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**SOUNDS  
TO DIE BY**

**SENSORY OPS SERIES**

**NIKKI DUNCAN**

Between her eyes and his ears, there's a world of sensory overload...

*Sensory Ops, Book 1*

Rookie FBI Agent Kieralyn Beckett is in a delicate position. Her team refuses to buy into her theory that a string of kidnappings is connected. If she pushes too hard, they'll discover the latest victim was her college roommate and boot her off the case. A garbled recording is the only evidence, and there's only one man who can decipher it. The hard part will be convincing him to take the case.

Blinded as a child, NSA "listener" Ian Cabrera spends the majority of his time analyzing data while secretly searching for his father, a missing CIA operative. His plate is full, but Kieralyn's passion and determination, as well as the erotic beat of her heart, spark his interest. So does the mention of his father's code name on her recording.

There's only one way to follow this new crumb-trail of clues without tipping her off about what he's really after. Convince her she needs him to be her undercover partner, despite his handicap. Between her eyes and his ears, they make one beautifully orchestrated team. Every time they touch, though, the arousal they generate creates one red-hot element of distraction...

Warning: This title contains a blind hero who knows his way around a woman's body, steamy kitchen sex, verbal sparring, kidnapping evasions, fiery near-death experiences, and heart-pounding sensory overload.

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# Sounds to Die By

*Nikki Duncan*

# Dedication

CIS, you gave me a window to the world. Chaos and Destruction, you keep life interesting. Never give up on things that matter the most to you. Never settle for less. I love you.

Lindsey, you've offered support from the first time you passed on a project of mine to ... Well, you still are a great support. You've helped me grow as a writer and you've given me confidence and kept me motivated. I am thrilled that you love Ian and Kieralyn. It's an honor to be working with you.

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Joy, you are the greatest roomie and cheerleader a girl could ask for.

# Chapter One

Time was running out. Every minute of the clock on the sea blue wall ticked with a spine-tingling intensity. Returning to the office empty handed, losing that stupid bet, and proving to her unit that she didn't belong with them was not an option. She'd already tried a power play and failed—you had to have power to pull them off. It was worse since the guys on her team were too set in their ways.

Like Ian Cabrera and the security guard—Dante, according to the sign on his desk—blocking the way to the inner sanctum of his lab. Dante's militant bearing might intimidate some—likely anyone who came into contact with him—but she was here. She was determined. They wouldn't block her forever. She would use any tool at her disposal to see Cabrera.

“Dante.” If flattery didn't work, she'd wait him out. “Please call him and ask.”

“You've heard his answer.”

“Not in person.” Cabrera's refusal to help, passed through Dante and paperwork stamped *Reject*, had every man in her unit goading her.

“I'm sorry, Agent Beckett. It is policy that all requests be submitted in writing. He is not to be disturbed.”

Her jaw clenched painfully. She drew on the patience she'd worked so hard to maintain since starting her job a year ago and bit back her instinctive smartass reply. If working in the FBI Specialized Crimes Unit had taught her one thing it was how policies worked. And how they had to be manipulated in certain cases.

“I submitted the paperwork.”

“To which he responded.”

“I understand that Mr. Cabrera doesn't see anyone without an appointment.” Desperate not to fail, Kieralyn ignored the internal feminist that insisted on women's equality and pulled out the big guns. Affecting her sweetest smile, she leaned forward on the granite-topped cedar desk and hoped her charm worked on Dante.

His pupils flared. His dark gaze shifted briefly to the V of her sweater.

“It's a matter of life or death for at least six women.”

“Every case is life and death.” He shook his head sadly. “You have his answer, Agent Beckett.”

“Dante.” Beginning to feel desperate, she reached down and grasped his hand. When he met her gaze, she creased her forehead in concerned interest. “Do you have a family? A wife? A daughter? A sister?”

His eyes narrowed. His head cocked to the side. “Yees.”

He may be suspicious of her, but she had his attention.

“If they went missing, wouldn’t you do something? Something possibly against regulations, but that you *knew* to be right? Something that could mean getting them back?”

He hesitated. His dark eyes and chocolate-skinned face softened.

*Yes!* She mentally pumped her fist in the air. She was close.

“Mr. Cabrera is very particular about not being interrupted.”

“It’s just a phone call, Dante.” She squeezed his hand and shifted a little closer. Intimacy, flirting, whatever. She wasn’t afraid to use her femininity for the greater good, which in this case meant finding kidnap victims and stopping others from being taken. It meant doing whatever was necessary to help Lana, even if her use of guile was one reason her teammates gave her a hard time. Some situations didn’t allow for pride.

“I would *really* appreciate it. The women I’m trying to help could be depending on his expertise.”

“He is not going to like this, and that argument will not work with him.” He picked up the phone and an instant later was speaking quietly. “Sorry to interrupt you. Yes, I know. There’s an... So you’ve said.” He cleared his throat. “There’s an FBI agent here. She insists on seeing you.”

Half the battle won, Kieralyn stepped away and surveyed the plush lobby complete with a flat-screen plasma on one wall for entertainment and deep chairs that would offer hours of comfort. Did they really have so many visitors to this small building, set apart from the others in the NSA business plaza, that they needed such luxury? Or did people have to wait that long to be seen?

Tension pinched between her shoulder blades. She would see Ian Cabrera. He was the only person who could prove her right. Or wrong, as her unit insisted. If they were right, if she’d manufactured the theory for personal reasons, if her theory was entirely off-base it would be one more arrow in the target on her back. If they were wrong, she just might win a little respect. Finally.

“Yes, I told her... She is.” Dante frowned and bowed his head slightly. “She insists... I will let her know.”

She gripped the handle of her bag in her fist and bit back her anxiety long enough for Dante to return the phone to its cradle. Standing a few feet away, her stomach lurched as if she’d just jumped from a plane with no parachute. She swallowed the fear of failure bubbling in her throat.

“What did he say?” He had to say yes. Just had to. Otherwise, she would be reduced to ... Well, she wasn’t sure what she’d be reduced to in her mission for answers.

“You have one chance to convince him.”

The tightness eased between her shoulders. She was certain she could convince Cabrera to listen to her recording. “Thank you, Dante. Thank you so much.”

“He is not pleased.” Dante moved around the desk and headed toward the hall. “I may not have done you any favors.”

“He’s not going to come down on you for this, is he?” She might have considered it earlier, but she’d been too focused on her end goal. On her need for answers. For resolution. Those needs still outweighed any sense of guilt.

“On me, no.” He led her around a corner and keyed in a code on the keypad by the second of two doors.

Possibilities and answers waited on the other side, closer than she’d expected to get. Cabrera could dish out whatever he wanted. She’d take it. She’d formed a thick skin thanks to her teammates. Good guys beneath gruff surfaces, they were set in their ways and entertained archaic ideas about where women belonged. She couldn’t change everyone’s opinion.

Only one mattered at this moment.

“A word of warning, Agent Beckett.” Dante gripped the door handle without opening the door. “He doesn’t like people in his lab. Touch nothing.”

“Got it.” So the NSA employed an eccentric listener. If he could isolate something useful, some truth from the recording, she’d gladly meet the terms of the bet and fetch coffee and bagels for the team for a month. More was at stake than who did coffee runs.

With a nod, Dante pushed the door open and stood back.

“Thank you.” She stepped into the chilly darkness of the lab she’d heard had been custom built and outfitted to suit him.

Giant flat-panel monitors had been mounted on the walls and illuminated a seemingly large room in shadowy greens, yellows and reds. A circular desk, equipped with technology that could make a NASA control room look like a video game controller dominated the middle of the un-carpeted floor.

Ian Cabrera tapped controls and tilted his head at an angle that indicated he was listening closely to something. He was a large-framed man with a shaved head silhouetted by lights flashing from the control panel. Headphones sat beside his monitor. The undertones of a classical piece of music—no, opera floated from speakers high on the walls. A conversation badly garbled with static was slightly louder than the music. He touched one button and the conversation ended. Another button shut down the music.

She heard nothing aside from her thoughts. Whatever she’d expected, this wasn’t it. “It’s quiet in here.”

“Soundproofed.” His smooth, Enrique-Iglesias voice, laced with a touch of gruffness sent a shiver down her spine. “You’ve got two minutes. Don’t waste them.”

If he looked half as good as he sounded he’d be a threat to any woman with a pulse. But she was running out of time and wasn’t interested in men or relationships beyond work.

“I’m Kieralyn Beckett with the FBI.”



"I know who you are."

"I'd like you to listen to a recording." Her blood thrummed. "I'm looking for a connection between a series of kidnappings."

"And you think a recording is going to do what? Provide a manifest of victims and their fate?"

"If the world were perfect, yes."

"If the world were perfect your job would not exist."

"Nor would you be needed to analyze crime tapes."

"Perhaps." He rolled his chair to another section of the desk and tapped a few keyboard keys. "Tick tock."

Small talk wasn't his thing. Fine. She moved deeper into the room. "The recording was sent to me by an anonymous source."

"Meaning you secretly did surveillance on your own?"

"No. It was emailed to me hours before the latest victim was taken. She's a journalist."

"Not anonymous at all. You believe the journalist sent the recording knowing that she was going to be next."

How could he have known that? She couldn't let anyone know why she'd been the one the recording had been sent to. "Yes."

He returned to his original spot and pushed some buttons. Several TV screens turned off, almost obliterating all light from the room. "Why you? Why not one of the men in your unit?"

She fisted her hand on her purse and blinked to adjust her eyes to the darkness. "You too?"

"Excuse me?"

"Is it a thing with all men or just men in what they themselves see as positions of power? You think that because I'm a woman I don't have a brain? That I don't deserve enough credit for someone to trust me with potentially valuable information?"

"I—"

"You're wrong." Her heart danced an aggravated jig. Her hands shook at her sides. She was sick to death of arrogant men. "And it doesn't matter why *I* was sent the recording. It only matters that I was."

"Defensive."

"Fed up. Pissed, actually. Women are being kidnapped and—if I'm right—shipped into another country where they're sold into slavery. And not a single man I deal with seems to give a shit!"

"Yelling is not necessary." Cabrera turned his chair toward her.

"You son of a bitch."

"Most women use flattery or charm when trying to get something from a man." He kicked back with his hands linked behind his head as if he didn't have a care in the world. "How's your approach been working out?"

*Arrogant jackass! Maybe with an enema for your personality you wouldn't have to live your life in the dark with no one around.* It was on the tip of her tongue, ready to slip off. Damn it, he was right. She wasn't going to get his help by yelling and cussing.

"I'm waiting. And why do you need my help if the recording told you enough to send you down the path of slavery?"

She dug her thumb and forefinger into the corners of her eyes and growled low in her throat. She took a deep, slow breath and worked to keep her voice calm. "The recording came with a note saying that kidnapped women are being sold into slavery. And that I have to stop them if she can't."

"She, as in the reporter?"

"Yes."

"You know her."

Thinking about Lana now and all they'd been through over the years wouldn't help her case. It only served to agitate her. "We have no video, and there is too much background racket on the recording for me to make anything out with certainty."

"You know her."

"I'm hoping for a name. Hell, I'm to the point that I'll take anything that will validate my theory."

"That the kidnappings, while appearing random, are connected."

"Yes." Finally he dropped the insistence that this was personal.

He shook his head. "The door is behind you."

"These women may well become slaves!" If he wanted her out he would have to escort her. "Who knows how they'll be treated. They deserve to live their lives here." He wasn't budging. "What if you had a sister? What if she was one of the women I've been assigned to locate? Could you ignore this then? Let it go unstopped?"

He straightened and tilted his head as if he was actually interested. "If anyone tried to take my sister I would kill them."

"So help me. These women are sisters, daughters, wives and mothers."

"Tell me something." He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. He seemed attentive, but oddly she wasn't sure he really saw her. Or maybe he saw too much. "Why are you so convinced, aside from an email, that these cases are connected? Why wasn't any of this mentioned in the formal request for my services?"

"My gut makes me think it." He was close to giving in. She refused to believe differently. "Every woman taken has been between eighteen and twenty-eight. Caucasian with blond or very light brown hair. Pale eyes, though no one particular color. They are the kind of women that might be appealing to a certain class of man in nearby South American countries. Maybe Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Colombia or Venezuela."

“That’s a bit of a jump, don’t you think?” His voice hardened. Each word was a precise clip of judgment. “You’re stereotyping Latin men and essentially accusing countries that have no reputation for such atrocities. Besides, slavery was abolished.”

“In the US it was. Yet rich white men buy women, little more than girls, from other countries and enslave them. They force them into marriages.” She strode forward, unable to stand still and listen to another man tell her she was inventing problems in her head. “It happens in this country on a daily basis. What makes you think that girls wouldn’t be taken from here and sold into other countries? Countries where slavery and women’s rights in general are not necessarily a high priority.”

“I didn’t say it was impossible. Just that it seemed a bit of a leap.”

“If you’re going to be a closed-minded ass and refuse to help me—these women—just say so.”

“There you go again with the insults.” He chuckled. “You interrupt my work, invade my space, call me names and then accuse me of not being willing to help. I should be angry. Instead you have me wondering...”

She waited, but he didn’t continue. He was playing some game that only he understood. “What?”

“Is this how it works for you, Beckett? Is this how you solve your cases?”

She shifted her weight to her left foot and sighed. “You’re right. I’m being a bitch.”

“Your words.”

Not that he was going to argue. “I’m tired of slamming into concrete walls of maleness on this. Tired of not being taken seriously. Of being treated like I’m inferior and incapable of intelligent thought.”

“So, I’m your solution?”

“Maybe.”

“And you come here with *your* mind closed and defenses up. What are you going to do if I disprove your theory?”

“I’ll fetch coffee and bagels for a month,” she mumbled. She approached his desk to make her plea more personal. Maybe to get a better look at him. “I’ll accept what you tell me you hear, or don’t. I need the truth. All of it, one way or another.”

Cabrera stood and pointed at a chair opposite the desk. “Give me the recording. Sit there.”

She fished the disc out of her bag as she closed the remaining distance. “Thank you.”

“I haven’t done anything.” He took the CD she’d made and turned away before she could get a good look at his face. He was dark and had strong bones. Even with her eyes adjusting to the light, she could see little else.

“Don’t move. Don’t speak.”

Clearing her throat, she sat in the chair. Reaching down to place her bag on the floor, her arm brushed the leg of the seat. She creased her brows, ran her fingers along the other legs. The entire chair was covered

with corduroy. Flicking her fingernail across the grooves, she watched Cabrera walk to a cabinet beneath the desk. He bent down and slid the CD she'd handed him into a slot.

Curious about the reason for covering chair legs, she scooted the chair on the floor. Not a sound. He'd covered the bottom too.

"Stop moving."

*Wow. That's some sensitive hearing.* Humoring him, she settled in to study him as best she could.

He moved easily, but with a cautious alertness that kept his moves from being smooth. Effortless.

"Does having the lights off somehow help you hear better?"

"Aside from the constant buzz that sometimes interferes, it makes no difference." He sat in his chair and rolled to the section directly in front of her. "Don't speak."

Shrugging, she settled back and studied him in the flickering lights of his control panel. Judging from the shadowed intensity of his bone structure, the strong jaw and prominent cheekbones, she guessed he could claim some Latino lineage. His long and thick dark eyelashes remained unblinking for long stretches of time. He intrigued her despite his irritating arrogance. She wanted to study him in the light, but doubted he would allow them to be turned on.

Cabrera pushed a series of buttons. The recording she'd listened to for the last day and a half flooded the room. All she could determine was that it had probably been made on a cell phone in a crowded club.

She shifted cautiously on the chair, wishing it had a bit more padding. He lifted his head. An amber light from the panel before him hit his black-rimmed eyes like a fire reflecting off a glass of bourbon. Basic. Intensely predatorial and blank in the shadowy light.

"Don't move."

She nodded and resolved not to move again.

"Don't even nod."

He wasn't looking at her. How could he know she'd nodded?

Damn woman had called several times over the last couple days—all easily ignored. Now she'd slammed Ian's back to the wall by showing up at his door. Apparently, she couldn't follow a simple order to not move any better than she could take no for an answer. He didn't like it, but humoring her seemed the fastest way to get her out of his way. Not that he'd ever been great at turning away people who managed to make it past Dante. They just never got past his guard.

Besides, she intrigued him. Her determination called to him. And her heart had sped up when he asked if she knew the reporter.

He'd accepted long ago that his biggest handicap was his inability to help everyone. He should have insisted that he couldn't help. Insisted that she leave. Her case was important, he didn't deny that. So were all the others that came to him.

She distracted him. Her heart beat in an erotic melody. Bold and powered by almost tangible emotion. Her spirit filled the room and wrapped around him like an invisible cocoon. A disconcertingly comfortable one.

She fidgeted on the chair. Flicked her nails—filed to short, square tips unless he missed his guess—over the chair fabric. It was an irritating, nervous tic that got most people tossed out to the waiting room.

He didn't like distractions. Yet, he allowed her to stay. She had spine and secrets that might be fun to reveal by peeling away their layers.

She shifted on the chair. The balls of her feet rubbed the floor. "If you're going to fidget, you can wait in the lobby. I'm sure you'll be more comfortable there."

"Is that why you have only one hard, fabric-covered chair in here? To make people uncomfortable? And what am I doing?"

"Yes. And you're flicking your nails across the chair, sliding your feet and shifting your ass. Stop it, or go outside to wait." She shook her head. He could imagine her rolling her eyes. "Don't move your head either."

She froze. The moment she did, the whispered brush of thick hair against her silky blouse stopped. Only the excited pounding of her heartbeat remained.

More accurately, her heartbeat and the scents wafting around her remained. Primarily, he noticed the lilac-scented perfume that didn't overwhelm, but was instead subtle enough that he'd almost missed it until she had leaned toward him to place the disc in his hand.

Turning his attention to the CD, he willed himself to not think about the woman inside the skin of the FBI agent trespassing on his space. Or to imagine what her skin would feel like as he slid his finger along her—

*Focus.* He slowed his breathing, his own heartbeat, and directed all of his senses into his hearing. He backed the recording up and began from the beginning.

The garbled quality of the recording indicated low-end equipment. It had likely been a spur of the moment recording. A crowded club where someone had shoved their phone in a pocket so it wasn't seen. A soft fabric brushed against the microphone, making it difficult to decipher anything.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head. Kieralyn's staccato heartbeat moved to the forefront. Leaning forward, he dipped his head closer to a speaker. There. Beneath the brush of fabric, jazzy blues music, chattering voices, drinks being poured and dishes chinking together on trays, was a more private conversation. He fiddled with some controls and minimized the fabric noise.

Working deeper, he separated the music and chattering voices into their own tracks until only the private conversation remained. The voices were still too muted to be clear, so he set to work enhancing them.

It was a tedious, time-consuming task that he enjoyed. Somehow, Kieralyn managed to stay perfectly still the entire time he worked. Finally, he heard the speakers more clearly.

Two men. One angry and foreign. South American. The other was local to Florida, but not Miami. There was still too much distortion to be certain which part.

Ian moved to a section of the desk closer to Kieralyn. Her scent fluttered on the edges of his senses. He was absorbed enough in the sounds on the recording now that she didn't distract him. Sliding a few levers, moving some away from him and a couple back down the control board, he sliced away another layer of distortion.

Mentally running through the clubs in Miami that played the kind of music he'd heard and served meals on china—if he'd judged the clink of dishes accurately—he figured it for a high-class club.

He pulled a map of the city into his mind. Jazzid at The Beach and Jazz on The Rocks were the two clubs in Miami that fit the requirements. Narrowing down which was the right club would only take a quick visit.

Shifting that information aside, he turned his mind to the CD. Even with the fabric pulled out, the conversation was difficult to decipher. He adjusted more controls and backed the recording up. He boosted the sound.

“Did you...trouble?”

“No more...usual.”

“Then...black eye...busted lip? ...deliver...unmarked.”

Ian slid a keyboard toward him and typed what he could make out. The text wouldn't show on a monitor, but he would be able to print it out for Agent Beckett. She and her team would have to fill in the missing bits of conversation.

“The redhead...kicked...balls. Had...coming.”

“El Dogo...pissed.”

Ian's fingers stumbled over the keys, only having typed *El*. El Dogo. The Bulldog.

His gut knotted. He ran the recording back to make sure he hadn't missed any breaks in the speech. That he wasn't picking up a second conversation he'd missed. That he'd heard right and that it hadn't been a mispronunciation or interference from another conversation. He couldn't have heard accurately.

“El Dogo...pissed.”

He ran it back a second time. Had he created it in his mind out of desperation?

“El Dogo...pissed.” He'd heard it.

Fabric rustled against the microphone as if the person doing the recording was shifting for a better position. "...reminder...her sedated."

"Pick up...get...jazz...beach..." The rustling fabric made it hard to discern the information. Maybe a confirmation of one of the two clubs. Jazz on The Rocks was at the beach too. "El Dogo...there."

"...reporter...on to us."

"Follow her...or...join others."

Ian's heart stalled. Twice El Dogo had been mentioned. He had to tell Agent Beckett what he'd heard. It might help with her case. But he didn't have to fill in meanings.

That could jeopardize his opportunity for answers.

He listened longer, but the recording had stopped. There was no more information to be found.

"I'm going to print out the transcript as I've been able to make it out." He saved the individual sound files along with the original onto his hard drive. He'd be going over the recordings more to see if he'd missed anything. He doubted it though.

"Based on what you heard, do you think there's any basis to my theory?" Her voice jumped in anticipation, maybe hope, that she wasn't wrong.

"Maybe." He pushed the button to print out the paper. The printer hummed to life. He turned his chair toward hers. The push of another button turned the lights up so she could see better. "It's on the printer."

She gasped. Her heart kicked up a pace.

*Yeah, I get that a lot. Not like what you see?* "Problem?"

"N-no." She swallowed. "No problem."

*Liar.* He had a strange desire to call her out on it. He always got the same response from people when they saw his eyes. His face. His doctors told him the scarring had been minimized as much as five surgeries could manage. He wasn't interested in trying anymore. He couldn't change what had happened, and though fires agitated him he'd do it again. The tightness of his skin reminded him of what was important in life. Of the gifts he'd been given. Still, it irritated him that Kieralyn had recoiled like most everyone else.

He felt her eyes on him when she moved toward the printer. Her stockings shifted against the corduroy of the chair as she stood. Silk. Expensive.

"Thank you."

Her heels clapped against the floor with precise, smooth clicks. His guess, two or maybe two-and-a-half-inch high heels. Wide for more stability. Probably a rounded or squared toe. Practical.

She stepped through the opening in his desk and walked around him to get to the printer. Her perfume trailed behind her and mixed with the mild scent of recently colored hair. Brunette with blond highlights? Or red? Or a blonde going darker?

Agent Beckett was a sensible, logical woman with a touch of femininity. Damn if he didn't love that in a woman.

Metal scraped against the countertop. She'd picked up the framed picture of Maximum. He kept it for the irony of the gift.

"You have a dog, Cabrera?"

"There's a kennel in the back."

"Is it standard policy for NSA employees to bring pets to work?"

He cocked his head, considering her question. She didn't know—hadn't realized. Interesting. She either hadn't done enough research into him, or someone had held the truth from her. "You might say we've been a team for a long time."

"Hmm." The frame clicked gently as she sat it back on the counter. The paper shuffled as she picked it up and began to read it. "This is a tremendous help, despite the missing pieces. I can't thank you enough, Mr. Cabrera."

Satisfaction thickened her voice. Her heart accelerated with excitement. She liked what she saw. His gut tightened at the sound of her pleasure. At the idea of him being the one to provide her a different kind of pleasure. "There's no proof one way or another."

"No, but I'll get it." She walked with determined strides until she was facing him. After a moment of silence, she touched his arm. Her fingers quivered slightly. "Thank you."

She'd been waiting to shake his hand. He didn't miss that sort of thing often, but it was too late to redo. Her brief touch filled with warmth, strength and acceptance made him wish that he could. Even if she didn't know all of his secrets.

"No need to thank me."

Had he taken her hand, he could have held on a bit longer. Absorbed the sensation of her skin against his. Was her palm velvety smooth, or did she have calluses? Were there defined ridges from hours of target practice at the shooting range? She'd only brushed her fingertips across his skin. The compassion he'd sensed in her wasn't enough to satisfy his curiosity.

"This will go a long way to swaying my colleagues. To get them thinking along the same lines as me." Her heart thumped harder for a beat.

What drove her to pursue a path that no one else saw? Was it the reporter, or something else? She needed to have her opinion valued by her team. She needed their approval, but didn't have it. It was a source of pride for her, which made him want to learn more about her. He didn't like long conversations any more than he wanted people in his lab. But he couldn't let her go just yet. "Do they not trust you to do the job?"

"It's not that. I've proven my physical abilities many times. They trust me to shoot a gun, they just don't like that I can do it better than they can in some cases. They think that women belong in the home. Cooking. Cleaning. They certainly don't approve of it when my emotions get wrapped up in a case." She chuckled and shifted away. "I have no clue why I just admitted that to you."



*Maybe for the same reason I want to tell you my secrets. The one that makes me want to kiss you.*

Maybe they were giving her a hard time. Then again, maybe they didn't trust a woman with a brain. She scared them. Could be why she'd tracked him down. Why the first request for his assistance had been missing information. Facts were important, but so were instincts. If she came back to him with a recording, regardless of regulations, he would listen again.

"I've isolated the voice patterns of the two men for you." He tapped the necessary controls to burn a new CD that would have his lab seal on it, in the event she needed it in court. "One is a Floridian. The other is South American. Should you get another recording of either of the men talking, I'll be able to match their voices. Possibly narrow down where they're from."

"You can do that kind of thing?"

"I've had nothing to do but listen for a very long time. I remember everything that I hear, every accent and sound. Every place has a distinct soundtrack, if you will. Those soundtracks are stored in my brain."

"A sound savant." She moved to the chair she'd sat in and picked up her purse. Her clothes shifted softly as she stooped and straightened. "You should put that on your business cards."

"I'll take that under advisement." She was leaving. He wasn't sure he wanted her to. He wasn't sure if he'd try to stop her.

"Thanks again." She was at the door. Her hand was on the knob. "I need to get busy trying to narrow down what club they were in."

"If I come up with anything else of use, I'll let you know." He'd make something up if it meant getting her back to see him again. If he figured out which club El Dogo had been at—and if it helped her case without jeopardizing his goals—he would give her that information. He needed to check out the lay of the land first.

## Chapter Two

“You’ve got nothing, Beckett.” Breck’s smirk was evident through the phone line as Kieralyn paced the courtyard outside Ian’s lab. “How much more of your time are you going to waste on this snipe hunt?”

“As much as it takes to get proof one way or the other.” Irritation bubbled up. Breck was the most open-minded of the guys on her team, and he still didn’t make things easy for her. If she could admit to them that she knew Lana, the missing reporter, and was therefore able to justify her certainty that the information was accurate, some of these arguments might be curtailed. Or the admission would justify her team’s thoughts and get her tossed from the case. It was a risk she couldn’t take. She wasn’t going to trust anyone else with her friend’s life.

“Proof is why you went to see Cabrera. You didn’t get it.”

“Proof that I’m right, no. Neither did I get proof that I’m wrong.” *And Cabrera knows more than he’s telling.* His posture stiffened when he heard the mention of El Dogo. His head tilted more when he’d worked the file of sounds focused on the club. “We have more than we did.”

“Kieralyn.” Breck’s voice dropped an octave.

He never called her Kieralyn. To her unit she was always Beckett. “What?”

“I like you, and you’re good at the job. I’d hate to see you do something that’s going to hurt your career.”

Breck also never offered her a genuine sentiment. They talked trash and harassed each other about their love lives, but genuine emotion ... No. She valued her instincts, and they were singing to her now. She just couldn’t name the tune. “You’re in a mellow mood. Did you get laid?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been seeing Eden, and she’s still hung up on Andrew.”

They’d worked with Eden Maverick a year ago before she’d stopped searching for her business-partner-slash-lover Andrew Corrigan. She and Eden had hit it off immediately. “She loves him.”

“He’s dead.”

“Until she sees his body, he isn’t to her. And even if he is, he’ll never be dead in her heart.” Kieralyn couldn’t help but be a little jealous of how deeply Eden loved Andrew. She’d always wanted something that special.

“That’s sentimental tripe that you women hang on to in an attempt to make yourselves believe men have the nature you want them to have.”

Man, Breck did arrogant and overbearing well. “Believe it or not, there are some men who have not had the emotion center of their brains eaten by the maggots of parasitic flies.”

“What? Disgusting.”

Kieralyn grinned. She’d seen an article online about parasitic flies being used to control ant populations. It had grossed her out, but apparently gave her a way to torment Breck. “Aww. Who knew you had a weak constitution?”

“You’re sick, Beckett.” He muttered something to someone nearby. “Get back here by Monday, with or without proof, or you’ll be answering to the boss.”

“Is that a threat or warning?”

“A reality. We only get so much leeway on these things.”

She had no leeway as she saw it. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She stared at the building she’d exited a short time earlier. The impatient, brandy-eyed man inside was another mystery she wanted to crack. A sexy one. And she’d start with the slight scars around his predatory eyes and along his left jaw line. He mesmerized and aroused her as no man ever had with a single glance.

“Be careful.”

“Yeah.” But did his words apply to her career, the case or Cabrera? She’d been shocked stupid when he’d flipped on the lights and they’d intensified his unblinking stare. Hell, that gaze alone made her want to grant any sexual wish he might have. And she thrived on staying in control.

“I mean it, Kieralyn. Watch out for yourself.”

*Because the team’s gunning for me?* She hoped that maybe she had at least one ally on the team. “I get it, Breck. Listen, can you check into something for me?”

He sighed, as if he was sure he wasn’t getting through to her. “What?”

“Something on the recording snagged Cabrera’s interest. I think it’s a name. I was hoping you could run it. See if anything comes up.”

“What is it?”

“El Dogo.”

“He didn’t say anything about it?”

“No. It’s just a hunch.”

“You get a lot of those.”

“You’ve had your share.” No one harassed him for them. “Are you going to check it out or not?”

“It’s Spanish for The Bulldog, but I’ll check it out for you. See if anything else comes up.”

“Thank you.” She ended the call before he could issue any more warnings and settled onto one of the many benches scattered throughout the courtyard near Cabrera’s lab. Pulling up the Internet on her cell, she

began a search for jazz clubs in Miami. There was still more to the puzzle that she would solve. She wasn't leaving until she had some answers.

Cabrera had given her the facts of what he'd heard. He hadn't shared his insights or instincts. El Dogo meant something to him. That was obvious. It also seemed as if he'd narrowed the clubs down more than he'd told her.

But why would he hold that information back? Unless he knew El Dogo to be a person. Someone he felt the need to protect. Or wanted for himself. He hadn't gotten those scars shaving.

Setting aside the long list of clubs that had come up, she scanned the pages Cabrera had printed for her. A comment had been made about the beach. For now, she discarded any clubs that were not on the beach. Time was running out, and she had little more to go on than her gut. She was following what she had until her team gave her proof that she was on the wrong path.

Ian Cabrera knew something about one of the men responsible for Lana's disappearance, for the women being taken. He may be an NSA employee, but that wouldn't save him from her wrath if she discovered he was intentionally hindering her case. Kidnapping and human trafficking were federal offenses, but the NSA shouldn't have an interest in it. Unless the South American connection Cabrera mentioned was somehow involved in terrorism or political intrigue.

It wouldn't be the first time that an FBI case intersected with one from another government branch. If they were up against the NSA, her case would likely be dismissed. Kidnap victims were not typically a higher priority than the security of the country. She'd never liked the reality of having to sacrifice one for the greater good. She wouldn't allow this to be one of those times.

Focusing on what she could control, Kieralyn pulled out a notepad and jotted down the names of ten jazz clubs near the beach. She'd check them out over the weekend.

Shifting the transcript of the recording to the top, she settled in to logically fill in the missing bits of conversation. It was guesswork and wouldn't help get search warrants, but it might lead to information that could. She needed a warrant to make sure anything she found stuck in court.

"No more...usual."

"Then...black eye...busted lip? ...deliver...unmarked." One of the women had been roughed up at the very least, and whoever was in charge wanted them unharmed. At least they weren't intending to kill the women.

Kieralyn jotted down her thoughts. Seeing them on paper helped her consider all the angles.

"The redhead...balls. Had...coming." Devin Wilson was a redhead who had gone missing four days ago. Had she put up a fight? Maybe wounded one of her captors? Kieralyn hoped so. She would have.

"El Dogo...pissed." There it was. El Dogo. Likely a nickname. Was he the head guy, a buyer of the women, or a transporter? What power did he hold that these men would worry about him being pissed?

"...reminder...her sedated." They had sedatives.

Her team would have to consider the kinds that would be easily accessible and the possible distribution avenues. For all they knew, the meds could be prescription grade. Possibly prescribed by a therapist or doctor after a trauma. Maybe a doctor working with them who was willing to help keep the women quiet.

Following the trail of prescriptions written by medical professionals in the Miami area was too daunting a task. They'd need to narrow the search more, and that wasn't going to happen with the information they had at hand. Unless...

Kieralyn punched in Breck's number on her cell and waited eagerly for him to answer the phone. This could be a lead the men couldn't dispute, regardless of the target they'd painted on her back.

"I haven't found anything yet," Breck said when he answered.

"I'm calling for something else." She jotted the translation onto the paper beside the mention of El Dogo. "There's a mention of sedatives in Cabrera's transcript. I think they are sedating at least one of the women."

"That doesn't help much."

"I know, and this may be a stretch, but what if one of the victims was on sedatives when she was taken? What would happen if she didn't have her meds? What if they got her meds and are giving her too much or are using them to keep the other women quiet—assuming there's a connection." She didn't like tacking on the last bit, but it kept the male feathers from ruffling too much.

"We've talked to all of the families. No one said anything about meds."

"Were they asked specifically? We focused on their daily habits, on their associations. Sure we approached the doctor angle, but what if one of the women was seeing, or had seen, a shrink. Maybe she isn't still going, but that doesn't mean that she used all of the pills."

"You're thinking the family wanted to keep that quiet. That if one of the women was in therapy we might dismiss her as a runaway rather than a victim."

"It's happened before." He was listening. He saw the validity of her idea. "If she was, I don't know, clinically depressed or maybe suicidal and was taking something to level her moods, hormones or emotions she could go into a downward spiral in captivity."

"Erin Lorian has an infant. Maybe she has that after-birth depression thing women say they get. Would her doctor prescribe something for that?"

"It's more than a claim, Breck." *Archaic-thinking ass.* A woman surely couldn't be anything but thrilled at having her body taken over by a fetus and her hormones sent rioting out of control. And depression caused from the sudden shifts in hormones had to be in her head.

Kieralyn bit her tongue for a second to keep from ripping into Breck. He wasn't intentionally being an ass. At least not this time. "Postpartum depression, and yes I believe some doctors will prescribe meds depending on the severity."

“I shouldn’t have asked. Doctors will prescribe anything for anyone these days.”

“Ridiculous, I know.”

“We’ll check it out. I’ll let you know what we find.”

“Thank you.” She almost asked him not to share the source of the idea with the unit, but if she was right she wanted credit for it. The smaller the target on her back got, the longer she’d survive in her chosen career.

“It’s my job.”

“I mean for seeing my side of this.”

“We’d all see it better if you’d open up to us more.”

“You’d accuse me of being too emotional. Of making it too personal.” Not like they opened up.

“Possibly, but don’t forget that something about every case drives each one of us differently. And if you didn’t have such a chip on your shoulder the other guys might listen a little closer.”

She was stunned. In the year she’d been with the Specialized Crimes Unit she’d been accused of many things. Having a chip on her shoulder was a new one. Though it wasn’t entirely unfounded or off-base.

Cabrera stepped out the front of his building, gripping a harness and led by a seeing-eye dog. *He’s blind.*

“Gotta go.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” She hung up on Breck, shoved her papers in her bag, and set out after Cabrera. Blind? How had she missed that?

He moved with confidence in his lab, but even in his domain there was a cautiousness about him. About the way he moved.

His steps had been measured. Precise. He’d never looked directly at anything. Not the controls or her, which explained why he hadn’t taken her hand. He hadn’t known she had offered it.

Not certain how sensitive his hearing was—and based on his ability to tell when she’d moved earlier it was fairly heightened—she maintained about fifty feet between them. She should be far enough back that he wouldn’t hear her, but close enough that she could move in quickly if he tripped or found himself in some danger. A blind man had to be an easy target for muggers and pickpockets.

He strode along beside his dog without hesitation. He’d said they’d been together a long time. How long? Had he been born blind? Or gone blind as a result of an injury or illness? Was this his first seeing-eye dog?

She’d bet an injury. Whatever had caused the slight facial scarring had likely robbed him of his sight. Or the missing sight had led to an accident that resulted in the scarring. She wanted badly to know which was true. When it had happened.

She thought back to the cool, dark lab with the lone wolf at the door. It was her experience that people with sour attitudes and short tempers like his rarely had many friends. Anyone who would try to get close would be driven away by the gruff shield surrounding him. Cabrera's handicap forced him into a dark and possibly lonely existence.

Her heart ached. He seemed proud and confident, but how did he feel about his handicap? How did he handle having to depend on someone else to see to his day-to-day livelihood? Grocery shopping, laundry, cooking and cleaning would have to be hired out if he wasn't married. Driving would be impossible, which no doubt made getting around tough.

Strangers would either pity him or make him their target for practical jokes. Without the benefit of sight he would rely on the kindness of others to make sure he was pointed in the right direction. Simple things like finding the restroom in a restaurant would be a challenge. Few places used Braille to mark doors. They certainly didn't use it to mark arrows on walls for handicapped people.

Cabrera stopped at a crosswalk. Even without waiting for the flashing hand to indicate it was safe for him to cross, he and his dog moved forward. Kieralyn's heart jumped. She rushed forward, certain he'd be creamed by an oncoming car. There were no cars moving in his direction. How could he possibly have known it was safe? Weren't aid dogs trained to go only when the light changed?

He rounded a corner before she crossed the street. Hustling, she caught up in time to see him turn again. Closing the distance a little more, she followed him to a white stucco home with a red tiled roof. It sat slightly away from the other homes on the street, but not in a secluded sort of way. The lawn was immaculate with beds full of vibrant color lining the sidewalk and front of the house. Whoever maintained it for him had a knack for utilizing the light and airy mood of Miami. That combined with a talented hand transformed Cabrera's home from the cookie-cutter model of those around him into a veritable oasis.

*What imperfections and darkness lurk beneath the surface?*

She leaned against a tree on the opposite sidewalk, trying to decide if she should go demand answers. She needed to know what he'd held back. Fifteen minutes later he came back out in a change of clothes and without his dog. He headed down the street. Dressed in black slacks and a perfectly tailored slate gray dress shirt, carrying himself with confidence, he could fit in most anywhere. The way his shirt showed off his defined biceps and abdomen was a plus for a woman. But he was walking around without the aid of his dog or a cane in a busy city.

Was he a complete moron? Violence and drug-related crimes were steadily rising. He left himself open to anything from stumbling into a pothole to getting mugged.

He'd been grumpy when she interrupted his work. He wouldn't appreciate her following him. She hoped he led her to another clue for her case. Distance would be best. Not too much though, in case she needed to step in to help him.

Miraculously, he wound his way from his home toward the beach a couple miles away. As he neared the beach and the businesses that stretched the length of the strip, the crowds thickened. She moved closer. He managed to shift through the throngs of people and around vendor booths without slamming into anyone—another mystery.

A dirty guy, little more than a teenager with bad body odor, bumped into her, grabbed her arm and reached for her bag. She shoved her elbow into his gut. “Back off.”

“Give me the bag, bitch.”

“Dream on.” She elbowed him again, not wanting to waste too much time on him. “I’m FBI.”

“I don’t care.”

“I don’t have time for this.” Cabrera disappeared into a crowd. She fisted her hand and punched her mugger in the nose. Blood gushed down his face. She jumped back to avoid any splatter.

He released his grip on her and cupped his nose. “You broke my nose.”

“You’re lucky I left your balls intact.” She shouldered her way to where she’d last spotted Cabrera. He was gone.

“Damn it.” She turned a circle and scanned the crowd for him. He was a big man, taller than the majority of people around. His shaved head should make him easy to spot. He had vanished.

“Shit.” She wouldn’t find out where he’d been heading. If he’d been following up on something he’d heard in the recording that morning she would only know if he bothered to call her.

Edging away, she continued scanning the faces. In front of a surprisingly busy vintage clothes shop, she pondered the decision to move forward or go back. She’d left her car at Cabrera’s lab and needed to reclaim it. But maybe if she went forward she’d catch up with him. Decided, she turned in the direction Cabrera had been heading.

Shit. He’d been her chance at finding Lana and insight into El Dogo. Without whatever information he had withheld she would take longer to prove herself to her team.

“Hoping to catch up to me?”

His voice, seductive and low, brushed along her ear.

“Shit!” She spun on the ball of her foot. “What the hell? Where’d you come from?”

“I know the area well.”

“Obviously.” The sun slipped toward the horizon over the beach. The shifting light that she hadn’t noticed before struck his eyes. “Your eyes are eerie.”

“That’s some change of subject.” He grabbed her elbow and pulled her to the side just before a kid rushed by on a skateboard. “Why are you following me?”

“How’d you know he was there?”

“I heard him, just as I heard you following me.”

He’d heard her? “How could you hear me in this crowd?”



He leaned close to her ear. “Your heartbeat. Why are you following me?”

She leaned away from his subtle, evergreen scent so she could see his eyes—escape the proximity of sheer maleness that tempted her in the middle of a busy sidewalk. “You held something back. Didn’t tell me everything you heard.”

He sighed and straightened. “I was going to call you if I confirmed my suspicions.”

As if it was his case to solve. His right to decide what information she knew and didn’t. And when she’d hear it. He was just like the men in her unit.

“You don’t know me. You have no right to make decisions for me.”

“This was—is—about more than you. Or even the case you’re working on.” This was his first lead in two years. To ease his mother’s grief and his sister’s worry, he would do what he needed to find the truth about El Dogo. He’d never thought it would require getting close to a woman who made him think of sex on the beach they were currently standing near. Getting close enough that he could touch her, absorb the feel of her skin. Experience the rising excitement that swept through him when he caught the sound of her heartbeat—one of a kind even in a crowd of hundreds.

“You need to clue me in. What’s going on, Cabrera?”

She stepped back and a cool breeze swept her warmth away. He missed it. He didn’t want to miss it. He’d lay serious odds that she saw him as a charity case.

She’d followed him since leaving his office, immediately recognizing his blindness. Her heart had kicked with the surprise he’d no doubt given her with Maximum and his harness. She’d kept a careful distance until he’d reached home. When he’d started out without Maximum, certain she waited outside, she’d cut the distance in half.

He knew her type. Trusting people was only one of her issues. She saw him as handicapped. She considered him venturing out without his dog as foolish. She hadn’t quite grasped the reality that he wasn’t like other blind men.

When he’d entered the crowds, a place he felt as comfortable as any seeing man, she’d closed in on him more. Her heartbeat grew louder and stronger the closer she’d gotten. She wanted answers. He wanted answers.

“We can each have what we want.”

“How’s that?”

“You’re cautious. I like that.” He grinned. “To a point.”

“How I am isn’t for you to like or not.” She shifted. The leather of her bag rubbed against the softness of her clothes. “Tell me what you know.”

He stepped around her and headed toward the clubs.

“Damn it, Cabrera.” She stayed at his side, as he’d known she would.

“Ian.”

“Tell me what you know.”

“Call me Ian.” Testing her reaction, and his own, he reached down and linked his fingers with hers. A shot of electricity and instant warmth slid up his arm. Her hands were soft, free of calluses except the small one on the inside of her middle finger from writing. “And I’ll tell you what I think.”

“I need facts.” She pulled her hand. He held firm. “Fine. Ian.”

“Ah.” He flustered her. Her heart skipped. “You really are a charmer.”

“And you get off on dragging things out.”

“You don’t know me well enough to know what gets me off.”

“Nor do I want to.”

Sparring with her fed an intellectual hunger he hadn’t known he had. She had a quick wit and even now that she knew he couldn’t see, she didn’t dwell endlessly on his lack of vision. Even his family forgot to think of him as a whole man at times. “Don’t protest too soon, Kieralyn. Patience is a virtue.”

“And that’s a shitty cliché.”

“Shitty because you don’t like how true it is.” He stopped outside the door of Jazz on The Rocks. “Like now.”

“How so? What did you hear that sent you here?”

He could have said he’d come just for the music, but it was her case and she might see something he missed. He’d just have to think fast if El Dogo was inside.

A couple approached. Ian pulled her intimately against him. With his lips against her ear, her scent once again slipping into him, he closed his eyes and sighed. “This club may be the one the recording was made in.”

“And you know that...”

“Based on the sounds of the place. Different calibers of clubs have different levels of sound. Different décor impacts acoustics differently. The one on the recording was high class and near the beach.”

“And this is one?”

“One of two in Miami.” He slid his lips along her neck, tasted seduction and craved a more thorough exploration of her. “You be my eyes. Tell me what and who you see. Where they are. What they’re doing.”

“Let me guess...” Her throat bobbed in a swallow. Her skin heated. Her heart pounded faster. “You’re my ears.”

“I could differentiate your heartbeat from the masses of people on this street. If there’s something worth hearing in the club, I’ll pick up on it.”

Her hands rested at his waist. “And if there isn’t?”

“We try the next one.”

“What’s the catch, Cabrera?”

“Uh-uh.” Suddenly determined to torment her every time she called him Cabrera, he nibbled her lobe. His blood rushed from his head, leaving him a little dizzy. “Call me Ian.”

“What’s the catch, Ian?”

“You have to pretend to be into me.” He slid his hands over hers and tugged on her arms so they wrapped around him. “Really into me.”

“I’ve been undercover before.”

“I’m your partner in this, Kieralyn, and you aren’t convincing me. Intimacy requires touching of the very personal kind.”

“I’m touching you.”

“This club is one for lovers. I’m not talking a first date kind of thing.” He rolled his hips forward. Her heart jumped. “Touch me of your own will, Kieralyn. As if you’re interested in me on an emotional level as well as a physical one. Allow yourself to let go.”

“Are you saying this is a kink club?”

“No, but now I know how your mind works.”

She shoved against his chest and stepped back. “You think you’re funny?”

“A man has to find fun where he can.” He cleared his throat. “Seriously, if you can pretend to be attracted to me we’ll blend in better. People will be more at ease and more inclined to talk to us.”

Her spine popped as she straightened. She placed her hands at his waist. “How intimate?”

*Very.* “Enough that we’re a believable couple, rather than two government employees looking for answers. And no flinching when I touch you.”

“I have not flinched.” She stepped up until her body brushed against his. Her fingers dipped into the waist of his slacks and she jerked him close. “And I won’t, so long as you mind your hands.”

“Kieralyn.” Already enticed by her, he instantly hardened at the touch of her hands on him. At the fantasy of her slender fingers snapping his slacks open and lowering his zipper before she reached in and cupped him.

Maybe he should have just hidden until she was gone. He brushed his cheek against hers and prayed he could cope with the distraction of her. He needed to find out about El Dogo without cluing her in on why he wanted the information. “I believe your hands are the ones in question at the moment.”

She pulled her fingers free of his pants, but kept her hands at his waist. Her heart hammered—matched the rapid pace of his.

“Tell me something, Ian.” She arched her neck. A wanton sigh escaped her lips. “You don’t strike me as the type to do field work. What are you here to investigate?”

“Possibly nothing.”

“If you’re holding something back that pertains to my case—”

“I’ll let you know when I know if I am.” He nipped her neck.

*Nikki Duncan*

“I don’t work that way.”

His breath caught as her husky whisper feathered over his ear. “You have no choice in the matter.”

## Chapter Three

Kieralyn flailed around in her head for a solution. There had to be an approach that didn't include snuggling up to Cabrera. *Ian*. His body was hard, everywhere and in the most arousing ways. It wasn't exactly a hardship to stay close to him, to have him touch her, breathe along her ear or brush his lips over her neck. To listen to the evocative slide of his voice. But she had a job to do. If she didn't have proof of her theory come Monday morning, her unit would never let her live it down.

She couldn't afford Ian Cabrera right now. She couldn't afford to turn away from him. She needed to know what he knew, and the best way to know he wasn't keeping secrets was to stay by his side. To be his eyes as he'd put it. And if he could hear half as well as he claimed, he could pick up on information no one wanted them to have. Better yet, no one would suspect a blind man of being a threat.

She would just have to shut off her emotions. Involvement wasn't an option.

"What do you say, Kieralyn?" He pulled away and gazed at her as if he could see her. See into her mind. "You willing to play?"

"Don't confuse this for anything personal, Ian." She put some space between them and surveyed him up and down. *Damn, but he's fine*. "I'm using you for my job. Nothing more."

"Use me for whatever you'd like." He slid one hand along the line of buttons on her blouse. He held the other out to her.

He was smooth. So smooth that his insinuations weren't the least bit insulting, though they awakened hidden desires that could make non-involvement an issue.

She swallowed and took his offered hand. Following him to the club, she resolved to figure out the mystery of him before the night ended. Including the way he stayed in shape and how he managed to maneuver so easily without aids. If she was lucky, she'd discover the cause of the scars and his confusing attitude shifts.

He hesitated a second at the door. She nudged him aside and pulled it open. The room was softly lit by decorative sconces at alternating heights on the walls and votives in colored glass bowls on the linen-covered tables. A single, padded bench ran the length of the farthest wall with small tables placed in front of it. The tables were crescent shaped and positioned so the chairs faced the stage positioned in the far corner. A giant, sepia-toned painting of a man's closed eyes dominated the wall above the bench seating.

“Welcome to Jazz on the Rocks. I’m Taylor.” The handsome man smiled. He was mid-twenties, blond and average height with a tiny scar at the corner of his lip. His suit and gray striped tie were sophisticated, but not overly formal. “Table for two?”

“That would be great.” She stepped in front of Ian and casually placed his hands on her hips so she could guide him through the tables. To anyone watching, she would look like a woman wanting her lover’s touch.

Not that he would ever be her lover.

“Do you have a back table?” Ian leaned over her shoulder and spoke to the maître d’. “Maybe near the bar?”

Taylor picked up two menus and smiled. “Right this way.”

As she followed him to their table, Kieralyn wondered how Ian would get past not being able to read the menu. Again, her curiosity rose about his decision to leave his dog at home and venture out without aid.

Did the dog make people uncomfortable? Did certain establishments give him a hard time about taking his dog inside? Maybe he thought he would draw less attention to himself alone. Though to her, it seemed more likely that a blind man stumbling through places unfamiliar to him would draw quite a bit of attention.

“Here you are.” Taylor pulled a seat from the table and held it for Kieralyn.

She started to comment that Ian should take the seat.

“Kieralyn.” He brushed the hair from her neck, his fingertips dancing along her nape.

An electric charge followed the path he drew. She stifled the urge to press back against him.

“Sit.” His voice was pitched low so only she could hear.

She sat and took the menu Taylor handed her. Ian sat beside her as if he knew exactly where the chair was and took the menu he was offered.

“Thank you, Taylor.”

Ian moved his chair closer to hers. As soon as Taylor was out of ear shot, she asked, “How’d you know he was offering the menu to you, but didn’t know in your lab that I’d offered you my hand?”

“Because it’s the logical step in his process.” He rested his arm on her chair and played with her hair. “And the laminate rubs against his fingers. What color is your hair? The highlights?”

“Brown with red. How’d you know I colored my hair? Highlights rather than full color?” She scanned the other tables, filled with couples all sitting close. “And how could you hear his fingers on the menu?”

“Hmm.” He buried his face in her hair. “Most women would go blonde. Then again, a lot of women would straighten their hair if it was this wavy. As for the menu, Taylor needs lotion. He has dry hands like a lot of people in the restaurant business.”

Tingles of apprehension, excitement, slid just beneath her flesh. Her skin was hyper-sensitized. She felt each hair on her arm and head down to the roots. “Wait. You know my hair is curly?”

“Wavy and thick.” He cupped the back of her head. “Tempting. Like you.”

“Ha.” She coughed a little. “You do remember we’re only pretending, right? That you’re supposed to be listening and I’m supposed to be watching?”

“So tell me what you see.”

“Other than a blind cad who will, thank God, never know what he looks like?” *Who has the charm of Simon Baker and the rockin’ bod of WWE wrestler Randy Orton—the combination was sexy dangerous.*

He pulled back and scowled straight ahead. His brandy eyes shifted from friendly seduction to something akin to primal fury. She couldn’t have offended him. He had to know he was behaving like an oversexed charmer. And surely he’d come to terms with his blindness. However long he’d lived with the disability, he’d had time to adjust to it, judging by his ability to move around.

“Yes,” he snapped. “Other than that.”

He was so confident. How could he not realize how appealing he was? “You’re touchy.” Yeah, she’d misstepped. He was pissed. She leaned close and placed her arm around his neck. She brushed her lips along his lobe. “Makes me wonder why. What makes you tick, *Ian*?”

“Some mysteries are not yours to solve.” His voice held its harshness, but he relaxed his shoulders and settled back into the stance of lovers. “What do you see?”

“All business.” She’d preferred that since joining the Bureau. Had needed it to keep from thinking of how differently she’d thought her life would turn out. She accepted his mood shift, but didn’t move away from him. He’d said intimate. She would give him intimate. “Fine. As you said, there are couples everywhere. Touching, holding hands, kissing, leaning together as they listen to the music. Waiters and waitresses are bustling around the room.”

“Any sign of ours?”

“Actually, a woman just indicated she’d be right over.” She narrowed her eyes. “Did you know that?”

“Pay attention to why we’re here. What else do you see?”

*I hate secrets.* “You’re a pain in the ass.”

“You followed me. Now do your job.”

“Fine.” She huffed lightly. Arguments would have to come later. Not that they were going to have a later. “There’s a married man hitting on a woman at the bar. Sleaze. Though even there, most of the people are obvious couples.”

She brushed her fingers along the nape of his neck, his shorn hair tickling her fingertips. “Another man, dressed much like Taylor, only slicker, is at the end of the bar talking to the bartender. The jazz band is an ethnic mix of guys. One woman. All dressed to the nines. Everyone is absorbed in their date or their job, and are paying little to no attention to what goes on beyond the circle of their table. No one raises any alarms or seems like they’d be involved in something like a kidnapping and slavery ring.”

“Is that all you see? Nothing else?”

“What do you want? A description of every outfit worn?”

“I want you, a trained FBI agent, to see the details you’re missing.”

“I miss nothing.” She was still considered a rookie, but Cabrera couldn’t know that. Just as he couldn’t know what she’d missed. “I can tell you where the people in here have bought their clothes and estimate an income level for you. I can go out to the parking lot and tell you which person likely drives what car, and I noticed that even though you can’t see the room, you sat so that your back is as close to the wall as it can get with everyone else either in front of you or to your side.”

“You’re touchy.” He taunted her with her earlier words. “I’m not arguing that you’re observant, but like most seeing people, your sight is a handicap for you whether you realize it or not. You see what’s on the surface, missing the undercurrents of the environment you’re in.”

“Don’t get pissy again, but how would *you* know what *I* missed?” No way was she handicapped. She would let him speak, but she wouldn’t allow him to go on thinking she was lacking.

An attractive waitress stepped up to their table and sat two glasses of water down. “Sorry for the wait. My name’s Lisa. What can I get you to drink?”

Kieralyn smiled, though she really wanted to get back to the debate with Ian. He was mentally stimulating, if a bit irritating. “I’ll have a glass of your best Riesling.”

Lisa nodded and smiled at Ian. A glint of appreciation lit her eyes. “And you, sir?”

Ian smiled up at Lisa. The scars at the edges of his eyes crinkled and added to his appeal. “A Coors would be great.”

“I’ll get those drinks right over and take your food order.” Lisa strode away.

Kieralyn turned back to Ian. “All right. Out with it.”

“First, I’m sorry for being *touchy*. Your reaction got to me more than I’d thought it would.” He put his arm around her at the waist and leaned close. “Now, for what you’ve missed.”

“We’ll start with the man talking to the bartender. He’s the owner and shows it off by wearing a well-cut, high quality suit and an expensive watch. He’s right handed and wearing a gun under his left arm. He’s not afraid to do his own dirty work. He’s trained himself to speak and move as if he was born to wealth, but there is an almost imperceptible layer of the streets beneath his veneer.”

If he was the owner, was he involved in the case? Something from her recording had sent Ian here. If the recording had been made at the club, the owner would know. Wouldn’t he? If that was the case, he’d know about Lana. Or had something else tipped him off to her? “I’m going to get tired of asking, but how do you know that?”

“Fabrics are no different than places. They each have sounds that are as distinct as their weights and textures. His suit whispers.” Ian rested his hand on her knee and ran it up her thigh where he fingered the edge of her skirt. “Like these stockings you wear beneath this skirt. Both are silk, but the skirt’s fabric is woven with a poly blend to give it more weight than the spun silk of your stockings.”



Kieralyn swallowed the desire bubbling up and resisted the urge to shift in her seat. Her body pulsed and tightened in awareness. “And the watch and gun?”

“The second hand on the watch sweeps rather than ticks. It’s almost soundless. The holster forces him to hold his arm a little differently, which in turn makes the lining of his jacket rub less evenly than, say, Taylor, who is unarmed.”

“You can’t hear that over the music and conversation in here.”

“On the crowded street, I could tell from the shift of your silk shirt that you’re wearing a lace bra.” He slid his hand up her leg and over her shirt. His thumb brushed just beneath her breast. His eyes locked on her face as if he could see her. “Tell me, am I right? Or wrong?”

Moisture pooled in her panties. Her stomach clenched, and the muscles along her spine bunched. What was he doing to her? More important, how was he doing it? Men didn’t get to her. She’d had sex, sure. But no man had ever aroused her with a touch or the sound of seduction in his voice.

Ian Cabrera was not like other men.

“Am I right or wrong, Kieralyn?” His thumb eased up, closer to her breast. “Do you wear lace beneath your sensibly sexy FBI agent clothes?”

“Keep your mind on the investigation, Ian.”

“I can multi-task.” He nuzzled into her neck, his lips smiling against her skin. “You’re aroused.”

“What?” She jerked, but he held her firm against him.

“Pheromones.” He slid the tip of his tongue across the pulse point beneath her ear. “Lilacs. Your normal scent, sort of flowery, becomes intoxicating when it’s mixed with the musky aroma of your desire.”

*Son of a—*

“Here are your drinks.”

Lisa’s appearance at the table snapped her back. Kieralyn found herself looking into the envious eyes of their waitress. Ian straightened in his chair as if he’d been doing nothing at all. As if he hadn’t been close to bringing her to orgasm with little more than his words and a couple of caresses.

“Thank you, Lisa. I’m feeling a bit parched.” Humor and warmth lit his eyes as he smiled at Lisa.

Unlike most blind people Kieralyn had encountered, Ian didn’t have a glazed-over look to his eyes. His gazes were as engaging as the next person’s. More so because he rarely blinked.

Lisa blew out a soft breath, as if she was turned on simply by the idea of Ian. Hell, how could a woman not be? Especially if she’d heard any of what he’d been saying. “Have you had a chance to consider what you’d like to eat?”

Ian grinned and slid his gaze toward Kieralyn. Oh, she was so not going there with him. She couldn’t. No way.

Damn, but she could imagine how great it would be. Kieralyn lifted her wine glass. Maybe a drink would soothe her. Calm her River-dancing nerves a bit.

"I'll have the steak, medium well, and the house salad. I may need the protein later."

Kieralyn choked, struggling not to spew her wine across the table. Energetic Ian was an image she didn't need, but too late it popped in her head. Only it was naked, energetic Ian, and he was worshipping her in bed. Or maybe she was worshipping him.

"Breathe." He rubbed a hand over her back in small circles. "I need you coherent for the night to come."

She cleared her throat and placed the glass carefully on the table. Lisa watched them with rapt appreciation. Kieralyn wanted nothing more than to crawl beneath the table and hide. She never should have agreed to this charade.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Lisa sounded concerned, but Kieralyn wasn't fooled. The woman was turned on.

"I'll be fine." *As soon as the ground swallows me whole.* Kieralyn scanned the menu, more to take the moment to compose herself than to choose her dinner. "I'll have the baked cod and steamed vegetables."

"An excellent choice." Lisa took their menus and sauntered off. Her step a little lighter than it had been before.

Had Lisa been the target of Ian's seduction, she wouldn't be walking at all. Even sitting, Kieralyn's knees shook. "What else did I miss in my assessment of the club?"

Ian chuckled, but didn't dispute her change of topic. "Okay, the man at the bar hitting on the woman."

"The sleaze. What about him?" She glanced to where she'd seen the two in question. "He's making nice headway from all appearances. She's blushing."

Ian grinned. "As she should be. The man is smooth, but he's also deeply in love."

"Then he shouldn't be hitting on a woman in a bar."

"But she's the one he's in love with. She's his wife. The mother of his newborn child. Why shouldn't he hit on her?"

"What? You can't possibly know all of that." Married women who'd given birth didn't flirt and blush like girls just turned twenty-one out on the town for the first time.

"We walked past them on the way in. She smells of breast milk. He smells of baby burps. There's a familiarity in their voices, the way they speak to one another as if they know every secret of importance." Ian began fingering Kieralyn's hair again. "And he's telling her all the ways he's going to love her, worship her body, when he gets her home."

"You're making every bit of that up."

He lifted her hand with his free one and pressed his lips to her palm. "Bet me."

Lightning streaked down her arm and spread through her body. Her panties grew damper and abraded her swollen clit. She closed her eyes and restrained herself from squirming in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure. "What?"

“If I’m right, you owe me one indulgence. If you’re right, then I owe you.”

“What kind of indulgence?”

“To be determined by the winner.”

She laughed and shook her head. “That’s a loaded bet.”

“Indulgences can be physical.” He dropped his hand from her hair enough to rub her neck. “Sexual, or not.”

“I know what kind you’re aiming for.” Using the hand he still held, she placed his hand in his lap. “I’m not playing.”

“Some would call that proof that I can read a situation without sight better than you can with.”

“And some people are idiots. There’s nothing wrong with my eyes or deduction abilities.”

“Then take the bet.”

“Fine.” She pushed away from him and stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to go prove you wrong.”

“Wait.” He stopped her with a gentle hold on her wrist. “How am I supposed to know you’re telling the truth when you come back?”

Her jaw dropped. He honestly thought she was going to lie to win a bet. That she was unworthy of trust. “You take me for a liar? You think that I have something to hide?”

“I think you’re afraid of what I’ll ask for if I win.”

She bent down close to his ear. “I’m not the one keeping secrets.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Then you’ll just have to listen.” She yanked her hand free, spun on the ball of her foot and nearly cried out when her panties shifted over her swollen sex. Stiffening her resolve, and her knees, she headed toward the bar.

“Sexy jerk,” she muttered to herself. He’d been the one to hold back about what he’d gotten from the recording. He’d intended to investigate the clubs on his own, claiming he’d have let her know if he found something useful. This was her case, her career and her friend’s life on the line. Who the hell did he think he was to interfere? And how had he talked her into a second stupid bet?

So what? She hadn’t told him everything. She’d never intended to tell him everything. She didn’t know him or owe him explanations. It wasn’t his business. But whatever he’d gotten from the recording *was* hers. She’d win this bet, and she’d indulge in listening to him tell the truth.

The man Ian had identified as the owner sat a few stools down from the couple. She would also see if Ian was right about the man, because if the club was being used to hide women, the owner not only knew, but was likely involved. Logically, that would mean he knew who Lana was and that she’d been working on a story.

Pasting a friendly smile on her face, keeping her own agenda in mind, Kieralyn eased onto the stool by the couple. The woman smiled back.

“Hi. My name’s Lana. This may sound strange, but I’m working on a story about the value of women and how they’re often still treated as subservients, slaves almost, by some men.” She slid her gaze to the owner and smiled. “I wonder if you could answer some questions for me.”

Ian grabbed his beer and leaned back in his seat. He shifted into a position that relieved some of the pressure that even his loose slacks put on his hard-on. The conversations from nearby tables mingled with the ballad the band had switched to. He could focus and pick up the conversations from tables farther away and from the bar, but he tried more often than not to shift what he could hear to the background.

His heightened hearing made him indispensable at work. Outside, it too closely resembled an invasion of privacy. If people thought their conversations could be heard by some random guy anywhere in the room, they would never relax.

Instead, he drank his beer and pulled the music to the forefront of his mind. The pianist caressed the ivories while a saxophone player added some edge. A woman sang with a weeping softness about her lover coming home and turning her on. In his head, Kieralyn swayed her gently curved hips as she moved in time with the musical seduction. The way they’d moved beneath his hands as she’d led him to their table.

If she proved him wrong, he would gladly grant her whatever indulgence she wanted. Unfortunately, she wouldn’t be interested in sex play.

His touch, taunts and innuendos turned her on. And tormented him. But his blindness—or rather his scars—were the first thing she saw when she looked at him. Though he’d grown used to people being that way, it bothered him that Kieralyn was no different.

He wouldn’t change his sight if he could. He’d been without it long enough to not miss it. Somehow dwelling on how life might be if he got it back seemed to diminish how he’d lost it and all that he’d overcome and accomplished since. Sounds provided his livelihood, but they also enriched his life. They allowed him to notice little things that others missed. He would only be with someone who could see that. Kieralyn, though damned tempting and fine for a temporary affair, didn’t seem to.

She’d been a conundrum since he’d approached her outside. One minute, seemingly open and accepting of his vision and hearing. In the next, she saw only his handicap and thought it necessary to lead him around.

All the more reason to focus on why he’d come here. The owner walked behind him and turned a corner toward the kitchen and restrooms.

Ian got up and headed the same direction. Sound waves moved like the wispy clouds he remembered seeing in the bright sky as a child. They floated and flowed around the tables, chairs, walls and people, making it easy for him to walk to the hallway near the back. The volume of the music became muted like it had been on the recording.

He ran his hand along the wall to his right until he reached the first door where women's laughter came through the panel. At the second, he hesitated long enough to feel for the sign. A bumpy outline of a man confirmed that it was the men's room, but he hadn't reached the end. He moved farther down the hall. With each step the music grew slightly quieter.

Ten steps beyond the men's room he encountered another door. Feeling the inset lettering of the sign on it, he discovered that it was the manager's office—likely where the owner had gone to. The sound waves eased past him and hit a sort of dead spot just ahead before they bounced off a metal door, likely an exit, and came back up the hall.

Shouts came from the kitchen opposite him. One of the double doors swung open and the heat of flames from the grill rushed across the air and brushed Ian's skin. He instinctively jerked back before logic told him he was safe and allowed him to return his focus to what he'd come to do.

See if El Dogo was around and if Kieralyn was on target about the women.

What was the dead spot? After walking another five steps, sliding his fingers along the smooth wall, he encountered a small dip. Continuing on, he returned to the smooth wall for a few feet before hitting another dip.

He tilted his head to make sure no one was coming and spent a few seconds investigating the dips, running his fingers up and down. It was as if there was a hidden door.

He cleared his mind, funneled all of his senses into his hearing, but no sound came from the other side. He edged down the wall and past the door, tapping lightly to check for hollow points. Working his way back toward the restrooms, he registered the sounds of his tapping.

Sounds he knew well from within his own lab. The sounds of soundproofing. But why would a jazz club need a secret, soundproofed room?

Exiting the hallway, heading back to his table, he hesitated outside the manager's office. The owner was talking with another man. "How do you know she didn't send something off before we got to her?" The owner was the local man from Kieralyn's recording.

"I personally checked everything she had on her," the other man said. "If that reporter had sent something off, someone would have shown up asking questions by now."

"You missed something." The owner's heart thumped in a steady six-beat with a jump on the last beat. "There is a woman at the bar pretending to be a reporter with the same name. It can't be a coincidence that she claims her story is about women and slavery."

Ian's heart lurched. Kieralyn's passion and determination to be taken seriously was going to get her killed. How in the hell did she think *that* would help Lana?

"She said people would be coming for her. For them." The South American from the recording. His heart rabbited nervously.

The owner slammed a door closed. “Neither woman would be here if you had covered your tracks better.”

“Let me separate the reporter and work on her.”

“El Dogo will take care of her.”

Ian fisted a hand. Years of searching, of plaguing questions, and two men that knew of El Dogo stood a door away from him. Men who would be able to lead Ian to answers that would free his mother from her years of agony.

He reached for the handle. He stopped himself. Barging in and beating answers out of the men was an appealing thought, but more was at stake. He needed to take his time and analyze the data before him. He needed to test the waters in the club and see if Kieralyn had more information.

El Dogo had disappeared long ago. Or had he been in Miami all along? And what did he have to do with a jazz club owner and a nervous South American worried about a woman reporter who was working a kidnapping and slavery story? Something had enticed El Dogo to turn away from everything he’d said he stood for. But what?

“When? How long are we going to wait?”

“Until he orders you otherwise.” The owner’s voice hardened with impatience. “You aren’t paid enough to question directives.”

The South American grumbled low in his throat. His teeth ground together in his attempt to hold his silence. A good soldier, following orders.

“You have another assignment.”

“What?”

“Follow the woman pretending to be the reporter and the man she came in with. I want to know everything about her.” His intonation clearly brooked no argument and indicated that Kieralyn’s safety could be taken away at a moment’s notice.

Ian creased his brows. Kieralyn had put on an act and tipped her hand enough to get interest pointed toward her.

“The man?”

“He resembles El Dogo, who has claimed to have no family.”

Kieralyn had set a trap, but now if he didn’t handle things just right she would be caught in the middle with no way out. Being followed would alert these men that he was blind, therefore essentially eliminating him as a threat to anyone. Kieralyn wouldn’t be so lucky. Too easily she could become the next kidnap victim. Or worse if they learned who she was. Taking the reporter was one thing. She would have kept her information silent until she had proof and could bust the story wide open.

An FBI agent changed the rules. She would have discussed the case with her team. They would come after anyone who took her, hurt her. But she could be a greater risk if they kept her alive. Alive she would no doubt use her training to either attempt contacting her team or escaping.

Whatever else she'd done to draw attention to them, Ian couldn't let Kieralyn come to harm.

He headed back to the table and arrived just as Lisa approached and set their plates down.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"I think we'll be fine. Thank you, Lisa."

"You're welcome." She tapped her acrylic manicured fingernail on the table. "You look familiar to me."

"Really?" He picked up his napkin and unrolled his silverware.

"Yes. Have you been here before?"

"A time or two shortly after it opened."

"Hmm." She clicked her tongue. "Maybe that's it."

Ian smiled and waited for Lisa to leave. His audiographic memory allowed him to recall sounds as clearly as someone with a photographic memory recalled images. But he didn't remember his father's face. He knew the shape of his own features. He just didn't know how close the resemblance was. He had no concept of what he looked like.

Kieralyn's staccato heartbeat approached. She sat in her chair and unwrapped her silverware. "It pains me to admit it, but you are right."

"Do tell." He smiled and cut into his steak. She was going to owe him.

"They've been married seven years. The last five they've been trying to get pregnant and almost lost themselves in the process."

"So now they have their miracle and are trying to rediscover themselves?"

"Yes." She speared some food with her fork, the metal tines scraped lightly across her teeth. A sigh slipped past her lips and brushed across his cheek. "I'll admit that you have some amazing abilities. I'd love to know how you came by them."

"That could have been your indulgence. Instead, you owe me one." One that would likely surprise them both. Perhaps he would ask where her trust issues came from, what made her cynical. Unless he had read her completely wrong, something bad had happened. She wasn't hard or unfeeling—far from it—but there was a reserve in her. Something kept her from accepting easy touches or even the concept that a couple could fight any odds and stick together.

"You realize you don't get carte blanche with this."

"That's not how a bet works, Kieralyn." He leaned into her and whispered in her ear. "You can't set the terms of it after you've lost."

"You can't make me have sex with you."

“I wouldn’t force you. Then again, I wouldn’t need to. You want me.” He pulled back. “I know that from the pace of your heart and the scent of your excitement.”

“Ian—”

“Relax.” He returned to his meal and waited. “Eat.”

“I need to know what you’re planning.”

“We have a long walk after dinner. We’ll talk then.”

She tucked into her meal, but tapped her fork on her plate between bites. Vibrations of anxiety rocked the air around them. “You know something. You heard something that you aren’t telling me.”

“I’ve heard many things tonight.”

The South American came out and moved to the bar.

“You know something that has to do with my case. You owe it to me to read me in.”

*Possibly at the cost of your life if we pursue it here.* He grabbed her chair and scooted her close until his thigh brushed hers. Her arm flexed and brushed against his when she raised and lowered her fork.

Ian lifted her wine glass and offered it to her. He leaned into her and kept his voice low. “Later. For now, you need to forget who you are at work and just be a woman on a date.”

“I never forget.” She took her glass and swallowed. “And this is not a date.”

“Then set it aside.” He rested his lips against hers. Wine flavored her soft lips, beckoning him to explore deeper. To discover what other tastes would be waiting for him. “Trust me. It’s important.”

“Then eat fast. I’m an impatient sort.”

“Channel that impatience into the show you’re supposed to be putting on.” He slid the tip of his tongue along the edge of her mouth. “Pretend you’re so into me—that you are so aroused by my touch and the sound of my voice at your ear you can hardly wait to get me home. Imagine what you want me to do to you with smooth sheets gliding against your silken skin.” His bed. He kissed a path along her jaw to her ear. She shivered instantly, something he realized she did more quickly each time he closed in on her. “What you want to do with me in a large bed.”

“You seem to have enough imagination for us both.” Her voice cracked and she wiggled in her chair. The musky scent of her longing wafted up and arrested his senses. Emotional and logical reservations held her back, but her body reacted to his. She held no hope of denying an attraction.

If he had to use that against her to keep an eye on her, to learn more about El Dogo’s involvement, he would do it without hesitation. With any luck at all, he would be able to walk away before she walked out on him.

He had no doubt that she would walk because she wouldn’t trust anyone enough to let herself stay.

After wrapping up dinner and paying the bill, Ian allowed Kieralyn to lead him from the club. On the sidewalk, he linked his fingers with hers and strode toward home.



He kept to a leisurely pace and split his focus between the sexy woman at his side and the South American following them. The man's heart thumped loud and rapid like he was tightly leashing violence. Taking the watch-and-wait position he'd been forced into went against his nature.

Kieralyn's hair brushed her back in a gentle sway with each step. Her body twisted slightly as she looked behind them. She expected to be followed, but she didn't seem to spot their tail.

"I should go pick up my car."

"Turn left two streets down. I know a shortcut." Having her car gave them an advantage over the South American following them. When he realized their plan, he could call for a lift, but by the time his ride showed, Ian and Kieralyn would be gone.

Kieralyn looked for a tail again as she made the turn and sighed with disappointment. She thought she'd failed at getting the owner's attention. It was a thought that could lead her to dropping her guard—a mistake that could cost more than she could afford. He could tell her she'd succeeded, but he preferred having control over the situation.

"So, what indulgence are you going to require of me?"

He had to respect a woman who would admit when she was wrong and accept whatever price she had to pay. He slid his thumb along the pulse point at her wrist and smiled when it kicked in reaction to him. "It's a tough decision. I mean, we have a certain chemistry that would be interesting to explore."

"You mean sex."

"Can you honestly tell me you aren't interested? That you aren't attracted to me?"

"Wow."

"I'll take that as a yes." He sighed and wrapped his arm around her waist. The man following them turned the corner and stayed close to the buildings. "Though, as much as this may shock you, I want something else."

"Like."

"The truth."

"Ha. You think I haven't told you the truth."

"I know that you've held something back from me. My indulgence is answers."

## Chapter Four

Each step closer to her car, each moment Ian didn't specify what answers he wanted, sent vibrations of awareness through Kieralyn and ratcheted her anxiety up another notch. He'd been silent for the last three blocks. Instead, he held her close and kept himself on high alert as if he expected trouble. His body brushed against hers, inciting waves of anticipation.

If he really hadn't listened to her conversation with the couple at the bar, what had him on edge? She looked over her shoulder but again saw no signs that they were being followed. Had her plan worked? Was she closer than she thought to answers and success? Had he heard something?

*Truth.* He could want the truth about her source or about her attraction to him. Damn, but she wanted it to be the latter. She needed it to be the former. "Are you going to tell me what you want?"

"You in my bed would be nice." His voice was even more seductive in the cool night breeze than it had been in the closeness of the club. He shifted a little behind her until his six feet four inches of solid muscle practically cocooned her.

"Imagine that. An original desire that I've never heard before." *An image that comes too easily to mind.*

"I promise, you've never had a man do to you what I would. You've never known the pleasure I could give you."

"Ha! How could you possibly know that?" Ian guided her around a corner and then quickly made a few more turns before steering her onto the sidewalk in front of the NSA compound.

"It's in the way that you move and speak. Which lot is your car in?"

"North." She headed toward her car. Ian stayed at her back rather than her side. "What makes you think you'd be so good for me?"

"I feel your body's responses. Hear the way your heart beats as the blood heats in your veins. I know what turns you on and can sense the pleasure building inside of you."

As if his words commanded it, her body pulsed and her blood heated. Her panties rubbed against her sensitized sex with each step, heightening her awareness of him. Heightening her desire for his indulgence to be erotic.

"Are you always so arrogant, Ian?" She veered right, toward her car sitting alone beneath a security lamp.

"It's not arrogance."

She pulled her keys from her bag and led Ian to the passenger door before going to the driver's side and sliding behind the wheel. "Then what is it?"

"Confidence in the skills I've spent my life developing." He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes a moment before he pulled his door closed and relaxed into the seat.

Kieralyn rolled down her window and surveyed the area as she drove from the lot. Something had demanded his attention and kept him on guard during their walk. Had she captured the interest of the owner and enticed him into making a move? Had they been followed? Maybe her excitement and anxiety had been from a sense of someone following her rather than her attraction to Ian. She sure preferred that possibility.

"Well, you can keep your *skills* to yourself." She zipped toward his home. The walk earlier had taken nearly thirty minutes. The drive would take less than five. "You said you wanted answers. Answers to what?"

"You intrigue me, Kieralyn Beckett. Just when I think I know what you may say next you jump topics."

"And you always steer them back to sex." She stopped at a light and sat watching her rearview mirror until it turned green. Without Ian touching her, she was convinced that at least a fraction of her nerves had been her instincts. She saw no one, but she'd been followed.

"And you only want to discuss business. That's one way that I know you've never been fully satisfied by a man." His hand brushed over her knee. His lips angled up in a small smile. "You need to learn to relax. To enjoy the simple things."

"And you need to cut to the chase. What answers do you want?"

"You've been hurt by someone. You're too smart to let a shitty father figure warp your views on men." He nodded slowly. "You were hurt by someone you trusted. Someone you viewed as an equal, but who couldn't or wouldn't view you the same way."

"That's a nice theory." And too close to the truth. Her jaw ached with the pressure to not clench her teeth.

"It's logical, like you. It likely played into your decision to become an agent, which is a field dominated by strong men. You want to prove to yourself that you can belong. You're not against shoving their faces in it when you succeed."

"You're an ass, Cabrera. What answers do you want?"

"See? I'm close. You're putting me in my place, compartmentalizing me by switching to my last name."

"Damn it. I don't have time for your games."

"You'll have to play them a little longer. What I want from you... It's more than you'll be able to give in the time it takes to get to my house." He pulled his hand back to his lap. "We'll talk there."

*Arrogant ass.* Cool air brushed over the warmth he'd left behind, mocking her. With him, she might find the warmth she'd looked for her entire life. It would only cost the control she'd fought to regain after her eighteenth birthday. The control she'd almost lost just as quickly as she'd discovered it.

She pulled into his driveway and slid the car into park.

"Hold on. I'll open the garage." He was out of the car and crossing the driveway before she could argue. There was no reason for her to park in the garage. She wasn't going to stay overnight.

He stepped around the corner of the house, out of sight. A moment later the double wide garage door rose to reveal an immaculate space. It was equipped similarly to his lab at work, though on a much smaller scale and with the control panel along the right wall.

Rather than argue, she pulled in. He stepped into the garage behind her car, pushed a button and closed the door. He was opening her door before she could reach for the handle.

"Come on in. I'll make us some coffee."

"If I drink coffee this late, I'll be awake all night." She slipped her keys into her bag and eased out of the car. The garage door bumped against the floor. Some kind of sprayed-on padding coated the walls and the inside of the door. They were immediately cocooned in silence. "You soundproofed your garage?"

"The entire house actually. The coating is a specially designed insulation. It keeps the temperature regulated and blocks the outside sound."

An image of Ben Affleck in a sensory deprivation tank in *Daredevil* popped into her mind. Was that how sound was for Ian? He didn't act like it gave him the ability to see, but maybe it overwhelmed him after a while. She almost asked him, but knowing too much about Ian would draw her deeper into his world than she cared to be.

She needed structure and predictability. Independence and control. She couldn't afford him. "I can see the appeal, but I think I'd miss the sounds of life I can hear from my apartment."

"I still hear sound from the windows, so the house isn't entirely soundproof." He opened a door that led to his kitchen and flipped on a light. She followed. "I would have foregone windows, but I like the warmth of the sun. There are pros and cons to everything."

"Some things, like bets, have more cons. When are you going to tell me the answer you want?"

"Then you're taking losing bets." He walked to the refrigerator. "Would you like a bottle of water or a soft drink?"

"Just an answer."

He shrugged and pulled out a water. His yellow lab, heavily grayed around his nose and eyes, padded into the room and sat beside the back door. "Hey, Maximum." Ian walked over and opened the door.

*Maximum. Interesting name for a dog.*

They moved together as seamlessly as they had walking home. Ian had said they'd been together a long time, and the dog was obviously getting up in years. How long had Ian been blind? Was this his original seeing-eye dog?

"I want to know everything you know about the recording you brought me, including who sent it to you. And by *who* I'm looking for the background of how you know her. Why she chose you."

His response jerked her from her thoughts. She wasn't with him to get to know him. She stiffened her spine. "That's none of your business."

"But you're going to tell me," he continued. "Start with exactly what you said at the club when you went up to the bar."

"Ah, so you can't hear as much as you claim." If he could, she wouldn't have to tell him what she'd said. Explain its meaning, yes. But not what it had been.

"I can. I could have heard your entire conversation easily. I wasn't listening."

Why not? What had he been doing? She'd been certain he would have eavesdropped on everything she said.

He sat at his table and pointed at a chair opposite him. "Sit. Talk."

"Should I perform tricks for you as well?" Like he'd done this morning, he commanded and expected her to obey. Unlike this morning, he wanted her to speak.

"You're a smartass."

"You're just an ass."

"Kieralyn, you accepted the bet and lost." He closed his eyes and breathed deep. His jaw ticked, the scar along the edge danced. "Tell me what you said at the bar and who you got the recording from. There was a reason it was emailed to you privately, rather than your team or the Bureau as a whole. What is it?"

"What difference does it make?" She recognized the futility in her voice. He'd had sex on the brain when he'd dared her. Something had changed his mind. Something big to have him giving up a sure thing.

"It matters because it's what drives you to solve this case." He leaned forward and braced his elbows on the table with his hands out before him. His fingers rested inches from hers on the table. "You know, or knew, her personally. She's not random."

Kieralyn dropped her shoulders and sank deeper into the chair. He couldn't make her life more difficult than her team. She told him how she'd introduced herself to the couple at the bar using Lana's name and a slavery story angle and how very shortly afterwards the owner had walked away seemingly pissed. Ian was easy to talk to and he'd pinpointed the owner at the club when she might not have.

She'd wanted someone to talk to, someone she could tell about Lana. Maybe he would be more willing to help if he knew why it mattered so much—unlike her team.

"There was this group of pre-law students that I wanted to join. *Cras Credemes* they called themselves. It means 'tomorrow we believe', and members of the group had amazing contacts and success.

I wanted that on my resume. What they apparently left off of their crest was the second half of the saying. *Hodie nihil*—but not today.”

“What didn’t they believe in?”

“The value of women in modern society. That women had a right to get educations and compete against men for jobs. Take your pick.” Oh, but they had talked a good game until she saw the truth of them. “They refused to let me in, so I went to the school paper with plans of exposing them.”

“And you met Lana.”

“Yes. We put together an amazing article backed up with printed data and recorded statements from two former members. We proved that they were discriminating. Rather than let me or any other woman into their inner sanctum the group disbanded.”

“Really?”

“No, but they said they did.” Which just proved that people lied. “Regardless, during the course of the investigation, despite the pressures from the school faculty and the threats from the men in the group, Lana stuck by me. We got an apartment together the next semester and only split ways once our careers were headed down solid paths.” She was the first person to ever keep her word. The first person to never back away or run when things were less than perfect. “She’s determined to win a Pulitzer for writing a hard-hitting, emotional story.”

His brows popped up. “And you haven’t told your team that you knew her because they would insist you be taken off the case.”

“It’s a chance I can’t take.” She wanted a drink after all, so she got up and helped herself. “We’ve been tracking these kidnappings for a month. We’re getting reports of other women who’ve gone missing, but they’re from scattered towns and it’s taking time to follow up on the leads. I worry that even if I prove a connection and find the perpetrators that we won’t recover everyone.” She shook her head and sighed. “A couple days ago we were called about another one.”

“Lana.”

“I couldn’t believe it.” Tears she hadn’t allowed herself to shed clogged her throat. She wouldn’t cry now either. It would do no good. She uncapped the water and chugged it, washing the tears down. “There I stood in her home, knowing everything she’d ever done for me. Knowing the odds of recovery and that I may never see her again.”

“When did you get the recording? How have you kept your team from connecting her to you?”

“I took point on running her background and interviewing her connections. The guys on the team were all busy doing the same for other victims.”

“And the recording?”

“That night when I checked my email.” She chuckled. “The name on the account was Crazy for Naoko.”

“And that meant something to you?”

“Naoko is Japanese for straight. Honest.” Her mind floated back to college, as it had when she’d read the name. “Naoko was also a guy in one of our college English classes.”

“And you guys liked him.”

“Ha.” She smiled and breathed slowly as she remembered him. “Everyone, guys and girls alike, liked him. Naoko was just one of those likeable people. Lana, though, was more than a little bit in love with him. And he loved her.”

“What happened?”

“Despite dual citizenship and having been raised in America, he succumbed to family pressure. He returned to Japan and married the girl his family had chosen for him. To give him credit, he’d told Lana from the beginning that he would do what his family expected of him. Anyway, Lana made a joke out of the irony of his name. He’d been the only honest man she’d ever known.”

“I’m guessing that you or your team traced the email account? The IP address the email came from?”

“Yes. She stopped at a cyber café one night and created the account. Mine was the only email she ever sent from it. She was reported missing eleven hours later.”

“So she had known that she was a target.”

“Yes.” Lana didn’t miss details. Ever.

“Tell me something. She made the recording in the club. You’re playing games to draw the owner toward you.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you honestly think that if they are selling these women that they would keep them in one place, especially a busy club, for a sustained period of time?”

“Are you telling me that you believe it’s impossible?”

“No. I’m asking you to consider that you might not find the women there.”

“I might not, but if they have the facilities, the club could be a good cover. If the owner came under suspicion, no one watching him would see anything off as his day-to-day schedule would remain the same. The noise of the club at night would cover any racket the women did manage to make, and he’d have the mornings and afternoons to deal with whatever it is he needs to do with them.”

His raised eyebrows indicated that he was impressed. She’d given it more thought than he’d given her credit for.

“You put yourself in danger in the club by using Lana’s name.”

“I wanted them to follow me. I wanted to be able to track them back to the women if they weren’t at the club.”

“You wanted to put yourself in the line of fire so you could prove to your unit that you knew what you were talking about.” His jaw hardened and his eyes narrowed. He drummed his blunt-tipped fingers on the

table. “To shove it in their faces that you were right. You view them like the guys that wouldn’t let you into their club. You have to earn that spot sometimes.”

“You know nothing about my motivations.” She popped up straight. As she pushed slightly away from the table, the chair legs scraped loudly on the floor. *This is completely different. Isn’t it?* “I have a case to solve. It was a necessary risk.”

“Bullshit! What if I hadn’t been with you? What if I hadn’t heard them talking about you?” He slammed a hand against the table. “It was a stupid risk.”

Kieralyn’s phone jingled with an incoming text message. It was Breck’s ring. She retrieved the phone and read the message he’d sent. “You son of a bitch.”

“What?”

“You lied to me.” She shoved away from the table. Her chair crashed to the floor with a clatter. Her heart slammed in her chest. He was treating her like a fool, a moron, while withholding key information. He was no different from other men. He just heard a little more.

“You took information from *my* recording and used it for your own gain.” Her pulse thrummed, but rather than rage at him, she channeled her shaking anger into control. “Tell me, Ian, what does El Dogo mean to you? Why do you want so badly to protect him? And don’t try to lie.”

Kieralyn’s passionate accusation slid down Ian’s throat like the juices from a fresh pear—sweet, succulent and not entirely satisfying. She’d learned something new from whatever message she’d just received.

The air backed up in his lungs. He ducked his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. He should be focused on the fact that someone had followed them from the club, and that whoever it was had shot off a text message as Ian and Kieralyn had headed to the car. If their pursuer’s ride arrived quickly enough, they could now know where Ian lived.

But no one had shown up in the parking lot and they’d passed no one on the road by the office. Though, they could have picked up a tail on the main street. Someone who’d been told what car to look for.

Kieralyn’s driving had been hurried—almost erratic—fueled by her frustrations. They would have stood out to anyone able to keep up with her. Ian had listened to the familiar sounds of his street while she’d pulled in. He’d heard only the light buzz of a few porch lights.

He told himself that having her park in the garage was an added precaution. It had nothing to do with a desire to keep her close and everything to do with not knowing the resources of the men they were up against. It was possible for Kieralyn to be tracked by her license plate. Or for him to be tracked from his place of work. No one was ever one hundred percent safe. Danger was as unpredictable as a faulty gas line. Only time would reveal when it struck and how much damage would result.



"I'm waiting, Ian." Her nails tapped the wooden top of his table. "You got the truth from me. I deserve it from you. How do you know El Dogo?"

Maybe she was right, but telling her everything might not be the best idea. He needed more information about what was going on. Unfortunately, it was information he wasn't likely to get without filling her in a little. Answers, though, would be on his terms. "What makes you think El Dogo means anything to me?"

"You reacted oddly when you heard it on the recording. I'm betting that's what sent you to the club tonight."

"Tsk. Tsk." She'd just maneuvered herself to the angle he'd intended to take her. "You should stop betting while you're ahead."

"Are you really going to sit there and tell me I'm wrong? That something else sent you to that club tonight?"

"Yes." Maximum bumped his nose against the door. Ian stood to let him in. "After hearing the recording, considering the sounds and how they flowed together, I figured it was likely the men had been talking about one of two jazz clubs. Jazz on the Rocks or Jazzid at the Beach."

"You should have told me about them. Let me, my team, follow up the possibility."

"I didn't." He opened the door and Maximum marched past him to sit by Kieralyn. Ian rubbed the back of his neck. Weird. Since losing his hearing and some of his sense of smell, Maximum rarely took to other people. "I took the opportunity to indulge in my love of jazz."

"Damn it, Ian. It wasn't your place, and you're still not answering my question."

"Maybe not." He sat in the chair beside her rather than across from her. Close, he could smell her better. "Can you tell me that you or the men in your unit would have been able to identify the same sounds I heard on the recording? That you could have confirmed or dismissed the possibility of the club being the one on the recording? Or that your unit would have taken it as a serious lead?"

"They want to find these women as badly as I do."

"And yet, when they submitted the request for my services they omitted everything that angled toward the cases being related and possibly linked to the women being sold. And even if they did buy into your theory, you don't have anything beyond a hunch. No judge would give you a warrant, which means you can't go searching."

"We're trained to observe. We could have checked the leads out just as well as you. *Better.*"

He reached behind him and grabbed the cordless phone from its cradle. Holding it out to her, he smiled. "Call your team. Tell them that you think some or all of the missing women are being held at an upscale jazz club on the beach. A club that has a sterling reputation and is owned by a reputable member of the community."

She snatched the phone from him.

“Oh, and be sure to tell them to scope the place out for a soundproofed room in the back that can be accessed by a hidden door. Assuming they can get in at this late hour.”

“The FBI has contacts. We can get in.” She rubbed her fingers over the phone keys, but didn’t call anyone. “How do you know there’s a soundproofed room?”

“You’ve already tipped your hand in there. Your team will not go unnoticed.” He crossed his arms. “Then again, maybe that’s how you all work. You go into a place and flash all the cards you’re holding in hopes that maybe the bad guys will walk up and admit that it’s them you’re after. No wonder your team doesn’t listen to you.”

He really was no different than her team. They saw her as expendable and one way or another she would prove them all wrong. “You son of a bitch.”

Her tantalizing scent intensified as anger spiked her body temperature. “And we return to the insults.”

“You have no right—”

“You’ve admitted to holding back information from your own team and said that you aren’t taken seriously. You aren’t helping your case any by being impulsive.”

“These women deserve to be found.” She jumped up and paced the floor. “To have what’s being done to them stopped.”

“I’m not debating that.”

“But you’re standing in the way!”

“And you have no rights to make demands of me. You’re welcome to leave at any time.” Ian stood and moved to the door leading into the garage. “You know the names of the two clubs. Personally, I think the second place will be a dead end.”

“Is El Dogo your father?”

She couldn’t know that. “Good luck finding Lana. I hope your team will indulge you long enough to see the validity to your ideas.”

“You’re just like every other overbearing, self-important, chauvinistic man I’ve ever known.” She grabbed her bag from the counter and stomped toward the door. “Tell El Dogo—or maybe it’s Mick Cabrera—hello when you see him in Hell.”

Ian slammed the door a second before she got to it. He should just let her go and be done. She would solve her case and whatever truth there was to his father would be revealed in the fallout. He needed to warn his mom and sister. He had enough on his plate without riding the Kieralyn Coaster.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he blocked her path. “If you’re taking down El Dogo, I am going to be there.”

“No chance. Now move.” She pulled on his arm. “I have things to do.”

He didn’t budge. “He is my father. He’s been missing for two years. Beyond that I have no answers for you.”

“You can’t go to the scene with me again, Ian. You’re too close.”

*Right. I’m too emotionally invested.* “I listened to you make your case this morning. I listened to your recording. I typically wouldn’t have let you past Dante.”

“Why did you? What made you decide not to send me packing?”

*Keep her guessing.* “You’re passionate.” *Or not.*

“Two minutes ago you called it impulsive, as if it was a bad thing.”

He sighed. With her prideful views, she saw it as a contradiction. An insult. He reached out and took her purse from her hand. After hanging it on the hook by the door, he took her hands in his and linked their fingers. “Passion drives you into impulsive decisions that could get you hurt.”

Her heart skipped a beat. She cleared her throat. “You say *that* as if you care.”

“More than I’m comfortable with.” *And I’m helpless to fight it.* “Passion is a good thing in your work, if you can temper it. Some people need emotional distance to do the job you’ve chosen. Others feel a connection to every victim, every case.”

He pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her. “You need the connection, but you may be too close to this one.”

“I’m not stepping away from this.” She struggled against him. He held firm.

“I didn’t suggest that.” He kissed her forehead. “But you need to release some of the energy building inside of you.” He kissed the corner of her mouth. “One way or another, you have to allow yourself to escape all thoughts of the case.” He kissed the other corner of her mouth. “Or you’ll burn out.”

“I’ll escape after I save the women.” She softened against him—marginally.

“No.” He slid his mouth over hers. “As much as rescuing those women—Lana—means to you, as important as it is to stop the injustices they and other women may suffer, you have to realize that you can’t do it all alone. And you can’t do it without *knowing* who has them and where they’re being held.”

Like she had outside the club, Kieralyn melted against his body. Her hands rested at his waist with her fingers brushing against his shirt, sliding the material against his skin.

“You believe that I’m right about the connection? That the club we were at, the owner, is connected to it all somehow?”

“Yes.” He walked her backwards, deeper into the kitchen. “But there are still too many unanswered questions.”

She arched her neck. A tiny moan escaped her lips. “Like what?”

He nibbled the cord of her neck and maneuvered her around the table. “Like what you taste like.”

“You’ve already kissed me.”

“Not enough. Not everywhere.” He slid his hands up her back and buried them in her heavy hair. “Are you going to let me make love to you, Kieralyn?”

“Ian, the case—”

“Isn’t going anywhere.” Her heart slammed beneath her soft breasts pressed against his chest. “I, on the other hand, may go mad if you say no.”

“No pressure.”

“Oh, there’s a lot of pressure.” He rolled his hips so she could feel his arousal. “It started building when I heard your voice in my lab this morning.”

“Aah.”

“The breathy way you pleaded your case teased me.” He fisted his hands in her hair and pulled her head back some more. “Then I caught your scent. Soft lilacs that became more erotic with every beat of your heart.”

“You’re a confusing man, Ian Cabrera.” Her ragged breath rushed over his neck. She bunched the fabric of his shirt in her hands. “I don’t know how to handle you.”

The image of them outside the club earlier—when she’d slipped her fingers into the waist of his pants—popped into his head. It would be easy for her to slip the button free, ease the zipper down, and slide her hand down and around him. His dick throbbed.

“There’s nothing confusing about desire.” Unless he considered the unsettling speed with which she was coming to be important to him or his inability to turn away from the chance of spending more time with her.

Her passion, the way she tested everything and kept him on his toes, reminded Ian of the spark he’d always seen between his parents. A spark he’d always wanted, but had never found with a woman. That the woman he found it with couldn’t see past her own agenda or his blindness to see herself as his match was his problem. He would get hurt when she walked, when she proved unable to accept him.

She awakened something inside him. A yearning that made resisting her for his own sake impossible. Dredging up the remnants of his control, he raised his head and faced her. If she paid attention, she would realize that she would remain the center of his focus for as long as she wanted to be. He would face the fallout later.

She remained still and quiet, but for the bold pounding of her pulse and the brush of her blouse against her bra with each hurried breath.

Her hands dropped from his waist. Her breathing slowed with her heart rate. She’d made her decision. There would be no sex.

He stepped back and told himself to be grateful. Going forward with her was begging trouble. Kieralyn defined complicated. But damn, he wanted her. Craved her like a wild cat craved the sustenance of a hunt.

*It’s better this way. Cleaner.*

Her fingers brushed his lips. “I want you, Ian.”

He saw himself slamming her against the wall and devouring her whole. Driving her mad as he awakened every sensibility she possessed. Instead, he closed his eyes and sighed. “Be sure, Kieralyn. You won’t be in control of yourself any more than you will be of me.”

She pushed up against him and pressed her lips to his. Her lips tilted against his mouth in a smile that enticed him as much as her arousal-thickened voice and the musky smooth scent of her passion. “I’m sure.”

The tether on his control snapped. She was going to be his.

He dropped his head and claimed her mouth. Stepping forward, he backed her to the kitchen wall and pressed her flat against the hard surface. She pushed up to her tiptoes and slanted her mouth against his.

His chest constricted uncomfortably with emotions he didn’t want to acknowledge. He cared about what happened to her—he admired her—but it couldn’t go beyond that.

He shoved the sensation down and molded his hands to the curves of her hips. Before the night was through, he would know her entire body. But his favorite part of her was her hips. Her hips—the way they swayed when she moved—made his palms itch. After fighting a raging hard-on as she’d placed his hands on her hips and led him across the club, imaginings had flooded his mind. Of the way she’d move while dancing, running alongside him and Maximum in the mornings or making love.

“I want you in my bed.”

“Okay.” She writhed between his body and the wall. She raised a leg, brushing the inside of his.

“I’m not going to make it that far without a taste of you.” He slid the tip of his tongue across the crease of her lips. She opened for him. He explored her mouth, her tongue glided against his. Desire breezed across his skin, warm and smooth like melted candle wax.

The richness of the wine and dinner she’d had mixed with her natural honey flavor and burst into his mouth. He hardened more. His heart stumbled.

Kieralyn flexed her hands against him. Her scent intensified as her blood pulsed faster through her veins.

Ian eased his hands over her body and began slipping her blouse buttons free. Each inch of open fabric revealed more skin for his exploration. Skin that shimmered with gooseflesh beneath his touch. He tugged the blouse from the waist of her skirt, slipped it off her shoulders and allowed it to flutter to the floor.

He cupped her breasts and grinned. “I was right about the lace.”

“No need to be smug now.” She pulled her hands away and reached for her skirt. He grabbed her hands and placed them on his shoulders.

“I will undress you.” He kissed a path from her collar bone down to the valley between her breasts. “I’m going to taste you while I do it.”

He cupped her breasts. Tweaked her nipples through her bra and smiled when they puckered and hardened. "I do love lace. The sheer thought of the soft coarseness of the fabric sliding against the creamy smoothness of your skin is arousing. Feeling it for myself is an unimaginable pleasure."

Her legs trembled between his. She gripped tight to him for balance. "Hurry up."

Smiling at his power over her, he eased a hand behind her and popped her bra free. Her large breasts dipped and swayed as he pulled the scrap of lace away. "There's not going to be anything hurried about this."

Drawing on the control he'd learned in tactical and martial arts training, he slowed his breathing. He was going to savor every second he had with Kieralyn.

Her hands slid over his chest and stomach. Her moan, as she dug the tips of her nails lightly into his skin, made the time he spent lifting weights and running worth it.

He cupped her breasts, molded them in his hands and memorized their weight. Rolling her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, he caressed her with his mouth. He feasted on her skin until she writhed before him as her broken pants serenaded him.

He tasted every inch of skin he could reach, working his way down until he knelt before her.

She braced her hands on his shoulders. Her body arched toward his mouth, her breasts into his hands. Her hips rolled forward as if seeking immediate satisfaction. "Can't we have a quickie on the table?"

He smiled against her belly button as he grazed his hands down her silk-encased legs. She wanted control, but he wasn't giving it up just yet. "It would be over quickly."

"Exactly."

He lowered the zipper on the side of her skirt and pushed the fabric down her legs. Nibbling at the satiny skin above her lace panties, his tongue skimmed over a slight pucker of skin, long and slim, just over her hip bone. He tilted his head and explored the skin more thoroughly. "How'd you get the scar?"

"I fell off of a roof when I was ten."

So she'd always been a bit adventurous. Interesting. "Why were you on the roof?"

"Long story."

She shifted a leg, bumping his shoulder. The move was just enough to create the subtlest of breezes that had a fresh wave of her essence wafting toward him. His mouth watered. His skin tingled. His cock jerked.

He reached for the sides of her panties to slide them down. His fingers swept up and over garters and then tangled in thin strings. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he wished he could see. "Sweet hell. Panties that tie. And who knew women still wore garters."

"They're practical. If I snag my hose, I only have to change one stocking."

He traced the top of a stocking with his tongue. Dipped inside the edge as he reached the inside of her thigh. "I like practical."

She gasped. Her leg fell farther to the side. “They’re less constricting and breathe better than full hose.”

He’d swear his eyes rolled back in his head. His throat closed up, making him struggle for a breath. “You’re going to kill me.”

“If you don’t hurry up, I might.” She squirmed again, spreading her legs even more.

She was tempting. So tempting. He bit hard into his lower lip. Then he angled his head and pulled one of the tie strings of her panties into his mouth. Tugging gently, the lace fell loose.

Yeah, her underwear was practical.

For sex.

Widening his stance, he released the strings at her other hip. She stood before him, leaning her upper body against his kitchen wall with her legs spread. Only a garter belt, stockings and high heels remained.

Her long hair was mussed from his hands. Her skin was warmed, likely flushed, with sexual excitement. The musky scent of arousal flooded his senses.

Screw sight. A man didn’t have to see to appreciate the picture she presented. Her smell, her heat and the tiny moans escaping her lips were more erotic than any vision.

She rolled her hips. Her crotch hovered just in front of his face—a beacon welcoming him home. Her heart raced in time with his.

“Ian, please.” Her plea rushed out on a strangled breath.

He traced the edges of her garter belt. His fingers trembled as his desire to hurry battled with his need to go slow. To draw out her pleasure. To push her senses, and his, to new limits. To savor every sensation and new erotic discovery waiting to be awakened.

Another bumpy patch of skin brushed his hand. “What’s this scar?”

“Car crash in college. Lana was nearly killed.”

They had faced a lot together. Ian hoped they could survive this too.

He flattened his hands on her stomach and slid his palms down. His thumbs brushed her bikini line and extended out to glide over her perfectly smooth skin, free of hair. Waxed or lasered? Not shaven or there would be small bumps.

Tremors quaked through his entire body. He licked his lips as he used his hands to spread her shaking legs. Her hands flexed on his shoulders. He rubbed his nose against her, inches away from his ultimate goal.

Her knees buckled.

He slid his hands around, cupped her ass, and tilted her pelvis forward. He moved in closer. “Lift a leg over my shoulder.”

She did as he said. The sweet scent of her desire assaulted him. A rumble rose in his throat. He flicked his tongue out and swiped it over her clit.

She bucked forward. Warm moisture teased his tongue. They gasped.

Her sex was swollen and hard against his tongue. The driving beat of her heart spiked his blood pressure. The intensity of Kieralyn's arousal, her lack of inhibitions and her almost volatile reactions amplified his desire.

He blew a warm breath. Grinning at the idea of undermining her control so thoroughly, he gripped her tighter and held her still. Inhaling, he moved deeper into her space. He slowly licked his way along the length of her wet, swollen lips. Easing his way back up, he blew another warm breath over her.

She grabbed the sides of his head. An instant later, her hands curled into quivering fists on his—thankfully—shaved head. She'd have ripped any hair he had out.

She jerked forward. He flicked his tongue over her clit again and again in a rapid succession. She sank down on the wall, positioning herself more intimately against his face.

He opened his mouth and nipped her gently before easing the sting with a kiss.

“Taaan.”

“Kieralyn,” he whispered against her weeping sex. He would always remember the thrilling memory of her cradled against his mouth, dripping honey-thick nectar and begging him for completion.

“I...you...pleeease.” She teetered on the ledge. Damn if he wasn't going to enjoy pushing her over it.

Embracing the control she'd handed over to him, he gripped her thighs and rhythmically squeezed the toned muscles while he assaulted her sex with his mouth. Impaling her with his tongue, he showed her exactly what he wanted to do once he got her to the bed.

She pulsed against him. Her inner walls squeezing and releasing as an orgasm rocked through her. His heart raced with hers. Heat swept across them. He spread his legs wider to ease the still-building pressure on his cock.

As her body relaxed, melting languidly so her weight was supported by the wall and his shoulder, still beneath her leg, he licked and sucked at her.

He drained every last drop of her essence into himself.

He wasn't sure he could let her go.



## Chapter Five

Kieralyn braced herself against the wall and looked down at Ian on his knees before her. He raised his head, his eyes locked with hers as if he could see her. As if he could read the secrets imprinted on her soul. As if he alone would save her from the darkness lurking in her mind.

She swallowed. A tear slid past the corner of her eye. *What have I done?*

“Kieralyn?” He lifted her leg from his shoulder and set her foot on the floor. Sliding his hands up her legs, he stood and looked down at her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” She shook her head and swiped away the tear. She never cried. She’d be damned if she did it in front of him. Suffusing her voice with suggestion, she ran her fingers down the middle of his dress shirt. “How could I not be after that?”

Ian tilted his head. His gaze darkened and his nostrils flared. “Kieralyn.”

“Ian, don’t tell me that you’re not going to finish what you started?” The woman hiding inside of her craving to be valued and seen as sexy by a man had awoken beneath Ian’s touch.

“You aren’t finished?”

“No, Ian.” Whatever the cost, she was going to know more of the pleasure he had to offer. Looking into his eyes, curious if they would reflect his emotions like a seeing person’s, she worked loose the belt buckle at his waist. “I am not finished.”

His throat bobbed in a swallow. The brandy coloring of his eyes intensified and resembled the sky just before the final rays of the sun slid over the horizon. The seduction of secrets lurked in the darkness.

“Good.” He grabbed her waist and hoisted her up. “You’re in for a ride.”

“Bring it on.” As she locked her ankles behind his back, pressed her body close to him and buried her face at his neck she realized she was ready for anything he tossed her way. His warmth and strength seeped into her as he carried her from the kitchen. “But this time, I get to undress you.”

He eased his hold slightly. She slid down his body so that his erection brushed her sex with each step. The satiation she’d felt after her last orgasm faded. Hunger gnawed at her gut, but it was a hunger for Ian.

“We’ll see how things turn out.”

She wiggled her hips and smiled to herself. She traced the scar along his jaw with the tip of her tongue. She lightly bit his earlobe and blew a warm, open-mouthed breath over his ear. “I like things hard.”

“I think I can oblige.”

“So I feel,” she whispered against his ear. “But I’m thinking I may need to test just how hard for myself.”

“Ha.” He trembled beneath her and kicked a door open. “How do you propose to do that?”

She swiped her tongue along the rim of his ear. “With my mouth.”

He stumbled, but tightened his grip. “Tempting, but not this time.”

She sighed and continued nibbling on his neck. Enjoying the way his dick jerked against her with each bite. She’d work on him. He’d tasted her. She deserved her shot. “Can we at least turn on the lights? I like to see you.”

“Really?” He stiffened beneath her—coiled as if waiting for an attack.

“Yeah.” She leaned back a bit and studied him. “Do you think you’re unattractive, Ian?”

“I really wouldn’t know.”

“Turn on the lights.” She would dispel his suspicions before the night was through.

“Fine.” He moved back to the door and reached out to flip on the light.

Dim lighting from a wall sconce in each corner revealed a warm, tidy room decorated in varying shades of brown, and a wall dominated by windows gave the room an open airiness she hadn’t expected. Vibrant blue sheets with a satiny sheen to them peeked out at the top of the comforter. Fluffy pillows with matching cases called to her.

She’d carefully chosen the colors in her apartment so that each room struck a different mood within her. Had Ian participated in the décor of his home so that he would somehow feel on an intrinsic level a certain mood? Or had he turned all choices over to a decorator? “I like your room. It suits you.”

“It’s a place to sleep.” He kicked the door closed and turned toward the bed.

“And have your way with willing women.”

“Only you.”

He couldn’t mean that she was the first woman to be in his room. His bed. His prowess at undressing her, at touching her, proved that he had plenty of practice with women. The evidence of his arousal pressing insistently against her crotch...well, a woman would be insane to not want a piece of him. “Why don’t you get on with it?”

As if proving to her again that he didn’t like to hurry, he slid her down his body until her feet touched the floor. “You have someplace to be?”

She tugged his shirt from the waist of his pants and quickly worked the buttons free. Slipping her hands inside the open shirt and flattening her palms against the hard ridges of his pecs, she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and reveled at the touch of him. Maybe there was something to be said for taking things slowly. “Not anymore.”

“I see.” He opened the buttons at his wrists before reaching out and sliding a finger from the hollow of her throat down between her breasts.

Her heart lurched when he circled her left nipple. Determined to repay him for every moment of torment, however pleasurable it had been, she tugged his shirt over his shoulders and down his arms. Like she'd molded clay as a child in school, she slid her hands over his torso. Her thumbs dipped into the swells and valleys of ridged muscles that he'd hidden beneath his shirt.

"How do you stay in this kind of shape?" She'd known he was built. He couldn't hide his width. But damn. Spreading her hands over him and up to his shoulders, she memorized the image of her arms extended up so her hands were level with her ears and spread almost twice the width of her own shoulders.

"Weights and a treadmill in the next room." He circled her nipples with his thumbs. "Or run on the beach."

"I like to swim." Leaning into him, she rubbed her nose along an invisible line connecting his nipples.

"A good choice."

"I know this private spot where I can be completely alone." The redolence of his cologne, sweet and tangy, seeped into her. Her eyes drifted closed as she exhaled slowly.

"You'll have to take me there. We could...swim...together."

"I'd like that. I like your eyes when the light strikes them." Kieralyn rolled her head and pressed a kiss to his chest. The evocative spice of Ian reached deep into her soul. Tantalized her with promises of security. Safety. The peace to be herself with him. She eased back and shook her head to banish the overemotional sentiments invading her.

She released the buckle of his belt and whipped the strip of leather from the loops. The end flicked her hip a moment before she dropped the belt to the floor. The sting of pain reminded her of the boundaries she'd always insisted on. And that they were more important than ever with Ian.

She'd done casual sex before. Raw, basic sex was her preference. This should be no different. This *would* be no different.

She opened his pants and shoved them over his narrow hips. He toed off his shoes and socks and stepped free of his pants, kicking them all aside. The sight of him in nothing but tight-fitting, gray striped boxer briefs with the head of his erection poking over the top of the waistband was a punch to the gut.

"You're absolutely stunning, Ian."

Opening and closing her mouth, not certain what else to say, she splayed her hands across his stomach. Every man she'd ever been with, regardless of how in shape they were, had always had a pouch of fat hidden somewhere. Not Ian. Every inch of him was sculpted to perfection and aside from the narrow trail of dark hair leading into his waistband, his skin was completely smooth.

Kieralyn stepped closer and slid her hands into the waistband of his underwear. As badly as she wanted to go fast, she wanted more to enjoy the feel of the man before her and she would take full advantage of being quite a bit shorter than he was. She eased her hands around him and cupped his ass. Curling her fingers so her nails brushed the backside of his balls, she ran her nails up to his lower back.

He flinched and gasped, but didn't try to rush or stop her. Her pussy clenched and swelled in anticipation.

As if he were a pole and a sexy track of music played in her head, Kieralyn moved closer and straddled him. Bending her knees, she eased her body down his, rubbing her breasts over his smooth skin. She ground against his cock and slid a hand around to cup him. He jerked against her. She swiped his exposed tip with the pad of her thumb.

Moisture dripped down her thigh. His pre-come slickened her fingers.

"Damn, woman. You're going to kill me." He pushed his underwear off, bent at the waist, and lifted her in his arms.

She grinned when his arms trembled beneath her. Her touch had been powerful enough to make him quiver. To turn him on to the point that he was ready to bust. "I haven't done anything yet."

"You've done plenty." Ian carried her to the side of his bed and laid her gently on top of the comforter. "But I'm going to do more."

Scooting back to the pillows that smelled of him, she reclined and watched him crawl across the bed to her. He was big, both length and girth. Her womb clenched at the idea of him sliding into her. He would easily fill her up.

Since stepping out of the car, he'd never missed a step. He hadn't fumbled in the slightest when driving her arousal higher and claiming her body against the kitchen wall. How did he do that? "Bring your best."

He tilted his head and laughed, low and seductive. In a flash, he grabbed her ankles, yanked her down to a supine position, and straddled her with his knees by her hips and his hands by her head. Her heart slammed violently against her ribs. Aggression darkened his gaze. It excited her to know that he was tightly wound. It gave her power and made her feel in control. She'd pushed him here. Even submitting, letting him be the driver, she aroused him as much as he aroused her.

She sighed and sank deeper into the bed. "You can't scare me."

"Who said I wanted to scare you?" He bent his elbows, lowered until his mouth was just at her ear. "I only want to enjoy you. To see you enjoy yourself."

"I'm not complaining so far."

He slid the tip of his tongue around the rim of her ear. Shivers skittered down her spine faster than when she listened to the lead singer of Nickelback crooning about his dreams and missing the woman he loved.

"Ah, but you still need to relax." He nipped her ear, lowered his hips and rubbed his cock against her. "Let go of that control you're so determined to hold tight to."

He couldn't know about her need for control. Lucky guess.

She popped her hips off the bed, keeping the contact when he would have pulled away. “Why don’t you give up control?”

He rubbed his smoothly shaved face along her neck. “Where’s the fun in that?”

She didn’t like hairy men or the abrasion of an unshaved face, but damn if she didn’t want to feel his five o’clock shadow. How perverse.

*Fun indeed.* She lifted her hands from the bed and eased them along his chest. She rolled his nipples between her fingers, wanting them to harden. Stand on end.

Ian sat up and mirrored her move. He alternately pinched and rolled her nipples between his remarkably smooth fingers. His pinches sent slight pain tripping through her, kindling the fires of hunger deep in her belly. Her nipples saluted him. His saluted her.

He shifted so his knees were between hers. She immediately lifted her hips, rubbed herself up and down the length of his thick cock. There was so much of him. “Ian, come on already.”

“Soon.” He leaned over her and reached for the nightstand drawer. He grabbed a condom and tossed it on the bed beside her hip.

She grabbed the foil wrapper and ripped it open. She’d always wanted to roll a condom on a man using her mouth, but she’d never been with a lover that made her feel bold enough. Ian did, but now, this time, she more desperately wanted to feel him inside her.

Slipping her hand between them, taking his pulsing erection in her hand, she grinned. Her stomach fluttered in anticipation. “Very soon.”

She sheathed him, but rather than pull back or quickly position him for a quick thrust, which she craved, she held him and absorbed his warmth. Squeezing gently, she glided her hand along his length to the tip and then back to the base. Tension coiled in him. His pupils dilated. His nostrils flared.

Digging her head into the pillow, electrified by the leashed power in her palm, she slid up and down him again. He cupped her breasts in his hands and squeezed. A guttural moan rumbled up from his throat. “Kieralyn.”

“You’re so big.” Her inner walls pulsed. Her pussy swelled painfully. Tension gripped the base of her spine. Her head buzzed. She needed relief. A release that only Ian could give her. “Powerful.”

She positioned him at her aching entrance and grabbed his head to guide his mouth to hers. He was kissing her before she’d finished her maneuver.

He plunged his tongue into her mouth in the same instant he thrust into her throbbing core. She dug her head into the pillows, writhed beneath him in an attempt to minimize the sensations assaulting her.

He pulled back, almost completely withdrawing before driving home again. His tongue mimicked the action. She couldn’t catch a breath. Euphoria wrapped around her, heating her blood to boiling. He was going to cause her to combust.

He repeatedly drew back and thrust home. Slow, then fast. Fast, then slow. The ridges and bulging veins of his erection teased her. His coarse hair tickled her clit and drove her higher and closer to orgasm.

He worshiped her body with his hands while expertly tormenting her with his confounding control. Every second, every thrust and every withdrawal built her arousal.

Ravenous, she sucked his tongue into her mouth and latched her feet tight around his back. She curled her hips up and forward and impaled herself on him, unwilling to let him withdraw again.

Ian groaned and pushed deeper than she'd thought he could possibly go. Her inner walls convulsed, grasped at him. She jerked against him in tiny thrusts. Stars danced at the edges of her suddenly blurred vision.

Battling for breath and coated in sweat, they indulged in the raging need for completion. Greedy, she milked every second of the orgasm until he collapsed against her.

She bit her bottom lip and steadied her breathing. "That was better than B.O.B."

"Excuse me?" Ian pushed up on his elbows and moved slightly away from her. "You're comparing me to a Bob? Do you have a checklist for each man you have sex with?"

"You're jealous." She grinned.

"Apparently I have nothing to be jealous of." He dropped to the bed beside her and pulled her against him. "But no more talk of Bob in my bed."

"Fine. Keep up the good work and I won't need to recharge my batteries for awhile."

Ian busted out laughing and hugged her close. "Oh. B.O.B."

Her chest constricted. She'd screwed up. Not on the case, but with Ian. He'd gotten too close and damn it, his pleasure pleased her. He made her want to please him in and out of bed on a regular basis.

*Shit.* She'd forgotten for a moment that he was off limits.

Kieralyn woke in darkness that was relieved only by the pale moonlight slanting through the wooden blinds. Ian's considerable weight pinned her to the firm mattress. He'd draped his arm and leg over her. His hand cupped her breast. His dick, semi-hard even in sleep, pressed against her hip. A garter snap dug into her thigh beneath his.

Looking for the clock, she turned her head and nearly brushed her nose against his. Sliding to the opposite side of the pillow, she raised up to check the time.

*Four a.m. Ugh.*

Intimacy surrounded her. The lingering scent of their sex. The press of his body cradling hers. The flow of his breath sweeping across her neck and face. Sex she did. Not often enough if her reactions to Ian's touches were any indication, but she wasn't a stranger to it. Falling asleep in a man's bed was

something she never did. It opened her up to vulnerability. Vulnerability robbed her of control. Much like Ian had with sex.

*Damn it. I should never have gotten involved with him. I can't deal with a relationship right now. No matter how amazing the man is.*

Kieralyn slid her legs to the edge of the bed, easing out from under his. With a sigh of relief that she didn't wake him, she lifted his arm and rolled away to stand beside the bed. She watched him closely, judging his breathing while holding her own breath.

*Don't wake up. Please, please don't wake up.*

He squirmed, settling his head deeper into the pillow. His breathing remained slow and steady. The air conditioner kicked on. A blast of cold air hit her skin. Wrapping her arms around herself, she edged to the end of the bed where she knelt and felt around for something to wear. She found his shirt and slipped it on.

Clutching the shirt closed at her breasts, the soft fabric whispering across her legs almost to her knees, she headed toward the doorway. She smelled him on the shirt. The image of his olive-skinned, meticulously toned body peeking at her as she'd parted the gray material jumped to the forefront of her mind with the rest of the night flying in behind it.

She kicked the heel of her shoe with a stocking-clad toe and stumbled. Stifling a curse, she tried to remember when she'd taken the shoes off, but clear recall was lost in the haze of killer sex.

A few steps away, she stopped and turned back toward the bed. Ian sprawled across the mattress and tangled sheets. The slightly puckered skin rimming his eyes and along his jaw made her think of life's ugliness. She'd dealt with plenty that had left her messed up inside. He'd apparently dealt with more physical traumas, but somehow he didn't seem to mind. He seemed stronger for it.

His face, softened in sleep, reminded her of his generous spirit. The way he'd helped her and how he'd made her pleasure his primary focus. The sight of his lips, plump and pressed together, reawaked her desire.

He was as commanding in sleep as he was awake. As captivating. Alluring.

Pain gripped her chest. Her lungs constricted, robbing her of air. Tremors shook her body.

*Dangerously alluring.* Chewing her lip, she left the room.

Space. She needed space to think. To breathe. To forget how alive she'd felt in his arms.

Stepping into the hallway, she almost slipped on the tile floor. Regaining her footing, she headed through the kitchen and went into the garage. She kept a bag in her car with exercise clothes and a spare work outfit for emergencies. Ian's shirt was comfortable, but walking around his home with it and her stockings on crossed an intimacy line she wasn't ready for.

Using the car's interior light, Kieralyn changed her stockings and garter for yoga pants and Ian's shirt for a sports top. The control she'd given over shifted back to her.

Looking between the car and the open kitchen door, she considered collecting her stuff and leaving. She didn't typically stick around for *the morning after*. Doing so with Ian somehow felt monumental—uncomfortably so. But he'd put her on the path of the jazz club. He had an inside track to El Dogo, even if it was insight into who the man had once been. He'd listened to her when no one else would. She headed back into the kitchen.

The twinkling stars shining in through the glass door caught her attention. Living in the heart of the city, she missed seeing the stars at their full power. She sat her stuff on the table, walked past a snoring Maximum and eased open the door. The humidity of the night air, though slightly oppressive, was a welcome change to the cool interior of the house. She loved fresh air.

Sitting in one of the padded patio chairs and staring up to the sky, she recalled with clarity the sensations her body had felt beneath Ian's touch. With tender precision he'd overwhelmed her emotions, aroused every sense and awakened a long dormant desire to belong to a single person. The reverence in his attention awoke fantasies of intimacy and dragged them to the surface.

Ian was nothing like past lovers and boyfriends. His touch was filled with light and admiration rather than darkness and hatred. Still, he made her lose control. She needed her control.

Intimacy was unacceptable. Intimacy on an emotional level led to pain and disappointment. Promises made were always broken. No one ever cared as deeply as they claimed.

She couldn't belong to anyone. Wouldn't. However great Ian seemed now, as soon as things moved to a serious level, he would change.

She stood. "I shouldn't be here."

"It's a good enough place for us." An unfamiliar voice came from just behind her.

She spun around and found herself facing two men wearing plastic masks. Her heart pounded. Her instincts and training kicked into gear.

Her gun was in her bag on Ian's kitchen table, but at least she'd put on clothes that allowed her the freedom to move.

"Good enough for what?" How had they gotten so close without her sensing them? Right, her mind had been caught up on Ian. Another reason to avoid him.

She sized up the men.

"To take you with us."

Man A. Alpha. Physical. Shaved head. Six foot. Two hundred and twenty pounds, give or take a few. A stiff set to his shoulders and popping knuckles working in and out of fists identified him as the more violent of the two.

"To have some fun."

Man B. Beta. Weaker, though not wimpy. Six foot two. Hundred and eighty pounds tops. Brown hair fell loosely over the top edge of the mask. The easier of the two to take down.



"I'm not going anywhere with you." She edged around the table, putting some distance between them.

Alpha stepped forward. Menace pulsed in the surrounding air. She scanned the area, calculated where the men stood and their sizes and considered her options. A closed door, furniture and approximately fifty feet stood between her and her weapon. She was good at hand-to-hand, but she had yet to win a sparring match with her partners when they teamed up on her.

She could turn and run, hoping like hell she managed to outrun them while barefoot. Not that she had anyplace to run to. Or she could scream like a banshee, which should wake Ian. He could set Maximum on them or call the cops. Damn it, no. She was a trained FBI agent. She knew how to protect herself, and screaming for help from a man who would only get hurt was no way to prove herself. This was up to her to solve. No one was coming to her rescue. She didn't need them to. She would just have to take the men out one at a time.

"What could you want with me?"

"Answers. Silence. Whichever comes first."

"Who sent you here? What are you going to do to me?"

"Who is not your concern." Alpha stepped closer. "Unless you're telling us who you are and what you're up to."

"Don't worry." Beta stayed still, looking ready to dive over the table to get her. "You'll have company in your new hell."

"You know, I've visited Hell. It's not a place I care to see again." She gripped the edge of the table. The wrought iron dug into her palms. "You, on the other hand, can tell me if it's changed any."

Kieralyn shoved the table at Beta. He went down with a grunt beneath the force of the clanking iron. Alpha advanced. She stood her ground, ready to deliver an upward jab to his nose as soon as he was close enough. Two more steps and she could make her move. One more. She narrowed her eyes and pushed her arm out from her side.

Inches from connection, Alpha grabbed her wrist. He yanked her to him, spinning her at the last second so her back was pressed to him. His right arm wrapped around her throat. His left hand held her right fist near her face.

She panted and fought against him. How had she misjudged the distance? *Shit.*

"Bitch." Beta shoved the table off him with a clang and got up. "You will pay for that."

*Shit. Shit.*

"Two men against one woman doesn't seem like a fair fight." *Ian!* "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

She struggled harder against Alpha's hold. Making use of his hold on her, she curled her knees toward her chest, lifting her feet off the ground. She had to take them down before Ian got hurt. She kicked out with all the power she had. Alpha held firm.

Damn it! Regardless of how easily Ian had seemed to move through the earlier crowds, he didn't stand a chance in a fight against two men. Hell, even Beta could take him.

Alpha turned toward the house, affording Kieralyn a view of Ian. Two steps onto the patio, dressed in only his boxer briefs with his hands hanging loosely by his sides, she thought she might just have been wrong.

Electrical pulses of energy vibrated around him. His eyes pointed toward the ground. He cocked his head to the side like he had in the lab when focusing on sounds. Could he process the scene well enough to help?

"Stop him," Alpha snapped at Beta. Beta moved in on Ian.

Kieralyn fought against Alpha. If they were closer, she could raise her legs again and kick Beta now that he'd moved positions. That would help Ian, but they were still just out of reach.

Ian stood stock still. Waiting. Beta closed the remaining distance. He swung his fist toward Ian's face. Ian raised his hand, blocking the hit. He closed his hand over Beta's fist, and squeezed until Beta's knuckles cracked.

Beta cried out. Ian released his hand. Bending his arm, Ian swung his arm in front of him. His elbow slammed into Beta's face. More bone cracked. Blood gushed from his nose.

Ian stepped back from Beta. "You want more?"

Alpha's grip loosened.

Kieralyn grabbed on to his arm, leaned back into him, and then flung her body forward. Alpha flew over her. His head slammed into the tile of the patio. He didn't move.

Beta turned to run.

"Oh, no you don't." Ian leapt forward and grabbed his shirt in a left-handed grip.

Beta spun around, with his fist primed to strike. Ian raised his right fist and delivered a solid uppercut to the underside of Beta's jaw. Teeth clacked against teeth. Beta slumped into unconsciousness. Ian released his grip and let him fall to the ground like a lump of potatoes.

He turned to her, his head cocked again. He had to hear the pounding of her heart. Hell, she could hear it. How had he managed to fight off an attacker so easily? He hadn't stumbled or misjudged a single punch.

She had.

Ian stepped around the men sprawled on the ground and advanced on her. The moonlight hit his eyes, lighting them as eerily as the control panel in his lab had. Rather than strike fear in her, it aroused her. Comforted her.

Confidence and power oozed from him with each step closer. The term "animal magnetism" took on a whole new definition when applied to Ian.

"Are you all right?" He framed her face and ran his hands over her body.

Her nipples hardened. Her skin heated. This was why she'd needed space. He distracted her, and she couldn't afford distractions. She wanted to indulge in him. Here. Now. Despite the two men who'd been sent after her lying on the ground.

"I'm fine." She grabbed his hands to stop his exploration of her body. "We need to call my unit. Have these assholes picked up and questioned."

"What if we didn't call your team just yet?"

"Excuse me?" She pulled back and stared at him, searching his face for any hints to his thoughts. He was asking her not to call her team to pick up the men responsible for Lana's disappearance. At the very least they were knowledgeable. If she called in her team they would have to give her credit and see the validity in her theory. "These bastards planned to take me to wherever the other women are being held."

"They told you that?"

"Not outright." Maybe she'd wanted to believe that was their plan. Maybe she'd missed something or read more into their attack than she should have. She didn't think so.

"Do you trust me?"

She scrunched her brows. Trust him? "With what?"

"I guess an all-encompassing trust is too much to ask for." He stepped away and headed toward the sliding glass door. "So how about as far as it relates to this situation and finding out more information?"

"What have you got in mind?" She couldn't have hurt his feelings. They didn't know each other well enough.

"I've been working on something." Without waiting for her to agree one way or the other, he headed through the kitchen toward the garage. On the way, he grabbed a phone from a table and punched in some numbers. "Yes," he spoke into the phone. "I need to report an attempted break in."

He'd called 911, but wouldn't call her team? At least her team could question the men to see who'd sent them. How they'd found her at Ian's. She tripped a little. She'd have to admit to her team that she'd slept with Ian. They'd give her grief for crossing lines of propriety on a case, or assume that she'd used sex as a tool. It was the kind of thing they would applaud if she were a guy, but as a woman ... Well, it wouldn't compute for them.

Ian walked to the garage as he rattled off his address and briefed the 911 operator on the basics of what had happened.

"Thank you." He hung up the phone and moved to a set of clear drawers on top of one of the cabinets. "Police are on the way."

"What are you doing? I haven't agreed to do things your way." He hadn't waited for her to agree to whatever his plan was, so why didn't it piss her off that he was taking over the control?

He moved to another cabinet holding two strings that looked like little more than silver hairs between his fingers. He rummaged around for a second. "Shit. Where'd he set it?"

She walked to him. "What are you looking for?"

"An aerosol can. Small. Maybe five inches tall. Narrow like a...a votive candle."

She looked around and spotted the can a few feet away on a different counter. *And he calls my sight a handicap.* "Found it."

"Grab it and come with me." He headed back to the patio and squatted beside Alpha. "Raise his shirt and spray a thin coating of the aerosol down the center of his chest."

Apparently, she did trust him because even though he irked her, even though she didn't like doing things he could easily handle if he was sighted, she wasn't fighting his orders. "What are we doing? What are those hairs?"

"It's a new listening device I've been working on."

She pulled the man's shirt up and did as Ian said. "Done."

He handed her one of the hairs. "Smooth it over the adhesive. You only have a minute before the adhesive dries and we have to start over."

"How can this be a listening device?"

"Because I'm good. It's completely undetectable to scans, can be tracked any place there's a cell signal, and once the adhesive dries you don't know that you're wearing one."

She wanted to ask how he'd developed it. How he'd built something so fragile and apparently high tech without sight. How he'd learned to use the technology he had, and even how to fight like he did. But whatever he was planning took precedence.

He hadn't steered her wrong yet, and though she was a little concerned that his father was somehow involved in the case, neither could she hold it against him since she wasn't exactly neutral.

She did as he said and then checked to make sure the adhesive was dry before pulling Alpha's shirt back down. Wailing sirens grew closer. "Done."

"Now the next one." He moved to the other man's side. "Hurry. The cops are going to be here in less than two minutes."

She repeated the process on Beta quickly. Tires squealed in his driveway out front just as she pulled the man's shirt down. "Done."

Ian stood. "Take the can in the house and put it under the kitchen sink."

## Chapter Six

Ian resisted the urge to shelter Kieralyn as they dealt with the cops. Her pounding heart rate slowed as she stood, telling the officers how she'd come out for some night air and had been taken by surprise by the men. Ian added details from his side as they were asked for.

Neither he nor Kieralyn offered more information than was requested and the police quickly loaded the men in the back of their cruiser and drove away. Keeping the truth of who she was, what she was and what she was working on from the police seemed like a natural thing for Kieralyn. She hadn't stumbled over her answers once.

"Why aren't we including my team?" Kieralyn followed him into the house. "What game are you playing?"

He walked to his bedroom and went to the closet for a fresh change of clothes. Stepping out of his slacks and underwear, he listened to her behind him. She didn't even try to hide the fact that she was watching him change.

"Calling in the cops gets those men away from the house long enough for us to get someplace else." He put the clothes in the laundry hamper, grabbed some clean underwear from a drawer and pulled a pair of jeans from a hanger.

"The wires will track their location and allow us to hear who they're talking to."

"Your agency doesn't have the right to do that kind of surveillance." She'd grabbed some tennis shoes from her car before joining him and the police. Her shields were back in place. The agent was back in control. "What are you doing with equipment that can do that?"

"Who do you think develops most of the listening devices you use in the FBI?"

"A team of scientists."

"Yeah. Me more often than not, with Dante's assistance." He pulled a V-neck T-shirt from a hanger and pulled it over his head.

"Your security guard?"

"He's more than that. We're still testing these. Why not test them with you to oversee the results?"

"This is about more than testing a new product. You're holding back the truth behind your interest in helping me with this case."

“My lover sneaks from my bed, most likely with intentions of running away while I sleep, but instead goes outside and has two men try to hurt her.” Her heart lurched when he called her *lover*. His hearing was a great tool at times. “And you think I don’t have an interest?”

He walked to her, wanting to pull her close and entice her back into his bed. “No one comes on my property under similar circumstances without me finding answers.”

“Then why didn’t you tell the cops about them going after me? Why make it sound like they’d only tried to break in? You could have kept them in a cage much longer.”

“The one who held you when I came outside followed us from the club.” He brushed a thumb along her cheekbone and cupped her face. “We lost him at my office when we got into your car, but obviously they’re well connected to have found you here.”

Which meant they’d tracked her and Ian and waited for an opportunity to take her. They’d gotten lucky when she’d gone outside.

“So calling in the cops keeps us from having to drop them somewhere. It gives us time to get away from here in case they come back, but where are you thinking we’re going to go?”

“We’ll go back to my lab. The surveillance I have there will alert us if anyone tries to come for us.” He took some socks from the dresser and sat on the bed to slip them on. “We can also monitor their movements.”

“And hear what they say to the cops.” Kieralyn went to his closet and pulled his tennis shoes out. “But what about my car? If we drive it they’ll see it if they check your parking lot, or are having it watched. Then they’ll know where we are.”

“We’ll hear what they say to the cops, but we’ll also find out who bails them out.” He smiled when she sat the shoes beside him. She was taking care of him again, almost instinctively. She didn’t have to ask what he needed, or when he needed something. She just saw to the task of getting it for him. On one hand, her help irked him as if she saw him as incapable of seeing to himself. On the other, it pleased him. Made it easy to imagine that she cared enough to want to help. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. What about the car?”

Her heart hammered as she straightened the covers on the bed. She couldn’t sit still. She needed to move, to feel like she was doing something. It had to irritate her that he held the control at the moment.

“I’ll call Dante. He’ll meet us someplace neutral and swap cars with us. Though if anyone is still watching the office they’ll see us go in no matter what. Grab your purse.” He could only counter so many possibilities. Then again, they could swap cars, park in the neighboring lot and go in through Maximum’s kennel on the back of the building. It would lower their chances of being seen. “Oh, and there’s an extra garage door opener in the drawer beside the fridge. Grab that, would you? I’ll get Maximum and meet you in the garage.”

“Hey, speaking of Maximum. Why didn’t he bark or make any racket when those men showed up?”

“He went deaf a couple of years ago. His sense of smell is going too.”

“You use a handicapped dog as your guide?”

“We’ve been together a long time. Besides, what he can’t hear, I can.”

She chuckled and slid her tongue over her teeth. “What you can’t see, he can.”

“Yes.” He moved into the living room and gently nudged Maximum’s foot with his own. “He’s never led me astray, and a missing sense or two doesn’t make me love him less. He’s as valuable today as the day I picked him from the litter.”

Just as his missing eyesight shouldn’t diminish him as a person in Kieralyn’s opinion, or anyone else’s. He’d long ago come to terms with the fact that someone would always see him as less of a man because of his sight.

“How sentimental of you.”

Maximum sat up and rubbed against his leg. He was ready to work. Ian strode toward the garage, Maximum and Kieralyn following. “Everyone has something that they’re sentimental about.”

“Don’t bet on it.” She pulled open the kitchen drawer and grabbed the remote. “Sentimentality is a wasted emotion.”

“You’re wrong.” He plucked up her bag and pile of clothes from the table and held them out to her before grabbing his cell phone. “Sentimentality is what’s driving you in your pursuit of this case.”

“My desire to save lives drives me.”

“That’s nothing more than a desire to make a difference. Emotions, motivations both personal and professional, are sentiments too. And in this case your loyalty to a friend is a driving sentiment for you.”

“You’re wrong about me.” She raised the garage door with the remote and got in the car. Once he had Maximum in the backseat and joined her, she shot out of the garage.

He wasn’t, but neither was he going to argue with her over it. She didn’t want to see herself as sentimental, or have anyone else perceive her that way. That was her business. But it made him curious to find out what had happened to make her that way.

He called Dante and arranged the car swap.

He had a high enough security clearance to run a background check on her and uncover every secret she wanted hidden. She would never know he’d done it. He would know the answers to all the questions circling in his mind. Beginning with her upbringing. But if he was going to know the answers, he would learn them over time as she volunteered them.

His guess was that something had happened in her childhood that had formed her into the disciplined, controlled woman he so enjoyed verbally sparring with. She struck him as someone who’d never been shown the true measure of joy. If she had, she’d blocked the memory.

She let herself go during foreplay and sex, which was amazing. He wanted to see her loosen up at other times.

Control and focus rightfully needed to rule when working a case. People's lives depended on her. Kieralyn didn't seem to stop working. Even when nothing was actively happening in her case, she withdrew into herself. Her long silences and occasional murmurs she made to herself said that she never stopped thinking about the women unknowingly relying on her for help.

"Sentimentality may work for you, Ian." Sadness coated her voice. Or maybe it was regret. "It's a luxury that I can't afford."

"It's a luxury that can fit into anyone's emotional budget if they deem it important. Like love or happiness. You just have to want it—be willing to recognize it when you find it." He leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. Her heart beat steady and slow, like a metronome ticked off the beat for a beginning musician. He'd never heard a more appealing rhythm.

"Easier said than done." She eased onto the highway, gunning the engine for more speed.

"No. It's a matter of knowing what you want from your life and not being afraid to go after it."

"I know what I want from life."

"Eighty hour work weeks and no real personal relationships? Ulcers and no close friends to call on when you have great news to share?"

"You presume to know so much about me." Her voice trembled with frustration. He'd hit a sore spot. "Do you psychoanalyze every woman you take to your bed?"

"I don't go to bed with many women, never take them to my own, but no." He laughed. "You, though, would make an interesting study."

"Like I'm some specimen to be dissected and discussed."

"I promise to only discuss you with you."

"Yeah, because I want to endlessly hear your perceptions about me."

Her bristly attitude excited him. He rolled his head toward her and inhaled deeply. "How about we discuss the way your scent turns me on? How it revives the sensory impressions of you standing against my kitchen wall? Or the way you felt beneath me in bed?"

Her heart kicked. Blood thrummed faster through her body, heating her up, heightening her scent. With the distraction of Kieralyn close, and aroused, he needed a new direction for his thoughts. Something to minimize the impact of her on his senses.

Kieralyn pulled into the parking lot where they were meeting Dante to swap cars. Grateful for his friend's desire to return quickly to bed, the swap went fast.

Settled into Dante's car, which was slightly more luxurious than Kieralyn's, Ian rolled his window down, leaned his head back and listened to the sounds of the early morning. Listening close, he heard the waves slapping the sandy beach. He would have liked to wake up to that sound with her at his side. To roll her beneath him and enjoy the feel of her body again. Or to pull her on top of him and give her complete control. She would thrive if he submitted to her. Hell, he'd let her tie him up if it turned her on.



Maybe if he did she would see that he was worthy of her trust. He preferred to be a unit during sex. To share completely in the pleasure of filling one another's desires.

One day he would discover the joy of transforming sex into making love. He'd come close with Kieralyn. Felt more for her than any other woman before, but he hadn't felt more *from* her. She'd held a part of herself back.

A light breeze caught Kieralyn's essence and carried it through the car. He gritted his teeth and pictured the way she moved. He could practically feel it.

"Why are we going to your lab tonight if these two are in prison? We could stay at my apartment until morning," Kieralyn said as she slid into the car. Her voice had grown strained. Tired. "It's going to take those two some time to get through booking and then get bail posted. The apartment's secure and I have a weapon."

"We could have stayed at my place too. But the perps will be talking to people, including each other, in the meantime." Ian sighed, suddenly desperate for sleep. He'd love to take her up on her offer. To slip into the oblivion of sleep, but it would have to wait. "We need to get to the lab to activate the listening devices. Otherwise, it doesn't do any good to have planted them."

"Does it record after that?"

"Yes. And I have an apartment attached to the lab. We can get some sleep after the listening devices are activated. If you're after security, what's more secure than the NSA compound?"

"Why do you have an apartment at work? Do you stay there often?"

"It depends on the case I'm working. A blind man walking alone in the middle of the night while he's half asleep makes an easy target." He stifled a yawn. "It's easier to crash at the lab when I work half the night."

"I would think after watching you fight off that man this evening that you wouldn't worry about stuff like that." A traffic light pinged, signaling a change in color. Kieralyn eased to a stop.

"The best self-defense is knowing how to minimize your risk of a fight."

"I'm curious about you, Ian."

"Ask your questions. I have nothing to hide."

"How did you learn to fight that way?" She rolled forward when the light pinged again. "When?"

"My dad was an Army Ranger. He thought my sister and I needed to know how to protect ourselves, so he taught us some moves." He wondered for a moment if he should tell her the full details of his training. The parts that revolved around his sight.

"And you remember those few moves well enough to fight that man without breaking a sweat?"

He smiled at the suspicion thickening her voice. Her questioning mind gave her a challenging attitude. It made her a pain, but it also made her more open to the possibilities. "It's not hot enough to break a sweat over such a minor altercation."

“Seriously, Ian. How’d you learn to fight like that?”

“Why does it matter?” Why did she want to know more about him when everything about her screamed anti-commitment?

“You fascinate me.”

Not what he wanted to hear, but he’d take it for now. “My dad and his unit would take me to the swamps when they weren’t on a mission. Essentially they took me through basic training obstacle courses, taught me tactical strategies and drilled me in hand-to-hand combat with some martial arts tossed in.”

“How old were you? What made them do all that with you?”

“I was twelve and getting my butt kicked in school.” A blind kid on the playground at recess made a much easier target than a trained blind man walking around town. Bullies often outgrew their tendencies after life knocked them back a time or two, which it was well known for doing.

“So what happened when you went back to school? Did you kick anyone’s ass?”

“Not for a while.” The feel of fists slamming into his face, a throbbing nose pumping blood and shooting burning shards of agony through his brain, his lip busting against his teeth and swelling instantly, snapped into his mind as clearly as the times he’d been bullied. “Have you ever seen a Great Dane puppy? They’re all feet and skinny, gangly body.”

She laughed as she pulled the car to a stop. “You’re telling me that was you?”

“Oh yeah. When I wasn’t hiding from the bullies, I was tripping over my own feet and crashing into walls.”

“You were clumsy? I find that very hard to believe.”

“The only thing I was missing from being a full-on reincarnation of a nerd was the pocket protector and thick-rimmed glasses.” The pens wouldn’t have done him any more good than the glasses.

“Then may I say that you grew up nice.” She cleared her throat. Her heart kicked. “Very nice.”

“Thank you.” Her admission that she appreciated his body filled a need that his adolescent heart had never had fulfilled. Still, admiring his body didn’t mean that she accepted his scars. “Eventually, the day came when I couldn’t avoid the bullies anymore. I was walking home one day and they ambushed me.”

“We’re here.” Kieralyn stopped the car and slid the gear shift into park.

“You parked where I told you?” Ian got out and let Maximum out of the back seat.

“Yes.”

Kieralyn locked the doors and they headed inside through Maximum’s kennel.

“So, what happened when they ambushed you? Is that when you used what your dad taught you?”

“Yeah.” Against his will, but it had forced him to test himself. To trust that he didn’t need to rely on people for the simple things in life. “One took Maximum’s harness and pulled him away from me. Two more moved in on me.”

Ian keyed in the code to let them into the lab. The locks reengaged with a swish when he closed the door behind them. “Long story short, I walked away with a couple of new bruises. One of them walked away with a broken jaw, another had a dislocated shoulder, and the one who pulled Maximum away left with a nasty bite in his leg.”

“Wow. Not bad for your first fight.”

“Yeah. Despite the victory, I can’t claim to have enjoyed myself.” He unhooked Maximum’s harness. “Give me a minute.”

He left Kieralyn in his lab and went to Dante’s desk for an extra desk chair. It would be more comfortable while they worked than the wooden guest chair.

“Why didn’t you enjoy your success?” she asked when he returned.

“I’d stooped to their level.” He flipped on the lights for Kieralyn, and pushed the chair over to the console. The buzzing of the fluorescent bulbs would irritate him while he was working, but she wasn’t familiar with the room’s layout. He’d deal with it. “I hadn’t been able to walk away.”

He pushed a button and turned on his favorite Pavarotti CD. Maximum padded over to his bed in the corner of the room and curled up to go back to sleep.

“You don’t always have a choice.” She sat her bags by the door and moved to his side. Her jaw creaked as she yawned. “Fighting is a necessity in some instances. Is this what you were listening to when I was here last time? Doesn’t it interrupt your work?”

“Pavarotti, and it depends. This and jazz engages the part of the brain I use for analysis and increases productivity. As for the fighting, I know that now. Hell, I knew it factually then, but to grasp all the nuances of fighting at twelve... Even the brightest kids would struggle with that.” He sat in his chair and brought up the program that would activate the listening devices.

“You had Maximum. Your dad and his unit taught you these lessons after you’d lost your sight.” She settled into the chair beside him. “Was your sight the reason you were being bullied?”

“I was an awkward kid pulling straight As with no effort. The eyesight only made me an easier target in their eyes, but they harassed me even before then.”

Cuing up the recording devices, the voices of the men from his patio poured clearly from the speakers.

“It’s not our fault.” A man with a smoky rasp to his voice whined. It sounded like he was pacing. Maybe limping. “That son of a bitch was fast.”

“Isaacs won’t see it that way,” said the South American from the bar. The one who had been holding Kieralyn and pretty much calling the shots. “He won’t care what we were up against. We were told to deliver her to him at the club. We failed.”

“She had help.”

“Help that’s landed our asses in this cage.”

“Big deal. Isaacs has cops on his payroll.” This was the one to count on for information. It would never occur to him that someone might be listening in or that he should be cautious what he said. Even in a cage with no one around but his cohort in crime.

“You still shouldn’t have called him.” The South American thought more clearly. He was more experienced. “He’s going to be pissed that he’s tied to us on this. Besides, we don’t know which cops he owns. Talking to the wrong one could land us in deeper shit.”

Keys jingled and scraped in a lock. Iron squeaked as a door opened. “Someone’s coming.”

Cop shoes smacked the floor, sucking slightly against the linoleum. A key slid into another lock. “You’re free to go.”

There was muttering and more talking as they went through the discharge process. As soon as the men stepped outside the front doors, night street sounds blended with the bar owner’s heartbeat through the mics.

“Boss.”

“Shut up, Sanders,” the bar owner snapped.

“Isn’t that the man from the first recording?” Kieralyn asked.

“Yeah. He’s also the club owner.” Ian waved her to a nearby computer. “Using Churchill 1952, key into that computer. Do a search for Isaacs and the club. Maybe you’ll find a paper trail to back up anything we hear.”

“Winston Churchill? And why 1952?”

“Yes. That’s the year he’s known for speaking at Chateau Laurier in Ottawa. ‘Withhold no sacrifice, grudge no toil, seek no sordid gain—’”

“‘Fear no foe’,” Kieralyn continued. “‘All will be well’.”

Ian raised his brows and smiled at her. She knew Churchill. She’d been a geek too. He wouldn’t have guessed it. He didn’t have many people he could talk to about history. Maybe Kieralyn would indulge him. Later.

“Let me get this straight.” The boss’s voice was hard with suppressed anger. “I tell you to follow the woman, to get answers, and you wind up in jail.”

“I followed them to a parking lot where they got into a car.” The South American man spoke. *Did these people never use names in a conversation?* “I text messaged Sanders to pick up their tail.”

“Once I saw where they went, I headed back for Horatio.” *Seriously? Horatio? It was one thing for a TV show character to have that name, but who tortured a kid for life by naming them Horatio?* Regardless, they didn’t seem to know who he was yet. Good. Kieralyn clicked away on the computer. “We were going to bring her to you.”

“As soon as she was alone, we approached her.” Humility softened Horatio’s voice. He wouldn’t completely submit to his boss, but neither would he blatantly disobey. He knew how to stay in his place. “We would have taken her—”

“But her lover came out.” Ian grinned at the idea of a grown man whining about getting his ass kicked by a blind man wearing nothing but boxers. The sad thing was that it hadn’t been hard. For hired muscle, the guys didn’t have many original moves. “They knocked us out.”

Kieralyn chuckled. “Wonder how he’d feel if he knew you were blind?”

“He’d ignore the knowledge. Currently, I think he’s aiming for sympathy.”

“I don’t think their boss has any. I know I don’t.”

Oh, but she was wrong. Not for these men, and she didn’t recognize it, but sympathy is what had her trying to help him get around. It’s what made her think she needed to protect him.

“And now, they’re both likely gone,” Isaacs snapped.

“We’ll go back and check his place,” Sanders offered. “We’ll find them. After he’s dead she can join the other women on their trip to Venezuela.”

“That’s right, boys,” Kieralyn muttered. “Run your mouths and give me proof.”

Ian echoed Kieralyn’s sentiment. Regardless of what she found on the computer, they could now tie the club and Isaacs to the attempt on Kieralyn. They were one step closer to proving the connection to the missing women. And his father. “You could call your team in now. You have enough for a warrant.”

“You’re right.” She tapped away on the keyboard. “But there’s more to learn before I do. I can’t be impulsive with this. I need to know where the women are, and we know based on the last recording that they won’t be moved until El Dogo gives the order.”

The fundamentals that had formed Ian had happened between his tenth and thirteenth birthdays. And in the lessons with his father and honorary uncles he’d learned more than how to fight. He’d learned to respect and appreciate life.

His father had shown him the importance of setting a level of moral expectations for himself and always living up to it. Again he struggled to believe that El Dogo was out to harm the missing women. Then again, maybe he was remembering incorrectly. His father had been a successful operative, which required him to be a good liar. Ian had to face the possibility that El Dogo was the real personality of the man he’d called father. He had to accept the chance that his father had spent his life putting on a show for the family.

“Then we’ll get you proof. And we’ll keep our ears open for news of El Dogo.”

Going along with Ian’s plan seemed to be paying off. Besides, her team wouldn’t appreciate her waking them up in the middle of the night to talk possibilities.

Energized by the excitement of having a new direction to go with her case, Kieralyn settled in to work. The keyboards and control panels were marked with Braille as well as the traditional letters and numbers. She hadn't thought of it before, but it explained how he commanded the equipment so easily.

Ian's computer sprang to life seconds after she entered his password. She too used Churchill as her password, though she placed the year at 1940. On June fourth in 1940 Churchill spoke about never surrendering. His words "we shall not flag or fail" had become her motto over the years. It drove her today more than ever before.

How odd was it though that they would use the same quote? Ian had admitted to being a bit of a geek in school. She had used books as an escape. The diversion she found in her studies kept her from thinking too much about when she might be moved again, what the new circumstances of charity handed out might be like, and who would she be reliant on for food and shelter.

Granted, most of the homes hadn't been too bad. It didn't take more than one to harden your skin and heart. To accept that charity was filling your belly rather than love. Books made no demands for gratitude. They didn't expect repayment for kindness, lay guilt trips, or prey on perceived weaknesses.

Books had been her escape and the main place she'd learned most of life's important lessons. She doubted Ian could say the same, but what did it say about them that in addition to an obvious attraction they also shared an appreciation for history? Churchill, to be more precise?

A window popped up on the computer screen. The owner of Jazz on the Rocks was Dorado Inc, a foreign corporation based in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. With Bureau restrictions, she would have just hit a dead end. The NSA—and Ian by extension—didn't have such restrictions. After a few mouse clicks, she had the computer searching for registered officers of the corporation. With the computer running the new searches and looking for information on the names she'd heard, she turned to watch Ian.

She hadn't fully believed he would get anything useful off the recording, but he had. And now less than twenty-four hours later he'd granted her access to his equipment without a thought to her security clearance. He'd gotten her closer to solving the case, freeing the women, than she'd thought possible. Lana would be free before much longer and then they would set to work locating any other women who had been taken.

Ian worked at the control panel. He seemed to be recording everything while at the same time processing voice patterns.

"I'm putting a display up for you that'll show our men's movements." A map came up on one screen. Two dots moved along the streets, leaving behind a pale line. If they were really untraceable, his devices would be amazing tools.

"What happens if they take showers?" She shook her head. "I mean to the bugs and adhesive."

“The adhesive bonds the device to the hair or skin, but it will naturally disintegrate after two or three soakings depending on the length of access to water. They’ll never know they had it on them.” Mischief glinted in his eyes when he smiled at her. “If it does fall off, they’ll think it’s a gray hair.”

She laughed. “Brilliantly evil. I love it.”

The computer beeped and captured Kieralyn’s attention. The accounting records for Jazz on the Rocks were perfect. Beginning with the amount put in for start up cash, how long it took to turn a profit and how much of a profit they were turning.

A lot of those books she’d read had been on math and accounting. The numbers on the reports before her were too perfect. Every month revealed a steady increase. In the three years they’d been open they had never had a month where they showed less than a five percent increase over the month before.

Clicking through the pages to the end, she checked out the signature. Luther Isaacs. No surprise there.

She leaned against the back of the chair and sucked her bottom lip between her teeth. She was missing something. Something little that would fill in a major hole. Or she had it before her, but wasn’t seeing it. The words and numbers on the screen blurred.

Snapping her fingers, she straightened and initiated a new search to see what other assets Dorado Inc listed. A minute later, a list popped up on screen. A warehouse, two yachts, some cargo vans and the jazz club.

“Why would a company based in the Dominican Republic own a jazz club in Florida?”

Ian kept working at whatever he was doing. “Diversification.”

“Unless you count automobiles and a warehouse near the club, they aren’t diversified. They claim no other holdings in the United States or the Dominican Republic.”

He tilted his head and drummed his fingers on the counter. “What’s the name of the company?”

“Dorado Inc.”

“That’s Spanish for gold. Use variations of gold for the name and do another search. You could also reverse the spelling and run another search.”

“All right.” She yawned so wide that her jaw popped. Not very original, but he hadn’t led her wrong yet.

“When you have the run started, we’ll go get some sleep.”

“I can keep working.”

“Kieralyn.” He rolled his chair to her side and rubbed a hand over the back of her neck. “You’re exhausted.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re yawning, your heart and breathing are slowing down and tension is knotting your shoulders.” He brushed a kiss below her ear. “You need rest if you’re going to have the stamina to see this through. A massage wouldn’t hurt.”

*Nikki Duncan*

*A massage. As if he would stop at a simple massage. Her muscles spasmed and pulsed as if they'd heard the words and knew what they meant. Or maybe it was the idea of lying down and having Ian touch her again.*



## Chapter Seven

Ian listened to Kieralyn's heart as she initiated the search. Her passion and laughter swept over him like a balm, soothing the loneliness he hadn't recognized. A self-inflicted loneliness that he would not allow himself to return to when she went back to her life. For years he'd felt like a single salmon swimming upstream. Only he never gained any distance in work, relationships or his search for his father.

Kieralyn held herself back, didn't let him see the deepest parts of her spirit, but he would enjoy her while she was with him. Pressing a few controls, he flipped off the opera and keyed up the CD his sister, Jennifer, had recently made for him between baking wedding, birthday and graduation cakes. The music was a somewhat odd mix of songs by an Australian singer, Delta Goodrem, and a guy named Eli Mattson whom Jennifer had seen on a televised talent show. Both artists played the piano beautifully. There was a purity to their sounds that Ian enjoyed, but he rarely listened to the CD. Now he realized why.

The emotions in many of the songs too closely mirrored what he'd been feeling. They drove home the message that he was missing out on something great in life. Hell, they depressed him. Finally, he saw the songs the way Jennifer had meant them. As hope that he could have everything he'd always wanted.

"It's running," Kieralyn said just at the beginning of a song about being strong, a song about how it always seemed to be raining.

"Good." Ian grabbed her hand and pulled her to him. He cupped the back of her head and eased her head to his chest. Swaying slowly from side to side, he maneuvered them into a simple dance.

Delta sang sensually about holding on to your spirit, about keeping it together when the light fades away and your darkest hour strikes. Life hadn't hit that point of desperation for him, but for the women currently held in captivity, the women they were working to rescue including Kieralyn's friend, it could very soon.

Kieralyn shook against him. She sniffled.

He reached up and thumbed a tear from her cheek. "We'll save them, Kieralyn."

"I hope you're right." She blew a breath out and nestled deeper into him. "We have no idea how they're being treated. I can't stand the thought of what they're going through."

"Then don't think about it." He slid his hand beneath her chin and lifted her face. She exhaled a warm breath that floated across his mouth. He swiped his tongue across his lips as he bent down and kissed her.

Her kiss was tender and filled with a depth of emotion she hadn't shown him before. Whether the emotion was for him, caused by the situation, or a buildup of stress from everything going on... He didn't

care what the reasons were. Well, he preferred to think it was a reaction to him. A shared bond between them, but he wasn't going to miss the opportunity to get close to her again by dwelling on maybes and what ifs.

"Ian, take me to bed."

His breath caught. His heart raced. Moving in time to the music, he edged them toward his attached apartment and the bedroom.

"Gladly." Skating his hands over her top, he grabbed the hem of her exercise shirt, pulled it over her head, and dropped it on the floor. Free of the confines of the built-in bra, her breasts swayed against him. He kissed a path down her throat and cupped her breasts in his hands.

Her hands moved over him, pulling his shirt over his head before sliding back down his chest and stomach to the waist of his jeans.

"You fit perfectly." Her breasts in his palms. Her body against his with her head tucked just beneath his chin when they danced.

He shifted his feet so he could toe off his shoes without stopping. "Step out of your shoes."

She gripped the waist of his jeans, her nails bit lightly into his skin. Holding on to him, she did as he asked. He focused on the sound of the shoes plopping to the floor so he could avoid tripping. With each step closer to his room, he eased her pants over her hips and down her legs until they fell to the floor for her to step free of.

He skimmed his hands along her shoulders, gently kneading the muscles in her neck and then walking his fingers along her spine. She arched against him, her naked skin rubbing against his. Her muscles quivered and eased. Hungry for her taste, he captured her mouth again. She opened for him with no hesitation.

Her fingers dipped deeper into the waist of his jeans. She worked open his fly. As she lowered the zipper, she rubbed against his erection. She bit into his lower lip. A low moan rumbled in her throat.

His skin hummed with the desire to have her under him again. In his bedroom, he walked her backwards until her knees bumped the mattress. He lowered her to the bed and followed her down without taking his mouth from hers. The melodic music flowed into the room, echoed the sentiment of the moment.

He didn't know what tomorrow would bring. Tonight, this moment, they could find pleasure in each other and reassurance that everything in life wasn't ugly.

Tensing his muscles to keep from crushing her, he framed her face and skimmed his fingers down her neck and over her breasts. Her nipples poked his palms as he worked his way to her waist. A moan vibrated his chest as he lifted his head and squatted between her knees.

He trailed his fingers over her hip bones and missed the erotic discovery of her garter belt. "It's a pity that you changed clothes at my place. I do love those garters."

“You don’t—” Her voice broke, forcing her to try again. “You don’t even know what color they were.”

“Color doesn’t matter.”

“What does?”

He licked his lips and skated his palms down her legs, raising them until her feet pointed toward the ceiling. Leaning forward, he placed a kiss on the back of her knee. “Taste, and you taste divine.”

She gasped and bucked her hips off the mattress, jerking her legs. A wave of her musky arousal pulsed in the air. His dick jumped. His balls tightened.

“Smell. Your scent...warm and welcoming ...is delicious.”

He closed his eyes and breathed through his mouth. Her scent and the remembered taste of her nectar exploded on his tongue. He swiped his tongue one last time across the back of her knee.

“Feel. The way silk glides against your skin and the way your skin slides against my fingers.”

Goosebumps broke out across her skin. She trembled. He grinned and leaned toward her other leg. He lightly bit into the satiny flesh behind her knee, scraped his teeth over the prickly skin. More prickles popped up.

Blood pounded in his veins and head, drowning out sound. The driving desire to slam into her, into the hot center that he knew would be swollen and ready, snapped at his spine. Too soon she would solve her case and walk away from him. No way would he rush this.

He placed her knees on his shoulders and leaned toward her. The tip of his cock nudged her sex. She enticed him. Intrigued him. Propelled him toward insanity.

“Tan, I wish to hell you’d hurry up.”

He grinned. “Not happening.”

Dipping his head, he nipped the underside of her breast. He pinched lightly at the inside of her thighs. She bucked. Her arms flailed in the air for a moment before her nails scraped across the comforter as she sought purchase. A feral pleasure flooded him.

Driving her as mad as he was beginning to feel was a temptation he couldn’t resist. He’d figured out that his touch drove thoughts of his blindness from her mind. In these moments she thought of him as the man capable of bringing her body to life. Her responses brought his to life.

“Come on.”

Nibbling a path across her chest to her other breast, he shook his head. “Need a condom.”

“I’m on the pill.” She wiggled against him. Her legs brushing the sides of his head, her sex rubbing the length of his cock.

“Meaning that you trust me.” His brows arched. He again pinched lightly behind her thighs as he bit into the underside of her breast.

“Do I have a reason not to?”

“No.” He swiped the pad of his tongue across her skin. Juvenile or not, he wanted to mark her. He pulled a patch of skin into his mouth and sucked. Her sweet flavor heightened as blood rushed to the surface.

She popped her hips off the bed, sliding onto him. He dug his fingers into her hips to stop her. Her inner muscles gripped him. He swallowed and shifted his grip. He lifted her ass, impaling her on him.

Diving hilt-deep, sucking harder on her breast, he drove her higher.

She swelled, heated and pulsated against him.

He kissed the spot where he’d no doubt marked her. The skin puffed slightly and the taste buds on his tongue were sensitized. He struggled to clear his head.

“Come, Kieralyn.” She groaned, low and long, and rolled her hips so she took him deeper. She shook. Sweat broke out at the base of his spine. “Let yourself go.”

She trembled. Her hands yanked at the covers before seeking out his. He released her hips and linked their fingers.

He eased up her body. She raised her head and met his mouth. She slid her tongue along the inside of his top lip before diving between his teeth. Their mouths battled. His brain tingled.

She tightened around him. “You let go.”

What choice did he have? The woman had driven him mad. He pulled away and thrust home. She dug her head into the pillow and writhed against him. She screamed. The erotic pleasure-filled sound bounced off the walls and wrapped around him.

With a final thrust, he pretended they wouldn’t end and followed her into bliss.

The oddly pleasant scent of evergreen and peppermint drifting on the air pulled Kieralyn from sleep. Cocooned in darkness, not even the morning cobwebs of exhaustion clouding her mind could make her forget where she was or what she’d done. She couldn’t block the memories of the last twenty-four hours any easier than she could ignore the seriously expensive, high-thread-count sheets soughing against her skin. The man assaulted the senses on every level.

Getting emotional about a case was one thing. Getting emotional over a man, showing him her inner self, was not an option. Vulnerability led to pain and disappointment. Personal relationships were not her thing. Hell, she barely maintained a decent working relationship with her coworkers and they had things in common.

Once she’d discovered freedom and independence, sharing space with people for prolonged periods of time made her itchy. Claustrophobic. She didn’t even like when she had to allow the apartment maintenance people in her place. Lana had been the only person she’d never minded sharing space with, the only person to never stifle her or expect more of her than she had to give.

Lana had always been there and had shown her what life could be like. Kieralyn would be damned if she wasn't there when she was needed the most.

Staying around Ian, regardless of how competent he seemed to be, would catapult her into the role of caretaker. There were too many things he couldn't possibly do for himself. Things that would naturally fall into the lap of a girlfriend, fiancée or wife. He probably paid someone to do his cooking and cleaning. Hell, a significant other could save him money. He may already be thinking of her in the role. If a way existed for it to be an equal partnership she wouldn't mind a relationship with Ian.

Not that being with him—helping him—would be a tremendous hardship. He was capable of handling himself. He was an attentive companion.

*Shit.* She'd messed up. What she'd had with Ian in the past twenty-four hours threatened the balance she'd struck. It mocked her, taunting her with the desire to know more about him. To know his secrets and what drove him.

Walking away would hurt like hell. She may as well slice the heart from her chest. At least then she wouldn't have the capacity to care about men any longer. She wouldn't be tempted to make monumental mistakes that could alter her life.

She would leave him. Self-preservation and her case mattered more than what Ian might think of her. Nope. Anything remotely long term with him was not a possibility.

She tossed the sheet back and flung her legs over the side of the bed. Whatever was happening between them was temporary. It would not interfere with her case. It would not hold any power over her life.

In the small kitchen, she found the pot of coffee that Ian had brewed. She poured a cup and drank it black before pouring another one. It was good. Better than her local coffee shop. With the caffeine burning through the cobwebs in her brain, she headed toward the lab.

Wall sconces were on in the lab, providing muted light for her. Ian kicked back in his chair listening to a recording, but not one of the men they were tracking.

"El Dogo to Enigma."

Kieralyn's brows shot up. Ian had a recording of El Dogo and hadn't said anything? It might be connected to another case he'd dealt with, but her gut said differently. El Dogo had a deeply personal connection to Ian. But what?

"Enigma here. Go."

"The mark is tainted. Fall back."

"Orders are to move in. We move in."

"I don't like this." El Dogo sighed heavily. "She's a blind child. She's hurt and scared."

"All the more reason to get her out." Enigma's voice was hard. Unmovable. "Move in on my signal. I'll cover you."

Enigma counted down from three. Sounds of bustling leaves crushing beneath heavy boots filtered into the room. Metal struck metal. Something scraped and then a door squeaked open. The girl screamed. There was a thump and then she silenced.

El Dogo knocked a child unconscious? As a favor to her or to himself? And if the child was already scared and traumatized, his actions wouldn't help her trust people if and when she did get free.

Gunshots and cursing broke the relative silence. "Move out."

El Dogo's breathing grew strained. There was a lot of shuffling, a few thumps as if punches were being thrown, and then running feet mixed with more gunshots. A car engine roared and the scrape of a van's side door sliding open and closed were the last sounds heard before the recording ended.

Kieralyn leaned against the wall and crossed her arms. "When did your father—El Dogo—get out of the military?"

Ian flinched and turned his chair toward her. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Since the beginning of the recording." He'd been so wrapped up that he hadn't noticed her. It was the first time he'd been taken off-guard and she'd lay serious odds it was because of El Dogo. Very personal.

"Soon after I was blinded." He raised his head, slightly jutting his chin out as if daring her to say the wrong thing or judge him. "He wanted to be around more for me. Then he was recruited by the CIA."

"So, why not just tell me the whole story, including the bit about him being CIA? Or are you trying to protect him from something?"

"At first I wanted verification. I didn't know you, but I did know that he disappeared two years ago." Ian lunged from the chair. It rolled back and slammed into the desk. "He's my father and I want answers, but I would not risk those women."

She stomped toward Ian. Blood pulsed through her veins. He was another in a long line of people who thought they could dictate what she knew. Granted, she'd allowed herself to get so wrapped up in what he made her feel and her personal goals that she'd relegated the importance of his father being El Dogo to a low spot on her list. That wouldn't happen again.

That was the kind of mistake that could get someone hurt or killed. Then she wouldn't have a career or a team to worry about. "Withholding information and going off half-cocked, ready to do your own investigation, isn't helpful to anyone but you."

"He's my father!"

"And he has ties to my case! That makes him a person of interest. I should have known about this." Betrayal stabbed at her. She'd known Ian had held something back. She hadn't thought for a moment that she would stay in the dark about it, but nothing had prepared her for the disappointment suffusing her. "What would you have done if I hadn't followed you yesterday? Can you stand there and tell me that I would have the information that I have now?"

“You... I...” He stopped and dragged his hands across his face. His shoulders slumped. He went after his chair. Fumbling around where it had hit the desk, he was a good five feet away from where it had stopped rolling.

It was a relief to know that he wasn't perfect and always in complete control. She smirked and let him search for it while she went to the chair she'd been using. He would tell her what he knew so she could recover the women. If it meant taking his father down... Well, she'd try to be understanding of Ian's feelings.

Diverting her focus to the job and her professional goals was safer than dwelling on the hurt gripping her chest. Whatever lenience she might have shown Ian because of her feelings for him had diminished with his admission that he'd crippled her chances of finding the missing women and winning the respect of her team.

“El Dogo is what my father was called when he was in the army. When he got out and joined the CIA as an operative, he kept the name.” He tapped his fingers on his knees. Sadness darkened his gaze. “Two years ago, on an undercover assignment to ferret out a group of terrorists, he went missing.”

“He told you what he was working on?”

“Not really. I knew he was undercover on something big. He'd been gone for two months when I went to my mom's one day. She was running late getting home and I didn't expect Dad to be there. I overheard him on the phone. I'm not sure what he was planning, but it unsettled me. A week later, he was gone. Since his disappearance... Well, we needed answers. I've quietly dug into what he was working on.”

“We?”

“My mom, sister and me.” He popped his knuckles and stretched his neck. “For the last two years, I've listened to every recording coming in from the government in hopes of hearing some mention of him.”

“And you found it on mine.”

“Kieralyn, I'm not trying to stop you from solving your case.” He leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees. “If my father has betrayed his country, my family, then he deserves to face the consequences.”

He said it so easily, but Kieralyn doubted Ian could really turn his father over. “But you don't think he has.”

“One of my earliest memories is of my father loading the dishwasher every night after dinner. He was always there and every action he ever took, every task he took on, was backed with a solid strategy. I can't see a reason why he would be tangled up in your case.”

“But...”

“But he seems to be. I don't know if this case is related to the one he was working or if he stayed under and used the same cover for a new case or if he somehow lost himself after he left.” Ian ducked his

head. His shoulders slumped with defeat. "It doesn't make sense. He valued life. More, he wouldn't have abandoned my mother for some unethical cause."

She could connect the dots. "What are you more afraid of? That we'll find out he's turned or that we'll compromise him if he's still undercover?"

"I'm not sure. Both possibilities could result in losing him forever."

Kieralyn considered her options for a moment. Take what she'd learned from Ian, walk out now, and go to her team. Never see Ian again. Or stay. Working with Ian and combining what he knew with what she knew and trying to determine together how his father was connected might be what they both needed.

She'd been bull-headed, rude and insulting to get him involved in her case. She'd allowed emotions and personal involvement to drive her. Ian hadn't once insulted her or treated her badly. He too had been ruled by his emotions. They were no different in that respect, but before she made any promises about Ian's dad, she needed to know more about El Dogo as a man. Ian claimed he wouldn't have left his mom, yet that's precisely what had happened.

Maybe Ian had his loyalty misplaced, or maybe his instincts were dead on. As someone trying to prove the worth of her own instincts, how could she brush his aside as easily as her team did hers?

"Was your dad around when you lost your sight?" It didn't have anything to do with the case, but Ian's answer might give her a glimpse of the man she was tracking. It might also give her a better understanding of the man she was ... No, she couldn't think about that right now. Not until she'd found Lana, solved the case and proved herself to her team.

He sat silent and statue-still for so long she suspected he wouldn't answer. That he wouldn't share his past with her. "He was on a mission. Before he left, like every other time before, he pulled me aside and told me I was the man of the house in his absence. He asked me to watch out for my mom and my sister."

Leaving a young boy with the perception, at least in his own head, that he was the adult. That expecting someone to look out for him would lead to disappointment.

He'd had a mom, but had she known about his dad's requests? Had she done anything to counteract them, to let Ian know that she kept an eye out for him? Or had he truly been expected to be the man?

"One night, I was ten, the house caught fire. We'd practiced fire drills. We all knew how to get out and where to meet. Jennifer, my sister, ran back inside for a stuffed sheep." As he traveled back in his mind, his eyes glazed over, making him appear blind for the first time. His voice grew distant. "Mom's screaming for her. I can't hear sirens. No one else is around. Only crackling fire."

He was deeply entrenched in the past. Almost as if he was reliving it.

"Jennifer's only four. She's scared and can't remember what she's supposed to do. The smoke detector...it's going off now. It hurts her ears. Mine. The house is burning faster and faster. I run after her. Past the kitchen to her room. She grabs her stuffed sheep. Fire is crawling up the walls." Sweat broke out across his forehead. "It's so hot."



“I grab her and hug her to me. She buries her face in my chest. I hurry through the house.” He rubbed his arms. “The hair is burning on my arms. Something smells rotten, like the eggs Mom had thrown out once. In the kitchen, something’s whistling. Flames wrap around the door. I turn to look in the door.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. His face tensed and sweat ran down his temples. “The stove explodes. I’m knocked against the wall. Jennifer cries out. I clutch her closer and curl myself around her. I fall to the floor. Something’s wrong. I can’t see. I can’t feel my face.”

He’d rescued his sister, but he’d lost his sight. He’d done what his father asked at a cost greater than any of them had likely anticipated.

Ian shook his head. His eyes cleared. “I woke up in a hospital to find Dad pacing, Mom crying and Jennifer singing some song with made-up lyrics to her sheep.” His voice lost the reflective tone and he swiped at the sweat on his face as if it frustrated him. “They told me that I would have to have multiple, painful surgeries and skin grafts to correct the damage from the fire, but that I would never see again. My dad took a leave of absence while I was recovering. He was at my bedside when I woke up covered in sweat from the nightmares. He stayed close at hand every time I went into and came out of surgery. He was my mother’s and Jennifer’s support beam when they were worried and scared for me.”

“And when you were recovered from the surgeries he and his unit taught you what they’d learned in the service.” He’d been Ian’s rock. His actions had given Ian the strength to become the man he had.

Not the actions of a man who would betray his country. He hadn’t abandoned the family when things had gotten tough and ugly. When it became obvious that he and his wife would have to spend the foreseeable future helping their handicapped son cope with day-to-day life, it appeared that he’d dug in and done his part.

“Yes.”

“Do you know anything about the case he was working on when he disappeared?” Judging by Ian’s remembered impressions, and it would be tough to romanticize such a dark time, Kieralyn was inclined to believe that his dad’s disappearance had been meant as the ultimate protection for his family. Tragedy tested a person’s character, and Ian’s family had dealt with their share as a unit. A man didn’t change his core beliefs easily, and few did at all after they reached a certain age and maturity level. It seemed unrealistic to hang on to the belief that a father of two grown children, a man who’d done the things Ian spoke of, would suddenly change his moral code.

“Only that it dealt with terrorism. Based on what I’ve been able to find out, or rather what I’ve managed to surmise based on guess work, it’s a more subtle attack on our country. Key people in the government were, or still are, being controlled by a group of Venezuelans.”

It was almost too coincidental that she’d considered Venezuela as a shipping point for the women, but it might explain his father’s involvement. “What people are being controlled? What’s the end game?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” He snapped his fingers. “You said your team didn’t think there was a connection between the women taken.”

“None that we found aside from age range and race.”

“Types of jobs?” He jumped up and started pacing. “Lifestyles? Income levels? Types of neighborhoods?”

Kieralyn filtered through everything they’d learned about each woman, but nothing spectacular popped to her mind. “Their annual incomes were probably within ten thousand dollars of each other, all from different lines of work. Most of them lived in apartments or town homes.”

“Types of jobs? Their employers?”

He might be onto something. It might be small, but... “I need to go to work. I need access to the files.”

“Are they on your computer?”

“Yes.”

“You can access them here.” He moved to grab his chair and positioned it beside hers before sitting.

“Excuse me?” Her jaw dropped and she gaped at him. “How is that possible? Since nine-eleven, security measures have increased. Bureau files are protected behind several layers of firewalls.”

“And since nine-eleven, there is more participation and information sharing between agencies. You can access your files from here.”

“You’re saying that you can hack the FBI?” She glanced from the computer to him and back to the computer. He’d lost it. He’d passed the level of talent and skill and headed straight into grandiose impossibilities.

“National security could be at risk.” He shrugged. “Besides, nothing can be accessed without proper authorizations.”

“How comforting.” The urge to argue that the NSA shouldn’t be able to hack the FBI sat on the tip of her tongue. That a blind listener had been given the capabilities was just... weird. He acted like nothing was wrong or off about the setup. As if anything—underhanded or not—was acceptable when his agency decided that national security might be at risk.

“Kieralyn.” Humor lightened his tone. “Few people in the agency know this program exists or have the know-how to use it.”

“But *you* do.”

“Yes.” His voice grew clipped. “I, with a security clearance that you couldn’t imagine, know how to access the files. It’s a tool that has been used on occasion when working with other agencies to verify what I found in a recording. To save the lives of Americans.”

“Touchy much, Cabrera?”

“You’re one to talk about being touchy. I get it. Lana is important to you. More than anything or anyone else.” He raised his hand and waved off whatever she might have said. “Do you want to do this, or not?”

She opened her mouth to deny what he’d said. The ugly truth was that she couldn’t. On some level his assessment was right. He’d shown her on multiple occasions that he could function without his sight. He’d been the first man to buy into her theory about the women, he was an amazing lover, a talented listener and he’d saved her ass from joining the women she was trying to save.

Being involved with anyone, being with Ian as deeply as she suspected he would want to be, wasn’t an option. Relationships were hassles.

“Yes. I want your help.”

## Chapter Eight

Ian walked Kieralyn through the steps of accessing her files. He didn't like it. Kieralyn didn't verbally admit it, but neither had she denied his claims. Hell, he'd known there was no future for them. That didn't mean he'd wanted to be right about the status of their relationship.

Last night, holding her, dancing with her and feeling every beat of her heart as she moved against him, absorbing the warm tenderness in her voice, he'd glimpsed the connection they could have if she let herself go. He wanted the chance to solidify that connection, though he knew that along the way he'd likely fall in love with a woman who refused to allow herself to love him back.

Regardless, he wouldn't try to persuade her beyond letting her know how he felt. Kieralyn had to decide for herself what she wanted.

"Do you really think there's a connection?"

*Yes.* "I'm not sure." He dragged his mind back to thoughts of the case. If her team had investigated thoroughly, and he had no reason to doubt that they had, she would have the information to confirm his suspicions. "It warrants serious consideration. Are you in your files?"

"Yes. One woman worked as an aide to the mayor of Miami. Another ran the local office for a congressman." Her nails clicked the keys rapidly. "The third woman was the private tutor for the governor's errant son. The fourth woman, the last one before Lana, had no ties to government within the last five years."

"Look at her again."

"She broke the pattern, Ian. She doesn't fit the profile."

"Use the computer program you were in last night. Go deeper, especially into her college education and work history." She'd either been taken to throw the FBI off track, or she had an association with a local politician. One that could ensure certain indiscretions got swept aside. "Something's missing."

"We know how to run an investigation, Ian." Irritation pinched her voice. She clicked the mouse and tapped at the keys, commanding his computer much faster than he could with verbal commands. "Every missing person that we try to locate gets equal attention. Every one deserves to be found. Rescued when possible."

And yet, as fired up as she was, she was running a deeper search into the victim of question. She was stubborn and contrary. Damn, but he loved that about her.

“I’m not disputing your methods. The fact is that if we’re going to seriously consider the possibility of a connection, we have to know if there’s more to why Lana was taken.”

“You’re hoping to find something that settles her neatly into the profile.” She slid her tongue over her teeth, making a slight sucking sound. “But why? Are you hoping that it will somehow clear your father of any wrongdoing? You haven’t said how far you’re willing to go for him, Ian. For the man who walked away from your family, the mother you swear he adored, without a word? Do you really believe with your whole being, given the evidence, that he’s better than that?”

He almost blasted her with a rebuttal, cataloging all the great things about his father. Instead, he considered what she’d just said. And the silent revelation of why she held herself separate from others—including her coworkers. Someone had abandoned her, set her up for a rough life, and she’d convinced herself that everyone was capable of the same thing. His story about his father sealed that truth in her mind even more, that given the opportunity even the most upstanding person would turn on you.

“Until your recording, we half suspected that he’d been killed. I *want* to believe that my father had altruistic reasons for his choices, but I will not trade the lives of five innocent women for the sake of a traitorous father. My mother and sister can handle the truth either way.”

“I hope you mean that.”

Regret thickened her voice. His heart slammed against his ribs before stalling half a beat. “Why? What have you found?”

“The fourth victim attended a local junior college for a year. She attended a self-defense class. One Mick Cabrera is listed as the instructor.”

“Which gives her—along with a few hundred other people—a connection to my father.” Not that it was looking real coincidental.

“Well, she also took a criminal investigations course from a police lieutenant at the police academy.” She drummed her fingers on the desk. “He’s now the chief of police.”

Ian’s brain tingled. He rubbed his temples and got up to pace. Flipping through everything he knew from his research into his father’s case and Kieralyn’s, he considered the angles and connections. “Okay, find any holes in this.”

“Gladly.”

“A gang begins moving drugs or weapons, maybe both, into Miami society. Crime rates rise and the government goes on alert. After investigating and following up leads, they get an idea of who is behind it all.”

“The gang wouldn’t just jump up activity like that. They’d first get some cops in their pockets at the very least.”

“Right.” Ian had thought the same thing. “So, someone higher up in the department, maybe the chief of police who suspects he has cops on the take working for him, calls in some help.”

Again, she slid her tongue over her teeth, making a sucking sound. He hadn't realized it, but she'd done the same thing the night before when she'd been thinking things through. "The help he reaches out to is a buddy he made while teaching at a local college."

Ian stepped through the opening in the control panel and paced the outer circle of his desk. "A former military, now CIA operative buddy."

"The CIA buddy, your father, looks into the case."

"And goes undercover to see what he can discover, but it takes a long time so he changes his tactics. Maybe he reaches out to the chief of police and the gang gets word from their guys that the heat is on to them."

"So they begin taking women with connections to the politicians capable of making what they're doing disappear."

*Was she really on the same wavelength as him?* "The fourth victim could have been taken either as leverage against the police chief, or she was on the payroll of the gang, or involved with someone on the payroll who was making noises about getting out and she was taken as leverage against them."

"Maybe she stumbled across the dirty cops and threatened to turn them in and this is their way of silencing her."

"Maybe." He blew out a ragged breath and turned toward her.

If Kieralyn could be made to believe that his father might be innocent of any heinous involvement then maybe he wasn't such a fool for hoping. If that was true, his father could eventually reclaim his spot in the family.

Ian's heart broke every time he visited his mother and sister. Every time he heard the sadness, the grief in their voices. They'd thought his father was a consultant for the government. If they knew what he might be tangled up in... He would make sure they didn't crack.

"Ian, I know you want me to agree that you're right about your dad. That you think maybe if I believe the best of your father then maybe he hasn't done your family wrong."

"I'm a big boy. I can handle it if you see the situation differently." He approached the desk opposite her and braced his hands flat on the cool surface. "I need your honesty on this. I need to know that I'm not coloring the options to suit my desires."

"You could be right." She slipped a hand over his. A brief touch of comfort that had tears thickening his throat. "It's possible that your father has gone so deep undercover that he's stopped talking to our side. I hope, for your sake, that's what has happened."

"Yeah, I've thought of that. I've just never found any validation to the theory."

"Don't you have a high enough clearance to find out for certain?"

"When I'm not being shut down at every turn by my father's supervisor. He says there's nothing to know. That my father is gone."

“Sounds like a great guy.”

“He’s an ass who would prefer that I think my dad is dead.”

“I hope *you’re* right about your dad.” She pulled her hand away and went back to tapping on the keyboard. “Right now, we need to see what the background runs found through the night and check on the wires we planted.”

“I’ve checked the wires. About an hour ago, they met for breakfast. Nothing of interest has been said yet.”

“How can you know that? You don’t have the recording playing.”

“It’s turned down. I can hear it.” Though he may have missed something during their talk. “I’ll wind it back and turn it up.”

“I’ll check the search results on the computer.”

He moved to his control panel. She worked at the computer. They worked in silence, aside from Kieralyn’s pulse thrumming steadily—a constant reminder of what would never be.

Hell, maybe he was imagining his feelings. He didn’t have a lot of experience with emotional connections to women.

“A Horatio Danielson and David Sanders were cellmates in prison for two years. Without confirmation of the names of the men we’ve tagged, I can’t be sure they’re the same men, but it’s a bit too coincidental.” Her heart sped up suddenly. A flush of warmth heightened her body temp, carrying her essence to him. “Especially when you add in the fact that one Tyler Isaacs served time in the same prison during their incarceration.”

*Interesting.* He paused the recording. “What did they do time for? When?”

“Danielson got charged with drug possession, intent to deal, and assault and battery with a deadly weapon. Sanders for three counts of armed robbery. Isaacs went in for murder three years ago. Interestingly, all three were released less than two months from when Isaacs went in.”

“Someone pulled strings to release them. Serious strings in Isaacs’ case. When did that happen?”

“July of 2005.”

“Six months before my father went missing. Though we’re still missing hard proof of where the women are being held, and if they’re going to be shipped out or the details of said shipment. Some of the women have been missing for weeks. Would they really keep them in the same place—especially a club filled with people?”

“If they have cops on the payroll and know that no one is on to them why would they need to move them?” She huffed out a frustrated breath. “I have to bring my team in on what we’ve learned. I’m thinking that since they came after me they at least suspect that they’re being investigated.”

“Logical.”

“I have to tell them about your father and the possible link between the cases.”

“Goes without saying.” He considered the situation. “Will you advise them of the possibility that he’s still undercover?”

“I can do that, but I can’t guarantee how things will go down.”

“Understood.” Ian stood and pointed toward the phone. “Call your team. I need to...feed Maximum.”

They would likely argue that she was rushing the case, but Ian understood her need to act fast, and he wouldn’t let her confront anyone without backup. He forced himself to walk calmly from the room to give her privacy. His gut told him that whatever happened with the case, regardless of how soon it took her team to move in, today would be his last with Kieralyn.

She’d stopped being the woman who fell apart at his touch. The woman who undermined his control with her sexy moans and the wiggle of her hips had vanished when she walked into his lab that morning. The untouchable FBI agent, determined to save her friend and prove herself to her team, sat in her place.

He turned the corner into his apartment and leaned back, resting his head against the wall. He closed his eyes and listened to the steady rhythm of her heart. He ached for the loss of the sensual lover he’d discovered, the spunky woman willing to spar with him. Kieralyn was the first woman to make him see the lighter side of life, to make him remember the pleasure of a simple laugh. She was also a woman who couldn’t be his.

“Damn it.” Kieralyn slammed her hand against the desk, wishing she had something she could plant her fist into. “I’m surrounded by closed-minded bastards.”

“Present company excluded?”

She spun around to find Ian leaning against the door with his head tilted. Maximum sat at his side with his head tilted the same as Ian’s. It might have been comical if she hadn’t just slammed into the brick wall of the men on her team. “They won’t move in until we *know* Isaacs has the women, and where.”

“They’re right.”

“Bullshit!” She jumped from her chair and paced the floor. “What is it with men? Why can’t anyone take what I have to say as valuable information?”

“Um—”

“I didn’t get to mention your father. They didn’t give me the chance. What is it about me that makes people not see me?” It had always been the same thing. Ever since she’d been abandoned as a young child, left with nothing more than a bag of clothes and a paper with her name and birth date, she’d never managed to stop being a charity case for more than short bursts of time.

Lana had been the one person who hadn’t looked down on her or belittled her. Even though she hadn’t gotten into that college group, Lana had taken her reports seriously and covered the story. How could she



not do everything possible to save the first real friend she'd had? She couldn't let a group of arrogant men keep her from answers. Keep her from helping the only person who'd valued her.

"You don't let them." The rough timbre of Ian's whisper scraped her nerves.

"Excuse me?" It was her fault that people treated her the way they did? Did that make it her fault that her team didn't put any stock in her investigative skills?

"You don't let people see you." He pushed off the wall and walked to the desk where she'd been working. Reclining against it, he crossed his arms over his broad chest. "Whatever has happened to you, whoever turned away from you, you've given them the power to control your life."

"I control my own life." He couldn't know what had happened to her.

"You hold yourself distant behind a protective shield. You say you want to be accepted, but how often do you let people know the real you?"

"As if you know the real me." Ugliness swelled in her gut. "We only met two mornings ago."

"And I've witnessed your protective streak even as you resent expressing it." His tongue swept across his plump, kissable lips. "I've felt you melt beneath the influence of genuine affection. You want to be liked, even loved. You crave acceptance and friendship. You just don't trust yourself to be able to give the emotions back. You think they'll make you soft."

"You know nothing about me."

"Keep telling yourself that while you continue blaming the men you work with for your professional difficulties. Hell, Kieralyn, if you treat them like you have me since you walked in that door the first time, you make it an uphill battle littered with lethal landmines to find anything likeable about you."

"You seem to like me well enough in bed."

"For some perverse reason, there's nothing about your smartass bitchiness that I don't like." He rushed her and pinned her against the desk. "Hell, maybe it's because I don't have to deal with you daily. Maybe it's because you keep things entertaining. Or maybe it's because I find immense pleasure in witnessing your loss of control at my touch and the way you quiver when I kiss you."

She braced her hands on his chest and shoved him back. Her hands shook as she walked to the control panel he'd commanded. Hoping to drown him out, not that she could nudge his words from her mind, she cranked up the volume on the listening devices they'd planted on Sanders and Danielson.

"Sanders, get the van and prep it. Danielson, get the women ready to move out." Isaacs ordered the men as brusquely as a drill sergeant. No one would dare cross him.

Ian snapped to attention and joined her. Tension vibrated off him. They were running out of time.

"Yes, sir. When do we move them?"

"El Dogo will be here within the hour." Something clinked noisily as Isaacs spoke.

*Shit.* She had to get her team together, which would no doubt lead to another argument.

“We haven’t discovered the identity of the woman who was asking questions. We can’t afford to take chances that she’s with the cops.”

“You have cops in your pocket. Can’t they find out?”

“If only I’d thought of that.” Disdain dripped from Isaacs’ voice. “Since you fumbled the task and failed to get anything helpful like her plate number while you followed her, I’ve got nothing to go on. I can’t ignore the possibility that the reporter got a message to someone.”

“Right.”

They didn’t know she was a fed or that they were being listened to. Some luck was on her side. She could use more. Like a verification of where they were and the right approach to get her team to back her up.

“What if the woman pops back up?”

“Then she’ll join the others on their trip.”

“The guy she was with?”

“He’ll never see the bullet coming.”

“They’re on guard.” Ian’s fingers drummed his leg. “That can work for or against us.”

*Me. Not us.* Her suspects didn’t know who she was. They likely didn’t know Ian was blind, but they were right about his chances against a bullet. Adrenaline kicked through her. As good as Ian was with hand-to-hand, she had to keep him away from the danger. She had to get away from him.

Ian snapped his fingers. Maximum, who sat facing them, rushed to the main door and sat in front of it. “Grab what you need. We’re moving out.”

She glanced around looking for a way to leave him behind. Problem was... “Do you know where they are?”

“Yes.” He stepped around her, opened a drawer, and pulled out a handheld pocket PC sort of device. “We’ll call your team on the way.”

“Where are we going? The club?”

He angled a smile her way and shook his head. “If I tell you now, you’re only going to try to find a way to leave me behind.”

“So?” She grabbed her phone and bag. “You heard them, Ian. They will kill you if they see you.”

“And you will be shipped off to wherever with the other women. You want to find Lana, but I don’t think you’re willing to pay the price of being some man’s slave.”

“I’m doing my job!”

“You’re being impulsive! I’m not letting you go in without knowing that backup is with you.” He slipped the device into his pocket and faced her. “Besides, how are you going to know if they change their plans? How are you going to know what’s going on inside of wherever they are, so that you know the right time to move in?”

She tapped her foot. She could jump him. If she moved fast enough she might be able to surprise him enough to knock him unconscious and get the device he'd slipped into his pocket—likely a portable listening device. Then she recalled how he'd fought those men. And he'd helped her. The least she could do was make sure he stayed safe.

"If you manage to knock me out, Maximum will never let you out of here."

"Sure, you can hear my thoughts now?"

"No, but considering that protective streak I mentioned earlier, it's logical that your mind would go there."

"Fine. If you get shot, it isn't my fault."

"Fine." He grinned and turned his back on her to walk to the door. "Get your ass moving."

Her lips quirked into a smile. Arrogant prick acted as if he had a right to order her around. As if they were more to each other than two agents from different agencies working on a case. She wanted to be angry that he'd thwarted her intentions of going in alone. She wanted to knock him out and deal with things herself. To walk away from him and all the mixed up emotions he had churning around inside of her. "Do you have anything we could use to talk to each other?"

"Because you've decided that having me in the car to be your ears isn't a bad plan?"

Admitting he was right, that she needed his help, irritated her. She absolutely couldn't reconcile her desire to keep him close as long as possible. "Pretty much."

"In the drawer below the one I was just in, there's a black case."

She opened the drawer and found three cases. Black, white, and gray. "Why are they different colors? I would've thought you'd describe it to me based on the location."

"It's easier to tell a sighted person to get the black box than the middle box on the right side of the second drawer in the third bank of drawers."

"Both ways work." Grinning, she grabbed the box and closed the drawer.

"My way uses fewer words." He bent down and put Maximum's harness on him. "When you're finished being a smartass, we can go."

"You enjoy it." She joined him at the door. "Don't pretend otherwise."

He leaned close and brushed a kiss just below her ear. She shivered before she could brace herself. "Do you want to talk about what we enjoy? What *I* enjoy?"

"No." She pushed him back and opened the door. Now was not the time for distractions. No time was great for the distractions Ian seemed so intent on providing. Too bad her traitorous body didn't agree.

## Chapter Nine

Kieralyn pulled her car under a giant tree in the parking lot across from Jazz on the Rocks and cracked the windows in hopes that the breeze would diminish the cloying heat inside of the car. It only stirred up the outdoorsy scent of Ian beside her.

The morning sun pounded the parking lot concrete, glinted off the mirrors and windows of the other cars parked around. The club's back door opened. "A man's coming out. He's heading to a cargo van."

"That's Sanders."

"How can—"

He tapped his ear and then his chest before smiling.

She rolled her eyes. Sanders opened the driver's side door and popped the hood. "What are your limitations?"

"Obviously, I can isolate and identify sounds better when it's quiet."

"Yet, you were able to pick me out of the crowded street on a Friday night." Sanders climbed in behind the steering wheel and started the van. Kieralyn straightened in her seat and reached for her phone. "You knew the secret of the couple at the bar, and you identified Isaacs as the owner of the club despite everything that was going on."

"Kieralyn." He cocked his head and smiled. "If I didn't know better I'd almost think you were beginning to get used to me. Maybe you even like me a little."

Sanders turned off the van, got out and headed back inside. She relaxed back into the seat and put her phone on the dash.

"I'd hope you aren't a betting man, but I think we both know you are." Damn if he hadn't grown on her, though, with his quick wit and sense of humor. Predictability clung to him. Everything around him was structured. The way his furniture sat, the color-coded order his shoes and clothes were lined up in his closets, and that he faced his toothbrush north in his home and apartment at work were just a few examples. As regimented as he, and his life, seemed to be, she never knew what he would say or do next.

"It depends on the odds and the stakes."

Like that. He indulged in spontaneity more easily than she did without losing his grasp of the possible consequences. She couldn't get her balance, so why bother trying? Focusing on work was more her speed.

"Speaking of odds—" She pulled her gun from her bag and sat it on her thigh. "I'm going to go improve the ones for the women inside that club."

Ian grabbed her wrist. "What are you doing?"

"Sanders just checked the van to make sure it was ready to go." She took the ear piece out of the black box sitting between them. "I'm going to go disable it."

"How?"

"Like you, I'm more than a pretty face."

He grinned as he ran a finger along the scars on his face.

"Ian?"

He shook his head and dropped his hand. "How?"

Wherever his mind had gone it had pleased him, but she couldn't think about that now. "Distributor cap, spark plug wires. They're equally effective."

"So when they're ready to move the women—"

"They can't."

"This isn't right. You should wait." He looked into her eyes as if he could actually see her. She narrowed her eyes and studied him. Intensity and concern shone in his gaze.

She took out the second earpiece and placed it in his ear. "Don't worry. You'll be able to hear everything from the two men and me. Besides, I'm just running across the street."

"You need backup. You need to call your team before you move."

"Fine." She picked up her cell and called Breck. After giving him the thirty-second overview of where they were and what was going on, she hung up. "Happy?"

"You didn't tell him what you're planning because you knew he would tell you to wait."

"The women in that building are counting on me. I'm doing this." *Arrogant jackass.* "Besides, Breck will have the team here in less than ten minutes. They're just a few blocks away at the gym."

"It only takes one minute for you to be hurt." He sat the mini PC on the seat. "Let me go in. I can distract them until your team shows up."

He was trying to take this from her. "Can you defend yourself against a bullet?"

"No more than you."

"Can you disable the van?"

He grinned. "Never saw the point in knowing how to fix a car. Let alone disable one."

"Well, I can." She grabbed her gun, opened her door and darted across the street before he could argue anymore. "Keep your ears peeled."

"You're a foolish woman, Kieralyn."

She shrugged off his grumbled chastisement in her ear.

"Be careful."

Shrugging off the impression that his voice deepened with intensity and fear for her safety wasn't easy.

Keeping an eye on the door that Sanders had gone into, she tucked the gun in the back of her jeans and hustled toward the van.

“There’s a car approaching.”

“I’ll be done in a jiff.” Quickly and quietly, she opened the door and popped the hood. Grateful for the first time that one of her foster dads had forced her to help him in his garage all the time, she jiggled a spark plug wire loose.

“Shit,” Ian said into her earpiece. “Someone’s coming.”

“Almost done.” Smiling with satisfaction, she reached up to lower the hood. “Who?”

“Not sure. Hurry up,” Ian urged. Anxiety shook his voice.

A hand brushed the small of her back. An instant later, her gun had been taken and the barrel was pressed against her temple. “Time’s up.”

*Shit.* Another ten seconds and she’d have been headed back to the car. To Ian. She swallowed and held her hands out beside her head.

“Shit. Kieralyn it’s—”

“Turn around.” The man stepped back.

“El Dogo.” She choked down the irritation that she’d been caught. The anger that she’d depended too heavily on Ian’s help that she’d been oblivious enough to her surroundings to have her weapon taken. She lifted her right heel, placing her weight on the ball of her foot. Using her left foot to control the move, she spun around and grabbed for the man’s arm.

He stepped out of range quickly and cocked her gun. “You complicate matters, Agent Beckett. Don’t make it worse by getting shot with your own weapon.”

*Shit. Shit.* Her heart slammed against her ribs. Her stomach shook violently.

Ian’s eyes, older and harder, glared down at her. Evil. Sweat broke out at the base of her spine. She struggled to keep her hands from visibly trembling. “You must be the infamous El Dogo.”

She’d been discovered and he knew who she was. Did he know about Ian? Or that backup was on the way?

“Agent Beckett, you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He tilted his head as he regarded her, like Ian did when he listened. “You should have stayed away.”

“You know who I am.”

“Your reporter friend has a big mouth.” He grabbed her arm and jerked her away from the van. “I know more than you can imagine.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Out of the way.” He shoved her toward a metal door. “Now shut the hell up.”

She would’ve tripped if she’d been wearing her heels. She had to figure out how much he knew, what his plans were, and where the women were being taken. Ian wouldn’t be able to follow them.

She doubted El Dogo would knowingly take an FBI agent to the other women. She had to break free and get the evidence her team needed. Then again, given the circumstances and Ian's awareness of the situation, they could enter the building without a warrant.

El Dogo opened the door and shoved her inside. He muttered a curse.

Pain exploded across the back of her head. Everything went black.

Naked fear gripped Ian's spine. He'd been distracted by his worry for her and had almost missed the sound of someone approaching her. When he finally picked up on it, the second heartbeat, the pounding reverberation of a snare drum, jerked him back to the last time he'd seen, rather heard, his father.

Ian had stepped into his parents' living room to wait for his mom. His father was in the kitchen on the phone. "They're not giving up the information. It's going to take more drastic measures."

Nothing good ever came from his father employing "more drastic measures". He tended to resort to his Army Ranger days and entertain solutions that included someone's death.

"That's not going to work this time."

Ian could focus and listen to whoever was on the other end of the line, probably Eli aka Enigma. It was too much of an invasion of his father's privacy, and he'd accepted long ago that he and his family were safer not knowing the details of his father's assignments.

"Listen, I have to go. Lily's going to be back soon." His father's heart pounded anxiously. "If anything happens, keep an eye on everyone. It could hit Lily the hardest."

Ian never found out what his father had been planning, but soon after that call he'd vanished. Eli had stuck close to the family until he knew Ian's mother would hold it together. Anytime she'd voiced concerns about Mick's possible death, he'd simply told her to have faith.

Ian snapped back to the present. His father's heart had pounded then as it had when he'd approached Kieralyn. Now, he couldn't hear either of them.

"Kieralyn?" *Answer me, damn you. Say something. Anything.* "Where's he taking you?"

A nails-scraping-on-chalkboard chill, intensified a thousand times, raced through him. Crashing waves in the ocean drowned out all sounds, erasing the possibility of pinpointing anything that could help Kieralyn.

His father *was* involved. He'd known that. He hadn't expected his father to take Kieralyn. But did it mean that he'd gone fully to the other side, or had he somehow been trying to protect her?

A car pulled to a stop, but he couldn't judge where. What was going on with his senses? His hearing?

"Kieralyn, talk to me." *Damn it.* He shouldn't have gotten distracted with memories. For that matter, he should have focused more closely on the surroundings than he had on Kieralyn. "Where are you? What's going on?"

“That’s what we’d like to know,” a man said from outside the car.

Ian jumped and instantly determined that four men stood outside the car on the driver’s side. Kieralyn wasn’t responding, he figured he was about to face down her team, but couldn’t know for certain. And his dad was inside the club. He needed to get his shit together.

Shaking his head clear, he exited the car and turned toward the men. “Who are you?”

“Where’s Kieralyn?”

She’d said her team wouldn’t be long. Still, he’d learned a lot from his dad and Eli. Caution was one of them. The men standing around could be more of the group trafficking women, though he doubted it. El Dogo or Isaacs could’ve found her earpiece and destroyed it. “I’m going to need an answer first.”

“I’m Breck.” The man’s cotton shirt shifted as if he pointed at someone. His heart made a sort of whooshing sound. Reliable and steady like the waves lapping at the shore. “This is Aidan, Liam and Tyler. We’re her team.”

“Where is she?” one of them asked. His heart beat faster than the others, with a pulsing energy.

“You’re going to have to help me out with which of you is which.” Ian tapped his right eye. “I’m blind.”

“You’re...no one...” Breck’s teeth ground together. “She neglected to mention that.”

Another of the men cursed.

“How were you supposed to be any help to her?” The questioner’s heart clipped along almost erratically.

“I’m not exactly helpless or useless.”

“Chill, Tyler.” Breck seemed to be the leader. “It’s not like we can *control* Kieralyn.”

*As if anyone could. Well, except in bed.* Ian jerked his mind back to the moment. Besides, he didn’t want to think about another man in bed with her.

He pointed across the street to the club, taking Kieralyn’s omission to his lack of sight as a sign that she didn’t see his sight as important. “She went to disable their van. She had her weapon and a comm device on, but I’m not picking anything up now.”

“I’m Liam.” A slight Scottish burr thickened his gravelly voice. He spoke the way his heartbeat sounded, as if he worked to leash the energy. “You should have made her wait for us.”

“Ha.” Ian started to laugh at them, to blast them with the truth that Kieralyn was a capable agent who’d tracked down the leads that had brought them all to this club where she and a group of kidnapped women were being held inside. Then he realized why Kieralyn thought her team didn’t respect her.

None of them had bashed her, badmouthed her abilities or degraded her. They hadn’t behaved as if they thought she’d screw up. They worried about her—like he did for his sister. Their need to protect her rivaled her need to be independent. To her, they were antagonistic or chauvinistic. To them, they were looking out for her.



“She took every precaution. We have ears on two of the men inside, the two who attacked us at my place last night. We know their movements. She was armed and the comm device she wore allowed us to communicate.”

“You were attacked?” Aidan, the one with the fastest heart rate who stood the farthest to the right, bellowed. “Why the hell didn’t we know this? Was she hurt? What’s with her not telling us this shit?”

“Last night. Late. She knocked one of the two out cold. As for not telling you...” Yep, definitely the big brother routine. How could she not see it? Was it really his place to give them a clue? “Well, she has the impression that you guys don’t value her as a member of the team. That she needs to prove herself at every turn.”

“That’s Aidan,” Liam said. “Her idea is bullshit, which we’ll deal with later. How long ago did you lose contact with her?”

“Just a few minutes ago. I warned her that someone was coming, but too late for her to hide.” Ian cocked his head. “You and Aidan are related. Twins?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you know that?” Aidan asked.

“Your heartbeats are almost identical.” Though Aidan didn’t seem to work as hard for control as Liam.

“This is all very fascinating.” Anxiety pinched Tyler’s voice. “But we have a teammate who needs our help.”

“Ian, you said you have ears on two of the men.”

“Yes.” He leaned into the car and grabbed the pocket PC he’d brought along. He tossed it over the car toward Breck, who caught it neatly judging by the slight slap of hard plastic against skin. “It’s muted. Just press the speaker icon and you’ll hear them if they’re talking.”

Aidan cleared his throat. “Is that like a sonar thing, Batman?”

Ian grinned and shrugged as he rounded the car to stand with the men. Anyone watching hopefully wouldn’t see them as more than a group of guys shooting the breeze. Unless they recognized Ian. “Sort of.”

Breck pressed the sound button.

The metallic striking of a lighter flint came through the small speaker. “One of these days you’re going to do some damage with that thing.”

“I look forward to it.”

Great. They were dealing with a pyro.

“That’s Danielson and Sanders,” Ian told Kieralyn’s team. “They’re the ones who are wired.”

“Do we want to know how you managed that without them knowing?” Tyler stepped to his left and leaned against the hood.

“You’d have to see it to believe it.”

“Sanders! Is the van ready?”

“Yes, boss.”

“That’s Isaacs,” Ian identified for the team. “It sounds like they’re in the main part of the club. Near the end of the bar by the hall leading to the office, kitchen and restrooms.”

“El Dogo is inspecting the women. We’ll be moving them out in five.”

Ian’s jaw tensed as a flash of rage washed over him. His father had answers to provide. If he was still on the good side and knew what was going down he should’ve found a way to reach out for backup. No one was lingering in the area. And damn it, he’d done something to Kieralyn. But what? Isaacs didn’t act like he knew about her.

“Then I’m going to torch the place.” Danielson laughed.

Four sets of teeth ground around him. “You know your way around the club, Ian?”

He nodded to Breck. “Yeah.”

“You’re going in with us.”

A gunshot reverberated off the walls inside the club. “Son of a bitch!” Isaacs yelled, but who’d been shot? Who’d done the shooting?

Kieralyn’s team shuffled. Four weapons were cocked and primed.

Liam stepped forward and tapped Ian’s shoulder. “With me. Stay close.”

“Head toward the back for the most direct route.” Tracking the men around him by their sounds, allowing them to be his armed shields, he kept pace. “There should be a door about fifteen feet down. Sanders used that one earlier.”

As they went, he gave them the layout of the club as he knew it. He’d been too distracted with Kieralyn to pay attention to the interior sounds when Sanders had opened the door, but he suspected it would take them into the hallway. “They may be at the end of the hall when we go in. Or they could be about fifteen feet inside where I think the door to a hidden room is.”

“Seriously, dude,” Tyler put in. “You’re going to have to tell us your secrets when we’re finished here.”

“Sure. Just do me a favor. If you have to shoot a man who looks anything like me, shoot to wound, not kill.” They all stopped. He knew they’d turned to look at him, as if they had time for this shit in the middle of broad daylight. “He’s my father, I think he’s undercover, and I want answers. Kieralyn or I will fill you in on the rest when we all get out of here.”

“Stay behind us unless you can dodge bullets,” Breck ordered.

“Sorry ’bout that.” El Dogo’s voice cracked through the speaker Breck still held. “That reporter was getting mouthy.”

*Son of a bitch!* Ian stumbled and then surged forward. Screw caution. A woman had just lost her life. Kieralyn was going to be heartbroken when she learned about Lana. Ian would personally see to it that his father shared her agony.

“Whoa!” Aidan grabbed Ian and blocked his path. “You aren’t flying in there, well blind, and getting yourself killed.”

“That bastard is mine.”

“Fine, but on our orders.”

“Fine.” Ian jerked free of Aidan. His jaw clenched with suppressed rage.

They proceeded to the door. Tyler and Aidan took the low positions. Breck and Liam took high, just behind Tyler and Aidan. From the sounds of it, they’d move into the door all at once. Four weapons trained and ready to fire.

Was he occupying the spot they assigned to Kieralyn? Even blind and unarmed, he understood her frustration if he was. She would want to be in the middle of the action, not shielded from it.

One of them grabbed the door knob and twisted it slowly. The latch clicked almost inaudibly. “Three. Two. Go.”

The door swung open. Rushing feet thundered.

“FBI!” Gunshots ricocheted. A door creaked. Isaacs, Danielson and Sanders shouted.

Women screamed from within the secret room. The door was cracked partially open.

Sanders and Isaacs turned and fled toward the main part of the club.

A lighter flint scraped. The stench of gasoline assaulted his nose an instant before the hiss of fabric catching fire arrested his attention. A kitchen door creaked as it swung open. Glass rolled across the tile floor.

One of Kieralyn’s team popped off another shot. Whatever Danielson had lit caught fire in the kitchen. Danielson fell to the floor. His heart stopped.

Shit. She had to know her team had moved in. Unless she was unconscious. Shit.

Tyler and Aidan went after Sanders and Isaacs. More shots rang out as they demanded Isaacs and Sanders put their weapons down. More gunshots volleyed.

The hissing pop of flames lapping at the walls held Ian frozen. His heart raced, pounding louder than ten drum lines at a high school football game and drowning out everything. He had to save Kieralyn.

A gun cocked to his left. Breck and Liam spun in that direction. “Freeze, asshole.”

*El Dogo.* Ian’s blood boiled. He pivoted toward his father and charged him with an animalistic war cry ripping at his throat. The shift of metal in his father’s hand had him reaching out to knock the weapon away. Ian grabbed him by the throat. “Where is she?”

With the strength of momentum, Ian forced his father back and shoved him against the wall.

“Who?” His father struggled and jerked his head back and forth. He clawed at Ian’s fingers on his throat.

“Agents, check on the women. See if Kieralyn’s with them.” Something told him she wasn’t.

Flames lapped up the walls, quickly consuming the place. Heat licked at Ian’s arms, singeing the hair, shrinking his skin. He struggled to stay in the present ...to not revert back to the scared kid trapped in a burning house. Smoke roiled and sucked the moisture from the air. Breathing would not be an option much longer.

Breck and Liam moved toward the hidden room.

El Dogo jerked his head and made choking sounds.

“We’ve got these bastards.” Tyler and Aidan hustled back into the hall dragging two bodies—Isaacs and Sanders, based on everyone’s locations.

“Hold him, Ian,” Breck commanded as he came through the door of the room with the five sobbing women. Kieralyn wasn’t one of them, judging from heartbeats. Where was Liam? “Tyler, Aidan, take those assholes outside. Tie them up, knock them out, I don’t give a shit, but I want them controlled.”

Liam came through the door carrying a woman whose heartbeat and choppy breathing were her only movements. Not Kieralyn. Lana? Had she not been killed?

“Beckett!” Ian tightened his grip on his father’s throat. The building was burning down, and Kieralyn wasn’t with the other women. His father had seen to that. “Where is she?”

El Dogo clawed at Ian’s hand gripping his throat. Ian loosened up enough to allow the bastard to speak. “K-kitchen.”

Of course she was in the kitchen. Near the fire. *Fuck.*

“Breck!” He couldn’t let his dad go, but neither could he leave Kieralyn alone.

“Here!” Breck raced back into the hallway.

“Take this son of a bitch.” Ian shoved his father at Breck.

“You can’t save her alone.”

“The hell I can’t.” He darted toward the kitchen and Kieralyn. He’d pick up the pieces of his shattered heart later. “She needs me.”

Like the song that had been playing last night when they’d made love said, their darkest hour had struck. He hoped like hell that Kieralyn would wait for him to get to her.

He pushed through the doors, toward the heart of the fire. The paint on the walls bubbled and cracked. Glass in the pictures fractured and shattered. Blazing heat surrounded Ian as if he’d walked into an inferno. He hesitated. Didn’t hear her heartbeat.

“Kieralyn!” Ducking his head, he worked his way through the kitchen. Flames licked at him. Smoke smacked him in the face. He covered his mouth and nose with his T-shirt. “Where are you?”

Nothing. He couldn't make out her heartbeat or anything else above the din of the fire. Panic set in and threatened to carry him back to his childhood. His heart raced—nearly obliterating his working senses. *No! I've done this before. I can do it again.*

He shook his head and focused his senses. She was in here. Somewhere. “Kieralyn! Damn you, woman! Answer me!”

*Thump.*

“Kieralyn?”

*Thump. Thump.*

There. To the right. He moved slowly, unfamiliar with the layout of the kitchen. Leading with his feet so he didn't burn his hands, he felt for obstacles. “Kieralyn, come on. Talk to me, baby. Where are you?”

He couldn't lose her. He couldn't lose the woman he loved.

*Thump.* “Ian?”

Yes! She sounded weak, but alive. He could work with that. Hurrying toward her, he tripped over something that had fallen onto the floor. Sprawled on his hands and knees, he could breathe a little easier in the thinner air.

“Kieralyn. Talk to me.”

She coughed. Two feet ahead.

He crawled forward. His hand brushed against her shoe. Rushing, he grabbed her and pulled her to him. Her heart beat timidly. Her breaths were more like gasps. He slid his hands over her quickly to check for injuries. A bump on the head seemed to be the worst of it. Physically anyway. Smoke inhalation was a different story.

“Come on, love. We have to get you out of here.” He eased up until he was standing with her clutched against him. Stooping a little, he slid an arm behind her knees and picked her up. She buried her face into his chest. He turned to go back the way he'd come.

Wood groaned. Something that sounded like a beam crashed to the floor. Flames formed a solid wall. They were trapped. *Shit!*

Where was her team when he really needed them? How in hell was he supposed to get her out of this?

Clutching her in his arms, listening to the soundtrack of her heart and her ragged breathing, he turned circles. Ideas and scenarios streamed through his head lightning quick and mixed with the terror he'd felt at ten. He'd been able to see then. He'd known where he was and how to get out. Now, the way he'd come was blocked. He didn't know of another exit. They would burn together.

The screeching hiss of the flames was awful. The smoke grew thicker by the second, flames hissed viciously as they climbed the walls and ceilings, eating everything in their path. They would devour him and Kieralyn. Melt the skin from their bones.

*No!* He would save her that hell. He would save her even if it meant he lived without her.

He buried his face in Kieralyn's neck and breathed deep. The smell of his soap coating her skin soothed him. Focused him. The only thing that mattered in this moment was her.

Ian stopped turning circles and told the frightened little boy inside to shut the hell up. He'd survived a fire. He'd found his way out of the swamp during one of his training sessions. He could get them out of here.

He took tentative steps forward, again leading with his feet though it was more difficult with Kieralyn in his arms. He bumped into a hot metal table. He steadied his balance and lifted his foot to get the feel of the table. His foot hit what seemed to be a bottom shelf. He shoved at the table, but it was either too weighted down with equipment or dishes or it was mounted to the floor.

To his left, a solid wall of flames from the fallen wood blocked him and grew hotter. He turned right and edged along the table. Another few careful feet away, the space opened up. The space to walk around. The table was the main work center. Fire hadn't reached this far into the room yet, but the temperature was climbing more with every second.

He coughed. Kieralyn wheezed. The smoke was taking a toll on their lungs.

He sidestepped left to check for another opening, but bumped into a fiery hot metal table. Was it L-shaped? U-shaped? Damn it! He was running out of time.

A pipe popped maybe three feet behind him to the right. A high pitched whistle followed. His heart stalled for several agonizing seconds before kicking into overdrive.

*Shit!* He'd heard that whistle before. He was out of time. Any second now the gas fumes from the busted pipe would hit the flames. They were too close to avoid being hit by the explosion. They wouldn't survive.

"Ian!"

He leaned his head to the right. Had he really heard...

"Ian!" His father was urging him on. Why had Kieralyn's team let him go? "Hurry up. Keep going straight."

"H-how..." Smoke slid down his throat, coating his lungs. He couldn't get enough breath to yell. If he was hallucinating, he only hoped it led him to an escape.

"Come on, son. Five more steps then turn left."

Ian counted the steps like he had when he was younger and learning where the furniture was. Odd, he counted all the time now, but never seemed to notice doing it.

"Good. About three more feet. There's a door."

The air was mixed with a cool breeze and waves of heat. The door opened to outside and the flames were reaching for the fresh oxygen. The gas would do the same thing.

The whistle intensified. Ian hurried. If he didn't get out before the explosion, he could at least be close enough to the door that the momentum might shove them outside rather than trap them against a wall.

He took two more steps. Two sets of hands grabbed his arms and hauled him outside. The explosion shook the building. Fire surged out the door and caught at his shirt. Someone smacked it out a moment before he collapsed with Kieralyn still in his arms.

## Chapter Ten

Kieralyn wiggled her legs but couldn't move. Shit! Had something worse than she remembered happened?

"Hey. Look who's awake."

Her muscles tensed as she eased her burning eyes open to see how bad off she was. Liam sprawled across the end of her bed grinning at her. His weight crushing her feet to the mattress explained the paralyzed sensation. She sank back into her pillows with a sigh.

Aidan and Tyler slumped together in the corner on the floor. They supported each other against the wall and snored lightly. The curtain was pulled so it blocked the top half of the other bed. Feet tented the thin blankets.

A bouquet of balloons and cookies sat on the roll-away table with a card stuck between the support sticks.

She looked around the darkened room but didn't see Breck. Lights lit up the city beyond her window. Maybe he'd gone home to get some sleep. And Ian, where was Ian?

"Breck's off tormenting the nurses and doctors since you haven't been awake to do it."

Not Ian.

She returned her gaze to Liam's deep brown, concern-filled one. A surge of emotion grabbed her throat and threatened to strangle her. They'd stayed at her side, waiting for her to wake up. They'd worried about her.

"You—" She coughed violently and grasped for the water beside her bed. She sipped slowly. The act of swallowing ached. "Comfy, Liam?"

"As a bug." He winked, but sat up.

Needlelike pain engulfed her feet when blood rushed back to them. She gasped, which sent her into another fit of coughing.

"Sorry, K." Liam ducked his head sheepishly and rubbed her feet. "Didn't think about putting your feet to sleep."

"It's all right." She kept her voice to a low whisper and rubbed her chest, hoping to minimize the coughing. She sounded raspy, as if she'd spent the last twenty-eight years sucking down two packs of cigarettes a day. "How long have you guys been here?"

"Since we brought you in yesterday morning."



She replayed what she could remember from the club. El Dogo's eyes—Ian's eyes—were one of her last memories. He'd knocked her out. She'd come to consciousness long enough to hear Ian calling for her. To see him coming toward her with flames at his back. "Was it Ian who pulled me out? Do I remember that right?"

"Yeah." Liam chuckled. "Surprising man. He stood there with a death grip on his father's throat, demanding to know where you were. Then he surged through those flames like a seasoned firefighter." Liam angled his head toward the bouquet. "He brought that by. Made us promise not to eat the cookies."

"That was nice of him." And like him to not do the typical flowers. A cough vibrated her chest. "The women. Lana. Did you get them out?"

"The five at the club and Lana are accounted for. We found records of past sales. Those women are being tracked down and will be brought home. The bad guys are either dead or behind bars." He held the cup of water to her lips again and narrowed his eyes with chastisement. "You should have told us about Lana. Who she was and why she sent you the information."

"I couldn't tell you. Breck would have kicked me off the case. Is she safe?"

"Maybe." Breck spoke from the other side of the sheet as he pushed it back. "Lana is enjoying the effects of sleeping pills, but will be just fine."

Lana's long blond hair fanned out over the pillow of the bed beside her. "What's wrong with her?"

"Long story short, she didn't realize El Dogo had been her source on her story. She rushed him when he went into the room with your gun."

If she'd listened and waited for her team, Lana wouldn't have been shot with her gun and she wouldn't have been trapped in the fire. Ian wouldn't have had to face another inferno. No one would be in the hospital right now. Then again, they might not have saved the women.

Kieralyn swallowed and held her silence as her team leader approached her bed. Anger pinched Breck's face, hardened his lips. He was going to kick her off the team before she was out of the hospital bed. Great.

"You were too close to the case. It led you to taking foolish risks."

*Going in without them.* "I only went over to jiggle some wires loose to keep the van from starting. I was going to head back to the car and wait for you." She forgot to whisper. More coughing gripped her. Liam grabbed a tissue and handed it to her. She wiped away smoke and soot residue.

"You should have waited. You could have followed them if they moved the women."

"Which would have put the women at risk if we'd been spotted tailing them. Besides, with the van disabled all the men were forced to stay in the same spot."

"Without someone who could *see* what was going on, it was a foolish move."

"There is nothing wrong with Ian Cabrera." She lurched up. "He functions just as well as you do with your sight."

Throbbing agony sliced through her head. She groaned as she eased back down and gave in to another fit of coughing. Being sick sucked.

Liam handed her a cup of ice chips. "You scared the shit out of us."

"Cabrerera was the one who dragged you out of the fire a second before the kitchen exploded." Breck grabbed her hand and smiled the first warm smile she'd seen aimed at her. "How could we argue that he's not a superhero?"

"Batman," Liam smirked.

She gave a small cough as she studied Breck and Liam. They were sincere. They liked Ian. More importantly, they liked her. And not out of sympathy that she'd almost died.

She studied the men filling her room. They hadn't left her. They'd given him a nickname, and they didn't do that lightly. Her throat grew thick with happiness. They'd called her K when she'd rarely been anything other than Beckett.

Tears pooled in her eyes. The saltiness stung her dry eyes, but she didn't care. They'd liked her all along. Cared for her.

It was like Ian had said when he'd blasted her about her shortcomings. She hadn't allowed herself to see affection from others. To believe it when she glimpsed it. "I'm sorry I've been an albatross for you."

"You're a woman." Liam winked. "It's your job."

She opened her mouth to retort back to him, but decided the pain of coughing wasn't worth it. What she'd regarded as chauvinism had been their brand of humor and caring. It was their way of baiting her into fights, and she'd played along beautifully.

"I'm sorry I risked so much. That I didn't wait for you." She shrugged. "I guess I knew that between Ian and you guys backing me up that everything would be all right."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Tyler smirked as he shoved Aidan's head off his shoulder and got up. "Next time, wait for us anyway."

"Is there going to be a next time?" She glanced to Breck, holding her breath for a second. "Are you keeping me on the team?"

He glanced at the men around her. She followed his gaze and studied each one. Another thing she'd missed. She'd always viewed Breck as the leader, and based on seniority he was, but this was a team in every way. Her fate rested in all of their hands.

She swallowed and waited. Sweat broke out on her palms. Her heart pounded. Her arm hairs vibrated. She fought the urge to close her eyes and pray. To beg and plead and make them whatever promises they wanted to hear.

Aidan got to his feet and walked to the foot of her bed. He stooped down for a second before moving to her side.

"Oh, just put her out of her misery," Lana squeaked sleepily from her bed.

“You stay out of this.” Aidan narrowed his gaze at Lana. “Troublemaker.”

“Make me.” But she leaned back against her pillow and closed her eyes.

Aidan turned and met Kieralyn’s eyes as he took her hand in one of his. With a small smile, he placed her badge in her palm. “Welcome to the team, Agent Kieralyn Beckett. Though from now on we’re calling you Albie for Albatross.”

Tears swelled in her eyes. She choked them down and grinned. She had to look like a loon, but she didn’t care. She belonged with these guys. They’d accepted her. Hell, they respected her.

Pain squeezed her heart. Her smile slipped away. She had everything she’d been looking for. She hadn’t realized what would be missing even once she found it.

“You realize that in college I minored in psychology.”

Ian rolled his eyes and tried to ignore Dante’s persistent presence in the lab. He hadn’t slept in days, kept checking his phone for missed calls and was fighting exhaustion. The last thing he needed was more dramatics.

“I don’t need those classes to know that you’re avoiding the situation.”

Ian focused on the recording he was analyzing. It might be cowardly, but he wanted to ignore the truth that his friend was trying to make him see.

“Ian, he’s been pacing the lobby for over an hour.”

He’d worked with Dante for five years. They’d become pretty good friends. Dante knew as much about the disappearance of his father as Ian did. He didn’t know the circumstances of his sudden reappearance. Or why Ian had left him waiting in the lobby.

“I’m working, Dante.”

“No.” He moved farther into the lab. “You’re playing that same section of track over and over. You aren’t actually analyzing it, because your head is out in the lobby.”

No. Ian’s head was with his heart in another building across town. “You’re wrong.”

“You want to think I am.” Dante tapped the desktop with his blunt fingertips before turning back toward the door. “You have one minute to get your shit together before I send him in.”

“I’ll fire you.”

Dante laughed. “You won’t. No one else will put up with you.”

A truth that unfortunately held true for Kieralyn as well.

“Oh, and if you care, Agent Beckett was released from the hospital this morning. She’ll be taking a few more days off to recover.”

Dante closed the door behind him. Ian dropped his head to the cool marble desk and fought to shove down the sorrow that had been tugging at his chest for the past three days. He’d checked on Kieralyn

several times over the last few days. Thanks to cowardice he'd only gone well after visitation hours when he knew she would be sleeping.

He'd never believed in love at first sight, or love at first heartbeat, as the case may be. Something about Kieralyn had arrested his attention from the moment she'd set foot in his lab.

Every second in her company had revealed another layer of her and she'd kept him intrigued even while she'd tried to pull away. She'd shown him that people could still be passionate about their jobs, and she was well suited for hers. He'd had fun with her and relaxed. He'd forgotten the freedom in sharing someone else's company.

The door latch clicked. He straightened in his chair and braced himself for whatever his father had to say. Despite everything he'd heard in the last few days, he still ached to believe that his dad's moral compass had stayed true over the years.

"Ian."

He stood and turned. "Dad."

His father stepped across the threshold of the still-open door.

"Did you agree to see me, or did Dante force this on you?"

Ian had taken an ecstatic call from his mother. Gushing about his dad's return, she hadn't noticed Ian's reservations. His sister had been more cautiously excited, but she hadn't understood Ian's hesitation to celebrate. He couldn't have told them what he'd found his father mixed up in even if he'd had it in him. "Does it matter?"

His dad sighed heavily as if any hope he'd had of a reconciliation had deflated. Good. Ian needed to know there was nothing but truth between them.

"I'd hoped that you would trust in what I taught you as a kid."

"You mean that morals and behavior define a man? Or that family is the most important thing he should hold on to?"

"Both." The hard soles of his dad's dress shoes smacked the floor as he walked over and leaned up against the desk. He'd always seemed comfortable wherever he'd been. "I thought you of all people would have understood what I was doing."

"That's where you're wrong." Ian shook his head and slumped against the desk opposite his father. "For two years, I watched Mom doubt her beliefs. Were you dead? Had you changed into a man she'd never know again? Maybe you'd been leading a double life and discovered a preference for the other one. I listened to the sadness in Mom's voice every time I talked to her."

"I told you before I left that I was working a case."

"Yeah. And I heard you on the phone before you vanished. You were going to do something drastic. Apparently that meant disappearing to join a kidnapping and slavery ring."

“You should have asked about that.” He shoved away from the desk and paced. “Damn it. I never wanted you to worry.”

“Maybe you forgot, but that’s what family does.” Ian reached behind him and punched a button to turn off the looping recording he’d forgotten about. He rubbed his gritty eyes. “I get that you were working a case. I know it dealt with terrorism, but I fail to see how that has anything to do with selling women into slavery.”

“I tried to get them to go with a different plan.” Distaste slurred his father’s voice. “They were certain that taking women who mattered to influential Miami officials would ensure them leniency with their plans.”

“You should have tried harder to veer them down a different path.” Though if he had, Ian wouldn’t have met Kieralyn. Pain stabbed deep at the thought of her. Maybe that would have been best.

“The best I could do was keep tabs on the women and ensure they were not harmed. It’s taken me this long to get high enough in the organization and find the proof I needed to bring down the head guy.”

“And you couldn’t tip your hand to him.” Ian remembered his tactics training. He’d never agreed with some of the methods, but he knew what they were.

“More lives than those of the women taken were at risk.”

“It’s all for the greater good.” His father hadn’t traded sides. He hadn’t betrayed his family or his country. Why was he still fighting the excitement that his dad had returned? That he was still apparently the same man he’d been when he left?

“Ian, I know that you understand why I made the choices I did.” Mick stopped pacing and stood right in front of Ian. “Just as I understand why you got involved in the first place with something as seemingly small scale as a series of kidnappings.”

His father hadn’t changed. Like his heartbeat, he was steady and confident. “I only listened to a recording.”

“I’ve talked to the FBI. To Agent Beckett.” His dad laughed. “I can see how she got past Dante. And I can see—” his voice grew quiet, “—how listening to that recording and hearing my name would have hurt you.”

Ian’s eyes grew heavy with the buildup of unshed tears. There was the answer to why he was still fighting. “I couldn’t tell Mom that I had confirmation that you were still alive. That you were possibly close by.”

“That’s been the hardest part of this assignment. I’ve been in the area, but haven’t been able to see any of you. To let you know I was all right.” He stepped closer and rested his hand on Ian’s shoulder. “I saw you the night you went to the club with Agent Beckett. You’re good together.”

He blinked and a tear slid down his cheek. How ironic was it that he would fall in love and his father would approve of a woman who may not want a relationship? He wanted to go to her. The desire burned in

his gut, but she needed to make the next move. She needed to find out for herself what she wanted. Breathing slowly, he brought himself back under control.

“I’m glad you’re back, Dad. And that the FBI didn’t have to kill you or put you in a cage.”

“It says a lot that they gave me the benefit of the doubt for your sake.” He squeezed Ian’s shoulder before dropping his hand. “And I’m glad you were all there. I hadn’t been able to make contact with my team and hadn’t figured out how I was going to stop the women from being shipped out.”

“Then why did you knock Kieralyn out? Why not tell her what you were up to?”

“I considered it. In the end I decided she would be safer if she was out of the way.” He shuffled his feet, a rare show of uncertainty. “That didn’t work out as I’d planned.”

“I’d say not.” It hadn’t been in anyone’s plans for her to get trapped in a burning room. Neither had it been in Ian’s to ever face another fire, and yet he’d run into another one if it meant saving Kieralyn.

After talking a little longer and promising to join the family for a welcome back dinner that weekend, Ian listened to his dad leave. Letting go of the hurt had been surprisingly easy once he’d faced his dad and recognized his hesitations as fear rather than hurt.

After two days, the misery dogging him from Kieralyn’s absence had a firmer hold on him than two years without his father had. Knowing he wouldn’t be able to focus enough to work, he got Maximum from the small yard behind the lab and headed out through the lobby.

“What do you say we shut down early, Dante? Go knock back a few drinks?” Something had to occupy his thoughts.

Dante shifted in his seat and cleared his throat a couple of times. “Tonight’s not good.”

“What are you up to now?” Something was up. He wasn’t in the mood for more surprises.

“It’s my turn to host football night with the family.”

*Right.* Every third televised game was at Dante’s house. “Have a good time.”

“You’re always welcome.”

“I know.” Ian had gone once. Dante’s family was nice, but they didn’t know how to behave with a blind man in the house. He’d tried to joke that he wasn’t the pope, and that they didn’t have to worry about what they said. They hadn’t been able to relax though, so he took pity on them and stayed away. “Thanks.”

He slid his mental shields into place to protect himself from the onslaught of sounds and walked outside with Maximum at his side. The dog brushed against his leg, offering comfort. He smiled and rubbed Maximum’s head. “You’re the perfect companion. My best friend.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have one that could talk back, though?”

Ian froze. His heart plummeted. Afraid to discover he was imagining things, he slid his shields down and listened to sounds around him.

A heart powered by a bold and almost tangible emotion beat an erotic melody that now lived firmly inside him. Just as it had that first day in his lab, Kieralyn's spirit wrapped around him like an invisible cocoon.

She stood a few feet away near the bench where he so often ate lunch. She'd been waiting for him, and Dante had known it. "What are you doing here?"

"Did you mean it?" She walked closer until she was standing a foot in front of him. "What you wrote on the card?"

*I'll be waiting when you're ready to trust me. I love you.* His eyes watered up again. Tears clogged in his throat, making it tough to speak. "Every word."

Her heart slammed out a hard rhythm that matched his own. "Thank you."

Not what a man wanted to hear after confessing his love. "For the fire? Don't mention it."

"For..." Her voice cracked. She stepped closer and touched his hand. "For listening."

"It's my job." Why was she doing this to him? She wasn't blind. She had to see what he was going through.

"For standing by me. You showed me that I had everything I thought I wanted with my team." Her hand shook over his. "That they do respect me."

"They care for you. It's impossible not to." His voice rasped.

"Ian—"

"I have to go." He pulled his hand from hers, stepped to the side, and walked away. Tears ran down his face. He couldn't escape fast enough.

Her heart stuttered and she gulped. She couldn't be crying. She cared, but not enough that his walking away would make her cry.

"I trust you."

Her quiet admission was as effective as a lasso tightening around his neck. He jerked to a stop and lowered his head. He swiped the tears from his face. She hurried to him, but didn't come around to face him.

"Don't do this, Kieralyn."

"Ian."

"Don't play games with me. I'm not built for them."

"No games." She rested her shaking palm on his biceps. "No reservations. I love you."

Listening closely to her heartbeat and the levels of her voice, he turned and aimed his gaze, whatever it looked like, straight at her. He couldn't bring himself to touch her until he knew she meant what she said. "None?"

"Not a one." She stepped closer and brushed her thumbs beneath his eyes. Her palms rested on his cheeks. "I love the man that you are. The man that your blindness has made you."

He dropped Maximum's leash and framed Kieralyn's face. He brushed a tear from her cheek with his thumb. "Do you know what this means to me?"

"I think I do. When I was in that hospital bed, surrounded by my team, listening to them talk about me being one of them I realized that I'd been granted everything I thought I wanted. Then I looked at that bouquet. I remembered waking up for a minute in that burning kitchen. Hearing your voice." Her voice shook. Tears flowed down her face. "I thought I was imagining things because there was no way that you would face another fire. And how were you supposed to help me? To see where I was?"

"Kieralyn."

"I know now that it isn't your eyes that give you sight." She trembled beneath his hands. Her breath quivered. "It's your ability to like yourself, to accept what life has given you. It's your heart."

"You're not always pleasant or easy company, but you're my heart, Kieralyn." He pulled her to him and hugged her tight. "I don't know how, I sure as hell didn't expect it, but you captivated me from the beginning. I was helpless to falling in love with you."

She sniffled against his chest. "We must look like morons. Standing here blubbering on the NSA lawn."

He laughed and pulled back enough to kiss her. The glide of her mouth against his resonated with the love she'd declared. She was making it all so easy. "Why do you want someone like me? It won't be easy."

"Someone like you?"

"Blind. Scarred."

"That doesn't matter to me. Because you're blind and scarred, you don't pretend to be someone you're not." She pulled back and ran her fingers along his face—tracing his scars. "These scars add to your charm. They're intriguing. They're a testimony to all that you've been through and they're evidence that you have rough edges. You're challenging and unpredictable. You aren't perfect, but you're sexy as hell in every way. It helps that I really like you."

He grinned and took her hands in his. "I really like you, too. Even if you are a pain in the ass."

"Does this mean I can come home with you?"

He brushed his thumbs over the pulse points on her neck. "There will be conditions."

"Name them."

"You have to take my name and eventually be willing to give my mom at least one grandchild."

"I think I can do that." Her lips lifted into a smile beneath his palms. "I love you, Ian."

"I loved you first."

She laughed. "I see how it's gonna be."

"Never dull." He laughed and pulled her close. Life with Kieralyn would be a challenge. And he would make sure she never regretted her decision.



## About the Author

Nikki Duncan, jokingly known to some as Naughty Nikki, juggles her time between writing, multiple jobs, household duties, and family. Of all the things on her To Do List, Nikki neglects the household chores most frequently. Then again, who doesn't want to ignore laundry and dishes?

Before turning to writing, Nikki passed her spare time with a hundred or so romance books a year. While the reading has tapered off a bit, her love of books and reading is stronger than ever. She now spends large chunks of time indulging in her love of creating stories that will hopefully offer people the peace that, regardless of whatever is wrong with their life, hope and faith in something better can always be found between the covers of a book.

To learn more about Nikki, please visit [www.nikkiduncan.com](http://www.nikkiduncan.com). Send an email to Nikki at [nikki@nikkiduncan.com](mailto:nikki@nikkiduncan.com).

*A wounded cop. A frightened woman. A desperate race to save a child in danger...*

## The Midnight Effect

© 2009 Pamela Fryer

In a single phone call, Lily Brent's entire life—past and future—becomes foggy with confusion and danger. Her estranged sister is dead, and the body is lacking one definitive mark: a surgery scar from the kidney Lily thought she'd donated to her sister long ago.

There's more than a mystery on her hands. There's a niece she never knew she had, and a madman on her trail who's hell-bent on getting the child back.

When a beautiful woman crashes her car into his remote mountain gas station, followed closely by a man with a silencer-equipped pistol, three years of inactive duty fall away as Miles Goodwin springs into action. He saves Lily and her golden child, but nothing can save him from the painful reminder of the family he lost. Retreating to his emotional coma, however, isn't an option; they're far from safe.

There's something strange about a six-year-old girl who's never eaten a hamburger or heard of Tinkerbell—and who seems to be the source of psychic phenomena so powerful, someone's willing to kill to get her back.

Warning: Contains heart-pounding suspense, a charm-your-socks-off kid, and a compelling romance that may inspire you to combine your DNA with someone you love!

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Midnight Effect:*

Miles Goodwin tipped his chair back as he took a slug from his beer. Across the tree line the remainder of the day was a bloody smear on the horizon. The setting sun drifted away mockingly. *Another day and you're still here because you don't have the courage to put your revolver in your mouth.*

He smacked at a mosquito on his neck. The bugs were relentless at dusk, but this was Miles' favorite time of day. Swallowing darkness was moments away, when he wouldn't recognize each agonizing minute in the passage of time. Night was limbo in the personal hell his life had become.

It was a chore to drag himself out of bed every morning, painful to endure every endless minute. The mark of each sunset brought him one day closer to the end he longed for. Closer to the end he didn't have the courage to seek on his own. Suicide was a sin, and if there was a sweet hereafter, he wouldn't join Sara and Michelle there if he took his own life.

The roar of an engine pulled his attention to the dark tunnel of Northern pine where the highway wound out of sight. The front legs of his chair fell onto the porch with a *thunk*. He rarely saw a customer at his little gas station after six. By now most of the tourists were already in town at the expensive restaurants, sipping their second martinis.

A classic Mercedes two-seater raced around the bend and went into a drift on squealing tires.

The car fishtailed before regaining traction. Clouds of white smoke poured from the exhaust as though it had blown a head gasket. As it barreled down the highway at breakneck speed, chunks of rubber flapped at the right rear wheel. The car was out of control, but the driver wasn't trying to stop.

Sparks flew from the rim as the last shreds of the tire disintegrated. The car careened down the embankment on the side of the highway and launched itself off the incline, headed directly for his small station.

"Jesus!" Miles leapt to his feet and dove off the porch, narrowly missing the rusted edge of a twisted bumper as he hit the ground. He scrambled to his feet and ran, still clutching his foaming beer bottle, as the car crashed into the pumps.

A dull *whuff* pressed on his eardrums as the pumps exploded. For the space of a heartbeat the dusky forest was as bright as high noon.

Miles hit the emergency shut-off lever at the side of the garage and the tanks sealed off, but the car was already on fire. There were no sprinklers at the historic station's stand-alone island.

Nobody could have lived through an explosion like that. At that horrific moment, he knew there was at least one dead body at Goodwin's Garage.

The irony hit him—there could have been two. What had made him run? He'd been longing for death for three years, aching for it more with each day that passed. Yet at the first sign of danger he'd been on his feet, preserving his sorry ass. It had been instinct as much as police training.

*Dammit to hell.*

Momentum had taken the car past the worst of the flames. The windshield was a shattered milky spider web, but still held.

Conditioned by police training, he ran toward the car without thinking, more concerned for the driver than for himself.

Movement shifted behind the white-green kaleidoscope of safety glass. A hand passed over the steering wheel, and Miles knew it was a woman in the car.

*She's alive—there must be a God in Heaven.*

The driver's door opened as flames burst across the hood. She staggered out and fell to her knees.

A second explosion rocked the quiet mountainside. Still running, Miles threw up his arm to block the intense heat.

His heart caught in his throat as he rounded the coupe's door and saw she had a little girl clutched under her arm.

The woman braced herself on the ground with her other hand as she tried to get away from the burning car. He grabbed her by the forearm and hauled her to her feet. She wobbled unsteadily as he pulled her arm over his shoulder. The child scrambled past him, headed for the backside of his garage.

A confusing mixture of past and present rocked him like a punch to the gut. She wasn't his beloved daughter, but the sight of her blond hair tossing as she ran ahead of him sent coherence spinning away.

The woman moaned and her weight sagged on him, bringing him back to the here and now.

"Help..."

He dragged her away from the car. "Jesus, lady, what the hell? Are you trying to get killed?"

He was practically carrying her by the time they arrived at the corner of the building where the little girl waited, shielded from the scorching heat.

"Aunt Lily!" She threw her arms around her aunt's waist.

The woman knelt and gripped the child by her shoulders. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, sniffing.

"I'm so sorry." She pulled the child close. "It's okay, Annie. We're going to be okay."

"Not if you keep driving like that," Miles growled. "You just blew up my gas station."

The woman glanced at him. The horror in her eyes made him flinch. A trickle of blood ran down the woman's temple and spattered her blouse.

"You're hurt," Annie said. Her voice trembled with the precursor to tears. She reached out and touched the woman's face with tiny, hesitant fingertips. The gesture caused his shriveled heart to jerk.

Without removing those wide, brown eyes from his, Lily took her niece's hand and stood. Only then did she glance past him.

"Is that your truck?"

His mouth fell open. "Lady, you need an ambulance."

Would the phone still work, or had the destruction of his station knocked out power and phone lines? Services were finicky enough up here without being rocked by a two-megaton blast.

"He's coming," Annie whimpered.

The horror in Lily's eyes deepened. She glanced at the child and started past him.

"I need your vehicle."

Before he could have guessed this night would get any weirder, she snatched up a rusted sliver of metal and whirled around, pointing it at him.

"Give me the keys."

*She's robbing me with an old antenna?* "You've got to be kidding."

"Aunt Lily," Annie persisted with greater urgency.

Slivers of wood exploded from the corner of the building above his ear. Miles heard the muffled chirp over the roar of the fire. He knew what it was even before a second shot whizzed past his head. The sound sent him careening back to his eight years with the Seattle PD.

*Silencer.*

*Sometimes what you're looking for is closer than you think.*

## Because of You

© 2009 Mari Carr

Jessie's life is a mess. In the eight hellish months since her husband died in a freak accident, she's been mugged, her house has been trashed, and now she's receiving frightening pranks calls. She resists a friend's offer of a weekend getaway—her grief is still too fresh to consider meeting anyone new.

Then again, since it's a party for gay men, there won't be any pressure, right?

ER doctor Caleb James feels perfectly at ease among his gay brother's friends, but one look at Jessie sparks a sexual tension that's impossible to ignore. A few drinks and a few hours of conversation later, things move a lot faster than either of them expect. Jessie is left confused and Caleb aches with regret—and love for a woman who is still guarding her heart.

Pressure is the last thing she needs. But as it becomes apparent that her string of misfortunes trace back to her husband's death, help is what she's going to get. Caleb's help...ready or not.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Because of You:*

"Husband?" he asked and she saw his eyes dart to her ring finger. She'd given up wearing her diamond engagement ring, but she couldn't seem to part from the actual white gold wedding band.

She sucked in a breath at his question. She'd carefully avoided talking about Tommy all night. She'd wanted a night to forget, a night to pretend that her life was normal and happy and that she hadn't had her heart ripped out of her chest eight months earlier.

"I'm a widow," she said and the sound of that simple word released the flow of ice cold water throughout her body once again. For a few hours, she'd been warm. Hell, between Caleb and the alcohol, she spent more than a few moments on fire and it had felt so damn good.

"I'm sorry," he said, rising and crossing the room to take her icy hands in his. She didn't realize until his touch that she was shaking. In just one evening, he'd diminished the shadow of fear that constantly hovered over her. He'd rejuvenated her, made her feel alive.

She shook her head, desperately willing away the chill, the sadness. Dammit, she didn't want to be cold anymore. She was tired of being afraid. "It's been eight months and I'm afraid I sometimes tend to talk about Tommy in the present tense, like he's still here."

"Had he been ill?" he asked and she smiled sadly. He sounded very much like a doctor.

"Freak accident. He slipped on a patch of ice and hit his head on a car door. It was late and brutally cold and he was the last person leaving work that night. It was several hours before I found him and by then—"

“You found him?” he asked, pulling her gently to a chair in the kitchen. He pushed her down before sitting next to her. He never released his grip on her hands and she knew he felt the coldness in them as he began to rub them with his own as if to warm them.

“I was concerned when he didn’t come home and didn’t answer his cell. He was an accountant and it was audit season, so he worked late occasionally, but it wasn’t like him not to call and check in. Finally, I worried myself into a frenzy and decided to drive by his office, fully prepared to give him holy hell for scaring me so.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry it was you who found him.”

She shrugged and closed her eyes. She was a master at controlling her tears, yet here with Caleb it seemed harder to do. She’d managed to push her pain deep inside her and she even found it easier of late to discuss Tommy’s death. Tonight, whether it was the alcohol or her tiredness or Caleb’s compassion, the emotions were threatening to bubble over and she refused to let that happen.

“Well, I suppose I managed to bring tonight’s fun level down. That’s me—the official ruination of all parties,” she tried to joke. She pulled her hands out of his comforting grip and went back to the counter. “Do you like cream and sugar in your coffee?”

“No, I drink it black, and, Jessie, you didn’t ruin anything. You’re going through a damn hard time right now, dealing with something no one should ever have to deal with. Don’t be so hard on yourself. I wish I could give you an easy fix, but I’m afraid nothing except time will cure this.”

She grinned over her shoulder, determined to return to the easy banter they’d enjoyed all night. “That’s quite a bedside manner you have, Dr. Caleb.” The flirtatious line felt rusty and foreign as it fell from her lips, but Caleb didn’t seem to notice.

He gave a short, brief laugh. “Oh yeah, I’m a master at bedside—” He paused mid-sentence and she was surprised when he walked over to her and placed his hands on her cheeks. “Christ, Jess. I want to kiss you so badly it hurts.”

“So kiss me,” she whispered, uncertain where the words had come from, his and hers. From the second he touched her face, she wanted him with a passion she’d thought long gone.

He leaned down and took her lips gently, sweetly, but she refused to be patronized, treated with kid gloves. She was a living, breathing woman and she wanted him. Wanted him beyond reason, beyond care.

She reached up, gripping his hair in her fingers roughly, pulling his face more firmly to her. She opened her mouth and welcomed his tongue, before pushing it out of her way to explore his lips, his teeth with her own.

He moved his hands down to her waist, his grip stronger, more certain, more controlling. She was giving him everything her broken shell of a body had left to give and she sensed he was more than ready to take her up on the offer.

His lips slid from hers, gliding along her cheek to her earlobe, down her neck. The whole time he worshipped her with his mouth, his hands roamed, finding their way beneath her T-shirt to her breasts. She groaned at the hot touch of his hands against her taut nipples and he ground his hard erection into her pussy.

“God,” she gasped, his touches, his lips, his body pushing hers rapidly into overdrive. “More,” she demanded. “Please, Caleb. More.”

He continued his sensual assault and she fought to keep up. She shoved his hands off her body for a moment so that she could pull his T-shirt over his head. The image of his bare, sculpted chest was a visual treat, but she couldn't make herself take the time to enjoy it. She was on fire and her body was demanding that she take everything he had to give immediately. She leaned down, nipping at his small, hard nipples and he hissed with delight. His hands began working at the button and zipper of her jean shorts, shoving them and her panties over her hips, leaving her bare from the waist down.

Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she wondered what the hell she was doing, but that thought was quickly squelched by a single touch of his fingers against her clit.

“Yes,” she whispered hoarsely. His hand delved farther and soon she found herself roughly pushing her hips toward him, forcing the two fingers he plunged inside her deeper, harder, faster. She was cresting on the edge of an orgasm within moments, but she refused to come alone. Caleb had given her so much tonight. Without realizing it, he'd offered her an escape, a refuge from the mourning, and she wanted to give him back some small part of the incredible pleasure he was building inside her.

“You,” she demanded. “I want you.”

*Seeing dead people is bad enough. Loving him could make her one of them.*

## Catch Me In Castile

© 2009 Kimberley Troutte

When the mother of all panic attacks prompts Erin Carter's boss to pass her over for promotion, her mind doesn't just crack. It explodes like an egg in a microwave, shattering her career along with the company car she crashes into the office building.

The death grip she's kept on her sanity slipping, she takes a friend's advice and flees to Spain. There she finds comfort in the healing arms of surgeon Santiago Botello—until a fifteenth-century ghost warns her that being with Santiago is dangerous, possibly even lethal.

Santiago has his hands full protecting his sister from a dark curse and his family from a very modern-day psychotic killer. The last thing he needs added to his plate is a neurotic American. Yet something about Erin tugs at his heart so hard he wants to wrap her in his arms and never let go. No matter the risk.

Erin's attraction to Santiago makes her the killer's next target. Survival means she must face her greatest fear, solve an ancient murder mystery—and hang on tight to the one man she's fallen crazy in love with.

*Warning: This book contains a woman willing to lose her mind for love, a hot Spaniard with hands a girl could die for, deadly family curses, a ghost with memory disorder, and a really mad killer.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Catch me in Castile:*

"You worked with Maria?" Santiago asked.

"I am...was...am a stockbroker." I laughed. "It's a little confusing right now. I'm taking a break from it all." I sat back. "Call it a vacation."

"Ah," was his polite answer. He probably suspected I'd been canned. I let him think whatever he wanted. Somehow being fired from my job would have been better than losing my mind, heart, and soul to it.

"It's a difficult business, especially for a woman."

My hackles rose. "For a woman?"

His eyebrows rose to match my tone. "It's not?"

"It's a hard business for many. A woman dedicated to succeeding in her career can handle it just fine."

"You're a career woman."

"I most certainly am—hey, watch out!" A fist to my shoulder blade rudely cut off my thoughts. Spinning around in my chair, I was ready to scream at the brute who had the audacity to sock a woman in the back. Oddly, no one was there.



*Dear God, I'm imagining things?*

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Facing him again, my hackles had gone down, replaced by goose bumps all over my skin. "Did you see who hit me in the—?" I closed my mouth.

His dark eyebrows hitched up in confusion.

*No, I scolded myself, Stick to Plan 3 in my Get a Life Journal—don't go crazy.*

"Nothing." The old fight to stand up for myself and my gender was gone. I sighed. "To answer your question, I'm trying to be all right. Sometimes...it's hard."

Emotion I couldn't decipher passed over his face. "I know."

He had his own hardships to bear. I wasn't about to drop mine in his lap. "Santiago, all I want to be right now is on vacation. I need a break from my life. When I get home, I'll try to sort out what I want to be when I grow up."

"Fair enough." He still eyed me suspiciously. "How long will you be staying?"

"Trying to get rid of me already?" I teased, but thought it might be true.

"No. How long will we be fortunate to have your company?"

"Ah, a charmer you are. My condo is rented out for the summer, so I have three months to play around. I'll probably travel Spain a bit. See the sights."

"Why don't you stay here the whole time?" His mouth opened in surprise as if he hadn't meant to say that at all.

"Here? In your home?"

His lips parted, but no sounds came out.

I kept my answer light. "That would be imposing. Something my mother tells me not to do."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. What in the world was he debating in that glorious head of his? Finally he said, "The house is big. I'd appreciate it if you keep Maria company while she settles back in. It will be good for her to look after you. I'm not here often. I have a flat downtown, closer to the hospital."

"Oh."

"Please consider staying. Here."

"You and Maria are very kind. I'll think about it."

*Oh man, that devastating grin.*

We switched gears and I asked him about his career, while the candlelight shimmered in his eyes. He had a general practice, was trained in internal medicine and elected to the position of Chief Medical Doctor at the Salamanca hospital.

I smelled modesty. "Impressive. Where'd you go to school?"

"I graduated from UCLA. Pre-Med. My graduate work was here, in Salamanca."

“You must know Dr. John Stapleton at UCLA,” flew out of my mouth before I had a chance to rein it in.

He thought a moment. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Which medical department is he in?”

*Holy crap, please tell me I did not drop my psychiatrist’s name into casual conversation with the sexiest man on the planet.*

I ran my hand up the back of my neck. “Um, not sure.” *Think, Erin, think.* “Hey, I almost went to UCLA too. USC has a better Economics department.” I drew lazy eights on the glass table with my fingers, trying to calm myself. “Too bad I can’t speak to you ever again.”

“What?”

“We’re rivals.”

“I hope not. You make me look good on the dance floor.”

*Nope, did that all by himself.* I wondered for a millisecond about Helena. Had she gone home? Could I be so lucky? “I, uh, noticed you dancing with a lovely lady over there.”

“With beautiful red hair?”

“That would be the one.” I resisted touching my own sandy locks. “Is she, are you two, you know?”

“Helena is a friend of mine who volunteers at the hospital.”

“Say no more.” I held up my hand. “Been there myself.”

He frowned, studying my face. “Been where? The hospital?”

I blushed. “No, I meant you don’t need to tell me about your relationship. I understand the need for—” I searched for the appropriate word, “—discretion at work.”

He smiled and leaned a little closer. “Helena and I are friends. You had male friends at your last job, right?”

Dry gulp. “Not friends, exactly. More like spiteful, vicious—Ow!”

“What’s wrong?”

I rubbed my shoulder. “Something pinched me. Do you have mosquitoes here?”

His face was serious “What happened in your job? Did someone hurt you?”

He seemed determined to make me tell him the gory details. I wasn’t going there. Not anymore. I looked into his sensitive eyes. “My life is…” I thought about Maria, “...littered. I’m trying to clean it up. And I will. For now, I’m seizing the day one moment at a time. Starting with this one.”

I flattened my palms on the round table and leaned closer. He watched curiously as I moved toward him until we were face to face. Softly, I kissed his lips. Calculating career woman would never dare do such a thing. The newly developing goddess in me was feeling reckless. Alive.

I meant for it to be a soft peck, a gentle caress. I had absolutely no intentions of flicking the tip of my tongue across his bottom lip, deepening the kiss, sucking his delicious bottom lip into my mouth, and running my fingers through his glorious black hair. None at all. But the best laid plans...

The attraction raged like a storm out of control, snapping and crackling under Santiago's skin. He couldn't help it. The dancing had warmed his blood and the fire roaring inside the woman threatened to consume him.

Erin was beautiful beyond words. She was also smart, sensitive, and courageous. But he saw something else behind those deep honey eyes that scared him. Every now and then he caught a flash of anguish, a twist of her pain, buried deep in her psyche.

It ate at him. He wasn't good at sitting idly by while a beautiful woman was tortured before his eyes. And why she kept looking over her shoulder was beyond him. Hallucinations? Post-traumatic disorder?

*Damn it!* What happened to her?

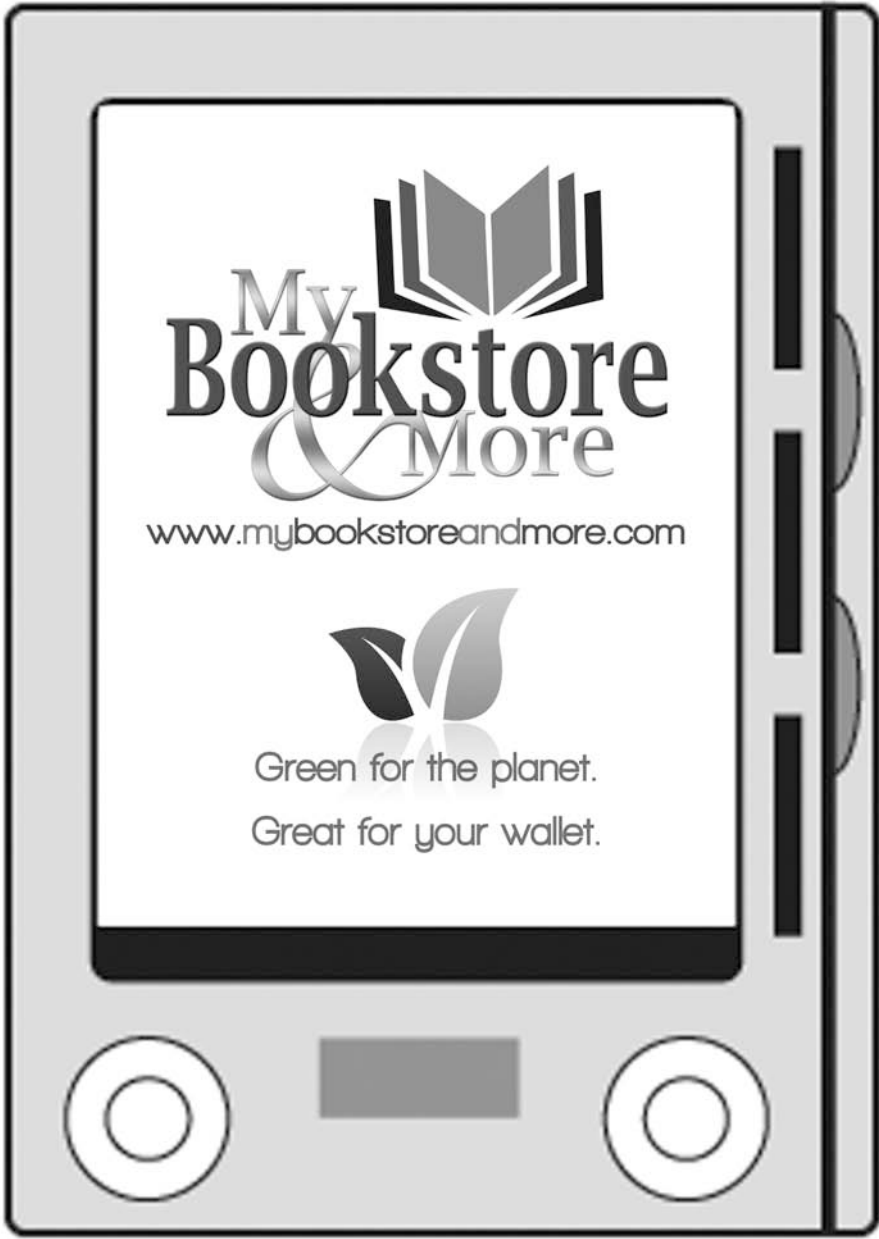
*Don't get involved,* he warned himself. *I can't fix her.*

Besides, he had more than enough problems to worry about. No, he had to squelch the firestorm spreading through his veins. For both their sakes.

But when her lips met his...

Dear God, when she kissed him electricity sparked through his nervous system and lightning struck his heart. It was as if he'd been zapped by the hospital's defibrillator. His mind was five seconds behind, trying to comprehend the situation. And when her tongue ran across his bottom lip, slowly, sensually...*mierda*, he had to learn how to breathe all over again.

Erin Carter was a force of nature, unlike anything he'd ever seen. Lord help him, he wanted to seize the lightning in his fists and dive headlong into the storm.



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