



Amanda McIntyre

Shake
My Tree

A Men of Entice Novella

Shake My Tree
by Amanda McIntyre

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The Men of Entice:

Your desire is their pleasure

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Prologue

Nevada 1847

Angel was not intimidated by the seclusion of the bordello from the rest of the town. She'd been alone for as long as she could remember before traveling to Deadwater with a gentleman friend when she was barely out of her teens. Now, in her late twenties, she'd seen more in her life than she'd ever imagined but she wanted more. Someone that she could come home to and count on every night. Maybe loneliness was the cause of the restlessness clawing at her insides.

"Here's another load, Angel." Josie plopped another basket on the dry, broken ground. Not much grass grew around the stately clapboard farmhouse-turned bordello. Except the flowers that blossomed lush and full in the window boxes that Miss Lillian had made for the front of the house.

"Thanks Josie, is this the last of it?"

The young girl nodded. Josie was a good year or two younger than Angel. She offered her a bright smile, its effect showing more innocence on her face than the years of her experience at the bordello.

"That's it. I'll fix us something cold to drink."

"Sounds good." Angel looked up at the endless span of bright, blue autumn sky. She thought of Miss Lillian.

Two years had passed since she disappeared and shortly thereafter in what everyone assumed was a search Sheriff Sloan had also disappeared. It was for the best, perhaps, as

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the townsfolk all but believed that the burly Sheriff had a loose spur under his black hat.

Angel saw him once, speaking only briefly to him as he sat in a chair leaned against the front of the jailhouse. In his hand he studied the necklace Lillian had given him.

"You think she's out there somewhere, Sheriff?" Angel was cautious not to get too close. People said he'd sit for hours dangling Lillian's necklace, staring at the tiny ruby on the end.

"If she were dead, I'd know it." His gaze never wavered.

Prompted by a morbid curiosity to understand the mechanics of such a relationship between a man and a woman Angel pressed on. "How would you know, Sheriff? How could you possibly know what fate had in store for Miss Lilly?"

His gaze narrowed as though harnessing some sort of mystical strength. It was a moment before he turned his gaze to hers. The intensity of it caused Angel to take a step back.

"I know that I'm going to find her. No matter how long it takes, or how far I have to go. I will find her. It's like a piece of me is missing. I've got to find her." He blinked. "Does that make a lick of sense?"

Angel nodded just to make him feel better, but the truth of it was, she had trouble grasping the tenacity of such emotion. After all, her experience with men had been on the shallow end of relationships.

Less than two weeks later, Sheriff Sloan disappeared. It was assumed when he didn't return that he'd been overwhelmed by brutal Indians or perhaps had run into

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renegade bandits who often roamed the desert looking to terrorize and rob unsuspecting wagon trains.

Nate, Sloan's deputy, was sworn in as Sheriff and from then on he had his eye on Angel.

Their age difference did not however detour the young man's infatuation with Angel, or his repeated advances. He'd probably make some lucky woman a fine and loyal husband one day, but in Angel's mind and more so in her heart, she wanted a man who'd think about her, like Sheriff Jake thought of Lil.

"Sing me a song; you're the piano man" Angel quietly sang as she snapped the wrinkles out of the wet sheets before hanging them on the line.

In the time she'd known Lillian, she'd come to respect her independence. It seemed she was not afraid of anything. Angel had been running from her past for as long as she could remember.

Her wispy blonde hair blew freely around her face and she turned her face to the sky as a warm gust of autumn wind brushed back the strands for her.

She didn't know much about Miss Lillian's background, but it was the songs she sang at the piano that caused Angel's heart to take wing and dream.

What kind of man could write such lyrics about a woman? Certainly no man she'd ever met and none since her arrival in Deadwater. Sheriff Sloan was probably the closest, and it was clear his heart belonged to Lilly.

Angel remembered the night she asked Miss Lilly about her music.

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"Did you make up these words, Lil?" Angel asked dreamily as she rested her arms atop the piano. Most of the patrons had turned in for the evening and the parlor was empty, except for the two of them.

Lillian chuckled as she took a sip of stout Kentucky Bourbon the best Bert carried behind the bar.

Her shoulders shivered and she grimaced as the effect hit her system. "The composer's name is Billy Billy Joel." She sighed and gave Angel a sad smile.

"Billy." The name slipped off her tongue in a whispered sigh.

"Are you waiting for the Sheriff?" Angel glanced up from her daydream as Lillian stood, downing the remnants of bourbon in one hefty swallow. Angel's brow rose as she waited for Lillian's reaction.

"It would seem the good Sheriff has other affairs to attend to this evening. I left the dinner party ahead of schedule." She gave her a smile as she touched Angel's cheek. "Don't be up too late, busy day tomorrow."

It was the last time she spoke to Miss Lillian, the next morning she was gone without so much as a trace.

But the melodies of her music played over and over in Angels' mind, creating fascinating dreams that would surely create obstacles to the pleasure of her male guest, had any of them been awake enough to hear her.

Angel was on the front porch shelling peas Tuesday afternoon when Josie came flying up the road in the horse and buggy left to them by Sheriff Sloan. Dust from the wheels

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swirled in giant hazy, brownish-red clouds as the carriage approached the bordello.

Angel pushed up from the rocker, forgetting the bowl in her lap in haste as she peered at Josie in the driver's seat. She glanced at her feet; Tuesday's supper lay scattered across the wooden porch floor.

Her attention snapped back to the approaching girl as she heard her screaming her name. Angel considered for a moment whether to step inside and get Bert's rifle. But as she scanned the murky shadows playing off the mountain walls, she saw nothing that would indicate the girl was in danger.

Angel could hear the girl's excited yelps as she stepped down the front steps to meet her.

"You won't believe what's" Josie breathed hard, yanking back on the reins, causing the wagon to swerve precariously. She slapped her hand against her chest and licked her lips parched dry from the wind. "In townthere's a new teachersays he's a music teacher. He's got himself a piano!" Josie took a deep breath and turned her bright gaze to Angel. "He says he wants to give folks lessons."

Angel's heart soared, and as quickly plummeted into the dry, cracked ground. "Josie, you know how the townsfolk feel about us."

"He could come to the Sweet Magnolia," she responded quickly, "I could go get him."

The idea, though tempting, flitted briefly though in Angel's head. "That would definitely cause problems for his business."

Angel turned toward the porch realizing, to her chagrin that she'd now have to wash all the peas before supper.

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She bent down to clean up her mess.

"But would it hurt to ask? Maybe you could arrange something with our new Sheriff?"

Angel glanced up, the corner of her mouth lifting in a wry smile.

Josie grinned in return. "It's no secret that Sheriff Nate has had his eye on you for quite a spell. He might be willing to work out an arrangement."

She continued to gather the peas in the apron of her skirts and dumped them into the crockery bowl. Thoughts of her slender fingers skipping across the beautiful ivory and black keyboard danced merrily in her head.

She jumped when the front door slammed. In her mind Ermyma Brisbee, the towns' only true pianist then only for church, weddings, or funeralsslammed the lid down on her musical fantasy.

"Afternoon ladies." The man tipped his hat as his gaze scanned the horizon. "It's a beautiful autumn evening."

Josie glanced at Angel hiding a knowing smile beneath her hand.

The man was new to the Magnolia, but Angel was well versed in how the release of sexual tension could alter a man's outlook. She smiled with the knowledge that this man was fully relaxed. "It surely is, Mr. Brisbee, it surely is."

Chapter One

Present Day

Shado tore open the instant heat packets, stuffing them inside the thick rag wool gloves he wore. The fingertips were cut out so as to allow quick access to the gun he carried in the waistband of his jeans.

"How's it lookin' out there tonight?" His partner in the operation sat huddled, warm and toasty in the van parked half way down the block ready to roll at Shado's signal.

They at least had hot coffee.

Shado took a gulp of stale, cold coffee grimacing as he tossed it in the rusty oil barrel nearby. For a fleeting moment, the thought of a nice can fire passed through his head as quickly dissipating as he glanced at the stacks of Christmas Trees surrounding him.

"Was this your idea, Gleason?" he muttered into the microphone discreetly attached to the silver diamond stud he wore on his left earlobe. It wasn't his style, the earring, but Gleason thought it would add character to his cover.

"The Christmas tree lot? Hell, yeah that was my brilliant idea. Look you've got a straight shot to the valet parking of that joint."

Shado sneezed, wondering how long it would take for his toes to thaw from the cold.

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"What's the temp out here?" He smacked his hands together, grateful for the warmth provided by the packs as he reminded himself to bring some for his boots tomorrow night.

"They said its going for record cold tonight, could beat the old record of twelve below zero."

"Nice," Shado responded with no enthusiasm.

"Yeah, it makes it a good night to snuggle up w to with something warm, right? That's what we're counting on, anyway. Hoping our boy shows up and wants to visit one of his favorite ladies."

Shado raised his arms, over his head and stretched. "I'm going back in the shack for a few minutes and warm up. Let me know if you see anything."

"Crack a window in there, space heaters can be bitches sometimes."

He cast a tolerant gaze to the van as he tugged open the rickety wood door. Inside were a small kitchen stool, a red-hot space heater, and a crude wood ledge with a metal moneybox. The department paid the owner of the facility to have access to the lot after hours in order to watch the comings and goings of the hotel running a prestigious gentleman's escort service.

While they were keeping an eye on the service itself, the real concern was catching up with Espinozareported head of an East side drug ringand someone that Shado had an intimate score to settle with.

"You guys hear about that Billy Joel musical that opened tonight?"

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Shado pulled off his gloves and tried to stuff the heat packs in the sides of his work boots. He ignored the chatter about the musical, what to get the kids for Christmas, and who was taking whom to the annual Policeman's Christmas Party. He didn't care for Joel's music, he didn't have kids, nor had he attended the Christmas party in yearshell, he hadn't even thought about Christmas in years. Before that, who to take had never been a problem, since most women who found out what he did for a living smiled the next morning and left with out so much as a see you around.

Yeah, he was the guy who usually volunteered for night shift so the rookies could attend.

"It's supposed to be pretty good. My wife has been at me to take her. Maybe that's what I'll do for Christmas this year." Gleason's voice sounded thrilled that he'd solved his own dilemma.

"How about you, Jackson? What are your plans for Christmas?" Gleason asked his voice crackling through the transmitter.

Truth was Shado figured it was just another daylike any other.

"Probably the same thing I'm doing tonightsitting in this god-forsaken toothpick hut watching pimps pick up their products."

"Damn Jackson, you make the *Grinch* sound like *Mother Theresa*," his partner retorted.

Shado's brow arched. He was probably right. He wasn't the type of guy full of cheer and good will when it came to Christmas.

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"Yeah, well get off my ass, Gleason. Just because you go around from Thanksgiving to December like some overgrown elf" Shado responded as he rubbed the frost off the inside of the window pane view.

"Ouch, man that was cold," his voice emitted in the earpiece.

"More than you know, brother," Shado muttered, "how much longer do we have?"

"Next shift-Rooney, supposed to be here at midnight. You okay?"

"Yeah, listen, I'm going to step over here relieve myself. Keep an eye on things." He slipped on his gloves as he awaited Gleason's response.

Shado's pulse picked up in wake of unexpected silence. He'd anticipated one of Gleason's smartass comments. "Gleason, you copy?" He tapped his earring stud, his gaze squinting through the dark toward the van. A raucous laughter burst through the earpiece.

"What the hell" Shado yanked at his ear.

"Sorry, bro, we were taking bets at how many trees Mr. Grinch was going to take a whiz on."

"You're a sick, sorry bunch of bastards." Shado flipped the finger toward the van and turned on his heel toward the abandoned gas station bathroom. Rundown and ransacked years ago, the property now served locals as a place to peddle everything from velvet pictures of the Virgin Mary to shiny chrome hubcaps of questionable origin.

"Must be the traffic from the musical. It would be letting out about now. Stay alert."

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Gleason's voice crackled in the transmitter. Shado sighed with relief as he zipped up his jeans. Three days more of this and he better see some action or he'd go nuts. He stepped through the narrow path created by the angled stacks of pine-scented trees. Across the street from the lot stood the eleven-story monstrosity of *the Imperial Hotel*. Glorious in its day, it had gone through several owners and as many renovations.

She was a beauty though with her raised white marble columns and great circle drive where limos and vintage Cadillac's pulled in to pick up female clients.

Unfortunately, the Madam of the establishment kept a tight ship barely under the legal limitations.

In this operation however, she'd been extremely cooperative, mainly because the ruthless bastard in question was recently using the hotel for his buying and selling excursions. There'd also been a rash of unexplained disappearances of some of her girls. That too, attributed to her level of cooperation.

He'd used his team of thugs to heighten the intimidation of Madam Lee and her entourage of escorts. Still, in the two weeks they'd been on stake out Madam Lee had often sent out her girls with a plate of homemade cookies and a thermos filled with coffee.

"Keep sharp Jackson, Captain says this guy will use anyone and anything to get what he wants."

"You don't need to remind me, Jesse."

"Oh right, Shado, sorry man." His voice was laced with remorse.

"It's okay, man. What's the word on this guy lately?"

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"Captain says he's getting desperate reportedly has paid some of Madam Lee's girls to score new clients for him giving them a bit of the kickback. Word is he's bringing in fresh faces from the coast to deal for him. Problem is they seem to disappear right after the deal goes down."

Shado's teeth ground in frustration. This guy, if he ever got hold of him, was fish food. How many others would die at his hand before he was brought down?

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Sweet Magnolia 1847

The piano man agreed to come out to the house and give Angel lessons. She wasn't sure exactly what had transpired, but she suspected that it had something to do with Josie's lengthy meetings with Mr. Brisbee and perhaps a bit of bribery in order to keep his wife from raising Cain.

Angel felt immediate ease with Mr. Smith, well, Bart, as he instructed her to call him. His bright blue eyes sparkled with wisdom and kindness. He wore his silver gray mane to his shoulders, brushed back from his face. He was short in stature, but fit and dapper-looking in his polished suite and vest.

"You play as though you have carried around the music inside you," he remarked one day as they sat together at the piano.

Angel smiled; her greatest joy was when she sat at the keyboard. She played through the scales he'd taught her, first with one hand and then with both.

"Lillian said I had an ear for music, she taught me a few chords of some songs, but I would love to play with the heart of Lillian one day," Angel said as her fingertips stroked the worn ivory keys.

"She was right, but the music that beats inside each of us is different Angel. You must allow your own music to come through. Close your eyes feel the music and let it carry you to your heart's desire."

She glanced at her hands, moving effortlessly across the keys and though she played only simple scales, when she

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closed her eyes she imagined herself in a great concert hall, wearing a beautiful ivory gown with thousands in the audience waiting to hear her play.

"The music is in you, my dear. Set it free, dare to risk what you know, for what can be."

His voice tapped into her daydream and she smiled, allowing herself to fall more deeply into the trance of the song's melody.

Angel could see clearly the darkened stage; she could sense the anticipation around her. Her fingers tingled as though the very energy from her greatest desire was coursing through their tips, transporting her to a place she'd only dreamt of.

"Find your heart, Angel. Find your Billy," Bart's voice whispered soft against her ear.

In her mind's eye, darkness gave way to a single beam of light poised over a person dressed in white, seated at a black piano. The scales she'd been playing gave way in her mind to thunderous applause.

* * * *

As though hung over from a round of whiskey shots, Angel pulled her eyelids open and squinted through the darkness.

"Sing us the song"

She shifted her awareness of others around her solidifying in her mind. She peered through the dark and realized that she was seated in an enormous hall. Scores of crowded onlookers sat, while others stood in an arena-like room watching a man seated at a piano on a stage.

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"The man's a legend." A young woman seated beside her jumped to her feet, joining the crowd in singing along with the man. The girl glanced down and motioned to Angel.

"Come on, you can see much better if you stand. Cool outfit by the way. You get that over at Madonna's Vintage?"

Angel glanced down at the flimsy dress, it was the same floral one she wore when she went for her piano lesson with Barteven her best button-up boots were still dusty with Nevada clay.

"Where am I?" She tapped the woman on the shoulder.

"Hey, that's gutsy. How'd you get past security if you're that far gone?" She smiled. "Don't you remember that this is the best musical out right now, and every song is one of Billy's greatest hits?"

Light, brilliant and sure, flooded Angel's brain. Bart had told her to follow her heartbut how?

"a song tonight"

She turned her attention to the stage and her mouth opened, singing along with the song that had brought her to him. The last note permeated the air and Angel felt the magic in the air as the audience chanted wildly, "Billy, Billy."

Frightened and thrilled at once, she lifted her hands and clapped.

"Come on follow me. There's a faster way out and if we're lucky, we might get to see him."

The girl grabbed her hand and tugged her through the crowd. A myriad of smells assaulted Angel's nose as the girl dragged her through the human sea.

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"I don't know where I'm going." Angel's words were lost in the din of voices raised in demand for more. She strained against the girl's hand searching the strange faces around her for Bart.

The girl looked over her shoulder and pointed to a sign that glowed red like a candle in the dark. It was marked "Exit." At that moment, the crowd seemed to break lose and a wall of humanity severed their connection.

Swept through the throng, Angel kept her eye on the sign and when she was close enough she grabbed at the wide metal handle and shoved with all her might.

"Hey," a voice sounded from behind her, "that goes to the alley."

She turned to catch a young man's expression. "It's okay, I'm meeting Billy."

His brows arched over his dark eyes. He shrugged and lifted his arm over her shoulder pressing on the horizontal bar. The door magically opened.

"Thanks." She glanced back, but he was gone.

Before the door could latch Angel pushed forward, stumbling into a darkened street. She grabbed the railing to get her balance. Startled by the cold, she realized she had no protection against the bitter wind.

"You get your coat ripped off?" A tall man from a dark, sleek carriage approached her. Angel's heart thumped erratically. She'd only seen men like him working in the mines back home.

"Here, she'll never miss it." He opened the back of the carriage and pulled out a white furry bundle.

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"I can't no really" She shook her head as he placed it over her shoulders.

"You look a bit lost, you okay? Are you on some kind of medication or something?"

He studied her face with concern. His command of the English language was remarkable.

"II need to get back to the *Sweet Magnolia*," she stammered, her teeth chattering from the cold.

His brows pressed together. "You mean the Imperial? That used to be called the *Sweet Magnolia*, but that was a long time ago. You sure that's where you need to go?"

Angel chewed her lip with worry. What choice did she have? "Can you direct me to it, please?"

"Hey, you ready out there?" Another man appeared at the top of a short flight of steps.

He nodded, turning his gaze back to Angel. "Go right down here to the streetlight, take a right, and it's about a block, maybe two. There's a Christmas tree lot right across the street."

"Thank you." She snuggled inside the warmth of the coat.

"Good luck." He waved as he returned to the carriage. Angel's boots scuffed along the strange hard ground more solid than the hard clay of mud roads. She followed the path he'd given her and wound up on a virtually deserted street with the faint noise of the crowd leaving the building far behind her.

The wind blew crisp, whipping her hair in her eyes. Nothing looked remotely familiar. Great buildings made of stone and brick towered over each side of the hard-surface street that

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seemed to stretch for miles in either direction. Angel glanced at a large brown, odd-shaped carriage parked near the curb. She paused to study its wheels made of shiny metal and something hard and black that formed the wheel instead of wood spokes.

"Can I help you?"

The brusque voice startled her and she stepped back distancing herself from the man. He had a close-fitting cap that framed his face. His clothes resembled farmer's overalls, but heavier, and he wore boots, but they were like nothing she'd ever seen. His gaze was piercing, the color of his eyes ice-blue as a mountain lake.

"I'm looking for the *Magnolia*." She straightened as tall as her five foot six frame would allow. He was still a good head and shoulders taller.

"The Magoh, you're *not* from around here are you?" He rubbed his gloves together as if to stay warm.

Chapter Two

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Shado kept his focus on her face instead of the flimsy dress swirling around her legs in the breeze. She wore interesting attire, he'd give her that, but what can you expect from "coastal babes?"

"So, where are you from?" He glanced over his shoulder toward the van, hoping the guys had the tape rolling. Maybe he should turn so she'd face the camera. She was pretty for someone in her line of work, but not unlike most women he'd seen in escort services. Still, she had a fresh-scrubbed innocence and her hair, the color of harvest wheat, blew haphazard around her face. Shado glanced down. She wore a pair of black velvet button up shoes. Probably from a pricey little Internet boutique. *California Babes, so unpredictable.*

He stepped easily around her keeping his gaze locked to hers. Easy to do with eyes that sparkled with passionate energy, or maybe she was on something.

"Listen Mr., I need directions to the Magnolia or the Imperial, either one." She perched her fist to her hip and offered him a no-nonsense look. "It's a house of ill-repute."

Shado's brow rose. She was a gutsy broad. He pointed to the building rising high on the hill behind her. "That's the place. *The Imperial*, she's the oldest bordello west of the Mississippi. Youuh, meeting someone there?" Shado raised his

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voice, hoping to capture the conversation on tape. His attention drew back to her puzzled expression.

"I'm lost, not deaf. Why are you yelling? And no I'm not meeting anyone as if that is any of your concern, though I am hoping to get some answers from someone."

"She has a point, you don't need to yell." Shado heard his partner's voice in his earpiece.

He cleared his throat with a chuckle. "You some kind of undercover cop?"

Her gaze narrowed. "Thank you very much for your time. Excuse me."

"Tail her." His earpiece urged.

Shado's gaze stay glued to the gentle sway of her hips and the sassy way her dress flounced when she walked. Those boots were a sight, but maybe she was *into that kind* of fun.

"Uh, Merry Christmas, I hope you find your answers." He followed her a few steps, stopping at the curb as she crossed the street without looking, he noted.

He heard the roar of the car before it emerged like a demon, racing down the street at breakneck speed. Shado rushed at her, pummeling his body forward, hugging her from behind as he pressed them both to the ground. They rolled over and over, the cold concrete slapping his face as he fought to hang on to the squirming female. His head slammed against the curb and he squeezed her close as the car whizzed past. The heat from tires blew like dragon's breath against his face.

"Jackson" Gleason screamed in Shado's ear.

"I'm all right," he bellowed in response.

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"That's just wonderful, but what about my dress?" The disgruntled woman pushed from him, sitting up to check the flounce of her hemline.

"Are you hurt?" Hell he'd saved her life, thank you very much. Shado pulled her upright, brushing her off as he waited for some kind of appreciation.

"I'm fine, now if you'll kindly remove your hands, sir."

Shado stepped back, pulling his hands back to his sides. "Maybe I should go in with you just to make sure you're all right."

The woman glanced at him as though sizing him up. "I believe I'll be fine. What was that demon from hell, anyway?" She dusted off her white rabbit jacket with quick sweeps.

Shado frowned at the peculiar question. "Mustang'68 vintage," he replied, curious as to her response.

"Doesn't look like any Mustang I've ever seen," she muttered.

She glanced up at him and in the light of the hotel; he saw her face completely for the first time. Her eyes were large, almost striking for her delicate features and blue as a sunny day in winter. He swallowed hard.

"Are you going to let me by?"

"Oh." Shado stepped aside and she climbed the set of steps leading to the circular drive. She all but ignored him as she bent to touch the potted flowers flanking either side of the steps.

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She didn't look back, but continued across the drive, where the doorman greeted her tipping his hat as he opened the door.

He had to get in there. She was the perfect set-upstranger in town, ridiculously independent. In all probability she was Espinoza's target tonight. Who would look for a woman that no one in town knew? The woman had no clue what she was walking into.

"Watch my back, I'm going in." Shado walked down the sidewalk out of the doorman's sight, cut through the darkness of a hedgerow, and found what looked to be an old cellar door.

Unsure of what he'd find, he pulled open the door slowly trying not to make a sound. Below, a set of steps descended into black nothingness.

He tested one foot on the top step, proceeding cautiously as he immersed himself into the darkness. Shado tugged a penlight from his pocket, snapping on the potent beam. He made his way through the catacomb-like maze, ducking the mice that scurried in the floor joists above him.

Angry voices in the hallway above stopped him in his tracks. Listening carefully, he rounded a stack of discarded crates and found the steps leading up to the hallway. Gun drawn, he kept his back to the wall, checking behind him, while listening to the voices upstairs. There was blast of angry dialogue, and the hairs on Shado's neck raised, his instinct warning that chaos was about to follow.

Two gunshots rang out in rapid succession, followed by a woman's scream. Shado pushed open the door with his

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shoulder and rolled into the open hall on his belly. He held a steady aim poised on the man holding the strange woman's neck in the crook of his arm.

His gaze widened as he watched her teeth clamp down on the man's hairy forearm.

"Son of a Bitch," he growled shoving the gun against her temple.

"Come on. She's no one, let's go," his accomplice yelled from near the side entrance.

"Police! Freeze." Shado rose on his haunches, keeping his barrel pointed between the man's eyebrows. He swerved, firing, and Shado ducked hesitating to fire with the woman between them. The man's hateful glare held his just before he brought his gun down hard, clipping her on the temple. She crumpled like a rag doll to the floor.

"We have a civilian down. Suspects heading out the side door." An angry wound on her temple oozed a scarlet rivulet down her pale cheek. "Call an ambulance." He tucked his gun away, as he crept toward her body. Staying low, he glanced into the room and saw the feet of a man lying prone on the lush blue carpet. He peeked around the corner of the doorway staying low. When he was certain no one else was there, he turned his attention back to the strange woman.

"What is going on here?"

He knew Madam Lee's distinctive oriental accent. "We've got a little trouble, Madam Lee. Afraid you're going to have to answer some questions." Shado brushed a strand of hair from the unconscious woman's brow. Her interrogation would follow when she was well. He checked her pulse at the base of

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her neck. It was stronglike the rest of her, he noted. She appeared to be fairly athletic in build; perhaps it would aid her recovery.

Madam Lee peered over Shado's shoulder. "Is that Mr. Winegardner?" Her hand flew to her mouth in shock.

"You didn't hear anything about a buy going down tonight?"

She shook her head; great pools welled in her dark eyes.

"Where the heck are those guys?" Shado blew out a frustrated sigh. He scooped the woman into his arms as he strode toward the entrance. "You stay right there. The ambulance is on its way. Are you okay?" he called over his shoulder to Madam Lee.

"Yes, but who is that?"

* * * *

Shado held the woman in his lap, ignoring the concerned gaze of his partner. She was out cold.

"You know her name?" Gleason asked as he punched a set of numbers into his cell phone.

"Find Billy," she muttered softly.

Shado gently turned her face to his. "What? Tell me again who to find?" But she'd already slipped back into unconsciousness. Her face was soft, pale, and almost doll-like in delicate features. Not the type of woman who would turn tricks.

"We're going to need a forensics crew at the *Imperial*. We're taking one of the suspects to County. Yessir, hurt in the altercation." Gleason nodded.

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"Captain wants to see her when she's better."

Though he knew it was standard procedure, something about all of this bugged him, but he couldn't place his finger on what it was. Then it hit him. "She saw the murderer."

"So did you, so what?"

"No, I saw the accomplice; the other guy was down the hall. She can identify the murderer."

"Maybe she was in on it."

Shado frowned. "No, I think she was in the wrong place at the wrong time." Her head bumped gently against the window and Shado shifted her body so her head rested against his shoulder.

"You think we should lay her in the back seat?"

"Nah, just step on it, Frederickson." Shado stared down at her peaceful expression; something foreign breezed by his heart.

Angel awoke to a bright light and a rip-snorting headache. For the second time in one night, or so she guessed. "Where am I?" That seemed to be the question that had plagued her all evening.

"You're at Nevada County Hospital ma'am. You've taken quite a clip there."

Angel's gaze sharpened when the doctor swerved the small light from her eyes.

Behind the elderly man dressed in a white coat, stood the strange man off the street and another man beside him.

"Who are you?" she asked. Reaching up, her hand brushed over a gauze patch at her temple.

"That's what we wanted to ask you."

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The stranger who'd saved her from the Mustang smiled. It was an honest smile. He reminded her of Nate back home.

"I'm Angel."

The two men glanced at each other. "Okay Angel, we have a man who would like to ask you a few questions, if you're up to it."

The doctor looked at her and raised his brow.

Angel's stomach growled making her realize that she didn't know how long it had been since she last ate. "I'm sorry I haven't eaten since I can't remember when." She offered a weak smile.

"I'll go to the cafeteria and get you something; the Captain should be here soon."

Angel gave him a puzzled look. She'd once met a ship Captain once in New York.

"The Captain my boss?" The kind man's gaze narrowed.

"Is he like a Sheriff?"

The man's expression appeared deep in thought. "Yeah, I guess you could call him that. You allergic to anything?" He paused at the door.

"Allergic?" Angel responded with a frown.

"Uh, is there anything that doesn't agree with your system?"

"Oh that. Cigar smoke, those stringy things on pea pods, mice" Angel's gaze scanned their silent faces.

"I think we can probably find you something. My name is Shado. This is Sergeant Jesse Gleason."

The man named Jesse nodded his greeting.

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"Where's our suspect?" The brusque voice came from a wide-shouldered man in a navy coat. He wore no hat; no silver star graced his chest.

"How do I know you're a Sheriff?"

The man turned to Shado, who waved his greeting. "We carry our badge in our wallets."

Angel waited as the tall man pulled a small square of leather from inside his coat. He flashed her a quick glimpse of a silver oval.

"I'm hoping you can help me Sheriff, I don't know how to get home."

"Doc is going over a few more things with her, but he says until we know more, she'll need to come down to the station."

"Damn," Shado scolded. "Can't we keep her here?"

"Hospital policy." Gleason shrugged.

"She doesn't belong in a cell." Shado reasoned as he paced the Emergency entrance hallway."

"Not much choice, Jackson."

Shado's gaze snapped to Gleason. "Yes, there is, she'll stay with me."

"Oh hell yeah, like the Captain's going to go for that."

"I live like a mole; no one will know she's there."

Gleason raised his brow. "I can't argue that man. You're worse than my Aunt Lucy and we haven't seen her in twenty years."

"You told me she died."

"Yeah, and it took weeks to find her." Gleason grinned.

"Look, I work undercover, I'm gone all the time. What do you expect? It's perfect. We'll bring the books to my place."

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"I dunno, Shado, sounds like trouble."

The doctor came up the hall with Angel at his side. Even if it was an alias, it fit her perfectly. For a moment, Shado considered how risky his idea was, given the stirrings in his belly, but he only had to remind himself of why he was housing her to sober up his libido.

"You ready?" Shado reached out and took the small white paper bag from the doctor.

Angel plucked it from his hand. "Can you take me back to the hotel?"

Gleason gave Shado a side-glance. "Uh, ma'am. I'm afraid not." Shado cleared his throat. "You're coming home with me," he interjected quickly as he turned toward the door. The whoosh of the electronic doors echoed in the deserted hallway.

"I think I'd rather go back to the hotel, "Angel called after him.

Her once white fur coat was now marred with dirt and matted blood. She looked a bit like a musty, worn glamour cat. She stepped out into night air beside him; her chin thrust high in stubborn challenge.

"Gleason?" Shado held his gaze to hers. The woman was going to be one major challenge.

"Uh, ma'am, until we nab the guy who did this to you and shot that man back at the hotel, it just isn't a safe place for you to be."

An awkward moment passed as reality settled in. "Well, is there someplace else I can stay?"

Shado raised his brow and looked at his partner.

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Gleason heaved a weary sigh. 'It's either his place, or jail.'

"Jail? What did I do?"

"Ma'amits for your safety"

A shrill squeal of tires peeled though the silent parking lot and a black car sped past spraying bullets at the emergency entrance. Shado dropped to the ground pulling Angel with him and covering her with his body.

"Gleason? You okay?" Shado called out as the car sped away.

"I'm okay, the Doc's been hit in the arm. I'll stay here. You get her some place safe."

Chapter Three

* * * *

Angel had to wonder what kind of man would tackle a defenseless and homeless woman twice in one night. She huddled inside her damp fur coat stealing glances at the stern man behind the wheel. She knew that any moment she was going to waken with a three-day hangover and find herself the butt end of a prank of some of the boys she'd been drinking with at the saloon.

"Is that your real name?" His voice broke the silence of her planned escape by awakening from this horrid dream. She only wanted to find Billy, not get involved with a murder, and a lawman whose intensity radiated through his bulky clothing.

"It's Angel Marie Sutter, given to me by my mother at birth." She glanced out at the darkness, feeling dizzy as the buildings whizzed by. Suddenly the carriage came to a jolting halt and she was pitched forward, prevented from slamming into the front glass by the strength of Shado's arm blocking her.

"Do you have much experience driving this electric carriage?" She uttered breathlessly as she slumped back in to the soft leather-like seat.

"Do I what?"

He glared at her as he leaned over and tugged a wide strap from behind her head.

"You ought to have your seat belt on."

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He pulled the strap over her chest, his gaze flitting briefly to hers. There was a clicking sound and he settled back into his seat, drawing a similar strap across his body.

"I guess you forgot yours as well." She offered a brief smile. She heard his sigh just before the carriage once again lurched forward. "Where are you taking me?" Angel kept her gaze straight ahead. The speed of objects whirring past did nothing for her equilibrium. She closed her eyes, but that made it worse.

"To my place, it's not too much farther."

Thank god, just so you bring this thing up to a hitching post quickly.

No sooner had she thought the words, than he did just that, only there were no hitching rails, only a wide swathe of stone. Angel had never seen quite so much of it in her life.

She searched the door for a means to exit, startled when Shado appeared suddenly on the other side, opening it as he stood aside waiting for her to get out.

"It's a few flights up, but I think you can manage."

Angel had to manage. She was in a strange town, with a strange man. Not unlike how she'd come to live in Deadwater. Whatever magic had brought her there; she knew that it had to be the place where she would find Billy. Perhaps Shado would be able to help her find him.

He gently took her elbow and led her up the steps, keeping a slower pace at each landing. When at last they reached the top, he removed a ring of keys and searched for the one he placed in the lock. Opening the door, he ushered her inside.

* * * *

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Shado wasn't in the habit of bringing home strays, whether animal or human. He was a loner and he liked it that way.

"Go ahead and take your coat off, I think it's pretty trashed, to be honest. I'll see what I can find you to change into" He shut the entry door and headed toward his bedroom, leaving her to scout out the place for herself. "What size would you say you wear?" he called out a few moments later as he dug through his drawers. No sound came from the other room and he shrugged making a guess as he jerked free a pair of sweatpants and an old t-shirt.

"These will have to do" He stepped into the living room and found her on the couch still wrapped in her coat. She was sound asleep.

He stepped around the coffee table and lifted her feet, slipping her boots off required a bit more effort than he'd thought but it didn't wake her. He placed an afghan over her and stared at her expression as she slept. Not liking the unsettled flip-flop in his stomach, Shado dropped the clothes at the end of the couch, and turned out the light.

* * * *

"Angel?" Shado called as he dropped a stack of books by the front entrance. It had been three days since he'd brought her home and each day he discovered something new about her.

He could hear the music playing loud from the bathroom. He frowned as he knocked on the door, his senses keenly

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aware of the dangers of electricity near water. "Angel, are you in the"

A deep sounding thud and then a splash emitted from the other side of the door and envisioning the radio landing in the tub and electrocuting his only witness, Shado swung open the door just as Angel was straining to turn off the radio still plugged into the wall.

Without thought, he leapt forward, knocking her back into the tub and yanking the plug from the wall at the same time.

His heart palpitating fast, Shado closed his eyes and slid down the wall of the bathroom, his hand covering his mouth. He took a couple of deep breaths to regulate the beat of his heart again. It wasn't until he heard the squeak of flesh on the vinyl tub that he realized Angel was sitting in a bubble bath.

"I hope you don't mind that I took a suds bath."

Shado blinked at her non-complacent attitude and wondered where she got soap for bubbles.

"I figure if it's good enough for dishes, its good enough for me."

He had to give her that. Though at the present time, he was having a hard time getting past what lie beneath the mounds of bubbles.

"Did you see your new rug?"

Hell if he could yank his gaze from where it was glued, secretly waiting for gravity to be kind.

He blinked again. "What?" Had she gone shopping after he instructed her to stay inside?

"I found some torn up t-shirts in your room."

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"You found those?"

"They were piled in a corner; I thought they were refuse."

"Those were my best weight-lifting shirts." His libido waned with the realization that he was sitting on his favorite t-shirts.

"They were filled with holes; I thought they looked like rags."

Old friends, he thought wearily. Leave it to a woman not to understand the vintage caliber of a freshman college gray T. Bonnie Freeman was the first girl who ever wore that shirt

Her hand splashed on him as she reached over the side pointing to her creation.

"One of the girls back home taught me how to braid a rag rug. It will last forever, providing you take it out for a good beating now and again."

Yeah, but it sure as hell would look goofy on Bonnie now

Shado realized that he was too deep into his glory days. He glanced at the rug, his gaze following Angel's arm glistening wet with tiny bubbles. His gaze locked into her soft blue eyes and heat slammed into his gut. It sure as hell was time to leave.

He swallowed hard and ran his finger over the intricate braided workmanship. It was impressive, that she could create something of such homespun beauty from torn up shirts. He studied the rug in silence.

"Are you planning on staying while I dry off?"

Jostled from his reverie, which included flashbacks of Bonnie modeling his shirt gave way to a mind blowing visual of Angel modeling it for him wet.

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"I was just leaving." He pushed from the floor and reaching the door turned to caution her about having electrical devices near water.

A small gasp emitted from her throat as she stood in the tub trying to cover the intimate parts of her anatomy.

His mouth hung slack-jaw. "Watch those electrical devices."

She nodded and by the panic look in her eye they both knew there wasn't much time before gravity revealed more than he was ready for.

"I'll get you some clothes." Shado ducked into the hall flattening his back against the wall. He closed his eyes summoning his control and forced his erratic heart to a steady, placid thud.

He quickly gathered another old sweatshirt and a pair of running tights, wondering what he could possibly offer her in the underwear department.

The heat rose in his face as he kept his gaze averted and held out the clothes to her. It was a moment before his hand was relieved of the clothes and he stay turned toward the wall studying the hairline crack that started near the ceiling. "I'm sorry about under things; I only have boxers for now. Not sure you want those."

"Its okay I usually don't wear them anyway."

Her statement had the potency of an arrow to the brain. As much as he wanted to ask for an explanation he decided the answer might open an area he had no desire to enter or at least had no business entering.

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"I'll start some dinner," he called over his shoulder. The further he got from the bathroom, the easier it was for him to breathe.

* * * *

Angel dipped the spoon into the rich, beefy broth and raised it to her lips. "Just a touch more of this" She unscrewed the lid on the Cayenne spice tin and tapped in a generous portion. For the first few days, she'd eaten what he'd fixed, which amounted to scrambled eggs, a thing he called pizza, and cheese sandwiches fried in a skillet. While they were all palatable, Angel missed experimenting in the kitchen, so she decided to treat him to a home-cooked meal. Chili, made with beef chunks was a *Magnolia* specialty. She hoped it was something that Shado might like.

Scrounging through the icebox, she'd found some oranges too old to eat, but just right for scent and strung them with some thread she'd found in a drawer. They now hung in a neat little row across the front window, the citrus scent lending a fresh life to the drab confined living space.

The box he kept in the corner showed pictures of people celebrating Christmas and she thought how much fun the girls at the *Magnolia* had decorating for the holidays. She wondered about them, how they were, if they were still alive. But the present and all of its wonder, as well as caring for the kind stranger who'd taken her in and let her cook and clean for him had faded her memory of Deadwater. As she rummaged through the many boxes stacked in the corner of

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his living room, straightening as she went, she pondered if he was a Christian man who believed in Christmas.

Angel placed the wood spoon on the stove and checked her image in the wall mirror; as she bent down to neatly crease the edge of Shado's dinner napkin.

The tiny kitchen table, stuffed in one corner of the equally small kitchen had previously only served one. With the addition of his desk chair, it became a cozy eat-in table for two.

"Hi." He peeked around the door of the kitchen. His cheeks flushed from the cold. "I have your evening entertainment here." Shado lifted the books cradled under his arm.

Angel opened her mouth to speak, but he disappeared into the living room. She heard the thump of more police books as they hit the coffee table. The thought crossed her mind whether he noticed that he could see the coffee table now.

"I have dinner ready. Just a few minutes for the biscuits."

"Biscuits?" His voice was muffled as he tugged his sweatshirt over his head. She caught his headless form as he walked past the kitchen entry.

She stepped into the hall, surprised by her body's reaction to the sight of his rippling back muscles and the way his jean hung low on his narrow hips. Angel braced a hand to the doorframe to steady her nerves, blinking a couple of times to clear her thoughts.

He is not the reason you are here. Find Billy; find your heart was what Bart had said she must do.

"I don't have time." He leaned back. Looking down the hall, his gaze met with hers.

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"The radio said there was to be a storm, are you sure you should be out on a night like this?" Concern caused her to worry at her lip.

"Listen, around here, the snow doesn't stop anyone." He walked down the hall, detouring into the bathroom not shutting the door behind him.

Angel covered her eyes as she stood near the open door, looking up as she heard the now familiar rapid flush of what he called the toilet.

"Oh sorry, bad habit, one of many I'm afraid." Shado washed his hands and studied a day's growth of a shadowed beard. "Keep it or shave it?" He turned to her with urgency in his voice.

Angel blinked. "Keep it?"

He glanced back at the mirror, tipping his head from side to side. "Okay, for now."

The buzzer for the timer he'd shown her how to work gave the alert that the biscuits were done.

"That smells great Angel, really." He patted her shoulder as he stepped around her. "Save me some, I'll eat it later." He grabbed his coat and black knit stocking hat. "Have you seen my gloves?" He searched under a folded afghan, leaving it askew on the back of the chair.

Angels' mouth formed in a tight line. "In the basket on the top of the desk." She fought not to allow her disappointment creep into her voice.

"Ah, great thanks." He grabbed his gloves and met her as she entered the small living room. "It could be a late night."

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The buzzer on the stove brayed annoyingly. Angel took a steadying breath. "Well I guess this will keep until later." She turned toward the kitchen.

"Angel."

The softness in his tone touched her like a caress. She wasn't going to turn around and let him see the tears welling. She blinked. "Yes?"

"Everything you've done the oranges, the dinner, the rug I really, really appreciate it."

Angel nodded wishing he would leave. It wasn't as though she needed or wanted his approval, or his appreciation. She was a guest in his house, he allowed her to sleep on his couch.

"I can't I'm not ready damn," he muttered quietly.

She cleared her throat and wiped the tears from her cheeks as she squared her shoulders. "You don't have to explain anything, Shado. I was just trying to earn my keep. You have no obligations."

A brittle stretch of silence followed her statement. He kept his gaze to the floor.

"You'll be okay? Here, I mean?"

"Sure go on. Oh, wait." She ducked into the kitchen and snagged a dishtowel off the cabinet. With a grimace, she yanked the pan of steaming biscuits from the oven, gingerly grabbing two, she plopped them in the towel.

"Here." She scurried back to where he waited by the front door. "These will at least keep you warm on a night like tonight."

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He accepted the blue gingham towel, avoiding her gaze.
"Thanks, I'll see you later."

"I'll be here." She plastered a brave smile on her face. He was an odd man, handsome and rugged, completely a man in every way, yet so distant in his emotions.

He hesitated, gave her a quick nod, and bound down the stairs. The deep thud of the old beveled glass door in the foyer resounded in his wake.

Chapter Four

* * * *

Shado carefully placed the warm biscuits on the passenger seat as he started up his car. He stared at the cloth, his mind cluttered by the events of the day, the last being the telltale evidence of tears in Angel's eyes.

His gaze traveled through the soft curtain of snowflakes beginning to fall. Cranking on the radio, he listened to the latest weather report.

"The upper tiers of the state are under a winter storm warning while the southern half has been issued a winter storm watch. Chances for freezing rain and sleet are forecast for late tonight and into tomorrow."

He sighed, the thought of standing out in the Christmas tree lot another frigid night did not appeal to him. There'd been absolutely no word of Espinoza or any of his men since the shooting. Like cockroaches they had scurried into their holes. Eventually though one of them would surface.

His gaze was drawn upward to the window of his apartment. He hardly recognized it these days. She'd only been there a week and already he was asking her where his belongings were.

The hell of it was he kind of liked it. He couldn't deny that coming home after a long day to a sumptuous dinner and her prescribed "bubble baths" to relieve his stress was pretty nice.

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Nice however, did not equate to *long term*. Hadn't she already made it clear that she was in town with the express purpose of finding her ex-boyfriend, Billy?

Shado pressed the windshield wiper button and sat mesmerized watching the blades methodical sweep across the glass.

She'd gotten to him.

He closed his eyes, willing the transient thought to disappear. "This isn't good," he muttered as he checked his rearview mirror. His vision caught a movement in his apartment window and he leaned over the steering wheel, craning for a better look.

She'd raised the window and hung her torso over the windowsill, spreading her arms wide as though trying to catch snowflakes in her palm.

His mind whirled as he focused on her. With some things she was free and innocent as a child, and other times the look in her eyes signaled she was a woman who knew exactly what she wanted.

The thought caused a shiver to skitter up his spine.

He pushed open the car door and leaned on its edge. "Hey, get back inside. That's kind of dangerous." He had to chuckle at her sour expression as she gathered a handful of snow off the windowsill and tossed it at him.

The light fluffy flakes spit back in her face and she squealed with laughter.

God, he was an idiot. Standing there like some lovesick schoolboy. Yet he couldn't leave until he knew she was safely inside. "Get back inside, and don't forget to lock the door."

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"Afraid someone will steal me, Jackson?"

She didn't wait for an answer, but drew her body inside and struggled with the window doing just as he asked.

Shado climbed back into the car aware the snow was falling heavier.

"Yes," he muttered aloud, before he jerked the car in reverse.

* * * *

He sipped at a cup of lukewarm coffee, grimacing at its taste. Earlier he wolfed down the warm biscuits, savoring their homemade goodness. He glanced down at his belly, patting his hand against his abs. With all this home-cooking he guessed he'd put on a couple of pounds.

Part of his edge was staying in shape for his mental dexterity as much as his physical. It kept his thinking clear, his wits keen.

Shado squinted through the snow, now blustery and thick. He pretended to adjust his cap over his ears as he tapped into the earplug hidden beneath. "Doubt our pigeon is going to roost tonight. What do you think?" He waited for a response from the team situated in the unmarked van down the block.

"What's the matter, business slow?"

Shado poured the cold coffee out of his cup and tossed the Styrofoam container into a nearby bin. "Who the hell would buy a tree in weather like this?" He stomped his boots trying to bring back some feeling in his toes.

"Wait a minute we've got a live one." The microphone sputtered into silence.

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Shado's gaze squinted through the blinding snow and noted a figure approaching from across the street. He frowned, his mind hallucinating about the night Angel walked down this very street and into his sorry life.

"Thought you could use a cup of coffee. You look pretty cold out here. Wanna come over and join us, we're having a little holiday party."

Of all things that could happen, her proposition caught him off-guard. His mind, preoccupied with Angel wasn't prepared for the hospitality of a scantily clad stranger. He heard the faint titter of laughter in his earpiece.

"Uh, I was just closing. Maybe another time?" Shado swallowed hard as she handed him the cup.

"You're kind of cute. My friends and I, we watch you every day out here, moving these old trees around. You must be very strong to lift that much."

Not wanting to appear inhospitable about the coffee, yet unsure that the concoction might be laced with something he handed the cup back to her. "My doctor says caffeine's bad for you."

"Oh? Strong and healthy that's a very attractive combination." She grinned.

Shado cleared his throat and glanced over the woman's shoulder wondering how many of her friends were watching. They'd made the deal in secret with Madam Lee, but to the best of his knowledge the rest of her girls were not aware of any collaborative efforts.

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Though it appeared this woman was trying hard to form her own type of collaboration. Then again it could be an elaborate plan to distract him from something else.

Shado caught a movement from the corner of his eyes and glanced up in surprise. "Angel?" Her name popped out before he could stop it. Damn, how did she get there?

The well-endowed woman glanced over her shoulder giving Angel a once over appraisal.

"What are you doing here?" Shado's body went full alert. She was in grave danger if anyone, perhaps even this woman, recognized her.

"This your old lady?"

"I'm not that old."

The woman gave her a wry smile. "Right honey, none of us are."

"No, she's" He stopped mid-thought considering his situation, Angels' relationship to him even if it was only perceived-might be safer for everyone. "She's my sister."

"Sister?" both women replied in unison.

"I was just getting ready to close. How's Ma's cough?" Shado gave a convincing hack, sounding like he might produce his left lung.

The woman from the *Imperial* stared at him in horror. "You ought to get your brother out of the weather and honey if you need a steady job," she glanced at Shado again with a skeptical expression, "that pays well and you stay warm. Look me up."

Angel smiled at the woman's offer. "I guess some things haven't changed," she remarked.

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Angel turned her gaze to Shado. "You promised *mom* you'd be home if the weather turned bad." Her brows rose into the stocking hat she wore clamped down over her hair. Her golden hair spilled over the shoulders of the coat-two sizes-too large for her.

He went along with the ruse hoping it convinced the woman from across the street. He could straighten things out with a simple explanation when he got home. Now he was thankful that Espinoza hadn't ventured to the *Imperial* to see his favorite girl.

"Well honey, "the woman caressed Shado's cheek. You can play at my house anytime." She glanced at Angel as she adjusted the thin kimono robe she wore. "That is, if mama will let you."

Angel returned the woman's saccharin smile. Her gaze darted to his as she shoved a thermos into his gut. "I thought you might like some soup."

She turned on her heel before he had a chance to ask what the hell she was doing and was halfway down the block before his feet moved.

He locked the tiny shanty office, not that it mattered since it'd been broken into nightly anyway.

He slipped on a patch of ice as he started after her. The thermos flew from his hands landing in a snowdrift. He glanced up brushing the snow from his eyelashes as he saw her shadowed form turn the corner.

"You want a ride to your car?" The deep voice of his partner crackled through his earpiece.

"No thanks, I'll walk."

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"Okay, talk to you in the morning. Are you going to be all right?" A note of concern edged in his voice. "Hey, you probably don't want to drink from that thermos now, it's probably got a broken liner."

Shado dusted off his coverall and glanced toward the car, offering a clear gesture with his hand in response to his partners teasing. He heard the low-timbered laugh. "Watch your step."

He picked up his pace as he lumbered down the sidewalk. There was no doubt as to the double meaning in he partners warning.

* * * *

Angel huddled inside the jacket she'd found in Shado's closet. Though he hadn't said specifically where he was going she had a feeling she'd find him in the tree lot. A kind man who was fixing a broken tile in the foyer, gave her directions to the only tree lot in the neighborhood. Following his advice, she then found the performance hall, and knew she was on the right track. What she hadn't anticipated was finding him with another woman, or for the surprising affect that it would have on her.

The strange woman was beautiful in a polished, sophisticated way and there was no mistaking that she was interested in him. Angel wondered to what length Shado would go to get the information he needed to solve this case. Besides, it wasn't as though she hadn't also taken advantage of her present situation. Sure, Billy's words tickled her heartstrings, but Shado as he trudged sleepily from his bed to

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the bathroom each morning touched something much deeper inside.

She walked past his car on the way to see him. Now she waited, hoping he'd be closing up the lot as he'd said he would. Another minute or two, and she would assume that he'd taken the woman up on her offer.

Her gaze snapped up when she heard the thud of heavy boots. Around the corner came the silhouette of a large man, broad shouldered, his gait determined.

"I thought I told you to stay put."

Angel's dander escalated. This was the thanks she got for walking four blocks in this godforsaken storm just to bring him soup?

"Am I being detained as a prisoner?"

He stood toe-to-toe with her, fumbling for the keys in his pocket.

"As long as those guys are out on the street, your life is in danger."

She bit her lip at the brusque tone in his voice. "Listen Mr. I can look out for myself. You forget where I come from."

"Yeah, and that's another topic I want to discuss with you. Get in the car; you've got to be freezing."

Angel climbed begrudgingly into the car. She'd yet to understand the purpose of what he called a seat belt. Shifting to her side she managed to pull the tormenting strap far enough in front of her, but was having trouble finding the contraption to insert the prong into. Angel laughed, part of her frustrated that she'd never had *that* problem before.

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There was no running from the fact that he bothered her in ways that she'd not expected.

"What?" He turned his gaze to hers as he slammed the driver's door. He started the car, toying for a moment with the dials before re-focusing on her.

The smile on her face dissipated. "I can't get this where it's supposed to go." She saw a flicker of irritation in his gaze. At that instant, she was more than an imposition in his life she sensed it.

Without a word he reached out and took the buckle sliding it easily into the clasp at her hip. The strap hung woefully loose curled lifeless in her lap.

"You pulled out too much give the strap a tug"

Angel turned her focus over her right shoulder and tugged at the strap with no success. "It's not" She turned to speak and her gaze slammed into his, not more than a breath from her face.

In her profession, she'd grown accustomed to the many expressions of a man's face pleasure, fear, loneliness, and confusion. All of those and a few others swam in the intensity of Shado's deep blue gaze.

Her breath caught and it was all she could do not to give into her baser instincts.

"Here."

His warm breath, smelling slightly of coffee brushed over her. She closed her eyes as she felt the slight tug at her shoulder and then the strap tightened as if by magic.

"There, that should do it."

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Angel opened her eyes and he was right where she'd left him thirty seconds before.

"When I ask you to do something like to stay inside, please listen. Next time, it could mean your life."

He hesitated before shifting back into his seat.

Angel stared straight ahead, unable to speak. She wondered what heartache this man had suffered in his life that kept his emotions so tightly wrapped. He reminded her of the drifters that passed through Deadwater. Not showing their hand, keeping to themselves, and for the most part putting the fear of God into the average man. She'd never kept company with one, but she'd talked to those who had. Passionate in their lovemaking, there were no frills, no sweet words simply pure, silent energy.

A subtle throbbing emerged low in Angels belly as she remembered what one of the girls had said after a drifters visit. "To harness that kind of potent energy, you want to be sure that you're ready to hang on for a bronco bustin' ride."

* * * *

She brushed her teeth, gently replacing her bright-colored pink toothbrush in the glass next to his black one. He'd been considerate to pick up a few toiletry items for her and let her borrow some of his clothes.

Angel gazed at her reflection in the mirror. The dryness of the Nevada desert hadn't helped her complexion, but now she didn't have the milk baths and lavender oils to keep her skin moist and young looking.

There was a soft tap on the bathroom door.

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"Almost done." She picked up her hairbrush and carried it with her. At least she could still do her nightly seventy-five brushes before bed. She pulled open the door and met Shado's somewhat perturbed gaze.

"Sorry, didn't mean to take so long." She adjusted her t-shirt hoping to cover her nipples tightening at the sight of him in nothing but his soft gray sweatpants.

"Not a problem."

He shrugged as he squeezed past her. Angel wasn't sure which was worse his anger or his apathy.

Hours later she lay awake, staring at the peach-colored streetlight outside the living room window. She wondered what magic power had brought her here and why it seemed she was detained from her purpose of finding Billy. Somehow she'd have to find a way to get in touch with him. Perhaps she could find a music teacher to help her or maybe she would locate what Shado called a radio station. They played music; maybe they would know how to find Billy. She snuggled deeper under the covers watching the snow fall in giant flakes outside the window.

A movement out of the corner of her eye caused her body to stiffen. Near the front door a shadowy figure was rifling through the coats. Quietly she reached over, flipped on the light, and caught Shado's startled expression.

"I thought you were asleep."

He stood there in his boxer briefs as though he was a stranger in his own home.

"Did you lose something?" She scooted up, keeping the covers wrapped tight under her arms. Why she should feel

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modest around him puzzled her. Seeing naked men had once been such a normal thing, now that time seemed a distant memory and the sight of Shado caused an unexplained rush to her system.

"It was a recording device. It must have slipped out of my pocket."

"Sort of like the one laying on top of your TV box?" She nodded toward the silent cube.

His gaze followed hers. "That's it. I just wanted to be sure I didn't drop it outside."

She had the strong sense there was something more on his mind.'

"Hey, sorry to disturb you. Good night."

Mustering her courage, Angel blurted out, "You want some warm milk?"

Chapter Five

* * * *

The question stopped Shado in his tracks. Every pore in his body reminded him that it was unwise to get intimately involved with a suspect or victim. He wasn't even sure at this stage what Angel was, other than a challenge to every sense he possessed, and some that he hadn't sensed in a long time. It was better for him and for her, if the reason she was there remained very clear.

"Sure, that would give us a chance to go through some of these photos, maybe you could see if you can identify the first man to leave the room that night." He turned in time to catch her flipping back the cover, quickly tugging down her t-shirt over her bare midriff.

Thoughts of how warm and soft her skin probably was paraded in his mind. "I'll go get some pants on." He turned on his heel. "You want a pair too?" He checked over his shoulder assessing the sexy length of legs emerging from her boxer shorts. An uncomfortable tingling stirred in his.

"If it's not too much of a problem, it's a little chilly." She padded to the kitchen looking more at home within those four yellow walls than he did. *Yellow walls? Were his walls yellow?*

He blinked as he followed her movement around the kitchen. Somewhere he was losing control "I'll just go get

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those then. It was absurd; he realized that he was repeating himself.

Shado took a little more time digging through his clothes aware in his search how many drab gray clothes he owned. "Is gray okay?" he called out at the top of his lungs. A stern pounding sounded on the bedroom wall from his neighbor. "Yeah, like I haven't had to listen to your Friday night escapades, buddy," he muttered as he closed the drawer with his hip.

"That's fine," came her reply from a distance. That too, received the wall pounding in response.

"Yeah, yeah" Shado muttered thinking of the nights he'd had to cover his head with a pillow to block out the screams of passion lasting until the wee hours of the morning beyond his bedroom wall. Hell, maybe I'm jealous, thought Shado as he reached to flip off the switch. The thought occurred to him that Angel's voice sounded farther away than just the kitchen.

He sauntered down the hallway that spilled out into the living room and his heart stopped at the sight of her heart-shaped backside as she leaned over the windowsill. Her face upturned, she was catching snowflakes on her tongue.

"Will you cut that out?" He tossed the pants on the hide-a-bed and walked up behind her clamping his arms firmly around her waist.

"I've not seen snow like this for so long. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

He hadn't anticipated the sudden jolt to his system. Forget the snow; his mind zeroed in on how well her firm little butt fit like a glove against him.

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"Come back in here. You are bound and determined to catch something and then you'll get sick and I'll have to"

She drew back inside, turning in his arms as she did. His arms stay locked around her.

Angel held his gaze as she brushed the remnants of snow from her hair.

"Then you'd have to take care of me?"

That was no meager question. That was a direct challenge. The heat from their bodies pressed firm against one another formed a tight knot in his groin.

"This can't happen."

"Can't, or won't?" She responded flicking a snowflake from his short, cropped hair.

Shado closed his eyes knowing he should let go. Remove his armsdistance himself from her sweet scent and comforting warmth. God help himhe knew what he should do, but he couldn't.

Unsure of the consequences he held her gaze as he lowered his face to hers. His mouth hesitated as he searched her beautiful eyes waitinghopingfor some sign of retreat.

He saw only challenge.

Shado captured her mouth, her moan urging him to pull her close.

Angel's hands soft and gentle touched his face, tentative in their exploration.

He needed to taste, purge himself of his fantasies and so he drew the kiss deeper, longer, until there was no doubt of what they both wanted.

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He lifted her shirt over her head, breathing deep from the prolonged kiss. "I can't give you forever, Angel." He stepped back and held her face in his palms. God, she had to understand he hadn't felt anything like this in years, not since his brother was killed. Shado dropped his gaze to the floor, his guilt about Danny rushing his senses.

"I'm a big girl; despite the fact that you think I'm such a hayseed."

Her fingers lifted his chin and he studied her soft smile.

"I know what I'm doing." She took a step toward him, the tips of her breasts brushing against his bare flesh.

"No, I don't think you do, Angel." His breathing was irregular, heavy in his lungs as he fought not to throw her on the bed and ravish her.

"You're just like the drifters," she whispered as she traced a fingertip over his brow.

Every movement of her body weakened his resolve.

Shado didn't understand what she was talking about. And frankly, he didn't care. Need clawed at him.

"No promises." Shado searched her gaze. He held himself back, needing her to understand he couldn't get emotionally involved.

"No promises," she whispered, her voice clouded with desire. She ended with a feather-light kiss to the corner of his mouth.

"Jesus," he breathed as he tugged her face to his, crushing his mouth to hers. Shado feasted on her lips exuberant in accepting her offer. She was right; she was a big girl and could think for herself. He tore himself from her mouth and

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dropped to his knees, sliding his hands around her bare waist, sensing her flesh shiver beneath his palms.

Her hands lifted smoothing over his temples with a loving touch, caressing the back of his neck as she drew him near.

His lips pressed against the warmth of her stomach, enjoying the sweet scent of her flesh. He cupped her breast, brushing his thumb over her supple pink nub, pleased at her quiet sigh. Drawing the tip between his lips, he teased with his teeth and tongue, watching her expression melt into desire, submitting to his pleasure. She'd no idea of the animal she'd released.

Shado squeezed her firm butt, pulling her against him, wanting to lose himself in her sighs. Her flesh, warm and sweet, moved sensuously in response to his kisses, fueling the fire licking at his gut until his body trembled for release.

She stepped away from his grasp, drawing him toward the bed. With kisses that threatened to undo him she slid her warm hands inside his waistband and pushed his sweatpants to his knees.

"You're tense. Are you sure about this?" She sat on the edge of the bed looking up at him.

Expert hands glided over the hard plane of his chest, teasing his nipples until they stood erect. Shado steadied his hands on her shoulders to keep his knees from buckling. Heat throbbed between his legs, pulsing deep in his groin, aching for deliverance. "I haven't done this in aawhile" His heavy breathing stifled his ability to run his words in a complete thought.

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"Angel" Her sweet mouth closed over his hot member and his breath caught as he turned his face to the ceiling. "Oh my god ... wait."

Shado swallowed deep as he held her face in his hands. He wanted nothing more than to blindly drive himself and hear her scream out his name.

"We're not going to be able to finish this the way I'd like." He turned her face up leaning over to kiss her. "Wait here."

He made his way to the bathroom clumsily holding on to his control.

The harsh glare of the bathroom light caused him to squint as he yanked open the medicine cabinet. His eyes and fingers searched quickly for a box of condoms he hoped was not empty. Shado's teeth ground in frustration as he pushed aside every bottle, every old band-aid box, and a palette of old razor heads.

"Are you okay?"

Her voice issued from the doorway. Lord, how could he tell her he wasn't prepared?

"I don't have any protection." He pressed his palms to the sink. Of course he wouldn't, there hadn't been anyone in his apartment in eons. "I'm really sorry." She didn't have a clue just how much.

"What are you worried about?" She reached for his hand and drew it around her waist as she walked into his embrace.

Shado's brow arched. Was she that unaware of the diseases, the problems that could arise, not to mention the possibility of children?

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"I was told I could never have children." She lowered her gaze as though ashamed.

"Angel, I'm sorry, but its more than that" His desire struggled with reason.

She kissed him soft and slow, easing his concern, calming the frantic beat of his heart.

"You're an amazing woman. I've never met anyone like you. You're so trusting and so willing to give. Where did you come from, Angel?" He held her hand to her cheek.

"Does it matter as much right now where I come from, or the fact that I'm herethat we're here together?"

She sampled his lips, and he sensed her body growing urgent as his. He knew what he was thinking wasn't wise.

"You need me Shado. If only for tonight. Let me in" She tucked her hand in his and held his gaze as she led him back to the living room.

With a playful smile, she turned and fell with him onto the bed, holding him briefly in a simple embrace.

She tucked her hand between their bodies sliding her palm the length of him. Her sigh was soft and approving.

"Is this sturdy?"

"I'd like to think it still is," he replied kissing the soft spot beneath her jaw.

"I meant the bed." She grinned against his shoulder.

"Oh." He nibbled his way along her shoulder, trailing kisses to the valley between her succulent breasts. His heart soared when she lifted her hands above her head in complete abandon.

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"This isn't wise, Angel," he breathed against her skin, his body responding to her pleasure with every heartbeat.

"What's not wise is to not allow yourself to feel, Shado."

"*That* I'm joyfully doing," he murmured against her skin.

She lifted his face to hers.

"You know what I mean."

Shado knew all right. And he knew that it was going to take a freight train to stop him now.

"Are you sure about this?" His fingers hooked into the waistband of her boxer shorts, making that *his* boxer shorts. Even that turned him on.

She lifted her hips.

Her soft, musky scent intoxicated his senses as he drew the cotton barrier down her long legs. Legs he'd dreamt of being clamped tight around his waist at least a dozen times in the last week.

He took his time, offering gentle kisses of appreciation, marking every curve with his mouth. Her hips rose, meeting his lips as he sampled her velvet heat.

"You're my angel," he whispered as he leaned on his elbow, holding her head in the crook of his arm

He watched her lids flutter as he slid his finger into her moist clit, stroking slow and deliberate, wanting to see her as he brought her to the edge. She sighed, fighting to hold his gaze in her ecstasy, her hips gently rising to meet his hand. Shado lowered his mouth to her breast, knowing as she pressed harder against him that she rode on the edge of oblivion, spurred on by what he alone was doing to her.

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Angel's hands sought his face, holding his gaze to hers as she rocked against his sensual caress. A soft gasp emitted from her mouth and no amount of restraint could keep his mouth from claiming that pleasure. He kissed her with such ferocity that it took him a moment to realize that she'd clamped her legs around his waist, inviting him without a word.

He slid into her fully, enjoying the carnal union of their bodies, realizing with a degree of guilt, that his heart was not completely out of the picture. Sure he'd told her no promises and he meant it then but he couldn't deny the power of what threatened to consume him.

God he was insane, but all he wanted was to make her forget this Billy character and make damn sure that the only bed she came back to was his.

"Look at me, Angel," he whispered. He wanted her to remember this moment as he would. With each thrust there were sweet words that crept into his mind words that could promise tenderness, love, and commitment. Shado frowned pushing them aside, concentrating on the fever setting his flesh on fire, his body searching for release to the intensity building inside him.

Angel's unbridled scream of pleasure took him by surprise as an explosion of light penetrated every pore of his body. It blinded him like a flash fire in his brain and he had to bite his lip hard to prevent screaming out.

He braced his elbows on the mattress.

"Like riding a horse, you never forget," she whispered reaching up to kiss his chin.

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"That was a helluva lot different than any horse I've ridden." A residual shudder rippled through Shado's body and he realized she supported the brunt of his weight. He quickly rolled off and lay on his back staring at the ceiling. *Sweet god in heaven what had he done?*

The awkward silence that followed stifled his ability to speak. He hadn't lied and he wasn't about to give her false hope now, just because he'd experienced the most mind-blowing sex he'd ever had. And he didn't want her to make promises she couldn't keep. This was a momentary thing they were both in different places in their lives. They needed to stay there.

"We left the window open."

Her soft, husky voice near his shoulder should have jarred him from his reverie, but his body was alive for the first time in many months. A stiff northern breeze sent shivers cascading over his naked flesh, awakening him from the sensual fog in his brain.

Shado crawled from the bed, his body instantly aware of the lack of warmth in lying next to her. He brushed away a small drift that had pushed through the open window, glancing outside at the covered street below. Not another soul was awake at this hour save maybe his neighbor. Shado raised his brow and grinned.

"Did you want to go through those police photos?"

Startled at the suggestion he turned to find her propped in bed, the sheets tucked up around her. That was not the reaction he'd anticipated, though it was certainly the one he'd led her to count on.

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by Amanda McIntyre

"How about we look at them tomorrow?" he suggested as he searched the floor for his pants.

She shrugged. "Are you coming back to bed then?"

"Uh" He pulled up his pants and averted his gaze from her alluring crystal blue eyes. "Look, I can't explain what just happened here."

"It's the course of nature, Shado. Old as time itself." She grinned.

He cleared his throat. "You know what I mean. I can't offer you a reason why I let it go that far."

"Did I ask you for one?"

His gaze met hers, steady as radar focused on him. "No, you didn't." He glanced away not wanting to make more of a mess of things than he'd already done. "I'll go back to my room I snore terribly." Yeah, it was lame and along with that came a battery of other emotions bombarding his gut, most prevalent, guilt. He stopped glancing over his shoulder. She hadn't moved a muscle. "You need anything?"

"Hum? Nope, I'm fine." She reached up and turned out the light. The room went pitch black save the reflection of the sodium streetlights shining amber on the white snow.

He stood transfixed a moment longer reasoning that his shift at the tree lot would begin in a few hours. It would be good for them to be apart to clear their heads.

* * * *

Angel barely slept, her memories too vivid, her body still sore and sensitive from intense lovemaking. Shortly after

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dawn, she chose to straighten the bed, bathe, and get dressed.

Sipping a cup of strong tea, she sat curled up in his recliner near the front window. On her lap lay the third police album she'd leafed through.

His alarm had gone off, but she let him sleep. At ten minutes until noon the phone rang. Angel placed her hand on the receiver and frowned wondering if she should wake him. Its shrill ring startled her and she refocused on the receiver. With a cautious tap of the "talk" button she held the phone at arm's length and spoke clear and loud.

"Hello?"

A voice emitted from the white receiver.

"Yes?" Angel raised her voice.

"Is this Jackson's number?"

"Mr. Jackson is still asleep, may I help you?"

"What the hell"

"Here let me take that."

His soft morning voice spoke near her ear as he reached over her shoulder, gently plucking the receiver from her hand.

"Jackson," he spoke bluntly into the phone.

The unexpected emotions of his presence caught Angel by surprise. She took a step away, toying with the teabag in her cup.

She sensed his gaze even before she glanced up to meet it. A flicker of warmth passed through his eyes and in an instant returned to their steel blue.

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Her days at the Magnolia had made her privy to many types of men, but she'd never met a man like Shado.

Part of her wanted to challenge his aloof attitude while the other half wanted to wrap him forever in the security of her arms.

"Got it. Right. Call if you need anything." He held out the phone to her view. "You click talk to speak and then click it again to disconnect.

"Disconnect?" Her brow furrowed.

"End the speaking."

She was more confused than ever. "But didn't you just say that's the button to use to speak?"

"Yeah. Listen, I need some coffee."

He placed the phone in its base and plodded into the kitchen.

Angel's gaze held to the gentle bunching of the muscles in his back as he walked away. Her fingers tingled.

"Looks like we're holed up here for a while," he called from the confines of the kitchen.

Her heart raced with the thought of being alone with him all day. Particularly in light of what transpired between them in the early morning hours. Still he hadn't mentioned the event at all.

"Oh?" She glanced over her shoulder at the snow coming down in a heavy white curtain. Angel shivered.

"Need a warm-up?" His low-timbered voice near her shoulder caused her to drop her cup. They both bent at once to pick up the shards.

"I'm sorry"

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"No, I'm" Shado heaved a large sigh and took both of her hands in his. "Look at me."

Angel did as he requested, barely able to swallow past the desire to kiss him again.

"What happened" He glanced away and she noted the tick in his jaw muscle as though he was holding inside what he really wanted to say.

Please don't say it was a mistake.

"I don't regret last night, Angel. Not one second. Do you?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Good." His grin was flat, matter-of-fact, relieved. He stood drawing her upright.

"We have the day together. We feel it's best if you aren't out on the street."

"You mean *you* don't want me out on the street, right?" She narrowed her gaze.

He ignored her question. "Chief has assigned me to keep watch over you for the next couple of days. There's rumor on the street that Espinoza is up to something."

"My keeper? I'm perfectly fine alone."

Shado rubbed his hand over his chest as he appeared to contemplate his thoughts.

"The word is that he's looking for you."

She offered a dry laugh. "That gunfire at the hospital was no rumor."

He raised his brows, nodding in agreement. "Well, the Chief has stepped up his search and we really need to get cracking on these books to find out what he looks like."

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"I think I could use that warm up now," she said as she stepped around him. She shuddered at the thought of seeing a man shot down in cold blood. Odd that she'd had to travel through time to experience it.

She grabbed another cup from the cupboard and poured a cup of hot water, dropping a fresh teabag in the cup, its tangy lemon fragrance tickling her nose.

"Are you up to looking at more books?"

His voice issued from the doorway. Did he have any idea what the sight of his half-naked body did to her? Was he immune to human emotion? Certainly it didn't seem that way a few hours ago. A small smile played on her lips, wondering how it might affect him, if she paraded around without a shirt.

"I don't mind, actually I've been through three of them. There are an awful lot of men who don't abide the law in this town."

"Yeah, I'm afraid so." He scratched his head as he glanced at her. "Well, then I'll go grab a shower and dress and we can get started on the rest."

"You don't want breakfast?"

"I had a cup of coffee, I'm good to go."

As much as she disagreed with his choices she nodded and he disappeared down the hall.

Angel stepped into the hall and heard the metal on metal sound of the shower curtain rings sliding across the pole. The faucet handles creaked as he turned on the water. What an amazing miracle it was to have running water right in your home and this far up into the air to boot.

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She toyed with the idea of surprising him in his morning shower. Her mind wandered to the steamy hot water sluicing over his hard body.

Angel took a quick sip of tea, followed by a deep breath, realizing that she was going to have to keep what happened in perspective.

A small photo amidst the pile of shoes near the front door caught her eye. She glanced toward the bathroom door as she stooped to pluck it from where it was wedged along the floorboard. Was this what he was looking for last night?

She studied the picture, wiping the corner of a smear of mud. It was the picture of a beautiful blonde-haired woman, and snuggled close to her was a small boy. His hair, the same blonde as his mother's, but his eyes unmistakably steely blue.

The water shut off and Angel returned the photo where she'd found it and scurried to the recliner.

"Did you check for the morning paper?" He scrubbed a hand towel over his head and, thankfully, a larger one secured at his waist, though it hung low leaving little to her imagination.

"I can check." She welcomed the diversion and had to wonder how the heck she was going to deal with her emotions for the entire day.

The one thing she remembered to do was check through the 'peephole' before opening the door. He'd cautioned her that this was not the safest of neighborhoods.

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She perched on her tiptoes and closed one eye as she peered through the viewer. It was not unlike taking proper aim with a Colt 45.

Her breath caught and she reached out, waving her hand to motion him closer and grabbed at the first thing she touched.

"What the"

She turned to meet his startled expression, as he held only the hand towel in the air.

"Is this foreplay where you come from?"

"There's a man outside the door," she whispered, her gaze having a difficult time staying above his neck.

He held out his hand wiggling his fingers, wrapping the towel around his waist. "Get down the hall, away from the door."

Shado lifted his coat and pulled a small caliber pistol from a holster from underneath.

Angel's insides quaked as she pressed her back against the wall. She shook her head, silently willing him not to do what her gut told her he was about to.

In the blink of an eye, Shado jerked open the door, dropped to one knee and poised ready to shoot.

One, then two moments ticked by with no sound. Angel peeped open one eye.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Reading your paper. Man, do you always answer the door half-naked with a gun?"

Shado stood, once again having to adjust the towel to cover him properly.

Shake My Tree
by Amanda McIntyre

"That's just a bit more than I care to see of you in the morning, Jackson."

A large man dressed in a heavy parka, wearing a stocking hat that covered half his face stepped in the apartment and closed the door behind him.

"Chief sent me over with more books; figured you two needed more to do. He has a bee in his butt on this one all of a sudden." He looked over his broad shoulder and caught Angel's stupefied gaze.

"You on the other hand are something that I don't mind seeing first thing. How you doin,' Angel?" He turned and stuck out his hand. "Oh, sorry, it's me Jesse, ma'am. We met at the hospital."

Angel blinked twice, her memory recalling the nice man who'd been with Shado that night.

"How is the doctor?"

Jesse smiled and glanced at Shado. "He's doin' fine, I'll tell him you asked about him."

She took his hand. "I knew a Jesse once," she responded shaking his hand.

He raised his brow as he turned back to Shado. "Got the books on the snowmobile."

"No way! He let you take it out?"

Like a kid Shado sprinted to the front window and looked below to the street. "Damn, I've been waiting for a good snow to take that baby out. How's she run?" His eyes were bright with excitement when he looked back at his friend.

"Go ahead, take her for a spin. I can stay here with Angel," Jesse offered while removing his gloves.

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Shado glanced from Jesse to Angel and she could see the gears turning. "Nah, maybe another time, we need to get on these books."

Jesse shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He turned to Angel. "Don't feed him after midnight, he turns into a gremlin." Jesse tugged on his gloves. "I'll go get those books."

She waited until she heard Jesse's footsteps tramping down the stairs. "You could have gone."

Shado shrugged, tightening the towel at his waist. He said nothing as he flipped the safety clip on his gun and returned it to his holster.

"We have a lot to do today."

Angel nodded, but wondered if the man allowed any joy into his life. "I'm going to get dressed." He strode past her, heading to his room.

Angel shivered feeling a cold draft and quietly eased the door shut to a small crack. Remembering the small mixing bowl in the kitchen she smiled. Maybe she could show him how much fun snow could be.

Chapter Six

* * * *

Shado returned to the kitchen freshly shaven, sporting his favorite sweatshirt and jeans, and found Angel sitting at the table with a bowlful of snow. "Where did you get that?" He glanced toward the door. A new stack of books waited next to the others.

"Jesse brought it up for me. Here try this." She held out a spoon to him and waited.

"You don't want to know where this has been," he stated as he eased into the chair across from her. His mouth curled into a grimace as he accepted the spoon from her.

"From the sky?" Angel looked at him perplexed.

"Yeah, well that's another story." He chuckled.

"Jess assured me that it was from a fresh drift."

"Ah." He raised a brow as he twirled the silver spoon in his hand.

She picked up a container of maple syrup and poured delicate little scrolls in the packed down snow.

"When I was small, I can remember mama gathering us around the table. The fire was so hot, it kept the whole cabin warmcourse, that was before papa left and mama packed us up and moved us west with her sister and her husband" She stopped as though lost for a moment in the past, wherever that was. Questions were a part of Shado's job, part of what he did and who he was, but the expression on her face

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cautioned him against asking any questions at the moment. He only hoped that she'd be around long enough that he could find out about her past, but right now his interest was in the present.

Her gaze connected unexpectedly with his.

"I'm sorry, my mind wanders sometimes." There was no doubt that she'd been through something that was foreign to his upbringing.

"It's okay, I wish mine did more often. So, how do you eat this? And you're going first, by the way."

She scooped her spoon in the icy mix of crystallized maple sugar and snow.

"Of course, we had real maple syrup." She held the spoon to her mouth tasting a bite, and then nodded toward the bowl.

"You're sure about this?"

"As you can see it didn't hurt me."

He gave her a wary once over glance and consumed a spoonful of the frigid concoction in one gulp.

"And this was a treat?" he mumbled through the melting snow.

Angel chuckled as she scooped up another bite and smoothed it between her lips. "I like it."

His gaze was glued to her mouth remembering the taste of her lips. "Me, too." Shado swallowed the snow and could almost feel it sizzle down his throat.

"I don't suppose you've ever had a snowball fight then, have you?"

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A wicked grin lifted the corner of her enticing lips. She grabbed a handful of snow and tossed it playfully at his chest.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Life's too full of 'you shouldn'ts.'"

He slowly reached out and cupped a palm of snow in his palm. "You need a head start?"

She dropped a nearby hand towel on his head and squealed as she rushed past him.

He blindly reached out his fingers able to only brush her backside, as he tipped the chair over heading toward the hallway.

He saw her heading for his bedroom and the thought of impending disaster flew through his head. "You have no place to run." His gaze locked with hers as she turned and slammed the door. With the frozen ball dripping through his fingers he shoved his shoulder against the door.

"Don't you" His warning blatantly signaled his next challenge.

A click sounded, locking the door.

He could break down the door, or he could climb out onto the fire escape from the bathroom window.

Holding fast to the fast melting snow, he strode the few feet back to the bathroom and lifted the window sash. A bitter cold wind whistled around the corner of the building sending a spray of fluffy snow into his face. He didn't know what the hell he was doing, only that he felt alive and he was having fun.

The railing of the fire escape was a scant few inches from the windows. A simple vault and he'd have access to the

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bedroom window. It was the first time that he was glad that the lock didn't work properly on that window.

He eased himself through the window, his training reminding him not to look down. All that was left of the snowball was small lump of melting ice squeezed tight by his fist.

Shado dropped the ice chunk and wiped his hand on his shirt. Barefoot, he backed his body out of the window and pulled himself to the frozen railing. He knew he only had a few moments before his feet would react to the frozen metal grate. With two strong jabs of his palms the window eased open and he slipped inside.

"How?" Her words halted as she turned toward him.

"You forget I do this for a living." He reached through the window and grabbed a handful of snow, leisurely packing it between his palms as he sauntered toward her.

Her gaze darted around the room before locking back to his. "You can run, but you can't hide." He grinned.

"I bet you use that line a lot." She dove under his arm and leapt to his bed, grabbing a pillow as a shield.

Shado grinned, damn it felt good. He thought of days when he and his brother would drive their mom crazy with such antics. "You can't run. Angel, you're mine now."

It was always Danny who was the fastest, the strongest

He lurched forward across the end of the bed and grabbed her ankle and in one motion had her flat on her back. The bed bounced, shifting the mattress and her laughter filled the dark shadows of his heart, spurring a childhood like joy in its resonance. Something he hadn't experienced in years.

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In vain she tried to hold him off, her fit of giggles egging him on.

He tore her shirt from her grip and slid his chilled hand underneath, holding the snow against her belly as she squirmed frantic with laughter.

"That's not fair," she laughed batting at his hand.

For no reason, good or bad, he lowered his head and captured her mouth.

Maybe he wanted to experience her joy, hoping to transfer some of her lighthearted laughter into his tormented soul. God knows he couldn't remember the last time he'd really "felt" a joy for living.

In the short time he'd known her Angel had brought him more joy in his life than he could remember.

She stopped fighting him off and instead curled her hands around his neck. Her laughter subsided into throaty moans of pleasure and he was drawn into how freely she enjoyed the moment. How did she do it? It was as though she filled a void long kept dark in his life.

Her skin beneath his palm felt like heaven, warm and smooth as though a wonderland of delight made just for him.

Angel tugged at his shirt, frantic in her efforts. There was no question she wanted him as much as he wanted her. By all code of ethics of his work this was wrong and he knew it, but he couldn't stop. He didn't want to.

Leaning on his elbow, he aided her quest and returned the favor, tugging her shirt over her head. He dropped the clothes over the side of the bed and sought the sanctuary of Angel's lips. He wanted to be lost there forever.

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Shado found comfort in her warm embrace, taking as much as she gave, they were equal in passion. He hoped that he could purge himself of his need by a few delirious kisses, but when her fingers curled at the back of his neck, he knew it wouldn't be enough, for either of them.

"I've never wanted a woman so badly."

Her gaze sparkled as she smiled up at him. "Hard to believe, you are a man after all." She ran her fingertip over his lips.

He closed his eyes. That wasn't exactly the impression that he'd meant, but it was the exact impression he'd given her all along.

Her body warm and alive with desire called to him through the fire in her gaze.

"I don't know what's happening here, Angel, I mean, I hardly know you." He searched her face hoping the answers to his many questions might be resolved. First and foremost, he was becoming intimately involved with someone he was supposed to be protecting. "But I feel like I've known you forever."

"I'm just like any woman who wants the love of a good man. Is that so odd?" She stood on the bed, holding his gaze as she shimmied from her pants and knelt before him.

He followed as she pulled him to his knees and watched the smile widen on her face as she unzipped his jeans. Pressing him to sit, she lifted her leg over his and settled comfortably on his lap.

Shado cupped her butt, the warmth of her soft damp heat pressed against his flesh. "You are different from other

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women. You're so strong, but I find myself wanting to take care of you. Your innocent" He tipped his head to kiss the slope of her neck. "But you seem like you've been around the block a time or two."

She shifted over him, nuzzling over his hot tip. Maneuvering with expressive pleasure, she eased onto his rigid shaft as she held his gaze.

"Around the block? I've stayed right here, just like you told me, Shado." Angel faced him, studying his face intently, confusion plagued her gorgeous eyes.

"Who are you, Angel?" he whispered against her skin, the silent prayers of his lonely heart answered in her sighs.

"I'm not sure anymore. There are places I remember, but my time with you has become my reality. I'm not sure now which is which, but I know how I feel when I'm with you."

She raked her fingers over his shoulders, comfortable to be having conversation in the middle of such intimacy. That alone, made her different from other women he'd dated a hundred years ago, it seemed.

"What about Billy?" He kissed her silky shoulder, inhaling her scent; cataloging it to memory should she ever leave.

"What about him?" She shifted, pressing her pelvis against him in silent request.

Her fingernails drew across the back of his neck teasing the short ends of his hair.

"Do you still?" He paused unsure if he had the right to ask her about other men. After all, could he commit to her anymore now than a week ago? Hadn't he already seen what living with an undercover cop could do to devastate a family?

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The picture he carried in his wallet of Stephanie and Daniel Jr. was reminder enough. Maybe it was better he didn't know where she came from, then he wouldn't have to think of her there when she was gone.

* * * *

Angel rubbed her palm over the hard sinewy muscle of his shoulder. "Who's the woman and little boy?"

Shado's gaze snapped to hers as though on a tight hinge.

"Where did you see that?" He lifted her off his lap, standing quickly in the darkened room.

Without a word he yanked up his jeans and tugged a shirt over his head. Shoulders slumped in what appeared defeat; he sat on the edge off the bed and dropped his forehead to his palm.

Angel had no idea that his reaction to the picture would be so severe. Whoever the woman and the young boy were, they obviously meant a great deal to him. At least she assumed they were mother and son by the warm embrace in the picture.

"It was lying on the floor, near your shoes," she answered softly. Her heart was torn between the desire to pull him back into her arms and finding out more about this woman who had such a hold on him.

Before she could entertain her next question, he bolted from the room leaving her exposed flesh chilled from the open window.

She pulled her t-shirt over her head, contemplating how best to approach the situation. Given they were stranded

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together in a tiny four-room apartment there was really only one choicedirect.

She scooted off the bed, straightening it quickly before she headed down the short corridor. "Shado?"

There was a long silence as she continued past the bathroom and kitchen not finding a trace of him anywhere.

Her gaze followed the parameter of the living room and there was no sign of him. She checked the pile shoes near the door and realized his hiking boots were gone, so too, the picture and his jacket.

Angel rushed to the window and tore open the sash, sticking her head into the swirling white flakes to search the street below.

At the end of the block, she saw him trudging though the snow. His head and body slanted against the wind. She drew inside, shaking the snow from her hair, pondering whether to chase after him. Angel lowered the window and drew an afghan around her shoulders. He wouldn't have left without good reason, even if the only reason was that he needed some space to think.

She curled up in his recliner and watched the snow until the shadowy gray sky turned a deep indigo purple.

* * * *

Angel was jarred awake at the sound of the key in the lock. She rubbed her eyes, unaware of how long she'd slept. The view outside was dark, except for the glow of the streetlights. Shado said nothing as he placed a large package on the floor and hung up his coat.

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"Have you had anything to eat?" It wasn't what she wanted to ask, but it seemed a good start.

"Wasn't hungry. I thought maybe you'd like to get out though. Our policeman's Christmas party is tomorrow night. I thought maybe you could use an evening away from this place." He cleared his throat. "Well, I'm going to call it a night. Hope this fits." And with that he turned and disappeared into his room.

Angel had no idea of what she must look like, though her hair felt plastered to the side of her face and her throat was bone dry. She blinked to make sure she hadn't dreamt that he had given her a package.

She held up the sack with gold braid handles and read the elegant script on its side *Nieman Marcus*.

Her brows rose. Sure she'd received little trinkets from men before in return for services, but none of them ever came with an invitation to a Christmas Party. She brushed the afghan from her shoulders and reached into the sack.

Inside was a large white rectangular box tied neatly with a sheer gold ribbon. Angel's breath caught as she gazed at the beautiful packaging. Her heart beat a steady cadence as she laid the box in her lap. Cautiously she tugged at the decorative bow and slid it from the box.

Angel glanced toward his room, wishing that he'd waited for her to open the box. Was such extravagance a common thing for this man? Who were the woman and young boy? Why would he leave without explanation and then return with such a

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Angel's eyes widened as she peeled back the delicate tissue. Inside was the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen.

The color was dark amber, like the rich opulent hue of Burt's best Kentucky Bourbon.

She pulled it from the box as she stood and the box slid to the floor. Her gaze fixed on the exquisite garment she held in her hands. The neckline scooped softly in front and plunged into a deep 'v' in the back. Included in the sack was a pair of intricate beaded earrings and a simple open-toed shoe.

She studied the shoes in her hand, marveling at the thin straps, wondering how women were supposed to walk in them no matter how beautiful they were. They were the most impractical things she'd ever seen. Her thoughts traveled back to the man who had brought her these extravagant gifts. Like other single men she'd known, and even some of the married men she'd kept company with, he was a paradox of passion and reserve encased in a near perfect form.

She closed her eyes, cautioning her heart not to lead her where there was surely another dead end. It was clear that his heart belonged to someone else if only a memory.

Angel carefully laid the gown over the back of the chair and brushed back her hair with her fingers.

She stopped in the bathroom to make a quick assessment before she made the choice to face whatever demons held him at bay.

"Are you asleep?" she whispered as she eased open his door.

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The light from the living room filtered past her offering a dim view of Shado lying on his back, his arm thrown over his forehead.

Angel crept forward, listening to his slow and steady breathing. "Shado?" His name barely escaped the uncertainty in her throat. She leaned over him, her hand inching close to his shoulder.

Before she could speak his name again, Shado reached up and snatched her forearm. He pulled her body to his, rolling her beneath him, his hand clamped over her mouth. His gaze was glued to the window behind her.

She'd heard stories of men who'd snapped, and wondered if his seclusion had finally taken its toll. His finger moved to his mouth as if to caution her not to speak. Frozen with surprise pinned by the weight of his body, she nodded.

From the fire escape outside a shadow passed by, hesitating briefly before it disappeared. Fear as real as anything she'd known welled inside her. Tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes shut tight against what might come next.

"He's gone. It's okay," Shado whispered.

It was then she sensed the pad of his thumb brushing away a trail left by her tear.

"*Shh*, I didn't mean to frighten you. I didn't want to startle him into doing something stupid."

"Who?" she whispered, not wanting to part from the warm security of his arms.

"One of Espinoza's men most likely, probably followed me home." He glanced down at her, a strange mix of emotions on

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his face. "You shouldn't be here." He eased away and sat on the edge of the bed.

Angel rubbed her fingertips over her eyelids. "I don't know how it happened. One minute I was playing the piano the next I'm running into you on the street."

He turned his confused gaze to hers.

"I mean in my bed."

It was odd that she wanted to explain where she came, but every time she tried more pressing issues got in the way. Like now, the sleepy sex-filled sound of his voice sparked a new set of emotions inside her

"I don't understand you." She sighed wanting desperately to reach out and touch him.

"What's there to understand Angel? I live for my work, and it's impossible for me to get involved with something on the level you deserve. Maybe it would be better if you just find this Billy when this case is done and get on with your life."

"What I deserve?" Her heart melted at the purity of his words. No man had ever considered what she deserved before.

"Is this because of your wife?" There. She'd confronted her worst nightmare. Secretly she hoped that there had been some great cosmic scheme that drew her from the past and into his arms. But she was not going to live in a dream world, either.

"My wife?" He turned his body toward hers, the chiseled plane of his chest made sharper in the muted light.

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She bravely tried to hold his gaze, but her eyes kept straying over his torso, lower to his waist, remembering the sinewy strength beneath her fingers.

"Did you say my wife?"

His abrupt tone brought her gaze and her thoughts back to his face. "The woman in the picture and the little boy, who looks so much like you. I assumed"

"You assumed wrong. She's not my wife."

He shifted to stare out the window offering no further explanation.

"Your sister, then," she asked in quiet curiosity though part of her was glad she wasn't his wife.

"No."

She opened her mouth to speak when his intense gaze met hers.

"What do you want from me? I already said that I'm not capable of anything long-lasting."

Angel scooted to his side. "I know, I'm not asking you for anything. I just want to understand." Tentatively she reached out and brushed her fingers over his brow.

He lifted his face to the ceiling and she could see the tortured expression of his soul.

"You can't understand."

"I know what you're capable of." Her heart crept further out on the dangerous limb she knew might break at any moment.

"Dammit, Angel, you don't know anything about me."

"I know you're hurting. I know you care about people. You have a gentle loving spirit."

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He snorted and turned his gaze to hers. "Well then I have you fooled."

Angel shook her head. "I don't think so." She leaned forward kissing his temple.

"Angel, please"

"Things that happen usually work out, the pain fades, and only good memories remain."

His gaze studied her.

"How do you know? How do you have any idea what I've been through?"

"I don't have specifics, Shado, but I know the look in your eyes. I've seen my share of tortured lives, trust me."

"I want to," he whispered as he trailed his fingers down her cheek.

"I won't judge you. I can't take away your pain forever, but I can make you forget for awhile." She reached for her shirttail hem, watching the flash of desire in his gaze.

His arm circled her waist tugging her to his lap as his mouth claimed hers.

Chapter Seven

* * * *

God, he wanted to forget. Three years of tormented sleep, the continuous image of his dead brother's lifeless body replaying night after night in his mind.

Angel's hands splayed over his shoulders aiding in his sensual quest to bring pleasure and to please himself.

It wasn't fair to her, he knew but she felt so damn good, so soft, willing, and sweet. He needed those things like an addict needed a fix.

Her hand slid over his thigh, gently taking his length in her hand stoking him with her warm palm.

His fevered body responded to her touch as he captured her mouth, sampling her lips, mating with her tongue in a carnal dance. The running tights she wore molded to every curve of her body and he literally peeled them from her long legs as she stood in front of him.

"You are a beautiful woman." He leaned forward, cupping her breasts in both hands, offering them to his mouth, pleasuring her lavishly with teeth and tongue.

He had no protection and he couldn't in good conscience leave her with the possibility of a child. It wasn't his style.

"Lay down." His heart throbbed against his chest as he poised over her.

"You know how much I want you."

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She traced his jaw and nodded, her legs falling open willingly as she held his gaze.

"I told you I can't have children."

The image of his young nephews' expression the day of the funeral flitted across his mind.

"Damn." He hesitated a moment before struggling with his boxers. "This is insane," he muttered as he freed himself from the cotton confines. His tip nudged against her heat, and he remembered how well they fit together.

The shrill ring of the phone jarred him for moment, but his body, angled toward that warm vortex in quivering anticipation, held him in place.

Again the insistent ring pulled him from his fantasy. Plunging a hand through his hair, he reached over and snatched up the phone, his erection hard and painful as he shifted trying to get comfortable. "Jackson," he spoke terse into the phone. Whoever it was, it had better be life and death.

"Hi Shado," the feminine voice responded. "Did I catch you asleep?"

Understatement of the century. "Uh, I did turn in early but that's okay what's up?" He glanced down at the sharp angle of his

"I wanted to tell you thanks for Danny's puppy. You don't know what a god-send that has been."

He could hear the gratitude in his sister-in-law's voice, but it was still laced with sadnesssadness that could have been avoided.

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"I'm glad he likes him, but I warn you that breed of husky can get large."

Angel appeared in front of him and dropped to her knees, nudging between his.

"He's so cute though, scampering after Danny, it was so funny the other day, Daniel ran next door"

The rest of her dialogue was lost as Shado's mind went fuzzy with what Angel was doing with her mouth.

"Oh my God" Shado squeezed his eyes tight.

"Oh, it's safe, I promise, Uncle Shado," Stephanie chided. "He goes next door quite often, but I've checked them out like you cautioned me to do."

"Oh yeah, that's good."

Her hands were masterful, coaxing gently as her lips worked their magic.

"So are you still coming for dinner Sunday?"

Shado's heart pounded in his ears.

"Coming? Uh, yeah, I guess" His hand gripped the bedpost as heat rushed through his body.

"Do you have other plans? Another undercover assignment?"

Nope, this one was purely above the covers.

"I'm coming. It's okay," he gritted through his teeth as her hands massaged his balls.

"Good we'll see you around two. Could you maybe pick up one of those hard chew bones on your way over?"

Shado's teeth clenched. He nodded, squeaking out, "Sure."

His mouth had gone dry. What the woman was doing to him would be a paying job in his line of surveillance.

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"Okay, well go back to your rest. Sweet dreams."

Shado gulped. "I will thanks."

He slammed the phone to the cradle and yanked Angel to her feet, crushing his mouth to hers as she brought him to a head with her hands. A deep-seated groan rumbled from his chest, and his breath caught as he climaxed. Her hands, like velvet, gently coaxed him over the edge.

With a last jolt of his hips, he held her tight, plunging deep into a kiss that left nothing to the imagination. With a rippling shudder he brought her down beside him on the bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to find his brains again.

Was he any better than the guys who entertained the hothouse that he'd been watching? No God, he was worse. *He didn't pay her.*

"Are you okay?"

Her voice issued above him and he realized she'd moved off the bed. He opened his eyes to see her face through the valley of her perfect twin globes. "That was amazing." It was asinine, but it was all he could think to say. It wasn't as though there was congratulatory protocol slated for such skills.

"Its something I learned back in Deadwater."

Shado held up his hand, catching hers. "I don't really want to know." The hard cold fact was that he never promised her anymore than she'd promised to him. A cold void filled his gut and he recognized the reality that he was still alone.

"You probably need to use the bathroom. Go ahead I can wait." He dropped her hand not wanting to attach any sentimental value to what just happened.

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"If you're sure" Her voice was noticeably quiet.

He swallowed as he sat up, searching the floor for his boxers. "Yeah, go on ahead." He didn't turn to watch her leave. He didn't want to. Had the light in her eyes been arousal and nothing more?

Maybe it was time he asked her about her past and how many partners she'd been with. He dropped his face in his hands slamming the heel of his hand against his forehead. "You've got to get a handle on this," he muttered as he yanked up his boxer shorts.

* * * *

Angel's nipples, sore from his loving, tightened as the tepid water ran down her chest. She stood straight and faced her reflection in the mirror. There was no mistake of the look in her eyes. They could not lie about what was in her heart. And she knew, despite his repeated warnings that she was falling hard for Shado Jackson.

That had not happened to her before. Not in real life anyway. She'd dreamt, forever it seemed, about Billyher piano-playing invisible fantasy. But Shado exceeded every fantasy, physical and emotional, that she dared to dream about.

She felt like a woman in his arms, not just a one-night stand. He talked to her, wanted to know her thoughts and opinions, and he trusted her.

She hugged herself tight, afraid she would awaken and find out this was all a dream.

"Oh, sorry."

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In the harsh light of the bathroom, her nakedness combined with the tone in his voice seemed to be in stark contrast to one another.

"I'll get my things from your room." She started past him.

"Here, I uh, brought them to you."

So you can go straight to your bed where you belong. It didn't take much to see his point.

Performing a slight dance to keep from touching, she inched past him. All other fantasies of being Mrs. Shado Jackson vanished as quickly as the passion she'd seen in his eyes.

"Good night," he called as he closed the bathroom door.

In a moment of panic, she knocked on the door. "What about the man outside?" The thought of what might happen to him as he slept in the back bedroom propelled the question from her lips.

Shado shrugged. "He was sent as a scare tactic, most likely. They aren't going to try anything stupid. They have too many things pointing to them right now."

His gaze held hers as he frowned. "Are you okay sleeping out there?"

Angel took a deep breath. She wanted to ask him to sleep with her, that she needed to feel the safety of his arms.

"You'll be okay back there alone?"

He nodded as the corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. "I'll be fine."

"Ok, then, I guess. Good night." She turned clutching her clothes to her chest.

"Angel?"

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She glanced over her shoulder, her heart hoping he'd changed his mind.

"I wish I could give you more." His gaze fell to the floor and the muscles in his jaw clenched with his struggle.

"At least for a few moments you were able to forget."

Angel averted her gaze as she turned to leave, not wanting for him to see the tears beginning to escape from her eyes.

She would never forget.

* * * *

Angel woke to the brilliant sun reflecting off the snow on the windowsill. She pushed off the heavy coverlet and followed her nose to a carafe of freshly brewed coffee. Pouring a cup, her eye caught the bright orange note attached to the refrigerator by an odd harvest pumpkin.

Coffee's made. See you tonight. Party starts at seven-thirty. I'll pick up my suit on my way home. Stay inside, do not answer the door. P.S. No leaning out of the window.

Her smile was bittersweet as she replayed their conversation last night. Still if he wanted to take her to this party, she was going to make damn sure he wouldn't be able to concentrate on much else.

Chapter Eight

* * * *

"Angel, sorry I'm late. With the snow, some of the streets are down to narrow little one lanes" Shado dumped his suit bag over the back of his recliner. He pushed off his hiking boots and hung up his parka, an uneasy feeling crawled up the back of his neck. She hadn't answered him. "Angel?" His instincts went full alert as he scanned the room, his gaze falling on the open window.

"Almost ready," she called from behind the closed bathroom door.

Shado let go a relieved sigh, allowing his heart to return to a normal pace.

It didn't last long.

The bathroom door opened and from its interior emerged a goddess, a proverbial siren. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth as he stared slack-jawed at her beauty.

Concern flashed on her face and she glanced down nervously smoothing her hands over her hips and the gentle slope of her stomach.

Looking that good should be a crime.

"You don't like it."

Her expression of confidence dropped a notch or twounlike his libido.

Shado needed someone to give his heart a jumpstart. He shook his head. "On the contrary." He hesitated as he

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appraised her once again. "I didn't know you could look any more beautiful."

A spark snapped in her gaze and her bright smile sent an unholy signal straight to his groin. *This was bad.*

The woman had made it clear she was searching for her boyfriend, Billy. Her only mistake was being dragged into something she hadn't asked for.

Still it gnawed at his ego that she hadn't mentioned the guy since she'd been there.

Shado shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Let me grab a quick shower and I'll be ready to go." What he really wanted was to grab her maybe in the shower minus the dress.

He swallowed hard keeping his eyes averted from her mesmerizing gaze. One look in those eyes and they'd never make it to the party.

* * * *

Angel perched on the edge of the couch hands folded in her lap. She'd seen what she thought was desire and appreciation in his eyes. But then his demeanor changed instantly and he became distant again.

"Almost ready. What do you think?"

Shado stepped around the corner into view and her heart leapt in her throat. His suit, a deep charcoal blue set off the stormy color of his eyes. With a pristinely pressed white shirt and red tie, the outfit accentuated every one of his chiseled features.

"Turn around."

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The corner of his mouth lifted slightly and he cast a glance to the ceiling, as he obliged her.

"You are the most dashing man I've seen since Sheriff Sloan." She realized he wouldn't know who that was and she opened her mouth to correct herself.

His brows rose as he turned to face her. "Sheriff Sloan, huh? Then I guess I should be flattered?"

Angel closed her mouth and nodded, afraid to explain her past. Even now to remember the events of the past were becoming more like an old story she'd maybe read about. Her memory of Deadwater Gulch and the Sweet Magnolia were quickly fading, replaced by the memory of her time with Shado.

"So, are we ready then?" His hand rested on his coat. "Damn, I just realized you don't have a coat."

Angel walked toward him and watched his eyes as she drew close. She was familiar with that expression she'd seen it before. It was a hungry look one that sent goose bumps parading up her arms.

He blinked as though trying to remember why he was holding the coat.

"I hope this works for tonight. We'll have to take care of that situation on Monday."

Angel placed her hand on the coat, preparing to take it from him. Instead he held it for her, his fingers brushing slow over her shoulders.

"Sorry I don't have something more appropriate for you."

For the span of a heartbeat he paused with his hands on her shoulders.

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"You look beautiful, Angel."

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled. The scent of the men's toilet water he'd used held her gaze to his. "Thank you for the dress."

"It fits you well."

His voice flowed over her like warm honey on biscuits. What would she do when this was over? How could she return now to the Magnolia? What role did Billy have in her life? Perhaps she could find employment at the *Imperial*, though she had a suspicion that brothels were not as easily accepted these days as in the past.

"You ready?"

Shado place his hand on the small of her back and her concerns disappeared with his simple smile.

Angel was aware immediately of the stares they received the moment Shado removed her coat. Was it the dress? Did her hair look strange? She'd chosen to wear it up securing it with a pair of wooden chopsticks she'd found in the kitchen. She was also acutely aware that many of the women wore much more rouge and face paint than she did. All she'd been able to find was a pot of lip balm in the medicine cabinet and she'd pinched the fool out of her cheeks to make them rosy. Angel moistened her lips nervous as her gaze scanned the room of extraordinarily beautiful women.

"Good lord, this is the woman who's been under your protection, Jackson?"

A large man, a good two inches taller and three times broader than Shado held out his hand to Angel.

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"Angel, this is Chief Murphy, head of the Seventy-Sixth Precinct."

He took her hand and offered her a brief bow. "We are counting on your memory young lady to help us out. Your name, by the way, could not describe you better. Has this thug been treating you well?"

Angel gently pulled her hand from his unsure of what a thug was. She glanced at Shado and caught the teasing glint in his eye. The man must be making fun of him.

"Mr. Jackson has been a perfect gentleman. I'm very grateful for his hospitality."

The formidable man glanced at Shado with a raised brow. "I'm glad to hear that."

Jesse appeared at her side, his grin white and even against his dark skin. She was surprised to see him in a suit and looking every bit as handsome as Shado. In her day, folks with skin other than white were not allowed to mingle at social events.

"Are you serving tonight?" she asked as she extended her hand in greeting.

"I serve and protect, lovely lady." He took her hand and kissed it, surprising Angel. No one even blinked an eye.

"May I steal her for this next dance, Jackson?"

Angel glanced at Shado expecting him to say no.

"Sure." He shrugged. "It's the lady's choice if she would like to dance."

"I'm charmed, sir." Angel took Jesse's arm and wished that it had been Shado that asked, but she'd been listening to the wonderful music since they'd arrived.

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Jesse's palm felt cool against the open back of her dress as he moved with her on the dance floor.

"Are you from around here?" He tipped his head as he studied her.

"No, I'm from out west, near Deadwater Gulch."

Jesse frowned. "Can't say I've ever heard of that suburb."

They danced in silence and as the song ended, Captain Murphy appeared, requesting the next dance.

Angel glanced up and caught Shado's steady gaze. She willed him to dance with her, but he took a sip of his drink and glanced away.

An hour later, the band took a break and Angel wanted nothing more than to remove the silly shoes from her sore feet.

"It appears you've danced with everyone here."

Shado's low timbered voice whispered near her ear.

"Except for the man I came with," she responded quickly knowing that it sounded a bit possessive, but she was tired and she wanted to go home.

"I'm not much of a dancer."

She leaned forward in the chair and rubbed her feet.

"Good god Angel, are you wearing anything under that dress?"

His hand pressed her shoulder, pulling her upright in the chair.

"Boxers would spoil the line of the dress." It was fortunate that the scooped neckline had provided sufficient drape to her breasts, though she never claimed to be overly endowed.

Shado rubbed his hand over his mouth.

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"Okay, let's go get your coat." He tugged her from the chair as he headed toward the cloakroom.

"We haven't been here very long; won't people wonder where you've gone?" She bumped against his back as he made a sudden stop and turned to face her in the confines of the deserted coatroom.

"Long enough for every guy you've danced with to know you're not wearing any underwear," he whispered sternly.

The color of his eyes darkened as he held a firm gaze to hers. "That's fine," she responded her chin held in slight challenge.

"Fine," he repeated his breathing more pronounced with his agitation. He stood so close that the heat of his body seared through her thin dress.

"Well?" she asked looking past his shoulder for the coat she wore.

His lips formed in a tight line as though he held himself from kissing her. Angel's entire body honed in on his desire, but this time he was going to have to come to her. He had to make the first move, or she would know it was time to get on with her life.

His gaze dropped to her mouth and he slammed his palm against the wall above her head.

"You know I want you."

"Yes." She swallowed as she restrained from grabbing his face and throwing her well thought-out plan to hell in a hand basket.

"Right now," he whispered as he closed in on her mouth.

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His breath smelled of the sweet punch he'd been drinking in lieu of alcohol. She shuddered as his hand slid up her leg, cradling her hip. Angel flattened her back against the wall to steady herself. He pressed closer, nibbling kisses near her ear, his hand dipping below the fabric at the back of her dress.

Angel's body responded of its own accord as it always did around him. She dropped her head back and turned to face his hungry gaze.

"What if someone needs their coat?" She sighed as his other hand joined in cupping her bare bottom, caressing gently as his kisses trailed down the exposed flesh of her shoulder.

Heat poured through her, as her mind grew hazy with need.

The slinky fabric lifted easily above her knees and then her hips. Angel shifted her legs apart slightly so her legs wouldn't buckle and grabbed his shoulders, succumbing to the ferocity of his kiss.

His warm palm brushed between her legs and she sighed, deepening the kiss. Why was he doing this to her if his heart wasn't somehow involved? Despite what he claimed, Angel knew something had changed in their relationship. He had yet to admit to himself, or to her.

"I've got to get you home. This is crazy." His words were muffled against her cheek. "Tell me this is crazy. Tell me you don't want me to touch you."

"I'd be lying." She pulled his coat jacket open and slid her arms around his torso, feeling the muscles of his chest bunch

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under her palms as his mouth moved over hers again more passionate and more determined. If they didn't stop soon there would be no turning back.

"Can we get home?" He leaned his forehead to hers, letting the dress slip back down to her ankles.

Angel heard the quickened sound of her breathing in time with his. "Home sounds good."

Chapter Nine

* * * *

Shado stared ahead into the dark night, the beams from the streetlights cast pillars in the dense fog. Beside him, Angel had kept quiet most of the ride home.

"You okay?" He didn't want to look at her, he couldn't trust himself and he sure as hell didn't want to be picked up by one of his own for indecent exposure in a public place.

"I'm fine. May I ask you something?"

"Sure." He turned the car heater down a couple of notches.

"Were you jealous back there?"

The question hit him hard between the eyes. "Who me jealous?" He glanced away. The idea, of course was ridiculous. Hadn't she been listening to anything he'd told her? Sure the sex was incredible, but jealous?

"Were you afraid of another man touching me like you?"

Okay, that comment jumpstarted his libido.

"Don't you know by now that I don't want anyone else to touch me, except you?" Her voice was soft, luring him to pull the car over to the curb of the quiet street.

"Look Angel" He glanced at her and she'd dropped the coat from her shoulders, exposing her creamy soft skin.

"What are you afraid of Shado?"

She leaned in close peering into his face and in his mind he could see the gentle slope of the dress in back, her firm bottom straining against the fabric.

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He groaned quietly before he grabbed her chin and kissed her with a madness that traveled all the way to his groin. If they hadn't been on a public street, he might have suggested the back seat.

"Home." He tore himself from her, reminding himself of how crazy this was to be this absorbed with her. It wasn't going to last, nothing good ever did. Look at Stephanie and Daniel.

He gripped the steering wheel to regain his control. At the very least, get her home, but this time it would be with protection.

"I have to make a quick stop up here."

She shifted back in her seat, as she tugged the coat over her arms. "Okay."

His imagination sizzled with the thought of making slow passionate love to her. The car fishtailed in the snow under the sudden surge of acceleration.

* * * *

The corner market was unusually busy for eleven thirty on a Friday night, especially in this weather. Didn't people know when they should stay home?

Shado shifted from one foot to the other as he tapped the box of condoms against the bottle of wine he'd picked up. He knew it looked cliché but he wanted this time to be special, he wanted to tell her what she wanted to hear. The half-insane way he'd been behaving suddenly hit him tonight as he watched her dancing with other men on his force. The frustration wasn't about Angel, it was about him and coming

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to grips with how he felt for her. She'd apparently arrived at that realization long before him. Hopefully it wasn't too late to make things right.

"Next?" The clerk, a methodical man with thick glasses peered up at Shado and offered a wide grin. "Merry Christmas."

"Uh, yeah, same to you," he mumbled, placing the items on the counter as he ruffled in his pocket and found his wallet.

The clerk held up the box, studying it with a frown.

Shado cleared his throat after a moment. "Is there something wrong?"

"You knowhow much?" The precise man's broken English was succinct and professional.

"Doesn't it scan?" Shado glanced over his shoulder at the elderly couple clutching a gallon of milk and a box of bran flakes.

"Scanner broke."

His definite response was doing little for Shado's frustration. What cosmic force didn't want him to own a blessed box of condoms?

The old man reached around him and grabbed the box from the clerk without precedence. "Twelve ninety-five." And he promptly dropped them on the counter. His blue eye winked in his wrinkled face as he looked up at Shado. "The missus likes that one."

Shado could not hide his look of surprise.

The ring of the register pulled his attention back to the clerk. Through the plate glass of the front window, Shado's

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gaze narrowed on the man walking past. He was fairly certain that it was the same man he'd seen at the hotel that night, the same one who'd shot at Angel from the car at the hospital.

"Could you please hurry."

A chuckle erupted behind him. The clerk counted his change and Shado grabbed the sack and darted out the door searching the sidewalk for the man.

He yanked out his cell phone and headed for the car, stopping short of the hood when he realized the passenger door stood open and Angel was gone.

"Shit!" He tossed the bag in the car and searched the near empty parking lot. The mist hovering like heavy cotton balls made it difficult to see more than ten feet ahead.

Shado flipped open his cell phone, dialing the station. "I'm at the corner of Market and 142nd next to the alley. Suspect may have our witness in the Espinoza case. He should be considered armed and dangerous." His gaze scanned the area searching for anything.

"Ten-four, we'll send squads in the area over."

Grateful they hadn't asked more questions he stuffed the phone back in his pocket. A slight flutter caught his eye and he followed his gaze to a piece of sheer fabric attached to a rusted break in the chain link fence at the back of the lot.

One streetlight illuminated the entrance. Shado pulled his snub nose revolver from his waistband and moved cautiously into the murky alleyway. At the opposite end, he could see the muted streetlight where the next street crossed the alley.

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He picked his way past trash bins and clutter and peered into an abandoned car, discovering another piece of her dress secured to the bumper.

Shado put aside the fear that he might not reach her in time, willing every ounce of his intuition to connect with her.

Three cars, fairly new, sat unattended in the parking lot of a boarded up adult strip club. He knew he should wait for back-up, but frustration clouded his judgment. Fear of what she might be going through tossed his usual reasoning right out the window.

Skirting the dark shadows away from the streetlights, he made his way, gun poised to the back door of the deserted building.

He jimmied the door and it gave enough to indicate it was unlocked. For a moment he hesitated silently hoping the guys would be arriving soon. Carefully he eased into the narrow hallway, the pungent stench of rotting wood, urine and old liquor permeated his nose.

"I say we take care of business and get out of here."

Shado's jaw clenched, suspecting he knew what the man meant.

"We need to make sure her boyfriend hasn't followed her," another voice spoke. His accent was foreign, probably Spanish. It dawned on him that it was likely Espinoza himself, the man they'd been tracking for the past five years.

Shado pressed his back against the wall, his mind racing with his options.

"I've told him nothing. He doesn't know what any of you look like."

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There was a laugh that made Shado's skin crawl.

"Loyal. Got to admire that even for her." The Spanish-speaking man chuckled. A low voice, sounding like gravel under tires joined in the laughter.

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Sure, mama," Espinoza remarked, the serious tone returned to his voice. "You, JC, go check it out. Make sure no one followed you."

He eased into the alcove of the old restroom and held his breath. He had two choices. Take the guy now and risk Angel's life, or sit tight and wait for back up. Both choices put her life in danger.

He didn't have to decide.

One of the men yelled a warning to the others as the back door came crashing in, splintering under the heavy boots of the police officers.

"Officer, don't shoot!" Shado bolted into the room ahead of the officers rounding up the two suspects in the hallway. His eyes widened as his gaze met Angel, her arms and legs bound tight in Duct tape.

"Behind you," Angel yelled.

Shado whirled, clothes-lining the man in the neck and sending him sprawling across the bare concrete floor.

From the corner of his eye Shado saw another man attempting to wiggle through a broken window. He gave out an anguished cry when a jagged shard sliced through his side. He stumbled back in the room, falling on his back and Shado aimed his gun down at the man.

"Drop it, asshole."

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Shado glanced up realizing he stood face-to-face with the man who killed his brother and god knows how many other innocent people.

The barrel of his gun pointed directly at Angel's head.

A muffled moan caught Espinoza's attention and Shado seized his only chance. He fired off a round and watched as Espinoza slumped lifeless to the floor.

"That was for Danny," he muttered as the room filled with blue uniformed men.

Shado reached Angel, kneeling at her side as he assessed her condition. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you?" Without thinking he tore the tape frantically from her wrists and pulled her into his arms.

"I'm all right."

Shado leaned back, brushing back an errant wisp of hair from her forehead, discovering an angry, blood-crusting wound on her temple.

She winced when he gently touched it.

"I need to get you to the hospital."

"It was the ring on his finger."

Shado's fury erupted like an uncontrolled volcano.

Angel's gaze widened. "I put up a fight. He thought he'd knocked me out when he threw me over his shoulder." She grinned. "That's how I left you a trail. Pretty good detective work there, Jackson."

Shado closed his eyes in relief that things had worked out as they had. "Let's get someone to look at that."

* * * *

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Angel sat in the waiting area her forehead plastered with an overly large gauze dressing. In her hands, she held three more pads, extra tape, and antibiotic ointment, and an admonition from the same doctor that she should consider a different line of work. Thankfully there was no sign of a concussion, but he recommended that if she refused to go to observation overnight that someone needed to check on her hourly until morning.

Shado volunteered without hesitation. She knew the warm fuzzy feelings of security were probably overblown. In light of Shado's dangerous rescue, she would always be grateful to him.

He smiled tight-lipped as he ended his conversation with Captain Murphy.

Whatever he had to say, she suspected that it was going to be difficult, based on the look in his eyes.

"The Captain says there is no need for you to be under my protection." He took a deep breath and sat down beside her.

"Of course, I told them I would keep an eye on you tonight, but the Captain says he's made arrangements for you to go to a Women's shelter on Monday.

He raked a thumbnail over his brow clearly having trouble telling her that after next week, she was on her own.

"That's very nice of the Captain and of you. Thank you." With the realization that she had no knowledge yet of how to return to Deadwater and that Shado preferred his solitary life, what choice did she have but to go with the Captain's plan?

"*Youuh*, can take everything. I mean anything you need and they will help you get set up somewhere; help you find a

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good job. They can train you to develop some skills that will help you with that."

Her eyes welled as she saw his struggle. Perhaps once settled, with a reputable job, maybe even her own place, maybe he'd like to see her from time to time. Even as Angel thought these things, a cold dread settled inside of her.

"Well let's go" he paused, "back to the apartment."

"You and I have sure spent a lot of time at hospitals in the short time we've known each other." Angel offered him a smile hoping to lighten his mood as they drove home. She stared at his profile, illuminated by the dashboard lights. He'd not uttered more than two words since they left. Both a muttered "dammit" as he stared straight ahead.

The apartment seemed even more quiet than usual. A heavy uncomfortable feeling hung in the air.

"Do you want some tea?"

The sudden sound of his voice startled her. She nodded.

"I'll pull out the couch first"

"May I sleep with you?"

His hand grasped the doorframe. "Angel"

He sounded weary.

"We can set the alarm; I promise you, nothing will happen."

His chin dropped to his chest. "Okay, you go on and uhchange. I'll be right in."

* * * *

"Who are the woman and the little boy?" They lay side by side in his bed staring at the ceiling, platonic as strangers.

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She heard his reluctant sigh. "If you'd rather not talk about it"

Another sigh.

"That's my sister-in-law and nephew. My nephew's birthday is tomorrow."

"You have a nephew born on Christmas Eve?"

A stretch of silence followed before he spoke. "Yeah, I guess the day slipped my mind."

"Are she and your brother separated?"

A rough gasp choked from his throat and she turned to see his chin quivering as he struggled to keep his emotions at bay.

Tears slid down his temple as he forced the words out of his mouth. "The man I shot tonight" his voice cracked.

Angel waited, everything inside her aching to reach out to comfort him, but she'd made a promise.

"He killed my brother. Stephanie was in labor when the call came that a drug bust was going down. He wouldn't wait for back up"

Angel promised she wouldn't touch him, but no force on earth or beyond could stop her. "I'm so sorry. My god, what you've carried inside all these years."

A deep, brief sob erupted from Shado as though he was being run-through by a sword.

Angel touched his face and he turned, clinging to her as he pressed his face to her shoulder. His rumbling sobs came from deep inside his soul.

She gathered him close and allowed him to purge himself of the burdens he'd carried.

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The front of her t-shirt was soaked by the time she heard his steady breathing. His arms were firmly clamped around her waist, his face buried like a child against her breast.

She kissed his forehead, wondering if this was the reason she'd been sent through time. Fatigue poured through her body and she closed her eyes thinking she should set the alarm.

* * * *

Angel awoke by herself. On the pillow next to her was a note, "*Needed to file a report on last night. See you later. Stay in bed and rest.*"

She pulled the damp t-shirt from her body and elected to take a long, hot soak in the tub.

Perhaps she could use this time to gather her few meager belongings, so on Monday the move to the shelter would be quick and painless.

It took all of two hours.

Chapter Ten

* * * *

Traffic at shift change was hell. Shado flipped on the radio and rolled the tuner bar from one end to the other looking for anything to take his mind off the fact that Angel was going to walk out of his life.

"Don't go changin', to try to please me" Billy Joel's voice crooned soothingly in contrast to his wayward emotions. It momentarily appeased his frustration, but traffic jerked forward and Shado yanked off the switch as his gaze fell on the nearly empty Christmas tree lot where they'd staged the stake out. Another man stood by the shack, stamping his feet in the cold. Shado spied a handful of trees, stacked against the makeshift fence.

* * * *

"I'm insane," Shado muttered as he hooked his arms around the thick lower branches. Yanking twice, the widest part of the six-foot Fraser fir cleared the front entrance, leaving a spray of needles scattered over the black and white floor tile.

"Jackson, what the hell do you think you're doin'? You know the policy. No live trees."

Shado struggled through the narrow front foyer as he glanced over his shoulder at his landlord. "Mr. Ross," he spoke with the authority of a businessman about to strike the

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deal of the century. "I'll give you two-hundred dollars to look the other way and let me take this tree up those stairs. I swear to you I won't place a single light on it. Not a thing that would create a potential for fire."

"Well, hell Jackson, is this a bribe? And by the way, aren't you a police officer or something?"

Shado held out the bills folded between his fingers to the man.

Ross frowned. "Hey, it's Christmas Eve, I don't wanna be no Grinch." He grinned as he snapped the money from his hand. "Say, is that for your girl?"

The idea coming from a third party didn't sound half bad.

"I guess we'll find out." He began backing up the steps dragging the tree with him.

"Next time flowers would be easier." Ross waved the money in the air as he shook his head and grinned.

"Trust me; this is most effective for this woman." The point of the tree bobbed softly shedding a few needles with the gentle thud of each step.

"Generally takes more than flowers or a tree Jackson, unless she's a squirrel." The man laughed at his own joke. "I just hope you're packing a better surprise with this," Ross called as he rounded the first landing.

The small ring box in his pocket jiggled as he bent over to grasp the tree trunk. He glanced upon only six more flights. That's what he was counting on.

* * * *

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Angel watched a little of what Shado called television, finding the most interesting show called, "*Wild and Unruly; Tales of the Wild, Wild West.*" Oddly, she thought little about the Magnolia. In fact, she could barely remember a day without Shado in her life. Between short naps in his favorite chair, she turned on the radio and listened to what the station called holiday tunes of the Season. Unfortunately it hadn't done much for her mood until the man in the small box started to speak. It was as though he spoke straight to her.

"I'm ready to make someone's Christmas wish a reality. If you're the ninth caller, you will receive not only concert tickets for two, but backstage passes to meet live and in person, the one and only *Billy Joel.*"

And there he was, his voice singing to her from the radio, crooning the very song that had haunted her dreams and all but sparked her incredible journey. Angel picked up the phone and punched in the numbers as she chewed on the corner of her lip. After three rings, an enthusiastic voice came over the receiver and she pressed her ear to the receiver, trying to hear over the loudness of the music in the background.

"Ninety-two Classic Rock you are on your way to meet *Billy Joel.* What do you think about that?"

Angel's voice stuck in her throat. "I get to meet Billy?" Finally? It was too good to be true.

"Yes ma'am. Now if you'll stay with me on the line, we'll get your name and address."

Angel grasped the receiver in both hands her heart pounding against her chest. Somewhere in the floors below

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she heard doors slam and loud voices, though her attention was pulled back the voice on the other end of the phone.

"Okay, hey congratulations? Are you a big fan of *Billy Joel*?" The excited man sounded very happy. *Perhaps because he was giving away presents at Christmas?*

"I do like his music very much," she responded carefully, not sure what fantastic hole had opened in her universe.

"Can you give me your name and address and we'll get this right out to you."

"Uh, my name is Angel Marie Sutter and well, I'm visiting a friend and I'm not sure of his address."

"Well okay, is your friend around?"

"Not yet but he'll be here any minute, I think."

Angel frowned as she heard another voice closer nowyelling at someone in the hallway.

"Can I call you back?"

There was a moment of silence. "Tell you what, normally we would choose another winner, but because it's Christmas, I'll give you ten minutes to call back. If you don't then you forfeit your win, does that sound fair?"

Angle nodded. "Uh, yes, thank you, I think it does."

"Here's the number, you got a pen?"

She wrote down the number, amazed at her good fortune.

"Hey, Angel you sound like a wonderful lady and what a great name for this time of year. Be sure to call right back."

She hung up and held the remote receiver to her chest. She could barely breathe. All day her emotions were plagued with facing her feelings for Shado. She finally came to the conclusion that if he truly cared for her, beyond his sense of

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duty, that he would have said something by now. Certainly they'd had their intimate moments and her body tingled with the memory, but she had to be realistic. Perhaps this was the sign that she needed to move on and continue to pursue her relationship to Billy.

A knock on the door broke her from her reverie and she opened it to find a mammoth green pine tree filling the doorway.

"Merry Christmas, Angel," a familiar voice emitted from the other side.

She recognized Shado's voice but couldn't see him.

"Back away from the door; I've got to get this thing inside. Already half the building is calling in with complaints."

She stepped back pulling the door as wide as it would allow.

"I thought" He grunted as he tugged at the tree, his arms grabbing it in a bear hug as he lifted it over the threshold and into the living room. "We could at least have a quiet Christmas Eve celebration."

He was covered in needles from head to toe as he waddled the tree into the corner of the room. He tripped on a stray shoe and Angel gasped as the tree lurched forward and ended up lopsided, but standing in the corner.

Shado took a step back, beaming at his accomplishment. His laughter caught her off guard and for a moment she forgot her good news.

"I don't have a stand, but we can improvise, you're good at that." He turned to her with a grin.

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His joy reminded her of her own good news. "I found Billy."

Like a gray cloud passing over the sun, she watched the joy disappear from his face; the light went out of his eyes.

"Well, heythat's terrific, really, yeah, that is." He swiped a gloved hand over his mouth and then tore them off tossing the gloves to the chair. "So, is he coming here to get you?"

Angel's eyes widened. "No, the man said he'd give me directions to meet him."

"What man?" Shado's gaze narrowed.

"The man in your radio."

"In my radio?" he repeated as though he hadn't heard her.

Angel held up the paper. "You need to call this number and tell the man your address and he will send us directions of how to meet Billy."

A spark of amusement mixed with curiosity peered at her from Shado's face.

"Okay, here let me call and find out what this is all about."

His smile widened as he spoke on the phone. "Yeah, they don't have this sort of thing where she comes from, thanks for being understanding."

Angel clasped her hands together looking like a child getting her fondest wish on Christmas morning. She wondered if he would allow her to play the piano piece for him that she'd tried to learn. "When do I get to meet him?"

Shado took her hands and drew her to the couch.

"This Billyit's *Billy Joel*, the entertainer?"

"Is that the one who plays piano?" she replied.

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Shado smiled his brows arching above his steady blue gaze. "Yeah, he's pretty good at it."

"Well, then that's him. That's the man I've been looking for."

"Really." He continued to study her face.

Shado sat on the coffee table in front of her and it wasn't until that moment she realized he was still holding her hands between his. Still the tone in his voice caused greater curiosity.

"May I ask, what makes him so special?"

Angel smiled. "Have you heard him sing? Listen to the words of his songs? I've never known a man who could so openly show his love for a woman."

Her statement hit Shado like a two by four.

"They said they would be playing more of his music." She jumped up and turned up the dial on the radio and sure enough there was Billy Joel cranking out one of his lover's ballads.

He was going to have to bring her to her senses without bursting her bubble.

"Let's dance." He tugged her into his arms encircling her waist as he pulled her to the small patch of empty space left in the living room. He drew her close; her soft warmth fit him perfectly. Where she'd come from didn't matter, what mattered, was right here and right now what he held close to his heart.

It started in his brain, but soon Shado realized that as he rested his cheek against her hair he was humming along with the tune on the radio.

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"You sing, too?"

Angel's pleasantly surprised look bolstered his ego. He cleared his throat, not having attempted a single note outside of the shower since chorus in high school.

He let go a few of the words in the song and then held her out in front of him. "You really ought to see what's right under your nose, Angel. This guy is an entertainer. Granted he can sing, but hell, I can singsort of."

She opened her mouth to speak, but Shado had to get out what was pressing on his heart.

"He plays pianobig deal. I've been known to play a little acoustic guitar."

"Really?" She smiled with a tip of her head.

Unsure of what she was thinking he continued on, his hands toying with the buttons on the oxford shirt of his that she wore. "The guy's a legend, sure, but you have about as much chance with him"

"As with you?" she interjected. Her challenging gaze was the final straw in him laying all the chips on the table.

Three of the four buttons had magically come undone; he was working on the fourth. "I admit I'm no prize Angel. I'm stubborn, a true slob of a bachelor. I have one toe that bends the wrong way."

"Everything else seems to be in working order." She grinned as she drew his sweatshirt over his head.

He drew the small box from his pants pocket and held it open between them. Inside was the thin silver band with a simple diamond. Shado dropped to his knee, kissing the soft

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warmth of her exposed belly before forcing his gaze to her face.

Angel held her hand over her mouth.

"My real name is William Reynolds Jackson, Billy for short, but the guys at the precinct call me Shado"

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly. "I found my Billy."

He wondered, in what was left of his rational thought, if this qualified as a "yes," but decided he would deal with it later. Her body sweet and supple molded against him as she straddled his lap. She was his joy, his laughter, his passion. Slow and easy he captured her mouth tasting what she offered and wanting to give her everything inside him.

"Stay with me Angel. Don't leave. I need you and I think you need *this* Billy." He spoke against her neck as he held her close. Shado held her face and searched her eyes. "Stay with me?" He had to hear her answer.

Great tears welled in her eyes as she offered him a wobbly smile. "Yes, I will."

He dropped his face to her mouth in a searing kiss that caused a flash fire in his groin. This was a new beginning for both of them and he welcomed it with open arms.

As his mouth claimed hers, stepping over the threshold of what he hoped would be a lifetime together, Shado heard a soft rushing sound. He opened his eyes and glanced over her shoulder just in time to see the giant Fraser fir plummeting toward them.

He twisted his body, trapping Angels beneath him against the floor and braced himself for the inevitable.

Shake My Tree
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A groan escaped his lips as the full weight of the tree landed on his back, sandwiching his body between it and Angel.

A loud pounding sounded immediately from his neighbor next door. "Take it to the bedroom," he yelled though the paper-thin walls.

"We should maybe look for a different place," Angel offered quietly, her voice strained under the weight of his body and the tree.

Shado reached out and pushed the tree to the side laughing as it landed with a loud thud to the floor.

Sure enough the pounding on the wall offered yet another warning. "*Pluuueeease* people."

"You're probably right." He pulled her to her feet, mesmerized at how she could look so beautifully sexy with her shirt hanging off one shoulder. "But for now, we're going to take his advice." He grabbed her hand and headed for the bedroom.

"What about the tree?" She tugged his hand, causing him to jerk to a stop in the hallway.

He grinned when he realized he hadn't been this excited about opening any present Christmas or otherwise in such a long time.

Shado scooped her into his arms. "I'm anxious to unwrap my present first." He grinned as he strode toward t his bedroom

"And what do I get?" she purred as she trailed her finger down his chest.

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"You mean beyond the ring?" He lifted his chin relishing in the nibbling kisses she offered along his jaw.

"Uh huh, do I get more?" she whispered seductively.

Shado chuckled as he laid her on his bed. He stared down at her as he removed his undershirt. It was odd how the cosmos had taken away his life and then gave it back in the form of a woman who was searching for her Billy. "You get my heart, Angel."

Angel held her arms up, her eyes shining with love and gathered him close. "*You* are the best present I've ever received."

He kissed her slow and thoroughly, thanking the Universe for sending an *Angelhis Angel*, to rescue him.

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