



'TIL DEATH

DEADLY

*Obsession*

KRIS NORRIS

A Total-E-Bound Publication



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Deadly Obsession

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**Warning:** This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

**'Til Death**

**DEADLY OBSESSION**

**Kris Norris**

## *Dedication*

To Kyle and Jared, my future rock stars. I can't wait to say, "I knew you when..."

To Sydney, my brilliant little artist. One day, your beautiful pictures will grace more than just my walls.

To my dad, Norm, who can still tell me what's wrong with my car with only a telephone call.

To the fabulous folks at TEB. You really are the best. Claire, an author couldn't ask for a better publisher. Alexa, a girl couldn't have had a more fabulous FLE. And to the awesomely talented cover artists. You ladies rock.

And, of course, to Chris. Thanks for your patience on this one and for keeping me honest. As usual, your wisdom and insight helped make this book more than just a collection of words. Oh, and you really are stuck with me now.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Chapter One

### March 12<sup>th</sup> – Seattle – Quill and Ink Bookstore

Brooklyn Matthews sat behind the table, pen poised between her fingers, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She stared at the crisp, blank page, listening to the woman ramble on about her sister and how much they loved reading her books.

“We’re your biggest fans,” the woman said in a heated rush, threading all the words together in her haste. “We’ve read all your books. I like *Sarah’s Secret* the best, but Marg, the sister I was telling you about, she thought *Badge of Honour* was better. Don’t get me wrong, I liked it too, but I still think this is your best work.” She paused to gulp down a large breath of air. “Do you have a favourite, Ms. Matthews?”

Brooklyn looked up from the flap of the book. She’d tuned the lady out ten minutes ago, and other than her name, hadn’t heard enough to even hazard a guess at an exceptional answer. She smiled, twirling the pen around her fingers. “Am I making the dedication out to you?” she asked. “Or did you say this was for your sister?”

The woman hesitated, giving Brooklyn a puzzled look, before flashing another exuberant smile. “For me...please. As I was saying, *Sarah’s Secret* is my favourite novel of yours.”

“That’s very kind of you to say,” replied Brooklyn, scribbling the same, sentimental words across the white paper. She signed her name, closing the book as she handed it back across the table.

The woman giggled with joy, clutching the treasured pages to her chest, as she rose from the seat and headed for the door. Brooklyn looked around the small store, relieved the steady stream of eager fans had dissipated. She sighed and glanced at her watch. Only half an hour before she was scheduled to meet Gage at the lawyer’s office, and she definitely needed a breather before she’d be ready to face him. She rose from the padded, wooden chair, fidgeting with her hair again, before heading towards the back of the store. At least, she could steal a few moments of quiet in the woman’s restroom, even if it meant listening to the steady drone of elevator music playing across the intercom.

She ducked down a small hallway, skirting a discarded bucket and mop. She turned left at the end, but stopped at the entrance, staring at the muck splattered across the floor and the large, yellow sign blocking the doorway.

*Out of Service.*

She stepped back, reading the black, block letters with a sigh. She backtracked to the hallway, opening the door to the men's room. The only male employee had scampered off on a break, and she doubted the manager would care which restroom she hid in.

"Hello?" She stepped inside, ignoring the predominately male scent lingering in the air, and headed for the sink, eager to spray a handful of cool water across her face. Of all the days to have a book signing, today was by far the worst. She never would've agreed if her agent hadn't conned her into it, subtly reminding her how well her books did when she mingled amidst her fans. While it was usually one of her favourite activities, her heart just wasn't in it today. She looked down at her left hand, noticing how bare it looked. She feigned a smile, telling herself it was all for the best...Gage didn't love her, so why make them both suffer?

She wiped a tear from her cheek, feeling others sting her eyes. She hadn't seen Gage in the past three weeks, and it'd been over six months since they'd made love. She lowered her head, remembering their last encounter. He'd been angry, and had touched her in a way she'd never forgotten. Her heart clenched wishing the memory was one to cherish rather than forget. It marked the beginning of the end.

She stifled a sob, biting her bottom lip for strength, when something cold brushed against her back. She looked in the mirror just as the blade pierced her shirt, sinking into her flesh until the hilt locked against her skin. Her chest constricted as her throat clamped around a scream. She locked her fingers around the porcelain rim as an arm reached around her chest, pulling her backwards. She slammed into a man's chest, feeling the knife twist in his grip.

"Did you think you could escape me, Sarah?" he slurred, brushing the side of his woollen mask against her neck. "Did you really think I wouldn't find you?" He slid his hand under her shirt, cupping her breast as he gazed at her reflection, inhaling deeply. "What an intoxicating scent," he mused, plumping her flesh, rubbing his erection against the cleft of her buttocks. "You smell good enough to eat, precious."

Brooklyn stared at the mirror, her body frozen, as the pain buckled her knees, leaving her sagging in his arms, the shaft of the knife holding her up. He was a full head taller than she was, with large shoulders and strong arms. He was covered in black, from the ski mask on his face to the sweater and pants hugging his body. They were tight, clinging to every inch of his muscular frame. She looked into his eyes, watching the brown colour turn black with desire. And though she couldn't see his mouth, she knew he was smiling.

"This is only the beginning, Sarah. And if you survive, you'll prove you're worthy of my love." He pulled the knife free laughing as she fell to the floor. "Don't disappoint me, Sarah. I'll be waiting."

\* \* \* \*

Special Agent Gage Matthews sat in the wide, leather chair, tapping his fingers on the polished, oak table. He'd been waiting for nearly an hour, and the three cups of coffee he'd pilfered were pushing his already frayed nerves to the limit.

She was late.

He growled. Why he'd agreed to meet her today was a mystery. He should've known better than to believe she'd be able to drag herself away from her precious fans for something as insignificant as the end of their ten-year marriage. But he'd shown up anyway, papers clenched between his fingers, his ring hidden on the gold chain around his neck. He'd even arrived a few minutes early, hoping to keep their meeting to a minimum, no longer able to bear being in the same room with her. Not with the way she looked at him, like he was a stranger instead of her husband.

"Damn it!" he cursed, crumpling the Styrofoam cup in his hand.

He looked at his watch again. If she didn't show up soon, he'd have to leave and prolong the torture for yet another week. He stared down at the papers stacked between his hands. He'd never thought it'd come to this. While he wasn't above righting a wrong, marrying Brooklyn hadn't been wrong.

He cursed again, pounding his fist on the table when the door cracked open. He turned, expecting his soon to be ex-wife to come bounding into the room, her long, brown hair flowing behind her. No doubt she'd be dressed in her favourite beige pants and purple,

cotton shirt that clung to her body just enough to hint at the lean physique hiding beneath it. He knew every inch of that body. The feel of her breasts in his hands, so soft and smooth he could spend hours touching them, caressing them with his lips. Suckling her nipples into his mouth, feeling them tighten into hard buds. She liked it when he nipped at them, then laved them gently with his tongue, bringing her to the edge between pleasure and pain. She would arch into him. Spear her fingers through his hair. Beg him to stop, but then moan in desperation when he moved away.

He'd laugh and tweak them between his fingers as he roved down her body. Her stomach was tight and strong, but with enough softness she felt totally feminine against his hard body. She had two scars above her hips. One from an emergency appendectomy five years ago, when he'd almost lost her. The other was a long, jagged mark, compliments of a car accident when she was ten. She'd lost her parents in that accident and had been raised by her grandparents. Both marks were sensitive, and he enjoyed watching her squirm when he licked them, teasing her into a fiery need. She'd beg him to stop, to move lower.

God, how he loved moving lower.

Her skin was bare, every inch waxed clean. He could still see her silky lips quivering beneath his tongue. They would swell with arousal, opening slightly to reveal the delicate folds inside. She'd gasp when he'd slip his tongue through her narrow slit, circling her clit, lapping the slick cream into his mouth. She tasted sweet, like honey and peaches, and he never got tired of licking her.

Damn, just thinking about it made his cock tighten painfully inside his pants. He hadn't had sex in over six months, and the need for release was only getting stronger. But it wouldn't be with Brooklyn, and the reality of that was slowly driving him insane. He set his jaw, ignoring the throbbing in his groin as he watched the gap widen.

"Gage?"

Gage stood up, running his fingers through his hair as Jack Reynolds walked into the room, his sombre expression more evident than usual. "Jack. Where the hell is she? I've been sitting in here for an hour. While I realise my job isn't as glamorous as hers, it's still important." He shifted his feet, shoving his hands into his pockets before he felt the need to strangle something...or someone.

"Gage, I need you to sit down for a moment."



"Oh God, don't tell me she isn't coming? Damn it, this is the second time she's bailed on me. You'd think she'd at least have the sense to show up since she's the one who wants the divorce. What happened this time? Her fans barricade her inside the bookstore?"

Jack sighed, patting Gage gently on the shoulder. "Just do me a favour and sit down."

Gage tensed, easing back into the soft leather. "What's going on? Where's Brooklyn?"

Jack pulled his lips into a thin line, slowly exhaling. "It seems there was an incident at the bookstore."

The hair on Gage's neck prickled. "What type of incident?"

"I'm sorry. I wish there was an easy way to tell you this." He paused, looking around the room as if searching for someone to take his place. "I'm afraid Brooklyn was attacked. Someone stabbed her in the back while she was in the restroom. Luckily, her agent saw a man dressed in black running out the back and thought enough to investigate. She called nine-one-one, and they've taken Brooklyn to Harborview."

Gage stared at Jack unable to speak. The temperature in the room had suddenly risen, and he was finding it hard to breathe. He turned back to the stack of papers, the word, *Divorce*, shimmering in the harsh, florescent light. He forced himself to swallow. "There must be some kind of mistake," he rasped, wanting to stand up, but not sure if his legs would hold him. He looked back at Jack. "She was at a book signing. She goes to them all the time."

Jack pulled out the chair beside him and sat down. "There's no mistake. Emma called me personally. Said she'd tried your cell a dozen times, but kept getting your voice mail."

"I turned it off," he mumbled. "I didn't want anything to interrupt the meeting...drag it out longer than necessary." Gage watched Jack nod. "How is she?"

"All Emma said was that she'd lost a lot of blood."

"But she's okay, right?"

"I'm sure they're doing all they can..."

Jack's voice faded as Gage pushed to his feet and headed for the door, ignoring the strange ringing in his ears. He thought the man mumbled something about stopping by the hospital later, but it was lost in the sound of Gage's blood pounding through his veins. He headed for the elevators, cursing when the damn doors just stood there, refusing to let him inside and made for the stairs. Though he wouldn't put it past Emma to exaggerate

Brooklyn's condition, there was something about the way Jack had looked at him that had sent a cold shiver down his spine.

He pulled out his cell as he descended the steps, trying to still the sudden trembling in his hands and dialled Emma's number. She answered on the second ring.

"Emma Tate."

Her voice was thick and shaky, and the mere sound of it sent his adrenaline into overdrive. "Emma, it's Gage."

"Jesus, Gage, I've been trying to reach you for over an hour!" she shrieked, her voice a full pitch higher than usual. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way to the hospital. What happened?"

Emma sobbed, pushing the words out in a heated rush. "I'm not sure. I saw...and then I found..."

Gage cursed as the woman fell into hysterics, crying into the phone. He took a deep breath, trying to still the fear now tight in his chest. "Emma, try to relax. We can talk about that later. Just tell me how Brooklyn is."

"I don't know yet. The doctors haven't told me anything. They took her up to surgery a little while ago." She paused. "Oh God, there was so much blood."

Gage clenched his jaw, throwing open the door to the parking lot as he listened to Emma sob in his ear. He took the lot at a full sprint, clicking his truck door open as he juggled the phone to his other hand. "I'll be there soon," he mumbled.

"We're on the second floor."

Gage snapped the lid shut, tossing the cell on the console as he slipped inside and revved the engine. It was a thirty-minute drive, but he could make it in just over fifteen. He spun out of the space, ignoring how the scenery passed in a hazy blur. Everything would be all right. Brooklyn would be fine, and he'd spend the rest of his life hating the only woman he knew he'd ever love.

\* \* \* \*

Gage swept into the second floor waiting room. He spotted Emma from the doorway, and headed straight for her. "Where is she?"

Emma jumped at his voice and looked up. "Gage, you made it."

"Where's Brooklyn?"

Emma shook her head, coveting a cup of coffee against her chest. "Still in surgery. The doctor said he'd come down when he knew something."

Gage held back the growl building in his chest and sat down on the faded, grey sofa. Emma's eyes were puffy and rimmed in red. He wondered what it must have been like for her to find Brooklyn. She was more than his wife's agent. She was one of her closest friends. He glanced over at her, watching her thumb the edge of the cup.

"It wasn't your fault."

Emma huffed, breaking a small chunk of Styrofoam off the rim. "She wouldn't have been there if I hadn't convinced her to go."

"You know she loves meeting her fans. She always has."

"But not today." Her voice was shrill and edged with the same guilt that flashed in her hazel eyes. "She didn't want to go to this one, not when she knew she had to meet you after. I had to beg her to do it...blackmail her, actually."

Gage looked away, wondering if it'd been him or the divorce she'd been reluctant to deal with. He sighed, certain he knew the answer. "Don't be silly. Brook's her own boss. If she really hadn't wanted to go, she would've found a way out." He met her gaze, but then looked down at his feet. "How bad was it?"

"Pretty bad. She was lying on the floor, surrounded by blood. I didn't expect to find a pulse."

Gage clenched his jaw, trying not to picture the image Emma had created with just those few words. He'd seen more than his share of bodies, and didn't want to add Brooklyn's face to any of them. "Did she regain consciousness at all?" he asked, aware of the roughness in his voice.

Emma shook her head.

He nodded, staring down at his feet again. He didn't know what else to say. He could tell by the nervous twitching of her fingers she wasn't in any condition to answer his questions, and the lengthening silence between them was slowly driving him crazy.

*You'll just have to sit here and wait.*

He growled at the thought. He'd done nothing but wait all day – wait until it was time to go to Reynolds' office, wait for Brooklyn to show up, wait to see if she'd live long enough to erase him from her life.

"Excuse me? Are you related to the woman they brought in earlier?" The doctor looked down at the report fastened on his clipboard. "A Ms. Brooklyn Matthews?"

Gage stood up, nearly knocking the man's chest. "How is she?"

"And you are?" he asked, raising his eyebrow in challenge.

"This is Special Agent Gage Matthews," said Emma, standing up beside Gage. "And I'm Emma Tate. I'm Brooklyn's agent."

"Special Agent," repeated the doctor. "I didn't realise this was a federal investigation."

"It's not." Gage paused, and glanced down at his left hand, wishing he hadn't taken his damn ring off. "I'm Brooklyn's...husband."

The doctor nodded, shifting a glance at Gage's left hand. "Sorry. I didn't make the connection with the last name." He sighed. "You'll have to excuse me, it's been a long day." He motioned for them both to sit, sinking down on the small coffee table in front of them. "I'm Dr. Nick O'Brian. I operated on your wife."

"And?" asked Gage.

"She's alive. I'm not really sure how, but she seems to be holding her own. We've taken her to the I.C.U. department until she's stable enough to be moved into a private room."

Gage let out the breath he'd been holding and Emma sobbed into a Kleenex. "Thank God," he mumbled.

"There're a few things I'd like to discuss with you – Gage, was it?" asked Nick.

Gage nodded, not sure he liked the concerned look in the doctor's eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"Not wrong, just not completely right yet. I just want you to fully understand your wife's condition. Like I said, the fact she made it through surgery is encouraging, but she's not out of the woods yet. We're having trouble stabilising her blood pressure, and her cell count is way below normal. There's still a chance we could lose her, though she seems to be quite a fighter." Nick stood up. "The next twenty-four hours are critical. As long as we can keep her from going into cardiac arrest, she should pull through."

"When can I see her?" asked Gage.

"I'll take you now, if you'd like. She's still unconscious, and I doubt she'll wake up before tomorrow." He smiled at Gage. "She was very lucky."

"Sorry," said Gage, crossing his arms in front of him. "But I'm not seeing the luck side of this."

"As far as knife wounds go, hers did very little damage, especially considering the width and depth of the laceration. Do you know what the weapon was?"

"I haven't been to the scene yet, so I don't know if they recovered anything. I assumed it was just a regular knife."

"There was nothing regular about what cut your wife. I've never seen a wound that large before. Looked like she'd be run through with a sword." Nick shook his head. "That's why I said she was lucky. As bad as it was, it managed to miss all the major organs." He scratched his chin, his eyes distant. "It's almost as if her assailant knew exactly where to stab her to do the least amount of damage. If I didn't know better, I'd think the guy wanted her to live." He glanced back at Gage, motioning him forward with a flick of his wrist. "If you'd kindly follow me."

Gage looked over at Emma, but she waved him off.

"I'll drop by tomorrow. You need some time alone with her."

"Thanks," he said, following the doctor down the brightly lit hallway. He didn't like the gnawing sensation the doctor's words had formed in his stomach. It usually meant things weren't what they seemed.

That usually meant trouble.

"My brother's a Federal Agent," said Nick, leading Gage through a maze of hallways and doors. "He works out of the office in Reno. He's been there nearly twenty years." He looked back at Gage over his shoulder. "How long have you been with the Bureau?"

"Fifteen," said Gage.

"Right out of college, huh." He smiled, dodging around a rush of interns. He took several more steps and then stopped in front of a set of large, glass doors. "Have you been married long?"

"Ten years next month."

Nick nodded. He reached out and touched Gage's shoulder. "I realise you've seen..." His voice trailed off. "It's different when it's someone you love."

"I can handle it."

Nick sighed, opening the doors with a gentle whoosh of air. He walked straight ahead, stopping at the bed second on the right. "Judging by what I know about Federal Agents, I suppose you'll insist on staying." He smiled at Gage's guarded nod. "I'll clear it with the nurses...see they don't try to kick you out at two in the morning. Just do me a favour and try to keep out of their way. And for God's sake, stay back if they have to treat her."

"You mean bring her back to life when she dies in front of my eyes?"

Nick patted him on the shoulder again. "I'm hoping it won't come to that." He moved aside. "You can hold her hand, talk to her...whatever you like. I, for one, believe it helps."

Gage brushed past the man, stepping up to the side of the bed. He looked down at Brooklyn's head peeking out from beneath the covers and nearly fainted on the spot. Her face was the same colour as the sheets and the ends of her hair were still matted with blood. There were lines and tubes sticking out of both arms, and it looked as if she wasn't even breathing.

Nick moved behind him, positioning his arms as if he intended on catching Gage when he fell. Gage grabbed the bar of the bed, steadying himself for several seconds before finally releasing it. Nick sighed and stepped to the edge of the bed.

"I'll check in on the two of you later. I've got my pager and instructions for the staff to beep me if anything happens. Try to get some sleep."

He left, leaving Gage alone with a ghostly version of his wife. He stared down at her again, fighting the sudden dizziness, as he reached out and touched her cheek. Her skin was cold and didn't bounce back when he removed his finger. His chest tightened and tears burned his eyes. He sat down, cupping her hand in his. Her fingers were small and delicate, and for the first time since he'd met her, she seemed fragile. He brought her hand to his face, kissing her fingers as he stroked her skin. Then he lowered the railing, placed his head next to hers, and waited.

## Chapter Two

The dream returned.

Gage pulled into the driveway, his heart racing, his anger barely contained beneath the surface. The house was dark, quiet. She must be asleep. His fists clenched at the thoughts that seared his mind.

*Brooklyn naked. Another man's hands caressing her body.*

He felt...

Damn, there was no way to describe how he felt. He cursed, stepping out of the truck as he headed for the door. He shouldn't be there, not when he wasn't certain how he'd react when he saw her. He opened the door and stepped inside. He could smell the sweet scent of her perfume lingering in the air. Lavender, mixed with a hint of rose. He felt a stab of pain stake through his heart.

*Turn around. Turn around before you do something stupid.*

He headed for the stairs, turning right at the top. Their bedroom door was closed, a faint gleam of light filtering through the small crack by the floor. He fisted the handle, stilling the need to bounce the damn thing off the wall, and slowly inched it open. She was sitting on the bed, her laptop open across her legs. But she wasn't working. Her head was bowed to her chest, slightly angled towards her right shoulder, and her hands were resting beside the keyboard.

Had she been writing? Or waiting up for him?

He stepped inside, tossing his coat across a chair, as he watched her. Her breathing was slow and steady, gently raising her breasts, and her mouth was frozen in the beginnings of a smile. God, she was beautiful. His pulse quickened, as his cock thickened inside his pants. He wanted her.

*"I'm just having lunch with Emma. We're going over some details on the book. I'll see you at home later."*

Her words echoed in his head. He'd been watching her. Studying her face as she'd sat at the table and lied to him. He clenched his jaw, once again trying to persuade himself to leave. He moved to the door.

"Gage?"

*He should yell. Demand answers. Dare her to lie to his face.*

"You're home late tonight."

*Holding another man's hand. Naked. Lovers.*

"You sure have been busy these last few months. How's Sam?"

Gage turned. Her eyes were the deepest blue he'd ever seen. So full of life, of love.

*For you, or that bastard?*

"Sam's fine. He said to say hello. Wants to know if we'll go over for dinner next week with Sue."

Brooklyn smiled, pulling the covers aside as she laid her computer on the floor before standing up and walking over to him. She reached up and loosened his tie. "Sounds like fun. Do you think you can pull yourself away from your job long enough to go?"

"I'll try," he replied, moaning as she rubbed her body against his, tossing the tie to the floor.

She felt so small next to him, her body melding into his. She pressed her head against his chest, as she grazed her fingers across his stomach.

"Brooklyn..."

"You're so tense." She nuzzled her face against his neck, licking her way to his mouth. "Everything okay?"

He looked into her eyes, trying to remember how it felt to see her with him, that bastard, when she reached down and began undoing his pants. "Now's not a good time."

She smiled, running her tongue across his lower lip, nipping at it until he took her mouth. Her tongue grazed across his, softly stroking it into her mouth. He tightened his fingers around her shoulders, pressing his lips harder against hers. She pulled back.

"Easy, baby." She licked his lips again as she popped open the buttons of his shirt, revealing the sleek muscles of his chest. "You look like you need to relax. Why don't you let me help you out with that?"

"Brooklyn!"



"I know. It's not a good time." She slid her fingers down his chest, tweaking his nipples as she moved lower until she reached his pants. She paused, watching his face as she slowly finished opening them, and pushed them down across his thighs. "But I promise, if you just wait for a few moments, I'll make it a good time."

He opened his mouth in protest just as she released his erection, stroking his cock so damn slowly his breath caught in his chest, stilling the words still formed on his tongue. He moaned, watching her face as she knelt down, dropping kisses across his chest, his stomach, his thighs, as she seared a path to his groin. She hummed, her lips softly vibrating against his skin as she skirted past his engorged head and kissed his other thigh.

"You work too much," she whispered, planting another kiss at the base of his shaft, brushing her cheek against his skin. "You need more time here...with me." She looked up at him, meeting his heated gaze as she poked out her tongue and drew it down the length of his cock, flicking it over the crown.

"God damn."

"Shhh. Don't distract me." She moved again, running her tongue down the other side, licking away a small drop of pre-cum from the tip. "Mmm. Rewarded already. How very generous of you."

"Darling, please. We need to talk."

"We can talk after I'm done. Unless we can find something else to do."

He speared his hands through her hair, intending to pull her away, when she slipped her lips around him and took him deep into her mouth. "Oh, God."

His resolve vanished, his anger but a fleeting memory lost amidst the moans of pleasure Brooklyn murmured around his erection. She suckled him, her cheeks hollowed, her tongue laving the bottom of his flared head, as she moved slowly down his shaft, taking over half his length into her mouth.

"So good," he rasped. "So damn good."

He fisted her hair, pressing his palms against her head, as he began moving with her. She cupped his scrotum in one hand as the other held the weight of his cock. Easing the pressure so her mouth could slide along his skin. She slurped at him, swallowing every drop of fluid that eased from the tip, moaning in pleasure at the taste. God, she was good. Taking his cock deeper as his thrusting increased. He loved feeling her hot mouth stretched around

him. It was all he could do to stem his release, prolong the pleasure until the need was almost painful.

“Still a bad time?” she asked, releasing him long enough to lick down the shaft and across his scrotum.

He moaned as she gently sucked each one into her mouth, laving them with her tongue. “Darling.”

“Hush. I’m not finished yet.” She looked up at him, drawing her finger into her mouth, moistening it with the same bobbing motion, before easing it free. “There’s still one area I have yet to attend to.” She smiled, taking his cock back into her mouth as she reached around to the cleft of his buttocks, slowly tracing it downwards until she reached his anus. He growled when she sank one knuckle into his ass, probing gently, but firmly against his tight muscles.

“God damn.”

He gasped, fighting to breathe, his legs so tense he wasn’t sure he could stay standing. But she refused to stop. She moved faster, clamping her lips harder around his cock, stroking her finger into his ass in perfect time with her bobbing mouth. His release tingled along his spine, tightening his scrotum, beading his body with sweat. He was close.

“Enough.” He moved away, stripping his shirt off as he stepped out of his pants and pulled Brooklyn off the floor. “Bed. Now.”

His voice was harsh, demanding, and he could see the flash of hunger in her eyes. She liked it when he took control. Used his strength to overpower her. Tonight would be no exception.

Brooklyn moved with him to the bed, her fingers firmly wrapped around his arm. “Something else on your mind now?”

He ignored her, grabbing the knot of her robe. He yanked, nearly ripping it as he flung it across the chair. She was dressed in a dark purple camisole and matching thong panties. He almost came just looking at her. He gave her body a long look, stopping at her groin. Though the panties were nearly black, he could still see the wet spot marking her arousal. His jaw twitched. Any other night, he’d spend an hour just teasing her. Lapping her juices until she was so close to climaxing he could feel her vagina quivering. Then he’d stop, stimulate her breasts, maybe play with her tight little ass. He groaned. He’d never taken her

there. They'd only just started exploring that area of their bodies, and his size necessitated more preparations.

But not tonight.

"Knees."

Brooklyn looked up at him, her brow furrowed in concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Knees." He pushed her onto the bed, not waiting for her to comply. Tonight he'd take her anally, before his bastard brother had the chance. Tonight he'd prove who really owned her. Tonight...

"Excuse me, Agent Matthews?"

Gage bolted awake, staring at the young nurse. "What's wrong?" His gaze flew to Brooklyn.

The nurse smiled at him. "Nothing's wrong. Dr. O'Brian just left. He's decided your wife's vital signs are stable enough for us to move her into her own room."

Gage glanced at his watch. "But it's only been twelve hours. I thought she needed to stay here for at least twenty-four?"

"Dr. O'Brian feels she's out of danger now." She stopped and laughed softly. "He also thought you'd be more comfortable if you could sleep on the couch in your wife's room, instead of the chair."

Gage smiled despite his thoughts, sitting back as they readied Brooklyn for the trip to her room. He stretched his back, groaning at the stiffness in his muscles. He hadn't moved since he'd planted his ass in the chair, afraid he'd miss the moment she regained consciousness, not that she'd necessarily want him there. He sighed, remembering the dream. He hadn't thought about that night for weeks, and wondered why it'd haunted him tonight.

He shook his head, forcing his aching body upright, as he followed the small procession down the hall and into a waiting elevator. They went up four flights and down another long corridor to the last room in the wing. It was pleasant, with an adjoining washroom and a large window across the far wall. He waited at the door until they'd moved her onto the small bed centred in the room, and then took a seat on the couch a few feet away. He sank into the cushions, drawn to the simple beauty of her face. She looked peaceful, and it

reminded him of all the times he'd held her in his arms, watching her as she slept. Those nights seemed a lifetime ago, and he doubted he'd ever experience anything close to them again.

"How'd we ever let it get to this?" But it was too late. Even if she found it in her heart to forgive him, he'd never be able to forgive himself.

For hurting her.

For not trusting her.

He cursed, leant back and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Gage sat on the couch, watching the sky slowly change colour. Nick had stopped by two hours ago to check Brooklyn's I.V. He'd smiled at Gage, remarking on her encouraging recovery before rushing from the room, his pager screeching in the silence. Gage had moved over to the bed and spent the rest of the time watching her sleep, praying the man hadn't been too hasty in relinquishing all the monitors and equipment, which had constantly assured him she was still alive.

He sighed, wishing she'd wake up and tell him to get lost, when he heard the door creak open. He turned, staring at a man standing in the doorway. He was dressed in blue scrubs and was holding a tray out in front of him. He smiled at Gage, walking silently across the floor to the side of Brooklyn's bed.

Gage shook his head. He'd never get used to male nurses. And the thought of this guy giving Brooklyn a sponge bath anytime in the near future frayed his nerves. The man was tall, muscular, and had a rugged appearance he was certain women found attractive. His hands looked strong and steady, and his movements were so smooth he looked as if he floating over the floor rather than walking.

Gage looked away, not wanting the guy to catch him staring. The lack of sleep was obviously getting to him. He closed his eyes, listening to the sounds of the city echoing outside the window. Sirens wailed in the distance and someone was shouting obscenities at the passing cars. He chuckled, glancing back at the male nurse tending his wife.

*What the...?*

The man was caressing her arm, trailing his hand up and down her skin, running his fingers through the ends of her hair as he smiled wantonly at her. Gage rubbed his eyes. His vision cleared to find the guy merely checking the I.V. and changing the gauze pad layered over the needle. He took a deep breath, calming the pounding in his chest. He needed to relax. Brooklyn was safe...it was over.

"She's very strong."

Gage shifted his attention, meeting the man's gaze. "Excuse me?"

"I said, she's very strong."

"You could say that."

"Not many people would've survived a wound like that." He turned to look at Brooklyn's face. "She's special."

Gage stared at the man. Why did the guy's tone send a cold shiver down his spine? He watched as the man checked her pulse, pressing his fingers against Brooklyn's wrist. "I believe the doctor referred to it as luck."

The man laughed, shaking his head as he straightened the sheet around her, lingering over Brooklyn's shoulder in a way that made Gage's skin crawl. "I don't believe in luck. Fate, maybe, but not luck." He checked her temperature, scribbling some numbers across her chart. "No, she survived because she was worthy."

Gage frowned. "I'm not so sure about fate, or worthiness, but whoever did this to her had better have their share of good luck. Because when I get my hands on them, that's all they'll have to rely on."

The man grinned at Gage. "You sound like a cop."

"Federal Agent, actually."

The nurse raised his eyebrows. "She must be pretty important to have gained the protection of the F.B.I. I'd have thought the police were looking into her unfortunate incident."

"They are. Brooklyn's my wife."

The man's jaw twitched as he glanced at Brooklyn. Then the guy whispered something under his breath, before levelling his gaze back towards Gage. "I'll be back later to check her dressing. I need to make sure there's no infection." The nurse scooted around the bed and headed for the door. "Will you be here later?" he asked without turning around.

Gage stared at the man's back, another shiver tingling down his spine. "I'll be here until I can take her home."

The guy looked back at him over his shoulder. "Then I suppose I'll see later, Special Agent."

Gage stared at the closed door, moving back to the chair beside Brooklyn's bed. The man had made him feel possessive, and suddenly his need to assert ownership over her had become paramount. He stared down at his hand, wondering if he should put his ring back on. He searched her finger and sank back in the chair. She'd moved on, or so he'd heard, and he needed to do the same. He reached out and took her hand in his, drawing it against his cheek. Her skin was cold and he felt the need to warm it. He'd move on after he knew she was safe...after she asked him to leave.

\* \* \* \*

"You look like shit, you know that." Special Agent Sam Houston stood in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a red T-shirt, the gun holstered around his shoulders partially covered by a brown leather jacket. He nodded at Brooklyn as he stopped at the end of her bed. "How is she?"

"Alive. Other than that, they haven't said much. They moved her up here from the I.C.U. a few hours ago, so I guess that means she's getting better." Gage followed his friend's gaze. "She looks like death to me."

Sam nodded and sat down in the chair Gage offered him. "Sorry to break it to you, buddy, but like I said, you don't look much better." He waved his hand at Gage's face. "You've got black circles under your eyes and that's yesterday's five o'clock shadow." He forced a smile. "Get any sleep?"

"A couple of hours here and there." Gage looked at his wife. "I didn't want to miss it if she woke up." He turned back to Sam. "Thanks for going to bookstore for me. I don't think I would have been too useful last night."

Sam smiled, patting him on the shoulder. "Don't mention it. Besides, I know you'd do the same for me."

"So what did you find out?" asked Gage, hoping Sam didn't hear the tension in his voice.

Sam sighed, kicking the floor with the toe of his boot. "Not much, I'm afraid. By the time I got there, the CSI guys were photographing and swabbing everything in sight. I had to wait to get a look at the restroom." He shook his head. "Other than the obvious blood, there didn't seem to be much evidence. I asked some questions, but one of the officers was all worried about 'jurisdiction.' He kept going on about how this isn't a Federal investigation, so I didn't get the answers I wanted." He met Gage's gaze. "I had a feeling you might want to check the place out, yourself, so I called an old buddy of mine, Trevor Watts. He heads the homicide unit over in the Southwest precinct. His guys aren't fielding the case, but he agreed to meet us there later today and let us have a look around...if it's want you want."

A slight quiver formed in Gage's stomach. "I don't see as I have much of a choice."

"I could go back...alone."

"Thanks, but I think I need to go...it might help me better understand what happened."

"Whatever you say." Sam got back up. "I'll go grab us some really bad coffee and something that resembles a Danish. Then we can both sit here and watch her sleep."

"You don't have to stay, Sam."

"Sure I do." He headed for the door. "Be right back."

\* \* \* \*

Voices. Familiar. Close.

Brooklyn heard two deep voices echoing through the fog. She felt strange, heavy and weak, and she wasn't sure she had the strength to open her eyes. She started to fade again when she heard her name. She turned her head slightly, prying her eyes open. The images were fuzzy and out of focus. She could see a man sitting directly in front of her, his body only an arm's length away. There was another man beside him, his chair turned to the side. She felt she knew them, but couldn't seem to remember their names.

She closed her eyes, hoping the moisture would sharpen the images, but the edges were still faded when she peered at them again. She focused on the man in front of her, drawn to the familiar curve of his jaw.

“Gage.” She hadn’t realised she’d spoken until he stopped and turned towards her. Relief flooded his expression, tears gathered behind his blue eyes, as he reached out his hand, gently caressing her cheek.

“Brook.” His voice was rough, and she could hear the edge of fear in it.

She tried to lean forward, say his name again, but the small movement ignited a pain in her back and the word came out as a strangled moan. Darkness edged her vision until she was forced to close her eyes. She could feel her consciousness slipping away, taking her away from the pain and back into the fog.

“Brook!”

She opened her eyes again. Gage was dabbing a damp cloth on her forehead. The colour had drained from his face and she could see a single tear rolling down his cheek. “Gage.”

“Easy, darling. Don’t try to talk. Just relax. I sent Sam to fetch the doctor. Get you something for the pain.” He bit at his bottom lip as her eyelids fluttered and rolled, the pain pulling her back into oblivion. “Brook.”

She forced herself to look at him. Her chest hurt when she breathed, and she was finding it hard to swallow. “Where...am...I?”

“Harborview,” he said, still brushing the cloth across her skin. “They brought you in yesterday.”

She closed her eyes. “Hos – pi – tal?” she finally forced out, groaning between syllables. “Why?”

He feigned a smile. “We can talk about that later. You need to rest.”

She shook her head, clenching her jaw to hold back another moan. “Want...to know.” She tried to catch her breath. “Oh God. Why...why does it...it hurt so much?”

He leaned over her, kissing her forehead. “Don’t you remember?”

“No.” She screamed this time as a sharp pain sliced through her torso.

He grabbed her hand, patting it as if he didn’t know what else to do. “Hold on, darling. Sam should be back any second.”

“She’s awake.” Nick O’Brian walked into the room a few minutes later, a knowing smile on his face. “That’s a good sign.”



"Forget the sign, damn it. She's in pain!" Gage shifted enough for Nick to manoeuvre beside the bed. "She needs something."

Nick nodded, tapping the syringe. "Your partner already expressed that need. Though you might want to advise him we're really not out to watch our patients suffer. Fisting my shirt wasn't necessary. I'd have given her morphine either way."

"Sorry. Sam gets passionate when his friends are in trouble."

"So I've seen," he said, slowly injecting the liquid into Brooklyn's I.V. "It'll only take a few minutes to take effect. Then she'll be much more comfortable."

Brooklyn moaned, and Gage watched her slump on the bed.

"Better?" asked Nick.

She opened her eyes, nodding slightly. "What..."

"Morphine. Not much else will help you at this point. We'll switch to something less potent once you're stronger." He brushed the hair back from her eyes. "I was right. You're quite a fighter." He wedged himself out from between the bed and Gage, heading back to the door. "Rest. Let the medication do its job. I'll be back in a couple of hours. Try to sleep."

"You okay?" asked Gage.

"Better." Her eyelids fluttered again. "Everything's...mixed up."

"Don't try to remember just yet. Give it time." He traced her jaw with his finger, vaguely aware Sam had ventured back into the room. "Try to rest."

She nodded, closing her eyes.

Sam walked over to Gage's side. "Trevor just called. They want to clear the scene, so if you want to pay it a visit, we need to leave now."

"Sure." He looked down at his wife. Her eyes were closed and her breathing had relaxed. "I doubt she'll wake up for another few hours. We should be back by then."

"I can go back alone. I'd understand if you want to stay." Sam touched him on the shoulder. "Might be for the best."

"Just make sure you get me back in a couple of hours."

Sam nodded and headed for the door, Gage close behind.

"Gage."

He stopped, startled by Brooklyn's frail voice. He walked back over, bending down to brush another kiss across her forehead. "Sleep."

"Stay. I feel better when you're here."

Gage choked back another sob. Her eyes were closed and he was positive she wasn't conscious of her words. "I'll be right back. I just need to check something out with Sam. I promise I'll be here when you wake up."

She nodded, brushing her fingers over his as he squeezed her hand. "Love you," she whispered.

Gage stilled. He stared down at her, unable to speak as she faded back to sleep. He glanced over at Sam. He was waiting by the door, hopefully too far away to have heard. Gage straightened, trailing his finger down her side before joining Sam at the door. Sam pushed it open when her voice broke the silence.

"Sarah."

The two men stared at her, not sure they'd heard her correctly.

"Sarah," she called again, groaning as her body went limp.

Sam turned to his partner. "What does, 'Sarah', mean?"

Gage shrugged. "Not sure. Her new novel's called, *Sarah's Secret*. Maybe she's remembering the book signing." He took one more glance back. His stomach clenched and the hair on his neck stood up. Nothing was making sense. "Something doesn't feel right."

"You think she's still in danger?"

"I don't think so. I just..." He huffed. "Damn it, let's just go. The faster we leave, the faster we get back." He looked his friend in the eye. "And I need to get back as quickly as possible."

## Chapter Three

Gage sat in the car as Sam wove through the traffic. Neither of them had spoken since they'd left the hospital, and Gage knew it was only a matter of time before Sam started hounding him.

"You sure you're up to this, buddy?" Sam asked, eyeing him with uncertainty. "You really do look like shit."

"There you go again with the compliments," he said. "And yeah, I'm up to this."

"See you're still determined to convince everyone you're not in love with Brooklyn."

Gage chuckled. He'd wondered how long it'd take Sam to bring up Brooklyn. He glanced at his watch. "You're a minute early, partner. I had you pegged at five."

"Joke all you want, but it's painfully obvious you're still in love with her."

"I never said I didn't love her," he said, staring out the window. "I just can't be married to her anymore."

"Care to explain why?"

Gage grunted, staring at his friend from the passenger seat. "You know bloody well why. Everyone does." He sighed and looked back out the window. "Besides, Brooklyn doesn't want me in her life. She's not in love with me anymore."

"That's why she just begged you to stay with her?" he countered, obviously determined not to let the subject drop.

"Someone just stuck a six-inch blade in her back! She's scared, nothing more. Despite everything that's happened between us, she knows I'd protect her."

"That wasn't fear in her voice. It was love. She wanted you to stay because she loves you...case closed."

Gage focused on Sam's face. Had he heard Brooklyn say she loved him? He watched the man carefully, finally satisfied his friend was merely stating a thought. "Believe what you want to, but I prefer to live in the real world." He watched a group of people cross the street, as Sam stopped for a red light. "She's moved on. Emma told me she went out on a date last week."

Sam snorted. "It wasn't a date it was a charity dinner. And she went with Emma's brother as a favour, so stop trying to change the subject. I know for a fact Brooklyn's still hung up on you."

Sam took the next left, easing his car over to the kerb, wedging it between two police cruisers. Gage stepped out, turning his collar against the chill. The March day was cold and dull, with the promise of rain cloaking the city. He followed Sam through the throng huddled outside the store, stopping long enough for Sam to flash his badge at the cop standing guard.

"Sam."

Sam and Gage turned towards the voice, watching a tall, dark-skinned man move towards them. "Trevor." Sam shook the man's hand. "You remember my partner, Gage Matthews."

Trevor nodded, exchanging a firm handshake with Gage. "We met a few months ago, at a party." He turned back to Sam. "Sorry to call so soon, but the Commissioner wants this cleared up. He says it's bad for tourism to drag crime scene investigations out so long."

"Since when is twenty-four hours long?" asked Gage.

"Hey, you and I know it, but try telling it to headquarters." Trevor sighed and nodded at Gage. "Sorry to hear about your wife. I'm glad she's going to be all right." He waved his hand towards the back of the store. "Everything's still the way we found it. The clean-up crew should be along within the hour, so feel free to take any pictures or samples you want. But I'll tell up front. Our guys didn't find anything other than a single, black fibre. And from what I've heard, it's typical black wool. Could've been bought at any department store. I've been told they ran the prints and blood, but everything came back as Brooklyn's. I'm afraid whoever did this, didn't leave anything behind for us to find."

"Maybe not," said Gage. "But if it's all the same, I'd like to see for myself."

Trevor nodded, stepping aside as Sam headed for the back. Gage followed, nearly slamming into the man's back when Sam stopped in front of the men's washroom. Gage stared at the yellow tape crossing the door and frowned.

"I thought Brooklyn was stabbed in the woman's washroom?" he said, flicking the edge of the tape.

"I found that puzzling as well," said Sam, "until I noticed this." He pointed to a trail of blood droplets scattered across the floor. "I've been thinking that maybe the creep attacked her out here, then dragged her inside."

"Possible," said Gage. "But then why didn't she scream? Trust me, Brooklyn wouldn't go quietly." He glanced back down at the blood. "It could have dropped off the knife on his way out," he suggested before looking away, remembering it was Brooklyn's blood on the floor.

Sam shuffled up beside him, grabbing his arm. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

Gage brushed off Sam's hand. "I didn't come all the way down here just to stand in the hallway." He gave Sam a quick nod. "It's okay. I can handle it."

Sam pursed his lips, pausing with his hand on the door, before pushing it open and stepping inside. Gage followed him in. The room was small and square, with two stalls along the back wall. There was a sink opposite the toilets and a large pool of blood centred on the floor. He stared at the blood, unable to look away, as the room started to spin. He reached out his hand, bracing it against the wall, hoping his legs didn't give out.

"Easy, buddy."

Sam was at his side, shouldering his weight as Gage covered his mouth in an attempt to keep from puking. Good God, how had Brooklyn survived?

"Damn. You'd think I was a bloody rookie," he muttered.

"Hey, it's one thing to analyse a scene. It's another when the blood on the floor belongs to someone you love. Cut yourself some slack." Sam eased his grip as Gage steadied his stance. "And in case you haven't noticed, I can't bring myself to do more than glance at it."

Gage patted Sam on the shoulder. "Thanks." Gage pushed away, walking slowly towards the evidence. He still couldn't imagine what had brought Brooklyn in here. It wasn't her style to use the men's room. "He definitely stabbed her in here," he said.

"He took the knife out of her back in here," agreed Sam. "But I still say he could've dragged her in from the hallway."

Gage shook his head. "No way. That's easily twelve feet. Screaming or not, Brooklyn would've put up a fight if he'd given her that much time. She isn't a blue belt in Jujutsu for nothing." He moved over to the sink. "Prints."

Sam stepped up beside him. "She must have been standing at the sink. The guy was probably waiting in the stall. Sees her bent over washing her hands and sticks the knife in her back before she even knows he's there."

"Explains why she didn't struggle." Gage looked more closely at the sink. "Looks like she was pulled backwards. See how the prints smear towards the rim." He copied the motion with his hands. "He jumps out behind her, stabs her, and then drags her back here before pulling out the knife."

Sam nodded. "He lets go and she falls to the floor. Then the bastard runs out the door, but Emma sees him ducking out the back, and finds Brooklyn unconscious."

"But Emma said she saw Brooklyn lying in a pool of blood. That means she must've been lying here for several minutes. Why did the guy wait so long to leave?"

"Maybe he was rifling through her purse? Or maybe there were people nearby and he had to wait until they left?"

Gage sighed. He had a bad feeling nothing would make much sense until Brooklyn regained her memory, and a part of him hoped she wouldn't. "Well, at least we have a sense of what happened. Now all we have to do is answer why." He motioned to Sam. "We can leave now."

Sam nodded as Gage opened the door and stepped out, careful to avoid the blood. He took two steps towards the door before stopping.

"Something wrong?" asked Sam.

"I just need to check something out." He walked down the hallway and disappeared around the corner.

"Find what you were looking for?" asked Sam as Gage rounded the corner.

"Sort of." He stopped in front of Sam, frowning. "There's nothing wrong with the ladies room. I checked the toilets, they're all working, and there's no lock on the outer door." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I just don't understand why she went in there."

Sam grabbed Gage by the shoulder, easing him forward. "I'm sure Brook can fill that part in when she's stronger. Or maybe Emma will know. We can talk to her later. Either way, I doubt we'll find the answer here." He glanced down at his watch. "And you made me promise to have you back at the hospital before Brook woke up again."

Gage grunted, following Sam to the door. Trevor stepped up beside them as they reached for the handle.

"You guys finished?" asked Trevor.

"It's like you said. There's not much to go over," said Sam. "Thanks for letting us take a look. I owe you one."

"Don't mention it. I'll have our CSI department fax a copy of their findings to you."

"I'd appreciate that." He shook Trevor's hand as he stepped onto the pavement.

"Hey, Gage."

Gage stopped, looking back at the man over his shoulder.

Trevor forced a smile. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do. I hate seeing these kind of crimes go unpunished, especially for one of our own."

Gage nodded. "Thanks." He walked out, joining Sam at the car. "Let's go. I need to be there if Brook wakes up again."

"Sure thing, buddy." Sam smiled. "Wouldn't want to keep you away from the woman you're about to divorce."

Gage growled as he opened the car door. "Just get in and drive."

\* \* \* \*

"Gage." Brooklyn's head tossed on the pillow, a grimace twisting her lips.

"Easy," he soothed. "The medicine should kick in any moment."

"But the mirror...I see..." She drifted off.

Gage sighed and brushed the hair from her face, tracing the gentle curve of her jaw. She'd been restless for nearly an hour, and he'd finally paged the nurse. Nick had come instead. He patted Gage on the shoulder before shoving another needle of morphine into the tube in her arm. Then he'd sighed, adjusted the flow of liquid through the I.V. and disappeared.

"Better, darling?"

Brook mumbled as her head lolled off to one side. Gage tried to smile as he sat back down, sandwiching her hand in his. He'd been back for hours, but she hadn't opened her eyes. Not even with the steady stream of visitors. First Emma, who'd broken into hysterical

sobs again the instant she'd seen Brooklyn's pale face beneath the covers. He'd immediately given up any hope of questioning her. Then Jack Reynolds had stopped by, sighing loudly, before patting him on the shoulder as he walked away. And of course there was Sam. He'd only just convinced the man to leave thirty minutes ago. He wanted to be alone with Brook. Hold her hand and touch her skin, without wondering what others were thinking. He didn't want to think.

"Gage."

He bent down over her. She'd whispered his name several times, though she seemed lost somewhere. "I'm here, Brook." He squeezed her hand, reassuring her he was still perched at her side.

"Someone's here...don't..." Her voice trailed off. She was gone again.

*She's not really here.*

Perhaps, but he wanted to believe she could hear him—sense his presence. He brushed his lips against her ear. "It's okay. I won't let him hurt you."

"Love you."

How long had he waited to hear those words from her...to believe what he knew to be false? Yet she'd spoken them twice in the same day.

*Yeah, while heavily medicated with morphine!*

Still, she'd said them. That must mean something.

*You want it to mean something.*

No, he needed it to mean something. He needed her back in his life. He needed to hold her, to protect her. He needed...

"Rest," he said, stroking her hair. "We'll talk later."

\* \* \* \*

Brooklyn opened her eyes, squinting at the bright light streaming in the window. Her head felt heavy and she couldn't seem to get warm. She rolled slightly then stilled, waiting for the pain to ignite in her back. She didn't remember much, but she remembered the pain. Smothering, eye-rolling pain that seared through her whenever she tried to move. She held her breath, but the pain didn't come.



*Morphine. Not much else will help you at this point.*

She must have had another shot, which explained the foggy feeling swirling in her head. She looked over at the couch. "Gage," she breathed.

He was sleeping, his head propped up on a pillow. He had one arm wrapped around his shoulder, while the other dangled an inch from the floor. She drew a deep breath. He was, without a doubt, the most handsome man she'd ever laid eyes on. The way the sun accentuated the blond streaks in his hair as his chest moved in a steady rhythm. His figure looked even larger wedged on the small sofa, and the sight of it stole her breath. She wanted to reach out, feel the strong beat of his heart beneath her fingers. He was so close.

*He'd only run away.*

The thought sliced through her, bringing a pain the morphine couldn't ease. How had she let it to get so far? Allowed the only man she'd truly loved to slip away until the rift was so deep no bridge could span it? She loved Gage—had since the moment she'd met him—and she feared she would until the day she died.

*But he's here. That must mean something.*

She sighed. Gage was a protector. There was no question about that. Even the distance between them wouldn't stop him from playing the role of the gallant knight. It was one of the things she loved most about him. How he always made her feel safe.

A tear trickled down her cheek. She hadn't felt that kind of security since their last night together. She hadn't realised how angry he was until he'd touched her. He'd been rough. Of course she understood why, now. But at the time, it'd been an erotic mixture of uncertainty and lust. It'd been the last time she'd touched him. Felt his skin, hot against her lips, her body. She'd gone down on him first, savouring the taste of him, so completely male it made the juices weep from her body. There were times she'd get so close to climaxing while sucking on his cock, he'd only touch her once before she'd explode. He used to love when that happened. He'd smile. Tell her how much he loved her. How he'd never get enough of her.

But not now.

Since that night, he'd gone to extreme lengths to avoid being around her. He'd slept at the office, worked weeks on end, until she couldn't even remember the last time he'd held her, let alone kissed her. There'd been no love in his touch that night, and she supposed there

never would be again. She'd lost him, and she knew as soon as she was strong enough to leave the hospital, he'd disappear from her life completely.

Gage felt the sun warm his skin an instant before he realised he was being watched. He tensed, prepared to pounce, as he opened his eyes and met the gaze staring back at him.

Blue eyes, glassy, brimming with a familiar sparkle.

"Hey."

Her voice was soft and low, and for a moment he wasn't sure he'd heard her speak. Some of the colour had returned to her cheeks, and a tentative smile touched the corners of her mouth. He rose from the couch and moved to the edge of the bed, their eyes still locked. He eased into the chair, lowering his face until it was even with hers. "Welcome back."

Her smile widened. "Was I gone long?"

He touched her gently on the cheek. "Two days."

Her expression hardened for an instant. He could see the confusion in the lines of her face. She reached out, tracing the line of his jaw, rubbing her fingers gently across his shadowed chin. He must look like hell. He hadn't shaved, and he knew his clothes were wrinkled.

"How long have you been here?" she asked, grazing her fingers against his.

He chuckled. "Two days."

"You stayed." She smiled. "Thank you."

"It's the least I could do." He took her hand in his. "How do you feel?"

"Tired...cold." She paused, as if deciding whether to continue. "Confused."

Gage stood up and walked over to a small closet on the other side of the room. "The tired will take care of itself," he said, as he opened up the door and removed a thin cotton blanket. He shook it out and returned to the bed, draping it gently across her body. "The cold I can help you with. But the confusion is going to be a bit harder." He took her hand again. "Do you remember what happened?"

She stared at him, her bottom lip quivering, her eyes wide and teary. "No." Her voice was timid, and he knew she was scared.

"Nothing at all?"

"Why don't you tell me, and I'll let you know?"

"The doctor thinks it's better if you remember on your own. That way I won't influence any of your memories."

"So I'm just supposed to lie here and wonder why the hell my back hurts so much?"

Gage smiled. There was a touch of the old Brooklyn in her voice—sarcastic and strong—and he couldn't help but feel relieved. "I don't expect you to do anything of the sort. I just want to ease you into the memory. Not throw it at you so you can spend another day unconscious on the bed." He stroked her fingers. She used to love that. It was one of the many ways he'd learnt to sway her to his reasoning.

Brooklyn moaned, glancing at her hand. She looked back, grinning. "You're not fighting fair."

"It's the only way I ever win with you." He moved up her hand, massaging the back in small circles. "Why don't we begin with what you do remember?"

"I'm not sure where to start."

"Do you remember going to Emma's that day?"

"Emma's?" The word came out as a question. "Yes, I remember driving over to her house. I was supposed to go somewhere. I didn't want to."

"Do you remember where?"

"It had something to do with work." She stopped, and looked to the side, as if trying to sift through the memory. "That's right. I was supposed to go to a store, to sign books." She gasped suddenly, and touched her hand to her temple.

"Brook?" Gage grabbed her shoulder, ready to call the nurse if she so much as sighed the wrong way.

"It's okay. The images just caught me by surprise. I remember going to the bookstore. Emma wanted me to promote the new novel, but I didn't want to go."

"Why not? You love going to book signings."

She shook her head. "Not sure. There was something else I had to do that day. Another place I had to go." She paused, as if trying to remember, but just sighed. "I didn't want to go there either. It made me feel..."

Gage waited for her to continue, but she didn't. "Made you feel what?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"Everything matters. How did it make you feel?"

"Sad. Or perhaps a better description is alone." She looked at him. "I'm not sure what it means."

Gage nodded. He knew exactly what it meant. She'd been upset about having to meet him at Jack Reynolds' office. Probably didn't want to be stuck in the same room with him.

"Do you know where I was going?" she asked.

"Let's just stay with the bookstore. Do you remember what you did?"

"The usual. Talk to people, sign books. It's not rocket science."

Gage smiled at the hint of impatience in her voice. "Do you remember leaving the bookstore?"

"I must have left..." she began, but then stopped. She didn't remember leaving the store. In fact, she didn't remember much after that.

*Brown eyes reflected in the mirror.*

Brooklyn gasped as a sharp pain pieced her head, flashing an image so bright her eyes stung.

"You okay?"

She forced her eyes open, still wincing from the shock. "I just got a pain in my head. It's gone now." She focused on his face. "I don't remember leaving the store. Did I?"

"Tell me what happened just before you wanted to leave."

"I'm not sure. I remember listening to some woman go on and on about her sister, and I felt like I needed to escape. When she left, I went to the washroom."

"The ladies room?" asked Gage.

"I tried there, but there was a sign...a yellow sign, with black letters." She waved her hand in the air, as if it were still in front of her. "It said, 'Out of Service.' So I used the men's room. It was empty." She smiled at Gage. "It smelt funny. I just wanted to splash some water on my face."

"Then what happened?"

*Did you think you could escape me, Sarah...did you really think I wouldn't find you?*

The pain seared through her head again, the voice ringing in her ears. She grabbed her head this time, moaning as a bright light blinded her.

"Brook?"

"It's back...the pain in my head." She tried to pant through the worst of it. "I don't remember anything else."

Gage touched her head, gently stroking her hair. "It's okay. We'll stop for now."

Brooklyn took several more breaths, gradually relaxing as the pain dissipated, then vanished. She looked up at Gage. His face had paled, and he'd clenched his jaw tight.

"Sorry. I wish I could tell you more."

"It'll come to you...when you're ready." He slid back in the chair. "Maybe you should rest now?" he suggested. "You look drained."

"Aren't you going to tell me what happened?" His face paled further. "Is it bad?"

"Brook..."

"I need to know. Did I hurt myself?"

"No."

She searched his face, catching the guilt and pain that flashed in his eyes. "Did someone else hurt me?"

"Don't."

"What did they do?" Her breath hitched. "Oh God, did someone rape me?"

Gage shook his head and opened his mouth, but then stopped. He looked into her eyes, and for the first time since she'd met him, she saw fear.

"No!"

"You weren't raped, Brook. Some bastard stuck a knife in your back and ran out the back door."

Brooklyn turned towards the voice. "Sam." She hadn't heard him come in.

Sam walked over to the bed. "Nice of you to finally wake up. How do you feel?"

"I was feeling better until Gage gave me a heart attack." She looked over at him. He still looked scared and the fear she'd felt returned.

"Don't be too hard on him. It wasn't easy going over the crime scene. You lost a lot of blood."

"You guys went to the bookstore? But why? Isn't that police business?"

Sam snorted, sitting down on the edge of her bed. "Do you really think either of us would leave it at that?"

"I suppose not." She glanced back at Gage. He'd managed to pull himself together and had plastered a phony smile on his face. "There's stuff you aren't telling me, isn't there?"

"Unfortunately, you know about as much as we do," continued Sam. "Emma was the only one who saw anything, and we haven't been able to get more than two words out of her before she falls apart." He edged closed. "Does what I told you help with the mind block?"

*Arms crushing her...a voice whispering in her ear...promises...*

She closed her eyes, trying to stop the assault. Images. Feelings. Sounds. Nothing concrete, but too much to ignore. The memory was in there, hiding.

"Don't push it," soothed Gage. "You'll remember when you're ready. We can wait."

Brooklyn nodded, easing back on the bed. She'd only just awakened, and yet she felt as if she hadn't slept in weeks. She smiled as he pulled the covers around her shoulder, his fingers lightly touching her skin. "Maybe we can try again later?"

"Rest now. I'll go grab some coffee and camp out on the couch some more."

"Gage." She intended to tell him he didn't have to stay, but the thought of him leaving her there alone sent a shiver down her spine.

*This is only the beginning, Sarah...*

"Thanks," she whispered.

Gage brushed his thumb across her cheek and headed for the door, motioning Sam to follow. Gage closed it behind him, pulling his partner off to the side. "Did you hear what she said about the restroom?"

"I didn't see any, 'out of service', signs. And nothing in the police report mentions it either." Sam pouted. "Could she have imagined it? Maybe from another signing, and another store?"

"I don't know. But it'd explain why she went in there."

"You've got that look. What's up?"

"Why would someone put out a sign and then take it away? It doesn't make sense unless—"

"Unless they were targeting Brooklyn," finished Sam. He swore, hitting his fist against the wall. "I'm not liking the sound of this. Do you think she's in trouble?"

Gage sighed and leaned against the wall. He was far too tired to think clearly. All he knew is that Brooklyn's account of the incident had made his skin crawl. "I don't want her left here alone, not until we have a better idea if she's still at risk."

"Do you want me to call the office? I'm sure Henderson will send out a team if you think it's necessary, jurisdiction or not. He's always had a soft spot for Brook."

Gage smiled, but shook his head. "Let's hold off a bit until we get some more information. I'll stay for now. We'll just make sure there's someone else here when we go see Emma tomorrow. She said we could drop by the house."

"Whatever you think is best. Just try to get some sleep. You still look like shit."

"You know, you can stop bruising my ego any time now. I'll grab some coffee, while you stay with her." He headed for the vending machine at the end of the hallway. "Let's just hope whoever hurt her isn't planning on a repeat performance."

"Hey, Gage?" called Sam as Gage stopped and turned back to face him. "Why did you hesitate when she asked about being raped? I don't suppose you know something you're not telling me?"

Gage clenched his jaw, trying to shake the unsettling feeling away. What if that's why the bastard had stayed so long? What if he'd assaulted her while she was bleeding to death on the floor? "Nothing. It was just a feeling." He waved his concern away. "I'll talk with the doctor later, just to ease my conscience. Now stop stalling me, Sam, and let me get that coffee."

## Chapter Four

“Knees.”

Gage shifted on the couch, tossing against the cushions. The dream was playing in his head again, and he moaned at the images flashing in the darkness.

Brooklyn looked up at him, her brow furrowed in concern. “Gage? Is everything okay?”

“Knees.” He pushed her onto the bed, not waiting for her to comply. Tonight he’d take her anally, before his bastard brother had the chance. Tonight he’d prove who really owned her. Tonight she was his.

Brooklyn rolled onto the bed, tucking her knees under her hips as he encircled her body with his arms. He grabbed the lacy band of her thong, ripping it off her body, separating the fabric in his need to strip her. She moaned at the sound of material tearing, tensing her body beneath his. “What are you doing?”

She was nervous, her voice wavering slightly out of pitch. But she was also aroused. Her breath came in fast pants and her breast swelled in his hand as he reached around and cupped one side. He palmed it, squeezing her nipple between his fingers until she cried out. It was rock hard and he wished he could take it in his mouth, rasp it against his teeth. He squeezed again, harder.

“Oh, God!”

She tried to push up onto her hands, but he pressed his other hand across her shoulder blades, trapping her on the bed. “Don’t move.”

He could hear the anger in his voice, a deep resonance that had her tensing further. She resisted for only a moment, before allowing him to push her breasts against the mattress, leaving her hips up in the air, her buttocks completely exposed to him. He moved back, caressing each pearly cheek with his hands, kneading the muscles with his fingers.

“You’ve got such a pretty ass.” He brushed one finger down the crease, skimming over her anus. She shuddered. “So pretty and round. I love touching you like this.” He caressed her again, probing just the tip of his finger inside.

“Baby, are you sure you’re okay?”



He growled, slapping one cheek with the palm of his hand. Not hard, but enough to flush her skin, make her jerk in response. He raised his hand and repeated his action on the other side, feeling her push against the bed. He reached down, slipping his fingers between her legs, drawing them through her narrow crease. She was wet, her arousal drenching his fingers, coating the sides of her thighs.

"You like that, darling?" He made another pass, dipping two fingers inside her. She arched off the bed, her head thrown back before he pushed her back down, locking his arm across her back. "I said, don't move."

He raised his hand again, spanking her harder, his fingers still lodged inside her vagina. She cried out, clenching her body around his hand, milking his fingers as she did his cock. She moaned as he pressed further inside her, raking the sensitive tissue until his palm pressed against her flesh.

"Don't tease me like this. It's been almost a week since you've made love to me." She tried to push back against him, but he held her firm. "Please, darling. I need you."

He pulled his lips back, exposing his teeth as he wondered if she'd slept with his bastard of a brother yet. He could see them, her pale skin shimmering in the moonlight, his brother's hips pumping her until she screamed.

And he knew she'd scream.

"What's the matter? Haven't I been man enough for you, lately?"

Brooklyn stilled beneath him, her breath catching in her chest. "What's wrong with you? You know you're more than enough for me."

He laughed, the sound rattling in his chest as he caressed her ass again. "Really?" He smacked her one more time, even harder. "Why don't I show you just how much of a man I can be?"

He heard her start to protest when he drew his fingers back and quickly thrust them inside her again. She gasped, straining against his fingers as he leaned over her back, lowering his weight onto her. He rasped his teeth across her shoulder, scraping the skin at the base of her neck.

She cried out, and tilted her head to grant him better access. He licked at the light mark, increasing his thrusts, setting up a rhythm he knew would drive her into a climax. Her vagina tightened, contracting around him as he stroked her channel, rubbing his fingers

across her G-spot. She tried to get up, desperate to increase the penetration, only to collapse back down beneath his weight.

“Yes. Oh baby...please...right there.”

Her words were disjointed and slurred, mixed with a series of short gasps. She was close. Gage reached his other hand around her thighs, slipping it down her crease as he rasped it against her clit. The tiny bud hardened at his touch as he caressed her with small, firm circles. She cried out, pushing her flesh harder against his fingers.

He leaned over her back again. “Scream for me,” he whispered, biting on the muscle of her neck as her orgasm rocked through her.

“Gage!”

Her voice echoed off the walls, mingling with the steamy heat from their bodies. She convulsed beneath him, sobbing against the fire he knew was ripping her apart. He could feel her pulsing around his fingers as he continued to rub the inside, prolonging the sensations until she sagged onto the bed. He growled, slowly removing his hand. She whimpered at the motion, clenching one last time as he finally slid free of her body. He looked at his fingers. They were coated with her release.

*Perfect.*

He moved them to the cleft of her ass, rubbing them across the puckered opening, spreading the moisture around the hole. Then he poked his finger inside her, slowly parting the tender muscles until it was completely buried. The moan that escaped her lips was deep and raw, a primal plea of pleasure. His cock pulsed at the sound, easing more fluid from the tip.

“Damn your ass is tight.” He pulled back then plunged again, feeling her muscles grip his finger. “So tight and hot it’s all I can do not to come on the spot.”

She groaned her reply, apparently not able to speak. He smiled a savage grin, adding another finger. Damn, it was too tight. How the hell would he ever get his cock inside her? He pushed harder, separating the untried tissues, tunnelling his fingers back and forth until the severe clenching relaxed as she accommodated the width more easily.

*Now. Take her now before she has a chance to refuse.*

He thrust again, reaching to the side table, removing a tube of lubrication from the drawer. He opened it with one hand, squirting a generous amount down the length of his

shaft. He'd only tried to penetrate her once this way and had needed to stop when the pinching had gotten too much for her to bear. He could only pray he wouldn't have to stop tonight.

He spread the gel along the length of his cock, ensuring the head was completely covered. Then he removed his fingers and lodged the crown against her anus. He didn't see how he'd fit, but he was sure as hell going to try.

"Easy, darling, I don't want to hurt you."

She relaxed her muscles, moaning in pleasure as he pushed against the tiny opening. It gave slightly, allowing just the tip inside. He growled and pushed again, pulling her cheeks apart as he speared his cock against her. He felt the tight ring clenching on the end, whether to draw him in or force him out he wasn't sure, but the small measure of success was all he needed to spur him on.

He thrust forward, sinking the head inside. She cried out, wailing his name as more of his shaft sank into her hot, forbidden opening. He withdrew, pausing with only the crown still lodged inside before plunging ahead and sinking his cock completely inside her anal channel.

"Oh God. You're so hot and tight. I never dreamed it'd feel this good."

Her reply was nothing short of a growl. He started moving, taking her ass with slow, firm strokes. It was almost painful in nature, her ass milking his cock so hard it took more force than he'd intended to keep moving. She mumbled something, but all he could make out was the pounding of his heart.

She squeezed, clamping her muscles around him.

He lost control, pounding into her so hard he nearly pushed her off the other side of the bed. He could feel his release growing, but he wasn't even sure he'd be able to finish inside her.

She screamed his name, convulsing beneath him. He kept moving, feeling her squirm until her body went limp and he came inside her, head thrown back, balls squeezed tight. He gasped for air, finally taking them both to the bed, turning them onto their sides. Damn it'd been incredible. So tight and hot he'd been able to feel every shot of semen he'd squirted into her ass. Felt every contraction of his cock as it erupted over and over. It was the most erotic act of his life.

He closed his eyes, trying to steady his breathing. Brooklyn shuddered in his arms as he grasped her hips, easing his softening erection from her body. He should hold her. Stroke her hair. Whisper words of love. Thank her for the gift she'd given him. But he couldn't. Instead he rolled off the bed and stomped over to the window. Good Lord, what had come over him? He'd been too rough, pushed her too far. He should have left when he had the chance. But it was too late now. He clenched his fists at his side, holding them rigid, as he turned to face his wife. "Why, Brooklyn? Just tell me why?"

She tensed at the anger in his voice, skirting a quick gaze back across her shoulder. "I don't know what you're talking about. Why, what?"

"Damn it, Brook! It's one thing to have an affair, but it's another to lie about it to my face!" He took three steps towards the bed. "Just tell me why you thought it was necessary to screw around on me with my own brother!"

Brooklyn turned to face him as she rose from the bed, her face twisted with anger. "What are you talking about? I'm not having an affair with Peter!"

Her body shook, and Gage could see tears gathering in her eyes. "Don't bother denying it. I saw you two together today at O'Toole's. I couldn't believe it, so I called your cell, and watched you lie to me about where you were, and who you were with." He took one step closer, his large figure diminishing hers. "Just having lunch with Emma, huh? Need to talk about the book!" He growled deep in his chest. "You've been lying for a month now. I have proof you've seen him at least a dozen times. Jesus, I'm a Federal Agent, didn't you think I'd be smart enough to figure it out?" He looked away in disgust. "I bust whores for a living. I just didn't think my wife would be one of them."

Brooklyn's mouth dropped open as she stepped back, nearly tripping onto the bed. She stared at him as if he'd just punched her in the stomach before finally sucking in a ragged breath. She steadied herself, set her shoulders, and pushed past him, grabbing her robe off the chair. "How stupid of me to think I could actually outsmart you. Not you. Not the mighty Gage Matthews, Special Agent! You're right. I have seen Peter a dozen times this past month, and that's not all. I've seen Sam behind your back, too." She smiled as the mention of his partner twitched the muscle in his jaw. "That's right. I've been seeing both of them, and you never suspected a thing." She pulled the robe around her body, cinching it tight. "Do you want to know why?"

He clenched his jaw, his reply nothing more than a deep rumble.

"I'll tell you why. Because next Thursday is your fifteenth anniversary with the Bureau, and I was arranging a surprise party for you. I wanted all your friends and family to attend, not just your work buddies, so I phoned Peter, and he offered to help. Sam did the same. I even got Director Henderson to concoct some lame-ass assignment to keep you busy that day, but would conveniently bring you to O'Toole's at seven o'clock. Congratulations, Gage, you've caught me red-handed." She slipped on a pair of socks and headed for the washroom.

Gage lunged at her as she tried to brush past him, and grabbed her arm, spinning her to face him. "If that were true, then why were you only meeting with Peter?"

"Because Sam called and cancelled at the last minute. He said he couldn't break away." She placed one hand on her hip and glared at him. "Call him if you want. He'll back my story."

"I'm sure he will...*darling*." There was no mistaking the sarcasm in his voice and he knew Brooklyn understood the message behind it.

"Go to hell."

She backed away, but he grabbed her again, his grip harder than before. "Nice try, lover, but I'm not buying it. Peter was holding your hand and I saw him kiss you."

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked, pulling away from him, toppling against their dresser. "Peter always holds my hand. And he kissed me because I'd just showed him the first copy of *Sarah's Secret*." She bent her head, tears once again falling from her eyes. "I'm not sleeping with him. How could you even think I'd do that to you? I love you." She looked back up, the hurt in her eyes staking through his heart. She waved her hand at the bed. "So is that what tonight was all about? Wanted to take me up the ass before another man had the chance?" She wiped the tears from her face, cringing as more took their place. "Tell me, did hurting me and treating me like a whore make you feel like a man?" She cut off his reply with another wave of her arm. "Save it. I don't want to hear it." She marched into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Gage opened his eyes, his heart racing, the sound so loud it echoed in his head. He sat up and looked around, finally settling on Brooklyn's silhouette. She was sleeping, her body hidden beneath the thin cotton blanket he'd placed across her earlier. He got up and walked

over to the bed, gently taking her hand in his. Except for the past two days, he hadn't touched her since that night. He'd been wrong. Sam had gone ballistic when he'd confronted him the next day, and Peter hadn't spoken to him since, except to tell him what a jerk he was. Brooklyn had attended the party, a smile plastered on her face. She'd even given him the present she'd bought for him—a custom-built, nine-millimetre Glock with his anniversary date engraved on the back. It'd been a bizarre gift by most standards, but it'd saved his life twice since that night.

He looked down at her face. He could still see the hurt in her eyes as she'd tried to pretend everything was okay. It'd only gotten worse since then. Now she wanted a divorce. He sighed, kissing her lightly on the forehead. "I'm sorry, Brook. I only wish I could say it to your face." He thought about waking her up, to tell her just that, when the door opened behind him.

"I understand you wanted to see me?"

Dr. Nick O'Brian stood in the doorway, his profile nothing more than a black shadow against the glaring hallway lights. He stepped inside, moving over to the bed. He glanced at Brooklyn, flickering his gaze across Gage's hand, before meeting his stare.

"I paged you this afternoon," said Gage.

Nick merely shrugged, resting against the edge of the bed. "I do have other patients, not to mention a whole lot of surgery." He wiped his sleeve across his forehead. The man looked exhausted, and Gage doubted the doctor had slept any more than he had. "What can I do for you? Your wife is coming along nicely, so I doubt it's about her condition."

Gage shuffled his feet. "There's something I need to ask you...about Brooklyn." He looked down at her, hoping to God his suspicions were wrong.

"Yes?"

"The day they brought her in, did your staff..." He trailed off, trying to force the words out. He huffed and tried again. "Did they check to see if she'd been..." Damn, he just couldn't say it.

Nick sighed, and shook his head. "Did we check to see if she'd been sexually assaulted?" he finished.

Gage clenched his jaw. "Did they?"

"It's standard protocol on any kind of assault case. Since we didn't know the circumstances surrounding the knifing, we wanted to make sure her obvious injuries were the only ones we needed to treat."

"And?" he asked, not sure he could stomach the answer if it was 'yes'.

"Your wife wasn't raped."

Gage released a long breath, sagging against the bed. "That's good to hear."

Nick straightened and patted Gage on the shoulder, before moving to the door. "Try to get some sleep, or you might be my next patient."

Gage nodded. "Thanks."

Nick opened the door and stepped through, but stopped and turned around. "What made you ask now?"

Gage looked over at him. "I'm not really sure. I just needed to be certain."

Nick nodded. "Get some sleep. I'll drop by again in the morning."

"Thanks again, doc." Gage watched the man leave before staring down at Brooklyn again. At least that fear had been resolved. But that still didn't answer why her attacker had waited so long, or why someone would be targeting her in the first place? He sighed and sat down. There was no way he'd be able to figure anything out if he didn't get a few hours of sleep. And stumbling around on his feet wouldn't help Brooklyn any. He looked at her one more time, smiling at the softness of her face before he closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep, silently hoping the dream wouldn't return.

## Chapter Five

**March 15<sup>th</sup>**

“Good God, Brooklyn! Are you okay?” Peter Matthews rushed into the room, running to Brooklyn’s side. He grabbed her hand, squeezing it tight. “I would’ve come sooner, but I just heard.”

“It’s okay, Peter. I haven’t been conscious for long.”

Peter pulled back turning to Gage. “Damn it, Gage! Why didn’t you call me?”

Gage stood up. Peter had three inches and forty pounds on him, but Brooklyn knew he’d never backed down from the man before. And she could tell by the expression on his face, he sure as hell wasn’t going to start today.

“I’ve been busy,” said Gage, keeping his tone casual. “Besides, as I recall, you told me never to call you again.”

Peter hissed and stepped forward, brushing his chest against Gage’s. “You know damn well that doesn’t apply to this situation.” He clenched his fists at his side. “You were just trying to piss me off.”

Brooklyn sighed. She hated watching the two men fight, which is all they did on the rare occasion they met. Peter had never forgiven Gage for hurting her, and Gage had let the relationship slide.

She cleared her throat. “Are you two boys finished acting like children yet, or are you going to throw a few punches before you consider the job done?”

Peter glanced back at Brooklyn and took a step back. “Sorry, Brooklyn. This isn’t the time...or the place.”

Gage dodged around his older brother and moved to the side of the bed. “I need to go and talk to Emma. She said I could drop by today. If it’s okay with you, I’ll dash out while your gallant knight is here to protect you.”

She heard Peter utter a hushed curse. “Must you make it so hard, Gage? He’s trying to be civil.”



Gage snorted and headed for the door. He stopped halfway into the hallway and turned back towards his brother. "Keep an eye on her. And whatever you do, don't leave her alone. I won't be long."

Peter sneered as he watched Gage leave. "I don't know what you ever saw in him. He's got the manners of goat."

Brooklyn laughed. "That's part of his charm. At least it was, when we were together." She stared at the door, suddenly chilled. Gage hadn't left her side all day, and his absence made her feel vulnerable.

"Hey. You okay? The colour just drained from your face."

She smiled at Peter, pushing the unsettling feeling away. "Just tired. I haven't been awake this much for days."

Peter pulled a chair up beside the bed. "Then rest. I'll stay until my brother gets back."

"I'll lay down, but I'd rather listen to you talk, if it's just the same."

Peter smiled and started up an easy conversation, his voice soft and deep. Brooklyn felt herself fade, the steady sound of his voice soothing her fears. When she finally managed to rouse herself, he was still talking, a smile tilting his lips. She watched him shift in the seat, drawn to the lines of his face. He reminded her so much of Gage she couldn't drag her gaze away. They both had a strong, chiselled chin and smooth features. Their hair was same colour brown and longer than most men wore, and except for the larger dimensions, their bodies were both muscular and fit. The only physical difference was their eyes. Gage's were a brilliant blue, while Peter's were the deepest brown she'd ever seen.

But that's where the similarities ended.

Peter was a sophisticated man, whose tastes lay in fine wine, good theatre, and stylish women. He was a corporate lawyer for an international commodities firm, and spent most of his time negotiating multi-million dollar contracts. He'd been in a steady relationship for three years and was now engaged to Maya, a legal secretary at his firm. He was formidable and strong, but rarely used his size to solve his problems.

In other words, completely opposite to Gage.

Gage was physical, in every sense of the word. His job had landed him in the hospital on more than one occasion, and he never tried anything unless he had to sign a waiver first. Brooklyn could still remember the day they met. She'd been doing research for her first book

and had requested an interview with a Federal Agent to get a better understanding of what the job entailed. But her car had broken down on the way, and she'd shown up thirty minutes late, her clothes covered in grease and dirt. Gage had actually laughed at the sight of her, ushering her into his office with a huge grin on his face. She'd merely nodded, determined not to allow her circumstances to spoil her professionalism. She'd sat down across from him, pen poised in one hand, her expression calm, prepared to ask her first question when he'd reached across the desk and wiped a smudge of dirt off her left cheek.

It'd only taken that one touch to dissolve her composure. Her cheek had tingled beneath his fingers and her heart had kicked into high gear, racing so fast she'd found it hard to breathe. The heat had risen in her body and moisture pooled between her legs. He'd smiled again, and had asked her to dinner before the blush had faded from her cheeks. She'd accepted, and the rest was history. They'd spent three weeks glued to each other's side, before Gage had asked her to marry him. It'd seemed so surreal at the time, but he'd merely told her he didn't need five years to discover his love for her. And he didn't want to take her into his bed until they were properly married.

She'd loved that about him. They'd had a quiet ceremony two weeks later, and then spent the next ten days in bed, discovering every inch of each other's bodies. He'd been every fantasy she'd ever dreamed of. His body was hard and muscled, and she'd never grown tired of touching him, tasting him...

"Hey, Brooklyn?"

She looked up. She'd forgotten she'd been staring at Peter as she'd drifted into her thoughts. She smiled. "Sorry, Peter. I didn't mean to stare."

"That's okay. It's just, you looked sad."

"I was just thinking."

"About Gage?"

She sighed, shifting on the bed. "Is it that obvious?"

"To everyone but him. He's as dense as a damn tree. You deserve way better than him, you know that?"

"He made a mistake. Nothing more. Doesn't he deserve a second chance?"

"No! Look, Gage may be my brother, but accusing us of having an affair was beyond ludicrous. Not that I don't find you incredibly attractive, it's just...I thought he knew me better than that. And hurting you is unforgivable in my book."

"He was angry. I'm sure I would've acted the same way if I'd thought he was having an affair with someone I trusted."

"But you wouldn't have fucked him up the ass and called him a whore!"

Brooklyn watched as Peter stomped up and stormed across the room, punching the couch as he stalked by it. She'd never intended to tell him that. But he'd cornered her at the party and she'd broken down, sobbing out the story before she'd realised what she was doing. "I never should've told you that," she said.

"And I should've beaten some sense into him that night," he countered.

"It's not like he raped me, or anything."

Peter snorted, clenching his fists at his sides. "Do you honestly think he would've stopped if you'd asked him to?"

"Yes. I do."

Peter shook his head, stepping back over to the bed. "You're far too kind a soul, and I don't know what deal my brother made with the devil to ever get you in his life." He arched an eyebrow at her. "So if you care so much for him, why are you getting a divorce?"

Brooklyn sighed and looked away. "He won't talk to me anymore. And I don't know how to make him see past that night." She looked back into Peter's eyes, feeling the tears sting hers. "I forgave him long ago. But he won't forgive himself."

"I might be just a typical guy, who doesn't know how to read other people's feelings, but there's no doubt in my mind Gage is still in love with you. He just needs to admit it."

The door creaked.

They turned, expecting Gage to walk through, but watched a man dressed in blue enter instead.

"Glad to see you're feeling better," the man said, walking up to the other side of the bed. "You gave our medical staff quite a scare. That's a rather imposing wound you've got on your back."

Brooklyn smiled despite the shiver running down her spine. She'd never seen this nurse before, but something about him made the hair on her neck stand up. "So I've been told."

The man looked over at Peter. "I need to change the dressing on her back. We can't afford to allow any infection to set in while the wound is still open. She's far too weak for any setbacks."

Peter looked at the guy then back at Brooklyn. "Gage told me to keep an eye on you. I don't think he'd like it if I left. Not even for this."

"Oh, you don't have to leave," said the man. "In fact, it'd be better if you stayed. I'm afraid the process may be a bit uncomfortable, and I'm sure she'd appreciate your support."

"You're not going to put that cleanser on it again, are you?" asked Brooklyn. Dr. O'Brian had changed it last night and she'd passed out halfway through.

"I promise you I'll be as gentle as possible." The nurse smiled and brushed his finger along her jaw. "I have no desire to hurt you."

Fear tightened Brooklyn's chest. Something about this guy wasn't right, but she couldn't seem to place it. It was almost as if he was familiar somehow. She turned to Peter. "Maybe we could wait until Gage gets back?" she suggested. "It's already been over an hour. I can't imagine he'll be much longer."

"I'm sorry, but I'm going off shift in a few minutes, and the head nurse was insistent I change your dressing before I left. I think they're afraid it might get overlooked during the night rotation." He smiled again. "All I need you to do is lie on your stomach for me. I'll take care of everything else."

Brooklyn bit at her bottom lip as she slowly rolled onto her belly. "Gage won't be happy about this."

"Then perhaps he shouldn't have left your side," sneered the nurse.

Brooklyn went to move when he untied the back strap of her gown. She tensed. "Peter?"

"It's okay, Brook." Peter bent down beside her, taking her hand in his. "I'll stay. And I'll explain it to Gage when he gets back. Now take my hand. Squeeze as hard as you need to, okay?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice as she felt the nurse pull the edges of her gown apart. His touch was soft and gentle, but something in the way he lingered against her skin made it crawl.

"First, I'll remove the old dressing. This shouldn't hurt at all." He moved his fingers across the tape, holding her skin taut as he pulled the strips away. "See, nothing to it." He tossed the old bandages on his tray, and then picked up a syringe. "Okay, now the part you won't like. Just try to breathe slow and easy, and I'll make this as quick as possible."

Brooklyn screamed the instant the liquid touched the incision. It burned and she could feel the world starting to spin. She clenched her fingers around Peter's hand, aware she was gouging his skin with her nails. But she didn't care. She was in too much pain to care about anything, but making it stop. "Please," she whispered, wishing Gage was there to soothe her.

"God damn. How does Gage stand here and watch you go through this?"

"He curses a lot," she panted, screaming again as more cleanser soaked into her skin.

Peter leaned over her, lightly kissing her forehead. "I'm sorry," he breathed.

Brooklyn sobbed, wondering how long she could hold on when the rinsing stopped. She held her breath, waiting for another round to start, but felt a gentle dapping instead.

"Easy," the nurse said. "It's all over. Just some cream, but this won't hurt. As a matter of fact, I think you'll find it quite relaxing." His voice was low and it sparked a memory.

*Did you think you could escape me, Sarah?*

She drew in a quick breath, trying to make sense of the sounds in her head. A voice...his voice.

*Don't disappoint me, Sarah. I'll be waiting.*

Oh God. It was him...the voice from the bathroom.

"Gage!" She tried to move, but her arms and legs felt numb. She cried out, fighting against the fog descending around her.

"Brooklyn? What is it? God, you sound terrified." Peter bent down over her again. "Easy..."

His voice trailed off into a garbled wail. She felt his body jerk hard against hers a second before he crumbled onto the floor, his limbs thrashing at his sides. "Peter!"

"Easy, Sarah."

She stilled at the touch of his hands as he caressed her back, grazing his fingers across her shoulders and down her sides, probing the curve of her breasts. She tried to roll away, but only succeeded in exposing her right breast to him. "Who..."

"Don't play games with me. You know who I am."

Brooklyn shook her head, sobbing into the pillow. "Please..." She cried out as he moved down her hips, skimming his fingers across her buttocks.

"You're so pretty, Sarah. Your skin's so soft and smooth. It's like touching silk." He trailed one finger down her crease. "Such a perfect little pucker. I can't wait until you take me in here. It's going to be so good."

"No, please."

He ignored her plea, moving lower. She heard him moan as he pulled back. "You smell so sweet. I bet you taste just as good." He laughed. "I'll find out soon enough."

He moved away. She could hear him rattling something on a tray. "We don't have much time. I'll tape on a new bandage, and then we'll take a ride together. How does that sound?"

"Who are you?" Oh God, she was fading. She could feel the edges of the fog getting closer, pulling her under. "Gage."

"Don't worry. You won't have to see him ever again. I'll take care of you now. I'll save you from the evil in the shadows. You don't have to be afraid anymore, Sarah." She felt him tape a new layer across her wound. "Now close your eyes. When you wake up, we'll be home."

"Gage," she breathed again, clinging to his image as the world shifted and darkened.

\* \* \* \*

Gage met Sam at the elevator, holding the doors open as his friend dashed inside.

"Well that was a waste of an hour," said Sam, straightening his jacket.

"At least Emma got through the first version before breaking into hysterics," replied Gage, pressing the number six on the panel. "And the few details she did remember backed Brooklyn's story." He glanced at Sam. "Until Brook's ready to leave, I want one of us staying with her. I can't shake this feeling that the creep isn't ready to give her up just yet."

Sam nodded. "Damn good thing I brought you some clothes yesterday. Have you been home at all?"

"I haven't been home in over three weeks, you know that. I just keep a bunch of stuff in my truck, and go to the laundromat regularly." He sighed at the thought. "But I guess I'll

need to drop by later, or at least tomorrow. I should make sure everything's ready for when Brooklyn gets home. I don't suspect she'll be able to do too much for a while."

"Are you going to stay with her while she recovers?" asked Sam.

"You're joking, right? The tension between us is suffocating under the best of circumstances, and these aren't them." He shook his head, staring at the numbers flashing across the top of the elevator. "Brooklyn's not the easiest person to keep calm. She'll be like a caged bobcat if she has to take it easy for a while. I'm surprised she hasn't asked to go for a jog yet."

Sam laughed. "Yeah, she is a bit on the stubborn side." He elbowed Gage in the side. "But I thought that's what you loved most about her?"

"There're lots of things I love about her." He cursed as the machine shuddered to a halt. "I'll get her a nurse, and drop by until she's stronger."

"And then what? Take the papers over to her?"

Gage looked over at Sam as he stepped out of the small cubical and headed down the hallway. "It's what she wants."

"Don't give me that crap! Did you think I wasn't listening when Emma said Brooklyn didn't want to sign off on the divorce? Even she didn't hide the truth from you, and she's been after Brooklyn to sign those papers for months."

"But she was going to, just the same."

"Yeah, because she thinks you don't love her anymore. All it'd take is one move on your part, and this whole mess could be fixed."

"Jesus, Sam. Why are you so hell bent to get us back together anyway? You know what I did to her that night. Peter made sure of that." He shook his head. Peter had stormed into his office the morning after the party and damn near shouted out the account at Gage. "Why would you want her to allow me back into her life?"

"Because you're a good man. Yeah, for one night you acted like an asshole..."

"Bastard," Gage corrected him.

"Bastard then. But that doesn't mean you aren't good together. You love her and she loves you. We both know it'd be a cold day in hell before you ever did anything like that again."

"Never," he added quickly. "Just let it go for now. Let Brooklyn regain some strength before we start debating the living arrangements. Besides, I suspect it'll be a few more days before she's strong enough to go home." He sighed and went to open Brooklyn's door when Peter stumbled through it, his hand clenched around his neck. His brother fell against him and Gage had to grab the man's shoulders to stop him from crashing onto the floor. "Peter, what the...?"

"She's gone." His words were garbled and Gage could tell the man was in extreme pain.

"Sam!"

"Already on it." Sam dashed into the room, reappearing moments later. "Brooklyn's gone."

"Damn it!" He turned Peter to face him. "What happened? Where is she?"

Peter pushed himself away, bracing his arm against the wall. "A nurse. He hit me with something. It's hasn't been long."

Gage looked down the hall. At the far end of the corridor a man was pushing a wheelchair into the elevator.

"Sam!"

Sam was already running down the hall, his gun gripped in his hand. Gage turned to Peter. "Stay here!" He dashed down the hall.

"I'm sorry," Peter shouted.

"Just stay put," he yelled back, meeting Sam at the large silver doors.

"They're going down," said Sam, searching for the stairs. "Here!"

Gage ran through, taking them three at a time. Sweat soaked through his shirt, blood pulsed through his veins. He went down two flights before yanking the door open, looking to see if the bastard had gotten off early. "Nothing."

Sam nodded and kept descending, checking the next level before descending again. "Only two more flights," he noted.

"Unless the bastard goes underground," cursed Gage, flinging open the second floor door. "Still nothing." He paused to look at the elevator numbers. "Shit! He's already two floors below us." He waited. He needed to know what level they were stopping at. It was the



only hope they had of catching up with them. "Two below the main," he yelled, watching the number flash then stay red.

"I'm on it." Sam swept down the stairs, his motion so quick the constant shifting made Gage feel nauseous. Sam was four inches shorter than him and about twenty pounds lighter. But the man could fight like a badger, and had the speed of a cat. Gage caught up to him at the doorway.

"On three," said Sam.

Sam mouthed the numbers then threw open the door. Gage barged through, his gun pointed straight out.

"Clear." He moved forward, Sam behind him. "He'll be heading for an exit...a loading ramp. Anything to get outside."

Sam nodded, following Gage down the dimly lit corridor. "Any idea where something like that might be?"

"Hell no." Gage stopped at another door. He palmed the handle when a faint clanking sound resonated through the door. "Wait." He pressed his ear against the metal.

Voices.

## Chapter Six

“Easy, Sarah, don’t try to move. You’ll only pull out those stitches in your back, and we can’t have you losing more blood.”

He brushed the hair back from her face as he pushed her down the hallway. She was slumped over to one side, and the pressure on her back was excruciating. “Please,” she begged, trying to move forward in the chair.

“I said, don’t move,” he snarled, as he grabbed her across the chest, shoving her back in the seat. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

“But why?”

“Because you belong to me. Don’t you remember? You need me to save you. You love me.”

Brooklyn sobbed, vaguely aware he’d pushed her into an elevator. She felt it rumble and knew they were moving. “Where...” Damn, it hurt to talk. He must have given her something.

“Home. I’m taking you home, precious. So we can be together.” He moved his hand so it was cupping her breast again. He started massaging it in slow circles. “And once you’re stronger, I’ll show you just how much I love you.”

His breath whispered across her neck as he bent down over her, lowering his hand. She whimpered, forcing her legs together.

“What’s the matter, precious? Not in the mood?” He pushed harder and she was helpless to resist him.

“Please. The pain.” She heard him curse, but he stopped and stood up.

“Don’t worry. The pain will soon be gone. Just another few days and you’ll feel much better.” He rasped his lips against her neck. “I can hardly wait. I want to show you everything. All the ways a man can pleasure a woman.” He licked her skin. “I bought all the things you like...vibrators and plugs. I want you to be happy, Sarah.”

Brooklyn cursed as the elevator lurched and stopped. He grabbed the handles and pulled her backwards out of the machine. The air was cold and there was a strong medicinal

odour in the hallway. He headed towards the far end. Her vision blurred, dissolving the surrounding scenery into streaks of washed out colour. His pace was strong and steady, and he didn't stop until he reached another door. He flung it open, pushed her through and kept walking.

"We're almost there. One more door then we'll be out."

"Gage."

"He's out of your life." His tone was bitter and judgmental. "I hope you didn't take him into your bed, precious. You know how I feel about that." His hand tightened around her neck as she shook her head. "Good."

He stopped again, and this time she felt a whoosh of cold air blast her face. Oh God, they were outside. Gage. Damn it, where was he? Did he even know she was missing? Peter. The memory returned, stealing the air from her chest. What if Gage was still gone? What if Peter was dead? She felt the wheels bump down a ramp. He was taking her.

"Here we are, precious." He stopped in front of a large car. She couldn't tell what make it was, only that the paint was dark. "I'm sorry. But you'll have to ride in the trunk for now. I can't have anyone seeing you." He moved away. She heard a door open, a chiming sound from inside the car, followed by a dull, popping noise. He'd released the trunk.

"No." She could feel him beside her, raising the hatch.

"It's okay. I've placed a thin mattress on the floor, so you don't hurt yourself. Now be a good girl and just lie still, and nothing will happen."

She tried to look at him, but her body barely moved. He grazed his finger across her cheek.

"Time to go, Sarah."

It was now, or never. "Fuck you." Brooklyn tensed her legs and pushed, catching him across the thighs, tumbling him back into the trunk. Then she shifted her weight and threw herself onto the ground. Maybe if she rolled under a car, he wouldn't be able to reach her. She tried to move.

"Sarah!" His screech pierced through her head as his hands clamped down around her shoulders. She'd been too slow, and now she knew she'd pay for her disobedience. She tried to scream, but his hand clamped around her throat again.

"I told you not to make me hurt you."

She couldn't breathe. His grip tightened and she knew she was going to pass out. She reached for his arm, scratching his skin as something warm trickled across her waist.

"Look what you've done," he hissed. "Look..."

His words got cut off as the door to the building crashed open. She heard someone shout her name before everything went black.

Gage stood at the door, listening to the voices in the other room. He nodded to Sam. Sam grabbed the handle, waiting until Gage nodded again before pulling it open. Gage dashed inside, his finger half cocked on the trigger. Sam stepped in behind him.

"Door, far end." It was just clicking back into place. Gage felt the air breeze by him. "He's outside."

Sam darted ahead, reaching the doorway three steps ahead. "Best to get a bead on him as quickly as possible. He might kill Brooklyn if he sees us before we can take a shot."

Gage nodded, fear so thick in his chest he didn't even know if he could speak. He could lose her, here and now. One slip on his part, and she could die in his arms. He looked over at Sam.

"We won't let anything happen to her, Gage. We'll get her back."

"This one opens out, so we'll go together."

Sam pushed as Gage shouldered the door, breaking into the cold, night air. He ran forward, taking the ramp at a full sprint. He could see a man far off to his right, kneeling beside a large car. The trunk was open and there was a wheelchair lying on its side behind it.

He ran, gun drawn, heart racing. He had to reach her. He could hear the guy shouting at her, cursing her for not listening to him. He watched as the man raised his hand over her. "Brooklyn!"

The sound of his voice stopped the man in his tracks. He looked at them, smiling a toothy grin, as he stepped over Brooklyn and jumped in his car. Gage was still twenty feet away when the engine revved and the tires squealed, a puff of smoke blinding him as the guy drove away, the trunk bouncing against the rim of the car as he sped down the lot. Gage ran to Brooklyn, kneeling down beside her limp body.

"Brook." His voice was low and tender, and he didn't even try to hide the tears dampening his cheeks. He lifted her up, cradling her in his arms, when something warm moistened his hand. He pulled it back, staring at the blood covering his fingers. "Sam!"

Sam pulled his cell away from his mouth. "Two minutes. They'll be here in two minutes."

Gage looked back at Brooklyn, clamping his hand around her wound. She couldn't afford to bleed for two minutes. "Hold on, darling. Just please hold on."

\* \* \* \*

Gage sat on the edge of the bed, watching Brooklyn sleep. She'd pulled out half her stitches, and lost another few pints of blood, but she was alive. He glanced at the marks around her neck and growled. The bastard had nearly strangled her, and he couldn't help but wonder if he'd done anything else.

"Gage?"

He turned. Peter was standing in the doorway, a scrunched up bag in his hand. "Peter."

"Can I come in?"

Gage held back the curse already formed on his tongue and merely nodded. Peter had taken quite a jolt from a taser, and even he knew now wasn't the time to argue.

"How's your neck?" asked Gage.

"Sore." Peter shuffled over to the couch. "How is she?"

"White...cold. But she'll make it." Gage glanced at his brother over his shoulder. "We're lucky you came to, and told us what happened. Another minute, and the guy would've been gone in the elevator."

Peter huffed, then cursed. "I'm hardly the hero in all this." He shifted over on the couch. "Here." He tossed Gage the bag. "I figured even your billy-goat of a stomach wouldn't thrive on hospital food, so I grabbed us a couple of burgers. Besides, I heard the doctor say you needed to eat something after giving up a few pints of blood."

"Who knew hospitals could run out of O negative."

"So you volunteered," finished Peter. "Just eat the damn burger before you pass out."

Gage moved over to the couch and sat down. He hadn't realised how hungry he was until he took a bite. "Thanks," he mumbled around a mouthful of bun.

Peter sighed. "I'm sorry."

Gage shot Peter a fleeting glance. "It wasn't your fault. I never should've left her. I knew there was something creepy about that guy, but I never checked it out. I'm the one who should be sorry." He looked over at Brooklyn. "I let her down...again."

Peter cursed and stood up, pacing back towards the door. "Damn it, must you always make it so hard?" He fisted his hands through his hair. "I screwed up, and it nearly cost Brooklyn her life! She didn't want the guy to change her bandage. She wanted to wait until you got back. I guess she sensed something was wrong. Then I think she recognised his voice or something, because she screamed your name just before he took me out." Peter growled as he shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm sorry."

Gage sat in shock as he watched his brother kick at the floor. He'd never heard Peter get so upset. "You know if Brooklyn were awake, she'd have both our heads for arguing again." He watched as Peter mumbled a vague form of 'yeah', still staring at the floor. Gage stood up and took two steps towards him. "It really wasn't your fault. Besides, Brooklyn's okay. That's all that matters. At least now we've got a few clues to go on. You gave a great description to the police sketch artist, and they found some skin tissue under Brooklyn's nails."

"But what good is the guy's DNA if he's never been coded?"

"If nothing else, it'll let us know when we've got the right suspect." Gage moved over to the couch and sat down again, picking up the burger. "Go home, Peter, You need the rest. I'll bet Maya is going crazy."

"She's waiting downstairs." Peter walked to the door. "Tell Brooklyn I'll see her later, if she'll ever agree to see me again."

"Oh, she'll want to."

Peter opened the door and stepped out, but then turned back and looked over at Brooklyn. "You know how I feel about what happened between you two. But for some unknown reason Brooklyn thinks you deserve a second chance. If I were you, I wouldn't screw it up." Peter glanced back at him. "Get some sleep, little brother. You look almost as bad as she does."

Brooklyn twisted, fighting the images tumbling in front of her.

"Because you belong to me, Sarah."

She could hear his voice. He was close. She ran, hoping the darkness would hide her. Something rattled off to her left. Oh God, he was there. She could see him standing in front of the light, his shadow stretching out towards her. She turned, and darted down a long hallway. There had to be a way out.

She spotted a door up ahead and reached for it. The handle was cold and it took all her strength to turn it. She pulled it open, running headlong into his arms.

"I told you not to make me hurt you. Look what you've done!"

She stared at his hands. They were covered in blood. Her blood. She tried to scream, but he wrapped his hands around her neck.

"You belong to me. You're in love with me."

"Gage!" She screamed his name, hoping he'd find her in the darkness. She could barely breathe. Too tight. His hands were just too tight.

*"Easy Brooklyn, I'm here."*

She fought against the fingers that encircled her arm. Oh God, he was going to touch her again. "No! Please. Don't touch me." She tried to squirm away. "Gage!"

*"It's okay, Brook. I'm here. For God's sake wake up, darling."*

Hands gripped her shoulders and she opened her eyes to find Gage staring at her, his eyes wide, his lips pulled into a thin line. "He's here," she blurted out, still straining against his hold. She needed to get away, before the bastard touched her again. "He's here. Please..."

Her words disintegrated into tears as the shock hit her. Gage sat on the bed, gathering her gently in his arms as she sobbed his name, fisting his shirt in her hands.

"Just let it go, darling. I'll hold you."

Nearly half an hour had passed before the sobbing had started to ease. Gage had held her the entire time, stroking her hair, whispering soothing words in her ear. He'd never once asked her to stop, or tried to convince her to tell him what had happened. Instead, he'd held her close, dropping a kiss across her forehead whenever she eased her grip. Even now he rocked her gently in his arms, protecting her in his embrace.

"That's it. Just breathe, darling. I've got you."

His words drifted over her, calming some of the fear still pounding in her chest. His voice was deep and soft, with the same tone he used when he wanted to seduce her. She smiled at the thought, snuggling her head into his chest. She loved how safe he made her feel. How strong his arms held her against him.

Gage stopped moving and pulled away just enough to catch her gaze. "Feel any better?"

She shrugged, staring at the buttons of his shirt. "Not sure yet," she said, cringing at the sound of her voice. She looked up at him, but he only smiled, drawing a finger down her jaw line.

"It's okay to be scared. I'd be worried if you weren't." He brushed his fingers through her hair, tucking a long strand behind her ear. "You had quite the adventure."

She smiled at his boyish grin. "Not exactly the kind I was looking for." She felt her chin start to quiver again and bit at her bottom lip.

"Shhh," he soothed, cupping her face in his hand. "Don't think about it tonight. We'll talk tomorrow, when the images aren't so frightening. What you need now is to rest. I think you're even paler than the sheets, this time."

Brooklyn looked down at her hands. They were ghostly white. She glanced at her arm, wondering why it was bandaged again. "What's this?" she asked, pointing to the inside of her elbow. "I thought the doctor said they couldn't give me anymore blood because they were out of O negative?"

"Guess they found some poor soul willing to lend you a few pints."

Brooklyn looked back at him. "You."

"Lucky we're the same blood type."

"And you called Peter a gallant knight..." She stopped. Oh God. All this time she'd been crying and she'd never even asked what had happened to Peter. Her throat constricted around another sob, and her vision dimmed. What if he'd been killed? Had Gage had to deal with that as well? She closed her eyes, unable to look at his reaction. "Peter..."

"He's okay. The guy zapped him with a taser. His hair's a bit curlier, but he's going to be fine. He dropped by, but you were still out. I sent him home with Maya. He said he'd check up on you later."



Brooklyn nodded, still not able to look at Gage. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't let him leave. I shouldn't have..."

"Hey." He cupped her face again, raising her gaze to his. "None of this is your fault. Peter's a big boy. He can take care of himself. Now stop worrying about everyone else and get some rest. You look like death warmed over." He went to pull away, but she grabbed his arm.

"I don't want to sleep. Maybe you could turn the TV on for me?"

"You need to sleep, not watch the late show. Now lay back down and get some rest."

Brooklyn felt the tears pooling again as she looked into Gage's eyes. She could see his tension building. The way the muscles in his shoulders bunched, followed by the involuntary twitch in his jaw. He wasn't up for another round of her tears.

"Just for a while, please?"

He inched closer, his lips only a breath away from hers. "What's wrong, darling?"

She stared at him, so close she could taste the scent of his cologne. She wanted to kiss him. Taste the heat of his lips, still the fear still controlling her. She tried to steady her breathing, but only managed to mumble a soft whimper. "He'll be there."

Gage touched her chin with a solitary finger. "He's gone, and I won't let him come back tonight. I promise."

She felt a tear burn a path down her cheek. God, she hated crying in front of him. "I just can't. I can't relive it again. Not now."

Gage's jaw clenched as he stroked the tear away. "I'm sorry, darling. What can I do to help you?"

Brooklyn tensed. Did she dare ask? "You could lay beside me..."

His temple danced as he tensed his jaw even further. She cursed. She shouldn't have asked. She went to pull away when he smiled.

"Are you sure I won't hurt you?" he asked.

"You won't hurt me."

"Okay, then shove over." He wedged his body onto the bed, cradling her gently in his arms as he laid his head across the pillow, tucking her head in the crook of his shoulder. "Is this okay?"

“Perfect,” she whispered, snuggling against his body, feeling the chill finally start to lift from hers. She glanced up at him. “No moving over to the couch once I’m asleep,” she warned.

Gage smiled. “Now who’s not fighting fair?” He brushed his lips across her hair. “I’ll stay. Just close your eyes and go to sleep.”

She smiled, draping her arm across his chest. “Thanks.”

He touched his fingers to her face, softly stroking her cheek. “Don’t mention it. Now sleep.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. No more nightmares tonight. Gage would keep them away, even if only for now.

## Chapter Seven

“Mmm.” Brooklyn cracked open her eyes. Bright light bathed the room, and for the first time in days she felt warm. She burrowed against Gage’s chest, sinking deeper into his embrace. He was asleep, his body relaxed, his breath even. He’d wrapped one arm around her shoulder, while the other held her waist. She breathed deeply, inhaling the faint scent of his cologne. He smelt slightly spicy, and she couldn’t help but run her fingers along his chest. She smiled as his muscles twitched beneath her touch, drawing a soft moan from deep within his throat. She’d spent months dreaming of holding him again, but even her most vivid fantasies didn’t compare to this.

She looked at his face, wishing she had the strength to seduce him. Maybe if she kissed him before he woke up...

“Now before you go re-enacting one of those scenes from your books, Brook, could you have mercy on my virgin eyes?”

Brooklyn smiled. She didn’t need to look over at the couch to know Sam was sitting there. “From the stories I’ve heard, you could give me a few new ideas.”

Sam laughed. “I’d be mighty hurt by that accusation if it weren’t true.” He smiled at the grin she flashed him. “I see you got yourself a new pillow.”

“Easy, Sam. Don’t go getting any insane ideas. I had to cry hysterically in his arms for almost an hour before he agreed to lay with me. I can assure you this doesn’t change anything.”

“I see you’re going to be as stubborn as Gage in this matter.” Sam stood up and moved to the edge of the bed. “But then you weren’t conscious to see the look in his eyes when you nearly bled to death in his arms. I’ve never seen him cry before.”

She stilled. Gage? Cry? She didn’t think that was possible. “Probably just had something in his eyes. But thanks for trying.”

“Jesus, Brook. I expected you to have more sense. Why I have half a mind to—” His cell phone rang. He shook his head, flipping the lid open. “Sam Houston.” He paused as another voice echoed on the line. “Hold on a second, Trevor.” He looked over at Brooklyn. “I’ll take

this outside. Why don't you sleep some more. I'll come back in a couple of hours and sneak some real food in for you two."

Brooklyn nodded as Sam scooted out the door. She looked back at Gage. Had he really cried for her? It was more than she could hope for. She sighed and sank back against his chest, brushing a soft kiss across his shoulder. She'd think about that later. Right now she wanted nothing more than to sleep in his arms.

Gage relaxed back in the bed and stared at the ceiling. He'd heard Sam leave, his partner's phone jostling him awake. He'd thought about getting up, but his eyes had felt too heavy to open, so he'd laid still. But he'd felt Brooklyn kiss him. Even through his shirt her lips had been warm, and it'd sent his pulse racing. It'd taken every ounce of strength not to roll her over and slant his lips over hers. She'd nestled beside him, her curves hugging his. While he'd been able to keep his thoughts from straying last night, there was no control over them this morning.

He'd been terrified yesterday when he'd held her in his arms, her blood oozing between his fingers. Then the nightmare. God, he'd never seen her cry like that, not even the night they'd fought. If he'd had doubts before, they were gone now. He was certain. The bastard had touched her, and it hadn't been just his fingers around her neck.

He growled, easing his hands down her side, gently stroking the curve of her hip. He'd kill the man. Rip his dick off his body and shove it up his ass. Then he'd get nasty. No one touched his wife, but him. And sure as hell not against her will. Even he hadn't done that. Been a bit too rough, maybe, but he would've stopped if she'd insisted.

She trembled as he caressed her hipbone, rubbing it in small circles. Damn, he loved touching her. Feeling her skin beneath his fingers, so soft and smooth he wanted nothing more than to rub every inch of his against hers. She moaned as he grazed across the soft hollow of her stomach. She was thinner than he remembered, but just as sexy. He moved up, tracing her ribcage, stopping below the firm mound of her breast.

"Gage?"

"Brook." Damn was that his voice? It was so raw and hungry he barely recognised it. He looked down at her. Her eyes had darkened, her lips slightly apart. She looked ready for whatever he had in mind. He tensed his jaw, determined to stop, when she touched her

fingers to his jaw, drawing him towards her. He couldn't help but moan as she pressed her lips to his, softly stroking his tongue into her mouth.

He pulled her closer, curling his tongue around hers. Her lips were cool, like her skin, and he felt the sudden need to strip off her gown. Warm her body against his. He needed to know she was all right. Touch every part of her before he'd be satisfied the bastard hadn't hurt her. She leaned into him, resting more of her weight on him. He knew she was far too weak for what they both wanted to happen, but he wasn't about to deny her, or himself, the brief moment of intimacy that had suddenly enveloped them. She was scared, and reaching out for the only security she knew.

He shifted on the bed, easing her over on her side, careful to keep his hands away from her back as he rolled with her, pressing her curves into his body, moaning in need as he ran his fingers along her ribs and down her hip, stopping at the edge of her buttocks. He wanted to drape her leg across his thighs, ease his fingers between her silky lips, and stroke her clit until she screamed out her release. But she just felt so damn weak in his arms. He eased back, knowing he should pull away when she licked the shell of his ear, and grazed her outer leg along his thigh.

He growled, hooking his finger under her knee, balancing it across his hip. A soft whimper feathered across his neck as he slipped a single finger down her thigh, trailing it through her narrow slit.

He groaned, feeling her feminine juices coat his skin as she tilted her hips ever so slightly. He made another pass, gathering more of her cream onto his finger, knowing he'd have to lick it clean. Brooklyn's eyes met his as he brought the digit to his lips, sucking off every drop. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, and he pulled her closer, moulding their bodies together as he slanted his mouth over hers again.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed, finally breaking the kiss. "You taste so sweet, darling." He kissed her again, softly this time, just brushing his tongue across her lips.

"More," was all she whispered, as her eyes fluttered shut.

He smiled, knowing she was fading, but unable to deny her request. He'd spent too many nights dreaming of touching her again, and he wasn't about to pass up any opportunity.

“Relax, baby,” he breathed, dropping his hand again, following the soft line of her hip until he reached her mound. Her breath hitched and her grip tightened as he slowly lowered his finger, dipping it through her delicate folds until he could slip just the tip inside her.

Brooklyn hummed in his ear, trying to deepen the penetration, but he kept it light, just teasing her with the soft press of his hand on her clit as he gently moved his finger back and forth through her channel. He didn't know how long she'd last, or if she'd even come before exhaustion claimed her, but he couldn't rush his movements, secretly wondering if this was his last chance to feel her against him...hear her breathy little mumbles as he brought her to a gentle orgasm. She nipped at his lobe when he pulled back, and he heard his chuckle rumble through her chest.

“Okay, baby. Just rest against me, and I'll ease your ache.”

She snuggled closer, notching her head into his shoulder and resting the weight of her leg completely on his hip. He smiled against her hair, tracing his finger up her slit and softly circling her clit. A hushed gasp breathed across his chest, her body rolling gently against his. He kept his motion slow, wanting her to come, but afraid she'd hurt herself if she moved to quickly. He shifted his free hand down to her hip, holding her tight as he increased his pace, rubbing her clit with firm strokes.

Brooklyn pressed her head against him, straining to move her hips when he felt her body tense. She gasped once, then moaned, arching her head back as her climax washed over her, drenching his hand with the evidence of her release.

Gage growled, gathering as much juice as he could on his fingers before lifting them to his mouth, savouring her sweet flavour. Brooklyn watched him from behind lowered lids, her eyes glassy and dazed. He smiled as the tension eased from her body, a soft sigh trembling from her lips. He leant forward, taking her mouth with his, knowing she'd be able to taste her cream on his tongue.

Brooklyn whispered his name, straining to deepen the kiss. She inched closer, brushing her tongue against his when her grip in his hair loosened. He smiled. Despite the arousal still coursing through her body, the desire he'd seen in her eyes and felt in her touch, she was drifting back towards sleep.

“It's okay, darling. Sleep. We'll talk later.” He wanted to say he'd love her later, but the words wouldn't form on his tongue right.

"Please don't go."

Her words were slurred, but there was no mistaking the neediness in her voice. "I'm not going anywhere. Just sleep." He gathered her back in his arms, draping her body across his again. "I won't let him hurt you. Never again."

"I love you."

He smiled at her soft words, so faint they'd been more like a wish than a statement. "Me too. Now sleep."

\* \* \* \*

Brooklyn sat in the bed, her back cushioned against some pillows. She'd only been awake for an hour, but already her limbs felt heavy. She cursed, hating the weakness creeping through her body. It wasn't like her to just sit around, and the waiting was driving her crazy.

Sam had returned as promised, a couple of sandwiches tucked inside his jacket. Both he and Gage had insisted she eat one, and had sat there watching until she'd gulped down the last bit. Now they were huddled on the couch, talking in hushed whispers, as Sam flipped back and forth through his notepad. It was almost as if they'd forgotten she was there.

"Are you two finished gossiping yet?" she asked.

Sam looked up at her, closing the pad. "Was there something else you wanted us to do?"

"Not particularly. It's just, your constant whispering is annoying. Either talk so I can hear you, or don't bother talking at all." She could hear the agitation in her voice, but she didn't care.

Gage smiled and crossed over to the bed. "We're not trying to keep secrets. You just looked tired. We thought you might drift off to sleep again if we were quiet enough." He picked up her hand and began stroking her fingers.

"Gage..." She couldn't finish her thought as he cupped her other hand and repeated the sensual caress. Damn. Why did she respond so easily to him?

*The dream.*

That must be it. Just after Sam had left she'd drifted back to sleep and dreamt Gage had kissed her. That he'd trailed his fingers down her body, caressing her skin, stroking his tongue against hers. She remembered arching into him, laying her leg across his thighs, silently asking him to touch her. He'd chuckled and moved his finger through her slit, circling her clit until a gentle orgasm had washed through her. He'd lulled her back to sleep then, his arms holding her tight, whispered words of love following her into the darkness. It'd been so real. But then she'd woken later in the same position she'd gone to sleep in, and had realised it'd just been her fantasy taking over again.

"All I do is sleep."

"You've lost nearly half your blood volume in a matter of days. You're lucky you're conscious enough to sleep." He settled on the edge of the bed. "Would you rather talk?"

She tensed. She'd known it'd only be a matter of time before he asked about the abduction. "About what?"

Gage brushed his fingers along her jaw. "It's okay, darling. If you don't want to talk about it yet, we'll understand. Sam and I can wait until you're ready."

He was being too patient, too understanding, and just too damn considerate. And the combination only made her want to help him. "I don't remember too much. I think he gave me something to try and knock me out."

"It was in the syringe and the cream," said Sam, stepping over to the bed. "The lab tested them. Both substances were loaded with a form of Ketamine. It affects the body similarly to an aesthetic."

"That explains why I had trouble moving," she replied.

"Luckily for us, your wound didn't allow it to enter your blood stream fast enough to completely immobilise you." Sam smiled at her. "You put up quite a struggle in the parking lot."

"He was going to put me in the trunk!" she spat out, pulling her hands away from Gage before wrapping them around her chest. "I know better than to allow that to happen. At least not without a fight."

"You did great," said Gage. "Sam was just trying to point that out." He scooted closer. "We're not trying to criticise your tactics. We just want to know what you remember."

She nodded, leaning back against the bed. "Sorry, Sam."



"It's okay. Under the circumstances, you're allowed the occasional outbreak." He shot Gage a quick glance. "Would you feel more comfortable if I left?"

"You don't have to leave. That's not what this is about." She lowered her gaze. "He wants me," she whispered.

"Do you know why?" asked Sam.

"He thinks he's saving me. That I love him. He wants us to be...lovers." She flinched at Gage's curse

"Did he touch you?" growled Gage.

She bit her bottom lip as she nodded her reply.

"God damn." Gage got up and stalked across the floor, slamming his fists against the couch. He turned back towards her, physically restraining his anger. "Did he hurt you?"

His voice was dark and the look in his eyes was nothing short of barbaric. "It hurt the most when he grabbed my neck." She grazed her fingers across the marks.

Gage lunged to the bed, taking her in his arms. "I'm so sorry."

She felt the tears gather as he stroked her hair. "There's more."

Gage pulled back. "What?"

"He called me, Sarah."

\* \* \* \*

Brooklyn sighed, still sitting on the bed an hour later, while Gage and Sam scrutinised their notes. She was exhausted, and wanted nothing more than to drift off to sleep. But she couldn't. She needed a shower. She could still feel the bastard's hands on her body. Smell the scent of his skin on her arms. And she wouldn't rest until she'd washed the memory away.

"Hey."

Gage looked up. He'd hounded her for information. Made her repeat every word she could remember. He'd even wanted her to tell them how the guy had touched her, but she'd refused. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah! I'm tired, cranky and in desperate need of a shower." She flicked her hand at them. "You guys have been at this for an hour. Do you think you could pause long enough to help me shuffle over to the bathroom?"

Gage smiled as he walked over to the bed. "Why don't you rest first? I'll help you with the shower when you're a bit stronger."

"No. Shower first!"

"You're not strong enough to stand up, let alone spend five minutes in a shower." He patted her arm. "Don't be so stubborn. Sleep for a while and we'll see about a sponge bath when you wake up."

"I don't want a fucking sponge bath! I want a shower! Now either help me over to the washroom or get out of my way so I can do it myself!"

She was yelling. She could hear her voice echoing off the walls, but she didn't care. The pain in her back was escalating again, and she wanted to clean the bastard's handprints off before she passed out. She watched as Gage drew a deep breath, levelling a quick look at Sam.

"Okay, Brooklyn. You need a shower. Just let Sam go get the doctor so he can tape a waterproof dressing over your back first. We don't want to damage anything back there."

"Fine!" she huffed. "But no funny business and no meds until I'm done. I wouldn't put it past you two to bribe the man to sedate me."

"Do you honestly think we'd trick you like that?" asked Gage.

"Of course you would if you thought it was in my best interest. Don't pretend like I don't see the look on your faces. You think I've suddenly lost it."

"No, we think you've been through hell and are finally starting to realise what's really going on. That, and the fact you're in pain and need to rest," said Sam. "I'll go get the doctor."

"I'm not crazy, Gage," she said as Sam darted out the door. "I just need a shower."

"Care to tell me why that's suddenly so important?"

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with the chunks of dried blood in my hair, or the dirt from the parking lot smeared up my legs."

"They washed most of the dirt and blood off when they re-stitched your back. Care to try again?"

Brooklyn fought back the tears as she met his heated stare. "I want to get rid of his scent. The feel of his fingers on my skin." She sobbed once before gathering her strength again. "I just want him off me."

Gage tensed his jaw and touched his hand to hers. "Okay. I'll help you get a shower. Just try to relax until the doctor gets here."

She nodded, pulling her arms tight across her chest. The wounded edge to his voice only made her feel worse, and she knew she'd start crying again if she looked at him.

## Chapter Eight

"So what's this about a shower?" asked Nick O'Brian as he stepped through the door.

"I don't get what the big deal is," huffed Brooklyn. "You act as if it's an unreasonable request."

"Just not one I expected for a few more days. I think you'd find a sponge bath more accommodating in your condition."

"Trust me," interrupted Gage. "You don't want to go there."

Nick smiled. "I understand your need. I just don't want you passing out on me in there."

"I'll be fine."

"Very well. Turn around and I'll check your stitches before I put on a new dressing."

Brooklyn turned, shuddering as he undid the strap to her gown. She felt a gentle tug on her back before she heard him throw the bandages onto a tray.

"Good God," gasped Sam.

"Impressive, isn't it," sighed Nick. "Okay, you're all set. You've got quite a bit of bruising around the laceration, so be careful not to spray the water directly on the cut."

"I'll be careful." She watched as Nick shot Gage a quizzical look before he turned and marched to the door.

"I'll come back in about thirty minutes and give you something for the pain."

"All right. Let's get this over with so you can rest," said Gage, taking her arm in his. "Just go slowly."

Brooklyn swung her legs over the edge of the bed and placed them on the floor. Then she eased forward, transferring her weight onto her feet. She hadn't even stood up before her knees buckled and she fell into Gage's arms.

"Easy, darling." Gage pulled her against him, balancing her weight.

"Oh God." She hadn't stood up since the stabbing and now she knew why.

"Just put your arms around my neck and I'll carry you," said Gage

"I'm sure I'll be fine once I can balance against the wall," she assured him.

"You are one stubborn soul," he huffed, carrying her over to the washroom.

She was too light. Too fragile in his arms. He held back another curse as he stepped through the doorway. The shower was off to their left. It was small, but Gage doubted she'd be able to stand up for more than a second, wall or not.

"Sit here while I get everything ready." He placed her in a chair and walked out, returning moments later with a couple of towels. Then he unwrapped a new bar of soap and opened a small pack of shampoo. He looked over at her, growling at the sight of her half slumped in the chair, her eyes wide with pain. "Oh bloody hell."

He lunged forward and closed the door, stripping off his shirt as he went. Then he reached in and turned on the water, adjusting the spray before undoing his pants.

"What are doing?" Brooklyn's voice was timid and he could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

"You're crazy if you believe for one moment you'll be able to do this alone. And if it's just the same, I'd rather not get my clothes wet."

Brooklyn looked at him for several seconds before raising an eyebrow in question. "You're coming in with me?"

"Do you want the shower or not? Because this is the only way you're going to get it without pulling out all those stitches in your back. And the good doctor already threatened me regarding what he'd do if he had to stitch you up again."

He watched as she looked from the shower back to him. He thought she'd be angry when their eyes met again, but that wasn't what he saw in her expression.

"As long as you don't mind. We haven't..." Her voice trailed off. "I don't want you to do anything you don't want to."

"It's just a shower." But as he watched her shrug the gown off her shoulders, he knew it'd be much more than that. She was beautiful. The way her breasts thrust out from her chest, the nipples pointing straight towards him. She must have gotten chilled because they were already hard and thick, like tight little rose buds ready to be touched. Her ribs were showing beneath her skin and her stomach was slightly hollowed. He forced himself to swallow as she shed the garment on the floor.

She was naked. Gloriously bare from her head to her toes. He trailed his gaze down her thighs, smiling at the way her hips flared out from her waist and then disappeared down the smooth joint of her legs.

He looked away, not wanting her to catch him staring. Besides, if he saw any more details, the bulge in his pants would only swell. He cursed, removing his other shoe as he lowered his jeans to the floor. He didn't know how he was going to hide his erection from her. His cock was heavy and thick, and so engorged it blazed a path across his stomach. He glanced over at her. She was smiling at him, her attention focused on the tent in his underwear.

"Glad to see you're not having any erectile difficulties." Her tone was a mixture of amusement and arousal, and his cock pulsed at the sound of it.

"Are you going to make this more difficult than it already is?"

"No."

"Good." He stripped off his last line of defence and walked over to her, his shaft leading the way. "No wisecracks about the state of my arousal, understood?" he said, placing her hand in his as she nodded at him. "Okay. Nice and easy." He lifted her arm as she stood up, cringeing at the stifled moan that echoed off the walls before she sagged against his chest.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I need to. Please."

She moved her feet forward and he half carried her to the stall. He stepped in first, sheltering her from the spray as she slipped in beside him, pressing her upper back against the wall.

"Thank you," she whispered, as she laid her head against his chest, her hands palming his skin.

Gage held his breath, not sure how long he could stand the pressure of her body on his without quenching his need to touch her. To graze his fingers along her side, caress the gentle curve of her breasts. He felt her nipples rake across his chest. They were even harder than when she'd undressed, and he could feel every subtle movement she made as they traced a path across his skin. He wanted to take them in his mouth, sip at them until she moaned his name in need. He'd hadn't gotten a chance to touch them earlier, and just the feel of the tight little nubs against him was making his head spin.

He closed his eyes, trying to quench the sudden rush of desire. He could smell her sweet arousal mixing with the steam and knew, if he moved lower, he'd find her creamy juice trailing along her inner thighs. He'd caught more than just a glimpse of her when she'd stood up and longed to touch the soft skin with his tongue this time, lapping at her until her taste was all he knew. He groaned, feeling his erection tighten further, pressing into her stomach.

"This is payback, isn't it?"

Brooklyn smiled against his chest, running her fingers across his male nipples. "I thought it was just a shower."

"You're pure vixen, you know that?" He laughed. "Which do you want to wash first? Your hair or your skin?"

"Doesn't matter."

Her voice was husky and raw, and far deeper than usual. She was aroused as well, just as she'd been this morning. She hadn't spoken a word about it, and since he wasn't sure whether she didn't remember, or had chosen not to, he'd decided it was better to just let it slide. He stole a quick glance. There was no way he could touch her skin right now. Not without using his tongue.

"Hair." He reached for the packet, emptying the contents into his palm. Then he turned around, still cradling her against him, until her back was facing the stream of water. "Just ease your head back, darling."

He groaned as she tilted back, pushing her breasts up towards his lips. They were so close he could've touched them with his tongue. He watched the water soak her hair, spraying droplets across her lips. What he wouldn't give to lick those drops away.

"Is that okay?" she asked.

"Great."

He pulled her back, lathering the cream in her hair. She tilted her head, moaning softly as he massaged her scalp, scrubbing the blood from the ends. She was still cradling his erection between her hips, moving just enough to keep it hard. He clenched his bottom lip between his teeth, biting back the urge to slip it inside her.

"Okay. Lay back again."

She eased back in his arms, resting against his cock as he rinsed the soap from her hair. Some of the bubbles dripped down between them, leaving a trail of white across both their chests. He followed one of the bubbles, watching it slide over her breast, stopping on her nipple. It wavered, distorting the nipple's silhouette before dissolving against her skin. His control shattered. He reached up, gently grazing his thumb across the tip, feeling it pucker against his caress. She moaned, arching into his hand, filling his fingers with her soft mound. He made another pass, raking the tip again, brushing the remaining bubbles from her chest.

Brooklyn didn't speak, but pressed her pelvis against his, rubbing her skin across his cock. He barely stilled the moan of ecstasy in his throat as it pulsed, flaring the head against her stomach. Damn, if he didn't stop touching her now, he'd have her pinned between his chest and the wall with his cock lodged inside her before the shampoo had washed down the drain.

He pulled back, grabbing the bar of soap from the ledge. She watched him, her lips parted, her eyes half hidden by her thick lashes. She'd wrapped her fingers around his shoulders, bracing her body on his. She smiled as he touched the bar to her stomach, drawing it across her abdomen and up her torso.

"Anywhere else I need to get?" he asked, rubbing the soap down her arms.

"Just my back. I want to wash away the blood."

"Why don't you lean against the wall?"

Brooklyn nodded, allowing him to turn her around and brace her chest against the shower stall. She tensed as he ran his fingers down her back, scooting around her bandage.

"I won't hurt you, darling. I promise."

"I know. It's just..." She stopped.

He watched as she hunched her shoulders with a hint of disgust. He stilled the growl in his chest, moving over her until his lips caressed her ear. "Did he touch your back?"

She nodded, a small whimper mixing with the steam.

Gage grunted his reply and lathered the soap, cleaning her skin with gentle circles. He looked down, staring at the curve of her buttocks. A dark stain marked a path between her cheeks. "There's some dried blood on that cute little butt of yours. Do you want to clean it up, yourself?"



Brooklyn grabbed the soap he handed her and tried to wash the blood away, but the twisting tore a muted cry from her lips. She sagged against the wall. "It hurts when I twist." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I can't do anymore."

Gage looked back at her ass. She'd only managed to clean the patch over her tailbone. He grimaced, knowing she'd be upset if he left the blood there.

"I'll get the rest."

Brooklyn eased in his embrace, relaxing against the wall as he slid his fingers down her waist and along the cleft of her buttocks, massaging the stain away. He'd always loved her ass, and wished they'd shared the gift she'd given him that night under more romantic circumstances. It'd been so darkly erotic he longed to take her like that again. But with love instead of anger. He moved lower, removing the last drop of blood as he brushed across her anus. She tensed and pulled away. He yanked his hand back.

"I'm sorry, Brook. Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head, but he heard her muffle a sob. "It wasn't you," she whispered.

Gage frowned, not quite sure what she meant when the image hit him. Brooklyn trapped on her stomach as that bastard changed her bandage. Caressing her back, sinking his hands lower until he slipped them between her soft cheeks. The rumble that filled the small stall caught them both by surprise.

"Brooklyn?"

"Don't."

"How bad did he hurt you?"

She paused as another sob caught in her chest. "Bad enough."

Gage cursed and slammed his fists against the side. Brooklyn jumped at the force of his blow. He wanted to pound them through the wall, but the soft sound of her crying snapped him back. He moved closer, cradling her trembling body against his.

"Tell me what to do. Tell me how to help you."

"Just hold me. Hold me and make it all go away."

"Anything, darling," he said. "Anything."

\* \* \* \*

*March 18<sup>th</sup>*

"I can't believe you talked me into this," said Gage, pulling up the driveway to their home. "You should've stayed in the hospital for at least two more days."

"You know how much I hate hospitals," said Brooklyn. "Besides, I didn't feel safe there."

"And this is better?"

"If the creep knows where I live, then why did he wait to attack me at the bookstore?" she protested, opening the door as Gage slowed the car to a stop. "Besides, it's not like I'll be alone." She motioned to the two officers waiting at the front door. "You and Sam have seen to that."

"Sam and I didn't arrange for your new fan club. That was Trevor's doing."

"And Trevor is one of Sam's oldest friends," she countered.

"Trevor is doing Sam a favour by being part of the unit assigned to your case," replied Gage, stepping out of the car and over to Brooklyn's door. "The bodyguards would've been recruited even if Trevor wasn't fielding the investigation." He grabbed her arm, helping her out. "Now quit being so damn difficult and let's get you inside."

Brooklyn huffed at his forced smile as she followed him up the path and into the house. Some of her strength had returned, but even the short burst of exertion drained her, and she gladly accepted the chair Gage offered as they stepped through the door. "So when are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"When you don't pale from the least bit of effort," he teased.

"Very funny. Where's Sam? I doubt you're the only mastermind behind this operation."

"He's waiting in the study. I'll help you there as soon as some colour returns to your face."

Brooklyn shook her head and stood up, ignoring his huff of protest as she swayed on her feet. She headed down the hall, bracing some weight against the wall. She turned right through the doorway, walked past Sam, and headed for the small sofa by the window, sinking into the leather cushions.

"Stubborn as usual," said Sam. He smiled at her bemused snort. "Trevor's just checking out the security system we installed. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"What security system?" asked Brook.

"We're not about to take any chances on your safety," said Sam. "So we called one of our tech guys and had him install a high-end security system in the house. Trust me. If someone so much as breathes around this place once it's armed, we'll know about it."

"Do you really think that's necessary? You know how much I hate all that stuff."

"Just humour us until we catch this guy," said Sam. "Then you can leave it disarmed if you want."

Brooklyn sighed, relaxing back in the cushions just as three people walked into the room. She recognised one of the men from Gage's party, but had no idea who the other two were.

"That's one slick system," said one of the men. "How did you manage to get the Bureau to spring for it?"

Sam smiled. "Once you get to know Brooklyn, you'll discover most people are willing to help out when it involves her." Sam motioned to her. "Brooklyn. This is Trevor Watts. He heads the homicide unit in the Southwest precinct."

"I remember you from Gage's party," said Trevor, shaking Brooklyn's hand. "I didn't realise you were Gage's wife." He shot Gage a quick smile. "Didn't think a brute like him could land such a beautiful lady."

"Believe me, that fact has astounded most people," teased Sam. "Why don't you introduce the rest of the team, Trevor?"

"Sure." He stepped over to a large man with black hair and blunt features. "Brooklyn. This is Troy Jones. He's part of the domestic violence unit at the station and the lovely lady to his left is his partner, Rebecca Brown. They've both dealt with hundreds of assault cases and have had some exposure to serial pursuits."

Brooklyn nodded at the two people. Neither smiled nor moved forward to shake her hand, but merely stood with their arms crossed. "Do you have experience with stalkers?" she asked.

"It's not a crime that occurs that frequently in this city," said Troy.

"So that's a no," replied Brooklyn.

Troy glanced at his partner then at Trevor. "No," he confirmed.

"They may not have direct experience in a case exactly like yours. But they're the best in their field, and I'm certain they'll be able to catch this guy," said Trevor.

"So what do you know so far?" asked Brooklyn, shifting over so Sam could join her on the couch. She glanced over at Gage, but he appeared rooted to his spot by the window.

"Unfortunately, not much. We ran the partial prints we found on the wheelchair and the DNA sample from your fingernails through the computer, but haven't been able to find a match yet. That suggests our mystery man hasn't been arrested before. We're expanding our search parameters, but there's a distinct chance he's a ghost in the system."

"That's crap and you know it," hissed Gage. "This guy's far too organised to be a rookie. He's done this before."

"Perhaps," said Troy. "But if he's never been caught, knowing that doesn't help us much."

"Easy, gentlemen," said Trevor. "We all want to find this guy. That's why Troy and Rebecca have come up with a plan to draw him out." He waved his hand at Troy. "If you'd be so kind as to tell everyone your idea."

"Of course." Troy stepped forward, drawing himself up straight. "Both Rebecca and I feel the best way to catch this guy is to trap him. He seems motivated to get you, so it stands to reason he'll come after you again. Only this time, we'll be waiting." He removed a file from his jacket and placed it on the desk behind him. "Based on his attack at the bookstore and his attempt at the hospital, it's obvious he won't try to abduct you unless he can get you alone, or in a position which shifts the power in his favour. But, in order to do that, he'll have to expose himself to a public forum first. What we want to do is choose the time and place you'll be vulnerable, and then trap the bastard when he tries to take you."

"You want Brooklyn to be bait?" asked Gage.

"Protected in every way," assured Troy. "We've arranged for another book signing, only this time we'll have undercover police at every exit and in the crowd. When our guy shows up hoping to set his snare, we'll trap him instead."

Brooklyn didn't even have a chance to respond before Gage stormed across the room, stepping in front of Troy.

"Over my dead body," he hissed.

"Gage..." she began.

"Forget it, Brook. There's no way in hell you're exposing yourself to this guy. He's too unpredictable. There's no way they can assure me of your safety."

Troy glanced at Rebecca. The woman stepped forward. "I can understand your concern, Agent Matthews. But it's completely unnecessary. We've executed similar scenarios several times, and never experienced any problems." She feigned a smile. "Your wife will be completely safe."

"You're damn right she will, because she won't be anywhere near that bookstore!"

"Easy, buddy." Sam stood up beside him, gently taking his arm. "Let's just look through their security measures, first, before we shoot down any ideas. After all, we both know this guy's a threat until he's caught."

Gage huffed and ran his fingers through his hair. "I realise that, but this isn't the way to catch him. He's too sophisticated. His attempt at the hospital wasn't just a spur of the moment decision. He took that nurse's identity two weeks before he attacked Brook, anticipating she'd live through their first encounter. And when he made the attempt, he was prepared to deal with anyone in the room." He levelled a heated look at Rebecca and Troy. "This guy's dangerous."

"All the more reason to catch him," said Rebecca. She waved her hand at Gage's growl. "I'd like the opportunity to go over the details with Brooklyn, first, before *she* makes her decision."

"I already told you. Over my dead body."

"Gage."

He turned to her. She was still sitting on the couch. "Brooklyn."

She stood up and made her way over to the desk. "We need to talk." She glanced around at the small gathering of people. "I'd appreciate it if you'd all kindly wait in the hall. Maybe you could get them some coffee, Sam?"

Sam nodded, extending his hand towards the door. "Sure." He followed the group out, stopping in the doorway. "Give a shout when you're done...talking." He smiled as he closed the door, leading the way to the kitchen.

## Chapter Nine

"You're not putting your life on the line so two hotshot detectives can add another notch to their belts." Gage was angry and Brooklyn knew there wasn't anything she'd be able to say to change his mind.

"I don't intend on doing anything of the sort. But I don't see the harm in listening to what they have to say. They're the experts here."

"Experts?" He moved over to the desk she was leaning against, bracketing his body in front of hers. "Let me assure you neither one of them is prepared for what this guy's capable of. There's something wrong with this guy, and I don't mean just the usual insanity. The way he's personified you into your character, calling you Sarah." Gage shook his head. "It's just too dangerous."

"So what would you have me do? Stay locked up in the house until the creep gets tired of trying to find me?"

"No." His voice was strong, but she could see the reservations in his eyes. Staying locked up in the house was exactly what he'd hoped she'd do. "But taunting him with your body isn't exactly what I had in mind either! You said it yourself. The bastard wants you, and not just to have you sign his copy of your book."

"I'm more than aware of what the guy wants," she replied. "But I can't spend the rest of my life hiding from him. Eventually the bodyguards will leave, and then what? Living here alone isn't that much safer."

Gage clenched his jaw, and she knew she'd struck a nerve. "I won't let that bastard hurt you." He leant forward, his lips only a breath away. "I promise."

Brooklyn tried to breathe, but he was just too close. She touched her fingers to his face, feeling him tense at her gentle caress. "You can't stay perched by my side twenty-four hours a day. You haven't done that since our honeymoon."

He took a laboured breath as he placed his hands on her waist. His eyes had darkened and he looked ready to kill. "I won't let him hurt you."

He inched closer, straddling her legs around his hips. She stole a quick glance at his crotch, smiling at the bulge in his jeans. He stopped before he touched her, his chest hovering beside hers.

“Gage.” She tilted her head towards him, slanting her lips over his. Maybe if she made the first move...

“Bloody hell.”

He took her in his arms, wrapping his hands around her shoulders, as he sealed his mouth to hers. She opened her lips as he thrust his tongue inside, stroking hers with a fiery need. She moaned into the kiss, slipping her fingers beneath his shirt, palming his chest with her hands. Warm skin greeted her and she could feel his muscles bunching and twitching beneath her touch. She squeezed, quickly skirting across to his nipples, teasing them with slow, strong tweaks.

“Good God,” he moaned, pulling her body against him, pressing his cock into the vee of her thighs. She could feel the head pulsing through the fabric, desperate to be released.

She obeyed.

Without losing contact, she moved her hands down his chest, releasing the first button on his pants. He groaned. She smiled against his chest, kissing him through his shirt as she moved lower and slowly released the next button. He growled this time, moving his lips to her neck. She stilled for just a moment as he ran his tongue down her throat, nipping at the hollow of her shoulder. Brooklyn tilted her head back, increasing the pressure as she popped the last two buttons free. His cock thickened against the tip of her fingers as she pulled his underwear down to release the long shaft from its prison.

“Brooklyn.” His voice was a husky plea, so deep and raw the sound of it pooled the moisture growing between her legs.

“Gage,” she whispered, taking his lips with hers again.

He pulled at her shirt as she trailed her fingers down the length of his cock, teasing the skin of his scrotum. His hands tore at her clothing, flinging some of the buttons across the room in his haste to free her from it. He cupped her right breast, massaging the hard nipple between his fingers. She hadn't been able to wear a bra, and Gage was taking full advantage of that fact.

"You're skin's so soft. So soft and warm. I love touching it." He lowered his face to her chest, gently suckling her nipple into his mouth. She gasped at the intensity of it, straining to give him more of her breast. She needed him to touch her, claim her as he had when they first met. She speared her fingers through his hair, no longer able to keep her hand wrapped around his shaft.

"I need to touch you, too."

He released her nipple just long enough to raise his face back to hers. "There'll be time for that later. First I have to convince myself you're really all right. And that means licking every square inch of your body."

Brooklyn groaned as he bent down and engulfed her other breast, licking and sucking with the single-minded intent of a man on a mission. He curled his tongue around her nipple, coaxing it harder and thicker. The pleasure was exquisite, better than any dream she'd conjured in his absence. She closed her eyes, allowing her body to feel every sensation. Her nipples tingled, swelling to twice their normal size. She felt her face heat, and there was a strong fluttering in her stomach every time he grazed his skin against hers. Sweat beaded on her skin as her arousal pulsed from her vagina, coating her lips and thighs with its slick essence. She needed him to touch her there. To lick her until she wailed his name. She arched into him.

Gage growled. She was putty in his arms, and he couldn't wait to plunge his cock deep inside her. Feel her walls clench around him, milking him into his own release. But first he needed to keep his promise. He felt her arch into him. She was still wearing her pants, but he knew she was already wet. He could smell the sweet scent of her arousal wafting around them. Mixing with the steamy heat now rising from their bodies. He remembered the scent, the taste. Like honey soaked fruit, all sweet and moist. It was all he could do to strip off her pants without tearing them and ease them over her thighs until they fell in a heap at her ankles. He looked down. She was wearing a black thong, the front wet against her skin. His jaw twitched.

"Oh darling. I can't wait to taste your sweet cream. The scent is driving me crazy." He reached down and rimmed the band, brushing his finger across her clit.

"Oh God. Please don't stop."



“Stop? I have no intentions of stopping until I hear you scream my name.”

He took her lips in his again, fisting the silky material as he ripped it from her body, tossing it to the floor. Brooklyn moaned as the panties separated, undulating her clit against his finger.

“Easy, darling. I don’t want to rush this.”

“But, I need...”

Her plea became a strangled moan as he dipped his finger inside her, drawing the moisture out before circling her swollen clit. He heard her bite back a muted cry, digging her nails into his shoulders as she anchored herself against his body. He smiled, kissing a path across her stomach and down to her thighs. The aroma had become more pungent, and he couldn’t stop the quick dart of his tongue as he swept it between her lips, slurping the cream from her skin.

“Yes...oh God...right there.”

He moved back slightly, watching her vagina clench as he dipped inside her again. Two fingers this time, disappearing into the hole of her sex. Her muscles pulsed, trying to draw him deeper.

“Damn, you’re beautiful. So wet and sweet. I’m not sure I can take much more of this.”

She mumbled something about finishing, but he couldn’t make it out. Her breath was heavy and rough, her fingers clamped around his arms so firm he was certain he’d have tiny finger-sized bruises after. She’d braced her feet on his shoulders, splaying her knees open to accommodate his large figure, as he lapped at her flesh. She wept cream, soaking his fingers as he pulled back out before quickly thrusting back in. She arched her hips off the desk, another muted cry echoing in his ears. She was close.

“Fight it a bit longer. I’m not finished eating you, yet.”

“But it’s been so long. I can’t...”

Her words trailed off as she quivered at his thrust, this one even deeper than before. He loved feeling her skin part around his fingers, holding him tight as he moved through the swollen tissue until his hand palmed her mound. She clenched her muscles, massaging his intrusion as she did his cock. He smiled, savouring each inch of skin as he slowly withdrew, her body closing behind his fingers as if it refusing entrance to anyone other than him. A growl caught in his throat as he considered the thought, wanting to tell her she was his, but

unable to get the words right. She pulsed again on his next thrust, the muscles in her thighs tensing as spasms quivered in her pussy. She was on the verge of climaxing. He cursed, knowing she'd go over the edge whether he continued or not. He'd be damned if he'd pass up the opportunity to taste the heat of her release.

He lowered back down, licking her clit with quick, short strokes, twirling the small protrusion of skin around his tongue. She cried out, clenching her fingers in his hair, as her body exploded. Her vagina contracted, holding his fingers deep inside as he drank the juice that seeped out beneath them.

"So sweet, darling. I could eat you forever."

"Gage!"

Her voice echoed off the walls, vibrating the air around them. Damn, he loved it when she screamed. So overcome with her own pleasure she couldn't stay in control. He kept licking until her thighs relaxed and her grip eased. He smiled, more than triumphant.

"Something on your mind? I believe you called my name."

"You're too smug for your own good," she whispered, still lost in the embers of her release. Her face was flushed a deep red and her nipples were nearly purple.

He moved back up, grazing each breast with his tongue before reaching her lips. They were puffy and red, and he knew she'd bitten them in her attempt to halt her wail. "Are you complaining?"

She smiled, tracing his bottom lip with her tongue. "Not at all. But it's my turn now."

She tried to move, but he held her firm, circling her wrists with his fingers. God, they were so small he could almost touch his palm.

"I told you. There'll be time for that later. I'm not finished yet." He flashed her a wicked grin he knew drove her crazy. "As a matter of fact, I'm just beginning."

Brooklyn drew a sharp breath as he lodged the head of his cock against her sex. Moisture coated the tip, dripping down his shaft and across his scrotum. He'd eased his pants down just enough to completely free his erection and loved the contrast of her skin against his clothes. He groaned, slipping the crown inside her.

She clenched.

He bit his lip, barely stilling the need to pummel into her. He was still worried she was too weak for the pounding he had in mind, and reminded himself to go slowly. She needed tenderness, passion.

*Not like the last time.*

Damn it, he hated that whining little voice in his head. The one that always remembered what was better left forgotten. He'd promised himself he'd never hurt her like that, again. That meant leaving her the hell alone.

But he couldn't. He trembled with his need to claim her. To show her, once and for all, she belonged to him. He pushed a bit deeper, feeling her body clench tighter.

"God damn, you're tight," he rasped, stilling the fire burning down his spine. He was close. One stray thought was all it'd take to push him over the edge.

"Too long," she panted, straining to draw him deeper, but he held her firmly in place. "It's been far too long."

He smiled at the desperate quality of her voice. She wanted it just as bad as he did.

*Of course she does. She's scared and alone, and you're the only protection she knows.*

He cursed the thought, convincing himself that wasn't the real reason she wanted him. Surely she loved him as he did her?

*This isn't a loving, you moron. It's a transference of need. Sex for safety.*

*No, he wailed, inching deeper.*

*If you take her now, you'll never know. Stop, before she hates you for taking advantage of her.*

Gage stilled, the voice reverberating in his head. He needed her. Wanted her more than he ever had. But he couldn't live with the thought of her hating him. It was the reason he'd stayed away for so long. He'd hoped time would ease the pain he'd caused. He looked down, overwhelmed by the sparkle in her eyes, the smile of pleasure on her face. It was the first time since the stabbing she actually looked alive.

He growled. Damn the voice in his head. He'd deal with the repercussions later. Right now, he had a woman to please.

He withdrew, leaving only the tip inside her. He smiled at her huff of frustration as a sensuous pout formed on her lips. She looked ready to rip a strip off him when he eased back inside her, reclaiming the lost inches. Brooklyn groaned, throwing her head back with a muffled wail of ecstasy. God she was beautiful. He only had half his length inside her and

yet she was pulsing on the edge of another climax. He pulled back once more, intending to fill her to the hilt, when the cold sound of Sam's voice washed over him.

Brooklyn froze, her skin puckering at the sudden intrusion. A wave of cold air breezed over her even as the sweat dripped down the side of her jaw. She'd been close. So close to screaming out another orgasm she hadn't even realised Sam was there until Gage had stopped and looked towards the door. She could still hear Sam's voice, mumbling something about locking the door next time, as the damn thing slammed shut. Gage's body had tensed, an intense scowl suddenly covering his face. He'd been moments away from filling her. From plunging his iron-hard cock completely inside her, penetrating her so deeply she knew she'd climax the instant he locked his balls against her ass. Even now, his body trembled beneath her fingers. She could feel him clenching his buttocks in an effort to regain some measure of control. He was going to stop.

She eased forward, brushing her lips across his chest. His skin was warm and salty, and she purred at the mixture of flavours. He was still staring at the door and she couldn't bear the thought of him pulling his cock free, leaving her empty, hollow. She nuzzled his neck, feeling the small hairs on his nape rustle from her breath.

"Gage."

He growled, tightening his fingers around her hips. For a moment she thought he was simply going to slam into her, but then he bowed his head and pulled himself free, concealing himself with a quick adjustment of his clothing. She clenched her jaw, resisting the need to pound her fists against his chest. Demand he quench the fire he'd lit inside her. But she couldn't. In what couldn't have been more than five seconds, the love had disappeared from his eyes, replaced by guilt, or was it regret. She watched as he walked to the far side of the room, and stared blankly out the window.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice rumbling in the thick air. "I shouldn't have taken advantage of the situation like that." He hung his head. "It was wrong."

*Wrong? Since when was making love to your wife wrong?*

Brooklyn slipped off the desk, gathering her pants in her arms. She didn't bother with the panties. They were ruined and could simply lie on the floor until she got around to throwing them out. She pulled the pants up, sighing at the rustle of fabric as it covered her

body. Then she tucked in her shirt, wondering how to make it presentable with half the buttons missing. "Forget it. Just forget the whole thing."

He snarled behind her as she turned and headed for the door. He slammed it shut as she tried to open it. "What's that supposed to mean?" he said, turning her sharply in his hands.

"Exactly like it sounds." She pulled away and took two steps back. She hadn't seen that cold expression on his face since he'd accused her of having an affair. "You obviously feel that almost making love to me was a mistake, so just forget it."

"Is that what you think we were doing here? Making love? Because it felt a lot more like needy sex to me."

"Needy sex?"

She stepped back again, feeling the desk brush against her backside. She'd given her heart to him, allowed her emotions to run wild. She'd hoped it was the beginning of a new relationship for them, the first step on the road back to being husband and wife, in every sense of the word. But apparently it'd meant little more to him than a casual screw with some willing hustler. He'd just been comforting her again. Giving in to her needs.

Brooklyn's chin quivered, and tears burned her eyes, but she refused to let him see her upset again. She'd cried in his arms too much over the past week and was determined to regain some measure of self-respect. "Sorry," she spat out, surprised by the anger in her voice. "I didn't realise you'd demoted our activity to a mere mercy fucking."

Gage's eyes glittered with anger. "That's not what I said."

"No. It's what you were thinking." She marched forward, pushing past him as she fisted the door and stepped into the hall. Sam and Trevor were talking at the edge of the hallway, and Troy and Rebecca were standing with their backs against the wall. They all turned as she stormed out of the office and headed for the stairs.

"Brooklyn!" Gage's voice echoed off the walls and down the hall. "Damn it, we're not finished."

Brooklyn glanced back at him as she rounded the stairs and started climbing. "Oh, we're finished, and in more ways than one."

"Like hell we are." He'd lowered his voice, but there was no mistaking the deep edge to it. He was ordering her, not asking.

Sam looked from her back to Gage, nervously stepping forward. "Everything okay, buddy?"

Gage clenched his jaw, twitching the muscle as he fought to restrain his anger. Anger Brooklyn knew was directed at her. "Fine." One word. That's all he said as he stared up at her.

"Okay," said Sam, talking another step towards them. "Then perhaps we can all go back in the study and talk about the situation at hand?"

Brooklyn's face heated at the thought. There was no way she could go back in the study without remembering how Gage had made her orgasm on the desk. Damn, she'd never be able to write at that desk again. "There's nothing to talk about," she said, grabbing the railing for balance as her strength started to wane.

Gage took a step forward. He'd obviously seen her sway and seemed determined to mount the stairs until he met her gaze. He stopped and turned back to Sam. "Brooklyn's right. There's nothing to discuss because she's not being bait!"

Troy stepped forward. "This is the only way to catch him. Even you know that. And she'll be surrounded by cops!"

"Enough!" Everyone turned as Brooklyn's voice filled the air. "Trevor."

"Yes?" he replied calmly.

"Get your team ready. I'll do whatever you want. Just make sure you catch the creep."

"Forget it. You're not doing this," said Gage.

Brooklyn met his heated gaze with one just as fierce. "The last time I checked, you'd given up the right to make decisions for me." She skirted her attention back to Trevor. "Just let me know where and when."

"We've got everything arranged for the twenty-first," said Trevor. "If you think you'll be strong enough?"

"Fine."

"Very well." Trevor glanced quickly at Troy and Rebecca before grazing a look at Sam and Gage. "We'll be back in two days to go over the security and to test out the wires. Then we'll meet here the next morning and go to the store. Troy will make sure the event is broadcast, so our mystery man knows about your special appearance."

"I'll see you in two days then," she huffed and started back up the stairs.

"Bloody hell you will!" shouted Gage, rounding the stairs and taking them two at a time until he was level with her. "You're not thinking clearly. You just got out of the hospital. You're not ready to go back to the bookstore, let alone sit through another signing wondering if the bastard who stabbed you in the back is watching you." He reached for her arm, but stopped when she pulled it tight to her chest. He took a laboured breath. "Just give Sam and me some time to dig up more info on this guy."

Brooklyn ignored the hurt in his expression and the neediness in his voice. She would've given him anything he wanted if he hadn't just broken her heart...again. A tear tracked down her cheek and she winced. "This isn't a federal investigation. I know for a fact you and Sam are only observers here, through professional courtesy."

"Jurisdiction has nothing to do with this. And I'll be damned if I stand here and watch you throw your life away."

"Then don't bother coming to the store. I'm sure Trevor's people can handle the situation without you."

"And if the bastard gets you? Then what?" mocked Gage. "Think you'll enjoy spending the next few years tied to his bed!"

"Gage."

Sam's voice penetrated the air, pulling Gage back. He glanced at Sam and then back at her. She could see his muscles tensing as he watched the steady flow of tears down her face. He cursed under his breath, clenching his fists so tight they turned white at the knuckles. He drew in a long rush of air.

"It's a mistake."

His voice had softened, but she was past reasoning with him. Past staying in the same room as him. She straightened her shoulders, gathering as much dignity as she could while still crying in front of him.

"Then it won't be the first I made tonight." With that she turned sharply on her heels and dashed up the stairs and into her room, slamming the door shut with a resounding thud. She stumbled her way over to the bed, collapsing on the duvet in a dishevelled mess. She felt angry, tired and completely alone, much the same as every night in the past six months. Every night except the ones Gage had stayed by her side, holding her hand, brushing her hair back from her face, and for the first time, she wished she'd stayed in the damn hospital.

Gage watched her leave, her shoulders stiff, her back rigid and straight. She was insane. There was no other way to describe her actions. Bait! She'd just agreed to be bait for the psycho who'd touched her back, slipped his fingers down the sensuous curve of her ass and caressed her tight, perfect little pucker.

"Shit!" He stomped down the stairs and out the door, not bothering to look at the officers still standing on her porch. He needed to get away. Escape the anger and guilt welling up inside him. He'd done it again. Pushed past the boundaries of common sense. Blurted out the first words that had popped into his head before realising how much they'd hurt her, scared her.

Sam called his name, but he kept moving, stalking to the driver's side of his truck. He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to do anything other than break down Brooklyn's door and shake some sense into her. Then he'd finish what they'd started in the study, only letting her pause long enough to suck in a gulp of air, before pounding into her all night. Damn, he never should've stopped. Never should've listened to the annoying voice in his head that kept insisting he was hurting her again. Fucking her when he should be comforting her. Reassuring her they'd catch the bastard.

*Which one? You or him?*

He growled and threw open the door just as Sam grabbed his arm.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" demanded Sam.

Gage pulled free, glaring at the man. "Leaving."

"I can see that. I was talking about that little performance in there. Jesus. I've never seen you lose it like that before." Sam shook his head, staring at his shoes. "I thought you and Brooklyn had made up?"

Gage snorted, jerking the door closed as he slid behind the wheel. "I think she made her feelings for me quite clear," he replied. "And regardless of what everyone seems to think, this trap is a mistake. It's not going to work."

"Why's that?"

"Because this bastard's not your ordinary stalker. He's sophisticated and quick. He'll be expecting this, and he'll come prepared. Mark my words. It'll turn ugly."

"All the more reason to be there when it happens," said Sam.



Gage turned the key and revved the engine. "Oh, I'll be there. Much to Brooklyn's annoyance, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry I interrupted you two. If I'm the cause of this, I can talk to her."

"You're not the cause of anything. It's me." He sighed. "It's always me." He shoved the stick shift into reverse. "Tell the guards I'll be back in a few hours. Once I'm certain she's asleep." Then he stomped on the pedal and tore down the driveway, spinning the truck around as he sped down the street. He needed to find the nearest bar, and drown his pain in whatever was on tap. He needed...Brooklyn.

## Chapter Ten

**March 21<sup>st</sup>**

Brooklyn leaned against the counter, a mug of tea clutched between her hands. She could feel the heat seeping into her fingers, the rest of her body still chilled. Trevor sat at the table, surrounded by Sam, Troy and Rebecca. Three other officers were scattered around the room, dressed in jeans and sweaters. None of them had smiled during their introductions, and their hands had been cold and unforgiving when they'd touched hers. She was restless, or perhaps a better word was scared. Trevor had spent the better part of yesterday going over the details, showing her where every officer would be placed, and how the small device they'd slipped into an earring would guarantee her safety. She'd listened carefully, walked through every scenario until it seemed like she'd already lived through it. But just the same she was scared. She chanced a look at Gage. He stood pouting in the corner, his eyes dark, brooding. He hadn't spoken a word to her since that first night, and he didn't look like he was going to any time soon.

She sighed, wondering how it had all fallen apart so quickly. One moment he was touching her, holding her while she screamed out her release. The next, he was apologising for taking advantage of her, for making a mistake. She looked away, knowing the tears would pool if she stared at him. She was tired. She hadn't slept or eaten much, and the uncertainty of the day's events had kept her on edge. Would she recognise the creep? Would he try to touch her again? Would she finally be free?

"Hey."

Brooklyn looked up, forcing a smile. "Sam."

"You okay? You look upset."

"Fine." That's all she could say without her voice cracking. She wasn't okay.

Sam frowned. "You don't look fine. Want to tell me what's wrong?"

"No." She pushed out a lung full of air and smiled again. "Don't worry. I'm fine. Really."

"You don't have to do this, you know. We can call it off if you're not ready. No one will think any less of you if you're not up to facing this guy yet."

Brooklyn shook her head. She couldn't turn back now, not with the way she'd yelled at Gage in front of everyone, her determination to exert her independence clouding her judgement. "I'll be fine. I can do this. Besides, I'm not even convinced he'll show up."

"He'll show up," rasped Gage.

Brooklyn jumped at the sound of his voice. Somehow he'd managed to walk up beside her without her noticing. She clutched her hand to her chest in a feeble attempt to calm the pounding in her heart. She turned towards him, ready to curse him for scaring her, but couldn't speak. He looked lethal.

"Let's hope you're right," she finally replied, hoping he didn't hear the resonance in her voice. "I want this over."

"Let's just hope it ends the way they've planned," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

He looked agitated. She glanced at his clothes. He was wearing faded jeans and a dark green shirt. She could see his muscles bunched through the fabric. He looked incredible.

"As long as it ends." She pulled at her shirt, smoothing the bottom over her pants. It was the first time she'd managed to pull one over her head, and the tightness of it felt awkward.

"How's your back?" Gage asked, looking more through her than at her.

"Better. They had Dr. O'Brian stop by yesterday. He took out the stitches. He seemed pleased with the incision. He said it looked good." She snorted, remembering how she'd made him hold up a mirror so she could see what the bastard had done to her. She'd nearly cried. "I can't say I agree with him," she added quietly.

"Don't worry," said Sam. "The scar will fade."

Brooklyn sighed and nodded her head, watching Gage clench his jaw. "I'm sure you're right."

"Brooklyn?"

Brooklyn turned to look at Trevor. He was standing off to her left, slightly behind Sam.

"Everything okay?" Trevor asked.

Damn, could everyone tell she was more than reluctant about today's charade? "Sure."

Trevor narrowed his gaze for a moment, watching her expression, before sighing loudly. "Good." He glanced at his watch. "It's almost time to go. Are you sure you remember everything?"

"My part's pretty easy. I walk in, sit down, and wait for the guy to make a move."

Trevor laughed. "I mean about your security."

"You went over it pretty thoroughly. I think I've got it all memorised."

"Just remember. Even though you can only hear me, everyone can hear you. We figured hearing all the guys check in every fifteen minutes would be distracting."

She nodded, biting at her lower lip. "You're sure he won't know I'm wired?"

"Don't worry," said Trevor. "We'll be all over this guy long before he gets close enough to wonder that."

Brooklyn nodded, wrapping her arms around her chest. "Sure," she mumbled, less than convincingly.

Trevor sighed, looking around the room. "All right folks. Let's get this show on the road."

Obediently, the officers headed for the door. They were silent except for the soft swishing sound of fabric across metal, where their coats glided across their weapons. Trevor waited until they'd left before turning back to Brooklyn.

"Rebecca will be waiting for you outside when you're ready." He shot Gage a quick look. "You've got a few minutes."

"Thanks," she replied, smiling as he left the room.

Sam touched her gently on the arm. "Are you really certain about this? I'll call it off myself if you're not."

"I'll be fine." She gave him a shove. "Really."

Sam nodded, kissed her on the cheek and left. She'd expected Gage to follow behind him, but he simply stood there, hands stuffed in his pockets, face drawn tight. She could see the vein in his temple pulsing as he repeatedly clenched his jaw. She looked away, not sure what to say.

"You look thinner."

Brooklyn chuckled. It wasn't what she'd expected. "I guess I've been distracted lately. I'm not very hungry."

"You know how I feel about this."

"I know."

He nodded, shifting from one boot to the other. "Just don't do anything..." He paused as if searching for the right word.

"Stupid?" she suggested.

"Dangerous."

"I'll try," she assured him, reaching behind her to grab her coat off the counter.

"Ready?" he asked.

"You go ahead. I'd like to use the washroom quickly before I leave."

He nodded again, turned, and left. She watched him stop once, at the doorway, and glance back at her. He looked like he was about to say something when he thought better of it and stalked off. She sighed and headed for the toilet. She walked around the corner and made for the small bathroom by the front door when she spotted a manila envelope on the table near the door. She picked it up, fingering the flap as she read the return address. Her heart sank. It was from Jack Reynolds' office. One of his boys must have delivered it this morning while she was busy with Trevor's briefing. The bottom dropped out of her stomach as she held the heavy papers in her hand. She closed her eyes and willed the tears to dry. Then she stuffed the damn thing in her purse. She'd deal with it later, when the threat was over. When her future was more than an endless array of days trapped in her own house. When she'd sealed away her feelings for Gage.

*So, in other words, never.*

She cursed the voice in her head, pulled on her jacket and headed outside.

Gage watched Brooklyn descend the porch steps and climb into the grey sedan idling in the driveway. She never glanced at his truck, and his heart lurched as the car sped away. This was wrong. Everything instinct in his body told him this was a fatal mistake. Somehow, he knew the bastard was already prepared for their little scam, and would have a way around the security measures. That's the only reason he'd come along. He needed to be certain she was safe. That meant being no more than a scream away.

"You ready to go?" asked Sam.

Gage looked over at him. "You say something?"

Sam shook his head. "You sure you're up to this? That's the third time I've talked to you today, and you haven't heard a word I've said."

Gage shrugged. "I was thinking."

"About how wrong this is?" said Sam.

"This guy's smarter than they're giving him credit for. He'll be waiting."

"But so will we."

Gage huffed and started down the drive. He and Sam rarely disagreed, but when they did, there wasn't much either could say to bridge the gap. Better just to let it slide, which is what he should've done with Brooklyn. He never should've pushed her like that. She was like a bloody badger when cornered, and would do things just to get a point across. This time her point was directed at him. She was exerting her independence. Proving to him how strong she was. It had absolutely nothing to do with catching the bastard, and everything to do with him. It wasn't until he heard the rumble vibrating the air he realised he'd growled.

"She'll be safe," insisted Sam.

"You're damn straight, because I'm pulling her out of there the moment I feel something's not right."

Sam nodded and looked out the window. "Have you talked to her since the other night?" he finally asked, still looking outside.

"Not a word until the kitchen this morning."

"You think that's wise?"

Gage huffed. "You heard her. It's over."

"She was angry. I'm sure she didn't mean it."

"Oh, she meant it." Gage sighed and pounded his hands on the wheel. "I don't know what's wrong with me. Every time I try to make things better, I end up screwing it up even worse. It's like a fucking curse."

"Maybe you should try talking to her, instead of jumping straight to the sex?"

Gage eyed Sam, not amused by the grin the man was trying to hide. "Sex is the only thing I know how to do with her anymore. It's the only thing I'm good at."

"So what's stopping you...besides me walking in on the two of you?"

Gage chuckled. "She needs romance. Tenderness. Passion. Not her almost ex-husband stripping her naked and fucking her without so much as tender word." He shook his head. "I just can't seem to control myself where she's concerned."

"If you ask me, she didn't seem unhappy with your approach. I heard her scream all the way in the kitchen."

Gage smiled, remembering the way she'd wailed his name so loud it'd vibrated in his chest. He could still feel the softness of her skin beneath his fingers, the taste of her velvety lips on his tongue. It was enough to drive him crazy, not to mention send him into an instant state of arousal. He could feel his cock lengthening against his stomach, pressing against the confines of his jeans. He cursed, glad he'd had enough sense to throw on his leather jacket. At least, he'd be able to hide the worst of it. He glanced at Sam, knowing the man already knew what he was thinking about.

"Let's just see how today goes, and worry about the rest later. Maybe once this bastard's behind bars I'll be able to think more clearly."

"If you ask me, you're already thinking too much. And with the wrong head."

\* \* \* \*

### **Bound Treasures Bookstore - 4:30 pm**

"I can't believe I was the last person to see you before...you know."

The woman fidgeted in her seat, her eyes sparkling in the dim light. Brooklyn had recognised her the moment she'd sat down. The same woman who'd gone on and on about her sister, Marg, the day Brooklyn had been attacked.

"It just seems so...creepy," the woman added.

Brooklyn nodded, shifting her shoulders. She'd been sitting in the same chair for over four hours, and the pain in her back had grown from a slight throbbing into a heated inferno. "Yes, I suppose it would seem that way," she said, twirling the pen around in her hand. "Is there a book I can sign for you?"

The woman blushed slightly, folding her hands across the table. "Not really. I just wanted to come down and see how you were doing." She left out a large huff of air. "I was so

worried for you after I saw the report on the television. I still can't believe you're out here so soon. It sounded so serious."

"You know reporters," said Brooklyn, pushing her hair back from her face. "They always make the stories sound more exciting than they really are."

She shifted again, stealing a quick look around the store. Rebecca was hovering by the front door and Troy was over by the exit leading into the adjoining mall. The other men would be patrolling outside, guarding the employee entrance and emergency exits. She sighed. The store was due to close in thirty minutes, and so far there'd been no sign of her admirer.

"Have the police caught the man who attacked you?"

Brooklyn looked back up at the woman. "Sorry?"

The woman smiled and huddled forward. "I said, have they caught the fellow, yet?"

"No. Not yet. But I'm sure they're working on it." She whimpered softly as a sharp pain pulsed through her back. The constant twisting had taken its toll and she wasn't sure how much longer she could stay there. She smiled at the lady and handed her a copy of her previous book. "You said your sister liked this one better. I signed it for her when I saw you walk in."

The woman blushed and took the book, clutching it to her chest. "Oh, Ms. Matthews..."

"Brooklyn, please."

The woman giggled. "Brooklyn." She paused again, sucking in a deep breath. "I couldn't possibly take this."

Brooklyn waved her hand. "Of course you could. Besides, I don't need a dozen copies for myself."

"But what about your family?"

Brooklyn felt the blood drain from her face as her heart skipped a beat before slamming back into a shaky rhythm. Just the casual reference to Gage made her stomach clench and the tears gather in her eyes. She'd thought about him all day, knowing he was listening to her every word. The desk they'd set up for her was cold and smooth, similar to the one in their study, and she couldn't help but remember the way he'd lifted her onto it. Stroking his tongue down her body, finally settling between her thighs. His touch had been strong,



demanding, and she'd been unable to fight against the onslaught of sensations. She'd nearly cried when the orgasm had washed over her, his fingers still lodged deep inside her.

She sighed, blinking back the tears as she forced a smile. "I don't really have any family in the area," she said. "So please, take it for your sister."

The woman frowned slightly. "I'm sorry to hear that." She stood up, still clutching the book to her chest. "Thank you Ms...I mean Brooklyn."

Brooklyn nodded and stood up, stretching her back as she watched the woman leave. There were still a dozen people mingling around, but no one seemed ready to approach her. She sighed, turning towards the wall so she could speak without looking suspicious.

"I don't think he's going to show," she whispered.

Trevor sighed into the microphone. "We've still got half an hour. Let's not give up yet."

"This is stupid," she hissed, trying to keep her voice low. "He's not going to walk up to the table and ask me to sign a book for him. He's waiting for me to go somewhere else—somewhere more...vulnerable." She paused, feeling her stomach sicken at the thoughts running through her mind. "Maybe I should go to the back of the store and hover around the washrooms for a while. That might be all it takes to bring him out."

"Brooklyn..." Trevor's voice stopped and she could hear Gage cursing something in the background. While she couldn't make out any of the words, she had a pretty good idea what his message was. Trevor mumbled some words and then huffed into the mike.

"Are you sure you're okay with that?" he asked, his voice calm despite the change in tone.

"Not really. But it seems like a wasted trip if we don't do everything we can to catch this guy." She stopped and bit at her bottom lip for strength. "You *will* have police covering me, right?"

"Rebecca's already got a clear view of the hallway, and Troy's heading for the men's room as we speak. They'll both be no more than a few seconds away."

Brooklyn tried to chuckle, but her throat clamped shut. A few seconds. That's all it'd taken the guy to drug her and zap Peter with the taser. Too much time in her books. "All right," she heard herself say. "When do you want me to go?"

“Wait another minute and then head down the hall. Rummage around in your purse for a while outside the door, like you’re looking for something. Then it’s up to you whether you want to go in or not.”

“Okay.”

Brooklyn turned back to the table, brushing her hair back from her shoulders. She bent down beside the chair, grabbing her purse off the floor. It felt heavy and she remembered the papers she’d stuffed inside. Divorce papers. Her heart skipped again and her chin quivered. It was almost over, and it wasn’t the stakeout she was thinking about.

“All right, everyone’s in place,” she heard in her ear. “Start moving.”

She shook the thoughts out of her head. She needed to be ready. Prepared to defend herself at the slightest indication of danger. She slipped the strap of her purse over her shoulder and walked towards the back of the room, smiling at the people still milling around the store. None of them looked familiar. Blank faces with phony smiles. She skirted around a small group of women and entered the narrow hallway. It smelt sickeningly sweet, like someone had emptied an entire can of air freshener all at once. She choked back a cough and made for the last door on the right. She paused at the threshold, searching through her purse like Trevor had asked her to.

One minute. Two...five.

She glanced at the doorknob and felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. It was just like the one in the other store. She gulped, pretending to fuss with her hair as she spoke quietly to the wall. “It’s been five minutes. What should I do?”

“That’s up to you. Can you go inside?”

She stared at the door. No. No way at all. Definitely not. “Okay.”

She fisted the handle and pushed open the door, cringeing at the loud squeaking sound. She took one step when a loud explosion dropped her to her knees.

## Chapter Eleven

Gage sat inside the van, brooding. He should be out in the store, mingling with Troy and Rebecca, watching for any sign of the creep from the hospital. But Trevor had been adamant that he and Sam wait in the van, insisting the stalker would recognise them, ruining any chance Trevor's team had of catching the bastard.

He'd finally agreed, hoping this wasn't yet another mistake, before confining himself to a seat near the back. Then he'd spent the better part of four hours waiting. Except for the odd pervert trying to convince Brooklyn he was her wildest fantasy come to life, nothing interesting had happened. She'd signed nearly fifty copies of her book, and had talked to twice as many people, but so far, her greatest fan was a no show.

Gage sighed, kicking his boots against the table. He was restless, agitated and so damn horny it hurt. Ever since he'd stopped in the middle of plunging inside her, he'd had a constant hard-on. If it didn't go away soon, he was sure the head of his cock would simply explode.

*Sounds like a solution to all your problems.*

He snarled, shifting his legs so he could squeeze the erection away. Now was not the time to be thinking about sex. He was supposed to be listening for any sign of that bastard, but Gage knew it was futile. The guy wasn't going to walk up to the desk and give himself up. This guy was a strategic genius. If he was here, he was hiding. And he wouldn't strike unless he thought he could win.

*"I don't think he's going to show."*

The sound of Brooklyn's voice caught his attention. He turned towards Trevor, listening to the man answer her. Her voice was strong and clear, but edged with a hint of fear. He'd heard it all day. The way she'd hesitated when someone had asked her about the attack. Or how her voice had wavered out of pitch when they'd wondered if the guy had been arrested. Then there'd been the lady who'd gone on and on about her sister. He didn't know how Brooklyn had refrained from screaming. But then the woman had asked about Brooklyn's

family, and her voice had changed. Even Sam had shot him an unsettled look. Gage had been forced to bite back the growl building in his chest and had merely looked away.

*"Maybe I should go to the back of the store and hover around the washrooms for a while? That might be all it takes to bring him out."*

Gage was off his chair and at Trevor's side before the man got out anything, but her name. "Not a chance in hell she's doing that," he barked, watching the man wince at the harshness in his voice. "No way."

"Gage." Trevor began, but then shut his mouth as Sam pulled on Gage's sleeve.

"Easy, buddy," said Sam.

Gage glared at Sam. "She's not going into that washroom."

"She doesn't have to go inside," said Trevor. "But she's right. We need to separate her for a few moments to make the guy think he's got a chance. I'll send Troy into the men's room and have Rebecca wait by the end of the hallway. All she has to do is stand outside for a while."

Gage huffed as Trevor spoke into the mike, giving Brooklyn the go ahead. He turned to Sam. "This is wrong," he snapped, stuffing his hands in his pockets before he pummelled one of the men through the wall.

"She's got two police officers within fifty feet of her. She'll be okay," said Sam.

Gage swore and stomped over to the door, followed closely by Sam. "It's not just the creep I'm worried about. Brooklyn still doesn't remember what happened that day. What if going in there brings it all back? She's not ready to face that yet."

Sam sighed and cursed under his breath. "You're right. We've all been concentrating on catching this guy, instead of thinking about how hard it'd be on Brooklyn." He patted Gage on the shoulder. "We'll call it a day. Get Trevor to get her out of there."

Gage nodded and smiled, stepping over to Trevor, just as a loud explosion sounded from the store, knocking Gage into the side of the van. He bounced off the metal, banging his head before gaining his balance. "What the..."

He lunged forward, grabbing the mic out of Trevor's hand as he pushed the man roughly aside. "Brooklyn, don't move. Just stay there and I'll come and get you." He didn't wait for her reply as he ran to the door, clipping on a transmitter, his hand cupping the grip of his gun holstered at his side. "Sam!"

Sam was already at his heels, his face so close he could feel the man's breath against his collar. "Go!" Sam shouted to him. "I'll follow. Make sure no one tries to come at you from behind."

Gage nodded and ran for the store, his heart pounding so hard he could feel his ribs moving. He had to get to her. He cursed as people dodged in front of him, running from the store, blocking every path he took. He reached the door and skidded to a halt, half wondering if he should just crash through the glass. Someone bumped into his shoulder, knocking him back as he clamped his fingers around the handle. He yanked on it when another blast echoed through the room, breaking the pane off to his left. He dove inside the store, covering his mouth as a thick plume of smoke filled the air and billowed out the door.

He cursed, trying to push to his feet, when Sam grabbed his shoulder, pulling him across the floor, just as a throng of shoppers mobbed the door grazing his ribs.

"Damn, that was close," cursed Sam, squatting down beside him. "You okay?"

"I'll live." Gage brushed the broken shards of glass off his jacket and stood up, swaying slightly. "Man, that was loud." He coughed at the sudden inhalation of smoke and pulled his shirt up across his mouth. "Brooklyn's at the back," he said, pointing his finger.

"Got your back, buddy."

Gage nodded and dashed for the rear of the building.

*She'd better be all right. She just had to be all right.*

\* \* \* \*

Brooklyn felt the explosion rumble through her chest, knocking her to her knees. She palmed her hands against her head, trying to stop the loud ringing in her ears, when a hand closed around her arm. She looked up, staring at a man in a grey sweater. She could see his muscles bunching beneath his shirt, his blond hair iridescent against the bleak surroundings.

"Ms. Matthews," he said, a thick Irish accent rolling off his tongue.

She stared at him, noting his icy blue eyes and lightly tanned skin. "Officer Collins?"

"Aye ma'am. Seems there's been some type of detonation. We need to get you out of here immediately." He tightened his grip, pulling her to her feet as a second blast erupted near the front of the building, pushing her back. He grabbed her shoulders as she swayed

towards the wall, then locked his hand around her wrist. "Easy, ma'am. Just hold onto my arm, and I'll get you out of here." He pulled Brooklyn across the hall, towards the dim outline of a door. His grasp was firm and she wasn't certain she could've resisted if she'd wanted to.

"Where are you taking me?" she mumbled, coughing from the smoke.

"Somewhere safe."

"But Gage is coming for me. He told me to wait for him," she insisted as the officer pushed open a door and dragged her through. It wasn't until the door clicked shut she realised an alarm had been ringing in the room. She turned to the man, tugging against his hold. "I need to go back."

The man looked at her, a smug smile catching the edge of his mouth. "Sorry, Ms. Matthews, but I have my orders. I'm sure Gage will understand," he noted, tightening his grip as he dragged her down a dim corridor, snaking through a low passage. His smile widened as he glanced over at her. "Besides, if he didn't want you in danger, he shouldn't have left your side."

*Then perhaps he shouldn't have left your side.*

The words from the hospital washed over her like a cold, unforgiving wind. Had she just imagined his accent faltering on the phrase? She stared at his features, comparing his profile to the guy she remembered from the hospital.

Brooklyn sucked in a deep breath. It was him. She knew it. Somehow he'd changed his appearance, infiltrated Trevor's security, and now she was alone with him. He was taking her and she was certain no one knew where they were headed. Fear struck her, and she reacted before she even realised she'd moved.

"What the...?"

The man yelled as she spun her body around, taking him by surprise. She used his hold on her and his momentum to throw him off balance before twisting his wrist and tossing him across the floor. He sailed through the air, landing on his shoulders, before sliding into a mangled heap at the far wall. Brooklyn didn't wait to see if he'd recover. She bolted back to the door and tried the knob.

"No!" She pounded on the steel, screaming Gage's name until her throat hurt. Oh God. Why hadn't she listened to him? She stopped, fighting back the tears when she heard something scuff the floor behind her.

"Nice throw, Sarah. I didn't know you were so skilled in Aikido."

Brooklyn whirled around, watching the man walk slowly towards her until he stopped ten feet away, his hands clenched at his side. There was no trace of the accent in his voice now, and he'd lost one of the blue contacts. She clenched her jaw, looking for a way around him. "Jujutsu, you ass. And there's plenty more of that if you're still interested."

He laughed, his lips curled into an evil smile. "Jujutsu. I'll have to remember that." He inched closer. "Sorry, the door only opens one way, precious. And don't get any ideas of calling for help." He touched the unit on his shoulder. "It jams the signal. I can't have anyone interrupting us this time."

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Why do you insist on lying to me? You know who I am."

Brooklyn moved sideways as he narrowed in on her. She'd caught him by surprise, and wasn't sure how effective her next counter-strike would be. "My name isn't Sarah, it's Brooklyn."

He growled and took a step forward. "You're not thinking clearly. That man made you forget. That's not how it's supposed to be. You love me. I'm your hero."

Brooklyn stilled as his words hit home. Hero. He thought he was Drake—Drake Davenport—Sarah's lover and protector in her books. The one man Sarah would risk anything for, and had nearly died to save. "Drake?"

The word came out as little more than a wisp of air, a sound so soft and light she wasn't sure whether she'd spoken it, or just imagined it in her head. His eyes darkened with desire as he moved towards her, only to stop as she recoiled in fear.

"That's right, precious. It's me. Drake. Finally, after all this time, I've found you again."

Brooklyn shook her head, retreating until her back pressed against the wall. He was too large, too close. She tried to look for another way out, but his shoulders obscured the background.

"No," she whispered.

"You belong to me." He moved, grabbing her around the waist as he pulled her tight against him. His cock lengthened along the cleft of her ass, pushing her cheeks apart as it thickened and pulsed. He pressed his lips against her ear, as he blew a heated breath across her neck. "Come quietly, and I'll try to remember it wasn't your fault you took him into your bed. I'll even wait until our second encounter before I fuck you up the ass. That's how much I love you."

Bile coated the back of her throat as a cold sweat broke out along her skin. He was going to rape her in the name of love. She hissed, steeling the knot building in her stomach. She wouldn't let him take her. Not without a fight.

"I already told you. Fuck you!"

Brooklyn moved, fast and sure, dropping her weight towards her feet as she twisted in his grip, punching one arm towards his head. He gasped as she slipped free of his hold, grabbed one of his arms and pummelled him forward into the floor. Then she sandwiched his shoulder between the ground and her leg, pressing forward with her entire body. He yelled once before a loud popping sounded in the room.

She'd dislocated his shoulder.

Nausea crested again, but she fought it off. The bastard didn't deserve her sympathy. She pushed his arm to the floor, knowing the change in position would increase the pain when something metallic flashed in the corner of her eye. She turned just as he pulled a taser from his pocket, pointing it at her with his other hand. Then he smiled and pulled the trigger.

\* \* \* \*

"Brooklyn!" Gage ran through the thick smoke, pushing his way to the back of the store. He nearly tripped over a woman lying across the floor, but managed to catch himself just as he skimmed the wall. He was close. Just a few more feet.

"No!" The hallway was empty. He darted forward, kicking her purse across the floor as he stopped at the doorway. His heart rose into his throat, his stomach lurched and heaved, as he stared at the strewn contents of her bag. "Brooklyn! Damn it, answer me!"



"Where?" shouted Sam, stopping beside him. He took one look at the purse and cursed, flinging open the washroom door before running inside. He returned moments later, his face furrowed into deep lines. "She's not in there."

*Shit!*

"She's not answering," he cursed, tapping the small receiver in his ear. "Check the men's room. I'll see if Trevor had one of his men grab her."

Sam nodded and ran down the hallway.

"Trevor!"

"Gage. What the hell's going on? I've called in the men, but Rebecca and Collins aren't responding and Troy's trapped in the men's room somehow."

*Son of a bitch!*

"Brooklyn's gone, and she isn't answering over the wire. Did you have one of your guys take her out?"

He listened to Trevor curse on the other end. "Fuck, no! You told her to wait for you. Why would I have someone else pull her out?"

Gage stilled the need to punch his fist through the wall and took a deep breath. "Get the hell in here and get Cooper to see where Collins is. I'll check up on Rebecca and Troy." He cursed at the noise of the alarm, so loud he couldn't hear himself think. "And for God's sake, turn off that fucking alarm!"

\* \* \* \*

Brooklyn felt the barbs span across her shoulder an instant before the shock hit her. She screamed as her muscles clenched then jerked, dropping her to the ground. It felt as though someone was smashing her bones and grinding them into the floor before the sensation finally eased, leaving her lying in a hazy blur.

"Damn it, Sarah! You shouldn't have done that to me." The guy grunted and banged something hard against the wall. There was another loud growl followed by a cry of pain. "That hurt!"

Brooklyn turned her head, trying to remember who was talking to her, when two hands seized her shoulders, lifting her off the ground until she was staring into the man's face—his

face. Her memory came rushing back, and she drew a shaky breath as her eyes locked on his. "Drake."

"Why do you fight me? I asked you nicely, but you still insist on making things difficult." He ran one hand up her arm and across her chest. "I told you I didn't want to hurt you. I promised I'd wait to show you everything. But how can I do that if you keep disobeying me? Perhaps you need something to help bring your memory back. A taste of what it's like between us."

He fisted her shirt and ripped it from her body, ignoring her frantic movements as he trapped her with his body. "You'd better not try to trick me again," he warned, tossing the torn pieces on the floor. "Because you're going home with me, even if I have to take you by force." He eased forward and nipped at her lips. "You know how much I hate using force, precious."

Brooklyn shook her head. "I won't," she whispered.

"Good. But just to be certain..."

She jumped as something cold and metallic slipped around her wrists. She pulled her arms away, staring at the silver bracelets encircling her hands. Her heart flip-flopped and she had to bite back the nausea as her stomach heaved in protest. "No. Drake, please."

"I'll take them off after we get reacquainted. When I'm convinced you won't try to run away on me." He took a step back, and wrapped his fingers around her arm. "This way."

Brooklyn took one last glance up the corridor and followed.

\* \* \* \*

Trevor ran into the store just as the whine of the alarm cut off, leaving a sudden void in the air. Gage met him at the end of the hallway.

"Well?" asked Gage.

Trevor shook his head, panting despite the thick mass of smoke still hanging in the air. "None of my men have her. Cooper found Collins. Looks like he was hit with a stun gun and then drugged. He's alive, but Lord knows when he'll wake up."

"Shit!" Gage slammed his fist against the wall, denting the plaster. "Rebecca got knocked out by the blast. Sam's got her back by the washroom. She's pretty disoriented."

Sam ran down the hallway. "Rebecca's okay. But someone fused the lock on the men's room. I can't get Troy out of there without taking the door off the hinges."

"Collins was at the employee's door, right?" asked Gage.

"All afternoon," said Trevor. "I even had the men call in a security code before Brooklyn went to the washroom. I can't see how the guy got in and out so fast."

"Easy," said Gage. "He'd already disposed of Collins before *he* gave you the code."

"But that's not...?" Trevor stopped. "Cooper's been there since you called it in. There's no way the guy got out and by him that fast. He's still got to be around here somewhere." Trevor shook his head. "I still don't understand why we can't hear Brooklyn?"

"The bastard's probably jamming the signal somehow. It's not impossible," said Sam.

Gage looked around the store. The two small blasts had created more smoke than anything else. There were a few pieces of burnt paper still floating in the air, but they'd been nothing more than a distraction. He levelled a glare at Sam. "Any ideas?"

"Fuck no," cursed Sam. "We came in through the front, and there's no way he'd take her into the mall. There's way too many people, and Brooklyn would put up too much of a fight."

"My men have secured the other doors," said Trevor. "No one's been in or out."

Gage closed his eyes. He could feel the anger bubbling through his veins, followed closely by overwhelming guilt. He'd fucked up again. "There's got to be something we're missing. Another way out." He stomped back down the hallway, stopping at a small door off to his left. "What the hell is this?"

"That's an emergency exit only," said Trevor. "It's on a timer. It only opens up after the store closes. In case someone gets trapped in here. We had one of our guys try to override the system. Took him three days."

Gage looked at Trevor then back at the door. "Are you sure there isn't any other way to rig it?"

"Not that I know of. The store manager assured me it's always locked."

Sam walked up beside Gage. "You thinking something?"

"I'm thinking this guy is one smart son of a bitch. Brooklyn wouldn't go with him willingly, unless..."

"She thought he was one of us," finished Sam. "Damn it. So the bastard changes his appearance, grabs her during the explosions and leaves. But where did he take her?"

"Through here." Gage pointed at the door. "Somehow he got the door open." He turned to Trevor. "Where does this go?"

"It leads into the basement and through the utility room. From there, you can use a few different doors to get out."

"Get your men on it. Have them cover whatever they can. Sam! I want this fucking door open...now!"

"Any ideas?" asked Sam.

Gage pursed his lips. All he could think about was what that bastard was doing to Brooklyn. He wouldn't put it past the son of a bitch to have her pinned to the wall already, ramming his cock inside her despite her screams of protest. Or worse. He'd knock her out so he wouldn't have to listen to her scream. Gage knew she'd fight, and she'd get hurt.

"Gage?"

Gage shook off the thoughts of Brooklyn stripped naked, her eyes dim, unseeing, and tried to focus on Sam. "There must be another way to get the damn thing open." He ran his fingers through his hair, cursing under his breath. "If Trevor's men couldn't override the system, I doubt our guy did."

Sam tried the handle, shouldering it with most of his weight. "Tight as a preacher's daughter, buddy. Maybe we should just head for the doors? Try to catch him on the way out."

"I told her I was coming for her. I won't break that promise. Besides, he might just be hanging around waiting for us to leave so he can double back." Gage tried the door. "Fuck!"

"We'll get her back."

"What if we don't? What if she spends what's left of her life being raped by that bastard before he kills her?"

"We won't let that happen." Sam shouldered the door again. "I'll break the damn thing down before I let that happen."

"Sam..." His voice trailed off suddenly. "Emergency exit."

Sam stopped shoving on the door and looked at Gage. "What?"

"Trevor said it was an emergency exit."

“So.”

“So what happens when there’s an emergency?”

“Fuck. The bugger pops open,” scowled Sam, already heading down the hall. “Ready?”

Gage nodded, his Glock already in his hand. He drew a quick breath as Sam pulled the fire alarm. A sharp shrill filled the air. Gage pressed on the handle, releasing his breath as the door gave against the pressure and disengaged from the lock.

“Well?” asked Sam.

Gage smiled as he pushed the door open, clearing the area with a sweep of his gun. “Let’s go get the bastard.”

## Chapter Twelve

Gage moved slowly down the passage, his gun leading the way. He could smell the faint scent of Brooklyn's perfume hanging in the air. It was so uniquely hers – fresh with a hint of floral sweetness – he'd recognise the fragrance anywhere. He'd always loved how he could still catch the scent on his clothes long after she'd left, or how it'd drift through the house following her from room to room. It was his scent. His wife.

"Gage."

Gage stopped, pressing his back against the wall as Sam touched him on the sleeve. He hadn't heard or seen anything, but Sam's hushed word was more than enough to convince him his partner had. He glanced at the man, nodding when Sam raised his hand in a fist. He covered his friend as Sam dashed forward, clearing the next doorway before darting back into the room and over to the far corner. He crouched down near the doorway, and grabbed something off the floor.

"Well?" asked Gage when Sam rose slowly to his feet.

Sam pushed his breath out in a long, low sigh, sending cold shivers down Gage's spine. Sam didn't like what he'd found.

"Just show me."

Sam turned, pieces of purple fabric wedged between his fingers. "I'm sorry," he said, laying the strips in Gage's hand.

Gage stared at the bizarre offering, noting how cool and soft the torn shirt felt. It reminded him of Brooklyn's skin, so soft he often feared he'd scratch it from the calluses built up along his palms. He loved the contrast. Her silky skin, his rough hands. Despite the fact she was strong and fit, her skin always felt completely feminine against his.

He turned the shirt over, lifting it high enough to catch the strong scent of her perfume. There was no doubt it was hers. He looked up at Sam, bunching the material in his fist. "I'll kill him."

Sam didn't reply, but merely drew his lips into a thin line. "Maybe we can catch up to them before they get outside. Based on how badly that shirt's ripped, I'll bet money Brooklyn's giving him a hard time."

"Oh she'll fight, all right. That's what I'm afraid of."

Gage stuffed the shirt into his jacket pocket and moved to the doorway. He cleared it again and shuffled down the corridor. The hall was dimly lit, with a strong musty odour clinging to every surface. The floors were dark linoleum and smudged with years of dirt. He followed the passage around a corner and down a flight of stairs before entering a small utility room. There was a boiler wedged against one corner and two sets of doors along the other walls.

"Damn it!" He threw open one door as Sam checked the other. "How the hell do we choose the right one?"

"We can split up. One of us is bound to find him."

Gage cursed, pounding his fist against the wall when a sharp hiss sounded in his ear. "Son of a bitch," he snarled, grabbing the device, his lips pulled back to expose his teeth. "What the hell is Trevor —"

*"Drake."*

Gage stilled, the soft sound of Brooklyn's voice a whisper of hope in his ear. He cupped his hand to his head, straining to hear another clip of conversation. The words were garbled at times, but enough came through to convince him the bastard's jamming device was malfunctioning. That, or Brooklyn had found a way to trip the switch.

*"Don't argue with me, Sarah. I know what's best for you...now try to relax and we'll be out of here in a few minutes."*

Gage clenched his fingers around his gun, the anger so hot inside him he felt burnt from the inside out. He looked over at Sam. The man was crouched down on the floor by one of the doors. "Sam."

Sam glanced over at him. "I heard. Looks like our girl's still got some tricks up her sleeve. From the sounds of it, the bastard doesn't even know we can hear him." Sam motioned to a smudge on the floor. "Someone scraped their toe across here, recently. Left a smear behind."

"Our mystery man, perhaps?"

"It's not much. But it's something." Sam met his heated expression. "Your call, buddy."

Gage joined Sam at the door. "I'll trust your hunches any day. Is Trevor still using the other frequency?"

"As far as I know. They switched so they could talk without worrying about the bastard hearing them, so I doubt they heard Brooklyn."

"Good. Then they won't alert him." Gage motioned forward. "Let's go."

Sam nodded and headed down the corridor. They followed the twisting passage until the sound of Brooklyn's voice wavered in the air again. She was pleading with Drake to loosen the handcuffs...to not touch her.

Gage stopped, his chest tight, unable to deny the truth. The creep was going to rape her, or worse, kill her, and he was going to hear every second of it. Forever live with the memory of the terror in her voice, the arrogant words the bastard said to her as he strangled the life from her.

His wife.

His life.

He snarled. He'd kill the man, slowly and painfully. Laugh when the guy begged for mercy knowing there was none to give. He was going to make this Drake pay, no matter what the cost. He growled and grabbed the doorknob.

"Easy," said Sam, wrapping his fingers around Gage's arm. "We've got to be close. Just a few more minutes."

"He's killing her. She doesn't have a few minutes!"

"I don't think he'll kill her. He seems pretty intent on taking her alive."

"Yeah, so he can rape her!"

Sam winced at the pure hatred in his voice, but he didn't care. There was no way to contain it, to pretend there was anything but revulsion for the vile creature violating his wife. He needed to get to her. Now.

"He said there was only one more door." Gage watched Sam nod his reply, the desperation Gage felt mirrored in his friend's expression. There was no need to state the obvious. They both knew if they didn't reach Brooklyn before Drake reached that door, they'd never find her.

"Let's just clear this one first," said Sam.



Sam grabbed the handle and pulled it open, as Gage popped through clutching his gun. He felt the blood rush from his head, his heart skip two beats and then kick start into overdrive as he watched a man at the far end of the corridor open a door and step through. The dull light from the lot blurred the man's features, but his silhouette was sharp, as was the outline of the woman draped across his back. She hung without substance, her head swaying as the man turned to close the door. For a second their gazes locked, and while Gage couldn't see the man's face, he knew the bastard was smiling.

Gage growled and took off, running like a man possessed. He could hear Sam behind him, his footsteps in perfect sync with his. He reached the door several seconds behind the guy and barrelled through, rolling across the ground and into a squat. He swept the lot, finally spying the guy way off to his left, heading for a black Jeep.

"He's pretty far," shouted Sam. "But there's no time to call in Trevor's men." He looked over at Gage. "Think you can make the shot?"

Gage snarled, as he aimed his gun. "Hell yes," he said, slowly releasing his breath as his finger compressed the trigger.

\* \* \* \*

Sue opened the door, one arm cinched around her waist, a tight smile capturing her lips. She nodded at Brooklyn as Gage led her across the porch, her body barely hidden beneath his leather jacket.

"There's stuff in the spare room," said Sue, holding the door open. "You can shower and change while I get some tea."

Brooklyn watched Gage nod his thanks, his features too stiff to register any change. He'd been that way since she'd regained consciousness at the hospital, jerking back to life as Dr. Nick O'Brian hovered over her, his tender expression finally penetrating the terror. He'd backed away slightly, given her time to realise where she was and that the immediate threat was over. Sam had stood in one corner. Gage the other. Neither had spoken, but merely watched, their eyes dark and brooding, their lips pulled into tight lines, turned down slightly in the beginnings of a grimace. She'd only been able to hold Gage's stare for a second before the intensity of his expression had chilled her blood and she'd dropped her gaze to the floor.

But he'd watched her. They both had. Listened to every answer, frowned at her single syllable responses.

Had Drake raped her? *No.*

Had he touched her? *Yes.*

For thirty minutes Nick had grilled her, his questions more specific until he was satisfied with the outcome. Then he'd checked her shoulder and head, forced a smile and stepped back, handing her a gown. She'd dropped it on the floor the moment it'd touched her hands and turned away, crossing her arms beneath her breasts. Anger had burned then when she'd realised no one had bothered to hide her near naked appearance. That she'd spent God knows how long in the room with nothing but panties and a bra covering her, the pants she'd worn obviously taken for evidence. She'd sneered when Sam had picked it up and held it out to her, her expression hardening until his face had paled. Then Gage had stepped forward, his jacket slung across his arm. He'd started to remove his shirt when she'd directed the anger towards him. He'd stopped with the waist pulled up to his chest and simply handed her his jacket instead. She'd taken it, wrapped it around her shoulders and walked to the door, swaying against the doorframe. Sam had lunged in her direction but had stopped before touching her, his indecision etched across his brow. He'd flashed Gage and Nick a desolate glance then simply moved back to the wall.

Now she sat in Sam's living room, huddled in one of two single chairs, her knees tight to her chest, a mug of tea clutched in her hands. No one spoke. Four souls trapped in the same dark nightmare. She was wearing some of Sue's clothes—a pair of grey sweats and a dark purple sweater. They were too large, but they beat naked any day of the week. She'd showered for twenty minutes, trying to erase the feel of filth from her skin, but nothing had helped. She couldn't erase evil.

"Brooklyn?"

Sue's voice wavered in the stillness, startling Brooklyn from her thoughts. She chanced a gaze at the woman. She was sitting beside Sam on the couch, her leg and arm touching his. She seemed restless, nervous of the sombre mood suffocating the small space.

"You haven't had any of your tea. Can I get you something else?"

Brooklyn tried to smile, knowing it was a pathetic attempt at best. "It's not the tea. I'm fine."

“Could I get you something to eat?”

“Maybe tomorrow. I’m not very hungry right now.”

Sam grunted at her reply, shooting a heated glare at Gage. Brooklyn watched the men exchange the same stolid expression before Sam turned to her.

“You need to eat something. You’ve lost too much weight already.”

Brooklyn snorted and stared into her mug. “I’m hardly starving to death. One more day won’t make a difference.”

Sam opened his mouth, but then closed it with a sigh. He looked back at Sue, who smiled warmly at him.

“Brooklyn.”

She stilled at the sound of Gage’s voice, so deep and hard, it weighed down the already heavy air hanging in the room. She clenched her jaw, drawing on any reserve strength she had left just to turn towards him, and hold his gaze. Oh God. Her heart flickered, stopping dead for several seconds before finding some obscure rhythm that left her gasping for air. His was angry, or so far beyond it she couldn’t really tell what he was feeling. His hands clenched the arms of the chair and his jaw twitched. She could tell his control was hanging by a thread as he watched her through narrowed eyes. She forced herself to swallow, fear tingling down her spine. She hadn’t cried since she’d woken, but she knew the tears were only a careless word away. She bit at her bottom lip, praying for divine intervention, as she matched her husband’s grim expression.

“Yes?”

Gage swallowed, pausing just long enough to make her shift in the seat slightly. “You need to eat.”

Four words – five if she included her name. That’s all he’d said to her. Pain churned in her chest. God how she wanted him to hold her. To wrap her in his arms, protect her with his heat, his male hardness. She was clinging to her sanity by her fingernails, and seeing him so removed only pushed her further over the edge. She looked away, not willing to let him see the pain in her eyes, or how her chin quivered to the beat of her heart. “I’m really not hungry.”

“Hungry or not,” he started.

She turned back, anger finally bubbling inside. "What good will eating do when I'll only throw it up!" She uncurled her body, slammed the mug on the coffee table and stood up. "I said I'm not hungry, so stop staring at me like I'm some defiant child who doesn't know any better!"

Gage rose to his feet, taking every advantage of his larger frame to intimidate her. "Oh, and I suppose today's little episode was a great example of how good you are at making your own decisions!"

Brooklyn ignored the stab of pain that nearly slammed her to the floor and met his accusations head-on. "It wasn't me who screwed up today. I did my part. I signed books, smiled at the people, wiggled my ass to try and draw the bastard out. I followed everyone's instructions to the tee!"

"Including the one where I told you to wait for me?"

Brooklyn stopped, her tongue too thick to work right. It didn't matter that the bastard had all but dragged her through the door. It didn't matter that she'd dislocated his shoulder in an effort to free herself. She'd followed, and that's all Gage could see. She backed up, feeling a rush of vertigo wash over her. She grabbed the chair, willing the darkness to abate, as she waited for her legs to collapse. She heard Sam curse and felt someone grab her arm. She opened her eyes, blinking through the haziness. Gage was standing beside her, shouldering most of her weight against his chest. His face had paled and she could see the heavy lines creasing his brow.

She sucked in a shallow breath and pulled back, breaking his embrace. He moved to follow, but stopped when she glared at him.

"Don't." She backed up until her back brushed the wall. She was going to lose it. Cry, scream, laugh hysterically. Or maybe she'd just fade into a drug-like numbness where nothing mattered anymore. Either way, she needed to escape. She flashed a quick look at Sam. "Am I spending the night here?"

"Same room you changed in," he said, his voice so raw it made her cringe.

She simply nodded and headed down the hall.

She wouldn't let Gage see how much he'd hurt her.

She wouldn't let him know how much she needed him.

She wouldn't feel anything.

“God damn, Gage! What the hell is wrong with you?” Sam stomped to his feet, anger flashing in his eyes. “For God’s sake, I know you’re upset, but taking it out on Brooklyn isn’t the answer.”

Gage met Sam toe-to-toe. “I wasn’t taking anything out on her. I was merely stating a fact. We both know she only agreed to do the damn scam because she was pissed at me. So don’t act like I’m the heavy here. It’s about time she realised life isn’t all neat and tidy like in her books. Out here, there’s not always a happy ending.”

Sam snorted and shook his head. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, taking several quick breaths before locking his gaze on Gage again. “By the look on her face, I’m positive she got the message...*buddy*.” He turned to Sue. “I’ll be knocking back that case of Corona on the back deck if you need me.” He left.

Sue pursed her lips as she rose slowly from the couch. She gave Gage a half smile and followed after Sam. Gage cursed, fighting the need to throw Brooklyn’s mug across the room. Shit! Why did they argue every time? Why couldn’t he say what was really on his mind? He felt like screaming out his frustration, but huffed and kicked at the chair instead. He was angry. But more with himself than Brooklyn. In fact, he’d intended to tell her how proud he was of her. How well she’d done disengaging the bastard’s jamming device, fighting back when the opportunity arose. But instead, he’d yelled at her. Jesus, he might as well have screamed, ‘I told you so’, and been done with it.

He sank into the chair. All he’d wanted to do was hold her. But something inside him had snapped when he’d bent down over her limp body and scooped her off the pavement. Her pants had been torn and smudged with blood, and one breast had been freed from her bra. He’d touched her gently, drawing the fabric over her pale skin as Trevor’s unit had pulled up at the scene. He hadn’t even given the man time to speak before he’d brushed past him, carrying Brooklyn against his chest. He couldn’t look at Trevor, or his team, without seeing the images Brooklyn’s words had evoked as he’d listened to her plead for her life.

“Damn you, Drake. I swear you’ll pay.” It wasn’t enough he’d shot the bastard in the leg, dropping him to the ground in a crumpled heap. Or that they’d been close enough Drake had been forced to leave Brooklyn behind, limping over to his Jeep and skidding out of the

lot, nearly colliding with a bus. Just the fact he'd escaped—again—was a failure in Gage's books. One he couldn't afford to make.

Gage cursed as he pushed off the couch, grabbed a beer out of the fridge and headed for the front porch. He needed to be alone. Cool off so he could talk to Brooklyn later, though he doubted she'd want to talk to him.

## Chapter Thirteen

Brooklyn sat by the window, listening to the grandfather clock chime a single note. She'd holed herself up in the tiny room for four hours already, and it was starting to feel as though the walls were closing in on her. She glanced longingly at the bed. She wanted to sleep. Wanted to ease the weariness clouding her head, clinging to her bones until it was almost too hard to move. But he'd only be there waiting for her.

She sighed and looked back out the window. The rain had stopped, but the clouds were heavy and the window was streaked with moisture. Faint lights flickered in the distance, wavering out of focus as they passed over the glistening droplets. Brooklyn shivered, peering through the darkness. Was he out there, watching her? Smiling at the fear in her eyes, the nervous twitch in her lips? Could he see the way her hands trembled above the blanket she'd thrown across her lap, or how she jumped at the slightest noise?

She cursed, glancing back towards the bed. A dark silhouette drew her attention to the night table. She shuffled across the floor, carefully flipping the book over so she could read the title in the dim light. *Sarah's Secret*. Brooklyn's heart stopped dead as she stared at the cover, before she realised it was Sue's copy. The woman had told her she was a fan, but Brooklyn didn't take that stuff to heart. Everyone was a fan when you were in the room. It was only polite.

She flipped through the pages, wondering how many times she'd read the damn thing. *Too many*, she thought with a sigh. She turned back to the cover, and stared at the picture. Images of Sarah and Drake swept away in passionate embraces graced the page. It'd been her idea to superimpose discrete, shadowy silhouettes over the main one, each reflecting a different scene in the book. She'd been thrilled when Emma had shown her the final product. But now the pictures made her feel hollow.

"You bastard," she sneered as she threw the book across the room. She didn't bother to watch it slam into the wall, but simply smiled at the deep thud that echoed through the room.

"Are you talking about him...or me?"

Brooklyn whirled, her heart racing, her eyes bulged wide. She nearly screamed before she realised it was Gage. He was standing inside the doorway, his broad shoulders wedged against the frame. He'd stuffed his hands in his front pockets as he watched her from beneath a veil of shadows and eyelashes. She curbed the impulse to yell and leant back against the chair.

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

A smile tugged at the edges of his mouth, uncovering just a hint of white beneath. "After the way I reacted tonight, I doubt it." He walked across the floor and picked up the book she'd thrown, running his thumb across the cover. "Having second thoughts?" he asked, holding it up.

Brooklyn shrugged, tilting her head over to one side. "Just tired of looking at it."

Gage nodded, scanning the pictures again. "It's a good likeness, don't you think?"

"You mean of Drake, or Sarah?"

"Both, I suppose. But then all your heroines remind me of you."

"There's a bit of me in every one. It's the only way I know how to write." She looked away, wondering if he knew who inspired her heroes. "It helps me feel connected to them."

"What about the men? Do you feel connected to Drake?"

"The creep stalking me isn't Drake."

"No. But he thinks he is. He thinks the world you created inside these pages is real. That you're his."

"If such a place existed, he'd never play the part. Drake would never hurt Sarah. He loves her, and would rather die than raise a hand to her." Brooklyn watched Gage's face pale slightly. She knew he'd heard Drake's threats, but she was too tired to care. She sighed and sank further against the chair. "He's never going to stop, is he?"

"There's always a possibility..."

She shot him a knowing look.

Gage sighed and ran his fingers slowly through his hair. "No. He's not going to stop until we catch him."

"Or he gets me," she added.

Gage grunted and covered the short distance between them. "That's not an option."

"But a possibility, just the same."



Gage cursed under his breath and kicked at the carpet. "It's late. You should get some rest."

"Maybe later," she said.

Gage met her gaze. His eyes looked heavy, as if weighed down by the burden of having to protect her. She felt a stab of pain stake through her.

"You need to rest now. I have some medication if you need it. The good doctor gave me some pills to help you relax."

"Great, so I can spend another few hours unconscious?"

"Asleep."

"Against my will!" She stood up, nearly knocking into his chest. "I won't give up that kind of control. I can't."

"I can sit in the chair while you sleep. He won't hurt you. Not tonight."

"I don't want you to sit in the damn chair. I want you to sleep in the bed...with me." She sucked in a quick breath, not able to halt the words from springing forth. "No, that's a lie. I want you to make love to me, first."

Oh God. What the hell had she done? She could tell by the stunned look on his face her sudden confession was the last thing he'd expected. But the mixture of fatigue and fear had broken down her inhibitions, and somehow she'd blurted out the truth before she'd been able to rein in her tongue.

Gage placed a hand on her shoulder and drew her softly against his chest. She could feel the strong beat of his heart on her cheek, and the evidence of his arousal hard against her groin. She groaned, rubbing her hips gently across his crotch. He moaned, a deep, sultry sound that made her body weep, but there was a wariness in it she hadn't heard before.

"You're confused, and you're only turning to me out of fear."

Brooklyn pulled back and looked into his eyes. They were cloudy with desire, like a mountain thunderstorm just starting to rage. "No." The word came out as a harsh whisper.

"Brook."

"Please." She pressed her face into his chest, palming her hands against his shoulders. "I'm not asking for promises. Just one night." She heard his breathing escalate, felt his erection harden further.

"You'll hate me in the morning."

The hurt edge to his voice had her curling against him, her hands wrapped around his neck. She pulled away just enough for him to see the honesty in her face. "I could never hate you. Not even if I tried."

With that she raised her lips to his, softly slanting them across his mouth. She moved slowly, touching his skin as if any hard motion would bruise it. He was still hesitant, and she needed to allow him time to work through his concerns. His lips were warm and slightly wet, as if he'd licked them in anticipation. She pressed against them, savouring the feel of his breath mixing with hers, as she gently dipped her tongue into his mouth. He moaned at her soft intrusion, palming his hands on her back. She could feel his pressure increasing, slowly flattening her chest on his. Brooklyn closed her eyes, and let her heart lead her.

Gage was dying. And a damn willing sacrifice at that. He hadn't expected Brooklyn to make a move, especially after the way he'd treated her tonight. As if she were responsible instead of the victim. She'd been right. None of what had happened had been her fault. Drake was proving to be a borderline genius, riding that fine line between insanity and brilliance with complete control. Gage knew if he didn't find a way to stop the man, he'd eventually succeed.

He'd gone to her room as an afterthought. As if his heart needed to see she was safe even though he knew the bastard couldn't track her down that fast. But the moment he'd seen her standing by the chair, cursing the book she'd spent months writing, he knew he'd only been fooling himself. He wanted her. Wanted to take her in his arms, kiss her as if he never intended on letting go. Make love to her with only the pale light from the window as his guide, using his hands and tongue to explore every inch of her body. He wanted to ease the pain he'd seen in her eyes. Replace Drake's touch with his. He wanted to claim her.

"Gage."

He moaned at the soft whisper of her voice, so deep and hungry he had to fight the urge to push her against the wall and plunge his cock inside her. He knew she was ready for him, the sweet scent of her arousal mixing with the flowery scent of soap from her skin. But that wasn't what she needed. "Easy," he whispered, kissing her neck as she arched against him. "Nice and easy, darling."

"So you'll stay with me?" she asked.

His heart clenched at the pain in her voice. She'd thought he'd refuse her, distance himself as he'd done earlier. He should apologise, confess his undying love, give her the reassurance she needed that he had no intentions of ever letting her go. But his cock answered first.

"Couldn't leave if I tried," he mumbled.

He felt Brooklyn smile against his chest as she moved her fingers down his torso, pausing at the edge of his shirt. Her hands trembled as she slipped her fingers beneath the cotton, palming his chest. She cooed at the intimate contact, running her fingers across his abdomen, squeezing the tight muscles. She moved slowly, tracing each band as if she had all the time in the world.

He groaned. She was going to kill him. It was that simple. His control was hanging by a thread, his need to possess her so strong it was all he could do not to rip off her clothes. Start up a rhythm guaranteed to have them both screaming before she could utter a protest. Yet, she was teasing him as if they'd never spent a night apart.

"Darling."

He heard her chuckle at his voice. It was raw and impatient, a direct order to speed things up before he took control. But she paid it no heed, running her fingers along his ribs, circling his nipples until they burned for her touch. He sucked in a breath through clenched teeth as she lifted his shirt up, tugging it forcefully from his shoulders. He smiled, determined to remove her shirt as well, when she placed her lips around his nipple and sucked.

Fire seared his body, the feel of her soft, wet lips on his chest stoking the flames higher. She had a way of curling her tongue and sipping his nipple into her mouth that sent a rush of blood to his cock, tightening it painfully inside his jeans. He groaned, clenching her hair in his hands. He needed to sate some of his hunger before he hurt her in the process.

"Enough," he said, pulling her away.

"But..."

"You're playing with fire here, darling, and if you keep up this pace, you'll get burned."

He watched as she bit her bottom lip. God, she was beautiful. Even with fear creasing her face, nights of sleeplessness bunched in her shoulders, she was the loveliest creature he'd ever seen. He moved quickly, pulling the large sweater off her as he ground her body against

his. She gasped at the sudden movement, before sinking into his embrace. He loved how her body moulded to his. How her breasts pressed against his ribs or how her hips cradled his erection. He was even harder and knew if he didn't release his cock soon, he'd come in his jeans.

"Pants."

He had no time for lengthy phrases. One word to convey his thoughts was more than enough. He felt her fumble with the button before easing it free. Then he heard the faint hiss of the zipper as Brooklyn lowered the fly, finally releasing some of the pressure. She moaned at the feel of his cock against her fingers. He was hard and thick and he knew she was imagining how tight she'd feel as he thrust inside her.

*Don't think about it, or it'll be over before it starts!*

He listened to the voice in his head, trying to ignore the way Brooklyn eased his pants down his legs, taking his socks with them. He couldn't concentrate on the gentle caress of her fingers as she retraced her steps, finally taking his erection in her hand. She squeezed.

Gage cried out. Over six months without sex and Brooklyn wanted to torment him. His control vanished, a fleeting thought along with any reservations he had left. He picked her up, crossed the four steps to the bed and practically threw her onto the mattress. He watched a smile light across her face as he grabbed the bottom of the sweatpants and pulled them off, tossing them to the floor. Then he removed her socks, pausing just long enough to suck each toe into his mouth. She moaned in need, spreading her legs as if trying to tempt him with the evidence of her arousal.

Gage looked between her thighs. His heart skipped then raced. She hadn't been wearing any panties, and he could see her moisture coating her velvety lips and the inside of her thighs. It glistened in the pale light, begging him to lick it away.

He growled, grabbed her ankles and pulled. Brooklyn laughed as he dragged her across the bed, positioning her ass on the edge. He met her gaze, loving the way the shadows had eased from her face, replaced by a mischievous smile that was pure minx. He looked down the length of her body. She was gloriously naked. He gazed at her breasts. Her nipples were hard, the deep pink colour not quite distinguishable in the soft light. The skin around them had puckered slightly and he longed to run his tongue across the tiny bumps. Her ribs were showing more than they should, a reminder of the trauma she'd suffered. He ignored the

searing pain at the thoughts that flashed in his mind, and focused on the sleek line of her abdomen. The way her belly button formed a perfect little pool in the centre of her body, or how her hips flared out gently from her waist.

"Lord have mercy," he rasped, kneeling at the edge of the bed. He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was. How much he desired her. But it was all he could do to swallow past the large knot of emotion stuck in his throat. He reached out, softly touching her stomach.

"Oh God!"

Her voice resonated in the small room as the simple touch had her arching off the bed. He growled deep in his chest, easing his fingers up her body until they cupped her left breast. It was firm and warm, slightly smaller than his hand. He held it gently, not wanting to hurt her. There was still a scattering of bruises across her body and he knew he wouldn't feel satisfied until he'd kissed every one.

"So pretty, darling," he said, bending to take her nipple in his mouth. Brooklyn hummed at the sensation, spearing her hands through his hair. He knew she loved to wrap the strands around her fingers and tug on them as he suckled her chest.

"Harder." She pressed against him, but he moved with her.

"Easy. I don't want to hurt you."

"You could never hurt me. Please. It's been so long. I need you."

"And you'll get me, but first I plan on kissing every tiny bruise on your body."

Gage ignored Brooklyn's whimper of protest as he moved across her skin, licking and kissing every bruise and cut he could find. He knew the worst scars were on her back, but he'd get those later, when he mounted her from behind. He held back the rumble building in his chest. He already had it all planned out. He'd make love to her missionary style to alleviate the initial ache they both felt. Then, once he'd come inside her, he'd flip her over and take her a second time from behind. He wouldn't need to rest between. The way his cock felt, he knew he could make love all night if she wanted. Come inside her as many times as she'd let him.

Gage looked up from her thighs, his gaze meeting hers. Her eyes were black now, with just a hint of blue rimmed around the edges. Her chest rose in heavy pants, and the moisture between her legs was now easing down her inner thighs. He drew a deep breath, drinking in

the mixture of perfume, cologne, cotton and arousal. It made him feel light-headed, like he'd just finished off a fifth of Jack Daniels. But this intoxication ran much deeper.

"Watch me," he ordered.

Brooklyn looked at him as he lowered his body between her thighs, nudging them farther apart to accommodate the width of his shoulders. He loved knowing she was watching. Seeing his pleasure shadow his face as he licked the sweet honey from her body. He stopped just shy of touching her, darting a glance back across her chest. Her gaze met his and he smiled a wicked grin as his tongue peeked out and swept a fiery path through her slit.

Brooklyn gasped and tilted her hips up, her fists now clenched in the covers. He licked again, circling her clit, sucking the small nub into his mouth. God he loved the taste of her. Sweet, yet earthy. Like berries after a mountain rainstorm. He savoured her scent, tracing his tongue over his lips before licking again. He went lower this time, dipping into her vagina, thrusting deep before pulling it back, swirling the moisture around her lips.

"Oh God. Right there," she moaned as he flicked his tongue over her throbbing knot of nerves.

Gage hummed his reply, watching her clit quiver at the slight vibration. He loved when it did that. "So soft and wet," he said, pausing to watch his finger slide through her crease and into her tight sex. "God damn," he said, feeling his sac tighten between his legs. The head of his cock was nearly purple now, with a large drop of fluid beading on the tip. If he didn't do something soon, he'd have to rearrange his plans.

Gage placed his hand on her flesh, pulling her silky lips apart with two, long fingers. He wanted to see her clit pucker as he brought her to orgasm with his mouth. He lowered back down, placing the other at the entrance to her vagina. Then he latched his tongue around her clit as he thrust two fingers inside her.

"Yes!"

Brooklyn's voice broke the heavy air as she strained against his possession. Her stomach clenched, her clit quivered, as he licked the tiny bud with fast, strong strokes, while thrusting his fingers in and out of her sex. In again. Her walls trembled. Out. She arched against him. In. Deeper.

"Now. Yes. Oh baby, please don't stop!"

Gage licked harder, thrust deeper until her body shattered around him. He moaned, physically holding back his own release as hers coated his fingers and wept from her body. She thrashed on the bed, her head thrown back, her hands fisted around the covers. Every muscle in her body tensed as the climax rippled through her, beading her skin with sweat.

“Oh, darling. You’re so beautiful when you explode for me.” He kept his fingers inside her, not wanting to feel the loss of her skin against his.

Brooklyn smiled through the heated haze, sucking in a brief breath. “Come up here, baby, and I’ll do it again.”

Gage smiled at her enticing words. He stood up, wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to the head of the bed. She took his lips with hers as he lowered his body on top of her, feeling her small frame give beneath him. Damn, he loved that too. How large and strong she made him feel next to her. Brooklyn whispered his name as he kneed her legs apart, nudging the crown against her hole. Her slick juices coated his skin, easing his way as he moved slowly forward, inching his way inside her. Brooklyn clenched her hands around his shoulders, scraping his skin with her nails, as she wrapped her legs around his hips. Gage felt her vagina spasm on the second thrust, so close to coming again he knew she’d go over on the next.

He waited with only the head lodged inside her until she raised her hips in desperation, whispering her need in his ear. He crushed his mouth to hers and he filled her with one stroke, drinking in her scream of release. The walls of her channel clenched around him, squeezing his cock with steady pulses. He tried to fight the need to finish, but lost all hope when Brooklyn locked her heels around his ass and thrust him even deeper.

“Damnation!”

Gage growled the curse, pumping his hips with fast, strong strokes, sending her even higher. Her nails bit into his skin, her teeth clamped around the back hollow of his shoulder as he pummelled into her, no longer able to control his movements. Faster. Harder. Deeper. Fire burned down his spine, pulling his sac tight against his body as the first shot of semen erupted from the tip, soaking her tight tissues. He grunted a deep guttural sound as his cock flared and spurted again, causing his body to jerk against hers. The heat of their releases coated his skin, as more sperm filled her tight space. Gage squeezed his eyes shut, unable to halt his groan of ecstasy as he came over and over until he thought he’d been drained of

every drop of sperm in his body. God, it'd been too long—too long without her soft skin sheathed around him, her fingers clutched around his shoulders. Too long since he'd held her for hours in the night, watching her sleep in his arms, knowing his life was exactly how it should be.

He looked down at her, gasping in a deep breath as the last few embers tingled through his body. Brooklyn pulled him tight against her as he lowered his weight, resting on his elbows. She was still falling back down from her climax, and he'd wait just long enough for her to open her eyes before he made love to her again.



## Chapter Fourteen

Brooklyn was soaring. There was no other way to describe the height of passion Gage had taken her to. She felt as if her body was suspended above the bed, with only his arms to keep her from floating off. Her orgasm had been stronger than any she'd had, and his powerful thrusts had rolled her into another as the first had started to wane. Now she was lying on the bed, clinging to Gage's body, afraid to let go and discover it had all been a dream.

"Bloody hell." His voice was weary, but lighter than she'd heard in days. "You're too much vixen for your own good."

She smiled at that thought, wondering if she'd be able to tempt him again later, when he rose up higher on his elbows. She opened her eyes, afraid to see the look of regret in his, but that wasn't what burned in his expression. His face was seductive, his lips curved into a dangerous smile. He looked like a man intent on a mission.

And she had a feeling the mission was her.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, trailing a single finger along her jaw.

"No."

"Good." He leant down and licked her lips lightly with just the tip of his tongue. "Are you sore?"

Brooklyn smiled at the hint of concern in his voice. "I know it's been a while, but I'm hardly a virgin. I don't bruise that easily."

Gage smiled in a way that stole her breath. "Glad to hear it."

He pulled out, though she could feel his cock was still rock hard. She whimpered at the empty feeling his retreat left, and had to hold back her urge to beg him to take her again. Once hadn't been enough.

She'd never get enough.

She sighed as he got to his knees, wondering if he'd agree to stay all night in the bed with her, when he placed his hands on her hips.

"Roll over, darling."

His voice was soft and deep, but there was a sense of urgency in it that sent her pulse racing. She felt her body liquefying, preparing to take him again. She eased up on her elbows as he turned her waist in his hands, flipping her to her stomach.

"Something on your mind?" she asked, stunned by the erotic tone of her voice. She sounded like a temptress, and by the low rumble from Gage's chest, he agreed.

Gage laughed, running his hands down the centre of her back. "I said I wanted to kiss every bruise." He paused by her waist, then timidly kissed the scar on her back.

Brooklyn tensed. He hadn't looked at her wound, let alone touched it since the hospital.

"Gage, you don't have to..."

"Shhh," he hushed, peppering kisses along her skin. "Am I hurting you?" His voice was rough, touched by the anger she knew he was hiding inside.

"It wasn't your fault. None of this is. I should've..."

She stilled at the sudden heat of his tongue on her back as he laved the area around the scar with soft, gentle flicks. She moaned at the unusual sensation, relaxing into the bed.

"One more spot."

The smooth line of his chest glided over her back as he moved to her shoulder, kissing the marks Drake had made with the taser. "Your skin is so soft. It amazes me every time I touch it." He traced his fingers down her sides and over her hips until he reached her knees. "Tuck these underneath you, darling."

Brooklyn moaned as she drew her knees beneath her hips, raising her buttocks. It reminded her so much of their last encounter, she trembled with anticipation. Would he take her anally again? Relive that hot night when he'd pushed her farther than ever before? Did she want him to? The uncertainty fuelled her desire, as she waited anxiously for his next move.

"Relax," he whispered, running his hands over her round cheeks. "I won't do anything that'll hurt you."

She could hear the regret in his voice. The pain he still felt for taking her too roughly that night. Her heart clenched, wondering if that was why he'd stayed away so long. She turned her head, intent on telling him she'd enjoyed his touch, and secretly longed to relive it, when he touched her clit with his finger.

She cried out, her body so sensitised she nearly climaxed again. All thoughts vanished as the need to orgasm raced over her. She backed against his hand, increasing the pressure.

"Does that feel good?" he asked, stroking her again.

"Too good. Please don't make me beg you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said, thrusting his fingers inside her.

Brooklyn arched backwards, her hair touching the mounds of her ass as she fought to control the fire swirling inside her. Gage had wrapped one hand around her hips to stroke her clit while the other pushed through her already swollen tissues. She gasped for air, feeling the orgasm spreading through her stomach when he moved over her, biting her neck gently with his teeth.

"Yes!" She wailed his name, not caring if she woke the house, as the world dissolved into flashes of white light that seared through her, driving the air from her lungs. She whimpered in desperation as he withdrew his hand, and moved back, stilling when she felt the hot, hard head of his cock lodge against her pussy.

"Get ready to scream again," he whispered and thrust deeply, plunging home.

A second orgasm rocked through her, ignited by the deep caress of his silky shaft. Brooklyn tried to scream, but there was nothing left to form the sound and she collapsed on the bed, followed by Gage. His weight pushed her down, but it only made her feel more feminine. He was pumping her hard now, driving deep with every stroke. Her sanity drifted away as yet another climax began building.

"Oh God. Now! I need you to take me now!"

She knew he'd understand her message. He groaned behind her, clenching his fingers around her hips as he thrust even faster. Brooklyn grabbed at the headboard, wrapping her fingers around the small spindles in an effort to counter his thrusts. His breath panted in her ear, as he fought to push through her tender tissues, her walls clamping around him.

"Now. Come for me now, darling."

Brooklyn barely heard his voice as he thrust deep, grazing her womb with the tip of his shaft. She exploded, squeezing his cock so tight she heard him cry out behind her. She'd locked him in place and she knew the climax he'd built was stemmed until she could relax enough that he could pulse inside her. He stilled, his cock lodged deep until, at last, her muscles eased, and he came in one overwhelming spurt. His back bowed, his hands grinding

his pelvis into hers, as shot after shot of his hot seed filled her womb, dripping past his shaft to coat her thighs. He growled from the strain, his grip the only thing holding her off the bed. She waited until his embrace loosened before collapsing on the mattress, exhaustion quickly replacing arousal.

“Too good,” he mumbled, following her down on the bed, his body curled against hers. “You’re dangerous, darling.”

Brooklyn sighed, not able to form the words she wanted to say. She was already drifting into a peaceful sleep, the warmth of Gage’s body protecting her from the terror she knew lurked in the shadows. He moved from the bed. She started to turn in protest, when he returned with a warm cloth, and gently cleaned between her legs. She smiled at him, and opened her lips to speak when he slanted his over hers in a kiss that stole the last of her strength. The last thing she remembered was feeling him lay down beside her, their lips still sealed as he drew her tight to his chest. Then a calming darkness descended around her, as she gave herself over to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Gage lay in the bed, forty minutes after kissing Brooklyn to sleep, and still his cock was rock hard. He cursed, trying to will the damn thing to stand down, as he shifted Brooklyn in his arms. He wanted her again, but she needed rest more than another round of sex. His erection lengthened as he remembered how wet her channel had been as he’d moved within her. How she’d begged, even after coming for him several times, needing him to send her over the edge again. And he had.

She moaned, and rubbed her body against his as she snuggled closer to him. He groaned when she lifted her leg and nestled it across his cock. The pressure made his balls squeeze and for a moment he wondered if he could climax like that.

“God help me,” he muttered. What the hell had he done tonight? He knew she was riding an emotional rollercoaster, so overwhelmed by fear she wasn’t fully conscious of her actions. Yet, he’d allowed his need for her to cloud his judgement, fool him into believing it was love they’d been making, and not just sex.

*But you do love her.*

The thought came suddenly, but it didn't take him by surprise. He'd known all along the depth of his feelings for Brooklyn, but it was the first time since their separation he'd truly embraced it. Now all he had to do was convince her she felt the same way, and life could start again.

*Give her time. Don't crowd her. Wait until she's safe before you push her.*

It sounded logical. He knew her feelings were a jumbled mess. How couldn't they be? Some bastard was hunting her, touching her, trying to steal her life. It was a miracle she hadn't descended into a deep depression. And what had he done to help? Chastised her. Criticised her decisions, then taken her to bed instead of talking things out.

Gage sighed, pulling her closer. Sam was right. They needed to work things out first. Come to terms with what had transpired between them before they jumped back into bed together.

"Too late," he rasped, watching her eyelids flutter in her sleep. God, she was beautiful. So innocent, yet he knew the seductress that hid behind the soft smile. She'd been more than willing tonight. Even after coming inside her that first time, he knew she'd wanted him again. When he'd flipped her over, he'd nearly come again at the sight of her tight little ass peaking out at him above the glistening lips of her pussy.

He wanted to take her there again. Feel her hot, snug anal channel close around him, milking him so hard he'd have to thrust with all his weight just to push through the tender muscles. He could feel it now, the burning sensation dousing his cock, prickling up his spine until he had no choice but to barrel into her. Take her ass with long deep strokes he knew would push her to the very threshold of her limits. He looked down at her face. She'd trembled when he'd turned her over, and he couldn't help but wonder if she'd been afraid of his desires? Or was it anticipation? A hope for what he might give her? He couldn't be certain, but it'd been enough to quell the need...for now.

"No."

Brooklyn's frightened voice startled him. He focused on her face.

"Please. Don't..."

Her words trailed off. She'd been restless for the last ten minutes, mumbling incoherently in his arms. She was dreaming again. Reliving the nightmare she'd been thrust

into by Drake. He held back a curse and gently touched her face. She trembled beneath his fingers, but seemed to settle slightly and relax against his chest.

“Easy, darling,” he soothed. “No one can hurt you. Not as long as I can breathe.”

“Gage.”

He smiled at the change of tone in her voice. It was sultry now, as if she remembered she was in his arms. He watched her wiggle, gently burrowing into him until she seemed satisfied with her positioning. Then she sighed, and drifted off again. Gage shook his head. He was in way too deep. And he had absolutely no desire to come up for air.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh yeah, darling. You know I love it when you touch me like that.”

Brooklyn cracked open her eyes, roused by the deep male voice whispering in her ear. She glanced up at Gage. His eyes shifted beneath closed lids, and his breath came in short, choppy gasps.

“Good God, Brooklyn.”

Brooklyn smiled. He was dreaming...about her. A warm satisfaction spread through her, as she watched him twitch in her arms. A light perspiration had broken out along his skin, and his hold around her had tightened. She eased up on her elbow, keeping her right hand firm against his chest. He was panting now, and mumbling her name after every ragged breath. She glanced down at his thighs, feeling her chest constrict and her breathing hitch. He was beautifully erect, his cock thick and hard beneath the single sheet. She licked her lips, wondering if she could straddle him before he jolted awake.

“Only one way to find out,” she whispered, slowly inching the blanket down his body.

He stirred as she lifted it off his legs, but didn't waken. She held her breath, biting her bottom lip with anticipation as she eased away from him, and gently raised her leg over his hips. If she could slide over his body and sink the crown inside her before he woke up, she knew he'd be helpless against her.

Brooklyn moved slowly, placing one hand on the bed beside his chest as she straddled her legs across his hips. His breathing slowed, his chest rising gently with the steady rhythm. She smiled at the look of satisfaction on his face, some of the tension and worry from the

previous day eased from the lines in his face. He looked older than she remembered, but still more handsome than any man had a right to be. His body was hard and firm, muscled as much from life as from the gym. And he still wore the gold chain she'd bought him for their first wedding anniversary around his neck, though she noticed it now held his wedding ring.

A tremble of pain moved through her. She'd searched several stores for a band to reflect his rugged style, and had known instantly when she'd found the right one. But she'd never dreamed he'd ever take it off. She glanced down at her left hand. Her ring was still in her purse. She'd been unable to leave it far behind, and had tucked it inside a small, velvet pouch. For a moment she wondered if she should put it back on, but decided against it. Only Gage held the right to do that. She'd have to wait to see if his desires matched hers.

"Don't stop."

She stilled, her focus drawn to his face. His lips were twitching, but his eyes remained closed. Her heart raced, her body warmed as she leant forward and gently brushed her lips across his. The soft moan that rumbled from his chest pooled the moisture between her legs, and hardened her nipples to the point the peaked tips ached for his touch. She swallowed the whimper bubbling in her chest and drew back, shifting her weight to the hand on the bed. His cock was lengthened along his abdomen, a small drop of white fluid leaking from the tip. She shivered, wanting nothing more than to lick the precious prize away. But she knew he'd never sleep through that, and she needed to have him sheathed within her before he realised her intentions.

Brooklyn reached between them, encircling his erection, loving how it pulsed, the veins thick and engorged beneath her fingers. He shifted slightly as she raised it between her legs, his hands clenching at his sides. She lowered her hips and swept his crown through her slick juices. The rumble that shattered the silence had her weeping cream. She held her breath and made another pass, wrapping her silky lips around his cock, as she slowly sank towards his groin. Inch by glorious inch, until he was lodged halfway inside her. Streaks of white light pulsed across her eyes, heat seared through her sex as the Gage's body joined with hers.

"God damn."

She stilled, heart racing, chest heaving, as Gage stopped her downward descent, his hands clenched around her waist. She was almost fully impaled, and so close to easing the empty feeling gnawing at her, she had to bite her tongue to stop from crying out. She moved

her hands to his shoulders, bracing her weight as she met his heated gaze. His eyes were black, the white mere wisps within the darkness, his lips pulled back to expose his teeth. He looked like a man intent on getting his way.

“Something wrong, baby?”

Gage drew a haggard breath, forcing the air in, as his tongue dampened his lips. “You asked for once, and I’ve already taken you twice.” He moaned as she shifted her hips, tightening his hold on her. “You’re in no condition to...”

Brooklyn moved her hand over his mouth, silencing him with a solitary finger. “I asked for one night, and the night isn’t over, yet.” She wiggled again, wrenching a desperate growl from his chest, and he closed his eyes as she smoothed her fingers across his chest. “Just one more time. Just let me love you one more time. I promise I won’t ask you again. I’ll leave everything up to you, if you let me have this last moment with you.”

She could hear the emotion in her plea, feel the tears collecting behind her lashes, but she didn’t care. Tonight was all that mattered. Sharing her love with Gage one more time meant more than her pride. Even if he didn’t return her feelings, she’d give him everything in her heart.

Gage released one hand and drew it softly along her cheek. Even in the darkness she could see the gentleness washing across his expression.

“I just don’t want to hurt you, darling. After all you’ve been through...” His voice trailed off into a sigh.

Brooklyn smiled, nuzzling into his caress. “Then lie back, and let me pleasure you.” She watched a slow smile creep into the edges of his lips as he eased his grip, cupping her waist instead of clenching on it. Brooklyn reached out and touched his lips again, wrapping her other hand around his shoulder as she dropped her weight, burying him completely within her.

“Oh yeah, darling.”

Gage held Brooklyn’s hips as the deep thrust sent her into orgasm. Her walls quivered, clenching and releasing on his cock as if trying to milk out his climax as well. She threw her head back, her face clenched in the pleasure. Her hands locked on his shoulders, the nails biting into his skin, as she as quietly chanted his name.



"You're so tight. So wonderfully tight. I can feel every inch of your smooth skin against mine."

Brooklyn gasped in a large breath, allowing her head to bow towards her chest. She was coated with perspiration, her soft, pale skin shimmering in the faint light from the window. Her hair was already damp, and he loved how her breasts rose with each breath. She gazed down at him, a look of satisfaction on her face. He groaned at the sight of it, amazed at the sheer joy in her expression.

"It's not me. It's all you. You're so thick and long. You're every woman's fantasy."

The large knot wedged in his throat again at the love in her voice. She wasn't holding anything back. He tried to breathe past the thickness growing in his chest, but only managed to wheeze.

"I doubt I'm any woman's fantasy."

Brooklyn smiled at him, slowly raising her hips until just the head was still inside her. "That's where you're wrong. But why don't I see if I can be one of yours."

She moved, sinking slowly down his shaft, burying him to the hilt. He moaned at the hot caress, so damn slow he could feel every ripple of her skin, every clench of her muscles. He moved his hands to her chest, cupping both breasts as he tweaked her perfect, turgid buds between his fingers. She cried out at his touch, quickly rising then descending again. God, she was wet, her juices weeping out around the base of his cock, coating his groin with each pass of her soft, inner lips. She undulated in his arms, rotating her hips so his crown brushed against her G-spot.

"That's it, darling. Make yourself come for me."

Brooklyn glanced down at his face, holding his gaze for only a moment before closing her eyes as her strokes increased. Damn, if she wasn't getting close to another climax. He could see the increased need in her face, hear it in her heated moans. Her channel pulsed again, twitching around his invading shaft as if desperate to draw him even deeper. He gave her nipples one more tug before shifting his hands back to her hips. Then he gently raised his buttocks and met her thrusts with his own.

"Yes! Oh God. Please, baby. Don't stop."

Her plea was carnal, her voice so raw he wouldn't have known it was hers if she hadn't been straddled across his body, his cock buried deep inside her. She rode him hard, using his

shoulders for an anchor as she thrust down on his shaft, her pace never slowing. He tensed his jaw, holding back the fire starting to tingle up his spine as he angled his hips, penetrating her deeper.

“Yes!”

Her voice echoed off the walls, her cry so loud he almost expected Sam to come running through the door, gun drawn, clothes optional. He’d heard his friend making love to Sue before he’d ventured into Brooklyn’s room, and then again just prior to drifting off, and wouldn’t be surprised if Sam was pumping the woman again.

“Feel good, darling?” Damn, his voice was just as husky as hers, his desire so strong now he wanted nothing more than to pound into her. Drive her so high she’d pass out in his arms. But he waited, cock twitching, balls drawn painfully tight, as she fell back to earth, her body still jerking above his. It was her seduction, her pace. He didn’t want to steal it from her. Not yet.

Brooklyn whimpered, finally locking her gaze on his. Her eyes were like two dark shadows, her face flushed a deep red. He could see the helpless look on her face, so taken by her own pleasure she was unable to hide any emotion from him. She smiled and lowered her body onto his, pressing her breasts against his chest. “You’re a dangerous man, Gage Matthews. If it felt any better, I’d die in your arms.”

“I’d settle for having you pass out. I don’t think you’ve ever done that.” He smiled at her seductive chuckle. “Every man wants to think he’s capable of pleasing his woman to that extent.”

*His woman.*

Had he said it that way? All but confessed he had no plans of allowing her to become some other man’s lover? He looked at her face as she drew back, her eyebrow arched in question. If she’d taken it that way, she hid her reaction well.

“Is that a challenge?”

Gage smiled. “Not a challenge, darling. A statement of what I have in mind for you.” He lowered his hands to her hips, gripping them as he raised his pelvis higher. “I was going to let you have full control. But you’ve pushed a possessed man too far. So hold on tight.”

Brooklyn stifled a cry as he drove into her, his motion so fast his thrusts blurred against the shadows. He was out of control, his need to claim her the only coherent thought still left. She was his, and he'd prove it—now.

“So much. I can't hold on.”

“Don't. Just go with it. I'll catch you when you fall.”

Brooklyn tensed at his words, twisting around his hands as the fury of her release took over. She shattered around him. Her womb contracted, her walls clenched around his cock to the point that it took all his strength to keep moving. She screamed his name, her hips tight around his. She hadn't taken a breath, and he could see the strength fading from her.

He kept pumping, struggling through her tight flesh, desperate to make the fire erupt inside him. He'd come too many times to make the task an easy one. He knew it'd take several more minutes of filling her hard and fast to send him over the edge.

He called her name, feeling her gasp in one quick breath. She was still pulsing, and he knew if he did it right, he'd push her from one orgasm into another. “Don't fight it. Keep it coming, darling. I'm not near done with you yet.”

Brooklyn opened her eyes, holding his gaze until her world shattered again, and Gage watched her slip off the edge. She opened her mouth in a soundless scream as her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed on top of him. A rush of pure male dominance raced through him as he pushed into her three more times before his cock jerked, and his release spurted from the tip, drowning her womb, with his thick fluid. He cried out, the sheer magnitude of pleasure unlike any he'd experienced. He clenched his jaw, fighting the darkness that clawed at his consciousness as shot after shot of his seed filled Brooklyn's channel, marking her as his woman, his mate. He held her tight, revelling in the way her body hung limp against his, her breath soft against the nape of his neck.

“Oh, Brook,” he whispered, brushing the hair back from her face. “You're amazing, darling. Truly amazing.” He waited, but she only sighed in reply. “Sleep. No more sex for you, you little minx. We'll talk tomorrow.” He felt something burn his eyes but closed them before he could consider the possibilities too deeply. He and Brooklyn needed to talk before they shared a bed again. Before he lost her to his desire.

## Chapter Fifteen

Brooklyn slivered her eyes open, squinting through the dim light bathing the small room. The sun was up, but the dull light meant another day of heavy clouds. She moaned and reached for Gage, startling awake when she realised he was gone. She bolted upright, glancing from the chair to the door. His clothes were missing from the floor and the smell of coffee filled the air. She released the breath she'd been holding and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. He'd simply risen before her and was most likely talking with Sam in the kitchen. There was no reason to think he'd fled.

She forced a smile as she rose, wincing at the soreness between her legs. She'd never expected Gage to take her so forcefully, and the intensity of their last coupling had left its mark. "I'm not a virgin. I don't bruise that easily. Yeah, right," she huffed as she padded over to the bathroom. *Maybe not bruised, but definitely used.* She laughed at the thought, twisting on the shower as she stole a quick glance in the mirror.

"Damn." Brooklyn touched her right cheek, gawking at the large, purple welt staining her skin. She remembered Drake striking her just before she lost consciousness, but never imagined the evidence of his abuse would be so obvious. She turned her chin, examining the extent of bruising as steam billowed softly from behind the glass door. "Gage is going to go ballistic," she muttered, testing the water before sliding inside. She hummed at the pleasure of the simple act, and had to persuade her body to move twenty minutes later when the water began to cool.

She stepped out onto the soft, beige mat, wrapping herself in a large towel, sighing as the gentle motion of the fluffy cloth against her skin ignited a warm, liquid feeling in the pit of her stomach. God help her, but she wanted him again. Wanted to feel his strong hands cinched around her hips as he thrust deep inside her, brushing her womb with his cock until she exploded into a blinding sea of white light. Wanted to hear him cry out her name as he filled her with his release, so lost in his own pleasure he couldn't stop his hips from jerking against hers, or his body from trembling when he collapsed on top of her.

Brooklyn slid her fingers down her body, tracing a path through her narrow slit. Damn, she was wet. Wet and hot, and so damn needy it made her want to scream. She'd begged him last night. Swallowed her pride for the taste of his skin, and the warmth of his body. She would've sold her soul if she'd had to, just to have the chance to touch him again. Feel her love for him course through her body. Now if only she could convince herself he returned her feelings, she'd relax. But he'd been hesitant. She'd seen the uncertainty flash in his eyes, felt the reservations in his touch until the fire between them had burned so hot he'd given in to her request.

"He just didn't want to hurt me," she whispered, but the words were far from convincing.

Brooklyn released a long, slow breath as she ran a brush through her hair. She tried to ignore the male scent that clung to her skin. Gage's scent. Even after a thorough washing it was still there, mixed in with the floral scent of the soap, and the cocoanut fragranced shampoo. She tried not to smile as she moved back into the room, stopping when she spied a pair of track pants and a long sleeved shirt resting over the footboard. She walked over to the bed, picking the garments up in her hands. Gage's clothes. He must have ventured in while she was in the shower. Her breath hitched. Had he watched her through the steamy glass? Licked his lips as she washed her breasts, and ran the soap between her legs? Had he remembered touching her there? Taking her until she'd passed out in his arms?

She growled, willing her body to calm, as she pulled the pants over her hips, and slipped on his shirt. It was even larger than the sweater she'd worn yesterday, but somehow it felt better. She drew a deep breath, drinking in the faint scent of his cologne. It reminded her of fire and heat, spicy, yet so damn mesmerising it took most of her resolve to slip on some socks and head for the kitchen. She could hear Gage and Sam talking, their voices hushed in the early morning stillness. She'd planned on just walking straight in, but stopped when she heard her name.

"Are you sure Brooklyn's going to be up to this?" asked Sam. "She seemed pretty close to the edge last night, not that I blame her."

"I'm not sure of anything anymore. But I don't see as we have much of a choice. This Drake creep isn't going to stop because we nearly caught him. Next time, he won't leave

anyone alive to come after him." Gage sighed. "She's all but hysterical. I keep waiting for her to slip into a catatonic coma on me."

Sam muttered something under his breath before he answered. "Whatever you think is best."

Brooklyn huffed, placed her hands on her hips and slipped into the kitchen, her feet silent across the cold, tiled floor. She moved up behind Sam, steeling her expression as she met Gage's head-on. "Don't you think you should be asking me what's best, Sam? Or doesn't my opinion count anymore?"

Sam jumped at the sound of her voice, spinning quickly in the chair. "Sweet Jesus! You're lucky I didn't draw my gun and fire, I'm so wired right now!"

Brooklyn gave him a stunning smile. "I know you better than that. You never draw your gun unless you intend to shoot."

"That's what I'm afraid of," he warned, easing up out of the chair. He held it out for her, but she crossed her arms beneath her breasts and stared at him instead.

"I resent you two talking about me as if I've fallen off the deep end," she scolded.

"That's not what we said," countered Gage, still watching her from beneath his dark lashes. But he looked more aroused than annoyed.

"No, but it's what you were implying."

She watched Sam and Gage exchange an exasperated roll of the eyes. Damn, what was it about these men that immediately put her on the defensive? She was more than aware they'd single-handedly saved her ass yesterday, and yet, she felt the need to exert her independence whenever they were around. Or was it just Gage she was edgy about? He looked different today, but hadn't made any indication their night of passion had changed anything between them.

Brooklyn sighed, and ran her fingers through her wet hair. "I don't suppose you have something other than coffee?" she asked, attempting to diffuse some of the tension.

"It just so happens I have a canister full of your brand of tea," said Sam. He took a step towards the counter, but stopped when Gage rose from his chair first. Sam nodded, once again holding the chair out to her. "Sue made some muffins, if you're interested."

Brooklyn laughed, settling into the seat. "Gee Sam...canisters on the counter, homemade muffins. You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were starting to

settle down in your old age." She grinned at Sam's guarded expression, folding her hands on the table. "So how long has Sue been living here?"

Sam glanced over at Gage, raising his eyebrows slightly before sitting down next to her. "Just over a month."

Brooklyn nodded. Evidently Gage was aware of the change in their relationship. Something he'd neglected to tell her. But then, she hadn't spoken to him in so long, it didn't surprise her.

"She's better than you deserve, you know that, right?" she said, grinning when Sam flashed her a wicked smile. "I'm happy for you. I hope it all works out."

Sam opened his mouth, but closed it, as the tension in the room seemed to escalate. Instead, he simply nodded, gulping down another swig of coffee. Brooklyn resisted the temptation to glance over at Gage. She didn't want to see his reaction.

"Does your cheek hurt?" asked Gage.

Brooklyn raised her eyes to his, before skirting a gaze at Sam. "Not as much as my pride."

"This isn't the time to worry about your pride," said Sam. "Besides, the bastard had us all fooled."

*Right. Everyone, but Gage.*

She sighed at the thought, wishing she had the tea to stare at instead of Gage's body. He'd turned back towards the counter, and she couldn't help but watch the play of his muscles as he prepared her drink. His movements were smooth and fluid, and just seeing the way his back rippled from the activity sent her heart racing. She'd felt those same muscles flex and bunch as he'd pummelled into her, filling her until she'd felt ready to burst. She smiled at the memory, hoping the heat fusing her face wasn't as obvious as it felt.

"So, are you guys going to tell me the plan, or do I have to call the psychic hotline and talk to Yolanda?"

Sam laughed, moving back as Gage reached across the table and set the mug beside her hands. Then he handed her a plate with two muffins.

"You'll eat both of those if you know what's best for you," said Gage, returning to his chair.

Brooklyn held back the sarcastic reply poised on her tongue and merely smiled her thanks. "Well?" she repeated around a mouthful of food.

Gage watched her eat, his eyes still brooding. "There's not much to tell. We're simply going to take a short vacation."

"Vacation?" she questioned. "Where to?"

"Reno."

Brooklyn nearly choked on the piece of muffin she'd just stuffed in her mouth and stared at him wide-eyed. "Reno? But why?"

Gage shrugged, his expression still calm. "I hear it's nice this time of year."

"Since when are you into snow and casinos?"

"Just think of it as research for a future book."

"I didn't realise you were so concerned about my career all of a sudden."

He averted his eyes before staring at her again. It'd been over a year since he'd taken any interest in her manuscripts, or attended one of her signings, and she knew her comment had hit too close to home. She looked down at the tea, watching a small bubble float around the mug.

"I guess it's a safe move. I can't see Drake following me to Oregon, let alone Nevada."

"On the contrary," said Gage. "I'm counting on his devotion."

"But why would you want..." She stopped, mulling over his words in her head. "Jurisdiction," she finally whispered.

Gage smiled. "We need him to cross the state line to justify our involvement. After that, any attempt on your life is federal business."

Brooklyn nodded. She should've guessed Gage and Sam would find a way around the legal issues. She fingered the mug, wondering how the hell her life had fallen apart so easily. "So why did you choose Reno?" she asked, still staring into the mug. "Isn't it enough just to go to Portland?"

"I want this guy to make his intentions crystal clear. Following you over more than one state line will confirm his obsession. Besides, we've already got a contact in Reno."

"Who?"

"Nick O'Brian's brother. The good doctor was kind enough to contact him and he's more than willing to come on board. If the man's anything like Nick, he'll be an asset."



"When do we leave?"

"We've already obtained the necessary clearance, and Sue's packing some things now," said Sam. "We were supposed to be heading off to Hawaii in a few days, but Reno's just as good. Having her along will make it look less like we're trying to hide you away." He stood up and pushed in his chair. "I'll go see if Sue's ready. Then we can hit the highway." Sam took a few steps away before Brooklyn found her voice.

"I'm sorry, Sam."

He stopped and moved in behind her, kneeling down until his breath caressed the back of her neck. "Sorry for what?"

"For dragging you into this nightmare. You shouldn't have to rearrange your life just to help me out."

Sam sighed, stirring the hairs on her nape. "You know I love you like a sister. There's nothing I wouldn't do to help you." He leant forward and kissed her cheek. "Nice love bite," he teased, brushing his fingers across a red blotch on the back of her neck. "Curious how Gage has a matching one on his shoulder."

Brooklyn swatted at his hand, but he'd already made for the door. "That man's dangerous," she teased, sipping more of her tea.

"No more than you," said Gage.

Brooklyn looked over at him, instantly pinned by the erotic gleam in his eyes. He looked like he had last night when he'd decided to take control. Her stomach fluttered, releasing a wave of heat that infused her body. Damn, she responded too easily to him. One look and she could feel her body preparing to take him inside. She shifted her legs, hoping the slight rubbing would ease the sudden ache between her legs. "I didn't thank you for the clothes," she offered, tugging at one sleeve. "I wasn't too fond of Sue's sweater."

"They're even bigger on you," he noted, his gaze still intense. "But I know how much you hate having people fuss over you."

She nodded and glanced at his clothes. He was wearing the same faded jeans, but with a dark blue fleece sweater, the same shade as his eyes. She could see the strength of his chest and arms bunching beneath the fabric, and it took more concentration than she would have thought to keep talking. "I see you managed to change."

Gage smiled at her comment, reading her question without missing a beat. "I always keep a bag in the truck, even before we separated. I haven't been staying at Sam's."

*Separated.*

His other words were lost, jumbled in with the voices in her head. He'd admitted they were separated. She'd never heard him refer to it in those terms before. She lowered her gaze, not wanting him to see the slight quiver in her chin.

"I don't suppose we can stop by the house? Grab some of my stuff before we leave?"

Gage took a long, deep breath. "I'd rather not. As much as we want Drake to follow us, I'd prefer it to be on our terms."

"You still think he knows where I live?"

"Darling. I'm certain he knows more about you than I do."

*That wouldn't be too hard,* she thought. Especially since she'd barely seen him over the last several months.

Gage stood up and walked over to her chair. "We'll be in Reno by tomorrow night. Once we get there, you can buy out a store if you'd like. Just try to make do 'til then."

Brooklyn looked up at him. "Tomorrow night? I've only got one set of underwear. If I wait that long, I'll be going commando until I can wash it."

Gage's eyes darkened. He gave her body a long, slow sweep, causing her to shift in her seat again. "Guess that's a chance we'll have to take," he said. "I've got a few calls to make. Finish eating and we'll head out."

Brooklyn waited until Gage was at the door before calling out to him. "You never asked if I was willing to go."

"No. I didn't."

### **Oregon State - March 22<sup>nd</sup> - 9:00 pm**

Brooklyn trailed into the motel behind Sam, her restlessness marked in the shuffle of her feet. She'd spent most of the day trapped in the back seat of Sam's Forester, listening to what seemed like the same four songs over and over. She'd tried distracting herself with the passing scenery, but the heavy clouds and sporadic showers had reduced the countryside to

dense pockets of grey mist. Even talking with Sue hadn't been enough to take her mind off of Drake. Or Gage.

He'd sat like a statue in the front passenger seat, nodding his head and offering pointed answers to Sam's questions. The few times their eyes had met in the visor mirror, he'd stared at her with a hooded gaze. He was angry, but at what, she didn't know.

*Everything*, she supposed. Their marriage, the mind-blowing sex, the increasing patch of purple on her cheek. It was as if the bruise was Drake's claim over her, and she knew the mere sight of it irritated the hell out of Gage.

"Nothing like stepping back into the seventies," said Sam, glancing around the room.

Brooklyn followed his gaze. The floors were a mixture of brown tiles and burgundy shag carpet. There was a small, cloth couch along one wall and a single, velvet chair in the corner. "At least it doesn't smell," she said, easing into a vinyl chair angled beside a square table.

"We came here because it's secluded," said Gage. "And so damn ugly it's the last place anyone would look." He ran his fingers along the cloth, shaking them out as if wanting to shed the feel the place gave him. "We'll only be here for a night. I'm sure we'll survive."

"Speak for yourself, Gage," teased Sue, wrinkling her nose. She turned to Brooklyn. "Not quite the standards you get when you do book tours, I bet."

Brooklyn shrugged, wrapping her arms around her waist. The room made her uncomfortable, but not because of its décor. "You'd be surprised at some of the places I've stayed. This isn't so bad."

"Always the diplomat," said Sue. She turned to Sam. "So where's our room?"

Sam pointed to a small door centred on the wall. "Your palace awaits you through there."

"You're not staying in here?" asked Brooklyn. She'd assumed they'd all be holed up together, hopefully meaning Gage would have to sleep with her.

"This room comes as a set," said Gage. "It's got a small bedroom at the far end and a separate suite next door. I'm not taking any chances on what might end up on the other side of that wall."

Brooklyn cursed under her breath. What if Gage insisted on sleeping apart? What if she had to face her demons alone? She choked back the whimper stirring in her chest as she stood up and paced across the floor.

Gage turned to Sam. "I'll keep this side locked, but I want you to leave yours open."

"Just make sure you knock before you barge in," said Sam, moving towards the door.

"Don't tempt me," joked Gage, turning to face her.

Brooklyn watched as he skimmed his gaze over her. He looked unsure of himself, as if he couldn't decide on his next move. Her heart rose to her throat. She didn't know if she could walk into the other bedroom alone. Not without thinking about Drake. Despite the air of confidence she tried to shield around her, she was terrified of him, and his promises.

Gage furrowed his brow, his expression still hesitant. "You can take the bedroom. I'll stay out here on the couch."

His words hit her in the stomach, nearly doubling her over. Oh God, he wanted her to stay alone. Sleep in the darkness wondering if she'd wake up to find Drake standing over her. A rush of panic swelled inside her, as a cold sweat dampened her skin. She forced herself to swallow, wondering if Gage could see how hard she'd clenched her fingers at her side, as she fought for something to say.

"I appreciate your gallantry. But...uh...why don't you take the bedroom? That way I can watch some t-t-television after you've gone to sleep without waking you."

She wanted to cringe at the shakiness of her voice. How she'd paused in the wrong places, stuttered to find the right word. God, she might as well have come out and admitted she was terrified to sleep alone.

Gage's furrow deepened, and his eyes narrowed. He wasn't buying her story. "You look exhausted. Television is the last thing you need right now. Besides, there's only one window in the bedroom. This area has too many entry points to secure. You're safer in the other room."

Brooklyn chewed on her bottom lip. She should've known he'd have a rebuttal. She looked back at the handle. Its tarnished finish wavered in the yellow light, so much like the others she felt the world start to spin. She closed her eyes, resorting to the only weapon left in her arsenal – the truth.

"All right," she whispered, hating each word as it slipped from her lips. "If you want me to admit I'm nervous about staying in the room alone..." She took a deep breath. "I'll admit it." She raised her face until she was staring into his eyes. Damn, they were so calm and confident she wanted to run into his arms. Instead, she held her ground, thrusting her chin out with as much dignity as she could muster. "Couldn't we just share the bed? Just sleep?"

Gage ran his fingers through his hair. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Please." She took a step closer. "We'll only sleep."

Gage huffed, and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Let's at least be honest with ourselves. We both know damn well what will happen if we get within ten feet of that bed together. I think last night proved that. The last thing we need is to complicate the situation further."

"What do you mean, complicate it further? I was under the impression we'd made everything pretty clear."

Gage broke her gaze, stuffing his hands in his pockets. When he looked back into her eyes, she felt a cold shiver curdle her blood. Regret shadowed his face as he set his jaw, and spoke through set teeth. "You're confused, and scared. Don't mistake those feelings for something they're not." He tried to soften his expression, but she saw a flicker of pain glitter in his eyes. "We need to deal with this Drake situation first, before we hop back into bed like a couple of rabid bunnies."

"I'm not asking you to have sex with me," she bit out. "I said, we'll only sleep."

"You also said you wouldn't ask again," he snapped, closing the distance between them. "I gave you what you wanted last night. Let's leave it at that until this madness is over."

He reached out to touch her, but she backed away. She felt her heart drop out of her throat, and shatter on the floor. He hadn't loved her last night. It'd been a submission on his part—a pity fuck to keep her under his control. The door pressed against her back, and darkness clawed at the edges of vision. She could see Sam and Sue over Gage's shoulder still standing beside the adjoining door. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Brooklyn reached behind her, twisting the handle until the door opened against her weight. She backed into the room, hoping her legs wouldn't buckle before she could seal the world away.

Gage lowered his hand, a desolate expression on his face. He took a deep breath. "Brooklyn..."

"I'll take the room," she heard herself say, her voice so distant it sounded like it'd come from far away. She backed in further.

"Brooklyn?" Sue's voice was timid as she walked halfway across the floor. "Sam and I are going to grab some food at that truck stop next door. Why don't you join us?"

An answer. The woman was waiting for an answer, but nothing seemed to come to mind. Her head felt fuzzy, her tongue thick, and there was a strange ringing in her ears. She pruned her gaze off the floor, and did her best to hold Sue's stare.

"I think I'll just go to bed. I'm pretty tired." She grabbed the edge of the door and slowly drew it across in front of her.

"You should eat," said Gage.

She didn't look at him, but continued to close the gap. "Goodnight."

Gage listened to the door click shut, the soft sound loud in the hush of the room. She'd looked more than upset, and a new wave of guilt washed over him. He backed away, keeping his eyes fixed on the door, half expecting her to open it up and confront him again. He heard Sam shuffle his feet behind him. "Don't start with me."

Sam snorted. "Wasn't planning on doing anything of the sort. I'm done trying to convince you of what an ass you're being. As far as I see it, you're free to screw up your life as you see fit."

Gage spun around, holding Sam's heated stare. "Ass? At least that's one step up from being a bastard by taking advantage of her." He took a step towards the couple. "She's not thinking clearly. What do you think she'll feel inside when all of this is over and she realises I used the situation to fuck her like she was my own personal sex toy?"

"She wasn't asking you to *fuck* her."

Gage winced at the way his friend said, fuck. He'd never heard Sam use that tone before. "Damn it. You're just as disillusioned as she is! I know you heard us last night. Don't

pretend you believe for one moment that wouldn't happen again if I go anywhere near that room." He stopped and jerked his coat off his shoulders, tossing it across the back of the couch. "I promised myself I'd never hurt her again, and having sex with her right now is doing just that."

Sam walked forward, and took Sue's hand, leading her to the small door. He looked back at Gage as he escorted her through. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe it was *love* you were making, and not just sex?"

Gage stared at the empty space as the door closed behind Sam, his mind replaying the man's words. He hadn't considered Brooklyn's feelings could be genuine. Not with the stress she was under. And he knew he'd never be able to just hold her without wanting more. His control was too shaky, his need too great. The last thing he wanted was for her to never forgive him.

*As if you've forgiven yourself.*

He sighed at the thought, sinking into the couch. It was lumpy, and gave too much under his weight. The voice was right. He still hadn't come to terms with that night, especially after the way she'd trembled beneath his touch when he'd flipped her over on her stomach. And he had a hard time convincing himself her reaction was anything other than fear.

"Damn." He stared at her closed door. Didn't she realise they needed to talk things out first? Reconcile their feelings, his betrayal? He closed his eyes, feeling fatigue steal over him. He'd let her rest for a while. Then maybe he'd talk to her.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Midnight

Brooklyn sat on the bed trying to pick up the pieces of her shattered soul. It was over. While the realisation didn't sit well with her, she finally accepted it for what it was. She couldn't make Gage love her anymore than she could convince Drake she wasn't Sarah. The sooner she pulled herself together, the better. She'd lived through adversity before, and she'd make it again.

She forced in a large breath, clenching her teeth to maintain her resolve. She was done following Gage around like a desperate puppy. As though she was unable to take care of herself. And the idea Drake would spend the rest of his life trying to hunt her down halfway across the country seemed surreal. It was time she took control. She glanced at the window. It was small, but large enough to squeeze through. She knew she'd be able to hitch a ride at the truck stop. There'd been more than a dozen eighteen wheelers parked out front. Surely one of them would be headed east.

Colorado. Her grandparent's cabin.

She hadn't been back since they'd died the summer before she moved to Seattle, but she knew the place was still there. She'd sold it to a friend of the family, and they'd promised her she'd always be welcome. She sighed, hoping the invitation didn't have a statute of limitations on it. While she knew it was a gamble, it was the only place even Gage didn't know about. Besides, it would only act as a stepping-stone—a place to regroup before she ventured somewhere else.

Brooklyn shook the uncertainty away. She'd solve the problems as she crossed them. All she knew was she needed to escape. Get as far away from Gage and her broken heart as possible. She opened her purse and took out a small note pad, brushing over the thick envelope she'd stuffed in the other day. Her stomach fluttered at the sight of it as she slowly pulled it out. She thumbed the edge, glancing back at the door. If nothing else, she owed Gage his freedom.



She tugged at the flap and removed the stapled sheets. The paper was crisp, and the whiteness seemed to glow in the pale light of the room. Her heart cried in protest as she steadied her hand, signing each line in turn. A single tear blotted her final signature, releasing Gage from their vows.

Freedom, or was it just another type of prison?

A soft sigh escaped her lips as she placed the package on the small night table. Then she pulled out the velvet pouch from her purse and set it on top. The ring had belonged to Gage's grandmother, and she couldn't find it in her heart to keep it. Maybe he could give it to Peter.

*Aren't you going to leave him a note?*

Should she? What would she say? Her hands trembled as she opened the notepad and scribbled some words across the page. She placed it beneath the pouch, wishing her hands would stop shaking, before stuffing the pillows under the blankets. At least in the darkness it would look like she was sleeping. It was juvenile, but it might buy her a bit of time.

"Damn that's tight," she growled, wedging her body through the narrow gap, dropping silently to the ground. The pavement was wet, with dark puddles laced across the path. She followed the thin walkway around the back of the motel, pausing at the corner. The diner was off to her right, a short jog through the rain. She straightened her shoulders, steeling her resolve, as she dashed across the lot and through the door.

### **3:00 am**

Gage sat in the darkness, staring at Brooklyn's closed door. There hadn't been a sound from inside the room since she'd shut him out hours ago, and he hadn't been able to bring himself to open it. He sighed, running his fingers through his hair as the clock ticked in the background. He'd heard Sam return from dinner, Sue's sultry laughter proof they were making the best of the situation. Their room had grown silent shortly after midnight, and Gage had spent the rest of the time thinking.

*Sulking.*

He cursed the thought, staring at the empty space on his finger. He didn't want to feel this way, or have Brooklyn so distant from him, but he didn't know how to bridge the gap. It

was obvious his previous assumption was right. If he went anywhere near her bed he'd end up making love to her most of the night.

*I thought it was just sex?*

Not to him. But he couldn't convince himself Brooklyn's feelings were justified. There was just too much uncertainty in her life. They'd jumped back into bed way too fast. He should've had the courage to confront her in the hospital. Discuss what had happened. Admitted he'd been wrong and promised never to doubt her again. But instead he'd rammed his cock inside her for hours on end, fulfilling his primal needs instead of her emotional ones.

He slammed his fists on the couch, fighting the need to scream out his frustrations. Damn it, they'd been married for ten years. Surely he had the guts to just walk into her room and clear the air? He looked down at his hands, amazed at how they trembled. He'd spent fifteen years on the force. Faced more dangerous situations than he cared to count. Yet, the prospect of talking to his wife scared him more than anything he'd faced in the line of duty.

He huffed, realising it was the outcome he feared. What if she didn't want to work it out? What if she couldn't forgive him? He shook the thoughts away. Peter had claimed she believed he deserved a second chance. That had to mean something.

Gage stood up, crossing the short gap in three long strides. He fisted the handle, ignoring the way his heart pounded in his chest, and turned the knob, easing the door open. The room was dark and quiet, the air humid and thick. He squinted at the bed, skimming over the motionless silhouette shifted to one side. A knot formed in his stomach, and a lump lodged in his throat. A nervous sweat greased his palms, and he wiped them across his pants as he slipped a step further inside the room.

"Brooklyn?" He waited, listening for her reply. "We need to talk."

He cringed at the silence, wondering what was sifting through her mind. She'd always been a light sleeper, so he knew she was awake. He grunted. Nothing was going to stop him this time.

"Okay. I suppose I deserve the silent treatment. But if you think that's going to stop me from saying what should've been said months ago, then you're wrong. The truth is, I've been wrong. About everything." He sighed, leaning against a wooden chair. He wasn't certain his legs would take the strain, and welcomed the small measure of support. "I'm sorry. I know I should've told you months ago, but I never seemed to find the right words. How do you

justify hurting the one person who means the world to you? I couldn't. Then it was just easier to avoid the issues than deal with them." He took another deep breath. "To avoid you."

He kicked the chair back and sank into it, ignoring the creak that echoed in the room. He didn't know what else to say. He glanced over at her outline on the bed. God he wanted to go to her. Hold her in his arms, feel her breath warm against his skin. Ease her fears, and fuel her desires. He'd undress her slowly. Show her there was nothing more important than her pleasure, her love. Once he had her naked, he'd touch her gently, careful not to mar the smooth perfection of her skin. It'd be soft and warm, like the sun kissed petals of a rose. He'd explore every inch, kissing and touching, worshipping her like she deserved. She had several erogenous zones, all of which brought soft whimpers from her lips. He'd start at her neck, paying special attention to the soft hollow of her shoulder. She loved when he nibbled her there. He'd linger, lave the area fully before moving down to just below her armpit, where the curve of her breast blended into her ribs.

He moaned just thinking about kissing her there, knowing it'd only build their desire. She'd start to beg him then. Use her sultry voice to sway him to her needs. But it wouldn't work. He'd kiss her lips once then venture farther down, tracing her hips with his tongue. She'd squirm at his touch, as his fingers skimmed down her leg to caress the soft spot behind her knee. That usually had her arching off the bed, her hips thrust against his thigh in desperation. He'd be able to feel the liquid proof of her arousal. Smell the scent mixed in with the bouquet of perfume. But he wouldn't touch her silky inner lips just yet. First he'd tease the groove of her inner thighs, draw his fingers gently along the edge of her sex. She'd try to shift, but he'd follow her movements, prolonging the pleasure until he could feel her juices soaking her skin, spilling down her thighs and up the cleft of her ass.

He couldn't wait to touch her tight pucker. Spread her moisture around the tiny opening until he could ease a single finger inside. She'd enjoyed his explorations before, and he'd ensure any memory was replaced by something hotter, more passionate. He wouldn't try to take her anally, not until they'd discussed every detail of that night. Until he was assured he wouldn't scare or hurt her. But the thought of fingering her ass as he came inside her brought his cock to instant attention.

Gage cursed under his breath, trying to push the images away. Nothing was going to happen if Brooklyn didn't talk to him. He stood back up, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He wanted to grab her, and knew he wouldn't be able to restrain himself if he didn't keep his hands away from her. "Come on, darling. I know you're royally pissed at me, and I deserve any form of retaliation you have in mind. But don't just lie there, ignoring me. Please. Talk to me."

He waited, a cold shiver burning up his spine, as he stood listening to the sound of his heart throbbing in his ear. He bit back a snarl, willing her to answer him, when a cold breeze whispered over his neck. He turned towards the window, pulling the drapes apart.

"Oh, God." Gage felt his heart stop, his stomach drop, as he stared at the opening. The screen had been cut away and the window pushed back as far as possible. He stood frozen for two seconds before flicking on the light and twisting towards the bed.

Pillows.

He felt Sam's name form on his tongue when he saw the offering on the nightstand. He moved over to the table, his feet dragging across the floor, as he picked up the small, velvet pouch in his fingers. It felt heavy in his hand and he let it fall on the bed as he reached for the hand-written note.

*Dear Gage*

*I'm sorry, but I can't stay. Please try to understand. All I've ever wanted was your happiness, and it's obvious I can't give you that anymore. I hope someday you'll find someone who can. You deserve that much, and more.*

*Thanks for being there these past two weeks. I'll never forget what you did for me. And don't worry. I know how to disappear.*

*Love always,*

*Brooklyn*

He stared at the words, his chest tight, his hands clenched around the edges. Tiny black dots flickered across his vision, before he closed his eyes in desperation.

She'd left. Shimmied out the window and into the darkness.

All because of him.

He looked back at the table, grabbing the envelope still wedged against the lamp. He thumbed open the flap and pulled out the stack of papers, feeling a part of him die when he realised what she'd done. He cursed, snatched the note and pouch off the bed, and headed for the door.

\* \* \* \*

He was a bastard. No, a coward. No, worse than that. What was worse? It didn't matter. He didn't need to find something worse, he just needed to add the same prefix – fucking.

Gage slumped against the window of Sam's Forester, hearing the road pass as an endless drone in his head. Every mile sounded the same, a dull, flat noise that was slowly driving him crazy. He didn't have time to drive across the damn country, not with Brooklyn roaming about, completely oblivious to the bastard who was probably tracking her right now. He'd wanted to return to Seattle, by plane, but Sam had convinced him continuing to Reno was for the best. They were only several hours away, and Douglas O'Brian was already waiting for them. Based on the information they'd received on the man, he was first rate.

Gage looked out the window. There was still a scattering of snow across the landscape, gradually thickening towards the mountains. But with the exception of the sporadic pockets of evergreen trees poking out from beneath the veil of white, the place looked barren.

*Just like your heart, buddy.*

He snarled and checked his watch. Another hour before they'd arrive at the Reno branch, and they could finally start searching for Brooklyn. The diner had been a bust. Both waitresses had seen Brooklyn come in. She'd ordered a pop and had simply sat on one of the counter stools for about thirty minutes. The next time either of them had looked her way, she'd disappeared, leaving only a five-dollar bill in her place. The women had given them the names of all the regulars who could've given her a ride, but tracking down a bunch of truckers was going to take time.

Time he didn't have.

Gage resisted the urge to yell, resting his head in his hands. He was angry, tired, and so damn scared he couldn't even think straight. While he had no doubts he'd eventually be able to find her, he wasn't convinced it'd be in time. Drake wasn't about to let up, and if the

bastard discovered Brooklyn was alone, Gage knew nothing would stop the man from claiming her.

A low growl resonated from his chest before he realised he'd made a sound. He saw Sam glance back at him in the rear-view, a deep furrow etched between his brows.

"Everything okay?" asked Sam.

Gage met his stare, fighting to keep his expression calm. "Fine."

Sam sighed. "We'll find her. She has to be heading somewhere specific. I can't see Brooklyn merely wandering around the country...not when she knows we'll come after her."

"I think she's hoping we won't follow her. But then she probably doesn't think Drake will either." Gage looked back out the window, running his fingers through his hair. God, what he wouldn't give for a hot shower and a cup of coffee. His cock throbbed at the thought, as memories of the shower in the hospital flitted through his mind. Only now he remembered too vividly exactly how good Brooklyn's body had felt next to his. How tight her nipples got when he ran his tongue across them, sipping them into his mouth. He'd stopped to watch her in the shower at Sam's house, her body dimmed by the billowing steam. It'd taken a year's worth of control not to yank the door open and join her, help her rub the soap into every tiny crevice on her body, then use his cock to clean her pussy from the inside out.

He groaned, trying to stem off another hard-on. He needed the blood in his other head, where it might actually be put to good use, trying to figure out where in the hell she'd gone. Sam was right. It wasn't like her to make a move without having the first step figured out. She'd be headed to a specific location—a place she felt safe. But be damned if he knew where.

"Any ideas on where she might be headed?" asked Sam.

"Any place that comes to mind is too obvious. She'll head somewhere she doesn't think I know about."

Sam frowned, glancing in the rear-view again. "Are you sure she'll be so selective? Maybe she'll just head somewhere comfortable. A friend's house, or family."

"The only friends she has are back in Seattle, and her family's dead." Gage sighed breaking Sam's gaze. "And I already told you. This about me, not Drake. She'll go somewhere she thinks I can't find her. Period."

Sam nodded, focusing back on the road. Gage knew the look on his friend's face, but Sam hadn't let the words, 'I told you so,' slip yet. Gage cursed, watching the endless cliffs of rock pass in the distance. Brooklyn was smart. She'd know the ways he'd be able to track her—bank account, credit cards, cell phone—and she'd avoid using them. But that left a disturbing fact. She'd be without money. He'd already checked their account. She hadn't taken any money out since she'd left. They'd put a trace on all her cards, but she hadn't tried to use them yet.

He sighed, suddenly realising how little she'd done to remove him from her life. Even during their separation, she'd never tried to split their accounts. Both their monies had been deposited and spent as usual. In fact, all their joint ventures were still intact.

*Shit!*

Why hadn't he noticed it before? Brooklyn had given him clear signs she still wanted to try, but he'd ignored them. Chosen to hide behind his job and his sense of honour, when really, he'd just been too ashamed to admit his mistake. He could still see the look in her eyes last night when she'd practically begged him to stay with her. She'd been scared, and he'd brushed her off because he couldn't keep his cock from taking over.

*I'm sorry. So sorry, darling.*

He'd find her and tell her that. Convince her to give him another chance. Then he'd tell her to hide for risking her life. Either way, she wasn't going to erase him from her life before he said everything that needed to be said. Before he proved how much he still wanted—needed—to be with her. Before he told her he loved her.

### **March 24<sup>th</sup>**

Brooklyn moved along the edge of the woods, staring at the cabin off to her right. It was small, only two bedrooms and a large loft, but just the sight of it ignited a warm feeling in the pit of her stomach. She'd spent nearly a decade of her life inside the place, learning what life was really about. After the accident, she'd moved out here to stay with her grandparents. She'd only met them twice before that, both times before she was six. It seemed her parents had disagreed over something, and allowed the relationship to slide. But they'd come to the rescue, when no one else would, and she'd always loved them for that.

Brooklyn glanced at the windows. Though there were three lights on in the house, and several more outside, it was obvious the house was empty. She'd watched them all blink on at the same time, and hadn't seen anyone moving around inside. The snow in the driveway was untouched and there was a stack of papers by the front door.

She sighed, heading for the back. Sylvia always left a key under the rose pot on the back deck, or so the woman had told her on several occasions. Brooklyn had never imagined she'd ever need to use the knowledge, but as she slipped her fingers beneath the cold terra cotta, and brushed over the small, ridged metal, she felt relief flow through her.

*Thank God.*

She'd spent most of the trip worrying if her journey would end in a closed door. She'd managed to catch a ride from the diner within the first thirty minutes. She'd sat at the counter, silently sipping her drink, listening to the conversations happening around her. Two men, four stools over, were headed for Vegas. A direction she definitely didn't want to go. Another down the end was off to Houston. Three more were going somewhere in California. She'd cursed, wondering how long it'd be before Gage noticed she was gone, when a man behind her told a fellow trucker he was headed for Denver. It'd taken every ounce of control she'd had left not to fall at the man's feet and beg him for a ride. Instead, she'd waited until the guy left and had followed him out to his truck. He'd hesitated at first, waving his hands in the air as if to shake her request away. But then he'd spotted the bruise on her face, and his eyes had narrowed into two dark slits. He'd pulled his lips tight and had asked if the mark on her face was the reason she wanted a ride. Brooklyn had looked away, allowing a few stray tears to track down her cheeks as she'd softly replied, yes. He'd cursed and ushered her aboard, mumbling something about the prick who'd obviously hit her.

It'd taken the better part of two days to get to Colorado, then another ride to take her north to White Falls. But she'd made it, unscathed, and now stood perched on the threshold of salvation. She grabbed the key, opened the screen door and slid it inside the lock, silently praying as she twisted it within the hole. She couldn't help but smile when the soft click of the lock penetrated the silence, and the door gave way beneath her grasp.

Brooklyn walked inside, locking the door behind her as she surveyed the house. She'd entered through the kitchen, a small U-shaped area that opened into the main living space. There was a washroom, two bedrooms and a utility room down the corridor off to her left,



and a loft area above the living room accessed by a set of stairs on the far wall. All the floors were wood, softened only by a large area rug beneath the leather couch across from the fireplace. She glanced at the mantle, sighing at the dark space. She would've loved to have started a fire, but the smoke would attract the neighbours, and the last thing she needed was the Sheriff paying her a visit.

She ignored the other rooms and headed straight for the loft. She'd claimed that space the day her grandparents had walked her through the door. They'd seemed puzzled by her decision, but had graciously moved her bed into the small space. It'd been her only sanctuary as a teen, and as she crested the top step, she realised it'd play that role again. An unlikely haven in a harsh world. She remembered the days she'd spent crying on her bed, mourning the loss of the only people she'd ever loved, and it seemed fitting she'd cry there again. Purge the grief from losing Gage on the same bed.

"Gage."

His name came as a soft whisper, no more than a flutter of air across her lips. She'd spent so much time dreaming about finding the love of her life in this room, the sudden realisation she'd let that love slip away rocked her to the core. She stumbled over to the bed and threw herself down, giving in to the sadness she'd tried hard to suppress. She'd allow herself one more moment of weakness before putting her life behind her. Surely the pain would fade with time, just as Gage's love had faded. She closed her eyes and let the tears pull her into the darkness.

## Chapter Seventeen

**March 26<sup>th</sup> - Reno – 6:00 pm**

“We’ve been over this for the last three days,” said Gage, tossing a file down across Special Agent Douglas O’Brian’s desk. “What makes you think we’ll find anything different this time?”

Doug looked over the rim of his mug at Gage, his dark eyes blurred by the steam rising off the coffee. “You know Brooklyn better than anyone else here. That’s all the information we’ve been able to dig up on her. All her phone records, credit card statements, medical information. There has to be something in there we’re overlooking. A clue to where she’s hiding.”

Gage sighed, dropping into the hard leather seat beside the desk. It was already dark, the shadows marking another lost day in Brooklyn’s life. He hadn’t thought it’d take him this long to figure out where she’d gone, but everything he’d tried had turned up empty. “I’ve gone over the damn stuff a hundred times. We’ve checked out her friends, and all the associations she’s made through publishing. Hell, we even found her roommate from college living in Pennsylvania. No one’s heard from her, let alone seen her. Even Emma swears Brooklyn hasn’t been in touch with her.”

“Can we trust her to be honest with us?” asked Doug. “No offence, but it’s obvious her loyalties are to Brooklyn.”

“Emma’s idea of loyalty changed when I described...in detail...what the bastard did to her in the bookstore.” Gage grunted and ran his fingers through his hair, ignoring the urge to pull some of it out. “She assured me she’d contact us if Brooklyn so much as emailed her.”

Doug nodded, taking another slow sip of his coffee. “Well, she’s bound to give herself away sooner or later. She can’t go much longer on the cash she had in her purse.”

Gage looked away. The thought of Brooklyn living on the street, doing God knows what just to make some cash, boiled his blood. And she would. Her damn stubborn streak would kick in and she’d do whatever was necessary to stay gone.

He looked down at his hands, cursing at the sight of them shaking. Damn, he needed to hold her. Wrap his arms around her, feel the warmth of her skin against his. He'd kiss every inch of her this time. Touch every hollow and curve on her body before he'd believe she was okay. Then he'd spend half the night tasting her. Licking her skin, as he travelled down her body to the hot centre of her core. He could almost taste the sweet musk of her juices, so potent his head would be spinning before she came in his mouth. But he wouldn't stop at just one orgasm. He'd tease her for hours until she'd come so many times she wouldn't have the strength to raise her head. Then he'd slide into her. Hold her close as he moved slow and easy within her. No rushing this time. No hard, fast hammering until he'd shown her he still remembered how to make love.

"But time is one thing we don't have," continued Doug. "From what you've described about this Drake character, he's bound to be searching for her as hard as we are."

Gage sighed, trying to keep up with the conversation, but all he could do was think about all the things he wanted to do to Brooklyn. When those fantasies ebbed, he'd get flashes of all the terrors she'd face if Drake got to her first. That's assuming the trucker who'd given her a ride didn't try to rape or kill her.

"Shit," he breathed, standing back up in one, strong, sudden motion. He marched over to the window and stared out at the city. To most, the snow-capped mountains landscaped behind the shimmering skyline would be considered stunning, but it only made him feel cold. "We can only hope he's having as much trouble as we are."

Gage heard Doug sigh and swivel in his chair, the sharp squeak of metal grating in his head. There was a brief pause before he felt the man's hand on his shoulder. "Why don't you look at it one more time while I go and see how the search on our mystery man is going. I had the team change the search parameters. Something about the guy's method seems familiar to me, but I can't seem to place it." Doug moved towards the door. "I'll check back in a bit."

The man bridged the doorway just as Sam stepped through. Sam hadn't talked much since their arrival, spending any free time alone with Sue.

"Any news?" asked Sam, ambling over to Doug's desk. Sam picked up the file and flipped through it, keeping his back to him.

Gage stuffed his hands in his pockets. He knew Sam was itching to tear a strip off him, and the obvious tension between them was irritating. "Why don't you just say it?"

Sam glanced at him over his shoulder, still flipping the pages. "Say what?"

"That I'm a cold-hearted bastard who doesn't know when to shut up."

Sam turned towards him, his fists clenched around the folder. "Why bother when you already know?"

Gage scowled and turned away. He hated the look on Sam's face, as if it was him he'd hurt instead of Brooklyn. "Forget it." He moved to go when Sam grabbed him by the arm.

"Just tell me one thing, *buddy*. If you wanted to hurt her so badly, why did you wait until we were in the middle of fucking nowhere to do it? Why didn't you just make her feel like shit back home and save us all the hassle?"

"Do you honestly think I planned this? Do you know how many times I've died inside wondering what hell I've put her through all because I couldn't think past my dick?" Gage pulled his arm away and stormed across the room, kicking the chair back a few feet. "I'd give my soul to take it back. To relive that one moment when I couldn't see anything, but what I'd conjured up in my mind. I've spent so many months convincing myself there's no way she could possibly love me, I can't conceive it any other way." He thought about punching his fist through the wall, but sank down in the chair instead. "I just didn't want her to hate me. Even if she never loved me again, at least, she wouldn't hate me."

Sam's feet scuffed across the floor and stopped behind him. "I don't think she could hate you if she tried. All you need to do is let go of the guilt, and stop fighting what you feel. I'm sure Brook will take care of the rest."

"That's if she'll even listen to me. And to do that we have to find her, which is proving to be a son of a bitch."

"Here," said Sam, placing the folder in his lap. "Let's go over it one more time. Doug's right. There's got to be something in there that can lead us to Brooklyn."

**9:00 pm**

"Yeah. Thanks." Gage hung up the phone and sat back in the chair, trying to rub away the headache he'd had for the last two days. Every lead had gone nowhere, and if he had to read through Brooklyn's life history one more time, he'd slam his head against the wall.

"Any luck?" asked Sam.

Gage shook his head, pushing the chair back from the desk. He thought about rising for a moment, but then decided he was too tired to try. "I've tracked down seven of the truckers from the diner. All of them deny giving Brooklyn a lift, though one of them remembered seeing her at the counter." He ran his fingers through his hair. "There's one left. A guy bound for Denver. I talked to his wife, but she said he'd gone right out on another run. She didn't say much else."

"Maybe she's hiding something?" suggested Sam.

Gage shrugged, letting his breath exhale in a long, slow huff. "Hard to tell over the phone. It's possible. She sounded pretty nervous, but then lots of people freak out when the F.B.I. calls them out of the blue."

"Just the same, might be worth a look. Maybe we should hop a flight—"

Sam stopped in mid sentence when Doug burst into the room, a file clutched in his hand. His face was pale, his lips thin lines. He closed the door behind him, giving each of them a hardened look before walking over to the window. Gage watched the man's jaw twitch and knew nothing good was going to come from the conversation.

"What?" asked Gage, not sure whether he should stand up and stay sitting.

Doug glanced at Sam, a grim expression on his face, before shaking the file in his hand. "My guys identified our mystery man."

"What!" Gage jumped up and covered the room in three strides. "Who is he?"

Doug sighed, allowing Gage to rip the folder from his hand. "Drake Davenport is really Scott Mann. Or should I say, ex-Special Agent Scott Mann. The guy's a former Fed."

Gage stared at the picture of the man stapled in the upper left-hand corner. It was a few years old, outlining a guy with brown hair and dark eyes. Only his head and shoulders were visible, but Gage knew it was the same guy. There was something about the man's eyes and the set of his jaw that left no doubt.

"That's not all," continued Doug. "Seems our guy spent ten years in the Navy before he joined the Bureau. Guy was a SEAL. Based on his military record, he was one of the best."

Crack shot, great strategist, and one hell of a fighter. He's got more commendations than I've got socks. Says he quit after getting shot in the shoulder. Apparently it affected his accuracy, and he decided to go civilian." Doug paused, shaking his head. "His Federal record is just as impressive."

Sam joined Gage by the window, looking at the papers over his shoulder. "So what the hell happened? Sounds like the guy's a hero."

Doug sighed as he raked his fingers through his hair. "It's only a theory, but as soon as we got a match, I had our profilers search Scott's previous assignments. Seems he was working on a serial killer case just before he resigned. The guy they were chasing was a walking nightmare. Bloody bodies across three states, and nothing but some stray black fibres left at the scene. They gave Scott the case because he had a knack for getting inside his prey's head. Something he probably picked up while in the SEALS.

"Anyway, he spent the next three months hunting the guy, always a step behind. Four more women died before he finally caught a break. He'd managed to anticipate the killer's next move, and they launched a pretty impressive strike. According to the records, they cornered the guy and wounded him during some heavy gunfire. The guy managed to slip away, but died during the chase."

"Sounds like a happy ending to me," said Sam.

"That's what Scott's team thought until they discovered the bastard had already killed another victim before they'd caught up with him. The woman turned out to be Scott's wife."

"Damn," huffed Sam.

"Yeah. Apparently the creep had been following her for over a week. You can imagine how Scott reacted. He blamed himself for not catching the guy sooner. Seems the killer was your typical psycho. He'd been abused as a child. Thought he was saving the women he killed from their own sins. Scott's superiors sent him to the staff psychiatrist. I just talked to her on the phone. She wouldn't break confidence without a warrant, but she did say Scott had become obsessed with the killer after his wife died. Apparently he spent hours going through all the evidence again."

"He was trying to see if he'd missed something," said Sam. "Couldn't let it go."

"My profilers think he became so entrenched in the guy's life, he eventually became the stalker, or at least a version of him."

“That might explain why he uses a taser instead of a gun,” added Sam. “And why the bombs he set off were mostly smoke. Somewhere inside, he’s still Scott Mann, and can’t bring himself to kill without provocation.”

“So why Brooklyn?” asked Gage. “If he’s so hell bent on not killing, why did he stick a fucking knife in her back?”

Doug exhaled a long, slow breath. “We’re not completely sure on that. Like I said, this is a theory. But I can tell you Scott’s wife was an author. She’d just published her third book. Romantic suspense novels similar to what Brooklyn writes, only hers were much more...tame.” Doug flashed Gage a sly smile. “Brooklyn sure can heat up the pages.”

Gage cocked half his mouth into a grin. He got that reaction a lot when colleagues found out who his wife was. “So he picked Brook because she writes erotic thriller novels?”

“That, and because the main character for her last three books was Sarah Porter. Sarah was Scott’s wife’s name. From what I’ve read, Drake Davenport is a dangerous hero, who isn’t afraid to resort to his darker tendencies in the name of love. He has a number of traits in common with the killer they were chasing. Drake just uses those traits for good now. Apparently all because of Sarah. I think the first episode at the bookstore was his way of killing the women with some sort of justification. If one of them lived, she became worthy of his protection. We’ve unearthed three more unexplained deaths, all writers, all with characters named Sarah.”

“So when Brooklyn survived...”

“Scott became her leading man, Drake, in an effort to bring Sarah back to life. To have a second chance at saving her.”

Gage cursed, crumpling the edge of the file as he turned and took three heavy steps away. Everything Doug had told him confirmed his belief that Drake—Scott—wouldn’t stop hunting Brook, no matter how far she ran. He glanced over at Sam, reading the man’s expression. Apparently Sam had arrived at the same conclusion, and merely nodded back at him.

Gage turned back, shaking the file. “Any reason we’re just finding this out now? Surely Trevor’s team checked the same database.”

Doug frowned and kicked his toe against the floor. “It seems Scott’s file was locked with a level four security password. We didn’t even get an indication it was there until I

specifically ran the Bureau database against the fingerprints using a class five pass code. Then it took three calls to Langley to get the clearance to open it. And I still can't access his military file." He sighed. "Stuff like this doesn't just happen, gentlemen. I have a very bad feeling Agent Mann locked it up himself, but I can't prove it. That doesn't bode well for us finding out any more information about him."

"What about the DNA sample? Does it match his?"

"Unfortunately, his file is missing any DNA records, but we're working on obtaining a current address so we can get a comparison. But let's not ignore the fact the man certainly has the expertise to pull off a scenario like what happened at the bookstore."

"So where does that leave us?" asked Sam. "Whether he's Drake Davenport or Scott Mann doesn't get us any closer to stopping him, or finding Brooklyn."

"Maybe not right away, but at least we can start searching his side of the story. See if we can track down friends, or family, who may know where he lives." Doug looked up at Gage. "Any luck with the Brooklyn's file?"

"So far every lead has been a dead end. There's only one regular from the diner I haven't talked to. His wife said he went out on another run. She sounded distressed about having to talk to me, but that might not be anything."

"Where was the guy headed?"

"Denver."

"Has Brooklyn ever been to Colorado?" asked Doug.

Gage laughed. "Not with me. I'm not a big fan of snow."

"What about before you two were married?"

Gage sighed and looked away. "We never really talked much about that. She was born in Vermont, and lived there until she was ten. Then she moved in with her grandparents. I know they originally lived in Florida."

Sam opened Brooklyn's file, and flipped through the pages. "Here it is. Says social services contacted a few relatives, but only the grandparents were willing to take custody of her. At the time of accident, they lived in Miami." He scanned further. "I can't see a current address for them."

"They died the summer Brooklyn graduated from high school. Cancer. Funny how it got them both within a month of the other."



"Damn," said Sam. "Brook never told me she'd lost everyone that was close to her."

Gage's chest tightened, but he pushed it away. "She didn't talk much about it. I think..."

Sam looked over at him, shifting a quick glance at Doug before he gave Gage a shake. "You think what?"

"Bloody hell!" Gage grabbed the file from Sam, exchanging it with the one in his hand. He could feel both men watching him as he scanned through the sheets, tossing the ones he didn't want on the floor.

"Buddy. You okay?" asked Sam.

"Damn it! We've been looking at the answer all along. God, I can't believe I didn't see it." He threw one more sheet on the floor, before sucking in a harsh breath. "White Falls."

"White, what?" said Sam.

"White Falls. It's a small one-horse town in northern Colorado. I remember seeing an address in here, but I never thought too much about it. Since Brooklyn's grandparents are dead, I didn't think she'd ever head back there."

"Head back where?"

"Here." He pointed to the address on the sheet. "Some obscure cabin on the edge of town." Gage held up a copy of Brooklyn's driver's licence. "The address matches her first licence. They must have moved there after they got custody of her. It didn't click because the current owners are Frank and Sylvia Boyd."

"So what makes you think she's gone there?" asked Sam. "I could see it if she still owned the place, but running off to a stranger's house isn't Brooklyn's style. Not even in an emergency."

"Something tells me these people aren't strangers to her." Gage flipped through some more papers, running his fingers along the entries. "Damn, I know I've seen that name or place somewhere else."

Sam took some of the sheets, copying Gage's approach. He'd gone through three pages of telephone numbers before he stopped. "Well I'll be damned."

"What?" asked Gage.

"There's a call from White Falls, Colorado. Only lasted five minutes, and it was a few years ago, but it's there." He turned and smiled at Gage. "How much do you want to bet that number belongs to the Boyds?"

Doug joined them. "I'll run the number, just to be sure. I'll also have my team check the flights. See how fast we can get you two there." He walked out the door without waiting for an answer.

"So you think she's really gone there? One phone call in the past few years isn't much to go on."

"Oh yeah. She went there."

"Are you sure you want to go after her? Maybe I should go...alone."

Gage looked at Sam, noting the man's worried expression. Sam had every right to question his intentions. He'd done nothing but fuck up since walking back into Brooklyn's life. But that was all about to change.

"I appreciate the offer, but I have no intentions of allowing Brooklyn to get away from me that easily."

Sam nodded, but the frown between his brows deepened. He took a step forward, visibly holding his fists at his sides. "I need to warn you —"

Gage stopped him with a wave of his hand. "I know what you're thinking. I've been insensitive, pushy, and downright asinine. Brook would be a fool to even let me through the door, let alone give me another chance. Not after the way I've treated her. She was scared, but I was too busy worrying about how it was going to make me feel, than to be the man she needed me to be." He sighed, stuffing his hands back in his pockets. He would've kicked his own butt if it were possible. Instead, he'd have to settle for having Brook kick it for him. If he could convince her to listen to him, that is. "I've got a lot to make up for. And I can't make things right if I keep hiding from the truth...from her." He looked up at Sam. "I need to go. But I fully expect you to kick my ass if I so much as look at her the wrong way."

Sam sighed, kicking his foot against the floor. "All right, buddy," he finally said. "Let's go get the little minx."

## Chapter Eighteen

### White Falls – 10:00 pm

Brooklyn startled awake, jolting up in the chair, the blanket fluttering to the floor in a rumpled heap. She looked around the dark room, the acrid taste of fear burning down her throat. Where...

*Colorado. The cabin.*

She tried to laugh in relief, but only managed a small whimper as she stood up, gathering the blanket from the floor. It felt even colder, and she needed the extra duvet to chase the chill away, especially at night.

She headed upstairs, nearly tripping over the last step when she reached the landing. She narrowed in on the bed, tossing the blanket across the sheets before groping for the matches she'd left waiting on the small nightstand. The room would feel more inviting once she'd lit the candle, and snuggled under the sheets. She slid her fingers over the wood, finally settling on the tiny, square booklet. It only took two rasps to ignite the end, bathing the shadows with a welcomed light. Under different circumstances, she would've considered the gesture romantic.

But not here. Not now.

Brooklyn cursed as her thoughts drifted to Gage. She'd done everything to shun his memory, but his image seemed forever seared in her mind. Just closing her eyes conjured up pictures of his face. The way his dark hair wisped across his forehead, the main mass long enough for her to wrap around her fingers. His features matched his body, firm but sleek. There was something about him that spoke of pure male dominance. Had he been an animal, there was no doubt in her mind he'd be an alpha. Always expecting compliance. She smiled when she remembered all the times her own stubbornness had driven him to the brink. But she knew it was a trait he'd admired in her.

*Not anymore.*

She sighed, and stripped off her clothes. She'd found an old hockey jersey, and had relegated it to pyjama duty. It wasn't quite the silk lingerie she'd grown accustomed to wearing, but it beat naked. At least here.

*Naked.*

*Gage.*

Brooklyn threw back the covers, ignoring the pang of longing moving through her chest, and sat on the bed when she remembered she hadn't made the obligatory trip to the ladies room. And getting up in the night wasn't an option. She cursed and dragged her butt back down the stairs, hoping she could make it back before the sheets cooled. She'd just bridged the hallway when she stopped and glanced towards the kitchen. Had she heard something? She listened, fists clenched around the doorframe, eyes searching the shadows. She could hear the clock ticking on the far wall, and an owl cry out in the night. She forced a smile and turned when it sounded again.

*A creak.*

Fear beaded her skin with a cold sweat as she moved back towards the chair. Frank had been an avid hunter and still kept a few rifles around for keepsakes. She'd checked them out as soon as she'd arrived, hiding one under her bed, and another beneath the chair. While it'd been over a year since she'd gone with Gage to the firing range, she knew how to handle a weapon.

She knelt beside the chair, feeling underneath until her fingers grazed over the cold, metal shaft. She pulled it free, feeling for the magazine as another creak echoed from the back. Damn. Someone was out there. She stayed crouched, and practically crawled back to the hallway. She needed a vantage point, and that was the only place she could anchor the thing against her shoulder without standing out in the open. She tried to breathe, but her chest wouldn't inflate, a large knot now formed inside. Why the hell hadn't she set up some perimeter alarms? Booby-trapped the damn doors? It didn't matter that she didn't have the foggiest idea how. It only mattered that she hadn't.

*A click followed by a soft swirl of cold air.*

*He was inside.*

Every instinct told her to run. Slip out a back window and head for town. She wanted to, but her feet didn't seem to be listening. They felt rooted to the floor, stuck in place as

surely as if she'd nailed them down. She heard another click and realised the bastard had closed the door.

Oh God, she was trapped. It was too late to run now. He'd hear her and catch her before she could force open one of the windows and escape.

Were those footsteps?

*Shit!* She eased back slightly, and raised the rifle to her shoulder. She'd never fired at anything other than paper targets and clay props. How the hell could she kill a man?

"God damn."

A deep voice whispered across the room, so muffled she wasn't even sure she'd heard it. He'd bumped into her clothesline. She smiled, hoping the fucker had impaled his groin on the damn thing. Serve him right, the cocksucker. Invading her house, threatening her life. In a perfect world the small pole would've clipped his fucking sac off, but she'd settle for hearing him writhing in pain on the kitchen floor. Maybe she could corner him while he was crying over his poor, skewered cock.

She took a step forward just a large figure stepped through the doorway. *Drake. Ohmygod.* He was here. Standing in her living room. Determined to make her his lover. She was cornered, with only a rifle between her and a set of restraints anchored to his bed. She could see it in her head. The very bedroom she'd described in her books. The large, four-poster bed, draped with rich silk batting. The thick, goose-down duvet, layered over chocolate-coloured Egyptian sheets with matching throw pillows. There'd be a soft, faux, bearskin rug centred in front of a stone hearth, where Sarah had seduced Drake on more than one occasion, and an antique dresser beside a large picture window along one of the walls.

Brooklyn shuffled back, and pressed her back against the wall. She held the rifle next to her leg, not sure what move to make next. Would he check out the rest of the house first, or go straight to her bedroom? She forced herself to swallow, praying she wouldn't gag, as she listened for any indication of his direction.

Hallway? Bedroom?

God, the uncertainty was killing her. Should she take the offensive? Hold him at gunpoint while she called the cops? Would he lunge at her? Would she have to fire?

*Fuck!*

Enough. She took another step back and turned towards the room, raising the rifle to her shoulder again. Then she edged forward until she could make out the guy's silhouette. He was still standing beside the doorway, his gaze fixed on the set of stairs leading to the loft.

*That's it, asshole. Head for the stairs so I can blow your fucking head off if you so much as breathe too loudly.*

She watched him walk off to his right, tracing a path across the wall. His hands looked empty, but she knew he was packing. She inched ahead, her feet silent across the cold wooden floor. She waited until he was two steps away from the staircase before cocking the gun aimed at his back. Even in the darkness she saw his reaction. He froze, his shoulders bunched, his back stiff. He'd reached for something inside his jacket, but now stood rigid with his hand still angled towards his chest. She stood watching him for two more heartbeats before wetting her dry lips and breaking the silence.

"You so much as twitch, and I'll blow your head off." Brooklyn tightened her grip, the muzzle pointed in the centre of the man's back. "Now I suggest you listen very carefully. I want you to remove your hand from inside your jacket, and raise your hands above your head. Don't bother trying to grab that gun you've got tucked away. We both know I can pull the trigger faster than you can draw and turn."

Brooklyn watched the man nod as he jerked his hand away from his chest. "Slowly, asshole," she yelled, trying to keep her voice steady. Beads of sweat trickled down her back and between her breasts, as she clenched her hand around the shaft so tightly her knuckles glowed white in the pale light.

"That's it," she said, when his hands stopped at either side of his shoulders. "Now keep them there." She stole a quick breath, racing to think up her next move. Damn, she hadn't thought it all through. She should call the cops? But it took both hands to hold the rifle, and she didn't think she could spare one to grab the phone. Maybe she could knock it off the base and use her toes?

Brooklyn nearly laughed hysterically at the thought of her playing footsies with the telephone while keeping her rifle trained on the bastard standing in her house. She sucked in a haggard breath, willing her hands to stop shaking. First she wanted to see Drake for

herself. Stare into his eyes while the power flowed through her instead of him. Maybe he'd think twice about trying to lunge at her if he was looking down the barrel of the gun.

"Okay, jackass. Here's what you're going to do. I want you to take two very slow steps to your left. Don't lower your hands and don't move faster than a fucking snail, got it?" The man nodded, and for a moment she thought she heard him chuckling. She firmed her stance. "Good. Now when I tell you, you're going to move your left foot over a bit and press that switch on the floor. It's attached to the lamp in the corner." She shook the gun at him to accentuate her point. "And remember to move slowly."

The man nodded again, inching his foot over until it wavered above the small circular switch. He held it suspended an inch from the button until she growled behind him and he carefully lowered his weight. There was a flash of white light as the lamp sprang to life, casting a bright glow across the room. Brooklyn squeezed against the trigger, engaging it halfway in case the creep decided to spin at the same time, but blinked to find him still standing next to the fireplace, his hands wavering beside his head. She stood there, fear so heavy in her stomach she had to concentrate to keep from throwing up. What the hell had she gotten herself into? Even with the deadly weapon cradled in her arms, the guy's heart centred in the crosshairs, she felt vulnerable. This was so far outside her comfort zone she couldn't even think straight.

She clenched her jaw and forced her knees to lock. There was no way she'd let Drake take her. "Okay. Now turn around."

Brooklyn waited. Hands trembling around the cold metal, eyes watching for any sign of divergence. Her chest heaved and the sweat dripped down her forehead. His head was bowed towards the floor, his hair hidden beneath a dark woollen cap. She held her breath, bracing herself to peer into the eyes of a killer, when a familiar sparkle nearly brought her to her knees.

"Hello, Brooklyn."

Brooklyn hissed out the breath she'd been holding, anger flaring through the fear. "God damn it, Gage!"

She met his gaze, her hands still locked around the rifle. He didn't even look nervous, a roguish smile gracing his face.

"Jesus Christ! Do you know how close I came to pulling this trigger?"

Gage raised his eyebrows, bending slightly as if trying to get a better view at her hands. "By the looks of it, I'd say about halfway."

"Halfway?" she huffed. "You are far too smug for your own good."

Gage's smile widened and she could tell he was resisting the urge to wink at her. "Nice rifle. It'd be even nicer if you pointed it somewhere else. Or are you still toying with the idea of shooting me?"

Brooklyn sneered at him and tried to lower her arms, but the signal wasn't getting through. She closed her eyes, wondering if she might pass out.

"Easy, darling. Just take a deep breath."

Brooklyn opened her eyes, to find Gage stepping towards her. She matched his motion backwards before she realised what she was doing. Gage stopped, his eyes darkening as he studied her carefully.

"Are you okay?"

She swallowed, forcing her arms to lower until the barrel was pointed at the floor. She wanted to drop it, but her fingers wouldn't release their death grip. "Fine. And don't flatter yourself. Shooting you would be a waste of a good bullet."

Gage winced at the tone in her voice, but didn't move any closer. He merely pulled off his cap as he leaned against the chair and watched her, his arms crossed. She sighed, finally allowing the weapon to clank to the floor. Damn, she was tired. She glanced at the clock. It'd only been ten minutes since she'd gone up to her room, yet it felt like an eternity. She took another step back and rested against a small, wooden table. She would've run her fingers through her hair to calm her nerves but didn't have the strength to lift her hand.

"How did you find me?" she asked, cringeing at the desolate quality to her voice.

"It wasn't easy. We got a few names from the diner where you hitched a ride, and discovered one of the men was headed to Denver. I talked to his wife. She seemed anxious about the topic of our conversation, which made me suspicious. After that, we just pieced it together with the information in your file."

"File? Since when do I have a file with the F.B.I.?"

"Since you ran off on me five days ago."

Was that hurt in his voice? Brooklyn studied his face, but he'd plastered on a fake smile to hide whatever he was feeling. It was a look she knew well, and one he'd perfected over the



past several months. She released a long, slow breath, trying not to appear too overwhelmed. She heard Gage shuffle closer, but he stopped several feet away.

"I have to hand it to you. You picked your location well. If that guy you bummed a ride from hadn't been a regular, we might not have found you."

"He was the only truck heading this way. Besides. I didn't have time to be choosy." She looked back up at him. "So are you going to tell me why you're here?"

"I think you know why. Based on the way you looked when I turned around, it wasn't me you'd thought had found you."

"It's a shame, too, because I could've ended it all tonight."

Gage shook his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Oh it would've ended, all right. But not the way you think."

"Gee, thanks for your vote of confidence, *baby*. But I could've sworn it was your head in my crosshairs just a few minutes ago."

Gage gave her a cocky half smile she instantly wanted to smack off his face. The man was way too arrogant for his own good. "I would've countered your approach if I'd needed to. You're a pretty good shot, but that rifle's way more than you're used to handling. Your reaction time would've been a lot slower than you realise."

"Does that mean you'd like to try it again?"

Gage huffed and shook his head in frustration. "I can see you're going to be difficult."

Brooklyn snorted. "I wasn't planning on anything of the sort, because there's nothing to be difficult about. I believe I made my feelings quite clear. I don't want the Bureau's help, and I don't want your protection. I'm doing just fine."

"Oh, are you? So I suppose you think hiding out here is enough to stop that bastard from tracking you down?"

Gage took another step forward. It was a typical tactic of his. The closer he got the larger his shoulders appeared, making her feel small and feminine. But she wasn't falling for his intimidation techniques tonight.

"It took you five days to find me, and you had the entire Bureau at your disposal. What makes you think Drake could track me down that fast? He doesn't even know me."

"Four days. We knew where you'd gone last night. We just couldn't get here any faster. And there's no doubt in my mind Drake will find you."

"What makes you think that?"

"We know who Drake is. His real name is Scott Mann. He's an ex-Navy SEAL and an ex-Federal Agent. Based on what Doug uncovered in his file, he's more than got the expertise to hunt down your location."

"You know..." Brooklyn sagged back, her legs suddenly weak. Oh God. They knew who he was.

Gage nodded. "Quite frankly, we're just lucky we found you first."

Brooklyn snapped her head up. "We? Don't tell me you dragged Sam here as well?"

"Of course I brought Sam along. He's co-ordinating with Doug to arrange a safe house as we speak." Gage moved towards the stairs. "Is there anything you need to pack? It might be better if we spend the night in town. I'm sure Doug can get us out on a flight in the morning..."

"No."

"I'm not sure where we'll be headed, but—" Gage stopped and turned to face her. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'no'. I'm not going to a safe house."

Brooklyn watched Gage's expression change. He wasn't hiding his emotions any more, and the look on his face barely contained the anger boiling inside him. He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"Okay. What's up?"

"Nothing's *up*." She kept her voice calm and low, not wanting to irritate him further. "I'm just not going to a safe house. I was planning on moving in the morning, anyway. Now I'll just make sure I'm even more careful."

"Careful? You're going to be careful? Just like you've been careful all along? Hitching a ride with a man you didn't even know! Leaving with barely enough money to buy some food for a few days! Hiding out in a house that took me exactly ten seconds to break-in to! Great idea. I feel much better now. I can't imagine why I didn't think of it first!"

Brooklyn ignored his sarcasm and drew herself up, crossing her arms beneath her breasts, in an attempt to stop the sudden onset of shivers from becoming more noticeable. She didn't know whether she was cold, or upset, but she'd be damned if she'd give Gage the

satisfaction of seeing her lose it. "Good. Then we agree. Say 'hi' to Sam for me, and don't run into the clothesline again on your way out. I wouldn't want you to hurt anything important."

"Okay," said Gage, stepping in front of her as she tried to brush past him. "I tried asking nicely. I tried explaining the danger you're in, but you're obviously too damn stubborn to admit running off was a mistake. So why don't we cut through the crap and discuss what's really going on here?" He paused, as if drawing on some hidden reserve of strength. "We both know you left because you were mad at me. This little stunt of yours has nothing to do with Drake."

Brooklyn backed away, not wanting to be within arm's reach of him. "Mad at you? You think I left because I was mad at you? How juvenile do you think I am? This isn't about me being angry with you. This is about us not being able to stay in the same room together without it blowing up into a showdown. About you avoiding me for six months. About everything, *but* me being mad at you." Tears collected behind her eyes, but didn't care. She was done running from him and her feelings.

"Do you have any idea what it's been like living in our house these past several months? Ever since that night you've been the invisible man. I'd find evidence you'd been home...an empty beer bottle in the kitchen, a pair of socks on the floor, maybe a half-eaten sandwich in the den. You rarely talked to me. You never touched me. You didn't even call to tell me when you weren't coming home you just had Sam do it for you. Do you how many times I died inside wondering if Sam was calling to tell me you'd been k..." She trailed off, wiping the steady stream of tears off her cheeks. "It took me two months to stop jumping every time I heard the phone ring. Then I was attacked, and finally, after all this time, things seemed...different. I thought..."

Brooklyn sighed and bowed her head. "I was wrong. You were just humouring me. Doing what was necessary to keep me in check. I suppose I suspected it all along, but I just didn't want to admit it. I may be slow, but I got your message. So I did the only thing I could." She re-crossed her arms and walked straight for the stairs, moving by him without glancing his way. "I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing. Now I suggest you go back out and take Sam to the motel. He must be freezing his ass off out there."

"Sam's not out there. I sent him to town when I got out."

Brooklyn continued up the stairs to the first landing before glancing back at him over her shoulder. "Then you can sleep on the couch. It's a bit lumpy, but no worse than the one in your office. I'm going to bed." She met his gaze one last time. "I expect you gone in the morning."

Then she disappeared.

Gage stared at the empty space on the stairs, a lump so large in his throat he could hardly breathe, let alone speak. Listening to Brooklyn's words, seeing the pain in her eyes, was more than he could bear. God, what had gotten into him? Where was the calm, loving tone he'd been practicing in his mind? The sweet words she'd needed to hear? The apology he owed her?

He was a bastard, and the worst type. He reran the short exchange in his mind, trying to figure out where it'd all fallen apart.

*When he'd turned around.*

She'd been terrified. There'd been so much white in her eyes he'd barely been able to see the vivid blue that often took his breath away. Her hands had clenched the rifle so hard the skin over her knuckles had looked transparent, and despite her best efforts, she'd trembled.

And he'd lost it.

All he could concentrate on were the images of Drake getting to her first. How the bastard would've easily turned the events around, perhaps raping her in her bed before waiting to take her away. He could hear her screaming, begging Drake to stop, as he pumped her mercilessly until all her fight was gone, and she just lay limp beneath him. And his emotional outburst had cost him his last opportunity to make things right.

"Fuck."

He wanted to shout the word until the walls shook with his frustration, but it came out as little more than a whimper. Damn, where was Sam when he needed him? When he needed a hard kick in the ass to bring him back to his senses. To remind him who was supposed to be grovelling for another chance.

He glanced up the stairs. Twenty feet. That's all that stood between them—twenty feet and six months of misunderstandings. He huffed and headed for her room. He'd come here to talk and he wasn't leaving until he'd done just that.

## Chapter Nineteen

Brooklyn was huddled beside the window, her face reflected in the icy glass, when Gage crested the top stair and halted in the centre of her room. He could see tears drying on her cheeks, as more liquid pooled in her eyes. She looked lost, like a fallen angel searching for her faith. He fought the pain that wrenched his heart, and the guilt that swept through him like a wildfire. He needed to get through this before he allowed any emotion to cripple him.

Brooklyn turned to face him, her eyes wide with surprise. She obviously hadn't thought he'd follow her upstairs, and seemed unsure whether to stand up to him, or try to run past him. He took one more step forward, eliminating any hope she had of fleeing.

"Does this look like the living room to you?" She'd put just enough annoyance in her voice to sound convincing, but Gage wasn't about to back down.

He straightened his stance, using every inch of height to increase his presence. "If you think for one minute I'm going to sleep on the couch while you're up here...crying, you've got a lot to learn about me." He raised his hand when she tried to interrupt and waved her objection away. "Not this time. You've had your say, now it's my turn." He took a deep breath. There was so much to say, but he didn't know where to start. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and felt the soft brush of velvet against his left hand.

Her ring.

Their life.

It all came down to this.

Gage looked into her eyes, and for the first time since he'd asked her to marry him, he let his heart speak. "I didn't come here to fight with you. As a matter of fact, the only reason Sam let me get on the plane was because I promised him I wouldn't hurt you again." He waved his hand in her direction. "But I can't even do that right. I don't know what it is when I'm around you. I get all mixed up and say or do the one thing that could make the situation worse. It's like some kind of curse." He sighed and wished there was something to lean

against. His legs were already shaking and his vision was starting to blur. He took another deep breath. "All I really want to do is hold you."

He looked up at Brooklyn. Her expression had softened and some of the uncertainty had faded from her eyes. He smiled at her, overwhelmed by how beautiful she was. "God, you're beautiful."

Brooklyn laughed softly, her breasts moving gently against her shirt. He could see her nipples pressed against the rough fabric, and longed to wrap them in the soft warmth of his tongue. Caress the tight buds lightly with his teeth. He'd never hurt her again, if she'd only give him another chance.

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Brooklyn. For not being there. For allowing my job to come between us. For ever doubting your loyalty. I knew in my heart I was wrong, but a part of me was all too aware I'd left you lonely too long. I was angry with myself for giving you the opportunity. But instead of kicking my own ass, I took it out on you." He sighed and stared down at the floor. "After that night, I couldn't look at you without seeing the hurt in your eyes. The pain I'd caused. So I stayed away. I told myself I was giving you space to deal with things...time to forgive me. That if I just waited long enough, things would fix themselves. But it was just an excuse to avoid the real issues. To admit what a jerk I'd been, and that I didn't know how to ask for your forgiveness...or how to forgive myself." He forced himself to meet her gaze. "I never meant to hurt you that night. I swear. If I could take it back..." His voice trailed off.

He didn't know what else to say. His throat hurt from trying to talk past the lump and his head was spinning. Brooklyn stared at him, her mouth slightly open, her body frozen like a statue. He'd give anything to know what she was thinking. He tried to form the words to ask, but only a hollow whimper came out. He hung his head again, no longer able to watch her face for her reaction.

"So is that everything?" she asked.

His head whipped up. Damn, her voice was so steady and calm, as if they'd been discussing the weather and not their life. He clenched his jaw, wishing she'd just tell him to fuck off and be done with it. "Almost," he said, wincing at the sudden harshness in his voice. "Since you woke up at the hospital, you've accused me, on more than one occasion, of merely fucking you. I want it on record that of all the things I've done wrong, that was never one of

them. I've never fucked you. It's always meant more to me than that, even if I didn't know how to show it."

"Then why..." She stopped and clamped her lips together, waving her hand in the air as if trying to erase what was on her mind. "Forget that. There's just one thing I need to know. You've said everything, but what I really need to hear." She drew herself up, pushing her chest out as she held her chin high. "Do you love me?"

Was that fear in her eyes? He looked closely. *Shit!* The woman he loved more than his own life was afraid he no longer loved her. How the hell had it come to this? Gage took an involuntary step forward, curbing the need to pull her into his arms until she felt his love for her burn her flesh. Words. She needed words first.

"Darling, I love you more than I ever imagined possible. So much I sometimes wonder how I've managed to function these past few months. My life is empty without you in it. I know you'd be foolish to give me another chance. I certainly don't deserve it. But regardless of what you decide, I'll still love you, and I will until the day I die."

Gage watched a single tear pool in Brooklyn's eye and fade slowly down her cheek. Oh God, if he'd hurt her again, he might just as well go out back and shoot himself. He held his breath, his heart jammed tight in his chest, until Brooklyn's face slowly lit into a smile. That was his sign to move. He crossed the short distance between them, his footsteps heavy on the wooden floor, and stopped a heartbeat away. She stared up at him, her lips curved upwards, slightly opened as if she hoped he'd kiss her. Her eyes glistened in the flickering light, so full of love he felt his own tears cool his cheeks.

She sighed and reached up, softly brushing the moisture from his face. Her hand felt so small against him he couldn't stop from placing his over top, clenching his jaw at the rush of arousal that pulsed through him as their skin touched. In that instant he realised, he not only loved her, but needed her, as surely as he needed air to breathe. She was his soul, his reason for living. He knew he'd never survive without her. He choked back the sob in his chest and brought her fingers to his lips in a gentle kiss.

"Darling..."

"Shhh," she whispered, placing a soft finger across his mouth. "I think you've said enough. And we both know how foolish I am when it comes to you."



She moved in closer, moulding her body tight to his. He could feel her breasts pressed against his chest, her hips bracketing his erection. He didn't know if it had stayed that way throughout their exchange, or if it had reappeared the instant he'd realised he hadn't lost her. Either way, he was long and hard, and dying to make love to her.

"Now," she whispered, wrapping one hand around his neck. "Why don't you show me just how much you love me?"

Gage groaned, still shocked she hadn't kicked him out with her foot firmly inserted in his ass. But he wasn't about to waste his good fortune. After tonight, she'd never think about leaving him again. He smiled at her, kissing her fingers once more before slipping his arm around her waist and pulling her tighter. Even without her perfume he could smell her sweet, womanly scent mixed with a faint soapy fragrance. He nuzzled her neck, drinking in the fresh aroma of her silky hair as it cascaded over her shoulders. Everything about her reminded him of warmth and softness. It was like holding the sun in his arms. He placed a kiss on her neck, smiling at the needy moan that rumbled in his ear.

"Gage."

Damn he loved her voice. So low and smoky it sent the blood racing to his groin, increasing his erection until he wondered if he'd burst. "God. How is it you can turn me into a puddle of lust with only the mention of my name?" He sighed against her skin, loving how she trembled from the subtle caress of his breath. "You have far too much control over me, darling."

Brooklyn whimpered as he eased his hand down her thigh and traced his way back up under her shirt. "I have control? Then why do I fall apart every time I look at you, or think of you?" She pulled back enough to grab the hem of his sweater and guide it over his head, settling her fingers back on his bare chest. "No," she whispered, tracing the angular planes of his muscles. "I have very little control where you're concerned, especially involving my own response. I suppose I simply love you too much."

"Not too much. Never too much." He stared down at her, watching her tongue dampen her lips. Her mouth looked like a soft pink flower, slightly open and ready to be caressed. The edges were turned up in a sexy little smile with just a hint of innocence when she pressed them lightly together. He smiled and bent over her, keeping his gaze locked on hers.

"Now, I believe you had a request," he teased, brushing his lips across hers. They were even softer than he remembered.

Brooklyn laughed, poking her tongue out as she drew it along the length of his mouth. "I have a number of requests, baby. But I suppose we can take them one at a time."

Gage smiled, capturing her tongue between his teeth. He paused just long enough for her to submit control before drawing it slowly into his mouth. He stroked it gently, suddenly needing to show her how beautiful their joining could be instead of giving in to the fiery need burning down his spine. There'd be time for hot, hard sex later, after he'd shown her he still had a modicum of control left.

Brooklyn moaned into the kiss, and he could feel that control slipping.

He pulled away slightly, his chest heaving, his vision blurred with streaks of white light that pulsed to the beat of his heart. God, he wanted her so badly he didn't know how he was going to keep his touch soft and loving. She felt so right in his arms. The way her body moulded to his, the perfect female counterpart to his male physique. He couldn't think of anything except his desire to strip her and plunge inside before her shirt hit the floor. He bit down on his bottom lip, hoping the bite of pain would bring some blood back to his head.

"I need to do this right, darling. If you keep moaning like that, you're going to get far more than you bargained for."

Brooklyn smiled at him, rubbing her body against his. "Is that a threat? Or a promise?"

Damn the little minx, she was deliberately tempting him. Daring him to lose control. A sudden flood of images flashed through his head, and he grabbed on to the most erotic one. He breathed heavily in her ear, feeling her body tremble with anticipation. "Both," he whispered, slipping his fingers farther under her shirt until he caressed her ass.

It was bare. No panties.

*Shit.*

"You're not wearing anything underneath."

Her innocent laugh filled the room. "I told you I only had one set of panties. And they're dying on the line."

Gage eased his fingers around the soft flesh, cupping it in his hand. It fit perfectly, with just enough softness to make his arousal skyrocket. He needed to be inside her, now,

pumping hard and fast, claiming her with every inch of his body. She was his, and the sooner he'd shown her that, the sooner he could concentrate on other things, like keeping her safe.

But first things first.

He moved his hands, gently massaging her round cheeks. They were cool from the air, and the simple touch of his skin on hers prickled her flesh. "Cold, darling?"

"Not for long," she whispered, drawing her tongue along his jaw until she could snag his lower lip between her teeth. She tugged on it once then released it, laving the slight hurt with a series of licks. He was just about to ravage her mouth when she moved her lips to his chest, lightly stroking it across his nipple. He froze, unable to pull away from the gentle assault.

Damn, she was good at seducing him. Touching him with just the right pressure to leave him yearning for more. She kneaded the tight muscles on his stomach as she worked at his chest, drawing him into her mouth as she softly suckled him. A shiver ran through his body and into hers, as she trailed her fingers to the fly of his jeans, firmly massaging his bulging erection.

"Do you know how much I love touching you?" she asked, slowly releasing the button.

Gage groaned his reply, not able to form any words. Her fingers were caressing the small patch of skin she'd exposed, their tips grazing the top of his crown. She smiled against his chest, apparently amused by his response.

"You're so strong and hard. I could run my fingers along your skin forever."

She pressed her lips to his skin as she slowly released the zipper, moaning around his nipple at the loud hiss that echoed off the walls. He wanted to talk back, whisper sexy words that would have her dripping cream down her thighs, but her blatant approval of his erection stole any thoughts from his mind. Every neuron was focused on the slow descent of her hand. The way her fingers skimmed over his cock, exerting just enough pressure to make him swell even further. His chest squeezed and realised he'd been holding his breath.

He hissed out the air in a long whoosh, rustling her hair as she stayed pressed against him. She wrapped her hand around his shaft, as she pumped it up and down inside his underwear. He gritted his teeth, willing the climax building inside to stand down.

"Brooklyn." Her name came out as a strangled moan as she released his cock and twisted her thumbs around the loops of his jeans and yanked them down along with his

briefs. Before he could utter a protest, she'd shoved them to his ankles with one foot and was cupping his sac in her left hand. "God damn. You're going to kill me, darling."

"Then you'll die a happy man," she mused, rocking his balls in her hand.

Gage stared down at her. Her eyes glittered, so dark with arousal only the rim was edged in colour. Her lips were wet from kissing his chest and the skin over her cheeks was taut.

"I said I wanted to do this right. That means I need to please you first."

Brooklyn shook her head, softly squeezing his sac. She smiled at the unbridled moan that twisted from his lips. "If you truly want to please me, then you'll allow me this time with you. I need to touch you, taste you. It's been so long since I've felt you come in my mouth." She lowered her other hand and began a slow stroking motion. "Please, baby. Just let me taste you first. Then I promise you can do whatever you like to my body."

He tensed around her hand, his chest pushing out his breath. "But..."

"Do you have only one orgasm in you?" she taunted.

He hissed out his breath this time. "You know better than that. The way I'm feeling, I could come inside you all night without stopping."

"Then hush, and enjoy the ride."

With that, Brooklyn sank to her knees, peppering his body with kisses as she blazed a path to his groin. His erection swelled, but she was still surprised by the immensity of it. The veins on his cock were thick, marking a roadway of vessels across his skin. She could see the blood pulsing beneath the surface, the skin drawn so tight she wondered how he could stand the pressure.

*Then relieve him of it.*

She smiled at the thought, still shocked at the sudden turn of events. One moment she was standing in the bedroom, watching the pieces of her heart collect on the floor, the next she was wrapped in the warmth of his arms, feeling his love for her with every beat of his heart. It was more than she'd ever hoped for. Now she could finally give him all the love and pleasure she felt inside.

"You're so hard. It always amazes me that I can do this to you."

"You have this effect on any man standing in the same room as you. You're incredibly sensual, and it glows on your skin like a sexual tattoo." He gasped as she planted a kiss at the base of his cock. "Why do you think I always stay so close when we're out in public? I know what every other man is thinking, and I want them to know I'm the only one fortunate enough to taste that pretty body of yours. I swear, darling. You make me feel completely possessive."

Brooklyn hummed as Gage speared his fingers through her hair, gently tugging on her scalp. "Isn't that a bit barbaric?"

"You're damn straight, and I won't apologise for it. You're mine, darling. A fact I intend on showing you repeatedly tonight. If I manage to live through your torture, that is."

Brooklyn placed an open-mouthed kiss on the end of his shaft, smiling at the way it sprang up in response. "Does that imply you want me to stop?"

Gage looked down at her, meeting her heated gaze with one even hotter. "I'd rather put a bullet through my head than have you stop. I can't tell you how many times I've fantasised about you sucking me. The way you wrap your lips around me as you slide down my length..." His voice trailed off into a sharp hiss as she did as he'd described. "You're wicked."

"Sorry, but I can't talk right now. I've got my mouth full."

Gage cried out above her as she sank down his shaft again, taking as much as she could into her mouth. His head flared against her throat, and she could taste the first drop of pre-cum coat her tongue. She drew back, licking away the next drop, moaning at the exotic taste of it. It was slightly salty, but mixed with a spicy musk that drove her senses wild. She'd never tasted a man as delicious as Gage. He was like drinking pure desire.

She glanced up at him, warmed by the look of pleasure on his face. His eyes were dark, his skin bunched tight, and the muscles in his stomach and chest flexed with each bob of her head. He was helpless against her assault. That one thought made her feel powerful. He outweighed her by eighty pounds and was easily ten inches taller than her. But in this one act she held the power. Her small hands and delicate touch brought him to his knees, his strength nothing more than the prize she held in her fingers.

And she had no intentions on relinquishing her reward.

Brooklyn closed her eyes and focused on her delicious task. She wanted to make him so desperate for his release, he'd thrust into her, literally fucking her mouth until he screamed out her name. She suckled harder, rolling her tongue on the underside of his cock as she drew on him. His balls pulled tight to his body, his legs so tense they started to tremble. He chanted in some guttural language, his fingers now clasped around her hair. His control slipped further, his hips jerking against her, as she plunged down, pausing with his cock deep in her mouth, before slowly inching her way back up. A light sweat beaded his chest, as she moved rhythmically around his erection. Each pass made him whimper, until he couldn't halt the need and he began thrusting into her mouth.

Brooklyn hummed, feeling his release build. She could almost track the movement. How his sac tightened even further, nearly pulling up inside his body. Or how his stomach clenched hard, outlining the band of muscles weaving towards his chest.

"Are you ready, baby?" she asked, releasing his cock for just a second.

"Oh God. Please, darling. Don't stop."

His words were barely perceivable, blending with the heavy air hanging around them. Brooklyn smiled at him as she eased him back inside her mouth, loving how he wailed in response. He was close. She thought about stopping, and waiting for the sensation to pass before starting up again, but she knew she'd lose control. He'd take matters into his own hands, and mount her before she could explain her intentions. Instead she sucked harder, bobbing faster over his flesh, raking her teeth gently against the sensitive hood.

"Yesss." He tightened his grip, holding her head steady as he pounded her mouth. She could see he was trying to metre his thrusts, but he was too far gone. Brooklyn grabbed his thigh with one hand, the other still stroking his shaft, as she steadied herself for his release.

"I'm going to come. If you don't want it in your mouth, move back, darling."

She answered his plea by inching her body closer, giving him no chance at desertion. He clenched his jaw once more, then surrendered to the rush of pure pleasure surging through him, crying out her name as the first jet of sperm spurted into her mouth and down her throat. She kept moving, knowing the motion would milk him dry. He came again, another jolt coating her tongue. She drank it all, not wanting to waste the glorious taste of him.

“Good God. Where on earth did you learn to do that?” he sighed, unclenching his fingers from her hair.

Brooklyn laughed against his thigh, loving how the wisp of air across his cock made his entire body shake. “I write erotic thrillers. What do you think I spend my time imagining? Besides, I need to have someone to base my heroes on, both in and out of bed.”

Gage stared at her, his eyes narrowed, his lips slightly open in surprise. He looked like he wanted to say something, but instead, he watched her rise from the floor.

“Come on. Surely you know you’re the man behind the mystery...the source of all my leading men. Whether his name is Drake, or Logan, it’s still just you, altered to suit the situation. You’re the only man I’ve ever fantasised about.”

Gage stood staring at her a moment longer before pulling her close, pressing one hand around the back of her neck, the other around her waist. She could hear him swallowing hard, fighting against his emotions. She waited, savouring his heat until he finally eased up and drew a finger under her chin, tilting it until she was staring into his eyes.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I won’t let this second chance go to waste.” He brushed his finger across her lips. “I hope you enjoyed your little show, darling. Because now it’s my turn.” He pressed closer, bringing his lips to her ear, making her tremble from the hot breath he blew across her lobe. “I have absolutely no intentions of allowing you to come up for air before the night fades into day.”

## Chapter Twenty

Gage didn't give Brooklyn a chance to smile before capturing her mouth in his, taking it hard and deep like he longed to take her body. At least, in the kiss he could give into his carnal desires, and claim her with strong filling strokes that mimicked the way he wanted to make love to her. But he'd made himself a promise, and he wasn't going to screw this first time up.

Brooklyn returned his hungry need, tangling her tongue with his. God, it felt so good to love her like this, with no reservations, no worries about what she was thinking. Finally, he could give her everything he'd kept bottled up inside. Show her how deep his feelings ran. He'd spend the night worshipping her, then the rest of his life proving how perfect they were together.

Gage wrapped his fingers in her hair, tilting her head as he deepened the kiss. Her mouth was hot and wet, and he refused to stop before he'd traced every inch of it. Brooklyn gasped when they finally parted, staring into his eyes as he held her only a breath away. Her eyes sparkled. Her lips were swollen and red. She was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. He held her gaze as he brushed a gentle kiss across the tip of her nose before lifting her into his arms. The house was cold at best, and he wanted her as comfortable as possible for the night he had in store for them.

"You're too light," he said, laying her on the bed. "You've been neglecting yourself too long."

"You can feed me in bed...later," she teased, drawing her fingers along his arms as he moved back. She frowned as he took a step back from the bed. "Aren't you going to join me?"

Gage couldn't help but laugh at the sensual pout of her lips. "In a moment, darling. I just want a minute to look at you." He lowered his gaze and did a long, slow sweep of her body, from her sexy little toes to the ruffled hair framing her face. She was perfection, in every sense of the word.

And she was all his.



"You're so beautiful. I still can't believe you didn't throw me out."

"I never wanted you to leave. I never stopped loving you."

"I'm sorry it took me so long to see that. But I promise we'll make up for lost time." He reached down and stroked her ankle, taking her foot in his hand. He smiled as he raised it to his lips, gently sucking each toe into his mouth. He'd never considered himself to have a foot fetish, but he'd be damned if the sight of her small, pale feet didn't drive his excitement higher. Her toes were perfect, each one smaller than the next. He caught her gaze as he suckled the smallest one into his mouth. "I'm going to start by licking every inch of that hot little body of yours. Then maybe I'll help ease some of that tension I see in your shoulders with a body massage. After that, I plan on making you come until you beg me to stop."

Brooklyn moaned at his words, watching with half-lidded eyes, as he released one foot and grasped the other, deliciously repeating his action. She giggled when his tongue tickled her arch, smiling at him with such warmth he nearly pitched his body forward and plunged into her. It was only with his last sliver of sanity that he was able to stand his ground and lower her leg gently to the mattress. Damn, this was going to be harder than he'd planned. She was too desirable, too sexy. And too damn dressed.

He bent forward, catching the bottom of the jersey between his fingers. It was cool and smooth, with a satiny texture he knew would rub her nipples into hard little buds. He reached his other hand behind her back easing her up as he lifted the shirt over her head and tossed it behind him on the floor. She wasn't going to need it again. He had a bag for her in the car, for tomorrow. And tonight, he'd keep her warm.

Brooklyn's gaze met his as the shirt hit the floor, his hand still palming her back. Her skin beaded from the cold, but the look in her eyes told him she didn't even notice. Her pupils were large and dark, once again hiding the colour in the flickering light. She looked like a siren ready to tempt him, and he was more than willing.

"Comfortable?"

"I'd be better if you were already inside me."

His cock jumped against his stomach. "You're making this extremely difficult." He cursed as she grinned and spread her legs. His head snapped down, pinned by the sight of her soft, velvety lips, coated with her sweet dew. "Damn," he rasped, kneeling down on the

edge of the bed. "I'm trying to be romantic here, darling." He waved towards her thighs. "This isn't helping."

"You don't have to put on a show. Just love me."

He laughed, trailing his finger up her leg until he found the soft spot behind her knee that made her arch her hips towards him. "This isn't a show, darling, it's a loving. And I plan on loving you all night long."

Brooklyn blinked in surprise as he lowered his lips to her leg and kissed a path to her knee, his tongue joining his finger at the back. "But—"

"I told you I was going to lick every inch of your skin. So you might as well lay back and settle in. I've still got a lot of territory to cover."

"I'll come before you finish," she protested, arching again when he licked the back of her other knee.

"Have you only one orgasm in you, darling?" he taunted, tossing her words back at her. She laughed. "You are truly wicked."

"It's what you love most about me," he countered, moving up to her thighs.

She was panting now, her chest rising and falling in the cool air, her nipples pointed towards the ceiling. He smiled, knowing he'd be rasping them with his tongue, feeling them peak even tighter in his mouth. He inched forward, warming her skin with his body as he nibbled her hips. She bucked against him, moaning softly as she rubbed her mound against his chest. Her arousal moistened his skin, sliding her silky lips across his nipple. "Easy, darling. I'll give you what you want in a moment."

"But I need you now."

Gage sighed against her skin, the last of his control slipping away at the sound of her voice. He lunged up, capturing her nipple in his mouth as he moved his hand between her legs. Brooklyn cried out when his lips sealed around her tight bud, his fingers rubbing the moisture around her clit. She was warm and wet, her juices so slick two fingers slipped inside her with ease.

"You're so wet. Damn, I love it when you respond to me like this." He pulled his fingers out and thrust them in again, clamping his mouth around her other nipple.

"Please."

She pumped her hips against his hand, pressing her breast into his mouth. He could smell the scent of her sex filling the room, mixing with the sweat beading their bodies until the air became a humid mass of sex and heat.

“Soon, darling, soon. I don’t want it to be over yet.”

“It’s only the beginning. You can tease me more next time.”

Gage chuckled, loving the way she’d confidently accepted there’d be a next time. And a thousand times after that. “Do you know how damn sexy you are when you beg me to make you come?” He moved his face up until it was even with hers. “Okay. Come for me.”

Gage watched her face as he swirled his fingers around her clit, squeezing it lightly with each pass before dipping them inside her again. She stared into his eyes, her mouth curved into a large O. He could see her orgasm building, the tension drawing her skin tight across her cheekbones. He smiled down at her, mesmerised by the loud wet sounds of his fingers pumping her flesh.

“You can’t fight it, darling, it’s too close.”

Brooklyn tensed her jaw and looked as if she were going to counter his statement—no doubt with something sarcastic—when he drew his fingers out again and stroked her clit hard and fast. She moaned and arched her chest into his, clamping her right hand around his forearm. “Yes...right there. Just one more pass.”

“Just one more? Are you sure?”

Brooklyn smiled then closed her eyes as the orgasm hit her. She arched higher, screaming his name as she dug her fingers into his arm. Her nails bit into his skin, but he didn’t care. The look on her face held his attention. It was a mixture of love and pure pleasure that nearly made him cream the bed. God, he loved it when she exploded, her entire body sharing in the release. Her head thrashed against the bed, her legs clamped around his hand, and her torso twisted beneath him. It was the most exciting show he’d had the privilege to witness.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are when you come? It’s like watching an exotic dance.”

Brooklyn sighed against his neck, her body still shaking. He still had his fingers lodged deep inside her, sending tremors of pleasure through her body.

"I feel the same about you. I love watching you give yourself to me." She moaned as he slowly withdrew his hand. "Please don't go," she whispered, trying to clamp her nether lips around him.

"I'm not going anywhere. But you interrupted my itinerary. Now I've eased the need a bit, I want to get back to where I left off."

Brooklyn grabbed his arm as he started to rise. "But I need you inside me. Now. You know touching me like that only makes the hunger worse."

Gage leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips, resisting her tongue as it probed his closed mouth. "Ah, ah, ah," he crooned. "We both know the anticipation makes the reward that much better." He rose up and straddled her body, not even trying to hide the immensity of his erection. He watched as Brooklyn's gaze fell to his groin, her tongue plotting a slow path across her upper lip. He knew his cock was strained, the skin a deep shade of red where it pulled tight across the crown. "Now be a good girl and roll over for me."

Brooklyn pouted at his request, but rolled around inside the small space between his legs, relaxing down on her stomach. She groaned as her breasts rubbed against the sheets. He smiled, knowing any movement would further excite her nipples. He looked down at her body, feeling his cock clench at the sight of her tight little ass. It was perfect. Firm but round, with just enough cushion she looked completely feminine.

"You know how much I love looking at your butt. Damn if you don't have the sexiest rear-end I've ever seen."

"Then why don't you ever touch it like you used to?" she asked quietly.

Gage stilled. They may have cleared the air, but they still hadn't discussed that night. "You know why," he said, his voice raspy and thick.

Brooklyn glanced back at him over her shoulder, a crease formed on her brow. "Because I came so hard that night I didn't know whether to laugh or cry?" She pursed her lips together to express her confusion. "I thought you'd enjoyed taking me that way?"

"I hurt you that night."

Brooklyn's smile caught him completely off guard. "You hurt my heart that night. Not my body. Sure, you were a bit...enthusiastic, but you didn't hurt me...not the way you've

worked it up in your mind." She turned back to the bed. "I enjoyed it," she added quietly, as if afraid to admit it too loudly.

"But I thought..." He trailed off, no longer able to form the words. His chest was too tight to get anything else out.

She turned back to him. "I tried to tell you before, but you never gave me the chance. I love every way you touch me. I always have." An impish smile lit her face. "I was hoping we might start bridging that gap again. Maybe by the time we're back home, you can love me like that again?"

Gage growled his reply, taking her lips in a kiss so carnal he had to grab his cock and squeeze his release away. All this time he'd been agonising over the wrong issue. He pulled away, loving how she huffed in regret.

"You'd just better hope we're home soon, lover. Because your little confession just upped my schedule."

Brooklyn's face blushed bright red before she turned away and laid her head on the bed. Oh yeah, she wanted it. He could see the tiny shivers racing down her back as she considered his words. She was just as curious as he was to find out if the next time would be as mind blowing as the first. But Gage knew it'd be even better. He smiled and placed his hands on her shoulders, firmly massaging her muscles.

"God, you're tense. You need to take better care of yourself." He moved down her back, finding every knot twisted in her muscles. She moaned with every swirl of his hands, sinking farther into the bed as he moved down her body. By the time he reached her buttocks, she was practically purring.

"Feel good?"

"Too good. But please don't stop."

"Un-ah," he whispered, tracing the curves of her ass. Even here her muscles felt tight, and he couldn't help but continue his massage down her cheeks to the thighs. "Just relax and let me ease your ache." He knew Brooklyn was aware he was talking about more than just her muscles. He'd felt the heat rise in her body. Heard her breathing escalate as he'd neared her pussy. She needed to be fucked. Hard and fast until she came so strong she wouldn't be able to scream. But he'd promised her he'd be gentle, at least in the beginning.

Gage rolled her over on her back, catching her by surprise. She looked up at him, her eyes wide, but then she smiled as he moved his hands along her inner thighs, pushing them farther apart until she was spread eagle on the bed. He loved seeing her reactions as much as feeling them, and wanted a clear view of her arousal. He eased down, lifting her feet in his hands.

“Bend your knees for me,” he commanded, bringing her feet up towards her ass. “That’s how I want you. So open I can see your pretty little clit clench when I touch you.” He moaned as she made it flutter. “Vixen. You’ll pay for that.”

Brooklyn gasped her reply as he lowered his lips to her nub and suckled it into his mouth. She tasted hot and sweet and he knew he’d be drunk on her taste before he entered her. He could lick her for hours, never tiring of feeling her velvety skin beneath his tongue. She was an addiction and he the junkie. He eased back, watching his fingers disappear inside her. She clenched and he tightened his jaw. He couldn’t wait much longer. His cock pulsed against his stomach. Even with the release she’d given him, the fire burned along his spine, demanding satisfaction. If he wanted to be gentle, he’d have to start soon.

“I want you to come in my mouth before I slide inside you.” He darted out his tongue and licked her entrance. “God, I love the taste of you. I could eat you forever.” He licked again, thrusting his tongue inside her this time. The walls of her vagina quivered as he traced the edges of her sex. “You like that, don’t you?” he said, sucking a path to her clit again.

She cried his name when he reached the nub, circling it with the tip of his tongue. He placed a hand on her stomach, amazed at how tight her muscles clenched with each pass of his mouth.

“Please. It’s killing me. I need you to make me come.”

“Now, darling?” he asked. “You need me now? Are you sure?”

“Gage!”

His name echoed off the walls and Gage was certain Sam could hear her outside in the car. He’d lied about sending Sam to the hotel, so Brook wouldn’t throw him out. But now he almost wished he had. “Okay, darling. Take a deep breath because in a moment you’re going to be screaming my name again.”

Brooklyn tilted her hips in the air, pushing her clit harder against his mouth as he set up a rhythm he knew would drive her over the edge. He rubbed his tongue flat against her nub

while thrusting two fingers deep inside her, the tips curled towards her stomach to graze her G-spot. Her body tensed, weeping cream so thick it coated his hand and her thighs. He could smell the distinct scent, and felt his erection grow even harder. He needed to get inside her.

“Now. Oh God. I’m going to come.”

Her body convulsed once and he moved, stroking her clit with his finger as he positioned himself over top. He waited until she moved her hips, signalling him she was completely over the edge before removing his hand and wedging his cock at her weeping entrance. She snapped her head towards him, gripping his shoulders with both hands as he eased his shaft inside, groaning at the rhythmic pulsing that clamped around his cock, gripping him so tightly he had to fight to move forward.

She whimpered, and the sound shattered his defences. He lunged forward, filling her with one deep stroke.

“Yesss,” she hissed, thrusting her body up. “Faster, baby. Hard and fast.”

He groaned in defeat and pounded into her, knowing he’d be disappointed with himself later. But her whispers of encouragement fuelled his desire until their mutual release was the only intelligent thought he had. This was how it’d always been with them. Hard. Deep. Fast. He could fuck her for hours like this. She was his. Body. Soul. He closed his eyes, knowing it would be over far too fast, but unable to stop. He chanced a glance at his groin, watching as his cock pulled free, the shaft coated with cream, before plunging back inside. He loved watching them make love. The way his cock separated her lips, his dark skin parting her pink. He kept his hair shaved, and seeing his skin merge with hers was more than he could stand.

He cursed, increasing his thrusts as he drew his attention back to her face. She chanted his name, begging him not to stop, holding onto his back as if her life were hanging by a thread. He moved lower, wanting her to feel every inch of his skin against hers. Wanting her to know she was his woman. His lover. She squeezed harder, pressing her chest against his as she buried her head in his neck. Her breath grazed across his shoulder a moment before her teeth scraped his skin.

“Lord have mercy...”

His words disintegrated into a harsh wail as she clamped down the instant her body rocked into another orgasm. Gage felt her walls close around him, and he let go, stiffening in

her arms as his sperm shot from the tip, drenching her vagina with spurt after spurt of hot seed. He tried to breathe, but all his muscles were contracted in an effort to purge every ounce of seminal essence from his body. He hung on, still rigid in Brooklyn's arms, as his world started to fade into grey.

Brooklyn moaned beneath him, bringing some of the blood back to his head, and he gasped in a large volume of air, collapsing onto his elbows in an attempt to keep from squishing her. Her body contracted again, milking his empty cock until her legs fell away from his hips, and her arms released his back, coming to rest on the bed. He looked down at her, smiling at the satisfied look on her face.

"Better, darling?"

"Hmmm," she groaned, her eyes closed, her voice already fading.

"Sleep. I'll let you rest a while before I make love to you again."

Brooklyn didn't make a sound, she just rolled against his chest as he pulled out of her and eased his back onto the bed. She fit perfectly against his side and he couldn't stop his smile from widening as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her tight.

"I love you."

"Love you more," she whispered, then she was gone.

Gage watched her sleep for several minutes, studying every line on her face, every twitch of her lips. He knew he'd never get tired of seeing her like this – content, vulnerable – and it warmed his heart knowing she trusted him enough to expose herself to him. Now if he could just take care of her unwanted admirer, their life could start again.

"I won't let that bastard hurt you, darling. I swear. I'll never leave your side again."

Brooklyn sighed against him, nuzzling even closer. Gage brushed a kiss across her forehead and relaxed back. Two hours. He'd give her two hours to get some rest before picking up where his erotic plan let off. Only this time, he'd play a few games.



## Chapter Twenty-One

Gage woke to the distant sound of ringing. He moved, not realising what he was reaching for, until he stared at the small, black unit in his hand. "Damn." He flipped it open, pressing it against his ear. "Yeah?"

"Finally finished, or are you already in the middle of round two?"

"Jesus, Sam, do you know what time it is?"

"Yeah, it's half past midnight. I've been watching the minutes tick by since you went into the house." Sam paused and Gage could hear him fighting back a chuckle. "I assume Brooklyn was kind enough to allow you to stay the night?"

"I convinced her," he replied, trying to keep the arrogance out of his voice.

"I heard you," said Sam, not bothering to hide his amusement. "Everything okay between you two, or are you just fooling yourself again?"

"I promised you I'd make things right with Brooklyn, and I did. This isn't an isolated incident. She's back in my life...for good."

"About time, buddy. Look, I just talked to Doug. He's got us booked on a flight out of here tomorrow afternoon. He wants Brooklyn in our Virginia safe house by tomorrow night. Do you think she'll go?"

"I think I can persuade her, just don't expect her to be happy about it. She's still in shock from what I told her about her mystery man. I think she was secretly hoping it was all a big misunderstanding...a crime of opportunity, not obsession."

"I'll do my best to be understanding," said Sam. "Okay, I'll call Doug back and tell him it's a go."

"Why don't you head back to the hotel? You must be freezing your ass off."

"I've suffered through worse, though I could use a few hours of sleep. But I'll be back by sunrise, so make sure you're done with your...activities by then. The last thing Brook needs is for me to walk in on the two of you...again."

Gage laughed, bidding Sam goodnight as he closed the phone and placed it back on Brooklyn's night table. They'd only slept for an hour, but already his body was humming.

Brooklyn was curled beside him, her head snuggled into his chest, her leg draped across his thigh. He could feel his erection pulse against her smooth skin, ready for another taste of her sweet body.

He smiled, remembering the plans he'd made for them. Now that he knew she was okay, there was her little act of defiance he needed to deal with. He wanted her to know the pleasurable penalty for taking ten years off his life. He rolled onto his side, cradling her head in the crook of his shoulder and lifted her leg over his. *Perfect*. In this position she was completely open to him. He wanted to wake her slowly. Get her juices flowing before she even realised his intentions. Then he'd spring his little trap.

He lowered his hand, easing it between their bodies. Her skin was warm and soft, scented with his masculine essence. He drew a deep breath, drinking in her intoxicating aroma as he skimmed his fingers across her mound. Brooklyn moaned softly in her sleep, shifting her leg against his thigh. He made another pass, lightly brushing her silky lips this time.

"Mmm."

The sound of her murmur peaked his cock against his stomach, increasing the ache building in his balls. He wondered if there'd ever be a time he didn't crave her. Didn't feel like a man racing out of control with his need to be inside her. But it wasn't just the sex he craved. He wanted to be with her. Have her talk to him about her day. Know she was listening because she wanted to when he talked about his. Fill her with love and security. All the things he had before, but let slip away. He wanted it all back and more.

And now he could.

His heart swelled at the thought, finally realising the true depth of her love for him. The ease with which she'd allowed him back into her life...and her bed. He moaned when he remembered how she'd begged him to make love to her. She'd beg him again.

Gage reached for her sex again, dipping inside her to test her readiness. Warm slick cream greeted his fingers and he couldn't stop the groan of pleasure that ripped from his chest. Even asleep she was ready for him. Dreaming of the pleasure he could bring her. Only this time, he'd have a bit of fun first.

He pulled his fingers out, circling the juice around her pulsing nub, feeling her body tense at the delicate intrusion. She moaned louder, pushing her hips against his hand as she

started to come out of her haze. He knew the moment she was fully awake. Her hands rose to his chest, palming his firm muscles as she undulated against his fingers.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

She chuckled, licking his chest in lazy circles. “As long as you intend to finish what you’ve started, I won’t hold that minor indiscretion against you.” She looked into his eyes. “You do intend on finishing, don’t you?”

“Of course, darling. But before we jump to the main course, there’s something I need to give you.”

“What’s that?”

“Your punishment for ever thinking you could leave me in a motel, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing more than a note and some signed divorce papers to explain your disappearance.” He pulled his hand from between her legs and tapped his index finger towards her. “You scared me out of ten years of my life. Now you’ll see what happens to bad little wives who scare their husbands.”

Before Brooklyn could blink, Gage grabbed her by the waist and hauled them both upright. He smiled wickedly at her, and pulled her body across his lap, deftly swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. She was still trying to make sense of the situation when she realised he’d positioned her across his legs with her ass in the air.

“Gage Matthews, what on earth do you think you’re doing?” She tried to sound irritated, but only cringed at the seductive drawl to her voice.

He merely laughed as he caressed her bare skin with his hand. “You knew you were putting your life at risk. If I hadn’t spent every waking moment wondering what that bastard could be doing to you, I could’ve overlooked your irrational behaviour. But that’s all I could think about. I know it was me you were running from, and I deserve any reprimand you have in mind. But first you’ll get your penance for risking what’s mine.” He stopped and leaned down over her back, scraping his teeth gently across her shoulder. “And you’re mine,” he whispered, his breath so hot against her skin it felt singed. “Completely mine.”

Brooklyn wanted to respond, to remind him that he’d given her no other choice but to flee, but her mouth wouldn’t form the words. Something in his voice had wedged a large knot in her chest, preventing her from any other action but breathing. Fear. She’d never

stopped to think how her leaving would affect him. She'd just assumed he'd be happy he was finally free. It'd never crossed her mind he'd be scared.

"I'm sorry," she finally whispered. "I didn't know what else to do. You were so angry, and..." Her words faded with the slow progression of his hand across her buttocks. There was something in his touch that sent warning bells off in her head. He was planning something.

"Gage?"

"After tonight, you'll think twice about scaring me again, darling."

God, his voice alone was enough to ignite a fire deep inside her. She struggled against his hold, but it was futile. She had no strength in this position, and wiggling only exposed more of her ass to him. "Tell me what you're going to do," she warned, but her voice was far from threatening. It sounded husky and raw, like a woman on the verge of climaxing.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'd never hurt you. But you are going to get a spanking, darling. An erotic paddling that will leave you begging to be taken."

Brooklyn opened her mouth to protest when the first slap landed on the firm cheeks of her ass. She gasped in surprise, a sudden tingling igniting through her body. She'd written scenes like this on several occasions, but she'd never experienced it. Never had the nerve to ask Gage to give her something so forbidden. Another hit sounded through the room, warming her skin, as the liquid pooled between her legs. She moaned, and squirmed to get closer to him.

"Feel good?"

"Oh God," she panted, crying out when his hand connected with her skin. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Yesss," she hissed, another slap echoing in the room. "Please take me."

He laughed, and he landed two more slaps before he answered. "Soon."

Brooklyn moaned through six more whacks to her ass before he stopped

"You're skin's so soft. So soft and red." He caressed his fingers lightly over her rear, gently easing the stinging sensation fluttering through her. "I love touching it."

He moved lower, trailing his fingers along her inner thighs. Did he know how wet his *punishment* had made her? Or was the real punishment arousal with no relief? She cringed at the thought of being left with such longing between her legs.

“Open your legs for me and let me see how wet you are.”

Brooklyn inched her feet apart, not able to deny his request. He couldn't leave her like this. He wouldn't. She held her breath, wanting to scream when his fingers brushed her lips, but didn't penetrate. Oh God, she needed him to touch her. Needed him driving into her, hard and fast. Deep. Oh so deep. She'd had to beg him before, knowing he wanted to show her how gentle he could be. But she didn't want gentle. She wanted Gage, out of control, so lost in his desire he couldn't hold back. He moved again and she couldn't stop her hum of ecstasy as two long fingers penetrated her sex, plunging deep inside her weeping channel.

“You liked that, didn't you.” It wasn't a question. “Tell me, darling. Was it as hot as you make it out to be in your books?” He pulled out and caressed her cheeks again. “Such a pretty ass. You're right. I've neglected it for far too long.” He drew his moist fingers down the cleft between her cheeks, brushing the cream against her anus. “I need to know. The other night, when I flipped you over, you shook. Was it because you were scared or excited at the prospect of me penetrating your tight little pucker?”

Brooklyn held back a moan when he brushed her anus again. “Anticipation,” she said, panting out the syllables. “I wanted you to touch me there.”

“Good. I thought maybe you were nervous, but now that we've cleared that up, there's nothing standing in my way.” He dipped his fingers inside her again, gathering more moisture, before transferring it to her ass. “Do you know how hard it was to love you from behind and not touch you here? I swear it used up a year's worth of my self-control.” He circled the hole this time, pressing just the tip inside her.

Brooklyn clenched her muscles, wanting to push back but unable to anchor herself. “More. I need more.”

She didn't care how desperate she sounded. His teasing was building an orgasm inside her she was certain would kill her.

“Easy. I don't want to cause you any discomfort.”

He collected more juice and slid a full knuckle into her ass. She bucked against his legs, desperate to take him deeper.

“You're tighter than ever back here,” he continued, not allowing her movements to rush him. “We need to go slowly. Just my finger tonight. Then, once we're settled, I'll buy you a plug. We can use it for a while until you're relaxed enough to take me without pain.”

She cried out this time, when his finger sank completely inside her anal channel, filling her with an unusual pleasure that was both familiar and new. She'd forgotten how it felt to have him deep within her nether hole. It was hot and tight, with just a bite of pain that made the sudden surges of satisfaction that much stronger. She wiggled against him, needing him to move inside her.

"You're so hot and tight. God, it's incredible." He pulled out until just the tip of his finger burned against her tight ring of muscles, then plunged back in, taking her ass in one long, deep stroke.

"Oh God. Yes. Please. More."

Gage growled as he repeated his thrust, palming her ass with his hand. She jerked on his lap, unable to stop her body from grinding into his. If only he'd touch her clit, she knew she'd fall off the edge.

"Ready to come for me again?" he asked, moving his other hand between her legs and caressing her clit, as if he'd read her thoughts.

"Yes. Please. I can't..."

Her scream vibrated through the air as he circled her clit with one finger while driving the other repeatedly into her ass. She opened her legs wider, needing to give him more access to her drenched lips. It wasn't much, but it was all she could do.

"That's it, darling. Let me watch you come for me."

"Don't stop. Now...now...now!"

The world exploded, arcs of white light blinding her, as the orgasm shot through her ass and into her womb. Time stopped, the room reduced to just Gage, his body and hers. Every nerve felt like it was electrified, burning a path straight to her sex. She screamed, convulsing in Gage's arms as he held her tight. He whispered in her ear, telling her how beautiful she was, how much he loved her. She heard his words as echoes in her mind, so far away they seemed lost in the haze of pleasure. It wasn't until the feelings started to ease she realised she was crying.

"Oh darling. You're amazing. So damn amazing. God, I love you."

He turned her on his lap, hugging her body close to his. It was so intimate, so safe. She clung tighter, not wanting their connection to end.

"I love you, too," she whispered, not sure she'd spoken until she felt him smile against her hair.

"Are you too tired to continue? Or can I love you some more?"

A new wave of tears spilled from her eyes, his simple words shattering any doubts she may have hidden away. His voice was soft and steady, the way he used to sound when they were first married. There was no hiding from the truth. Gage loved her, and had no intentions of leaving her again. This wasn't a one-night stand that would end with him watching her through narrowed eyes. She wasn't just a familiar body he was using to scratch an itch. Even the notion of him using pleasure to get his way faded with the honesty in his voice. He was hers, and he apparently intended on showing her that a number of times tonight.

She drew a ragged breath, trying to will the tears to abate, and turned to look into his eyes. He was sexier than any man she'd created in her mind or sketched with words. He was her wildest fantasy. And he was real.

Gage frowned as he wiped the tears from her face, a flash of doubt swirling in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

She nuzzled her face into his hand, kissing the palm. "You didn't hurt me. They're tears of joy. It just hit me you're here to stay, and I wasn't quite prepared for the sudden surge of emotion." She bit playfully at his fingers as they cupped her chin. "That and the fact I just had a mind-blowing orgasm." She blew a warm breath against his chest. "I swear you're even more masterful than I remember."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," he teased, but then his expression turned serious. "As for your other remark, I'm never leaving you alone again. This isn't a game I'm playing. You're the most important part of my life, and I don't intend on living without you."

He shuffled her on his lap and reached down to his pile of clothes at the side of the bed. Brooklyn watched him rummage through them, not sure what he was searching for.

"If you're looking for condoms, I think we've already blown the roulette theory to hell."

Gage chuckled and paused to wink at her. "If you're trying to scare me at the thought of you pregnant with my child, it's not working." He looked back at the pile, finally pulling a thick envelope free from the rumpled heap.

Brooklyn drew a sharp breath as he held the letter up. She knew what was inside without looking. She glanced at Gage's face, her heart slamming to a halt at the hurt in his eyes.

"I lost a part of my soul when I opened this," he said, slowly removing the papers from the envelope. "I think somewhere deep inside, I never really believed you'd ever sign them. Even waiting at Reynolds' office a part of me didn't want you to show up, despite what I'd told myself." He held the papers out to her, a slight tremble ruffling the edges. "Is this still what you want?"

Brooklyn choked back a sob, taking the white sheets from his hand. She could see her name scribbled across the lines, the last entry blurred from a single tear. It'd seemed so clear back at the motel. But now she realised she'd been a coward. She'd taken the easy way out instead of making Gage to talk to her. She forced herself to meet his gaze. "I never wanted this, and I'm sorry I ever signed them. I suppose I felt as if I had no choice, but that's not really true." She looked over at the table. The candle she'd lit earlier was still burning beside the lamp, the hot wax gathering in the bottom of the glass jar. She raised her hand, holding the papers above the flame until the edge flickered and ignited. "This is what I really wanted to do to the damn things," she said, finally dropping the burning pages into the jar. She turned back to Gage. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Gage smiled, a sigh of relief ruffling across her shoulder. "You're forgiven," he said, taking her mouth in his.

Brooklyn moaned into the kiss, losing herself in the sheer beauty of it. It wasn't hungry or carnal, but deep and possessive, as if he were trying to give her the proof of his love. She returned his need, allowing her love to flow through her. She didn't want him to ever doubt her desire again. His body tensed, his erection hardening against her thigh. She smiled. He wanted her, almost desperately judging on the size of his penis. She had no intention of leaving him in this condition.

She pulled back, licking his bottom lip when he frowned in disappointment. "Now I believe you mentioned something about loving me again?" she mused, capturing his nipple between her teeth. The sharp inhalation of air told her she had his attention.

"Are you sure you're up to it? You seem pretty worn out."



Brooklyn nipped at his nipple, loving the hushed curse that rasped from his chest. "I'm fine," she said, moving her lips over to his other peaked bud. It was just as hard and she didn't wait before suckling it into her mouth. "Maybe it's you who needs to rest?" she taunted. "You did say you were going to love me all night, but I'm starting to think you're eyes are bigger than your cock –"

Her words broke into a surprised yelp as he threw her back on the bed and pounced on top. His eyes were dark and stormy, his muscles bunched in anticipation, as he looked down at her like a victorious predator measuring up his fallen prey.

"You're more temptress than is good for you, darling." He licked his lips and gave her body a slow, seductive sweep. "Now you'll see just how long I can love you."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Brooklyn came awake slowly, her first thought lost in the heat from Gage's body. She was lying on top of him, their bodies still entwined. She could feel his semi-erect penis lodged in her entrance, the tip still inside her. She moaned, loving the complete feeling his presence stirred in her. She'd been empty for so long, it'd become a natural part of her existence. But that was behind her now.

She felt him sigh beneath her and smiled. He'd more than impressed her last night. She'd only been teasing about his stamina, but he'd kept his word. After pinning her to the bed, he'd thrust inside her. Not slow and soft like he'd tried earlier. He'd plunged forward, filling her to the hilt in one strong stroke. She'd climaxed immediately, pushing against him as he held her prisoner on the bed. He hadn't moved, just locked his cock deep in her channel as she rode the waves of her release. He'd smiled when she'd finally settled down, and bent over her.

*"That's one, darling. Only a dozen more to go before I'll consider the job done."*

She'd moaned at his words, knowing he was serious. Then he'd started moving. Shallow then deep. Fast then faster. Hard and long until she was screaming again, writhing beneath his body as he pumped his hips against hers. He hadn't stopped that time, just lifted her legs across his left shoulder and continued to pound into her. She'd lost count of her climaxes, fading from one into another until she wasn't even sure she was conscious. That's when he'd flipped them over and held her body above his. She'd protested, her limbs so limp she'd claimed she couldn't even move. But he'd ignored her and started pumping into her again. Before she'd realised, she was riding him, rising and falling along the length of his cock as he whispered encouraging words to her. How beautiful she was, how much he desired her. How tonight was only the beginning of their time together.

She'd lost herself, gripping his shoulders with both hands until he finally roared out his release, coating her walls with sperm until she was certain she'd drained his entire body. Then she'd collapsed onto his chest and drifted to sleep with his shaft still clenched inside her. It'd been the most erotic night they'd ever spent together.

“Good morning.”

Brooklyn smiled at his voice, husky and raw, wishing they could stay wrapped in each other's arms all day. “Morning,” she replied, feeling his cock harden inside her. Oh God, he was going to take her again. Just the thought of it sent a shiver down her spine, liquefying some hidden pool of arousal. She moaned, not even trying to hide her desire from him.

Gage chuckled, tightening his arms around her. “I love sleeping inside you too,” he said. “I love coming inside you even more. How about I show you just how much?”

She moaned, feeling him start to move. It wasn't hurried or frantic, the need to orgasm no longer paramount. He just eased his erection back and forth, gently stirring the embers growing inside her.

“I love how we fit together. Like you were made especially for me.”

“I was,” she said, staring down at him as she rested her weight on his chest. There was something delicious about lying on top of him, but having him move within her. It made her feel powerful. “I could stay like this forever,” she breathed.

“An appealing thought,” he agreed, increasing the rhythm. “But I doubt you'd survive long with no meat on your bones.”

“I could live on your taste alone, baby.”

Gage growled at her words, no doubt remembering how he'd come in her mouth, and instantly, the raging fire was back in his eyes. Brooklyn smiled at the outward declaration of his intentions and tightened her grip on his shoulders, knowing the ride was about to get rough. He gave her two more slow strokes before grabbing her hips. He raised his pelvis, aligning his cock for deeper penetration before thrusting into her, pushing so deep he brushed the end of her channel.

His name erupted as a hiss of pleasure, the feeling too exquisite to put into words. She tilted her hips, taking him deep with each stroke, crying out at the pressure building inside her. She could feel it moving through her stomach, then warming her groin in a wave of heat. She was going to come.

But she wanted him to go over first.

“Come for me.”

“Once you go over, darling,” he managed to groan between clenched teeth.

“Come for me now. I promise I'll join you.”

Gage met her wanton stare, held it, then nodded in defeat. He threw his head back, a loud wail vibrating the air as he filled her one last time and let go, flooding her channel with thick, hot sperm.

Brooklyn felt his crown swell against her inner walls and released the fragile hold she had on her body. Her cry joined his as the sun peaked above the horizon, filling the room with a soft yellow light. The candle flickered and slowly faded, the last of the wax drowning the tiny pinpoint of light. Brooklyn smelt the faint aroma of artificial pine mix with the heady scent of sex as she collapsed on top of Gage, her head resting on his shoulder.

Neither knew how long they stayed joined together, their chests rising in sync, their hearts beating as one, before Gage sighed against her skin.

"You're going to kill me," he breathed. "You know that."

"We'll go together," she replied.

He laughed. "Why is it you always have an alternate solution?"

"Because if I didn't, you'd get your way far too often."

Gage glanced out the window. "You know Sam said he'd be here at sunrise. If we stay like this, he'll get an eyeful when he walks in."

"He got an eyeful before, if I remember correctly."

Gage smiled a sinful grin. "Don't worry, I trumped him when I walked in on him and Sue at the motel that night you left. She was wearing his handcuffs."

"Lucky girl."

Gage stared at her, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Seems you've got a few more fantasies you want me to bring to life. If I were you, I'd come to bed prepared for anything."

"I'll take that as a promise," she remarked, gently rolling off him. She sighed the moment his cock slipped free, already missing his connection. "Do I have time for a shower?"

He sat up in the bed and swung his legs over the edge. "You've got time, but have you got hot water?"

"There should be enough for a quick one." She stood up, and walked straight to the stairs, not bothering to grab any clothes. "Care to join me?"

"I don't think I can go again so soon. It's been a long night."

She looked back at him over her shoulder. "It's only a shower."

"I'll give you running start," he said, stalking towards her.

Brooklyn screamed and ran down the stairs, Gage hot on her heels.

Gage creaked down the stairs, his hair still dripping down his back. His chest was bare, with only his jeans clinging to his body. Brooklyn was wearing his shirt until Sam arrived with the clothes he'd bought for her. But he almost preferred it this way. It made him feel connected to her. As if he was still touching her somehow. He smiled at the images that lingered in his mind as he made his way to the kitchen. A quick breakfast and then a full scale bug out to the airport. Brooklyn had insisted on cleaning up the loft before she left, and leaving a note for the Boyds with some cash to cover the items she'd used. Brooklyn wasn't one to take charity, or even help, despite the circumstances. While that sometimes got on his nerves, he respected her strong sense of pride.

He turned left through the doorway, keeping clear of the clothesline, and started rummaging through the cupboards. There wasn't much in the way of breakfast items, but he managed to find some instant oatmeal and a jar of canned peaches. He groaned at the sight of the sweet juice surrounding the fruit, thinking of Brooklyn's thick cream. He'd eaten more than his share of her, but couldn't wait to indulge again.

"Focus, man. Focus." He spoke the words firmly, injecting enough authority in them to shake some sense back in his head. He needed to concentrate on the task at hand before he found himself upstairs in the bedroom, Brooklyn plastered against the wall as he filled her with his, once again, erect penis. Damn, didn't the thing ever rest? He'd come five times since he'd arrived last night, and yet, he knew he could love her again.

He sighed, placing a pot of water on the stove when a loud crack echoed through the room. Gage felt his body jerk forward, then back before swaying off to the side. His head bounced off the corner of the marble countertop, as he crumpled to the floor. Black dots filled his vision a moment before the world spun and faded, thrusting him into the darkness.

"Gage, baby, I don't smell anything cooking yet," Brook teased as she rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. A pot sat on the stove, spitting boiling water into the air. "Gage?" She stepped past the table and screamed.

She rushed over to his limp body, dropping to her knees at his side. His head was sliced open, the wound dripping blood onto the floor. She touched his neck, searching for a pulse when the jolt hit her body. A soundless scream rushed from her chest as she jerked above Gage's body before falling beside him on the floor. She heard a wicked laugh sound behind her as the needle pierced her skin. Coloured streaks replaced the washed out silhouette of the kitchen, until nothing remained but darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Gage groaned and rolled onto his back, his eyes squeezed shut. He could hear his name floating around inside his head, but the sound was so distant, he couldn't make sense of its location.

*"Gage!"*

Damn, there it was again. That voice. He yelled back, hearing the sounds in his head, but unsure whether the words formed on his lips.

*"Easy buddy. Don't try to move. Just see if you can open your eyes."*

Gage pried his lids apart, squinting at the jumbled images flip-flopping across his vision. It reminded him of how laundry looked tumbling in the dryer, only less solid. He groaned and closed his eyes, sinking back in to the darkness, when a firm hand shook his shoulder.

*"Open your eyes. We need to find Brooklyn."*

*Brooklyn.*

The name bounced around a few times before his mind cleared and fear staked through his heart. Gage blinked, ignoring the sudden shifting in his stomach and forced his eyes to focus. Sam was kneeling beside him, his complexion pale, his jaw clenched tight. Gage could see the panic lurking behind Sam's guarded smile, his friend's hands fisted so tight the skin was white. "Sam?"

Sam grabbed his arm when he tried to push up onto his elbows, and stopped him from falling back on the floor. "I'd move slowly, if I were you, buddy. You've got a welt on your neck worthy of its own zip code."

Gage moaned his reply, his tongue still too thick to work around the thoughts in his head. He leaned against Sam's shoulder, praying the man wouldn't move away before his equilibrium returned. The fuzziness began lifting, but he couldn't seem to remember what had happened. "What..." He stopped and looked at Sam, hoping he could read the rest of what he was thinking.

"Looks like someone hit you from behind while you were standing at the stove." Sam waved his hand at Gage's head. "Then you clipped the counter on the way down. You've got quite a slice on your forehead."

"What?" It took three tries, but Gage finally swiped his fingers across his temple, wincing at the sticky patch on his left side. He brought his fingers back, an exasperated sigh washing out with his breath as he stared at the smear of blood. "Damn." He looked up at Sam, still sifting through the scrambled images when his mind locked onto a single thought. "Brooklyn!"

Sam grabbed him by the shoulders, stopping him from stumbling to his feet. "Easy."

Gage brushed off Sam's hand and levered himself up. "She was cleaning up the loft. I've got to check on her—" He stopped when Sam shook his head. "What?"

"She's gone. I cleared the house before I tried to wake you up. There's no sign of her."

Gage felt the room dip and weave, and had to grab the counter to stop from falling back down on the floor. A crippling fear swarmed over him, and for the first time in his life, he felt completely lost.

"One of the back windows was still open, and there were fresh tracks leading off towards the woods. I'm guessing Drake came in that way, knocked you out, and took Brooklyn. He probably had a car stashed somewhere."

Gage nodded, still not able to talk around the large lump in his throat.

Sam forced a thin smile. "He can't be far away. We still have a chance."

"A chance?" Gage's head pounded with each syllable, but he was too angry to stop the sudden flow of words. "How can we hope to find Brooklyn when we haven't got a clue where the fucker took her?" He pushed his fingers through his hair, hoping the pressure against his skull would ease some of the throbbing. He felt so damn helpless it bored a hole through his heart. "I never should've let her stay here last night. I should've hauled her ass off to the motel the moment I walked through the door instead of being selfish." He looked

down at his hands, not surprised to see they were trembling. "I fucked up. And Brooklyn's paying the price."

"It's not..." Sam's voice mixed with a loud ringing noise, stopping him in mid-sentence. He whispered a curse and pulled out his phone, glancing at the name on the screen. The colour drained from Sam's face as he looked up at Gage. "Where's your cell phone?"

Gage drew his eyebrows together in question as another ring vibrated the air. "Upstairs on the night table. Why?"

"Because it's calling me."

"But how..." Gage growled as Sam flipped open the lid, his teeth bared in disgust.

"What the hell have you done with her?" barked Sam, not bothering to hide his anger.

Gage hissed and reached for the phone when Sam stilled, flashing him puzzled look.

"Hello?"

"Sam?"

"Brooklyn? Oh God, is that you?" Sam twisted the phone so Gage could listen in. "Brooklyn?" he whispered again. "Can you talk?"

"Sam." Her voice was quiet and thick, and Gage knew she'd been crying.

"Brook," Sam began. "If you can't talk, just tap the phone, or sigh, or something."

"I can talk...I think...But not for long. He might hear me."

"Where are you?" asked Sam, wincing as she sobbed again. "Brooklyn..."

"I don't know," she cried. "I'm in the trunk of his car. I just woke up. I think he drugged me. I'm not sure. I don't remember everything." Her voice broke off and Gage heard Sam bite back a growl.

"It's okay. Just try to stay calm. Everything's going to be fine," soothed Sam.

"But Gage! He was lying on the floor...I saw blood—"

"Gage is okay. He's right here listening. If you just calm down I'll put him on."

Gage grabbed the phone and cupped it to his ear. He could hear Brooklyn's staggered breaths and wanted to crawl through the phone and hold her. "Brooklyn?"

She cried at the sound of his voice, making the lump in his throat even larger. He fought back tears and gripped the phone harder.

"Easy, darling. I'm right here. It's going to be okay. Just talk to me. Are you okay?"

"I thought he'd killed you," she sobbed, her voice little more than a whisper.



"I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"Yes." She'd paused just enough to tell him she was anything, but okay.

"Did he hurt you?"

"I...I don't think so. I think he hit me with the taser again. I don't remember anything except waking up in the trunk." She sucked in a quick breath that rattled the phone. "I don't know where I am. I don't even know what kind of car it is. I..."

"Shhh," he soothed, stroking the phone as if she could feel his touch. "None of that matters. As long as you're okay, everything's going to be fine. Now I need you to listen very carefully. My phone has a built-in GPS. Sam's calling the office as we speak. It'll only take a few minutes before we'll be able to track you. But I need you to do me a favour. I know it's not safe for you to keep talking, so I want you to hide the phone somewhere safe. Leave it on, so I can hear you, but put it somewhere Drake won't find it. We can't take the chance he'll get angry."

"But where? I'd clipped it on the back of my panties so we wouldn't have to go back upstairs, but if I put it back on there, he might find it this time!"

"Easy, darling. Don't get upset. Chances are he won't stop until he gets to a place he considers safe. So just hide it in the trunk. Try pushing it into a corner by the tail lights. Once we have your location, we'll catch up with you."

"But I don't want to lose..." She sobbed twice then sighed. "Okay."

"I'll still be on the line. I promise. I'll be there before you know it." He heard Sam talking in the distance, but concentrated on Brooklyn. "I'm not leaving you."

"I'm...I'm scared."

He couldn't stop the huff of pain that squeaked from his chest. "I know, darling. I promise I'll be there soon. Now stuff the phone in the corner and pretend to be sleeping. Don't give him any reason to hurt you. Do whatever you have to. Your safety is all that matters." He paused wondering if she understood what he was implying. "Do you understand?"

She whimpered into the phone, and he knew she understood. "I love you."

"You can tell me again in person, because I'm not letting you go. Now put the phone away. I'll see you soon." He hesitated, not wanting her to think he was saying good-bye. "I love you too."

He felt a tear strike a cold path down his cheek as the sound in his ear changed. Instead of the constant panting of her breath, the noise was muffled, followed by a thumping. *Good girl.* He pulled the phone away, tucking it against his chest. He couldn't bear thinking about her cold and scared, lying in the dark. If he did, he wouldn't be able to function. "Sam?"

Sam looked over at him from the kitchen phone. "They're tracking it now. Just a few more minutes to isolate her signal."

"We don't have any time to spare," he growled, pulling his boots on. His vision was still blurred, but the anger was helping him focus. He'd kill Drake. No hesitation, no guilt. As soon as he had the bastard in his sights, he'd blow the guy into the afterlife. He doubted Drake would be going anywhere pleasant.

"Thanks." Sam hung up, and made for the door. "Brooklyn's heading west. They've managed to narrow the signal down to a small road just north of highway forty. He must have turned off the main highway to avoid being spotted. Doug's looking into possible locations. Drake's got to be heading somewhere specific."

Gage nodded and grabbed a jacket out of the closet. The sleeves were too short, and he wasn't fond of camouflage, but he wasn't going to waste any time running upstairs. He followed Sam out and through the snow to the car, tossing Brooklyn's purse in the back. "How far away is he?"

"He's got fifty miles on us. But then I doubt he's driving a hundred and sixty," said Sam, sliding into the driver's side. "I suggest you fasten your seatbelt, buddy. It's going to be an interesting ride."

"Just get us there quickly," he replied, clipping the buckle around his waist. "I can't lose her. Not now...not to him."

Sam nodded as he revved the engine and skidded down the icy street. "Don't worry. You're going to have a lifetime of grovelling at Brooklyn's feet ahead of you. I'll see to it personally."

Gage gave Sam a half smile as he watched the scenery streak by. *Hold on, darling. Just hold on.*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

She was cold. A bone-deep cold that shot icy fire through her veins, igniting pain in her fingers and toes. Brooklyn moaned and rolled over, feeling her hands bind above her head. She tugged against the metal, wincing at the sharp bite on her wrists. She was handcuffed to a bed, a pile of blankets tossed across her. Fear prickled down her skin, an uneasy feeling building along her neck. Someone was watching her.

"I see you're finally awake, Sarah. I was beginning to think I'd gotten to you too late. You were nearly blue by the time I lifted you out of the trunk."

Brooklyn turned towards the door, her heart flip-flopping hard in her chest. The fear she'd felt escalated as she watched Drake step through the doorway and saunter across the room, stopping at the foot of the bed. His hair was dark this time, but with the same brown eyes she remembered from before.

*Dark eyes reflected...*

She pushed the images out of her head. She couldn't afford to panic now, not with Drake in control. If she allowed her fears to run wild, there'd be no one left for Gage to rescue.

*Gage.*

Had Drake found the phone? Was Gage on his way? How long until she was finally free? There were a thousand questions and no answers. All she knew for certain was Drake had her exactly where he wanted her.

"Drake." Her voice was timid, and she cursed at the obvious fear she heard in it.

Drake chuckled and smiled a tooth-filled grin at her. "So you do remember me. I was beginning to have my doubts. Especially after your little show last night." He eased down on the edge of the bed. "Tell me. Did you enjoy your time with him, precious?"

Brooklyn turned her head away from his hand, when he reached up to grab her chin. "Please. I'm not feeling well."

"You felt well enough to fuck that bastard for hours last night!" he snarled, pinching her face between his fingers. "Then again in the shower this morning. I have to hand it to you. You're quite a little minx."

Brooklyn yelped at his hold, a single tear escaping down her cheek. "Please. You're hurting me."

Drake growled and pulled his hand away, rising quickly from the bed as he stalked off across the floor. "I've got some soup for you. Once you're warmer, we'll deal with your...indiscretions." He looked back over his shoulder as he passed through the doorway. "Penance will make you forget all about him, precious. I promise. I can still save you."

Brooklyn watched him leave, her heart tight in her chest. She needed to find a way out, before Drake unleashed her *penance*.

*Don't give him any reason to hurt you. Do whatever you have to. Your safety is all that matters.*

Brooklyn cringed at the memory of Gage's words. How could she allow anyone to touch her after giving everything in her soul to Gage? She'd rather die than have him live with that knowledge. He meant everything to her. She looked back at the door. Drake would be back soon. She needed to act now. She needed a miracle.

\* \* \* \*

Sam stopped at the snow-covered lane, the bright sun casting dark shadows through the trees. "The signal ends a few hundred yards up this street," he said, nodding in the direction of the road.

Gage felt the sweat trickle across his brow and down the back of his neck. "I hope they're right. We don't have time to make mistakes."

"The GPS is pretty exact. As long as he didn't take her away in another car, we'll be okay."

Gage stilled at the thought. Damn, he should have convinced Brooklyn to shove the phone down her pants and hope for the best. But if Drake found it..."We'll go the rest of the way on foot," he said, already opening his door.

Sam nodded and followed, running across the snow, his gun tight in his hand. Gage stopped when he rounded a corner, almost slamming into a grey sedan. He bent down,

ducking behind the trunk, Sam close at his side. The hatch was still open, a small layer of frost covering the inside. He reached in, feeling around the edges until he found the phone. His heart pounded painfully against his ribs as he closed the lid, and stared at the outline of a cabin amidst the trees.

“What do you want to bet the bastard has her inside?” said Sam.

“God, I hope so. I’ll take the front door. You go around to the back and see if there’s another way in.”

“Are you sure? Maybe I should go first? Surprise the bugger so you can get Brook out of here.”

“We’ve already been over this. And I’ll be damned if you get first dibs on the guy.” He glanced down at his Glock, watching a flicker of light dance off Brooklyn’s engraving. “I’ll give you a few minutes head start, then I’m going in.” He gave Sam a hard, calculating gaze. “If anything happens to me, I’m counting on you to make sure Brook’s okay.”

Sam drew his lips tight, and looked as if he were preparing a comeback, but turned instead, and headed through the trees. Gage watched him disappear, silently counting the seconds until the need to get to Brooklyn overcame every other thought. He inched ahead, following the contour of the car. The cabin was off to his left, half hidden in the dense trees. It was an old F.B.I. safe house that had been decommissioned a few years ago. Doug had called on Brooklyn’s phone with what little information he had on the place. It seems Drake—Scott—had kept closer contact with the Bureau’s files than they’d first thought.

Gage cursed the bastard, easing his way towards the front door. Once he reached the porch, he’d be completely exposed. He stopped just short of the three steps and listened. The air was thin and cold, his breath a visible cloud around his face. He checked his watch, hoping Sam had managed to find another way in, and launched himself up the stairs. He didn’t even bother trying the handle, as his foot connected with the wood, shattering the frame. He stepped through the broken door, not certain what he’d find on the other side.

“Agent Matthews. What an unexpected surprise.”

Gage stopped, his gun levelled, his finger half compressed on the trigger. Drake was standing in the middle of the room, Brooklyn plastered against his chest. He was holding a ninety-two Beretta to Brooklyn’s temple, the trigger partly engaged.

“Let her go, Scott.”

Drake winced, an angry growl rumbling from his chest, as he hardened his hold on Brooklyn. She whimpered in pain, but didn't move. "My name is Drake, you fucking bastard."

Gage glared at the man, his attention half focused on Brooklyn's face. Her eyes were wide with fear, and slightly glassy. She was shaking in his grip, her lips a cool shade of blue. "Okay, Drake. I'll tell you again. Let Brooklyn go."

Drake howled this time. "Sarah! Her name is Sarah! And you're the one who's going to leave." He took a step back, dragging Brooklyn across the floor. "She belongs with me. I'm the hero here, not you! Only I can save her."

"Then why are you holding a gun to her head? I thought you loved her? Do you really think this is the way to gain her love in return? Look at her face. You're scaring her."

Drake shook his head, never allowing his gaze to waver. Gage had hoped the man would turn just long enough to get off a shot, but the bugger seemed to sense his intentions. He remained steadfast, his gun still pressed against her skin.

"Everything will make sense to her once she realises who I am. She's only scared of the unknown. Once she remembers, she'll stay with me...forever."

Gage took a step forward, his gun still aimed at the bridge of Drake's nose. He could take the shot. He knew he wouldn't miss. But Drake wasn't an ordinary psycho. His time in the military, alone, suggested he'd be able to kill Brooklyn before the bullet penetrated his skull. And Gage wasn't about to gamble with Brooklyn's life.

"Okay, Drake. Why don't we both try to relax and talk about this. I know you don't want to hurt Bro...Sarah. It's one thing we have in common."

Drake laughed, the sound raw and nauseating. "Don't lie to me. You don't care about her. All you want to do is keep her in your bed. Fuck her until you've had your fill. Then you'll get rid of her, just like you did with all the others." He shook his head again, and narrowed his eyes. "No, you don't love her like I do. She's mine." He nodded towards the door. "Now leave, or I'll prove my love the only way I know how."

*He'll kill her.*

The thought struck him deep in the gut, nearly doubling him over. He could see the insanity raging in Drake's eyes. Feel the intensity radiating from his body. He'd rather die

with Brooklyn, than let her go. Gage took two steps back, hoping the brief retreat would ease some of the tension. "All right. Sarah's yours. I just have one question for you. What now?"

"Now you leave, and she comes with me."

"Where?"

"Home. I've built a life for us. She'll be happy there."

"Happy? Do you think being tied to your bed will make her happy? Did the other women that were killed find happiness? You weren't able to save them. What makes you think you can save her?"

Drake stilled, his body rigid, his eyes narrowed. Gage could hear the man's breath stall in his chest, as his face paled. *Yes.* He'd gotten a reaction, however small. Perhaps reminding Drake who he used to be was his only chance.

"Fuck you," snapped Drake, sweat now beading his forehead.

"You haven't answered my question. How are you going to save her when you couldn't save the others? How can you keep her safe? All your training. All your medals. They couldn't save Sarah before, so what makes you think you can save her now?"

"Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!"

"You used to save people. You used to stand for justice. Look at what you've become. You're willing to kill an innocent woman just to appease your tortured soul." He inched forward, watching for a single chance. "This isn't who you are, Scott. You're not a monster, like the man who killed your wife."

"Sarah's not dead!" screamed Drake, removing the barrel from Brooklyn's head as he aimed it at Gage. "I didn't fail her! I'm her hero."

Gage saw a flash of movement from the adjoining hallway a second before the report of the gun filled the room. Brooklyn screamed as the bullet knocked Gage across the room, slamming him into the wall. His breath left his chest in a large whoosh, as his legs buckled and he fell to the floor. A sharp pain erupted on his left side, quickly spanning his chest. Black flitted at the edge of his vision, slowly filling his field of view. He tried to push back up, but couldn't seem to anchor his hands on anything.

"Gage!" Brooklyn screamed his name as he crumpled to the floor, the smell of sulphur stinging her nose. Drake followed Gage's motion, ready to fire another round. His body

tensed against her back, his muscles primed for the final blow, and she reacted before she even had time to think. In a single motion, she whirled her bound hands at his arm, knocking it sideways, as the bullet left the barrel. The slug ricocheted off the doorframe, a few inches from Gage's head, and impacted the wall behind them.

Drake snarled in her ear, deftly avoiding her elbow as she tried to connect with his chest, and threw her to the floor. Then he aimed the gun at her head, a savage smile twisting his lips. "I'll never let him take you. You're mine!"

Brooklyn braced herself, wondering if she'd feel the bullet pierce her flesh, when a loud crack echoed through the room. Drake flinched as the gun flew from his hands, landing with a crash against the wall. He stared down at the hole in his hand when a blur of white flew across the room, knocking him against the far wall. Brooklyn screamed, and pushed to her knees as Sam followed Drake's motion, smashing his jaw twice with his fist. Drake twisted and almost succeeded in throwing Sam into the wall, but Sam dodged the man's attempt, connecting with his jaw for a third time. Drake sagged in Sam's grip, his head lolling to one side. Sam sneered and released the man's clothes, smiling as Drake fell heavily to the floor. Then he flipped the guy over and snapped the cuffs tightly around his wrists. Sam turned back to look at her, but she was already moving, running across the floor to where Gage was laying on the floor.

"No!" She skimmed her hands across his chest, searching for the wound she knew had taken him to the ground, but couldn't find any sign of the impact. "Darling, speak to me. Where are you hurt?"

Sam knelt down beside her, gently encasing her hands in his. "Easy, Brook. Gage is fine. He's just had the wind knocked out of him." He gave Gage a firm shake. "Hey, buddy. You okay?"

Gage groaned, his head rolling to one side before his eyes fluttered and finally opened. "God damn that hurts," he moaned, rubbing his left shoulder. "I thought these things were supposed to stop the bullet?"

Sam laughed. "Bullet, yes. Pain, no." He turned to her, smiling at the puzzled look on her face. "He's wearing Kevlar. He insisted on being bait, so I insisted on the vest." He grinned back at Gage. "You're lucky he went for your chest instead of your head."



"Soldiers rarely go for the head shot in battle. It's too small a target. They're trained to hit the torso first."

Brooklyn stared at the two men, talking as if they'd been out at the range instead of facing a deadly opponent. Fire erupted in her veins as she stomped to her feet. Both men turned to stare at her, their eyes wide.

"You two are crazy, you know that? Completely off the deep end! No wonder you're partners. No one else would be insane enough to work with you!"

Gage smiled, accepting Sam's hand, as he rose into a wavering stance. "I love you too."

Tears flooded her eyes, relief mixed with shock breaking the last of her defences. She took two steps forward and sagged into Gage's arms, wrapping her fingers around the edges of his jacket. Gage smiled against her hair, his heart beating with hers. She was just about to thank him when a creak sounded behind them.

"You'll always be mine, Sarah."

Brooklyn gasped as Gage jerked her sideways, shielding her body with his. She heard a bullet shatter against the wall just as Gage raised his gun and fired. A loud groan sounded behind her, followed by a hard thud. She turned, watching a small pool of blood puddle below Drake's shoulder.

"Jesus!" cursed Sam, rushing over to check the man's vitals. He looked over at them. "He's still alive, but he'll need to get to a hospital pretty fast."

Gage holstered his gun and pulled Brooklyn back against his chest. "I thought you'd taken care of the problem, partner?"

Sam shook his head, pressing a piece of cloth against Drake's shoulder. "I didn't think he'd regain consciousness, let alone try to take a shot with his hands still cuffed behind his back. I'll be damned if it wasn't a hell of an accurate one, too."

A deep chuckle rumbled through Gage's chest a moment before the world started to spin. She leaned into him, feeling him gather her in his arms.

"Easy, darling. You're still suffering from exposure. Just rest and I'll get you warmed up in the car." The world shifted as he picked her up and headed for the door. He let his gaze lock with hers as a devious smile spread across his face. "Now if I recall my first aid training correctly, bodies heat faster when they're naked." He swiped a heated path across his lower lip with his tongue. "And we both know what happens when we get naked together."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### March 30<sup>th</sup> - Reno

"By the power invested in me, by the state of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Brooklyn wiped a single tear from her cheek as she watched Sam bend down to Sue and take her lips with his. A warm feeling filled her heart. She looked over at Gage. He stared her with a hooded gaze, barely conscious of the two people kissing in front of the altar. Brooklyn flashed him a smile, chuckling at the way his breath hissed through his teeth.

"Congratulations," she said, giving Sue a firm hug, as she smiled at Sam over Sue's shoulder. "You're way better than he deserves, you know."

Sam smiled, pulled her against his chest, and gave her a wet kiss. "Behave yourself, or I'll give you one of those spankings you write about."

Brooklyn's face heated and she prayed her friends couldn't see the swirl of desire she felt flash in her eyes. She met Sam's knowing grin. "From what I hear, you're already way beyond that."

Sam's eyes sparkled with amusement, while Sue's complexion blushed a deep red. Sam gave her one more squeeze before grabbing Sue by the hand. "Thanks for coming out, guys. It meant a lot to us."

Gage moved beside her, shaking Sam's hand as the couple bolted from the small chapel, their laughter drifting through the air. Brooklyn felt his chest press against her back, his heat seep through to her skin. She sighed, leaning into his embrace. He'd barely left her side since the cabin, even insisting she accompany him to work. But she'd found the gesture more romantic than anything else.

"They make a good couple, don't you think?"

"Almost as good as us," said Gage, cinching his arms around her waist. "Now how about we head back to the hotel and see if we can find a way to occupy the time? Maybe I can help with some *research*."

Brooklyn smiled, falling in beside him as they wove their way back to their hotel. He kept his arm firmly around her shoulders, never allowing her hip to leave his. She felt giddy, like when they were first married, only now they had the advantage of experience. No treading around the issues, or wondering what the other enjoyed. They knew every inch of each other's bodies, and exactly what turned them on. Though it seemed Gage still had a few tricks up his sleeve. Last night he'd ordered an exotic fruit platter, and had insisted on using her body as his personal plate. She'd never think about strawberries and pineapple in the same way again. Then he'd held her all night, gently stroking her whenever the nightmares threatened to pull her under. She smiled when she thought about what she had in store for him. Tonight was all about putting their past behind them, and she knew just how to do it.

"So, darling," said Gage, locking the door to their room. "Looks like we've got twenty-four hours to occupy." He sauntered up behind her, gently grazing his fingers across her hip. "Any ideas on how we should spend them?"

Brooklyn smiled and turned in his arms, melting into a soul-searing kiss, before placing her hands on his chest and softly pushing him away. "I do have one idea," she teased, stepping back until she reached the bathroom door. "Do me a favour and wait on the bed. I'll be right out."

Gage groaned his reply. She saw him move towards the bed, his fingers already working the buttons of his shirt, as she stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. She'd been waiting for this night since they'd driven back to Reno. Drake, or Scott as she now knew him, had been treated for his gunshot injury and then transferred to a Federal hospital until he was deemed fit to stand trial, though neither Gage nor Sam seemed to think that day would ever come. His injury had opened the door between his two realities, and he seemed unable to exist as either identity.

She sighed. It would be months before she'd feel free of Scott's torment, but at least she wouldn't have to face the memories alone. Gage would be there to ease her through it. Be strong for her when she couldn't. She smiled and slipped off her dress as she pulled a lacy, purple negligee over her head. It clung to her breasts, firmly holding them in place, before skimming her torso until it reached her thighs. Two long slits ran up the length of the sides, held together by intricately woven ties, exposing just enough of her pale flesh to make Gage's tongue water.

Brooklyn smiled as she gazed at her reflection. She wanted Gage so far gone he'd submit to her wishes, and the thin piece of lace barely covering her body was just the thing to do it. Gage was a visual lover, and dressing up for him always made his blood boil. But she still had one last preparation.

She reached for the drawer farthest from the door, and slowly pulled it open. She took a nervous breath as she removed a small box and opened the lid, exposing the smooth plug she'd bought at a shop downtown, during one brief moment when Gage had allowed her to go with Sue to get Sam's wedding present, while he waited in the car.

A shiver tingled down her spine and into her womb. She was so excited about having Gage take her anally, she feared she might come before she even left the bathroom. She took a soothing breath, reining in her libido as she picked up the plug and placed it on the counter. Then she removed a small tube of lubrication and twisted off the cap. She dampened her lips as she held the tube against the plug, squeezing a long thin line down the length of the toy, before swirling the slippery substance around with her fingers. It felt cold and slick, but she knew it'd grow warm the instant she took it inside her. She glanced once more at the closed door, imaging Gage waiting for her on the bed, then raised one leg, bracing it on top of the toilet. She eased her hand between her thighs, rimming her anus with the tip of the plug. A low, guttural moan trembled from her lips as she slowly inserted the device, allowing the thick width to ease through her tight tissues until the base lodged against ass.

"Oh, God." The act was erotic and hot, and just thinking about Gage's reaction was enough to make her vagina clench in anticipation. As much as he'd promised to take her there again, the incident with Drake had scared him enough he'd eased up on his desires. She knew he was afraid of hurting her, and needed a strong push to break him free of the glass bubble he'd wrapped her in.

"Time to show me how much of a man you can really be, darling," she whispered to the closed door as she stepped back and inched it open. Gage was splayed out on the bed, naked except for a tie slung loosely around his neck. He was propped up on one elbow, his eyes glued to her body. A low growl vibrated through the room as she walked out of the bathroom and over to the edge of the bed, stopping an arm's length away.

"Hungry?" she teased, drawing a single finger down the edge of his thighs.

“Starving,” he countered, ravaging her with his eyes. He reached out his hand. “Come here.”

Brooklyn inched closer, but placed her hand against his chest when he tried to pull her down. “Tonight’s my night,” she whispered, circling his nipple with the tip of her finger. She smiled at the low hiss that erupted from his chest. “I have something special planned.”

Gage raised an eyebrow. “Care to enlighten me?”

“Not yet. Now be a good boy and roll over on your stomach for me. I want to relieve all that tension I see in your shoulders.”

Gage gave her a quizzical look, his eyebrow still raised in question, before he moved to the centre of the bed. Brooklyn hummed in delight as she watched his muscular frame settle on the bed, his broad shoulders tapering into a narrow waist. She climbed onto the bed and crawled over to him, accentuating the rock of her hips as he watched her through half-lidded eyes. He moaned as she straddled his thighs, pressing her moist lips against his skin.

“You know, if you kill me, all the fun will be over,” he teased.

Brooklyn laughed. “I have no intentions of killing you. But I am going to pleasure you.”

She smiled at his hum of approval as her hands dropped to his shoulders, firmly rubbing the bands of muscle in slow circles. He was exciting to touch. All hard planes and angles. It was like pushing her fingers against liquid steel. Every inch of his back spoke of strength and virility, and she could feel the moisture pool between her thighs as she roved her hands over his body, rediscovering every inch.

“You’re the most incredible male specimen I’ve ever seen. God, I love touching you. Feeling your skin heat and twitch beneath my fingers. Knowing it’s me who makes you hard with desire. Don’t doubt for a second I don’t know exactly how lucky I am.”

She skimmed her fingers lower, grazing over the mounds of his ass. His muscles flexed at her touch, and she couldn’t stop the needy whimper from feathering across her lips. She drew one finger between his cheeks, gently stroking his tight pucker. “Do you know what I love most about your ass?” There was a long pause as Brooklyn listened to Gage fight to draw a deep breath.

“No.”

She nearly climaxed at the raw sound of his voice. It was primitive and hungry, and she knew he was close to teetering over the edge. “I love how it feels in my hands when you’re

making love to me. When you're so far inside me I can't tell where you end and I begin. The way you flex and squeeze as you pump with your hips..."

Her last few words translated into a surprised gasp as Gage pushed up on his hands and knees, and tipped her over on the bed. Her body bounced once before he straddled her, his arms pinning her wrists to the bed. His blue eyes gleamed like two raging suns, the lust so intense she had to fight to hold his gaze.

"Playtime is over," he said, in a voice so husky she knew she'd pushed him past his limits.

"Then by all means, let's get started. There's just one rule. No crying foul when I state the nature of the game."

Gage lowered his body down until his chest rubbed against the front of the lacy fabric, rasping her nipples until she moaned in pleasure at the delicious sensation. "I don't scare that easily, darling. You should know that by now."

"So you promise not to back down?"

"Oh, I won't back down. As a matter of fact, I already know what you have in mind."

Brooklyn smiled at him, knowing he'd found the mock handcuffs she'd hidden under the pillow to distract him from her true intentions. Though she did plan on using them later. "Good. Then it's a promise."

He merely smiled and slipped his hand beneath the pillow, smugly removing the velvet cuffs. "I see you took Sue's story to heart," he teased, twirling them around his finger.

"I couldn't resist. The purple velvet looked so pretty. But that's not what I have planned." She watched as he caught the spinning cuff in mid air and stared down at her, his brows furrowed in question. "Oh, I have every intention of tying you up later, and having you watch me pleasure myself until you're so hot you beg me to release you. But first, there's another fantasy I want you to bring to life." She arched against his groin, rubbing her aching clit across his erection, loving how he closed his eyes as her juices spilled along its length. "I bought you something," she whispered.

Gage opened his eyes and smiled, stroking the small strap of purple lace on her shoulder. "It's very pretty. You're stunningly beautiful."

Brooklyn shook her head. "Not the negligee. Reach between my legs."

He tensed as he shifted his weight to his left elbow, and slowly eased his right hand between their bodies until it brushed over the base of the plug. He stilled, a sharp intake of breath marking his surprise. His head snapped down to meet her gaze as he traced the outline with his fingers. "Brooklyn?"

"I can't wait any longer. I want you to show me how beautiful it can be, so I can show you how much I trust you." She moaned as he made another circle. "Please, baby."

Gage stared into her eyes, humbled by the immensity of her love. He'd been dreaming of loving her that way since she'd let him back into her life. But then Drake's actions had scared him to the point he never wanted her to know pain again.

Especially not from him.

He tugged gently on the plug, removing it slightly before pushing it back in. Brooklyn gasped and thrust her hips against him, moaning in pure delight. Fire raced down his spine and into his groin. He knew what she was doing. This was about more than just that night so many months ago. It was about their future as well. And he had every intention on proving just how deep his love ran.

He moved his lips over to hers, keeping them suspended just out of her reach. "You're truly a siren, and I've been under your spell since you first walked into my life." He poked out his tongue and ran a light lick along her lower lip. "Make no mistake, darling. You're mine, and you always will be. In body and soul. After tonight, you'll never doubt who truly possesses you."

With that he rose onto his hands and knees, keeping her body trapped between his legs. He couldn't stand the thought of losing one inch of contact with her, needing the flow of heat burning between them. "Roll over for me."

Brooklyn flashed him a sensuous smile, palming her hands up his chest before twisting sideways until her stomach brushed the sheets.

"Damn, you've got a beautiful ass. Firm, but with just the right amount of give to cushion me when I thrust inside you." He drew his hands down each curve, tracing the backs of her thighs until he reached her knees. "Your skin is so soft back here. Like fine silk." He heard Brooklyn moan as he made tiny circles with his fingers. "I could touch you forever."

"I'm not in a rush," she teased.

Gage chuckled. "You might not be, but if I wait too much longer, I just might explode."

Brooklyn glanced over her shoulder, her eyes widening as she lowered her gaze to his groin. He knew what she was seeing. His cock, hard, thick and long, throbbing against his stomach, the first drop of pre-come dotted on the thin slit, giving the pulsing head a shiny appearance in the soft light.

"I could help you out with that," she tempted, running her tongue slowly along her upper lip.

Gage groaned, feeling the head tighten further. "Oh don't worry, my little sex goddess. You're going to get all of me and more." He hooked his fingers under her hips. "Tuck your knees underneath you, darling, and let me get a closer look at my present."

Brooklyn pulled her knees under her hips as Gage lifted gently from above. He loved how he could smell the sweet scent of her arousal, as she pushed her hips into the air. He brushed his fingers through her narrow slit, moaning at the wetness that coated them.

"Excited?" he asked.

"I've been fighting not to come since I put the plug in," she breathed, crying out as he plunged one broad finger inside. "Please. I'm so close."

"I can tell," he said, thrusting again, revelling in her wail of ecstasy. "God, I love it when you scream. But we're only beginning. Better save some strength for the main event." He pulled his finger free and swirled the juice around her clit, smiling at the way she nearly jumped off the bed. "You are close," he taunted, repeating his caress. "But before I put you over the edge, I want to see what you bought for me."

Gage kept one hand stroking her lips as the other sought out the end of the plug. The base was lodged against her skin, keeping her tight muscles parted around the toy. He wrapped his fingers around the end and pulled, gently easing the plug from her grasp. Brooklyn moaned louder, making his cock jump, as he continued pulling until just the tip was still inside. He groaned in delight as he watched the plug slide back in, her ass separating to accommodate the width. He could see her muscles clench and release with each inch that pressed inside her, and he couldn't wait to feel them spasm on his cock.

"Do you have any idea how erotic it is to see you take the plug? It's by far, my best present." He pushed the base back in place and returned to her vagina, quickly thrusting in two fingers while massaging her nub.



"Yes."

Her voice was a hiss of pleasure as she pushed against him, deepening his penetration. Gage wrapped one arm around her waist, wanting to feel her climax with every part of his body. He loved how she fit perfectly against him, her ass hugging his groin, her back pressed into his chest. He could feel every inhalation, every exhalation. He palmed her stomach, inching his hand up until it cupped one heavy breast. It swelled at his touch, tightening her nipple into a small hard bud as her skin puckered around it. She was ready to explode.

"Oh God. Now. Please."

As much as he wanted to prolong her pleasure, he knew she'd crossed over the edge. He released her chest and plunged his fingers inside her weeping channel as the other hand attacked her clit. She clenched around him, locking him within her, as she skyrocketed into a climax.

Gage groaned in need, her release dripping past his hand, filling the air with the heady scent of her arousal. God, how he wanted to drink the cream spilling from her body, but there'd be time for that later. He withdrew his fingers, licking the moisture clean, as he grabbed the base of the plug. Brooklyn cried out, arching into him as he slowly removed the toy, and tossed it on the bed. Her ass was slick and wet, as much from the juices leaking from her pussy as from the lubrication. He smiled, running a solitary finger through the cleft of her buttocks.

"Ready?"

"Yes. Oh God, yes."

"Then relax for me, darling."

Gage felt her muscles release slightly, and took that as his signal to begin. He moved both hands to her cheeks, gently parting them until her pucker eased apart. It was small and tight, and for a moment he wondered if perhaps he should stop. But then he slipped one finger past the outer ring of muscles, and heard Brooklyn's moan of approval as her body clenched around him.

And all doubts and reservations faded into the past.

Gage moved, kneeling her thighs further apart as he placed the head of his cock at her ass. He could see the opening fluttering as he brushed the hole with the crown, gathering some of the lubrication onto the head. More than anything else, he needed to please her.

Show her how much her gift meant to him. That meant moving slow and easy until she was fully impaled.

“Easy,” he whispered, pushing his thick shaft against her ass, watching in stunned fascination as the tip of his cock sank slightly inside.

Brooklyn cried out beneath him, pressing back against his invasion, her body thrashing on the bed.

Gage grabbed her hips, stilling her movements. “Just stay still. I don’t want to hurt you. We need to go slowly.”

“Please. You’re killing me. I need it too badly. Please, just please take me.”

A grunt tore from his throat as Brooklyn levered back, sinking the flared head inside her. He bared his teeth, his head thrown back, as he braced her hips and thrust forward, taking her anal channel in one deep stroke.

“Damnation!” He curled over her, savouring the tight feel of her ass holding his throbbing cock like a silken glove. He could feel every inch of her hot channel clenching around him, her muscles keeping him buried deep within her. God, it was even better than he remembered, his pleasure heightened by the love coursing through his veins. Never before had he felt such connection, such bonding, as he did with her right now. He knew he’d never love another woman as long as he lived.

He stretched forward, rasping the soft spot behind her ear with his tongue, loving the way her breath rushed out of her lungs in one strong sigh. “Forever. I’ll love you forever. Now take a deep breath, and let yourself go.”

Gage moved, strong and sure, taking her ass in steady strokes. He started slowly, pulling out until just the head clung within the ring before pushing firmly back inside, driving deep until his balls slapped against her moist inner lips. “So hot, darling. So hot and tight, it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before.” He retreated and thrust again, watching her back arch against the assault. “Are you okay?”

She only whimpered in reply, practically screaming at his next pass. He stopped, his cock locked inside, his balls dripping with her cream.

“Talk to me. Are you okay?”

“Damn it, I swear if you don’t start moving hard and fast I’ll use those handcuffs to arouse you to the point of pain with no release!”

He resisted the urge to slap her rounded cheek, choosing to answer her demand with another action. He closed his hands around her hips and pounded into her, taking her fast and deep and long. She screamed his name, thrashing wildly on the bed as he continued to drive into her, pushing through her tight muscles, needing her to accept him. To accept his love.

She took everything, begging him not to stop, pleading with him to give her everything he had. He clenched his teeth, knowing when the orgasm hit, it would shatter what was inside him, rebuilding him in a way he'd never dreamed. But he couldn't stop. Couldn't deny Brooklyn's pleas, or the pleasure he knew was about to tear through her. She was close to climaxing again, with a force he feared would drive her past her threshold. But he'd be there to catch her if she fell.

"Now. Oh God!"

She exploded, her back bowing, her hands fisted in the sheets. Her voice cut off into a soundless scream, her body so tense he couldn't keep moving. He stilled, his cock a few strokes from climaxing as she trembled then collapsed, her chest falling to the bed. He could feel the walls of her vagina quivering through the thin barrier separating her ass, and in that instant, the world went supernova.

Gage closed his eyes, blinded by the white streaks that raced through the darkness, burning a path down his spine and straight to his cock. He felt it swell, pushing against Brooklyn's anal channel until the head finally pulsed, jerking his hips, as he came in one all encompassing spurt.

Brooklyn couldn't speak. She couldn't even breathe at the overwhelming sensations rioting throughout her body. Her orgasm had hit her with such intensity, everything had faded into flashes of coloured light, until she'd collapsed onto the bed, Gage still hard and tight inside her ass. Her vagina had creamed and quivered, rippling the pulses straight to where Gage was locked within her when he'd roared, and pumped a hot thick stream of sperm into her ass, drenching the walls until she felt it coat the back of her thighs.

"Lord have mercy."

Gage's voice broke the stillness, his words drifting through the haze, mixing with the loud pounding of her heart. She could feel every rush of blood through her veins, every beat

of Gage's heart through his shaft, as it continued to pulse inside her. He surrounded her. His chest wrapped around her back, his thighs sandwiched between hers. He'd circled his arms around her waist, holding her firmly against him. There wasn't a place on her body he wasn't touching, and the feel of his heat lulled her into a light sleep.

"Darling, are you okay?"

She sighed, a dreamy hum to her voice. She was better than okay. She felt Gage smile against her neck, not yet separating from her.

"Thank you. That was the most beautiful gift I've ever been given." He squeezed her gently. "I love you."

Brooklyn forced her eyes to open. She looked back at him across her shoulder and smiled. "And I you."

"I have a present for you too," he whispered, finally easing his weakening erection from her ass.

She moaned at the loss of his body, another small wave of pleasure washing over her. "What is it?"

He looked down at her, a flash of concern flickering across his expression, before he rolled over and reached into the drawer beside the bed. She couldn't see what was in his hand until he opened his fist, and held out a small purple pouch. Brooklyn stilled, her heart jamming up into her throat as he shook out her ring and held it firmly between his thumb and forefinger.

"You know. If I had it to do over, I think I'd buy you a ring exactly like this. It suits your spirit...strong, but made with such delicacy I wonder how it keeps from breaking. It's the perfect paradox." He took her hand and straightened out her fingers. "I'd be honoured if you'd consider wearing it again."

Tears trickled from her eyes, but she didn't try to stop them. She stretched out her hand, inhaling loudly as he slipped it on her finger. "I think it's even more beautiful than I remember." She looked into his eyes, pouring all her love into her gaze. "I'll never take it off."

Then she reached up and slipped the knot of his tie down until she could throw the silky fabric on the floor. His necklace was still anchored around his neck, his ring hanging at the top of his chest. She reached behind him, opened the clasp, and removed the chain,

cradling it in her hand. It only took a moment to slide the ring off and clip his necklace back on.

"I wanted to put this back on your finger the moment I realised it was gone. But I was afraid you didn't want what it stood for anymore." She pushed it gently over his knuckle, twirling it in place. "I'm not afraid now."

Gage cupped her face in his other hand, clasping their ring fingers together. "You'll never be afraid again, if I have any say in it."

She smiled. "I suppose we have Drake to thank for this."

"Perhaps. But he was wrong about one thing."

Brooklyn drew her eyebrows together. "What was that?"

"I'm your leading man. And I always will be." He bent forward and took her lips gently with his. The kiss was soft and sweet, but it lit a fire in her soul just the same. Gage flashed her a wicked smile as he pulled back. "Now how about we try out those handcuffs?"

Brooklyn giggled and fell back on the bed, Gage's body covering hers. "Looks like my books are going to get a whole lot steamier."

"Oh yeah, darling. And I can't wait to help you with all the research."

## **About the Author**

Kris sees herself as somewhat obsessive and feels she tends to push the limits sometimes. But her friends graciously see her as passionate and adventurous. After all, speed limits are only guidelines and shouting is just her way of rising above the chaos. Besides, she thinks the air is cleaner out there on the edge.

Kris started writing erotic stories a few years ago, but didn't try putting them out into the real world until recently. She loves penning independent leading ladies who aren't afraid to kick a bit of butt, especially when it only fuels the desires of their men. But of course, it wouldn't be any fun if the men didn't get to play... Most of her stories involve elements of suspense and quite often have a downright creepy villain lurking in the shadows. But all the better to get the hero's protective instincts going. After all, Kris still loves having a knight ride to the rescue...

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