

Deception brings them together. Exposure can tear them apart...

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A sexy grin spread across his face. "Room 112 at the hotel across the street. Come over when you're done here. You won't regret it."

PRAISE FOR AUTHOR

Lia Slater

"FATAL EXPOSURE is an exciting read with edge-of-the-seat suspense. Kade is perfectly flawed and the perfect solution to Ava's troubles. Scorching hot sex, thrilling action and an explosive climax."

~KyAnn Waters, author of Hot Blooded and Executive Positions

by

Lia Slater

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Fatal Exposure

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Dedication

To my husband for all your support and unconditional love.

Special thanks to P and to K.A. for all your help with this book.

You ladies rock!

Thanks to my editor, Diana, for coming up with such a fabulous title.

And a big shout-out to the sassy, talented Colorado Vixens.

Chapter One

Ava Lureau snaked her leg around the silver pole, gripped it tightly with one hand, and slowly let her body fall until she twirled around. As she came to a stop, she planted her stilettos firmly onto the stage and whipped back the auburn locks of hair that covered her view of the front door.

It swung open and a group of whooping, whistling frat boys barged through, pushing and shoving their way into the club. Two of them began jumping up and down to the beat of the techno music blaring from the speakers.

Shit. Not these guys again.

Ava crawled on her hands and knees toward the man who had been her only audience for the past ten minutes. He hadn't showed her any dollar bills yet, but he could keep her from having to dance for one of the obnoxious Alpha Betas or whatever the heck they called themselves.

At least Zack hadn't walked through the door.

It had been seven months since she'd packed a single backpack and fled from his Washington, D.C. condo, but his words were still fresh in her mind. Try to leave me, bitch, and I'll hunt you down and kill you.

Ava believed him, considering he'd almost taken her life once. After recovering from three broken ribs, too many bruises to count, and a concussion, she decided to take the chance and run like hell. She

emptied her measly savings account, paid cash for a bus ticket to *anywhere-but-here* and ended up in Flagstaff, Arizona. Twenty-two hundred miles from home.

She'd gotten off the bus and immediately noticed the strip club. A *Dancers Wanted* sign hung in the window. She'd never once considered taking such a risqué job before, one that forced her to be the center of attention. And she was sure her ex-boyfriend would come to the same conclusion, which made it the perfect choice.

The owner of Hothouse Gentlemen's Club hadn't cared that she'd "lost" her identification. The only requirement had been a flash of her breasts, and she was in. And saved from having to let anyone know who she really was, a bookish college student with little to no social life.

A woman on the run.

How would Zack find her if *Ava Lureau* completely disappeared?

She learned a long time ago that Zack Moreno wasn't a man to mess with or to underestimate. He worked for one of the most powerful senators on Capitol Hill. The right hand man who did the dirty work. Work that required a jaded heart and a sick mind—something Ava hadn't realized until it was too late.

The simple fact that he hadn't found her yet was a miracle of its own. In the two years she had known him, he'd always needed to have the last word, and she'd always let him. Until now.

She moved along the stage, closer to the tall man with the short dark hair and leather jacket. He appeared to be in his early to mid thirties. Attractive. Strong, stubborn chin and an angular

jaw line. Lips that beckoned without saying a word. Brooding eyes. Hmm. How hadn't she noticed his eyes were an alluring light blue before? Well, now that they were staring at her breasts that swayed with her movements...

Yep, they're real, bud. Just not the hair and eyes. But he didn't need to know that. No one did. It was part of the cover.

His ice cold gaze finally blinked as she lay out on her back in front of him, arching her spine and caressing her breasts.

Her nipples were tightly budded against the cold air that perpetually loomed in the club. That, along with the icy tiled floor underneath her, kept them taut. But she wouldn't doubt her current customer's avid attention was the cause of why they tingled and felt heavier than normal.

This guy had been coming in every evening for the past week, mostly sitting a good distance away. And as Ava took in his ruggedly handsome features, she couldn't help but wonder why. He didn't look like the type of man who would have a hard time finding a date.

Maybe he was recently divorced? Unhappily married? Looking for a distraction from his mundane world? Who knew?

She continued with her usual routine by sitting up and sweeping her hair back. The wispy tips glided against the man's broad chest. Then she spread her legs apart in front of him and lifted her ass to sway her hips in the sexy way she'd learned from the other girls. His gaze left her breasts and traveled down to the thin strip of sheer black panty that barely covered her pussy.

For the first time since landing a job in this place, she found herself attracted to one of the patrons. And she had to admit, getting this gorgeous man off would be a huge turn on. Having a little fun, just this once, could be what she needed to forget about her worries, if only for a few minutes.

But he seemed so stiff and serious, she couldn't tell if he liked her or not.

To test it out, she abandoned her routine and spread her legs wider, running her finger from her crotch up to her navel.

His lip twitched.

She swerved her finger over her stomach, between her breasts, to her mouth where she sucked on the tip and then reached out and brushed it across his full lips.

His tongue ran over the damp path she'd left.

Ava never gave any particular man this much attention, especially if he wasn't showing any dough. But this guy's cut jaw line, piercing blue eyes, and powerful-looking mouth had her more than interested. She knew nothing would happen. Nothing could happen. But he'd make a mighty sweet dream when she hit the sheets tonight...alone.

"Do you want a lap dance?" she asked him, since Poppy had taken the stage behind her and the frat boys were beginning to close in. "Over there?" She pointed to a secluded corner of the club across the sea of clear plastic chairs and lavender laminatecovered tables that were each topped by a faux candle. Tacky to say the least, but once again, she put the thought out of her mind.

Without a word, he stood up to his six and a half foot height and offered her a hand off the stage. A

large hand with long callused fingers. Masculine. No wedding ring.

Ava was tempted to curl her smaller hand around his palm, into his embrace, but remembered the house rules. "Sorry, the bouncers will be all over you in two seconds if you touch me." She slid off the stage on her own. "You go. I'll follow."

The mysterious man turned on her order and began walking. The rear view of him didn't look half bad either. His broad shoulders and wide back put the bouncers to shame. Unfortunately, his black leather blazer covered his ass, but she didn't imagine it would be disappointing.

He stopped short in front of her and swiveled around. His well-built frame was a good foot higher than her height in heels. And as he stared down at her with a strange intensity, a cold sliver of fear crept down her spine.

Zack was about this tall.

That bastard just wouldn't get out of her thoughts. No matter how red she dyed her hair, what color of contacts she wore or what job she had...a job she never dreamed she'd have the nerve to do in her previous life.

The mere thought was laughable. She'd been an excellent student, working hard to get her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree. And now here she was about to purposely arouse a complete stranger. It was part of the job, but there was something not quite right about this guy. Something unsettling.

Before she could get up the nerve to turn and leave the intimidating blue-eyed man, he lowered his body into a chair and tugged off his jacket.

His black T-shirt stretched against his muscular chest and ribbed stomach as he leaned back, letting

his hands dangle at his side. He cocked his head while his wintry eyes engulfed her like a hunter examining his prey.

Everything about this guy told her to flee, to get the hell away from him and fast. As inconspicuously as possible, she swept a glance around the room, finding the nearest bouncer. Jarred, the two hundred twenty pound mass of muscle, met her gaze and gave her a slight nod. At least she had that.

"What's your name?" The man's deep voice drew her back.

Time for the show.

She stepped in between his massive legs, bringing her knee up to rest on his thigh. Her hands braced on his stone hard shoulders as she leaned forward and let her lips touch his ear. "Lily," she answered in the sensual, playful voice used only inside these walls. The musky smell of his aftershave wafted up her nose, relaxing her a little. "What's yours?" She pulled back, lightly brushing her mouth across his stubbly cheek.

"Is that your real name?" His voice rumbled across her jaw line, warming her cheek and prickling her skin.

Like she was going to tell him that. She smiled and rested her forehead against his, meeting his stare. "It's whatever you want it to be." She ran her fingers over his temple and through the soft curls on his head.

The coldness in his expression began to fade as he edged into her touch. *Not so tough after all*. He was just like any other guy who walked through the door, putty in a woman's hand. But unlike any other man, he was holding her interest.

Ava brushed her breasts against his chest, and he sucked in a breath. Her nipples hardened achingly from the friction...and from his reaction. Or maybe it was because she hadn't had sex in so long. It was lonely being on the run. Heck, who was she kidding? She'd always felt somewhat isolated. Even in a room full of people. And nothing or no one could ever quite squelch that glum feeling.

It might have had to do with the fact that she'd never had a real family. Her mother died when she was six. After the funeral, she moved in with her only other relative, an elderly aunt, until she passed away just after Ava's seventeenth birthday. From then on, her friends were her family. Well, what few friends she chose to have.

But none of that mattered at this moment.

"What's your name?" she asked him again and ran her fingertips over the curve of his lips—full, powerful and tempting. She let her leg fall off his to straddle his solid thigh. Her pussy jolted from the contact, threatening to drench her panties, and him in the process. Damn.

Get a hold of yourself, Ava. She cleared her throat and tried to concentrate on the show.

"Kade," he answered, without blinking.

"I love that name," she lied. His name didn't make a damn bit of difference to her, but his wallet did. Why the hell hadn't he pulled it out yet? Maybe it was time to scoot along to the college boys. At least they came prepared. "And what do you do for a living, Kade?"

"Traveling salesman," he murmured.

"Oh, and does that pay a lot?" she asked, hoping he'd take the hint. A girl had to eat.

He eyed her lips as he spoke. "Enough to get what I need." Then his gaze slowly lifted to meet hers. "And what I desire."

She held her breath for a moment as she took in his seductive tone and penetrating blue eyes. There was no doubt he was used to getting everything he wanted with or *without* having to pay. Hell, she was proof of that as she stood there pressing her mostly naked body against his hard, masculine chest, massaging her fingers over his scalp, down his neck and up again.

She should move on, but something was keeping her in his presence. It was an odd mixture of feeling protected and scared shitless at the same time. Imagining waking up enveloped in his strong arms was the clincher. It had been a long time since she'd felt that comfort.

Ava swiveled around, angled her ass against his groin, and swayed her hips as she ground into his jeans. The bulge in his pants grew, hardening against her bottom. As she realized the extent of his length and thickness, her body heated, and her pussy pulsed with need.

She wondered how he would feel inside of her, filling her, stretching her. This place was all about fantasy anyway. Usually the patron's fantasy, but what was the harm in indulging her imagination just this once? With this man, who she was sure could have any woman he chose?

The coarse hardness of his jeans grazed her ass and, as she rolled her hips back just so, she felt the solid column of his erection against her center. Her cheeks flushed with sudden awareness, and her pulse thundered in her chest. She'd done this a

hundred times before but not once had she enjoyed it, not once had her head spun with possibilities.

Before she could snap out of her haze, his hand slid around her waist, down her pelvis and began rubbing against the thin, now-wet strip of cloth covering her pussy. She didn't push him away. She couldn't. The shock from the pleasure he brought her was too overwhelming.

Jarred and the other two bouncers were busy throwing one of the drunken boys out of the club. *Good*. She leaned against Kade's solid chest and let her eyes roll back. His long rough finger forced the strip of useless panty aside and dipped into her wetness. She caught her breath, both startled and excited by his boldness...and how hot she was for him. God, how long had it been since she'd been touched like this?

"Does that feel good?" His deep voice rumbled into her ear as his finger kneaded into a sensitive spot deep inside her snug walls.

She nodded, paralyzed to move any other part of her body—one single finger bringing her close to a fast climax. Rough, long, and deep, it slid up into her slick channel. Then out as it rubbed against her sensitive clit. Then in. Out. In. *Oh*, *God*. This was crazy. Never had she let a stranger do something so personal and in such a public place. And with her job at risk too.

Her thighs weakened with slices of pleasure cutting through them. She panted and dug her fingers into his muscled legs as her pussy danced with tiny pulses.

Before she could come *or* pull away, he drew his hand back and dropped it at his side, leaving her empty and cold. "I want to continue this somewhere

private," he said, sounding confident he'd get his wish.

Focus, focus, focus.

Ava gulped and straightened. Her legs wobbled underneath her as she gathered her wits and readjusted her panties as casually as possible. She should be used to men coming on to her, treating her like a piece of meat, but this time had been different. This time she'd let herself be vulnerable.

"I'm not a whore," she said over her shoulder, suddenly feeling completely naked in more ways than one.

She puffed out a breath, irritated with herself for allowing him to touch her, and for liking it too much to stop. Just how far would she have let him go? How far did she *still* want it to go? His proposal was annoyingly tempting.

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the bodily juices that still clung to his skin. Her juices. He winked. "Sure tastes like you do."

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A sexy grin spread across his face. "Room 112 at the hotel across the street. Come over when you're done here. You won't regret it."

Before she could respond, he grabbed his coat and headed across the room toward the door.

Kade Gavin stepped out into the biting cold air and finally let out a breath. What the hell was he thinking? It was as if the woman had put a spell on him and made him forget his whole purpose for being in there. He had lost his entire focus when she moved against him in her seductive way. Her lush, petite body at his fingertips had pushed him over the edge. Almost to the point of picking her up in his arms and removing her from that shit hole of a joint. He shook the vision out of his thick skull.

He had a mission to complete and none of it involved being anyone's knight in shining armor. Just the opposite, actually.

What a fool he was for telling her his real name. "Fuck," he muttered and stepped across the street.

He'd been watching her for the past few days. As a PI, it was his job to observe, but it had never resulted with him getting a hard-on or fantasizing about his target's full breasts under his caress. But the fantasies had built up every time he saw her swaying her hips on that stage or wrapping her toned legs around that pole.

"Knock it off, Kade," he mumbled as he reached his hotel room. He was doing it again. Envisioning. Imagining. What was so different about her? None of the other women at the club had this arousing affect on him.

Get a grip. This was a job. If she showed up later, he'd play it off. It would help if he knew she was definitely the girl he was looking for, the one he was being paid to hunt down. But he wasn't positive.

Take away the red hair and those obvious brown contacts, and maybe she could pass as the petite woman in the fuzzy photo he'd been given. It was all the information he had besides the description Zack Moreno had given him—long blonde hair, green eyes, and full C-cup. Not much to go on, but at least that had cut it down to two prospects. The one who called herself Poppy fit the description to a T, and then of course there was Lily, trying so hard to disguise herself.

He walked into the hotel room and fell onto the bed. His mind raced as he let the name slide off his tongue. "Ava Lureau."

I'm coming to get you.

Snow lightly fell around Ava as she stood outside her hotel room. A chill wind blew past so she pinched her jean jacket shut. The pink and blue neon sign "Girls, Girls, Girls" buzzed across the street. Three months ago, she'd chosen this place because of its convenient location...and because they took cash and didn't ask for identification.

But now she wished she were anywhere but here. She was too close to the mysterious blue-eyed stranger. Two rooms down to be exact.

The temptation to knock on his door was overwhelming.

She was more than entranced by the tall, broadshouldered man who had branded a desire in her so deep she ached to have it quenched.

And spending another lonely night in a cold, bland hotel room all by herself wasn't exactly a thrilling thought. Waking in the middle of the night whenever she heard strangers outside her room window didn't warm her heart too much either. It was frightening to think she was a thin door away from some deprayed lunatic. Or Zack Moreno.

Was there a difference?

She shook his image from her head once again.

She should be used to being alone, but the fantasy of having a safe, normal life with a loving husband and family always crept into her mind. It was silly, really. The only thing she needed to concentrate on now was survival, and if that meant being on her own for the rest of her days, then so be it.

"You've got the wrong room," a deep familiar voice said behind her.

Ava swung around to see Kade standing less than two feet away with sprinkles of snow falling onto his dark hair and a brown paper bag in his hand.

"No. No I haven't." She backed up against her door and pulled the key from her jean jacket pocket. "See?"

He stepped closer and towered over her. "You have a room here." It was a statement, not a question. He stared at her with a blank expression. "Why? And for how long?"

His leather blazer opened as he reached inside to pull out his own key. She fought back the urge to wrap her arms around his waist and cuddle up against him, indulging in the warmth of his body.

"Uh, not too long. My house is, um, being fumigated," she said, using the same lie she'd used at least a dozen times in the past couple of months.

"Your house? Is it near here?"

"Why do you want to know?" No one else had cared to ask, and she hadn't quite worked out that detail of her fabricated life yet.

"Just curious." His mouth quirked up to half a grin. "Want to get out of the cold? Your lips are turning blue." He rattled the bag in his hand and caressed her face with a gaze that warmed her insides. "A beer and some company on a chilly night?"

Company. What a concept. Besides work, she didn't allow herself to have that.

For a good reason.

She opened her mouth to say no, but a pang of loneliness deep in her chest forced her to close it. Her dark, dreary room was all that awaited her. The stiff comforter that never quite warmed her. The small television that had a lousy signal. The romance novel she'd read for the hundredth time. The telephone that never rang.

It all sounded so bleak and depressing. And cold. God, why was she always so cold?

She looked at Kade and could almost see the warmth emanating from him. How would it feel to be wrapped up against him for one night?

What could it hurt? One night with a gorgeous man.

Ava nodded once and gestured toward his room. Her room was out of the question since she couldn't remember if she'd hidden her contact case or thrown away the bottle of medium auburn brown hair dye—or any other self-incriminating evidence. Not that she was a criminal. Far from it. But she was a survivor. If anything was true, it was that. And she didn't want to make any stupid mistakes to jeopardize the only thing she had going for—her beating heart.

Beating faster every second she was in Kade's company.

As Ava Lureau, never would she have thought of going into a strange man's hotel room, but as *Lily*, it almost seemed natural. Besides, what if he turned out to be someone she could trust? How wonderful would it be to have someone on her side? To protect her, to keep her safe...to fight for her. Maybe she was being unrealistic and foolish, but what could she possibly have to lose that she hadn't already? Just this once she'd allow herself to play out a fantasy to see where it took her.

He led her to his room, unlocked the door, and waved a hand toward the dimly lit room. "After you."

Kade pulled the six-pack out of the paper bag and set it in the mini refrigerator that also served as a nightstand. "Would you like a beer?" he asked as he used his foot to nonchalantly slide his duffle bag farther under the queen-sized bed.

"No thanks."

He eyed Lily, taking in her nervous lip biting and the way she tapped her three-inch heels on the carpet. She stood guarded by the door with her arms crossed. Tomorrow he needed to find out exactly how

long she'd been living out of a hotel room, where this mysterious house of hers was or if it even existed.

But tonight the only burning question on his mind was if she was going to scream or score her nails into his back when he made her come. It was all he could think about ever since he'd had a taste of her. Whoever *she* was.

After draping his coat over the wooden chair by the desk, he closed the distance between them and lifted his hand to cradle her flushed cheek. His other hand wrapped around her tiny waist and gathered her up against him.

"I've never done this," she murmured just as he was about to kiss her glossy rose-colored lips.

"Done what?" He pecked at them, sampling their strawberry flavor and wanting more. It was just how he'd imagined they'd taste.

"Had a one night stand." She looked up at him with the combined expression of naivety, lust and fear. "I mean, that's what it would be, right? I don't know anything about you other than you travel a lot and sell...What do you sell?"

"Software," he answered simply. Of course it was a lie, but she didn't need to know that.

She gave him a nervous smile. "So you're smart then, right? I like smart men. Although, I'll admit you don't look like much of a computer geek." She let out a giggle and then stopped abruptly, her smile faded to a frown. "Oh geez, not that I'm calling you a geek. I just—"

Kade brushed his finger over her lip, quieting her, growing desperate to strip the anxious smile off her face and the clothes off her body. "Why don't we pretend that we knew each other many years ago?"

He kept his voice even. "When we were both innocent and life was easier."

A time like that didn't exist for him, but he was sure it must have for the petite woman in his arms. Someone must have loved and protected her from the evils of the world at some point in her life. How could they have not?

Her dark coppery eyebrows knitted together as she seemed to mull his idea over. Suddenly, one of them arched up. "Did we used to play doctor?" she asked with a cute grin.

"Yes." At this point he'd say anything to keep her in his arms, to have her soft breasts crushed against his chest. "And I always made you feel better when you were sick...or happy when you were sad." God, that was corny. But at least she hadn't backed off yet.

"Oh." Her delicate fingers trembled as they fluttered along his neckline and then settled on his shoulders.

He grew achingly hard in his jeans, wanting to relax her and give her the pleasure he knew she hungered for. He fought back the questions racing through his mind.

Was this the woman Zack Moreno was looking for? And if so, what was her fate? He couldn't let himself care. That wasn't part of the job. Caring. All he needed to do was seize the target, deliver it to its destination, take the money, and never look back.

It was cut-and-dried. Or at least it always had been before.

She rose onto the tips of her toes to press a kiss on his lingering lips. He inhaled the innocent fruity scent and slid his tongue into her mouth searching for more.

A soft purr rumbled from her throat, and her hand traveled down, down, down his abdomen until her fingertips lightly brushed over his jean-covered erection.

So much for focusing on his job.

He shoved off her jean jacket, let it drop to the floor, and began unbuttoning her pink sweater. She was braless underneath; he could tell from the dark aroused nipples piercing against the thinly knitted material. Each button unfastened with ease, and he made quick work of it before she came to her senses and walked away.

Before she realized what a selfish bastard he was for taking advantage of her. Didn't she sense it? The danger she was in?

He fought the struggle within himself. Tell her to run. Tell her to not use her credit card the next time she forgets and mistakenly hands it to the clerk to pay for her box of tampons.

That's how he had found her. That's why as soon as he pinpointed his exact target and seized it, he was going to take the money and not give a fuck what happened next. Business as usual.

Damn woman.

He picked her up in his arms and dropped her on the bed with more force than he had intended. More than she had counted on from the startled look on her face.

But still she let him unzip her jean mini skirt and ease it down her legs. Tug her black, dainty panties down her smooth thighs and drop them alongside the rest of her scattered clothes.

The dim lamplight poured over her naked body, and he took in the beautiful sight of her shaved pussy. Completely bald. Not a single hair to

determine if she was a real redhead. He smirked, not all that surprised. He'd thought as much when she'd spread her legs for him on the stage at the strip joint. The panties she'd had on barely covered her.

He shut out the thought of her doing that same dance for any man who walked in those doors and let himself pretend he was special. After all, she was here with him now. And if he believed her words, then she didn't do this often, or ever.

If it was true, he would make this worth her while.

His cock tightened and his mouth watered as his taste buds anticipated licking and tasting her soft, smooth pussy. He dipped his head and kissed her mound just once, as an appetizer for what was to come. Her honey musk scent drugged him as he drew in a breath and grinned. Good enough to eat.

One thing was apparent—the woman made him smile when everything and everyone else in his world left him annoyed and angry.

He watched her curvy body quiver as he ripped his T-shirt over his head and slowly unbuckled his belt. He wanted to tease her like she'd teased him. Make her want him like he wanted her.

She caressed her round plump breasts, and his cock throbbed and swelled against his zipper. When her pink tongue darted over her lips, wetting them, he couldn't hold back any longer. He shoved down his jeans and boxers in one swift motion. Her tanned legs spread apart to welcome him, and he stifled a groan. God, where did this woman come from?

Hurrying his pace, he reached underneath the bed, pulled out a condom, and wrapped it over his swollen cock.

Ava Lureau or not, she wanted him. Who was he to refuse her?

Chapter Two

Ava rested her hands on his massive chest when he wedged himself between her thighs. She couldn't keep from staring at him. Every inch of his naked body was toned to perfection, leaving her craving to trace her fingers over the strength of his muscles. He had a few scars here and there, but the one that grabbed her attention was the circular indentation on his left shoulder.

A gunshot wound? She lightly brushed her hand over it.

"Iraq," he murmured as if that would explain how he'd been shot. And sadly, it did. Obviously, he'd been in combat. He'd fought for their country. Which had to mean he was a man of integrity, a man of honor. Right?

She clenched her eyes shut and tried to stop her bustling mind from over-analyzing. This was sex with a hot guy and nothing more. *He* was nothing more.

He dug his fists into the mattress on either side of her head before dipping his mouth to softly kiss her top lip and then her bottom. His tongue slipped between the two, parting them. Gently, patiently—a kiss she'd never experienced from a man.

He baited her, and Ava responded by opening for him, sliding her tongue along his. He tasted of a mixture of cinnamon, quiet confidence, and restrained power.

Who was he? She didn't even know his last name, but every fiber of fear in her body was disappearing as he manipulated her mouth with his skilled tongue. It owned her and she wasn't protesting.

His large, hardened cock pressed against the wetness between her thighs, tempting her. She could only imagine what he was going to feel like inside.

Daring to seek more, she lifted her pelvis and grazed her pussy against his hard shaft. He was thicker and larger than either of the two lovers she'd had in the past. And she was sure he would bring sensations that would stretch and push her to limits she'd never known.

"Fuck me," she heard herself saying, impatiently, shocking herself.

His eyes opened and met hers, no longer the ice cold color, but a blue that reminded her of a tantalizing hot, bubble bath.

Ava took a desperately needed breath. "Please."

He grinned, sensually, devilishly, as if he had plans beyond her realm of fantasy. She pursed her mouth shut, thinking she'd most likely bitten off more than she could chew.

His upper half dropped onto his elbows, resting his solid chest against her sensitive breasts. She prepared herself for the roughness she thought he was capable of, but instead, she received soft kisses down her jaw line onto her neck. He licked the crevice behind her ear and gently nibbled a path to the area just above her shoulder.

Ava trembled at his touch and wrapped her legs around his waist, preparing for him to enter her, wanting nothing more.

But he didn't. Instead, he trailed licks and kisses in between her breasts and down her abdomen to her navel, his body moving down, brushing against her sensitive pussy. Her nerves zapped and tingled, and her skin shivered with need.

"You're teasing me," she said.

"You're too impatient," he mumbled as his fingers spread her folds.

His powerful lips smiled at her before he descended and slid his warm tongue against her clit. He licked slowly, forcefully, commanding her to whimper his name. Kade. It felt like sex rolling off her tongue.

Every nerve in her body was on fire, burning for him. She ran her hands down her neck to her breasts as he sucked and nibbled on her nub. The rising pressure was almost too much to take, and just as she thought she would burst, he plunged his tongue inside her slit. His fingertips bit into her thighs as he greedily took her with his mouth. She spread her legs farther apart, enjoying his uninhibited exploration, loving how he groaned as he tasted her. A new sensation built inside her slowly...steadily.

Then she felt him pull away, leaving the cold air biting into her wet skin. "Wait," she pleaded, not wanting the pleasure to end. She'd almost reached climax. So close. So good.

His hot breath returned as his teeth skimmed her aching clitoris. "I'm not done yet," he murmured and lightly bit her swollen nub. "Not by a long shot."

Panting, Ava tilted her head back against the mattress and waited as he climbed up her body. He was torturing her at his leisure. Again. His MO, it

seemed. But she held her tongue, waging it would be worth it in the end.

He kissed the same path he'd branded on the way down but stopped at her breasts. The warmth of his mouth slanted against her nipple as he sucked and ardently ran his tongue over it.

A searing pang threaded through her nerves from her breast to her core, making her writhe and arch against him. "Oh, God," she said and caressed his face, infatuation and hunger covering it. "Please, Kade."

The low light from the single lamp cast wicked shadows off his eager eyes as he met her gaze. The tip of his hot tongue scored her as he ran it down the valley between her breasts and up to her other budded nipple. He tugged at the sensitive flesh with his teeth before sucking it into his mouth and giving it equal treatment.

All the while, he never once broke eye contact. No, his gaze silently promised her this night wasn't going to end any time soon. Heat coiled in her womb, and she let out a small moan.

A pathetic excitement surged through her at the thought of being in this man's arms tonight rather than alone in a cold bed. Absolutely pathetic.

Ava wondered if he'd look at her that way if he knew who she really was and what she was running from. If he'd take the chance of falling for a woman who was frightened enough to leave everything behind and hide shamelessly in a strip club, the only place where she could make money and stay under wraps.

Would she ever be able to come out and live normally, fall in love, and start a family?

He released her nipple and gently swept his wet lips up her neck, pressed a kiss on her chin and then her cheek. She relaxed against his sweet, slow pecks and the warmth of his breath across her face.

How simple it would be to let her guard down and expose her true identity. How easy it would be to get used to being loved by a man like this.

So gentle and caring.

Kade slipped two fingers inside her. She was soaking wet and unbelievably hot and tight...too tight for him to fit his full length in without hurting her.

He slid in a third finger and worked them in and out until she began to loosen.

Finally.

The tips of her fingernails trailed up and down his back. He wished she would just dig them in and get it over with. Teach him a lesson for being such an arrogant prick. All he wanted her for was instant gratification. A quick fuck, in other words, and he couldn't bring himself to care if she deserved more.

Kade Gavin wasn't a man who stuck around to see if the scenery was good enough to pitch a tent. He wanted—no, he *needed* to keep going.

Without another thought, he rammed the head of his cock inside her slick, tight walls. He looked into her eyes to see if he had hurt her. But there wasn't anything but the dead, blandness of her colored contacts staring back at him. Nothing. She was nothing to him. Why would he worry what happened to her now or ever?

"Don't stop," she whispered into the air between their lips.

On her words, he drew out halfway and drove back in as far as he could. He felt the pain of her fingernails cutting into him. "Sorry," he mumbled into her ear. "You okay?"

"Yes," she said too quickly and then bit into her bottom lip.

"Really?" He chuckled. "Are you sure about that?"

Her mouth turned up in a wicked grin, and her cute little nose crinkled. Kade nearly lost his breath at the sight of her softer side coming through the disguise.

"I can handle you just fine." She tilted her hips up, letting him farther into her snug little pussy. "What are you waiting for?"

He held back the thundering desire to pump into her without caution. But no matter what words came out of her mouth, her soft, petite body told him different. She was more fragile than she was letting on. He couldn't help but wonder if that was a trait she had outside of the bedroom as well.

Her pelvis sloped up against him, and Kade obliged her by inching his way out and back in. She was slick and almost painfully tight.

He parted her rigid lips with his tongue and kissed them. Gentle pecks to relax her. Like the rest of her body, her mouth was too eager as she crushed it hard against his. He slipped his tongue in and curved it alongside hers, so sweet and enchanting. She tasted like pink bubblegum, like innocence.

Someone who needed to be protected rather than hunted.

A purring moan rumbled from the back of her throat, and her walls began to stretch and loosen for him. She molded to his size, allowing him to pull out

farther and delve in faster. His dick throbbed with the need for release, the primal urge to claim her body. Perspiration beaded his forehead as he held back. He never let a lover down, and he wouldn't start now, no matter how this woman affected him.

"Mmm," she moaned into his mouth and tore away from his kiss, tilting her head back against the mattress.

He smiled to himself and steadied his pace, slowly kneading his cock into her. Her fingernails scraped down his back again, so he grabbed her hands and tacked them down above her head.

Enough of that. He wanted her to scream now.

"Let me hear you," he demanded.

She moaned louder, and he thrust deeper, every inch of him filling her warm wet channel.

"Kade," she called out. "Oh, Kade."

"Come for me," he whispered into her ear and burrowed his forehead into her long strawberrycolored hair that splayed out over the pillow. Anything to take his mind off reaching orgasm before she did.

Her body shuddered under his as she screamed out his name one more time, her taut pussy squeezing his cock. His balls tightened as she milked him with her orgasm.

Oh, God. With all the strength he could gather, he drove into her one more time and released his pent-up heat, collapsing hard onto her small body.

Ava woke from too deep of a sleep and blinked repeatedly. The contacts in her eyes blurred the dark shadows around the room. The only thing reminding her where she lay was a strong muscular arm tightly

wrapped around her waist, pinning her against the warm, hard flesh of his chest.

How was she going to get out of this?

Why would she want to? It was amazing. She felt safe for the first time in months, no, years.

Her eyes began to water, begging for the irritating, foreign objects to be removed. God, she hated those things. If only she didn't need them. Unfortunately, she didn't have a choice. They were part of the disguise.

Carefully, she unpeeled his fingers from the underside of her waist and planted them on the vacant spot she left as she rose. She observed his dark silhouette, large and intimidating. Only moments ago, he had been filling her with ecstasy with that same body.

How long had it been anyway? Ava squinted to see the green neon numbers on the clock by the bed. A quarter after six. It was still dark outside, but a beam of light shone from the bathroom.

She followed the path, closed the door behind her, and looked in the mirror. Her eyes were reddened and somewhat puffy. She had no choice but to remove the contacts.

With nowhere to store them, she let the water from the faucet carry them down the drain. It was time for a fresh pair anyway and, lord, did it feel good to have them out.

The image in the mirror was less distorted now. She ran her hands through her messy hair and remembered how it had gotten that way. Never had she been so satisfied by a man. A delightful thrill flickered throughout her body as she thought back to how Kade had pleasured her so thoroughly.

She splashed cold water on her face, but the trickles of wetness that ran down her neck to the tips of her sensitive nipples flustered her more. Her fingers followed the damp path but didn't stop at her breasts.

With a mind of its own, her hand lowered until she cupped her tender mound. She instantly recalled how Kade had fucked her there. Meticulously. Completely.

An undeniable smile curved her lips. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Spreading her legs farther apart, she carefully stroked her hand across her smooth folds, against her tender nub, savoring the soreness.

Kade's tongue had worked that area with precision. She exhaled and allowed the self-indulgent fantasy of being in his arms for many nights to come, not just this once. The idea was foolish, but it warmed her, making the harsh, fluorescent lights of the bathroom that pierced through her closed lids disappear. So much so that she didn't realize when he opened the door and stepped behind her.

She opened her eyes to see him there, grinning at first but then narrowing both his mouth and his stare.

"They're blue," he said, looking intently at where her brown contacts had once been.

"I know," was all she could say. She had been caught in the lie, the disguise, and now there was nothing she could say to defend herself.

His mouth slowly formed into a full-out smile, and he looked happier than she'd ever thought a man like him could. "They're not green."

"Or brown," Ava added. *Had he forgotten already? Sheesh*.

She looked at herself in the mirror again, abruptly remembering the compromising position he had found her in. As inconspicuously as possible, she removed her hand from her pussy and planted it at her side, repositioning her legs back together in the process.

He chuckled behind her and her cheeks warmed.

"Don't stop because of me. I'd love to watch." He placed his large rough hand over hers. "Or help."

Their fingers intertwined as he led her hand back down, past her navel, over her mound. Ava held her breath and met his stare through the mirror. His light blue eyes seemed to sparkle at her darker, grayer version.

His foot guided her legs into a wider stance as he pressed his erection against her lower back. Combined fingers moved together to delve into her wetness, cramming between her sensitive walls. With her other hand, she held tight to the edge of the bathroom counter. That and Kade's free arm wrapped snug under her breasts were the only things holding her up—her trembling legs were useless.

His long fingers bypassed hers and plunged farther up inside of her. "I think you're ready for me," he said with a raspy voice into her ear. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

Before she could respond, he withdrew his hand and body and left her there, weak with desire. Less than a second later, he appeared behind her again. A crinkling sound could only mean he had retrieved a condom and was preparing himself to enter her.

She gulped in anticipation, now fastening both hands on the counter as she waited for him.

One of his strong hands gripped her waist while the other leaned her over, nudging gently against her back. She followed his lead without argument and ignored the tiny voice in her head telling her to stop the foolishness and leave.

Her breasts brushed against the cold tiled sink, contrasting with her scorching skin. She could still see him through the mirror. His expression was heated and full of passion.

His fingers ran down her back to her bare ass. He gripped her butt cheeks forcefully, spreading them as his eyes took in the sight. "I want to fuck you so hard," he said through his teeth.

Turned on by his words, she dropped her head, bracing for the threat to take place. All signs of sanity hid deep in the corners of her mind while lust throbbed and thrived.

The rough fingers around her waist grew tighter, piercing her with delightful pain as he rubbed his hard cock over the sensitive area between her anus and her drenched entrance.

"Do you want me?" he asked with a deep rumbling voice and then inched the head of his penis into her slick channel.

Ava held her breath. Perspiration moistened her cheeks and forehead. She nodded once before he had a reason to pull out and leave her filled with want.

"I need a better answer than that, *Lily*." His cock slid in only slightly. "Do you want me?"

Frustrated, she attempted to maneuver her hips to get him in further, but he held her still. "Yes, I want you to fuck me."

With a fast and powerful thrust, he filled her. Ava gasped and nearly lost her footing as the wicked pleasure surged through her body.

Quickly, his arms wrapped around her, steadying her. "I thought you could handle me?" he asked in a teasing voice.

"I haven't asked you stop, have I?" The presence of his hardness inside her pussy made her anxious for friction. "Can we quit talking now?"

A devil's grin appeared on his face, and he bent her over again but with more force this time. She grasped the edge of the counter as his left arm gripped around her waist and his right hand slid past her hip and over her mound to her clit.

Two fingers rubbed in a circular motion over her sensitive nub as he pulled his ever-increasing erection out of her and then slowly eased it back in. A moan left her throat as he continued this same steady motion.

Again, her legs lost their balance as a climax threatened to paralyze her with its enormity. A blaze of fire twisted and smoldered deep in her womb as she gasped for air. She'd never experienced such a powerful sensation. And now she didn't know how she would ever want it any other way. Who else could bring her this much pleasure?

"Kade," she called out as she hit what she thought was the pinnacle of titillation. But then he hastened his pace, slamming into her, winding her to an even higher level of ecstasy. "Oh, God, yes, Kade."

Her scream echoed in the small bathroom as she collapsed against the sink, her entire body pulsing...tingling...rushing with heat.

"This isn't working," he grumbled from behind. Or at least that was what she thought he said as he pulled out of her and picked her up in his arms. Her mind was still cloudy, and her body still pulsed uncontrollably.

They left the bathroom, and before Ava knew which way was up, she was dropped face down on the bed.

Kade despised uncomfortable sex. And the way he wanted to fuck *Lily* required a much safer backdrop to do it against. He spread her legs as she lay on her stomach. Then he kneeled on the mattress between them, staring down at her lush ass. This promised to be a better position. He gripped her hips and forced her ass towards his welcoming cock. "Much better."

He slid his finger into her wet hot pussy, worshiping her creamy silken entrance. So perfectly tight. Then he pulled out, listening carefully to the sound of her syrupy liquid against his movement. A careening rush of blood surged to the head of his swollen cock, and he held back a groan.

The harsh light from the bathroom shone on her beautiful face as she turned her head and stared at him over her shoulder. He licked his finger and tasted the juice that was her. Her cum was so sweet. He'd have to remember to get more of that later.

Right now all he wanted to do was swipe that desperate look off her face. It was as if she'd never been screwed properly. That was a shame. A tight pussy like hers deserved special treatment. Repeatedly. And since she wasn't the green-eyed Ava Lureau, he could do it as often as she'd let him.

He ran his hands over her beautifully rounded ass and spread her folds apart with his thumbs. His cock swelled painfully as he crowded it against her slit and eased in his engorged head. Her drenched pussy constricted and seemed to suck him in. He hissed in a breath and steadied his legs. God, she was perfect.

Out of the corner of one deep blue eye, she still stared at him, so he tilted his head toward her. "You're very quiet down there."

"I'm waiting for something to happen," she snapped back at him.

Such a sassy girl, she was. Kade loved it. She was a woman he could verbally spar with without getting bored—the kind that would bite back when bitten.

"Well?" She turned to face the mattress in front of her.

With that, he felt he had no choice but to teach her a lesson. He slapped his hand firmly against her ass and then drove his cock inside her, deep and mercilessly. Her tight, slick walls engulfed him, all of him.

He noticed her hands clench the comforter when he pulled back and slammed into her a second time.

"Don't stop," she said.

"I've only just begun." He hoped, anyway, wanting to give her an experience she wouldn't soon forget.

He plunged harder and faster as he dug his fingers into her hips. His balls ground against her moist flesh with each thrust. He was going to burst soon. She felt so good. So right. At least, she seemed to be enjoying herself as she moaned and writhed

against the bed. Sweet sounds that made him want more.

Her pussy contracted, clutching him. He watched his throbbing cock, slick with her juices, slide out of her and back in. His pulse raced and his gut knotted, pleading for release. The air in the room was thick as he drew in heavy breaths. He steadied and sped up his rhythm.

"Ohmigod, Kade!" she screamed. Again.

That was all he could take. He crashed into her one last time, letting his cum fill the protective barrier between them.

His body wanted to drop onto hers in exhaustion, but he held himself up in fear he would crush her. Instead, he withdrew and lay by her side.

She looped a damp, sweaty lock of dark red hair behind her ear and smiled at him through heavy breaths. Her face was flushed, her cheeks pink, her lips moist and full. Absolutely beautiful.

Kade imagined it wouldn't be difficult waking up to see that face every morning. In fact, it would be a pleasure. If it was possible for a man like him to settle down and get married.

He'd screwed up that likelihood a long time ago when he escaped his father's fists by joining the army. Four years later, after being shot in the shoulder by a sniper, Kade returned home to find his mother dead and buried and his father in prison for life.

He'd failed to protect the one person who mattered to him, the one person who loved him. He didn't deserve a family, a second chance.

With his mom dead and his second family, the army, declaring him useless, he'd gone independent.

It suited him. PI work paid well, he was good at it, and he never had to get close to anyone. Ever.

Ava rolled over and cuddled up next to Kade's chest, crushing her breasts against him and running her fingers through his thick dark hair. "Thank you," she whispered. "That was incredible."

His face softened to her touch only for an instant before the ice in his eyes thickened. He slipped away and stood from the bed, then gestured toward the condom. "Better get rid of ole faithful."

Here it goes.

Ava sighed and pulled the stiff comforter over her bare body. Why had she let herself spin daydreams that Kade might be *that* guy? The one who would rescue her from Zack Moreno...and herself. What a joke. Hadn't she figured it out by now? The only one who could save her was herself.

She listened as the toilet flushed and then watched him as he walked back to the bed with a tight grin on his face. He pulled his jeans on and zipped them up, all the while avoiding eye contact.

"Want a beer?" he asked as if they'd just finished watching a football game together instead of making passionate love twice. He opened the mini refrigerator and pulled out a bottle.

"I get it," she mumbled and began scanning the dimly lit room for any trace of her clothing. She spotted her panties and scooped them up.

"What do you get, exactly?" He twisted the cap off, not giving her his full attention and not seeming to give a crap what her answer would be.

"I'm supposed to leave before it gets awkward." She pulled her panties on and picked up her skirt and sweater.

"Come on, you said yourself this was a one night stand." He took a swig of his beer and then set it down on top of the fridge. "I don't even know your real name."

And it's a good thing, too.

She tugged her skirt up and tried to remain calm. She should be used to assholes treating her like a discount whore, like she was less than her worth. Unfortunately, she let this particular asshole lure her out of the safety of the club and straight to his bed.

She'd been lonely and she'd let herself read too much into his actions, and the connection they made in bed. It was a stupid mistake, and she wouldn't let it happen again.

"Hey," he said in a low voice and walked the distance between them. "I'm sorry if you thought this was leading somewhere. I didn't mean to give you that impression. I'm only in town until I complete a job and then I'm gone. A relationship would never work."

Ava gave him her best dirty look. "Don't you think I know that? Why else wouldn't I give you my name? It was just sex. No big deal."

She shrugged but couldn't seem to take her eyes off of his shirtless body. The ribbed muscles. The scars that didn't seem to faze him. The eyes that bore into her.

Focus, Ava. He's a jerk.

She took a deep breath and slid her arms into her sweater. His hand ran down the side of her breast before she could fully pull it on.

"No big deal? Do you mean that?" he asked with an unsmiling face.

"Don't touch me," she snapped, more furious with herself than with him.

He pulled his hand away and clenched it at his side. "Sorry. You tempt me like no woman I've ever known before."

"You don't know me, and you never will." She clasped her sweater shut and grabbed her jacket off the floor.

"Listen. I don't want it to end this way. I'd like to see you again before I leave. Maybe tonight after you get off work?"

Ava held back a laugh. How desperate did he think she was? "Sorry. I have a date," she lied.

Dates were a thing of the past. Something she couldn't enjoy as long as she was on the run. But he didn't need to know that. If he could play games, then so could she.

"With who?" he asked, his blue eyes narrowing.

Why did he even care? She shook her head and opened the door to leave.

"With who?" he repeated and grabbed her wrist. "One of the bouncers? One of those loser guys who sit in there all day dishing out money just so they can get a woman to touch him?"

She twisted from his grip. "Gee, aren't *you* one of those loser guys?" she asked but knew he wasn't. No, Kade was unlike any other man she'd ever met. The way he stared at her with thick dark lashes shading his menacing icy eyes told her that much, and it was answer enough.

She huffed out a breath and shrugged. "Doesn't matter. What I do is none of your business anyway."

He heaved the door shut and towered over her, cradling her face and forcing her to look up at him. "Your date's canceled. Come back here after work,

and I'll make you forget any other man exists. I promise." He dipped his mouth and threatened to kiss her.

"Promises are for fools," she said, staring at his lips. "And I'm no fool."

"That's a shame, because we'd get along a lot better if you were." He grinned and trapped her against the door. His mouth molded to hers and his tongue thrust past her parted lips as she gasped. One of his hands braced the back of her neck while the other slipped under her sweater and roughly caressed her breast.

Ava tried to shove him away, but he didn't budge. She should have been frightened. She should have bit his tongue, kneed his groin, and shoved the palm of her hand straight at the bridge of his nose.

Just like she'd learned in the self-defense class she'd graduated from less than a month ago.

But she didn't fear Kade—she yearned for him. In his bed, cradled in his strong arms, she could forget all her worries. She didn't need to think about the looming possibility of Zack finding and hurting her. She was safe. Free from fear and free from her disguise.

If only the overgrown man would stop acting like such an ass.

With fire in his passionate eyes, he finally broke the kiss and opened the door. "I'll see you soon," he said in a gruff voice.

She didn't argue. She'd have plenty of time to do that later. Pinching her sweater and jacket shut, she left.

Chapter Three

After getting a few hours of sleep, Kade showered and dressed. It was time to scope out his probable target, Poppy. And maybe check the stats on Lily's loser date.

Damn it. Why did he care? It shouldn't have mattered to him, but just the thought of another man touching her made him mad as hell. Especially so soon after she'd been in his bed, in his arms.

God, she'd had his cock inside her one night and she was planning on going out with another man the next. He shook his head. That didn't seem right. Sure, she was a stripper, but she seemed so sweet. Not the type to fuck around. And, hell, she'd been so tight, almost virginal. His balls tightened from the memory.

Her beautiful face came to mind. *Lily*. The fact that he didn't know her real name ground at his nerves as well. How could he even begin to have feelings for a woman who was nothing but a stripper incognito?

 $\mathit{Fuck}\ it\ all.$ He had more important things to worry about.

He reached under his bed and pulled out his duffle bag to see if everything was still in order before he left the hotel room. His handgun was tucked safely in its lockbox between a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

Satisfied, he clasped it shut, locked it and then slid the bag back under the bed. It wasn't safe to leave the gun in a hotel room for anyone to find, but he couldn't get it past the bouncer's pat-down at the front door. All he could do was tell the hotel manager he didn't want his room cleaned and hope for the best.

Not that he wanted to carry the gun around. He'd seen enough violence and heard enough gunshots during his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan to last him a lifetime.

Most of the time, Kade used his size and sometimes his fists to get what he wanted. People listened when he talked, making his job that much easier.

Which is why he wondered how Lily wasn't afraid of him. Not even after she'd seen the scars on his body.

She had to know he wasn't just a regular businessman traveling through town. She had to know he was dangerous and selfish, not worth the time of day she'd given him so far.

Kade drew in a breath, and the vision of her naked underneath him ran wickedly through his mind. To hell with it. Until she figured it out, he planned on taking full of advantage of her naivety.

The so-called dressing room was filled with every emotion a woman could have. Poppy was talking and laughing about the guy with man-boobs who always liked to rub his own nipples when she danced for him. Jasmine was crying about her latest breakup. Rose was screaming about the hairy spider in the toilet.

And Ava was angry and horny at the same time.

She walked past the other women and set her bag in one of the cement-colored, doorless stalls. The room was comprised of four of them, with the toilets removed from all but one and replaced with a bench, a full-length mirror and a single hook to hang stuff. Not exactly classy, but at least it gave Ava a little privacy when she changed costumes.

What a glamorous life. She sighed at just the thought of it. She missed her old life working with the animals at the shelter while studying to be a veterinarian during the week and volunteering at the battered women's group home on the weekend. How ironic that she had turned into one of them. Zack had called her a saint once, and now he truly wanted her to join the angels.

"Coming in, girls," Jarred warned, and Ava peeked around the stall to see him barging through the backroom door as if he owned the joint. Arrogant bastard. His brother was the owner, but Jarred might as well have been. Most of the hiring and firing was left up to him.

"Hey, Jarred," Poppy said in an adoring tone. The woman had a serious crush on the tall, dark, muscular man and everyone in the club knew it.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem Jarred felt the same way. "Hey," he answered her but gave Ava his attention. "Could everyone give me and Lily some privacy? I need to discuss something with her."

Shit. Shit. Shit. What did he want now?

With reluctance and audible irritation, the women left the room, leaving Ava alone with him. Thankfully, she hadn't started to undress for her shift yet and was fully clothed.

"What's up, Jarred?" She leaned against the outside of the stall so she wouldn't be trapped inside.

"I wanted to ask you that same question." He lazily walked to her and stopped only inches away. His dark brown eyes took in her entire body in one swooping glance. "You seemed to be into that guy yesterday, but I didn't see him tip you. You have something going on with him?"

"No. I was just avoiding the jerks from the university." She gave him her best innocent smile, loathing that she had to be nice to him.

"Ah, well, they're the ones who buy drinks and keep us in business. We don't want them disappointed, do we?"

"Won't do it again." Just tell him what he wants to hear so he'll leave.

He inched closer. "I'd hate to see you get fired, Ava. You know bringing in your boyfriend is a nono."

"He's not my boyfriend, and please call me Lily." She despised that she'd had a moment of weakness one night after work and told him her real name...after succumbing to four shots of tequila. It had been a long day and all she'd wanted to do was drain her sorrows. But as the evening had progressed, Jarred had begun looking less like an asshole and more like her salvation. What a joke.

She vaguely remembered making out with him in the parking lot. Thank God Poppy had caught them, putting a stop to it before anything else happened. But now Poppy hated her guts, and, honestly, Ava didn't blame her.

The whole ordeal had been a new low for Ava, and she swore to herself she'd never drink tequila again. Especially when accompanied by the likes of Jarred.

He stared down at her for a moment. His predatory gaze shifted to her lips and then to her breasts. "Just so we're clear then," he finally said and turned his back to her. "See you out there, *Ava*."

Kade scanned the room for his target. And Lily. But neither was in sight so he took a seat at his usual table in the back.

The place was mostly empty. Nearby, a man in a business suit sat at the bar talking to the forty-something bikini-clad bartender who looked like she'd led a hard life. A couple of scraggly looking men in painter's uniforms were sitting at the stage watching the raven-haired dancer blow bubbles while wearing a school girl skirt and no top. And to the left of the stage were a few young-looking guys, drinking and watching one of their buddies get a lap dance by a blonde with fake lopsided breasts. Kade figured they were students from the local university.

Then he spotted Poppy. She pushed through a door and nearly rammed it into one of the ogling boys, but he didn't seem to notice and neither did she. Her face was red, and she looked pissed as she stormed over to the bartender.

"Lily's doing it again," she spewed out. "Can you believe that shit? She's such a slut."

Kade's ears perked up.

"Relax, Pop," the brassy-haired bartender said while adjusting the strap to her bikini top. "You know Jarred picks a favorite every so often. She's just his flavor of the month, that's all. Next week, he'll be back with you. You can count on it."

"I bet they're back there having sex right now." *So this was the date, huh?*

Kade clenched his fists and started to stand. He'd be more than happy to break up anything that was upsetting his target, especially if it had to do with some fucker groping Lily in areas Kade had explored only hours ago.

But before he could approach Poppy, Lily took the stage. He sat back down and drank in the inviting sight. She wore a black lace thong under a tiny see-through teddy and spiky black heels.

Kade grew hard just looking at her as she danced slowly and erotically to the beat of the music. Her hips swayed as her painted red fingernails swept over her flat stomach to her neck and back again.

The young men quickly grabbed chairs next to the stage and pulled out their wallets. Lily gave them a cute grin and let the teddy fall to the floor, fully revealing her plump breasts.

They better not touch her. Kade sat up straight in his chair and prepared to make a move.

"Would you like a dance?" Poppy asked, breaking his concentration. She wore a strip of pink spandex as a skirt around her hips, barely covering her goods. A red feathered boa hung between her breasts.

He wanted to say no, but he needed to say yes since he was so close to pinpointing his target and collecting his money.

And getting the hell away from this woman who was driving him insane.

He gave a quick nod but kept his eyes focused on Lily. Without missing a beat, Poppy straddled his leg. Her hands cradled his cheeks and forced him to look her in the eyes.

"You like Lily?" She nodded toward the stage. The fluff from the boa itched at his nose.

"That her up there?" He played dumb.

"You had your finger inside her yesterday, and you don't even know her name. What a bad boy you are." She giggled and ran her hand down his chest.

That got his attention. His probable target had been watching him, and he hadn't had a clue. Maybe she was smarter than he gave her credit for, which wasn't much. Or maybe he had been too distracted to notice.

"Did you like watching me do that?" he asked, trying to get more info.

"I'd like it better if you did it to me." She scooped the boa over his neck and attempted to pull him into her bare breasts.

Kade resisted. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Lily tug at her panty strap so the punk kid with the green and white striped polo shirt could stick a dollar under it. "Did what to you?" he asked, absently.

Poppy leaned over him and blocked his view. She brushed her fingers down his stomach, over his penis and back up again. Then she put her lips to his ear. "Anything you want," she whispered.

Kade cleared his throat. He needed to move this interview along. "What's your real name, Poppy?"

"That is my real name, silly." She gave him a coy grin and tickled a feather along his forehead.

Kade swept it away. "Right. Every dancer here is named after some sort of flower. It's cute but a little annoying."

"Fine," she said, looking irritated. "It's whatever you want it to be."

"Do you ladies practice saying that?"

"What do you want from me, buddy?" She pouted her lavender-painted lips at him. "I'm just trying to make some money here."

Kade took the not so subtle hint and pulled out his wallet. He handed her a five dollar bill.

She rolled her almond-shaped green eyes at it and stuck it in her band of a skirt. "What did you give Lily?"

"A hell of a lot more." He smiled at the memory.

Poppy gave him a piercing glare and stepped away, but Kade grabbed her feathered scarf and drew her forward until they were eye to eye.

"What do you want?" she asked him.

"I want Ava Lureau," he said, finally losing all of his patience.

A look of distaste spread across her face as she jerked the boa out of his grasp. "You're an asshole," she said and walked away.

That wasn't exactly the response Kade had expected, giving him doubts. He let out a breath and tried to remain calm. If Poppy wasn't his target then who the hell was?

Ava tried not to notice Poppy fondling Kade in the back of the room. She was *not* jealous. The man obviously wanted another night of free sex, just not from her.

"Hey," the guy in the polo shirt said after sliding a twenty dollar bill under the string she was holding out for him. "Can I get a dance, a private one?" A boyish grin cut across his lips. He was cute. Only a couple years younger than her. Could have been someone she would have dated back home. Well, before Zack came into her life.

"Sure. It's fifty bucks. You pay the bouncer over there." She pointed to Jarred who watched her intently from the doorway. "Tips are extra."

"I'll pay whatever you want." His smile widened, showing his perfectly aligned white teeth his parents probably paid a fortune for.

"Okay, sweetie, I'll meet you back there." Ava brushed a finger over his nose and left to collect money from a couple more men who were offering. Then she scooped up her teddy and headed off the stage.

The room designated for private dances was a little more posh than the rest of the club, which wasn't saying much. Red carpet covered the floor and ended in the middle of the room where a small stage with a pole extended to the ceiling. Black velvet curtains draped all of the walls from top to bottom, and two leather loveseats sat on either side of the stage.

She adjusted the light to dim and tried to relax. Private dances always made her nervous. Sure, she had a bouncer outside the door if she needed him, but there was always a chance she could get overpowered by some loony pervert.

In this case, it seemed the culprit was just a horny college student, but she still felt uneasy.

Thoughts of Poppy putting her hands all over Kade's body whirled through Ava's mind. She supposed this was what Poppy felt like when the whole Jarred incident happened.

There. Now they were even. No more feeling guilty. *Yeah*, *right*.

"Lily." Kade's voice filled the room, and Ava spun around to see him walking through the

doorway, the top of his head almost touched the frame.

"What are you doing in here?" An annoying sense of relief overcame her. What did this man have that made her crave his mere presence?

"I saw you come in here. I was curious." His eyes focused on the stage she was now standing on. "What are you doing?"

"Somebody's paying for a private dance. He'll be here any second."

His eyes narrowed and his jaw twitched. "He'll have to find someone else." He shut the door behind him and locked it.

Her heart fluttered with desire and fear at the same time. "You can't do that. I'll be fired and you'll be arrested." She covered her breasts with her hands, but that didn't stop the goose bumps from rising on her skin.

"You were going to quit anyway, and I'm not scared of that pussy of a bouncer." He walked up to the stage and plucked her hands away from her trembling bosoms, which were just below his eye level.

"Who said I was quitting?"

"Me." His mouth parted and licked at her already aroused nipple.

A sizzle of fire careened down her core. "Kade, this isn't a good time." Her voice shook. "Really, I mean it. Why don't you go find Poppy again?" Ava said the words but found herself running her fingers through his hair, breathing in his masculine scent.

The idea of seeing him with another woman after the night they'd had together left a bitter taste in her mouth. Even if he was a jerk, he was *her* jerk...for as long as he was in town anyway.

"I'm allergic to weeds," he murmured against her breast and then lightly blew on it. "When am I getting my private dance?" His hands slid up her thighs and wedged underneath the sides of her gstring. "With this thing off."

The rattling of the door handle broke the sexual tension building up inside her. "Hold on a minute," she yelled.

"What's going on in there, Lily," Jarred's voice boomed from the other side of the door.

"I'm having a personal problem." She smiled at Kade. "Just give me a few minutes."

Kade snickered and tugged her panties over her thighs and down her legs.

Jarred banged on the door. "Christ, Lil, why didn't you use the goddamn bathroom for this shit?"

"Sorry. It'll only take a second."

Ava couldn't control her quivering body. Or her mind, for that matter. She was jeopardizing her job, her only means of survival, for a moment of pleasure. *Extreme* pleasure if it was anything like the night before. But still, it was only a temporary fix. Kade would leave soon, and she'd have to deal with the aftermath of what yet another man had left behind.

"I'm going to need a little more time than that." He climbed back up her body. His tongue extended to lick her navel and then a spot between her breasts before reaching her lips.

"Sorry. If we're going to do this, we need to skip the foreplay." Never in her life did she think she'd say those words. But since meeting Kade, she'd done quite a few surprising things.

He smiled and grabbed her hand, leading her off the stage and to the loveseat.

There was more banging on the door, making Ava feel naughty and more sexually aware than she'd ever felt before. "Unzip your pants and sit down," she whispered into Kade's ear.

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a fake drawl and then did as he was ordered, adding the extra step of slipping a condom over his hard length.

She watched him with enthusiasm. The thumps on the door becoming meager background noise as the sound and sight of him preparing for her held all of her attention.

"Come here," he said too loudly.

Jarred pounded harder. "Is someone in there with you?"

Ava lowered herself into Kade's strong arms and straddled his lap. Their time was limited so she grabbed his cock and helped guide it into her wet pussy.

He thrust his hips upward, and tiny pulses of bliss tingled down her thighs and into her belly. The orgasm had already begun and she didn't want it to stop. Tightening against him, she pushed off his cock and sat back down on him fast and hard.

Kade threw his head back against the cushion behind him. His fingers dug into her hips, and she knew he was losing control. She smiled at the power she had over him and continued sliding her body up and down his thick shaft, squeezing and sucking him into her tender walls.

"I'm getting a key, Ava," Jarred shouted, sounding furious.

Ava braced her hands on Kade's shoulders as a burning fever built in her womb, coiling and tightening, surging through her thighs to her toes. "Kade, I'm going to come."

His grip on her hips loosened, and he brought his hands up to cradle her warm cheeks. "What did he call you?"

Overwhelming liquid heat poured through her, and she clenched down on his cock. Her body reeled from the sensation, but she held back a moan. Exhaling a long pent-up breath, she let herself relax as she nuzzled against his neck.

The euphoria didn't last long. He grasped a stiffer hold on her face and forced her to look at him. His confused, angry gaze quickly yanked her back to reality.

"What's wrong?" she asked him but didn't really want to know.

"Is your name Ava?" His voice cracked.

She nodded. He'd heard Jarred, but she didn't see any reason at that intimate moment not to tell her lover her real name. "Yes, it's Ava Lureau," she whispered and kissed his unresponsive lips.

He stared blankly at her for a moment before picking her off his lap and setting her to the side. She watched him as he zipped up his pants and cursed under his breath.

No way. She was not going to put up with this crap again. "Who the hell do you think you are? I'm not a person who can be thrown away with the trash. I'm a human being, for God's sake." She stood up in front of him, but he wouldn't respond with words or eye contact. "What is it? It's not a fantasy anymore now that I have real name?" She watched for his next move, hoping his stone hard expression would lessen. "Say something," she said softly, changing her tone. "Please."

He scooped her panties off the floor and threw them at her. "Put 'em on," he grumbled and walked to the door.

Ava slid them on and wished she had more to cover herself with. She scanned the room for her teddy and saw it hanging by the door.

Kade picked it off the hook, scrunched the seethrough gown in his hand, and tossed it at her. "Sorry." He shook his head. "This whole thing was a huge mistake. I didn't know."

"Didn't know what? That you were a self-centered dickhead?" Ava shot back at him. "You're so hot and cold, I don't even know if there's any warmth in that body of yours. Why did you come in here anyway? Did Poppy turn you down? Is that it?" She was on a roll of fired up adrenaline and couldn't stop. "She's a smart girl. More than I gave her credit for. She knew a pompous ass when she saw one. Me? I shoved away my doubts about you and just let you have your way with me. What kind of fool am I?"

Kade's light turquoise eyes felt like they were cutting a hole in her heart from across the room. "You should've listened to your intuition, Ava," he said in a low voice and walked out of the room without looking back.

She wanted to run after him and slap his smug face. If she weren't a survivor, she might consider crying. But he didn't deserve her tears. No one did. She slipped her teddy on and clasped it shut. Just in time.

Jarred stumbled into the room breathing heavily with a key in his hand. "Not your boyfriend, huh?" He threw the shiny piece of metal toward her. It glinted against the dim light and landed at her feet. "Get in the office. Now. We need to have a talk."

After a moment of consideration, she nodded and followed Jarred to the owner's office. She'd screwed up and there was no doubt in her mind she was going to be fired. Although being alone in a room with Jarred for any reason was currently on the bottom of her list of fun things to do. She might as well get it over with. At least that room had windows so she wouldn't be completely separated from the rest of the club.

She stepped into the doorway, and he pointed at the folding chair in front of the desk cluttered with papers, a laptop, and a few smut magazines. "Sit."

"I'd rather stand." She took another couple steps in, only far enough for him to close the door.

She heard it slam shut behind her, and before she knew it, she was hauled against the hard wood. His chest pressed against her breasts, and his hands held her wrists above her head.

Tattered blinds hung halfway down the window that looked out to the rest of the club, not letting Ava see if anyone was watching. What had she gotten herself into now?

"Look at me, Ava," he said into her ear while crushing harder against her. His body wedged between her legs, spreading them apart.

Shit. Now she couldn't shove the palm of her hand up the bridge of his nose *or* knee him in the groin. But, goddamn it, if he tried to stick his tongue down her throat, she was going to bite down with all of her might.

"Let me go, Jarred. If I'm fired, I'll get my stuff and leave."

"I want to know what you did with your boyfriend in that room." He leveled his cold, damp lips to her jaw line and licked a path down her neck.

She squirmed against him, sickened by his unwanted touch. She had vowed she'd never let another man hurt her like Zack had. And now here she was at the hands of yet another abuser. "I'm going to scream if you don't let me go."

"Go ahead. Nobody gives a shit about you." He held tighter onto her wrists, and his slimy tongue dipped into her ear.

"No!" she screamed, using the only weapon she had left—her voice. "No!"

"Shut the fuck up," he growled against her cheek as his knee rode higher against her crotch. "No one's going to save you. You're just a whore, opening her legs for any lucky son of a bitch who walks through the front door."

He mashed his lips against her mouth, and she prepared to bite down.

But a knock on the door made him pause. "Go away. I'm busy," Jarred shouted to person on the other side.

"Hel—" Ava began to scream but was silenced by Jarred's hand over her mouth. With his other, he scrambled to grab both of her wrists again. But he failed.

Her hand was free, which meant she had a weapon. Remembering her self-defense instructor's advice, she shoved her palm as hard as she could upward toward his nose.

Chapter Four

Kade shook his head as he unlocked his hotel room. Why did *Lily* have to be his target? It didn't make any sense. She had blue eyes, not green. What the hell was Zack Moreno trying to pull?

"Hey," Poppy called out from across the street. "Hey, you!"

He turned to see the blonde standing outside the club door wearing that same skimpy outfit she had on earlier. What now? She waved her arms frantically with a panicked look on her face, making Kade take notice.

Cars honked as they sped past. Some slowed and stared at the woman in distress with her fuzzy boa whipping about in the cold wind. Kade hurried across the street, dodging and swerving around the mess she was creating.

"It's not a good idea for you to stand out here like that," he said when he reached her, not really sure why he cared. He was saying and doing a lot of unexpected things since Lily—no, Ava crawled under his skin and lit a match.

"Lily," she started to say, with chattering teeth.

"Get inside," he ordered. "You're freezing." He reached for the door handle, but she stopped him, moving in front of it. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Go look in the office. She's in there with him." Her voice was calm, but her eyes were narrowed and serious.

"Show me where." He pushed her out of the way and opened the door.

The rugged looking bouncer who always sat by the front door stood from his chair and faced Kade. "Arm's up. Spread your legs," he ordered.

"We just did this," Kade said but took the stance anyway. He understood the need to protect the women who worked at the club. Who knew how many scumbags walked in here on a daily basis? Hell, Kade was one of them.

The man patted up his legs while Poppy slipped by them, retreating through a door by the stage.

"Where is she?" Kade called out to her, but she didn't turn around to acknowledge him. What the hell was going on here?

He scanned the rest of the room, looking for any signs of disorder, but everything and everyone was just as it was when he left. Well, except the bouncer named Jarred was nowhere in sight. The man had fury written all over his face when Kade had passed him on the way out. Unfortunately, Kade had been too distracted to put two and two together.

The son of a bitch better not have hurt her.

"I need to talk to the owner," he said, thinking that was his best chance of finding Ava and protecting her from whatever danger she was in.

"Owner's not in," the bouncer said, patting under Kade's arms. "But you can find his brother in the office. Last door on the right. The room with all the windows."

"Thanks."

Kade weaved through the maze of purple tables and clear plastic chairs until he reached the first window of the office. Ava's muffled shouts made him stop in his tracks. He dipped his head down and

peered through the small space under the blinds, but couldn't see anything other than a cluttered desk.

Where was she? His body tensed as he walked to the door and listened. Nothing except the blaring music from the nearby speakers and the thumping of his own heart. He brought his hand up and knocked twice.

A man's voice answered on just the other side, followed by Ava's cry for help and the sounds of a scuffle. Oh, shit. He needed to get in there. He had to save her.

His pulse quickened as he brought his foot up and kicked the door once and then again. It swung open just in time to see Jarred holding his bloody nose with one hand and backhanding Ava across the face with the other.

She fell to the floor, and Kade reached for his gun that wasn't there. It was probably for the best since he believed any man who struck a woman deserved to die.

Kade helped Ava off the ground. Once she was standing, she pulled her arm away from him and looked at him as if he'd been the one who had hurt her. An unwanted feeling of guilt bit into him. He may as well have been. He'd taken advantage of her and left without a second thought. When would he learn?

She rushed out of the room, and Jarred made a move for her. Thinking quickly, Kade shoved him full force against the desk, sending papers flying. "Stay the hell away from her. If I find out you even glance her way, I'll kill you."

"Fuck you," Jarred said through the blood running into his mouth. "Tell her she can be a whore somewhere else. She's fired."

"She quits." Kade gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. Men like Jarred needed to be put in their place, but it wasn't worth sticking around to fight with the loser. He needed to find Ava to see if she was okay.

More angry than frightened, Ava heaved the dressing room door open. She wasn't leaving without her clothes. Not when she had so few of them to begin with. God, her entire life was in a constant upheaval, and she was sick of it. When was it going to get better? When were men going to stop trying to control her?

Poppy walked out of one of the stalls, and her mouth dropped open. "Did he hit you?" she asked as if it were a shock.

"Not until after I broke his nose." Ava stopped in front of the blonde, letting her get a good look at the red mark Jarred had left on her face. Her entire left cheek was throbbing in pain. "He was going to rape me, Pop."

"I don't believe that. Jarred would never go that far. You probably just antagonized him."

"Believe whatever you want, but just be careful, okay?" It was no use trying to warn a woman like Poppy—someone who had blinders on that read *this way to love and happiness* all pointing to Jarred.

Ava gave up after not getting so much as a blink as a response. She walked to the stall where her clothes hung.

Poppy followed. "Are you leaving?"

"I'm not sticking around here to find out what Jarred does next. He's an animal."

"Is that guy going with you?"

"No," Ava answered with more force than she had intended. "I'm sure he's going his separate way."

"Really? Seems like he cares about you."

Ava held back a laugh. "Kade cares for no one but himself. Trust me. He's no better than the likes of Jarred."

"I'm insulted." Kade's voice echoed into the stall where she stood, now completely nude as she prepared to dress in her street clothes.

Poppy rolled her eyes at Ava. "Good luck," she said and left.

Ava held her breath. Knowing he was so close made her ache for contact. Even though she despised him. Even though she knew he'd break her heart over and over until she finally got smart and told him no. How the hell was she going to turn off her own blinders?

A large shadow on the floor told her he was walking toward her. He stopped outside of the stall and leaned against it, staring her down. "You don't think much of me, do you?"

She turned, letting him see her in full view. She'd rather have him staring at her breasts than scoring her with those intense eyes. "Have you given me a reason to?"

His gaze drifted down for only a second, and then quickly made its way back up. "I've never hurt a woman before and I never will."

"Not that you've realized, anyway," she mumbled and stepped into her panties. She slid them on but kept eye contact all the while.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He moved past her, brushing his muscular arm against her breasts, and sat on the bench behind her.

Her nipples puckered disobediently. "Do you mind? I'm trying to get dressed." She reached over him and snatched her jeans off the hook above him.

Without warning, he grabbed her waist and pulled her onto him like a little girl sitting on Santa Clause's lap. The only difference was she was a grown woman with more passion for the man before her than she cared to admit.

He inspected her face, while his fingers gently ran down her sore cheek. "I shouldn't have left you here with him. He had murder in his eyes when I passed him on my way out the door. I've seen that look before. I should've known."

Ava wanted to ask where he'd seen it, the same expression she'd noticed on Zack before he beat her to a pulp. But she couldn't speak. Infatuation filled her pores and tickled at her lips that were so close to his.

"You need to put ice on that," he said with a visible gulp. "Will you come with me to my room so I can help you?"

With her mind blurred and her body on fire, she simply nodded.

He let out a chuckle. "Not that you need my help. You messed that guy up pretty good."

"He deserved it."

"Yes, he did." His fingers traveled to the bottom of her chin where he lifted it and guided her mouth to his. His other hand trailed lightly down her bare back to the bottom of her buttocks where he made soft circles against her skin.

A sweet, light kiss parted her lips and made her quiver with anticipation. How was she so easily seduced by him? Not a care in the world entered her

mind when she was encompassed by his solid body and musky masculine scent.

Well, not until he pulled it away.

"We should get out of here before he sics his henchman on us." He lifted her to her feet as if she were a puppet with limp strings. "Finish getting dressed. I'll wait for you outside the door."

The fuckhead who had hurt Ava was nowhere in sight when Kade scanned the room. Smart guy. In fact, the club was just as it had been. Bouncers stood in their assigned spots, and the dancers edged their way from one man to the next. Except Poppy, who was lazily swaying her hips out of sync to the music on the nearby stage.

Kade cleared his mind of Ava and the affect she had on him. His overwhelming need to touch her, kiss her, and protect her would undoubtedly put one or both of them in danger, and he needed to get a handle on it somehow. If he only knew what Moreno had up his sleeve. Why had the man placed such a high price on Ava's head? When Kade had spoken to him, it was obvious Zack was passionate about finding her. But for what reason?

There was only one way to find out. Kade pulled his cell phone from inside his jacket and dialed Zack Moreno's cell phone number.

"Moreno speaking," he answered quickly.

"What are you trying to pull?" Kade asked, tension building inside of him.

"Gavin, you're calling." The man seemed surprised. "This must mean you have good news for me."

"Not just yet. I need you to answer some questions for me first."

A false burst of laughter roared into Kade's ears. "You're my employee," Zack said, adding another chuckle. "You don't get to ask questions. You get to do what you're told. Now, do you have Ava or not?"

"Why do you want her? You obviously didn't want me to find her right away with the bogus eye color you gave me."

A moment of silence passed.

"Why do you want her?" Kade repeated but with more authority.

"I'm impressed. You found her despite my misinformation. You've lived up to your reputation. I may have to tell the senator to hire you on."

"My reputation is dirt. I'm a son of a bitch, but I still need to know your plans. I won't have her put in harm's way."

"Relax, Gavin," Zack said with a bite. "You act as if she means something to you. I know that can't be true because Ava belongs to me. Have you overstepped your boundaries? Have you *fucked* my property?"

"She doesn't belong to anybody, especially you. Is that why you want her? Do you want to force yourself on her?" Kade gritted his teeth at the mere thought.

Zack let out another bitter laugh. "Now, that would be illegal, my friend, and I'm a man of values. I only want to have a conversation. Then she can be on her way if that's what she pleases."

Kade bit his tongue. Moreno was spitting out garbage and both of them knew it. Ava was in danger. But why?

"Besides," Zack added. "If you don't follow through, Gavin, you won't get paid, and I'll see to it

you don't work another day in your life. Understand?"

"Completely." Kade shut the phone off. There wasn't anything more to discuss. He knew what he needed to do. He didn't like it, and he sure as hell knew Ava would hate him for it. But it had to be done.

Kade's hand on the small of Ava's back allowed her to momentarily forget about the stinging sensation on her cheek as the cold air bit into it. She only wished she knew why he looked as if he had just shot someone. Or wanted to.

This wasn't a man who traveled selling software. With his intimidating appearance, how could anyone trust him?

How could she? For all she knew, he was being paid by Zack to find her. But that was ridiculous. Zack would never allow his employee, or anyone, to lay their hands on her, let alone make love to her over and over. She mentally laughed at the thought. No, it had been months since she'd left Zack, but she was sure he would be just as possessive as the day she'd met him.

Which meant Kade was still a complete mystery. Everything from his last name to his real occupation to where he came from was a huge puzzle just waiting to be pieced together. If only he'd let her in long enough to at least have a glimpse.

"I'll go grab some ice from the machine while you warm up inside," Kade said after opening the door for her.

She tried to smile, but her face hurt too much so she just nodded and stepped into his room. His bed was unmade, but it looked tempting all the same.

She crawled on top of the mattress and snuggled up in the stiff comforter and tangled bed sheets. Just a hint of his scent lingered on the white-cased pillow. She inhaled deeply.

God, what was wrong with her? It was as if she were a lovesick teenager...with serious doubts about the man she was falling for. How could someone make her feel so safe and frightened all at once?

Although she was exhausted, she forced herself to sit up, hauling her body off the bed like dead weight. A shower was exactly what she needed to clear her head and start thinking of where to go next.

The next town over or a whole new state all together? Maybe someplace warm where it never snowed. The cold weather was beginning to get on her nerves. Phoenix, maybe? She could get back on the bus and head south, stopping when and where she felt far enough away from the danger. Ha. That would be never and nowhere.

She turned the shower on and undressed while the water heated. Her body ached from being manhandled by Jarred. One thing was for sure wherever she went, she knew the people would all be the same and none of them could be trusted.

Sighing, she stepped into the pelting hot water and let the spray beat down her back. When had she become such a pessimist? Or was she a realist? Either way, it was lonely and depressing.

Through the marbled glass shower door, she saw Kade's large, distorted image walk into the bathroom. She held still, not sure if she wanted him to leave or to join her. Could she handle one last fling? Or would it only leave her craving something more? Something she realized he wasn't willing to

give. It had been painfully obvious the first couple of times he'd made that clear.

"I'll put the bucket of ice in the sink, Ava."

She liked the way he said her name. It felt familiar and warming. "Okay, thanks," she answered, still immobile.

For what seemed like an eternity, he stood there, just outside of the shower door. She couldn't tell if he was watching her or not. She guessed there probably wasn't much of her he could make out if his view was the same as hers.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked over the noise of the running water.

The blackness of his T-shirt fell out of sight, leaving the tan of his flesh. From what Ava could tell, his jeans dropped next.

Her heart beat heavily as anticipation pulsed through her, making her breasts ache for his touch and her pussy grow warm with need.

His hand pressed against the steamy glass and slid it open. He stepped in and moved toward her, only allowing Ava to close her eyes before he grasped the good side of her face with one hand and braced the other hand on the small of her back. His commanding mouth took control of hers and let her know how much he desired her.

Ava reached for him, wanting to feel the mass of his chest, the firmness of his stomach. She dared to slide her fingers around his waist to run them over his tight buttocks. Water ran down her arms and onto his backside, making it slippery to the touch as she rubbed his firm ass.

His skilled tongue tangled with hers, and she let her fingers crawl up his back, gliding lightly on the solid muscle.

Her wet breasts crowded against his body. Their skin slithered smoothly together, making her nipples aroused and receptive. They pebbled into hard knobs against the coarse hairs on his chest.

His erection grew stiff against her stomach, and the craving to explore every inch of him overwhelmed her. Having a mind of its own, her hand came back around and encompassed the velvety skin of his long, hard cock.

She gently squeezed as she slid up and down his wet, slick shaft.

His lips froze on hers as he drew in a breath. Ava dared to open her eyes and see firsthand the pleasure she gave him. A heavily lidded gaze stared back at her. The paleness of his blue eyes read more than just lust, and she shivered at the possibilities of what he could be thinking.

In any case, exciting him awarded her more satisfaction than she'd ever imagined. She took in the sight of his pulsing erection ready to burst at her fingertips. *Scrumptious*.

Wanting nothing more than to taste his warm cum, she shoved him against the far wall and kneeled at his feet, holding his thick length in her palm.

"Jeezus, Ava." The sound of her real name leaving his lips sent warm flutters to her belly.

Glad this wasn't over between them just yet, she licked the salty pre-cum from the tiny slit at the head his cock. Mmm.

He hissed out a breath and visibly tensed the cables of his stomach muscles. "You don't have to do this. It wasn't what I'd intended." He tilted his head. "You're hurt. You should rest."

She ran her fingertips down the corded muscle that led to his groin. The man was perfection. And, for this precious moment, he was hers. She dared to meet his gaze. "I want to do it. I want you, Kade. All of you."

He gently cupped her injured cheek and nodded stiffly, his gaze never leaving hers. "Stop if you feel pain."

She shoved away the thought of how many other women had knelt before him like this. How many he'd stared at with those hot-and-cold eyes, promising them both everything and nothing.

It didn't matter. She had the power now. With the flick of her tongue over his engorged head, she made him groan. His fingers entwined in her hair, holding her closer.

She held his base with one hand and cupped his tight balls with the other, loving how every inch of him responded to her. She licked her lips, then took him in her mouth, just a couple inches. Her cheek felt bruised, but she ignored the tenderness, her desire overpowering any discomfort.

He was large, but she tried not to let that intimidate her. She'd give him pleasure one way or another.

Trickles of his hot cum danced at the back of her throat as she sucked him in harder. She found herself purring against him, his taste making her hot with need. Her thighs trembled and her pussy ached as the water from the shower pelted her ass and lower back.

He leaned against the tile wall and slowly pumped his hips forward. With his hand holding her in place, his cock reached the depths of her throat.

Ava swallowed and slurped, eagerly accepting his rhythm, wanting nothing more than to consume every inch of his yummy length. She moved her hands over his muscled thighs, up to his perfect tight ass, and clutched his flesh.

He swore gruffly as if pleading for her mercy.

Yes. Come for me, Kade.

Sheer satisfaction rolled through her, and all her thought and energy centered on sucking and manipulating him with her tongue.

He grasped the hand towel rack beside them and let out a rumbling groan that echoed in the shower stall. Hot cum shot down her throat, and she drank him up, savoring the taste of his liquid cream. When there was no more to be taken, she eased away and kissed his taut rippled abdomen.

Was it wrong to worship his body, to need more? "Ava," he said in a husky, heated voice. "What do you do to me?"

Water trickled down her face as she stood to face him. How could she answer him if she didn't understand the question? Her mind was blurred with a strong yearning to be held and caressed by him. Nothing else mattered at that moment.

He reached out and pushed back a wet lock of hair that had fallen against her injured cheek, and her skin tingled across her entire body. What did he do to her? One single touch had her reeling with an unbridled hunger.

Not being able to wait any longer, she grabbed his wrist and directed his hand toward her needy breast. He massaged it, gently stroking his thumb over her drenched, aching nipple.

A half grin formed on his lips. "The water's starting to get cold."

It wasn't until then she noticed the goose bumps on her skin and her quivering lips. She was freezing.

He stretched his arm around her and shut off the shower. "Come on. Let's get warm."

Without a thought, she followed him out and let him pat a towel down her roused body. She was glad when he slowed and paid special attention to the inside of her thighs, sliding the terry cloth up between her legs, over her sensitive pussy...her mound...her stomach...and across each breast.

After grabbing another towel, he walked behind her and began to dry her hair, wrapping it up and squeezing the water out of the locks.

"I could get used to this." She instantly regretted her words.

He stopped what he was doing and draped the towel around her. "I wouldn't if I were you," he said in an almost inaudible voice as he maneuvered around her. His intense gaze cut into her, and he walked out of the bathroom, leaving her there feeling like a complete idiot. Again.

Biting into her lip, she refocused and tried to gain control of her emotions. "I didn't mean it literally, Kade," she called out to him. "It's not like I want to marry you and start popping out puppies. I don't even know your last name."

Silence thickened between the rooms so she gave up trying to defend herself for absolutely no reason at all. Why did she care anyway? The man was good for the physical stuff but that was it. That was where it ended. If she could manage to keep her mouth shut, she could probably get one more night of sex out of him before she moved on. And maybe find out where he lived in case she wanted to locate him again. Just for the sex. Really.

The mirror over the sink reminded her of the long day she'd had. Her cheek was pink and slightly swollen, and the dark circles under her eyes made it seem like she'd aged ten years in the past few hours.

She sighed, wrapped some ice in a towel and gathered the courage to join him.

When she walked through the door, he had on a pair of black boxer briefs and was sitting at the edge of the bed rifling through a duffle bag.

"How are you feeling?" He looked up only for a moment.

"Fine." One word answers were the best way to go.

"You don't look fine."

"Mmm." Not a word but cursing at the man probably wouldn't get her laid. She crawled onto the bed, still completely naked, but he didn't even give her the courtesy of a glance.

"Why don't you take these?" He swiveled around to face her with a brown prescription bottle in his hand.

"Those?" She raised an eyebrow. "What are you trying to do, drug me?"

He shook his head but still didn't make eye contact. "They're pain killers for an old injury I've got that flares up from time to time. A couple of these, and you won't feel a thing, I promise you."

She arched her body toward him and circled her finger over her nipple. "What if I want to feel something?" she asked in the sultry voice she'd used a billion times at the club.

He blinked. "What?"

Why was it so much easier to play a seductress when you were named after a flower? "Nothing," she

said, giving up. She placed the ice-packed towel over her cheek and tried to forget how horny she was.

The bed creaked as he stood. "I'll get you some water."

"Whatever," she mumbled, reminding herself that *survivors* didn't beg. If Kade didn't want to see her anymore after tonight, then to hell with him. Oh, who was she kidding? What would one more try at seduction hurt?

Kade didn't look in the mirror as he filled the plastic cup. How could he when the man looking back at him was nothing but a pathetic, self-centered prick?

Ava Lureau deserved better than what he had planned for her, and it sickened him. But there was no other way around it.

If she weren't so innocent and loving, pleasing him so readily with her beautiful body, then what he had to do would be easier. Cut and dried. Regrettably, he knew as long as she let him, he'd take everything she had to give. Just like a drug, he was quickly becoming addicted to her. He longed to please her—every part of her. Fill her. Possess her. Protect her.

He walked back into the bedroom and saw her lying there with the comforter only partially covering her naked body. God, he wanted her, and he wasn't sure he would ever be able to get enough.

Maybe if he were to have her just one last time before she found out his identity. What could it hurt? She was going to despise him anyway.

After spilling out two of the pills into his free hand, he walked over and sat beside her. "Here, take these."

She met his eyes while pressing the towel filled with ice against her cheek. "I don't need it."

"They'll help you sleep." He watched a droplet of water drip down her neck from the makeshift ice pack.

"I don't want to sleep." She sat up, and the wet bead ran down between her supple breasts.

Instinctively, he grew hard as he imagined following that path with his tongue. The taste of her, the soft creamy feel of her, just the thought aroused him.

"Please, take the pills," he ordered himself to say.

She pulled the pack from her cheek and set it down on the bed beside her. "Don't you want me?" she asked. "I know I look like hell, but...I don't know. We could have one last fling before we go our separate ways."

"Aren't you in pain?" Kade attempted to keep his thoughts rational because his body wanted to flatten her against the mattress, spread her legs, and make love to her until she was completely satisfied.

"A little, but you can make me feel better." She picked up an ice cube from the towel and slid it over her hardened nipple and down her stomach to her navel. "You know, like you did when we were young and innocent." It melted quickly over her tanned flesh, and trickled down the area between her bare mound and her thigh.

Focus, Kade.

With the minute bit of willpower he had left, he shoved the pills and the cup of water toward her. "Take these or I'll feel bad."

"And then?"

"Then I'll screw you so hard you'll have to retire your pussy."

She giggled. "Retire my pussy? Is that all you got?"

He would've upped the ante but was relieved when Ava took the pink and white capsules from his hand and swallowed them down with the water. Maneuvering her naked body to the middle of the bed, she lay on her back and opened her knees, letting him see the luscious rosy folds between her legs.

"Ready," she said softly and laughed again.

Lord, he was going to miss her. One last night. One last time pleasuring her. He needed to make it worth her while...before it was too late.

Chapter Five

Poppy sat in her blue two-door hatchback and stared across the street through her cracked windshield. After she had overheard Kade on the phone, an uncanny feeling had her running circles in her head.

Who had he been talking to?

Whoever it was obviously had plans for Lily or Ava or whatever. It didn't really matter what her name was now that the slut was leaving and would be out of the picture.

Poor Jarred should have called the police on her ass. His nose was the size of a grapefruit. Sort of deserved it. But still. He was the only guy who'd ever cared for her. Enough to rescue her from the streets and give her a job. A safe job. One where she didn't have to spread her legs for just any ol' pervert who flashed some money at her.

Those days were over thanks to Jarred. She owed him. And hopefully one day he'd realize she was good enough for marriage, and maybe a kid or two.

Her mama would've liked to see that, if she were still alive.

Not that Poppy didn't allow a man to have his way with her once in a while. If the money was right and the man was worthy enough, she'd do just about anything. She didn't let Jarred in on her little side jobs, although he was always suspicious.

But what Jarred didn't know, wouldn't hurt him. Besides, he wasn't exactly faithful.

If only tramps like Ava would stop tempting him, he'd stop fooling around and get serious. *Maybe buy me a nice ring*. Get down on one knee like you see in the movies. They could buy a house. The one on Bluebird Street with the wraparound porch and that nice big elm in the front.

She sighed and gripped the steering wheel. Someday she'd get what she wanted.

The light dimmed in the hotel room across the street, and Poppy's mind started swarming with ideas again. What if that Kade guy was a spy? What if Ava was a criminal and the mysterious person on the phone wanted to put her in prison? What if...

Ava loved the broad width of Kade's back and shoulders. His well-defined arms weren't bad either. Especially when they flexed while he reached down to pull off his underwear. As he turned to climb onto the bed, she licked her lips at the sight of her favorite muscle of all.

"I swear that is the most beautiful penis I have ever laid my eyes on." She ran her hands over her thighs in anticipation.

"Have you seen many?" He moved to kneel between her legs, and began massaging the inside of her thighs with his rough hands.

"Jealous?" She inhaled deeply at the feel of his touch.

"Just want to know how many other guys I've beat out." He shrugged and smiled. "It's a man thing." His fingers kneaded and molded her flesh, stroking from her knee to the heat burning between her thighs.

"A few." She bit into her lip both to keep from moaning and to hide her grin. Could a guy like Kade get jealous? He didn't seem to care about much.

A finger brushed lightly against her clit, teasingly, back and forth. "Four? Five?" he asked in a heady voice.

Ava let out a small whimper. "Umm." She tried to gain focus. "Tell me your last name, and I'll answer your question."

He nudged a finger inside of her wet slit. "Gavin."

Mmm. She arched her back and angled her hips to urge him in farther. "Kade Gavin, you have beat out two other men. Congratulations." She smiled up at him, but he didn't return the favor.

"What were their names?" His eyes narrowed, and he slid in a second finger.

She sighed at the welcome invasion, happy she was getting one last thrill from the mysterious man who was becoming more familiar by the minute. Maybe he *was* jealous. But that would mean he cared. Was it possible?

"Tell me where you live?" she countered and clenched down on his fingers.

He inhaled deeply. "Rocky Mountains."

"Colorado?"

He nodded, extreme concern still written all over his face. "Your turn."

"Josh and Zack." She let out a moan as he found a sensitive spot.

"Did you love them?"

"Why do you care?" She grasped her breasts and pinched her hard nipples as fire coiled tightly in her belly. "Oh, Kade," she breathed out.

He withdrew his fingers and pierced her with a glare. "Tell me."

"No, don't stop. Please. I didn't love them. Not even a little. I swear." Bracing herself on her elbows, she glanced at the god of a man who had more power over her than she ever thought possible.

His impressive cock stood erect, arcing toward his muscled abdomen. His broad chest, his cut features, the scars that held numerous stories—every inch of him captivated her. She wondered what else she'd tell him in the heat of the moment.

He eased his fingers back into her swollen pussy, so wet her juice trickled down past her anus. She let herself relax and fell back onto the bed. The ice from the towel spilled next to her, stinging her skin. With her arm, she pushed it back but was distracted by the sudden heat and heaviness of Kade's body on top of hers.

"Hi," she said startled but welcoming.

The pale depth of his eyes answered for him as he peered down at her, only centimeters from her face. His short dark hair clung in damp ringlets to his forehead. His tempting lips lingered just above hers. The angle of his jaw, chin, and nose were harsh and masculine. *God, he was gorgeous*. Ava imagined she could stare at him for eternity and never grow bored. She couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever give her that option.

"Have you ever been in love?" she dared to ask.

"Never." The single word sounded so definite. Infinite.

"Oh." Ava's heart sank.

His Adam's apple fell and rose again. "Want me to get rid of this ice?"

"Umm, sure. It's kind of cold against my arm." Who was she kidding? She couldn't feel anything but desire burning inside of her.

With one hand he scooped the ice back onto the towel. In the process, his body moved against hers, and Ava held back the urge to wrap her arms and legs around him until he broke down and made love to her.

Instead, she watched with false patience as he picked up one of the cubes and ran it over her lips. Water melted into her mouth as she parted it for him, letting him know she was ready for his game.

He dipped his head and licked across the path. When he pulled away, Ava ran her tongue over her lip to taste him. She could have sucked on his familiar cinnamon flavor for days. He was yummy inside and out.

She caught her breath when he maneuvered down her body, trailing the ice cube along her neck, over her shoulder, up the curve of breast to her nipple. He circled the bud until it hardened painfully, shooting lightning to her core. When she thought she couldn't take anymore, he laved his warm tongue over it.

Every nerve in her body crackled with want. She reached to caress her breasts as he continued hungrily lapping at her sensitive bud. Then he sucked it into his hot mouth, so hard the pleasure was painfully good. She bucked under his touch and jammed her fingers into his damp hair. More. God, she wanted more.

She got her wish as he moved to the other breast and gave it the same treatment. Sucking, licking, nibbling. Blurring her mind with an overwhelming need, propelling fiery sparks to her core.

He released her nipple and met her stare, his eyes drunk with lust. "Time to move on."

"Please do," she quipped, arching her hips toward him.

He sat up, selected a new piece of ice, and dropped it onto her stomach.

Ava gasped from the sudden chill against her feverish skin.

"It's okay, baby. I'll make it feel better." He pressed on the cube with his palm and slid it over her navel. His mouth followed the path, kissing and licking her skin.

When he reached her trembling mound, his lips halted but his hand kept going. Over and in, he directed the shrinking ice.

Ava shuddered at the clash of cold on heat.

"Fuck," he mumbled. "It melted." He grabbed for another cube and then paused, looking her over as if planning his attack.

After setting the ice next to her, he took hold of her legs and slid her to the edge of the mattress.

Ava wanted to ask what the hell he was doing, but clamped her mouth shut, afraid he'd waste time by answering her. Just as long as he was touching her in some way, she was pleased...no, ecstatic.

Her legs and half of her ass were off the bed, her feet planted on the floor. Kade picked up the ice again and knelt down before her, out of her view.

Without warning, she felt a cold sting on her clit. She tried to bring her legs together, but he was in the way. He coerced them apart, as far as they could go.

"Let me do this." He sounded a mile away, his voice echoing around her.

"What is it that you're trying to do?" Ava attempted to sit up, but he forced her back down with one large hand.

"Just relax. I'm not going to hurt you." His tone was calm and tender. "Trust me. I want to make you feel good."

At that, Ava lay back down and waited, staring up at the ceiling. Trust wasn't something that came easily to her. Not after losing her parents as a small child or being thrown out into the world alone at the ripe age of seventeen. And especially not after what Zack had put her through.

But Kade was different. Somehow she could sense he'd never harm her. Never put her in danger. After all, he had been there to help her escape from Jarred. Who knew what could have happened if he hadn't shown up.

Another frosty pinch nipped at her as he stroked the ice against her clit, but this time it was quickly followed up with the warmth and softness of his tongue. It was odd how pain and pleasure went so well together.

He repeated the torturous action twice more. Cold. Heat. Cold. Heat. She tensed and relaxed under his intense workings, surprised as the sting dulled, leaving only a delicious throbbing ache. The bliss spread from her pussy to her womb, where warmth curled and smoldered.

She whimpered and bit into her bottom lip. Her hands clutched onto the comforter at her sides.

He stared at her as he slid the ice cube lower and buried it inside her feverish pussy. Ava gasped and covered her face with her hand. It was too much...until his hot tongue dipped deep inside, thawing it.

He sucked and prodded, elating her. The sound of his tongue and lips eagerly kissing and licking as he gripped her thighs with his rough hands sent her spiraling. Her pussy pulsed, her core singed, and her body writhed and bucked against his ready mouth.

"Kade. Oh God, Kade."

"Mmm," he groaned and greedily consumed her, licking the juices, from her pussy to the path it took to her sensitive anus.

Ava cried out when he lingered there, his tongue nudging her taut entrance.

"So good, baby." His fingers pierced into her hips as he held her close, not letting her go until her sobs broke off and her body settled.

When he finally released her, he reached for something under the bed. "Don't move."

Ava was so exhausted and enraptured, she didn't argue. Whatever he wanted from her, he could have. Whatever he wanted to do to her, she would let him.

The crinkling of a wrapper told her what he was preparing to do next. He stood up and guided her back a few inches so her ass was fully on the mattress. Clasping onto her calves, he pushed her legs toward her, spreading them as far apart as her body would allow. Then he thrust his hard, thick length into her, filling her pleading, wet pussy. So full.

In short passes, he drove in and out repeatedly, already building a new heated sensation deep inside her. His hips slapped against her, and she felt his balls hitting her ass. Her thighs quivered as he hunched over her, watching her with a dark intensity. His stomach muscles constricted with each thrust. His solid arms held her legs.

She wanted to feel him, to touch him, but he was too far away. She ran her fingers over her mound and let them skim over his cock as it slid into her pussy. It was hard and slick with her cream, a tangible reality of their passion for each other.

"Yes, baby, feel me fucking you. My cock driving into your tight little pussy. Does that feel good?"

"God, yes!" She loved him inside of her, filling her, stretching her. Her orgasm rose to a level she'd never known existed. Her entire body was on fire, hot and pulsing as he clenched tight to her thighs and drove in and out of her. "Oh, Kade! Yes! Yes!"

Tears welled in her eyes as she came hard, sparks bursting from her core and spreading to her fingertips and toes. How could she say good-bye to him? To this connection she'd never been able to find with another man?

He pushed her back farther onto the bed and lay on top of her. Ava wrapped her arms and legs around him as he drove harder and faster. Afterspasms tingled and delighted.

She was his. All his. Her fingertips coursed down the corded muscles on his back, felt them bunch each time he pumped into her. Hot breaths huffed beside her ear.

"Oh, baby, I'm going to come." He groaned and shuddered, violently filling the latex separating them.

Their hearts hammered in rhythm as he stilled. The air smelled of sex, and she nuzzled her nose into his neck, licking his salty heated skin.

Not enough. It would never be enough.

Ava ran her hand through his damp hair as they recovered together. She kissed his stubbly jaw and

welcomed his warm sweet breath against her cheek. It felt natural to hold him close and adore him.

Suddenly fatigued, she sighed and closed her eyes.

"Don't go to sleep yet," he whispered into her ear. "Please."

Her lids were heavy, but she managed to lift them and see him brush a soft kiss to her lips.

"Where in the Rockies?" she heard herself ask and only wondered briefly where the thought had come from. It was sorely obvious. She didn't want to lose him. Not yet.

"It's a cabin. Pretty remote area. Maybe I can take you there sometime."

She ran her fingers over his five o'clock shadow, and he leaned into her touch, drawing in a heavy sigh. He did care for her. She could see it in his expression. "I'd like that." She shut her eyes again and began to drift.

"I hope so," she heard him say in a low voice.

Kade tore himself off Ava's unconscious body. Raw emotion was eating at him, but he needed to stay focused.

Don't give in to weakness.

She was too good for him anyway and was bound to detest him when she found out who he really was. And that he'd drugged her so he could kidnap her. What was the point in caring? In falling for a woman he couldn't have? His was a life of danger and solitude, and Ava was only a distraction.

Beautiful, spirited and goddamn sexy...but not his to enjoy permanently.

Nor was she Zack Moreno's, but Kade planned on taking care of that detail when the time came.

He swiped the remaining melting ice onto the floor and covered her body with the blanket so she wouldn't get chilled before he had a chance to dress her.

How had she ever gotten involved with the likes of Moreno? He was a lying, deceiving, short-tempered bastard. He was a corrupt minion for an even more corrupt Senator. And he was Kade's current boss. Fuck him.

It nauseated Kade to know he was about to let him close to Ava.

He only wants to have a conversation.

That was all Kade was going to allow. Get it over with so Ava could move on without having to hide from the bastard. And so Kade would know she was safe.

He wouldn't be able to live with himself knowing Ava's life was in jeopardy. This was one target he couldn't deliver without knowing the outcome. Whether he liked it or not, he cared too damn much.

Poppy perked up when she saw Kade stepping out of his hotel room with a duffle bag in his grasp. It was hard to tell if he looked guilty or innocent from across the street, but his head was bowed and his step was quick.

He shoved his bag onto the floor of his shiny, blue truck and relocked it. Next, he traveled two rooms over and disappeared inside.

Where was Ava?

She hadn't answered the door.

The same overpowering curiosity Poppy's mama used to warn her about was rearing its ugly head, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She exited the car and made her way across the street.

Kade found a backpack and a plastic grocery bag in Ava's dresser. He grabbed them and opened the second drawer. Inside were an array of panties, one pair of jeans, two skirts, a sweater, tennis shoes, a tattered novel, and a T-shirt.

He scooped up everything and shoved it into the backpack.

The bathroom contained a sparse amount of makeup and personal items. Everything went into the plastic bag. He wasn't going to leave any scent of her behind. Not even the stupid brown contacts.

He scanned the entire hotel room, but there was nothing else. Not even a picture of a family member or an old friend, and Kade couldn't help but wonder if she'd had any. And if they missed her.

Like he was going to. How could he not?

He took a moment to roll his tense shoulders and then locked the door behind him. A flash of blonde hair and long legs from the corner of his eye startled him out of his stupor. He turned quickly to see Poppy standing in front of the soda vending machine that stood between his and Ava's room.

Shit.

It wasn't like him to be so careless by not scoping out the area beforehand. Thank God it was only the scatterbrained blonde from the club.

She pressed the button on the machine but nothing came out. "Oh, shoot. I think it's broken," she said, clearly lying. She turned toward Kade and her gaze swept over him. "Do you have a dollar so I can try it again?"

Annoyed, Kade cleared his throat and dug into his pocket to pull out a crinkled bill. "Here." He handed it over and tried to walk around her.

"Where's Ava?" she asked, stopping him in his tracks.

"Sleeping." The less he said the better.

"Why do you have her stuff?"

"She asks. I deliver."

"That's nice of you. Are you sharing a room then?"

"Yep." He nodded and took another step away. "See you around. Good luck with the soda."

"Wait."

Damn it. This unexpected delay was beginning to get on his nerves. It was the last thing he needed before the long drive home.

Poppy closed the small distance between them. "I can see why Ava likes you." She reached out and slipped her hand under his T-shirt, resting it on his stomach. "You're hot." She stared up at him with large green eyes and a pink-glossed smile.

"Thanks, but I have to go—"

"Why the rush? She's sleeping. We can have a lot fun before she wakes."

"Mmm...tempting," Kade said, trying to sound sincere. "But—"

One of her cold fingers dipped inside his jeans. He cringed and was about to step back, but an older model sedan pulled up beside his truck and slammed on the brakes.

Jarred. What the hell did he want?

Kade soon found out when Poppy hurried to yank her hand back.

"Pop, get the fuck in the car. What are you doing?" The large white bandage on his nose made

him seem even more pathetic, and Kade almost felt sorry for the guy. *Nah*, *he got what he deserved*.

Seeming flustered, Poppy slipped the dollar into her bra and sprinted to the car, leaving Kade to finish business.

Thank God.

Ava was still sleeping soundly when he returned. Considering the dose he'd given her, she'd be asleep for at least another ten hours.

More than enough time to get them to his cabin.

Poppy didn't know what bothered her more—not finding out what was really happening with Kade and Ava or getting caught by Jarred with her fingers in Kade's pants.

She figured she might as well deal with the issue at hand.

"I wasn't going to do anything with him" She leaned toward Jarred as he sped down the street.

He shrugged and kept his eyes on the road. "Why would I give a shit?"

She ignored him. His words didn't sting like they used to. "I think he's going to do something to Ava. I was just trying to find out what."

Jarred began to laugh but winced and brought his fingers up to his nose. "Goddamn it. I hope he does do something to that bitch, and whatever it is, I hope it hurts like a motherfucker."

Poppy sat back in her seat. "Why didn't you call the police on her?" she asked in a soft voice. The question was sure to anger him, but she needed to know the truth.

"And tell them that a hundred and nothing pound woman broke my nose so they can laugh in

my face?" He hit the steering wheel with his fist. "Fuck that."

"You hit her back." Poppy dared to remind him and braced for war.

He glared at her from the corner of his eye. A small threat from a large man. "Drop it, okay?"

"Sure." She knew his breaking point and had no intention of crossing it. Not tonight.

Instead, she allowed herself to wonder if this man was really who she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Sure, he'd practically saved her life. And he could afford a nice ring...and that house on Bluebird. But did she love him?

She shook the recurring cynical thoughts out of her head. Love was a distant fantasy. It didn't happen to people like her.

He pulled up in front of the club and hit the brakes. "Let's go inside. I'll show you what a real man feels like."

Poppy doubted it, but she followed him in anyway, thinking maybe it was one step closer to getting what she wanted.

Kade was exhausted when he finally pulled up to the cabin at dawn. A snowstorm must have blown in ahead of him. There was at least two feet up against the log walls and the front door.

Inside was probably freezing. He needed to get in there and start a fire before Ava woke up.

He looked down at the petite, bundled up body stretched out on the seat next to him. Her long auburn hair splayed across his lap. He'd had the urge to run his fingers through her tresses for most of the trip. The act was soothing...but stupid. Very stupid.

If he wanted to move on with his life and his career, he'd have to keep his distance from her. Which was easier said than done.

He was so exhausted, all he wanted to do was carry her to his bed and wrap her in his arms. Feel the warmth from her body against him. Run his fingers over the soft suppleness of her skin. Inhale her fresh, lively scent.

Lord, he wanted to make love to her again, but he couldn't.

He left her in the heated truck while he went inside and prepared a fire in both the living room and bedroom.

There was only one bed. It was king-sized and large enough for the both of them. She couldn't deny him that. Besides, she was already going to want to kill him for everything else he'd done.

Lying to her, drugging her, kidnapping her, and now holding her against her will.

It was pointless to try to salvage his morality now.

He trudged back out into the snow and gathered her in his arms. Her body was limp as he carried her inside, to *his* bedroom, and placed her gently onto the bed. *His* bed.

His heart constricted at the sight of her there. He never brought women to his bedroom, not even Lucy, but somehow this seemed right. He could easily imagine waking in the night and drawing her close, wrapping her up safe in his arms. Protecting her. Feeling her soft flesh bumped up against him, her warm steady breath on his skin.

One beam of light from the rising sun pierced the room and lit it up. It was too bright so Kade pulled the shade down, instantly darkening the room

enough to create shadows on the wall from the crackling fire.

He spread her dark coppery hair out on the white pillow and wondered for a moment what she looked like with her natural blonde color. Too bad he wasn't going to be able to see that. After everything was said and done, she'd leave here angry and hating him, never wanting to see him again. Which, of course, was for the best.

At least she would be safe. At least she'd be alive and well and not at the hands of some maniacal dickhead. But for now, while she was in his home, he'd take care of her, make sure she was comfortable. *Protect her*.

The room was warm enough to get her out of her jeans and sweater. He worked with the tiny buttons and slid her top off, exposing her bare breasts.

She stirred slightly and one of her hands brushed her budding nipple.

He grew hard at the sight. *I'm such a bastard*.

But he couldn't stop now. She needed to sleep comfortably, he told himself as he tugged her jeans off and then took in the full view of her body. Creamy skin. Ample, perky breasts. Rosy pink nipples. Supple, curvy hips. Flat, smooth stomach. Her skimpy red panties that barely covered her—

Snap out of it. Kade tucked her under the safety of the comforter and forced himself to the bathroom. He splashed his face with ice-cold water but still couldn't relieve himself of the desire that was imbedded in him.

It's not right.

He'd known that from the very moment he'd realized she was his target. But that hadn't changed

his feelings for her, how she tempted him. How he never wanted to let her go.

He showered and brushed his teeth, trying to erase the image of her body lying naked on his bed.

Nothing could happen. Not tonight. Not again.

Chapter Six

The fire was slowly burning out, but Kade didn't dare move, afraid he'd wake her. He'd tried with all his might to keep to his side of the bed, but after all her tossing and turning, she ended up with her supple, curvy backside butted up against his swollen cock.

He was cornered and growing more lustful by the minute.

So much for getting some sleep before she woke up.

After wiping the beads of perspiration from his forehead, he attempted to ease her body away from his aching erection. He gripped her hips and slowly urged her forward.

"Mmm." She moaned and smiled in her sleep. "Don't stop."

Oh, shit.

Her fingers intertwined with his, and together they slid slowly up to her breast.

Stop. Wake her up. Tell her what's going on.

Her skin was soft, her nipples hard. She pressed her hand against his, and Kade couldn't help but cup her supple flesh. She moaned again.

Breathe.

"Touch me," she mumbled and pulled his hand down, down, down. She opened her legs enough for both of their hands to fit cozily up against her lacecovered pussy. Warm, inviting.

And mine.

He couldn't let her go. Wouldn't. She'd have to forgive him. God, he hoped she would.

Eagerly, he shoved her hand out of the way and slipped his fingers under the elastic band of her panties. He spread her smooth folds, and dipped two fingers into her wetness. She was cream and silk at his fingertips. So wet and hungry for his touch, even in her hazy state of sleep.

"Yes." Her bottom angled back against his throbbing cock. Her juicy walls clenched tightly against his fingers while he kneaded them into her.

She maneuvered her hand under his arm and into his boxers, rubbing against him lightly, making him pulse with want. All blood drained from his brain and shot straight to where she massaged him.

Small moans mixed with pants rose up in her half-asleep body. She must have thought they were still in the hotel room...and he was still a normal guy she'd simply stumbled upon. Unfortunately, neither was the case.

He removed her hand from his throbbing cock, and she quickly moved it up to caress his face.

"I need you, Ava," he whispered into her ear as he circled his fingers along her clit. "I want you so much it's killing me not to have you. Do you understand that?"

She grinned and sluggishly tugged at her panties. "Take them off." Her voice was a husky whisper. "Please."

Kade didn't waste time following her orders. He stripped the lace down her legs and watched as she lazily kicked it to the side. His heart raced unsteadily when she lifted her leg over his hip, giving him better access.

Oh, hell. Did he have a condom?

With the greatest of care, he leaned back and opened the nightstand beside the bed, just behind him. He couldn't see a thing, but his fingers finally reached the unopened box he kept there.

After tugging his boxers down just enough to slide the rubber on, he fingered her again, making sure she was still ready for him.

"Mmm," she responded and ran her fingers back around his head and through his hair. "Fuck me."

Good enough.

Kade found her pussy with his hard length and slid into her slick tightness. If he wasn't going to burn in hell already, he might after this. But damn it, he needed her. He needed Ava.

Ava felt him enter but didn't bother to open her eyes. Waking up to a man like Kade was a fantasy she'd had for a long time. But she never imagined it would feel this good.

As he slowly drove in and out of her from behind, Ava wrapped her leg around him tighter. His thick cock brushed past her butt cheeks as it plodded steady, curving upward as he moved into her pussy. Pressing against her walls. Finding new and undiscovered areas to tantalize.

One of his hands gripped her hip while the other reached around and firmly stroked her sensitive clit.

Her eyes fluttered as his pubic bone hit her anus, stirring a new sensation that prickled her skin and sent her reeling. "Oh, oh." She leaned back against his hard chest.

"Yes." His minty warm breath brushed her cheek. "Come for me, baby."

He thrust up almost taking her onto his lap, his cock pressing into her G-spot. She cried out and bore down on him, attempting to return the favor. Clenching her muscles as tight as possible, she shoved off him and then let him slam back in.

She opened her eyes, but the room was blurry. It was just the two of them in the throes of passion. In a hazy euphoria, Ava pressed her ass against him. Anything he wanted, he could have. She wanted to give him every part of her.

He swore and pulled out. "Ava. God, honey, I need you closer. I can't get enough of you. Never enough." There was growl of desperation in his voice as he grabbed her hips, shoved her onto her back, and wedged his solid body between her thighs.

"Have me," she whispered, ignoring the cotton feel of her throat and her weighted eyelids.

The hard lines of his face were rigid as he guided himself into her welcoming pussy. His movements were slow, tender, deliberate.

She caressed his ass, pulling him forward, wanting him deep. His cock crammed her innermost walls, and he carefully prodded her there, tapping and teasing. His lovemaking was gentle and loving. Different. All the same, the familiar heated pressure built in her core. She dragged in a breath and smelled sex, piney soap, and him.

His nostrils flared, and perspiration dampened his forehead as he dipped down and kissed her lips. "This won't be the last time I fuck you." He tugged at her bottom lip with his teeth. "I promise you that."

His words mixed with his steady, provocative rhythm pulsed through her thighs, her belly...and into her heart as she lazily met his intense stare.

He skimmed a hand down the curve of her hips, then lifted her leg over his thigh. He wetted his finger with her juices and slipped it back to her sensitive anus. There, he circled and nudged.

Prickles of delight shot through her core, and she whimpered his name.

"I want to feel every inch of you, Ava." His warm breath rustled in her ear. "Do you see how much I need you?" He dipped his slippery finger into her taut puckered entrance, jolting her pussy.

"Oh, God, yes." Her voice was hoarse, but nothing mattered at that moment but the crackling pleasure buzzing and building in her womb.

She cradled his stubbly cheeks with her hands and let him see how he affected her. Gasping at the intimate invasion, she threw her head back and arched up to meet him.

His breathing was heavy and strained against her ear. "Such a tight pretty ass, Ava. It's mine. Every inch of you is mine."

She was aware of every sensation. Tingling and spiraling. Her aching nipples as they hardened and scraped against his chest. His finger where no other man had explored, matching the pumping rhythm of his powerful cock.

He could have her there. Anywhere he wanted.

Her mouth hung open as she gasped for air. The overwhelming pressure coiling, burning, like a ball of flames licking and blazing up through her abdomen and down through her thighs. Until it exploded, splintering blissfully to every nerve in her body. She cried out and held tight to his damp muscles, her fingers digging into his solid flesh.

"Kade." His name echoed through the room and into her heart.

"Yes, baby. God, you're squeezing me so tight. So fucking tight." He gripped her hips as he drove into her one last time and then let his weight fall on her body as he quaked and trembled. His lips pressed to her cheek and then her forehead.

Ava accepted the kisses, quickly reeling down from the ecstasy. Exhausted and utterly sated, her body relaxed and her eyes grew heavy.

She closed them and drifted off again.

Kade cursed himself as he swung the ax up and over his head, splitting the log in two. There was already a large pile of firewood at his disposal that he'd prepared before the snow came in. But this was the only way he knew how to take out his frustration.

Not only would she hate him now, she'd accuse him of taking advantage of her. And he couldn't deny it. He'd tricked her, deceived her, and used her.

Fuck. He'd fallen in love with her.

And it wouldn't be long before he saw firsthand how much he had hurt her.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed the shade from his bedroom window move.

Here it goes.

He swung the ax down one more time, lodging it deep into the stump.

Ava looked around the room bewildered and groggy. She combed her fingers through her tangled hair and rubbed at her throbbing temples. Where was she? Better yet, how had she gotten here?

The room was mostly filled with the large log bed covered with white sheets and a brown down comforter. A small fireplace took up part of one wall.

In the corner was a wooden nightstand and a matching dresser stood a few feet from that. Everything was rustic and homemade.

As well as the walls that contained them. Logs. A log cabin.

Noise from outside the window had her running to it. She peeked through the side of the shade and saw Kade cutting wood.

This was his home. His bed?

And she was naked. How could this be? Flustered, she let the window-covering drop and searched for her clothes.

The night before, she was in the hotel with Kade.

The painkillers. They had knocked her out.

"Ava," he called, and she heard a door shut in the other room.

Panic rose in her throat and flushed her skin. What the hell was going on?

"Your clothes are on the side of the bed. Come out when you're dressed. Please."

Her mouth was parched and her tongue stuck to the roof, but she didn't want to answer him anyway. She didn't want to give him an excuse to see her standing there dumbfounded and helpless.

She grabbed her clothes and shoved them on piece by piece. They were the same articles she'd left in her hotel room. A pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Her backpack was lying up against the wall.

How could she not remember anything? It was almost as if she...if she were...

Did he drug her and bring her here?

There had to be a puzzle piece missing. Kade wasn't dangerous. He wouldn't hurt her. No, she

hadn't known him more than a few days, but she had sensed it.

You should've listened to your intuition, Ava. She remembered the words he'd said to her. At the time she thought he was just being a noncommittal jerk-off. Not a psychopathic kidnapper. How could she possibly have known? She'd been wrong about the intentions of a man before.

Her shoes were nowhere to be found. Shit. How would she run without those? There was at least two feet of snow out there.

She didn't have a choice other than to face him and find out what the hell was going on. Her legs wobbled and her stomach rumbled as she took the steps needed to walk into the next room.

A brown leather sofa sat in front of a burning fireplace. A small wooden table with two chairs sat behind it. A bookshelf against the wall. An enormous rolling desk. The front door. Farther, in a separate area, bordered off by a half wall was the kitchen. It was tiny, especially with Kade's width and height taking up most of it.

He wore a blue and beige flannel shirt and jeans. His face drained of color as he walked toward her with a plastic cup in his hand.

"I thought you could use some water." He handed her the cup but didn't meet her eyes.

Guilty as sin. Bastard.

Ava took a desperately needed sip and scanned the room for something sharp or blunt. Nothing. It was sparsely decorated with only the essential furniture.

"This is my home," he said with a shaky voice.

"No shit." She tightened her grip on the cup. "Did you drug me?"

His Adam's apple rose and fell. Still no eye contact.

"Did you?" she repeated as her heart sank.

"I had to."

It was true then. Suddenly sadness transformed to rage. He'd betrayed her. Lied to her. Without further thought, she threw the cup of water at him.

He caught it, but not before the liquid soaked his shirt.

"Why?" she yelled at him but wasn't sure she wanted the answer.

"I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice."

"Why?" she asked again as her heart began to break, remembering how she'd trusted him. How she'd fantasized about sharing a life with him.

"It's what I do. Or did. I might not find another job after bringing you here instead of delivering you to..." His voice trailed off and he drew out a breath.

"To?" She urged him on but deep down she knew the answer. He worked for Zack. She should have realized it from the beginning. How naïve she'd been. A mysterious and handsome man walking into that seedy strip joint and paying a simple, jaded stripper special attention? It just didn't happen.

His ruggedly toned and muscular body wasn't that of an average man traveling through town for his mundane career. And his evasive behavior should have rung some serious bells.

Why had she been so easily seduced by him? Why hadn't she asked him more questions about his life? Why had she let herself believe she had feelings for him? That he had them for her?

She caught her breath as his clear blue eyes finally met hers. Her stupid intuition told her they

read sad, regretful and caring. But she refused to believe it. She couldn't trust anything about him.

He'd deceived and exposed her.

"To Zack," she answered for him, holding back the tears he didn't deserve. "He's coming here then? When...when will he be here?" she asked, her voice unstable.

There was no point in playing around with the possibility of Kade's innocence. Sadly, he'd been on Zack's team the entire time, and the mere thought hurt like hell. The man she thought she'd been falling in love with didn't exist. Her imagination had allowed her to mold him into her hero...her salvation. Once again, she'd been duped. How completely pathetic.

"It's not what you think." He set the cup on the table and walked past her into the bedroom.

Ava followed and watched as he removed his wet shirt and hung it on one of the posts standing from the bed. Flashes of the passion they had shared in that same room ran through her mind. He'd made love to her here. Before she knew. Before she was fully awake.

She felt woozy and breathless, as if someone had ripped into her stomach and drained the air out of her lungs. He had used her. She'd trusted him and given him every bit of herself, and he'd exploited her naivety for his own benefit.

He'd taken something from her, and she wanted it back.

As he was opening his dresser drawer, Ava ran at him with a vengeance. With swiftness she hadn't anticipated, he turned toward her but didn't defend himself as she beat her fists against his chest. He didn't budge. He didn't hurt. She needed to do

something else. She needed him to feel her agony. Her heartbreak.

Remembering her self-defense class and the damage she'd caused Jarred, she shoved the palm of her hand up toward Kade's nose. But he caught her wrist and held it down.

She jammed her foot as hard as she could onto his, but his boots were steel-toed. Not to be defeated, she attempted to ram her knee toward his groin, but he turned his hip.

Furious she was being denied her right to defend her honor, she brought her free hand up and slapped his face once, twice, and then a third time.

She used all her might, and he stood there and took it.

He wasn't fighting back.

"Don't, Ava," he said in an annoyingly calm voice as she brought her hand up again. "Please don't."

"Or what?" she yelled at him, tears stinging her eyes. She was *not* going to cry. Not for him. Not for anyone. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing," he said, his cheek reddened from her assault. "I won't hurt you."

"You've already hurt me, you son of a bitch." She dropped her hand at her side and fisted it shut. "Tell me when he'll be here!"

"I don't know." He let go of her wrist, grabbed a shirt out of his drawer, and walked back into the living room.

Ava followed, sick about not knowing the destiny Kade and Zack had planned for her. "I can't believe I trusted you, that I gave myself to you so easily. You're no better than Zack."

He showed no emotion as he tugged his shirt on while making his way to the kitchen. "I'll make you some eggs. You have to be starving."

She was numb. "So we'll wait until he walks in the door?" Sarcasm rang in her voice. "Maybe he'll show up in the middle of the night and kill us both."

"He's not going to *touch* anyone," Kade grumbled as he cracked an egg into a frying pan.

Finally. Some emotion.

"So you think he'll just stop by to say hello?" Ava moved up behind him. "Maybe he'll want a quickie for old time's sake."

His body tensed. "Zack Moreno is not going to lay a finger on you. I promise you that."

"Do you want to watch? Is that it?" Ava goaded him, satisfied she was finally getting some type of response. "While he has his way with me?"

Before she could blink, Kade turned and backed her against the refrigerator. He grabbed her wrists and pinned her hands above her head. His body crushed hers as he stared down at her with his piercing blue eyes.

Ava's heart leaped. He was stronger than anyone she'd ever come into contact with, quicker than she had known possible. And she was his prisoner.

"You're not scaring me," she said, taking a gulp. She needed a weapon.

"I'm not trying to, Ava." He kissed her forehead, and she squirmed under his touch.

"I get it. You want to have your way with me."

Kade pulled back and attempted to gain control. The fear and resentment in her expression was killing him. If he could only explain how he felt

about her. How it bothered him to know Zack Moreno would be close to her. That the man would undoubtedly figure out that Kade had brought her here, and then come to finish the job on his own.

Kade had too many enemies and so-called friends who knew where he lived. And Moreno was too impatient a man to waste any more time. He'd be here, all right. It was only a matter of time.

"Oh, wait," she said. "You already did that. Several times. Tell me, Kade. Did Zack pay you to fuck me? 'Cause I can't imagine him letting anyone touch me unless he had complete control over it."

"No, of course he doesn't know."

"You bad boy. I guess you screw everyone you know."

The eggs were beginning to crackle in the frying pan so he grabbed a paper plate from the cupboard. There was no point in arguing with her. He already knew he had done her wrong.

"Sorry," he muttered and flipped the eggs onto the plate. "Do you want toast?"

"Toast?"

He turned to hand her the plate and noticed her eyes were rimming with redness. Shit. If he could cradle her up in his arms and make it all go away, he would. But it was too late for that. She hated him and he didn't blame her.

"I don't want *anything* from you, Kade." She tossed the plate out of his hands. It flew into the air and landed on his shirt before the eggs fell to the floor.

This was going to be a messy day. But he didn't care. Whatever she needed to do to get her aggression out...as long as she didn't try leaving.

Not that she had the option anyway since he'd hidden her shoes.

"Fine." He tore his T-shirt over his head and threw it on the counter. "You can help yourself if you get hungry enough." He bent down and wiped the egg mess off the floor.

And saw her foot swing up toward his head.

Kade grabbed her ankle before she made contact, causing her fall to the floor. Quickly, he moved over her, restraining her against the hard wood. She writhed underneath him, putting up a hell of a struggle. But her attempt to battle him off was pointless. He weighed twice as much and could easily handle any fight she had in her.

"Goddamn you," she screamed into his ear with a sob in her voice. "Let me hurt you."

"I can't, Ava," he said against her cheek as he secured her wrists to the floor and his body in between her legs. If he was injured, how would he protect her?

"Don't say my name," she yelled and slammed her head against his mouth.

Fuck. That hurt. "Baby, I'm going to have to tie you up if you don't knock it off." He propped his forehead against hers. Her eyes went to his lip, which felt like it was cracked and swelling.

A drip of blood landed on her chin and she smirked. "I hate you." She seethed while her eyes welled over. One tear escaped and slid down her temple.

"I know." God, it felt like it was his heart that was leaking blood onto her instead of his lip. If only things could be different. If he could have found her outside of these messed up circumstances.

"Let me go." Her body grew limp under his. "Please. You're hurting me."

She was lying, of course, but he released her anyway and stood, grabbing a paper towel to press against his lip.

She rose from the ground and angrily swiped at a tear and the drip of blood on her chin. "Where are my shoes?"

"You can't leave."

"He's going to kill me."

"I won't let him touch you. I already told you that."

"Why would I believe a word you say? You brought me here so you could hand me over to him. So you could make a few bucks. Why the hell do you think he wants me?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?" Kade could only guess. Maybe she'd angered him by snooping in his dirty laundry. Maybe she witnessed something she shouldn't have. Or maybe she had info on Zack that he didn't want shared with the public. Zack Moreno's boss was rising quickly on the political ladder and any dirt on him was sure to be swept under the rug.

Whatever the problem was, it could easily be talked out or bargained. Kade was sure of it. Just as long as Ava's sassy mouth didn't get in the way.

"You don't even know? Are you just some bozo Zack hired off the street?"

Kade took offense and threw the bloodied paper towel in the trash. "I don't usually get involved with my client's and target's quarrels. I pinpoint, abduct, deliver and collect. Cut and dried."

"Oh really? You forgot fuck over. Is that before or after pinpoint?"

"I didn't know you were the target until—" He raked his hand through his hair. "I thought Poppy was you. She had green eyes. You have blue. Zack gave me the wrong description."

Ava laughed. "Of course he did. He's colorblind. How much is he paying you to know absolutely nothing?"

Colorblind? Kade scowled, furious with himself for not knowing this bit of information, and he wondered if it were true or if Ava was feeding him bullshit. "Why does he think they're green?"

"None of your concern."

"Did you lie to him?"

"Believe whatever you want."

"Why did you tell him they were green?"

She shrugged and walked away. "I'm going to find my shoes and get the hell out of here."

Six drunken, slurring, stumbling men walked into the club, and took a table by the stage. One of them had a G-string around his neck so Poppy assumed he was the bachelor about to lose his freedom.

Magnolia was on stage and already going in for the kill, hitting up the least drunk man who was most likely the best man. And the one responsible for sending his buddy off with a thrill.

Bachelor parties usually paid big bucks, but Poppy had her eye on someone else.

Tall, slicked back brown hair, brown eyes, a nice suit and jewelry that sparkled from across the room. This guy was loaded, she could tell.

He seemed to be scanning the room for someone or something, and Poppy decided that someone

should be her. She walked over before one of the other girls could get their claws in him.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

His dark gaze swept over her. "Probably not." He smirked. "You know a girl named Ava?"

Of course. Ava was stealing the show even when she was gone. What was it with that chick? "She doesn't work here anymore."

"Oh?" His eyes widened. "When did she leave?"

Poppy made a note of the black leather case he held in his hands. A businessman of some sort. "Just come from work?"

"Work?"

Poppy pointed to the case.

"Yeah. Sure. Work. So, when did she leave?"

"Yesterday, I think."

"Fuck," he mumbled. "Was she with anyone?"

"Why do you want to know?" The suspense was killing her. What was going on? Who was the real Ava and how deep of trouble was the girl in?

"Listen, I haven't got the time to stand around and chat. The view's nice and all." He scoped out her body again, stopping at her bare chest. "But could you just answer my question?"

"You seem tense. Want a lap dance?" She needed to get more information out of him and maybe some cash. He looked like he had a lot of both. "Come on. Ask me anything you want while I'm getting you off."

Feeling confident he'd follow, Poppy turned and walked toward the backroom. And just as she guessed, he did. She felt his presence close behind her. The strong scent of expensive cologne gave him away.

She pushed the door open and let him walk in first.

Usually the client had to pay a bouncer for this type of special treatment, but Jarred hadn't come to work yet and none of the other bouncers really gave a damn what she did.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" He sat back on the leather sofa and set his briefcase beside him.

"Poppy. What's yours?" She straddled his lap, and an instant erection poked up against her.

"Just call me Zack."

Chapter Seven

Kade sat down at his desk and lifted the rollaway panel to reveal two flat screen computer monitors, all the while listening to Ava tear apart his bedroom. She wasn't going to find her shoes in there so he didn't bother trying to stop her. Besides, it kept her occupied. And he had work to do.

On one screen, he was able to oversee the views from the surveillance cameras he had set up over the only road coming up the mountain. There were three in all. One five miles down the road, the second a quarter mile and the third was positioned at his front door. Unless a fool wanted to hike up a steep mountain or be dropped down by a helicopter onto his roof, no one was getting past those cameras.

He was ready for Zack or anyone else who attempted to trespass onto his property.

The other computer was used for finding data or email contacts with his buddies and his competition. Most were one in the same. With what he did for a living, being paranoid was the only way to survive.

He pulled up his email account. Twelve unread messages. Nine from Lucy. *Shit*.

"What is all that?" Ava asked from behind him.

Kade swiveled his chair around to face her. Her cheeks were flushed and rosy. A loose strand of auburn hair fell into her face. She blew it away, and Kade held back a smile. She was adorable even when she was angry.

He just hoped she wouldn't stay mad. Visions of electric makeup sex with Ava came to mind, making him uncomfortable in his jeans. Hell, a man could hope.

"Stop looking at me like that." She frowned at him and placed her hands on her slender hips.

"Like what?" Curiosity made him ask.

"Never mind." She pointed toward the desk. "Is that your *spy* equipment?" She asked as if the costly setup were a flimsy, plastic toy a five year old would play with.

Kade gave her a grin. "Surveillance. So I know when your boyfriend's getting close."

"He's not my boyfriend, and I don't plan to be here when he arrives." She scrunched up her forehead as obvious concern took over her face. Her dark blue eyes plunged to new depths. "Please tell me where my shoes are." She kneeled down before him and ran her trembling hands up his thighs. "Please. I'll do whatever you want."

Kade conjured every bit of self-control he had in him as she braced her palm against his cock, knowing full well what she was attempting to do—seduce him into letting her go. He cleared his throat but couldn't gather the willpower to push her away. "Tell me why you lied to Zack about your eye color?"

"Then you'll give me my shoes?" She looked up at him with pouty lips and sensual eyes.

He shrugged, but his cock hardened from her touch. "You give me info. I'll give you info." He wanted to offer her so much more than that. An embrace to calm her nerves. A kiss to tell her he loved her. An orgasm to please them both. Something. But not a way for her rush out of here with the false hope that she would be saving herself.

If Kade let her go, he was sure Moreno would have ten other guys to take his place.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted movement on the screen. His attention went back to the cameras as he watched a red SUV drive past the five-mile mark, sending a series of light dings out through the computer speaker. Damn it.

Poppy ground her body into Zack's erection held back only by a pair of thin black slacks, getting herself off in the process. This was her favorite part of the job, but she would never admit it to anyone.

Her mama, bless her heart, would have called Poppy a depraved trollop and sent her to the preacher for a good talking to. But Poppy couldn't help it. She always loved everything about sex and didn't see what the problem was.

The stranger underneath her grunted and groaned as she slid back and forth, rubbing hard against him. "Take off your panties," he ordered.

"This is as far as I go, mister."

"Five hundred bucks says you'll do whatever the fuck I say." He grabbed her waist and held her still.

She rolled her eyes. Did the man think she was born in a barn? "You got that on you?" she asked, just in case. Five hundred would get her one step closer to her dream house, that was for sure.

His large hand plopped down on the briefcase sitting next to them, as if it were its own person. He pulled the case between them and carefully opened it enough for her to see the stacks of dough inside. With a glint in his eye, he reached in and pulled out a single one hundred dollar bill. "I have five more of these just waiting for you."

"You got a hell of a lot more than that in there," she said, excited. "How much is it?"

"Enough to get me laid. Now, take off those panties."

Without another thought, she stood and slid her thong down her legs. She'd do just about anything to get her hands on that case. Even screw this guy. At least he was cute. She'd had worse, much worse. And it wasn't like Jarred was in a hurry to turn her into an honest woman.

Ava felt Kade harden from her touch. She might be angry with the man for all he'd done, but she couldn't help but still be attracted to him. And if seducing him was the answer to her survival, then so be it.

"I didn't lie to Zack about my eye color," she said, maneuvering her body in between his muscular thighs. "He guessed and I didn't argue. It was almost as if he wanted them to be green. As if it meant something to him. So...I let him have that."

"Do you always give pieces of yourself to unworthy men?"

She bit her tongue so she wouldn't curse at the man. His words had hit her somewhere deep, but she didn't want to face the ugly truth. Just focus on the objective. *Get your shoes and get out*. She peered up at Kade, who seemed distracted by something on the computer screen and the odd noise coming from the speakers. This was going to take more work than she thought.

Determined, she took a breath and ran her tongue over his jean-covered erection.

"Baby." He shifted in his seat and looked down at her. "Don't do this. Not now, and not for the reasons you have in your mind."

Ignoring him, Ava fumbled with his fly, unbuttoning one, then two, then three.

"Shit. *Ava...*" He ran his fingers through her hair and rested them on her chin, nudging her to look at him. His expression was intense, concerned, caring. But he didn't say a word.

She knocked his hand away and went back to work. He wasn't allowed to look at her that way—like she meant something more to him other than just a paycheck or an easy fuck. This was about sex, seduction, and survival. That was it.

The rest of the buttons came undone easily, and she peeled his underwear over the bulge burgeoning beneath. His beautiful cock sprang free and her mouth watered.

A pang of desire pulsed between her thighs as she licked his full length from base to head.

"Jesus, Ava. I can't say no to you."

"Then don't," she murmured and ran her tongue over him again. He was thick, hard and silky, and she let her mind wander to the times it had been inside of her, commanding her to come.

After tightly gripping his base, she sank his head deep into her mouth, devouring him. "Mmm," she rumbled against it, sucking and tasting him. Her tongue wound around, back and forth, over the ridge of his head and then up and down, feeling every inch of his shaft with her taste buds. His cock pulsed in her mouth, and his hand braced the back of her neck. He massaged her roughly as he leaned down and cradled her head.

"Oh, God, Ava," he said huskily.

She palmed his balls and they tightened in her embrace. Her pussy ached for more, and she rocked against the seam of her jeans.

The taste of his arousal filled her senses, dizzying her mind.

An anguishing need throbbed between her legs so she pressed her fingers there, rubbing her clit. She sucked his hard length into her mouth with a vengeance, letting him skim the back of her throat. Her tongue stroked and massaged his silky skin, and he groaned by her ear.

"Ava, look what you're doing to me." His deep voice vibrated through her body, straight to her blazing core.

His grip tightened in her hair. He filled her mouth with his sultry cock, so thick and powerful. She scored her tongue down his pulsating vein, his velvety taut skin. Over the clipped ridge of his rounded head.

She eagerly sucked more of him in, tasting his salty flavor. Her pussy wept against the denim of her jeans, crying for release.

She was so close, but before she could reach the pinnacle of orgasm, he thrust forward and let out primal growl.

He held her against him as his hot cum spurted the back of her throat. She stopped rocking and swallowed him whole, hating that she loved the taste of him.

And despising that the seduction was over.

She'd gone too far too fast. He'd gotten what he'd wanted and she hadn't gotten a thing.

One more piece of herself she'd given away. His words had definitely hit home.

Her heart twisted terribly, and she fell back onto her bottom. He followed her onto the floor, hovering over her body, slanting his wounded mouth lightly against hers.

"Forgive me," he whispered and kissed her again. "Please."

"I'll forgive you when you let me go." She stared into his pale blue eyes as she held her breath. Only momentarily questioning if she would have loved him under different circumstances.

"I...I can't. It's for your own good. You have to believe me." He moved in to kiss her again, but Ava wasn't having it.

"Fuck you," she whispered and brought her feet up. She slammed them against his solar plexus as hard as she could. Surprisingly, he lurched back against the chair, like a tired old man.

Huh. She supposed every man had a weakness, but what was so different about that particular instance she didn't know and didn't have time to guess.

He stood from the ground and quickly buttoned his jeans as he towered over her. "We'll finish this later," he said in a grave voice, but somehow she wasn't frightened by his threat at all.

She rose to her feet and straightened her shoulders. "Only if I let it happen."

A sexy smirk curled his lips. He brought his hand up and brushed it against her pebbled nipple pointing shamefully against her snug T-shirt. "Oh, I think you will."

Shocked by his words and embarrassed by how he could turn her into mush by one simple touch, she could only watch as he headed toward the door—just as someone began to knock.

Zack's cell phone rang as Poppy was about to sit down on his latex-covered cock. He put up a finger. "Hold on. I have to answer this."

She sighed and sat back on his legs.

"This better be good," he said into the phone while groping one of Poppy's breasts with his callusfree, manicured hand. "He's not here and neither is she, so where are they?" He released her and traveled down over her Bermuda-waxed mound to her wet heat. He slipped one finger in absently. "You got to be kidding me." Growing impatient, Poppy slapped his hand away and slid on top of his hardness, guiding it into her. She began slowly driving up and down.

He didn't object, but it was obvious he was irritated at the information he was receiving over the phone. "No, I don't want you to go there. I've paid you morons enough money as it is," he yelled. "I'll do it my goddamn self. It's what I should've done in the first place before Gavin decided to screw me over." He shut his phone with force and slammed it back into his jacket pocket. "Didn't I tell you to wait?" he bellowed at Poppy.

"Time is money, pal." She pumped him faster, grasping his shoulders as she began to climax. "Yes, yes, yes!" she called out as she worked overtime, clenching her walls tightly against his erection until she reached a full orgasm and then collapsed against him.

"Get off of me," Zack barked into her ear. "I can't believe this shit. I just got raped by a whore."

"I didn't rape you," she shrieked. "And I'm not a whore." She flung herself off his lap and his deflated cock and began searching for her panties. The jerk

was just looking for an excuse not to pay her, and she wasn't going to let him off that easy.

"Yeah, well, I'm not a satisfied customer," he grumbled and threw his rubber to the floor. "And I've got to get out of here."

"I don't think so, pal." She was determined to get her money. She ran out of the room and quickly slid a chair under the knob, locking him and the briefcase inside.

"What the—" Zack's shouts trailed off as she made her way across the club to the office.

Jarred walked up behind her, nipping at her heels. "Pop," he yelled, startling her. "Dean said you were in the backroom with some guy without cover. What the fuck were you doing?"

"It's not what you think." She dodged his hand as it came out to grasp her arm. She jerked the office door open and hurried to the desk.

"Don't lie to me, Pop. I know the look you get after you've pulled a trick."

"I didn't do anything. I swear," she lied. She couldn't help it. That case of money was the answer to all her prayers and dreams...and she didn't need to suck up to any two-bit loser to get it.

Although she might have to kill one.

Frantically, she yanked out the drawers of the desk, sweeping her hand through each one. Where was the gun she always saw Jarred playing with?

He came up behind her and captured her arms, swinging her around and pinning her against the desk. "What are you doing?" he asked, piercing her with a stare. "Looking for a condom? Who you got in that room?"

"Nobody. And trust me. I'm not looking for a condom." She already had a stash of those in the backroom.

Poppy scanned the room, making up time as Jarred held her down. And then she saw it. On top of the filing cabinet. "Do you want a blow job?" That usually distracted him.

He stood up and straightened his leather jacket. "Uh, sure."

As he sat down in the folding chair, Poppy sprung for the gun and attempted to dash out of the room.

Jarred was quicker than she'd anticipated. He grabbed her arm and flung her around.

"Let go!"

"Give me my goddamn gun, you bitch." His free hand swung up and made potent contact with her cheek.

This is what Ava had warned her about.

Poppy brought the gun up and pulled back on the trigger. "Do you want to die today?" she asked him with all the authority she could muster.

He dropped her arm. "Pop, that's not funny. Give me that thing."

"No. I'm in charge now. Get over there by the desk." She clasped the gun with both hands and aimed at his head.

Slowly, he backed up, and she felt more powerful than ever. *This* is what it felt like to be in control.

"Throw me your jacket."

He shrugged off the leather coat and reluctantly tossed it at her feet. "You going to pull this shit after all I've done for you?"

"Sorry." She shrugged and picked the jacket off the floor. "I want more than a job at a strip joint." She walked backward. "See ya," she whispered and left him there.

Stumbling only once on her spiked heels, she raced back across the club. She slipped the oversized jacket on, grasping tightly to the heavy weapon in her hands that hid underneath the long sleeve.

But she stopped in her tracks when she saw the backroom door wide open with Zack no where in sight. Dean, one of the bouncers, stood by with a grin on his face. "Sorry, Pop. It's goes against the fire codes to block these doors."

"Fuck you, Dean." She brought the gun out and waved it at him.

He jumped back, and Poppy laughed. She liked being in charge. Too bad she didn't have the time to stick around and have some fun.

Zack with his shiny, black leather case was getting away.

Ava held her breath, expecting to see Zack walk in Kade's front door. Instead, it was a tall, thin brunette with big, beautiful brown eyes and deep red lips. She wore a short red leather mini skirt with black thigh-high boots, a charcoal-colored stretchy turtleneck. And in her arms was a sleek black cat.

She looked angry as she stomped in the door and held Kade's stare. "You know what I'm going to say."

"Yes, I know," Kade answered. "I couldn't help it." He nodded toward Ava, and the woman turned her head and gave Ava the once over.

"Who's that?" she asked Kade as if Ava wasn't in the same room.

"It's a long story."

"Is that your target, Kade? Did you bring her home with you?" The woman let the cat drop to the floor, bending over to showcase her long legs.

Ava felt smaller and less visible with every word they spoke. She wasn't a target. She was a human being. "Who are you?" she asked the woman.

"This is Lucy," Kade answered but didn't meet either of their eyes. "Lucy, this is Ava."

"I'm his girlfriend," Lucy said, sticking her chin out. "And his overworked cat-sitter. Which, by the way," she shot back to Kade, "I'm not doing anymore. I'm just as busy with missions as you are."

A rush of heat crawled up into Ava's cheeks. He had a girlfriend. What a great way to top off the day. Suddenly, the threat of seeing Zack was becoming less and less of an issue as her mind clouded with both anger and unwanted jealousy.

"She's not my girlfriend," Kade mumbled while looking at Ava. He shook his head and turned toward the kitchen.

"Oh, excuse me. I'm his lover." Lucy threw a grin Ava's way. "From the expression on your face, I'd guess you are, too."

"No." Ava pushed a lock of her mussed hair behind her ear. "I'm nothing to him. I just want to leave. He kidnapped me." She thought maybe this woman could help her escape, but by the way Lucy rolled her eyes, it didn't look like she cared much. But what the hell? Ava gave it one more try. "He kidnapped me against my will and brought me here. You have to help me."

Ava watched as Kade pulled a box of cat food from the cupboard and poured some into a dish that rested against the wall. He didn't seem concerned at all.

Lucy winked at Ava, walked up behind Kade, and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Why don't you let her go, honey?"

He peeled the woman's hands from him and forced them back to her side. "You know why, Luce. Don't play stupid."

She laughed and swerved toward Ava. "Did you give him that nice little cut on his lip? I bet he deserved it."

"Time for you to leave, Luce. You've had your fun."

"Not nearly enough." She walked over to Ava and swept her hand across her slightly bruised cheek. "Did he do this to you?"

Ava didn't answer. Lucy's up-close beauty was breathtaking, and her scent was heady and sexy. Her skin and makeup were flawless.

She was the perfect woman. And she was Kade's. Ava fought the unwanted jealousy burning inside of her, attempting to turn it to anger. Kade was a deceiving, manipulative asshole.

Lucy smiled at her, emphasizing her blushed cheeks and full, crimson lips.

Ava was speechless and fully aware of her own lack of makeup. She felt like a complete and utter mess. And she was sure anything she said at that moment wouldn't be enough to make up for it.

"Kade?" Lucy said, not taking her eyes off Ava. "I thought you were against striking women? I mean with what happened with your mother and—"

"I didn't hit her." He strode across the room with heavy footsteps, stopping in front of the two women. "You need to leave."

"Why?" Lucy's smirk was pure evil. "Want to beat her again? Like father, like—"

"Shut up." Kade's jaw visibly tightened. "I'd never hurt Ava. I'm in love with her."

"What?" both woman said in unison.

Ava felt the blood rush from her face as she grew faint. She stared up at the distraught expression Kade held as he closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Never mind." He shoved his hand through his hair. "Luce, you need to go. Okay?"

Ava took a step away from them. Clearly, he hadn't meant to say he was in love with her. And if he had, it was just another deception. He wanted to get this woman, who was causing him obvious grief out of his home, and his bungling words were simply a tactic.

"Are you kidding me?" Lucy narrowed her eyes at him. "You're in love with her? She's your target, Kade."

"I said never mind. Just go. I won't bother you with the cat anymore."

"Fuck the cat. You've known this woman for how long?"

Ava needed to lie down, scream into a pillow, splash cold water on her face...something. Anything as long as she wasn't there next to Kade.

Of course he didn't love her. It wasn't possible. He had abducted her so he could collect money, for God's sake. How could that ever be confused with love?

As the pair continued to argue, Ava slipped away into the bathroom. She clicked the door shut behind her but was frustrated to see there wasn't a lock on it. There was just no getting away from that man.

And everything he represented. Someone she fantasized she could have fallen in love with. Someone she could have woken up next to every morning for the rest of her life. Someone who could have saved her from Zack and her past.

But no. Within the past few hours, Kade had become the exact opposite, and Ava hated him for deceiving her and for getting her hopes up.

A surge of loneliness fell like dead weight in the pit of her stomach, and she tried to shake off the feeling by taking in the room around her. Everything appeared to be remodeled, contrasting with the rest of the house. Dark blue and rust-colored slate covered the floor and ran up half the wall where a brownish tone of paint took over. The bathtub was new, but it looked like a vintage clawfoot tub. Its delicacy and elegance drew her near. Kade didn't seem like a man who bothered with baths but rather used the standup shower in the corner of the room.

Feeling the urge to pee, Ava pulled her pants down, sat on the toilet, and listened to the raised voices in the other room.

The mystery woman was obviously upset over Ava's presence, and Kade wasn't backing down or giving in. He must have really wanted to get paid. He was going through a lot of trouble for Zack Moreno, making Ava wonder exactly what amount had been put on her head. And why Kade had brought her to his home rather than deliver her to Zack's front door.

She washed up and turned on the hot water in the tub. The rushing sound was what she needed to drown out the voices and calm her nerves. As she waited for the bath to fill, curiosity led her to the mirrored cabinet above the pedestal sink. It wouldn't

hurt to find out a little more about the man who held her hostage.

The two shelves contained the usual hygienic products, but right behind the deodorant was a familiar brown prescription bottle. She opened it and spilled out four pills onto her hand. They were the exact same pink and white capsules Kade had fed to her.

These might come in handy.

She stashed them in her jean pocket and hid the bottle behind a full bottle of hair gel. Maybe she'd get through this after all now that she had ammunition.

With new confidence, she undressed and slid into the warm bath.

Kade drew in a deep breath after Lucy slammed the door behind her. She was pissed off, of course, but he knew she'd get over it. She was a strong woman and their relationship had been based only on sex. He'd made that clear from the beginning, and she never questioned it until tonight.

His only regret was telling her about his parents after a few too many beers. How his father had beaten his mother until her last breath. How Kade wished every day of his life to have been able to protect her from his father's unforgivable sins. Little had he known Lucy would slap him in the face with his drunken confessions, making him admit his love for Ava.

The look on Ava's face had been horrifying, to say the least. Pale, frightened. As if it was her against the world and Kade was just another obstacle to overcome.

Damn it. He didn't want to be her enemy. He wanted more. He wanted her to forgive him.

Raven, his ten-year-old cat, purred at his feet, wrapping her body around his ankle, so Kade reached down to pick her up. The cat had belonged to his mother before she died. It was the only living link he had to hold on to.

His attention went to the steam rolling out from under the bathroom door. The woman liked her baths hot.

So did Kade. Well, he'd get used to the heat if it meant being entangled with her naked body. The image had him taking steps toward the bathroom. He couldn't resist her, although every sensible bone in his body told him to stop and leave her alone. She deserved better than him or any other asshole who desired her.

If only he had the power to erase her from his thoughts, but it was useless. He wanted her. Every part of her, not just a piece. And after the way she'd taken him in her mouth and so eagerly made him come, there had to be some part of her that wanted him, too.

Lord, he hoped so because at that moment nothing was more important than the sight of her wet, bare body in his tub. He turned the handle and eased the door open.

Chapter Eight

Ava grabbed the washcloth draped over the towel rack and covered her sensitive breasts. Damn her body for wanting something it couldn't have. She cupped her hand over her mound to both hide and to tame the pulses that were growing stronger as the door knob turned.

Kade's large body entered the room and seemed to take up all the space. The cat was in his arms, but he gently let it drop to the floor as he sat down at the edge of the tub. His eyes swept over her body and met her stare.

"Shouldn't you be watching the surveillance?" she asked, hoping he'd take the hint and leave.

"I set it for the alarm to go off." He pointed to a speaker near the ceiling.

"Your girlfriend leave?" Her voice sounded bitter even to her own ears.

He grinned at her. "She's not my girlfriend, Ava. She's nothing to me." His hand dropped and landed on her bent knee where his fingers lightly circled. "Can I join you?"

She tried to force herself to say no but, "What do you think?" was all that came out, and her voice wasn't at all as harsh as she wanted it to be.

He leaned over and began untying his boots.

"It's...it's not a good idea, Kade," she managed to say.

He slipped off his boots, and they thunked to the floor. Then he stood and removed his shirt, showing her his broad chest, his lean, ribbed stomach. Two cabled muscles arrowed down into his pants. Ava knew too well where they led.

"I don't want this," she mumbled as he unbuckled his belt. "I don't want you," she said a second time more for herself than for him.

His eyes devoured her as she clung tightly to the small white washcloth.

"It's not that simple." He unbuttoned his jeans and yanked them and his underwear to the floor. His cock was hard and erect, reminding her of the times it had filled her up and satisfied her unlike any other man ever had.

She gulped down a knot in her throat. "I despise you, Kade."

"As you should, Ava." He peeled off his socks and stepped into the water. "But I can't let that stop me."

After she pulled her legs into her chest, she dunked her head under the water and attempted to hold her breath. It was silly and childish, but what else could she do to distract her from the overwhelming urge to straddle his lap and ride him until she came?

He spread her knees apart and wedged his body between them. Oh God. This was too much. Losing control of her senses was not something she could handle. She brought her head above water and gasped for air.

Just as his tongue slid into her mouth.

Bite, bite, bite. But she couldn't gather the nerve. He tasted too good, so familiar and enticing all at once.

Her body was pinned against the tub as his mouth possessed hers. His lips were both soft and powerful. His tongue tousled back and forth with hers, each fighting for the upper hand.

Only Ava didn't know what the prize was.

With her last bit of self-control, she clenched her mouth shut, forcing him out. "I can't."

He ignored her by moving on to her neck where he kissed and licked her sensitive skin. His erection rubbed against her thigh.

"Stop," she said but closed her eyes, almost hoping he'd continue and dive into her without warning, without protection, without fear. "Stop," she said again while spreading her legs for his entry and tilting her neck for his mouth.

But suddenly both were vacant. A cool breeze swept across her damp neck as she heard the bath water swish. She opened her eyes to see him leaning against the other side of the tub. He stared at her with a narrowed gaze that matched the color of the water between them. A translucent blue she could have plunged headfirst into and swam in the passion that exuded from him.

He didn't say a word, but Ava knew he wanted her and would probably be in her if she hadn't opened her big mouth. It was for the best. The last thing she wanted was to get pregnant by a man who made his living kidnapping people...kidnapping her. What a vivid story she could tell her grandchildren. Ha!

She combed back a drenched lock of hair and avoided his intense stare. "Did you do all of this?" she asked, hoping to break the tension. He didn't respond so she elaborated. "Did you remodel this room?"

"Yep." His deep voice echoed off the walls and fluttered in her belly. He was playing with her. Probably having a grand time of it, too.

"So you have a hobby outside of ruining people's lives?" *There. That should put a damper on his mood.*

A wicked grin curved his lips. "Turn around and come here."

"I may be your prisoner, but I'm not your servant."

"Fine," he said, losing his smile. He reached forward and grabbed her waist, spinning her around as easily as a rag doll.

Annoyed he had that power, she gripped the sides of the tub and attempted to take back control.

His mouth touched her ear, and she quickly twisted her head to witness his next move.

"I'll be your servant then," he whispered and kissed her cheek.

Unwanted goose bumps rose on her skin. "I don't want you to do anything but let me go." But curiosity made her sit there and wait for whatever he had in mind.

From the corner of her eye, she watched as he squirted shampoo into his palm and rubbed his hands together. He scooped up her wet hair and lathered the suds into her scalp.

Ava faced forward and let his large hands work magic. Hoping he didn't notice how much she was enjoying his touch, she closed her eyes and began to relax.

His fingers massaged her scalp, working out the tension and titillating her senses.

He brought two fingers up to sweep some bubbles off her forehead and then tilted her head

against his stone hard chest. Repositioning, she scooted her butt back and sat in between his solid thighs. If he wanted to give her pleasure, then she would let him. But that's as far as she was going.

Slowly, his hands curved down her jaw line and settled gently upon her neck, where his thumbs began kneading the tight muscles at her hairline.

"Is this all right?" he asked in a soothing voice as his thumb worked out a kink.

When she didn't answer, he moved his hands over her shoulders, inward toward her collarbone, and down to the tops of her breasts where he lingered for a moment, teasing her. Making her wish he'd move on and give his attention to her sensitive nipples that ached for his touch. Just an inch and he could cup her heavy swollen breasts.

Instead, he reached for the portable showerhead. "Time to rinse."

Attempting to clear her overexcited mind, Ava braced her hands on his legs and sat up. His muscles flexed at her fingertips, and she couldn't help but take in the image. Dark hairs sparsely covered his powerfully chiseled thighs. There was no doubt his body was a perfectly sculpted machine. A beautiful sight she wouldn't have minded kissing and licking on the way up to his hardened cock.

Ava ran her hands up to his knees and back down again.

"You okay?" he asked, and she swiveled her head to see him smiling.

Damn him. He had to know the effect he had on her.

The warm water squirted onto her back so she tilted her head, letting him rinse the shampoo from her hair. When he finished, he lowered the

showerhead into the bath and let the water rush against her abdomen.

"What are you doing?" She tensed.

He answered by grabbing her by the waist and gathering her against him. He lowered the pelting liquid in between her legs, against the inside of her thigh and then against her clit.

"Oh, God." She started at the instant pleasure and widened her legs for more.

She figured her reaction must have ignited something in him because he dropped the device, slammed the faucet off, and lifted her chin for a deep kiss. Two of his fingers parted her folds and massaged her sensitive nub. His other hand left her chin, moved down to cup her wet swollen breast, and stroked her pebbled nipple.

Overwhelmed with ecstasy and adrenaline, Ava fell against him as if she were his puppet and his arms were the strings keeping her alive and thriving. At that moment, she would have allowed him to do anything he desired. He could have her, and she didn't give a damn about the consequences.

Her back slid against his damp, muscled chest as he stroked firm circles against her clit. She reached around and caressed his strong jaw, sucking eagerly on his tongue while it slipped in and out of her mouth. His erection hardened against her ass, showing her how much he wanted her.

She attempted to pivot on her butt and let him in bare and unprotected, but his arm held her in place as he massaged her breast and teased her nipple. Below, his two fingers dipped deep into her, milking *that* spot.

Wanting more, she clenched down on his fingers, causing her pussy to quake, her womb to heat. His

tongue darted into her mouth, echoing the stroking movement of his fingers.

Ava moaned, and he pulled his lips away, watching her with leaden eyes. His breath was as ragged as hers, his cheeks ruddy. She bit down on her lip and fully allowed her stimulated pussy to have its way. The wave rippled through her center. Stinging. Coursing. Freeing her.

His nostrils flared as she whimpered and bucked against his touch.

"Kade." Her body grew limp, and she slumped against him in the warm water, satiated and relaxed.

Several minutes of silence passed before she looked up into his eyes. *God*, *what was the expression on his face*? He was grinning, and he seemed both amused and proud at the same time. Suddenly her orgasm hadn't seemed worth it. What had she been thinking?

Nothing, apparently.

"Have you forgiven me yet?" His grin twisted into a satisfied smirk.

Pompous ass.

Not being able to get away from him fast enough, Ava slipped out of his grasp and pushed off him. "Not even a little," she said, feeling her face warm.

His smile faded. "Come on, Ava. Don't be mad. I just wanted to make you feel good, and I think I did."

Why had she given into him so easily? How had she forgotten how he had deceived her for his own benefit?

She prepared to reach across and slap his smug face or at least cut him down to size with some

choice words, but she was startled by the alarm sounding from the speaker.

"Shit," he muttered and quickly climbed from the tub.

"What's going on? Is he here?"

Without answering, he pulled on his jeans, not bothering with the underwear. "Here." He grabbed a robe off the door hook and handed it to her as she stood. "Put this on."

Poppy drove her car into the gas station where Zack's oversized SUV was parked. She'd stayed at least two cars back for most of the journey, but the road ahead entered into a mountainous region and she was sure her beat up hatchback wouldn't hold out for much longer, especially in the snow.

It was time to get creative.

Through the window of the convenience store, she could see Zack talking to the man behind the counter, paying for the gas and then taking a key attached to a wooden stick. The bathroom key. This was the perfect moment.

With the briefcase tightly clenched in hand, Zack exited the building and walked around the corner to where she assumed the men's room was. She didn't have much time, unless Zack was the type to sit on the toilet and grunt it out. Eww...not a nice visual.

With haste, she slid on a skirt she had stashed on the floor of the front seat of her car. Thank God she'd dropped it after the last laundry day. She hadn't had time to go home for clothes after Zack made his mad dash from the club. With that money.

The glorious sight of all those crisp green dollars was still imprinted in her mind. Oh, the wonderful things it could do for her.

She tightened Jarred's coat around her bare upper body. His awful body odor still lingered in the lining, making Poppy want to gag. What had she ever seen in him anyway? With the briefcase in her possession, she'd never have to ask herself that question again.

A grey-haired gentleman in overalls and a scowl watched her as she slipped from her car and made her way to the SUV. She flashed him a boob and his mouth dropped. That should keep him speechless for a while.

Both back doors were locked, but the front driver's side wasn't. *Idiot*. He hadn't even removed the keys from the ignition. Anyone could have stolen the damn thing. Unfortunately, Poppy wasn't a car thief. She had her sights on the real deal.

She climbed into the SUV and lunged into the back just as Zack turned the corner and began heading toward her. Luckily, the tint was so dark, she was sure he didn't see a thing.

The inside of the vehicle was enormous with a third row of seats perfect for her to hide out. She scrambled over and lay flat against the soft leather, waiting for him to take her to the next destination.

When a large man almost identical to Kade walked in the front door, Ava let out a breath. Again, relieved it wasn't Zack but curious to know who the man was. His eyes were a mysterious dark brown, and his hair hung shaggily onto his forehead, but other than those obvious differences, he could have been Kade's twin.

The two shook hands and muttered greetings. It was apparent they weren't the best of friends.

Ava hung near the bathroom door, mostly out of sight, as she listened to them talk.

Kade invited the man in, calling him Jax, only glancing in Ava's direction once as he sat at the table with the stranger.

"So what are you doing here?" Kade asked with a sharp bite in his voice.

"I just came to warn you. Moreno's on your tail, and he wants the target like you wouldn't believe."

Ava's body stiffened when she heard Zack's name come out of the stranger's mouth.

"And?" Kade asked coolly.

"And he knows where you are so I suggest you follow through and give her over to him...or me."

"Did you sell me out?" Kade asked with an eerie calmness.

"I just gave him what he would've gotten from someone else. It's not like this shitty cabin is a secret. And in case you've forgotten, you have more enemies than Satan himself. Anyone would have given Moreno your whereabouts. Even Lucy."

"Fuck you," Kade said through clenched teeth. "You're my goddamn cousin. We're blood."

Cousins, huh? Ava squinted at the man's profile. That explained the resemblance, but it didn't explain why Kade was angry. Didn't he want Zack to find them? Wasn't that the whole point?

"That's why I came up here," Jax said. "To warn you." The brown-eyed man shook his head and leaned over the table. "Why the hell are you pulling this shit anyway? He's got the money for you."

"Then he can bring it here. I've got what he wants."

Ah, there was the Kade Ava had grown to know. Damn him. It was all about the money.

"Where is she?" Jax asked abruptly. "Got her tied up somewhere?" He grinned like a schoolboy about to perform a prank. His eyes shot across the room, and Ava stepped backward, completely out of sight.

The lump in her throat was painful as she listened on. She needed to get away before Zack showed up. And before Kade could get paid for kidnapping her. Bastard.

Maybe this guy was the ticket out. If she could get him to take her away from here, away from this man who made her heart break every second he kept her hostage, then she could get to a different location. And maybe, just maybe, she could have a chance to escape—to survive.

She peeked around the corner again and caught Jax's amused stare.

He smiled and nodded once, his features just as handsome but darker than Kade's. "Are you going to come out and join us?"

"No, she's not." Kade stood. "Ava, go to my room," he ordered.

Screw you. If this was her only opportunity to break away before Zack arrived, then she'd seize it and run. Whatever it took.

She walked out into the open, letting the bathrobe open as she moved.

"Mmm," Jax rumbled. "Now, I see what all the fuss is about. Why don't you come closer so I can have a better look at this sweet little target?"

Kade's face paled as he strode toward her. With jerking motions, he pulled her robe closed and tightened the knot. "I know what you're doing," he

said under his breath. "Trust me, Ava. It's not a good idea." His knuckle skimmed down her cheek as he gave her one of those bogus you-mean-something-to-me expressions.

Ava flung his hand away and glared up at him. She wasn't going to fall for his bull. "You can't keep me here," she whispered up at him.

Kade leaned down and spoke softly into her ear. "I'm not letting you go so you can forget about whatever strategy you've got rattling around in that foolish head of yours."

"Foolish?" She lifted her chin defiantly.

He crossed his arms. "If you're considering leaving here with him, then yes."

"Besides," she said loud enough for Jax to hear and walked around Kade's large frame. She took bold strides and stood in front of the stranger. "This looks like fun." She ran her hand through the man's hair.

"Could be." Jax swept his dark gaze up her body and tugged at the terry cloth belt. "I like this girl, Kade." The robe opened, and he slid his hand across her bare belly.

Ava swallowed and tried not to think of what Kade could be thinking of her at that moment. And hated herself for caring. She peeked at him. He hadn't moved, and he wasn't looking. But his fists were clenched white at his sides, still standing where she had left him.

It didn't matter. This was her only chance, and she had to take it.

Just like any other time at the club, she lifted her leg and set it on the man's thigh. But unlike any other time, he responded by holding her close, his large hands firmly gripping her hips.

She tried not to think, letting her attention go to Kade, who turned around and looked sickened.

"Ava," he gulped out. "Don't let him do that to you. You're more than that."

Jax chuckled and slid his grip over her ass. "Lighten up, cuz. We're just having a little fun."

"Let's leave," she gathered the courage to whisper into his ear. "Take me with you and we can finish this without an audience." Without Kade staring at her, making her ill. She had to do this. She needed to survive.

"Mmm...that sounds tempting." He shoved the robe off her shoulders, and it landed at her feet. "Kiss me in front of him," he said in a low voice and forcefully squeezed her butt cheek. "And we'll go."

Ava attempted to empty her mind. It was just a kiss. She closed her eyes and lowered her lips. His mouth crushed hers while his tongue slid between her lips. It was like Kade's kiss, she told herself, but without the passion and enticing taste.

"Fuck this," Kade's angry voice said from behind her and suddenly she was being yanked from Jax's hold and into Kade's strong arms.

He didn't look happy as he rushed her into his bedroom and slammed the door shut with his foot.

"Kade," she breathed out, feeling unwanted guilt and anxiety.

He dropped her on the bed and climbed on top of her, unbuttoning his pants in the process. "What? Did you want me to just stand there and let him have you?" He tore off his shirt, making the buttons fly, and threw it on the floor. "Do you think I'm that kind of a man?"

"I just wanted a way out," she whispered.

His eyes were distant and avoiding her stare. It was upsetting to see him hurt. She cared about him. And even after all that had happened she still wanted him.

"I'm your way out, Ava. Not him." He reached over her and grabbed a condom from his dresser. Quickly, he pushed his pants down and rolled the rubber over his thick, long hardness, making her mouth water with anticipation. "I'm the man you need."

Ava nodded. It had taken another man's touch for her to realize how her feelings for Kade had grown...whether she wanted them to or not. What was wrong with her? How did he get under her skin? How did he make her desire him?

"Fuck me," she heard herself say and spread her legs wide for him. *Love me. Never let me go.*

Kade wedged her thighs farther apart and only let her have one passing glance before he drove his cock deep.

She gasped at how he quickly filled her and with enough force to inch her up the mattress. He pulled out halfway and repeated the thrust. Like a man on a mission, he pumped faster and harder through each pass. So much so the bed shook and rattled beneath her. She'd never felt anything so powerful.

Pain and pleasure. How that combination kept arising.

She cradled his face while one of his hands reached down and grabbed her ass. He hauled her bottom up toward him as he continued to slam his full length into her. Almost as if he couldn't get in far enough.

Ava felt the heat rising and buried her head into his neck, licking at his pulse.

"You feel so good, Kade." Tears burned her eyes as she lifted her hips to meet his thrusts.

Skin slapping together and panting breaths were the only sounds in the room, and it made her even hotter. She hoped Jax could hear it. She hoped he would walk in the room to see Kade pleasing her like no man could.

The door pushed open, and she got her wish. Jax leaned against the jam with a grin on his face.

Thankfully, Kade didn't appear to notice. His full attention seemed to be on their two bodies colliding together.

Jax stared at her breasts with a predator's eye as they bounced every time Kade glided into her. To show the wicked man who she really wanted, she wrapped her legs around Kade's body and began moving with him, matching his thrusts, letting him go deeper than ever before.

His cock was agonizingly delicious and, as she stared up into his eyes, she allowed herself to pretend she saw love and devotion. Was it really there? Could he love her? Her heart wanted to believe. It stuttered and flurried as the words tingled at the tip of her tongue. *I love you*, *Kade*.

"Come, Ava." He tore her from her foolish thoughts as he tugged her earlobe through his teeth. "I'm the only man who'll ever fuck you this hard, this good. Scream for me."

"Oh, God, Kade!" she cried out. Her mind and body ached with pleasure, and she forgot all about Jax's presence, focusing only on the man she was falling in love with.

The ceiling above spun as she climaxed, abrupt and potent.

Kade groaned and fell onto her, his body slick with sweat, sliding against hers. All Ava could think of doing was holding him close. She ran her hands over his broad back and kissed his cheek as he breathed heavily against her ear.

A few minutes passed before he finally met her blurred gaze, but he didn't say a word. Instead, he rose, pulled the spent condom off and threw it onto the floor. He stashed himself back into his pants and buttoned up.

"I'm going to get rid of him," he mumbled, pointing his thumb to the now closed door. "Stay here."

Ava nodded, grasping at her thighs that panged with gratification.

How was she ever going to say good-bye to Kade Gavin?

Chapter Nine

Kade dressed before leaving Ava sprawled out on his bed. Bits of her hair were drenched in perspiration and clinging to her rosy-cheeked face. Beautiful, as always. But goddamn her for letting Jax touch her like he did.

Watching the woman he loved being groped, especially by a man as unscrupulous and undeserving as Jax, had driven him to the brink of insanity. Sure, for the past few years, Kade hadn't been much better, but he was going to change that. He was going to become a good, moral man. For Ava. He just needed to convince her of his loyalty and love so she'd stay to witness the change. Maybe then she could grow to love him, too.

He closed the door behind him and spotted Jax sitting in the same chair, staring at the computer equipment that had been concealed by the roll top desk...but wasn't any longer.

"You've got a nice setup here." Jax nodded toward the bedroom. "I'm jealous." He stood and walked to the desk and let a finger brush against the screen. "Listen, I know you probably hate my guts, but I'm only looking out for you."

Kade clenched his fists. That was bullshit. Jax Cullen might have been his blood relative, but he was not his friend. They were competitors, with unresolved grudges tracing back to their childhood. Not to mention, Jax was the spitting image of Kade's

father. "It's time for you to go," he said through his gritted jaw.

"Don't get mixed up with this girl." Jax looked at Kade pointedly. "Moreno wants her dead. You know that, right?"

"That's not going to happen." Kade took the few steps to close the distance between them. "Not on my watch."

Jax shrugged his shoulders and exhaled a breath. "No one's going to hire you after this crap you're pulling. You could end it. Just apologize to Moreno. He's a fair man. I bet he'd still pay you."

"I don't care about the fucking money," Kade said in a low voice and took another step forward with his arms crossed. "And I'm not going to let anything happen to Ava."

Jax shook his head, making Kade want to knock it off his shoulders. Of course the guy didn't get it. He'd never been in love with anyone but himself. And with his attitude, he never would.

"You're being a complete moron, cuz," Jax said. "But if you want me to stick around and help out, just say the word."

Ha. Kade couldn't and wouldn't trust the man, not after all they'd been through. "No thanks."

"All right." Jax stepped back and then headed for the door. "Good luck then. You're going to need it." After gripping the handle, he sent Kade a look of warning. "You might want to find out why Moreno wants her head on a platter." He shrugged. "Before you give up your entire life for a woman who's willing to leave with a guy like me."

"I'll take care of it." Kade attempted to sound confident, but Jax's words had struck a chord. Finding out exactly why Moreno was after Ava was

top priority if Kade planned on resolving this without any fatalities.

Poppy tried to keep her heavy eyes open as she lay comfortably in the very back seat of Zack's SUV. Maybe she'd purchase one of these after she got her money. It was damn cozy.

Zack hummed along to a Frank Sinatra song from the front seat. The music wasn't helping her stay alert either. She turned onto her belly and ran her fingers across the lush black carpet on the floor. Very nice. She could get used to stuff like this. It was much nicer than her dirty old car. Stains everywhere. Torn upholstery. Fast food wrappers all over.

A cell phone rang, and Zack answered. "Moreno speaking."

Poppy turned back around and listened intently.

"Like I said before, Gavin, I don't need to tell you shit. You're screwing with me, and it's pissing me off."

Ooh, this was getting interesting, but who was Gavin? She tried to remember if she'd heard Kade's last name. It had to be him.

"No, fuck you," Zack yelled. "I'm going to kill the cheating bitch, and if I find out you've touched her, I'm going to kill you, too. You got that?"

Shit. This guy was nuts.

Poppy peeked over the seat to see the side of his bright red face. He slammed his hand onto the steering wheel, and she ducked back down.

"Listen," his voice lowered. "I'll give you another chance, Gavin. I know how manipulating that little whore can be, and she obviously has your balls in a

sling, so all you got to do is—hello? *Hello*? Motherfucker hung up on me," he yelled.

Poppy heard a swish, a crack, and then a thunk on the floor. He'd thrown something at the window, and she was pretty damn sure it was his cell phone. *What a freak*.

She was really going to have to be careful getting that briefcase away from him.

The speaker beside her head started blaring *The Best Is Yet to Come* as the SUV lurched forward, accelerating.

Good. The sooner she got to the next destination, the better. She got cozy on her side and plopped her arm over her ear to block out the deafening music.

Maybe a little nap to pass the time wouldn't hurt.

The overhead lights in the kitchen spotlighted Kade as he slammed the cell phone on the counter. Ava stood in the shadows of the wood-burning fireplace, against the bedroom door watching him. She'd heard everything and was horrified.

"Are my ears deceiving me or did you just call the man who wants to kill me and ask for a reason?" she asked through the dusk-darkened room.

Slowly, Kade looked in her direction. His mouth was pursed and his forehead crinkled. "I need to know, Ava."

"So you asked him? Do you think I'd lie to you?"

"No. That's not it." He shook his head and closed the distance between them.

Before he could reach her, Ava put her hand up, making him stop an arm's length away.

His clear blue gaze swept over her as she stood there wearing one of his flannel shirts, buttoned up

only half way. She'd been in a hurry to run into his arms after she heard Jax leave but then was shocked when she heard the phone call.

"I didn't think you'd tell me," he said. "You haven't exactly been happy with me."

"I just let you make love to me," she said and pointed at him, poking him in the chest with her finger.

"After you asked Jax to take you with him."

Another sting of guilt ripped through her, and Ava dropped her arm, allowing Kade to step forward. Her anger fizzled with him so near, his strong presence much like a sedative. He caressed her cheek as she stared up at him. Flickers of light from the fire danced across his ruggedly handsome face. Always so serious.

Ava wanted to make him smile. She could imagine making that her life's goal and never growing bored of it.

The reality was spending more time with Kade wasn't an option. Not if she wanted to survive. And damn him for putting her in a situation that jeopardized her right to live. "I didn't know what else to do."

"Can we call it even?" A half a grin peaked the corner of his gorgeous lips. His fingers dragged her hair back and then slid down between her breasts.

Why did he have to be so tempting? She nodded, mindless under his watchful gaze.

"So tell me what happened, Ava? Why does Moreno want you?"

With her hand in his, she followed Kade to the couch in front of the warm fire. She had no desire to rehash the memories of Zack, but she would rather

Kade hear the story from her than from the devil himself.

He sat down at the edge of the brown leather sofa and drew Ava next to him. His concerned and caring expression gave her some comfort but not nearly enough.

"Tell me," he said in his deep husky voice. "You can tell me anything. I'll understand."

God, she hoped so. "I thought he was a normal guy at first," she started. "We went out on dates. He brought me jewelry and flowers all the time. I didn't need that stuff, but I thought it was sweet. Know what I mean?"

He nodded. "Go on."

She took a breath. "I moved in with him and started noticing things. Especially when he was campaigning for Senator Wadsley. Zack would be talking on the phone to someone and then just become this different person, threatening and harassing."

Shaken, she looked up at Kade. His entire focus was on her, so she continued. "One day I asked him who he was talking to and he flipped out. He said it wasn't my business and to stay out of it or I'd be sorry."

Kade's eyes narrowed. "Then what happened?"

"I didn't want to stick around to see what happened next, so I started packing my bags." Ava pressed her hand to her flushed forehead. It had beaded up with perspiration. After all this time, the very thought of Zack still terrified her. "But before I could leave, he pushed me against the wall...and beat me unconscious," she said, closing with a whisper.

Talking about that day was humiliating. To relive it all in her thoughts turned her stomach. How had she not seen it coming? It was the same question she'd asked of the many women who'd sought shelter and safety at the battered women's shelter where she volunteered. She'd wanted them all to believe they could survive and be strong enough to fight back. But now she knew how terrifying physical abuse really was. Enough to force her to run and hide.

Kade gathered her onto his lap and held her, taking her by surprise. His solid arms were comforting as she leaned into his embrace.

"Zack promised to hunt me down and kill me if I left, Kade. He said he'd find me no matter where I go. Now, do you understand why I can't sit around here waiting for him?"

"You can't run forever." He loosened his hold on her, and Ava looked into his unresponsive eyes.

How could he still want her to stay after what she'd just told him? How could he not comprehend how frightened she was?

"You have to trust me, baby. I know you're scared, but you have to believe me when I say it's for the best that we handle Moreno in person."

No. No way. She wanted to scream at him, but she held her tongue. Trying to reason with him was pointless. Her body shivered as she stared up at his stubborn expression. This was the man Zack hired to find her. No matter what her heart was saying, she was going to have to force herself to listen to her head. How could she rely on a man who had drugged and kidnapped her for money?

She couldn't. She needed to get out and away as soon as possible. But how?

"Talk to me, baby," Kade said. "Tell me you'll trust me."

Ava forced her mouth into a grin. "Okay," she lied.

Poppy awakened after a slapping sting made contact with the cheek Jarred had already bruised. Her eyes fluttered open to see Zack straddling her body, leaning over her with a malicious smirk. Darkness surrounded them, but the moonlight shone on half of his face.

"You snore when you sleep," he said. "Did you know that?"

Oh, shit. She tried to sit up but was immediately greeted with a gun to her forehead. *Her* gun, goddamn it.

Zack chuckled and pulled the trigger back. "What the hell were you thinking, you little whore?"

"The house on Bluebird Street," she said as clearly as possible with her trembling lips. "I want it."

Shaking his head, he pulled the gun down her sore cheek, skimming it along her tender skin. "I have no idea what the hell you're talking about." The cold steel ran down her neck to her bare breast. "But what you have here," he nudged the barrel against her nipple, "makes up for what you lack," he quickly brought the gun up to her forehead again and tapped it against her skull, "here."

"Fuck you," she belted out. If Poppy Q. Smith was going to die, she'd do it with style.

"Honestly, I'd love to fuck you, but I've got business to tend to. A woman who just happens to look a lot like you is waiting for me, and I don't have the time or energy to screw you both." He backed off.

Poppy sat up and clenched her jacket shut. Her eyes located the briefcase resting in between the two front seats.

"Get out," he ordered. "And don't even think about touching that money, or I'll put a bullet through that pretty head of yours."

She climbed over the seat and felt the barrel on her bottom as she did. *Dickhead*. *Pervert*. *Son* of a *bitch*. She'd get that fucking briefcase from him if it was the last thing she did.

"Out the door, my little blonde harlot," Zack said as he followed her over, adjusting his aim from her ass to her chest.

Poppy was so close to the money, she swore she could smell green crisp dollars.

"Out," he yelled. "I'd shoot your head off, but it would ruin my new interior."

Reluctantly, she opened the door and slid out onto the snowy ground in her heels. "How the hell do you expect me to walk in this crap?" She threw her arms up, but before she could turn around to face Zack, his foot propelled her away from the vehicle and flat into the pile of dirty snow that hugged the plowed road.

She tried to scream, but her entire body stung. Before she could get to her feet again, Zack, his SUV, and her money drove away.

Trembling with anger and pain, she stood at the edge of the road and kissed her destiny good-bye. She wasn't usually a crier, but she figured this moment was probably as good as any. Tears filled her eyes and ran down her cold, bruised cheek.

Just then an enormous black truck with chains on its tires drove up on the opposite side of the desolate road. She squinted and saw a brawny man

with dark features roll down his window. "Need a ride?" he called out.

Poppy's mama always said not to get into a car with strange men, but what other choice was there? She was freezing, it was dark, and he had a vehicle to get her closer to her destiny.

Pulling away from Kade's embrace, Ava excused herself to the bathroom. Her clothes were still in there, and the more she had on, the less chance she had ending up naked with Kade, *again*.

She needed to remain focused if she wanted to stay alive. And although the idea of trusting Kade was alluring, it wasn't practical.

They weren't on the same team.

It was her against the unknown, and so far she was losing. But not for long.

She pulled on her jeans and patted her pocket to make sure the pills were still there. Yep. It was time to take action.

"Ava," he called from the other side of the door. "Are you hungry yet?"

"I'm starving." She slipped on her snug T-shirt and tied his flannel shirt around her waist to hide the appearance of the capsules.

After taking a deep breath, she opened the bathroom door and almost ran right into him. He was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, waiting for her.

"Hi," she said, attempting to act as normal as possible.

His clear blue gaze swept up her body and met her eyes. "Are we okay?"

"Just fine." What did he expect her to do? Cartwheels? "Why don't I make dinner?" She

attempted to walk past him to the kitchen, but he grabbed her arm.

"You don't need to do that."

"I want to. Really. I feel bad for destroying the meal you made earlier. You could go play with your detective stuff." She waved her free hand toward his computer equipment.

He loosened his grip and smiled down at her. "It's been a long time since a woman cooked for me."

Ava watched as he bit into the small cut on his lip, reminding her he was just a man. Not some mysterious force who ruled her fate.

He leaned down and kissed her lips. "I'd love it," he whispered against her mouth.

Get a hold of yourself, Ava. She swallowed down the rising desire to strip the clothes off his body, push him onto the couch, and ride him until she was completely satisfied. "Okay, I'll get started."

Poppy plopped into the front seat after climbing up the mountain that was the man's truck. A difficult task for a petite woman in three-inch heels. She supposed he was single because no sane woman would go through this stunt more than a few times.

"You okay?" he asked as she closed the door behind her.

She finally gave him her full attention. And fell in love at first sight. His lips were positively lickable. His muscular arms could throw her onto a bed any day. His well-defined chest was wrapped tightly under his dark gray T-shirt. Yummy stomach. Nice bulge in the jeans. Oh yeah. That was impressive.

"Are you staring at my dick?"

Poppy shrugged but didn't look away.

He chuckled. "What's your name?" He placed two long fingers under her chin, edging her face up.

"Poppy." She met his gaze. The overhead light dimmed, setting shadows under his dark brooding eyes and cheekbones. Damn.

"You're soaking wet, Poppy."

Hell, yeah, I am. "I know. Do you have something I could change into?" She slipped Jarred's stinky jacket off and let it fall behind her.

"I might." He took in her exposed breasts with one all-too-quick sweeping glance while tugging his rugged-looking brown leather jacket off the back of his seat.

Was he gay? Hello? What kind of man didn't look when a woman's bare breasts were less than two feet in front of him? "I could trade you for something," she said without breaking her stare. Poppy brushed her hands over her receptive nipples and up through her hair.

His face was blank, but his fists were clenched tightly to the leather in his hands. No man who emitted that much testosterone was a homosexual. "I don't like to barter. If I want something I take it." He handed her the jacket.

"Ah," she said, impressed with his answer but somewhat saddened he didn't want *her*. "What's your name, anyway?" She slipped on the coat but left it unzipped.

He straightened and his massive body loomed over hers while his sober gaze slowly drifted down. "Some people call me Jax."

Chapter Ten

Ava searched through Kade's refrigerator and pantry, which were both overloaded with food. How much could one guy eat? "Expecting company?" She swiveled around to see he was right behind her. Startled, she jerked back.

"The nearest store is fifty miles away so I stock up every so often." His Adam's apple bobbed up and down, telling her he was nervous about something. Geez, how was it she knew so much about him from the little time they'd spent together?

"Oh." She moved toward him and wrapped her arms around his neck, attempting to comfort him. And hopefully, convince him they were on the same level, the same team. She tilted her head up, stood on her tiptoes, and met his lips.

His kiss was powerful, passionate, and always exactly how she wanted it. Damn him for being the perfect man in the most imperfect situation.

She pulled away to see his eyes slowly open, letting their alluring hue draw her in. Their children would have been beautiful if they'd looked anything like him.

"I'll get out of your way." He gulped visibly.

Ava nodded, speechless. Now wasn't the time to be daydreaming about what might have been. Now was the time to take action. *He doesn't care about you. He's working for Zack*. She repeated the words

in her mind over and over as she plucked the pills out of her pocket.

Kade grabbed a beer from the fridge and went to sit at his desk. This was too easy. She was being overly accommodating. But why? What did she have up her sleeve?

He swerved his chair to watch her as she moved around in his kitchen. Like she'd done it a million times before. She fit perfectly in his home *with him*.

If he could just convince her to stay.

He shook the thought from his head and turned toward his computer screen.

One mountaintop at a time, Gavin. Just save her life first.

Pots clanked from her direction, and Kade quickly did a mental inventory of his pantry, freezer, and cabinets. Nothing lethal or mind-altering came to mind. He was sure of it since he kept his drugs and chemicals locked up in the shed out back or in his safe, hidden in the opposite wall of the fireplace.

Besides, Ava couldn't harm him that way. She didn't have that fucked up mental capacity to kill, and she wouldn't drug him without knowing where her shoes were. He could relax.

Raven purred at his feet and wrapped her body around his ankle. Kade reached down and picked her up. "Do you like cats?" he called out to Ava.

"Uh, yeah, sure," she answered with a hint of hesitancy.

"It's okay if you don't. You can tell me the truth." Kade swiveled in his chair again to see her busy whipping something together in a pot. A spicy aroma filled the air.

"Actually, I love all animals. I was studying to be a veterinarian before all this happened."

"Really?" Kade wasn't all too surprised. Ava as a stripper just didn't match up.

"Yeah." She glanced over and graced him with a quick smile. Her face brightened for only an instant, letting him into a world that didn't include Moreno or Jax or anyone else but the two of them.

He could get used to that.

"I could've used your services about a month ago. Raven had this disgusting hacking cough. Kept me up all night."

Her soft giggle filled the room and warmed his heart. "Well, I'm glad she's better."

"Yeah, me, too." He set the cat back on the floor and ran his hand through his hair. It felt good to have a normal conversation. Well, as normal as it could be.

"I have to admit you don't seem like much of a cat person." The electric can-opener whirred and grinded.

He waited until it stopped. "Just this cat. Trust me. For the past few years I haven't been any type of person. Animal or otherwise."

"Oh?" She arched her eyebrow at him. "What about Lucy?"

"She doesn't mean anything to me. She numbed my mind at times, but that was it." He clenched his eyes shut. The sound of his own words sickened him. He opened them to see Ava had looked away, busy crushing something into the mortar.

What was she making anyway? Whatever it was smelled delicious.

Curiosity led him back to the kitchen.

"Where you headed?" Jax leaned over Poppy's lap and opened the glove compartment.

She inhaled the musky masculine scent of him and watched as he pulled a gun out with what could only be a silencer attached to it. She didn't know much about weapons, but she'd seen enough movies and crime scene investigation shows to know what one looked like.

"What do you use that for?" She squirmed in her seat. Her mama would surely be giving her a scolding when they met in heaven.

"My job." He slid the gun in a holder behind his sun visor and then peered at her from the corner of his shady, dark eyes. "What were you doing in Zack Moreno's car?"

She stilled, shocked by hearing that name rumble from the stranger's mouth. "How do you know him?"

He shook his head. "I ask the questions, got it?"

Obviously, he wasn't up for negotiations, so she didn't answer.

"That was Moreno in the SUV, right?"

Screw him. "Maybe."

With a quick sweeping movement, he pulled the gun down and pointed it at her head. "Answer."

"Fine. Yes, it was him." Poppy rolled her eyes, tired of having men push her around and not being able to shove back. This sucked.

"What were you doing with him?"

"He has my money."

"Your money?"

"Yep." Damn, right. The son of a bitch owed her. Plus interest. "Do you know where he's going with it?"

Silence thickened the cab of the truck as he stared at her with a calm intensity, suddenly reminding her of what's-his-face. Kade. Ava's guy.

"Well, do you?" she asked, peeved he was making her feel insecure. She clenched her jacket shut.

"I know where he's heading," Jax finally answered as if breaking from a trance.

"Why? You want the money, too?"

He grinned, easing some of her tension. "You try to steal it? Is that what happened?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

A guttural laugh erupted from him, and he slipped his gun back in its holder. "You have no idea what you got yourself into, do you? You're lucky Moreno didn't put a bullet in your head."

"Please," she said, trying to sound blasé. "I've dealt with much worse."

"Really?" He didn't seem impressed or like he believed a word she said. "I wouldn't mind seeing you in action."

"You mean you want to watch me get the money from him?"

"Hell, I'd be cheering you on."

"Then take me to him." She may have been naïve but she certainly knew how to take advantage of an opportunity.

He laughed again, clearly not taking her seriously. "Listen, you've got a lot of spunk, but that's not going to help you when dealing with a man like Moreno."

"I'll give you a portion of the cash. All you have to do is drive me there and then to a safe location after I get the briefcase."

"If you screw with Moreno then a *safe* location doesn't exist, understand?"

"Wow. You looked like a tough guy. Hell, you almost scared me with that cute little gun of yours, but now I know you're nothing but a chicken shit." That should get him. If she knew anything, it was that a man's ego was bigger than any other part of him. Which meant Jax's had to be huge.

He shook his head at her, shifted his truck into gear, and took off in Moreno's direction. "I never should've picked you up, huh?"

"Too late now."

Ava quickly rinsed the residue off of the mortar and stirred the crushed pills into the chili.

Just in time.

From the corner of her eye, she could see him walking over. He nudged up beside her.

"You've got a ton of canned food," she explained, trying to sound casual and relaxed when she was anything but. "I'm making chili." She gestured toward the empty can and let out a nervous giggle. "Just added some crushed peppers. I'm not the best cook."

"It's perfect." Kade wrapped his arm around her waist from behind and looked down at the now bubbling chili.

She tensed against him. Did he suspect? What would he do if he found out? She couldn't imagine he'd hurt her, but what did she really know about him anyway?

Yes, he was gorgeous. He made her toes curl in the bedroom. His kiss blinded her with ecstasy. His deep calming voice could lull her to sleep. He had a

cat. He owned a rustic cabin in the woods. And he smelled like...like fresh mountain air.

She inconspicuously leaned in toward his chest and sniffed. Yes. That's what it was.

That and...burned chili.

"Damn it!" She quickly used the ladle to scoop all that wasn't stuck to the bottom of the pot into a bowl. "Oh, geez, I ruined it." She clasped her hand over her mouth and stared down at her escape plan.

Kade took the bowl from her. "It's fine, sweetheart."

Sweetheart. The tiny sentiment blared in her ears.

"Really. It's okay." He looked down at her with what seemed to be adoration. Love. Whatever it was sucked the air out of her lungs.

She watched him take a bite. He chewed, swallowed, and took another mouthful. *Stop!* A muted voice in her wanted to yell. *I need you*.

Every cell in her body froze, and as if time had warped, the last bit of chili disappeared.

He swiped his hands together and smiled down at her. Warm and tender. "You okay?"

She nodded but her stomach disagreed. It rumbled with nausea. She tried to remind herself drugging him was the only way to survive this mess. Once he passed out, she could take his shoes. She could run far away again and start all over. Without Kade, Without his touch.

"Are you sure? You look a little pale."

"I...I should sit down."

"Go ahead. You're probably starving. You haven't eaten in a long time."

"Yeah," she whispered and dazedly ambled away.

She could feel him behind her, gripping her elbow until she reached the couch and plopped down.

"I'll make you a fresh bowl in a new pot."

She nodded again. What could she say? That she was sorry? Sorry for what? She was protecting herself.

Surviving.

She couldn't listen to the voice in her head that had gotten her into all this trouble in the first place. The same one that told her Zack was a decent guy.

The fatal instinct that shouted for her to fall in love. With the man who found and exposed her. With her own kidnapper.

Jax peered at Poppy from the corner of his eye as she breathed onto the truck window and sketched out a dollar sign. The woman was certifiable.

"Not that I care," she said. "But what is he planning on doing with all that money?"

"Why don't you ask him when you see him?" Jax said, aggravated he had bothered to pick her up when she would most likely get in his way. There had to be some way he could stop Kade from ruining their family name. Once this was all over, he was sure neither one of them would be employable.

She swerved around and faced him. "That's not funny."

"I didn't laugh." He shot her a warning glare. "The only reason you're still here is because I've got no idea what else to do with you. And if you think I'm going to help you screw over Moreno, you're insane."

"What about half?" she asked. "I'll do all the dirty work. All you have to do is wait for me. He won't even know you're a part of it."

That got his attention. He gripped the steering wheel and punched on the accelerator. If the crazy woman could pull it off, all Jax had to do was put her back where he found her and take the money. With that amount of dough, he wouldn't have to work for a long time. "How exactly are you planning on getting it in your possession?"

"I'll shoot him with your gun."

"He won't be the only one there who wants that money. There's another man and a woman."

"Kade and Ava?"

Jax smirked. She knew more than he realized. "Yep."

"I'll shoot them, too." She stuck her chin up at him.

Not only was she crazy, she was a horrible liar. But it didn't matter. If it worked out, this could put him on easy street. "Okay," he said. "You got a deal."

Mere moments passed until Kade was back with a bowl of chili in one hand and a spoon in the other. "Here." He placed them down on the coffee table in front of her.

Ava scooped up the spoon and tasted it. She really was starving, and if she planned on escaping, she needed her energy.

Kade tended to the fire, giving it another log and jabbing it with the poker. He seemed fine. Normal. How long had it taken her to pass out after she had been drugged? She couldn't remember.

Who knew if the drugs would be effective anyway? Some of the chili had stuck to the bottom of the pot. And she'd only used a few of the pills. He was bigger than her. Much bigger. What if it didn't have the same effect on him?

"We need to discuss a few things," he said, snatching her out of her thoughts. He leaned against the mantel and gave her a gentle grin.

Ava dropped her head back down and kept busy chewing and swallowing. What if he started feeling fatigued and dizzy and realized what she'd done? She was sure she wouldn't get anymore of those smiles.

"Look at me, sweetheart."

That word. She gave him her attention just so he wouldn't say it again. She was anything but his sweetheart, he'd soon realize.

"I want you to be prepared for when Moreno gets here." He knocked his knuckles against a log on the opposite wall of the fireplace. "This is where I keep my weapons." He pushed against the wood, and Ava heard a click.

The panel of wall popped out like a dresser drawer. He pulled out a rifle and a handgun, showed them to her and carefully set them back.

"Why are they hidden?" she asked, confused by that and why he was giving away his secret hiding place. "I thought men like you liked to show off their guns."

He let out a short breath and closed the drawer. "I guess you don't know me very well, huh?"

"Not at all," she lied. She knew him better than she ever wanted to.

Her words seemed to give him pause. He dragged his hand through his hair, and that Adam's apple bobbed up and down again.

"Are you feeling better?" He sat beside her on the couch and set his hand on her knee.

She looked at where their skin connected for a moment and contemplated standing up just to get

away from his touch. "I'm fine. Why are they hidden?" she asked again, suddenly curious to know more about the man she'd never see again after this day. The mere thought of not having him around anymore gave her an unwanted knot in her stomach.

"In all honesty, I don't like them. I've seen enough violence in my life, and I'm not particularly fond of looking at something that reminds me of it." He stared into her eyes as he spoke, his light blue gaze drawing her in like a magnet. "But I'll do anything to protect the people I love."

She gulped as he leaned toward her. He tilted his head and kissed her lips.

"Who?" She braced her hand against his chest and nudged him back. "Who do you love? Lucy?" God only knew why she asked. Jealousy? Curiosity? Hope?

It didn't matter anymore.

He stood and grabbed her hand, pulling her from the couch and against his body. "No, she's not who I love," he said in a low voice as he looked down at her with an expression that gave away so much more than she was asking for.

Reluctantly, she let him guide her to the furry shag rug in front of the fireplace. He dropped to his knees and loosened the flannel shirt still wrapped around her waist. It fell to the floor.

Before she could object, he lifted her blouse and ran his tongue from the top of her jeans to her navel. Defiantly, her body ached for more.

He began unfastening her pants, but she clamped her hand over his.

"I can't do this, Kade. I'm sorry." So sorry.

"You're going to have to stop rejecting me sooner or later, sweetheart...if we're going to make this work."

His words both bewildered and ignited her. And as she stood paralyzed, he tugged down her jeans and panties all at once. He untangled the clothing from one foot and then the other, discarding them to the side.

Ava's body trembled under his touch as he gripped her hips and stared up at her.

"Kade." She let her hand run through his hair. "I don't know what you mean." *Do I really want to?* Her heart was beating hard as her chest rose and fell with her rapid breaths.

"It's wishful thinking on my part." His staid blue eyes seared into her. "I've fallen in love with you."

The shock of his words forced Ava's knees to buckle. She dropped to the floor and into his arms. "What?" Her throat tightened.

A warm, adoring smile spread across his face as he drew her to him. "Now that I've found you, I don't want to lose you." He slipped his hands under her top, hoisting it up and over her head.

"But you...I thought you—"

"Only wanted the money? Only cared about myself?"

Ava nodded.

He shook his head, still grinning. "I love you, Ava." With swiftness, he tore the shirt off his body and began unbuttoning his pants.

"What?" she asked again, unable to believe her own ears.

"Let me show you," he whispered and took her lips with his. Tender, loving...heart-wrenching.

His tongue slid seductively along hers as he lowered her onto her back. *Oh*, *my*. Panic and passion battled for the thoughts in her mind, leaving her stunned, putty in his hands. Under his spell. She couldn't move, couldn't respond, couldn't think.

He licked and kissed a path down her neck, over her breast, sucking in her nipple as he reached the tip. "Mmm." His moan rumbled against the aching pebble, and then he gently took it between his teeth.

Her belly fluttered as she watched his strong masculine jaw move, his powerful lips score her skin, and his intense blue eyes stare back at her. Too deep. Too sincere. She opened her mouth to speak, to say anything intelligible, but nothing came out.

He'd said he loved her. No one had ever said those words to her.

Unaccounted moments passed until he released her breast and moved to dispose of his jeans. He retrieved a condom from his wallet before throwing everything else to the side. He rolled it on his magnificent cock and then returned to her.

He stood above her trembling body. His gaze swept over her, locking on her pussy. His foot nudged her legs apart, spreading her for his view. Then he kneeled between her thighs and brushed his lips across her mound. He lingered and inhaled her scent.

"Kade." Her heart twisted into a tight knot as her pussy wept.

He licked his lips and kissed her once more before standing. "I'll be right back. Don't get up."

Ava squeezed her eyes shut and attempted to steady her breathing, to ease her thumping pulse. One word beat a relentless tempo against her forehead Love Love. Love.

Could this moment be more ironic? She only hoped the pills wouldn't have any effect. Then she could pretend everything was fine. She could love him back without him knowing she'd tried to drug him. Wasn't that what she wanted? His love?

She wrenched one eye open as he approached, a bottle of lubricant in his hand. Curiosity forced her to give him her full attention. "What are you doing?"

He grinned and spilled a few drops into his big palm. "I never want to lose you, Ava. You make me want to be a better person."

She sighed. It was all she could do. Her heart was in her throat. Her mind was nowhere to be found.

He cupped her mound, letting the oil trickle down her folds, and massaged her. "I'll follow you anywhere. Do anything for you."

Guilt consumed her. She couldn't face him. Instead, she tilted her head back on the rug and stared at the ceiling. His slippery fingers circled her clit, gently rubbing the lube into her tingly flesh.

"I could spend the rest of my life making love to you." He paused. "Look at me, Ava. Look what you do to me."

She dared to glimpse at him as he fisted his hard cock and greased it with the lubricant. God, the man was perfect. She rocked against his hand and whimpered as he slipped a slick finger inside her already wet center.

A groan rumbled from his chest. "I want this pussy all over me, honey. Can you give me that?"

Before she could ask what he meant, he spread out on his back beside her, easily lifting her onto his stomach. She straddled his waist as he poured oil down the center of his taut abdomen.

"Rub it in." His husky voice was barely audible.

A shiver rippled down her spine and stung her core at the mere idea of seeing his muscular body oiled beneath her. She touched her trembling fingers to his searing skin, but he grabbed them and shook his head, a sly grin quirking his lips.

"No, sweetheart, use your smooth little pussy. I want to feel it on me. All over me."

"Oh," she said with a ragged breath. Her breasts grew heavy and her womb burned. Sex was sex but what he was asking was somehow much more intimate.

Determined to be bold for him, she rolled her pelvis forward, inching over his navel, his narrowed hairline coursing across her sensitive flesh. Ahh. Her core coiled tight. Such a simple act but so powerful.

His rough hands gripped her hips, biting into her skin. "Keep going. Please."

She pushed off her feet and slid farther along the lubricated path, her hot pussy brushing along his skin. His stomach muscles constricted underneath her and he bit into his bottom lip.

"Goddamn, Ava, your pussy is scorching me. Tell me how bad you want me." A hint of vulnerability flashed through his usually steely gaze. "Tell me you love me."

The truth bubbled up her throat, but she pursed her lips. How could she lead him on? Yes, she loved him with every cell of her body, but what would it change if she were to admit it? She couldn't. Not yet, if ever.

To distract him, she braced his shoulders and ground her hot center up his abdomen to his chest. Then back down again. Her core ached for him. She

was soaking wet with combined oil and juices, smearing the trail along his lean torso.

"Enough," he growled and shifted her weight until her pussy covered his cock.

Right there. Just an inch until heaven. The last bit of her resolve kept her from guiding him to her slit and capturing him inside her quaking walls.

He chuckled and rolled her onto her back. "Stubborn, aren't you?" His slick upper body skimmed her budded nipples until he rested on top of her.

Ava drew in a much needed breath. "Kade." She cupped his stubbled cheeks and noticed that his eyes looked heavy. Oh, God.

"I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you. I love you." He skated his oiled hands over her thighs and boosted her legs over his hips.

Her drenched center propped against his cock, and with one slow drive, he stretched her throbbing pussy, filling her.

No. Yes. No. No. Yes! "Oh, God." She breathed out and flung her head back against rug.

"Does this feel good, sweetheart?" He pulled halfway out and gradually slid back in.

"God, yes."

"Tell me you love me, too." He worked the head of his thick cock into her tight channel as his hands gripped her ass and held her in place. One lubricated finger gingerly nudged her sensitive anus, prodding in just past her puckered entrance.

Sparks sizzled from her nerves, heating her pussy, and stinging her skin. Her core twisted and tethered with each stroke, dip, and plunge until her insides detonated.

"Kade," she cried out and grabbed his neck, pulling his mouth down to hers. She welcomed his tongue, sucking on it, trying to show him how much she loved him. Needed him.

Hoping the drug didn't work. *Please*, *please* don't work.

She'd take it all back if she could. If she'd only known her instincts were right this time. Kade Gavin wouldn't hurt her. He loved her.

The weight of his body on top of hers grew more apparent, and he drew his hands and mouth away. His head dropped down beside hers. Seconds passed and the only sound Ava could hear was his steady breathing.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her shaky voice giving her away.

In a sudden, startling jolt, he jerked up to a sitting position, hauling her with him onto his lap, driving deeper in.

"Thank God." She trembled. Not only from the aftershocks his long, thick cock was granting but from the relief of knowing he was awake and vigilant. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, licking his full lips, his teeth, his tongue.

He slid his large, rough hands down her backside and grasped her ass, shoving her farther down on him. She shuddered from the impact, her pussy walls clenching and tingling.

"Tell me you love me," he whispered against her mouth. "Tell me you'll forgive me."

"I can't."

He lifted her and let her slide back down. "Don't be afraid. I won't ever hurt you again. Or..." His voice trailed off, and his grip on her ass loosened. "Let anyone else."

Ava could tell his eyelids were reddening and getting heavy. *Please*, *don't let him fall asleep*.

"I do love you, Kade," she said, attempting to keep him alert. Not knowing it would feel so good rolling off her tongue. "I love you so much." She cradled his cheeks with her hand.

He blew out a breath and eased her hands away. "We need to get dressed."

Holding back tears, she watched as his paling expression transformed from loving to another emotion altogether. Disappointment, maybe? Did he know?

"Quickly."

She stood, found her pants and shirt, and tugged them on over her oily skin. The only thing keeping her from breaking down was ignoring how he struggled to dress, stumbling and bumping into furniture.

What could she do to help him? Something. She hurried into the bathroom and wet a hand towel, then ran back out to wipe his hands free of the lubricant. "There. Is that better?" As if that was his problem. Stupid.

"What did you give me, Ava?" he asked, startling her. Of course, he knew. He wasn't an idiot.

She finished cleaning her own hands and faced him. She owed him that much. With his jeans and boots on, he sat on the couch with his elbows against his knees, fingers intertwined.

"I'm sorry, Kade. I'm so sorry."

"What was it?" All color drained from his face, and his jaw visibly ticked.

"They were in the bathroom, the pink and white pills." She brought her hand to her mouth, both trembling with regret and fear. "I panicked. I

thought you only wanted the money. I thought you were going to let me die. And I can't—I won't die."

He clenched his eyes shut and seemed to have a difficult time reopening them. "Okay," he said, calmly. "It's okay."

Really? He wasn't losing his temper? "Aren't you angry with me?"

He shrugged one shoulder as he looked up at her with heavy, reddened eyes. "No time, sweetheart. Have you ever shot a gun?" His words were slurred.

"Only once. It was a part of my self-defense class. I was supposed to practice longer, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It was super powerful and way too intense. My instructor—"

"Ava," he said, breaking her nervous chatter. "We have to concentrate, okay?"

She bit her lips and nodded her head.

"Let's get your shoes."

"Where are—" She stopped short at the sight of him attempting to stand. His legs wobbled and his hands shook.

When he finally stood to his height, he pointed to his shirt on the ground. "Can you hand me that? I'm going out to the shed."

"The shed?" Why hadn't she thought of that? She shook the silly question out of her head. All that mattered now was getting out of this alive *with* Kade. "I'm going with you." She picked up the shirt and handed it over.

"No, it's too far out. Your feet won't be able to stand it."

She started to argue, but Kade's attention went to the ceiling. Ava followed his gaze and noticed a blinking light on one of the speakers.

"Damn it." He turned toward his monitor on the desk. "The alarm didn't sound. Moreno's close."

"How—"

"Goddamn Jax must have messed with my equipment." Kade held a shaking hand out to Ava. "Come on. I'm not going to leave you alone in here. I don't know how long we have."

Chapter Eleven

The old wooden shed stood at least thirty feet away from the back door. Ava could see it as clear as day under the full moon that projected off the white snow.

"It'll be a cinch." She looked up into Kade's dazed eyes. It killed her to see him so out of sorts because of the stupid mistake she'd made.

He shook his head. "Get on my back. I'll carry you."

A nervous laugh erupted from her throat, but she quickly squelched it when Kade narrowed his eyes at her. "Sorry. It's just that, well, you know. You're kind of out of it."

"Get on, Ava," he mumbled. "We don't have time to waste."

She figured it probably wasn't a good idea to argue, considering Zack could show up at any moment. She grasped the back of Kade's shoulders and jumped up, wrapping her legs around his lean waist.

He stumbled slightly but gained his balance.

They began their trek through the snow and Raven followed at Kade's feet as if she knew her master were in danger. *Smart cat*.

"I'm sorry, Kade," she whispered into his ear as she clung to him.

"It's not your fault," he said through heavy breaths. "I didn't give you a reason to believe in me, but I hope you do now."

"I do." She kissed his neck. "If we get out of this alive, I'm going to make it up to you."

He stopped to hoist her farther up on his back and then trudged the rest of the way.

"Here," he said, breathless, and set her down at the threshold of the old, dilapidated building. He grasped the doorframe, which didn't appear strong enough to hold itself up, let alone a man his size.

The moonlight beamed in from two broken windows on each side of the shed. Ava wandered in and spotted her tennis shoes on a shelf next to a jar of rusted nails. "Finally. I've never been happier to see a pair of tennies in my life." She grabbed them and turned toward Kade. "So, what did you do with my heels—"

The six and a half foot man fell to his knees in front of her. The wooden floor shook and the jar of nails tipped over, spilling onto the shelf.

"Kade!" She knelt down in front of him and grabbed his shoulders. "Kade!"

His eyelids lifted halfway as his body swayed. "Oh, fuck," he murmured. "I forgot the gun."

"It's okay. We'll go back and get it. But you have to get up." She grabbed his bicep and attempted to lift him.

It was pointless. He was deadweight.

"Come on," she begged him. "I need you."

"You have to run. Take the truck. Leave here."

"No." Ava let go of his arm, and his body buckled and fell to the side. "Kade," she said, panicking. "Oh, God, don't give up on me." She bent over him and cradled his face. "I'm so sorry." Her eyes blurred

with tears. "But I love you, and you can't just quit on me."

Nothing. No response. Barely a breath escaped him.

Ava leaned over his unconscious body and whispered into his ear, "I'm not leaving without you. Dead or alive."

Fuck surviving if it wasn't with Kade.

But she wasn't dead yet. Neither of them were.

Holding back the urge to break down and sob, she shoved on her shoes and then softly pecked his lips. "I'll be back."

That *wouldn't* be the last time she kissed him. She stood and headed toward the cabin.

The back door was still open. She closed it behind her and jogged over to the hidden weapons. With as much force as she could muster, she pushed against the secret compartment until she heard the click. The drawer popped open, revealing an array of handguns and two rifles.

She picked up a small pistol, the least intimidating. Her heart pounded fast. Guns *killed* people. Ended their lives. Kaput. Over. And here she was holding one and contemplating how she was going to shoot a living, breathing person.

In the head? In the heart? Did she want to maim or murder him? And who knew if the bullet would hit where she targeted. The one and only time she'd shot a gun, she'd been way off.

"Drop it," an eerily familiar voice said from behind her.

Ava jerked around to see Zack standing in the shadows in the corner of the room with a revolver aimed directly at her head. A crooked grin adorned his wickedly handsome face. He looked the same as

the first day she'd laid eyes on him. But now she knew his outer charm was deceiving. Pure evil flowed through his veins.

She took a slow breath and attempted to steady her shaking hands. But the pistol dropped to the rug below.

"Good girl," he sneered and stepped toward her. "It's about time you started listening to me."

"What do you want?" She could smell his strong cologne as he neared and stood in front of her. It brought back memories of him on top of her, naked, having his selfish way with her and not giving a damn if she was satisfied. Nausea rolled in her belly. She should have known he wasn't the man for her then.

He pressed the gun to her temple and stroked her cheek with his free hand.

Her churning belly caused her mouth to water. She gulped but couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. It was as if Zack had taken her wits and thrown them into the dying flames of the fireplace.

His thumb rubbed against her lips. "I'm very disappointed in you, Ava. I hear you've been a naughty girl. Taking off your clothes for money?" He smirked. "Fucking my employee?"

"He quits," she whispered and swallowed down the bile rising in her throat.

"Nobody quits me. Not Gavin. Not you. No one. You understand that?"

The barrel prodded harder against her head.

"Get down on your knees." He kicked the pistol underneath the couch and out of her reach.

"Go to hell." She had a better chance standing than bowing at his pathetic feet. She'd given enough pieces of herself to this man.

Zack shook his head and grasped the hair at the base of her skull, slamming her body down. Her knees gave way, and she fell to the floor.

"You always did have a big fucking mouth. I thought I had beaten that out of you."

Her forehead was pressed firmly against her bent knees. She couldn't move. He had a tight grip, keeping her under control. Anger pushed past the fear, and she flailed her arms, attempting to either free herself or knock the gun out of his hands.

But neither worked. He lifted her up by her hair and threw her onto the couch. Her head hit something hard, and she turned to see a black briefcase.

Poppy zipped up her jacket all the way when Jax returned to the truck empty-handed after searching Zack's SUV. They had parked behind it, close enough to the cabin to walk but far enough away so whoever was inside couldn't hear the engine.

"I can't believe he took it in with him," Poppy said. "It's like it's his second dick or something."

Jax glared at her. "Are you going to do this or not?"

"Of course. All I have to do is sneak in and quietly—who's that?" She watched a tall brunette slip through the shadows and scoop up a black cat.

"Shit. What is she doing here?"

The woman glanced their way and then headed toward the back of the cabin.

"That's Lucy Quinn. She's a friend of Kade's, and she's one of us."

"One of us? What the hell are you people anyway?"

"Don't worry about it. Just get the money before she does so we can get out of here." Jax handed Poppy the gun, and she clenched it in her hands.

"Okay. Here goes nothin'."

Ava sat up on the couch and shot Zack her best glare.

He didn't seem impressed as he chuckled and waved the gun at her. "I can't believe I was ever attracted to a whore like you. You see that case beside you? That thing is filled with cash. Do you know why?"

"Cause you're a pussy who couldn't catch me on your own?" She snapped and then bit into her tongue. It wasn't exactly a good idea to antagonize a madman with a gun, but she couldn't help herself. Zack Moreno was an ass.

His face reddened as he moved closer, straightening the gun. "Wrong answer, bitch." He shot a hole in the couch beside her head.

Her breath caught in her throat, too frightened to move.

"That money spells revenge," Zack said. "Did you think I was going to just let you run out of my life?" He raised his voice. "I warned you, Ava. People don't leave me. I leave them."

The sound of the gunshot and the smell of the burnt leather forced Ava to realize this situation was completely out of her control. "So what do want? What do you want me to say?" she asked out of desperation.

"You can't say a goddamn thing. It's too late for you. You could've been my wife, but you fucked up. And now I have to make good on my promise." He held the gun pointed directly between her eyes.

But the sound of the front door opening distracted him.

Still in a daze, Kade heard the sound of a sharp slap and felt a stinging sensation on his cheek. It repeated over and again until he finally forced his eyes open to see what or who was causing it.

Lucy was sitting on him, constricting his airway and bringing her hand up to strike him again.

He tried to grab her arm but couldn't move. "Get off," he managed to croak out just as her hand made contact again.

"Finally," she whispered loudly and swiveled to his side. "What the hell are you doing out here? Your target's in danger."

Ava. "Where is she?" He lifted his throbbing head and attempted to gather his wits.

"Thank God the cat led me to you. The woman's inside with Moreno. I just heard a gunshot, but I don't know whose gun it was."

"What? A gunshot?" Blood pulsed against his temples, and he forced himself to sit up. "I need to get to her." He prayed it wasn't too late. The whole situation had blown up in their faces, and it was entirely his fault. How had he expected Ava to trust him if he hadn't given her a reason to?

"Where's your gun, Kade?" Lucy asked. "How many times have I told you to always carry it with you?" She stood and held out her hand.

"I know." He accepted her help and slowly stood up on wobbly legs. "I fucked up. But I need to save her. Let me borrow yours."

"No way in hell."

"Please. You have to help me out. I can't lose her." Kade took in the way her hard eyes softened as he spoke. "I'm in love with her."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." She reached inside her jacket and pulled out a black pistol with a pink handle. "If you lose my gun, I'll kill you."

Kade took it from her. "Thank you, Luce. I owe you."

She shrugged and grinned with those beautifully-painted lips. The woman was a knockout, he couldn't deny. Why he hadn't fallen for her was a mystery. All he knew was how much he desired Ava, the one woman who ignited him from the inside out.

"I'm sorry about us," he whispered as he gripped the gun.

She rolled her big brown eyes. "*Please*. You weren't even that good. Just go get your woman. I'll take care of the problem out front."

"What problem?"

"Jax Cullen. He's probably got his eye on Moreno's money. I'll get rid of him."

Kade nodded and headed back to the cabin, watching Lucy sprint away in the other direction.

"Poppy?" Ava narrowed her eyes at the blonde as she walked in with a gun pointed toward Zack. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to collect. That man owes me."

"I can't believe this shit." Zack laughed. "How the fuck did you find me?"

They knew each other? Ava watched on, confused and relieved at the same time. "Shoot him, Poppy,"

she urged and jumped over the couch to stand next to her friend.

The gun shook in Poppy's hand, but there was a determination in her eyes that gave Ava hope. This wasn't the same woman she had known at the strip club. No, this was someone strong and unyielding. Someone on a mission.

"Shoot him before he shoots you."

"Shut up!" Zack yelled. "Neither one of you bitches is going to take me down. I'm the goddamn man here." He rushed at Poppy before Ava could blink.

Poppy shot. And missed, hitting the wall behind him. He grabbed the gun from her hand before she could shoot again and lifted his arm to strike her. *No.* Ava jumped on his back, attempting to save her friend from the familiar assault. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck and squeezed as hard as she could.

But he was too strong. Zack grabbed Ava from behind and heaved her toward Poppy, sending them both to the ground. With fury in his eyes, he held Poppy's gun in one hand and his in the other. One pointed at each woman.

Chapter Twelve

Jax was giving Poppy two more seconds before going in after the money himself. The more he contemplated, the better the idea sounded. Why he had ever thought that petite-sized whore would have a chance against Moreno was a mystery. Time to get the job done right. He reached under his seat and pulled out his backup gun.

The sound of his passenger door opening forced him to aim it at whatever unlucky son of a bitch was on the other side.

Lucy's red-painted nails gripped the door handle as she lifted herself into the cab. "Long time, no see," she said, with her signature dazzling smile.

Ever since Jax had first laid eyes on the woman, he'd wanted to rip that condescending grin off her face by jamming his tongue down her throat and his cock up her pussy. She was a good PI. Too good. In fact, she routinely turned down the assignments Jax and Kade were more than happy to take.

So what the hell was she doing here?

"Why the sour face, Cullen? I thought you liked me." She scooted up close. Her short skirt bunched up, showing him the inside of her thigh.

Jax dropped his gun to nudge the barrel against the creamy skin of her blushed cheek. "There's a huge difference between liking a woman and wanting to fuck her brains out. I didn't realize you were so naïve."

Her arched brow rose as she crooked her neck and licked the tip of his gun with her pink, slick tongue. "You know this is more exciting than frightening for me, right?"

His cock hardened. "Really? You like it rough, eh? Have you ever had one of these inside of you?"

"Fully loaded," she said with a smirk.

He licked his lips. The woman was surely up to no good, but who the fuck cared? He had a few moments to waste. And if she tried anything, she was going to get a hole in her head.

"I bet you've never had a man like me inside you." He grabbed her hand and rammed it against his hard erection.

She rubbed against it. "No, I don't think I have."

"Do you want it?"

"Why don't you tell me?" She guided his free hand under her skirt to the heat between her legs.

Jax grinned. Having Lucy Quinn in a screaming orgasm under his control was a fantasy he'd played over in his head more than a few times. "We should get together sometime. I can show you what it's like to be fucked by a real man."

"Why not now?" She slid her leg over his lap and straddled him. "Just a quickie to take the edge off while we wait to see how all this Moreno business plays out."

Jax's mind and cock went into overdrive. She was so close. He could take her right now. She leaned in and pressed her soft red lips to his. Her delicate tongue slid out and edged into his mouth, driving him crazy.

He jammed her skirt up to her waist to see the red lace thong she had on underneath. He slipped his finger in the crotch and tugged hard, ripping it

open. She moaned and he grabbed her ass, confining her wet pussy against the stiffness in his jeans.

She crushed her lips to his again and purred into his mouth as she shifted her pelvis against him. "You're so much better than Kade."

Damn right. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and let her suck on it.

"Mmm," she moaned.

And then she bit down.

Fuck. Jax pushed her away and attempted to get hold of his gun. But it was no longer in his grasp. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Lucy had it aimed at his head and was now hurrying her way toward the passenger door. "Sorry, Cullen. But this isn't your mission, and it's time for you to move on."

"Bitch," he growled. His throbbing tongue wouldn't allow him to tell her what he really thought. Who ever made her the goddamn PI police?

"Bye, love." She blew him a kiss. "Take off now, and I won't mention this to anyone else."

Jax hit his hand against the steering wheel. "You're gonna regret this, Luce," he slurred.

"We'll see." She smiled, jumped out of the truck, and waited as Jax started up the engine and drove back down the hill he had quietly driven up not long ago.

Ava looked up at Zack who had murder in his eyes. This was it. But she refused to give him one tear. That was one element he didn't have control over.

And, luckily, next to her, Poppy was dry as the desert. Her sight was fixated on the briefcase that had fallen onto the floor beside the couch.

"Why don't you let Poppy go?" Ava asked. "She doesn't have anything to do with this."

"Why don't you shut the hell up?" Zack bumped the barrel against her forehead. "This isn't a negotiation. This is me teaching you a lesson." Sweat poured down his temples onto his cheeks.

"Then do it," she whispered. "Shoot me." Don't give him control. Don't let him have the last word.

"Not so fast," he said in a jarringly calm voice. "I think I'd like to have a little fun before we end this."

Ava gulped as bile rose in her throat. Just the thought of being touched by him again was revolting.

"You like that idea, I see. Get up on your feet or your friend dies."

Reluctantly, Ava stood.

"Take off your clothes."

"Let Poppy leave first."

"Shy? That's so cute. And here I thought you were a dirty little girl." He shook his head. "Get out, Poppy."

"I can stay," Poppy said, still staring at the case.

"I said get out!"

Slowly, Poppy stood and headed toward the front door.

"Okay." Zack sneered down at Ava. "Undress."

Nauseous and lightheaded, she tugged her shirt off, exposing her bare breasts to her worst enemy. It was both humiliating and infuriating. How had she ever trusted this man enough to allow him to make love to her? Enough to move in with him and entertain the thought of spending the rest of her life with him?

"Very nice." Zack kneeled in front of her, pointing one gun at her head while the other

jammed against her nipple. "Too bad Gavin's not around to see this. I'd think he'd appreciate a nice show. What did you do? Knock him unconscious out there?"

She clenched her mouth shut. Clearly, Zack knew enough about Kade's vulnerable situation. He must have watched from the back door.

Zack shrugged. "Okay. No talking. Just action. Where's his bedroom? I don't think he'd mind too much if we used it, do you? So I can show you what you've been missing."

"He'll kill you," Ava said. "He loves me, and if you touch me, he'll hunt you down and murder your ass."

"Then I guess I'll have to take a trip to that old shed out there when I'm done with you and get rid of that little problem."

"No!" Tears burned her eyes. She should've kept her mouth shut.

"Well, I guess I found out what your weakness is." He smiled wickedly. "Get in the bedroom, or I'll kill him first."

Poppy watched through the window as they disappeared into what could only be the bedroom. Finally. Now, she could get her money.

And then steal a car because that prick Jax was nowhere in sight.

She reopened the front door and tiptoed inside. The sound of Ava quietly sobbing stunned Poppy. Not good. What was he going to do to her? Well, besides kill her, obviously. The man was a lunatic.

Through the crack in the door, she could see Ava peeling down her jeans. Poppy had seen Ava's body a million times before but never trembling with fear.

There had to be some way to stop him. Ava wasn't the best of friends, but there was a connection there. They'd both been abused by the hands of a dickhead, and Poppy couldn't simply watch it happen again.

Before she could take one step toward the bedroom, a large rough hand covered her mouth, and gathered her against his body.

She jerked forward, but he held her close. "Shhh. It's me. Kade," he whispered into her ear. "I'm going to save her. Just get out quietly, okay?"

Poppy nodded her head. Thank God. Now, she could take the money without feeling guilty.

Kade gripped the gun in his hands. Moreno was going down. The sound of Ava crying was the clincher.

Kade's eyes were heavy and his body was sluggish, but there wasn't a damn thing that could keep him from saving her from that fuckup.

To hell with his career. Who cared if he'd end up in prison for murdering Senator Wadsley's minion? Just as long as Ava was safe, like he promised her she would be.

As Kade watched Poppy run out the door with his truck keys and the briefcase full of money, he didn't even bother flinching. None of it mattered.

Just save Ava.

He stepped quietly against the wooden floor, being careful to remember which boards creaked and which didn't. If Moreno knew he was out here, that would be the end of it.

Never let them see you coming.

Never let them see you care. It was too late for that. Nothing was cut and dried anymore. Not when his heart was filled with love.

"Lay down on the bed." Moreno's voice jabbed at Kade's gut. Son of a bitch.

One shot. That's all it was going to take. You can do it, Gavin.

Ava took her time climbing onto the bed she'd shared with Kade not too long ago. How stupid had she been for threatening Zack? For giving him a reason to potentially kill the man she loved?

Another uncontrollable sob escaped. She couldn't let it happen. "I'll do anything you ask if you just leave him alone, okay? He won't find you. He won't care. I promise."

Zack laughed and moved on top of her, shoving the gun into her belly. "Why would anyone care about you? You're a stripper who used to scoop up dog crap for a living. You're nothing. You're worthless."

She covered her breasts with her hands and clenched her legs shut. How could she have ever cared for this man? How had she not seen the signs? Controlling? Possessive? The ultimate charmer? The classic Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

"Open up for daddy," he said with a sneer and skimmed the gun down the outside of her thigh. "I'll admit I'm almost convinced to keep you around just to make good use of your body. I could find a nice little hiding place for you. Keep you locked away."

The cold steel ran up her hip, leaving a painful path.

"I'd rather die than to be touched by you."

Zack's dark, ominous eyes met hers. "Is that so?" He lifted the gun to strike her.

"Moreno!" Kade shouted from what seemed to be not far behind Zack. "Drop the goddamn gun."

Ava's heart fleeted with joy. He was wide awake and alive. And aiming the gun at Zack's head!

A slow, devious smirk peaked Zack's lips as he kept his eyes on her. "There you are, Gavin. Is sleepy time over with?" He repositioned his aim toward her heart.

"For me it is. Drop your weapon, or I'll put you down for a permanent nap."

"That's a clever remark from such an idiotic man. To think I almost lost all hope for you."

Kade visibly gulped and met Ava's eyes. His expression radiated both fury and fear. "Go ahead and get dressed, Ava. You're not his prisoner anymore."

She attempted to rise, but the hard steel dug into her skin, forcing her back down.

"She's not *going* anywhere!" Zack shouted. "This was my property long before you put your filthy hands all over it. *I* decide her fate. Not you."

"You're pathetic, Moreno. She doesn't belong to you, and she doesn't want you. It's over."

Zack's face reddened, and his eyes grew wide as he spoke to Kade but kept his cold stare on Ava. "It's over when I say it is. Does she know what kind of man you are, Gavin? Does she realize how many other people you've kidnapped for me and so many others? 'Cause I really think she should get a grasp on who she's been fucking before she meets her maker."

"Ava," Kade said calmly, gently. "I'm not that man anymore."

"I know." Ava breathed out, uncontrollable tears running down her temple. "I love you."

"Bullshit!" Zack brought his gun up to her face and jammed it into her cheek.

She winced and instinctively swiped it away, giving her enough time to drop to the ground out of his range. With her breath caught in her throat, she hugged the wooden floor and waited to hear a gunshot.

Nothing.

Turning her head, she could see across the floor to the other side of the bed. Kade's feet were planted firmly at the end. *Why hadn't he shot him*?

"Stay down, sweetheart." Kade's voice was solemn and careful.

The mattress springs creaked, and Ava could see Zack's feet touch the ground on the other side of the bed. "Yes, *sweetheart*," Zack mimicked as if it were a dirty word, "Stay put. You won't want to witness me shooting a hole in your lover's head."

A dozen or so cop cars passed Poppy on the way down the hill with their sirens blaring. Boy, was she glad she'd gotten out of that mess unharmed. And with the money. She smiled and patted the black leather case that lay on the seat beside her. She'd been smart enough to grab Kade's keys before she left. Thank the lord Mr. Blue Eyes had been preoccupied.

Bright headlights pulled up behind her out of nowhere and tailed her closely. What now? Whoever it was swerved into the other lane and sped up until it was side by side with her.

She looked over and saw him. Jax. He rolled down his window and started yelling for her to pull

over. In any other situation, she would've been more than happy to obey the wishes of a fine man like him. But not today. Not when there was a chance she'd lose half, if not all, of her money to him. This was her future, her destiny. She'd traveled far and had guns pointed to all parts of her body to get the shiny briefcase that sat beside her, and she wasn't giving it up that easily.

But how was she going to lose him?

She pressed the button to roll the passenger window down. "Go away!" She shoved her foot down on the accelerator.

He fell back for only a moment but then caught up. Poppy glanced over to see him shaking his head and looking as if he wanted to murder her in cold blood. Screw that. If speeding up wouldn't do the trick then—

She hit the brakes but the truck wouldn't stop. It slipped across the icy, slick road and swerved to and fro. Jax's truck disappeared out of sight, and then she saw it behind her. She punched on the brake pedal again but had lost all control. The back end slid around to the front, and suddenly Jax's headlights were in front of her. He veered off to the side and barely missed her.

But it didn't matter. She kept spinning. Her heartbeat pounded in her chest. It was over. This was it. *Oh*, *God. Mama help me*.

Chapter Thirteen

Why Kade had chosen that particular moment to freeze was beyond him. Ava had gotten out of the way. It was the perfect time to shoot the fucker right in the back of the head, but now it was too late.

What the hell had happened?

He'd killed more than a few men in battle. Faceless men speaking a foreign language he didn't understand. Men who weren't connected to people who could put him away for life, leaving him helpless to protect the woman he loved. Men who weren't standing in the bedroom of his very own home.

It was too complicated.

And now Zack Moreno stood before him, gun drawn.

Kade kept his aim straight as Zack edged his way to the bedroom door. "You planning on going somewhere?" Kade asked him.

"Just for now. But I'll be back to get what I want. And I'm sure your cousin will be more than helpful."

"Can't let you go if you say shit like that." Although Kade knew it was true, unfortunately. What would it take for Jax to gain a heart? Just as Kade had in only the past few days.

Love? Yeah, right. Jax wasn't capable of it.

"Then I'll kill you both now." Zack swept his aim past Kade to where Ava now stood.

Her face was pale, and her cheeks were moist with tears.

Oh, fuck.

"Shoot, Gavin." Lucy's husky voice called out from behind.

"Who the fuck is that?" Moreno jerked his gun back away from Ava.

Now or never, Kade. Get your shit together and save the woman you love. He steadied his aim and pulled the trigger. A familiar cracking sound split through his eardrums as the gun went off in his hands.

Zack fell to his knees, then dropped faceforward, onto the hard floor. A bullet hole centered perfectly through his heart. Too bad the son of a bitch didn't have one.

Kade dropped the gun to his side and fisted his other hand shut. The sight of all the blood on the floor brought back too many vivid memories and made him woozy. But at least it wasn't Ava's blood. No, he'd saved her life, just like he'd promised.

He'd protected her. She was alive.

Thank God.

Lucy breezed by him with a half a dozen armed police officers backing her up.

"Miss me?" She smiled and patted his cheek.

Cops swarmed the room, taking Moreno's pulse, confirming his death.

Stunned with relief, Kade sat back on his bed and handed Lucy's gun to the men in blue. He looked over at Ava who had thrown on one of his white dress shirts and was now climbing across the bed to get to him. Her face was ashen, her cheeks were stained with tears, and her eyes were bloodshot.

But she was okay. And her soft, tentative smile calmed his jumbled nerves in the otherwise chaotic room. He'd killed a man and was most likely headed to prison, but when she looked at him like he was her hero, anything seemed possible. If only for a moment.

She flung her leg around him, straddled his lap and clung tightly to his neck. "I love you," she whispered into his ear. "God, I love you."

Kade felt the rest of the ice melt from his heart. He enfolded her in his arms and gathered her as close as possible. "You have no idea how sweet that sounds." He pressed his lips to her moist cheek. "I love you, too. Forever."

"Sorry to break this up," Lucy said from the doorway. Kade and Ava both looked up at her as she flashed an FBI badge at them. Who the hell was this woman? She smiled her crimson smile and cocked her head. "But we're going to have to take you both in for questioning."

Kade tightened his grip around Ava's waist. "In a minute. Give us some time." He had a bad feeling about what was to come and didn't want to let go of the best thing that ever happened to him. Not yet.

"Afraid we don't have time, Mr. Gavin," Lucy said, blandly. "We've got a crime scene here." She gestured toward two of the detectives. "Boys, take her into the station, would you?"

The men reached for Ava, but Kade held a hand out. "I said wait."

"What's going on?" Ava's deep blue eyes searched his face. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine." God, he hoped so. "I just wanted to kiss you good-bye before you go."

"Why can't you come with me?" she asked him and then looked up at Lucy. "We'll go together and straighten this all up."

"Miss Lureau," Lucy began with an annoyed tone. "We're going to read Mr. Gavin his rights, and you're going to the station. Put up a fight, and we'll read you yours as well."

Kade drew out a breath. It was obvious Lucy had been undercover all this time. Shit.

Ava caressed his jaw with her tiny hands and looked into his eyes. "What are they talking about? You didn't do anything. Zack did."

"It's okay," he said, as calmly as possible. "I'll handle this." Whatever it takes. He kissed her lips and watched helplessly as the policemen grabbed her from his arms. "No matter what happens, don't forget I love you, okay?"

Her mouth fell open and her eyes narrowed with bewilderment. They had her by her arms, forcing her out of the room.

"Don't forget!" he yelled again and then dropped his head into his hands. It was time to face the music.

Jax pulled back and watched as the truck in front of him lost all control and slammed into the ditch on the side of the road. Hell, all he wanted to do was get the goddamn money, not kill the feisty little tramp.

He eased his truck to a complete stop and slid out, waiting to see if there was any movement in the wreckage. He wouldn't be surprised if the woman tried to run off through the snow with the case in hand. She was a complete nutcase as far as Jax could tell. Adorably sexy, but crazy.

The truck had dropped rear first into the ditch. The cab stuck out a couple of feet from the road. He pulled himself up and opened the passenger side door. Inside, Poppy was slumped over. Her eyes were closed.

He slid into the seat, threw the briefcase to the floor, and checked her pulse. Steady. *Good. She's not dead*. And there wasn't any blood to be seen. She must have just passed out. Not that he cared. Why would he? She was just another woman, and as far as he was concerned women were nothing but trouble.

Jax skimmed his fingers down the lining of his jacket, which still covered her body. He took in the sight of her full breasts. Plump with rosy nipples. He had forced himself not to check her out earlier when she'd practically shoved them in his face. But now there was something so appetizing about her.

It was impressive how she'd taken on Moreno and come out with the case full of money. He hadn't counted on her coming out alive at all. But she had and here she was. Right in front of him. Breathing. Her chest expanding while her ample breasts rose and fell.

The urge to feel her soft skin overwhelmed him, and he reached out and caressed her supple flesh. Her eyes fluttered open, catching him in the act. But she didn't stop him.

Instead, she grinned. "You didn't take the money," she whispered.

"No," he said, only then remembering why he'd tracked her down to begin with.

She sat up and stared at his lips. Her sensual green eyes devoured him for a moment. Jax grew hard in his jeans and smiled at her, letting himself

think of all the fun he could have with her curvy little body.

Poppy jerked her eyes away from Jax's alluring stare, taking in the situation she'd gotten herself into. The truck was totaled. There was a bump on her head, a hand on her breast, and a massive bulge in his jeans. "I think I need a ride," she said, happy he hadn't taken the case and left her stranded. And thrilled the gorgeous man had finally noticed her assets.

"Well, then..." Jax squeezed her flesh in the palm of his large, rough hand. "I'd be more than happy to give you one."

What a gentleman.

Poppy wrapped a leg around him to straddle his lap. Could it be Poppy Q. Smith found herself the man of her dreams *and* the money to buy her house on Bluebird Street?

Her mama would be so proud.

After hours of questioning, Ava slouched down in the wooden chair in the cold, bland interrogation room and took a deep breath.

"No, Kade Gavin did not kidnap me," she repeated for the hundredth time. "Yes, I was free to leave if I had chosen to." And "No, I do *not* want to press charges."

It was mostly lies, but she didn't care. All she wanted was her life back with Kade in it, and she'd do or say anything to get it. *Where was he?*

The bald-headed man with the mustache who had been questioning her took yet another loud slurp of his coffee and then set it down. "Well, then, Miss

Lureau, you realize if he's set free, we can't offer you protection from him?"

"I don't need *protection* from him." She grinned. If she told the man what she desired from Kade, he'd surely want to add a bolder ingredient to his java.

"I see. You do understand we've had our eye on this particular man for quite some time. He's a dangerous person. We just haven't had enough proof to lock him up yet."

"And you won't get any more evidence from me. He saved my life, Officer—" Whatever-the-hell-his-last-name-was. It didn't matter. "And I'd like nothing more than to see him so I can thank him properly."

The door opened and Lucy stepped in wearing a knee length skirt and matching coat with a silk chamois underneath. Her hair was up in a tight bun. Mauve lipstick.

It didn't look like the same woman Ava had met at Kade's cabin. But she was. And she was avoiding Ava's stare. "Officer Kingsley, can I speak to you for a moment?"

Who the hell *was* this woman? And what was she up to? Ava wondered if Kade knew her true identity.

After Lucy whispered to Officer Baldy, he shrugged and took a seat in the corner of the room.

Lucy turned to Ava and nodded. "You're free to go, Miss Lureau."

Ava stood and adjusted Kade's white cotton shirt to cover herself as much as possible. The scent of fresh mountain air wafted up into her nose. "What about Kade? Where is he?"

Lucy shut the door behind her and took a few steps toward Ava. "Sit down."

Ava didn't like the look on the woman's face. Solemn and grave, not snide like it had been before. Ava sat but didn't take her eyes off Lucy. "Where's Kade? I want to see him right now."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid he's dead."

"What?" It couldn't be true. She was lying. The bitch was screwing with her mind. What kind of interrogation tactic was this?

Lucy's face seemed to pale as she straightened her shoulders. "I was forced to shoot him when he attempted an escape by grabbing at my gun."

"That's bullshit," Ava bellowed. "Why are you doing this? Who the hell are you?"

The woman turned to the cop and gestured for him to leave. He nodded and obeyed.

Good. She was alone with the wench. Maybe now Ava could get some real answers.

Lucy took the idiot cop's seat and looked over the table at Ava. Certain sincerity blanketed across her stunning face but Ava wasn't fooled.

"What have you done with him?"

"I've been working undercover for quite some time, so I know all about Kade Gavin drugging and kidnapping you."

"He didn't—"

"And I know about Mr. Moreno paying to have you found."

"Just tell me where Kade is."

"You're lucky to be alive. You understand that, right?"

"Who are you?" Ava finally asked. Curiosity leaving her no other choice.

"I'm Special Agent Lucy Keller. And I'm not here to hurt you. I think the best thing for you to do is to go home and get back into your regular routine."

"My regular routine? I don't—"

The woman put her hand up and stopped Ava from going on. "Forget about Moreno. Forget about Kade."

"I won't forget about Kade. I love him, and I want him back." Ava searched the woman's heavily made up eyes for something...anything that said she was lying.

There was nothing but blank expression on her face.

"Tell me where he is," Ava pleaded, losing control. It didn't make sense. Kade couldn't possibly be dead.

Lucy slammed her hand on the table and looked Ava directly in the eyes. "Kade Gavin is dead," she said pointedly. "Move on."

Chapter Fourteen

Kade sat on the couch in the tiny living room of Ava's apartment and stared over Lucy's shoulder at the front door. "When is she supposed to be home?" he asked anxiously as he ran his fingers over Raven's fur.

Six months had passed since he had last seen Ava. Six excruciatingly lonely months. But Lucy had insisted he wait that long to make sure there wasn't a threat of retaliation from Senator Wadsley or any of the men working under him. Moreno had been his top man, the guy who had done all the dirty work. And now he was deceased with Kade to blame.

The long list of wrongs Lucy had on Kade gave him no choice other than do as they said to avoid prison time. Including agreeing to play dead until the FBI collected enough evidence against Wadsley to take him down.

Kade Gavin no longer existed. Kaden Thompson did. He hoped Ava liked the new last name since it would be hers soon, too. That is, if she agreed to marry him.

"Any minute. She works in a battered women's shelter on the weekend, but our surveillance team informed me she usually arrives home by seven."

Kade looked at the clock on the wall. Five past the hour.

He swallowed down his anxiety and took yet another look around the small apartment. The Ava

he *didn't* know lived here, but somehow it felt familiar. Veterinary textbooks spread across the secondhand coffee table. His cat that she'd kept purred at his fingertips. A pink, loosely knitted sweater lay on the couch beside him. He scooped it up and inhaled the fruity scent before setting it back down.

"Think she'll recognize me?" He ran a hand over the stubble on his head. He'd kept it shaved, and it was just now growing back.

Lucy chuckled and gave him the once over. "It's not like you've had plastic surgery. Geez, Kade, you've got it bad. It really is pathetic." She tossed a manila folder onto the table between them and stood. "Birth certificate, social security card, driver's license—they're all in there."

"Thanks." Kade didn't bother picking it up. His mind wouldn't be able to register anything other than the thought of pulling Ava into his arms and onto the bed. Thankfully, he finally had that choice. "I appreciate you going up to bat for me, Luce."

She shot him a sly grin as she stood and headed for the door. "Why wouldn't I? You're a good man, Kade. And a talented investigator. You'll more than make it up to me after you complete your training and show everyone at the force what you're made of."

A new name, a new career, a fresh start—it was all coming together. And he couldn't wait to share it all with Ava. *Where was she*?

At a quarter past ten, Ava walked up the steps to her apartment. Her friends and co-workers from the shelter had convinced her to finally go out for drinks and dancing. Their intentions were good. But

after two and a half hours of being hit on by men who weren't Kade, Ava was done.

It was too soon. His image was still fresh in her mind. Light blue eyes that easily switched from ice cold to a warm pale hue. Broad shoulders that were intimidating to others but made her feel secure. Muscular arms that could completely engulf her body to make her think she was the luckiest woman on the planet.

The ripped stomach muscles that traveled down

Ava shook the thought from her mind. *He was gone*. It had been six months, long enough for her to accept reality.

She shoved her key in the door, but it turned too easily. She reflected back to that morning. Had she remembered to lock it? It was hard to tell. Her mind was useless ever since *it* all happened.

Ava twisted the door knob slowly and pushed. The lights were off so she reached and flicked the switch, illuminating the living room. Raven slept lazily at the foot of the couch. Nothing seemed to be to be bothering her. Not that it would. The cat was the sweetest animal Ava had ever come across. And she was the only memento that bitch, Lucy, had let her keep from Kade's cabin.

After closing the door behind her, Ava swept a long glance over the apartment. Everything was in its place except for a folder sitting on the coffee table. That was odd. She was sure she'd remember putting something like that there.

Someone had been here. Or still was.

She went to see what the file contained. But stopped short when she heard the shower running in the bathroom.

A surge of fear shot through her, standing her arm hairs on end. No one had a key to her apartment. And she'd just left every friend she had in the world at the bar.

There was a stranger in her home.

Moreno was dead, but there was nothing to keep one of his buddies from trying to take his place. Ava had been afraid of retaliation. That's why she had purchased a gun.

Without another thought, she made her way to the kitchen drawer where she kept it hidden. The small black pistol was the perfect size and fit for her hands as she grasped hold of it.

She'd been through too much to simply roll over and die now.

No, she was still a survivor. And whoever attempted to change that would regret it.

Kade let the hot drizzling water run down his back. He had to do something to ease his mind from the nervous anxiety of seeing Ava again.

He pictured her in his head—deep blue-gray eyes that saw right through him. A petite curvy body he could hold in his arms. Nice, plump breasts. Soft. Supple. Lickable skin. Every inch of her. God, he couldn't wait to taste her. That sweet flavor. He grew hard just thinking of it. Six months was too long.

"Who the hell's there?" Her voice echoed into the bathroom.

The feisty sound of it made him smile. Sassy, lovable Ava.

He reached down to shut the water off and then yanked open the pink, flowery curtain that hung between them.

She stood there with a pistol gripped tightly pointed at him. Eyes wide and bloodshot. Face pale. Hair was blonde and cut short. Lips pursed. Light makeup.

He'd never seen such a beautiful sight. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Kade." She choked out a whisper. Her eyes rolled back into her head and her body went limp. The gun dropped to the rug.

Before she could fall to the hard linoleum floor, he grabbed hold of her waist and lifted her into his arms. Her small, feminine body fit perfectly in his embrace.

He was home.

Her fast fluttering heartbeat woke her as he carried her to the bedroom. He was naked against her. Wet.

It was Kade, wasn't it?

The same searing eyes looked down at her through those dark lashes, saying so much more than words ever could.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a half grin.

Ava nodded, not knowing whether to scream, cry, or cheer. How could it be? She had gone to his funeral. Closed casket. Jax Cullen, his only family, had insisted on it even after Ava begged for one last look to say good-bye.

"I don't understand," she said as he gently placed her on the bed. "They said—"

"It was a lie. A cover up. I had to play along to avoid prison time." He lay beside her and kissed her once. "I'm sorry," he whispered, against her mouth.

The feel of his lips released a wave of pent-up fantasies she'd been evading ever since she spent her first night alone without him. But he was here now.

Wasn't he?

It seemed too good to be true. She brought her hands up to his clean-shaven face and cradled his strong jaw line. His head dipped down to kiss her again. His velvety tongue slipped past her stunned lips and possessed her mouth, commanding her to want so much more.

Yes, it was Kade. It had to be. No other man had the ability to blur her mind with a mere kiss. A surge of overwhelming heat raced down her body, settling between her legs. How the miracle of getting him back came about wasn't important. But as his hand made quick work of the buttons on her silk blouse, a horrible thought occurred to her.

She pulled away from his kiss. "Where have you been? You don't have to leave me again, do you?" she asked all in one fretful breath.

He smiled and shook his sexy shaven head. "We'll talk about it after I'm done making love to you. And, no, I'm not going anywhere." He finished unbuttoning and then threw her blouse to the floor. He dragged his fingers down her belly to unfasten her jeans and tugged them off with panties that were already soaked with her desire for him.

There was an urgent yearning in his eyes that left Ava wanting to quench it. To give him everything he needed and desired. She kissed his lips, his cheek, the droplets of water on his neck. She inhaled his masculine scent, unable to get enough.

"Damn, I missed you," his voice rumbled out of his mouth and into her heart.

Eager, she continued down his moist body, trailing a path along his powerfully built chest, solid to the touch. He leaned back and allowed her to lick at the rippled muscles on his stomach. She arrived at his cock—hard, thick and long. Stiff under her lips. She ran her tongue over the tip, tasting a small amount of his pre-cum. Delicious. Familiar. Hers. It was enough to make her hunger for more—to have him shudder under her power.

Before she could wrap her mouth around his hardness, he grabbed her and hauled her up to his broad chest. He pressed his lips to hers and kissed her, taking back control.

She resisted. "Wait. I have a better idea."

"No. I need you."

"And you'll get me, but on my terms." Joy overwhelmed her, but she kept a serious frown on her face. It was time to take matters into her own hands. No more being led around by a leash *or* a gun. No more allowing a man to have complete control of her destiny. It was time for Ava Lureau to be in charge.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not your captive anymore, Kade. I'm a free woman and I'll do whatever I want whenever I want." With you.

No response. Just a blank stare. Apparently, he hadn't factored in the possibility of her saying no. She wanted to laugh out loud. But she remained poker-faced for the game. She gestured toward the grip he had on her upper arms. "Let go."

He did as she commanded but sure as hell didn't look happy about it. "You know I didn't mean to—"

"Shush." She clapped her hands against his chest and shoved away from him. "Lie on your back in the middle of the bed."

"Do you want to be on top?"

"I want you to be silent." She turned her head away so he wouldn't see her smile. This felt way too good. But who knew how far he'd go for her.

I guess I'll find out soon. She made her way to her dresser and plucked out a handful of her silk scarves. When she returned to the bed, he was in the middle, just as she had ordered. He propped up on his elbows and watched her.

"Maybe we should talk about this," he said. "I'm sure this was all a lot for you to take in."

Ava ignored him and attached one of the scarves to his ankle.

"What are you doing? Tying me up?" A tight-lipped, anxious grin spread across his face.

"Trust me." She jerked the scarf toward the bedpost and knotted. "Trust your intuition."

"Oh, I get it. This is cute, but maybe we could play later. After I've made love to you."

"Nope." She secured his other leg to the opposite post, forcing his muscular legs apart. His cock jutted up, arched toward his stomach. God, she wanted him inside her. It had been too long.

His gorgeous ice-blue gaze followed her as she maneuvered around the left side of the bed and grabbed his wrist. His head fell back against the mattress. "You're mad, right? You want to teach me a lesson?"

Not bothering to answer him, she yanked and tied. Then she climbed on top of his naked body and sat on his chest. Attempting to avoid his piercing

stare, she gripped his free hand and began to wrap the last scarf around it.

"I'll do anything you want," he said but twisted out of her grasp. "However, I need to be able to touch you." He cradled her cheek and ran his thumb over her lips.

Weakened by the loving gesture, she closed her eyes. She felt him drag his fingers down her neck and over her tender breast, swollen with the need for his touch. He circled her nipple twice and then continued along her stomach.

Ava's skin prickled from the intimate contact. Something she thought she'd never experience again but was ecstatic to have once more.

The tips of his fingers encircled her navel and then trailed back up the same path. "I love your body," he said in a husky voice. "Every part of it."

She forced her eyes open as he reached her cheek. She took a deep breath to steady her pounding heart. He'd had a certain power over her since the first day she'd met him. Today was no different.

Determined to take back the control, she gripped his hand and slid it back down to her breast. "I have one scarf left. Do you want to touch me or see me?"

Kade understood the game. And he didn't mind playing as long as he won the prize of Ava at the end. He squeezed her breast. "Touch."

After all, he could do so much more with his hand than he could with his eyes. He dragged his fingers down her stomach to the sexy patch of blonde hair on her mound, arrow-shaped, pointing to heaven. He'd liked the smooth bald look, but

somehow the downy curls seemed more authentic. More Ava.

"Okay." She gulped and leaned over him to pick up the last red scarf.

He watched as her rosy pebbled nipples lightly grazed his chest. Damn, he was going to miss the view.

She finished wrapping the silk around his head, blinding him, forcing his other senses into overdrive. The heat from her wet pussy smoldered against his chest as he lifted his head for her to tighten the knot. He could smell her sweet scent, feel the supple skin as his fingers skimmed her outer thigh, and hear her breathing when she spread out over his body. He could taste her fruity lip gloss as she molded her soft lips to his.

He enveloped his hand around the back of her neck and held her to him. Then he slid his tongue into her lush mouth, hot and delicious.

She let out a small moan but pulled away from him.

Fuck. Why was she fighting it?

Maybe she needed clarification of his feelings for her.

"I love you, Ava." The words drifted into the air above him and didn't return. Had she changed her mind about him? Did he even stand a chance? Lord only knew. He'd put her through hell and back and wouldn't blame her if she despised him.

She sat up on his stomach and brushed her fingertips across his chest.

Kade reached for her, finding her leg. He made his way over to her soft folds and slid a finger in between his stomach and her pussy, up into her tight, moist heat. So wet. She might not love him,

but she definitely wanted him. He could work with that.

She clenched down on his finger as he slipped in and out, rubbing against her clit with each pass. She moaned as she began working with the rhythm of his finger, her ass sweeping up against his throbbing cock.

"I want you, Kade," she said breathlessly.

"You can have me. Whatever you want, it's all yours." His body. His heart. His soul.

Without warning, she grabbed his wrist and tore his hand away from her wet juices. Then she lifted off him, and his body felt empty without her heat warming him from the outside in.

"Are you teasing me, sweetheart?" he asked, blindly attempting to locate where she had gone. "Are we even yet?" This was getting ridiculous. All he wanted was to be close to her after all the time they'd been apart.

The bed creaked, and the softness of her lips touched his ear. "Not even close," she whispered. "I'm going to go hide your shoes. Be right back."

"What?" The shock of her words made him forget he was tied down. He attempted to rise but jerked back to the bed when reality hit. "Ava," he bellowed. "Ava, I thought you forgave me."

With his free hand, he yanked his blindfold onto his forehead—and saw her sitting at the end of the bed with one of her crinkly, adorable smiles on her face.

"Just kidding."

"Very cute." He tried to grab her, but she was out of reach.

She crawled on her hands and knees across the mattress, her short blonde hair swaying with her

movements. God, this new hairstyle was sexy as hell. And it suited her.

His cock tightened when she stopped between his legs and kissed the tip of his engorged head. His gut knotted painfully, and he gritted his jaw.

Her deep blue eyes stared intently at him as her pink, slick tongue slid out and licked. "Mmm," she murmured against his skin.

Kade inhaled sharply. The woman played a good game. "Are you going to let me make love to you yet?"

"After." She ran her slick tongue down his shaft and up again.

Oh, hell. "After what?"

"After you promise me no more secrets. I want to know all there is to know about Kade Gavin." She brushed her fingers over his ever-increasing erection and dipped his throbbing head into her hot mouth.

God, he was about to burst. "Kade Gavin is dead," he said, mindlessly.

Ava jerked her head up and sent him a glaring look. "Probably not a good time to be joking around like that."

"I changed my name. It's Kaden Thompson. I hope you don't mind," he said, quickly.

Her eyes softened as she repeated the name a couple times, rolling it off her tongue. "I like it. Why would I mind?"

"You'll be *Mrs.* Kaden Thompson after you marry me," he dared to say.

"Marry you?" She smirked, her wet, luscious lips curving up at him.

"If you'll have me, that is." He grinned back.

She shrugged her creamy, delicate shoulders. "We'll see."

Kade waited anxiously as she maneuvered her naked body around the bed, slowly untying each of the scarves, teasing him with her lingering, sensual movements. One of these days he'd get her back good.

But now, he only desired to please her. Once all the bindings were loosened and tossed to the side, he grabbed her by the waist and threw her to the bed, laying his body on top of her in the process.

She giggled and smiled up at him. "Feel good to be free?"

"Better than ever." He molded his mouth to her moist lips and slid his tongue along hers. Then he pulled away and kissed her neck, her collarbone, her breast.

She sighed and arched her back, meeting his mouth as he sucked in her aroused nipple.

She was his. All of her. And he didn't plan on ever letting her go.

"Fuck me, Kade." The sweet, familiar words delighted his ears.

"As you wish."

Chapter Fifteen

Ava waited, impatiently biting her lip and running her hands through her short, wispy, trendy hair, or so her hair stylist had told her when she chopped off all the red.

Kade didn't seem to mind the change. He released her starved nipple with a slurp and hungrily took her mouth. In return, she suckled his tongue and skimmed her fingers over his sexy stubbly head.

It was so good to have him back. And hearing he wanted to get married elated her.

Who cared about what had happened in the past? Shoes? What shoes? She'd gladly throw them out the window and lock herself in a room as long as he promised never to leave her again.

She wrapped her legs around his lean waist and stared into his eyes as he drew his lips away. Clear blue eyes that penetrated her. Lord, she could have an orgasm just from one look.

He grinned, showing her his pearly whites. "You going to tell me you love me yet?"

"I don't know," she quipped, unable to help herself. "We'll see how well you do after six months with no pulse."

He chuckled and kissed her again. No one had ever adored her as he had. Even after she opened her big mouth he still loved her.

What was wrong with him?

She soon realized the answer to that was nothing as he slid his thick cock inside her. He was perfect—every inch of him. Slowly, he worked his way in, filling and stretching her sensitive walls, finding the areas of her that welcomed him—no, screamed for him.

Biting her bottom lip, she closed her eyes and focused on the glorious sensations she'd been missing for so long. His lips brushed against her cheek and then her forehead as he slowly slid out and then plunged back in.

"I think I feel a pulse," she whispered and grinned up at him.

Unfazed, he pulled out a second time and then drove back into her harder, jouncing her up the mattress. Wiping the smile off her face.

"Oh, Kade." She moaned at the heat building in her womb and tightened her legs around him, ready for more.

But he stilled.

"Tell me you love me." His voice rumbled into her ear.

"Make me come," she countered.

His eyes narrowed at her. "You're asking for it, Ava."

"Damn right." She tightened her snug walls around him, and he gasped for air.

"It's been a while, sweetheart. You might want to slow down." He withdrew from her body, leaving her with an empty feeling.

"What are you doing?"

He grabbed her by her calves, dragging her to the side of the bed as he stood.

Half of her body hung over the mattress, her ass on the edge. "Kade, what are you doing?" she asked again.

"Obeying your every command." He gripped her knees and eased them toward her. After spreading her thighs, he took in the view. His tongue ran over his top lip. "Looks tasty."

She gulped down the anxiety building in her. "Take a bite," she dared say.

A smirk spread across his greedy face. He released her legs but she held them in place and ran her hands down the insides of her thighs. Then she inserted a finger into her wet, swollen pussy.

Satisfaction rippled through her as recognizable raw hunger flashed through his eyes.

Kade dropped to his knees in front of her and jerked her hand away. "Let me do this." He clasped his large hand over her mound, rubbing his thumb against her clit. "God, you're so fucking beautiful."

She stopped trying to watch his every move and let her head fall back against the bed. His warm tongue dipped into her and fervently and forcefully stroked her inner wall. Heat surged up from her thighs, spreading to the tips of her toes, causing her legs to give out and fall forward.

He grasped hold of them and draped them over his shoulders. One long finger sank into her tight slit, then another. Her juices seeped from her pussy and trickled down her ass. His thumb followed the slick trail, stopping to massage her receptive anus.

"Baby." His hot breath feathered against her clit. "Does this feel good?" He ran his warm tongue over her swollen nub, slow then fast, working her up to a place close to insane.

"God, yes," she cried out and tilted her hips. The smoldering pressure built inside her, and she grasped for her comforter, clenching it in her fists.

He sucked her clit into his mouth and prodded his thick thumb into her puckered entrance. She loosened for him, trusting his every move, allowing his wet thumb to press on into her taut warmth. Unexpected sparks jolted straight to her pussy.

"Kade..." She lost her train of thought. What the hell was she going to say? Did it matter? The pleasure was too intense. The wave of ecstasy rolled through her core to deep inside her thighs. "Oh, yes! Oh, baby! Oh..."

"Yes. Come for me, Ava." He withdrew his fingers and laved his tongue over and into her throbbing pussy, milking her. "You taste so good, honey." He removed his thumb from her anus and slipped in two slippery fingers. "Feel so fucking good."

She pumped her hips up to meet his rhythm until she exploded, her body bursting against his sweet mouth. She threw her head back and clapped her hands over her face. "Oh, God," she whispered as her body slumped with satisfaction.

Tiny pulses tingled throughout, but he didn't wait for her to recover. Instead, he slid her back up the mattress and climbed between her legs.

"Still waiting for my love." He slowly delved his solid cock into her still-sensitive depths.

She caught her breath. The game was getting better than she had anticipated as his hardness teased her all-too receptive nerves. Leisurely, he prodded, kneading her inner-most walls.

His pale blue eyes were heavy and filled with desire as he stared down at her. Telling him she

loved him wouldn't even begin to describe the emotions he triggered. She caressed his cheeks and inhaled sharply as another orgasm began to rise. How easily he could bring her there.

"I love how you feel inside of me."

He smiled down at her. "Nice, but not what I want to hear."

Before Ava could respond, he pulled out of her, letting his cock tease just outside of her pussy walls.

Frustrated with the interruption, she gripped his ass and attempted to persuade him back in.

He simply shook his head. "Tell me," he said with a hint of uncertainty lingering in his eyes. "Do you love me?"

How could he not know? Guilt bit into her gut. The game had gone too far if he had an ounce of doubt. "Of course I love you." She lifted her head to kiss his lips. "My heart can't contain how much I love you."

Her eyes burned from the release of the pent-up emotion.

A knowing smile adorned his face, and his expression brightened. "I love you, too." He chuckled, and she didn't know whether to feel annoyed or ecstatic.

He had played her well. With a smirk, he lifted off her and went into the bathroom.

"Where are you going?" Her body ached in his absence. "We're not done here." And she wasn't about to let him out of her sight. Not anytime soon, anyway.

Seconds later, he returned with a small velvety box in his hand. "Trust me, sweetheart, I know."

Ava propped herself up on her elbows and stared in astonishment as he displayed an engagement ring

—gold banded with at least half a karat. Princess cut, just like the ones she'd always ogled in the jewelry store display whenever she went window-shopping. "Is that...is that what I think it is?" Her eyes honed in on the shiny object as her belly turned upside down with utter enthusiasm.

"What? This?" He slid the band onto the tip of his pinky and climbed back on top of her, forcing her to drop back on the mattress.

He fisted his hands on either side of her head, and from the corner of her right eye, she could see the glinting diamond. She desperately wanted to see it in full view—on her finger. She wanted to be his. Forever.

She reached for it, but he stopped her by grabbing her wrists and pinning them above her head. "This isn't funny, Kade. I just want to see it."

"Really? How bad?" He clamped both her wrists into one of his large hands. His free hand brushed down her arm, over the side of her breast, and past her stomach.

Her skin prickled from the light, teasing touch. When he reached her center, he took hold of his erection and guided it into her welcoming pussy. Gradually, he filled her and began working her just as he had only moments ago.

But now Ava was distracted. She could feel the band of the ring against her wrist. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Hmm?" He grasped the backside of her knee and shifted her leg up.

Instant pleasure blurred her mind as he pumped in and out, sliding his thick cock along her slick walls. "Kade," she moaned, her mind slowly

wandering away from the ring and her future and focusing on the moment.

His hand gripped tightly to her leg as his body spread out against hers. Deeper, he plunged, driving into an area that erupted from his touch.

"Oh, Kade." She met his thrusts as he continued to crash into her with a passion she'd never experienced. A passion she never wanted to live without again. She ran her now-free hands down his broad back to his firm ass and held on tight as she peaked yet again, lifting her hips to meet his last thrust. She indulged in the way his body shuddered and collapsed onto hers.

"Ava," he whispered into her ear as if she held the secret to his next breath.

They lay motionless for several minutes before she realized something heavy was on her finger as her hands gripped the damp skin on his back. She loosened them and brought them into view. A shiny glint caught her eye.

The ring was on her finger. And it fit perfectly. "How did you?" she asked but didn't wait for the answer. "Oh, Kade, it's absolutely beautiful."

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. "Ava, will you marry me?" His voice was sweet and contrasted with the hard, masculine lines of his gorgeous face. The words were even sweeter. "I love you and I want you to be my wife."

"I, uh—"

He pulled his lips in, and she observed the familiar telltale sign as his Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"Yes, I do. Or I will, I mean." She let out a nervous giggle and a tear ran down her temple. His expression immediately turned to that of relief. "I

had no idea when I woke this morning that you'd come back to me alive and well." She slanted a kiss to his grinning lips. "Now that you're here, I'm never going to let you go."

Kade swiped his thumb down the wet path into her hair. "That's good to hear because I'm never leaving. I'm training to become one of the good guys," he said, with a crooked grin. "I'll be working for the police."

She laughed with joy at the good news. "You mean no more pinpointing and abducting young, innocent women?"

"Nope. And nothing in my life will ever be cut and dried again. Not when I have you as a wife," he teased. "But that's okay because—" He let out a breath and kissed her lips. His cock began to harden inside of her again. "Because I love you, Mrs. Thompson."

Ava clenched down on him and enjoyed the pulses of pleasure that surged through her thighs, up her belly, and into her heart. "I love you too, Kaden. Forever."

About the author...

Lia Slater thinks the world would be a better place if everyone read romance novels. There's so much to learn from the storylines. Love. Loyalty. Confidence. Passion. Desire. Conflicts would be resolved with happy endings. And, of course, the sex would be mind-boggling.

Lia is well on her way to helping the world become a better place by writing steamy romance with heart-throbbing emotion.

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Desiree Holt

A cryptic message from her brother leaves Rina Devargas with a secret and no one to trust...

Carrying the fate of a nation in a locket next to her heart, Rina's life is turned upside down as her brother's partner, McCall, moves into her home under the guise of keeping her safe. Though she surrenders her body to his dark desires, someone betrayed John, and until McCall gives her a sign, Rina can't be certain that someone isn't him.

Assigned to protect her, Connor McCall must gain Rina's confidence the only way he knows how...

Having once shared a night of forbidden pleasure, McCall reawakens her submissive appetite for dominance. However, keeping his mind on the job and his hands off Rina proves difficult--remaining aloof from his feelings for her, even more so. He's been down that road and paid a handsome price for it—the life of a fellow agent.

With an assassination plot brewing and killers after Rina, will McCall gain her trust before it's too late? Or will their dangerous desires ultimately destroy them all?

Chapter One

Rina Devargas ran full out, arms pumping, lungs burning, every muscle in her body on fire. Her thick auburn curls had come loose from the gold clip at the nape of her neck and tossed wildly about her face. The fabric of her slacks flapped against her leg where she'd ripped them running through a low hedge. She had no idea which direction to take, which building was safe to hide behind. Too many open spaces. Too many street lights.

Behind her, she heard the slapping of leather on pavement as the man pursued her. He'd been waiting for her, watching for her to leave John's townhouse. As she'd slipped out the back door, sure she was safely away, he'd grabbed her, slamming her head into the brick wall. She wasn't certain, but she thought her nose might be broken. Blood had run down her face and onto her blouse. Only instant reaction and a well-placed knee to the groin had freed her from his grasp.

His shoes pounded on the pavement behind her, closing the gap with every second. Could she cut through a walkway between buildings? But what if it led to a dead end? Where was everyone, anyway, in this residential neighborhood of upscale town homes? Shouldn't someone be walking a dog?

Slap! Slap! Slap!

The echo of his footsteps sounded like rifle shots.

Damn it, she had to find a place to hide, quickly. Her car was back near John's place, so no hope of cutting back there. She tried to pick up the pace, but every step sent a jolt of pain through her head.

Turning a corner, she sprinted down the sidewalk, searching for a place with lights on. Maybe she could bang on someone's door, ask for help, if her appearance didn't scare them to death.

She stopped for one precious second to drag air into her lungs and froze when a muscular arm pulled her against a hard male body and a hand clamped over her mouth. Her heart actually stopped in mid-beat, and for a moment, she was sure she'd pass out.

"Don't scream," a voice whispered at her ear.

Rina's nose twitched as a familiar scent drifted in the air and the body pressing against her from behind had a remembered feel. She tried to turn her head to see her captor, struggling in his grasp.

God, surely not him. Not here. Not now.

The man pulled her into a nearly invisible tiny alcove where two buildings met, waiting until the running figure passed. Then he half carried her to a car that pulled up to the curb.

"You can let go of me," she mumbled against the fingers over her mouth.

"Not yet. And quit struggling. I'd hate to coldcock you," he growled. "But I will if I have to."

Opening the passenger door of the car, he shoved her inside. "Not a word," he cautioned as he changed places with the driver. He hit the accelerator, and they roared down the street. By the time they reached the bridge from Harbor Island to downtown Tampa, Rina had managed to slow her

heart rate to somewhere between almost dead and hopefully alive.

She eyed the man next to her. Her nose hadn't let her down.

"Hello, McCall."

Of course it had to be him. The very last person in the world she wanted to see.

But he was paying no attention to her, speaking into a cell phone too softly for her to understand what he was saying. Blood dripped from her nose again, and she pulled up the tail of her blouse to blot it, the only thing she had since she'd lost her purse when the man attacked her.

McCall snapped the phone shut and dropped it on the seat beside him. "I should lock you up just on the grounds of stupidity." His voice was taut with tension. "What in the fucking hell were you doing at John's place tonight?"

Her hand went automatically to the locket around her neck "What were *you* doing there?"

"Uh uh. I get to ask the questions." He huffed a breath. "Have you lost your everlovin' mind?"

No matter what she said, it would turn out to be the wrong thing, so Rina kept silent, blotting her nose and wishing she had a huge bottle of aspirin.

"Listen, you idiot," he went on. "You know the lengths we've gone to in order to keep your relationship with your brother a secret. In our line of work, families are prime hostage targets."

Rina knew that. When John had been accepted as a member of the ultra-secret anti-terrorist task force, every trace of their relationship had been buried. His boss had even gone so far as to acquire a phony birth certificate for her brother and a fake background. Any evidence that John Wilson, black

ops operative, was her brother, John Devargas, ceased to exist. Except to Sully and the team.

"No comment?" he asked.

"Who-who was the man who attacked me?"

"Someone whose identity we'll never know now that you blundered into the middle of our stakeout."

She had never heard McCall quite so angry, but it couldn't be helped. The call from John had shocked her, coming out of the blue as it had. There was no way she could have refused his request, no matter what the rules were. Or what she made a mess of. "I left my rental car back there."

"Forget about it. I'll have someone pick it up."

"I, um, don't have my keys. I...that is...I lost my purse."

"Jesus Christ." McCall pounded the steering wheel. "Are you serious? You left your purse with all your identification where these people could get it?"

"What people?" The ones John was afraid of? The ones who were after him? Had even maybe killed him?

No. She pushed that thought out of her mind.

"What people?" she asked again, but McCall drove on in silence, his mouth set in a grim line.

Rina took a good look at him. His lean, muscular frame was dressed in the familiar all black, his thick black hair blending in with it. She remembered all too well the last time she had seen Connor McCall.

One year earlier

"I can't believe you were just in the neighborhood."

Rina stared at the lean, hard-faced man standing in her doorway. He was the last person she'd expected to see in San Antonio late on a Saturday afternoon. Or any other morning.

"Are you going to let me in, or should I stand here and give the neighbors something to gossip about?"

She stepped back and gestured him inside. He closed the door behind him, standing so close to her she could feel his body heat.

She shoved her hands in the pockets of her cutoffs. "So, what are you doing here anyway?"

"I have a letter for you from John. You know we can't just send it through the mail."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Is he okay? Nothing's wrong, is there?" She swallowed the fear that always rode just at the surface. She and John were both fully aware of the incredible danger in his job.

"No, he's fine. Just...off on a mission that will keep him out of touch for quite a while." He pulled an envelope from an inside pocket of his black windbreaker and handed it to her.

She nearly grabbed it from his hand and ripped it open. Then, realizing she didn't want to read it with McCall watching her, she rushed to the kitchen.

"I don't suppose you've got a beer I could drink while I'm standing in the hallway?" he called after her.

Her cheeks heated. Where were her manners? "Sure. Come on in." She pulled a bottle from the fridge and twisted off the top. "Um, why don't you take it out on the patio? It's really nice out there this time of day."

He gave her a lopsided grin, a rare expression on his usually grim face. "I can take a hint. Let me know when you're through reading." The letter was only two pages, but Rina read them over and over. John couldn't give her any details about his assignment, so he filled the pages with idle chatter and reminiscences. Since the death of their parents five years earlier, they'd made every effort to stay connected. In fact, it was their death in an explosion at the American University at Beirut that led to John's decision to join the task force.

Rina sat for a long time at her kitchen table, just holding the letter, squeezing back the tears at John's, "Love ya, Dusty," visualizing his face, and whispering a silent prayer for his safety. As she stood to carry it to her den and lock it away with the others, she realized she'd left McCall sitting outside for more than an hour. His beer was surely long gone, but he'd sat patiently waiting for her to finish.

Sliding open the patio door, she stuck her head out. "Sorry. I didn't mean to take so long."

He unfolded himself from the lounge chair. "No problem. But I'll take another beer if you've got one."

"I have a couple of steaks in the freezer if you'd like to stay for dinner." Now where did that come from? Invite McCall—the original granite man—for dinner?

He stared at her, as stunned by the invitation as she was.

And suddenly she wanted him to stay, a connection to John she could hold onto a little longer. "Please."

He studied her as if wondering what trick she had up her sleeve. Finally, he nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

It was already well past six o'clock, so she took the steaks out and stuck them in the microwave to thaw, then began to gather ingredients for a salad. McCall sat at the kitchen table, drinking his beer and watching her with silver eyes that seemed to see right through her. He wasn't one for casual conversation so she worked in silence, acutely aware of his gaze on her.

As she went about her prep work, she wondered what on earth had possessed her to invite this man to dinner. He was the most antisocial person she'd ever met. She wasn't even sure he liked her. But he was a connection to John and somehow she felt she could touch her brother through him.

She'd lit the coals in the barbecue on the patio before starting the salad. As naturally as if they did this all the time, McCall grilled the steaks while she finished the dinner preparations. She didn't know if McCall was a wine person—she actually knew almost nothing about him except that he was the senior member of the team and the one John worked with the most—but she pulled a bottle of her favorite white from the fridge anyway.

Okay. We'll eat dinner. I'll pump him for information about John. He'll avoid all my questions, leave, and that will be that.

He answered her questions about John in short, terse sentences, but at least he could assure her he was alive and well. And maybe that was all she could hope for.

"Why do you use the name 'Rina'?" he asked in an abrupt tone. "Why not your full name? Sabrina."

She shrugged. "When I was a toddler I had trouble saying the whole name. All I could get out was Rina, so it stuck." She gave him a lopsided grin. "Shorter to sign in books, too."

Silence descended on the table again.

"So tell me about your family," she said finally, searching for a topic of conversation.

He shrugged. "Not much to tell."

"I don't even know where you live when you're not, um, working."

"D.C. But my folks have a place up north."

"Do you get to see them often?" God, this is like pulling teeth.

"Not as much as I'd like. My sister, either."

He had a sister? "Does she live up north, too?"

"Yes. She's a physical therapist at a hospital near there. She's living with my folks right now."

More silence. And somehow a certain tension that she couldn't identify had crept into the air. Whenever she looked up from her plate McCall's silver eyes were fixed on her. If the situation were different—if he was different—she would have said his gaze was devouring her. But she had no idea what was going on in his steel-trap mind.

For a brief, mad instant she wondered what it would be like going to bed with McCall.

Are you crazy? The man is an emotionless machine, and a member of your brother's team to boot.

She poured herself another glass of wine with a hand that trembled slightly. McCall picked up on it and narrowed his eyes, but she managed to lift her glass and sip the liquid without spilling it.

Get a grip, Rina.

At last, the meal was over and McCall helped her clear the table. She poured the last of the wine into their glasses.

"Thank you for dinner," he said in a formal tone. "You're welcome."

McCall put his wine glass down on the counter, and without warning, reached for her, brushing his lips against hers. Just a brief contact, but it seared her down to her toes. Her bones felt as if they were melting, and she could have sworn the ground shifted beneath her feet.

Move, her inner voice commanded, but not one of her muscles would obey.

He traced the seam of her lips with his tongue, an artist's stroke painting the surface. A tiny sound whispered from her mouth. As if it were a signal he was waiting for, he captured her in a kiss so hot it burned her lips. His hands cupped her face, holding her in place while he fed on her, his tongue pressing inside and tasting the texture of her flesh.

She gripped his wrists but not to pull them away. She couldn't have broken the kiss if someone paid her to.

Time stood still while he devoured every corner of her mouth, his fingers lean and hot against her cheeks. When he lifted his head, his silver eyes had darkened to almost black.

Rina felt dazed and weak.

He studied her face, his breathing uneven. "Two choices. Either tell me to leave or tell me where your bedroom is."

She had trouble getting the words out. "Upstairs. Last door on the right."

He kept his eyes riveted to hers, something unidentifiable lurking in them. "I won't hurt you."

Her breath caught in her throat. "I didn't think you would."

"All right, then."

He lifted her, as if she were weightless, and took the stairs two at a time. Inside her bedroom, he set her feet carefully on the floor and drowned her in another of his kisses. With his mouth still fused to hers, he backed her up to the bed, sliding his hands under her T-shirt and cupping her breasts.

Rina thought she might faint, his touch was so arousing. Her panties were soaked enough just from the kisses that she was afraid the evidence of her arousal would slide down her thighs. She was hardly aware of him lifting the T-shirt over her head, unclasping her bra, and tossing both to the side.

"Jesus." His long fingers plucked at her nipples, chafing them, teasing them into diamond-hard points.

When he lowered his mouth to take one nipple between his lips, she nearly fell backwards. The wet heat of his mouth made her nipples throb. He moaned softly against her flesh, the sound reverberating through her body.

"I think we have too many clothes on." His voice was heavy with desire. He made quick work of her shorts and thong, guiding her onto the bed before stripping off his own clothing. He reached down and snapped on the bedside lamp.

Rina's eyes widened as she took in the lean, fit body with its matte of dark hair curling on his chest. It arrowed over a flat abdomen to his groin, forming a nest around the most impressive erection she'd ever seen in her life. The flat head of his cock was a deep purple and ropy veins pulsed beneath the skin. The sac of his testicles rested against his thighs, heavy and tempting.

He lay down beside her, pulling her into another hot kiss, one hand caressing her breasts, gliding over the slope of her flesh, rasping at her already swollen nipples. When he moved his mouth to bite gently on one of them, her insides convulsed.

One arm slid beneath her, arching her back to give him better access to her breasts while the other hand traced feathery patterns over her belly and down to her mound. When one finger parted her labia and stroked the already-slick flesh, she whimpered and lifted herself into his touch.

He was like a tiger unleashed. Feral and hungry. He touched her everywhere and with a need so great it shocked her. His skin was hot, burning her, and her own hunger rose to meet his.

With one last, brief thought for her lack of sanity, she fell into the maelstrom his touch created. Her pulse throbbed in her everywhere. A lightning storm couldn't have generated more power.

His mouth nibbled, sucked, his tongue licking a trail over her feverish skin from nipples to cunt. He was a master of torment. If she'd been able to think at all, she'd have wondered how this grim, silent man had become such an accomplished lover.

Her nipples felt as if they were bathed in liquid heat, each nip of his teeth sending jolts directly to her womb. His fingers parted the lips of her sex, tracing a line from end to end as he focused on her breasts. When he slid two fingers into her waiting heat, the tips curled to search for her sweet spot. His thumb pressed on her bundled nerves, massaging with a steady stroke.

"God, you feel good," he breathed. "You are so wet it feels like heaven. I'll bet it tastes even better."

Shifting, he knelt between her legs and, with his hands cupping her ass, lifted her to his mouth. The moment his lips closed on her, she spasmed, her inner walls fluttering. He held her in a firm grip as

he teased and tormented her until she felt as if flames were licking at her. His tongue glided in and out, scraping over every inch of her wet channel.

He was voracious, eating at her like a starving man. When her first orgasm rolled over her and she poured into his mouth, he lapped greedily at her juices. When the spasms slowed, he began again, lapping at her, stroking her with his tongue, driving her up the erotic spiral of hunger until she had no control of her own body. Again she convulsed, hips jerking in his grasp, the walls of her sex grabbing at his tongue as she shook uncontrollably.

And still he worked her relentlessly. When the third orgasm overtook her, she shattered completely, every muscle in her body clenching, the flesh of her pussy quivering. Splinters of her consciousness tumbled through the air, and colors flashed behind her closed eyelids.

Finally, he lowered her hips to the bed.

Exhausted, she lay back on the pillows. Surely now he would give her a moment to rest.

But rest wasn't in McCall's vocabulary. Moving up, he straddled her so his swollen shaft bobbed at her lips.

"Take me," he whispered in a hoarse voice. "Let me feel your lips on me. Come on, Rina. Suck me with that hot, sweet mouth. Just thinking about it is driving me crazy."

Automatically, she opened her mouth. Taking his shaft in one hand, he guided himself past her teeth until he was pressing on her tongue. She began to drag on him with her lips and swirl her tongue around the velvet flesh covering solid steel. Her fingers wrapped around him to give herself better leverage. His testicles pressed against her chin as she pulled and sucked, his taste a heady flavor.

"Stop." Abruptly, he jerked away.

"What..."

"I'm so ready, and I don't want to come in your mouth. Not this time."

He shifted off her and, with practiced ease, flipped her over to her stomach, tugging her up to her knees. His fingers slipped into her, gathering her moisture and painting it on the tight ring of her rear opening.

She shivered. "McCall?"

"I don't have a condom with me so we have to improvise. You'll like this. I promise. Trust me, Rina."

He began working first one, then two fingers into her rectum, preparing her, one hand on her belly, holding her up tight to him. She tensed at his first invasion, muscles clenching to shut him out.

"You've never done this, have you?"

She shook her head.

"Take a deep breath," he told her and pressed the head of his cock against her puckered opening.

At first it burned, his penis so big and thick it stretched her unbearably. But then, with a tiny pop, he was past the entrance and moving steadily to fill her. The burn turned from painful to delicious as hot and cold chased through her system, igniting nerves she didn't even know she had, setting the pulse in her womb to throbbing with a deep, insistent beat. Whatever functioning brain cells she might have had left disappeared as he pushed her onto a plane of arousal beyond anything she'd ever felt before.

"Breathe," he told her again.

Then he was all the way in, pumping his cock in a steady rhythm, the thick length rasping the sensitive skin inside the dark tunnel along the way. His balls slapped against the backs of her thighs, his arm like steel supported her, his hand spread across her belly to hold her to him tightly. She fisted her hands in a pillow and breathed through her mouth as he increased the pace of his strokes. Harder, faster, he filled and retreated, filled and retreated. Up and up the spiral she went again, every muscle quivering, every nerve firing.

His body tightened and clenched, his fingers pressed harder into her belly. When she felt the first splash of his cum, she climaxed, rockets exploding through her and hurtling her into space. The orgasm wracked her body, shaking her even more than the last one. McCall's body pressed into hers as he rode out his own convulsions.

Exhausted and spent, sore everywhere, she simply collapsed. He lay atop her, still shuddering. Sweat slicked their skin, and their hearts beat like kettle drums. She would have easily fallen asleep that way, his cock still impaled in her ass, but he withdrew from her slowly and turned her over.

"Shower," he murmured.

She shook her head, trying to burrow back into the pillows.

McCall made a sound suspiciously like a chuckle, then simply rose from the bed and gathered her up in his arms. In her shower, he bathed her as one might wash a baby, gently, his fingers probing all the right places, washing away the remnants of the most explosive sex she had ever experienced in her life. When he was satisfied they were both clean, he dried them off with her big towels, carried her

back to the bed, and tucked her under the covers. She thought he bent and kissed her, but it could have been her imagination.

She slept dreamlessly and woke feeling pleasantly sore. Her hand stretched out, seeking human flesh, the memories of last night springing to life in her mind, but the space next to her in bed was empty.

McCall was gone.

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