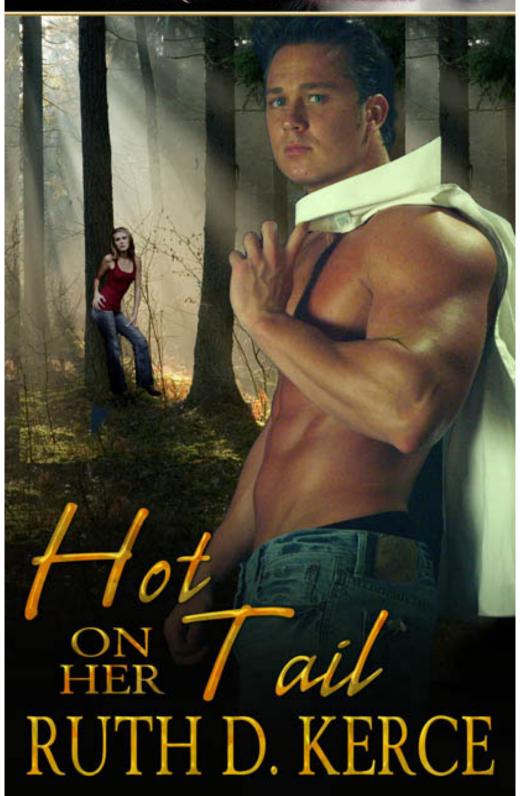
# ELLORA'S CAVE Breathless



### Hot on Her Tail

### Ruth D. Kerce

Captain Aaron "Ace" Trainer is assigned to protect a witness who will be testifying against a drug trafficking ring. The problem? It's a woman he's known since high school. A woman he's never been able to forget. A woman he had a one-night stand with years earlier.

Rachel finds herself in big trouble. She's gotten involved with an organization that wants her dead. She's shocked to learn that Ace will be her bodyguard—the same man who treated her so badly after their night of hot sex many years ago. Now her life is in his hands. He's still hot as hell and as sexy as ever, but he's also just as arrogant and irritating.

Stuck in the forest, running for their lives, Ace and Rachel put aside the past and rekindle the fire that never went out. This time it's more than hot sex—their passion turns emotional. Only their newfound love and trust in each other will be enough to save them. Rachel's just not sure it will last this time, either.

#### An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Hot on Her Tail

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# HOT ON HER TAIL

Ruth D. Kerce

# **Chapter One**

She lay naked on the bed, waiting for him to fuck her. She wasn't the type of woman he usually went for but he'd been drawn to her tonight. And now here they were together. Alone.

They must have met up at the party but he didn't actually remember. Didn't even remember bringing her back home. Damn.

He hoped he hadn't brought her back on his motorcycle, for he'd had way too much to drink. But not so much that his cock didn't work. He felt exceptionally hard and exceptionally captivated by this beautiful woman.

He'd sensed that she needed him. And he needed her too. For more than just sex.

As soon as the thought hit him, he froze. Where the hell had that come from? He'd never needed anyone. Not on a personal level or any other way. He lived alone, worked alone, walked his path in life alone.

Okay, so maybe that wasn't entirely true. It was just how he'd lived since being forced from his commando unit and since his brother had been killed in the Middle East. It's what he'd wanted for his future. To remain a loner. Fewer complications in life that way. Fewer heartaches. But something about this woman strangely made him want more. Made him want to take a chance.

Or maybe it had just been too long since his last good fuck.

He peeled the shirt from his shoulders and let it fall to the floor. With a small smile lingering on her mouth, her eyes followed his movements. His own mouth hitched up at the corner.

As he unbuckled his belt, his gaze skimmed her body—petite, firm, nicely-rounded breasts with pink nipples and a thatch of dark curls covering her pussy. So sexy. And tonight, she was all his.

She spread her legs, bending her knees, giving him a good look at her already moist cunt. Fuck. She was driving him nuts. And she damn well knew it too. The tease.

When he unzipped his jeans, she ran her tongue over her bottom lip. It took everything he had to keep from groaning. He could almost feel her pouty mouth wrapped around his cock, sucking the cum right out of him. He shucked his pants and briefs, intending to show her a very good time.

She obviously had the same thought, for she curled her finger, enticing him to join her. He didn't hesitate and crawled up next to her. His mouth immediately found one of her breasts and he sucked greedily, loving the taste of her flesh against his lips and tongue.

His fingers found her wet pussy and he delved inside, stroking her clit with his thumb until she moaned. He hesitated and when she made a sound of protest, he stroked her some more, loving the low, sexy sounds she made when aroused.

Her fingers circled his cock and he jerked. The coolness of her hand, wrapped around his warm shaft, made him actually stop breathing for a few seconds. With effort, he forced much-needed air back into his lungs until he felt on steady ground once more.

He needed to get inside this woman before he came against her hand. Something he hadn't done since he was a teenager but she affected him that much. Or maybe the booze had something to do with his lack of control.

Reluctantly, he released her breast, giving her nipple one last lick. Delicious. He slid down her body and spread her cunt with his thumbs. *Ah yeah*. He leaned over and circled her clit with his tongue. She moaned and arched her back. After a few more flicks of his tongue and several whimpers from her, he sucked her clit into his mouth. He loved the taste of a woman—her lips, her nipples, her pussy. Her hands tangled in his hair but he didn't intend to let her come. Not without him.

Unwilling to deny himself any longer, he released her clit and covered her body, spreading her legs wider with his knees. Then he sank inside her pussy, giving her

every last inch of his hard cock. *Oh, damn, she feels good*. Her warmth surrounded and gripped him, keeping him deep.

For a moment he just lay on top of her, supporting his weight with his elbows, enjoying the feel of his cock buried deeply inside her. She wrapped her legs around him and pushed her hips up, demanding more.

When she opened her mouth to say something, he covered her lips with his and pushed his tongue into her mouth. No words. No complications. He just wanted to feel tonight.

He moved his hips, fucking her hard. He moved his mouth, kissing her hard. He needed to conquer this woman. To give her the orgasm of a lifetime. Something she'd never forget.

She mewled and clawed at his back, not in protest, but in need. Her hips pushed up against his and she turned wild beneath him.

He tore his mouth from hers. "Oh fuck yeah!"

Her body bowed. "Ace!"

A ring jarred in his head. He jerked. What the -

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Slowly, he roused and became aware of his surroundings. *Shit!* His dick, hard as steel, pressed into the mattress. Nothing but a fucking dream. Figures. Or was it a memory? He couldn't recall. It had seemed so damn real.

His headache was definitely real. His eyeballs felt ready to pop. Too much liquor at the party tonight. He glanced at the clock. Last night. It was early morning now.

Pre-Fourth of July celebration. The local bar, only a few blocks from his apartment, liked to get an early start. This was the first year in several that he'd been able to join in. And he'd fully indulged. He had planned to sleep in today.

He glanced around for any signs that a woman had been there with him but he saw none. Not that a lack of indication specifically meant anything one way or the other. Then it hit him. The woman had been Rachel North. Yes, definitely her, now that the memory became clearer in his mind. It had indeed been a dream. He and Rachel had known each other in high school. Never dated though.

He'd enlisted in the army after graduation. A couple of years later, he'd returned on leave and bumped into her at a party. They'd spent one incredible night fucking before he'd been reassigned. He hadn't seen her since. Fifteen years ago. It seemed a lifetime.

The phone again rang in his ear, sounding as loud as a siren and sending shards of pain right through his brain. He reached toward the nightstand and fumbled with the receiver. "What?" he mumbled, not in the mood for chit-chat.

His mood had been set by a petite brunette. He needed to jack off, to return to the dream, relive the memory again in vivid detail, to fuck the hell out of Rachel as he'd done so many years ago.

A male voice came over the line. "I've got a job for you, Ace."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kitty LaManti looked out the window of the well-worn minivan as it slowly made its way up the narrow and winding mountain trail. *Kitty LaManti*. She cringed. Not her real name but law enforcement had insisted she use an alias for her own protection. This one made her sound harmless, they'd said, their grins just a little too large for her liking. To her, the name made her sound like a stripper.

She could hardly believe how complicated her life had become, just because she'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time and now needed to testify against a ring of drug dealers. Fate had certainly thrown her an ugly curve. She'd be glad when the trial was over and done and she could return to her normal, even if slightly boring, life as a college professor.

When all this started, when she'd accidentally found the notebook of drug contacts, seen the drug deal going down, she'd known it was serious. When she'd told the police, when numerous arrests were made and then she'd been somehow outed by the press as

the primary witness, she'd known it would cause some chaos in her life. As it turned out, chaos was an understatement. She hadn't expected her life to be in actual danger.

One day she'd been worried about finding time to score thirty-three art projects for the special session she'd agreed to teach after regular spring classes ended, the next she was a witness against some group of criminals.

Almost immediately after the press release broke about the arrests, her life began to change. That evening, she'd found a bloody rat's head on her porch. Disgusting, but not that big a deal, or so she'd thought. Some animal must have left it. The next day she wasn't as calm as the first, after a snake's head appeared. The third day she'd called the police after a poor kitty's head had shown up on her stoop along with a note that read, "Wonder whose head will be found next?" She shuddered at the memory. That's when the authorities had decided to put her in protective custody.

She sniffled as she thought about the fate of those innocent animals. Guilt had hit her hard at the time and it still bothered her, for if someone hadn't been trying to scare her, the rat, snake and cat would still be alive.

Then the authorities went and named her Kitty. *Yeah, real funny, guys.* Perhaps it was a fitting punishment to pay for the deaths but it did not inspire confidence in her long-term safety, for certain.

Everyone had guaranteed her that once the trial was over, she'd have no further worries. Somehow she was beginning to believe they'd just told her what she'd wanted to hear so she wouldn't back out. She was their only witness now. The other witnesses, two male students, who had also seen the drug dealers and agreed to testify, had mysteriously disappeared. She hadn't found out they were missing until this morning, which made her more than a little nervous. She'd seriously considered bailing after hearing the news. But she hadn't. Testifying was the right thing to do. "I hope," she murmured under her breath. She'd definitely gained a new appreciation for the personal safety she'd always enjoyed prior to this and taken for granted.

Fourth of July in the city would be terrifying, so she was glad to have left before the fireworks started. Every firecracker would sound like a shot, directed right at her. Especially since she lived near campus where the students always gathered to party and set off anything they could get their hands on—legal or not.

Though glad to be out of the city, where she wouldn't need to be looking over her shoulder every few seconds, she still held reservations about this temporary arrangement. She hadn't wanted to put her family in any danger by being around them so this probably was for the best. But it had not been easy to explain to her parents and sister because she hadn't been allowed to tell them where she was going. Only why. They were more than scared for her. She understood the feeling.

She glanced around the van at the other housewives chatting with each other. To remain as inconspicuous as possible, she'd taken a seat in the back. She twisted the fake wedding band on her finger. She felt like a fraud, which she was actually.

No safe house had been available for her inside the city, so now she was headed up into the mountains for two weeks. Hiding out for her own safety at the WyPoka Wilderness Program for Married Women. *Camp, geez.* Not her cup of tea by far. She'd never camped. Not even as a child. She'd hoped to be put up in some cozy lodge, but no such luck. She had to agree with those who set this up though. She doubted anyone would think to look for her here.

Supposedly one of the camp instructors was some former army commando or something and he was going to bodyguard her. He did special assignments for the government and various law enforcement organizations from time to time, she'd been told. Other than that, they hadn't given her a lot of details about him. He'd be undercover. No one, not even the other instructors, knew his real purpose here. Peachy.

He'd probably turn out to be some stern, hopped-up, gung-ho type, whom she couldn't stand. She respected what those types of men did but personally she preferred the sensitive souls of the world. Painters, poets—artistically inclined men, who could create pieces that affected a person deep down inside. There had only been one

exception in her life and that was long ago. An erotic memory of a super-sexy man to keep her warm on lonely nights. An alpha male whom she suspected would never settle for the typical relationship most women craved.

The van pulled off to the side of the trail. They must finally be at the campground. She hadn't thought they'd ever make it up the mountain. Her stomach began to churn. She didn't really know what to expect.

Everyone looked out the windows. She saw one of the four instructors they'd been told would be waiting. The wide smile on the woman's face made her feel marginally better and her stomach settled down. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

I'm Kitty LaManti – remember that. She cringed as the stripper-like name ran through her mind. Though she hated it, she decided she might as well start thinking of herself as Kitty, so she didn't make a mistake while here and give out the wrong name. Or not respond to the name.

Maybe if she pretended she was on some sort of secret mission, she'd get through it easier. Nothing like fantasy and an unhealthy denial of the truth to ease one's stress.

They all stepped out of the van and hefted their backpacks across their shoulders. The packs contained the only belongings they'd been allowed to bring—clothes, toiletries, first aid items, a personal water bottle and any needed medications.

As a light breeze blew through her hair, she glanced at her surroundings. Trees, mountains and dirt. She didn't know what she'd expected to see. Someplace less wild and more like a tended park, she supposed. As she walked across the trail, small branches crunched beneath her shoes and a spider scampered by. She stepped over a pile of animal droppings, barely noticing it in time. Lovely.

The mountains were cooler than the city, which was good, but it still felt warmer up here than she had thought it would. The shorts they'd told her she could wear for the ride up actually felt quite comfortable so she was glad she'd opted for the outfit. They'd also told her to bring jeans for their outings and a jacket. The nights would be cool, which would make the mornings up here chilly.

She definitely was not an outdoor person. She preferred a temperature-controlled mall and a fully-stocked food court to mountain ranges, trees, pollen, bugs and dirt.

She chuckled at her attitude. She was probably the only painter in the world who didn't much appreciate the beauty of the great outdoors. Actually, she did appreciate it, but only as long as she had the option of going indoors when she chose.

"Welcome, ladies," the instructor greeted as she waited for them to gather near the trees, well away from the road. "This will be your home for the next two weeks. After you complete our self-esteem for life program, you'll be emotionally and physically stronger and will be better able to handle the stresses in your life. My name is Hattie Strangler, by the way."

Strangler? Kitty felt her mouth drop open. Good grief. A scary name and quite a coincidence, given her situation and fear for her life. Her mother once told her that there was no such thing as a coincidence. Of course, her mother drank a lot. Still, an odd tremble traveled down her spine and it took her several moments to settle her jumbled emotions and nerves.

When she heard the van's engine roar to life, she turned. The vehicle lurched forward, made a tight half circle and headed back down the trail. When the rear of the van disappeared around a clump of bushes, she suddenly felt very isolated and alone, though she was surrounded by people. Seemed she'd be stranded here the entire two weeks, whether she wanted to be or not.

She turned her attention back to the group. A radio or some sort of communication device clipped to the instructor's belt caught her eye. All the instructors could probably call for help or for the van to return if it were needed. Just in case an accident happened or if mobsters showed up. Okay, so maybe mobster wasn't the right word but she didn't know what else to label the guys who were after her.

She'd heard the police talking. Higher ups were involved in this case than just some drug dealers. The police suspected that she was now an irritant to those in charge of the organization and needed to be eliminated.

Thinking about calling her contact at the police department just to hear a familiar voice, she automatically patted her belt where she normally kept her phone. Not there. The participants had been barred from bringing their cell phones to the campgrounds to prevent any interruptions or negative influences from affecting them while there. She'd almost forgotten, but understood. Some people talked so much on their cells that it began to look like an extra appendage. She felt more than naked without one herself, which showed how reliant she too had become on technology. It also made her feel vulnerable, a feeling she didn't like.

"The campground is over here," Hattie announced. "Come along. I'll show you around."

Everyone murmured amongst themselves and they all followed the instructor through the trees like an obedient pack of ducklings. Did ducklings travel in packs? Somehow that didn't sound right to her. Just as none of this felt right to her.

Maybe I'll go by Kit—the thought struck her out of the blue. Oh yeah. Much better. She could get used to Kit. It sounded feisty. Strong. The name of a survivor. And it didn't bring back bad memories. The hell with what they thought, all the authorities with all their answers. They weren't here, living in her running shoes.

Everyone had already introduced themselves after they first squeezed into the van. But no one should think it odd if she told them she preferred to go by Kit.

Oh why couldn't she have been put up in that plush lodge she'd dreamed of? She could be checking her email from her laptop or lounging in a hot tub right now or even stretched out on a massive bed watching television and waiting for room service to bring her a decadent tray of sweets and wine. And she could call her family. Maybe. She didn't know if that would be allowed but this was her fantasy so she would make up the rules. A girl could dream. Right?

After ten minutes of hiking, one of the participants wailed, "How much farther? My feet hurt."

"Not far," the instructor answered.

The instructor's voice sounded just a little too cheery for Kit's taste. She swatted at a mosquito. Damn. She should have brought bug spray.

Suddenly the hair on the back of her neck bristled. She stopped and glanced around, feeling as if she were being watched. When she saw nothing out of the ordinary, she forced herself to relax and moved forward with the others again. *Great. Now I'm getting paranoid.* It was probably just an animal, peering at her through the trees. She had to get a grip on herself.

After a few more minutes of stepping over logs and avoiding poison ivy, she saw a man in brown shorts and a white shirt standing in a clearing. Her pulse immediately quickened. She wasn't yet close enough to get a good eyeful but he looked extra fit with large arms and thighs. Her bodyguard?

"We're here, ladies," Hattie announced, moving them closer to the clearing and to the man. "This is Jeb Callahan. He's one of our instructors."

Everyone nodded as they gathered around. The man's sandy blond hair and extremely light blue eyes struck Kit as a bit eerie looking somehow.

"You'll be staying in those pup tents over there," Jeb informed them, taking over and pointing off to the side. "We have portable toilets for you up the hill. Quite the luxury given our location, I'm sure you'll agree."

Pup tents? Portable toilets? She felt like sobbing then mentally chastised herself for being such a whiner. So they'd be roughing it. She could do this. It would actually make a good story to tell at parties. She could see herself as the center of attention when she entertained friends and family with tales about all her adventures in the wilderness. She had to admit that "Kitty in a pup tent" had a certain comical ring to it.

Besides, the only thing she really should care about right now was staying alive.

"Today is just for getting comfortable," Jeb continued. "Tomorrow we'll begin putting you through your paces, so to speak. Your name is pasted on your individual tent. Go ahead and get settled."

Kit frowned at the tents. All but four of them were dark blue and looked to be about the size of large doghouses. A pup tent accommodated two people. She couldn't imagine sharing anything so small and was glad she wouldn't have to. The other four tents were beige, probably for the instructors. She thought theirs were larger. Rank had its privilege. Wasn't that the saying?

She couldn't see the toilets from here. She did see a campfire area and several picnic-type tables. There was also a large tent off to the other side, which she assumed to be some sort of community gathering spot. She wondered where they were supposed to bathe.

She looked back at Jeb. His eyes never met hers directly and he didn't give any indication that he knew who she was. Or that he even cared. Hmm. She wondered where the other two instructors were.

Just as the thought entered her mind, a woman emerged from the community tent—younger than Hattie and skinny as a rail. Probably not yet out of her twenties. The younger woman spied the group and waved enthusiastically.

Hattie, who looked about thirty-five and seemed completely comfortable in these surroundings, waved back. "That's Julia Haus, ladies. Another instructor. Now, go on. Get those backpacks off."

Following waves of greeting to Julia, everyone headed off to find their tents. Kit found hers at the far end of the group and pulled her pack from her shoulders, grateful to get rid of the weight. She tossed it into the doghouse sporting her name.

After always wondering what it would feel like to be taller, this was one time she would enjoy her small stature, at least while staying in the tent. *I also make a smaller target*, she suddenly thought, then brushed the disturbing visual from her mind.

That feeling of being watched struck her again and she shivered. Slowly, she turned toward a formation of rocks and looked up. Her heart slammed against her ribs.

Crouched atop the rocks was a man in camouflage pants and a white muscle shirt. Dog tags hung from around his neck. His eyes were covered by dark aviator-type sunglasses. His dusty brown hair covered the nape of his neck. A sprinkling of whiskers shadowed his jaw, as if he hadn't shaved in a couple of days. The muscles in his arms bulged as he plunged a large hunting knife into something she couldn't see beside one of his combat-style boots. Maybe an insect. Maybe just the ground. He was staring straight at her.

*Him.* She knew it instinctively. Her bodyguard. Oddly, he seemed familiar to her, reminding her of someone but she couldn't figure out whom. Some celebrity, an action hero in the movies perhaps. Certainly, if she knew a man such as him personally, she'd remember.

"Hunky, huh?" said one of the ladies who'd come up beside her.

Kit blinked. "Um...yeah. I suppose. If you like that type."

"Who doesn't, honey?"

*Me,* she thought. At least not anymore. Sometimes she wished she'd never reported that damn drug deal and had turned in that notebook anonymously. Then she'd be at home. Comfy. Safe. And she wouldn't be having to deal with any of this.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ace Trainer stared at the petite woman in the lime-green shorts and a lemon-colored top. *High maintenance* was the first thought that came to mind. Things hadn't changed over the years.

She looked too prim and proper for the wilderness. Too prim and proper for him.

Except he knew that she had a wild side. Very wild. At least in bed. He had experienced her passion for himself. The one night they'd spent together had shown him without a doubt that looks could be deceiving. His cock remembered that night too. He shifted uncomfortably.

His gaze dipped down her body. Still not much in the breast department but nice legs, considering her lack of height. Though not scary skinny, like some women, a good wind would probably still blow her over.

Professor Rachel North, aka Kitty LaManti. The years had been good to her. She wore the extra maturity well.

He'd recognized her immediately from the photo he'd been given, along with a file on her. At first sight, he'd been taken aback because of his erotic dream—memory—about her. He'd never believed in premonitions but this came damn close.

His protective instincts had kicked in and there was no way he was going to turn down this job. How could he turn his back on a woman he knew, a woman he'd gone to school with, a woman who'd sucked the cum from his cock like no other?

When this job had come along, he'd needed a break from the covert government assignments he'd been involved with since his medical discharge from the Army Rangers. And he had owed a colleague a favor. The timing was perfect. After finding out the details, he'd wanted to make certain this woman stayed safe until the trial. She deserved that. Besides, he'd been too intrigued to say no.

She'd certainly gotten herself into a mess. He admired her for actually becoming involved. Most people didn't bother these days, hoping someone else would step up or just deciding that it wasn't their problem. Responsibility didn't rank too high among the masses anymore.

She was probably trying to figure out whether he or Jeb was her watchdog. He didn't think she'd recognized him yet. He'd changed a lot over the last fifteen years. Filled out. Grown harder. He'd have to approach her soon. Even if she did realize who he was, remembered their passionate night together, she might not make the connection that he was the one sent to watch over her. He didn't know how much they'd told her about him. He didn't want her questioning Jeb and accidentally blowing both their covers. Especially because something about Jeb bothered him, though the man had checked out as clean, according to the police.

He scanned the group of women. Too bad there weren't any available hotties here he could fuck to help pass the time. Seven of the eight participants were housewives. Both the female instructors were also married, their spouse's military men and currently deployed. No possibilities there. He never encroached on another man's territory. And "Kitty LaManti" was strictly hands off while he was assigned to protect her. He'd learned the hard way that intimate entanglements with a subject fucked things up.

If only their one night of incredible passion would stop replaying in his head like a movie on permanent repeat mode, sex would be the farthest thing from his mind. Well, maybe not the farthest.

He shouldn't even be thinking about fucking her anyway—in the past, present or future. She was too petite, too brunette and too normal for a loner like him. She'd want a real relationship. And though she had done the one-night stand thing with him, he remembered her face the next morning when he'd told her that was it. Thankfully, she'd left quickly, before he'd had to deal with any emotions he wasn't prepared for. But even so, that morning had haunted him for years. He felt like an ass over how he'd handled their goodbye.

Now she was an art teacher. The only thing he knew about art was that he didn't much care for it. But he did care about her feelings and her well-being.

He actually shouldn't have an issue with reestablishing a physical relationship with her anyhow. Not anymore. His sexual radar only got turned on these days by tall, blonde, big-boobed women, with flashy come-get-me-soldier smiles. Women who knew the game and were there to play, then walk away, happily moving on without him.

*Now repeat that lecture ten times.* 

The words sounded really good in his head. Somehow, though, no matter how many times he might repeat them, he couldn't get the image of Rachel, naked, out of his head. Good thing he was only here for two weeks. After that, Ms. Rachel North would be gone from his life permanently. As it should be. And she would eventually fade from his memory too. If not his dreams.

In fact, once this job ended, he would check his little black electronic address book for the nearest sure thing and spend three days up to his balls in wet pussy. Then he'd be ready for another deep covert job after having fucked Rachel from his mind and fantasies for good.

He loved the challenge his work provided. He wouldn't let Miss Kitty change that or distract him from his purpose. It's just that he felt he owed her one. So he'd pay up and then the slate would be clean.

He sheathed his knife, stood and jumped down from the rocks. He'd better do a quick patrol of the area just to make certain nobody had followed her up here.

\* \* \* \* \*

As *the hunk* strode into the trees, Kit let out the tight breath she'd been holding. He looked huge at full height. At least a head taller than herself, probably more. She wasn't certain if she should say something to him or not. He didn't appear approachable. But he had been staring at her, as if he'd wanted or expected some contact.

Kitty, you're a scaredy-cat, her brain taunted. Yeah, so she was. But meeting a stranger alone in the woods did not make her comfortable even if he had been sent here to protect her.

As she continued to wonder whether she should push her trepidation aside and follow him anyway, she heard Hattie call out for all of them to come over to the campfire area. She'd best go, otherwise it would look odd. Yes, it was a good excuse not to venture into the unknown, but everyone would go into a tizzy if she disappeared. She would have no way to explain a sudden absence. Besides, she might get lost if she went hiking in unfamiliar territory.

She followed the other women as they all gathered around. The sun was beginning to hang low in the sky. Beautiful. She saw colors out here that she never saw in the city. Or never took the time to notice. Soon it would be dark and she wondered if the stars would shine as brilliantly as she remembered them from when she was a child and would look out her window late at night after everyone else had gone to bed.

"A couple of things to let you know, ladies," Hattie began. "First off, keep all food locked up in the large tent between meals. Don't take anything into your own tent. Mountain lions and coyotes live up here. We don't want them coming into the tents while you're sleeping because they smell food."

Wild animals? Drug dealers and mobsters weren't enough to worry about? Now she had to worry about wild animals too?

"Also, potty before going to bed and don't wander out alone after dark," Jeb added with a stern look.

Potty? She didn't think she'd ever heard a man use that word, especially with such a serious look on his face. She held back a chuckle.

"We don't want anyone attacked or getting lost or maybe falling and getting hurt in the dark," he continued, his look easing. "Even during the day, if you go off, please stay within shouting distance and go in pairs for safety's sake. Any questions?"

Everyone shuffled a bit but nobody said anything, until finally the woman who'd approached Kit earlier asked, "Who was the soldier hunk we saw up on the rocks earlier?"

Julia laughed. "That's Captain Ace Trainer." She glanced around, her brow furrowing. "Well, he's out here somewhere. He doesn't say much but is here to help us out this session. A former army officer, highly trained in many specialized areas. We're lucky to have him aboard, I'm told. He'll be coordinating our hikes, our planned river rafting trip and our mountain climbs. We've never worked together before but he comes highly recommended. The more the merrier, I always say."

Ace Trainer.

Kit's heart practically leapt out of her chest. Aaron "Ace" Trainer. The alpha male from her past. That's why he'd looked familiar. A track star from her high school where they'd met, he'd done it all—sprint, relay, long distance, cross country. The team's ace in the hole, thus his nickname.

She'd had such a crush on him. But her admiration had always been from afar. Following his older brother's lead, he'd enlisted in the army after graduation and was gone. A couple of years later he'd reappeared out of nowhere at a party and taken her home to the apartment he and his brother had kept in town for many years.

That was one night she'd never forget. He'd fucked her so thoroughly that she'd barely been able to walk the next day. Though sore, never in her life had she felt so satisfied. Never before and never since.

He'd practically kicked her out the next morning. Or that's how it had felt. He didn't want any entanglements, he'd said. Well, neither had she at the time. He was in the service and heading out again soon. She was still in college and working toward her bachelor's degree, majoring in art with a minor in art history. She'd had her own career and higher education plans so she could teach one day. Even so, she'd been hurt by his manner and attitude. He hadn't been very diplomatic about how he'd handled the morning after. And now here he was. Her bodyguard.

Apparently, his former job was no secret. Just his present one. They definitely needed to talk. She couldn't help but wonder if he had recognized her when approached to do this job. If he even remembered their night together. Certainly he remembered. If not, her ego might never recover. Well, she'd find out soon enough, she supposed. At least she was over him.

A tremor rippled down her spine and her clitoris tingled. *Stop it,* she told her body. She *was* over him.

Julia's voice pulled her from her thoughts. The young woman held up a plastic bag. "How about we roast some marshmallows?"

# **Chapter Two**

It was after dark when Kit headed to the outdoor toilets before settling in for the night. Strange but she never had seen Ace again. He had seemingly disappeared like a ghost in the night.

Just as well, she supposed. The less she saw of him, the less she'd dwell on the whole situation. And the less likely that old feelings would surface to drive her crazy. She'd wanted to talk to him but, under the circumstances, it was probably best not to engage in anything personal unless completely necessary. Keeping her time here strictly business meant fewer complications.

"Mmm." She licked her sticky fingers. After Hattie had put out the fire, Kit had stayed behind while everyone else went off to their tents. She'd told them that she would be along in a moment. She had one last marshmallow to finish. That moment had stretched out for longer than anticipated. She was actually surprised that Hattie hadn't protested her staying. She'd seemed so rule driven. Jeb had been quite insistent about nobody being out alone. Strangely, he'd disappeared earlier in the evening too—like Ace. Maybe the marshmallow feast was supposed to be girl-time or something.

She glanced up at the sky. The sun had set much faster than she'd anticipated. She hurried her steps, but didn't regret her decision to stay behind and savor her treat. She'd almost forgotten how yummy slightly burnt marshmallows with a gooey center tasted.

She topped the hill and went into one of the four portable toilets. From the outside they looked like upright coffins. Morbid thought, she knew, but then that was the line her thinking followed lately.

Minutes later, she emerged, feeling relieved and ready for a good night's sleep. She glanced at the night sky once more. Gorgeous. The light, cool breeze soothed her and

she felt the tension drain away from her body. Maybe her time here wouldn't be so bad after all. With an easy stride, she continued toward her tent.

A large hand suddenly clamped over her mouth from behind.

Her heart slammed against her chest. She froze, physically and mentally. A second later, a thick arm slid around her waist. Panicked, she screeched against his fingers and tried to pull away. A man had her! His strength was unmistakable.

"Shh," he whispered in her ear, his hold tightening. "It's Ace. I'm your bodyguard. We need to talk. Don't say anything until we're away from this area."

All the fear and energy bled out of her and she sagged against him. If he hadn't been holding her up, she'd have collapsed to the ground. His body felt like a rock against her soft flesh. A pleasant feeling, now that she was over her initial panic attack, for his strength made her feel safe. But she was mad as hell over the way he'd jumped her in the dark. That was totally unnecessary. And she planned to tell him so.

After steadying her on her feet, he grabbed her hand and dragged her into the trees. Years ago she'd have relished a secret liaison in the woods with Ace. His warm fingers around hers made her thoughts wander into areas best left untouched. As soon as they were well away from the camp, she dug in her heels and tugged her hand free.

He turned to face her with an inquisitive tilt of his head.

"Are you crazy?" she whispered harshly. "You scared me to death, Ace. Almost literally. I could have had a heart attack." Though she appreciated the presence of someone she knew—it was a real comfort actually—she didn't want him to make this type of approach a habit. After all she'd been through, dying of fright, brought on by the man supposedly here to protect her, rubbed her the wrong way.

"Good to see you again too, kitten. You remember me." A sexy grin crossed his face.

"Of course I remember you." Obviously he remembered her too.

His smile widened. "You're not going to faint on me, are you? Want me to check you over? I have a little medic training under my belt now. You'd be surprised how many places you can take a pulse."

*Under my belt.* Her gaze dipped down to his belt...and lower. When he chuckled, her eyes snapped back up to his face. "No. Thank you. I'm fine. By the way, it's Kitty. Kinda. Actually, Kit. I prefer Kit." Damn. She was practically stuttering.

"Relax, kitten." He leaned back against a tree trunk and crossed his arms over his chest.

His insistence on calling her kitten, and the fact that he seemed quite pleased with himself over all this, irked her. In the dark, with only the moon and stars for light, he appeared menacing, even with the large grin on his face. And big. Bigger than she ever remembered him being. She felt a moment of doubt, out here alone with him. Especially because he still wore sunglasses—different ones than he'd had on earlier though. These looked...heavier.

"What's with the glasses?" He couldn't possibly see in the dark with those things, which did not make her feel safe.

"They're a fashion statement."

"Funny." Not seeing his eyes bothered her. She hadn't realized before now just how much she relied on the look in someone's eyes to gauge their intentions. Though she knew him, she remained wary. Time changed people sometimes.

Oh, who the hell did she think she was kidding? She'd known him from a distance in high school. Known his reputation as smart and fair but also a bit of a player. Spent one night with him a couple of years later. Fifteen years and a lot of living on both their parts had passed since that night. He could be a total nut case now as far as she knew. Though he must be good at his job for the police to use him. If they trusted Ace, she supposed she should too. "What do you want? Why'd you ambush me like that?"

"I want to set up some parameters," he began, all serious now. "I figured after dark would be the safest time to get you alone. With so many people here, more than one are

bound to be nosey if they see us talking privately and in hushed tones. While you're at the camp, try to relax and don't let anyone know who you really are."

"Well, duh." Okay, maybe that hadn't sounded so nice but she was irritated and hormonal right now. Or something.

Ace flashed that killer smile of his once more. "Still spunky. I like that."

"Ace-"

He held up a hand, silencing her. "The days should go by fairly quickly. I don't want us interacting more than seems appropriate. You're supposed to be a married woman, after all. No need to start any rumors. I'll come to you at night if need be."

"Yeah, that should quell any rumors. Nightly liaisons." Erotic images, decadent and savage, came to her at his words. Though she knew he hadn't meant them that way.

His voice lowered to a deep rumble. "Don't get me all excited, kitten."

A jolt of sexual awareness hit her between the legs. She felt a blush creep into her cheeks. When another grin split his features, she felt like hiding behind a tree.

"Relax, Rachel."

The sound of her real name on his lips brought back an image of them in bed, his cock buried deep inside her with him whispering her name in her ear. She shifted uncomfortably as she remembered the most explosive orgasm she'd ever had in her life. It took all her strength not to whimper as waves of desire washed over her.

"During the day, pretend I'm no different than Jeb. Stay quiet and try not to stand out in any way. The less attention paid to you, the better. Also..." He hesitated and turned his head, glancing behind her and to one side.

"What?" Though she couldn't see his eyes, she could tell that he'd gone on full alert from the tenseness of his body.

He stepped away from the tree and pulled off his white shirt.

She gulped at his action and her heart pounded like a jackhammer. Maybe she'd misread him. Had he sensed her desire? Protector or not, intimate in the past or not,

taking off his clothes without any outward encouragement from her was a definite alarm bell. "What are you doing?"

"I heard something."

She turned and listened but didn't hear anything unusual. She looked back at him, feeling really confused now. What the heck? Why would he take off his shirt because of a sound? That didn't make sense. Slowly, she backed away from him.

He reached out and pulled her toward the trees. She barely held back a screech, not knowing his intentions. Not knowing if she should wake the entire camp. Trust for anyone right now did not come easily for her.

"Stay here. Stay out of sight. Hug this tree and don't move until I come for you."

Ace moved silently along the tree line. He hoped Rachel was smart enough to listen to him and do as he'd said—he'd heard a small sound. One he recognized. Too well. His throat constricted and he switched from easygoing to warrior mode.

He dropped his shirt near a clump of bushes. The white color was like a beacon of light in the dark. Right now, he needed stealth. Damn bold son of a bitch, making a move the very first night. Nobody had followed Rachel up here as far as he could tell. If that was accurate then this had to be an inside job. Someone in authority, in the pocket of the drug traffickers. And he suspected who the connection could very well be.

As a check, he fingered the knife on his belt. He also carried an easily accessible gun but he wanted to keep that under wraps for now. If one of the women happened out of her tent and saw the weapon, she might get a bit hysterical.

Looking around, he didn't see anyone in the clearing. He circled the shelters. All seemed quiet, which was deceptive. He knew the fucker was out here. Somewhere.

Paying close attention to his surroundings so nobody could take him by surprise, he crouched beside one of the blue shelters, Rachel's tent, and felt along the outside. The dark color made it hard to identify details. He frowned, although what he found didn't surprise him. He grabbed a small flashlight from his pocket and directed the beam over the canvas to confirm his suspicions.

Shit. Yep. As he thought. He flipped off the light, reached inside the tent and with two fingers hooked the backpack near the entrance. Cautiously, he stood, pack in hand, and made his way over to his own tent. After grabbing his pack, he made his way to another of the beige tents. Empty. He cursed under his breath then crept silently back to the trees.

When he reached the clump of tress where he'd left Rachel, the area was deserted. He turned in a slow circle, peering into the surrounding darkness. Where the hell was she?

This assignment had gone down the shitter faster than he'd ever anticipated. He dropped the backpacks and checked the ground for signs of a struggle. Nothing obvious jumped out at him. He hadn't heard anything. He doubted Rachel would go quietly. She was spunkier than she looked.

A sudden, small sound caught his attention. He pressed himself up against one of the trees and peered toward the noise. A shadow moved between the bushes. Rachel? No, not Rachel. Too big.

He didn't want anyone near where he'd left her. He started in the opposite direction, making just enough noise to lure the person away. When he was certain that he'd lost his shadow, he circled back.

What the hell had happened to Rachel?

Moving deeper into the trees, he scouted the area, using a set search pattern to look for her. Into the forest was the only direction she could have gone without him seeing her.

From the side, out of the bushes, a hand touched his arm. *Damn it!* He turned and tackled the stranger.

"Oof."

He felt a soft body beneath him and breathed in a unique scent. *Her.* "Hell, never do that. I could have killed you. What happened to you?"

"I think someone was in the trees. It scared me. Geez, get off." She pushed at him. "I can't breathe."

He moved to the side and sat up. This woman would be a trial. She was smart, but unpredictable. Which made her dangerous. "Did you recognize who it was?"

"In the dark?" She sat up and brushed the dirt from her palms. "No, but I knew it wasn't you so I moved, just to be safe."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

She frowned. "Um, I'm not really sure."

"How can you not know?"

"Well, excuse me," she snapped. "I flunked Night Stealth Identification 101."

His irritation grew. Not at her, but at himself. How had such an easy assignment, compared to what he normally handled, suddenly gotten so off track? Had he missed the danger signs? His thinking had definitely been more on Rachel's body than this assignment, which made him think he was losing his edge. Lack of concentration had never been an issue for him before. Even around a woman. But Rachel had thrown him completely off his game.

"It was just a shadow—the person... Larger than me. Shorter than you. Not so muscular, I don't think. I was being silly, right?" She spoke a bit hesitantly, as if trying to convince herself of her own words.

The look on her face touched him. She needed reassurance. Unfortunately he couldn't give her any. He wasn't going to lie to her.

When she spoke again, her words tumbled out of her mouth faster than normal. "It was probably one of the instructors or other participants who maybe couldn't sleep and was out for a stroll. We're not supposed to be wandering around alone, but—"

"Whether it was one of them or not, one thing is sure - you've been found."

"Found?" She visibly shuddered. "By the bad guys, you mean? Are you sure?" Realization, but then wariness, of the possibility entered her eyes. "How do you know?"

Bad guys. She spoke as if this were some Hollywood movie. No scripted happily ever after exists for us, sweetheart. They'd have to create their own ending of survival.

"There are bullet holes in your tent. Right where your head would have been if you'd been in there asleep." If she hadn't been in the woods with him... He shook aside the disturbing thought.

The shooter had been careless in not checking the tent first. In too much of a hurry. Never assume the location of an enemy. He'd learned that early in his training. "Obviously, they used a suppressor—a silencer—but I picked up on it. That is what I heard." In the cool night air, sounds traveled well if one knew what to listen for.

At first he had planned not to tell her about the shooting, but he changed his mind. She needed to know how serious this was so she wouldn't balk at his orders and so she stayed on alert. He wouldn't tell her his suspicions about this being an inside job though. Yet. She had enough worries on her mind for now. He'd let her process what was going down at the moment before adding to her stress.

Good thing she was already sitting on the ground. A bullet hole. She felt faint. Her body began to shake uncontrollably and she didn't know what to do, what to say. Breathe. Yes. That was primary and the best she could hope to manage right now.

"Sit here while I get our backpacks," he told her. "I grabbed them earlier and stashed them in the trees."

She nodded, at least she thought she had, but wasn't entirely certain. Okay, she just had to reason this situation out. She was all right. It's not as if she were out here alone, handling this on her own.

### Or was she?

She glanced around. Ace was gone. So quickly. What if he didn't come back? What would she do then? Her stomach clenched. She could go to one of the instructors, but she didn't know whom to trust. She wasn't stupid. One of the other instructors could very well have been the shooter. Or even one of the participants.

She could follow the trail back down the mountain. It would take hours and she'd have to stay off the road so as not to be seen. She would also have to avoid any animals that might look at her as a free meal. After reaching the camp's office, she could use their phone to get a cab to town and back home.

Of course, help could arrive sooner. Once she was discovered missing, at least one of the instructors would certainly call for help. They all couldn't have been paid off to kill her. But even then, she still wouldn't know whom to trust.

What if one of the cops on her case was in on this somehow? That possibility chilled her to the bone, but made sense, given how quickly they'd found her location. With her luck, she'd trust the exact wrong person. Geez. Was this drug case really so convoluted or had she simply gotten paranoid? Not that paranoia was such a bad thing when trying to stay alive.

At least she had a basic plan. She took a deep breath then let it out slowly. Having a plan was good. The trail seemed to be a fairly direct path, from what she remembered. No side trails where she could get lost or turned around.

A shadow caught her eye and she shot to her feet. Ace reappeared in front of her. She relaxed slightly and tried to slow her breathing. She was more than glad he was back.

"Our packs are gone." He grabbed her arm. "Let's go. Quickly. Whoever shot into your tent is still out here and wandering around." He pulled her forward. "They followed me back into the trees. I circled around and lost whoever it was, temporarily, but they took the packs."

"Why would they take our backpacks?"

"They've realized they fucked up, that you're still alive and that I'm with you. If we get away, they don't want us having any supplies." He tugged her deeper into the trees.

"Where are we going?" He must have some idea given the directness of his actions.

He grabbed a gun from a pocket in his pants and checked it. "We'll head for the river. The noise will mask our movements and we can cross to hide our tracks. They'll

expect us to head down to the camp's main office. Instead, we'll go around to the ranger station. It's a little farther and rougher terrain but safer in the long run."

The gun hadn't freaked her out as much as she'd thought one would. She actually felt better knowing he was armed, though she normally despised weapons of any sort.

She slapped at a bug that bit her leg then tripped over a rock. She barely caught herself before falling. Trying to get her footing in the dark and keep up with Ace's pace was harder than it should be. She never should have stopped going to the gym. Her stride was much shorter than his though, in her defense, and her mind wasn't quite functioning on high yet. Her fear had too much of a hold on her. She was moving mostly by instinct right now.

Ace grumbled under his breath. For someone so small, Rachel sounded like a hippo moving through the brush. "Can you walk without tripping over your feet?" Maybe once she settled down, she'd do better. How she had sneaked up on him back in the bushes, he'd never know. She confused the hell out of him. He was definitely losing it. If they were going to get out of this alive, he'd better get and stay in combat mode and stop being distracted by his personal feelings.

"Sorry. Maybe if you'd slow down a little—"

"We can't afford to slow down." He paused and waited for her then pushed her ahead of him and directed her where to go.

Low-hanging tree branches and high-grown brush tugged at their clothing and scratched his bare chest and back. He ignored the stinging sensations and was grateful that Rachel hadn't issued any complaints about the terrain. Even when a branch caught her hair, she just pulled it loose and continued going.

He wished he knew exactly how many were following them. If only one, that would be sheer luck. He could handle one. Even two. More than that and things got interesting. If he were alone, no problem. He was good at disappearing. But Rachel made the job a challenge. What had he said about loving a challenge?

"Don't you have a cell phone or something?" she asked him over her shoulder. "I know the participants weren't supposed to bring one, but—"

"Yep. In my backpack. This way." He pulled her to the right. After another couple of steps, he grabbed her abruptly around the waist.

"What?"

"Shh." Someone was tracking them. Whoever was out there knew what they were doing for he only heard the rustling of branches every now and then. Too high up to be an animal. Too low for a bird. And too damn close for his comfort. "Don't question me. Keep quiet. We're being followed," he whispered in her ear, barely audible.

Making a snap decision, he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder. He heard her slight gasp and tightened his hold. To his relief, she had no further reaction. For now. She was a smart cookie, thank goodness, and he was grateful for her cooperation.

Though carrying her, he actually made better time. In the short haul. And made much less noise. Her added weight would eventually slow him down though, so he needed to get away quickly.

He spotted what looked like a small cave. He'd duck in there and hope whoever was following would pass right by. If not, the entrance was narrow enough that even if there were more than one, they'd have to enter individually to get at Rachel and he could pick them off with his gun. He had enough ammo with him and was an expert shot.

If they were also armed—which he assumed they were—even if they rushed into the cave firing, well he still had the advantage. It was harder to hit a target, to fire straight, while one was moving.

If their trackers tried to wait them out, knowing they had no food or water with them, he'd find another way out of the cave. No matter what, he'd die before he let them at Rachel. He'd vowed to protect her and nothing would stop him.

When they got to the mouth of the cave, he hesitated and peered in as best as he could. He hoped no animal had decided to make this place its home. He wrapped his fingers around the handle of his knife just in case.

After stepping inside the cave, he saw that it was indeed empty. He set his package down and put his hand over her mouth to let her know to be quiet. Light from the moon filtered into the cave from a small hole up top. Normally he'd have appreciated the bit of brightness and a possible secondary means of escape, but right now he'd have preferred pitch dark. He pushed Rachel deeper into the cave and pointed toward a rock formation. She'd be safe from flying bullets there. When she didn't move, he realized that she couldn't see him. "Head toward the back," he whispered. "Hide behind the rocks."

"What? Where?"

He pushed her in the right direction and she stuck out her arm, feeling her way along the cave wall. After she was safely hidden, he positioned himself so he could see outside.

One shadow passed by. Only one. A man. He could tell by the build and walk. The person Rachel had seen earlier? The one who had followed him? The man moved back and forth among the trees. He stopped then moved back and forth again, closer to the cave this time. Did he know she was in here or not?

The brush was too thick for him to make out any of the man's details. Not that he needed to. He was fairly confident that he knew who their stalker was. Jeb. It was the only thing that made sense. He was holding something in his hands. Ace couldn't tell what. Not a gun. When the man walked into a less dense area, Ace saw him more clearly. Yep. Definitely Jeb. The moonlight struck the device in his hand for just a moment and silver controls glinted. *Shit*.

Luck was not on their side. Ace checked his gun and then patted his leg, finding his extra ammo mags.

After long, tense moments, Jeb moved on.

They'd caught a break though he knew it was only temporary. Ace let out the heavy breath he'd been holding. Once sure that Jeb was nowhere nearby, he slowly made his way to just outside the cave.

Having come prepared, he pulled some invisible wire from one of his pockets and strung it in front of the cave. If someone came up on them, they would trip over it and he'd hear them. Luckily he'd kept a few helpful items in his pockets, instead of transferring them to his backpack. Always be prepared. Another lesson he'd learned the hard way.

Too bad he hadn't kept his cell phone with him. It had needed charging and he'd planned to take care of it with his portable charger after everyone else had gone to bed. That's when he'd spotted Rachel out alone.

He turned and stalked deeper into the cave until he found her crouched behind the rocks. "Take off your clothes, kitten."

# **Chapter Three**

Rachel stood up slowly and her eyes widened. She took a step backward. "Excuse me?"

Damn. He'd scared the spit out of her. She had to know he'd never hurt her. Didn't she? The fact that she might believe otherwise bothered him a great deal. "I think you've got a tracking device on you. I need to check."

When she simply stared at him, he scrubbed a hand down his face and paced toward the front of the cave, giving her a chance to process the information and calm down. And giving himself a chance to organize his thoughts.

These guys were thorough and determined. He grumbled under his breath and his thoughts raced as he sorted through all that had happened. Something about this whole thing made him itch. And not in a good way. He turned as Rachel stepped closer and grabbed her hand. He was glad she no longer seemed wary of his intentions. He led her deeper into the cave, back behind the rock formation. The closer she was to the mouth of the cave, the more likely the tracking device would pick her up.

"A tracking device?" Fear of another sort clouded her features. "If I do, they'll know we're in the cave." She glanced toward the entrance.

"Don't worry." He, at least, could reassure her a bit about that. "The cave seems to be masking the signal for now, even with that hole up top. The tracker probably isn't very high-tech. But we need to get rid of it so we can get out of here free and clear."

"You think it's in my clothing?" She looked down at herself and spread her arms as if she felt dirty. "How?"

"You'd be surprised at people's ingenuity. My bet is that it was planted before you ever made it to camp. Probably back at wherever you were living prior to coming here."

"Impossible." Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head, meeting his gaze. "How would they know what I would be wearing?"

"Give me your bra first. That's most likely where it's at."

"I've got four bras, Ace. For them to pick the exact one—"

"They could have easily placed one in each of your bras. If we find a tracking device, you'll need to remember to clear or toss your other lingerie after you get back home. Now let me have it." He snapped his fingers, not used to explaining his words and actions to anyone. He wanted this taken care of quickly.

"Don't snap at me, Ace."

He puffed out a heavy breath. "Come on, Rachel. I need to destroy that thing." He also needed to rein in his impatience but this whole operation stank big time. It worried him.

Still looking skeptical, she quickly removed her bra. Without removing her shirt. Women who could do that had always fascinated him. It seemed like such a sexy move somehow.

"Here."

He took the silky garment and felt around the edges. B-cup. But barely, from what he remembered. Still, tits were tits. He usually preferred large ones though he wouldn't turn down smaller ones. Hers were quite soft and tasty from what he remembered. He shook his head. *Keep your mind on business, you fucking idiot.* 

With his flashlight stuck under one arm, he checked the bra thoroughly. "Yep." He pulled out the small electronic device. "In with the underwire." It had been positioned perfectly. A little off and she'd have felt it. He grabbed the flashlight and held it closer as he examined the tiny piece. "A crappy model. Government issue, but old."

"Government?"

"Black market stuff, most likely." He didn't want to mention the alternative. He dropped the piece of metal on the ground and smashed it with the heel of his boot. He

clicked off the flashlight and stuck it in one of his pockets. "That should take care of it. Now anyone who's following us will have to track us the old-fashioned way."

Rachel nodded but still looked worried. She glanced toward the cave's entrance for the hundredth time at least.

"Relax. This is good news, kitten. Smile." His gaze lowered to her chest. Her nipples were clearly visible through her shirt. Damn. Maybe when this was over, they could have one final goodbye fuck. Okay, so he was a hound dog in need of a good rut. He could admit it. Somehow he thought that should make him feel worse than it actually did. But when it came to sex, not much made him wince or even think twice.

Rachel—no need to think of herself as Kit anymore—wasn't in any mood to smile. Or relax. She was actually getting tired of Ace saying that to her. *Good news*, he'd also said. Good news would be knowing that all of this was behind her and she could go back home safe and sound. She held out her hand. "My bra?"

He pushed the garment into her palm. When his fingers touched her skin, small tingles traveled down her body, right to her pussy. She wondered if he felt the same electricity. Both their hands lingered longer than necessary before she finally pulled away.

Now was definitely not the place or the time for personal feelings to fog their thinking. The knowledge that he might want her though was thrilling. Her shirt brushed against her hardened nipples, making her very aware of her nakedness beneath the thin material.

"Turn around a minute while I put this back on."

"It's pitch black in here."

"Turn around anyway." He could see much better than he was letting on and she suspected it was the glasses. He was too self-assured when he moved and able to make out details where she felt totally blind.

"Nothing I haven't seen before."

"I'm going to smack you. Now turn around, Ace."

He chuckled and turned.

Relieved, she started unbuttoning her top. That relief switched back to sexual awareness as she peeled off the garment. She needed to quell all the physical tension she felt, so she concentrated on their current predicament. "Was it just one person following us?" Once she had the padding over her breasts again, she knew she'd feel sexually safer.

"That's all I saw. It was Jeb." He'd decided that he should tell her. He wanted her on alert in case she spotted the man. He didn't want her thinking that Jeb might be there looking to rescue her.

She hesitated, then grunted. "I knew he had shifty eyes."

Ace laughed. "Always a dead giveaway, right? No pun intended." He imagined her half naked behind him and fought hard not to turn around for a peek.

"Don't make fun of me."

"Never."

"All right. I'm ready."

He turned around. His gaze immediately went to her breasts and she crossed her arms over her chest in a protective manner, as if she could feel him staring. With effort, he forced his gaze upward and held back a smile. "When he doesn't find us, he'll head back to camp. I don't want to run into him again on his way back, so we'll stay here for a few hours. After some rest and a reasonable amount of time, we can take off and should be all right."

"You make it sound so easy."

He sat down and leaned against the cave wall. "Don't mistake my words. We're still in a serious situation." Whoever was after Rachel had gone to a lot of trouble. They wouldn't give up easily. This was far from over. "Come on. Sit down. Let's try to get a little sleep."

Hot on Her Tail

"Shouldn't one of us stay awake?"

"I have the entrance booby-trapped. If someone tries to come in, we'll know it."

She glanced toward the mouth of the cave. "What about animals?"

"They should smell us and stay out."

She looked at him skeptically. "Should?"

"Don't worry. We'll be fine." He had his weapons and felt confident he'd be able to take down anything, human or otherwise, who came upon them. "Now sit down."

She reached out for the wall and slowly lowered herself down beside him but didn't relax. Instead she looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"What's with the look?"

"So you can see. It's the glasses, right? Some sort of night vision?"

He chuckled. She'd tricked him. Smart lady. "Special issue. Experimental. They let me see in the dark. Infrared." He set his flashlight, knife and gun on a flat rock—all close at hand.

"Infrared glasses. I should have known. So much for being almost pitch black in here. Good thing I insisted you turn around when I put my bra back on. Pervert."

He shrugged. "Hey, I took a shot."

When she didn't whip back another caustic response, he became concerned. She rubbed her arms and he realized how cold and uncomfortable she must be. He was cooling off too with no shirt. After dark the mountains got really chilly. Sharing their body heat would make the night go by a lot easier. He reached out and pulled her against his chest.

"Wait! What—"

"Calm down. We need to stay warm. Just relax and sleep."

She stopped resisting. "You say relax too much, Ace."

"So do it and I'll stop saying it."

She didn't say anything else and after a few tense moments, she finally did relax against him. When on assignment, he generally slept for only a few minutes at a time. And he'd trained himself to wake at the smallest sound. So he didn't worry about anyone sneaking up on them, especially with the wire in place in front of the cave's entrance. With luck, the night would pass quickly.

He tried to settle back but comfort didn't come easily. His thoughts wouldn't stop spinning. He was missing something here. He felt it in his bones.

Though Rachel seemed to have relaxed earlier, she once more felt tense against his body. He could tell she wouldn't be settling into sleep any time soon either. "What's wrong?" he asked in a low voice.

"What isn't?"

"Try not to think about everything. You're going to need your rest. Tomorrow will be a long day."

"I know. I can't help it. It's almost too much. You know?"

He began rubbing her arm in light strokes. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you." One of her hands rested on his thigh and she curled her fingers into the fabric of his pants. A desperate attempt to hold on to something she could believe in? Maybe. At least he hoped she believed in him.

"What do you think will happen when we're discovered missing?" she asked. "Hattie and Julia will call the police, right?"

"If I were Jeb, I'd tell the others that we ran off together. That he saw us fucking in the woods. Or something like that. Anything to make sense of us being gone so nobody would panic and call it in. Don't expect the cavalry, kitten."

"Sometimes I wish you'd just lie to me."

Her head rested on his chest. The feel of her soft hair against his skin made him want to run his fingers through the thick strands. He brushed some dirt from her leg. His fingers lingered on her cool flesh. He shifted a bit. Damn his cock.

"Um...should I move?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"Not unless you want to." She looked up at him and he glimpsed the multitude of emotions in her eyes—need, desperation, fear. Unable to resist, he lowered his head and gently touched his lips to hers. Just to reassure her.

She made a soft sound deep in her throat and turned her body more tightly into his. He groaned and slid his hand from her leg to her hip. She opened her mouth and he slipped his tongue inside, tasting and exploring. Her fingers traveled along his chest, fueling his sexual need.

She pulled back and her brow crinkled. "What are these scars?"

Damn. His scars were the last things he wanted to talk about right now. But he heard the genuine concern in her voice and didn't want to brush her aside as he often did with others. With great effort, he reined in his desire enough to answer. "Gunshot wounds."

"From when you were in the army?"

He nodded. "It happened after a joint military exercise." She seemed interested and expecting more so he continued. "One of the soldiers from another unit went crazy. We were in a bar the night the exercise ended and he just lost it. He pulled a pistol and started shooting and..." His voice trailed off as all the memories returned.

Rachel lightly kissed the scar on his chest. She let her lips linger and his heart constricted at her tenderness. Then she looked back up at him. The trust in her eyes floored him for it seemed so absolute. He suddenly felt very unworthy of that trust.

He should have protected her better. Seen the danger signs sooner. He'd even ignored that damn nagging itch on the back of his neck that always indicated that shit was well within sniffing distance.

"What happened to him?" she asked. "The soldier."

"Last I heard, he was still in prison. I never did find out why he did it. He just couldn't handle things, I guess. Three of us took him down that night. I got badly wounded and had to be discharged. If two buddies of mine hadn't backed me up, I'd probably be dead now. They saved my stupid butt. Unfortunately, my career couldn't be saved, because he also got me in the knee."

She looked at him in silence for a moment. No pity shone in her gaze, just understanding. "So now you're doing the next best thing?"

"After I recovered, I couldn't face a desk job at some company. I needed to get back in the field in some way. This keeps me close to the action but allows me a great deal of flexibility. My damn knee is barely even a consideration anymore. In my opinion at least."

"I'm glad you're here, Ace."

Truthfully, so was he. He was more determined than ever to see her through this safely. He lowered his head and kissed her again. More deeply this time. More urgently. She didn't pull back. She returned his kiss with a hunger that matched his own.

He pulled her closer until she was straddling his lap. She felt so soft and warm. He massaged her thighs, moving his hands inward.

Rachel's heart pounded. Reluctantly she broke their heated kiss. She reached down and pulled her top over her head, not bothering with the buttons.

Ace didn't move. Maybe he'd removed his glasses. "I took off my shirt."

"I can see that."

Self-doubt struck her hard, for he wasn't touching her. After those hot kisses, she'd thought for sure that he wanted her. "Should I put it back on?"

"Actually, I'm enjoying the view and just thinking about ripping your bra off next."

She smiled at the breathless sound in his voice. She reached behind her and unhooked her bra. In a matter of seconds she flung it aside. In the next instant, she felt his mouth on one of her nipples. He licked and sucked the hard bud. Yes. She'd always wanted larger breasts but Ace had always made her feel that her body was more than adequate.

She felt the sucking, the sexual thrill, all the way down to her pussy. He licked and sucked and nibbled until she thought she'd go crazy. She reached out and fumbled with his glasses. He stopped just long enough for her to take them off him. She'd never considered herself much of a voyeur, but she wanted to see. She slipped on the glasses and everything came into focus. She watched Ace's tongue and mouth move over her breast. The sight excited her more than she thought possible.

Clumsily, she reached between them, trying to open his pants but her fingers wouldn't cooperate. His cock felt rock hard. She needed him inside her. Now.

Ace's tongue slid from her breast, up the side of her neck and over to her mouth. Again they kissed hungrily.

When he broke the kiss, she saw him sweep his hand over the cave floor, brushing away some rocks. Then in an instant, he had her on her back.

"You have no idea how long I've thought about doing this." He tore at her shorts, dragging them down her legs and tossing them aside, right along with her underwear and shoes.

His words excited her and made her want him with a fierceness she'd rarely felt for a man. Dirt and a few small pebbles that he'd missed pressed against her back and bottom but she didn't care. She just wanted Ace.

Before she realized his intentions, he slipped the glasses off her. "I need to see you."

He knelt over her and she could hear his heavy breathing. She wished she could see him too. She wanted to memorize every inch of him, compare him now to her memories of him all those years ago. He'd seemed like almost a boy then. Now he was all man.

She heard him pop a snap then slowly lower the zipper on his pants.

Anticipation almost drove her crazy. She reached out, blindly searching for the small flashlight. She knew it was nearby and they were in a place that would obscure the light from the cave entrance. When she felt the round cylinder, she grabbed it and flipped it on.

"Hey, don't waste the batteries."

"I'm not turning it off until I see your cock."

He smiled that sexy smile of his. And then his cock was free. Large. Long and thick. He curled his fingers around his shaft and she watched as he moved his hand up and down the length.

He didn't make any moves to take off his boots or pants. He just worked his hand over his rigid shaft. The whole scene felt so primitive, with him half dressed and her lying there naked in the dirt. She loved it.

"Are you going to fuck me?" she finally croaked out, unable to take it any longer.

"Oh yeah, baby. Thoroughly. But first, you're going to click off that light and suck my cock."

Not a request. An order. Still, she didn't bristle at the command. Instead, her whole body trembled. She doused the light and set it beside them on the ground.

He pulled her into a sitting position and cupped the back of her head. "Take it."

Ace pressed his cock against her lips until she opened to accommodate him. His musky scent filled her senses as he slid his cock head inside her mouth.

He made a sound somewhere between a growl and a groan. Both of his hands were now on her head, his fingers tangled in her hair. "Suck it hard."

She hollowed her cheeks as she sucked on the head of his thick cock. With his encouragement, she gradually took more and more of his length.

"Ah yeah, Rachel. I'm going to fill your mouth with so much cum that you won't be able to take it all."

*Yes. Give it to me.* She reached up and gently played with his balls.

"Fuck!" He jerked, sliding his cock deeper. "You really want it, don't you?"

Before she could react, he pushed her away. "What's wrong? I was ready."

"Nothing. Lie down. I'm going to fuck you. I changed my mind. I need to be inside your cunt when I come."

His bluntness made her hotter. She heard him fumbling for something then heard a tear. "What are you doing?"

"Getting a condom."

She hadn't even thought of protection. What was wrong with her? Geez. Did men carry that stuff with them no matter where they went?

He pushed her thighs apart with his knees. Leaning over her, he took her lips with his once more. He must have removed his glasses because she didn't feel them on his face.

The weight of his body on hers made her feel completely captured by this soldier's lust. He'd matured a lot and she greatly respected the enticing and exciting man he'd become.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth and his cock into her pussy at the same time.

Oh! Yes. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, reveling in the feeling of him inside her. All the years melted away and she felt as if they'd never been apart. She pushed her hips up against him.

He tore his mouth from her lips and moved to her ear. "That's right, Rachel. Show me how much you want me."

She did want him and so had no problem with his request. She squeezed his hips with her thighs and scratched at his back. The muscles in her pussy clenched around his cock.

"Ah yeah!" He pulled back and thrust into her hard.

She sucked in a breath. His cock was so thick that he stretched her to her limits. She held on and met him thrust for thrust as he fucked her faster.

"Damn, your cunt is tight. Ah!"

She hadn't been with a man in a while. Certainly not a man as big as Ace. When he tongued the inside of her ear, she about lost all control. She thrashed against him.

"Yeah, push your hips up harder." He bit her earlobe.

She let out a small yelp and dug her fingernails into his back. "Fuck me, Ace!"

He grabbed her arms and pressed them down into the dirt on each side of her. His gaze burned into hers. "You want it rough?"

"Yes. Do it!"

"Hell yeah." Ace thrust into her hard, over an over. His eyes looked wild. Like a conqueror. And she definitely felt conquered.

An orgasm began building inside her. She squirmed as the feeling between her legs grew. Her clit throbbed. Her nerves tingled. "Oh, Ace!"

"Come on." Still holding her down, he pounded into her, as if trying to get even deeper, unable to control himself. "Come hard for me."

"Yes, yes!" She felt right on the edge of a massive climax. At that moment she lost control. The orgasm exploded inside her. She arched her back and Ace covered her mouth with his as she cried out with more pleasure than she could ever remember.

She heard Ace groan deep in this throat, felt his whole body stiffen and she knew he was coming too. The pleasure filled every cell of her body and took her to a sexual peak she'd never reached before.

As the ecstasy gradually ebbed, he released her and relaxed. His body felt heavy on hers but she loved the weight of him on top of her.

Only when her mind completely cleared did she realize that he'd muffled her cries with his mouth to keep them from being discovered. He'd thought of a condom to keep them both safe. And he'd given her the orgasm of her lifetime.

It seemed no matter the situation, Ace was ready and able to take care of her. She liked that in a man.

## **Chapter Four**

The next morning, while Rachel got herself put together and ready to leave, Ace removed the wire he'd rigged up the night before in front of the cave. He took his time, giving her a little extra privacy. She wasn't used to roughing it and this couldn't be easy on her. Especially with no supplies.

His thoughts drifted to their night together. Fucking her probably hadn't been the best idea, given the circumstances, but it sure had felt damn good. Better than he remembered all those years ago. Even better than in his dreams, which he hadn't believed could be possible.

They hadn't really spoken yet this morning. Another awkward morning after with this woman was not what he'd wanted but that's exactly what he'd gotten. He'd never felt awkward with any other woman after sex. Somehow that fact made him think he'd better not analyze the situation too closely. He might discover something that could complicate his life. He was a loner and he liked it that way. He had no intention of changing.

Regardless of what had happened between them or how either of them felt, they needed to get out of this cave. He'd intended for them to continue their escape late last night, while the mountainside was still dark. More danger from nightly predators would have existed, but they'd have been less likely to encounter anyone trailing them. He hadn't had the heart to wake her though. She'd looked so peaceful in his arms. And she had felt even better. Hopefully that decision wouldn't prove to be a mistake on his part.

He turned. "We need to go, Rachel." He couldn't help but grin. She looked so deliciously rumpled. He remembered the sounds from her, the way she'd felt, when

he'd made her come. That was something he intended to lock inside his memories forever.

"I'm ready. I guess."

She stood there looking so uncertain, waiting for him to say something more. His grin faded. He had no idea what to say to her. As such, he opted to say nothing. Sensitivity was for saps anyway. He'd probably just end up saying something stupid.

He turned and waited until he heard her at the mouth of the cave. He stuck out his hand, indicating for her to stay back a moment while he checked the area. He didn't want to lead her into a trap. He'd scouted the forest earlier but wanted to do another quick sweep. Assured that no one was anywhere nearby, he motioned her forward. He kept his pace slow, making certain she'd be able to keep up with him.

They walked in silence for a long time. Nothing seemed to be moving in the forest this morning except them. He glanced up. Even the birds were oddly quiet.

"Is it me or is it weird out here?" Rachel asked in a quiet voice behind him.

A feeling of unease snaked through him. That itch he hated started again along the back of his neck, putting him on alert. "Don't worry about it." In a couple of hours they would reach the river. After that, he'd feel a lot safer. Tracking them would become more difficult and they wouldn't be far from real shelter and help. Besides, they needed water.

A low rumble stopped them in their tracks. The sound gradually became louder and closer. Warning bells went off in Ace's head.

"What's that?" Rachel asked.

He grabbed her hand. "Let's go!"

The ground began to shake. As he pulled her away from the rocks and through the trees, stones broke free from where they'd just come and rolled down the side of the mountain. Some of the skinnier trees uprooted and toppled around them. They sprinted into a small clearing and Rachel fell to her knees, gasping for breath.

Everything turned still and quiet once more. Stopping as quickly as it had started.

Ace dropped down beside her on the grass. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, taking in a large gulp of air. "I didn't even know we had earthquakes around here."

"We must have been really close to the epicenter for it to uproot those tress like that. There will probably be some aftershocks. We'll need to be careful." He hoped the ranger station was still standing. Those structures were sturdily built to withstand such events, so the odds were in their favor. "Can you continue?"

"Will there be food at that station?" she asked with a hopeful look.

He chuckled. "Most likely. Probably an outdoor shower too."

"How about an indoor toilet?"

"Don't push it."

She laughed and got to her feet. After brushing off her shorts, she held out her hand to him. "Let's go. I'm really tired of the great outdoors and am craving more civilized surroundings."

He grabbed her hand and got to his feet, amazed at her resilience. He wondered if it were real or if she was just covering her fear. Either way, it worked in their favor. He led them out of the clearing and down the slope of the hill toward the river below. He kept watch for wild animals. He'd rather not disclose their location by firing off any shots if he could avoid it.

"Ace?"

"Hmm?" He turned down an easier path, less direct but it wouldn't tire her out as much and she'd be able to walk farther. Also there would be less chance of one of them getting injured.

"Why are these drug dealers out to get me like this? I mean, dealers are arrested all the time. Right? Why is this case different and so important?"

He glanced back at her. Damn. They hadn't told her. Someone was fucking with her big time. When they found a working phone, he'd call his contact and tell him this whole thing reeked of dirty cops. He might be wrong and just overly suspicious but he didn't think so. Not with everything that had happened.

"These aren't just dealers. You stumbled onto a drug trafficking ring, kitten. A big one. The guys you fingered, and the ones on that list you found, are key players. If they fall, it would start a domino effect within their organization. We're talking millions of dollars at stake here. But without your testimony, the case is shaky. Depending on the judge, the bosses would probably get off and the lackeys would maybe just get a light sentence in a facility where they could continue their activities. You can put them all away permanently. Into a high-security federal penitentiary."

"If they don't put me away first. I suppose it's too late to back out and pretend I don't know anything."

"They'd stay after you anyway. They couldn't take the chance that you might talk in the future. The only protection you have now is for the entire organization to fall." And for any dirty cops to be exposed, otherwise she might continue to be threatened. But as long as she had the courage to testify, he'd take care of the cops and any other loose strings. It was the least he could do for her.

"What about witness protection? Something more permanent than this."

"Would you really want that? Not to see or talk to your friends and family?"

"No. That would kill me." She hesitated as a shudder shook her. "Sorry. Bad choice of words. How did my life get to be such a mess?"

He reached back and grabbed her hand. "It'll be all right. I'm not going to leave you, Rachel, until you're safe." And he meant it. Even if he had to become her permanent shadow.

Rachel gripped Ace's hand tighter as they neared the river. She could see the water moving swiftly. Her mouth felt so dry. "Is it safe to drink?"

"We're going to have to take the chance."

Hot on Her Tail

When they got to the riverbank, they both kneeled down and drank heartily. Water had never tasted so sweet.

The sound of the rush over the rocks drowned out the other sounds Rachel had become accustomed to hearing as they walked. She knew the water would cover their tracks and any noises they made but she felt vulnerable now that her own senses were also blocked.

"Which way?" she asked, standing up.

"We need to head downriver." He stood and led them into the water but stayed in the shallow part, close to the bank, where it remained calm.

"If they track us to the river, even if they lose our trail here, won't they figure out we're headed for the ranger station?"

"A main road is just through that far clump of trees in the opposite direction." He dropped her hand and motioned toward the west. "That's where they'll look first. They probably already have men stationed in various spots out there, waiting for us to emerge. By the time they figure out we're not headed that way and check the ranger station, we'll be long gone."

She glanced behind them. "I hope you're right." She bumped into something solid and was stopped cold. "Oof." Ace's back. "What's going on?"

"Shh."

In panic, she searched the area. Had someone found them? He pointed downriver and she saw what he'd spotted. A bear. It looked like a brown bear. But she was far from an expert about such things. The animal was lingering on the bank. He wasn't huge but was big enough to cause her concern.

"He's come to fish," Ace whispered.

"What do we do?"

"Wade to the other side and pass him real slow."

She gripped his waist. "We're going to walk by him?"

"It'll be fine." Ace grabbed her hand again and led her across.

Her nerves kicked into high gear as they approached the middle and the water got deeper and faster. She hated deep water. "Just so you know—I can't swim."

He looked back at her and his eyes widened. "Hell of a time to tell me." His grip on her hand tightened.

Luckily this part of the river wasn't too wide. She'd seen people do this in the movies all the time. How hard could it be?

The bear looked up. She and Ace froze. When the animal spotted them, he took off into the trees. She breathed a sigh of relief. One danger avoided. Now if they could negotiate this river... Just when she was feeling confident about getting across safely, she slipped and lost her hold on Ace's hand.

Before she could even scream, water covered her head. She thrashed in panic as she felt the water overcome her, filling her mouth and nose. Then she was jerked up and found herself in Ace's arms.

She coughed and sputtered. Her vision turned blurry from the water in her eyes. Even so, Ace looked and felt heaven sent. She clung to him.

"Are you all right?"

She had no idea if she was but she nodded.

Ace held her tightly. Finally he untangled himself from her and wiped the hair from her face. "Hell of a way to freshen up, huh?"

A small smile was all she could manage. She was still shaking and her lungs burned from her fall but she knew she had to get herself together fast. No time existed for hysterics. "Let's just go. Okay?"

"We'll stay in the shallow part from now on."

They waded all the way to the opposite bank but stayed in the water and started downriver at a snail's pace. "Do you think the bear might come back?"

"It won't be a problem either way. Don't worry."

She laughed lightly but it came more from nerves than anything else. "Don't sound so cocky. I could have drowned. Or that bear could have come charging. We could have been eaten."

"Don't be melodramatic. I wouldn't have let you drown. And the bear was probably more afraid of us than we were of him. Besides, I'm the only one who'll be eating you, kitten." He chuckled.

She rolled her eyes then stuck her tongue out at him behind his back. Yes, childish. But it made her feel better. She hoped this would be their last water journey and their one and only dangerous wildlife encounter.

Ace helped her from the water. "We're close. Just up the hill."

She looked up and could actually see what looked like some sort of tower. She couldn't see the bottom of the structure, but assumed it to be the ranger station. Relief washed over her. Finally all of this was coming to an end.

Unfortunately, the tower wasn't quite as close as it appeared. It still took them forever to reach the station. They had to climb a rocky slope and her feet were killing her from the uneven stones and her soggy running shoes.

She wondered if the ranger on duty could see them coming and what he would think. "Do you see anyone in the tower?"

"No."

"What if no one's there?" If they'd come all this way for nothing, she'd cry.

"We'll still get in. Don't worry. They'll have a radio or a phone at the station and we'll call my contact to get you relocated fast."

Finally the entire station came into view. It looked to be mostly wood. A cabin-like room atop a platform, located a few steps up. Then a narrow tower rose and expanded into an observation deck, well up among the trees.

"I don't see a vehicle," Ace said as he walked up the steps to the door. He turned the knob. "Locked. He might be off patrolling the area."

She followed him up the steps and peered into a window. "I don't know. It looks deserted." As she'd feared.

He stepped to the side and looked in also. "Hmm. You might be right. Damn budget cuts. These towers used to always be manned."

"Now what?"

Ace approached the door, took a step back and kicked the wood next to the knob. The door cracked and flew open. He looked over at her. "Now we go in."

"Handy." She followed him inside. The room had a small table with two straightback chairs. Some filing cabinets, open and empty. A dust-covered desk with an old shortwave radio that looked ancient. No computer or phone that she could see.

A cot sat in one corner. A small refrigerator in the other. She opened it. Empty. A cabinet hung above. She pulled on the doors. Two cans of beans and a jar of applesauce sat on the shelf. A rusted sink hung off the wall. She turned the knobs. After a groan and a hiccup, water flowed out. "Thank goodness." There must be a water source nearby. A spring maybe."

Ace fiddled with the radio. "I don't think it works." He walked over to a locker and rifled through its contents.

"Anything useful, like a cell phone?"

"Nope. Change of clothing. That's about all. A towel."

He headed toward the back of the room. "We need to go up top." He began climbing the ladder to the tower.

She followed close behind. Her stomach rumbled. What she wouldn't give for a hamburger.

When they reached the platform, Ace helped her up. Small. Empty. Not even a chair. No glass in the windows. There were shutters though, all open wide.

She peered out one of the windows. "I see the shower down there. And a portable toilet."

Ace looked out the windows. "I don't see anyone moving through the trees. I don't think we were followed."

She leaned against the wall. "My feet hurt."

"Don't get too comfortable. I'm going to have to see if I can get that radio to work. You'll need to keep watch from up here. I don't want anyone sneaking up on us."

"Okay." She'd never felt so bone tired in her life. When she got back home, she intended to sleep for a week.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ace worked for what felt like hours on the radio. His knowledge of the equipment was limited and his frustration grew.

It was almost dark now and he hadn't been able to find any candles. There must have been a generator out here at some point but it seemed to have disappeared. Stolen probably. The radio operated off a battery, which actually was still good, but that hadn't helped him much.

The only tools he had to work with were the ones on his utility knife. Other than one loud squawk, the damn radio hadn't done anything but crackle and it kept dying on him.

He glanced toward the ladder. Rachel had been very quiet. He'd better check on her. He'd fiddle with the radio again in the morning. They might have to hike out of here on their own after all.

As he started up the ladder, he heard multiple pops in the distance. "Shit." He didn't even remember taking the rest of the rungs. All he knew was that he'd reached the top and his eyes immediately zeroed in on Rachel.

She sat casually on one window sill looking out. "Fireworks," she said when she saw him.

He released the breath he'd been holding and tried to slow his pounding heart. "Damn. I forgot it was the Fourth."

"Where are they coming from, do you think?"

He looked out the window as a colorful display burst in the distance, barely visible through the trees. "Campers probably. Hope they don't start a fire."

"Any luck with the radio?"

"Not yet."

"Do you have a can opener? I can dish us out those beans. I found a plastic bowl and some spoons in a drawer down there when you were searching through the locker."

"Yeah, sure." He handed her his utility knife and took over watch duty while she went down to get the food ready.

If they had to hike out of here, they couldn't use the main road or established trails. They'd be sitting ducks. The safest route would be to continue downriver. A kayaking operation existed a few miles away. Even if some men had already staked out that area in the hope of finding them, they still might be able to slip in unnoticed among the tourists.

A few minutes later, Rachel returned to the tower with a bowl and two spoons. "There was only one bowl, so we'll need to share. Sorry, the beans are cold. The hot plate didn't work."

"That's okay." He took the bowl and they ate in silence.

## **Chapter Five**

Rachel carefully washed the plastic bowl and spoons and set them on the counter next to the sink to dry. They'd need them again tomorrow. A lucky find, considering the ranger station had been stripped of almost everything useful. The two cans of beans had been an even luckier find.

She and Ace had eaten together in silence while watching the fireworks. She'd actually felt at peace as they enjoyed the colorful display just visible through the distant trees.

The meal had been mostly satisfying, surprisingly enough, but she still wanted that hamburger. She and Ace left the jar of applesauce for morning. They'd need the sugar rush if they had to trek further downriver.

She yawned and stepped over to the front window.

After eating, Ace had gone outside to set up some perimeter safeguards. Whatever that meant. She assumed he knew what he was doing. She was still alive, after all. And quite grateful for all his help. Without him, she would have been shot and killed in her tent back at the campsite. She shuddered at the thought.

He'd said afterward he would check out the shower. She'd had a good enough dunking in the river not to want another one. If the shower worked, she'd take a turn in the morning.

Contemplating their past relationship, she thought it strange how the two of them had reconnected after all these years. Even stranger were the circumstances. What were the odds that he'd be the one hired to watch over her? Perhaps fate had played a hand and thought they deserved a second chance.

"Stop fantasizing," she whispered. After this assignment was over, he'd most likely be gone once again. Somehow the thought of not having him in her life anymore made her heart ache more than she ever expected it would.

The sound of water caught her attention and she moved to the far window. The shower. It was working. Ace stood with his head back, letting the water spray his face and bare body. The moon and stars provided the only light, so her view was minimal. Too bad. He had such a great body, even if the only things halfway visible were his head and legs.

The memory of the very first time he'd fucked her returned in full force. He'd had a bit too much to drink at the party, but not so much that he'd been drunk.

She'd pretty much thrown herself at him after she'd seen him walk through the door earlier in the night. She could admit it now. And he'd definitely been receptive to her attentions.

He'd asked her to come back to his apartment for the night, quite clear that sex would be the agenda. She'd agreed.

They'd barely made it into the apartment. In fact, she'd thought he was going to fuck her right up against the wall outside his door. His hands and mouth had been all over her, under her clothing, squeezing her breast and fingering her pussy. She'd never been so turned on in her life.

After getting inside, they'd torn each other's clothes off. He'd pushed her over the back of an overstuffed chair and fucked her like some savage until she came. Her body trembled at the memory.

Yes, Ace! Oh...more, she'd begged him. The memory came back to her so clearly.

He'd tangled his fingers in her hair and pushed her down to her knees. His fingers curled around her hips and he plunged into her repeatedly from behind. She could still hear his flesh slapping against hers.

And again she'd come. Hard.

Before her body stopped trembling, he'd pulled out his cock, moved in front of her and said, "Lick your cum off my dick."

She'd obeyed and licked him clean. Then she'd taken him into her mouth and sucked him as if her life depended on making him come.

"Ah fuck. Yeah, Rachel." His fingers had tightened in her hair. "Swallow every drop."

And she had. He'd spewed his cum into her mouth. She eagerly took it all, never wanting him to forget her. But, also, she loved the decadence and never wanted to forget him or that night either.

After that, he'd carried her to his bed and they'd fucked every way humanly possible, until neither of them had an ounce of energy or cum left.

The memories had her shifting uncomfortably, her underwear soaked. She'd best get her mind elsewhere.

She shuffled over to the cot and stretched out. She needed to close her eyes. Just for a few minutes. Since it had turned dark, they couldn't see anything from the tower but she felt safe here in the cabin. For now. Ace had said the people after her would check the station at some point but the two of them would be long gone before anyone showed up.

Feeling more relaxed than she had in a long while, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ace secured the door of the station and made certain the windows were locked. He'd actually felt more at ease when they'd been holed up in the cave. It had been a smaller area to secure. The tower provided them with an excellent view during the day but didn't do them much good at night.

He'd set up a few booby-traps around the station. Hopefully it would be sufficient. He hadn't had much to work with. They both needed sleep and more than simply a light doze. Tomorrow was going to be a long day and their energy levels needed to be high.

They'd been damn lucky so far—they were still alive and uninjured. Hopefully that luck would continue. In the morning, he'd try the radio once more. If he couldn't get it working, they'd leave before noon. He didn't want to stay in one place for too long.

He felt much better after taking a shower. The water had revived him. He noticed Rachel asleep on the cot. He didn't have the heart to be angry at her for not keeping alert until he returned. She'd been through a lot and for the most part had handled herself well.

The cabin felt cool, even with the windows securely closed. The only sounds outside were chirping insects and the occasional bird. The fireworks had ceased some time ago. Everything felt peaceful, as if they shouldn't have a care in the world.

He watched out the windows for a while, until his eyes felt heavy. He hated to wake Rachel but he needed a break. Even the shower hadn't given him enough energy to pull an all-nighter. Quietly he approached the cot and stretched out behind her. The cot wasn't made for two, so he snuggled close. He slid his arm around her waist and whispered in her ear. "Wake up, kitten. I need you to watch for a while."

She stirred and turned in his arms. She felt so incredibly soft. When their gazes met, he suddenly didn't feel that tired anymore. Her sleepy bedroom eyes and her lips, slightly open, drew him in. He wondered what she was thinking. He kissed her gently. When she eagerly responded, he slipped his fingers underneath her top.

Their tongues dueled and she slid her hands into his hair. He loved the feel of her hands on him. After only a moment, one of her hands left his head and traveled down his body to tug at the opening of his pants. *Yes!* He cupped one of her breasts and squeezed lightly while brushing her nipple with his thumb.

She broke their heated kiss and stared into his eyes. "Is it safe enough to take a quick break?" she asked in a breathy voice.

He hesitated and glanced toward the windows. Nobody would be able to get close to them without making some noise. As long as they were awake, they'd hear any approaches. He'd made sure of that. He looked back at her. "Definitely."

"How about we get rid of these clothes then?"

Without another word, they both stripped down like horny teenagers. Clothes flew everywhere and dropped to the floor. Rachel pushed him down flat on the cot and straddled his hips.

"Taking charge, kitten?"

"Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He grinned and waved a condom in the air. "You may have your wicked way with me, ma'am."

"My wicked way?" She laughed. "I like the sound of that. Why are you carrying condoms anyhow?"

He shrugged. "A guy never knows. It pays to be prepared."

She laughed and snatched the packet, tore it open and rolled the piece of protection over him with an excruciatingly sensual touch. Slowly, she sank down on his cock.

"Ah yeah, Rachel." Her pussy felt tight and warm. His fingers curled around her hips. He let her set the pace, though she moved too slowly and easily, driving him insane.

She leaned over and traced his lips with her tongue but refused to kiss him when he tried. The little minx knew how to make him wild with need.

Well, he had a few surprises of his own. Just because she was on top didn't mean he had no control. His hand slapped down hard on her ass.

"Oh!" Her eyes widened and snapped to meet his gaze.

He chuckled. "You tease. I torment."

"Tease?" She ground down on his cock. "Does this feel like a tease?"

"Ah!" He grabbed her ass and held her tightly as he thrust his hips up. Okay, he conceded. Whatever she wanted. However she wanted it. They both groaned and all he could think about was coming until he was completely drained.

Her breasts pressed against his chest and she licked at his ear. "Spank me again, soldier. I actually did like it. You just surprised me, that's all."

Her words shocked and excited him. His cock felt as if it swelled to twice its size inside her. His little kitten was one sexy wildcat. And she had the uncanny ability to make the word "soldier" sound like the sexiest term ever. He smacked her ass, fascinated by the look of enjoyment on her face and how powerful it made him feel.

"Mmm." She squirmed on top of him.

The sound of his palm, repeatedly contacting her butt, filled the room. Her nipples felt like two hot bits of pure ecstasy against his chest. Moisture from her pussy eased down her legs and dripped onto his thighs.

Each time he slapped her ass, the muscles in her cunt squeezed him. The harder he spanked her, the harder she squeezed, so he didn't hold back. *Fuck, what a feeling!* 

He had to come so badly, but he didn't want the ecstasy to end. She was squirming and bouncing on his cock now like a desperate woman. Her whimpers and murmurs for more sent his mind racing. He sucked deeply on one of his fingers and plunged his wet finger right into her asshole. "You like it in the ass?"

"Ace!" she cried out and tensed. "Oh, do it!"

From her wild reaction, she obviously loved the double penetration, so he fingerfucked her ass at a merciless pace. She frantically lapped at one of his nipples then took it between her teeth.

"Ah geez." The pleasure shot all the way down into his cock. She nibbled on the bit of flesh until he groaned. Her need of an apparently savage fucking appealed to something equally savage deep inside him. "Give me one of your tits." He wanted her to feel the same combination of pain and pleasure.

She shifted and he sucked a nipple into his mouth then bit down on the nub, holding it between his teeth as she squirmed. She screamed and came, thrashing on top of him as he continued to thrust his cock up into her cunt and plunge his finger into her asshole.

"Oh, oh...oh!" Her whole body trembled. "Yes, Ace! I'm coming hard! It's so...ah...fuck!"

Ah, yeah. I'm right behind you, baby. Knowing he'd more than satisfied this woman made him feel like some kind of sexual master. Releasing her nipple, he gave it one quick swipe with his tongue then he too came hard, shouting out his pleasure.

Once spent, they collapsed in each others' arms and everything became quiet except for the sound of the insects and their own heavy breathing.

But then a sharp crack broke the calm surrounding them. They looked at each other and the cot buckled and fell apart, sending them crashing to the floor.

A moment of surprise passed before they both started laughing and couldn't stop. He'd never enjoyed a woman so much.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ace ran toward the soldier. All he had to do was tackle the guy and the man's killing spree was over. Two yards away. The soldier turned and saw him. He fired his pistol.

It was too late. Ace had nowhere to go. He felt the impact, the burn, the sharp pain. He fell to his knees.

Shouts filled his ears.

Ace bolted awake. Damn. He rubbed his chest and his knee throbbed like a bitch. His gaze took in his surroundings. The ranger station. That's where he was. Not the bar where his military career had ended.

After making love last night, he and Rachel had dressed and kept watch for a while. Then they'd lain down on the broken cot to rest. He hadn't planned to sleep long, or so deeply, but he'd gotten lazy. The sun was now up and he knew he'd made a fatal mistake. Especially when he turned his head.

A gun was pointed right at his face.

Hattie Strangler stood above the broken cot, aiming a pistol at them. Well, hell. So much for the background check he'd had done on her. Crappy government databases. He couldn't reach for his gun or knife without getting shot.

Rachel lay stiffly beside him. He could tell she was awake and aware of what was going on.

"How'd you get past my security, Hattie?"

She smirked. "You're good, Ace. You almost got me. But I'm better."

No way had she gotten through his defenses herself. Someone else had to be with her. Someone with more training than she could possibly have. She didn't move or hold a gun like an expert. Far from it. If she were a part of the organization that was after Rachel, she wasn't very high up in the ranks. Jeb had to be here too. Somewhere.

"You don't have to do this, Hattie." She might be having doubts. Otherwise, she would have just shot them in their sleep. "Let's talk."

"Not necessary. I intend to get me two rabbits for the price of one. Doesn't get any better."

A rumble reached his ears and the cabin began to shake. Another earthquake. Or maybe an aftershock from yesterday's quake. Hattie stumbled to the side.

Ace shot forward and tackled her to the ground. The gun flew from her hand and clattered to the floor.

He saw Rachel lunge for the weapon but a boot covered the grip before she got to it. Both Rachel and he looked up. As he'd suspected, Hattie wasn't alone. He reached for his knife but it was gone. *Shit*. He spied it next to the cot. It must have fallen when he'd lunged forward.

Ace didn't recognize the man on the other end of the boot. It wasn't Jeb. He looked South or Central American. He must have entered while Ace was concentrated on taking Hattie down because he hadn't seen the man earlier.

Ace reached for his concealed weapon, but hesitated when he saw another strange man in the room, standing farther back. Pale, armed, and big as a tank. Whoever he was, he had his pistol aimed and ready to fire. Ace eased his hand away from his gun.

A yelp reached their ears from outside. One of his traps had gotten someone.

Hattie pushed him aside and stood up. "That sounded like Scud." When the darker-skinned man simply glared at her, she took a step back. "Sorry, he surprised me."

The man leaned over, picked up the gun and shot Hattie in the head. Rachel gasped and covered her eyes as the woman fell to the floor.

Ace cringed. He felt bad for the woman, though she had been about to kill him. He'd seen too much death in his lifetime. He slowly got to his feet, trying not to spook either guy. These men were professionals and they meant business.

The pale-skinned man pointed his gun at Rachel. Ace saw him tense and he knew he had no choice. The man was about to fire. Ace moved quickly, blocking Rachel and reaching for his weapon at the same time. The sound of a shot filled the room.

Rachel screamed.

The darker man's eyes widened and he turned. The tank fell forward and hit the floor with a loud thud.

Ace fired to take down the man who had killed Hattie, but his gun jammed. "Damn it," he muttered. As the man turned back, Ace charged forward, knocking him to the floor.

"Hold it!"

Ace's head snapped up and he spotted another man at the entry to the room. Jeb. He must have been the one who shot the tank. Ace knocked out the man beneath him and grabbed his gun. He had no idea how many of these assholes had come for Rachel,

or why they were taking each other out, but he didn't care. Rachel was getting out of this alive. He rolled to his feet.

Jeb took a step back. "Wait, Ace." He flashed a badge. "ICDA."

Ace stopped in his tracks. "ICDA? What the hell?" Jeb was an agent? He hadn't been told that the InterContinental Drug Agency was in on this case.

When several men in jackets rushed into the cabin, he turned to check on Rachel. She was on her feet in the back of the room. Her eyes were wide and she was breathing heavily. "Are you all right?"

She nodded and leaned back against the wall.

Ace turned to Jeb. "How did you jokers find us out here?" He began connecting the pieces in his mind. "What were you doing at the camp to begin with?"

Jeb hesitated and his eyes shifted.

"Shit. This was all a setup, wasn't it?"

"We needed these guys, Ace. We had to make things look on the up-and-up and we knew they'd come after Rachel if they thought she was vulnerable. A few details were released on the street, we wired her and -"

Out of nowhere, Rachel charged past Ace and punched Jeb in the nose, sending him reeling backward.

"Ow, damn it!"

Ace grabbed her and dragged her back. Several agency men rushed forward, surrounding them.

"Leave them alone," Jeb ordered and they stepped back.

"You could have gotten us killed, you asshole!" Rachel pulled against Ace's hold.

Jeb held his nose. "You're both fine. We got the people who were after you and who have killed so many others—the drug traffickers' execution squad. And once you testify, we'll bring down the rest of their organization. It's all good."

"Why the hell wasn't I informed?" Ace demanded as he watched the ICDA agents clear the tower.

"Or me?" Rachel echoed. "It's my life."

Jeb wiped a trickle of blood from his nose. "Because we knew you wouldn't go along with it, Ace."

"Damn right."

"And we didn't want to scare you, Rachel. Or conversely give you a sense of extra security. We couldn't have you acting like you knew you had a large group of people protecting your back. Just Ace, who provided legitimacy to the setup, though you made things harder on us."

"Harder on you? She almost got shot at the camp. Where were you then?"

"I know. That was a close call. I was trying to find Hattie. Then I tried to track Rachel. What happened to the transmitter we planted on her?"

"I found it. It was a piece of crap and it's dust now."

Jeb frowned. "In the forest, right? That's where I lost the signal."

"Yeah, I saw you out there trailing us."

With a look of irritation, he puffed out a heavy breath. "Well, it all worked out in the end. Except two of our guys have broken ankles from those traps you set up outside. And one of their guys is hanging upside down by one leg."

"I'll cry in my beer over it later." He should have gotten more of the bastards. "This whole operation was not by the book or even close to legal."

"Due to the international scope of this case, we got special permission to bend some of the rules."

"The lawyers are going to have a field day." He hoped to hell they hadn't blown this entire case.

"Not if you back our story. These people had to be stopped, no matter what it took."

"The end justifies the means?" In his line of business, Ace was used to that philosophy. But this time it involved someone he cared about, which made it a bitter pill to swallow.

"Are you two ready to get back to civilization? We'll need statements from both of you."

Ace looked at Rachel but didn't say anything. She didn't say anything either. Now that the time had come to leave, he realized how much he didn't want to. But staying here wasn't an option.

He knew she must miss the comforts of home and probably couldn't wait to return to her old life. And he had some loose ends to tie up.

When she still didn't say anything, he answered for them both. "Yeah, let's get out of here."

## **Chapter Six**

Back to civilization and in the company of a sexy man. Rachel was in heaven. She loved her life and vowed never again to take her blessings, or her safety, for granted.

Ace, so handsome in his black suit, wined and dined her, making her feel as if they were a real couple. She had often fantasized of such intimate moments with him and now her fantasies had come true.

While listening to the most romantic of music, they danced under the moonlight on her balcony. The night was warm but a soft breeze wafted over them, cooling their skin. Looking into Ace's eyes, Rachel knew that she never wanted to be with another man. Only him. She couldn't remember a more perfect night.

As Ace held her closely, he whispered against her lips, "Are you ready to go in?"

Her heartbeat picked up a notch and she nodded, knowing the evening was far from over. Hand in hand they walked inside and she led him to her bedroom, flicking off lights as they went.

When the turned-down bed came into view, Ace swept her up in his arms. She laughed and clasped her hands around his neck. The smile on his face made her feel warm all over. And wanted.

Gently he set her on the mattress and slipped off her black high-heeled shoes. Only one small lamp lit the bedroom, keeping alive the romantic mood of the night.

The look in Ace's eyes mesmerized her. She saw desire, compassion and something else she couldn't quite name. "You're quiet all of a sudden."

He toed off his shoes, removed his socks and slipped the belt out of his pant loops. "I'm just...happy that we're here. If anything had happened to you—"

"Nothing did."

"No." He peeled off his jacket and laid it in a nearby chair. "Nothing did." He unbuttoned his shirt and slid it off his shoulders.

When she just sat there watching, he cocked an eyebrow. "Am I the only one getting naked here?"

She laughed. "No." She rolled the stockings down her legs, giving him a good view of her thighs. Then she dropped the sheer nylons on the rug, one by one. "Can you get my zipper?" She turned and rose to her knees.

Ace pulled down the zipper of her black dress, taking his time, touching her back softly. "You are so beautiful," he whispered in her ear. He kissed the side of her neck, making her sigh.

With ease, he helped her out of the dress and laid it across the bench at the foot of the bed. She turned to face him in just her black underwear and bra. His gaze immediately went to her breasts. She felt her nipples harden and her temperature rise.

He smiled. "I love the way your body flushes when you're excited."

"You're the only one who has ever affected me like that," she confessed, wanting him to know. He didn't respond to her words but after a moment she saw him swallow hard as if fighting back his emotions.

She reached out and unzipped his pants then worked loose the top button. "You're staying the night, right? All night? This isn't just going to be a fuck and run, is it?"

He cupped her cheek until she looked up at him again. "I'm staying."

The vulnerability in his gaze touched her. She'd never seen so much emotion in his face. Her own emotions rose up and threatened to overcome her. She fought back the tears of joy she felt welling in her eyes. Tonight was a night she knew she'd never forget.

She leaned forward and kissed him right above the bellybutton, letting her tongue stroke his skin. Hurriedly, he pushed down his pants and underwear and kicked them aside.

Rachel couldn't help but appreciate his toned body—broad shoulders, six-pack abs, flat stomach, muscular arms and thighs. So sexy. And his cock was a woman's dream—long, thick, perfectly veined.

Ace joined her on the bed. His lips covered hers and their tongues tangled. He tasted of spice mixed with a touch of alcohol from the meal they'd enjoyed earlier.

With a quick flick of his fingers, he unhooked her bra and pulled it off. Needing to feel his flesh against hers, she rubbed her breasts against him. A sexual shock rippled down her body. *Oh yes*.

A groan rumbled up from the back of his throat and he broke their kiss. He lowered his head and his lips immediately found one of her nipples.

She mewled as he sucked the bud into his mouth, drawing on it hard. "Ah!" She wanted him so badly.

He nibbled and tugged on one bud, then the other, making her crazy. His fingers found her pussy and delved inside.

"I can't wait, Ace. Fuck me now."

He pushed one finger deeply inside her. He raised his head and their gazes locked. "Like this, kitten?"

"No," she practically sobbed. "I need your cock inside me. Please."

He pulled away from her and grabbed a condom from atop the nightstand. He quickly sheathed his cock then gave his large shaft a couple of strokes. Rachel's heart almost pounded out of her chest.

His attention returned to her and they both tore at her panties until she finally worked them down her legs and flung them aside. With a look of pure need, he pushed her down flat on the mattress.

Without a word, Ace covered her body and thrust his cock into her pussy. She gasped at the intensity of the feeling, both physically and emotionally. "Oh yes, Ace. That feels so good."

Her life seemed perfect and complete. They'd been through an ordeal and had survived it together. She'd never felt closer to any man in her life.

Ace moved his hips slowly, gradually increasing her pleasure. He could be so gentle when he wanted to be and it made her want to cry.

She looked into his eyes, connecting with him on a level that went deeper than simply a physical joining. After a lot of lonely years, he was finally in her bed. In her body...again. And for always in her heart.

They weren't just fucking this time. They were in love, sharing their hearts and souls. At least that's how she felt.

Ace smiled then lowered his head. His lips captured hers and their tongues stroked and played. She wrapped her legs around him and lightly caressed his back. Matching his rhythm, she pushed her hips up against him.

The orgasm began to grow inside her, higher and higher, until she didn't think she could take the pleasure anymore. She needed to come but wanted him to come at the same time.

She broke their kiss. She had to see his eyes again. His gorgeous brown eyes. "Ace," she whispered as she looked at him, her heart fuller than she'd believed possible. "I love you."

His body tensed, as did hers. And as one, they climaxed until they both became breathless and collapsed in each other's arms.

After their breathing returned to normal and Ace disposed of the condom, he held her tenderly. He didn't say anything for a long time and Rachel thought he had fallen asleep.

Then he whispered, "You are everything a man could want, kitten. Remember this night always." Softly he kissed her temple.

Sometime later, Rachel's eyes fluttered open and she glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Early morning, well before sunrise.

The air conditioner kicked on and she felt a chill. She reached for Ace. His side of the bed was empty. Abruptly she sat up and looked around. "Ace?"

The apartment was dark, still, way too quiet. And she knew. Holding the sheet tightly, she gulped back a sob and her heart shattered. Ace was gone.

## **Chapter Seven**

Last she'd heard from Jeb, Ace had gone to Nicaragua on a special assignment for the ICDA. Something related to her case but that's all the details she'd been given. That had been months ago.

The trial had gone well. The drug trafficking ring had been shut down. From what she'd read in the newspaper, it had been one of the largest operations in the area. And rumors were circulating about an international connection, which made sense to her, given the ICDA's involvement. She felt good to have played a part in putting those criminals in jail.

She'd also read about some cops getting indicted. That had been scary, thinking some of the guys assigned to protect her had actually wanted her dead.

Though a lot of Ace's suspicions had been caused by the ICDA setup, Jeb and some of Ace's contacts had flushed out a few cops who actually had been working for the other side, which was why it had taken the authorities so long to bring down this organization.

Thankfully all that was behind her now and she didn't have to look over her shoulder anymore. She was back to teaching and back to her old life.

Her stomach rumbled but she didn't feel much like fixing dinner. As she stood there deciding what to do, she heard a knock at the door. Probably Jeb. He personally checked in on her a couple of times a week, worried about her state of mind. She was fine. Well, maybe not fine but she'd survive. She'd learned from all this just how strong she actually was.

She walked over and glanced through the peephole. Her heart skipped a beat and she yanked open the door.

Ace stood there with a duffle bag beside him. He held a white sack in one hand as he leaned on a pair of crutches. A cast covered his left leg below the knee.

"Ace! What happened? How'd you get here? I thought you were out of the country. Your leg! Are you all right?" The words tumbled from her mouth.

"Hey, kitten. Can you give me a hand? After lugging my things up here, I'm about to fall over."

"Oh sure." She grabbed his duffle bag and dragged it into the apartment. "Geez, do you have everything you own in here?"

Ace followed her inside. "Pretty much."

She shut the door and turned to face him. "What happened to you?" She noted his cast was on the same leg as his previous knee injury.

"A log crushed my leg. I'll be all right but I think my undercover days are over."

She knew how much he loved his job and could see his disappointment. Or maybe it was frustration. With Ace, it was sometimes hard to tell. "I'm sorry." She took the white sack from him. "Sit." Her nose twitched. "Hamburgers?"

"A peace offering." He set his crutches aside and, with a groan, lowered himself to the couch.

"For disappearing on me without a word?" As always, whenever she saw him, there was an instant connection, as if they'd never been apart. She set the sack on the coffee table and rubbed her stomach when it growled.

He gave her a look of apology. "I was a coward. I couldn't face a big goodbye scene. Especially since I wasn't sure I'd make it back."

She didn't know if he meant that he hadn't known whether he'd want to return to her or hadn't known whether he'd be around to return to her. The second possibility terrified her. She wasn't quite sure what to think about the first.

"Do you hate me?" He watched her closely as he shifted on the cushions.

"I could never hate you. But I won't lie. It hurt when you left like that." Her voice hitched. "I thought you didn't care."

"I care. I just—" He shook his head, then took a deep breath and let it out in a whoosh. "Can we try again?"

"For a third time? Now that you can't go on your missions anymore? Am I your consolation prize?" She wasn't sure where her words came from. But resentment bubbled up inside her. Once he recovered, what if he grew bored and restless and left again in search of who knew what? Her heart couldn't take it.

"I would never purposely hurt you, Rachel. I need you. I-I love you, kitten."

Love. His confession shook her to the bone. She'd dreamed of him saying those words to her. Though she'd felt his love, there was something much more powerful about hearing the words spoken aloud. Before she could say anything in response, he spoke again.

"Did Jeb tell you what this last mission was?"

"Not really. No details. Just the location and that it was for the ICDA."

"It was for you. I don't give a damn about the ICDA."

"Me?"

"I told Jeb before I left that this was my last job. For any agency. I love the life but I love you more. Being apart from you for extended periods of time would tear me apart. Besides, I'm getting sloppy and tired. I need to get out while I still can. Prior to this case, I never had anything else to look forward to. But now I do."

Her heart melted. When she started to speak, he held up a hand, silencing her.

"The organization you put away had ties in Nicaragua. I had to sever those ties to make sure that particular phoenix didn't rise from the ashes and put you in danger again. I accomplished my mission. It's done and all over with now. You can be assured of that."

She cocked her head, studying the intense look in his eyes. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning you're safe. And that's all you really need to know about it, kitten."

She didn't know what to say. He could have been killed. She choked back her emotions. "You did that for me?"

"For us. What do you say?" He glanced around. "Is this place big enough for two? Is there room in your life for me? In your heart?"

When she didn't immediately answer, her mind racing, he continued, talking faster than normal.

"As soon as I'm healed, a contact of mine said he can get me a position on a special investigations team. It's local, so I'll be staying in town. The job is mostly computer work, but I'll still be able to get the occasional adrenaline rush when I go out on a case. I just need you to make my life complete."

He looked so vulnerable. So hopeful. She sat down beside him and cuddled against his side. She wanted Ace in her life. She loved him enough to take the chance that he'd stick around for a while. "How long do you want to stay with me?"

He curled his arm around her. "Forever. I love you, Rachel. I want to marry you."

She looked up at him and saw the moisture in his eyes. Her eyes began to mist. "Marry?" Her thoughts raced all over the place as her feelings rose to the surface and threatened to bubble over. She hadn't expected that kind of a commitment from him. Living together, sure. But marriage?

He stroked her cheek. "Say something. I'm about to crumble here."

Her hand covered his and she pressed her cheek into his palm. "I love you so much, Ace." She had never actually believed that he'd ask her to share his life like this. "Yes. I'll marry you."

She saw the joy that leapt into his eyes. Her feelings matched his. She'd loved this man for a very long time and had dreamed of him more nights than she could even count. No way was she letting him go now. Her dream had finally come true.

#### **About the Author**

Ruth D. Kerce got hooked on writing in the fifth grade when she won a short story contest—a romance, of course. And she's been writing romance ever since.

She writes several subgenres of romance—historical, contemporary and futuristic. Her books are available online in many internet bookstores. Her short stories and articles are available on several websites. She has won or placed in writing contests and hopes to continue to write exciting tales for years to come.

Ruth welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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