



Safe

Shara Azod

RaeLynn Blue

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by

Shara Azod and

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Cover Artist: Shara Azod

Editor: Jennifer Puckett

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Chapter One

"Don't look at me, Quent. I don't want you to see me like this."

It took a hell of an effort, but Quentin managed to swallow the rage he felt boiling deep in his gut. There was no place for anger right now. Briony needed him. His hands shook as he gently pushed the hair out of her face. The bastard had really done a job on her; the bruises purple, black and red against the deep russet skin. One eye was grotesquely enlarged, swollen completely shut, bandaged now to help it heal. Her bottom lip had been split, her entire right arm encased in a cast. And yet, to him she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He was going to kill Bobby Ray. Brother or not, that little bastard was going to pay for what he had done to Briony. And all she had ever done was love the worthless piece of shit. At least she had at the beginning. Quentin had watched the light slowly dim whenever she looked at her husband, his brother, over the three years since their wedding. Quentin hadn't believed Bobby Ray was fool enough to hit her though. How wrong he had been.

Bobby Ray had always been an underachiever. How he had gotten a woman like Briony to marry him, Quentin would never know. While their parents had been alive, Bobby Ray had at least made a show of being a good husband. Their parents had loved Briony to death. Since the car accident that had taken their parents from them, Bobby Ray had let it all hang out.

Briony had made excuses, saying Bobby Ray was heartbroken, that he would come around after he dealt with his grief. Quentin had known the truth. Bobby was just

being the Bobby he had been before Briony. There was nothing to hold him back now. Their parents had left Bobby and his wife the modest home they worked their lives to pay off, along with their life savings. Quentin hadn't needed it and Lord knows Bobby was always in need. Taking the advice Quentin had given them, they left it all in Briony's name, which is probably what had brought this on.

"Do you know where he is, Bri?" Damn it hurt to talk. His throat was so dry the effort it took to force the words out grated against the soft tissue of his throat. He had to find his brother – find him and kill him. No one had a right to do this to any woman. Quentin was going to make damn sure no man carrying the name of Beauchamp ever did again.

"He owed some men money," her usually gentle, lyrical voice was painful to hear. It sounded so broken.

Quentin's fists clenched and unclenched sporadically by his side. He wanted to pull her into his arms, kiss away all her hurts, swear to her no one would ever hurt her again, but he couldn't. It would probably hurt her, and then she would know the secret he had worked so damn hard to hide for the last three years.

He was completely, irrevocably in love with his sister-in-law.

He had tried to fight it. He had tried to choke back the jealousy that swarmed him whenever he saw his shiftless brother with the woman he knew damn well Bobby Ray didn't deserve. There was no controlling his wayward thoughts anymore than he could control the raging erection he seemed to develop when he was anywhere near her. Her smile sent his heart racing like a fucking schoolboy; a casual touch of her hand

had his shaft crying precum. Everything about her, everything she did, and it was like a magnet, pulling him in until there was no hope of escaping.

His cock wasn't hard now. Instead, he felt every bit as battered as she looked. There was nothing hot about feeling helpless. Powerless. Collecting her in his arms was out of the question. All he could do was be there for her and pray. Lord, she looked so battered, and all because of his no good swamp rat of a brother. It was sometimes hard to believe they came from the same parents. Lola and Mitch Beauchamp were honest, hard-working people. They worked their fingers to the bone to put their sons through college. But Bobby Ray had dropped out in his first semester. Caught up in a life of drugs and gambling, he would disappear to New Orleans for days at a time, showing up when he needed money.

Then he brought home Briony James.

Baton Rouge may have been the capital city of Louisiana, but interracial relationships were not easily accepted. It had been a shock that Bobby Ray had married an African American woman, but Lola and Mitch never batted an eyelash. They had seen the same things Quentin had the first time they laid eyes on Briony. She was a sweet and gentle soul. She always had a smile for everyone. She never raised her voice, and she never complained even when Bobby Ray moved them into a dilapidated mobile home. She just rolled up her sleeves and made it a real home. She worked two jobs when Bobby ran through the money. And never once did she say a word. His parents knew that Briony was way too good for Bobby Ray. Hell, his mother, a devout Catholic, tried to get Briony to leave Bobby Ray on more than one occasion. Not because

he hit her, Quentin would have killed him long before now, if he had. Mitch would have skinned his youngest son alive had he had any inkling Bobby Ray was physically abusing Briony before Quentin could even think about it though. Briony stayed with Bobby even after finding out the type of man he really was, which baffled everyone. He suspected it was not because she loved him, but because she had made a vow.

That was what killed Quentin most of all. He felt the heat that arced between them whenever they were in the same room, and he knew damn well she did too, but Briony was faithful to a fault. Would he have taken his brother's wife and run off with her? Hell yes! In a heartbeat! But knowing she wouldn't want him to do anything of the sort kept his offer in his mouth.

"Please don't hurt him too bad, Quent," Briony pleaded drowsily.

He had to smile at that. She knew him better than his own partner did. Right this second, Special Agent Tomas Richards was pacing outside the door next to the local cop Quentin had pulled some strings to get stationed outside Briony's door, wondering what he was going to do. Tomas Richards had been Quentin's partner for seven years, almost from the time he joined the FBI. The man knew almost everything about him, but she knew him better.

"He has never hit me before." She was almost asleep now, the drugs finally working their magic. He was glad for that. It tore him to shreds to see her in pain. "He was desperate. Don't hurt him too bad."

She didn't ask him not to hurt Bobby at all, Quentin noted. Because she knew that was something he couldn't do. This would not pass. Bobby needed to be reminded

that if he ever even thought about putting his hands on her again there would be hell to pay. And she wasn't staying with the jackass, either. Quentin would drag her kicking and screaming far from his brother. He would do anything to keep her safe.

He waited patiently until she had fallen completely asleep before placing a tender kiss on her brow and quietly leaving the hospital room. He didn't have to say a word to Richards; his partner fell into step beside him. They didn't speak, not even on the drive to the house that used to belong to his parents. Briony had redecorated – a nice update from the fifties décor, but the place still felt like home. He wanted her to work her magic on his home, the white and beige house in a new development that was mostly empty houses. He hadn't bought much but a cheap couch and a big comfortable bed. How many times had he lain in that bed at night, dick in hand, feverishly dreaming of the one woman he could never have? There was only one picture in the entire place, right next to that big ole' bed. Briony's picture.

He should have felt shame, remorse, something to indicate the wrongness of staring at that picture, his cock thick and heavy. His hand became her warm, wet pussy in his delirious mind. His own groans of tormented pleasure morphed into the sexy, sweet sighs he wanted so much to inspire. And there had been no guilt as he stroked himself off. Only bitterness that he hadn't seen her first.

There had been a time when he loved his little brother, but Bobby Ray had a way of killing the love people had for him. He used and manipulated people. He lied, he stole, and Quentin had still loved him through all of it. But watching Briony wither a little bit at a time, seeing her natural love for life die slowly, that had been the final nail

in the coffin. Those slightly tilted, soul-deep brown eyes used to brim with an inner light any sane man would want to foster, to see it burn brighter had been clouded with sadness for far too long. Bobby had been snuffing out any joy she might have had, and Quentin wanted to put his fist in his face just for that. But he had stopped himself because Briony wouldn't have wanted that.

The yard in front of the house was fast becoming overgrown with weeds. Quentin had caught Briony out here cutting the grass once. Since then, he had tried to come by to do it himself at least once a week. The current state it was in gave testament to the fact he hadn't been around for a couple of weeks. A case he and Richards had been working on had taken up the majority of his time. He had been able to call Briony a few times a week to make sure she was okay, but that was about it.

The call from the hospital earlier today had stopped his heart. He had just wrapped up the case and had planned on coming by after a few hours of sleep. If he had only come by earlier....

"Door's open," Richard's muttered, his weapon coming out of his shoulder holster before approaching the opened door.

Quentin went on high alert, pulling his own weapon before following his partner. He saw the twisted booted foot before Richards, and he knew.

Fuck.

Bobby had been left right near the front door, one bullet right between the eyes. It had been a clean shot, up close. Bobby had known his assailants. The chain remained

attached to the door, not torn off, as it would've been if they'd charged through the door. That meant Bobby had willingly let his murder inside.

The place was in shambles, everything had been ripped apart. Cabinets had been thrown off their hinges, dishes smashed on the floor. No room had been left untouched; they even tore apart the bathroom. By the look of things, whatever they had been looking for hadn't been found.

"Have any idea who did this?" Richards asked, not bothering to offer comfort Quentin didn't want or need.

"Not off hand. Briony said something about Bobby needing money. She wouldn't give him any, so he beat her. None of the low-lives he usually hung with would have the balls to do this."

"Looks like your little brother moved on to a new set of friends."

"Yeah, looks like it." He should feel something other than pity. Bobby Ray was his brother for crying out loud!

The truth was, Quentin had been an agent long enough to know this was where his brother had been headed for some time now. Poor, sorry bastard. He was just glad his parents didn't live to see it. He couldn't manage to work up any grief himself. He was only sorry he hadn't gotten to beat his brother's ass before he died.

"I'll call the locals," Richards offered. "You need to start thinking about your sister-in-law. If they didn't find what they were looking for, chances are they will come looking for her thinking she might have the money or whatever it was."

They had killed Bobby Ray outright, so whatever they were after, they didn't believe Bobby could have come up with it. That could mean a host of things where Briony was concerned. Either they wouldn't bother because they had their revenge on the person who had wronged them, or they would want to collect from her. Quentin's gut told him it was the latter. Criminals rarely took the easy way out.

It occurred to him that he should be looking to find the men that murdered his brother. He should want vengeance of some sort. He should be sad, mournful. Quentin was pissed that once again Bobby Ray had managed to fuck up Briony's life. But more than anything, he felt relieved.

Chapter Two

"You sure?" Briony asked, aware of her lips slurring of the "s" in sure.

She was so numb; she couldn't feel her hands, or her legs. Now she thought she also wasn't hearing quite right. It sounded like Quentin said Bobby Ray was dead. That couldn't be right. The morphine left her feeling sluggish, but maybe it also messed with her memory, her hearing, heck, maybe her comprehension, because nothing Quentin had said made sense.

She lay back against the flat pillow and yanked the scratchy sheet and threadbare blanket further up. Her nipples pebbled beneath her hospital gown and she wanted to fold her arms over their pointy tips, to hide them from Quentin's sexy eyes. Her hunky brother-in-law leaned against the hospital bedrail on her left. He stayed on her left so she could see him. Her right eye's bandage kept that side of the room in darkness. A blind spot. He did little things like that all the time. See? That proved she hadn't heard him right. She would never think of her brother-in-law in a sexual way when her husband was dead somewhere. Right?

He was close enough for her to feel his body's warmth, inhale his scent. She always loved the way he smelled; woody, wonderful, masculine, marvelous all rolled up in one hell of a package. Despite the dull ache shimmering across her body, one very real throb had nothing to do with pain, and everything to do with Quentin's proximity. Her clit acted as a Quentin radar. When he came closer it pulsated more, and when he moved away, it decreased its frenzy.

His allure hadn't lessened now because of the subject manner, if she wasn't hallucinating that is. Did he say someone was dead? Bobby Ray? Her husband? That couldn't be right. She knew Quentin had been angry with his brother, but death? He would have never killed him.

"What did you say?" she asked again, unable to keep out the disbelief from ringing through each word. "It sounded like you said Bobby Ray is dead."

"Dead. Yeah," he replied, gorgeous cerulean eyes burrowing into hers, making her feel exposed and very, very raw. "He's gone."

"Gone?"

Stupid questions. Quentin wouldn't be here telling her the news if he hadn't checked and double checked.

"Dead?" she squeaked.

He nodded.

Dead. She tore her eyes from Quentin's and shivered. The paper-thin hospital gown did nothing to comfort her, to stave off the icy realization spilling over her. It found a home in her awareness, shooting through the light shawl of morphine-induced contentment. Relief, grief, and a strange pinch of hurt whirled in her chest and she tried to hug herself against the rising tide of disbelief. She moved her arm to do just that, but the jolt of her cast made her yelp.

"Bri, you all right?" Quentin bolted upright. Searching the area for the nurse, and finding none, he scowled. He mumbled something about nurses, but she missed it.

"I'm, I'm," she stammered, words failing her again. She wasn't fine, and she wouldn't lie to him. Maybe someone else, but not to Quentin. Never to him. Nothing would be the same. She hadn't loved her husband, not anymore, but she hadn't wished death on him. Maybe a little hurt, but not death. A widow at the age of twenty-five, Briony couldn't wrap her mind around the concept. As much as she wished she were free, this was never something she had contemplated.

A widow.

Quentin stood there, the muscle in his jaw beating rapid against his tanned skin. There was more to it than just Bobby Ray being dead. The tick only went haywire when Quentin held back, which was almost all the time around her. Another terror bucked through her and she sat up straight and gasped. She clasped her hand over the rail, inadvertently touching his, and at once, her stomach clutched hard as it always did.

"You - you didn't," she trailed off, realizing in her horror that she didn't want to know if Quentin had done the job, had killed her husband, his only brother. What scared her more than knowing was the reason he would've done it - for her. No one should lose their lives for her.

"No," he said, gravely. "I didn't."

"Oh, thank God." She fell back to the pillows again. Her swollen eye ached, but no tears came. She dug for sorrow and found only sadness rimmed with pity. Maybe she was still in shock and once it registered, she'd cry, grieve, and behave like a good wife who'd just lost her husband.

A husband she had been more than excited to wed.

Three years ago, when she'd met Bobby Ray, no one could've told her this would be her life. A life steeped in misery and constant struggles. She wore it, not proudly, but with a sense of duty. She gave her vows before God, her momma, and her preacher. She wasn't going to back out of them just because her husband turned out to be an ass. A sorry ass at that, but she couldn't very well go back in time to change her fateful decision when she had said, "I do." Each day she kept hoping he'd return to that Bobby Ray who swept her off her feet, who spoiled her with gifts, entertained her with jokes, and won her heart and commitment with his sweet demeanor.

Each day she kept hoping that he would turn into Quentin. That somehow they'd switch bodies or something magical like that. Bobby Ray had the same inky black hair as Quentin and the same blue eyes, but Bobby Ray's had been watered down from the intense cerulean to a faded baby blue. That is where their similarities ended.

Each night when she closed her eyes, then and only then, did her wish come true.

Her marriage had soured the moment she walked across the threshold and into their home. Her parents weren't quitters and neither was she. How many times had her mother told her marriage was like a war, you had to be in it to win it. Her father had been no prize, but her mother had stayed, raising the children and being a good wife. They were Catholic, there was no such thing as divorce. With determination, she put her life with Bobby Ray together and smiled bravely when he tore it to pieces over and over and over again. It took a lot to keep repairing it, but she did.

Until two nights ago when Bobby Ray came bursting through their house in a furious rage. She shuddered just thinking about it.

"You're cold. Here, I'll get another blanket." Quentin walked over to the closet and grabbed a blanket. She couldn't keep her eyes off his tight buttocks that filled out his pants so darn nicely.

Lord, help me! I'm going to hell, but I so want him to crawl in with me, hold me tight, nestle me against that ripped chest and plant wonderful kisses across my hair, stroking my face.

He stalked back to her bed and tossed the blanket across her, tucking it in like a father would. With swift, deliberate actions, he had the second blanket over her and she felt warmer. From the blanket or Quentin's actions, she didn't know. Her cheeks felt hot, and hastily grabbed the glass of water from her bedside. She sipped eagerly, trying to ease her parched throat.

"I can handle the funeral arrangements, if you want," he explained, leaning on the bedrails again. In this position, his forearms rested on the rails, his hands were laced together and his ass stuck out. "We can use the same place we used for mom and dad's funeral."

His parents. Good people, may God rest their souls. Thankfully, they didn't have to hear about Bobby Ray's death like this. She remembered the funeral arrangements and how sensitive the funeral home had been to the family's needs. She liked the staff. They would do well for Bobby Ray.

"Okay. They were nice people."

Truth be told, she couldn't think around the words – Bobby Ray's dead. Three simple words that sent her world into a complete tailspin.

Quentin walked over to her hospital room door and shut it. The private room cost more than one she was supposed to share, but her brother-in-law insisted she be placed in a private room. He'd insisted on the cop outside her door too. If it was one thing she'd learned about him in all those visits, holidays and cookouts, no one told Quentin no. No one.

When he turned back to her, he walked over to the bed, closet to her and leaned down again beside her.

"We've got to wait until the M.E. releases his body, but it shouldn't be more than a few days."

"M.E.? An autopsy," she shook her head. "What happened? How did he die?"

Quentin sighed. He hung his head, the silence stretched out, devouring her patience, and she wanted to ask again – because maybe he didn't hear her, but he coughed, clearing his throat.

"Someone shot him," he said, blowing out a huge sigh with it. "Murdered."

What had Bobby Ray gotten himself into now? The phone calls, the threatening letters, and the rogue's gallery of uninvited guests to the house all hinted at something illegal. He owed people money. Bad people. Vicious people who hurt and killed people. She'd warned him and tried to tell him to go to his brother, to tell Quentin, but Bobby Ray wasn't having any of it.

If only she'd given him the money.

The trembling started at her feet and worked its way up to rattle her entire body.

"You all right?" Quentin asked again.

She nodded, but all right wasn't even in the ballpark of what she felt inside. Confusion, fear, and most of all, a strange light feeling that expanded in her chest swamped her. Where it came from, she didn't know, and she wasn't all together sure it wasn't from the morphine drip.

"Oh, God," she sobbed, the guilt pressed impatiently against her throat, making it close around the knot of emotions. "I did this."

"What? Bri, listen..."

She waved him off with her good arm.

"I, I did this," she stammered out, nodding to confirm it for him. "I should've just given him the money. If I'd done that, he'd be alive."

"You can't be sure of that. No one can. Bri, BRI, stop, stop, shush, shush," he cooed, taking her hand into his and caressing the back of her palm with his thick fingers. "Shush. You knew him, and you know that if it wasn't today, it would've happened eventually."

Yes, maybe, but this she had a direct hand in. With the money, Bobby Ray could've paid off whoever he owed and been alive. Not murdered.

"Listen, the people that came after Bobby Ray may come back," he said, standing ramrod straight beside her bed. "You can't go back to the house."

She lived there. It had been her home, and his parents' home.

"I will need to get a couple of things from the--"

"No. I've got your stuff, clothes, and your cell phone."

“Really, it’s no big deal, I can stop off at the house, grab a few things, and go to a hotel–”

“Bri, *it is* a big deal,” Quentin breathed, hands clutching the bedrail so hard his knuckles had turned white. “Someone killed Bobby Ray, and those bastards will come looking for you. You and whatever the hell they couldn’t get from him. You’re not going to a hotel.”

“I can...”

“No!” he roared, caught himself, and took several deep gulping breaths. When he’d collected himself, he continued. “It’s a crime scene anyway and it’s sealed until the forensics people have collected all they wanted to grab. You can’t go back there. Period.”

“Quentin...”

“I won’t, Bri, I can’t – no. Damn it, Briony, I’ll not gonna–”

The door creaked opened, and a nurse came strutting in.

“Time to check you vitals, Mrs. Beauchamp.” She was whipping out the blood pressure materials and a handful of gauze. “We’re going to have to redress that eye too. Seeping through a little bit.”

Face flushed crimson, and those cerulean eyes burning, Quentin stood. Releasing her hand, he stepped back as the nurse, who gave him an approving once over, scooted and placed the items on the chair beside her bed.

With his hands in fist, his mouth a slash of fury, he stalked out of the room.

Chapter Three

Briony left the hospital two weeks later. Quentin had been walking a razor's edge. Luckily, he had been cleared to work in concert with the local police on his brother's case. The downside was that there were no clear leads. Bobby Ray had been into a lot of shit, none of it good. Meth dealing and gambling were the simple stuff. Word on the street was he had gotten in with a motorcycle gang out of New Orleans. The gang's tentacles spread all the way west into Texas. Not much was known about them because no one had been able to get a man inside, but they were into everything from running guns and drugs to prostitutes.

So far, there had been no attempts on contacting Briony at the hospital, but the uniform outside her door was one hell of a deterrent. There was no way in hell Quentin was going to let her stay anywhere on her own. Not until he knew what they were dealing with. Yeah, who the hell was he kidding? He doubted he would ever let her out his sight again. As fucked up as it was, he knew once he had Briony in his home, he wasn't letting go. Three years was a long time to yearn for something he never thought he could have. It was wrong, immoral, and twisted as all get out, but he craved his brother's widow, ached for her. While he should have been mourning, he was plotting for ways to get her to stay.

He was a seriously fucked up individual, but knowing that and feeling bad because of it were too entirely different things. Quentin didn't feel bad at all. Bobby Ray's death was sad, but he had been prepared for it for some time. He was just sorry as hell Briony had to be dragged into the mess his brother had made of his life. Yet,

Quentin couldn't deny the opportunity this whole mess had afforded him. As sorry and cheerless as the whole thing was, he was taking that opportunity.

"You know, I can always go back to New Orleans, to my parents."

He wondered if Briony knew she had winced when she said it. She had never talked about her parents much, but from what he could gather, he suspected they didn't have a close relationship. Not that it mattered. Three years was a long time to watch the woman that haunted his every waking second and bulldozed her way to his dreams. It was bad enough she was taken, but being taken by his own brother – there had been a special kind of hell in that.

"I don't think so." He didn't try to cajole or order it. He didn't really put much inflection in his voice when he spoke. It was little more than a softly spoken statement with a wealth of meaning that just couldn't be expressed in a fit of anger or frustration.

Briony paused, her eyes flying to his face. Quentin couldn't hide a slight smirking grin at the shock recognition in her eyes. The nurse had helped her into a delightful little summer dress that tied at her shoulders. She wasn't wearing a bra, but then, she didn't need to. Her breasts were neither large nor small. To his way of thinking, they were perfect; high and round, they would fit nicely in his hands. Her nipples were long hard points, brushing against the light cotton fabric of her dress. He could have been fooled to believe it was the cool air of the hospital room, if only that pulse in her neck wasn't jumping like crazy, or those plump, inviting lips hadn't been slightly parted, or those deep brown eyes hadn't darkened until they looked almost black.

Good, she had understood him.

“Time to go,” he smiled broadly this time, pointing to the wheelchair. Quentin had no intention of making his move today, or anytime soon, really. He did want to get her out this place. Seeing her lying in that bed drove him out of his mind. He had wanted to dig up the brother he had buried without a funeral, without any recognition at all and kill him all over again.

At least Briony didn’t look as battered as she had when he had first seen her here. The phone call from the emergency room had scared the living shit out of him. He had broken all kinds of laws getting to the hospital. Thank God she had used him as her next of kin! Richards had known him well enough to just stand silently by as Quentin had raged. His partner had even waited around through the hours that Quentin had spent by her bedside while she was still unconscious. Right now Richards was waiting patiently to tail them home.

Quentin really didn’t like the situation. Members of the motorcycle gang Bobby Ray had associated with appeared to have vanished. No one had seen them in Baton Rouge since the murder. Most of the time, when a murder goes down, a payback murder, a don’t try to fuck with us or this will happen murder, the bad asses are talking about it, bragging about it, and spewing it all over the place like a dog marking territory. Strange thing about it was that no one was saying anything – period. So damn quiet, even the criminals were mute. While Quentin could travel to New Orleans, he didn’t want to leave Briony just yet. Then there were several odd things about the murder scene. The one thing that bothered him most was that some of Briony’s clothes

had been missing from the house, along with toiletries women usually used. That bugged the shit out of him. He didn't like it one bit. Because of that, he was sending some junior guys down to the Big Easy to shake some trees, hopefully something would fall loose. This way, he could stick close to Briony at all times.

"I can walk," Briony grouched, but plopped down in the chair nonetheless. "I am fine you know. They even took the cast off. Nothing was broken really, just a really bad sprain. I was only here so long for observation – something about losing consciousness once I was admitted."

She said it like he didn't know. Quentin had grilled her doctor every day, twice a day. He'd even threatened the man when she hadn't woken up after twenty-four hours. Even if he had never been able to touch her, hold her, love her openly, he needed to know she was safe and alive. He would spend the rest of his life making sure of that. And yeah, it was a fucked up thing to think, but Quentin couldn't help but be glad Bobby Ray was dead. The boy had brought nothing but pain to everyone who ever loved him.

The thing that really had killed the last vestiges of sentiment toward his younger brother was when Bobby Ray had looked him in the eye and told him point blank why he had married Briony after it had become apparent to everyone Bobby Ray had married far above himself.

"Yeah, she was hot," Bobby Ray had sneered. "I was trying to get in her pants, but the more I got to know her, the more I thought '*Now here is a bitch Quentin would fall head over heels for.*'" For some reason that had struck Bobby Ray as tremendously funny.

Quentin had never wanted to punch him in the face as much as he had at that moment. But Bobby Ray wasn't done. "And the funny thing is, all I had to do to get her to marry me was pretend to be like you! She thought she was marrying my perfect big brother. And she won't cheat on me. I know she won't! Too damn honorable for that." Bobby had snorted as if being honorable was something to disdain. "Now if it were me, I would say fuck it and go for what I want. That's the problem with you!"

Not even when Bobby Ray had stolen their mother's heirloom pearls had Quentin wanted to beat the shit out of Bobby as he had right then. The only thing that had saved the little asshole was that Briony had come outside at that moment.

"Quent? Where did you go?"

Her voice snapped Quentin out of reminiscences of the brother dead and buried.

"Yeah, baby doll, I'm right here."

He felt a slight shiver run through her at the little endearment. He had never called her by one before. He had wanted to, but there was no way in hell he would give her husband anything to use against her. And although he had regularly mowed the lawn or fixed things around the house, he had been damn careful to never be alone inside the home with her. Not only because he had never trusted himself, but because he had never been too sure of what Bobby Ray would make of it. He could handle the wise cracks about pining for her from afar, but he couldn't handle a blemish on her reputation.

"You shouldn't call me that," Briony's voice dropped to little more than a whisper.

Quentin let it go, for now. First, he needed to get her home, and then they would have to have a heart to heart. This was not the time or place.

"I suppose I need to make arrangements for a funeral. Though I don't know who would possibly show up. Bobby Ray had alienated all the friends that I knew of anyway," Briony sighed once they were on the road. She was looking out the window with a little frown marring her brow.

That wasn't going to do at all. There had been enough frowns in her life.

"Already did it," he mentioned casually. He had known this was coming, but he had hoped to put it off for a little while.

"You made the funeral arrangements?"

"I buried him." There he had said it. She might be a little upset he had taken it on himself, but damn it, he knew she couldn't afford to bury the little bastard, and she didn't need the hassle. Bobby Ray never did a damn thing to earn the devotion she had to her vows.

"You what?!"

The screech was definitely not what he had expected. She was looking madder than shit too. Damn.

"Look, Briony, it was a hassle you didn't need, okay? And did you think I would allow my brother to cause you more heartache or headache?" Running his hand agitatedly through his head, he searched for the right words. Shit, what could he say? *Hey, Bri, I'm sorry, but I will never allow anyone or anything to hurt you again?* How corny was that?

So what if he really felt that way.

"I think you should take me to the bus station right now," Briony retorted quietly. Too quietly.

"That isn't going to happen, Bri. Did you really want to stand there while they laid his sorry ass in the ground?" He waited a full minute for any kind of reply. He didn't get one. His foot got a little heavier on the gas pedal. Not that she would jump or anything crazy like that, but the quicker they got to his place the better.

For the rest of the drive, Briony stared out the window with her little jaw set in a stubborn, frigid line. He could almost see the wheels spinning in her head. She was trying to figure out a way to get away. So not going to happen. It would be one thing if Quentin didn't believe she felt the same way he did, but he knew that wasn't the case. Whenever they were in the same room together, the air grew thick with sexual tension. So much so, you could cut it with a knife. She looked at him with the same desperate need he felt whenever he looked at her.

The attraction had been instant and intense. Hell, even his mother had seen it. At first, it had worried Lola they wouldn't be able to fight it. Before her death, she was trying like hell to throw them together at every opportunity. Quentin gritted his teeth when he thought about how often his mother had lamented that a woman as sweet and good as Briony had been stuck with her ne'er do well son. She had wanted them to be together; she'd even had gone so far as to give Quentin implicit blessings to try and take Briony from Bobby Ray.

What a fucked up life they had all led. All thanks to one single cause.

Pulling into the garage, Quentin turned to Briony, unsure what to say but wanting desperately to make it better. She looked so small and lost, most of the anger gone now, and only sadness left. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss that lost look away. She probably wouldn't appreciate it.

"Come on inside," Quentin pleaded softly. "We need to talk. Give me that at least. There are a lot of things that have been left unsaid for far too long."

He almost missed the murmur as she got out of the car. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Chapter Four

Briony had a very good idea of what Quentin wanted to talk about. It was the conversation she knew was bound to happen sooner or later, ever since she had first laid eyes on him. She wasn't sure she was ready for this. Wasn't sure she could handle it along with everything else. It was bad enough she couldn't seem to work up even a small amount of grief for her dead husband. She didn't think she could handle this. Her feet were like stone as she followed Quentin through a barely furnished house, past plain whitewashed walls into a large but sparsely furnished living room.

"I know I don't...I didn't really know how to decorate," Quentin explained, seemingly embarrassed by the Spartan appearance of his home. "You can change it any way you like."

She stopped right there in the middle of the living room, just froze, unable to move another step.

"I can't stay here, Quent." She was unable to make her voice as forceful as her convictions. She sounded like a little mouse. He probably thought her to be one, one of those docile women that waited patiently for her man. "Not for good. As soon as you find out who killed Bobby Ray, I'm going back home. To New Orleans."

To her surprise, Quentin didn't argue.

"Come on, let's sit down," he tugged her down next to him on the couch.

Briony sat, but kept her body stiff, trying to slide away from him. He was just too close. It didn't work. Quentin simply moved with her until their legs were touching.

Those deep blue eyes of his wouldn't allow her to look away.

"Sweetheart, I know you've been through a hell of a lot the past couple of weeks," Quentin began, one hand idly caressing the outline of her ear while his other held her hand in a firm clasp. *Sweetheart, baby doll*, each careless endearment stroked something inside her she thought had died in the reality of her marriage. Bobby had once uttered similar words, but from him it had meant less than nothing. "I don't want to add anymore pressure." Yeah, right. Like being here alone with the man she had dreamed of for the past three years was no pressure at all. "But, Bri, I can't just walk away. I spent the last three years going crazy. I'm not real good at expressing the way I feel, but I want you something fierce. Not just sex, but permanently. And I think you want me too. If I'm wrong, I'll let you go. But look me in the eye and tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you don't want me. Tell me you can't feel this thing between us."

Briony only wished she could. The words stuck in her throat at the fierceness in his stare. His lips were so close, if she leaned forward just a little...

A harsh groan sent her eyes flying back to his.

"You licked your lips," the harsh whisper explained to her befuddled brain. "So damn sexy. Let me?"

Not that Quentin was one to wait for permission he knew damn well he had. His lips descended on her own with a forceful passion that left her breathless. She had always loved the way his lips were shaped – thick and full, a sensual dream. They felt so much better than they looked! Her mouth opened under his tongue's demand, allowing him inside to plunder at will. Her arms wrapped around his neck, allowing

him to pull her into his lap. So good! Her body undulated under his touch, desperate to get closer even though her brain screamed "Stop! Too far!"

"I've dreamed of you like this," Quentin murmured against the quivering skin of her jaw, her neck. "So fucking sweet."

Briony knew she should stop now before they crossed a line, but her body wasn't listening. How long had been since she had been kissed this passionately, or held so masterfully? Never, she realized with a start. Her sex life with Bobby had ended almost as soon as it had begun. Three short weeks after her marriage she just couldn't bring herself to enjoy his touch. Bobby had found his release elsewhere, not even bothering to ask. At least he had had that bit of decency.

"We have to stop." How insipid she sounded. And by the way her hands where clutching his shoulders, her body was stating as clearly stating she didn't want to stop. She didn't. She wanted more!

"Look at me, Briony!" And of course, she did. She loved it when Quentin got all forceful and demanding. Did he know? Could he have possibly guessed it?

"Yes?"

"You aren't getting rid of me. Not when I find out who killed Bobby Ray, not ever. If you want to go back to school, I'll be there with check in hand. If you want to move back to New Orleans, I'll be there loading all our collective shit in the moving van. If you want to climb fucking mountains, I'll be right there carrying your backpack. Unless you tell me you don't want me, I'm going to be here, you got me?"

She could have melted in a pool at his feet right there. Her clit spasmed against the silky material of her thong. The only way to relieve the pressure was to press up against the hard ridge of his erection. They were so going to hell!

"I'm not the woman you think I am, Quent," she felt it only fair to tell him. "I am not the sweet little woman you believe me to be."

"Bullshit!" came the growled reply. He cupped the cheeks of her ass, rocking her vigorously down on his rock-hard length. "You are exactly the woman I think you are."

"But I'm not!" she cried vehemently. "I am not sweet and kind and gentle. I'm not docile or – or –"

"You aren't a doormat," he supplied for her. "Baby, I know that. I never thought you were some goody two-shoes. I could always see the fire inside you. And I want that. Just as you are."

As much as Briony wanted to argue the point, she couldn't. Not when he had captured her mouth once more in his commanding kiss. She was lost in a sea of raw Quentin, and she really didn't want to surface.

How weak she was! What they were doing was wrong on so many levels it wasn't even funny. However, with his hands easing underneath her dress, smoothing along the hot flesh of her skin, she couldn't begin to care. The artificial, air-conditioned breeze did little to cool her skin as it was exposed inch by inch until she was bare before Quentin's heated gaze. Although his hands hovered ever so close, he didn't touch her once she was completely disrobed. Briony could feel the heat from his hands, tempting but not satisfying her need to be touched, stroked, to just once feel loved.

"I had planned to wait," Quentin's voice was low. She wasn't sure he was talking to her or himself at first. When his eyes swung from her body to her face, her breath caught at the raw, naked desire in his fiery blue gaze. "I wanted to make you comfortable here. I had hoped..." he swallowed hard and shook his head. What?! What had he hoped? "I had hoped to make you comfortable with me. I know it is no easy thing for you--"

"Geez, Quentin, I'm not a fucking nun!" As hot as she was for him right now, she was equally pissed. No matter how much he denied it, he still saw her as his version of the perfect woman. Well, she wasn't perfect. She was far, far from it. "Do you think I never dreamed of this? That I don't want this every bit as much as you do?"

"I know you feel guilty because of Bobby," he answered simply, never once looking away. "I know you have felt guilty for desiring me as much I desired you."

"No, Quent, I didn't." There, she said it. Might as well get all out and over with. "Not once did I feel guilty for wanting my husband's brother. You know what I felt? I was pissed. I have been pissed for damn near the entire three years because I was duped into marrying the wrong brother. And yeah, I stayed true to my vows, but not for Bobby's sake, or your parents, or even myself. I did it for you. Because I knew the second you crossed that line you would hate yourself for it, and that was something I couldn't allow."

Quentin was quiet, too quiet. Briony shivered at the lack of emotion that had suddenly descended across his face. Usually, she could read his feelings easily. Or

maybe, he just never bothered to conceal himself around her before now. Dread filled her, washing away all former traces of longing. She had said too much.

She tried to move from her seat straddling his lap, but he wasn't having it. His grip tightened at her waist, his strong hands preventing her from moving.

"At least let me get my dress," Briony couldn't stand to look at him anymore. Feeling shame to her very soul, she didn't want to see the ice in his eyes become disgust.

"I don't think so, Bri." His voice was thicker, deeper than she had ever heard it. It combined all the dangerous things she had always known lurked somewhere deep inside him with something vividly carnal. Her already hardened nipples turned diamond hard, the skin puckering and stretching, sending tiny shards of electricity straight down to her already seeping cunt. "Look at me, Bri." Lord, she loved that tone! It demanded she did as he told her, not allowing for anything less. "Baby, do you think I would have given a flying shit what anyone thought? Hell, do you know how many times I had to talk myself out of driving over to that broken down ass mobile home and throwing you over my shoulder? I didn't do it because I didn't want that burden on *you*. Not because that dead man and I shared the same DNA. He killed whatever familial affections I ever had for him long before you came along. And if you think I am going to let you go because we were both too stupid to just come out and say what we were feeling, you have another thing coming. And if I ever hear you refer to yourself as anything less than perfect," one single thick digit ran along the seam of her puffy outer pussy lips, placing an all too brief pressure on her clit before disappearing. "I will spank

that pretty little pussy of yours until you beg for mercy. And then I will spank it some more."

Briony watched him bring his finger glistening with her own juices to his mouth, she watched his tongue wrap around the finger, his eyelids grown heavy. She heard the moan as if he were tasting ambrosia, unable to pull herself away from his stare. She wanted this man. She needed him inside her now! She surprised herself yanking apart his casual button down shirt, not caring if she ripped off half the buttons in her haste.

Thankfully, Quentin either felt her frantic need, or had harbored the same aching hunger himself. She only gave him enough time to yank his pants to his knees before she sank down on the most beautiful cock she had ever seen. Thick and long, it was pointed straight up, ready for her. Despite the fact she was soaking, she had to work to get him inside.

"Shit, Bri!" Quentin groaned, his head falling back against the couch. His hips punched upward, assisting her in her quest. "So fucking tight!"

"It's been a while," she panted, sinking down a few inches further. It wasn't enough! She needed all of him, like she wouldn't be able to live another day without possessing him completely. He was hers, and damn it, she wanted it! Wanted him!

"How long?" Quentin demanded, not allowing her to roll her hips the way she needed to. "How long has it been, Bri?"

Now? He wanted to talk now? She felt the need to cry coming on. She couldn't possibly have this conversation now!

"Three weeks after we got married! Now please, Quentin -!"

Her plea was cut off by one deep upward thrust. Briony sucked in a desperate gulp of air, her nails digging into the skin of Quentin's shoulders. She was so full! He took up every millimeter of available space inside her pussy, She could feel the hot skin against the delicate flesh of her inner walls, like satin covered granite, he was so damn hard, yet so alive she could feel his cock pulsing inside her. Or Lord, he was so long she could feel him deep in her womb.

"Mine!" Quentin growled, slamming her down on his cock over and over. "My woman, my pussy, MINE!"

"Oh, God, yes!" She always had been. They both knew it.

Briony had to tighten her thighs against him to hang on. Her body was completely under his control. As if caught up in the fever he fed, she rode him with everything she had, rolling her hips and grinding down every time she propelled down on his solid length. Their movements were frenzied, almost spinning out of control as the barely leashed craving they had both tried to deny burst the seams. His lips and hands were everywhere, and she loved it. She loved the way his greedy mouth pulled on her aching nipples, sending her spiraling out of control. She loved the way his hands palmed her ass, squeezing as he pulled her to him, demanding she take every inch.

"I've need this for so long," Briony wailed, reveling in the erotic sensations engulfing her body. "Please, please fuck me, Quent, make me yours!"

"You are mine. You have always been mine," Quentin gasped back at her. "Oh, damn Briony, it's so damn good! Never leave me, baby. Swear it!"

"Never."

As if she could! Her whole body was consumed with tremors that graduated into quakes as Quentin drove her over the edge again and again. She came so hard, and so long, so many times, one orgasm drifted into another, until that was all there was.

“Yes, Bri, baby, milk my cock!” Quentin encouraged, pulling their bodies tightly together. “Fuck yes, baby, I’m coming!”

“Inside me!” Briony demanded, knowing he wasn’t going anywhere, but saying it anyway. “Come inside me. Please, Quent, I need it, need you.”

Oh sweet Lord have mercy, she could feel it! She felt the hot splash of his orgasm deep in her womb, triggering another delicious ripple deep inside her.

“Quent! Oh, God Quent!”

Her head was spinning. If it hadn’t been for his unbreakable hold on her, she would have fallen over. She felt consciousness slowly slipping away, and she went gratefully.

“I love you, Bri,” she could have sworn she heard Quentin whisper as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Five

"I, I ain't sayin' nuthin', man," Tom-Tom sputtered against the rush of the air conditioning. "I dunno nuthin'."

"The fact he said he didn't know anything means he knows something," Richards said, leaning against the two-sided mirror. He shrugged.

"Where the hell did you find this shit for brains?" Quentin asked, scowling at the scrawny, crack addict. Pupils were round, too damn round, and the dark swallowing up almost all of the green of his eyes. Damn it. Should let him dry out and detox in a cell, but knowing this gang, they'd kill him in prison. They wouldn't let that happen. Not before they got a confession.

Tom-Tom had been small time crime forever, but he snitched about all kinds of criminal activities to keep himself from doing seriously long stretches of jail time. Credibility issues rained all over this poor bastard.

"You trust him?"

Richards again gave his one shoulder shrug. "Yeah. The unis picked him up over at Michael's Bar. Bunch of that New Orleans motorcycle gang hung out there, and pimped out a bunch of the barflies for profit."

"Why the uniforms grab him? Drugs?"

"Not this time," Richards said with a small grin. "I put out an all points bulletin on him. He's a person of interest. Seems he pawned some of Briony's missing jewelry over at Samson's Pawn Palace. Idiot used a fake name, but Samson don't want no part of what happened to Bobby Ray being solved, you know. In exchange for us not

pressing charges about the purchase of stolen good, and because of you, Samson gave him up. Cake.”

Quentin nodded. The person in interrogation room four had morphed in his mind into a big pile of shit, not a human being to be respected. This scum bastard had Bri’s jewelry. Pieces of gold and silver that had touched her skin, that she’d put on with her soft, beautiful hands, and this, this cockroach had the fucking nerve to touch them? Sell them to some cheap fucking pawnshop? For what? To feed his next high? He shuddered as the vision of him ripping the head from Tom-Tom’s body crashed through him.

No, Tom-Tom didn’t kill anyone, let alone Bobby Ray. Too fucking stoned to remember his own name most of the time, hence the moniker, Tom-Tom. The stupid ass always stuttered his name out when asked. Not a true stutter, but his crack soaked brain couldn’t quite put the letters together and his first attempt at giving anyone his name was followed up with another attempt. Tom-Tom.

“...So, the unis snagged Tom-Tom. He’d been hanging out there, collecting dust in the corners over at Michael’s.”

Quentin nodded again.

He heard Richards, loud and clear, but his partner had known him long enough to know better than to expect a discussion about it. There wasn’t any need to converse.

None at all.

Tom-Tom was going to tell him what he wanted to know.

"I figured we shake him and see what falls off," Richards said lazily and pushed off the wall. The manila folder in his hand made a short wave before being extended out to him. Props were good for suspects. It also gave Quentin something to do with his hands besides wrap them around Tom-Tom's throat.

"Yeah. Let's do that."

He followed Richards, strolling into interrogation room four with the calm ease with which he did everything. Quentin had watched Tom-Tom shoot up in his seat, wide eyes skating between him and Richards.

"Oh, so what is this shit? Good cop, bad cop?" he pointed first to Richards and then to him.

Everyone always thought Richards was the good cop. His attention to details made him absolutely lethal, but on the surface, he seemed as right as rain and as calm as a millpond.

Looks deceived.

Most criminals didn't learn that before they confessed something important to Richards in fear of Quentin's fast right hook. Not that he ever had to use it on a suspect. The threat alone propelled others to talk.

"No," Quentin said, more than aware of the ice spiking through each of his words. "He's bad cop and I'm gonna-kick-your-ass-cop."

Tom-Tom giggled like an eight-year old girl before really meeting his eyes.

What he saw in Quentin's blank face must've scared him because he fidgeted in the hard metal seat.

“Mister, uh, Smith, I am Agent Richards.” Richards slid in, smooth as butter, “You want to tell me about Briony Beauchamp?”

Though he framed it like a question, Richards didn’t give any hint that he didn’t expect an answer. Quentin walked by Tom-Tom’s chair, barely a breath from touching the junkie, violating the hell out of his personal space. He stood behind him. Sandwiched between Richards and Quentin, Tom-Tom didn’t know who to watch out for, so he kept his eyes on Richards.

“I, I dunno who that is,” Tom-Tom said, and giggled again. He’d folded in on himself. Arms crossed, legs shaking as they rattled against the chair’s side, Tom-Tom scratched idly at the lines marring his ghost-pale skin.

“You sure?” Richards asked as if Tom-Tom had said the weather called for rain. He rubbed at his chin and peered at the cockroach with an expression of an exterminator. “Think on that one and give it another go.”

“Now!” Quentin exploded, making Tom-Tom shoot out of his seat.

“Jesus! You tryin’ to kill me?” he squeaked, large eyes on Quentin, his skeletal hand over his heart.

Quentin held up the folder and grinned that cold smile that said he held all the cards to Tom-Tom’s future. If he had his way, Tom-Tom wouldn’t have a future that didn’t involve a 5 by 6 box and a shared toilet. Rehab didn’t work for people like Tom-Tom, who were addicts because they enjoyed the shit too much. Tom-Tom had lost everything a person can lose, and still, he got cracked out every damn day.

Richards kept on in that same leveled tone. “Briony Beauchamp?”

Tom-Tom tore his eyes from Quentin and slowly sat back down. "I dunno who that is, I told you."

Richards nodded in Quentin's direction. Tom-Tom swallowed so hard and loud, it echoed in the room. Slowly, as if in a horror movie, he turned to look over his shoulder. Quentin kept the greasy smile, the one he reserved just for slime, on his face. He shook the folder and the papers inside it ruffled a bit.

Tom-Tom closed his eyes, giggled, and swallowed again. When he turned back to Richards, he gasped and rubbed his hands on his tattered jeans. After hugging himself, he shook his head and said, "Listen man, I, I don't know her, honest."

"Who said it was a her?" Richards asked, his hands in his pockets.

"A name like Briony?" Tom-Tom chuckled. "Fuck yeah, that's a chick."

"Chick? A chick?" Quentin boomed off the wall. He snatched Tom-Tom's chair, spun it around so hard, the bastard nearly fell out of it and got right up in his face. So close the spit flying from Quentin's rage fell all over Tom Tom's face. "You fucking shit! She's not some *chick*. You tell me right now what the fuck you know, or you'll never see sunlight without the fucking shadows of a chain link fence and barbed wire. And then, you get to be someone's *chick* for a long fucking time!"

"Agent Beauchamp," Richards said so quietly the air conditioner almost drowned it out. "Please excuse yourself from the room."

"No."

"Agent Beauchamp," Richards repeated, using the same quiet voice.

Quentin kicked Tom-Tom's chair and bolted out of the room like a hurricane. He quickly stepped into the neighboring room and took up his spot behind the two sided mirror. Now that he'd rattled Tom-Tom's cage, Richards would extract the information they needed. The good cop, bad cop scenario worked with most suspects, as long as they didn't realize that was the plan being ran. There weren't new schemes interrogation, just new ways to present them.

"Beauchamp? That guy's last name is Beauchamp?" Tom-Tom squeaked.

"Yeah."

"Like the, uh, like the uh, ch-, uh woman."

Richards nodded.

"Isn't that like illegal or something? He, he being in here with me?" Tom-Tom asked, straining to see through the sliver of window if Quentin had really left the area or was just outside the door.

"Illegal? No," Richards answered with the same smooth tone of a guidance counselor or a good shrink.

"But, shit, he nearly took my head off about that, ch-, uh, woman."

"Which woman?"

"The, the Beauchamp one," Tom-Tom exclaimed, his voice raising an octave higher on *one*. "Shit, I can't believe that's him. Him!"

He appeared to be muttering to himself, and not really talking to Richards. Didn't matter, a confession was a confession.

Someone had been talking about Quentin and Tom-Tom had heard it. What? What the fuck had Bobby Ray gotten himself into that involved Bri? Quentin slammed his fist into his open palm, but confessions took time. Trust had to be established, and then, only then, would the suspect give any information to the cop. Richards had a gift with getting people to trust him. Damn guy should've been a shrink.

"I won't be able to keep him out of here forever," Richards said with a soft shrug. "If you don't talk to me, my superiors may bring him back in here. He is better at this than I am."

Quentin smirked.

Tom-Tom's eyes bucked and he shot out of the chair. "No, hell no. I want you." And then to the two-way mirror, "Don't send him in here! I'll talk to Agent Richards!"

Richards gave him an apologetic shrug.

Beads of sweat littered Tom-Tom's forehead and made his extremely white skin seem pasty. He ran a trembling hand through his hair and shook it hard. He wiped his face with his hands and again rubbed his damp palms on his pants.

"Ain't you gonna tape this or record this or something?" Tom-Tom asked, looking around.

"We are," Richards said, but didn't elaborate on the camera's recording. So small most suspects didn't even realize it was in the room, every interrogation was recorded.

Quentin couldn't stand it. He opened the door of the observation room and banged as hard as he could on the door to interrogation room four.

"Richards, my fucking turn!" he roared, though a wide grin was on his face.

"All right, all right. I was at Mike's and this gang came in. A bunch of them out of New Orleans, you know they got the thing where they sound funny."

"An accent."

"Yeah, that. Well, uh, I don't remember, but they were plenty pissed about someone fucking up the supply."

"Supply of what?" Richards asked, again so softly, Tom-Tom had started his next sentence before he realized a question had been asked.

"Cocaine, whatcha think?" Tom-Tom scoffed. "Fucking cops don't know shit."

"You are so right. Fill me in."

"Aight. So, Donny Chestnut, he's in charge, said this guy owed him a fucking ton of money. Fucker snorted a lot of the merchandise, you get me? You don't snort the profits, Donny said. So, couple days later, fuck could've been weeks, the guy comes into Mike's one night, begging and pleading for Donny to give him more time to get the money."

Richards nodded.

"Donny don't give him no chance. Gives the guy to Friday or some shit. Anyway, this fucker tells Donny, he can have his wife. You believe that shit? His wife! Donny tells this dude, he ain't got no interest in more fucking whores, you know."

Quentin growled.

He'd written Bobby Ray off as a bastard, a turd, a fucking waste of DNA, but a slave trader? That ranked below low. He wanted to dig that fucking asshole up and kill him all over again.

"...So, this is the funny shit," Tom-Tom chuckled, eyes shiny with tears. "That dude tells Donny his wife can fucking make up the money he owes him by fucking."

"How so?" Richards asked, and the hard edge bricked in the question.

Tom-Tom missed it.

"You know? Fucking. This dude damn sold his wife to Donny. All the money this dude owed the Don, his wife would make up on her back, on her knees, hell, in her ass!"

Richards stood up slow and deliberate and locked the door.

"Whacha doin'?" Tom-Tom asked.

"Saving your ass from a beat down," Richards quietly explained.

Quentin scrambled out of the observation room and banged against the door.

"Open this fucking door, Richards!" Quentin saw only red; fury stained everything. "Right now!"

Richards stepped away from the door and looked at Tom-Tom.

"If you want to survive to get high again, you need to tell me everything, dates, names, and then go work with our sketch artist."

"Man, I ain't doing shit."

Richards touched the lock.

"You sure?"

Chapter Six

Bobby Ray should be singing a Hallelujah, Amen chorus while roasting from his perch in hell, because there was nothing Quentin would have liked more than to kill him at this moment. It was a damn good thing Richards had picked him up this morning and was now driving him home; he might have killed somebody. The red haze that marred his vision didn't appear to be going away. If he could have dug up his brother and killed him all over again he would.

"Take me by the cemetery," Quentin growled, belatedly realizing his partner had probably done him a huge favor by locking him out of the interrogation room felt immediately contrite. "Sorry, I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"No problem," his partner replied smoothly. "I don't pretend to understand what you're feeling, but I know you. She must be one hell of a woman."

"She is."

That was why he couldn't go home like this; he didn't want to scare her. Briony has been through enough. As soon as Tom-Tom spilled his guts, Quentin was on the phone ensuring that Briony was safe and sound in the home he had bought for her. He knew she had been out shopping to replace some of things that had gone missing, but he knew due to her pigheaded reluctance to spend money he gave her she probably didn't get much. He had planned on taking her shopping for all the things she hadn't bought for herself this afternoon. Now he wasn't so sure he could let her out of the house. Hell, he didn't want her out of his sight.

Quentin could feel the tension radiating from Richards as soon as the slowed to a stop in the stately cemetery where Bobby Ray had been laid to rest. Like every other cemetery in the great state of Louisiana, some of the graves dotting the well manicured lawns sported offerings to the dead, charms to keep the dead in the grave, and even voodoo *gris-gris* mixed in with small statues of saints, flowers and candles. Someone had even planted magnolias all over one grave, which was oddly beautiful – the stark white, delicate petals against the dark green of the lawn.

He had paid to have Bobby buried next to their parents. *What a waste of time and money*, Quentin scoffed looking down at his brother's grave. He wasn't the least bit surprised to find some sick shit had left a freebase pipe right there on the damn grave, along with a mason jar filled with some kind of clear substance. Quentin would bet dollars to donuts it didn't contain water.

What a sorry waste of a life. Bobby Ray had been a cute, precocious kid, but not really bad. Not until that summer between junior high and high school. Somehow, the kid had gotten it in his head he would always be second best to his big brother, which was only true in Bobby's mind. For some reason, he kept comparing everything he did to Quentin, who was three years older and understandably more advanced. Once it had been firmly planted in his diseased mind, Bobby saw Quentin as the sole reason why he would never amount to anything, and blamed his parents for showing preferential treatment. He had conveniently forgotten the reason why he was always in the shithouse was because he was always fucking up. Hanging out past curfew, drinking, taking drugs, skipping school. What parent in their right mind would trust a kid like

that? Yet to Bobby, it was the teachers, the principle, their mother and father, and Quentin himself who were to blame for his attitude and inability to do a damn thing right.

Then Bobby had gone and done the unimaginable. He had drug an innocent into his world of shit.

“You don’t deserve to rest in peace here,” Quentin spit at the ground, crushing the pipe beneath his shoe. “You don’t deserve peace anywhere.” Unzipping his pants, Quentin did the only thing he could think to do other than digging up the body, which he would have done. This place was too good for Bobby. And unmarked grave in a shitty run down cemetery was going to have to do for Bobby’s “eternal rest”.

Satisfied he had done something, Quentin returned to the car to go home to Briony, his future.

“Tell me you didn’t just do what I thought you did,” Richards muttered pulling away.

Quentin just shrugged. One day Richards would understand. Someday, he would meet a woman who made you want to piss on a dead man’s grave for slighting her. Quentin only hoped he would be there to see it. Richards was way too uptight for his own good.

“Hey, baby.”

Briony had no chance to reply before she was swept up in to Quentin’s strong embrace. His lips silenced any attempts to return the greeting, his mouth and tongue

probing, nipping, melting her against his hard frame. Her arms wound around his neck, a soft sigh escaping as he lifted her with two big hands cupping her butt cheeks and backing up against the kitchen counter. Her body went from hot to scorching in a heartbeat, his insistent kiss sending sharp pangs of need through her body. Her hips were grinding themselves against the hard bulge in his slacks tenaciously, seeking relief only Quentin could provide.

“Put your legs around me, baby,” Quentin ordered in that sexy drawl of his.

She shivered as she did as she was told, already panting for him. In the week she had been in his home, Quentin had probably made love to her in every room of the house. He had the uncanny ability to set her off by a simple touch, a word, or even a look. He turned those burning azurite eyes in her direction, sweeping her from head to foot, and she was a goner.

It seemed this time Quentin was opting for the big bed in the master bedroom. He carried her without pausing in his lip worship of her mouth, her face, her neck—anywhere his lips could reach. His hands were removing her clothes even before he laid her down. Not frantically, not like the frenzied rush to feel skin against skin they both experienced the first time. With each layer he removed, she removed one from him, trading a kiss or caress as each new patch of flesh was revealed.

“Lay back and stretch your arms up over your head,” Quentin rasped as soon as he slid his panties down her hips.

His eyes glittered, glued to her freshly shaven mound, a treat she had planned for after diner. Quentin seemed to have a developed quite a fondness for eating her out.

He did it before he left for work every day, when he came home, before they made love, and occasionally just because. She loved every second of it.

“Bri, do you trust me?”

“With my life,” she answered without hesitation, without doubt.

Something flickered in his eyes, something she couldn’t define. Picking up his tie from where she had thrown it to the floor, Quentin crawled up the bed, up her body, allowing his lips to linger on her calf, her thigh, pausing at the juncture of her thighs to blow teasing wafts of hot hair across her pulsating, stiff clit before kissing her belly, the valley between her breasts, and finally taking her lips in a devastating kiss. She didn’t realize until he lifted his head he had bound her by the wrists to the headboard with his tie.

“Still trust me?” he smiled.

Lord, that smile never failed to send her heart thumping double time against her chest.

“Yes.” There was no other answer. Quentin had been there for her from the moment he laid eyes on her. Being tied and at his mercy didn’t frighten her, it excited the hell out of her.

“Spread your legs for me.”

Her thighs fell open, allowing his body to sit comfortably between them. With a hiss of appreciation, he slid one finger down her sodden slit, rubbing the bare lips of her labia.

“You did this for me?” There was a catch in his voice, one that sent more moisture to flood her passage.

“Yes.”

Leaning forward, Quentin ran the flat of his tongue in the same pattern his finger had recently taken.

“Please,” she begged, her hips bucking off the bed.

Damn it, he was deliberately ignoring her clit, sending red hot molten desire shooting through her, teasing her.

“*Shhh*, I’ll take care of you. I promise.”

His voice was thick, so deep. It coated her body like rich honey, making her sticky and wetter. He had a firm hold on her thighs, forcing them open while his tongue toyed with her, lapping up her cream but not giving her the satisfaction she craved. She was a whimpering mass of nerves before finally, he speared her with his wicked tongue, fucking her with it before curling it around her clit and sucking softly.

“Yes, yes, please more!” She was panting, sweat glistening all over her body.

Briony didn’t have vast experience when it came to sex. She had only had one other lover besides her husband, none of it especially great. Quentin worked her like no other. The man made her breathless. He ate her pussy as if it were the most delicious thing he had ever had in his mouth.

“You taste so good, Bri,” Quentin murmured against her quivering flesh. His pinched her clit, before sucking into his mouth once more. “I could eat you for every meal.”

Oh, hell yes! She felt her body tightening, climbing higher and higher toward the inevitable combustion. Her hips moved with his tongue, seeking deeper penetration.

“Do you like this?” He rasped, pinning her with those searing eyes. “Tell me, baby. Tell me what you need.”

“Oh, God, Quentin, please eat me. Put your fingers inside me. Suck on my clit.”

And he did just that. One finger slipped into her soaked channel, his tongue steadily lapping at her juices. Then there were two, until finally he was stretching her with three thick digits, stroking her happy place with each deep thrust.

“Yeah, baby show me how it makes you feel,” Quentin groaned against her sensitized nub. “Come for me.”

She felt a gentle probing around her back entrance. Just a brush at first, then one finger sinking slowly inside, pushing against the rosette of her ass, then a burning stretch before he was buried inside.

“Oh my Gawd!” Her stomach cramped down hard, spots danced behind her closed lids. “Oh, damn! Oh, God!”

Briony exploded from the inside out, her body spasming, burning up even as she flew apart.

“That is so fucking beautiful, baby,” Quentin rasped, the fingers in her pussy still plunging, still stroking. “Don’t stop. Keep coming.”

Quentin had visualized this a million times in his fevered dreams, but nothing could ever come close to having Briony falling apart in his hands. His dick was so hard

it hurt, throbbing to be where his fingers were right this second. Waiting until her tremors died down, he moved up her body, untying her hands.

“Turn around,” he instructed, not waiting for her to do so on her own.

Gently turning her on to her stomach, Quentin lifted her hips until she was on her hands and knees, taking the time to run his tongue down the gentle slope of her back.

Damn, he loved the way her back dipped in then flared out to the most unbelievably sexy ass! He couldn't resist a quick bite followed by a small smack. The move elicited a tormented moan of pure pleasure, making his cock jump in response.

“I love your ass, Bri,” he breathed, cupping the full globes in his hands. “Can I have you there, baby? Would you let me take you here?” His question was followed by a finger tracing the outline of her rosette. Her body shook underneath his exploration, her back arching into his touch.

Not tonight, he sternly reminded himself. She wasn't ready for that yet. But he knew where to get the plugs to prepare her for him.

“You can have me anyway you want me,” her honeyed voice washed over him.

“Aw, hell.” He surged forward, burying himself deep within the snug cocoon he could spend the rest of his life inside. Her walls sucked him in deeper, convulsing against his flesh. “Shit, Bri! My pussy is so damn tight! So good!”

He slid almost completely out, then slammed back as if pulled by an irresistible force. Her cries only spurred him on, inciting the blinding passion already burning through his veins.

“Yes, Quent, please!” Briony egged him on. “Harder! Fuck me, please!”

Quentin was helpless to do anything less. It was too perfect, too right. Pulling her up into his arms he plundered her, driving inside her like a man possessed. His mouth clamped down on the tender skin of her neck, sucking, biting, his hands full of her perfect breasts. Her hips rolled back to meet every thrust, their cries mingling together in a perfect chorus.

“I can’t get enough of you,” Quentin confessed, lost in the haze that was Briony.

“I never want to get enough. Stay with me Bri. Promise me!”

It wasn’t the most romantic of requests, but damn it, he needed this woman. He needed her in his bed every night; he needed to wake up with the taste of her on his tongue every morning.

“Yours,” Briony sobbed her pussy clamping down impossibly tight all around his dick. “Always yours!”

With a roar of sheer male completion, Quentin came deep inside her womb, burying his seed and praying it would take root. But he was a long way from being done. Sliding his still rock hard erection from her warmth, he gently laid her on her back, holding her legs open as he slid back inside.

‘I’m going to hold you to that,” he told her, taking her slowly this time, rolling his hips until he was buried to the hilt. “Always mine.”

Chapter Seven

Briony woke missing the solid warmth she'd become so accustomed to. She sat up with a start, short shiver racing down her spine. She could have sworn she heard the slight creak of the floorboards.

Listening, head cocked to the side, eyes closed, she tried to figure out if the sound was real or merely her imagination. With covers yanked up to her chin, she suddenly became all too aware of her nakedness. The king sized bed felt large and empty without Quentin. The enormous house seemed cozy when he was home, but now, now it seemed too big and hollow. Whenever he left for work, she found herself counting the hours until he returned home. Home. This was the first house she had ever inhabited that felt like home. Shoving the covers back, she swung her legs around to the edge of the bed, stretched and moaned in lazy pleasure.

What would she do today? She didn't have to worry about hiding money from Bobby Ray or cleaning up his vomit from around the bathroom sink after one of his nights out. Nope. All she had to do was figure out what she wanted for breakfast – cereal, oatmeal, or eggs with bacon. She walked to the bathroom, muscles a bit sore from her bedtime fun with Quentin. God, she loved that man.

As her hands touched the door's knob, she paused.

Creak.

There it was again. She stopped listening. Nothing moved, just the continued hush of the air conditioning. Shaking her head, she smiled. Sighing, she mentally

shrugged, breathing deeply to calm her racing heart. Wiping her hands on her thighs, she laughed nervously and went on into the bathroom.

She found herself relaxing as she slid underneath the warm spray of the shower. She had to get to work soon, or else she'd go stark raving mad cooped up in this house day after day. Suds slipped along her body, gliding as Quentin's beautiful fingers had done just minutes before he left for work. Her lips stung from the fierceness of his kisses, and she touched them now, smiling at the memory.

Only the rumbling of her stomach turned her mind away from Quentin. That's one hunger, he couldn't fill. Stepping out of the shower, she snatched her towel and dried off quickly. She glanced in the mirror and noticed how her hair had grown longer in the last few weeks. With a smile, her skin seemed to glow and she set about getting dressed. Maybe she'd go to the store to get new sheets to match the guestroom's décor. One of the stores was having a white sale and she wanted to get the sheets at the sale price. Then she could start the crock-pot for that pot roast she planned to make for dinner tonight. With mashed potatoes, collard greens and a sweet cornbread, dinner would be yummy. She liked cooking and she enjoyed it more having Quentin to cook for.

She hurriedly yanked on a tank top and shorts before the air conditioned chilled her damp skin. With her hair wrapped up in a high ponytail, she looked ready for high school. Laughing at the steam-smeared reflection of herself in the mirror, she picked up her comb to begin working her hair into something manageable.

Excited to get started now that she had a plan, Briony didn't notice the shadow until it was right upon her.

"You sure are one sweet lookin' honey," the drawl sounded grotesquely wrong in her ear.

"Who the hell—" She screamed as the horrific parody of a man came into focus.

A mass of stringy black hair and a kaleidoscope of tattoos and piercings took up the bathroom's doorway. He leered at her from bleary eyes framed by thick untamed brows. A bushy beard shot through with strands of gray obscured half of his face. Black leather stretched over his hulking frame. Muscles and height all tensed with fury. His eyes weren't looking at her a way a man would look at a woman, not even one he hated. Bobby Ray had those same eyes and it made her heart beat fast in her chest.

God, help me.

"Take, take what you want," she said, body quivering inside, her mind whirling for solutions and escape routes. The big brute of a man with his overly hairy arms reached for her, and she quickly bounced out of his reach, leaping onto the closed toilet seat. "I have money, jewelry, a new entertainment system. Take it! Just take what you want."

"Oh, I am. See, I gotta collect on what your husband owed me, and he didn't lie about how fuckin' good lookin' you are."

"What? Bobby Ray is dead!" she gasped. Shit, shit, shit! She had to do something! Snatching up the toilet brush, she swung it at him. It caught his arm, not doing much damage. He simply swatted it across the room.

"I know, sweet cheeks. I killed him."

The next thing her hand landed on was much more solid. The mop pole felt good in her hands. She swung like it like a MBA slugger.

Whack!

"Ah fuck! Ow! Ow! Fuck!"

"Get the hell out of my house!" she swung again, but this time he grabbed the end of it in his enormous hands. He wrenched it from her and threw it aside.

Fear's icy fingers clutched her heart and plunged into her stomach. She couldn't breathe, and her world tilted on its axis. This man killed her husband, not that he was much of one, but she had never wished him dead. And she had every reason to! If he could kill just because Bobby Ray owed him money....

What the hell was he doing here? Oh, God what had Bobby done?

He lunged into the small space, eyes all crazy and ferocious, like he meant to shoot heat vision with them. Terror shoved her backward as she scrambled off the toilet seat and into the tub, running as far as she could, but too quickly the walls closed in. She slipped on the slick, wet surface and nearly fell. She grabbed hold of the towel bar and pulled herself up.

"Get the hell outta here!" she screamed and picked up the first thing her hands landed on – a brush, and threw it at him.

She wasn't going to let him kill her. She would scratch out his eyes first.

It smacked him square in the face.

The bastard didn't even blink.

“Come here!” He grabbed for her with his beefy paws, determination setting his mouth in a thin line.

“Let go of me!”

Oh, hell no. she was not about to let this fucker get his mitts on her! She kicked at him.

His hot breath brushed her face and she gagged on reflex. Smoke, soured beer and food on his breath made her sick to her stomach, but she couldn’t throw up. She had to get out of this bathroom and down the stairs.

The alarm! How did this waste of oxygen get past the security alarm? She didn’t hear it go off, and surely Quentin set it before he left. He swung, shattering the mirror over the sink with his fist. Shards of glass rained over the porcelain. With her heart in her throat, Briony kicked out as hard as she could.

“Take that you fat bastard!” she spat and kicked again, and again, her legs becoming dual weapons.

Fast, too fast, his hand wrapped around her ankle and yanked her to him. With her free leg, she lifted it up and smashed it into his balls as hard as she could muster.

“Fuck!” he bellowed, dropping her ankle like a hot poker. He bent over where she’d successfully nailed him in the nads. She didn’t even pause before kicking the side of his face.

Briony slid her legs out of his reach, scrambled to her feet and kicked again. He tried to block it, but it caught him in the neck. The next one caught him in the face once more, and sent him careening backward through the doorway.

Finally.

She leapt over him, using her adrenaline to propel her forward. He snarled from behind her. Without looking back, she ran, as fast as she could out of the bedroom, down the stairs and right into the living room.

“Get back here, bitch!” he roared.

She heard him panting behind her, but nothing would stop her reaching that door and Officer Gomez. She’d managed to clear the stairs when a great weight fell on her, forcing her to the carpet.

“Gotcha!” he bellowed, laughing and wrestling her arms behind her. “Fuckin’ johns gonna like your spicy ass.”

“Get off of me! Help! Help!” He was too big! Too strong!

He locked one of his meaty arms around her neck and lifted her as if she weighed nothing at all. His other hand was so large he kept both her wrists in his grasp. She beat against his hands, his face, she struggled, she shouted, and she even tried to bite him, but he laughed.

Laughed! He found her terror amusing.

“Let go, you bastard!”

Briony smacked at his hand, and kicked with her legs. Hissing in pain, she clawed at the smelly and hairy arm at her throat. He yanked tighter and the pressure on her windpipe made her vision blur.

“Scream all you want. That damn cop is deader than a doornail. He ain’t hearing shit.”

That stilled Briony's frantic movements. Officer Gomez had two little girls and a fantastic wife who made tasty enchiladas. This guy wasn't playing and she was wasting her time trying to fight him. She had to defeat him using her brains. *Think, Bri, think!*

"But I am," came Quentin's voice, as chilly as the Arctic sounded from behind them. "Get your fucking hands off her!"

Briony sagged as relief washed through her.

She knew that tone, and really it was too bad the funky smelling bastard didn't because if he had, he would know to just let her go. No one told Quentin no. She'd heard him use that same tone with Bobby Ray it always lead to disastrous effects – for Bobby Ray.

In seconds, she was whirled around to face him. The fuzz-covered arm tightened even more and she squeaked. Again, she buried her nails into his thick flesh, but he didn't let go. Her eyes met Quentin's for a brief second before he put them back on her attacker.

"Are you deaf and stupid?" Quentin asked, eyebrows crouched down, his lips a flat line of fury and his weapon, unwavering and pointing directly at them.

"You ain't gonna shoot little miss piece of ass," the bastard rumbled out, chuckling. "You FBI types are all the same."

Quentin smirked, a cold partial rise of his lips.

"No, we aren't."

Briony had no idea where the loud firecracker sound came from. She didn't see smoke, but then, she couldn't really focus at the moment.

“Uhm,” the bastard grunted. She was suddenly propelled backward, the massive arms loosening their grips on her.

“Ah!” she screamed, but before she hit the ground, steely arms were pulling her up into safety in arms not at all frightening, but full of comfort and love. Quentin.

“Come here, baby,” he said against her ear.

She was already there, melting into her own personal safe haven, zipped into his embrace. She noticed Richards coming in from the kitchen’s archway, his gun at his side. Behind Quentin, the fat bastard who attacked her lay sprawled, glassy eyes that were once wild had blanked in death. He stared blindly up at the ceiling not moving.

“Don’t look, baby,” Quent said, guiding her head to his chest and hugging her close to him. “Come on, let’s go outside.”

Numb, Briony burrowed further against him. She shuddered and it didn’t stop. She snuggled into Quentin’s embrace and she knew she’d be all right. He was here. Everything would be all right.

Chapter Eight

There was no way in hell Quentin was letting Briony out of his sight. The close call had scared him shitless. How had they found out where he lived? How the hell was he supposed to keep her safe with the fearless assholes breaking into the house? His first thought was to get Briony to a safe house, somewhere far away from this shit. The problem was, if she was out of sight, there was nothing to draw them out.

"Think, be sensible," Richards had urged. "She is the only thing we got."

"There is no fucking way we are using her as bait," Quentin shot right back.

"Not. Gonna. Happen. She's been through enough. I won't put her through this shit."

In the end, they had come up with a somewhat workable solution. The Bureau had rented out one of the many empty houses on the block for Quentin and Richards. There, they would keep watch on Briony, while an undercover was stationed at Quentin's place with a black and white outside. There were three other houses on the block, all manned by agents; hell the uniform in the black and white was an undercover agent. Quentin just couldn't trust the local police with this. It was too damn important.

It had been two days and no sign of other gang members. They weren't stupid. They were waiting for the heat to die down before making another move. Quentin had the feeling this time they wouldn't be sending in just one.

"I'm taking Bri out shopping," Quentin announced to his partner. She was understandably suffering from a little cabin fever, plus with Richards so close, she had been somewhat reserved in the bedroom.

"I'll shadow you," Richards stated, putting down the morning paper.

As much as Quentin wanted to take him up on the offer, Richards needed a break from them as much as they did from him.

“Naw, I’ll get one of the others to do it.”

“Sure,” Richards nodded, reopening the paper.

Quentin watched him, waiting for him to move, make plans, something. But no, his partner sat right there at the cheap kitchen table.

“Don’t you have somewhere to go? Something to do?” As much as Quentin appreciated Richards being around, the man seemed to have no life. He lived, ate, and slept the job.

“I’m doing it.” Richards quirked a brow, but didn’t turn from his paper. “Go take your woman shopping.”

In the past, the rib might have gotten Quentin riled, as was his partner’s intent. Now, Quentin just felt a little sorry for the guy. For the past three years he had been wallowing in his own personal hell so deep, he hadn’t seen what a lonely sad sack his own partner was. Before Briony, they would meet at one of their houses, depending on whose turn it was to drive, spend the entire day together, then spend a few hours at a local bar hanging out with equally as lonely cop types.

Quentin had been able to identify what ailed him. Briony in his life now made him acutely aware of all he had been missing for so long. Guys like Richards never even realized what they were missing because they had never seen it, and couldn’t fathom being with someone, really with someone.

Shit, he had it bad to be thinking syrupy shit like this.

Briony breezed into the kitchen, pecking Quentin lightly on the lips before nodding in Richards's general direction. She never touched the other man, a thing Quentin greatly appreciated. He would hate to have to kill his partner. He liked the guy.

Quentin pulled her into his arms before she could go about her normal routine of cooking everyone breakfast. "Don't even think about cooking. I'm taking you out for breakfast, lunch, and maybe dinner. Maybe we can even pick up Richards a sense of humor in the form of a hot little package. A redhead maybe to keep him on his toes."

"I can't believe you just said what you did with a straight face," Richards was staring at him visibly appalled.

Quentin merely shrugged. "Wait and see. If you're lucky, one day you'll understand."

Shopping was easier than Quentin had thought. He had steeled himself, bringing along a good mystery he had yet to crack open. Even though he had given her money to buy new things before, in typical Briony fashion, she had used the bulk of the money for things around the house he hadn't realized he needed, like pots and real dishes. For herself, she had gone to a discount chain supercenter and bought the basics, and not much else. That just wasn't going to do. Briony had been making due for a little too long. It was time to splurge a little.

It was actually fun helping her pick out things of far better quality than the sweats and jeans she had allowed herself. She had protested everything from the price

of the clothes, to the futility of buying more than she needed, but Quentin was adamant. If anyone deserved a little spoiling, it was Briony.

“Try this on for me,” Quentin grinned wickedly, holding up a little scrap of nothing. It was supposed to be a dress, maybe, nothing more than an oversized scarf with thin straps to tie around her neck.

“Um, and where would I wear that?” Briony looked at the dress as if it were a snake. “I can’t see myself going in for job interviews wearing that. I wouldn’t go to the corner store wearing it either.”

Yeah, damn right she wouldn’t! Behind closed doors however, that was another thing entirely.

“Please? Just try it on. You can wear it around the house.” She looked skeptical, but he could tell she was weakening. “You can wear it just for me.”

Shaking her head, she grabbed the fragment of material from his hand, stomping off toward the dressing rooms. Quentin stomped right behind her. Apparently, he had some kind of shopping fetish because he was sporting one hell of a hard on. There was just something about watching Briony posing in the clothes she tried on that turned him on. He loved to watch the way different materials clung to various parts of her body, especially if it was tight over her ass.

It wasn't that he hadn't made love to her in the two days they were stuck in the house with Richards, it was just that Briony had been a little uptight and way too cautious, fearing his partner would hear them. He just didn't have the heart to tell her Richards knew good and damned well what was going on when they disappeared

every night around eight o'clock. Making love to Briony was always beyond fantastic, but he knew that in the back of her mind, she was conscious of always being quiet or not making the bed squeak too much.

At some point during their day at the mall, Quentin had decided two could play that game. He wanted to see just how quiet she could be. It was a good thing malls weren't all that busy midday in the middle of the week. There was no one to witness him slipping into the tiny cubicle with her.

"Quentin! What are you doing?" Briony jumped as he pushed his way inside.

Damn these things were tiny!

"I thought I would help you," he lied, a grin of pure deviousness on his lip. "You might need help with your zipper."

"I'm wearing a dress, Quent."

"Ummm..."

He didn't bother to reply, letting his fingers do the walking; he slowly pulled the sundress up over her head, making sure the light fabric brushed across her skin as much as possible.

"Quent!" It wasn't really a complaint this time, or even an admonishment. Quentin smiled against the smooth skin of her shoulder as he plucked at her nipples.

Briony had exquisitely sensitive breasts. Sometimes, he could even make her come just by showing them proper attention. It was a heady thing to watch his woman come from the things he did to her. He wanted to see that look of unabashed passion on her face every damn second of the day if he could.

Turning her in his arms, Quentin buried his head in the valley between her breasts. She always smelled so good! The light floral scent of her perfume mixed with her natural scent was beyond intoxicating. His mouth watered just thinking about the globes filling his hands. Her body shuttered slightly as he pressed her mostly nude body against his fully clothed frame. He needed two mouths and four hands to do any kind of justice to Briony's lush figure. He wanted to be everywhere at once! Inside her, tasting her, feeling her.

A minute cry escaped when his hot mouth closed around one taut nipple. He loved that sound; equal parts surprise even though she knew it was coming, and delight, which he always wanted to inspire. He added teeth to the suction of his mouth, not hard, just a little edge, the way he was learning she liked. He used one hand to apply equal attention on the other mound while busily delving inside her scant panties.

Ah, nice and wet. His fingers slipped past the lips of her slit, coated with her delicious natural juices. Despite the copious flow of her honey, her pussy still gripped his questing fingers tightly.

"Oh, damn!" Briony whispered harshly, throwing her head back to lean against the dressing room wall. "Yeah, Quent, right there!"

"*Shhh*, baby. You don't want anyone to hear us do you?" Quentin couldn't give a flying fuck whether or not anyone heard them. The only thing he cared about was right here in his arms.

Sliding down the front of her body, he hooked his fingers into the side of her underwear and slid them down with him. The smell of their combined lust flooded the

small area, fueling Quentin's already growing need. His cock was pounding painfully against the crotch of his jeans, but he was determined to make Briony come before burying himself ball deep inside her tight sweetness. He loved gliding into her core before the spasms of a good orgasm died down. Her walls sucked him right in, welcoming him with thousands of tiny kisses.

Groaning in anticipation, he placed one leg over his shoulder and buried his face between her thighs. He thrust his tongue deep inside, savoring every nuance of her sweet, spicy goodness. This succulent pussy was an addiction he would never get over, nor did he want to. He ate her like a man possessed, desperate to lap up every drop of the dew falling on his tongue.

"Quent! Oh God, I'm going to come!"

Her fingers gripped his hair, pulling him closer as her hips rolled, pressing deeper into his mouth. He could feel precum leaking from his shaft as if the organ was mimicking the actions of her quim.

"Come for me, baby," he growled against her, unwilling to pull away. "I want every drop in my mouth!"

Her body tensed, her clit throbbing against the flat of his tongue. Her orgasm flooded his mouth, just as he had instructed. His eyes closed savoring the taste, a soft hum emitting from the back of his throat. The vibrations made her jump then clench down, coming even harder.

"Quent! Oh, damn, Quent!"

All pretense of being inconspicuous flew out the window. Quentin's pants were down before he had fully risen to his feet. Grasping both thighs, Quentin drove into her core in one single thrust.

"Yeah, baby, you feel so fucking good all tight and juicy," he groaned, burying his head in the crook of her neck. "I love being inside you, Bri. My pussy is so damn good!"

Her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms around his neck. He loved the way she gave her body over completely, trusting him to take her there. He cupped the generous cheeks of her ass, leaning her back against the wall as he powered inside, driven to a state of near frenzy by her sexy little sighs sounding in his ear. Anyone walking by would know what was going on in the changing room, but Quentin couldn't stop even if he tried.

"Quentin, please," Briony huffed, digging her feet into his plunging behind. "I'm going to come again! Oh, shit, Quent I can't hold back!"

"Don't hold back!" Heaven help him, he couldn't hold back either. "Give it all to me, Bri. I want everything!"

Their lips met in a frenetic kiss, the movement of the bodies clashing together in wild abandon. Tongues interlaced, hands clutched; Quentin felt the powerful wave of climax building ever bigger inside.

"Come now, Bri baby!" he couldn't hold on any longer. His balls tightened painfully, burning in the need for release. Her walls clenched down, sucking his seed out of him with a force of a freight train. Quentin had to clench his teeth to keep from

roaring his pleasure to the whole damn department store. "Fuck yeah!" he ground out through gritted teeth. "Milk my cock, baby. Just like that."

Briony's answering cry wasn't phrased in coherent words, but it was the sweetest, most perfect thing he had ever heard. Her legs drew him even closer, their torsos mashed against each other. Perfection. If he lived a million years, Quentin would never feel as complete as he did in Briony's arms.

"Um, you taste like pussy," Briony laughed softly as Quentin rained light kisses on her supple lips.

"Of course I do," he murmured, helping to dress her, not even bothering to resist tasting bits of flesh here and there. "Bri pussy is my favorite meal."

Neither was surprised at the knowing, sly look from one clerk, or the pursed lipped disapproval of the woman's co-worker as they paid for their purchases. Quentin refused to be the least bit ashamed of his actions. He was a man in the deep end of the pool. It had been a miracle he had held out as long as he had.

The dress was never tried on, but Quentin bought it anyway. Whenever she wore it, he would remember today with a smile.

Chapter Nine

"Talk."

Richards's throat dried moments after the word left his lips and he couldn't gather any more, just that single one. He coughed hard to clear the thick lump in his arid mouth, but all he could manage was a wheeze. Damn it. Damn it all to hell, because that's exactly where he was going if he screwed this up. Quentin would never forgive him, and what was worse was that he'd never forgive himself if anything happened to Briony.

The petite beauty, Cecile Morel according to the mile long rap sheet, was seated beneath the harsh interrogation room lights. She smirked at him, hitching her cute chin up and thrusting her full, fabulous tits out like a damn offering.

Stop! Fuck! Focus! Briony and Quentin are depending on me.

"I already told the dumbass on the 1-800-Crimestoppers line," she said, meeting his eyes. "Don't you yahoos record that or something?"

"Tell me again," he replied evenly. Or he hoped it voice sounded smooth and even. He couldn't quite make the sliver of heat disappear, but he managed to sound like she didn't get all under his skin. Normally he didn't talk much, but the woman – criminal – seated at the table stole his concentration as smoothly as she did diamonds, priceless art, and high-end merchandise.

He could pretend all he liked. And in interrogations, it was all pretend. He and Quentin performed like actors all the time, anything to get the confession, the information, the scoop. Yes, he could do this. He'd been doing it forever.

The problem was that nothing about the voluptuous woman in front of him was fake, including what her very presence did to him. Even in the spare and somewhat clinical environment of this box of a room, she glowed, a flower in the desert. Silky dark brown hair with caramel highlights sprinkled throughout, full mahogany lips, and smooth, flawless skin the color of the most exquisite dark chocolate stretched over a curvy frame no taller than five feet and a handful of inches.

And he hated it.

A thief. That was all she was. He has to make himself think of her that way. He couldn't allow himself to dwell on how wonderful and deliciously moist her lips appeared against the brush of dark brown hues of her skin. Or how her soulful eyes melted his cool calm.

No. He couldn't allow himself to see any of those things.

But she is.

"You want the reward money?" he asked, unfolding his arms and crossing the short distance to the table where she sat. "Then start singing."

"I did my part earlier."

"I say when you've done your part," he snapped. He'd grabbed the table's edge so hard his knuckles were white. This close to her, her perfume assaulted him, and the soft floral fragrance stirred his cock, making it throb. He swallowed again and tried to concentrate on the job. He had to get the information she told Crimestoppers and he needed now. "So, start from the beginning and tell it to me again."

She glared at him, those pools of dark cocoa flashing. If he pushed too hard she could walk out of the room, and he'd lose everything. That couldn't happen. Quentin would kill him and he owed it to Officer Gomez's family to find the person who slaughtered him.

"You're protecting a cop killer," he said, rolling his hands into fists. His fingernails bit into his palms and the brief pain pushed back against his lust – for now. "I can charge you with aiding and abetting, conspiracy to commit murder and a whole host of things."

She tossed back her hair and unfolded her arms. Sighing as she rolled her eyes.

He waited, but couldn't help licking his lips at the sight of her creamy neck. What would she taste like? Honey? Warm melted chocolate? The urge to lick and kiss the slope of her neck, from collarbone to ear burst forward in him so hard, his hand already reached for her.

She glanced at his outstretched hand.

"You want to shake on it?" she asked, arched eyebrow rose in question. "Or is this the beginning of police manhandling?"

"No, no," he stammered. "Just, get on with it."

He shoved his hands into his pockets and went back to the wall adjacent to her. Being in her personal space trapped his hormones. Thankfully, his erection had vanished or he wouldn't have been able to move from the table's shadow. He balled his hands into fists inside his pockets and again the brief pain gave him some clarity, but not much.

“Fine. For you, Agent Richards, I’ll tell it again.” she purred, running her long, painted fingernails across the swell of exposed cleavage. “Yesterday, I was at the mall...”

“Why were you at the mall?”

“Uh, I was looking for someone.”

“Who?”

“Look, do you want me to tell you this or what? I’m feeling a little bit like a suspect, and you know what? I’m not. I’m a good citizen,” she said, and crossed her legs.

His brain blanked at the flash of black lace between her legs, but then it was gone.

Damn. Focus. Had to focus...

“Let’s be clear about one thing,” Richards said, pushing himself off the wall.

“You’re not a good citizen. A good thief, but citizen, no.”

“You don’t know shit about me,” she shot back and slowly got out of her chair.

“So you can read a police file. Whoop-de-do. But that don’t tell you anything about me.”

No, it didn’t. And Richards realized he wanted to know more about her. What did she eat for breakfast? What did she look like in a red, lace teddy? Or were the black lacy panties she wore now thong? V-string? Crotchless?

“Excuse me? Hello! Do you want this information or not? To be honest, it isn’t worth all this to me.”

She glared at him, hands on those delectable hips, daring him to deny it. Damn, when she looked all pissed off like this, the only thing he could think about was how similar she would look when an orgasm shot through her. Would her eyes squint up like that? Would her breathing heave in pleasure as it did now in irritation?

Fuck!

And that was all he wanted to do with her right then and there. Slam her down on the table, and taste all the delights she kept hidden under the tight ass miniskirt and tee-shirt. She stirred his hunger with those delicate hands. He could almost feel the supple flesh of her hands wrapped around his ever-increasing cock.

His phone beeped then and he jumped. She laughed and then sat back down in the chair.

He glanced down at the number. Quentin. Back to business. Pulling his head out of the gutter and away from the carnal hunger she created in him, Richards cleared his throat, put his agent face back on and got down to work.

"I apologize, Miss Morel. Please start again."

Puzzlement appeared on her face, but only for a moment. Then she said, "All right. I was at the mall yesterday and I was looking for Binky Benton."

Richards wrote down in his notepad the name and a question mark. He wanted to ask her about who that was later, but right now, he didn't want to interrupt.

"...and Binky was there casing the jewelry store at the corner between the Ruby Tuesday and the Gap. But he wasn't..."

Richards wrote down the description of the jewelry store. No doubt Miss Morel was there checking out her competition, though mall stores weren't her normal hit according to her rap sheet.

"...following these two people. I thought Binky meant to, you know, mug them, but he didn't. He kept on following them as they went from store to store, all sneaky and weird. It wasn't until the couple was at the food court that I saw her."

"Her? Who?"

"The woman from the news. That Mrs. Beauchamp. Her husband was found dead a few weeks back and then someone tried to kill her. All over the news. A local celebrity. That's when I put it together. Binky Benton was following her, and it clicked."

Richards grew still.

"Miss Morel, tell me what you put together."

This was the linchpin, the thing that could break the case wide open. His blood slowed and his heart beat didn't speed up, but instead beat out as if in slow motion. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Her eyes grew wide as she rubbed her arms as if cold.

"Listen, I told you all I know..."

"What did you put together?" he asked again, and he noted the chill in his voice. This was what she didn't tell Crimestoppers. Would she tell him? He had to get that last nugget of information.

She shuddered and looked away from him.

"Humor me, Miss Morel."

“They’ll kill me. And honestly, this isn’t my worth my life,” she said, barely above a whisper. “I can’t spend the reward if I’m dead, Agent Richards. Just pay me and I’m good as gone.”

He didn’t want her gone. He wanted her pressed tight against him.

Damn! What the hell was the matter with him?

He walked over to the table, sat down across from her and leaned in on his elbows. A rush of heat erupted across his body, but this time he didn’t fight it.

“Miss Morel, I would never let anything happen to you,” he said. He hadn’t realized it until the words had been spoken, but he meant them.

She bristled, squirming in her seat, before bringing her eyes up to meet his.

“We will protect you,” he said, meaning every single word.

“You?”

“Me.”

“Why?” she asked. “I’m a thief.”

A thief.

A criminal. What the hell was he doing?

He blinked, reeling back from the pull of her gaze. He’d nearly lost himself there.

“Why? Because we need your testimony,” he said, a bit harsher than he intended. He got up from the chair and brushed invisible lint from his suit. “The reward money is only awarded if the tip leads to the capture of the individual or individuals responsible for the crime.”

She scowled at him and rolled her eyes and tutted in disgust.

“Okay. Whatever,” she said and then a smirk inched across her mouth. “I tell you on one condition.”

“Yes?”

“That you protect me. Not any fresh damn rookie from Quantico. You, Agent Richards,” she said, a smile curling her full lips. “And I’m not saying another word until a lawyer confirms it – in writing.”

Damn.

He shook his head in disbelief as she sat back in her seat, arms crossed. She meant it. She wouldn’t tell him what he needed until he did this act. He could threaten to arrest her, but she wouldn’t give up the goods. That stubborn streak in her ran wide.

“Excuse me while I go get a lawyer,” he said, and stalked out of the room.

He knocked on the door to the neighboring room and it opened. Inside, Agent McClure grinned at him.

“Richards, she’s got your nuts in a vice, doesn’t she?” McClure sniggered. “Fuck man.”

“Get the local ADA over here or someone from that office,” Richards said. The rumble of anger swiped the grin off of McClure’s face. “Quentin wants this thing done, and I do, too. If she wants it in writing and it gets me the bastards that killed Officer Gomez and tried to kill Briony, then I’ll do it.”

“Yes, sir!” he said and bolted out of the room.

Richards headed back into interrogation room four and into the den with his lioness.

"The ADA is on the way," he said and she pursed her lips in disbelief, "or someone from that office."

"I figured."

"Tell me what I want to know, Miss Morel."

"Not until I get what I want in writing," she quipped. "May I use the restroom?"

"Sure."

"Thank you," she said and collected her purse.

"If you'll follow me," he said, and opened the door.

She stood. Gracefully, she strutted from the room. He couldn't help himself from watching the swish of her ass against the stretch of the skirt's denim fabric. Her ass was an upside down heart, all full and tight. He wanted to palm those globes in his hands, to smack her ass and make her shriek in delight.

Stop, you horny bastard!

He could hear Quentin in his head. He had to get his job done. Briony's life depended on it.

"You going to go in with me too, Agent Richards?" she asked, purring the words out in a deliberate attempt to stroke his cock with her voice. She did a damn good job of it, too.

"No," he croaked, and adjusted his tie. Damn, it was too hot in here. "I wanna make sure you find your way back to the room and not out onto the streets."

She nodded, but her smile said she knew exactly what she was doing to him – and she liked it.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

After she emerged from the restroom, he made a point to walk beside her all the way back to the interrogation room. Once there, he found a young attorney waiting.

"Agent Richards? I'm Matthew Kline from the DA's office," he said, sticking out his hand. He wore a rumpled gray suit and had a dirty blonde afro. "I'm here to make arrangements for protective services for Miss Morel."

"Excellent," she said, and sat down, took the paper from the attorney and began to scroll through it, line by line.

A common thief? No, he was beginning to think there wasn't *anything* common about Miss Morel.

"This works," she said brightly and handed it back to the stunned attorney.

Once things were signed, hands were shook and the attorney had gone, Richards sat down across from Miss Morel and said, "Tell me everything."

"Binky Benton hangs out at Mike's and once or twice I saw him with Donny Chestnut. Donny must've paid Binky to find the girl, because everyone knows Donny Chestnut's gang is the ones who killed Bobby Ray. I was there the night they decided to brag about it. Everyone knows that before he got his dumb ass killed, Bobby Ray sold his wife to the Don. I was there the night he came stumbling in. The dude that tried to kill her last week was a moron named Turt. He wasn't a part of the Don's inner circle. He was some bit player trying to impress the boss. It's a good thing you guys killed him or else the Don would've."

Richards released a breath. The link. There it was. All nice and sexy in front of him. The links to Bobby Ray, Donny Chestnut and the entire gang.

“And you heard all of this first hand?”

“Yes,” she confirmed softly. “They hang out at Mike’s all the time.”

“Then how come my agents haven’t heard those same things?” he asked.

He’d had agents stationed at Mike’s for weeks. Nothing but rumblings and rumors that didn’t add up to anything had come out of there. But here was a living, breathing connection.

She sighed and hugged herself.

“You don’t ask for much do you?”

“This Turt killed a police officer and tried to harm a woman, a woman like you,” he said, and the knot of lust in his chest tightened. Quentin’s words echoed in his head. *Wait and see. If you’re lucky, one day you’ll understand.*

She sighed again.

“There is a secret room behind Mike’s bar. That’s where all of us, *criminals*, hang out, make deals, swap information,” she whispered, avoiding his eyes.

“Can you point out Donny Chestnut?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Then you’re not going to go home tonight,” he said, getting to his feet. “I want to know how to get into this secret room behind Mike’s bar, and I want you to talk to an artist to draw a picture of Donny Chestnut.”

She just nodded again. Her eyes had taken on hollowness that picked at him. She had folded herself into a ball, crossing her legs and clasping her hands over her knee. She hugged her knee tight.

He wanted to hold her, to cradle her against him, but he had a job to do and right now, she was the key. He had to turn her a bit to unlock the door.

“I promise, I’ll protect you,” he whispered down to her. “Trust me.”

With her eyes shining and turning hard, she looked up at him.

“You better.”

Chapter Ten

Quentin was between a rock and a hard place. He couldn't leave Briony. The last time he had, she had almost been taken from him. He would never forgive himself if anything happened to her. Hell, he wouldn't be able to breathe should something happen to her. She was his life, even before he had ever touched her. Briony was the thing he lived for, fought for.

Yet, he had a personal, burning need to rip the bastard who dared threaten her apart with his bare hands. Richards was setting up the sting at Mike's Bar tonight. Quentin had to be there. He had to see the bastard face to face. He had to make sure he saw with his own eyes that the man was either dead or in custody. Preferably dead. It was the only way he could be sure Briony would be safe, and nothing was more important than that. If it meant his shield, so be it.

So what did he do with Briony? Leaving her here was out. Not after what happened the last time. It didn't matter how many damn agents were surrounding the safe house. Not one of them felt about her the way he did. It was perhaps a diss to his fellow agents, but they had no vested interest.

Damn it! What the hell was he going to do?

"You can have McClure and Michaels come in and sit with her, while posting a couple of guys outside," Richards suggested, knowing the reason for Quentin's restless pacing without being told.

"I can't leave her, man. I just can't."

Richards nodded.

"Then we have to take her with us," Richards said, folding his arms over his chest.

"What?"

"We can put her in the black and white with the informant," Richards said. "The squad car will be locked. Briony will have the keys so she's safe."

Quentin scowled at him. Richards stared back, his blank face set on serious. Taking an informant to a sting was one thing, but a civilian? Not just any civilian, but Briony. If anything happened to her... He didn't even want to contemplate what that would be like. It was too fucking horrifying.

"How the hell is that supposed to be safer? Guns? A sting operation? SWAT?" Quentin didn't even try to soften the words. "What the hell?"

Richards gave his one shoulder shrug, the one that meant he was being practical – or what he thought was practical.

"You have two options. Leave her here or take her with us."

"I know that, genius."

Richards nodded, as if agreeing on the genius part. "If she goes with us, you will be there. You can see her and protect her. If she's at the safe house, you can't. She's in danger no matter where you put her because Donny Chestnut is still walking around."

It made sense. Still, the gun play could get out of hand. With fucking bikers, it always did. Bastards didn't like prison any more than anyone else did, but they seemed

to prefer suicide by cop. He looked at Richards and shook his head. It was too dangerous. The entire thing was too damn dangerous for her.

“No.”

He paced again, around and around.

“We’re running out of time,” Richards said. “You can keep Briony safe in a parked black and white at the perimeter, away from SWAT’s entrance at the rear of the bar, third tier back. You sit with her there. Once we arrest Donny Chestnut and the others, you can have a huge piece of him at the station. This way, you don’t leave Briony and you still get your piece.”

Quentin didn’t like it but it was far better than the alternative.

“Agent Richards, sir,” McClure bounced into the room, panting a bit. “SWAT is ready, warrants have been signed, and the operation is a go, per Assistant Director Wong.”

Good.

“Let’s do it.”

Quentin left without a word, his adrenaline kicking into high gear. He didn’t wear his vest but instead marched into the large rectangular squad room and the crowd of people in there. He walked right up to the front of the room. The sea of black clad SWAT personal, uniformed local cops, and the suit and tie dressed agents all turned to face him. Richards stood behind him, and to be frank, he didn’t want to be up front.

Seated in interrogation room four, Briony waited for him to come back and collect her. The sooner the fucking better.

“This is gonna be brief, and then Agent Richards will go over the operation,” he said, loud enough to get everyone’s attention. “Most of you know me. For the newbies and SWAT, I’m Agent Beauchamp, lead agent on this case.”

Rumbling of whispers and several sharp coughs scrambled across the room. Some of the SWAT people whispered to each other and a couple shook their heads.

He didn’t give a fuck what they thought about him, about his relationship with his brother’s widow or any of it. He only wanted one thing – to be with Briony – and to do that, they only had one job, catch or kill Donny Chestnut. The fucker had to go down.

“I wanted to thank you, personally, for the hard work you do. Today we get a cop killer.”

Claps and a few “yeahs” met his words, but he didn’t really hear them. Already cutting through the crowd, he headed to interrogation room four, to Briony. He had to be sure some stupid ass didn’t hurt her while he was in the squad room. He trusted them, he did, but no one had the same level of investment he did in her.

He stalked down the polished corridor and right into interrogation room four. She sat at the table, reading a book. She wore this summer yellow dress and it brushed the tops of her smooth knees as if caressing them. Her gold charm bracelet dangled as she flipped the page. When she heard the door open, she turned and instantly her face brightened like a blossoming flower, sunny and warm. She smelled nice, and he wanted to bury his face in her neck and kiss the skin he already knew tasted like heaven.

Damn. She had him thinking all that mushy shit again.

“Hey,” he said, sitting down in the chair across from her. He took her hands into his. “Here in a bit, you and I are going to take a ride.”

“Okay.”

Just like that. No questions, or inquiries, she just trusted him.

“Let’s go outside,” he said, standing up. He looked at the two-way mirror and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up in warning. Someone was back there, watching him – watching them. He didn’t like being treated like a suspect or a criminal, so he went to the door with Briony right behind him.

He headed down the hallway, the opposite direction from the squad room.

“Is that Richards?” she asked from behind him.

“Yeah.”

“Are you supposed to be with him?”

“No,” he said, and pushed open the back entrance doors.

He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. Across from them, a sea of parked patrol cars waited to be used. Perfect.

“You are supposed to be with him. He’s your partner,” she said, stepping in front of him.

“He is my partner, but he doesn’t need me with him.” He didn’t lie to her. Richards could handle the tactical part of the job. Yeah, he was the lead agent, but being a leader meant knowing when to delegate. “He’s got his part covered.”

She pursed her lips and looked around.

"All right," he said, and put his arms around her. "In a few minutes, you and I are going to take a ride."

"Okay," she said again, but this time she heard the thread of worry in his tone. "What's wrong?"

He sighed and hugged her to him.

"It's going to be dangerous," he explained. "You'll be protected and I'll be right beside you."

"What do I have to do?" she asked, burrowing in closer to him.

"Nothing. Just sit in the patrol car."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"What will you do?" she asked, kissing his bicep.

"I'll be keeping you safe."

"I'm sitting in a car!"

"Yeah, but baby, even that can be dangerous," he said, his anger brewing anew. Damn Bobby Ray for doing this to her. Fuck.

"Agent Beauchamp," Agent McClure called, searching around until he spotted Quentin. He slowed his pace as he approached. His eyes darting to Briony and then back to Quentin. "Here are the keys to patrol unit #4210."

He held out his hand, and the fresh faced agent put the keys there. Briony tried to pull away, but he held her fast. She felt good in his arms and he wanted her to stay a

tiny bit longer. In a half an hour, maybe less, she'd be put in harm's way again. Not directly, but shit happened. He had to keep it from happening to her.

"Sir?"

"Yeah, agent," Quentin answered. His anger rolling out. "What?"

"Uh, Agent Richards said you should get her, uh, Ms. Beauchamp, a vest."

"A vest?"

"Yes, sir."

Briony firmly stepped out of his hug. With her book still clutched in her hand, she said to the newbie, "Where do I go get one?"

"Follow me, ma'am," McClure said, his on the ground, not meeting Quentin.

Why the hell did Richards think she needed a vest?

He closed his eyes and exhaled.

"There you are," Richards's calm tone rushed out to greet him. "The vest..."

"Yeah, what the fuck?"

"It's precautions, Quentin, just a precaution. She's a civilian. I had to sell it to the assistant director that she too was sort of an informant," he explained. "Otherwise she wouldn't be allowed to be there at all. I have the real informant in the back of the black and white I'll be in. Wouldn't be a good idea to have them together. She'll be wearing a vest as well."

"Then I wouldn't be."

"Then you'd be fired."

"I don't give a shit about being fired!"

"Quentin!" Richards roared, getting into an inch of his face. "You are way too fucking close to this!"

"Fuck you, and get out of my face!"

"Or you'll what? Hit me?" Richards said, voice back on calm, but he didn't move.

He raised his fist. Damn he wanted to punch the fuck out of him.

"Hit me and get over it, because damn it, you're acting like you need to be fucking suspended. Damn it, I don't want anything to happen to her either. Give me some credit. But if you keep popping off raw, you're going to make a mistake that might cost us or worse, *her*."

Quentin's fist rose.

Who the fuck did Richards think he was? He so didn't get the fact that this slimy fuck had threatened his life.

"Hit me and get this shit over with," Richards said again. He stared at him, waiting for the punch.

Richards was right. Quentin dropped his fist. "I just wanna get this guy."

He nodded. "I know you do."

"Fuck."

"We have a good plan to get him, but if you go all Rambo and shit, his conviction can get tossed. It can go sideways. So by the book on this one."

Quentin nodded, but he made no promises.

"Come on, let's go."

The ride over to Mike's Bar held so much tension he could cut it out with a spoon. Briony sat beside him in the patrol car, the bulletproof vest making her seem fragile. Up ahead, the SWAT units, several other patrol cars, and a bunch of unmarked F.B.I. vehicles moved into positions Richards had already predetermined. All Quentin had to do was keep his baby safe.

She reached for his hands as he parked three blocks over.

"Team four in position," he said into the patrol's radio.

"Team one in position."

"Team two in position."

"Team Alpha in position."

"Team Beta in position."

"Team three in position."

The last team's lead had whispered it in.

"Who are the Alpha and Beta teams?" she asked.

"SWAT."

"The numbered ones?"

"F.B.I. and locals."

He didn't mean to sound terse, he just couldn't think about the operation. This part of his life he didn't want her involved in. The grit and grime of humanity. Sure, she'd experienced it with Bobby Ray, but he wanted to lift her above it. Keep her above it. Exalt her high above the petty and the puke. Tonight it would end. Tonight she would be safe.

“What do we do now?” she asked, her hand squeezing his.

“We wait.”

Chapter Eleven

"Team four! Team four!" came the crackling barks. "Team four, over!"

Briony bolted awake in her seat, her heart in her throat and her heart galloping like a team of horses in her chest.

Christ! She'd dozed off next to Quentin. The static filled shouting of the radio made her stomach hurt.

"What?" Quentin yelled into the black receiver in his hand. He held it so tight his knuckles were white. This wasn't good. Not good at all.

"Donny Chestnut escaped! Suspect is on foot heading in your direction!"

Escaped. What did that mean?

"Suspect is wearing jeans, blue shirt, and black boots," the SWAT person radioed.

"Roger that."

Briony rubbed her eyes and swallowed hard. Donny Chestnut. The name conjured fear in her gut, so much she clutched her belly. The bulletproof vest seemed to get tighter all on its own. Chestnut had escaped and whatever plan the F.B.I. and SWAT had was falling to pieces. They didn't catch him.

And he was headed in their direction.

"Quentin?" she asked, a frown staining her face.

"Stay here. Lock the doors and get down," he said, face tight with anger. He had his gun out, checked it for rounds and shoved the clip back in.

"You're scaring me," she whispered, touching his face, her fingers brushing the bristles of new growth along this chin. "What's going on? What are you going to do?"

He puffed out a big breath, and twisted in the driver seat to face her.

"I love you."

"I, I love you too," she croaked around the knot in her throat.

He kissed her hard on the lips and said, "Stay down!"

With that, he shoved the door open and got out of the car. He scanned the area, and then he caught her watching him.

"Get down!" he roared at her and she did.

She pressed the button to lock the doors. She couldn't lose him. Surely, she didn't come all this way, go through all that hell, just to lose the one thing that mattered.

"Stop! F.B.I!" she heard Quentin yell and then shots! Or what sounded like shots.

Oh God! Is he all right?

His warning to keep her head down be damned. She had to know if he'd been hit, harmed, or injured. She counted to ten, but it felt like ten million, before she slowly sat up. All around her silence crept out. Nothing. No people, no cars, nothing.

It was like the world had gone to hide.

Where was Quentin?

She peered above the window and then a harsh, dark shadow fell over her face.

"Get the fuck out!" the man roared. His goatee gleamed with sweat. A tattoo littered the side of his neck, but fury spilled out from his eyes, those deeply hated-filled pits.

No, it couldn't be. The police artist's illustration of Donny Chestnut made real shoved a gun hard against the glass window.

He stared at her a moment and then laughed.

"Ain't this some shit! You the bitch I been lookin' for!"

He recognized her.

"Fucking bitch! I said to get the fuck out of the car! I'll blow your head off!" He pointed a gun at her and as if daring her to disobey him, his finger moved about the trigger.

She inched back down from the window shaking her head. There was no way she would willingly give herself into his hands. He was going to kill her anyway, wasn't he? He pointed a gun at her forehead. He grinned.

"Now!" He fired a shot at the windshield, shattering the glass.

Briony screamed, realizing the windows weren't bullet proof. He could have shot her, had deliberately aimed to show her he could if he wanted to end her life right now. What were her options? She could get out of the car and pray that Quentin would arrive soon, or she could possibly be killed in the front seat of a cop car. Why the hell weren't the front windows bullet proof?

Would he really shoot her? God, she didn't want to take that chance.

"Get the fuck out of the car or I swear you're one dead bitch!" Donny's entire face was red and purplish, sweat running in rivers down his face.

She nodded and slipped out of the passenger door. Shivering, she got out. Where did he plan to go? What did he plan to do with her? God, he couldn't kill her. Right?

Quentin and the others were looking for him. He wasn't going to get far with the swarm of cops all over this area.

She had to stall him.

Swallowing the terror clumped in her throat, she said, "Listen, I, I..."

"Shut up!" he roared, snatching her by her hair and dragging her off. She tripped over her feet as he walked in a hurried pace down the sidewalk. She wanted to slow him down. As long as she stayed out in the open, Quentin could find her, but if he hauled her into one of these dusty little stores, Quentin could miss her.

Scalp on fire, she walked slowly, making him carry her somewhat dead weight.

"Walk faster!"

"I, I can't! You're hurting me!" she shouted, and latched both hands around his wrist, trying to gather some damn relief from his hold on her hair.

"Shut up!"

Whack!

Reeling to the ground, Briony did what she could to brace herself. Her face burned from his punch, but he'd let go of her hair.

"Get up!" he spat, and kicked at her.

She rolled herself into a tight ball and prayed. Quentin would come and save her. He promised. He never broke his promises.

"If you touch her again, I'll put a bullet right through that dough you call a fucking brain!" shouted the only voice in the world Briony wanted to hear – Quentin.

She uncoiled enough to see Quentin's tight, angry face a few feet from her. He wasn't looking at her, but right at Donny Chestnut.

Whack!

The pistol's barrel slammed against her already enflamed scalp.

"I'll fuckin' do her right here," Donny Chestnut growled.

"You got nowhere to go. Nothing to gain, but a one way ticket to the grave."

"The bitch goes with me," Donny snarled back.

The whirling of sirens and the influx of police made her sick to her stomach. Cornered, people did crazy things.

"Don't do it," Quentin warned. "Don't."

Whether Quentin was telling Donny not to shoot or not to give up, Briony didn't know. She looked at his face, all tight and white with rage.

"I want out of this or this fucking hostage gets dead. You get me pig face?"

Donny Chestnut spat.

The barrel of the gun shook against her head.

"Hostage?" Quentin scowled. "Fuck no!"

A loud bang followed by a whistle of air were all Briony was conscious of, and then Donny Chestnut's body dropped to the sidewalk like a sack of potatoes. She stared stupidly at his prone frame trying to comprehend what just happened.

"Oh God, oh God," Briony repeated. She couldn't do anything, but reach out, stretch toward her rock strength and safety – Quentin.

Chapter Twelve

"Quent, stop it! I'm fine," Briony complained as he placed another cold, wet cloth against her skull.

He didn't give a damn what the doctors said, he didn't like the look of that bump. Though she had suffered through a full M.R.I. at Quentin's assistance, he wanted to make damn sure there wasn't anything there the doctors hadn't caught.

"You may feel fine now, but there have been plenty of people who thought they were okay after a head injury and..." He couldn't even finish the thought much less say it out loud. It was just too much for him to even contemplate.

"Look, I have a slight headache, but it's been two days. I'm fine, I promise."

Damn, when she looked at him like that, he felt all powerful and helpless at the same time. He had almost lost her, again. It had stopped his heart cold to see her in Donny's clutches. One shot to the head, quick and clean, Donny didn't have a prayer of tightening his trigger finger as a reflex. Had Quentin hesitated, Briony would be dead. Pulling her into his arms, he buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent. She always smelled so good! Right here is where she needed to be for the rest of her life.

"I love you, Bri." It came from the depths of his soul. He was completely, utterly putty in the hands of this woman. "I swear to you, I won't put you in danger again."

"Hey!" Pushing him back, she gave him one of those fierce little glares he was becoming familiar with. His little Bri was pissed. "Don't you dare blame yourself for what happened!"

"I left you in the car. I should have never done that, Bri. Anything could have happened to you!"

He was mad at himself, mad at his dead brother, madder than hell at the dead biker. He was going to have to pay the nondescript grave Donny had been buried in a little visit. No matter he had emptied his clip into a corpse after ensuring Briony's safety. Donny wasn't dead enough. If he could call him back just to kill him all over again he would.

"Look, you were chasing him, he got away, but in the end you got him," Briony argued. "That's all that matters. And you didn't place me in danger. Bobby Ray did that. You saved me. You kept me safe."

He would die keeping her safe; it had become his only goal in life.

"I thought I was going to lose you," Quentin admitted after a few minutes. "I've never been so scared. If anything happened to you..." He had to stop obsessing about it. His heart felt like it was being ripped out his chest every time he did.

"You wouldn't have let him kill me," she said with a certainty that both made him proud and scared at the same time. Such faith. A man could never wish for anything more than a woman who believed in him the way she did. "You would never let anyone seriously hurt me."

"Marry me." The words blurted out his mouth before he could think about them. Not that he would have called them back. He meant it. He wanted to spend his life with her.

Briony gasped, her beautiful brown eyes widening in shock. As adorable as she looked all stunned and breathless, it kind of irked Quentin a little. Surely, she had known this was coming. Although they had both been understandably distracted in the past month since Bobby Ray's death, she had to have known or at least suspected he would want to make her his wife.

"I often dreamed to hear those words," Briony admitted, easing Quentin's mind somewhat. "I often wondered if I would be strong enough to say no."

For a moment, Quentin was sure he was hearing things. No, she didn't just say that.

"Bri -"

"No listen, Quent," Briony tried to push away from him, but he wouldn't budge. In fact, he pulled her closer, erasing the space she had put between them earlier. "It has barely been a month since Bobby Ray died. What would it look like for us to run off and get married so soon? I mean," she bit her lip, her eyes glazing with the sheen of unshed tears, "what would your parents say? I would feel...I don't know, I just think maybe we should take this slow."

Not going to happen. He needed to make her his wife. He needed her to bear his name, and he didn't really give a shit if it was the same one as she had now. It should have been *him* giving it to her, not his dead jerk wad brother.

"My parents would be happier than you know," Quentin told her softly. "You think they couldn't see our attraction? You think they didn't know how I felt about you."

Baby, my mother begged me to take you away from Bobby. She knew you were too good for him."

"But I wasn't," she cried softly. "I slept with the brother of my dead husband before his body was even cold! What kind of woman does that make me?"

"It makes you my damn woman!" Quentin's patience had run out. It was time to make Briony understand how dead serious he was.

His lips clashed over hers in more than a mere kiss; it was a claim. His teeth nipped her generous lips, demanding entrance. She surrendered so damn sweetly, her body yielding to his bigger, harder frame, moaning as he plundered the moist recesses of her mouth. His hands half-dragged, half-pulled the scant clothing from both of their fast heating bodies.

"I've waited three long years to be with you like this," he murmured, his mouth traveling from her mouth to her cheek, her jaw, her neck. Her skin was so satiny smooth, soft and welcoming.

"I love you, Quent, but -"

His mouth halted all further protested. He didn't raise his lips again until she was moaning breathlessly, her body rubbing against his in search of relief. He had no intention of easing her ache. Not yet. Not until she consented to be his wife.

It might have been different had he believed for a second she didn't feel the same way. But he knew her. He knew Briony loved him, and her love made him feel like he could conquer the world. He wasn't about to allow any kind of guilt to come between

them. She had nothing at all to feel guilty for. She'd had three years of hell; he wanted to give her a lifetime of heaven.

His mouth traveled once more, running his tongue across of silky texture of her body. He kissed, licked, suckled, bit everywhere except her most sensitive place. He rained kisses down the valley between her breasts, underneath them, on top, but he refused to take them into his mouth when she cupped both mounds and lifted them in offering. Instead, he moved southward, dipping his tongue into her belly button, lightly running his teeth over her pelvis. As much as he wanted to snake his tongue further south to taste her sweet honey, he held off, knowing he was driving her crazy.

"Quent-tin! Please!"

Damn, he loved to hear her voice all heavy and deep with need. Knowing he was the man doing this to her, making her feel this way was better than anything he could ever imagine feeling. Except for maybe when she was finally carrying his child.

"Uhhh, Bri, baby, I want to be inside you so bad," he moaned against the soft skin of her inner thigh.

She was so wet; her inner thighs had traces of her dew lightly coating the surface. Quentin licked up every drop, wanting more but knowing he had to hold off. Just a little while longer.

"I need you to touch me, Quent," Briony pleaded, tugging on his hair to try to pull him closer.

Quentin welcomed the pain. It helped him keep his head. His gaze blazed a trail up her writhing body, drinking in her curves, the deep espresso tone of her skin, everything about her stole his breath and sent his pulse racing. So beautiful, so perfect.

“Tell me you’ll marry me, Bri,” he bit the underside of her knee, smiling at the way her back bowed at the stimulation. Briony had wonderfully sensitive knees. He loved how she responded. She was open and honest, giving herself up completely to what she was feeling. “Tell me and I will give you what you need.”

His cock was leaking something fierce, but he didn’t touch it. He didn’t want anything caressing his dick put pure unadulterated Briony.

“I-I just think it’s too...Oh, God, Quent, you have to touch me!” she cried when he started to suck the backside of her other knee, right at the crease.

He could smell her arousal, his mouth watered in remembrance of the taste. But he had to get the answer first. Briony would never go back on her word, and Quentin wasn’t going to waste a second after she agreed. His vacation time had been approved. He had already bought the ring and the tickets to Vegas leaving in the morning. He didn’t want another day to pass without having her legally his.

“Say it, baby,” he voice was rough with passion. He needed her so damn bad! “Make me the happiest man in the world, and I swear I will spend every second of the night making you happy.”

He punctuated his statement by running his finger lightly over her wet slit. He swallowed hard, silently willing her to say yes. She was pulling at her own nipples,

desperately trying to find relief. When her hand reached down towards her mound, he bit it.

“None of that now,” he moved her hand away, blowing across the hooded clit peeking out as though to see what the problem was. “You know what I want, Bri. You give me what I need, and I will give you what you need.”

Man, he wanted to just reach out his tongue and take a swipe. Just one little taste.

“Yes! Yes, I will marry you, damn it!” she finally growled. “Now get your ass up here and fuck me.”

Ignoring her demand, Quentin dove between her thighs, lapping at the sexy pussy that had taunted him with its juicy goodness. His fingers joined his mouth, thrusting inside her until she was screaming out her release.

“Quent! Oh, God Quent!”

As good as she tasted, he had to get inside her. His woman, soon to be his wife. The thought almost had him coming as soon as he gliding inside her snug channel. Her walls contracted around him, trying to milk him before he was ready.

“Please, Bri, baby you have stay still,” he gasped, holding himself completely still. He wanted this to last.

“We have all night, you promised,” she laughed at him, rolling her hips underneath him.

“Shit!”

His hips slammed into her despite his best efforts to hold back. He didn’t want to hurt her, and Lord she was so damn tight he wanted to take it easy, but she drove him

to the brink. And she loved it. Her eyes closed. Her teeth worrying her bottom lip as she strained to meet him thrust for thrust. Seeing her like this made him piston faster, cupping her ass and pulling her into him. He wasn't going to last. No fucking way he could hold on.

“Come with me, Bri,” Quentin grunted, unable to stop his wild plunges. Especially when Briony grasped the cheeks of his ass, pulling him even tighter against her. “Shit, baby come now!”

And she did, her pussy spasms rocking his cock, vibrating down to his balls. Quentin came with a roar, spilling his seed deep inside her womb. All he could think of was how he needed to do this over and over again until she was nice and round with their baby, and then he would do it some more.

Epilogue

Cecile Morel, his ass! Her name was Desiree Babin, and Tomas Richards would be damned if she was walking out here unprotected. Grabbing her battered suitcase from her grip, he threw it back in the general direction of the guest room, holding on to the little vixen at her elbow. His own grip was a little hard, but if he gave her an inch she would take the mile, and damn it he was tired of fighting her.

"What's your hurry, Desiree?" he sneered, turning her none too gently to face him. "You have someplace you need to be?"

His accent started to slip out, but he couldn't help it. The woman got under his skin. It was bad enough he had to dig to find out who she really was, and a little she wasn't, but discovering she was not only wanted by members of the bikers gang that wanted revenge for the chick who had sold out Donny Chestnut, but she was running from her goddamn step-father, himself a convicted rapist, was too much! Why didn't she tell him? Why couldn't she trust him just a little?

"Wow, Tomas, that accent of yours is getting mighty thick," the imp purred, rubbing her full chest against him. Her own accent was getting pretty thick too. He wondered if she realized her eyes were starting to dilate, or that her nipples were hardening against him. "What's up with the last name? Richards doesn't sound at all Cajun to me."

"Not Cajun," he gritted through clenched teeth. He wanted to push her sweet little ass against the wall and stick his tongue down her throat while shoving his cock deep in her pussy, but that wouldn't be very smart. She would be out of here quicker

than he could blink if he did that. He didn't plan on ever letting her out of this apartment without him, not until they moved into a house together. "Now you want to tell me about Henri Gauthier? And where the hell do you think you're going?"

He noticed she wasn't the least bit surprised he had found out her real name, but then, he was F.B.I., she probably counted on it happening sooner or later.

"Look, it's over. The trial is over; all the other bikers are doing time in jail. It's time for me to go."

"Donny Chestnut had a brother, freshly released from Angola. Word is he's looking for you."

That stopped her. For a brief second, she looked so vulnerable, almost innocent. Shit! He wanted to take her in his arms so damn bad. He understood why he couldn't. Desiree wore the whole tough chick persona like a second skin. As much as he itched to peel away her armor, he had to be smart about it. Hopefully.

"I can handle Henri," she drew herself up to her full, diminutive height. Cute.

Why the hell would she be running from her step-father? She was a full grown woman. According to what he had found out, her mother had passed eight years ago. The man should have no control over her, so why was she hiding from him, and why the hell was he looking?

"And Jesse Chestnut?"

No reply. She did look visibly shaken, just a touch, but enough. She would stay for now. All he had to do was figure out a way to make it more permanent.