



TREVA HARTE

KING
IN
CHECK

Loose Id

King in Check

Treva Harte



King in Check

Copyright © January 2010 by Treva Harte

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-501-2

Editor: Morgan Fayne

Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the 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.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

King in Check

Check: If a King is threatened with capture but has a means to escape, then it is said to be in check.

http://www.flyordie.com/games/help/chess/en/games_rules_chess.html

Check: the condition of a king that is in danger of capture on the opponent's next move: when in such a condition, one's king must, if possible, be protected.

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/check>

Chapter One

“Need anything? I'm going to town.” I looked up at the big man on the kitchen porch, trying not to show how urgently I wanted to leave. It would have been even more obvious if I'd left without asking, since trips to town were rare.

I kept myself from shifting my weight from one foot to the other. I was trying to stay casual, trying to avoid the inevitable.

“What for?” Calle asked the question anyhow.

“To pick someone up.” I made it sound routine, but of course a trip to Medianoche never was. If you weren't caught by the Feds or robbed, and if you got what you were willing to barter for—hell, that made it an extraordinary trip. And if we returned, we never took new people past the portal.

“Rey?” Calle's face lit up. “Is it today?”

Calle was a big man who didn't talk much and never smiled. None of the men ever complained about his cooking, and it wasn't just because they wanted to be fed regularly. Despite his injury, his muscles were impressive, and his arms could reach wide enough to grab and knock someone against the wall before the other person could move. He'd proved that more than once...and all without changing his dour expression.

But now Calle was beaming like I'd told him I'd found a miracle cure for his crushed leg. Damn it. Where was the stolid cook I'd come to know when I wanted him?

“If he shows.”

“If he said today, he'll show.” Calle's smile left. He seemed to be thinking deeply. Then that smile came back full force, unable to be restrained. “Yeah. I need something. Bring sugar. We'll do something special for the meal tonight.”

Shit. The man was going to bake a cake or something. The cook who always cooked chili on Monday, eggs on Tuesday, and so on through the week, following his routine without fail.

I already hated Rey. I'd spent three months busting my ass to manage the compound, and all I got was "*Rey wouldn't do things that way.*" I was the freakin' boss's kid, but it didn't matter. No one took orders from me unless I got in their face and proved I could enforce or buy what I demanded. Otherwise the men just did what Rey had told them to do back when he was still around to give orders. After all, in their minds, he was still the foreman.

He'd been gone for years. While he'd been gone, the compound had withered. The *campesino* women and children had left first. Then the strongest and boldest of their men had vanished. I'd been sent to save the compound before the hands deserted us and everything fell apart. I'd arrived before the last of the *campesinos* left. I'd promised the hands double pay if they kept the remaining sharecroppers on our land without killing them. I didn't ask how they managed it, but the *campesinos* stayed. Just that was almost enough to make the compound sustainable if we ever needed to close the portal against the *Federistas*.

"Maybe Dog should go instead." Calle frowned. "He's strong."

"I'm touched that you worry so about my safety," I said. "But I'll do it."

I knew damn well what Calle was worried about, and it wasn't me. His concern was that I was too short, too weak, too city to pull off bringing Rey home.

I'd managed a miracle to get the compound back to life so quickly. I'd not just ridden but walked the entire compound to work it with the men. I'd done more than my share and never whined. But all I got as a reward was the short end of the Rey stick.

Those hands who stayed made it clear they did because Rey would be back someday. The *campesinos* didn't look at me or speak when I gave them orders. But they would sing at night about El Rey—and they didn't mean their primitive god. Unless, of course, they thought the man was their god. I wouldn't be surprised.

"But, Boss, if you let someone else go—"

"Don't argue with me." I stalked out.

* * * * *

My mood hadn't improved after waiting almost two hours at the station. No one from outside Medianoche stayed in one place that long once they reached town. And waiting at the station, a place officially sanctioned, was even more dangerous when you weren't sanctioned yourself.

The fans that provided some relief from the heat moved sluggishly, raising my temperature and temper by the minute. When was the coach going to arrive?

I wiped my face. Sweat had already stained my shirt through. Maybe I should leave. Probably he wasn't going to show. There were all kinds of dangers traveling by coach—from retired-soldiers-turned-thugs to interfering officials, all of whom required either a bribe or a beating before you were sent on your way.

I wasn't sure the new Rey would be able to manage either feat if he were stopped. From what I could gather in the brief message sent to me before the reception was jammed, Rey was returning because he was of no more use to our side. I didn't know what that meant exactly, but no one gave us back healthy, whole men once they became part of the endless fighting in the cities.

That thought sent a sudden chill through me. Maybe he'd been sent back to die. God, how would I manage the hands if that happened? Especially if it happened when he was my charge.

And then I heard the noise in the distance. No one else around me looked up, but I fumbled with my locator and caught the faintest blip of something foreign on the screen.

The coach.

I stood up and pushed my hands into my pockets to keep them from shaking.

The same dilapidated coach that had spit me out here into my new world three months ago stopped again. The horses slumped under the shade, and the driver leaped down, more concerned about them than any of the passengers. The coach door opened, and I braced myself.

One passenger leaped down, apparently healthy, his face hidden under a wide-brimmed hat. Then he looked up.

Jesus God.

Blue eyes in a tanned face. Blue eyes that looked right into you and almost made you miss that the rest of the man was equally beautiful. Almost. Perfection like that was hard to miss for long.

And *hard* was the word for that body.

I'd had no one since I arrived at the compound. But that wasn't why my body was leaning toward him.

It was him. He did it with one look at me.

“Mosquito?” His voice rumbled through my head, and I blinked.

“Traven.” I answered automatically. Thank God I did still remember my own name.

“Yeah. Mosquito.” His lips quirked up into an almost smile. “That's what the hands call you.”

“Shit.” Out here people lived and died being known only by their nicknames. At least none of them had called me that to my face. But to the hands I was a small pest—annoying but easily swatted away.

How the hell did Rey know what they called me before I'd found out myself?

“The name makes sense.” He turned to survey the exterior of the station and, without warning, leaped up. I watched his arm muscles cord as he grabbed a porch rafter. Shit. I managed to catch my tongue between my teeth before it fell out. He swung his body close enough to knock a concealed camera away from the entrance. Then he dropped back down and, without taking a deep breath, said, “Your father is *Mosca*, after all.”

Mosca might not sound much better for a name, except that my father had made it one people respected. Mosca was everywhere, watching and gathering information. The Feds feared the fly who knew everything.

I looked at the surveillance camera, now twisted toward the ceiling. For some reason I'd hoped no one would notice us. The realization that maybe they had just been waiting until Rey arrived made me swallow hard. “How anxious are the Feds to find you?”

“They know I'm back.” Rey didn't quite answer me. He picked up the duffel bag he'd dropped at his feet just before he disabled the screening eye. “But let's not make it too easy for them.”

“Then we'd better go now.”

Rey was already striding down the dusty street before I'd finished my feeble attempt to take command.

I ran behind him, feeling more and more like a small boat in the wake of a much larger ship. A small boat that desperately wanted to be noticed by that ship. Obviously he wasn't going to be impressed by the boss's kid. What might impress him?

Well. I sure as hell didn't hate Rey anymore.

When the Feds stepped out of the shadows, I skidded to a halt, cursing to myself. Instead of thinking sweet thoughts about a stranger, I should have been getting prepared for battle. Right now I had my stunner safely tucked into the back of my pants, where I couldn't reach for it without the larger of the two men drilling me first. His stunner was firmly in his hands and directed at me.

Rey was already half a block away and gaining speed.

"Call your buddy back." The smaller Federista hooked his thumbs into his belt.

"Fuck you."

My head rang from the backhanded blow the smaller one landed on my face. Even though I expected it, no one really was prepared for pain bad enough to make them puke. I gagged a little as I tasted the blood in my mouth.

They said something, but I was focusing on staying steady, bracing myself—the next blow was harder. I yelled this time. Forget being a hero.

Rey's intervention happened so fast that I wasn't even sure what I saw. One moment he had come up from the shadows behind my two captors, and the next I saw—thought I saw—his arms reach to grab both of them around the neck. Honest, once I had time to think, I would have sworn his eyes were glowing as he grabbed them. Within three moments, they were slumped to the ground, their necks at obscenely odd angles. And Rey was looking at me with that half smile, which made my skin prickle with alarm this time. He'd just killed two government officials and looked as calm as he did when he first said hello to me.

"Hurry up, Mosquito. I don't have time to take out every Federista in this town before you start moving."

Every Fed in the area would be out to get him now. It was stupid to scoot back to the compound, where they might try to starve us out, burn us out...

I followed him. Because when Rey says something, that's what you do.

* * * * *

“The cake.” Calle laid it on the table in front of Rey. Rey cut into it. Dark on the outside, rich garnet red inside, the two sides looked completely different from each other. “Red velvet, just the way you like.”

It was as if he was paying tribute. I looked at the other men who had arrived the moment Rey set foot in the compound. Silently touching his vest, giving him news they never volunteered for me—hell, they were paying tribute. Homage to the king.

My previous ideas about facing the man down and claiming my turf had been completely blasted away. It wasn't my turf. It could never be my turf. I wasn't even sure that my father could take this place from the man who was supposed to be his employee. Foreman was just a word. In every way that mattered, Rey owned this place.

Why had my father sent me here when there was any possibility Rey was coming back? What the hell was I supposed to do here now?

Rey looked up, as if he could read my thoughts, and glanced over at me. I held my breath when his gaze met and held mine.

It wasn't as if I was complaining that he was here. I certainly had some ideas about what we could do. But I was pretty sure that hadn't been in Dad's original plans. Or Rey's right now. Damn it.

Rey stood up, the slice of cake finished, and smiled at the rest of the men. “We have some work to do, but I know you can back me. Tomorrow I'm going to take a look at every last corner of the place and see what needs doing and how soon.”

I had to cut in. Had to try to stop the hold he had on me, even if I couldn't stop it for the hands. “For tonight, make sure whoever is on guard duty keeps a close watch. The Federistas won't be happy about how you announced your return.”

There was a low growl from the hands.

“As if a damned Fed would be able to get through us.” The hand spat to emphasize his words.

Someday they would be. I'd been here long enough to know it was a matter of time. We were just lucky that most were still in the cities, and the resistance was still fighting them.

I wondered if Rey was big enough bait to make them bring the fight to us.

"It's good to be back." Rey stood up. "Tomorrow."

He looked at me again. When the others headed out, I stayed.

"Yeah?" I wasn't sure what I hoped for.

"Come with me. We need to talk."

Talk. Talk might be all right. I put my hands in my pockets and followed him outside.

We didn't head to the foreman's guesthouse or the hands' quarters. I wouldn't have argued with him if he took up residence in the main house, but we didn't go near any of the living spaces for the men. I was puzzled, but it was obvious Rey had something in mind.

He stopped in front of the stables. "I missed this."

"That's not a surprise."

"Because?"

"You're God here. Who wouldn't miss that?"

He looked out over the landscape, though there wasn't much to see by now. It was dark, and the baking heat was cooling off slowly. He didn't say anything for a long time.

"Too bad I'm not God. Come on, Mosquito." He opened the locked gate where we kept the bulls before they were castrated.

It made for a cage, not one a big man like Rey looked comfortable in. He shut the gate.

"What?" I stared at him.

He stared back at me, silently demanding that I obey. "Lock me in."

Chapter Two

I expected Traven to give me an argument, one that might be hard to win. I'd immediately understood why the hands were wary of the kid after my first glance. I'd surveyed the high, razor-sharp cheekbones, the almost delicate features, combined with the pouting lips, and first thought the face and body were pretty, even fragile—until I saw the look. That came from Mosca. I'd seen that same assessing, cool gaze in Mosca's eyes as he was about to annihilate the enemy. To see it in a kid who looked maybe seventeen or eighteen, tops, was...disturbing. A look like that was too encompassing, too world-weary for someone that young.

But right now I wasn't getting that unnerving stare. The kid looked stricken instead. And didn't say a damn word.

That wasn't part of my plans. I'd expected Traven to be as cool as Mosca, to be as able to do distasteful things when necessary without hesitating. I should have known better. Traven was still young, and Mosca had likely protected his child from the worst of what his war could do—maybe protected too much.

“I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't think you could handle something like this.” I put an edge to my voice, one that made most people sit up and listen.

The kid blinked at me and kept silent.

“Mosquito. Traven.” I wasn't going to beg. But I could feel the shakes starting, and I was starting to feel a little desperate. “I need you, man.”

I was already tired. I hadn't slept all the way back, just in case. But no matter how hard I tried, I'd start to lose consciousness soon. And then, when my guard was down, things would get bad.

My words finally got the kid moving. At least as close as the bars allowed. A small hand reached out through the barrier and touched my face. For some reason, that got me shaking even harder. The kid's voice was low and concerned. “What's wrong?”

No one ever asked me that. I was in charge of making sure nothing was wrong.

Except, of course, this was a little bit outside my control. So far outside that I had to ask for help from a kid who looked young enough to need someone tucking that thin, fragile body in at night.

Idiot. I was the one who needed tucking in at night. Barricading in. Chains and bars to keep me from bursting out. The minute I let my guard down, it would start. And I had to let go soon.

“You don't want to know. Just—I need you to lock me in. It's best for everyone. Believe me.”

“You look kind of sick.”

Something was twisting my gut. I knew it would get worse. At least I could still talk now. But I could feel sweat starting to trickle down my face.

“You ever hear of the fighter flu?”

“Sure, but I thought that was all bullshit. Who would allow themselves to be fucked up like that?”

“I would. We all would. Everyone fighting knew taking the drugs would give us an edge. And we figured we'd only last two years, max, out there. Why not use something that would make us stronger, faster, meaner?”

“But it kills you.”

“Later. It didn't kill us then. We were all going to die anyhow. I thought it would be something else that got me. Something faster.” I gripped the bars and fought to talk without my teeth chattering. “Lock. The. Damn. Gate.”

Mosquito did. Finally.

I relaxed a little and let the next wave of nausea hit without fighting as hard. I needed my strength for later. I'd try to stay awake a little longer, but I didn't know how long I could. So close...

“What can I do?” The kid was still there.

I didn't want the kid to see what would happen. I didn't even want anyone to know, but if someone had to, that someone didn't have to watch everything that came next. But suddenly my

strength drained from my body, and something else, something alien and frightening, slid inside me while my brain began to shut down.

“Nothing. Unlock the gate in the morning. Bring some water and towels with you.” *And leave me alone now.*

My eyelids began to shut. God. The dreams were going to start. No, not dreams. Even nightmares was too soft a word for what they were.

The hallucinations crept forward, just in the periphery of my vision. Sometimes they were people I'd known—or at least known long enough to kill. Sometimes, lately, they weren't people at all but monsters from God knows where in my brain. I leaned my head against the bars.

The bars seemed solid. Whatever happened, they weren't going to break. Whatever happened.

“Get out!” I screamed it as the first creature with the melting face reached toward me. I didn't have time to see if the kid obeyed before I felt phantom sweaty fingers brush across my face.

* * * * *

Dawn. I was on the ground, still twitching from the last convulsion. But I could see the light streaks in the sky, and the pain seemed to be gone. All that was good. It seemed I was still alive. Alive and conscious again.

I looked down at my hands. They were swollen from where I'd beaten them against the bars. I tried flexing them. They responded. Also good.

Maybe I could sleep now. I shivered. Sweat had seeped through my shirt, leaving it wet, but the morning was chilly enough to need some kind of cover.

“Here.” I almost missed the voice, it was so soft.

I didn't miss the blanket being pushed through the openings of the cage.

“You still around?” My voice cracked.

A bottle of water came through next.

“All night.”

Shit.

"I'm fine now. Just need sleep." With a blanket over me and water to ease the thirst, I had all I needed. I took a swig from the bottle.

"Do you want to head back to the house? A bed?"

I wasn't sure I could manage to stagger there. "I think it's over for the night, but I don't know. Go get some sleep yourself. I need to be out of here before the hands wake up."

"Rey, is it always like this?"

I took another swallow and thought. "Yeah. Sometimes worse."

"Jesus."

"Go sleep. Since you've seen it all, you're now part of my little secret." And I intended to keep it a secret as long as I could. The hands didn't need to know El Rey was turning into a monster. I didn't need them to both fear and pity me.

The only one who really knew how it was now was Mosquito. The kid crouched as close as possible to me, despite the barrier. I looked but didn't see any of what I expected to see on Mosquito's face. I didn't see anything but the kid checking me over with that spooky gaze. I didn't know what I looked like, but I was afraid my boss's kid had seen much, much more than I wanted anyone to see. I didn't know what the hell to do about that.

"You sure, Rey?"

I huddled under the blanket and shut my eyes in response. I needed those few hours of sleep desperately. Now.

Rey had been perfect. The man I first saw was flawless, godlike. Not screaming with pain and defiance at whatever was eating inside him. Whatever was killing him in an ugly way.

Watching him there, covered with sweat and his own blood, I'd fallen past whatever last resistance I had to Rey. I wasn't able to help perfection. But this man—I could do something for him. Or I could try.

How long did you last once you got fighter flu? I didn't know much about the drugs they used. You had to keep injecting the shit into your veins once you started, or death came faster and even uglier. I rubbed my forehead, trying to massage some ideas into my brain.

Nothing came through. Rey was in pain, would continue to be in worsening pain until he ripped himself apart, and I couldn't think of anything that might help.

So of course I went to the piano. When I couldn't think of a damn thing else to do, I played.

The kid hadn't locked the cage after all. I should chew ass about that. Maybe I would once I felt stronger. Instead I injected one of the few damned precious vials I had left and pulled myself toward the *casa grande*.

On the way I heard the sounds I'd heard every morning I'd lived here. First was the creak of the windmills that powered the compound. Then, as I kept walking, I heard the mumbles and low voices of humans who needed that power. The scrapes of chairs around the breakfast table.

The hands were waking up. I heard Calle growling at them, probably telling them to wait, the way he did every morning for every breakfast. It was comforting, almost, to know how things didn't change. But I didn't head for the food, try to mingle with the men. I might've, but I heard just a wisp of sound, muffled by the noise of the hands getting ready for the day. That other sound pulled me toward its source. Pulled me to where my watchdog of last night must be. Toward *casa grande*, the boss's house.

As I got closer, the sound got clearer. The notes were tentative at first, then clearer, more controlled. Music. Apparently Mosquito could make music.

I wondered when I'd last heard anything like that.

Too long to remember. If I had ever heard a real piano before.

Mosca's wife had played, some of the older campesinos told me once. She'd been a very grand lady who no more belonged among us than a snowflake in hell—and had stayed with us almost as long. When she went back to the city, her husband followed, both of them swallowed up by the endless struggle between Federistas and the country. Mosca had only returned home once or twice. He'd left the place to me and my care until I left for the city and the fighting myself.

I opened the front door—*foolish child, to leave the door unlocked*—and stood in the doorway to watch.

Face intent, eyes focused on the distance, Mosquito was playing something sad and moody, something that wasn't finished before those eyes focused on my face and those hands

stilled on the keys. The memory of the interrupted music crawled into my skin along with the excitement and lingering anger and fear.

“Ah...”

“Hello.” My voice was hoarser than I wanted it to be. Hungrier.

“Calle promised me breakfast in a few minutes. I'll share.”

“I don't share well, Mosquito.” I began to walk toward the seated person before me, my steps slow and quiet like I was stalking.

“No?” Mosquito stood up but didn't move.

Foolish child, not to run.

“I take what I want. Everything I want and all of it.”

“And what do you want?”

We were half an inch from each other by now. I was a foot taller than my prey—maybe more. I could reach out and grab—

“You.” I ripped the thin cotton tunic off, and the kid hunched over protectively. The flowing material had concealed a lot that was now revealed. “You're too pretty to resist.”

“Wait! You don't know—”

The wrappings made it pretty clear, though. I ripped them off for good measure.

“It doesn't matter.” I ran my hands, still slightly bloody, down the rib cage of that tiny waist. So fragile. Such a contrast with the traces of red against ivory skin.

“I'm not—”

“It doesn't matter.” I pushed the thin shoulders back and fastened my mouth on her breasts, feeling the nipples pucker under my tongue. When I bit one nipple, just lightly, just to taste, she bucked under my mouth. I raised my head. “Male, female. It doesn't *matter*. I want you.”

“Ahhh.” She relaxed against my hands. “Then take me.”

My huge thumbs rested against the pulse points of her throat. I watched her chest rise and fall with her shallow breathing.

“Aren't you afraid? I'm a soldier. Filled with a poison that makes me faster, meaner, angrier than normal. I could twist or snap here—or here—” I traced against her body, looking at the dried blood between my fingers. “You'd be dead.”

“Fuck me first. Then I'll decide if I'm afraid.” She kissed my fingers and smiled up at me, a slight trace of my blood on her lips.

The edgy feeling that never left me nowadays was suddenly swamped and pushed aside with a rush of hot, sweet tenderness. I bent down and kissed her, trying to be gentle. It had been a long time since I'd tried that. Since I'd been able to even think about trying.

She reached up and grabbed my hair, pulling me down closer to her, twining her arms around me. Then she bit my lower lip, and that pouting mouth closed over mine, soothing the tiny sting.

I held her down, but still gently. I could overpower her, but I wanted to overwhelm her a different way. I kissed her throat. I traced the nicks and scrapes on her hands and frowned.

“I work here, Rey. Hard work.” She held out her palms, and I saw the welts on them.

“Use gloves.” I kissed the welts. “I don't want you hurt. You or your musician hands.”

I licked a trail from between her breasts down that flattened stomach, pushing her loose pants down as I traced my way to where, at last, I nuzzled the short curls near her pussy. I smelled her and thought I'd go crazy. But instead I buried my face in her and let the scent tease at me, not moving.

“Rey!” Her hands pulled at me, but I shook my head, letting my beard stubble scrape against that soft skin of her thighs. Soft against hard. There would be more softness waiting for me, and I wanted to savor it.

Her legs twisted under my body, trying to force the pace. I smiled, my mouth close to her pussy, so close I could touch it with my tongue. If I tried. But I turned and kissed her inner thigh instead. Close, but not close enough for Miss Impatience.

She hissed and wiggled. It was barely a twitch under my weight, but she made her point. I licked my way, slowly, tasting the sweat and the wetness of her pussy, flicking my tongue lightly, so lightly, against her.

“Mooore.” She wailed it.

I liked that. Her breath came out in a sob, and her nails tried to fasten into my shoulders, but it was as if she couldn't control her movements. *Dios*, I liked that even better.

I sucked on that tight clit at last, rolling it against my teeth and tongue, and I thought she would explode, fly to pieces. Maybe she would have if my weight hadn't been holding her down. She shuddered and screamed and arched her body against mine.

I was heavy. I grew heavier, the weight surging toward my cock and balls. I was shaking now too, not letting myself do more than suckle that pretty clit, pushing my tongue deep into where I wanted my cock to be. She was wet, her vaginal muscles clutching at nothing. She wanted my cock there too.

Not...yet.

I wanted to be in her more than I wanted to breathe, but I wanted to hear more of her cries and pleas and helpless movements. I wanted...I wanted... I began to shake too.

Then I couldn't wait. I moved my body up so my cock slid into her. Yesss. Wet, hot, tightly clinging to my cock. I wanted more. But I pulled back, not quite able to let myself out entirely, took a deep breath, trying once more to hang on, to—

She caught my cock, began to milk what I couldn't bear to withdraw, her legs crossed behind me, her heels digging into the small of my back, her eyes shut, and her top teeth sunk into her bottom lip. Fast and furious, she rubbed against the head of my cock, the only part I'd left inside her. Oh yeah. It was more than enough.

“Dear God...” She moaned it.

“Sweet...fuck...” I shoved all the way inside, and we both lost whatever control we had left.

I came, shot into her, cursing and laughing at the same time. And again. By the third time I was gripping the piano bench, trying to keep from falling off, and wondering if everything inside me had emptied out. The fourth time was when I think my vision grayed, and my brain completely shorted out.

I tried to move off her when I finally got my breath back, but my arms were actually weak. I managed to give her enough room by gritting my teeth and forcing myself to move away.

“Not exactly as gentle as I'd hoped.” But I hadn't done something... unforgivable... when I lost control. Thank God.

“It's been a while for me. I didn't want gentle.” Her lips were swollen. I could see some bruises on her forearms, where I'd hung on.

“Maybe. But you shouldn't want me.” I sat up, feeling like weights were attached to my chest. I didn't want to not touch her. Her skin was already cooling after sex while mine stayed hot. I could see us staying there, spooned together, my body and mind slowly returning to what used to be normal...

But you don't always get what you want. She sat up and swung around, cross-legged on the bench. Her wary look was back. And so was I. The ruined self, the not-normal one. The edge of what could be adrenaline humming below my skin. “Now that that's over with, what are we going to do with you, Rey?”

“I don't know that it will be much of a problem, sweetie. At least if you can keep me contained in the next week or so. Because when I left, I commandeered a few days' worth of drugs”—the dead or dying bodies that still had a few of the drugs left in their kits wouldn't miss them—“but after that, there's nothing. I expect I'm going to die.”

“Aw shit, Rey.” Mosquito didn't look frightened or repulsed. The kid looked like someone weighing the odds before making a bet. “You don't give someone a lot of time to work on a problem.”

Chapter Three

I didn't know what to do, and Rey was looking at me as if—hell, as if he was depending on me.

I decided breakfast would be a good idea while I thought. At least it would delay forcing me to admit I couldn't help. “I'll fix some food here unless you want to join everyone else. The hands will want to talk to you.”

Rey looked at me and wiped his face off with a damp towel.

“Can you hold them off?” He looked ill. Why wouldn't he be? He probably hadn't slept in days. The few hours drowsing in a cage shouldn't count.

“I can try for a little while. But they will talk to you. And they'll blame me for not letting them talk sooner.” I tried not to sound bitter.

“It's not you that's the problem. Or not exactly. They're afraid of you.”

“Please.” Why would they be afraid of someone smaller, weaker, and inexperienced in anything they thought was important?

“You remind them of your father.”

“Huh.” My father could be scary.

“You have the power of life or death in this compound.”

“Only if they pay attention.”

“They watch everything you do.” Now that was scary too.

“I kind of prefer not to know that.” In fact, I preferred not to know that so much that I blurted out what I'd been thinking, even though I'd planned to work into it carefully. “What about folk medicine?”

“For me?” Rey might be big, and he might be out of control, but he wasn't stupid. I liked that. I liked the big and out of control too, actually, but the not-stupid part was the most helpful. That is, if he didn't die before I came up with a solution for this.

“Yeah. We used to have a healer on the compound, back before everyone started to run. I never met him, but you probably did—”

“Her.”

“Do you know where she might be right now?”

“Angelina was old. She might not be alive now. But if she is, and she's not here...” Rey shut his eyes. “The mountains. She probably ran there.”

I glanced out at the high peaks on the horizon and refrained from saying what I was thinking. But the mountain range was very big and went a lot of miles. Far more miles than I was prepared to search.

“Think you could narrow that down some?”

“Some of her nephews could. There's at least one, maybe more, still around. She had dozens.” Rey's smile was a bit tight-lipped. “I'm sure I could persuade them to chat with me about it.”

Depending on some campesinos for help, going outside the compound in search of someone who might or might not be able to help a dying man, when Federistas were just waiting for the chance to pick us off...

“Great. When do we start?”

“With breakfast. Come on.”

Jesus. The man couldn't make up his mind. I grumbled, just a little, as I followed at his heels like a trained dog. Again.

He had me out of breath before we reached the back door of the kitchen. We were late. Very late. The hands had already cleared out. The kitchen was starting to cool down again after the fire in the huge stone fireplace had been banked.

“Calle!” Rey slapped open the door. The big cook was clearing up dirty dishes. He looked up at Rey's next words. “Hey, cocksucker.”

I was a little surprised Rey could say that to the cook and live.

So imagine how stunned I was when Calle stared at him and then shoved him against the wall. All right, the shoving didn't surprise me. That was the least of what I figured Calle might do to anyone who greeted him like that. The fact the two of them stayed smack against the wall after that, Calle resting his body against Rey's... I think my jaw hurt when I dropped it.

They were smiling at each other, totally at ease. Breathing in sync, for God's sake. Calle touched one of the cuts on Rey's face.

"Looks like the last person you called cocksucker bruised you up some." Calle glanced at me and half smiled. Obviously he didn't see me as a threat to either of them. "So what do you want, asshole?"

"A kiss, sweetie." Rey pushed against Calle, just a little, more to get attention than to make that behemoth move. "And your auntie."

"*Tía*? She's not here."

"Then I need to get to where she is."

Calle grunted. "Can't get it up anymore? You don't look like someone who needs some love mojo. That's mostly what the hands wanted when they looked for her."

"Yeah. I need something to get my cock hard, Calle, or I can't ream you anymore. Always loved those cute little whimpers you'd make. Come on. Where is she?"

"I'll take you." Calle looked over my way again and then back at Rey. "You."

It was stupid to feel like the girl who wasn't asked out for the dance. But I slapped down the hurt. Forget that less than ten minutes ago I'd been thinking this was a stupid idea. Forget that now the newest addition to this stupid expedition was a man who couldn't move fast.

"And me. Like it or not." I kept my voice flat, with just the slightest edge to it.

Calle looked at me and didn't smile. "Maybe *Tía* is dead."

Rey tapped his fingers against the wall like he wanted to do something harder and more brutal. "Then you and me and Mosquito here, we'll all find that out together. Say a prayer at her grave. She might like that."

"She might." Calle shrugged. "Tonight, then?"

"Sure."

Apparently that was all it took. Rey left without saying anything else, and I followed. I waited long enough to get out of hearing range before I let Rey have it.

“What do you mean we go tonight? How are you going to manage that?”

“I’ll be all right.”

“How? You did everything but turn into a werewolf and bay at the moon last night.”

“I’ll sleep today. You can lock me into the vault in the Casa Grande. It’s not night that’s the problem. When I lose control—well, that’s when things can happen, night or day. Sleep is one of those times I can’t keep a grip on my actions.”

“We don’t even know how long we’ll be gone.”

“Calle does. He’ll handle what we need. But he isn’t going to tell us. His family is very protective of their *tía*.”

I still wasn’t happy. “Nice to know how you keep the hands in line around here. Fuck them into submission. Here I was trying all the wrong things—you know, impressing them with how much I knew, working with them. A blowjob or two would have done a lot better.”

Rey almost grinned before he looked at me and decided maybe it wasn’t a good idea. He really was smarter than you’d think for such a big, good-looking soldier. “Calle and me go back.”

I growled. “This is totally half-assed.”

“Don’t pout. I fuck what I want, Mosquito.”

Damn him for knowing my real problem.

I fastened my lips really tightly together. Why I’d thought—I didn’t think. It had been a long time, and he was just another good fuck. That was all.

A good fuck that apparently I was going to risk my life for tonight.

Fool.

“Traven.”

I’d never liked my weird, androgynous name before, but I liked the way it sounded when he said it. “What?”

“Right now I want you.”

Why that made me felt better, I don’t know. But I ducked my head to hide the smile.

Double and triple fool.

It wasn't until we got back to the house that I said, "We never did get anything to eat."

"I'm not hungry now." Rey looked me over. Since I'd been spending the last few minutes surveying that tight butt of his, I could figure out the gleam in his eyes without any problem. My mind was going on the same path.

"So." I suddenly realized a problem I should have figured out a few minutes back, except that I'd been angry. "Sex is no big deal to you?"

"I like sex just fine."

"But you don't lose control when you have it."

"I—" Rey frowned. Then he looked me up and down again and gave an evil smile. "Not yet. There's always a first time, though, right?"

Oh damn. Why did he have to make that sound like a challenge? Even as I knew that was a challenge that wouldn't be good to win, I began to strip away my cotton tunic, cursing as I unwrapped my breasts. Dad had been right. Once the men knew I was female, there'd be trouble.

Trouble for the men. Trouble for one of them, anyhow.

Rey unfastened his pants. Jesus, that was nice. No, not nice. Amazing. Something that amazing was ready and waiting for me.

He had a half smile on his face as if he were happy, not just amused. I bet he was the type who used to smile easily, to enjoy what he had. He'd had a good, uncomplicated life once. He commanded, others obeyed...and gladly. He wasn't like suspicious, overthinking me.

Without thinking, I stroked the golden stubble growing on the side of his jaw. He turned his head and kissed the palm of my hand, and I bit into the flesh of my cheek to keep from crying out. My legs actually went a little weak.

"Hey." He didn't change expression, but the corners of his eyes crinkled.

I had this stupid urge to kiss the corner of his mouth and make his face light up with a full smile. But I figured I had other ways to make him even happier. More basic, less stupidly sentimental ways. I got on my knees.

"I like that attitude in a sex partner, Mosquito."

“Don't get used to it. I need to brush up on my blowjob technique if that's what I have to do around here to get anyone's attention.”

“Always happy to help. Go right ahead and practice.” But he didn't shove his cock inside. Instead he left it poised just outside my lips. A quarter of a millimeter more, and I could brush against the head of his cock, taste the salty precum slipping through the slit. He wasn't moving.

We waited each other out for maybe a quarter of a minute.

I gave in first. I needed to taste how that smooth skin and the tang of semen mixed together. As I lapped my tongue against him, I heard him grunt. Mmmm. Soft and bitter mingled, my saliva and his cum all combined.

He still didn't move.

Stubborn, was he? I leaned forward some more and sucked in just a little bit of that cock. Thick and stiff and eager. More eager by the second.

“Sooo good.” I hummed the words against him.

His cock jerked to life. *Score!* He might be able to keep the rest of his body from moving, but his cock had other ideas. It bobbed against me, demanding in. Now.

I could hear his deep breathing, a harsh noise in the stillness of the late morning. And I went to work.

I nuzzled his balls first, mostly as foreplay but also because he shivered when I licked them. I moved slowly back toward his cock, feeling him tense and then relax with each lick and nip. I was rewarded with a groan when I finally got back to my starting point.

His fingers reached out to dig into my hair while I relaxed my jaw, trying to really fit more cock in before—

“Fuck!” His voice got a desperate edge that didn't sound like he was about ready to spew. It just sounded...well, desperate.

I pulled my head back, startled. I had a second to see his agonized face before he lifted me up by the elbows, and I whizzed back across the room, hitting the wall with a thump. Then he turned on his heel and ran. And once again, right on cue—after I shook the confusion out of my head—I ran after him.

He dived for the open entrance of the vault in the office.

Rey didn't have to say anything. He probably didn't have time to say anything anyhow. Besides, I knew what came next by now. I slammed the heavy door shut behind him and twirled the old-fashioned tumbler lock, hearing it clank shut.

Then I slid to the floor and panted. I put my head against my knees to catch my breath. Eventually my breathing slowed, and I could start thinking again.

“Hell.”

I wondered what was going on inside. You couldn't hear anything from where I stood, even if you put your ear to the door. Maybe I didn't want to know. There was enough air in there for a few hours. Long enough to quiet him down, I hoped.

“Well...hell.”

I *would* have to get him wondering about losing control during sex. This could be a real crimp in any future togetherness. Damn it, I liked sex, and Rey was the only person in the compound I could safely have it with. Besides, I was starting to like Rey. I was already looking forward to having sex with him in particular.

Those realizations settled any hesitations I had about my less-than-perfect plan. It wasn't much, but that plan was all I had. And if I wanted Rey inside me again—or even close to any orifice of my body—we had to get him cured.

* * * * *

Which is why that dusk we were packing supplies on the backs of the two burros in the compound, all that were left after the Feds poisoned and killed any contraband transportation animals about three years back. The Feds knew their stuff. Whatever technology there was left had been rationed and kept to the most powerful Federistas or their most elite troops. But then they realized how the country made do, and went after whatever we used to function.

“Ready, Traven?” Rey looked a little worn at the edges. That could have been from our interrupted morning bout or, more likely, what had happened immediately afterward.

I wasn't fond of unlocking a door and seeing a bloodied, exhausted wreck emerge. But he'd slept hard after that. It was better than no sleep at all but not something anyone could do for long and survive.

“Of course I'm ready.” I pulled at my burro's reins, and we lurched forward.

Calle, looking as grim as fate, was in a small cart behind the strongest burro. I hoped the animal could get that hulk to where we needed to go. I didn't look at the small crowd of hands hovering near us, wondering if we'd make it back.

It would have been good to not let them know we were going anywhere, but I had no idea how to make that happen. Everyone knew when people came or went. There was only one secure way from the compound to the outside, one that hesitated a moment after I punched in the monitor's numbers—someday it would fail, and then where the hell would we be?—and then noiselessly rolled its metal door upward.

We moved forward, quickly, before the heavy gate could roll down again.

Vaya con Dios. Or whatever would work to get us through this one.

Chapter Four

“Stop here.” Calle opened his mouth at last. Traven nodded.

We weren't talking much, just in case we were being followed, so I didn't know how the others felt. By now I'd almost managed to ignore the headache beating my brain in. Christ. The injection hadn't worked well this time, and it was dangerous to try again. Dangerous and stupid. I didn't have much more left to inject.

I already felt dangerous, but I didn't want to be stupid. Of course, I might be too late for that.

I'd already had one hallucination this morning. I had watched Calle turn into a rabid coyote with blood on his fangs. Wouldn't it have surprised him if I took my stunner out and blasted him! I almost grinned at the thought of seeing his face...if he lived to hear my explanation.

But I was getting better at telling real from false by now, especially when I had a headache to remind me not all was right with my brain. I'd walked myself past the shimmer of the hallucination and the thirst and the heat. I'd moved to working on adrenaline. I could live on that for a long time. I was stronger, tougher, meaner than anyone around. That was the advantage of fighter flu.

I stared at Calle now, willing myself to see just a man in a cart. And that was all I saw. He was licking the sweat from his lip, looking exactly the way he always had—big, solid, and stubborn.

I wondered how being jostled in that crazy little cart felt. I wondered how long the burro could handle our seemingly straight-up-the-mountain journey. Or how long it would take to get there. How long it would take for a recon hover to come by and spot us. I wondered if Traven was tough enough to stick with me when the trip got worse. Because it was going to get worse.

In other words, I was twitchy. Really twitchy. Something was off, and it wasn't just me. I wasn't sure what that something was, but I could almost see signs and banners signaling trouble.

I kept prowling. I would move ahead or drop behind the others for hours at a time until my uneasiness told me to circle back. I told myself I was scouting in case of danger, but I could feel the nerves jumping under my skin, keeping me unfocused. This wasn't the drugs. It was whatever instinct you developed to stay alive after fighting for so long. We were doing something wrong.

Stopping seemed like suicide. But the sun was fully up, and we couldn't keep moving. Well, the others couldn't. And I wasn't going to leave them.

"God, it's already hot. I'm not sure how I'll sleep in this." Mosquito had taken her poncho off almost as soon as first light appeared. The mountains were cold at night, but things changed quickly during the day. I saw sweat on her temples. I wanted to lick it off.

No.

I shut my eyes and breathed through my nose. That was not the main reason I was pacing the tiny clearing. Wanting sex could make me restless, but—

I wasn't going to think about the last time or how good her mouth was or what might happen if I tried having sex again. With her. With anyone, maybe.

Crap. What if just me and my hand were too much? If so, dying soon wouldn't be as bad a fate as I'd always thought. A merciful release. How many words could I think of that had different meanings depending on if you used them for sex or death?

Jesus, I didn't want to mix up sex and death images in my head. That was almost as big a deflater as thinking I'd go berserk every time I used my cock—

Other things. Time to think about them.

The pack on the burro was relatively light. Calle meant the trip to be short. Short because the journey wasn't long, or short because he expected us to be interrupted before we got to our destination?

Calle and I did go way back, just the way I'd told Mosquito, but it wasn't an easy history, and I didn't trust anyone entirely. Not anymore. There'd been too many betrayals.

Don't think about that right now either.

I had two days' supply left. I could cut the dose in half. I'd get the sweats and feel sick, but I could function. I wouldn't be as swift or strong, though, and we might need that.

Four days. Maybe I could last it out for five. That last day wouldn't be pleasant.

I heard a faint scrabbling. Animal? Harmless, predator, or human? I pulled the stunner from my belt and switched it on in one quick motion. Just like that, my nerves settled down. I didn't have to think about this one. I just had to respond.

"Paz!" a voice yelled.

Warning or welcome?

I made a flattening motion toward Mosquito, in case the kid was too new at this to know to be quiet and hug the earth. Calle was already deadly still, crouched down as far as his leg would let him.

"Come out." I backed up as I said it.

Paz. Huh. There wasn't any peace around here. A split second after I spoke, I leaped toward the brush where the voice had come from.

My hand was around his windpipe, and my stunner was at his forehead before he could move.

"Pat him down." I jerked my head toward Mosquito.

"Kinky."

"Hurry up before he loses what air he has left. I'm not playing." She hurried forward and carefully checked—twice, where I told her to—as the guy grew limp.

I let him go in time. Just. He slumped to the ground and gasped awhile.

"Moro." I knew him. Another one of Tía's nephews.

He shook his head a little but didn't say anything for a few minutes more. We could wait. My gut had totally relaxed. Danger was over.

"Rey, you play rough." He finally wheezed it out. *"Just doin' what you asked. What Calle asked."*

I hoped the two things were the same. I glanced over at Calle, but he wasn't reacting.

"And so?"

"I'm taking you to Tía." Moro glanced over at Mosquito doubtfully but was smarter than his cousin. He didn't try to limit the members of the guest party.

I studied his thin, scarred face. Moro had always been one of the smarter campesinos. I wasn't sure if that would work to my advantage or not. Hell. I didn't have much choice about trusting him.

“Now?”

“Tonight.” And faster than I'd thought an almost-strangled man could move, he headed back into the brush. I suppose I could have caught him, but there was no need. If Tía had told him to fetch us and when, that's when it would happen and not before.

Which left us with the day to hide from the inevitable sun and from the—hopefully—less-inevitable Feds. Shit. Waiting and hiding weren't my favorite pastimes.

Mosquito was already sitting in what shade the rocks provided, looking half-dead. I grabbed the filthy brown tarp and set it up so that it provided a little more shelter and some camouflage. I rolled the kid underneath, guiding her when she stumbled. She was out almost before she lay down.

The burros were set out in the brush, as were the packs and cart.

Which left Calle and me.

He wasn't wilting from the heat or lack of sleep, but then, he had been in the cart for the trip. It might have been a little rough, but he hadn't walked either. And Calle was a lizard. He knew all about heat and how to deal with it.

I opened my stash of alco and offered him a sip. He swigged it down, his eyes fixed on mine.

I couldn't tell if he was drinking with me as a friendly gesture or just to make it seem that way. Or because he never could refuse alco.

“So, amigo.”

“So.” He tapped his fingers on his boot, the special one he used to stabilize his leg. The one he kept a knife in.

I wondered if a pair of the syntho-boots that soldiers were issued would help him. Almost involuntarily, I wiggled my own feet, safely encased in my synthos. They were lighter than homemade leather footwear, more durable and sturdy and closely fitted to your individual foot,

but only available to the military or wealthy civilians. Calle didn't fit any of those categories. Of course, they were also too thin to hide a weapon.

"It's been a long time." I kept my eyes on his face, but with my peripheral vision, I watched the fingers. Was that a threat or impatience for what would happen next?

"Should I say I missed you?" Calle asked roughly.

"If it's true."

"Oh, it's true."

And maybe it was. Calle had always missed me when I was gone. It was when I was around that trouble started. I never figured out why, exactly. Because he'd rivaled me once for strength and mastery of the hands? Or because—

I bent over and put my hands over those restless, tapping fingers, trapping them beneath mine. Then I kissed him, hard, with my tongue and teeth.

He relaxed against my touch and responded hotly, almost helplessly, to my kiss. Mosquito might not have believed me, but I told the truth when I said he'd whimper underneath me. I knew he could, because he'd already done it for me. More than once.

"Man, I did miss you." He breathed it against my cheek.

I gripped his jaw, looked into his eyes. Then I smiled. "I'd think of you sometimes, at night, *hermano*. When everything that is here seemed too far away."

They'd been long nights, nights when I wanted to think about anything but what I was doing then.

"Did you come hard when you were thinking?" His smile was almost as predatory as I meant mine to be.

"Harder. Almost as hard as you will now." He was unfastening his belt before I finished the sentence, and I helped drag him to his feet.

In less than a minute he was bent over a rock, his pants at his ankles. We ignored the heat radiating from his resting place as I unfastened my pants. I knelt behind him and opened up the crack between his ass cheeks.

He groaned and rocked forward.

“No one but you, Rey—does it—” His words got tangled somewhere in his mouth. I knew he bit his tongue to keep from screaming. I could hear him hiss as I pushed my tongue inside. But I made him whimper anyhow when I tongue fucked him, deep.

He bucked against me, his hands still gripping the rock, still not begging. But I knew him. Knew what he'd do as soon as I took my fingers, already wet from my precum, and used them inside his hole.

“Rey, God, please...” He groaned the words, his face up against his arm as if to hide what he felt.

When I had two fingers in, he began to thrash against my hand. By four fingers he was alternately praying and cursing. I used my cum and then his on my cock, rubbing up and down my shaft with one hand, while I worked him with the other hand. At his first sob, I knew he was ready, and I pushed my cock inside.

Inside was hot and quivering and clutched me tightly.

I toyed with him some more, moving slowly out and slowly back in. He slapped his hands against the rock, forcefully enough to crack something—his bones or the rock itself, if either of them hadn't been made so tough.

“What do you want, Calle?” I whispered it against his ear, then bit the lobe for fun. “Tell me.”

“Rey—”

I slid out just a little bit and waited.

Calle didn't disappoint. “Please. God, please.”

“What, Calle?”

“Fuck.”

“Fuck what?”

“Fuck my ass.”

We knew the routine by now. I sped up a little, but only a little, just enough to make both of us crazy.

“Fuck my ass what, Calle?”

I knew when he'd break. I heard him draw a breath. Huff it out.

Now.

“Please. Fuck my ass hard.” Calle panted the words out. I slammed in.

“More, Calle, if you want it.”

“Fuck me like a dog. Fuck me. Please. Rey. *Please*. Fuck.” I moved with each broken word, harder and faster, until we were both slamming against each other like crazy people.

His sweat and mine soaked our clothes, his tears mingled with the sweat. It didn't matter. The blood when I bit him made it all the better. He gripped his cock, moaning all the more.

“Hurt me good. Please. Please, Rey. More.”

I gave him more. I made him take more. I could hear my heart roaring in my ears, my lungs about to burst, when I heard him cry out, all control gone. That. That was what we both wanted.

He stiffened and jerked against my body, his ejaculate spilling, dripping down on my feet, and we came almost together, my eyesight dimming as I shot.

We stayed that way, spooned together, panting.

I opened my eyes.

Adrenaline was still burning inside me, but not as much as usual. And I was...safe. Nothing more had happened than what might be expected when you fucked like an animal.

I hadn't turned into one.

Safe.

“*Gracias*, hermano.” I pulled myself off him and wondered where and when I might get enough water to get the spunk off my skin and clothing. I could make him lick it off, but I figured the fun was over for the day.

Calle let out a long sigh and straightened up.

“Nobody does that like you, Rey.” He scrubbed at his face. “Jesus.”

He pulled up his pants.

“Get some rest,” I told him. “The kid is probably the only sensible one among us. The heat is going to fry us if we're tired.”

Maybe I could even sleep myself now.

“The child—” Calle jerked his thumb toward where Mosquito slept like the dead. “What are you doing with him? Is it because he's the boss's kid?”

“You think I'm stupid enough to play with Mosca's brat to impress the boss? He'd more likely have my balls.”

“Then I don't understand. You could eat that one up in two bites and want more, Rey.”

The sated, humming satisfaction in my body froze a moment. What the hell was I doing with the kid? I said what I always did when people pressed me too hard.

“I do what I want, Calle.”

“Be careful.”

Careful. Of Mosquito? Of Calle? Of myself? I didn't know. Calle was staring at me, but I couldn't read the message in his face.

So I gave him one tight hug and then hit him in the shoulder, the way we did when we were just out of adolescence, not sure how to react to each other. “Be careful for yourself, Calle.”

Calle didn't return the hug. He didn't smile. Instead he settled himself against one of the pines and tilted his hat down. In his drab clothing he looked like part of the scrub.

I thought he wasn't going to say anything until he cleared his throat.

“Always.”

Chapter Five

“Stop staring at me, kid.” The voice was a growl.

Of course I looked him up and down even more carefully. The broad, scarred face. The wide shoulders. The special boot. The stained pants.

I just didn't see the attraction.

“You knew I wasn't asleep.”

“I knew. I get too noisy for anyone to sleep when Rey fucks me.” Somewhere in the growl I thought I heard amusement. But I've been wrong before. I'd be safer to believe the growl was hostile.

I looked over at our shared Sleeping Beauty. No worries over there. Just blissful, untroubled slumber. Damn him. How could he screw Calle into the rock and not be concerned about tripping off whatever got him crazy? Why the hell Calle and not me?

“I didn't know you had it in you, Calle. Or that you had Rey in you.”

It was getting hot enough that nothing moved. No wind. Not even the insects that usually whirled in the brush. And not the man who was stretched out opposite the clearing where I sat.

“You don't know a lot of things, kid. Rey and I grew up together, ever since we were first hired on the compound, back when we weren't much older than you. He's been in me more than you've ever been fucked. If you have.”

I clamped down hard on letting words fly out my mouth. If Calle didn't know what I was and what I liked, I wasn't going to say. My father was a big believer in telling people as little as possible. I was older and more experienced in everything than Calle thought I was, despite my youthful appearance. But having people think differently could be to your advantage when you didn't tell them that. Yes, I was my father's child.

“He's been gone. Things change.”

“He saved my life.” There was a strange note in Calle's voice. “If you ask, that's what all the hands will tell you. Pulled me out of a flash flood where I was trapped.”

“Another story with Rey as the hero.” I shrugged. “I don't listen to them all.”

“You don't believe it?”

“I wasn't there. It doesn't matter if I believe the story or not.” A sudden thought came to me. “Do *you* believe it?”

“Rey dared me to cross over the water on the rocks. He crossed first. But I lost my footing and was swept downstream. He saved me. Hauled me out of the water where I was caught in the rocks, and damn near killed himself doing it.”

What he didn't say was suddenly as clear to me as what he had. Clearer.

“But you figure he pretty much threw you in there. Taunted you into doing it.”

“I didn't have to listen to him.”

“But you did, because he is who he is. Was that how you hurt yourself?”

“You talk too much. Buzz, buzz around a man's head like a mosquito.” Calle shut his eyes and shut me out.

Fucker. Fuckers. Both of them. I wasn't going to get the images out of my head as easily as the two of them could. The heat burned up under my clothes and into my skin.

All the worry I'd had before we started this insanity came back, along with a healthy dose of jealousy.

I sat, putting my head against my knees, and told myself it was trying to find some shade that was putting me in such a foul mood.

* * * * *

I woke so fast that my neck hurt from where I snapped it up. It was twilight, but the red glow from the launchers was already making it deadly bright. The sound, even from miles away, was deafening.

I took one deep breath and held it.

Everything I'd been afraid of had happened. The Feds were tracking us down.

“*Vámonos*, you slugs. Now!” It was Moro's voice that kept me from total panic as my head cleared and I realized exactly what was going on.

I was on my feet so fast that I staggered. Rey grabbed my arm, not very gently, to steady me.

We ran, leaving our equipment behind. Calle pulled himself up on one of the burros. It brayed once, in protest, but after that, nothing, and no one had time to do more.

I think we went almost straight up the rock face once or twice. We skidded down ravines no one should have tried. But all of us followed. All of us knew that Moro wasn't going to wait for anyone left behind.

When we reached the edge of a cliff and saw the yawning space between it and the next piece of land, I knew whatever happened next wouldn't be good. There was no way in hell I could jump that. I doubted even Rey could make it on his best day.

Moro reached up, and for a moment, he hovered above us. I gaped until, in what was left of the rapidly darkening light, I realized there was a small wire above us. Hand over hand, he zipped across.

Shit. It was no problem for him. But every single one of these men had more upper-body strength than I did.

Stay and die. Go and—

I threw myself forward, ignoring the digging of the wire into my palms, breathing hard as blood made the line slippery. I wasn't going to pay attention to the ache in my arms—or my gut. I wasn't looking down. How far down it was didn't matter. All that mattered was—

Moro grabbed my flailing legs and yanked me to safety, head down, when I got close enough to him. My head bumped on hard earth.

Hard, solid earth. Thank you, Dios. I lay there for a moment, refusing to puke.

Next came Calle, lifting himself up with arm muscles as wide as my body, and moving easily across. He grunted as Moro steadied him, helping him down. We all watched as Rey undid the burro's harness and slapped the animal's rump to send it running into the brush. Then Rey swung, hand over hand like Moro had, and leaped down by himself.

Moro cut the wire and then placed disappearing acid on the end. We watched as the entire length dissolved with a faint sizzle and stronger smell.

“They’ll still find a way—” I began and stopped when I realized a new sound was cracking its way across my eardrums.

A thunderstorm. How often did that happen? Once every few months out here? Rain began to pelt down. It was raining the way it did sometimes, in torrents, hitting us with hot, slightly acidic pellets of water.

The deluge was hard enough to extinguish the fire the launchers had hit the earth with. Hard enough to wash away all traces of us when they came to search for us on land. Hard enough that nothing could hover above and catch our body heat to track us.

All we had to do was run for shelter.

Rey braced Calle with his shoulder, and Moro, smaller than the other two, moved to Calle's other side as a second crutch. We hobbled and cursed softly, knowing the thunder would drown out our noise.

“Paz!” Moro gasped out suddenly and stopped.

A female figure scurried out from shadows and asked, “All is well?”

“For now.”

Our new visitor held out blindfolds. I bit the inside of my cheek. I hated them. But protesting would only delay us. We didn't have time for that. Moro and the woman efficiently knotted the blinders over us.

“Ha. Come on, then. Tía is waiting.” The woman pulled me abruptly by the hand. I winced from the cuts and welts on my palms, but she ignored the blood. Unsteady, I stumbled forward into sudden, complete darkness, a darkness so overwhelming that somehow even noise was blacked out and muted, and all I could hear was the thumping of my heart after my abused hands hit the ground.

I ground my teeth together to keep from yelling out loud.

Where the fuck had they taken me?

A cave. A deep, dark opening in the rock of the cliff we'd been staggering up. It should have been reassuring once I knew, after a torch had been lit and we'd been permitted to sit near the flames, our blindfolds long since gone.

There were others huddled around the fire, faces I knew from before they began to disappear from our land. A lot of faces and bodies sitting in the half dark.

It was a bad time to remember I was claustrophobic. Old memories dimly resurfaced of being covered in blankets as a child and hurried away to dark places to hide when my searchers came...

I crossed my arms and hugged myself. I wasn't that young now. I hadn't screamed my fears, I hadn't been found. Not then, and not now.

What I wanted—open space and fresh air and safety—wasn't important. Or at least not as important as staying in the cave. We were here to help Rey and find Tía. So far we'd managed to find Tía. Now we'd see about the rest. I kept breathing, slowly and steadily, through my nose. I concentrated on the voices speaking around me.

I could almost feel someone staring at my back. Rey. It had to be Rey. My spine tingled. Only he could give me that reaction. It was embarrassing.

"You have trouble, *mijo*." Tía looked older than the desert itself, huddled in a giant shawl by the cave's fire. Her voice sounded scratchy and older than her looks. "I remember you when you were nothing but skinny arms and legs. That's changed. You're very beautiful. Very adult."

"But you still call me your son." Rey spoke up at my elbow.

Not Rey watching me from behind? I refused to turn around.

"Old habits." She took his hands in hers. They should have been dwarfed in comparison. But they looked right, clasped together. I could see Rey relax, maybe for the first time since I'd met him.

They smiled at each other, and I knew I was a jealous idiot. Bad enough to envy Calle. Worse to envy this old woman because Rey smiled at her so intimately.

"You're still beautiful, but something is wrong, yes?" Her hands slid to his wrists, as if to test his pulse. "You're not so beautiful as you could be."

She frowned.

She didn't have to go on before Rey said, "I'm sorry, Tía. I know I shouldn't have, but there seemed no other way at the time."

She sat there, staring into his eyes, still frowning. Finally she sighed. "I'm sorry too, mijo. Such a waste. So many pretty boys filled with this evil. How do you want me to help?"

If she didn't know, we'd risked everything and achieved nothing. I swallowed hard.

"What can you do?" Rey asked in return. "Cure me?"

She shook her head.

Shit.

"But help me? Somehow?"

"You're taking poison, Rey. All I can do is give you more."

Rey licked his lips. "Will it kill me faster or worse than the way I'm going now?"

I didn't want to hear this. I didn't want to know how death was at his elbow whether someone was chasing him or not. I didn't want to know if death was what he welcomed, as long as it was easier than what he faced now.

"No. It will still kill you, but slower. I can give you a plant extract. It's where your poison came from long ago, undistilled." Tía glanced over at me and then back to Rey. "I gave it to Mosca first. I told him I had no antidote. He said he could use it anyhow."

When I swallowed hard again, I realized my hand was clutched at my throat as if I might choke—or scream. I assumed the Federistas had come up with this cruelty. I'd wanted to think that. Not my father. I knew he was Mosca and as ruthless as any other general, but...not my father.

Breathe. Calm. In and out. Just concentrate on what others say and let yourself center.

"And I can keep going as I have?" Rey stared down at his boots. "For a while?"

"Yes. It will end the same way, but...you have more time."

More time could work. More time always gave you options. Death could just stay at his elbow and not creep nearer while we explored them. God, if my brain could just start thinking again instead of feeling frozen, I could come up with a solution. I knew it.

If Mosca started it, then Mosquito could end it. My father always said I was smart. This time I had to be smarter than him.

“Not much time. The Federistas are going to come visiting here soon enough. Then we’ll all be dead.” Calle’s voice, rough with ... fear? Unhappiness?—broke the silence, sounding too loud behind me.

“We’ve run from Feds before. We can do it again.” Tía sounded unconcerned.

But she was an old woman. Too old to be running.

And Calle couldn’t run.

The compound couldn’t run. I wondered if it had gone up in flames. Or had the Feds used everything they could find in this godforsaken region to go after us?

I was failing at my mission even though I wasn’t sure why my father had sent me back to his home. Once, I’d thought it was to preserve his heritage. Now that I’d tried to do that, I wasn’t so sure. He didn’t seem to care. But whatever the reason, he didn’t send me to destroy the few things he still allowed himself to care about. His land. His people.

Tía was staring at me as if she could hear what I was thinking. I stared back at her, wondering what she was actually thinking. I wasn’t going to buy her all-knowing act. I had tried that act plenty of times myself. She was mortal. The difficulty she had moving, speaking—even breathing—was testimony to that. She didn’t know all. She couldn’t help all. She couldn’t cure Rey.

She wasn’t the solution to my problems.

“I knew your mother. I knew you before you were born. Everyone came to me when they were pregnant. I told your mother when she was going to have her first. You. I told her what I could see of you.” Her smile was sly and quick and disappeared again into her wrinkled face. “She left to birth you in the city. She trusted doctors more than folk medicine.”

What had Tía seen of me before I was born? I refused to ask. All-knowing or just allactress, Tía could say anything. I didn’t want to find out what it might be. Not in front of an audience.

But I’d forgotten my roots until she said that.

David, my brother, had been conceived and born in the city and never lived to see anything else. Mother had never spoken of her time here in the desert to anyone. But somehow it made me believe I had a connection to this place. It might not have been much of one, but I had been created here. Was that why my father had sent me back?

I didn't want the compound to die.

"Can you put something on those hands, Tía? They're cut up." Rey's voice echoed. "Mosquito doesn't take care of them properly."

How had he known? The wire had dug deep into my skin, but I hadn't whined. It had to be too dark to see them. I shifted my hands farther back into the shadows and realized if he'd been guessing I had a problem, I'd just given myself away.

"Aloe will help. Santo!" Tía called out, and one of her many shadowy relatives jumped to obey, disappearing into the dark.

When he returned, holding something in a small bowl, she stretched out her hands. They trembled a little with age. I hesitated.

"Hold them out, child." She hissed when I put my hands in hers and she got a look at them. "There's no need for this foolishness. Bandages too, Santo!"

I could feel warmth seeping into my hands even before she began to plaster the liquid on my palms. Warmth from her.

Perhaps there was more to her than I had wanted to believe at first. Certainly everyone else believed she could heal with her touch and look into another's brain. Possibly she walked on water too, or used to when she could walk properly. If only because others believed in her, she could be a strong ally if she wanted to be.

I cleared my throat as she continued to work on my cuts.

"Tía. I'd like you to come back to your old home. You especially, but we need all the campeys"—I winced at the slang term I used, and corrected myself—"all the campesinos. The compound will wither away if you aren't there. That is, if the compound is still there."

"When you return to the compound, then I will consider it. I'll not be able to hold my kindred together by myself much longer. Age has its limits, and I accept them." Tía patted my bandaged hands. "But you are going on a journey first, yes?"

How did she know that? I'd just started planning it out in my head.

"I might be."

Tía laughed. “Yes. That means yes.” She leaned closer to me and said, “Don't be offended. I knew your father for many, many years, child. You sound just like him. It is amusing to hear such a clear echo from the past.”

“Where are you going?” Calle spoke up this time.

“Nowhere yet. I'd like to make sure the Feds haven't tracked us.”

“Don't try to dance the issue away, Mosquito.” Rey put his hand on my shoulder. “Tell us.”

“Not yet. Not until I'm sure.”

He stared at me with those blue eyes, and my stomach twisted as if I would be sick. Or jump him. But I didn't look away.

“Tía, I have a question. One of those love-mojo questions Calle said I wanted to ask you. You know, just like everyone always does.” Rey stroked my cheek with one finger, just barely touching me. I wanted to moan.

“You are having problems with sex, mijo?”

“I'm just wondering how safe it is for me to have sex, especially with someone weaker than I am. In case I lose control of my own strength.”

“What the h—” Calle shut up.

“Ahh.” Tía sounded very amused now. “A man with your poison in him needs to have sex. It will help get the poison out safely. Most people don't die from sex.”

“But—” Rey stopped.

“Let me guess. You don't sleep, you don't eat—that may give you problems with your temper, Rey. If you don't make love...that could give you more. Don't eat, sleep, make love, and you'll...” She stopped and sighed. “Eat, sleep, have sex, and get rid of the evil that makes you lose control. Then you'll be fine.”

Rey stood up, lifted the old woman up to her feet with one effortless move, and then kissed Tía on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“For nothing.” She patted his upper arm, which was a stretch for her tiny, hunched-up body. “We'll all wait here until the Federistas give up, and then we'll see what Mosquito decides we are to do, yes? Santo! Bring Rey what he needs before he sleeps.”

Me. She said it was up to me.

Rey needed me. And God knows, I needed him. But they all needed me, one way or another.

Tía leaned forward and brushed her lips against my cheek. She whispered, “Take care of him, *mija*. But take care of yourself too.”

She'd called me daughter, as she'd called Rey her son. I couldn't help liking it before I blinked.

Of course she knew.

Right now it didn't matter. I leaned forward and kissed her back. “I can't promise, *Mamacita*. But I will do my very best.”

Chapter Six

I realized I was glowing, a little buzz I hadn't felt for a long time. Eating a dried-up herb was different than injecting military issue. More pleasant, at least for now. I remembered it used to be that way at first.

The buzz made me almost believe this could work. Tía hadn't saved me, but maybe Mosquito could.

What kind of man let a kid take on that burden while he played? I didn't know what was coming next, but that was wrong.

"It's been a long time, Moro." I threw the cards down.

"A long time since you lost money to me." Moro smiled and scooped up the coins.

We knew I hadn't meant just that. It was almost like old times, when I used to wager and drink and brag with the others. Just like the others. Back when I was just a hand, picked out from the campesinos along with Calle. For a little while Calle and I were simpatico with everyone in the compound. Campesino, hand, it didn't matter. We were part of them.

When I became foreman, things changed. Suddenly I was the one everyone looked up to or envied. Envy or respect me, I was the one with power, and I'd learned to use it.

I could use it—the unity, the envy, the power—right now, while we were still drowsy and warm from the campfire and old memories. If I pushed, just a little, the campeys would come back with us immediately. That seemed to be what Mosquito wanted.

It would be good for the compound. It was a smart move.

But I wasn't thinking. For the first night in a long, long row of nights, I was feeling. Feeling something that wasn't numbness or anger.

The kid was watching me. Quiet but watching, the way she always was. What did she see? What did she want to see in me?

When she turned from me and stood up, I wanted to growl and pounce on her before she walked away. I wasn't going to let her go without me. Not even to push my advantage with Tía's family.

"Traven—" I reached my hand out and grabbed her shoulder.

I couldn't see her eyes in the darkness of the cave. But her lips curved up. "Rey."

I didn't think she was really smiling.

"What is it?" I asked. Ever since Tía had said I needed sex, I'd had an itch for Traven. Hell, before Tía had mentioned it I'd wanted to jump Traven. She was like her nickname, getting me irritated. I wanted to soothe myself, maybe soothe her, and see if Tía was right. Hell, I wanted to sink into that body and make her scream.

"What?" she asked right back.

I was glowing but not entirely lost yet.

"Something is going on in there." I tapped her head. "What do you need?"

"I want to go home." She caught herself. "Back to the compound."

Home. She'd said the word like she meant it. Like she wanted it. She admitted to wanting so little, even when I knew there was more inside her.

Home.

I'd dreamed of it myself while I was away. When I came back it was all the same—and all different. Or I was different.

"Then we'll go."

"Tonight?"

"You're in that much of a hurry?"

"As long as it's safe. Maybe Calle could follow us later. His family would make sure he got back."

"Why? What's wrong? Is it Calle?" If it wasn't Calle, what other reason did she have to run back?

She shrugged. "Or we could all ride together. I noticed they have a lot more horses and burros here than the compound does. I think we could borrow back a few."

It would be quieter at the compound, as long as it wasn't overrun by Feds. What I had in mind now didn't really require an audience.

And I couldn't even begin to guess what was in Mosquito's head. Finding out might take more time alone with her.

"I'll saddle up some horses." Calle's voice echoed in the cave. He must have heard us, but for once, he didn't seem ready to confront me immediately. "It's dusk now."

"Thank you." Traven was all graciousness, her mouth and teeth gleaming while she smiled.

No, she hadn't wanted him along. I wondered how I could find out why.

* * * * *

They blindfolded us for the first part of the trip. Simpatico only went so far, and they still weren't going to make it easy for us to know where they were located. That was fine. I knew the mountains better than my own mother, and I had a good idea where we'd been. And when they did set us free, I wished we'd stayed blindfolded.

I was used to the smell and sights of destroyed earth. But this was *my* earth, destroyed to capture me. The dead birds...the dead silence...the smell of charring. Destruction had arrived and left nothing else.

We didn't talk on the way back, for some of the same reasons we hadn't spoken on the way up. But now the hope we hadn't been seen, that we weren't going to be punished if we were caught, was gone.

We probably shouldn't go back, but by now I couldn't keep away. I needed to know what was left.

I knew Mosquito had seen some things like this before, when she was small, and our men hadn't been organized well enough to defend our own properly. How Mosca's family escaped total destruction was part of our legend. I had let myself forget how dangerous her life had been at first, because she usually looked so fragile.

Yeah, Mosquito was all right. Her lips were tight, but she was steady as she urged her horse on, holding tight to keep the nervous beast from shying at the strange smells and sights.

Calle, on the other hand, had a face that gradually got grayer and more deathlike as we followed evil's path down to the valley. I'd forgotten that he was still new to what could happen when Federistas came to call. He coughed once or twice when lingering smoke blew our way. It sounded more like he wanted to gag than clear his lungs.

Was that why she hadn't wanted Calle along? That was kind but shortsighted. He might turn green now, but he'd fight if we needed to. And after looking at this, he'd be ready to kill anyone who had a hand in the burning of his land.

Gradually, though, the burning and waste decreased. Soon the land looked almost undamaged and then untouched. That seemed wrong, in a good way. The closer we got to home, the safer the countryside appeared.

We paused on a rise a few miles away from the compound.

"Look." Mosquito pointed.

There it was, spread out below us, still far enough away that it would take a heavy launcher to send fire down to the buildings.

But no launcher had tried. The compound looked untouched—at least the compound's lights were on in the darkness, just as if there were no threat of attack. There seemed to be no walls down.

I couldn't help the first quick rush of relief.

"What does it mean?" Mosquito sounded troubled.

She was smart, no doubt about it. Nothing should be that easy. Relief changed to worry.

"I don't know. I don't know why they spared the place. We could maybe have fought off the hick Feds out here, even though we weren't prepared. But it looks like the hands didn't even have to try." I scowled down at the compound's walls.

"Maybe we got lucky." Calle's voice sounded strained.

"I don't trust luck." Mosquito frowned too. "Do we go on?"

"You're the one who wanted to get to the compound, Mosquito." And I was the fool who'd wanted to please her.

"We don't know how to go back to Tía, and we have no supplies." She stared down, unmoving.

Of course we could come up with another plan. But suddenly I didn't want to.

"Come on, then." I pulled the stunner out. "If anyone is tracking us, it's too late to run."

Mosquito glanced over at Calle and back toward the compound. She sighed and kicked at her horse's sides. We began the descent toward the compound as the moon rose, full and lovely and clearly showing our return.

As we got closer everything looked...fine. Untouched. A few outside gardens that our remaining campesinos tended were still there. I heard a cock crowing inside the courtyard. The animals were alive.

No one stopped us.

Why not? Someone should have been standing guard.

Calle tapped the boot holding his knife. I realized I was gripping the stunner hard enough to numb my hand.

Mosquito went to the heavy metal door and punched in the code in the box next to the entrance. The door began the familiar groan before moving, and the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. We were going to go in, God help us. Everything I'd learned in the past few years screamed, *Stop*.

But my gut needed to know.

I pushed my way to the front, but all three of us rode through the entranceway together.

"Calle, guard our backs." Mosquito dismounted. We all scanned the courtyard.

"*Hola!*" she yelled out, the sound bouncing against the walls and doubling back into our faces.

Nothing.

"*Hola, Rey.*" A whisper of a voice came back to us.

"Who is it?" I turned my stunner in that direction.

"Tesero. Hold up. It's just Tesero." Calle put his hand on my shoulder.

I shook off the hand. "Tesero, show yourself."

The hunched-over old man shuffled out of the shadows and nodded to himself, listening to whatever was locked inside his head, the sounds only he could hear.

I slid off my horse and crouched in front of him, letting him absorb who I was before I questioned him.

"Tesero, what happened?" I asked as calmly as I could. Shouting wouldn't help.

"*El jefe*." Tesero kept staring at the ground. "I must keep everything safe. Feed the chickens, yes. *El jefe* trusts me."

He rocked back and forth, lips moving soundlessly. What the hell?

"Mosca?" Traven almost sang it in Tesero's ear, she asked so sweetly. "It was Mosca?"

"He flew in and out. *El jefe*." Tesero made one sweeping gesture and then stared away again.

"Is it possible?" I asked.

Mosca hadn't been near here for over a decade. Closer to two.

"Anything is possible with my father. Of course, Tesero could believe he saw anything, possible or impossible." Mosca's daughter looked around her. "Whatever happened, everyone else appears to be gone, and so far I see no signs of blood or fire or poison. I'd say our people were completely tricked by the enemy or ordered to do something by someone they trusted."

"Calle, make sure there are no signs of blood, poison, or fire."

"Wait—" Mosquito snapped out and then paused. "It doesn't matter, I suppose. Go ahead, Calle."

He hesitated. Then he swung down from his horse and began to limp away with Tesero, the two of them leading the horses away.

"I need to talk to you alone, Rey." She said the words briskly, lady to peon.

That was the wrong tone to use with me. I hadn't been a peon for a long time. Not even the military could make me back into that.

So why did the snottiness make my mouth water?

I put my hand on the small of her back. That was wrong too. This wasn't the right time or place for the little flickerings of want to leap up into my gut. But there never was a right time or place. Hell, I might be dead before there was one.

"I want to talk to you alone too, Traven."

She didn't look at me as we walked to the main house. But she didn't brush my hand off either as I walked with her, close by her side. I kept checking the compound, waiting for something to jump out at us. Some trap. Some mistake. Anything.

Nothing. There was nothing.

She sighed a little—the barest wisp of sound—as she shut the door to the house and took the bandanna off her head.

“It's just the way we left it. If my father was here, he left no sign.” It was like she was echoing my thoughts.

“Do you think Tesero spoke the truth?”

She ran a finger over the keys of the piano, creating a sudden soft trill. “I don't know anything. If he did come and leave—”

She was quietest when something bothered her the most. I'd figured out that much about her.

“You want to see him?”

“I haven't seen him for more than a day or two in a decade. Since my family died.” She shut the lid of the piano with a tiny thud. “He's busy; it's dangerous for others to be with him... It doesn't matter now.”

“Maybe it does.” I'd seen more of Mosca when I was young than his daughter had.

“Calle won't find anything either.” She seemed lost in her thoughts. Thoughts she never shared. Why did she shut down like that? As if it weren't right for her to feel or think and let others know. “We need to talk about—”

I ran my hand up to her shoulder and squeezed. “Bad luck for you, not seeing your father. Worse luck for him, not seeing you.”

“It's all r—” I didn't expect her voice to break. I didn't expect her arms to circle around me, gripping me like she was drowning.

I didn't expect the sudden sobs. She tried to muffle them against my shoulder, but I could hear them. I could feel her body shaking against mine.

“I'm sorry, kid. I'm so sorry.” I didn't know what else to say. Not that it was all right. It wasn't all right. There was nothing I could do to make it that way.

I kissed her neck. I kissed her cheek. She turned her head, and we kissed, lips touching and then with tongues twining, sliding deep inside. I forgot why we were here. I forgot everything but her and needing her.

For a moment I think we were both lost.

“I want you, *mi alma*. Now.” I scooped her up and moved to the bedroom. The floor would have been fine with me, but I wanted better for her. I wanted—

I put her on the bed and looked at her, stretched out and staring at me, soft and vulnerable. I could jump on her now and take. That was tempting. Very tempting. But not this time.

“I’m not anyone’s soul, Rey. I’m not sure I have one of my own left.” She still had tears in her eyes, but then she sniffled and gulped at the same time. I watched her forcing herself to stop. “I did want to talk to you alone, but right now I want to fuck more.”

I managed to think after that, at least enough to remember why I’d wanted her bed instead of the floor.

“Ties? Do you have any?” I looked around. Everything in her room was tidily in place, but not a damn thing there would help me.

“You’re not tying me.” Her face set stubbornly. “I won’t allow it.”

I laughed. “Maybe another time, Mosquito. You’re tying *me*.”

Just in case. Just to be sure I wouldn’t lose control. Of course, that meant giving her control.

I rolled my shoulders, just the way I would before I went into battle. The other choice was no sex.

“Oh.” She thought about it, her hand stroking my chest as I unbuttoned my shirt. A sly smile formed, as she absorbed the idea. “Ohhhh.”

She kissed one of my nipples. Licked it. Sat up and squeezed it hard with her fingers. I sucked my breath in. She moved over the other and used her nails on that nipple, just firmly enough to make me jump. Both of them tightened, as quickly from pain as from pleasure.

The zing went from my nipples to my crotch about a split second later. My cock jumped.

“Tie me,” I said through my teeth.

"You aren't afraid of me, big guy?" She laughed down at me, her body white and beautiful as the beginning of dawn lit the room.

"You should be more afraid of *me*, little girl." My cock was already twitching. I felt dangerous. A hungry, deep dangerous. "Traven?"

"Yes?"

"I would never want to hurt you." No. Not good enough. I tried again. "I never will. I promise you."

Her fingers stilled for a moment, frozen where they had been stroking my cheek.

"I trust you, Rey. Even though that terrifies me." She shut her eyes, hiding from my stare. I thought she might be crying, but when she opened them again, she smiled. "But just to be sure, I have something better than ties. Handcuffs." She moved to the drawer of the stand near her bed.

And within two seconds I felt the cuffs, cool and tight against my wrists. She snapped them against the bedposts and smiled.

For once restraints made me feel safe. But her smile made me uneasy.

"Your legs are free." She tapped her chin. "What to do about that?"

My cock was already as hard as if she'd spent hours teasing me. The rest of me wasn't so happy. My jaw hurt, I was clenching it so tightly. She slid my pants down, intentionally tangling them around my calves so it would be hard to move.

"Baby." I whispered the word, and her little smirk faded.

"Yes?"

"You know why I'm doing this, don't you?"

"To keep me safe. Just in case." She squatted over me, her hand cupping my face. "I know I'm safe with you."

"Then play fair."

"Life isn't always fair. You have old wounds too, soldier. So much pain." She traced a pucker on one shoulder, as if to heal me.

I turned my head to kiss her fingers.

"I'd never cause you pain, Rey. I swear it." She held her hands out to me, and with the bandages gone, I saw the crisscrossing from old scars and scratches on them. My breath caught.

“You're the one who knows too much about hurt, Traven. And mostly you hurt yourself. Play fair with us both.”

We looked at each other. She looked so...stunned. Soft and sexy—angelic. And in another second she was on top of me, her crotch rubbing against my cock. Jesus. My arms tightened involuntarily, despite the cuffs, and the bed creaked.

The little smirk returned. “I'll spread-eagle you. Just to prove I'm not lying, once I have you helpless.”

She unwound the bindings from her breasts and tied them, still warm from her body, around one ankle. I tested it—just to be sure—and realized she knew what she was doing. Snug but not too tight. I could twitch, but I couldn't move much.

Jesus. I fought the old soldier instincts to fight or run, and put my other ankle against the last post. She did the same thing to that one. When she ran her hand up my spread thighs and cupped my balls, gently and then tighter, we both knew I wouldn't be going anywhere, tied or not.

Then my body arched up, and I cursed.

She was kissing her way up my legs to my thighs. Licking and kissing, leaving a slow, damp trail on her way. She breathed against my upper thigh, a short puff of air, close to my balls, and my cock bobbed up and down.

Her teeth scraped the head of my cock, lightly, but enough to make me jump again.

“Fuck!”

“I thought you wouldn't like being topped.” She bent over and murmured the words against my cock. It straightened, almost painfully, at her touch.

I tried to remember how to say words back. Blood was pounding into my cock and my other head. Power and powerlessness, all at the same time.

“Not usually. See if you can change my mind, Mosquito.” I licked my dry lips, and then her tongue followed mine, licking the same places. I shook, I knew it, all defenses gone now that I'd chosen to submit to her. But I felt her tremors too, when the wet slide of her mouth covered me, soothed me.

“I already have, Rey. *Es verdad?*” Her voice sounded lost.

“As true as anything between us, Traven.”

“I don't want anything between us, Rey. Just you and me.”

She had a clever tongue—all kinds of clever. She was smart enough to stop talking but use that tongue to make me arch up against her mouth, my cock demanding more. She sucked me down deep, like heaven. Then her lips worried at the vein in my cock, the one pounding as if I were thirteen and thinking about having a woman for the first time. When her teeth scraped, just a little, against the head of my cock, I thought I'd come.

I panted and fought my own body while she took it and made it do what she wanted. I held myself still while she brushed her face against my cock and licked the precum with a noisy slurp.

I moaned. I didn't usually scream and moan for a woman—for anyone—but this was different.

It felt like I hadn't been in a woman—in her—for years. The only thing left was my cock and my need. All I wanted was her, to be inside her, to make her want too.

“Just a minute, Rey.” Her hands were shaking, making her fumble as she took a condom from the drawer.

“No waiting.” I couldn't wait. I was already crazy because I could imagine her, moving over my cock, gloving it tight and hot and squeezing.

“I want you, Rey. I want you so bad.” She whispered it against my cock again.

“Oh God.” I think I might have been praying.

She rolled the thin film onto my cock. I thought I might lose it then, even that felt so good.

Her hands grabbed my hips.

“*God.*” We said it together as she slid down on top of me and didn't move.

It wasn't enough.

I stared up and looked at her breasts above my face, her fingers pinching at her own nipples. I watched them grow red and hard and wanted them in my mouth. I smelled her arousal and wanted her in my mouth. God, I wanted that soft skin touching every part of me.

Traven.

I'd gotten what I thought I wanted. I was surrounded by her, all of her, and now I thought I'd die from wanting her more. Wanting everything.

She paused, lips tight together, face set.

I gripped the bedposts like I could tear them off the frame. I was close enough to ripping my arms out of my sockets as everything in me centered on her. Just her.

The sight of her, focused on our pleasure, but not letting us get there. That might kill me.

I wanted the two of us moving together, to hear the threatening creak of the bed as we hit our rhythm. To see her toes push up as she slowly, slowly slid up my cock. To watch the heels of her feet hit the bed as she went down, hard, slapping herself against my body.

She was crying. Her eyes were shut, but the tears trickled down her face anyhow.

I could smell her. Smell her arousal.

I twisted, trying to get close. I needed to taste her too. Everything. I needed everything. Scent, sight, taste. Touch. God, I needed her touch. I wanted to touch her.

Damn those cuffs.

I was howling. Cursing. Promising—I wasn't sure what I was willing to promise that was worth this. Not my life. Not my soul. They were already gone.

She opened her eyes to stare down at me.

“You're so beautiful. God, I love you.” Those words weren't enough, not nearly enough, but they were all I had left to give her.

That did it. She began to move.

Her hands gripped my shoulders as she rose and fell, her thighs flexing against my legs and hips. Deep and slow in, fast slide out. I gripped the wooden posts with my hands and held on, trying to match her speed.

She shifted her hips, and that was when my vision started graying out. I didn't want to give in now. My wrists ached as badly as the rest of my body; I was pulling so tightly to be free. But I wanted this to go on forever, with her riding me hard...

Her panting matched my own as she slammed down on me, her feet thumping into the mattress with each beat of our bodies smacking against each other, just the way I'd pictured it.

She was tightening her grip on my cock, tighter than I could bear it without coming. Tighter...

I was losing control—but she had it, she had me, she—

“Rey!”

It was like fire, ripping through my body. It was like heaven. I realized I was crying and groaning with her as we came. I kept coming inside her, even as she slumped down against my chest, still crying, her cunt still gripping me, not wanting to let go. She held me tight, even though she was still collapsed on top of me, and still shaking with sobs. I couldn't stop pumping into her, the aftershocks still hitting me as strong as anything I'd ever felt, even as I vaguely realized my wrists were chafed and bleeding.

Gradually, gradually my heart stilled, my cock drained, and I realized my wrists and ankles were rubbed raw. I heard her sobs, softer now. Her arms were around me, and I wanted to hold her in return.

I wanted to be untied. I wanted to stay just this way forever. I managed to kiss her shoulder before I shut my eyes. I was probably dead, but it was just the way I'd want to go.

* * * * *

“Impressive.”

I opened my eyes again, all the adrenaline that I'd thought was leached out of me starting to build again.

“Calle. How long have you been peeping?” Damn cuffs. I needed my hands free.

I took a breath and let it go, trying to clear out the still-confused aftermath of sex from my brain and body.

“I walked in. The whole Federista army could have walked in, and you wouldn't have noticed.” Calle growled. *“You idiots. We're in goddamned danger here, and you decide to go off and fuck.”*

He put one hand on my ankle and began to untie me.

“Mine,” Traven told him sharply and untied the other leg.

Releasing me from the cuffs was a blessed relief but—surprisingly—left me a little sad. I never knew I'd had it in me to want restraint.

Or to want anyone the way I'd wanted her while restrained.

“Stop staring at her and think, man!” Calle snarled. He threw my pants at me. *“We have to get out of here.”*

“Why, Calle?” Traven stood up and stretched.

Her voice was casual. There were no tears left in her. No desperation or passion.

“Are you crazy...girl?” He spit the last word out as if it were filthy. “We could die if we just wait around.”

“You sound very sure of that.” Traven began to button her shirt. She didn't bother redoing the bindings this time, leaving them tied to the posts. But then, the secret was well out now.

“I'm sure that we're targets, and we'll be *easy* targets if we stay here.” Calle grabbed her by the shoulder.

This time I snarled. I body slammed him against the wall before I thought. My pleasant buzz had turned into familiar rage.

“Rey! Damn it, Rey, stop!” I heard Traven's voice faintly.

I looked down and realized I was choking Calle. I let go. Whatever was between us, good and bad, I knew I didn't want to kill him.

“Sorry. I—Just don't touch her, and we'll be fine.” I put my hands up against the wall, boxing him in even though his eyes were blazing at me. “Understood?”

“*Claro.*” His fists clenched. “Totally fucking clear. Could we pay attention to the actual danger now, maybe?”

“How much time do you think we have before they arrive?” Traven had her pants on and was wiggling into her boots.

“Half hour at best,” Calle said.

My hands froze in the act of pulling my pants up. “How the hell do you know that, hermano?”

“You want to explain, Calle? I believe I can, if you don't want to.” Traven tied the bandanna back on her head.

“Shit. Can we explain later and move now?”

I finished dressing.

“We can do both.” I picked up my stunner and didn't tuck it away. “Calle?”

“Jesus God, *move.*” Calle pushed the door open. “I know because I told them myself, damn it. Happy?”

I shoved the stunner up against his temple, not allowing myself to think too much beyond the obvious. We were threatened, and I knew what to do about threats. “And we’d be taking you with us for what reason, then?”

“I don’t think things went exactly as planned, Rey.” Traven pulled at my arm. Somehow, without much effort on her part, I had put up the stunner, and all three of us were walking toward the stables. “You see, we weren’t all supposed to escape at first. Right, Calle? Maybe we all aren’t supposed to leave now.”

“I didn’t know. I didn’t know you were a woman or that Rey—” Calle stopped.

“Ah yes. That’s what I thought. I’m the one to be captured, Rey. The Feds want us both, but Calle figured he could sneak you out, and they wouldn’t care that much. Not as long as they had Mosca’s kid.” Traven leaned forward to touch Tesero as he held out the reins to her. “I suppose the compound is done for. But what about him? Did you think about that, Calle? What will they do to Tesero if we get away? To anyone they find who is here?”

“Fuck.” Calle stared down at the old man and swallowed. “Tesero, you can climb up in front of me. I’ll ride you out.”

“Why do you think I’m going to let this go, Calle?” I asked, the first rage chilling now, forming a hard surface under whatever other emotions I had. “Why do you think I’ll let *you* go?”

“It wasn’t supposed to mean anything to you. They promised to leave us alone if I gave them the kid. They were willing to let you out of the deal, and I figured it would be like it had been. You’d be with me—with us—back where you belonged.” Calle took a deep breath. “And none of it would be your problem, however it turned out for her.”

How could he have thought that would work? He was insane.

Oh Christ. He was jealous. Add that new ingredient to the emotional brew Calle and I had managed to create together.

“They told you just what you wanted to hear, didn’t they?” I fought the urge to smash his stupid face in.

“Gracias, hermano,” Traven said bitterly. She took a deep breath, and her next words were calm. “All right, no point in saying more. It’s done, and we have no time. Rey, open the coops and stables. I’m not going to let the animals burn if they have the sense to run.”

“Doesn't this matter to you? He said he was going to have you captured and knew you'd be likely tortured and killed. And all you can tell me is to take care of the animals?” But I pulled open barred doors and gates.

Why did she bother when her own life was in danger?

If the animals ran, what chance did they have? A chance to be food for a desert predator rather than burned alive?

A few of the bolder birds began to edge outside their cages toward whatever freedom such creatures could have.

Hell, Traven was right. Better a chance to run than to die in a cage. All of us.

“Arguing about what happened is useless. I know what my life is worth—or not worth—to others.” Traven shrugged. “This isn't much different than other times, other betrayals. At least he told me the truth in time, although I'd already guessed. After all, he was the one who went to town most often for supplies. He'd be the easiest to reach. So they did and he did. And now we have to move on before they catch us all.”

“Fuck! You really don't care? You'll let him go?”

“Why not? I don't see you killing him either, Rey.” She nudged her mount toward the portal, our exit to...to God knew what.

“Do you want me to?” I could. The ability and the rage were there, along with the sick confusion. But I wouldn't this time, not if she didn't want me to.

“No need. He's no danger now. Likely the Feds will kill us all quick enough. Tía too, if you were stupid enough to let them track you there, Calle.”

“Track? You have a transmitter?” His betrayal must have made my brain slow down. I couldn't believe it. Except that was what the Federistas did.

Calle tapped his shoulder. “Back here. It's small. All it does is signal when the gate here goes up and I'm nearby. I couldn't pull it out of me.”

“So they know you're back. Just the way they knew you'd left.” I turned him around to view the tiny bump on his shoulder blade.

“I'll stay here when you leave.” Calle sounded defeated. We knew what would happen once the Federistas arrived and missed their prey. “It would give you time.”

“What if we get you over the wall without going through the gate?” Mosquito said.

“Or why don't you bend your neck and hold still?” I drew my knife.

He didn't ask what I meant to do. He just obeyed. He didn't even cry out when my knife flashed out and pierced his skin. The tiny transmitter rolled down his back and hit the ground.

I realized my hands were trembling, just a little. I never shook when I had to kill. I never hesitated. Maybe Calle's acceptance was what kept me from finishing the job as I should have. I don't know.

“I should have told you long ago. I was...wrong.” Calle didn't try to stanch the blood trickling down his shirt. He met my gaze, but I couldn't read what was in his eyes. Shame, I think. Defeat. But was he upset at his plans being found out or because he realized what he had done? “I can still stay.”

Not even the old battle rage flickered in me now. I was hollowed out. I wasn't sure what to feel. I looked over at Traven.

“Whatever she says, we'll do. She's the boss, Calle, like it or not. And I think you may learn to like it.”

“You sure as hell have, Rey. I never thought I'd see you—” He stopped.

“Careful.”

“Enough, both of you. You're right about one thing, Calle. We don't have much time.” She wasn't crying any longer. Traven seemed to have withdrawn into herself, the way she often did when she felt threatened. Damn it, I wasn't a threat to her. Calle thought I was weak because of her. He didn't know how strong I could be for her.

Maybe she didn't either.

* * * * *

We rode out of the gate as silently as before. This time the portal creaked but stayed open as Mosquito pressed the controls. It looked strange that way.

“Calle.” Her voice was still flat, still emotionless. What was she holding in this time?

“Yes, ma'am?”

“Don't call me that. It's safer for me to be only Mosquito.”

“Yes...Mosquito.”

“Take care of Rey. Promise.”

“Of course.”

“What the hell do you mean?” I asked.

“You need each other, no matter what else happens.” She looked at Calle. “Make sure he's safe, or next time I'll come back to slit your throat. After I cut off your balls.”

“What are you saying?” I was starting to see into her head for just a moment, and it made me want to—

Cry. Protect her. Rage.

Freeze.

Stare at her like I'd lost my mind.

“I'm going that way. You two—you three—go another. It's safer for all of us that way.” Traven sighed. “I wanted to do more, but... I suppose healing you was a long shot anyhow. And it's time for all of us to cut our losses.”

“No.” That was all I could manage.

“Rey, I'm always going to be some kind of trophy. Federistas will try to capture me as long as I'm alive. I'm poison. As much poison as the drug my father ordered for you. No one else needs to live that with me. So...take care, Rey. I need to focus on keeping alive, and you need to do the same.” She leaned over, close to me. “For God's sake, take care of yourself.”

She ignored the horses' attempts to back away, and kissed my cheek lightly.

Her kiss was so warm against my skin. She hadn't said anything after I told her I loved her. Probably she thought I always said that during good sex, but she was wrong. *Jesus, Traven, you're so wrong.*

A moment later a white shock of heat paralyzed me.

I'd felt that pain before, but knowing what it was like only made it worse. I damn near fell off the horse. It wasn't as bad as it could have been. I could see and hear. Just not move.

“The bitch stunned you,” Calle said in awe.

Mosquito glared at Calle. “I'll do worse if you don't keep him away from me. Make sure no one hurts him, Calle. Understand?”

“Again, claro.”

And then she was gone, leaning over so she was almost one with the horse, leaving me at a gallop.

Dios.

I willed strength back to my hands and legs. I had a faster recovery time than normal people, but for precious minutes, the best I could do was grip the saddle and pray not to throw up.

“Rey?” Calle’s voice was tentative. His hand stretched out to touch my back. “I never meant for any of this to happen to you.”

“No?” I got the word past my thickened tongue. “Traitor.”

“I—” Calle pulled his hand back. “I suppose you’d see it that way. But she’s right. We need each other. We always have, one way or another. And she needs to be left alone to stay safe.”

“Tell Tía to pick Tesero up—somewhere. You can follow me if you want, once he’s safely out of the way.” Feeling began to return. Too much feeling.

“Where?” Calle stared at me.

“Wherever she is.” I rubbed my hands together and felt them tingle. “She doesn’t understand about me. But that doesn’t matter. I’m with her.”

“No—”

I had no time for this. When I’d been young, before the military, I thought I knew what a man should and shouldn’t do in life. That had all been changed with the resistance. There I saw evil being done for good, good creating desolation. I’d been lost in what was lie and what was truth.

But now, at least for this moment, after all the years of fighting and treachery and confusion, I was absolutely clear again about what was important. Maybe she needed to be shown that as well.

“You can go to hell instead, if you want. That doesn’t matter either. She’s what matters, and she doesn’t even know it.” I slapped the horse’s flanks and almost fell out of the saddle when he responded. But I grabbed the saddle again and hung on. I didn’t have time to fall. “She thinks we’re done. We’re not.”

She had almost disappeared on the horizon already.

Epilogue

It was a slow day in Medianoche. In other words, a day like most days I'd spent there. The nights were different—they were ugly and quick to turn uglier yet. But during the day, there wasn't much else to do but sit in the bar and enjoy one of the few places that had thick adobe walls and some coolness.

I eyed the gamblers in the corner, bickering over the pile of money between them. I needed more money.

“Alco.” A new customer had entered the bar, in his Federista uniform, swaggering a little as everyone stared. “I want some.”

He threw some money down on the counter.

Albert, the bartender, shuffled over, just fast enough to keep the man from yelling again. “Here.”

“That's not a lot.”

Albert shrugged and put out a glass. He was in charge of the alco, the bar, and anyone in the place, and everyone knew it. Everyone but maybe new Federistas who liked to think they were gods.

The man scanned the group and then focused in on me. He looked me over the whole time he drank. I stiffened but kept quiet. No one was going to care what a Federista did, as long as he paid cash and didn't bother them.

“You, girl.” He walked over to me and pulled me up. “How much for you?”

“How much d'you have?” I smiled at him and ran my fingers over his crotch. Like clockwork, it stiffened underneath my hand.

He laughed. “You have a room?”

“If you pay for it.” That was the standard answer. “I'll show you.”

It wasn't much of a room, but the door locked, and I was reasonably sure there were no holes drilled anywhere in the walls for interested bystanders. I shut it behind me.

"Yes...sir? What would you like?" I took a step toward him, trying not to show my real feelings. I used to be good at shutting off my real feelings.

"What do you think?" He threw the hat off, and his blond hair gleamed. I shut my eyes.

I'd thought I wasn't going to see him again. "I think you're crazy. Stupid."

"I am crazy stupid." Rey's fingers tightened on my shoulders, and I winced. "But did you really think you could get out of here on the coach without someone else finding you? They're searching everywhere, asking questions."

"My horse went lame, so I have no other way to go. I didn't think they'd expect to see Traven as a girl." I shrugged.

"Idiot." His eyes blazed at me, and I was lost in them, just like the first time.

I couldn't keep my emotions away. They were tangling up my mind, making me not want to think, not remember what was best for me and for others.

"She deserves to be beaten." Calle's voice came from the window as he carefully swung the rest of his body into the room. "Can I watch?"

I'd even missed him. Damn it.

"So." Rey settled on the creaky bed, with me on his lap. It almost gave way under his weight and mine.

"So...what?"

"Where are we heading? We don't have to wait. I got another horse from Tía in exchange for some of the chickens and a cow."

"I got the damn horse, you mean." Calle snorted.

"You don't want to go, Rey. It's dangerous for you." *And you matter too much to me now.*

"Where are we going, Mosquito? Or are you going to make me guess? I've had a lot of time to think about it—to try to think like you—while I guessed where you'd gone. I'm getting good at it, even though it makes my head hurt. And if you think you're going to leave me behind again, be sure to kill me first. That's the only way it's going to happen."

I gave in and let him hold me. I even put my head against his chest and let myself count the heartbeats, strong and steady under my ear. Call me weak. At least I didn't cry, the way I suddenly wanted to.

I wasn't alone after all. Rey wasn't going to let me be.

"How did you find me?" I asked in turn.

Rey looked grim. "I tried using my brain once I lost track of you. You had no supplies even when you did have a horse. Where else could you go?"

"I'm not staying in Medianoche for long."

"That's the first thing you've said that I've agreed with in a long time. There's something bad brewing here." Rey rubbed his forehead. "I haven't heard anything about the compound. Nothing. I don't like it."

"Me either. I wonder if my father set a trap. Or if the Feds thought he did. I would have, if I'd heard Mosca had come and gone and had kept the compound open. Or—No, I don't like it either."

"Then can we leave?" Calle asked. "*Por favor*. Once you tell us where the hell we're going."

I gave in. They'd have to know soon, anyhow. "To the only place I can think of. To my father's."

"Fuck. We're going to die. You're going to let her take us right to our graves." I could feel Calle's stare, could almost touch the envy and lust directed at Rey and me. It was a truce, then, not peace between us.

Rey threw his arms open. "I'm a deserter, kid. Mosca is not going to welcome me home to the army. I don't *want* to be welcomed home."

I'd already figured that Rey hadn't exactly asked permission to leave, but that wasn't why I hesitated. I guess I wasn't used to explaining. It was dangerous.

But this was Rey. The man who loved me.

"Mosca is the only one with the answers. The only one who has whatever doctors and researchers the Federistas don't have. Plus, he's not the kind of person who would create a drug

and not an antidote. He might not tell anyone, but he always has a backup when things go wrong. I need to see him, Rey. Do you have any better ideas?”

“No.” He grinned at me. “I wouldn't dare. All right. I trust you. Let's go. But, kid?”

“Yeah.”

“I don't mind you being the idea person. You have some big ideas. But let me handle the logistics. You suck at that.”

“A partnership. All right. As long as you know who's in charge.” I kept my own grin to myself.

“Can we go now?” Calle looked out the window again.

I took Rey's hand. “Now we can.”

His eyes glittered down at me, reckless and compelling.

Click.

He'd handcuffed my wrists behind me. It took some effort, but I kept my mouth from dropping open.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“Arresting you. Federistas are sworn to clean up moral corruption, and you, lady, have tried to lure a Federista officer to have sex for money. I'm taking you to the territorial court.” He sounded exactly like a pompous Federista officer.

“You bastard. Do you think this is the right time for payback?” I pulled at the cuffs, but he obviously wasn't playing about restraining me.

“I think this will get us out of Medianoche without anyone asking questions.” He shoved me, and I staggered forward a little bit. “Calle, pack her things and meet us at the fork in the road outside town. No one would be surprised to find a thief stealing in a prostitute's room. Anyone here will shut their eyes if they see you leaving out the window. Bribe them if you do get caught.”

“I'd like to stay and watch. She looks good like that.” Calle smiled, stiffly, almost as if he were forced to.

“Yeah. I might keep her that way for a while. You never know who might be watching.” Those damned blue eyes were amused and so seductive that I almost smiled myself.

Instead I raised my voice as he opened the door. “Federista bastard! You just wanted to have me without paying me.”

I managed to give his shins a good kick.

“I’m sure the judge will be happy to hear all your excuses before he sentences you.” He gave me a none-too-gentle shove, and we started down the stairs. “Come on. We have a long ride ahead of us.”

A long, long ride. I felt the weight of the cuffs and wondered just what I’d do to repay him for this.

The journey back to my father might have a few better moments than I’d expected.

 THE END 

Loose Id(R) Titles by Treva Harte

Carry On
I Heart That City: Silent Partner
King in Check
Never Never Land
The Deviants, Vols. 1 – 3
The Seduction of Sean Nolan
The Wildling
Tying the Knot
Why Me?
Wicked

The ALPHA Series

Walk Away
Stay
Home
Hunted Down
Beg
Heal

The QUEEN'S RULES Series

Every Good Boy Deserves Favor
King of the Castle

“Twelve Nights of Christmase”

Part of the anthology *Nicely Naughty*

With MaryJanice Davidson and Lani Aames

Treva Harte

Treva Harte lives near a city with many, many attorneys. Thanks to Loose Id and her writing, she is now able to be a recovering attorney and spends her time writing, editing, raising adolescents, taking care of an elderly mother and dealing with a hyperactive husband (he says he's just very energetic.) She is also co-owner and Editor-in-Chief of the e-publishing company [Loose Id](#).

She and her husband both like writing in whatever time they have left, so they often fight over—sorry, since he is still a practicing attorney they NEGOTIATE—keyboard time. No wonder Treva's particular brand of sensual romance is a bit offbeat and usually mixed with fantasy.