



# Do You Trust Me?

Desiree Holt



**A cryptic message from her brother leaves  
Rina Devargas with a secret and no one to  
trust. Assigned to protect her, Connor McCall  
must gain her confidence the only way he  
knows how...**

He stared at her for so long she wondered if he'd ever speak again. "Do you trust me, Rina?"

"Yes. I do." And she did. Absolutely. There was no question about that. At least where sex was concerned.

"You know I would never hurt you."

She nodded.

"Next time we'll discuss a safe word," he told her. "You won't need it tonight."

*Safe word?* She knew about those. McCall had no idea that the world he was taking her into was one she wrote about in her romance novels. Now it would be more than just her imagination.

She swallowed and let out a breath. "I'm ready."

His body was rigid against hers. "Sully will kill me for this."

"Forget Sully. We don't have to tell him. And he's not in bed with us, last I looked."

"Jesus, Rina. You'll send me to hell, but I can't avoid the journey."

## Reviews

There's not a book from Desiree Holt that I haven't enjoyed.

*~Night Owl Romance, Reviewers Top Choice*

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Desiree Holt is a talented author and I will be on the lookout for more of her writing in the future.

*~Romance Junkies*

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Holt pens an exciting, rapid-paced tale that's sure to keep the pages flying. A sexy alpha male and a fiery heroine create a dynamic couple readers can stand behind. The love scenes scorch the pages, and overall, this is a compelling, satisfying novel with emotionally driven characters.

*~RT Book Reviews 4 stars*

\*\*\*\*

Holt creates tense situations for her characters that will have readers eager for a happy ending.

*~RT Book Reviews 4 stars*

## GIVE IT TO ME

A hot read. Don't miss it!

*~Cocktail Reviews*

\*\*\*\*

Looking for a quick read you can dive right into? Do yourself a favor and print out this novella. Holt delivers with delicious love scenes, a believable story and characters you care about. A perfect combination of wit, sexuality, experimentation and romance. It's over way too soon!

*~RT's top rating 4 ½ stars*

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by

Desiree Holt

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.

Do You Trust Me?

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## **Dedication**

How could I not dedicate this book  
to Diana Carlile, who believed in it and gave it life.



## 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 were tossing 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 would be 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 at least be walking a dog?

Slap! Slap! Slap!

The echo of his footsteps sounded like rifle shots.

Damn it, she had to find some 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 just 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 arched 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 rosy 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.

## Chapter Two

Sitting in the car now next to McCall, seeing his body rigid with anger, her memory of that night hit her with a visceral punch. Heat flooded her body, and she felt an automatic dampness at her crotch. In a minute, the tiny pulse in her cunt would begin to throb. Imprinted on her brain was his forcefulness, the power of the sex they'd shared, his total command of her body. He was the complete alpha male in every way.

Deliberately she forced the overwhelming lust from her mind, giving her body silent commands. The last thing she needed right now was to react this way to a man who'd fucked her senseless, then left like a thief in the night without a word. Sex should be the furthest thing from her mind. But damn it to hell anyway. Just being next to him turned her on. What rotten luck that he'd be the one to rescue her tonight, kick starting her sleeping hormones.

"Where are we going?" She dabbed at her nose again and wished once more for a year's supply of aspirin.

"You'll see when we get there." There was a hard edge to his voice. "Someplace where we could lock you up if the choice was up to me."

*And thank you so very much, asshole.*

They'd left downtown Tampa behind long ago and were moving through the quiet streets of the northern suburbs. She couldn't tell if the heat rolling off him was anger or sexual tension or both. Whatever it was, it ramped up her own confused

feelings and didn't help her state of mind at all.

At last, McCall pulled up in front of a three-story motel with an understated appearance. He drove around to the back and parked the car at the far end of the building. Taking her arm in a tight grip, he helped her from the car and half-dragged her to an end entrance that opened into a long corridor. At the second door he stopped, knocked twice, then twice again. A man Rina had never seen opened the door and gestured them inside.

The room itself was unremarkable, a carbon copy of a million other oversized motel rooms. This one was set up for business meetings, with doors that led to bedrooms on either side. What caught her attention was the man who rose from the table and came forward to greet her.

"Hello, Rina. It seems you've given us a tiny problem tonight." He was smiling, but there was little warmth in his tone.

Sullivan Raines, six-foot-two with steel gray hair and impenetrable black eyes, was the leader of the task force, the man who'd put it together. Rumors said he was closer to the president than the first lady, and his opinion counted for more than the president's chief advisor. Rina had met him when John joined the team and seen him on two other occasions when he arranged for brother and sister to spend some time together. He'd always been warm and welcoming. Not tonight.

"I guess you're not too happy with me," she said in a wry voice.

"A masterpiece of understatement, Rina."

"I'm sorry, I just—"

He held up a hand to cut her off. "Stop. Forget about apologizing. You've precipitated a situation here that we need to deal with at once." He looked her over from head to toe, taking in her appearance. "But why don't we get you cleaned up first and into

something not hanging from you in tatters. You need that nose looked at, too, and probably some ice for your head.”

“I’ll be fine,” she protested.

“Fine?” Raines shook his head. “I don’t think so. And you’re not exactly in a position to argue with me.” He turned to McCall and pointed to the inside bedroom. “Give her that room. There should be a robe in the bathroom, courtesy of the hotel. Check the damage to her face and her head and find some aspirin. I’ll order coffee.”

“I can take care of myself,” she objected, trying once again to gain some kind of control.

But McCall was already hauling her into the connecting bedroom and on through to the bathroom. Sure enough, a thick terry robe hung on a hook on the back of the door. He checked the supplies to make sure she had everything she needed, then turned on the shower for her.

“Don’t think you’re going to bathe me,” she snapped, although visions of it danced tantalizingly in her brain. His big hands soaping her body, his lean fingers probing her secret places, his mouth hot on her—stop!

She gave herself a vicious mental shake. This was neither the time nor place for such erotic daydreams, and McCall’s noticeable absence in her life since their one night together was a good indication of his lack of interest.

*Quit daydreaming, stupid. You can’t climb the walls he’s put up.*

“I’ll be right outside,” he told her as if she hadn’t said a word.

She resisted the urge to slam the door after him.

Her clothes were unsalvageable, so she simply threw them in the trash. Somehow she’d figure out how to get new ones.

She stopped to take a look at herself in the

bathroom mirror and almost wished she hadn't. Her normally alabaster skin was paler than usual, making the bruises on her nose and face stand out even more. Fatigue and stress had dulled her emerald green eyes and drawn black smudges beneath them. Stepping under the shower spray, she gratefully let the hot water cascade over her sore and aching body. Using the washcloth, she carefully cleaned the blood from her nose, guessing that while it would probably swell to the size of a football, it didn't seem broken.

When she'd washed away every trace of dirt and blood, she used the tiny bottle of shampoo to wash her hair. Finally, she stood under the shower until she felt waterlogged.

*Maybe I can stay in here all night. That way I won't have to answer any questions. Or face McCall again.*

A heavy pounding on the door brought her back to reality.

"Rina?" McCall's voice sounded like gravel. "Do I need to come in there and get you?"

She turned off the shower and pulled back the curtain, reaching for a towel. "Not if you value your life. I'm almost through."

She was belted into the robe, a towel wrapped around her wet head, and was reaching for the door when it opened, startling her. In her addled state, she'd apparently forgotten to lock it. Damn!

"I hope there isn't a spyhole you were watching through," she spat at McCall. "I'd hate to have you arrested as a Peeping Tom."

As usual, he ignored her and held out a small bottle. "Aspirin. Take two right now."

Before she could back away from him, he was in her space, his hands on her face as he examined the damage to her nose and head. The gentleness of his touch was in marked contrast to his attitude and

made her wonder what emotions might be at war within him, too. She desperately needed an ally here, but how could she trust a man who closed himself off yet gave mixed signals? And how did she deal with the fact that just the touch of his fingers sent electric shocks through her body, making her breasts ache and her pussy quiver with need?

“Well, nothing’s broken,” he said, confirming her own diagnosis. “But your nose won’t be looking any too swift for a while. And you’ll probably have a hell of a bruise on the side of your face.”

“Thanks, Dr. McCall. I can take care of it from here.”

“Sully has coffee waiting. Five minutes.”

He was gone, leaving her staring open-mouthed after him.

As she dried her hair with the hotel blow dryer, she tried to figure out what she was going to say to Sullivan Raines, head of John’s special unit. Anything but the truth, that was for sure. John had been betrayed. Trust no one, he’d told her. She had to believe he knew what he was talking about.

She touched the locket nestled at the hollow of her throat.

*Don’t worry, John. I’ll do whatever I need to. Just stay safe.*

\*\*\*\*

*Twenty-four hours earlier*

“Help me, Dusty. Someone’s betrayed me.”

The use of her childhood nickname threw Rina off balance. Her breath caught in her chest, and every muscle in her body froze from the shock of hearing her brother’s voice after three years of silence.

Pressing the cordless phone against her ear, she strained to hear over the popping sound of the poor connection. “John? I can hardly understand you. Is it safe for you to call me?”

“No choice.” His voice sounded hollow, as if he were in a deep hole. “I’ve...something that scares the hell out of me. People...see me disappear.”

“What? John, what are you talking about? You’re frightening me.”

“Just listen, okay? Remember the key...townhouse I sent you...time ago?”

Even through the distortion she could hear his labored breathing—ragged, as if he’d been running too hard. “Rina?”

“Yes. I’m here. A key for emergencies.”

“Right.” He coughed, a harsh, dry sound. “You still have...directions?”

“Yes.” Fear pressed in on her chest like an elephant had stepped on it.

“Go to the airport. Ticket...car waiting.” He struggled to get out the details of the flight and the rental car.

Beyond the ragged breathing, Rina heard a barely-concealed groan of pain. Terrifying images of him, bloodied and dying, slammed into her brain. She nearly dropped the phone. “You’re hurt!”

“Can’t worry...now.” Each word sounded as if it was being dragged from him by force. His voice grew weaker as the connection faded in and out.

“Don’t let me lose you, John. Please let me help you.”

“Help by doing this, Dusty.”

There it was again. The nickname. It was almost her undoing.

“Oh, John.” Tears clogged her throat.

“I don’t think...gonna make it this time, kiddo. Someone gave me up...hunt...find out who.” The bone-jarring cough rattled across the wires again. “If luck’s with me...later on your cell. If you don’t...dead.”

Rina turned cold. A sick feeling grew in the pit of her stomach. “No! Don’t say that. Please.”

“...chip. Got it?...chip...out of time. Go to my place...right now.”

A burst of static crackled in her ear like the amplified crinkling of tissue paper. “John? Talk to me. John!”

“You gotta do this, Dusty. Please.”

Did anyone on his team know where he was? Had he been able to call his boss? She forced herself to concentrate. “Okay. What should I do when I get there?”

“Get Mom’s locket...souvenir.”

Rina frowned and bit her lip. He always carried that locket as a good luck talisman. Why didn’t he have it now?

“I couldn’t...let...find it. Get it...get out of there...don’t let...out of...sight. Careful...watching.”

Rina closed her eyes and willed herself to be calm. Three years since she’d laid eyes on him, and now she was terrified she’d never see him again.

“All right. Yes. I’ll get it.” Her hand gripped the phone so tightly the muscles cramped.

“...safe...do it.”

“Safe? From what? From who? What should I do with it?” She swallowed hard. “John, let me call someone, get you some help.”

“No.” The vehemence in his tone made her eyes widen, and her breath hitch. “Can’t call...betrayed...betrayed.”

He stopped again, this time for so long she was sure he was gone for good.

Then his voice came through once more. “You’ll know...right person...give it to...promise. Dusty? Trust...no one.” He coughed again, a harsh, rasping sound. “Got that? Trust no one...love you, kiddo.”

“John? John, don’t hang up.”

Silence greeted her. She looked at the dead phone in her hand. John was gone.

His counter-terrorism work was so secret, the

men he hunted so dangerous, he could only protect her by keeping her out of his life. Only a major crisis could make him break the rules and contact her like this. Rina had to force back the panic that swept in full blown with his call.

Okay. She'd get the locket and keep it safe. She wiped her sweaty palms on her slacks and looked at her watch. She'd better get moving if she meant to catch that plane. God, why was this happening?

John's last words were so garbled she wasn't too sure what she was supposed to do with the locket when she had it or who she was supposed to give it to. But three words burned into her brain loud and clear.

*Trust no one.*

That was something she would remember.

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Rina rubbed the locket as if to draw strength from it. She squeezed it between thumb and forefinger and suddenly it popped open, startling her.

Nervously she unclasped it from around her neck and held it in her palm. Her hand shook as she stared at the piece of jewelry. She'd done enough research for her romantic suspense novels to know what was nestled inside. A microchip. Oh god. Whatever was on the chip contained the very information John had given his life to protect. It was up to her now not to give it to the wrong person.

Under any other circumstances she would hand it over to Sully, but she was caught in a situation where there was no one she could trust. Not Sully, not even McCall.

And she couldn't stall any longer. Another minute and McCall would barge through the door and haul her out of the bathroom. She snapped the locket shut very carefully and rubbed it against a towel, as if her fingerprints on it would be a flashing

sign to someone. Then she clasped it around her neck again, making sure it settled in place.

Tightening the belt on the robe once more, she opened the door and marched into the room where Sully waited. She felt as if she were about to face the Spanish Inquisition.

“Better?” Sully gestured for her to take a seat opposite him.

“Yes, thank you.”

One of the men in the room handed her a plastic baggie with ice in it and someone else placed a mug of steaming coffee in front of her. She sipped at it, her movements somewhat awkward as she worked to keep the ice in place against her nose. The warmth of the liquid coursing through her system at least settled her nerves.

Sully watched her through hooded eyes while she drank part of the hot liquid, giving her time to gather herself before he pounced.

“Okay, Rina, play time’s over.” His voice had an edge of steel in it. “What were you doing at John’s tonight?”

In the bathroom she’d pieced together the least implausible story she could come up with. “John called me and asked me to meet him there.”

Sully gave her a wintry smile. “Try again. John would never break mission protocol that way. Not after the great lengths we went to, hiding your relationship from the world. And certainly not without asking my permission.”

“But he did,” she insisted. “He said it was very important, otherwise he’d never ask me.”

“How did you get in?” McCall asked from behind Sully’s chair, arms folded, watching her as if she were a bug on a slide.

“He gave me a key a long time ago.” She spread her hands open, palms up. “In case of emergency, he said.”

Sully exchanged glances with the two other men in the room. His face was carefully expressionless, but anger and suspicion flickered in his eyes. "I can't imagine him doing anything like that. There's no way you should even have known about the townhouse."

"He's my brother, for God's sake," she cried, knotting her fists. "No one is more conscious of national security than John is, but we only have each other. We had to make some...difficult adjustments."

"McCall tells me you lost your purse." His tone was slightly accusing.

"Yes, I'm sorry. But when that man hit me..."

Sully waved a hand at her. "No matter. Can't cry about it now. But in addition to everything else, they now have your identity, and this puts you at great risk. Rina, I don't want to flex my muscle, but you have to tell me what John wanted."

"Tell me about his mission first," she demanded.

"You know I can't do that."

She pressed the bag of ice to her head and glared at him. "Then I have nothing else to say."

"Damn it," McCall exploded. "If you're keeping something from us that could save John's life or keep the mission from being compromised—"

"Save John's life?" Her heart tripped over itself. He'd sounded so badly wounded. Were his injuries life-threatening?

"That's a good possibility," he ground out. "So quit playing games that are way over your head and tell us what he wanted."

*If he wanted you to know, he'd have called one of you. Instead, he called me. He broke every rule to call me because he's been betrayed. It could be any one of you. I can't tell you. I can't.*

"I'm not playing games." Irritated, she dropped the bag of ice onto the table. "And I really don't feel

well. I'd like to get some rest, and then I want to go home."

Sully shook his head, and McCall gave her a grim smile.

She looked from one to the other. "What? I can't go home?"

Sully leaned forward and took one of her hands. Lines of anger still bracketed his mouth, but apparently he was determined to handle this with kid gloves. "Rina, you've made yourself a target for these people by doing what you did. Everything else aside, I'm putting you in protective custody until this is finished. One way or another."

Every muscle in her body tightened. "What people? Who are they? Never mind. You can't tell me, right? But I have to go home. I have a life. Things to do. My writing. Book signings. All my regular activities."

"Listen to me." Sully's patience was wearing thin. "These people have your information from your driver's license. They know where you live. How simple do you think it will be for them to come after you?" His hand tightened on hers. "And do you think for a minute that after tonight's little trip to the townhouse they won't assume you and John are related?" He leaned forward. "I think it's safe to assume they were after what John wanted you to have, don't you?"

"I have nothing to tell you, Sully." She pulled her hand away and folded her arms across her chest. "I don't know why John wanted to meet me, why he broke the rules, but it must have been pretty damn important. Why aren't you out there trying to find him and ask him yourself?"

"We have men—" one of the others in the room began.

Sully cut him off with a slash of a hand. "We're looking for John. Count on it. But what you know

might help us.”

“I know nothing.”

“Rina, I can’t just turn you loose. You’ve made yourself a target.”

“Then you’ll have to arrest me,” she snapped. “Otherwise, I’m out of here as soon as it can be arranged.”

Sully let out a long breath and tapped his fingers on the table. “Fine. Then McCall goes with you.”

“What?” they both shouted.

“There’s no room for negotiation here. These people are going to come after you. Until this is wrapped up, he’ll be sticking to you like glue.”

“And how am I supposed to explain him?” she asked. “What do I tell my friends when a strange man suddenly moves into my house?”

A mischievous smile played on the older man’s lips. “Why, you just tell them you’ve acquired a new lover. Who wouldn’t want to take a handsome lug like this home with them? Right, McCall?”

Rina just stared, all her words stuck in her throat. Have McCall living in her house with her? The man who’d given her a night of unbelievable sex, then left her high and dry? Impossible. Looking up at McCall she could see similar thoughts reflected in his silver eyes.

Oh, God, she couldn’t do this. She could barely control the need that vibrated from her just being in his presence with other people around. Her nipples tightened, sending a tingling feeling through her breasts, and a tiny flutter set up in the muscles of her cunt. What would she do if they were alone? What would *he* do?

Sully ignored them both. “We’ll fly you back tomorrow in the task force jet and have someone meet you at the airport. As soon as you’re in your house, Rina, you give McCall a copy of your complete

schedule for the next month. He'll get it to me. We'll be taking some other steps, too, but I want to discuss it with the rest of the team first."

"You can't screw with my schedule," she snapped, wondering where all this courage was coming from. "Besides everything else, I have a huge special book signing planned for March second. Texas Independence Day. That's less than a week from now. My new book will be released and my publisher and my agent worked this out with the governor's office more than a year ago. Sully, this is the biggest thing I've ever done. It's included in all the publicity, too."

"We'll take a look at it," he told her. "McCall will discuss it with me."

"Sully, I—"

"That's it, Rina. I said we'll discuss it. And while you and McCall are attached at the hip, you might consider what John told you that got you in the middle of this in the first place."

"I told you all I know." She swallowed, hard. "Can you at least tell me if he's all right?"

Sully looked at the other two men in the room, but their faces gave nothing away. "We hope so. That's the best I can tell you."

John's words clicked in her brain. "He hasn't gotten in touch with you again, has he? You don't know where he is."

Sully ignored her statement. "I'd suggest you get some sleep now. You'll be leaving early in the morning. I'll send someone out to get you some clothing so you don't have to go home in a bathrobe."

He stood, an indication the conversation was at an end.

"You'll sleep in here." McCall led her into the bedroom attached to the bath she'd used. "Hold on a minute." He went back into the meeting room and through it to another bedroom. In seconds, he was

back, holding out a man's extra large T-shirt. "You'll probably be more comfortable sleeping in this."

She was touched by the gesture, even though she could still see the suppressed irritation in his face at Sully's instructions.

"McCall, listen..." *How do I talk to him about this?*

"I'm leaving your door ajar just in case you need anything."

*In case someone attacks me?* Did he really think whoever it was could sneak in here and get to her? She clenched her hands into fists and tucked them under her arms so he couldn't see them shaking.

"Thank you," she finally managed.

"See you in the morning."

She stared at his retreating figure, a maelstrom of emotions churning inside her. What a fucking mess.

## Chapter Three

Rina didn't expect sleep to come easily, despite being exhausted down to the bone. Her body, however, had a mind of its own. She was still sorting through the jumble in her brain when she drifted off. She dreamed, and in her dream someone was screaming. She kept trying to reach them, but the screaming went on and on.

"Rina."

Someone was shaking her, hard, their fingers pressing into her arms like steel bands. Whoever it was wouldn't let her get to whoever was screaming.

"Rina. Wake up. Now."

She dragged her eyes open and realized the screams were coming from her. Gun tucked in the waistband of his sweat pants, McCall sat beside her, shaking her with both hands. She was covered with sweat, the T-shirt sticking to her body like a second skin.

"What? What is it?" She couldn't seem to make her mouth or her brain work properly.

"You were screaming the house down." His hands still gripped her. "Are you okay? I thought someone had gotten in here."

"Oh, God." She scrubbed her face with her hands. "I was having a dream, but I don't remember what it was. Someone was screaming."

"That would be you. Are you okay? Let me get you some water." He left her for a moment and returned with a full tumbler. "Drink this. It will help your throat. It must be sore as hell."

She nodded, surprised at the strained

gentleness in his voice, and sipped at the water. She felt like the biggest idiot. "I don't know what happened. I never have dreams like that. I certainly never scream in my sleep." She looked past him to the other room. "Did everyone hear me?"

He shook his head. "If any of the hotel guests heard you, they probably thought it was the television. I got to you right away. Everyone here is gone but me. They'll be back in the morning."

She tried on a weak smile. "So they left you to be the babysitter."

He shrugged. "Might as well get started."

"McCall." She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and tried to still her galloping heart. "I just want to tell you I'm sorry you got stuck with this. I'm sure you must hate it."

Heat flared in his eyes, bright and sharp, and in the slanting light from the other room, she could see his body tense. So he hadn't forgotten that night after all. Reflexively, her eyes dropped to his crotch, the tent in his sweat pants unmistakable. Dear lord, she was in trouble.

"No problem," he said at last. "I do what needs to be done. Why don't you lie down and let me cover you up. You're shaking."

She knew it but couldn't seem to control the trembling. Obediently, she lay back on the pillows, and he pulled the covers up, leaning over to tuck them under her chin. The heat rolling off his body warmed her bones. She felt the strength in his hands, their touch raising her internal thermostat and releasing a flood of moisture between her thighs.

*Oh, God, I'm about to embarrass myself.*

Their faces inches apart, their eyes locked, hers wide and still frightened, McCall's dark and bottomless. A muscle jumped in his cheek. That night at her house was like a living thing between them, and the sexual thread tightened, pulling at

them. McCall leaned over that last little bit and, in a movement as natural as breathing, touched her lips with his.

It was just like the last time. Incendiary. Scorching. Consuming. The instant he made contact things spun out of control. They were playing with fire. She could almost feel his resolve melt away. He took her mouth as a thirsty man drinks from a fountain, probing with his tongue, touching every inner surface. His hands cupped her face, claiming possession.

Rina answered him just as hungrily, twining her tongue with his, drinking in his warmth as if she could pull it into her body. He tasted of coffee and wine and toothpaste. The musky scent of him surrounded her like an erotic cloud. She was drowning in the kiss.

Drawing her arms out from under the covers, she wrapped them around his neck, tugging him closer. So what if he'd run out on her before. So what if this was totally crazy. Right here, right now, with turmoil swirling around her, this was what she needed. There was absolutely no way her body was letting her turn away from this.

McCall shifted his head to a better angle and deepened the kiss. Her body tightened against him, the peaks of her nipples pressing into him, hard and soft at the same time. Finally, he drew back, pulling in a shuddering breath and staring at her face.

"Shit."

"I didn't think it was so bad," Rina said, trying to find her voice. "Actually, I thought it was pretty good."

*I'm babbling. Stop babbling, Rina.*

"That's not the point," he muttered. "I swore to myself not to let this happen again. Along with everything else, it's totally inappropriate."

"Why?" She only wanted to dive into his arms

and have him take away the unknown terror of her dreams. “What’s different about tonight from the last time?”

“Rina, I’m here to protect you, not take advantage of you. You’re feeling vulnerable right now. What you don’t need is someone jumping your bones. Anyway, the team has an unwritten rule about getting involved in cases.”

“Is that what I am?” she asked, trying to draw him back. “A case?” *Hold me, McCall. I need to feel your warmth.* Her teeth were chattering no matter how tightly she clenched her jaw.

“That’s all you can ever be.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I never should have touched you before. Everything else aside, you deserve far more than I can give you.”

“And exactly what is it you think I should have?”

His face was like a clenched fist, his eyes dead black as he searched for the right words. “Listen to me. In the first place, you’re John’s sister. I can’t treat you the way I do other women. The women I...get involved with aren’t like you. They’re...different.”

“Oh? Different how, exactly? Do they have two heads? Three breasts? Four eyes?”

*Stop talking and hold me. Give me tonight. Later, I’ll worry about tomorrow.*

“Damn it, you’re deliberately misunderstanding. You have no idea the kind of sex I enjoy. What turns me on. If you did, you’d really start screaming and run as fast as you could in the other direction.”

“Are you trying to scare me on purpose?” She licked her lips. “What are you talking about that’s so bad? Would you lock your handcuffs on me? Tie me up? Make me helpless?”

*Oh, my God! He would!*

The thought had more cream gathering in her cunt and her already racing heart speeding up.

Every pulse point in her body was throbbing. She'd never thought of herself as a submissive in sex, but with McCall, she could be a lot of things she'd never been.

"Damn it." He raked his fingers through his hair in a gesture of frustration. "This isn't a game we're playing. Do you want me to spell it out for you? What I want isn't for you."

"Oh, and you know so damn much about me, right?" She was getting angrier by the minute.

"I use women, Rina. That's all I can do. There's nothing beyond that. I like my sex rough. Hard. I like bondage. Maybe some other things."

So she was right. He *was* a dom, although maybe not in the truest sense of the word. She'd done enough research for her romance novels to know the different levels of BDSM. What would he say if she told him she wanted that as much as he did?

But when she opened her mouth to speak, he cut her off. "No. Don't say anything. Let me finish. I don't want any emotional connection, either. I just won't do that to the sister of a man who's like a brother to me. You should be with someone who can offer you a relationship, something, anything but this."

"Then why did you fuck me the first time?" Fighting to keep her anger under control, she studied his face, unreadable as always. "All you had to do was walk out of my house."

"I wanted you. Badly. Anyway, I figured I'd managed to frighten you off after that night."

She felt her face heat as she thought of what they'd done.

"Uh uh. I know exactly what you're thinking. John should beat my ass for that," he ground out. "I just pray he never finds out."

"But John isn't in this room with us, McCall,

and the last I looked, I wasn't a cowering virgin." She hugged herself with her arms. "I never said I didn't like what we did. It was just...unexpected. But all in all, I've had a pretty bad day, I don't know if John is alive or dead, and I'm falling apart. If I didn't want this, you'd be doubled over massaging your groin instead of wrestling with your conscience."

"Rina," he began again.

She threw up her hands and flopped back on the pillows, tugging the covers up to her chin. "You must have ice water in your veins. It's just sex, for God's sake, right? Isn't that what you think? Get the hell out of here and let me go back to my nightmares."

He stared at her, his face wearing its usual unreadable expression, for so long she wondered if he was ever going to say anything.

"No." His eyes burned holes into her. "No, Rina, it isn't just sex. And that's the problem. But that's all it can ever be with you. I can't change who and what I am no matter what my feelings are, and you just don't fit into that picture. Now do you understand?"

Rina's heart tried to leap into her throat. Not just sex? Did that mean he felt the undercurrents, too? The feeling of being connected? This was crazy, but no crazier than the way her life had been turned upside down since she got the call from John. Her nerves were shredded, and she'd been knocked completely off balance. And someone had tried to kill her.

Strong and independent was good, except right now she wanted to melt into a puddle in a man's arms. McCall's arms. She wanted to find her way under that granite exterior and unleash what was hiding there. For better or for worse. She pushed herself up, the covers falling to her waist.

"Despite what you might be thinking after our

last...episode, I don't fall into bed easily or quickly. And I'm pretty picky about whose bed I fall into."

"Rina—"

She shook her head. "You also haven't the faintest idea what I might or might not like. You don't scare me, McCall, but you won't even try to give it a chance. Listen to me." She grabbed one of his hands. "I'm feeling vulnerable. And scared, more than I've ever been in my life. But I also haven't lost my mind altogether. We were good together, and I think we could be better." She dropped his hand. "Never mind. It's humiliating to have to beg. Go on. Go. I won't bother you again."

"You bother me all right," he said through gritted teeth. "Too damn much. That's the problem. Do you really want me to tell you what I'd like to do to you?"

"Yes." Her breathing hitched at the flare of lust in his eyes. "Yes, I do."

He pushed her down until she was flat on her back, circled her wrists with his fingers, and pulled her hands over her head, stretching her out. His face was so close to hers his warm breath fanned her face. "I want to tie your wrists to this bed and spread your legs out as wide as I can. I want to suck on those gorgeous nipples until they're as swollen as I can get them, then fasten nipple clamps on them to keep them inflamed and engorged so I can bite at them and lick them."

Rina squirmed in his grasp, the walls of her pussy quivering with desire.

"I want to spread your pussy wide open," he went on, his voice guttural. "And see all that beautiful pink, glistening flesh and eat you out until you scream for me to let you come. But I won't. Not until you're sobbing and pleading with me, until I know when I finally give you your release, you'll be screaming my name and your body will shatter from

the force of it. Can you handle that, little girl?"

"Try me and see," she gasped. "Are you chicken, McCall?"

His mouth was practically touching hers now. "What if I want you on your knees in front of me, hands behind your back, sucking my cock until I spill my cum down your throat? Or turn you over my knee and spank that pretty little ass until it's bright red." He spoke the next words into her mouth. "And then, when you're so hot you're about to burn up, I'll fuck your ass until you come again and again and again. What do you say to that, little daredevil?"

She thought she'd burn up just from his words alone. She'd never been into these kinds of games with anyone before, but with McCall, she would gladly drop all boundaries. The trick was getting him to accept her willingness to try.

She licked his lips with a bold stroke. "You can't deny there's something going on between us. Go on, tell me it isn't true."

He stared at her for so long she wondered if he'd ever speak again. "Do you trust me, Rina?"

"Yes. I do." And she did. Absolutely. There was no question about that. At least where sex was concerned.

"You know I would never hurt you."

She nodded.

"Next time we'll discuss a safe word," he told her. "You won't need it tonight."

*Safe word?* She knew about those. McCall had no idea that the world he was taking her into was one she wrote about in her romance novels. Now it would be more than just her imagination.

She swallowed and let out a breath. "I'm ready."

His body was rigid against hers. "Sully will kill me for this."

"Forget Sully. We don't have to tell him. And he's not in bed with us, last I looked."

“Jesus, Rina. You’ll send me to hell, but I can’t avoid the journey.”

He relaxed his hold on her, and she slid her hands under his T-shirt, smoothing them against his skin. Her fingers tangled in the crisp hair on his chest and pressed against the warm, hard muscles it covered. His heart thudded beneath her fingertips, vibrating through her hands into her body. The light from the adjoining room slanted in through the open door and cast shadows on his face, accentuating the hard angles and planes.

In the semi-darkness, he looked like exactly what he was—dark, edgy, very dangerous. A loner. A man who set his own rules. And now she was going to show him she could play by them. If she was making a mistake, she’d live with it. But in the darkest part of her mind, she wanted what he was offering. Wanted it with a driving need she didn’t even know existed within her.

For a moment, when he rose from the bed, she thought he was going to tell her to forget it. Instead, muttering another curse, he placed his gun on the bedside table.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t move.”

He disappeared but was back in seconds, tossing something onto the night stand and dropping his sweat pants. Her eyes widened at the sight of his magnificent erection rising from a thick nest of dark curls. The broad, flat head was swollen, the dark purple surface glistening with a drop of pre-cum. She could almost taste it.

Oh, my God. She wanted it in her mouth. In her cunt. Every way she could take it. She had never, ever been this aroused before. Not with anyone. Not ever. She was so wet she was sure he could catch her scent. Desire raced through her, pulling at her nerves. She wanted him. She wanted this darkness that he promised.

“Once we start there’s no going back,” he warned, his eyes boring into her.

Grabbing her robe from the foot of the bed where she’d thrown it, Rina yanked the belt out and handed it to McCall. She held out her hands, wrists together.

“You may have to do a little improvising with this flat headboard.” Damn. Why was her voice shaky? She swallowed hard. “But I know you’re up to the task.”

Eyes glittering, he yanked the T-shirt she was wearing over her head. His breath caught in his throat, and his gaze swept over her naked body as if he were devouring her. Hunger and desire were etched on his face. Her pussy wept, demanding attention, and she clenched her thighs together to still the tiny spasm rocketing through the slick channel.

McCall wrapped the belt around both her wrists, pulling it tight. When he was satisfied with it, he pulled her arms over her head and tucked the ends of the belt between the mattress and the headboard.

“Do not move your hands unless I tell you to. Not at all. That’s an order. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Last chance to change your mind, little girl.”

She shook her head, beyond words. The feeling of utter helplessness was so delicious that her desire spiked even more, a reaction that shocked her. She closed her eyes and visions of herself bound in various positions floated through her brain. Was this what she’d been waiting for all her life? Was this what had been guiding her writer’s hand? Would her more than willing participation shock McCall?

“All right, then.”

Her eyes flew open at the sound of his voice. In an instant, he was pushing her thighs apart and kneeling between them.

"I'm going to taste every inch of you," he ground out, his voice so thick with desire it was almost unrecognizable.

She gasped when his fingers brushed against her breasts and her nipples sprang into peaks, a line of fire streaking to her womb. He took one plump, ripe berry into his mouth while his fingers rolled and tugged on the other one. Teeth scraped sensitive flesh, lighting every nerve. Then his tongue, like a slide of silk, licked and soothed the hard bud before switching to the other nipple. Heat raced through her, and her skin suddenly felt too tight.

Rina was conscious of forcing herself to keep her hands in place over her head, even as her body writhed under his touch.

As McCall worked his magic with his hands and his tongue, tension flowed out of her like water down a hill. She knew the exact moment she lost herself in the man.

Slowly, he kissed his way over her skin, his lips like warm velvet, now touching lightly, now placing sucking kisses. Marking her. He licked her navel and traced it around and around with the tip of his tongue. Everywhere he tasted her, heat followed and fire raced through her veins.

Forgotten was the pain in her head and her almost-broken nose. All that mattered was this man and his touch and the things he was doing to her.

She kept her eyes on him, his face taut in the reflected light and covered with a fine sheen of perspiration. But when he slipped his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her to his mouth, she forgot to look, forgot to think, forgot to breathe. His teeth grazed her clit, nibbling until it throbbed and pulsed. His tongue glided through her slit from top to bottom, licking at the wet flesh, sucking it into his mouth one inch at a time.

She could already feel her orgasm building,

rising up from deep in her womb. *Fuck me*, she wanted to scream, but she clenched her teeth together and kept her hands in place with a great effort of will. But when he began to flutter his tongue against her opening, inching it inside her waiting channel then slipping it back out, she knew she was close to losing it.

When he stopped, she moaned. "Please, please, please," she cried. "Oh, God, don't stop."

His laugh was hoarse and deep. "Do you want to come, little daredevil? Do you want to feel your body convulse?"

"Yes, yes, yes." She twisted back and forth as if her hands were, indeed, anchored in place.

"Not yet," he breathed. "Not until I decide it's time." He grabbed her T-shirt and bunched it in his hand. "If I were prepared I'd have a proper ball gag, so the entire hotel wouldn't hear you scream down the house. This will have to do. Open your mouth and bite down on it."

Willing to do anything if he would only give her release, she obediently did as he asked, sinking her teeth into the fabric.

"Okay?" he asked. "I don't want you to choke on it."

She nodded and lifted her hips to him.

"I want you to come this time, Rina. Don't hold back," he ordered. "And don't close your eyes."

Don't hold back? As if she could.

He lifted her to his mouth again and teased and tickled her cunt with his lips and tongue. His teeth nipped at all the sensitive flesh, biting lightly at her clit. The throbbing deep in her womb built in intensity, reaching into every part of her body.

His fingers clutched the globes of her ass as he thrust his stiffened tongue inside her waiting flesh and fucked her with it in a steady motion. Her climax rose again, roaring through her, and when it

hit, she shook so hard she was afraid her bones would shatter.

She was glad she had the T-shirt in her mouth because she was screaming mindlessly, her body convulsing as his tongue fucked her relentlessly. Her hips thrust at him, and her blood pulsed in her veins.

Her pussy was still throbbing, flooding his mouth with her cream, when he lowered her to the bed, yanked the belt out of where he'd tucked it and flipped her over. Before she realized it, he had pulled her up to her knees. She heard the tearing of foil, felt him moving behind her. In a moment, his lean fingers stroked her still fluttering vagina, spreading her cream, then spreading her lips wide. While spasms still wracked her body, he drove into her, his thick cock filling her.

"Is that good, Rina?" he rasped. "Does my cock feel good inside you? Jesus, you are so friggin' tight. You might burn me alive. Do you like the way this feels, baby?"

She couldn't speak, even if she hadn't had the T-shirt in her mouth, but she nodded her head and moaned her pleasure.

"This is only the beginning. Just the beginning. Before we're done, I'm going to do everything to you that you could imagine and more."

His fingers grabbed her hips, pulling her back toward him, and he stroked her slow and steady.

*Harder*, she wanted to shout. *Faster*.

But she knew he would take his time, drawing it out until his control finally snapped. The tension built in her body again, and before she even realized it, another orgasm overtook her. Her muscles spasmed, clamping on his thick shaft, milking him, and still, while she shook and shuddered, he never varied his pace.

She dropped her head to her bound wrists, heart

thundering as aftershocks raced through her, but before she could catch her breath, he'd found her sweet spot, his enormous cock pressing against it and rubbing back and forth. She shook her head, trying to tell him no more, but he was relentless.

She felt the spiral unwinding in her again, felt the walls of her vagina grasping him and milking him in desperation to reach the pinnacle of release again. At last, he increased his speed and his rhythm, pounding into her, driving her over the edge one more time.

She screamed into the T-shirt as every muscle in her body spasmed and she bathed him with her liquid heat. On and on it went, before the intensity finally began to ease off and his shaft ceased pulsing inside of her.

She fell forward onto the mattress, McCall shifting to the side and pulling her with him, their bodies still connected. Sweat glued them together, and she wasn't sure whose heart was beating harder or faster. McCall reached around and pulled the belt away from her wrists, then gently removed the T-shirt from her mouth.

His big hand stroked her arm, her hip, her thigh, caressing her, easing her. Eventually, his cock softened and he slipped out of her.

"Stay just like this," he whispered in her ear.

She felt the shift in weight as he got up and heard him in the bathroom. In seconds, he was back with a warm wash cloth. He turned her onto her back and bathed her sex and her thighs with soft, gentle strokes. When he was finished, he traced a line of feathery kisses over her neck, her breasts, her tummy, and her thighs.

"You are a revelation," he told her. "We aren't nearly done yet."

"Mmm," was all Rina could manage.

The mattress dipped under his weight, and then

he was lying beside her again, spooning her to his body, his strong arm around her.

“Won’t someone notice if you aren’t in your room?” she finally managed to ask in a sleepy voice.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

Her eyelids fluttered and then, despite everything that had happened, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Rina woke to feel McCall’s hard cock, already sheathed in a condom, pressing inside her. His strong arm held her in place against him as he entered her from the rear. He’d lifted her leg over his thigh to open her. No preparation, no foreplay. And she was ready for him.

“Okay?” he whispered in her ear. “Nothing fancy this time, daredevil. Just you and me, my cock in your pussy.”

If she thought that night in her house had been a deviation for her, she was very much mistaken. Tonight had been an unexpected revelation. Whatever drove him, whatever made him the best at his job, also made him an intense lover. There was a wildness in him, a primitive, barely-leashed core that flowed from his mouth to hers, from his body to hers.

*This is what I give the women in my books, but I didn’t think happened in real life. Lordy. If there’s anything better than this, I don’t think I can stand it.*

She clenched his thick shaft with her inner muscles even as she struggled to recover from their first joining.

McCall kissed her cheek, the shell of her ear, her jaw line, the hollow of her neck, more gentle than she expected him to be.

As they moved in a slow cadence, she felt his hard thickness within her, stroking in and out. Felt herself throbbing with need, shocked that she could

be aroused so quickly and so soon. Imperceptibly at first, then more pronounced, she moved her hips to increase the friction between their bodies. He lowered his hand and touched her clit, manipulating it until, with unexpected fierceness, once again her body shook and shuddered with an orgasm that took control of her.

McCall rode her through it, his fingers still tormenting her clit, until she felt his own climax explode at the last minute and he emptied himself inside the condom.

She was so exhausted she could barely move as he tightened his arm around her and tucked her body more tightly against his.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered.

Long after Rina had fallen asleep, he lay staring into the dark, wondering how he’d gotten himself into this jackpot. He didn’t want to feel this, didn’t want to be emotionally engaged with her, but his brain seemed to have gone on vacation.

He was no novice to sexual experiences. Far from it. As he’d tried to tell Rina tonight, being a sexual Dominant was where it was at for him. He’d had many women, all of whom knew the score and none of whom were important to him. Nor had been for a long time.

Haunted by the past, by the train wreck he’d made of his life, he’d deliberately made sex into nothing more than an exercise. A way to release the tension under which he lived. To affirm that he was still among the living. And after the act was completed, when the physical need had peaked and died, he had no trouble gathering himself and walking away.

But even an idiot would realize this time was different. Nothing in his life had ever come close to what he felt coupling with this woman. As exhausted as he was, as ferocious as the act had been, he knew

it wasn't enough. It had only whetted his appetite. She had taken to the introduction to his style of sex like a duck to water. He wondered if she'd still be as eager when his demands weren't so simple. When he commanded instead of asked. And how in God's name was he supposed to keep his emotions separated here?

Damn him to hell, this was far more than need. Desire and emotion had intruded under his carefully constructed outer shell. The sudden intensity of his feelings for Rina Devargas scared him far more than the people he was after.

What the hell was he doing? What was he getting himself into?

Big trouble, he told himself, but his common sense seemed to have taken a vacation. The best way to handle this would be to act like nothing had happened. Pull up that invisible wall he always kept wrapped around himself. If that was even possible. Because it shouldn't have happened. Nor could it again. All he had to do was remember his history. That should be enough of an ice bath.

Yeah, right. Try telling that to his body and the sensations he was trying to wish away.

He was shocked to realize how desperately he wanted this woman, wanted to be inside her, wanted to swallow her with his body. Wanted to bury himself and his past inside her warm, welcoming heat.

Making this about more than just sex would be a disaster for him. And for Rina. But it was happening, like a runaway roller coaster. The trick would be keeping distance between them when other people were around. And making her understand the necessity for it.

As he finally drifted off, listening to the soft puffs of Rina's breathing, he realized this was the first time he had ever wanted to actually sleep with

## Do You Trust Me?

a woman after sex. Getting up and leaving didn't even seem to be an option. And he knew he was in big, big trouble.

Damn, damn, damn.

He was so screwed.

## Chapter Four

“McCall?”

Rina stretched out an arm, expecting to feel flesh next to her but encountering only empty space.

*No. Please. Not again.*

She sat up, the sheets falling away from her naked body. Her gaze skittered around the room, finding only furniture and the robe draped over a chair.

Rubbing her eyes, she blinked them wide open, as if trying to conjure an image. Had she dreamed the whole thing? No. Absolutely not. Her sore and aching body told her the truth of the matter.

Then where the hell was McCall?

*Gone, just like the last time.*

No. Her brain finally engaged. He was covering up, playing a part, so no one would know what happened between them. I’ll take care of it, he’d told her.

The connecting door to the next room was open a few inches. She scrambled out of bed, slipped on the T-shirt lying at the foot of the bed, pulled the robe off the chair and shrugged into it, then opened the door wide.

McCall sat at the table where they’d eaten dinner the night before, mouth-wateringly dressed in jeans and a polo shirt. He looked as good this morning as he had in the heat of their passion. A coffee cup sat in front of him and as usual he was talking on his cell phone.

Rina shoved her hair out of her eyes, smiled at him, and poured coffee for herself in the other cup.

McCall finished his conversation and snapped the phone shut. "You should get dressed. We don't have much time." He handed her a bottle of aspirin. "Better take a couple of these."

His voice was so remote and cool Rina blinked. Had she wandered into someone else's room? Surely this wasn't the same man who had aroused her to such a pitch she had all but forgotten her own mind. The man who had told her what he would do to her in explicit detail. Who told her they were far from done. Her smile faltered.

"I thought maybe we could have breakfast together."

"I've eaten. Tell me what you'd like, and I'll order it while you shower."

"McCall?" She reached a hand out to touch his shoulder.

"Listen." He grabbed her hand. "Whatever goes on between us at night, during the day we have to be little more than strangers. It's the only way I can do my job." He studied every inch of her face. "Can you handle that?"

*Do I have a choice?*

He caught her hesitation. "Last night I asked you if you trust me. You said yes. Have you changed your mind?"

She drew in a long breath, looking hard at his eyes. His voice might be remote, but his eyes weren't. Far from it.

"No." She made her voice as cool as his. "I understand what you're saying. That's fine with me."

"Good. Someone will be here to pick us up shortly, so you'd better get moving." He handed her a bag from a local discount store. "Not your usual wardrobe, but it will have to do until you get home."

She gaped at him. "You went shopping for clothes for me? When?"

He shook his head. "Sully had someone do it."

They delivered the stuff about an hour ago. You'd better get dressed. As soon as they get here, we'll be leaving. What do you want to eat?"

"I...just toast. Thank you." Screwing up her courage, she asked, "Can you just give me some idea of what I'm up against? It would make things a lot easier to deal with."

The mask was back in place. "You know I can't, so please don't ask me again."

*Damn!*

Taking her cup of coffee, she fled the room, slamming the connecting door behind her. In an instant, she heard it open.

"This door is not to be closed." His voice was flat, uninflected. "That's an order."

"Yes, *sir*." She snapped a shaky salute and headed for the bathroom. "Did you want to watch me shower, too?"

In seconds, he was beside her, his hands gripping her shoulders. "Rina, this is not a game. You know I can't give you any details. Just be aware that dangerous people have hatched a treacherous plot. Right now, they have you in their sights. My job is to make sure nothing happens to you. And help find whatever John was hiding from them."

"H-hiding?"

His eyes narrowed, and a muscle jumped in his cheek. "Yes, hiding. No matter how much you deny it, I think you know what I'm talking about." He waited, but when she didn't answer, he stepped back. "Take your shower and get dressed."

She'd said she trusted him, told him she could do this his way, but now she wondered if that was possible. Strain piled on strain. Where did he put his feelings that he could bury them so completely after the intimacy they shared?

*I will not cry. I will not fall apart. I will just remember what last night was like and hold onto*

*that.* She could almost hear John whispering to her, “*You can hold it together, Dusty.*”

She repeated it over and over as she showered, dried her hair, and pulled on the jeans and blouse Sully had provided. The bruise on the side of her face was turning a rainbow of colors, and her nose was still swollen. All things considered, though, she didn’t look too bad. Without makeup to use, she was finished quickly. When she returned to the meeting room, a plate with a silver cover sat on the table with a clean coffee mug beside it.

McCall pointed. “Toast. Eat up. Our ride will be here any minute.” He looked up at the sound of the double knock on the door. “In fact, it’s already here.”

Even with the prearranged signal, he pulled his gun from his waistband and held it at his side while he opened the door. He shoved the weapon back in place when Sully and another man entered. The older man immediately went to Rina and cast a critical eye over her.

“I’d say today is a vast improvement over last night,” he told her. “How’s the head?”

Unconsciously, she touched the bruise. “I’ll live.”

“Let’s hope so, and I’m not talking about your bruises. Ready to go?”

She lifted her hands and dropped them. “I guess. All I have is what’s on me. And by the way, thanks very much.”

“At least it will get you home.” He looked at McCall. “I’ve ordered new identification for her. Someone will bring it to her house. And I’m sending a team tomorrow to install a new security system. I wish I could get them there today, but everyone’s...hunting. So be on your toes.”

Rina widened her eyes. “You think they found me already?”

“I thought I explained last night,” Sully told her with exaggerated patience. “They have your purse.

They have your address. The only thing we can hope is they can't move as fast as we can. And they won't chance anything in broad daylight. I hope."

McCall nodded. He clipped his cell phone to his belt, swept the papers on the table into a slim briefcase, and stood up. "Let's roll."

Everyone was silent as they rode in the big SUV to Tampa International Airport. The driver avoided the main terminals, taking them instead to a small building with a sign that said simply "Private." A gleaming Gulfstream waited fifty yards away. The SUV pulled up next to it and everyone got out.

Sully gave Rina one last searching look. "Are you sure you have nothing to tell me? About John's call? Or anything else?"

With an extreme effort of will, she refrained from touching the locket. *Not until I know who betrayed my brother.* "Nothing at all."

"All right then. Have a good trip."

A man walked out of the building carrying a large suitcase, which he handed to McCall. "This was delivered a little while ago."

McCall nodded his thanks and took it from the man.

The cabin of the plane was luxuriously outfitted with leather arm chairs, tables for working, a flat screen television monitor, and a bar built into one wall.

"There's a bedroom and bath through there." McCall pointed toward the rear of the plane. "And a galley tucked behind the bar. I don't know what's on board for provisions, but if you get hungry, I'm sure I can rustle something up for you."

He still had not smiled, and now his eyes were hidden behind the aviator sunglasses he'd worn since they left the motel.

"I'm fine. Thank you." She could be just as cold and formal as he was. She'd give nothing away.

“We’d better get buckled in then.”

Rina chose one of the arm chairs near a window and fastened her seat belt. McCall conferred with the pilot who came out of the cockpit to greet him, then established himself at one of the work tables, facing away from her.

Once they’d taken off and were in the air, she got up to get a glass of water at the exact moment he headed for the coffee on the bar. They bumped into each other, and their bodies were pressed suddenly together in the small area with no space between them. Rina felt his cock harden instantly beneath the rough denim. She was sure her nipples were poking into his chest.

*Oh, God.*

He’d taken off the shades and now stared down at her with those impenetrable silver eyes, darkness flashing through them. Neither of them moved or said a word. The air between them was like a thunderstorm, electricity zapping and crackling and wind-tossed. Invisible lightning shot through them, piercing the armor they’d each erected after last night.

Then he was burning her mouth with one of his incendiary kisses, his lips molded to hers. She knew she should push him away, but that was an impossibility. Apparently, all he had to do was touch her and she went up in flames. When had this happened? *How* had it happened?

“I thought we were supposed to be cold strangers in public,” she said when she could breathe.

“That’s the plan.” He lifted his head. “But we’re not in public now, are we?” His tongue traced the outline of her lips, his hands tightly gripping her shoulders. “Damn it. What is it about you that makes me lose my mind?”

“Same thing that affects me, I guess.” She was

weak-kneed, trying to find her equilibrium.

"I'm poison," he told her. "I told you that from the beginning. Why do you think I left the way I did that first time? If I was a nice person, I'd tell you to call Sully right this minute and tell him you'll go into hiding. Get yourself away from me." His breathing was raspy and his voice thick. "But god help me, I can't make myself leave you alone. The things I want to do to you drive me crazy."

*He's right. He's probably poison for me. I should lock myself away at the other end of this plane, but I'm addicted to him as much as he is to me.*

"I don't understand it, either. But I can't seem to control how I feel about you." She slid her hands under his shirt and brushed her fingers across the soft curls of hair on his chest. Deliberately tormenting herself. And him.

"Shit," he swore and gripped her face. He pulled her mouth to his again, his tongue sweeping inside with broad strokes like a heated saber. Need, feral and vicious, clawed its way through her.

Breaking the kiss with obvious difficulty, he picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind them. In what seemed like seconds, he had them both stripped of their clothes and a condom rolled onto his pulsing shaft.

"You don't know how badly I want to tie you up, face down, and fuck that pretty sweet ass of yours," he groaned. "Again and again. Can you take that, Rina? Does that idea turn you off?"

She shook her head. "No," she breathed, a flood of cream drenching her as the image floated through her head.

His fingers plucked at her nipples, stretching them until they tingled with heat. His knee pushed her thighs wider apart, and he slid his hands down, down until they rested on the top of her mons. And all the time he kept talking to her in that voice,

rough with lust. "But right now, I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll scream. This bedroom is all but soundproof, and I want to hear you yell like you couldn't last night."

"Yes. Oh, yes." She squirmed on the bed, spreading her legs even more for him. "Hurry. Please."

*My God, I'm turning into an animal. How does he do this to me?*

"Show me that pretty little pussy, Rina," he commanded. "Do it now. Open those lips wide for me and let me see all that delicious flesh. I'll bet you're dripping wet now, aren't you."

With shaking fingers, she reached down and opened herself for him, the eroticism of the act driving the need in her higher.

His eyes glittered as he stared at her open sex. "Play with yourself for me. Did you ever masturbate for a man before? Let him watch you pleasure yourself? Tell me."

She could hardly get her breath as her fingers slid through the fluid coating her folds. A throbbing set up inside her cunt, deep and insistent.

In the light of the cabin, his lean, rugged figure glowed like the image of some god, muscles flexing with each move, dark eyes eating her alive. Just looking at him made her hotter, weaker, willing to do whatever he wanted. And his cock. God, it was so magnificent. The remembered feel of it inside her heated her blood and set it racing through her veins.

"Well? Did you, daredevil?"

"N-no," she finally gasped. "Never."

"Good. I want to be first. Do it, Rina. Finger that clit for me."

He knelt between her outspread thighs, stroking his latex-clad cock as Rina tentatively moved the tip of one finger to the protruding knot of flesh. The moment she touched it fire spiked through her body

and a fresh wash of cream slipped from her vagina and trickled down into the cleft of her ass. She couldn't tear her eyes away from McCall's as she manipulated that tiny bud, driving herself higher and higher.

The rasp of McCall's uneven breathing blended with her own choppy breaths and the pounding of her heart. The beginning of a climax gathered low in her belly.

"Do you like that?" he asked. "Do you like having me watch you play with yourself? Does it turn you on?"

She nodded, well beyond speech.

When he slid one finger into her quivering vagina, her muscles clamped down on him, trying to drag him further inside her. She was...almost...there...almost...almost...

The orgasm began to break over her, roaring through her body. McCall slipped his finger out and used his hands to pull wide the lips of her sex, staring at the spasming, slick flesh and the juice of her arousal pouring from her.

*Fuck me!* She screamed in her head. *Fill me. Damn it, I want your cock.*

Her body bucked, her finger kept up its motion, and her internal muscles clenched over and over again. At the moment when she thought she'd surely fly apart, he took his cock in his hand, leaned over her, and drove into her with one hard, swift stroke.

The swollen shaft filling her, stretching her, drove Rina toward yet another climax, the muscles of her tummy clenching, her hips thrusting. She lifted her hand and used both to grab his arms to steady herself, her ankles linked together at the small of his back to pull him in more tightly.

Sweat dripped from his face and mingled with the perspiration on her heated flesh as their bodies slammed into each other. There was no finesse this

time. No preparation. No kisses or stimulating foreplay. This wasn't making love; this was raw sex. But the intimacy of it was just as overwhelming.

His gaze still held hers, watching her for the unmistakable signs of yet another orgasm about to crest. Hands tight on her bottom, he lifted her to give himself greater depth and with one final plunge took them both over the edge.

The walls of her pussy clutched around him, grasping him, as she shuddered over and over. Her blood raced in her veins, and the walls of her cunt pulsed and clenched again and again. She felt as if an earthquake had exploded with her at the epicenter. It took her a long time to ride through the aftershocks.

At last, McCall slid carefully from her body and eased her legs down. They lay there panting, absorbing the last of the tiny spasms. When he rolled off the bed to dispose of the condom, Rina covered her eyes with her forearm, not sure she could look at him. She had no idea how to handle this powerful effect he had on her or even what to call it. Or what she was supposed to do when they reached San Antonio. But the sexual pull between them was so overwhelming they couldn't seem to escape it.

God. She was in *such* trouble.

When he leaned down and brushed the knuckles of his hand against her cheek, the gesture both so tender and so uncharacteristic of him, she wanted to cry.

"It will be all right," he told her in a tight voice. "I don't know how, but it will. Trust me, no matter what."

What was he saying? How could it possibly be all right when her world was collapsing, her brother was God knows where, and McCall had lighted a fire inside her she might never be able to put out? How

had she let herself become addicted so quickly to a man whose hidden baggage might destroy her?

She finally looked at him. "McCall, I—"

"Not now. I have work I have to finish." He traced the outline of her lips with the tip of one finger. "But when we get to your house, we'll talk."

Talk? About what?

How in hell was she going to manage with him living in her house if he threw up that same emotional wall again during the day but found his way to her bed each night?

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Behind his desk in a walnut-paneled office in Washington, D.C., Senator Bryce Patterson held the telephone receiver to his ear and drummed his fingertips. As the senior senator from his state, he had been elected six times to the Senate, but not without the help of some very powerful men. He knew his obligations to them and always kept his part of the bargain. Now, in the waning days of his career, he was finding some of the biggest ones the hardest to keep.

"Everett, we have to be very careful with this," he told the man on the other end of the conversation. "I've told you that."

"Time is running out," Congressman Everett Hanes said, his deep voice booming across the wires. "That bill is ready to come out of committee, and once it does, if President Brandon signs it, we're all cooked."

"I'm working on things."

"Like killing John Wilson." Hanes snorted derisively. "That was a stupid move."

"That wasn't me and you. It was ordered by our patron. The eminent entrepreneur, Andrew Brechtel."

"Brechtel should realize he can't have his trained monkeys running around killing people in

this country the way he does everywhere else.”

Patterson gritted his teeth. “Don’t try to tell me you had no idea how he operated.”

Hanes made a rude noise. “Even he should have known killing Wilson would open a can of worms. Now that ultra-secret team of his is breathing down our necks. And we’re nearly out of time.”

“But they didn’t find anything, right? No one knows what he did with the information, especially them. Otherwise, we’d be out of business. So what did we gain?” Patterson picked up a pen and began rolling it between his fingers.

“We got rid of one troublesome thorn in our side,” Hanes conceded.

“Yes, well, if we’d just been a little more patient, we might have had everything.” He cleared his throat. “We did get one nice little piece of information none of you were aware of.”

“And that is?”

“We got hold of his *real* identification file, not the fake one they built for him.” Patterson liked dropping bombshells like this. It kept people off balance, leaving more power in his hands. “Guess what, folks. His actual name is John Devargas and he has a sister.”

“A sister? He has a sister?” The voice was heavy with disbelief. “And how do you know that.”

“Uncovering the relationship wasn’t easy since that information is buried very deep. If we didn’t have some heavy artillery on our side who knows how to find these things, I’d never have found it.”

“That heavy artillery can’t be putting himself on the line like that. We can’t afford to have anything trace back to him until we’re ready to move.” Hanes paused. “How did she even cross your radar?”

“It seems she paid a little visit to her brother’s townhouse the same night we were ‘searching’ for the information.”

“How do we know it was her brother’s place? He could have been a close friend. Or a lover.”

“Our ‘friend’ breached the firewall searching for information on who our victim was. He had to dig really deep but he uncovered the man’s real last name. Devargas. And that opens another can of worms. In her haste to get away from the man we sent to the townhouse, our little pigeon dropped her purse with all her identification in it. Her driver’s license identifies her as Rina Devargas. That’s not a common surname. And the relationship’s been verified. That means her visit to his place was no accident.”

There was a prolonged silence before Hanes spoke again. “Is it too much to hope you know where this sister is?”

“I do.” Patterson paused again, drawing out the anticipation deliciously.

“So where is she?”

“She lives in Texas. In San Antonio. Our friend has people on it as we speak. He’s sure she was at the townhouse because John told her where he hid the information. Unfortunately for all of us, he’d begun to suspect someone on his team had betrayed him and took steps to keep the information away from everyone.” Patterson’s mouth lifted in a vicious grin. “If only he knew how right he was. But that means our man in place somehow gave himself away, and we can’t have that happen again.”

“Tell our man to be extra careful. If he slips again we’ll have to eliminate him.” He swore softly. “Let me know the minute you have your hands on her. And keep our errand boys under control. We can’t afford to have bodies littering the landscape. Not at this point.”

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When the plane landed in San Antonio, someone was waiting with a rental car.

"I figured, with your purse gone, you didn't have any keys," McCall said. "If you've got an extra set at home, I'll get someone to retrieve your car."

She'd insisted on driving, arguing with McCall that she knew where they were going and he didn't. The ride, like the end of the plane trip, had been accomplished in silence.

Unfortunately, it gave her too much time to think.

*Do you trust me, Rina?*

The words echoed in her head. Well, did she? She'd said yes, but each time he retreated behind his wall she was plagued by doubts. If she trusted him, why didn't she tell him about the locket? Or did she only trust him with her body?

How were they supposed to share a house together? He was making her crazy. *We can't show any relationship in public*, he'd said. Then he practically attacked her on the plane. Or wasn't that in public?

*We'll talk when we get to your house*, he told her. About what? For the moment, she had no idea what to say to him. Her emotions apparently had been tossed in a mixer and had no intention of settling down, especially when McCall was harder to read than a foreign dictionary.

*But my body reads him just fine.*

She shivered as she remembered the things they'd done last night. The things he'd said they would do.

When they got closer to her street, he finally broke the silence. "Drive past your house, circle the block a couple of times, and approach the house from the opposite way we're going now."

"What for? Why can't I just go right into the garage?"

"Don't you want to find out if there's a chance someone is lurking around? Waiting for you? Maybe

someone like you ran into last night?”

“Oh.” Her stomach clenched, and she unconsciously touched the bruise on her face. She didn’t know what else to say so she simply followed his directions.

When Rina had moved from her condo to the house a year ago, one of its attractions was the rural setting at the far northwest end of San Antonio. Her neighbors were visible but not close, and she had enough land to give her the privacy she wanted. Now, she wasn’t sure if that was a curse or a blessing. Did she still want that same privacy, or would she feel safer with other people closer to her?

“I remembered how isolated you are out here,” he commented. “There’s a lot of space between you and your neighbors.”

“Yes. I like it that way.” Let him make of that whatever he wanted.

At last, he seemed satisfied that there were no discernible signs of the enemy. “Go on and head for your house. Since you don’t have your car, you don’t have your remote. How do you plan to open the garage door?”

“I leave the side door unlocked. You can let yourself in and press the button inside. Please,” she snapped, hearing a muttered curse. “I’m a writer, not a spy. And people leave their doors unlocked around here all the time.

“Not any more,” he told her. “When you get to your house, let me out. I’ll take care of things.”

The minute she hit the driveway, McCall was out of the car and around to the side of the house. In seconds the garage door slid up and she drove in, the door already closing behind her. Rina climbed out of the car and opened the side door into the house.

“Not locked?” McCall asked her.

“I never lock that door. The garage door locks when it closes.”

“From now on, I want it locked. No exceptions. Better let me go first.”

She stood impatiently in the little utility room while he pulled out his gun and checked every room in the house. It seemed to take forever before he was back, signaling all clear.

As they moved into the living room, he looked around at the rambling, adobe ranch style house. “Not bad.”

The one time he’d visited her she’d still been in her condo. Now she tried to see this new home through his eyes. Hardwood floors gleamed in the slanting sunlight and fabrics of soft colors covered the furniture. Wide windows opened the house to bright light that swept over the artifacts displayed everywhere. It was a reflection of her personality. If he didn’t like it, that was his problem.

Meanwhile, she had other things on her mind. Like finding out just what John had been involved in and exactly how she was supposed to figure out who to give the locket to. Because John sure didn’t explain a hell of a lot. Maybe if she had more information...

Surely John didn’t expect her to wait around indefinitely for someone to give some kind of signal.

“Exactly how long do you plan to stay here?” she asked McCall. Conflict raged inside her. She wanted him gone. No. She wanted him to stay.

*This is making me crazy.*

McCall studied her for the space of two heartbeats. “For as long as it takes. Hopefully before the worst case scenario plays itself out.”

“I’m going to take a shower and change.” She started up the stairs. “You can pick whichever one of the guest rooms pleases you.”

He closed a hand on her arm, stopping her on the second step. “I said we needed to talk when we got here. We should do it now.”

“About what?” Her fingers tightened on the banister as she swallowed back her edginess.

“All right. Do you want to come into the kitchen? I’ll put on some coffee.”

“I’m coffee’d out, but I could use something cold.”

“Fine.”

Rina poured orange juice for both of them, then sat down at the kitchen table across from him. She waited, knots twisting in her stomach while he took off his sunglasses and brushed his hair back from his face, obviously choosing his words carefully.

“This is not an easy conversation for me, Rina.” He watched her face as he spoke.

“That already sounds like I’m not going to like it.” Rina sipped her juice, watching him over the rim of the glass.

“I just want to lay it all out on the table so there’s no misunderstanding here. So you have one last chance to say, ‘thanks, but no thanks.’” His voice was flat and uninflected.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I thought last night we were...developing something. I thought we were going to talk about how we could make this work.” She clenched her fists in her lap. “Silly me.”

“Listen to me.” He fiddled with his glass. “There’s no way we can get around what’s happening between us. Believe me, I’d give everything if we could. Not because of you but because of me. Of what I am. Despite last night, despite your willingness to try...whatever I want, I can only be trouble for you. You deserve more than I can give you, but I’m warning you. If you don’t shut it down now, I’ll take everything you’ve got.”

She stiffened her spine. “You asked me to trust you. I thought that meant we could try to work things out. See where this goes.” She tucked her hair behind one ear. She hated the telling blush creeping up her cheeks as memories of the erotic things they’d

done slammed into her. "You can't take what I'm not willing to give. It's my choice, too, McCall."

His mouth tightened. "You think I didn't like what we did? That I don't want more? How many times do I have to tell you? It's not you, Rina, it's me. When I said I was poison, I meant it." He took a careful swallow of his drink and set it down slowly. "I have so much baggage I need a truck to haul it around. And despite your willingness to...experiment with me, I worry that ultimately, it will be too much for you. That I'll be too much for you. That you won't be able to deal with the shields I have to put up during the day."

"I'm not a child, McCall." Her fists were so tight her nails dug into her palms. *Shut up*, she wanted to yell at him. *I know what I'm doing*. But did she? And how could she offer her body on a platter to a man she still wasn't sure she could trust with John's secret.

Her head was beginning to ache.

"The smartest thing for you to do," he went on, "would be to lock yourself behind your door until this is all over. And while I'm sitting here warning you, telling you what you should do, I'm hoping you'll ignore what I'm saying. So I guess that makes me the asshole of the year."

Rina let out a tremulous sigh. "Let's cut to the chase here, shall we? What's the bottom line?"

"That I can't make myself not want you. That I'll take you in ways you've never even heard of. That I don't know what I have to give beyond the physical. If I could find the strength to do it, I'd tell you to kick my ass out of here and call Sully to demand a replacement. But I can't. So it means I'll have to work extra hard not to let myself be distracted from my assignment, and that's why during the day we're little more than strangers." He let out a deep, agonized sigh. "And, finally, it means I won't need

one of the guest bedrooms. I'll be sleeping in yours."

Her stomach unknotted and did a little flip as the total effect of what he was saying hit her.

"What is it you're so afraid of, McCall?"

He took a swig of his orange juice before answering her. "Nothing. Everything. Things I can never talk to you about. Maybe whatever this is will just burn itself out. God knows we'd both be better off."

So. Whatever happened in his past must have nearly destroyed him. He couldn't put it behind him. It couldn't just be some woman who ran from the D/s relationship, even though she expected McCall to be a very controlling yet giving Dom. It had to be more than that. And, damn it, she couldn't ask Sully for help on this one.

*Great. Let's fuck ourselves to death so we can get over each other. I can hardly wait.*

She had to swallow twice before she could speak without scratching his eyes out. "If that's the way you feel, why are we doing this?"

"Because we both want it." His voice was flat, his face expressionless. "It's either this or both of us driving each other nuts. And compromising the mission."

"And you consider that a valid reason?" she spat at him.

His eyes drew her, the gray now a stormy black. "Rina, the choice is yours. All you have to do is say no."

*No.*

The word echoed in her head, but she couldn't make her lips form it. Why was she punishing herself by agreeing to this stupid situation? Because, truth to tell, she'd wanted him from the very first time John introduced them. Because he was the man in all her erotic fantasies, the one who made her nipples harden and every erotic pulse in her body

beat a furious tempo. Because in bed, McCall brought her a wildness she'd never known. For however long it lasted, she wanted it. Because, right now, it was the only thing that could blot out the terror invading her life.

So if that was all she could have, she'd take it. No matter what that made her look like.

He waited the space of one more heartbeat. Two. Then he nodded.

"Fine. Then we're done talking." A muscle jumped in his cheek. "That works out just fine. I have two main objectives here—to protect you and to find out why you were at the townhouse."

"Anything else?" she asked, trying to be as matter-of-fact as he was.

"Yeah. My social skills suck, so I'm sure to piss you off with great regularity. Consider yourself warned."

She burst out laughing, as much a release from tension as anything else. "Fine. Then you won't mind if I kick your ass now and then."

He smiled. It was obvious he was using unfamiliar muscles to do so. "So. Let's get settled in."

They both rose from the table at the same time, bodies bumping. She put out her hands to keep from stumbling and came into contact with the hard wall of his chest. His hands reached up to cover hers, his hips shifting just enough that she could feel his erection press against the soft flesh of her tummy. His breath hissed.

"Jesus, I can't look at you for five minutes without getting hard." He rubbed their joined hands over her nipples. "I see something else gets hard, too."

She lifted her face at the same time he bent his head, and he took her mouth in a kiss that sent heat through every nerve and muscle in her body. He did that thing with his tongue, sweeping and tasting,

that almost made her climax just standing there.

When he broke the kiss, she wanted to wail at him to come back. Not to stop. The only sound in the room was the uneven rasping of their breath. Her heart was still galloping in her chest and her breathing hadn't quite returned to normal.

McCall carefully stepped away from her. "Go take your shower. I need to go through every room in this house again as well as the outside perimeter."

Rina stood for a long time in the shower, hoping the pounding water would wash the cobwebs out of her brain. How had she let herself get into this fix? McCall was a taker, no mistake about it. Even his rare gentleness had a demanding edge to it. But after that first night so many months ago, she'd known if the chance presented itself again, she'd be right where she was. Rapidly becoming addicted.

She touched the locket at her throat.

*I'm not forgetting you, John. I just wish I knew if this whole thing with McCall is the signal you told me to look for or if I'm just fooling myself.*

By the time she turned off the water, her brain was just as muddled as before. When she went back downstairs again, freshly showered and dressed in slacks and a silk blouse, McCall was waiting for her in the hallway.

"Your security stinks," he told her.

"I'm a writer. How much security do I need?"

"A lot more than you've got. But that'll be taken care of tomorrow when Gage and Les get here. I just wish we didn't have to wait until then, but they're finishing up a priority assignment. Now. What's your routine?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, what do you do when you get up in the morning until you go to bed at night? Do you have places you go? Do people come here? We have to make some arrangements, but a lot depends on

your schedule. What does a writer do with her day?"

"She writes," she told him. "What else?"

"Can the smart mouth. I need to have details."

"All right. Whatever. Right now I'm working on a new book. I spend most of each morning in my den, writing. Afternoons I run errands, cook, bake, do something to let my mind relax and open itself to new ideas. Then I write again for two hours or so before I quit for the day."

"Are people likely to call? Come over?"

"Of course." She flapped a hand in the air. "I'm not a hermit."

"We'll need to be ready for that. They'll ask questions about me." He frowned. "Anyone who's especially likely to stick his or her nose into your business?"

"*You're* sticking your nose into my business," she pointed out.

"What about a boyfriend?"

She had to laugh at that. "Isn't it a little late to be worrying about any men in my life?"

"Well, do you?" His voice was heavy with impatience.

The smile disappeared and anger seeped into her voice. "Do you really think I'd be falling into bed and having wild monkey sex with you if I had a man in my life? Is that how you see me, McCall?"

"Okay. Sorry. I told you I'd piss you off."

She grinned. "So you did." Then she sobered. "Back to your question. I need to find a way to explain you to my friends. My agent. My publicist. Yes, there are people woven into my life who will ask questions, for God's sake."

"Fine. Where did you live before San Antonio?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Where did I live? Detroit. Why?"

He made a face. "What a God-awful place. No wonder you moved. All right. I know enough about

Detroit to fake it. I'm an old lover from the Motor City who's just shown up in town."

Rina closed her eyes for a moment, dizzy with the turn of events. She had the feeling she was on a runaway train that was unstoppable.

"Just follow my lead," he added, "and you won't get into trouble."

"I'm already in more trouble than I can handle," she muttered under her breath.

"Did you say something?"

She just shook her head. "Listen, I need to get to the grocery store. I hadn't planned on having a guest, and I'm a little low on groceries."

"Good. That will give me a chance to check out the neighborhood. Map it in my mind."

"Map it?" She raised her eyebrows.

"See how easy it could be for someone to cruise by your house, get onto your property, get away if they're spotted."

Tendrils of fear clutched at her. For a moment, she almost forgot the degree of danger she was in. "I have a small problem. Without my purse, I have no identification and no cash. Not even an ATM card."

"Not to worry. The team coming to install your security system is bringing the new stuff with them. Sully took care of it like he said he would."

"B-but how? I mean..."

McCall gave her a wry grin. "Sully can do anything."

Her jaw dropped. "He can get into my private life just like that?"

McCall nodded. "And in this case, you should be damn glad he can. Meanwhile, I'll pay for the groceries."

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a telltale gesture that always betrayed her nerves. She dropped her hand quickly. "I guess I don't have a choice. Thank you. Also, I need to check my

messages on my machine. I'm sure there's a bunch. Let me do that first."

He followed her into the den. The message light on her answering machine was blinking madly, and she punched the Play button. Two were from her editor, three were from her agent, both asking for immediate callbacks. Several from Laurel, her best friend, wondering where the hell she was that she didn't even answer her cell. And a few miscellaneous calls that she could ignore.

The last one, though, made her heart stop.

"Miss Devargas?" The voice was soft but icy cold. "You don't know me, but I'm a friend of John's. I believe he gave you something that belongs to me. I want it back. I'll call again to make arrangements." Pause. "I wouldn't mention this call to anyone."

Rina groped for the nearest chair, her legs unsteady, her body trembling. She felt as if a block of ice had dropped into the pit of her stomach and was slowly freezing her blood. With a tremendous effort of will, she forced herself not to touch the locket.

"Did you recognize that voice?"

She jumped. McCall was right beside her.

"No." She shook her head, her hands tightly clasped together. "I have no idea who that was. Do you?"

*But I'll bet anything it isn't the person John told me to expect.*

"What did John give you?" His voice was hard and flat. "I asked you if you trust me, remember? If you meant what you said, don't you think it's time you came clean with me? It could be dangerous for you to hold onto anything."

"Dangerous?" she squeaked.

"Rina, these people aren't playing a game. If you have something, give it to me and I'll deal with it."

*I've been betrayed. Trust no one.*

John's words came back loud and clear. She may be having mind-blowing sex with McCall and Sully might vouch for him, but she still didn't know him any better than she knew the deadly voice on the telephone. After his little 'talk' and the way his attitude blew hot and cold, how could she get an accurate reading on him?

What if he was the one who betrayed John? Men were very good at hiding things, even in bed. Maybe especially there. What if...oh, God, what if the whole sex thing and his attitude were just a ploy?

No. She shook her head mentally. She didn't think that was true. But she wasn't about to hand anything over to anyone until she was sure they were the right person.

"Well?" he prompted.

"Nothing." She wet her lips. "He gave me nothing. I have no idea what they want."

He threw up his hands. "Have it your way. But this little game of yours can't play out much longer."

She glared up at him. "Is that what you think, McCall? That I'm playing a game? Maybe *you're* the one playing games. In the bedroom."

Every muscle in his face tightened. "None of this is a game to me, Rina. None of it."

She drew in a deep, calming breath and turned away from him. "I have to return my calls before we leave. Two of them, anyway. Business."

"No problem. I have some calls of my own to make." He unclipped his cell and headed for her patio.

Rina kept her voice upbeat and casual during her calls to her editor, Carilyn Moore, and her agent, Shar Fontaine.

"Thank god you finally called back," Carilyn said. "Have you spoken to Shar? I want to make sure everything's coordinated for the March second event." Her voice held a bright edge of excitement.

"This is the first time they've included anything like this. All the publicity from the governor's office for the past year has included the release of the book and the signing. It's been on the governor's calendar for the same length of time. We can't afford to drop the ball here."

"Relax," Rina said. "We'll have everything under control." *I hope.*

Shar was another problem. "Don't forget you've got some other book signings scheduled. I sent you an email with all the info. The first one's tomorrow."

Damn. She had forgotten all about them in the topsy turvy world of the last few hours. McCall would have a cow. Or maybe a whole herd.

"Rina? Are you there?"

"Yes." She gave herself a mental shake. "Sorry."

"*Roses for Breakfast* is in its third printing and the orders keep pouring in. We're using these signings to also promote the new book and the event at the Alamo." She paused. "There's not a problem, is there?"

"No. No problem." *Only someone trying to kill me, a very suspicious agent that's taking me on an erotic roller coaster, and a sickening feeling that my brother is dead.*

"Rina, are you sure everything's all right?" Shar's concern came across the connection. "You sound a little strange."

"Yes, everything's fine, Shar." She drew a deep breath, let it out, and waited for the response to her next words. "I'll be bringing a guest with me."

"Oh?" The curiosity hummed across the phone lines. "Anyone I know?"

"An old friend who showed up out of the blue. He won't be a problem." *I hope.*

"He?" Shar's interest was sharp. "Sounds interesting. A romance for the romance author? Is there a story your fans would love to hear? Maybe

we can work it into the interviews.”

Oh, they’d love to hear this one. “No story. I mean it. Just give me the details again, and I’ll be there.”

She made notes on her desk calendar as Shar talked and assured her again everything was fine.

“I can’t wait to see that hunk you’re bringing,” Shar chuckled.

“Oh, please. How do you know he’s not ugly as a toadstool and completely unappealing?”

“I read your books, honey, remember? Nobody who writes about alpha males like you do would settle for that. See you tomorrow. Three o’clock sharp.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. We can go over the details for March second.”

“The Texas Independence Day celebration, right? It’s almost here. Carilyn just touched base with me about it. Again.”

“Honey, this is a very big deal. You’ll be signing the new book in a tent at the Alamo after the governor’s speech. They’ve had it-”

“I know, I know. On all the governor’s publicity for the last year. Believe me, it’s engraved on my brain.”

“And also on everything coming out of the Alamo. Don’t get antsy, Rina. This could be your biggest event yet, cookie.”

She’d set the new book during the time of the Texas Revolution. Shar had worked incredible magic to get the debut of the book tied into the activities at the Alamo, the biggest celebration in the state. This year even President Brandon was coming and everyone was about to wet their pants.

“I’m good, Shar. I know the drill.”

“Every big shot in the state will be in attendance and then some. We’ll get mega publicity. Your new

boyfriend won't screw it up, will he?"

"He may not even still be here then." Rina hoped she was right.

When she hung up, she leaned back in her chair, pushing her hair away from her face and trying to wish away the beginning of a headache. Time to face McCall with this newest wrinkle.

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McCall paced the enormous back yard, cell phone clapped to his ear, venting his frustration.

"No, I didn't recognize the voice. And we can't trace a call on an answering machine. It could be any one of them."

"McCall, what's your take on her?" Sully's voice was heavy with concern.

*My take on her? I can't keep my dick in my pants, and I'm becoming far too attached to her. Is that what you want to hear, Sully? And tonight I'm going to take her to her knees and fuck the shit out of her.*

He shook himself. This was business. No matter how much he craved Rina Devargas, he still had to keep one thing in mind. His gut told him she knew something she wasn't telling him, no matter how many times she denied it. He wasn't stupid. None of them were. She didn't show up at a location she supposedly didn't even know about to meet the brother she wasn't even supposed to be in contact with and not have an agenda.

How the hell was he going to get it out of her? Not with sex. He might be a blue ribbon asshole, but he wasn't about to play that card. Not with Rina. He'd have to think of something else.

*Do you trust me, Rina?*

*Yes, I do.*

But obviously not completely.

"McCall?" Sully's voice cut into his mental meanderings. "You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here," he answered. "And I don't know what to tell you. I haven't pushed her again on what she was doing at John's, but I will. I wanted to give her some time to realize just how great the danger is." He kept a watchful eye on the house as he talked. "You really believe he told her something? Or left something for her? But what?"

"I don't know. It's just damned strange. He doesn't see her for three years and suddenly she shows up there in the middle of the night. We pulled her phone records and know she got a call from someone, most likely John. What did he tell her? Did he give her some kind of secret code? I know in my gut he sent her to his place to get something. We just have to figure out what."

"If he did, I don't know where she's stashed it. The people who attacked her have her purse. It's obviously not there, or she wouldn't have gotten the threatening message from them on her machine. She threw away her clothes at the hotel. And she hasn't had an opportunity to hide anything since I picked her up in Tampa."

"If it's the proof he had of his suspicions, then you'd better get it soon," Sully said. "President Nicholas Brandon's life and the security of this country could depend on it, if what he found out is correct."

"I'll do what I can, sir." *And screw up another woman's life in the process.* The taste of bile washed up to his mouth.

"There's some good news, anyway. I juggled some schedules and shook Gage and Les loose. They were in Dallas so they should be there any time now. They'll be bringing equipment to tap the phones as well as the security stuff you need. I didn't think, under the circumstances, we should wait until tomorrow. If she does get another call, we'll be all set and waiting for it."

“Thanks, Sully. I appreciate it.”

He spotted Rina stepping into the yard from the house and there it was again, that intense surge of heat she generated in him. She had a graceful way of moving that made her seem to flow. The sun caught the highlights in her auburn hair, picking up sparks of flame and almost creating a halo around her. Looking at her walking toward him, hips swaying with her stride, her breasts outlined beneath the soft fabric of the T-shirt, his erection pressed instantly and painfully against the denim of his jeans.

*Tonight, Rina. Tonight I'll have my cock in your mouth, filling it with my cum. Then I'm going to tie you to your bed and fuck that pretty ass of yours after I spank it bright pink.*

He shook himself. What was happening to him? In the past several years sexier women, more beautiful women, had stirred nothing in him, done nothing for him but satisfy his immediate needs, willingly played his games. This one was different. What was it about her that got under his skin? That made him mentally strip off her clothes and devour her naked flesh with his eyes?

Ravaging her the way he had on the plane from Tampa had been stupid and idiotic, especially after he gave her the speech about how they'd have to behave during the day. He'd had a raging hard-on from the minute she climbed into the car with him. By the time they were settled on the plane, he could barely walk without pain. Pretending to work had hardly been a diversion. When their bodies touched, it had been all over but the shouting.

*Nice, McCall.*

That would really look good in his fitness report. His self-control needed some serious work. His life depended on it. Not to mention hers.

What he really needed was to take her to an isolated cabin and spend a week getting her out of

his system. Too bad it wasn't possible. He already had his nuts in a vise, trying to control his lust for her and figure out what she was hiding and protect her at the same time.

"Gotta go. I'll look for the guys in a while." He snapped the phone shut just as Rina reached him. "Sully managed to free up the team tapped to set up security for you. They'll be here today. Soon, as a matter of fact."

"I need to run something by you." She stood next to him now, shading her eyes from the sun with her hand.

"And that would be?"

She ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip, almost making him come right there. "I forgot to mention this to you, but I'm sure you can figure out how to handle it."

*Uh-oh.* "Handle what?"

She cleared her throat. "I have some book signings scheduled here and in Austin during the next few days. Starting tomorrow."

A muscle jumped on his cheek. "Book signings?"

"You know. People come to the book store, I sign their books, chat with them. Get a little press coverage."

The first thought that came to him was how much danger she'd be in, what an easy target she'd be for the people after her. His growing attachment to Rina Devargas was already kick-starting emotions he'd buried a long time ago. Protecting her had become much more than a job. Now every moment she was out there, she was putting herself on the line. The idea of her being hurt or captured made his gut twist and bile clog his throat. If something happened to her, especially on his watch, he didn't know if he could handle it.

McCall shook his head and started to walk toward the house. "No. Absolutely not. Cancel them."

Rina grabbed his arm. "Are you crazy? People are expecting me. Ads have run in the paper." She gave him a waspish smile. "I did tell my agent you'd be with me, though. I didn't think you'd want to miss anything this exciting."

"Rina." His fingers pressed her shoulders in an iron grip. "Whoever called you and left that message will contact you again. These people are not fooling around. In a situation like that you'd be a sitting duck for them."

"I don't even know who *these people* are," she bit back at him. "You won't tell me anything. McCall, this is my life. My profession. I don't run out on my obligations."

McCall gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry. There's no room for negotiation. You'll just have to cancel."

"Oh, really? Just like that?" She snapped her fingers. "Are you planning to lock me in my room? Because that's what you'll have to do." She stormed back into the house.

He caught up with her in the kitchen. "You are one big pain in the ass," he bit off.

"Fine. Get out of my life, and I won't bother you any more."

His eyes raked over her face. "Why aren't you even scared? Last night you were having screaming nightmares. Today, when you get a threatening call from a killer, you go on as if everything's normal. What is it with you?"

He spotted the trembling in her hands, saw her shove them in her pockets when his gaze dropped to them. "Of course I'm scared. I'm not stupid. But I trust you and whoever to protect me. And John wouldn't want me to just hide in a corner."

"John would want you to stay alive." They glared at each other for a long moment. He clenched his fists, then opened them, flexing his fingers. "All right. Write out all the details for me, and I'll see

what I can do.”

“See what you can do?” Her eyes widened and defiance glittered in her eyes. “What does that mean?”

*It means I need to know every little detail so you don't end up dead. Shit.*

“Details, Rina. Give me the information.” When she just looked at him, he exhaled a heavy breath of exasperation. “You said you trust me to protect you. I can't do that unless I have all the bases covered. I need location, layout, size of crowd expected, all that stuff. I have to set things up if you're going to be out in public like that.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Okay. I guess you're right about that.”

“You know I am. Stop battling me. Please.”

She took a breath, let it out slowly. “Don't go ballistic on me, but we also need to talk about the event I discussed with Sully. Or have you forgotten it?”

“The one at the Alamo?” Anger swept over his body. “Damn right I remember. And the answer is ‘no way in hell.’ That's final. I mean it.”

“McCall, I cannot cancel this.” She shoved her hands through her hair, tossed her head back, and glared at him. “We worked too hard to set it up, and there's too much involved. You heard me tell Sully it's been on every piece of publicity for the past year. And the president's coming. My agent confirmed it.”

*The president? Well, shit, isn't that just great. How the hell does that tie in with everything else? Can this be a bigger clusterfuck?*

He swore under his breath in frustration. “Do you have any idea what kind of security nightmare that will be? This will be the best chance for...”

“For what, McCall? What don't you want to tell me?”

“Best chance for them to snatch you.” *Because*

*they sure don't want any evidence of who's involved falling into the wrong hands.* "This is not negotiable."

"It's my life." She lifted her chin. "If I want to risk it, that's my choice."

McCall dropped to the chair across from her and leaned across the table until his face was mere inches from hers. "Either you do as I say, or I *will* lock you up until this thing is over and it won't be to play fun and games."

"What thing?" She folded her arms across her chest. "See? That's just it. Why won't you tell me what's going on? You might get more out of me." She shook her head. "You can't stop me from attending this event, McCall, so get over it."

He ground his teeth. "Okay. I'll make a deal with you. Give me the information, let me protect you properly for this, and in the next couple of days, I'll see if I can get the okay to let you know what's going on."

"I want to know about John, too."

McCall's face looked grim. "I can't go there. Sorry."

A feeling of cold dread crept over Rina. "He's dead, isn't he?" One tear escaped, despite her determination not to break down. "He's dead, and no one will tell me."

*If you don't hear from me, I'll probably be dead.*

"I don't know, Rina. I wish I did. But yes, he's missed his check-ins so that's probably a good bet." He let out a long breath. "I'm sorry I can't tell you more than that. What about you? Are you ready to tell me why you went to his townhouse? Why you dropped everything and jumped on a plane?"

*If only you'd give me some kind of signal, McCall, I'd hand it over in a flash.*

She sat very still until she was sure she could speak without falling apart. "I'll get you your

information on my events.”

Back in her den, she booted up her computer and began typing out what McCall wanted. He was probably right; she was taking a foolish chance. But people were depending on her. The locket pressed against her skin, a heavy reminder of the trust John had put in her and the unknown danger that lay in wait for her.

But she wasn't going to allow some strangers to dictate her life. Or let Shar down. McCall would just have to be really good with her security.

## Chapter Five

The trip to the grocery store was thankfully uneventful. Again, Rina insisted on driving and McCall made no objection, using the time to study every street and turn, check the traffic, make note of the busy activity on Broadway, the main street in Alamo Heights. He said little, and Rina used the time to let her brain try to unscramble the whole situation.

She wished she could figure out the puzzle that was McCall. What had turned him into what he was? Someone had done a number on him, and she'd guess it nearly destroyed him. It couldn't be just the job because she knew some of the team members were married. She'd even met their wives the one time Sully had brought them all together to welcome John. Marriage to a man on that task force would be difficult, but a strong female could make it work.

If not the job, then a woman.

*That must have been some disaster. Whatever it was scarred him badly. I'd give my next royalty check to know what happened.*

When they turned onto her street again, she spotted a van in her driveway that said Turner Electric on it. It was parked far enough to the side so she could pull right into the garage.

She glanced at McCall. "Do you know them?"

"Yes. It means Gage and Les are here."

"How did they get into the house?"

He gave her a look as if to say 'get real.' "It's what they do, Rina. Anyway, if anyone notices the van and asks, you're having trouble with your

electrical wiring. It's usually a good cover."

"This isn't exactly a crowded residential street," she pointed out.

"Unfortunately," he grunted. "Still, there's traffic up and down the road. No sense pricking anyone's curiosity."

As she shut off the ignition, the inside door from the house to the garage opened. A man walked down the two steps and over to her side of the car, opening the door for her.

"Gage McKenzie." He held out his hand to Rina.

"Nice to meet you. Thank you for coming."

He was nearly as tall as McCall, but where McCall was all darkness, Gage was light—sandy blond hair, a slight smattering of freckles, clear hazel eyes. He was lanky where McCall was muscular. And unlike McCall, he wore a friendly grin that gave her a warm feeling. Despite the grin and the firm handshake, Rina sensed the same air of deadliness that she felt with McCall. These were men who didn't play games.

"How long have you been here?" McCall asked, opening his own door.

"We got here about fifteen minutes ago." The smile disappeared, replaced by a grim look.

McCall raised his eyebrows, asking a question.

Rina started to walk around the vehicle, but Gage blocked her path.

"Miss Devargas, I'm not sure you want to go in right now." His hands on her shoulders were gentle but firm.

Her heart flipped and not from his touch. The look in his eyes telegraphed bad news. "Why? What's wrong?"

McCall and Gage looked at each other, then McCall took her arm.

"Damn it," she snapped. "This is my house. Get out of my way." She pulled away from him, dodged

around both men, and raced into the house through the utility room and into the foyer.

The first thing she noticed was the little table she kept there lying on its side and the vase it held shattered to pieces on the floor. McCall and Gage were right behind her, McCall's hands on her shoulders, steadying her.

Rina shrugged out from under his grasp, her heart tripping erratically as she walked into the living room. She did a slow turn, taking in every bit of the destruction, and swallowed a scream as she looked at McCall. "Oh, my God."

"It was this way when we got here," Gage explained. "How long were you two gone?"

McCall glanced at his watch. "Not much more than an hour."

"Well, they're damn slick then, because they didn't have all that much time."

"They must not have been able to get here before we arrived this morning," McCall told him.

"They were obviously watching for this place to be empty." He nodded toward Rina. "You'd better take care of her. She looks like she's about to keel over."

Rina stood rooted to the living room carpet, stunned at the condition of the room. Furniture had been overturned, cushions dumped on the floor and slit open, small items like the vase in the hallway smashed beyond repair. Pictures had been yanked off the walls and their backing sliced away.

"Rina, go into the kitchen and sit down," McCall ordered. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"Look what they've done." She clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking worse than they already were. "Oh, God. McCall, look at this."

"Come on." He was right beside her. "You need to sit down."

She didn't think she could make her feet move, but McCall took her arm and propelled her along. In the kitchen, the only room not trashed, he sat her in a chair, ran a glass of water for her and made her drink it.

"Just swallow," he told her. "Take deep breaths. And stay right here."

He moved to the doorway where he and Gage spoke in low tones. Then he pulled out his cell phone and speed-dialed a number, turning away from Rina as the call connected.

"Me," he said. "We have a situation. Did Gage call you? Uh huh. Yeah, just fifteen minutes ago." He described the scene, including the rundown Gage had given him of the other rooms. "They're looking for something. I also think they wanted to send her a message."

"Things are ramping up," Sully told him. "These people are vicious and will stop at nothing to find what they're looking for. Maybe this will frighten Rina enough to open up to us."

McCall grunted. "Don't count on it. Do I want to give her any information yet? Something that might goose this along?"

There was a momentary pause. "No," Sully said at last. "We'll hold off as long as we can. It's chancy, but if she really doesn't know anything, I don't want to tell her."

"Fine. Your call. But I need to get her out of here. I'm taking her to a motel while we get this place cleaned up."

"I'll be in touch. And McCall?"

"Yeah?"

"I know this sounds harsh, but if you can use this episode to advantage, do it."

McCall snapped the phone shut. He was angry and frustrated. John Devargas had been a good friend on a dangerous assignment, and he was days

past his last check-in. Now this. He had a very bad feeling about everything.

John was the one who'd first sniffed out the plot against President Nicholas Brandon and the possible reason behind it. They were treading on thin ice by not involving the Secret Service, and the involvement of foreign countries meant other agencies should be clued in, also. But Sully played everything close to the vest. That was the nature of this agency.

They hadn't yet touched on the book signing on the second, but he was expecting Sully to put his foot down and none too gently. Politics and publicity be damned. That was the worst place she could be with what was going down. And short of arresting her, he knew he didn't have a prayer of keeping her away. Damn it, anyway.

He turned back to Rina, checking her out with a critical eye. Her color was a little better, but not much, and she still looked shell shocked. He needed to question her but wanted to give her a little more time to catch her breath. And he had to figure out the right approach.

Suddenly, she jerked out of the chair. "My den," she said tightly. "Oh, crap."

Before McCall could stop her, she raced down the hall to the room where she did all her work. When she flung open the door and looked inside, if McCall hadn't been behind her, she would have fallen.

"No. No, no, no."

She shook her head back and forth as she kept repeating the word over and over. The room was a disaster, even worse than the living room. Desk drawers had been yanked open, papers strewn everywhere, program disks and music CDs spilled onto the floor. There wasn't a surface or item left untouched.

Rina sank to her knees, sifting her hands through the debris, a stunned look on her face at the terrible invasion of her privacy.

"God," she said. "I feel so violated. So...so...naked."

She didn't protest when McCall lifted her from the floor and put his arms around her. He saw Gage in the doorway, watching him, one eyebrow lifted.

*The hell with him. With everybody. This is what she needs right now. It's just part of the job.*

*Yeah, right. Keep telling yourself that.*

"I'm sorry." She shook her head against his chest. "I can usually take just about anything in stride."

"Understandable," he said. "Something like this is personal. You feel robbed of all dignity and sense of security." He eased himself away from her and pushed her gently onto the loveseat. "Just sit tight for a second. I want to check on something."

Opening the narrow cabinet where the Central Processing Unit for her computer was, he yanked at it and pulled it out. The side panels came away easily, and his suspicions were confirmed. This would really send her over the edge.

"Rina." He sat back down beside her, unhappy about giving her more bad news. "They've taken the hard drive from your computer."

"What?" Her voice sounded like a croak. "What are you talking about? My computer?" She looked over at the dismantled unit. "Oh, hell."

She looked so white he was afraid she would faint after all. He took her hands in his and rubbed them to get circulation back into her system.

"Do you have any brandy in the house?" he asked her.

She nodded. "There's a bottle in the bar in the living room. If they haven't broken it."

"Sit right here. Don't move. And don't pass out

on me, okay?"

Rina just stared straight ahead. She was sure they were looking for the microchip in the locket, but how did they even know about its existence? Unless someone had leaked the information.

*Betrayed. I've been betrayed.*

That's what John had been trying to tell her.

*You'll know who to trust.*

No, John, I don't, she cried silently.

*Come on, McCall. If it's you, let me know. Please don't be the traitor.*

The control that had been holding her together until now suddenly snapped. The tears she'd been forcing herself to hold back overflowed and streamed down her cheeks unheeded. Burying her face in her hands, she just let them come, swallowing the wrenching sobs trying to break through.

She looked up only when she felt something prodding her hand, and a tissue was shoved into her fingers. Blotting her face she finally looked up to see McCall standing in front of her, holding a glass.

McCall looked at her, feeling her desolation. She was a mess, and he didn't think one juice glass of brandy was a cure-all, but at least it would steady her system. He handed her the glass.

"Here. Drink it all," he ordered. "Every bit, even if you have to sip. Your system needs it."

She took the glass with hands trembling so badly she nearly spilled the liquid. He closed a hand over hers and guided the glass to her lips. She took too big a swallow, choked, coughed, then sipped a little bit.

When he saw color begin to come into her face again and her hands stop shaking, McCall removed his hand but didn't move away from her. "Gage and Les are still going ahead with the security stuff," he told her. "At least it will discourage further intrusion."

He raked his gaze over her. She looked so defeated, sitting on the loveseat, hair disheveled, cheeks lined with tear tracks, eyes with a bruised look. He fought an unwanted urge to pull her into his arms and comfort her, kiss the tears away. Shit. Jesus. That wasn't him at all. He was just sinking in deeper and deeper. Unbelievably, he felt his cock harden.

*Great, asshole. Think about fucking her when her world is falling apart.*

If he didn't watch it, he'd screw up a critical situation just like he'd done once before and a lot of people might get killed. The past had a rotten way of repeating itself. He sensed a presence in the doorway, just a slight disturbance in the air, and looked up. "Rina."

She raised her head.

He nodded in the direction of the doorway. "This is Les Burkell. He's going to be working here with Gage."

Les dipped his head. "Miss Devargas. Sorry we had to meet under such circumstances. We'll do our best to see there isn't a repeat. McCall, can we talk for a minute?"

When McCall walked out of the room, Rina gathered up the spilled papers and computer disks and piled them on her desk. Her work, her personal papers, everything was damaged or destroyed. The thought that these people, the ones who'd possibly killed John, had been pawing through her things made her nauseous.

Suddenly, the locket felt like a living thing against her skin. McCall hadn't paid attention to it, and she didn't think anyone else would either, but she had to keep herself from constantly touching it. She was dying for another look inside, but not where anyone could walk in on her and see what she was doing. Her head was starting to ache again. She was

just about to go find some aspirin when McCall reappeared in the doorway. "How are you coming along?"

"Okay, I guess." She waved her hand distractedly at the clutter on her desk. "I like to think I'm a little smarter than the average bear."

"What do you mean?"

She opened a section of the bookcase, pressed a spot in the backing and a panel slid sideways to reveal a small wall safe. Dialing in the combination, she opened the door and took out a small file box.

"I mean this." She took off the lid to show him a pile of tiny instruments that looked like harmonicas. "My flash drives. I back everything up to both disk and memory sticks. I lock the sticks in the safe, just so I don't have to worry about recreating any of my manuscripts. They got the CDs, but I still have all my documents."

He almost grinned. "Smart lady."

"Thank you." She gave him a shaky smile. "Also, my laptop's in my car, so they didn't get that. Do you really think they'll come back?"

"They might when they discover the things they took give them nothing."

The thought pierced her mind like a spear of ice. "Oh, God." She couldn't seem to find anything else to say.

"I'm through taking pictures." Gage joined them in the den. He saw the look on Rina's face and glanced at McCall. "Do you think..."

McCall shook his head. "Sully's department."

Gage shrugged. "Whatever. Les and I need to do some cleanup before we get started on the electronics."

"Okay." He guided Rina into the kitchen, the only room still with some semblance of order. "We need to make arrangements for tonight."

"What about tonight?"

"Rina, you can't stay here. The place is a mess and the security isn't in place yet. Please, for God's sake, don't give me a hard time about this."

"I won't be chased out of my home." She folded her arms across her chest, jaw jutting defiantly.

Gage had come into the kitchen, and he and McCall exchanged a glance.

"Your call," Gage said.

McCall shrugged and opened his phone again.

"We've reached the 'need to know' stage," he said cryptically. Then, after a minute, "Fine. I'll call you when I have a destination."

He looked at Rina, assessing her condition. "All right. Here's what we'll do. Sully's the only one who's authorized to answer your questions. He'll come here to speak to you himself, but only if you agree to get out of here for the night. You know you can trust him, right?"

*I've been betrayed. Trust no one.*

"We'll see." She couldn't hide her skepticism.

"I just have to call him back and tell him where we'll be. Is that a fair enough deal?"

Rina nodded grudgingly. She'd do it to get her answers.

"Good. Go pack, enough for a few days just in case. I'll check us in someplace with room service so we can have dinner before he gets here."

She just nodded her head, her spurt of energy waning, leaving her weary and deflated.

"Good girl. Go on upstairs and get ready. I'll take care of the reservations. Oh, and Gage has the envelope with all your new identification and credit cards. I'll bring it to the hotel with us."

"I have my book signing tomorrow," she reminded him. "And another one three days later."

"Jesus, Rina." McCall raked his fingers through his hair. It was the first time she'd seen a break in his stoic image.

"I have to do this," she insisted. "I'm not stupid. I know this will put a strain on things. But if I pass on it, you'll have questions thrown at you that you won't want to answer."

"All right, all right." He pulled out the notes she'd given him and glanced over them. "Give me a few minutes to go over this with Les and Gage."

"I'll check my den and see if there's anything I need to take with me."

It took her less than fifteen minutes to gather any disks and notes that might be usable and stuff them in a tote bag. She found McCall in the living room talking on his cell while Gage and Les dumped debris in a large trash bag.

"We have a cleanup crew coming in an hour," Gage told her. "We just thought we'd pick up some of the worst of it."

She looked around at the wreckage. "I need to call my insurance agent. And file a police report."

"No. You won't be doing that. We'll take care of everything."

She stared at him. "Like what?"

Les walked over to her, a small wastebasket in one hand. "Miss Devargas, this is what we do. Go with McCall and let us handle everything here."

She just stared at him helplessly until he winked at her and the knot in the center of her body eased.

McCall closed his phone with an abrupt snap and turned to look at her. "You need to get packed."

She nodded. "You've got the address for tomorrow's event, right? At the Books Galore in northwest San Antonio?"

"We'll get it checked out and see how to best set up security."

Her eyes widened. "I still can't believe someone would really try something in a book store?"

His hand closed over her arm. "I have to expect

things to happen any place, no matter what. It's how I do my job. They didn't find what they wanted here. The next best thing is grabbing you."

He had a look on his face she couldn't read, but the intensity of it made butterflies tap dance in her stomach. She slid her arm away from him, her skin tingling and burning where his fingers had touched her.

"We can make it work," Gage said in his low voice. "We'll get Sully to give us a couple more men."

"We're already stretched thin," McCall reminded him.

"Not that thin. And this is a priority. You know that, or you wouldn't be here in the first place." He gave Rina a reassuring smile, then looked at his partner. "Trust us to take care of her, McCall. Let's try not to upset her life more than it already is."

*Why don't I fall for men like him? No. I always get the alpha males who act like they have a stick up their ass.*

"I know you're right," McCall agreed at last. "Okay, get your clothes. I'm lucky I didn't have a chance to unpack."

When Rina came back downstairs with her suitcase, McCall was standing in the hall with his, waiting. Two more men were talking to Gage and Les, one of them cutting a small hole in the foyer wall. They just nodded to her and went about their business.

McCall picked up her suitcase and took her arm, but she stopped in mid-stride, snapping her fingers.

"Wait. I can't believe I forgot about my phone messages. People will think it's strange if they can't reach me."

"Don't you have a code where you can call in and retrieve them?" McCall asked.

She nodded.

"Then that's what you'll do. And you can return

calls on your cell phone.”

“Damn.” She bit her lip. “Cell phone. I have to get a new one. Mine was in my purse.”

“We’ll take care of it. Meanwhile, we need to get out of here. I found a motel for us.” He gave her the location. “That work for you?”

“Yes, anything.”

“Let’s go then.”

It was already six o’clock by the time McCall had made a few more calls and they finally left the house. McCall drove through the last of the rush hour traffic, constantly checking the rear and side view mirrors.

“Do you really think someone’s following us?” Rina turned to glance through the rear window.

“Don’t do that,” McCall snapped. “And yes, it’s entirely possible.”

He exited the Interstate twice, drove through parking lots, then slid into the lanes of traffic again. At the motel, he parked the car behind the building close to a side door and lifted out their suitcases. In what seemed only seconds, he hustled her into the lobby, registered, had two plastic key cards in his possession and was motioning for Rina to follow him.

She raised her eyebrows when he handed her one of the cards, remembering what he’d said earlier.

“Let’s not give Sully any more to chew on than he already has. But make no mistake. You and I will be in the same room tonight.”

Even in the stress of the situation, desire flared in his eyes and she felt the answering heat in her body. Oh, she was in *such* trouble here. She wanted to trust him so badly, but that invisible wall kept stopping her.

*How do I do this to myself?*

“This place has three floors,” he went on. “And we’re on the top. Less accessible. But we’re close to

the stairway if we need it.”

“But you made sure no one followed us,” she pointed out. Her head was pounding again, and she realized she hadn’t taken any aspirin in a long time.

“Nothing is fail-safe, and to tell you the truth, Rina, at this point, anything is possible. I think you’ll understand better when Sully explains things.”

The reservations turned out to be a suite like the one in Tampa. McCall stashed their suitcases in his room and picked up the phone. “I’m ordering dinner from room service. Steak and salad, okay? You need protein in your system.”

“I’d rather just have a club sandwich. I don’t think I could handle a steak right now.”

“Whatever you want.”

At the last minute, he added a bottle of wine to the room service order.

Rina quirked an eyebrow at him at the last item.

“Strictly medicinal,” he told her. “I figured your nerves could use some soothing.”

“Thank you.”

He took a large manila envelope out of his briefcase and handed it to her. “Gage brought this with him. Replacements for your personal stuff.”

Rina dumped the contents of the envelope out on the round table. Sully had done an incredible job, even gotten a new driver’s license issued. Shoving it all back into the envelope, she carried it into the room that would be hers. She put everything away in the wallet she’d grabbed from her dresser, then took out her clothes for the next day and hung them up to get out any wrinkles.

Through the open door she heard McCall speaking to someone on his cell phone, probably Sully who was already en route. By the time he was finished the food was delivered.

Rina eyed the tray skeptically. “McCall, I don’t

know how much I can eat.”

“Just work your way through what you can. Get something into your system.”

Surprisingly, she found she was hungry enough to polish off almost everything on her plate. She sipped a glass of wine while she ate and realized McCall was right. It relaxed her a little. She was stirring her coffee when his cell phone rang.

“Yeah? Okay. We’re ready.” He looked at Rina. “He’s here and on his way up.”

Even as he spoke, a code knock sounded at the door. McCall opened it with the chain still in place while he checked out the visitors, then, satisfied, let them in.

Sully entered the room, followed by two men in dark suits. He extended his hand to Rina. “We seem to be making a habit of this.” He turned to the others in the room. “How about giving Miss Devargas and me a few minutes of privacy? I think it’s safe to say she won’t shoot me.” He smiled, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

McCall looked at the other two, then nodded. “I have a quick errand to run and didn’t want to leave Rina alone. I won’t be gone long. These guys can wait next door in my room.”

They left, closing the connecting door behind them.

Sully reached into his pocket and placed a cell phone on the table, pushing it toward Rina.

“A replacement. McCall said yours was stolen with your purse. This one is secure and also has a GPS chip just in case.”

*Just in case someone kidnaps me and you have to find me.*

She shivered but thanked Sully.

“Also, if you tell me where the spare key to your car is, I’ll get someone to deliver it to your house. I told McCall I’d take care of it. One less thing for

either of you to worry about.”

“I appreciate it.”

He scanned her face with practiced eyes. “Well, the bruises are turning a nice shade of purple, but I’m sure makeup can handle it. And your nose doesn’t seem to be any the worse for the wear. How about the headache?”

She shrugged. “Aspirin takes care of it.”

He poured himself a glass of water and sipped it carefully, watching her. “I know this has all been frightening and confusing for you. And I’m afraid I don’t have good news for you.”

“About John, right?” Her stomach knotted and nausea rose in her throat.

He nodded. “I already told you he missed his last check-in. The truth of the matter is we haven’t heard from him in several days. At this point, we have to assume he’s been compromised and is most likely dead. I’m sorry, Rina. I know that’s not what you want to hear.”

She clenched her fists in her lap, determined not to fall apart. “But you still have no body, right?”

“With the people we’re dealing with, we may never find one. You need to be prepared for that.”

“What’s going on, Sully? McCall hasn’t given me room to breathe and he won’t tell me a thing.”

And John certainly said nothing except get the locket and don’t trust anyone. Someone betrayed him and blew his mission. Who? McCall? The affable Gage? Les? Even Sully himself? Money was a powerful motivator, no matter who it was.

“All of my men are under orders not to disclose information,” he reiterated, as if she hadn’t known that.

“But you’re here to give me some answers.”

He nodded. “Only because I hope to persuade you to tell me what you know and be more careful with your own life.”

“You know whatever you tell me will go no further.”

“If it does, we’re all in trouble. You should know that the safety of this country is being threatened by some of the very people sworn to protect it. John had uncovered a plot to assassinate the president, funded by arms manufacturer, Andrew Brechtel, a close friend of the vice president. We’ve learned two of our long-serving congressmen—a senator and a representative—are also involved, but we don’t have concrete proof. John was gathering that proof. But he was well aware of the fact that if he was discovered, it could mean his life.”

Shock waves coursed through her system. “Kill the president? My God, Sully. Are you serious?”

“I’m only telling you this because things are moving fast, you’ve been unexpectedly involved, and I have to trust your discretion. And McCall seems to think we’ve reached a stage where you need to know the facts.”

“I can hardly believe what you’re saying.”

“Believe me.” A muscle ticked in Sully’s cheek, and his fingers threaded through his hair in a gesture of frustration. “Some people will stop at nothing to protect their own illegal activities and source of funds. John was aware of the risk and willingly took the chance.”

Rina twisted her hands together in her lap, barely holding onto her control. This was worse than anything she could have imagined. “What kind of evidence was he gathering?”

Sully watched her reaction as he spoke. “Recordings of conversations between the people involved.”

“And now you have no idea what’s happened to him.” She swallowed hard, fighting back tears.

“I know, and I can’t tell you how sorry I am about that.” He studied her face. “I’m concerned

about the phone call you got and the break-in at your house.”

“Do you have any idea what they’re looking for?” Rina tried to make her face as blank as possible.

Sully’s face was just as expressionless. “Do you?”

She looked down at her coffee. “How would I know?”

“Rina, I’m going to ask you again. Why did you go to John’s place that night? We went to such lengths to keep your identity a secret. What made you break that? What made *him* break protocol?”

“I-I don’t know what he wanted. I told you last night. He called me, but when I got there, he never showed up.”

He smiled. “Maybe you can get that story over on my men, but you’ll need something better with me. If John called you, he had a specific reason. Did he want you to get something from there? Is that why you went?”

“What could he possibly want me to get?” She was amazed at how calm she sounded, with her heart thundering against her ribs.

“The evidence he’d collected?”

“Why wouldn’t he give it to you?” *Yes, Sully. Why wouldn’t he?*

Sully sighed. “Rina, sooner or later you’ll have to stop playing games. I’ve been honest with you. Don’t you think it’s your turn?”

*I’ve been betrayed. You’ll know who to trust.*

But she didn’t know yet. Not without reservation.

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” she insisted.

“If John trusted you with something, he’d want you to pass it along to me. You know that.”

*Betrayed.* Again John’s words echoed over and over in Rina’s head.

“Then why didn’t he call you instead of me? He must have had a reason.”

Sully gave her a hard, appraising look and shook his head. "Sooner or later you'll have to make a choice, Rina. Just don't take too long to make up your mind. We'll be out of time before long, and I'd hate to do something that damaged our relationship. Never mind put the president at risk."

Rina said nothing, afraid to open her mouth and have the wrong thing come out.

"All right. Let's change the subject for a moment. You won't let us put you in a safe place until this is over. You've made that plain. But if you're willing, we can use the situation to our advantage." He shook his head. "It would be a lot to ask of you."

"You want to use me as bait," she guessed. "To see if these people, whoever they are, keep coming after me and give you a chance to grab them. Am I right?"

"It's a big risk," Sully warned. "Especially if you know something and we don't. One slip could mean your life. No one would ever be able to prove a thing. If you can tell us something that can leapfrog us over all this, that would be better. If not..."

She looked at him with a steady gaze, even as a chill raced through her body. "You'd have people protecting me, like McCall? They'd make sure nothing happened to me, right?"

"We'll do our best, but you should know there are no guarantees. These people are completely ruthless." His words were like stones falling on concrete, hard and unyielding. "If they could discover your existence, contact you and destroy your home, they can do anything. Even make you disappear. Be sure you know what you're doing, Rina."

She bit her lip. If John had discovered some kind of conspiracy within his team, anyone could be part of it. That's what he'd warned her about. If he

was dead, this could be the best way to catch his killers. She inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“All right,” she said at last. “I’ll do it. For John. He believed in what he was doing enough to give his life for it. If he’s actually dead, I don’t want it to be for nothing.”

“Then I’ll also tell McCall the event at the Alamo is a go. If they can’t get to the president before then and they still believe you have something that points to them, that’s the best place for them to try for both of you. But we’ll be prepared.”

Rina sat up straight. “And I will, too.”

Sully took both of her hands in his. “We’ll do our level best to keep you safe. Your new security system is being installed, and we’ll give you as much personal protection as we can. The two men with me will meet Gage at your house after they drop me off. And McCall will be with you until this is completely resolved.”

And that was a two-edged sword.

## Chapter Six

All the tension the wine had eased returned with Sully's information. Alone in the second bedroom, she touched the locket lying between her breasts. John had said she'd know who to give it to, and so far no one had said or done anything to make her think he was the right person. God, what if she made a mistake and all his sacrifice was for nothing?

And on top of everything else, the night with McCall loomed ahead, setting every pulse to beating and her panties to dampening. An image of a naked McCall flashed across her brain, causing more moisture to seep from her hungry cunt.

*Everyone's talking about life or death situations, and I'm thinking about sex with the most alpha male I've ever met.*

She felt like Alice down the Rabbit Hole, searching for answers in a world gone mad.

"Long day."

She jerked, dropping her hands to her sides. She hadn't heard McCall come up behind her. Now she felt his warm hands on her shoulders and his breath on her hair.

"Too long." She gave a short laugh. "I wonder if I could go back and live it over again?"

"It would be nice if we could do that with a lot of things, wouldn't it?" His hands massaged her shoulders, working the tension from her muscles. "Try to relax if you can. You're tight as a rubber band."

"I know. Keep doing that and I might be able to."

“What about this?” His voice was low as his hands slid past her shoulders and came to rest on her breasts, his thumbs chafing her nipples while his fingers caressed the swell of her flesh. “Does this help you unwind?”

A low moan escaped her lips.

A rusty-sounding chuckle rumbled up from his throat. “I guess that answers my question.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but he turned her to face him and his lips came down on hers, his tongue thrusting into her open mouth. His hands were busy at her breasts again, rubbing the nipples and caressing the upper slopes.

Even with a shirt and bra between his fingers and her skin, she was sure he could make her come just from stimulating her nipples. She clutched at his biceps, holding on for dear life, as the kiss went on and on, his tongue tasting every inner inch of her mouth, sucking hers into his own dark cavern. And his fingers never stopped their sensual dance.

“We have too many clothes on.” His voice was unsteady as he broke the kiss.

She nodded, beyond speech.

“I want to see every inch of your body,” he growled. “Touch it. Taste it.” He nipped at the tender place where her shoulder and her neck joined. “I have big plans for us tonight, Rina. We can’t make the trouble go away, but just for a while, we’re going to forget killers and plots and book signings and everything else. Tonight, I’m in charge. Clear?”

Wordlessly she nodded.

“Good. First things first. Take off your clothes.”

She stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“I’m in charge, remember?” His voice had deepened, if that was possible, and the edge of desire had crept into it. This was McCall, the dom, and he was exercising his position. “You do what I say. Strip.”

Rina's hands shook slightly as she unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged it off her shoulders. Her fingers fumbled with the clasp of her bra before it gave way and she tossed it to the side with her blouse. The rasp of her zipper sounded unnaturally loud in the room as she lowered it and shimmied out of her slacks. The last thing to go was her thong, embarrassingly soaked with her juices.

McCall's eyes never left her as she removed each item of clothing. She stood there, a shiver racing over her skin, waiting for whatever came next.

He had already tossed his jacket. Now his shirt and tie landed on the chair, and he toed off his shoes and socks.

"Safe word," he said.

"W-What?"

"Remember I told you to have a safe word ready? Any time you want to stop, all you have to do is say that word."

God, she'd totally forgotten, and now her brain wouldn't work. "Um, roses."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Roses?"

"My favorite flower."

"Roses it is. Now. Come here."

Rina moved to stand closer to him.

"Down on your knees. Right here in front of me."

Her eyes locked on his, and she lowered herself to her knees, the bulge in his trousers a mere breath away from her mouth.

"Unzip my pants and lower them."

With fingers that still shook, she unfastened the one button, lowered the zipper, and dragged the fabric down to his ankles. He stepped out of the pants and kicked them to the side. His cock sprang to life, tenting his boxers and nearly pushing through the opening.

"Now the boxers," he ordered.

When he stood naked before her, he took her

head in his hands. "Clasp your hands behind your back and open your mouth. I've been thinking about this all day. It's a wonder I didn't come in my slacks like some horny teenager."

Rina obediently opened her mouth, and McCall wrapped his fingers around his erection and slowly pushed it past her waiting lips. She had to strain to accept its size, but even at that, she was so hot liquid dripped from her cunt and wet her thighs.

"Knees apart, Rina. I want the scent of your arousal to fill this room."

She shifted, and at once the scent of sex enveloped them. McCall inhaled, and his cock swelled even more. Rina tilted her head back as the hot, silken shaft pressed deeper into her mouth, the broad head bumping the roof. She swirled her tongue against the velvet skin, feeling the steel beneath it. Drops of pre-cum dripped down her throat.

"Suck me, Rina." His voice was so hoarse she almost didn't recognize it. "Let me fuck that sweet, sweet mouth. I've thought about that last time until I was so hard I thought my dick would explode. And this time I don't want you to stop. This time I want to come in your mouth. Feel it shoot down your throat. Do it, Rina."

She hollowed her cheeks to increase the suction as he eased his cock in further and further. She found by tilting her head back even more she could take him deeper into her throat. Gently, she scraped her teeth along his flesh, and an answering groan burst from his lips.

He began to move his hips, slowly, thrusting into her until at last he was fully seated. His hands reached down and gripped her head again, shifting it this way and that, showing her how and what he liked. She found the rhythm and settled into it, his hips rocking in tandem with her mouth.

“Look at me,” he demanded in that thick voice.

She raised her eyes, shocked at the intense lust she saw in his.

“That’s it. Keep looking at me. God, you look so gorgeous, naked on your knees, my cock in your mouth. I’d like to freeze this forever.”

And all the time he fucked her mouth, slowly, steadily, she sucked and pulled and grazed the skin with her teeth. She knew when his orgasm was ready to take him. His thighs tensed, his fingers on her head tightened, and he thrust hard once, twice. And then his seed jetted down her throat in hot and thick spurts. She swallowed and sucked until she drained him of everything he had and felt the loosening of his muscles.

Slowly, he eased himself from her mouth and lifted her to her feet. He kissed her, his tongue swirling in her mouth and tasting himself on her skin. She was dizzy with the effect of it, her body so needy she was sure she’d come herself just standing there. It was one of the most erotic experiences she’d ever had.

When his breathing slowed and she felt strength flow back into his body, he lifted her and carried her to the bed, stripping back the spread and covers. Placing her on the cool sheets, he spread her legs, bending them at the knees and placing her feet flat on the mattress. Her sex was completely exposed to him.

“Jesus, Rina. Even in my dreams I couldn’t imagine how good that was. I may never get enough of that talented mouth.”

She gave him a shy smile. “I liked it.”

“Good.” The voice of command was back. “Because we’re going to do it a lot more. Now, I bought you some presents today.”

“Presents? Is that the errand you had to run?”

He nodded, a predatory grin spreading across

his face. "Yeah. I spotted the store when we got off the Interstate."

Her heart was thumping and bumping in her chest. "We're in the middle of a crisis and you went out to buy *toys*?"

"Best medicine for stress," he told her. "You'll see. Now, I want you to play with your pussy and rub your clit while I get them for you."

She wasn't quite as tentative as she'd been the day before. Her hands went at once to her cunt, stroking the wet flesh and rubbing the swollen tip of her clit. Her gaze followed McCall as he pulled a brown paper bag from the nightstand drawer.

"Slipping this into the room with those two hardasses in here was a trick," he said in a wry tone. "Good thing the store keeps plain bags for people like me."

Opening it, he began laying its contents out on the bed. The first thing he took out was a large box of condoms. "Don't want to run out," he growled. Then he emptied the rest of the contents.

Rina's eyes widened when she saw a dildo, a silver egg vibrator, something that she identified as a butt plug and a tube that could only be lubricating gel. And another box, which he picked up and brought to the other side of the bed with him.

"Anything here bother you?" he asked.

"N-no. Nothing."

"Ever use any of these before?"

Rina nodded. "The vibrator."

One corner of his mouth turned up. "Good to know." He looked down at her. "Keep those hands busy, Rina. No matter what I do. Clear?"

She nodded, rubbing herself and slipping her fingers into her sopping channel.

McCall sat down beside her and took her nipples between thumbs and forefingers, rolling and pulling them, stretching them out from her breasts.

“McCall, I-”

“You will not come,” he ordered, guessing at what she wanted to say. “Only when I tell you to. Clear?”

*Oh, god.*

Her channel was already sopping, her clit throbbed with unfulfilled need, and the tight coil of desire was unwinding from deep inside her faster and faster. Everything in her told her she was ready to tumble over the other side of that peak. But she nodded, gritting her teeth to keep from coming. She knew it was important that she not disobey him.

“Good.” He bent down and began to suck her nipples, one at a time, biting them lightly then soothing them with his tongue. “You have the most exquisite nipples. So beautiful. So plump. We’ll make them a little plumper, okay?”

He opened the box he’d set next to her, taking something out. Rina recognized what he had at once. She’d never used nipple clamps, but she’d done enough research on them for her romance novels. Each of these was comprised of two thin bars with gold chains dangling from them, the whole thing held together by tiny screws.

McCall took one nipple, pulling on it again, then sliding it between the bars of one clamp and tightening the screws. Pain shot through her breast at once, replaced immediately by the most exquisite shock of pleasure. He licked his tongue briefly over the engorged tip. Then he placed the clamp on the other one.

He bent his head to her. “Is that good, Rina? Do you like those little bars squeezing your delectable nipples? Oh, yes. I can see it on your face. I love that hot look in your eyes and the way your tongue just peeks out of your mouth when you reach for that crest.”

Rina hoped he didn’t expect an answer from her

because, with three fingers now inside herself, she needed every bit of concentration to control the spasms that threatened to roar through her uncontrolled.

When McCall was satisfied with the placement of the clamps, he removed the silver bullet from its packaging and knelt between her outspread legs. One lock of his dark hair had fallen across his forehead, giving him an unusually rakish look. The taut muscles of his powerful chest and arms flexed as he moved into the position he wanted. His eyes, so dark, shone with heat in the reflected light of the lamp. He looked for all the world like a warlord come to claim his prize.

“Ever since I picked this up, I’ve been imagining how it would look in your cunt, little daredevil.” His voice was thick with desire. “Sliding up through your juices into that very slick flesh. I almost embarrassed myself in the store.”

He lifted her hand from her sex and placed it at her side. Using the fingers of one hand to open her labia wide, he slid the bullet inside and picked up the remote that came with it.

“Perfect,” he told her. “Jesus, that is the most gorgeous sight I’ve ever seen. Does it feel good inside you? Does your pussy love it?”

She nodded, barely hanging on by a thread.

“I don’t want you to come yet,” he told her. “You will control yourself until I’m ready. Understood? And keep your hands flat on the bed beside you. Don’t move them.”

“Yes,” she whispered, amazed that she not only didn’t resent his total domination of the situation but was incredibly turned on by it. She was a person used to being in charge of her own life, yet here she was, handing herself over without reservation. And so aroused that controlling her orgasm was a test of her will.

As the little bullet buzzed away inside her vagina, McCall leaned down and licked her clit with the tip of his tongue. Lightning streaked to every part of her body, and the muscles in her abdomen clenched at the sensual assault. Her breasts, already feeling the pleasure/pain of the clamps on her nipples, suddenly felt too full. Too tight. Every erogenous zone lit up like the Fourth of July, snapping and crackling with heat.

“Like candy,” he continued. “Did it taste as good when you sucked my cock, little daredevil? Did you like the taste?”

Rina found the strength to nod even as she wanted to scream with the need for release, but she held herself still as he’d ordered. Her nipples throbbed, her clit was an inflamed bundle of nerves, and every muscle in her channel clamped down in frustration.

At the moment she was ready to beg for him to let her come, he suddenly flipped her over and pulled her up to her knees. Grabbing his tie from the chair, he wrapped it around her wrists and bound them together behind her back. She had to struggle to keep her balance.

“Are you hot, Rina?” His voice was low and raspy. “Answer me. Tell me what you feel. What you want.”

“I want you,” she gasped. “I want to come. I want you inside me. Oh, God, I want you to fuck me. Please.”

*Was that her really saying those things?* But she would have said anything just to get relief.

“Ahh. That’s what I want to hear. Remember how I fucked your ass? Jesus, I thought you were going to burn me alive. It was your first time, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” She barely got the word out.

“This time I want to make it really good for you.

I don't want to hurt you, so we're going to make sure those tender tissues are good and ready for me. Tell me you want this, Rina."

"I-I want you to do this."

"Do what?"

"Fuck me in the ass."

She heard a breath explode from his mouth. Then she felt his hands on her buttocks, rubbing the skin, squeezing the flesh. Unexpectedly, one hand landed in a stinging slap, shockingly increasing her level of desire. Her pussy clenched harder around the bullet, and she had to bite her lip to hang onto her control.

He rubbed the flesh where he'd spanked her, then landed another stinging blow. And another. And another. By the fourth or fifth one, she was thrusting her hips back at him, unconsciously begging for more.

"That turns you on, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she gasped, wiggling her ass, tempting him to continue.

"You continue to amaze me, daredevil." He placed a brief kiss on each cheek of her ass.

She felt fingers separating the inflamed cheeks of her ass and something cool on the tight ring of her anus.

The lube! Oh, God. Was he going to do it now? She remembered how thick his cock had felt, how it burned and stretched her. She tensed, anticipating the same thing.

"No, I'm not going to fuck your ass now," he told her, as if reading her thoughts. "That first time you weren't prepared, and I know I hurt you. My object isn't to cause you pain, except when it gives you pleasure. I'm not into pain for pain's sake." More light kisses on her ass. "I'm into making you feel good," he whispered.

More cool gel, then one finger pushing against

the ring of muscle. Bearing down. Popping through and sliding in and out of her dark tunnel. Then two fingers, scissoring back and forth. When she felt the head of the plug pressing into her, she caught her breath and, at first, tried to pull away from it.

“Push back,” McCall ordered. “It will be a lot easier. We rushed things that night. Take deep breaths now and push against the plug.”

Deep breaths? Was he crazy? The little bullet was driving her crazy, her nipples ached, and if she didn’t come pretty soon, she’d lose her mind. But she took as deep a breath as she could and pushed back, discovering to her surprise that he was right. She rocked back and forth, a little at a time, the plug pressing further and further into her rectum. Stretching her. Filling her. Bringing her darkest desires to the surface so that she burned everywhere for him.

When it was finally in all the way, another slap landed on her buttocks, nearly sending her over the edge. She felt so full, so stretched with just the plug, she wondered how she’d ever taken McCall’s very large cock.

“Tell me how it feels,” he breathed. “Do you like that plug in your ass? I always want to know if what I’m doing gives you pleasure.”

“Yes,” she hissed. “Oh, God, yes.”

Leaning over her, his lips close to her ear. “Time for you to come,” he whispered.

*Oh, God, please!*

He must have pressed the remote again because the little bullet began to vibrate on high speed and jolts of pleasure stabbed into every part of her body. McCall reached around her with one hand and pinched an engorged nipple. With the other, he reached between her legs and dragged a fingernail over her clit.

She exploded. The orgasm raced through her

like wildfire, shaking her body, her pussy spasming, the muscles of her stomach clenching and unclenching. She tumbled over the edge in a freefall, but just when she thought the intensity had receded, he pushed her higher and she launched into space.

She was tumbling, twisting, shuddering, and still he urged her on. By the time he reduced the vibrations and finally turned the bullet off, tears stained her cheeks and her nose was running. She felt as if her body had been turned inside out and it would never be the same again.

And that was probably right.

McCall slipped the bullet from her cunt, then turned her over and loosened the nipple clamps, easing them off her body. The sudden rush of blood to her nipples lit sparks of pleasure and pain, and he took each bud in his mouth, sucking it gently, easing it. He placed a light kiss on her lips.

“Take in a deep breath and let it out,” he said, and eased the butt plug from her rectum. Finally, he untied her hands, rubbing the muscles of her arms and shoulders to ease any stiffness.

“I’ll be right back,” he said in a voice so gentle she wasn’t even sure it was his.

She heard him in the bathroom. When he returned, he had a warm cloth that he used to bathe her nipples and her ravaged pussy. He cleaned the excess lube from around her anus, then pulled the covers over her.

Seconds later, he climbed into bed beside her, turned her so she was spooned against him, and wrapped his arm around her. “Did you enjoy it?”

She nodded, feeling herself blush.

“You’re a very sensuous woman, Rina Devargas. Much more than I thought.”

He kissed her cheek, cupped one breast in his hand and pulled her closer. She cuddled next to him, limp and spent, unable to do anything except spoon

herself against his body.

“Sleep, Rina. You’ve earned it. Tomorrow could be a tough day.”

Long after she’d fallen asleep, McCall lay staring into the dark, realizing he was in deeper than he could have believed. Had he accomplished his original purpose? Enough sex to get her out of his system? He snorted. Yeah, right. What a brilliant idea that was. All it did was make him feel things emotionally he wanted to keep buried.

But her body was like a drug. The more he had, the more he wanted. Just remembering the sight of her plump nipples encased in the bars made his cock twitch. Eating her out had been like dining at a banquet for the gods, her cream the finest nectar. Watching her orgasm with the vibrator made him wish he’d slid his cock into that hot, wet, tight pussy. It was enough in itself to make him climax just thinking about it.

But nothing compared to the memory of the hot, burning feel of fucking her ass. Jesus, he’d thought his cock would catch fire. Remembering now made his shaft twitch, and he realized things were even worse than he thought. He was *feeling* things for her. Emotions. Things that had gotten him in trouble before. Big trouble. The worst kind. And he knew they could again. Yet they washed through him like an unstoppable flood.

No doubt about it. He was definitely fucked.

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McCall knew she expected him to be gone in the morning, but the sight of her was too tempting. He needed to take her just once more before he put on his game face for the day. Sheathing himself in a condom, he leaned over her sleeping form and woke her at six o’clock with a hard kiss. Gently but firmly, he lifted one of her legs over his thigh, his hand slid easily over the soft flesh of her belly, down through

her curls to her wet, quivering sex.

He shifted her position, opening her wider, his cock rubbing against the lips of her pussy. He was so hard he had to grit his teeth to hang onto his control.

He pushed one finger inside her, then another one, her slick flesh setting off sparks through his body like an electrical storm as he massaged her. Words weren't necessary between them. Silently, she rocked backward, trying to impale herself on him, but he had other things in mind.

With fingers slippery from her juice, he slid his hand through the cleft of her buttocks, finding the tiny puckered opening there. He teased at it, spreading her cream around to lubricate it. The tissues were softened from being stretched by the plug, and he easily inserted two fingers, his heart thundering as he remembered the feel of that dark tunnel clenched around his swollen cock.

*Oh, Jesus.*

He closed his eyes, consumed by lust and the emotions he'd been doing his damndest to talk himself out of.

She gasped, pushing back on his fingers as she'd done the night before, shivering and shaking. His fingers stroked in and out of her while his penis rubbed against the lips of her cunt.

"Tell me that feels good," he demanded, sliding his mouth to her cheek. It sure felt damn good to him. Better than good. Unbelievable. All-consuming.

"Yes," she gasped. "It feels good."

"And what else?" he insisted. "Tell me what else, Rina."

"I want you there," she begged, her hand stretching back, trying to reach for his erect shaft. "Please."

"Not yet." His voice was so harsh and rough with passion he almost didn't recognize it. "Tonight."

Easing his fingers from her rectum, he grabbed

his cock and slid quickly into her pussy. At once he began the familiar stroking motion that their bodies already knew. He could tell from the way her cunt gripped him she was close and it wouldn't take much to tip her over the edge.

He was ready. God, he was so ready.

"Come, Rina," he whispered.

And just like that she shattered, her body convulsing, her liquid heat bathing him. Her body shook in his arms as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through her. His hold on her tightened, the muscles in his arms contracting, as his shaft throbbed inside the latex and filled it with his cum.

When the spasms finally subsided into ripples, she pressed herself back against his hard body and his hands cradled her breasts. Her heart beat wildly against his palm as her pulse tried to settle into a steady rhythm.

Spent and shaking from the aftereffects, McCall felt the strength flow out of his own body. Dragging in a deep breath, he caressed her arm, her hip, her thigh. They struggled to pull sufficient air into their lungs and the chilled air blew over their sweat-slicked bodies.

At last, reluctantly, he slipped out of her, staring down into the flashing emerald green of her eyes.

"I'd stay here all day if I could," he murmured against the deep red silk of her auburn hair. "But you have an event today that I've been ordered to let you attend." His voice was half joking, half angry. "I'm going to shower and throw some clothes on, then go over the plans with Gage."

"Thank you." What else could she say?

"Close your eyes. I'll wake you in an hour, okay?"

But she was already drifting back to sleep.

## Chapter Seven

“Time to get up, sleeping beauty.” McCall was sitting beside her on the bed, dressed in sweat pants and a T-shirt. He kissed her lips softly, rubbing his against them and tracing the outline with his tongue.

“What time is it?”

“Almost ten thirty.” His mouth curved in a lopsided grin, an unfamiliar expression on his face. “I figured you could use the rest.”

A pleasant feeling washed over her as she recalled exactly why she’d ended up sleeping so late. The residual soreness was another reminder. She hadn’t even thought some of the things they did were possible.

“Tell me what you want to eat, and I’ll order it. I already have coffee. And Gage and Les will be here any minute.”

“Just coffee will be fine. I’ll wait and eat lunch.”

All the evidence from last night was gone. If she didn’t feel so sore in every cell, she might have thought she imagined the whole thing.

While she brushed her teeth and ran a comb through her hair, she mentally ran down her check list for the day. Find out what was happening with her house. Call Shar. Lock down the details for today’s book signing. Call Laurel.

*Right. Call Laurel. I need three aspirins for that.*

Laurel Bryant was a good friend but very high maintenance. If she wasn’t allowed to pry into every nook and cranny of Rina’s life, or participate in it, she was put out and sulky.

So, a call to Laurel.

But first, coffee.

Fishing a robe out of her suitcase, she made her way into the next room. McCall was seated at the round table with Gage and Les, poring over sheets of paper. When no one looked up, she cleared her throat. "Good morning."

McCall looked at her and nodded. "Morning."

Only the banked fire in his eyes told her what he was really feeling. Otherwise, from his attitude, she'd have thought she dreamt everything the night before.

Rina wanted to smother her own smile. She gestured at the table. "What's all this?"

"Plans for your book signing. Gage scoped out the area and diagramed it so we know where the weak points are."

"Weak points?" She shoved her hand through her unruly hair. "It's a book store, for God's sake."

"Exactly. With everybody and his brother walking in and out." He tossed a pen down onto the table. "Sully's sending two more men to help cover it inside and out. And get used to the idea that I'll be glued to your side the entire time."

Rina opened her mouth to say something, then snapped it shut.

"By the way," Gage said. "After you and McCall left yesterday a friend of yours showed up and peppered us with questions. Who are we? Why were we there? Where could she find you?" He grinned. "Little spitfire. I thought she'd try to take my head off."

Rina heaved a sigh. "Laurel. I need to call her."

McCall raised an eyebrow. "Someone you forgot to tell us about?"

"She wasn't exactly at the forefront of my mind," she apologized. "Although, she should have been. Anyway, I'm sure that was Laurel Bryant. Probably

my closest friend but very proprietary and very nosy. I'm sure she'll be at the book signing today. Be prepared."

"You tell her nothing," McCall ordered.

Rina felt as if she should salute. "I think I've figured that out." Her voice was edged with sarcasm. "I'm assuming you have a schedule planned out for today?"

"We'll order lunch up to the room, then leave in time to get to the store about fifteen minutes ahead of time."

"Wait." She held up a hand. "I have to get there in time to sign all the presolds, unless you want to hang around afterwards."

McCall frowned. "Presolds?"

"Yes. People who ordered the books but can't come to the event. I also sign a certain amount for the store to sell later on."

"Shit. All right. Thirty minutes ahead of time. No more. You'll just have to write fast."

She stifled the urge to kick him. *Write fast.* Okay, McCall. "What's happening at my house?"

"You can move back in after the signing today," Gage told her. "The security system's in place, we have extra men on the premises, and everything's cleaned up." His voice softened. "You'll hardly know anything happened."

"What about my furniture? And the insurance?"

Les, who had said nothing up until now, chuckled. "When Sully wants something done, it gets done. The insurance agent showed up late in the day with a form for me to sign as your representative. He gave us an authorization to rent stuff until you can go shopping, told me to tell you the check would be in the mail today, and ran like hell out of there."

Rina couldn't help laughing. Sully could definitely be a force to be reckoned with.

"So I have rented stuff?"

Les nodded. "Until this is over and you can take the time to pick out what you want. But at least it's livable."

She appreciated everything that had been done, but she still felt that ultimate sense of violation. The knowledge that someone had insinuated themselves into her life and attempted to destroy her home. Looking for something. Her hand automatically went to the locket, and she yanked it away.

"Thank you very much. And thank Sully. I'll be in my room, making some calls."

Gage pointed to the table. "There's coffee and rolls to hold you until lunch time. "

"Thanks." She poured coffee into a cup and put a roll on a plate. "Well, you know where I'll be if you need me."

She gathered up her coffee and headed back through the open door, conscious of McCall's eyes on her as if they were twin lasers burning holes in her back. The worst part was, just thinking about the things they'd done—the things they had yet to do—aroused her and made her wet.

*Jesus, Rina. Get hold of yourself.*

Touching base with Shar took only a few moments, although explaining about her *bodyguards* got a little sticky. They reviewed the schedule one more time, and Rina hung up. Taking a deep breath, she dialed Laurel.

"So, let me see." Rina could visualize her friend, as blonde as Rina was dark, smooth hair flowing down her back, long legs pacing the room as she talked, blue eyes flashing with impatience. "You run off to someplace without a word to me. Come home and don't call me. Strange men are crawling all over your house, and now you've disappeared again. So what's the deal, kiddo? You hiding from old Laurel?"

Rina forced a laugh she didn't feel. "No. I was just out late the night before, and when I got up

yesterday morning, I discovered the a/c had conked out. They worked on it all day, but I decided to stay at a motel until it's fixed."

"Yeah?" Laurel's skepticism cut through the connection. "Those guys didn't look like any a/c mechanics I ever saw. You holding back on old Laurel? Doing something for one of your books?"

Rina chose to ignore the question. "I'll be back in the house tonight. Are you coming to the book signing today?"

"Would I miss it? I bask in your glory." The teasing note had a little edge to it. "What time will you be there?"

"About two thirty. The signing starts at three. Oh, and Laurel?" Better get it out in the open now.

"Yeah?"

Rina fisted her hand in the pocket of her robe. "Hands off the handsome lug I'm bringing. He's spoken for."

Silence hummed across the connection. "You're bringing a guy with you? As in a real, live male? Out in public?"

Rina tamped down her irritation. "Is that so difficult to contemplate? I *have* been known to have a date now and then, you know."

Sometimes Rina wondered just how good a friend Laurel really was. The travel agent had been recommended by another author, and she was very efficient at handling Rina's arrangements when necessary. The relationship had evolved from those first meetings, but every so often, a nasty thought would skitter across her brain that it was really the residual fame, or connections to other clients, Laurel was really after.

She shook herself. This was stupid. She was just jittery because of the situation.

"Anyway, he's, um, visiting me for a few days." *There. Did that sound normal enough?*

“And just where did he come from?” Laurel pried. “Is he someone you mentioned before? Oh, wait. That’s right. You never mention your men.”

And with good reason. Laurel collected men like charms on a bracelet.

“He’s someone I knew when I lived in Detroit. He’s on his way through, knew I’d moved here, and took a chance on calling me.”

*And that’s all you’re going to get.*

“Ah hah! I can’t wait to meet him. Say, maybe we can all have drinks after the signing, and I can give him the third degree.” Laurel was laughing when she said it, but the edge was still there.

“I think not, man-stealer.” Rina forced herself to sound casual. “We’ll be pretty busy.”

“Well, I’ll see you at Books Galore.” She chuckled again. “I’ll keep him company while you’re being a famous author.”

Sometimes Rina wondered if being friends with Laurel didn’t take more energy than she wanted to expend. The woman was high energy—with the emphasis on high—and a demanding friend. But she knew in an emergency Laurel would be the first one to help her. Still...

Sighing, she put her cell phone away. She really was glad for the event today, even if McCall and the others cursed the logistics. Taking care of ordinary tasks kept her mind off John and his continued disappearance, as well as the men who were after her and Sully’s ominous words.

“Gage and Les have gone to scope out the location once more.” McCall’s deep voice came from right behind her. He moved so quietly she hadn’t even heard him come in.

She whirled to face him. “My God, you scared ten years off my life.”

“Sorry. Stealth is a hard habit to break.”

She forced a grin. “In your line of work, I

wouldn't think you'd want to." She let out a deep breath. "Break it, I mean. I'm going to take a shower and do my makeup."

When he didn't comment, she headed for the bathroom, shutting the door behind her and turning on the shower full blast. She was reveling in its warm cocoon, letting the hot spray massage her well-used body, when she heard the bathroom door open, the sound of fabric rustling, and the swish as the shower curtain was pulled aside. Then strong hands pulled her against a hard male body and big hands cupped her breasts.

"Shouldn't you be standing guard or something?" Her voice didn't sound like her own.

"I am." She heard the heat in his voice. "How much better can I guard you than being this close?" He bent his mouth to her ear. "And in case you're worried, my gun's on the counter within arm's reach."

"Didn't we do this already this morning?" Her breathing was ragged, spikes of pleasure stabbing her as his fingers manipulated her still sensitive nipples and his thick shaft—already hard as steel—pressed into the cleft of her buttocks.

"I wish I could figure out a way we could do this all day." His voice was already rough with desire. He slid his hands down and pressed them against her tummy. "Rub your nipples for me," he commanded. "I love watching you touch yourself. Maybe tonight, if we get through the day unscathed, I'll tie your ankles to your bedposts and watch while you play with yourself again. Bring yourself to orgasm for me. God, I love to see that pussy ripple when your climax hits."

"Oh, God," she groaned, her womb contracting and throbbing at the erotic image his words called up.

"Then I'm going to spread that sweet little treat

as wide open as I can and shove my tongue inside, lapping up all that syrupy juice. Tonguing you is better than eating ice cream, Rina.”

Rina’s knees wobbled, and she leaned harder against McCall for support. A soft moan rolled from her lips.

“Right now I’m going to slide my fingers inside that hot sheath and rub your clit with my thumb until you can’t stand it any more. Until you beg me to take you. Until you scream to have me inside you. You want that, don’t you, Rina? You love it when I tell you what I’m going to do to you.”

She could only nod, well beyond speech. She had shocked herself at the latent feelings he’d uncovered in her. A love of domination in the bedroom. The heretofore unknown desire for submission. He might have started the whole thing as a way to scare her off, but it had turned into a stunning revelation for both of them. And just like that the sex between them took on a whole new meaning, one that excited her and aroused her darkest of desires.

The soft hair of his chest was like a sensuous blanket against her back and his hands like warm cradles holding her breasts. Her fingers plucked at her still sensitive, aching nipples. The liquid of her arousal trickled down the inside of her thigh, mingling with the spray of the shower.

“Would you like to feel me inside you, Rina? Maybe in your ass? God, I can hardly wait.” His lips were right at her ear, his breath a whisper against her skin, the heat of his body greater than the water. “You loved the feeling of the plug inside you, didn’t you?” His breath hissed between his teeth. “Tonight, it will be my cock you feel there.”

He reached for the bar of soap, working up a thick lather, which he began stroking over her body. When he reached her pubic curls, he rubbed the soap into them as if shampooing them.

“Your curls are so soft. But you know what would be even better? If that hot little mound was completely naked. Bare, so every inch of it showed. Would you let me shave it for you, Rina?”

For a brief moment, she placed one hand almost protectively over her mound. Then she gulped in a breath, swallowed hard and nodded.

“Tonight,” he promised. “Tonight, I’m going to make the delicious cunt as naked as the day you were born.”

He lifted one leg and rested her foot on the rim of the tub, sliding his soapy fingers deep into her sheath. Just as he’d promised, his thumb found her sex and began a slow, circular massage. She was glad his arm was holding her upright, or she’d have collapsed on the floor of the tub. Every pulse inside her pounded until her body throbbed everywhere.

She was so lost in the pleasure of McCall’s fingers probing inside her and stimulating her that it almost didn’t register when he massaged thick lather into the cleft of her buttocks and slipped a finger into her rectum. She jerked slightly.

“Don’t tense, baby,” he whispered. “Go with it. I’m just going to relax you for the afternoon.”

As the fingers of one hand plunged into her pussy again, his thumb circling her clit, two fingers of the other hand pressed into her hot, dark tunnel. His tongue traced the line of her ear, tickling and teasing.

“Oh, my god.” She shivered all over at the multiple assaults on her senses. Her body was not her own any more, totally controlled by the strong, hard man stimulating and filling her.

“I can feel you,” he said in that same soft voice. “You’re almost ready to come, aren’t you?”

She nodded.

“Say it,” he commanded. “Tell me the words.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chanted. “I’m ready. I want

to come.”

The fingers in both her channels moved faster. She leaned her hands on the wall in front of her, water cascading over them, as he finally took her over the edge. He held her in the clasp of both hands as her vaginal muscles clamped down on his fingers like a vise. Spasms rolled through her like tidal waves.

When the last little ripple subsided, he slipped both hands from her body and lowered her foot back to the tile floor. When he pulled her back to him, she felt his heart thud against her, beating in cadence with hers. He hadn't come, concentrating only on her, and his cock was still hard as steel.

*Tonight, McCall. Tonight I'll give it all back to you.*

At last, he turned her and placed a hungry kiss on her lips. When he drew back, his hands cupped her cheeks and he blinked the water out of his eyes. “I think I'm losing my mind. That's the only excuse I can find for this fire I can't seem to put out.”

“But-”

He placed a fingertip on her lips. “It's too late to stop it. I just hope it doesn't burn us both alive. When this is all over...”

“We'll worry about it then,” she finished for him.

“Maybe. We'll see. I can't make promises.”

“And I'm not asking for any.”

He reached for a wash cloth. “Meanwhile, we'd better shower for real and get dressed. Lunch will be up pretty soon.”

It took the better part of a half hour, a tube of concealer, and most of the bottle of her foundation makeup to cover the bruises on her face. A dusting of powder helped even more. When she was satisfied she'd done the best she could, she dressed for the afternoon in a simple tailored dress and low heels, with a wide gold necklace and tiny hoop earrings.

The heavy curls of her thick hair were caught at the nape of her neck with a gold clip that matched the gold of her jewelry. She was the epitome of professionalism, but she could see from the flare of heat in McCall's eyes that he was remembering her as she was only moments ago in the shower. A ghost of a smile drifted across his face.

"Okay." He led her out to the elevator. "Here's the drill. When we get to Books Galore, we'll walk in together. It's very natural for your lover"—his lips twisted on the word—"to stick close to you."

"Close. Fine." She couldn't look at him. Just the word 'lover' dampened her fresh panties and sent tingles through her breasts.

"Gage and Les and the others will already be there," he continued. "Do not look around for them, though. We want this to be completely routine, nothing different than you've done before. We don't know who might be watching. We'll go to whatever room they have set up for the pre-signings, then to the open area."

"Don't forget Laurel's planning to show up, full of questions, I'm sure."

McCall made a sound of disgust. "That woman sounds like a pest," he told her. "You should choose your friends more carefully."

"Laurel has her faults, but she's been very good to me," Rina pointed out. "And she's a great travel agent. She always manages to get me awesome ticket prices."

"Did you ever think how convenient it is for a travel agent to be best friends with a famous author? Someone who could throw a lot of business her way?"

Since she'd been thinking exactly the same thing that morning, she barely kept herself from flinching. "You're cynical, McCall. You don't trust anyone."

"I can't afford to," he said quietly, and that

simple statement brought it all back to her again.

Shar was waiting for them with the rear door open when they parked in the small lot behind the book store.

“Hi! Shar Fontaine.” She reached out her hand, and McCall shook it. “You must be the boyfriend.”

“I don’t think boyfriend quite...” Rina began.

“That’s me. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice choice, Rina.” Shar winked at her, then took a harder look at her face, touching the bruises with the tip of a finger. “I hope the new boyfriend didn’t do this.”

McCall tensed, but Rina moved Shar’s hand away gently. “I thought I covered them up pretty well. And no, McCall didn’t do it. Believe me on that. It’s a long story, and one we don’t have time for now.”

Shar looked from Rina to McCall and shrugged. “If you say so. Come on. It’s already jammed in the store. The manager’s letting us use her office for before and after. And I brought some of the posters for March second with me. The manager put some up around the store. Thought you’d like to have a couple for yourself, too, since your picture’s included.”

“Are these the posters they’ve been sending out for the past year?”

Shar nodded. “How they got the president to commit this far in advance I’ll never know, except for the fact that he’s a sixth generation Texan.”

“More headaches for the Secret Service,” McCall muttered, looking over her shoulder at the crowd gathering inside.

He immediately shifted into alert mode, glancing up and down the back end of the strip center, scanning the parking lot. She knew he was mentally cataloguing the people getting in and out of cars.

*He doesn't miss a thing.*

"Sorry there's not more space." Ellen Barton, the manager, ushered them into her office. "But we've got all the books set for you to sign, with notes on each one." She grinned. "I had them clean the place up so you could meet with the reporters in here afterwards."

"I really appreciate this," Rina told her. "I'm sorry to make such a problem."

"Not to worry. It's good for sales." Another grin and she was gone to the main part of the store.

"I'm going to mingle and listen," Shar said and moved away.

"Reporters?" McCall snapped. "Is that a little detail you left off the list, like your friend, Laurel?"

"Only one, actually. Just a writer from the Express-News. The publicity's good for me, and it won't take long." She took a seat behind the desk. "This, however, will take a while. You might get bored. Are you sure you don't want to go find Gage or something?"

"Gage is a big boy. He doesn't need me to hold his hand. And there is no way in hell I'm going to be more than two inches away from you until we leave here."

By the time she'd finished with the stacks of books, Rina was sure her hand wouldn't make it through the main part of the program. But Ellen had thoughtfully left her bottled water and ice, so she sat back, kicked off her shoes, and dangled her hand in the ice cubes.

McCall looked at her curiously. "Ice?"

"My hand gets swollen when I sign a lot. No big deal. They always have ice for me. We've got about ten minutes so I can recharge myself."

"When you go out to the snake pit out there, I will be right with you. Introduce me as a friend who's visiting. Let people draw their own

conclusions.” He gave her a feral smile. “Maybe the thought of a lover will spice up your sales.”

“My sales spice up all by themselves, thank you very much.”

“You know the rules. Sully wants me to stick closer to you than your own skin, and I agree with him.”

“If you’re supposed to be my lover, I hope you can put a more pleasant expression on your face. I wouldn’t want my readers to think making love to me was a painful experience.”

“I am your lover,” he told her quietly. “And making love to you is hardly painful. It’s—”

A knock at the door interrupted him, and Shar poked her head inside. “They’re ready for you, honey.”

Rina stood up. “Let’s do it, then.”

The book store was packed, the early birds in line, others waiting their turn. McCall held tightly to her elbow, guiding her through the lines of people waiting to see her. Several of them called out her name, and she smiled and waved at everyone.

“This is nothing less than a nightmare,” he muttered. “Anyone can pop out of this throng at any time.”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” she asked in an edgy voice.

“Over here, Rina,” a voice called out.

Shar materialized at her other side, leading her to the table that had been set up. Rina sat down, pulled a stack of pens closer to her and nodded that she was ready.

McCall stationed himself not more than an inch away. He knew he was crowding her, but he didn’t dare leave even an inch for someone to crawl into. So he stood immobile, like a stone statue, as she signed book after book, smiled at people, exchanged greetings, posed for snapshots. The whole process

was driving him nuts.

"How do you do it?" He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "I'd shoot myself if I had to go through this all the time."

"Then let's be thankful you don't," she whispered back.

His gaze never stopped roaming the crowd, seeking likely suspects, watching for anything unusual. Gage and the others were doing the same thing, or at least they'd better be. If they were lucky, they'd get through this without an incident, although the whole thing was giving him a headache.

He knew she was secretly hoping her appearance here today would draw these people out in the open so he and his men could grab them. The plan might sound good in theory, but McCall knew exactly how dangerous something like that could be.

Finally, they were done, the last book signed, the last hand shaken, the last photo snapped. The reporter was waiting off to the side with Shar.

"Good show, Rina." Laurel had materialized from somewhere. "I insist on taking the two of you out for a drink to celebrate. I want to get to know this hunk a lot better." She winked at McCall.

He cringed inwardly. How did Rina not see this woman for the barracuda she was?

"Thank you." He made his voice pleasant but distant. "We appreciate it, but Rina and I have plans."

"Oh." Laurel pasted a smile on her face. "Well, perhaps tomorrow. After all, Rina and I are best friends and we share everything." She tried to slide her hand through the crook of his elbow.

"I think we'll be keeping pretty much to ourselves while I'm here." He extricated himself smoothly and moved a pace away. "As a matter of fact, we need to get going right after her interview."

But thanks, anyway.”

They left Laurel standing in the aisle, an unpleasant look on her face.

“That’s one of the most predatory females I’ve ever seen,” McCall told her. “I can’t believe the two of you are friends.”

“Sometimes I wonder about it myself. Listen, I have to hit the restroom first. Then we’ll go back to the office.”

“Jesus, Rina. We need to get out of here.”

“And I need to answer the call of nature. Even you can’t make that go away.”

The ladies’ room was directly across from the office, in the same little hallway that led to the back door. McCall looked at the setup and his neck itched. Not a good sign.

When Rina found him right on her heels, she said over her shoulder, “I think this is one place you can’t follow me, McCall.”

“But I’ll be right at the door. Coming in if I need to. Count on it.”

He politely shooed everyone away from the area, opened the door for a quick peek, then gestured her to go inside.

“I can take it from here, McCall.” Rina stepped into the restroom and let the door swing shut behind her. She leaned against it for a moment, breathing slowly, trying to settle herself as she always did after one of these events.

“Oh, Miss Devargas.” A woman stepped out of one of the stalls where she’d been hidden from McCall’s view. “I just love every one of your books. You have such a way with words.”

Rina straightened up and forced a smile. *Can’t I at least go to the bathroom in peace?* “Thank you. I’m glad you enjoy them.”

“I’ll enjoy this even more.” She pulled something from her pocket and sprayed it at Rina’s face.

Desiree Holt

Rina tried to call out, but her voice was trapped in her throat. Her legs didn't want to support her and she felt herself fading into a black hole.

## Chapter Eight

McCall paced in the hallway, eyes moving rapidly from his watch to the people in the area to what he could see of the mob scene in the book store. This was a bigger clusterfuck than he ever imagined. Anyone—*anyone*—could have gotten to Rina here. And still could. He wouldn't breathe easy until they were well away from this place.

He scanned the area again. Nothing looked unusual, but then how the hell would he even know?

He was aware that he was more intense about this than normal. He also knew the reason for it. He'd let the gate open just a crack and Rina had slipped through, diving into the mess that was his emotions and hanging on for dear life. How was he supposed to function this way?

*Fucking shit, just stop it.*

He was a professional. He'd learned the hard way to keep his emotions in his back pocket when he was in a treacherous situation, and this certainly fit that description.

He checked his watch again. Too much time had gone by. Something was wrong.

"Rina?" He cracked the door a little and yelled for her. "Time's up." Pause. "Rina?"

McCall was through the door in a flash, almost stumbling over her body.

"Rina, what the hell..."

A woman moved behind him, crashing something heavy down on his skull.

*Shit, shit, shit*, echoed in his brain as pain spiked through his head, and he stumbled against

the wall and slumped to the floor.

Rina tried to pull away from the hand holding her arm in an iron grip. Through fuzzy vision, she saw McCall crash to the floor, watched the woman from the restroom take a good look at him, waiting to make sure he'd stopped moving. She could barely stand, her legs rubbery and threatening to collapse beneath her.

"Coming out now." The woman spoke into a tiny lapel mic, then hoisted Rina to her feet, draped an arm over her shoulders, and opened the door. "That's it, Rina," she whispered. "Just lean on me."

"W—what? W—who?" Rina struggled as the woman dragged her along, her body like a sack of flour.

"Could you give us some air, please?" the woman holding her asked the people standing in the hallway. "Miss Devargas feels a little faint."

Rina tried to focus and push away but strong arms held her tight.

She heard a woman's voice saying, "Neither her agent nor the store manager are anywhere around right now, but you can bet they'll be here in a second. And I don't know how long McCall will be out. Bring the car around right now."

Rina forced her eyelids open and saw the shadowy images of two men at the rear door. They were almost out of the store when Rina felt herself jerked from the woman holding her. A familiar arm banded around her body, and McCall's voice cut into her consciousness. She wanted to weep with relief.

"This isn't a toy gun I have at your neck," he told the woman, his voice like a knife. "It takes more than one hit on my hard head to do any damage. You might keep that in mind in the future." He raised his voice. "Gage? Move it before someone gets shot."

"Right here." Gage came up behind the two men, his own gun very much in evidence. "Drop it, guys."

McCall had Rina firmly under his arm as he pressed the barrel of his gun against the woman's neck.

"Everyone back out of here slowly and drop to your knees," Gage ordered, then spoke into his lapel mic. "Out back, on the double."

Then everything happened in a blur. The woman pushed hard at Rina, throwing McCall off balance, and rushed forward. The men with her spun around, one of them shoving against Gage and knocking him to the ground. A black SUV with darkened windows pulled up, its doors flying open. Gage fired from where he'd fallen and one of the men clutched his shoulder.

Sully's other two agents raced around the corner just as the SUV pulled away.

"Well, shit." McCall held Rina in his arms. She was too limp for his liking. He felt for her pulse, relieved to find it slow but steady. "Sully will have our nuts for this."

"What happened?" Shar hurried out the back door, followed by the manager and Laurel.

"Oh, my God!" Laurel gasped. "Is Rina all right? What's going on?"

"Everything's under control," McCall snapped. "Rina's fine."

"But we heard shots."

"I'll call the police," Ellen put in.

"No." McCall looked at Rina, pale and still trembling, and took a deep breath to grab onto what was left of his temper. "I'll take care of this."

"With all due respect," Ellen told him, "I have a responsibility to this store, and I think this needs to be reported."

"With all due respect," McCall said through gritted teeth, "I am getting Rina the hell out of here before she's in any further danger. Call the police if you want, but we won't be here to answer any

questions. Gage?”

“Get her in the car. I’ll take care of this.”

“Good.”

“What happened?” Shar asked demanding.

“What’s going on here, anyway?”

“Later.” He put Rina in the car and buckled her in, barely controlling the rage he felt. At the moment, he could easily have killed someone.

“McCall?” Laurel pushed through the crowd and shouted through the window. “Let me go with you. I can help.”

“Not now, Laurel. Get out of my way.”

At the coldness and the unmistakable authority in his tone, Laurel’s eyes widened and she backed quickly away. But avid curiosity was etched on her face as she took in every detail of the scene.

“I’ll come to the house,” she said.

“Call first.”

A Bronco pulled up behind them, and the horn beeped once. McCall pulled out of the parking lot, the Bronco trailing. He pulled out his cell phone and punched in numbers. When Sully answered, McCall recited a recognition code, gave him a brief report on what had happened and descriptions of the three people he’d seen.

They made it to Rina’s in record time. Sully had sent two men to check out the house while they were en route, just so they didn’t walk into any more surprises, then called back with an all clear. McCall carried Rina inside and laid her on the couch, cursing under his breath.

“I should have gone into the damn ladies room with her,” he muttered to the men waiting for them. “Privacy be damned.”

“She’s fine, McCall.” One of the men Sully had sent also doubled as a medic. He went to work at once checking Rina’s vital signs. “I’m putting her on oxygen just to clear her head and until we know

what stuff they gave her.”

“McCall?” Rina stirred, her eyes fluttering open. She pulled at the oxygen mask, but McCall stilled her hand.

“Right here.” He was on his knees beside her, concern eating away at him.

“What happened? Some woman spoke to me, then I think she sprayed perfume at me.”

“It wasn’t perfume. It was something to knock you out, but you didn’t get very much of it. They tried to sneak you out the back door, but we got to you in time.”

“Out the back? But who...” She wrinkled her brow.

“Never mind. Just rest. I’ll tell you all about it later.” He ground his teeth, restraining the impulse to take her in his arms and kiss her.

She looked at him with a worried expression. “It wasn’t your fault. I don’t want you blaming yourself.”

He leaned close to her so no one else could hear what he said. “Remember when I told you getting involved would take the edge off my focus? I was right.”

She grabbed for his hand. “No, damn you. I will not let you pull back. Don’t you do this to me. To us.”

“Rina,—”

Her fingers were like steel talons. “I won’t let you pull away, you hear me? I’ll just learn to be a little more vigilant myself.” She forced a grin. “Next time you can even come into the ladies room with me.”

He smoothed the hair back from her face, then stood up.

Fear flashed in her eyes. “Where are you going?”

“Just into the other room for a minute.” He indicated the man standing next to him. “This is Jesse. Sully called him. Thank god he happened to

be in the area on his way to another assignment. He's also a medic and happens to have a handy little lab and pharmacy in his van." He turned to Jesse. "And make her keep that damn oxygen mask on."

Jesse had already moved into place, strapping the oxygen mask back onto her face. "You'll be fine, Miss Devargas. I'm just going to take a little blood, okay?"

He tucked the throw pillows behind her, propping her up, and pulled out his lab kit. In seconds, he was handing a vial to another agent and telling him to get it the hell to their truck.

Gage and Les were waiting for McCall in the kitchen.

"Well?" McCall demanded.

Gage shook his head. "Didn't get anything. The smooth bastards had it all planned. The SUV they were in was long gone before we could even get a vehicle out in the street."

"The store has security cameras. We need to get the tapes."

"Already done." Les held up a satchel. "We'll all need to go through them, including Miss Devargas."

"For all the good it'll do." McCall snorted in disgust. "These aren't amateurs. They're more like hired assassins. You can bet they took care not to be taped."

"They had this planned like a military operation, you know," Gage told him.

"Brechtel," McCall said.

"What about him?"

"He has to be the one hiring them. I don't think our senators—and certainly not our esteemed vice president—have connections to people like this or would risk what happened today. Too chancy for them. Besides, we know he's calling the shots."

"I left our other two guys at the book store to clean up the mess." Gage grimaced. "The manager

was insisting the local police take over and the reporter who was there to interview Rina was salivating over a possible hot news item. By the time the crowd had finished gossiping about it, the story had grown to five terrorists in all black, leaping into the store through the roof with guns drawn." He shook his head. "What a nightmare."

"Well, they got the terrorist part right," McCall said sardonically.

"So what now?" Les asked. "It doesn't look as if they're going to forget about Rina and whatever they think she's got." He narrowed his eyes at McCall. "And by the way, just what is it she's got that everyone wants so badly?"

McCall was about to answer when Jesse came into the room.

"We tested the blood in our little mobile lab. Whatever they sprayed was non-lethal, just something to immobilize her while they got her out. There's very little in her bloodstream."

"Thank god for small favors," McCall said.

"As soon as we knew what it was," Jesse went on. "I gave her something to counteract the effects. The oxygen should do the rest. But it might be a good idea to get her into bed. Oh, and she needs to drink a lot of water."

"I'll take care of it." McCall stood up. "Thanks for everything."

"No problem."

Gage pulled out his cell phone. "Take care of Rina," he told McCall. "I'll call Sully and see where we go from here."

"Thanks."

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Rina wanted to stay on the couch, but McCall was adamant. He swept her up in his arms and carried her to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him and laying her on the bed.

“You need to get into a nightgown, then I’ll hook up your oxygen again until Jesse says we can shut it off. He said for you to drink plenty of water.”

“McCall, I’m fine. Just a little woozy.” She pushed herself off the bed and wobbled her way to the dresser.

He grabbed her arm to steady her. “Yeah, fine. I can see that.”

“I’m good,” she protested. “Really.”

She wasn’t going to be a baby about this, but when she started back toward the bed, she stumbled and nearly passed out. The room was spinning around her.

“All right. That’s it.” McCall picked her up, carried her to the bed, and stripped her out of her clothes. Eventually, he had her in her sleep shirt and tucked under the covers.

“Be right back.” He returned with a full glass of water, which he made her drink, then placed the oxygen mask on her again. When she tried to push it away, he stopped her. “Just for a little while longer, until we’re sure all that stuff is out of your system.”

“All right.” She could feel herself drifting off again.

“I’m going to talk to Gage and Les in the kitchen, but I’ll keep checking on you.”

Her eyes slammed shut, her mind already sinking into black nothingness. In her befuddled state, she thought she felt him kiss her forehead. Then she was asleep.

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Gage had made a new pot of coffee and was sitting at the table with Les and the other agents who had just returned. All of them had full mugs and grim expressions.

McCall busied himself pouring his own coffee, forcing his mind away from Rina and her naked body. Jesus. He wondered if he’d ever get to the

point where he could look at her without wanting to fuck her senseless. Probably not. Especially since he'd discovered that, rather than frightening her, his sexual preference actually turned her on. Go figure.

Damn it, anyway. He'd made a comfortable niche in life for himself, focusing on his work, content with the occasional female who was into the kind of sex he liked. Personal relationships had no place in his life. Not anymore. Yet here he was, allowing Rina Devargas to pierce his shields and doing a piss poor job of protecting her because of it.

He was considered the stoic of the team. Very little rattled him. Except this time. Because of Rina. He shook his head. Now what did he do?

*Not again. I will not let this happen again. Not to another woman because I can't keep my dick in my pants. Although the last time...*

"So what now?" Gage asked, interrupting his mental debate.

"You tell me." He leaned against the counter, watching the men at the table. "One at a time, please."

"Me first." Jon Addison, one of the other agents, set his mug down on the table. "You left us quite a mess, thank you very much. Screaming women, a hysterical manager, and an irate agent, to name a few. And no bad guys to be seen, as you know. They made a clean getaway."

"Sorry," McCall said. "I needed to get Rina out of there and to safety. Particularly since I was the jackass that got suckered into a blow on the head and nearly lost her. What about the local cops? How did they react?"

"We told everyone that some obsessed fan tried to kidnap her."

"Logical enough." McCall nodded. "Let's hope they all buy into it. You get them calmed down okay?"

"As much as possible. That Shar's a bulldog, though. I expect her to come rolling up any minute, demanding to see her client. Did you know there's another one of these things scheduled?"

"Christ." McCall raked his fingers through his hair. "I did and I forgot about it. We've got to find a way to cancel it."

"Or follow her into the ladies room," Gage joked.

McCall began pacing. "Not funny. We have a major problem here and our stupidity's showing."

"Well, you better figure out what to do with Shar," Gage told him. "Because I think that's her car I hear in the driveway."

McCall groaned. "You guys need to make yourselves scarce since I don't have an explanation for you being here. Where are your cars?"

"Around the corner," Pedrosa, the other man, told him. "We figured someone might be watching the house. We came in through the back yard. Good thing there's high hedges and a lot of space between houses out here."

They vanished through the sliding door to the patio and faded into the shrubbery as the doorbell rang again.

McCall barely had the front door open before Shar charged into the house, indignation in every line of her body.

"Where is she? I want to see her with my own eyes. And who the hell are you, anyway? That old lover shit doesn't cut it with me, buster. Not after today."

"Please calm down." McCall took her arm and led her into the living room. "Rina and I have known each other for a long time. I called her because I was going to be in the area, and she invited me to visit."

"Oh, tell me another one," Shar spat at him. "I want the truth."

McCall was done playing games. "If you want

any more, you'll have to ask Rina. And right now she's not seeing anyone."

Shar turned and looked at him, her eyes probing his, calculating. "Listen," she said. "I don't even care who you are. But that woman is a friend as well as a client, and the last thing I want is to see her hurt. So what the hell is going on here?"

"Rina will be well taken care of. That's all you need to know." McCall fought to control his irritation and impatience. He didn't have time to fool around with this woman.

"Bull." She glared at him. "You give me some answers, or I'm going to her room and drag them out of her."

"No, you won't." McCall blocked her movements, his voice like steel. "She's asleep, and she's going to stay that way. She's exhausted. I will *not* have her interrogated. By you or anyone else."

McCall was good at reading people, and he sensed that Shar Fontaine seldom backed down from anyone or anything. But his body language sent her an unmistakable message—don't mess with me on this.

She moistened her lips with her tongue, watching him carefully. "All right. But I do need to have some kind of explanation to give out. And the people at the bookstore were going nuts."

"I left people there to handle everything," McCall assured her. "It's all being taken care of."

"What about the other book signing? The ads are out, and the store's been loaded with calls. We can't just cancel it without some explanation."

McCall frowned. "It's tomorrow, right? Tell me again where it is."

"The Books Galore on the other side of San Antonio. Same time as today. Three o'clock."

"All right. Let me think a minute." McCall rapidly ran possible scenarios through his head. "I

want as little opportunity for a repeat of today as possible, so here's what we'll do. Get the presolds here in the morning, and she'll do them before we leave. Then you can deliver them back to the store for mailing."

"But—"

He shook his head. "That's not negotiable. Also, no interviews at the store. If anyone wants one, get their number and tell them Rina will call and do a phone interview."

"How am I supposed to explain all these changes to people?" she demanded.

"Don't you think after today's incident they'd be a little surprised if we *didn't* make changes?"

Shar stared at him for a long time. McCall glared right back at her. Finally, she picked up her purse and turned toward the door.

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow at the signing. Please try to be there by quarter to three." She started to leave, then stopped and turned back, handing him the large envelope tucked under her arm. "These are for the big Texas Independence Day shindig at the Alamo. I thought she might like to see them. Also, if there's anyone she wants to give one to—"

"I think the publicity machine is grinding enough," he told her. "I have to tell you, I was dead set against it, but Rina refused to budge on it."

"Damn good thing, too." Shar looked like she wanted to stamp her foot. "This is too important. I worked my fanny off to get her included, and the announcements have been out for—"

"I know, I know," McCall interrupted. "A year. Tell me, Shar. Aren't the president's people or the governor's worried that with all this advance publicity some nut might use it as an opportunity to do something?"

"I've spoken with the head of security for both

men as has Rina's publisher. Everything seems to be well in hand. These people aren't novices."

"But they won't be protecting Rina."

"No, Mr. Macho," she snapped. "I assume that's your job. Deal with it however you have to. But in just a couple of days Rina will be seated in a tent on the grounds of the Alamo, smiling and signing her books. The governor gets the first book, and we'll be handing one over for the president. It's all arranged. So get your act together."

She stormed out of the room, and in a minute, the front door slammed.

McCall went back to the kitchen. His team had slipped back inside as soon as they heard the front door close.

"This is going to be a nightmare," he said to the men staring at him. "And you don't know the half of it yet." He raked his hands through his hair. "Okay. I want you guys," he pointed to Addison and Pedrosa, "to really scope tomorrow's location out ahead of time. I'll give you the address. No ladies' room visits for Rina unless I check the place out first and guard the door while she's in there."

"Is that the last of them?"

"Not by a long shot. Wait until you hear this."

When he'd finished with the details of the Texas Independence Day event, everyone looked at him as if he'd grown two heads.

"Is this for real?" Gage asked at last.

"You bet. And we don't have a chance of canceling it without, apparently, an incident of national proportions."

"This is stupid, McCall."

"She discussed it with Sully and flat out told him she was doing it. Short of locking her in a closet, we don't have a choice. We just need to have our best plan in place."

Gage shrugged. "Your call, buddy."

## Chapter Nine

When Rina came downstairs shortly after eight, McCall was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the paper and nursing a soft drink. She had changed her sleep shirt for a T-shirt and shorts, but she still felt rumpled from sleeping. The effects of the spray had not completely dissipated, either, and her bones had a jelly-like feel to them.

"Where is everyone?" She yawned and tucked her hair behind her ears.

"Gone on assignments. How are you feeling?" He folded the newspaper and shoved it aside. His eyes studied her from head to toe, assessing her condition.

"Not great but not bad." She forced a smile. "Better."

McCall ran a glass of tap water and handed it to her. "Drink. Doctor's orders." When she'd chugged it all down, he asked, "Would you like something to eat?"

"I am a little hungry," she admitted. "I thought I'd make myself a sandwich."

"Why don't I just order some pizza? Can you handle it? I found a takeout menu stuck to your refrigerator." He gave her a wry smile. "You must be a regular customer."

"Cooking for one doesn't cut it too much. Pizza sounds great. Pepperoni, mushrooms, and green peppers, please."

"You got it."

They ate in tense silence, eyeing each other like dogs circling in the yard. Despite her attempts to

question him, McCall avoided any mention of the afternoon until they'd devoured every bite of the food.

"Okay." She pushed away her empty plate. "Quit stalling. I want details."

So he gave it to her, as much as he knew, knowing she wouldn't be satisfied with less. He stressed the story they'd concocted for everyone's benefit. "It's important that no one get any idea of who those people really are. For their sake as well as yours."

"An obsessed fan, huh?" She tried to grin. "Does this mean I've hit the big time?"

Beneath the forced bravado she was shaken, nevertheless, at how vulnerable she'd been. She knew McCall could see it and was trying to play on it when he told her about the arrangements for the next signing.

"And no reviewers," he insisted, his voice firm.

"No way," she protested. "The reviewers are my life's blood. If they can't get to me, they'll go on to the next author and I could be tomorrow's bird cage liner."

"You may have to settle for that." McCall was unmovable.

"And hauling the books back and forth? You don't think someone will think that's strange?"

"Not as strange as finding your dead body," he said coldly.

His words slapped at her with the hard punch of reality. Somehow, she hadn't thought of herself and death in the same breath. Now she was faced with just how real the threat was.

"And Shar's okay with this?"

"Yes."

That flat 'yes' was a strong indicator that it hadn't been an easy battle but he'd won.

"McCall?"

“Yeah?”

“Does that mean our plan to use me as bait is working?”

He waited a long moment before answering. “All too well, damn it. Using you as bait is one thing. Letting them get their hands on you is another. We want to draw them out, not get you killed.”

She frowned. “So what now?”

“They didn’t succeed today. They’ll try again.” He narrowed his eyes. “Rina, this would be a good time to tell me if John said anything to you we should know about. Or gave you anything to pass along. Maybe we could put an end to this right now.”

The locket suddenly felt heavy against her skin, like a piece of granite weighing her down. *Tell him, tell him.* She’d taken this man into her bed. Into her body. Why did she balk at sharing this most important secret with him? But the trust John had placed in her was the most important thing. She couldn’t let the demands of her body override that.

*I’ve been betrayed.* John’s words echoed in her head. *You’ll know who to give the locket to. You’ll read the signal.*

*How will I know, John? Is there a secret word?*

Once again she wondered how she’d handle it if the man who was rapidly becoming so important to her turned out to be the traitor. God, she didn’t even want to contemplate that.

“No.” She wet her lips. “Nothing.”

McCall stared at her, as if his eyes could pull words from her mouth. Finally, he got up and took their dishes to the sink. “I expect the local media to give this a lot of air time. You’re big news.”

Rina grimaced. “Not the kind of publicity I really want.”

McCall headed toward the sliding door. “Gage and the others are outside. We’ll check the house and make sure the alarm is set, see if anything’s

stirring.”

“Okay.” He was near enough she could smell the spice of his aftershave. “McCall?”

“Mmm?”

“Thanks. I mean, for what you did today.”

“Just part of the job.”

*Was it? Really?*

One minute he was as remote as ever; he might have been two miles away rather than two feet. The next he was right in front of her, a battle raging in the eyes that devoured her. He bent, hesitated a moment, then his mouth lowered to hers briefly, his tongue tasting her. And just as abruptly, he pulled away.

“What—”

“I need to keep my mind on business. You should go upstairs and rest. Tomorrow will be another busy day.”

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In her room Rina lay back on her bed, trying to make sense of everything. Especially McCall. He was such an enigma. They were either at each other’s throats or at each other’s bodies. If only she could get a good reading on him.

The longer she delayed handing over the locket, the more critical the situation became. She knew that. But she was terrified of revealing anything before the traitor was identified. If it turned out to be McCall, she’d be devastated.

*What should I do, John? Help me out here.*

How stupid of her. Did she really expect to hear him whisper in her ear, “Here’s the name, Dusty. He’s the one.”

God, she was in such big trouble.

She punched her pillow and buried her head in it, but that didn’t keep her from hearing the soft footfalls coming up the stairs and heading down the hall toward her room. She knew it was McCall, and

every other thought flew out of her head.

He closed the door behind him and locked it.

“All set downstairs,” he told her, his voice quiet, his face still expressionless.

She sat up, her stomach suddenly churning. “You really think they will try for the house again? With all this protection.”

“Let me be very clear on this if I haven’t already.” As he spoke he shucked off his clothes and tossed them on her small slipper chair. “We’re dealing with a group of the most ruthless men in the world who have a great deal to lose. Very little will deter them.”

Rina clutched her pillow to her, wrapping her arms around it. “But you’re prepared for them, right?”

McCall nodded. “The alarm’s set, including the sensors, and we’ve got two armed men on the perimeter at all times.”

“And what does everyone have to say about our sleeping arrangements?” She couldn’t help the tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

His face hardened. “Not a damn thing if they know what’s good for them.”

Crawling under the covers, he pulled the pillow away and drew her tight against his body. She shivered, and he tightened his arms around her.

“You’re still tense,” he remarked.

“I know. I can’t help it. I close my eyes and see gremlins everywhere.”

“After the day you’ve had, I should take myself down the hall to the guest room,” he told her. “But Jesus, Rina. I can’t keep my hands off of you.”

His feathered kisses were so gentle, so un-McCall-like, she wondered if she imagined them. But the trail of his hot mouth down her cheek suddenly kicked loose the knot her nerves were tied up in.

“Let me make you feel better, Rina.” His breath

was a whisper against her skin. “No games tonight. Just let me take the nightmares away. At least for the moment.”

He pushed up her nightshirt so the lower part of her body was exposed and ran his fingertips through the soft hair covering her mound. Even the light touch of his hands was electrifying. Every place they skimmed came alive.

With infinite care, he touched every inch of her body, exploring her with his hands and his mouth. He kissed the pulse throbbing in the hollow of her neck, the soft spots behind each ear. He cupped each breast in turn, feeling their weight in his hands, massaging them, drawing a line around them with his tongue. The peaks of her nipples pressed into his palms. He bent and caught them in his lips, each in turn, teasing them, gently biting them until she thought she would die from the exquisite pain, then laving them with his tongue. The cool air washing over the wetness of the areoles was like an erotic kiss.

He slid his hand slowly along the contours of her belly, his touch light and teasing as he touched the sleek skin now heated and flushed. He nipped at her with his teeth, blazing a trail from the hollow of her shoulder across the slope of her breasts, down across the clenching muscles of her abdomen to that tight nest of curls and the quivering core of her sex, already slick and waiting.

“You don’t know how much I was looking forward to shaving your mound tonight and seeing it naked,” he murmured in a taut voice. “We’ll save that treat for another time.”

Rina shivered in anticipation as the image floated across her brain.

Gently, he parted her thighs, his fingers probing her aching cunt. Leaning down, he kissed the inside of first one thigh, then the other, tracing his tongue

over the sensitive flesh. The rough stubble of his beard grazed her skin, sending shivers through her. When his tongue traced a line the length of her slit, she jerked beneath his hand, arching closer.

Shifting to kneel between her thighs, he lapped at her cunt again, pausing to nibble lightly at her clit. His tongue was like rough silk moving over her, touching every nerve in that weeping channel. When he lifted his head, cool air washed over the heated flesh, making the pulse in her womb beat even harder.

And then he went to work on places she didn't even know were erotically responsive—her ankles, the arches of her feet, the backs of her knees. When his mouth began its travels up and down the insides of her thighs, she shivered with anticipation, trying to urge him back to her waiting, demanding vaginal channel.

She wanted the feel of his cock inside her now. Why was he tormenting her this way? Was this supposed to relax her?

McCall swiped his tongue across her clit again, then blew against the overheated bundle of nerves. Rina fisted her hands in the sheet as streaks of pleasure raced through her. She shifted her hips, trying to push against him, but McCall was devilishly clever, working his tongue just wickedly enough to make her want more.

"Pinch your nipples for me," he whispered in a hoarse voice. "Let me see you pluck those luscious ripe berries. Make them swell like they did last night."

Mindlessly, Rina took her nipples between thumb and forefinger and pinched them until jolts of pleasure/pain speared through her. McCall's tongue was working faster now, plunging in and out of her pussy, filling the whole of her, his thumbs busy teasing and rubbing and tormenting.

When he lifted his head again, she cried out in need until he slid first one then two lean fingers into her, rasping them against the hot, wet walls of her pussy. Spasms already clutched at her, and her liquid spilled onto his fingers. His thumb found her clit again, massaging it while his fingers kept up their clever rhythm.

His touch was magic, coaxing her response, teasing at her, driving her need. She was having trouble breathing, and her hips were doing their own sensual dance.

“Look at me, Rina,” he commanded.

With great effort, she forced her eyes open.

“I want you,” she begged, her hand stretching out, reaching for his hot erection. “Please.”

He shifted and grasped both of her wrists with one hand and held them over her head. She thrust her breasts up to him, the nipples that she plucked into hard points aching for his touch.

“Not yet.” His voice was so harsh and rough with passion she almost didn’t recognize it. “I want to watch you come first. Come for me, Rina.”

The muscles in her tummy clenched as a climax thrust up from the well of her body, pushing, grabbing her. Every muscle tightened and clenched, her back bowed as she arched up off the bed. When she began to moan, McCall slid two fingers back into her cunt and moved up on her body to cover her mouth with his, swallowing the scream that bubbled up in her throat.

And then it was there, shaking her, spinning her in space, violent spasms that clutched and released, clutched and released.

“Beautiful,” he breathed. “Just beautiful.”

As the aftershocks still raced through her, McCall reached into the nightstand drawer and she heard the tearing of foil, the snap of latex as he sheathed himself.

She reached between them and took his shaft in her hand, feeling the pulsing waves even through the shield of the condom. She remembered how he'd felt in her mouth, how he tasted, and she wanted to rip away the latex and put her lips to him again.

"Show me the way," he whispered hoarsely. "I need to be inside you. Now."

She guided him to the opening of her pussy, widening her legs as much as possible to give him access. Although she was wet and soft from her climax, she was still very tight. Inch by inch, he slid inside her.

She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer with the pressure of her ankles. Faster, faster, she urged silently, moving to meet his rhythm. The pressure began to build in her body again, the unbearable sensation of him inside her, the increase in tempo. More, more.

Rina felt as if she'd been dropped into a void, surrounded by a blackness that heightened rather than diminished her senses. The crisp hair on his chest rubbed against her sensitized breasts, the grip of his lean, hard hands flattening hers to the mattress. The rasping sounds of their breathing and the slide of their sweat-slicked bodies filled the room as they drove for fulfillment.

When the climax hit, it took them both, like the drop of a roller coaster on a steep slide, robbing them of everything except the convulsing of their bodies. The walls of her cunt milked him through the thin latex until the throbbing of the hard shaft subsided, and her own body shuddered one last time.

At last, she fell limply back on the pillows, her body sated and exhausted. He left the bed, and she heard him in the bathroom disposing of the condom. Then he was back, pulling her into his arms again.

"Think you can relax now?"

She felt herself sink into sleep, a tiny smile on

her face.

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Three cartons of books were sitting on the kitchen table by the time Rina came downstairs in the morning. Shar was waiting in the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee.

“McCall let me in,” she said. “I picked up the books for you to sign myself, and he oh-so-kindly carried them inside.” She searched Rina’s face with a critical eye. “So, how’s it going today, kiddo? You look pretty good for someone who barely escaped a kidnapping.” She paused. “And are you ready to tell me about those bruises on your face? Without all that makeup you look like someone used you for a punching bag.”

“It wasn’t McCall,” Rina told her again. “I had a run-in with a brick wall. And don’t tell me how lame that sounds, because I know it.” She turned away as heat rose in her face, found a mug, and filled it from the pot. “I just can’t tell you, Shar, and I’m sorry about that. But I’m fine. Really.”

*As fine as you can be when someone’s trying to kill you.*

When she turned back to the table, Shar was grinning. “Okay. I’ll take your word for it. For now. So if he didn’t give you the bruises, would the hunk have anything to do with you being so fine?”

“I plead the fifth.”

The hunk. Would she ever figure him out? So emotionally remote yet so fiery in bed. When he said rough sex, he meant it, but last night he had been so unbelievably tender she’d wondered if the wrong man had slipped into her room. Whatever baggage he was carrying from his past, it weighed more than an elephant.

She settled herself in a chair. “So. I guess we need to be on the lookout for obsessed fans today.”

“Honey, you can sell that story to everyone else,

but you know me. I'm not buying it. I can't get a thing out of McCall. You want to tell me what the hell is going on? Is someone after you for some reason?"

"Everything's fine, Shar." Rina sipped at her coffee, hoping her hands wouldn't shake. "I guess my celebrity's just catching up with me."

Shar leaned across the table. "Rina, who *is* McCall? What's he really doing here?"

Rina touched her friend's hand. "I can tell you don't like him, but trust me. McCall is a man who knows what he's doing. And what he's doing is taking care of me. Whatever this is about, he'll make it go away. So just relax."

"Relax," Shar grumbled. "I'll relax when *this* is all over." She looked at Rina and smiled. "Meanwhile, I'll haul out my sunniest personality and make nice with the store manager and customers today."

"That's fine. I appreciate it."

Shar rose. "Have the muscle men bring the books when you show up for the signing. I'll have everything set like McCall wants."

Rina stood up and hugged her friend. "Thanks for everything. I mean it."

When her agent had gone, she poured more coffee into her mug and sat down to sign the books. She sensed rather than heard McCall enter the room and looked up.

"You okay today?" Although his eyes searched her face for any traces of fatigue or fear, his face was as expressionless as always, as if last night had never happened.

Rina swallowed a sigh.

*Back to our daytime personalities. Is that a personal or professional question? Is he asking the woman he's guarding or the woman he has great sex with?*

"I'm fine. No problem." She went back to her task, wishing he'd give her some space. Trying to figure him out wasn't helping the tension that had her strung tight as a wire.

"Rina." He sat down in the chair Shar had used. "I have to ask you again. Is there something I should know? If you think you're helping John by keeping something to yourself, think again."

"Nothing. There's nothing." She set the pen down and looked up. "I have to ask you something."

"Okay." His voice was wary.

"Are you sleeping with me because you think you can get information from me?"

His eyes turned so dark they were almost black, and his face hardened to granite. He stared at her for a long time before he stood up. Without saying a word, he walked out to the patio, slamming the sliding door so hard she wondered it didn't shatter.

*He didn't answer my question.*

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"Hanes, I'm not pleased with the way things are going."

Andrew Brechtel's voice was colder than Alaska. He clipped off the end of one of his ever-present cigars, lit it, and leaned back in his chair. He reached out with one hand to switch on the small air filter on his desk, his only concession to the people who bitched about his cigar smoke. The look he gave the man across from him was cold and unsympathetic.

"We have to be careful how we do this," Hanes told him. "This last episode was a fiasco."

"Yes. I heard." Brechtel slammed his hand on his desk. "Most unfortunate. Our inside source assured us there wouldn't be a problem. Now all this will make getting closer to her that much harder."

Everett Hanes frowned. "I don't understand why we can't just go ahead with our original plan and not

worry about her.”

“Because, you idiot, we still don’t know what Devargas did with his evidence. If the president gets killed and that stuff shows up after the fact, we won’t have to worry about who’s getting what contracts. The only thing we’ll be getting is three squares a day in some godforsaken prison. Can I be any plainer?”

“No. No, you’re right.” Hanes stood up. “I just have to make sure our friend, Bryce, settles down.”

“Worried about getting his hands dirty, is he?” He gritted his teeth. “He doesn’t worry about how clean the money is that he gets.”

Hanes shook his head. “Andrew, there’s a big difference between sending your paid assassin after someone in another part of the world or a corporate thief and offing the president of the United States. You’ll pardon us if we’re a touch nervous.”

“I’m running out of time, Everett.” Brechtel puffed on his cigar, eyeing the man across from him angrily. “I have to do what I have to do. Rina Devargas is expendable. We’re not.”

“I know, I know. I’m doing my best.”

The congressman walked heavily from the room, a sour taste rising from his stomach. He didn’t have to wonder how he’d gotten himself into this situation. Too greedy for easy money. That was how.

The door had barely closed behind him before Andrew Brechtel lifted his phone and pressed a button.

“William? We need to talk. I’m getting more than a little worried about some things our friends are doing.”

“I’ll be right there,” his son answered.

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McCall parked in the reserved space at the rear of the book store and waited until Gage pulled into the space next to him before opening the door.

"We walk in together," he told Rina. "Once we get you situated in place, Gage will have someone come back and get the books you've already signed. I don't leave your side. Got it?"

"No problem." Unconsciously, she fingered the silver locket. When she realized what she was doing, she dropped her hand, sliding a furtive glance at McCall. If he noticed, he gave no indication, his eyes busy scanning the area.

Shar and the store manager were waiting for her at the rear entrance. Just like the previous day, they could see the book store was already jammed. Rina headed immediately for the area set up for the signing, flanked by McCall and Gage. She would have giggled at the absurdity of the situation if it hadn't been so serious. Only the specter of John's death reminded her she herself was far from safe.

"We're delighted to have you, Miss Devargas," the manager told her. "I promise you we won't have any episodes like you had yesterday. We've checked everything out thoroughly. Even hired two security guards."

McCall tensed at her words. A silent message passed between him and Gage, and the other man nodded.

"If you'll just tell us where you've placed them," Gage told the manager, "we'll introduce ourselves and see what their arrangements are."

"Oh. Of course. They're both at the front of the store. Come with me, and I'll show you."

McCall stationed himself close to Rina, their bodies almost touching. She knew his eyes would be roaming the crowd constantly. The mention of the security guards made him nervous; he hated unknown quantities. Gage's assessment of them would be important.

"I guess the guards are all right," he reported five minutes later. "I checked their credentials, but

people we don't choose ourselves always make me nervous as hell. I radioed Addison and Pedrosa to keep an eye on them."

McCall nodded. "Good."

"I think we're ready now." The manager hurried up to the table, slightly out of breath. "If it's all right, we'll go ahead and get started."

McCall and Rina both nodded, the manager made her announcement, the two salespeople working the line motioned the first group through, and the procession of fans began. Rina smiled and exchanged words with everyone as they came through the line, signed books, posed for pictures. Whenever she stole a glance at McCall, his gaze was constantly moving, but his body never changed from its deceptively relaxed stance.

The signing process seemed to go on forever.

"I don't know how you do it," he muttered in her ear when she stopped to drink from a bottle of water. "I'd have killed half of these women by this time, but you never lose your cool."

"It's how I make my living," she told him. "Meeting me is important to these people, and every one of them will keep buying my books. And tell others to buy them."

She knew he was worried that the crowd never seemed to thin out. People took their books but still hung around, watching her or chatting in groups.

"I'll be damned glad when we can get out of here," he told her when she signed the last book.

And finally it was over, without an incident of any kind. When Rina asked to use the restroom, Gage went in and checked it thoroughly first, then blocked anyone else from entering.

When she came back out into the hallway, McCall gripped her arm and they headed toward the back door, Gage moving in front of them. As they headed toward their vehicle in the parking lot, they

were stopped by one of the temporary security guards. He held one of Rina's books in his hand.

"Miss Devargas? Excuse me, but I wondered if you'd sign this book for my mother," he asked earnestly.

"Sorry, she's through for the day," McCall said.

At the same time, Rina replied, "Of course."

She tugged her arm from McCall's grip and reached into her purse for a pen.

Gage turned away and headed to where they'd parked.

"Rina, forget the damned book," McCall ordered, trying to push her toward their vehicle.

"But--"

"Now, Rina. You can send him a copy."

"Please?" the guard pleaded. "It will just take a second. I'd consider it a personal favor."

He held the book out to her, but as she reached for it, he dropped it. In the next moment, the book in his hand had been replaced by a gun and he'd grabbed Rina's wrist, tugging her toward him.

"McCall," Rina screamed, trying to free herself.

McCall drew his own gun, yelling, "Let her go. Now."

When the guard ignored him, he fired and hit the guard's gun hand. The man screamed in pain, and as he loosened his grip on Rina, McCall reached out and yanked her to him.

Gage whirled at the sound of the shot, pulling out his own gun. A dark van pulled up in front of them, skidding to a stop, and a man jumped out, knocking Gage to the ground. The next moment, Gage was back on his feet, grappling with the man who'd hit him, as two more men materialized from the van. One landed in a crouched position and fired a shot, the bullet whizzing past Rina's head and barely missing McCall's scalp.

Addison and Pedrosa rounded the corner in a

dead run, guns drawn. As McCall dragged Rina toward their car, shielding her with his body, Addison snapped off a shot that caught the shooter from the van in the arm. The guard was holding his wounded hand, his friend was trying to staunch the bleeding in his arm. Pedrosa tackled the third man just as a patrol car pulled up, blocking the van.

A crowd poured out of the book store, drawn by the sound of the gunshots, and voices chattered and shouted.

“Damn it, I’d like to shoot every one of them,” McCall cursed under his breath.

“Go,” Gage yelled at McCall. “Get her out of here. We’ve got a lock on things here.”

McCall half shoved Rina into the SUV, jumped in, and cranked the engine. As he roared out of the parking lot, he glanced in the rear view mirror at the chaos behind him. His men indeed had things under control, with the help of the police.

He spared a glance for the woman next to him, unhappy at what he saw. She had lost all color in her face, and even clenching her jaw could not stop the chattering of her teeth. Her hands were fisted in her lap and her body was rigid. He knew she was holding herself together by a very slender thread.

Gripping the steering wheel, he swore steadily as he maneuvered the vehicle through a maze of traffic. He was doing a lousy job protecting this woman who might be the only link to John’s information. And he was having a helluva time battling his raging desire for her, which seemed to pop up at all the inappropriate times. Like now, when he wanted to yank her into his arms and kiss away the devastation on her face instead of concentrating on driving.

If he didn’t watch himself, he’d end up costing himself his job and Rina her life. If history repeated itself, he’d be totally destroyed.

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McCall pushed the speed limit until they reached Rina's house, punched the garage door opener as they pulled into the driveway, then closed the door as soon as they were inside. He turned off the engine and blew out his breath. "Damn."

"No kidding." Rina was trembling all over, her hands and body still shaking uncontrollably as she fumbled with the seat belt.

"You're white as a sheet." McCall flipped the catch on his own seat belt and put his arm around her. He pulled her as close as he could, even as he realized what a bad move that was. "Let's get you into the house. Right now."

Inside, he sat her in a chair and went to get the bottle of brandy. In a minute, he was back, holding out a nearly full glass to her. "Drink it. Just like the other day. You don't want to go into shock, and right now, that's a real possibility."

After she managed to get more than half of it down, McCall took the glass from her shaking fingers. "I'm going to turn on a hot shower for you. I'll be right back."

She nodded with obvious effort.

When he returned, he tried to get her to stand up from the chair, but she was still trembling so badly she couldn't move. Uttering a sharp curse, he swept her up in his arms and carried her to her bedroom where he stripped off both her clothes and his.

"Come on. The water's good and hot." He took her into the shower with him and stood her under the spray. Without his support, she would have collapsed on the tiles. He held her there until they were both waterlogged, then took her out and dried her gently.

"I found some sweats in your drawer." His voice and his touch were both gentle. "I'm going to help

you put them on. They'll keep you warm."

She was like a robot, letting him manipulate her body which ever way he needed to. Finally, he carried her to the bed, pulled back the covers, and laid her down on the mattress. Her skin felt slightly warmer to the touch but not much, and she was still shaking.

"Don't leave me," she begged when he started to move away.

"I won't. I'm just going to throw on some clothes. I'll be right back."

McCall again cursed steadily as he pulled on jeans and a T-shirt and ran a comb through his wet hair. He'd taken her into the shower to warm her up, to take care of her, and now he was dealing with a raging hard-on. This was stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. And it had to stop now. He'd nearly lost her again today. His job, this thing with Rina—whatever it was—and too many secrets made the whole situation impossible.

He was being punished for the past. He just knew it, but what the hell was he supposed to do?

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To Rina, it seemed like a year before McCall was beside her again, holding the rest of the brandy.

"Drink some more of this," he ordered, holding the glass for her.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" she asked with a feeble attempt at a smile.

"Get down as much as you can. It will help you fall asleep, too."

"I don't think I'll ever sleep again." But she dutifully sat up and sipped the fiery liquid.

"Gage and Les and the others are back. I need to go talk to them, but I won't be long." He started to walk away.

She clutched at his hands, refusing to release him. "No. Don't go away."

“Rina, I have to find out what’s going on. I’ll just be a minute.”

She shook her head. “Have them come in here.”

His jaw clenched. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“I don’t care what they think. And I need to hear what they have to say, too.” She shut her eyes tight to blink back tears, then opened them again. “Those men shot at *me* today, McCall. They tried to kidnap *me*. Please don’t keep secrets from me.”

“All right.” He pried her hand from his arm, lifted it to his mouth, and kissed it. “Let me get them up here.”

In seconds, the room seemed filled with large, lethal men. McCall sat on the bed next to Rina. She reached for his hand again, gripping it as if it were a lifeline, and watched each of the men for some reaction, but everyone’s face was carefully blank. Except for Gage, whose eyes narrowed at the physical contact. She stared back at him defiantly, and he dropped his gaze.

“Let’s have it,” McCall said.

“But...” Gage shot a look at Rina.

“It’s all right. She doesn’t want secrets. It’s her life so I guess she’s entitled to hear what you have to say.”

“Okay.” Gage shrugged. “It’s your call.”

He leaned in the open doorway while Les, Addison, and Pedrosa tried to make themselves inconspicuous against the wall.

“Status report,” McCall said.

“We got everything taken care of,” Gage reported. “But we had to call Sully to clean it up.”

“To handle the locals, you mean?”

“Yes. Otherwise we’d have been in a huge mess. Two incidents so close together and all. Anyway, he called whoever he had to. Then, like one big happy family, we all trooped to the local lockup and stashed

the bad guys.”

“So where are they? Still with the locals?”

Gage shook his head. “Sully sent a team in to pick them up and carry them off. We waited until they got there.”

“And the cops were okay with that?”

Gage shrugged. “You know Sully. He always makes it happen.”

McCall looked at all four men. “What did we find out about them? Who are they? And who sent them?”

Rina tensed as she waited for the answer.

“Nada. Zip. Not a word.”

“They wouldn’t even give name, rank, and serial number,” Les put in. “We got them medical attention for the gunshot wounds. Other than saying they weren’t allergic to anything, they didn’t even groan. You’d think their tongues had been cut out.”

“Maybe they were afraid someone would do just that if they talked.” McCall exchanged a look with Gage. “We have to find out who sent them. We can’t keep playing Russian roulette with Rina’s life. I’ll call Sully later to see what he’s found out so far.”

Gage nodded. “All right. He’ll be stashing them at the usual place, right?”

“Yes. Meantime, we’re all eating in tonight. I want full coverage on every area of the house.”

“Want me to call out for pizza again?”

“No. I don’t trust strange delivery guys.” McCall thought for a minute, then pulled out his wallet and extracted some bills. “Let’s do this. We could all use a decent meal. One of you run to the market for steaks and stuff. That always seems to be the easiest. Gage, you’re cooking tonight.”

“One thing we can all produce is a good steak, right?” Gage grinned. “No problem. I’ll go to the market myself, so I can pick out what I want. Miss Devargas, you try to get some rest.”

“Thank you, Gage. And let’s make it Rina, okay?”

I think we're way past formality."

"Absolutely." He gave her a warm smile, then exited the room.

When they were alone again, McCall turned back to Rina. She felt only marginally better than she had before, but at least she'd stopped shaking. She wasn't sure the terror would ever go away, and she had no intention of being more than an inch away from McCall.

"They wanted to kill me, didn't they." It was a statement, not a question.

"Not right away. They wanted to take you with them. Rina, they're convinced you have something they want. That's why they tore the house apart, and that's why they keep trying to get their hands on you." He searched her face, looking for some kind of clue. "What is it they're after? Can't you tell me?"

She fingered the locket absently.

*Tell him, tell him. Don't be stupid.*

No. She was still trapped by John's words.

*You'll know. He'll give you a sign.*

She sure as hell didn't think great sex was the signal her brother meant for her to look for.

*Trust no one. I've been betrayed.*

John hadn't said trust no one but McCall.

*Oh, John, how could you do this to me? We're in the middle of a crisis, and I'm acting like a frightened school girl.*

"You look like you're doing a lot of tough thinking, Rina." McCall's voice was flat, hard. This was the McCall on the job, not the man in her bed. "I'm asking you once again, is there something I should know? Something you're hiding? Are you ready to tell me why you went to John's that night? And I mean the real reason."

*If you only knew what I was thinking, McCall.*

She shook her head. "I just can't get this afternoon out of my head. That's all."

“All right. Have it your way. For now. “ He stood up and pulled the covers up to her chin. “I want you to try and sleep a little. Then we’ll have dinner. You need to get some food in your system, even if you’re not hungry.”

He was angry, but she couldn’t do anything about it. Not yet. Not even with her life on the line. She had to be absolutely sure.

“You’re right. Suddenly I feel exhausted.” She lay back and closed her eyes, wishing all of this was over and she could get back to her normal life.

Normal? Did she even know what that was any more?

## Chapter Ten

Rina slept fitfully for an hour, restless sleep that did her little good. McCall managed to persuade her to eat, and she choked the food down just to keep from arguing with him.

When they were finished and the others had left the room, he poured coffee for both of them and sat down opposite her. "We have to talk about something that I know you'll give me a hard time about. Today was too close for comfort, so we have to set some firm rules for you to follow."

"I'm not canceling the appearance at the Alamo." She set her jaw in a defiant line. "We worked too hard to get it. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity." She glared at him over the rim of her mug. "Anyway, Shar would kill me."

"Actually, I think she'd kill us first. I've seen pit bulls that were friendlier."

Rina managed a weak grin. "That's Shar. Blunt and to the point." She looked at McCall. "She'll never stand still for this, and neither will I."

"Sully was right, you know." He looked at her over the rim of his cup. "When you're dealing with people as high up as the ones we're after, you can be sure killing anyone in their way means nothing to them."

"I think two bizarre episodes constitute enough reason to at least cancel the two upcoming appearances in Austin." He held up a hand as she started to protest. "We'll have a harder time preparing for those, and it really isn't worth the risk. Will you at least agree to that? Then we can

concentrate on preparing for the Alamo event.”

Rina sighed. He was right. She could afford a little give and take here. “It’s nice of you to ask me, since I know you could just demand it and get Sully to back you up. Okay. I’ll tell Shar. Just hold your ears for the explosion.”

Gage wandered back into the kitchen at the tag end of the conversation. “Your friend Laurel came by while you were sleeping. She didn’t threaten me with bodily harm, but I’m sure she wasn’t far from it.”

Rina stared at him. “What did you tell her? Laurel’s not so easy to get rid of.”

Gage chuckled. “All you need to know is I handled it.”

Rina dropped her head into her hands. “Oh, lordy. That will just make her more persistent.”

“Laurel can be a bigger problem than Shar,” McCall told her. “Shar has your best interests at heart, no matter how aggressive she gets. Laurel’s like a hungry wolf, sniffing around for raw meat. Trust me. She didn’t come over here because of any real desire to check on your well-being.”

Rina sipped the last of her coffee and went to the sink to rinse her cup. “Laurel is...Laurel. I can handle her. But I’ll have to call her, or she’ll just pop up again.”

“We’ll see.” His cell phone buzzed, and he looked at the caller ID. “I need to take this. I’ll be back in a minute.” Despite the encroaching darkness, he let himself out to the patio and walked away from the house to take his call.

“Dinner was very good,” Rina told Gage. “A man who can cook should go far.”

“I think my skills are somewhat limited in that direction, but steak I can handle.” He smiled at her, trying to ease the strain that gripped her. “McCall will get things under control, Rina. That’s what he

does.”

“He’ll have a fight on his hands if he keeps pushing cancellation of March second. If he’s so damn good, he can just figure out how to keep me from getting snatched. Besides, with the crowd that will be there, grabbing me might be a little difficult.”

Gage shook his head. “There’s where you’re wrong. Sometimes a crowd is the safest place to pull something off. All those diversions.” He leaned against the wall, hands in his pockets, studying her face. “You know, when John called you that night, he may have said something important without you realizing it. Holding back right now isn’t the smartest thing you can do.”

His voice was even and smooth, warmer and less demanding than McCall’s, but Rina gritted her teeth. Today had made her realize more than ever that opening up to the wrong person could jeopardize whatever had probably cost John his life. She fisted her hands in her lap to keep from touching the locket.

“Sully said John thought there was a traitor in the group,” she told him. “Don’t you think you should find out who it is before trying to get your hands on John’s evidence?”

Gage made a face. “That may be harder to do than anyone thinks. Whoever it is, he’s very good or he would have been discovered by now.” He studied her face. “Just think about what I said, okay? Despite how things look on the surface, I can tell there’s tension between you and McCall. If you don’t want to talk to him, you can always dump on me. Anything I can help you with, just let me know.”

“I’ll think about it,” she told him.

Gage had walked back to the front of the house when McCall let himself back in. His expression gave away nothing.

“Are you going to tell me what Sully had to say,

or should I guess?" She was irritated at his natural instinct to hold things back from her.

"I don't have any good news," he said finally. "And I don't want you to worry any more than you already do."

"Oh, and I won't worry if you keep secrets from me?" She stamped her foot. "I want to know about those people from today. And the ones from yesterday as well. Right now. You owe me that much, McCall."

"You know Sully wants to keep as tight a lid on things as he can. And you—"

"Will make a huge stink if you try to shut me out again." She waved her hands in the air. "So answer my question. What have you found out?"

"Nothing." He dropped into the chair next to her. "Flat out nothing."

"Nothing? That's not possible." She leaned toward him slightly. "Don't lie to me, McCall. Quit messing with my head. It's already messed up."

"When I say nothing, that's exactly what I mean." He dry-washed his face, and a muscle jumped in his cheek. Something flashed in his eyes, something Rina could have sworn was rage. But at what? "And it gets worse," he went on. "There's a reason we got nothing."

"A reason?" She frowned.

"Something we didn't plan for or expect. The men we captured today? They're dead."

"Dead?" Rina felt the blood drain from her face, and her hands—finally steady after her nap and dinner—began to tremble again. She tried to swallow, but nothing got past the sudden lump in her throat. "How could they be dead? Weren't they in custody? Didn't they have guards?"

"Yes." McCall nodded. "Sully tucked them away in a special place he uses for interrogation. Someone got to them. Double taps on each of them. A silencer,

so we wouldn't hear anything." He looked hard at her. "Rina, one of our agents is dead, too."

"What? One of your agents?" She was sure she sounded like a babbling idiot, but she couldn't think over the panic racing through her. If these people could get at someone in a secure facility, what chance did she have? No, she wouldn't think of that. Couldn't think of that.

McCall looked venomous. "No one, and I mean absolutely no one, can get access to the place where they were. Only team members or someone they give the information to. That means John was right. There's a traitor on the team."

"Oh, my God, McCall." Her heart was banging against her ribs.

*Is it him? Is he just putting on a very good act?*

"Sully is well and truly pissed. He personally screens everyone he puts on the team. We've had no casualties in three years. Now, all of a sudden, John disappears and Gary Holland is dead."

"Oh, my God," Rina repeated. She dropped back down into her chair, her legs suddenly unable to support her. Hot tears pricked her eyelids. Furiously, she blinked them away.

"It also confirms something for us," he said.

"What?"

"Andrew Brechtel has a very long reach into every part of the government. It underscores how dangerous he is and *that* scares me even more."

"So what happens now?"

*Tell him. Tell him right now.*

But the tiny flicker of doubt wouldn't go away. She had only his word that all the calls he made were to Sully and not someone else. He was like a ghost slipping in and out of the house, abruptly terminating his calls whenever she came into his space. If only this almost obsessive physical attraction wasn't complicating things further.

It shamed her that she could give him her body without any restrictions but not her trust.

*Oh, God, John. Why aren't you here to tell me what to do?*

"I have to call Sully back later," he told her. "We'll discuss options from here on out."

Rina pushed herself up from her chair, her body finally under control by sheer effort of will. "I'm going to bed. All of a sudden I'm extremely tired."

"Don't forget. You need to call Shar about Austin. And Laurel before she shows up here again. What will you tell her?"

"I don't know. It depends on what story she's gotten from today. But I will call Shar and cancel the rest of the signings."

"Good."

Despite the situation and the current tragedy, when he looked at her, banked fires still gleamed in his eyes. A thrill skittered along her spine, and she turned hot and cold by turns. She couldn't get their last episode in the bedroom out of her mind, or the way his dominance aroused her to the boiling point.

"She won't be happy, but I'll do it."

"Okay, then. I'll see you in a little while."

She just nodded and headed for the stairs, wishing a clue would fall on her head and she could do what she had to do.

The conversation with Laurel drained whatever strength she had left. Fielding questions and not giving answers was increasingly nerve wracking.

"No one is saying anything," Laurel complained, her voice strident. "I called Shar, and she said she doesn't know a thing. Who the hell was shooting, Rina? What was it about? How does it involve you? My God, I was so scared for you."

Maybe McCall's opinion of her friend was affecting her, but what she heard in Laurel's voice didn't seem like concern. "I'm sorry, Laurel. Truly I

am. But it really didn't have much to do with me. I was just...in the wrong place. That's all."

"Oh, right." Laurel snorted. "Pull the other one."

"I'm telling you, it has nothing to do with me."

Rina leaned back against her pillows, feeling the first tendrils of a headache.

"I find that hard to believe, honey. This is Laurel you're talking to. You're the only one of my friends involved in police-related incidents in two days. Don't tell me that's a coincidence. Come on, Rina. Give."

"I don't know what you want me to tell you, Laurel."

"How about if I come over and bring a bottle of wine." Laurel lowered her voice. "You can tell me all the details about that hot lover of yours."

Rina sighed. "I don't think that's such a good idea. McCall and I really need some privacy right now."

"Oh, right." Laurel couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "What about all those lethal-looking men hanging around your house? Oh, wait. You didn't think I'd find out about them? They did their best to hide when I came over. Except, of course, for the hottie who answered the door. Don't try passing them all off as friends of your lover."

"Give it a rest, Laurel. I'll call you after McCall leaves, okay?"

"How about lunch?" Laurel persisted. "The three of us. My treat."

"No lunch. No drinks. I really need to get my act together for March second."

"Oh, yeah. The big event." Laurel's voice drop to a conspiratorial whisper. "Are you going to get some face time with the president?"

Rina snorted. "More like waving to him from across the Alamo grounds. Security's going to be very, very tight."

"Oh," Laurel teased. "I know you. I'll bet you find a way."

Rina had had enough of the verbal sparring. "Listen, Laurel. I appreciate your call and all the invitations. I think we're just going to hole up in the house for a while though. But thanks anyway."

She was exhausted by the time she was finally able to hang up. Taking a deep breath she speed-dialed Shar.

"As long as you're okay, that's all I care about," was the first thing the agent said.

Rina allowed herself a small sigh of relief. "That's good, because you have to cancel the rest of the signings." She waited for the explosion.

A long silence hummed across the connection. Then Shar cleared her throat. "I won't ask you again what this is all about. Maybe when it's all over you can work it into a plot. But I'll take care of the cancellations. No problem. We'll reschedule when this—whatever this is—is all over. You just tell that McCall if anything happens to you, I'll kill him myself."

Rina actually found herself smiling. "I'll pass that along. And thanks for being such a trouper."

"We're still a go on the second, right?"

"No problem there," Rina assured her.

"Better take your friend Laurel's caffeine away from her. She's higher than a kite about this. You'd think *she* was the celebrity."

Tired of defending her friend, Rina just let it ride. She replaced the receiver and looked up to find McCall in the doorway.

"Shar okay with everything?" His face and voice wore their familiar blankness.

"Yes, believe it or not. But she did say if I got hurt she'd kill you."

One corner of McCall's mouth almost lifted in a ghost of a smile. "I have no doubt about that."

"But the Alamo is still on," she reminded him.

"Rina," he began.

She shook her head. "Forget it. This is an argument you won't win. Just do whatever you have to in order to make it work."

He studied her carefully. "You look a little better than you did."

"I wish I could say I felt better." She hugged herself. "I'd be lying if I didn't say I'm scared, McCall. I don't know what's going to happen next. Now this thing with your other agent."

"Sully will get it all under control. Don't worry."

"Don't worry? I could be dead tomorrow, and you tell me not to worry?"

"But not enough to cancel your big shindig."

"No." she shook her head. "Besides, I thought I was the bait. They seem to be taking it. Maybe the event on the second is when they'll make they're move and you can nab them. If it's the president they're after, what better place to make their move?"

"That's what worries me." He took her hand and ran his thumb over the knuckles. "But rest assured, no one's going to kill you on my watch, Rina. You can count on that."

"Good." She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. "I'm depending on you."

"We'll get through this. And we'll find out what happened to John."

All the glue holding her together suddenly disappeared, everything crashed in on her and she simply imploded. The tears she'd been swallowing for two days burst forth, cascading down her cheeks. She hugged herself as she shook with silent sobs.

McCall groaned, then stretched himself out beside her. Rina pressed herself against his body, seeking the comfort and warmth she found there. His arms wrapped around her, and he held her to his chest, letting her cry.

She'd been so sure she was holding it together since John's call and the wild trip to Tampa. That she'd get through it all just fine. But the stress of the past three days was crashing down on her, battering her emotions. This thing with McCall was driving her nuts, and the mention of John's name seemed like the last straw.

At last, she lifted her head, wiped her face on her sleeve and gave him a watery smile.

"Sorry," she sniffed. "I'm not usually such a fountain."

He stroked her hair with that always-unexpected gentleness. "We all do it one time or another."

Just when she thought she had him pegged as an unemotional hardass, he did something that knocked her off her feet. Like now. "But not you, right? Not McCall, the stoic. The tough guy."

Kissing her forehead, he eased her away from him and rose from the bed with catlike grace. He closed and locked the door before lying down on the bed again and pulling her back into his embrace.

"Rina, I've tried to be honest with you from the beginning. There are so many things I can't tell you. I'm not the person you think I am. I can't give you what you want, what you deserve. All I'll do is make you miserable."

She lifted her face, still wet with tears. "Don't you think that's for me to decide? I'm not a child. I can take chances with life. You haven't made me miserable so far."

His laugh held no humor. "That's a crock and you know it. Just because we're good in bed doesn't mean we could have anything else. And it isn't just the job."

She frowned up at him. "What is it you're not telling me? If it isn't the job, then it's more than just this case. Isn't it? I know it is. It has to be."

“Please don’t push me.” A muscle twitched in his cheek. “Don’t ask me any questions.”

*Please don’t let that mean he’s the mole. The traitor. Surely my body would know. Wouldn’t it?*

She pressed her breasts into his chest and kneaded his hard-muscled back with her hands, drawing his heat into her emotionally-chilled body. He tilted her head and brought his lips down on hers in a kiss that began as a soft caress but turned into a fierce possession. His tongue forced its way into her mouth, tangling with her eager one, sweeping the dark recesses. His head shifted to give him a better angle as his kiss ravaged her mouth.

*I have no resistance where he’s concerned.*

She let herself fall into the erotic storm possessing her body as his hand drifted along the slender, silken column of her throat, over her shoulder and down to her breasts. They felt swollen and hot, just from the teasing caress. The hard pad of his thumb abraded her nipples, first one then the other, before his fingers grasped each one and taunted them into hard points.

“Do you remember how the clamps felt?” he asked, his voice heavy with desire. “Those gorgeous nipples were so swollen I thought they’d pop right in my mouth, like ripe berries.”

Rina’s pussy clenched and arousal flooded from her, wetting her thighs and filling the room with her scent. As if a strong wind had blown through the room, a storm of violent emotions seemed to overtake them. The familiar dark, erotic passion blazed between them.

His tongue traced the line of her ear. “I didn’t mean for this to happen tonight,” he muttered. “Not with everything that happened today. But you set my blood on fire, and all my cock wants to do is plunge itself inside you.”

The coolness of the air whispered softly against

her heated skin as he yanked her shirt off with one swift tug of his hands. In the next second, her sweat pants and panties disappeared. Pleasure spiked through her just from the hunger in his eyes.

He groaned as he moved away from her to strip off his clothes and toss them to the floor. He was fully aroused, his erection jutting hard and thick before him, one tiny drop of glistening moisture already gathered at the tip of the broad purple head. Ropy veins pulsed beneath the skin.

Her mouth watered as she remembered his taste and the thickness of his cock in her mouth.

*Take me, she wanted to scream. Use me. Make me forget everything but this, here and now.*

Then he was over her, spreading her legs, using his mouth on her to tease her to a fever pitch. He spread her swollen labia, opening her wide, his thumb rasping against her inflamed clit. Shivers of excitement danced over her skin as his tongue lapped against the sensitized flesh of her pussy, invading her, drinking her copious fluids.

She reached for his head, wanting to run her fingers through that thick, silky hair.

“No,” he growled.

Manacled her wrists with his fingers, his tongue plundered her hot, wet sheath. He used it like a sensual weapon, delving, plunging, swirling, tasting. Every nerve in her body was firing like a rocket, driving her to the edge of some steep precipice.

He was merciless, licking her hot flesh, lapping up the cream that flowed from her. When she lifted her hips to the torment of his mouth, he rearranged his hold on her hands so both were locked in one of his. His free thumb slid downward into the crevice of her buttocks. In the next second, he was teasing the sensitive pucker of her anus. His touch lit fires on the surface of the ultra-sensitive skin and electricity

spiked through her.

He lifted his head to look at her. "We forgot the plug last night, but tonight it goes back in."

*Yes, anything. Whatever you want. I'll do it.*

As she clawed her way to her orgasm, he withdrew his tongue and hands and flipped her over.

"Nooo," she cried.

"Who's in charge here?" he asked, his voice raspy.

"Y-you are."

"Any objections?"

"N-no. Just please, please-"

"Let you come? You'll come when I say so. Remember that." But the hard edge of his dominance was softened by the light kisses he scattered across the cheeks of her ass. And she realized she *wanted* him to have that control. To force her to hang onto her release until he gave permission.

*Because he knows my pleasure will be that much more intense.*

Each step they took together was another revelation to her.

She closed her eyes, hunching to rub her inflamed clit against the fabric of the sheet. McCall moved and then the mattress dipped as he knelt and separated her thighs. So swiftly she barely realized he was doing it, he raised her to her knees and used his leg to widen her thighs.

"Jesus," he breathed. "What a gorgeous ass."

In the next second, she felt the familiar sting of his slap, the flat of his hand on her flesh. Then another and another. Her breathing hitched, and she was sure her body was on fire.

"More?" he asked in a guttural voice.

"Yes," she hissed and thrust her buttocks at him.

The spanking resumed, an irregular rhythm that didn't allow her to anticipate when and where

the next slap would land. When he smacked the swollen lips of her cunt, she jerked at the intensity of the sensation and new fresh moisture washed from her.

“You like that, don’t you, daredevil. That sting on the pouty lips of your cunt.” Two fingers probed her slit. “Oh, yes. You’re soaked. You don’t just like it, you love it.” His laugh was deep and sensual. “Who’d have thought little Rina would be into such things. See what you do to me?” He rubbed his cock against the cleft of her ass, bumping the head against her anus.

“Oh!” The exclamation popped from her mouth, and she hunched back against him.

“You’d love my cock in there, wouldn’t you? But not tonight. Tonight the plug goes back in, because tomorrow night, if circumstances don’t fuck it up, I’m going to make use of your great four poster bed here, tie up your ankles and wrists, then spank and fuck that ass until you come so many times you’ll lose count.”

His words painted such dark, erotic images that Rina felt her climax building again and her pussy weeping with need. Then she felt the cool gel from the other night, McCall’s fingers pushing inside her rectum and spreading it liberally. She was so hot she thought for sure she could take his entire hand.

Then the head of the plug pushed against her. Tonight, he didn’t take his time, simply banded his arm around her waist, pull her up tight to him, and pushed steadily until the plug was seated.

That was all it took. Her pussy convulsed, and unconsciously, she reached between her legs to find her clit.

“That’s it,” he whispered roughly. “Fuck yourself. Tug on that hot little button. Do it, Rina.”

His other hand held the pillow up for her to bite on as spasms rocketed through her. Her thighs

clenched as she tried to squeeze them together, but McCall relentlessly kept them wide apart.

When her next orgasm began to gather, tightening her body, fluttering the walls of her vagina, she wasn't above begging.

"Please," she implored him. "Please, McCall. Now." She hovered again on the edge of release while he grabbed a condom from the drawer and rolled it over his hot erection.

"Take your clit again," he whispered. "Drag your fingernail over it."

As she did so, he entered her in one hard, slick thrust, burying himself to the hilt, his balls slapping against her with the force of his movement. This was lust, pure and simple. No tenderness, no caring, just two people driving toward orgasm, and she'd never been so aroused in her life.

It didn't take long for either of them. For Rina, her third orgasm nearly wrecked her. For McCall, it seemed as if he'd been holding it in, just waiting to feel his cock inside her.

She came in an explosion of senses, wave after wave of convulsions gripping her body until she thought her muscles would shred and her bones snap. As the last spasm washed over her, she felt him thrust one last time. He let out a rough cry and exploded into the latex reservoir.

At last, he slumped against her, his head buried in the crook of her shoulder, his body heaving as his lungs reached for air.

Rina was limp beneath him, struggling for her own breath, her heart thundering so loudly it echoed in her ears. At last, he lifted away from her, leaving her feeling battered and bruised, as if she'd survived a terrible storm. He left her only long enough to dispose of the condom. Then he was back, stretched out on his side. He cradled her in his arms, his breath still rough and uneven.

How could she feel so ravaged and yet so sated at the same time?

She cuddled against him, grateful for his strength, for the wall of protectiveness that stood between her and the rest of the world. If only this wasn't so complicated.

*If only I'd been able to resist him in the first place.*

She fell asleep with the locket grasped in her hand.

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When he was sure Rina was deeply asleep, McCall slid out of bed, yanked on his jeans, and slipped quietly from the room. He was grateful there was no one else in the upstairs hallway as he made his way to the empty room next to Rina's. He needed some space. Badly. Closing the door and throwing himself onto the bed, he lay on his back with one arm thrown across his eyes.

*Shit!*

How had he gotten himself into this cement mixer? He never should have fucked her in the first place. What a stupid mistake that was. But who knew she'd get into his blood so easily? Or love the same kind of games he liked to play? Every time he took her to a new experience and she tumbled in like a kid in a pool of candy, he felt himself hooked more and more.

He really wanted to tell himself it was just sex, but that was too big a lie. She was under his skin, in his blood. In his mind. He had worked so hard to put the darkness of history behind him, to focus only on his job. The blinding need that Rina aroused in him and the feelings he refused to acknowledge were screwing up his life.

*Rina!*

He couldn't get the taste and feel of her out of his mind.

## Do You Trust Me?

He knew she was hiding something. As well as he'd come to know her, she might as well have been wearing a sign. So why wouldn't she tell him? Why wouldn't she just tell him what John had said when he called? He had the itchy feeling he'd somehow blown any chance he had to get her to tell him the truth. He'd played this all wrong.

*Shit!*

What the hell was he going to do now?

## Chapter Eleven

Bryce Patterson looked at his colleague, a tic jumping in his eyelid. "Everett, it was a chance I had to take. Our deadline is getting closer and closer."

Everett Hanes twirled his glass on its coaster, not looking at the other man. "Well, it was a stupid chance. Where did those people come from, anyway?"

"Brechtel's son. He assured me they'd get the job done."

"I thought he had better connections than that. These bungled incidents aren't helping our cause any. They'll have that woman surrounded with so much security after all this even the president couldn't get to her."

"And speaking of the president," Patterson said, "I made one last plea to get him to veto this bill when it leaves the floor. Pointed out the economic benefits, the importance of continuity with suppliers, yada, yada, yada. No deal. He's adamant. He's still smarting from Halliburton, and he's not giving the ghouls anything to suck blood from if he can help it."

"If only he knew he's signing his own death warrant."

The two men were silent for a while, each with his own thoughts.

Then Hanes spoke again. "Doesn't it scare you that we're talking about assassinating the president of the United States?"

"Not half as much as the thought of losing my income from Brechtel and being poor in my old age."

"Whatever happens, it has to be before that bill comes out of committee and hits the floor."

Bryce stood and walked to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows in his library. He enjoyed seeing the woods that surrounded his home, the band of nature that separated him from the city. This was the place where he could recharge at the end of a stress-filled day and be ready to tackle what the next day brought.

He loved Washington, D.C., with all its political and social battles. The city had given him chances for success he wouldn't have found anywhere else. At this point in his life, nearing the end of his political career, he was doing whatever it took to ensure a golden retirement. If some sacrifices had to be made, some corners cut, well, that was the price of achievement.

He turned to face Hanes. "I'm stalling the bill as long as I can. I can't be too obvious about it. And to add to our misery, Brechtel insists on speaking with us."

"Have you talked to him since the last incident?"

"Not until he called to say he was on his way here."

"That's way out of character for him. He always avoids contact outside his office," Hanes noted.

"I guess he thinks coming to my house won't be a problem. I'm far enough out in the woods to avoid prying eyes." As he spoke, the doorbell rang. "I'd say that's him now. George will let him in."

Publicly, George was Patterson's legislative aide. In fact, he was a great deal more than that. He'd been with Patterson since the early days of the first campaign, and the senator had no secrets from him. Whatever he did, George was a part of. Even this. When Patterson retired, George was planning to run for his seat, with his boss's support.

"I'm here." Both men turned as the door to the room opened, then slammed shut. "Meeting in person is not a good idea, but I didn't want to trust

this conversation to a telephone. And I didn't want either of you seen coming to my office." Andrew Brechtel's presence, larger than life, filled the library.

Patterson and Hanes backed away slightly, blown by the wind of barely controlled anger.

"We're always at your disposal, Andrew," Patterson said, recovering first. "Please. Sit down."

"I don't have time for sitting. I'm here to clean up the mess one of you made and tell you some hard truths." He threw his jacket over a chair and began pacing the room. "Of all the damn idiotic things to do. Bryce, I see your fine hand in this. And my son's, whether he admits it or not." He stopped pacing, almost nose to nose with Bryce. "Did you ever stop to think of the fallout? Of the unwanted attention this will draw?"

"Getting that woman is a priority," Patterson reminded him. "If John Devargas had passed the chip on to his team, we'd be guests of the federal government instead of sitting in this library. If they don't have it, his sister does. There's no one else he'd trust with it. I'd give a week's pay to know why she hasn't turned it over."

"I'd have thought she'd go right to his boss with it," Brechtel commented. "But my man hasn't heard a thing, which is very unusual."

"John may have told her there's a mole," Hanes reminded them. "If so, she has no way of knowing who it is and she won't move until she does."

"Thank god for that. But if she's waiting for some kind of signal, all the more reason we need to get our hands on her before that happens," Patterson protested.

"You know this little drama of yours has so far cost me two of my best people," Brechtel snapped. "They had to be disposed of."

Both senators stared at him.

"I don't understand," Hanes said, his voice not quite steady. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I couldn't leave them with the little covert unit the government thinks no one knows about. Their silence would only have lasted so long. I had to take chances with a man it took me years to get in place in order to do it."

Brechtel dropped into one of the leather chairs, pulled out a cigar, and glared at the two men in the room with him.

"Andrew, I'm sorry," Patterson said finally. "If I had known..."

"William knew." *Clip* went the cigar cutter. Brechtel deposited the tip in an ash tray, flicked on his lighter, and paused in his diatribe while he lit up. "He chose to ignore it. William likes to think he's smarter than me. This time all he's done—all you both have done—is buy us more trouble than we need."

"The bill's going to come out of committee soon," Hanes said. "We need to move before then."

"I agree. But this time I want you to leave it to me. Not my son. I've been doing this longer than any of you, and I'm better at it. You both do your thing on Capitol Hill, and I'll take care of little Sarah Jane or whatever her name is."

"Do I even want to know what your plans are?" Patterson asked cautiously.

"I wouldn't tell you anyway. Can't afford any more screwups." He heaved himself to his feet and reached for his jacket. "Stay the hell out of things you don't know how to do. If I want something from you, I'll let you know. Meantime, we either kill the bill or the president. I don't much care which."

He stomped out, leaving both men shaken.

## Chapter Twelve

Rina woke feeling as if she hadn't slept at all. Despite the exhausting sex, her sleep had been disturbed by the conflict that constantly wrestled with her brain, the fact that battered her mind every day from the minute she woke up. Someone on the team was a traitor, and she had no idea how to identify that person. Every one of them—Sullivan Raines included—was in a position to betray the team members. And the tighter things got, the more imperative it was for her to find out who it was.

*Even if it's McCall. Oh, John, please don't let it be him.*

If she couldn't trust McCall or anyone else on the team, what did she do with the locket and its valuable contents? Was there someone in another government agency she could turn to?

*John, you said you'd send me a sign. Where is it? I'm getting in deeper and deeper. You don't know how much I'd give just to hear you call me Dusty one more time and tell me how to make things right.*

The mirror in her bathroom brutally reflected the shadows under her bruised-looking eyes and the lines of strain in her face. She showered, removing the plug and rinsing it carefully, and pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, postponing the trip downstairs as long as possible.

Finally, she couldn't stall any longer. Someone was bound to come looking for her. She descended the stairs slowly. Just before she reached the kitchen, she heard McCall's voice, hard and uninflected, and stopped where she was. Reflected in

the sliding doors, she saw him leaning against the counter, cell phone clapped to his ear.

"No, I damn well will not tell her that. I'll tell her nothing. It's too great a risk." Pause. "I know you're the boss, but you have to trust me on this. God knows we seem to have little enough of that around here. We can't give her that piece of information. What if she's more than an innocent bystander in all this?" Another pause. "All right. But give me some time." He snapped the phone shut.

Well, what a laugh that was. He didn't trust her any more than she trusted him. So what was *really* going on here? She stepped into the kitchen, deliberately ignoring McCall. After pouring herself a cup of coffee, she started out of the room.

"Where are you going?" His voice sounded like a knife cutting through steel.

"I'd like to say to the Bahamas," she retorted. "But just to my den." She was desperately trying to process what she'd overheard without showing the turmoil she felt.

"What are you going to do in there?"

She wanted to throw her coffee at him but stopped herself. Why was she being such a bitch? He wasn't doing anything different than she was. "I'm going to try writing. I have a book on deadline. Do I need a hall pass?"

He didn't say anything, and she didn't move, just stared at his face, his phone conversation echoing in her head.

"Something bothering you?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The look on your face. Are you trying to tell me something?"

The words seemed to just fall out of her mouth. "Exactly what is it that you damn well will not tell me?"

"You eavesdropped on my conversation." His

voice was hard and accusatory.

She could see him trying to regroup.

"No. I would never do that. But I couldn't help hearing you when I was in the hall."

"And you chose not to announce yourself? Let me know you were there? How nice."

"You're evading." She put her mug down carefully and took a deep breath. "I assume that was Sully you were talking to. What is it he wants you to tell me and you won't?"

She could see him fighting a battle with himself. Who exactly was he trying to protect here? And what if that wasn't Sully on the phone but someone on the other side? God, she felt sick every time she thought he could be *the one*.

"Never mind," she said suddenly. "Don't tell me. But when you call Sully back—if in fact that's who you were talking to—tell him I'd rather protect myself and it would please me if you all got the hell out of here."

McCall walked over to the sliding doors and stood looking out into her yard. Gone was the man who chased away her nightmares, who made her body sing. Who held her and soothed her. Who introduced her to the darkest pleasures she'd ever known. This was a hard warrior who gave no quarter. "This is a very unpleasant business I'm in, Rina. Filled with nasty people who do unimaginable things. There's no way you can protect yourself against them."

"I hear what you're saying. John felt the same way."

He snapped around. "John told you that? When? Is that what he said when he called you?"

*Uh oh.* "We didn't. I mean, he didn't." She was stumbling over her words. Why was she such a blabbermouth? "When he joined your team, that was one of the reasons he gave me for doing it. He

wanted to help fix some of the mess.”

*Don't touch the locket.*

He stood so close to her now she could hardly breathe. “We need to get some kind of handle on John’s last contact. Find out what he did with his information.”

*I'll bet. Do you want it for Sully or yourself? Who are you really, McCall?*

“Why didn’t he just tell you the last time you talked to him?” she asked, curious.

“The call dropped off before he could finish talking. We never made contact again.”

*But I talked to him. Why the convoluted message?*

*Trust no one. You'll know who to give this to.*

“What was the last thing he said? Can you tell me that?”

“You know I can’t.” He narrowed his eyes. “Unless, of course, he told *you* the same thing.”

Rina turned away from him. “I already answered that question.”

McCall reached for her, his fingers biting into her arm. “You’re hiding something, Rina, and I’m getting sick and tired of whatever game you’re playing. It might damn well cost you your life. Don’t we trust each other at all yet?”

“I don’t know. Do we?”

Even with anger sparking between them, the moment he touched her, her traitorous body leaped to attention, nipples hardening, pulse throbbing between her legs. McCall’s jaw tightened and his eyes darkened. It seemed, no matter what, the sexual thread between them tugged and pulled.

Yanking her arm way, she looked away from him. “Never mind. Think what you want.”

“All right.” He made a sound of disgust in his throat. “I just hope whatever is sticking in your craw doesn’t blow up in your face.” He backed away.

"We're going to be doing a bunch of stuff around here today. Increasing the security. Making some contingency plans."

"Why can't you tell me what Sully said in that phone call? I agreed to stick my neck out to help trap these people. Doesn't that buy me any new information?"

He shook his head. "Not an option."

"I asked you this before, McCall. Is this all a big act on your part? Get me into bed so you can see if I've got something to spill?"

He was furious now, his eyes blazing. "You have no idea what you're talking about. You don't know a damn thing about anything, Rina. Least of all about me. Go in your den and work."

He let himself out into the yard where she saw Gage waiting for him.

Rina sighed. Things were getting a lot more complicated than she wanted.

*Help me, John.*

\*\*\*\*

The three men seated in the room looked at each other.

"We'll have to do this ourselves," Andrew Brechtel said at last. "Those other idiots couldn't derail a garbage truck."

"Where does the bill stand now?" William asked.

"Coming out of committee next week for a floor vote."

"It'll pass the Senate easy," George Franklin commented, knowing both Brechtels looked to him for assurance. He was, after all, the manipulator. The game player. The man who did all the dirty work without ever getting a smudge on himself. And certainly not on the Brechtels. "It's already passed in the House. The president should have it soon after that."

"We have to take Brandon out before that,"

William pointed out. "Otherwise the two things will be too closely connected."

"Even now it's dicey," George added. "We really need to have every detail down pat."

"We have no choice." Andrew slammed a fist on the desk. "I can't believe it's gone this far. For as much as we pay them, our tame politicians should have been able to kill it long before this."

"Halliburton cast a long shadow." William's voice was tinged with a combination of bitterness and envy. "They were the first civilian contractors and they are still top dog."

"Not for long," his father snapped back.

"Nevertheless, everyone's nervous about contract awards. No one wants to take chances." He cleared his throat. "And we need to get our hands on the girl, too. Find out what she knows, get whatever her brother gave her, and get rid of her."

"What if she doesn't have it?" George asked.

"Then we're no worse off than we are now," Andrew told him. "We'll simply dispose of her where no one will ever find her. If we can't do it before, the event at the Alamo would be the best place for both projects. Check with our man inside again, see if he's been able to come up with anything that will help us."

George Franklin rose from his chair. "I'd better start making some phone calls. You have your person in place, right, Andrew? All those arrangements have been made?"

"You don't need to worry about that. It's all set. You just do your job."

Franklin left the room, William on his heels.

Alone again, Andrew Brechtel hesitated, then picked up the phone to make a call.

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Bryce Patterson looked at the caller ID, read the word Blocked and picked up the receiver with

reluctant fingers.

“Damn it, Bryce.” The words exploded through the connection. “You had a simple chore to perform, and you can’t even get that right.”

Patterson suppressed an urge to throw the phone across the room. This was his benefactor. He couldn’t afford to antagonize him. “I’ve stalled as long as I can without looking suspicious, Andrew. We’ll just have to move a little faster on our end.”

“My end, you mean. I want the president’s schedule for the big event. That bill should hit his desk about the same time as his visit to Texas. Let’s hope he shows up for his presidential performance before he can pull out his signing pen.”

“Are you talking about the March second event? Shit, Andrew. They’ll have more guards than in a prison.”

“Don’t you worry about that. Call that idiot Heller and get all the details from him. If we’re going to make him president, he can at least get us some information.”

“I’ll call him today,” Patterson agreed. “But we’d better do this carefully.”

“You aren’t the one to be giving warnings, Patterson.”

Both men hung up. For the first time since they’d begun hatching this little plan, Bryce Patterson wished himself someplace else. Anyplace. He’d go along with a lot of things. Already had. But murder, especially of the president, despite what he’d said to Everett Hanes, was getting a little hard to swallow.

He picked up the telephone again and with a sour taste in his mouth, dialed a familiar number. When the call was answered on the other end, he said, “This is Senator Patterson. Connect me with Vice President Heller, please.”

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Sullivan Raines leaned back in his desk chair, eyes closed, fingertips rubbing his temple. Noel Stennis, seated in one of the overstuffed chairs nearby, watched him carefully. He knew his boss was used to dealing with situations filled with strain and tension. Normally, he didn't worry about him, but this time there were too many factors turning up the heat.

It wasn't every day they were faced with a plot to kill the president of the United States. John Devargas's disappearance underscored the long reach of the people involved. Noel fully expected they'd find John's body any day now. And of course the killings of the captured attackers had set everyone's teeth on edge. The presence of a mole, as yet undiscovered, made everything twice as dangerous. The attempts to kidnap Rina Devargas despite her protection detail showed the daring and desperation of the plotters.

And overriding it all, the life of President Nicholas Brandon hung in the balance. If not for John, they wouldn't even have known the plot existed.

"We're missing something, Noel," Raines said, without opening his eyes. "There's got to be some clue to where John hid that chip. We're just not seeing it. And I don't know how much longer I'm willing to use his sister as bait. I'd never forgive myself if I dishonored his memory by letting Rina get killed."

"You still think she knows something?" Noel asked.

Sully dipped his head. "Yes, but that's no reason to play fast and loose with her life. She's not, after all, one of my agents."

"With all due respect, Sully, we're running out of options. If you have to turn the screws, that's what you have to do. We can't find a fingerprint record of

the two men who were killed, which in itself is suspicious. We know who's involved in this plot, and we can plant bugs to track them. I also understand the bill that's got everyone so jittery is coming out of committee a week early. That means they may have to make their move before they find John's evidence and hope they come out clean."

Sully sighed heavily. "Risky for them."

"Yes, it is. But letting the president sign the bill is even riskier. Brechtel's entire empire is built on the illegal arms he smuggles along with the machinery and goods he supplies legally overseas. His sole source provider contract gives him a lot of freedom."

"And there's no way he's about to let his gravy train come to an end. Never mind that the arms Brechtel sells are used most of the time to kill our own people."

It was an endless argument and they both knew it.

"Well." Sully sat forward in his chair. "We need to figure out how to up the ante a little. Get me the president's schedule for the next two weeks and every detail of this big hoorah in Texas. And get McCall on the phone. We can't sit on our hands while the country self-destructs."

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"The best opportunity we have is his appearance at the Alamo event," Brechtel reiterated. "I've studied his schedule and although the security will be upped, there are more opportunities for my shooter to get close."

He, Patterson, and Hanes were seated in his limousine on a side road in the Virginia forest. It had been a long drive for a short meeting but secrecy was crucial. He'd also insisted the two politicians drive separately to two different pickup points. And finally, he'd had his driver take evasive action to be

sure they didn't have a tail.

"Because it's outside," Patterson concurred.

"Yes. Security is a lot easier to breach when you're not in a building. Lucky for us he decided to accept the governor's invitation to appear."

"Your shooter will have to be there long before the Secret Service does its recon," Hanes reminded him.

"Not necessary. We've made other arrangements to circumvent the guards. Besides, the person I have in mind is used to this type of thing. The price will be high, but not as much as if that jackass signs the bill Congress is voting on."

"Well," Patterson said, looking at the printout they were sharing. "The event begins at one in the afternoon. I have the whole program here. He's scheduled to speak about one thirty. They'll bring him in by helicopter and walk him directly to the stage. Your shooter is going to have to be ready for the one moment he's standing there alone."

"Don't you worry about that part. You just make sure the schedule doesn't change. And keep Heller from wetting his pants. All we need is for him to fall apart."

Hanes looked at Brechtel. "Andrew, I know what's at stake here, but have we really stopped to consider what we're doing? We're planning to kill the president of the United States."

"And replace him with someone more pliable." He massaged his jaw, working to control his temper. "He's just a man, Everett, like any other man. He puts his pants on one leg at a time. But right now, he's a man who could destroy us all."

"But-

"But nothing." Brechtel gave a short, humorless laugh. "Just remember, if you and Bryce Patterson didn't love the good life so much, you wouldn't even be involved here. So shut up and let's get this done."

“And Rina Devargas?” he asked.

“That’s all set, too,” Brechtel told them. “She’ll be out of there before anyone knows she’s gone. All right.” He folded his copy of the printout and stuffed it in his pocket. “We won’t meet again. Anywhere. Too risky. At this point, I doubt if we’ll talk again until after Heller’s swearing in.”

“And what do we do in the meantime?” Hanes asked.

“Keep your mouth shut and your nose clean. Don’t do anything you wouldn’t want to read about on the front page of *The Washington Post*.”

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There were some things Andrew Brechtel didn’t know about, however. Like the GPS locators fixed to the underside of the congressmen’s cars. The one piece of information they had gotten from John before they lost his call was that the two members of congress were somehow involved. Both cars were parked in assigned spaces when at their offices, and Sully’s men were good at being undetected.

There was also one under Brechtel’s car. That had been a little trickier to handle. Fortunately, at a gas stop that week, the driver had decided to step into the men’s room for a minute. One quick slide under the car and it was done.

Now, in Sully’s office, he and Noel watched the computer screen, tracking the three vehicles.

“They all drove to Virginia,” Noel commented. “But separately.”

“Yes. And Patterson and Hanes left their cars in different spots where Brechtel picked them up. They all went somewhere in his car, then reversed the process.”

“There’s no doubt that our two esteemed politicians are in Brechtel’s pocket. Whoever hatched this plot, they’re all in it together, and time’s getting short. I’m afraid they’ve decided to go ahead and try

to take out the president without knowing for sure about the chip.”

“If we could get our hands on whatever proof John had, things would go a lot easier. This way we look like crazed idiots.”

“They’ve tried twice to get Rina,” Noel pointed out. “You think they’ll just forget about her?”

Sully shook his head. “No, and that’s what worries me. They’ll figure if she had something, she’d already have handed it over. But just in case, they’ll get rid of her, too.”

“But how? We’ve got her covered like white on rice.”

“That’s what I want to talk to McCall about. And quickly.” He looked at the sheet of paper in front of him. “I’m convinced they’ll try to make the hit at the Alamo, where security will be tougher to maintain.”

“Do you think it’s time to let the Secret Service in on this?”

“Probably have to. But first I want to talk to McCall. Did you call him?”

Noel paused a moment. “Do you think there’s something going on with him and Miss Devargas?”

Sully’s eyebrows lifted. “Why would you ask that? I’d think with his history he’d avoid that like the plague.”

“Just a hunch. He won’t leave the house. Or her. Gage could take over for an hour, you know. Or Les.”

“Yes, well, that’s very nice. But this will take more than just him. She won’t do him any good if she’s dead.” He stood up, gathering his stack of papers together. “Call him back and set up a meeting. I want to see him tonight.”

## Chapter Thirteen

When the doorbell rang, McCall was closest to it and yelled, "I've got it."

He yanked open the door to find the oldest pizza deliveryman in the world juggling four large pizza boxes. He gawked, then burst out laughing. "High marks for ingenuity, Sully."

Sully grumbled as he handed over the food to McCall and stamped inside. "It was the best I could do on short notice. If our friends are watching the house, I didn't want them to see me au natural, and I understand you are shackled to Miss Devargas?"

McCall shoved his hands in his pockets, tightening them into fists to maintain control.

*I'm not going to let Sully or anyone separate me from Rina.* "I think it's unwise for me to be away from her at all right now."

Sully looked at him hard. "Just remember to do your job."

McCall's face tightened. "You don't have to worry about that, sir."

"All right, all right. This whole damn situation has got me jumpy. Well, let's take the food in the kitchen. I'm hungry. I should make you pay me for these."

Rina had just been brewing a fresh cup of coffee. When she saw Sully, she went over and shook hands with him. "Nice to see you, Sully. I think."

"Just here to do a little tightening up, Rina. I'll be out of your hair as quick as I can." He looked at McCall, then back at her. "We all agree the event at Alamo Plaza will be the optimum time for these

people to act. And you'll be sitting out there, too, like a peach ripe for the plucking. If they can kill the president and get their hands on the evidence at the same time, they'll be home free. The event's only two days away so I wanted to make sure we have everything nailed down tight."

"I still think it's a bad idea to let her do this," McCall put in.

Sully gave him a long look. "I think we'd all rather figure out something else. But they're still convinced—as am I—that John managed to get evidence that incriminated them and handed it off to you, Rina."

He paused, waiting for her to comment. She simply sat in her chair with her lips pressed together. Finally, she slapped her palms on the table. "Stop it. I'm a big girl. I can make decisions for myself. I'm not canceling out on the biggest signing of my career, and if it helps draw out the bad guys, so much the better. I'll just have to trust you all to take very good care of me."

"Rina," McCall began.

"Don't you 'Rina' me." She lifted her chin defiantly. "I've been nearly kidnapped, shot at, my house has been broken into and ravaged. My brother is probably dead, and you're using me as bait on your very bare hook. I think I deserve more than being shuffled off to Buffalo here."

The silence was thick while everyone waited to see what Sully would do. Finally, he nodded his head. Once. "All right. But we better make sure everyone knows their roles and there's no margin for error. Remember. They'll be trying to get at you to retrieve whatever they think John gave you as well as accomplish their assassination plot. You'll have to follow our orders exactly."

"Fine." She turned away and began pulling out plates and napkins.

When they were all seated at the table and the pizza had been served around, Sully related everything they'd managed to find out so far—Brechtel, Patterson, Hanes, the bill, the plot against the president.

As he talked, Rina tamped down her feelings of guilt. The proof they needed to arrest everyone was hanging around her neck, but still she hesitated. What if she pulled it out now and gave it to the wrong person? Every time she was ready to tell McCall, something he did made her suspicious.

*Yet I take him into my bed every night.*

"We're sure he'll use the same assassin he always has," Sully said.

"He's been too efficient and harder to find than Houdini. And for something like this, Brechtel will want the best."

"Can't we get a line on the guy somewhere?" Gage asked. "In all this time, you'd think you could get a smell of him."

McCall shook his head. "Slick. That's the only word to describe him. It isn't just that no one will talk. I don't think anyone actually knows who it is."

"Which is why I'm sure that's who'll be after the president."

Rina listened without saying a word, but the more she heard, the sicker she felt. She realized now, as Sully described the kind of person Andrew Brechtel was, how easy it had been to trap John. If, indeed, that's what they had done. And how nonchalantly they would dispose of her. Anyone who would plot against the president wouldn't waste a tear on Rina Devargas. McCall was right to take precautions with her.

Time was running out for her to make a decision. Once again she wished desperately for some sign as to what she should do.

*Trust no one, Dusty. You'll know when the time*

*is right.*

Exactly how was she supposed to know? She hoped she wouldn't wake up in two days and find out the president was dead. The whole thing was making her crazy!

"Are you letting the Secret Service know what's up?" McCall asked.

"Yes. I can't wait any longer, even though we don't have the proof we need in our hands. We have to hope they'll just trust us on this one."

"So where does that leave Rina?"

"Yes," she chimed in. "Where does that leave me?"

"In a very precarious position, I'm afraid." Obviously, Sully was trying to choose his words with care. "They may have decided, whatever you have, you aren't sharing with anyone, for whatever reason. Or maybe they don't even think you still have it. But just in case, I'd guess they'll try to neutralize you. Whether they succeed or fail in this attempt, they can't worry about leaving loose ends around."

"Neutralize?" she shrilled. "You mean kill me?"

Sully nodded. "I want to go over every bit of your security with McCall. And I'm leaving the whole team in place. We can't take any chances. But it also means you cannot leave this house until we say so. Agreed?"

"But I thought the idea was to use me to draw them out? That was the whole plan. How will they get at me?"

Sully cleared his throat. "We're hoping they'll make another try here, where we can control the situation. Outside events leave too much to chance. Rina, I'll ask you for the last time, did John give you something to hide for him? Or tell you where you could find it?"

Rina looked down at her hands. "I don't have anything to tell you."

“Don’t you think, with the stakes as high as they are, he’d want you to turn over anything you might have to me?” Sully’s tone had softened.

*What if you’re the traitor, Sully? How long am I supposed to wait for some kind of sign? Oh, God, I don’t know any more.*

But her promise to John was her last link to him. She wasn’t about to chance making a wrong move no matter what.

She curled her hands into fists in her lap and forced herself to remain calm. “We’ve been over this so many times I can recite it by heart, but isn’t it more likely John would turn something over to you than to me? You’re his boss.”

“He gave his life to protect this evidence. He tried to get it to his team. If these people succeed in killing President Brandon and we have no proof of their conspiracy, think what else they might feel free to do.”

She looked at the faces watching her. If the traitor was sitting here at the table, it would be so easy for him just to dispose of them all and make off with the chip. Why hadn’t Sully been able to ferret him out by now? Somehow she had to figure out who was safe—and who wasn’t—on her own.

“All I know is John is probably dead and my life isn’t my own any more. I’m going upstairs. Plot whatever you want to.”

She cleared the table, her hands slightly unsteady, while Sully and the men discussed how to tighten up the security around her. She had just put the last of the dishes in the dishwasher when her phone rang.

“I’ll get it.” Gage reached for it at once. He spoke briefly, more of an argument actually, then handed the receiver to Rina. “You friend, Laurel. I’ve been stalling her again, but it seems she won’t go away.”

“I heard that,” Laurel fumed when Rina came to

the phone. "I'm your best friend and you don't want to talk to me? And who was that answering the phone? How many people are staying with you, anyway?"

"It's a little complicated," Rina told her. "And I'm not trying to get rid of you, Laurel. Honest." She pulled an excuse out of her head. "I'm just on an accelerated deadline with this book. They want the first five chapters by Friday instead of in two weeks. And I have another set of galleys to proof. I'm locked up in my house until I get it all done." She paused, then lowered her voice in what she hoped was a sexy whisper. "And of course, McCall demands a lot of my time."

"I'd think you could spare a minute or two for me," Laurel huffed. "I've hardly talked to you all week. And all this stuff that's happening to you. Something's going on and you won't tell me."

"Nothing's going on, Laurel," Rina said, her voice tired. "I've had some unpleasantness with a fan, and I got caught in a drive-by in a parking lot. That's all."

She had to bite back the overwhelming urge to dump all her fears and uncertainties on Laurel and get her wisecracking point of view. Laurel was the only sane person in this whole nightmare. She'd get a good read on everyone. Especially McCall. Of course, her answer would probably be, "If you don't trust him, look at what you're doing as a physical exercise to let off steam. I never yet kicked a good man out of bed. But if you do trust him, what the fuck are you waiting for?"

And that was the sixty-four dollar question. Was she waiting for some mysterious signal that might never come? Would disaster arrive while she was playing some game?

She sighed. "I'm just tired. Honest. And trying to meet my deadlines."

“Let me bring over a bottle of wine,” Laurel cajoled. “We’ll get a little tipsy like we usually do. Surely McCall can spare you for a couple of hours.”

Rina bit her lip. She knew everyone would pitch a fit, but she really wanted to see her friend. And maybe this was just what she needed. If it didn’t help her get her head on straight, at least maybe enough wine would make her not care.

“I’d love it. How about in an hour? Is that good?”

“Perfect. See you then.”

She gathered her courage and headed for the kitchen to break her news.

“What?” McCall exploded. “That’s impossible. No one comes in or out right now except us. You know that. Call her back right away.”

“No.” Rina set her jaw. “I’m about ready to fall apart. I need a couple of hours of silly female chatter. It’ll be good medicine for me.”

“I can’t permit it.” Sully was just as obstinate as she was.

“Permit it?” Rina jammed her fists on her hips. “Unless you want to arrest me, I’m still free to come and go from my own home and invite my own guests. Laurel will be here in an hour. She’s no threat to anyone. You can all disappear except McCall.”

“And exactly what am I, your hot lover, supposed to be doing while you and Laurel indulge in whatever?”

“Working on your laptop upstairs. You *are* supposedly in this neck of the woods on business, right?”

The silence in the room was charged with electricity. The men glared at her, but Rina refused to back down.

Finally, Gage said, “I think we can back off on this, Sully. Nothing’s going to happen in the next couple of hours, and Laurel’s an old friend of Rina’s. What harm can there be?”

"All right." Sully rose from the table. "But don't push me, Rina. Remember, I'm only interested in saving your life."

"I'm going to the den," she said. "When Laurel gets here, would you please tell her that's where I am? Nice to see you again, Mr. Raines." She turned to walk down the hall.

McCall caught up with her at the door to the den. He stared at her as if he could see right into her head, then unexpectedly pressed his lips hard against hers. Before she even realized what was happening, it was over and he was headed back to the kitchen.

Rina rubbed her mouth where his had touched her. All evening he'd seemed angry with her for some reason. Now he kissed her senseless. What the hell was that all about?

She wanted to bury her head on her arms and let herself have a good cry.

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"I thought I was banished for the duration." Laurel breezed through the door to the den, closing it after her with a little more force than necessary. She waved two bottles of Rina's favorite blush wine. "I brought sustenance for a good gabfest."

Rina leaped up from her chair and embraced her friend in a huge hug. "No one could ever banish you, Laurel. You're a fixture in my life." She stepped back and looked at her. "And a good one." She picked up two goblets from her desk. "Look. I brought glasses in. Open and pour, kiddo."

Laurel curled up in the large arm chair, took a sip of her wine, and fixed Rina with a penetrating look. "Okay, out with it."

"Out with what?" Rina worked to make her face as blank as possible.

"Uh, uh, uh." Laurel wagged a finger at her. "None of that. This is Laurel, remember? I want all

the dirt on McCall, the hunk of the year.”

Rina sipped on her wine, trying to organize what she'd say. “Laurel, there's no dirt. He's just a man I knew before, and now we've connected again. We ran into each other on my last signing tour. Then he called and showed up. End of story.”

“Bull.” Laurel poured herself more wine. “The way he looks at you? Honey, this is more than just a casual reunion. And anyway, this is Laurel you're talking to. You don't do casual.”

Rina averted her eyes. “Maybe I should. I haven't had much luck the other way.”

“That's because you usually have lousy taste in men.” Her eyes narrowed. “Anyway, this guy has an air about him that's, oh, I don't know, mysterious? Like maybe he's not what he pretends to be?”

“What do you mean?” Rina felt her stomach knot. Was McCall doing something to give himself away?

Laurel shrugged. “Never mind. Maybe it's just me, and I'm reading something into this that isn't there. Just because he's the first alpha male I've seen you hook up with.”

Rina got up to refill her glass. “You have an overactive imagination. There's nothing the least bit mysterious about McCall. What you see is what you get.”

“Okay. Who does he work for?”

Rina bit her lip. “He's, um, changed jobs since I knew him. I don't think I bothered to ask him.”

“What kind of work does he do then?”

“Computers.” Rina blurted out the first thing that came to her mind.

“Computers?” Laurel's eyebrows nearly disappeared into her hairline. “You mean he sells them?”

“No, he does something with computer security.”

“Yeah, right.” Laurel snorted her disbelief.

“Anyway, why the third degree? He’ll be gone in a few days, and I’ll probably never see him again.”

“Maybe.” Laurel’s voice had a sly note to it. “And maybe he’s got an agenda you don’t know about.”

“I think we’ve beaten this subject to death, don’t you?” Rina tried to stifle her irritation. “I didn’t think you came here to interrogate me, did you?”

“Oh, honey, of course not.” Laurel was instantly contrite. “I’m sorry. No more questions. Let’s have some more wine and talk about something else. Like your upcoming signing at the Alamo Plaza function.” She snapped her fingers. “Listen. I know how jumpy you are, and this is a really big deal for you. Why don’t I go with you, keep you calm?” She winked. “Maybe sneak in a bottle of wine.”

Rina chewed her bottom lip. “Oh, Laurel, I don’t know. The security’s so tight because of the president. I’ll be going with McCall and two other men.” She coughed up the big lie. “After the last two incidents, Shar convinced my publisher to spring for extra protection, and I don’t think they’re anxious to bring anyone else along.”

“Not even your best friend?” She winked again. “Come on, kiddo. Tell them you can’t go without me.”

“All right, all right. I’ll see what I can do.”

By the time Laurel left, Rina had a splitting headache. She didn’t know if it was the wine or the tension, but she was beginning to think a visit from her friend had been a bad idea.

Normally, Laurel’s avid probing and poking into her personal life didn’t bother her. She always assumed her friend was trying to catch a taste of what she envisioned of the glamorous life of an author. But her interest in McCall seemed just a little too intense. Or was she making something out of nothing?

The whole business had her so on edge, everything seemed blown out of proportion.

Only Gage was in the kitchen when she carried in the empty bottles and stuck the glasses in the dishwasher.

“Have a nice visit?”

His voice was so soothing it almost banished her headache. “In a way. Sometimes Laurel can be a little much to take.”

Gage chuckled. “I know how that goes.” Then he was serious. “Rina, I know you’re having a tough time right now, and I’d like to help you if I can.”

“What do you mean?” She was instantly alert.

*Was he the one?*

“Hey, nothing heavy.” He held up his hands, palms outward.

“If you really want to help, convince McCall to let Laurel come along with us to the Alamo. I know, I know,” she said, when Gage started to object. “But she *is* my best friend, and with all that’s going on, it would be nice to have some company.”

He studied her face. “You really think it’s all right for her to be in a secure area?”

Rina laughed. “Come on. What do you think she’s going to do? Shoot someone? It’ll be fine.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to McCall.”

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No matter how many times she punched her pillow, or how many different positions she shifted to in her bed, Rina could not make herself go to sleep. McCall had come downstairs as soon as Laurel left and he was still down there, doing whatever it was he did. There was no exhausting sex to counterbalance the adrenaline rush produced by the urgency of the situation. And she missed it.

Something was driving him, chasing him, something more than this case. Gage had told her they called him The Ghost because he lived in shadows, making no commitments to anyone, living a solitary life in an environment of total danger.

When she asked him why, he told her it was for McCall to tell her, not him.

Unless of course he happened to be the one who betrayed John.

How could she trust him if he kept secrets from her?

*Well, dummy, you're keeping a secret from him, aren't you? But only because...*

Because what? Because good sex didn't mean he was the one to give her secret to? Right? God, how many times had she asked herself that in the past twenty-four hours? Because she expected him to know the code word? Or whatever else she was supposed to be waiting for? What if *he* was testing *her*? Because he wanted her to trust him on her own, to know that he wasn't the traitor.

*Think, Rina! Use your head.*

Why, after all the great sex she'd had with him—and very kinky sex—couldn't she make herself trust him enough to give him her secret? He'd been alone with her often and for long periods of time. If he was really the mole, he'd had plenty of opportunity to torture her to get at the truth. He could have used a number of painful methods to extract the information from her. She swallowed a smile. Instead he'd tied her up and tortured her sexually, a pleasure not a punishment.

Certainly, if he wanted to kill her, he could have done so already. Of course, that wouldn't have gotten him the information. But he'd also had two opportunities to let the killers get their hands on her and didn't take advantage of them. No, none of that had happened.

Besides, she knew herself too well. If she really, in her heart, thought McCall was the traitor, she couldn't possibly enjoy such sexual freedom with him. Certainly not willingly play the submissive to his Dom. All right, so maybe she could trust him.

Her head was beginning to ache, and she rubbed her temples with her fingertips.

So now she was left with other things to consider.

Okay, say she told him. The first thing he'd do is tell Sully. What if the great Sullivan Raines was the mole? He was close to the end of his career. He could be looking to make a big score for his retirement.

*No! Not possible!*

But it could be. She couldn't rule him out yet. And if not him, maybe one of the others. Someone who might decide to kill McCall to get to her. Get him out of the way and she was completely vulnerable.

She had to protect not just herself but McCall as well.

God! She was getting so sick of the whole thing. Sometimes she felt totally stupid, like a child playing a game. Then John's words would come back to her and the fear would close in again.

Finally, she got up, pulled on a robe and slippers, and padded downstairs. A tiny lamp glowed in the living room, outlining Gage's body on the couch. His eyes were closed, but she didn't think he was asleep. He'd be waiting. Listening. Alert despite his appearance.

"It's me," she said softly. "Getting a drink."

"I know," he said, without even appearing to move his lips. The guard was definitely on duty.

In the kitchen, she pulled open the refrigerator door, found an opened bottle of wine, got a glass from the cupboard and let herself out into the back yard.

Settling herself on one of the lounge chairs, she filled the wine glass, set the bottle down, and sipped from the cold liquid. The sky overhead was inky black, dotted with the crystal shapes of stars and a sliver of moon. Rina felt as if she'd stepped into a

black cocoon, shielded from the world, and as the wine began to work its way through her blood, the tension eased from her body.

“Taking the night air?”

The deep voice, inches away, startled her. Her hand jerked, sloshing some of the wine onto her robe.

“Damn it, McCall. You scared me half to death. I can’t even see you.”

He moved closer, dressed in the familiar black jeans and T-shirt that molded his lean, rangy body. The moonlight reflected from his thick, black hair and shadowed the hard planes of his face. No wonder he’d been invisible.

“I thought you’d gone to sleep.” His deep voice was seductive, sweeping over her like warm honey.

“To bed, maybe, but certainly far from sleep.” She brushed at the drops of wine on her robe, then took a long drink from the glass. A sip wouldn’t do her much good in her state of mind. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“Just checking things out. Gage tattled on you. He didn’t think it was too smart for you to be out here by yourself, and he’s right.” He dropped into one of the chairs at the patio table, long legs stretched out before him. “Can’t be too careful, you know.”

Squinting, Rina could just make out the outline of the ever-present gun he carried.

“I hear you want to drag Laurel along with us to the Alamo. Do you think that’s wise?”

“If I thought she’d be a problem, would I even suggest it?” Rina demanded. “Ease up a little, okay? You’ll be busy, and she’ll be good company for me.”

“I don’t like that woman,” he told her.

*Why? Does she see through you? Will she find out what it is you’re hiding?*

A painful silence stretched between them, but

she could feel his eyes on her, piercing the blackness like twin lasers. She reached down and lifted the wine bottle. "Would you like some wine?"

"I'll get a glass." He was in the kitchen and back before she realized he'd even risen from the chair.

*He really is The Ghost.*

She poured his wine and refilled her own glass, thankful that in the darkness he couldn't see her hand shaking.

"Not bad," he commented after the first taste.

"I get it from the Creekside Winery. They're in a wide place in the road outside San Antonio called Sisterdale. This is their signature wine."

"You have good taste."

More silence. Then Rina sat up and pounded her fist on her knee in frustration. "Why are we sitting here like two polite strangers when there's so much to be said?"

"Strangers?" McCall's voice held a touch of irony. "I'd say by this time we're a little more than that, wouldn't you?"

"Are we?" Her voice was strained. "I'm not sure what we are, exactly." She sipped at her wine again. "The first night we were together, when you came to deliver a message from John, the last thing I expected was for us to end up in bed together. Now this throws us back together again and here we are. In the middle of a...what? What is it we have, McCall? I was sure we'd made a real connection, but I keep feeling you pull away from me."

"Rina, listen."

She held up a hand. "I'm not finished. I'm sitting out there as bait for the bad guys, which leads to me getting shot at and nearly kidnapped. And I guess they'll come after me until they get whatever they think I have. But then what, McCall? What happens when this is over? To us?"

"Rina—"

"I said, let me finish. I know there's something here, McCall. Stoic that you are, I still sense it, see it in your eyes. In the way we make love. Not just sex. Love. So what the hell is going on? I think I deserve to know."

Again there was a long silence, filled only by the darkness. Rina had to bite her lip to keep from saying anything else. At last, she heard a faint rustle of movement, and she barely made out McCall rising from his chair and going to stand at the edge of the patio, hands thrust into his pockets.

"You're right. You deserve some kind of explanation. I haven't been fair to you at all."

When he didn't continue, Rina prompted him. "And?"

"I've been in this business a long time, Rina. I came into it as a green kid with a lot of ideals. In almost twenty years, I've learned there isn't much to be idealistic about. People commit the most abominable atrocities on each other without missing a night's sleep."

"I still have nightmares about the bomb that killed my parents," Rina said in a low voice. "And I wasn't even there. I can imagine how it must be for you."

"I've worked with Sully for the past ten years. Before all this terrorism stuff started, our main focus was working with the DEA on drug cartels and the connection between drug money and arms sales to insurgents in Third World countries. I was part of the protection detail for a witness due to testify against a Jamaican drug cartel."

He paused, and Rina forced herself to be quiet, waiting for him to continue. The tension in his voice was almost palpable.

"Danielle was a lot like you—beautiful, spunky, intelligent. A spitfire. A daredevil. I fell for her really hard." His words sounded choked now. "Or

thought I did. The sex didn't frighten her either. She liked it just as rough as I do. And..." He shook his head, seeming to run out of words.

"And playing the submissive," Rina filled in for him, and added, "It's very heady stuff, you know."

McCall turned and stared at her, searching her face before he continued.

"I was afraid we'd kill each other in bed before the thing was over. I could tell something was going on with her, besides the trial. I thought as close as we were she'd trust me. Tell me what was inside her head. I worried that the sex was too much for her. That I'd pushed her too hard, so I backed off. But that wasn't it at all. I was so involved in what I was feeling for her, I couldn't see what was right in front of me."

Rina didn't know what to say so she just waited.

"The truth is, she was lying to me. Had been all along. She had no intention of testifying against the cartel. They just needed a way inside our radar. I didn't know what she was hiding was a plan to kill all of us and get the cartel leader off the hook. Before I could get my dick back in my pants, she'd given his men every detail of our setup."

"Oh, McCall." *And I'm doing the same thing. Keeping a secret.* "No wonder you got so angry when I asked you if you were using sex as a way to undermine me."

"I know what it's like being on the other end, Rina. I'd never do that to someone. Certainly not you. What we have is...what we have."

"I'm sorry about what happened to you. It must have been devastating."

"We lost two men before we stopped her so-called friends. But they killed her, too. Tying up loose ends, they told us when we captured the others."

Rina had to choke back the tears burning her

eyes. She couldn't even begin to imagine how horrible it had been for McCall. Or the nightmares he'd lived with all these years.

"I took every dangerous assignment that came along. Shut myself away from personal relationships. I know this will sound strange, but life's been a lot simpler for me since then."

"You must have loved her very much." Rina could hardly get the words out of her throat.

"I thought I did." His voice sounded tight and strained. "It's...not easy to find someone who isn't turned off by the kind of sex I enjoy and can still have an emotional connection to me. But the whole thing with her was a lie." He made a sound of disgust. "I swore to myself that would never happen again. After that, I kept sex and emotion separate. Plenty of women like rough sex and don't want any attachment. Anyway, that was ten years ago. How much is real and how much memory?"

Rina wet her lips and took another sip of her wine. She had to force the next words out of her mouth. "Is that what got in the way of us? The feelings you still have for her? The love you lost?"

"I didn't just lose *her*," he spat out angrily. "I was responsible for her death and the death of my team members. Do you think I want that on my shoulders again?"

"Is that why you did the things with me you did? To see if you could scare me? Push me away?"

In two strides, he was next to her, jerking her up out of the lounge. "You have no idea how it shocks me that the sex between us is so good. That you'd let me push you to your limit and beyond and get hotter with it each time."

She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, staring up at him. "Because I enjoy it. Not with just any man but with you. Can't you get your mind around that?"

"It's very hard for me. Most women, unless I choose a...certain type...run screaming in the night when I tell them I want to tie them up. Or fuck them in the ass. Or all the things I've said I want to do to you."

"I'm still not screaming." She gave a short laugh. "Except in pleasure."

"But you hit me where I live, too, Rina. Something I said I'd never allow again. I'd give anything if I could stay away from you, but it just doesn't seem to be possible. And I keep thinking if I'd been sharper, neither of these incidents would have happened. I want to be the one who keeps you safe. But I can't let my feelings color my judgment again. Especially when I'm trying to figure out what it is you're holding back." He stared into her eyes. "Just like *she* was."

Rina's insides were quaking. "You think I'm lying to you? Is that what you're trying to say?"

*I am but not in the way you think. I don't want you to know what a fraud I am.*

"I don't know. Are you?" When she didn't answer, he went on. "The important thing here is not losing my focus."

A shocking thought pierced Rina's brain. Maybe his experience had made him bitter enough to change to the other side. She couldn't risk it. Yet her body and her heart wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

If she had a lick of sense, she would run upstairs and lock herself in her room. Instead, she put her hands on his arms, feeling the coiled tension in the muscles. "McCall, you're ten years older now and a lot wiser. Don't you think you'd handle things differently? And you know what's between us isn't just some hot sex and a wave goodbye. I dare you to deny it."

*Tell him, tell him, tell him.*

But then his mouth was on hers—hard, demanding, unyielding—and just as in the earlier kiss, her mind shut down. If he didn't have her in a death grip, she was sure she'd have collapsed to the concrete. Her senses swam, her blood was a heated river in her veins, and all rational thought left her head.

"You make me crazy," he said when he lifted his mouth from hers. His voice was harsh with pain. "Let's go upstairs. Right now. I'm so hard from wanting you I can barely walk. Tomorrow's a big day for you, so let's celebrate it right."

*Tell him no. You're getting in deeper and deeper.*

But she put her hand in his and let him lead her to the back door. If sex was all she'd ever get out of this, she was taking it while she could. If McCall turned out to be the traitor, she'd deal with it then.

*Well, Rina, your mother always said you didn't have a lick of common sense.*

\*\*\*\*

The minute they hit the bedroom and locked the door, they were on each other like starved animals. Clothing fell to the floor every which way as he pressed her against the wall. They didn't even take time to fall onto the bed.

His hands insistently turned her body toward him. His lips touched her cheeks, then she felt the hot roughness of his tongue licking away the remnants of the wine on her lips. His tongue slipped and swept through her inner recesses, touching every part of that warm cavern, dueling with her tongue, until her entire mouth felt like an erogenous zone.

With a sigh of surrender, she let her own tongue answer back, tasting his smooth lips, the softness of the inner flesh, the sharpness of his even teeth. His mouth was a whirlpool that sucked her in until she thought her whole body would find its way inside

his.

His hands slid up her body, one hand catching both of her wrists and holding them tightly. Slowly, he bent his head to her breast, which she arched at him, her nipples pointing like arrow tips. He grazed the hardened peaks with his teeth, then swirled his tongue over them, drawing them into his mouth, suckling them. She was sure her breasts would explode as he ministered to them with tongue and teeth, first one, then the other. His tongue was like fire, washing over her skin, pulling all her nerves into the center of her body.

Then he was working his way down her body, his grip immobilizing her so she could do nothing but stand there and feel. He dipped his tongue into her navel, his touch as light as a feather. Then lower, planting moist kisses on the softness of her belly, finally reaching the nest of curls covering the entrance to her core.

She tried to twist away and reach for him, for the hard shaft that her hands wanted to curl around, to stroke. That her mouth wanted to taste. But he deftly shifted away, determined to do nothing but give her pleasure.

In one swift movement, he released her wrists to part her thighs wide, exposing her fully to his eyes and his explorations. At the first touch of his tongue to her already swollen bud, she heard a mewling noise and realized it came from her throat, a sound of pure pleasure. His fingers parted the folds at her entrance, and he blew soft puffs of breath into her heated sheath. She tried to arch against him, but he held her firmly in place.

Then, with a slowness that was torturous, he lapped at her with his tongue, tentative strokes at first, then deeper and harder, until he tasted every inch of her inside, his tongue scraping the sensitive walls, reaching for that elusive spot. As his tongue

thrust in and out, his thumb found that bundle of nerves and began a teasing, tantalizing motion that showered sparks throughout her body and set every nerve ending to rioting. Every pulse throbbed in heavy rhythm, like the answer to some primal drum beat.

The intensity was so great she feared its strength, as if it would totally consume her. She tried to pull away, but McCall would have none of it. He held her firmly, his hands hot against her skin, tongue twisting and thrusting, thumb circling incessantly. And then she felt it, sweeping over her like an avalanche, gripping every muscle of her body. Clenching, spasming, pressing her bones until she thought she'd snap, and she poured herself into his mouth.

He never moved, never shifted position, never took away his mouth or hands, until the last aftershock left her body. Then he began again, teasing, taunting, taking her up the spiral.

"Pinch your nipples for me," he ordered. "Hard. Squeeze them. I love to watch you do that."

She grabbed them with her fingers and did as he ordered. In an instant, they were hard and pleasantly painful, shooting arcs of sensation throughout her breasts.

McCall reached for the night stand drawer, pulled out the box with the clamps in it and carefully tightened them on her plump, reddened nubs.

"Tell me you like that," he breathed.

"Yes. You know I do."

"If we were together, I'd want you to wear them almost every night."

"McCall..."

He held up a hand. "I said if."

McCall returned his mouth to her pussy, sucking it, nipping it, giving it very tiny bites with his teeth. He seemed determined to wring every last

drop from her, every reaction, every response, until she was nothing but a limp rag. As if the ferocity of the sex could drive everything else away.

When he rose to his knees again, his eyes had a feral gleam. He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, laying her on the covers. "Tonight's the night, daredevil. Do you trust me? Last chance to change your mind."

It wasn't even a contest. Maybe not with her secret. There were still so many others involved in the situation who could be the mole. But trust McCall himself?

*Yes! In my bed and in my...heart. Oh, god where did that come from? But I do. I trust him in the most intimate way possible.*

In silent answer, she turned herself over and stretched out her arms and legs. McCall placed a kiss on one shoulder and nipped at it.

"Keep that pillow handy so you don't scream," he ordered.

He must have been prepared because in short order, he had her wrists and ankles tied to the posters of the bed with silken scarves, just loose enough so she could move when he needed her to. Another scarf slipped over her eyes.

"The senses are greater when you can't see." His voice was hoarse with lustful anticipation.

Testing each scarf, satisfied that she was secure, his fingers parted the now soaked lips of her pussy and she felt the silver bullet slide in. In seconds, it began to vibrate on low speed, the hum resounding in every muscle and nerve of her body. Her cream dripped from her, but all she cared about was the pleasant stimulation racing through her.

Then the gel, slick and cool, rubbed carefully into the delicate tissues of her rectum. More this time than he'd used before.

*Because his cock is bigger than the plug.*

But by this time she knew she could take him without any pain, except that which bordered on the exquisite.

“Now, Rina,” he whispered. “Now, I’m going to fuck this ass until you have so many orgasms you pass out.”

The helplessness of her situation, the blindfold, only increased her arousal as McCall’s latex-clad cock slid into her well-greased rectum, slow and steady, until he was all the way in. His lean fingers gripped her hips, and his balls rested against her swollen pussy.

“Get ready for the ride of your life, daredevil,” he whispered, and then it began.

His strokes were steady, filling her then receding, hitting sensitive places then moving away from them. In and out, in and out, while the little bullet hummed away in her cunt. When the spankings began, the heat consuming her ratcheted higher, streaks like lightening spiking through her. Slap, slap, in and out. Slap, slap, in and out.

Rina pulled at her restraints, the utter helplessness a complete turn on. With each slap of his hand, she grew hotter, more aroused, more...*say it, Rina...lustful.*

“Jesus, Rina.” He leaned over her, his mouth against her ear, his voice raw. “You’re gonna burn me alive. You set me on fire, daredevil. Make me hotter than I’ve ever been. You’re so tight around my cock I can hardly think.”

Neither could Rina, transported to a level of pleasure beyond anything she could have imagined.

The first orgasm took her by surprise, gripping and shaking her, muscles clenching, her breath trapped in her throat.

“That’s it,” he gasped. “Come, baby. Let me feel that hot tunnel of yours milking me. Oh, shit, Rina. It’s so good I can hardly stand it.”

Spasms raced through her, blood pounding, the pulse in her womb throbbing as she convulsed again and again. Just as she thought she'd reached completion, he pushed her to yet a higher plane, wringing another climax from her.

McCall never missed a beat. "More," he ordered, lust thickening his voice. "Come for me again."

Another stroke. In and out, in and out, and then the spankings again. She was sure she'd reached the highest peak, yet she was at the precipice once more, her body a mindless collection of spasming muscles and sparking nerves.

She strained for yet another climax, her body demanding it when he stilled, his cock fully inside her dark tunnel. He leaned forward, reached around her, and pinched her clit. She screamed into the pillow as she convulsed again, her pussy clutching at the buzzing little bullet, her nipples throbbing in their clamps.

She barely had time to catch her breath from that one before she was shattering again. She lost track of how many times he pounded in and out of her, how many times his hand landed on her ass. She was on a rollercoaster and couldn't get off. Each time it crested, she was hurtled into space, shivering and shuddering, sure she couldn't stand one more spasm, one more clenching of her muscles. And then he'd push her over again.

Exhausted, sure he couldn't wring another climax from her body, his rhythm increased, the force of his strokes harder, deeper. His hands gripped her waist again, pulling her ass back toward him.

"Now, Rina." She barely recognized his voice. "Now we come together."

He slammed into her again and again, and unbelievably her body responded, swamping her with a climax so intense she lost every thought,

every sense of herself except for the giant convulsions consuming her. McCall's cock emptied itself into the condom in her ass, pulsing hard against her tissues.

She was sure she must have passed out. The next thing she knew McCall had removed the blindfold and the scarves, taken off the clamps and lifted her into his arms. He carried her into the bathroom.

In the shower, he bathed her, careful to wash each and every crevice. He dried her with exquisite tenderness, then placed her carefully in the bed. The last thing she remembered was him crawling in beside her and pulling her against him, their bodies spooned skin to skin.

He whispered something in her ear.

Did he say he loved her or did she just imagine it? While she was trying to puzzle it out, she fell asleep.

## Chapter Fourteen

March second opened to the world as a beautiful Texas spring day, a gift from the weather gods. The sky was a vivid blue, the sun a globe of gold hanging over the earth with puffy clouds drifting across its face. The temperature was predicted to hit the eighties, with the heat tempered by a slight breeze.

The Secret Service was busy at Alamo Plaza before dawn. All entrances to the area were closed and all streets barricaded, with armed guards posted at each blockade. A helicopter would deposit the president, the governor, Secret Service agents from the president's personal detail, and the Texas Rangers assigned to him just behind the Alamo. Forming a phalanx around the two men, they'd walk them to the podium facing Alamo Plaza.

Another helicopter would continue to patrol the air space over the area.

To one side of the Alamo, between the old mission church itself and the book store, a white tent was set up for the book signing. Shar was directing the arrangements like a Russian general, arguing every step of the way with the Secret Service agents and members of Sully's group sent to secure all staging areas.

The podium had been set up just in front of the massive doors leading into the Alamo, rows of chairs lined up in front and to one side for the dignitaries. Men in suits with ear pieces and shirt cuffs they spoke into waited patiently to admit the honored guests.

More Texas Rangers, San Antonio Police, even

the vaunted DPS Motorcycle Unit were on patrol in and around the plaza area. They monitored the work inside the barricades and kept alert eyes on the activity outside. Already, huge crowds were gathered outside the perimeter, some in lawn chairs, staking out their spot for the festivities.

"I certainly don't expect to see Brechtel himself today," Sully told Ron Giddings, the head of the president's Secret Service detail. They stood at the side of the Alamo. "Too much exposure for him. He'll send his pet assassin. And with all the people crowding outside the barricades to see the president and the governor, as well as to watch the pageantry, we'll be hard pressed to spot that person."

"How will he even get close enough?" Giddings asked. "We've blocked off all the windows in all the buildings facing the plaza. It won't be possible just to walk up, pull out a gun, and shoot."

"I don't know. I just have this nasty little pinch that tells me we're being outfoxed."

"I guess anything's possible," Giddings sighed. "But I've got four people doing nothing except scanning with binoculars until this is over. They'll all need eye exams and a chiropractor when we're finished."

Sully looked at his watch. "One hour until Brandon and the governor get here. Let's you and I take a little tour of our own. Just to be sure."

"All right. Let me just tell Alex what we're doing. He'll be in charge while we're out roaming."

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Rina treated herself to a long bubble bath when she finally got up, trying to ease the pleasant soreness in her aching body. McCall had been right; he'd fucked her senseless. If it was all over after today, at least she'd have memories that would keep her warm for years. She leaned her head back in the tub and relived every dark moment of the previous

night. It was one she'd never forget, that was for sure. If only...

She shook herself. Those kinds of thoughts could only get her into trouble.

He'd been gone from her bed when she woke up, doing whatever he needed to do for today. He was waiting for her when she came downstairs, face as implacable as ever, as if the night before had never happened. Had she actually heard him whisper to her what she thought, just before she fell asleep? Or was it only a wishful fairy tale?

The locket lay like a living flame against her skin. She should give it to him. She'd allowed him to know her as no other man had, or probably ever would. Today was Armageddon. She had to make up her mind.

She thought about the story he told her. About the woman who'd betrayed him. Who'd been killed by her co-conspirators, leaving him with a truckload of guilt. Wasn't she doing the same thing? Would he ever trust her again, knowing she'd held out on him?

*Give it to him, Rina. Quit being such a wishy washy.*

But still she sat, caught in the purgatory of indecision. Nausea roiled in her stomach, a combination of anticipation and fear. Unable to stop herself, she touched the locket again. All right. No matter what happened today, after the event was over she'd give the locket to Sully. She was sure McCall would be gone as quickly as he could and she'd never see him again. But she could give the thing to Sully so they could tie the knot tight around the conspirators. She'd no longer be in danger, and McCall would go back to doing...whatever it was he did.

They rode to the site in a black SUV with tinted windows and a car in front and in back. She'd been told she'd be waiting in the team's communications

van until it was time for her to walk to the tent. When they got to where the van was parked, Gage had helped her climb in with a smile meant to be reassuring. Then he stood aside for McCall and Laurel.

Now she sat in the vehicle parked on a grassy area next to the book store, hands tightly fisted in her lap as she fought to maintain a calm exterior.

She looked around her. On one side of the extended vehicle was an electronic setup that she was sure could talk to someone on Mars. On the opposite side was a narrow bench. Laurel sat on one side of her, an arm draped protectively around her.

What a fit everyone had pitched when she'd asked to accompany her, but Rina had insisted on it. "She's my best friend. She belongs with me here. I want someone I know I can trust."

On her other side, McCall sat, stolid and unsmiling, his face like chiseled granite.

If even for one brief moment she'd entertained thoughts of handing the locket over to McCall, his cold, remote attitude this morning wiped that out of her mind. The hell with him.

"Shouldn't you be out enjoying the festivities?" she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

He glanced at Laurel, then bent to whisper in her ear. "Surely you don't think I'd leave the love of my life unprotected, do you?"

Rina wanted to bite her tongue. In her fit of pique, she'd almost blown McCall's cover. In an overly sweet tone, she answered, "Certainly not."

Even as remorse gripped her for nearly blowing his cover, the coldness in his voice was like a sword to her heart. So she *had* imagined that he had real feelings for her. What a fool she was.

A fist tightened around her chest where her heart beat heavily, squeezing the life out of it. Still, it was better this way. They could never be anything

to each other. He'd all but come right out and told her so, even though she, in her stupidity, kept trying to believe all that hot, writhing sex meant something.

She should have listened to him. She should never have gone to bed with him. She should have done any number of things except act like the fool she was.

Well, it would all be over soon. Maybe she could write this into the plot of her next book.

Several times during the hour and a half they sat in the cramped quarters, Rina wondered if she should speak up now.

Maybe she should talk to Gage. He was warmer, friendlier, more easygoing. Much more inviting to confide in. Just as she'd about made up her mind, three sharp raps sounded on the van door, and someone slid it open to admit Sully and another man.

"Meet Ron Giddings," he told them. "He's part of the protection team today."

"Heads up, everyone," Giddings said. "The helicopter's about to land." He looked at Rina. "You don't move until we tell you to. This is too good an opportunity for a snatch."

She swallowed hard, aware that Laurel was giving her an odd look, and nodded. "Yes, sir."

She heard the *whup, whup, whup* of the rotors as Marine One set down on the lawn behind the Alamo. On the monitors she could see first the governor, then President Brandon exit the machine, surrounded immediately by their security details. Lined up in front of them was the honor guard to lead them to the roped off area where the podium stood.

The Texas Longhorn Marching Band on one side of the plaza, and the Fightin' Aggie Band from Texas A&M on the other side broke out into a combined

rendition of "Hail to the Chief." Rina was sure they could be heard clear across San Antonio.

The processional moved across the lawn to the roped off area, and everyone began to take their places.

Three sharp knocks sounded on the van door again. McCall reached over to open it. Gage was standing in the opening.

"What?" McCall asked.

"Sully said he needs you on the other side of the podium area right away."

"Why can't you take care of it?" McCall demanded.

Gage shrugged. "I don't ask questions. I just obey orders. He told me to send you over there and bring Rina and Laurel out. The speeches are about to begin."

"Then I'm not leaving," McCall objected.

Gage pressed a hand to his ear piece. "Yes, sir?" He spoke into his tiny mike. "I'm trying, sir." He looked up at McCall. "Sully says he's trying to reach you but your mic must be dead."

McCall tapped it and frowned. "It seems fine. What's the problem?"

"He says to get moving right now. Do you want to talk to him on my comm? He sounds like he's in a hurry."

"No. Damn it all, anyway. What a fucking lousy time for electronics to foul up." He climbed out of the van, then handed Rina and Laurel down to Gage. "No one comes near them, understand?"

"After all these years, you have to ask that?"

McCall tapped him on the shoulder and took off at a run.

Gage took each of the women by the arm to lead them away from the van. "Single file, now," he said. "So I can keep tight with Rina."

The president was just beginning his remarks.

The three of them had almost reached the side of the roped off area when Rina felt something pressing hard into her side. She tried to push at it and looked up at Gage.

He had a grim expression on his face. "Don't move. Stay right here next to me and you won't get hurt."

Rina looked down and realized the thing pressing against her was the gun in his pocket. Her eyes widened in shock. "What—"

"Where's the chip, Rina? Time to hand it over."

Fear greater than she'd ever known clamped itself onto her. "You? You're the one?"

"Too bad you had to find out this way. It makes you a disposable item. But I've waited as long as I could for you to get through playing your games. Give me the chip, and I'll make sure the end is quick."

"You'll never get away with it in this crowd."

"Don't bet on it. I've been doing this for years."

Her mouth was so dry she couldn't swallow, and the nausea was pushing its way up to her throat again. "You're the one who betrayed my brother, aren't you? He's dead, isn't he?" It wasn't even a question. The sick feeling in her stomach told her the truth of it.

"John was stupid. He didn't have to be such a boy scout."

"But..." Rina's gaze drifted to Laurel who kept walking in front of them. "Laurel," she called.

"Don't call attention to her."

Gage's grip on her tightened as Laurel reached into her purse with one hand and with the other pulled up the flap on the side. Shocked by the sudden knowledge that burst into her brain, Rina realized Laurel was aiming a gun at the president and not one person knew or would be able to stop her.

“Laurel! Stop! Don’t do it!” she screamed.

With superhuman strength, Rina wrenched herself away from Gage and launched herself at the woman she’d thought was her friend. She heard the pop of a silencer and white heat blazed across her side as she knocked Laurel to the ground, trapping her beneath her body.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Gun!”

“Gun!”

“Gun!”

Multiple voices screamed the warning word. Standing on the far side of the podium with a bewildered Sully, McCall heard Rina scream, saw her tackle Laurel and both of them fall to the ground.

The two security details hustled both the president and the governor back to Marine One, shoving them into the helicopter and signaling the pilot to take off at once. As the rotors split the air with their peculiar whupping sound, Texas Rangers fanned out to keep the seated dignitaries in place as people scrambled to see what was happening.

In the same instant, he saw the women fall, McCall spotted Gage with the gun in his hand. The gun everyone had spotted. Stupidly, instead of pretending to answer the emergency, he was trying to shove it into his pocket.

“Get Gage,” McCall yelled to Addison and Pedrosa, who were standing nearby.

As Gage tried to melt into the crowd, two sets of hands clamped down on him and dragged him toward the van.

“Cuff him and check his pocket,” McCall shouted as he sprinted toward Rina and a screeching Laurel.

As Rina pressed Laurel to the ground, the woman squirmed beneath her and she heard the discharge of the gun Laurel clutched in her purse. Rina’s ears rang, and the stench of cordite filled her

nostrils. Her side felt as if a burning poker was pressed against it, and breathing was becoming more difficult.

“Get her off me,” Laurel yelled. “She’s suffocating me.”

Rina clung to her with desperation, even as the scene around her began to blur. She twisted her fingers in Laurel’s hair, gripping hard until she felt hands moving her and Laurel being pulled out from beneath her.

“Rina?” McCall turned Rina over, his hand searching for entry wounds. Blood stained the side and front of her blouse, blood that was pumping out of her in a steady stream.

“She’s...shooter,” Rina gasped before her eyes fluttered closed again.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” Laurel shouted, kicking at her captors.

“Shut the hell up.” McCall was in no mood for histrionics. “Check her purse,” he snapped at the two Secret Service agents who held her handcuffed body between them in a firm grasp.

Despite her struggles, one of the agents yanked her handbag from her shoulder and dumped the contents on the ground. Everyone’s eyes widened at the gun that fell out. One of the men lifted it with his handkerchief, dropped it into a plastic baggie someone held out, and handed it to a waiting technician.

“Pedrosa, tell the Service to get her the fuck away from here.”

“My pleasure,” Pedrosa said. “No wonder that bitch wanted to come along with us. We were her entry into the secured area. I’ll bet she’s been planning this since the announcement was made a year ago.”

Laurel was spitting fire, screeching curses at them in three languages as they dragged her toward

a waiting vehicle.

McCall tore off his jacket and wrapped it around Rina, pressing hard against her side to stem the frightening flow of blood. He felt as if an hour had passed instead of seconds, and he winced at the blood draining from her body.

"Where the hell are the EMTs?" he yelled.

Around them, people were moving in all directions. The Rangers were trying to disperse the dignitaries in an orderly fashion, and the San Antonio police were backing the crowd up as far as they could. The slap-slap-slap of leather on pavement signaled the hurried pace of the Secret Service agents as they rushed to help contain the scene. But for McCall, the only thing that existed was the woman lying so pale and still before him.

"M-McCall?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Right here, Dusty." His voice held an edge of panic he couldn't push away.

Tears began to leak from her eyes.

"D-did you say...Dusty?"

She saw him try to smile. "That's what John called you, isn't it?"

"God...damn it, McCall." She bit back the pain. Arrogant man. "Why did you wait...so long to use...nickname?" She hesitated while another spasm of pain washed over her. "John knew...trust anyone who used it. But I can give...to you now."

Pain struck deep as she moved her arm. Gritting her teeth, she reached up and yanked the locket from her neck, chain and all. With waning strength, she pressed it into McCall's palm.

"For you," she whispered. "From John."

"I'll just take that." Sully reached over McCall's shoulder and retrieved the locket, its shiny silver surface now sticky with blood.

"We've got her." The EMTs from the ambulance that always stood at the ready for the president were

at McCall's side, trying to move him away.

"Hold on, Dusty," he whispered. "You'll be all right. I promise."

Then Sully was pulling McCall away, leading him to the side. "Let them help her, McCall. They know what they're doing."

"Damn it to hell anyway." He gritted his teeth. "That bastard, Gage. Good men dead because of him, and now maybe Rina." He tried to wrench free of Sully. "Let me get to him. Let me just get my hands on him."

"Pull yourself together," Sully snapped, although not unkindly. "You're a professional. We need to handle this in the appropriate way."

"We're taking her to St. Luke's," one of the EMTs called.

Then the ambulance doors slammed shut, the siren began its mournful wail, announcing the start of its urgent journey, and the vehicle moved out into traffic.

McCall stood where he was, rooted to the spot, staring at the bloody locket. Sully took out a sharp pen knife, inserted the tip between the two halves of the locket and pried it open with great care. A tiny microchip fell into his hand.

"Here's our smoking gun, if you'll pardon the bad pun."

"She was wearing this that night at John's place," McCall told him. "I guess she'd already found it and put it on. Wearing it was probably the only thing that saved her life. Brechtel's man had no idea it wasn't an ordinary piece of jewelry. And damn it, she's had it on ever since."

"Scared to give it to the wrong person is my guess," Sully mused. "But at least we have it now."

"Too late," McCall said in a dull voice.

"No. In plenty of time." He signaled to Noel Stennis who was waiting off to the side and handed

him the locket. "Get this to Washington pronto. Have the Rangers take you to the airport and use my plane. Call the pilot while you're en route. Let me know as soon as you're in the tech lab."

"You're not leaving?" Noel asked.

Sully shook his head. "Not yet. Too many loose ends here."

Noel took off at a run.

"I have to get to the hospital," McCall said, his voice filled with pain. If Rina died...shit. He didn't even want to think about that. If only he'd been smarter. Taken a harder look at everyone around her. Damn, damn, damn.

"I know. Come on, I'll take you. Just give me a minute to wrap up the scene here."

McCall stood numb and unseeing as Sully spoke to the men in charge of Gage and Laurel, giving orders and leaving instructions. After that, he had a short conversation with Ron Giddings. Then he was back, leading McCall to a vehicle behind the Alamo. A DPS highway patrolman stood beside the open doors.

"St. Luke's," Sully told him,

He nodded. "I'll hit the siren."

Then they were off.

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McCall had always hated hospitals. This one was no exception. The smell of antiseptic mingled with the odor of death, making his stomach heave and his nerves dance. He was in the surgical waiting room, watching Sully speak to two gowned doctors, then nod and move back to him.

"She's stable," he told McCall. "They had to give her a lot of blood in the trauma center, but they stabilized her enough to take her to surgery."

"Damn it. I never should have left her. But Gage was so insistent..."

"Stop beating yourself up over it." Sully ran his

hand through his thick gray hair. "All of us were fooled. Gage, for God's sake. Of all people. Good old Mr. Rock Solid. None of us could have foreseen this."

"She'll die and it's my fault," McCall said in a dull voice. "Just like before."

He couldn't get away from the picture of her body lying on the concrete, blood pumping from her wounds, her face whiter than snow. Nausea clawed at his throat, and his heart felt as if a dull knife had pierced it. *He* should be the one lying in the operating room, not her. *He* was the one who deserved to die.

"No, nothing like before," the older man insisted. "Rina wasn't out to betray you."

"But she didn't trust me." McCall could hardly stand the misery that gripped him. His ego had made him play a game that might cost Rina her life. No wonder she didn't trust him. He should have just given her the damn clue to begin with, and all this could have been avoided.

"Why should she?" Sully asked.

"When John called Rina that night you can bet he told her where to find the locket. I was the only one who knew the key word to use in an emergency. I was the one he trusted, and I betrayed that trust."

Sully frowned. "I don't understand."

"I'm such an arrogant ass I had to do it my way. I wanted to make her feel safe enough with me, trust me, so she'd tell me without any screwy code words or shit like that. Tell me because it was *me*. Don't you see?"

Sully's face was emotionless. "I'd say that's a breach of protocol, and it certainly would have made a big difference to have that chip a lot sooner. But it still wouldn't have told us which member of the team was the mole, would it? The one responsible for John's death?"

"But-

“But nothing. *I* might even have been the mole. I don’t know what was going on between the two of you, but I’d say Rina’s a smart cookie. She managed to separate her emotions from reality, which as you know is damned hard to do. And which, I might suggest, is something you used to be able to do.”

“But-”

“But nothing. You can’t take her lack of trust personally, no matter how involved you are. This is a different ball game. She didn’t want to make a mistake and hand over the evidence to her brother’s killer.”

“But if I used the code name earlier...”

“You can’t do that to yourself. Besides, we might have moved prematurely and not caught them all. You need to keep that in mind.”

“They planned to use Rina from the minute the Alamo event was announced, didn’t they?” McCall felt sick to his stomach at the thought.

Sully nodded. “That was supposed to be their failsafe if they couldn’t find another way to get at President Brandon.”

McCall scrubbed his hands over his face. “But if we’d known ahead of time, I never would have let Laurel go to the Alamo with her. Be that close to her.”

“And we never would have caught Brechtel’s pet assassin. Who would have suspected someone like Laurel? She might still be out there waiting for her next assignment. That alone is worth its weight in gold.”

“Don’t soft soap me.” McCall ground his teeth. “I did everything wrong here. If she dies it’s my fault. You should kick my ass from here to Washington.”

He didn’t care what Sully said. He’d put the entire mission in jeopardy because he couldn’t be straight with Rina. Couldn’t let her know he was John’s contact. If the President of the United States

had been assassinated, if Gage and Laurel had not been exposed, it would have been through his own stupid pigheadedness.

Images of him and Rina together kept assaulting his mind. Somehow she'd reached into his soul, into the frozen place where he kept his heart, and melted the wall around it. Knowing what was at stake, if he'd really wanted her to trust him he should have spent more time telling her what was really in his heart instead of drawing lines in the sand and telling her it was nothing but sex. Who the hell would trust a man like that? No wonder women said men thought with their dicks.

Now he might never have the chance to tell her how he felt. Let her know that somehow, some way, he wanted to make a life with her. Not that she'd be willing at this point. He'd promised to take care of her and what a joke that turned out to be. If she died, it would be no one's fault but his.

All he could do now was pray.

"Drink this." He looked up at the sound of a voice. Pedrosa stood beside him with a cup of vending machine coffee. "It's hot and you need to get it into your system. Come on."

"He's right," Sully told him. "Drink it before I have to force feed it to you."

McCall reached out and took the cup with a hand not quite steady. He tasted the liquid, made a face, but dutifully drank as much as he could. Then, consumed with self-loathing, he looked at Sully again. "You should fire my ass and send me to the worst hellhole you can find."

"Damn it, McCall. We're done with the pity party. We got the bad guys plus an assassin we've been trying to find for years." His gaze was piercing, as if he was looking for something, seeking clues to what was really behind what McCall was saying. "My God. You're in love with her."

“For all the good it will do me now. If she lives through this...” McCall pressed his lips together, unwilling to contemplate the alternatives. “We gave each other everything but trust. I’m more to blame than she is, because I could have told her at any time. I wanted her to come to *me*. How do you build a relationship with that?”

And that was the last word he spoke, shielding himself in bitter silence. He paced, he cursed, he burned his stomach with bad coffee. Sully sat quietly with two of his team members, smart enough to know there was nothing he could say right now that McCall wanted to hear.

They lost track of how many hours passed while they waited. McCall continued to pace and curse himself. Sully spent most of the time on his phone, talking to Noel, checking with his men on the situation with Gage and Laurel. Finally, when McCall’s patience had completely worn out and he looked ready to storm the surgery suite, the tired doctor, still in his surgical scrubs, approached them.

“Mr. Raines?”

Sully walked over to the doctor. “How is she?”

McCall stopped pacing, doing his best to control the apprehension he felt.

“Much better than we had any right to expect. Getting blood back into her right away helped a great deal.” He paused. “She was hit twice and the bullets did a lot of damage. One of them nicked two ribs and the fragments damaged her liver, a lung, and one kidney. The other severed an artery, which explains the massive bleeding, but we stitched it up.”

“She’s going to be all right,” Sully said, making it a statement rather than a question.

“She’ll be with us here for some time, but, yes, she’ll eventually make a full recovery.”

McCall listened to every word, then turned

away. Despite himself, tears burned his eyes.

“Can we see her?” Sully asked.

“In about an hour, I’d say. She’s still in recovery. Someone will come and get you when they move her. We’re putting her in ICU for a few days. Just in case.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Thank you very much.” He turned to McCall. “You heard?”

“Yes.” He turned and headed for the elevators.

“Wait just a minute here.” Sully’s heavy hand clamped on McCall’s shoulder. “Where the hell are you going?”

“What does it look like? I’m leaving.”

“Leaving?” Sully stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. “The woman you love is miraculously dragged back from the jaws of death, and you want to leave?”

McCall’s lips thinned. “She won’t want to see me. I promise you that. If she doesn’t hate me yet, by the time she starts to come around, she will. She probably wishes I was the one who took the bullet.”

Sully fixed him with a hard look. “You may have made some...errors in judgment, but you were always on top of things. None of us expected what happened with Laurel and Gage. And in the end, damage was minimal, and we got what we needed.”

“Let’s not forget Rina nearly gave her life, trying to do the job I was supposed to do because I didn’t question Gage’s message. Didn’t follow my instincts. So where should I start, Sully? Which mistake should I drag out first? What could she and I possibly have to say to each other after all this?”

“That’s bull,” the older man said. “I will not let you leave it like this. If you walk out on her now, without thrashing this thing out, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

McCall just shook his head. Nothing Sully said was going to make a difference to him. He’d been an ass. He’d fucked up and almost gotten Rina killed.

He didn't think he'd ever forget that for the rest of his life. She deserved someone a lot better than him. He turned away from Sully and nearly ran down the long corridor to the elevators.

## Chapter Sixteen

The newspapers were full of stories about the plot to kill the president, which involved not only two congressmen and a billionaire but the vice president. Shots of Andrew and William Brechtel, flanked by attorneys as they were led away by federal agents, played over and over again on television and in print. Vice President Grant Heller became the man the whole country loved to hate. And Patterson and Hanes? Quietly processed by agents and just as quietly sequestered while their attorneys sorted out their part in the plot.

And of course, because the media loved ordinary people who became heroes, Rina's picture was plastered on every front page and every television screen in the country.

Gage and Laurel quite literally faded from the landscape, hidden away while Sully worked to make them disappear permanently. The media nearly drove itself crazy hunting for information, but not even a whisper was heard. And all attempts to pry something loose from the Secret Service were effectively stonewalled.

Rina lay in a drug-induced fog during the initial frenzy. Her doctor ordered pain medication on demand, whatever she needed, so she was kept as comfortable as morphine could make her. When they moved her from the ICU and she did surface, it was to see a nurse attending to her or Shar or Sully hovering over her.

Four days passed before she opened her eyes and kept them open for more than a few minutes.

She could tell it was evening by the darkness outside her window and the glow of the outside lights creating yellow halos. A lighted lamp beside her bed threw the rest of the room into shadow, but she could sense someone moving.

“Who’s there?” Her voice sounded like a croaking frog, and her throat felt as if someone had sandpapered it.

Shar moved into her line of vision. “Hello, sweetie. Glad to have you back with us. How’re you doing?”

“Not so great. Where—”

“St. Luke’s Hospital.”

“Oh.” Rina ran her tongue over her dry, cracked lips. “Drink?”

“Ice chips, and if those stay down okay, some ice water.” Shar filled a teaspoon with chips from a glass and slid them one at a time into Rina’s mouth.

“Hard...to swallow,” Rina said when the chips had melted.

“That’s because they had a tube down your throat for a few days to help you breathe. Dr. Redfield said it might take a week or so, but the soreness will go away.” She fed another spoonful of chips.

“What...what happened?”

“You’re a heroine,” Shar told her, a soft smile on her face. “I’m keeping your press clippings. Do you remember anything?”

Rina shook her head as much as pain would allow her movement.

“The president nearly got killed,” Shar told her. “You got shot, and you gave the government a computer chip with all the information they needed to catch the bad guys.” She grinned. “You’re all over the papers. Book sales are through the roof.”

“You’re...kidding.”

“Not for a minute.” Her face sobered. “Have they

told you about Gage? And your dear friend Laurel?"

Rina nodded "I knew...that day when it happened. I can't believe it." She closed her eyes briefly. "Sure had me fooled."

"They had all of us fooled. Even people as sharp as Sully."

"McCall?" She barely managed to get the name out.

Shar smoothed Rina's hair back from her forehead. "Sully's kept him pretty busy. You know, he was the team leader on this, and he has a lot of debriefing and wrapping up to attend to."

Rina's eyes searched her friend's face, then closed against what she saw. In her few moments of lucidity, her first thought had been that McCall would turn away from her, hate her for not trusting him enough to give him the precious chip. How could she have shared such intimacy with him and not believed in him? An unexpected surge of pain engulfed her.

"Hurts," she mumbled. "Real...bad." But she couldn't tell if it was her heart or her body.

"Time for more happy stuff." Shar pushed the button for the nurse.

The woman appeared almost at once and carefully injected clear liquid into one of the IV tubes.

"I'm glad to see you awake," said a strange voice belonging to an unfamiliar person in the room. "I'm Dr. Redfield. I'm afraid I'm the one who made the nasty cuts on your body." He smiled kindly.

"How...am I?"

"Well, there's no doubt you'll be our guest for quite a while, although when they brought you in, we weren't so sure you'd be around at all. The bullets did some pretty nasty damage."

"Bullets?" She was confused.

"You were shot, my dear."

“Shot.” Then she remembered what Shar had said. “Bad?” *That was stupid*, her drugged mind said. Of course being shot is bad.

“One bullet hit just under your left arm. Thank god your ribs deflected it away from your heart, but you still had a good bit of damage to your organs. The other one nicked an artery, which led to some problems, but we got them under control. How are you feeling now?”

“Hurt.” She tried to swallow again. “Sore.”

“I’d expect that. I’ve ordered maximum pain meds for you. That should help. Especially tomorrow when we try to get you out of bed.” When she shook her head, he just patted her hand. “Have to get you up as soon as we can. Just for a minute. Okay? All right, then. I’ll check in once more before I leave the hospital tonight.”

She turned her head. “Shar?”

“Right here, honey.” Shar picked up the ice chips and spooned a few more into Rina’s mouth.

The door to the room opened, and Rina sensed a large presence.

“How is she?” Sullivan Raines asked.

“In a lot of pain,” Shar told him. “But better, I think.”

Sully took Rina’s hand in both of his. “I am so very sorry this happened to you. You can’t know how badly I feel about it.”

“Not...your fault.” The hoarseness in her voice was becoming more pronounced.

“Oh, I think it is. It was our job to make sure you were safe, and we didn’t do that very well.”

“Mine,” she rasped. “Locket.”

“Yes, we have the locket. Thank you. We’ve rounded everyone up and put them away. Including the vice president. Quite a scandal, too.” He smiled at her.

Rina motioned for something to write with. She

didn't think her throat could take any more. Shar dug a small notebook and pen from her purse.

*All my fault, she wrote. If I'd given it to you before, none of this would have happened. But John said...*

"John was worried about a mole. I know. And he was right. Just before he was killed, he may even have wondered if *I* was the one who betrayed him. I don't blame him for being paranoid."

*John said trust no one. I'd know who to give it to. But I didn't.*

"You did just fine," Sully said. "You kept the information safe, and that's the important thing."

*McCall?*

Sully averted his eyes. "He's been in debriefing for a long time, my dear. Plus he's been involved in all the clean up. He's been quite a busy boy."

*Not coming.* A tear trickled down her cheek as she wrote the last words.

Sully squeezed her hand. "Give him a little time, Rina. He's battling a lot of unfamiliar emotions. McCall's been a loner for such a long time. I think his feelings for you scared him and made him treat you...in a less than sterling manner. Then..."

*The locket. Didn't trust him. I know.*

She threw the pen and notebook down on the bed. She was exhausted, and the pain medication was starting its pleasant journey through her veins.

"No, Rina, that's not it at all. He's convinced he's the reason you got shot. He let himself be pulled away from you."

She pointed to the notebook and pen again, and Shar handed them to her.

*Stupid!*

She underlined it three times.

"I agree." Sully sighed. "Go to sleep. Sleep is the great healer. And don't fret about McCall. Things will work out."

*Funeral?*

“For John?”

She nodded.

“When you’ve fully recovered, we’ll have a proper ceremony. We pried the location of his body from Brechtel. We have time for that. We’ll do it right, I promise.”

“Thank you,” she mouthed. Then her eyes closed again. She couldn’t tell when Sully and Shar left the room. She was grateful for their concern and care, but they couldn’t heal the hole in her heart. Tears ran freely, and she made no effort to wipe them away. She just lay there, waiting for the medication to work, silently weeping for the man who’d invaded her heart, the man she never expected to see again.

## Chapter Seventeen

"I think you're making a big mistake." Sully looked at McCall, standing at the office window, hands in his pockets, back rigid.

"I've already made the greatest mistake I could. Now I just want to forget about it."

"At least talk to her. She's desperate to see you."

"I doubt that." He gave a short, unhappy laugh. "Why would she want to see me? She has every right to hate me, and I'm sure she does. She probably thinks I took her to bed so I could worm the information out of her. How do I know she wasn't right not to trust me? Jesus, I can't even trust *myself* any more." He raked his hands through his already disheveled hair. "At least she didn't end up dead like the last woman I had a relationship with. No thanks to me. End of story."

"The two situations don't even compare. Danielle was a killer herself."

"Leave it alone." McCall's voice was bitter. "Who would want a loser like me, anyway?"

"I never imagined you to be a coward." Sully took a swallow of coffee from his mug.

"I'm not a coward." McCall clenched his fists. He was a lot of things that weren't so nice, but he'd never imagined himself as a coward. "I just think a clean break is best for both of us. I've caused her nothing but pain."

"You have no idea what she thinks, and you won't unless you talk to her."

"But I wanted..."

"What? To make up for Danielle? To prove you

were a man who could rise above his feelings? You're a true professional, McCall, but all of us are human. You need to realize that."

McCall turned from the window and began pacing. He'd been doing a lot of that lately. Waiting for the doctor. Waiting each day for Sully's report from the hospital. Trying to decide what to do next with his life.

"I was crazy to get involved with her in the first place," he said flatly. "I knew better. This job doesn't make for good relationships. I tried to keep telling myself she was just an assignment."

"Bull. Stop trying to talk yourself into that. Whatever you did that you think is so unforgivable, don't you think she has the right to make that decision?"

McCall rubbed his forehead. "How is she doing? Is she all right?"

"Physically? The doctors say she's doing very well. She'll have a long recovery, but in the end, all she'll have are some very sexy scars." Sully paused. "Of course, I thought you already knew all that. And not just from my reports. The hospital tells me you've been calling at least twice a day. What?" he asked at McCall's look. "You didn't think I had them report all her calls to me? Have her guard report all her visitors to me? Brechtel could still be hunting for revenge. Even from prison."

"Good. Then I don't have to worry about her."

"Go see her, McCall. Don't let this thing fester."

"Actually, I think I'd like to go home and see my family," he said.

Sully looked startled. "Are you sure that's such a good idea?"

"Whether it is or not, I need to see them. It's been far too long. I need to feel connected again."

Sully was silent for a long time. "You know, Noel's wife is expecting a baby."

“How nice for him. But what does that have to do with me?”

“He’s been with me since we started this unit. It’s not exactly a piece of cake. He’s told me he wants out. I’m arranging for his transfer into a less, um, high profile situation. With a substantial raise, I might add.”

“So?” McCall was still confused.

“So that leaves his slot open for a bright young man with a lot of experience. One who might want to get out of the field and into something less, shall we say, hazardous than covert work.”

“Are you offering me a job?” McCall was stunned.

“You might want to think about it while you’re visiting your folks. Just as an option, mind you. In case something happens to prompt a change in lifestyle.”

“I don’t know, Sully. Maybe going back out in the field is the best way to work all of this off.”

“Not yet. You’ve got some time coming and you need it. Go home. Reconnect with your family. Call me when you get back and let me know what you decide.”

McCall walked out of the office, his pain etched deeply on his face.

Sully sat thinking for a long time, then looked up a number in his coded file and dialed the first of several calls.

“Hello,” he said when the person on the other end answered. “This is Sullivan Raines. How are you? Good, good. Glad to hear it. I’m actually calling with an agenda. I have a little problem that I think you can help me with.”

## Chapter Eighteen

One day slid seamlessly into the next for Rina. Her routine seldom varied. Eat, get up, go back to bed, sleep. The only thing that differentiated her from the other post-op patients was the armed guard posted constantly at her door.

“Just to make me feel better,” Sully told her, still cognizant of Brechtel’s long reach.

The first time she got out of bed and walked to the chair, a nurse and Shar supporting her, she felt as if all her stitches would rip out. By the time she was propped up in the chair in a cocoon of pillows, she was shaky and covered with perspiration.

“There now,” the nurse said, flashing her professional smile. “We did very well.”

*Oh, God. Just my luck to get someone who bustles and uses the editorial “we.”*

“I don’t know about you,” Rina said, gritting her teeth, “but I feel like a train just ran over me.”

“It gets a little better each time,” the woman assured her. “We need this to build up our strength, you know.”

Rina rolled her eyes.

Shar winked at her. “Hang in there,” she mouthed.

“Any word on what’s happened with Laurel?” she asked.

Shar shook her head. “That’s the best kept secret of the century. Sully refuses to comment, except to say she was probably a plant who worked her way into your life so she could be at the big signing. Otherwise, she’d never have been able to get

close enough to President Brandon.”

Rina nibbled on a fingernail. “I’m more angry than hurt, I think. She used me, Shar. For more than a year. I was her cover, her excuse, and when things came to a head, her way in to complete her job. I still haven’t gotten over that.”

“Laurel was always a user, honey.” Shar fussed with the covers. “You just never saw it. She’s a vicious little bitch, and nothing they do to her will ever be enough. If I had her in front of me right now, I’d kill her myself.”

“Well.” Rina felt her lips curve in a smile in spite of her depressed state. “Remind me never to piss you off!”

She sat up while her bed was remade and the nurse changed all the IV bags still pouring life-giving liquids into her. Then they made the trip in reverse. By the time she was once again lying on the cool sheets, she wondered if dying might not be preferable.

“I think we need a little something to take the edge off,” the nurse muttered efficiently as she injected pain medication into one of the IV lines. “There. Now we can get some rest.”

When she left, Rina looked at Shar and made a face. “I’ll give her a permanent rest if she doesn’t stop treating me like a mental deficient. If she likes that ‘we’ business so much, she can trade places with me.”

Shar chuckled and smoothed back the top sheet. “You do need to sleep, honey. Go on, close your eyes. I’ll just curl up in the chair with this book from a possible client. The prose is supposed to be so purple I need asbestos gloves to read it.”

Rina would have laughed if it hadn’t hurt so much. “Don’t you have an office to run?”

Shar leaned over and squeezed her hand. “My office is doing just fine. My assistant is practicing

how to replace me and having a ball. So you just relax and get better.”

Sully continued to come by each day, his presence more reassuring than she cared to admit. Each time he provided her with a few more details of the unfolding drama. She saw his sadness when he spoke of Gage and shared his shock at the discovery of Laurel’s real profession.

He also insisted the government would cover all her medical expenses and anything else that might come up. Including her recovery.

But no McCall. Each day she waited hopefully for something—a call, a note, a visit. Anything. His absence was like another raw wound, only this one wouldn’t heal. Did he hate her so much because she hadn’t given him the locket? Made him compromise his situation? She could hardly blame him.

Had it all been a lie, everything that happened between them? Or did he just need to be The Ghost more than he needed her?

She had no appetite. When they finally started giving her solid foods, she had to force herself to eat. She felt as if she’d lost the whole focus of her life.

At night she dreamed of McCall, remembering the wonderful hours in his arms. God, what a mess everything was in. She’d never be able to fix this one, no matter what anyone said.

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“Arrangements are being made for when you leave here.” Shar bustled around the room, moving plants, straightening stacks of books.

“What kind of arrangements? I’m going home, aren’t I?” Rina had just gotten back in bed after a short walk down the hall supported by Shar and a nurse. They got her up for longer periods twice a day now, and it always exhausted her. She was beginning to wonder if she’d ever get her strength back.

“Get real, kiddo. You have a long way to go before you can be on your own.”

“So where can I go, Shar? I know I’ll need help. I feel weaker than a baby, and it’s been two weeks.”

“Well, we need to keep you away from the press. That’s for sure.”

“Away from the press?” Rina frowned at her. “What on earth do you mean? Are they still camped outside my door? And quit fluttering around like a nervous housewife.”

Shar finally sat down in the chair beside the bed. “You’re kidding me, right? With all the publicity, your latest book, the one you were supposed to sign at the Alamo, is already in its second printing. The book stores can’t keep it on the shelves. And reorders for your backlist are through the roof. When you get back to normal, we have a drawer full of appearance requests to shuffle through.”

“I guess almost getting killed makes me a celebrity.” Rina leaned back against her pillow, trying to find a comfortable place for herself.

“Not to mention saving the life of the president and exposing the plot of the century.” Shar smoothed Rina’s hair back from her forehead. “You’ll dine out on this for a long time to come, sweetie.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question. Where can I go? I refuse to be a burden to anyone. Why can’t I just stay home and have someone come in?”

“Forget it.” Shar shuddered. “You’re liable to get a duplicate of Nurse Ratchet here.”

“Then tell me what my options are because I don’t see that I have any. And I won’t stay with you and give you an invalid to worry about.”

Shar smiled. “Mr. Raines has been most helpful.”

“Sully?” Rina’s jaw dropped. “What does he have to do with this?”

“Well, he feels responsible for you getting shot, so he’s taking care of whatever you need.”

“I think Shar and I have made some very satisfactory plans.” They hadn’t heard Sully come into the room. Suddenly, he was there beside the bed. “Hello, Rina. I’m delighted to see you looking a little better.”

“So you’re the one taking control of my life,” she said, half joking, half irritated.

“I’d say, at the moment, you’re not in the best position to do that, agreed? And you’re being discharged day after tomorrow, so I had to make some decisions for you.”

“Then tell me where I’m going,” she demanded.

“There are some people I know who have a home in Maine,” he said.

“Maine!” Rina interrupted. “Why do I have to go to Maine?”

“Because we want you as far away from any media and any commotion as possible,” Shar reminded her.

“Who *are* these people? Why are you sending me there? And why are they letting me come?”

“The family has strong agency connections,” Sully told her. “They’ve helped me out before with agents who needed a place to recuperate or just have some down time. They’re well-prepared to house you, and one of the members is a rehab nurse, who’s taking some vacation time. Which we will compensate her for, of course.”

“I don’t know, Sully.” She chewed her lower lip. “I can’t just descend on a bunch of strangers. I’m still pretty much helpless and everything.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s all set. You’re going.” He smiled. “And that’s a government order.”

Something tickled at the back of her mind, but she was too tired and her mind still too clouded with all the medication to chase the thought.

“All right. I’m too exhausted to argue about it, anyway.” She looked hard at him, afraid to ask her next question. “McCall?”

It had been almost three weeks. He hadn’t called or come by. She was sure she’d never see him again. She felt tears threatening again and blinked them away.

“He’s also taking some time off. I think it will be good for him. For both of you.” He leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the cheek. “Don’t give up yet, Rina. I haven’t.”

Then he was gone.

## Chapter Nineteen

Two days later Shar descended on Rina with her discharge papers and two packed suitcases. The woman helped her into a long, loose fitting patio gown, all she could stand to wear with her incisions still so sore, and fussed with her hair until she had it fixed to her satisfaction.

“There.” Shar stood back and looked her over. “You’ll do.”

“Do you have any idea where they’re taking me?”

“Maine, remember?”

“Maine’s a big state.”

“Sully said he’d leave me the name of the people and their phone number,” Shar said. “And I’ve had all your phone calls forwarded to my office. If anything important comes up—more important than your health—I’ll get in touch with you.”

Resignation settled like a piece of lead in Rina’s heart as she let herself be helped into the waiting wheelchair. Everything had been taken out of her hands. She might as well stop fighting it. She just wished she could figure out the thought whirling around in her mind like a wraith. Something she should remember. Damn. Would she ever be able to think straight again?

Sully himself was waiting at the patient discharge exit. The doors to the limo he sometimes used were open, and a uniformed driver took the suitcases from Shar. Rina had asked that all the flowers she’d received be split up between the children’s ward and rooms of the terminally ill. A

few books were the only other things she had with her.

"Picking me up in style, are you?" she asked Sully.

"I just thought you might be more comfortable in this. Your ride in the air may not be quite so smooth."

"McCall?" She was almost afraid to ask.

"All in good time. First your health."

"You can stop sparing my feelings, Sully. I know he's written me off." Biting back her impatience, she let him settle her on the comfortable leather seat. "Well, the whole situation taught me a valuable lesson. Too bad I'll never get to put it in practice."

"What do you mean?" Sully paused in the act of closing her door.

"McCall is a tough act for any man to follow. I think I'll just stay single for the rest of my life."

"Very dramatic," Shar commented. "Remember it for your next book."

At last they pulled away from the hospital, Shar waving furiously. Just moving from her room to the car had tired Rina, so she dozed as they rode. She was startled when Sully woke her gently to tell her they were ready for the next leg of their journey.

She raised her eyebrows. "You're coming with me?"

His smile was warm and caring. "Surely, you didn't think I'd just send you off to the care of strangers. Not with all I owe you. I intend to make sure you're settled and comfortable with your situation."

When the car door opened, she saw they were at a small airport. An attendant waited for her with a wheelchair, which Sully's driver easily lifted her into. She was shocked, however, when he wheeled her up to a helicopter.

"This is my ride?" She was incredulous.

“Easiest way to get you there. Otherwise, it would be another long car ride from the nearest airport. These people live on an island near Portland.”

Just before they took off, he insisted she take two of her pain pills. “These will help the ride, and maybe make you sleep. Which would be good.”

Sully was right. When they lifted off, she realized the helo ride wouldn’t be nearly as smooth as the limo. Even propped in with pillows and padding around the seat belt, she felt the vibrations at once, echoing through her body. The pills kicked in almost at once. Rina was out within seconds of swallowing them.

It seemed she’d hardly closed her eyes when she felt Sully nudging her gently.

“We’ll be landing soon. I thought you might want a second or two to get yourself together.”

She blinked, trying to focus and clear the haze from her brain. “Thank you.”

They flew in over a wide expanse of water, a lake that Sully told her fed into the Atlantic Ocean. The copter passed a causeway connecting the mainland to an island that grew steadily larger as they flew lower. Pine trees were everywhere, with huge New England style homes barely visible through the dense greenery. Then they were lowering into a clearing at the back of one of the houses. The pilot set them down on a vast expanse of lawn and cut the engine.

The house was white clapboard, rising three stories and capped by a gabled roof. Multiple windows reflected the sun back at the people in the helicopter. A wide flagstone walk led from the lawn to an old-fashioned porch that wrapped around the house.

Three people, a man and two women, stood to the side. They moved forward as the pilot emerged,

ran around to Rina's side and lifted her gently out of the aircraft. He deposited her in the wheelchair that the younger of the two women pushed forward.

The air was filled with the scent of fresh pine, newly cut grass, and the tangy essence of the lake, and she inhaled a deep breath.

"Hello." The older woman stepped forward. She was of medium height, with slightly graying dark brown hair, the warmest eyes Rina had ever seen, and a smile that went straight to her heart. She held out her hand to Rina in a welcoming gesture. "We're so happy you've come to Gray Rocks to recuperate. And I'm very happy to meet you, Rina. I'm Sharon McCall."

Rina looked from one woman to the other, then at the man, who was a carbon copy of how McCall would look twenty-five years from now. And she realized what had been teasing at the back of her mind all this time.

"Oh, my God." Blood drained from her head, and her heart nearly stopped beating. For the first time in her life, she fainted.

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When she came to, she found herself in a huge king-sized bed made up with the softest sheets she'd ever touched and covered with a lightweight quilt. The bedroom itself was spacious, with a separate sitting area and wide windows that looked out over the water. A large glass vase on a side table held fragrant blue flowers that matched the tiny ones dancing on the wallpaper.

For a moment, she had trouble remembering where she was. When she did, she wanted to faint again. What had Sully done? Why had he sent her to McCall's family to mend? How could she do this? Why were they taking her in? And what would McCall do when he found out? The questions gave her a headache. She pressed her fingers to her

temples, trying to still the throbbing.

Pulling herself up to a sitting position, she wondered if she had the strength to get out of bed by herself. At that moment, there was a light tap on the door, and the young woman she'd seen when she landed, a carbon copy of McCall's mother, walked in carrying a tray. She set it on a little table by the window and came to sit on the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry we gave you such a start," she grinned.

"I've never fainted before in my life. I feel like such a fool." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, I didn't think you could faint sitting down."

"Unusual, but possible. I'm guessing Sully didn't tell you where he was taking you."

"No. No, he didn't. I'm truly embarrassed about this." Rina heard the nervousness in her voice. "Listen, I can't stay here. There's been some kind of mistake. This is a totally impossible situation."

"Don't be silly. We're delighted you're here. By the way, I'm Abby McCall."

"Hello, Abby. I guess you know who I am." Rina covered her face with her hands. "This is awful. Just awful. It was very presumptuous of Sully to do this. I must apologize, but I can't do this."

"Of course you can. Just because my brother is an idiot doesn't mean the rest of the family is." An impish expression came over her face. "It seems you two know each other."

"Yes, I guess you could say that." She tried to collect her thoughts. "Abby, did Sully happen to mention that your brother wants nothing to do with me? That I haven't seen him since, well, since...a while? That he probably never wants to see me again?"

"My brother has a monopoly on stupidity at the moment. He'll get over it. Seriously, Sully told us everything you did, all about your brother and how

you got shot and everything. He wanted to bring you someplace where there were people who didn't require explanations for anything. That's us. Besides, I'm a nurse and a physical therapist. You're going to need both for a while longer."

"But I can't impose like this." Her hands fluttered. "Is Sully still here? He can take me someplace else."

"Gone with the wind. Or at least with the helicopter. He said he'd call later to make sure you got settled in all right."

"Lordy, what a predicament." Rina looked around the room and at herself in the bed. "How did I get up here, anyway?"

"The pilot carried you, and I took care of the rest." She studied Rina with professional eyes. "I checked your incisions while you were sleeping. Everything's healing nicely. The big question is, how are you feeling?"

"Tired. Sore. And so sorry for doing this to you." She closed her eyes for a long moment. "I can't imagine what your parents must think about all this."

"Are you kidding?" Abby chuckled. "My mother is your biggest fan. I had to beat her off with a stick, but she'll be up here as soon as I give her the okay. I say just lean back and enjoy it."

"You're being very kind about this."

"Look, Rina. Sully said you need deep seclusion and a place to heal, where people won't ask a lot of questions. We have this huge house, we know all about the agency as well as what happened to you. We've done this before, and I can take care of your medical needs and your rehab." She smiled again. "We're really glad to have you here. So quit worrying about it, okay?"

"I guess." Rina returned the smile weakly.

Abby waved at the little table. "I brought up a

light lunch for you. Just a tuna sandwich and some iced tea. I hope that's all right"

"You know, suddenly I'm famished. For the first time in weeks."

"Good. Let me bring the tray over. I think by tomorrow we should start getting you up for your meals. But today you're exhausted, what with the trip and all, so you get some extra pampering."

"Abby?"

"Yes?"

"I shouldn't ask this, but is McCall...I mean, Connor..."

"Not here, if that's what you're asking. At least right now." She settled the tray on a pillow on Rina's lap, moving the iced tea to the bedside table.

"Will you stay with me while I eat?" Rina asked, her voice tentative.

"Sure, if that's what you want. Don't feel you have to be polite."

"No. I'd like some company. Please."

These people were so nice. But how could she stay here when it was so obvious McCall had washed her out of his life? She'd have to find a way to call Sully and get out of here. Regardless of what Abby McCall said.

"I'd like that, too," Abby said, pulling a side chair up to the bed. "Anyway, I've been dying to meet the woman who has Connor tied up in such knots."

Rina nearly choked on her sandwich. "I'm not sure how you mean that. I haven't seen him in weeks."

"I know." Abby watched Rina carefully. "All his life my brother has been a very focused person. Even as a kid, whatever he did was the complete center of his attention. Sailing, skiing, baseball. Whatever. His personal relationships always came second."

"Even then?"

“Yes. Even then. And believe me, he had plenty of girls hanging around him.”

Rina smiled at the thought. She could see McCall with girls draped over him and that implacable expression on his face. “No steady girls?” She couldn’t help asking.

“Not for our Connor.” She made a face. “I hate to say this, but where girls were concerned, he was a taker. He never invested himself emotionally in any relationship. Not part of his plan, you know.” The smile disappeared from her face. “Except for...”

“Danielle?”

“You know about her?”

Rina nodded. “He gave me the bare bones, and Sully explained in more detail.”

“She used him. I think that hurt as much as anything. And her death wasn’t his fault, no matter what he says. What he felt for her was just, how can I say this? The heat of the moment. We all tried to tell him.” Abby stood up and took the tray from Rina’s lap. “But that’s why he fell so hard for you.”

Rina’s mouth dropped open. She tried to say something, but she couldn’t get any words out.

“Hold that thought,” Abby said. “But trust me, I know what I’m talking about. Now.” She straightened the covers and pillows. “I know you think all you’ve done is sleep, but you had some serious surgeries that depleted your strength. That trip had to tire you out. Why don’t you take a short nap? Then I think my parents would like to spend a few minutes with you, if you’re up to it.”

She closed the door softly on her way out.

Rina leaned back on the pillows. Abby was right. She was more exhausted than she thought. She dozed off at once, yet her sleep was anything but restful. Her dreams were disturbed by images of McCall and the memories of being in his arms.

## Chapter Twenty

McCall's family was wonderful. Rina couldn't have asked for people to make her more comfortable, even as she felt guilty about staying there. But she was determined that first day they should be clear about one thing.

"McCall...that is, Connor..." She struggled to get the words out. "I mean to say, we didn't exactly part on the best terms..."

Sharon McCall just smiled. "My son can be extremely hardheaded at times. He's always been like that. I'd give him some time to realize how foolish he's being."

"He was pretty blunt about letting me know where he stood with relationships," she told them. "I think we probably did a lot of damage to each other." She felt heat streaking across her cheeks. "There are...were...other circumstances...I just thought you ought to know how he feels about me."

"Oh, I know exactly how he feels." Sharon smiled at her. "He just hasn't admitted it to himself. But we're working on that."

"Is he here?" She looked around, tensing.

"No." Sharon shook her head. "He did come home a couple of weeks ago. First time we've seen him in more than three years, and it was wonderful. Sully insisted he take some time off, although getting him to do it was a battle. To tell you the truth, I don't think Sully gave him a choice."

"Where is he now?"

"He's gone to northern Maine to a hunting cabin we have up there. He wanted solitude, so we gave it

to him, along with more advice than he wanted to hear." Sharon smiled at her. "He just needs time to get his head on straight."

"When will he be back?"

"The end of next week," Abby told her. "You've got lots of time to get ready for him."

"Oh, please." She was panic-stricken. "I have to be gone before then. I don't think I can ever face him again."

"Don't be ridiculous," Sharon said. "You're in no shape to go anywhere. Besides, I know two people in love when I see them."

"We never thought he'd find someone, stubborn and hardheaded as he is," Frank told her. "We don't intend to let you get away."

Love? Was that still possible? No, they must be mistaken. Just wishful thinking on their part. Rina didn't even want to let herself hope.

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By the end of the week, Abby had her taking short walks in the woods, and she'd started swimming. The lake water was warm enough to be comfortable when the sun was out. Shar called every day with questions and news. "Your book's in the fourth printing," she reported with glee. "And the orders are still coming in for your backlist. Carilyn wants to know what you're doing for an encore."

"Great," Rina groaned. "Getting shot does wonders for sales, I guess."

"Hey, don't knock the free publicity," Shar said cheerfully. "We couldn't buy this if we tried. Just let me know if you need anything."

Sully came to visit once, bringing news, the helicopter dropping him unexpectedly into their midst. He looked Rina over carefully with shrewd eyes. "Much better," he pronounced. "I knew this would be just the ticket for you."

"What's happening back in civilization? No one

tells me anything. They always say 'later.'"

"The Brechtel Corporation has been effectively shut down," Sully reported. "Andrew and his friends are in prison awaiting trial. And Grant Heller has been allowed to resign rather than be impeached. But he, too, is facing a stiff sentence."

"Good." Rina felt a strong measure of satisfaction. It was no less than these men deserved.

"We've monitored Brechtel's communications with people very carefully. As far as we can tell, no one's put out a contract on you." The corner of his mouth flirted with a grin. "That's as much serious as a joke, honey. I needed to be sure you were out of it cleanly." His gaze raked over her. "What's wrong?"

"How could you bring me here to McCall's parents?" she demanded. "This is such an awkward situation."

"They've done this for me before, so I knew it would work."

"Sully, I've got to get out of here before McCall gets back."

Sully stood up and stared out at the lake. "I'm going to be very blunt with you. You and McCall are two of my favorite people, but someone needs to shake both of you. I'm not moving you from here until you both sit down and talk to each other." He turned and kissed her cheek. "John was like a son to me, and you've become like a daughter. That gives me the right to assert parental authority."

He'd also brought her laptop, blank CDs, and a flash drive. "In case you feel like doing some writing while you're here."

"I feel like getting out of here," she grumbled.

"All in good time," he told her, kissed her on the cheek and left.

Biting her lip in frustration, she decided some iced tea might help settle her nerves. She'd just taken a glass from the cupboard in the kitchen when

she heard footsteps behind her.

“Abby?” she called over her shoulder. “Is that you? Would you like some iced tea?”

“I’m not Abby, but iced tea sounds pretty good.”

She turned and the glass dropped from her nerveless fingers, shattering on the floor. McCall, lean and hard, in faded jeans and an old polo shirt, stood not six inches from her.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“McCall.” Her mouth was so dry she could hardly get his name out. Just looking at him made her heart race and the familiar heat start low in her body. God, he looked good. Strained, on edge, but still generating that air of sex and danger. Rina focused, trying to pull herself together.

“How are you, Rina?” His voice was stiff, almost formal.

“I-I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Let me pick this up for you.” He retrieved a broom and dustpan from a narrow cupboard and swept up the broken glass.

“Thank you.” She wet her lips. “How have you been?”

His eyes seemed to bore through her. “To tell the truth, not as well as I’d like to be.”

“Oh! I’m sorry to hear that.” What a brainless conversation this was turning out to be. She reached toward the cupboard again. “Let me get that iced tea.”

“I’ll do it.” He grabbed two more glasses. “It might be a little easier on the glassware.”

“That was careless of me. I’m sorry. You...startled me.” Her face flamed with embarrassment, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“You’re looking well. Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes. Much better. Your family’s been wonderful to me.”

He started to say something, then stopped. “This is stupid. I can’t do this.”

Pain speared through her heart. “I’m sorry.

You're absolutely right. I'm making this difficult for you. I didn't know you'd be back today, or I'd have been gone. Or at least out of your way. I'll pack my things at once."

She started to walk out of the kitchen, but his lean, strong hand closed over her arm. Nerves fired everywhere in her body and little frissons of desire chased themselves up and down her spine. Wounded and all, her nipples still hardened and her pussy flooded at his slightest touch. Despite everything that had happened and all the time that had passed, she still felt the same way about him. Would she ever be able to get over it?

"That's not what I meant." His voice was like steel.

She could sense the tension vibrating in his body and wondered if he hated her so much that just being near her did this to him. "I know you want to avoid me," she said. "I can't blame you. If you'll just let me get by, I'll be out of your way."

Still, he kept a firm hold on her arm. "Why don't we go up to my room?" He glanced over his shoulder, aware as she was of two pairs of eyes peeking around a corner. "It's about the only place around here where we're liable to get any privacy."

"What do we need privacy for? Just say it and be done with it. I know how you feel about me."

Why didn't he just leave her alone in her misery? She was sure he'd come back to make sure she understood she'd killed any chance there was for them. She guessed he didn't want any loose ends dangling. She wasn't sure she could stand to hear what he had to say.

"No," he said, "you don't. You have this all wrong, you know."

He put the glasses on the counter, swept her up in his arms, and took the back stairs two at a time.

"McCall." Rina pushed at him with a feeble

gesture. "People are watching."

"Good. We'll spice up their lives."

When they reached his room, he kicked the door shut with his foot and reached behind him to turn the lock.

Rina was trying to make sense of it all, fumbling for words. "I thought you made everything very clear when you stayed away from me."

"Maybe that's what I wanted at first." His arms tightened around her. "But I'm allowed one mistake, aren't I?"

"Mistake?" Somewhere deep in her core a small tendril of hope fought to get out.

"Rina." He placed her carefully on the bed and lay down beside her, tugging her against his body. "This is no accidental meeting. I knew you were still here. I called my folks and asked them. I came back early because of you."

"Of me?" Couldn't she think of something more intelligent to do than just repeat his words? She sounded like an idiot.

"My mother took great pains to tell me we still had a lot to say to each other." His mouth turned up slightly at the corners. "And I always do what my mother says." As he talked he unbuttoned her cotton blouse and brushed it open, wincing when he saw her vivid scars. "God." He ground his teeth.

"I know I look terrible..." Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes.

"I want to see it all," he rasped. "Every bit of you. Please." He kept talking as he gently removed her clothes one piece at a time. "I need to say this before I lose my nerve. I'm a hard-headed man, Rina. My family teases me about it all the time. Usually it works to my advantage, but this time it got me in trouble."

Now he was kissing her scars, tracing them with his tongue between words. He kissed every puckered

ridge, then licked them, telling her more than words could ever say that nothing affected how she looked to him.

“McCall.” She shifted, acutely aware that while she was completely nude, he still had all his clothes on. “You don’t have to...”

“Yes.” He was quiet for a moment, as if searching for a way to begin. When he spoke, his throat was hoarse, raspy, sounding like something dredged up from a deep canyon. “Yes, I do. So please just listen.”

The tips of his fingers drifted in a lazy pattern over her skin, tracing the scars, circling at her navel.

One corner of her mouth turned up in a smile. “It’s hard for me to listen when you keep distracting me like this.”

“That’s my plan.” He grinned, his hand resting on her hipbone. “Are you too sore for any of this? I know we can’t...well...can’t...”

“Have sex?” She giggled.

“Yes. I want you so badly I couldn’t be gentle with you. I know you’re not ready for the things we enjoy. But I’ve dreamed about making you feel good, about at least sliding my fingers inside you. About tasting you.” Concern lined his face. “If it’s too soon for that, just tell me.”

“Your sister’s been a tyrant. I’m in really good shape.” She lowered her lids. “Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

He pulled in a deep breath, as if his lungs had been deflated, then slowly let it out. “We did a lot to hurt each other, Rina. I’m more at fault than you are, and look what happened. Jesus, if it hadn’t been for me, you wouldn’t have been shot.”

“I think that’s a debatable issue we need to put to rest. Just like my not trusting you enough to give you the locket.” She caught her bottom lip in her teeth. “I’m ready to move past that if you are. All of

it.”

His hand returned to her breast, fingertips gently pinching her nipples, rolling them until they turned into hard, swollen buds and their color darkened. He nudged her thighs apart and stroked the inner flesh.

“The first time I ever saw you I wanted to rip off your clothes and take you to bed. Of course,” and she thought she heard a slight chuckle, “the timing wasn’t exactly what you’d call right for that. But then we did. Go to bed, I mean. Against my better judgment.”

“I know that,” she said in a quiet tone, wanting to ease the stress in his voice. “But I was willing. The risk was worth taking.”

He went on as if she hadn’t spoken. “I figured, okay. We were once and done. I’d get you out of my system.” He snorted. “What a joke that was. When this...assignment...threw us together and we, well...”

“Had incredible, wild, rough, mad monkey sex?” she teased. His fingers were caressing the outer skin of her slit, his touch as light as a feather. Inside, she felt a million fires burst into flame.

“Yeah.” One corner of his mouth kicked up. “It was the last thing I expected. And then I was hooked.”

He looked at her directly, that familiar piercing look. Rina held her breath, waiting for his next words. “I tried to use what happened with Danielle as a shield, tried to make you hate me by treating you in a way my mother would kill me for.”

His fingers swept from her clit to the very tender flesh between her vagina and her anus. Rina shifted restlessly, raising her knees to plant her feet on the bed and widening her thighs. Her juices were running from her quivering cunt, her body demanding his invasion. And still he kept talking.

“The plain fact is,” he went on. “No matter how I

tried to run away from it, no matter what happened with this whole episode, one thing kept staring me in the face. I love you, and I don't want to have a life without you. That's it. Nothing else is important."

At McCall's words, the breath whooshed out of her, and she arched her hips into his hand. She was almost beyond forming coherent words. "You...love me?"

"It wasn't easy for me to admit that to myself." McCall raked his fingers through his thick hair. "I want you to know that. But there it was. And it made a lot of problems for me."

"I know," she said gently. "Everything's been so mixed up."

"It wasn't just that. When it all came down and you got shot, I figured you had a lot of reasons to hate me. I was sure I'd ruined everything."

"And I thought *you* hated *me*." She stopped moving and stared at him. "McCall." Her voice was pleading. "Can you just shut up for a while and finish what you're doing? We'll talk afterwards, okay?"

"Whatever you say, daredevil." He grinned and bent to his task.

Kneeling between her thighs, being careful with her body, he spread her labia and lapped at her with his tongue, stroking, teasing her. He linked his fingers through hers and held her hands on the bed beside her while he drank his fill from her pulsing inner flesh. He ate at her and licked at her, and nibbled until she had to grit her teeth to keep from screaming.

When her body gathered for its release, he let go of her hands, slipping two fingers into her hot, wet, clenching vagina. Scooping some of her flowing cream, he rubbed it against her anus and inserted a finger into her dark, clutching heat. His mouth swallowed her screams as the double penetration

tipped her over the edge, and she convulsed for him, pouring into his hand. He worked her with his fingers until the last of her spasms died and she lay sweating before him, her breathing uneven but a smile on her face.

“Are you okay?” His forehead was creased with worry lines. “I wasn’t too rough with you?”

“Rough?” she grinned. “You’re kidding, right? And I’m better than okay. A lot better.”

He lay down beside her, pulling her into his arms, careful of her incisions. His hands roamed her body, as if he couldn’t stop touching her. When she shivered, he cursed under his breath and pulled the covers over her.

“See what a selfish bastard I am? Hold on.” He shucked his clothing and crawled under the covers with her. “I know we can’t do anything else right now, but it feels so good to be naked next to you.”

“For me, too.” She curled up to him, stroking her fingers through the soft hair on his chest.

“God, Rina. I was so scared when I saw all that blood. All I could think of was you were going to die and it was my fault.”

“I thought we were going to put that to rest,” she reminded him. She reached for one of his hands and pulled it next to her heart. “I’d rather talk about the future.”

“You know, at first I was pissed when I found out Sully was sending you here to recuperate, so I got my dad to let me use our cabin for a couple of weeks.” He shook his head. “When you don’t have anyone but yourself for company, you have plenty of time to think.”

“And what did you think about?” Despite what had just happened, she was almost afraid to hear the answer.

“A lot of things. But in the end, mostly about what a damn fool I was and how I felt about you and

that everyone was right. I knew then we had to see each other and talk this out. I had to find out if you really believed we had a chance.”

The muscles in his throat worked as he swallowed hard, and Rina thought his eyes held the unfamiliar sheen of unshed tears.

“And are your questions answered?” she asked, her voice slightly shaky.

“In spades.” McCall turned her face to him and looked hard into her eyes. “I can’t walk away from this any longer. I love you. I have from that first night together.” He paused. “What did you mean when you said you’d rather talk about the future?”

Her throat tightened, and her heart raced in mad acceleration. “Oh, McCall, don’t you know I love you more than anything? That not seeing you or hearing from you just about killed me? All I wanted was for you to tell me everything was all right. I wanted to hear the warm sound of your voice and feel your hands on me again.”

“You’ve got me now,” he said softly and bent to touch the rough silk of his lips gently to hers.

It began as nothing more than a brief kiss, a promise of things to come. They were both crying, their tears mingling on her cheeks. But then the kiss became ravenous, greedy, all his pent up need rushing forward. He pressed hard against her, and she opened for him, accepting his ravaging tongue, answering his hunger with her own.

The kiss seemed to go on forever. Rina’s body was humming with desire. For *him*. At last, he lifted his head and she caught her breath.

“I guess that answers most of my questions,” McCall said, smiling. He brushed her tears away with his thumbs, softly caressing the velvet of her skin.

“Only most of them?” She wrinkled her forehead. “What else could you possibly want to

know?”

Still holding her face between his palms, he told her about Sully’s offer. “Noel’s moving into another division, and Sully offered me his job. I wouldn’t have to be out in the field any more. Oh, sometimes I might need to be gone for a couple of days, but mostly, I’d just be backing Sully up and running the team with him.”

“That’s a big promotion.”

“But for a reason. So here’s the most important question. Rina Devargas will you marry me? Will you be my wife and have my children?”

The tears cascaded down her cheeks again, startling him, and panic flashed across his face. “Rina? Is something wrong? Did I spring it too suddenly?”

“Oh, no. No, McCall. You did it just right.” She hugged him close, then lifted her eyes to him, memorizing the look on his face. “You bet I’ll marry you. Just try and get away.” She gave him a sly grin. “And I promise to obey you for the rest of my life...Master.”

McCall laughed out loud. His first real laugh in weeks. “Do you think you have enough strength for me to show you again just how I feel?”

She smiled at him. “If we’re very careful, I can even return the favor.” She reached for his erection throbbing against her thigh. Then a thought struck her and she felt herself blush.

“What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

“I can imagine what your family must think we’re doing up here.”

He laughed again. “And they’d be absolutely right. So let’s not disappoint them, okay? Besides, I have big plans for the evening.” He leered at her wickedly. “*Very* big plans.”

He took a nipple in his mouth as he began to probe her pussy again. God, how she’d missed this—

his hands, his mouth, the heat that raced through her body whenever he touched her.

Downstairs Frank McCall was pouring drinks and exchanging a conspiratorial toast with his family.

Sharon looked at her daughter and her husband. "I must call Sully and tell him he can close the book on this one." A pensive look stole over her face. "They'll be too busy to make plans themselves, so we'll do it for them," she said. "I think early fall is such a nice time for a wedding, don't you?"





## **About the author...**

Desiree Holt has lived a life of excitement that brings the color to her writing. She was a summer fishing guide, a summer field hand where she was one of only three women working, a member of a beginning ski team that skied in competition (and no, no broken bones!). She spent several years in the music business, representing every kind of artist from country singer to heavy metal rock bands. For several years she also ran her own public relations agency, handling any client that interested her. She loves to tell the story of sending a singer up in a hot air balloon, singing “Up, Up and Away in My Beautiful Balloon” and stopping traffic for four miles in every direction.

Before and between her two marriages, she dated enough hunks to fill up two he-man calendars, one of whom taught her to shoot so beware, she’s always armed. She’s kept a fresh look at erotic romance by making sure the sensuality factor in her private life is always high. She’s married to her own personal alpha hero who helps her with that.

Visit Desiree at [www.desireeholt.com](http://www.desireeholt.com).

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