the proceedings somehow so she remained where she was.

"Ready?" Helen asked him.

He looked down at his naked body and then back at her. "No, but I can't stall."

Jade wasn't sure what the qualifications were for the job, but Cas's lean, well-muscled frame looked like it could take on just about anything. The moonlight turned his body into a mosaic of light and shadow. As a former fitness fanatic, she could appreciate a well-conditioned body. And a well-endowed one. As a woman, well, she ignored the faint stirrings of what might be considered lust as his flaccid penis throbbed with life.

"Kiss her," Helen suggested, thrusting her chin in Jade's direction.

"No way!" Jade protested. Though he was much better looking without the baggy sweats than she'd ever imagined, there was no way she was getting roped into touching him. Her "gang-bang-girl" days were way over. Besides, what more prep work did he need? He was already naked, although not quite...errr...up for the action.

She started to edge away, but Helen stopped her. "You're not leaving, missy."

"If you think I'm going to participate in this...this...whatever this is, you're in for a serious disappointment." It was one thing for Cas to declare he loved her; it was quite another to have him make such blatant sexual advances and expect her to respond. She'd been subjected to a lot of crazy ideas in the name of therapy, but this was by far the most outlandish. Surely they couldn't force her to participate in their group orgy if she didn't want to.

"No, I wouldn't expect you do to anything. That would mean you had to care about someone besides yourself, and there isn't room enough in your cold, dark icebox of a heart for that."

Cas leapt to Jade's defense. "Don't, Helen. She doesn't understand. As long as I know you're watching over her for me, I'll be fine."

Helen's expression darkened, but she bit back whatever else she was going to say and turned her gaze toward Dana's house.

"Let's see if I can help you, Cas," Ella said. She shrugged out of the top of her teddy so that the material settled around her hips. "Come here, big boy, and show me what you've got."

In the dim light cast by the moon, Jade couldn't help but notice the way her nipples jutted out from her perfectly shaped breasts. Ella glued herself to Cas' body and thrust her tongue into his mouth. Alle circled around the kissing couple and ran her hands over his body, murmuring sexy words that Jade wished she couldn't hear. The final straw came when Alle inserted her hand between Cas' legs and started to massage his balls.

Jade made a disgusted sound, then turned her back on the three of them and sat down on the dew-damp ground. A few seconds later she heard Cas say, "That's enough. I'm good."

"You're better than good," Helen replied. "You're the best. But you don't have to go inside. Digger can hold out until the doctor gets here."

As if the big black man had heard her opinion and disagreed, a long howl emanated from the house. Not the kind of sound made by a man who was enjoying

himself, Jade thought. She glanced up at the shaded windows, but didn't see a sign of what might be going on. What kind of farce was this? Nothing about this situation was improving her mood. Again, Jade had to wonder what they hoped to accomplish by putting on this act.

Cas sprinted across the yard toward the front door, bellowing for Dana. His engorged dick rode before him like a sword held high during a battle charge. The concept was so funny, Jade had to laugh. This dark comedy sure as hell wasn't going to cure her, but she no longer felt like she was the only person out of touch with reality. This place was absolutely nuts.

"What's going on inside that house is no laughing matter, girl."

Jade looked up to find Helen standing over her. "Does this mean I can't play Whips and Floggers with you guys? Gee, and I here I thought I'd finally found an occasion to wear my chain mail bikini."

"I suggest you use that sassy mouth to pray those boys come out of that house alive."

Helen retreated a few steps and locked her gaze on the house. Jade glanced around for the twins, figuring she'd exchange a sympathetic look. But the women were huddled together, tears streaming down their creamy smooth cheeks in perfect synchronization. They looked as if they'd taken Helen's words to heart.

Jade wasn't so naïve. Cas and Digger couldn't possibly be in danger from little Miss Manners. Both of them could tackle her easily, no matter how much hardware she waved at them. Now Dana, on the other hand, might be in a spot of trouble. The way the twins had raised Cas' interest then sent him after another woman might make it a bit tough for the skinhead to keep him under control.

Another male scream ripped through the night air. Two shadow puppets crossed in front of the window, the smaller of the two holding a knife above her head. Jade heard gasps from the women beside her, but she just couldn't take the situation seriously. It was like watching a bad B-movie horror flick without the popcorn. No way could any of this be real.

A motorcycle came over the hill, toting a side car. Both riders wore black, from head to toe. As it came to a stop beside the small group, the driver dismounted. Jade was surprised to see that he wasn't much taller standing up than he'd been sitting down. The passenger leapt out of his seat. He took off his helmet to reveal a short mass of dark brown hair. The helmet got tossed into the sidecar before the man fished out a pair of studious eyeglasses from his black jacket. Both new arrivals studied the house as if they could see through the walls.

"You can't help here," the taller one said without turning around. "Go inside Helen's place, but stick together. I'll let you know when it's over."

"Don't send us away, Dr. Scott," Helen begged. She stood between the twins now, with an arm around each of them.

So this was the so-called doctor? Apparently he was getting into the act too. Jade knew she shouldn't be surprised. Wasn't there always a mad scientist lurking about in those old B movies?

The shorter man shoved his hands into the jacket pockets. "Why stand around in the cold when all you can do is wait? Let Cas do his thing. If he can't talk her down, I'll go in and sort things out."

Helen turned her ire on him. "Great idea, Boyd. Let's give her yet another toy to play with."

The doctor gestured to forestall further comments from the short man. "What did you have in mind, Helen?"

"Nothing specific, but it seems stupid to shove more prey under Dana's nose. At least if I confront her you know I'll come out with the same amount of skin."

"Hey, I'm all about equality. You want to risk getting a knife shoved up your rectum when the Domme decides to play with you, then you go right ahead." Boyd's finger jabbed the air, adding a graphic demonstration to his words.

"She won't acknowledge a woman in her current state, Helen. You wouldn't make any more of an impact in that room than a throw pillow," the doctor explained. "Unless you got in her way while she's playing with the boys, and I strongly advise against that. It's best to let one of the men handle the situation."

Did they really expect her to consider Dana a threat to two strong, healthy men? The woman barely topped five feet. She was a tree hugger who would have been completely at home in the eighteenth century when women had fewer rights than some male slaves. They needed to do a better job of typecasting if they expected her to buy this substandard plot.

"So we're just going to stand around and do nothing while Dana feeds Cas and Digger their balls?" Helen demanded.

"At this point, it's the safest course."

"Safer for whom, Doctor?" Ella wanted to know.

Dr. Scott ignored the question. "Where is Ms. Rue?"

"Right here." Five heads swiveled in her direction. Jade waved her hand so they could spot her against the dark hill.

"You shouldn't be out here, Ms. Rue. I'm sure witnessing this event is very stressful for you."

Ah, so they did expect her to be freaked out by all this drama. Too bad. She wasn't that good of an actress. "I didn't want to be here in the first place. But now that I am, I think I'll stick around and see how this movie ends."

"Really, I think—"

The doctor's words were cut off as a chair came through one of the windows. Glass and wood fragments rained down on the porch as the chair sailed out and landed hind legs first in the otherwise pristine front lawn.

"That's my cue," Boyd said. He stripped off his jacket, then quickly tossed aside the black T-shirt under it.

"Not yet," the doctor replied, holding his hand up, studying the house intently.

Jade heard someone speaking now that the glass was gone, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. One speaker was male but if it was Cas, he was using a tone of voice she hadn't heard him use before. He sounded angry, commanding. So unlike the gentle, soothing tone he typically used with her. The person holding up the other half of the conversation was female. Had to be Dana, but Jade wouldn't have recognized her voice either. So much rage coming from the pacifist...now *she* was a good actress.

"Are the med techs standing by?" Helen asked.

"Yes. Any more stupid questions or can I get on with this?" Boyd said, irritation evident in his tone.

Jade glanced at the short man. While she and the others had been concentrating on action inside the house, Boyd had stripped to the skin and began choking his chicken.

He had a muscular form and an impressive package, but watching him jerk off wasn't doing a thing for Jade, sexually or otherwise. She wished she had a remote to fast forward through this boring part. The finale had to be a groaner, but having sat through the action so far, Jade wasn't willing to spare herself that painful end.

"You're a very bad girl, Dana. I'll have to punish you."

The gruff male voice, presumably Cas', drifted out of the open window. What followed was a high-pitched scream which dwindled into a girlish giggle.

That odd laughter sent an unexpected shiver down Jade's spine.

"It won't be long now," the doctor said, speaking softly.

Good to know, Jade thought. Her butt was going numb from sitting on the cold grass for so long.

"That nip barely pierced my skin." There was the sound of flesh striking flesh, but when Cas spoke again, his voice sounded calm, reasonable. "Bind your feet with this, you disobedient whore. If you force me to check the knots, I'll take away all your toys."

Jade was slightly disappointed to learn that Cas had this dark streak. Just when she thought he was finally developing a personality she could live with too. She really had to get rid of him now.

Dr. Scott gazed at the house. A frown creased his forehead. "I don't think your services will be required, Boyd. Why don't you get dressed?"

The short man grouched but stuffed himself back into his clothes. Stuff was the most appropriate term, since his dick hadn't yet gotten the message to stand down. He walked over to the bike, picked up a cell phone and started issuing orders.

"Suck it, bitch. Take it in your mouth and suck it hard. Don't stop until I say so."

The order was Cas' and Jade presumed Dana was on the receiving end. Why was it that men always thought women should enjoy gagging on their penis? At one point in

her life, Jade had enjoyed being intimate with a well-hung man but never so much that she wanted to swallow his hard cock whole. Gagging was so not attractive.

As she watched, Cas—still naked although with dark streaks on his thighs and chest—led a docile Dana out of the house, her mouth wrapped around a large dildo. The makeup she wore made her face look even more doll-like and fragile. Her legs were encased in black boots that reached up to her thigh. A strip of black leather spanned her hips without covering her mound of blonde curly hair at the juncture of her thighs and another banded her breasts, leaving holes for her nipples to poke through. Predictably, she was handcuffed, her fingers curled into claws in front of her. A length of rope circled both her ankles. It was loose enough for her to walk, yet it tripped her up when she tried to take a big step.

Another overdone performance, Jade silently scoffed. She couldn't dream of any behavior that would require such restraints for the little woman.

More vehicles arrived, including two ambulances. The doctor and Boyd took possession of Dana, one at each arm. The twins tried to rush past the small group, but Cas blocked their path.

"Digger!" they cried.

Cas put an arm around each woman and spoke to them softly. Jade only knew that he was speaking because she could see his lips moving. The doctor led Dana to one of the ambulances and the two climbed inside. Cas herded the girls out of the way, allowing Boyd and a pair of med techs to go inside the house.

"Well, I guess it's all over but the crying," Jade said, getting to her feet and brushing the dirt and grass from her mostly-numb butt. "Anticlimactic ending though. Might want to work on that."

"This was no joke," Helen told her.

"I don't know, it had a few amusing moments."

Even in the moonlight, Jade could see the older woman's face was rigid with anger. "You aren't the only one in the world with problems, Jade. I suggest you keep that in mind before you say something you'll regret."

"You sound just like Nana. And I'll tell you what I told her. The only thing I'll ever regret is not dying when I had the chance."

Determined to get her shadow and go home, Jade reached the porch as the techs brought Digger down the stairs on a stretcher. She barely avoided a collision, but it gave her a good view of his body. There were spots of blood on the sheet over his groin. His black face was stretched with pain and his breath came in sharp, ragged gasps. Damn, he looked like hell itself had stomped him good. Jade conceded that he might be a better actor than all the others combined.

The twins took up positions on either side of Digger's head, kissing what skin they could reach. Cas watched them go with sad eyes.

This made no sense. Okay, so maybe Domme Dana wasn't as good with the whip as she should have been. All the more reason why this asinine drama shouldn't have been attempted in the first place. Violence for the sake of violence was never a good idea. If they needed a lesson there, she could certainly give them one.

Her temper, already simmering over Helen's unnecessary criticism, started to boil. She let loose on Cas since he was the only target available. "I've given this movie a thumbs down so you can cut the drama."

"Movie?" His voice was back to normal, although he sounded bone weary.

"Your little production. Next time you plan to pull one of these stunts, I hope my invitation gets lost in the mail. I'm not amused."

Bewilderment flashed over his haggard face. "No one expects you to be amused, Jade."

"Then what was the point?" Besides the obvious one jutting between his legs. His erection was waning now, but she could remember every glorious detail. Not that it—or Cas—interested her. The butterflies she got by standing near him only had to do with hunger for food, not his luscious body.

But for fuck's sake, couldn't the man put on some clothes?

"Point? This was a mistake."

"At least you admit that much."

He slumped against the putty colored siding, the picture of exhaustion. "Can we please discuss this later? I'm really not up to another fight tonight."

Why the hell wasn't he cooperating? Wasn't he supposed to love, honor and obey? "Didn't you hear me? I said I've had enough! Drop the act and get me the hell out of here."

"I can't go yet. I have to talk to Boyd and the doc."

Of all the times to leave her side, he picked now? After she'd begged and begged to be left alone? Jade didn't know why that pushed her rage to its limit, but she felt mad enough to hit something. And that scared the shit out of her. Shaking with anger, she told him, "Then I'm going home without you."

Jade jumped off the edge of the porch to the ground, feeling better for having trampled something under her foot, even if it was only grass. She looked over her shoulder to see if her shadow would give in and follow, but he stood outside the door where she'd left him, looking like a shell-shocked victim.

A naked, extremely well-built victim.

Because her attention was elsewhere, she didn't see Dr. Scott approach her. When he put a hand on her shoulder, she jumped and started to turn in a move designed to sweep his legs out from under him. She connected with her target but had time to adjust her force so he fell gently rather than crashing to earth.

She stood over him, her hands on her hips, and glared. Hadn't Nana warned them not to sneak up on her? Didn't the man realize she could have killed him? "What is it

with you people? All I want is to be left alone, but will you do that? No. You haul me out here in the middle of the night to watch some stupid sex show that doesn't mean shit to me and yell at me when I refuse to applaud. Cas only follows me when I don't want him to and the whole team seems to have exhibitionist tendencies that would get them arrested on almost any city street. If you ask me, you're treating the wrong patient here."

"Are you done, Ms. Rue?" the doctor asked politely from where he reclined on the ground.

Jade blinked, then checked her short term memory for any other topics she felt the need to vent on. "I think I've covered it for now."

"Good. Please come with me."

Slowly, as if he were eighty instead of forty, he stood up and led her back to Cas' side.

She ground her teeth in frustration as she followed him, unsure why she was obeying him when she flatly refused to interact with anyone right now. "Nobody listens to me. Nobody fucking listens to me. Maybe I really am dead."

"I heard you, Ms. Rue. Under other circumstances, I would probably even respect your decision and let you return to your house under the assumption that nothing of real consequence happened tonight. However, I think it would be beneficial for you to get a dose of someone else's reality for a change. And the most expedient way to do that is for you to join me inside."

Helen had joined Boyd and Cas. Jade collapsed on the top step of the porch, turning her back to them as the doctor started asking questions.

"Do any of you know what set Dana off tonight?" Dr. Scott asked.

Cas ran a hand over his face in a washing gesture. "I accidentally brushed up against her the other day when I was semi-aroused. I didn't think much about it at the time, but I guess I upset her more than I thought."

"Did you report the incident to Boyd?"

The troubleshooter spoke up. "Yeah, he went by the book. I'm the one who failed to put two and two together."

"You know me better than that, Boyd. I'm not blaming anyone. I need the facts so I can help Dana as well as the rest of you."

Cas rehashed the events that led up to him rushing into Dana's house. He added, "Digger might know more."

"Digger needs medical attention and a quiet night before I start asking him questions," the doctor replied. "A break wouldn't hurt you either."

"Don't pull me out. I can handle it."

Jade heard the defensiveness in Cas' tone. She didn't understand why he'd look a gift horse in the mouth. The doctor was offering him a chance to escape her. He'd be a fool not to take it. She would if she could, in a heartbeat.

"It's not punishment, Cas. You did well. Great, in fact. You deserve a week at the main house at the very least."

"I started this assignment and I'll see it through." He tapped Jade on the shoulder. "Come on, Jade. We can go now."

Jade followed him, glad someone finally agreed with her, but Dr. Scott had other plans.

"You get a break, Cas, whether you want one or not. Ms. Rue and I have a few things to discuss. Go home, clean up. Take a nap if you want. It'll be a few hours, but I'll make sure you return before Ms. Rue does."

Cas kept his eyes on Jade. "Are you okay with that?"

Right, like any of them actually gave a shit about her opinions. If they had, she'd be back in Philly by now. Besides, the great doctor had spoken. "Go, Cas. I keep telling you I don't need a nanny or a shadow. I'll be fine."

Cas stared at her for a long minute, then walked away. Helen left as well, then the doctor gave a few cryptic messages to Boyd who took off, leaving him and Jade alone.

Jade got to her feet, brushed off her hands on the dirty pair of jeans she wore, and said, "So, Doc, is it our turn to go in front of the camera?"

Chapter Seven

An Explanation

Cas let the hot spray slam into his neck, then cascade down his back. Boyd had offered to open one of the massage rooms, but Cas declined. He didn't need to be manipulated. He needed to be with Jade.

And she wanted nothing to do with him.

Understandably.

And that was before Dr. Scott decided to educate Jade himself.

So he'd ended up back at Boyd's place where Boyd had tracked him down a few minutes later. To avoid a discussion he wasn't ready to have, Cas opted for a long shower.

Boyd rapped on the plastic panel with his knuckles and slid it open far enough to hand over a frosty beer. The troubleshooter sucked down a few gulps from a bottle in his other hand before making himself comfortable on the toilet lid. "So how they hanging, my friend?"

Cas choked out a laugh. "You seem to have this obsession with my balls, Boyd. Will a declaration of love be next?"

The short man sprayed the bathroom rug with beer as he tried to laugh and choke at the same time. "Shit, you did that on purpose."

"Can't have everyone buying into that God image of yours. Not even you."

"He made man in his own image, right? I can't help it if I'm closer to divine perfection than the rest of you pathetic mortals."

What an ego. The hell of it was, the small man was entitled to it. Boyd might have missed Dana's danger signs, but he wouldn't have made the mistake with Dana in the first place.

"Wipe that kicked-puppy look off your face, Cas. You didn't blow it. You didn't even give it gas."

"How many strokes did you have left? Twenty? Ten?" The water pounded the tension from his muscles, but nothing could erase the images of Digger laying there helpless on Dana's floor as she whipped his naked body.

"Now you're getting personal."

"I'm serious, Boyd. How much time did I have left before you decided to storm the castle and save my ass?" He didn't bother to add *again*. They both knew it wasn't the first time Cas had been in over his head with Dana.

"You're talking trash. I'm backup. I'm supposed to be ready to save your ass. That's my job. You went in and talked her out so that I didn't have to get my hero cape dirty. That's your job and you did it."

"None of it should have been necessary in the first place."

Boyd kicked back on the toilet seat and put his feet up on the sink. "I have a hunch this incident has nothing to do with you."

"I got hot and bothered and she knew it."

"You got hot and bothered looking at another woman. That's not Dana's trigger."

"I rubbed against her."

"Oh, Christ on a cracker. You didn't whip out your one-eyed snake and charm her with it. If she were that easy to trip, she would have flipped every time Digger walked into the room. Those twins keep him pretty happy."

"Then maybe it's just me."

Cas stuck his head under the spray, a delaying tactic to prevent the troubleshooter from trying to talk him out of his guilt. Boyd slid the panel back and shifted the temperature to arctic cold. Cas shut the water off with a growl and glared at the man who handed him a towel.

"If you want to wallow in guilt, fine. I'll leave you to it as soon as you get out here and wag your weenie for me. Doc's orders."

"Like hell."

"Hey, all I'm asking for is a quick peek. Medical would do a thorough search and seizure. Guess which option I'm hoping you go for?"

Cas stepped out of the shower, held his penis up with two fingers and then wiggled his hips to get his balls to shimmy.

"Yeah, you're a funny guy. Now let's get this over with so we can get back to bonding over beer."

Cas hitched his hip on the counter, set his beer on the sink behind him, then spread his legs. While he balanced with his right hand, he used his left to show Boyd the spot where Dana had nipped him high on his thigh.

"Damn, man, you can almost make her a set of dentures from that impression. How the hell did she get that kind of grip on you?"

"I had her pinned. I didn't think she could reach me."

"Pinned?" A lift of his brow invited further explanation.

Cas didn't want to get into it. It was embarrassing. But Boyd would find out as soon as he reviewed the security tapes. "I had her shoulders pinned under my knees while I checked on Digger."

"You leaned forward, didn't you? Dangled your boys right over her mouth." Boyd shook his head. "You're damn lucky you had a stiffie to pull those up or you'd be one T short of a pair."

Putting a patch on the bite marks took a bit of doing as they continued to ooze blood. Boyd wasn't the most gentle of nurses either, and so Cas winced several times as the pain rocketed through his system.

"Oh, stop being such a baby," Boyd chided as he applied a final length of tape to keep the bandage in place. "Or is that your way of begging me to kiss it and make it better?"

"Fuck you."

"In your dreams."

Cas opened his overnight bag and pulled out a pair of lightweight sweatpants. He slipped into them, then grabbed his beer from the bathroom sink and walked out of the room. Boyd followed on his heels, of course.

"Why don't I call down one of the House girls to rub anti-ick cream on the places that hurt the most, huh?"

"Not interested." Not unless the girl was Jade. What was Dr. Scott hoping to accomplish by keeping him from Jade after this awful night? Would she be okay? Would she understand he'd had no choice but to drag her along to be with the others as he attempted to rescue Digger?

Damn, he was a mess.

Boyd dogged his steps to the kitchen where Cas proceeded to raid his friend's fridge. He wasn't going to get much sleep so he might as well fuel his body to keep it going.

Boyd slammed his bottle down on the table, sending a volcanic effusion of foam over the lip. "I hate it when you do this."

"So don't watch." Cas went through his kitchen cabinets, looking for something edible. The man must eat out a lot, Cas surmised. Noodles and tuna were about the best he could do. He put a pan of water on to boil.

"I can't help it. It's kinda like rubbernecking at an accident. You don't want to see anything that'll make you puke, but you don't want to miss the gore."

Cas discovered a package of frozen peas in the freezer nearly covered in frost. He excavated them with a dull butter knife and plopped them in with the noodles when the water boiled. The tuna went into a big mixing bowl along with lemon pepper and a spoonful of mayonnaise.

"You think this thing with Dana is going to screw up your progress with Jade?" Boyd asked him.

"Probably, although it depends on what Dr. Scott says to her about it."

"Plenty, I imagine. He's giving her a personal tour of Dana's world."

Cas spun around so fast that bits of the flaky meat flew from the end of his fork. "Jade is going inside Dana's house?"

"Yeah. Seems Jade thought this whole night was a setup. She doesn't believe you or Digger were ever in any real danger. Doc figures by rubbing Jade's nose in it, she'll

realize you weren't playing around. And it wouldn't hurt her to learn that she's not the only one who's hit a bad bump along the road of life."

"I wouldn't classify what she went through as a bump, Boyd." He returned his attention to his dinner. "Maybe a hundred-foot drop off a cliff into shark-infested waters, but not a bump."

"She was attacked, not sold into sexual slavery."

"She was beaten by five men, men whom she'd either sparred with or taught. She only survived because she killed two of them and knocked two more unconscious. A feat that goes against a lifetime of personal philosophy and training."

Thinking about what she went through caused the bile to rise in his throat. The attack was only the beginning of her problems. Jade, broken and bleeding, had returned to her dojo to find her business partner waiting. Not for her though. He'd denied any involvement or knowledge of the attack, but he had two contracts waiting to be signed. Contracts that would give a couple of shady businessmen who'd ordered the attack a share of their dojo.

Cas couldn't imagine Jade allowing someone to give away her reputation so that a couple of wannabe mobsters could clean their dirty cash through her accounting books. Apparently her partner didn't think so either, because he never intended to mention the deal to her. His new friends were a little more cautious and thought that having only one partner to deal with seemed the best solution.

Jade had fought like a hellcat on the street that night, then later in the police station and again in the courts for at least partial ownership of the school, but she lost that fight too. The paperwork giving her half ownership in the dojo was never finalized so she had no legal basis to stand on. The final straw was when asked under oath about his reasons for selling out to men of questionable reputations, her former partner had claimed she was becoming more violent and unpredictable toward the students which was why he'd been looking for other buyers.

The case against her partner's involvement in her attack didn't stand up in court for lack of evidence and he was permitted to keep sole ownership of the school. Since she'd been living in one of the two apartments above the dojo, that meant she no longer had a home. So in the end of a string of battles, she had her freedom, but no desire to use it and no place to go. After a few weeks of living on the streets, Jade finally let her grandmother give her money to rent her own place, but the damage to Jade's spirit had been done.

In her mind, the court rulings were karmic payback. Her life for those of the men she'd killed. She didn't think she deserved joy or peace or love, or even a second chance at building a future for herself. She was just waiting to die.

Cas planned to do everything in his power to prove her wrong.

"Five against one, huh? No wonder she thinks we're all pricks."

Cas drained the noodles and peas, and then tossed them in the bowl with the tuna. He mixed it up and dumped the resulting concoction on two plates. He gave the bigger portion to Boyd and grabbed two more beers before sitting down with this own plate.

"Jade doesn't need to have Dana's problems shoved in her face."

"Since when did you get your Ph.D. in female psychology?" Boyd asked around a mouthful of food. "When it comes to warped minds, I'd pick Dr. Scott's instincts over mine any day."

"That I'd have to see to believe."

"When that chair came through the window, I was rock-hard and ready to rumble. But the doc said to wait, that you had Dana under your thumb. He held me back and he was right to do it. Give him some credit about being right with your girl too."

There were lots of reasons why Cas thought the unveiling of Dana's past was the wrong move to make with Jade. Mostly because he wasn't a part of it. How could he help her work through her emotional blockade when he was being shut out of this disturbing event?

He should be with her. Instead he was having dinner with a bad-tempered control freak. And Boyd.

Jade was right. He was nuts.

In an effort to shift topics, Cas asked about another piece of the evening's puzzle that had been bothering him. "What happened to the comm link anyway? Why did you abandon the Nest?"

"I'm surprised it took you this long to bust my chops over that."

"I had other things on my mind." Cas picked up his half empty plate and dumped it in the sink. He waited until the disposal was done devouring the remains of his meal before he continued. "So what happened?"

"I went up to the main house to check on something."

"You put Jade and everyone else in danger so you could watch the blonde with the fake tits get her ass tickled with a feather?"

"Don't be a dick. I went to check the visitor logs. I had this theory about..." Boyd glanced up at Cas and apparently changed his mind about voicing his hunches. "Right. We can get to that later. Anyway, I cut over the live feed to my headset. Under normal circumstances you'd never know I was gone."

"I knew. I had to smash into the backup system to reach you."

Boyd frowned. "I'll take a look once we get back to the heart of R Block. Actually, I'm going to go over the whole damn system one wire at a time. I should've done it when Aimee ran off just in case she left a surprise behind, but I didn't credit the girl with enough smarts to do something that sophisticated and make it work."

At this point, Cas ceased to worry about the communication issue. Boyd would ensure the lapse didn't happen again. "Anything else on Dr. Scott's list of my sore spots to poke and prod?" Cas asked.

“Just one.”

“What’s that?”

“He wants you to tell Jade about Aimee.”

Chapter Eight

The Other Side of Life

Dana had quite a collection of erotic toys. A box suitable for storing a full-length mink coat sat on top of her bed with the lid off. If contents of that box were secreted away, nothing else in the small house would clue the observer in that a dominatrix lived there. In fact, the interior looked like something out of a Puritan settlement.

Jade's gaze skimmed the collection of gadgets. There were a few she could name, but most of them were beyond her knowledge and experience. Pain of any kind didn't bring her pleasure. She hugged herself against the dark thoughts that crept into her mind, and surveyed the rest of the room.

If she hadn't met Dana, Jade would have mistaken this bedroom as that of a young girl. Dolls were sitting in a rocker by the bed. A pink, ruffled comforter had been pushed to floor. Pictures of kittens hung on the walls. Except for the box and the coppery scent of blood in the air, the room seemed to be frozen in a childhood several decades past.

"So what do you think?"

The doctor stood at the door to Dana's bedroom, watching her. "Dana was a sick puppy."

"Because of this?" He pointed at the box. "I'm surprised that you'd make value judgments on so little evidence."

"Oh, come on. It's obvious that's what you want me to believe."

"Things are very seldom what they seem." Dr. Scott ran his fingers over a white sheet that had been spotted by Digger's blood. "Did you know that Dana was adopted?"

"Don't know, don't care." Her mind was beginning to awaken to the fact that something terrible had indeed happened in these rooms tonight. The shock of it made her want to run and hide. It was all she could do to keep her insolent façade in place.

The doctor continued in a pleasant tone, as if she'd expressed interest. "She was, by a minister and his wife. They already had three boys, but the wife wanted a little girl that she could dress in flowers and lace. Instead of rolling the genetic dice one more time, they paid for a little girl, bought her from an underage hooker who sold her for drug money."

The doctor moved to the broken window and stared out into the night as he continued in a tone that was both calm and disturbing. "They were strict with Dana, knowing who her mother was and what she'd already been exposed to in her first two years of life. They didn't want their precious little girl turning into a whore."

Jade wanted to run out of the house, but his voice kept her in place as though her feet had been nailed to the floor. "Please stop. Please," she begged him. She didn't need to be dragged through more drama tonight. This story had "heartbreaking" written all over it and she already had enough pain in her life.

He continued, ignoring her plea. "Now Johnny, the oldest son, in addition to being a horny, perverted bastard, was also an enterprising one. After he spent several months teaching a five-year-old Dana all the sexual tricks he knew, he offered her services to a few of his friends for a small fee."

Jade's stomach roiled at the thought. Despite the cool night air spilling into the room from the broken window, she was sweating. She hugged her waist to keep herself from vomiting.

"Johnny's business became so successful that he had to change venues. I understand the excess money was a bit of a problem too. Poor kid had to create the appearance of a part-time job to explain his absences and the cash in his pocket. His parents were so proud of him."

Dr. Scott pulled a picture out of the box that showed five very happy faces and one very pretty little girl dressed in pink satin and lace who looked like she wasn't sure if she should smile or scream.

"One day while cuddling with her father, Dana noticed that he had a hard-on. Being a good little girl, she did what she'd been trained to do."

"Oh, dear God."

"I assure you God had nothing to do with it. The minister attempted to beat the sin out of Dana. Of course, Johnny couldn't have that. He had become quite fond of the things his business could buy him, especially after he tapped into the pedophiles who'd pay big bucks for a few hours with a tiny blonde angel."

Jade was sobbing openly now. At least when she'd been attacked she'd been able to fight back and had Nana to go to when her world had turned to shit. Dana never had that kind of security net. She hadn't had anyone. It broke Jade's heart in ways she thought she could no longer be hurt.

"Johnny brought the men to her or, when she was older, her to the men and rewarded her good behavior with treats. Her father, on the other hand, took advantage of her skills then beat her for being too good at what she'd been trained to do. The tug of war between Johnny and her father continued well into her early teens."

Jade couldn't stand it anymore. She had to know how the little girl had escaped her sexual enslavement. Surely the police or a teacher or someone had intervened. "Someone turned those bastards in, right?"

The doctor nodded. "Eventually, yes. Father and son were arrested and Dana was forced into counseling."

"That's how she ended up here?"

The doctor turned from the window to face her. "No. The psychologist, a parishioner of her father's, believed Dana was acting out as some teens do and that her stories about her sexual exploits were merely lies to get attention. Johnny and her father perpetuated that myth as much possible. Her family didn't want the police looking any deeper than the one guilt-stricken man who had gone to the police with a confession about a single lapse in judgment."

"No one believed her." The trials had been hard on Jade. She couldn't imagine going through the ordeal without the faith of her lawyer, prosecutor and Nana behind her. Dana had had no one to back her up. And to endure all that at such a young age... "What about her mother?"

"Dana's mother blamed her for disgracing the family and ruining the reputation of two fine men, men who would have remained pure if they hadn't brought the whelp of a whore into their home. She explained that very carefully to Dana right before she killed herself with an overdose of pills."

How much worse could it get for that poor girl? It was more than morbid curiosity. Fissures of concern had broken through the ice around her heart. Jade had to keep listening until she knew that someone had cared more for Dana than the people who'd bought her. "What happened to her then?"

"The courts shipped her off to live with her other brothers, who were, by then, adults sharing a house while they attended an out-of-state college. Neither of them wanted her around. Consequently, they didn't keep tabs on her which made it fairly easy for Johnny to contact her, even from prison."

"How old was she?"

"At this point, about fourteen."

At fourteen, Jade had been playing with friends, working on her green belt and trying to keep her knees from getting skinned so her parents wouldn't scold her when she had to put on her Sunday dress. "But someone must have cared about her if she ended up here."

"Dana came to live with us the day she turned eighteen."

Eighteen. The day she'd become an adult. Jade didn't dare contemplate what could have happened to her during those intervening four years. The evidence left behind in this room was enough to let her know that Dana's past was not a place she ever wanted to go again.

Suddenly Dana's bedroom became too small. Her heart raced. Panic hammered at the back of her head, demanding that she flee. Jade had to get away from the stench of drying blood, the recent horror of what had happened here. She dashed toward the door, but Dr. Scott blocked her escape.

His round face hardened as he said, "There is one small matter you and I still need to discuss, Ms. Rue."

"No."

He continued, implacable. "Everything I've told you is a matter of public record."

"After what she did to Digger, I'm sure that's her biggest worry." She hadn't meant to put it that way, but she'd spent so much time trying to bury her social graces that she could no longer call on them when she needed them.

The doctor didn't strike out at her, although from the look on his face he wasn't pleased with her choice of words. "You don't know Dana," he said. "Until you do, think about this. After five years of being in my care, Dana had progressed to the point that I felt she could safely mix with our other guests. Tonight, she betrayed that trust. I plan to do everything in my power to find out why."

Shock momentarily overrode all of her other concerns. "Are you suggesting that I had something to do with happened here?"

"I assure you that left to her own devices, Dana never would have crossed the line into sexual torture again. Someone pushed her into it. I intend to find out who and see that they are punished." He took a step back, but before she could escape him, he added, "There are many kinds of victims in the world, Ms. Rue, and very few of them are victims by choice. I advise you to keep that in mind when you speak with the other guests and the staff who care for them."

She fled the room, as if the hounds of hell were on her heels. Rapid footsteps dogged her and she suspected the good doctor wanted to make sure she didn't corrupt another soul on her way home.

Her shadow was waiting for her on the porch. Jade sped past him without a word. She had nothing to say to him, to anyone. She stumbled into her living room, feeling thoroughly wiped out. She never had much energy these days, but getting a peek into Dana's mind made her even more weary. Emotionally empty. Because if she had the energy to emote about anything, she'd be scared out of her ever-lovin' mind.

The doctor cornered Cas outside. Through the open door, she had a good view of them as they conferred. Their conversation didn't rise above a whisper, but out of sheer familiarity, Jade was learning to read the body language of her brawny shadow. And his body language was shouting that he was pissed.

Unable to handle any more drama at the moment, she retreated to the bathroom. Since it lacked a lock on the door, she couldn't shut out the world. She did the next best thing by filling the tub with the hottest water available, creating thick clouds of steam.

Despite the muggy, warm temperature, Jade shivered as she stripped off her clothing. Her skin was cold and clammy. Her nipples pebbled from the chill she felt, despite the rising moist fog. The thoughts passing through her mind were far colder than the air around her. She flashed back to the first couple days after the killings when she thought the dirty memories of what had happened were so ingrained into her soul that she'd never be truly clean again. Dana's tragic past brought back echoes of that soiled feeling. It wasn't her dirt this time, but she felt its taint regardless.

The water burned the nerves in her feet and then her calves as she stepped into the chipped porcelain tub. Jade steeled herself for the pain as she immersed more of her

body in the steaming liquid. Her knees bent, her forearms came to rest on the edge, then, shaking, she lowered herself further.

“Son of a bitch!” she cursed as the water rushed in to caress the sensitive flesh between her legs.

“Jade? Jade! What’s wrong?” Cas asked. Judging by the volume of his voice, he was still standing on the porch.

She bit her lip against the harsh sting and slipped in deeper, until the hot water lapped against her nipples. Her body acclimated quickly, but it left her skin tingling from the heat. “I’m sorry,” she replied in a mock mechanical tone, “Jade isn’t available to take your call right now. If you’d like to leave a message, you’re in worse shape than she is. Beeeeeeeep.”

“I’ll call back later.”

If she could see him, she was sure she’d find a smile spreading his lips. Another excellent reason to bury her head under the water’s surface and never come up for air. Cas had qualities she found herself admiring in her weaker moments. Qualities that encouraged her to open up to him, trust him. That spelled more trouble than a box of Scrabble letters.

Jade wasn’t a rabid feminist. She didn’t belong to any special interest group. Belonging meant sharing. Sharing meant pain. Pain meant she had to feel scary things like trust, vulnerability and hope, and she couldn’t feel if she were dead inside. Dead people don’t have anything to share.

She’d often repeated that logical loop since she’d met Cas. Back in Philly, with or without Nana, Jade had no one to challenge her logic. Blossom House, much as she tried to resist, didn’t permit her to roll over and play dead.

Take tonight, for example. It hadn’t been her idea to investigate Dana’s house of horror. She’d been quite content to watch the unfolding events from her dining room window. Instead of letting her remain an outside observer, they’d dragged her front and center, shoving her face in the whole nasty mess. If that was their idea of shock therapy, she’d rather have the electrodes.

Jade let go with her feet, allowing her butt to slide forward and her head to sink under the surface until she was completely submerged. Even with her eyes and mouth tightly shut, contact with the hot water stung.

“Is the lady of the house at home?”

The words filtered through the water, garbled but still understandable. Two things forced her back to the surface. The desperate need for air and the knowledge that there wasn’t a whole lot of her body that she could hide from his gaze while submerged in a bathtub.

Waves of water sloshed over the side of the tub as she rose, carelessly soaking the legs of his gray—why was it always the same endless gray?—pants. “I don’t know. Why don’t you go home and find out?”

"Home is where the heart is, and my heart is definitely with you."

God, she wasn't up for this tonight. The temptation to give in and gain some comfort from his strong arms was overwhelming. Comfort she didn't deserve. Comfort she'd done nothing to earn. Comfort that would be dangerous to her already shaky resolution to remain an emotional zombie. "I don't have a heart."

"Sure you do. I'll help you find it again, if you let me. I love you."

Jade smacked the water with the flat of her hand, sending up a spray of water that splashed them both. "Stop saying that."

"Not until you believe it."

"Fine. I believe you. Now get out of this room, and out of my life."

Cas rested his butt on the edge of the tub. His fingers combed through her wet, tangled strands, brushing them back from her forehead. His touch was so gentle and tender, as was the emotion in his eyes. "Look at me and tell me that. Tell me you believe in my love for you. That you feel it."

"I don't feel anything." If only. At the moment, she felt so much her body was on overload. Searing heat from the water and a strange arousal from being naked in front of such a handsome man currently topped the list. There were also her feelings about Dana's past and Dr. Scott's implied accusation to deal with. She needed time alone to fortify her emotional walls, but Cas seemed intent on breaking them down. She couldn't allow that to happen. She didn't want to be cured; she wanted to be left alone to die. Didn't she?

The fact that she'd been brought to the point of questioning her deepest desire now just pissed her off. She didn't want to be attracted to Cas any more than she wanted the knowledge of Dana's childhood in her head. Yet, she was apparently stuck with both. She tried to hold onto her anger, but her own emotions were acting against her. She felt confused, frustrated, hurt, curious. Too many things to process. It would be so easy to give up control to Cas, and let him take care of her. But she knew that was a mistake she couldn't afford to make. It was too risky. She could be hurt. Or worse, she could hurt him. She really didn't think she could live with another casualty on her conscience.

"That's because you're not trying."

Well, duh. It was about time he figured that one out. "Good, now that we understand each other, will you please get the hell out of my life?"

"Doesn't work that way, Jade." His hand dropped to her shoulder where it lingered to caress the soft skin along her collarbone. "Then again, maybe we can play *Let's Make a Deal*. Are you up for that?"

His touch sent a warm shiver down her spine. How long had it been since someone had shown her such tenderness? The fact that she didn't want or ask for his touch seemed to make him more determined to give it. She quickly decided she was up for anything that involved making him disappear. "Can I get dressed first?"

"No."

“Then hurry up. The water’s getting cold.” It wasn’t really, but she wanted to give him something to do that didn’t involve staring at her naked body. He couldn’t be seeing anything that riveting. She’d lost a lot of muscle tone since she’d stopped exercising. Surely he had better eye candy – like the twins – to ogle.

“We can’t have that.” He released the plug so the water could drain, then stood up and started removing his clothes.

“You could at least wait until I’m out of the tub before you start a bath of your own.”

The gray shirt came off over his head, and his chest looked even better than the last time she’d seen it, just a few hours ago. “Here’s my deal. I get fifteen minutes to bring you to orgasm. If I fail, I’ll do whatever you want for the next twenty-four hours, including disappear.”

Chapter Nine

A Little Healing

Outrage and fear slammed into Jade's gut, inciting another round of panic. Or maybe her panic was due to the fact that his words had also triggered a longing for sensual human contact. "What the hell is wrong with you? I'm your patient. You can't touch me like that!"

His brown-sugar eyes sparkled as he slowly shook his head. "I'm not a doctor and you're not a patient. I can touch you in any manner that's consensual."

"Well, I'm not consenting to anything."

"You will."

He removed his loose, damp pants, carefully peeling the fabric over a bandage on his inner thigh. Next he reached for the waistband of his plebian underwear and Jade shut her eyes. He might be an exhibitionist, but that didn't mean she had to look.

In an attempt to stop him from carrying out this new insanity, she struck out with the only ammunition she had. "Didn't you get your rocks off with Dana?"

"No, I almost got them bitten off."

She didn't understand until she opened her eyes and saw him pointing at the bandage. "Dana did that?"

"Yep."

"Because you asked her to." Jade didn't want to picture that kind of scene. The highlights she already had were enough to give her nightmares for the next month.

"I'm not into pain." He plugged the drain in the bottom of the tub and turned the hot tap on so that a steady thin stream trickled in.

"Then how—" She shook her head, spraying droplets over him. "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

Cas slipped his hand into the water then slowly stirred it to create a current. She stiffened, her legs snapping together as if facing a shark in the shallows that was after her sweetest meat.

Cas' hand rode the tiniest of waves into her belly. The pads of his fingers skimmed her torso. Again she held herself rigid, panicked at the possibility of him drifting toward her breasts, but he stayed on a steady course through the center of her body. Only when he reached her neck did his fingers spread to span its width. His thumb rested over her pulse for a few heartbeats, then settled into a slow stroking rhythm.

"I did what I had to. To save Digger," he told her quietly.

"Even if it meant hurting Dana."

Cas shook his head. "I'm not the one who hurt Dana. Once I tried to save her, but I wasn't quick enough. Boyd did that."

"The runt?"

Cas shook his head again, slower and with great sadness in his eyes. "That's not you talking. You don't judge people by their size, shape or color."

Fed up with whatever game he was playing, Jade batted his hand away. "You don't know shit about me. Nana might have given you a few facts but no one knows how I really feel." Dr. Scott had proved just how misleading facts could be.

"I think I do. Gives us an interesting basis for that wager, don't you think?"

She eyed him warily. "What kind of wager?"

"Pleasure for both of us versus a little peace for you."

"Absolutely not! How can you even think about fucking me after what happened tonight?"

His hand came up to rest against her cheek. "Easy. I'm not thinking about fucking you. I'm thinking about pleasuring the woman I love."

Jade couldn't turn from his piercing gaze. Faint stirrings of...something...flitted through her chest, the brush of butterfly wings against her soul. Hope? Desire? Lust? She didn't want to name it. "I can't. I can't be what you want me to be," she whispered hoarsely.

"I want you to be yourself. The real you." Before she could argue, he rushed on, "But tonight I think I can be what you need. Give me the time I asked for. Fifteen minutes. If I can't bring you a little bit of joy by then, I'll leave you alone for a day."

That was what she wanted, his absence, but at what cost? Could she resist him that long?

Yet if she said no, he'd continue this slow assault on her senses. Surrounding her with love and acceptance until she had no place left to go to escape it. How much longer could she battle against that kind of warfare?

If only he'd picked another time to make this silly wager. In the morning, after she'd had time to shore up her defenses. Except by doing so, she'd be granting him the same advantage. Now he was weak and desperate, if his earlier statements could be believed. Was that enough to give her an edge?

Cas waited for her answer. He didn't look weak or desperate. He looked like a Roman warrior, ready for his turn in the Coliseum. She'd been a warrior herself once. She could do it again, pit her will to remain numb and unfeeling against his need to bring her pleasure, if it would secure her a day of freedom from his endless temptation.

"All right, Cas. You have a deal. I'll put up with fifteen minutes of your pawing me in a futile attempt to make me..." No. She couldn't say it. "And when you fail, I want you to go. Immediately. No arguments. You accept those conditions?"

"No restrictions. I can do whatever I want?"

"For fifteen minutes," she agreed. And may she find the strength within herself to endure it, unmoved and unchanged. Death awaited her. In that unending emptiness she could at last find peace. She clung to that future in a double-fisted mental grip, determined to meet her destiny.

Cas seemed unmoved by the grim set of her jaw. He gave her a smile full of promise. Her heart slid into the pit of her stomach and turned to stone. She was a dead woman. Again.

But then, to her amazement, Cas rose to his feet and walked out of the room.

Naked.

And he looked as good from the back as he did from the front.

"Hey! I thought we had a deal!"

"We do." She could hear him moving around in the kitchen, then he returned with a timer in his hand. He set it to fifteen minutes and put it on the sink. "I wouldn't want to go over my limit."

How thoughtful. But considerate or not, Cas was still a man. His little head ruled his big one. No man could resist putting his penis to use when the opportunity came up. And the fact that he could even think about sex after tonight's bloody adventure, well, that gave her enough fuel to keep her heart and body hardened against him. "Let's get this over with. Where do you want me?"

She started to rise, but he held her down with the slightest pressure of his palm against her shoulder. "Stay where you are. Just inch forward a little so I can squeeze in behind you."

The height of the water doubled as Cas sank into the tub. A fair amount escaped over the side when Jade instinctively scrambled to get out of his way. Except there wasn't anywhere for her to go. If she wiggled away from him, the thin stream of hot water from the dripping tap was nearly unbearable against her sensitive her skin. If she avoided that hot spot, then she rubbed up against him. A very naked, very masculine him.

Jade's heartbeat doubled its pace as his strong hands grasped both sides of her waist and lifted her up. "Don't worry. There's enough room for the both of us." He slid his legs under her, then set her down on his thighs. A little hiss of breath was the only sound he made to indicate the movement and the hot water troubled his fresh wound. Why was he being so stubborn about this?

"Aren't you going about this the wrong way?"

Cas chuckled, causing his thigh muscles to flex under her bottom. "Nope."

Jade leaned forward, away from him. "Well, I've got to say this arrangement isn't doing much for me."

"Don't count me out yet. I still have a few minutes left."

More than a few. A glance at the timer told her she hadn't even made it through the first sixty seconds.

“Lean back.”

She didn’t want to. Having the rough texture of his hair-dusted thighs instead of smooth porcelain unsettled her enough.

“No resistance, or the deal’s off,” Cas reminded her when she hesitated.

“I’m not enjoying this, you know,” she replied as she permitted his hands to guide her into position, reclining against him. *Liar*, her inner voice chided.

He drew her head down to rest against his shoulder. “Perhaps not yet. But that’s going to change, I promise.”

That was one promise she didn’t need from him. She kept quiet.

Cas wrapped one well-muscled arm around her waist. He shifted his big shoulders, causing the water to sway. Afraid, she pulled away. Instantly, his arm tightened holding her in place. “Easy, woman. I don’t plan on drowning us just yet.”

Jade discovered that they were now reclining more than before. Her body was cupped by his, his thighs supporting hers, his hips cradling her own. It felt oddly intimate, but it didn’t send her into a panic as she’d anticipated.

“You’ve lived with me for days now. You know I won’t hurt you. Close your eyes and let me take care of you.”

His voice was a low rumble in her ear. While she couldn’t quite bring herself to relax, she admitted to herself that the contours of his body fit hers to a T.

“I’m going to touch you the way a woman should be touched, slowly, reverently.”

Riiight. In her previous life, men seemed to think foreplay was guiding her hand to their cocks. Jade braced for him to grab at her, perhaps impale her with a broad finger. Cas did neither. He raised his hand to rain droplets down on her bare chest, then washed them back into the tub with the flat of his hand. His palm stayed in the middle of her torso, following the line of her breastbone, raising his hand at the waterline that bisected her hips. Over and over, he continued the motion.

“Your skin feels so soft. I love it.”

“Good for you,” she replied, pleased that her voice held none of the softening she was beginning to feel in her bones.

“Good for you,” Cas countered. “I could do this for hours.”

“That would be a violation of our agreement.”

“True, but the offer stands. Feel free to take me up on it any time. For now, just relax.”

Easier said than done. However, she did try, mostly because she was tired and his touch really was soothing. The alarm would warn her when the time limit hit so she could afford to give up control to him for a few seconds and still come out of this little contest a winner.

Couldn’t she?

Cas raised his knees, making it impossible for her to slide away from him. That freed up his other arm. He continued to caress her, gliding over her sides from shoulder to hip, barely scraping against the side of her breasts. The first time it was unnerving, like having a stranger bump into her on the subway. When he did it for the third time, Jade decided it was intentional. She didn't mind. She felt like a pampered cat being petted. Not at all the approach she expected him to take, but if he wanted to waste his time this way, Jade didn't feel it necessary to argue.

She didn't realize she'd kept her back arched away from him until she let those muscles go lax. The sensitive skin at the lower curve of her spine came in contact with his abdomen. The pressure of his hands increased slightly, molding her against him. He continued stroking her, his hands traveling in both directions, all the way down to her thighs and back up.

"Sweetness, every inch of you."

"Only if you think vinegar tastes sweet," she told him.

His body tightened with laughter. He wrapped his arms around her under her breasts and gave her a quick squeeze. "Maybe I do."

"Then you're the one who needs therapy."

He resumed his gentle stroking. "You're my therapy," he said, his voice devoid of the lightness it had held a moment before. "Having you open up to me, to trust me like this, means a lot to me. Whatever else you may think about me right now, please accept that I don't take your participation in this bet lightly."

Jade had to bite her lip to keep from agreeing with him. For the first time in over two years, she was truly comfortable in another person's presence. He knew about her past and never treated her like a caged, dangerous animal. That had to count for something.

"You have beautiful breasts," he told her.

Automatically, she flinched, accepting the fact that a few moments of pleasure for herself required that she return the favor. If he wanted to pinch and fumble with her breasts, she'd let him.

Cas didn't hesitate in his movements, nor did they change. His hands continued to roam her torso, grazing the undersides of her breasts but not manhandling them. "Beautiful, beautiful Jade. Creamy smooth, just like the gem."

"Are you saying I'm green around the gills?"

His low chuckle washed over her in a heated wave, warming her more deeply than the hot water ever could. "Jade comes in white as well as green and red, although it's not as sought after by collectors. I guess you could say it's an acquired taste."

"Taste again? You definitely need to talk to someone about your oral fixation."

"Is that a hint?"

Was it? Had she been trying to flirt with him? She'd never been any good at it, even before the attack. Yet, with Cas, the teasing words seemed to fall off her tongue with little effort. What did that mean?

"I don't know," she said, answering him as well as herself.

"Why don't I tell you what I'd do with my mouth if you'd let me. If you don't like it, I'll stop."

She didn't have to ask him how he'd know if he'd upset her. He read her body too well in this position for her to be able to hide any reaction. And she suspected his words would counter the warm tingling that he now sent coursing through her nerves. "Go on."

He kissed her temple. "That's first."

"Kissing my head?"

"Yeah, so I could watch your eyes drift shut."

Damn him, she thought as she did just that. "I'm only doing that so I don't have to look at your goofy face."

"Lie to yourself if you want, but I know better." He brought one hand to her neck and traced the beating pulse. "My tongue would linger here, so I could feel the way I make the blood race through you."

"That's annoyance, not lust." She ignored the inner voice that called her a liar for the second time. It was getting harder and harder to ignore her true reaction to him with each sensual, loving touch of his hand. "Hurry up with this confession, will you?"

"No. I think you like it slow and drawn out. And that's exactly what I'm going to give you." Cas ran his hands down her body then used them to gently pry her legs apart. "Rest them on top of mine."

Her mind screamed no while her body panted yes. Unable to decide which desire was stronger, she hesitated.

"I know what you're thinking, but I have something else in mind. Trust me."

She didn't trust any man these days. However, so far, every time she'd leapt to a conclusion about Cas, she'd been wrong. She could at least give him the benefit of the doubt for once.

When she'd complied with his request, her knees spread wide, allowing him access to her most vulnerable core. His fingers gripped her thighs and inched her up a little, then tugged her back into place. The hot water lapped at her pussy, a teasing sting as though it were being lightly slapped. She bit her lip to keep from moaning.

"That's better," he said.

"Better for who?" Jade wanted to know. She was half sick with fear and half aroused. She hated both sensations yet was helpless to control either. Damn the man.

"Both of us. I was running out of room."

Jade opened her eyes and looked down to see his hard cock bobbing in the water between her legs. It was beautifully cut, thick but not too long, and a rosy shade from the warm water. A shiver ripped through her body and Cas was quick to reassure her.

"We both know I'd be lying if I tried to convince you that holding you like this doesn't make me horny as hell. The evidence is obvious. But while I can't entirely control my body's reaction to you, I can control what I do about it. And I won't do a damn thing with my cock until you ask me."

"Never happen," she snapped at him. The agreement was that he could touch her; there was no obligation for her to touch him...even if she did harbor a small desire to see if the skin along his shaft was as soft and firm as it looked.

"Then there's nothing for you to worry about."

Oddly, she believed him. In the past five minutes, he'd managed to convince her that he wanted more than her acceptance of his movements in this game. He desired her active participation. Being female and available wasn't enough for Cas.

Her estimation of him rose, as did her uncertainty about being able to win this bet.

"Now where were we? Oh, yeah. Your neck." His hands picked up where they'd left off. "I'd probably drop a kiss or two on your shoulders, but I have to confess, I'm drawn to your breasts. I wouldn't be able to keep my tongue off them for long."

He palmed her swollen globes, gently shaping them with his dexterous fingers. Jade's anger simmered under his attention, wanting him to stop. Wanting him not to stop. Hating the fact that she couldn't decide.

"I'd lick the very tip of your nipples." His thumbs rubbed over those sensitive nubs in slow motion. "When they were hard and aching, I'd suck them between my lips and nibble on them."

Had the temperature gone up when she wasn't looking?

It didn't matter, she reminded herself. His goal was her climax and he couldn't induce her to come just by feeling her up. And although she was vexed with herself for allowing him to bring her lusty feelings this far so easily, she gave herself permission to enjoy it. Just a little bit.

Against her back, she sensed his heart rate pick up. "You like the idea of me sucking on your nipples. So do I," he told her.

He plucked at her budded nipples with his fingers. She bit her lip to contain a groan of pleasure. She wasn't so successful at restraining her restless movements. Her hands, previously squeezed between his thighs and the tub, slipped free and piggy-backed his. She turned her head toward him and pressed her face against his neck.

"Let go, love. Let me hear how you burn."

His fingers milked her distended nipples, mimicking the actions his mouth would perform in their place. He even supplied the moist heat by dragging the warm bath water over the beaded flesh in between long tugs.

She would've been able to stay silent if his cock hadn't chosen that moment to throb against her mound, the firm, rosy head tapping against her swollen clit. Up until that point she'd feigned mental ignorance over what was happening between her legs by concentrating on other sensations. When the two combined, a low, hungry groan burst from her throat.

Cas nipped her earlobe. "Sweet Jade, I'm going to make you come for me."

Jade wanted to throw his confidence back in his teeth, but it wouldn't prevent his words from coming true. Fear hammered into her veins. She couldn't lose to him. She couldn't!

"No, no," she cried. She struggled within his embrace, trying to free herself from him. All she managed to accomplish was to further excite herself by trapping his rigid erection between her thighs, pushing the flared head against her sensitive folds with every thrust of her hips.

"Oh, yes, love. I'm going to make you come. I know you're afraid. I know you don't want it to happen because you think you'll lose something precious. You have nothing to fear with me. I'll make it all right, I promise."

She barely heard his words, but she felt his arms circle her again in a protective embrace. A sob escaped her throat, but her body continued to seek his on automatic pilot. Her hips rocked against his, meeting each surge of his throbbing cock as it rubbed against her pussy lips. He wasn't inside her, he wasn't even attempting penetration, but each smack of his fat head upon her clit sent pleasurable sparks shooting through her.

The tears fell faster now, but Cas held her so tenderly, his rough, needy voice retaining a commanding note as he whispered in her ear. "I love you, Jade. I want to you feel how good it can be to live again. Let me set you free."

His right hand slid along her belly and came to rest at the top of her short, dark curls. Like a bear trap, her legs snapped shut, capturing his engorged penis at the juncture of her legs. Too frighteningly close to orgasm for her mind to handle, too far from satisfying her body's craving that would only be met when that rock-hard part of him was buried deep inside her.

Cas growled in the back of his throat. "Oh, God."

Lost in the sensations he'd resurrected in her, Jade could only continue to murmur her protest over and over. He read her body language well, and responded to it rather than the weak words that passed from her lips. She didn't really want him to stop, a fact she knew would haunt her later.

"I want you to ride me, Jade. I want you to take me inside you, to be one with you. I want you to feel my love for you pounding through my cock as I push you over the edge."

"No, no, no."

"That's right. It's not going to happen. Not now. Because I know you don't want it. Not the way I do. And that's okay. I can wait. But you don't have to."

Her whole body tensed in reaction to the touch of his finger on her heated nub. He stroked over her clit with a gentle pressure. Her hips flexed, trying to urge him into harder contact. His other hand divided its attentions between her breasts, turning her whole body into one throbbing, aching need. Tension mounted between her legs. It only scratched the surface of the boiling desire his touch created in the depths of her cold, dark existence.

And the signs of impending climax scared the hell out of her. That kind of feeling didn't belong in her afterlife.

"Cas?" Her voice trembled. Her fingers gripped his arm.

"It's all right. I'm here. I'm with you."

"It hurts, Cas."

"Hush, now. Don't think, just feel."

Jade dug her fingers into his forearm. Her hips bucked in a steady rhythm. Between her legs, she felt his hard column rubbing against her softest folds. She no longer feared his deep penetration as she had, but rather feared that she'd never experience it at all.

As if he'd read her thoughts, his palm bore down on her pussy, driving her clit up against his shaft with every flex of her hips. Her back arched in ecstasy.

Cas began to surge under her, thrusting between her legs faster and faster. She clamped her legs tighter around his cock. The ridge of his cock head grazed her clit again and again. Orgasm hovered just out of reach.

"You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen."

Her lungs released another heartfelt wail that Cas was free to interpret any way he chose. Even she couldn't really say whether it was agony over losing or ecstasy at becoming reacquainted with her sexual side that evoked such a passionate moan.

"It's time, love." For a split second she thought he was talking about the bet, but he continued before she completely broke his lusty spell. "Come for me."

With one final bucking thrust that sent a cascade of water over the rim of the tub, Jade came in an explosive, all-consuming burst of pleasure. Her inner core clamped down hard, even though he'd never entered her. She shuddered and gasped as Cas praised her courageous spirit.

As her body came down from the heights of ecstasy, her thoughts coalesced around one solid, irrefutable fact. She'd lost an important, potentially life-altering battle. Again.

Chapter Ten

A Step Back

Cas flattened his palm over her clit, allowing Jade to ride out her orgasm as long as possible. When the full body tremors stopped, she slumped against him. He began the comforting stroking that had started the whole thing, but she quickly brushed his hands aside.

“Don’t touch me.”

Immediately, he lifted his hands and settled them on the edge of the tub. He had expected her to reject him for making her body betray her mind. Still, her brusque dismissal stung. But that was his problem, one he wouldn’t make hers. “I’ll do my best to comply, but you are lying on top of me.”

“And whose fault is that?” she snapped at him. “No, don’t answer that. I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.”

She didn’t strike out nor did she try to get up. In fact, if he didn’t know better, he’d swear she was still basking in the erotic afterglow. He wanted to cuddle her, reassure her that what they’d shared was something real, untainted by her past or Dana’s, but she’d already tied his hands in that respect.

After a few seconds, the timer went off. Jade kicked it with her toe, sending it spinning into the trash. He wasn’t sure how to read that and she wasn’t giving him any hints.

“Jade, you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I think I broke something.”

Scared that he’d missed a fresh wound or had somehow injured her, he started searching for the source of her pain, his hands going where he couldn’t investigate by sight. “Where? How bad is it? What can I do?”

Again, she slapped his hands away. “Lay off. It’s a joke. I guess my sense of humor is as defective as the rest of me.”

“You’re unique, special and a pain in the ass.” He added the last adjective because he knew it would make her smile.

“Yeah, yeah. Now get me out of here before the wrinkles become permanent.”

Cas pushed with his feet, bringing both of them into a sitting position. The resulting surge of water rocked around them, but he pulled the plug with his toes to let it drain. She planted one foot between his legs and pushed herself up, bracing herself with her arms on the lip of the tub. With his guidance, she stepped out of the water and sat upon the toilet seat.

Cas stood up, grabbed a towel from the bar and wrapped it around her shoulders, then stepped out of the tub and sank to his knees before her. "Are you sure you're okay? Do you want me to call a med tech to check you over?"

"Why, so you can brag about your easy conquest?"

Her tone was mildly curious instead of biting. Something was wrong with both her body language and her voice, but he couldn't put his finger on it. "I wouldn't do that."

"You could though. It would be the truth. I was an easy lay for you, hardly put up a fight at all."

"You're joking, right? I was sweating bullets right up to the end." She could have turned to ice on him at any second. The close confines of the tub made it less likely that she'd damage him or herself if she got violent, but he never forgot the possibility was very, very real.

He brushed his finger along her neck and drew her chin up so that she had to meet his gaze. "What's going on in there?"

She settled back against the toilet tank but raised her feet so they rested on his thighs. "Wondering about what happens next."

"What are you talking about?"

She nudged his raging hard-on with her toe. "This."

"It's not your problem." As soon as he felt he could let her out of his sight for a few minutes, he'd take care of it himself. He'd already thought about it. He'd lick his own fingers, savoring the remnants of her cream that clung to his skin, pretending that his fist was her muscular thighs squeezing him tight until he pumped himself dry. Heaven, or at least as close as he could get to it for now.

She closed her eyes. "You don't have to, you know."

"Is that an offer?"

"Sure. Why not?"

He couldn't believe that she'd even considered it, let alone said it. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

She stared at him blankly for a minute, then laughed. "You thought I meant me. Sorry to burst your bubble, but I've had more than enough of you for one night."

Though disappointed, at least the world, as he knew it, still made sense. "Then what did you mean?"

"Find someone else to satisfy you."

"I don't want anyone else."

"Yeah, you can sell that line of bull along with the big bridge."

"I mean it."

Her jade green eyes opened, and her face turned grim. "Your lies would be a hell of a lot more effective if I hadn't seen you get hard over the way Ella stuck her tongue down your throat."

“It’s not what you think. She had to—”

“It’s exactly what I think. Ella’s kiss made you hot. Maybe I was wrong about you and Dana, but I’d rather not have you walking around here like a sexual time bomb. So get the hell out and find yourself a rutting partner. Come back when you can zip your pants without cursing.”

Her words made him too angry to think about her perspective or the emotions that prompted her to say such stupid things. For the first time, he completely lost his cool with a special guest. He opened his mouth and let his anger fly out. “If I were the rutting pig you believe me to be, you’d have won that stupid bet. A man intent on his own pleasure couldn’t have made you come apart like that.”

“Another pretty speech, but it doesn’t mean dick to your dick. Or to me.”

She stomped out of the bathroom, naked and angry. He followed her to the living room where she threw herself on the couch and buried her head under the lumpy pillows. Cas tossed them over his shoulder, one by one, not caring where they landed. When the couch was bare and she had nowhere else to hide, he ripped into her again.

“Since you seem so concerned about the condition of my dick, let’s talk about it. See, Dana likes it too. Very much. I don’t take that personally because she favors any dick that’s hard, the bigger the better.”

“Why don’t you go find her then? I’m sure she’d know just what to do with it.”

“Dr. Scott showed you her room, so you know what she’s become. Did he tell you why she almost killed Digger tonight?”

Slowly, Jade shook her head though her eyes softened, almost pleaded with him not to say any more. “All he gave me was the stuff on public record.”

“Then he didn’t tell you that she was convicted of killing a man. As a juvie, those records would have been sealed.” He didn’t like spitting out the grim details of Dana’s past, but even Dana herself would approve of using any method that got through to one of their special guests.

Immediately, Jade spit back, “If the woman is that dangerous, then Dr. Scott had no right to let her roam free.”

“Treat her like the animal she’d been trained to be, you mean?” Jade refused to answer him. To even look at him. He had to reach her, had to make her understand, or all the progress she’d made tonight would be for nothing.

He loomed over her, resting his hands on sofa to either side of her shoulders, and penned her in. “Dana’s more a danger to herself than to anyone she’d meet in R Block. The only ones who need to fear her are men who can’t control their cocks. Until you joined us, that wasn’t a problem for me.”

Her head snapped up to spear him with her flashing green eyes. “Quit the veiled accusations. I told Dr. Scott and I’m telling you, I had nothing to do with Dana’s warped behavior tonight.”

His rage settled into an icy calm. He rose, got a glass of water for each of them and a few tissues for her, then sat on the couch next to her. He wasn't done with Jade Rue yet. Not by a long shot.

"Before she arrived here, Dana had been unable to reconcile her dual natures, the sweet, innocent, God-fearing girl and the professional sex expert. Dr. Scott taught her that being a sexual creature wasn't a sin when the act was consensual between adult parties. I was a part of that training process."

"You fucked her? How could you?" Jade threw the glass of water against the far, blank wall, shattering it. "You sick, sick bastard!"

She fought him, kicking and scratching and biting, too hurt and upset to use the techniques she'd trained for all her life.

Her elbow clipped his jaw. He grabbed at it but missed. He was faster when her knee came up at his crotch, catching him on the hip instead. He quickly realized he wasn't going to win a wrestling match. He had to tackle her another way.

Cas scrambled off the couch and grabbed her by the ankles as she tried to slither away. He stretched her out on the couch and then pinned her there with the weight of his body. "Condemning me before you have all the facts," he said between ragged pants. Rendering her immobile had taken a hell of a lot out of him and he was already running low on energy reserves. And, dammit, his thigh was bleeding again.

"You walked into her place with an erection she had to notice. I'd say that's all the evidence anyone needs."

"Because without it, in the state she was in, she never would have listened to me. Johnny taught her to obey the biggest cock in the room. Once she fulfills her sexual obligations, her religious side doles out the punishment. Digger's a pacifist and couldn't get hard for Dana when she's dressed in leather if his life depended on it. If I hadn't shoved my cock in her face, she would have castrated him for failing to provide an outlet for her Domme side."

Neither of them heard the door open, but when their uninvited guest stormed into the room, they both looked up. "You," Helen said, pointing at Cas, "out. Go cool off."

Jade looked triumphant, which made Cas want to smack her and Helen both. He'd never do it, but just the fact that he'd had the thought in the first place shocked him into realizing how far over the line he'd gone. He picked up his wet clothes from the bathroom, not even pausing to put them on, and stomped out of the house without a backward glance.

* * * * *

Jade used a few of the tissues Cas had brought her. "Thank you for rescuing me from that manipulative bastard."

She extracted herself from the cushionless couch and went in search of clothes. She grabbed the first thing her fingers encountered in the closet and put it on. A green

halter dress so faded it was practically transparent in places. She slipped a bra and panties on under it, then returned to the living room and started stuffing the pillows Cas had thrown around back into place.

When she returned, Helen asked, "What makes you think I did it for you?" Helen pulled out a chair from the dining room, sat down with her legs crossed, then fished around in her red robe for a packet of cigarettes. "What a night. I quit this nasty habit ten years ago."

"You really shouldn't do that, you know. It'll kill you."

Helen took a long drag. "And why should that bother you? You've made it very clear that you don't value anyone's life, not even your own."

Jade let the truth of that statement rattle around her empty soul. Caring meant getting hurt. She didn't have to look beyond her current circumstances for evidence of that. The second she'd let Cas slip behind her defenses in the most elemental of ways, he'd used that weakness against her. She ruthlessly buried the fact that she might have been the catalyst for his painfully blunt attitude in her black hole of regrets.

"Promises, promises," the older woman said. She cocked her head as if listening, then added, "I'll hold you to it."

"Hearing voices?"

"Yes. Boyd's whispering sweet nothings in my ear." She choked on a breath as she tried to inhale and exhale at the same time. When she got herself under control, she said, "Uhm, make that sweet somethings."

"Boyd? You mean that little man?"

Helen's amused expression melted off her face. "You're in no position to be judging others. Especially not a professional like Boyd."

"How can he be talking to you when he isn't even here?"

"Hi-tech earphones you can't see and a monitoring system the government would pay good money to own."

"You mean he can hear us? All the time?"

"And see you, most of the time. You didn't think we'd leave Cas entirely alone with you, did you?"

Actually, Jade hadn't really thought about it. Now that she did, it made sense. It also made her face flame to think of what others might have seen in the bathroom.

"Speaking of whom," Helen said, stubbing out her cigarette. "What did you say to Cas? I've never seen him so riled, not even with Aimee and she definitely had a knack for twisting his knickers."

"Who's Aimee?"

"A former employee, and stop changing the subject. What did you and Cas argue about?"

"If the walls have ears, then Boyd knows. He can tell you."

"I got Boyd's side when he hauled me out of bed for the second time tonight. Now I'd like to hear yours."

Jade shrugged. "I told Cas to go get fucked. He didn't like it."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you tell him to go?"

"Because looking at his erection was making me sick."

Sick with longing. Sick with need. One orgasm and her body had developed an instant obsession with his touch. The problem lay within the chasm between what her body craved and what her mind could live with. The Grand Canyon looked like a sidewalk crack by comparison. The only way she could handle it was by not handling it at all.

"Cas is a big boy and capable of taking care of his own needs when they arise. I'm still not seeing the problem here."

"He claimed the only woman he wanted was me. I knew it was a big fat lie, so I called him on it. Then he jumped down my throat."

"Cas doesn't lie."

"Maybe not to you. But even you have to admit that Cas got a woody from Ella's kiss. All I did was suggest that he go to her to finish what they'd started."

"And he denied that Ella made him hot?"

Jade thought back. "No, he didn't deny it. He told me something about Dana that was supposed to explain why it was necessary. Not that I believed him."

Helen held up her finger, presumably giving her a second to tune into Boyd again. Her eyes were frosty when she spoke. "It's true, every word of it."

"I don't know why I thought you'd take my side."

"Maybe the fact that you're a self-centered wench has something to do with it."

Jade closed her eyes and feigned sleep. However, she couldn't completely block out Helen's side of the conversation she was holding with the hidden, peeping Boyd.

"She doesn't need me. What she needed is a sharp slap to bring her to her senses... No, that's no good. Her mind is made up... Replace him? Maybe, although I don't think we have anyone capable of getting through to her if Cas can't... No, Boyd, that's going too far... Seriously, there's got to be a better way... Did Dr. Scott approve it? Dana's blanket permission isn't enough. Boyd? Boyd?"

Helen strode across the room. Jade could feel the older woman looming over her, but she didn't open her eyes or acknowledge her in any way.

"You're in for it now, girl. No one can stop Boyd when he's on a tear except Dr. Scott and he's still with Dana. I suggest you listen with an open mind and an open heart or you can kiss your peaceful existence here goodbye."

Despite her parting threat, Jade breathed a sigh of relief when the woman left. Finally, she was alone. She turned over on her back and tried to find a comfortable position on the couch. The squeaking of the springs masked the first few sounds, but as she settled, Jade heard the bolts being shot. Window by window, door by door, they were putting her in lockdown. That didn't particularly frighten her. It usually happened much sooner.

However, when the silence ended with a girlish giggle, Jade started to panic. She raced from room to room, but there was no escaping Dana's voice as she started to explain how dark her past had been.

Chapter Eleven

A Revelation and a Mystery

Dana's taped conversations with Dr. Scott played on, hour after hour for two full days. Jade couldn't tune them out, couldn't ignore them. By the time the tapes clicked off, Jade had nothing left inside her. She was emotionally spent.

The next couple days were spent in isolation, giving Jade nothing to do but think. There was no one for her to take her anger out on. No one to love her through her fear. No one to talk to about the alien feelings churning inside her. She had to sort this tangled mess of emotions out for herself.

After rejecting any emotion for so long, it was hard work to get in touch with her feelings. Dana's refusal to give in to her past gave Jade the strength to keep at the task. She didn't sleep. She didn't eat. She didn't give in to the desire to hide from herself and the truths that were coming to the surface. As a result, Jade's emotional walls crumbled into dust. Anger and resentment turned into pity and remorse.

She now accepted responsibility for all the wrongs she'd committed since coming to Blossom House, and even the extra hardship she'd placed on her Nana. Her distrust of Cas was without foundation. Her need to lash out at those who were trying to help her was nothing more than a childish reaction to being thrust into a situation not of her own choosing.

Though it seemed like a sudden change, she could look back over her stay thus far at Blossom House and see how Cas and the others had been guiding her toward this revelation. It had taken her countless hours to reach that understanding. Listening to Dana's experiences helped Jade to see so clearly what she'd refused to face on her own. Her depression had nothing to do with the loss of the dojo or the fundamental breach of trust between her and her students, but rather her own guilt that the attack had exposed some fatal flaw in herself. And that if she let anyone get close to her, they'd see the flaw too and likely be hurt by it.

Instead of facing that fear and breaking it down into manageable pieces, Jade had become a shrew who went out of her way to keep everyone at a distance. Since her life before had been filled with people, it was a terrible, unnatural punishment to isolate herself so ruthlessly. Her psyche, conflicted over wanting reassurance that she didn't harbor a dangerous dark side and refusing to let another human being close enough to find out, shut down, sending her into a deep depression. A death, of sorts. A death she was content with until she came to Blossom House.

Until she learned through Dana that it was possible to live again, flaws and all.

Her old pessimistic self pointed out that it wasn't exactly rational behavior to take advice from a sadistic nymphomaniac. But Jade couldn't reject her epiphany just

because the catalyst was insane. No, her revelation wasn't a cure-all. She still had a lot of sorting out to do. But at least now she felt like taking that step, taking back control of her life.

She couldn't wait to tell Cas.

Cas, with his loving hands and warm heart. Cas, who accepted her even when she did everything in her power to make him angry. She needed to do something special to make it up to him.

Jade started with the living room, sweeping the broken glass and dirt from the corners and dusting the furniture to remove the worst of the accumulated grime. The kitchen floor needed to be torn up and replaced, but she did the best clean up job she could with a mop.

With the meager supplies available, Jade threw together a hearty, healthy casserole that could sit in the refrigerator until they were hungry. Jade then entered the bedroom. The bed didn't look used, even though she knew Cas had slept there several nights, getting in and out through a trap door in the closet that seemed to work only by his touch. Currently empty, she subjected this room to the same scouring treatment as the living room. She changed the sheets and tried hard not to picture Cas' muscular form stretched over them. She'd grown a lot in the last few days, but her sexuality still lay buried under a tangled web of emotions.

The bathroom she saved for last. Her face heated as she scrubbed the tub, removing the remains from their erotic bath. In part because of what he'd done to her, how he'd made her feel, but also because of the way she'd responded. She recalled the feel of his fingers on her skin, the heat of his body against her back. The memories gave her a warm glow in the pit of her stomach. And for that gift, she'd repaid him by behaving like a jealous, puritanical girlfriend. She didn't like what she'd become or the way she'd treated others because of it. She hoped he would give her the chance to apologize and explain.

She finished cleaning with the scrubbing bubbles. Every surface gleamed, even the shabby mirror. Jade studied her reflection. She wished it would be as easy to make herself shine the same way. Unfortunately, all the elbow grease and cleaner in the world couldn't make a dent in her appearance. She needed help.

She tugged at the front door, prepared to eat crow and beg forgiveness from Helen and the others. When the door failed to open, she remembered that she'd been locked in. She considered her options. In the end, she decided that she'd dug her own ugly pit, so it was up to her to crawl out of it on her own.

It took some hunting around, but she found a decent shampoo, curlers and an array of old cosmetics stuffed into the back of a closet. In the bedroom, she discovered a dress that suited her mood, not too frilly yet tailored to accentuate the curves she'd been trying so hard to hide. Best of all, it was a soft baby blue. Her favorite color.

She was putting the finishing touches on her face when she heard the locks disengage. Her heart climbed into her throat. Was she ready to face the world? Could she really do this?

She ran a brush through her shaggy blonde hair one last time. Butterflies careened around in her tummy, but ready or not it was time to move on.

She'd planned a poised and warm greeting when Cas entered her house, but the living room was empty when she entered. She sat down to wait, sure that the release of the locks meant that she should be prepared for company. By the time he finally arrived, she'd been left waiting long enough to stretch her nerves to a tightrope thread. His haggard face caused the string to break and she flew at him, flinging herself into his arms.

"I'm so sorry, Cas. So, so sorry."

Cas shifted the stranger in his arms so he could better see her face. "Who are you and what have you done with Jade?"

Her grin turned a bit sheepish. "Yeah, okay, I deserve that," she admitted. "And honestly, I'm not sure I have an answer to either question yet."

Uncertainty hovered in her eyes. Radical personality shifts were usually a signal that some bad thoughts were occurring deep inside, but that hint of uncertainty meant she was coping, not covering.

Jade laced her fingers through his and tugged him toward the couch. "You look tired."

"Sorry. Long night."

"Dana?"

He really didn't want to get on that less-than-merry-go-round again. Not until he had ten full hours of solid sleep rather than the restless two and a half he'd had in Boyd's lumpy bed when his legs were tired of pacing the ground outside. An identical replay of each night since he'd left Jade with Helen. "Partially."

"Where is she? How is she?"

Cas sat on the couch, rested his head against the wall and fought like hell to keep his lids from lowering. He managed to hold out about three seconds. "She'll be fine."

"I'd rather hear the truth. That is, if you can tell me."

"Dana is recovering," Cas told her. He didn't want to add that Dr. Scott quarantined her in S Block after she tried to kill herself in the ambulance. He squeezed her hand. "It's okay. Really. Dr. Scott said she knows her behavior was inappropriate and she feels guilty. As long as there's genuine remorse, there's hope."

Jade stroked his arm from elbow to wrist. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you when you tried to explain about her before."

"S'okay." He brought her fingers to his mouth for a comforting kiss. At least, he thought he did, but he was so tired even his short-term memory was shorting out.

"No, it's not. But I'm not going to spill my guts when you're likely to sleep through the best parts."

She sounded amused, not angry. He felt the gentle brush of fingers against his cheek, then another caress sweeping the hair from his face. It felt better than he believed possible.

"Go to sleep, big boy."

Since his natural inclination was to do whatever she asked of him, that's exactly what he did.

* * * * *

When Cas woke, the house was dark and silent. He didn't recall the specifics of his dreams, but an acute sense of despair remained. He felt as if he'd lost something unspeakably precious, irreplaceable.

He struggled to disentangle his legs from a thin blanket someone had tossed over him as he'd slept on the couch.

No, not someone. Jade.

As he swung his feet to the floor, he discovered she'd removed his shoes as well. How...sweet. And unexpected.

Since he'd taken up the couch, her habitual resting place, he wasn't sure where she'd camp out. His second surprise of the day was to find that she'd gone to bed.

Asleep, Jade cuddled the flat pillow to her chest. She still wore the dress, a blue tinted cloud, which created the illusion that she floated on air.

Cas returned the favor, covering her with the blanket still warmed by his body heat. He watched her snuggle down under it, then forced himself to walk out of the room. Another second and he would have said to hell with the blanket and covered her with himself.

And then he'd be the one needing an ambulance.

Cas was rooting around in the refrigerator when Boyd hailed him over the private comm link. "If you're up for the duration, swing by here. I have something to show you."

"Sorry, but you're not my type."

"Considering your type is usually mental, I'll take that as a compliment."

Cas spoke to the air as he constructed a bologna and spreadable cheese sandwich. "What time is it?"

"Half past a monkey's ass, a quarter to his balls."

"Riiight. Does Dr. Scott know you've been hitting the sauce?"

"Sure does. Gave me the first sip himself. Now get your buns of steel over here or it's going to take a deep sea diver to find the boot I'll put up your ass."

Cas chuckled, then took his breakfast on a short jog over to the security expert's quarters.

"If you're that desperate for anal play, why don't you call Helen over?"

"I don't fuck my friends," Boyd replied, flat and unyielding.

Cas had a feeling that the troubleshooter felt a little more than just friendly toward the former beauty queen, regardless of the generation gap that separated them. However, he kept that particular observation to himself. "What have you got for me?"

"A great deal of respect and this." Boyd gestured with the remote before handing it over. "Check it out."

Cas turned his attention to the screen he'd indicated. The picture came up, a black-and-white image, old-school surveillance crap. Low tech, not like the video images he'd seen in the Hawk's Nest. A man walked in, stripped off his clothes and stepped out of view. Seconds later, he returned and got in bed. As the guy reached for the bedside lamp, the camera got its first good shot at his face.

Cas sat back in his chair, stunned. The guy in the film was him.

It could have been any one of a thousand nights, likely in his own room. He didn't have a lot of personal possessions laying around. What he did have, he kept in a drawer, out of sight. So there was no way to know exactly when it was filmed. Or why. There weren't supposed to be any cameras in staff quarters.

A thousand questions flooded his mind, but only one slipped past his lips. "Why am I watching this?"

"Stay tuned to find out."

Returning his attention to the screen, Cas observed himself restlessly moving around in the bed. Seconds ticked away on the monitor. The action was damn near as exciting as watching paint dry. He began to lose patience with the whole thing when his on-screen persona reached out to turn the light on again.

Oh, no. It was one of *those* nights. This wasn't going to be fun.

The man—Cas felt a little more comfortable telling himself that it was a very good impersonator on camera rather than himself—opened up the drawer of the night stand and extracted a photo. He propped it up against the light, then reclined.

The steady pulse of a growing erection tented the sheet over his lap. The man's head turned to stare at the photo as he kicked off the sheet. One hand slid down his torso and then under the white fabric until his fingers grasped his cock. He then began to stroke his engorged shaft in a steady, intent rhythm.

Cas shifted around in his seat, uncomfortable with the idea of witnessing himself masturbate. Especially knowing his friend had already viewed the recording. "I thought there were no cameras in crew quarters."

"There aren't, officially."

"And unofficially?"

"Dana's got a few in her place that she put up herself. Don't ask me why. Digger had one during his sleepwalking phase, but I removed it when the twins started spending more time in his bed than in their own. Otherwise, I limit it to new hires, until their first ninety days are up."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Not if they're informed. It's buried in some obscure paragraph of the contracts, but most don't bother reading that deep into the legalese. Besides, it's temporary. Most people will tolerate anything for three months if it means being able to work here."

Silently, Cas agreed. He hadn't been particularly thorough in reading his contract when offered the job at Blossom House. Knowing that he was being filmed inside his own bedroom during his trial period wouldn't have stopped him from joining up. "So this was recorded when I first got here?"

"No. Those tapes are on a loop that gets overwritten every week. If there's something to save, I copy it off to disk. Otherwise, it gets wiped. I didn't keep anything on you. I checked."

"So where did this come from?"

"Dana. It was on a secured partition of her hard drive. I cracked into it this morning. But other than the date it was loaded, I can't find a damn thing on the file or in the content to tell me when, why or how it was made."

The man on the screen was getting his whole body into the act now. His knees came up, giving him better leverage to raise and lower his hips. Pre-cum glistened in the lamplight. His lips pulled back from his teeth, and Cas suspected that if this picture came with sounds, there would be low grunts and groans as he urged his dick on to climax.

What a humbling sight. In the Relaxation Rooms at the public facility, he accepted what he did with the guests would be recorded. Same for the periods when he worked with people like Jade. It was part of the job. But somehow the idea that he'd been filmed during a private moment in his personal quarters without his knowledge or consent made him feel...violated.

"Notice anything yet?"

"Yeah. The guy on the screen is about to come all over the place."

"Forget the action. Check out the props."

Grateful that Boyd didn't comment on his self-pleasuring technique, Cas did as he requested. Everything appeared to be where he usually kept it. "What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"It's amazing to me how you can be so blind about some things and so fucking observant about others," Boyd remarked. He jabbed a finger at the screen. "There. Does that mean anything to you?"

The picture of a woman. Nothing unusual about that. He sometimes chose to imprint his next special case in his mind by associating the patient's face with sexual

gratification. It helped him to build up intimacy in his mind, the kind he needed to make himself so open with them. The woman in the photo could be anyone from Laura, his first love, to Jade.

He couldn't immediately identify the fragile yet lovely face currently in the frame. He let names drift through his mind, hoping for a match. When he got one, he blurted it out in surprise. "That's Dana!"

"Bull's eye."

"But that's impossible. I don't have a picture of her." And certainly not one from a time when she'd had such gorgeous blonde hair and was all dolled up like a beauty queen contestant.

"Right."

"So what happened? How did her face get in my space?"

"I hoped you'd have the answer for that one."

Cas puzzled over it, relieved to see that his on-screen stand-in had shot his wad and was in the process of cleaning up the aftermath. "Can you ask Dana?"

"No. Dr. Scott doesn't want to disturb her by asking about it. She had to know it was on her PC, but I don't think she recorded it or did the digital magic to change the photo. It's certainly possible that she knows how, but I can't come up with a reason she'd bother. Not on her own."

"Then you're saying someone coerced her into doing this?"

Boyd shut down the video program, ending the show. "It's high on my list of possibilities."

"Who would do that?"

"Probably the same person who had wild monkey sex in your bed the other night."

More questions swirled through Cas' mind. "Any leads on that?"

"Nothing I'm ready to talk about. Equally important to who is when and how this was done. I don't have a fucking clue how to answer those questions either." Boyd blew out a frustrated breath. "Look, it's not your problem. It's mine. I'll bang my head over it some more and maybe something relevant will fall out."

Another monitor on the other side of the room beeped in warning. "Your Sleeping Beauty stirs," Boyd announced after silencing the alarm.

"You know where to find me," Cas said, acting upon his cue to leave.

"The locks on your private rooms are being changed this afternoon. I'll have your new set of keys when you're ready for some down time."

Cas waved his arm in acknowledgement. However, he had no desire for solitude now. If her earlier statement held true, Jade would want to talk and this time Cas was ready to listen.

Chapter Twelve

Make Love, Not War

Jade woke up slowly, allowing the memories of the previous day to wander through her mind as she stretched, groaned then cursed when the material from her dress ripped apart under the strain. One more washing probably would have sent it to its grave anyway, but she really liked the dress, liked how it looked on her. Cas hadn't been awake enough to appreciate it the night before. She had higher hopes for today. Maybe if she hurried she'd have time to repair the damage before he saw her.

She sat up and watched the bodice fall like a blanket that had been turned back. The notion gave her warm shivers. If anyone asked her a month ago, she'd have said it was impossible for her to feel lust for a man. Now her body was proving otherwise.

As she thought about Cas' hands, his tongue caressing her nipples, her breasts grew heavy and tight with need. Jade doubted any interaction she had with him today would go far enough to soothe even a fraction of her desire for him. She'd succumbed to his touch to honor the terms of the bet, but she couldn't envision letting a man, even Cas, get close enough to thrust his thick cock inside her. But there were some very nice things they could do instead, if Cas was interested.

The direction of her thoughts caused her to be a bit more brazen. Why cover herself up when what she really wanted was to uncover him? Men, in her limited experience, enjoyed a warm body to cuddle with when they woke. If she could be with him before he opened his eyes, it shouldn't take much more convincing at all.

She didn't bother to glance in the mirror, afraid it might show a reflection that would deter her from her chosen course of action. As she turned into the living room, she saw him walk through the front door. Immediately her plans to seduce him into wakefulness got sacked and the momentary surprise left her somewhat speechless.

"Morning," he said, as if she didn't have her breasts hanging out and the tatters of her dress hanging around her hips.

It took a few tries to get her mouth working, but she managed, "Hi."

"Were you looking for me?"

"Yes."

"Can I help you with something?"

Polite, friendly, but a long way from panting with lust. Lord, she wanted to turn the tables and make him want her just as much as she wanted him, but her seduction skills had atrophied from lack of use. Thinking of the actresses on late night television, she shrugged, causing her breasts to jiggle and the material to fall another inch.

"Yes, you can. If you want."

“What is it that you need?”

She searched for a sign that he understood what she was hinting at and that he was interested. She found what she needed in the slight tremor of his hands. He hadn't done that in her presence before, not even the other night when he'd bathed her.

She closed the distance between them and circled his waist with her arms. She leaned into him, pleased with the way he immediately adjusted to accept her contact. As she nuzzled against his neck, she said, “I made the suggestion. I'll leave it up to you to work out the details.”

“I'm good at details,” he agreed, “but I need you to tell me what you want.”

“Isn't it obvious?”

“I don't want to make a mistake that'll get one or both of us into trouble.”

Jade discovered his voice was ten times more erotic when she listened to it by letting her tongue ride his Adam's apple. “Hmmm...no regrets here.”

She felt his hands tighten on her hips. She swayed forward, anticipating his tug. The tug turned out to be a gentle push that left a foot of space between them. When she raised her face to see if she'd done something wrong, he bent over and kissed her lips. Slowly. Almost brotherly. Almost but not quite. That little zinger at the end, when his tongue darted out for a taste of her lips, kept her from feeling completely rejected.

“You taste like cinnamon toast, sweet, spicy,” he told her.

“That's good, right?” She didn't understand what was going on here. Was he interested in her or not? After that kiss, she knew she wanted him for sure, but what did Cas want?

He nodded. “Very good.”

“Then why aren't you coming back for seconds?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

His head dipped toward her. She met him halfway. This time he lingered over the task. Jade leaned in, but he didn't let her get close enough to feel the solid wall of his chest against her budding nipples. She needed more of him, damn it!

But when she hooked her fingers over the waistband of his pants and pulled, Cas backed off. “What do you want, Jade?”

Now he was starting to piss her off. “Use your eyes, or better yet, use your hands.”

He removed them from her hips and held them up in front of her. “I'll put them wherever you want them. Just tell me.”

And she'd worried that he'd be turned off by her lack of experience. Apparently his seduction talents existed only in the tub, and those had drained away with the water.

She grabbed his hands and settled them over her breasts. “Here.”

His hands rested there, inert yet driving her nuts with their heat. Her nipples had to be pressing into his palm, but he did nothing. “Tell me what you want, Jade.”

She was scared, nervous as hell, and all this discussion was beginning to cool her libido. Why couldn't he just get with the program? "Is all this talking really necessary? Because it's not doing much for my mood."

Cas turned his hands over and ran the backs of his fingers across the swell of her breasts, to her neck, then nudged her chin up so he could look her in the eye. She gasped when she saw how his brown eyes reflected his deep desire. Everything she wanted from him was right there, except he refused to reach out and take it unless she walked him through each step. And that was bolder by far than she was prepared to be.

"I love you, Jade. And I'm dying to take you up on every offer your body has made to me." When she opened her mouth to comment, his thumb ran interference. "But," he continued, "the talk really is necessary."

"Oh." Great. Did she really want to go through with this if it meant orchestrating each move as if they were following some kind of instruction manual? She stepped out of his range to decide from neutral ground.

"It's okay if you want to stop. I won't be mad. In fact, I'm proud of you. You made a lot of progress by taking things this far."

How embarrassing, that he thought she was using him to test her reaction to men or a man to her. She was—she could admit that now—but she wouldn't have taken the risk if he were anyone else. Even Digger, the loving, quiet giant, wouldn't do. She wanted Cas or no one.

But she wanted him as an active participant, not a posable mannequin.

"Maybe it would be better if we got in the tub," she suggested, only half joking.

Cas laughed, a low sexy rumble that made her wish her tongue yet lingered against his throat. "Why do you think that would be better?"

"Because you didn't require a coach then."

"Then you're interested in me?"

"Do birds fly?"

The right side of his mouth curved up and a look that was both edgy and daring speared her to the bone. "Hell yes," he said.

She smiled back at him, surprised at how easily it came to her lips. "Well, there's your answer."

"So what are we going to do about it?"

Her bare chest rose and fell in rapid correlation with her shifting emotions. Irritation to attraction, frustration to lust. Cas made her feel so many things, and all within the space of a few heartbeats. If this went on too much longer, she'd need more than a few hours to find a stable emotional center again.

Since she'd always been good at problem solving games, she tried to tackle this one head-on. "This talking thing you said is necessary. Is it some kind of fetish?"

"No, although I like knowing how you feel when I touch you. What you like, what drives you crazy."

“Let’s not use the word crazy here, okay?”

Jade decided she couldn’t have a rational discussion while her tits were sending him blatant messages that he continued to ignore. She retreated to the bedroom, shed her dress and used the top sheet to fashion a toga. When she returned to the living room, Cas stood exactly where she’d left him. A quick glance at his crotch, however, gave her an extra boost to her ego. Unless she was very much mistaken, he wasn’t as unmoved by her as his words might indicate.

She crossed the room toward him, and put her arms around his shoulders, expecting that he would hug her waist. But he didn’t move, except for the rapid breaths he sucked in and out.

Funny how the second she started getting her autonomy back, Cas lost his. “If it’s not a kink, then what’s the deal? Why do I have to talk you to death now when the other night you took me for the ride of my life without so much as a signal light?”

By the look on his face, he was remembering those intimate moments, just as she was. “When I made you come in my arms, I didn’t put you in a position where you could claim I compromised you. I gave you all the power, all the freedom you needed.”

“I’m not complaining or anything, but you did trap me.”

“Oh, I might have manipulated you a little, but you had all the control. You just didn’t realize it.”

Jade tried to be objective, see his side. There’d been a point when she’d struggled to free herself and he’d locked his arms around her, holding her in place. That was a trap, wasn’t it?

Not really, a little voice of reason told her. He’d comforted, reassured. Hell, his cock had rested between her thighs for most of the time. If she truly felt fear, she could have ripped it off and fed it to him. Instead, he trusted her not to damage him and she trusted him not to push her for more than she could handle.

And both of them had lived up to their end of the bargain.

“Okay, I get that part, but I still don’t understand the difference between then and now. If me being in control means that I trust you won’t hurt me, you already have that.”

He surprised her by jerking her body against him and lifting her off the floor. Before he squeezed the life out of her, he set her back on her feet, and dropped his hands though he still looked like he might grab for her again at any second. She read his need for contact and she offered her hand, which he quickly took and raised to his lips. “Thank you. Thank you for that.”

Her heart melted another fraction at the depth of emotion in his voice. “Trusting you? I’d say it’s overdue.”

“You don’t trust anyone easily, especially not men. I’m honored that you consider me worthy. Really and truly honored, even if you change your mind about wanting me later.”

Were those really tears shimmering in his eyes? Damn, he was making her all watery too. How did the quest for some foreplay degrade into another emotional mess?

Well, at least this time it was bound to end better than one of them storming out in a huff. They were working toward a mutual understanding, not just butting heads.

"I'm not going to change my mind. And now that we have that settled, can we get back to kissing?"

"Sure. Just tell me what you want me to do."

She reacted, pulling her punch so that it knocked him backward without doing lasting damage. "God, you're a pain in the ass! I'm no good at this. If your intent is to make me feel stupid, congratulations. You succeeded."

She stomped into the kitchen and stuck her head in the refrigerator. It didn't cool her off, but it did remind her that they had lunch ready to go. All she had to do was throw it in the oven. So that's what she did, literally.

Her hand hovered over the knob, considering what temperature to use, when Cas swept her off her feet. "Put me down, you jerk!"

"No," he said, carrying her into the living room.

"Oh, so now you decide to go all caveman aggressive on me. Well, you're about five minutes and a couple hundred sentences too late."

He lowered them both to the couch, keeping her on his lap. "You started this conversation, but I'm not going to let it end with a comment like that on the table."

"What? The fact that your timing stinks?"

He shook his head. "The one where you claim I'm trying to make you feel stupid. That was never my intent. I'm sorry if I gave you the impression that I'd ever do such a thing. I told you once that my goal is to help you love yourself as much as I love you. That's what I care about most."

His body heat was incredible, like some forest fire raged under his skin. Even through several layers of sheet and clothing, she could tell exactly where her body rested against his. Once again, as her mood downshifted from anger to lust, her body raced to change its tune.

Jade rested her head on his shoulder and let her hand—the one that wasn't pinned between their bodies—burrow under the shirt and explore the expanse of his chest. Too bad she couldn't see what she was touching. It probably looked good enough to eat.

"I know you didn't mean to. It's just that I'm not much for sexy talk. Not even before...well...when I was more open with people. I'm sorry if that disappoints you."

Cas rested his cheek against the top of her head. "Nothing about you disappoints me, Jade."

"Yeah, right. I'm sure you were thrilled with me all those times I yelled at you or when I tried to toss you into another woman's bed."

"You had your reasons." He kissed her temple and gave her a light hug. "Even when I was angry, I blamed the circumstances, not you."

During her journey of discovery, Jade ran her palm across his flat nipples. Curious to see if they were as sensitive as her own, she stroked and circled them. A small nub popped up to give her the answer. "Are you sure we can't negotiate?" she asked.

"It's for your protection more than mine. For myself, I'd risk it. For you, never."

"Protect me from what?"

"Rape."

Her hand stilled over his pectorals. Underneath, she could feel his rapid but steady heartbeat. She felt warm, safe, secure.

She resumed her exploration, learning the contours of his abdomen. "You'd never do that."

"I'm glad you feel that way now, but hindsight may change your perception."

Ah, finally, her mental light bulb got some juice. "You need me to tell you it's okay to touch me so I can't claim later that I was raped."

"Right."

"Why didn't you just say that?"

"As strong as you are, there are things that could set you back. Think about when you said that you'd made the suggestion and left it up to me to fill in the details. Instead of putting the burden back on you, what would have happened if I'd said, 'For the record, tell me it's okay for me to do whatever I want so you can't claim I raped you later'."

Nasty. That's what it would have been. She wasn't comfortable in her own skin and depended on him to ease her way. Without the time to relax with him, see how far he went in restraining his own desires to give her the security she needed, she would have taken the directive as giving him a license to do exactly what the rule was meant to prevent.

"You've done this before, haven't you?"

"No."

"Bullshit." She didn't put any heat behind it, but it was so obvious that he'd been with other women under similar circumstances or he wouldn't have handled her so deftly. It didn't make her withdraw. He wouldn't be her first lover either. But she couldn't fool herself into believing, even temporarily, that she'd be his last and that knowledge stung a little.

"I'm serious. I won't deny being intimate with other women in the past, but none of them were you. None make me feel the way that you do, only you can do that. You are Jade Rue and anything we do together will be a new experience for me. It's not bullshit, it's just the way I am."

Another pretty speech, but one he seemed to mean sincerely. It turned that hot knot of tension in her belly into a warm, liquid feeling that spread throughout her body. "Kiss me, Cas. I really want that. And if your tongue happens to get lost, I won't mind if it hung out in my mouth until you tracked it down."

His lips were still curved into a smile when they descended onto hers. He kissed, he nibbled, he enjoyed. She melted. He savored and licked and sucked, not straying more than a millimeter from the ground she'd specified. She soaked up his techniques and practiced it all right back.

And then he unleashed his wicked tongue. Instead of trying to tickle her tonsils with it or counting her teeth, he treated her to pure male appreciation. He licked the roof of her mouth, a sensation that sent pleasurable tremors to her breasts announcing the wonders to come.

She moaned, then whimpered as he withdrew.

"Is that what you wanted?" His voice was strained, needy.

Needy for her. Oh god. "Yes, more."

"More what?"

Her brain kicked in with a reminder that with Cas she usually got exactly what she asked for, even if it took awhile to get there. It opened up all kinds of possibilities. "You'll do anything I ask?"

"Yes. As long as it's legal in the State of Ohio."

"Take off your shirt," Jade ordered quickly. She found if she blurted out her desires instead of thinking about them first, the words actually left her mouth.

He left her to support herself as he separated the light gray shirt tail from his darker gray pants, then drew the shirt off over his head.

"Welcome to Male Appreciation 101," she murmured. She'd seen his bare chest several times now, but never under these circumstances, when she could truly appreciate the view. Her hands chased the rapidly growing expanse of skin.

After he tossed the shirt into the center of the room, his arms dropped at his sides and waited for her next instruction.

"Put those back where they belong. Around me," she told him.

He was big and strong and could probably hold his own for a little while if she had to fight him. She liked that. She didn't have to worry about being too intimidating, and her generally aggressive behavior wasn't a problem since he required it. The key was learning to let herself go. Trusting that nothing she did would disgust him or change his mind about her.

Jade started with his shoulders, tracing his muscles and kissing each tantalizing group as she went. Dark hair spread out from his breastbone to generously cover each pec. Not enough to call him hairy, but in sufficient quantity, and quality, for her to run her fingers through. The arrow pattern pointed to his lap, but she didn't go past his rib cage. There were some things she still had to work herself up to.

His male nipples captured her attention. No longer flat disks, they puckered in a fashion like her own. She ran her thumb over the hard little nubs and was surprised to see him flinch. She immediately removed her hands. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that would hurt you."

"It didn't."

"But you flinched."

His brown eyes glittered with mirth. "It happens sometimes when something feels better than I expected."

"Then I can do it again?"

"As often as you want."

She brought her index finger to her mouth and wet it. This time when she rubbed her finger over his nipple, she was rewarded with a shudder. Taking it one step further, she slid down a little and touched the nearest one with her tongue. Not only did she love the taste, she delighted in the groan of masculine approval she lured out of him. With just a simple touch, amazing.

Even as she indulged herself in her new hobby, she planned her next move. Her breasts complained bitterly about promises made to them and not kept. She'd make sure he took proper care of their needs.

"I want you to treat my chest to the same treatment I gave yours. Hands, mouth, all of it. Don't stop until I tell you to. Got it?"

Cas nodded. "You don't have a shirt on, but there is something in the way. If you remove it, I'll be ever so obedient and attentive."

It wasn't the simple matter of whipping off a piece of fabric as his had been. She had to wiggle and squirm to unwrap enough of the sheet to set her torso free. In the process, she couldn't help but notice his erection. Notice, but not acknowledge.

"May I make a suggestion?" he asked.

"Sure." Once again, her breasts were bared to him and he wanted to talk. Geesh!

"Bending over will be awkward in this position. It will also limit your movements. Can you think of another way of aligning ourselves that you'd enjoy, but wouldn't require me to develop a double jointed spine?"

Oh, that could be a problem. Lying down implied a level of commitment she wasn't sure she could live up to yet. "How about the table? Will it support your weight?"

"Yes."

"Then park your butt on it and I'll stand in front of you. Does that work?"

"I'll give it a try and you can let me know."

She tried to stand, but the sheet monster got rough with her. It was much easier to do without. The alternative would be to find a skirt that would keep her covered in something more concealing than her white cotton panties from the waist down. She drew the mental picture and decided against it. Not only did she not want to leave him again, even for the short amount of time it would take for her to find what she wanted and return, it would also look damn silly.

Cas rested his hot hand against her spine as he followed her into the dining room. She'd drawn the curtains in there the night before, not wanting to be reminded of the scene inside Dana's house that was so fresh in her mind.

Cas sat on the long side of the solidly built table, scooting back until the backs of his knees rested against the edge of the wood. She spread his legs with her hands and stepped between them. "Okay, do your thing."

Chapter Thirteen

Dead Nerves Come Alive

"Hmmm, my pleasure." He grazed his fingertip over her hardened nipples and watched her jump. "I believe it started with something like this."

"Oh, yeah."

He didn't miss a trick. He inserted his finger in her mouth to wet it, momentarily stymied when she trapped the first knuckle between her teeth to do a thorough job. His breath came in short bursts by the time she released him. He got even by giving her the finger on the opposite hand to tease with her tongue while his drenched digit outlined her rosy nipple.

"Why is it my flesh doesn't taste this good?" she asked him.

"But it does."

"Men always say that, even about..."

She shivered in his arms, but this time it wasn't from passion. Cas changed his focus, running his hands over her bare back. A touch that contained a lot of comfort and a little bit of pleasure. "No two men are the same, just as no two women are the same," he reminded her.

Jade rested her arms over his shoulders. "Not even the twins?"

"People expect them to act alike so they do. However, I think they're more different than most people realize."

She dropped a kiss on his lips. "If you're saying that, you must have reason to know."

"Is this something you really want to talk about right now?"

"No," she replied, facing up to the real reason she was now babbling. "It just that I'm scared."

"I won't pressure you and I won't make any decisions for you. You have to tell me where we go from here." He prayed she'd be brave enough to continue. It was a big hurdle for her, letting someone love her again, but it had to be her choice or she'd end up losing the amazing amount of ground she'd already gained.

Jade turned, pressing her back against his chest, wrapping his arms tightly around her torso. "I love the way you make me feel, Cas. I want to repay you for that. I really do. I'm just not sure that I can."

"Repay me?"

"Yeah, for all the things I've done wrong. All the things you've done right. I know I treated you badly and I want to make up for it."

“With your body.” He didn’t know whether to shake her or scream. How could he drill the point through her impossibly thick head that love wasn’t a form of currency he traded in?

“Well, duh, it’s the only thing I have of value to you.”

Boyd whistled in his ear, the sound of steam boiling in a kettle. Obviously he wasn’t as good at hiding his feelings as he’d thought.

Usually he could get inside a woman’s head and make himself at home. With Jade, that was impossible. It caused friction between them whenever he tried to muscle his way in past her mental defenses. Boyd’s warning meant he needed to box up his own biases and get with the program. Her program.

“Sure, I want what you got,” Cas told her, giving her nipple a playful tweak between his fingers. “So what’s stopping you from giving it to me?”

“Fear. Great big whopping doses of it.”

He wondered if she realized how much she had to trust him to share that weakness. “Of?”

“Memories, definitely. But mostly it’s the fear that once you drop your pants you won’t be Cas anymore.”

Cas suspected her real fear wasn’t what he would do to her, but what she might be forced to do again as a result. But she’d come so far, he didn’t want to push her into making that deeper connection. “I hate to break it to you, love, but I drop my pants every night and I’m still me when I put them back on in the morning.”

“I’m serious,” she retorted, but a ghost of a smile curved her lips.

“So am I,” he said, kissing the nape of her neck. “I don’t carry my brains around in my back pocket, or even my front pocket. I don’t turn into some feral beast when my dick is unleashed.” He dropped another kiss on her shoulder. “I already love you. Sex won’t change that. Getting to know you better won’t change that. I’m not like the men who hurt you, Jade. I won’t betray your trust that way.”

Worry occluded the bright green of her eyes. “I know it’s silly, but that’s the way I feel.”

As gently as he could, he tried to explain this particular quirk in her behavior. “I think it’s the way you want to feel. It makes things much easier for you, to blame it all on me. And you get the added bonus of being a martyr by going through with it anyway, as if the whole process is quite distasteful but you’ll make the sacrifice to repay me for loving you in all the other ways a man should love a woman.”

Jade stepped out of his reach. “You’re starting to piss me off again, Cas.”

“Good, then you’re starting to think again.”

She rested her back against the wall opposite him, with a sizeable amount of space separating them. She stared at him in silence, biting her lip, before she finally said, “I don’t get you. Every time I get hot, you find a way to cool me down. Don’t you want to have sex with me?”

He hopped off the table and planted his feet, bracing himself both mentally and physically to weather her oncoming temper storm. "Yes, I want to have sex with you. I'd even make love to you, if you let me."

"Same difference."

"No, it's not. I'll demonstrate the difference to you some time." When she would have interrupted, he talked over her. "But going back to your question, none of what happens between us is about me. I can't let it be and still help you."

"Then I'm making an ass out of myself for nothing here."

"Hardly. You've got a lot to work through in your head. To do that, you need a place where you feel safe, secure. A place where you can test some theories. That's where I come in."

"So you can point out my failures?"

"And share in your successes," he added. He closed the distance between them in slow, easy steps. "And that's what we have to decide here. Is this a success or not?"

Without hemming her in, he let his lips settled on hers, slowly bringing her body back up to simmering. She played hard to get, but he kept wooing her with his mouth, teasing, tempting, until she returned his interest full force. He waited until she was completely engaged to drive home his point.

"This is what you're afraid of, Jade. How good you feel right now. How you're trying to decide if liking it so much makes you a bad person. If liking it is linked to that deep, dark secret place inside you think those men unleashed in you."

Jade gasped as though he'd slapped her. "Let me go, you bastard!"

He didn't want to, but as he'd already said to her, what he wanted didn't matter. He retreated, giving her the room to escape that she'd demanded.

"So you see it too." Instead of running, Jade slid down the wall, then drew her knees up and hugged them tightly to her chest.

"I love you, Jade, but that doesn't make me blind to your flaws. You have them, even wear some of them on your chest like badges for all the world to see." He squatted, meeting her on her level yet again. "But there isn't one damn thing about you, inside or out, that makes me think you're a monster or that you deserve to be abused."

"It must be there, if you can sense it."

"I know *you* think it's there. In your mind, it's real. Personally, I don't see it at all."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "What do you see?"

He took her question as an invitation to sit on the floor in front of her and stretch his legs out to either side, not getting in her personal space but not allowing her to feel isolated. "I see a strong fighter who doesn't know how to deal with losing the fight that mattered most. I see someone who wants to put their life together but doesn't know if she has the courage to do it alone. I see a beautiful woman who doesn't understand that she has the power to bring me to my knees just by smiling at me."

"I think you're the one who's imagining things now." She sniffed, but the tears never fell.

Cas nodded. "Perhaps, but it's all true, Jade. I see the woman you were, the woman you are and the woman you can become. A happy, healthy woman, if you give yourself the chance."

"And I suppose you're going to tell me how to go about it?"

"I don't have to. You already have all the answers. You just have to trust yourself enough to take a long, hard look at your traits and pick the ones you can live with."

"That sounds like work."

The mood in the room shifted once again, back to a lighter, playful one. "It is. Hard work. But the cool part is that you don't have to do it alone."

"You again?" she said, looking at him from under her long eyelashes.

Cas nodded. "Yup. Me again."

"So where do we go from here?"

"Straight up?"

"Straight up."

"Make love with me."

She released her legs and rested her calves on his thighs, an act that told him he'd made the right move, even when her next words seemed to say otherwise. "Just when I think you've got a sensitive side, you go and prove you're truly an insensitive male. I don't have to ask what's in it for you, but I am curious to hear what you think I get out of that deal."

"A basis for comparison."

Jade crossed her arms under her breasts, making them rise, her rosy nipples offered like a tasty treat. "Thanks, but I think I have sufficient experience with the mechanics of sex to forego the refresher course."

The fact that she used mechanics in the description led Cas to believe there was a lot about making love that her experiences had left out. "What happened before that night doesn't count."

"Hey, that's my life you're writing off."

"No, it's your past. You aren't the same person now as you were then. A part of you did die in that alley. You have to mourn that loss and decide who you are now, today. Sex is going to play a big part in that decision because it's your most vulnerable spot. Letting someone get that close to you—both physically and emotionally—and trust that they won't take advantage of you, that they won't turn against you because they find something inside you that repulses them...that's your dragon to fight."

"So having sex with you is going to solve all my problems? Why didn't you just say so?"

God, she was cute when she got mouthy.

Cas wiggled closer until the bottom of his feet brushed the wall at her back. Her knees now hung over his thighs but he didn't dare let himself touch them. Not yet. Not until she gave him permission. "No, it's not going to solve all of them. It's not even going to solve most of them. What it will do, if you let it, is help you swallow some of that big ball of fear you're choking on. It'll help you work through your anger at being betrayed, the guilt you carry because of what you were forced to do as a result, so that you can concentrate on more important things."

"Such as?"

"Deciding how to put your life back together again. Getting to know yourself. Choosing a future. Pick any of those options, or a hundred more."

"Why you? I mean, wouldn't any guy do if all it takes is a warm male body for me to cuddle with?"

Ouch. That hurt.

Cas tried to keep the pain from his face, but he doubted she'd miss the flinch he made as she spoke. "Couple reasons. I love you. I hope I've proven that I won't hurt you. I'll stop, guaranteed, the second you say the word. I know what you went through, so you don't have the added pressure of explaining it to me. And I'd say the chemistry is working in my favor. But if you'd prefer someone else, it can be arranged."

Jade closed the gap by scooting toward him and crossed her ankles behind his back. She stroked his cheek with her finger, following the ridge of his jawline. He looked so vulnerable, as vulnerable as she felt. "It's got to be you, Cas. Only you."

Jade wondered if the wooden floor shook with the heavy hammering of her beating heart. It felt like that big muscle was pummeling her ribs into powder. Although he'd tried to hide it, she caught the hurt in his eyes when she suggested trading him in. He'd misunderstood her question. She wasn't trying to get rid of him. She was trying to find out if he considered her a duty or a choice. The fact that she mattered so much to him made a big difference.

"Slow and easy?" he asked, his voice as soft as her touch.

She nodded. But as he reached for her waist to bring her up against his chest, she gripped his wrists real tight. "Cas, I know what you said before, but I really am afraid of...well...it," she told him, gesturing toward his lap. "I never really had much contact, you know? I mean, I've seen a few, of course, but I don't know much about it or what to do with it or anything."

Could her face turn any redder? It felt hot enough to fry an egg.

"You're not talking about the floor, are you? Because I can't believe that you've earned a black belt without meeting the floor at least once or twice."

She had to swat him on the arm for that one. "You, you idiot, I'm talking about your...thing."

She couldn't say the P word. During the murder trial, the lawyers seemed to work it into every sentence. In fact, there was a plethora of p words she now had a problem with, such as pistol, perpetrator and plea. She'd pleaded with them—Lord, how she had begged and begged—but each one of those six perps had attacked her again and again, until, in a rage she couldn't remember except as an exhibit on some prosecutor's easel, she'd ripped the penis off the man preparing to rape her and perforated the carotid artery of another with the metal tab off her belt buckle.

"Hey, hey," Cas said, snapping her out of the past. "Don't wander off like that. It's bad for my morale."

"Sorry, sorry. It's a habit. I can't seem to break the loop. The thought of sex is enough to send me spinning back to the trial and the days leading up to it. The press releases afterward." She huffed out a breath, trying to cool her brain as well as her overheated cheeks. "This isn't going to work, is it?"

"You're sitting in front of me mostly naked when less than a week ago you were prepared to feed me my teeth if I so much as breathed in your general direction. That doesn't spell failure to me."

"Can't we pretend we had sex and get on with the rest of it?"

"Pretending is what landed your pretty butt in Blossom House. Only the truth can set you free."

She really hated it when he was right.

She was attracted to him. Who wouldn't be? He had those brown eyes that oozed genuine compassion without pity. Not to mention a soul-deep voice that calmed the worst of her anger? And his body...simply wow. She felt the impact of that down to her toes. But did she really have the guts to have sex with him?

Dana's face flashed in front of her mind. Not exactly the best role model for this situation, but Jade drew courage from knowing that the woman had faced far more difficult challenges on her road to recovery than making love to a man who found her attractive.

She could do this. She could.

Cas stroked the sensitive skin on the inside of her knee. "You've gone away on me again. What's so fascinating in there?"

She gave him a shy smile. "A little housekeeping, making room for the new memories."

"Memories of what?"

"Of how good it'll feel to have you make love to me."

A warm smile curved his lips. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He took her hand and traced a pattern on her palm. She watched him make lazy circles and realized it was the symbol for infinity. What did that mean?

She glanced up at him. His eyes held a wealth of love. It wasn't an answer, or maybe it was, but to a different question. She leaned forward for a kiss. He obliged with a slow, breath-stealing one that warmed her from the inside out. His hands ran over her thighs, up to her waist then down to her knees. Each time he made the trip, his thumbs rode high on the inside.

Her body remembered his intimate touch. What the attentions of his hands could do when properly placed. Jade wiggled her butt over the uneven wooden boards, trying to bring him into contact with the center of her heat, where she needed him the most.

"Slowly, love. We have plenty of time to go slow and do this right."

The feelings stirring inside her were anything but slow. She wanted to grind her pussy against the flat resistance of his palm, but he never reached that far. A murmur of dissatisfaction escaped her throat. She could feel a smile in his kiss.

Two can play this game.

She delved deeper into the wet, welcoming embrace of his mouth. Her fingers wrapped around his knees. Under the thin fabric, his muscles bunched as she ran her nails lightly over him. "Like that?"

"I love it," he replied.

"Can you do better?"

"If that's what you want."

"It is."

He toyed with the thin scrap of fabric over her hip. "Then I will if you will."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we're both wearing too many clothes to do justice to each other."

The panties were more a psychological barrier than a physical one. Still, removing that last barrier was a choice she had to make. A step that was hers alone to take.

Keeping her eyes on his, putting her faith in him, she leaned back so she could raise her hips from the floor and slide them off. She was about to toss them behind her, but acting on instinct, she offered them to him, dangling the fabric from the tip of her finger.

Cas cupped the fabric in his hand and raised it to his face. He inhaled the intimate scent of her. Strong emotion caused his arm to shake, his hand to clench. She braced herself for an animal unleashed, but his face retained that "trust me" look. And once he held himself together through another deep breath, he relaxed and so did she.

"You smell like spring, everything fresh and new and feminine," Cas told her. He kissed the dampest part, then set the underwear behind him. "Now it's my turn."

His hands went to the tie at his waist. Jade sat up and tucked her legs underneath her. The simple knot came undone. Air rushed through her lungs as he inserted his hands under the waistband and drew the fabric down his legs. Part of her wanted to watch as he revealed himself an inch at a time. However, at the first hint of his prominent masculinity, Jade shut her eyes.

"I can't do this without you, Jade. If you disappear again, so will I."

She didn't want that. Not now, when her body was aching for him. Cream flowed from her inner core to wet her pussy lips. She couldn't deny herself the pleasure of her body any more than she could deny the very real fact that she was beginning to love him too. She opened her eyes and raised them to meet his. "I'm not going anywhere."

He got to his knees and guided her hands to the material that hung low on his hips. "Then help me."

Jade took over, also rising to her knees so they met as equals. Her hands skimmed over his hips, then got distracted by the firm curve of his butt. Although it forced her to move in a little closer, she explored his magnificent glutes with a collector's passion. She'd always been a sucker for a well-defined ass. She should have expected that his was first-class.

"Find something to interest you?"

"Oh, yeah," she breathed in his ear. Her hands kneaded the flesh of his butt cheeks, testing their firmness. Their resilience. "Very nice."

"There's more," he reminded her.

She took his hint and lowered the pants. The front edge caught over his...thing. She made the necessary adjustment and succeeded in dropping his drawers to the floor.

Cas reached behind him and tugged off one leg, then the other. Jade held herself steady as he balanced against her. When they were cast aside, he captured her hands and held them against his chest.

"I want you. I want to feel your body against mine. I want to press myself inside you, here," he said, brushing the back of his hand over her short curls. "I want to make you crazy with desire until you're so wet and desperate for me that it becomes the most natural thing in the world to slide into you and make you feel complete. What do you want?"

"The same." The two words slipped out because they were easy. He wasn't willing to settle for that. Slowly, he shook his head. He wanted more from her. Trembling, Jade rubbed her face against the soft hair on his chest. "I want to feel your need, a need that only I can satisfy."

Jade kissed her way from his nipple to his throat, taking every opportunity to savor the taste of his skin. "I want to make love with you. I want you to teach me everything about sex that I never had time to learn before. But most of all, I want to get to know you, let you get to know me. The real me."

When she nipped the sensitive area under his ear, his breath came out in short pants. And by the time she reached his lips, a low, endless hum emanated from somewhere deep inside him.

Cas broke away and rested his forehead against hers. "Touch me, Jade. Touch me and see how deeply I'm under your spell."

He didn't try to guide her or force her hand. He simply waited, with great patience, as she let her hand fall to his waist. Then lower, where the thinning band of hair widened out again to encompass his rigid shaft.

She cheated a bit by outlining the thick base, then running her fingertips over the sac that was already high and tight. He put his arm around her, his fingers resting just under her breast, and Jade dropped her head onto his shoulder. Her free arm wrapped around his back, holding him tight, in contrast to her other hand, which barely skimmed his most sensitive flesh.

"There's more to it than that," Cas pointed out.

"Who's doing this? Me or you?"

He chuckled. "It's all you, love. It's all you."

But he was going to help. He wouldn't be Cas if he didn't do everything he could to make her job easier, even if she didn't recognize it or appreciate it at the time.

His efforts now definitely earned her appreciation. His lips sucked up the wet trail left by his tongue along her neck. She brushed her hardened nipples against his chest, moving past her trepidation and falling deeper into the realm of pure instinct.

Her hand rose from the base of his shaft, riding the baby smooth skin to his cock head. She didn't pick up impressions in terms of size, only that it was just like the rest of him. A tower of strength with a heart of gold.

The realization brought on a wave of sexual desire so strong that she swayed against him, unable to hold herself upright.

"Hey, you okay?"

"No, I'm not." She was much better than okay. But before she had a chance to explain, Cas scooped her off the floor and carried her into the bedroom. He placed her in the middle of the bed and sat down beside her.

"I'm so sorry, love. I really thought—"

Jade put her hand over his mouth. "Shut up and kiss me," she ordered.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. He mumbled through his makeshift gag. "You said you weren't okay."

"If you'd given me a chance, I would've told you my only problem is that I haven't become as well acquainted with a certain portion of your anatomy as I'd like."

If possible, his beautiful brown eyes opened even wider. "Really?"

She took possession of his cock, running her thumb over the tip, feeling it jerk with excitement. "Really. Now, will you please shut up and kiss me?"

Chapter Fourteen

Working Out the Kinks

Happier than he could ever remember being in a long, long time, Cas replied, "My pleasure."

He stretched out on the bed, lying on his side so he could feast on her breasts. Jade rolled toward him. He laved her nipples until they stood in stiff peaks, and still couldn't get enough.

He rested a hand on her lower back and pulled her closer to him. She arched her back almost instinctively, offering her breasts to him. He dipped his head and wrapped his mouth over her right breast, taking as much as he could inside and sucking it hungrily. Her hand left his cock so she could hold him to her breast, moaning and shivering in his arms.

She cupped her left breast and rolled her nipple between two fingers, twisting it and pulling it. Cas groaned upon seeing this and moved toward it. His tongue twirled around her areola. He licked her nipple with the tip of his tongue until he was sure it couldn't be more erect. He took the beaded flesh between his teeth, scratching it gently, pulling it, letting it go and trapping it again. She encouraged him to take as much of it as he could inside him. He sucked on her breast hard, passionately, her hand holding him tight against her skin.

She whimpered, arching herself once more. "Both yours, Cas, take them."

Her words struck a chord with his most animalistic instinct and he groaned. He let her left breast go, cupped both breasts in his hands, squeezed them together and began to pass from one to another, so hungry for them. He wanted to devour them as he wanted to devour every part of her.

She moaned louder, tossing her head back, her body shaking. She clutched the sheet with both hands while he sucked frantically on her breasts. Her hips began to rock gently, nuzzling his stomach. Her pussy felt so warm, so moist against his body. He wanted more, needed more of her.

He opened her legs gently and shifted his body between them, covering her skin with soft kisses. The tip of his tongue just brushed her skin. She lifted her head to look at him and she stroked his cheek with her hand, letting him know again that she was very much okay with his attentions. He tilted his head and kissed the palm of her hand. She lay back again and closed her eyes, dropping her hands in the process to knead his strong shoulders.

He slid down her body until he reached her belly button and then nibbled the flesh around it. She whimpered. Her fingernails raked gently across his shoulders, encouraging him to continue his way down. He kept on kissing her, licking her, sucking

her silky skin tenderly, afraid to bruise her. He heard her breathing becoming erratic and her moans intensified.

It was amazing how responsive she could be after spending more than two years shunning human contact and Cas vowed to do whatever he could to reward her for freeing herself that much.

“Beautiful Jade,” he murmured. “Such a beautiful woman.”

He could feel every lingering kiss, every brush of the tip of his tongue against her skin making her shiver and he smiled, satisfied. He reached the nest of curls at the juncture of her thighs and she raised her torso again. He stopped and looked at her, afraid for a moment that he might have moved too fast, too soon. Some small pearly beads of sweat had appeared on her forehead and Cas smiled when she said in between shallow pants, “Kiss me, Cas. Kiss me there.”

She lay back, lifted her hips and offered her pussy to him. He spread her legs wider and bent her knees up. He licked her labia, a slow, long lick, tasting her, her scent driving him wild. She gasped at the sensation his tongue produced and her hips jolted toward his mouth instinctively. Her swollen clit waited there for him like a precious jewel and he didn’t hold back anymore. He licked it, pressed it, hummed onto it, the vibrations making her moan louder. He grabbed the tiny bundle of nerves between his lips, sucked it, and tapped it rhythmically with his tongue again and again, harder, firmer, teeth scraping it, eating her alive. Her fingernails sank deeper into his shoulders as her clit swelled against his tongue. She ground her wet pussy into his face and he devoured it.

He pressed her knees even further up, fully opening her to him. He cupped her ass cheeks, lifted her hips and drank her, licking the juices that dripped from her inner passage, mumbling assurances about how good she tasted. He pushed his tongue inside her, invading her. She grabbed the bed sheets again, and her head tossed side to side while she cried out his name. She bucked against him. Her body trembled. The walls of her vagina clenched around his tongue hard, and she groaned, panting, seemingly ready to explode in his mouth.

He sensed she was about to come but he wanted more. He needed to be inside her, feel her joined to him. He raised his head, kissed her clit and slid up her body slowly, the same way he went down, kissing, licking, nibbling her skin until he reached her mouth. He kissed her passionately. His tongue explored the inside of her mouth, twirling his tongue with hers, sucking hers gently, drinking from her. She rocked her hips, rubbing herself against him. His cock stood erect against her curls, trapped between their bodies, sticky, warm precum soaking both of them. A little further and he’d be buried inside her creamy channel...

“Condom,” Boyd whispered in his ear.

With a low growl—because he sure as hell wasn’t going to do anything to remind Jade that they were under surveillance now—Cas reached across her to open the drawer of the nightstand. Sure enough, there were a few foil packages inside.

“Good idea. I’ll do the honors,” she said, tearing open the square wrapping.

He lay on his back and she straddled him, resting her bare ass on his thighs. His shaft only became harder as she used both hands to guide the thin layer of rubber over his cock. Most times he didn’t even notice the latex barrier, but today it annoyed him. He didn’t want anything to come between him and Jade. Ever.

Which was a pretty damn dangerous mindset for him to have. Something to talk over with the doc later...much later.

His hands skimmed up the sides of her body. She leaned forward, offering him her berry-colored nipples. His lips latched on to the right one and sucked it hard. The velvety soft tip tightened anew and Jade moaned.

“Touch me, Cas. Touch me here.”

She moved his hand to the juncture of her thighs. Wetness seeped from her pussy and coated his shaft where it was trapped between their bodies. His fingers delved through the short curls and found her plump, moist labia. He turned his hand palm up so he could cup her mons, then slid a finger into her slick core.

“Oh, yes,” she moaned, moving her hips over him.

Her shallow rocking had his finger penetrating her tight channel with rhythmic thrusts. He added another digit, gritting his teeth against the need to pick her up and plunge her down onto his rigid shaft. Lord, how he wanted to be inside her.

But it had to be her decision, not his. He could wait. He could...

“More, Cas. Give me more.”

Harder and faster he finger-fucked her. Her mewling drove him wild. More erotic than that was watching the sexy expressions cross her face. For the moment, there were no traces of the emotional shadows she’d clung to so tightly. Only joy and pleasure warmed her face. The woman in the original picture shone through her angry-at-the-world façade. That was the strongest aphrodisiac he’d ever known.

“Fill me up, Cas. I need you.”

He gazed up into her green eyes, dilated by lust. “I’m here. I’m yours.”

“Need you,” she repeated, biting her lip.

Her hips kept rocking, spreading her warm cream over his skin. He removed his fingers from her vagina and drew them into his mouth, slowly licking her carnal honey from them, making sure she caught his every move. The taste of her flooded his body with an incredible craving only she could satisfy. The smell of sex perfumed the air and he breathed it in deeply as he watched Jade do the same.

“I want to be inside you, Jade, but you have to do it. It has to be your choice,” he reminded her gently.

She blinked, then comprehension dawned through her erotic bliss. “Oh. Right. Well, then...”

She leaned forward and positioned his cock under her, then slowly sank down upon him. Her tight heat enveloped him from the start, squeezing his cock in erotic

bliss. Hot and wet and oh, so good. He struggled against the need to push himself deeper into her. She took a few small sips of air as she acclimated to his girth. He didn't think her small body could stretch enough to take all of him. He was wrong. Though it happened in several stages, he was soon seated in her to the root.

Her cream trickled over his balls as she paused to absorb the feeling of him being buried inside her. He took a deep breath and held it. For a moment he thought she might panic. But she reached out and placed her hands on his chest and seemed to find some strength in that connection.

And then she began to move.

Air left his chest in a rush as she rode him, raising and lowering herself on his cock. Her small breasts bounced with each movement. When his hands weren't guiding her into a better position, they were molding those soft globes and pinching her ripe nipples. Her inner muscles gripped him tightly and rippled like a fist to hold his cock captive.

Once she gained a bit of confidence, her tempo increased. She tossed her head back and bucked against him. His hips came off the bed, driving his cock deep inside her. The sensations she triggered in him were too much for words. Cum gathered in his balls as they drew up against his body, slapping her ass with every thrust. He wouldn't be able to hold back much longer. Silently cheering her on, he watched as she drove them both to the brink of sexual ecstasy.

And then orgasm burst bright behind his eyes. The pressure in his balls increased with a sudden jerk that sent fluid rippling up his cock. Though it only filled the plastic sheath surrounding his cock, he could well image his cum bathing her vaginal walls. He wanted that very much. To spill his seed inside her and claim her as his own. His heart filled with hope that someday that could happen.

Bending over him, her mouth lowered to his and devoured him. Tongue, teeth and lips robbed him of all thought as Jade fell into that orgasmic abyss with him. Her pussy clenched him deep within her, setting off another powerful explosion. He automatically tilted his hips to plunge deeper, letting her grind her clit against his pelvic bone to enhance her own pleasure.

Sweat trickled down from her brow, plastering her blonde strands to her face. Her skin was flushed from breasts to her neck. She looked wild, sexy...free.

She continued to groan for several minutes and Cas could feel her body quake in the throes of orgasmic after-shocks. Finally, Jade sprawled over his chest in a satisfied heap, which caused his softening cock to slip from her body. Sweat-slicked skin made her perch a bit precarious, but Cas steadied her by wrapping his arms around her waist. Her body lacked the tension he expected, but he remained cautious about her mental state.

When she didn't speak after a few silent moments, he asked, "How are you doing?"
"I'm not sure yet."

"You have no idea how happy that makes me." Odd as it sounded, he really was happy about her answer. Of all the things she might have said, that was the most healthy, under the circumstances.

"Because I'm confused?"

"Because you didn't crawl back into your pit of despair and cover yourself with a thick blanket of self-loathing over finding a little pleasure in life. You could have, you know. Just as you could have kicked me out of this bed half a dozen times for any side-trip your brain might have taken you on." He kissed her forehead. "I'm very proud of you."

"Because I didn't chicken out?"

"Very few women could accomplish what you've just done, Jade."

"It's not the first time," she informed him. "Don't kid yourself about me. For a while, I took on every man who came on to me, figuring that it would either drive the evil out or fill me up with anger until I no longer cared about what I'd lost."

"In all the ways that matter, it was," Cas insisted. "You've changed. You care more about yourself now, and I like to think you care a little about me too. That makes a big difference."

Her blush delighted him.

"Enough sappy talk. Tell me about you. What's a rotten guy like you doing in a nice place like this?"

"Now would be a good time to tell her about Aimee," Boyd whispered to him.

Cas just barely managed to bite back a growl. The reminder that they weren't completely alone broke the spell of intimacy. The joyous afterglow fled, dropping him back into cold, hard reality. Sometimes, life was a bitch.

"It's a long story," Cas said, reluctant to bring up such a dark subject when they should be celebrating her latest success. However, orders were orders. If he didn't tell her, he was sure someone else would.

Jade yawned. "Well, I think I have time for the *Reader's Digest* version before I fall asleep."

"I came here to help people," he said simply.

"Okay, maybe you can take a little more time than that." She folded her arms over his chest, then propped her chin on them.

Their faces were inches apart and Cas found it hard to think about anything but stealing another taste of her from her lust-swollen lips. "I...uh...worked at a jail, once upon a time. Juvie jail. A detention center, really. As a social worker."

"That doesn't surprise me. You'd be good with kids."

Cas thought about those dark days and repressed a shudder. He did, however, cuddle Jade a little tighter, which helped keep the bleak despair at bay. "They didn't think so. Many of them complained that I couldn't possibly understand their problems because I'd never experienced them. After that, I tried very hard to put myself in their

place. Sexual abuse, physical abuse, the constant temptation of drugs and peer pressure to join gangs. I immersed myself in their world, completely."

There were things about that period of his life that he wasn't going to share with Jade. Literally, for weeks he had put himself in their shoes, homeless, penniless and hopeless. He well remembered the nights on the streets, trying to find any bit of nourishment that would stay down in his aching belly. The violence he fostered over the scant comfort of a mattress in a flophouse or a box to curl up in. The heinous acts he'd forced himself to watch without doing a thing to get help. Oh, he'd gotten a very good education in what it was like to be one of the many hundreds of children who went through his detention center.

And he'd nearly died as a result.

"That sounds...dangerous."

He ran his hand over her back, taking comfort from the fact that she wasn't tensing or trying to pull away from him. "It was stupid," he admitted, with all the clarity that hindsight could bring. "I became so lost in their world that I couldn't find my way back to mine. I got fired from my job, alienated my family and became part of the system that I had been so determined to improve."

"You went to jail?"

Cas nodded. It was one of his lowest points. He'd looked around at the faces in the exercise yard and realized he recognized many of them. He hadn't been able to help them, turn them from the path of destruction they'd started on as young teens. Instead, he'd become one of them. And for what? What was the point, he'd asked himself day after day. And having no good answer, he finally concluded his life had been a waste so he'd tried to end it.

"Then how did you end up here?"

"Dr. Scott. He came to visit me." In the jail's psych ward, while he was still strapped down on suicide watch. "He told me my heart was in the right place, but my body had led me astray. He offered to bring me here and teach me how to help others without harming myself."

"Thanks for sharing your prodigal son story," Boyd whispered to him. "Now tell her about Aimee."

Cas sighed heavily. The security tech had a one-track mind at the most inconvenient of times. He acknowledged that Dr. Scott must have a good reason for wanting her to know if Boyd kept harping on it like this, but the insistence that he do it now was really starting to get on his nerves.

"What is it?" Jade asked, pulling the sheet up around them. Her brow was wrinkled in concern. "I've heard Boyd cut in so there must be something important going on, but I can't make out what he's saying."

"Nothing for you to worry about," he soothed.

Jade rolled over, off his chest and onto her side. She tucked the sheet around them to cover her breasts. "I'd like to know. Please."

Cas sat up as well and rested his back against the wall. He used a tissue from the nightstand to clean up and dispose of the condom. None of that gave him enough time to figure out how to explain the chaotic mess that was Aimee.

Impatiently, Boyd cut in again, this time over the house system so that Jade could hear him too. "He's under orders to tell you about Aimee and I'm under orders to be sure that he does. Since he's dragging his toes, I've lodged my boot deep in his ass for motivation and it's making him a bit uncomfortable, metaphorically speaking."

Jade giggled. Cas frowned. She laughed again and tweaked his nipple. "So is she an ex-girlfriend or something? What's the big deal?"

He really didn't want to have this conversation without her comforting closeness, but he didn't have a right to ask for that from her. Jade had to come to him on her own terms as long as she was in Dr. Scott's – and thus Cas' – care.

"Aimee was my girlfriend for a while, yes. It didn't last long and there were no hard feelings on either side."

"And why is that so important for me to know?"

"Because she also worked here," Boyd cut in.

Cas growled. "I'll tell her if you'd just shut up!"

Jade flinched, unnerved by his sudden burst of anger. But she quickly recovered and, to his surprise, curled up against his side. "Tell me. Whatever it is, it'll be okay."

Cas wished he could be as confident of that. But with Dr. Scott using Boyd as a blunt weapon, pushing him into this corner, he had no choice but to spill the sordid details. "Aimee and I met at the detention center. She was one of three females on staff, totally outnumbered by a lot of juvenile testosterone. You can understand, I think, why she often came by my office for a little peace and quiet."

"How did she end up here?"

"I recommended her." That guilt still burned in his gut. He hadn't looked deep enough into her background or her mind. Dr. Scott had trusted his judgment and he'd let him down. Let everyone down. Worst of all, he'd failed Dana by putting her in contact with someone who further abused her. Only Boyd's quick actions managed to save Cas from death at Dana's hands. "See, after I'd been here a few months, she came to visit me. Said without me the center was intolerable so she was looking for a new job and asked if I could get her a position in here. Dr. Scott and I decided it wouldn't be good to let her mix with the guests at first, but we needed a security tech to watch our backs. Since that was similar to her job at the detention center, I thought she'd be good at it and she agreed to take the job."

"I take it she turned out to be something less than a stellar employee?"

"You could say that," Boyd replied.

Cas rolled his eyes, then turned on his hip to face Jade. "Dana joined us about the same time. She was much different then. Very..." He was at a loss to explain. Dana had to be seen to be believed.

"I think I get the picture. I heard her story on the tapes, remember?"

"Okay, so you know a little bit about her. Let's just say that no one with a penis could get within ten feet of her and live to talk about it." Except Dr. Scott. The connection between the two of them was something magical that Cas could never quite grasp. "Even women had trouble with her occasionally. Yet somehow Aimee managed to get along with her beautifully. She was the only one, besides Dr. Scott, that Dana would always obey."

He still wasn't sure how that relationship had developed so quickly or what Aimee's motive for getting close to the troubled woman had been. He'd been over it in his mind and with Boyd and Dr. Scott so many times the possible motives were permanently etched in his brain. None of them had any answers and Dana now went catatonic whenever Aimee was mentioned. Until Aimee could be found and questioned, they had only guesses.

"What happened? I mean, something must have gone wrong."

Cas closed his eyes and lowered his gaze. "One night Boyd came by to check on Aimee and discovered she was absent from her post. He went looking for her and found her with Dana. Instead of helping her, Aimee was..." Whipping her for being a bad girl. And Dana was loving it. Licking the blood from the wounds the lashes left on her chest and arms. Her limbs had been chained to a homemade St. Andrews Cross. Cream coated her lips and Aimee's crotchless Domme outfit left no mistake about where that glistening wetness had come from.

"Out with it," Boyd growled. "Tell her the rest so I can extract my size tens from your ass and go home."

Cas closed his eyes against the pain the memories invoked and let the words tumble past his lips. "She was giving Dana lessons in extreme BDSM. The bad kind, the kind that leaves scars. For Dana, that was like giving heroin to an addict, reinforcing her bad behavior."

"Dear God." Jade reached for him, closing her hand over his. "How awful. What happened then?"

"I'm not very good with crazy people," Boyd said, "so I high-tailed it out of there. I ran into Cas before I tracked down Dr. Scott and sent him in to see what he could do to liberate Dana with minimal fuss. In the meantime, the bitch split. She left us a little surprise before she did though."

Jade's grip tightened on his hand. "Cas?"

"Aimee needed time to escape. She knew Dana would be a nightmare for the rest of us to deal with in that condition and Aimee counted on her to keep us busy. That was practically a guarantee after she let Dana loose and turned the whip over to her."

"But you did it. You got her down," Jade said with a pleading note to her voice.

She wanted a happy ending. This story didn't have one. "No, I couldn't get it together. Aimee's betrayal overwhelmed me. Faced with Domme Dana, I froze."

"You're too hard on yourself, Cas. You always have been when it comes to Aimee." The gentleness in the security expert's tone brought Cas to the brink of tears. "You didn't run and you didn't let Dana kill you. I count that as a success."

"I lived because you came in like thunder and rescued me," Cas reminded him softly.

"Yes, and I have smooches tattooed all over my ass from the gazillion times you've thanked me for it." There was a slight pause where Cas heard keys tapping in the background, then Boyd added, "And now that you've completed your assignment, I'm going to bugger off."

The connection cut with an audible snap.

Cas rubbed his eyes and sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, you shouldn't have had to listen to that. You have enough to deal with."

"Boyd's right. It's not your fault," Jade told him. "But I also know that nothing erases the guilt. You can learn to live with it, but it never leaves."

There was nothing much Cas could say in response to that. What she had said was true.

Jade snuggled against him and wrapped her arm over his waist. "Nap time. Will you be here when I wake up?"

Cas ran his fingers through her hair, loving the texture of it and the fact that she still wanted him nearby. "If that's what you want."

"Yeah. Then maybe we can have that dinner."

She drifted off quickly but Cas remained awake, still toying with her blonde strands. He thought about Aimee and Dana, and about the strong woman at his side. "I love you, Jade." And this time he meant it as more than just a human being. He was, genuinely, falling in love with her.

Too bad it would soon be time for him to say goodbye.

Chapter Fifteen

A Night to Remember

Cas was already on the porch waiting for her when Jade returned to her tiny house after her three week progress consultation with Dr. Scott.

"I'd ask how it went, but I can see you're pretty pleased with yourself. Anything you want to share with me?"

How could she put into words everything that she was feeling? The conversation with the doctor had been difficult and often uncomfortable. But it was also...liberating. Dr. Scott agreed that she'd made great strides in reclaiming her old self.

No, not reclaiming. Repurposing. Taking the bits about herself she'd liked and then filling in the holes with new hope and optimism. She still had a long way to go before she could declare herself officially happy with who she was, but she'd evicted the monster that had taken up residence in her soul.

The pain and harm she'd caused those men—and everyone else in her life as a result—still haunted her. Restraining her temper continued to be a problem. But overall she was making progress, enough that Dr. Scott had agreed to let her start teaching martial arts to other guests and staff.

And while Dr. Scott had tried to persuade her otherwise, she knew a large part of the credit for her improvement went to Cas.

Gratitude and love swarmed over her heart as she rushed into his open arms. She dotted his face with kisses. "Thank you." More kisses. "Thank you, thank you."

"For?"

"For loving me when I didn't." She kissed him again, this time on the lips. "For believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself."

He lowered his face down into the crook of her neck. "Then you feel like celebrating a little?"

She playfully nipped his ear. "What did you have in mind?"

"Dinner. Out."

"Out? Out where?" She pulled back to look at his face.

"In town."

"We can do that?" She wasn't sure she was ready to leave the security of Blossom House, but the idea of a real night out with Cas was far too appealing to pass up.

It didn't take long to arrange at all. Helen brought over a fitting dress to wear, the twins did her hair. They were happy to have someone to fuss over.

The biggest surprise, however, came from Boyd. He drove up in a black Lexus and turned the keys over to Cas, dressed in slacks and a baby blue shirt, without a word.

"Boyd, this is your car," he said.

"Don't scratch it."

"Mine would be just fine. I know how you are about your car. You don't have to do this."

Boyd put on what Jade had started to call his grumpy face, the one that made him look like a pissed off dwarf. "Your POS wouldn't make it to the end of the drive and back. I've got plans of my own tonight and they don't involve coming after your broken-down ass."

"Gee, Boyd, way to wreck my plans for a few hours alone with a beautiful woman on a deserted road..."

"Yeah, right. Said woman would kick your ass if you tried some smarmy act like that. Just take the damn car, okay?"

Jade giggled as Cas got into the expensive car and started the engine. When she went to open her own door, Boyd leaned against it, holding it closed.

"What's up?"

Boyd handed her the smallest cell phone she'd ever seen.

"What's this for?"

"Insurance."

She tilted her head to the side, curious about the need for such a device. "Cas and I are going to dinner, not exactly a high-risk endeavor."

"It's not you I'm concerned about. It's him."

"Why? What's wrong with Cas?" Worry formed a knot in her stomach. As far as she knew, he was fine. Then again, she couldn't get him over the idea that she was no longer as fragile as glass. If something was wrong with him, he wasn't likely to tell her.

"Nothing that I know of." Boyd scratched the accumulation of three days worth of hair that sprouted along his jaw.

"Then why bother with this?"

The grumpy face came back for another visit. "You two are perfect for each other, you know that? Neither of you can do the simplest thing without a bloody argument."

Jade stopped examining the bit of electronics to give the troubleshooter a thorough once-over.

Boyd immediately became suspicious. "What?"

"I'm looking for the blood."

Comprehension flashed across his face, followed by a rare grin. "Brat. Just take the damn thing before I lose what little hair I have left."

"On one condition."

Boyd let out a sigh that indicated he shouldn't have to suffer so much. "And that is?"

"That you won't use it to listen in on our date."

He grabbed the phone out of her hand and Jade thought he meant to keep it. Instead, he held the butt end up as if he were looking at the display of a pager. He leaned toward her and jabbed a thick finger at the first light in a series of three. "This means you got power. The second lights up when you've got an active phone connection."

"And the third?" It was slightly different than the other two. Instead of being square and green, this one was round and red.

Boyd flipped open the cover and pointed to the key pad. The first button on the top right was labeled with a red P. "Panic button. Hit that and it alerts whoever is on duty at Safety Central. It also pages me. Even if you can't hear us, as long as that red light is on, we can hear you and track your position. If you don't want us listening in, don't press the P."

"I still think you're being a worry wart, but I'll carry it just to make you happy."

"I'm delirious with joy," Boyd deadpanned.

Jade dropped the little gizmo into the inner pocket of her jacket where it wasn't likely to get bumped by accident and then Boyd rather gallantly helped her settle into the passenger seat.

The drive to the restaurant was a quiet one, through the country roads she'd only seen from the helicopter. She had a feeling even if she had seen them close up then, they would look different to her.

Everything looked different, now that she no longer hid the truth from herself. Not always rosy, but definitely shades of color rather than the slate gray her life had been since the night of the attack.

Shades of gray...suddenly things clicked into place and she turned to Cas. "Promise me something."

"If I can."

"I want you to burn all those damn gray sweats you wear. Whenever you're around me, I want to see clothes with some color. Promise?"

His laugh warmed her deep inside. "Burning them might be a little dramatic as I'm sure I'll need them again someday, but I can promise you'll never see them on me again as long as you're a guest at Blossom House."

"Good." She said the word but her heart ached a little knowing that soon she would be leaving to return to Philadelphia and he would remain here in Ohio, helping those in need. Others like her.

Feeling the dark thoughts creep in, she resolutely turned her thoughts to happier subjects, like the night ahead, and watched the amber colored leaves fly by her window as they headed toward town.

The restaurant they went to was a country-western style place, with empty peanut shells on the floor and a huge dance floor in the middle that she suspected sometimes got used as a mechanical bull ring.

They were seated at a cozy table far away from the action and quickly ordered steaks with sweet potato fries. It was hard to talk with so much noise from the DJ, so they mostly just held hands and smiled at each other. It was like a sweet date, the kind she'd heard other women wax poetic about. She always thought that type of romance would be wasted on her, but if this was a taste of what it was like then Jade was all for it.

By the time she finished her meal, she was feeling quite warm. Sexual heat that had been arching between them throughout dinner sent zippy little sparks through her body. She decided she needed a quick break to regain her composure before she did something regrettable, like jumping Cas' bones right there on the table.

"Interested in dessert?" His warm brown eyes danced with a knowing light.

"Let me think about it while I take a quick trip to the ladies' room."

Jade held her head up as she threaded her way through the crowded dance floor toward the restrooms at the back of the bar. The dimly lit hall caused her heart to kick up a notch, but it wasn't at all like the cold, dark alley in her nightmares. That realization was enough to keep her feet moving.

The women's restroom had a gaggle of barely legal females gathered around the spotty wall-length mirror. Jade smiled at their frantic conversation which centered on how to divvy up the young men they'd found hanging around the pool tables.

By the time Jade needed her turn at the sink, they had departed, leaving only one other occupant who could have passed for an older sister of the younger crowd. The woman met her eyes in the mirror.

"Were we ever that young?" Jade asked her.

The woman shrugged, but didn't say anything. It was a little spooky, but after being around Dana, Jade had a lot more tolerance for strange behavior.

"Well, I'm out of here. Have a good time." Jade paused, giving the other woman a chance to respond if she wanted before she turned her back.

"You're from that loony bin, aren't you? That flower place?"

How this woman would know that, Jade had no idea. But her clear, cold tone stated that she didn't approve of "that flower place" or anyone associated with it. Jade was too eager to get back to Cas and whatever he had planned for the rest of the night to stand around and debate the merits of Dr. Scott's programs with someone who wasn't open to hearing the truth.

"I've been to Blossom House, sure. They give great massages." Jade took another few steps toward the door.

"Not that part. The other part. The buildings in the back where they keep the freaks."

Wherever this chick had gotten her information, it was a pretty good source. That didn't mean she'd drawn all the right conclusions. Or that Jade wanted to take the time to educate her. "I have some friends there, yes. Good night."

"Is Dana Goddard one of them?"

Jade froze in the act of opening the door. Sounds from the bar spilled down the hallway, reassuring her that she hadn't fallen down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. Carefully, Jade turned to give the woman another, deeper look. "Why? Is she a friend of yours?"

"That lunatic?" The woman laughed. "You can't know her, or you wouldn't ask."

Then why were they having this conversation? "Look, my date is waiting. Anything you want to know about Blossom House or their guests you should ask the management directly."

The woman said something, but Jade refused to be drawn back into the pointless conversation. She found Cas waiting for her at the edge of the crowd. As soon as she was close enough, he reached for her hand. "You were gone awhile. Everything okay?"

"Ladies' room gossip. Someone who seemed to know a little bit too much about what goes on behind the fence at Blossom House."

Cas frowned. "What did she look like?"

"Youngish. Dark hair." Jade shrugged. "I didn't really study her, ya know?"

Cas looked from her down the dark hall as if he thought about charging into the woman's bathroom to see if the weird chick was still there.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Jade said softly, stroking his arm.

"No worries," he replied, although his face said otherwise. "How about a dance?"

She smiled up into his warm brown eyes, and the strangeness of the last few minutes flitted out of her brain. "Perfect."

The music shifted into a slow, dreamy tune. Cas drew her into his arms. She put her hands on his shoulders and tilted her head up so she could watch him watching her. They swayed, not even attempting to make it look like a dance.

His fingers stroked her back, sending shivers down her spine. She loved the way even the most innocent touch from him set off a warm glow, thawing another brick of the icy wall she'd used to keep him and everyone else out of her heart for so long.

Before the song ended, she'd made up her mind. It was one of the easiest decisions of her life. She loved this man and wanted to know what would be like to be loved by him, not because she needed his comfort but simply because she wanted him. It only took a brush of her hips against his to learn that's what he wanted too.

"Let's go home, Cas."

"Jade, I—"

She pressed her fingers to his lips. "Yes, I know what I'm doing. I've come to conclusion that I've put my life on hold long enough. I want to start living again. With you."

Jade suspected the watery look to his eyes had nothing to do with the mix of sweat and cologne swirling around them, but she didn't want to ruin the moment with a lot of tears, even happy ones. There had been enough crying in her past. She wanted only smiles for the two of them tonight.

He stroked her cheek with the back of her hand. "You're so beautiful."

And she knew he was talking about more than her face. Since his open, loving expression threatened to make her own eyes water, she said, "And you're one serious stud muffin. Now, can we please blow this joint?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "Lead the way, sweetheart. I'll be right behind you."

She made sure of that by lacing her fingers through his. Outside, the night stars twinkled extra bright. It was the perfect night, the perfect man and, Jade hoped, the perfect beginning to a real relationship.

Cas slowed his steps and Jade pulled herself out of her thoughts. A white van had parked close to their car, real close. He went between them first, unlocked the door then opened it between them so she could slide in.

Suddenly, the side door on the van opened. Two sets of arms reached out for Jade and hauled her inside. Cas made a grab for her, but cold steel rammed into the side of his neck.

A cool female voice greeted him. "Hello, Cas."

Chapter Sixteen

An Old Friend

Even though he couldn't see a face, he recognized that voice. "Aimee."

"Ah, so you do remember me. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me since you and your friends never put much effort into tracking me down. Or did I play too hard to get?"

The van door closed, locking Jade away from him. Thumps inside the van indicated that she wasn't docilely accepting their change in circumstances.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The only shot he had at rescuing her was negotiation. Too bad he didn't have a clue what the crazy bitch was after. "What are you doing here, Aimee? What do you want with us?"

"Get in. We'll talk about it as you drive."

The steel retreated. He was so relieved to learn that they didn't intend to leave him behind that he didn't hesitate to follow her orders. He climbed up in the driver's seat of the van as she slid over to the passenger side to give him room.

"Where are we going?" he asked her.

"Blossom House. I think you know the way."

Aimee continued to hold the gun on him. Cas glanced in the rear view mirror to see what had happened to Jade as he started the engine and backed out. There were three men holding her down. The two who had grabbed her from behind and a third he thought looked vaguely familiar but couldn't name.

What concerned him most was the way Jade's eyes were dilated, and the rapid rise and fall of her chest, all the signs of an imminent panic attack. Sparks of fear and anger warred for control of Cas' nervous system. Why the hell did this have to happen to them? To Jade? If those men hurt her...

Worry about that later, after she's safe.

Cas pulled out onto the freeway and pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The best chance of help, for both of them, lay within Blossom grounds. "What's this about? Revenge?"

She scoffed. "Hardly."

"Then what's the point?"

"I left something behind when I split. You're going to help me get it back." She glanced at the speedometer and frowned at him. "Slow down. If I see a cop coming for us, you'll die first. She will too, and it won't be nearly as quick."

Cas gritted his teeth but used the brake, keeping the needle just under seventy. "If you're talking about the electronic gear, you'll have to see Boyd. I don't know what he did with it."

Aimee laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound. "Finally caught on, did he? Took the little freak long enough. Not that it matters now."

Jade's grunts became a frightened mewling. He risked another glance in the mirror and saw the men had started to paw at her breasts. Without pausing to consider the ramifications, he jerked the wheel to send the van skidding across the gravel berm. The vehicle jolted to a stop in a shallow ditch.

"What the hell?" one of the men yelled from the back as he struggled to untangle himself from his cohort.

Aimee rubbed her head with one hand where it had bounced off the window. It came away with blood which she licked from her fingers. The gun was aimed directly at his gut. "Dumb move, Cas. Really dumb."

He didn't agree. Even if Jade was hurt in the sudden impact, it was worth the risk to get those two men off her. Jade's dress was ripped, exposing her breasts. The bottom of her skirt lay up around her waist. Oddly, her jacket was practically untouched, just shoved a bit off her shoulders so it wouldn't spoil the view.

The one who'd had his dick out and primed for action lay groaning on the unfinished steel bed. The two men who had been holding her down for their friend had her pinned to the floor again but they weren't nearly as happy about it now.

"Let her go," Cas demanded.

Aimee waved the gun in a farce of a friendly gesture. "You're not in control here."

The engine continued to idle. Cas revved it, a roar that he couldn't let escape his own throat. "Let her out, or I'll make sure the next ditch we go into is deep enough to bury us all."

"What's to keep me from killing you now and using her to get past the gate?"

"The fact that you haven't already tells me that you know the answer."

Whoever was on duty at the gate to the secured area of Blossom House wouldn't open it for Jade. Even if she could pull herself together enough to make the request sound reasonable, she'd have to give an access code. As a guest, Jade wouldn't know it. And since the word of the day changed randomly based on whatever entered Boyd's warped mind when it came time to issue it, there was no way for Aimee to anticipate what it might be.

"Maybe you'll be more cooperative if I shoot her," Aimee suggested.

The gun didn't move. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the third man begin to stir. "I admit there's a good chance you'd get off one shot before I could stop you. I guarantee you wouldn't get a second."

On the highway, a car slowed to check out the scene. Cas signaled that they were fine. Aimee nervously licked her lips as the car pulled away.

"The next car might be a cop," Cas reminded her. "What do you think they'll say if they find us sitting here on the side of the road?"

Aimee leaned over until the barrel pressed painfully into his gut. "Drive or die."

"As long as Jade's in the van, you know what my answer is."

Behind them, the third man rolled over Jade and placed himself between her legs. "Scream for me, bitch," he ordered as he bit down hard on her bare nipple. "Your boyfriend's little trick only made me hotter to fuck you."

This time, Cas didn't allow his impulses to rule though he badly wanted to rev the engine and pop it into gear, causing the van to take another painful bounce. "I'm not kidding, Aimee. Either she goes free and we continue with this plan of yours or you take me out. Permanently. If I drive out of here with her in the van, none of us will live to see the next mile."

"You expect me to believe you'd deliberately kill a woman in your care? I don't think so, Cas."

Jade lay rag doll limp, not moving or making any attempt to protect herself from the angry man's painful bites. Cas feared she'd gone to that blank catatonic state. He knew without having to ask that she'd rather die than wake up with only a shadow of her former self to live on.

"I love her." Which is precisely why he'd do it. He didn't have to voice the second half of the statement. He let Aimee read it in his eyes.

From the back, a masculine voice drifted over to them. "It's no fun if you don't fight me, bitch. Can't you whimper, just a little?"

Although the tone was coaxing, the actions that accompanied the words were far opposite. Listening to that bastard goad Jade into self-defense was killing him; listening to them rape her would be even worse. Cas gave Aimee five more seconds before he acted on his own.

Silently, he counted them down. When he reached zero, he put the van into reverse. "Fine, we all go down."

"Wait," Aimee ordered. "If we dump her, you'll do as I say?"

"As long as it doesn't involve further harm to her, yes." While Jade lived, he'd find a way to go on living too.

Aimee hesitated and Cas pressed on the gas to rock the wheels out of the rut. "Wait, damn it!" she hissed at him. "One of these days you aren't going to be nearly as smart as you think you are."

Aimee didn't take her eyes off Cas, but did raise her voice to reach the men in the back. "Dump her out. Now."

"No fucking way," the one on top of Jade replied. "He can have what's left of her when we're done."

His buddies laughed along with him. Cas pictured their heads exploding to keep his own from doing the same.

"I said, let her go!" Aimee barked.

"Seventeen months in jail without a bitch to fuck and you think I'm going to pass up the first one I get my hands on?" The guy shook his head. "What's the hurry anyway? It'll only take another minute for me to drill her sweet tail."

One shot exploded through the van. Cas coughed and tried to dispel the blue smoke that hovered in front of his face, anxious to see where the bullet had landed.

The talkative one gripped his thigh where blood oozed through his fingers. Too bad she hadn't hit an artery, Cas thought.

The man smiled in a way that made Cas' skin crawl as he clamped his hand over the bloody wound. "Well damn, sweetheart, if I'd have known you were the jealous type, I'd have fucked you first."

Aimee cursed under her breath. Cas thought he caught the words John and prison. Not that he cared about her problems at the moment. Jade still hadn't moved.

"Ditch the bitch, you asshole, or the next shot will give your jailhouse lover a second hole to rent out."

He looked like he wanted to argue, but one of his buddies leaned over and said something that apparently changed his mind. "Yeah, yeah. This one's no fun anyway. But you better get me one who likes it rough, Aimee, and soon, or I'll see to it that you take her place."

His sidekicks opened the sliding door. With his good leg, the third man kicked Jade in the ribs until she fell out. Cas didn't give them time to reconsider. He cut the wheel and gunned the engine. The van whipped back onto the road in an arc that he prayed would miss any of Jade's limbs. The force of the spin brought the door crashing closed, but one of the three had their arm in the way. He howled in pain as it got crushed between the two inflexible steel objects.

"You'll die for that," the disappointed rapist promised Cas as he and the other man tended to their friend.

"Not until we've gotten what we came for," Aimee reminded them, although she didn't look too unhappy about the damage to her crew.

Cas ignored them all. He concentrated on the road, fighting like hell to keep from shouting with joy and drawing attention to the figure that had risen from the ditch and ran away into the night.

Jade darted into the dubious cover of a thin line of trees. She couldn't seem to stop shaking, which made extracting the small cell phone from her jacket pocket ten times more difficult than it needed to be. Once that task was accomplished, pushing P was a piece of cake.

Through chattering teeth, she managed to stutter a few words. "Boyd? You there?"

A man's voice she didn't recognize replied, "Boyd's unavailable at the moment. I'm Sunny. Where are you? Is Cas with you?"

What the hell? Someone has a gun to Cas' head and Boyd is too fucking busy to take the call? Angrily, Jade shot out the words, rapid fire. "Aimee's got Cas. They're headed toward Blossom in a white van with three ex-cons in the back. Tell that little fucker he better save Cas' butt or he'll answer to me."

Wisely, Sunny didn't attempt to respond to that. "Tell me where you are so I can send someone to pick you up."

"Don't bother. Any person you can spare can also be used as backup to keep Cas alive. Besides, if I'm right about the path Cas took, it'll be faster for me to run through the fields. I'll check in when I get to the fence."

"Leave the —"

Jade didn't hear the rest. The phone went back into its protective pocket. She wasn't about to lose her only connection with the people who would soon know more about Cas' condition than she did, but she needed to free her hands.

She ripped the ragged edges of the skirt that had gotten twisted between her legs and used it to bind her breasts. From a distance, she'd look like she was wearing a bikini which she hoped would attract far less attention than a half naked female. At the same time, she kicked off her shoes, thinking that the hard calluses on the bottoms of her feet would provide better traction than the slick-bottomed heels.

And then she ran toward Blossom House as if all the hounds of hell were at her heels.

Chapter Seventeen

Battle Cry

Cas zigzagged through the back roads, betting on the chances that Aimee didn't remember enough of the area to know he was driving in circles. The fact that Jade was up and moving under her own power gave him tremendous hope that she'd find a way to alert the staff that trouble was about to gate crash. He just had to give her time to do it.

"You're playing games again," Aimee announced after perhaps fifteen minutes.

"You told me to take you to Blossom. That's where we're going."

She peered out the window into the darkness. "It shouldn't take this long to get there from town."

As distracted as she was, Cas decided against trying to wrestle her for the gun. For one thing, it meant letting go of the wheel and he no longer had a death wish. Secondly, there were still the three guys in the back to deal with. While there might not be any love to lose between Aimee and her cohorts, they would almost certainly defend her from his attack, if only to have another target upon which to take out some of their frustration.

"It does right now. The county closed off the Styx River Road shortly after you left so they could put in new sewer pipes. Would have been done by now except a couple of tornados came through and ripped up the bridge over the highway down on the other side of town."

She transferred her skeptical gaze from the countryside to him. "I don't believe you."

He shrugged. "Your choice. Either way, it takes a bit longer to get back and forth to town these days."

"How much longer?"

Cas quickly calculated his options and how much patience he thought Aimee had left. "Five minutes. A little less if we get the light at the crossroads."

"This is bullshit," the one who'd been shot called out from the back. "I bet the bastard is lost."

"I'm not lost," Cas assured Aimee. If he'd had Jade beside him, it would be a different story. They'd have left the bar together and found a quiet piece of countryside in which to get lost in each other, under the stars. He vowed he'd make this night up to Jade, somehow. "Why don't you fill me in on what you're after so I know what to do once we get there?"

"Dana has something of mine. I need to get it back."

"And you didn't think asking her to send it to you would work?"

"No contact, remember?"

"Come on. You expect me to believe you'd let a little thing like Boyd's security setup stop you from talking to Dana if that's what you really wanted to do?"

Aimee laughed, a chilling sound that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. "You're right. I did talk to her. Every night for weeks, even after Boyd kicked me out."

"Then why not have her send you whatever it is that you wanted back?"

"She refused."

"So now you're just going to go in and take it from her?"

Aimee cocked her head, giving him a knowing smile. "Actually, I thought you could do that. She's got a special thing for you."

Cas raised his eyebrows at that. "Dana? No way. She barely talks to me."

"She thinks you're sexy. She told me that she can't talk to you because you make her feel naughty."

Naughty. That was Dana-speak for hot. Horny. That didn't make any sense. Dana had been conditioned to lust after men who desired her. Cas didn't desire her that way, never had. He loved her, as he did all the guests who lived with them in R Block. Anything more was purely in her imagination.

Or in Aimee's. "You convinced her of it."

Aimee nodded. "One of my better ideas, I think. It certainly kept her from running to you with all my secrets. Do you want to know how I did it?"

Oh, yeah. If for no other reason than to tell Dr. Scott so he had a better shot at undoing the damage that had been done to Dana's mind. "I'm listening."

"I realized I had to keep an eye on you fairly early so I installed cameras in your place to spy on you."

She glanced at him to see how he was taking the news. Since they were coming down the home stretch now, he didn't want to disappoint her so he gave her the growl she'd been expecting.

"I didn't think you'd like that. I have to say though that watching you masturbate was one of the high points of that otherwise boring job. You have a first-class bod, Cas. Maybe if you'd shared it with me, we'd be on the same side now."

She ran the barrel of the gun over his cock. His balls tried to climb up in his body to get away from her. It pretty much summed up how he felt about the idea of being intimate with her. He tried not to let the revulsion show on his face. "Both partners have to want the same thing in order to click. We didn't."

"That's because you didn't give me much of a chance to show you how good it could be. I'm very skilled at delivering pleasure," she drew the muzzle over his crotch, then jammed the weapon in hard, making him yelp, "and pain."

She withdrew the gun and leaned forward as the lights of Blossom House appeared on the horizon. "Anyway, I got some nice clips of you jerking off. I spliced together voice recordings to lay over it so that it sounded like you were fantasizing about her. She'd play that thing every night before she'd go to bed."

Great. No wonder Dana had fixated on him. Conflicted over wanting him and not wanting to return to her deviant behavior would have created the very situation that nearly got Digger killed. "So it's the tape you're after?"

"I think I've told you enough," Aimee replied as he pulled up to the gate. "Play nice and you just might live to see tomorrow."

Cas rolled down the window and pressed the intercom button.

"Hey, Cas. Coming home a little late aren't you?" Sunny said through the speaker.

They'd been expecting him. Jade had reached them. Thank God. The fact that Sunny answered instead of Boyd meant that the troubleshooter was waiting for him somewhere in R Block. It was hard not to sigh with relief. "Had some car trouble."

"I noticed that's not your normal ride. Who do you have with you?"

Aimee had angled her body away from the camera mounted on top of the speaker box so her face couldn't be seen. "An old friend. She offered to give us a lift back here when my car wouldn't start. Since I knew the way, it seemed more logical for me to drive."

"Where's Jade?"

"Stretched out in the back, asleep. Too much excitement, I guess."

"She's pretty solid. I bet she'll be back on her toes by morning."

Oh, thank God. Jade might be upset, and rightfully so, but Sunny didn't think there was any permanent damage done, physical or otherwise. What a weight off his shoulders.

With his most critical worries eased for the moment, Cas wanted to end the chatter so they could finish this thing with Aimee once and for all. "I'm sure you're right. Listen, it's getting late. Can you let us in?"

"Code?"

"Iguana." There was an incredulous snort from the passenger seat that Cas did his best to ignore.

"Pretty quiet around here tonight. You and Jade should be able to sneak in without a hassle."

"Appreciate it," Cas replied as the gate opened.

As soon as he could, Cas drove down the path that would lead to R Block. Sunny's warning led him to believe that the place had been evacuated.

"That kid had a lot to say," Aimee said, her voice laced with suspicion.

"He's new. Night shift can get a little lonely." Cas flexed his hands on the wheel. "Where do you want me to park?"

She gestured toward the ring of buildings. "They'll be expecting us to pull up in front of your place."

Cas stopped the van outside his house, then put his hand on the door. Aimee stopped him. "Uh-uh. You stay here with me while the boys go after my stuff."

"Fuck that," said the mouthy one. "I'm not going to haul anything for your lazy ass. You go after it your damn self if you want it so bad."

"That wasn't our agreement."

"You should have thought of that before you damn near shot my leg clean off."

Cas didn't have much knowledge about gunshot wounds, but he figured if the guy was as badly injured as he claimed, he would have passed out from blood loss by now. Apparently Aimee wasn't buying his excuse either.

"The first time you disobeyed me, I went easy on you. You'll find my aim is much better this time." As if to prove her point, she pointed the weapon at his dick.

"Fuck, man," the guy complained to his buddies. "This is the last time I work for some whore, no matter who her boyfriend is. Fucks up a simple gig from one end to the other and doesn't let us have any fun. Is that any way to run a show? Hell, no."

"Give them your keys," she told Cas.

Cas tossed them back. He hoped like hell they headed straight for Dana's place. It remained empty since she'd been moved to S Block. He expected them to damage his own quarters, but the ring he gave them had all the keys on it. Including the one to Jade's place. She'd recover more quickly from this new trauma if her space wasn't violated.

"Remember what I told you," Aimee said to her crew as they slithered out the back.

Cas noticed that the one with the broken arm could barely move it without wincing. The leader limped, although it was hard to tell if he was trying to make it look like he was seriously wounded or act as if it didn't bother him at all. The third hovered in between the two, obviously wanting to help the guy in real pain but afraid that he'd get in trouble with the other by playing favorites. Together they stumbled through his front door like drunken frat boys. Their antics would have been comical if he'd been watching a movie rather than living through a very real nightmare.

And it wasn't over yet.

"Where did you get those three jerks from?" he asked Aimee to keep his mind off what might be happening inside.

"Temp Agency. Idiots-Are-Us."

Cas glanced at the side view mirror and almost wished that he hadn't. Two figures were creeping up along side the van. The smaller body, dressed in all black, hugged the shadows with a professionalism that one would expect from a man like Boyd. Cas wasn't sure who the other shadow was. Why were they creeping around out here instead of taking out the men inside?

Cas continued making pointless conversation. "Might be hard to leave once you've gotten whatever it is you want. Anyone watching the security screens is going to know that none of the people going inside are women."

"People will see what they want to see. They expected two short, one tall. That's what they got. Unless Sunny's dick is as hard for your tramp as yours is, it won't make a difference who appears on his screen."

Seeing that Sunny already knew who those men weren't, it hardly mattered. Cas had only raised the question to keep Aimee's focus from wandering. Those two shadows crawled along the grass now. They were at their most vulnerable position, but if he could give them a few more seconds, they'd be able to surround the van.

A crash shattered the silence. Aimee cursed. "Assholes. Wake everyone up, why don't you?"

They waited for lights to come on, something that would have definitely happened if all the staff and guests were in their rightful beds. When it didn't, the former security tech knew something was very wrong. "You set me up," she growled at him. "You bastard, you fucking set me up!"

"I followed your orders, Aimee. That's all." Jade was the real hero here.

"Start the van. Get me the hell out of here."

"What about your guys?"

"Just do it! Now!" she screamed at him.

Boyd and his partner were still too far away to help. And the way Aimee now trembled with rage made disobeying her orders far too chancy. It wasn't her obsession on the line now, it was her life, her freedom. Cas knew that made her a much more dangerous animal.

He turned the key in the ignition and backed out.

"Don't take the roads," she ordered.

"Been a lot of rain lately. The van might get stuck in the fields."

"You better hope not," she replied. "If I don't make it out of here, neither do you. Ever."

Chapter Eighteen

The Chase

A month—less than that, really—wasn't enough time for Jade to regain her prior level of physical fitness. The extended run drained all her resources until anger was the only fuel her body had left.

It was more than enough to keep her going.

When she reached the brick wall that surrounded the private grounds, she doubled over and sucked in as much air as her heaving chest would permit. Her hands were no more steady now than when she'd been dumped out of the van, but she fumbled until she had the phone in her hand and could read the lights, which indicated she still had a live connection.

"Sunny?" she said in between pants.

"Still here, Jade."

"Cas?"

"Inside the gates."

"Safe?"

"Working on it."

Damn. She hoped it would all be over by now. But if the party was still going on, she wanted to be there. "Ride?"

"Helen's on her way to meet you. If you can't see her yet, you should be able to hear her."

She couldn't hear much beyond a mild roaring she assumed was the blood rushing through her ears. And she couldn't see a damn thing with the wall in her way. She'd have to go over it. That would suck in her mostly naked condition, but she'd do whatever she had to in order to reach Cas.

"Incoming." She hoped Sunny would understand her terse message and turn off any gizmos that might fry her ass as she vaulted over the six-foot wall.

If she reached up, she could grab the iron bars that jutted out of the brick, adding an extra two feet to the height. Pulling her self up over the rough rock would hurt like a bitch. She did it anyway, using her toes to grip the spots where the mortar became concave. She lost her footing twice, scraping her legs like cheese against a grater, but finally managed to haul herself up on the narrow ledge.

As she stepped over the iron spikes, she saw two sets of lights bouncing across the hilly landscape. The closer of the two appeared to be a person on a three-wheeler bike, the kind meant for riding over rugged terrain. The other pair of high beams, much

further away, Jade suspected was the van with Cas and the others, although she had no idea why they'd be out here, so far from R Block.

Going down the wall was easier than climbing up. Jade lowered herself before dropping the foot or so to the ground. Helen met her with a bright smile, raising her voice to be heard over the engine of the ATV. "Glad to see you made it in one piece, girl."

"What's happened?" Jade asked as she hurried into the gray sweats the older woman tossed to her.

"Got three of them locked up in R Block."

"Cas?"

"In the van, as far as I know."

"With Aimee?"

"Yes."

And, Jade had to assume, with the gun. Now that the woman was on the run, she had even less reason to keep Cas alive.

"Where are they?" She was pretty sure she already knew but wanted to hear confirmation.

Helen's eyes flicked in the direction of the other set of lights, but only said, "Boyd wants me to get you over to the hospital wing."

"Fuck Boyd," Jade said succinctly. She wasn't going anywhere until she knew Cas was safe. She had no idea how she was going to make that happen, but she sure as hell couldn't do it from here.

Once more she dug out the phone. "I'm going after the van," she told Sunny.

"Negative. Boyd has it under control."

"Cas is safe?"

"Not yet, but—"

"Then I'm going."

"No! Jade? Are you listening to me?"

No, because he wasn't saying anything she wanted to hear. She knew the smart thing to do would be to stand back and let the professionals handle it. Unfortunately, they'd already missed Aimee once. And as good as they were with emotionally conflicted people, Jade had no idea how well equipped they were to deal with the violent criminal elements.

She, on the other hand, had a little experience to draw on when it came to kicking ass.

"It's risky," Helen said.

"So's breathing." Jade finished tying on the pair of running shoes Helen had supplied, then looked the older woman directly in the eye. "You can stay or you can go with me. The only thing you can't do is stop me."

Helen shimmied up in the seat, leaving room for Jade to get on behind her. "Well, hurry up. We've got a man to save."

"They're following us," Aimee screeched above the racket the van's suspension created as they bounced over terrain it wasn't meant to handle.

"Isn't it nice to be wanted?" Cas shouted back. He'd cracked his head too many times on the ceiling to be completely rational. Besides the pain, darkness crowded in on the edges of his vision.

"Can't this thing go any faster?"

"I'm going forty. The only thing keeping this piece of scrap metal together now is rust and a whole lot of luck. If I push it much more, we'll bust up on the next bad bounce."

"Then I'll have to get rid of them myself."

She rolled down the window, leaned out and fired at the headlight closing in on their right. There was no way she could hit anything she aimed at with all the jostling around. What worried Cas was that she'd hit something else equally vital.

Aimee fired off three more shots.

Time was running out. The others were closing in. The grounds of Blossom House were not endless. Once Aimee saw the wall, Cas was sure she'd panic. Whatever slim chance for his own survival he chose—a disabling crash, a jump from a moving vehicle, a grapple for the gun that left the wheel unattended—he'd have to do it soon.

Jade hung on to the older woman's waist as they raced over the hills. Each time she got a peek at the van's progress, she tried to calculate whether or not they'd reach them in time to do any good. Another ATV came in at an angle from the opposite direction, but they had even farther to go.

The flash from the muzzle of the gun indicated a shot had been fired at the other riders. The crack reached her ears seconds later. She held her breath until she saw the other ATV on the rise. The relief was short lived as three more shots ripped through the night, but the bobbing light continued on a steady course. No one had been lost yet.

Suddenly Jade realized that the closer they got, the more accurate her aim would be. And the headlight made a damn good target.

"Turn out the light!" she screamed over the rushing wind into Helen's ear.

The older woman shook her head.

"It's a target!"

It was no use. Either Helen didn't understand the request or she refused to comply. Jade couldn't do it for her since she couldn't reach the switch. Her fingers were numb from the cold, but the phone was the only other way she could think of to reach them. She extracted it from her pocket, gripping it tightly so it wouldn't spin out of her hand and out into the night.

She still had an open channel, so she screamed her instructions once more into the speaker. She didn't even try to listen for a response. She'd never hear it.

Whether she got through to them somehow or they came to the same conclusion on their own, the result was the same. The spot of light that tracked their progress blacked out for good.

Jade returned her attention to the van. It was slowing. She was still trying to figure out if that was good or bad when two more shots rang out. This time the bullets were aimed at them.

"What the hell are you shooting at now?" Cas yelled at her.

Aimee had her arm out the window and was firing across the windshield. Between the blinding flashes of light and the stench of gunpowder that caused his eyes to water, he couldn't see a damn thing.

"Go away! Leave me alone!" Aimee shouted, as if their pursuers would be able to hear her. She unloaded the empty clip and slipped in a new one that she took from her waistband.

Cas glanced to his side, but dancing blue spots hid her mark. Blinking didn't clear them. Or maybe it was that last bump on the head that caused so much of his vision to go dark. Not good. If he passed out, he'd have no chance to save himself at all.

So...this was it. He had to make his move now.

He drove with one hand while he fumbled for the door switch that would release the lock.

"What are you doing? We're slowing down!"

Exactly. The slower the van went, the better chance he had of living through the jump. "This is where I get off."

It took both hands to shove the door open. Without his firm grip on the wheel, the van had no clear direction. The back end kicked up like a bucking bronco determined to throw its rider.

Aimee grabbed at his pants, trying to keep him in the seat. "Get back here! Keep driving!"

But the decision had already been made, his body committed to the act of lunging out of the vehicle. Gravity sucked him down, out of her hands.

Escape.

Impact.

Pain.

Then nothing but blissful, silent darkness.

Jade watched in horror as the driver's side door opened and Cas' body fell out. They were close enough to see him bounce on the hard soil.

“No!” Jade screamed. “Cas! No!”

Helen covered the distance that separated them at a dizzying speed, pushing the ATV to its limits. It seemed like Jade’s whole lifetime passed before they reached him. Jade jumped off the back of the vehicle and threw herself onto the ground at his side. Blood ran freely from several cuts on along his hairline. His left shoulder was dislocated, if not completely broken. She suspected that his list of injuries would get even longer once they had a chance to poke and prod him, but what she feared most was the damage inside that she couldn’t see.

Helen joined her, the ATV idling nearby in case they needed to move in a hurry. But Cas wasn’t going anywhere that way.

“How is he?”

“Alive,” Jade replied as she counted the beats of his heart through the artery at his neck. “Barely.”

Aimee had tossed him out like garbage, then fled. Anger at the thought that she might get away with attempted murder—please, God, don’t let Cas die—burned through Jade’s system like a forest fire.

She checked the horizon and saw the other vehicle break away from the pursuit and head toward their small group. There was no one left in sight to stop Aimee from escaping.

Except her.

She bent over the man who meant more to her than anything else in the world. “I love you, Caspar Milokovich.”

Helen must have caught the farewell in her voice because she stepped between Jade and the van, cutting off her view. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“After Aimee. She’s not going to get away with this.”

“The others will get her. Stay with Cas. He needs you.”

He needed the care of trained medical professionals. There wasn’t anything more Jade could do for him. “I’m better at breaking bones than I am at putting them back together. Take care of him for me. I won’t be long.”

She mounted the ATV before Helen could take the key and took off in pursuit of his attacker. The one who had brought so much pain and suffering to those who least deserved it.

Angry tears blurred her vision. She wiped them away as she chased the van. Up ahead she could see the brick wall, solid and unmovable. Aimee had to see it too.

Relentlessly, Jade pursued her quarry. No doubt there were more bullets in the gun but the crazy bitch didn’t seem inclined to use them. Or perhaps she was too busy trying to muscle the vehicle in the direction she wanted it to go. The van seemed no more willing to comply with her than Jade was.

The wall loomed closer. Jade checked the speedometer. They were doing just over twenty-five but slowing, as if someone had taken his foot off the gas but not yet touched

the brake. At that speed, the ATV could overtake her in a heartbeat but Jade hung back, leery of stepping into a possible trap.

When less than a hundred yards separated the van from the wall, Jade stopped to watch what the desperate woman would do. The van's engine sputtered and choked, then coughed itself into silence, but still the beast lumbered on. Jade couldn't quite figure out what was happening until she heard the string of curses.

Aimee had run out of gas.

And out of luck.

Chapter Nineteen

Showdown

The van crashed into the wall with all the force of a love tap. The wall repelled the attack by refusing to yield. The front end crumpled enough to burst the radiator. Steam spewed out in an evil hiss. The back doors exploded open, seemingly of their own volition, but the side door remained shut.

Jade got off the ATV and pocketed the key in the same jacket she'd been wearing all night. No way would she give Aimee another means of escape. She stood at the rear of the van and waited for the woman to make her next move.

The sound of glass breaking surprised Jade. She'd been expecting the woman to dart out one side or the other. Or perhaps play possum to draw Jade in for a surprise ambush. But instead Aimee was smashing the windshield. She wielded a tire iron and a boot with equal force until she'd pushed out the tempered glass enough to crawl through.

She was going over the wall!

Jade sprinted the few yards separating them and then flung herself into the back of the van. She scrambled forward between the seats, catching Aimee's left leg before it followed her right through the hole. Immediate impasse. Aside from a little useless kicking, Aimee couldn't free herself without coming back inside the van where Jade would have the advantage. Jade couldn't pull her down as long as the other woman had her right leg to use as leverage.

Jade's hands were bloody, as were the jeans she clung to. Her death grip wouldn't last much longer. Where the hell were Boyd and the others?

Though Jade didn't hear anything, something sure got Aimee's attention. A kind of wild desperation flickered over her face. Jade kept her muscles as loose as she could, preparing for whatever move the woman would make next.

"Get off me, you bitch!" Aimee shook her leg again, but Jade clung tightly. "Hell, I did you a favor by killing that dumbass Cas."

Cas, I love you. Please don't die.

Jade drew inner strength from that mantra. Knowing she'd only have a split second to act, she reached up with one hand and grabbed the waistband of the other woman's jeans. Then she let her body go slack, except for the death grip on the heavy material.

Aimee jerked forward when she felt the slight decrease in pressure, but Jade's dead body weight jerked her off balance before she could gain any forward momentum. She fell through the remaining bits of windshield glass and landed on top of Jade.

When her body hit the metal floor, air rushed out of Jade's lungs. Her head didn't fare much better. Since Aimee had her to cushion the fall, her recovery was much quicker. Before Jade could evade her, Aimee pounced.

Digging one knee into her hip and the other into her thigh, Aimee leaned forward to hold Jade's shoulder down while dripping blood and malice. "What would a strong woman like you want with a wimp like Cas anyway?"

Jade ignored the taunts and tried to figure out how to reverse their positions. The doors behind her were open, as was the way forward now. She thought she could push off the floor and throw Aimee out the back.

Assuming that her legs had the strength for that kind of move. She honestly didn't know, when once she'd known her body's limits better than her own name. How perverse life was...that the thing that she once loathed about herself was now the one thing she desperately needed to save her.

"What a pathetic fuck, your boyfriend. He couldn't keep an erection for Dana to save his life."

That's what makes him strong. That's what makes me strong.

Jade sucked in as much air as she could, then bucked, hard. Aimee rolled to the side, but the edge of the driver's seat caught her before Jade could slither out from under her.

In the distance, she could hear others approaching. She just had to hold out a little longer...

Aimee wrapped her fingers around Jade's throat and squeezed. "Too bad you're so stubborn," she said casually. "Johnny could have made a real woman of you."

"Like he did Dana?" Jade croaked.

"I made Dana!" She giggled, a strange laugh, eerily like the one Jade had heard the night Dana had hurt Digger. "She's my daughter. Or didn't your friends figure that out yet?" She laughed again. "Sold the little whore too cheap. Johnny and I have plans to make her pay for that."

There wasn't much time to assimilate that nugget of information. The noises were getting louder.

"Jade!" Boyd's voice carried to her over the sound of his ATV's engine. "Where are you?"

"In here, you dumb little shit," Aimee shouted back. "And I'll kill her if you don't bring that bike to me."

"Yeah, I'll do that little thing."

"No!" Jade cried, though the pressure on her throat made speech almost impossible.

There was another roar of the small engine, and then the sound of crunching gears. Then, as if their minds had been linked, Jade understood what Boyd meant to do.

Suddenly the ATV's headlight came on, blinding Aimee. That was all Jade needed, a distraction. Her fist flew up, clipping Aimee's jaw. She must have caught her tongue

between her teeth because she made a sound like a wounded animal as she fell back. Before she could try for the front window again, Jade backed out of the cargo area, taking Aimee's legs with her. The rest of her followed, with a bone-rattling thump when her shoulders hit the turf.

Now that they had more room, Jade's old instincts kicked in. Aimee attempted to defend herself as blow after blow fell upon her head and torso, but she was no match for a black belt. Jade barely felt the impact of the strikes as her mind was already focusing three or four moves ahead.

"Jade!" Boyd cried out. "That's enough."

No, not nearly enough. Jade, her body numb and her mind a white haze of anger, dropped to her knees beside the woman whose body was now inert. The rain of punches kept coming in a well choreographed routine.

"Jade, stop!"

It would only take one more blow to end her life, Jade was sure of it. A single strike to make sure this evil woman never had a chance to hurt people like Cas and Dana again.

Jade gripped the woman's shirt, her other hand poised to strike, her body frozen in motion as her mind raced. To kill or not to kill? If she took Aimee's life, would she be able to live with herself afterward? Did she want that guilt on her conscience? Could she accept the consequences if she allowed Aimee to live and Cas died?

She was aware of the short man's approach so she didn't flinch when he spoke softly beside her. "Jade? This isn't who you are. You're not a killer."

Right and wrong warred within her. The need to punish the guilty for what she'd done to her, to Cas, to Dana versus the core of her training in which all life is precious. The agony of that decision hurt her more than any of her physical injuries.

Boyd placed his hand on her shoulder. "Let it go, Jade. Let *her* go. You've got better things to do with your future than to spend it in a private hell."

Jade shuddered, let the last of her strength ebb so that Aimee's limp form sank back to the ground and then, with a strangled cry, she buried her face in Boyd's waist and wept.

Chapter Twenty

Loose Ends

There were medical exams, interviews with a thousand blank faces and an entire forest of paperwork to fill out. Every step of the way, Boyd was by her side. Dr. Scott came and went, as did a battalion of lawyers. But Boyd never even stepped outside of the room Blossom House had set aside for law enforcement to use. Not even for a bathroom break, unless she went too.

Most of the business Jade conducted on autopilot. She'd been through it all before, but thankfully this time she wasn't the accused. The long stretches where the lawyers argued over technical legalese gave her plenty of time to think about Cas. His internal injuries and broken bones almost took his life. Miraculously, he was bouncing back from that according to the news Boyd fed her. His emotional health, however, was not rebounding quite as quickly.

Jade wanted to help him, but wasn't sure if she could. She was still fighting her own demons and felt ill-equipped to offer advice. After all, he was supposed to be the expert in putting one's mind at ease. That line of thought kept her occupied as she and Boyd left Blossom House to visit Cas in the hospital.

"It's hard when the doctor becomes the patient," Boyd said, as if he could read her mind. He punched the button that allowed them to enter the rehab ward where Cas was now staying. Instead of continuing toward his room, Boyd steered her into the private family waiting room. For the first time since she'd met him, the security expert seemed less than rock-solid sure of himself.

"What? Is something wrong with—"

He waved her off. "Yeah, of course there's something wrong with the man. He was almost killed a few days ago. It'd put anyone off their game. The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Me?"

"Well, I'm not gonna play nurse with him," the short man said gruffly. "Look, it's a pretty simple question. Do you love the guy or don't you?"

Given the way her heart lurched at the question, the way she'd felt at thought of Cas dying, she knew the answer. But she wasn't going to share those feelings with Boyd. He'd been privy to too much of her life lately. "None of your business."

He gaped for a half second before his face cracked into one of his rare grins. "Bet your ass, it's not. But for the sake of argument, let's say he ranks somewhere above toilet bowl bacteria in your heart."

"Boyd, that's just gross!"

Another short burst of laughter escaped his lips before he continued. "I'm a guy. What'd you expect? Anyway, think of it this way...Cas isn't going to listen to me or Dr. Scott or anyone else from the House. But to hear from someone who's been through it...the guilt, the anger, the fear...he just might pay attention."

Jade dropped into one of the padded chairs with a heavy sigh. "What am I supposed to say, Boyd? I've thought about this a lot, but the only lines I have are the ones he gave me. If he's not going to take his own advice, then why should he take it coming from me?"

"No one said it was going to be easy, darlin'. But you've got the voice of experience. You've taken his advice and you know it works. All you have to do is convince him of that."

Could she do that? Did she have the words? Her inability to talk about her feelings was what had brought her to Blossom House in the first place...

"Hey, if he's not worth the effort, then don't bother trying. It's your call. No one would blame you for walking away after all you've been through, certainly not Cas." Boyd walked over to the door and put his hand on the knob. "Find me in the cafeteria chasing the female docs when you're ready to go."

He disappeared through the door, but she barely noticed. Her thoughts were on the man down the hall. Her brave, strong, sexy, loveable Cas. Walking out on him now wasn't an option. But what the hell was she going to say?

Even the drugs he took to keep his pain at bay couldn't stop his body from leaping to attention when Jade entered his room. His spirit felt lighter just having her near, and at the same time he wanted to tell her to leave him and never look back.

She'd almost been killed, because of him.

No, because of Aimee, that little voice of reason tried to tell him.

That little voice, however, couldn't overcome his overactive sense of guilt. So he greeted her with a tired smile and hoped Jade had come to announce her plans to return to Philly. He would lose a big part of his heart, but she'd been so strong, so brave when fighting Aimee. Surely she'd be better off without him now.

"How do you feel?" she asked as she sat next to him on the bed.

"Fine."

She cocked her head and narrowed her gaze. "Is that the morphine talking or do you just lie about your health naturally?"

A soft blush was the only answer she was going to get to that question. "How did it go with the lawyers today? Have the police released you from their investigation?" *Are you free to leave me?*

"The police are more afraid of Boyd than they are the lawyers. It's a bureaucratic rat's nest of paperwork, but they're pretty happy with casting all the blame on Aimee and her friends."

“So then you can leave Ohio? Go back to Pennsylvania to live with your grandmother?”

“I could, but I’m not going to.”

“Not going to?” Cas had trouble believing that. How could she possibly want to stay at Blossom House after everything that had happened? Her cocoon of safety had been violently ripped apart. “Where else would you go?”

“Why should I go anywhere?” She reached out for the upper part of his arm where the cast holding his broken wrist together ended. “I have everything I want right here.”

“Jade, I don’t think –”

She nodded before he could finish. “That’s right. You’re not thinking now. You’re feeling. You’re feeling like crap because I got hurt. You’re feeling like crap because Aimee came back. You’re feeling like crap because you brought her into Blossom in the first place. And all those feelings are making your head a pretty sad and lonely place.”

Sad and lonely...yeah, that much was true. But he didn’t want her pity either. “You think you owe me? Is that why you want to stick around?”

Her fingers gently ran through his hair. He had a few bald patches where stitches held his scalp together, but she didn’t come near those. Her touch was just...soothing.

“We’re rather uniquely suited to each other, don’t you think? I mean, very few people would understand what we’ve been through.”

“That’s a reason to stay in touch, not to stay at Blossom.” God help him if he had to listen to her liquid sex voice over the phone every day, knowing she needed him but not in the same way he needed her. If she was going to go—and he still thought that was the best option for her—he wanted a clean break.

Her green eyes glittered, as if any moment tears would spill down her cheeks. “Then how about this, you big idiot. I love you and I’m not leaving unless you tell me you don’t give a shit about me.”

“Jade...” The tears began to fall and he wanted to hold her in his arms. Unfortunately his broken collarbone prevented his left arm from moving, and he wasn’t willing to chance bashing her with the cast on his right. “Come here.”

His bruised ribs protested when she shifted to lean against his chest, but he didn’t care in the slightest. He could endure physical discomfort. It was Jade’s emotional distress that he was worried about.

“Baby, I love you too, but I want what’s best for you. Blossom House was great when you felt safe there, but now...” He rubbed his grizzled cheek against her soft blonde hair. “I don’t see how you’ll be comfortable there after what happened.”

“I thought about that, especially the first night I spent there without you. I thought I’d be nervous, unable to sleep. I admit, I had a lot of worries on my mind. But it occurred to me pretty quickly that what really scared me most was the thought of losing you.”

She sat up so she could look at him. Even with puffy, red eyes, she was gorgeous.

“See, Cas, you taught me that what I couldn’t accept about myself was my guilt over taking another human life. That by doing so, I’d become some kind of monster. A creature that couldn’t be allowed near others because I might snap and kill them too. Now I know better. I can control my body even when my temper gets the better of me.”

“Those are good things, but that doesn’t mean you should live with daily reminders of what Aimee and her buddies did to you. That’s why your grandmother wanted you out of Philly, and why I think you’d be happier away from Blossom House.”

Jade shook her head slowly. “No, you’ve got it wrong. What I feel when I look at the damage she caused is courage. Strength. See, now I know that I can control the beast inside me. I can be that angry and not hurt the ones I love.”

She amazed him. She had no idea how truly special she was. “You’ve come a long way, Jade. I’m very, very proud of you.”

“So does that mean you’ll let me stay?”

He hated to quash the hope blooming in her eyes, but he couldn’t lie to her. “Dr. Scott has the final say, but I’d have to recommend against it if he asked me.”

“Why, dammit? Weren’t you listening to me?”

“I was, but there are other things to consider, Jade. You still have some healing to do. To be honest, I do too. I don’t think it’s a good idea to get serious about each other until we’re more confident about ourselves and what we want from life.”

“You think I don’t know what I want?” She got to her feet and jabbed a finger his way. “Don’t answer that. Dr. Scott has already said I’m welcome to stay at Blossom as long as I want. Yeah, I still have things to work out, but I’m not giving up. Not on me and not on you.”

His cock throbbed with longing for the fiery woman standing before him. This was the Jade he’d seen in the first picture. Brave, vibrant and strong.

And, god help him, he loved her. Truly loved her.

It could turn out to be a mistake, but if she had the courage to meet him halfway, he could hardly disappoint her by failing to do the same. “I won’t make promises, but I really want to see where our futures might lead.”

She dropped her fierce look and reached for his arm again. “Just give us a chance. That’s all I’m asking.”

“You got it.”

If there was any justice in the world at all, they’d spend a lifetime together, in love and happiness.

Epilogue

Six Months Later

“Crazy, isn’t she?” Boyd asked him.

“Dr. Scott is the only one who understands how her mind works. I couldn’t even begin to follow her logic.”

“You could have just said yes, you long-winded fart.”

Boyd let the taped session of Aimee instructing Dana in the art of extreme BDSM play on. The fact that Aimee was, in Cas’ opinion, even more messed up than her daughter didn’t matter to Dana. She continued to obey the instructions she was given. At the same time, she’d tried to reach out for help.

To Cas.

That was a real stunner when Dr. Scott had explained it. The messages on the mirror, the picture and the damage to his room. It was Dana’s way of trying to say she was in trouble and hoped he could save her. She’d picked him, the one man who never understood her. Not even Dr. Scott could explain why. Yet. But Dana was making progress, so maybe one day he’d have a chance to ask her.

In the meantime, he had another assignment. One he very much enjoyed.

The cell phone at Cas’ waist beeped. He glanced at the text message. *Hurry home. I need your pen_s.*

“Pens?” Boyd said, reading over his arm. “What the hell is so special about your pens that she needs you to bring them home?”

Cas chuckled. “She won’t use the word penis, although I think now it’s more to tease me than a result of any lingering trauma.”

He smacked his forehead with his palm. “Penis. If she wants your dick, boy, why doesn’t she just say so?”

“It’s more fun this way.”

He stood up from the uncomfortable chair—all of Boyd’s chairs were uncomfortable, another unfathomable truth about the strong but strange man—and took one last glance at the monitors where they’d been scrutinizing every frame of tape they’d confiscated from Aimee’s place before the police did. Dr. Scott was grateful that it had been kept out of the police evidence room, but there were hours and hours of video to sort through and make sure that all of Aimee’s devices had been removed, and that any emotional damage she might have inflicted on other vulnerable souls like Dana had been addressed. That task kept Cas busy these days as he recovered from his injuries, and Boyd when he could be spared.

“You know, if Jade needs help coming up with alternate terms, she should talk to Helen. That woman has more ways to say cock than there are feathers on a rooster.”

Cas raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment. Apparently Boyd and Helen had spent more time together than anyone knew. “See ya tomorrow.”

“You bet your ass you will. Front and center.”

It was raining outside. Cas jogged across the courtyard of R Block and let himself into the campus house he now shared with Jade. Many changes had occurred in those rooms since the day Jade moved in. Most of them within the woman herself.

As he'd anticipated from the message, she was waiting for him in the dining room. Naked. On the table. Her blonde hair shimmered in the sunlight streaming in through the windows. Her green eyes—the kind of vibrant green that used to exist only in a crayon box until he saw her irises light up with a smile—sparkled with desire.

“Dinner's on the table,” she said in a throaty purr. “Better eat before it gets cold.”

Tough love, Cas thought as he stripped off his sweats, could work miracles. But loving Jade these days was nothing but pure pleasure.

About the Author

Kira Stone lives in a warm, many-chambered cave tucked away in the Scottish Highlands. A diverse group of ever-changing characters keeps her company. As they relax in front of a roaring fire, devils dance her delight and angels sing her bawdy songs. Faerie folk often stop in for a cup of mulled wine and to listen to Kira tell passion-filled stories. If you look in the dark shadows, you might even find a sexy human hanging around too. And when daylight turns to dusk, together they somehow find a way to keep the cold, uncaring world at bay for another night...

Okay, maybe not. LOL.

When multi-published author Kira Stone isn't living in a fantasy world, she's writing about one from her ordinary house in Ohio with a few feline companions (who don't sing nearly as well as the angels do). Is it any wonder she prefers the cave?

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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