



Loose Id

*Dead*  
**RECKONING**

Trista Ann Michaels

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## Chapter One

Her eyes were wide with fear, her breathing erratic. He could almost smell her terror as he circled the young woman tied to the table, and he inhaled deeper.

Naked, she shivered from head to toe beneath the tape holding her against the cold metal of the table. Tears streamed from the corners of her eyes to disappear into her hairline, dampening the blonde curls. Tape covered her full lips to stifle her screams, but he could still hear her muffled sobs. He closed his eyes, taking a moment to enjoy the sound. It was almost like music, growing soft in her fatigue or booming in a loud crescendo as her fear intensified.

He loved the power he had over her, the control. He could make her tense, scream in pain, cry almost hysterically.

Coming to a stop at the head of the table, he stared down at the young woman and brushed his hand over her hair. She flinched as much as she could beneath the binding, and he smiled. She looked so much like his mother. They all did.

“It’s okay, Mom,” he murmured.

The woman’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Everything will be fine.”

He pulled the tape from her mouth, enjoying the sound of her whimper as the tape ripped at her sensitive flesh, leaving it red and raw. She licked her lips, her eyes widening slightly in growing fear. Her lips trembled as she tried to speak.

“Please,” she said, her voice shaking with barely controlled hysteria. “Please. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Of course you won’t. You’ll never get the chance.”

With a smile, he sank the blade of his knife into her soft flesh. Her scream filled his ears, and he sighed as the sound surrounded him like a cold blanket. He kept his cuts shallow, careful not to hit a vital organ. He liked taking things slow. He liked drawing it out to the point they begged for death.

“It won’t be long now, Mom,” he whispered as he repositioned the trembling fingers of her left hand against the table.

He set the blade of the knife just above her knuckle at the base of her ring finger and pressed down hard. The blade cut through flesh and muscle easily, but at the bone, he had to push down just a little harder. It snapped, and the blade hit against the table with a soft pop.

The woman cried out, sobbing almost uncontrollably now as he held the finger up and examined it against the light. Blood dripped from the digit to slide down his wrist and arm.

"A perfect cut," he murmured. "But I think I need to sharpen the blade just a little." He stared down at the wide, frightened eyes of the young woman and smiled. "Or maybe not. Dull blades hurt more, I think."

\* \* \*

Sheriff Brian Scott closed down his computer, anxious for some sleep. He'd worked a double shift two days in a row due to budget cutbacks, and he was exhausted.

He rubbed his hand down his face with a sigh.

To be honest, he would much prefer going to see Kathryn. He hadn't seen her in a few days, and he missed her. God, he was such a damn idiot. He needed to tell her how he felt—how much he wanted her—but he was terrified if he did, he would lose the best friend he had.

Pulling his phone from the belt clip, he glanced at the clock on the screen. It was still fairly early. She would be finishing up at the bookstore she owned, so maybe he could convince her to go to a late dinner. Kathryn was always up for Chinese.

He flipped his cell phone open and started to dial her number when one of his officers stuck his head in the door.

"Just got a call from a woman out on Evans Road. She lives across the street from that new condo building that's going up. She was out walking her dog and thinks she saw someone messing around over there. Figured since it was on your way home..."

Brian flipped his phone closed and grimaced. "Trying to run me out of here?"

"You've been here for over fourteen hours. Check it out on your way home. Then get some sleep. It's probably just kids. It'll take you ten minutes max to check the perimeter."

Brian nodded. He was right. He did need to get some sleep. He wasn't any good to anyone as a sheriff if he was exhausted.

\* \* \*

He lifted the dead woman into his arms and headed across the packed dirt toward a hole he'd seen earlier. It wasn't deep, but it was deep enough to dump her body into. He wanted this one found sooner than the others. He wanted that son of a bitch sheriff to know that he was back—that the nightmare was ongoing.

He shifted the stiff body as he came to a stop, standing over what would be the woman's shallow grave. Rigor mortis had already begun to set in, making carrying her difficult. With a grunt he tossed her body into the hole where she landed with a

dull thump. No sound came from her bruised and tattered body, no movement from her bloody limbs.

He reached down, grasped her wrist, and pulled her arm upward, making sure her hand was visible above the mound of dirt beside her.

The roar of a diesel engine caught his attention, and he glanced quickly around the deserted parking lot. He could see the headlights as the vehicle slowed, preparing to turn into the Evans Road entrance to the complex.

Had someone seen him? He looked around, checking the shadows but seeing nothing. He glanced back toward the truck, squinting in the hopes of getting a better look.

The sheriff. Damn.

Moving quickly, he made his way back toward the woods and to his car parked about a mile away.

\* \* \*

Brian pulled into the littered parking lot of the future upscale condo complex. He drove slowly through the lot, looking for vehicles that didn't belong or anything out of place. So far, he'd seen nothing. The woman had probably seen an animal or a couple of teenagers poking around.

He would much rather be with Kathryn.

Putting his walkie-talkie to his lips, he spoke into the mic. "This is Scott. I'm at the construction site, but so far..."

He hit the brakes hard as the beam of his headlights landed on a small mound of dirt just beyond the parking lot. He squinted, unsure what he really saw.

"You there, Sheriff?" dispatch asked, and he blinked.

"Yeah," he mumbled. "Hang on a sec. I need to check something out."

"Not going anywhere," dispatch replied with just a hint of sarcasm, but Brian ignored it.

He climbed from his truck, checking the area around him. He saw nothing and moved forward, his hand on the butt of his gun. As he got closer, his gut clenched at the sight of the outstretched hand. He swallowed, anger knotting his stomach.

The hand was female and missing the ring finger. He moved closer to get a better look but was careful not to touch her and disturb any forensic evidence that might remain on the body. As though on cue to aid his study, the clouds moved, revealing a full moon that cast an eerie white glow and made the flesh under all the dried blood appear gray.

Dropping his hand from his gun, he squatted at the edge of the hole and stared down at the young woman who gazed blankly at the night sky. A warm wind blew, carrying with it the smell of blood and death and making him cringe in distaste.

He stood and studied his surroundings. The feeling of being watched tickled the hairs on the back of his neck. Was he out there? Was he watching? There were

numerous places in the surrounding woods and even in the half-finished buildings themselves where someone could hide.

His gaze dropped to the dry, packed dirt covered in loose gravel. The ground was so hard from lack of rain there was no sign of footprints, drag marks, or anything to show anyone had been here. It was as though the woman's body had been dropped off by a ghost.

A strong, almost overwhelming sense of foreboding settled over Brian as he lifted the walkie-talkie. "This is Scott. I need a forensics crew out here."

"Dead body?" the voice asked over the speaker.

"Yeah. Female. Appears to be in her twenties. She's so messed up, though, I'm not sure. Get me the name of that woman that called in, too. I'm gonna want to talk to her."

Brian rubbed his fingers across his lips and frowned as he realized his fingers were trembling. He'd seen dead bodies like this before. Numerous ones.

Finding his former girlfriend in this same bloody shape had been the worst. It had taken him a long time to get over it and ruined a friendship he'd had since he was six.

They'd never found the man who'd done it. He'd disappeared like a puff of smoke. Was he back? Was this only the beginning of yet another killing spree?

"Please," he said as he glanced toward the night sky. "Please don't let this be him again."

\* \* \*

Locking the front door of her combination bookstore and coffee shop, Kathryn Hayne stood inside and glanced out across the darkened parking lot, a sense of dread tightening her chest.

Through the reflection in the glass, she noticed the numerous spirits fading in and out of sight. They always followed her. She'd seen them for as long as she could remember. Most of the time, she could block them out, but tonight they seemed particularly restless. As if even they felt the danger hanging in the air.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, mentally blocking the spirit images, and turned from the door to finish up the nightly paper work.

"Well, how do I look?"

Kathryn stared at her friend and business partner, Janie. She wore a red minidress. Her long tanned legs glistened with the lotion she'd just applied, and her feet were adorned in her usual three-inch heels. She'd refreshed her dark blonde curls and makeup for a night out on the town. She looked great; unfortunately, Kathryn couldn't shake the feeling of dread to muster up more than a faint smile. Although for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why.

"You look fabulous as always, Janie, but are you sure it's a good idea to be going out? I heard on the news earlier they found a murdered girl."



"Oh good grief, Katie," Janie scoffed as she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. "You worry too much."

"I lost one friend to a serial killer. I'd prefer to not lose another," Kathryn grumbled as she moved behind the counter and closed out the register.

Janie leaned against the counter. "It was one murder. He's gone, Katie."

"Yeah, so they keep telling me," Kathryn said, then shrugged. "But they never found him, Janie."

"Have you talked to Brian?"

"Not in the last couple of days."

"You should give him a call. Ask him about the woman. Maybe it will make you feel better."

Kathryn shook her head. "I'm sure he's busy. If he wants to talk, he knows where I am."

"Lord, girl. You're too passive." Janie pushed away from the counter and grabbed the purse she'd left lying on the display table behind her.

Kathryn bristled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're attracted to him. He's attracted to you. Yet neither of you do anything about it."

"We're friends, Janie," Kathryn said, then sighed. "Nothing more."

"But you want there to be more," Janie said, watching her.

A grin played about her friend's lips, and Kathryn frowned. "Why do you always do that?"

"Do what? Speak the truth? Come on, Katie. The two of you have been sniffing around each other for two years now. What's holding you back?"

Kathryn rolled her eyes. She'd often wondered the same thing. Instead of being honest, she offered up the same old tired excuse she'd used over and over. "He was Lisa's boyfriend. It would just be too weird."

"Why?" Janie cried, spreading her arms out.

*Why? Why indeed.*

"Are you afraid he's not over her?" Janie asked.

"No. I know he's over her."

"Okay. Then what's the deal? Are you afraid of being compared to her?"

Kathryn shook her head. "No."

"Then what?" Janie asked, this time more softly.

With a sigh, Kathryn gave in. "We've been friends for a long time, Janie. Since high school. He dated my best friend. We comforted each other after her funeral. I don't want to screw up that friendship."

"Uh-huh," Janie replied, not the least bit convinced.

Kathryn grinned. "You know you could stay here and try to help me sort through my feelings, help me muster up the courage to seduce him."

Janie snorted. "Please. I know you. If you wanted to seduce him, you would. You don't need my help. You're just trying to keep me here."

"Guilty."

"Relax, worrywart," Janie said, smiling. "I'll be back later."

Kathryn watched her friend go and swallowed back the desire to stop her as she followed her to the front door. Janie was a grown woman. If she wanted to go out dancing, she should. Maybe she was being too much of a worrier.

Janie threw her a smile and a wave over her shoulder as she made her way across the parking lot to her car. Kathryn watched until she entered the four-lane road fronting the store and disappeared from sight.

With a sigh, she locked the front door, once again ignoring the spirits reflected in the glass.

\* \* \*

Crime-scene photos littered the table in Brian's office. He paced around it in agitation, sipping lukewarm coffee. At the moment, he wished it were whiskey. He needed a drink after coming to the conclusion he had.

They thought the bastard was gone, that he'd stopped, died, or been caught for something else and now rotted in jail. Unfortunately, the photos told another story, one that made Brian's stomach churn.

Their elusive serial killer was back.

With a growl, he threw the half-empty coffee cup against the wall. The Styrofoam fell silently to the floor and he huffed in disappointment. He'd have felt a hell of a lot better if the cup had been glass.

"That's a waste of good coffee."

Brian turned and stared in surprise at his former best friend, Nick Banion. He lounged against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest, his tie loose from its knot, his normally perfect black hair slightly mussed. He looked tired.

Brian snorted. "Obviously you haven't had our coffee."

Nick had left town two years ago, one year after the murder of their girlfriend, Lisa. They'd both been detectives at the time, both trying to hide from society that they shared a girlfriend.

After Lisa's death, Nick left to take a position with the FBI. Brian hadn't been surprised. Nick had taken Lisa's death pretty hard and wanted to get away, make a new start. Brian had chosen to remain behind and continue the search for the monster who had killed her. Unfortunately, he'd disappeared.

Until recently, that is.

Nick's lips spread into an easy smile, but Brian didn't miss the worry in his gaze and knew instantly why his friend was here.

"Who called you?" Brian asked.

"Nobody. I was just coming in to take care of a few things with the sale of that property I had and heard about the murder on the radio."

"Yeah, I think I heard something about that. The sale of the property," Brian said as he rearranged the files on the table. "Did you get a good price?"

"Brian," Nick began, ignoring Brian's attempt to change the subject. "I heard the woman was in her twenties and brutally murdered."

Sighing, Brian turned back around to face his former friend.

Nick pushed away from the jamb. "I had a bad feeling, something in my gut that told me this one was different...or the same?" He stared at Brian, his expression serious and devoid of any of his usual humor and mischief. "Is it him?"

Brian nodded. "I think so. Everything is pretty much the same as all the others. I even pulled the old files to double check."

"Damn," Nick snarled. "I'd hoped the son of a bitch was dead."

"So did I. Apparently, he was just taking a break."

"That's not funny," Nick growled.

"It wasn't intended to be funny," Brian countered as he moved around the table, studying the photos.

"Are you positive it's not a copycat?"

Brian nodded. "Everything's the same, right down to the missing ring finger on her left hand and the marks on her flesh where he pinned her down with tape. This nightmare is starting all over again, Nick, and we're no closer to figuring him out than we were before."

"We'll get him, Brian. This time, we'll get him."

"We?" Brian studied his friend.

"I can work with you on this through the Bureau."

Brian scowled. "What the hell makes you think I want you to work with me on this one?"

"Come on, Brian. You need me on this, and you know it."

Brian grumbled under his breath. What fucking timing! He was still pissed at Nick. The last thing he wanted was him underfoot. He didn't trust him anymore. He'd let him down.

Nick tapped a photo with his finger. "They look like Katie, Brian. Have you noticed that?"

Brian stared at his friend and frowned. "They're blonde like Kathryn. They've all been blonde, Nick. Even Lisa."

"We got close, and he retaliated by taking Lisa, then disappeared. If we're going after him again, I don't want the past to repeat itself."

Brian frowned. "Why would he even go after Kathryn, Nick?"

"You're still close with her, right? I'm still close with her. The killer knew about Lisa. He could know about Katie."

"What do you mean you're close with her?" Brian snarled, staring at Nick as jealousy ate at his insides. "You've kept in touch with Kathryn?"

Nick stared at him in surprise. "Ever since I left. You didn't know that?"

Brian shook his head, his chest tightening slightly. "Kathryn never said anything."

"Why don't you call her Katie like everyone else?"

"I don't know," Brian said, turning his gaze back to the photos. "Just never did."

Brian liked calling her Kathryn. It was something that was just theirs. She was his Kathryn. Unfortunately, she wasn't his. He'd never dated her. Kissed her only once, but he'd been drunk, and she'd brushed it off as nothing.

She'd been a great friend to him. She'd been there after Lisa's death and after Nick had left. She'd been his rock, and the last thing he wanted to do was ruin that friendship. A fuck just wasn't worth that. Despite how much he wanted it.

"Well, name aside, I don't want to make any mistakes this time. I'd feel better if we made sure she wasn't ever alone," Nick said.

"I still haven't said I want you in on this."

"Oh fuck you, Brian. Are you seriously going to turn this down? Really? All because you're still pissed at me?"

Brian picked up a file and tapped the edge of it against the table before tossing it to the other side and away from Nick. "Hell yeah, I'm still pissed at you."

"You need to get over it," Nick growled.

Brian sighed and inside, despite how much he didn't want to, he conceded to Nick on this one thing. He did need his help and he could certainly use the Bureau's resources on this.

"I haven't told Kathryn yet."

"I'll tell her," Nick said. "I wanted to go by the store and see her anyway."

Brian's stomach knotted painfully.

"I also want to talk with her about never going anywhere alone. At least for now."

Brian snickered. "She's not going to like that, Nick."

Nick shrugged. "She'll get over it. I don't want her alone. During the day, she'll be at the store. We just make sure one of us is always there when she closes up. I need a place to stay too. I'll convince her to let me bunk in her guest room."

"She has a roommate," Brian replied, hoping to discourage Nick's plan. If anyone was going to stay at Kathryn's, it would be him, not Nick.

Nick tilted his head. "She also has four bedrooms. Surely one of them is empty."

Brian studied his friend. Just how close were he and Kathryn? And why hadn't Kathryn told him she and Nick had kept in touch?

Nick's eyebrow rose. "Is there a problem?"

"No," Brian replied. He shook his head and began putting the files on the recent murder back together. With a tired sigh, he squared his shoulders and glared at Nick. "You know what? Yeah, there is."

Nick studied Brian closely, making Brian glance away briefly. "Is there something going on between you and Katie I should be aware of?"

Brian rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, deciding not to push this after all. Hell, he hadn't even told Kathryn how he felt. No way did he want her to hear it from Nick. "No. There's nothing going on. We're friends."

"I know that look, Brian. You said the same thing about Lisa in the beginning. Remember?"

Brian rubbed at his face tiredly. "What are you getting at, Nick?"

"I'm not getting at anything," Nick replied as he pulled his tie free of his collar. "I don't want to fight with you, Brian. That's not why I'm here."

"Are you looking at starting something with Kathryn, Nick? Is that why you're so curious?"

Nick sighed and shook his head. "Does it matter?"

Brian scowled at his friend. "It matters if you're just looking for a temporary fuck while you're here on assignment."

"I wouldn't do that to Katie," Nick snapped. "Why the hell are we fighting? What happened to us, Brian?"

That was a good question. One Brian wasn't sure he had an answer to right now. "Two years of separation and limited contact. You ran out on us, Nick. When Kathryn and I needed you the most. You left me with unsolved murders, and Kathryn was a wreck for months. Lisa was all the family she had, her best friend."

"I know that, Brian. Katie understood. Why can't you?"

"I loved her too, Nick. I didn't run."

"Neither did I, damn it!"

Brian slammed the files down on the table. "What do you call it, then?"

Nick spread his arms in aggravation. "I don't know. I just know I needed to get out. I needed to get away from this case before it completely consumed me, and get my head together and get over Lisa. I knew I never would if I stayed here."

"So you just leave and let her killer walk?"

"We didn't let him walk, Brian! We couldn't find him! It was screwing up our lives. Our friendship."

Putting one hand on his hip, Brian pointed a finger at Nick. "No. Your leaving screwed up our friendship."

“I give,” Nick said. He raised his hands in agitated surrender. “I’ll be at Katie’s.”

Nick turned to leave and Brian watched him go with a heavy heart. Why the hell was he still so damned angry? Maybe Nick was right. It didn’t change the fact their killer was back and they were no closer to finding him this time than they were before.

## Chapter Two

Finally finished with the monthly paperwork, Kathryn closed down the file on her laptop. She slid her finger over the pad, moving the mouse to the pictures file on her desktop. Opening it, she stared at an old picture of her, Lisa, Nick, and Brian.

She brushed her finger over the men's faces. They were so handsome and so much alike physically, they could easily be brothers. They were as close as brothers, or at least they used to be.

Now they hardly spoke.

She missed their playful banter, their constant picking at each other. With a sigh, she clicked out of the file and closed down her computer. No sense wishing for something that probably wouldn't happen.

She'd always envied what her friend had with them. A ménage relationship wasn't a common occurrence, but they made it work. Two men who would love her, take care of her...have sex with her. It was something Kathryn had always found intriguing. Unfortunately, she'd never found two men she would even consider trying it with.

Well...she actually had found two men, but one of those men lived in Washington now, and the other still carried a load of resentment toward the other.

Stubborn jackass.

She'd called him that more than once, until finally she'd just given up. Brian would come around eventually. He just had to do it in his own time.

The spirit of a young woman reflected in the screen of her laptop, and she slammed it shut, closing her eyes to block out the image of her bloody face.

Whoever it was had died a horrible death and her heart ached for her, but there wasn't anything she could do. She couldn't hear them, most times couldn't figure out what they wanted, so she chose to ignore them. It was the only way to keep her sanity.

Lisa had been the only one who knew about her gift. Or her curse. Her friend had even tried to help her figure out what they wanted, but they hadn't had any luck.

When Lisa was murdered, Kathryn had been terrified she'd see her friend's spirit and had avoided anything that gave off a reflection for days. She could never block them from reflections. She finally determined that her friend knew how she felt about her gift and never attempted to contact her.

In some ways that made her sad.

"I miss you, Lisa," she whispered.

A loud knock sounded at the glass door, and Kathryn jumped, squealing as her hand flew to her chest as if to keep her hammering heart from escaping. Her fingers trembled against the material of her blouse as she turned to stare at the tall, broad figure on the other side of the door.

She recognized him immediately, and her eyes widened in happy surprise.

"Nick?"

His mouth spread into a wide grin, his deep brown eyes sparkling with his familiar mischief as he waved to her from outside.

He wore black slacks and a white shirt, the collar open slightly, showing hints of the black hair that covered his chest. Gray tickled his temples, and a day's growth of stubble covered his jaw. He looked good that way—rugged, handsome, sexy as hell.

"Hey, Katie Bell," he called through her door. "How about letting me in?"

She grinned, her whole body warming at the nickname he'd given her. Her heart hammered wildly as she ran across the room to open the door and throw herself into his outstretched arms with a laugh.

"Oh my God. What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Oh, we'll get to that," he said, chuckling.

Kathryn couldn't help but notice the hardness of his chest, the warmth of his flesh as he wrapped his arms around her back, the feel of his breath as it tickled her ear, and she shivered in response. She kept thinking about all the flirty emails they'd sent back and forth, the crazy, sometimes wild late-night talks over the phone, especially the recent ones. Nick had a way of making her feel light-headed and dizzy. Just like now.

Pulling back, she kept her hands on his shoulders and stared at the part of his body that seemed so much broader than she remembered.

"Wow. Someone's been working out." Grinning, she pinched his hard biceps. "Be still my heart."

Nick laughed. The deep, rich baritone wrapped around her like a warm blanket, and she took a deep breath, trying to still the growing embers of desire deep in her stomach. It was the same desire she felt whenever Brian was near.

*I'm such an idiot.*

"What about you?" Nick teased as he stepped back and twirled her around. He studied her, a wicked gleam darkening his gaze, and the heat of a blush moved over her cheeks, making her slightly uncomfortable.

"Nick," she chastised. "I look the same."

"You most certainly do not. When I left, you looked like a rag doll. Skinny and pale. You look amazing, Katie."



This time she did blush. With a most unladylike snort, she slapped at his arm. “Stop. Save it for your next conquest.”

Chuckling to cover her excitement over his praise, she ushered him in and locked the door.

“My next conquest? I thought our last phone conversation made it clear you were my next conquest.”

Kathryn glanced at him over her shoulder and smiled. He was such a flirt, and she had to try really hard to not fall for it and actually believe him.

“You know,” she said, pointing a finger at him. “You better be careful. One of these days I just may take you seriously and throw you to the floor wherever we happen to be.”

Nick spread his arms out, a devil-may-care smile tugging at his lips, and Kathryn tried desperately to ignore the burning need coursing through her veins.

“I’m game,” Nick said.

She eyed him up and down slowly, letting her gaze linger on his trim waist, wide chest and the impressive bulge behind the zipper of his pants. Her gaze shot back to his. “Doesn’t look to me like you’re game,” she replied slyly. “You’re no good to me, Nick, if you can’t get it up.”

“Oh, that was cold,” Nick said, laughing.

Kathryn smiled and leaned against the counter as Nick turned in a circle, admiring the bookstore and coffee bar.

“I have to hand it to you, Katie. This place looks great.”

“You sound surprised.”

He turned to give her a stern look over his shoulder. “No. I always knew you could do it, and you know it.”

She smiled. “I know.”

“How’s it going?”

He tossed his keys onto the checkout counter where they landed with a clang and leaned his hip against the dark wood as he waited for her to answer.

“It’s going great. We have six employees now, two full-time and four part-time.” She crossed her arms over her chest and eyed him suspiciously. “But this is all stuff you know already. What gives, Nick? You said earlier we’d get to why you’re here.”

Nick nodded. “Yeah, I did. Didn’t I?”

“Well?”

“I’m here to help with the case.”

“The case? You mean the recent murder?”

“Yeah. And while I’m here, Brian and I decided that I should stay with you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Kind of you to let me know.”

Nick chuckled. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not. I just can’t believe you spoke with Brian.”

Nick rolled his eyes and turned away to walk toward the coffee bar, studying the shelves as he went. Kathryn followed him, curious at his sudden change in mood.

“I take it that it didn’t go well.”

“We ended up yelling at each other.”

“Nick,” she said with a sigh. “What about?”

“The usual.”

“When is this going to stop?” she asked.

“The hell if I know,” he replied as he picked up a ceramic mug with hearts all over it. He frowned, studying the mug as though the answers to all his problems resided within the design surrounding it.

“It doesn’t suit you,” Kathryn teased, shaking her head and taking the cup from his hand to place it back on the shelf.

“You think my bureau buddies would find it amusing?”

“I would find it amusing. Men don’t carry around coffee mugs with hearts all over them.”

Nick snickered. “Glad to know you’re looking out for my manly image.”

Her lips twitched as she fought a smile. “Somebody has to. Now...what are you not telling me?”

Nick’s lips twisted and he waved a hand toward one of the small tables surrounding the coffee bar. “Have a seat, Katie.”

“Oh, man. This can’t be good,” she grumbled as she dropped into one of the chairs.

Crossing her legs, she let her black dress shoe dangle off her toe. Nick’s gaze spent a moment on the shoe, then slowly traveled up her leg and chest before coming to rest on her face. A hint of worry clouded his usual spark, and she tensed, forgetting for a moment how his slow appraisal had made her skin tingle with awareness.

“He’s back, Katie,” he said simply.

Her heart stopped, for she knew instantly to whom he referred. “Are you sure?”

“As sure as we can be. And in light of what happened with Lisa, either Brian or I will be with you at night. I don’t want you going anywhere in the daytime alone, either.”

“You don’t think—”

“No.”

Nick reached across the table and covered her hand with his. The warmth of his touch made her feel safe instantly, and she leaned forward without thinking, propping her elbows on the edge of the table.

"Then what? You must be worried about something. Otherwise you wouldn't..."

"He went after Lisa because we got close. Too close. I'm just worried if we get close again, he'll try to...do what he did before, but this time with you."

Kathryn swallowed. "Oh."

Nick drew his finger along her jaw, sending sharp tingles down her spine. "I won't let him get to you, Katie. We made mistakes with Lisa. We were naive to not think he might go after her. We underestimated him. We won't do it again."

She took a deep breath and backed away from his touch. Nick had never expressed a *real* interest in her, other than his usual teasing, and the last thing she wanted to do was scare him off by coming across like a love-struck schoolgirl in the midst of her first crush.

"I know you won't," she said, giving him a small smile. "How's Brian taking this?"

One side of Nick's lips lifted into a grimace. "Badly. I think he still feels a lot of guilt because he got away the first time."

"He vanished, Nick," she reasoned, shaking her head.

"I know," Nick said with a nod. "We did everything we could, but the trail went cold. I accepted it. Brian refused to."

Kathryn knew. She'd spent numerous nights with Brian, helping him through the grieving, the anger, then finally helped him find some peace with it. Now that peace was shattered with the return of the monster they all had tried so hard to forget.

\* \* \*

Nick pulled into the driveway and parked his rental car behind Katie's convertible PT Cruiser. The car suited her. Small, sporty, but full of class and get-up-and-go. Nick's lips twisted into a half smile.

Katie had been his lifeline lately. He'd always kept in touch with her, but lately their calls had become more frequent. At night when he couldn't sleep, he found himself thinking of her, and more often than not, he picked up the phone and called.

She was always happy to hear from him, no matter the time, and her voice and easy personality never failed to put him at ease. He could talk to her for hours and often did. He didn't think there was anything they didn't know about one another or a topic they hadn't discussed.

Hell, he'd even teased her about sex.

One call in particular had almost gotten out of hand. She'd just stepped into a hot bubble bath. She'd reclined in the water, talking to him. He could hear the water sloshing through the phone as she moved, and he imagined her submersed in bubbles, the curls around her face damp from steam, her skin flushed.

He shook his head to clear the image. He could feel his cock hardening just like before. He'd wrapped his fingers around his cock that night, slowly stroking himself as she talked in that low, soft, sexy voice.

She had to have known what he was doing, but nevertheless her question had startled him back to reality.

*"Nick, what the hell are you doing?"*

He'd let go of his cock instantly. *"What makes you think I'm doing anything?"* he'd asked, trying his best to cover his embarrassment.

*"You're breathing funny."*

Nick chuckled at the memory. He'd never been able to put anything over on her. He watched as she climbed from the car and turned to face him with a smile. She'd changed since he'd been gone. She seemed older, wiser. Her hair was longer, and she'd lightened it a little, going more platinum blonde, and he couldn't help but notice how the highlights shone silvery under the full moon.

The high humidity in the air made her hair curl slightly, causing it to look fuller, thicker. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief but as he looked closer, he'd swear he saw desire. His heart jerked as he studied her more closely, but she looked down, twisting her keys around to find the one for the front door.

Had he really seen it, or was it a trick of the moonlight or even worse, wishful thinking? He'd half fallen in love with her over the phone, but where did she stand in all this? Was he still just a friend? A fun big brother whom she turned to for advice or a fun night on the town?

She started walking toward the door, and his gaze dropped to admire her ass. She wasn't as skinny as she was before. She'd put on a little weight, filled out more. She had curves, fuller breasts and hips, but her waist was still small, her stomach still flat.

Coming to a stop, she glanced at him over her shoulder and snickered at the fact that he still sat behind the wheel.

*"Are you going to sit there all night?"* she asked with amusement.

Nick smiled and climbed from the car. *"Sorry. I was just remembering,"* he said as he pulled his suitcase from the trunk.

*"Remembering what?"*

He nodded toward the house. *"All the work Brian, Lisa, and I put in on this house."*

She frowned and put one hand on her hip. *"All the work you guys put in?"*

*"Excuse me,"* he said as he came to a stop just inches from her adorable body.

Her eyes widened slightly as she stared up at him. Her breathing became slightly more shallow and quick. He smiled, thrilled to see he had at least a small effect on her. Maybe he wasn't the only one who'd been affected by their growing closeness.

*"I meant to say the four of us."*

“That’s better,” she replied, her voice deep and husky.

Turning, she headed toward the front door of the large brick ranch house. It had belonged to her parents and was left to her when they’d both died in a car crash ten years prior. He, Lisa, and Brian had helped her to remodel the house, one room at a time.

She’d been twenty then. Still in college with big dreams. She’d brought one of those dreams to life—the bookstore and coffee bar. Lisa had helped her plan and design it. Lisa loved Katie and would have done anything for her, and vice versa. The two had been inseparable.

Nick smiled slightly and followed her into the house. He set his bag in the entry hall and kept going to the back, toward the den. The big stone fireplace looked the same, as well as the kitchen with its deep cherry cabinets and granite counters. The furniture was different, though.

Instead of the old sofa and loveseat that had been her parents’, the room was now filled with a reddish leather sectional and cherry end tables that matched the kitchen cabinets.

“Nice,” he said with a grin.

Katie returned his smile over her shoulder as she strolled to the kitchen. “It’s getting there.”

“Brian said you had a roommate,” he said as he pulled out one of the stools at the bar separating the kitchen from the den and sat down.

“Janie. She moved in a couple of weeks ago. I guess I just forget to mention it,” Katie replied with a nod as she opened the fridge door. “You want something to drink?”

He leaned on the counter, staring at her ass as she bent forward. “You wouldn’t happen to have a beer in there, would ya?”

“Of course.”

She smiled and held up a bottle of beer, letting him see it as she closed the door. She handed him the bottle and he reached out to take the cold beverage from her hand. For a brief second her gaze remained glued to his fingers. She shook her head as though to rouse herself from a daydream. She stood on the other side of the bar and opened her Diet Coke. The can made a popping sound, disturbing the quiet of the house.

“Janie took over the basement. There’s a fourth bedroom down there, another den and bathroom. She wanted the distance between us for when she”—Katie waved the can of Diet Coke—“brought her boyfriends over. She’s a screamer.”

Nick choked on his sip of beer. “You know, you’d think after all the things we’ve talked about, I’d know that.”

“That she was a screamer?” Katie asked, her lips twitching.

He swatted her forehead with a magazine lying on the bar. “That she lived here.”

Katie laughed, and the sound made his stomach tighten. He loved her laugh. “You never asked, and like I said, I guess I just forgot to mention it.” A wicked gleam made her eyes sparkle. “And I suppose you were too busy masturbating to ask.”

Nick’s eyes widened, and Katie busted out laughing.

“You didn’t think I knew what you were doing?”

“I stopped,” he said, fighting his own smile.

“Only because you’d been caught.”

“Like you haven’t masturbated to my voice,” Nick said, putting her on the spot.

“Maybe. But at least I wait until we’re off the phone.”

Nick grinned. “Where’s the fun in that? I might have liked to hear what you sound like when you come. Are you a screamer like Janie?”

Katie snorted and turned to put her drink can in the sink. “You’re such a flirt, Nick,” she said, staring at her Coke as she poured what was left down the drain.

He assumed she did it just to have something to do, so she wouldn’t have to look at him. Her cheeks were an adorable shade of pink, and Nick’s smile widened.

## Chapter Three

Katie felt her whole body heat with the direction their conversation had taken. It was easy to flirt like this over the phone. She didn't have to look at him, see the heat flaring in his eyes, feel the way his stare made her skin tingle with unanswered need.

Yes, she'd masturbated thinking of him. She'd also done it thinking of Brian, but more often than not, it was thinking of the three of them together that sent her into orbit. But Nick didn't need to know that. Neither did Brian.

It was doubtful with their strained relationship that would happen anyway.

She glanced toward Nick out of the corner of her eye and almost melted at the way he watched her. He lifted his beer bottle to his lips, keeping his gaze on her as he sipped, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. He set the bottle down and grinned.

"Have I embarrassed you, Katie?"

She snorted and set the can upright in the sink. "No. It's just weird talking like this face-to-face."

"It shouldn't be."

She glanced back at him and smiled slightly at the adorably roguish expression on his face. She tried to skirt around him and head into the den. "You're incorrigible," she teased.

Nick stood and grabbed her elbow. Katie jumped, unprepared for the touch and the sudden flare of sensation traveling up her arm. She turned too quickly to face him and lost her balance. With a squeal, she fell backward onto the couch. Nick tried to stop her but ended up falling with her, his hard body landing on top of hers.

She laughed, not yet aware of just how they'd landed.

Nick's chest shaking with laughter against hers was her first indication, and she stopped laughing, staring up at him with wide, surprised eyes. He lay on top of her, his chest pressing against her breasts, his thighs nestled between hers, his cock positioned perfectly against her pussy. He shifted slightly, putting pressure on her aching mound, and she gasped in shock at the wave of lust that tightened her womb.

Nick stilled and looked down at her, his brown eyes darkening with desire. "You okay?"

She nodded but otherwise said nothing. She couldn't. All those crazy late-night talks ran through her head. All the wild things they'd said to each other in teasing sped through her mind.

"You'd think as a FBI agent, I'd be a little more coordinated."

"Somehow I doubt coordination is a requirement," she whispered.

His heat surrounded her, seeped into her, and she inhaled his warm, musky scent. Nick had always smelled so good, so sexy.

One corner of his mouth twitched into an amused grin, but it faded as quickly as it appeared. He seemed to be just as affected by their position as she was. When his cock thickened against her, she had no doubt.

"Nick," she whispered breathlessly.

"I don't know about you, Katie, but I think we've been pussyfooting around this for a while."

"This?" she squeaked.

He lowered his head, and her breathing increased tenfold. Her ears roared with the rush of blood through her veins as his lips came ever so close to hers.

He flexed his hips, putting delicious pressure against her pussy through their clothes, and she sighed softly.

"This," he whispered.

His lips brushed across hers gently, barely touching her. She moaned, parting hers in silent invitation for him to deepen it, really kiss her and make her head spin just like she'd imagined he would.

He cupped her cheek, tilting his head to the side while holding hers steady. "I've been thinking about this for weeks," he whispered. "All those phone calls. The teasing. The flirting. I think it's partly why I came back. I just used the real estate as an excuse."

"Nick." She whimpered, bending her left knee and wrapping her leg over his hip.

Nick closed his eyes briefly and flexed his hips. With a groan, he planted his lips over hers, sliding his tongue between her parted lips and proceeding to kiss the very breath from her body.

Katie moaned, wrapping her arms around his back and answering his sweet kiss with a need she hadn't even been completely aware existed. He tasted so good. A mixture of beer and coffee. His tongue was soft, warm and teasing as it twirled around hers, stroking, coaxing.

God, he could kiss.

She dug her nails into the flesh of his back, then dragged them down his shirt. He moaned, and his lips spread into a smile against her mouth.

"You feel good, Katie," he whispered before swiping his lips over hers in teasing sweeps. "*This* feels good."



He moaned and sucked on her lower lip before letting it go with a pop.

"We need to think about what we're doing, Nick," Katie pleaded, although halfheartedly. She'd never been so turned on in her life. She'd been thinking about this too—fantasizing about it, but for a lot longer than a week. She'd been thinking about this for years. Unfortunately, in her fantasies, there were three of them, not just two.

"Don't think," he whispered as he moved his lips to the side of her neck, gently nibbling and sucking at her skin.

She closed her eyes as a wave of need pounded through her limbs. She wasn't sure she could think clearly now anyway. He turned her mind to mush and her body to limp pasta. Right now she was likely to do anything he asked of her. His touch, his kiss, the way his body felt against hers, was something she'd imagined, dreamed about. But the reality was so much better than her imagination. The reality was heaven.

The only thing that would make all this any better was if Brian showed up and joined the play.

"What the hell is going on?"

Katie stiffened immediately and slowly opened her eyes, staring back over her shoulder at a shocked and angry Brian. Nick raised his head as well, glaring at his friend.

"How the hell did you get in here?" Nick demanded.

Brian raised his hand, jiggling his key ring. "I have a key, asshole."

The tension in the room was palpable. She could taste it, see it. What she saw in Brian's gaze shocked her but at the same time made her heart race. Behind the anger, the hurt, was a bright spark of lust.

She began to squirm under Nick, trying to extricate herself from his arms. "Nick, let me up."

Nick sat back on his knees, allowing Kathryn to come to a sitting position. What the hell did she do now? Truthfully, Brian didn't have any reason to be angry. They weren't dating, not in the boyfriend-girlfriend sense anyway. He'd only kissed her that one time, but it had been enough to leave Kathryn breathless and horny for days.

Had his kiss been more than a drunken misstep? Was he interested and just never said anything?

"Brian—"

"Kathryn, I need to speak to Nick for a minute."

Kathryn frowned. "Now wait a minute, Brian." Brian turned his cold, hard stare toward her, and she bristled. "Don't you dare look at me like that."

"Kathryn, please," Brian said in a softer tone.

She remained sitting for a moment longer, studying him, trying to gauge just how angry he was. Brian had a temper and had been known to take blows at Nick if

pushed too far. The last thing she wanted was for them to fight. Although their fights were rare, she knew they wouldn't stop till both of them were beaten to a pulp.

"I don't want to have to clean up bloody noses and busted lips like the last time you guys argued," she said, giving both of them a pointed look.

"I promise," Brian said as he lifted one hand in the air. "It won't come to blows."

Raising her hands in surrender, she stood. "Fine. I'll be in the bedroom."

Brian watched her go with mixed emotions. Part of him hurt like hell after seeing her in Nick's arms. Another part of him...a part he thought long buried, was turned on by it. This was his own damn fault, and he knew it, which was partly why he was so angry.

He turned his glare back to Nick. "You asked me that question about Kathryn at the station. I guess I should have asked you."

Nick sat on the couch on his knees, his elbow resting against the backs of the cushions, his hand over his mouth, his stare glued to the fireplace.

"Damn it, Nick. Why the hell didn't you say something? How long has this been going on?"

Nick let out a tired sigh. "We've been talking on the phone for a while."

Brian snorted. "Talking on the phone? You been screwing her through the phone, too?"

Nick pinned him with a cold glare. "Fuck you, Brian. It just happened."

"It just happened?"

"What the hell is your problem?" Nick demanded as he came to his feet. "You told me at the station there wasn't anything between you two. Are you trying to tell me now that you lied?"

With a sigh, Brian moved to lean against the counter. "Okay, yes. I have feelings for Kathryn. I just didn't want to screw up our friendship by acting on them. After you left, she became my best friend."

"Are you in love with her, Brian?"

Brian studied his friend. "Are you?"

Nick nodded. "I think so."

"Figures," Brian grumbled.

"You didn't answer me," Nick said, and Brian drew out a long sigh.

"I've been in love with her for a while, Nick."

Katie stood at the back of the hall, listening. Her heart soared at what she was hearing. They both thought they loved her? Her dream of a ménage relationship

with the two of them seemed within reach, but Brian's next words made that dream coming crashing back down to the ground.

"I'm not interested in sharing again, Nick."

"I didn't say anything about sharing, but there is one thing you're going to have to accept."

"And what's that?" Brian sneered.

"My dating her."

Kathryn's eyes widened as she listened.

"I know she's attracted to me, and if the look in her eyes when you walked in is any indication, she's attracted to you as well."

Kathryn swallowed her embarrassment. Was she that transparent? She sighed and glanced toward the ceiling. It didn't matter now anyway. Looked like it was all out on the table.

"So we both date her and she decides?" Brian asked skeptically.

She decides? Like hell. She wanted them both. There was no way she could decide. She'd heard enough.

Kathryn pushed away from the wall and headed back to the den.

"I don't see..." Nick stopped talking, and his gaze met hers as she came into the room.

"I have an idea," she said sarcastically. "How about the two of you drop your pants and I go with whichever one has the bigger penis?"

Nick snickered and glanced toward Brian.

"What the hell are you looking at me for?" Brian snapped.

"I'm longer," Nick replied.

"So? I'm thicker."

"Oh, for the love of God," Kathryn murmured, turning her back on both of them, unsure if she wanted to laugh or scream in frustration.

"And we all know women prefer girth. Isn't that right, Kathryn?"

Kathryn glared at them over her shoulder. "Actually, women prefer knowledge over size."

Nick snickered. "That's a load of crap and you know it."

"Jeez. Enough sex talk." She turned and pinned both of them with a hard stare. "I heard what the two of you were talking about, and there's no way in hell I'm going to become a prize in some crazy game of seduction."

"So you're saying you don't want either of us?" Nick asked.

"No. That's not what I'm saying."

"Then what *are* you saying?" Brian asked with a frown.

"A threesome. It's all or nothing."

"Kathryn..." Brian started with a shake of his head.

"I know what you said, but that's how I want it. No choosing, no games, no competitions. Just the three of us."

Brian studied her, and she suddenly wanted to squirm under his penetrating police-officer stare. Ignoring the heat traveling down her spine, she stepped over to Brian and slapped his hard chest with the back of hand. His eyebrow rose in amusement, making Kathryn's heart skip a beat. God, Brian was so damn good-looking with those pretty eyes so dark brown they were almost black, and long black lashes any girl would kill for.

"That's for not saying anything before now!" she snapped.

"Nick didn't say anything before now," Brian reasoned.

"Nick's not been here right under my nose for two years. Damn it, Brian. We go out all the time. You come over and watch movies. Hell, you've even slept in my bed!"

Nick snickered. "You had feelings for her and you slept in her bed and still didn't do anything?"

"Shut the fuck up, Nick!" Brian snapped.

Nick shook his head, a sideways grin tugging at his lips.

"Nick, really," Kathryn said, giving him a firm look. "You're not helping."

"What makes you think I was going to?"

Brian made a move toward Nick, and Kathryn quickly stepped between them, putting her hands on Brian's chest to hold him back.

"Why didn't you say anything, Brian?" she asked, trying to defuse the growing tension.

Brian stared down at her with an almost helpless expression. "I'd already lost one best friend. I didn't want to lose another. If you hadn't returned my feelings, it would have made things too weird and I didn't want to lose what we had. I'd rather have you as just a friend than not have you at all. But, Kathryn...I don't want to share. Not this time."

Kathryn swallowed, unsure what to do. She knew what she wanted, and she wanted them both. She loved them both. She didn't want one without the other. Not if she could convince them to at least give it a try.

Taking the bull by the horns, she said, "It's a threesome or nothing, Brian. I love you both. I refuse to choose."

She gave him a pleading look, silently begging him to understand. Brian sighed and gripped her chin with his thumb and forefinger. "I'd do most anything for you, and you know that," he said, and she nodded. "But I don't know if I want to do this or even if I can do this. The things between me and Nick—"

"Can be fixed," she whispered. "You're just being stubborn, Brian, and you know it."

Brian glanced over her shoulder toward Nick, then back to her. Appearing torn, he cupped her face and gave her a small smile. "I'm going to head out. I have an early day."

Disappointment left her almost weak in the knees. "You're leaving?"

"I need to think about this, sunshine."

She nodded. "Okay."

He surprised her by planting his mouth over hers. With gentle pressure, he encouraged her to part her lips, allowing him to slide his tongue inside to explore. She felt light-headed and leaned into him, holding tight to his uniform shirt, gripping it tight within her fingers. He pressed his palm against the small of her back, pulling her closer as the kiss deepened, became more sensual and sexy.

It was a kiss meant to seduce and left her reeling. She wanted more, and disappointment made her stomach tighten when he pulled away much too soon. Smiling down at what she was sure was a dreamy expression on her face, he cupped her cheek, then turned away, leaving her standing there staring after him like a dumbstruck idiot.

"Nick," Brian sneered as he walked away.

"Mmm," Nick replied.

The front door clicked closed, and she turned to look at Nick, who watched her with amused interest from his spot a few feet away.

"What?" she snapped, frowning.

Nick chuckled. "You're adorable. Do you know that?"

"Of course." She shrugged one shoulder, giving him her best teasing smile. She felt relief at the moment that he wasn't showing any jealousy and hurt after that kiss with Brian.

This time Nick laughed and held his hand out. "Come here, Katie."

The lust shining in his eyes made her whole body flush with answering need. God, it had been a long time since she'd had sex, but she doubted her raging desire had anything to do with that and everything to do with the way Nick looked at her.

After hesitating only a second, she slipped her hand into his and allowed him to pull her into his arms. He didn't try to kiss her, just wrapped his arms around her. It felt wonderful being in his embrace, and she rested her cheek against his chest, listening to the slow, steady beat of his heart.

\* \* \*

Music blared around him, the beat vibrating in his loins. A blonde on the dance floor caught his eye, and he watched with mild interest as she sashayed and swayed to the beat. Her tight red dress hugged her curves. Her tan skin glistened beneath the colorful lights of the club.

He'd found his next target, but tonight wasn't the right time. He'd follow her, see where she lived, where she worked. Soon he would know the best time and way to abduct her. Soon, her death would quell the hunger, the pain within his soul.

Soon.

## Chapter Four

“Alone at last,” Nick said with a grin.

Katie looked a little uneasy, and he brushed her hair back over her shoulder, trying to put her at ease.

“Strange circumstances we find ourselves in, huh?” he asked.

Katie snorted. “What do you mean *we*? I’m the one who said all or nothing.”

“True.” Nick grimaced. “But I’m the one with a hard-on that could hammer a nail.”

Katie snorted and turned her head to hide her laughter. “I’m sorry,” she said, covering her mouth.

“You think that’s funny?” he snapped, teasing her.

She put her hand over her mouth, covering her giggle. She nodded and backed away. Nick made a move to grab her, but she skirted out of his reach.

“There’s always your hand,” she said, smiling. “You should be used to that.”

Nick lunged for her and she squealed, moving to stand behind the corner of the sectional. Her laughter filled the room, and he couldn’t help but laugh along with her. He raised his hand and pointed a finger at her.

“You have to sleep at some point, minx.”

“Oh, like I’m afraid of you.”

He gave her a pointed look he doubted she took seriously. “You should be.”

With a sigh, Nick dropped onto the sofa. Katie leaned her elbows against the back and stared down at him. “You haven’t said much. What’s your opinion on all this?”

“Sharing?” Nick asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah.”

Nick shrugged. “Honestly, right now I would prefer to have you to myself, but I’m also open to sharing. Matter of fact, thinking about it doesn’t do a damn thing to lessen the pain in my balls. If anything, it makes it worse,” he grumbled.

“Sorry,” she said, her lips twitching.

Nick chuckled. “I’ll live. Brian, though, is another story. He’s still angry with me and right now doesn’t trust me as far as he can throw me. And to share a girlfriend takes a lot of trust.”

Katie sighed. “I know.”

Nick studied her. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She nodded. "I'm attracted to both of you, Nick. I refuse to choose."

"What if Brian and I choose for you?"

Katie stood straight, a frown creasing her brow. "You mean one of you back out? No. Nick, I fell in love with the two of you as a pair. I feel guilty saying this, but I want what Lisa had. She had the best of both of you, and I want that too. You and Brian are at your best when you're together. It's like you guys complete each other."

What she said made sense. Since he'd been in Washington, he'd felt lost, not quite whole. He'd missed his friend, and that might have been why he'd initially started calling Katie—as a way to stay connected to Brian. In no time, he'd found himself falling for her.

"If this is what you want, I'm game." Nick gave her a sideways grin. "Brian is up to you."

She scowled. "What do you mean Brian is up to me? This is going to take both of us, Nick."

Nick flattened his palms against his chest. "What do I get for all my troubles?"

She grinned. "A hard-on that would hammer a nail?"

Nick chuckled and dropped his head back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. "God...the things I do for love."

Katie giggled and he winked at her. It was enough to just be with her right now. "I have an idea," he said as he pulled his phone from the clip at his belt.

"Who are you calling?" Katie asked as he scrolled through the numbers.

He didn't say anything, just hit Send and put the phone to his ear. Seconds later, Katie's phone began to ring, and she glanced at her purse, then back at him with a frown. "Is that you?"

He shrugged and kept the phone next to his ear. Katie grabbed her phone and flipped it open.

"Yes," she drawled.

"Hey, Katie Bell. I just got back from a date with this girl who turned me down and left me with this raging hard-on."

Katie snorted. "She turned you down? How dare she."

"I know. She doesn't have a clue what she's missing, but I understand her reasons."

"Oh, I don't know. You might be surprised just how much she knows she's missing."

"Wanna watch a movie with me?"

Katie shook her head, laughing. "You're a nut," she said.

It wasn't the first time Nick had called her and they'd watched a movie together while talking on the phone. She smiled at him from the other side of the



bar, and every part of him seemed to warm from the inside out. She looked so adorable with her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Got any good thrillers?" he asked, still talking into the phone.

"No thrillers," she said with a grimace. "Too close to reality right now."

"Sci-fi?"

"I have the new *Star Trek*," she offered.

Nick smiled. "Now you're talkin'."

"It's in the drawer under the TV. Why don't you get it ready, and I'll slip into something more comfortable."

Swallowing, Nick raised an eyebrow. "Naked would be more comfortable."

She snickered. "True, but I was thinking something more along the line of sweats."

"Damn," he grumbled into the phone, making her giggle. "Have you at least got popcorn? If I can't eat you, I need something else."

"I have lots of popcorn," she replied, smiling at him over the counter.

"Well, stop standing there and get changed, woman."

She gazed at him with the most adorable, sexy expression that made Nick's balls throb even harder. She flipped her phone closed and dropped it into her purse. "Didn't you bring anything other than slacks?" she asked as she passed by him on her way to the hall.

Nick flipped his phone closed as well. "Yeah, but I'm afraid if I take my slacks off, I may not be able to get anything else back on. You know, like once you release something very large from its packaging, you can never get it back in."

"Oh, as if."

Katie laughed as she made her way down the hall, making Nick smile.

\* \* \*

Brian stood at the waterfront bridge in the middle of downtown, gazing out across the water. He and Kathryn came here a lot on weekends. It was their favorite spot.

He tightened his lips and watched the full moon shine down on the waves of the Mississippi River, making them sparkle like diamonds. The night was humid, more than usual for the middle of June. Nights like these were usually busy ones for the police department. The heat and humidity always made tempers flare.

Why the hell hadn't he done something about his attraction to Kathryn sooner? What the hell had he been waiting for?

Deep down he knew what the problem had been. He'd lost one best friend. He didn't want to lose another. What would have happened to their relationship if she'd turned him down? He supposed it didn't matter now. Their feelings were all out on the table, and because of it, their relationship would be forever changed.

A hot breeze ruffled Brian's hair, and he ran his hand through it, fingering it back into place. Right now, Kathryn was back at the house with Nick. How did he feel about that? Lousy, that's how. He wanted it to be him that was with her.

He wasn't jealous, not really. He and Nick had shared before, and there had been numerous times he or Nick had been alone with Lisa, but for some reason, it felt different with Kathryn. This time, he didn't want to share. He wanted her all to himself, and he was sure Nick felt the same way, although he hadn't come out and said it earlier.

Unfortunately, Kathryn wanted a threesome. She wanted them both. Brian wasn't sure he could trust Nick enough to go through with it. Nick had let him down. Run out on him when Brian and Kathryn had needed him the most. How did he know he wouldn't do it again?

"Brian?"

Brian turned at the sound of Mike Sinclair's voice and smiled at their fire chief. Mike was the youngest chief they'd ever had, but despite his young age of thirty-two, he was a damn good firefighter and an even better friend. Mike was someone he could rely on, both in and out of work.

"Hey, Mike," Brian replied as he stepped forward and clasped Mike's hand in greeting.

Mike stood about an inch taller than Brian's six feet two, but he was much stockier and thicker around the chest. Mike worked out a lot. He'd needed that strength on more than one occasion as he carried unconscious victims from burning buildings.

"I usually see you out here with Kathryn." Mike glanced around. "She in the bathroom or something?"

Brian smiled. "No. She's at home for the night."

Mike's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You here alone?"

"Couldn't sleep."

With a nod, Mike leaned against the bridge railing. "Any leads on those murders?"

"One. Seems it's the same guy as before."

"Son of a bitch," Mike said with a sigh. "This shit never ends, does it?"

"Doesn't look like it."

From the corner of his eye, Brian noticed Mike watching him as he leaned his elbows against the railing, but Brian kept his gaze straight ahead. He knew his friend and had a feeling Mike was about to say or ask something Brian wouldn't like.

"I heard Nick was back."

Yep, he was right. Brian snorted. "News travels fast in this town, huh?"

"Is he here for the case?"

A tired sigh left Brian's chest as he stared out over the water. He needed to talk about this with somebody; might as well be Mike. "That's one of the reasons he's here."

Mike frowned. "What's the other?"

"Kathryn. Seems they've been talking on the phone lately and grew close."

"You're kidding. Surely you're not going to just let him swoop in like that, Brian. You're going to fight for her, right?"

Brian turned to stare at his friend in surprise. "Was I that much of an open book? Does everybody know?" he snapped.

With a chuckle, Mike stood straight and turned to face him. "Not everybody, just everyone who saw the two of you together."

Shaking his head, Brian chuckled softly. "Amazing. Everyone saw it but Kathryn."

"Well," Mike drawled. "That's your own damn fault." He slapped Brian on the shoulder and smiled. "Chin up, man. I saw the way she looked at you. She may have the hots for Nick, but she has them for you, too. So stop staring out over the water like a lovelorn puppy and do something about it."

Brian smiled. Maybe he could use a little seduction to coax Kathryn away from the threesome idea. "You know what, Mike? You're right."

Mike chuckled. "Imagine how much time we would save if you would just keep that in your mind as a given."

"Ha-ha," Brian said, grinning.

"Come on, man. Let's go get a beer. I need some company since my better half is out of town for the week." Mike pulled Brian from the railing and led him toward one of the bars lining the riverfront. "We'll work out your strategy."

"Like you know what the hell to do," Brian teased.

"Hey..." Mike replied, smiling. "I'll have you know I was quite the ladies' man in my day."

Brian snorted. "Mike. You're all of two years older than me. We're still in 'our day.'"

"I meant my single days," Mike drawled with good humor.

Brian chuckled. He was glad he'd run into Mike. He had a way of making him feel less stressed and more at ease.

\* \* \*

Kathryn sat next to Nick on the sectional, snuggled against his shoulder. She tried to keep her mind on the movie, but truthfully all she could think about was Brian. How was he handling this? Where was he? Would he turn them down?

They both heard the front door open, and Nick sat up straight, reaching instantly for his gun holster at his side, but his hand landed on nothing, and he cursed.

Kathryn smiled and placed a reassuring hand over his. "It's okay. It's just Janie."

"Hello?" Janie called out. "I'm home."

"We're in here," Kathryn replied.

"Did Brian get a new car?" Janie asked as she stepped into the room, then instantly came to a dead stop upon seeing Nick. Her eyes widened slightly as she took in Nick's good looks. "Oh...you're not Brian."

Kathryn giggled at her friend's reaction. Janie never thought before she spoke. Nick frowned and turned to glare at Kathryn. "Who the hell is Brian?"

Janie went pale and mouthed, *I'm so sorry.*

Kathryn snorted and slapped at Nick's shoulder. "Don't mind him. He knows who Brian is. This is Nick."

Janie grinned. "Oh, the phone guy."

"The phone guy?" Nick asked, his lips twitching.

Ignoring him, Kathryn turned to talk to Janie. "He's here to help Brian with the murder and will be staying with us for a while."

"Cool. It'll be nice to have a man around the house." She waved to Kathryn, a knowing smile tugging at her full red lips. "I'll just leave you two to your movie. Good night."

"Good night," Kathryn and Nick replied in unison.

Nick watched her go, then turned to Kathryn and grinned wickedly. "Where the hell did you meet her?"

She pointed a finger at his nose, then laughed when he leaned forward and tried to bite at it. "She's not as she appears, trust me. That woman has a head for business and accounting like you wouldn't believe."

"And a body for sin," Nick drawled.

Kathryn slapped at his chest, and he chuckled. He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips and kissed her palm. Tingles traveled up her arm at the touch of his lips on her skin. Lord help her. If she reacted this way to just one of them, what would it be like with both?

"Don't worry, Katie Bell. I like yours better."

With a thoroughly wicked gleam in his eyes that set her heart to pounding, he placed her hand against his chest and slid it slowly down his torso to the massive bulge beneath his zipper. She bit down on her lower lip as she wrapped her fingers around the thickness of his shaft.

Wow, and Brian was thicker?

Nick leaned down and kissed the sensitive spot behind her ear, making goose bumps rise along her flesh. "Sure you don't want to?" he whispered.

"You know I want to." And boy did she want to.

"But you want to wait?" he asked, staring into her eyes.

"I want it to be the three of us, Nick. Especially now that I know both of you have feelings for me."

"So if I can get Brian to take back what he said?" Nick asked, his smile telling her he was teasing. Nick loved to tease, and that was one of the things she loved best about him.

Kathryn smiled and removed her hand from his cock to smooth over the stubble covering his chin. "Just accept it."

Nick stuck his lower lip out, pouting. "I may need to masturbate." The wicked gleam was back quick as a shot, making her jump from wanting to giggle to wanting to straddle him right there. "Do you wanna watch?"

Her eyes widened slightly as she imagined doing just that, but she was determined to stick to her guns. She wanted both of them, and she'd make it happen, come hell or high water.

Groaning, she dropped her forehead to his shoulder. "God, you're making this so hard. Stop."

Chuckling, he placed a kiss on her head. "If you think for one minute I'm going to make this anything but hard, you got another think comin'."

\* \* \*

Sitting just down the road, he watched as the light in the basement went on. So this is where she lived. He knew this house. He'd followed one of his other girls to it before.

That had been three years ago.

He remembered each and every one of his girls. Where they lived, worked, played. When he killed them and how long he got to play before they begged.

This one had spunk. She would no doubt fight him, and the idea sent blood pounding through his veins with anticipation. His palms began to sweat, and he wiped them down his pants. He looked forward to playing with this little spitfire.

## Chapter Five

“Good morning,” Janie said cheerfully as she sashayed into the kitchen.

Today she wore black slacks and a red sweater that, when she raised her arms, showed about an inch of stomach. Janie had an amazing figure, and she dressed to show it off. Her hair was perfect, straight, and pulled back with a red barrette at the nape of her neck. Her hair looked so much longer whenever she straightened out the curls.

Kathryn smiled, always amazed at how Janie could stay out so late and still look so refreshed in the morning. Kathryn, on the other hand, felt as though she hadn’t slept at all, and truthfully, probably hadn’t slept much. She needed coffee desperately and stood by the sink, sipping on a cup of steaming brew.

“Good morning,” Kathryn replied.

Janie studied her closely, then grinned. “You look like you had an interesting night.”

“Sort of.”

As she poured a cup of coffee, Janie glanced around, although not the least bit conspicuously. Kathryn knew she was looking for Nick.

“Nick’s in the shower,” Kathryn said.

“And you’re here why?” Janie asked. “You should be in the shower with him. I would be.”

“Well, I know you would be.”

Janie smiled. “So what’s the story, Katie? I thought you had a thing for Brian.”

Kathryn stared at her coffee cup. “I do.”

“Oooh,” Janie cued. “A triangle. Does Brian know? That you have feelings for Nick?”

She stared at her friend in shock. “I never said that.”

Waving her hand, Janie moved to lean against the counter. “Please. Like you had to. I saw that excited look on your face whenever he called. Come on, girl. Dish before he gets in here.”

Kathryn snickered as she turned to pour herself another cup of coffee. “Nick told me last night he wants to see where our relationship goes.”

“Okay, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

“So did Brian.”

Janie's eyes widened. "Oh. What are you going to do?"

She glanced toward the hall to make sure Nick wasn't coming. "I gave them an ultimatum."

Janie's shrewd eyes narrowed. "What kind of ultimatum?"

"The three of us or none of us."

"What?"

Kathryn almost laughed at the shocked expression on her friend's face.

"You mean like a threesome?"

Kathryn nodded.

"Have you ever done that?" Janie asked.

"No. You?"

Janie shook her head. "No. But I've always wanted to try it at least once. So, what did the guys say?"

"Nick's okay with it. Brian needs to think about it. He's still really pissed at Nick."

Janie cleared her throat and glanced pointedly at the hall. "Morning, Nick," she said.

Kathryn turned to stare at him as he walked into the kitchen, his hair still damp from the shower, his shirt still undone and showing off hard muscles. She swallowed and lifted her cup to hide the drool she was sure trickled down her chin. Her libido still hummed and sent desire coursing through her veins. God, no wonder she hadn't been able to sleep last night.

"Good morning," he said, smiling toward Janie.

He walked toward Kathryn and placed a sweet kiss against her forehead, making her heart flutter. "Morning, Katie Bell."

"Morning," she croaked.

"It's awfully early for the two of you to be up to no good," he drawled.

Janie giggled. "For your information, we were talking about the store. There's a huge shipment coming in this morning."

"Oh, crap! I forgot about that." Kathryn slammed her cup onto the counter with a loud clang. "I need to finish getting ready."

"Hurry," Nick said. "I'm dropping you off this morning."

Kathryn stopped in her tracks. "What?"

"Matter of fact," Nick said as he waved the tip of a spoon between her and Janie. "I think Janie should ride with us too."

Janie snorted and twisted her lips, obviously displeased with that suggestion. "While I appreciate the whole protector vibe, Katie and I work different hours. I usually go in early and she works late. The only reason she's going in early today is because of this shipment."

Nick frowned but conceded. Pointing his finger at Kathryn, he said, "You, though, have no choice in the matter, and you know why."

"I don't know why," Janie said as she straightened to watch them in interest.

"Fine." Kathryn shook her head. "Explain it to her, please, while I finish getting ready."

"Yes, ma'am," Nick replied in his best hillbilly accent, making her smile as she made her way down the hall.

\* \* \*

"So..." Janie began, and Kathryn dropped the box onto the table so she could pick up the box cutter.

When Janie didn't continue, Kathryn looked over at her through her lashes. "Was there something else or was 'so' it?"

One corner of Janie's lips lifted into a slight grin. "Sorry. I was trying to decide how to proceed."

"With the boxes?" she asked as she slid the cutter through the tape holding the flaps closed.

"No. With you. Are you sure this is what you want? Two guys? Think about it."

Kathryn shrugged as she set the cutter down, then pushed the cardboard flaps aside to get to the shipment of books inside. "I have."

"Really? Two guys...twice the arrogance."

"Yeah, but twice the fun."

"Twice the headache."

"Twice the love."

"Twice the sex."

Kathryn smiled. "Twice the sex."

Janie giggled softly. "What about the times you're lying in bed, counting the minutes until he's finished because you're exhausted? And that's just with one guy."

"What about all the times once wasn't enough?" Kathryn asked with a grin.

Janie snorted and pointed a trim finger. "Well, that statement clearly shows that you just haven't found the right guy yet."

"Apparently, neither have you if you're counting the minutes."

"Touché."

Kathryn grinned and returned to pulling romance books from the box and adding them to inventory with her computerized labeling gun.

"You know," Janie began. "A ménage might be fun once or twice. But a lifetime?"

"They've done it before and made it work. Why couldn't they make it work with me?"



“With whom?” Janie asked in surprise as she came around the table and stood across from her.

“Lisa.”

Janie’s eyes widened. “Your best friend? I knew Brian dated her. Nick too?”

Kathryn nodded. “I was sort of the...” Kathryn frowned, trying to find the right words. “Sort of Nick’s girl in public. To keep the tongues from wagging about the three of them.”

“That didn’t really work, did it?”

Kathryn’s lips twisted. “Sort of. A few people tried to tell me what a jerk Nick was because he was cheating on me with Lisa.”

Janie snickered. “What did you say?”

“What could I say? I pretended to be the blind idiot.”

Janie laughed. “Oh, God. That must have been a mess.”

“Yeah, as well as a learning experience. I think I would rather have the tongues wagging than to go through all that.”

Janie nodded and began opening another box. “I suppose they would eventually get over their shock and accept it.”

“If they don’t, then who needs them, right?” Kathryn asked as she shot her friend a knowing smile.

Janie returned it but shook her head. “That’s always easy to say, but like it or not, we have to be careful what other people think.”

Kathryn stopped what she was doing and frowned at her friend. “This coming from you?”

Janie waved her hand in dismissal. “I know. How many times have I said screw ’em for what they thought, but seriously, Katie? Things like this can affect so many things in your life. Didn’t Lisa ever experience anything negative over it?”

“The only thing Lisa experienced that was negative was when people thought she was cheating on Brian with Nick. I think not telling people caused more problems than telling the truth.”

“Maybe.”

“Why are you so worried about this?”

Janie sighed and grabbed the labeling gun from her hand. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt. And I’m more worried about you getting hurt by people other than the guys. People can be narrow-minded and petty and...just plain assholes. Trust me, I know.”

“I know,” Kathryn replied softly.

Janie meant well. Kathryn knew that and smiled in understanding. Janie smiled back, relief brightening her eyes. Her friend had been through a lot in her life, jerk boyfriends, an absent father. But she’d finally just accepted who she was

and what she wanted. Janie wanted fun and excitement and never made apologies for seeking that out. She lived in the moment.

Sometimes Kathryn wished she could be more like that. But in a way, wasn't she doing just that? How many other women would even remotely consider a relationship with two men at once? She would bet not many.

The whole idea was a little daunting and at times scary and uncertain. She could well remember Lisa's initial reluctance, but it had all worked out in the end, and maybe that's why she was so gung-ho about it now and so determined to have it. Kathryn knew what it would take—the sacrifices that would need to be made, the patience, the trust—and she also knew the rewards.

This was definitely what she wanted.

\* \* \*

Brian strolled into Kathryn's office at the store and quietly shut the door behind him. Kathryn hadn't noticed him yet, so he took a moment to admire her firm behind in her navy blue slacks as she bent over to pick up something that had fallen to the floor.

Her hair was pulled back in a French braid, and small Tennessee pearls dangled from her earlobes, the light catching the gold trim as she stood and moved toward the desk. He cleared his throat and she jumped, squealing as her hand flew to her chest. She startled so easily. He grinned as she scowled and threw a wad of paper at his chest.

"Would you stop doing that?" she snapped.

He chuckled and caught the paper in his hand as it bounced off his chest. "You'd think by now you'd be used to it. After all, don't we always have lunch together on Tuesday?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Oh my God. It is Tuesday. I completely forgot."

He frowned, teasing her. "How could you forget? And after I brought you your favorite." He held up the bag and grinned. "Chinese."

Kathryn's full lips spread, lighting up her entire face. God, he loved to see her smile. It never failed to warm every inch of him from the inside out.

"I knew there was a reason I kept you around," she said as she came forward and reached for the bag.

He jerked it quickly out of her reach and wagged his finger in front of her nose. "Not until I get a kiss first."

Her eyes narrowed slightly in desire, and he definitely didn't miss the slight catch in her breathing.

"A kiss?"

"I think that's fair payment for Chinese. Especially considering how much you like it. And how much trouble it was for me to cross four lanes of traffic, without once getting hit, mind you, to bring it to you."

Kathryn crossed her arms and eyed him with a mixture of amusement and mischief. He loved her mischievous side. "I suppose that's worth a kiss."

"Well, I think it's worth more than that, but we're still in the negotiating stages."

"Oh, we're negotiating? You never said that. You just said the payment was a kiss."

He moved closer, crowding her space. His gaze dropped to the shallow rise and fall of her breasts. As he watched, her nipples beaded behind the lace cups of her bra, which he could see clearly through the thin material of her hot pink blouse.

Had she always reacted this way to him, and had he ignored it, trying to keep his head on their friendship and not how much he wanted her beneath him?

He shot his gaze back to her flushed cheeks which almost matched her shirt perfectly. Her tiny pink tongue darted out to lick her lips. An image of her doing that very thing to the tip of his thickening cock ran through his mind, and it was almost his undoing.

Reaching around her, he dropped the bag of Chinese food onto the desk and pulled her close with his hand at the small of her back.

A soft gasp escaped her lips as he hauled her up against him, flattening those adorable mounds against his chest. Her heart pounded a furious rhythm along with his as he lowered his head, intent on the glorious prize of her delectable mouth.

"How about we start with a kiss?" he whispered just before his lips covered hers.

She tasted of coffee and caramel as she parted her mouth, accepting the sweeping thrust of his tongue between her lips. Her curvy body melted within his embrace, molding to his hard frame. He felt her nails as they scraped along his biceps and fisted into the sleeve of his uniform shirt.

His cock hardened even further, straining against the zipper of his pants as though trying to force its way out to the prize just a hairbreadth away. The material of her blouse creased within his grasp as his fingers tightened on the material. He had to fight to keep from ripping it off her so he could feel her warm flesh under his touch.

Her sweet mouth was making him crazy as her tongue twirled around his, meeting his demands and then some. He raised one hand and held her still as he deepened the kiss, plundering her mouth, enjoying her deep moans of approval as they vibrated against his chest.

Breathing hard, he pulled away, absently stroking her chin with his thumb as he stared into her eyes. The lust he saw shining there took his breath, and he had to look away before he lost control and took her right here.

"You're going to be the death of me, Kathryn," he whispered.

She snorted in her usual playfully sarcastic way. "You started it."

He looked back at her, holding her gaze with his. "I could finish it. Right here. Right now."

Her eyes widened slightly, but the flicker of lust deepened. "With customers just on the other side of the door?"

"So? Are you saying you can't fuck quietly?"

Her swollen lips twitched. "Knowing you the way I do, it's doubtful."

"Ah," he teased as he slid his fingertips down the side of her neck.

A tremor ran just beneath her flesh and he grinned, loving her reactions to him. Why the hell hadn't he seen this before? He'd been such a damn fool.

"Do I have a screamer on my hands?"

"Maybe you should come over later and find out," she whispered.

"Will you let me fuck you while Nick watches?" he asked.

"Will you fuck me while Nick does?" she countered, and one corner of his lips lifted into a tortured smile.

That very image sent lust scorching through his veins to center in his balls, which were already bursting with the need to bury himself inside her.

He dropped his hand to her breast, cupping it within his palm. He squeezed gently, never taking his eyes off her as she dropped her head back with a soft sigh.

"I think we should find out now...just how loudly I can make you scream."

Her gaze shot back to his, the battle between her wild side and conservative one apparent. She wanted him, but he knew her and knew the people just on the other side of that door were a concern. He would never embarrass her like that, but damned if he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep himself in check.

"Brian," she whispered, then glanced at the door. "It doesn't lock. Someone could walk in."

He dropped his hand from her breast and turned to glance at the door, noticing the absence of a lock.

"Damn," he growled, letting out a deep huff of breath.

He couldn't help himself, though, and turned back to her. Watching her face, he moved his hand between her legs, applying gentle pressure to her hot mound through her slacks. She gasped, grabbing hold of his arms to steady herself as he slowly stroked back and forth.

He spun her around and pressed her back against the door as quietly as possible. She stared up at him in stunned surprise.

He grinned. "Can't help myself, Kathryn. I have to touch you before I go."

"Brian—"

"Shh," he admonished, and she narrowed her eyes.

Kathryn hated being told what to do.

With one hand, he flicked her button open, then slowly slid the zipper of her pants down. The other hand he braced against the door just in case someone tried to open it. That would give them a few precious seconds for her to compose herself.

Brian's fingers trembled slightly as he pushed his hand inside her pants and between her legs. The fact she didn't wear underwear didn't go unnoticed, and he smiled, sliding his fingers through the thick cream coating her labia.

"Do you have any idea how long I've wanted to do this to you?" he murmured, sweeping his lips over hers.

She sighed, parting her mouth in silent invitation, but he held back. He wanted to see her face when she came. He'd waited a long time for that, dreamed about it, fantasized about it, even masturbated to it. The reality was so much better than his imagination.

## Chapter Six

Kathryn's knees shook so badly, she wasn't sure she could hold herself up much longer. The delicious feel of Brian's fingers stroking through her labia made her weak with desire. God, she'd never wanted him so badly in her life. Nor had he ever looked so sexy.

Those beautiful dark eyes were alight with passion and lust. They practically devoured her with just a look and made her feel wanton and cherished.

"Brian." She groaned as her hips jerked outward toward his wicked touch.

A deep, sexy chuckle rumbled through his chest as his lips hovered over hers. As he spoke, they moved against hers, teasing her, tormenting her with their closeness.

"You're wet, baby," he whispered. "Do you want me?"

"Oh, yes," she hissed, her hips rocking with the movement of his stroking fingers.

"Hmmm, I bet you do."

The purely animalistic growl that emanated from deep in his chest made her heart race.

He pressed two fingers into her channel, forcing her to her toes, and she sucked in a gulp of air, struggling to not come right then. She'd almost forgotten about the people outside, the customers strolling through the aisles, completely oblivious to what they were doing.

At least she hoped they were oblivious, but Lord help her, she couldn't seem to keep herself quiet. Mewling sounds escaped her as he thrust his fingers deep, then pulled them out to tease her clit with light strokes before thrusting back inside her channel.

He moved from gentle to hard as he used the pad of his middle finger to stimulate her G-spot. Kathryn tensed. She knew what would happen if she came with him doing that. She would explode like a rocket and scream loud enough to wake the dead.

She shook her head, staring at him with pleading eyes. Pleading for him to stop but at the same time not to stop—to put her out of her beautiful misery.

"Is that the spot?" he teased, licking his tongue along her lower lip. "I like that spot."

"Brian," she moaned, biting down on her lower lip.

She could feel herself falling, her hips bucking wildly as the pressure built. Her body tensed, and her fingers dug into the flesh of his arms as he increased the pressure, sending her screaming into a black orbit.

“Oh God,” she groaned. “Don’t stop.”

Juices leaked from her core, coating his fingers as she rode him harder. There would be hell to pay if someone came to the door now. She would never be able to stand on her own two feet and look anyone in the face. Anyone except Brian.

He looked amazing with those dark eyes boring into hers as she rode out every wave of her orgasm.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he murmured.

He thrust his fingers in and out slowly, easing her down from her explosive release. All she could do was stare at him, shocked at what he’d made her feel, shocked it had come on so quickly and so damn strong.

“Did I scream?” she croaked, almost dreading his answer.

He smiled slightly. “Not very loud. I guess I’ll have to try harder next time.”

Kathryn gave a short, hoarse laugh. “I still want you.”

“I know,” he whispered as he drew his fingers through her labia with deliberate slowness, tormenting her further.

He drew his hand from her pants and brushed his fingers over her lips. She frowned slightly, wondering what he was doing. She didn’t have to wait long. His head dipped, and his tongue, his gloriously wicked tongue swiped across her lips, licking her cream away.

“Mmm,” he murmured. “Sweet.”

Kathryn was breathless. She knew Brian was amazing, but she had no idea he could make her feel like this and all with just his fingers. She dropped her hand and cupped the hard bulge behind the zipper of his pants, shocked at his length and girth. His eyes closed, and his jaw jerked as though he was in some sort of pain.

“Why the hell did we wait so damn long?” he whispered, dropping his forehead to hers.

“I don’t know,” she answered, tugging at the button of his pants.

She couldn’t let him leave the store like this. As soon as he opened the door, his condition would be obvious to anyone who happened to look. And she’d seen women look often. Women noticed Brian. Women couldn’t help but notice Brian. He was gorgeous.

He put his hand over hers, stopping her, and stared deeply into her eyes. “I want to be inside you, Kathryn. Not your hand or your mouth...but inside you.”

She nodded, swallowing her growing desire.

“I know you and I have been tested and that you’re on the pill, but do you know about Nick? He’s been gone for two years.”

She blinked at his sudden change in discussion. "He was tested last month. He told me about it."

Brian nodded, but he still looked tense.

"So does that mean you're okay with sharing?"

"I'll admit...right now, thinking of you with your mouth around Nick's cock has me close to the edge. But I don't know, Kathryn. You're asking a lot."

"I know."

She smoothed her palms up his chest to his shoulders. "But I love you both. I want you both."

Brian closed his eyes briefly, letting out a soft, long breath. "Tell me you love me...just me."

She smiled slightly and cupped his cheek. "I love you, Brian."

His eyelids lifted, exposing a gaze full of uncertainty, love, desire, and maybe a little torment. Her heart ached. She hated doing this, but she would hate having to choose even more.

He cupped her cheek, brushing his thumb over her mouth. Her lips parted, and he covered them with his, slipping his tongue inside. She sucked softly as he pulled it back, allowing her teeth to gently scrape along his flesh. His eyes narrowed with dark desire, and her heart skipped a beat.

"On second thought, I might like your mouth around *my* dick instead."

Kathryn giggled and he smiled.

"I love you, Kathryn. No matter what happens, no matter whom you choose. I love you."

She shook her head. "I'm not choosing." She moved closer and feathered her hands down his chest to his waist. "Accept it, Sheriff. You want me any way you can get me."

"Damn straight," he said, his lips twitching.

"I'll even let you tie me up." His eyes darkened, and she inwardly patted herself on the back. She knew what Brian liked. Leaning closer, she whispered in his ear, "I'll even let you bury that thick cock of yours in my ass. I know you like that."

"You sure do talk dirty real nice," he drawled playfully, making her chuckle.

"That's just the tip of the iceberg, Sheriff. But to continue, you have to be willing to play by my rules."

One corner of Brian's lips lifted in a slight smile. "I'll play by your rules. Just remember." He gripped her chin, forcing her to meet his dark, sultry stare. "At some point, you'll have to play by mine."

Her heart jerked. "I can handle anything you dish out."

His smile widened. "Famous last words."

\* \* \*



"Where the hell have you been?" Nick asked as Brian sauntered into the main office of the local sheriff's department.

Brian glanced toward him with a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin that made Nick frown.

"You seem awfully happy," Nick growled suspiciously.

"When is your team arriving? You know...the forensics guys?"

Nick's eyes narrowed as he stood and followed Brian into the conference room. "Tomorrow. Are you going to answer my question?"

"No." Brian turned to their dispatch officer. "Will you call everyone that's here in here, Mary?"

Mary nodded. "Sure, boss."

Nick stood off to the side and crossed his arms in aggravation. "We're supposed to be working on this case together, Brian. You can't keep running off by yourself."

Brian spun around and sent him a hard glare before picking up a stack of papers lying on the long table against the wall, which also held the coffeepot and a plate of hours-old bagels.

"Where I went didn't have anything to do with this case, Nick, so get off my ass about it."

"Were you with Katie?"

Brian snickered. "Oh, so now we're at the real root of all these questions. Jealous?"

"Kiss my ass," Nick snarled.

Hell yeah, he was jealous. He glanced toward Mary. She sat at the desk, watching them with interest. It was probably best to keep his mouth shut on the subject for now. The last thing he wanted was to be fodder for the office gossip mill.

Officers began to file into the room and stand along the wall. Some Nick recognized. Some he didn't.

"Morning, everyone. Or I guess it's really afternoon," Brian muttered as he glanced at his watch. "As I'm sure most of you have heard." Brian waved his hand toward his friend as he leaned against the wall just a few feet away. "Nick's back."

A round of applause broke out in the room, and Nick gave them a sideways smile of amusement as the ones who knew him shouted rounds of hello and welcome back.

Nick nodded in acknowledgment.

"All right, all right, knock it off," Brian grumbled with just a small hint of annoyance. He waved his hand, indicating everyone should be quiet. "Don't get too excited. It's only temporary. He's here to help with the murder."

"Do we have another serial killer?" Charles asked.

Brian shook his head. "No. Same one."

Nick watched as Charles frowned and stepped back, running his hand through his short dark blond hair. Charles had been with the force a long time, at least as long as Brian. He was quiet, kept mostly to himself, but there had always been something about him that made the hair on the back of Nick's neck stand up.

"You're kidding," another officer replied from farther back. "Is that son of a bitch really back, Brian? Are you sure?"

"As sure as we can be at the moment. The murder is the same as all the others. Missing fingers are the same. Looks are the same. We never released all the details to the press, so unless someone snitched and we have a copycat..." Brian shrugged. "My gut tells me it's him."

The officer nodded. Brian's gut was usually dead-on, and everyone who had worked with him knew that.

Brian took a deep breath before continuing. "From here on out, Nick is in charge. Report directly to him on anything concerning this case. He also has some additional help coming in from the Bureau, as well. They should be here tomorrow."

"Forensics?" Jin asked from the left of the row of officers.

He was their chief forensics guy and a damn good one. Nick didn't want him feeling as if his toes were being stepped on so was quick to reassure him.

"No offense, Jin. Just as help only," Nick replied. "You're still in charge."

Jin smiled and tipped his chin up in acknowledgment. "No offense taken. To be honest, I could use the help."

"You got it," Nick said with a grin.

"Don't let him get away this time, guys," Brian said as he stared down each and every officer. "He's taken too many of our girls. It's become personal."

Nick's lips thinned slightly. When a case became personal, it was never a good thing. After all, look at what it had done to him and Brian.

## Chapter Seven

“Brian,” Nick called out and Brian stopped. Turning, he checked his handheld radio, then glanced questioningly at Nick.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Where are you headed?”

Brian’s eyebrow rose, but he answered the question, albeit sarcastically. “Well, Dad, I thought me and the guys would head out to the river for some swimmin’. I promise to be back by ten. That cool with you?”

Nick scowled. “Don’t be a fucking smart-ass, Brian. We have to work together on this, remember?”

Brian rolled his eyes but deep inside, he actually agreed with Nick. “I know. You’re right. The Kountry Kitchen was robbed a couple of hours ago. I know them personally, so I was going to swing by, then head home and pack.”

Nick frowned. “Pack?”

“Yeah. You didn’t think after last night I would let you stay at Kathryn’s by yourself, did you?”

“So you’re moving in,” Nick drawled. “Katie know?”

“Not yet. But I’m sure you’ll tell her as soon as I leave.”

Nick’s lips twitched. “No. I think I’ll wait and let you tell her.”

Brian stepped closer and lowered his voice. “She wants both of us, Nick. If you’re thinking she’ll be upset about this, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Nick pursed his lips, shaking his head. “I agree. I think she’ll love the idea.”

Brian studied his friend closely, wondering just what was running through that mind of his. If he knew Nick—and he did—then Brian knew it would be something that would be sure to piss him off. Nick loved pushing buttons. The problem was, Brian wasn’t in the mood to have his buttons pushed.

Brian snorted. “Just pick up Kathryn and make sure she gets home okay.”

Nick nodded. “She said she’d rearrange some of her employees’ hours so that way no one would be there alone anymore.”

“Good,” Brian said as he checked his watch.

“You and I really need to talk, Brian,” Nick said, and Brian agreed.

“I know. But not here.”

“Meet me at Roadhouse in two hours?”

Brian rubbed his hand along the back of his neck, trying to ease some of the tension before it turned into a full-blown, pounding headache. "Deal. I could eat. I'm starving."

Nick frowned. "I thought you had lunch with Katie today. Isn't that where you went?"

Brian grinned wickedly, not being able to resist just one good jab. "We did...but we didn't eat."

His grin widened at Nick's scowl before he turned to leave the station. "Roadhouse in two hours, Nick," Brian called over his shoulder.

\* \* \*

Nick sat back, rapping his nails against the wooden table as he waited for Brian to arrive. Country music blared through the speakers, fighting for dominance over the low rumble of voices as the people around him talked to one another. Above his head, a deer stared down at him with a mocking expression. Nick sneered back, his impatience getting the better of him.

He glanced at the bucket of peanuts in the center of the table. He'd eaten numerous peanuts already, the evidence scattered around his feet. The broken shells crunched under his shoes as he shifted position, peering over the heads of other customers to see if Brian had come in yet.

He should have known. Brian was almost always late when it came to anything other than work. He probably got held up talking with the restaurant owner or another call had come in. He'd give him fifteen more minutes and then he'd eat without him.

There was something about this case that really gnawed at his gut. That was one of the things he wanted to speak with Brian about. That and Katie. The more he thought about the idea of sharing, the more he liked it. If he could just get Brian to let go of his anger.

It would be much harder now. Especially since they knew the killer was still around. And still killing.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," Brian said as he slid into the booth across from him.

"Work?"

"Traffic accident out on Valencia."

"Bad?" Nick asked.

"No, just a fender bender, but it happened right in front of me, so I had to take care of it. Some knucklehead teenager was too busy texting and not paying attention."

Nick snorted. "Remind me never to let my kids have cell phones."

"No kidding. Worst things invented in my opinion."

"Katie would disagree with you," Nick said as he waved over the waiter.

Brian looked tired. For the first time Nick noticed just how much his friend had aged in the last couple of years. The lines around his eyes were deeper than he remembered. More gray speckled his hair.

"Well, what do you expect? She's a girl," he sneered, then grinned.

Nick chuckled, relieved to see some of his friend's sense of humor returning. He just hoped it held. They placed their orders, then handed the waiter the menus. As soon as he left, Brian sat back and began to dig into the bucket of peanuts on the table.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well. Katie for one."

Brian's lips twisted just before he popped a peanut into his mouth. "I figured as much."

"What's your opinion on the whole sharing thing?"

Brian shrugged and glanced out the window toward the crowded parking lot. "Takes a lot of trust, Nick."

"I know. I'm still the same guy, Brian. I haven't changed."

"I know," Brian replied with a long sigh.

"I sense a *but* in there."

Brian's gaze shot back to his, a small trace of mischief making them twinkle. "No, the butt's across from me."

Nick snickered as Brian's lips spread into a saucy grin. "Seriously, Brian."

Brian rolled his eyes. "You ran out on me, Nick. You ran out on Lisa."

"Honestly. Even if I'd stayed, do you really think we would have found him?"

Brian's lips twisted. "No."

"Then why can't we get past this?"

"We probably will in time." Brian shrugged and nodded a silent thank-you to the waiter as he set his tea in front of him. Nick grabbed his bottle of beer and lifted it to his lips. Brian watched him with a raised eyebrow. "Aren't you on duty?"

"Nope. Off duty as of twenty minutes ago. Got a problem with it?"

"Not today. Too damn tired to be pissed off at you for more than one thing at a time."

Nick laughed as he set his bottle back down on the table. "I've missed this, Brian."

"Yeah...me too," Brian said as he let out another long sigh of resignation.

"You haven't answered my question about sharing," Nick prodded.

"It's what Kathryn wants."

"What do you want?" Nick asked.

"To be honest...I've been thinking about it a lot today." Brian tapped his forehead. "Picturing it in my head. Which hasn't done a damn thing toward keeping my libido under control, I can damn sure tell ya that."

Nick snickered. "I can imagine."

"Physically, sexwise, I like the idea. Mentally, trustwise..." Brian pursed his lips as he pulled apart the peanut shell. "I'm still leery."

Nick nodded. "Then we take it one step at a time."

They looked at each other and grinned. "Sex first," they said in unison, making Brian chuckle.

Nick grinned and lifted the beer bottle to his lips, taking a long drink before setting it back down.

"You said Kathryn was one. What's the other?" Brian asked.

"The case."

"Have you found something?"

"No. Just a feeling."

"I'm listening."

Nick remained silent for a moment before continuing. "Do you really think he's been docile these last few years?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. Just a gut feeling that we're missing something."

Brian nodded. "I've been struggling with that same feeling. It keeps me up at night."

Nick pointed at him with the mouth of his beer bottle. "That explains the bags."

Brian snickered. *Fuck you*, he mouthed silently, making Nick smile.

Yes, he definitely missed this. Being here was almost like old times. Tonight would tell the tale, though. Would Brian really accept a ménage with him and Katie? Or would he not be able to go through with it because deep down he was still angry with him?

Regardless of whether Brian participated or not, Nick planned on making love with Katie. He'd had a hard-on since last night, and it hadn't lessened as the day had worn on. If anything, it had gotten worse as he'd thought about what he'd do to her and with her.

Nick sobered as he finished off the bottle of beer and signaled the waiter for another one. "Tomorrow, I'm going to get with a couple of the guys from forensics and see if we can't work up another profile for this guy."

"Let me know what you come up with."

"I will."

"Have you talked to Kathryn this afternoon? I haven't had a chance since lunch."

"I talked to her on the way here. Everything's normal. Store's crowded. I asked if she wanted me to bring her anything, but she said no. She's still eating on what you brought over for lunch."

Brian smiled. "She loves Chinese. You're picking her up, right?"

The waiter placed another beer before Nick, as well as their dinner plates.

"I'm going over there after I leave here."

"You two will probably beat me home. I need to run back by the station, then pack." Brian narrowed his eyes. "Don't start without me."

One side of Nick's mouth twitched. "I'm not making any promises. If you hear screams, don't hesitate to jump right in."

\* \* \*

"Are you going out again tonight?" Kathryn asked Janie as they wrapped things up at the store.

Nick had just pulled into the parking lot and already her heart was racing with anticipation. She felt like a giddy schoolgirl anxiously awaiting the arrival of her first crush.

Janie turned to look at her, a wicked grin tugging at her red painted lips. "Do you want me to find somewhere else to go?"

"No. That's not it," Kathryn stated before throwing a wad of paper toward her friend, which she dodged easily. "I'm just worried, that's all."

Janie's grin spread into a knowing smile. "You're such a mother hen. I do have plans to meet a couple of people for a late dinner at Macaroni Grill, then head back home. I'll be sure and use the basement entrance, though, so I don't disturb you," she added with a wink.

Kathryn pointed her finger at her friend.

"What?" Janie teased. "Are you going to try and tell me you're not going to be doing anything?"

"I don't know," Kathryn chided.

She could feel the blush moving over her cheeks, and that made her blush all the more. Nick came through the front door, and the tiny bell embedded in the frame tinkled softly, alerting them to his entrance.

"The two of you must be talking about me," he drawled, smiling broadly. "Katie Bell is all aglow."

Janie giggled. Kathryn stuck her tongue out at him, making him chuckle. "I'll have you know we were not talking about you."

"Well...not directly," Janie said.

"Would you stop?" Kathryn chastised playfully. "Like his head isn't big enough."

"Hey. I'm entitled to that big head, thank you. After all, my conquests are legendary."

"I have no doubt," Janie replied with a grin.

Kathryn just rolled her eyes, refusing to play along. "The two of you are impossible."

"Are you ladies ready to go?"

"We are, but I have dinner plans with friends, so it looks like it's just the two of you," Janie said as she strolled by and grabbed her purse she'd set on the counter. "Have fun," she called as she headed out the door. "Do everything I wouldn't do."

Nick laughed. "Now that's an interesting take, but my guess is there's not a whole lot she wouldn't do."

Kathryn gave a small snort. "You're probably right."

\* \* \*

He sat back behind the wheel, getting comfortable as he followed the car out of the parking lot and east on the road running through town. The hunger was growing, the need rising. It would have to be soon, before the monster within him took control and he made mistakes in his haste to quiet the beast within.

Tonight he would watch, bide his time. It might be the perfect opportunity. It might not. But whichever it was, he would be ready—ready to pounce, to take advantage of any opportunity that might present itself.

She was perfect. She was exactly what he needed to fulfill his need. His palms itched to touch her, to run his fingers through her hair as she cried out for mercy. But mercy was something she would never get from him.



## Chapter Eight

“Ah, home at last,” Kathryn said as she plopped onto the couch and kicked her shoes off.

With a sigh, she lifted her tired feet and laid them on the coffee table.

“If we hurry, we can get a round of sex in before Brian gets here,” Nick teased.

Kathryn opened one eye and glanced up at him in surprise. “Before Brian gets here?”

Nick braced one hip against the arm of the sofa. “Brian’s moving in.”

Kathryn sat up with a start. “Brian’s doing what?”

With a shrug, Nick stood and strolled into the kitchen. “That’s what he said. Want a beer?”

Kathryn blinked in shock. Brian was moving in? Had he decided to give a threesome a try? Or was he planning on being here so he could intervene and cause tension between her and Nick? Lord, this may have just turned into a huge mess and a situation that could possibly ruin their friendship. Had she done the right thing?

“Katie?”

She stared blankly at Nick for a second before remembering he’d asked her something. “I’m sorry. What did you ask me?”

“I asked if you wanted a beer.”

She shook her head.

“Are you okay?”

Nick watched her with concern as he shut the fridge, then came back to the den. He sat on the coffee table and rested his elbows on his knees.

“I’m fine. You threw me for a loop for a second. When did he tell you this? He didn’t say anything about it at lunch.”

“Earlier at dinner. Are you okay with this?”

“Well, yeah. It’s what I wanted. I’m just wondering at his motives.”

Nick reached across the space that separated them and patted her knee. His warm fingers came to rest against her thigh, and her whole leg warmed at the touch. Every since Brian had left the store, every inch of her had been humming, hungry for what Brian had only given her a taste of.

“I think Brian is more on board with this than you might think.”

Kathryn bit at her lip briefly in doubt. "Do you think so?"

Nick nodded, his sexy, kissable mouth lifting at the corners into a soft smile that, if she were standing, would make her weak in the knees.

He must have seen something in her eyes, for the look in his went from mildly amused to scorching hot. The deep brown of his gaze burned with the same need that coursed through her veins. Brian had begun something earlier she could easily see getting out of control.

"If you keep looking at me like that, you're going to find yourself flat on your back."

"That doesn't sound so bad," she replied.

Nick moved to his knees and settled his hips between her splayed thighs. She'd been wet all afternoon, and all it took was the close heat of his crotch to make her sigh in growing anticipation.

"I thought you wanted us both together?" Nick purred as he slid his palms up the outsides of her thighs.

"I do," she whispered. "I want the two of you to accept a threesome. That doesn't mean I won't have sex with each of you alone."

"I see," Nick replied, smiling a beautiful, dreamy smile that set her insides on fire. "Did you have sex with Brian today?"

"Sort of. My office door doesn't lock."

"We need to work on that, I guess. Did he get you off?"

Kathryn nodded as the memory of Brian's afternoon treat made her body warm.

"Tell me how," he whispered softly in her ear, sending tingling goose bumps all over her flesh.

Nick's lips moved to the side of her neck, and she tilted her head, giving him better access to the sensitive spot behind her ear. Breathing was becoming increasingly difficult, but she took a deep breath and continued in a shaky voice.

"He used his fingers."

"I bet you liked that, didn't you?" he teased, his voice feathering across her ear.

She nodded, swallowing down her moan. God, she wanted him to touch her. He moved his fingers to the buttons of her blouse, slowly unbuttoning it, separating the fabric and exposing her lace bra. Her breathing hitched as he studied her aching mounds. She could feel them thicken and swell under his heated stare.

"Very nice...sexy," he murmured as his thumb traced the lace.

Her heart sped up as he dipped his fingers inside the cup of her bra and lifted out her breast.

"Oh, definitely very sexy," he whispered as he dropped his head and circled his tongue around her exposed nipple.

It beaded, tightened as he continued to tease the nub. He squeezed her breast, forcing it up higher, closer to his mouth. Kathryn moaned and arched her back, trying to coax the tip of her breast into his mouth. His hot lips engulfed the aching tip, and she cried out, almost coming right then. The sensation made her gasp in surprise. God, she couldn't remember the last time she was this turned on. Well, actually she could. Earlier with Brian.

Having two men shower her with attention was definitely the way to go. Even though Brian wasn't there, what he'd started this afternoon was apparently the beginning of one wild ride.

Nick bit down on her nipple, making her yelp in surprise, then giggle in delight. He reached his hands around, undoing the clasp that held her bra closed. His palms smoothed the straps and the sleeves of her blouse down her arm, making every inch of her flesh tingle with his slow seduction.

He tossed the discarded clothing to the floor, leaving her chest exposed to his hot gaze.

"I like that much better," he purred.

Leaning forward, he covered her lips with his, shocking her with the intensity and the hunger as his mouth devoured hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her fingers into the short strands of his soft hair.

He cupped her breast, massaging it within his grasp. Kathryn whimpered into his kiss, the ache between her legs intensifying with every swipe of his tongue, with every pinch of her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

"God, I've daydreamed about this for weeks," he growled against her mouth before covering her lips again and kissing her wildly.

Her head spun; her whole body burned. If she didn't get him inside her soon, she'd fucking combust.

"Nick," she squealed as his mouth left hers to mark a blazing trail down the side of her neck, then lower to her breasts.

His wicked tongue licked at her nipple, teasing the tiny bud before sliding lower. He bit at the underside of her breast, making her giggle in delight.

She watched through heavy lids as he worked the button of her pants loose, then the zipper. She lifted her hips, allowing him to slide her slacks over her hips. They landed somewhere close to her blouse a few feet away. Where, she didn't care.

"No tan lines," he said as he put his hands under her hips and pulled her to the edge of the sofa.

She sank down, laying her head against the back. The leather was cool and almost like another caress as she shifted, trying to make herself more comfortable.

"You're still dressed," she countered breathlessly.

"Not for long," he said. "I don't need to be naked to lick your pussy. Which is exactly what I intend to do."

She swallowed at the intense look in his eyes. He used his thumbs to separate her labia. His hot breath blew across her clit, and she bucked her hips completely off the couch, mindless now with need. Nick was so intense...slow, hot. Brian was more wild and dominant with his seduction. She enjoyed both; craved both.

"Nick," she growled as he slowly slid his tongue along her slit, lapping at her juices.

"Just like I thought," he said as he grinned up at her. "Perfect."

"And so turned on I can't stand it," she snapped.

"Good," he replied. "Then you won't have any problem going all night."

"Are you planning on wearing me out right from the get-go?"

"No. Just working on getting my fill. Two men, sweetheart. Twice the lust, twice the hunger...twice the orgasm."

He thrust two fingers deep inside her vagina before returning his lips to her clit. He teased and tormented, drove her close to the edge before pulling back.

She screamed in frustration, her nails digging into the couch, her hips working wildly against his face. He put one palm on her lower stomach, holding her steady as he gently sucked at her clit. She groaned, struggling against his hold as her release built from her womb outward.

"Stop fucking teasing her, Nick, and make her come," Brian said.

Kathryn's eyes snapped open, and she found herself staring straight into Brian's wild, erotic gaze. His eyes glowed, his chest rose and fell with his labored breathing, and his thick cock strained against his pants.

"Brian," she whispered.

Nick raised his head but continued to slowly fuck her with his fingers. "You're early."

"Just in time," Brian whispered. "Make her come, Nick, so I can have her."

Her heart practically jumped clean from her chest at the way Brian watched her. She stared as he slowly removed his shirt, exposing a wide, hard chest full of muscles. She'd seen him shirtless before, but damned if he didn't make her blood run hot now.

Nick returned to her pussy, his tongue doing wild and wicked things to her insides as he ate his fill. Kathryn moaned and rotated her hips along with him. Her breasts ached, and her stomach tightened.

She glanced again at Brian. He'd removed his pants and she stared, fascinated at the sight of his long, thick cock. She licked her lips, anxious for the feel of that thick rod buried inside her.

He wrapped his fingers around the base as he watched her, his gaze fixated on her face as her release began to take hold.

Nick's fingers increased their rhythm, going deeper with every thrust, practically pushing her backward. He engulfed her tight, sensitive nub with his lips and sucked, forcing an explosion behind her eyes that made her gasp in surprise.

“Oh God.” She sighed, lifting her hips off the couch.

Her eyes drifted closed as her orgasm raced through her system. Her limbs shook with the intensity, even as her body craved more.

Brian sat down beside her as Nick helped her to sit up. She turned, lifting one leg to straddle Brian’s lap. There was no warm-up, no fondling, no gentle build-up, just one long, deep, powerful thrust as he buried himself deep into her wet pussy.

She cried out as her walls adjusted to his girth, giving as he forced himself deeper still, filling her.

“Fuck,” Brian groaned as he dropped his head back against the couch.

Kathryn leaned forward and placed a kiss against his cheek, rubbing her face against the rough stubble covering his jaw. His hands settled at her waist, slowly pulling her forward as he lifted his hips off the couch. His hips rubbed against her oversensitized clit, making her gasp.

Putting her hands on the back of the couch, she decided to take matters into her own hands. Watching his face, she lifted up on her knees. When the head of his engorged cock was at her entrance, she slid slowly down his shaft, sighing as he stretched her wide.

“Oh, hell yeah, baby,” Brian said, encouraging her to do it again.

She did, moaning as she took every long, thick, glorious inch of him. Nick moved in behind her, his bare chest pressing against her back as he reached around to cup her breasts. He squeezed and pinched, teased and tormented, sending her soaring ever closer to that cliff again.

Brian leaned forward and wrapped his lips around the nipple of one of the breasts Nick offered him. It was the wildest, most erotic thing she’d ever felt. Nick’s lips brushed along the side of her neck; his teeth scraped against her skin, making her shudder everywhere.

Her hips began to move faster. Juices ran out to coat Brian’s balls and slide along his thighs. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold off. She wanted Nick inside her too.

Nick must have read her mind or sensed what she wanted. Two of his fingers teased the entrance to her anus, smearing her cream around the hole and his knuckles.

She whimpered as he pressed those two fingers into the tight passage. Brian stopped moving, holding himself still as Nick pressed his fingers deeper.

“I can feel his cock inside you,” Nick whispered as he slowly moved his fingers, stretching her with scissorlike movements.

Kathryn gasped at the unusual sensations screaming through her. What he was doing felt strange, yet at the same time incredible.

“Nick,” she moaned.

“We can’t, Katie. I don’t have any lube. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Kathryn sighed and buried her fingers in Brian's hair as he sucked at her breast.

"We'll get to that. Right now, ride Brian. Then you'll ride me."

Her heart skipped at the very image. The walls of her pussy clamped on to Brian's cock, and he groaned before slapping at her hip. The sound reverberated through the room, but what surprised her the most was what the sting made her feel.

The slight pain felt good, and she wondered what more she might like.

"I think she enjoyed that," Brian murmured as he sat up to study her face. "Did you?"

She nodded, unable to say much else.

"I think we should explore that a little further," Brian said as he nipped at her lower lip. "But not now. Right now, I just want to fuck you."

His mouth covered hers, his kiss swallowing her moans as he and Nick moved her hips over his. She could hardly breathe and was barely aware that Brian came, thrusting hard into her core as he spilled his seed.

Nick instantly pulled her off him and impatiently threw her to the sofa to land flat on her back. Nick settled over her, his eyes glowing almost black as he thrust into her pussy, taking the very breath from her lungs as he went in balls-deep.

He growled loudly, twirling his hips, grinding against her.

She lifted her legs, wrapping them around his hips. Brian had moved to the other side of the sofa, silently watching them as Nick thrust into her over and over. Kathryn enjoyed Brian watching. She loved the look in his eyes as Nick took her, pleased her. She was so close again. She could feel it just out of her reach.

Nick's cock pushed deep, hitting her cervix and sending tingling sensations radiating outward from her womb. He felt so good; she loved the way he brushed his hips against her clit on the down thrust, and she loved how the head of his cock rubbed against her G-spot.

It would be a wild one, a strong one. The beginning stirrings started in her stomach, then swam outward like a wave. She gasped, scraping her nails down the backs of his arms.

Nick groaned, then began to thrust harder, faster, deeper. Kathryn screamed as her release crested, blinding her to anything other than them, the burning hot stare of Brian, the feel of Nick as he tensed and fell prey to his own release, emptying his seed inside her along with Brian's.

"Son of a bitch," Nick said as he stared down at her in a mixture of shock and wonder.

"What?" she asked breathlessly, sated, but deep down she knew it would never be enough.

"I don't think I've ever lost control like that."

She frowned. "You lost control?"

Brian snorted. "Yeah, baby. He lost it. He fucking pulled you off me before I was even finished."

Nick scowled. "You came."

"Well, yeah, but the shock of the cold air as you pulled her off me dulled the pleasure. You couldn't let me enjoy it?"

Kathryn grinned at Brian. "I'll make it up to you."

"Hell yeah, you will," Brian drawled. "I think you should do it while Nick runs to get lube. No more of this fucking taking turns. He gets too damn greedy."

Kathryn snickered, trying hard to fight the giggle struggling to get free. She couldn't help it. Brian's comment struck her as funny, although she doubted he'd meant it that way. Apparently Nick thought so as well. His chest shook slightly with a chuckle.

"Why didn't you get lube before you came here?" Nick asked.

Brian crossed his arms over his chest. "If I'd done that, I would have missed this."

"Well, we wouldn't want you to miss anything."

Kathryn rolled her eyes. This could get ugly real fast. "Please don't fight," she said.

"Why?" Nick asked. "Haven't you ever heard of make-up sex?"

Feeling wicked, Kathryn grinned. "It's not me you'd have to make up with, but each other."

Nick's lips twitched. "I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Seeing you and Brian have make-up sex? Maybe."

Brian moved to stand behind Nick. He placed one knee on the couch, then leaned over. Nick watched him warily over his shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing, Brian?" Nick asked, then tensed as Brian moved his hand to Nick's ass.

"Giving Kathryn what she wants," Brian said as he leaned over and flicked his tongue over Nick's cheek.

Nick grimaced and swatted at Brian's hand as it slowly stroked Nick's butt cheek. Kathryn bit down on her lower lip to keep from giggling at the two of them.

"Get your hand off my ass before I jump off this couch and knock the hell out of you," Nick growled.

Kathryn's eyes widened as laughter bubbled up from her chest.

Nick glared over his shoulder. "Brian," he snarled.

Brian smirked and walked back to the other couch.

## Chapter Nine

Kathryn stood at the entry to the kitchen, silently watching Brian as he stared thoughtfully out the kitchen window. His wide shoulders were tense. The cool night air ruffled his hair as it blew through the open window.

Brian loved the night breeze, so it didn't surprise her he'd opened the window. The full moon shone on the grass, casting a soft blue light across the lawn and through the window, where it cast the same bluish light against his tan skin.

She loved nights with a full moon. They were so bright, so pretty.

Her eyes wandered down his strong back to the jeans hugging his hips. He shifted, bending one knee as he braced his palms against the sink. His triceps flexed and bunched as he leaned forward. He looked good enough to eat, but right now she was more concerned with how he felt.

He hadn't said much. While Nick was in the shower, she'd decided to try and get him to open up a bit. If she could. Brian could sometimes be a tough cookie to crack, but she'd had lots of practice over the last few years.

"Brian," she said softly.

He turned to stare at her, his face registering surprise. Brian was a hard man to sneak up on, so it shocked her that he hadn't heard her come up. He smiled slightly as he turned to shut the window.

"I thought you were in the shower with Nick," he said as he turned to lean his hips against the sink so he could fully face her.

Kathryn came into the kitchen to stand before him. She pursed her lips as she reached up to brush her fingers over the coarse hair covering his chest.

"I wanted to check on you first."

"I'm fine."

He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her palm. It wasn't the first time he'd done it, and just like all the other times, a warm, tingling sensation traveled up her arm.

"Usually it's the girl who needs comfort after a threesome. Guys are used to it. Girls usually aren't," Brian said with a grin.

"But we didn't really have a threesome...well, we sort of did, I guess." She shrugged. "I've thought about this for so long. Ever since I realized I was in love with you."

"When did you realize you were in love with Nick?" he asked.



He didn't meet her gaze, but instead studied her palm. She could see the tension in his jaw and in the wrinkles deepening across his brow, and her heart ached.

"I'm not sure. I think truthfully I've been partially in love with the two of you since the beginning. Whenever I dated, I looked for men who looked like you, acted like you. I was always a little jealous of what Lisa had with you. I hate myself for that sometimes—"

"Don't," Brian whispered. "Lisa wouldn't want you to feel guilty over this, Kathryn. She loved you. She would want you to be happy, even if you find that happiness with me and Nick."

Kathryn swallowed down her gathering tears. "I know." Taking a deep breath, she plunged forward. "Do you think you can do this?"

"I enjoyed watching you with Nick," he murmured as he drew slow, gentle lines on her palm with the tip of his finger. "More than I thought I would."

"I sense a 'but' in there."

Brian snorted. "Maybe a small one." He finally met her gaze, and the torment she saw there made her gut clench in guilt. "It's going to take me a while to trust him again, Kathryn. I'm not sure I can do a *ménage* again. At least not a *ménage* relationship."

She licked her lips. "I heard you put him in charge of the investigation. Sounds like you trust him well enough to do that."

Brian let out a short, rough breath. "It was more of a...necessity."

"How so?"

He kept her hand enfolded in his and rubbed her cold fingers within his palm, warming them. "I'm sheriff now. I have a lot more responsibilities. Nick can devote his full attention to this. I can't." He shrugged one shoulder in indifference. "Plus, I don't want to lose myself again. Not like last time. I let it get the better of me. I let *the killer* get the better of me. If I hadn't had you to pull me back, God knows how far I would've fallen."

"I think you would've eventually caught yourself. You're a smart man, Brian. Much smarter than me in a lot of ways. You would've figured it out."

Brian smiled sadly. "Maybe."

He brought her hand to his mouth and pressed the backs of her fingers to his lips. He smiled at her over her hand before pulling her into his arms and holding her close. His chest felt warm against her cheek, his back hot against her palms. She caught the hint of Polo cologne on his skin, and she inhaled, smiling slightly.

She loved the way the cologne mixed with his own scent, creating a smell that was all Brian.

"Nick's probably wondering why we haven't joined him yet," she mumbled.

She felt as well as heard Brian's short grunt. "He'll live."

"This constant competition between you two is going to be the death of me," she grumbled.

"You started it," Brian replied, but she didn't miss the smile in his voice.

She could always tell by the sound of his voice whether or not he was smiling. It was the same with Nick.

"You just had to have us both," Brian teased, then sighed dramatically.

Kathryn dipped her head back and smiled up at him. "That's right."

Brian smiled back, and for the first time since this whole thing had started, Kathryn felt as though everything would work out.

\* \* \*

He strolled through the dance club, keeping his eyes on Janie as she swayed to the thumping beat of the music. He'd learned a lot about her since he'd first laid eyes on her. He always learned as much as he could. It helped to know his victims.

After dinner, her small group had decided to go dancing. That worked out perfectly for him.

He'd learned dancing was one of her favorite things. It hadn't been all that hard to find out her history, her likes and dislikes, her routine. His line of work made discovering those things easy. His line of work opened up doors and had even helped him to hone his craft, helped him hide his pastime.

Her body swayed to the beat, setting his blood on fire. The lights caught the fine sheen of sweat on her flesh, making it sparkle like diamonds as she moved. Her tight pants outlined full, curvy hips that he couldn't take his gaze off.

He kept himself hidden within the crowd, blending in. The last thing he wanted was to stand out, and he'd become quite good at remaining invisible. She laughed at something the girl next to her said, and her whole face lit up.

It wouldn't be long. Soon she would be his. He just had to bide his time, watch for his perfect opportunity. He kept his gaze on her, kept watching as the minutes passed. If she felt his gaze on her, she gave no indication. She danced as though there wasn't anyone else in the room.

Finally, she left the floor and waved good-bye to several people as she made her way to the exit. Now was the time. He followed her out, keeping a few paces behind her as she made her way to her car.

Glancing around, he quickly scanned the deserted parking lot and pulled the syringe out of his pocket. He tugged off the plastic cap covering the needle, then moved in behind her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders to hold her still.

She struggled against him, but he held tight, pressing the tip of the needle against the side of her neck. He held his breath as the tip popped through the top layer of flesh and sank deep into the softer muscle beneath. He took a deep breath, enjoying the control he had over her.

Janie gasped before going completely limp in his arms. He quickly checked over his shoulder, making sure the lot was still empty.

So far so good.

The drug would keep her immobile for a few hours. Pavulon was his drug of choice. It was relatively easy to get, inexpensive, and lasted long enough for him to get the girls secured into place. She would remain conscious, feeling everything, but would be unable to move beyond the occasional flopping of limbs.

Fear would cloud her eyes. Tears would gather and fall. Her limbs would begin to tremble as the drug wore off. Very few lasted until the entire effect wore off. Most passed away from shock or begged to be put out of their misery before the drug had completely left their system. Only one had refused to beg. Only one had remained defiant up until the very end.

Lisa.

Just thinking about her spirit made blood race through his veins. His heart began to pound fiercely as he imagined the upcoming night with his latest victim. His hunger would soon be sated, the monster again quiet for a short while.

He grabbed her keys from the ground where she'd dropped them and opened her back door. As though helping a drunk, he tossed her into the backseat and shut the door.

With a wicked grin, he adjusted the gloves covering his hands and climbed behind the wheel. He'd dispose of her car later, just like all the others. Tonight was the first time he'd taken someone from such a public location, and he found he enjoyed the thrill, the excitement.

He felt so little anymore. Only anger and hunger, the need to kill, to free the monster that clawed to get out.

"Soon," he whispered as he threw the car into drive and pulled out of the parking spot.

\* \* \*

Brian led Kathryn back to the bathroom. He could still hear the water running in the shower and wanted to get back there before Nick decided to step out. This whole threesome thing was turning out to be more interesting than he'd initially thought.

He'd enjoyed earlier. A lot. The look on Kathryn's face as Nick had made her come had almost made him come as well. She'd looked absolutely beautiful and so damn desirable. It had taken everything he had to not do what Nick had done—pull her away from him and take her for himself.

He still couldn't get over how Nick had done that. It wasn't often his friend lost control. Matter of fact, Brian couldn't remember Nick ever losing it whenever they'd shared a girl. Kathryn seemed to bring out the beast in both of them.

Now it was time to bring out the beast in Kathryn.

Brian stepped into the steam-filled bathroom, Kathryn's hand clasped in his. With the other hand, he pulled back the shower curtain. Nick stared at him with a

mixture of amusement and surprise before dipping his head back to rinse out the shampoo.

"Want some company?" Brian asked.

"Depends," Nick replied with a smirk. "Male or female?"

"Both."

Nick glanced around the shower. "Think it's big enough in here for three, do ya?"

"We'll make it work," Brian said with a frown. "Or you could get out."

Nick snorted. "Not likely."

"Knock it off," Kathryn snapped.

She pulled her hand free and untied her robe, letting it fall off her shoulders to pool on the wet floor. Brian's gaze wandered lazily over her smooth tan flesh, high, firm breasts, and rounded hips.

"I'm getting in the shower. Are you coming?" she asked as she stepped past him and into the steam.

Brian snickered as his mind landed smack in the middle of the gutter. Something it never failed to do whenever Kathryn was close by. "I'm not coming yet. But give me a few."

"I hope it takes you longer than a few," Kathryn replied, her lips spreading into a dirty little grin that set his heart pounding wildly.

Nick chuckled. "Someone's getting a little sassy."

"Getting?" Brian asked with a smirk.

"Hey," Kathryn countered. "Behave yourself and play nice, or I'll..."

She pursed her lips in thought.

"You'll what?" Brian asked.

"Make you go for lube," Nick finished, making Brian frown.

"Actually, neither of you may need to go after all," Kathryn said.

Brian began unzipping his jeans, anxious to get his aching cock free of its confinement. "Why is that?"

"Check the counter by the sink. I may have some KY gel."

Brian's eyebrow rose a notch. "Really?"

"Yes," she replied, sarcastically yet playfully. "I masturbate. Don't act so surprised."

"Maybe you should show us exactly how it is you do that," Nick said, his lips spreading into a grin.

Kathryn gave Nick the sexiest grin Brian thought he'd ever seen on her face, and he suddenly felt a wave of jealousy so strong, he wasn't sure he could remain in the room. She was his. She belonged with him. He still believed that. Seeing her tease Nick hurt more than he wanted to admit.

He and Nick had shared before. They'd shared Lisa, for crying out loud, but this time it felt different. His only problem was he just didn't know why. Was it because Nick ran out on them? Was it because it had been so long since they'd shared? Were they just out of practice, so to speak? Was he just being stubborn, as Kathryn had suggested more than once?

He loved her and felt for once in his life he had a right to be selfish.

With a quiet sigh, he turned away from the sight of his best friend in the shower with the woman he loved and grabbed the gel Kathryn had pointed out. Shoving off his pants, he stepped into the shower and set the plastic bottle in the corner caddy, rattling the metal shelves.

Kathryn glanced at him in concern before turning to face him, her back to Nick. "You okay?" she asked.

"Perfect," he snarled.

Reaching behind her, he grasped the back of her neck and tugged her to him. He slanted his mouth across hers hungrily, and she melted against him, returning his kiss with equal vigor. With his other hand, he pressed against the small of her back, pulling her closer, forcing her body flush against his own.

Her nipples beaded against his chest, and her dainty little hands wrapped around his waist. Her fingers kneaded his flesh, making his cock thicken and ache. God, he wanted her again. Right here, right now. The hell with Nick. He could stand there and watch, or he could fucking leave. At the moment, Brian wasn't sure he cared.

Kathryn must have sensed his thoughts. She pulled away and smiled as she gently cupped his cheek. He wanted to drown in her eyes, remain there and forget about everything and everybody.

She grasped the hand behind her neck and held it within her small fingers. He could have easily pulled it free, even thought about pulling it free as she turned to kiss Nick. But something held him frozen in that spot.

Warm water cascaded down, bouncing off Nick and Kathryn to splatter against his skin. Steam filled the small room, floating around them like fog. For a brief second, Nick's gaze met his before he closed his eyes, submitting to Kathryn's sweet lips.

Despite the jealousy, despite the desire to keep her all to himself, a small part of him could admit to how right this felt—how arousing it was.

Brian reached out and moved her damp hair from the side of her neck. Leaning down, he placed a soft kiss against her shoulder. He pulled his hand free from hers and placed his palms at her waist, then smoothed them down her hips.

Nick covered one breast with his palm, and she moaned, arching her back slightly. Brian joined him, covering her other breast with his hand and massaging the firm mound. He pinched at her nipple, and he felt her sharp intake of breath against his chest.

Brian watched as Nick pulled away and moved his lips to the opposite side of her neck. He moved his palm down to her inner thigh.

“Put your foot on the side of the tub,” Brian whispered.

Nick glanced at him briefly while Kathryn placed her small foot onto the edge of the tub. Brian pulled her back against his chest, helping her balance while Nick slowly worked his lips lower over her abdomen. His friend dropped to his knees in front of her. Kathryn watched, her breathing shallow, as Nick licked at her clit with the tip of his tongue.

She gasped as her fingers latched on to Brian’s arm, digging into his flesh. Brian buried his face in her neck, inhaling her sweet scent. He could feel her muscles twitch and flex against him as she undulated, working her hips closer to Nick’s mouth.

Brian pressed his cock into her hip, trying to relieve some of the pressure building in his balls. The move did nothing. If anything, it made the pain worse, the need worse.

Reaching out, he grabbed the plastic bottle of KY lubricant and flipped the top open. Turning his hand, he allowed the slick gel to fall into his fingers and mix with the warm water raining on them. He set the bottle aside, his fingers now slick and shaking slightly as he slid them through the cleft of her ass.

Kathryn moaned and pushed her hips back just a little as he pressed two fingers past the tight ring of resistance of her anal passage. The muscles gave way, relaxing and allowing his fingers deep into her channel.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Kathryn?” Brian whispered.

She swallowed and nodded. Nick glanced up at her as he added two of his fingers to her pussy. She cried out and her knees buckled. Brian winced as her fingernails scratched across the flesh of his arm. She sagged back against him, and he tightened his arm around her waist, holding her close.

Brian didn’t know how much longer he could hold himself back. He felt as though he’d spent his entire life waiting for this...waiting for her. He’d wasted so much damn time by not saying anything. He could have lost her to Nick by not saying anything. He’d be damned if he’d make that mistake again. From here on out, every day, every second, he’d tell her how he felt—show her how he felt. There would never be any doubt.

He and Nick worked together as though they’d never been separated. It felt like old times again...almost.

Brian pulled his fingers from Kathryn’s ass and reached for the lubricant. With trembling fingers, he spread it over his engorged cock, sighing as his hand worked up and down his swollen length, smearing the cool gel.

“Hold on to Nick,” he said as he pressed the head of his cock between the cheeks of her ass.

Nick kept his fingers in her pussy as Brian pressed the tip of his cock against the tight entrance to her anal passage. Kathryn pressed outward, relaxing the

muscles and allowing him to push inside. He let out a long, slow, deep breath as her tight walls gripped his length in a stranglehold that almost had him coming on the spot.

Kathryn moaned and reached around to grasp his thigh as though to hold him to her. Like he could go anywhere. The warmth of her body kept him trapped. He couldn't leave now if his life depended on it.

Nick's fingers began to move with Brian's cock. He felt them rubbing against his length as he slowly moved in and out of her passage. Her moans and sighs coaxed him on; her whispers for more sent blood roaring through his ears.

He pushed deeper, burying himself balls-deep. Kathryn groaned, bending forward slightly to try to shove him deeper.

"Can you take us both, baby?" Nick asked as he stood in front of her.

"Yes," she hissed.

Nick cupped her breasts, giving them a final hard squeeze. Lifting one of her legs around his hip, he positioned the head of his cock at her weeping entrance. Brian could feel how wet she was, how much cream leaked out to coat his balls. He remained still, buried to the hilt inside her as Nick pressed his cock forward.

Her body tensed as Nick invaded her tight pussy. Nick groaned, pulling back slightly.

"Fuck, you're tight," he growled.

"Don't stop," she panted. "Nick, please don't stop."

Brian bent his head and gently kissed at the side of her neck. She purred in response, her fingers kneading at Nick's shoulders, her hips rocking slowly back and forth between the two of them. Brian's balls were close to bursting. If Nick didn't do something soon, he'd fuck her without him.

"God, you're so damn sexy," Nick groaned as he began to thrust forward once again.

Kathryn moaned and whimpered in pleasure.

"Oh, God," she cried out as Nick pressed even deeper, burying himself as far in as Brian.

Brian held his breath as her channel became even tighter. The thickness of Nick's cock pressed against his, increasing the pleasure as they began to move in counterpart. One in, the other out. Over and over until Brian thought he'd lose his damned mind.

Kathryn wiggled between them, unsure which way to move, completely at their mercy. Nick grasped her other thigh, lifting both legs around his waist. The movement forced both of them deeper, and Brian cursed at the shocking pleasure that raced up his spine.

"I hope you're close, Brian," Nick whispered between kisses along Kathryn's jaw.

“How close are you, Kathryn?” Brian asked. “I can feel your walls contracting. I can feel them throbbing.”

Kathryn murmured something incoherent, making Brian smile.

His sentiments exactly.

His mind was the closest to mush he could ever remember it being. His whole body trembled as he changed his rhythm to match Nick's. Both of them pounded into her together—harder, faster, forcing themselves deeper with every thrust.

Kathryn screamed as her release hit. Brian could feel every pulse of her channel and yelled as her orgasm meshed with his. Nick followed, and their shouts mingled together, then faded. The only sound that remained was their breaths and the water as it hit the tile around them.

Brian sighed and dropped his forehead to Kathryn's shoulder. Her arms fell to her sides as her breathing slowed.

“Now I definitely know I want the both of you,” she whispered tiredly.

Nick chuckled and kissed her cheek. “I'm game. You just have to convince the stubborn ass behind you.”

“Don't start, Nick,” Brian said quietly.

Kathryn reached up and cupped his cheek. Brian turned his head and placed a kiss in the center of her palm.

“Let's not talk about threesomes right now,” Brian whispered. “We're here. We're together...for the moment. Let's just leave it at that.”



## Chapter Ten

Her throat felt raw, constricted. Tears streamed down her face, wetting her cheeks and chin. Pain raced through her body—gut-wrenching, unbearable pain unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

Kathryn gasped and opened her eyes wide to stare at the ceiling above her. Her mind clung to remnants of the nightmare, and she closed her eyes tight against the snippets of pain and fear. She wasn't one to have nightmares, at least since she was a child. Why would she have them again now?

Taking a deep, calming breath, she tried to slow her racing heart. "It was just a dream," she whispered.

Beside her, Brian shifted. Had she woke him? She sat up and stared down at him. He was still asleep. His black hair had fallen over his brow, and she used the tip of her finger to move it. On her other side Nick snored softly, and she smiled.

They were all in one bed. That was a start, wasn't it? That thought gave her pause as she stared at them. Was she doing the right thing? Was Nick really okay with this? Would Brian ever truly be okay with it? Would this completely screw up her relationship with both of them?

She needed some water.

As quietly and slowly as possible so not to wake the guys, she lifted the covers and climbed from the bed. Once out, she padded barefoot across the carpet to grab the robe she kept lying across the back of the wingback chair in the corner. Even though she was in her own home, she still felt strange about walking around naked and very seldom did.

She walked out of the room, slipping her arms through the sleeves as she went. All the way down the hall, she could see them—the ghosts who were always around. She'd stopped making eye contact, stopped trying to help them. She'd tried and could never figure it out. Most finally left, but these were persistent. It's like they were trying to tell her something—to warn her of something.

Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do.

Blocking out the images as best she could, she opened the refrigerator and reached for the glass pitcher of juice. It was cold and heavy, so to keep from dropping it, she put her other hand at the bottom and closed the fridge with her hip. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the image of Janie and smiled.

"Hey, it's about time you got home," Kathryn said as she turned to face her friend.

The second her eyes landed on Janie's face, Kathryn stopped breathing. Blood and mud covered most every inch of her body. Her clothes were ripped or gone altogether. Her face was cut and swollen, her eyes haunted and fearful.

Instant pain, both emotional and physical, raced through Kathryn's body, and she screamed, dropping the pitcher. It shattered on the floor, spewing sticky juice all over her legs and feet.

"No!" Kathryn sobbed, reaching out for her friend. The image shattered as though the sound of her cries had startled the ghost. Kathryn slid to the floor, wrapping her arms around her stomach as the physical pain faded but the emotional pain remained. "No!" she screamed again toward the ceiling, her body shaking.

\* \* \*

Nick woke to find Kathryn gone, her spot next to him cold. He put his hand where she'd been earlier and smiled as he thought of their shower earlier.

Sharing her with Brian seemed natural, but then he didn't have the anger Brian did. His friend was still pissed at him, still leery that he would leave again. But Nick didn't have any plans to go anywhere. Not now.

He loved Kathryn and wanted to see where their relationship could go—with or without Brian.

"What are you smiling about?" Brian grumbled. "And where's Kathryn?"

"Bathroom would be my guess," Nick answered, then called toward the bathroom where a soft light glowed from under the door. "Katie."

No answer. Nick sat up and called louder. "Katie."

Brian sat up as well when she didn't answer the second time. Suddenly a loud scream came from the other side of the house, along with the sound of breaking glass. They both jumped from the bed, Nick's heart racing in real fear as he sprinted down the hall just as her second scream split the air around him.

"Katie," he yelled, glancing around for her.

He saw the juice on the floor, and both he and Brian ran to the kitchen. He found her on the floor, her arms wrapped around her stomach, tears streaming down her face as her body shook with wracking sobs.

"What the hell happened?" Brian asked as he tried to make his way through the broken glass covering the floor.

Nick grabbed a couple of towels from the counter and threw them onto the floor, covering the glass. With as much care as possible, he stepped across and lifted her into his arms. She wrapped hers around his neck, crying into his shoulder as he carried her to the couch and set her down.

"Katie, what happened?" he asked.

"It's Janie," she sobbed. "Janie's dead."

"Janie's dead?" Brian asked. "Kathryn, how do you know? Where is she? Is she in the house?"

Katie shook her head. "She's dead," she repeated.

Nick and Brian threw each other a worried look. "Check the basement," Nick said.

Brian nodded and headed to grab his pants and check Janie's room downstairs. He returned seconds later, a solemn look on his face.

"She's not there, and her car's not in the driveway."

Nick glanced at his watch. "It's four in the morning. Is she normally out this late, Katie?"

"I told you," Katie repeated, her eyes staring straight ahead at something behind Nick. "She's dead. He got her."

\* \* \*

Nick threw on the pants that Brian brought him as Kathryn sat on the couch, staring across the room at Janie. Her friend was trying to tell her something, but she couldn't make it out. Sighing in frustration, she dropped her head in her hands.

How the hell was she going to explain this? They were going to think she was nuts; she just knew it.

Nick sat down on the coffee table. She glanced up at him warily, Nick's close scrutiny making her nervous. Brian stood close by, a look of concern on his chiseled face. She knew Brian. She knew he didn't believe in anything he couldn't see or touch. Nick, on the other hand, was a little more open-minded, but by how much, she wasn't sure.

"How do you know Janie is dead, Katie?" Nick asked softly.

She swallowed, knowing now she would have to come clean. "It's hard to explain."

"It's us, Kathryn," Brian said as he sat down next to her and put his hand on her knee. "It can't be all that hard to tell us."

She shook her head, tears again gathering in her eyes. "You have no idea, Brian, just how hard this is going to be."

"I can make this much easier for you," Nick said. "How long have you been seeing ghosts?"

She blinked, caught off guard by his question. "What?"

"Nick," Brian chastised, but Nick held up his hand.

"I've worked with a lot of psychics at the Bureau. The lack of mirrors in the house tipped me off."

She stared, speechless.

"Lack of mirrors doesn't mean anything," Brian said, but again Nick held up his hand, silencing him.

"The woman I worked with didn't have mirrors because she could see them in the reflection. It was the only place she couldn't block their images. Am I right, Katie? Did you see Janie's ghost?" he asked.

She nodded slowly.

"Wait a minute," Brian said. "What? Ghosts? Kathryn, what the hell is he talking about?"

"I've seen them since I was a little girl. Lisa tried to help me to help them, but—"

"Lisa knew about this?" Brian asked.

"She was the only one who knew about this."

Nick was silent for a few seconds. Then he said, "We need to get an APB out on Janie's car and file a missing-person report."

"Nick..." Brian began.

"Would you just fucking do it?" Nick snarled in frustration.

Shaking his head, Brian stood and walked over to the counter. Grabbing his cell phone, he flipped it open and started making calls. In the meantime, Nick turned back to Kathryn. She began to wring her hands nervously, unsure now what either of them would think about this. Would knowing this change how they saw her?

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Kathryn whispered.

"I don't know what to think. Why didn't you tell us about this, Katie?"

"I've never told anyone but Lisa," she replied, staring at her clasped hands. "I was always embarrassed by it. I was always afraid people wouldn't believe me."

Nick grasped her hands, squeezing them reassuringly. "Do you just see Janie?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"Who do you see?"

"Right now, women. They're all the same. Bloody, beaten...oh my God."

"What?" Nick asked.

She brought her gaze back to his. "They're all the same."

"All the same how?" Nick asked as Brian came back to the couch.

"APB is out. Who's the same?"

"The women that I see. They're all beaten, muddy as though they've been buried, and they're all missing their left ring finger."

Nick glanced at Brian. "Did you ever tell her the details of the cases?"

Brian shook his head. "No. You know we don't do that. I can't even tell her." Brian looked at her and frowned.

"Was Lisa missing a ring finger?" she asked, unsure she wanted to know. Brian and Nick had decided to do a closed casket, telling her it would be better if

she didn't see Lisa. They wanted her to remember her friend as she had been, not how that monster had transformed her.

"Yes, she was," Brian said. "Have you seen Lisa?"

She shook her head. "I think I haven't because Lisa knew I wouldn't want to."

"How many do you see?" Nick asked.

She took a deep breath, preparing herself for the onslaught of images once she let down her barrier. Slowly, one by one, they became visible. She squeezed her eyes shut briefly, steeling her heart against the grotesque condition of their bodies. Oh, God. Is this how her friend had looked?

Once again opening her eyes, she quickly counted. "Twenty-three."

"Are you sure?" Nick asked, his eyes wide. "Are you sure they're all missing a ring finger?"

Kathryn nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Oh my God," Nick whispered.

She glanced up at Brian, who'd remained silent but now stood over them, a murderous look in his eyes. Kathryn immediately tensed.

"Brian?" she whispered.

"There can't be twenty-three," Brian said. "We've only found eleven bodies. That would mean he's been..."

"The others could have been prior, Brian. This doesn't mean he's been killing the past two years," Nick argued. "We would know if there were twelve women missing. Have there been any women since I left that have gone missing and matched the profile?"

Brian shook his head.

"They could have been prior and we just haven't found their bodies yet."

Brian again shook his head. Kathryn felt sick to her stomach. "Not that I'm saying I believe any of this," Brian began, and Kathryn's heart sank. "Could you describe them?"

She glanced at the ghosts, then nodded. "I think so."

"Then let's get dressed and go to the station."

"For what?" Kathryn asked, but Brian didn't answer her. Instead, he headed down the hall toward her bedroom, and she sighed tiredly.

"I think I know what he wants you do to," Nick said. "Are you sure you're ready for this, Katie?"

She nodded her head toward Brian. "I'm not sure I have too much of a choice in the matter."

\* \* \*

Brian stood back, watching as Kathryn sat at the desk in Nick's temporary office. She looked tired, worried. She chewed on her lower lip as tears again welled

in her eyes. She dropped her head, squeezing her temples with her thumb and forefinger.

He wanted to go to her, hold her. Part of him still stung because she hadn't said anything about any of this. Brian wasn't one to believe in stuff like this. He'd heard of police officers and detectives using psychics. He could just never wrap his mind around it enough to jump on the bandwagon.

Did he believe her? He believed that she believed.

"You wanted to see me?"

Brian turned to look at Charles, forgetting for a moment why he was there. He blinked, gathering his thoughts, and took a deep breath.

"Yes. I need you to talk with Kathryn, get whatever descriptions she gives you, then run a search through the missing-persons database. Keep the ages between twenty-three and thirty."

Charles frowned as he glanced at Kathryn over Brian's shoulder. "Is this pertaining to the serial-killer cases?"

"Yes."

"How? Did she see something?"

"In a manner of speaking." Brian sighed before continuing. "Kathryn believes she sees the dead victims of our serial killer."

Charles's eyes opened wide in shock. "Kathryn's a psychic?"

Nick came up as well and slapped Charles once on the shoulder. "Psychics see the future, Charles. She sees dead people."

Charles snorted. "Are you serious?"

Nick scowled. "Dead serious. I suggest you do your job just like you normally do it. No snarky remarks."

Charles's face reddened, but there was something in his eyes that made the hair on Brian's neck stand on end. Charles was a good police officer, but there had always been something about him that made Brian uncomfortable. He'd always brushed it off in the past and would probably continue to do so. There were people in the world he didn't care for. Charles was one of them.

"I...I wouldn't do that," Charles scoffed.

"Good," Nick said as he nodded toward the office. "Get to it and let me know what you find out. The sooner, the better."

"I'll have some answers by the end of the day."

Brian followed Charles into the office just as Kathryn lifted her head to stare at them.

"Kathryn, this is Charles. He's going to take down your descriptions and feed them into the database for missing persons."

She nodded, looking a little wary. Her gaze darted around the room, and her brow crinkled slightly in concern.

"Is something wrong?" Brian asked as he moved closer and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I see them as they died, Brian. I'm not sure I can tell him how they looked normally."

"Just do the best you can. We know he usually goes for specific looks. What I need more than anything is any distinguishing marks—tattoos, scars, that sort of thing. It will help to narrow them down in the database. Think you can do that?"

She swallowed and nodded. "Yes."

"Okay. I'll come check on you shortly."

Brian nodded to Charles, then turned to leave the room, returning to Nick in the main lobby.

"I've been thinking," Brian began as he came to a stop next to Nick.

"Should I move and put some distance between us?" Nick asked, his lips twitching with amusement.

Brian scowled.

"Lighten up," Nick scoffed. "Brian, don't do this again."

"Do what?"

"Lose yourself in this case."

"What if he's been killing all this time, Nick? What if he's gone out of state to get the girls?"

Nick's lips twisted as he glanced around the crowded lobby. "It's possible, Brian. I have to be honest. He knew we were on to him, and he knew what to do to totally throw us for a loop. He won't do it again. I promise you that."

Brian scratched at his jaw with the front side of his thumbnail and studied his friend. Nick was good; unfortunately, neither of them had been good enough. Nick's promise meant nothing to Brian at the moment. His major concern was Kathryn. He couldn't let what happened to Lisa happen to her, and the only person he trusted right now to make sure that didn't happen was himself.

If their killer had been killing all this time, what had made him come back to his home turf? Arrogance? Was it a challenge? Boredom?

"What if we check with the surrounding areas, see if they have any unsolved murders that match our own?" Brian asked.

"We could do that," Nick said as he clasped his hands in front of him, slapping the files against his thighs softly. "It'll take a little while. We have no way of knowing how far away he went. There are a lot of counties to cover. We'll know more as soon as Charles runs those descriptions. It will give us more of a starting point if we know what area the girls were taken from."

Brian sighed. Sometimes the database was updated when the girl was found murdered. Sometimes it wasn't. They would have their work cut out for them.

“Do you need any more help with this?” Brian asked. “I can give you a few more officers.”

Nick shook his head. “No. I have three more agents coming in to help. They should be here in about an hour or so. I also want to work with forensics and rework this guy’s profile.”

“Let me know what you come up with.”

Brian turned to leave, but Nick stopped him.

“Brian,” Nick called.

He turned to his friend, hands on hips. “Yeah?”

“I know I’ve said this before, but don’t let this be a repeat of what happened the last time.”

Brian scowled, but then nodded in agreement. Albeit reluctantly. “That’s why I put you in charge, Nick.”



## Chapter Eleven

"You look tired, baby. You ready to head home?"

Kathryn quickly clicked out of the Internet screen she was reading. She'd finished up with Charles a couple of hours ago and spent the rest of the time surfing the Web on Brian's computer, researching her so-called gift. If she could find someone else that had the same ability as her, maybe they could help her figure out what the ghosts needed from her.

She glanced over the computer screen toward Brian, who stood in the doorway of his office. He looked as tired as she did, if not more. His uniform shirt was wrinkled, his hair mussed as though he'd spent the day dragging his fingers through it.

"What time is it?" she asked, stretching her tired muscles by reaching toward the ceiling with her palms.

"Well past dinner."

He walked over and tapped the edge of her paper plate on the desk next to her. He frowned at the sandwich with only one bite taken out of it, and she grimaced in guilt.

"I see you missed lunch," he said in disapproval.

"I know. I just wasn't hungry." She glanced up at him, biting her lip. "You don't really believe I see ghosts, do you?"

"I believe that you believe. You know me, Kathryn. If I can't see it or—"

"I know. If you can't see it or touch it, then it doesn't exist."

Brian sat on the edge of the desk, his gaze softening at he stared down at her. "Why didn't you tell me about this?" he asked.

"Nick asked me the same thing."

"To hell with Nick," Brian snapped, but not harshly. "Why didn't you tell *me*? We've been friends a long time, Kathryn. I thought we told each other everything."

"I think we've already established we don't tell each other everything," she replied, narrowing her eyes at him.

His lips twitched slightly. "Touché. Not telling you I was in love with you was a pretty big omission, I'll admit."

"I guess I was afraid to tell you about my seeing ghosts for the same reason you were afraid to tell me you loved me. I was afraid of what your reaction would be."

"Did you think I would run or never talk to you again?" he asked.

Kathryn shrugged and glanced back down at her hands. "I don't know how you would've reacted. I guess that was the concern. I'm sorry, Brian."

"Don't be sorry, Kathryn. I'm just as guilty as you when it comes to withholding information. What you've told me hasn't changed anything about how I feel. I still love you, and that won't change."

She smiled slightly in relief. Although truthfully, she'd almost rather have his belief. It was important that he believe her, but she knew Brian would need time and proof. Both would come as the case unfolded. She would just have to be patient and not push.

"Should we call Janie's parents?" she asked.

"Not yet," Brian replied, sighing. "No sense upsetting them until we know for sure."

"I know for sure, Brian. She's here. She's been here all day...watching me, trying to talk to me."

Brian frowned. "She can't speak to you?"

"She tries, but I can't hear her. It's like looking at her through glass. I can see her, but not as clearly as I see you. I can tell she's frustrated...angry, but she can't communicate to me why. They're all like that. In the beginning, I tried to help them but could never figure out what it was they wanted to tell me, so I just started blocking them. Janie caught me by surprise last night. I thought at first she was home from her date. Then...then I saw her face."

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she swiped at them in frustration. She'd cried enough today. She didn't want to cry anymore. Brian grasped her hand and pulled her to her feet before tugging her into his embrace. He didn't say anything, just wrapped his arms around her, supporting her like he always had. Even though he didn't truly believe her, he still supported her.

\* \* \*

"Nick!"

Nick spun around and stared in surprise at Mike. Their fire chief stood just on the other side of his desk, glaring, but his eyes twinkled with his usual mischief. He'd always enjoyed spending time with Mike when he'd lived here.

"Why the hell haven't you come by the station to say hello?" Mike demanded.

Nick smiled at the giant of a man as he walked forward and returned his hug of welcome, patting him on the back.

"I'm sorry, man," Nick said as he pulled away. "I've been so busy here."

"Yeah, I know what you've been busy with," Mike replied, snickering softly. "Are you really going to come in here and take Katie out from under Brian?"

"Boy, you don't beat around the bush, do you?"

Mike smiled.

"He's been through hell, Nick. He and Katie belong together."

Nick rolled his eyes. "You've got to be kidding me. And here I thought you were here to see me because you missed me. Did Brian send you here?"

Mike's deep chuckle shook his entire chest. "No. Actually, I just came by to see if you, Brian, and Katie wanted to join my wife and me at the waterfront."

"I would love to. I haven't seen Maggie in years. I would love to get caught up on all your shit. But I don't think Katie would be up for it."

Mike frowned. "Why? She under the weather?"

"No. Her business partner Janie didn't come home last night. Katie thinks something may have happened to her."

Nick sat in the chair, watching Mike as his lips twitched slightly in a mocking smile. "I know Janie. More than likely she spent the night with her latest conquest. I swear, Nick, that girl is like a guy when it comes to sex."

"I don't doubt it," Nick replied, chuckling. "But Katie doesn't think so. She always comes home."

A look of worry clouded Mike's eyes. "Brian thinks that serial killer is back. Do you?"

Nick nodded solemnly. He wished he didn't. He wished Brian had been wrong.

"Damn," Mike mumbled. "If there's anything I can do to help, you let me know."

Nick gave his friend a half smile. "I will."

Charles stepped into the office, a look of worry on his face that made Nick's own chest tighten.

"Excuse me," Charles began. "I don't mean to interrupt, but I need to speak with you."

"I'll talk to you later, Nick," Mike began as he left the office. "When you have a chance, give me a call and we'll get lunch."

Nick lifted his chin in acknowledgment. "Will do." He turned back to Charles. "What is it?"

Charles came farther into the room, both hands holding a folder tightly, his knuckles almost white from the tension. What had him so nervous?

"I ran those descriptions that Katie gave me."

"That reminds me," Nick started with a frown. "Don't tell anyone about this. It took Katie a long time to tell Brian and me about her ability. I doubt she would want the rest of the department to know."

Charles nodded in agreement and licked his lips.

"What did you find?" Nick asked.

"Out of the descriptions she gave me, only six came up on the national database. Four of those showed up as found murdered. Cases unsolved. Date of

death within the last eighteen months. I got their pictures and put them in the file. I thought maybe Katie could take a look and see if these are the ones.”

Charles held the file out and Nick grumbled silently to himself as he reached out to take it. Laying it on his desk, he flipped it open, staring at the women who’d all died so young.

“None of the others were there?” Nick asked.

“The descriptions were too vague. Those six had some sort of distinguishing marks. The others didn’t. There’re hundreds of women in that database that her descriptions could match. Without something to separate them, or a name, it’s impossible to narrow it down.”

Pursing his lips, Nick fought the urge to throw the file.

“Thanks, Charles. At least this is a start.”

“Not a problem.” He started to leave the room, but turned back. He hesitated as though wanting to ask something.

“What is it, Charles?” Nick asked, more harshly than he’d intended.

The murderous anger that momentarily darkened the officer’s eyes took Nick by surprise, but he remained silent, waiting to see what Charles would say. The anger was gone almost as quickly as it had appeared, and for a brief second, he wondered if maybe he’d imagined it.

Charles pursed his lips briefly. “Brian wanted me to tell you he took Katie home.”

Nick nodded. “All right. Thanks.”

Charles left the room, and Nick dropped his head back, staring at the ceiling. He wanted to go home as well, but he had too much work to do. They now needed to call the precincts and find out about these girls, especially the ones who’d been marked as murdered. If those cases matched the ones here, Nick wasn’t sure how Brian would take the news.

His friend already felt a huge amount of guilt that the man got away. How much worse was he going to feel if he found out their killer had continued to kill?

Nick knew how he felt. He wanted to vomit. They never should have stopped looking.

\* \* \*

Kathryn dropped onto the couch with a tired sigh. She’d cried so much today, her eyes felt swollen and heavy. She wanted something to drink. Something strong and full of alcohol. Something that would help her to forget, to block the images she’d allowed back into her life.

A bottle of beer appeared in front of her face, and she reached up to take it, glancing at Brian as he let go of the bottle. The cold glass felt good against her hand.

“Thanks,” she mumbled as she lifted it to her lips.

She swallowed half the bottle in seconds, desperate for the numbing effect she knew would soon follow. She didn't drink often, so it wouldn't take long for her to start to feel the effects, especially if she drank fast.

Brian sat down next to her, his thigh touching hers. She could feel his heat and wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms and sleep. If only she could sleep.

"I'm scared, Brian," she whispered.

He turned to look at her. "Why, baby?"

"That this nightmare is starting all over again. Promise me it won't be like the last time."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe he's been killing all this time. I don't believe he ever stopped. I don't want this to do to you what it did before."

Brian sighed and reached over, grasping her hand in his. "I promise you, Kathryn. It won't."

She leaned over and rested her head against his shoulder. She was so tired, but at the same time so damn scared to sleep. She just knew she'd see all their faces in her dreams.

"So I guess sex is out of the question, huh?"

She sat up with a start, staring at him in shock and just a bit of anger. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Brian's mouth lifted into a small smile, and it was then that she realized he'd been teasing her. She slapped at his shoulder in disgust, her lips twisting. "You're impossible."

"Do you see them now?" he asked softly. "Are they here?"

She studied him, wondering why he'd brought it up. "They're always here," she replied, shaking her head. "But I can usually block them. I've gotten pretty good at it over the years. Sometimes one will catch me by surprise, like Janie did, but for the most part, I can ignore them." She licked her lips and stared down at her half-empty beer bottle. "I know you're having a hard time with this."

"I'll admit you threw me for a hell of a loop," he said. "But I know you. If you say you see ghosts, then I believe you see ghosts."

Her lower lip began to tremble, so she took a deep breath. "You're going to make me cry again."

Brian snickered and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "Oh God. No more tears, please. I can't take it."

Kathryn giggled, wiping at a single tear as it slipped down her cheek.

"I need you to do something for me," Brian whispered close to her ear.

"What?" she asked, breathless. Despite her despair and her current fatigue, Brian's soft voice could still give her goose bumps.

"I need you to eat something."

"Can it be anything?" she pleaded.

"Anything within reason."

"Within reason?"

"No junk food."

"Is pizza junk food?"

Brian appeared thoughtful for a second. "I'll agree to pizza. Pepperoni?"

"Onions and—"

"I know. Onions and peppers on your half," Brian said with a nod as he pulled his cell phone from the holder on his belt.

Kathryn smiled sadly and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "You take such good care of me," she said as she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

Brian winked at her as he dialed the number in his cell phone. They'd ordered pizza so many times, he had it on speed dial.

\* \* \*

Nick tiptoed into Katie's bedroom as quietly as possible. She'd had a rough day, and the last thing he wanted was to wake her up.

The blue-white lights on the alarm clock displayed the time as 2:30 a.m. Nick winced. He would have to be up and back at the station in just under five hours. Sleep, he knew, would elude him. Too many things clogged his mind.

With a sigh, he worked his tired fingers down the row of buttons on the front of his light blue dress shirt. He'd taken his tie off hours ago and right now couldn't remember where he'd left it and truthfully was too tired to care.

He sat softly on the side of the bed and removed his shoes and socks. His shirt came next. Then he stood and slid his pants down his legs, letting them drop to the floor at his feet. He'd pick them up in the morning. Right now, he just wanted to get into bed.

He slid under the covers and met Katie's worried gaze. "What are you doing awake?" he whispered as he settled himself on his side, facing her. "Did I make too much noise?"

"No," she replied. "I was already awake."

He reached out and brushed the backs of his fingers along her cheek. "Couldn't sleep?"

She shook her head, lifting it slightly to slide her palm under the pillow, supporting her head. "You told me this morning you knew another woman like me."

"Yes. Her name is Sharon Wiley."

"Could you set up a meeting?"

Nick frowned. "Why?"

“I think it might help if I can talk to someone who experiences what I do. Maybe she can give me some advice or some help...something. At this point, I’d take anything I could get.”

Nick nodded, understanding somewhat. “I’ll see what I can do first thing in the morning.”

He still had Sharon’s number somewhere in his BlackBerry. He’d give her a call and see if she could do anything for Katie. If he remembered correctly, Sharon could communicate with them. Maybe she could explain to Katie how she could as well.

“Thank you, Nick,” she whispered.

Her eyes closed and her breathing slowed. For a few moments, Nick remained where he was, just watching her sleep. Brian turned behind her, sliding his arm possessively around her waist, and Nick’s lips lifted in a sad, one-sided smile. Despite how often he’d shared a woman he loved with Brian, for some reason, this time felt different, and seeing his arm around her like that hurt.

They weren’t as close as they used to be, and he believed that would be their biggest obstacle. He and Brian needed to work on their relationship if they wanted this relationship with Katie to work. He brushed the hair from her forehead and drew in a slow breath, inhaling her scent. He definitely wanted this relationship to work.

## Chapter Twelve

Kathryn strolled through the bookstore as though in a daze. She grazed her fingers lightly over the spines of books as she passed by, absently pushing those back that stood out too far. All around her the spirits stared, silently pleading. She shivered and closed her eyes against the grotesque images, their bodies covered in blood and mud.

Her eyes popped open wide as a thought gained entrance and took hold. Mud. They were buried somewhere.

She glanced around the quiet store looking for Nick. Two of her part-time employees stocked shelves, and another stood at the coffee bar, getting it ready for their usual morning rush. All of them looked solemn and sad, worry for their boss evident in the way they carried themselves.

She'd told her employees as soon as they'd arrived about Janie's disappearance. They all thought what Katie already knew—Janie was most likely the next victim of their elusive serial killer.

Nick stood by the counter, stirring his coffee. For a moment, she was sidetracked by the way the morning sunshine highlighted the gray in his hair. The usual sparkle in his eyes was gone this morning, replaced with fatigue and worry. Even the laugh lines around his eyes appeared deeper.

It was three years ago all over again.

"Nick," she said, and he turned to face her. "I was just thinking..."

He tilted his head. "I'm listening." He lifted his cup, taking a sip of the hot coffee while he waited for her to continue.

She walked over to him and sat down on one of the numerous bar stools. Her employee handed her a cup of white chocolate mocha, and Katie smiled her thanks.

"Did you want to tell me something?" Nick asked.

Her lips thinned briefly. "Where were the women found?"

"Different places," Nick replied, frowning slightly. "But I don't think the actual location is what you were asking."

"No." She took a deep breath and glanced toward a couple of the spirits. "They're all covered in mud. Except for one."

Nick glanced around as well, as though trying to see what she saw, then looked back to her. "The ones we've found so far were all buried, at least partially." Nick nodded his agreement. "All except this last one."



Kathryn nodded. "I think he buries all of them."

"I wouldn't doubt it. That seems to be his thing," Nick grumbled softly.

Something nagged at her. "Some of them appear muddier than others, like they're wet."

"It could have been raining when he buried them, which would mean more mud."

"Why wouldn't he have buried this last one?"

"He wanted her found. Either that or the ground is just too hard and dry to bury her like he normally does."

"How will you find them all?"

Nick set his cup down and moved in closer. "What do you see, Katie?" he asked. "I know you said mud, but is there something else about them? Something that might help to narrow things down a bit?"

Katie studied Janie, trying to keep her gaze on her torso rather than her distorted face. Mud and dirt covered her limbs, mixing with blood and clinging to her tattered clothes. My God, she must have died a horrible death.

"It just looks like mud to me, Nick. I don't see anything that..." She sighed and rubbed her fingers over her forehead to ease the dull ache that throbbed behind her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Hey," Nick scoffed, lifting her chin with his finger. "Don't be sorry. Because of you, we know he's still out there and still killing. If I can get a hold of Sharon, maybe she can help you get some more answers."

"Is she good?"

Nick nodded. "Yeah. She's been working with the Bureau for a while. She doesn't just see them, Katie. She can sense things from them, see images. Are you sure you want to..."

"Open myself up to that?" she asked, her lips lifting in a slightly sardonic smile.

"Yeah," Nick whispered, a worried glint in his eyes. "What she sees really has an effect on her. Sometimes it terrifies her."

"You don't think that what I see doesn't terrify me?" Katie replied.

"I know."

Nick cupped her cheek and leaned down to place a soft kiss against her forehead. The gentle touch put her at ease and made her feel safe and loved. She wished she could stay with that feeling forever and forget all about this nightmare.

Nick pulled away but kept his palm against her cheek. "I'm going to try to get a hold of Sharon this morning. In the meantime, stay here. Don't go anywhere alone. Brian and I will both be checking in throughout the day, and one of us will be here later to pick you up. Okay?"

She nodded.

"If you need me, you call me. Hell. Call me if you just want to talk, all right?"

Again she nodded, this time smiling.

"I'm sure Brian will probably be by for lunch," Nick said, and Katie couldn't help but grin at the slight hint of jealousy in his tone.

"You're welcome to stop by for lunch as well, you know."

"I may do just that," Nick replied, his voice deep and sexy.

Katie couldn't help but imagine all the glorious possibilities of a lunchtime threesome, but her thoughts quickly turned to Janie and her unknown whereabouts.

"Be careful out there, Nick, and watch out for Brian."

Nick snorted. "Brian doesn't need a keeper. He needs a head shrink."

"Nick," she chastised.

Nick chuckled and hunched his shoulders, dodging her halfhearted slap to his arm.

"Brian will be fine," he said. "And so will I. Thanks for asking."

Kathryn giggled. She couldn't help it. She knew Nick wasn't really jealous, but he sure could act it sometimes.

"You know good and well that I worry about you too and tell Brian the very same thing."

Nick's lips twisted. "So that's why he's watching me all the time. And here I thought he had the hots for my muscular bod."

Kathryn grinned. "No, dear. That's me."

"Oh, yeah," Nick said, smiling devilishly. "That is you."

He chuckled her under the chin and mouthed quietly, *I love you*.

*I love you*, she mouthed back.

He turned to leave but threw over his shoulder as he walked across the floor, "Don't leave the store."

She saluted him, her smile fading as he strolled out the door and across the parking lot to his car.

\* \* \*

Nick glanced up from the paperwork scattered across his desk just in time to see Charles heading toward his office. He knocked softly on the door frame and waited for Nick to wave him in.

"What have you got?" Nick asked.

Charles tossed three files onto the desk. "Two murders in Franklin, Tennessee, that match ours. One in Desoto County, Mississippi."

Nick frowned and picked up the thick files. "Is everything in here?"

"No. That's just what they could send electronically. The rest is coming FedEx."

"I want the bodies too," Nick said.

"I don't think those will go FedEx, Nick."

Nick snorted, surprised at Charles's sense of humor. Usually the man had none. "Cute."

"We're working on the usual paperwork to have the bodies exhumed. Forensics is preparing to run a second autopsy."

"Wow." Nick grinned slightly in surprise. "Not bad, Charles."

"Eh," Charles replied, shrugging. "You hang around Brian long enough, you pick up on stuff."

"True," Nick said with a chuckle, then tapped his finger against the files Charles had handed him. "Were these women in the missing-persons database?"

"The two in Franklin were not. The one in Desoto was, but not marked as found. I took care of that also."

"All right—"

"I hate to interrupt." Officer Terry Watts stuck his head around the door frame. "But someone called in a dead body."

Nick stood and reached for his phone he'd left lying on the desk. "Where?"

"At that construction site on the river. The new high-rise luxury condo building that's going up."

"Get the usual team together," Nick said as he slid his phone into the holder on his belt loop. "Has anyone told Brian?"

Watts nodded. "He said he'd meet you there."

"Great," Nick said, then frowned. "Where's there?"

Watts grinned. "You've been gone way too long, Nick. I'll write down the address for you; then you can punch it into the GPS. I know that fancy phone of yours has one."

"What?" Nick asked, his lips twitching with amusement. "Everyone doesn't have one of those now?"

Watts snorted before turning to head back to his desk. Nick frowned as his thoughts turned to the dead body and Katie. Part of him hoped it was Janie, so the uncertainty would be over, but he knew Katie would take it hard.

"Do you think it might be Katie's friend?" Charles asked.

Nick tapped his finger against the side of his phone as he waited for Watts to come back with the address. "I don't know."

It could be Janie, or it could be another victim that hadn't been identified yet. According to Katie there were several more yet to be found. He pulled his phone from the clip and clicked on his GPS program as Watts came down the hall.

"Here ya go, boss. Coroner is on his way also."

"Thanks," Nick replied as he took the piece of paper and headed toward his car.

\* \* \*

Brian stood on the rise, a mound of dirt off to the side of where the body was found. They worked slowly, uncovering the young woman and making sure any evidence found was photographed and cataloged before removal. It was a long and slow process, something he'd tried to explain to the job foreman who'd been angry about the loss of a full day's work.

He spotted Nick working his way past the yellow tape and the small group of reporters who'd gathered, anxious for any tidbit of news. Brian waved, catching Nick's attention. His friend nodded in acknowledgment as he made his way to where Brian stood.

"Know who it is yet?" Nick asked as he came to a stop next to him. His gaze wandered over the scene and the various officers below.

"Yeah. It's Janie."

Nick rubbed the back of his neck. "Are you sure?"

Brian nodded, fatigue and anger knotting his stomach. The second he saw her face, he knew it was her. The small tattoo of a hummingbird on the back of her neck confirmed it. He'd been up here ever since, thinking, strategizing, trying to come up with something they'd missed all those years ago, some piece of the puzzle that would make everything else fit.

"Damn it," Nick growled. "Have you told Katie?"

"Not yet. I thought that needed to be something done in person."

"Yeah, you're right. You want to do it together?"

Brian shrugged, but truthfully his answer would be no.

"Brian," Nick said in exasperation. "I've known you a long time. I know what that shrug means. If you don't want me there, say so."

"Okay. I don't want you there."

"Fair enough."

"I sense another 'but'."

"I'm going to be there too. Regardless."

Brian snorted. "That's what I figured."

"I told you if you didn't want me there, say so. I didn't say I'd go along with it."

They both remained silent for a moment, watching the men just a few feet below. The ground was still wet from the overnight rain, making digging difficult and messy.

"Anything new?" Nick asked.

"Nothing yet. It's all pretty much the same. Missing finger, mutilated body, obvious signs of torture. Mostly from the waist up. They're still working on the legs. He buried her legs deep and her shoulders and head shallow. It's almost like he wanted this one to be found. He'd left her ear and the side of her head exposed. All the rain last night made it easier for him to return to his usual habits."

"Either that or he'd been in a hurry. Interrupted possibly. Has anyone talked to the workers? Maybe someone was working last night and saw something."

"Already done that, and no one saw anything."

"Great," Nick grumbled.

Brian remained silent, his jaw tightening in anger. He crossed his arms over his chest in an effort to keep from hitting something or someone.

"I'm sorry, Brian," Nick said softly.

Brian looked over at him, startled. "For what?"

"I shouldn't have left."

Unsure what to say, Brian didn't say anything for a moment. It wasn't Nick's fault. It wasn't his fault. He knew that now and had accepted it.

"The trail went cold, Nick. He played us and for a short time, he won. What's important is this time he will not get the upper hand. Not again."

Nick nodded and Brian got the sense he wanted to tell him something but was hesitant. "What is it, Nick?" Brian asked.

"We have three more bodies besides this one. Two from Franklin, one from Mississippi. Bodies and evidence are on their way."

"That should keep forensics busy for a while," Brian said with a sigh. "Maybe this time they'll find something we missed before."

"Maybe," Nick mumbled. "Hey, Doc!"

The coroner looked up at him from his crouched position next to Janie's pale body.

"Got a cause of death yet?" Nick asked.

"You're kidding, right? Take your pick." He stood and waved his hand toward the body still partially covered in dirt. "It could have been blood loss, shock. I haven't seen a wound yet that would be fatal on its own, but put them all together..."

The coroner sighed and rubbed his dirty gloves together, trying to dislodge the caked layer of mud as he made his way toward him. Once at the top of the rise, he spoke more softly.

"I think he tortures them and tries to get them to beg," he said.

"Beg for what? Death?" Brian asked.

"That would be my guess. It would also fit and explain why they all didn't die of the same thing. Some of the women died from a fatal wound, others from shock, blood loss. One even died of a heart attack, I suppose from fear. She had a weak heart to begin with, but it was doubtful he knew that, or otherwise I don't believe he would have taken her."

Nick nodded toward Janie's body. "I doubt she begged for anything."

"So do I." The coroner swallowed. "She appears to have more wounds than some of the others and may have lasted longer. Whoever does this is a sick son of a bitch, Nick. Real sick."

Brian swallowed the lump in his throat that always swelled whenever he thought of what Lisa must've gone through, what she must have suffered at the hands of that lunatic.

"Do not, under any circumstances," Brian growled, "say any of this to Kathryn. Are we clear?"

He gave both Nick and the coroner a stern look, making sure they knew he meant business.

The coroner nodded, then shot Nick a look of concern before heading back to Janie's body.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Nick snapped. "Do you really think we would tell Katie this?"

Brian dragged his hand down his face, trying his best to keep his frustration to a minimum. "No," he said, then let out a slow, ragged breath. "This is just..."

"I know." Nick slapped Brian on the shoulder. "We gotta get through this, Brian, preferably without killing each other. That's Janie down there, not Lisa. He's still out there, he's still killing, and it's up to us to stop him. On top of that, Katie is going to need us. She's lost a second friend, a business partner, a roommate."

Brian nodded, knowing deep down Nick was right. "Did you get a hold of Sharon for Katie?"

Nick frowned. "How did you know about that?"

"I heard you two talking last night after you came in."

Nick grinned slightly. "No privacy while you're around, I guess, huh?"

"Nope."

With his hands on his hips, Nick looked back toward the officers working the crime scene. "I booked her on a flight first thing tomorrow morning."

"Is she willing to help?"

Nick nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you think she can help?"

"I've seen her do some amazing things, Brian. If anyone can help Katie, it's Sharon. I just hope Katie can handle it. Sharon said she would need to open herself a lot more than she has, which means she may see and feel things she's not prepared for."

Brian tensed. "Then maybe she shouldn't do it."

"She wants to do it, and if we're going to get any further on this case, we need her to do it. We'll be with her the entire time. If it looks like it's getting too intense for her, we stop."

## Chapter Thirteen

Kathryn gave her best fake smile as she handed the young woman her change.

"Here you go," Kathryn said. "I hope that cookbook works out for you."

"Me too," the young woman replied. "I'm tired of the same old things all the time."

"I know what you mean. That one should give you lots of variety."

The young woman smiled her thanks and headed out the door with her purchase. Kathryn sighed as she glanced around the store. Several customers strolled around the shelves; a few sat at the coffee bar. She inhaled the scent of freshly baked blueberry muffins, and her stomach growled in hunger.

She'd missed breakfast. Glancing at her watch, she noticed the late hour and frowned. Brian was usually here by now with lunch. She hoped nothing had happened.

As though sensing his presence, she glanced out the window just in time to spot his truck as it turned into the parking lot. He pulled into an empty slot, then climbed from behind the wheel of the Chevy Avalanche, lunch in his hands.

She immediately tensed at the way he carried himself across the lot. His shoulders were slightly slumped, his brow wrinkled into a worried frown. Something had definitely happened. He looked tired, beaten in a way.

She waited behind the counter as he strolled in the door, then waved him over.

"Is everything okay?" she asked as he placed the bag before her on the glass countertop.

She opened the bag, peeking inside and inhaling the smell of warm cheesesteak sandwiches.

"We found Janie's body."

She glanced up at him through her lashes, her fingers trembling against the bag. Dropping her hands to the counter, she stood straight and drew in a slow, steadying breath. She knew this was coming. She knew they would eventually find her body, but now that they had, it just made it all seem so final.

"Nick wanted to be here when I told you, but..."

"You told me anyway."

Brian nodded. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Sorry you told me anyway?" she asked.

"No. I'm sorry for this. Part of me was hoping you were wrong. That you were mistaken and Janie was still out there somewhere."

"Me too," she whispered, sniffing. "But now it's over. We can finally tell her parents. Finally lay her to rest." She swallowed, trying her best to keep the tears at bay. "It was him, wasn't it?"

Brian again nodded, sadness and regret filling his gaze. Her lower lip began to tremble, and she looked away, fighting the tears. Even though she knew Janie was dead, it still hurt.

Brian let out a soft whistle, catching the attention of one of her employees. He tilted his chin, indicating Mary should come to the counter. Mary looked a little hesitant as she came closer. Kathryn knew she could tell by her tears the news wasn't good. Mary came to a stop at the cash register, watching Kathryn closely.

"You okay?" she whispered.

Janie gave her a soft, reassuring smile. "I'll be fine." Kathryn licked her lips and handed the young girl the keys. "Go ahead and lock the doors. I'll make up a sign for the customers..." Her voice broke, and she took a moment to compose herself.

The young girl looked to Brian. "You found her, didn't you?"

Brian nodded solemnly, and the young girl went to lock the door, her lips trembling too.

"Are you sure you want to close down?" Brian asked.

"For today and maybe the next day or two, at least until after the funeral."

"What about the customers still in here?" Brian asked. "Do you want me to tell them you're closing?"

"No. Let them finish. We'll let them out when they're through shopping. In the meantime, we can be shutting everything down. Did she suffer?" Kathryn asked, although deep down, she already knew the answer. She could tell by the trauma, the cuts, the bruises, the mutilations all over Janie's ghostly body that she'd suffered. Why she even asked, she didn't know.

Brian didn't say anything, just stepped behind the counter and pulled her into his arms, letting her cry out her grief for the umpteenth time in the last two days. She just couldn't seem to stop.

\* \* \*

Nick studied Kathryn as she slept fitfully on the sofa. Soft music came through the television on one of those radio channels that came with cable. It was soothing, sweet, which would hopefully calm her a bit.

He glanced over at Brian as he moved around in the kitchen. The smell of steak filled the air as it cooked on the indoor grill Kathryn had on her stovetop. Nick's eyes narrowed in anger. He'd made it clear to Brian he'd wanted to be there when he told her. What the hell was the matter with him? He was acting like a damn child.



"Why didn't you wait?" Nick snarled as he walked over to the bar separating the den from the kitchen and set his cell phone down along with his gun and keys.

Brian shot him a look of indifference from the corner of his eye before grabbing the large fork on the counter and turning the steaks. "I didn't see any point in waiting."

"Are you seriously that fucking jealous that you can't wait? You just had to tell her yourself so you could be the one to comfort her all by yourself. Is that it?"

"If I'd waited on you, it would have been late before we told her. At least this way, she heard it from me instead of through the news."

Nick sighed and dropped onto one of the barstools. Truthfully, he knew Brian was probably right. The news media found out Janie's name pretty quick and announced it on the news just as he was telling Janie's parents. Sometimes Nick wanted to deck reporters.

"I hope you're making one of those for me," Nick said as he stared at the steaks hungrily. As he watched Brian cook, Nick realized he hadn't had lunch.

"This one is yours." Brian tapped the steak with the tip of his fork. "You still like them well done?"

"Yeah," Nick replied tiredly. "Did Katie eat anything for lunch?"

"She ate a little of her steak sub when she wasn't crying."

Nick shook his head, clasping his hands and resting them against the counter. "I wish she didn't have to go through this again. Burying another friend."

"Me too." Brian glanced back toward Katie, who still slept on the couch. "It just floors me she never said anything about this gift of hers."

Nick studied Brian. "So you believe her now?"

"I think I always believed her, at least somewhat, but now..." He looked to Nick and frowned. "Nick, she described Janie's injuries to a tee. Every one of them right down to the tears in her clothes." Nick nodded in understanding of Brian's awe. To see someone do that was something he still hadn't gotten used to. "How could she have kept something like that so secret?"

"She's been living with it since she was a child. She's learned to ignore it. That's not uncommon," Nick said as he turned to look over his shoulder at his sleeping Katie.

She'd drawn her knees up as though she was cold, so he walked over and covered her with the knit blanket lying across the back of the sofa. He tucked it around her shoulders, and she mumbled something, so he leaned down a little closer to see if he could hear her better. Her brow creased and he brushed his finger over it, easing the tension and soothing her into a deeper sleep.

"Let her sleep, Nick," Brian snarled from the kitchen. "She's exhausted."

Nick stood and glared at his friend. "I am. Just covering her up."

Brian placed a plate on the bar along with a bottle of beer. "Come over here and eat before you wake her."

Nick scoffed as he took his seat and reached for the fork Brian handed him. "You're like a damn mother hen. *Don't touch her, be quiet.*"

"Kiss my ass," Brian countered, making Nick chuckle as he cut into the juicy steak.

"Not my type." Nick placed a bite of steak into his mouth and moaned as the flavor filled his mouth. "I got to give you credit, man. You always could cook. Maybe you should have become a chef."

Brian snorted as he stood on the other side of the bar, cutting his steak. "At this point, I think I would almost rather be a chef. I'm tired of all the death."

"You and me both, brother. You and me both."

\* \* \*

"Katie, this is Sharon," Nick said as he walked into the small conference room, an older woman just behind him.

She smiled sweetly, and Kathryn felt an immediate sense of understanding and friendship. Sharon's long, dark hair hung around her shoulders, streaks of gray highlighting the strands. She kept it parted on the right side; a wide streak of solid white about two inches wide created a startling contrast to the other darker strands.

Kathryn had always associated white streaks such as that as a sign of having suffered a great trauma or fear.

She appeared to be in her fifties, maybe. Her eyes were still a vibrant bright blue and crinkled at the corners when she smiled. She reminded Kathryn a lot of her mother, and she immediately felt at ease but still anxious to talk to the woman.

"Hello," Sharon said as she came into the room and sat in the chair next to Kathryn. "I understand you have a few unwelcome visitors."

"You could say that," Kathryn said with a slight grin.

Sharon patted her hand softly. "Well. I'm going to help you take care of that. How long have you been seeing them?"

"Since I was a child. Can you see them?"

"No. And you wouldn't be able to see the ones that I see. For whatever reason, they've chosen to show themselves to you and only you, so it's up to us to figure out what it is they want."

"How do we do that?" Kathryn asked as she took a deep breath for courage.

"Well, you're going to have to open yourself up to them."

Kathryn let her deep breath out with a loud swoosh. "Open myself up to them?" Her chest tightened in trepidation as she lifted her trembling hand to push her hair behind her ear. "Do you mean what I think you mean?"

"It depends on what you think I mean."

"I feel like we're talking in circles," Kathryn replied with a slight chuckle. "To be honest, I'm not sure what it is you mean."

“Have you ever let them inside you or let them touch you?”

Kathryn shook her head. “No. I usually have a difficult time meeting their eyes, much less letting them touch me.”

Sharon patted her hand again, this time letting her warm fingers linger over hers. “I know it can be tough. It’s scary as hell at first, but it’s the only way they can communicate with you.”

Taking another deep breath, Kathryn nodded in determination. “Okay. I’ll give it a try.”

She glanced up at Nick, and he smiled, encouraging her with a small nod of his head. Behind him, Brian walked into the room. He looked tired, and Kathryn’s heart ached for him. He looked like he did shortly after Nick left. She worried all this was getting to him again, and she vowed to do something later to take his mind off things. If she could.

His gaze met hers, and one side of his lips lifted into a tiny smile, but that tiny smile made her feel so much better about what she was about to do. She knew Brian. She knew he had a hard time believing things like this. Seeing that smile, she knew he believed in her.

“Brian,” Nick said as he glanced at him over his shoulder. “This is Sharon. Sharon, this is our sheriff, Brian Scott.”

“Hello, Sheriff,” Sharon replied, standing to take Brian’s outstretched hand.

“Sharon. Call me Brian, please.”

Sharon nodded. “Brian.”

“Can you help her?” he asked, tilting his head toward Kathryn.

“I’ll do what I can, but how much she opens herself up is up to her.”

Brian glanced at Kathryn, and she could see a slight hint of worry darkening his eyes. Her gaze shifted to Nick, and she noticed his held the same worry, and her stomach tightened.

“If the two of you don’t stop looking at me like that, I’m making you leave.”

Nick snickered and dropped his gaze to the table. Brian shook his head and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling as he paced behind Nick. Brian’s hands rested on his hips, and Kathryn recognized his stance as one of tension. Despite his smile of encouragement, he was nervous for her. So was Nick, but Nick hid it better.

“I can do this, guys. I want to do this. I want to find who killed them,” Kathryn said with more determination than she actually felt.

Truthfully, she was terrified.

Nick nodded, and she turned her questioning stare to Brian. He nodded as well.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she turned to Sharon. “What do we do?”

“Well, first I need to know if they’re here.”

Kathryn licked her lips nervously and mentally dropped her guard. All around her, ghosts began to appear. One by one they came into view. Just looking at their tattered bodies made tears gather in her eyes.

"What do you see?" Sharon asked.

"I see them," Kathryn whispered.

"Are you close to any of them?"

Kathryn nodded. "Yes. Janie's closest."

"Reach out to her."

"How?"

"Put your hand out on the table, then meet her gaze. Head-on, Kathryn. Don't look away."

Kathryn placed her hand palm down on the table and hesitantly raised her eyes to meet Janie's. Kathryn's lower lip began to quiver as she took in her friend's beaten face, her missing teeth, her swollen eyes. She must have suffered so much.

Janie moved forward, instantly coming within inches of Kathryn, and Kathryn flinched but didn't move. She held fast, determined to see this through.

Janie reached out and placed her hand within Kathryn's. A warmth spread slowly up her arm as the light in the room faded. Her surroundings changed, and she gasped in shock at the dance floor and the thumping music all around her.

"She's at a club," Kathryn murmured.

"What club?" she heard Nick say from somewhere far away.

Kathryn tried to make it out as her body moved to the music of its own accord. Instantly, she realized she was inside Janie's body, not her own. She was seeing things through Janie's eyes.

Her heart began to race.

Unfortunately, her vision wasn't in focus. Everything was too blurry. It was like looking through the eyes of a drunk or a wavy carnival glass.

"I can't make anything out clearly. I know she's dancing. The music is techno. The lighting is blue and white."

"Is there a man with her?" Nick asked.

"There're lots of men with her, but I can't make them out. I can only tell that they're male."

"It's okay," Sharon said. "Stay with her. Does she feel frightened?"

"No. She's happy. She's having fun."

She watched as Janie left the dance floor and turned to wave to a group of women sitting at a table in the far corner. Kathryn squinted, struggling to make something...anything out.

"Damn it," she growled. "I just can't..."

"It's okay. Just stay with her."

Janie went out through the side door and headed across a darkened parking lot. The cool air hit her flesh, and Kathryn shivered, despite the heat in the room.

“She’s leaving.”

Janie came to her car and reached into her purse for her keys. A sharp pain pinched at her neck, and Kathryn squealed, raising her hand to cover the side of her neck. She could feel Janie’s fear, could feel the drug as it pulsed through her body, weakening her.

“Janie,” Kathryn whispered.

Kathryn gasped as her gaze landed on the blurred reflection in the car window. A man, wearing a mask, his eyes concealed in shadow. All she could make out was his height as Janie sank against his body, her flesh cold, her heart slowing from the effect of the drug.

Kathryn jerked her hand away and drew in short gasps of air.

“He got her in the parking lot. He drugged her...in the neck.”

“Could you see him?” Brian asked.

Kathryn began to sob as the images faded. She shook her head, disgusted with herself. “I can only tell you his height.”

“It’s okay,” Nick said as he came behind her and rubbed her shoulders. “Did you recognize the club?”

“It’s, uh,” she said as she wiped at her eyes using the tissue Sharon handed her. She tried to remember the images, the decorations of the club. “I think it’s the techno club down by the waterfront.”

“The techno club?” Nick repeated. “Brian. Don’t they have cameras?”

Brian’s eyes widened with excitement. “They have cameras all over the fucking place.”

Before Kathryn could even blink, Nick and Brian were out the door.

## Chapter Fourteen

"Nick," Brian called and Nick stopped, turning to stare at him in impatience, silently waiting for Brian to continue. "Get a warrant."

"What?"

"When we catch this son of a bitch, I don't want his lawyers getting him off on a technicality because we jumped the gun and didn't follow procedure. Get a fucking warrant."

Nick scowled. "Fine." He turned and headed back down the hallway, his voice booming through the halls. "Someone get me a damn warrant!"

Kathryn's scream carried through the hall, and Brian's stomach clenched in fear at the painful sound. He spun around and shoved at the conference room door, throwing it open so he could get inside.

She sat at the table, her hand over her chest, her breathing shallow and erratic. Tears streamed down her pale face, and Brian quickly dropped to his knees next to her. Sharon sat on the other side, her hands gently rubbing her shoulders.

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

"I tried to see more," Kathryn whispered through sobs of sorrow and pain.

"She feels everything they do," Sharon said, shaking her head in warning to Brian. "She felt what he was doing to them. She felt the physical pain."

Brian's eyes widened as what Sharon said sank in. He cupped Kathryn's cheeks and forced her to look at him. "Listen to me. Don't go there."

"But if I can see his face—"

"No, Katie," Sharon said as she pulled Kathryn's hair back over her shoulder. "You can't connect with them during that. You apparently feel what they feel. That's rare, but it's also dangerous."

"But this is too important. I can do this."

Brian shook his head stubbornly. "Not at your expense, Kathryn. Do you understand me? Don't do it."

Kathryn turned in her chair and looked pleadingly at Sharon. "Is there a way to block the physical pain?"

"No," Sharon replied, shaking her head sadly. "Once you open yourself up to them, there's no way to stop it or lessen what you see or feel."

With a growl, Kathryn slammed her fists against the table and stood. Brian's heart ached for her as she paced around the room in agitation. He knew her and

knew she wanted to help them, but he couldn't let her put herself through that. The pain those women suffered would have been unbearable. The last thing he wanted was to see Kathryn relive it.

"I think we all need to take a break," Brian said as he stood and adjusted his pants around his waist.

Kathryn turned and stared at him, flabbergasted. "Take a break?"

"Yes," Brian replied sternly. "Take a break."

"I agree," Sharon said with a nod. "Don't try to do too much at once, honey. You'll wear yourself out."

Kathryn shook her head and started to argue. Brian held up his hand, stopping her. He'd carry her out of here if he had to.

"You have us a good lead. Let Nick see it through. If it doesn't pan out, we'll pick up again tomorrow."

She reluctantly relented, then turned to Sharon with a soft smile. "Thank you so much for your help. Will you be here again tomorrow?"

Sharon stood and walked over to her. She lifted her arms and embraced her in a motherly hug. "Of course I will. I'll be here as long as you need me to."

Pulling away, Sharon gave her a warm, understanding smile, which Kathryn returned. Brian hoped to see the two of them continue their friendship. Kathryn needed a good mother-type figure, and the two seemed to hit it off very well.

"I'll be at my hotel if you need me. You can call anytime, any hour." Turning to Brian, she gave him a firm, motherly look. "Take care of her."

"I will," Brian replied with a nod.

Sharon left the room, shutting the door behind her as Kathryn tiredly sank into one of the chairs. She appeared as though the weight of the world hung on her shoulders. He grabbed the back of the chair next to her and turned it. He sat and, leaning over, placed his hand on her knee.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," she replied as she studied her fingers clasped in her lap. "Just frustrated."

With his finger, Brian lifted her chin so she met his gaze. "Don't be frustrated. You did good."

"I didn't get his face."

"That was just today. One girl. Don't give up yet, baby."

She swallowed and nodded. She looked so vulnerable, so sad. Brian wanted to hug her to him and hold tight.

He brushed his finger along her jawline and didn't miss the shudder that skimmed along her limbs. "I think we should head home early and do something to take your mind off things."

She snorted. "I'm not sure that's possible."

“So little faith,” he teased. “Trust me.”

\* \* \*

Kathryn dropped onto the leather sofa in the den and stared blankly toward the empty fireplace. Nick was still at the station, barking orders and cussing because he couldn't get the warrant fast enough. Brian was in the kitchen unloading the bags of groceries they'd brought in.

At the moment she wasn't sure she could eat any of the food he'd bought. She'd walked through the store like a zombie, nodding or shrugging at Brian's suggestions for dinner. He'd finally decided on fajitas with the strict order that she would eat them or else.

Glancing over at him, she couldn't help but smile at his pampering. Brian always had taken care of her, even when she'd been sick.

He caught her stare and then glanced down at himself. “What's so funny? Do I have something on my shirt?” He smoothed the material with his fingers, looking for stains. “I don't think I can go a day without getting coffee or something on it.”

Kathryn giggled. “No, there're no stains. I was just reminiscing.”

He lifted his gaze back to hers. “About what?”

She shrugged. “Just thinking about how you've always taken care of me.”

“And I always will.”

Deep down, Kathryn knew that. Standing, she strolled over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. Laying her head against his chest, she breathed in his scent and listened to the soft beating of his heart.

He wrapped his arms around her back, holding her close. “You okay?” he asked.

“No worse than before, I guess,” she mumbled.

She could feel Brian's chuckle rumbling against her ear. With a slight smile of her own, she pulled away from him and turned to the counter.

“Do you need any help?” she asked as she reached for an onion.

“Oh, I don't know.” Brian slipped his arms around her waist from behind and leaned down to softly whisper in her ear. “I think dinner can wait a little while.”

His lips moved to the sensitive spot behind her ear, making the butterflies in her stomach flutter madly. His teeth scraped along her flesh, and the onion fell from her hand to land on the counter with a soft thud.

Her first thought was that Nick wasn't here, but she hadn't realized she'd spoken those thoughts out loud until Brian replied, “We don't need Nick today, do we?”

Warm palms slid up her ribs to cup her breasts and gently massage. Her whole body shuddered at the feel of his hands kneading her swollen mounds and his hot, sexy words smoothing over her like warm honey, making her forget everything but this.



"I think you and I would do just fine by ourselves," he murmured.

He pinched at her nipples through the material of her clothes, and she gasped, arching her back just a little.

"I could take you right here." He pressed the hard length of his cock into her hip. "Bend you over this counter and fill that pretty pussy up."

Kathryn gasped at his words, but at the same time they sent a thrill through her whole body she couldn't even begin to deny. Brian definitely had a dirty side, and it really turned her on.

His hands moved lower, along the sides of her thighs to the hem of her skirt. He slid them under the material, gently gliding them along her flesh, upward toward her throbbing pussy.

"These have to go," he whispered as he slid her panties down her legs.

They landed around her ankles, and she absently kicked them aside. Brian wasted no time cupping her mound and softly stroking her labia with his thick, expert fingers. Kathryn moaned and dropped her head back against his chest. When he said he could make her forget, he wasn't kidding.

Every inch of her skin burned for his touch; every part of her screamed for him to keep going, not to stop.

"Brian." She gasped softly, grabbing the counter for support.

"That's it. Just Brian," he whispered. "I can give you everything you need. Just me."

He pushed two fingers into her wet vagina, and she sighed, pushing her hips back to force him even deeper.

"I can make you scream," he growled.

Kathryn could tell by the deep timbre of his voice that he was as aroused as she was, and her heart jumped in her chest with excitement.

With a roughness that took Kathryn by surprise, Brian bent her over the counter. Her hands landed with a loud smack against the hard granite, and her stomach quivered with giddy anticipation.

Lisa had often talked about how Brian's wild side sometimes frightened her, but Kathryn loved it. It made her feel wanted and sexy when he got like that.

"God damn it," Brian groaned. "I didn't want it to go this fast, but if I don't get inside you now, I'm going to explode."

Kathryn's stomach tightened in need at the sexy sound of his straining voice. She loved that she had this effect on him. It made her arousal shoot through the roof with alarming speed.

She could feel him behind her unzipping his pants, his breathing just as shallow as hers. She even thought she could hear his heart pounding along with hers. She braced herself, spreading her legs, waiting breathlessly for his first initial thrust that she now craved with every breath she took.

## Chapter Fifteen

He didn't even bother to remove his pants, just freed his engorged rod and pressed one hand at her lower back, holding the edge of her skirt over her hips. He used his other hand to hold the base of his cock as he guided the head to her throbbing entrance.

With one delicious, powerful thrust, he embedded himself balls-deep, making her scream in delight. Her walls stretched tight, encasing his cock in a tight grip, holding him inside her. He moaned, grinding slowly and forcing himself even deeper.

He pulled back, then pressed in again slowly, making her growl with an agonizing mixture of pleasure and pain.

"That feels good," he groaned, pulling back and doing it all over again.

Each time he pushed forward with more force, shoving her lower stomach against the counter, forcing her upper thighs against the cabinets.

Her fingers tightened into fists as he pounded into her faster, wringing cry after cry from deep in her throat. She begged for more, begged for it harder, deeper. With each thrust he made her want it all the more.

Cream coated her inner thighs as his balls slapped against her pussy, teasing her with brief touches. Her walls clenched and quivered, sucking at his invading shaft. Her stomach tightened, and her limbs shook with the intensity of her oncoming release.

The room began to swim as her womb contracted, sending waves of rapturous pleasure along every inch of her limbs.

"Brian," she panted, close to panic.

"Let it go," he growled. "Come with me, baby."

She closed her eyes tight, took in a deep breath, then screamed as her release slammed through her unabated. Brian followed right behind her, holding himself deep as he emptied his seed with a shout to rattle the windows. She used her walls to squeeze his cock, holding him inside her.

His grip on her hip lessened as he bent over and placed soft kisses against her temple. His breath was harsh against her brow, and suddenly the overwhelming urge to giggle took hold.

Brian chuckled as well, as though he understood what she felt—the craziness of what had happened. All the stress of the last couple of days had just melted away and left her legs as wobbly as licorice strips.

“That was insane.” She giggled.

“That was incredible,” he countered, grinning. “See how good we are, just the two of us?”

“Are you trying to make a point, Brian?” she teased, trying her best to keep it light and not say something that would hurt his feelings or turn this into something far more serious.

“Damn right, I am,” he whispered in her ear. “I’m not going to stop trying to convince you to choose me, just like I’m sure Nick will continue his seduction.”

“But I don’t want to choose.”

“Then get used to this competition.”

Kathryn’s lips trembled as she fought a smile. “I think I could most definitely get used to this. Even if you two get used to the threesome idea, I think I would still like for you to compete a little.”

Brian chuckled and kissed her cheek.

\* \* \*

Nick made his way to Katie’s bedroom, dragging his feet tiredly along the plush carpeting. It was two in the morning, and his whole body ached with fatigue.

He’d spent most of the afternoon waiting on that damn warrant. By the time he’d gotten the thing, he’d decided to let a couple of officers take care of collecting the tapes in the morning. He was too tired to deal with it tonight, and in just under four hours, he needed to get up and start yet another day.

Walking into the darkened bedroom, he quietly removed his shirt, then slung it over the bench at the foot of the bed. He grinned slightly, rethinking what he’d done. Katie was a neat freak. He could easily see her eyeing him with annoyance the second she saw the shirt lying there instead of in the hamper just a few feet away.

He grabbed his shirt and tossed it into the hamper along with his pants and underwear. Normally, he kept his underwear on when he slept, but when he slept with Katie, he liked having every inch of his skin touch hers.

She slept in the nude as well, and thinking about it made his cock harden slightly despite his fatigue.

Turning around, he studied her lying in the center of the bed, close to Brian. Her hair covered part of her face, and he walked over, gently brushing it off her forehead with the tip of his finger. She stirred and opened her eyes, smiling up at him sleepily.

“Hey,” she whispered.

“Hey, Katie Bell,” he replied as he climbed into bed beside her.

She turned to face him, snuggling close to his chest. Brian shifted too, turning to put his chest against her back.

"How did it go?" Brian asked softly.

Nick glanced at him over Katie's shoulder before dropping his head back to the pillow.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow. I'm too tired right now."

"Fine." Brian yawned. "Tomorrow."

Nick closed his eyes, but sleep eluded him. All he could think about was his worry for Katie. What she was doing concerned him. Terrified him. He worried about how she would be able to handle all this. He worried about the killer who was still out there. Would he go after Katie?

He opened his eyes and watched her sleep. She looked so peaceful at the moment—so angelic. She'd quickly become his life, his whole heart. He'd take her with or without Brian. He'd take her any way he could get her. He loved her. It would kill him if anything happened to her as well. He couldn't lose another girlfriend. He couldn't and wouldn't let anything happen to her.

No matter what, he'd do whatever he had to do to keep her safe.

\* \* \*

Nick awoke with a start and glanced quickly at the clock by the bed. The bright blue digits flashed 6:30 against the screen, and he grimaced.

He rubbed at his tired eyes and looked over to Brian's side of the bed. It was empty, but Katie still lay next to him, sound asleep. He didn't hear the shower running. He knew Brian went to work early, especially now. They were alone.

He turned onto his side and watched Katie. She was on her back, the sheet low on her chest, exposing her breasts. They rose with the slow rise and fall of her breathing, the perky, pink nipples hard and erect in the early light of dawn.

He licked his lips, anxious to draw his tongue around the tight buds. His cock immediately stirred, not that it needed much encouragement. He always seemed to remain in a state of semiarousal whenever she was near, and now was no different. Even asleep, she could drive him to madness.

Reaching out, he drew his finger around her taut nipple in slow, lazy circles. She barely stirred but sucked in a quick breath, letting it out in a slow sigh. He smiled slightly and swiped the flat of his palm across the hard bud. Her lips parted on a breathy gasp.

He watched her face as he cupped her breast, squeezing and kneading the firm mound. He liked her breasts. They fit his hands perfectly. Her head lolled before she turned her face toward the window, making Nick grin.

She was such a sound sleeper. Just how far could he go before she finally woke up and realized what he was doing?

Deciding to find out, he slid his hand down her stomach and under the sheet toward the heat emanating from between her thighs. One leg was bent, so it was

easy for him to cup her mound and gently swipe his fingers through her labia. She moaned in her sleep, her hips rising just a little off the mattress as he slowly spread the cream leaking from her vagina.

His cock hardened painfully, and he grimaced at the pounding in his balls. He wanted her so badly. Leaning over, he swept his tongue over her nipple, and she arched her back, thrusting her breast toward his mouth. He glanced at her through lowered lashes. Her eyes were still closed, her cheeks slightly flushed, her mouth parted.

He opened his lips and engulfed her areola in his mouth, swiping his tongue back and forth over the tip. She moaned and wiggled beneath him, every movement of her sexy body making his balls throb all the harder.

He couldn't take it anymore. He had to have her. Now, while the house was quiet and it was just the two of them. God only knew when that would happen again.

He removed his mouth and rolled over her. Bracing himself on his elbows, he positioned the head of his cock at her entrance. Her eyes popped open, and for a second she stared up at him in a mixture of confusion and fear.

"It's just me, sweetheart," he whispered as he slowly ground his hips against her.

"Nick?" she questioned.

"Yes?" he asked as he gripped the back of her thigh, lifting one leg around his lower back.

She raised her arms and gripped his biceps, her fingers flexing into the muscles. He pressed the head of his cock into her entrance and watched as her face relaxed with pleasure and her eyes drifted closed. Slowly, he pushed forward, sighing as her walls gripped his hard cock, squeezing and milking his length.

"Mmm, don't stop." She sighed, lifting her ass to force him deeper.

Nick gritted his teeth and pulled back slightly, determined to tease and make it last. She felt so good, and he groaned as he thrust forward, forcing his shaft through the tight grip of her slick walls. She was hot as lava against him, and he groaned as he pressed deeper still, going until the hilt of his cock pressed against her clit.

He kept himself deep, gently grinding against her, over and over, stimulating that hard little bud between her legs. Katie moaned, moving her hips with his as her nails dug into his flesh.

Grasping her face in his hands, he leaned down and covered her parted lips with his. He swallowed her moans, teased her tongue. Every beat of her heart could be felt everywhere, against his chest, in the taste of her kiss, even the way her pussy squeezed his shaft. It pounded along with his own heart until he thought it would burst free of his chest.

"Nick." She whimpered against his mouth. "Nick... Oh God..."

Her hips pumped harder beneath his, trying to get him to go faster, to fuck her harder. He pulled almost out, watching her face as he thrust back in hard, filling her deep. She squealed and arched her back beneath him. Lifting the other leg, she wrapped them both around his back, holding him to her as he pulled back and thrust in again. This time harder...deeper.

God, he could lose himself in her and never look back.

Taking his cues from her, he increased his rhythm, pumping into her over and over. He lifted onto his hands, forcing himself as deep as possible, giving her every last inch of himself.

"Don't stop," she begged as her pussy tightened around him.

Nick growled, holding on to his sanity by a mere thread. Her breasts bounced with every pounding thrust. Her cries echoed through the bedroom as sunlight poured through the window, illuminating her flushed cheeks.

"Fuck," Nick groaned as he felt his own release work its way through his groin.

Her walls pulsed and sucked at his cock, taking everything he had. She screamed and forced her hips higher as her orgasm melded with his. With a shout, he slammed into her, forcing her farther up the bed until the last bit of pleasure was gone, leaving him limp and sated.

Sighing, he dropped back to his elbows and buried his face in her neck, inhaling her sweet flowery scent.

"Do we have to start the day now?" she said softly.

Nick rose up and stared down at her. He brushed her hair back from her brow and placed a soft kiss just above her eye. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

She snuggled closer. "Brian will be upset with us if we remain in bed all day."

"To hell with Brian," Nick grumbled. He rose up and frowned. "How did you even know Brian wasn't here?"

"He told me bye when he left, but I must have fallen back asleep." She grinned shyly. "At least until you woke me."

Nick smiled and brushed the backs of his fingers along her cheek. "I think I like waking you."

He rotated his hips, reminding her he was still deep inside her. She moaned and slowly dragged one foot down the backs of his hips and thighs.

"Did you find anything on the tapes?" she asked, suddenly turning serious.

Nick sighed softly and rolled to his side, pulling her with him. She rested her head next to his chest as he slowly rubbed his hand up and down her back. Tension had come over them again, something he had hoped to avoid today, but he guessed, until this case was solved, that tension would always be there no matter how he tried to distract her.

"Forensics should be going over it shortly."

"Do you think they'll find anything?" she asked.

“I hope so. Do you want to meet with Sharon again today?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

Worry tightened his chest. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“No, but I’m not giving up. Not yet.”

Nick smiled slightly. “That’s my girl.” He held her closer. “Five more minutes.” She shifted, and he snorted at the feel of his cock getting harder. “Unless you don’t stop moving around, and then it may be a lot longer.”

“After what you just did, do you seriously consider that a threat?”

Nick chuckled. “No. I guess not.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Brian looked up from the television screen and hit the Pause button on the remote. "Where's Kathryn?" he asked as Nick came through the door and pulled up a chair.

"She's with Sharon. They're going to try to contact another girl this morning."

Brian's gut clenched. "It makes me nervous, her doing that."

"I think she'll be fine," Nick replied tiredly.

Brian studied him shrewdly. Did he make love with Kathryn this morning? Strangely, thinking about it didn't really make him angry.

"What?" Nick asked warily.

Brian shook his head and turned back toward the television. "Nothing."

"Find anything on the tapes yet?"

"Not yet. I did find Janie, although I haven't seen anyone suspicious approach her."

"If she's on the dance floor, I'm not sure anyone would necessarily look suspicious. Are you checking the perimeter? Seeing if anyone is acting strange?"

Brian scowled toward his friend. "Would you like to take over, Nick? I mean, I've only been investigating crimes as long as you have, but if you think you can do this better...by all means."

"Don't be a fucking ass, Brian. I was just asking."

Brian sighed, unsure why he was being so snarky. He was just so damn tired. "I know. I know," he said. "Pete and one of your guys have the parking-lot tapes in the briefing room if you want to go check on them. I'll keep watching this one and see if anyone follows her out."

"All right."

Nick stood and patted Brian on the shoulder. Brian tensed but said nothing.

"We're going to find him, Brian," Nick said.

"Yep," Brian replied, then clicked the Play button.

\* \* \*

Kathryn took a deep breath and stared in sadness at the new ghost. She appeared different than the others. Instead of being covered in mud and blood, she was clear of all that and instead stood before her soaking wet.



Her hair hung in tangles around her face. One of her eyes was missing, and Kathryn grimaced. Swallowing her revulsion, she reached out, waiting patiently for the young woman to touch her hand.

She and Sharon had decided to try something different this time. It was becoming increasingly apparent that he kidnapped them from behind, not allowing them to see his face. This time, she wanted to try to see if she could witness the very last thing they saw before they died.

It would be painful, she knew, but she had to try. Their other strategy was getting them nowhere.

The ghost reached out, and Kathryn braced herself. Darkness clouded her vision as pain raced through her body. She doubled over, and nausea rolled through her stomach.

"Oh my God," she gasped, taking deep, steadying breaths of air. "I can do this. I can do this."

The young woman's vision remained straight ahead. She could feel her pulse slowing. The cold crept deep into her bones, and she shivered uncontrollably. Her field of vision bounced in front of her, and she realized she was being carried. Kathryn squinted, trying to make out the surrounding area.

Blurs of white against a black backdrop make her think marina. It was small, possibly private. Could it be the one at Camelot? The exclusive subdivision on the other side of town? What in God's name would he be doing taking her there?

She could hear his footsteps against the wood of the dock as he made his way down toward the edge. He stood still for a moment, speaking softly, but Kathryn couldn't make out his words. The woman was barely holding on to life.

Why hadn't he killed her? Or did he think she was already dead?

She felt herself fall and gasped as her body hit the cold water. Like a dead weight, she sank to the sandy bottom. She could see the moonlight flickering on the water above her, but she couldn't move. Her lungs burned, desperate for air. The weight of the water felt heavy, pressing against her chest.

She gulped for air, but water filled her lungs, choking her. Darkness was a welcome sight as it engulfed her in its cold embrace.

\* \* \*

Nick strolled into the briefing room, leaving the door open behind him. Three officers stood around the screen, all three looking aggravated and tired.

"Anything?" Nick asked, anxious to hear the news.

"Nothing," Pete replied with a sigh.

"What?" Nick asked, becoming angry. "Those cameras must have covered every inch of that parking lot. What do you mean we've got nothing?"

"They covered every inch except the one blind spot that Janie must have parked in. We see her car come in; we see her car leave. But while it's parked, it's out of the view of both cameras."

Nick stood there, flabbergasted. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"I wish I was."

"Can you at least see the driver?" Nick asked.

Pete shook his head. "Not the way the cameras are positioned."

"Who the hell set these damn things up?" Nick yelled.

"They're in place for muggings, sexual assault, that sort of thing, not necessarily to see who's in the car once they're already in it."

Nick picked up a cup sitting on one of the tables close by and threw it against the wall, watching in satisfaction as it slammed against the drywall and shattered.

"Nick! Brian! Someone come quick!"

Sharon's panicked voice set alarm bells off in Nick's head. He ran from the room, the three officers right behind him. Sharon stood outside the door, frantically waving them toward her.

"What the hell happened?" Nick asked as he ran past her into the room.

"Katie tried something different, but she's not waking up."

Nick spotted her on the floor staring blankly at the ceiling, and his heart practically stopped.

"Someone get Brian," he ordered as he rushed to her side.

Cupping her face, he cringed at the feel of her cold skin. "Katie," he called, shaking her slightly. "Katie, answer me."

He realized quickly she wasn't breathing and tilted her head back. Using his fingers, he opened her lips, holding her chin firm as he bent down, placed his open mouth over hers, and breathed into her.

Her chest rose and fell, but there was still no response, so he did it again. He heard Brian enter the room and his terrified gasp, but Nick couldn't turn away from Katie. He'd never been so scared in his life. What the hell had she been doing?

"What happened?" Brian asked. "Nick? What happened?"

"I don't know," Nick snapped.

"It's my fault," Sharon said. "I'm sorry, Nick. It's all my fault."

Katie coughed, and Nick breathed a sigh of relief as he helped her to come to a sitting position.

"Breathe slow, baby," he said. "Just go slow."

Brian dropped to his knees on her other side and moved her hair from her pale face. Slowly, as she drew in one breath after another, her color returned, and the dull shade of her eyes brightened.

"Kathryn, what happened?" Brian asked.

"There was a new girl. Another one. I saw her die," she whispered. "I felt it. I...I must have died along with her."

"What?" Brian demanded. "Kathryn, what the hell were you thinking?"

"I didn't mean to...to stay with her that long, but I couldn't get away from her. I couldn't disconnect." Her eyes were wide and frightened as she stared up at him. "She was still alive when he threw her in the water."

"It's okay," Nick said, trying to defuse the situation and Brian's rising temper. "What water, Katie? Can you remember?"

"I think she's at the marina at Camelot. He dropped her into the water at the edge of the dock."

Brian glared at her, and Nick could feel the tension in her body as she stared back at him, pleading with her eyes for him to understand. Brian stood and turned to the three men who watched them anxiously. "Get out there and check it out. Let me know what you find."

They nodded and quickly left the room. Brian turned back to Katie, who still sat weakly on the floor. "We're going to Janie's funeral this afternoon, but this little adventure of yours is over. No more." She opened her mouth to argue, but Brian cut her off. "I said no more and I mean it. You almost died, Kathryn. Do you understand that?"

Her gaze narrowed as her own anger grew. Nick could see it in her eyes, in the way she held her back ramrod straight. "Don't you dare treat me like a child! You think I don't know what just happened? I know I almost died, Brian. I was there. I felt it. But I will not allow you to order me around like a father to a child."

Nick decided he better intervene before this argument got out of hand. "All right, that's enough," he began. "Stop before you both say something you'll regret later." He turned his glare toward Brian, who appeared ready to explode. "You should know by now that Katie doesn't take well to being told what to do, especially in that tone." He glanced toward Katie, pointing his finger at her nose. "And you should know by now that Brian is dominant and bossy."

"I am not bossy," Brian grumbled. He started pacing the floor, his arms crossed over his chest.

Nick snorted. "The hell you're not."

Brian frowned angrily, pacing back and forth like a caged animal. After a couple of seconds, he walked over to Katie and reached down, grasping her hands in his and tugging her to her feet. She wobbled slightly before Brian engulfed her in his arms and held tight.

"God, Kathryn, you scared the hell out of me," he whispered.

Nick walked over and rubbed his hand down Katie's back as she wrapped her arms around Brian's neck. He believed it had probably scared Katie too. He knew it had certainly scared him.

"Well," Sharon said from her spot by the door. "I believe your need for me is probably at an end."

Nick looked over to see her smiling at him. "Yeah. I think her ghost-whispering days are over. At least as far as this case goes. We can't risk this again. We'll get the information we need another way."

\* \* \*

Nick stood at the back of the dock, silently watching as they pulled the body from the water, right where Katie said it would be. Rubbing his hand over the back of his neck, he massaged the tight muscles that bunched just below the base of his skull. He could feel the headache coming and had no doubt it would be a doozy.

Brian had taken Kathryn home to get ready for the funeral. Nick planned to meet them there. He glanced at his watch, wondering if he would make it on time.

"What's going on, Nick?"

Nick turned and looked in surprise at Mike. He stood just a few feet away, his uniform rumpled from a long night on the job.

"We found a body," Nick replied.

Mike's eyes widened. "Here?"

"Yeah." Nick nodded to the end of the dock. "Looks like he's changed his usual routine. I guess he got tired of digging holes."

Mike came to stand next to him, squinting through the bright sunlight toward the dock. "She's one of his?"

"Looks like."

"That's scary as hell, Nick. My wife is here in this neighborhood. She's alone at night while I work."

Nick shook his head. "She doesn't fit the profile of his other victims."

Mike snorted, putting his hands on his hips and glaring at Nick. "That doesn't make me feel a whole lot better, my friend."

"I know it doesn't."

Nick's jaw clenched as he continued to watch the forensics team do its job. He changed his routine after they brought Katie in. Was it coincidence? Did he just dump her here for time reasons? Or was it something else?

"I think the son of a bitch is screwing with us, Mike," Nick said.

"Of course he is. He was bored without the two of you chasing after him. He wants you back in the game."

Nick stared at him from the corner of his eye.

"What?" Mike asked with a shrug. "I watch all those cop shows."

Snickering, Nick shook his head. "All those cop shows get procedure right a third of the time at best. Don't believe everything you see on TV. It's all about the drama."

"You said yourself he's screwing with you. If it's not because he wants to play, then why?"

"I don't know."

"I heard through the grapevine you have a psychic on this case."

Nick grumbled under his breath in frustration, "God forbid they should keep their mouths shut."

Mike chuckled. "Who is it?"

He glanced at his old friend. He'd heard about it, so chances were he'd find out who before long. Might as well tell him. "Katie."

Mike stared at him with a wide-eyed look of disbelief that almost made Nick want to laugh. "Excuse me?"

"Katie sees ghosts. She's the one who told us the body would be here."

"You're pulling my chain, right? Katie? Sees ghosts?"

Nick nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. "She's a little embarrassed about this, Mike, so keep it mum that you know."

Nodding, Mike agreed, "Yeah, yeah, of course. Has she been able to see who's doing it?"

"No," Nick said, sighing. "She can't see his face."

"Damn, so close and yet..."

"So far," Nick murmured.

"How's all this affecting you and Brian?"

"Same as always. We're both in love with Katie, and deep down he still hates me."

Mike snorted. "Brian doesn't hate you, Nick. He's still angry, but you guys have been like brothers since what? Third grade? He doesn't hate you."

"I don't think he's going to be so willing to share this time, though."

Mike sighed and rubbed his fingers across his lips. "Are you sure sharing is such a good idea? You guys went through a lot with Lisa. Lies. People thought you were cheating with Katie. It was at times a fiasco, at best a mess."

"I would do it differently with Katie. We're sharing; they would just have to accept that. No more lies."

"Well, that's one way to handle it."

Nick glanced over at his friend. "How would you handle it?"

"I'm not sure I could do it at all. I mean, the idea of another man touching my wife...to me it's just wrong, Nick. No offense."

Nick smiled. "None taken."

"I just don't see how you and Brian do it."

Shrugging, Nick wondered that himself sometimes. "It's just natural to us. We've done it for so long."

Mike shook his head, his lips spreading into a good-natured smile. "I've said it before and I'll say it again now. The two of you are just weird, man."

Nick chuckled, agreeing completely.

\* \* \*

Standing a few feet away, he watched the funeral with a mixture of fascination and disinterest. The hot afternoon breeze promised rain and carried with it the scent of the numerous flowers through the cemetery.

He could see Brian and Nick, one on either side of Kathryn. Even from this distance he could see the tears on Kathryn's cheeks. He wiped at his own dry cheeks, wondering what it would be like to cry. He never had. Not once. Not even when his mother left him on the bench in front of that Florida hospital.

He wasn't even sure he knew how to cry or that he was even capable.

Pulling his hand away, he stared at his dry fingers before moving his gaze back to Kathryn. A gust of wind blew her hair in her face, and she pushed it back, holding it into place until the gust died down.

This one had turned into a hell of a problem. He would have to deal with her. Going after Nick and Brian's girlfriend had thrown them for a loop once before, allowing him time to escape into hiding for a time, but to do it again would take some serious thought and amazing timing. She was too dangerous to him, to his pastime.

He'd have to watch her, watch for his perfect moment. Eventually, it would show and he'd jump at it, surprising everyone, including those two arrogant, pain-in-his-ass cops.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Are you sure you want to do this today?” Brian asked.

Kathryn turned from the box of books she’d just set on the table toward the back of her store and nodded. Brian looked about as tired as she felt. None of them had slept well last night. Especially her.

Nightmares had plagued her over and over. More than once, she woke up screaming her head off. She’d seen through the eyes of her ghosts just what that madman was capable of, and the images and lingering sensations were getting to her—more than she wanted to admit.

“I need this to keep my mind off things,” she said.

She turned back to the box and ripped the tape off the top. She set it aside and separated the flaps so she could get to the shipment of books inside. Restocking would keep her busy, keep her thoughts off those girls and what they’d gone through.

Brian came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She jumped in fear at the sudden, unexpected touch but quickly relaxed and settled back against his chest. She’d always felt safe in Brian’s arms.

“This will all be over soon,” Brian whispered close to her ear.

“I know.”

She wanted to stay here all day, to just relax in his arms and enjoy the quiet of the store before they opened. Two of her employees stocked the shelves just a few feet away. She could hear their muffled voices as they spoke softly to one another. Both girls had been at the funeral yesterday. They were the morning crew and the ones closest to Janie, besides herself.

As much as she wanted to stay here, she needed to get back to work. “There’re two more boxes in the back room,” she said tiredly as she pulled out of Brian’s embrace.

“Do you want me to get them?” he asked.

She waved her hand in dismissal. “No. You have a job to do. I’ll be fine here. You need to get to the station.”

“I’ll get there when I get there,” he replied.

“Stop babying me,” she growled but not really meaning it. “I’ll be fine. Go.”

He cupped her face, studying her. “All right. Nick will be by later, I’m sure, but if you need us, you call.”

"I'll call," she agreed, nodding as best she could within the grip of his hands.

Brian snickered and placed a quick kiss on the end of her nose. One corner of her mouth tilted upward in a quick half smile as she realized that was something Nick would do. Brian was intense. Quick little kisses weren't his thing, but lately he and Nick seemed to be returning to their old ways.

The more time they spent with each other, the more they traded personalities. She wasn't even sure they were aware of it. It's what made them...unique. It's like they were more themselves when they were together than they were separate.

"I'm going to grab a cup of coffee from the coffee bar, and then I'll head out," he said as he turned to head toward the front of the store.

"Just tell Kim I said to put it on your tab."

He turned and began walking backward as he talked. "My tab's gotta be what now?"

She shrugged, returning his grin. "Close to a thousand, I would say. When you gonna pay up?"

"Later." He wiggled his eyebrows sexily, and Kathryn's heart skipped a beat.

With a chuckle, he spun back around and continued walking. Kathryn headed to the oversize stockroom in the back. It had a separate entrance for deliveries and was where they kept the extras and overstocks.

Kathryn never sent unsold books back to the warehouse if she could help it. Instead, she kept them in the back, and every three months or so she would have a big sidewalk sale. They were amazingly successful.

She grabbed one of the smaller boxes and moved it to the side in an effort to get to the larger one below it. A breeze blew, ruffling her sleeve, and she froze. Tingles of stark awareness traveled up her spine as she tilted her head to see the far side of the stockroom.

The entrance door was slightly ajar, allowing a warm breeze to blow through and light to filter in through the crack. She rose back up slowly, studying extensively the dark corners of the room.

That door should not be open. Had someone forgotten to close it? Was it her imagination that caused the hairs on the back of her neck to raise, or something else? She had a terrible feeling, but before she could open her mouth to yell for Brian, someone grabbed her from behind.

She squealed as a rough gloved hand clamped over her mouth, muffling her cries. His hard chest pressed against her back, holding her still. She struggled to breathe through her nose, inhaling the scent of musk and rubber.

"You think you're so smart," he growled menacingly in her ear.

Kathryn struggled in earnest, trying to free herself from the monster who wanted to do her harm. Fear didn't even enter her mind. Preservation did. She wanted to live to experience a life with Nick and Brian. She wanted children. She wanted to grow old. She would not let this happen.



From the corner of her eye, she saw the needle and knew he was about to drug her. Everything Brian had taught her about self-defense ran through her mind. What would work best? Did she have the nerve to pull it off?

Bracing herself, she swung her left arm as hard as she could. Her fist smacked into his balls, and he grunted, temporarily loosening his hold. She pulled away, her heart racing like a runaway train, and grabbed a large coffee-table book from a stack close by.

She didn't even look at him, just swung, hitting him in the side of the head with the hard cover of the book. He growled, his anger evident in the sound of his voice as he staggered. She tried to see his face then, but he had a ski mask covering it. Nothing could be seen, not even his eyes.

She screamed for Brian, and as she did, he took off out of the stockroom and into the back parking lot.

"No," she yelled and threw the book.

She wanted to run after him, but she knew she couldn't take him. She knew if she caught up to him, she would be the victim.

Brian put his hand on the handle of the door just as Kathryn's scream carried through the store. His heart stopped at the sound of terror and anger in her voice. He dropped his cup and took off at a run to the back, desperation to get to her clawing at his chest.

He threw open the stockroom door and glanced around the room in a panic. Where was she? "Kathryn?" he called.

"I'm here," she replied tiredly as she staggered around one of the many freestanding bookcases. "He went out the back." She pointed toward the back door, and Brian's heart sped out of control.

"He was here?" he asked as he took off running toward the door and out into the parking lot.

Once in the parking lot he spun in a circle, trying to determine which way he could've gone. Too much time had passed. He'd gotten away.

Brian silently fumed as he turned another circle, looking for any hint. He'd tried to take Kathryn. He'd tried to once again take the very thing that meant the most to him. He'd be damned if he let this son of a bitch do this again.

He spun again but saw nothing.

"Damn!" he snapped.

"Brian?" Kathryn asked from the doorway.

He turned to look at her. She looked so vulnerable standing there, her face pale, fear in her eyes. He walked over to her and engulfed her in his arms. She gripped his shirt with trembling fingers, and his heart broke for how frightened she must have been.

"What happened?" he asked.

"He was in the room, waiting for me. I used what you'd taught me. It gave me a brief second to get away."

"Let's get forensics out here; maybe there's a clue somewhere. A print...something. From now on, I don't want you out of my sight."

He held his breath, holding his body tight and still as stone against the outside wall. Brian couldn't see him from here. That had been too close. He thought Brian had already left. He had to be more careful. He couldn't afford to make such stupid mistakes.

His fingers closed around the syringe, making a fist. He had to get her. He couldn't let her keep doing what she was doing. She might eventually see something, and that wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all.

\* \* \*

Nick stood at the foot of the exam table, staring at the young woman they'd pulled from the water. She had water in her lungs. She'd been alive when he dumped her. That was a new one for him. Had something interrupted him? Or did he think she was dead?

The examiner believed the young woman probably appeared dead. There was very little water in her lungs, indicating her breathing was extremely slow at best. Even if he hadn't dumped her in the water, she would've died.

Wound after wound covered the girl's body. Nick found it sickening that someone could do this to another human being. That someone would enjoy it.

His phone rang and he cringed, wondering what could possibly be next. He pulled it from the clip and glanced at the screen before hitting Accept.

"Hey, Pete. Please tell me you got some good news for a change," Nick said.

"Just promise you won't kill the messenger."

Nick's gut tightened. "Why?"

"Looks like your guy went after Katie."

Nick froze, unable to move. "What?"

"Brian said to say she's fine, just a little shaken up. He's taking her home. Forensics is on their way to the—"

Nick cut off the call and ran from the room. He'd fucking kill Brian. Why the hell didn't he call him as opposed to having Pete do it? And why wasn't he called as soon as it happened?

Anger rolling in his stomach, he headed to his car and sped out of the parking lot toward home.

\* \* \*

"You're awfully quiet," Brian said as he studied Kathryn.

She smiled slightly and set her bottle of beer on the counter. She had been quiet. She'd spent most of the ride home thinking. "I was just wondering."

"About?"

"Nick's going to be pissed, you know," she said, avoiding his question.

"Why would he be pissed?"

"Because you didn't call him yourself and instead had Pete do it."

She lifted the beer bottle and smiled around the top before putting it to her lips. She needed the numbing effect. She needed to forget for just a while how close she came to never seeing them again.

Brian's shrewd brown eyes narrowed. "Are you sure that's what you were thinking about?"

"Well," she said before swallowing another large sip. "Maybe not."

He leaned his elbows on the counter, and she caught a glimpse of chest behind the open buttons of his shirt. She couldn't help it. Since coming home all she could think about was how much she wanted them...together...one more time.

"Are you going to tell me?" he prodded.

"You'll think I'm a pervert."

She could feel her face heating and quickly swallowed down another sip, emptying the bottle. She turned and placed it in the sink before heading to the fridge for another.

"Hell, Kathryn. You can't be anymore a pervert than me," he said, chuckling. "You sure you want to down another one?"

"Yes," she said, lifting the bottle to her lips.

"Kathryn," Brian chided as he stood and grabbed the bottle from her hands. "I'm all for the numbing effect of alcohol, but this isn't you, baby."

"What else am I supposed to do?" she said in exasperation. "I need to do something. I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my own skin. What if he tries again? What if next time, he succeeds?"

Brian grasped her shoulders and gave her a firm shake. "That's not going to happen. I promise you."

"You can't promise that, Brian."

"The hell I can't," he exclaimed.

The front door slammed shut, and Nick's voice boomed through the house. "Brian!"

"Oh, boy," Kathryn mumbled, knowing what was about to happen.

Nick stormed into the room, his intent evident in the fury shining in his eyes. Brian turned to face Nick, who swung hard.

"Nick, don't!" Kathryn yelled, but it was too late.

He clipped Brian on the chin, sending him backward into the counter with a grunt.

"Damn you, you son of a bitch! That's for not calling me the second it happened!" Nick snapped.

Brian didn't respond, and Nick brushed past him to cup Kathryn's face. "Are you okay? Really?"

"I'm okay," she replied, nodding. "But you shouldn't have hit him, Nick. It wasn't his fault. It was mine. I was scared and wanted all his attention."

Nick dropped his hands and snorted. "Don't try to take up for him, Katie. He knew what he was doing."

"Kiss my ass, Nick," Brian growled as he worked his jaw up and down.

"Did he break it?" Kathryn asked with worry.

"No," Brian grumbled.

"Too, bad. Maybe I should hit you harder," Nick said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Brian made a move to jump Nick, and Kathryn stepped between them, placing a hand on each of their chests.

"That's enough," she snarled. "The two of you need to stop acting like kids and *start* acting like the best friends I know you are. Stop fighting over or because of me. You both have me, and that's not going to change, so you both better get over the jealousy."

They stepped back in silence, and she dropped her hands to her sides. "I almost lost all of this," she began. "The only thing I could think about was dying and not being able to come home to *both* of you." Brian tried to grab her hand, but she jerked it away. "He could come after me again tomorrow, and I do not want to spend what could possibly be my last night with the two of you breaking up fights!"

Nick sighed and glanced up at the ceiling. Brian dropped onto the chair, his mouth set in a firm line.

"I'm sorry if that makes the two of you even angrier. At the moment, I don't care. Right now, I'm going to take off my clothes and get in bed. I would prefer it if the two of you join me, because right this minute what I want more than anything is to be taken by the both of you. So I suggest you get your acts together and work it out before I take care of things myself and then the hell with both of you."

With that, she left the room.

Nick watched her go, trying his best not to laugh. God, she was such a firecracker. Glancing over at Brian, he saw him drop his forehead in his hands, his shoulders shaking in silent laughter. Nick finally let his own laughter out and dropped onto the edge of the couch.

"So you think she'll do it?"

"Take care of things herself?" Brian said with a grin. "Don't know, but I wouldn't mind watching."

Nick chuckled, nodding in agreement.

"I'm sorry, Nick. I should have called you."

"Yeah. You should have." Brian scowled up at him. "But I guess you didn't deserve to be hit. So..."

Brian snorted. "Gee, Nick. Don't hurt yourself trying to say you're sorry."

Nick sighed. "I'm sorry, Brian."

Brian sat back in the chair, staring in thought at the far wall. "You know...thinking about the three of us back there turns me on, I have to admit."

"But?"

"But," Brian began. "This jealousy thing is going to be a problem. I don't want to share her with you. Not beyond the bedroom."

"Ditto."

"So, where does that leave us?"

"In a hell of a mess."

## Chapter Eighteen

Kathryn stood in front of the bathroom sink, studying in her small hand mirror she kept for applying make-up the light bruise that had begun to form on her face. His fingers had bit into her pretty hard, so the bruising didn't surprise her. Her current desire for Nick and Brian did, however.

She sighed and set the mirror down. She reached for the brush and began to pull it through her hair. Maybe she was a pervert. She knew what this man did to women. She knew the pain he inflicted, and she'd come damn close to being his next victim. She could have been dead now or screaming in pain. She'd been lucky.

So maybe it was normal for her to want to feel the men she loved holding her, touching her, giving her pleasure instead of pain. That is if they ever decided to get their asses in here. She set the brush on the counter and it knocked loudly against the granite.

Were they too angry? Were they talking? God, she hoped so. She wanted them to work this out, to be the friends she knew they could be.

"Kathryn?" Brian called from the bedroom.

She peeked around the bathroom door, and her breath caught. Brian stood in her bedroom in nothing but his pants. Behind him, Nick removed his shirt and dropped it onto the floor. Both of them looked so good with their hard chests and firm stomachs.

Nick was a little more muscular than Brian, his shoulders just a little wider. Brian was taller though by a little over an inch. Nick had worked out more over the last couple of years. Brian had just worked more.

As she watched, Brian removed his handcuffs and tossed them onto the bed. Her eyebrow rose at the possibilities, and her heartbeat quickly increased, thumping a mad rhythm in her chest. She'd always wondered what it would be like to be tied up, and she knew Brian definitely enjoyed doing it. He'd even teased her about it a time or two over the last couple of years.

More than once, she fantasized about just such a game. And now here they were, the three of them. Would he use them? She licked her suddenly dry lips and stepped into the bedroom.

Both men looked her over like hungry wolves. Her skin tingled as she waited for them to say something.

"I thought you were going to be naked," Brian said.

She glanced down at herself and the clothes she still wore. With a shrug, she smiled devilishly. "I changed my mind."

Nick raised his eyebrow. "A little too late for that, sweetheart."

She crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing. "So are you telling me you would make me if I said no?"

Nick snorted, but Brian was the one to respond. "Of course not, but we would definitely try to convince you to change your mind."

"How?" she asked, deliberately teasing them.

Brian slid his belt out of the belt loops and doubled the belt over. With a hard tug, he made the belt snap. "It's not nice to tease. Don't make me have to spank you, Kathryn."

Her whole body shivered at the thought of him using that on her ass. "Maybe you should. I think I might like it."

"Uh, oh," Nick said, chuckling.

"But before we do anything," she began, giving them each a firm look. "Have the two of you worked things out?"

"For now," Brian replied.

"For now?" she repeated, eyeing them skeptically.

Brian slowly stalked forward, his gaze wandering up and down her body, setting every inch of her flesh on fire. "I thought you wanted both of us...right now."

She bit down on her lower lip as he grasped her hand and pulled her toward the bed. "I do," she whispered.

Brian walked behind her and gripped the edge of her shirt within his fingers. He lifted it, pushing at the undersides of her arms on his way up, encouraging her to lift her arms over her head. He removed the shirt, tossing it to the floor. The cool conditioned air of the room hit her skin, making her shiver.

"Don't worry about me and Nick," Brian said as he worked loose the clasp of her bra. "We'll work it out."

Nick came to stand before her and tugged the straps of her bra off her arms. It hit the floor along with her top, leaving her naked from the waist up, just like them.

She could feel the heat of their bodies as they moved closer, crowding her between them. Brian cupped her breasts from behind, squeezing them and pinching at her nipples. She sighed, arching her back and fitting her aching mounds more firmly in his palms.

"I think it's so hot watching you," Nick whispered as he leaned down to gently nibble along the side of her neck.

His hands slid under Brian's, taking over the erotic ministrations. Kathryn moaned and gripped his belt loops to hold herself upright. Behind her, Brian unzipped her pants and slid them over her hips. They pooled on the floor by her feet, but she couldn't bring herself to move them.

Her legs felt like Jell-O as Brian pushed his fingers into the lace trim of her panties, gently sliding them down her thighs to join her pants on the floor.

Nick's mouth continued to tease her throat and jaw while his fingers worked her nipples into hard little pebbles. Brian kissed a path up the backs of her legs before biting her ass and making her yelp.

She giggled at the sharp sensation as excitement coursed through her veins like hot lava.

This is what she would have missed if the killer had taken her. This is what she wanted for the rest of her life.

Brian stood straight behind her, pressing his chest into her back. His heat engulfed her, warmed her as he pulled her hair aside and nibbled on the opposite side of her neck as Nick. The sensations running through her were so wild, so erotic, she wanted to scream. They could make her so crazy so fast that she could hardly breathe.

"Come here," Brian murmured as he grabbed her wrist and tugged her away from Nick.

She followed as though in a daze as he led her around to the side of the bed.

"Climb on. Onto your back," he ordered.

She complied, trusting him explicitly. Nick moved to the other side as she settled herself in the middle. She watched, fascinated as Nick removed his pants, exposing his long, hard cock. Precum glistened on the tip, and she reached out, running her thumb over it to wipe the moisture away.

Keeping her eyes glued to his, she put her thumb in her mouth and licked the salty cum away. Nick's eyes glowed with lust as he watched her. Brian tugged her hand away from her mouth and lifted her arm toward the headboard. She turned to watch just as he put one cuff around one wrist, then the other end around the spindle in the headboard.

She gasped as the locks clicked into place. She met Brian's hot gaze. "You only have one set," she said.

"Nick has a pair too." He nodded toward Nick, and she turned just in time to see him take her other wrist and repeat what Brian had done.

Her arms were over her head, for the most part immobile. She was pinned in place, naked and vulnerable to whatever they wanted to do to her.

Brian helped her to lift her shoulders and settled a couple of pillows behind her, making her more comfortable.

"I think I like you like that," he said as he walked to the foot of the bed. "Spread your legs."

She spread them as her breathing came in short, shallow spurts. Nick joined Brian at the foot, both of them studying her, both of them searing her with hot, lustful gazes.

"What about you, Nick?" Brian asked.



Nick's lips spread into a dirty little grin that made her heart skip a beat in anticipation. "Definitely," he murmured. "That pussy looks good enough to eat."

Her hips jerked in response. God, she wanted one of them to do just that—to put his mouth on her aching pussy and lick her till she screamed from pleasure.

"Take off your pants, Brian, while I have a taste of this luscious feast."

Nick climbed onto the bed, positioning his face between her thighs. He used his fingers to separate her labia, flicking his tongue over her engorged clit. She closed her eyes, sighing loudly as her stomach jerked in response. She tugged at the cuffs, using them as leverage to lift her hips.

Moaning his approval, Nick thrust his tongue into her vagina before flicking it back and forth over her clit softly, teasing her to the point she wanted to scream.

"That's nice," Brian said.

She looked up at him from her position on the bed. He stood at the side of the mattress next to her nightstand. His eyes were ablaze with passion as he slowly pumped his hand up and down his thick cock. She couldn't look away from his hypnotic gaze. There was no embarrassment, no jealousy, just pure, hot lust that singed every inch of her flesh.

Nick bit gently at her labia, and she gasped, jerking her hips toward his face. She closed her eyes briefly, enjoying the feel of his mouth and tongue as he used them to massage and stroke her throbbing pussy.

"I seem to recall you saying something about having a few toys," Brian said.

She opened her eyes just as he began to rummage through her nightstand.

Nick stopped what he was doing and peeked up from between her legs. "Toys?" he asked, his eyebrow raised in interest.

For a brief second, Kathryn could feel her face heating. He would find the anal wands and various dildos she kept in there. Although, for the life of her, she wasn't sure why she should be embarrassed. They knew she wanted them both and had wanted them both for some time.

Brian grinned and held up one of the dildos.

Nick rose up and held out his hand. "Give me that."

Kathryn's heart raced as Brian handed Nick the toy, which he slowly pushed into her pulsing vagina. Kathryn moaned, lifting her hips off the bed as he pushed it deep inside her. Her nails dug into her palms as her wrists pulled at the cuffs. Not being able to touch them was driving her insane, but the whole captivity aspect added an edge to her desire she hadn't expected.

She liked it...a lot.

"God, that's hot," Nick mumbled as he teased her pussy with the hard toy.

He pulled it out and placed the head at the tight entrance to her anus. Still wet from her cream, it slid in easily. Kathryn held her breath, waiting anxiously for that initial thrust into her passage, filling her.

He pushed it in slowly, and she gasped at the fullness, the slight bite of pain as it spread her opening, pushing past the tight ring.

"Nick," she groaned, wanting more.

Nick growled in response as he ever so slowly fucked her ass with the toy. His mouth returned to her clit, teasing, stroking, sucking to the point she thought she would lose her mind. She moved her hips wildly, mindlessly seeking more until Nick put a hand on her lower stomach, holding her still. He settled the cock deep in her ass and continued to lick at her pussy, driving her ever closer to that edge.

Brian climbed over her, straddling her chest and placing the head of his cock right at her mouth. She flicked her tongue out, licking at the precum glistening on the tip. He moaned and grasped the base of his cock tight, holding it steady at her lips.

"Lick it, baby," he growled. "Lick my cock like you did that damn Popsicle."

Kathryn grinned. She could well remember the look on his face that day she'd teased him by sucking on a cherry Popsicle. His eyes had remained glued on her mouth, and she'd truly thought for a brief second he'd attack her. Unfortunately, he didn't, and she'd accepted the fact that they were apparently just friends.

God, she was never happier to be wrong.

She ran her tongue along the underside, watching his eyes close as she circled the head with the flat of her tongue. Nick slowed his ministrations, and she glanced at him around Brian's hip, meeting Nick's hot gaze.

He liked what she was doing; she could tell by the heat blazing in his brown eyes. She opened her mouth, taking the head of Brian's cock into her mouth and lightly sucking, allowing her teeth to scrape along his head as he pulled it free.

"Ah, son of a..." Brian growled through clenched teeth. "Do that again."

Kathryn did just as Nick thrust two fingers into her pussy. She groaned around Brian's cock, pushing her hips upward to take his fingers deeper. She sucked hard on Brian's cock, and he moaned, pushing his thick rod toward the back of her throat.

God, she wanted one of them so bad she could scream if not for the thick shaft filling her mouth. The look on Brian's face as she teased the head of his cock with her tongue made her want to come. He looked so damn sexy with his eyes closed in pleasure, his jaw working as he clenched and unclenched his teeth with the strain of holding himself in check.

Nick pulled his fingers free, and she grumbled in displeasure around the cock in her mouth. He reached for one of the pillows beside her and placed it under her hips, lifting them higher. Her heart raced with excitement because she knew what he was about to do. Or at least she hoped he did.

She wanted him inside her now, all of him, every last inch.

He settled himself on his knees between her thighs and settled the head of his cock at her entrance. She stopped sucking, holding her breath as Nick pressed

forward, filling her pussy. The toy was still lodged in her anus, making Nick's cock feel even bigger and thicker.

He groaned loudly as he lodged himself balls-deep, pressing against her clit with his groin. Kathryn moaned and began sucking on Brian's cock in earnest. He cussed loudly and she almost giggled.

Nick began slowly working his cock in and out, grinding his groin against her as he pushed deep. She rotated her hips, working herself against him as his rhythm increased, sending her higher and higher into orbit.

With the toy in her ass, Nick in her pussy, and Brian in her mouth, it felt like she was fucking three people. It was incredible and hot and felt so damn good, she couldn't seem to get enough.

She was so close. Her vagina was so tight she could feel Nick's heartbeat against her walls. She lifted her legs, wrapping them around his back, and his thrusts increased, pounding into her even harder, deeper.

She breathed in through her nose, relaxing her throat, and swallowed Brian's cock.

"Ah, God," Brian gasped as he placed one palm against the wall to brace himself.

With the other, he cupped her cheek, watching her face as he fucked her mouth. His cock throbbed in her mouth as she sucked, stroking his length with her tongue. She could tell he was close, and so was she.

Every part of her pulsed and tingled with her oncoming release. Her muscles tightened, and her limbs shook with the growing intensity. She heard Brian's shout as he came, shooting his cum into her throat. Kathryn swallowed, milking his cock, sucking even more from him as he groaned and slapped his hand against the wall.

He pulled his cock free and watched her as she exploded into a million pieces. Nick thrust harder, forcing himself farther into her as she screamed through her release. One throb ran into another as Brian became nothing but a blur before her.

"That's it, baby," Brian whispered. "Come for us."

Kathryn closed her eyes tightly as her pussy sucked Nick's cock. Her anal muscles pulsed, intensifying the sensation and make her shake from head to toe. Nick shoved into her twice more, yelling as his own release slammed through him and into her with enough force to press her backward along the bed.

Nick closed his eyes, slowing his thrusts, easing them both off their amazing highs. She glanced up at Brian through half-open lids, and he smiled.

"That was fucking amazing," he said.

She nodded, unable to do much else. She tugged at her wrist, wincing as the metal bit at her skin. Brian noticed the marks and quickly unhooked them, allowing her to drop her arms. Brian grasped one, rubbing her wrists and forearms to get the blood flowing again.

Nick pulled from her pussy and moved to grab the other cuff, doing the same as Brian. She sighed, enjoying her two men as they babied her, took care of her.

“And to think,” she said, sighing. “I could have missed out on this today.”

Brian and Nick both stopped what they were doing and stared at one another and then her. Worry clouded their eyes and deepened the lines in their foreheads.

“Don’t,” she whispered, sorry she’d even said anything.

She knew they worried. She knew what happened today had terrified them more than it had her.

Nick leaned over her and brought his face close to hers. “I hope you have a lot of stamina,” he said.

“Why’s that?” she asked, her heart beginning to race all over again at the look of hunger in his eyes.

“Because Brian and I are going to show you just how demanding two men in your life can be.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Nick watched her eyes widen, then narrow in lust. Sex with Katie was better than anything he'd ever experienced, and he wasn't about to give it up without a fight.

But he also needed her to see just how demanding two men could be, especially when those two men wanted her as much as he and Brian did. He needed her to be sure this is what she wanted, so he planned on bombarding her sexually, showing her exactly what it would be like.

Okay, maybe it wouldn't be like this all the time, but it could be some of the time, and he needed her to be aware, to truly see what their sex life could be like, to see if after, she still wanted a ménage relationship.

It was true that there could be good things about a ménage relationship. There could also be overwhelming things about it.

"Are you trying to scare me, Nick?" she asked.

Brian snorted. "I seriously doubt that we could scare you at all."

Brian leaned down and flicked his tongue over her nipple. Her eyelids dropped and she hissed, arching her back like a sexy kitten.

"But we do want to make sure that this is what you want," Brian added.

"Are you saying that you've changed your minds and want this?" she asked.

Nick could see the hope in her eyes, and he would give anything if he could give this to her, if he could convince Brian to go along with it.

"I don't know," Brian said.

He then took Katie's hand and placed it over his semihard cock. She wrapped her dainty fingers around it and slowly stroked from base to tip. Nick's cock responded just like Brian's. Damned if she didn't make him hard just by touching his friend.

"One thing I know for sure," Brian murmured as she continued to stroke him. "Sharing you sexually is hot as hell."

"Yeah?" Katie teased, smiling.

"Sharing you in every other aspect makes me jealous, angry, competitive—"

"I get it," she said.

"It shouldn't be that way, Katie," Nick said. "There shouldn't be any jealousy in this at all. Not if it's going to work."

Her smile faded somewhat. "Are you jealous too?"

Nick nodded. She touched the side of his face and he turned his head, placing a kiss in her palm. "Don't worry about the future, for now, Katie. Just let us make love to you."

Nick bent over her, covering her lips with his. They parted willingly, and he slipped his tongue inside, tasting her, swallowing her moans of pleasure.

Pulling away, he stared down at her flushed face, her desire-filled eyes. He glanced to the side and saw her hand still holding Brian's cock. Brian had leaned over to nibble on the side of her neck. She smiled and tilted her head, allowing him better access.

Every part of him burned to be inside her again, to feel her lips wrapped around his shaft. God, his balls ached already. He put the flat of his palm over her nipple, slowly rubbing back and forth over the hard nub.

She purred and moaned, thrusting her breasts farther into his hands. He closed his fingers around her mound and squeezed, enjoying the feel of her firm breast in his hand.

"I'm going to go run us a warm bath," he whispered.

He slid his hand down her stomach and then between her legs. She sighed, thrusting her hips upward toward his stroking fingers as he slid them through her wet labia.

Brian turned his head and glanced down at Nick's hand between Kathryn's legs.

"She's wet," Nick murmured, meeting Brian's stare.

"Go run the bath water," Brian ordered. "And take your time."

Nick snickered before removing his hand and going into the bathroom. Brian heard the water start as he moved his hand between her thighs. Cream coated his fingers instantly, and he smiled.

"You are wet," he whispered against her lips. "Do you like it when it's the three of us?"

She nodded and bit down on her lower lip. God, she looked so damn sexy, so hot. His cock was already hard again; he wanted her so much. He slid his fingers between the cheeks of her ass and felt the butt of the dildo still lodged inside her.

"God, I'd like to bury myself there," he whispered, brushing his lips over hers. "Or would you prefer me here?" he asked, sliding two fingers deep in her wet pussy.

Her hips lifted off the bed, trying to force his fingers deeper.

"Like that?" he teased, gently moving them in and out.

She nodded, whimpering as he added a third finger. With the toy in her ass, she was incredibly tight, and he swallowed, almost desperate now to feel her walls wrapped around his throbbing rod.

"I could come just watching you, I think," he said.

"How can you make me want you like this so fast?" she panted.

Her eyes closed as he continued slowly fucking her with his fingers. He dipped his head and wrapped his lips around the tip of her breast, sucking hard. She cried out and buried her fingers in his hair. Her nails scraped along his scalp, tugging him closer.

He bit down on the hard nub, and she squealed, giggling as he stroked his tongue over it to soothe the sting.

"What the hell is going on in there?" Nick called, his voice full of amusement.

"Nothing yet," Brian answered just before covering her mouth with his.

She tasted so good, like mint mixed with honey with just a hint of coffee. Her tongue twirled around his, and he deepened the kiss, wanting to drown in her.

He pulled his fingers free, gently stroking the wet digits over her swollen clit. Her hips bucked and moved with his touch, driving him insane with growing need.

She responded so easily and so uninhibited to both him and Nick. She was open to most anything and gave as good as she got. Especially that mouth. God, her mouth was heaven.

He thrust two fingers into her vagina once more, pushing deep and hard.

"Brian." She groaned as he pulled them free and circled her clit, teasing her.

"God, I want to fuck you again," he growled against her mouth. He pushed two fingers deep again, making her gasp. "I want to feel these walls squeeze at my cock like they do my fingers."

"Yes," she hissed, working her hips wildly against his hand.

"Bath's ready." Nick's deep timbre came from the bathroom door, full of arousal.

Brian glanced over at him. He stood in the bathroom door, leaning against the jamb, his arms crossed over his chest, his cock hard and erect.

"Your timing sucks," Brian hissed.

Kathryn frowned and put her hand over Brian's mouth, making Nick chuckle. "You're probably right. If I had let you fuck her now, I could've had her all to myself in the tub."

"The two of you are going to be the death of me," Kathryn said, her voice breathless, almost like she'd been running.

"You haven't seen anything yet," Nick said as he walked over to her.

He leaned over and nudged Brian out of the way, then lifted Kathryn into his arms. She squealed and wrapped her arms around his neck. She smiled at Brian over Nick's shoulder, holding her hand out for him to follow them.

"You're coming, right?" she pleaded.

He glanced down at himself and shot her a wicked grin. "Not yet."

"Ha-ha," she said with just a hint of sarcasm, but smiling from ear to ear.

She looked so damn adorable with her hair a mess, her lips swollen, and her skin flushed.

"Brian," she whined as Nick carried her into the bathroom, disappearing from Brian's sight.

Brian smiled slightly, thinking about what life would be like with Nick in their lives all the time, in their bed every night. It was what Kathryn wanted. Sometimes Brian believed it was what he wanted, too. Sometimes it wasn't. Which did he go with? Could he get over the jealousy issues? Could Nick?

Sighing, Brian stood and headed to the bathroom, where he could hear Kathryn giggling. He peeked around the door and spotted Nick as he set Kathryn on her feet. She smiled up at him, her eyes shining, her emotions and love showing on every inch of her face. He and Nick made her happy. How could he deny her that?

She caught his stare around Nick's shoulder and smiled at him, the same love she showed Nick directed toward him. His heart warmed at the look of love and desire in her gaze. He could never deny Kathryn anything.

Nick looked over his shoulder at Brian, wondering at the strange look on his face, almost like a lightbulb had come on in his mind.

"What?" Nick asked.

"Nothing."

Brian pushed farther into the room and slapped Katie on the ass as he passed her. She yelped and slapped him back as he lifted one leg over the edge of the oversize tub and into the water. He hissed as he settled in. Bubbles and steam surrounded him, filling the room with the scent of lavender.

"Think you got it hot enough?" Brian said.

"Is it too hot?" Nick asked as he leaned over and dipped his hand into the water. Nick frowned. "That's not hot."

Katie smiled and leaned over to put her hand in as well. "That's perfect," she said.

She grasped Brian's hand and stepped into the tub. Straddling Brian's lap, she settled on her knees and ran her hands over his chest. For a moment, Nick just watched her. She was so sexy, so cute. He couldn't keep his hands off her.

They had to do something to convince Brian this was right. Yes, there was jealousy, but he believed they could get over that in time. He couldn't live the rest of his life without being able to touch Katie, to taste her, to feel her lying next to him. He loved her. So did Brian. They had to make this work.

"I think I like this," Brian murmured as he cupped her breasts, pushing her back slightly as he squeezed them.

She moaned and arched her back. Her hair cascaded down her back, the ends dipping into the bubbles. Her eyes slowly closed in pleasure, giving her a dreamy



expression that made Nick's balls tingle. The water sloshed back and forth around her waist, moving ever higher against the side of the tub as her hips moved over Brian's cock.

"We're going to get water all over this floor," Nick murmured as he reached for one of Katie's hair clips on the counter.

He climbed into the tub behind Katie and gathered her hair on top of her head, securing it with the clip. She turned her head, smiling at him over her shoulder.

"I like your neck," he said, then leaned down to bite gently at the skin just below her ear.

The tub was huge, but he still had to straddle Brian's calves as he settled in behind Katie. He reached around her ribs, approaching her breasts from below. Brian moved his hands as Nick cupped her breasts from behind, gently kneading the firm mounds. Her nipples stabbed his palms like hard pebbles, and he flattened his hands against them, rubbing them back and forth.

Her head fell back against his chest, and he nuzzled her neck, inhaling her sexy scent.

"Is he inside you yet?" he asked her.

"Not yet," Brian answered. "But if she keeps moving against me like that, I will be."

Nick glanced down at the tight, barely controlled lust on Brian's face and understood completely. He wanted her so bad himself his hands were shaking.

"What are you waiting for?" she purred, wiggling her hips.

Nick grabbed her waist, lifting her slightly while Brian positioned the head of his cock at her entrance. Once settled, she pressed down, sighing as he filled her pussy.

"Damn, she's tight," Brian ground between his teeth.

"Oh, yeah," Nick agreed, remembering how her pussy had felt gripping his cock.

Dipping his head, he bit at her shoulder, and she gasped, rocking her hips faster against Brian.

"Scoot down a little, Brian," Nick said as he gripped Katie's hip and pulled her off Brian's cock.

She whined, sticking her lower lip out at him over her shoulder. Nick smiled as best he could past the throbbing in his balls as he scooted back on his knees along with Brian.

Putting his hand between her shoulder blades, he pushed her toward Brian's chest. He reached out and grabbed the lube he'd set on the side of the tub earlier as she lifted her ass out of the water.

"Hurry the fuck up," Brian growled as he put his hand behind Katie's neck and pulled her to him.

Nick covered his cock with the lube, rubbing over every inch in slow strokes. Breathing hard, he put the head at the opening of her pussy and pressed in, sighing as her tight walls sucked at his length. God, she felt so good. So hot, so wet, so tight, he could hardly breathe.

He pulled back, then thrust forward again, going balls-deep with a groan. Katie moaned as well, but Brian swallowed any noise she made. For a second, he remained still inside her, enjoying her heat. With his fingers, he tugged at the base of the toy still buried in her ass, sliding it out slowly. He could feel it along his length through the thin membrane that separated both channels and sighed at the sensation.

Once he'd removed it, he spread lube around her opening, which had been stretched and loosened by the toy. Tossing the lube aside, he pulled out of her pussy, then thrust into her ass, going deep with one shove.

She gasped, pressing back against him and forcing him deeper. He groaned toward the ceiling, burrowing himself deeper still as her heat encompassed his shaft. He shifted forward slightly, allowing Brian to put the head of his cock at her pussy.

Nick leaned forward, bracing his hands on the sides of the tub on either side of Brian, forcing Katie down between them. Brian lifted his hips, forcing himself inside her pussy as Nick held still, allowing Brian to seat himself inside her.

He could feel him as he pushed deeper, filling Katie. Katie groaned loudly. Her whole body shivered beneath him. The water sloshed around them, spilling onto the floor. The bubbles had all but disappeared, but the scent remained, filling the room.

Nick barely noticed. He couldn't think of anything other than the feel of her body, the way her whimpers and sighs made his balls tighten. Brian pressed upward with his hips, forcing himself deeper. His movement also pressed Katie into him, and he groaned, pressing back.

Katie cried out, panting as they sandwiched her between them. "Don't stop," she said, breathing heavy. "Do it again."

Brian gave her what she wanted, pressing upward again with his hips. She gasped, squealing as they both thrust into her, moving together. Nick didn't want to pull out of her ass too much for fear the water would wash away the lube and he would end up hurting her, but his lust got the better of him, and he pulled back just a hair before pumping back into her again.

So far, so good. The lube held, and he began to pump harder, faster, pulling out a little more before shoving back in. Brian remained still, groaning as their cocks rubbed against each other.

"Shit," Brian gasped as he reached up and pinched at Katie's nipples.

"Oh, yes," she hissed. "Yes."

Nick was close. He could feel it building in his balls. He could feel the throbs in Katie's walls intensified by the tremor in Brian's cock. "Come with me, Katie," he groaned, thrusting faster.

“Nick,” she panted, then squealed, “Brian!” as her release slammed through her, shaking her whole body.

Nick gritted his teeth as her walls contracted around him, sucking him. He spilled his seed with a shout just as Brian shoved upward, spilling his own seed into her channel.

Katie sagged against Brian, silent.

“Kathryn?” Brian called. He leaned back slightly and brushed her hair from her face. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and even. “Kathryn? Nick, I think she passed out.”

Nick pulled free of her ass and studied her face lying against Brian’s chest. “I think you’re right.”

He touched her cheek. “Katie?”

She mumbled something in response, making Nick smile. “Just stay here, give her a second to come to.”

Nick stood and stretched his arms over his head before grabbing a towel on the rack.

“Where are you going?” Brian asked.

“You want me to climb in there and hold you too?” Nick teased.

Brian snorted. “Not likely.”

“I’m going to the kitchen to get us something to eat.”

“Sandwiches would be nice,” Brian called as Nick left the room. “And don’t forget the chips.”

## Chapter Twenty

Kathryn strolled into the kitchen early the next morning, feeling rode hard and put up wet. But despite her soreness, she'd never felt better. Brian was at the counter, cooking breakfast. He wasn't dressed in his uniform this morning, but instead in jeans and a T-shirt. He apparently didn't plan on going in today.

The scent of bacon and sausage filled the air, and her stomach growled. She hadn't realized just how hungry she was, and she inhaled the smell as she came farther into the room.

"Good morning," she said as she came into the kitchen area and glanced around Brian's shoulder to the bacon frying in the skillet.

"Good morning," Brian replied as he quickly kissed her cheek. "How are you feeling this morning?"

She smiled slightly as she made her way to the coffeepot. "Sore." She poured her coffee and turned to lean against the counter. "Where's Nick?"

"He's downstairs with Janie's parents. They're going through her clothes and things."

Kathryn sighed and closed her eyes. "Oh, God. I forgot they were coming today." She glanced down at her robe. "I shouldn't go down there like this."

Brian studied her over his shoulder. "It's fine. Nick's taking care of it."

"I know, but I should at least go say something..."

"You talked to them at the funeral. Nick's taking care of it, Kathryn. Relax. They know what happened to you yesterday and want you to stay in bed and rest."

Kathryn rolled her eyes. "He tried to kidnap me. I wasn't in a car accident or something."

Brian frowned. "No. What happened to you was worse." He set the skillet aside and walked over to her. "We almost lost you yesterday, Kathryn. We have no idea who he is. If he'd gotten you, that probably would've been it. For all of us. I can't lose you," he said as he cupped her cheeks.

She nodded, understanding completely how he felt. The thought of losing them tore her inside out. Leaning forward, she gave him a quick kiss.

"Do you need any help with breakfast?" she asked.

Brian's eyebrow rose. "Changing the subject?"

She shrugged. "Kinda. Thinking about yesterday makes my stomach hurt."

Brian chuckled. "All right. Yes, I could use some help. Wanna cut up the potatoes for hash browns?"

"Sure," she said, smiling. "I can do that." She washed three potatoes and set them on the cutting board. "Do you want onions too?" she asked as she rummaged through the drawers, looking for a knife.

"Sounds good."

"Aren't you going into work today?" she asked as she gave him a sideways glance, taking in his firm ass, which looked amazing in those jeans.

"Lack of a uniform give me away?" he asked good-naturedly.

"Sort of." She smiled at him before turning back to her task of cutting hash browns.

"I have a little sick time built up. I figured I was due some time off."

"It doesn't have anything to do with yesterday, does it?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the cutting board as she sliced the potatoes.

"Of course it does," he admitted.

Kathryn sighed. "Brian, you can't stay home with me all the time. You have to go back to work at some point."

"I will."

She set the knife down and turned to look at him. "When?"

"When I'm good and ready," he replied, not meeting her gaze.

She remained silent for a moment, watching him. He seemed more tense, the lines around his eyes deeper, the set of his mouth more firm, his jaw tight. He looked almost angry, and she knew he probably was. She was too.

The killer had taken Lisa from them both, and now he'd almost taken her, as well. She was sure Brian's anger had to do with the fact the killer was getting away and had almost, for the second time, taken what mattered the most to him. He moved like a ghost, always remaining unseen, even to the women he killed.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Nick come into the den. She smiled at him as he strolled into the kitchen, also clad in jeans and a T-shirt. She let her gaze wander lazily over his wide shoulders, trim waist, and firm chest, clearly visible through the snug-fitting tee.

"Don't tell me you're staying home too," she said.

Nick smiled. "No. Just short on slacks. I need to do some laundry."

Kathryn chuckled, nodding in understanding. "Laundry hasn't exactly been at the top of my to-do list lately."

Nick walked closer and kissed her cheek. "I'll take care of mine later. I'm sure you have enough on your plate as it is."

"How are Janie's parents?" she asked.

"As well as can be expected," Nick replied as he poured himself a cup of coffee. "They're taking most of her stuff to their church for the needy."

"Janie would like that," Kathryn said.

"They wanted to know if there was anything you would like to keep."

Kathryn thought for a moment. "There's a picture on her dresser of me and her I would like to have. It was taken at the store."

Nick nodded. "I saw it. I'll let them know," he said as he headed back down to the basement.

She remained silent, staring off into space and thinking about all the fun she and Janie had had over the last couple of years. They were complete opposites but got along well. She'd been a great friend and partner, and Kathryn knew she would miss her terribly.

"You okay?" Brian asked.

She gave him a sad smile. "I'm going to miss her. Seems like lately all my friends keep dying around me."

"You've lost two."

"That's two more than I should've lost. I don't have that many as it is."

Brian chuckled softly. "You have me and Nick, and then of course there's Mike and his wife, as well as all the officers at the station."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do. I really do..." Kathryn turned back to the potatoes and sliced at them angrily. "Just let me wallow for a while. I think I've earned it."

\* \* \*

Nick made his way down the hall toward his temporary office, his entire body aching with fatigue and stress. Why had he gone after Katie? Was it because she was helping them or was it because they were close to her?

Either way, the answer didn't sit well with Nick, because whichever reason they chose meant the killer knew them.

Was it possible they knew him? He'd wondered that before when the killer had taken Lisa. He'd apparently followed her to the grocery store and taken her in the parking lot. Unfortunately, the store didn't have cameras. Lisa liked shopping early in the morning before the crowds hit, so there hadn't been any witnesses in the parking lot either.

A quick snatch-and-grab. It's apparently what he did best. He watched his victims, plotting out the right time and place. He was a pro, if there could be a pro in such a thing. The only problem was they weren't mind readers and had no idea where he would pop up next.

He left no clues behind on the bodies. No one ever saw him, except for that lady who reported someone at the condo complex where Brian found the first body in almost three years. She hadn't been able to give them much information. She'd been too far away and her eyesight too weak. At best, she could tell them it had been a man.

There had been nothing to connect the victims. It seemed they were chosen randomly. The only thing consistent had been the way he disposed of them until this last girl.

Or...

Nick came to a stop in the middle of the hall. Was it possible she wasn't the first one he'd dumped in the water?

"Pete!" Nick yelled down the hall toward the open room at the end full of desks.

Pete leaned back in his chair, the phone stuck to his ear as he stared in question down the hall toward Nick. "Yeah?"

"Come to my office."

Pete nodded, and Nick turned into his office to sit behind his desk.

"What's up?" Pete asked as he came into the room.

"I need you to get a group together and start checking all bodies of water within a hundred mile radius."

Pete's eyebrow rose. "Do you have any idea how much water that is?"

"Yes, I do," Nick said. "Check ponds too. Any deep enough to hide a body."

"Nick—"

"Just do it, Pete."

Pete put his hands on his hips. "Can I ask why?"

"Call it a hunch."

"Based on what?"

Nick paused, thinking. "I'm not so sure the woman he dumped in the subdivision marina is the only one. He'd tied weights to her ankles to hold her down. It's possible he could have done more that way, and if he did, I want to find them."

Pete nodded. "All right. I'll coordinate with the surrounding counties and see what we can find."

\* \* \*

Kathryn sighed as she straightened the books displayed close to the counter. Two of her girls had quit, leaving her and one other girl to run the coffee shop. Thank God it had been slow so far today.

She didn't really blame them. Who would want to work at a store where one boss had been murdered and the other was the killer's next victim?

She'd put in a call to the temp agency, and they'd promised they'd have some girls here by lunch.

Her gaze caught the plain-clothes police officer standing close to the entrance, and she rolled her eyes. "You can at least look at books or something. You're going

to make customers nervous standing there like some vulture searching out his next meal.”

The officer smiled slightly. “I’ll try to look less like a vulture and more like a...hawk.”

“I would prefer you look like a customer.”

“He’s just doing his job, Kathryn,” Brian said as he approached the checkout counter.

He set his coffee on the polished surface close to the cash register, and Kathryn quickly grabbed it, moving it farther away from the expensive piece of equipment.

Brian’s eyebrow rose in slight amusement, but Kathryn continued to frown.

“Am I getting on your nerves?” Brian asked, his lips twitching slightly.

She shot him an annoyed glance. “Yes.”

“Well...at least you’re honest.”

“Brian, this is ridiculous. I don’t need all this...” She waved her hand toward the officer at the front, then the second one toward the back. “Protection. They’re scaring off customers, and worse yet, they could possibly scare off the new girls that are coming in.”

“You do need this,” Brian replied, lowering his voice. “And I’ll get them to try and look more relaxed. Fair enough?”

“Fine.” Kathryn sighed as her shoulders slumped slightly.

“Danny.” Brian caught the guard’s attention by the door and nodded his head toward the coffee bar. “Grab some coffee.”

Danny nodded and headed to the bar.

“Brian, this isn’t going to work,” Kathryn said with growing frustration.

“Do you want another repeat of yesterday?”

She could tell by the tone of his voice, his own agitation was on the rise. They were both stressed, he probably more so than she. If that was even possible. She wanted this whole thing over. She wanted him caught and the three of them to be able to move on with their lives. For the second time this morning, she wondered if maybe she shouldn’t put herself out there as a way to catch him.

“You’re right,” she said, surrendering.

“I know this is frustrating, but it will be over soon.”

“Maybe there’s a way to get it over with sooner rather than later.” She stared at him hopefully, but that hope was dashed the second she saw the anger brewing behind his narrowed eyes.

“I certainly hope you’re not going where I think you’re going with this,” he growled menacingly, taking her aback for a second.

She squared her shoulders. “What if I am? He’s come after me once. He would likely do it again if given the chance.”



Brian shook his head angrily. "No way, Kathryn."

"Why?"

"Why?" He stared at her in shock. "Are you serious with this?" he shouted, catching everyone's attention. "Do I really need to explain the why to you?"

She shook her head and waved to the wide-eyed patrons staring at them, letting them know everything was fine. "No. I'm not stupid, Brian. I understand the why. I also understand that I can't continue to live like this...always looking over my shoulder, being afraid to enter a room alone. This is ridiculous, awful, and I want it over."

"I'm not about to use you as bait," Brian growled, a little more quietly, but she could see in his eyes that he was furious she'd even considered it.

She tightened her lips and crossed her arms over her chest, letting him know with her own angry glare that she didn't appreciate the babying or the bullying.

He lifted a finger and pointed it at her nose. "Don't, Kathryn. I know you're pissed, but don't fight me on this. You won't win."

"She might not win, but I bet she would put up one hell of a fight," Nick said as he came to stand close to them, his curious gaze moving from one to the other. "What's going on, guys?"

Brian dropped his hand with a wave of frustration. "Talk to her." With that, he stomped to the coffee bar.

"Okay," Nick replied. He looked at her and smiled, his brown eyes twinkling, but behind the mischief, she could see the worry and stress. "Hello, Katie Bell."

She tilted her head and gave him a look of displeasure before strolling behind the counter. "Are you going to tell me what a bad idea I had as well? And what are you doing here? I thought you were working all day."

"To answer your second question, I'm taking a break. Thanks for the warm welcome."

Kathryn sighed and mouthed, *Sorry*.

"As to your first question. What's this idea you have?"

"She wants to use herself as bait," Brian snapped from the bar before Kathryn could answer.

Nick's eyes widened. "You want to what?"

"You know, that's not such a bad idea," Danny said.

"Stay out of this!" Nick and Brian both yelled at once.

Danny held his palms up in surrender before returning his attention back to his coffee.

"You two only think it's a bad idea because it's me. If it had been anyone else, you would have already suggested it, and you know it," Kathryn sneered.

She wasn't sure why she was so angry. Stress? Fear? She just knew that said anger was growing by the second.

“Katie,” Nick said as he reached for her.

She jerked her hand away, holding her palm up and glaring at him before walking to the back of the store.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Nick frowned as he watched Katie walk to the back of the store, then turn to glare at Brian across the few feet that separated them.

“Just say it,” Brian grumbled as he lifted the cup to his lips.

With a sigh, Nick strolled forward and ordered one of his own. “Say what?” he asked as he climbed onto the stool next to Brian.

“I handled that badly.”

Nick nodded. “At least you recognize your own bullish behavior.”

Danny snickered. Nick and Brian both looked over at him, Brian in anger, Nick with amusement. His snickers immediately ceased as he watched them warily.

“Nick’s right, Brian. You can be bullish at times,” Danny offered.

“Especially with women,” Nick added as he took a sip of the hot coffee.

“I am not bullish,” Brian grumbled as he turned his gaze to his half-empty coffee cup. “God, I wish I had some whiskey.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Drinking on duty? You?”

“Don’t be a smart-ass,” Brian snarled.

The officer next to them snorted. “It’s in Nick’s nature to be a smart-ass. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

“Thanks for noticing that, Danny,” Nick replied.

“Anytime.”

Brian dropped his head in his hand and squeezed his temples between his thumb and forefinger. “The two of you are about to piss me off.”

“About to?” Danny replied with obvious amusement. “Looks to me as though you came in here pissed.”

“This is getting to both of us, Brian, as well as Katie. Maybe we should consider her plan.”

Brian lifted his head and looked at Nick as though he’d grown a second nose. “Have you lost your mind?”

Nick rolled his eyes. “No. I have not lost my mind. We’ve done stuff like this before at the FBI. There are agents there who are trained in this sort of thing. It would work.”

“Or it would fail, and then what?”

“Well, then you can shoot me,” Nick sneered with sarcasm.

"Don't tempt me, Nick."

"Jeez." Danny shook his head. "No wonder Katie is a basket case. I would be too, having to stand between the two of you all the time."

Nick's lips twitched as he leaned over and looked around Brian at Danny. "Yeah, but when she is between us, she isn't screaming from frustration."

Danny almost choked on his coffee and used a napkin to wipe at his chin.

"You need help, man," Brian mumbled, doing his best to hide his own grin.

"Just trying to find some humor in an impossible situation."

"You better be careful with that kind of humor. Katie would have no qualms smacking you upside the head," Danny said.

Nick chuckled. "Don't I know it." He took a sip of coffee, then set the cup back down on the counter softly. "I think we should consider Katie's suggestion, Brian. I'll bring a couple of agents in. We'll work out a safe, strategic plan. We know he wants her. We can make this work."

Brian sighed but remained silent. Nick knew not to push him. He'd put the idea into his head. His friend just needed time to mull it over a bit. He'd come around. He just hoped it was sooner and not later.

\* \* \*

Nick flipped his phone closed as he rapped the end of his pen on the desktop. The two additional agents he'd requested would be here first thing in the morning, which meant they should be able to put their plan into motion tomorrow night at the earliest.

Brian still hadn't given his okay, but Nick was sure they could convince him.

If things went wrong, though, Brian would never forgive him, not in a million years. And Nick wouldn't blame him. He doubted he would ever forgive himself, so how could he ask Brian to?

He rubbed his hand down his face and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. He hoped he was doing the right thing. He prayed he was. They needed to find this man soon before he killed anyone else or, God forbid, got his hands on Katie.

\* \* \*

Kathryn strolled down the hallway toward Nick's office at the police station. Ahead of her, Brian led the way, periodically glancing toward a piece of paper Pete had handed him when he'd walked in.

Brian came to a dead stop, causing Kathryn to almost run into him. She stopped abruptly, and coffee spilled over the side of her cup and onto her fingers, burning them.

She hissed softly and moved the cup to her other hand so she could shake the coffee off the other.

"Geez, Brian. You need brake lights or something," she grumbled.

Brian snickered and glanced at her over his shoulder. "Sorry. I was just reading this report. Looks like forensics found some skin samples under one of the victims' fingers."

Her heart skipped. "That's great, right? If you finally find someone, that means you could possibly get a DNA match."

"Yeah," Brian said absently as he continued to study the paper. "It just seems strange to me that he would make such a mistake. All the girls were so clean, at least the ones we've found so far."

"Was she one of his firsts?"

"No. This one has been dead less than a year."

"Maybe he was hurried or interrupted somehow?" Kathryn asked as she studied the paper as well.

"Possibly," Brian mumbled, tilting his head slightly as he spoke.

"You're not going to find the answers by staring at the paper," she said, shoving gently at his shoulder to get him moving again. "We came to see if Nick wanted dinner."

"Well, you wanted to invite Nick to dinner," Brian grumbled as he continued toward Nick's office. "I had other plans."

"Stop," she said with a chuckle and slapped his shoulder with the backs of her fingers.

"Come on. Admit it." Brian smiled at her over his shoulder. "You wouldn't know what to do with us if we got along all the time."

"Well, I have to agree the two of you certainly make life interesting," she admitted.

They turned a corner and then past two doors before stepping into Nick's temporary office. He sat behind the desk, studying the computer screen with a frown Kathryn had come to know as a sign of agitation. After standing in the room for a couple of seconds, Kathryn noticed a scent that made her own brow crease.

It was the same woody scent she'd smelled yesterday when the killer had tried to kidnap her. She glanced around the room, trying to determine where it was coming from. It was faint, barely there, but she would forever remember it and knew without a doubt it was the same smell.

"Hey, guys. You just missed Mike and Charles."

Kathryn shook her head. One of them had to be wearing the same cologne as the killer. Nothing more.

"You okay, Katie?" Nick asked. "You look a little confused."

She turned her gaze to Nick and smiled slightly. "I think I'm still just a little frazzled from yesterday."

"What are you two doing here? Did you close down the bookstore?"

"No," Brian replied. "I got a couple of the girls to come back. They were more okay with it after I told them there would be police officers there whenever the store was open and would remain to walk them to their cars. The agency also sent over a couple of new girls. We're just on a dinner break."

"We came by to see if you wanted to come with," Kathryn said with a grin.

"Actually that sounds like a great idea. I'm starving," Nick said as he stood.

Brian's lips twisted just a little in disappointment. Kathryn didn't say anything, but she nudged him on the shoulder, giving him her best don't-say-anything-and-behave look. He winked, putting Kathryn a little more at ease.

He bent close and put his hand at the small of her back, leading her from the room. "The things I do for you," he whispered.

She glanced up at him and noticed the twinkle of mischief behind his brown eyes, and she grinned, knowing instantly he was teasing her.

"Where are we eating?" Nick asked as they headed down the hall toward the back entrance to the station and Brian's car.

"I have to put up with you. I'm picking," Brian commanded.

"The hell you are," Nick grumbled. "You pick lousy restaurants, and knowing you, you'll pick something that sucks just for spite."

"Then stay here," Brian offered over his shoulder.

"No way."

Kathryn giggled, shaking her head. "Enough. I'm picking."

"Oh, God," they both groaned in unison.

"Looks like it's Italian," Nick grumbled playfully.

"I'm guessing seafood," Brian countered.

"Nope. Mexican," Kathryn replied as she passed Brian with a smile to open the back door.

"Damn," Brian mumbled, making Kathryn and Nick laugh.

## Chapter Twenty-two

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Brian asked Kathryn as he clipped the small GPS device to the inside of her shirt collar.

She nodded, and his stomach tightened with disappointment. Part of him had hoped she would say no. His fingers trembled a little as he readjusted her collar. Looking into her pretty eyes, he could see the small bit of fear and uncertainty she was trying so hard to hide.

“Are you expecting him to take me?” she whispered.

“It’s just in case,” Brian replied. “Nick knows these new agents and how well they do their job. I don’t.”

Kathryn nodded in understanding.

“Here are the codes for the GPS online tracking,” Charles said as he handed Brian a small piece of paper. He nodded to Kathryn. “Nervous?” he asked.

Kathryn swallowed. “Yeah. A little.”

“You should be,” Brian said, pinning her with a hard stare. “And I should have my head examined for agreeing to this.”

Charles snorted. “He always says that. One of these days he’ll actually go through with it, and the exam will confirm what we’ve all always known. He’s nuts.”

Kathryn’s lips twitched as her worried gaze met Brian’s. Brian frowned toward Charles. “Don’t you have something else to do?”

“Yep,” Charles replied, then nodded toward Kathryn in good-bye.

Turning, he headed to the other side of the room where Nick and the two other agents went over last minute details.

“Charles isn’t known for talking much, but when he does, he’s actually kinda funny,” Kathryn said as she watched him go.

Brian grunted, not wanting to really look too closely at Charles or his sometimes odd behavior. He was a good cop. To Brian that was all that mattered. There were all types on the force. Charles was just one of many.

“How are you doing with this?” Kathryn asked.

He pushed a stray curl behind her ear and gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m doing fine.”

The last thing he wanted to do was make her even more uncomfortable or worry her unnecessarily.

"You're such a liar," she whispered.

Nick approached them, and Brian dropped his hand. Brian was still angry with himself for allowing Nick to talk him into this. Something didn't sit right with him, but he couldn't put his finger on what, and he had to bite his tongue to keep from dragging Kathryn from the room.

"Katie," Nick began. "This is Morgan, Joshua, and Allyson." He nodded to each of the three as he introduced them.

Kathryn took a deep breath. "Hello."

"Allyson is the one you'll be going to the club with. Morgan and Joshua will be watching from the sidelines."

"Where will you be?"

"Brian and I will be in the parking lot, watching the outside. Pete will be keeping an eye on the back entrance."

"What if he doesn't come after me?" Kathryn asked.

"He came after you once." Nick shrugged. "I can't guarantee this will work, but...it's worth a try."

Kathryn nervously licked her lips, and Nick pulled her into his arms, holding her close. "It's going to be okay, Katie Bell. We won't let him hurt you."

"I know you won't," she said with a sigh as she rested her cheek against Nick's chest.

She opened her eyes, meeting Brian's gaze, and he smiled, trying again to put her at ease. If anything happened to her...

His smile faded as he met Nick's stare over her head. Nick's eyes held the same worry Brian felt. His friend hid it well from Kathryn, but Brian knew that look. His gut was screaming at him as well.

\* \* \*

The beat of the techno music made Kathryn's whole body vibrate. She used to love to dance, but she'd been so busy with her store, she hadn't been out clubbing in a long time. Standing in the middle of the crowded club, listening to the loud music and feeling the excited vibe around her, she realized just how much she'd missed it.

Smiling, she started to head to the dance floor, but Allyson pulled her back by grabbing her elbow.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Kathryn pointed over her shoulder with her thumb toward the dance floor. "To dance. We're supposed to be natural, right? I dance."

Allyson nodded. "Just make sure you can always see me."

"You're not going with me?" Kathryn asked.

"Yes and no. I'll be close."



Kathryn shrugged and headed out to the floor, intent to enjoy herself for the time being. She needed to do something to take her mind off things, and dancing seemed just as good an option as any.

\* \* \*

Brian rapped his thumb on the steering wheel as he listened to the chatter on the scanner attached to his dash. It was a quiet night, and quiet nights put him on edge. They always made him feel as though the bottom was about to fall out. He just hoped tonight wasn't one of those nights.

He tilted his head, and his thumb froze against the steering wheel as a call came in about a fire across town at one of the many waterfront condo complexes.

Nick's voice came over the radio, interrupting Brian's thoughts. "Isn't that where Charles lives?" Nick asked.

"I take it you're listening to the scanner," Brian replied.

"Yeah."

"Not sure about whether or not it's Charles's. Can't say as I know that much about him. See anything odd?"

"Not yet, unless you want to count the way some of these people dress. They make me feel old."

Brian chuckled. "I hear ya."

Brian set the radio back down and sighed, keeping his gaze on the area. All exits were covered. Brian at one, Nick at the other, and Pete at the employee entrance.

*What could possibly go wrong, right?*

"Right," Brian murmured.

\* \* \*

He slowly made his way across the back of the building, keeping close to the shadows. The officer stood at the door to the employee entrance, nodding as two waitresses made their way inside. He hung back, not wanting to attract attention. He needed to keep the element of surprise if he was going to get out of this unnoticed.

His fingers tightened around the syringe as he edged closer. He gave the parking lot one final glance before stepping forward. He wrapped his arm around the officer's neck, holding him tight as he sank the needle into his neck. It took a total of two seconds before the officer sank, completely out.

Using his hip, he pushed the door open and dragged the officer through the back entrance and toward a small broom closet off to the left. He laid his body inside, then shut the door.

He looked quickly down the hall, making sure no one saw him, then headed inside to get Kathryn.

\* \* \*

Kathryn laughed as the thumping music blared so loudly, she could feel the beat in her chest. Sweat dotted her brow and the back of her neck as her body moved to the techno tunes. She loved dancing. She hadn't been in so long, she had forgotten just how much fun she used to have clubbing.

Several men had come over to dance with her, but none of them seemed dangerous or threatening. Some stayed close, moving between her and two other girls. Others moved off to dance with someone else.

Kathryn didn't mind. She knew that's how the dance floors worked. You danced with anyone and everyone.

She glanced over to the side and tilted her head back at her guard's tight-lipped glare. She knew they were in a dangerous situation, but seriously, that woman needed to pull the stick out of her butt. That get-your-hands-off-my-man stare wasn't really helping things.

Mentally shrugging, Kathryn turned her attention to the man approaching and smiled in surprise.

"Charles. What are you doing here?"

"Brian sent me in to get you," he replied over the music. "He said something about the communication not working. It's too dangerous for you if we can't talk to one another."

Kathryn nodded in understanding and looked to the side of the dance floor for Allyson but couldn't see her for the thickening crowd.

"Pete's getting her," Charles said as he grasped her elbow. "Come on. We need to hurry."

Kathryn frowned at Charles's sudden need for urgency. Was there something he wasn't telling her?

She nodded and followed silently, but something in her gut felt off. He pulled her toward the back and through a hidden doorway, which led to a darkened hall.

"Why are we going this way?" she asked.

"Brian's orders," he said without looking back.

Ahead of her a figure appeared, and she gasped as her features came into focus.

*Lisa?*

Kathryn came to a stop, staring in shock at her friend. She looked like she always did—beautiful. There were no scars, no blood, no fear in her eyes. She was trying to tell her something, but what?

Her heart racing, Kathryn fought against Charles as he tried to tug her along behind him. Something was wrong. It had to be. Otherwise why would her friend show herself now?

"I forgot my purse," Kathryn said as she tried to free her arm from Charles's tightening grip.

He pulled harder, almost tugging her off her feet. "Allyson will get it."

"Charles," Kathryn squealed as she began to struggle in earnest. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Damn it," he snarled as he turned to glare at her. The anger and utter evil in his eyes made Kathryn gasp. "I don't have time for your shit."

He pulled harshly at her arm, slinging her sideways and against the wall. The back of her head smacked the concrete, and she winced, closing her eyes against the pain racing down her neck.

"Oh my God," she gasped as realization dawned. "It's you, isn't it?"

She shoved hard at his chest before he could answer, but couldn't break herself free from his tight fingers. Lightning flashed behind her eyes as pain exploded in her cheek, temporarily knocking her senseless.

He tossed her over his shoulder and continued on his way down the hall. Kathryn struggled to stay conscious as she dangled upside down, staring at his lower back.

How had they missed this? He'd been under their noses this whole time, and no one figured it out.

Tears gathered in her eyes as the thought dawned that this would be it. Brian probably didn't have any idea what was going on. He probably didn't even have a clue that she was being carried out of the club by Charles—the very man they'd been looking for.

*My God.*

She faded in and out as he walked across the parking lot toward a dark car. He opened the trunk, dumping her quickly inside. Her head banged against the carpeted floor, and she groaned, only half feeling it. He reached down and tore the GPS from her collar, dumping it on the ground before slamming the trunk closed.

The car began to move, and she opened her eyes, fighting the rolling nausea.

"No," she croaked, shoving at the top of the trunk.

It wouldn't move and she sobbed, despair racing through her like a freight train. She hit it harder with her fist, growling with anger as she became more aware of where she was and just how much danger she was in.

Remembering something she'd heard earlier, she looked to her side and began to tug at the covering of the rear lights. If she could loosen the wire, maybe he'd get pulled over for his taillights being out and she could make enough noise to catch the officer's attention.

Unfortunately, she couldn't get to the wires. She tried tugging at the plastic so hard, she cut her fingers and cried out at the utter unfairness of the whole situation.

From the corner of her eye, she caught the light image of Lisa. She turned slowly and stared at her friend. Tears slipped down her cheeks as Kathryn reached out and tried to touch her friend's face. The image was like smoke, waving in and out, moving as her fingers displaced the air around her.

She was different from the others. Was she a figment of her imagination? Here only because she wanted her to be?

"I'm in so much trouble," Kathryn said, then sniffed the tears back. "What do I do?"

Lisa tilted her head but remained silent.

"You have to get to them," Kathryn pleaded. "You have to find a way to get through to Nick and Brian. Please, Lisa. You have to."

Lisa's image disappeared, and Kathryn took a moment to let despair rule her emotions.

\* \* \*

Brian's thumb continued to drum against the steering wheel with impatience. He hated this waiting. He hated being out here and not in there with Kathryn. That tense feeling in his stomach intensified as the night wore on. Something was about to happen; he could feel it in every bone in his body.

The radio beeped, catching his attention, and he raised it in preparation for someone to speak.

"Brian," Mike's voice called through the speaker.

"Mike?" Brian asked in surprise. "What's going on? Aren't you answering that fire call?"

"I did. Listen. We've got a problem."

Brian's fingers clenched around the radio as his fear grew at the tone of Mike's voice.

"What problem?"

"We checked the condo next to where the fire was just to make sure it hadn't spread. It's full of trophies—cut fingers, pictures. It's Charles's condo. The killer is Charles, Brian!"

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Nick growled. "How the hell did we miss this?"

Brian sat stunned, immobile. He'd been under their noses all along?

"Brian!" Mike yelled.

"Allyson, where's Kathryn?" Brian called into the speaker.

Allyson came back, her voice shaky. "Oh God," she said. "I saw her on the dance floor with Charles, and then they disappeared. I haven't been able to find them."

Brian slammed his hand against the dash with a growl. "Pete, did anyone come through there?" he asked into the radio.

No answer.

"Pete!"

*Son of a bitch.*

"Nick, get to that employee entrance. Allyson, tear the inside of that club apart."

"Got it," she replied.

"What do you need me to do?" Mike asked.

"Just stand by," Brian replied.

Brian jumped out of his truck and sprinted toward the employee entrance, meeting up with Nick just as he got the door open. He had to have come through this way.

"Did you find her on the GPS?" he asked.

Nick held up his hand, the small GPS device they'd put on Kathryn's collar in his palm. Brian felt sick to his stomach.

"I found it in the parking lot."

"Are you sure you didn't see anything?" Brian asked.

Nick glared at him. "Yes." He frantically searched the hall. "Pete was supposed to be watching this part of the parking lot. Where the hell is he?"

A young woman screamed as she stepped into the small closet to get out of their way. Nick turned to see what had scared her and immediately saw Pete's body. He rushed forward and felt for a pulse, then turned to Brian.

"He's still alive. Call for an ambulance."

Brian lifted the radio. "We need an ambulance at the techno club. We have an officer down."

"Who?" a worried voice asked from the other end.

"It's Pete. Looks like he may have been drugged," Brian replied.

Allyson came running down the hall, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Brian. Nothing."

Now Brian's heart was really beginning to race. They had no idea where to start looking. He glanced out the open back door and decided to head outside, check out the parking lot. Off to the side were two young men standing by their car.

Brian walked over, hoping they'd seen something.

"Did you guys see anyone leave her in the last five to ten minutes?" he asked them.

"Yeah," one of them said with a nod as he blew his cigarette smoke off to the side. "Just as we were pulling in, we saw a guy carrying a woman over his shoulder." He shrugged slightly. "At first I thought she might be drunk or passed out or something, but he threw her in the trunk."

Brian heart raced with excitement. Maybe this was a break. "What kind of car was it?"

"An older model car. A black Taurus, I think."

"Did you get the plates?" Brian asked.

"Nah, man. Didn't think I really needed to. Not really any of my business, you know."

"Not your business?" Brian snapped in anger, and the young man took a step back.

Nick put his hand on Brian's shoulder, pulling him back. He stepped up and flipped open the cover for this badge. "You boys watch the news?" he asked.

They nodded.

"That man you saw is the serial killer we're looking for, so it's real important that you try and remember anything you can."

"I swear, man. I told you everything. I'm sorry I didn't get the plate, but I just thought it was some drunk or domestic thing, you know."

"I swear if I hear 'you know' one more time, I'm going to fucking smack you," Brian sneered.

Nick glared at him over his shoulder, and Brian snarled back. This was fucking ridiculous and a waste of time. He lifted his radio and put an all points bulletin out on a black Taurus.

"Is it true, Brian?" the voice asked through the radio. "Is it Charles?"

"I don't know," Brian replied with a sigh. "Put out an APB on him as well. Let me know the second you hear anything."

"Got it," they replied.

The ambulance and two police cars pulled in, their sirens blaring loudly. Brian turned and moved his hand over his throat, indicating they needed to shut the noise down. The sirens stopped, but the light remained swirling, and Brian squinted against the pulsing light.

"Did you see which direction the car went as it pulled out?" Brian asked the two young men.

They nodded and pointed behind them toward the road that led to the warehouse district and river port.

Nick looked as well. "Looks like he might be headed to the warehouses along the riverfront."

"Come on," Brian said as he ran toward Nick's car.

"And go where?" Nick asked as he jumped into the passenger seat. "Brian, we can't just go running the roads blind."

"We have a direction. That's a start."

Brian reached for the ignition and realized there were no keys. He held his hand out and glared at Nick. "Keys."

Nick's lips thinned as he placed the keys in his hand. "I'm not sure you should be driving."

“Not now, Nick,” he snapped as he started the engine and threw it into drive.

## Chapter Twenty-three

Kathryn struggled against the bindings that held her down. She was so frightened her limbs actually shook uncontrollably. The cold table didn't help matters.

She'd tried to fight him off the second he'd opened the trunk, but despite everything Brian had taught her, he'd been too strong. He'd been prepared for every one of her moves and had blocked each and every one before slamming her so hard in the face, he'd knocked her unconscious.

When she woke, she found herself taped to a table, immobile and terrified. Her cheek throbbed, and she could already see the swelling below her eye. All around her were lockers, the ceiling exposed beams and hanging lights.

*Where are we?*

It reminded her of a school locker room or the employee locker room of a...warehouse. Were they at one of the abandoned warehouses on the riverfront? Were they that close to the club?

She could hear him walking behind her and tried to turn her head to look at him, but he had tape running across her forehead, holding her down.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"You were getting too close. I couldn't risk it."

"Brian will figure out it's you," she argued, hoping to buy some time.

"He hasn't yet."

He walked into her field of vision, and her stare caught the light reflecting off the steel blade of the knife. Her breath caught, and she tensed, fearful of what he intended to do with it.

"Why?" She swallowed a lump the size of a lemon. "Why did you kill all of them?"

He shrugged with indifference. "Just because."

"You're insane," she whispered.

"I would be careful if I were you." He leaned down, coming close to her face, and she fought the quivering of her lips as well as the desire to turn away. "If you piss me off, I may just make this much more painful than I originally intended."

The pure evil and anger in his eyes made Kathryn shiver within the grasp of the tape. He dragged the edge of the blade along her skin, but not deep enough to draw blood.



Kathryn held her breath, waiting for the pain. She knew what he did to women. She'd seen it firsthand through their eyes, felt it as well. He stepped away, and she breathed a momentary sigh of relief, but she knew it would be short-lived.

A locker banged off to her right, making her jump. She tried to see out of the corner of her eye but couldn't. Who had done that?

"What the hell?" Charles murmured as he walked over and studied the locker on the far wall.

He glanced over at Kathryn accusingly before shutting it more securely and walking back behind her where he was out of her field of vision. That made the whole situation even scarier. She had no idea what he was doing back there.

She glanced toward the locker again and caught the light image of Janie. Another locker slammed, and Kathryn bit at her lip, wondering what he would do this time.

He moved to stand beside her, glaring down his nose.

"How can I do anything?" she snapped as her fear turned to anger. "I'm tied up."

He snorted but said nothing.

\* \* \*

Nick sat in the passenger seat of his car, staring out the window at every car he saw. His heart was racing so wildly, he couldn't think straight. How had they let this happen?

"Brian—"

Brian shot him a glare before turning back to the road. "Just shut up, Nick."

Nick sighed and turned his attention to the approaching streetlight. Something kept nagging at him. Something he couldn't explain told him they were going in the wrong direction. He frowned as the four-way streetlights did something very odd. All of them went dark except for the one on the right.

Brian came to a screeching halt, forcing Nick to grasp the dash as a car crossed in front of them from the left. They barely missed each other.

"What the hell?" Brian snapped as he stared at the lights.

Nick glanced at the one light still showing green. They needed to go that way. He didn't know why; he just knew that's the way they needed to go.

"Go right," he said to Brian.

"What? Why?" Brian asked.

"Just do it!"

"Fine," Brian growled as he threw the car into reverse.

He backed up just enough to make the right-hand turn toward the river. At the next four-way stop, the lights did the same thing, this time indicating they should go left.

Brian stopped the car and stared at the light for a brief second before turning to look at Nick with confusion. "I assume now we're supposed to go left?" he asked.

Nick shrugged. "I guess. Just follow it, Brian."

"Are you seeing ghosts now, too?" Brian asked as he turned left and headed along warehouse row.

"No," he replied. "I don't know what's doing this. I just know we need to trust it."

Brian continued to look out the driver's window at the empty parking lots on his side. "And how is that?"

"I don't know. My gut tells me, I guess."

Brian hit the brakes without warning, and the car came to a screeching halt. Nick had to once again grab the dash. "Damn it, Brian!"

"Nick, look," Brian said, his voice full of shock and excitement.

Nick looked to where his friend pointed. His heart leaped in excitement. Right there, close to one of the side doors in the shadow of the building, was the Taurus they were looking for.

At least he hoped so anyway.

Brian moved the car into the parking lot and came to a stop behind the Taurus. He put it in park and reached for his gun. Nick picked up the radio and called in the plates.

A second later, the voice on the other end came back. "Car's registered to us. It's one of the undercover cars. It was checked out by Charles about six months ago."

Nick and Brian stared at one another as Nick raised the radio. "Got it, thanks. Have backup meet us on warehouse row, the old abandoned plastics one at the corner of Riverfront and First Street."

"Consider them on their way."

Reaching for his gun as well, he stepped from the car and met Brian's eyes over the top of the car. He could see the same fear in his friend's eyes as Nick felt pounding through his chest. He was terrified they were too late—that he'd already killed her.

"Let's go get this son of a bitch," Brian growled.

Nick followed as Brian slowly pushed open the door into the dark warehouse. The smell of mold and the sound of scurrying animals were the only things that greeted them. Could he have had another car here waiting and he'd just moved her from the Taurus to the other car? Was it possible he wasn't even here at all? That was the last thing Nick wanted to think about.

A loud bang came from the other side of the warehouse. It sounded like a locker slamming closed. They headed off quickly in the direction the sound came from. The whole way Nick silently prayed they'd find her alive.

\* \* \*

Another locker slammed as more and more of the ghosts appeared in the room. Kathryn watched silently, wondering what they were doing. Another slammed and then another, their sounds echoing through the empty warehouse.

Charles spun in a circle, his anger growing as he glared at each locker that slammed. "Stop it," he snapped before turning to Kathryn. "Stop it!"

"It's not me," she said. Her stomach was in her throat.

He stalked over and gripped her chin between his punishing fingers and squeezed hard. She winced in pain.

"I said stop it!"

"I can't," she sobbed.

Charles reared his hand back and slapped her hard across her cheek. Her head didn't move, which made the sting even sharper, taking her breath. She struggled to see through her blurring vision as the lockers began to slam louder and faster.

Her captor was becoming angrier by the second. What were they doing? She wanted to tell them to stop but was almost afraid to. What if they were doing this for a reason? What if someone could hear it?

"Somebody!" she screamed. "Help me!"

He slapped her again before shouting at the room. "Stop it! Stop it, now! Stop it now or I swear to God, I'll kill her!"

He put the blade directly over her chest, and Kathryn squealed, scrunching her eyes closed as she tried to prepare for the worst. She didn't want to die. Not now. She wanted to be with Nick and Brian. She wanted to someday have kids and see Fiji.

The banging stopped just as gunfire exploded through the room. Kathryn screamed, unsure who fired or where it had come from. She opened her eyes, trying to see. She could hear Charles groaning off to the side. She could feel the cold blade of the knife as it lay against her stomach, apparently where he'd dropped it when he'd been shot.

"Who's here?" she pleaded, still unable to move.

"Katie?" Nick called as he rushed forward.

Kathryn began to sob in earnest as Nick cupped her face. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I am now," she sobbed. "Get me out of this."

Nick began cutting away at the tape until she was finally able to sit up. She reached for Nick, hugging him around the neck and inhaling his wonderful, musky scent. God, nothing had ever smelled so good.

Over his shoulder, she met Brian's relieved stare. He held his gun on Charles, who slumped against the lockers, breathing harshly but still conscious.

"You okay?" he asked, studying her from head to toe.

She nodded, sniffing back tears. Nick continued working the tape loose from her legs. As he tugged it free, the tape tore at her flesh, making it red and raw. She hissed and reached down to rub at her legs.

From the corner of her eye, she glared at Charles. How could they not have known? She looked to Brian, who appeared to be hanging on to his temper by a mere thread. The veins popped out in his neck as though he struggled to keep from killing the man himself.

She swung her legs over the side of the table. As she did, her eyes caught Nick's gun tucked safely in his holster hanging just under his arm. She bit at her lip as anger unlike anything she'd ever felt took hold. He'd killed two of her friends. He'd destroyed Brian and Nick, and on top of that, he'd almost killed her.

Court was too good for the damn son of a bitch.

She jumped from the table and grabbed Nick's gun before he could stop her. Raising her arm, she took aim. Charles's eyes widened but it wasn't with fear. Instead, surprise brightened his eyes.

"Do it," he snarled.

His command surprised her, and she hesitated too long.

"Kathryn," Brian yelled just as she pulled the trigger.

The gun fired, but Nick shoved at her arm, forcing the bullet to hit the wall instead of her intended target. Charles took a deep, disappointed breath as he stared at her sadly.

"I didn't think you had it in you," he said.

"Shut up," Brian said as he kicked him in the side.

Charles groaned and leaned over slightly. "Careful, boss. That's brutality. I could sue."

Brian made another move toward Charles, but Nick stopped him. Kathryn began to shake from head to toe as Nick came forward and took the gun from her trembling fingers. She needed air; she needed to get out of here.

Nick removed his jacket and placed it around her shoulders. He picked her up in his arms and held her tight. She rested her head against his shoulder, grateful for his warmth and comfort. She'd come so close to losing this. Closing her eyes, she began to sob in relief.

Nick turned as the sound of footsteps became louder. "In here," he called before turning back to Brian. "Backup's here."

"Get her outside and call an ambulance."

Nick nodded and carried her out of the warehouse.

\* \* \*

Kathryn placed the yellow roses by Lisa's headstone. They were her favorite flowers.

"I owe you so much," Kathryn whispered. "You saved me, I think. You got through to them." She sniffed back tears as her lower lip began to tremble. "I miss you so much."

A movement caught her attention, and she glanced up to see Lisa standing just behind the stone. Kathryn held her breath, wishing they could speak to each another. Lisa smiled, and Kathryn suddenly had an overwhelming sense of acceptance and love.

"There you are," Brian said, making her jump.

She spun around to see him and Nick walking across the grass toward Lisa's grave. Kathryn glanced over her shoulder and could still see Lisa standing there, watching them.

"I didn't mean to worry you. I just..." She glanced back toward her friend. "I just wanted to tell her thank you."

Lisa smiled again.

"Do you think it was Lisa that led us to you?" Nick asked as he stared past the stone toward the distance.

"Yes. I do."

"You'll be happy to know Charles was denied bail," Nick said.

"Thank God," Kathryn said with a sigh and a glance toward the heavens. "I'm not exactly looking forward to testifying, but I'm glad he's not going to get an opportunity to run."


Brian grunted. "You and me both. Come on, sweetheart." He put his hand at the small of her back and tried to lead her away. "Let's all go home."

Kathryn stopped and stared at him. "All?"

Brian looked at Nick, then back at her with a nod. "All."

Grinning, she glanced back over her shoulder at Lisa, who smiled broadly and nodded. Kathryn smiled back.

Home sounded like an excellent idea.

 THE END 

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